

**THE  
HANDS OF FATE**  
*and other stories*

**J. ALLAN DUNN**

# THE HANDS OF FATE

## *And other stories*

**J. Allan Dunn**



1872-1941

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# 1: Down by the Rio Grande

(A Sandy Bourke Story)

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JEFF DAVIS COUNTY, Texas, has four irregular sides enclosing four unequal angles. In bigger words it is a tetragonal quadrangle, or a rhombus or something equally unsatisfactory to the lay mind. In plain language two of its straight sides are short and two long. The long ones nose down at an acute angle to the Rio Grande for a drink and a peep at Mexico between the Van Horn and Vieja Mountains. The Davis Mountains have got the center of the county rumped up from north to south, with a lot of streams running out of them eastward to join a main fork of the Pecos. At the southern angle Twin Mountains rise, with more creeks forming Alamito, which swells the Rio Grande after watering Presidio County.

Two railroads cut through Jackson County, either side of the Davis Mountains, the Espee and the Peevey Ess. Outside of their townlets, and Fort Davis, you can count the settlements of Jeff Davis on the fingers of one hand.

But it's some place to live in for all that or because of it, maybe, according to your disposition. There are parks tucked away in the crinkly cañons of the Davis Range, like plums in pie-crust, sheltered, timbered and well grassed, with good, sweet water—ideal cattle ranges. There are long, deep cañons with red cliffs chafed by streams that turn to raging torrents in rain-time, rugged, picturesque ravines. There is a high plateau that is hard to beat for grazing ground, if it is set with cactus.

It's the real setting for Lasca, with the "free life" and the "fresh air" and "the canter after the cattle," wild but lovable, a country that steals into the affections like a wayward child, never quite absent in thought, always a little favored above the rest, however full of present charm.

Thirty miles from Rubio, on the Espee, up under the shadow of Baldy Peak, is the Curly O ranch, the "Curly O" standing for the initial of Quimby, who had long since made his fortune out of fat three-year-olds and was handling the bulls of Wall Street with a vigor that commanded equal success.

"Babs" Barton—full name Barbara—daughter of the up-to-date superintendent of the Curly O, often drove to Rubio with her father in the buckboard behind the slashing bays when the cattle shipment was big enough to warrant his personal supervision, starting the morning after the drive and reaching town with the easygoing steers.

Then Babs would go visiting with a special girl chum and run the gamut of Rubio's attractions—ice-cream sodas, "truly" candy, fresh ribbons and

fripperies at the store, new magazines, and a matinée at the Star Cinematographic Theater. The evening was always sacred to the bewilderment and enslaving of some unfortunate Rubioan, and, according to Barton's raillery of his motherless daughter, the real object of the sixty-mile trip—down one morning, back the next day, thirty miles down the hill and up again.

BABS and her chum, duly ensconced at the matinée, divided their time between the pictures, a box of candy, and the man who sat next to Babs, unconscious of his surroundings, engrossed in the screen. The girls decided in the half light that he was not handsome but likable.

Babs, who esteemed herself an expert in matters equine and bovine, approved his absorption in the film which showed the annual Cowboy Carnival and Contest at Cheyenne, and she liked the way he sat his chair as if it were a horse, with his shoulders back but all his muscles easy. His hair was sandy and his eyes were blue-gray. He would stand, she figured, pretty close to six feet and ride about a hundred and seventy pounds of well-strung frame. In youth his freckles had probably made him a shining mark for youthful wits, but the merciful tan had blended them to hardly distinguishable inlays.

He wore none of the costume that characterized the figures on the screen—save a silk handkerchief in lieu of a tie—but Babs did not need the testimony of his attitude and his *sotto voce* remarks to set him down as a cowman, and a good one.

Through the rough-riding exhibition he sat his chair riding with the prize-winners thrown into flickering action on the sheet, swaying as they swayed, balancing as they balanced, with comments that were both expert and audible.

"Oh, you steamboat! You li'l ol' sun-fishin', side-weavin' son of a wild hawss! Ride him, you ol' son of a gun. Ride him. Thataboy! Whoopee!"

He looked around quickly, shame-faced at the sound of his own voice, but, reassured by the faces of the girls who sternly repressed their laughter, he turned to the screen again, rumpling his soft Stetson in his hands as the sub-title announced the Rope-tying Championship of the World.

It was the turn of his neighbors to comment on the film.

"This is it, Claire," whispered Babs. "I hope the pictures are good. There he is."

The frank face of a young man, evidently unconscious of the greedy camera, broke out upon the curtain, the friendly lips parting in a winning smile, eyes a little puckered from the sun, unembarrassed, suddenly nodding recognition to a friend as the picture passed. The sub-title had already announced his name as the winner of the contest, John Redding.

A steer hurtled along to the clicking of the projecting machine. Behind came a lithe form on a Pinto pony, a modern centaur, man and animal moving as one, alert, cat-like as they followed the steer. An arm swung, a lariat straightened in the air, its sinuous loop settling over both horns, the rider took a swift turn about his saddle-horn as he lifted a leg for the dismount—and the ruthless film-producer cut the scene.

The next picture was heralded in a cloud of dust out of which emerged the beef, his neck stretched by the line kept taut by the watchful Pinto pony and the rider smoothly adjusting thongs about the protesting hoofs of the steer.

The sandy-haired one was jerking his head forward with every move of the rider on the screen, the girls leaned forward eagerly, Babs' hand on her friend's arm. Beyond them a stout drummer smirked at the two girls appraisingly, smiling cynically at their enthusiasm from shallow eyes.

The picture blanked out, the sub-title took its place. Fifty people read it aloud to the annoyance of five times their number:

#### **HOG-TIED IN FORTY-NINE SECONDS.**

"You son of a gun, you sure-swingin', handy-tyin' son of a gun," murmured the expert.

"I thought it was forty-eight and a half, Claire," said Barbara. "Aren't you proud of him? I wish he was my cousin instead of yours."

"Are you sure of that, Babs?" quizzed her chum. "You said you didn't believe in cousins—"

Barbara cut short the sentence by nipping her friend's arm a trifle viciously and produced a protesting "Ouch!"

"Friend of yours, ladies?" asked the drummer, turning his massaged but flabby face toward them.

The girls gave him a swift glance, and, by the peculiar process granted their sex, transported themselves a thousand miles away to a zone appreciably chilly. The drummer grinned.

"Needn't to get huffy," he said. "I go to Cheyenne myself for that show, regular. Like to see the prize-winners, girls as well. Though I needn't have gone so far to see them."

The girls stared hard at the crudely colored local advertisements filling in between the films.

"Here's my card," persisted their tormentor, "Fancy waists is my line. I'm staying at the National. If you girls would like to look over my samples we might find something to strike your fancy. About thirty-four, eh?"

The two girls, ignoring the card, looked fixedly ahead, biting their lips. Tears were very close to the lids of Claire Ashton, Babs' face was red and her fingers itched for connection with the drummer's fat cheek. The man beside her noted their attitude and the cause of it. He hesitated a moment, flushing, then turned to Barbara.

"I beg yo' pahdon, but would you-all like to change seats?" he asked.

THE tone of his voice, tintured with the Southern softness welcome to Texan ears, produced the opposite effect from that of the drummer. The girls came back from the frigid zone—that is, Claire did, Babs had already passed to the torrid belt. Barbara's brown eyes met the blue-gray ones, estimating and appreciating their sincerity.

"Thank you," she said. "But we're going now."

The girls adjusted their hats and started to rise, finding the way blocked by the insistent drummer, turned squarely in his seat, one arm across the back of the vacant chair ahead of him.

"Ah, don't get mad at nothing," he said. "Be sports. Wait till the end and we'll take a walk down to the sample-rooms and pick out a waist. I picked you for live ones when I followed you in."

The girls sat back, both pale now and very upright. The audience, many of whom they knew, were beginning to glance their way.

The sandy-haired cowman got up quietly.

"If you-all 'll pahdon me," he said, "I'll go out first."

He passed cleverly in front of them, hardly touching their skirts, then unceremoniously swept aside the fat legs of the drummer, and, passing that disgruntled individual, gathered the lapels of his fancy waistcoat and his carefully displayed tie in a grip that was not to be denied.

As he stepped into the aisle, the stout, protesting man, only able to speak in a muffled whisper, followed him willy-nilly, smoothly, quietly, resistlessly to one side, leaving the way clear for the grateful girls who made their way swiftly up the aisle.

The cowboy followed, trailed by the drummer, furious, crimson, smoothing his disordered attire.

In the entrance the girls paused to let them pass. The drummer tapped the cowboy on the shoulder belligerently.

"Who in — do you think you are?" he blustered. "You attend to your own business or you'll get in wrong!"

The cowboy surveyed him calmly, with a glint in his steady narrowed eyes that seemed to cool the belligerence of his challenger.

"Ef you want to know who I am," he drawled, "my name's Sandy Bourke. As fer my bus'ness, I'm tendin' to it. I herd cattle as a rule but I sometimes make a specialty of trainin' hawgs. You-all want another lesson?"

The man tried to outstare him but failed to hold the eyes with the cold gleam that suggested crouching menace. He caught a titter from the girls and turned away muttering in a careful undertone.

Sandy Bourke watched him much as he would have regarded a troublesome steer leaving the corral after branding, and proceeded to twist a cigarette in the fingers of one hand. As he raised it to his lips he became bewilderedly aware of a small, white hand outstretched apparently to meet his own, a pair of dancing, grateful brown eyes, a gleam of white teeth between red lips and a voice calling him by name.

"I want to thank you, Mr. Bourke," it said in charming accents. "I've heard of you often."

Sandy dropped his cigarette in sheer embarrassment.

"I'm Barbara Barton of the Curly O, and this is my chum, Claire Ashton."

"The Curly O?" Sandy came to his faculties, enlivened by the burning of his fingers with the match he still held for the spoiled cigarette, and took the hands the girls held out to him, much as he would have received some fragrant, delicate blossom.

"Yes," went on Barbara. "There are two saddle-chums of yours working for dad. Joe Peters and Sam Manning. They are always talking about you."

"Joe Peters! Mormon Joe Peters and Sodywater Sam?"

The girl nodded laughingly.

"Well, I'll be hornswoggled!"

"So I recognized you when you gave your name."

"Answered the description, freckles, hair an' all," supplied Sandy who was beginning to feel more at ease, though to quote himself, "females, 'specially gels, allus make me feel as if I'd been sent for an' couldn't come."

"Dad calls you '*The Three Musketeers*,' you know."

"Wal, miss, I low I'm on the corral post order of arcitectuah myself, but Joe, he's some hefty. So's Sam. An' none of us ever aimed to sting unless we had to."

The girl looked puzzled.

"Oh," she said at last, dimpling, "you thought I meant mosquitoes?"

"Yes, miss. Muskeeters, or musketeers, whichever way you pronounce it."

"These were three comrades, soldiers of France, long ago, who did all sorts of brave things. I'll lend you the book."

"Thank you, miss. Thet drummer now, he was more on the muskeeter order. I shore would hev liked to squash him, for luck. I was aimin' to ride oveh

to the Curly O termorreh. Me an' Pete—thet's my li'l hawss. We been driftin' quite a piece an' we aimed to settle awhile in Texas. I kindeh tho't of mixin' up over the river in Mexico, but things has quieted down along the bordeh. I didn't know Joe an' Sam was up to the Curly O—thet's shore good news—but I know yore dad—of him, leastwise. The Curly O and Misteh Barton's shore got some reputation 'mong us riders.

"Dad's in town," said Barbara. "I know he'll have room for you. Come down to Claire's with us, now. Dad's talking freight with Mr. Ashton."

"Why, I—"

"Do come. He'll want to thank you, too. Is your horse here?"

"I put Pete in the barn. Treated him while I took in the show. He's bin shy on oats of late. But—"

"You must come. Mustn't he, Claire?"

Claire, a giggling, plump personality in pink ruffles, added her importunities, and Sandy, feeling all arms and legs and freckles, walked, as he had never walked before, down the street, flanked by two pretty girls who regarded him with evident approval and led him—much as they would a newly acquired Saint Bernard or, for a better simile, a wolfhound—captive to the Ashton household.

"BOURKE," said Mr. Barton the next afternoon in the office of the Curly O, "I can always find room for a man like you, entirely aside from the obligation I'm under. I've got a job right in your line, from what Joe and Sam tell me. They say you're handy on the draw."

He glanced at the business-like Colts that swung from Sandy's hips. The cowboy was dressed in his working clothes, worn leather chaps, flannel shirt open at the bronzed neck, spurred and belted, his soft Stetson in his hands.

"I ain't exactly what you'd call a gun-man," he answered deprecatingly. "I can shoot some, but—"

"I'm not necessarily calling on you to use them. I fancy a good bluff, backed up by a pair of steady eyes will do the trick," said the superintendent. "This isn't a case of running off nesters. We're not bothered with them. We've got a nice bit of pasture at the far end of the ranch, at the opening of Smooth Creek Cañon. There are a couple of chaps with a bunch of horses—I fancy the brands are pretty well mixed—and they've got a loose idea about fences.

"I need every spear of that pasture for fattening. Range is getting pretty well burned off. The boys have run them off a few times but it's too far away for them to watch regularly. There's a small cabin down there for you to make yourself comfortable in. Use your own judgment. I don't want any shooting if

you can avoid it, but I want the pasture. What do you say, Bourke? It's fifty a month."

"Sounds interestin'."

"And a bonus if you'll stay six months. I'd like to have you. The boys say you're hard to keep, Bourke."

"Reckon I was bo'n with the saddle-itch," admitted Sandy. "But Texas is shore home to me. I'll likely stick."

"My foreman gets married in the Spring. Going to raise alfalfa. If you and I get along together we may have another talk about that time."

"Put me on the books," said Sandy.

"Good."

The two men shook hands appreciatively.

"Your chums are bunking with another chap in a separate cabin. They've got room for you overnight, and when you come in to the ranch-house the cook'll outfit you with grub. Better report every week. Come in Saturday nights until you persuade them to leave the pasture clear. Come in!"

The door opened and two men entered, their spurs jingling on the floor.

Sandy swung on his heel to meet them, slapping them effusively on the back.

"You ornery, bow-windowed, wife-beatin' ol' Pi-u-te!" he exclaimed, smiting a stout, sun-rouged cowman, too stout for saddle ease, bow-legged, high-stomached and bald, who pushed him away rapturously with short jabs into the arms of his husky, square-set companion, whose drooping mustache, like the down-turned horns of a Texas steer, failed to cover his welcome grin. To him Sandy turned his welcome. 'An' you, you ol' timber-wolf, what's the price of sody-water. Stop millin' me. I'll stampede."

Superintendent Barton surveyed the boisterous trio and turned to his desk contentedly. Sandy Bourke was a valuable addition to the outfit upon whose efficiency he prided himself.

"Come to chuck, you spotted ol' son of a gun," squeaked the stout man in a high pipe strangely at variance with his build. "Come to chuck an' meet up with the boys. Yo're leaner'n a cactus-fed coyote. Livin' is high on the Curly O. Sage honey and deer meat for supper tonight. Tune up, Sammy."

The square-set man obediently produced a harmonica as they left the office, and, cuddling it beneath the lambrequin of his black mustache, breathed out melodiously a lilting march as the three marched toward their quarters where a dozen cowboys, their day's work ended, waved their hats in greeting.

The back door of the office opened, and Barbara's dimpling face appeared.

"Did you get him, dad?" she asked.

"Signed up, honeybunch. There go your 'Three Musketeers' now. I'm going to send him to Smooth Creek Cañon at sun-up."

"Then I must get him the book I promised him. Look at them, dad."

The two stood by the window, watching Mormon Joe introducing the newcomer with elaborate gestures, while Soda-water Sam, astride the corral fence, militantly sounded his harmonica.

*Behold El Capitan!*

*Look at his independent air,*

*Notice his misanthropic stare,*

*And match him if you can—*

*He is the champion beyond compare.*

IT WAS the fourth day of Sandy's vigil in the Smooth Creek pastures. At morning, noon and night he patrolled the meadows, set with great alama trees, thicketed with lower growths, the creek flowing clear and cold from the upper cañon. So far he had found no sign of invading hoofs.

For a while he was inclined to think the job one manufactured as a reward for his interference in Barbara Barton's behalf, but further meditation dispelled the idea and its accompanying resentment. Sandy knew his own value on a cattle-ranch, though his self-conceit as to purely personal attraction, especially regarding the fair sex, was practically nil.

He sat outside the cabin, snug in a shady hollow close to the water, devouring the last pages of "The Three Musketeers." The ashes of his midday fire sent up a last lazy thread of blue, his dishes, fresh-scoured in the creek, reflected the dabs of sunlight that filtered through the leaves. Pete, saddle-free and unhaltered, nipped the crisp, green blades contentedly, twenty yards away, lifting his head now and then to exchange looks with his master, nickering for attention when Sandy failed to raise his head from the book.

At last he closed it, rolled the inevitable cigarette, folded his arms beneath his head and lay at full length, looking up at a woodpecker, querulous at the tobacco smoke, yet loath to leave his well-lardered bough.

"That is sure some book, bird," said Sandy. "Search me though why they don't call it The Four Musketeers. That *Dartagnan* chap was the pick of the herd, to my mind. Hullo!"

He rose to a sitting posture, listening to the sound of hoofs dull on the sod. Pete's ears were pricked forward as he came in to his master's trilling whistle. The woodpecker flew away as the cowboy rose, his lean body bent at the hips, ready hands hovering above the holsters he had thrust forward on his hips.

"Don't shoot, Mr. Bourke," cried a merry voice. "I'll come down."

Barbara Barton cantered up to the cabin, her hands held above her head in mock surrender, the reins about her saddle-horn, her pony whinnying at Pete, standing by his master's side.

"Did you think I was a horse rustler?" she asked, dropping lightly from the saddle, trim in riding-skirts and tan boots. "I've brought you news of them. Dan Deering, he's our foreman, you know, saw them in Rubio yesterday trying to sell some stock. That means no work for you for a few days. Dan says they won't come in till they've spent all they get for the horses. Have you had lunch?"

Sandy nodded.

"All fed an' washed up. But I can blow up the fire if you want some coffee."

"Thank you. It's too bad you've eaten, I brought enough for two. And pie! You can eat a piece of pie, can't you?"

She loosened the girth of her pony and took off the saddle, waving aside Sandy's offer of assistance.

"Saddle your pony, groom and feed him,  
Then perhaps you'll learn to lead him,"

she chanted. "That's dad's orders. I'll turn him loose to make friends with Pete while we eat. Oof, oof! I'm as hungry as a wolf."

BEFORE he realized it, Sandy found himself seated cross-legged on the turf, opening sardines and talking easily with one of the prettiest girls he had ever seen.

"I often come down here," chatted Barbara, eating with a frank appetite. "It's the coolest place on the ranch. The cabin was built by Quimby when he first located here. We used to camp here often Summers when mother was alive. Just the three of us. There's a big pool down a ways where we went swimming. Find it?"

"M-mm!" replied Sandy, surprised, with a mouth full of sardine sandwich.

"Dad set up the diving-board. It used to be heaps of fun. I can't get dad down here any more, so I'm making a sketch of the pool for his birthday as a surprise."

She touched a canvas satchel tied to the cantle of her saddle. Do you draw, Mr. Bourke?"

"Cards," answered Sandy laconically.

"Do you gamble?" she asked, her eyes assuming the round-orbed seriousness that the most unsophisticated of maidens can produce instinctively.

Sandy's own eyes twinkled.

"Some," he said. "Jes' natchelly hev' to hev' some excitement. Breaks out spasmodic, like measles, an' gen'ally breaks me."

"Why don't you save your money?"

"I do—when Pete needs a new saddle or my Sunday clothes get careworn."

"Aren't you going to have a ranch of your own, some day?"

"I shore wish you'd answer me thet question, miss. I'm the original human wander-bug. Ever see them bugs skitterin' about the top of a pond? Thet's me. I come by the rovin' heel legitimate. Dad come to Texas, way off in Palo Pinto County, on the Brazos, from No'th Ca'lina in the seventies. He was a 'Ku Klux' leader an' they asked him to travel. He married a gel from home, later, an' the two of 'em, after I come along, wandered plumb over the whole western states. They're dead now, an' Pete an' me keep house where I hang his saddle. Never had what you'd call a home. Dad was always settlin' an' never settled, an' me, goin' along with 'em, got the habit bad, same as thet *Dartagnan* chap in the book."

"Did you finish it?"

"I shore did, an' much obliged to you. Wish I'd lived in those days. I'd like to have had my guns along, though. Them stickpins they packed didn't amount to much when they had the odds against 'em."

"I brought you the sequel. '*Twenty Years After*.' "

"Thet's bully. Any of 'em settled down by then?"

"*Porthos* tried. But it didn't last."

"I reckon all of 'em hed too much fun driftin'."

"I suppose so. Don't you like your pie? I cooked it myself."

Sandy flushed.

"I was savin' half of it for Pete," he said. "Hope you don't object, but he's plumb crazy over pie."

"Of course I don't mind. Let me feed him."

Pete, snuffing gently at the girl's hand, daintily ate the juicy slice of blackberry pie, nosing delicately at the crumbs in Barbara's palm, and holding up a forefoot for a shake of gratitude.

"Isn't he a darling?" she said. "Craps won't do that."

"Craps?"

"Dad called him that when he was breaking him for me, because he was always throwing himself."

They both laughed. Craps looked around suspiciously and went on eating.

"I'll hev to make my rounds," said Sandy rising. "Got to earn my money."

"Wait just a minute. We haven't finished the pie. No more? Then I'll leave it for you and Pete. Dad's birthday is Friday. We'll hold it Sunday. We always make real holidays out of birthdays on the Curly O. We have special things to

eat, and sports in the afternoon, and, after supper, there's a big fire in the corral and we all sit on the fence and look on at stunts. Sam plays his harmonica and some of the boys sing. What are you going to do?"

"Me? I'm a dummy a' that sort of thing."

"You must do something."

"I might do some fancy shootin'."

"Goody. You can do that in the afternoon. Do some now. Craps won't mind. I suppose Pete won't."

"The ol' pie-eater thinks powder's perfume," said Sandy, picking up the sardine-tin. "Will you throw this up, miss? Fairly high."

"All right. Say when?"

"Go ahead!"

"I was waiting for you to get your guns ready."

"They'll be there."

The girl tossed the tin into the air. Sandy's hands moved too swiftly for her eyes to follow, but there was a glint of dull metal and six shots barked in rapid succession. The can, about to descend, jumped twistingly at each explosion, dropping to the turf punctured in half a dozen places in box and lid.

"Dandy!" cried Barbara. "I wish I could do that."

"Got to go now," said Sandy, carefully swabbing out his barrels and refilling his cylinders from his belt.

"Do you remember the picture-show?" asked the girl, rubbing Pete's soft, appreciative nose while Sandy adjusted the saddle.

"Sure thing."

"Remember the winner of the roping and tieing—John Redding?"

"M-mm!"

"Do you know him?"

"No, but I'd shore like to meet up with him, though. He's some hasty kid."

"We saw him at Cheyenne. Miss Ashton and myself. He's her cousin. They gave the time there as forty-eight and a half."

"Forty-nine's good enough to hold most of 'em. I've done it in fifty-three myself, an' Pete an' me shore had to hustle."

"Do you—think—he's good-looking?"

Sandy looked at the girl, who was intent upon scratching Pete between the eyes. His eyebrows raised quizzically.

"Best-lookin' youngster I've seen in ten years," he answered promptly. "Bet he's clean cut all through."

"I think so," said Barbara and blushed; but only Pete saw it.

"I'll have to start my picture," she said. "I'll saddle up. Good-by, if I don't see you again before Sunday. Perhaps I'll come over again before then if I don't finish the sketch today."

"Betteh keep away till I've persuaded those gents where the fence runs," said Sandy, swinging up on Pete who tried to bite his foot in play.

"They won't hurt me. I've got to get the drawing done by Sunday. Good-by!"

"Good-by!" Sandy pressed his knees into Pete and loped up the creek.

"Pete," he said, "I allus suspected them freckles of mine had worked through to my fool brain. There was me, swappin' talk with thet li'l gel like I'd knowed her all my life, an' thinkin', like a swelled-up lunkhead, she'd rode over to see my sandy-topped carcass. Here's wishin' John Redding all the luck in the worl'. He's got to be some man to get her. Get along, li'l hawss!"

TWO more days passed uneventfully and Saturday came without Barbara's reappearance. Sandy, oiling his guns inside the cabin, began to pine for more intimate excitements than the second-hand adventures of "Twenty Years After" and the playing of Canfield solitaire. In the week he had beaten his imaginary banker to the tune of eight hundred and ninety-seven dollars and the useless luck palled on him.

"Thet's the way it goes," he said, glancing out of the open door at Pete who was standing at gaze by the creek. "First real game I get into I'll hold bobtails an' one-end straights all evenin'."

A sudden wind ruffled the leaves of his book lying by his outdoor fireplace.

"Mustn't spoil Miss Barba'a's book," he muttered, and stepped out to rescue it.

Pete snorted and wheeled as two men rode swiftly around the side of the cabin. They were rough-looking customers, heavily bearded, wearing chaparajos and tapideros that showed hard work among the cactus. One covered Sandy with his revolvers, the other held a Winchester across the pommel of his saddle, ready for action.

Sandy restrained with an effort the instinctive flash of his hands to his hips, remembering the revolvers that lay with his belt and empty holsters in the cabin. He held his arms high above his head at the gruff command of the man with the rifle who surveyed him sneeringly.

"Caught yer nappin'? Jim, keep him stretchin' while I collect his artillery. In the cabin likely."

He dismounted and entered the cabin, reappearing with the guns. Sandy followed him with cold eyes, the pupils concentrated to black dots that held tiny red sparks like the fire-beads on a burnt stick.

"Nice little hawss you got there," said the man, buckling on Sandy's belt above his own. "Think we'll add him to the string, eh Jim?"

Sandy whistled shrilly, twice between his teeth. Pete whirled on his haunches, and, at a second command, tossed his head and raced away into the bushes.

"Trick hawss, eh? Thet's the last trick you'll play on us," said the man with the rifle, sending a vindictive but useless bullet after the galloping Pete. "We'll get your circus pony after we get through with you. You can put your hooks down, Mister Two-Gun man. You're harmless."

"I never aimed to do any," said Sandy dolefully. "What's the idea of all this rough stuff?"

"Crowin' soft now your comb's cut? Ef you'd showed fight I'd 'a' shot the tongue out of yer mouth. As it is, I'll use it."

"We heerd Mister Barton hired a watch-dog," he went on sneeringly, "ony we didn't know it was a cur. Put up your face when I'm talkin' to yer!"

Sandy raised his dejected head. The sparkle had gone from his eyes which opened pleadingly.

"I ain't aimed to do you fellows any harm," he said. "A chap has to take a job when he needs one bad, don't he?"

"A coyote 'thout enny more spunk 'n you've got's likely to be out of a job most of the time. Listen! You go back to your boss—ef you ain't got the pluck to face him ye'd better find it—an' tell him from me, from Plug Selby an' his side-kick, Jimmy Burroughs, thet the grass is sweet in Smooth Crick Cañon an' we aim ter use as much of it as we want ter."

The pupils of Sandy's eyes had shrunk again at the mention of the names, but he stood meekly with his thumbs tucked into the strap of his chaparajos, the picture of cowed manhood.

'An' tell him he needn't ter send enny more watchdogs to tag us. 'Cause if he happened to send one that warn't yaller, an' barked, I'd muzzle him. Do ye sabe? Now git!"

"Can I fetch my hat?" asked Sandy. "I wasn't aimin' to interfere none. The boss didn't tell me this was a shootin' job."

"Yer one of these picter cowpunches? Kinder gun-shy. You leave guns to a man who'll use 'em. Ef you bin wearin' your'n I might hev thought you 'tended usin' them. No," he snarled, "you can't git yore hat nor yore saddle neither. You walk, pronto, an' git yore feet tender to match the rest of ye. Pah!—" he spat on the ground—"I hate a coward. Go out thet-a-way."

He pointed with his right hand to the bluff behind the cabin, then shrieked as a gun cracked and his knuckles spurted blood. His horse reared, the rifle fell to the ground as he tried to control the plunging animal with his unwounded

hand. His companion who had put away his guns while he sat laughing at Sandy's discomfiture, drove in his spurs and rode furiously toward the cowboy who had swooped for the rifle and gained it with one hand, the other holding the smoking derringer which he had snatched from beneath the strap of his chaparajos.

Sandy fired again, and the horse of Burroughs smashed to the ground, shot through the brain, his rider falling with him, rolling half stunned on the ground. Sandy was over him in an instant, kicking swiftly and accurately at the base of his skull, still menacing the wounded desperado, cursing at the pain of his broken hand and his frightened horse. Burroughs lay twitching, senseless.

"Even curs bite, Selby," snapped Sandy, his eyes blazing like steel in sunlight. "Get off that hawss. You'll do the walkin' afteh all. I allus pack a third ace to draw to when I'm dealin' with crooks. Now stick up yore hands! Never mind the leak. I'll cool you off."

"I've heard of you, Plug Selby," he went on. The desperado, his face twisted with rage and pain, his right hand dripping blood, stood before him helplessly, his horse sniffing at its dead companion. "Can't place you right now, I'm a bit excited, an' *nervous*. Stan' still! If I figger it out I'll come an' git you."

He dropped the rifle behind him and deftly took both belts from Selby.

"I hate to use my feet," he said, "but w'en you mix up with bad men like you, you've got to kick, bite an' claw, if necessa'y. My orders is to chase you, not to bring you in. I reckon Barton wouldn't waste grub feedin' you. He's got too many good hawgs about the ranch. I'll collect yore partner's artillery an' you can pack him out of here on one hawss ef he don't come to. Ef yore stock's in the cañon, take it along with you, an' keep goin'. An' hurry, because I've got a book I'm readin' which is a heap betteh company than you are.'

He stepped back, picked up the rifle, stripped the guns from Burroughs, who showed faint signs of returning consciousness, belted on his own guns and sat down on the sill of the cabin door, the rifle across his knees.

"Glad you brought the Winchester along," he said. "You keep straight down the medder an' don't turn aside long's you're in range. An' fix the fence after you. It'll save me trouble, later."

He whistled a trilling signal. There was an instant whinny and Pete trotted up to Sandy's side, where he stood, pawing, with little snorts at the dead horse.

The stunned rustler began to move, and sat up, holding his head in both hands.

"What the—" he began dazedly.

Selby cut him short.

"Git up, you fool," he said. "Kin you walk?"

Burroughs got stiffly to his feet, swaying with dizziness.

"Head's busted in," he grunted.

"Then climb on the mare."

Selby roughly assisted him to the saddle and placed the reins in his groping hands, taking the bridle in his left hand.

"Take yore saddle," said Sandy. "I wouldn't give it hawss room."

"I'll git even with you fer this," said Selby savagely, picking up the heavy saddle with difficulty and jerking the bridle free from the stiffening horse.

"Game's open any time," answered Sandy cheerily. "Ef I wasn't in a hurry to get shet of you I'd make you bury the hawss. I'll do it myself, though it's more'n I would for either of you. I'd use you—'thout strychnine—to pizen coyotes."

Selby, wincing with the pain of his wounded hand, set the saddle in front of Burroughs, cursing him as he told him to steady it, and the two moved slowly down the open meadow, Sandy watching them, the rifle across his knees, until they disappeared in the trees, half a mile away.

"Thet was shore a close call, li'l hawss," he said to Pete, stroking his muzzle. "We'll get rid of thet pony—I'd ruther shot one of them anyday—an' then we'll see if they chopped off the head of that Miladi person in the book.

"We'll have news for the birthday pahty termorreh, ol' pie-eater," he said, as he came out from the cabin later with the book, and, turning the leaves, was transported from sunny Texas to sunny France in the first enthralling sentence from the king of romancists, Alexandre Dumas, *père*.

IT WAS four o'clock when Sandy made a final tour of the pasture, finding the tracks that showed where the rustlers had followed out his commands and rounded up their herd, driving them through the fence and replacing the torn-down wires. Sandy saw the horses grazing here and there on the spare herbage. He felt inclined to examine their brands, still puzzling over some vague idea that failed to link itself with any definite line of thought.

"I've heard those two beauties described somewheres," he said to Pete, "or read it—on a reward likely—but I can't place it. Some likely hawsses in thet bunch of theirs. Fifty-seven varieties of brands, at that. I reckon Selby an' his pal hev gone to town for medical advice for busted hands and sore heads. Both of 'em got sore heads, Pete. Chuckle, you ol' pie-eater, thet's a joke."

He rode back toward the cabin to collect his belongings before reporting the week's happenings at the ranch, crossing the creek at a ford below the swimming-pool that Barbara had sketched for her father.

"Lots of daylight, li'l hawss," he said. "Let's take a look at the place so's we-all can compliment her proper when we see the picter."

He cantered along the shady bank, rolling a cigarette. At the diving-board Pete suddenly shied.

"Hol' on there, doggone ye, I've spoiled my cigareet," said Sandy.

Pete stopped at the remonstrant tone, bending his head to sniff at a block of paper on the top leaf of which showed a spirited water-color of the pool.

"Hullo!" said Sandy. "She's forgot her sketch. Shucks! Thet's funny!"

He dismounted and picked up the block. Close by lay the canvas satchel, an upturned paint-box, the white color-pans scattered on the grass amid pencils and brushes. Sandy threw the lines over Pete's head and sought the turf for signs.

"She must hev come early this mornin' while I was up pasture," he said. "An' those skunks spotted her. An' I sent 'em right along this way. She'd not hear the crack from that derringer, way the wind was. Only one of 'em!" he exclaimed as he found the signs he was looking for. "One of 'em drove off the hawsses to fool me, an' the other grabbed her. An' they got two hours start. It's up to me."

His lips closed down ominously as he spun the cylinders of his guns.

"We'll take these along, Pete," he said, gathering up the sketch and the drawing materials, tying them, replaced in their canvas bag, to his saddle. "Ef they've harmed her enny, I'll do some drawin' myself, an' it'll be a finished picter when I'm through."

He scouted the bushes, following a line of heavy footprints in the turf. A branch was torn away as if in a desperate grasp. A fleck of blood showed on the glossy leaf.

"Selby," he muttered. "Wish I'd plugged the rotten head of him, sted of just his hand. Burroughs 'ud come back for him with another hawss. Bettah cast about a bit, Pete. Too many rocks here."

He mounted and circled the thickets growing amid the outcropping rocks.

"Here we are," he said, scrutinizing the marks, dark-rimmed by the setting sun. "Pete, ol' swiftfoot, we'll catch 'em. Got no time to lose though."

With jaws close set, his Stetson well down over his furrowed brows, Sandy followed the trail that led through the trees to the cañon cliffs where cactus and greasewood and chamiso supplanted the thickets, growing on rocky ledges where hoofprints showed few and far between. He skirted the cliff, keeping on clearer, softer ground, knowing the walls of the cañon insurmountable for the time, and, now that the direction was determined, sure of his quarry as long as no trail came out from the tangled chapparal.

The cañon ran due east and west, and the sinking sun sent a long purple shadow ahead of the man and horse, as if eager to speed the pursuit. Sandy made good speed time, his thoughts far ahead, gusts of red anger sweeping

through him as he thought of the lengths to which such desperate outlaws might go in their desire to get even.

"Mebbe they'll jest hold her for ransom, Pete. Mebbe—Ef they've tangled two braids of her pretty hair—I'll shoot first, I reckon, an' ask her all about it afterwards."

The cañon walls grew closer. Smooth Creek belied its name, tumbling noisily over a rocky bed. A chapparal cock sped down the trail ahead of him. High up, a buzzard soared. Pete envied him his point of vantage.

"Give me a lead, ol' buzzard," he said, guiding Pete in the softest dirt to offset any betraying tinkle of spur on rock. "Give me a lead an' I'll likely provide supper for ye. Move on li'l hawss, it's shore gettin' dahk."

The crimson sun-stain was creeping up the cliffs, chased by the purple shadows. The old cattle-trail he had been following was invaded by cactus, casting distorted shadows that made the discovery of tracks momentarily more difficult. Sandy reined in, and Pete threw up his neck, snuffing with open nostrils.

"Scent 'em out, ol' hawss. I'm goin' up here a ways," said Sandy.

HE LEFT Pete and picked his way to a shallow box cañon up the sides of which he scrambled. As he reached the top, the dusk filled with a violet tide the narrow cañon he had left. Where he stood was still daylight, though one or two stars peeped palely in the zenith.

"No moon till about ten," he muttered.

Below, Pete whinnied softly. Sandy could barely make him out in the dusky flood as he stood with head outstretched, ears pricked forward.

"He's scented somethin'," said Sandy, climbing to the summit of a shelf of rim rock and gazing up the cañon.

On the opposite cliff, far away, a light flared like a sudden star amid the blackness of a cloak of pines, hung midway up the wall. It vanished. Sandy shifted his position and caught its glow, a steady spark of red flame.

He quickly clambered down to Pete, striding through the cactus regardless of the thorns that tore at shirt and arms and scored his leather chaparajos. Pete was pawing the ground and nickering softly.

"We got 'em, Pete," he said, "Yore nose an' my eyes. Get along, li'l hawss."

Beneath the pine-clad slope he halted, patted Pete, dismounted, lightly closed his hand over the sensitive nostrils, and whispered into one cocked ear.

"Keep quiet, ol' side-pardner. Crick's doin' its best to help but they might hear. I'll be back before long."

Masked by the roar of the torrent, he crept swiftly upward, skirting the trees until he caught sight of a shaft of light fingering its way between the

piners. He slipped off his leather chaps, then his shoes, making his way silently as an Indian trailer over the dry needles and slippery cones, gliding from tree to tree, invisible in the shadows.

Behind a great pine he shrank close to the bark, listening. He had come to a little plateau, partially cleared. A fire leaped ruddily behind a fallen log, lighting up the stumps of felled trees, the front of a tumble-down cabin built close against a ledge of rock in the face of the cliff, touching the dark mouth of a miner's drift-tunnel. No figures were visible, but he could hear men's voices from the fire which had been built with the prostrate pine for a back-log.

He dropped to his hands and knees and writhed softly forward on his stomach. A holster caught in a fallen branch and he stopped before a twig could snap, quietly loosening his belt and easing out his guns. He was close to the log now, and stopped to catch his breath regularly.

"Ain't ye goin' to give the gel suthin' to eat?" asked the voice of Burroughs.

"Eat nothin'. I've got suthin' to say to her thet won't improve her appetite, soon's I'm through. Pass thet cup."

Sandy inched closer, his body writhed upward like a snake until his eyes gazed above the log, his hands lifting slowly, the blued barrels of the Colts dull in the shadow.

The two men sat close to each other by the fire across from the log, intent upon the division of a flask of whisky in a tin cup. A blackened coffee-pot was on the coals and two greasy tin plates picked up the fire-light. The muzzles of Sandy's Colts raised and came down softly on the mossy log.

"Don't move till I tell ye. Don't wink."

The quiet voice of Sandy, coming out of the darkness, seemed to paralyze the drinkers. They held themselves rigid, arms stiffened as they held the flask and cup, only their eyes moving, red in the firelight, as they fearfully focused on the barrels of the pistols and Sandy's eyes, clear in the up-thrown glare. Not a finger twitched in the little tableau, frozen with sudden alarm.

"You Burroughs," said Sandy, not raising his voice, motionless himself. "You've got two hands. Unfasten yore belt. Don't stray from the buckle. Empty them guns on the ground. Kick 'em to one side, careful. Now, Selby, you turn roun'. Don't trouble to get up. Don't move nothin' but yore laigs."

The rustler twisted grotesquely about like a squatting toad in the ashes.

"Put yore hands behind you. Now, Burroughs, fasten him good with yore belt. Let me see the job. Turn 'roun' yoreself. Now keep still, both of you!"

He sidled over the log, strode through the fire, and, a barrel between the shoulder blades of each of them, marched them to where their horses stood by some saplings.

"Back up to thet tree, Burroughs," he ordered. "Fold yore arms 'roun' it backward. Fine! Don't you try to make no breaks, Selby."

He took the rope from one of the horses and deftly fastened Burroughs' wrists behind the tree, using the slack to make a snug turn about the trunk and the rustler's neck, leaving him helpless.

"Now, Selby, yo' turn."

The ruffian swore as Sandy unfastened the belt with one hand and snugly pinioned him to another tree, unheeding his wounded hand.

"You open thet foul mouth of yore's agen," he said, "an' I'll stuff yore hat in it. I meant to shoot you on gen'al principles an' I will yet ef you've harmed thet li'l lady, only I just remembered while I was crawlin' up the hill where I read the description of yore worthless hides. They's a reward posted in Las Cruces for a pair of hawss-thieves, one of 'em named Plug Selby. Five hundred dobies for information which I'll be collectin'—an' me wonderin' how I'd buy a birthday present for Misteh Barton 'thout drawin' ahead. Where's the gel. Tunnel or cabin?"

"Cabin," said Burroughs sullenly. "See here, cap—"

"Thet's the last word I want out of either of you. You can do all the talkin' you want between the time we leave an' when the boys come back for ye after moonrise."

He lit a pine-knot at the fire and entered the cabin. On the floor, sitting against the log wall, was Barbara Barton, her eyes brave in the torchlight, bound and gagged. Sandy cut the ropes and freed her, helping her to her feet.

"Did they hurt you any?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I heard you outside. Don't look and talk as if you were angry with me. I couldn't help it. You don't know how glad I am to see you."

Sandy laughed, his face slackening from its tightly drawn scowl.

"That's better," she said. "You looked as if you were going to eat me. Where are those brutes. How did you find me?"

"Pete an' me put our heads together. I've got the brutes chained up. Come on, Miss Barbara, we'd betteh be gettin' home."

"Dad'll be terribly upset. We're way in your debt again."

"Wal," grinned Sandy, "I've made five hundred dollars tonight. We'll call it even. Of cawse, ef I was John Redding—"

Barbara's face was as bright as the flame of the torch.

"Silly!" she said, and followed him out.

## 2: Nemesis

*Adventure*, 30 Oct 1923

IT WAS close to nightfall when the canoe crossed the last lagoon and entered a swift river, mangrove-banked with the current making curious sucking noises among the stilted roots—like chuckling mud monsters. The naked natives paddled hard, sweat beading on their dark skins while their eyes rolled strangely beneath their frizzly hair, fantastically bleached with lime to the semblance of yellow and orange dust mops.

Presently the mangroves gave way to the bush, tall trees festooned by lianas, wattled with jungle undergrowth. The lowering sun bloodied the drips from the paddle blades, painted crimson the ragged crests of the mountains, looming dark, savage, distant. The far-off throb of drums came down the whispering wind that went rustling mysteriously through the gloomy forest.

Benson lolled in the stern, languid, affecting nonchalance, as ever—posing—imagining himself the leader of a band of dusky slaves, not quite easy in the rôle but unable entirely to lose his theatrical tendencies, his love for playing a leading part on his immediate stage.

His eyes were haunted, like those of Harris in the bows, like those of all the men they were furtively going to join, men whose loud laughter was never extended to their glance, men who were anxious rather than gay, for all their swaggering masquerades.

Benson knew the hunt was up, implacable, persistent. In the calamitous hurry of discovery and departure he had not been able to bring much money, less than ten thousand dollars of all those gathered from his dupes, barely two per cent. of all his loot. Flight, with the knowledge of sure pursuit, had proved expensive and his funds were low. True, he had spent, had thrown away, most of that half a million dollars but there had been another coup pending. If he had only had a little more time—

His white linen was limp and grimy from the heat and discomfort of the trip from Suva. A good deal of the bravado was out of Benson and the look of the sullen jungle in the sunset glare was not promising. Mosquitoes buzzed and bit viciously. Invisible sand-flies were worse.

Harris, the cheap crook, the absconding trader's agent who had told him of the Brotherhood, was hunched up in the bows, foul of mind and body, half-drunk, swigging at his flask of rum, singing snatches of ribald song.

Strange company for Benson after the glitter of cafés, the music, the white, smooth shoulders of women, the food, the dance, the wine, the life for which he had bartered his honor—his essential liberty. He cursed the woman who

had given him away. His mood of make-believe vanished. The paddler facing him started at the sudden ferocity of the white man's face.

"Round the next bend, matey," sang out Harris. "Then we 'oof it. Git there just right. No use showin' up afore dark."

*Fair she was, to outward seemin'  
An' she swore that she'd be true.  
'T'was my gold that caused 'er beamin'  
For 'er nyme was Siren Sue.*

"Sirens up to the Brother'ood, matey. Good pals. There's one called Kumi they s'y is a fair knockout. Good grub an' plenty of good booze. All your 'eart desires so long as you got the price. Suit you, matey?"

"Sounds good," forced Benson, affecting distasteful fellowship.

"Betcha life."

The bow-paddler suddenly jabbered in Fijian and Harris answered him in the dialect. The canoe swung inshore against the swirling current. The drums boomed out louder. The barbaric, compelling rhythm seemed to Benson to come simultaneously from everywhere—the bush, the sky, the ground and the dark welling water. The ominous, sinister measure dominated his feverish pulse. The boohing of conch-shells, like demon hooting, came down the river gorge. He was sure he saw a dark figure materialize for a moment against the bush and then vanish like so much vapor.

His vivid imagination pictured stark savages careering about monstrous idols while shaven-headed women shuffled in silent files, their pendulous breasts swinging time, peeled wands surmounted by grinning skulls in their right hands, flaring torches in their left. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead as the canoe bumped gently, nosing into the matted bush.

"——, what a hole!"

Harris leaned forward.

"Cheerio! Ere we are, matey, chuck out your luggage."

They were at the entrance of a dim and narrow bush-path, its floor trodden hard by myriads of horny soles, walled by the impenetrable jungle. It was here that Benson had seen the figure appear and vanish. The paddlers had been paid beforehand. Without a word they swiftly turned the canoe, the paddles staking circles of troubled water that caught the red of the overhead sky. With a swiftly increasing stroke they went racing downstream as if glad to leave the spot.

Harris swung up a grimy duck bag to his shoulder. Benson, reduced to one piece of baggage in this latest flight, hesitated to take up his grip.

"I'll swear I saw a man watching us just now before we landed," he said. "A native. Listen to those cursed drums, will you?"

"Sure. Give me the creeps when I first 'eard 'em. Lor', I couldn't sleep without 'em nowadays! Wait till you've 'ad a beach-station, matey. Course you see a man. A lookout. 'E's on 'is w'y to s'y we're comin'. You don't ketch 'Rumbo' Williams nappin', matey. 'Ow 'ud we be safe if 'e didn't set watch? Come on."

The bush hemmed them with barely elbow room. Buttressed banyans, breadfruit, towering tutui, scarlet geranium-trees, feathery-bamboo, wild-citron, inextricably meshed with vines, dense shrubbery at their feet, writhing creepers across the trail. There was no sound of birds, only the hum of innumerable insects, jeweled beetles, metallic butterflies that flickered in the twilight. The foliage seemed black under the fading after-glow of sulfur-colored clouds floating on a sea of jade-green that swiftly dimmed to olive, then to purple, suddenly set with glowing stars—like eyes.

Out of the bush came the oppressive odors of decaying fruit and too fragrant flowers—a decadent perfume suggesting death.

THE Brotherhood had various names bestowed upon it by the various types of men that sought its sanctuary. It was a Clearing House for Criminals, a Fourth Dimension for Fugitives. They entered its immunity—at a price, fixed by Rumbo Williams, bawdy prior of this mysterious monastery—and disappeared. Sometimes an emissary of the law, a kilted half-caste of the native police, arrived in desultory search, found nothing and departed bribe in hand.

Swindlers and rogues and fools in their degrees. Fraudulent bankers, corrupt agents, venal trustees, pearl poachers, ex-convicts—some of them desperate fugitives from dread Noumea—runaway ship's apprentices, pallid men, men tanned by wind and sun and sea, men white, yellow, brown and black, of all ranks; all runaways, coming from all parts of the world for asylum, for a chance to hide and be forwarded by Rumbo's underground system to still remoter places. These the Brethren.

The low-roofed house was hardly visible as they broke out of the trail and crossed a tract of breast-high ferns whose crushed fronds gave out a faint smell of almonds. Again a flitting form preceded them, materializing and vanishing like a phantom. No lights showed.

The sounds they had heard while they were in the fern ceased suddenly—the whine of a violin, the blare of an accordion, buffeting of feet on a dance floor and men's coarse voices grating in careless chorus. Only the distant drums persisted.

Harris tapped a signal. This was not his first visit, he boasted, and he knew the ropes. A slide opened finally and the *sesame* was passed. There was the chink of coin, a door set wide and Harris passed in. Benson found himself confronted by a man half a foot taller than himself, his long bearded face in the shadow, his eyes dark though Benson felt their keen appraisal.

"It's twenty quid a week, pay in advance," said a deep voice that was not without an echo of quality, of educated intonation.

"Twenty?" protested Benson. "Harris said—"

"Harris is a horse of another color, my friend. I know a gent when I see one and I know brains. I don't know what your lay was, brother, and I don't care, but I'll warrant it paid well. You're not a piker, a picaroon, like most of our pals in here. And you pay accordingly—take it or leave it."

Benson gave him notes he had got in Sydney. The noise had started again. His host escorted him through the main room of the shanty where men sat elbowed at a long, low table, some playing cards, some drinking moodily, all turning hunted eyes towards the door. Tallow candles swung on wires suspended above the bar and guttered on the table. There were Chinese in the crowd, Malays, mixed breeds, white men drumming with nervous fingers to the music while their thoughts were far from the cards spread out in 'Canfield' before them. A few rough customers danced together. Two—more lucky—dragged about half-white girls who screamed with laughter as they repelled crude familiarities.

"All sorts and conditions of men," said Rumbo. "Good fellows but—careless—let us say careless. Knit in common interest, in common safety. A sort of socialism, effective despite apparent limitations of caste, because each depends upon the other. You can well understand that.

"It pays to be liberal. I should stand a round occasionally, if I were you. Get their goodwill. You can never tell when you may need it.

"Here are the sleeping quarters. Communism again. But I insist upon cleanliness and only white men sleep in this room. You can take either of these end bunks. Quite pleasant with the window open above. Mosquito nettings, you see. Fresh matting."

He had talked specifically to Benson. Harris, as a former guest, needed no enlightenment. Rumbo Williams lowered his voice.

"I do not ask your confidence or your name," he said. "Though you will require the latter. Call it Smith. Glad to have you stay here as long as you like. If you have decided where you are going I will arrange the exit, if not, I might suggest. The Marquesas now? If it were not for the profits—I'm being frank with you—I'd go there myself. May yet. Golden women with golden hearts who worship a white man like a god and hide you in the hills. Loving and not

over jealous. You can have a dozen of 'em if you want. Lotus Land. I can tell you are a woman's man, sir. All red-blooded men are. I'm one myself. My failing."

Benson wondered from what pinnacle of respectability this keeper of an illicit sanctuary had fallen when he became 'careless.' Closer inspection showed Williams to have good features coarsened by self-license, eyes that were a strange combination of being both bleary and keen, a prominent nose that advertised his title of Rumbo, a physique marred by corpulence—but powerful. With it all an assumption of fellow villainy that jarred on Benson who was not over sensitive.

"I can get you in without registry, Mr. Smith. The French authorities will never know you've landed. Once tucked away, you're safe forever. Unless things blow over. They do sometimes unless you happen to get in wrong with the Federal Government—we're both Americans. Uncle Samuel has an inconveniently long memory."

Benson dissembled easily enough. He was not going to give himself away to this trafficker in 'carelessness.'

"Quarters are fine," he said. "I'll talk things over with you later. Expect I'll stay here for a few weeks."

Rumbo's eyes glowed with cupidity. Benson knew that his was a slick villainy, that his veneer of friendliness would slide like a dirt road surface after rain if friction occurred. It would cost money to get away but it was worth it. The Marquesas and its golden women! That was an apt phrase. A man might do worse than live in Lotus Land and thumb his nose at the Federal hounds.

He had been a fool to cross swords with Uncle Sam, to plan with an alien enemy and conspire to prevent the shipment of ammunition to the Allies. True, he had not been an actual traitor to his own. He had double-crossed the very men who had paid him so liberally. It was lucky the Allies had taken over the South Seas. It would not do to fall into the hands of those with whom he had bargained.

There had been other matters too; trust funds, gold mines and oil wells, unfortunate investments for those who had sought his advice. All stirred up when the woman had betrayed him. Still—in the Marquesas a little money went a long way.

"Let's buy that round of drinks," he said.

There was a woman—a girl—posturing at one end of the big room, gracefully voluptuous, round of limb and firm of breast, chanting as she moved in a native *hula* to the plucking of a banjo. White wild-ginger flowers were wreathed in her hair and about her body above the swinging skirt of grass and

bark-paper. Not all the men regarded her. One looked at her with eyes that showed hatred of her sex.

"It's Kumi," said Harris. "Ain't she a charmer? A bit of all right, she is. 'Ave 'er up for a drink when she gets through."

The whole room responded eagerly to Benson's 'shout.' Clouted natives acted as waiters to those who did not crowd to the bar. The pungent liquor warmed Benson's body, mounted to his brain, loosened his emotions. He shook off his moodiness. Here was an audience and he was first and last an actor, a player to the gallery, desirous of applause.

With the same air—with something of the same hypocrisy—with which he used to lay a twenty-dollar bill upon the collection plate at church in his home town in Massachusetts—where his wife and child now lived as best they could—he flourished his money, bought them liquor, told them stories and sat smiling at their loud guffaws.

They cheered him and sang him passing fame as a jolly good fellow. The room grew thick with smoke, the air carried fumes of strong brews. Kumi came to his side and stayed there while Harris glowered. Benson was master of the revel. He began to boast a little, to hint more than his reason warned him—against his glib tongue—was wise. He absorbed their admiration, swollen with conceit like a dry sponge soaking water.

His eyes brightened and he complacently stroked the mustache and trim beard he had grown since he had read the newspaper in the club at Sydney that warned him to move on. He slid an arm about the giggling Kumi and Harris, red-eyed, drunken, malevolent, struck fiercely at him.

Benson was not a coward and he was a physically fit as the other. Harris fought foul with foot and knee, with fingers that clawed for his opponent's eyes and Benson fought him off half-blinded, a pain in his groin like a hot blade.

When his vision cleared Harris was struggling futilely in the grip of Rumbo who propelled him towards the door. A two-quid guest against a twenty-quid one! There was no question of the issue.

The men had formed a ring about them, musicians, waiters and barman, their eyes eager for a fight, already showing disappointment as Rumbo took charge.

"Out you go!" cried Rumbo. "I don't stand for that sort of thing, my bucko! Got drunk on his liquor and then turned on him for nothing. I'm running this shanty, women and all."

Harris, bloodied where Benson's fist had split his mouth, his whole face crimson with rage and mortification, struggled hard in the clutch of Rumbo, holding him aloft, calling for the offender's dunnage, prepared to cast him into

outer darkness and insecurity. Benson interfered. His brain cleared at the crisis. He could not afford to be enemies with any of his fellow refugees, let alone Harris, who knew more than the rest.

"Hold on," he said. "That was my fault. I didn't know she was his girl. If my drinks started the fuss let another round end it."

Rumbo regarded Benson with eyes that held a glint of approval, of recognition of the other's sapience.

"If that's the way you feel about it," he said, "I'll call it off as a favor to you. But I don't stand for having my rules broken."

He shook Harris a little before he put him down, as a bull-terrier might shake a rat. Harris stood glowering.

"My fault, Harris," repeated Benson. "I didn't mean to butt in. We'll have another drink round and forget it."

It was plain that Harris' ungracious growl of acceptance was more expedient than spontaneous but he shook hands with his assailant though he did not look him in the eyes. He turned to the girl who had stood by with her big eyes glowing, her breasts heaving in the feminine excitement and satisfaction of being the core of a quarrel.

She made a scornful *moue* at him.

"What name you so rough a fella?" she demanded as she eluded his uncertain grasp. "I no like that kind."

Benson, carrying his liquor better than most of them, knew he had not properly placated Harris and he made it a point to send the latter to his bunk in a condition which he hoped would produce forgetfulness of the details of the quarrel, though he did not doubt that Kumi would remind Harris of it if the agent again approached her for favors. Now she showed herself attracted by Benson but self-preservation was prime with him over his inclinations. Pretty and voluptuous as she was, he did not intend to enter an intrigue that might lead to dangerous reprisal from Harris.

All that could wait until he met the golden women of the Marquesas. In Lotus Land.

Benson didn't sleep much but lay in a reverie in which he saw himself a petty potentate, petted and pampered by black-eyed, black-haired beauties, secure from pursuit. A man might do worse.

There were none of those cursed drums in the Marquesas! They were pacific islands in the true sense; lands of wild, romantic beauty, of waving palms, of streams and waterfalls, of flowers and universal verdure, life, the love of life and the life of love.

He knew something of Rumbo Williams' methods of speeding his departing guests, gleaned from Harris. An outrigger canoe to Nuka Hiva, a cabin aboard a

discreet trader, a vanishing in the night. Costly—in Benson's case—but efficient.

Of the victims of his various speculations Benson, then, as ever, thought not at all. He had a faculty of dismissing them as inferiors unable to cope with his smartness, victims of their own credulity, to be forgotten as the birds limed and netted by a fowler. Man, woman, child, widow, orphan, friend, he eliminated them.

One thing remained with him against his efforts. The look in his wife's eyes when she realised that he was not merely rogue but traitor. In vain he called her to himself a canting hypocrite. He had hidden things from her because he had wanted to maintain her respect, if not her love, and the loss of it rankled. Far more than the fact that she sat in ashes amid the ruin of her respectability and that of their child.

Benson was a very thorough-going blackguard.

When he woke up it was well after dawn. The drums had ceased. A radiant shaft of sunshine came through the window above his bunk. He watched the little motes dancing in the shining beam. The *golden* beam.

It might be well to stay with Rumbo long enough for ingratiating—at twenty quid a week—then—emerald islands, sapphire seas, crags of gray-jade, silver streams and *golden* women—*golden* life—the old world laughed at.

THERE are at least two types of detectives, even those in government employ. The solver of mysteries, attracted to the profession by a flair for the unraveling of riddles. The man-hunter, the bloodhound of the law.

The last is brave, persistent, patient. The other need not have the first of these qualities.

Jim Griffin of the Federal Service was the bloodhound of the law. He had brains, bravery, pertinacity, a faculty for recognition, for penetration of disguise, an excellent memory and an absolute conviction that he was serving the ends of justice, the good of the community, doing his duty as a citizen when he took the trail.

From that moment he was a sworn foe to the fugitive, implacable, not to be shaken off. Taken off the official leash, given full liberty, Griffin had never failed to get his man. Some of them dead, but all of them accounted for.

During the World War the criminal who fled was of less importance than the still active agent of the enemy. Griffin was recalled from pursuit of Benson just as the trail began to grow warm. He returned from Sydney on the same steamer that had landed him and the years went by with the case of Benson docketed—filed, but not forgotten. It was a cold scent when Griffin took it up

again while part of the world, at least, settled slowly, very slowly, down towards normal.

Griffin was human. Professionally, a man like Benson was to him as a fox to a hound. That part of it was automatic. Personally, he held a warm man's hatred towards the human vermin who deliberately won the confidence of the ill-advised or the unadvised and robbed them by methods that left the victims helpless. This man had made beggars out of some women so that he could enjoy the loot with others. He robbed the fatherless and the widow without compunction and swaggered in many rôles. At his home he was a virtuous citizen, in New York he smiled to be pointed out as a *roué*. On top of it all he had played traitor. His part in the war had been one of chicanery. A carpetbagger was a gentleman beside him and Griffin took up the chase with a grim satisfaction that matched his determination.

But there were two sides to Griffin, just as there are two sides to velvet. Stern and implacable, though without rancor, wherever business was concerned, Griffin had a soft as well as a seamy side to his nature. He was born with an eye for color and an ear for music. The arts did not claim him yet he was at heart a poet. He was such a good judge of poetry that he abandoned his own attempts but he never traveled without one or more pocket-editions. To him the sea was beautiful and for him others more gifted expressed his feelings to his supreme content. He did not read his verse in public but went on deck primed with it and returned to it in his own cabin with renewed delight.

None suspected him of such a trend. None ever guessed his profession, for that matter. He had no wife, no home beyond bed and sitting-room in Washington where a discreet landlady enjoyed him as her only lodger and where he repaid her good offices by making her garden a glorious, perfumed riot—peonies predominating. He was a stocky, middle-sized, middle-aged man, inconspicuous yet affable. He was the sort of man to whom many people confided their troubles—principally domestic—and to whom he gave excellent advice, out of his knowledge of human nature.

He was generally thought to be something in insurance or else a traveling auditor but, on the *Miowera*, going out to Sydney, he let it be understood that he was a botanical chemist, being assured that he would find Benson somewhere in the South Seas. Benson had not had money enough in hand to seek indefinite sojourn in some country where the extradition courtesies are not exchanged and, knowing his man's tendencies, knowing that he had formerly headed for Sydney, through San Francisco, two thresholds of the Southern Pacific, Griffin felt sure that he would find him somewhere between

Capricorn and Cancer. His own rôle of botanist would give him excuse for rambling.

Griffin believed in finding his man first and securing local official warrant afterwards. Experience had taught him that this was the best way. Local justice might be blinded by a bank-note bandage, peculiarly opaque. Local gossip ran fast and far ahead where the law was invoked. A policeman off his beat in the South Seas is notoriously looking for a criminal and his company is equally suspicious.

Griffin went to Sydney only to tranship to Suva. He had learned that his man had gone to the Fijian capital on his previous trailing, when recalled. It was his habit to keep in touch with the fugitives with whom he was officially concerned. Many a man, heartsick and homesick, venturing at last back to God's country of Home, had been met on the borders by this medium sort of a man whose gray eyes were remorseless and whose methods of taking in charge were tremendously if unostentatiously efficient.

There was some luck in his meeting Harris, not an unusual amount, since Suva, like Port Said, Honolulu, Singapore and Shanghai, is a cross-roads and since Harris invariably made it his intermittent headquarters. He picked Harris with certainty as a rascal, finding him in one of the waterfront places he wandered into. And he managed to hint to Harris that he was in some trouble with his firm—that he had sold them out over a valuable discovery and, therefore, was inclined to lay low. Inside of forty-eight hours he had turned Harris inside out like an old glove, had heard of the Brotherhood and the lamented demise of Rumbo Williams.

" 'E got too bloody fresh with a woman from the 'ills," said Harris. "Now 'is 'ead 's 'angin' up in a club'ouse somewheres, dried. I 'elped bury what they left of 'im. Caught 'im spoonin' with the woman, they did. Probably sneaked up on 'im through the bush and got 'im with a 'ead 'ook. That's a loop of cane on the end of a stick with a spike they jab through the top of your spine when they jerk back. 'E was a nasty mess when we found 'im. The ants 'ad got at 'im. Reckon they cooked the woman. She was gone."

Over the fiery rum, with Griffin absorbing his tots until Harris declared with enthusiasm that he must possess a hollow leg, Harris reminisced of Rumbo. Griffin recognised it as a likely lead and elbowed him along the mental trail until Benson appeared like a picture thrown on a screen, clearly focussed by Harris' ancient grudge.

"I'd 'ave copped that girl if it 'adn't been for 'im, the blighter! It's too bad the Brotherhood's busted up, matey. No one else 'ad Rumbo's pull. But I can put you up to a 'ideout."

Griffin deftly led him back to Benson and the next day he took opportune ship for Tahiti, thence from Papeete to Hiva-Oa in the Marquesas in a trading schooner. The trail was warm again.

For seven hundred and fifty miles of sailing Griffin gave his poesy full rein, watching the birds and the fish, the argosies of trade clouds, the purple seas by day and the phosphorescent breakers at night, a milky path of trembling radiance. The winds, the stars, intrigued him and he read in his pocket-edition of Keats' magic casements, waiting to see the islands rise out of the sea, lonely, unvisited, without cable or wireless, ideal losing-places, but sure of his man.

The land smiled. Mount Temetiu, swathed in sulfur mists, waited the strengthening of the sun. The high crags were already tipped with amber, below them dense foliage ran, crisp as lettuce, down to the fronded palms on the bluffs where cascades fell waving into the sea. Blow-holes spouted at the foot of the cliffs and the spray surged like smoke.

Here was Hiva-Oa, the Bloody Isle, peaceful now and supremely beautiful. Griffin and his dunnage were landed on the beach at Atuona where the deep ravine back of the tiny settlement lay in violet shadow shot with gleams of green, like an opal. He registered at Government House in his assumed character and three days later started on his wanderings in the interior escorted by a native body-servant, bearer and interpreter, a trinity of usefulness with skin of bronze loin-clad in a scarlet-and-yellow *pareu*, the speed of Mercury, the body of Apollo and the guileless nature of a laughing faun. Regarding Griffin as a foolish white man who paid well to be shown plants which, to Talofu, were common as dandelions to a New England chore-boy.

A beau and a dandy was Talofu, boasting of his conquests, a bearer of gossip and a gatherer of news.

TALOFU led the way along the heights, bordering cliffs that looked into fairy ravines. Everywhere flowers were blooming, on the trees or hung like butterflies on the orchid sprays. Palms and breadfruit, bananas, guavas, candle-trees. Bright colored birds. Fragrance. High up, fantastic crags where the verdure ended, cloud-wreathed fastnesses to which they worked a toilsome but fascinating way, trailing at the last through a dense forest that led to a barren ridge, a spine of volcanic-rock finned above two valleys, leading to a sheer precipice split by a deep fissure down which thundered a waterfall.

Griffin's face was set. Talofu's was as grave but tinged with uneasiness.

"You go along back of that *vaitapu* (Forbidden Water)" he said. "I think better you not go. Maybe that man is dead. Me, I stop along this place."

Griffin saw that the gay Marquesan's skin was gray, that the man was quivering like a dog that scents a mysterious danger.

"No good along that place, I tell you," he persisted but would give no reason for his evident fear that Griffin set down to some ancient superstition. He admitted that the white man he had babbled about lived there—and not alone. Further, in speech or on trail, Griffin could not cajole or bribe him.

The intuition, born largely of rule of thumb, bolstered by a hundred hard-earned lessons of experience, told Griffin that his man was there.

Benson had chosen well. There was a *tapu* of some sort on the place. A gorge masked by the waterfall, barricaded by native credulity and reticence. Yet, swore Talofu, a place of wonders, once beloved of the gods.

Griffin left Talofu begging him not to venture, retreating into the forest before he was well out on the ridge.

There was a cave back of the fall, pierced by an arch that led to a narrow glen. Beautiful it was, but somber, visited briefly by the sun each day. The air was dank, the foliage wet with mists that hung about the crests of the high walls, waiting for evening to descend. There was a silence about the place that affected Griffin unpleasantly, keen on the scent as he was.

Here, he fancied, some tremendous battle might have been fought in the old days or the spot was one of heathen rites, the home of passed sorcerers, a secret place where cannibalism made its last stand.

There was a faint trail through the tangle and he followed its slippery windings. Ahead he heard a low pounding sound. He passed crumbling platforms of dry-laid stone, sites of perished buildings, houses or temples. The hollow noise became plainer and suddenly he paused on the edge of a clearing and gazed, unseen, at an old hag, shrunken to sexlessness, her skin like shagbark, white hair over her eyes, mumbling as she struck feebly but steadily at a strip of bark-cloth on a hollow log.

Deaf, toothless and half-blind, she did not look up as Griffin detoured about her, dodging from bush to tree. She seemed the eery witch of the place, humanity shriveled out of her.

The trail took up on the other side of the clearing where straggly taro grew in a swamp. Clutching at wet boughs that made a tunnel of the path, Griffin bored through it. His automatic was loose in a side-pocket. Benson was not the type to be taken back on a silken leash. His was the courage of bravado coupled to the desperation of a cornered rat. So Griffin estimated it.

He came out into a banana grove, the banners flaccid, yellowish rather than green, with sickly white shoots. Innumerable insects buzzed and stung.

In the middle of the plantation—if it was that—a tumbling, rotten thatch was supported on uneven poles, the miserable hut occupying half of a

tottering platform, the rest open, a hammock slung between posts. Litter was all about. The mouldy air was charged with offensive smells of ordure and garbage.

There was scant light and, at first, Griffin, peering through a cloud of mosquitoes, did not recognise the squatting bundle for a man. Then he distinguished the figure, cross-legged, clad in filthy pants, once white perhaps, and the remnant of a singlet. The man moved and his naked flesh gleamed strangely white. His feet were bare. His face was bloated as if with stings of insects, puffed and swollen out of recognition, tufted as it was with an unkempt beard and mustaches that looked mangy.

But it was Benson. Griffin knew, as he gazed in a maze of swift repulsion, that it was Benson. Benson the debonnair, the boulevardier of Broadway!

His gun came out of his pocket as he advanced, his jaw set, his gray eyes metallic. The man stood up, swaying, his arms hanging loosely, like stuffed appendages.

Something opened in his face, a hideous caricature of a mouth, as his face caricatured a badly-stuffed lion's head with its protuberant forehead and eyes that flickered in deep sockets. A harsh sound—it might have been a laugh, issued from the gap between mustache and beard.

"I want you, Benson," said Griffin. "No foolishness. Put up your hands."

Benson cackled. He spoke hoarsely, slobberingly.

"Come at last, have you? Never mind my hands. You see—"

The old crone came hurrying through the flaccid bananas carrying a wooden bowl. She halted, looking stupidly at Griffin.

"What do you want me for? Griffin, isn't it? Come to take me back, Griffin? Not this time."

He cackled again as Griffin, his gun ready for some move, a curious nausea possessing him as he scrutinized his man, moved closer.

"Money's all gone, Grif. I didn't have much. Last of it bribed the old dame to feed me till I die—or she does. You wouldn't think she was a golden woman once, would you? There were others—but they've gone. And you can't take me back, Griffin."

"Why not?" Griffin heard himself speak as a stranger. Horror was crawling on him.

The animal face crimsoned suddenly as Benson extended his arms. They were shapeless and scaly. They ended in hands that were fingerless save for one thumb, not scarred but smooth as a snake's skin and silver white.

"I can't feed myself, Griffin. There's no one else in the world but this hag who'd stuff my mouth. Do *you* know of any port that lets in a leper?"

### 3: The Valley of the Wind

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TO ROY FOLGER, standing with his red head brushing the low roof of the *jacal*, the ten dollars he had given the old crone was just money wasted, but he had done it to please Chiquita and there was no doubt about her interest and belief in the fortune telling. Perched on a stool, draped in her gay shawl, with her little head cocked on one side, her lustrous eyes wide as she watched the divination, she seemed like a bright bird.

La Bruja, whose ancient frame seemed jerking on wires beneath her nondescript garment whenever she moved, blew on her charcoal brazier until it glowed vermilion and its acrid fumes grew stifling in the tiny hut. Her exposed skin was like shagbark, her mouth was a mere slot between hooked nose and chin and, when she muttered or grimaced, a yellow tusk showed between the lips that seemed horny as a turtle's mouth. Old she was, incredibly old, with hands like claws, tremulous but efficient as she sifted fine sand on a tin plate, heated the grains over the brazier and commanded Folger to blow upon them.

Chiquita translated, though Folger could follow the crone's Mexican well enough. "You are to blow upon the sand, in the center. One puff."

Chiquita's lips illustrated. Tempting lips, red as cactus blooms, adorable when they pouted. She was a cuddly thing. Clean as an unplucked bloom herself, for all that she danced in the *bailes* and at the Cactus *cantina*. Vivid and vital and in love with the tall, lean cowpuncher who had lately set up for himself.

Folger was not in love with her. He had theories about love and matrimony, fearing the loss of personal liberty, the curbing of adventure. If he let down those barriers, none too strong recently, he fancied he could fall irrevocably in love with Margaret Collins, sister to the sheriff of Caroca County. Whether she would reciprocate was not so certain. She had many suitors. Her blonde, slender, but vigorous beauty, that would long outlast the swift bloom of Chiquita, her accomplishments as horsewoman, housekeeper, and dancer, her love of outdoor things, and her sportsmanship, had swept the county off its feet as far as bachelors were concerned.

And Roy was wobbling. An extra dance, a ride in the hills, a talk in the moonlight, and he would be a goner. Meantime, he was here in the fortune teller's *jacal* with Chiquita. He had come largely because he did not want to hurt her feelings. He was neither conceited nor a fool where women were concerned. Only with Margaret he lost sense of analysis. Chiquita openly

showed her preference for him, but she was a nice kid and he hoped someone else would come along. Not a chap like Emory Gates, the chief deputy sheriff, who was plainly bent on her capture, but perhaps Manuel Valdez, who was a sheepman but a decent sort, prosperous, and crazy over Chiquita, who flouted him.

Folger had a native reverence for women that was close to his own pride. Perhaps he had been foolish in coming here this afternoon with Chiquita—he must not let the thing go too far—but she was undeniably fascinating, and, when she begged resistance seemed almost cruelty.

He blew, and she drew in her breath as the grains went scattering, and La Bruja bent muttering over the pattern, beginning to rock to and fro, to mumble more articulately, to speak at last. Despite his cynicism, Folger was impressed. Wiser men than he believed that La Bruja foretold the future, whether by craft, or by gathering gossip and by judgment of human nature, none might say. It might be clairvoyance or the sheer wisdom of age where virility still cloistered in her brain. She had beyond doubt predicted many things, found lost objects. If she spoke as a sibyl, nevertheless she spoke sooth. How? *Quien sabe?*

Her croaking voice was impressive, droning or rising to a shrill pitch as she rocked back and forth, apparently unmindful of her audience, while Chiquita translated in a frightened little voice.

"Heh, blood I see, and gold! Gold hairs and black; and gold that grows on no woman. Gold in a cage of death. Trouble and treachery, and a lost trail. A noose, but it opens. Love spurned and love returned. Riddles. Riddles! But the gold is sure. Which? Who knows? The gold that is living and curls about the heart of a man so that he loses reason—or gold that shines in the sun and charms him so he forgets the living gold? Riddles. Riddles! Who knows? Fate finds—fate binds."

She turned the plate about and continued her divination.

"A high place, where trees grow and the grass is green. A lake of water with the wind blowing always across the lake and grass and through the trees, A pleasant place where the wind passes but there is death there also, I see dead men staring to the sky with eyes that cannot see. Trail's end. Treachery. And the gold. The gold within the cage of death."

Something flopped suddenly down from the roof, a squirming thing that wriggled on the still hot plate and darted off before it might be known whether it was lizard or roof-snake, or the veritable familiar of the old crone herself. She was startled, Chiquita screamed, and even Folger's nerves twitched a bit while his hand fell to his gun butt as fast as the thing itself had moved.

"So," said La Bruja, arousing herself. "The sands are scattered and I can see no more. Of what did I speak?"

"Gold an' death mostly," said Folger. "I reckon you can't dodge the last an' I c'ud sure use the gold, though I'm no prospector. Ready Chiquita?"

Chiquita had pouted at the mention of gold hair. That meant Margaret Collins. Why had La Bruja mentioned her and left it all a riddle? She should have been fair to her own race and set Folger's thoughts against *la señorita blonda*, for Chiquita, though she believed in the clairvoyance of La Bruja, was shrewd enough to think that the ancient soothsayer could and did, upon occasion, supplement her prophesies with statements that might be suggestions calculated to bring them to pass. As La Bruja dwelled insistently upon the choice between golden hair and black, Chiquita's eyes began to glitter. Her tempestuous nature ruffled to storm. There was a pain in her heart like a stab. She hated Margaret.

"Yes," Folger went on, half to himself, as they left the *jacal* where La Bruja watched them from the doorway, "I sure could use some gold on the ranch, right now."

"Gold hair?" flared Chiquita.

Folger chuckled, shaking his head at her. He was used to her swift jealousies, and sometimes he had teased her. Gone a bit too far, perhaps. He could see her eyes dilate as she looked at him, her breath suddenly indrawn, her breast rising.

"*Dios!*" she told herself, "he is good to see!"

Folger guessed something of her thought, and his eyes grew serious. "No. I meant the genuine *oro*, kid. I'm squeezin through, but it's close pickin's. It'll be another year befo' I've got any of my own three-year-olds tuh sell, an' I need a good herd sire. So, though I don't know ore from chalk, if I run across that gold she spoke of, if it's in a cage of death or not, I'll likely try tuh lift it."

But he could not halt the storm.

"So! You do not want golden hair? You do not weesh for the seester of the sheriff? No! Oh, no! You *love* her. An' you make fun of Chiquita. You gringos are all alike. You make girls like us your playtheeng. Oh, I should hate you!"

Folger's gravity increased. "Hold on, Chiquita. You're cute an' sweet an' you're sure mighty pretty. *Bien parecido*. Likewise you sure dance like thistledown on the wind. But, I've never made love tuh you. Nor no one else, for that matter. Can't afford tuh, if I wanted tuh. We've been good *camaradas*, why not let it thaterway?"

"*Camaradas!* Oh, you col' *Americano*. You theenk love is a horse you can saddle or turn loose in the corral. Rope w'en you like. Bridle. Ride. I do hate you. I weesh I had never seen you."

Folger was uncomfortable. But it seemed the time for a showdown. He didn't want to hurt her. It would be wiser perhaps not to speak.

"I reckon you don't hate me," he said. "Why can't we be just good friends?"

"Friends? *Amigos*? Between a man an' woman who are young? *Madre mia!* You, of the north! Weeth the water of ice een your blood. *Si! Adios*. Do not follow. Go to your *blonda!*"

Tears drowned the fire in her eyes as she thrust rowels into the flanks of her pinto cayuse, riding its desperate plunges down, quirting it. What a fool, to love a gringo! But she could not help it. He was a man. And, her heart longed for him. "*Vamos!*" she cried to the indignant pinto. "*Caballo malvado! Vamos!*"

La Bruja peered out of her door, like a witch out of a cave, and hobbled inside, chuckling. It was not so much that she was malicious as that her own fires had died and she liked to blow at other's embers. Those who sought her were puppets on her stage and she pulled the strings. Chiquita was a silly *gallina*, a foolish little hen, She was not so sure of the gringo. *Americanos* were not subtle but they moved on certain direct methods that she did not fathom. But she had told what she saw, or thought she saw, in the grains of sand, coupling it with the gossip for which her *jacal* was the inevitable clearing-house. Chiquita in love with the gringo, he in love with the sheriff's daughter, even if he didn't know it. Oh ho! It was good, for all her old bones that ached so, to watch the play. She tucked away the ten-dollar bill behind a basket that held a mummied head taken from an ancient cliff dwelling, mumbling over the brazier that could never keep her warm, though it was ninety outside in the shade, waiting for her next customer.

Folger whistled softly as Chiquita raced off. He hadn't wanted to make her cry. Perhaps it was just as well. Then he suddenly straightened and swept off his sombrero. Margaret Collins was close on him, riding her bright bay with the white blaze, trim in riding togs, her hair ashine under her Stetson, her eyes looking straight ahead.

At his bow she looked at him, through him and rode on.

"Now ain't that plain, unvarnished hell! No mo' use fo' me than Satan has fo' a burned match. Saw the hull shootin' match. Thinks I'm philanderin' with Chiquita an' thinks the kid's a wrong 'un jest because she's a dancehall gal. It ain't fair. Women are sure catty tuh each other, an' I git inside the scratchin' likewise an' also. Chiquita's straight but Margaret don't figger it thaterway, I reckon. Anyway she hangs me fo' Chiquita's *querido*. I'm in deeper'n a bogged maverick."

He rode on vexed, irritable. He had a good nature and a quick, hair-trigger temper at times. That Margaret, like Chiquita, might be jealous, never occurred to him. The affair wasn't just, and it riled him. He had to go to the depot to arrange for a car to ship some stock he was forced to sell, since the banks had been stingy about further advances on a poor market, insistent on a note now

out being taken up. On the way he passed the Cactus, rode into the alley between it and a long, ramshackle shed used as a hardware storehouse, and hitched his roan to the bowed rail. The roan promptly hitched up one hind foot, dropped its nose and drowsed. The alley was in the shade. There were no flies there and no other horses. After nightfall there might be as many as thirty along the rail.

The Cactus bar was deserted. Folger saw two loungers at a corner table and called them up to share his drink.

There was a card prominently displayed back of the bar.

ALL GUNS TO BE PARKED IN  
SALOONS AND DANCEHALLS.  
BY ORDER OF  
DAVID COLLINS,  
SHERIFF.

Folger did not notice it, did not realize he had broken the rule, which was really intended only for use after dark. It was a wise order if a stringent one. Vacada, county seat of Caroca County, was close to the border. There was an unruly element that was apt to clash with punchers off the ranch, spending their checks, bent on demonstrating their independence. Collins was a martinet. Gates was more popular perhaps, because he winked at irregularities that, some whispered, he was not above sharing in, on occasion. Whisped also that Gates was out for Collins' job. But the rule was generally obeyed. There was a little room at the curve of the bar, to the right as one entered, where the guns were swung from hooks of an evening as in quieter places cloaks are hung. Nobody ever took the other man's gun. That was an un contemplated crime to which horse stealing would be petty larceny

Folger's bone handled six-gun swung at his hip but he did not think of it. He was thinking of other matters, of the eyes of the girl that had gazed through him as if he had been a dust cloud in her way. His back was turned when Collins entered, but he shifted at the sound of feet, none too pleased in his present mood at the meeting. Collins, guardian of his sister in his own estimation, had never been over cordial concerning Folger's attentions to her. Folger might make a go of his ranch but that had yet to be shown.

To Collins he was a happy-go-lucky waddy who had still to prove up. Folger sensed and ignored this. So, in point of fact, did Margaret.

"Hoist one, Sheriff?" he asked.

Collins' eyes were cold. He took his office a bit too seriously, perhaps, zealous of what he deemed his duty and more aggressive than was sometimes tactful.

"I'm not drinkin', Folger. You c'n hand over yore gun. You know the rule."

To Folger this was the last, unnecessary straw. There was sudden tension. The bartender turned his back, polishing a glass, watching in the mirror. The two loungers edged away.

"You want it? Why don't you take it?"

The drowsy atmosphere of the place was suddenly charged with enmity. The two faced: each other. Collins cold and Folger hot, but the nerves of both steady, taut for action, their eyes hard and shining like steel. The sheriff's authority had been invoked and defied. The occasion was minor but the issue loomed large.

"Hand it over, Folger."

Folger's left forearm was on the bar, his right hand was poised over the gun butt. Collins' right thumb was hooked in his belt. Folger felt a burning sense of injustice. Collins was going out of his way to belittle him. He spoke in a slow drawl.

"Aw, you-all can go plumb tuh hell."

Then, just as the three lookers-on expected flame and smoke with blood to follow, a swarthy man, thickset, slightly bowlegged, a deputy's star on his vest, came through the swinging doors.

"They told me you were here, Sheriff," he said before he took in the scene.

Collins turned, his face eager. "Bring him in, Gates?"

"No. Someone tipped him off. He'd dragged."

Collins frowned, his cold eyes suddenly burning with blue flame. "Why didn't you—?" He checked his speech. "I'll go up tuh the jail with you," he said, and turned again to Folger. "I'll see you again."

"I'll be waitin' soon's you git yore feet warmed, Sheriff."

There was bravado in his speech and Folger knew it, half regretting it. Collins did not appear to hear the last words as he went out with Gates. The bartender set down the glass he had mechanically been polishing.

"Collins sent Gates out after that stage robber over tuh Semilla," he said casually. "They heard he was hidin' out in a shack up in the hills. Thousan' pesos up for him, *vivo*, or *muerto*. Reckon Collins is sore he got away. They claim it was Pilar."

"Yeah?" Folger straightened up and strolled to the door. The sheriff was not in sight. Nor did he see anything of him as he loped down to the depot and made arrangements for the car. Riding on out to his ranch, the Bar B, he cooled off, realizing he had been close to tragedy.

"Jest the same," he told the roan, "Collins had no call tuh git biggity. An' he can't run a rannikaboo over me."

He had supper with his three hands, who with him did all the work of the outfit. The fat old Mexican cook served the meal. Folger was silent and the punchers sensed his mood, talking among themselves. After the meal the two cowboys rode in from the neighboring ranch, looking for a game of stud poker. One of them had come from town.

"Collins is sure on the prod after Gates," he said. "Threatened tuh take away his star. Seems he had the straight dope on this holdup gent. Knew where he was hidin', an' Gates loses him. Name's Pilar."

Pedro, the cook, clearing up, halted to listen, his beady eyes agleam in his greasy face. "They allow this Pilar is mixed up with those border coyotes that are runnin' in Chinks an' dope. Some say he's the boss of the outfit," the waddie went on. "Collins is out tuh git 'em, an' some talk that Gates ain't so hostile to 'em as he might be. Anyhow he loses Pilar, an' the sheriff is sure peeved. Gates was lined up tuh the Cactus bar with Smiley an' that breed Romero when I left, drinkin' like they had a contract tuh make the place dry.

"Hear you-all told the sheriff tuh go tuh hell this afternoon, Folger?"

They all looked at the Bar B boss, who said nothing.

"'Lowed he was goin' tuh teach you tuh respect the law an' its representative."

"Yeah?" Folger's riders knew his slow drawl and the mood it stood for. They glanced at one another.

"Goin' tuh sit into the game?" his foreman, Jackson, asked him.

"No. I'm goin' tuh town."

Folger drew his gun from his holster as he spoke, inspecting it. It was clean, but he swabbed the barrel and replaced its cartridges with fresh ones. The rest kept range silence, while he put on his Stetson, nodded and went out.

"He's sure on the prod himself," said one of the visitors. "Looks like he meant tuh smoke out the sheriff. Thought he was sweet on the sister."

The Bar B men ignored the inference.

"Figger we sh'ud ride in?" one of them asked Johnson.

"On'y rile him," answered the foreman. "He's of age. What'll we play for? Either of you punchers got any money tuh lose?"

They heard the crisp gallop of Folger's roan as the game started.

Going into town, Folger cooled off a little. But the resolution to appear in person and see what the sheriff intended to do remained. If he went into the Cactus he meant to park his gun. There was no sense in openly defying a good rule and giving Collins the edge on him. But if he met the sheriff outside and Collins started anything, he was not going to have his weapon confiscated. He had broken the letter of the law but not the spirit of it and Collins knew that well enough.

He could beat the sheriff to the draw. There were few men who were quicker than Folger. Natural coordination made him a crack shot and a swift one. To kill the brother of Margaret, for all her slight of him, was not to be considered. To shoot the gun out of the other's hand, or to put his shooting wrist out of commission, would answer the purpose if it came down to an issue. The main thing was not to stay away after the sheriff's announcements. The puncher might have been trying to draw him, nevertheless a challenge had passed between him and Collins, the town knew of it, and he was not going to keep out of sight.

As for Margaret, she had hurt him so deeply that the sting of it told him he cared, beyond any effort to fight the feeling. He never saw her without receiving a momentary shock. When he was with her he knew that he was beyond reason, out of his depth.

Now Chiquita was the cause of this new state of affairs, but it was not Chiquita's fault entirely. He had gone with her to La Bruja's. And now Chiquita knew where he stood with her, at the cost of his standing with Margaret. He knew that his chance of explaining things to Margaret was remote. She was proud. Unless something extraordinary occurred she would not speak to him, would continue to ignore him. And his own pride was quick enough.

He rode into the alley beside the Cactus in a half reckless mood. He had not met Collins, but the sheriff invariably made the rounds of the *cantinas* in the evening. And he would find Folger there. The hitch rack was crowded with horses, he had to ride to the end of the sagging pole to place the roan. The ponies stood with their heads toward the warehouse, their heels far enough away from the wall of the *cantina* to give free passage to the side and rear doors. They were there for hours of patient or impatient waiting, according to their dispositions, some docile, others cantankerous, but all fairly philosophical under the restraint of hitching.

Folger entered as the music was beginning for a dance. He saw Chiquita standing with other girls at the wide opening between the dancehall and the gambling rooms, but looked away as Gates claimed her. He entered the little room and parked gun and gun belt on a hook among the rest.

Two or three hailed him as he walked to the bar. There was some chaff as to his "run-in" with the sheriff, a reference to Collins' wrath at Pilar having slid through his deputy's efforts at arrest. A suggestion for poker and adjournment to a corner table.

The game went well. Folger began to win, not much, but steadily. He could not well afford to lose. The shipment of his steers on a low market was necessary for running expenses, and before he got to the place where he would have natural increase to dispose of he was likely to have to sacrifice still

more. He needed every dollar, but tonight it seemed as if his expenses were going to be paid. Unlucky at love and lucky at cards, he told himself a bit grimly as he raked in a nice pot. Then his fortune changed and he began to lose it again.

It was a friendly enough game. Talk went on during shuffle and deal, or when a round of drinks was brought.

"Beats me why Collins horns in on the border-runnin' so heavy," said one, "Thet's a Federal job, I'd figger."

"Be a big figger in Collins' cap jest the same if he landed 'em an' showed up the Gov'n'mint chaps. Sheriff ain't all he's after. Collins is plumb ambitious, an' he's li'ble tuh git what he wants. Jest the right type tuh land. That's why he's been herdin' those border coyotes of Pilar's so close that Pilar went into holdin' up stages. Collins is a quiet one but he's been linin' up things, an' Pilar *sabe's* runnin' ain't right healthy an occupation while Collins is on the job."

"Pilar took a risk comin' over into the sheriff's own territory, at that."

"Daredevil sort of hombre. An' he gits clear."

"Wonder why Collins sends Gates an' don't go himself?"

"Collins is keepin' cases close tuh the border. This play of Pilar's might be a trick to leave things clear for a run. It's a cinch Pilar's in cahoots with someone this side of the line. There ain't a Mexican that'd give him away, partly because they're afraid of him, an' likewise because when it comes to a turn between a gringo an' one of their own breed they're goin' tuh back their own side. A *contrabandista* is a hero to them anyway."

The play went on. Folger's chips mounted, diminished, winnings balancing losses. He saw Gates come in from the dancehall two or three times in the general exodus after a dance, Chiquita with him, Smiley with a blonde, Ramon with varying partners. Then the three of them settled down at a little table, cards between them, playing perfunctorily, talking most of the time. Once Folger caught them glancing his way and fancied he was the object of their speech. He knew Gates resented Chiquita's fondness for him and thought that there was open enmity in Gates' look.

Then he stiffened. Collins had entered. The sheriff seemed alert. There was something about his carriage, the lift of his head and a pale fire in his eyes, that suggested strongly that he was not there on a perfunctory visit. A manner too eager to bother about the parking of a gun, or even the words that had passed between them, Folger decided, and knew his idea justified as Collins, looking about the room, saw him, evidently recognized him, but passed his glance on. Folger saw him catch the eye of Gates, beckon him with a slight backward jerk of his head.

Folger had thrown in his cards, and he noticed Gates say something hastily to Smiley and Ramon and join the sheriff, going with him into the private office of Cardero, owner of the Cactus. The door closed tight behind them.

They did not come out for some time. Cardero was with them, looking sulky, ill at ease. Gates came back to his table as the sheriff went out of the *cantina*. He tugged at his mustache, a scowl on his face. The three of them sat with their heads close together, whispering. Ramon got up, passed into the little room where the guns were parked, and then made his exit.

After a while he came back, reparked his gun and joined Gates and Smiley. Folger was having a series of low hands and he watched them, not altogether casually. There seemed to be some sort of concerted action between them. It was getting late, but the dance still went on and few had left. Gates, by virtue of his office, wore his own weapon. Smiley was the next one to leave and he did not come back. Collins had not reappeared. Folger had a hunch that something was brewing. The sheriff, he fancied, was on Pilar's trail, or on that of some of his confederates on this side of the line. Gates, who still retained his star, did not seem over keen, and Folger wondered whether he was really friendly toward the runners.

It was certain that he wanted Collins' job, likely that if he was sheriff he would not bother to assist the Federal men.

Chance had brought the hazards of the poker game to an even outcome. Folger had won a few dollars, no one had lost much, It was getting monotonous. One of the players suggested breaking up and another seconded it, proposing a final round. Gates and Ramon got up. Gates sauntered into the dancehall and the half-breed left the *cantina*.

A dance started with whine of violins, twang of guitar, the blare of an accordion and the beat of an Indian drum.

The game ended with Folger winning the last pot. He was some thirty dollars ahead, willing enough to quit. He had shown himself, and Collins had passed the matter over. That incident was probably closed. The sheriff had bigger game on hand. Folger's thoughts turned towards his ranch, the gathering of the steers for shipment, early work to do. With his companions he went to the bar for a farewell drink. The crowd surged out of the dancehall, laughing and talking, girls and men together, Gates and Chiquita among them. Folger saw them pass behind him in the mirror, saw Chiquita's eyes seek his own. At the same moment he felt something thrust into his hand, a folded scrap of paper. He was not certain whether Chiquita had passed it to him or not. It seemed likely, The men beside him were roaring over a story that had just reached its broad point when he read the message. Chiquita had never

written him before but this was signed with her name, a penciled misspelled scrawl.

*Querido—mus' see you. Plees come outside in allee soon as you can. Do not look my way. In five minutes. I am in trouble. Plees. Chiquita.*

He was not her *querido*. She had no right to call him that. But what if she was in trouble? His good nature asserted itself. The friction had gone out of his mood. He said good night, got his gun and buckled it on, and slipped out of the side door.

It was chilly and dark in the alley, the ponies getting restless, the stars still bright overhead with dawn not very far off. His eyes adjusted to the twilight, Folger could see nothing of the girl but he made out the figure of a man standing between him and the street, close against the *cantina* wall, watchful but not looking his way. Then it moved out a little and he recognized the straight, alert carriage of the sheriff. For a moment he wondered whether Collins was waiting for him but dismissed the thought. That was not the sheriff's way in such a matter. He turned toward the far end of the alley where the roan stood.

Suddenly there came a spurt of flame, a report at which the horses plunged and strained at their tie-ropes. Collins started out from the *cantina* wall, reached for his gun, staggered, fell prone on his face.

Folger's own weapon was out in a flash, its owner looking for the assassin, seeing no one. The shot had come from the warehouse side, perhaps from within through one of the roughly boarded windows. He ran toward Collins. Now men were swarming into the alley, Gates in the lead, his gun leveled.

"Man shot! Stick up yore hands, you!" shouted Gates.

Folger obeyed. His own gun was full, clean. Perhaps Gates knew who he was but it didn't matter.

"Don't be a damn' fool, Gates," he said, "It's the sheriff. Shot came from the warehouse. Better git after the feller that done the shootin'."

"The hell you say! Folger, eh? An' you tellin' the sheriff tuh go tuh hell this afternoon. In my hearin'. Keep 'em h'isted! Git his gun an' let me have a look at it, one o' you boys. Two of you hold him."

Folger did not resist. "He's goin' off half cocked, boys," he said. "The right man's gittin' clear."

His voice almost convinced them but they held him. A man passed his gun to Gates. Others were bending over the sheriff.

"Plumb over the heart," said one.

Gates produced a flashlight, his gun in his left hand for the moment. Then he sheathed it.

"Hold him, boys, while I take a look at this. You said it was clean, Folger. Clean, is it? It's just been fired! Grains in the a barrel yet. By God, we've got you!"

Folger stood with body and brain momentarily numbed. His gun fired? Gates lied!

But others examined, corroborated. The grip of the men tightened. There were angry murmurs.

The sheriff was being borne away, limp. They were taking him home—to Margaret. Collins was stiff and stern, he had his enemies but many men liked him and most everybody respected him. The town knew that Folger had challenged him, had said he would wait until Collins' feet were warm.

By what trick his gun had been fouled Folger did not know. But he could see where he stood in this predicament. Foredoomed! His own riders and the two visiting punchers knew he had gone to town in fighting mood. His words to Collins prejudged him.

Now he saw Smiley and Ramon close to Gates, grinning. He had the sense of a trap being sprung. But he was in it.

"Cover him, Smiley," said Gates. "I'm taking no chances. Put your hands out, Folger." There were handcuffs in the deputy's fingers. At the sight of them reaction surged through Folger. Those once on he was as good as hanged.

The men pushed him forward, hands on his shoulders now. A girl thrust herself through the crowd. It was Chiquita. What part had she played in this with her luring note, her plea of trouble, she did not answer. She had said she hated him.

Chiquita flung herself between Folger and Gates. She clutched at the deputy.

"*Querido*, they tell me you are hurt. That you are keel. Oh!"

The angry deputy thrust her off. Some fool might have told her it was he rather than the sheriff, but he did not want her sympathy now. She went staggering, blundering back, against Folger. He heard a swift whisper in his ear; the merest murmur of Mexican.

"*Horse, at back.*"

His doubt of her dissolved, if it did not vanish. It was his only chance, if the roan was clear. His hands were free. He drove one fist into the belly of the man to his right and kicked hard at the other's knee. High heel struck bone, his spur rowel gashed flesh, and the man winced with a shout at the sudden pain and shock, while the other one gasped for breath.

Folger wheeled and dived between two of the horses, all excited at the crowd and noise. He struck one on its muzzle and the half frantic cayuse

tugged, squealed, snapped at his flying figure and lashed out hard. The whole line responded like a row of pool balls tapped at one end.

Folger raced down between the warehouse and the hitch-pole, the ponies starting back at his bent figure, that was screened by them. Men and frightened girls jammed each other, shouting and screaming.

He shot 'round to the back and saw the roan, head high, ground-anchored by the reins that Chiquita surely must have unfastened from the rack when she led the pony away under cover of the excitement; it had not bolted. A word from Folger reassured it. The next second he was on its back, making for the dry wash that ran back of the main street, the roan jumping, cat-hammed, up the farther slope, as mounted men came in hot pursuit out of the alley. Guns were barking now.

Folger bent low, bullets whining past. It would be foolish to make for the ranch. It must be the hills, rocky ground where trail would vanish. The roan was fresh and fast. There were good horses behind, but not many as good as this.

He made for the sage with twenty riders after him. They were close, and weaponless he spurred for a burst of speed to take him out of gunshot.

Once the roan flinched, struck, he thought, in the flank, but not seriously. He heard the whine of a missile, knew that someone had a rifle, probably Cardero's. Rifle shooting from the saddle was not apt to be accurate. A moment more and—

They had him. High in the left shoulder. He felt the blood ooze out, hot in the cold night, and he bent low. If he could stick in the saddle he'd do them yet. The rifle spoke again, with the roan stretching out in full gallop, belly brushing the sage and gramma, making for the hills, gaining, gaining, gallant and game in the race.

He must get to cover before dawn. The smell of it was in the sharp air that stiffened the gluey blood that leaked out of him with every leap of his horse. The cold might clot it. He could ride as long as he had consciousness, perhaps after. He was at home in leather as an old salt in the crosstrees. And the pursuers were falling behind.

The wind rushed by him as the roan kept at top speed, nostrils wide, neck extended, ribs rising and falling and great plate muscles working rhythmically.

Where to go? Folger knew the terrain as a ranging hawk knows it, and he mapped out his route. Up Hardwater Canyon, out through the lateral ravine, rimrock on top. On toward Dusty Gap.

"Owens' tunnel." If he could cover trail, keep ahead, he could hide out there. Few knew of the mine. Owens kept it secret in his hermit fashion for all he had made no strike in it. Owens was esteemed a crank, if not crazy. He

came to town perhaps twice a year for supplies and spoke to no one, handing over a written list to the storekeepers. The rest of the time he waited in his cabin for his partner who had gone out to the desert ten years back and never returned.

Other men swore the partner must be dead, but Owens swore he was alive; maintained, before they jeered him into silence, that he had seen him, in a mirage. Not a dream but part of a desert phenomenon, driving laden burros in the foreground of a green valley where a lake sparkled.

Owens was old now, and rheumatic. He had given up his own personal quest for good but he still believed that Sam Davis was alive and would come back rich from a strike.

He would help Folger. They were friends. Roy and Margaret, they were the only two the old man knew. She and Folger, riding up into the hills, had heard the old man moaning after they had paused at his cabin for a drink. And they had found him in the entrance of his tunnel, pinned down by rock and the timbering he was installing too late.

But for them he would have perished there of thirst and starvation in the lonely place, far off the range, high up on the divide. He had been grateful after they had got him to the cabin where he could treat himself after they had brought him water, prepared him some food. Half mad, perhaps, with queer ideas on spontaneous generation, ever reading through a tattered old encyclopedia, but Margaret was sympathetic and Folger's mood was hers. That was a year ago. They had visited him two or three times and he had told them of the mirage, of the vision of his partner who would come back, some day.

Folger's shirt and coat were stiffening with congealing blood. He was getting weaker, and thought was an effort. But he believed the bleeding had stopped. Now and then he heard sounds of pursuit, saw riders once in a while as he rode up the ridges, the roan going valiantly but tiring, as the horses behind must be tiring, too. Some of them had dropped far behind, out of it.

One more hogback, then Purdy Creek, then the climb to Owens' cabin—and the tunnel. If Owens was up he might—Folger was getting lightheaded now. The sky was graying. Soon the sun would flash red daylight on the peaks, revealing, merciless,

Crossing the creek, the roan stumbled for the first time, gathered itself together clumsily. It balked at the climb, and then Folger felt it give way beneath him. He himself lurched as he got free from the saddle. The roan was lying half in and half out of the water, a gush of dark blood from its mouth dyeing the stream. The shot in its flank must have gone deep. It had been bleeding internally, the hemorrhage aggravated by its efforts. Now it was done, stretching out with a gurgling groan, dead.

Folger swayed. He had thrown the pursuers off a while back, he believed. But day was coming fast. They could read his sign, the trail of the roan down the ridge.

There was a rocky cliff ahead. The light was seeping in so that he could see seams and fissures. He called on his last reserves and sprang for a ledge, clinging, scrambling for footing, clawing up, diving into brush through which he crawled a little way and lay panting. He had left no sign on that rock. They would think he had gone up creek, or down. The strength was almost out of him, his heart pounding, lacking blood for energy.

On all fours he crept up, listening for shouts, hearing none yet. Overhead, through the brush, he could see the sky turned olive, changing first to blue.

There were trees about the log cabin with its dirt roof and clay chimney whence smoke plumed up. Folger staggered toward it, his sight dim, one arm entirely useless now, the other set against the friendly trunks.

The door of the cabin opened and Owens came to it, gray bearded, wrinkled, but tanned and fairly erect for all his rheumatism.

A faint shout from below came to Folger's dull ears. The pursuers had found the roan.

In a red haze Folger saw the old man's eyes open wide, his figure seem to grow gigantic as he stumbled toward it. Then he felt a sturdy arm about him and a voice talking as if from far away.

"Folger! You're hurt bad. Take a swig of this."

Raw liquor burned his throat but put new life into him. He was leaning weakly against the door of the cabin, things coming back to normal.

"They're after me," he said. "Close. I didn't—"

"I don't give a hoot what you done or didn't do. After you, are they? Likely to come here? By Gorrymy, I hear 'em. Brace up an' come 'round the back. Roof's the place," he went on as he helped Folger along. "They won't think of that. Brush an' grass up thar. Now then, thar ain't no ladder. I'll give ye a back up. You got to make it, son. I'll stave 'em off. They think I'm cracked, but I ain't spillin' over yet. Now—"

He grunted as he bent, grunted again as he lifted. And Folger clutched the edge of the low roof, scrambled up, aided by Owens, rolled over onto the dirt roof where wild shrubs and grasses had long since taken luxuriant root and growth. They were tall enough to hide him from a chance downlook from the heights. He snuggled in among them, consciousness slipping out of him.

Riders came through the trees, to find Owens pressing choke-cherries through a rusty colander. True to his character, he turned his back on them and went inside the cabin. Gates swung from his saddle and followed him, the

rest crowding in. The deputy set a harsh hand on the shoulder of the recluse, and Owens turned angrily.

"Git!" he cried. "The hull bilin' of ye. I ain't askin' fer comp'ny." He jumped back, nimbly enough, caught an old Sharps rifle from its deer-horn rack and held it at his hip, threatening them, his eyes blazing. They shrank from his fury though their own guns were out.

"Put up that rifle, Owens," said Gates, his face twisted and his eyes alight with purpose. "This ain't a call. There's been murder done. A man named Folger's shot the sheriff an'—"

The hermit did not obey the order. "What's the sheriff to me?" he demanded. "I ain't killed him. An' there's a bigger law'n his up here in the everlastin' hills. The Lord lives here and I'm His servant. I stay apart from men and thir wickedness. Begone, you spawn of iniquity!"

His gaze was fanatical as he swung his rifle from side to side, his finger on the trigger.

"The Lord gives arms to His people and the right to use them ag'in their enemies," he said. "Ye mock at me an' now invade my house. Git! This trigger is filed to a ha'r."

"Crazy as a loon," muttered a man in the rear. Gates swore, controlled himself.

"Look here, old man," he said. "Law's law. We're lookin' fer a murderer. Looks like he might hev come this way. Can't you answer a plain question without gittin' riled up? Hev you seen him? Red headed chap. His hawss died t'other side of the ridge."

"Do I look as if I would harbor murderers? Look 'round, if ye must, seein' you come in force an' I seek only peace. Day's clear enough. Can't you read sign?"

Owens' eyes were anxious for a moment. The ground was hard under the trees but there might have been blood where Folger had brushed against a tree; a branch might be broken.

"We lost his trail at the crick," said Gates surlily. He went to the double bunk and pulled back the old blankets and skins upon the beds, peered beneath.

"Ain't here," he said. Owens had put down his gun and taken up his colander again, kneading the cherries, as if unconscious of their presence. "He went upstream, like I said. Ramon says there's caves up by the falls."

"I tell you I hit him," said Cardero.

"You hit the hawss. He ain't here. Come on, we're losin' time."

They remounted, with Owens paying no attention to him, his face turned away until they had gone through the trees out of sight. Even then he continued to work his fruit, listening, muttering to himself.

"I kin act crazy when it's needed," he said with a chuckle. "An' I kin act cute. That depitty! He's spawn, he is. Bred out o' mud. The pore lad!"

Fifteen minutes later he went outside, called up to the roof, shook his head when he heard no answer.

"Hurt bad. Fainted, likely. Tunnel's the place fer him. Cool, there." Still muttering, he busied himself getting cold food which he put in a cracked dish and tied about with a big bandanna. He put a flask in his pocket, filled a canteen from a pail, got a hammer and nails and fastened cross pieces to two peeled sapling poles that stood against the cabin, making a ladder up which he climbed stiffly to the roof. Folger lay on his face. Owens turned him over, got some whisky into him, revived him.

"You've got to git inter the tunnel, lad," he said. "I'll fix it so they'll never go in. There'll be air through the shaft an' they'll hev a time findin' that. All overgrown, an' a blind man c'ud see no one's been nigh it for a year. Got to make it before the sun gits high an' while they're below ye. They've been here an' gone back to the crick. Brace yoreself, once more."

Folger barely remembered his trip to the tunnel. Once inside, the cool air revived him a little.

"You stay here," said Owens. "Here's whar you rescued me, you an' the gal with the golden ha'r. I'll be back with blankets an' dressin' for yore wound. Healin' gums an' herbs. You're plumb safe, son."

They were well within the tunnel in a stoped-out place where Owens had worked on his barren vein. He had lit a candle in a miner's iron holder, thrust into the rock's fissure.

"I'll bring more lights," he said. "Rest easy."

Folger was coming back to life. The liquor had helped him. He saw the food on the floor with the canteen, and took a draught of water. The thought of Margaret came to him. Long since they would have fetched the body of her brother home. The posse would return and fresh men would start out, on the trail that led close to the cabin she knew so well. They would tell her of the talk with Owens. Would she guess that the hermit had rescued him? What would she do, think? His mind seemed to spur his body. He was vital when the recluse returned.

"Want to tell you what happened," he said.

"Jest as you like. Better, mebbe. Don't talk too much."

Folger finished his brief story. He started with the quarrel with Chiquita that led to Margaret's cutting him. Owens liked Margaret. And Margaret was the key to his safety, Folger felt. Or his disaster.

"Got thet note with ye, son?"

Chiquita's note was in the breast pocket of Folger's shirt where he had thrust it. It was blood smeared but legible. Owens put it away carefully in an old wallet.

"Folks think I'm mad, lad," he said. "Daffy, as we say in Wales, where I was born. But we Welsh think deep. I may help ye. Don't fear for the lass. And none shall find ye. I'm goin' to pull down the timberin' at the mouth of the tunnel. When the time comes ye'll git out through the shaft, which'll give ye air, meantime. The tunnel's caved in, abandoned, ye see. An' you snug inside. There's grub to last ye, an' water. Here's the 'intment an' the healin' herbs. You'll be able to travel inside a week. Meantime, if news comes along, I'll give it to you. I'll go to town termorrer or the next day an' get in touch with yore foreman about shippin' them cows, like you said. See how things sit in Vacada. I'm not comin' nigh you for a spell. That outfit's likely to come back, an' I don't want to give them a lead. Whoever comes, I'll handle 'em. An' you're snug as a bug in a blanket."

He went out the tunnel. Presently, Folger, drowsy, heard the sound of pick, the rush of falling earth and timbers as the light that came from the entrance was shut off by the cave-in that would deceive all seekers. He was safe. Deeper in, faint illumination and a drift of air located the overgrown and hidden shaft. The dressing eased the throbbing in his wound. By and by he would think, but now loss of blood and loss of sleep overcame him.

OWENS cleared up things in the cabin, took the ladder apart, and sat down on his bench outside the door, poring through a volume of his worn but precious encyclopedia. About an hour before noon he saw a bay horse coming through the trees, a girl upon its back. Both were familiar to him, not unexpected. Margaret Collins slid wearily from her saddle, wan and heavy eyed.

"They've been here?" she asked.

"The posse? Yep, an' rode away ag'in. Seemed to think I was hidin' out the man who shot yore brother. I ain't."

She looked at him keenly and he met her gaze. In his own mind he was certain that Folger had not killed the sheriff. He was not so sure about the girl. He did not know much about women, he had a certain fear that they did not look at things as a man might. That Margaret was close to being in love with Folger he had long ago told himself, noticing her behavior when the two of

them visited him. He had been glad of the romance, liking both of them. Now, he sensed there must be conflicting emotions within her. She would have heard all that could be told when they brought her brother back to the home where she kept house for him. It looked bad against Folger. She was jealous of him over Chiquita. She knew he had had words with her brother whom she was so proud of and close to. It was in Owens' mind to use her to help clear her lover, if Folger was her lover, but he meant to be careful.

"They think that Jim is going to die," she said in a toneless voice. "The Vacada doctor is afraid to operate. We've sent to Ventura for a surgeon and a nurse. The bullet is in his heart muscles. Any excitement or movement might be fatal. He's under morphia. They won't even let me see him.

"They came here after Roy Folger? And you haven't seen him?"

The quiver in her voice, the instinctive betrayal of her real purpose, Owens fancied, reassured him a little.

"You take a dipper of spring water, lass, an' set down."

She drank eagerly, her fingers trembling.

"I met two of the posse," she said. "They were going back with their horses lamed. They seem to think he got away through Cumbre Notch."

Owens suppressed a chuckle. He had trailed a deer over Cumbre the afternoon before. But had not killed. They would be following his sign, no easy trail to trace, broken by rock passage.

"You glad he got away?" he asked, seeking to surprise her, to fathom her eyes. It was not easy. "You think he's guilty?" he asked again, sharply.

She caught at her lower lip with her teeth.

"He quarreled with Jim, challenged him. They found him with his gun in his hand, standing over Jim's body. He claimed his gun was clean but it had just been fired. I don't know. I don't know." Her voice died off, her eyes piteous.

"Looks like he was in bad, don't it?" asked Owens. "Suppose we sort of review things. Who said the gun had just been fired?"

"Gates."

"Humph! I live up here alone but I go to Vacada once in a while. I don't talk much but I hear quite a lot. Seems to me I heard that Gates was made chief depitty by yore brother because of political obligashuns. Seems to me I heard Gates wanted yore brother's job an was plumb sore because he on'y got to be chief depitty. And that he criticizes yore brother a heap. That right?"

"What do you mean?"

"That right? You're close to yore brother, you've told me that yoreself. He don't think much of Gates, does he?"

"No. He was angry with him for not bringing back Pilar. But it wasn't Gates that shot Jim. He was inside the place and came out with the rest when the shot was fired,"

"Ever hear of the monkey that got the chestnuts out of the fire 'thout burnin' his own paws? I ain't accusin' Gates. Jest showin' thar might be a motive for him to be interested in yore brother not bein' sheriff. But—Folger ain't a fool. He'd know they'd look at his gun right away. Gates says it's dirty. Does Gates let anyone else look at it, feel of it to see if the barrel was hot an' smelled of powder gas, as it w'ud if it had jest been fired?

"I don't believe much in circumstantial evidence but I do believe in spontaneous generation, an' this Gates crawled out of the same sort of slime thet spawns skunks an' weasels, if I know vermin. Here's another thing. Do they claim yore brother drew his gun?"

"They think he tried to."

"*Think*. Seems ter me I've heard how he was quick on the draw. So quick he's got a big name for it. Now then, you think Roy Folger the sort to shoot at a man without givin' him an even break? No, you don't, no more'n I do. Yore brother, least of all. Folger's in love with uou."

"No."

Owens blinked, remembering all Folger had told him. Margaret was jealous of Chiquita even as the Mexican girl had been of the blonde Margaret. "No smoke without fire," he mused. "Jealousy's akin to love."

"We'll leave love out of it fer a spell," he said. "Looks like Folger was in a bad mess, seein' he's wounded."

"Wounded? They told me his horse was shot but not—not—oh, you've seen him! Is he—?"

"He's a friend of mine, an' I believe he's innercent. I aim to help prove that, but it's goin' to be a mean job unless I git help. If you'd located him here, what was you goin' to do. Give him up?"

There were tears in her eyes. She set a hand over a wildly beating heart.

"No. Where is he? I can't think he did it."

"He's whar no one kin see him for a spell. An' his wound is fixed up. It ain't serious. Now, Miss Margaret, I want you to help me prove Folger's innercent an' find out who did shoot yore brother, at the same time. I'm goin' to trust you as his friend, an' mine. Goin' to show you suthin'."

He gave her the blood smeared note. She gave a little sign of pity, and then her eyes flashed. She started to tear up the paper. Owens held her fingers in his own strong palm.

"You don't wanter destroy evidence," he said.

"Evidence? Why do you show that to me? And you said he loved me!"

"Hold on. I look at this thing without prejudice, an' I've done a heap of thinkin' the last hour.

"Suppose thar was someone—we ain't mentionin' names—who wanted to git rid of yore brother an' rid of Folger at the same time. He's sweet on Chiquita, this party is. He knows Chiquita is sweet on Folger. But he *don't* know they've disagreed."

"How do *you* know?" she flashed at him.

"The birds bring me a heap of messages up here. Mebbe I'll tell you later. Here's this man. He gits hold of Folger's gun. That ain't hard, the way they park 'em. A man c'ud stroll out with Folger's gun durin' the evenin', fire it whar it w'udn't attract attention, tote it back, swop it ag'in for his own, an' hev things all set. Then someone writes this note an' slips it into Folger's hand behind his back. Folger's good natured. The gal says she's in trouble. He ain't been nigh her all evening, but—"

"You know that, too?"

Owens nodded. He was watching Margaret and saw that her face had changed. Her eyes were glowing. She wanted Folger proved innocent of more than one thing, even as she wanted to find the real killer of her brother. Her brain was active, her heart prompted her.

"So," Owens went on, "he's tolled outside whar they know yore brother is. Thar's no gal in sight. But thar' a shot, an' then Gates comes out on the jump. An' this Chiquita, seein' what's happenin', helps Folger git away."

"She might have been sorry when she saw what happened. She might have been trying to clear herself if the note was found."

Owens shook his head. Margaret went too fast for him. He had not thought of such possibilities. But he kept doggedly to his idea.

"I'm supposin' she didn't write it at all. That someone else did an' if we find out who that someone was, it'll help a heap. Thar's you an' me with Folger's foreman, Johnson, an' the two other riders at the Bar B, to help him. An' thar's Gates an' all the authority back of him on the other side. Mebbe this Chiquita c'ud help. If you'd ask her?"

"Me? You want me to ask her? You must be crazy." Margaret's face was scarlet, her eyes blazing.

"No. I ain't crazy, honey, though some people says so. An' I was sorter bankin' on that. We ain't got much to bank on. You see, I had a notion you might love Folger, gal, as he loves you. Then you'd do anything to help him, even if you do hev to swaller some pride. I figgered mebbe you'd be willin' to see this Chiquita an' ask her if she wrote this note. You, bein' a woman, c'ud tell if she was lyin'. Mebbe you c'ud git to see her real writin' an' compare it.

She might hev to swaller some pride on her side. She's a dancehall gal, an' she likely figgers you despite her.

"It'd sure be one step to'ards helpin' him. Even if you ain't in love with him but jest friends, that calls for trust, an' trust that don't go into action ain't worth much. If they catch him they're likely to hang him off the reel, with mebbe the man who *did* shoot yore brother laughin' up his sleeve."

Margaret sat silent, folding and unfolding the note. At last she put it away inside her blouse.

"I'll see her," she said. "Can I see Roy?"

"No, you can't an' that's a plumb fact. You remember how you two found me pinned under a cave-in in my tunnel? That give me the idee. I fixed up another cave-in, natcheral as kin be, an' he's back of it, with grub an' blankets an' candles. Thar's air comes down through the shaft I sunk when I first started the mine. I don't aim to go nigh him myself for a while because I've a strong notion Gates' outfit is comin' back here when they git through follerin' my tracks over to the Notch. They may cast 'round. Right now, the hill is plumb overgrown along by the shaft, an' a blind man c'ud see no one's been thar for months. But some of 'em might happen to remember I've got a mine an' think Folger hid in thar, whether I put him up to it or not. I aim to git him out through the shaft after a bit an' away from here, soon's he kin travel, but you see you can't see him. I kin take him a message."

Her face was rose-red again, but not with anger, and her eyes were shy.

"Give him—give him my love," she whispered and kissed the old man on his leathery cheek. Then would have gone, but he stopped her.

"Thar's one thing more. Git a message to Johnson of the Bar B an' tell him to go ahead an' ship the steers. Folger says he knows which to cut out. The car is fixed for Friday. An' to deposit the check in the bank. Folger says you kin trust Johnson to the limit. I'm sort of rheumatic an' I never was much of a horseman. Wouldn't do for me to be seen consortin' with Bar B men. Will you do that?"

"Of course." She mounted and rode off through the trees, waving her hand at the dip of the trail.

Owens nodded to himself, well satisfied. "She loves the lad," he told himself. "An' she's game. Not so derved easy for her to tackle Chiquita, I reckon, but mebbe it'll clear things up a bit, more ways than one."

Midway through the afternoon the posse returned, hungry, angry and tired.

"Ramon says you've got a mine," snapped Gates. "Where is it? I want to look at it."

Owens looked from him to Ramon, studying both. Then he emitted a slow chuckle.

"I had a mine once. Leastwise I thought it was a mine, but first she played out on me an' then she caved in. Lies down thar. Foller the trail."

Gates surveyed him with narrowed eyes and went off with two of his men. The others made a thorough search of the cabin, one even boosting another to the roof where he peered about from the edge. The resilient growth had straightened out. Neither without nor within was there any evidence. Gates returned chewing savagely at his mustache.

"You got grub fer us?" he demanded.

"I'm nigh out, goin' to town in a day or so for more. Reckon you'll help yoreselves," said Owens. Nor did he offer to aid them. When they had finished Gates tossed some money on the table.

"Fifty cents a head," he said. Owens watched them go off; then took the money Gates had left and, coin by coin, sent it scaling through the brush. Afterward he washed his hands, as if in a ritual.

"That feller Gates," he muttered, "has got a face that's intended for human, I reckon. But thar's a devil's eyes set into it."

MEANWHILE, Margaret rode back to town in resolve to clear Folger and at the same time discover the real shooter of her brother. In her own mind she went over what Owens had said and reviewed certain knowledge of her own.

She knew her brother's growing mistrust of Gates whom he had been practically forced to appoint and had never considered fit for the post. It had soon been clear that Gates was not in sympathy with his chief's endeavors to clear up the smuggling across the line between Mexico and Caroca County; traffic in drugs, pearls from La Paz, Chinese and Japanese. Gates insisted this was the duty of the Federal agents alone, and Collins, aside from the fact that these agents were few in number and the border long, believed such traffic in his territory a disgrace and a menace to it, considered it his duty to the citizens of the county to maintain peace with law and order.

The border-running was, Collins believed, responsible for much of the lawlessness that had broken out from time to time in Vacada and that had led to his "parking" rule for guns.

There were many Mexicans, and these, whether citizens or not, were undoubtedly more or less in sympathy with Pilar and his *contrabandistas*, from racial loyalty, from a general prejudice against the payment of duty, and from fear of Pilar.

Collins had many lines out to catch those he knew were helping Pilar on the American side of the line, not all of whom were Mexicans, he believed. But so far no fish had been caught, and now he was down.

So close had been his surveillance, though, that Pilar had been lying low. With some of his men he had come across and robbed a stage. The robbery was successful but Pilar was wounded in the leg and had taken cover in the house of a Mexican, to whose wife he made such advances that the man overcame his fear and sent word to Collins. Gates had been sent to apprehend Pilar but Pilar was gone. He had been warned.

Margaret knew how her brother felt about Gates' failure to capture the bandit who had thus put himself deliberately against the sheriff's direct jurisdiction. Doubtless Pilar was across the border again. She knew that her brother had severely reprimanded Gates. She knew more, that he had hoped that night to catch a fish or two.

It seemed as if Gates had a motive, but there was no proof, unless she could find some. To see Chiquita was the hardest task she had ever set herself but she meant to go through with it. Owens had done much, he could not be expected to be very active, physically. Johnson, the Bar B foreman, she liked. He would help, if there was any definite thing to be done.

And she wanted to find out if Chiquita and Folger were still intimate friends. She was not yet purged of jealousy. She fancied that the note might have been written in an attempt on the part of the girl to make up. Nor did she have a high opinion of her as a dancehall woman. But Margaret did know now that she loved Folger, and she hoped to prove him worthy of that love and innocent of the shooting.

She knew her brother did not approve of her friendship with him. Collins had not been able to talk of the shooting. As she rode fast, pondering all these things, her anxiety grew over his condition. They were closer than most brothers and sisters. She knew his ambitions, his scrupulous regard for his office, his severity, and she admired him immensely.

It was dusk when she entered Vacada. She saw that the shooting was still being discussed, that she was observed, wondered at for being away from the house. That could not be helped. They might think her indifferent to her brother's condition, they might be gossiping about her known friendship for Folger. If they could read her thoughts, if they knew where she had been, their feelings would be intensified, the talk increase. It was a hard position for her. She might even be suspected of treachery towards Jim. But her heart told her that Folger was innocent. Owens' shrewdness she respected, knowing him far from crazy, for all his usual reticence, his belief in the miraculous mirage that convinced him his partner was alive.

Their house lay beyond the depot which was at one end of the town. There was no one in sight. Vacada was preparing for supper, the men preparing to go uptown, to talk over the shooting.

Then she saw the tall figure of Johnson on his gray, coming from the depot toward her. Doubtless he had been worried over the shipment. That he was staunch to Folger she did not doubt. The Boss of the Bar B was beloved of his men.

Johnson was nearing forty, gaunt, hard bitten by the life of the range. He took off his Stetson as he neared her but made no offer to greet her. She was Collins' sister. He did not know exactly how she would stand with Folger in this matter. The evidence was all against him. She might believe it. And Johnson himself viewed with gravity the fact that Folger had deliberately ridden to town, ready for trouble. The two punchers who had been at the Bar B knew that. If they talked it would not help matters.

Margaret held up her hand. "I want to talk with you," she said. "I have a message for you about the shipment."

The foreman's lantern jawed face with its high, Indian-like cheekbones did not change or show the surprise he felt.

"You've seen him, Miss?"

"No. But he's safe. In Owens' mine tunnel."

"He'd best clear out for a bit."

"He will, after his wound heals."

"Didn't know he was hurt."

"Isn't there somewhere we can talk? You'd better not go near Owens. The posse traced him near there. And we shouldn't be seen together."

"We might ride down into the draw, Miss Margaret."

It was dark in the arroyo as they spoke together. Margaret told all she knew, even to the note. Johnson said little.

"He didn't do it," he averred decisively. "For more reasons than one. But Gates is boss while yore brother's out."

"I must get back to him."

"Yes, Miss. I'll attend to the shipping. Put the check in the bank. I'll hev it drawn account of the Bar B. That'll do away with the endorsement, mebbe. The bank'll protect themselves, an' I reckon they'll accept it."

"How about money for the ranch?"

"Me an' the boys ain't broke, Miss. If the bank won't give us any we'll git by."

"I've got some money."

"We won't need it, Miss. An' we'll be ready, any minnit, to ride, or do anything to help the boss. He's a white man, plumb through. Been workin' like

sin to make the ranch pay. I'm mighty glad you're with him. An' we'll keep our eyes and ears open.

"Gates is a slick one," he went on. "An' he don't keep over good company, for a sheriff. Smiley's a bad hombre an' I wouldn't trust Ramon. He works for the sheriff, but he's a breed an' he's likely to play both ends. Smiley's a brother-in-law of Cardero. There's talk that there'll be another border-run soon, now yore brother's down. All rumors, but they've likely got some foundation. I got a half hint from Pedro, our cook. He'd go as far as he dared for the boss. There's a reg'lar grapevine among all the Mexicans. They know a lot but they won't talk. We'll come out of this, Miss, an' so'll yore brother."

"I hope so," she said. She left the grave faced, efficient puncher with a renewed liking that was stiffened by his implicit faith in Folger. When she reached the house her brother was still under the drugs, with the surgeon expected within the hour.

On his part, Johnson rode up the street quietly. It looked bad for the boss, but he was safe for the time. And Margaret was true blue.

He was not so sure about Chiquita.

He met the posse coming back. They halted outside the Cactus and he drew rein to listen, unnoticed in the dusk.

"No, we didn't git him," said Gates. "But we will, if I hev to go over the line to do it. He's likely there by now. But I'll git him."

"You might do it at that," drawled a voice. "They say you've got friends on that side, Gates."

"Who said that?"

The man stepped out from the crowd on the high sidewalk. There had been a laugh to follow the sally and Gates was furious. He knew he was not generally popular. He had let two men get away now. If enough prominent citizens took it into their head to petition the governor he might appoint someone else to fill the unfinished term for Collins, or until the latter got well, if he ever did. There was not much chance of that, though, Gates thought.

Meanwhile the speaker, owner of the Circle K, a prosperous rancher, stood his ground. "I said it," he went on. "I'll say some more. I don't believe Folger shot Collins. An' I ain't the only one. He ain't that kind of a man."

Johnson heard the friendly talk with relief. He knew that Folger had friends. He had not been so sure they would speak for him.

"I reckon the prosecutin' attorney'll talk different," Gates replied, controlling himself with an effort.

"If you git Folger. You don't seem to be over lucky of late, Gates."

Again the snicker went 'round, and Gates dismounted and went into the Cactus, Smiley and Ramon following.

"If we kin ever turn up anything," Johnson told himself as he went at a lope toward the masterless ranch, "I reckon we kin collect a few to help our side."

But he was not over hopeful. A man's guilt, he reflected, was often easier to show than his innocence.

"An' the boss is surely in one jam," he concluded.

The surgeon came, diagnosed, measured, probed gently and decided to operate.

He found the bullet, which Gates stipulated should be turned over to him for the prosecuting attorney. The caliber was the same as that of Folger's gun.

With absolute rest Collins would recover, the surgeon announced. He left a nurse, and Margaret prepared to divide her duty. Jim would live.

At dawn the nurse called Margaret. Collins was conscious. But he had little to say. He did not know who had shot him, had not seen the man. He had been watching the horses of two Mexicans inside the *cantina* whom he suspected of being members of Pilar's band. He had warned Gates not to lose sight of them inside, to follow them when they came out. He had told Cardero that he held him responsible for the men, that he meant to question them. If Gates and Cardero were guilty, partners with Pilar, there was additional reason for them to remove the sheriff. But how to prove it? The Mexicans were gone now.

"Did they get the man who shot me?" he asked.

Margaret shook her head. The nurse made a sign of warning. Collins was not to talk too much.

"Gates tried to arrest him," she said, "but he got away."

"Gates!" The contempt of the sheriff for his deputy was apparent. "Who was it?"

Again the nurse warned, but Collins was insistent. To irritate him might be more dangerous than to tell him.

"They say it was Folger," Margaret said, trying to keep her voice steady.

"I don't believe it. I saw him earlier. We had a little trouble, but I passed it over. He understood. Gates is a fool."

But now the nurse was imperative. Collins was exhausted. She gave him a sedative, motioned to Margaret to leave.

Margaret was comforted. But the evidence was almost conclusive, unless she could find something. She knew that the prosecuting attorney would be keen on trial, that Folger would be charged if caught. Even if Collins lived, as seemed likely, Folger would be sent up for attempted homicide. Her brother could offer nothing but his opinion to the contrary. He had not seen the man.

And Gates would be all the more virulent, if he had plotted to get the sheriff out of the way—virulent against Folger, of whom he was jealous. Jealous with how much reason? Chiquita's move had been clever but she had

defeated Gates' purpose. Margaret must see the girl, get the truth from her as far as she knew it. A slender hope. But it steeled her for the interview.

She knew that the Mexican girl rode often on her pinto in the afternoons. She had seen her several times, though only once with Folger. She spelled the nurse from six until twelve, and then prepared to go in search of Chiquita. She told the nurse she was going for a ride, checking an impulse to confide in her, though she felt the other could be trusted.

"We'll keep your brother under opiates for a while," the nurse said. "He's still in grave danger. It may be best for him not to see much of you for a while, Miss Collins. It excites him, and that shouldn't happen again. I suppose Mr. Gates will want to know what he said."

Margaret hesitated, gauging the frank face of the other. "I wish you hadn't heard it," she said finally. "You saw that my brother does not have entire confidence in Gates. And Mr. Folger is a friend, a very dear friend of mine."

For a moment the two looked at each other. "As it happened," said the nurse, "I didn't hear anything at all—though it seemed to be in favor of your—friend." She laughed. "That sounds mixed," she went on, "but I'm Irish."

"You're a dear," said Margaret with shining eyes.

Luck, perhaps, was with Margaret. It was Chiquita's time for riding. Margaret caught sight of the pinto, and the dancehall girl saw her at the same moment, wheeled her cayuse, galloped out of town on to the sage flats. Margaret spurred her bay, setting it to full speed when she was clear of the scattering huts. Chiquita was in sight, half hidden in dust. Margaret spoke to the bay and started in pursuit. She could ride as well as Chiquita, as well as most punchers, and she had the better horse. Gradually she overhauled Chiquita who, conscious of the chase, curbed the pinto to a halt at last and wheeled it to face Margaret as the latter pulled up.

For a moment they faced each other, black haired and golden, Latin and Saxon, Chiquita's eyes blazing with dark fire.

"Why do you follow me, señorita? I do not weesh to see you."

"I want to talk with you. About Roy Folger."

"An' I, I weel not talk weeth you. You theenk he keel your brother. An'—an' he, Folger, ees in love with you."

Margaret's face flushed. Her heart leaped.

"Do you love him, Chiquita?" she asked. "If you do perhaps you can help him. I want to."

Chiquita looked at her scornfully.

"An' so you come to me. Why?"

"You helped him once. I do not think he shot my brother. Won't you talk to me. Won't you get off your horse? Please!"

She slid out of her own saddle. Chiquita regarded her doubtfully, then dismounted and led the way to a rise where she slipped reins over the pinto's head. Margaret did the same.

"I do not know why I should trus' you," said Chiquita. "I do not like you. You love heem, but you do not say so. I love heem an' I tell eet. But you have ice in your blood, like heem. You theenk because I dance weeth men that I am a bad girl. I see eet im your eyes. Yet you come to me, to help you. Do you have to make your leevin'? As I do! I am not bad, yet I would give myself eef it would help heem. Would you?" she challenged fiercely.

Her eyes blazed like black opals. Margaret felt the world slip about her. Suddenly she seemed to see things in elemental fashion. The Mexican girl loved with every atom of her nature. And she, herself—would she make such a sacrifice for the sake of the man she loved? There was a sudden surge of feeling in her, sweeping away conventions, a rush of primitive womanhood.

"I would do anything for him," she said. "I love him; we both love him, Chiquita, we two women. Whichever of us he loves, the other must lose him. I thought he loved you. And I do not think you bad. You are clean and true and sweet."

The fiery challenge of the black eyes died in a gush of sudden tears. Margaret bent and kissed Chiquita, and the girl stood sobbing with her head on the other's breast.

"Eet ees not me he loves," she said. "He tol' me so. Eet ees you. But I mean what I said. How can I help heem?"

Margaret showed her the note, explained away the threat of the brown smears upon it, told her of what she hoped.

"I deed not write eet. I did not geev eet to heem. He would not look at me that night. An' I have my pride. I know he does not want me, an' some day, I—perhaps I shall marry one who wants me, of my own race, señorita. But thees? Wait."

She sat as if turned to stone, staring over the flat, her brows drawn together over closed eyes.

"Someone feexed his gun," she said at last. "That was easy to do. Someone who hear him quarrel weeth the sheriff, perhaps, who wanted the sheriff to die an' who hated Roy. That would be Gates. He let Pilar go. He deed not try to take heem. Because he ees friend to Pilar. Weeth Smiley, an' Ramon. *Si*, an' Cardero. They say Cardero hides the Chinos een his cellar. An' Smiley, he dances that eveneeng weeth Helen. Perhaps he make her write that note. She weel not tell, for he would keel her. An' I cannot make Gates talk. He ees mad weeth me because he theenks I help Roy to get away. Eet ees true. But I mus'

dance, an' all the time they watch me. Cardero questions me. They theenk I know where Roy ees. You do," she flashed. "You have seen heem?"

"No. But I think I know where he is, safe."

"Thees paper ees no good unless we can prove Helen gave eet. They weel say that he saw the sheriff an' shot heem, anyway."

"Perhaps you could get something in Helen's own writing," suggested Margaret, remembering Owens' hint. She did not doubt Chiquita any more. Woman to woman, they had read each other.

"She does not write letters," replied Chiquita. "She ees much older than you or me, an' she ees what you would call hard. Smiley deed marry the sister of Cardero but she ees dead, an' Helen says that he weel marry her. Eet ees sure he would keel her eef she told. But I weel try."

She paused, looking out over the sage. Her breast heaved. "I weel see Manuel," she went on, tension in her voice. "I am sure that he mus' know sometheeng an' he weel tell me if I ask him. Eet ees he who would wed weeth me, señorita, an' he ees a good man. He grazes his sheep in Cumbre Pass through which eet ees sure Pilar come weeth *contrabanda*. I know I can make heem tell.

"I hav' geev notice to Cardero. He ees angry weeth me an' I am tired of dancing. I weel send a boy to Manuel an' I weel see you here the day after tomorrow, señorita. *Dios* grant I breeng news."

THE hours crawled to Margaret before their next meeting. Gates' posses still scoured the range and the hills. But her brother was steadily if slowly improving, and a real affection was springing up between herself and the nurse, Mary Conlin.

Chiquita was awaiting her.

"I hav' not much news, señorita," she said. "Notheeng of Helen. She weel barely talk weeth me. But I believe eet was she. The way she look' at me. An' once she say eet ees hard for a girl to lose two lovers at once. She mean me— an' the girls laugh.

"Manuel has tell me what he knows. He deed not weesh to, for eef Pilar knew he talked he would keel all the sheep an' cut the throats of Manuel an' his peons. So Manuel mus' never be mention'."

Margaret reassured her.

"Manuel say' that sometimes a man comes to heem an' tells heem that the grazeeng ees better higher up on the mountains, an' then Manuel drives up his sheep, an' that night Pilar passes.

"That ees in Cumbre Pass where Manuel owns some land and grazes on the open range that the cattlemen do not weesh because eet ees too close to the

border. He say also that Cardero ees weeth Pilar an' sometimes keeps Chinos een hees cellar. I theenk that ees true. The girls have smell opium sometimes. An' that Ramon is the *amigo* of Pilar. An' also Gates. But he cannot prove thees. Eet ees known, but who weel talk?

"There ees another theeng." Chiquita's eyes grew wide. "There ees also another pass but eet ees difficult. A hard trail on the *Mexicano* side, an' the desert on thees. So eet ees not often used, Manuel theenk. But he has been forbidden to graze hees sheep there wheech he would like to do because eet ees a high vallee, weeth much grass, weeth trees an' a lake, call' *Boca del Viento*—The Pass of the Weend!"

Margaret, disappointed at lack of real proof, despite confirmation of Gates' interest with Pilar, was struck with the mysterious quality of Chiquita's voice. She spoke of this valley with something close to awe. Presently she went on to tell in a low voice of the visit of herself and Folger to La Bruja.

"Eet ees that same place. La Bruja saw dead men there, an' the gold. She called eet the end of the trail. An' what she say, comes always true. Eet ees there, in *la Boca del Viento*, that theengs weel end, señorita."

Margaret was impressed, despite lack of belief in soothsaying. But it was all vague, indefinite, impractical. Manuel could not be quoted. If he was it would not amount to anything. If Smiley could be uncovered as an ally of Pilar's, perhaps the woman Helen might be made to talk.

Her brother with his authority might have done something with it all, but to Margaret their present forces seemed pitifully inadequate. There were Chiquita and herself, the old prospector, Johnson and the two punchers from the Bar B, arrayed against the evidence, the domination of Gates and his will to arrest Folger.

"You have done everything possible," she said to Chiquita, trying to sound as if she felt that the information was valuable. Chiquita answered very seriously. It was very clear that she considered the description of the Pass of the Wind by La Bruja vital.

"*Si, señorita*. An' I have promise to marry weeth Manuel. He ees a good man, of my own people an' my own faith. An' he loves me," she added simply, not without pride. "Also he has tol' more than you theenk. Señorita, een that valley, where the weend blow by the lake, een *la Boca del Viento*, where La Bruja saw the dead men lie, there eet weel all end. I know eet. How an' when? *Quien sabe?*"

She flung out her hands with the expression eloquent of her racial fatalism. She had made sacrifice. It was on the knees of the gods.

RETURNING home, Margaret found her brother in a relapse. She dared not leave the house for fear of his passing, of his asking for her. She knew that Chiquita would get into touch with her if there was any news, but none came.

Down into Vacada from the hills came the old prospector, Owens, plodding afoot behind his burro, traveling light to town but due to return with a full load.

A few hailed Owens, asking him if he had seen anything of the fugitive for whom search was still ardent. People, following the lead of Rand of the Circle K, were beginning to twit Gates about his failures now that Collins seemed likely to recover. But Owens had nothing to say. Close mouthed, he handed over his lists to the stores, making payment in the colors and *chispa* nuggets he had panned from the creeks, laying in, he told them curtly, a three months' supply.

Johnson, often in town these days, listening, talking a little, trying to pin something on the enemy, saw the burro outside the store. There were not many of them nowadays around Vacada and it was not much of a guess to surmise to whom it belonged. He strolled into the store for tobacco he did not need and saw Owens seated on an empty box, whittling a stick while his order was being made up. Johnson did not speak, there was no greeting between them, but he waited well out on the mountain trail.

"Tell the boss the shipment's gone through," he said, as Owens came up. "Nothin' new that I know of. Gates is bein' kidded considerable an' it looks like he'd got to make an arrest an' git a conviction or they'll laugh his star plumb off'n him. It'd be a good idee fer the boss to lay low a spell or clear out of the country."

Owens nodded. "His wound's healin' fine. He can't stay too long in that tunnel, though. It ain't healthy. I've been down for these supplies an' I'm goin' to outfit him an' send him off across the desert, close to the line, over by Coyote Wells. Not likely for anyone to see him, an' if they sh'ud he'll pass for a prospector. I'll make a trip myself later on. Mebbe by that time suthin' will hev broken. I was hopin' to see Miss Margaret today, but I know she'll git in touch with me if she finds out anything. Not that I kin do much."

"You've done a heap, old man," said Johnson. "The boss sure owes you a lot."

"No, he don't. He got me out of that cave-in when I'd hev died like a dog in a b'ar trap—him an' Miss Margaret. Thar ain't nothin' I c'ud do for them I w'udn't do. Meant for each other, them two. An' Folger's goin' to do suthin' more for me on this trip."

That "suthin'" Johnson shrewdly suspected had to do with the search for Owens' long lost "pardner." The old man was still "cracked" on that score.

The foreman rode back to the Bar B. He had heard that Collins was not so well, and had given up hopes of having any present talk with Margaret. Like Owens, he knew that she would communicate with the Bar B if anything did happen, but there seemed little chance of that. Johnson shook his head, his face grave, when the two punchers asked if he had any news. Pedro, the cook, was serving the meal, listening, none too certain of the American.

"Not a damn' thing," said Johnson. "Things ain't breakin' right for the Bar B, boys."

"Sure is tough luck, five ways from the ace," commented Buck Peters.

"Looks like the Old Man's friends don't amount to much."

"You can't play, let alone win, if you don't hold kyards," said Limpy Rogers, lame in one hip from a bucking contest but still a tophand in the saddle.

Pedro shuffled out. In his kitchen he set down empty dishes, scratching his head meditatively and crossed himself after a shrug.

"*Meterse en los peligros et malo*," he muttered. Which, literally translated, means that a man is a fool to deliberately place himself in danger. But Pedro did not seem entirely content with the quoting of the proverb. Folger was in trouble, and Folger had been very good to him. It was Gates who—

A roar from the other room recalled him to the fact that the punchers were waiting for the rest of their meat. He was not very wise, outside of his cooking, and even that could have been improved upon without scoring a triumph. He muddled over things and he was a fearful man. Gates and the boss? The boss and Gates? He could not see what anything he knew had to do with the boss shooting Collins. *Quien sabe?* He would think it over some more—*mañana*.

THE moon had dropped behind the western range, it was cold under the glittering stars in the narrow gorge where Owens stood with Folger, talking in a low voice though there seemed no danger.

Folger, with one sound arm, the other still to be favored, had helped to haul himself out of the shaft as Owens strained at the ancient windlass. Two burros, old but rugged, both pack-saddled, nibbled at the chapparal.

"You won't hev any trouble with them," said Owens. "Jinny, she's still some skittish but she won't leave Joe an' he'll do what you ask him. An' I'm keepin' Sammy for my own use. It's two days across the desert an' here's a map with the water marked an' the bearin's for Coyote Wells. That's right at the foot of the Seco Hills. Sweet water. I'll meet you there two weeks from today or sooner, mebbe, if anything turns up. You keep yore eyes skinned for sky-sign. If it looks hostile, keep atop the hills an' make a break for the border. Meantime you kin sorter prospect around for gold."

"I don't know ore from onions," said Folger, his spirits roused after his sojourn in the tunnel.

"Wal, thar's gold thar though I ain't found it myself. But my pardner found it though he never brought it back. They say he's dead, dead long before I saw him. But I did see him, plain. It was a mirage but what is a mirage but a real scene shifted by the sun? You look for gold, Folger, an' watch for sky-sign, but you look for Sam, too. Will ye? Ye might come across him.

"He was thar, drivin' his burros, one of 'em with tools an' grub an' t'other loaded with gold in his packs. I know it. Crossin' a green valley, whar thar was grass an' trees an' a lake, with the wind blowin' through a gap between the hills at the back. Reg'lar bowl, it seemed, with the front broken away an' a piece out of the back whar the wind come. You c'ud see the grass an' water ripplin' an' the trees wavin'. Sam's beard was blown by the wind—"

His voice died away and he stood as if he had lost consciousness of Folger's presence and the business in hand.

Folger stood still also. It was weird, this sudden coincidence. La Bruja had described a valley just like this, where the wind blew and a lake shone. Dead men lying there. Gold, in a cage of death.

He was seeking gold, equipped as a prospector. There had been treachery, the lost trail, the open noose. And now Owens, describing for the first time the details of his mirage to Folger, had drawn La Bruja's valley. A cold finger seemed to travel up and down Folger's spine. He felt the beginning of a hunch that did not, as yet, materialize.

Owens came out of his silence with a sigh. "You'll try to find him, son, won't ye? You might run across the place. Will you try?"

Folger gave his promise. That Davis was alive was not possible. But Owens believed it so.

"You must go now, boy. Down the ravine an' out to the desert. I'll see you a fortnight from today. An' we'll be workin', Things'll turn. But if they caught ye now you'd have short shrift. Thar's my six-gun an' the Sharps in the scabbard on Joe. I've got another rifle. Thar's ca'tridges. No thanks. You saved my life once an' you're goin' to find Sam. I know it. Good luck to ye. I'll git yore message to her. She believes in ye. It'll come right. I'll take you down the trail to the burros."

As Folger reached the edge of the desert the sun, as yet invisible, set a twinkling star of rose on a high crest. It spread glowing, while the barrens stretched cold and vague, with clawed growths and drifts of sand, lava dykes, ghostly dunes that swallowed him, Ahead, to the south, the hills showed sharp, two-dimensioned, like silhouettes cut out of slate colored paper, untouched

yet by the sun that now ennobled the western heights of the divide. These hills were outthrusts of burned rock, sharply serrated.

As Folger voyaged on behind the two burros that were going steadily enough by now, the hill turned purple, taking on form, far off but seeming only an hour's journey away. The last of the scraggly sage gave out, then the greasewood and scattering mesquite. The clumps of cactus were farther apart, the Judas trees and barrel cactus, the pillared *chayas*. Soon there was no more of them, nothing gray, or gray-green, only the sand and the dykes of igneous rock with here and there cracked surfaces of alkali. The hum of cicadas ceased, there were only lizards and crawling snakes and reptiles, venomous and ugly. A bird soared overhead. He was in the wilderness. To any who might see him from the slopes he had left he must have seemed a plodding prospector, a desert rat, setting out on the everlasting quest. His wound was healing, he could use his arm carefully.

His red beard had sprouted and he meant to let it grow. On the sea of sand, that looked so level from the height, but was in reality filled with undulations, ravines between the dunes where the sand rustled as the hot wind moved it, it was utterly lonely.

Now and then the sand gathered into little whorls, sandspouts that danced in a weird saraband of their own. As the sun lifted, the distant hills seemed to be lifted, their bases aswim on air.

He seemed to be committed to Fate, to be set in some fourth dimension outside of the world in which disaster had overtaken him, the world where Margaret lived and loved him. Margaret and Chiquita, Johnson and Owens, striving to clear him, with so little to help. Folger was sure that Gates had planned the murder, used him as a tool to fashion his own ends. And Gates, in authority, seemed safe. To convict him would require strong proof.

Fate finds. What was he to find in the desert? It seemed to him that there would be something, that this was a thing ordered.

At noon he reached the first spring on the map, a struggling pool of bitter water that the burros snuffed at but drank. Beside it was the skeleton of a steer, hide clinging to it here and there, the carcass torn apart by coyotes or buzzards, both probably.

Night with the air growing cold found him on the verge of the desert proper. He had brought some fuel and he made a tiny fire in a hollow place and sat beside it, smoking, dreaming, with the coyotes in ululating chorus far away, their yaps incessant for a while. The great stars burned above him like candles in a windless vault, infinitely remote and old. He woke to find the patient burros standing by, and made his meal of bacon and coffee with pancakes he shared with the two beasts, saving fodder.

The going was harder the next day. Soft sand, wide dykes of malpais, rough lava like rock candy in texture, blistered here and there into shells that hoofs and feet broke through, sharp edged. His wound ached and he applied another dressing, but the water was tepid and the ointment did not seem to ease it. His head throbbed, the burros lagged. He had no water keg with him, only two canteens. Owens had marked the wells and their bearings were indicated, but there was a curious haze on the desert and the outlines of the peaks were blurred.

A curious feeling came over him that there was something waiting for him in those barren hills, something more than a place where he could hide and survey the desert. He did not think he was being followed. It was not as if he was conscious of being watched—but there was something. His world had been the range and this dry bed of sand and rock, like the bottom of a vanished sea, seemed to hold mysterious influences.

It was well after noon when they came to where the well was marked, and found it dry. Digging deep produced no moisture. It had vanished, absorbed by the suction of the sand since Owens passed this way. He gave the burros water out of the canteens in the crown of his hat, and pushed on. He might have waited until nightfall but something drew him on, through the stifling heat, toward Coyote Wells.

It was still hazy and the sun seemed to be sapping his vitality as it drew the moisture of his body to the surface until there was no more to perspire. His eyes ached with his head, and his wound and his tongue began to swell despite sparing sips of water. The burros kept doggedly on, plodding toward the hills that seemed to mockingly retreat as they covered painful mile after mile.

Then the two brutes stopped on the brink of a rise, balking. He no longer saw the hills. They were blotted out by a moving cloud, dun colored, rolling fast toward them. He retreated down the slope with Joe and Jenny willing enough to follow, and found the lee of an outcrop. The storm came whistling over the rise like a brown wave, gritty, enveloping them, suffocating, roaring, piling up about their feet as they stood, backs to it, Folger with his bandanna over his mouth, the burros muffled with his coat and shirt. He could not see, his eyelids would not keep out the stuff that filtered into his nostrils, his ears, his mouth, despite the cloth.

It passed as suddenly as it had come, and he washed out his eyes, relieved the burros, astounded to find the sky serenely blue, like liquid sapphire, with a wan wafer of a moon hung in the south. As he topped the rise once more he halted, staring.

Before him, close, vivid, he saw an upland park, a lake of water in the midst of vivid green, trees on the shore, reflected there, the whole set in a broken

bowl of rugged hills with a notch beyond, like a pass. He could see wind in the grass, the trees, ruffling the sparkling water. It was the mirage of Owens. He must have come to the same spot, the same conditions. He closed his eyes and reopened them and the mirage persisted, trembling a little as if it was a picture flung: upon a gently shaker screen. But there was no figure in it of man or beast, no simulacrum of Sam Davis. Beside him the burros stood quietly as if they did not see what he did. And then—there was only the desert reaching to the hills, close enough now for him to see the gorges and fissures, in one of which was Coyote Wells. The air was sweet though hot. The sand lay in ripples at his feet as if a tide had lately flown there.

He got his bearings and went on. The sunset blazed, painting the desert and the ragged hills. It was smoldering out when he entered the little canyon, the burros quickening their gait as they smelled water.

The walls were white limestone, the shape of the place a narrow corridor ending abruptly in a steep cliff. The water was in a natural *tenaya*, with the droppings of antelope and mountain sheep. There was a scanty herbage the burros cropped eagerly.

The water was sweet, plentiful. Stars shone reflected in it like spangles on a black velvet cloth as he got supper, infinitely weary, numb for sleep.

When he woke the stars were still bright above him but beginning to pale. He looked up into the dim face of a man who was standing over him. His hand sought and found the butt of his gun. Had he been followed? Stars commenced to wink out, the walls of the little canyon changed from purple to gray as the sky lightened.

"No need to shoot, old-timer," said a voice that Folger did not fancy, the voice of a man who had lived hard, the voice of a boaster, a reckless liver. "I'll own up yore outfit looked mighty good to me. It w'ud come in handy. But I was jest thinkin'. You don't need yore gun. Jest blow hard an' I'll fall down. I've come fur an' tolerable fast an' I'm plumb famished. Had a run-in with my outfit, *sabe?*"

Then, "Gimme some grub, for Gawd's sake, will ye?" he pleaded, his tone hoarse.

While Folger put on the coffee, warmed beans, sow-belly and started some camp-bread to bake in the ashes, he took stock of his visitor, liking him none the better. He was a hook nosed man, with predacious eyes, a scar across one cheek, a dirty rag wrapped about his lower left arm. He had a canteen with him that was empty and he had tobacco, but apparently no weapons. Folger still held an uneasy sense that if the man had had a gun or knife he would have shot him while he slept, or cut his throat, and annexed his outfit without compunction. He had given no name. He sat smoking a cornhusk quirly, his

clothes rent by contact with thorny growths, as if he had forced a trail through chaparral.

And he gave no explanations. Folger did not ask him for one, eager to get rid of him, playing the prospector himself so that the man might forget him. The meeting meant that he must go into the hills right away from which he could overlook the desert, be near the border. He gathered from the other's scraps of talk that he had had a quarrel with an outfit with which he had recently joined, a fight over cards, or a woman, or both, and that he had left in a hurry without waiting for a general invitation to do so.

"I aim to git even," he said with a nasty look on his face and his eyes evil. "You prospectin' for gold, old-timer? Don't look like much of a place to me."

Folger recalled a saying of Owens' and applied it. "Gold's where you find it."

"Yeah? Jest the same, I'd ruther be campin' out in the place I jest came through. I'd hev stayed there if I had a gun an' if I warn't aimin' to carry out a bit of business across the desert.

"I come on it unexpected. I was travelin' north, you see, an' I struck a trail. 'Most like climbin' a wall in spots, but it leads up to a notch where the wind blows like hell, an' there at the top was a reg'lar park. A lake an' trees an' grass. Not a dern' soul in it. The trail I'd come by was old and ain't been used lately, an' the trail out this side'd beat anyone comin' in from the desert who didn't know it.

"When I looked down an' saw the spark of yore fire I didn't see any way to git down, at first. But fire meant food an' I sure needed it. Then I see a deep cleft where the soft rock has washed out an' left a reg'lar wall standin' out mebbe ten foot from the cliff. Part filled up, it was, an' I made shift to git down it.

"From here it looks like a box canyon, don't it? But mebbe you know the place?"

Folger, staring hard at the end of the little canyon that seemed closed by the same limestone as the sidewalls, hardly heard him.

The lake again! Wind. Grass and trees. The valley of the mirage! It was uncanny. A sense of Fate leading him inevitably along blind trails was on him. He roused himself to answer.

"I didn't know of it," he said. "Never tried to git up thataway." He tried to strengthen the impression that he was an old-timer in his craft.

"Well, there she lies," said the other. "You go plumb up to the end an' there's jest a crack, ha'f hid with brush an' a piñon nigh closing it. Squeeze through that with yore burros an' you'll see the trail. You'd never tackle it on yore own. You kin git all the fresh meat you want up there. I saw fresh sign of

deer. Old-timer, I've give you some information, free an' gratis. I ain't lyin'. You've got a rifle. There's as likely to be gold up there as any place, 'cordin' to yore own notions. Now then, I've got to git across the desert. You stake me to two days' rations an' give me that spare canteen of yores, an' I'll make it. Mebbe you kin give me the location of the wells. An' I'm stakin' you to fresh deer meat an' plenty grass for yore burros. It's a secret that's worth suthin', ain't it? I'll go back with you to prove it, if you say so."

But Folger knew it was there as the man had said. A fine place to hide, keeping a lookout across the desert. He wanted to get rid of the man. He did not like him. He might talk, would be more likely to if he hesitated to stake him.

"I'm on the trail of a lost strike," he said. "I'm not keen to hev anyone know I'm after it. There's folks'd figger what I was after, *sabe*? But I might take a look at this place, if there's grass an' water."

"I *sabe*. I don't talk too glib. You stake me an' I'll forgit I saw you. An' wish you luck with yore strike. I want to git on. I ain't follered. I didn't cotton much to the outfit I hitched up with or they to me. We wasn't what you might call intimate. An' they ain't missin' me none. But there's suthin' I want to 'tend to that won't wait. How about it?"

It was not Folger's business. If this man had pressing affairs of his own he would be more likely to forget the meeting, less apt to mention it. He surmised the other was headed for Vacada, though there was Calor not far away, but he did not want to ask him. He set aside the food and the other bundled it, refilled the two canteens that swung crosswise on his body and made ready to start.

"Good luck to you, pardner," he said and went off, swaggering a bit.

Folger did not watch him long. He was eager to find the trail, to reach the windy valley. The cliff stood apart, an eroded screen of limestone that denied any hint of passage behind it until it was actually reached. They toiled up the steep path to come out on the top of a chalcedony plateau. To the north lay the desert with the figure of the unnamed stranger moving across it, antwise. Beyond was the range where Owens was cabined.

Below, inside, was a grassy vale, the lake, the trees, the notch that showed a triangle of blue sky clear as crystal. A freely blowing wind. The burros picked their way down on nimble hoofs, and Folger followed. He wondered a little that no one had preempted this spot, despite the hard climb and the desert, then remembered that it must be close to the line if the border ran as Owens had said. Still he was surprised no shepherd had used it for pasturage, unless the travel to and fro was too strenuous. That hardly seemed likely.

He gave up the problem, and unpacked. The vale opened northward, with a gentle slope to the edge of the cliffs. A patrol every few hours would assure

him that the desert was clear. The hard looking stranger was now only a tiny swirl of dust but visible enough. To the south was Mexico. Little danger in that direction. Folger washed his clothes, stripped, bathed in the lake. A deer stood at gaze and he saw fish darting in the shallows.

Exploring, he found an old, dim trail leading from the notch. It had not been used for months, save by the stranger. From the notch itself, where the wind blew so hard he leaned against it, the cliffs fell away abruptly, though there was evidently a path established from the terrain below, a wild extent of mesquite thickets and cactus mazes stretching far to where, in a blue blur, the sky, the land and the water of the Californian Gulf merged.

He passed two days in luxury before he did any more exploring. And he moved his camp from the shore of the lake to a tree shaded spot under the western cliff, not far from where he had entered. There was a spring there, with grass and wild mints that delighted the burros. The central lake might find him cut off if men should elect to ride in by night from south or north, little chance as there seemed to be of such a happening, but a chance he could not afford to take. Every little while he searched the desert for sky-sign of telltale dust but saw nothing but the wind whorls gyrating. He wondered whether his late guest had passed the desert, feeling a little uneasy lest he give out information wittingly, or unwittingly, that would bring a posse to the valley, debating whether it would not be wiser to camp on top of the cliffs that walled the vale, even at the cost of comfort.

This unrest developed with a feeling that made him restless, forced him to a round of the place. He shot an antelope, saw some grouse. Close to his new camp was a gorge rent out of the igneous walls, a narrow, tortuous gash whose floor led sharply upward between black rocks of obsidian, a cleft he fancied might lead to the chalcedony plateau on which the trail from the desert emerged. He made up his mind to go up it. It might be well to have an emergency entrance, or an exit.

It was a tiresome place to achieve but it seemed to lead to the summit and he kept at it, although the obsidian walls, twisted and jagged and seamed, closed in and began to throw back reflected sunheat until he felt as if he was in an oven. Midway, the floor was broken into a series of terraces, the broken treads of a giant's stairway. He heard the whirring warning of rattlers, smelled their musky odor, and guessed them sunning themselves on ledges above his head. Once he saw a sinuous neck and flat, wicked head with topaz eyes and a pink, quivering, forked tongue, overlooking him. Then a scaly body, patterned symmetrically, as long as he was tall, glided ahead, halted, coiled and sounded its rattles.

Folger instinctively hated rattlesnakes, not fearing them, save as a menace to stock. Without thought he whipped out the six-gun and fired. The bullet cut the reptile's neck from its body, the latter thrashing and looping on the ground while the echoes of the report made local thunder. As if by magic the place became alive with snakes. From all sides came the sharp rattling, he could see them emerging from beneath overhanging ledges, peering from crevices, crawling here and there, great lengths of brown sinuousness, diapered in pink and black.

Folger leaped on a boulder, gun in hand, watching them, seeing the disturbance die down. If they had attempted a concerted attack they could easily have disposed of him. It was an uncanny place and these were the gliding devils that lived in it. He wondered, as he had often wondered in a rattlers' den, where the reptiles got their food. They lived in barren places and they had to seek their game. It could not be of too great size yet they would attack anything. And here there were scores, hundreds of them.

He forged on, looking warily about him. A chance step might bring him within striking distance of a serpent whose poison, if it did not kill, would bring him close to death. But it was nearing noon and they were sluggish. The gorge would be no place for a man to pass through at night, or twilight, or in cool weather.

Now the cleft turned at a sharp angle, and as he turned into the new course his heart began suddenly to pump. Walls and floor and fragments were all of black obsidian but here was a white stone, smooth, and the size of—a man's skull. He knew it for that before he reached it. The snake-guardians of the place had found one victim.

There were bones scattered here and there that had been crunched for marrow, most of them the missing bones from this broken skeleton of a man, a white man he judged, by the shape of the cranium. There was nothing left for identification. Years had bleached the remains that beasts had worried. There was a rusty pistol, eaten red. No shreds of clothing. All else had blown or been dragged off.

Had this been Sam Davis, snake bitten, suffering lonely agony as he strove to get back to the valley, bitten again perhaps, going to or from the plateau?

His quest was not yet finished. There was something more to find. The gorge narrowed again until he could have stretched out his arms and touched both walls at once. Another turn and then more bones. The skeleton of some beast of burden, largely articulate. He knew it for that of a burro. It lay on the backbone, the ribs curving out, like a cage.

*Like a cage. A cage of death!*

The legs were gone, fallen or torn apart, carried away. But the body had been circled with leather saddle packs, with cinch straps and the lacing of a diamond hitch. Time with the elements had rotted the leather, flesh and hide had gone. Insects had been at work here more than the prowling brutes that had secured the joints, the straps had seemed too much like a trap for animals. Buzzards, perhaps, had helped to strip those cage-like bones within which gleamed the dull yellow of gold, burst with its own weight from the rotting packs.

"Gold in the cage of death!" He had found it. Fate's finding.

The gold was practically pure. To it a little of the matrix clung here and there, but it was ninety per cent. virgin metal, hammered from its shell of quartz. Between thirty and forty pounds of it, he judged. Sam Davis' gold surely! Owens' now.

The next day he retrieved it with what was left of the saddle bags and the rusty pistol for identification by Owens. The skeleton of Davis, if it was Davis, he buried, and placed a cairn above it with a rude cross to mark it.

The natural thought came to him of the source of the gold. Davis might have taken it all but there was an even chance he had not, that somewhere there was a quartz seam only partly ravished. He tried to reconstruct the tragedy. Davis picking out the gold, breaking the rich fragments like a man getting kernels from crushed nuts, coming down to the valley, to the desert, on his way back with partial riches and news of a strike. The burro struck first by a snake's fangs, and Davis next, perhaps as he tried to help his faithful burro. Both perishing miserably. There had been a second burro, according to Owens. He could guess at its ultimate fate. He had seen the trail of a puma by the lake.

It was an ancient story now, but the gold remained. Owens was old, seeking colors and small nuggets in the creek, finding enough to fend off hunger but not age or rheumatism. There might have been some five or six thousand dollars' worth of gold in the packs but, if he could find the seam of quartz, why, he had ten days ahead of him and he might be able to tell Owens he was wealthy when he met him at Coyote Wells.

Once more he ventured up the snake-ridden gorge, this time to the top of the plateau, searching over the uneven surface for signs of miners' monuments or an outcrop of quartz. The piled up rocks that the dead prospector had heaped to mark the claim he never recorded caught his searching eyes at last. What notices had been left there had long since gone but there was the seam of quartz, like a scar, but rich with seeded gold that sparkled dully. How deep it lay he could not guess but there were some forty surface feet of it in length, in places two feet wide, fractured at one end where the dead man had

hammered, or blasted, to reach the treasure. A pocket mine at best, but holding a small fortune beyond all question.

Folger brought his burros up to the plateau the next day and made camp there, leaving the comfort of the valley, though it was still his supply house for all of them. Here was work to do for Owens, in repayment; work that checked the fretted current of his thoughts. And it was safer here. The sense of uneasiness still prevailed. He was far from being out of the woods. Every four hours he went to look over the desert, and found no sign as the days passed on to the time when Owens would be coming across the waste to bring him news of Margaret, who filled his dreams and whose face came often between him and the quartz he cracked. Sometimes he thought of Chiquita, going over the happenings of the night when he became an outlaw. That they were still hunting for him, had posted rewards, he did not doubt. That Owens and the rest could do much for him, he did doubt.

One night he woke to hear voices, a snatch of song. He went to the edge of the plateau and saw leaping fires by the lake, many men moving about them, men in *serapes* and Mexican costume. The valley was invested, and he was thankful for the caution he had taken. It was likely they would not come near his deserted camp, which was among trees, with few visible traces left of use.

These were surely Pilar's men. For some reason they had chosen to come up the stiff trail through the windy notch, perhaps only to a rendezvous, to hand over their contraband. Here was the actual border. It would not be Chinamen this trip, but drugs, to be taken over by agents, on the American side, or cached. Who were those agents? Gates? Smiley?

He had no glasses with him and the light was uncertain. Some of the band were camped within the trees. He settled down to watch. The fires were being used for barbecuing meat, portions of which were borne into the trees. The meal over, there was more singing, the twang of guitars, melody that changed in character to drunken howling and then, gradually, silence. They would sleep late, secure, considering no watcher on the plateau. With daylight he could tell better who was there. If the deputy sheriff was with them, trafficking with the smugglers, he would have something to work on, though exactly how he still could not devise. He brought his blankets to the verge and rolled up in them. He might need that rest before he was through.

IT WAS Chiquita's last night at the Cactus. Cardero seemed willing enough to let her go. Gates was surly, not speaking to her, still suspicious of her, vexed by his failure to find Folger, by the news that Collins was slowly on the mend. And he had other fat fish to land and fry before the sheriff resumed authority, before his own might be taken from him.

Smiley's woman, Helen, seemed to Chiquita to regard her with a none too well concealed triumph. And she had discovered nothing.

She arrived through the side door ready to go to the dressing room and put on her garish costume for the last time. Afterward, there was Manuel waiting for her. And Folger still was in jeopardy. She had seen Margaret, who had seen Johnson. Folger, she knew, was somewhere beyond the desert waiting for Time or his friends to clear him, an outlaw.

Chiquita saw Gates at the bar, with Smiley and Ramon, the three talking with Cardero. There were four or five more men in the place, loungers and a couple of punchers. Gates gave her a mean look as she passed and paused in the shadow of the as yet unlit dancehall, hoping to catch something of value.

The front door opened and a man entered, ragged and unkempt, an air at once swaggering and weary about him. There was a scar on his face and his skin was burned red over tan by prolonged exposure to the sun. He looked to Chiquita as if he might have come from across the desert. Her senses quickened.

The newcomer fished in his pocket and tossed a coin on the bar. "*Poco dinero!*" he said in a hoarse voice, "but I know where I'll git more."

No one noticed him. Obviously he could not stand treat and his manner seemed that of a braggart. Gates looked at him once, then turned his back on him. The man swigged the mescal he asked for and sauntered across the room close to where Chiquita stood back of the arch between bar and dancehall. He halted, his eyes fixed on two placards. One offered reward for Pilar, and he glanced at it casually. But his eyes gleamed as he perused the other.

He read the headline aloud. "Five Hundred Dollars Reward." His burned lips puckered to a soundless whistle.

"Two birds with one stone," he said with a dry chuckle, and turned to see Gates. "This redheaded hombre plugged the sheriff, did he?" he asked. "Who's actin' chief?"

"I am." Gates showed his badge.

"Then you're the man I'm lookin' for. On two counts, now I see this placard. That five hundred goes for informashun leadin' to his capture?"

"Sure does. Why?" Gates' tone was eager.

"I'm claimin' it. Givin' notice now. You folks are witness. This is a red-headed, red whiskered hombre, tall, with a blue star tattooed on the back of his hand?"

"Yes,"

"Well, I ran across him two days back. He's across the desert. I know where he hangs out."

"Where?"

"Hold on. I'm broke, I aim to stay here while I do a little collectin'. This five hundred, *pesos* an' a few more. I don't expect to collect in advance, but I want a stake. Do I git it? I talk better with money in my pants. Will you gamble?"

Gates eyed him narrowly. Then took a twenty-dollar gold piece out and handed it over. "I'll take that out of yore hide if you give us a wrong lead," he said.

The other laughed. "That ain't the only lead I'll give you. But you're a sport. We'll drink on it."

"On the house," said Cardero with a nod to his bartender.

Chiquita, in the dark room, leaned with her ear against the thin partition, praying no one would come down from upstairs to light up. The orchestra would be coming soon. A memory of La Bruja, weaving over the plate of sand grains, rose before her as she listened. For the man was telling about the *Boca del Viento*. Saying that Folger was camping there.

"Or thereabouts," said the stranger. "He'll likely be watchin' the desert if he's hidin' out. I sorter noticed his hands didn't look like a prospector's when I spotted that star. Reckon he's let his beard grow. But it's your man, an my five hundred *pesos*."

There were more drinks set out while Chiquita's heart hammered. Gates would send a posse. She must see Margaret immediately. It was lucky she had not changed her clothes. Folger must be warned, The Bar B men would ride. She slipped toward the rear door and passed out. Five minutes later she was racing on the pinto to Margaret.

Inside the Cactus the newcomer went on. "But thar's a back way to the place."

"I know of it," said Gates. "On the Mexican side. It's *Boca del Viento*. Border line runs plumb through the lake." He exchanged looks with Cardero, with Smiley and Ramon, reflected in the glass, while the informer, careless of his promise, of the fact that Folger had staked him, saved his life perhaps, thinking Judas-like only of reward, drained his glass.

"That ain't all," he continued. "There's a greaser called Pilar."

"Let's go in the private office," broke in Gates. "Talk better there. We'll hev some drinks sent in."

"All of us?" The man was looking with sudden suspicion at Ramon and Cardero,

"They're all right," said Gates. "Ramon trails an' interprets for us an' Cardero owns this place. We're all on the side of law and order."

They went inside.

"Now then," said Gates. "What about Pilar?"

The bartender brought in bottles and glasses. Cardero made a little sign to him with his hand before he went out.

"I'll tell you. Never mind why I was on the other side of the line. That's my business an' you ain't connected none with it except as this Pilar comes in. He's wanted. I know that. Wanted for stickin' up a stage. I run into his outfit an' I didn't git along so well with it. I figgered they might be *contrabandistas*, *sabe*, an' I kep' my ears an' eyes open. I *hablo Mejicano*, but I didn't let them know. They was mighty close mouthed. W'udn't let me in on much till I'd been what they called initiated. I hadn't said I'd jine 'em, *sabe*? But I listened in. It looked like there might be money in it.

"An' I heard a lot. First about this stickup. Pilar got shot in the leg. They was after him—yore folks, I reckon—but someone tipped him off. That was one thing. The other was that they're goin' to run contraband through this same valley yore redhead's campin' in. I didn't tell him that. If he runs across 'em that's his lookout. I suppose this drug runnin' is Federal business strictly. Leastwise I figger to collect from the Government on that score, but you want him for the stage robbery an' I guess there's some *dinero* for that turnup. You kin git two birds at the same time, same as I'm doin'. Take the Federal men along if you want to. I'm stayin' here, sittin' sort of pritty, seems to me. You see I had a little trouble with that outfit an' I quit 'em. Now I'm evenin' things up. They don't know I *sabe'd* their lingo."

Gates slapped him on the back. "You sure are. Some news. Cardero, this *mescal* ain't good enough for news like this. How about some brandy?"

Cardero pressed a button, his eyes creased to slits as he smiled.

The man tossed off the stuff, smacked his lips.

"Thet's the genuine art-i—" His eyes glazed and he slumped in his chair, his head on the table. The four regarded him contemptuously.

"I reckon he's spilled all he knew," said Gates. "An' that's a damn' sight too much. I'll slap him into jail an' keep him tight till we git back. He wasn't on the other side for nothin'. War-slacker, mebbe. We'll pin suthin' on him."

Cardero mopped his forehead. "Close call," he said.

Gates shrugged. "We'll haul in Folger," he said. "Clean that up. Pilar'll be there, 'cordin' to arrangement. We'll take over his stuff. Cache most of it, Collins is comin' through, damn him, an' this may be the last run. We'll go up through Cumbre an' 'round to the Boca Trail. Longer but better goin', Smiley an' Ramon an' me. An' we'll come back with Folger. Start after we eat."

THE sheriff had rallied. Margaret had given place to the nurse for the night when Chiquita arrived with her news.

"We'll warn him," she said instantly. "You must ride to the Bar B. You know how to get to this place?"

"Sí. Manuel told me."

"Tell me now, and then Johnson. And get one of them to tell Owens."

"That I weel do myself. There may be fighting. There weel be. Did not La Bruja see dead men? But Owens is old. He cannot ride as the *vaqueros*."

"He ought to know just the same. Now, where is this place, from the desert?"

"Good," she said when Chiquita had finished. "Tell Johnson I have gone ahead. They are to follow."

"You, señorita? To cross the desert? At night?"

"I can ride as well as a man. My horse is strong and I am light. There is no time to lose. Gates may start at any time. Someone must get there first. Get me that sweater."

They were in Margaret's room and she commenced swiftly to change to riding clothes, slinging a holster across her shoulder with her own gun in it. Chiquita watched, wide eyed, marveling. She had been ready for sacrifice but this, to cross the desert, to start after nightfall, this she could not have done. The desert was an evil place. The *blonda Americana* was strong, like her man.

"Eet ees far," she demurred. "You an' yore *caballo* mus' eat an' dreenk. The *caballo* ees not good for the desert eef you go fast."

"We'll get through," said Margaret briefly. "We must. If I do not, Johnson will. I'll take canteens. Grain for Peter, rice and chocolate for me. Beef extract. I've got to see Miss Conlin. My horse is in the barn at the back, Chiquita. Will you take these things and saddle him? He has mustang blood in him. We'll make it."

She swept Chiquita before her. "I have got to go away," she told the sympathetic nurse. "My—friend is in danger. When my brother wakes—"

"I'll attend to that. He still sleeps most of the time. I'll let him think you're off duty. I'll find some good excuse. And I'll pray for you, my dear."

They kissed, and Margaret went swiftly to where Chiquita had saddled the bay. Margaret examined the cinches, filled a bag with grain.

"We must go far and fast tonight, Peter," she said to the bay.

"Ah, you are his woman," said Chiquita. "Better for me ees Manuel," she added, half to herself. Margaret swung into the saddle. Then they were galloping through the night, to separate presently, Chiquita making for the Bar B and Margaret going down to the desert.

Coyotes slinking from the first water-hole two hours before day drew her attention to the pallid gleam. She loosened Peter's cinches, let him drink a little and get breathed, then take his fill, wisely, as became a horse whose dam had

known the desert, who knew there was an arduous task ahead. He was tired but still strong, his sweat dried on him by the sharp air. But she could not let him rest yet. When the sun got high they would have to do so, in some scrap of shade if they could find one, perhaps by another spring if she struck any kind of trail in that shifting waste of sand. If not, the canteens must serve to brace them for the last dash.

She nibbled chocolate as she rode. Later, perhaps, she would use her little stove of solid alcohol, boil some rice and stir in the beef extract. She was no tenderfoot. But thoughts of food were far from her. She had to keep ahead. Those who followed might be riders from the Bar B or they might be a posse. And Gates, if he was guilty, would guess her mission, guess it anyway.

Johnson and his riders would get through if she did not. But she knew she would. Her spirit sustained her and passed into the gallant Peter through the telepathy that existed between them. She had had him since a colt and she spoke to him now, coaxing him, telling him the need of courage and of sure, safe speed.

Sleep she did not need. Sunup, flashing over the world, turning the pale desert to momentary jewelings, found her far beyond the stage that Folger had made with his burros in the same time. There was no trail, no water, but she had ridden straight. The peaks guided her now.

On a rise she looked, half hopefully, half fearfully, for sky-sign of following dust, and saw none. It worried her a little. The punchers at the Bar B might have been absent, started late. Equally Gates and his posse, unless they had chosen another route, were far behind. They might catch up while she was forced to rest the laboring Peter. This she had to do before all shadow vanished at noon. There was not much water left, but it sufficed, and the bay's eyes were still bright when she watered him, after forcing herself to eat. Still there was no dust. She was ahead.

And now the toll of travel took its due. The horse's hoofs sank deep in the sand, he labored over the treacherous malpais, and fear began to creep into her. It was not a horse's work, this desert travel, for all her confidence. But it had to be done.

"Peter," she said, stooping to pat his lowered, sweat and dust caked crest, "you must not fail me, or him. You *must* do it, Peter. *You must.*" And Peter pricked forlorn ears and shambled on, trying once a lope but falling again to a walk. She saw no mirage but the hills swam before her sleepless, aching eyes, appearing to advance and retreat, mocking and encouraging by turns. The sun westered, still hot, its leveling rays fierce, flinging the shadow of herself and the failing Peter far upon the sand. The bay's tongue was lolling from his mouth, her own was swollen like a mushroom. And there was no more water.

The sun sank and the air grew cold and bitter while the aloof and arrogant stars watched the faltering progress. Margaret, afoot now, leading the horse whose slender legs had been strained and wrenched, whose thirst was still an agony despite the relief from the inexorable sun. The constellations wheeled as they crept on, the steed faithful, the girl tortured with cramps and weariness that dragged like a load but her spirit, her love, her faith, still potent, driving her to step after painful step.

The pendulum of Night's progress was swinging back toward the realm of day. In the quiet desert one might almost hear the creaking of the sun's chariot climbing up the slope, the hum of the turning world. The bay lifted its heavy head feebly, stretching nostrils whose membranes were still sensitive. Water! The cliffs were very close now. Ordinarily Peter would have sensed the moisture miles back, now it came as a relief to a forlorn hope. Margaret was too far spent to notice anything save that the bay's gait quickened. Now he was almost dragging her, one hand on the saddle horn, helping her along.

Direction was gone for her but not for him. He set a new course, straight for the canyon of Coyote Wells, moving stiff legged, eyes slightly luminous,

Into the corridor of stone he led her to where the tank lay, filled with drowned stars, and broke their setting into a myriad rays as he drank deeply. And Margaret, with a sobbing cry, lay flat beside him, cupping her palms full of the blessed fluid, bathing her head, her inflamed wrists and face.

Peter found a little grass, cropped at it but gave up for the time, subsiding with a grunt to lie there, exhausted but not vanquished.

It seemed to Margaret that she had stayed there for an hour until her spirit rose again to action. In a panic she got to her feet. Peter tried to rise and stayed on splayed forelegs for a moment. She stroked his nose.

"You've done your bit, Peter. You'd never make the trail."

She feared she herself would succumb as she toiled afoot in darkness up the pitch between the eroded wall and the cliff proper, falling now and then to hands and knees and then going with better, firmer tread as the sky grayed above her and the spangled stars fell away. It was day and she had yet to find Roy in the valley.

HE WAS not there, but awake on the plateau's edge, watching the slumbering camp. A sleepy man or so were replenishing the campfires below as the light strengthened and three men came riding through the notch. Gates, Smiley and Ramon!

There were the two ways to Folger's lookout; the trail from the end of the one that led up from Coyote Wells, and the gorge where the snakes were

coiled. He could not defend both of them. To escape across the desert was impossible, there was no good hiding place on the plateau.

He got his rifle and shells, saw to it that Owens' old forty-five six-gun was fully loaded, and awaited events, gazing down while Gates and his two companions were hailed by the firemakers, halted by them, while one went into the woods. Presently he returned with a Mexican whom Folger, livening to the full situation, judged to be Pilar. The greeting was cordial, jovial. Other men came yawning from the sleeping quarters and Gates addressed them. Pilar, gesturing, made pantomimic denial of some sort and then pointed to the cliffs where Folger lay behind a rampart of rock, intent, unhearing, unseeing what they saw until their attitude attracted him.

A girl had reached the summit of the plateau from the canyon of Coyote Wells. He barely believed his eyes, his heart. It was Margaret! She walked wearily, almost reeling, and suddenly halted as she saw the valley crowding with men, coming from the trees, mounting, gesticulating, their shouts and voices dimmed but plain enough.

That she was recognized by Gates, at least, was plain. Her slender figure in its riding-clothes was too well known. And Gates guessed something of what brought her here, saw instantly the danger of her arrival to find him fraternizing with Pilar. He turned with an oath to Smiley.

Smiley, his pocked face ashen with fear, the fear of a trapped wolverine, snatched carbine from sheath and fired. Gates struck at him and the aim went wild. The deputy was not yet ripe for murder.

But a shot rang out from the cliff top, and Smiley sagged in his saddle, slewing sidewise while up above Folger, slipping another shell into the breech of the old reliable Sharps, called to Margaret who stood as if fascinated. "Get back! *Back from the cliff!*"

She heard him then, saw him and obeyed, trying to run to him on blistered, aching feet, tottering as he caught her in his arms.

There was no need to talk. She was in no condition for many words. The situation was clear enough, desperate enough.

"Johnson is coming," she told him. "Chiquita rode to the ranch."

He nodded. Three riders against this band were sorry odds though they would reinforce them properly on the plateau. Smiley was lying on the ground, squinting unseeing at the sky. The rest had drawn back a little, consulting. Pilar pointed to the trail, and a little cavalcade rode hard to ascend it. If only they did not know, did not discover the other way up from the valley through the snake gorge!

Twice he fired, and a horse and rider went down. Again, and a man reeled. But the rest got under the cliff where he could not reach them. He heard the

clatter of their horses' hoofs, and moved to where he could command the head of the trail, motioning Margaret to cover, taking what cover he could himself. Now they were shooting from below, trying to dislodge him. They began to get the range, scraps of rock flew from his insufficient screen and he moved back a little, to find Margaret close to him, with her eyes shining, her gun ready for action.

The attackers had halted on the trail. They could hear Pilar cursing them, urging them on. There was a little silence that seemed an eternity of suspense with Folger's mind ever holding the peril of the other trail. A stone clicked. There was a sudden rush of men, dismounted; clambering up the rocky way, taking cover, firing as he fired back.

The bullets sang. They passed through his clothes, they seared his ribs as he returned the fire, discarding his rifle. Two stormers went rolling down but a dozen more came on. Now his six-gun was empty and there was no time to reload. They were hard upon him, close to the top, their swarthy faces exultant. In despair he stooped for his rifle with its one bullet intending then to use it as a club. From beside him flame spat and lead sped. The leading man went down, dislodging the next. Another flung up his arms and spun about, half falling, half leaping down, throwing all into confusion while Folger slipped cartridges into his pistol once more with Margaret emptying her own gun.

The assault was over. Folger turned anxious eyes on her. Blood was seeping through his shirt, but it was only a surface, bone-brushing wound. Margaret was unharmed and swollen lips formed a smile that changed as she pointed to where men were coming up through the snake gorge. He had been a fool to suspect that Pilar did not know of the place.

He fired his rifle and the riders spread out, coming on.

He and Margaret were done for. What Margaret's fate might be flashed through his desperate mind. He would go out fighting, but what of her?

Their eyes met, in a brief instant of understanding and farewell. She was thrusting shells into her pistol. The riders came on, exultant, forming a half circle, closing in. More men were coming up the other trail now. It was the end.

Desperate, not wishing to waste shells on the moving targets, knowing there would be no more reloads, Folger saw the riders nearest the desert cliff, falter, wheel. He heard shouts, the *yip-yippy* of the range. Hard faced, hard riding punchers were pouring onto the plateau, their mounts leaping under the spur, guns barking. Not just three men from the Bar B, but a small squadron of them, driving back the horsemen, dropping two of them before they disappeared, hard chased. Johnson, with Buck Peters and Rogers in the lead,

Rand of the Circle K with them, charged down the trail full tilt after Pilar and his demoralized men, who were flying for the notch, pell-mell.

Pilar set no faith in the fact that the border line crossed the valley. He wanted to get well into Mexico. He had seen the handwriting on the cliffs. Something had gone wrong. Let Gates take care of it.

But Buck Peters was after him and Rogers was trailing Ramon. Buck's second string pony drummed the grass. The bandit chief crossed the line. He turned to fling back a shot from his pistol when a bullet from Peters took him in between the shoulders and he went down.

Rogers swung his loop as he raced. Sent it circling out, the dally about his saddle horn. His sturdy mount slid to a halt. Ramon was at the other end of the lariat, struggling in vain to release himself, protesting.

"You have not the right," he said. "Thees ees Mexico."

"I roped you in the United States, hombre. Thats where my end of the rope was when I dropped it over you. You're plumb lucky it ain't 'round yore neck. May be, at that, before long." The breed's dark skin turned gray, his teeth chattering as Rogers towed him to where Gates sat, bluffing assurance and authority before Johnson and Rand, who had him circled.

"What in hell does this mean?" he demanded.

Johnson surveyed him coldly. "Reckon you'll find out right soon. Quite a bunch of folks never had much use for you, Gates. You was in an almighty hurry to pin the shootin' of Collins on Folger. But you slipped up some. Smiley slipped up when he got his woman to write that note an' sign it "Chiquita." You slipped when you sent word to Pilar you was comin' to take him, that time he was hid out with his leg after the stage robbery. An' now we run right on to you chummin' up with him. We didn't exactly expect that, though we knew you was in with him. But I reckon we'll find contraband right on you. Likewise Cardero's come across. You're likely to spend quite a time behind the bars, first for attempted murder, you an' Ramon, an' then Uncle Sam'll board you free."

Gates' defiance had fled. Rand turned to two of his men.

"Rope 'em up, boys," he said.

The deputy sheriff snarled inwardly. Cardero had talked! They knew he had deliberately warned Pilar! There was the informer he had left in jail! The sunshine had no warmth for him as the ropes tightened, and the shadow of the penitentiary seemed suddenly to fall on him. Ramon, also bound, went to pieces.

"I am State's weetness," he cried. "I weel tell what I know. Eet was Smiley who shot the sheriff, an' Gates, who plan eet. I—"

"Shut up," said Rand sternly. "You kin tell that to Collins when he gits out to yore trial."

"IT BROKE this way," said Johnson to Folger and Margaret. "Chiquita comes out to the ranch with the news. We're at chow. Of co'se we start to come, an' then Pedro pipes up. He thinks the sun rises an' sets in you, Folger, an' when he hears Chiquita comin' through with her talk he decides to speak himself. Wanted to right along but he was scared. Said he didn't see how it c'ud help you any. His head ain't over strong. But he tells that it was his nephew that rode to warn Pilar an' that Gates sent him.

"That was enough. We figgered on warnin' you an' mebbe rescuin' you. But now we had suthin' on Gates. I knew Rand was with you from what I heard him say to Gates one day, so I calls up the Circle K. Rand says he'll be right along with his outfit, an' when we meet up he's been doin' some phonin' on his own account. There was quite a li'l bunch of us. All friends of your'n. Roundin' up Gates. Didn't figger we'd land Pilar, too, but you kin never tell yore luck when the kyards begin to come yore way.

"We sure rode some an' we had remounts. But we never caught Miss Margaret. Her hawss is down in the canyon, sorter tuckered out but he'll come through."

"How about Cardero?" asked Folger, his arm frankly about Margaret.

"Well, Chiquita tells Cardero's in with Pilar an' Gates, an' so I sorter bluffed that across the board. Ramon fell for it, if Gates didn't, an' it was good poker." He grinned. "Cardero'll talk later, I reckon," he said.

They were halfway back when they met Owens, plodding on behind his burro toward Coyote Wells.

"Didn't figger I c'ud git thar in time," he said, "but as I told thet Mexican gal, I'd do my dernedest. Her hawss was played out ridin' hell bent for my place, an' she stayed behind."

"IT AIN'T my gold, them ain't Sam's packs, nor that ain't his six-gun," said Owens doggedly. "I oughter know, I reckon. The gold's your'n, Folger, an' I'm plumb glad of it. Now you kin git yore herd-sire an' run yore ranch right."

"But the mine's yours. It's recorded in your name. I worked it for you. There's more'n half the seam untouched."

They pleaded with him. At last he stubbornly yielded. "I'll go pardners with you," he said. "I ain't got long to last, an' my share'll go to your children."

"Chiquita should hev a share," said Folger as they rode away together through the trees.

"For a wedding present when she marries Manuel. Roy, Owens didn't tell the truth. He lied, like the gentleman he is, perhaps because he doesn't want

to give up his dream, but I think it was because he wanted you—us—to have it."

Behind them, Owens, fingering the broken packs and the rusted gun he knew so well, gazed out toward the desert. His dream had vanished like the mirages of the waste. Youth and love were riding down the trail together. But the old prospector's thoughts were on a lonely grave that was in a gorge, reached from the Pass of the Wind.

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## 4: Pearls of Great Price

*Adventure*, 18 Sep 1918.

LOUIS BODIN, "Levuka Louis," and Jim Hurley, "Hawkbill Hurley," were the two greatest and most successful rogues in the South Seas.

Ostensibly, the business of Bodin centered in his Levuka "Snuggery," a top-chop place of entertainment, bed and board for none below the rank of mate or supercargo. How much Louis owned, no one in Melanesia knew, though many guessed. Hurley possessed two or three *copra* plantations, two schooners, a barkantine and a launch—and liked to talk about them. Bodin's pudgy, dextrous fingers were in many pies of which he invariably superintended the division. Both had brains but, where Louis preferred finesse, Hurley was apt to bluff.

Commerce was sluggish in Melanesia since the commencement of the Great War. The need of corn had entirely eclipsed the call for copra; tortoise shell—from the hawkbill turtle—was no longer in demand. China was in trouble and the trade in sea-slugs—*bêche-de-mer*—languished.

Pearls? One can always sell pearls in Tahiti—at a price. Louis had a proprietary interest in certain pearl lagoons but he was giving these varying proportions of the seven years necessary rest between cullings. The value of a gray pearl, or a pink, any color outside of white, doubles when such gems are matched.

According to Bodin's philosophy, any fool can make money when times are good. In days like these, it took brains to gather profit. He relaxed his purely physical functions and concentrated his vitality in his brain-cells. His bright eyes dulled and his eyelids drooped as he lolled in his bamboo chair on the shady veranda, a native boy swaying a feather *kahili* to keep away the flies.

There is a wireless at Levuka, which is on the island of Oavalu, east of Viti Levu. Louis had a radio station of his own with which he issued his trade mandates and gleaned the passing news of the air. Over on the main island of the Fijis, on Viti Levu, is Suva, capital and head of the resident British Government.

The morning's report was in Louis' hand and in it was the latest from Suva. It was in code but Louis had deciphered it. As an Ally he was in good standing with the Government though sometimes suspected of sailing overdose to the mark, not of loyalty but of legality.

The French possessions in Melanesia, outside of the Loyalties and the penal settlement of New Caledonia, are negligible and, at Levuka, Louis was the king frog in a puddle large enough for his activity. The raiding of German colonies by British and French cruisers was balm to Louis' Alsatian soul and the present

item that such settlements were being held jointly by English and Gallic Governments until final distribution, furnished him pleasant food for meditation.

The *kahili* waved on automatically. The boy watched the rise and fall of the sash that bound Louis' generous stomach, a ribbon of color between the spotless linen of his trousers and the white silk of his shirt. The master's eyes seemed closed but the diaphragmatic respiration was too controlled for slumber. Tomi's soul lusted for a cool, green coconut with a surreptitious slug of gin added thereto, but his soul was in thrall to Bodin and he fanned on.

The languid figure came to action with a smart clap of palms to which a second loin-clad boy responded promptly.

"Hari, you take um canoe, ten men along of you. You go Rewa on Viti Levu—my word, better you walk along plenty fast, go catch Kapitani Wells. You speak him come along here Levuka way, plenty quick, in his schooner."

The *kanaka* vanished and Louis relaxed again. He would have sent his fast launch but the screw had fouled the top of a floating coco-palm in the darkness and, until another came from Suva, the craft was out of commission. Behind lowered lids he visioned the canoe speeding south and west with the paddles blading briskly to a chant. A slight sweat broke out on his olive features. The sash rose and fell. So did the *kahili*.

"Tomi, suppose you stop along fan me one *lele* second, my word, you plenty sorry. Fanchon!"

A sleek-coated bull terrier trotted out from a corner, yawning.

"Fanchon," said Louis, still with closed eyes. "You watch along this boy."

Tomi looked at the bitch who ran out a pink tongue over ivory fangs and grinned back at him, surveying him with eyes that were very like her master's. In the back of his sluggish brain he registered a thought.

"Too much devil-smart this white fellow boss along me," and the *kahili* resumed its regular, rhythmic sweep.

REWA is on the eastern coast of Viti Levu at the mouth of Rewa River, fifty miles from Levuka. In its higher reaches the idle fleet of Melanesian traders lay where the fresh water would arrest the bottom growth.

Hurley sat in the cockpit of his launch, fishing for mullet at the turn of the tide. Two fathoms below half a dozen baked and split breadfruit had been spiked to the bottom with sharp stakes, serving as ground-bait to the silvery fish.

Breadfruit baited his hook and he was just hauling in his eighth mullet when he saw the canoe with Bodin's head boy steering, battle up-stream against the ebb; make for the *Akua*, Wells' schooner, deliver a message that

resulted in instant activity aboard and then, their errand completed, he watched the crew paddling ashore to where a covey of *kanakas* were basking in the mottled shade beneath a clump of pandanus. There they would rest and visit a while before returning.

The *Akua* was the fastest schooner in the Fijis, bar one. That was Hurley's flagship, the *Lehua*, a Gloucester-fisherman type. To maintain speed supremacy, Bodin had bought his fast launch, the *Fleur-de-Lys*. The launch in which Hurley was fishing was but a small one, practically a tender, with eight knots to the *Fleur-de-Lys*' fifteen. Hurley would have purchased a sixteen or eighteen-knot power-boat had not times been so dull and deliveries so uncertain.

How much Wells was owner of his schooner, how large was Bodin's interest, Hurley only surmised. He knew that Wells had been stranded at Levuka after the wrecking of the trading barkantine of which he was mate and that Bodin had snapped up the smart young Yankee, staked him to the *Akua* and given him certain shares.

But any ripple of activity in these dull times was worthy of attention. Bodin's movements invariably meant money in sight and in these prospective profits Hurley instantly determined to share. He ordered the *kanaka* with him in the launch to haul in the anchor, started the engine and puttered over to the *Lehua*.

"Billi, you take this bottle *kini-kini* (gin) along those fellows. All same you hide him, you tell them you make um steal, you give um drink, find out from Hari what for he come along see Kapitani Wells. Bimeby you come back here plenty quick."

His crafty boatswain grinned and made his way ashore. Hurley shrilled on a silver whistle 'and soon his own crew assembled, got into their beached whale-boat and boarded the *Lehua*. Hurley turned to his mate.

"Brady, there's something doing Levuka way. I am going in with Billi in the launch. Soon as the *Akua* clears, follow her out. Split tacks with her and be off Kokua Head at sunset. Keep inshore so they won't spot you from Levuka."

Within fifteen minutes the *Akua*'s mainsail was hoisted, the cable up, the headsheets taut and she swung to the ebb, dropping down toward the mouth of Rewa River. Hurley watched her foresail mount as she caught and heeled to the trade and reached for Ovalu and Levuka.

Ten minutes later Billi came aboard with what news he could gather and Hurley took him in the launch and started in a bee-line for the *Akua*'s destination, his engine giving him the power of disregarding wind and current. When he made fast at the boat-landing the schooner was inhauling sheets for her final inshore tack. The *Lehua* was not in sight. Sunset was an hour away.

"Billi," said Hurley, "you go along back of Levuka Louis' place. Kapitani Wells he come along bimeby, talk along with Louis on back *lanai*, I think. When he come ashore I make plenty talk with him, maybe till dark I keep him. You hide along bush in garden, listen what Louis speak along of him. Then you come back to Foo-Ching's place—tell me everything. Savvy?"

"I savvy plenty that *haole* (white) dog along Levuka Louis. Suppose he savvy me in bush I think he make *kai-kai* (eat)."

"You rub your self plenty *frangipani* flower that dog no can tell. Now you walk along."

Billi went with the air of a martyr, but he went. At sunset the *Lehua* crept out from the reef behind Kokua Head and sneaked offshore in the dusk. Hurley, drinking gin rickies at Foo-Ching's, awaited the result of Billi's mission, wishing that he himself could have wormed into the garden as quietly as the *kanaka*, and Billi, his body smeared with the crushed petals of pungent *frangipani*, crouched in the *crotons* under the veranda where Louis talked with Wells. Fanchon was there too, drowsily unconscious of any intruder.

"SO," SAID Louis, "you wish to enlist now that America is one of the Allies. It is good. I understand that well. But listen, *mon ami*. It will be long before you can get back to the States, by that time the war may be over. Suppose it is not, what then? You enlist—in what? You—a first-class sailing master, will you try to make of yourself a private or become a Jackie aboard a cruiser?"

"I, too would serve France, old as I am. But brain is better than muscle, *mon brave*, and it is in my mind that we can help the cause here in the Fijis. I have a plan which should bring much money at the expense of those pigs of Germans. And money always wins. This money, *mon ami*, we will send to aid our braves at the front. If you will, you shall take it presently and tell them it is a gift from Louis Bodin, once of Alsace, now of the Fijis, a gift from Levuka Louis and yourself.

"It will do you no harm to be such a messenger. It is in my mind that they will need good master-mariners. Perhaps we will build with this money a little, quick ship, with you in command, to go hunting these sharks of U-boats, *nom de guerre*, that would be better than drill for six months to learn in which end of the gun fits the bayonet, *non*?"

Wells, curved of nose, lantern of jaw, nodded. Billi yawned in the *crotons*. This sort of talk was all words and idle.

"Tell me about it," said Wells. "It sounds good to me."

"In Melanesia," said Louis, "Great Britain owns twenty-one thousand square miles of islands, France seven and a half and Germany seventy-eight thousand—or she did. Now she owns nothing. It is spoils of war. By and by

France and England will divide. Meanwhile, what happens? The German plantations go back to the bush for lack of men and the pearl lagoons lie untouched."

"Ah," said Wells softly. "Pearls."

In the *crotons* Billi's ears pricked up like a dog's—like Fanchon's who was beginning to sniff uneasily.

"Northeast of New Mecklenburg in the German Solomons, there is an atoll that is ripe for gathering. It has not been touched for six years and the shell is very rich. I will give you the position later, on paper. Figures talked to the air find wings, and Fanchon is uneasy. What is it, Fanchon?"

Billi was no fool. In the few words last spoken he had gathered the reason of Wells' trip, to get the pearls from the German atoll. He sensed too that, in the hot evening, his own personal odor was mastering that of the fragrant blossoms sufficiently for the dog to detect it. It was time to be moving. He started to crawl away on his belly, silently as a snake.

But, as he sinuously stretched, from the exposed armpit glands the telltale *kanaka* scent permeated the breeze, to the indignant offense of Fanchon's quivering nostrils. Without waste of growl the dog's lithe body rippled over the railing of the *lanai* and crashed into the *crotons* from which the body of Billi shot, spurred by fear of fangs.

Wells arose, half drawing his automatic from its holster, but Louis laughed. "Let Fanchon obtain some exercise, *mon ami*," he said. "*Nom d'un nom*, see the *kanaka* run."

Across the lawn, leaping the shrubbery spread-eagled, Billi fled like a shadow in the dusk, the gray streak of Fanchon at his heels. They vanished in the palms that bordered the wild bush. There was a shriek, a yelp of triumph from Fanchon and presently the bull terrier came trotting back and laid a fragment of cloth at her master's feet. Billi had hurled himself into a mass of jungle too dense for Fanchon to tackle. But she had drawn blood and obtained a trophy and was content to leave Billi struggling in the tangle.

Louis picked up the bit of cloth. It was a strip of yellow muslin, nearly new, bright yellow with purple and red circles intertwined for pattern. He passed it to Wells.

"That came out of Hurley's trade-room," said the latter. "He has passed out two hundred fathoms of the stuff. No one else has it."

"It does not surprise me," said Louis. "He came ashore in his launch half an hour ahead of the *Akua*."

"And kept me chinning on the beach about the war till it was nearly dark," said Wells. "I left him at Ching-Foo's on the way up."

"One of his boys will steer standing for a while," said Louis. "Let us go inside. It is warmer but more private."

"This is the news I got from Suva," said Louis presently. "The Solomons are in charge of the dual Governments of France and England. The British resident will assume charge from Bougainville. The French gunboat *Leopard* will proceed from New Caledonia and inform the natives. It is doubtful if she will touch at our atoll. She must not hear your little plan. Also Hurley must not dip his fingers in this bowl of *poi*. He will try—which makes the game more interesting than *solitaire*."

Louis chuckled.

"You will provision tonight and go out on the ebb an hour before dawn. Do not wait to rot the pearls. The smell might prove traitor down the wind. Better to lose a few. You will find the best shell at the north end of the lagoon. Come to see me as soon as the tide turns. I shall be awake. I fancy Hurley may pay me a little visit and perhaps he will show some of his cards. He is a little fond of telling what he holds. Here is the position. *Eh Men, mon ami, au revoir*."

As Wells left him, the dapper little Frenchman, half pirate, half patriot, bent to scratch Fanchon behind the ears.

"So, you did not eat him, dog of my heart? Kanaka *kai-kai* is not to your liking. But you nipped him, eh? Nipped him in the breech. For that you get a better piece of meat, Fanchon."

AT NINE o'clock a sulky and subdued Billi arrived at Ching-Foo's with a furrowed flank and received first aid in the smart of carbolic acid, followed by peroxide, with an emollient in the shape of a bottle of square-face. Hurley was more than complacent at the news of the pearl atoll and took to the beach with a shirt-pocket full of cigars to work out the problem as he walked.

He and Bodin reasoned much alike. Both tried to look at situations first through the eyes of the other, then their own, playing the game several moves ahead and figuring all contingencies they could conceive.

If Louis' launch was in commission, Hurley was undone. His schooner could not follow. But he could trail the *Akua*. The joker in the pack was the position of the island. He had a plan for getting that but it meant taking Ching-Foo into part confidence and partnership. At the worst he could warn the French cruiser through the British Government at Suva. That would net him nothing save the discomfiture of Louis and he was playing for stakes—not just for the game. One thing, however, he resolved. If he could not get in on the pearls, Louis should not.

The news that Bodin had pirated from the aerograms had by this time reached Ching-Foo. Hurley gave tribute to Louis for the inspiration of the idea.

He himself could not especially share Louis' patriotic fervor in spoiling the Egyptians by using German pearls to fight them with the proceeds of sale. To Hurley, in South Sea ethics of mine and thine, the pearls were legitimate trove for the first finder. His financial horizon was largely bounded by the rim of the dollar.

As the butt of his second cigar hissed into the surf-line he resolved upon his first move. He would go and see Bodin. Louis had been right when he told Wells that Hurley liked to assist his bluffs by hinting at the cards he held. Louis knew that Billi, or one of Hurley's boys, had been listening. Hurley valued rightly the episode of Fanchon and the missing square from Billi's loin-cloth.

Louis would know that Hurley knew the main factor of his scheme. Louis would know that, in the *Lehua*, with the moon in her third quarter and rising early, Hurley could follow the *Akua* wherever she went, night or day. With these aces already in his hand he might persuade Louis to split the pot.

A random thought of trying to take the pearls by force from Wells after the latter had harvested them and was on the way home, Hurley dismissed. He had run up against Wells before and the New Englander was not to be bluffed. If it came to a fight for the possession of what the Government would consider illegal treasure, Wells would give as good as he received.

Hurley lit a third cigar and wandered to the Snuggery.

Louis received him affably.

"Here's to better times," pledged Hurley.

"Of a truth," replied Louis. "Present times are dull, eh, *mon brave*?"

Wells spent no time shuffling the deck. In his walk to the Snuggery he had learned that the *Akua* was provisioning. His own schooner was fairly well stocked, lacking only water, and that he had ordered supplied. If he had to chase Wells the latter would soon see the hopelessness of trying to get away and Louis might tire of the delay.

He looked into the Frenchman's smiling eyes and read that Louis had also gone over the situation. Between men of their caliber sparring was a waste of time.

"Few good things going now, Louis," said Hurley. "When one breaks we should all be willing to share it."

"Why, *mon ami*?" returned Louis evenly.

"Square thing to do. Besides, what is the use of blocking one another? Partners don't trump aces unless they are fools."

"Of a truth. Even Fanchon knows that. Eh, my cabbage? The dog sleeps. She has been running and is tired. Have you a proposition to make to me, *mon ami*?"

Incidentally his hand strayed to where a piece of cloth lay on the table beneath a cigar box. Hurley grinned at the gesture.

"Sure have I, Louis. You're on to a good thing right now. Let me in on it."

"Or you will block my hand?"

"I'd rather be partners, Louis."

"But this enterprise is not my own. The proceeds are not to go to me."

Hurley laughed.

"I suppose not. Going to give them to charity? The Widows and Orphans Fund?"

Bodin regarded him silently for a second or two. His eyes brightened and dimmed.

"The widows and orphans? *Mon Dieu*, Hurlee, that is not a bad idea. I thank you. I had not thought of that. An excellent idea, truly. But in any event I can not share this with you."

Hurley flicked the ash from his cigar and his eyes got steely.

"You will share it, Louis, or I'll copper it. I'm on to the scheme. Piracy, that's what it practically amounts to. Not that I give a whoop about that—"

"Providing you share the loot, *mon ami*."

"Exactly. As I say, I'm on to it."

"And you want—"

"Half. I'll do the work. You can dish Wells. You own him. Half—or—"

"Or what, *monsieur*?"

"Or nothing. Either let me in on it or I'll let myself in. You know me, Bodin, I'm no slack-brained copra-cadger. You're clever but I'm no fool. And there's no time to lose. What do you say?"

"Not one pearl, Hurlee, not one little, tiny *baroque*."

"You think you've got an ace in the hole because you know the location. But I know what you are after and you'll have a — of a time shaking me off."

"I know what you are drawing to, *mon ami*. You say I have an ace in the hole. I may have two. I am playing a good hand, Hurlee."

"There'll be a show-down for the pot."

Hurley rose, choleric but mastering his chagrin at the twinkle in Bodin's eyes.

Fanchon got up and sniffed gingerly at his heels to the door, standing to watch him before she went back to her master.

"That settles it," said Hurley to himself. "Widows and orphans!" he exploded aloud. "Does that Frenchy think I am a fool? Share with him? Not much. Either I rake it all in or he loses."

In the Snuggery Louis sipped at his vermouth. His eyes had dimmed again and he saw the ravaged villages of France, the weeping women and the wondering, frightened children.

"*Pour les veuves et les orphelins, Fanchon*," he murmured. "*Par le bon Dieu, c'est une bonne idée.*"

AN HOUR before midnight, Hurley, in his launch chugged out to where the *Lehua* awaited him and the schooner passed over the rim of the horizon and patrolled on long tacks until the dawn showed the *Akua* leaving Levuka behind her, off for the Solomons.

At noon Wells gave up the attempt to shake off a swifter opponent and the two returned as they had sailed for hours, on the same tack, like evenly matched cup racers—only Wells had known that Hurley was deliberately sailing a point farther off the wind than he had to when they were close-hauled, and had as deliberately slackened his sheets when they reached, with half a knot of superior speed ever ready to be let out upon occasion.

"Never mind, *mon brave*," said Louis when Wells reported. "We will lead him on the chase of the wild goose for a day or two. My propeller arrives from Suva on the *Manu*, Thursday. Then we shall see."

"What's the matter with Hurley getting on to that too?" said Wells. "He knows all about the accident and where you are getting the new screw. He'll see it when it comes. He'll play some trick. Tip the thing off to the Government, likely."

"If he does that," said Louis, "we will have to make a race of it with the *Leopard*. She can not make better than ten knots. You will have to stop at the Hebrides, at Malaita and maybe at Choiseul to get fresh gasoline for her tank and carry extra drums. See always you have plenty of gasoline, Wells, if we use the *Fleur-de-Lys*. I have no fancy to see her smashed by a shell, or you on New Caledonia. But I do not think Hurlee will inform—not until *le dernier resort*. We shall see what we shall see. In the meantime, *mon ami*, let us prepare for emergencies. I have something to show you. Also you can rot out the shell."

When Wells arrived aboard his schooner he wore a broad smile.

"Tim," he said to his supercargo, "Bodin's the father of all the foxes."

Tim Donnelly grinned.

"He's a whole kennel of foxes. 'Tis myself could have told you that," he said. "Levuka Louis was born with a wishbone in his mouth an' he chewed the nipples of his milk bottles to rags with his wisdom teeth whin he was yet a babe in ar-r-ms. Don't be tellin'me anything about Bodin."

Twice more the *Akua* put to sea and twice more the *Lehua* trailed her out and back. Then the inter-island steamer *Manu* came and brought a new

propeller for Bodin, to the knowledge of all Levuka. And Hurley took counsel with Ching-Foo.

That evening the *Akua* went to sea once more, and once again the *Lehua* trailed her, hanging to her quarter league after league like a wolf on the trail of a wounded caribou. But Wells was not aboard the half-manned *Akua* nor Hurley on the *Lehua*. The first was closeted with Bodin in his Snuggery and the second sneaked aboard the *Manu* from a shore-boat and took passage to Suva.

Twenty-four hours later the launch *Fleur-de-Lys* passed through the reef entrance with a smother of foam at her sharp bows. Fifty miles offshore Wells saw the topsails of the two schooners returning to Levuka.

"It looks like clear sailing, Tim," he said.

"There's one thing ye should rimimber," answered Donnelly. "Louis is a fox, but Hurley, bad 'cess to him, is a wolf. Sure, that engine runs like a watch, Skipper. What are we making?"

"A trifle better than seventeen, Tim. Are all the arms aboard?"

"Guns and cartridges—not forgettin' a stick or two of dynnymite for luck."

"The boat's a beauty," said Wells half regretfully. "It's a pity she hasn't got sticks in her. But she makes the time, and time is the essence of this contract."

DAWN rolled up the sky almost as swiftly as a spring blind jumps to the release and floods a room with light. The pearl atoll lay revealed upon the sea, sapphire to the reef and emerald within; clean cut as an etching, the palm-fronds waving in the morning breeze. The *Fleur-de-Lys* lay at anchor in the outer lagoon. There were two of these in hour-glass shape; the unlovely Teutonic name of the atoll was Pretzel Isle.

A thin thread of smoke wavered in the wind from a fire on the beach where Wells, with Donnelly and a crew of twelve men from the complement of the *Akua*, were preparing to enjoy a farewell breakfast.

A heap of shells proclaimed their industry. Gems that could not be held in a pint measure attested the richness of the fishing.

They had been there for ten busy days. Already the oyster meat, despoiled of pearls, was beginning to rot and taint the leeward air. And, so far, there had been no hint of disturbance.

The meal was leisurely finished and the crew prepared to gather fresh coconuts for the return trip. Six of them set strips of cloth about their middles and hitched themselves up the slender trunks. Wells lit his pipe and Donnelly busied himself to oversee the lading.

Unseen, unheard, unsuspected, a launch, painted white, with a buff funnel, one gilt letter at the bows, the tricolor of France trailing in the wind of her going, glided round the atoll, hidden by the palms and pandanus scrub until it

had fairly entered the mouth of the outer lagoon. A puff of smoke came from a gun in her bows.

Wells jumped to his feet; his hand swung to his hip and fell as he saw the ensign and the jackets of the French marines who charged up the beach, their bayonets gleaming. An officer ran with them, revolver in hand, lanyarded to his wrist. The *kanakas* slid down the palms and gathered open-mouthed. Donnelly swore.

"That dirty wolf of a Hurley," he said. "The informin' thief of the world."

Wells knocked the ashes from his pipe and grimly faced the officer.

"*Parlez vous Français?*" demanded the latter.

"I do not," answered Wells shortly.

"Then I will spik English. This island is the property of France an' Great Britain. You have poach pearl. Those pearl I deman'."

"Divvle a pearl did we get," said Donnelly. "Some one was ahead of us—a chap named Hurley."

"Hurlee I know not," said the officer. "But you lie. Regard those shells. Would you open so many for nothing? Bah! Give me those pearl an' I leave you with warning. I have not room for you in my launch, an' I must return to my ship. Refuse—I tow you all an' then—" he shrugged his shoulders—"New Caledonia is not healthy, *mon ami*."

"If I give you the pearls," said Wells resignedly, "you will leave us here?"

"Those are my ordaire. We know where from you come, *messieurs*; we shall keep the eye on you. Now we are ver' busy, too busy for *prisonnaires*. Perhaps you will soon fight for France an' Englan' an' this shall be forgotten."

"I am an American citizen," said Wells. "I am going to enlist."

"Me too," said Donnelly.

"*Bien*. But now, those pearl."

With a wry grimace Wells took off his belt. It was lined with chamois leather pouches designed for gold but now he emptied from them into the husk of a coconut a pint of shimmering globules, rounded, gleaming with all the tender hues of dawn. The officer poured them into a leather pouch he produced from his uniform and stowed them away.

"I must observe your gasoline," said the Frenchman. "Come to your launch."

Protestingly Wells went with them and watched them half empty the tank.

"This will hardly take me to New Mecklenburg," he grumbled. "And when I start to get more they'll pinch us."

Once more the officer shrugged.

"Ordaire, *messieurs*. You should have think of that before you play corsair. You have the chance to go where you like. I wish you *bon voyage*. *Au revoir*."

The marines reentered the trim boat and the ravished pearl-gatherers watched her vanish around the atoll.

"We should have think of that before," mimicked Donnelly. "You aren't as smart as you think you are, Frenchy Frog-Eater. Hari, you start um boys dig up those drums of gasoline. We'll not put in at Mecklenburg this trip. What's the idea, Skipper?"

"We ought to have made that chap give us a receipt for the pearls, Tim."

"Fat chance. Why?"

"Did you see his eyes? He has handled pearls before. I wouldn't wonder if some of them were missing when he turns them over."

"It won't be makin' any diffirince to us now," said Tim.

"No," said Wells, relighting his pipe. "Get those nuts aboard and we'll clear out."

IT WAS six weeks later when Hurley came to Levuka on the *Manu* and went up to the Snuggery with the officers of the steamer and the passengers. He was arrayed in linen and silk, and he led the procession.

"The drinks are on me, Louis," he said. "Take the orders. Presently you may buy."

He smiled at his audience who scented a joke. The deft boys served them.

"Here's to success, Louis," said Hurley.

Bodin bowed and raised his glass.

"If you will pardon me, gentlemen, I will drink to *La France*. And to the widows and orphans," he added, in an aside to Hurley, as the guests rose to the toast.

Hurley glanced at Louis and grinned.

"Are you in the market for pearls, Louis?" he asked.

"Perhaps. Have you any? I will look at them presently," replied Louis.

"Want to do business in private? All right; that suits me. But the drinks are on you, Louis, take my word for it."

The glasses were replenished. Louis rose.

"I give you, *messieurs*," he said, "the widows and orphans of our united armies."

Once more the toast was taken standing.

"And now, Hurlee," said Louis.

He led the way to his private room and Hurley followed with a shoulder grin at the crowd. As Louis shut the door Hurley reached into the inner pocket of his coat, disclosing the slung holster of an automatic. From a leather pouch he poured on to a black silk 'neckerchief a pint of pearls. Louis bent gravely over them.

"They are very pretty," he said.

Hurley threw back his head and laughed.

"Louis, you are a game sport. I am almost tempted to divvy with you. Almost, not quite. Why don't you ask me where they came from? Or has Wells got back in the *Fleur-de-Lys*?"

"He has arrived and gone away again," said Louis. "To the States. On the *Mariposa*. So you need not tell me where these came from, my friend. I have guessed. One thing I do not know. How did you get the position of the atoll?"

"Game, Louis! You're a game loser. I'll let you cheat me on the price for that. The position? Wells' cook is part *pa-ké* (Chinese). I sicked Ching-Foo on to him. He went through Wells' clothes when he was asleep. Simple enough?"

"Only you have to share with Ching-Foo. That is too bad."

"There is plenty to go around, I reckon. What are they worth, Louis? Or rather, what will you give me for them?"

"I overlooked the cook," said Louis, ignoring the request for the moment. "You took that trick, *mon brave*."

"I took all of them, Louis. I told you I held the best hand. You should have seen Wells' face when they asked him for the pearls."

"You were there?"

"In the cabin of the launch. We fixed it up for a man-of-war tender. Renault from Suva was the officer. He used to be an actor once. We only just got there on time, Louis. But we should have cut you off on the way back."

"Renault from Suva," said Louis softly. "I shall remember that name. So the marines were not real, eh Hurley? That was very clever of you."

"Fakes, every one of them," said Hurley. "Outside of Renault not one of the bunch knew a word of French. How about the pearls?"

A gleam came into Louis' eyes.

"Fakes every one of them, *mon ami*. They cost me sixty dollars a long time ago. Made in Melbourne, Hurlee. I will give you sixty dollars for them. The real ones were hidden in the *Fleur-de-Lys*. I bought them myself, on speculation, for twenty thousand dollars. Wells has the money with him, to give to widows and orphans. Never mind the gun, Hurlee. Be a good loser. *Au revoir et bon voyage*."

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## 5: The Right Ear of Malchus

*Unknown, June 1939*

THE learned judge, with lifted eyebrows, looked from the strange prisoner to the eminent counsel who appeared in her behalf.

A suave and polished legalist of secure position and reputation, an aristocrat and leader of the bar.

An old, old woman in a voluminosity of clothing, swaddled in petticoats and shawls of red and green; a kerchief covering her hair, tied under her sunken jaws, like a gravecloth. Her face brown as a roasted coffee-berry, more wrinkled than a shuckled walnut. Gold coins made up her necklace and the bangles of her withered stalks of arms— visible means of support, if anything short of the grave— if even that— might persuade her to part with them.

Her cheekbones looked like closed fists, her teeth were almost gone, and her colorless, snakelike lips were tucked in.

Old, infinitely old; and infinitely wise. She sat motionless, poised, patient, all the life in her— that had defied Death for so many decades— concentrated in her eyes. At times they filmed, like those of an owl— at will, they glowed like black opals. There was an air of regality about her, a composure that ignored her position before the court as a transgressor.

Her attitude irked his honor, vaguely stirred within him a reluctant acknowledgment of her as a person. He did not doubt her wisdom nor the sincerity of her self-belief, though he might not countenance them.

He was— in his fashion— a fair man, but strict against such lawless folk, defying the very essence of what he represented.

Gypsy, charlatan, adventuress. Consort of fortune tellers and pickpockets, against whom edicts had been issued through the centuries by civilized communities. Outcasts, nomads, of no certain origin— doomed to eventual elision. Pharaon— Egyptians— Tsigane— Zingari— Rom— Tinkers.

Vagabonds.

The gaze of the learned judge passed on, briefly, to other persons— distinguished persons. These had come to testify in her favor. After all, she was in no great jeopardy, merely charged with accepting fees while practicing medicine without a license. There had been no denial of her practice within the district— nor of her cures. Here, and elsewhere, she was a famous being— a wise woman— famous, or infamous, as his judgment might hold. She was a specialist. She made the deaf to hear.

The distinguished people were known to the learned judge. A renowned aurist, from the metropolis. An equally renowned musician, a composer, conductor of symphonies; a man who refused any dictatorship over his art. He

would lightly refuse the invitations of the mighty, but he had come— with the aurist and the lawyer— to do homage to the Queen of the Gypsies.

"COUNSELOR, you know the charge. Are you ready for trial?"

"If your honor please, may I plead that the defendant has used no medications, advised no prescriptions. .Her healing is accomplished by the laying on of hands, and through the powers she believes invested in her—"

The magistrate held up an object that had been taken from the romni by a jail matron. It was a small box, seemingly of metal, covered closely with the skin of a lizard, blackened and worn by time. The prisoner had protested against its removal. Now there came a glint of inner flames within those black-opal eyes— but she was still—and silent.

"A *power*, vested no doubt in this... this amulet. This savors of fetishism, or sorcery and incantations. Such matters foster ignorance and superstition."

"Not more so, perhaps, if your honor please, than the relics of saints and martyrs."

"Does she. make any such claim for this? You say you have secured an interpreter. We will question her presently. Information has been laid that she has taken money—"

"Information, if your honor please, laid without the knowledge or consent of a client of mine, from gossip by a servant, knowing her mistress visited the defendant. For the restoration of her hearing, my client made the defendant a gift, in gratitude for a cure accomplished after specialists had failed in their treatments.

"That client of mine, well known to your honor, has retained me as counsel for the defendant. She is willing to appear as a witness, if called upon."

His honor pursed his lips. The unnamed client was a lady of importance, of potent connections, financially, socially and politically. She would not relish appearing in court, her testimony would be all in favor of the prisoner. There would be publicity that might not favor him.

"This is all beside the issue. The law has been broken, may be broken again— unless such actions are severely dealt with— under the law. You wish to offer testimony, sir?"

He addressed the aurist. His tone was peevish. He felt his authority being thwarted, as vested in himself, rather than the law. "I must ask you to be brief—and to the point."

"—as an aurist, an otologist, I discovered serious disease. Aural polypi, paralysis of the facial nerve, and a septic thrombosis of the venal sinuses. A tumor of the auditory nerve threatened, with symptoms of meningitis. An

operation was indicated, but I did not care to consider it under the existing conditions of age and debility—"

"And you think that the power of this gypsy cured her?"

"Something cured her. I did not. Were I not a scientist, I should be inclined to consider this a miracle."

"You believe in miracles?"

The aurist flushed, seeing no occasion for the lightly veiled sneer in the tones of the magistrate.

"I may have seen one. In this case I called in consultants. We were agreed in diagnosis. We marvel at the complete cure which has resulted in general physical improvement. I might add," he said dryly, "there are more things in heaven and earth—"

"You are excused. We will use the interpreter."

THE MUSICIAN was sworn— his dark face alight, his eager eyes fixed with sympathy upon the romni, speaking a few words to her.

"You know their language?"

"Romani is their native tongue, I know only a few words of that, but what they call their 'secret language,' is Rumanian. I am a Rumanian. She tells me she will speak freely if her talisman is returned to her. She says it is a holy thing—and yet one that may be evil. That it contains that which was caused in evil and empowered by holiness."

"It sounds like skulduggery to me. Ask her what the box contains—then we may consider its return."

"There was a very holy man, who had acquired the hatred of the priests of that land, so that they wished to take him, to have him condemned to death. The priests sent a party out to seize him. One of his followers cut off the ear of one of the retinue of the priests, and the holy man chided him, caused another ear to grow by his touch.

"The ancestor of this woman, whose name is Sarai, was a small boy of the tribe the Egyptians call Harami. He was curious to see what was happening. He followed the crowd. When the healing took place, he was thrust roughly forward, and dropped upon his hands and knees. One of his hands fell upon the severed ear, which was the right ear of a servant of the high priest. He took it to his father.

"The name of the servant was Malchus, and the name of the man who smote off the ear was Simon Peter. The name of the holy man was Jesus."

There was a swift and intense silence in the courtroom. The musician touched the Bible on which he had sworn.

"The matter, she tells me, is set down in this volume, which she calls your 'sacred book,' on which oaths are made."

The learned judge flushed and frowned. "This is sheer blasphemy, I impose a fine of fifty dollars or, in default, thirty days in jail. Case closed."

The lawyer rose. "The fine shall be paid."

"Your honor," the musician and interpreter said, "she prays that the ear of Malchus be returned to her. She warns that if it is not used rightfully, reverently, the power within it will work harmfully—"

"The *power*— again the power! If she speaks the truth, which is beyond believing, this ear was smitten from one who was an antichrist."

"It was still living, still a part of the man, though severed. As a living part, the power that entered into the servant could also enter into this—"

"Balderdash! One would think there is Romani blood in you."

The musician flushed. "If that is so, I am proud of it—"

He turned to the *romni* and spoke swiftly with her. Her answer came hoarsely, like the croaking of a frog, and her eyes were like jewels.

"It will not matter so much to her, your honor, since she is very old— and her works are nearly done. But she warns you—"

"Nonsense! This is confiscated as an agent, a factor in lawbreaking. There will be nothing in it but some trumpery. The clerk will call the next case."

At the door, the Queen of the Gypsies— freed— paused, placed her shrunken hands to her temples, doubled up, forefingers and little fingers extended, forming twin sets of horns— pointing at the eminent jurist.

IN HIS private chambers, after the day's routine was ended, the learned judge sat, with an open book before him. In the outer room his clerk awaited his pleasure, fending off applicants who wished audience off the record.

The book was not a lawbook, it was not a volume he often consulted. Even now he studied it with more interest than reverence.

It was the tome the Queen of the Gypsies had called the "sacred book," on which thousands of witnesses had sworn— many of them falsely.

He turned— as one accustomed to research— to the gospels, seeking cross reference:

*And, behold, one of them which were with Jesus stretched out his hand, and drew his sword, and struck a servant of the high priest, and smote off his ear.*

*And one of them smote the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear. And Jesus— touched his ear, and healed him.*

Then Simon Peter having a sword, drew it, and smote the high priest's servant, and cut off his right ear. The servant's name was Malchus.

"The evidence," mused the judge, "is incomplete, even conflicting. Mark does not mention the incident at all, yet he must have been present, if the gospels are to be accredited. Matthew and John say nothing about the healing. If I remember rightly, John was the favorite disciple. Would he have overlooked a miracle?"

The judge took his penknife, opened the small blade, peeled the lizardskin from the metal box with some difficulty. It was made of copper, graced with what seemed like arabesque decoration, or inscription. The metal was varnished with some sort of lacquer, closed hermetically.

For a moment he decided not to try to open it. He remembered the final gesture of the ronini, for which he had almost recalled her for contempt of court— feeling that against his dignity. The lacquer was old. Deprived of the lizard skin, it was affected by the chemistry of the air within the room, and crystallized, flaking away. The lid lifted from a bevel.

There was something inside like a dried mushroom— it had the fleeting semblance of an ear before it turned to a pinch of dust as the air reached it.

From it came a faint aroma of ancient incense.

The learned judge sat staring at it as the clerk came in.

"Beg pardon, judge. I thought your phone must be out of order, or didn't you wish to answer it?"

The judge looked at him testily. The telephone rang shrilly. He made no motion toward it. There was a vague terror growing in his eyes.

"Are you feeling sick, sir— you don't look well."

"Speak up! What were you saying? What were you saying, man? Speak up!"

He could not hear his own voice! He read the clerk's look of wonder and worry.

"I said"— his voice faltered— "My God, I can't hear! I'm deaf, I tell you— deaf!"

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## 6: For the Sake of the Sweet One

*Top-Notch Magazine 15 Feb 1917*

THE Siskiyou are mostly wilderness. Up to his third September, Swiftfoot had never seen nor smelled a man. His education included knowledge of where best to sleep and when, the absolute necessity of always watching his back trail, and where to find the food his appetite most craved. There were many other things born of his individual experiences. Once, going down wind, he had come across a bear that grunted and whirled, half rising to flail at him with a death-dealing paw. But Swiftfoot had leaped high, far higher than ever before, over and across his enemy, and fled down the hill. Once a fire had swept up the home cañon. With the herd he had bounded up one ridge to find the next ravine in flame. Only the cool decision of the oldest buck of them all had led them across the line of the onrushing devastation, instead of flying before it. So they had found safety in a cañon that ran at angles to the rest, untouched by the fire. That taught him dread of flame and made the smell of smoke a danger signal.

It was the smoke of a hunter's camp fire, rising above the ridges and drifting on the light morning air, that warned Swiftfoot of impending peril. He had slept on a bare ridge with the bachelors: As the pungent smoke entered his nostrils, he sprang to his feet with the rest of them, six graceful forms gazing around.

There was no sound of crackling undergrowth and snapping boughs, no cloud of smoke; only the faint, insistent trace of something that meant danger. They remained restless for an hour before, reassured by nothing happening, they commenced to browse.

Swiftfoot left them. He had marked the Sweet One on the next ridge the afternoon before. She had gazed at him from the edge of a thicket and led him a merry love chase that he was forced to abandon at twilight. To-day he would be betimes. He had many ways of courting her now. The crude butting of his callow days was discarded; he wooed with gentle rubbings of his antlers against her sides, and led her to spots where dainties were to be had in seclusion.

As he reached the top of one slope, he found her mounting the opposite one. It seemed almost as if she was on the same errand as his own. Her pliant mood seemed to confirm it. Side by side she trotted with him toward a clearing that he knew of in a wood close to the timber line where the herd did not seem to have strayed. The taint was no longer in the air. The hunters had put out their fire.

The Sweet One looked at her admirer demurely. She had not been lightly won. She had not yet entirely capitulated. But she had made a close survey of the bachelor herd, and the choice of a partner was as much a matter of her decision as of his. Swiftfoot was the handsomest of them all. He was just over three feet at the shoulders, and almost exactly twice that length, the perfection of grace and symmetry, as he loped springily along close to her side. His antlers showed signs of future perfection. In a few years they would attain the length of a third of his body.~ She did not yet know how he could use them.

At the edge of the wood a young buck, almost a replica of Swiftfoot, trotted out to meet them, prefacing his appearance with a sound best described as a throaty whistle. It was one of the bachelors who, perhaps guessing Swiftfoot's mission, had decided to follow and investigate.

Swiftfoot stopped, throwing up his head and snorting angrily. So did his rival. The Sweet One walked midway between the gallants, looked at them in turn, and quietly stepped to one side. Her move and the expectance of her attitude were obvious. She had already, hesitated between the two, still uncertain which she preferred. This tourney of the wild would settle it. Valor, strength, cleverness were desirable attributes. Now her choice was about to be determined for her. The winner should be hers.

The bucks were nothing loath to abide by such a test. Neither was an expert. It was their first really hostile encounter. They knew and cared nothing for preliminaries, for sparring and side-stepping. Heads on, they rushed, and their antlers clashed together. Had these been more widely branched, they might have sprung apart and interlocked. As it was, each of them was hurled backward, half stunned by the encounter. The Sweet One, who would have been scared at the break of a twig under ordinary conditions, looked on complacently from the shelter of a bush, her head and eyes above it, her eyes filled with a proud emotion of expectancy.

Four times the combatants smashed together, the last time rearing and striking out like boxers. Swiftfoot's downplunging hoof caught the other on a leg, and he slipped to a kneeling posture, still guarded by his horns. He got up as Swiftfoot retreated for another rush, but limped as he came onward, swerving from the direct attack. Swiftfoot raked him in the flank as they passed, lunging hard at the groin. It threw the other off his balance and out of his stride, and Swiftfoot, wheeling, thrust at him from the rear. The other fell, and in a second Swiftfoot was on top of him, whistling and stamping in fury on his ribs.

The Sweet One ended the combat. It may have been from motives of mercy, or from the desire quickly to confirm the victor. She came into the

open, tossed her head, wheeled, and trotted away. Swiftfoot followed. The defeated bachelor, sorely bruised and humiliated, picked himself up and limped down the hill.

ii

THE Sweet One trotted on, coquettishly bounding ahead whenever Swiftfoot caught up with her, until at last he turned abruptly into a narrow side trail. It led high up across a rocky ridge into a cuplike depression, velvetturfed, set about with herbage and trees like a park. In its center was a rockbottomed pool fed by a bubbling spring where wild mint grew. It was a sylvan paradise to which he meant to lead his bride. But Me was determined to lead. He had fought for her and won; now it was for her to follow the conqueror. Not without misgivings he kept his pace along the deer path resolutely.

The Sweet One stopped short the instant she noticed her mate's apparent dereliction, and gazed after him in wonderment. She tossed her head and pawed the turf uncertainly. At last she blatted, first impatiently, then in appeal.

Swiftfoot, fifty rods away, heard the cry, and his heart smote him. But his masculine spirit prevailed, and, though he slackened in his trot and set back his big ears to listen, he did not turn his head. Something pattered lightly along the trait-behind him, loping to his trot. The narrow trail widened as it left the undergrowth close to the outcrop on the ridge. The Sweet One came up beside him, nuzzling at his neck. He turned and caressed her in turn with his lips, nipping her ever so softly. She had learned her lesson. The protector was henceforth to be the leader.

The afternoon shadows lengthened to dusk and slowly spread to form the web of night. The moon rose at midnight and found them couched together in a covert of sweet fern.

The next morning they were up betimes, ending their meal with the icy water of the little spring. Just after dawn had gilded the hill crests, they started for-the salt lick. Halfway down the slope, the mysterious taint in the air again affected them, the smell of smoke. They halted, sniffing the breeze.

A sound, new to both of them, a hollow howling that echoed among the hills, came rolling up to Swiftfoot and the Sweet One. Nearer and nearer it came, a baying that grew ever more triumphant and assured as it became plainer. It died away between the ridges and rose as it mounted the crests, echoing from the hills. Strange as it was, it struck terror to both of them. Memory, born in their instincts of their forbears, warned them of the approach of peril. It was the hunting cry of a hound, hot on the trail. The ominous noise came up the hill toward them. As they stood with far-planted legs, uplifted

ears, and staring eyes, they heard the sound' of a heavy body crashing through the undergrowth.

Trembling violently, they gathered themselves together. Through the trees rushed a white body, saddled and splotched with brown, nose to the ground, tongue lolling, ears pendent, occasionally throwing up its head to utter the fearsome sound that started with a howl and ended in the deep note of a bell.

For a few seconds they stared, their heads above a heavy growth of manzanita. Then the spell of fear was broken. Away! Away they bounded, circling the mountain through the trees, the unknown, dreaded beast in pursuit. Crazed with terror, the Sweet One broke from Swiftfoot's side, and, before he realized her desertion, was gone at a tangent over the crest of the hill. The hound followed directly in his trail, unheeding the doe. The dog had caught sight of Swiftfoot's spiked antlers and was not to be shaken off.

Swiftfoot, his head carried far back, leaped out of the live timber, and crossed a barren to where charred trees and firefalls marked the line of the last conflagration.

There was a flash from down the hill, a report, something that whistled by him and lent him speed that he sorely needed. The man, berating himself for not having held far enough ahead, fired again.

Something seared Swiftfoot's neck in front. Half, a quarter of an inch farther back, and the bullet would have severed the windpipe. He-raced on, almost blown by the tremendous pace, his heart pounding, tears of fright in his eyes.

The man swore again as the buck dodged in behind the burned timber. Another shot rang out from the other side of the hill. "That's Joe," he said to himself. "I bet he's got one. And he'll likely get a chance at this."

He roared abuse at the dog that had obediently driven the buck from cover and given him his chance to shoot, and vainly tried to whistle it back, blaming everything but his own inability to hit a running target.

Swiftfoot was in sore straits. At a slower-pace he could still have headed the dog and kept his wind,. though he might -have given a too easy shot for the' man in ambush. But now the blood pumped from his heart by his frantic bounds was congesting in his veins. The burned trees swam before him as he leaped; his legs grew weaker at every spring; his lungs seemed bursting. And behind him the dog bayed closer.

iii

YET, at the last, instinct had saved Swiftfoot. The treacherous firefalls over which he leaped with unerring judgment, despite his growing weakness,

offered the acme of difficulty to the hound. The trunks were recently charred, and the ground between lay deep in ashes. As the dog scrambled and clawed his way the fine dust choked him and stung his eyes to fiery watering. It filled his throat and coated his tongue and rose before him in fine clouds. He lost sight of the bounding Swiftfoot and struggled in a labyrinth of crisscross trunks, some of which crumbled beneath his weight. Scent was impossible; his nostrils were filled with the smothering motes. He slid and slipped, jumped and hung and fell as he fought his way.

Racing across a pine pole, the dog felt it break under him. He dropped into a pit between a jumble of trees and tried in vain to climb out of the fog of fine ash particles. Baffled, exhausted, he sat upon his haunches and changed his tune. The bay of hunting turned to a howl of distress that brought the man at last to free him.

Still speeding with spasmodic, automatic leaps, Swiftfoot cleared the burned timber and emerged into a slope of bronzed bracken. His breath came in gulps, his sides rose and fell like bellows, he could go no farther and turned at bay just as the hound changed to the call for help.

There is a volapük of the wild. The sounds that came to Swiftfoot were plainly those of distress. The pursuit was over.

He stood with widespread feet, his head hanging. Gradually his panic subsided, and his tortured lungs and heart attained their normal condition. Now he thought of the Sweet One. With every function centered in capacity for flight, his brain had lacked the blood for a memory impulse. The shot from the other side of the hill was registered in his brain cells, and, not knowing man's self-made regulations, he feared that a whistling thing like the one he knew was a missile of destruction might have reached the doe.

The ferns clothed the slight slopes of a dell that drained down to a tiny spring. He lapped the contents of the little pool and waited till it filled again and again before his parched throat was at ease.

His limbs cried for a rest in the fern, but his spirit called out for the mate he had so newly won. And slowly, stiffly, he trotted on.

There was a notch in the summit of the next ridge. It was an ancient runway, the trail worn out of the stone by the passage of countless animals that had for centuries passed that way. From the top the ground sloped smartly downward, barren rock for perhaps a hundred feet to where the thick timber commenced. "From his point of vantage Swiftfoot looked over the trees upon a tumbling confusion of hill crests. He stood upon the watershed of the range, the highest point in Siskiyou County.

Somewhere, unless the second shot that he had heard had compassed her destruction, the Sweet One was seeking through the wilderness that lay before

him, trying to rejoin him. The air brought him no clew of her location. This side of the range was unknown land to Swiftfoot, who knew intimately every rod of his own domain that could be traveled with safety and advantage. But he would have braved far more hostile outlooks to satisfy his desire to find the Sweet One, and he started into the cañon ahead of him. The wind blew uphill, a friendly aid to his senses, and he pressed on as swiftly as his condition permitted,

The wind warned him just as he was about to enter a clearing. It carried an odor that was disagreeable. It was new to him, and it meant danger. Straight down the wind it came, and his eyes followed up the trail. The clearing was some thirty yards across. As his gaze focused itself on the red patch that moved opposite, it became steady between two saplings. There was a movement like the waving of branches, only they, too, were red, and something flashed dully in the sunshine. The vivid color, brilliant as the blossoms of the Painter's Brush beneath his feet, fascinated him. He was standing broadside to a densely leaved bush of chamisal, his neck set at right angles, his head held high.

Across the clearing, the hunter, scarlet-jerseyed for his own protection, steadied his rifle until the hindsight dropped truly in the notch at the end of the barrel. He had killed one deer that afternoon, and was now on his way to camp to bring up a pony and pack it in. Two made up the limit of his licensed bag. This was the last day of his vacation, and the luck that had been against him for two weeks had suddenly changed. His forefinger remained motionless on his trigger while he tried to decide whether the buck was standing in line with the direction of his head, or, if not, if the body was to the left or right. It was impossible to tell through the heavy screen of the brush.

Fate decided for Swiftfoot and against the hunter. The man fired at where he guessed the buck's shoulder was placed and missed the target completely. Swiftfoot heard the song of the bullet, its sip! as it cut through the foliage; he saw the blaze spurt from the rifle even as he bounded from his shelter and once more fled headlong.

The hunter did not swear at his miss like his comrade beyond the ridge. Instead, he cheerily prevaricated to himself. "Only a yearling. I'm glad I missed it, after all. I don't want to be called a spike hunter."

iv

WITH his heart sounding an alarm and the sense of suffocation that comes from overburdened lungs, Swiftfoot bounded along, fear in his saddle, urging him to ever greater effort. The quiet woods that had so long provided him with

shelter and food seemed to have turned traitor. Danger lurked in the shadows, and he no longer trusted his most faithful sentinels, his senses. \_ As he raced headlong, he came upon a sight that halted him almost as abruptly as if the hunter's bullet had actually entered his heart. The sweat that had already begun to stain his coat in dark patches broke out freely. His limbs shook, slaver dripped from his jaws, and his eyes projected from their sockets at the horrible object.

The smell that rouses to frenzy all flesh-eating animals and paralyzes with fright and faintness all the milder tribes seemed to penetrate to his brain—the odor of freshly spilled blood. There swung the carcass of a deer, suspended from a slim aspen bent over by the weight and resting in the crotch of a sturdier tree. The body had been slit open and the head hung low from the gaping throat that still dripped scarlet.

In an agony of dread that fought with a desperate determination to make certain his loss, Swiftfoot placed one faltering foot before the other and forced himself nearer. Then his heart bounded; the faintness that possessed him passed in the glad reaction. He had caught sight of the drooping antlers. It was not the Sweet One! He wheeled and went pounding uphill. The man was below him, and until he was sure the dread presence had gone he postponed his search for the Sweet One, hoping that she would come back to their haunts of her own accord.

But the weeks sped and the time of berries supplanted the time of flowers and the Sweet One came not, though Swiftfoot sought her day after day, roaming ridge and cañon in his faithful exploration. He left the herd and fed and slept alone. The mild California winter came and passed, and with the return of spring, the new tips to the evergreens, and the resurrection of the sweetest herbs, the pain that had become only a dull ache throbbed once more insistently. He thought only of the Sweet One. His antlers' spikes had dropped away, to his great alarm, and been replaced with moss-covered projections that forked like a branch and grew daily more tender with increasing size. He wanted to display them to his mate. Something within him refused to believe her utterly lost. Forsaking entirely the range, he started out one spring morning, determined to continue in the direction which he believed she had taken until he found her. So far he had always limited his excursions to the high side of a swift stream beyond which the land lay gray and bare of vegetation, rolling in mounds of pumice streaked with lava dikes. What lay beyond he could not imagine. To him it seemed the end of the world, a place of desolation not intended for living creatures. Now the urge that dominated him spurred him beyond the stream to attempt the journey of the desert

where his hoofs clicked loudly on the flinty surface, and his shadow, distorted by the uneven slag of a long-dead volcano, was his only company.

He had started at dawn. Three hours later the sun beat fiercely down upon him, sweat-stained and parched, his swollen tongue hanging from his jaws, his blood hot and sluggish under the double glare of the sun and its reflection. Usually at this time he was in the shelter of the forest. Before him a high wave of lava lifted. He sighed and braced himself to surmount it, the duplicate of twenty others crossed in the last two hours, only to reveal still more ahead. It seemed impossible that any animal, even terror-stricken, would have fled this far across a desert where nothing grew and not even snakes made a home. But the toil of the trip behind him held present terrors that forbade return, and he topped the flinty ridge.

Before him lay another stretch of volcanic waste, but beyond that gleamed the welcome green of trees clothing hill after hill to far, blue distances. A human being would have failed to notice a breath of wind, but Swiftfoot caught the welcome scent of water. It was a long way off, but its promise annihilated distance. In less than an hour he clattered through shingle and plunged his dry muzzle gratefully in the limpid water, wading in presently to let it lave his weary, burning fetlocks. Finally he crossed the trout stream toward more solid food.

Three forms moved amid the trees. Two of them were spotted as if splashed with sunshine filtered through the boughs. These ran to the third and larger presence, and all three stood gazing at him. Swiftfoot's heart began to thump. His hopes had blossomed in a miracle. Slowly the doe advanced, stopped to gaze, and came on again, the fawns prancing about her on stilted legs.

It was the Sweet One and her children! *Their* children—his and hers!

v

SWIFTFOOT sounded his whistling love call, and she answered, bounding to meet him. Suddenly she stopped as if arrested by some hidden power and blatted. Swiftfoot rushed on, heeding nothing but the glad sight of his mate.

Something struck him breast high and rebounded, striking him smartly as he continued to advance. It seemed to be a vine stretching between stumps of trees, a vine set with sharp thorns. He trotted along the line fence, newly built by a rancher who had taken up a cattle range, seeking in vain to find an opening. The Sweet One kept parallel with him on the other side of the barbed wire, the fawns, big-eyed, gazing askance at their sire, trailing her.

Time after time he tested: the fence, snorting his indignation at this final obstacle between him and his love while she made little throaty noises of endearment that raised his pride and longing to the topmost pitch. He had never seen a fence before. He could hardly see this one. Above his neck there seemed no obstacle. He stretched across, and the Sweet One raised her muzzle to his and caressed him with her tongue.

Swiftfoot backed up. Somehow he scented a trap, a hedging of his liberties once he crossed the barrier. Yet, once passed, it could be crossed again. And beyond it was his heart's desire!

He snorted as he surveyed the clear run ahead of him. The top wire was invisible, but he had gauged its height. It had been pricked into him by the barbs. A dozen lengthening leaps culminated in one magnificent bound, head back, his legs tucked up beneath him. High above the fence he sailed, and landed springily, bounding on with the impetus of the jump into the trees. The Sweet One joined him. Behind them the two fawns skipped, and the friendly forest took them to its heart.

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## 7: Smuggler's House

*Everybody's, Feb. 1921*

THE rattletrap car came squeakingly to a halt and the driver shut off the chattering engine to make himself more easily heard.

"There's the house! Used to stand close to the edge of the cliff one time, lookin' out to sea across Windy Bay. That was the name of it on the old charts. Water, from below where we are, clear across to the spur of rocky ground yonder. Long afore my time. More'n a hundred years ago. Then the sand started to work in. Choked the sea an' nigh swallowed the cliff."

Benson gazed across the waste of dunes. Some of the slopes were long, smooth drifts; others were rippled by the wind; tawny plumes of yellow sea-grass grew sparsely on the crests. Between the ancient headlands the sand had reclaimed the sea. Billows of sand replaced the waves that once had leaped in Windy Bay, formed with infinite persistence to a seemingly useless end: grain after grain, shifting, piling, year after year, choking the haven, forming a no-man's land between sea and shore.

He looked at the house, built of stone, grim, substantial, four-square, its seaward windows flaming with the afterglow, like deep-socketed eyes that glared defiance at the usurping sands. Where the dunes mounted now, salt-water had washed and roared and honeycombed the buried cliff. The conquering grit, carrying the cliff by slow assault, had marched up to the very lintel of the door, spreading a dun carpet where soft turf had grown, smothering the orchard that once bloomed and bore. The main trunks were buried; the higher boughs peeled, blanched and drained of life, protruded like the bleached antlers of mammoth elk, seeking resurrection.

"ROAD used to run down to the inlet," said the lean, garrulous driver, humped over his wheel. "There, where ye see the gully. Tide-water there, one time. An' a wharf. You'll pass the timbers of an old ship juttin' out of the sand on your way to the house. Cap'n Jarvis Harmon's brig. Gran'father to the present Cap'n Harmon.

"Set down as Harmon Inlet on the maps. It's him— the old cap'n— they say was in league with the smugglers an' pirates of them days. That's why they call it Smuggler's House. Silks and wines an' Spanish landed to that wharf many a time, take lights on the cliffs an' sutteranean passages, they tell. Ships ashore an' the wreckers carryin' up the flotsam-jetsum."

He smacked his lips with the tobacco stains at the corners and his eyes lit up with avarice.

"Nothin' goin' on like that nowadays. Can't even git a mug o' cider. The law's strict an' the law's carried out in Whitsands— prohibition to piracy. I'm constable. An' deputy-sheriff," he added as he turned back his unbuttoned vest and displayed a badge pinned to his suspenders.

"'Nother crick beyond the house. Windy Brook. Back in the hills it's a live stream with trout in it. Fillin' up fast at the shore end. I go up it once in a while to git bait at tidewater. You aimin' to stay awhile? I cu'd take you out after scrod."

"I'm going back to-morrow morning," said Benson. "Can you be here at ten?"

"Count on me. The cap'n, he don't have many visitors. Nor his housekeeper. Reckon you're a friend of his— or her?"

Benson did not answer as he stepped from the car, and the driver climbed peevishly down to crank his engine. The tinny vehicle chugged and rattled off as Benson started down the slope of what had been the southern headland of Windy Bay.

There was wind there yet, though the evening was calm, with the sea lapping gently along the verge of the sands. But little breezes stirred in the hollows where the faint track led, shifting the sand along the slopes with sudden spurts of sliding grains that sounded like quick whispers.

A plume of sepia smoke came from the main chimney of the house. As he passed the remains of the old wharf and the timbers of the brig, mounting the sharper pitch that led to the brow of the original cliff, the wind blew stronger, in intermittent puffs. Weatherwise, Benson sensed a change. The sky was piled with clouds that glowed and gloomed, streaming in pink and orange vapors, like smoke above a dying furnace, as the sunset faded. The breeze began to whistle through the ghastly branches of the dead orchard, whorls of sand rose in little dancing spirals before and about him. As he moved on into this desert it seemed to him that the spirit of the place began to grip him in a tragic, infinitely lonesome way. The wreck, the dry bones of the trees, the sands that seemed to be whispering and creeping behind him in the gathering dusk, assembling for a night assault against the man-made citadel of the house; all cast their spell upon him.

And when he suddenly came across a fence of posts and pickets, slanting, half-buried, like the headstone they enclosed; he shivered a little from an inward chill as he stopped to read the carven letters in the marble. They formed one word. One only, unless others lay beneath the sand—

## RAMAYA

*Ramaya*? That was a name dimly familiar. The name of what? Here might be a memorial to some faithful dog. It was an eery place for a grave, yet, if it had been made while the orchard turf was still green and blossoms dripped upon it in the spring, with ripe fruit knocking on the door of death in the fall, with birds in the branches, it might have been a restful enough burial-place.

Ramaya? He rolled the syllables over on his tongue, then, with a feeling of being over-inquisitive, turned toward the door of the house. It was deeply inset, of solid wood and dignified proportion, bare of paint, pitted by the wind-flung grains of hard, sharp sand.

An iron knocker sounded sharply to his rap. While he waited, the wind hurled a spatter of sand at the panels as if to second his summons.

THE door opened to the gaunt figure of a woman in black, holding a lamp that flickered to a gust as Benson stepped inside the narrow hall, closing the door behind him, conscious that the wind was rising fast with the setting of the sun. He glimpsed white doors and mahogany. Ancient patterned paper showed starry on the walls. A tall clock ticked woodenly.

Benson was six feet but the gaunt woman topped him. Flesh and skin had shrunk upon the bony plates of her face and her eyes were almost white, the paleness accented by the fine black line about the opalescent iris. Her scanty hair, yellowish-white like flax, showed the pink of her scalp between the flattened wisps. And her neck, above the high neck of her sable gown, was all outstanding cords and deep hollows.

He announced himself and her lips parted with a sudden display of artificial teeth, a travesty in the aged face. The sight of that ghastly smile created in Benson a dislike of the woman that he knew was unfair. He tried to dismiss it as he followed her to the door at the end of the hall.

The room they entered was of noble proportions and ran the full width of the house. A fire leaped in the half-light beneath a Colonial fireplace of white wood, delicately carved with wreaths, upheld by fluted pilasters, inset with figured tiles. On a great table, beside a terrestrial globe, the model of a full-rigged ship rode on a strip of Batik cloth, its sails half-screening the fire from Benson. On the mantel was one ornament that riveted his attention as the woman passed on through a door in the paneled fireplace wall, toward the back of the house.

This was a carving in high relief, of greenish stone, nearly three feet in height; the figure of a dancing girl, barbaric, faulty of perspective but infinitely graceful, alluring. Benson knew what it was as he examined it more closely, fancying himself alone. He had seen such carvings in the crumbling walls of jungle temples in far-off Cambodia, he had seen such figures in the life in the palaces of Siamese princes— Apsaras— dancing girls of Angkor. The bas-relief

aroused memories, it gave the room an added touch of romance, it fitted the occasion upon which he had come.

He took in other details. Books and magazines on the table and two branching candlesticks of brass. Weapons glinted on the walls, arranged in trophies, the flickering firelight brought out the palms, pagodas and mackaws upon a screen, pearl inlay winked from a high cabinet. Old mahogany reflected the light in polished bloom with twinkles of brass handles. The floor rugs were Chinese, of rare color and pattern.

Then he saw, deep caverned in a settle chair of black wood and leather, backed by another screen of gilded lacquer, gay with flowers and fruits, an old man asleep.

A strong face, framed by an abundance of coarse gray hair, finely, boldly featured, marked but not disfigured by storm and stress— not wholly from without, Benson landed, as the changing firelight played tricks of expression on the sleeping mask. There was a strong jut of jaw under the long beard that lifted to the even rise of a massive chest. The lips were firmly closed. Age showed most in the high veining of the folded, powerful hands, at the purple tracery above the temples. A beak of a nose rang out from bushy eyebrows, still holding traces of the black they once had been.

Here was a man, thought Benson, of stern, swift, certain judgments and unbending will. Once he had been burned almost black by sun and wind and he was still deeply bronzed. If the elder Captain Harmon had been the pirate that the driver of the tinny car had vaunted him, he must surely have looked like this descendant. Sudden and quick to quarrel, fierce in love and war. Suddenly the headstone with its single word came to the visitor's memory— Ramaya— a woman's name.

The fire danced in fluttering waves of green and violet along the driftwood logs. One broke in half upon the heavy andirons and a rush of sparks frisked up the chimney. The sleeper stirred and sighed, opening eyes that reflected the flare. He did not notice Benson. He muttered in his beard in a low tone that held a deep-sea quality, the volume of a muffled drum.

THEN he saw Benson as he turned slowly in his chair. His eyes widened. They were a tawny amber under upper lids that made a straight line above the full-pupiled orbs. They were the eyes of a sea-eagle, searching, dominant, and bottomless. They could be cruel as well as stern. He made no start— the ancient nerves were sound.

"Captain Harmon? I am Richard Benson."

The skipper rose slowly but without apparent effort, rose until his massive bulk, for all of one bowed shoulder, towered above that of his guest. There

was more than nervous vigor to the grip of his hand. A great hound, haw-eyed and heavy-jowled, came out from the shadows between chair and screen and sniffed at the visitor, letting a hand rest at last upon the smooth dome of its skull as Benson scratched its ears. Captain Harmon, showing teeth big, sound and white, laughed.

"Ha!" he said. "Cæsar accepts you. You are welcome. You must pardon my dozing. Old custom reasserts itself. I sleep off and on. My housekeeper had orders not to disturb me. You'll sit down. We'll have lights, then supper and then our business."

He pulled a bellrope of heavy twisted cord and a bell tinkled at the back as Benson took the chair across the hearth, beside which he had already placed his grip. The housekeeper came gliding in. She lit the candles in the branching holders, drew down and lit a counterweighted hanging-lamp that swung in chains above the table, cleared one end of the board and spread it with a snowy cloth. From a mahogany cupboard she produced silver and glass and crystal and deftly set two places.

"Do you wish to go to your room, sir?" she asked Benson. "You are to have the one above the Captain's, in the southeast chamber, up-stairs."

"No, thank you. And never mind the grip. There are some things in it I may want. I'll carry it up when I go."

SHE glanced at him incuriously and went on with her preparations for the meal, passing silently in and out of the door. There were cutlets of broiled ham with poached eggs, creamed potatoes, hot biscuits, sweet butter, preserved quinces, honey, delicious coffee; all savory to Benson, too long used to city fare. But he ate almost alone.

"I lost my appetite," said Captain Harmon, "when I gave up the sea. And I have to be careful."

Benson eyed him more closely. "You don't seem much of an invalid," he ventured.

"All sound but my heart. And that is rotten. I'm more than twice your age, I fancy— and I've not been careful before, so I must be now. One reason I got you to come down. I read your book," he went on. "There's a lot of first-hand knowledge, and first-hand travel, I imagine, packed between those covers."

"I have traveled a good deal. I hope to travel more," said Benson. "I like first-handed information. I would rather collect personally than buy from owners, as a rule."

The captain showed a square, squat bottle. "Here is something that has traveled," he said. "I brought it over in the original of that ship. My ship. I built it, owned it. I'm ashore, but that ship is still sailing sound in the China Seas. Oak and teak outwear the flesh that molds them." He poured out curaçao into two

acorn glasses where it sparkled like liquid aromatic gold. Then he pushed across a small chest of cloisonné where cheroots nestled in tea.

"I envy your trips-to-come," said the host and the envy showed in his voice, in the leaping flash of his eyes as he sipped the curaçao. "I did not grow old gracefully. No red-blooded man ever did. A swift life, well-packed, like the bag of a bee— there's your Browning for you— that, and a quick death.

"The lure of the jungle trail," he continued, choosing a cheroot carefully, "sea, jungle or land. It all grips to the end." Benson's glance went involuntarily to the bas-relief.

"You noticed that?" asked the captain. "So you've been to Siam, and you've seen the Apsaras. Eh, I saw thirty of them once in old King Noródon's palace. Thirty princesses of the blood royal, from girls of ten, with breasts like camellia buds, to gold-skinned virgins of fifteen. Under the silver lamps— they've got them wired for electricity now, I hear— under the lamps in tissue silks. Ruby-studded tiaras of gold gold pinions shaped like dolphins' fins on their shoulders, crusty with gems. Sheathes of gold on thighs and loins, writhing under the lamps like shining serpents, posturing about the King of the Monkeys with his mask of gold. Eh— ah!"

In his eyes there showed the fire still smoldering in the ash of lusts long since burned out. His look was fixed on the carved Apsara.

Ramaya. That was a Siamese name, of course. It came to Benson in a flash. Here was a man of the strong breed who had lived and loved and still loved to live if only in retrospect. Ramaya, Apsara, princess of the blood royal. Had she been one of those thirty virgins? Had she won the rubies he had come to value?

The dog got up from the hearth and walked to the door through which the housekeeper had served them. He barked at it twice and it opened to the touch of unseen fingers. Cæsar slipped through.

"His supper, before he goes on watch outside," explained the captain. "Now, if you will put another log on the hearth— for stooping is a bad business for me— and make yourself comfortable with your cheroot, we'll get down to business as soon as Mrs. Wood has cleared."

"I am frank to say, Mr. Benson," he said when the function was performed and they were alone, "that I had you looked up before I wrote to you. My lawyers tell me that you are responsible and honest. A rarer thing than most people think. You see, I have little idea of the real value of the stones."

BENSON laughed as he answered. "I copied your precaution. I did not wish to take an idle trip. You wrote that you preferred cash. It was unusual I did not

care to carry several thousand dollars in currency to a lonely spot without knowing something definite."

"I am sorry if I put you to unusual trouble. I am not sure that I want to sell any of the rubies. I do want to set my estate in order. A valve here is leaky." He touched his chest. "It bothers me. My will is made, save for some blank spaces that I would like to fill with amounts as specific as possible. I have not needed money for my running expenses. I have liked to keep the stones for their—associations."

"They are Siamese gems and, when you see them, you, as a connoisseur, a lover of jewels, will understand better. They are rich of color, crystals of blood, living blood and in one of them a star shines, like the soul of the ruby, a beating pulse of light. But you shall see."

He rose and felt back of the metal frame that held the tiles of the fireplace in position. One of them came out into his hand and he set it on the mantel, groping with his right hand inside the cavity as if he twisted at a lever. There was a click and a section of the right-hand flattened column slid down part way into its base, disclosing an aperture several inches square. From this the captain took a small oblong box of black porcelain, or jet, or even obsidian, and laid it on the table. The lid rested closely upon a flange.

As he slowly lifted the cover, Benson held his breath at the rosy glow that shone from the little casket before the gems themselves became visible. Then Harmon pushed the box toward him and Benson gasped. Never had he seen such rubies, in such quantity and quality. Crystals of living blood. The phrase teemed cold and inadequate. The crossing, mingling play of radiance from their hearts diffused a light that was warm, exquisite crimson, transparent but with a shifting shimmer as of vapor. Under it the gems appeared to throb like living particles.

The general body-tone was an aurora red, the hue of the drop of blood that hangs from the beak of a dead pigeon. Captain Harmon picked up one stone delicately and laid it in Benson's palm. Its light was slightly milky, its surface convex and, in its center, like an enshrined spirit, trembled a six-rayed, luminous star.

"An asteria," said Benson almost reverentially as he watched the dancing change pulsing within the ruby corundum. "A star ruby."

He took a jeweler's monocle from his vest pocket and set it in his eye socket. Presently he set down the jewel carefully. "I give you eight thousand dollars for that stone," he said. "Now. If I sell it, it will be for more, but that is a fair price."

"I do not doubt it, but that is the one I care least to sell. I accept your valuation. I will do more, I will give you an option of purchase at that sum

when the gems are placed on sale. After—" he tapped his chest lightly. Suddenly his head went up, his heavy eyebrows joined and his eyes flashed golden as his deep voice challenged angrily.

"What does this mean, woman? You know I am not to be disturbed after supper!"

The housekeeper had entered, drifting like a shadow from a door leading to the room underneath the one specified as Benson's. She stood on the farside of the table, holding a candlestick, unmoved by the tirade of her employer.

SWIFTLY as a conjuror, Benson palmed the asteria, slid the lid on the box and shoved the thin stack of yellow-backed bills he had taken from his wallet under the shadow of the ship's hull. The woman showed no signs of having observed them or the cavities yawning in the fireplace. Later, Benson reflected that the canvas and rigging might well have hid them all from her.

"The oil did not come, sir," she said in a toneless voice that matched her pallid orbs. "There is none for Mr. Benson's lamp, so I brought him a candle." She set it down.

"One of these would have done as well, fool," rumbled the captain, watching her under his penthouse brows as she glided out, this time into the hall. "You moved quickly, Benson," he added with a note of approval. "I doubt if she saw anything. She has grown into something half-mechanical of late. This place has few excitements to keep one young. Tut! What do you think of the rest of the stones?"

Benson finished his appraisal, working deftly, sorting the rubies into little fiery heaps, making notes in a small book.

"The lot should bring at least eighty thousand dollars," he said at last. "There are forty-one, all told. Ten of them in every way unusual. They may bring considerably more, according to the way they are marketed."

"Eh! Five thousand better than my guess. It is a satisfaction, if one has anything to leave, to know the approximate value of one's estate."

"You do not care to sell the asteria?"

"I think not. We will talk further to-morrow. I do not want you to have come down here just for your fee, if we can arrange anything. But— we will see. I should prefer not placing it upon the market myself. It is a whim."

Benson had a swift vision of the captain in the middle watches of the night, working the sliding column, gazing at the pool of cold fire in the deep hollow of his hand, seeing it in memories. A dream of posturing Asparas, of one central figure of Ramaya with the star ruby on her brow?

Harmon put away the gems as Benson replaced his bills in the wallet and put the wallet in his inside coat pocket. As he did so, he noticed how closely tile and column fitted. Even with knowledge of some such combination, luck rather than observation would have revealed them to the closest seeker.

The wind went suddenly swooping round the old house with a roar, dashing grit against the long windows to the north, enveloping the sturdy edifice in a spiral of eddying air. The flames on the hearth shuddered and leaped upward, the soft ashes shifted. From without, the howl of Cæsar came faintly.

"He bays at the moon," said the captain. "It will blow hard to-night. And it flings the sand. I trust it will not disturb you. If you care to sit up, there are the cheroots and the curaçao. And a book or magazine. If you will excuse me, I will leave you. I have some writing to do. You go back with Martin, I suppose. He drove you over?"

"He will be here at ten. He can wait, I imagine."

"It will not be necessary. We'll breakfast as usual. At eight."

The wind rushed again, mounting, circling, about the house. A gust roared in the throat of the chimney, fanned the fire to a spouting volcano, sending flaming flakes whirling out into the room, soaring far and fast. They settled on the Chinese rugs, burning smoldering rings. They pitched into the dried yellow canvas of the model ship and, instantly, sails, and rigging were in a crackling blaze.

Benson looked for water, thought of flinging a rug, wheeled and ran for the kitchen through the door the housekeeper had used. The captain stared at the flaring ruin in wordless, actless horror, as if he had suddenly seen hell through a rift. Then he beat at the leaping, licking flames with his hands, scattering spars, trailing snakes of burning twine and scraps of smoldering tinder about the room. When Benson came back with a pot of water from the stove the stately model was a wreck and Harmon was stamping out spreading rings in the rugs. Benson helped him but the valuable weaves were badly damaged. The captain ignored them and stared stonily at the hull.

"So ends the day," he said as if to himself. Benson recognized the phrase as the that used by old-time skippers to close the record in their logs. "We had better put the guard in front of the fire," said Harmon, his voice calm, but Benson saw his hands tremble as he set the wire screen in place.

Benson turned, not to appear to notice the weakness, somehow the destruction of the ship seemed symbolic, tragic. He looked up at the dismantled hull and he felt quite certain that he did not want to sit up with the wreck that had ridden so gallantly upon its Batik strip, next to the terrestrial globe. That has been a happy combination. Now the varnished surface of the

globe was scorched and blistered. The portion principally injured showed the islands and peninsulas that ringed the China Sea, the Celebes Sea. And the ship that the captain had built had seemed so intimately a part of the captain and the captain's life. It would not have surprised Benson if he had been suddenly told the ship itself had foundered or been burned at sea— off Indo-China or Borneo.

ON THIS ship the captain had imported the curaçao, the rubies? Perhaps— ? Benson stopped. The lettering on the stern had been shadowed by the canvas before that had burned. Now the gilt characters fairly caught his eye. And the name of the ship was— *Ramaya*.

He picked up his grip and his candle and turned to his host. Harmon looked dragged and tired. His eyes were dull.

"I think I shall turn in," said Benson. The skipper looked moodily at him.

"Well," he answered and then strode ahead through the hall to the foot of the staircase, opening his own door. There was a light within and Benson caught sight of a four-poster bed, valanced and canopied, an ancient desk. A gust of sand rattled on the front door like the rapping of a myriad tiny knuckles, insistent, imploring. The weird fancy touched Benson that they had come from the half-buried grave. The place and its happenings were getting on his nerves.

"Good night!" he said and started to ascend. Harmon stood watching him till he made the landing.

"The room above mine, Mr. Benson? I think you will find conveniences. Pardon me if I do not make certain of that myself. My mounting days are over. Good night!"

The resonance had gone out of his voice and he went heavily into his room and shut the door. Benson, on the landing, heard the wind moaning in the dead orchard, sweeping up from the dunes. There was a window on the cross landing, above the front door. Through it he made out the troubled wraith of a moon, struggling through a wrack of clouds.

HIS room was large, with three paneled doors of white, one the entrance, another opening to a closet beside a chimney with a stove hole, papered over; the third, ajar, leading to a room fitted with a table, a desk, an antique mirror above a bureau, chairs and hook-rugs; forming a sitting or dressing room to the little suite. His bedroom, was furnished in much the same way, with the addition of a bed. The air was stuffy and he attempted to open a window. There were three of these, the frames opened and shut by metal slugs on springs, fitting into slots in the casements. These fastenings were supplemented by more modern catches.

The two windows to the east had their small panes badly blurred by the sand, and the wind rattled them. The south window, in the lee of the prevailing storms, was in better transparency and through it he caught a glimpse of the corner of the orchard, blanched under the moon. And he saw Cæsar, running with his nose at trail, following the ridge of a dune, disappearing beyond it. But he could not budge the windows, either in bed or sitting-room. They might have been nailed up, to judge by their resistance to his efforts; he gave up only when he threatened to disrupt the slender framing.

In the sitting-room he opened a second door that led to a passage running the full length of the house, as he judged. He noted an orange line of light beneath a door at the far end, across the passage. The housekeeper was still awake. It was not late. His watch showed the time to be a few minutes after ten.

Benson unstrapped his grip and took out some things. Then he undressed, placing coat and vest across the back of a bedside chair, and turned in. But not to sleep. The close room, the wind howling in the chimney, shaking the windows, buffeting the sturdy house until beams creaked and the rugs lifted mysteriously as if snakes were beneath them, combined with a feather-bed and the incidents of his visit to keep him wide awake. He tried reading a book by candlelight, but was unable to concentrate.

Darkness did not help him. Once Cæsar bayed, out on the dunes. The breakers sounded in the rising storm like distant artillery, the moon showed fitfully opalescent through the blurry windows bringing out the pale woodwork of the doors. At last he fell into hazy dreams of rubies, Apsaras, a full-rigged ship that flamed like a volcano and sank at last to the final subsidence of consciousness.

He awoke with his senses thrilling to a still alarm. Not for nothing had he followed jungle trails and slept in the bush. There came a stealthy creak on the stairs. Not the wind. It sounded in a lull. He slid softly out of bed and slipped through the sitting-room and so to the passage.

The wind had risen again with redoubled fury after its pause. Sand pattered against the panes of the landing window, the glass rattled. Silhouetted against the milky light that came from without, Benson saw the figure of a man, stooping in the nervous tension of one who prowls in the night on forbidden ground. He saw vaguely the outline of a face, clean-shaven, hawklike. The crouching figure glided to the door of Benson's bedroom, tried the handle, turned it, opened the door inch by inch, swiftly, silently; then entered, with Benson gliding after.

The man advanced toward the bed, plain against the southern window. His bare feet showed upon the dark pattern of a hook-rug. He did not glance

toward the bed, where Benson had thrust a pillow beneath the covers to suggest, in the darkness, a recumbent form; but reached out for the coat and vest that hung on the back of the bedside chair. This with his left hand. His right was close by his side. It suggested a weapon.

There was nothing of the coward about Benson. He had been in many straits that called for prompt action, and he answered his combatant impulse. Physically he was always fit, by birthright and by training.

TIPPED on his own bare feet, Benson took three quick strides and leaped. His left arm slid about the man's neck, his right hand caught the other's wrist and, in one coordination, his knee, upflung, formed a fulcrum at the back of the intruder's elbow while he applied leverage. The man twisted sideways to avoid the breaking of his arm, with a stifled oath at the unexpected attack and at the pain. Under the bruising, wrenching grip of Benson's fingers the weapon tinkled to the floor.

And then the hook-rug slid on the planking and they went down together. The man was supple, wiry, slippery as an eel, twining himself about Benson as they writhed, close-locked and desperate, fighting for possession of the knife. After the first thud of their fall they made but little noise but Benson expected any moment to hear the captain coming up the stairs. Not that he counted on it or had time for anything but try to subdue his assailant, who was fighting with a desperate frenzy.

Benson still clung to the wrist, trying to get a lock. The other forced it close to his mouth and tried to sink his teeth into the tendons of Benson's wrist. They touched the flesh but before they could snap and close, Benson, with a burst of strength, let loose his grip and smashed at the other's jaw. As he dodged, snarling and panting, like a beast, Benson saw his chance and kicked the haft of the weapon, a knife, sending it beneath the bed.

With a convulsive heave the man bridged himself in wrestler's fashion and, his knees helping, strove to throw Benson over his head. They smashed into the chair and it toppled. The clothes came down, the brass candlestick fell with a thump beside the book Benson had been reading. In a flash the other grasped the heavy candlestick and beat up with it at Benson's face. One blow got home, gashing his eyebrow so that the blood started. Then, as always with Benson, something snapped within him. Neither coolness nor judgment, but a measure of restraint that sometimes served and sometimes handicapped him. He buried his head in his opponent's face, careless of the flailing blows, he got astride of him, forcing down the left arm and grinding his knee into the biceps. And his right hand found the other's neck, sought and compressed the leaping artery, boring with a relentless thumb while his fingers clutched the nape. The

movement was swift and sure as the outcoil of a snake: a trick learned from a Chinese compradore, merciless, agonizing, capable of administering death.

THE man's feet drummed on the floor as pain and nausea swept over him and he wilted, unconscious.

Benson picked him up and laid him on the bed. He took the long straps from his suitcase and trussed him securely. Then he lit the candle, restored the chair and fished up the weapon. It was a Malay kris, with curving, double-edged blade, a stabbing knife from one of the trophies on the living-room wall. He stood with it in one hand, the candlestick in the other, gazing down at the marauder, his pajama-coat torn, blood on the sleeve, blood on his face, on the rug; breathing heavily. It had not lasted long but it had been no child's play. Yet it had apparently alarmed no one.

The chap was a sailor, from his clothes, his bare feet tanned, like the rest of his exposed flesh. He was in shapeless blue-serge trousers, salt-stained and wrinkled. A blue flannel shirt was belted into them. An anchor was tattooed on the right wrist. Benson had seen that as he had bound him, with a girl's name above it, partly erased— Lucy.

The face was not unhandsome, with a reckless look even in unconsciousness. The chin was stubborn rather than determined, the lips thin, the forehead low and the eyes close together.

They opened as Benson, who had rapidly flung on some clothes, and mopped the blood from his forehead, bent over the bed searching the man. His first thought was he might have been followed from Whitesands, his errand guessed as one to do with money, perhaps ready cash. That happened once before. His second idea was the rubies.

He found nothing. The man wore a singlet under his shirt. The three garments, with the belt, constituted his clothing. The wide bottoms of his trousers were damp and sandy. The pockets gave up only a few small coins and a bunch of keys. Benson felt a sense of relief. Apparently the man was only a common thief.

He held the candle closer to the face and the pupils of the eyes dilated and then shrank to pinpoints. Their look was defiant. In the life they imparted to his face it seemed to Benson vaguely familiar.

"What were you after?" demanded Benson. "Who put you up to this?"

The man stared back sullenly.

"Won't talk, eh? We'll see about that." He picked up the kris. "I can charge you with attempted murder, besides robbery."

The eyes changed at sight of the weapon. They became cunning. "You were too quick for me, boss, with that ju-jutsu stuff. But I wasn't meanin' to use that

sticker. I had it for a bluff. I'm not chuckin' myself at the Chair. I come up the back stairs first an' I butted in the wrong room. There was an old dame in it. I had to tie her up. If you don't want her to choke to death you'd better ease her up a bit or you may be 'sessory to murder yourself. I was a bit rough, bein' in a hurry."

His volubility showed bravado, Benson thought, behind which lurked a certain strain. For which the gagged housekeeper might well be the reason. After tying her he had gone down the back-stairs and up the front way, rather than risk the long length of creaky passage.

Benson examined the bonds carefully, tightened a strap, took the candle and went down the passage to where he had seen the strip of orange light. Still outside, he heard a curious, gobbling moan and hurried inside just as the dog howled again, a long drawn ululation that cut through the uproar of the wind. The swift question of how the man had passed Cæsar came to him before the sight on the bed dismissed it.

With hands fastened behind her back, her bony ankles tied with cord, a towel over her mouth, the gaunt figure of the housekeeper tossed in her nightgown of flannel. Her knees were drawn up so that the pans showed sharply under the drag of the long gown, caught by the binding of her ankles. The thin ridge of the shins was visible. She looked more like a skeleton than ever. Her pale eyes rolled wildly and fearfully in the candlelight. The gag was formed of the towel and a handkerchief, stuffed between her toothless jaws. She made queer choking noises as he relieved her. A glass stood on a little table with her false teeth soaking in water.

Benson removed them gingerly, rinsed the glass with water from the pitcher on a marble-topped chamber-stand and refilled it, assisting her to drink.

SHE took a swallow or two and clutched for her teeth, turning away while she clicked them into place, then grasped at Benson's arm.

"The man," she gasped. "You're wounded! Did you kill him?"

"No," he soothed. "He's bound in my room."

"You've got him? He's still alive?" Her voice was shrill with terror. Her fishy eyes stared at him as if she could not grasp his meanings.

"Yes. You're all right. I'm going down-stairs. You'd better get dressed. It must be close to morning."

"The dog!" she cried. "Listen to Cæsar."

"I hear him. On the fellow's scent. After he let him pass."

"He came— in the dark. He choked me. I— Oh, my God!"

Benson looked at her sharply. "You get some clothes on," he said crisply. "The man's safe. "You're not hurt?"

"No. Only faintish. I'll be all right."

Her eyes rolled after him as he left, going down the back way to the kitchen. He noticed that the back door of the house was locked and bolted. A lamp was on the kitchen-table and he lit that and carried it into the living-room and through it to the hall. Cæsar was baying incessantly outside the front door, scratching imperatively for admission. The skipper's door was ajar. With a sudden premonition of greater tragedy Benson unshot two bolts and opened the door, shielding the lamp behind it. The wind swept in, forcing him back with the weight of the gale against the stout panels. He heard the roar of the surf and saw the graying light outside as Cæsar leaped in, jaws open and slaving, his ruff lifted, bounding past Benson as he shut the door with some difficulty; half crouching, snuffing at the bottom of Harmon's door and then flinging back his head to a bell note that echoed dolefully through the house.

The door was not locked. The lamp showed the great bed with the captain lying, one arm outside the rumpled quilt. His eyes were open, they caught the light. But there was no life in them. There was blood dabbled on the end of the great beard. The hilt of a dagger, shagreen and silver-mounted, showed where it had been deep-driven to the heart that had failed at last, not to disease, but to the stroke of an assassin.

THERE was no need to test for pulse. Captain Jarvis Harmon was dead. There seemed to have been no struggle. He had been stabbed in his sleep with devilish swiftness and sureness. One pillow was misplaced as if search had been made for valuables. In the hall the big clock ticked woodenly on. The dog had its forepaws on the bed and was licking the cold hand of its master, its haw-eyes turned to Benson as if in entreaty for vengeance.

Fierce anger against the cold-eyed devil upstairs flamed in Benson. He did not touch bed nor weapon. That was a job for the coroner or the sheriff. He rushed up-stairs struggling with a desire to take punishment in his own hands. On the threshold of his room he halted in dismay.

The room was empty. The grip straps lay on the floor. Benson's wallet, rifled, lay on the bed. He put down the lamp and jumped to the windows. The catches were all set. In both rooms. He raced down the hall in apprehension of more tragedy, marveling how the man had escaped from the stout straps. The woman's door was half open, as he left it. She lay on the bed, still in her nightgown, arms extended, her eyes blank, rolled upward. But she seemed unhurt.

He dashed water in her face and she revived, sighed and thrust up her turtle's neck with her skull face palsied on its corded column.

"Eh?" she cried. "What's this?"

"Get up, woman. Murder's been done! The man's gone. Did you see him?"

"Murder?"

"Captain Harmon! Stabbed by the man I bound. And he's got away."

She sat up, raising herself by her arms. Her face worked horribly and her pallid eyes projected as she strove for speech. It came thickly, with sweat starting over her forehead. "Cap'n Harmon murdered! Oh, my God. *Oh, my God!*" She rocked herself to and fro, her wispy hair all about her face and shoulders. Benson shook her, none too gently.

"Get up and come down," he called to her. "I'm going to search the house."

With a sudden gathering of forces she sprang from the bed and began to don petticoat and skirt over her nightgown, regardless of Benson, who was examining the window. It was partly open but over it had been tacked some netting against insects. This was intact. He passed from room to room upstairs, six of them in all, but, with the one exception, all the windows were locked or jammed. There had been no egress that way.

The kitchen door was still bolted. In the living-room he saw what he had missed before, the tile misplaced, the column yawning, the black casket, that had held the rubies, empty on the table. Yet he had searched the man for the gems.

The long windows were locked. So were those of the room opposite the dead man's chamber. There were two casements in the skipper's room and they too were fastened from within. The front door he had rebolted and the locks were still close-socketed. There was a double mystery here. How had the man got in, as well as out?

He thought of the cellar, opening from the kitchen. It was divided into three by fieldstone partitions, doors between. These had been supplemented by square brick piers. And there were the bases of two chimneys. The smell of apples, a litter of boxes, cord wood, barrels, but no sign of the fugitive. Three oblong lights, gray now with dawn, would barely have given egress to the dog. And they were nailed.

A trap caught his eye and he tugged fiercely at it, remembering the driver's tale of subterranean passages. But stale, stinking water gleamed iridescently up at him less than two feet down. If this was a passage it was impassable. It was more likely a well. Man and rubies had vanished. Houdini-like, he had got out of the stout straps and, like a greater wizard, he had disappeared, with every exit barred!

A COLD fury took possession of Benson. His own loss— ten thousand dollars in currency— entered into it, but predominant was the foul murder of Captain Harmon and the manner in which the assassin had tricked him. The rubies were no slight matter, aside from their great value. That such gems should pass into hands so dastardly exasperated him and clinched the determination to solve the mystery, to bring the murderer and thief to book.

Once more he went swiftly but carefully over the house, noting several things, fitting them together with certain incidents but, though they furnished him with a theory, they gave him no actual clue as to how the man had entered nor, what was of prime importance, how he had got clear— in which direction he had fled. The housekeeper had passed him in the living-room, walking like a phantom of death herself, her face seamed with emotion, toward the death chamber where the dog still kept guard beside the clay that had once been his master.

If the man had got clear of the house— it seemed certain that he was not within it— he might have left traces. The wind, still blowing a gale in the graying dawn, would have eliminated footprints to a great extent with the scudding sand, yet in some sheltered hollow of a dune he might find the imprint of a naked foot. On the lee side of the house they should show, if he had gone that way.

He entered the death chamber. The woman had touched nothing but stood beside the bed wringing her hands, her spare frame shaken. Benson warned her to leave the bed alone. He opened the desk, searching for some better weapon than the two crises that had been taken from the wall, now sacred to the law. He saw a folded paper lying there and, with one glance at the back of the woman, a second at its contents, placed it in his pocket. In places the ink showed fresh as if the dead man had written after Benson had retired. He had so expressed his intention, Benson remembered.

IN A pigeon-hole he saw the butt of a revolver protruding and he took it out. It was of heavy caliber and fully loaded. If the old man had kept it under his pillow— but Benson dismissed that thought, the blow had been too quick, the attack too stealthy. Harmon had died in his sleep.

With the pistol in his hand he unbolted the front door and went out. The wind blew so strongly that he was hard put to it to advance. He leaned his weight against the strength of it while he shielded his face with one crooked arm from the flying grains. Then it momentarily slackened. Across an angry sea, tumbling at cross-purposes, a streak of pale yellow split the wrack of clouds, wan herald of the day. And he saw a schooner plunging under shortened staysail and main in a three-point reef, holding up in the wind. He

wondered why it did not beat out to open sea and then, the salty gusts clearing his brain, he realized purpose in its holding on to such a perilous course. It was waiting for some one.

He glanced to right and left. On the left must lie the creek that the driver had mentioned as still partly navigable for shallow draft. If the murderer was connected with this schooner, hanging on in the mouth of the snarling storm, he had come by boat. And he would so return, if a boat could live in that criss-cross of shifting pyramids, yeasty with foam, topped by spume flying parallel like snow in a blizzard.

A shout came faintly to him and he began to run across the dunes, to his left. Suddenly a figure showed, climbing out of a valley between hills, a man in blue trousers and shirt, surely his quarry. He was a fair hundred yards ahead, too far for range of the pistol. And he, too, ran fast on his bare feet. He topped a dune and disappeared as Benson labored through the dragging sand and fought the gusts that sometimes held him stopped, his laboring lungs seeming to be blown bare of air.

He reached the dune where the man had vanished and found himself looking down upon ebbing waters of the creek. The wind lashed at the stream and, favored by the tide, fighting the gale, he saw a dory with one man laboring at the oars and another in the stern.

Benson ran along the dunes that bordered the creek, gaining a little. The rower saw him and redoubled his efforts. Benson stopped and fired but the pace had unsteadied him and the bullet went wide and short, spurting up the water. He tried a second without effect. The windage was hard to judge and counteract, the creek was widening to an estuary and the dory hugged the opposite shore. In a lull it shot ahead as Benson raced down to water-level, firing again, uselessly. The two were out of range and he could only watch them as the dory struggled across the turmoil of the bar and started across the wider turbulence of the waves that threatened every instant to engulf it.

The man in the stern put out a oar in the notch and strove to keep the boat head on. Now they were hidden in a valley, now tossed up a heaving slope, clawing a way with frantic strokes, making some progress, the rower skilful at his task.

A man appeared at the rail of the schooner and shouted something out of cupped hands. Benson caught a wind-shredded remnant of the shout and guessed at its call for haste. Though he fancied the wind was lessening, the waves were mounting perceptibly, rolling in from beneath the widening streak of yellow and every second increased the hazard of the schooner if she hoped to clear the shallow crescent of Windy Bay and work out past the reeds that marked the almost vanished headlands.

ON THE wet shingle Benson stood impotent, drenched, watching the struggling dory. He saw it turn broadside to the rearing wave, saw the steering oar snap and a roaring mass of water engulf the little craft, pounding it viciously, smashing it, striking with the weight of tons of raging sea. A bobbing head— an upflung hand, and a last glimpse of wreckage— and the certain end had come.

He stood fixed, strained against the wind and saw the schooner fall off a little, then come up, with figures on deck staring where the dory had been. Then she fell off again, and, not daring to ease her sheets, her canvas hard as a board, began to sidle her way close-hauled, seaward, making dangerous leeway till she tacked, came about handsomely and buffeted her way out of her extremity. Inch by inch, foot by foot, she clung to the wind as a man might hand himself along a rope, gaining little by little, seeking her own safety, relinquishing the two men to the death that had already claimed them, swashing them about in the sub-currents, to fling them up at the flood, battered, sodden, broken husks.

Benson turned away, the gun still tight in his grip. His efforts at recall, at punishment, had been futile as the petty anger of a child. And he had other things to do. The bodies might come ashore somewhere on that rockbound coast, but the murder was yet to be reported, the question of the rubies settled. For he did not think they were taken with the men in the dory. The shadow of the tragedy had deepened, though he fancied he dimly saw a trail in the wild tangle of the night's events.

Above him, on a dune, her strange hair streaming, her clothes whipped about her bony frame in a thousand convolutions, her pallid eyes gazing wildly out to sea, her lips moving above the gleam of her ridiculous teeth, stood the housekeeper, her features in such a wild twist of frenzy, of unutterable woe, that Benson's impulse to go to her was checked. But he mounted and touched her on the shoulder. She turned to him, pointing to the tumbling fury of the waves that beat upon the shingle and sent spray sprouting inland, to fly in spindrift flakes above the dunes; greeting him with a maniacal laugh—

"So ends the day! So ends the day! But we will wait—wait until the sea gives up its dead."

She clawed at him wildly when he would have led her away.

A hail barely reached him. He turned to see a tall man coming over the dunes from the road's end, leaning against the gusts, a hand on his hat, the spare folds of his clothing lashing out. A stouter figure toiled behind. With relief, Benson recognized the driver of the car— Martin— deputy sheriff and constable.

Martin caught at him for balance as he reached him, gasping for breath, his Adam's apple working as he strove for speech, his eyes shifting from the woman to the schooner, laboring hard to gain an offing. Once they turned suspiciously to Benson.

"She'll make it," he cried at last. "She'll make it! Dad burn 'em but they can handle her! It's the *Miriam*! Old Job Bollard, runnin' in from the storm, sighted her foolin' about in the bay here at daybreak. Thought she might be tryin' to land a cargo. Rum-runner she is. Contraband. Why in time they put in so close here beats me. She'll fetch it, sure. Look at her soon, will ye?"

Benson saw the *Miriam* come about for a short tack, then fetch another and go lunging past the point in a smother of spray.

"Sheriff," he said, "you are the man that's needed. There's been murder done. Captain Harmon has been stabbed. Valuable jewels have been stolen. Ten thousand dollars of mine has gone with them."

Both men opened their mouths as their eyes goggled. The wind blew away the half formulated "Murder?" that formed on their lips.

"Then what in time are you and the woman standin' here watchin' the schooner fur?" demanded Martin. He had taken a visible brace. His loose-jointed frame coordinated into something authoritative, his eyes became keen. Benson approved his new aspect. The man had qualities, after all. His companion seemed of duller clay, awed, swollen with curiosity, yet stolid.

"I BELIEVE the man came off from the schooner. Two men tried to make her in a dory from the creek and were drowned. One of them is, I think, the murderer."

"I want to know." Martin scrutinized the shore line and the breakers. "Body'll be comin' in before long." he said. "Both of 'em. Land this side of the p'int. Strong current sets in. Nothin' doin' till tide turns. Davis, you stay here an' keep an eye out for 'em. I'm going up to the house.

"What's come to her?" he went on, looking at the housekeeper, who had hunkered down atop the dune, her eyes searching the waves.

"We need her at the house," said Benson. The deputy sheriff looked sharply at him, caught some special meaning and sucked in his lips. Then he tapped the woman on the shoulder.

"You come back to the house along of me, Mrs. Woods," he said. "I want to have a talk with you."

She stared at him blankly. Her eyes gleamed like pale opals that suddenly reflect the light. Then they became stony. But she rose. Martin took her by the arm, and though she stiffened she seemed suddenly to resign herself and went back, between Benson and Martin, with head erect and lips firmly pressed

together, though her scant bosom rose and fell as unevenly as the warring seas. They entered the house. Benson told some details as they walked and Martin looked once into the room where the captain lay, the dog beside him, which growled at Martin and then subsided.

"Nothin' teched?" asked Martin. "Good. We'll send for the medical examiner. Acts as coroner up here," he explained to Benson as the three of them went into the living-room. Martin led the woman to a chair and motioned Benson to another.

"NOW then," he said, his eyes alert. "Suppose you tell me the whole story as you come into it, Mr. Benson." As the latter talked, the sheriff fingered the empty casket and peered into the cavities in the fireplace. He glanced at the spaces in the trophy from which the crises had been taken, but said nothing until Benson stopped talking.

"You got anything to add to that?" he challenged the woman. She sat gazing at the ruins of the ship. Silent, rigid.

"Funny how he got clear of them straps," he continued. "Funny about them bolts. You got any theory, mister?" His eyes, no longer merely inquisitive, but official, sounded Benson's. Apparently he expected an answer.

"The man got past the dog," said Benson. "He was let into the house. Let loose. Mrs. Woods, what time did your son come to this house last night?"

The sheriff whistled softly. The woman started to her feet, her look wild, shocked into galvanic action out of her repression.

"My son? Who says it was my son? My God!"

"You lied last night, Mrs. Woods," went on Benson. "You said there was no oil for my lamp. The can in the kitchen is half full. You made that an excuse to spy on the captain and myself. And the man I caught in my room had your eyes. There were other things about him that struck me."

"Stop!" she cried, in a croaking, choking voice. "Stop, I say!"

"She has got a boy," said Martin. "He warn't no good. Cap'n kicked him out five years back for stealin'. Loose bills, it was. Wouldn't prosecute. Said he'd thrashed him. You'd better talk out, Mrs. Woods. 'Pears you're mixed up some in this yourself. An' your boy, if it was your boy, is—"

"Drowned," she wailed. "Drowned. But he didn't know. I swear it."

She stopped suddenly, glancing at them, at Benson's hard face and the Yankee's keen features and accusing eyes. Then, her arm outflung to the figure of the Apsara on the mantel, she faced them.

"I'll talk," she said. "I'll talk. Let the world know what I have kept until my heart was caked. She— the wanton. And him, cruel and cold, seeking his own lusts, denying his own flesh and blood, forsaking me. Cruel and cold, a lying,

crafty devil." She shifted her gesture to the door that led to the dead man's chamber. The floodgates of her speech were open, her eyes reckless.

"Lizzie Woods, I was. A beauty once. No puny thing like her. His housekeeper and his mistress. Strong I was, with a will of my own, but he was stronger. And I loved his mastery. He would have married me, but for her. Though he broke his oath as a man might break twigs, yet he would have married me and righted me. But he brought her back, thirty long years ago, in that ship that sits scorched there, a forewarning of the hell that has opened to him.

"And when I told him of the child that was coming, he laughed at me and said 'twas none of his. He had broken me by then, after five years, as he broke her. I've watched her sitting in the sun, looking out to sea, and smiled to see her pine away for her hot, green land and look to him for the caress he had tired of giving, as he did with me.

"Aye, I laid her out at last. I watched him dig her grave and carve the stone. Perhaps he loved her. He brought no more light-of-loves to Windy Bay. And the hardness of him shelled about him. He drove away my boy. His own son. And I, the broken fool, stayed on.

"For what? To get the inheritance for my boy. It was his. His and mine. I hoped that Harmon might grow less hard. I tended him. And he left the sea. His heart failed him, drained of its strength by wanton living. He saw the sand creep on as it has always done, to kill the orchard and to cover the shame of her grave. I was his cast-off, his slave. And I could have had a dozen proud to wed me once."

Martin nodded confirmation at Benson. It was difficult to believe that beauty once bloomed on that warped and dessicated vine. But her voice rang with truth

"I DID not spy," she said, turning on Benson. "I but made sure. I have watched him many a night in front of the fire, looking at his rubies. At my rubies. My boy's. They may have been hers once. She gave him— all— all— to mastery. A man like him is born as woman's master. To make a mock of them. But they belonged to my boy, since he would not give him a name. None knew of them but me. Sometimes he would look at me and laugh, and I knew he was figuring to fool me at the end.

"I guessed why you had come. I read the Sunday paper where he first learned of you. He took the supplement to his room and I found it. I read your book when he was out, walking the cliffs with the fog. I knew when he wrote you, when you would come. And the luck was against him. For I had a letter from my boy and I knew he would be coming yesterday, as he has sometimes

come before. Wild he was, with his father's blood in him. Wild with my wildness. But my boy.

"I told him of the rubies. Of the money you had brought. He had paid the schooner to bring him here and set him of. He meant to take some of his own. Could I blame him, knowing his father's treacherous heart? I knew the trick of the fireplace, watching him from the hall doorway the night, trying it when he was out.

"But he wanted the money. Most of all he needed money. The rubies he dared not sell. What more is there to tell?" She dropped her arms heavily, the life seemed to suddenly wane in her. But she regathered force.

"I did not know he had killed. I swear it. And he— ah, God!— he did not know that he had killed his father."

"You never told him?" asked Benson.

"Would I tell him his own shame? He thought my husband— his father— dead. Long ago."

"Yet he was willin' to take the jewels and the money," said Martin.

"One thing more," said Benson. "You let him into the house. You undid the strips while I was downstairs and then pretended to have swooned. How did he get away?"

"The cupboards," she said faintly, clutching at the table. "The cupboards between your sitting-room and the next. There is a space between, with a sliding panel. It leads to a chute— with a ladder. It leads down to one of the piers in the cellar. It is hollow. There is an old passage leading to the ruined wharf and the creek. He went that way. Now let me go."

"Your son had no right to this man's money." said Martin.

"I thought he had paid it to the captain for a stone. I thought it was in the mantel— or beneath the captain's pillow. And I could not stop him after I had told him. It would have been sent back, from the sale of the rubies."

"Where are the rubies?" asked Martin.

"Under the mattress on my bed. I was to keep them for a while. I— look!" she shrilled.

THROUGH the window they saw figures approaching the house, slowly. Two groups each carrying something that sagged— and dripped.

She broke from them, rushing through the hall, out through the door, where the stolid Davis, at a nod from Martin, trailed her as she went to meet her son.

"Likely'll have your notes in his pocket, if the sea ain't washed 'em out," said Martin, "Better look after them rubies. She's implicated, of course, but—" He looked, uncertainly, at Benson.

"You haven't guessed all of it, Martin," said Benson. "Look at this." He took from his pocket the paper he had taken from the captain's desk. "This is Harmon's will. He wrote in it last night, after I had appraised his jewels: There are a few bequests and, listen—"

*"To my housekeeper, Mrs. Eliza Woods, in recognition of her years of service and in recompense for certain wrongs she has suffered at my hands; to her and to her issue after her, I bequeath the sum of sixty thousand dollars, to be derived from the sale of my rubies this day appraised."*

The sheriff stared dumbly at Benson for a moment. "He left 'em to her after all. If that don't beat all, I want to know."

The front door opened. The heavy tread of men sounded, the broken sobbing of a woman, of a mother. From the dead man's room the dog suddenly howled. The door to the living-room opened. The sun, breaking through the clouds, sent level rays through outer door and passage, across the living-room of Smuggler's House. The beam touched the shriveled masts of the ship and rested on the face of the Apsara.

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## 8: The Water Wizard

*Adventure, 15 Nov 1927*

VILA, which is the capital of the New Hebrides, is on the island of Efaté, which is sometimes called Vaté and sometimes Sandwich Island, even as Vila is often known as Port Vila.

There are not many more beautiful harbors than that of Vila, with its blue and green of wooded peaks and clear water, its vivid light and shade, its jeweled islands scattered on the crystal bay where the flying-fish are almost always— not playing, but planing in grim earnest to escape the rush of their hungry enemies.

The British High Commissioner shares the rule of the islands with the French High Commissioner and each has an Assistant Resident Commissioner who live on separate islets. Most of the Mission stations are located the same way, also certain small native villages. It is both fashionable and pleasant to live on an island in Vila Bay and elsewhere in the group. It is cooler, and the sea is better than a fence when the tribesmen go on a raid.

There are few uglier people in the world than the natives of the New Hebrides. They are built for strength and not for comeliness. They have club noses in which is set a ring or a strip of bone; the distended lobes of their ears reach their shoulders and are pierced for use as receptacles for most of their possessions. They have woolly hair and woolly beards. They wear a gee-string and a wide bark belt which carries cartridges that foolish traders give them for use in antiquated Tower rifles: They are cannibals and use poisoned arrows, clubs and spears, besides their muskets. They make mummies of their dead and effect collections of skulls. Their women are abject slaves.

For choice they wear a boar's tusk hung like a locket, and a freshly severed pig's tail as an ear ornament. The wizards rule them, and none is supposed to die a natural death. Death is to be revenged, and the wilder parts of the dark, mysterious bush are death-traps where a native vendetta is in perpetual progress.

They are vicious and treacherous, sullen and lazy. Their one redeeming trait is cleanliness. A village is scrupulously clean, stone-walled, swept, decorated with flowering and bright-leaved shrubs, with bamboos growing on the tops of soft coral fences. Nevertheless it is a Place of Death.

There are some more peaceful colonies of Polynesian origin but, for the most part, the natives are natural murderers and eaters of human flesh. Back in the dense bush they defy castigation, though it occasionally overtakes them. There are spots called by such well-earned names as "The Traders' Graveyard," which should be sufficient warning to the wary.

Traveling between the islands on the steamer that, like an accommodation train, stops here and there and everywhere, you may see through glasses—the best manner of viewing—a group of herded women bathing on an open beach guarded by flat-faced warriors bearing guns and bandoleers of cartridges, ready to stall off or drive back a rush from bush neighbors. Quakes shake the group; live volcanoes spout. It is a wild, wild place, inhabited by wild, wild people. Savages in a savage, magnificent setting.

Step off the beaten track, turn your back on your own laborers, weaken a constant watchfulness and restraint and you pay the ultimate penalty. Your skull, decked with crude clay modeling in caricature of your features, will be a main exhibit in a grass-thatched *kamal*. Your flesh may be passed about the village from chief to still suckling infants. This is not so certain, as the white long-pig is not esteemed as *kai-kai*; and even black-skinned flesh is eaten with medicinal red berries, like tomatoes, lest it prove overrich and bring about indigestion.

For all this, there are worse spots to live in than Vila. It is the Little Paris of the traders and the planters who come to its one struggling street and deal at the stores, before they gather at the Café— Restaurant Français— where the food is fair, if overspiced for some palates, and one may drink thin claret, gin, whisky, grenadine or absinthe across the little tables and almost imagine himself back in God's Country. Which the New Hebrides, with all due respect for the efforts of the missionaries, is most distinctly not.

Saunders sat at the table with Haley and Stone, who were playing dominoes for the drinks. Saunders and Haley were in coffee, beyond Melé Beach, thirty-odd miles away. Stone grew corn and millet, closer in.

They had dined, and they had downed several rounds of drinks. They had discussed trade and the ridiculous situation of laws laid down by the Commissioners without means to enforce them. They had talked of their own affairs and the general plantation gossip and— below their breath, because there are two Frenchmen to one Britisher or American in Vila— they had aired their stale views concerning the dual government and the dirty deal the French gave the rest. And they fervently hoped that some one else they knew would drop in so that they could make up a game of bridge or poker.

Already they were a little sick of each other, knowing themselves so well. Always they came to Vila as an oasis that loomed bright and verdant from plantation distance, but it invariably palled after a few hours, so that they were glad to get back to work again. Taking it both ways, it worked out very well.

It was not steamer day for a week, and there seemed scant prospect of a fourth man. Stone suggested pool, and the two others ignored him. Stone played altogether too well to make it interesting.

In Tahiti there are complaisant and not unattractive ladies who help to while away a trader's leisure hours— and spend his money. In Vila the native women are neither amiable nor attractive, even if the trio had been that kind of men, which they were not. To Saunders, a woman was as a red cloth to a bull. Haley and Stone had little French and less inclination for the company of the sallow wives of the inhabitants, who dressed in the latest modes and languidly despised the Stones and the Haleys and their ilk.

Nevertheless, some of them, sipping their *demi-tasses*, looked up with brightening eyes and glances of distinct approval at the man who entered, bowing to some of them, murmuring a salutation in French that had once beyond a doubt been practised in Paris.

HE WAS a tall man and his immaculate white drill made him appear taller for all his breadth of shoulder. His thin unshaven face was so brown that his blue eyes appeared unnatural in their gleaming whites, and the flash of his teeth in a smile was momentarily startling. A keen face. A hawk face. A strong body. His name was Smith— James Smith. His nationality was proclaimed by the whispers among the wives of the habitants.

"*C'est M'sieu l' Américain!*"

Smith came over to the table where the three sat, and they greeted him almost boisterously. They hailed him as a younger brother at a boarding-school hails his elder, who comes bringing tips. Even Saunders' sour, nut-cracker face expanded in a smile.

"Smith! What good wind sent ye? How's a' wi' ye? Sit doon an' ha' a drink. It's Stone's treat."

"It's mine," said Smith as he sat down.

The *propriétaire* came bustling up with a "*bon soir, M'sieu Smeeth*," and he ordered the meal *à la carte*.

"And a claret punch. Whatever the others are drinking for them."

He spoke in fluent French, and the *propriétaire* courtesied and gave him a smile that was not all vinegar.

"The grub is rotten," said Haley. "Same old thing. Turtle steak's the best thing on it."

"Haven't seen a turtle for a coon's age. Vila looks good to me. First time in four months."

"How's copra?"

"Good. Averaging high. Ninety nuts on some trees. Same old bother with labor, but we worry along. Now let's cut out shop. My shop anyway. You old growlers have spilled your grievances, I suppose. What's the real news?"

He sipped his punch and smoked a cigaret after his soup, without regard of the glances of somewhat *passé* coquetry that were sent his way. He was easily the best-looking man in the room, the most impressive and the coolest. Vila has an average climate like that of a fernery. Or a steam laundry.

"It's all stale. Steamer's not due. What brought you here? Supplies?"

"I have come to interview the Commissioners— at their request. A complaint has been made that I am not living up to my agreement with my boys. No truth in it. I spoil the lazy bums, but I don't want to stay away and have a fine slapped on me. Bad example to the rest. No holding 'em."

"It's a burnin' shame," said Saunders, "the way they'll pamper the natives. You're too close in, Smith. Back in the bush we know how to handle 'em. A pack o' murderin' cannibals. All they recruit for is money enough to buy a rifle an' cartridges so they can go home an' kill a long pig.

"What was your trouble?"

"Two or three of 'em came down with what looked like dysentery. I dosed 'em pretty hard— pulled 'em through, before the rest got scared and quit. Some bush wizard got hold of them, and the result was they complained that I'd been poisoning them. I'll fix it all right, but it meant a trip to Vila. Glad I came now I've seen you chaps."

"Humph!" grunted Haley. "One of my boys made a swipe at me with a killing-mallet. My houseboy. I nursed him through a sickness, too. Got sulky at something. The fool forgot there was a mirror on the wall. Lucky for me I looked up. I should have potted the beggar, but it 'ud leak out and raise no end of a stink. I nearly skinned him instead. He took it out on the wizard who said he'd have no trouble with the job.

"The law's a joke. They can fine you and impound you on customs to secure it, but they never back you up with the natives unless there's a wholesale murder, when they send round a floating bath-tub they call a gunboat to fire a few shells into the bush. Fat lot of good that does."

"They hung a few of them over that Navaa affair," said Smith.

"They ought to have hung all of 'em. You've simply got to take the law into your hands and see that your plantation is far enough away to discourage the visits of the Lord High PishPash Commissioner. How about a game of bridge?"

"Good enough. Up-stairs on the veranda?"

"There's one bit o' news," put in Saunders. "Your especial friend Ford is a verra seeck man. They say he's bewitched."

"What's that?"

Smith turned sharply back to the table where Saunders still sat finishing his whisky and water.

"Not a soul'll go near him except the missionaries, an' he swears he'll pull a gun on the first who puts foot on his porch as long as he can hold pistol an' pu' trigger. We've sort of tabu'd him since the Abua business. Stone there called. Ford don't know what's wrong wi' him, but he's no strength an' juist lies on his veranda wastin' away. No fever, no pain, juist fadin' to a mummy. Eh, Stone?"

"That describes him better than anything I know of," replied Stone. "But he had energy enough to curse longer and more artistically than any one I ever ran across. He'd have punched my head if he'd had the strength. Said so. Tried to get up and do it.

"I told him I was a Johnny Newcome who'd heard he was sick and wanted to see if I could do anything for a neighbor, as he might do for me some time.

"He told me to go plumb to hades. Said I was like all the rest. All he wanted was to be left alone, and blast the eyes and heart and liver of every other white man in the islands.

"I left. He had a couple of villainous-looking houseboys hanging round, and I believe they'd have tackled me if it wasn't for my automatic. On the way to the boat-landing I saw the weirdest-looking bit of humanity you could find out of a nightmare. He was a nightmare.

"His hair was lime-bleached until it was yellow. There wasn't too much of it, and it looked like a moth-eaten duster. His face was painted with white all over except a sort of black-mask effect over the eyes. Looked like a skull. Eyes were red-rimmed and just devilish.

"Gimcracks all over his body. Red feathers stuck in braided sennit bands on his arms and legs. Skinnier than Ford back on the veranda. And scaly as a fish. Gray scales all over him."

"Scaly?"

Smith spoke the word. His plantation was far beyond that of the others, almost in *terra incognita* so far as whites were concerned. He was making money out of it for all that, with a superb grove of nuts from which he expressed the copra into oil, making by-products out of the husks and fiber.

His knowledge of native lore was wide, and he spoke the dialects. Without these he could never have mastered the wild boys from Tanna and Malekula who had signed out to him for five pounds a year. As he had said, he had his occasional troubles.

"Scaly as a mullet," affirmed Stone. "He had a peach of a boar's tusk. Double circle. And a necklace of human teeth strung like beads. Hundreds of 'em. Went three or four times round his scrawny old neck. Wore a kilt of human hair— beards, I suppose. He had a stone in front of him, and he was balancing smaller ones on top of it.

"He grinned as I passed. A grin without any teeth of his own; just the end of a withered tongue stuck out between his lips. They were scaly too. I'm hanged if he didn't give me the creeps."

"Tubu," said Smith. "The worst wizard on Efaté. A bloodthirsty old sorcerer. The stone was a magic stone— a *netik*— and he was doing a *hocum-pocum* rite with it. Making a spell. Funny he should be squatting there right on Ford's land. Wonder if Ford has had a run-in with him."

"Wouldn't be surprized," said Haley. "Ford's always raising Ned with his hands. Got fined twenty pounds for stringing one up by his thumbs and letting the ants get at him. Let's go up-stairs. Cooler."

SMITH went first, his face thoughtful.

"What was his run-in with Ford?" Stone asked Haley.

"Ford bought a girl on Abua for six pigs and some tobacco. They're Polynesian there, and the girl wasn't bad-looking. Young, of course. Ford took her to his plantation and abused her. Smith happened to drop in. Going by in his launch and heard the yells. He said she was bruised until she looked like a rotten plum. Wealed on the back. She was. I saw her later. Ford was in a rotten temper and taking it out on her by giving her a licking with a split bamboo. Had her tied up to a post on the veranda."

"Well?"

Haley grinned.

"Smith knocked him down and cut the girl loose. Ford wanted to fight, and he got his needings. Smith walloped him and then gave him a dose of his own medicine. Ford's a big man— was— but Smith spanked him with the split bamboo, and Ford took his meals standing and slept on his belly for a bit.

"Smith brought the girl over to my place, and I sent for Saunders. You know Scotty. He's a hardshell where women are concerned; but, when he saw that poor kid, he wanted to take his rifle and go over and shoot Ford out of hand.

"We did go over later, all three of us, and we told Ford a few things for the good of his soul— if he's got one. He was gray with pain; and if looks could have killed, we'd have lasted about one minute. Since then Ford hasn't been popular. The yarn got out. With the native boys, too, and that hurt Ford's pride, which is the only sensitive thing about the inside of him.

"Smith sent the girl over to Abua and paid the pigs and tobacco over to Ford. Otherwise her folks would have shipped her back. But I'll bet she wouldn't have reached there alive, if she'd had a knife.

"Here we are. Thank Heaven there's a breeze. *Garçon!*"

They were soon settled at the edge of the veranda, looking to the bay. There are no reefs about Efaté. The land goes down sheer to great depths. The

waves splashed soothingly on the shingle, and the palms rustled like big fans. The inevitable drinks and smokes accompanied the game. Smith played silently, as was his wont— and lost, which was not usual. The others rallied him.

"Out of luck tonight, boys," he said. "Gives you a chance to even up from last time. Fact is I'm bothered about Tubu and Ford."

"For why?" inquired Saunders caustically. "They're a pair of rascals."

"Two reasons. These bush wizards are getting to be more than a mere nuisance. They've got to be taught a lesson. Tubu's the big gun of them all. Spoil his little game in the open and you've got the rest tamed, for a while anyway, so far as we whites are concerned.

"It's a good bet he's cast a spell on Ford. Given out that Ford'll die. Told everybody, including Ford. There are five hundred natives now waiting for news of his death."

"But that's all bunk," said Stone. "I suppose a native will die from fright if he thinks he's bewitched, but not a white man. Not Ford."

Haley grinned at him.

"Bunk, is it?" asked Saunders. "You tell him, Smith."

"These wizards have got a lot of spells and incantations," said Smith. "I suppose they believe in 'em. Handed-down ritual. Grandstand and spectacular stuff. But if a man is stubborn and won't die they have got more practical methods. They kill some with trained snakes beyond a doubt. Set the snake in the right trail at the right time. And they've got a prime knowledge of all sorts of poisons.

"Then they've got assistants among the natives who are proud to help and get immunity themselves, though I imagine the assistants are often put out of the way before they can whisper secrets. I'll bet half my crop that if Tubu has got it in for Ford he's administering poison to him some way through his houseboys.

"Ford's no fool. He'll be careful of his diet. Use canned goods and open them himself. But Tubu's a past master. He's made the announcement. Ford has got to die or he'll lose his prestige.

"He's a water wizard. I mean by that his pet scheme is to make a clay model. Named this one for Ford. He's got it in a stream somewhere near a trail where it can be seen. As the stream washes it away Ford's life is supposed to ebb with it. And Tubu hangs round and sees that Ford gets weaker. Times the dénouement."

"This is a sweet country," said Stone, setting down his cigar as if it had suddenly gone against his taste.

"All right as long as you treat the natives fairly well and keep a good lookout. You've got to be boss, and you've got to be careful. I kept my veranda strewn with big thumb-tacks for the first six months," said Smith. "The boys' feet are calloused, but the tacks were sharp and long. Better than a bulldog. They stay off it now."

"Second reason is that Ford's a white man. If he won't have us around we'll have to save him without him knowing it. We can't let a white man be poisoned and look on."

The rest were silent. Finally Saunders spoke:

"I suppose not. Mind ye, I wouldn't help him for his own sake, but it wad be a bad theeng for business; an' a good theeng if Tubu was set down. How are ye goin' to do it?"

"There's only one way," said Smith. "All I need from you fellows is your moral support. If I go out you can clean up Tubu. I'll be through with the Commissioners tomorrow. My launch needs repairs, but that can be sent down the coast after me. I've got Liki with me, and he's a good man. Brought him from Samoa. My headman. He'll look after the launch. I'll pay a visit to Tubu. Do a little spying if I can and then beat him at his own game."

"Going to Ford's?"

"No. Into Tubu's village. He'll be there. He's just watching Ford for a time each day for general effect, diagnosis and to gloat."

"Going into the bush alone? Man, ye don't mean it!"

"Sure do, Saunders. Better one than many. I know their ways. They are a bit afraid of me or they'd have settled this present bother of ours themselves—or tried to—without tackling the Commissioner. I'll do a little conjuring on my own hook."

They laid down their cards and tried to dissuade him. At least to allow them to go with him. But Smith was adamant.

"You chaps don't know bush ways as well as I do. As for arms, a Gatling gun wouldn't do me any good. If they get me it'll be from behind. But the whole secret is that they are afraid of the white man's *mana*. That's hard to translate. Supernatural power revealing itself in physical force. They believe the white man has a more powerful *mana* than they have. Even Tubu believes that, though he'd hate to admit it to himself. The best of it is that *mana* can manifest itself after death very nastily. If they're afraid of me alive they'll be afraid of me dead. Savvy?"

"Ford ain't worth it," growled Haley.

"I tell you it isn't just for Ford. It's the principle of the thing. He's our breed. We've got to stay on top. And I'm sick of these bush-doctors running my affairs

and yours like a strike leader. That's settled. Let's play cards. And, now that I've got that off my chest, look out, you chaps."

They looked out— at phenomenal hands displayed and others they did not care to call. Smith won back all he had lost and as much again before they had the last round of jacks. He won three of those pots and gathered up his winnings.

"For general expenses," he announced. "Gives you all a hand in my trip. I'm turning in. See you tomorrow before I go."

SMITH hired two horses and made the first leg of his Quixotic journey in an Australian high-pommeled stock saddle. He took a native with him to return the nags, starting at dawn along the dusty Mele road for Undine Bay, his first stop, thirty miles distant.

The trail led out on to Mele Beach, a third of a mile wide and eight miles long of hard-packed powdered coral where the green beach vines trailed with their pink blossoms and the shadows were blue as strokes and washes of cobalt.

The beach was a blinding glare of whiteness, the bay shaded from amethyst to violet; with Melé Island sapphire in its midst. Out of this into the green twilight of the bush along the narrowest of paths between walls of buttressed banyans and lesser trees bound together with vines. Wild taro with leaves larger than elephant ears lofted above his hat brim as he rode. In the undergrowth ripe berries glowed. Parrots screeched and pigeons cooed. Wild pigs went trampling unseen in the jungle. Came a stretch of rustling reeds and then the bush.

At twilight when the sky was aflame and the sea one vast pool of liquid fire, he emerged upon a coffee clearing, its scarlet berries in the ordered rows looking like holly amid the glossy leaves, and drew rein at Saunders', where the latter's headman greeted him with obsequious welcome. Smith had taken warts from the man's hand when a bush-doctor failed, using caustic, and the "strong medicine," plus the result, had made Smith's *mana* very strong with the native.

The next morning he plunged into the bush alone, working upward to a ridge where the long grass grew slippery as glacial ice, always waving in the wind, but making better, safer going than the moist-hot bush with its pathways leading to hidden villages and calling for momentary precautions against pitfalls, or ambushed spears and arrows, triggered by projecting boughs or innocent-appearing liana.

He made a three-mile gait of it, inured to the climate, a pith helmet above white shirt and drill riding-breeches that ended in laced boots. He traveled

light save for a cartridge-belt and two Lugers tied down to his boot tops by thongs. His knapsack contained only a few things he had purchased in Vila— a conjurer's bag, together with a small supply of rice, some compressed beef tablets and hard crackers. For fruit he had the bush. Guavas in the scrub, berries and figs, bananas, great grapefruits, wild oranges. Breadfruit for baking and wild yams for vegetables.

To be seen was not a part of his program. He wanted to assure himself of Tubu's doings before his presence was known. So he went warily, listening for distant drumbeats that would wireless his approach. Here and there he saw threads of smoke. In mid-afternoon he looked down to where the lighter green of his own plantation showed by the sea's edge, four thousand feet below.

Until evening he worked his way through a thick forest, too high for the denser undergrowth. He made his solitary camp in a lave blowout cave, secure from interference. Above him were only the bare crags of the ridge, spirit-haunted, with the trade winds sighing through the defiles— tabu.

The Melanesians are not early risers. The Sun-God is their only genial deity; and, not until he has appeared or, in the rainy season, daylight is fully established, do they venture out. The night is filled with evil spirits. In their primitive state the men are warriors and the women slaves. When there is no fighting they dance or loaf. Bathing to the bushman, who must travel seaward through country beset with tribal enemies, is a luxury seldom engaged in. The use of water is limited. Along the beach after a hot night natives may seek the surf at dawn, but in the jungle they lie long abed.

This Smith knew and used to his advantage. Contrary to popular idea, the tropic dawn does not come in one wild swoop. When the sun tops ridge or trees the vivid change of color is swift, and the disk seems indeed to come up like thunder, but long before the fiery orb reaches sufficient altitude to chase the shadows from the valleys and the mists from the peaks, the world, rolling on into the zone of unseen rays, shifts through a gradual twilight. The sky grays, is softly suffused with light; the low tones of night gradually take on color; the stars pale slowly until the first beam seems to send them, shuddering; into obscurity.

Smith came out of his cave into an atmosphere that was olive-tinted, charged with the balm of sweet-scented fern and vines. A time of infinite silence with the low murmur of the sea and the soft rustle of leaves in the faintly stirring winds coming gently to the heights. Above him the mountain crests were wrapped in purple vapors which would shortly glow coral and sulfur and begin to writhe and dissipate under the influence of the sun.

He breakfasted on rice and beef extract, with some wild figs and guavas plucked the night before, finding water in a trickle of cascade. With infinite

caution he descended toward the spot he had marked as Tubu's village by smoke drifts, and a low roll of drum at nightfall.

He looked for a stream, found and followed it, using the boulders as stepping-stones. This, he imagined, would lead close to the stronghold, possibly flow through it. It was the chosen medium of the Water Wizard's *chef d'œuvre* in sorcery. Much hinged on his finding a clay image set in the water near some ford where the action of the current would slowly wash away the stiff clay. If he did not discover it his plans would have to be changed.

Here and there he was forced to the banks to make his way through the bush. He had not brought a hatchet, fearing lest the sounds of chopping would be too resonant. Most of all he dreaded disturbing the birds.

Now and then he came across banks of clay and noted their consistency and color with satisfaction. Occasionally he waded. Once he clambered up the buttresses of a banyan and worked up to a high bough that topped the surrounding forest. From the height he marked indications of a clearing, the light green of transplanted coco-palms about half a mile away. His climb scattered some wood pigeons, which wheeled, protesting, but he had seen what he wanted and took the risk. The sun was not yet above the mountains, though, high up, some wisps of cloud floated like great flamingo-feathers as heralds of the dawn.

Now he went with still greater caution. The falls of the stream were more infrequent and for the most part he waded half-knee-deep in the swirling water. Once he passed the two ends of a bush trail, a narrow, shadowy, sinister lane walled with green. It connected with a ford; but there was no image there, and he fancied that the path was out of the boundaries of Tubu's domain.

The stream met a mass of rock, widened, pooled out and made marshes where cultivated taro was growing rankly. He was nearing the village.

The brook curved sharply, running deep so that he had to work his way along the rocky confines. There was a low fall, then riffles, the signs of another path. Once more Smith took to the bush, examining every inch of the stream.

His keen eyes found the object of his search. Below a narrow spit about the edge of which the water curled and then swept on more placidly, yet with a fair and even current, he saw something projecting from the water that was too red to be a stone, that looked like a castaway *tiki-idol*, its head above water that eddied about it.

HE CROUCHED, listening. The sun was gilding the tree-tops, but the brook was in green twilight. Parrots were moving, chattering, occasionally screeching; but he had not started them, and he made no move. He heard the grunting of

pigs and guessed them to be domesticated since there was no noise of their progress.

Foot by foot he neared the water, waded in, stooped and examined the wizard's black-magic charm.

The image was rudely modeled but evidently meant for a white man, though its substance was red clay. The high, beaked nose determined that, and the two blue beads set in for eyes. It had been molded about a stake that was thrust deep into the bed of the brook.

The arms, roughly suggested, were almost gone, as were the legs, and the body was wasted. Two or three days more would see it almost dissolved—unless a freshet hastened destruction. Tubu would look out for that. If there were a cloud-burst he would make a swift end of Ford.

The clay had been mixed with fiber to toughen it. This Smith discovered as he gently eased out the image and carried it ashore.

He had to work swiftly, but he fancied he had time enough. The women would not come to till the crops until mid-morning. First breakfast would have to be prepared, and he did not think they were yet out of their huts.

From his knapsack he took a package of cement and another of red-ocher with small bags inside of it that held brown umber and black. He took sand from the stream and made his mixture to match the clay of the charm. A small bottle of oil, a feather and a can of plaster of Paris he set beside him while he dried off the image carefully.

In the idle hours on his plantation Smith sometimes played the amateur naturalist, gathering butterflies and moths, stuffing and skinning birds, often mounting them. One hobby was a collection of the gorgeous and strange-shaped fishes of the lagoon and the open sea. Preservation of these in formalin faded the bright colors, and Smith had adopted the plan of making plaster-casts of them and copying the brilliant hues in oils. Practise had made him an expert.

He dug a basin out of the clay with his knife and lined it with a *taro* leaf, filling it with plaster batter, stiffer than usual, in which he immersed one-half of the manikin and set it in a bright sun spot to dry. It set swiftly, and he oiled the other half, also the edges of the half-cast, boring shallow holes in the lower form to be sure of proper contact and pouring over the rest of the batter.

Then he waited tensely for his cast to dry. Once he heard the gabble of women and shrank back under the big leaves, ready to draw the cast out of sight if necessary. If any one came and found the image gone there would be a mighty hubbub. The voices persisted; but they came no nearer, and Smith decided that he was closer to the edge of the village than he had thought.

Cautiously he crawled to investigate, making no more noise or show of movement than a snake.

Less than two hundred yards away a stout bamboo palisade was masked by the wild growth. Just beyond the stout fence the women were gossiping. He could make out the words— idle talk of a young man who thought himself a dandy, at whom they were laughing. One yawned, and then the sound of dull pounding topped their talking. They were making *poe-poe* from steamed taro roots. He still had considerable leeway.

The halves of his cast came away easily, leaving a perfect form. He set the image back in the stream again before he began to mix his colored cement, testing out little dabs to be sure of the proper shade when it dried. His chief trouble lay in the stake, and he had to hunt around before he found one that would pass muster as a duplicate of the one in the stream.

If he had had more time he would have used the original; but he did not know how long the cement might take to set, and there was a long day ahead of him. Ford's plantation lay between his own and Haley's, and he had to go there and return before nightfall after he had taken a look inside the village.

He poured the mixture of sand and cement into the mold and set it away in the hollow of a big tree. Every moment he had been careful about leaving no traces of his presence, using rocks whenever possible to stand and step on; and now he went about erasing little signs, disposing of all powder of plaster and cement and paint, smoothing telltale marks and deftly replacing bowed leaves.

He was ready to play and give check to Tubu; but checkmate could not be attempted before he found out what was being administered to Ford. First he decided to take a peep and see what Tubu might be up to. It was certain that as the time drew near for Ford to pass out— and no doubt the date had been set, if not announced, for fear of accident— the Water Wizard would go through certain incantations and ceremonials before his tribe. Probably he would dance the Dance of Death, which takes three days. The drums Smith had heard the night before might have been a part of that ritual. It was patent from the condition of the image that he had come none too soon.

He knew that the bamboo stockade was the back wall of the village, and that the top was unpleasantly spiked. The entrance would be led up to by a maze of paths in which the stranger would get misled, if he was not pitfalled or speared by a trap. The front wall would be of coral blocks or lava-stones. The gateway would be a heavy one of wood. By the time he reached it there would be sentries set with muskets loaded with slugs, their aim developed by long practise on certain places in the path. But he held no intention of an open visit as yet. He wanted to spy out the land.

Smith had a hard and hot job to find the place he wanted, where some tree with thick foliage might allow him to climb to a point of vantage.

The wily Tubu had encouraged the growth of bush lawyers for his outer defenses; and in places the thick vines with curving thorns like tigers' talons were as thick and nearly as impenetrable as barbed wire in the trenches. But he found a great fig with lateral boughs, and hitched and writhed his way up until he was perched where he could look through the screen of leaves into the heart of the village.

In front of him was the *sing-sing* ground, a plaza where the earth had been trodden flat by the stamp of thousands of dancing feet. In the center were solitary *netik* stones and others piled into the shape of a trilithon, after the manner of Stonehenge. Against certain of these stones a victim doomed for the cannibal feast would be dashed to death by four men holding wrists and ankles and ramming his skull against the rock with catapultic force.

Near the stones was a group of idol-drums, great trunks hollowed out with an open slit for resonance, the upper part carved into hideous heads painted black— eyeless, skull-like things with long red tongues hanging down on some of them, as if eager to lap sacrificial blood. Perched on top of every one was a black bird, like a crow, with outstretched wings, carved from wood.

Directly opposite Smith was the *hamal*— the temple, club-house, museum and place of initiation. It was well built with a high-pitched roof of thatch, the upper half of its façade open and showing the carved ends of rafters from which dangled strings of human and pig skulls. Great horizontal logs closed it with occasional uprights, sennit-bound and strengthening the wall. Besides the top there were two square spaces, eight logs high to the sill. No porch or platform and no steps. Fringes of palm-leaves curtained the top.

There were a number of reed huts under the shade of trees close to the wall. The place was ominously silent and deserted, and Smith began to suspect that despite all his precautions they had discovered the presence of some one. He commenced to have the crawly feeling that scores of pairs of eyes were seeking him out, even observing him, waiting for some signal to uncover his hiding-place, greeting him with tearing slugs and poisoned arrows. He could not see the gate where the sentinels should be on guard.

The morning meal was evidently over or had been foregone. There were no women or children in sight— an ominous absence. Not even a pig, though they might have sought the shade.

WHILE he watched with every sense on edge he saw movement and color in a grove of trees to the right of the *hamal*. More to the left, though he could not see that side so plainly. He breathed more easily.

Processions were forming. The villagers were inside the enclosure and he outside and still hidden. But the motion portended a ceremony.

Out came a double file of almost naked men, belted with bright green pandanus leaf centered with crimson-dyed fiber strips, adorned with turtle-shell cuffs, with earrings and nose-pieces that dangled from their septums, painted with splotches of red, yellow and black; green and white feathers in their mops of hair, which were bleached orange, yellow and white with lime.

The six leaders bore drumsticks, carved and splashed with bright colors. These proceeded to the drums. Twenty more took place in line. The rest and less elaborately decorated stood about in groups to witness the dance.

The women came out from the left, armleted and necklaced with shell, a narrow pandanus strip about their hips. Each carried a peeled wand in either hand, and they stood in rows, leaning on the rods, motionless, half-stupid.

The drums began to beat, hollow, booming strokes that reverberated through the dense jungle and came back in a rolling rhythm that timed the listener's pulse and seemed to proceed from the sky, the forest, the earth itself. The women began to shuffle their feet, and when the tempo was established the score of dancers commenced to chant and race around the idol-drums, leaping, bending, running at top speed, bellowing with all their lung-power.

Faster and faster they went in a mad whirl with the deep sounds urging them to frenzy, fibrin pumping into their muscles from the madness of their blood-lust until they achieved prodigious feats of agility, bounding about with flashing teeth and rolling eyes, the sun glinting from the glossy pandanus-strips and polished shell ornaments, sweat streaming down their oiled bodies, ruddling the paint.

Just as the dancers, like devils of the pit, achieved the height of their excitement while all the place was filled with the whirlpool of noise flowing from the drums, Satan himself seemed to leap like a harlequin through the opening to the right of the door, though never was trim Harlequin so dressed.

Undoubtedly Tubu had leaped to the ground from some inner shelf or platform; but he seemed as if shot from a catapult, landing, despite his age, lightly as a great cat, without breaking his stride and commencing immediately to glide over the ground with his grotesque shadow skimming now below, now ahead, behind or to one side of him, like a diabolical familiar. His whitened face with the blackened space about the eyes was set in a mask of ferocity, his deep-set orbs gleaming but fixed always ahead of him.

The teeth in his necklace glittered as they shook, and little points in them broke into dazzles of light. The kilt of dead men's beards wagged. His projecting ribs had been picked out with yellow and underscored with black;

he wore a headpiece of red, white and green feathers arranged on bamboos that were bound to his forehead and nodded as he danced. And his scaly body shone with the dull luster of tarnished metal.

The leaping savages tore round and round the resounding drums; the women shuffled silently; the knots of onlookers were motionless while Tubu, with wondrous litheness, skimmed and hovered in the Death Dance, now swooping down on an imaginary prey with clutching hands, now seeming to herd his quarry while his tigerish, merciless face remained unchanged.

Smith had seen all he wanted, and he inched stealthily from his perch down to the base of his tree and rounded the outer wall until he could see the gateway through the leaves. Then he broke through the bush to come out on the trail that led to the beach and by sidepaths to his own plantation with the pulsing drums, boom-booming after him.

If the drums of yesterday had marked the first act of the dance he had a day to spare. He fancied he had two, by the condition of the clay image, and that the night performance had been an ordinary *sing-sing*; but he wasted no time, swinging on downward until his white drill was stained with sweat, maintaining his pace until the clean sea-breeze met him, and he came out on the beach a little below his own place.

He had hardly hoped for the launch, knowing the delays of machinery repairs; but it lay at anchor off his copra wharf. Liki had not failed him.

Ten minutes for a bath and swift change into fresh clothes. Another ten for a quick meal, and Smith was off again in the chugging launch at ten knots for Ford's.

The place seemed deserted. The gate of the labor quarters was closed. A sullen houseboy met him as he walked up from the wharf to the house, stilted high on a pitch of land between terraces.

The native's forbidding attitude vanished as Smith grew close enough for the savage to see the expression of "Simiti's" face and eyes. He knew something of Simiti. He had a very strong *mana*. If Tubu had been present he might have found hardihood, for he was growing contemptuous of the *mana* powers of 'Forodi," his master, dead or alive. Every hour testified that Tubu was the more powerful. But with Simiti he did not know.

As he mounted, Smith could look over the labor-quarters stockade into the yard. It was empty. Ford's laborers had deserted him. The houseboys waited only as assistants to Tubu.

Ford lay on a long chair of bamboo, stretched out at full length; without motion. A rifle stood against the arm of the chair, within reach of the hand and arm that languidly drooped near it. A small table held a tobacco-jar, matches, a dish or two, a glass. Flies buzzed so persistently round the sick man that it

almost seemed he was already dead. The split-bamboo curtains that should have shaded him were rolled up awry; the full sun beat on him.

SMITH'S tread was light; but Ford heard him, though he did not move.

"What name," he demanded in a weak and querulous voice, "what name you no come along here before when I call, you boy, you?"

"It isn't your boy, Ford. It's Smith."

A convulsion ran through the long body, which raised itself, the thin, nerveless hands clutching at the rifle. Ford's face, the hue of old putty, was seamed with virulence, and hate glowed in his eyes. The weight of the rifle was too much for him, and it drooped despite his efforts.

"Smith! Blast you, I'm not dead yet," he cried feebly. "You— you—"

He strove to lift the weapon, to aim it between his raised knees; but he shook as if with palsy, while Smith stood with folded arms, watching him with grave attention.

"Come here to torment me, eh? To gloat? I'll—"

Moisture suddenly varnished the dull skin of his face, and his eyes dulled. He gasped and sank back with a groan, the rifle slipping to the floor.

"I haven't come to gloat, Ford. I came to warn you that you are being slowly poisoned by Tubu; to pull you through and square accounts with the wizard."

"Tubu?"

Ford grasped the arms of his chair and succeeded in hitching himself up a little, his ghastly face sunken in his shoulders, looking suspiciously at Smith as if he feared a trick or some form of jest.

Smith nodded. His manner seemed to convey assurance.

"Tubu's been here every afternoon squatting down by the beach. He's been doing the gloating. He's got a clay image of you in a stream, wasting away, just as you are with the stuff he's been dosing you with through your houseboys. I saw him dance the Death Dance for you this morning."

"Tubu— on my place? Kicked him off it three weeks ago. Had to trim a boy for impudence— seems he was a clansman of the old — . If I'd known I'd have potted him. Too late now. All in. Mix me a drink, Smith, if you're so friendly. I can't help myself very well. The gin is under the cushion beneath me."

Smith picked up a glass, examined it, put it aside and poured out some liquid from a pocket flask into the cup that fitted on it.

"Take this," he said.

He had to help Ford swallow it; but the powerful drugs that he had mixed brought back some light to the sick man's eyes, lessened the deadly pallor of his face and gave him a flash of energy.

"I've thought of the poison stuff," said Ford. "'Didn't credit Tubu with it, though. And I've been careful. No fruit except nuts opened in front of me. Can't inject anything through a coco-husk. Canned stuff, fresh tins of crackers— slept on my liquor. Last few days— haven't eaten anything much. I don't see how they can have doped me.

"And I don't see what the — you are interested in me about," he added with his eyes changing back to suspicion. "Haley was here and a young cub named Stone. Now you come. I suppose you're all laughing at me. There'll be more to crow over soon. My boys have run off except the two housemen, and they're sticking around to loot as soon as I pass. They'll take my head along as the prize. Stick it up in the *hamal* and Tubu will Mumbo Jumbo to it."

A flush had come into his cheeks. He was close to hysteria. Smith checked him sharply.

"Personally I'm not especially interested whether you die or not," he said coldly and incisively, and Ford stared at the sound of his voice. "I don't give a hoot about it one way or the other. I think you're a rotter; but you're of my breed and Saunders' breed, and we are not going to let a bush wizard get away with you. A good deal for our own sakes. Let that sink in. There's no personal favor to you in this. You can go to — in your own way, for all I care; but I don't intend to let Tubu be your introducer. I wouldn't let him poison my dog and get away with it."

The cold, hard words acted on Ford as if Smith were dissecting him with a blade of ice. They were surcharged with indifference, destitute of either contempt or pity; and they had their calculated effect.

Ford closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again they were steady and held no enmity in the narrowed iris and pupil dilated by the stimulant Smith had administered.

"All right," he said, "if that's the way you feel about it. I'm not keen to pass in my checks, and I'm too helpless to do myself any good. Couldn't put up much of a scrap now, Smith.

"I don't know but what you're right," he went on a little wearily. "Maybe the rot has dried out of me a bit. I've had things to sour me— but that's no excuse for letting them. I've got the temper of a fiend, and drink rouses — inside of me. That's no excuse either. I'm not making excuses. I'll say this: If you pull me through, Smith, and I know you savvy a heap about the natives— if you pull me through, I'll be — grateful. I'm making no death-bed promises to reform," he added with a laugh that was bitter and also a trifle wistful.

"That'll be all right, Ford. I'm not asking for any. A white man is a fool to hit hooch in this climate, especially if he's much alone. I see no reason for either one or the other, with you, unless you play it that way. Now then, you're sure about your grub not being tampered with?"

"Dead sure. I don't know what's the matter with me. There's no chills or fever— just weakness, loss of flesh and strength and appetite. Look at my arm."

He painfully rolled up one loose sleeve of his shirt and showed the limb of a mummy, bones bound together with scanty sinews and skin.

Smith thought a moment, got the gin-bottle, poured out a little and tasted it.

"They might doctor it when you sleep," he said.

"Sleep? I haven't slept a wink for a week. I've been living in hell, Smith. If I'd had anything to put me to sleep I'd have taken a double dose. There was a little chloral in the case left over from the last dysentery outbreak. All that did was to make me drowsy. I lie and smoke— and do a bit of thinking."

"Smoke much?"

"So my throat's like a lime-kiln. No taste to the tobacco any more. No kick."

"Humph!"

Smith took the jar and put some tobacco on the palm of one hand, separating the fragments. He shifted them to the table and fished a small and powerful double lens out of his pocket, examining the stuff closely while Ford looked languidly on. Finally Smith separated from the rest a few tiny bits that looked more like small stems or leaf-veins than parts of the leaf itself.

"There you are," he said. "No great mystery. I don't know either the native or scientific name of this plant, Ford, but it's done the trick. See the tiny hairs growing on the stems?"

He placed them so that Ford could peer through the little magnifying-glass.

"No tobacco there," he went on. "I've seen this growing, and I've found it in witch-bags and seen bunches of it hanging up in the *hamals* drying. Get's you quickly with your cigarets the way you've been smoking them. Through saliva and inhalation both, most likely. Slow but sure."

"It takes all the life out of you. I'm numb half the time, as if I was paralyzed, and my heart runs down so I can't feel any pulse in my wrist. It's beating now."

"I gave you some strong stuff, Ford. I'll leave this with you. Not more than a teaspoonful every hour. And no hooch. Go on smoking— with my tobacco. Houseboys come up here much?"

"Haven't been near me since morning."

"Good. Let 'em see smoke blowing over the veranda. I'll move you closer to the rail. Then I've got to leave you till tomorrow some time. I don't think

there's much risk. You've got another day of grace anyway, and with my medicine and my tobacco you ought to get your strength back. Try and eat something later on. Suck some of these beef tablets of mine. Have you got any chickens?"

"I couldn't touch meat. Who's going to make broth?"

"I don't want it for that."

"There ought to be some outside if the beggars haven't stolen or starved 'em."

"All right. I'll be back in a minute."

Smith went into the house through the lean-to kitchen to the back compound. There he found the second houseboy asleep with an empty gin-bottle beside him. He let him lie in his drunken stupor and caught a miserable hen in a pen, killing it and burying the carcass.

Returning after a moment in the kitchen, he moved the long chair to the edge of the veranda. Looking down the path, he saw Tubu, stripped of some of his finery, emerging from the bush. The wizard hunkered down, glancing up at the veranda with an evil look. Smith said nothing but busied himself making Ford comfortable and setting things conveniently for him. At last he was ready to go and said so.

"If I don't see you again," said Ford, "good-by."

"You'll see me," answered Smith. "Good-by."

He held out his hand.

"Mean it?" asked Ford, his voice breaking a little.

"Surely."

They shook hands, and Ford passed his free palm across his eyes as Smith turned away.

"Tubu's below," he said. "Don't mind him unless he bothers you. Got a pistol?"

"Yes, but I'd been cleaning it and couldn't find the cartridges. I remembered later, but I was too weak to get them. They're in a drawer in the sleeping-room. Locked. Here's the key. Gun's under my pillow— should be."

"Smith found the automatic and filled a clip, sliding a cartridge into the breech, tucking the weapon down beside Ford.

"Don't use it unless you have to," he said. "Don't try and pot Tubu. He's my meat. I've a notion he won't stay overlong. Buck up, old scout."

Ford's lip trembled as he watched Smith leave. At the top of the steps he turned.

"Better cuss me out a bit," he said. "Do your best. No use tipping Tubu off we're not enemies. We're not, you know. So long."

And he went down the steps pursued by a torrent of vituperation in Ford's voice, already a little stronger. Tubu looked up at him malignantly.

Smith paused in front of Tubu, one hand behind him, casually. The Water Wizard had set up his magic stones again and was mumbling over them.

"Making medicine, Tubu?"

Tubu grinned. The sun shone on the necklace of teeth. Smith saw what had caused the dazzles of light on the *sing-sing* ground. Some of the teeth were gold, others inlaid with the metal. His eyes became like flint.

"Make it strong, Tubu," he said, using native. "I too am making medicine."

"For him who cursed you?" asked the wizard.

"Perhaps because he cursed me. Tubu, is the blood in your body black or red?"

Tubu looked venomous.

"Let us see."

Smith reached out with the hand that had been behind him and lightly touched the bush-doctor on his chest in three or four places. Instantly scarlet blood appeared. Tubu looked at the phenomenon with squinting eyes. He touched the stuff dubiously.

"I see it is red, Tubu. Taste it. You have not very much of it. See that it is not spilled. Enemy or not of mine, do not try your spells on a white man. I have spoken."

The wizard half-stupefied— Smith passed on, palming the small enema bulb and short tube he had filled with the blood of the chicken. The trick had been simple enough, and he was glad of the chance to play it. Tubu would be likely to give him an audience when he wished it.

Night found him again above the village after a stop at his own place for a real meal and a short rest. Dawn saw him replace the clay image with his cement one, throwing away the other, broken, into the deep bush. He had had to risk the action of the water meanwhile, but it had made no very appreciable difference to the success of his maneuver.

Again he found his tree, though this time he was earlier. He had brought a light rope with him. This he fastened securely from the nearest stout limb to the wall. It was not all-important that he should cover his method of arrival, but he hoped to do so. The cooking-fires were still smoldering, and one was crackling busily among the *netik* stones.

This last, he surmised, was a sacrificial fire which would be used in the dance. From it might later be furnished the brands for an oven and a feast.

That they would take the body of Ford after Tubu's spell was ended, he doubted. That they might have some prisoner immured in a hut, whose flesh

would furnish meat for a savage barbecue in token of victory was more likely. Ford's head would undoubtedly be counted upon as a trophy and offered to the biggest of the drum-idols after its tongue had been smeared with blood.

He imagined that they were eating within the huts, men and women apart. The sentries he had to risk, but they would have their eyes beyond the gate. He tested his rope, swung off and landed on the *sing-sing* ground, running swiftly to the buttresses of a great banyan which was inside the enclosure and taking up his place behind the root-pillars, waiting his entrance cue, unobserved.

From the higher, more horizontal, boughs there pended strings of boar heads with the tusks removed, each string ending in a human skull. They swayed slowly in the morning breeze that rustled the leaves above.

It was no part of Smith's program to bring about any actual hostilities with Tubu. He could hardly hope to cope with the whole village in their own stronghold. If he killed any of them and got away he would be in fresh trouble with the Commissioners, who had already seemed inclined to make an example of an American who might be mistreating their wards.

And he was eager to get back to Ford. The dose he had mixed and prescribed for him— out of a better knowledge of medicine than was in the usual scope of planters and traders, who must of necessity carry their own medicine-chests and tackle anything from a decayed molar to an outbreak of dysentery— was principally composed of adrenalin. Ford needed more than a stimulant; he wanted a moral tonic; and this Smith was prepared to furnish him, believing him in receptive mood.

Though he had purposely suggested to Ford his own lack of personal interest, he was by no means minded to see a white man go to the dogs if he could check him. Ford had his strength as well as his weakness. He was a good planter, aside from his treatment of his boys.

Saunders, Haley and Stone should be back on their places before this; and Smith had despatched a brief note by Liki in the launch to Saunders, outlining the situation and asking one or more of them to visit Ford and greet him with some friendliness. The launch was then to return to Smith's landing and await him after delivery of the note, whether personally made or not. Smith knew that under Saunders' Scotch crustiness there was a deep vein of humanity. But it was possible that they had been delayed, and he feared a relapse for Ford when he was left alone. Despondency was one of the symptoms produced by Tubu's degenerating poison.

There was still no outward movement from the huts. His trick with Tubu would have lost some of its impressiveness overnight. He felt sure that Tubu had tasted the blood and also sure that the wizard had divined before this that it was only a *teriki*, such as he himself might compass.

Inaction chafed him, and he strolled out into the middle of the *sing-sing* ground, toward the growing fire and the idols, halting in the center. Unexpected at this hour of the morning meal, he had been unnoticed.

In a loud voice he called on the wizard.

"Tubu! Come out. Tubu! Simiti calls you."

Instantly he saw startled faces appearing in the doors of huts and instantly withdrawn. How had this white man come into their village? From the sky, or through the earth?

"Tubu! Come out of the *hamal*. Unless you are too afraid."

The challenge could not be passed. Tubu appeared in one of the temple openings, peering out. The paint had been washed from him in preparation for a new make-up; and now he appeared only as a wizened old man who, lacking the exaltation of his mummeries, slowly descended and came out into the sunny *sing-sing* ground, blinking and evidently disturbed, though he tried to present a bold front as he advanced.

"Come out, O men of Tubu," called Smith. "Come out and listen to the words of my spirit, which is very strong within me. Come out and know that the white man's *mana* is powerful beyond that of Tubu. Come out and learn to be wise and to walk softly, for my spirit is angry and it is not a patient spirit."

The women remained in hiding and in hearing. The men came slowly forward and ranged in an irregular crescent well back of Tubu, their eyes shifting as they watched the pair. It was a trial of *mana*. Sleep was still heavy with them on account of their full stomachs. The rituals that lashed them to frenzy had not commenced. They were merely savages with the minds of dull children. The stage was set to Smith's liking, the audience in the right mood.

"TUBU," he said, "come closer. I am in mind to see if your blood is still red."

He thrust a tentative finger at the wizard, who fell back involuntarily. *Teriki* or no *teriki*, he was not inclined to let his people see blood drawn from him through his skin. Smith laughed.

"Listen, you Water Wizard! Know that the time is past for you to work your spells upon white men. You and all the wizards of the bush. The spells of the white men are stronger than your spells, and I am here to prove it."

His supreme confidence began to worry Tubu. It hypnotized the tribe. Why else should one man come into their midst unless he was backed by spirits who had brought him here, so tall and dominant in his solar topee, his white clothes, the two much-speaking guns at his belt? They shuffled uneasily.

"You have made a *tiki* of *Forodi*," went on Smith. "A *tiki* of clay with blue eyes and a nose like the beak of the frigate-bird which you have named for *Forodi*. You have set it in the stream, and you have told the people that as the

water washes it away so will the body of Forodi waste and his spirit leave him because your *mana* is greater than his and because he flogged a man who was impudent. Is it true, Tubu?"

The eyes of the villagers rolled toward each other, then centered on Tubu. The white man knew much. It was Tubu's move.

"It might be true, Simiti," said Tubu hoarsely.

Without the potent spirit he distilled from the tabu ti-root and administered to himself before he took up the rôle of sorcerer, without his trappings, his mumbo-jumbo by which he convinced himself of power, he was little more than a cunning old man whose body was usually very stiff and tired.

But his prestige was on trial. After all, Forodi was a very sick man. The poison was powerful, and he did not know of any antidote. Perhaps Simiti did, but perhaps he did not know about the poison, or what it was. Simiti might well be putting up a false front.

"It is surely true," Tubu went on more confidently, "that Forodi gets more sick day by day. Perhaps his *mana* is not very strong— for a white man. Who can say?"

"Who can say?" answered Smith. "We will see."

He stooped and began piling up some clay that he loosened with the point of his knife.

"We will see."

White men will gather and watch every move of a street fakir, gaze as some casual pedestrian happens to stop and look upward. To the savage every movement out of the usual routine smacks of jugglery. Smith had no more tricks to play. They were always dangerous.

But he had noted what the villagers, facing him, could not see— high windward clouds piling against and spilling over the high peaks. They were slate-colored; and now and then a faint flicker of lightning, fading in the sun, levined through them. It was close to the true rainy season. The chances of these heavy clouds discharging their contents in the gorges, ripped by a crag, were better than even.

He mixed the dirt with his spittle, remembering old-time lore, and fashioned a rude creature while the mob gazed fascinated, unmindful of the slowly darkening day. Save Tubu, whose eyes were the weakest among them but who as Water Wizard claimed to bring and send away the rain and was always susceptible to such tokens. He cast a backward glance and gathered heart.

"Can you make a well man of Forodi?" he asked mockingly.

"I can cure Forodi," answered Smith, going on with his plastic work.

"Then perhaps," said Tubu— and his tones were filled with a sneer that his clan was quick to notice, shifting their belief to his side with the easy balance of their limited reasonings— "perhaps you can stop the water from washing away the *tiki* of Forodi?"

Smith still played for time while the storm was doubtful and its direction uncertain. He dug a hole, buried his model and patted down the dirt. Tubu watched him uneasily. The burial struck him as significant. Simiti was making magic. He had said Forodi would be cured, therefore he could not be burying Forodi.

"Because you have done these things, Tubu, trouble may come to your village as it has come to Navaa and at Mallicolo, with great guns and much killing. You they would hang. But, because Forodi is not dead and because you are an old man with not much blood in your body and not very long to live, I, Simiti, have made a stop of these things. It is better that the tribes shall see that you are neither strong nor wise but only a foolish old man who will soon do nothing but sit in the sun and eat soft *poe-poe* when his last tooth has gone."

There was a chuckle from the bystanders. Tubu's eyes glowed like hot coals, but Smith's dominated them. Also Smith's hands were resting close to the butts of his pistols. Tubu had only a knife tucked in his loin-cloth. He was certain that his first overt move would bring a bullet crashing into his skull between the eyes, so he kept still, though the chuckle was galling. He knew the downpour would strike the gorge whence the stream issued. Then the freshet would wash away what was left of the *tiki* of Forodi. As for Forodi himself, the Water Wizard's cunning brain had already evolved a plan.

There was a mutter of far-off thunder, a flash of lightning. The light began to fail. Then a crash and a glare. The swift tropical storm was on, breaking half a mile away, two thousand feet above. It was apparent to the watching savages that both the white man and their own wizard appropriated this storm as of their own evoking. They thought of the clay image they had all seen in the stream that presently would be a raging torrent, and their faith veered back to Tubu.

The strong trade wind did not take long to scatter the wrack of the broken clouds. The sunlight shone through them, sparkled in the wet leaves of the higher slopes. The rain had not reached the village. In the stillness that followed, the murmur of the augmented stream was plainly heard as the water came down in spate, hurrying to the sea, swiftly rising and as quickly subsiding again.

"About the *tiki*," said Simiti. "You asked if I could stop it from washing away. There has been a lot of water, Tubu. Suppose you send a man to find out. Send two men, Tubu."

Tubu glowered at him. This was a strong bluff. He was sure that the spate must have melted the image. Smith stood calmly assured. He had driven in the stake firmly enough, he fancied. If he had not there was going to be trouble.

Tubu gave a guttural order to two men near him, and they set off at a run while Smith calmly rolled and lighted a cigaret. It was not smoked through before the men were back, their mouths wide open to impart the news.

"The *tiki* of Forodi is there. And it has turned to stone."

"I, Limuku, tried it with my spear. Lo, it is hard as rock!"

TUBU'S face of baffled rage was that of a disappointed demon. Excitement ran through the men behind him, seethed in the huts of the women. His prophecy had come to naught. His *mana* had been tested and found wanting beside that of the white man. His fingers stole toward his knife.

"Don't do that, Tubu, if you want to live," said Smith. "It's all over now. After this, leave white men alone. Next time I shall not be so patient. Now come with me to the gate."

He was taking no chances of Tubu, by some swift turn, rehabilitating himself by arousing race hatred. And he needed Tubu to point out which of the entrance paths was open.

"Come," he said and tapped his fingers against a pistol holster.

Together they walked across the *sing-sing* grounds while in their rear the crowd began to jabber and gesticulate. If Ford lived, Tubu's downfall was complete. The bush wizards would profit by his example and leave the whites and their plantation labor alone. It would be a good job, done bloodlessly.

Tubu waved aside the bearded guards, who openly scoffed at him and were patently afraid of Simiti the White Wizard. The heavy gate opened.

"Which is the free path, Tubu?"

"Does not your *mana* tell you?" snarled Tubu.

"My *mana* tells me to ask you and then to take you down the trail with me for fear you have made a mistake. Old heads are forgetful, Tubu."

One of the guards laughed. The reference to senility stung the wizard who snarled and turned such a baleful look on the man that he shrank away. None of the childish minds had retentive memories, but Smith felt sure that Tubu would remember the morning's work and, even when he regained the ascendancy over them, would hesitate to monkey with the white man's buzz-saw.

That he would soon dominate the tribe once more was certain. His mastery of tribal superstitions that were almost as deeply implanted in its members as instinct, would ultimately insure that, perhaps before Smith reached the beach. But he felt that among those instincts he had planted an inhibition that would flourish— a deeper reverence for the *mana* of all white men when it came into contact with their own.

He took Tubu's greasy arm in his own grasp and, holding it behind his escort, bade him go ahead.

"I will let you go when we reach the main trail, Tubu," he said. "But my gun will surely blow your liver into pulp if you try to play me a trick."

Tubu growled, the low growl of a trapped beast. His scaly body quivered as he led the way. He was as surcharged with wrath with desperate casts for snatching victory out of defeat, at least for saving his face, as a cylinder head at high pressure.

When they reached the main trail and Smith twisted him around to face him, the Water Wizard's malevolence was fairly dribbling from his mouth, which could not pronounce the words that formed, but which he dared not utter. He hissed instead, for all the world like a venomous snake that has been rendered fangless.

But there was craft in his eyes at the last, Smith fancied, and he lost no time along the trail. He held a strong desire to see Ford's condition, to see whether Saunders and the others had answered his note.

He was close to the beach when drums began to boom back in the bush. There was no marked rhythm to them. No dance was in progress.

The sounds were intermittent, staccato. They were in code!

Tubu was playing his last card. He was sending a message. A message to his assistants, the houseboys at Ford's place, an order to kill.

The conviction flashed through Smith's mind, and he cursed himself for a conceited fool. With Ford dead Tubu might yet regain ascendancy. And he had left the opening though he had seen the craftiness in the wizard's glance as they parted.

He sprinted hard over the firm beach, through a jungle strip that clothed a promontory, over the beach again, with the sea sparkling to the left and the green bush waving to his right. On to the beginning of his young groves, through files of older trees, panting and sweating, reviling himself for a self-sufficient fool.

Out to the crescent of his own bay. His launch was at the wharf-end, a figure in the cockpit that stood up and waved a stalwart arm as Liki saw his master racing and, knowing necessity drove him, started the engine. The launch was moving when Smith leaped aboard, steaming from the run, his

immaculate attire rumpled, diving under the hood to coax the engine to its best, staying there with oil-can and waste while Liki set the course for Ford's.

There was a white craft bobbing at the copra-pier. Saunders' launch! Smith's pulse began to slow down toward normal. The drums had stopped sending.

A shot sounded as they slowed up for the landing, and Smith shouted to Liki to put the launch straight for the beach. A heavier report rang out, followed by another, all three from the veranda.

Smith, his wind regained in the launch, burned up the path, guns ready. Liki jumped over the gunwale of the launch, stranded on the shingle, and tore after him, carrying an ax. Saunders was waiting at the head of the veranda steps, his face placid.

"What's happened?"

"There was a slight distur-r-bance, Smith. But it's all ower wi' noo. Ye're a wee late for this party, though ye seem to have been havin' some action o' your own. We were juist aboot to have a drink when the thing star-r-ted. Come in and cool off."

Smith stepped in with a swift survey of the porch interior. Ford sat up on his cushions, his eyes bright and his face faintly flushed, nodding a welcome at him. Haley was kneeling beside the body of one of the house-boys that lay face down, arms flung wide and a hole in his back where a high-powered missile had torn through. A second body had collapsed at the foot of Ford's long chair. This man's hand still clutched a knife. His head was turned to one side— what was left of it.

A rifle leaned against the wall near the door; another was on the main table; Ford's pistol on the smaller stand beside him.

Haley looked up.

"Just in time to help clear up the mess, Smith. Stone, hurry up with that Scotch. We've got a caller."

Smith stood with puzzled, narrowed eyes.

"I heard the drums," he said, "and guessed what they might mean. I've been putting a spoke in Tubu's wheel; but I overlooked one bet. How long have you been here?"

"About half an hour. Found For-r-d quite per-r-ky wi' the dose you'd gi'en him. There was no one else in sight, ye ken. We felt a wee thirsty, an' as Ford seemed a bit sleepy we went inside for a drink. Of course we'd noticed the drums; but that's not so much oot of the ordinar'. Anyway whiles we were lookin' for a corkscrew Ford's two hoose-boys slip in fra' somewheres at the back an' try to butcher Ford wi' a knife an' a hatchet.

"They made the fatal meestake of not noticin' we were here. By the smell o' their breaths I'm thinkin' they'd been makin' free wi' Ford's gin back i' the bush.

"Ford fired an' missed. Haley an' Stone grab the rifles they had set inside an' did some verra fine shootin'. I had the bottle between my knees at the time, wi' the cork oot. By the time Id set it doon the incident was closed. But the bottle 's open. We'd better get rid o' the two bodies."

"We'll set them down by the trail that Tubu uses," said Smith. "He'll be down later to see how things worked out, and I think we've settled his hash."

"Stone and Haley had best report to th' Commissioner," said Saunders. "Nothin' like the first word. I'll stay a while wi' Ford gin ye want to gang back to your ain place, Smith. D'ye think there's any danger of a raid?"

"No. But I should be getting back. And, with the evidence we've got, the Commissioners will have to come clean. How are you feeling, Ford?"

"Four hundred per cent. better, thanks to you. And to the rest of you good scouts. I hope I haven't seen the last of you."

"Not while ye've any of the peench-bottle liquor remainin'," said Saunders. "Mon, we're like to be a plague to ye. And no one's had a dreenk yet. Stone, ha' ye the glasses?"

"None for me," said Ford. "I'm off the stuff."

They looked at him, and he returned their gaze with a smile that held assurance.

"I'll take another nip of Smith's tonic with you instead," he said.

Smith fixed it for him. The four men lifted their glasses, and Ford raised his.

"In that case," said Smith, "here's to you, Ford. Best of luck and happiness."

"Make it friendship," Ford answered.

The others drained their glasses and reversed them. The toast was bottoms up.

## 9: Crime at the Casa

(A "Bud Jones of Texas" Story)

*Wild West Weekly* 14 Aug 1937

THE intense blue glare of the lightning revealed to "Bud" Jones the old half-ruined *casa* on the top of the knoll, partly hidden by the huge live oaks that surrounded it. Thunder crashed immediately, like the firing of heavy artillery.

With the next flash, the young Ranger could see the great boughs beginning to toss in the wind that was charging from the north, bringing rain in black masses of vapor, heavy and swollen.

Bud tickled the flanks of his big roan, Pepper, with his spurs, and the troop horse went up the hill at a gallop, through the rank overgrowth of the deserted garden, swerving aside as a dry fountain loomed up like a ghost.

The house had been once the mansion of a *haciendado*, a grandee of the days when Texas belonged to Mexico. It had no inner patio, and had in its time been as much fortress as home, built to resist the wild attacks of Comanches and Apaches.

It was two-storied adobe, from which the lime wash had long since peeled. All the windows had bars of wrought iron. In places, the heavy tiles had fallen from the roof.

Some of the windows were shuttered from within. Those on the upper story were balconied.

Bud was close to the low veranda, when the third flare showed the long streamers of gray moss on the oaks, waving like banners. He felt the advance beat of the rain squall on his shoulders. Roof or no roof, the lower floor would give shelter for the roan and himself.

Then, at an upper window, he saw a face gazing at him through the bars, a face unutterably evil, with snarling mouth and eyes that blazed, reflecting the lightning, glaring and gleaming like the orbs of a fiend from hell.

The lightning flickered out. The wind came with a roar. A cloud had burst, and the rain came down as if the bottom of a great cistern had given way.

The big front door appeared closed. Pepper took the low steps in his stride. The rotten boards of the veranda gave under his weight, sent him into a lurching leap that drove his shoulder against the door.

It gave way with a crash, barely heard above the storm, and the roan scraped through the gap, catfooted, keeping its footing while Bud's left leg grazed the door jamb before he slid to the floor.

The rain came down in a lashing fury, the rushing wind drove some of it through the sagging door. It hit the roof with a rattle as if tons of pebbles had

been hurled on the tiles. A thunderbolt hurtled out of heaven, split an oak with a crash and a burst of fire which the torrent smothered.

Bud glimpsed the yawning mouth of a huge fireplace, built of stone, big enough to roast an ox. He saw a gallery at one end of the big room, steps leading to it on both sides.

There was no furniture of any kind. The walls were paneled. It must once have been a noble chamber, with rich rugs and hangings, with portraits and rare paintings, massive furnishings.

It had been long deserted. Bud had never seen it before, but he had heard of it. The paisarws called it the haunted hacienda, but to their superstitious minds, any spot like this was haunted with phantoms and legendary memories.

The hideous face he had seen at the window would be called a ghost by Mexies, but it was flesh and blood to the Ranger. It might be merely somebody seeking shelter, like himself, but Bud's hunch cried out to him that the house held a horror and that this man had to do with it.

He made for the stairs with the next fitful blink of the lightning, gained the gallery, reached a door at the far end, and found himself in a passage that ran the length of the house, back of the chimney, that was concealed by paneling. There would be hidden space for storage either side of the chimney, on this second story, he figured.

Other doors opened off the passage. A lantern hung from a hook in the cracked, stained ceiling, burning dimly through its dirty glass. Bud darted to the door he placed as the room where the face had looked out, tried it, found it locked.

By the vague lantern light, which cast shadows around and below it, the Ranger saw a dark, creeping, slowly swelling line of fluid that gleamed redly sinister in its sluggish flow.

Somewhere within the house he heard the squeak of wood against wood, like the opening of a long-closed panel or window. Then there came the wailing scream of a woman, a woman in despair and distress. It was followed by a taunting laugh.

The next crash of thunder drowned out all else, as Bud flung himself at the door, slipping in the scarlet stream that oozed out from below it, tore a bolt from its holdings, and broke into the room, stumbling over a body close to the door, the source of the dark rivulet.

There were two windows at the front, through one of which the man had stared at him. But not this man. Lightning suddenly made all as light as day, flung the shadow of the window bars across the floor, over the silent, motionless figure that lay upon its back, a knife buried to the hilt in its chest.

This was the face of a youth, of somebody about Bud's own age. There was a brief lull in the storm, and Bud heard the sound of galloping hoofs. He was not afraid for Pepper. The roan would not let itself be ridden off in such fashion. Bud leaped to the window.

There were two horses. One had an empty saddle, the other bore double. A man in a wide-brimmed, tall sombrero, held the limp figure of a woman in his arms. He rode furiously, leading the second animal. A flare showed him galloping between the great oaks— gone.

The lad on the floor moved a little, moaned. Bud stepped into the passage, brought in the lantern, set it on the floor. The Ranger knew more than most men about wounds, had some skill in surgery. And he knew the other was close to death, that if he withdrew the knife the end would come immediately with a gush of the vital stream that, so far, had leaked but slowly past the guard of the *cuchillo*.

The youth looked up, with eyes already beginning to glaze. They took in Bud's face, centered on his silver star. He spoke in a whisper, between thunderclaps that now came more rarely, farther and farther off, less noisy, as the tempest swept south, and the deluge of rain began to lessen.

"Ranger? Wish you'd come sooner. Too late now. That devil has taken her."

"Who?"

"El Asesino. My sister! He came to our ranch— said he owned it— we must pay him for it— we had bought it already. Last week all our peons quit. My father is sick— why we came out West—I went to Nagaza to-day to try and get help. When I got back I found Helen— gone. Father heard her cry out— too weak to get out of bed. I found note— rode after them— tracked— here. Stabbed me as I came in room — looking— for—"

The feeble voice ceased, as his throat and mouth filled with the hot burst from his severed arteries, with his effort to talk.

He lay dead, puddled in his own life current, draining swiftly, ceasing, clotting.

The young Ranger's face was grim.

There was nothing he could do for the dead lad. He did not even know where he had come from. He could find out, and would, but he should not leave the body there, for rats to get at, to lie stark in the haunted hacienda. It should be haunted now. He must set out after the living.

It was "El Asesino," the bandit who boasted of his assumed name. The murderer and robber known as the "Assassin."

The Ranger knew about him and his crimes, set down in the Ranger's secret volume, "*List of Fugitives from Justice*." The one glimpse he had got of the

bandit at the win-dow, while the face was distorted with its snarl, answered well enough the description.

Bud had been on his trail, when the storm had led him to take shelter at the *casa*. El Asesino was said to make Nagaza his headquarters. Nagaza was a river village on the Rio Grande, close to a ford. It was reputed to be a hotbed for smuggling, a resort patronized by outlaws.

The dead lad's voice, feeble though it had been, denoted education. His clothing was of good quality. He was not the ordinary pioneer type.

His sister would be like him, gentle and refined. And she was in the power of El Asesino, who knew no pity, who reveled in cruelty, in murder.

Bud's young face was grim as he looked for the note the youth had mentioned. He found it, crumpled, wet with red smears, but still legible, where the lad had thrust it into his pocket before he rode after his sister, valiant, but a poor match for the crafty, bloodthirsty assassin.

He would find a stiffer opponent in the Ranger.

The note was crudely scrawled in poor English.

I sabe you have monney You wood not give roe when I ask. Quizas you give me now if you want back your muchacha one thousand pesos is cheep for her You get queek I keep her one weak I let you know wear to breeng dinero If you no breeng quizas I cut her wite throate I meen bisness This is El Asesino

## ii

BUD put the note in his wallet. He had to act quickly. El Asesino had killed, ' He might kill again, get rid of the girl, or he might get in touch with the sick father, let him think he held both the boy and the girl.

His greed for money was great, but he had seen the Ranger arrive in the storm. It must have given him a shock.

The Rangers were few, and they had a great territory to cover. Bud Jones had taken care to ride only by night to Nagaza. It was the hand of Fate that had led him to the haunted ranch, which no doubt El Asesino had thought a good place to hold the girl for ransom.

In that first flash he would have seen the size of Bud's mount, noted his double cartridge belts, the carbine beneath his thigh, glimpsed the silver star. He had already killed the brother, as he came through the door.

The lad had brought a gun along, but he had no chance to use it. It was in his hip pocket, the most foolish place of all to pack it, Bud thought. The tenderfoot had not even held it in his hand when he searched the cam. It was a nickelplated weapon that seemed like a toy beside the Ranger's .45 Colt, swung in its holster on his right hip, opposite the bowie knife on his left.

El Asesino might not think it mere chance that had brought Bud to the hacienda. He would know the Ranger would hit the trail. There would be clear sign in the wet soil. The storm was passing. A moon shone already through the ragged clouds.

Bud's hope—and it was not altogether a sturdy one—was that El Asesino had another hide-out that he could reach by a route that would blot out his sign. Bud would have to solve that mystery.

The money El Asesino demanded, perhaps still hoped to get, was the one hope for the girl's safety— until Ranger could outwit bandit.

Meantime, there was the sick father, the dead body of the boy. It was such problems that Rangers were called upon to solve on the wild frontier.

And Bud meant to find the proper answer. He could not bring back the youth, but he might save the girl, and with her the life of the father. Then El Asesino would swing— a lot too good for him.

Bud looked around the room. There was only one door, but there was a crack in the paneling. The Ranger did not hunt for the hidden trigger that opened it, but set the stout blade of his bowie in the slot, pressed, and heard the slide squeak again, open to musty blackness.

This was where the Assassin had taken the girl. It was a narrow corridor, and at the far end an iron door was partly open. Bud carried the lantern, and saw the yawning stone chimney. It had handholds of iron driven into the sides.

The girl must have fainted, as well she might, after the murder of her brother. El Asesino, spry as a great ape, had carried her down, found his own horse, and that of the brother, carried her away.

Her brother's body must wait there for the time. Bud felt that the following of the fresh trail was the important thing, while the moon shone, and the trail was new.

He left the lantern and went down, hand over hand, to where Pepper waited.

As he hit the bottom of the fireplace, the roan whinnied shrilly. It was trained not to do so except in dire emergency. Bud shucked his hogleg, as men surged in through the broken door.

The tricky Assassin had not worked alone. He had left his band, or part of it, behind, to handle the Ranger.

Moonlight sifted palely into the big room. There was the gleam of steel. These were Mexies, not liking firearms, none too good with them.

Bud stood back in the cave of the big fireplace. He watched their sidling rush and called to Pepper when they were halfway. The great roan shrilled again with a challenging neigh, scattered them, trampling one beneath its shod hoofs.

The man yelled, but his cry died out as the Ranger's six-gun spoke, with red flashes and hot lead speeding to the mark.

They had not reckoned on the horse, but thought to catch the Ranger unawares as he dropped down the chimney, watching the front door, none too sure which way he might come.

Bud dropped one man to his right, another on his left. The third turned to run, and the roan screened him, unwittingly, as he bolted out the door.

The Ranger raced after him, and as the Mexie turned, like a wild cat at bay, slugged him with the barrel of his Colt.

The bandit dropped senseless, and Bud turned back into the room.

The trampled man was dead. His skull was crushed. One squirmed, hit through the belly. Another kneeled, begging for mercy, then keeled over, with a shattered shoulder.

That part of it was over. Bud was not even scratched. He dragged in the man he had slugged, watching the other two. One of them was going to die, dodging the rope he deserved.

He spoke to the one with the splintered upper arm.

"I no spik Inglessh, señor," the man answered.

"Then talk Spanish," said Bud and shifted to that language. "Where has El Asesino taken the girl? This is a Ranger talking."

"I do not know," said the bandit. "I swear it. You can kill me if you want, but I do not know. I have just joined his band. But Pedro, the one you hit, he can tell you. But first, please fix my arm. I am in agony."

"You'll do," said Bud sternly. "I've been worse myself. There's a dead man upstairs. You're not hurt too much. I'll be back after a while. Right now, I can't bother with you."

But he bandaged the bandit, with a pad, laid him on his face, hog-tied him. He had little pity for the one who was dying. It was no time for pity. They had set out to do him in. The girl's fate was the question that had to be answered and speedily-

The fourth outlaw began to moan. Bud squatted beside him, thrust his hogleg in the other's ribs.

"Talk, hombre," he said, "and talk quick. Where has El Asesino gone with the girl? Talk, while you can."

"Señor, I will talk. It is the truth. He takes her to the Cave of the Bats."

"Then you and I will go there, *bandido*. And if we do not find her, it will be too bad for you. You came on horses?"

"Si, señor"

"Then you will ride with me. Get up."

The man groaned, and Bud slapped his face.

"Get up, or stay here— dead."

"I will show you, *Rangero*. But, if you do not kill El Asesino, he will kill me, and also the girl."

"I'll attend to my end of it and yours," said Bud. "Get up and going."

The clouds were almost gone, the moon shone brightly, as Bud and the bandit, lashed to saddle horn and stirrups, picked up the trail of the Assassin. It was plain for a while, then lost in a creek bed.

"This is where you git busy, *ladrone*," said the Ranger. "Or else quit, for keeps."

The bandit pointed out the way. Down the creek, to a narrow gap choked with chaparral and bosque, rock masses at the entrance.

The dawn was coming. Bud saw where horses had gone on ahead since the rain.

"How many more men has El Asesino?" he asked.

"None, señor. We shall find him alone, but for the girl. There is one old woman who cleans the place and cooks for him. That is all. He did not even like any of us to go there."

"He would be expecting one of you to report to him that I was taken care of," Bud told him, and the bandit shrugged.

Bud sized him up, looked over his clothing. He was tall for a Mexie. If this was El Asesino's secret hideout to which they were going, there would be some kind of signal.

They came to the gap.

"Get off," said the Ranger. "I'm going to wear your clothes. Not because I fancy them, but I'd like to surprise El Asesino."

The Assassin was well ahead of them. He might be resting by now, the girl secured, the old woman on the lookout, perhaps. Perhaps not.

He forced the unwilling Mexie to strip to his dingy underwear, took off his own buckskins and put on the other's raiment, not without qualms. With sombrero and serape Bud might not be mistaken for the other, but he would not be taken for a Ranger.

"This is as far as you go," said Bud. "I'll pick you up on the way back. If El Asesino doesn't like to be disturbed, you'll have some signal. What is it? Don't sound it off too loud—and give me the right one," he added as he saw the pupils of the Mexie's eyes quivering, dilating and contracting, "or it'll be too bad for you."

The man imitated the cry of a crow, twice, once more after a pause. He was sulky about it, but Bud felt he had the right answer. He hog-tied the Mexie and left him in the shade, with his horse and Pepper close by. Then he started into the gap.

It opened up a little. There was a fairly clear space at the end, a low shack of adobe, a small corral, a ramshackle bam.

A crone, bent almost double, came out of the shack. She had a knife in her hand, and Bud was relieved when he saw her purpose was choosing and cutting squash in a garden patch.

This old woman would probably have charge of the girl, he thought, and he hated the idea. Old creatures like that were inclined to resent youth and beauty, to take out that resentment in ill treatment, when they had the power.

To make it worse, the crone was a Mexie, the girl a hated gringo.

There was a grass hammock swung between two trees. In it there swung a man, asleep and snoring.

It could be no other than the Assassin. He was certainly going to get a surprise.

Bud had brought his reata, looped over his shoulders.

He came forward confidently and boldly. It was the only way to make the play.

The old woman stopped her cutting of squash and looked at him. Bud hoped her eyesight was poor. She would not dream he was a gringo, much less a Ranger, he believed, but she might know he was a stranger.

She still stared, as if uncertain, while Bud advanced close to the hammock. He stopped for a moment, sure that he had heard the low, pitiful sound of a girl, or a woman, sobbing. It came from the shack. It must be the girl, afraid, grief-stricken for her murdered brother, worrying about her father.

As Bud checked, looking toward the shack, the old crone went on with her careful choosing of the squash. She might be deaf, Bud imagined.

His first task was with El Asesino. Time enough then to reckon with an old woman, bring safety and comfort to the girl.

The sleeping face of the Assassin was no less evil, just as repulsive as when the lightning had revealed it at the window. It was lined and bloated with dissipation mapped upon the original form of his features. Flattened nose, high cheek bones, low brow, retreating chin, all told his mixed ancestry.

Far more Indian than Spanish. Low, digger breeds, at that.

His mouth was open, showing discolored, distorted teeth. He was pock-marked, and branded with a scar across his forehead, another on one cheek.

It was a face that would make a jury want to hang him on sight, without recitation of his misdeeds or proof of them. If ever nature proclaimed a man a murderer, it did now. And his record was down in the "Book." Aside from crimes not registered, aside from the knifing of the girl's brother.

The Ranger felt he would be doing the world a favor if he shot the bandit, then and there, in his sleep. But that was not the Ranger way.

He had on his belts and six-gun, his bowie knife. He prodded the bandit in the belly with the muzzle of the .45. El Asesino only grunted, coming slowly out of sleep. His breath was foul with tequila.

The woman had disappeared the next time Bud glanced her way. He thought she might have gone back to the shack with her squash, satisfied by his apparent right of way. He had given the crow signal. If she had heard it, it had not alarmed her. She had let her master sleep on.

El Asesino came sluggishly awake, stared at Bud with beady eyes, into which there suddenly leaped alarm.

Under the wide brim of the Mexie's hat he saw the gray eyes of the Ranger, hard as drill points, boring into him.

"Gringo!" he gasped.

"*Si! Gringo Rango,*" Bud replied in Spanish. "You are through, El Asesino. I'll attend to you more thoroughly later on. First, I want the girl whose brother you killed, for whose murder you are going to swing, although we've got plenty more against you."

Hate came from the eyes of the Assassin like heat from an oven. But he lay still while Bud flung a loop of the lariat over and around him, working one-handed until the bandit's arms were bound, then proceeding, with his six-gun holstered, to make the job complete.

*Brr-r-r-u'p!* A slug whined and plucked at Bud's sombrero rim, narrowly missing his skull.

A rifle cracked, and he knew it was his own carbine before he heard the shout of the Mexie he had left

bound and the cackling cry of the old woman who had been keener of sight than he had given her credit for.

He knew he had taken heavy risks, and he had got the worst of the breaks. The crone must have recognized the clothing, known they were not worn by their rightful owner. She had slipped through trees and brush with the knife she was using for the squash, found the Mexie, and released him.

Bud had left his carbine in the saddle sheath. Now he was going to pay for that oversight.

The Mexie's voice was crackling with oaths. El Asesino bellowed an order.

"Don't kill \*the gringo, fool, unless he does not obey me. Stand still, Ranger. Cover him, Manuel. Rosita, cut me free."

Reluctantly Bud lifted his hands above his shoulders. A sickening feeling of defeat went through him. Not only for himself, but for the girl. El Asesino would surely kill him, and then probably murder the girl.

He felt the prod of the carbine barrel in the small of his back, watched the old hag, who once might have justified the name of Rosita, but was now nothing but a cackling, triumphant witch, slash at his lariat.

"Give me his six-gun, Manuel— no, you, Rosita. We take no chances with this gringo. What happened to you, Manuel, and the rest? You look like a flayed sheep."

"If I had waited to put on *his* clothes," said Manuel, "he would have finished with you, been ready for me."

"*Porvida*, you are right! For that, I may forgive you. Gringo, stand face to that tree, at the foot of my hammock. Embrace it, put your arms around it. Hug it, gringo. Stand close! Rosita, bind his wrists, bind them well. Then his feet, together, and to the tree. Watch him, Manuel."

The old woman, expert weaver as she no doubt was, knew how to tie her knots. Bud stood helpless.

The bandit chief lay back in his hammock, and laughed. Manuel took Bud's knife and belts, buckled all on.

"I could stand a drink, and food," he said to his chief.

"Rosita will attend to you. First, tell me what happened at the hacienda. Rosita, prepare a meal for Manuel. He may have some of the tequila, not too much. Now, speak, Manuel."

El Asesino's swarthy face turned almost purple, veins swelled in his forehead and neck as Manuel told briefly what had happened.

"It is well for you, Manuel," he said slowly, "that you arrived when you did. Presently you shall go back, and bring in Luis, if he still lives. But, before that, we shall amuse ourselves with this gringo. Now go."

Manuel followed the crone into the shack, eager for his food, more eager for the tequila.

El Asesino swung the muzzle of the Ranger's own gun at Bud.

"To shoot you, my friend," he said, "would be much too easy a death. I must think of a better one, of a fitting one. You gringos must be exterminated. After you, I shall get rid of the girl, and her father. He is helpless. He is rich, and I shall find the money. El Asesino never fails. This land still belongs to Mexico. Now, let me think."

He rolled himself a cigarette.

If there had not been the girl to think of, Bud might have spoken the words that welled up within him, told the Assassin what he thought of him, hoping for a speedier death than the one the bandit was planning with half-closed eyes, like a rattlesnake basking in the sun.

He strained at the bonds, and did nothing but rasp the skin from his wrists. El Asesino chuckled as he watched. He reached for a wickercovered jug at the

side of the hammock, took a long swig, then another, enjoying himself, like the devil he was.

"It is well you understand Spanish so well, gringo," he said. "I can explain things so much better. I have thought of what I shall do. It will be rare fun, though perhaps I shall not witness anything but the end. In the bosque near by there are *jabalinas*, the fierce little wild pigs that will kill a man, with their tusks, eat him, while he still suffers. You know them, gringo? They are fierce and dangerous. That is why I may not watch what they do. Only see what they leave of you."

Bud knew. They were peccaries, the wild hogs of Texas and Mexico, trailing in packs, afraid of nothing, armored with thick hide and bristles. They were not afraid of wolves, even of a bear. It was the other way around.

"We shall strip you. Ranger," said El Asesino, "tie you by your arms and legs to four trees, perhaps give you a little play, to writhe in agony. Maybe the ants will find you first, but the *jabalinas* will surely come. They will have a rare feast. I shall hear your shrieks. I can tell the girl what is happening, so that she too may be amused."

No more frightful, fiendish death could be contrived. To lie helpless. to be devoured alive by the ravening peccaries!

Bud stood tense in his bonds, silent.

"You say nothing now, gringo, but you will talk when the *jabalinas* begin their meal. It will be very amusing. There is no hurry, after all. I am still sleepy. And you are quite secure."

He swigged at the jug again, closed his eyes, began to snore.

Bud's hogleg was by his side.

### iii

IN THE BLACKNESS of the horrible situation the Ranger saw one gleam of hope.

He had overlooked his carbine, which Manuel had taken into the shack.

And El Asesino had overlooked one thing, if Bud could use it before Manuel got through eating and drinking. Bud hoped Rosita would not be too stingy with the liquor.

The grass hammock, Indian woven, had the strands at head and foot looped through rings. Those rings were in hooks driven into the trees.

If Bud could get at one not so far from him—

It was a hard, tendon-stretching, straining job, with the fear that the Assassin might awaken, Manuel appear.

A long job, as the Assassin snored on, sodden with sleep and tequila.

The point of the hook was blunt, but it was a point. Bud got it into one of Rosita's knots, praying that the old crone might not come out again, or look his way.

The knot slowly opened up. The ends came out. Then there was another, and another, cunningly tied, stubborn, but yielding at last.

It was not easy to free his feet and legs. He had to squat to do it, reach around the swelling root bole. If they saw him now—

The Assassin choked, heaved, and Bud straightened, not yet loose. El Asesino gave him one sleepy, malicious leer, reached for his jug again. No sound had ever been more delicious than the gurgle of the liquor as it went down the bandit's throat, spilled on his hairy chest, exposed by his open shirt.

The Ranger was free at last.

As he stepped back from the tree, Manuel appeared in the doorway of the shack. He yelled an alarm, darted back for the carbine, as Bud hurled himself at the Assassin, reaching for the six-gun.

El Asesino clutched at him, muscular, powerful, despite his half-drunken, sleepy state.

Bud slugged him in the jaw with his left hand, wrested his gun hand clear, fired as Manuel, back again in the doorway, pressed trigger.

*Brr-rr-rup! Bang!* The six-gun's crack was the sharper, but not the quicker. Manuel had been swift. Bud, as he was grabbed once more by El Asesino, felt a terrific blow in the upper part of his thigh.

He saw Manuel pitch forward, sprawling, shot in the head.

Then the old woman appeared, jumping over Manuel's body, rushing toward the hammock.

As the Ranger sagged from the shock of the slug in his leg, El Asesino grappled with him, dragged him over on top of the hammock, and flung arms and legs about him in terrific grips.

If the carbine bullet had struck bone it would have been all over for Bud, then and there. Life spurted from his veins as the hammock strands broke under the double weight, and he and the Assassin rolled on the ground like a pair of fighting pumas.

Bud's gun muzzle was driven into dirt, stuffed with it. El Asesino sank his teeth in the Ranger's wrist, and he lost the hogleg. El Asesino was crushing breath and life out of him with his muscular limbs.

Then the crone attacked, clawing at Bud's throat, gouging at his eyes.

Bud got hold of her wrist, then a bony ankle, yanked hard and threw her off. He was fighting for existence now, and his strength matched that of the Assassin, despite his wounded leg. He heaved the Assassin free as he broke his arm grip, slugged him so that El Asesino's thighs lost their message from his

brain in a momentary paralysis that gave Bud his chance to roll away, panting, his pants leg sodden.

The Assassin was not out. He scrambled for the six-gun, but Bud reached it first, dropped the Assassin with a smack of the barrel behind the ear.

The fight was out of the crone. She was screaming that her wrist was broken.

"I'm sorry," Bud told her curtly. "I don't like to hurt a woman, but I'll forget you are one, if I find you've hurt that girl."

The fight was over. Manuel lay where he had fallen. The old woman protested she had treated the girl well, as Bud tied himself a twist of the reata for a tourniquet. He reloaded his gun and rammed out the dirt, master of the situation.

"Why do you serve such a man?" he asked the crone, as he hog-tied the still senseless Asesino.

"Señor, he is my son."

Bud felt sorry for her. Soon she would have no son. But he did not trust her, any more than he would a wild cat. He bound her, wrists and feet.

"When I leave," he said, "I shall put you where you can get at a knife, in time— if you have not hurt the girl."

The girl was unharmed. She clung to Bud when he reached her, locked in a store closet. She was hysterical, and she shuddered as they passed the dead body of Manuel.

"We'll get out of this," said Bud. "I'm taking you to your father, and I'll send you our troop surgeon for him. Get hold of yourself."

She pulled herself together. "Who are you?" she asked.

"A Texas Ranger. I had to change clothes. My horse is not far away. He will carry you without trouble. I'll use others. We'll get out of this."

"My brother! That devil killed him."

"I know. He'll swing for it. I'll attend to your brother. I'll bring him to you. You can ride?"

"Yes. You know we came here because of my dad. He was sick. We bought a place. We are not poor— that beast found out, somehow."

"I know. Your brother told me before—"

"Before he died. I hope I can see him hang," she cried, her eyes flashing.

Bud did not blame her. She was a beautiful girl, blond, a little younger than her brother, he thought. He did not know how to comfort her, except with action. The young Ranger's life was vowed to justice. Women had no part in it, save to protect them.

She was plucky. She helped him put a bandage about his wound.

She rode Pepper well, after Bud had whispered in the roan's ear. Then they started, El Asesino, strapped ignominiously to his own horse, while Bud rode that of Manuel.

He would leave the girl with her father, then ride with the Assassin to the Ranger's headquarters.

Troopers would bring in the dead and the living, those who were doomed to expiate their crimes. And they would bear in the body of the brave brother, to where the troop surgeon would attend the father. They would bury him, and after that they would see that the fear of the Rangers was seared into the hearts of Nagaza's citizens.

Bud would get patched up, as he had been before.

It was the perfect ending of a Ranger's day.

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## 10: So Ends the Day

*Argosy All-story Weekly* 31 July 1920

### 1: Undercurrent.

FROM northeast to southeast, stretching a full quarter of the horizon, lifting high toward the zenith, loomed a somber, chaotic mass; folded and swollen in strange convolutions that slowly changed form, the semblance of some weird landfall, stricken by convulsions, tumbling reluctantly to ruin. The bulk of it was dull, threatening gray, shadowed with deepest, ominous purple in its canons and deep caverns, the upper crags touched luridly with the hue of raw copper.

The sea was like a sheet of polished brass, of no color— a glare of reflected light from the sun that was just beginning to wheel westward. It heaved in long, low hills, smooth as the breasts of a golden-skinned *Apsasa* dancing-girl. Only beside the bilges of the barkentine, in the scanty shadow of the hull, the water took on tone. There wavering scallops of blue and bronze and green, the prismatic hues of a peacock's tail, glided out in kaleidoscopic patterns, fading in the sunflare without a hint of foam.

On the ship, flying-jib, jib and staysail, fore-skysail, royal and topgallant, drooped, flaccid, waiting for a breeze. The canvas hung from the lower yards of the bore in brails. The mainsail was down, held in loose gaskets, the mizzen set, sheeted-in; both topsails were furled.

The Malay crew, tall and lean, with flattened dish-faces, light bronze of flesh, were setting up the stays of the mainmast, hauling in unison to their low drone of *Bada-a-ah! Trama, tramah, tra-ma-ah!* transparent blue shadows shifted back and forth. Their coarse, black hair was confined in gaudy but sun-faded cloths, tied with prick-ears. Sarongs of brown cloth, patterned in red, skirted them to the knees.

Elsewise they were naked, save for the oil that they had anointed themselves with against tissue-smashing rays of the sun. 'Over them presided their *tindal*, their self-appointed quartermaster; younger, slighter than any of them, but senior, greater in brain; master of their tasks, appointer and often administrator of their punishments.

Over the half-poop deck an awning was stretched from mizzenboom to either rail. Beneath it, on rattan chairs, two women were stretched at full length, one twice the age of the other, both languid in the frightful, nerve-smashing heat of the Banda Sea. A white man leaned against the port rail near the after shrouds, surveying leisurely the younger of the women. Her eyes were half-closed, long lashes entirely shaded them, yet she was quite conscious of his regard, and uneasy under it.

The man, first mate of the vessel, was physically good to look at. He wore a white shirt, open at the throat, the sleeves docked above the elbows, clean duck trousers, with a *cummerbund* of vivid orange in *lieu* of belt, emphasizing the narrowing of his hips beneath his wide chest and broad shoulders.

He was swart with the sun, but there was a tinge of crimson heightening the tan on his cheeks, and his lips were full and red. He was clean-shaven, his hair black and curling, but close-cropped. His nose sprang out aquiline from between dark eyes that gazed on the girl. with a look that was provocative, a look that needed little to become possessive.

He was magnificently muscled, and stood the height of a full fathom. There was something of a swagger about him, even in his lounging attitude, something predatory in the grouping of his features.

The girl stirred under his persistent regard, and looked at him. Her hair was pale-gold, her eyes sky-blue, their curving fringes brown. Her skin was cameo-pale with the heat, but her mouth was brightly pink. For all her lassitude she was healthy, full of life and the love of living.

The mate's eyes were fixed on the silk-clad ankles and the graceful swell of what the shifting skirt revealed of her slender legs. Then it traveled appraisingly, boldly admiring, up the slim, rounded length of her, and rested on her face, slowly turning the hue of the inner surface of a pink-lined shell.

"Skipper taking his nap?" he asked.

"He always has his *siesta* at this time," she answered. "You should know that."

"Surely. Regular as a clock, the skipper. Ticking away, day in, day out, always the same, never too fast, always correct, standard time."

"I imagine that is a valuable attribute in a captain," she replied, shifting her look from his with a certain suggestion of effort. The mate smiled with a flash of white teeth.

"Aunty!" The elder woman moaned a little, and answered without opening her eyes, a little petulantly. Little beads of perspiration gleamed on her forehead.

"What is it, Mary?"

"Don't you want to go down into the cabin? It is unbearably hot up here. We can get the boy to start the *punkah*."

The aunt groaned again.

"It can't be worse than it is on deck. The sun pricks my eyes through the lids. I believe that awning makes it worse. Very well." She got up primly, and the girl followed her. Opposite the mate, the latter turned her head toward him, deliberately accepting his challenge. The blue eyes fought the brown, and faltered.

"See you later," he said, and, as she made no answer, moving on, slight, graceful in her white draperies, he smiled again.

In his cabin, off the trade-room, Sykes, the cockney supercargo, was compounding a rum punch for Pinckney, the second-mate, and Evans, the Welsh carpenter. These, with the skipper and the mate, were the only white men aboard the barkentine. The cook was Chinese; all others Malays.

"It ain't wot it ought ter be, wivout hice," said Sykes. "But the lime takes the bloomin' thirst out of yer, an' the tamarinds sort of puckers up yore cheek an' cools you orf."

"And the rum leaves you worse off than you was," said Pinckney.

"Want me to have it out of yore's?" asked Sykes. "I thought not. Well, 'ere's lookin' at yer both."

They half-drained their glasses at a gulp and, almost immediately, the sweat broke out on their foreheads. The Welshman scooped his off with the back of his hand, the other two mopped it up with *bandanas*. All three were in singlets and duck trousers, their feet naked. Overhead was the soft shuffling of the sailors, the faint sound of their chant— *Bada~a-ah! Trama, tramah, tra-ma-ah!* Suddenly it was topped by a bellowed order. The shuffling quickened. The chant died out and was not resumed.

"Bullyin' 'em again!" slid the Welshman. "Just make 'em sullen. He don't know how to handle 'em."

"He's new in these seas," said Pinckney. "Don't see why the skipper picked him."

"'E knows his bizness, outside of that," said Sykes. "And there hain't much choice of mates these days. They're scarce. The skipper 'ud 'ave myde you 'first,' Pinky, if you cud navigate."

"I know it. I'm as high as I'll get. But I'm as good a man as him, outside of shootin' the sun. Nineteen years I've bin at sea. I'm thirty now. But I'm a sailorman. Born in me. But no good at figgerin'."

"Yo're a good man, Pinky," said the supercargo. "'Ave another go?"

"No. It's too hot. One's enough. Goes right through you. The old man's goin' to be mortal sorry he shipped Samson as first mate," he went on, nursing his grievance. "For two reasons."

"Wots the other one?" asked the supercargo.

Evans said it. "He don't know how to handle the Malays. Good men, but techy. Some day he's goin' to hit one of 'em, an' then there'll be hell to pay. If a Malay does wrong he can be punished, but the *tindal's* got to do it. They'll stand for Selim, even to a floggin', an' Badoun could crumple him up like I would a bit of paper, but let a white man lay hand to him, an' like as not it means mutiny— or murder."

"Yo're right, Pinky. But that ain't the main reason. It's the gel. The skipper was a fool to let 'er come aboard for the voyage. Wanted 'er to see wot it was like afore he married her— an' she finds it dull. The mate's out to amuse her. He's a handsome devil."

"I heard at Singapore that he run away with his last skipper's wife," said Pinckney.

"Ho. Bazaar-pidgin!" said Sykes scornfully. "Not but wot it might be true. If it was, it warn't our kind of a skipper."

"The skipper's slow but sure," said the Welshman, finishing his glass. "Aye, an' deep. Anger 'll damn him for a bit till he thinks things over, but if the flood breaks through there's a sight of force behind. He's blind in love with the gal. Fair worships her. He looks at her as if she was a bit o' Dresden, an' him proud to own it, but afeard to touch. A man that lives at sea is shy o' wimmen. He sees 'em in visions, in the stars, an' in the clouds, fillin' the wide sea spaces wi' dreams. They're far-off, an' so they're more precious. He treats em wi' over reverence— not as they would be treated. But if it's hands off wi' the skipper, wo betide any else that comes too close."

"Where did yer git hall the stuff about wimmin an' the wide sea-spaces?" jeered the cockney. "For you've spent most of yore life at sea yerself."

"I've been married twice," answered Evans. "And every Welshman is a dreamer an' a poet."

"Spechully arfter a rum-punch."

Evans ignored him.

"The skipper's lost his luck," he went on. "Lost it when he changed the name of the ship. Halcyon she was, Mary she is. 'Tis bad luck to shift a ship's name between voyages. He should have married the girl first."

"E's a better man than Samson," said Sykes. "For all the mate's showy looks an' muscles. Shut the two of 'em in a room an' one 'ud come out. It w'udn't be Samson."

"Fightin' ain't makin' love." Pinckney shook his head knowingly. "The Welshman's right. The skipper's a novice beside Samson. The gal's bored. The mate's a woman-killer."

"Mebbe he is," answered Sykes. "But the skipper's a man-tamer."

There came a sudden patter or rain on deck. In a moment it was a torrent, drumming furiously on the planks, hissing in the scuppers.

"We may get a breeze after that," said Pinckney. "It must be close to two bells. My watch."

"Thank Gawd for the rain! I'm fair messy with the 'eat. Let's hall go on deck an' get a shower-barth." And Sykes led the way to the ladder.

## 2: The Secret Flame.

CAPTAIN MARTIN, skipper of the *Mary*— late the *Halcyon*— stood three inches shorter than his mate. He weighed close to a hundred and eighty pounds of compact flesh and bone, his legs were slightly bowed, his chest deep, his arms as stout as spars. His beard was luxuriant, but he kept it clipped fairly short. Like his hair, it was reddish-brown, only a shade or so deeper than his weathered skin.

Out of it all his eyes gleamed like jewels inlaid in bronze. They were chameleon eyes, the eyes of a seaman, blue in fair weather, gray in storm. Whenever he looked at Mary Leigh, they held the hue of the shadow of midsea waves under a sunny, cloudless sky. He was perhaps a year or so older than Samson, both around thirty.

The barkentine sailed easily under the stars, the southern cross a glittering pendant over her maintruck, her canvas pyramiding, umber in the shadow, high-lighted to ivory where the rising moon caught it; the harping of the air breeze in the rigging in harmony with the whispering rush of the water along the vessel's run. A forking wake stretched luminous with phosphor to meet the moon-path. In it a troop of porpoises, hunting their supper acrobatically, turned continuous somersaults, churning the sunshine into green fire. The skipper and Mary Leigh stood at the taffrail.

"Beautiful, ain't it?" he asked. "And a fair wind. We're heading up for Serang, Mary. Like a big garden it is, with a live volcano in the middle. The Spice Islands they call the group; where the nutmegs come from.. Nor' and east of that is the western end o' New Guinea. The Malay's call it the Head of the Dragon. Looks like it on the chart. There's where they get the best birds-o'-paradise. Skins like jewels, purple an' green an' reddish-gold. I'm goin' to get you some, Mary."

He slid an arm about her waist. She moved away from the embrace without immediate reply.

"What's wrong, Mary?"

"Nothing. But that man, Badoun, at the wheel?"

"His eyes are in the front of his head, not his back," answered the skipper. But he did not replace his arm.

"Don't anything ever *happen* at sea?" she asked him suddenly.

"Lord, yes! Storm and shipwreck, sometimes. But you can fight the one an' dodge the other if you've a good ship an' use judgment, Nothin' you need worry about my dear."

"Oh, *storms!*" Her voice was petulant.

"I was hoping you'd like it all," he said.

She shrugged her shoulders and turned, facing inboard, back to the rail. Behind Badoun the spark of a cheroot showed. Then, the first mate, emerging from the shadows into the spotlight of the moon.

"Great night," he said affably. "Have a *cheroot*, skipper? You don't object, Miss Leigh?"

"Not at all," the girl answered. The skipper refused the cigar. "Isn't the moon gorgeous?" asked Mary Leigh. All her indifference had vanished with the coming of the second male, the formation of the triangle.

"Looks like the inside of a pearl oyster," said Samson. "I've seen it when it looked like the open door of a furnace. I mind one time in the Solomons. I was mate on a recruity schooner. We'd gone ashore in the red boat in the afternoon. They paint all the whaleboats on a recruity scarlet, Miss Leigh, so the natives know what you're after. Saves time.

"Three natives wanted to go with us; we promised 'em trade rifles over and above their wages for a premium, but the chief didn't want to lose em. So we fixed it they were to come down to the beach after dark.

"Well, there wasn't any dark. The moon was up before the sun was down. We stood off the island and fetched it again after sunset. The moon showed through the cocopalms on the point like it would set the trees afire. The men were there in the scrub— they were worth twenty pounds apiece to us at the plantation— but just as we're gettin' 'em in the boat the tribe comes down with a rush, an' there we were at it; in the shore-surf, up to our middles, spears flyin', clubs whirlin', pistols poppin' an' flashin' in the shadows. The boat looked more like a porkypine than a boat, time we got clear."

"Were you wounded?" The girl's voice rang eager. The mate showed a scar on his bare forearm, flexing his muscles in the moonlight as she bent to scan it. Her lips were parted, her eyes big with excitement and admiration for this Ulysses of the South Seas.

The skipper, hands buried deep in his pockets, said nothing. He had heard another story about that scar. The girl turned to him.

"That's what I meant," she said. "Excitement! Life!"

"And death," the skipper commented. "No place for a woman."

Samson laughed. "There was another time when we ran on a reef in the New Hebrides," he commenced. "On a little island off Aoba—"

Sykes had come quietly up the poop-ladder and crossed to them. Now he broke in.

"Taku's sick, skipper. "Got a touch of fever."

Captain Martin hesitated.

"I'd better go for'ard and take a look at him," he said.

"I'll wait here," said Mary Leigh. "Mr. Samson will spin me more yarns. Won't you?"

"Were your men Malays, like these aboard?" she asked the mate when he had finished his perilous tale.

"Not them. Melanesians. Cannibals, with filed teeth. Huskies. Not mollycoddles, like this lot. The skipper mothers 'em too much, to my fancy." He glanced to see how she took the implied criticism, but she seemed not to have noticed it. They moved to the taffrail.

"The porpoises have gone," she said. "They were like so many animated pinwheels."

The moon shone full in their faces. The mate never took his eyes from her. He chuckled silently as he thought of her response to his yarning, and now, though eminently conscious of his regard, she did not resent it. The tropic night was full of glamour, the balmy air hinted of the Spice Islands all about them, of great drooping mango-trees heavy with luscious fruit, orchids festooning the fervid bush.

The lure of it was pumping in his veins, and he fancied her blood warming. He glanced at Badoun, like a carven image of ebony at the wheel— save for the play of his arms— thought and action centered on his work, eyes on the compass-card aswim in the light of the binnacle.

"They're off the quarter," he said; "followed up the school of surface fish. See 'em?"

She shifted her position, leaning over the quarter-rail, one hand on a mizzen backstay.

"I can't. They are too close to the side. I'm not tall enough."

"Want to?"

She nodded, not catching his meaning. He drew a deep breath, and looked again at Badoun.

"Put your elbows to your sides, hold 'em steady."

He gripped her arms at the bend, hot palms to bare, cool flesh that warmed to the contact.

She felt herself hoisted steadily, easily up, till her hips leveled his shoulders, while she held the stay for steadiness. Tingling vitality flowed out of his strength, her blood surged scalding, something of what fevered him transmitted through his clutch; intoxicating, dizzying.

"Put me down," she begged, half gasping.

He set her on the deck and twisted her toward him. She spun, still confused, clinging to him for an instant. He caught at her and crushed her close. As her head fell back he stooped and kissed her. For a moment her body

was molded close to his. She could feel the strong beat of her heart through his thin clothing. Then she thrust away.

"How could you? How dare you!" she panted. "Badoun!"

He smiled, and half of it was for that word: "Badoun."

"How could I help but dare?" he demanded, and his voice was husky with passion. But he turned a sharp eye to the Malay. The man's back showed, hardly visible in the shadow, one shoulder sharply accented by the moon.

"He saw nothing," he whispered. "You're not angry? I couldn't help it. God, but you are wonderful! You set me afire."

Her hair had become disarranged, or she chose to think it so. She stood apart from him, both hands busy. Her eyes were hidden under their long lashes, but he marked her bosom lift and fall, saw her underlip caught up by her teeth. His own hands were clenched, the veins high on his temples and in his neck. He made a short step forward. Her eyes opened. He read fright in them, where he had expected something else, before he realized that she was looking beyond him. Her hands drooped, fell to her sides.

"Nothing much the matter with Taku," boomed the skipper's bass. "The quinine 'll fix him by morning. How's she holding up, Badoun?"

He had turned to the binnacle. But how much had he seen? The mate's face became alert, like the face of a beast that thinks it hears the step of the hunter. Mary Leigh stood as if turned to stone. She was cold, all save her lips.

"Your aunt's comim' on deck, Mary." As the skipper spoke Miss Burton appeared, and the girl went directly to her. Samson faced the captain.

"Man all right, is he? Most of 'em malingerers. Don't pay to baby 'em too much, I've found."

"I'm not apt to serve out pap where it ain't wanted," answered the skipper, with dry emphasis. "I know how to handle my men— and my ship, Mr. Samson." His eyes looked squarely at the mate. They were gray, and cold as steel.

"We're going below, John," Miss Burton said. "I don't trust this night air."

"I shouldn't wonder but what you were right. I'll go with you. Mr. Samson, will you please take the deck?"

It was not the mate's watch for a full hour, but he said nothing. After the deck was clear, save for him and Badoun, he lit a fresh cheroot, but did not find it to his taste, tossing it into the sea and pacing from port to starboard and back again. He had made up his mind that the skipper had seen nothing. If he had he would not have stood tamely by. Unless the presence of both the women had restrained him.

The girl, with her fresh coolness, her difference from the longshore women he had known, had maddened him, but he had gone willingly along that path.

He had learned, with his knack of piecing such things, that Mary Leigh had a tidy little fortune in her own right.

He compared himself complacently with the skipper, remembering the moment when her body had yielded.

She had not returned his kiss, but she had suffered it. It had roused her, swept her off her feet, if only for a second. He had made the first step successfully. But the path was dangerous. The skipper was not a fool, not a man who let his rights slide. What if Badoun had seen and told? The Malays were crafty, and their senses were abnormal. He itched to question the man, but checked himself.

"I'll wager he's never got under her skin," he assured himself. "As for the two of us, it's man to man— and may the best win." And he let his thoughts slide to pleasanter prospects. He saw himself owning his vessel, as Martin owned the Mary, making a good income. out of her, cruising, prosperous among the islands. But there was no image of Mary Leigh in the cabin of his ship.

"I'll not be fool enough to take *her* to sea," he told himself, with a muttered laugh, as he found a third cheroot to his taste, and lounged by the taffrail, sending out puffs of fragrant smoke into the air that were wafted to the sensitive nostrils of Badoun, making them quiver, like the nostrils of a dog.

But Badoun had seen nothing, whatever he had sensed. And, if he had seen, he would not have told the captain.

Presently, Sampson slipped below to his cabin. As he passed down the poop-ladder he glimpsed the figures of Miss Burton and the skipper in the cuddy, built under the poop for dining and general assembly room. The girl was not with them.

He descended to the lower cabin, and saw the door of her state-room closed, going on to his own. There he unearthed a bottle of whisky from underneath the mattress of his bunk, and took a long drink, filling a flask to take on deck. Inside of an hour he had finished it.

His reveries had become inflamed, the liquor had fed his sensuous thoughts, never very dormant. When he tossed the last drops down and put away the flask in his trousers pocket for future tipplings, he was in a glow of confidence, sure of conquest, sneering at the chances of the skipper against such a man as he was: Don Juan of a score of lax seaports.

Elizabeth Burton was what Samson would have styled an old maid. The preservation of her virginity had not been from choice. She was well aware that she had been denied the outward and visible charms of her sex, cursed with a dull eye, a dry and sallow skin, a body denied all curves. Equally she knew herself blessed with a nature at once loving and maternal, possessing the

intuitions of her sex, where man was concerned, as fully as her niece, and, added to them, deductions derived from observation of the experiences of others.

Between attributes and drawbacks, she managed to preserve a happy balance. She had some of the unavoidable traits of the spinster, but they were not of the spirit. Perhaps because she had never known fruit of her own ripening, had never felt the *ennui* of love, she was the more interested in other folk's plantations.

Her soul had not shriveled; her common-sense matched her good nature. If her life had not been rounded-out according to the law of sex, she had achieved a very satisfactory oval. And she had fully countenanced and encouraged the suit of her niece by Captain Martin.

Mary Leigh had retired with a headache promptly upon going below. But her aunt remained to chat with the skipper. While he smoked she sewed under the cuddy lamp and led the talk around her subject. Yet she felt that she broached it clumsily at last.

"What happened on deck, John?" she asked.

Martin had seen nothing of the embrace. But he had sensed, with a lover's quickness, the tension between the two he had left chatting, left reluctantly. He knew his own failings in light speech, he was envious of Samson's facility. A seed of jealousy had been already planted, and, as he heard the sibillance of the mate's whisper while he had been mounting the ladder, a tendril had been flung up and out, coiling about his heart. Now he turned squarely to the spinster.

"What do you mean?"

"Between Mary and Samson."

"I saw nothing."

"There was something. Mary thinks you know. She thinks you should have acted."

"myself,

"Did she tell you?" His voice deepened, quickened. "Never mind, I don't want to know— from you."

"She did not tell me. It was not necessary. You love her, John?"

He looked at her. She nodded at him.

"Mary is only a girl, John. You know how she lived with me. Never seeing any one worth while, any one of interest. She loved you for the you that is inside, hidden. She doesn't realize that as yet. She loved you for what you stood for, romance, the high seas, adventure, strange places. She was like a child with a book. She admired the pictures first; the sound-sweetness of the tale she had yet to learn to read. She was untouched by passion. You were the

first man who ever kissed her. You haven't followed up that kiss, John. You treat her more like a big brother than a lover."

"I haven't had much experience in that Elizabeth. I have seen rough things, done them. There is a side to my life far apart from hers."

"Not if you love each other. Not if she is to be your mate."

"She is— Elizabeth, she is the woman of my sea-visions. Like a flower. I have feared to let myself go. I can talk to you. You understand. There is nothing of the prude about you. If I showed her all I felt, if I could tell her? I am no iceberg, but I am crude. I might frighten her. She would not understand. She is dainty."

"She is asleep. Or was. Wake her up. Frighten her, if you can. But— love her. John, I know Mary. She is ripening to womanhood. Young love, young passion, first aroused, often mistakes glittering pinchbeck for gold that may be pure, yet unpolished."

She had laid aside her sewing, and her pale eyes lost their dulness. They shone with earnestness. The cuddy door was open for air, and a step sounded on the ladder. She stopped speaking until Samson came back again, and they heard him above them. And she watched the skipper.

As she had said, she knew her niece, she had seen signs that night that told her of sex aroused. And not by Martin. She wondered if she had spoken too openly. He had not failed to understand. She could tell that by the way he sat biting at the amber of his pipe, gone out. She knew the riddles of his eyes, though she could not always read them. There was a depth to his nature she had never sounded, but suspected. It was strength, but she feared it, if perverted. Under his repression the man was volcanic.

He refilled and relit his pipe.

"Thanks, Elizabeth," he said. "I'll not pretend to misunderstand you. Samson is a good deal of a skunk, but I can handle him."

She gathered up her sewing and rose, as he did.

"Man-handle, you mean. What sense is there in disposing of the man if you lose the girl? Good-night, John."

She looked in at Mary. The moon touched one pillow, with a braid of hair, light gold. The girl's eyes were closed, and she went out softly. But Mary Leigh was not asleep. She was less certain now that Martin had seen. She had lain waiting for the sound of angry voices, waiting for her aunt to come to bid her good night, but she shrank from discussion. Despite the warm, tropic night, she was cold, all but her lips.

Something had suddenly sprung up within her. For one moment, when she had shrunk against the mate's body and received his lips on hers, her flesh and blood had transmuted into flame.

John had never affected her like that. Was there something lacking? Was she tainted with some streak of immorality to remember such a moment and thrill to it? She was plighted to John, but John did not rouse her to such a supreme moment that hinted of deeper transports to which her will and body had leaped.

Was John cold? Were they mismated? Was Samson the one man, as he had been the only one, who could fill her with such delirious desire? She was no simpering innocent, but passion had been born in her for the first time that night; she, a plighted girl, in the arms of another man than her lover. Surely she loved John? Her mind did— or was it only respect?

Fairly in the coils, she tossed on her bed. Behind it all lay dread. A sickening fear of what might happen between the two men.

Pinckney, the second mate, who was to take the middle watch, was, as usual, in the congenial company of the supercargo and the Welshman, in Sykes's snug domain off the trade-room. The three ate at second-table, and, always somewhat embarrassed by the presence of two women aboard, one of them the skipper's *fiancée*, were glad to do so, keeping away almost entirely from the cuddy, where, as one of the few whites aboard, the carpenter, with the others, usually had right of entrance.

The skipper broke in on their three-handed game of cribbage.

"The watches have been shifted a bit, Pinckney," he said. "You'll go up at two bells and relieve the mate. I'll take the deck for the morning watch, as usual."

"Very well, sir." The skipper nodded curtly to Sykes and Evans, and, without his usual pleasant word, left them.

"My eye!" ejaculated Sykes, when he was sure the skipper was well away. "Somethin' stirrin'. Wot-ho for ructions!"

"Samson!" said Pinckney prophetically.

"Somethin' in the bloomin' wind," said Sykes. "And the mate to loo'ard. 'Arf a quid yo're right, Pinkey."

"I'd be a fool to bet against what I think," said the Welshman. "Your deal, Sykes. It's none of our business."

The skipper returned to the cuddy, smoking pipe after pipe and brooding, brooding over what the aunt had told him, retrieving past incidents, cursing above his breath at last to find that he had nothing tangible for open grievance.

"I'll get rid of him at Singapore," he muttered, and reached into the table drawer for the log. There was little to enter save the position, already jotted down in pencil. He was never prolix.

He wrote in his precise hand:

Becalmed all day. A fair wind at sunset. Taku sick with fever. Not serious. Administered 15 gr. quin. At noon: 5' 19" South. 134' 27" East.

The cuddy clock chimed eight bells, midnight. Forward, one of the watch echoed the strokes upon the ship's bell. He added the invariable formula, old as the first merchantman manned by English sailors:

So ends this day.

### *3: Mutiny*

AN hour later he was still there, the lamp turned low. He saw Pinckney mount the ladder after the clock had chimed two bells, heard him on deck, then another tread, and saw, against the flood of moon that now washed the main deck, the tall figure of Samson descending.

The mate hesitated outside the dimly-lit cuddy, then turned in. He had his own log to write up. The skipper turned up the wick of the lamp, and the two men faced each other. The reek of liquor was distinct. Anger, long groping for pretext, flared up in the captain.

"I don't like my officers drinking on duty," he said. "There's no harm in a dram, for entertainment, or in emergency, but, outside of that, it's against my orders."

Samson, his brain fumed with the liquor, his sneering mood toward the skipper still uppermost, said nothing, but his look was eloquent of resentment. Martin's tone had cut like the lash of a whip.

"And I won't have you bullying the Malays," went on the skipper. As his choler rose he smothered it with the ice of his outer mood. "As you have done. You're new to these seas, or you'd have more sense. A free Malay will not tolerate it. Neither will I."

"Free Malay, hell!" drawled Samson. "A loafing lot of scum."

"That is enough, sir. I am the judge of discipline on this ship. I own her."

"The hell you do? Own all aboard her? Perhaps not as much as you fancy you do."

A red light danced in the cold steel of the captain's eyes.

"Just what do you mean?" he asked, evenly.

Samson leered.

"You know damned well what I mean."

The table was between them. The red spark grew to a flame as the skipper vaulted across it, straight for Samson. The mate caught the heavy inkstand and hurled it. It hit the captain's foot, and the contents spurted over the table and the red carpet. Then Samson staggered back from the impact of the skipper's bulk, striking out at him as he went. The blow glanced off Martin's muscle-

sheathed arm, and the next second the two had closed, reeling about the cabin.

The skipper's volcano had seethed over. Yet he fought coolly, his determination made. The chance had offered; he would show the mate once and for all who was the better man. They smashed against the table, hurling it to one side as each strove for a fair blow.

There were some antiquated cutlasses in a rack on the mast, with a native *kris* or two. The guns were kept in the main cabin, and in Sykes's quarters, a pistol for each of the white men, never used aboard the *Mary*.

The skipper's weight and push bore back the mate against the mast, and he grasped a Malay knife, curving, keen. His arm swept up, and the captain pounced upon his wrist, bending down with resistless force, down, and back, until the mate yelled with pain, and the weapon fell to the floor.

The skipper kicked it under the table with his heel, and sent in a slogging blow that caught the dodging mate high on the cheek, bringing a red flush that would soon turn to an angry bruise.

It was delivered with all his strength, backed by his weight, and it temporarily stunned Samson.

In a flash the captain's arms were about him, under his own, compressing his chest. He flogged and thrashed, but he was helpless in the grip that was strong and merciless as that of a bear. The strength oozed out of him. His ribs cracked, his lungs were constricted until he could taste blood in his throat. Red waves of it rolled in front of him. The cuddy reeled.

He came to lying across the table, breath a pain, his limbs still pithless; the skipper standing by with folded arms, his breath even, his gaze sardonic.

"Get up and down to your bunk," said Martin. "After this, perhaps you'll know that I'm master aboard this ship. I could have crushed you like an eggshell in the fist. Get out!"

The mate gathered himself together, and obeyed, his head still fuzzy with blood pressure, his knees wobbly. His brain at once shouted for revenge and bade him go cautiously.

He had met his master in fair fight, and he knew it. He slunk out of the cuddy like a whipped dog, with a snarl he took care the skipper should not see. Sore in soul and body, he finished his bottle in his bunk.

The heat had flattened out the sea as an iron presses linen. It lay unwrinkled, with the barkentine in the midst of it, motionless as a toy model glued to canvas. The horizon was a sharp line of purple against the lighter sky. No bird vexed the windless air.

Cleaving the surface of the water with barely a ripple, the simitar-shaped dorsals of two sharks kept patrol at the stern, passing from quarter to quarter,

ranging ceaselessly after possible scraps of waste. The hatches and bulkhead doors were open, for ventilation.

Breakfast was a farce so far as eating was concerned, lacking even the pantomime of perfunctory performance. Samson did not appear. Neither Mary nor her aunt had caught any sounds of the fight, but both suspected that something of the sort had occurred. Their eyes met and exchanged agreement concerning the skipper's attitude.

He was undeniably sleepy, and announced his determination for a *siesta*. And he was also undeniably in a satisfied frame of mind. He even breathed like a man who has come up from close atmosphere to free air. And the two women had not discussed between themselves the previous night's incidents, yet, in their sex freemasonry, they traded semiconfidences.

It was the first mate's watch on deck, a perfunctory job under the circumstances, but none the less peremptory. He had opened a fresh bottle to aid him to ignore the bruise showing plainly on his cheek. To him it seemed to blazon the fact of his encounter with the skipper. He himself would have boasted of it to the girl, had he been in the skipper's shoes, and he could not convince himself that the captain had kept silence.

He resented the covert looks of the crew, and he found them numberless tasks. They obeyed them in silence. One order, given through Badoun, was the flushing of the decks every hour with seawater drawn from overside in buckets, hauled in by ropes.

In the cuddy, the skipper left for his cabin, to catch up his needed sleep. Miss Burton languidly asked for the *punkah-boy*, and took up her sewing. The girl was too restless for any repose, still bothered with her own problem. She was dressed in the lightest of her tropic outfit, and she wandered out on the deck.

The mate was the only white man in sight. He had his back turned to her, and kept it so, as if to avoid her. She sauntered around the mainmast to confront him casually, piqued by his attitude.

She was uncorseted, and the long curves and rounded swells of her almost perfect body were covered, rather than clothed, by the thin Madras of her gown, and the light silks beneath. She became aware of a quality in the attitude of the Malays that offended her. They never seemed deliberately to look at her, but she was continually conscious of glances shot from the corners of long-slitted lids, glances that leered, sweeping her from head to foot.

Once in a while she caught a confidential look pass between two of them, polishing brass or recoiling halyards, and felt that she was the subject. Once, as she paused by the rail; she noticed Badoun deliberately gloating over the sharp shadow of her profiled body on the deck.

It sickened her, made her a little afraid. This had never happened before. It was as if she had been living among men now suddenly revealed: as pit-devils, treacherous and lecherous beneath their light copper skins. Suddenly apprehension swept over her.

Had she suddenly fallen in the estimation of the Malays? She knew how lax was their own morality, their polygamous practises; she knew how high they esteemed the virtue of the white woman. Did they sense something of what had passed between her and the mate, and, magnifying it, rate her as a light woman, forfeiting their respect?

She raised her head indignantly to see Badoun observing her, and stared him down with haughty pride, passing on to Samson's side.

The bruise instantly caught her eye, and fascinated her. The mate was dressed with unusual care. His fresh linen trousers were starched and even creased, thanks to Quong; his shoes had been newly pipe-clayed, his silk shirt was immaculate. His *cummerbund* sash was the vivid color of a *pomegranate* bloom.

He looked at the girl with swift suspicion. If she ignored his disfiguration, he told himself, the skipper had got in his own story concerning it. The suggestion that the captain had caused it did flash into her mind, but her lashes shut off any revelation as she slashed at the knot that puzzled the thread of her thought.

"Did you run into a spar?" she asked with a smile.

The mate's face cleared.

"Just that," he answered. "Hardly improves my figurehead, does it?"

"It will soon go away." She knew that he lied, and curiosity tore at her to know the details of the fight she was sure had happened. Happened on her account.

Four bells chimed, and Badoun gave an order. The men stopped their other work, and commenced flushing the deck, avoiding the immediate space about the girl and the mate. But one Malay was careless, and allowed the rim of his bucket to strike the rail as he inhailed. A little fountain of water splashed up and wetted the girl's skirt. The man caught hastily at his pail, tilted it, and spilled all the contents, soaking the mate's immaculate shoes and the bottoms of trousers.

Samson choked back a curse on account of the girl, and then let loose the mental bile that had been accumulating since his quarrel with the skipper. His lips curled back, and he kicked viciously, expertly, with all his force at the Malay, sending him sprawling on the deck, springing after him and kicking him again, deliberately and foully— though this the girl did not guess. As the anguished wretch rolled on the planks the mate followed him up.

"You clumsy, yellow-pelted Mohammedan hound," he said in a voice whose concentrated fury amazed the girl, unrealizing his long hours of brooding and drinking, "the next time I'll skin the hide from you!"

Her mind was set for some spontaneous outburst, knives flashing in rising mutiny, and she glanced about her for her best move. But no one appeared to have noticed the incident. The man got himself under control, and picked up his bucket, limping away to the farther rail while the mate stood by sneering.

"Yellow curs, that's what they are! And that's the only way to treat 'em. Looked for an explosion, didn't you? The skipper handles 'em like so much dynamite. Plain mud, that's what they are."

For the first time she caught the taint of whisky on his breath. She was neither prepared to defend the skipper nor listen to any slur upon him, and she made the excuse of changing her gown to leave Samson and go below.

At *tiffin* Samson joined the first table. His mind was filled with revenges against the skipper, with the girl as the one best outlet through which he could achieve them. He attempted to hold her in conversation, hoping to annoy both the skipper and the spinster.

To his surprise the former opened up the talk and kept it going, none fluent, but persistent, giving the details of a trip of his ashore on Celebes as guest of a *raja*, hunting *seladang* bison from the pad of an elephant.

The mate attempted some cleverly sarcastic remarks, but the girl did not rise to them, and the skipper plowed on through his yarn unstirred. The meal over, the mate went below, and the two women soon followed, hoping for some sort of a doze in the privacy of their cabins, where superfluous clothing could be dispensed with.

The skipper smoked a cheroot in the cuddy, and then applied himself, despite the heat, to his hobby, the correction of charts of the Java, Flores, Banda, and Arafura Seas. Pinckney held the deck until the first dog-watch, when Samson would relieve him, from four until six.

At two o'clock Sykes came on deck to go fishing in the bows, not from much hope of getting any fish, welcome as they would be, but from sheer desperation. Pinckney joined him. The crew squatted about in such shadow as they could find. Evans was tinkering somewhere below decks.

"What kind of lingo are they jabbering in?" Pinckney asked Sykes. The Malays were in small groups about the decks, talking in low tones, with an animation unusual for such weather.

"Harsk me somethin' heasier," replied Sykes. "I know. Malay pidgin an' some Bengalee, but I can't savvy that dialect. The whole bilin' of 'em are on deck, too, watch-below an' all."

"Fo'c'sle must be a reg'lar furnace," suggested Pinckney.

"I s'pose so." The hot afternoon droned on without a flutter of canvas, without a puff of wind or the gathering of a cloud in the sky. In the cuddy the skipper found his moist hands interfering with his task, and stretched himself on a lounging-chair. Presently Miss Burton and her niece joined him, both pale, from the steadfast heat.

The *punkah-boy* was dismissed, for the disturbance of the heated air only increased discomfort. Blinds were drawn over the skylight, and the cuddy was too dusky for reading or work.

The two women lay on their rattan couches, silently hoping for a breeze, for rain, for any relief against the terrible oppression and temperature that seemed to drain their bodies to the point of exhaustion, relaxed, thoughtless.

Pinckney left Sykes to hand over the deck to the first mate, and then went back into the bows. They had caught three flying-fish, and believed the capture augured a change in the weather, besides promising a change of diet. Samson glanced aloft, sailor-fashion, and instantly noted that the clewlines of the main royal were hanging loose, as if the quarter-blocks had frayed them. There had been no wind to accomplish this, and he strode to the bows.

"The main-royal clewlines are loose, Pinckney," he said. "Didn't you notice them?"

"No, I didn't," answered Pinckney, nettled at his tone. "They were all right when I took the deck. "Chafed with the roll of the ship, I s'pose."

"Might have," admitted Samson, and ordered Badoun to send two men aloft to reeve fresh lines.

Mary Leigh came out of the cuddy, unable to bear its confinement any longer. The mate noticed her out of the tail of his eye, but affected not to do so as he watched the two Malays, climbing nimbly, one of them the man called Telak, the one whom he had kicked.

Badoun saw her. She felt his glance upon her, in a sort of compelling hypnosis. His eyes, usually as impassive as dull jet, showed smoldering sparks. They made her shiver. Her whole being was depressed, nervously apprehensive of something about to happen. Badoun, eyeing her covertly, seemed careless to mask a mood half sensuous, appraising, insulting. Yet there was nothing openly to resent. She moved on closer to Samson.

The two sailors had halted at the maintop, and shifted to the mainyard at the slings. The girl saw them peering down at the mate like resentful apes.

"The royal, the royal, you pair of jibbering *orangs!*" he suddenly bellowed up at them. "Blast your yellow hides, do you have to make me come up there and show you how to do it?"

Mary Leigh saw Badoun, the smoldering sparks in his eyes changed to flame, set his silver whistle, his *serang's* pipe, to his lips, and blow a shrill call.

Instantly the two Malays dropped like cats out of the rigging, fairly upon the struggling mate. The crew, transformed from quiet sailors to Malays gone suddenly *amok*, came leaping from every direction.

They made no sound, but the astounded girl, held in a strange paralysis of inaction, saw the white roll of their eyes, the flash of their teeth as they grinned, the gleam of *kris*es. She heard the mate's oath as he fought helplessly against his captors, she saw Badoun advancing toward her with the face of a devil!

She tried to scream, but her parched throat failed her. At last she forced from it a hoarse cry that, by some weird fantasy appeared to have been made by some else. The mate was being dragged forward. They were to starboard. She had a dim impression of Pinckney and Sykes springing from the bows, clubbing their way aft along the port side, the sight of their fighting hidden and the sound of it muffled by the screening canvas.

Badoun's arm reached out. She shrank back, galvanized into action, yet weak from terror and the swift precision with which the open mutiny had started. Again she screamed.

A great bulk leaped past her. It seemed as if the wind of its passing swept her to one side. Her faculties returned with a gasp of relief as she saw the skipper. His face was set with furious resolution, his forehead seemed made of stone plates beneath which his eyes flared like blued steel under the sun, the hard line of his jaw showed under his beard.

One blow from his left fist sent Badoun sprawling over the hatchway, collapsing into the slack of the mainsail, his knees caught at their bend by the boom.

Then, with a roar, the skipper sprang upon the men who were dragging off the mate. He had come weaponless from the cuddy, but he caught up a belaying-pin from the rail at the foot of the mainmast and smashed it down upon the skull of the nearer Malay. The man collapsed. The other let go of the mate, ducked under the skipper's blow, and ran in with his *kris*. The skipper bent his body, supple for all its weight, caught *kris* and forearm between his own left arm and his chest, and once more brought down the metal club.

He glanced over his shoulder. Badoun had got himself together again. Four Malays were closing in from the bows. There was a fight going on by the companionway.

"Get back to the cuddy, Mary!" shouted the skipper. "Quick— while we hold them off. Samson, get a pin!"

But Samson had already retreated, rushing past the girl, who stood undecided. The Malays charged. One of the stunned men was coming to. The

odds were impossible. She saw Badoun on the hatchway ready to spring on the captain, and shrieked a warning.

"Back," roared the skipper. His hand shot up and tilted a boat in its davits, clutching for an oar. He needed to lengthen his arm, the belaying-pin was no match for so many knives. He swept the stout ash about him as the girl at last obeyed him. Badoun got the thrust of the blade in his chest, and once more toppled, the rest, crowding aft, hesitating before the swing of the oar as the skipper charged, and then, still facing them, took great strides backward.

The girl was in the cuddy-door. Pinckney and Sykes had broken through their gauntlet with the penalty of flesh wounds from which both were bleeding. But they were hard pressed, and the skipper covered his retreat for the moment with his flail-like weapon. A shot came up the companionway. Instantly the Malays closed and secured the door, while Sykes and the second mate, the skipper last, gained the cuddy. The whole mad mêlée had lasted less than three minutes, and it left the crew in possession of the deck. Evans in the main cabin— the two women, the skipper, both the mates, and Sykes, shut up in the little cabin beneath the poop.

There were shutters to the skylight, shutters to the windows, placed for protection against Malay pirates when the barkentine was new to those seas. These they closed and made fast with bolts. The cuddy door was halved, Dutch-fashion, and it was also pierced, like the window shutters, with loop-holes for guns. But all the pistols, a raffle and a shotgun, were in the main and sleeping-cabins with Evans. He might defend himself with them, they were useless to the holders of the cuddy. The only light that now came in to them was through the square ports in the stern.

The skipper swiftly took cutlasses from the rack about the mizzen, and laid them on the table, testing their edges and shaking his head at the result.

"They'll be at us with the axes," he said. "We'll have to tackle 'em as they come in. Take your choice." He selected his own, and swung it through the air, making the steel sing with the cleaving stroke. "Badly hurt?" he queried at Sykes and the second mate. Miss Burton had quietly started to do what she could for them, the girl assisting her. They tore strips from their white petticoats for bandages.

"Nothink to fuss habout," said Sykes. "W'ot in 'ell started it?"

"They were after me," said Samson. He was fiddling with the cutlasses. In the dusk of the cuddy his brown face seemed a trifle gray. Mary Leigh noticed that his hand shook as he lifted a weapon. The skipper went to the door and glanced out through a loophole. The Malays were all jabbering amidships. All save the first man he had hit with the belaying-pin.

"Eleven to four of us," he muttered, half to himself. "We can't count on Evans. They've got him out of it."

"Is there any way to get into the main cabin through this?" asked the girl, tapping with her foot upon a trap, outlined beneath the cuddy matting.

"No," answered the skipper. "Leads into the *lazaretto*. There's a bulkhead between that and the cabin. Locked with hasps that bolt clean through the teak. And the keys in my pocket. If any one could get through it 'ud be Evans, if he happened to think of it. And it 'ud take him an hour. They'd rush him. This thing will be settled before dark. If it isn't— I wonder what the devil they are up to?" he barked irritably.

"What about Quong?" asked the girl.

"You needn't worry about him. He's half Malay, anyway. If they force his hand he'll join. Here comes Badoun."

#### 4: "So Ends This Day"

HE had spoken with an eye fast to the loophole. His thoughts were gloomier than they showed in his voice. The Malays had got hold of axes. He feared an attack on the cuddy after dark. He feared that the crew might set fire to the ship, if resistance was too strenuous and costly to their side, leaving, then, in the boats. He feared the heat, thirst, hunger. He thought of a *sortie*, but to emerge through the cuddy-door would mean that they would be cut down by men who could stand beside the opening and hack at them. And, if the men were killed— what of the women? He thrust that lead aside, welcoming the sight of Badoun.

From somewhere the serang had produced a Malay sword. The skipper thought grimly of the motto— *strip a Malay and you'll always find a kris*. The crew were supposed to come aboard unarmed, but they had had plenty of opportunities to smuggle in their knives, and had, as usual, availed themselves of them.

With his sword in his hand, Badoun advanced aft, two of his men, carrying axes as well as their *kris*es, close behind him. These he posted by the companion hatch, evidently to guard against any attempt from Evans to break through from below.

It was plain that Badoun was leader. The *tindal* ruled the men as arbiter of their own regulations, but Badoun was the fighting man. He glanced at the cuddy-door, where the gleam of the skipper's eye must have been visible. His face was cruel and confident. Opposite the door he stopped and hailed the skipper.

"Tuan, let me speak along of you. I wish you no harm. See."

He laid sword and *kris* back of him on the hatchway, and stepped closer to the door.

"Stand back," said the skipper to those in the cuddy. "I'm going to talk with him."

He flung open the other half of the door.

"Now then, Badoun, what is the meaning of this? It's mutiny on the high seas. You'll hang for it."

"I think not, Tuan." Badoun spoke in musical sing-song, but there was menace in the tone— menace, and assurance. "We not want harm you, or ship. We want Samsoni. Suppose you give us him, all right, we take him. We go in boats. Go now, before wind come.

"Suppose you no give us Samsoni," he went on, "then we kill all of you. We kill all the men. We kill all the women— *after little while*," he added with an emphasis that made the two women shudder, and set the skipper's blood to boiling."

"You talk like a foolish man, Suppose you kill, you hang. Always I have treated you right." It was hard to get conviction into his words. He knew that if the Malays got clear in the boats it was not far to land, where the bush would swallow them. "Why do you want Mr. Samson?"

At that one of the men by the companion sprang forward. It was the one the mate had foully kicked. Even now he limped, and his face was convulsed with rage. He broke into a volley of Malay. The skipper stopped it with a bellowed command, backed by Badoun, who put his hand on his fellow's naked chest and pushed him away.

"You hear what he say?" said Badoun. "Better you give him up, *Tuan*. We sure get him. We kill all. I think perhaps we not kill women; we take along in boat. What you speak, Tuan?"

"*No!*" roared the skipper, and slammed the door. Sweat shone on his face, his eyes were troubled.

"Pretty soon two bells strike, Tuan," persisted the *serang*. "Much better you change your mind before that time."

The eyes of all of them swung to the cuddy clock. It was twenty minutes to three.

"Pinckney," said the skipper curtly. "See if there is a sail in sight, or any sign of wind?" The second mate looked out through the after ports.

"Nothing," he said simply.

Samson had turned to Sykes.

"What did he say?" he asked. His lips were dry, and he licked at them. The supercargo surveyed him contemptuously. His dislike of the mate boiled over.

"He says you kicked Telak, and they're goin' to carve the bloody 'eart out of yer, Unless we give you hup!"

"I gave you my orders about mistreating the men, Samson," said the skipper accusingly. "Now you've brought us to a hard pass."

There was silence in the cuddy, save for the suave ticking of the clock, beating out the seconds that lay between them and death— for the women, worse.

"Give im hup, I say," said Sykes. The skipper frowned at him, but he paid no attention. "It's 'im or the rest of us," went oft the supercargo. "And then," he jerked his head at the two women. "Ne time to be mealy-mouthed. 'E did it. They've got us, sooner or later. Listen to 'em jabberin'."

The Malays had evidently come aft, assembling outside the little cuddy.

"Between him and the women," said Pinckney. "I votes *him*."

The skipper looked from the mate to Mary Leigh. She was deathly pale, her eyes fixed on the mate. Then they shifted to him. But he could read nothing in them but dumb entreaty. Her aunt had taken up a *kris* from the rack, her face set in strained resolution.

Suddenly Samson broke down.

"My God!" he said, and the hand he held out shook like a leaf in the wind. "You're not going to give me up, to them? They wouldn't keep their word. They'd— Mary— you— you— ?"

The skipper's face hardened at the *Mary*. He seemed to be waiting for a sign from the girl. But she, too, appeared to hold back for his decision: It was up to him, the commander. He knew Badoun, he felt certain that they would, at that moment, be satisfied with the body of the mate. Later—? His eyes roamed about the cabin. The hands of the clock had passed on to twelve minutes past five. Twelve minutes. His face became a carving of stone save for the almost imperceptible movement of his lips.

"We'll not give you up," he said, and the contempt in his voice held the sting of a whip-lash. "White men don't work that way. Nor white women, I fancy."

A glance came over the face of the girl. It was radiant as she gazed at the skipper. But he did not see it. He was opening the locked drawer of the cabin, taking from it a little case, that contained his drugs. As they watched him, fascinated, he took up with steady hand a vial half-filled with white pellets. Two of these he dropped into his palm.

"We've got a show," he said. "If we take them by surprise. Samson, I suppose you are willing to fight for your life? You're in a corner?" The inference was plain in the scornful tone. Samson winced.

"I'll fight," he said suddenly.

"All right. They are all on the main deck. We'll go out through those ports, over the taffrail to the poop. If they hear us— there's the end of it! It's three to one. I'll take you, Samson. Pinckney, you and Sykes take the port ladder. We'll take the starboard. On the word, we'll charge 'em. If we can throw the bolts off the companionway and hold off until Evans gets to us with a gun or me; we've won. If not—?"

He shrugged his shoulders and turned to the two women.

"Close those after-ports en we're through. Keep the cuddy closed. You can watch, if you want to. If they get us— put out your hands."

They extended their palms. They trembled a little as the skipper put into each of them a pellet.

"Cyanide," he said. "I don't need to tell you what to do. Nor when. You'll never know—" His deep voice faltered, and the sweat ran down his face like a stream. He took half a step toward Mary, and checked himself. "We've just got five minutes," he said. "Out with you and go like snakes. I'll give the word. When they hear the cabin clock they'll break all hell loose. So, if we're to win out, we must get the jump on them."

There were four of the stern ports, and each opened. inward. The four men sat on the sills, cutlasses beneath their teeth. They reached up to the taffrail, hoisted themselves, feet on the frames. Then, with a spring and a flexing of muscles, they were up and gone, gliding over the rail to the deserted deck, where the idle wheel swung between spokes.

In the cuddy the two women, each with a pellet of death clutched in her palm, closed the windows. Beyond, the two sharks were trailing back and forth in the wake. The women looked at each other, blanched, listening for some sound above, watching the hands of the clock.

Two to starboard and two to port, the four white men writhed over the planks. At the break of the poop they rose to all-fours, still out of sight from below. A shot was heard. Evans was firing at random through the main skylight. If he would understand when they opened the companion, if he had guns ready, they might win through.

Five chiming strokes sounded from beneath them, blending with fainter tinkles from the clock in the main cabin. There was a crash of wood under an ax blow. The skipper leaped to his feet, cutlass gripped.

"Now!" he yelled, and vaulted the poop rail while the rest bounded down the ladders.

There was a moment or two of scythe-like strokes as the cutlasses rose and fell. The Malays, taken by utter surprise, massed confusedly. The skipper won through to the companion and backed to it, his left hand fumbling for the bolts while he exchanged blows with Badoun, fighting like a disappointed fiend.

"Evans!" he roared. And his great bass, that could top a gale, boomed vibrant. "*Up! With the guns!*"

Badoun's sword swept in a feinting circle about the skipper's clumsier weapon. But the captain's fury matched the Malay's speed. His cutlass thrust aside the steel, and, as the *serang* leaped back, the skipper lunged. The cutlass blade entered Badoun's chest, deep, with the blood spurting as the Malay reeled. And the bolts had been slipped.

Behind the skipper the companion doors slid back, a pistol barked, Telak fell writhing, Evans leaped out, thrusting a revolver into the skipper's ready hand, handing a shotgun at Sykes. Pinckney stooped and gathered up another pistol that lay on the top of the ladder.

The crew fell back at the fall of Badoun and Telak. The shot, the sight of the guns, swept the madness from their brains as a broom clears cobwebs. They knew the fight was lost.

"For'ard with ye!" shouted the skipper. "Down to the foc'sl'e! Drop your knives!"

They fled in a huddle, leaving Badoun gasping his last, Telak on his face, motionless. As they ran they dropped the *krises*. The skipper herded them, with Pinckney and Evans, fastening the forecandle hatch above them. Sykes turned to the cuddy door, now opening.

"We'll work the ship to Macassar ourselves," said the skipper. They can stay there. They'll swing for this, the last one of them."

"Short and sweet that was," said the panting Sykes to the women. "Did you see the skipper? A man-tamer, that's what he is. But it was a bit of a close shave, at that."

He flung himself, panting, into a chair, and held out this wrist to the elder woman.

"The bandage shifted," he said. "D' yer mind fixin' it?"

Mary Leigh stepped to the door. Her mind was clearing slowly from the tragedy that had deadened it. She saw Samson, standing over the fallen Telak, and her glance passed on to where the skipper was coming aft again, big, burly, shouldering along on the deck that he had won. A great light shone in her eyes.

Suddenly Samson, who had been watching her, reckoned the blankness of her gaze as it had ignored him, knowing why it had suddenly become brilliant, kicked savagely at Telak. Perhaps the Malay, clinging to revenge in the face of death, had been shamming, waiting his chance with the unquenchable patience of his kind.

His face turned from the planks, one hand shot out like the flung coil of a serpent, it clutched the mate's ankle, dragged him down with a frenzied jerk. In

the other hand a *kris* rose and fell once. Then Telak's arms dropped with a thud, his twisting features stilled and grayed. And Samson, blood spouting from below his groin, strove to drag himself away.

The barkentine was headed into the sunset, flowing in sheets of crimson splendor, clouds moving across the deeper glare like smoke. Into the wind she forged while the eastern sky flowed red, and everywhere, save where the dazzle of the sun played, the sea ran deepest-blue with a hint of glowing foam in the crests.

Mary Leigh was alone with the skipper in the cuddy. Pinckney held the wheel. The course was set for Macassar. Quong had come out of his galley, deprecatory.

"No good for me," he said. "Me cookee, no good for fight. If I no mixee, mebbe they let me alone. Now evellything allee lightee."

Badoun and Telak had gone to the sharks. The mutineers, secured below the hatch, would be delivered over to justice within twenty-four hours. Sykes and Evans acted as the working crew for the diminished sails spread. Samson was in his bunk, with Miss Burton tending him. The skipper had just come from patching him up.

"He is not going to die, unless there is blood-poisoning," said the skipper. "We'll have him in hospital this time to-morrow. This breeze is going to hold."

He did not look at the girl, though he felt her gaze compelling him. He cleared the table of two cutlasses, setting them in place in the rack.

"You had better turn in," he said. "It has been a strenuous day. You needn't worry about Samson. He'll get well."

"I'm not bothering about him," she said, and the trembling quality of her voice brought the skipper face to face with her, "He doesn't matter," she went on, and her face was the hue of the afterglow. Her eyes as sparkling as the crystal facets of the waves. "Nothing matters— except *you!*"

The skipper's pent-up passion overflowed as he swept her into his arms, holding her fiercely.

"You mean that?" he asked hoarsely. She answered him with her lips. Presently he felt her relax in his arms with a sigh.

"I'm hurting you," he said. She smiled up at him.

"Do," she said. "I want you to. What is it, John, you wrote in your log, after the day's-record?"

He replied wonderingly:

"So ends this day?"

"That's it. So ends this day. And every other day. Like this."

## 11: The Hands of Fate

Short Stories 25 May 1935

### 1: Murder?

"THERE is a dead man under the ice on Badger River. A *chechako*." Corporal Terence O'Kane, corporal in charge of the Mounted detachment at Fort Arrow, Mackenzie River Basin, looked up at the speaker.

It was Malcolm Murray, dour and not too successful independent trader. Behind the trader stood the Eskimo, Itosiak, Murray's right hand man. Both of the men were tall, both lean, and their skins were leathery. O'Kane knew nothing against Murray, save that he was a pinch-penny, but of the pair he preferred Itosiak, stolid but not stupid, a famous trail-breaker and, among the tribesmen, a mighty hunter.

Murray had a face like an old dog-fox, reddish hair and whiskers a bit grizzled, gray-blue eyes over close together, a trifle faded. They had the hue of shore ice, and they looked as cola.

Itosiak had eyes like sloes. They seemed to be pinched between cheeks and brows. His features were Mongolian and masklike, with the Oriental fold to the eyelids.

For a moment, O'Kane studied them. They were just off the trail. It was early spring, the sun had appeared, the long, long nights were over, snow was melting on the tundra, ice dissolving in the lakes.

"How do you know he was a *chechako*?" asked the corporal. Itosiak shrugged his parkad shoulders. Murray slowly drew off his mittens. That was the way with the trader. Everything he did appeared deliberate, but he usually came out ahead.

"No sourdough would try and travel Badger River bottom in the winter," he said. "No sourdough wears a beard on a winter trail. We could see this chap's whiskers through the ice. They didn't grow after he was dead. That's a fule's yarn. The flesh may shrink, but the hair; don't sprout. This one is well preserved Corporal; though there's no tellin' when he died. Badger freezes clear to the bottom in places. And the ice has been thinning for the last week."

"Couldn't identify him, I suppose."

"If I could, I'd ha' mentioned it," said Murray drily. "No, we couldna see that plain. The ice is rough, yet, and none too clear."

"You were coming down the river bed?" asked O'Kane. He was not much more than half the age of the man he questioned, but he had efficiency and authority marked upon his Celtic face. A corporal in charge of detachment is of

greater importance than the rank suggests, though he may have, as O'Kane had, only one policeman and a special constable under him.

HIS death sounded like what was called a natural demise, though some might cite it as contributory suicide, caused by the ignorance of a tenderfoot. But O'Kane got hunches sometimes. He had a notion that there was more to it than natural causes. Also that Itosiak shared that notion; that Murray himself knew, or suspected, something out of the way.

But he was not going to get it out of either of them by direct questioning. If they did not volunteer information they did not mean to give it. That was the way of natives and old-timers of the North, as if they absorbed something of its eternal mystery and silence,

"We've been to Whiterock," said Murray. "First trip in. I took six hundred pounds o' tobacco, candy, dried fruits an' tea, wi' some tinned stuff. We came back empty, an' fast."

That was not a reply to the corporal's query, but O'Kane did not seem to notice it. He made a note or two on the pad, still seated at his official desk, with his official coat of scarlet and the chevrons of command,

"Thinking of starting a store there?" he asked.

Whiterock was a new mining camp, started the year before. It might become a town if the lode kept producing. Miners considered that placer-mining days were done, and going in for quartz and stamp mills,

Murray's face grew sour. A vague mould seemed to come out upon it. He looked down his nose, half slyly.

"I might, if the Hudson Bay folk woulna cut prices to the bone; aye, to the very marrow"; he added, with a flash of warm temper. "They can buy cheaper an' bigger stocks than we free-traders. They'd grind us under foot. It was Itosiak saw the corp," he went on, as if he had never varied from the subject. 'We were on the - bank. Itosiak was breakin' trail. The snow was mushy, an' made poor traveling. The wind blew the stuff in the dogs' eyes, an' they were always tryin' to quit, to lie down an' sleep."

Kane knew all about that, as well as Murray, but he only nodded, swung his swivel-chair towards the Eskimo, who had not uttered a word. Itosiak used the Mackenzie Basin 'pidgin'.

"How come, Itosiak ?"

"I fix um dog. Go ahead, so they come along. No use whippum. They no can see, no can do. I look down, see something in ice. Look something like um seal, but no seal in'river. I speak along boss. I go looksee mo' plain. Boss come down. We both look. All same as boss speak along of you."

"You didn't know the man? Never saw him before ?"

For a moment, O'Kane believed he saw a deliberate attempt at unseen communication between Itosiak and the trader. It was gone, in a flash. At most it was little, if anything, more than a mere twitch of the flesh, such as a man with tic might make. It seemed rather as if the thing that passed— if it did pass— was telepathic rather than telegraphic.

BOTH men were in full range of the corporal's keen vision, but he could not see Murray. show the slightest reception. But, to O'Kane, Itosiak had silently, if mentally, asked a question, and Murtagh had answered it, also with silence. it did not seem vital. These men had just come in from Whiterock. The dead chechako might have been dead for weeks, for months, embalmed in the ice. It was not conceivable that they were guilty of his death, that if they had been they would have reported it— though Murray might have done such a thing. But, for some reason, they were withholding something. If they did not know the dead man, they guessed who he might be. If they were not willing to swear they had seen him before, they might not be willing to swear that they had not.

They had brought the news, turned the affair over to the police. And they were staying out of it. As for the Eskimo's complete accord with the white man, such fealties were not uncommon, and their causes often obscure, not easy to be understood.

Murray and his musher left the detachment barracks for the trader's store, and O'Kane prepared for his grisly task.

Another month, and the trails would be wide open. Now messages went by Indian runner, at twenty-five miles a day, to points where they could be relayed by telegraph. The Royal Canadian Signals, and their short-wave sets, could be called in on occasion, a plane might be chartered. But those things rested with District Headquarters at Edmonton. The burden of immediate and intelligent aes lay upon O'Kane.

So far it was merely mystery, not crime. In the territory there were five thousand Eskimos, four thousand Athabaskan Indians, and something like a thousand white men. The Mounted Detachments were expected to keep track of all of these, to account for the missing. The man beneath the ice might be on the lists sent from time to time of Missing Persons.

That was routine. It was not a routine job that lay ahead of O'Kane. He took along his constable and his special-officer, Koutouk, interpreter and musher.

They used the detachment's toboggan sled and seven dogs, and they called at Murray's store for Itosiak to go with them, and point out the spot. He went willingly— enough. Murray, in his dour fashion, had little to say.

IT WAS a ghastly detail, and not an easy one. Not hard to get through the ice about the body, but difficult to release it from the mass that extended to the river bed. It might not have done so when the man first lay there.

The ice has many flaws, and poor refractions. It was murky, and showed the corpse as if it were the reflection of a cheap and dirty mirror. It was enshrined there much as an insect is preserved in cloudy amber.

The face was most clearly revealed, though that was only a vague, pallid shape of flesh that stared upwards with horrible eyes, out of which all color seemed to have leached, so that they were only whitish orbs.

The man's parka hood had fallen back and the face was framed in black hair from chin to pate. Hair that was lank, like sable seaweed. The parka front was open, a long outer shirt of khaki or similar material, but its side folds concealed the arms,

They got the big block free at last, with prodigious, perspiring labor. It was a lump of ice roughly seven feet long, four feet wide, and about three feet high. Solid, save for the body in its center.

In some strange and sardonic quirk of memory, O'Kane was reminded of a salmon he had seen frozen and exhibited in the window of a restaurant. But that ice had been clear, showing every detail. This concealed more than it revealed, save for the main, insistent fact.

They wrapped canvas and tarpaulins about it, lashed it to the sled. It was a full load. In places, they had to help the dogs haul, on the way back to the detachment. There was an outhouse at the barracks that would serve as morgue.

The nearest official medical officer was at Aklavik, but there was a doctor at Arrow who had authority as acting-assistant-surgeon. He was a Scotch Canadian named Shiels. O'Kane called on him for an autopsy.

Shiels liked his nips, but he was a good medico, and a cool one. "We'll have to thaw him out," he said as he looked at the bulk that once had been a man.. "Best to freeze him up again when I'm through, if it's identification you're after. He'll not last long, once he's been exposed. Neither will the winter."

"Long enough to get him through to Edmonton, it it's necessary."

Shiels looked curiously at O'Kane. "Got one of those hunches of yours? Looks to me like another case of an innocent. North of Sixty is no place for tenderfeet. However, we'll soon see."

He glanced about the shed. It had a table, used as a carpenter's hench. "This' do," said the surgeon, "but you'll have to get a stove in here— for both of us. And a bottle of whiskey from your medical supplies. I'll not use it all, O'Kane, but this is not a sweet job ahead of me."

HIS face was grim. when he poked his head into the barracks room two hours later, and beckoned to O'Kane with a backward sweep of his head. He was perfectly sober, but the bottle was half empty.

The floor boards of the shack were wet, the air was steamy. The body lay under a sheet of light oilskin, used for sled packing.

"Cause of death," said Shiels, and dropped a misshapen bullet into O'Kane's palm. "It entered the skull at the base, by the nape of the neck; to be exact, through the top cervical vertebra, which it smashed. It wound up in the frontal sinus, with its force spent, and its deadly duty ended. It just did not break through."

"Rifle slug, looks like thirty-thirty," said O'Kane, weighing the missile. "Common enough weapon. Killed him instantly, I suppose. And was fired from below, at a sharp angle."

"Angle of about ninety degrees," Shiels agreed. "Looks as if he were on the bank and the killer fired from the river— from behind, at that. A damned good shot, O'Kane."

O'Kane looked at the surgeon curiously. He could smell the whiskey on his breath, but the man's hands were steady as those of a diamond-cutter, his eyes were mobile and brilliant. He was distinctly not drunk.

"Ws murder," said the corporal. "My hunch was right."

"Murder it is," echoed Shiels, "but you don't know the half of your hunch, O'Kane. Better take a snifter before I show you."

O'Kane shook his head. "Never on duty, and not much off," he said. "What is it?"

"This would have killed him, but it was done after he was dead," said Shiels; "or he would have been drained of blood. The murderer mutilated him, for some fantastic reason."

He drew back the shroud. Both the man's hands had been lopped off at the wrists, cleanly enough, with a sharp instrument, like a woodsman's hatchet, or perhaps an axe.' The cold had seared the flesh, but O'Kane could see the ends of both radius and ulna bones at the extremities.

"Sheared through," Shiels said. "Missed the carpals, perhaps by accident. I doubt if the beggar was an anatomist. It struck me as a bit uncanny, O'Kane. That's why I half emptied your bottle. I saw that, of course, before I probed for the bullet, or found the spot it entered. Poor devil hadn't had a haircut recently. His hair hid the entry. But it was those missing hands, so obviously severed after death— and missing— that made me look in it yet."

"Might be a quick way of getting rid of fingerprints," suggested the corporal. "Faster than cutting off the fingers. Or some malformation. It looks to me like a deliberate attempt to avoid identification, if discovery were ever made. Other three weeks, and if the body hadn't been found, the wolves or wolverines would have got at it."

"I wonder if they looked at it through the ice, knew what it was? I doubt it," said Shiels. "They have to smell their meat, giving off living scent, or dead rottenness. Well, O'Kane, there's your hunch and double-hunch, your murder and your mystery. Go to it. I'll turn in my report. And I'll take another drink."

"How about distinguishing marks?"

Shiels, helping himself to raw liquor, shook his head. "A mole or two, small pigmentary *naevi* that only a mother or a wife would remember. Nothing significant. Chap was under thirty. Healthy. If I believed in physiognomy, which I don't, I'd say he was strong physically, tolerably mentally, and weak morally— Very likely quite a likable sort. Not the | laborer type at all. Here's a tip, O'Kane— without a damn thing to back it up, mind— you. He might have been a remittance-man from the old country, one of the Rover boys in search of a fortune. That's my hunch— don't take it too seriously."

O'Kane did not, although he did not ignore the hint. He felt he was going to need all the sidelights, however feeble, that might illuminate the problem of the missing hands.

His work done, Shiels was beginning to show the effect of the drinks he had taken. He wavered out into the dusk.

O'KANE lit a bracket-lamp that was in the shed, and gazed again at the grisly exhibit before he covered up the mutilated body.

He spent the evening looking over Missing Persons circulars, but he found nothing that helped him identify the handless corpse. In all cases cited there was at least one outstanding mark of recognition.

The corporal intended to ask certain picked people to try and identify the dead man, but he did not intend to mention the lack of hands. He was positive Murray and Itosiak would not talk, Shiels would be professionally discreet, the two constables silent on command,

O'Kane felt, logically enough, that the truth about the hands would be the key to the mystery, but they might— or the lack of them— be used as a surprise to trap, if not the killer, a reluctant but important witness.

It would, of course, go in his official report to Edmonton. And that would go forward by Koutouk, the detachment's special constable and musher. First thing in the morning.

O'Kane finished that report before he turned-in, close to midnight.

In the outhouse, where the stove had long since gone out and been removed, the handleless, nameless relic froze stiff and stark as the temperature dropped down. Outside, and overhead, the aurora borealis crackled sharply as the brilliant streamers shook in shifting color, like brilliant banners of Boreas, soon to retreat for the few weeks of respite from the frost.

Sap was stirring faintly, leafbuds were forming, the miracle of spring resurrection was to hand, though it might be two weeks before the first true sign appeared.

O'Kane was no heretic, but he wondered what kind of resurrection awaited what Shiels had called "the poor devil."

## 2: The Hand That Talked

PÉRE Ladue, in charge of the mission at Fort Arrow, dropped in on O'Kane next morning, as he was wont to do after his daily stroll of visitation and exercise.

The ruddy, chubby priest, whose tonsure was wholly natural, removed his black broad brim, drew off his gloves and hitched up his soutane as he took the chair O'Kane offered: and regaled himself with a pinch of snuff. The Father and the corporal were good friends, Père Ladue was a staunch believer in the idea that temporal and ecclesiastical matters were best administered jointly, in a settlement like this.

There was little escaped Père Ladue, O'Kane fancied. Aside from the secrets of the confessional, the women told him everything— and more, which the astute priest discounted. His jolly, amiable appearance was cover for a great shrewdness.

O'Kane was sure that the priest knew of the departure of the sled the day before, its return with a swathed, mysterious load. Also the departure of Koutouk, the runner,

The wilderness is a hard place in which to hide anything, or anybody. The slightest incident is news, passed on, discussed. But Ladue was too politic and polite to put the direct question. The police had their own confessionale, which he respected.

He sneezed vigorously into the voluminous silk bandana, gift of grateful parishioners, folded his hands on his round belly and blandly inquired:

"Any news, my son?"

O'Kane nodded. He told the other of the discovery of the body, the finding of the bullet, but he did not mention the mutilation, even to Ladue, though he did not distrust the priest for an instant. Promising secrecy, Père Ladue would

regard the pledge as sacred. But O'Kane regarded that information as an ace in the hole. It was part of the hunch.

"I'd like you to see if you can identify the man," said O'Kane.

In the presence of death, the priest acquired new dignity. His office could pass beyond the threshold between the quick and the dead. He made gestures of benediction as O'Kane turned back the temporary pall, looked carefully, and shook his head.

"I think not," he said slowly. "A young man who died suddenly, and unshriven. Not, perhaps, of the Faith. It is hard for the young to die early, and violently. There is something vaguely familiar there; about the brows, I think, but too vague for me to assemble into a definite memory."

He shook his head again, repeated his hallowed signs, and followed the corporal back to the warm barracks-room.

"Is there anything I can do for you, Father?"

"I don't know, my son, just how far you will feel like extending your authority in this matter. Circumstances are naturally different than in a city, where they have local ordinances. It might, I suppose, come under the Criminal Code as 'False Pretenses,' or 'Fraud and Intent to Defraud?' On the other hand," he added with a twinkle in his eyes, "your superiors might consider it largely my affair. There is, I fear, nothing in Criminal Code or either Federal or Provincial Statutes against witchcraft."

"Witchcraft? You mean shamanism?" O'Kane was aware that P  re Ladue was well versed in its Code and statutes, as well probably as he was himself, with his course of lectures at Regina, and his periodical examinations, shamanism, of course, was hard to eradicate among the Indians. It interfered with the priest's conversions. Even the most faithful of his flock held secret belief in the ancient ways and superstitions.

"I mean witchcraft. Fortune-telling. You know a woman named Peekoya?"

"Widow of Mukhagaluk. He was chief of this tribe, also a shaman. He died of flu a year ago. She came here last winter to stay with relatives. She will be in this spring census. I have seen her once or twice. What is she up to?"

"She claims, like the Witch of Endor, to raise spirits from the dead. She sells charms that the natives wear next to their scapulars, and she tells fortunes. It is — disturbing and disrupting. Lately she has acquired quite a reputation making predictions for white miners. No doubt she has information as to where they can find quartz outcrops, from her own people."

"I've heard something about that," said O'Kane. "It's pretty hard to stamp out. Does she claim the spirits give her the tips in a trance?"

"I'm not sure of the details, except that the answers are given by the talking hand."

"By the *what*?"

"I understand it is a mummied hand, supposed to be that of some distant ancestor of Mukhagaluk. Shamanism is largely hereditary. In order to become one you have to have a collection of the right sort of drums, and some acknowledged supernatural gift. Mukhagaluk had two sons, but they were both drowned. So his mantle, together with the talking hand, descends upon Peekoya."

"What does the hand do? Tap? One for yes and two for no? I've seen a rocking skull, but that was worked by electromagnetism. I'd like to see this magic hand, Father."

THE mention of a severed hand was startling, though it might be purely coincidental. Such relics were part and parcel of the shaman's hocus-pocus, O'Kane decided to look up Peekoya, and her relatives. Koutouk could have told him, or found out, but Koutouk was on trail with the report. Questions put direct by the corporal would stir up too much interest. It would spread like wildfire among the natives, the magic hand would disappear, Peekoya would instantly become a decrepit, harmless old crone.

There was probably no great harm in her, but O'Kane made up his mind to investigate.

"I'll see what I can do, Father," he said.

Père Ladue got up, took another pinch of snuff, drew on gloves and adjusted muffler and hat. Whatever he wore underneath, he used no outer coat above his soutane.

"Do that, and may *le bon Dieu* bless you. That sort of thing is hard to put down, of course. It undermines the prestige of the Church." The twinkle came again into his eyes. "It might make the Indians think that my 'medicine' is not as strong as Peekoya's. It inclines them to ride the fence between the two of us."

"There is, or was, an old man up at Coppermine, named Oksuk," said O'Kane, "who claimed he had joined so many white man's religions that, together with his own, he was sure of salvation. They used to call him 'No-can-go-to-hell.'"

"Ah," said the priest, amusedly. "See what may be done with Peekoya, my son. She is a thorn in my side. But if you take away her magic tribal relic, you may stir up trouble."

O'Kane nodded, a trifle grimly. He knew what it might mean to get under the hide of an Eskimo, through the thin veneer of transplanted religion to his own ideas of shamanism, where every stick and stone, every cloud and beast has a soul, where nothing ever happened through Nature, but always by some

spirit, good or evil, controlled by charms and magic formulae. They had no native belief in anything like a god or goddess. They were not even pagans. And a generation of so of contact with what they regarded as white shamans did not go very deep.

If he made a wrong move, stirred up any sort of trouble, it would probably mean the loss of his promotion. The government was touchy about native rights, careful about the privileges of the precious "charges of the Empire." He might do Père Ladue more harm than good. O'Kane kept this thoughts to himself, but with all the Mounted, from the inspectors down, who had to do with Indians in actual contact and observation, he thought them pampered.

They were fast learning to depend upon government rations, losing their own initiative, giving up their hunting, too lazy even to catch fish for the winter, or bring in wolves for bounty at thirty dollars a head, They were getting dee dent.

But if the mummied hand proved to be a genuine relic, equivalent to a nail or fragment of the cross, or the bone of a martyr, O'Kane was going to leave it alone. He might caution Peekoya against too much hokum, but he would do it in a friendly spirit.

Now, if there had been two hands—?

O'KANE set that idea aside as fantastic, yet he knew he was going to see Peekoya, not only for Père Ladue, but because of the prompting of his hunch, It pecked at his subconscious, almost as the ghost-hand of Peekoya might tap out replies from the spirit-land.

There was a man at Fort, an American by the name of Emerson, whom O'Kane thoroughly trusted. The settle ment was swiftly growing in size and importance. The Hudson's Bay tradingpost had many buildings, as had the mission, Murray had a large warehouse beside his store. Three mining companies had representatieves there. Emerson specialized in supplies to the prospectors passing through to the new strikes, or in hopes of individual finds of their own, in the rapidly developing mining region.

Emerson had been partly crippled in the War. A shattered hip prevented him from active mining, bue he knew the game, specially with regard to similar ores and quartzes that were being discovered. These were not limited to gold, and Emerson was in request as an assayer. O'Kane believed him scrupulously honest. He did not overload a chechako with worthless and expensive equipment, he did not overcharge, and his assays had the reputation for averaging a high degree of accuracy.

Emerson was a mighty decent sort of chap who gave sound advice. He was likely to have warned a man against wearing a beard, sure to ice up, to become

part of a mask of ice that would cover the face, burn through the flesh to the bone in bad weather and long exposure.

He was one of the men the corporal wanted to look at the face of the dead man. He might have outfitted him, or talked with him.

A large number of prospectors, *chechakos* and sourdoughs both, dealt with Emerson, much to the disgruntlement of Murray, who begrudged the rivalry of the Hudson's Bay Post; established long before his own arrival.

And O'Kane had another thing in mind in connection with Emerson. He put it up to him after he had got the American to look at the body, displayed, from the shoulders up, at the end of daylight, by the bracket lamp.

Emerson looked long and carefully, finally shook his head.

"I don't think so," he said, "though I won't be sure. He might as well be wearing a mask as those whiskers, It's a funny thing how many tenderfeet think they have to make up like General Grant, or Fremont, when they come north. Of course there are plenty of white men with cheaters, but they are mostly traders, not trail-hitters. There is something about him," he added doubtfully, as Père Ladue had done. "He would have been a good looker, if he has any sort of chin under that beard."

"Doc Shiels didn't seem to think somuch of it as a chin," said O'Kane. The missing hands bothered him. He was a great believer in hands for identification. Not merely fingerprints, but the general shape, the length of fingers. He believed they could be easily classified and a man trained to recognize the types on sight. It was also his impression that there were no two sets of palms where the lines were alike. It was a theory of his he meant to work upon. And now these gabsat members hampered him.

"Theres an Eskimo woman," he said, "called Peekoya, they say tells fortunes' with a ghost-hand, mummied, I imagine, supposed to have belonged to an ancestor who was a wizard. They say she has helped her clients locate some good finds. Probably *her* relatives tip her off to white rock leads."

Emerson grinned. "I wouldn't wonder; I know the dame. I've taken chaps down there who traded with me, and had heard about her from outside. Of course it's bunkum, but she puts it over. It's one swell show. You ought to see it. Spooks whispering in the roof, the old girl throwing a fit, and the hand tapping out the right answers. Creepy. Gets under your skin, Made mine gooseflesh, and the short hairs stand up on my spine. Worth the price of admission. And she has handed out good tips. I hadn't thought of her folks tipping her off about the quartz, That's a slick angle."

O'KANE mentally gave Père Ladue due credit, but he did not sap the prestige of the Force.

"I'd like to see it, Emerson. If I went officially I'd get nothing, of course. How about you toggling me out as a *chechako* and introducing me as a customer of yours. I don't want to harm her. I won't have her fined or imprisoned. But I would surely like to see that talking hand."

"I wouldn't want to get the old girl into trouble. She paints the rainbow a bit, but he's just an old woman trying to get by, and she has handed out some worthwhile tips. I come from down south where there are witch-doctors, male and female. Most of their conjure is on the right side. So long as you aim to give her a decent show, I'll do that. How about tonight?"

"That suits me." O'Kane reserved his own ideas about Peekoya's possible chicanery until he got a good look at the talking hand.

### 3: Peekoya

SWATHED in a heavy miner's coat over a Mackinaw shirt, with a muffler up to his chin, wearing a fur cap with a low peak; it was easy for O'Kane to change his military erectness to a slouch that diminished his height, and perfected the disguise. Emerson's introduction helped a lot, virtually vouching for him as a *chechako*.

As often happened before the true spring thaw set in, the night was cold. Beneath the moon, the air glittered with tiny particles of ice, producing a faint rainbow iridescence seen against the light. The stone igloo in which Peekoya lived had its dome covered with snow that was frosted like a Christmas card. The surface squeaked beneath their snowshoes.

They would, Emerson said, find Peekoya's more or less worthless nephew on hand, apparently acting as tiler to the shaman lodge.

O'Kane had nothing against this Amokok, knowing him as one of half a dozen Eskimo youths who affected the white man's clothing, hung about the places where illicit liquor was sold. They added the vices of the white to their own, sponged on their female relatives and friends.

"He'll hold you up for a buck," explained Emerson. "That's his own private graft, but if he wanted to queer you with the old lady she'd never talk to you, even if you got through. She's a queer one. I've seen her turn down good money, and refuse to do her act for some men without any apparent reason, except that she figured them bad medicine. Might have felt them sceptical or laughing at her. If she takes a dislike to you she'll just say '*ajorpok*', and close up like a clam."

O'Kane did not doubt that the fortune-teller had a good measure of native sagacity, a certain clairvoyance. He was considering that as they came to the igloo, with a figure in a furlined parka on guard outside.

This was Amokok. He recognized Emerson, and looked at the corporal carelessly. He had an ill-tempered husky dog with him, a big beast, ninety-per-cent wolf, with a curious saddle of yellow fur. It snarled, leaping out viciously to the end of a short chain stapled to a tree.

Amokok knocked it down with a blow on its muzzle from a club, and it retreated, still emitting its hate in guttural coughings.

"Friend of mine, Johnny Newcome, wants to get advice from the Talking Hand," said Emerson.

"Some one inside now. Through pretty soon I think. You give one dollar now. Peekoya, she tell you how much, inside."

O'Kane produced the dollar, and Amokok pouched it with an insolent sort of cockiness that made the corporal want to stiffen him up. No doubt Amokok, the modernist, was an unbeliever in the magic of his ancient aunt. Perhaps he knew the secret of the "Talking Hand" and despised all suckers who fell for the deslusion, especially if they were white men.

An igloo, of ice or stone, is entered in only one fashion, through a sloping tunnel, up which the visitor goes in crouching manner, almost on all-fours. At the end of the tunnel a curtain always hangs. You emerge in the same undignified manner. The passage and its ramp are designed primarily for ventilation, but they make also for safety in defense, or a means of advantageous attack.

O'KANE thought of that as the client of Peekoya came out like a spring bear. The husky sprang again to the limit of its tether, and the man rapped out words to it in Eskimo that silenced it.

He pulled the hood of his parka forward but O'Kane got a good look at him before the fur lining hid his features.

It was Itosiak, musher and general factotum for Malcolm Murray. Amokok said something to him in his own tongue. O'Kane's Eskimo was limited. It was hard to study when most of the natives preferred the pidgin. But Itosiak was plainly not in good humor, and O'Kane fancied that Amokok replied to him with more than a tinge of mockery.

Itosiak took his snowshoes from where he had parked them in the crust, as uprights, and shuffled off without a syllable of greeting to the two white men. He seemed disgruntled. O'Kane wondered if Peekoya had told him a bad fortune, or simply refused to function. Amokok, the corporal remembered, had said he thought Itosiak would be "through pretty soon." The visit did not seem especially significant, save that it was Itosiak who had discovered the handless corpse, but did not know it was handless.

O'Kane made a note of it. It was a link that might not fit, but he had found odd links useful, once in a while.

Amokok motioned to them to enter. They thrust the stems of their snowshoes into the stiff snow, and crawled up the passage. At its end, a curtain of caribou hides waved gently in the draft. The interior of the beehive-like dwelling was warm enough. Some moisture crept down the walls. It stank of stale air, of seal oil, of musty garments, of old age, and fish.

A drum stove glowed red, its pipe thrust through the top of the dome. A stone shelf ran all around, bed, settee and sideboard all in one. It was more or less cluttered up with pots and pans.

There was a table covered with a cloth in pattern of red and white squares, its folds reaching to the floor, where some pelts and a native blanket were strewn.

On the high side of the table was a stool. On the other a more elaborate seat, a sort of throne of wood like teak, inlaid in ivory. It had walrus tusks for arms, with two more curving above the back in an inverted V. The seat was deep and low, and seemed occupied by sacking illy stuffed with rags but mantled in a robe that a trader would have fought over. It was made of the breasts of eider duck, edged with supple caribou skin beaded and quilled exquisitely. Undoubtedly filthy and lice-ridden, intrinsically it was a thing of great beauty and value.

An overhead lamp, shadeless, its chimney smutted, hung from the roof. Two smaller ones stood on the stone shelf. The flames sputtered and flickered on the rude, untrimmed wicks. The cross lighting was uncertain. Shadows blinked continuously.

The robe about the bundle on the thronelike chair had a peaked hood. That opened, and for a moment, O'Kane almost believed in shaman totemism and magic. It seemed as if the head of a great turtle was thrust out on a wizened neck that looked like a bundle of cords in a loose but scrawny bag of skin.

The nose was snubbed, the nostrils flattened slits. All the face was creased with innumerable plicatures, corrugated, charted with cracks that covered brows and cheeks and chin, like the glazing of old porcelain. The cheekbones looked as if bony fists were thrust from inside against the parchments skin, showing their knuckles. The skin itself was blotched with freak pigmentation. The lips were closed, beaklike, horny mandibles. The flat nose came down to meet them, the chin curved up. Peekoya looked centuries old. Her rheumy eyes seemed fixed, ophidian and baleful. They shone like beads, the only sign of life, until a claw crept from the robe.

THOSE eyes were studying O'Kane.

He could see the tendons of the shrunken wrist working as the repellent fingers moved, motioning to both of them. Emerson to a seat on the stone bench near the entrance; O'Kane to the stool.

Then there was silence, save for the sputtering of the stinking seal-oil lamps.

Presently there came strange whisperings in the top of the dome, tiny, shrill sounds that seemed mutterings from little, invisible ghosts. Eskimo ghosts, according to what syllables O'Kane could catch and translate. He was not impressed, though he tried not to show that, to appear interested and credulous. It was a typical chaman trick, a ventriloquial conjuration. The chin of the crone was now drawn back in shadow. Neither lips nor nostrils quivered. She was belly grunting her gibberish. O'Kane doubted if it was a true invocation. The hag knew well enough she could - never be a true shaman. She had no spirit drums; no ghost trumpets eight feet long. She would not have dared to use them. Hers was the sorcery of cunning and intuition,

The whisperings ceased. She croaked out her Mackenzie pidgin.

"What you like, white man? What you wanchee savvy. I think you white-rock man. You like findum gold. You ask Peekoya. She plenty poor. You giveum two dolla, I takeun spirit sleep, tell what I see, what I hear."

"What about the ghost hand? How much for that," said O'Kane bluntly, as he felt a chechako would have spoken.

HE FELT, rather than saw, those reptilian, hypnotic eyes boring into him, as if they wanted to observe his soul. For a moment he wondered if she smelled a trap, if her native sophism, irrational and subconscious, weighed his in the balance, and found him spurious. It was quite possible.

A dog instinctively likes or dislikes. A primitive, especially if ancient, often possesses some strange faculty of selection for amity or enmity. Civilized man plays games where the thoughts of many are concentrated on a hidden object while one tries to discover it. Try that with a shaman, and he would laugh at its simplicity. Eskimo tots play it as soon as they learn to talk.

O'Kane had found that natives were apt to read his thoughts, when they came within the scope of their understanding and experience. He found himself resisting a curious, psychic pressure of Peekoya's snakelike orbs. He tried to banish his true desire, his reason for the séance, to appear like a tenderfoot, gullible, green as new grass.

HE was not too sure he had succeeded when she spoke.

"Five dolla. That make Peekoya too much tire. She have to go long way in spirit worl' to find ghost of heap-big shaman one time own that hand. Him

Akkarna. Mukhagaluk him son, through many father. Akkarna speakum true. Not say much. You askum. Then hand say 'yes', mebesso say 'no', I not know which way. You askum. Give five dolla."

O'Kane wondered if he would ever get the five dollars back. It was a private investment. Disbursement officials at Ottawa were not lavish, if just. He was backing his own hunch. Two days' pay. He placed it on the table.

Peekoya did not touch it. She was fumbling with the cloth of the table on her side. She seemed to reach into a drawer. She produced an object she laid on the table top, in the vague light.

It was a hand, a human hand, that once had functioned normally. It seemed to have been mummified, preserved or pickled in some fashion. It had shrunk and curved inwards, so that the fingers, set close together, were also curved. They pointed towards O'Kane. Their nails were long and horny.

It was tanned, though it might once have been brown of skin by nature. There was no hair on the back. Youth is inclined to be hairless, and so are Eskimos. The fingers were well shaped. O'Kane had seen tapering digits among Eskimo artificers, carvers of ornaments.

And he had seen the hand of a white man, who was a famous organist. It had been pudgy, the fingers stumpy. This might have belonged to a Nordic, a Slav, an Indian, a Chinaman or a Japanese. It would take an expert ethnologist to classify it, he fancied, and that with close observation.

The brine, or whatever sort of natron had preserved it, had reduced the chances of identity. He knew that Aleuts mummified their dead. So might the early Eskimos, to whom they were akin. O'Kane was disappointed. If he showed his authority, and confiscated it, Peekoya and her tribefolk would let out an awful squawk. It would be an excuse for them to consider themselves injured, to get some compensation.

And if O'Kane did not submit some startling evidence, the Commissioner on Indian Affairs— always a bit touchy about Police supervision or interference with his charges— would see that Corporal Terence O'Kane was never chosen for those examinations at Regina that were preliminary to promotion.

His five dollars were up, ante'd. He had to go through with it, see how the thing worked.

Peekoya was going into her routine, the faked trance in which she could hear both the questions of her client, and the answers of her husband's ancestor, Akkarna, transmit them from astral to terrestrial plane, and work whatever mechanics controlled the hand that lay so quietly, palm down.

They were all alike, O'Kane reflected; Egyptian or Eskimo.

"You askum three question," Pa croaked in a faraway voice. "Hand speak, Him rap three time, mean yes. One time, mean no. Only three question."

O'Kane tried to make his voice eager

"Shall I find what I seek?"

He watched the dead hand. It did not stir. He could see no mechanism. He watched the crone's hands as best he could. They were hidden beneath her robe. He could see no movement, not even a slight twitch.

Then the hand rocked. It was uncanny. It moved as if balanced. The long nails tapped down—dulled by the cloth—more seen than heard. Three raps. "Yes."

"Shall I have much trouble?"

Again the hand poised, tapped dully on the cloth. Once, for 'no.'

"How about my girl?" He had to ask the third question.

As he put the question, O'Kane knew he had made a mistake as a man will know he has misjudged a finesse, played a wrong card, before he sees the gleam in his opponent's eyes.

He was not interested in women, His chosen job, his duty, came first. Time enough for that sort of thing later. It might happen, but he was not looking for it, did not think about it. There were no girls in Fort Arrow to stimulate that sentiment.

But it was the most primitive of emotions, the easiest for Peekoya to comprehend, to detect its presence, or absence. That was something physical, not psychic, simple for the wisewoman to deal with.

She had rung him on the counter of her perceptive and reflective faculties, and found him counterfeit. The atmosphere of the room changed, grew hostile. Her eyes, which had been closed, opened, burning like hot coals. Her simulated hysteria was gone. She was a witch, pure and simple, swift to distinguish between congeniality and discordance, to resent the latter. Mistrust turned to suspicion, flamed to rage. The mystic hand leaped spasmodically into the air, fell back again, bounced lightly, still palm down.

"You go," hissed Peekoya, panting. "You no good. I savvy. My spirit tell me. You no whiterock man. You try fool Peekoya. You no talk shookum. Inside I feel. *Ajorpok!* (It is not good.) Go—go!" Her voice shrilled and squeaked. She might not be a shaman, but she was a sybil, sensitive as a medium.

O'KANE rose. "I meant no harm," he said. The hand had twisted in its fall. He started to straighten it, to pick it up. He wanted a glimpse at the lines of the palm. He had a notion he could tell then if this was the hand of a white man or a native. The apparent age was negligible. Preservation accounted for that. The fat was in the fire. He would not get in here again, unless he did so as

Corporal O'Kane of the Royal Canadian Mounted. And the hand would have vanished. Amokok would be on guard.

Peekoya shrieked. She half rose from "ler seat, shaking her clawlike fist, shrill"ng more and more piercingly. "Ey-eeey-yah! Ee-ee-ee-yah!"

"We'll be getting out of this," said O'Kane. He had no mind to be caught Masquerading, to be ridiculous as a policeman visiting Peekoya, paying her money. That would be broadcast, reflecting on the Force, unless he could show sufficient cause— and he was not ready for that.

"She's on to you," said Emerson. "Better beat it. I'll be right with you."

O'Kane glanced at the table. It was clear of both the five-dollar bill and the dead hand.

Peekoya's screams became a continuous high-pitched, quavering squeal as O'Kane lunged past the hide curtain to the tunnel, fearful that the sound would go ahead of him.

He was wary of Amokok. That dissolute young buck might wear mail-order clothing, but beneath it there beat the heart of a savage. He would protect Peekoya if only to save his own graft. He might start a nasty row. The igloo was in the heart of the native settlement. A whoop from him would bring trouble.

O'Kane might be forced to reveal himself. He had brought along his service revolver but he did not want to use it, His idea had turned out badly. The old crone had been too shrewd. She had smelled out his ruse.

The cold air smote him as he came out of the tunnel, swiftly straightening up. The eldritch screech of the ancient beldame came like the screech of an owl, or the howl of a wolverine.

The wolfish husky leaped at him, and he saw it was free. It sprang, slaving and slashing, straight for his throat. All of sixty pounds, charged with hate.

O'Kane crooked his leg and blocked the charge, with the only efficient counter. His knee struck the brute in its chest and bowled it over.

Instantly O'Kane flung himself upon ig as it sprawled in the snow. It still wore its collar, and he got hold of it, twisting his fingers in the leather, barely grazed by the beast's fangs, before he shut off ts wind, and got to his feet again, lifting the husky clear of the ground.

Emerson was through the tunnel, confronting Amokok, who stood in a crouch, his bow-legs apart, a knife in his hand, feral as his wolfdog. Peekoya's screams were subsiding, from hoarseness, but they had done their work.

"What is? What is?" challenged Amokok.

"Nothing," O'Kane snapped at. him. "Shackle up your dog." His strong fingers vised on vein and nerve. The husky fought convulsively, clawing at him, but it was growing weaker, with wind and blood shut off.

"There is nothing wrong," Emerson cut in. "This is a *chechako*. He did not savvy but he meant no harm. You know me, Amokok."

The wolf-dog went limp. O'Kane let it fall.

"You kill my dog, by God, I killum you!" yelled Amokok.

Emerson tried to trip him as he leaped, but Amokok sprang aside, and rushed O'Kane, lunging with his long blade. The corporal parried, forearm to forearm, stepped inside Amokok's reach, and clipped the Eskimo on the jaw. He put plenty into it and Amokok pitched to his knees, to his face, and fell full length beside the husky, which was feebly twitching.

"Let's go while the going is good, Emerson. I'm afraid I've queered you with Peekoya. Sorry. If Amokok annoys you, tell him Johnny Newcome has left for the mines."

THEY adjusted their snowshoes. Peekoya was silent. Amokok was squirming. The cold snow on his face was bringing him around.

"It don't worry me," said Emerson. "I'd just as soon forget about Peekoya. Amokok was beginning to be a nuisance. He's like most Eskimos. They've got a begging streak."

"Cadgers," agreed O'Kane. He did not have an exalted opinion of the natives. They bragged about their hunting, boasted they could shoot better than any white man, and that the Mounted had to hire one of them to follow a trail. They lived always in conditions with which for generations they had been familiar, but they were habit and superstition ridden, of limited intelligence. A white man who was anything of a wilderness man could outmatch them.

"You've seen that hand trickery before, Emerson. How long has she been working it? Have you got any idea how she does it?"

"I've never had a good chance to watch. She never told my fortune. She hasn't been here very long, I understand. But she didn't always use the hand. Just the spook-voices."

They were well away, out of sight of the igloo. Behind them, Amokok's husky howled like a wolf as they swerved off into the main trail. They were not followed. The night was unalarmed. The rose and gold streamers of the aurora darted and crackled.

"You'll drop in and have a snifter?" asked Emerson.

"Not tonight, thanks. I've got a job to do, and it takes a steady hand. Will you drop in at the barracks tomorrow, and have another look at the body?"

"I will if you want me to. But I don't think I can place him. If I ever did see him, he wasn't wearing all that spinach."

"Exactly. You said, and so did Father Ladue, that there was something vaguely familiar. Now then, when you find a dead man with whiskers, it is a

general and natural assumption that the corpse wore them regularly. But they might have been grown on trail by some chechako who thought it the right thing to do, or liked the idea, or was too lazy to shave. Also, the murderer, knowing that where his victim might be known— Fort Arrow, for instance— he had gone clean-shaven, might count on nobody— even a constable— thinking he might be identified by shaving the dead face. You said the beard was good as a mask. But it could have been grown in a few months.

"You're right, dead right," Emerson agreed with some excitement. "I'd never have thought of it. Are you calling in a barber?"

"I'm doing the job ER " said Kane. "I don't want any gossip. The barber would tell his wife, anyhow. I may want to spring this as a surprise. Keep it under your own hat. And drop round tomorrow.

#### 4: Death Scores Again

IT was a grisly job that O'Kane took on. The body was frozen again, the flesh should be firm enough to stand shaving, if done dry, after he had used clippers, and also trimmed the trail-long hair.

Cameron did not offer his assistance. O'Kane might have made it an order, but it was certainly outside usual regulations and he did not blame his subordinate. "When you're through wi' the scissors, you can keep them," said the constable. "I'll not be carin' for them back."

O'Kane grinned at him, but when he was in the outhouse, the shade of the bracket lamp tilted, so that it shed wan yellow light on the set face of the dead man, with its sightless, hueless eyes, he almost wished he were Cameron.

He did not light the stove, fearful that Doc Shiels knew too well what he was talking about, and the thawed-out flesh might not stand up under the pull of the razor.

There seemed a sort of desecration about this disturbance of the dead. O'Kane stuck grimly to it, trimming the long hair first, then using the clippers. The growth rapidly fell away and he found, to his relief, that he would not have to use a tazor. Once he went too close. It was bitterly cold and his numbed hand slipped on the jaw. Instinctively he looked for blood, and his own seemed to congeal as he realized why there was none.

It was the marble hard, ice-cold face of a young man that stared blindly back at him. The colorless orbs heightened the suggestion of a statue.

Shiels had been right. Emerson was right. The chin showed weakness, but the features were handsome. They were refined by breeding. The poor devil

would have been well liked, by women as well as men. He would have been loose of morals, a happy-go-lucky ne'er-do-well.

Likely enough, a remittance man sent to the "Colonies" because of follies that banned him from society at home. He might have got entangled with a chorus girl, or a barmaid, he might have copied some signature too well, or welched on lost bets.

O'Kane did not have too much sympathy with weaklings, but he felt a surge of sorrow for a chap, no older than himself, paid to stay away from those he had disgraced, thrust on his own resources when he had shown himself a weakling.

Some of these black sheep turned out well enough, in the long run. Some got recalled through death to entailed inheritance, and stiffened with responsibility. But this chap lay here in the shed, mutilated and unknown— unless O'Kane recovered his identity— and landed his murderer.

"I'll do my best for you," O'Kane said softly to the frozen body. He left the clipped hair on the floor, turned down the lamp, blew it out with cupped hand over the chimney, and went back to the barracks-room by the light of his flash.

THE big stove pulsed in grades of red, giving a grateful warmth. O'Kane went to the cabinet of medical supplies, unlocked it, and poured himself a stiff dram of whiskey. He took it straight, knowing he deserved it. He took off his outer coat, lit his pipe and relaxed in his pet chair.

There was some short wave news coming in over the radio receiving-set, from station KDKA. O'Kane listened comfortably, a little drowsily. Cameron had turned in. There were five stations over which police and other messages might come: KDKA, CKY, CHYC, CNRO, CJCA. Broadcast reception varied unaccountably. The static that produced the Aurora often played hob.

There were no two-way sets. Some day there would be, and then the O'Kanes and Camerons would have to qualify as operators. Meanwhile, there was the blessing of the air-mail, going as far north as Akdaviik, close to the Arctic Sea; maintained all through the winter under conditions that made unsung heroes of the pilots.

There would be a mail in, soon. O'Kane— and Cameron— would get letters from home. There would be official communications, instructions. Spring was coming, and work would be heavy. There would be the census to check, issuance of game and trading licenses, changes in game laws to be explained, collection of various taxes, income, customs, fur exports and others; the registration of vital statistics. Action made for contentment, with the kind of men who joined the service.

CALLING ALL NORTHWESTERN DETACHMENTS. CALLING ESPECIALLY NORTHERN ALBERTA, RESOLUTION, RELIANCE, RAE, HAY RIVER, WRIGLEY, NORMAN AND GOOD HOPE, SIMPSON AND FORT ARROW. REGINALD MARCH AGED TWENTY-FOUR BEING SOUGHT BY OTTAWA ON REQUEST FROM LONDON, FIVE FEET SEVEN...

O'Kane lost interest in Reginald March. For a moment he had wondered if Reginald March was the name of the man whose body he had just shaved. But that body had stood all of six feet when it was alive— and erect.

The radio sputtered off into space, faded, failed utterly.

O'Kane stood up, tapped out his pipe, yawned and stretched himself, wondering vaguely if his evening, and his night, so far, would prove entirely barren of results.

Kontouk had taken only five dogs on his solo trip with the report. The two bitches left behind started to bar furiously. They were kenneled. O'Kane, used to such alarms, paid little attention until there came a knock at the door.

He opened it, two figures stood there. A thin snow was falling. It had been snowing for some time, O'Kane realized, as he looked at the ground. The flakes were small, but they were sticky and had already filled in all ruts and tracks, were beginning to pile in drifts before the light wind. The visitors were sprinkled with it. They were well muffled against the weather,

"Its me, wi' Itosiak," said the foremost, Malcolm Murray, the trader. His voice was husky and sounded worried.

O'Kane could tell, despite the snow, that dawn was not far away. It amazed him, though it was no longer dark until ten a. m. as it had been two or three months before. Winter was moving out. The snow was a farewell souvenir. And his eerie night had passed swiftly.

"What's wrong, Murray? Come in."

The two advanced somberly, refused seats. They acted like mourners at a funeral.

"I've shot Amokok," said Murray. "I doubt he'll live the day. I did not know who it was when I fired. He was prowlin' about my premises, breakin' an' enterin', tryin' to open my safe. He's been a pest of late, wantin' me to give him a commission on sales an' credits with his folk. Hes naught but a racketeer, like they have in the States. I saw he did not like my refusal, but he hung round the store, beggin' and coaxin'. I'd miss things, I'm thinkin' he was tryin' to catch the combination o' the safe— you know, I open it up often. I'm a sort of bank an' safety deposit for quite a few."

O'Kane knew these things. He knew, too, that Amokok had been to the mission school and was considered smart. He had been to Edmonton to the Sourdough Stampede and had no doubt picked up some ideas. One of them might be about safe combinations.

NOW he was dead, or dying. A few hours ago he had tried to knife O'Kane. A few hours ago, also Itosiak had visited Peekoya, perhaps as a client. The corporal considered these things for connection with the fact that Itosiak was now before him, presumably as a witness to what sounded like justifiable homicide.

"He chose a good night for it. If he had got clear, he would have left no trail. How did it happen?"

"I sleep in the rooms above the store. Itosiak sleeps in the back. I'm never a sound sleeper myself and Itosiak can wake at the cheep of a mouse. Yon Amokok was a fool to take the risk, but he was drunk, by the reek of him."

"Itosiak is your witness?"

"Aye. I heard a noise, and came down. He had come in through a window, and left it open for going out. I saw him at the safe with a big flashlight in his hand. I called to him to surrender and, with that, Itosiak closed in. Amokok fired, and the bullet whistled past my ear, out through the window. I fired from the hip, and he keeled over. Itosiak brought a light, and we saw it was Amokok."

"You have this weapon?" O'Kane noticed that Murray's agitation increased his dialect.

"It would be where he dropped it."

"Where is Amokok now?"

"We stopped by Doctor Shields'. They'll be taking him to the Mission hospital. It is hard to kill a man, even if he would've robbed and killed you."

The door opened from the room Kane's subordinate, Cameron, entered.

"Take a deposition, Cameron," said O'Kane. "You'll sign it, Murray? Itosiak too."

"Surely."

O'Kane dictated for a minute or two, then took up the viva-voce questioning.

"You saw all this, Itosiak, as Mr. Murray described it and I repeated it to Constable Cameron? You will be willing to swear to it?"

"I see all. Amokok try to steal, to open safe. Boss, he come, call out. I come. Amokok shoot, then Boss shoot. Amokok fall down."

CAMERON completed the deposition.

Murray signed it. Itosiak made his personal mark, a totemic drawing of a whale, crude, but unmistakable.

"What do you want me to do?" asked the trader. "Am I supposed to be under arrest?"

O'Kane shook his head. Murray ought to know better than that. "If you've got a clear case of burglarious entry, Murray, you don't have to worry."

"I don't," said the trader drily. "Might I suggest to you, Corporal, that if I went with ye to Amokok's cabin, I might be able to identify things I've been missin'. That might help my side of it."

"It's a good idea. We'll go at once. Cameron, you go with Itosiak to the store and check up. Get Amokok's gun."

AMOKOK lived with his mother and a younger brother, in a comfortable enough log cabin built by his father, who had died from congestion of the lungs, two years before.

Peekoya, actually great-aunt to Amokok, had been given the stone igloo because it was untenanted and, by Eskimo custom, an empty house is the property of the one who finds it so, and moves in.

The mother supported the family. She was a willing houseworker, skilled in making moccasins and deerskin clothing. For the Hudson's Bay store, she made souvenirs often bought by the miners to send back home or keep for mascots.

The cabin had a modern cook stove, cheap plush-cushioned furniture, iron bedsteads, a phonograph and a sewing machine. Colored holy prints were on the walls.

The mother and the younger son were at their breakfast of tea, oatmeal, and wheat bannocks. Amokok's absence had not disturbed them. He made his own hours. They knew nothing, naturally enough, of the killing. The woman was worried, though, at sight of the corporal. O'Kane guessed she would never be surprised to hear that her firstborn was in trouble.

She took his news stoically enough.

"Your son's been hurt, pretty badly. A shooting. He's at the Mission by now, and the doctor with him."

O'Kane spoke kindly. He knew that the lack of outer sign of emotion before white men did not mean she was not suffering. She said nothing, only her eyes seemed to cloud over. Without a word she put on a parka, while the boy did the same; then they tramped off to the hospital through the snow.

"That makes it easy," said Murray. "Hell have a room to himself."

O'Kane nodded. He was wondering what Amokok had done with his wolf dog.

They searched the room that was plainly Amokok's. There were many things there that O'Kane imagined had been pilfered. Knives, pipes, cheap jewelry. A pine bureau yielded up a miscellaneous collection, some of which Murray claimed had come from his store.

It was Murray who found the special cache, though O'Kane would have come to it, had it in mind. The trader seemed set to prove that Amokok was a marauder, possibly to soothe his own conscience, though O'Kane had not figured it as over tender.

There was a fireplace in the room. It was boarded-up, and through the boards ran the pipe of the squat stove. That was cold. Murray worked at the boards, found them easily removed in one section. He groped in the interior, and brought out a demijohn of alcohol, another of native wine, both almost empty.

"That's where he got keyed-up last night," he said. "There's more here."

The trader tossed the articles he salvaged on the bed. They were none too clean from soot, but the coverlet was from spotless or greaseless. A pair of high rubber boots, several pairs of shoes of assorted sizes, cans of fruit and meat, overalls, whose sizes also varied. A lot of brilliant ties. Tins of tobacco. In a word— loot.

"Hard to prove ownership," said Murray. "We all carry such."

O'Kane was surprised he did not definitely claim it. It certainly looked like the booty from a deliberate burglary, rather than occasional pilferings. Murray brought out, at the last, a steel cashbox that seemed to have been forced open.

"Do you recognize that?" asked O'Kane.

"It is a staple article. I could not swear to it."

O'KANE lifted the damaged lid. The box was partly filled with rock salt. In it was an object that made O'Kane narrow his eyes. He heard Murray gasp.

"Let's go into the other room. I want to get a good look at this by daylight."

The trader followed him. At the corporal's gesture, he flung open the door. The windows were curtained, blurred with snow.

O'Kane emptied the contents of the box amid the breakfast things. The brownish salt-crystals skittered away, revealing a severed human hand,

It seemed to O'Kane, at the first glance, the hand with which Peekoya, great-aunt to Amokok, had made her magic. It might or might not be the mummified hand of Akkarna, remote ancestor of Mukhagaluk, the shaman, husband of Peekoya. Brought home for safe keeping, perhaps, by Amokok. But why keep it in salt, if it were the hand of a mummy? Those thoughts shuttled in the mind of the corporal and suddenly showed definite pattern, part of an intricate design of which he now began to get a glimmering. This was a left hand. Peekoya's had been a right.

"It might be the other hand of Akkarna," Murray said. "There's talk of Peekoya jugglin' wi' a hand like that, using cantrips and invocations, whisperin'

the future with the help of the thing. This American Emerson sends her customers and she'd put a spell on them. She's Amokok's aunt, you know. Of course Emerson got the trade of these men. I sent Itosiak but last night to investigate, but she would. not take his money, or tell him anything. I'd have denounced her to the authorities, meanin' you, for obtainin' silver under false pretences."

It seemed that Murray was mostly concerned with Emerson diverting trade of which he might otherwise have had a share. O'Kane barely listened to him. He saw that Peekoya might have recognized Itosiak, or Amokok told her who he was. She had guessed he came there for no true reason of his own, no real desire to investigate the occult. His questions had left her in a suspicious mood to receive O'Kane.

But the main thing the corporal thought, as he picked up the dead hand, was that Amokok might have murdered the unknown man. It was not quite clear why he should have lopped off the hands, why anyone should have lopped them off.

The hand was rigid. The fingers were close together. He started to turn it palm upwards. A four-footed creature came charging through the drifts, scattering the snow. As it came it snarled with the deep-throated challenge of the wolf. A yellow saddle of fur showed plainly on its back against the darker coat.

It was Amokok's wolf dog, returning from some nocturnal excursion of its own. Amokok would certainly not have taken it to the store he meant to rob.

Now it scented O'Kane, another white man with him, and it hated all the race. And then it was diverted from a second attack on the man who had already conquered it. Amokok kept his dog half starved, and it prowled the village to fill its belly. A husky's working ration is a pound of dried and frozen fish a day. The wolf dog seldom got that much, it had no regular meals.

And eyes and nose told it that O'Kane held meat. Flesh that might be dry and salty, but better than fish.

O'Kane prepared to tackle the dog. He held the relic in his left hand, while his right hand drew back for his gun. He was tired of this ravening brute.

But the dog's leap was lower and shorter than he expected. It snatched the dried hand from O'Kane's fingers, and bolted with it.

O'KANE jerked his Colt free and fired. Just as he pulled trigger Murray, excited, lurched against him, and the snow spurted a good foot away from the fleeing beast, intent upon getting out of sight. Once it did, the hand would vanish in two gulps.

So fast did it gallop that it was close to range-limit before O'Kane thrust Murray back, stepped outside and got in his second shot. The husky rolled over in the snow after a head somersault.

O'Kane had hit it between the ears, at the back of the skull. It was dead before he reached it. Murray came with him, blundering through the snow, trampling clumsily without his snowshoes.

O'Kane was also in his paces, but he went carefully. The hand had dropped from the dog's jaws, but it had sunk into the snow, or been thrust there by the body of the dog.

"Careful, man," he called out sharply to the trader, "You'll make it hard for us to find it."

Murray muttered something apologetic and stood still. O'Kane groped for the hand and found it without much trouble. He would have dug over every cubic yard of that snow to retrieve it. The dog's teeth had bruised and slightly crushed the dried flesh, but the hand was intact.

O'Kane thrust it into his pocket.

"Will ye be seein' if Peekoya has the mate to it?" asked Murray.

"You think there is a mate to it? I mean in circulation?"

The trader shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, aye, it might well be one an' the same. I'm not tryin' to instruct you, O'Kane."

"That's all right. I'll attend to Peekoya later. I must get up to the hospital. Amokok may have recovered consciousness."

"I'll walk with you. I cannot help but feel responsible. Do you think, Corporal, that Amokok might have killed the poor devil Itosiak an' I found in the river bed?"

O'Kane looked at him sharply. Murray was not always easy to understand. It was stirprising, for one thing, that he should keep his store closed, even for the funeral of Amokok, much less to inquire about him. He knew well enough that he would not be held on any charge for shooting a burglar. He had stated plainly that Amokok was a rascal.

"Why should he?"

"I would not be venturin' that. I was just thinkin' that he owned a gun."

"The man was killed by a rifle bullet," said O'Kane.

"I didn't know that. There's been no inquest. Will you be buryin' the corpse soon?"

"I'm waiting instructions. I'm still hoping to get an identification." It was on the tip of his tongue, for the second time, to ask Murray to review the dead man, with the face now shaven; also to reveal the stumps of the wrists— but he did not. It was hard to know why, save that at the back of his mind there lingered a quick memory of the look he thought he had seen pass between

Itosiak and Murray; and his conclusion that they knew— or thought they knew— more about the man than they cared to reveal.

He meant to clear that up in his own time and fashion.

## 5: Old Scars

AMOKOK was still alive. He had been shot through the head, the bullet was still inside his brainpan, and Shiels did not dare probe for it.

"He was conscious for a while," said the doctor. "He can't live, but he may linger. Those beggars are tough. At all events, he may or may not have another lucid interval. I suppose you want a statement?"

"It seems like a straight case," said O'Kane. "I'd like a talk with him, of course, if that's possible."

"Father Ladue talked with him, but he sent the nurse out of the room, and told me to my face that since I had done all I could for the body, I should leave him to look after the soul. So I imagine that what he got was a confession, in which case, all the King's horses and all the King's men, whether they wear scarlet coats or not, won't get it out of him. The Church still holds trumps over the State in those things. He gave Amokok the Sacrament. Amokok went to the Mission school, one of Ladue's own flock. He'd tell him what he'd never tell the Police; because he'd know it was sealed and sacred."

Shiels was a tolerant sort, as a rule. But O'Kane detected a sardonic note in his comments on the seal of the confessional. O'Kane thought differently. He had yet to talk with the priest. When he came, O'Kane was surprised to note the stiffness with which Ladue greeted Murray. Almost as if he fancied that Murray had been over hasty with his shooting. Amokok might not have made it plain that he fired first. O'Kane knew how often a native, under oath, when the whole truth will help him out of trouble, will hold out something, for some hardly to be guessed at purpose in the innate craftiness of an Indian or Eskimo brain.

The Catholic priests had many converts among the Eskimos, but O'Kane was inclined to believe that these converts were willing to listen and watch the ritual more for amusement and for benefits that might come to them materially, rather than Spiritually. As Emerson had said, and Murray corroborated, the Eskimos were essentially beggars.

Amokok was probably more agnostic than anything else. But, at the point of death, he might have confessed to Ladue, the man, rather than Ladue the priest, and still twisted the version to his own advantage. O'Kane knew that such as he think nothing of lying to a white man. If he believes the lie, he is a

fool, and the liar smart. If he detects the falsehood, he gains a measure of respect.

Ladue drew O'Kane aside.

"It is possible that Amokok may become lucid again towards the end," he said. "So the doctor tells me. Now he is under a sedative. If he recovers consciousness, I shall make every endeavor to have him repeat to you, freely, what he has told me, under the seal of my holy office. There was no time before. He had a collapse, I thought him gone. But he has been shriven and anointed. If he rallies, I will send you a messenger immediately, my son,"

"Thank you, Father." That was just what O'Kane had expected from Ladue. "Murray's story is corroborated by Itosiak, but I should be glad to get an ante-mortem statement, of course."

"I might as well open the store," said the trader as they left the Mission. "I suppose Ladue thinks a Presbyterian no better than a heathen. Not that I profess to bein' very active in any church— I'm more of a Free Thinker— but yon priest treated me as if I'd murdered Amokok, instead of shootin' in self defense."

O'Kane made no comment. He was not over fond of Murray's company at any time, glad when they met Itosiak with Cameron, coming towards the hospital.

Itosiak went on with Murray. Cameron joined his corporal.

"You got the gun?" Cameron showed the weapon. It was a cheap revolver, nicked, thirty-two caliber; just the sort of gun Amokok would be likely to own, whether bought or stolen. "Keep it till you get back to barracks. Go over to Emerson's store and ask him if he can step over now. I spoke to him about it last night. It's important, tell him."

O'Kane was still studying the hand he had retrieved from the wolf dog, when Cameron arrived with the American. He swept the relic into a half-open drawer and closed it before they entered.

Then he took Emerson out to the impromptu morgue once more and unsheeted the shaven face.

"Good God! It's Ford. Austin Ford! I'll say that beard masked him."

"Friend of yours?" O'Kane had not known the face he had shaven but he had hardly expected to. He had only gained his promotion and been transferred to Fort Arrow the previous August, taking charge of the detachment just before winter set in and shut it off the world.

Since then there had been few transient in Arrow; few miners, even old sourdoughs, cared to risk the trails when there were only a few hours of twilight, called daylight by hardy optimists.

"I got to know him quite well," said Emerson. "He hung round here most of the summer. He was always talking about starting out some sort of trip, but he didn't get around to it. First it was trapping, then it would be radium, or gold. He finally elected to go to Whiterock but at the last minute lit out for Round Rock Lake. Somebody started the rumor that there was gold there, but I doubted it. The Indians claim no white man has ever been there, and I imagine it was that made him choose it as much as anything."

"Did you outfit him?"

"No. He sort of apologized for that. He was a Britisher, had a certain amount coming monthly. Murray was his banker, and he felt he should buy from Murray. Fair enough."

"When did he leave Arrow?"

"The last of July."

"By himself?"

"Yes. He might not have gone so early, but I heard talk about his getting into a mess with some Eskimo girl. He was a bit that kind, but a likable chap enough."

DOC SHIELDS had come mighty close in his guess, O'Kane told himself, despite the surgeon's avowed disbelief in physiognomy— and that covered by a beard.

"Ever take him to Peekoya's?"

"Yes, I did. He wanted to go and learn his luck, as he put it. He kidded her, but he made quite a hit with her. And listen, O'Kane, this sounds like hooey, but she didn't want to take his money. She wouldn't answer him when he asked if he would come out with a big stake. She told him he would come out; and then she shut off. All he could get out of her was that pet phrase of hers, the one she handed you. *Ajorpok!* She didn't have the hand then. She hadn't been here long."

"She wouldn't have had the hand," said O'Kane grimly. "Emerson, I wish you'd try and fix a date when she did start to use it. Try, will you?"

"Of course. I may be able to place it—"

He stopped, staring, as O'Kane pulled down the shroud and showed the lopped wrists. His lips closed to a thin line. The American was a quick thinker.

"Look here, you mean you think that hand Peekoya uses—?"

O'Kane nodded.

"Still keep what I'm showing you and what we're saying under your hat, Emerson. Peekoya's hand was a right. I've got another, a left, in my desk drawer. I found it at Amokok's. I suppose Cameron told you what happened to Amokok."

"You think he murdered Austin Ford? What for? Not just to cut off his hands. It don't make sense. I suppose he might have got word, through some native, that a white man had made a strike at Round Rock, and was coming in. He could then have stuck him up, but—"

"There has been no strike at Round Rock. I know that. Did you ever notice Ford's hands?"

"Not especially. As a matter of fact, he nearly always wore gloves. I used to think it was because of the flies, or was just a quaint British custom. He was what they'd call 'a bit of a toff' over there, I imagine. Good family, college education, and all that. But it seemed he'd had an accident of some sort. He didn't talk much about it. Sensitive, though you'd hardly notice it."

"What was the accident?"

"Some sort of explosion with a gasoline blowtorch, I think, when he was fiddling with surface assays. That's how he came to mention it to me. It was a nasty burn, of course, and some fool who fixed him up forgot to tie the fingers separately. The flesh stuck, and it was a mean job to get them apart. They actually grew together at the base. Made them sort of webbed. But he handled himself so you'd not notice. The palms were badly scarred. He asked me if Peekoya would want to read his hand— and then he showed me. We were quite chummy."

"The hand I've got is slightly webbed, and the inside of the palm is puckered," said O'Kane. "Looks as if a burn had eaten away part of the thumb pad. Ford grew that beard after he left here, Emerson, and the man who shot him from the pack knew that fact. He did not think anybody else would recognize him, except for his hands. So he cut those off, kept them in rock-salt, for some definite reason. Peekoya has one of them. Amokok had the other. But I don't think Amokok killed Austin Ford."

"Know who did?"

"Not yet. I think Amokok could tell me, There's a bare chance he may. I believe he's told Père Ladue, in confession."

"It's a bit spooky, old chap, standing here, remembering Ford sitting in front of Peekoya, who said he would come out, and then '*ajorpok*'. She using his dead hand later on, calling it the hand of her ancestor. Pretty thick. I could stand a drink, O'Kane, aside from its being damned cold in here. And then I'll take a look at the hand. I only glanced at his palms when he showed them to me, but I ought to know that scar on the thumb. Murray should know about that. He could identify him."

"I'm going to ask him to, presently. We'll have that drink. Do you happen to know the name of the girl Ford made an ass of himself over?"

"There were two or three of them. You know these young Eskimo squabs are not bad looking. Only they giggle too much for my taste. But the one he was warned to leave alone, and to clear out of Arrow if he didn't want a knife in his ribs, or a bullet in his heart was a girl named Kaiaryuk, Later on, she disappeared. She was a flirty bit, and we supposed some prospector took her along."

CAMERON was working on a report in the barracksroom.

"Was there an Eskimo girl named Kaiaryuk on the last census?" asked O'Kane. "Look her up."

"I don't have to. She was the native belle of Fort Arrow. Her old man was named Niptinatchiak. Died of delirium tremens. It was a good thing when the girl cleared out. She was a trouble maker, and they all ran after her. Made bad blood between whites and natives."

"Thanks, Cameron," said O'Kane. Emerson did not seem to have heard. He was staring at the hand, lying palm up in the drawer, with a fearful fascination. Automatically he reached out for the rest of his drink.

"I'll swear to the hand," he said. "Of course I know that was Austin Ford. And Murray—"

"Much obliged. Another spot?"

O'Kane was also thinking of Murray, thinking of remittances that must have been piling up. But he had no doubt that the canny Scot would have them all properly audited, entered and accounted for.

Emerson left, with a final promise that he would forget what he knew until O'Kane asked him to remember it.

O'Kane sat frowning at papers on his desk without seeing them The hand was again in his drawer He filled a pipe slowly and carefully, lit it, smoked deliberately.

Since Murray was Ford's banker, there might be a motive there for the murder of the remittance man. No doubt Murray was in direct touch with Ford's family, duly accredited by them. His own acknowledgment of the money would be satisfactory, together with reports upon Ford's welfare. So that it would pay to keep Ford's death a secret. Murray might | Ford intended to grow a ead know where he could find him. There was another thing. Ford would be likely to be a poor correspondent in any case. As a remittance man, probably shipped to the Colonies because of some mess with a girl, he would not be grateful to his family. A lawyer might be attending to the money end of it. And, with his scarred hands, writing might be awkward.

Then, if it were Murray, why keep the hands?

Because, some day, it might pay him to be able to prove that Ford was really dead. That was plausible enough. Ford might be a possible heir. Murray would know that sort of thing, if he had been appointed as a sort of Canadian guardian. And the next in line would be willing to pay for information that would clear the way.

Peekoya had had one hand, certainly for several weeks.

Amokok had kept the other in his fireplace.

How did they get hold of them?

O'Kane, chewing the horn stem of his favorite briar, began to get a glimmering of how that might have come about. But it did not suit him. Admittedly fond of money, grouching about trade, it was still hard to place Murray as having deliberately murdered Ford. The motive of remittance money had to be rejected. The trader was too canny to take any such risk.

But if one piece did not fit exactly into the pattern, another might. There was Kaiaryuk, the settlement Delilah. There was—

THE outer door abruptly opened. A boy tumbled in, breathless. He spoke in an excited splutter of French. His brown eyes rolled. Ordinarily he would not have dared to enter the barracks without knocking, without permission. It was one of Father Ladue's altar boys, the son of a trapper nae Regnier.

A member of the Mounted Police speaks French— Canadian French— of necessity, And O'Kane knew what had brought the lad pell mell, before he got out the words.

"Père Ladue, he says to come swiftly to the hospital, M'siew le Caporal. Amokok, he comes to his senses."

O'KANE stood up, straightened belt and tunic, gave an order to Cameron in a tone that bespoke its importance. The constable would have been useful in taking down and witnessing a statement from Amokok, but O'Kane felt he had greater need of him elsewhere.

It had stopped snowing. The sun was breaking weakly through. The wind blew from the, south, and it bore the faint but positive presages of spring.

At the gateway to the Mission, O'Kane looked back. He saw Cameron, in scarlet and blue and gold, without the regulation buffalo outer coat, his Stetson set at official angle, striding through the slushy me snow towards Murray's store, eminently efficient.

Cameron was sometimes a bit slow on the uptake, but he was a good man, And he knew that the corporal had set him upon an important errand.

THERE was a little delay before O'Kane could see Amokok. A nurse was administering a stimulant. Shiels came out of the little emergency ward, holding now no other patient. Father Ladue remained inside.

"He won't last long," said the surgeon. "Better let him do all the talking while he can, without bothering him to answer questions. A cerebral hemorrhage is certain. May come any moment."

O'Kane nodded. "You're a grand guesser, Doc, if it wasn't something better than guesswork. The dead man was a chap named Austin Ford, a remittance man, a philanderer with women, especially with a young belle named Kaiaryuk."

"Ford? How did you find out?"

"Shaved him, and got an identification. Murray was by way of being his banker, I understand."

"And Kaiaryuk was Itosiak's girl," said Shiels. "At least he considered her so. She was born wanton. And those two found Ford in the ice, and didn't know him— for the whiskers."

Shiels whistled softly, looking at O'Kane's tanned face with its clean cut features and Irish eyes, grave now with purpose, sighting to the end of a definite quest.

"You wouldn't be telling me you found the hands, O'Kane?"

"I've got one. I know who had the other. Peekoya, Amokok's witch-aunt. She may have destroyed it now. I'm not broadcasting any of this, Shiels."

"I understand." Shiels did understand the potential ability of the non-commissioned officer, young, strong, earnest, well-educated and well-trained; typical of the high standard of acceptance of the force.

The Sister-nurse came to the door. Spoke in her low voice to the doctor.

"It's all right to go in," he said to O'Kane.

Amokok, with bandaged head, the flesh of his face and hands like gray putty, lay very still. His eyes moved from O'Kane to Father Ladue, back again. Ladue talked to him quietly, motioned the corporal to a chair drawn to the side of the hospital cot. The Eskimo began to talk.

"Murray, he shoot me. I no shoot him. I not in store, not this time. One time, two, three month ago, I go along th at place. Murray talk hard to me plenty time. So I get even. I savvy combination. I take some good. I catch some money in safe. I find steel box. I no open it then. Take it home. That box home now, in my house, inside fireplace along my room."

His voice trailed off. Shiels, watching him, gestured to the nurse who again administered a stimulant. Shiels dared not use anything with a violent reaction.

"In that box I find two hand, in plenty salt. I think that damn funny thing to find in safe. I think Murray think I steal those thing, but he not say anything. He not speak to anyone that store was rob, safe open. I ask him for some things and he give and not ask for pay. I tell Peekoya. She say dead hand plenty good for her to make magic. I fix hand so it move, I think bimeby Murray hear about that hand. If something wrong, he give me more thing I ask, for nothing. He send Itosiak to see. Peekoya no tell him anything.

"Murray he afraid maybe I talk about hand. Then you want to know too much. So last night Itosiak he look for me, find me, tell me Murray want to be friend with me, maybe I catch money. We walk along. Little way from store I stop, say I no wantum see Murray. Then someone shoot from behind tree. They carry me to store. They fix so it look like I rob store that night. I tell you true."

He turned his eyes to Father Ladue, They were growing dull. The priest held up a crucifix. Shiels stepped forward, A shudder ran through the Eskimo. He suddenly seemed deflated, his jaw dropped, his eyes held nothing.

"He's gone," said Shiels.

He left the room with O'Kane, leaving the dead man to Father Ladue and the Sister who served the hospital.

"He didn't say positively that he knew Murray shot him, or that he recognized him," suggested Shiels.

O'KANE cleared his throat. Not that he meant to say anything. The time had come for action. The design was plain now though the puzzle was not complete. Shiels had given him a key piece when he said that Kaiaryuk had been Itosiak's girl.

"Want me along?" asked Shiels, accepting it that O'Kane was going to Murray's trading post.

"Not now. You might be needed later," said O'Kane grimly. "But I'll handle it right now."

He had it fairly straight now, he thought. Straight enough to go ahead. He found Cameron lounging in the front of the store. There were no customers. Cameron nodded to the back, and Murray came forward from his little office. Itosiak was behind the long counter, handling some barrels.

"Is Amokok still alive?" asked the trader.

O'Kane parried with his answer.

"I've just come from the hospital," he said. "I've been having a talk with him."

He watched Murray's face. It showed little expression that could be read.

"I'd be glad to think he wouldn't die," said Murray. His gray eyes were dour.

"It might be better for you, Murray. Itosiak, I want a talk with you. First, I'll tell both of you what you knew when you brought in the news of the dead man on Badger River. His name was Austin Ford. You handled remittances for him, Murray. His hands had been cut off, and you knew that too. And why. You can stay where you are, Itosiak, until I'm through. Murray, I'm giving you credit for good sense."

Itosiak stood stock still. What color he had drained from his Mongol-Aleut features, drained back again. He did not move, even when O'Kane took out handcuffs and let them jingle a little as he set them down. Cameron had another pair, but he did not produce them. He was watching both the men, alert, his ungloved hand hooked in his belt.

"Ford fooled round with your girl Kaiaryuk, Itosiak. And I think she was willing enough to fool round with him. Then you told him to leave her alone. You threatened him. He left for Round Rock Lake. Badger River flows out of that. And he grew a beard. You see, Murray, all this happened before I came to the detachment, but there is plenty of evidence. I shaved Ford myself. At first I took it for granted he was a man who had always worn a beard. But there were one or two who thought they saw some resemblance. I was pretty sure you and Itosiak knew more than you tried to show."

THE lids of Murray's eyes narrowed to slits when O'Kane spoke of shaving the dead face.

"Peekoya has one hand," the corporal went on. "You and I found the other, Murray, in Amokok's house. He got them both out of your safe, but not last night. We'll get back to you, Itosiak. Kaiaryuk did not go away with Ford, but not long afterwards she left Arrow. You thought she had gone to him— you may have been told, but you made sure. You found them. I don't know yet what you did with the girl. But you killed Ford with a thirty-thirty rifle. We can check that bullet. The beard did not disguise him from your jealousy. If it did, Kaiaryuk gave it away. You knew his hands would identify him so you cut them off. And you left the body where the springs still flowed in the river, knowing they would freeze up later on.

"You came back here and told Murray what you had done. I don't know, yet, why he made himself an accessory after the act. Perhaps because of the remittances that would keep coming in his care, but he did condone the act. Then Amokok broke into the store, opened the safe, found the steel box, and the hands. You kept quiet about the robbery. Amokok blackmailed you in a small way. You heard about Peekoya and her talking hand. Itosiak went to look. I saw him coming out just before I entered.

"Last night Itosiak picked up Amokok, and tolled him to where you, Murray, stood behind a tree and shot him. Killed him. He was dead when I left the hospital. But he spoke first."

Itosiak made a guttural noise in his throat, like a bear. Now his face went black with rage. He picked off the barrel head the tool he had used to open it. It was shaped like a small hatchet, with a hammerhead projection, a notch in the sharp blade.

He flung it at O'Kane as the corporal vaulted over the counter, one hand upon it, picking up the handcuffs, the other teaching for his gun.

The little axe struck him on the side of the head, a glancing blow, but a sickening one. Blood spurted.

Itosiak turned and dived through the window by which he had been standing. He took the frame with him, shattering tails and mullions and glass, landing in a frog-leap in a drift of snow, with O'Kane after him, showering crimson drops.

The crust was already disintegrating. Both men disappeared from sight in a flurry of whirling crystals,

Cameron had drawn his gun but he had no chance to shoot, for fear of hitting O'Kane. But he covered Murray, warning him not to move.

THE corporal landed on Itosiak, grappling with him, but it was like trying to grapple with a walrus in its own element. The Eskimo was all steel and tubber, fighting desperately for a chance to escape. It would have been a slim one at that time of year—his fellow tribesmen would not have sheltered him. O'Kane got one iron on him, then he jerked loose, just as he had dived through the sash. Now, since O'Kane's gun was somewhere in the drift, it was man to man.

O'Kane had the handcuffs, and Itosiak had a knife. He kicked and clawed and tried to free the blade.

They thrashed down the drift until it was only a wallow.

O'Kane was bleeding like a stuck pig. The snow could not stop the flow, but his head was clearing. He got Itosiak's arm and thrust it up between his shoulders in a hammerlock until the musher squealed with pain. With a frenzied effort he rolled over, and the bone snapped.

Itosiak was savage as a trapped wolf, The pain of the break sickened him, but he snarled and spat like a lynx. He got his left hand on his knife, striking with it, as if the hand were a taloned claw.

O'Kane smashed him on the jaw and got his forearm slit through the fat. He snapped on the other handcuff and got to his feet, panting but triumphant.

Itosiak was out. O'Kane climbed in through the broken window, his sleeve slashed, sodden with scarlet as red as its cloth. There was blood all over his face, spattering on his shoulder.

"Come and collect this," he called to Cameron. "Leave me your handcuffs, And your gun. Mine's in the drift."

Cameron dropped out the window and O'Kane turned to Murray.

"You'll not be needin' a gun," said the trader, "or the irons for that matter, thought I presume they're regulation. You'll not mind me takin' a wee pinch of snuff, O'Kane, before we talk?"

O'Kane wiped the blood but of his eyes, mopped at the cut over his ear. From his vest pocket, elaborately displaying all absence of trickery, Murray took out a snuff mull made from the end of a horn, capped with silver.

O'Kane knocked it from his hands, The cap opened and the contents were scattered on the floor.

" 'Twas naught but King's Mixture, with a wee bit of Tonka bean," said Murray deprecatingly.

"I'm taking no chances. You might have thrown it in my face."

Murray nodded, blinking mildly.

"You're a braw policeman, O'Kane. You'd better put on the irons, maybe."

He stretched out his wrists and O'Kane manacled him.

"Anything you say, Murray—" he started.

"I know the formula. I'll not say much. You're right, in the main. Itosiak killed Ford, but he didn't kill the girl, though she deserved it. She fled when she saw him before Ford did, the little wanton. I said nothing when Itosiak told me, because I owe him my life. He went through the ice to save me one time, you know. I'm not such a God-fearin' man, Corporal, but I like to pay my just debts.

"And then— well, you did not ask me or Itosiak to identify Ford. You sent a runner out. You said nothin' about the hands at all. You saw Itosiak at Peekoya's and he saw you. Mind you, I did not credit you with shavin' the dead man's face. That's not far from genius, O'Kane, But it was closin' in. I don't know what Amokok told you before he died, but I misdoubt it was all the truth. I never saw an Eskimo who did not hold back something. But it is the truth that he tried to hold me up for a thousand dollars, after havin' robbed me an' blackmailed me. If he told what he knew, Itosiak was doomed. I paid my debt— to Itosiak— when I shot Amokok. And now, thanks to you, I'll be payin' my debt to what they call society. But there was no thought of money in all this. That's all accounted for. If it was ever necessary, I could have produced the hands, you see, say they were brought to me by a native— but no doubt you've thought of that. You'll go far, and I've followed my fate to the bitter end."

SHIELS and Emerson were in the barracks. Koutouk had got through to the end of wire. The Commercial Airways third spare plane had flown up from Edmonton by way of McMurray, picking up an inspector at Fort Smith. O'Kane's case was complete, his responsibility transferred, his promotion assured.

The inspector had been talking to Shiels and the American. It was Emerson who put the query to O'Kane.

"Did you ever find out how Peekoya made that hand move?"

"It was simple enough, though it had me puzzled. I imagine she had Amokok to thank for that. There was a mail-order catalog in his room, another smaller one, with trick gadgets for sale. I'll give you a demonstration, if you've no objection, Inspector."

"Go ahead."

O'Kane got a hand from the small detachment safe— he had both of them now. He set a paper on his desk, placed the hand upon it.

"Twice for 'yes', once for 'no'," he said. The hand rocked, lifted, tapped.

O'Kane displayed the gadget. It was a length of slim rubber hose, a bulb at one end, a little pouch at the other.

"In the catalog they tell you to set it under somebody's dinner plate, and press the bulb beneath the cloth. Amokok went one up on them."

The inspector looked at the contrivance, passed it to Emerson.

"What will you do with Peekoya?" asked the latter.

"She settled that for herself this morning," said O'Kane. "It's the one thing I regret in the affair. But she ran true to tradition. She was old, infirm, likely to be a not-wanted burden. She had been exposed, she was probably afraid though I told her not to worry. She hanged herself in the stone hut some time last night. Doc says she had been dead for several hours when we found her."

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