

In Bad
with Sinbad

ARTHUR STRINGER

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BOOKS BY ARTHUR STRINGER

THE DOOR OF DREAD
THE MAN WHO COULDN'T SLEEP
THE HOUSE OF INTRIGUE
TWIN TALES
THE PRAIRIE WIFE
THE PRAIRIE MOTHER
THE PRAIRIE CHILD
THE WIRE TAPPERS
PHANTOM WIRES
THE GUN RUNNER
THE DIAMOND THIEVES
LONELY O'MALLEY
EMPTY HANDS
POWER
IN BAD WITH SINBAD

IN BAD with SINBAD

by
Arthur Stringer



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PERIODICAL TITLE, ONE ARABIAN NIGHT

IN BAD with SINBAD

In the reign of the Caliph Haroun-al-Raschid there lived at Bagdad a poor porter called Sinbad. And one day, when he was employed to carry a heavy burden from one end of the city to the other, and with still a great distance to go, he came into a street where a refreshing breeze blew on his face, and——

SINBAD THE SAILOR.

I

Laban yawned. His train was stopping again. He heard the hiss of air and the shudder of the brake-shoes hugging their wheel rims, followed by the whispering silence of the sleeper as all movement ceased.

He leaned back in his seat, drowsily ruffled. The accumulated impatience of four days of boredom now left him resentful of each and every delay. It was the last lap of his trip and he wanted it over with. He was tired of dust and dullness and being cooped up in a sleeping-car like a pullet in a market crate. All his thoughts were now centered on the end of that long journey from the Coast. He was counting the hours until he could get aboard the *Aleutiana*.

Before nightfall, he knew, he would be in New York. He would have to stay overnight, of course, in that strange city; and nothing, Laban had long since learned, could be duller than a strange city. But by daybreak he would be headed for the Brooklyn water-front and the *Aleutiana*. By sunup he would be installed in his little wireless room still smelling of white-lead paint, and life would begin for him again. Long before noon he would be heading out from Sandy Hook with his snapshots of home thumbtacked up on the wooden walls, and his three new radio uniforms of white duck duly unpacked. He would be needing that white duck, for his ship would be swinging southward toward Colon and the Canal, and once again he'd be getting a glimpse of flying fish circling off over a lazy ground swell of turquoise, and once again he'd be sniffing the warm trades and watching the

Southern Cross from the bridge. And that meant romance to Laban Lindhagen, the only kind of romance with which life had ever confronted him. It almost made up for the long trip overland. The mere thought of it took the sting out of a sense of homelessness which had of late been depressing him. He felt less abysmally exiled from this preoccupied eastern world into which he had been carried. For he remembered that he was, after all, a member of the National United Radio Telegraphers' Association in good standing, commissioned by the Puget and Kyukuot Company to go aboard their crack new freighter and give her a voice on her maiden trip up into the North Pacific.

But his train had stopped and he resented that arrest in advance. It seemed to sharpen into a spearhead of annoyance a disappointment, both large and vague, which had hung over him for the last day or two. From coast to coast, for the first time, he had seen and known and traversed his continent. Everything about it had combined to impress him as dull—dull mountains, and duller prairies and woods and lakes, and still duller towns and cities. And now he was being confronted by the supreme dullness of waiting interminably on a sidetrack.

“What’s holding us up this time?” he asked of the silent man who had come into his sleeper that morning.

“Frontier,” was the other single-worded reply.

Laban frowned over the word, slightly puzzled. The man meant, he finally surmised, that they were about to cross the line, to pass over the border from Canada into the United States. And that exotic use of the word “frontier” took his glance back to the stranger again.

This stranger, who was middle-aged and quiet-mannered and altogether inoffensive to the eye, had been about the only person to address Laban in anything approaching a friendly spirit since he had left the Pacific Coast. This stranger, Laban also remembered, had come aboard at Montreal. He had seemed so unfamiliar with the small conventions of American train travel that the younger man, even before he noticed the slightly foreign intonation of his voice, accepted him as a Polish Jew, or possibly a Silesian coerced into meekness amid the residuary hostilities of his one-time enemies. His mild air of loneliness, in fact, so impressed the lonely youth that the latter felt drawn toward a fellow traveler with whom he seemed to stand bracketed in a confraternity of homelessness.

Laban could see him sitting silent and impassive in the section next to his own while the customs inspectors went through the hand-baggage of the

half-empty car. He listened with equal impassivity while Laban, not without a touch of annoyance, reiterated his name and his destination and the mission carrying him into a country which seemed ready to welcome him with none too gracious a gesture. Then the stranger came and stood in the aisle a moment later, and fraternally smiled down at Laban as the youth stoically repacked the six Okanagan Valley apples which the inspector had so impatiently tumbled out of his suit-case. His praise of those apples, in fact, so touched Laban that he passed one of them over to the quiet-mannered stranger.

He did so with the youthfully confident challenge that he'd like to see any apple grown in the East that could equal it.

"Where are you from?" asked the stranger, as he took the apple and inspected it with an approving nod.

"From God's country!" asserted Laban.

The stranger seemed in no way perplexed by that vaguely denominated origin, for still again he nodded approvingly. He had just been through that country, he explained, for he himself had landed from the Orient only the week before. He had come over on the *Empress of China*, as fine a boat as there was.

Laban, as he pushed his big worn pocket-camera back under the seat beside his suit-case, looked up at the stranger, still so intently and so pleurably polishing the Burgundy-red apple on his coat sleeve. The man with the apple in his hand started to speak again; but instead of speaking, an odd thing happened. The expression on his slightly pitted face changed, changed as miraculously as a stubbled field changes when a drifting cloud shadow darkens it. Slowly his eyes became unfocused and fixed. On his bulbous and receding forehead appeared a fine dewing of moisture. He stood there, without speaking and without moving, bathed in a disquieting cold sweat of agony.

"What's wrong?" asked the younger man, persuaded, as he noticed the other steady himself with a hand on the seat back, that his eyes were resting on a victim of angina pectoris. What most impressed Laban was the mute and oxlike protest in that unfocused stare, the revolt of a startled spirit against some undeciphered but ominous verdict.

Instead of answering Laban's question, however, the stranger whisperingly asked one of his own.

“Will you help me out? For the love of God, will you help me out?” he said with sudden and intense earnestness. Yet he spoke in a voice so low that Laban had difficulty in catching the words. And the stranger’s eyes all the while seemed directed, without any movement of the Asiatic-looking head, toward some action or individual on the platform outside the still waiting train.

“Of course,” acknowledged the younger man, vaguely resenting the unnatural key into which an every-day episode threatened to pitch itself.

“But can you do what I ask—on your oath?” insisted the opaque-eyed stranger.

“Of course,” repeated Laban, laughing a trifle foolishly.

“Then take this camera of mine, quick!” panted the other as he let a worn oblong of leather drop from under his coat to the burlaped seat end. It dropped impersonally, like a leaf from a tree.

“What for?” asked Laban, reaching for the oblong of leather as the other man backed guardedly away.

“It holds pictures—pictures which must be protected.”

“But what am I to do with it?” demanded the youth in the car seat.

“It must be delivered in New York, to Wu Fang Low, at 997 Pell Street. To Wu Fang Low, the curio dealer there. He will be easy to find. See that he gets it. If you do that you will be——”

But that was as far as he got, for at that moment the door at either end of the car opened with movements that must have been simultaneous. Laban could not see those movements, but he could hear them, as the stranger himself must have done. For that harassed-looking stranger dropped suddenly into his seat, where he sank low in one padded corner, like a hurt teal huddling close to its swamp rushes. He was apparently making a pretense of being busy tying a shoe-lace, with his face down between his slightly tremulous knees.

Laban, as he dropped the camera to the car floor and pushed it back under the seat with his boot heel, was so preoccupied in watching this enigmatic movement on the part of the stranger that he did not at first observe the two uniformed officials with eagles on their caps as they stepped guardedly down the car-aisle at the same time that two other men in uniform approached from the rear.

But what most impressed the watching youth, once he became actively conscious of them, was the grim and guarded manner in which they moved. They seemed to converge, with a niceness that was more than accidental, at the section directly in front of Laban's. Then, with a common accord, they exploded into action.

They had the man on his feet with his elbows pinned back before he could even offer a show of resistance. Any show of resistance, in fact, seemed remote from his intentions. And the remarkable part of it all was the voicelessness of the encounter. Not a word during that first minute of singularly quick movement came from either the man or his captors. He eventually found his tongue, it is true, as they thrust him ahead of them down the car-aisle. Laban could catch the rumble of protests and commands, the conflict of charges and denials, as they approached the door. He even felt a valedictory small shock of the nerves as he saw the last of the quartet thrust a heavy revolver back into its holster. He could not be sure, as he saw them dragging their captive, whether or not they had put handcuffs on him. But he had been such a quiet-mannered little man that all their display of force eventually impressed Laban as foolish. It was like setting a bear trap to catch a red ant; it was about as ridiculous as trying to cannonade a canary. He even began to feel perversely sorry for that prisoner, so outnumbered and so meek-mannered and so helpless in the grim arm of the law.

One of the men came back with the Pullman porter a few minutes later and diligently searched the vanished prisoner's section. He even insisted on having the upper-berth shelf lowered and the bedding gone over. Yet he seemed to find nothing of moment, although he carried away with him the two hand-bags that stood on the forward seat, and gave Laban an odd feeling in the region of the solar plexus as he hesitated for a second or two, opposite him, as though on the point of cross-questioning a witness so contiguous to those recent activities. But he found nothing in Laban's blank eye to feed that impulse. So he moved on, and the train a moment later got under way.

Laban, with a touch of alarm coloring his perplexity, pushed the camera still farther back under his seat. When the Pullman porter came to restore order to his messed-up berth bedding Laban ventured on a discreetly impersonal effort to extract information from him.

"What in the world did they arrest that man for?" he innocently inquired.

"Ah raikon dey's got another o' dem rum runners," equivocated that functionary with a shrug of his white-clad shoulder.

"But that man didn't seem to be carrying liquor," argued Laban.

“Ah raikon he was carryin’ worse’n liquor.”

“But what?”

“Doan’t as’ me, cap’n! All Ah knows is Uncle Sam was af’er him—an’ Uncle Sam done got ’im!”

That was the most that Laban was able to find out. But his thoughts were active enough; and as his imagination went adventuring along the frontier of possibilities, his first conclusion was that the camera might be full of illicit photographs. The man could easily be a spy, with a case full of coast-fortification snapshots which he dare not be found in possession of.

Yet the more Laban thought over that theory the more untenable it became. For the war was done with, and the secret agent and his work were things of the past. Then it dawned on the young westerner that the man might have been an opium smuggler. He knew from his seagoing experiences on the Pacific that the underground traffic in all such drugs was an extensive one, and the Celestial was rather heavily involved in that contraband trade. And it was to a Chinaman, he reminded himself, that he had promised to deliver the camera under his seat.

He waited for a full hour, however, before taking the camera from its hiding place and venturing to look it over. The first thing that impressed him as he examined it was the fact that it stood practically a replica of his own camera, his own camera lying beside his own suit-case under the same seat. It was the largest pocket size of a standard make, some nine inches long and five inches wide. The only difference he could detect was that the second camera stood slightly more worn and abraded about the corners than was his own. It looked innocent enough to the eye, yet a distinct distaste for it grew up in him as he continued to study it. He’d have troubles enough of his own without peddling other people’s dubious leather cases about the back streets of a strange city. He wanted to get some picture post-cards to mail home to his Aunt Agatha, he wanted a night’s sleep, and then he wanted to get aboard his boat. He even took out his folder map of New York and for the twentieth time scanned that triangulated city of tiny parallelograms over-scored by its oblique red line of Broadway. But that map meant little to him. It showed a city across which he would pass as aloof as a wild duck winging northward to New Brunswick. He’d have his one night there, and bright and early he’d get aboard the *Aleutiana*, and then life, real life, would begin for him.

And as for this fool camera that had been tossed into his keeping, he’d get rid of it at the first crack out of the box. He’d made a promise, of course,

and he intended to keep that promise. He had no intention, however, of getting cluttered up in other folks' affairs. That Pell Street Chink would get his parcel, but he'd get it without the stranger from the West parading up and down Chinatown with it under his arm. For Laban finally decided that the simplest way out of it all would be to go to the parcel room as soon as he landed at the Grand Central Station, and there check the unpalatable leather case. Then he could mail the claim check down to its rightful owner, and with that done, he could wash his hands of the whole affair. He could find a hotel then and enjoy a sleep in a real bed again, and get aboard his ship by sunup.

II

Laban was less tranquil minded than he pretended to be. A small thrill of trepidation had spidered up and down his spine with the knowledge that he was at last in New York, and now he was more worried than he would have been willing to admit. He was worried by the sense of detachment which five days of train travel had coopered together in his cramped-up body. He was worried by the newness of an undecipherable new world. He was worried by the wall arrows and the route signs and the red-capped porters who seemed so unnecessarily eager to relieve him of the bulging suit-case that hung from his right hand and the two leather-covered cameras that dangled from his left hand.

He was worried by the incredible dimensions of subterranean passageways, where he had seen a pillar of concrete open like a mouth, swallow up a self-propelled truck, piled high with baggage, and close again like a maw well satisfied with its meal. He was worried by the long exile from sunlight and open air, by the feeling of being entombed somewhere deep in the bowels of the earth, by the quicker-moving tide-way of human units that elbowed him aside as he emerged into a high-vaulted rotunda humming like a beehive with its multitudinous noises and voices. The lofty roof, he noticed, magnified and mellowed these sounds until they took on a cathedral-like resonance, not unmusical to the listening ear. But he veered and tacked and circled deliberately on, intent on reaching the parcel room and easing both his arm and his mind of that second camera, which was becoming a bit of a worry to him.

Even when he reached the check-room, he found, his troubles were not at an end. For fellow travelers were already lined up two deep in front of the metal-covered counter across which hand-bags and parcels and corded bales were being passed in, and neatly lettered little claim checks of pasteboard were being handed out. Laban was even persuaded as he shouldered and wormed his way closer in toward the counter that some hand unseen in the crowd had tugged viciously at one of the cameras in his arm. But he had warned himself to be on the lookout for all such things, and the tug ended in nothing, just as the hand vanished undetected. The hand vanished, but it left in the young man's body a momentary needling of nerve ends, not unlike the thrill that follows a pull on a fisherman's hook.

Laban finally found himself face to face with the swarthy young Greek across the metal counter, and placed his camera and his dime on the sheet-iron counter, burnished by its never-ending flow of bag bottoms. Once the camera was safely stowed away in one of the serried pigeonholes overhead and the coin was dropped into the open drawer of a cash register, the busy attendant tossed in front of Laban a numbered claim check on which he had penciled a further pair of numerals. These figures had been called down to him by his colleague, working like a stoker overhead.

Laban reached out for the check. He had it in his fingers, in fact, when a thin-faced stranger beside him interposed.

“That’s my check, captain,” he quietly but confidently explained, reaching for it even as he spoke.

But Laban knew better, and he also knew one had to keep one’s wits about one in a strange city. So he betrayed no intention of surrendering that essential square of pasteboard.

“This is your check,” explained the stranger, still affably enough, as he pushed a comrade square of pasteboard closer to Laban’s hand.

“Not on your life,” announced Laban, with his cool Swedish eye on the kindling eye of the stranger.

“You’ve got my check there,” now angrily proclaimed that stranger.

“I have not!” contended Laban.

“But I say you have!” declared the other, his impatience getting the better of him.

“Then let’s see what the boss says,” suggested Laban, sure of his ground. He stopped the Greek, confronting him with the numeraled pasteboard.

“Whose check is this?” he demanded.

“Yours,” announced the busy attendant, as he swung a black patent-leather suit-case up over his shoulder to the iron shelf above.

“Are you satisfied?” asked Laban, slightly embarrassed by the attention he was now attracting from the deepening half circle about him.

“Sorry,” conceded the other man, forcing a grin. “My mistake.” And he vanished in the crowd.

Laban thereupon stowed his claim check deep in his pocket, made sure his filled-gold watch was still on his person, carefully buttoned his coat, and

looked about for the familiar blue globe that would signal the presence of a Postal Union Telegraph office.

He could see no signs of one and was compelled to seek the advice of a colored porter, who directed him to the farther side of the humming and high-roofed rotunda. It seemed a long way to have to double back with his suit-case and his remaining camera still in his hand; but Laban had decided on his plan, and he intended that nothing should interfere with it.

Yet instead of sending a telegram, when he came to the booth which was maintained for that purpose, he tore off a blank and wrote thereon: "This claim check will redeem parcel awaiting you at Grand Central Terminal check room." In this he carefully wrapped the square of pasteboard that he took from his pocket and inserted it in one of three Vancouver Hotel envelopes to which he had already affixed two-cent American stamps—for the original purpose, he recalled, of advising the boys at the Esquimalt and Friday Harbor and Port Townsend radio stations of his safe arrival in New York. He took pains to see that this envelope was securely sealed. Then he turned it over and on its face inscribed:

MR. WU FANG LOW
Curio Merchant
997 Pell Street
Chinatown
New York City

He studied this inscription for some time. The "Chinatown," he concluded, would be a designation not officially recognized by the Post Office Department, so he slowly and carefully scratched it out. He was still contemplating the sealed, stamped and addressed envelope, not without a sense of satisfaction, when his ear, so acutely sensitive to the nuances of telegraphese and so habitually alert to the Morse cluttered out by a key, became subconsciously aware of something arresting in the run of dots and dashes from the little brass instrument not twenty feet away from him. For the name "Vancouver" had come to him like a familiar word overheard in a crowd. And then attention became conscious and focused, for he heard, oddly enough, the brass key spell out the words "Pell Street."

He intended to hear more, but a redcap, asking for a second time if he wished his hand-bag carried, and overzealously attempting to possess himself of that piece of baggage, momentarily distracted his mind and caused him to lose the rest of the message.

It was a coincidence, he tried to tell himself, and nothing more. But there was the essence of something disturbing in it, of something that phantasmally perplexed and depressed him. He felt a vague ache to get out of that subterranean maze of tangled byways and intriguing possibilities, and he wanted to see his sealed and addressed envelope safely deposited in a letter-box.

He was relieved to find, on inquiry at the circular information desk, that there was a letter-box against the very wall confronting him. So he turned south again, toward the ascending floor of the main entrance, deposited his letter in the welcoming iron gullet of its official receptacle, and experienced a wave of relief at the thought that his message was finally and irrevocably consigned to its predestined channel of delivery. Whatever might happen, his hands were at least clean of that matter, and now he could face the city with a lighter heart.

He moved westward along the huge rotunda again, remembering that the crowds from the train platforms had moved in that direction in quest of their taxicabs. But he missed the doorways that opened on the cab tunnel and found himself wandering along a marble-paved passageway, with what seemed like little shops on either side of him. The array of fruits and bonbons and bright-jacketed books and cosmetics and haberdashery, behind the expository plate glass with its brilliant light, reminded him of scenes of Eastern markets, of something dimly recalled out of boyhood books of the Orient. He thought of bazaars and turbaned merchants, of mosques and caliphs and dusty camel routes, of worlds strangely remote from his own. He was teased by a sense of unreality in the things about him. But he was a youth by no means given to imaginative digressions. So he trudged stoically on, still jostled and elbowed by the quicker-moving stream of life about him. His tight-packed suit-case seemed to grow heavier as he found himself ascending a long ramp that ended in an arc of narrow doorways through which the crowd filtered into the open. A breath of cooler and cleaner air smote on his face; and he had the feeling, as he stepped through one of the doors, of emerging from a cave of tumult into the consolation of sunlight.

He could, in fact, see sunlight still bathing the upper ridges of the huddled sky-line before him, touching with a momentary glory the vista of minarets and cupolas and gold-ramparted roofs confronting him. And there was wonder in his eyes as he stepped into the crowded wide canon of Forty-second Street. For this, he remembered, was New York. He was in New York, the New York he had dreamed about all his young life, the greatest city in the world, the Mecca of the incredible that he had so hungrily and so

meagerly glimpsed from the movies and the magazines and the rotogravure supplements of Sunday papers. And now he was face to face with it, was in the very midst of it. He had torpedoed down under its far-flung hull to irrupt into its very engine-room, at the very core and center of its energy.

Yet it did not elate him. It disturbed and intimidated him. It set the cubs of desolation to whimpering in his heavy heart. As he stepped hesitatingly out to the curb and sought shelter between a painted tin receiver for waste paper and a chocolate-colored iron pillar with a yellow fire-alarm box adjusted to its base, he became the victim of a tremendous sense of loneliness. He had no part in the tides of traffic that ebbed and flowed about him, saddened as they were by the first hint of dusk falling over the city. Yet his one persistent impression was one of tumult, of an ant-hill gone mad. He beheld only the blind and foolish movements of mortals flung like snowflakes along conquering winds, to the equally blind and foolish orchestration born of their own noise.

Then, as he stared deeper down the narrowing arroyo toward the west, he noticed the band of pellucid blue sky still overarching that maelstrom of sound and movement, the benignant soft blue that deepened even as he watched it and merged into ashes of roses and saffron at the misty street end ramparted with its far-off wall of misty rock. He noticed the golden-green haze that hung in the air about him, and the cool shadows of horizon blue that lurked at the base of the saw-toothed line of skyscrapers to which the evening light lent more and more its etherealizing touches of mystery. Already, along that crowded valley of spangled shadow and sound, the lamps were coming out, one by one. They were coming out into sudden life, splashing the dentate canon walls with constellations of liquid color, jewelizing the upper twilight with agile gardens of ruby and green and azure that winked and flowed and revolved and went out and fountained once more into brilliance.

Then the youth beside the lamp pillar became more acutely conscious of the sounds assailing his ears, the continual high drone shot through with the fuller throb of wheels, hurrying wheels, pounding wheels, grinding and whining wheels. He heard the scream of steel against steel on the track curves, the pant and purr of motors with the occasional carbine crack of a back fire, the sharp calls and shouts too close about him to blend in with the unvarying universal hum. Over and over he heard the cry of paper venders, as reiterant as orioles in a windy orchard. Over and over he heard the repeated bark of car horns rounding the street corner, as melancholy as ship sirens in a fog-hung roadstead, baying for fairway as their mud guards threw

back like a mold-board the crowd pressing out from the curb. And it all combined at first to impress Laban as madness and immensity made vocal.

But as the quiet-eyed youth watched the countering tides of traffic he began to see an obscure order in their movements. The ant-hill, after all, wasn't as crazy as it appeared. There was purpose in the coming and going of the sidewalk swarms about him, even though the key to that purpose was withheld from him. They were commuters going home to eat and sleep, toilers to be carried countryward along tunnels and threads of steel, women shoppers, feathered like birds, beating nestward with their garnerings. They were pleasure seekers returning to their urban hives of laughter and light, nocturnal workers emerging to their labor, the innumerable units of an ebb and flow which all day long irrigated those flumeways of traffic that seemed eroded so deep out of brownstone and sandstone and brick. Each and every man jack of them, Laban remembered, moved on a quest of his own. It was a quest that he could neither know nor understand. It was something that had nothing whatever to do with him.

He was not of them. He meant nothing to them.

And they continued to flow and return and recede and eddy about him, preoccupied with their own ends, as solitarily intent on their own ways as lonely sails glimpsed along lonely mid-ocean horizons. He was merely a stranger in their midst, with nothing in common with them; a stranger who would sleep for a few hours within sound of their wheels and at daybreak take his departure again, with no chance of affecting their reticent destinies and no hope of lifting the indefinable veils of mystery that hung between him and them.

He was not used to isolation like that, and he resented it. He was impatient to get back to a world where he counted, where he could weave in again with the purpose of things. In the morning, he still again reminded himself, he would be aboard his ship. Ahead of him was one short night without an anchorage, and in the morning he would be solemnly at work in his white-walled radio-room. So all that remained for him now was to find a hotel and eat and sleep and forget the city that roared so incommunicably about him. He was an outlander there, with no ties and no interests. And remembering that again, his heart sagged. It seemed to grow as heavy as the hand-bag that hung from his right arm while he held the camera clutched in his left. It seemed as heavy as his step as he trudged stolidly along the city street now flowering with lights like an orchard breaking into bloom. He remembered, almost with irritation, that this troublesome camera of his might have been crowded into the suit-case, had he scrapped, as he had been

tempted to do, the five Okanagan Valley apples that remained with him. But those were exceptionally fine apples, and he wanted to show his fellow officers aboard the *Aleutiana* what the Pacific Coast could do along the fruit-growing line. The camera, none the less, was a nuisance, and he'd be at sea again before it could possibly be put to use. And the sooner he got into a taxicab and headed for a hotel, he decided, the sooner his troubles would be over.

He stopped and looked for an empty cab. He stood at the curb, within six paces of a non-parking sign, vainly signaling to drivers of empty cars. He even called out to one, who met his eye, and nodded, and mysteriously kept on his way. Laban was too perturbed to see that driver pull up three hundred feet westward of where he still stood, just as he was too perturbed to understand another driver's jocose gesture toward the sign standard so close to him, the prohibitive sign that kept the steady stream on its way.

Laban, in time, got tired of being ignored. He found a fresh cause for depression in this utter disregard of his desires. It seemed to dwarf him, to accentuate his divorce from that urban pageant in which he could have no slightest part. He felt, as he gathered up his wearisome bundles and moved on again, uncomfortably like an immigrant just off Ellis Island, an unconsidered alien with neither personal dignity nor the power of articulation. And the dusk-mellowed panorama of the street became something infinitely remote and unreal to him. It thinned out to something as ghostly as the stream of flat movement on a motion-picture screen when the music has stopped.

He blinked indifferently at a flashing blue limousine that drew up to the curb close beside him. He stared casually at the white-gloved woman in sables who swung open the car door.

Then he stopped short, for the white-gloved hand had almost unmistakably signaled to him. He stopped close beside the running-board, smiling a little at the enormity of the regal-looking lady's mistake. But he saw, to his bewilderment, that the regal-looking lady was apparently motioning him into the car.

"Please hurry," she said, with a touch of impatience.

He hesitated. But it was only for a moment. There seemed something both peremptory and preoccupied in the woman's movement as she made space for him on the deep-padded seat. The thing was none of his doing, and if people made mistakes it was up to them to explain those mistakes away. Yet his pulse skipped a beat or two as he climbed in beside her, dragging

camera and suit-case after him. She motioned for him to close the door. They both remained silent as the car got under way again.

“You don’t seem very glad to see me,” she finally said, in a tone of reproof touched with perplexity.

“But I don’t understand——” he began.

That was as far as he got. He had been studying her face, and the beauty of it had become something intimidating to him.

“Then why did you promise?” she demanded in a voice much too soft to be accepted as stern.

“Promise what?” he demanded.

“Surely,” she said with a small hand movement of protest, “we don’t need to go over all that ground again!”

He did not look at her. He couldn’t afford to, for he wanted to get things straightened out. So he sat staring at the clump of orchids set in a cut-glass cornucopia resting in a chased silver holder screwed to the car panel in front of him. Then his eyes fell on his big and slightly dog-eared pocket-camera and on his imitation pigskin suit-case stuffed so full that its sides showed undulatory in the side light.

Five days in a sleeper, he noticed, had left their disparaging crow’s-feet in his coat sleeves and their demeaning bags at his trousers knees. He rather wished that some excuse had presented itself for donning his new uniform.

Then he noticed that the woman beside him was also studying his hand baggage. She was doing this so intently that he turned to her to see if he could detect any touch of derision in her eyes. She looked at him when she became conscious of his scrutiny. She studied him with an intensity that caused him to avert his own gaze. It both troubled and intoxicated him. Never before in his life had he had a woman look at him like that. He dreaded to see the thing end, and yet he couldn’t afford to let it go on.

“I’m sorry,” he said, glancing out at the street crowds. “But you’re making a very serious mistake. You’re——”

She stopped him, with a hand on his arm.

“Look at me!” she commanded.

He turned and looked at her. Her gaze met his, not provocatively, but studiously, confidently, almost surrenderingly. She seemed to be giving him her face. She seemed to be offering herself through her eyes, fortified with

the knowledge that loveliness such as hers was not to be denied. Laban's color ebbed a little. But he found himself with nothing to say.

"Then you're not glad, after all?" she reproved, with a look of pain creeping up into the pale and flowerlike face.

He began to tingle with a sense of incompetence. He told himself that he ought to have spoken out from the first. He should have made the thing plain to her before she had a chance to venture into intimacies that were going to prove embarrassing to them both, and the sooner she was told now, the better for both of them. But he didn't know how to begin.

"You haven't answered my question," she reminded him, taking possession of his hand. And again he tingled.

"Will you answer one of mine first?" he finally found the courage to inquire of her.

"Of course," she quietly responded, swaying against him with the movement of the car.

She seemed to find something comforting in that sustaining shoulder close to her own, for she remained there, intimately and unquestioningly, as they floated on through the crowded streets. It was pleasant enough, Laban admitted to himself, but it had to come to a stop. So he compelled himself to meet her half-indolent stare of inquiry.

"Just who am I?" he challenged.

He waited, holding his breath and at the same time wondering how best he could extricate himself. For extrication would be necessary, once that unknown name was flung at him and the queenly creature's card house of delusion went tumbling down between them.

It was the solemnity of his face, apparently, that prompted her to revert to her careless little coo of laughter.

"Why are you trying to make me ridiculous?" she asked, still nestled against his shoulder; and he found it a little intoxicating to sit there within the perfumed aura of her body.

"I'm not," he protested. "I'm trying to correct a mistake."

"But doesn't that effort strike you as coming a little late in the day?" she asked, with the ghost of a frown between the broken line of her brows.

"We don't even know each other!" he contended, desperately aware of his lack of progress.

“I don’t think men and women ever really know each other,” she observed, with the ghost of a sigh.

It was his sudden movement of withdrawal that prompted her to emerge from her lassitude and sit up. Then she turned and studied his barricaded and deliberately averted face. There was a slow hardening of the lines about her rich but slightly petulant mouth.

“So this is all you find to say, after—after everything that’s happened?”

“But I tell you the whole thing has been a mistake,” he protested. “I don’t know you, and you don’t know me. I’ve never even——”

“That is quite enough!” she cut in with a sudden and glacial tone of command. “I think I understand!”

“But you don’t!” protested the unhappy Laban as she sat biting her lips, with every sign of being on the verge of tears.

“I at least understand that you don’t need to club a thing into my head,” she told him, withdrawing into her corner, where she sat deep in her shell of wounded resentment. And he was still sounding frantically for the right phrase, for the right words, as they hummed on down the valley of light veined with its double line of motor-cars that pulsed forward and stopped as colored eyes winked over them from the signal towers.

Then, stooping forward, she seemed to be deliberately turning away from him as she stared out through the glass-paneled door.

“There’s the Colbridge just ahead of us,” she said with an achieved and icy indifference.

“The Colbridge?” he echoed.

He wasn’t sure whether this stood for a tea shop or a theater or a department store. But he had his reasons for not parading his ignorance.

“I suppose that’s your hotel, isn’t it?” she was asking, and imparting, as she did so, a dismissive intonation to the question.

“Yes,” he said, eager enough for any respectable avenue of escape.

He stooped forward and picked up his camera. A shadow crossed the woman’s face as she noted that movement, but she refrained from speech. She merely shrugged a shoulder, almost imperceptibly, as she gave the order for her driver to come to a stop. To do this, however, instead of using the mouthpiece of the speaking tube that hung beside her, she leaned forward again and tapped on the glass partition with her gloved fingers. The rings

under the white kid gave a sharpened metallic sound to that momentary tattoo, imparting to it a touch of anger, a peremptoriness. The car swerved in to the awninged curb and came to a stop.

III

Laban rose awkwardly to his feet as an epauleted and gold-braided door man opened the car door. The embarrassed youth intended to say something to mitigate the brusqueness of his flight. But the pallid-faced woman in sables sat with her eyes turned moodily away, ignoring him. So he possessed himself of his suit-case, surrendered it to the stately door man, who in turn surrendered it to a uniformed stripling, and stepped in through the many-doored rotunda.

He found himself in a huge-pillared and high-vaulted hotel lobby that advertised its magnificence by much onyx and marble and plate mirror, by incredibly ornate electroliers and even more ornate ladies in full evening dress. It frightened him a little, in fact, as he followed his plethoric suit-case to the registry desk, where he waited until a prosperous-looking predecessor scrawled an all but indecipherable name and address. This, Laban noticed to his bewilderment, was not done on the pages of an impressively huge register book resting on a revolving walnut stand, such as was the pride of the Selby House in his native city, but on a meager and modest pad. He saw, however, as he covertly watched the man who preceded him, that it resulted in the due acquisition of a key and a room and bath for one.

So when his time came he carefully inscribed, "Laban Lindhagen, Nanaimo, B. C." on the waiting pad. Then he courageously met the eye of the prematurely bald young man behind the marble-topped barrier.

"Room and bath for one," he said, with an oblique eye on the stranger who had already gone through the rites of admission. For the newcomer to the great city was not quite sure of his procedure.

"Outside room?" asked the desk clerk, with his own eye going vacantly up one ladder of penciled numbers and down another.

"Yes, an outside room," proclaimed the newcomer, though at the moment he stood uncertain as to just what this implied.

"How long are you going to be with us, Mr. Lindhagen?" was the clerk's next question.

He spoke casually, but it did not seem casual to the young stranger from the Coast. After almost a week of anonymity, after five long days of homeless and nameless exile, there was something electric and warming in

having his identity thus established and authenticated, in being casually and fraternally addressed by his own name.

“Just till morning,” announced Laban, checking himself on the verge of details as to his waiting ship and his impending voyage.

But it shocked him a little to be told that he could have a nice room on the seventeenth floor for eight dollars and fifty cents. An afterglow of grandeur, however, still wined and warmed his body, and his nod, as a number was announced and a key passed over the marble, clearly proclaimed that any such sum was trivial in his eyes.

It was apparently some residuum of that earlier *folie de grandeur* that prompted him, in emulation of the man who had immediately preceded him, to stop importantly before the mail clerk and inquire if there were any letters for Mr. Laban Lindhagen.

It was a gesture of magnificence, and nothing more. It was an empty gesture of importance, for he knew only too well that there was no ghostly chance of a letter there. He was unknown and friendless. The only man east of the Rockies even familiar with his name was the near-by and prematurely bald desk clerk, who at the moment was engaged in transcribing it from the register pad to a small slip of paper. And Laban, for all his valorous pose of expectancy, felt secretly ashamed of himself.

“Laban Lindhagen,” said the preoccupied clerk, throwing down a cream-colored envelope with a heavily inked inscription. “That’s yours.”

The westerner started visibly. But the clerk was busy restoring the thick bundle of mail matter to the compartment labeled L, and the movement escaped him.

The man on the other side of the counter, however, hesitatingly reached out for the letter, picked it up and read the inscription. The words written there were:

MR. LABAN LINDHAGEN,
Hotel Colbridge,
[To Await Arrival] New York City.

A little tidal wave of horripilation went through his body, with an uneasy stirring at the roots of his back hair. The thing was impossible, incredible. It was uncanny.

His first impulse was to hand the letter back, to deny proprietorship. But apostasy before a name so unique was not an easy matter. They would laugh

at his contention of mistaken identity. And a somewhat restless newcomer was already at his elbow, waiting for his contribution from one of the alphabeted pigeonholes.

So Laban took up his letter and followed the boy with his suit-case to the elevator. There he waited on an oblong of muffling damask carpet for one of the express cages to descend. He waited behind three naval officers in full uniform, and three rustling ladies in extreme décolletage and an amazing quantity of jewelry, and two bearded men in turbans and most unmistakably wearing, under their loose-caped Invernesses, the robes of Oriental potentates. Between these two Laban noticed a slender-bodied girl in a harem veil and what he accepted as the somewhat disturbing apparel of an Egyptian princess.

They were bound, he concluded as he crowded into the cage behind them and inhaled the competitive perfumes emanating from their bodies, for some impending *bal masque* or dinner dance under that roof of institutionalized gaiety. But the strangeness of those costumes, the magnificence of the jewels, the un-American medley of vivid colors surrounding him, oppressed him with a sense of the exotic that he found it hard to shake off. He seemed very far away from Nanaimo, and he was seeing more of the world than he had bargained for.

Nor did he find, when he had traversed a long corridor padded with soft carpet and flanked by numbered doors, and had taken a turn and passed countless other doors and stepped into the room that had been assigned to him on the seventeenth floor, that eight dollars and a half was such an exorbitant price for sleeping in a chamber so luxurious and at the same time so exalted. It was worth the money, he conceded, as he swung his door shut and breathed deep with relief at being once more alone with his bewilderment and his unopened letter. It was the most gorgeous room he had ever been able to call his own, even for a night. And his abstracted eye dwelt for a moment on the huge frame of shimmering brass that stood so imperially between him and the windows.

“Metal must have been cheap when that bed was put together,” he said to himself, before frowning once more down at the letter in his hand.

His eye lost its abstraction as he did so, for being confronted by that letter meant being confronted by a problem. It could not possibly be for him, he felt, and he was reluctant to interfere with another man’s mail. Yet it was plainly enough addressed to Laban Lindhagen, and he had never heard of another by that name. A strange thing had already happened to him that day,

and he was becoming more or less inured to the unexpected. Perhaps, after all, there was another Laban Lindhagen in the world, in that city, under the same roof with him.

But that did not seem altogether satisfying, just as it did not seem altogether credible. He was Laban Lindhagen, and the letter he held in his hand was addressed to him, and nothing was to be gained by being chicken-hearted about a thing. Besides, the envelope was most unmistakably addressed in a feminine hand. That, in some way, made the situation more interesting.

It was mysterious, all right. But the thought of turning his back on that mystery became more and more unpalatable to him. So unappealing did the final prospect of meekly returning to the office with that letter seem to him as he hesitated there, turning it over and over in his hands, that with a sudden hardening of his serious young face he decided to burn his boats, to cross his Rubicon, to face the music and take his medicine. So, promptly forcing a finger under the unglued corner of the envelope flap, he tore it open.

Then he took out the folded double sheet of note-paper and read what was written there. His brow furrowed as he scanned the five short lines of angular script, for the message, after all, seemed to be for him. But it was not a tranquillizing one. The letter in his hand read:

Whatever happens, do not deliver package intrusted you to Wu Fang Low. That would be more than dangerous. Hold it, on peril of your life, until it is called for to-night by

THE RIGHTFUL OWNER.

Laban backed away until he came to a brown velour armchair and sat down in it. His thoughts flashed back to the scene on the train, to that complicating camera that had been thrust into his keeping, to the commonsense manner in which he had eventually rid himself of an impersonal obligation. He had acted in good faith, and he had no need to worry over melodramatic threats. He had, in fact, other things to trouble him, for he remembered that the hour was late and that his stomach was empty. It was a queer sort of a city, all right. But, whatever happened, he intended to eat.

Then he stopped short, staring down at his own camera where it lay on the white coverlet of the bed. It was still loaded with the twelve exposures he had made during their different stops through the Rockies, and he wanted

these pictures developed and sent back to his Aunt Agatha, as he had promised.

But supposing, in this city of crossed wires and interfering strangers, somebody came along and claimed that camera. Supposing they should mistake it for the other, the other that was now safely out of his hands, and try to take it away from him, as they had already tried to take away his claim check.

He could establish his rightful proprietorship, he remembered, by the L. L. in red ink with which he had once initialed the inside of the case flap. He pressed the spring that released this flap, held the opened camera up to the light—and then let it slowly drop again.

The once-familiar initialing was not there.

Frowningly he lifted the leather-covered case again, turned it slowly over and over, and then realized what it meant.

He had checked the wrong camera. The case he held in his hand was the one so hurriedly passed on to him by the stranger in the train.

He sat down and studied it. He weighed it in his hands and shook it, examined its lens and then its fittings, then its outline in general. He found nothing exceptional in any of its features. So he decided to go a step further and have a look into its film chamber. And it was then that he discovered where the difference lay.

For this film chamber, he saw, was held shut, first by a series of small black-headed screws and then by a sealing of black wax along the crevices of the hinged panel. But instead of being a deterrent, in this case, these obstructions were a challenge to further invasion.

Laban sat down on the bed, took out his pocket-knife and removed the black-headed screws. Then with the point of his knife he removed what he could of the wax. But the hinged back of the camera still held, pry as he would. He broke one of his knife blades off short, though he found what was left of that blade a better wedge for levering back the resisting panel. It gave way at last, as it had to, with a small rending of glued wood.

As it swung open a plump black bag fell out on the white counterpane of the bed. Laban, with a quickened pulse, stared down at it. For he saw at a glance that the camera was only a hollow mockery of a camera, having served in reality as a holder for the plump black bag that fitted so neatly into the space customarily occupied by the mechanism of such an instrument. So

he put down the leather-covered case and directed his attention to the black bag.

He found it to be made, as far as he could judge, from the top of a black silk stocking, with the ends held together by an exceptionally neat specimen of cross-stitching. Yet, instead of holding a powder, as he had vaguely expected, it seemed well filled with a collection of capsules of different sizes. So, after interrogatively pinching it for a moment or two between his fingers, he placed it on the bed, took his knife and slit it open.

They were not capsules, after all, he saw as he tumbled them out on the counterpane. He thought at first that they were lozenges, for they were of a uniform gray shade and of no particular appeal to the eye. The one remarkable thing was their diversity of shape and size, some octagonal and some egg-shaped, some angular and some as large and oval as a Lima bean, and some almost the size of a domino.

But Laban as he stooped closer over them discovered an odd thing about them: Here and there, along their corners and sharper edges, the dull gray seemed to be worn away, revealing small lines and facets of color. It was not until he had scraped at first one and then another with his knife blade that he understood the meaning of this.

Everything in that small bag, he finally realized, had been coated with wax. Why this had been done he could scarcely determine; but he judged, as he continued his explorative scraping, it had been an attempt to protect the jewels which had been jumbled together in that one container. For he could see now that they were jewels. He could see that by the polished hardnesses of the surfaces he had exposed, by the prisms of yellow and garnet that flashed in the light, by the green-white glitter of uncovered facets and the luminous glow at the core of one or two of the larger pebbles.

He knew little of precious stones, but he felt that such color and brilliance indicated they were articles of considerable worth. It frightened him just a little to remember how and why they were in his possession. He was further disturbed when his wandering eye fell on the recently opened letter.

IV

Laban stood with one hand resting on the heavy lacquered cap of the heavy brass bedpost, looking abstractedly about and wondering what to do. His first and his most natural impulse had been to telephone for the police; but he was morbidly afraid of getting involved in some movement, since the wheels of the law ground so slowly, which would prevent his sailing the next morning on the *Aleutiana*. He had a pang of regret, too, at the thought that there was no one in all that alien East to whom he could go for help and advice. He stared dejectedly at the lacquered metal cap about which his fingers were clutched. As he did so he noticed that this cap moved a little under the pressure of his hand. It was not an integral part of the massive-looking brass post, but a crown fitted to its top. That post, he remembered, would be hollow, and this gave him an idea.

He dropped to his knees and examined the lacquered cap. Under its heavy metal cornice he discovered two countersunk set screws to hold it in place. But these, for some reason, had become loosened. It was only the work of a minute, using his broken knife-blade as a screwdriver, to loosen these screws sufficiently to allow the entire cap to be removed from the post. Having done so, he stared down into a hollow metal column almost three inches in diameter. He looked at it studiously. Then he looked just as studiously at the array of wax-covered jewels lying on the bedspread. Then with a nod of determination, he pushed the little black silk bag down into the tube. Then, scooping the scattered stones up in his two hands, he held them funnelwise over the uncrowned bedpost and let the jewels rain down on the cushioning bit of silk. He repeated this operation until the last of the stones were out of sight. Then he readjusted the cap to the bedpost, fastened it firmly there with its all but invisible set screws, and took a deep breath of relief.

Then with equal deliberation he closed the ravaged camera and screwed shut its hinged panel, after which he placed it under one of the two large pillows at the head of the bed. He had taken up the letter again, though his thoughts were not on it as he held it, for he was remembering that he was hungrier than he had been for many a long day, when he became vaguely conscious of a movement that he did not directly see. It was a movement that, as he stood with his eyes directed toward the room door, sent a thrill needling up through his body. This door, he realized, was for some inexplicable reason slowly but surely opening.

It did not open far. It opened only far enough to admit a small white hand and a rounded arm. It was obviously a woman's arm, just as it was obviously a beautiful one. But what held Laban's attention was not the arm and the hand at the end of it, but what that hand held.

It held what he took to be a linen face-towel, with its fringed ends clustered together so that the pendent body of the fabric made a pouch; and this pouch most unmistakably held something of ponderable weight and size.

Laban did not stop to fathom the meaning of the thing. The city, in a way, had already drained his shallower reservoirs of wonder. He merely saw that his door had been quietly opened and that some unknown young woman—for that rounded small arm could belong only to the young—was thrusting in to him something equally unknown. And that impressed him as the important point—it was something, not taken from him, but being brought to him. So he crossed to the door, which still stood slightly ajar, took the clustered ends of the towel from the waiting white fingers and saw the rounded bare arm slowly withdrawn and his door slowly closed again.

He turned, with judgment oddly suspended, and crossed to the glass-topped table on which his telephone transmitter stood. There he placed the improvised pouch which had so strangely come into his possession, and pulled the switch cord of the shaded desk lamp. As the ends of the towel fell away from the objects which it had concealed, a faint gasp, not so much of bewilderment as of incredulity, escaped him. For it seemed to be lightning striking twice in the same place. It was the accidental ludicrously repeating itself.

On the glass-covered table in front of him he caught sight of a flashing and glimmering jumble of gold and platinum and jewels. He saw three or four ropes of Oriental pearls tangled together like worms in a bait tin. He saw diamond bar-pins and sunbursts of sapphires and a *lavallière* almost as long as a skipping rope, and bands of green gold circled with white diamonds and a dozen or two rings of every conceivable shape and character, and one tiny jeweled watch that seemed no bigger than a man's thumb nail. He saw a platinum heart-shaped brooch studded with brilliants, a small gold mesh bag with sapphires along its fantastically chased jaws, two diamond hairpins, half a dozen pearl studs, and even a pair of gold earrings with huge black pearls pending from them. They lay there, flashing and glowing and burning in a competitive riot of color and fire as the hard light of the electric bulb beat down on them.

Laban stood blinking at them for a full minute of meditative silence. The mystery of the thing was beyond his understanding, but he did not propose to play a blind part in the matter of their final disposition. He intended to know where he stood, this time, before other people's property passed lightly through his hands. So he remained there for a full minute, deep in thought.

Then he stepped back to the heavy bedpost and for the second time unscrewed the metal cap from its top. Then, handful by handful, he hurriedly dropped the jewelry into the hollow post. On top of that macaronic column of color and metal he wedged down his pocket-handkerchief, he scarcely knew why, and proceeded to adjust the cap once more to its place.

He was bent low, tightening the second set screw with his broken knife-blade when he heard a short scream from the hall without. It was a woman's scream of terror, brief and high-pitched. It was followed by a faint sound of running feet and then the repeated muffled bark of a revolver.

Laban wheeled about, at that sound, with an unconscious bristling of the hair along the nape of his neck. He dropped the knife into his pocket and glanced quickly about the room. Then he turned toward the door again, deciding to get it double-locked as quickly as possible, for that sound of pistol shots was a matter not altogether to his liking.

But Laban did not lock his door. For before he was half-way over to it, that door once more moved slowly and silently inward and a young woman with an orange cloak thrown over a conspicuously *décolleté* dinner gown of yellow silk sidled in through the aperture. She made her appearance with her back toward Laban, intently watching the hallway from which she was retreating.

He had time enough to notice her white and rounded arms, the rice-powdered shoulder blades that made him think of a pair of gull wings, the poise of the small head on the full but slender neck, the small head bent slightly to one side in a singularly birdlike attitude of attention. He stood there watching her as she swung the door shut and listened, for a waiting minute or two, with her ear almost against the panel. He could see her shoulders heave with a sigh of relief, apparently, as the moments dragged away. Then she lifted a hand, still without a glance behind her, and cautiously locked the door with its safety latch. Then, with a second audible sigh of relief, she wheeled slowly about and stood with her back to the door.

Her eye, the moment she did so, fell on the young man standing so close to her. And Laban, before she had sufficiently collected herself to address

him, had ample opportunity for a quick but comprehensive inspection of the intruder's face. She was dark, with seal brown eyes, a red and slightly wilful mouth, and an adorable small nose as tip-tilted as a trillium petal. Her hair was a dusky brown, and the elaborateness with which it was coiffured added a touch of maturity to the otherwise girlish face. But what most impressed him, and at the same time most appealed to him, was the ivory smoothness of her skin, a creamy and flowerlike fineness of texture that in some way seemed to imply a corresponding fineness of character. It succeeded in giving her an air of delicacy that amounted almost to fragility.

Yet she was far from fragile. He could see that from the careless vigor of her movements as she stepped back to the door, made sure it was locked and again directed her attention toward the young man so fixedly confronting her. He could tell it, too, from the quick audacities that clustered about the wilfully curved mouth as she stared at him, not with disapprobation, as though she recognized in him an enemy not greatly to be feared.

"Rather rummy, isn't it?" she observed, showing her teeth in a smile that was not so mirthful as she might have wished.

"Decidedly so," agreed Laban, backing discreetly away as she advanced into the room.

"May I sit down?" she asked.

Without more ado, and before her involuntary host could speak, she dropped into a chair.

Then the seal brown eyes circled the room. They went from point to point with a slow and studious stare. Then they rested once more on the young man standing beside the table.

"Where's the junk?" she asked with an obvious effort at carelessness.

But instead of answering that question, Laban decided to ask one of his own.

"What were those shots?" he demanded.

The severity of his face tended to amuse the young lady inspecting it. But she declined to give way to laughter.

"That was the house detective trying to stop the hold-up man before he got down the service elevator."

"What hold-up man?"

“The one who just lined up the women in the Louis Quinze ballroom and made them drop that jewelry into his hat.” She stopped and stared about with a slight look of worry on her young face. “By the way, you’ve got it all right, haven’t you?”

“I’ve got it,” acknowledged Laban.

The unlooked-for coolness in his voice seemed to puzzle her. She studied his face intently. He had the feeling of being measured by an invisible yardstick. Her own face, he noticed, had a touch of hardness in its more sober moments. But the wilful young lips were laughing again, and again she exhaled her odd impression of inextinguishable youth.

“It looked exactly like the third act of a play,” she babbled on, “until an extremely stout lady in sequins swooned and went down like a flour-sack. She did that when the hold-up man pushed his gun-barrel against her flesh and told her to move a little quicker. She had a *lavallière*, you see, that she did hate to give up. But the line broke, in the excitement when she went down, and that meant he had to herd ’em all back into one corner of the ballroom again. I ducked under the portière where he’d stuck his hat full of loot until he got their hands up again. I’d just time to empty the hat into my skirt as I ran. He knew what had happened by then and tried to come after me. So I went into a perfectly horrid man’s suite, who saw me taking one of his hand-towels. Then I decided that whatever happened, I wouldn’t let a thief carry off a fortune in hair ornaments and all that sort of thing. And I knew you were honest and——”

“How did you know I was honest?” interrupted Laban.

“By your face,” was her prompt and somewhat discomfiting reply. “I’d seen you coming up to your room, and I remembered the number.”

Laban blushed in spite of himself. But his embarrassment was eclipsed by a sudden movement from the girl, who had risen from her chair. She seemed to have remembered something. She stared with wide and bewildered eyes at the room door that she had so recently locked with her own hand.

“But what are we to do with it?” she asked, without looking at the slightly abashed young man who now stood closer beside her.

Her eye traveled to the telephone instrument on the little square table and her thoughtful young face was clouded with a look of worry.

“If that phone should ring,” she suddenly warned Laban, “don’t dare to answer it!”

“Why not?” asked the youth.

But she did not reply to his question. Her eyes were once more on the locked door.

“S’posing the house detective should come,” she said in a lower tone. “What could we do?”

Laban also wanted to know what they could do.

The girl crossed the room to where the Not-To-Be-Disturbed sign hung on one side of the dresser mirror. She thrust the square of cardboard into the young man’s hand.

“Put this under the clip on the outside of your door,” she commanded. “But be sure there’s nobody outside when you open that door.”

Laban went to the door and listened. Then he cautiously threw off the safety catch, listened again, and turned the knob. His pulse quickened as he swung the door an inch or two back, peered out, and made sure that no interloper stood on his threshold. His fingers were shaking a little as he stepped out and thrust the card under the metal clip between the two polished panels.

“Now lock the door again,” he heard the girl saying in a stage whisper.

He did as she commanded. Then he turned and faced her. He noticed the new lines of resolution about the audacious young mouth.

“Now where are the jewels?” she asked with a matter-of-factness that he vaguely resented. It seemed to be hurrying things too precipitately toward a conclusion he preferred to see postponed. It seemed to shake the pollen of romance from a situation not yet in full flower.

His hesitation did not escape her, and she looked sharply up at him.

“You’ve got them safe here, haven’t you?” she once more demanded.

“I’ve got them,” he acknowledged.

“Then what are you waiting for?”

“I’d rather like to know what you’re going to do with them.”

“I’ll show you,” was her prompt reply. “But first we must——”

Her words trailed off into silence. Then she moved a step or two closer to her companion. For quietly but clearly through the silence he could hear a series of small metallic sounds. And these sounds were made by some

unknown person fitting or attempting to fit a pass-key into the locked door of his room. He even started toward the door. But the girl held him back.

“It’s all right,” she whispered. “But if they knock, don’t answer. Don’t answer on any account!”

They heard the key being withdrawn again. The safety catch had saved them. They waited, with the girl’s fingers still clutching at the youth’s sleeve. But no knock sounded on the door.

“That might be a maid,” whispered Laban.

But the girl beside him, who had been covertly studying his face, shook her head in dissent. Then slowly and studiously she again inspected the room.

“I don’t like those windows open,” she whispered; but for the second time she held him back as he made a move forward to close them.

“Wait!” she told him, and he did as she asked. By this time, apparently, he was getting used to her commands.

She stood in an attitude of listening for a minute or two, and then turned to him again.

“Where are the jewels?” she asked, still speaking in little more than a whisper; but still again she stopped him before he could move from her side.

“Turn out the lights,” she whispered.

“Why?” he asked.

Her fingers, he noticed, were catching at the flap of his side pocket. There was something childlike in their clutch. The girl, he remembered, did not care to lose him in the darkness.

He switched out the light above the writing-table and the two wall lights on either side of his dresser. When he pushed the button that extinguished the bulbs over the imitation marble dome that hung from the ceiling, the room was in total darkness. This promptly threw into relief the two semiluminous squares of the still-open windows. He was about to move forward toward these windows when he was arrested by a muffled gasp from the girl at his side.

He thought for a moment that it was some unknown enemy back at his door again. But as he felt his companion’s fingers tighten on his arm he realized that the menace lay at the other end of the room, the end toward which she was staring so intently through the darkness. His own eyes

followed the obvious direction of her gaze, and as he looked he saw a moving silhouette darken for a moment the luminous parallelogram of one open window. A moving shadow seemed to slide in over the wide sill. It was followed by a second shadow and the muffled small noise of a moving object coming into contact with a carpeted floor. Then came a low “Sh-h-h!” of warning, a faint whisper or two in a tongue that Laban could not understand, and an ominous stretch of unbroken silence that sent half a hundred mouse feet of apprehension up and down the young man’s backbone.

So preoccupied was he with that silence that it was several seconds before he became conscious of the girl’s steady tug at his arm. But he finally surrendered to that unremitting pull at his coat sleeve and fell back with her, step by step, toward the door. Then he felt her stop suddenly at a repeated click close beside them. He was not sure whether this meant the cocking of a revolver or the pump of a shell into an automatic chamber. But it was unmistakably and acutely disturbing, as disturbing as the faint double knock which the next moment sounded on the wall somewhere behind him. Before he could wheel about, however, he heard the snap of a light switch.

He was dazed the next moment by the flood of light from the near-marble bowl above his head; and he stood there, blinking rather stupidly at what confronted him.

He saw himself between two swarthy and lean-faced men, watching him with an intentness so singular that it impressed him as catlike. He failed to see, in that first bewildered stare at them, the blue-barreled automatic which each man held poised in his raised right hand. But he had small chance to speculate on that tableau, for almost simultaneously each man took a step or two closer to him and the girl at his side.

“Stick up your hands,” commanded the taller of the two, with the barrel end of his automatic making an ugly O in Laban’s face. “Get them up, both of you! And get them up quick!”

He spoke with a slightly foreign intonation, but the young westerner, at the time, was giving more thought to the message than to his method of speech.

“Now back up against the wall,” was the next quietly worded command.

Laban, as he complied with that order, noticed that the girl’s gaze was fixed on his face as though by her eyes and her eyes alone she was attempting to impart some message to him. But a brusque hand pushed her

body flat against the room wall and all she could do the next moment was to direct a resentful stare toward her captor. And it was toward her, this time, that he directed the ugly blue-barreled pistol.

“Where’s that stuff?” he demanded, with his swarthy thin face thrust forward like a fighting cock’s.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” protested the girl.

She tried to speak quietly. But her voice was tremulous, and her face, by this time, was as white as chalk.

“Where’s that stuff?” coldly repeated the man with the automatic.

The malevolence of that ratlike face with the set jaw seemed too much for the girl. She shrank a little closer to Laban’s helpless shoulder.

“I don’t know where it is,” she finally admitted. “And when I tell you that, I’m speaking the truth.”

A short bark of contempt broke from the man confronting her. And for the third time, and just as coldly as before, he repeated his demand. Only this time he pressed the blue metal of his pistol end against the yielding white flesh of her bare shoulder. She cringed back from it, with terror in her eyes. But she did not altogether give up.

“I tell you I don’t know!” she cried. “It was taken out of my hand as I stood out there in that hall. I never even saw the man who took it. But it was taken from me, I tell you. Where it went I don’t——”

That was as far as she got. The man silenced her with a gesture of impatience at the same moment that he called sharply over his shoulder to the confederate on guard at the far end of the room. The words that he spoke were meaningless to Laban, but they had the effect of bringing the second intruder’s automatic ponderably closer to the young westerner’s midriff. Then Laban saw that the taller man was making a series of quick but dexterous passes about the shrinking body of the young woman beside him. He was searching her clothing for the loot which he apparently still suspected she held hidden about her. And that was an affront which Laban promptly resented. He resented it so acutely, in fact, that he quite forgot about the ugly blue-nosed pistol pointing at his breast-bone and the earlier mandate to keep his hands above his head and his back to the wall.

“Keep your hands off that woman!” he shouted as he flung a reckless arm out between her and her persecutor.

The swarthy-faced one stopped short, clearly stunned by an impertinence so unlooked for. Then he thrust a face venomous with hate closer to the face of the indignant-eyed young man.

“Do you want a hole through your head?” he quietly intoned through his yellow teeth. He spoke softly, but there was a deadly intentness in every accent. “For it’s what you’ll get, you rabbit, if you try another move like that!”

So fortified was he with the knowledge of his own power that he no longer looked at the youth with his back to the wall. His eyes were already on the white-faced woman again, the white-faced woman who shrank back from the explorative hand that was already thrust out to resume its padding about her body. The owner of this hand accordingly failed to notice the short squint of appraisal in Laban’s eyes and the sudden tensing of his jaw muscles. And being without knowledge of those things, he was without due warning of what was about to befall him.

For the youth against the wall, the next moment, exploded into sudden action. He knocked aside the pistol hand at the same moment that he flung himself bodily upon the holder of that pistol. The two bodies locked together, swayed and went over, striking and clawing and parrying as they went.

But it was a hopeless struggle. The smaller man in the background was too quick for Laban. He did not fire, as the breathless girl seemed to fear. He merely dropped to his knees and pinioned first the one hand and then the other of the still foolishly struggling Laban. In another twenty seconds the two of them had him in chancery. They had him garroted and helpless and were expeditiously thrusting him through the opened door of his clothes closet. There the taller man held him down while the other without hesitation or ceremony flung the startled girl in through the same door, which the next moment was swung shut and locked from the outside.

V

It was several moments before Laban could regain his feet, and several more before he could regain his breath. Then his mind cleared and he thrust a groping hand out through the darkness. He wasn't even sure, until his fingers touched the cool flesh of her shoulder, that the girl was there beside him.

"Are you hurt?" he heard her ask in a whisper. Then he felt her hand on his arm as he tugged uselessly at the door.

"No, no," she whispered. "We must wait."

"Not on your life!" he cried, rather drunkenly, dizzy with the indignities to which he had been subjected. "I've done nothing to deserve this!" And he continued his assault on the door panels.

"No, listen!" she commanded, holding him back. "Listen! Do you hear them? They're searching the room!"

Faintly Laban could hear the quick and frantic movements about the room beyond the locked door. Then came another sound, the shrill call of the telephone bell, repeated again and again. The girl behind him was shaking his arm.

"Will they find them?" she asked, with her lips close to his ear.

"Find what?" he asked.

"What I gave you," she said, and then he remembered.

"They're wonders if they do," he answered.

"But where did you put them?" she persisted.

"I'll show you when we get out," he told her.

"And just how are we going to do that?" she asked with a note of exasperation in her voice.

But he was listening, with his ear to the heavy door panel, and did not answer her question when he spoke.

"I believe they've gone," he whispered down to her after another stretch of silence during which she had dropped to her knees, apparently to examine the door lock.

“I was wondering if we could do anything with a hairpin,” she explained, with her eye to the keyhole.

He knelt beside her in the darkness. She was at least game. But the hairpin suggestion, he soon realized, was of no help to them. He felt carefully about the door frame.

Then he said, “I’ve got it!”

“What is it?” she asked.

“I can get the pins out of the door hinges,” he explained. “I’ve got the top one now, and that’s the middle one. But this bottom one is tighter. It would be easy if I only had something to pound it with.”

“Try my slipper heel,” she said, with one hand on his stooping shoulder as she pulled the slipper from her foot.

He took it from her, and using one of the already loosened pins as a punch, he soon had the lower hinge free. Then came the hardest part of his job. That was to work the hinge end of the door far enough away from its frame to get a grip on it with his fingers, for the door, to save space for the room entrance, swung in instead of out. By using a coin as a wedge, however, he was finally able to pry the door away from its jamb and the rest was easy. The lock bolt slipped out of its socket as the door was drawn aside, and they were again free and grateful for the fresh air of the outer room, where the ceiling light still burned and where no sign of the two interlopers with the automatics remained.

But it was not a pretty room. It still bore every evidence of the quick and frantic search that had been made through it. The huge brass bed had been pulled out from the wall, the bedding itself was disarranged, and the camera which Laban had left under one of the pillows was gone.

But the metal cap which crowned the lower right-hand bedpost, he had the presence of mind to observe, remained in its place and had in no way been interfered with. Table and desk and dresser drawers, however, were all open and awry. Laban’s suit-case lay on the floor, with his belongings tossed pell-mell about the carpet.

The first thing that definitely caught his eye was one of his five Okanagan Valley apples in a far corner of the room. He noticed as he picked it up and turned it over, that it was not only bruised but also bore the mark of having been punctured by a thin knife-blade. It was this ill treatment of his apples more than anything else that he resented, and his face was both a rueful and an angry one as he proceeded to gather up the rest of that

scattered fruit. He was interrupted in this, however, by his slightly bewildered-eyed companion.

“Shut and lock those windows,” she commanded.

He docilely crossed to the windows to carry out this order. But he first leaned far out over the wide sill.

“Yes, it could be done,” he said as he drew back after his examination of the wall.

“What could be done?” was the girl’s prompt inquiry.

“Any one with nerve enough could work his way along those wall ledges,” explained Laban. “It could be done, without even claiming to be a human fly.”

He locked the two windows and closed the heavy-slatted blinds. When he turned about he saw the girl rearranging her hair in front of his dresser mirror.

“You didn’t give my slipper back,” she said to him over her bare shoulder.

He went to the clothes closet for the missing slipper. But before returning it to her he threw back the key in the closet lock, readjusted the door and pounded the hinge pins down in place.

“There was a light in here we might have turned on,” he called out to her.

“Was there?” she called back in a slightly thickened voice, for she had her mouth full of hairpins.

Laban, with the slipper still in his hand, stepped out of the closet and closed the door. He paused a moment to pick a pillow up from the floor and toss it to the disordered bed. He was stooping for the second time when an unexpected sound arrested his movements. The sound, he realized, came from his room door. That door was thrown open without ceremony, and a thick-bodied man in a black hat just as unceremoniously stepped into the room.

Involuntarily Laban moved toward the girl still preoccupied with the rearranging of her hair in front of his mirror. He did this because he suspected for a moment that the intrusion meant the return of his earlier enemies. But about this newcomer was an air of heavy authority which both quieted and disquieted the staring Laban. He noticed that the girl, catching

sight of the newcomer in her mirror, wheeled about and stood wide-eyed and startled at his side.

Silently the black-hatted man inspected them. Then just as silently he inspected the room. Without speaking, he stepped back to the still open door, where he waited for a smaller and more clerical-looking man to join him. There was solemnity on the face of each as the two stepped uninvited into the room.

“Is that your man?” asked the smaller.

The black-hatted person shook his head from side to side.

“How about the woman?” asked the other intruder, as impersonally as though the pair confronting him were wax dummies in a shop-window. But the girl beside Laban betrayed no intention of acting like a window dummy.

“How dare you come into this room?” she angrily challenged.

The heavy-bodied man looked at her with an apathetic eye.

“That’s exactly the question I want to ask you,” he retorted; and his face, as he stared at her, was a stolidly insolent one.

“And who are you?” asked the girl without giving ground.

“I’m the house detective,” he informed her. “And this is Mr. Givens, our assistant manager.”

The girl, however, betrayed no interest in that second announcement. Her attention was directed solely toward the larger of the two men.

“Then you’re arriving a trifle late on the scene,” she remarked with a valorous show of indifference.

“But not too late to put a stop to this sort of thing,” announced the wide-shouldered official in the black hat, which still remained on his head. “It’s one of the things this hotel doesn’t stand for and isn’t going to stand for.”

Laban stepped forward at that, with a flush of anger. But the solemn-eyed young woman in the yellow silk dinner gown drew him back. Then she faced the house detective.

“Have you any idea as to whom you’re addressing?” she demanded; but her indignation, for some reason, failed to carry.

“That doesn’t interest me,” was the other’s altogether listless retort. “All I’m trying to do is to keep this house respectable, and I can’t say you two birds have been making it any easier for me.”

For the second time the girl held back the youth at her side. But it was the clerical-looking man who, with a movement of exhausted patience, spoke first.

“I think we’ve had just about enough of this, Burke,” he said as he stepped past his house detective and confronted Laban. “We want this room, young fellow. You’ve got ten minutes to get what you own out of it. That’ll give you just fifteen minutes, all told, to get out of this hotel, and get out of it for good!”

It was the heavy-jowled house detective who spoke next.

“How about the woman?”

“She gets out, and she gets out right away,” retorted the official, without so much as another glance at the girl.

It was Laban who turned and looked at her. He shared for a moment the detachment of the black-hatted man, still so impersonally eying her. She seemed to recede from him, so that he could stand there wondering why she should wear such a look of desperation on her agitated young face, wondering why the seal brown eyes should be so clouded with frustration. But she came closer again the next moment, reinstated by the sheer pictorial appeal of burnished brown hair and alert slenderness and orange-colored cloak about sloping ivory shoulders. She was a wonderful young woman, Laban had to admit, with her head thrown back that way and the splash of red showing along her anger-whitened cheek.

“But this is all so stupid!” she was crying out. “So stupid—if you only understood!”

“Understood what?” heavily asked the black-hatted man.

“That this is the man I’m going to marry,” retorted the girl as she linked her arm through Laban’s; and Laban, without knowing it, stood with his shoulders a trifle farther back.

“Then you’d better get where the fact is better known,” announced the cold-eyed man of administration. He stopped for a moment at the door. He stopped and glanced casually back, as though the matter were already a closed issue with him. “See that they’re out, Burke, in the time I said.”

“They’ll be out,” averred Burke with guttural-noted conviction.

“I guess I’ve got something to say about that,” cried Laban, going from red to white and back to red again. “I’m going to stay in this room until _____”

The girl cut him short.

“No, we’ll go—er—Mr. Burke,” she announced with a sort of painfully achieved patience. “Within ten minutes’ time we’ll both be away from your painfully respectable hotel. There’ll be no difficulty about that. But before the honor of your hospitality is withdrawn, I merely wish to warn you that you are making the mistake of your long and doubtfully varied career. I can quite see that you don’t appreciate that particular fact. But I can assure you, you will before you hear the end of it. And now if you’ll be so kind as to withdraw and close the door after you, I can finish dressing and get ready to go.”

Burke eyed her in heavy and unruffled silence, made a sound in his throat not far removed from a grunt, and slowly turned and walked out of the room.

The girl, the moment the door closed behind him, ran across the room and locked that door. Then she turned about, with her back against its polished panel.

“But I say——” began Laban.

“Quick!” she gasped. “Get ready! Get everything!”

“But I don’t——”

“Of course you don’t! But we can’t argue about that now. We’re going, but we’re not going the way you think. For that man isn’t the house detective and that other hasn’t anything to do with the management of this hotel!”

“Then who are they?” demanded the wide-eyed Laban.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” was the girl’s reply, as she motioned for Laban to make ready.

“But what makes you say they’re not what they claim to be?” he asked, finding the pill a hard one to swallow.

She laughed at his solemnity. It was an abandoned little laugh and at the same time a confident one.

“Because my old dad just about owns this hotel,” she announced with a smile still wreathing her wilful young lips.

Then her face, as Laban stooped to gather up his belongings, suddenly grew sober. Her tug at the slack of his sleeve made him look up.

“The jewels!” she reminded him. “Did they get them?”

His face went blank as he stood up and stared about the room. It went blank, not with consternation but with concern. Whatever happened, he remembered, it would be best to leave that double-barreled cache behind him. It would be safe enough for the time being. Circumstances had already proved that. And there was a riddle about this young woman in the orange cloak which he wanted to read before he went too far. She still puzzled him in more ways than one; and the solution of that problem, he felt, was not going to prove a disagreeable experience.

“They’re all right,” he finally acknowledged, meeting the studious eyes still bent on his face.

“But where?” she repeated, with a sharp stamp of her foot.

He turned and faced her.

“Don’t you trust me?” he demanded, as their glances met and locked.

Her eyes, he noticed, were hard, and behind their hardness lay a tinge of frustration. But as they continued to study the face which she had so recently acknowledged to be an honest one, the sternness went out of her gaze, and the lines about the impatient red mouth relaxed a little.

“Don’t you trust me?” he repeated, rejoicing, for all his guardedness, in the intimate nearness of that ebullient young face that made him think of a tip-tilted trillium.

“Sure,” she finally acknowledged, with her irresponsible little laugh; and Laban, manlike, nursed the momentary glow of the conqueror.

VI

Laban, during the next few minutes, was quite content to play second fiddle. He was an outlander, unfamiliar with the ways of that strange city into which he had plunged with such unexpected results. But the girl beside him knew her ground, seemed to know every inch of it, and he was not unwilling, for the time being, to place himself in her hands. He stood passive while she used his telephone for two or three calls, during which he sought to be gentleman enough not to listen to her quickly murmured words; and he remained equally passive as she piloted him coolly but quickly down to the hotel office, where at her admonition, he officially surrendered his room key. Then, having quite unnecessarily paid for a night's lodging which he had not as yet enjoyed, he stopped on second thought and checked his suit-case before rejoining his companion.

He was conscious of her standing, guarded and watchful, all the time they were detained in the almost deserted rotunda. And when they emerged at the carriage entrance he found a taxicab awaiting them and heard the girl's murmured "Quick!" as he climbed into the seat beside her. She watched through the door windows as they hurtled off. She looked anxiously back as they turned a corner, careened down a couple of blocks and turned still again. He once more heard her cry of "Quick!" as they skidded to a stop before a kiosk, and saw her thrust a bill into the driver's hand before she dived down a stairway which led below the street level.

He followed her, quite ignorant of the fact that he was entering a Subway station until he saw her drop two nickels in a slotted box and run for a vestibuled train which had just come to a stop on the rails beside the cemented platform. They stepped aboard, thundered on for what seemed merely a minute or two to the wondering Laban, and at the next station stop made for the door.

The girl, at the top of the stairs that led to the street level, looked carefully back to make sure they were not being followed; and with her fingers clutching at Laban's coat sleeve, rounded the kiosk and threw open the door of a limousine which awaited her there.

The next moment they were off, without a word of explanation or order to the uniformed chauffeur on the driving seat. It impressed Laban as rather miraculous. And it was not until they were well under way that the girl, leaning back in the padded seat, emitted a long and luxurious sigh of relief.

Just once, after resting there for a moment of utter lassitude, she lifted the curtain that draped the rear window of their swaying cave of darkness and stared back along the light-strewn street.

“We’ve made it!” she announced in a tone of quiet triumph.

“Yes, we seem to have made it,” agreed the young man at her side. “But the thing that’s worrying me now is just where we’re going to.”

He heard her quiet little laugh in the gloom.

“It’s funny, but I don’t know your name.”

He told her his name, and she repeated it twice, as though the sound of it was pleasant to her ears.

“And incidentally, of course, I don’t even know yours,” he reminded her.

“Mine’s Gale,” she said after a moment’s silence.

“Then, I suppose, Miss Gale——” he began, but she cut him short.

“No, no; not Miss Gale. I’m Gale—Gale Rimelander. You’ve heard of the Rimelanders, I imagine.”

He was reluctantly compelled to admit that he had never heard of the Rimelanders.

“That’s what makes it all so—so absurd,” she went on. “For, as I said before, dad just about owns that old Hotel Colbridge.”

“Then why didn’t they understand that?” asked the literal-minded Laban. “Why didn’t you make them?”

“Isn’t it all bad enough without announcing it to the world?” she demanded of him.

“Isn’t what bad enough?” he had to inquire.

She could afford to laugh at his innocence.

“The awful way we’ve been hitched together,” she told him as she leaned forward in her seat, as though making an effort to see more of his face in the meager light.

“It hasn’t seemed awful to me,” he announced, quite obviously satisfied with the situation.

“But that’s not what the rest of the world would say,” she reminded him. She leaned back in the padded seat before she spoke again. “You see, you

really ought to marry me, after what we've gone through this last couple of hours!"

He caught his breath. She was joking, of course. She was a world above him in every way. But there was intoxication in the thought, and anything might happen in a night of mysteries such as this.

"I'm no quitter!" he proclaimed, with a half-defensive and half-quizzical grimace in his voice as he spoke.

He felt her movement as she leaned forward in the darkness again. She was apparently trying to decipher his face in the darkness.

"Do you like me?" she asked with the impersonal directness of a child.

"How could any one help it?" he recklessly demanded; and he was rewarded for that speech by finding her hand thrust into his. It nestled there, warm as a bird, and Laban began to feel that life, for all its imminent perplexities, was a rare and wonderful thing. He even forgot about being hungry.

"You're a darling," announced the young woman at his side. "And you can kiss me if you really want to!"

Laban began to feel a little light in the head. They seemed, in the hooded gloom of the car, oddly remote from the rest of the world—as remote, for the moment, as though they sat on a lonely planet sailing through lonely æons of interstellar space. And already that night she had sent tumbling his trim little structure of suburban proprieties.

"You don't want to?" she asked, with a catch in her voice.

"I want to very much," he found himself saying, though he didn't quite know what he meant by that speech.

He didn't quite know, in fact, what anything meant. What he did know, a minute later, was that she lay close in his arms, that he had kissed her most unmistakably on the mouth, and that she was clinging to him and murmuring, "My hero!"

It wasn't until he had kissed her for the second time that she quite unexpectedly lapsed back into quietness. That sudden silence, in fact, tended to disturb the still tingling Laban.

"It'll be easier now when we see dad," she finally announced to him.

"See him about what?" asked the slightly tremulous Laban.

“We’ll have to explain things, of course, before somebody else tries to. Can you imagine how it would sound without knowing what you and I know?”

He was willing to agree that it might not sound any too reassuring. But he was still disturbingly unsure of his ground, still prodigiously in the dark about it all.

“So let’s get the rumpus over with,” he heard the girl say as the car drew up at the curb.

It had drawn up, he noticed, before a manorial-looking residence of gray sandstone with a street door of silk-draped plate glass behind a barricading grille work of wrought iron.

It was an impressive-looking entrance, just as it was an impressive-looking mansion and an impressive-looking street. Laban, all things considered, wished that he could feel more at his ease.

The girl ran up the wide sandstone steps, pushed the bell button and then turned blithely back to him.

“It’s just like something out of a fairy story, isn’t it?” she cried, as she hugged his rather listless arm close to her side.

They were admitted by a morose-eyed servant, on whom the girl’s light-hearted nod seemed entirely lost. So dour did that servitor’s face impress him, in fact, that Laban was glad to follow the girl up the stairway that cascaded in a ponderously ornate half-circle from above. The light was dim, and a heavy-piled carpet muffled their steps.

He came to a stop at the girl’s side before a dark-paneled door. She looked at him with one of her reassuring little smiles, and reached a hand out to turn the knob. But before she could effect that movement the door opened and a young woman in the uniform of a trained nurse stepped out.

“We want to talk to dad,” coolly announced the daughter of the house.

“I’m afraid that will not be possible to-night, Miss Rimelander,” replied the nurse, after a slight but not insignificant pause.

“But I’ve got to,” persisted the other, quite unruffled.

“Mr. Rimelander should not be upset at a time like this,” remonstrated the young woman in the peaked white cap.

“But it’s going to be good for him, what we’ve got to say,” averred the young lady of irrepressible spirits, as she nodded for Laban to follow her

into the room.

Laban did so, and in doing so he found himself in a large and luxurious-looking bedroom dominated by a mahogany four-poster overhung by a French canopy of Chinese-flowered chintz with an apricot-colored ground.

In the center of the bed, propped up by two huge pillows with ridiculous lacy edging, he saw a yellow-skinned old man who made him think of a Chinese mandarin. But that impression of Orientalism lasted for a moment and no more.

For the petulant-eyed man on the bed, when his gaze fell on the girl smiling at him from the footboard, blinked with condoning good humor at the daughter from whom apparently he had been taught to look for the unexpected.

“Well, Bobcat, what brings you here?” he asked in a thin but forbearing tone.

“We came for your blessing,” said the girl.

But she turned and pushed Laban gently back into the shadows. Her movement obviously implied that he was to wait in the background until she could approach her parent and discreetly break the ice. And Laban fell back, watching the girl as she circled about to the head of the bed, leaned over the ridiculously ruffled pillows and essayed certain whispered and intimate acknowledgments to the blinking-eyed old aristocrat on the four-poster.

“Bring the young upstart over to me,” Laban heard the shrill old voice command.

The girl, still with a note of laughter in her throat, said quietly, “Dad wants you, Laban.”

Laban crossed the room and stood half-way between the heavily shaded floor lamp and the canopied four-poster. He was conscious of the girl’s retreat into the shadows which he had so recently left. But he was more acutely conscious of the shrewd old eyes which were inspecting him from under the brocaded canopy.

“Huh!” snorted the old tyrant. “So you want to marry my daughter, eh?”

“She seems to want to marry me,” Laban was prompted to explain. But instead of surrendering to that impulse, he merely replied, “Yes, sir.”

“And what brought you to this?”

“She did,” was the reply of the literal-minded youth.

“What?” barked the old man on the bed.

“Don’t be unreasonable, dad,” remonstrated the girl out of the darkness into which she had retreated.

“Who’s being unreasonable?” queried her father. He turned and directed a quavering finger in her direction. “And who’s always been unreasonable around here, I’d like to know, since they’ve been knee-high to a grasshopper? Who’s giving me an even chance for a relapse with all this talk about love at first sight and getting married before the milkman can make his rounds? And what do you know about this young upstart who can’t even ——” He broke off. He broke off and turned angrily on the still slightly bewildered Laban. “If I thought, sir—if I thought for one moment that you were marrying my girl for her money I’d put an end to this before that self-willed young minx over there could slap a slipper heel against the floor!”

“What’s money to me?” demanded Laban with an airy gesture of repudiation.

“Huh! Have you got so much of it?” bit out the old tyrant in the silk-frogged pajamas.

“I’ve always had what I needed,” asserted the youth, who objected to being snarled at.

The old man sank lower on his heaped pillows, wagging his head as he subsided.

“I’m not dead yet, remember,” he mordantly reminded them. “So don’t you two young blatherskites figure on what I’m going to leave behind me.” He emerged from his pillows. “And you, Bobcat,” he wheezed out, addressing his daughter with unlooked-for energy, “how do you know this young jackanapes gives a fig for you? I guess a man’d hitch up with a homelier girl than you for a cool three million and a half! I guess——”

“But, dad, you don’t know——”

“Exactly!” crowed the vitriolic old invalid on the bed. “I don’t know. You’ve said it! I don’t know! And you don’t know! And the sooner we find out, the easier this thing can be settled. So, first thing, who is this young cub? And how did he get here, and where does he come from?”

Meekly and methodically Laban explained his origin, his advent to the city, and his earlier intention of promptly leaving it.

“And on what ship, sir, and of what line, were you to do this radio work?” demanded the bright-eyed old inquisitor, once Laban had identified

himself as a wireless operator.

“The *Aleutiana*, the new boat for the Puget and Kyukuot Company,” explained the youth.

“The Puget and Kyukuot Company!” echoed the other, sitting up. “Why, sir, I own that company!”

“You own it?” repeated Laban with a stare of incredulity.

A chortle shook the pendulous old throat of the man on the bed.

“Well, I carry enough of that company’s stock to have the final say-so in its affairs. And if you’re going to marry that Bobcat of mine over there, it strikes me you’ve got to be something better than a key pounder on a second-rate coaster. So what d’you want, sir? How’d you feel about taking over our eastern offices here and running the whole shebang from this end of the line?”

Laban’s head began to swim. There seemed nothing, in that sudden upheaval of his universe, to which he could cling and steady himself.

“I—I don’t believe I’d have the equipment for a job like that,” he hesitatingly explained.

“Fiddlesticks!” said the bright-eyed old man on the bed. “You get what you grab in this world, and I don’t want my girl hitching up with a chicken-hearted mollycoddle. I want something more than a handsome head, sir; I want something in it!”

Laban felt flattered at the same moment that he felt indeterminately distressed. Things seemed to be moving too fast for assimilation. He was being crowded into bignesses that were too amazingly new to be swallowed. When he realized the old man on the bed was still eying him with the sharpness of a narrow bargainer, the bewildered youth turned back to the girl named Gale as though in quest of support from her.

The silence was broken by a sharp cackle of laughter from the old man.

“How about it, Bobcat? D’you really like the lad?”

“I’m crazy about him, dad!” that amazingly candid young lady promptly protested; and still again Laban was both flattered and distressed; for, with all his youth, life had already beaten a feather or two from the wings of illusion. What he was getting seemed too much for him. The tide of luck in some way seemed too incredibly beneficent.

“Then that’s settled,” announced the keen-eyed old invalid on the four-poster. “You get the New York office, young man, and you get my girl. She’s a hot-headed young minx, sir. I warn you of that beforehand. But her heart’s as warm as her head, even though she has a will of her own. And it will be up to the two of you, when I’m gone, to——”

He was interrupted by the entrance of the nurse. She came into the room quietly but hurriedly, with a glance at Laban as she stepped past him that he did not altogether like.

“What is it?” asked her patient with a note of unlooked-for sharpness in his voice.

“There’s an officer waiting down at the door, sir,” was the nurse’s answer.

“What’s he waiting there for?” demanded the owner of the house.

“For this young man,” said the nurse, with a nod toward Laban.

“And what does he want with him?”

“He wants to question him about a jewel robbery.”

Laban felt his heart sink, but courage did not altogether forsake him. He swung about to the four-poster with his jaw set. But before he could speak the girl called Gale interrupted.

“That’s all poppycock!” she cried. “I know exactly what the detective down there wants to talk about, and if there’s any talking to be done I’m going to do it. So come on, Laban!”

The girl had already slipped an arm through his and was leading him from the room. He was dazed, but he was not too dazed to notice, once the door was shut behind them, that instead of turning toward the stairway they were heading deeper into the house and facing a narrow flight of steps that led to the story above.

“Where are we going?” asked Laban.

“To the roof,” was the grim rejoinder. “Don’t you see we daren’t face that man down there? And the sooner we get out of here the better for both of us.”

“But what good?” began Laban, following her up still another flight.

“Look out for your head!” cried the girl as she swung open the roof transom and half-guided and half-thrust him into the open.

He found himself on a sheet-metaled roof surrounded by a forest of coping-tiles and chimney-tops and roof-hatches. The stars shone down on them and a cool breeze blew between them, and there was a thin but persistent sense of consolation in the thought that he was once more in the open. Yet wonder was still strong in him as he watched the slender girl slide over a glazed coping-tile and drop, in her precarious narrow slippers, to a pebbled and sloping house-roof slightly lower than the one on which he stood. He heard her half-whispered call, warning him to come quickly. So he lowered himself more guardedly and turned to follow her as soon as he was sure of his footing.

But he could catch no trace of her as he peered through the shadowy half-light. He felt for one foolish moment that she must have fallen over a roof edge. Then he felt that she must be awaiting him in the shadow of one of the walls or hatches which stippled that broken arroyo of tarry pebbles and metal and bricks. But he failed to find her as he crept forward from shadow to shadow. He even called out to her as he circled irresolutely about. But he soon stood intimidated by the sound of his own voice. It came home to him as he groped his way to a wall top and sat down on the coping tile crowning it that the situation was not one to shout over.

He waited there with a slow subsiding of hope, wondering why that midnight enterprise should suddenly seem so pallid. The girl was gone; there was no doubt of it. She had dropped out of his life again as abruptly as she had dropped into it. And with her going, in some odd way, the zest and color of that ridiculous midnight excursion ebbed dolorously away. It came slowly home to Laban that he had been expecting a trifle too much of life. It came home to him, too, that he was lost along the skyey ramparts of an unknown city, and that the true explanation of how he came to be a trespasser along that nocturnal sky-line would neither sound reasonable nor stand investigation.

Yet Laban, for all his predicament, found his anxiety shot through with a sense of relief. He was grateful for the chill night air, which at the same time that it cooled his body also seemed to cool his reason. The whole thing, he began to feel, had been rather ridiculous and rather incredible. He experienced that indeterminate satisfaction which comes to a theater-goer at times when he emerges from an overcrowded playhouse of overcrowded action, and resumes once more the sane but sordid pace of the street. Already a haze of unreality was drifting between him and the scenes through which he had so recently been hurried. They seemed something fictitious and hectic. And even the girl called Gale, the girl whose voice he had heard

not ten minutes ago, seemed to be slipping away into the phantasmal, like a figure remembered out of an overvivid dream.

Yet the predicament directly before him, he saw, as he peered about in the darkness, was a sufficiently substantial one. He was a trespasser on somebody's housetop, where he had no business to be, and it was not the hour for casual explorations. As he pushed guardedly forward, a sense of isolation overtook him, like that of a mountain climber lost in lonely and perilous altitudes. It seemed as though he were treading on sleepers with nothing but the skin of a drum between him and that army of outraged householders only too ready to resent his intrusions. He imagined armed figures confronting him from roof doors and portly men in pajamas demanding his surrender. He pictured himself being led docilely down to a police-station and held for burglary or third-degreed as a second-story man taken red-handed in his wanderings. And his distaste for those solemn and gloomy housetops increased until the mere rattle of a clothes-line pulley could send a thrill scampering up and down his spine, and the crack of a pebble under his cautiously advanced shoe heel could bring him up short. More and more he felt like an aerial adventurer keeling the ridge-poles of a sleeping city, and more and more he longed for the chance of dropping an anchor down to earth.

There were doors enough about him, hatch and bulkhead and scuttle doors, which he was quite without the stomach to investigate. For each of them, as far as he could decipher, led only to peril. So he kept morosely on his way, struggling up and down limy parapets, evading cat teasers and clothes-lines, lowering himself over one party wall and mounting another, but always carefully veering away from skylights and treading more softly where rimped zinc threatened metallic thunders under his feet. But always, too, as he moved so cautiously forward, he peered about for any reasonable avenue of descent. He ached to feel flagstone and asphalt once more under his feet. For until he was back on terra firma, he knew, he could not walk with safety.

Then he stopped abruptly. He stopped because his scalp felt cold and he remembered that he had no hat with him. His spirits went down at that thought, slowly and ponderously, like a freight elevator. He stared disconsolately about at the suffused amethystine light that hung over the city. He could hear the restless murmur of that city, remote and unceasing, punctuated by the occasional sharper note of a motor horn and the periodic crescendo and decrescendo of surface cars passing a street corner on some near-by track. Then he heard another and more definite sound. It was the

whine of violins, the pulse and throb of music rising and falling in the night air somewhere ahead of him.

So he ventured farther along that rugged rectangle of housetops, smelling out the sound that was so disturbing and at the same time so relieving. His eyes had become accustomed to the dark, and as he advanced he could discern a roof-garden rising like an oasis out of that broken desert of brick and metal. He could see rustic railings and rows of tubbed cedars and a gray canvas awning flapping in the breeze above the massed greenery. There were no lights on this roof-garden, but the reviving pulse of music came from directly beneath it; and as he stood studying it he caught the refracted luminous glow from a door that quietly opened and closed again.

His spirits revived at that, for here was a pathway where he could awaken no sleepers and intrude on no privacies. It was dance music that he heard, and he could even catch the hum of many voices from that house of open mirth and open windows. So he decided to make the plunge.

He lightly climbed the coping-tiles, held two of the stunted cedars apart and swung heavily down to the slatted flooring of the verdure-inclosed aerie. Then he checked himself with a suppressed cry in his throat, for in making that descent he had come within an inch of treading on the trailing fingers of a woman.

She was a young woman, sheathed in pale rose, as far as he could see in the half-light, and between her and the boarded roofing, was spread a deeper red wrap edged with fur. Seated close beside her on this outspread wrap was a man. Laban could see the white oblong of his shirt front, the slash of white cuff at the end of the arm about the bare-shouldered woman.

The man had been kissing her, Laban knew. He did not even draw away his arm as the stooping, startled face stared down into the upturned faces, equally startled. Nothing was said during that moment of suspended motion. No word passed between them as the intruder indecisively drew back from the huddled figures so close to his feet. But some partnership of guilt seemed to impose silence upon them; and that silence fortified Laban as he straightened up, stepped quietly to the door at the head of the narrow stairway and swung it open.

He did his best to retain that air of quiet composure as light and warm air and a medley of voices confronted him. But his heart was in his mouth, and he found nothing to say when a couple, half-way down the stairs, moved closer against the wall to let him pass. Yet his courage rose the next moment,

for they had neither questioned nor stopped him, and a minute later he was lost in a crowded beehive of color and movement and noise.

He was so sure of himself by this time, that he deliberately side-stepped into a large and smoke-filled bedroom littered with men's hats and scarfs and greatcoats. He looked over the hats without trepidation, selected a modest one which he felt might suit him and knew would fit him, and calmly continued on his way toward the ground floor of the house. He pushed by couples too intent on their own ends to observe him, avoided the eyes of a hurrying footman, crossed a reception hall and coolly opened the grilled iron-and-glass door that led to the street.

VII

Laban breathed deep when he felt the fresh air once more on his face. He ignored the clump of chauffeurs smoking beside one of the cars lined up at the curb, but refused to accelerate his pace. He walked solemnly to the nearest corner, rounded it with a gulp of gratitude and once more caught the crescendo and decrescendo of a street-car as it swept across the canon of quietness into which he had turned. Seeing this, he decided to board the next car.

It was not until he was under way that he felt reasonably safe. Then as he slumped wearily down in his seat he surrendered to an unwilling but welcome mood of indifference, to a feeling of tension relaxed and danger past. His night had been a busy one, so busy that one wave of sensation seemed to have obliterated another. It had made its demands on him. He wanted to rest, to reorganize the overtrodden aisles of consciousness. His head was like a department store at the end of a heavy day's business. He was glad to sit there in a languor of fatigue and let that undulating and half-empty car carry him into some fortifyingly remote quarter of the city; and some quarter of the city, he reminded himself, where he could sit down before a square meal and end that desolating ache just above the pit of his stomach.

He had no intention of falling asleep. Nothing was further from his mind. But there was something soothing in the modified rocking of the floor under his feet, in the rhythm of the wheel rims pounding the rail ends, and before he quite knew it the curtains of fatigue were quietly lowered over his eyes and his head drooped forward.

He awakened with a start, persuaded that he had surrendered to forty winks and nothing more. But he noticed that the car in which he sat was now well-filled with passengers, and he further observed, as he stared out of the window, that they were in an entirely different part of the city. He could not be sure of the street, but it was one no longer bordered by sedate house fronts and the periodic illumination of lonely lamp-posts. He found himself in a valley of movement and color and sound incredibly crowded, a valley filled with light that was colder and harder than the light of day. This light came from a bewildering tangle of sources—from bulb-strewn foyers and brilliant shop fronts and multi-tinted sky signs in motion, with clustered globes on tall metal standards and terraced windows and lamp-lined façades

and moving vehicles barking or clanking for their right of way under signal towers blossoming with nervous moons of pearl and green and ruby.

Laban suspected that he must be back on Broadway again, but he could not be sure. He did his best to catch sight of a reassuring street sign, but he was uncertain where to look for such things, and before his eye had time for exploration, the car in which he sat swept on again. So he looked tentatively about the passengers surrounding him, hoping to encounter a face friendly enough to encourage a question as to his whereabouts.

He looked from face to face, vaguely depressed by the self-immurement which he encountered there. His eye wandered on, right back to the rear entrance. There it stopped, arrested by a movement on the platform as the car slowed down. Laban noticed a man leap up on the steps, as alert as a newsboy snatching a sale. He noticed as he sank a little lower in his seat this man's quick yet seemingly preoccupied stare up and down the car's length; and Laban breathed a little easier as he saw the man turn away and swing down from the steps. For that swarthy-faced man with the nervously appraising eyes, he now knew beyond a shadow of doubt, was the same man who earlier that night had invaded his room in the Colbridge and held a pistol barrel against his ribs.

Laban breathed easier, but only for a moment. For as the car slowed down again, that swarthy-faced stranger once more swung aboard the platform, pushed his way into a freshly vacated seat and innocently unfolded and quite as innocently proceeded to peruse an evening paper which he held well up in front of his face.

A large and sudden distaste for that car took possession of Laban. He watched two weary but rubicund old ladies, carrying opera-glasses and souvenir programs, as they pushed closer in toward where he sat. Discreetly he rose and proffered his seat. But even more discreetly he fell back in the shadow of their generous bulk, keeping his eye as he moved closer and closer to the front car door on the man behind the paper. That man, he tried to persuade himself, had no knowledge of this retreat. The man, at any rate, had given no sign of such knowledge. But Laban was doubly grateful for the crowd at the corner when the car stopped and he stepped out. He dipped into that crowd like a frightened animal into cover. Through those massed units he wove an irregular course, with an occasional guarded look over his shoulder to make sure he was not being followed. But what made cover for his own body, he remembered, made equally effective cover for an enemy's; and he had no wish to skirt too narrowly the margins of safety. Like all fugitives, he felt that his best chances of freedom lay in movement.

So when, on the fringe of the traffic that eddied about him, he caught sight of a rubber-neck wagon garlanded with the swaying paper globes of red and blue and yellow of Chinese lanterns and heard the midnight barker announcing the last sight-seeing trip to Chinatown, he circled about to the shadowed side of the wagon, climbed quietly aboard and buried himself behind the high-backed seats on the pretense that he had dropped a coin there. He maintained his search for that imaginary lost coin until it became ridiculous, and the last of the passengers to fill his terrace bench of a seat even became jocularly remonstrative. But the swaying lanterns were taken down, the barker climbed aboard and produced a worn megaphone, and the chariot of winged curiosity started on its way toward the realm of the tong and the tea house.

Laban wasn't much interested in that car or its mission. He was more interested in the fact that it was carrying him away from a certain swarthy-faced man, and at the same time, closer to the water-front. He remembered, from his earlier study of a map of New York, that Chinatown lay comparatively close to the East River, and that the East River lay between Manhattan and Brooklyn. This meant that he was moving appreciably nearer to where the *Aleutiana* lay at her berth, and his thoughts were now centered more and more on getting safely aboard his ship.

He found consolation in the fact that everybody aboard that rumbling and lumbering vehicle seemed, like himself, a stranger to the city. All about him were tourists and bridal couples and mild-eyed delvers into the enormities of night life, listening raptly enough to the nasal elucidations of the man with the megaphone. He knew well enough that they were being duped, in a way; that the ivory they were to buy would be polished bone and the jade a product of American factories, just as there would be a touch of the factitious about the opium-cellar scenes and the theatricalized fan-tan game at the end of some sufficiently intricate underground passage. He was a son of the Pacific Coast and knew the Oriental and his ways. New York, he felt, could show him nothing new along that line.

He sat back in his swaying seat, impressed by the tameness of the nocturnal quarters through which he was being charioted. Even the Bowery, a region which the moving-pictures and the printed page should have made wonderful to him, now merely tended to impress him as a well-lighted and sedately commercialized thoroughfare with no promise of romance behind its mask of respectability. Equally unresponsive did he remain to the clamorous ugliness of Chatham Square.

Yet a moment after the big car had swung out of that square, a change crept over the tired and listless-eyed youth. At a breath, almost, they had rumbled into a new world, a new world that seemed incomparably old. For by this time they were in a darker and less decipherable region, a region of huddled walls and narrow and irregular streets, of crowded iron balconies strung with colored lights, of swinging vertical signs in scarlet and gold. Laban's nostrils were assailed by heavier and more exotic smells, dull odors, of sandalwood and chandoo and sen-sen, which took his thoughts back to the Oriental steamers that used to lie along the water-front at Seattle and Victoria. He caught sight of narrow shop fronts that made him think of Canton and Shanghai, of curio dealers' windows crowded with lacquer work and jade and pottery and bronze, of the illuminated mouths of cellars stippled with moving figures in loose pantaloons and pongee blouses and senshaw skullcaps. Before a chop-suey house with red-and-black dragons along its walls he saw an old Chinaman in a queue and sandals, and in a doorway piled high with strange-looking greens and fruits and nuts he caught sight of a sloe-eyed child—who should have been abed hours ago—flaming like a night-blooming cereus in her straight-lined dress of brilliant raw silk. He saw tea houses, bright with Ningpo varnish and gold leaf, where yellow-faced smokers stared indifferently up at the invading omnibus. He passed a joss house whose carved images seemed more pagan than the totem pole of his native coast.

Then he caught sight of a more pretentious restaurant, with incandescent lamps along the galleries, and a bluecoat in front of it and a line of modish-looking cars parked close beside its curbing. He found something so fortifying in that repeated note of modernity that he decided, as the slumming party politely debouched from their parterres of seats to invade the gambling warren of one Sui Hau, to give his midnight friends the slip and work his way toward Brooklyn Bridge and the water-front, where he knew his ship would be lying.

He sidled off, without comment, from that sedentary and preoccupied line. He had not gone twenty steps, however, before he became conscious of an extremely spare youth in a soiled sweater apparently keeping step with him. He drew up short before a window filled with gongs and images and diminutive glazed pottery, to make sure that those companioning steps meant something more than an accident. The lean youth came to a stop close beside him.

“Yuh did the right t’ing, kid, in cuttin’ dat rubber-neck scow. Dey’s fakers, the whole bunch o’ dem.”

Laban's eye was a hostile one as he turned and inspected the interloper who stood so unpleasantly reminding the truant that he wasn't quite so free as he had imagined.

"Trail in wit' me an' I'll show youse a flop joint wit' the lid off," suggested the stranger, altogether undisturbed by Laban's studiously unsympathetic inspection.

"I'm not looking for flop joints," announced the young westerner. "I'm looking for a place to eat."

At that the lean youth brightened perceptibly.

"Den I'll steer youse to one o' the kippiest chow holes in the quarter," he fraternally suggested, with a claw already clinging to the other's coat sleeve.

But Laban, who felt he knew more of life than he had one short day before, shook off that claw and turned, with a show of ferocity, on his oppressor.

"Say, you get to hell out o' here!" he proclaimed, with a brusqueness which came as a surprise to his own startled spirit. "Save that bunco-steering stuff for the corn rustlers, for I happen to know as much about Chinatown as you know about coke snuffing."

Laban's chest was still a bit inflated as he continued on his way along the crowded street, for the withered figure had drawn back at that unlooked-for disclosure of sophistication and vanished in the darkness. And Laban felt surer of himself as he strode on to the next corner, though he was forced to pull up there for a moment, uncertain as to which turn would take him toward the river. He finally decided that it would be safest to veer back to the policeman for information. That officer could also tell him of a respectable place for a stranger to go in and get a decent supper.

His spirits rose almost miraculously at the thought of that supper. Then they sank again even more rapidly, for as he started forward he most unmistakably felt the weight of a heavy hand fall on his shoulder. He swung about, startled. He looked up to see a big man with a bony face and a chest like a gorilla standing close beside him.

"Wu Fang Low wants to see you," said the stranger, without so much as a look down into the face of the slighter-bodied youth.

VIII

There was something impersonal and fateful about that message so quietly delivered; and the receiver of it, as he stood squinting up at the bearer of it, had no liking for the mysterious huge hulk of a man whose paw rested so remindingly on his shoulder.

Laban's first impulse was to shake that hand off and writhe away, protesting that he knew nothing of Wu Fang Low and nursed no desire to be inspected by him. But Laban knew that this was not quite the truth. He also knew that his chance of escaping was microscopic. Flight, he remembered, would only muddle his case; and he had done nothing, after all, of which he need be afraid.

"What does Wu Fang Low want?" he asked, conscious of the power in the heavy hand that was already turning him about in his tracks. They were moving forward by this time, side by side.

"Wu Fang Low wants to see you," repeated the stranger.

That was all he said, and he uttered it in a tone which carried the implication that it was all he cared to say.

"You said that before," complained Laban.

"And once ought to have been enough," asserted his oxlike captor.

Laban began to resent this autocratic interference with his freedom. He resented the dictatorial way in which he was piloted around a corner and herded down a narrower but less noisy street, where yellow-faced figures clacked back and forth in list slippers along the shadowy shop fronts. He was pondering the most vigorous way of expressing this resentment when the stranger stopped, opened a black-wooded door and ushered him into a long passageway with its somber length broken by three gilded arches.

A silver bell tinkled as a door was opened at the end of this passage, and they crossed a small room with teakwood beams brightened with gold leaf. Then his guide opened another door on the right and descended a narrow stairway, where the air was pungent with the mingled aroma of hop and park nor mi. At the foot of this stairway Laban caught the sound of an alto violin squeaking to the accompaniment of a softly thumped drumhead. This music stopped of a sudden as the big man beside him knuckled a tattoo on the black panel of a door.

The door opened. It opened miraculously, swung back by no hand that Laban could see, for he found himself in an empty room.

“Wait here,” said his thick-shouldered guide as he crossed the room and disappeared beyond a heavy portière of apple green silk shuttled with threads of silver.

Laban, as he waited, examined the room closely. On three of the walls, black-studded and filigreed with gold, hung three pieces of tapestry. These, in a confusion of soft colors, seemed to depict the adventures of a celestial maiden sought by a youth in a sampan. The one wall without a tapestry was divided into two arches supported by carved and gilded panels representing, like magnified chinaware, conventionalized garden scenes of the Orient.

In one corner stood a heavily carved chest bound with bright metal. In the other stood a low dragon-claw table holding yellow tea dishes, and between chest and table lay a silk rug as soft in tone as the tapestries so companionably overlooking it from the wall.

Laban was still wondering why so simple an arrangement could produce so complicated a sense of beauty, when the silver-threaded portière parted and a yellow-jacketed young Chinaman, advancing mincingly, uttered the one word, “Come.”

Laban, walking slowly, and finding in that tardiness of movement a perverse expression of his personal independence, stepped in under the rustling portière. He found himself in a brightly lighted room not unlike the one he had just left. But this time the room was not unoccupied. Across the farther end of this inner chamber stood a black table, low, large, heavy-timbered. Seated behind it was an old Chinaman in a flowered mandarin coat, and at one end, facing him as he entered, sat a thin-nosed, narrow-faced white man with shining high forehead and eye as intent as a rat’s.

Laban from the first did not like the appearance of that white man. There was cruelty about the thin-lipped mouth and arrogance in the deep-set eyes, which studied him closely as he came to a stop in the middle of the lacquered floor. There a teakwood chair stood six paces in front of the table as though it had been placed with a scrupulous forethought as to symmetry.

“Sit down,” commanded the thin-lipped man at the table end.

Laban resented the manner of that address and showed it by the slow and slightly contemptuous way in which he finally seated himself. He was looking now, not at the white man, but at the old Chinaman directly opposite him. He saw a stout old man wearing horn spectacles and a large air of

benevolence. This man's face, for all its incredibly intricate network of fine wrinkles, was as hairless as that portion of the blue-scalped head not covered by the satin cap which lent an air of the pontifical to the impassive and motionless figure. The great loose-folded tunic of brocaded blue silk added to this effect. The only ridiculous thing about him, Laban felt, was the rimpled right hand resting on the black-topped table, the unmoving right hand, where the nails were so long that they curled in toward the flaccid palm. This, in a figure less venerable, might have carried an accidental note of malignity, but in connection with a creature so mild it seemed to spell only timeless and tribal futilities. For never once did the placid-eyed old Chinaman look directly at Laban. His expression remained one of aloofness, of imperturbable tranquillity, of mellow indifference toward all that may overtake man on this momentary sphere of trouble. Laban, in fact, felt drawn toward the benignant old figure in its fastidiously ornate apparel of another world, just as he was repelled by the keen and challenging eyes of the narrow-faced white man, who should have stood closer to his sympathies.

And as though to confirm that impression, the white man suddenly and sharply broke the silence.

"You have been very clever," he said, with a note of mockery in his words that was altogether distasteful to the studious-eyed youth confronting him.

"Have I?" parried Laban, not quite sure as to what the other was driving at.

"You probably think so," retorted the man at the table end. "But you have shaken out your bag of tricks, and now we shall see just how far your cleverness is going to carry you."

Laban stared at his enemy, for already he had accepted this man as his enemy. He stared with the blank-faced sullenness of a harried schoolboy. He sat there, perversely exulting in this silence which he had imposed upon them. He could show them just how far their own cleverness would get them if they proposed to pull any of their theatrical third-degree stuff on him! And he withdrew into his blankness stolidly, as a turtle withdraws into its shell.

Yet there was something about the resultant quietness that disturbed him. He could not define it at first. But he began to understand as he waited and listened that the disturbing factor in that sustained hush of expectancy was a sound or a series of sounds so thin and remote that at times they became inaudible. It was a faint tapping that he heard, muffled and hurried, and at

first Laban even thought it was some Oriental chef beating eggs in a metal bowl. But as he listened, with his eyes still veiled, he finally canceled that thought.

Then he let his gaze fall and seemed to be studying the motionless legs of the old Chinaman where the flowing pantaloons of light blue silk were held about the fat ankles by bands of black satin.

But his thoughts were not on those legs. All consciousness was focused on the fact that the metallic tapping which he heard was coordinating itself into intelligence and that he was listening to somebody, beyond the walls where he sat, operating a telegraph key. His trained ear could read the Morse by this time, and as he followed that staccato run of dots and dashes coming so thinly out of the distance it took an effort to maintain that beguiling air of blankness which he now felt to be more than ever an asset to him.

“Have the bird here now,” cluttered the distant key. “Get word to Comrades Martens and Marinoff in Washington to-night by new code. . . . Federal authorities intercepted courier at border this morning and took him. . . . Still at Plattsburg. . . . Know this kid got entire consignment; but so cleverly disposed of we . . . no connection with Erickson. . . . And unless we recover . . . loss of over three millions to Third Internationale. . . . Not wait for Hourovich, for it’s the cream. . . . Kremlin and Winter Palace collections. . . . And Wu Fang says we must go to the limit to get . . . seven hours . . . while we’ve got the bird in our hand. . . . Will leave it to Wu Fang. . . . Forty-three.”

That was all Laban heard; and even much of that was incoherent.

But he was not so dull-witted as he looked at the moment. He was still able to put two and two together, once those particular numerals had been made plain to him, even though behind them lay a vast hinterland of the unknown and the indecipherable. And if he was the bird they were exulting over, he could at least show them that he intended to be something more than a tame robin. They had pretty well spoiled his night for him, on the whole, and he was tired and sick of the whole unsavory mess into which he had been projected at no wish of his own. If that comic-opera old Chink wanted any information out of him, he’d have to have a smoother spokesman than this green-eyed Russian—for Laban was already fixed in his decision that this man was a Russian—who was still so pointedly and so balefully studying him. But Laban could not shake off the impression, on the other hand, that they were awaiting something; that something momentous

was in the air about him; that they were merely marking time until that unknown something manifested itself.

The silence became abysmal. It became ridiculous. It became so absurd that the narrow-faced Russian finally twisted about in his chair, leaned back with a sigh of exasperation and once more confronted the youth with the unparticipating eyes.

“You know why you are here?” he suddenly half-demanded and half-asserted, with the exasperation on his face hardening into hate.

“I’d prefer hearing you tell me why.”

He thought he smelled fried fish, or perhaps wong ye too, and that sniff of far-away cookery still again reminded him of the fact that he was very hungry.

“You carried into this city to-night a package which did not belong to you, a package which was intrusted to you by another,” began his oppressor.

“What was in that package?” asked the young man on the teakwood chair.

“We shall come to that later on,” retorted his enemy, with a flash of anger from his narrowed green eyes.

“You seem to be taking your time over it,” announced Laban, marveling at the immobility of the old Chinaman, who during this while had neither spoken nor stirred.

“You were sent word to deliver that package to Wu Fang Low here,” went on the other, with a gesture toward his blue-clad companion.

“Well?” prompted the young man.

“It has never been delivered,” slowly enunciated the other.

“Whose funeral is that?” demanded Laban, with an effort at lightness. A silence fell over the room.

“Yours,” the Russian finally and slowly asserted; and the venom in his eye began to worry the young westerner more than he would have been willing to admit.

“Is that a threat?” he demanded.

“On the contrary,” retorted the Russian, “it is merely a prophecy.”

His eye met Laban's. The significance of his look was not lost on the younger man; and the younger man, resenting that look, was about to put his feelings into words. But he was interrupted in that intention by the abrupt entrance into the room of two figures already familiar to him. One was the wide-shouldered giant who had so recently directed him to the house of Wu Fang Low and the other was the mysterious woman in saffles who earlier in the evening had so unexpectedly carried him in her car to the Colbridge.

They entered the room arm in arm. But there was small sense of the fraternal in that contact. Laban strongly suspected, in fact, that the big man was really holding the white-faced woman a prisoner there, just as if he had piloted her in between those walls practically against her will. The moment the big man spoke Laban found this suspicion confirmed.

"Here's the rib you wanted," was the cool announcement to the far from cool-eyed Russian.

But it was the woman who spoke next. She spoke angrily and with a crudity which went ill with the saffles and the white kid gauntlet gloves.

"Cut out this manhandlin', you big stiff," she announced to her captor, "or you'll see me rough-housin' round here quicker'n you're lookin' for! So cut it out, and cut it out quick!"

The two men exchanged glances. Then the Russian, after an earnest stare into the immobile face of the Chinaman, nodded his head toward the man standing beside the woman. It must have been a nod of dismissal, for without a word the sullen giant withdrew his arm, swung about and walked out of the room. The woman looked after him with a sneer of contempt on her face.

It was the Russian who spoke sharply to Laban.

"Did you ever see this woman before?" he demanded.

Laban, before he answered, turned and inspected the woman in the saffles. He looked her over wonderingly, impressed by both her beauty of face and the air of breeding which even her surrender to anger had not altogether obliterated.

"Sure," he finally retorted.

"When and where?"

The woman's short laugh of defiance did not escape the slightly bewildered youth.

“She very kindly took me for a ride in her car,” was Laban’s reply.

“When?”

“When I came out of the Grand Central Station to-night—I mean last night.”

“And what happened?”

Laban had no wish to hurt the lady’s feelings.

“She kind of mixed me up with her husband,” he somewhat reluctantly admitted.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean she must have mistaken me for the man she’s married to, or is going to be married to, or something like that,” he admitted, with a rueful glance at the woman so noncommittally studying his face.

“But what happened?” shouted the thin-nosed man at the table end.

“Why not consult the lady on that point?” equivocated Laban, once more resenting the overcoercive attitude of his interrogator.

“What did this woman get from you?” slowly intoned the Russian, with an air of sustained but sorely taxed patience.

“I don’t know as she got anything much from me,” Laban finally admitted.

The Russian gestured exasperation with his thin hands. Then he turned sharply to the woman.

“Ruzenka,” he said, more quietly, “you’ve double-crossed me, and you know it.”

“That’s a lie!” cried the woman with sudden vigor.

“Then tell me just where I’m wrong,” went on the other, maintaining his equanimity with obvious difficulty.

“You’re wrong in trying to blackjack out of me something I haven’t got.”

“But something you have in your possession, and could say even now just where it——”

“That’s another lie!” interrupted the woman, and the two confronted each other for a silent moment, with their glances locked.

“Listen,” said the Russian at last. “You know what happened to Fania Pobloff!”

“That red-flagger stuff can’t throw a scare into me,” maintained the insolent-eyed woman in the sables.

“But when you are bucking us, remember, you are bucking the whole organization; and that organization now extends over three continents.”

“Then why doesn’t it get busy?” taunted the quite unimpressed woman with her contemptuous stare directed toward first the sharp-eyed Russian and then toward the impassive and immobile Celestial behind the black-wooded table.

It was at this point that the unexpected happened. The imperturbable sphinx behind the table gave utterance, for the first time, to words. There was something startling about that unlooked-for guttural eruption into speech. It impressed Laban as oddly as human speech coming from a statue might have done.

“It glet busy velly quick!” was the flat-noted and throaty cackle that came from the obese squat figure in its incongruous sheathing of brocaded azure.

Laban could never be quite sure how it all began. It came so unheralded, in the first place, and its initial movements, in the second place, seemed so inexplicable to his startled senses.

But at the same moment that the woman ducked with incredible quickness before the pistol shot that spat from the voluminous blue sleeve of the Celestial, her hand swept under her own equally voluminous drapery and seemed to conjure out of thin air a bright-metaled revolver that barked even before she stood upright again.

The old Chinaman squealed like a rat as he dropped behind the table, which overturned as he went down, and from behind which he shot again, at random. The Russian at the same moment leaped for Laban, who fell back toward the door as the woman promptly put a bullet into the electric globe above them, throwing the room into darkness.

“Kick out, kid, and kick hard!” he heard her voice call across the blackness as she groped along the wall. “Beat it or they’ll knife you in the back!”

Then Laban ducked low, for a revolver was barking again through the gloom. He doubled back when he heard a call and shout immediately in

front of him, tumbled over an empty chair, twisted about and caught it up. He advanced, flailing the air as he ran forward, collided with something soft and yielding, struck blindly, and trod over a fat and silk-clad arm as he ran forward. All he asked for was to escape, to break away from those imprisoning walls which were now ringing with unintelligible curses and cries of warning. Then came a sound of breaking glass, the remoter shrill of a police whistle and the spurt of a match quickly lighted and shaken out again, not six paces away from him.

Laban, before ducking and side-stepping in that momentary illumination which precluded another short tattoo of pistol shots, caught sight of an oblong opening in the wall. He ran toward it, bending low, and as he pushed through it, with no knowledge whatever whither it led, his outstretched hand came into contact with the fur, warm and moving, of a wild animal. He at least took it to be a wild animal for a foolish moment or two. It was not until he had called out, without being conscious of the act, that he found this furred monstrosity to be merely the woman in the sables, pressed flat against the passage wall.

She must have recognized him by that sound, for she gave a little hiss of warning through the darkness. He could feel her moving closer.

“Get that panel shut,” she whispered. “It locks on this side.”

She was quicker than he was, however, to find and close what must have been a secret opening in the wall. The next moment she was feeling for him in the ingulfing blackness.

“Hurry up!” she said with a half-tired matter-of-factness as they started forward along the narrow passage.

They turned twice, ran down a short flight of steps, turned again, and passed through a door into another passage. This passage was larger and lighted by three electric bulbs strung along the boarded ceiling. Laban saw, as they advanced, that it branched into two.

“This way is quickest,” said the woman, turning to the right.

Yet she hesitated, with a frown of troubled thought on her face. Whatever scruples she may have nursed, however, she quickly overcame, for the next moment she was leading him down the passage at the end of which swung a portière, and she hissed again for silence.

Yet she stopped short before that swinging portière, with the frown of trouble once more on her face. She looked at Laban and still again studied the portière. Then, without saying a word, she quietly took from the youth’s

head the hat which he still wore. She motioned him back with one hand as with the other she held the hat between her fingers by the brim. She held it with an air of extreme fastidiousness, which puzzled its owner, as though it were something infected and to be avoided. She still held it in that manner, at arm's length, as she slowly and softly pressed it against the folds of the hanging portière.

Laban was still puzzled over the possible meaning of that tableau when the swaying black drapery beneath the outthrust hat was punctuated by a thin flash of light. It was a flash that lasted only for a second or two, and it had actually come and gone before Laban woke up to its actual meaning. For that stab of light had been a blade of polished steel, half as long as his arm, thrust silently through the swaying curtain. It was as thin and pointed as a ranseur shaft, slightly curved like a Turkish saber, tapering to a thinness that carried an incredible air of malignity about its twisted point. And there was malignity, too, in the way it had struck, as quick and silent as an adder's fang, through the screening folds of cloth, and had as silently withdrawn itself.

It gave Laban a chill as he fell back an involuntary step or two. The woman followed him, with the tip of one finger pressed against her lip for silence.

"That was meant for us," she whispered, as they fell back to the point where the other passage switched off to the left; and after a short glance over her shoulder she hurried him down this passage, where she found a ring in the floor, raised a trap and motioned him down a flight of steps.

They were in a subcellar by this time, amazingly close-packed with woven-grass bales and piles of glazed crockery and what seemed to be cases of Oriental household utensils.

Laban, as he followed the woman, stumbled over a heavy bronze lamp standard. His guide, at the sound, hissed softly for silence, but stopped him a moment later.

"Bring that along," she whispered. "There's a lock ahead of us here you'll have to break."

He groped about for the cumbersome bit of bronze, found it, and caught up with the woman, who was padding about a heavy door.

"Here!" she whispered, directing his hand toward a protuberant metal lock. "Smash it."

It was massive enough, but one blow tore away the screws that held it to its mildewed wooden sash; and they were through the door the next moment and climbing a steep flight of steps, from which they turned at right angles down a wooden-boarded passageway faintly redolent with the odors of cooking food. At the end of this corridor they were confronted by a young Chinaman in a soiled white tunic, carrying a wooden tray piled high with fresh-gutted fish.

“Put us through, Tom,” said the woman, tossing him a silver dollar.

The Chinaman, without speech or hesitation, conjured the disk of silver into his sleeve, balanced his tray on one hip, and with his free hand unlocked a small door which opened into a washroom heavy with ammoniacal odors and gray with cigarette smoke.

Laban followed the woman through this room, and was conscious the next moment of a sudden violent hubbub of contending noises. As she swung the farther door open, he caught the relieving sound of clattering dishes and music and many voices. He knew, even before they rounded the black-and-gold screen ambuscading that door, that they had emerged into a Chinatown eating-room crowded with its midnight patrons.

Laban saw a high-studded room stippled with crowded tables between which yellow-skinned waiters came and went. The air was blue with smoke, and many-colored lights twinkled about the walls decorated with imitation wistaria made of gaily dyed cotton. On a platform in a partly curtained alcove five garishly appareled Chinamen played five different instruments of musical intent, one a three-string banjo with a double head, another a mallet-shaped alto violin scraped with a bow of horsehair, another a drum entirely without resonance, another a moon-shaped sort of mandolin, and still another a long-handled two-string fiddle. They chanted as they played, but their music was not loud enough to drown the stream of talk from the crowded tables, where chicken and chow mein and rice and shark fin were being so busily washed down with park nor mi and plum-blossom tea. At the front end of the room stood a cluster of men and women, street girls and sailors, students and slummers, old gentlemen and officers, and women in opera cloaks, waiting for seats.

“The quicker you lose yourself in that bunch the better,” Laban’s guide was saying to him, unconscious of the relish with which he was eying the passing trays loaded with suey and foo yung high.

“But how about you?” he asked, studying her face, which looked a trifle tired and flat even in that modified light.

“Don’t worry about me, kid,” she said with a curt laugh. “But you make your duck out o’ here while the ducking is good!”

He started to thank her, but she cut him short.

“Beat it!” she said under her breath, as she gathered up her skirts and began to shoulder along one of the crowded aisles to an alcove, where a ruddy-cheeked old gentleman in evening dress was sedulously attempting to teach what was apparently his grandson, in the uniform of a West Pointer, how to manipulate a pair of chop sticks.

So Laban did as he was told. He elbowed in through that waiting crowd. He dipped into that crowd and emerged again just in time to encounter the cicerone of the sight-seeing bus leading his docile charges in through the gaudily festooned doorway and indulging them in a fleeting glimpse of one of Chinatown’s most popular chow houses.

Laban made for that line with the feeling of an exile heading for home. The dull-eyed barker greeted him with a recognizing eye, but did not address that strayed reveler until the completion of his official peroration on the Lotus Blossom Café.

“How’d you come to drop out of the party, bub?” he asked, as he indifferently herded his people back to the comfortably canopied wagon with its tiers of hospitable-looking seats.

Laban laughed, but it was laughter without a great deal of mirth in it.

“I kind of got lost in the shuffle back there a bit,” he noncommittally announced.

“Then you’ve sure been missin’ the best of your night’s show,” averred the interpreter of the underworld as he swung aboard his wagon.

“Oh, I’ve been wandering into a little show of my own,” Laban indifferently acknowledged as he watched the last of the sight-seers clamber wearily aboard.

He drew a deep sigh of relief, however, as he caught hold of the iron hand-rail to swing in after them. He glanced carelessly up to make sure of his space. His right foot was still resting on the curb as he looked, and for one motionless moment it remained there.

For on the far end of the seat on which he had proposed to perch himself, he caught sight of a big man with a bony face and a chest like a gorilla, and that impassive bony face under the lowered black hat brim was only too familiar to him.

His hand was still on the iron rail as he felt the car move forward. But his hold on that rail promptly relaxed and he ducked and slithered across the narrow street as the omnibus gathered speed. He ducked in between a row of parked cars along the opposite curb, pressed on with his eyes still turned back toward the swaying omnibus, and without once stopping, rounded the next corner.

His walk was quickened into a run by this time, and he no longer tarried to look back. He raced on, with no sense of direction and no clear-cut thought of destination. But he longed for the water-front as a harassed amphibian longs for the element that most readily harbors and hides its movements. He was sane enough to observe that the general slope of the terrain which he traversed was downward. This, he knew, meant he was at least wearing nearer and nearer the East River. He slowed down to a walk when he emerged into a side street more crowded with life, circled three sides of an irregular block, and once more followed the slope down toward the water-front.

IX

Laban was out of Chinatown by this time, and he found consolation in that fact. But he had no way of knowing how closely he was being followed or how quickly some one with a shrewder knowledge of that territory might circumvent him. So when the distant bellow of sirens came to his ears, and then the sound of bells, and then a fresher and more watery breath of air in his face, he felt sure he was near the river and was willing to take the risk of running again. He crossed a wide cobbled street bisected by car tracks and fringed with broken lines of hogsheads and packing cases. He saw his crooked canon of brick suddenly open to a wide vista of watery grayness overspanned by a gigantic cobweb spangled with lights. White lights drifted brightly along this cobweb and colored lights floated mistily beneath it. Laban's heart grew less leaden in his breast. He knew by this time it was Brooklyn Bridge that he saw, and the East River that lay before him. And somewhere within the shadow of that bridge end and along the near-by fringes of that river lay the clean and orderly ship with the clean and orderly little cabin which awaited him. He began to nurse the sailor's belief that safety could be found only afloat. He had seen quite enough of this strange city of indecipherable intrigues. He felt like a sea-turtle on land, glad to head for sheltering depths at time of danger. It seemed, in fact, like heading for home.

He slowed down to a walk again as he approached the wharf between the two open slips. He could hear the consolatory lapping of water and the bells of the ferry-boats nosing into their berths. But his arrival at that open river, after all, meant his arrival at the end of his rope. For here, he suddenly realized, his flight must end. And already, as he glanced back over the car tracks and the cobbled street, he could see a large-bodied figure advancing toward the wharf he had already invaded.

Laban sheered off to the string-piece along the wharf's edge. His first intention was to drop behind the shadow of that timber, but as he stared down at the slip water running between blackened piles he caught sight of the thin and pointed nose of an open motor-boat. So he wormed his way along the string-piece until he was directly above this gently bobbing peak, which reached out of the darkness toward him like a welcoming hand.

Then he dropped quietly down between the two sheltering gunwales.

The moment he did so the boat withdrew beneath the timbered flooring of the wharf. It withdrew as the tongue of a leviathan, having possessed itself of its prey, withdraws into a Gargantuan throat.

So opportune and so efficient was that withdrawal that Laban was more than a little puzzled as to its source until, as they drifted deeper in past dripping piles, a flash-light suddenly beamed full on his face and a slightly disgruntled voice inquired, "Where'd this robin blow in from, anyway?"

Laban found himself reinspected by that interrogative finger of light. He tried to grin conciliation up into the eyes beyond the blinding disk. But his grin was a grimace and nothing more.

"What'd yuh ever let this get aboard for?" demanded one of the apparently disembodied voices.

"Why, I t'ought it was Spider, all along," retorted the other.

That night had humbled Laban. It had brought home to him how small a factor, all things considered, he stood in the infinitely ramifying life about him. It had even incrustated him with a forlornly thin armor of guile quite foreign to his uncircuitous young soul. He was alone in this world of theirs, in this world of theirs that seemed so unitedly against him. But he nursed his human aversion to being so persistently regarded as of no possible consequence.

"That's all right, boys," he said in the friendliest voice that he could conjure up. "I didn't know I was butting in on anybody down here. I wasn't looking for trouble. I was only trying to get out of it."

He heard the skeptic snort from the remoter of the two men, and he was desperately afraid that they might take it into their heads to swing back to the wharf and put him ashore.

"Aw, t'row him overboard!" muttered the deeper of the two voices, not without disgust.

Still again the interrogative flash-light played over Laban's none too happy body.

"What t'ell d'yuh want here, anyway?" demanded the other voice, barbed with perplexity.

"I want to get to Brooklyn," announced Laban, wondering why that simple proclamation should result in a silence so prolonged.

“Are yuh the guy who’s hop-runnin’ for that Hon Low bunch?” the man who had moved back beside the engine suddenly demanded.

“No; I’m no hop-runner,” asserted Laban. “All I want, boys, is to get quietly over to Brooklyn. And there’s ten dollars apiece in it if you two men will put me over there.”

One of the men laughed.

“Say, Dutch, what’ll we do wit’ the boob, anyway?” he impersonally inquired, once his mirth had ebbed away.

The man called Dutch, who seemed to be engaged in taking a tarpaulin off the engine amidships, did not speak for a moment.

“We got to talk less if we’re ever goin’ to get away from this sewer end,” he finally complained, as he poled his way deeper into the pile-forested gloom. Then he spoke to Laban.

“Well, yuh’ll be took to Brooklyn, son. But before yuh hit that pious suburb you’re goin’ a ways wit’ us.”

“Going where?” asked the youth.

“To a funeral,” was the solemn retort.

“To a what?” demanded Laban with an uncomfortable stirring along the nape of his neck.

“I say yuh’re goin’ to a funeral, and if yuh don’t watch your step it’s goin’ to be yours! So sit down there and shut your trap and keep it shut!” Then he turned to the other man. “How about that chow, when we’ve got the chance?”

The other man said “Sure,” and moved along the boat bottom. Laban could hear the rustle of paper, the scrape of metal against metal as a tight-fitting cover was withdrawn from some sort of container, the faint squeal of a cork being withdrawn. Then plainly, in the damp air about him, he caught the smell of coffee—of hot coffee. He heard the crunching of food between heavy teeth, the smacking of heavy lips, the gurgle of the hot coffee from its metal container, the grunt of satisfaction as the cup passed from one hand to another.

It brought a burning sensation just at the base of Laban’s thorax. There was something like an ice-pick at the uttermost pit of his stomach, hacking against the walls of hunger. And the thought that they could sit there and eat, not ten feet away from him; that they could calmly regale themselves on

coffee and thick sandwiches while he sat famishing for food, filled him with a renewed sense of his own insignificance, of his triviality in the general scheme of things. He even sighed, without knowing it, when he heard them toss what was left of their food overboard.

Then came the shuffle of feet along the boat bottom again, a swing about with the current and a whispered "Give 'er half over!" to the man at the engine.

Laban, as he listened, heard little more than the sound made by the purr and drone of an electric fan. He suspected, as they slid quietly forward from slip side to slip side, that the craft in which he sat was electrically propelled. He could catch no sound of gases from its exhaust. It seemed to be gumshoed for midnight work, and that work was not apt to be any too legitimate. And his hosts, obviously, were not gentry for whom a man like Laban could have any particular liking.

"But how about your boob there?" he heard out of the darkness, as they forged ahead.

"It's not the boob that's worryin' me," retorted the other. "The thing I want 'o know is, what's become o' Spider? We can't get the casket out o' that warehouse without knowin' our back alley is open."

"Your boob will have to help wit' that casket," announced the second voice.

Then a silence fell over them as they arrowed onward through the darkness. They seemed to be rounding the Battery and doubling back again up the North River, keeping well out. Laban could see low shore-lines on his left, spangled with lights; on his right he could see a cliff-like silhouette, standing high and huddled against the luminous sky-line and freckled with innumerable flakes of fire, which he knew to be lighted windows.

He sat up, staring at them, until the blast of damp air against his body prompted him to drop down again between the tilted converging gunwales.

"She cuts—that wind!" said the man beside the engine.

"Yuh'll have six cases o' De Kuyper to get warm on!" commented the man at the stern.

"When we get it," qualified the other.

The man at the stern laughed.

"It's just pleadin' for burial, that casket!" he proclaimed.

Laban didn't know what they were driving at. He only knew that he was as uncomfortable, all things considered, as he had ever been in his life. He had been foolish enough to feel, once he was afloat, that all would be well with him. But here he was afloat, and he yearned for nothing more than to feel solid ground under his feet again. He was hungry and homeless. He was chilled through. He was so tired that his bones ached. And, to add climax to that drama of misery, he had every appearance of being in the power of a couple of river pirates who would probably slit his throat and tumble him into the Hudson River as quickly as they would steal a sack of coffee beans from a freight barge. But hope, in the heart of youth, dies hard, and Laban decided on one more effort.

"Listen to me, you two," he said with a laboriously achieved solemnity. "I've had about all the trouble I can stomach for one night. And I'm through! Do you get me? I'm through. I'm a wireless operator, and all I want is to get aboard my ship before she sails at six in the morning. I don't know you two men, and I don't know and I don't care what you're interested in. If I dropped aboard your boat without being asked to, I'm sorry I butted into your plans and caused you trouble. But if I can square myself, just say so, and I'll do anything in reason."

A full minute of silence followed this speech, which Laban regarded as an eminently sane and reasonable one. Then the deeper voiced of the two men spoke up.

"How much dough've yuh got on yuh?" he coldly inquired.

Laban considered. "A little over thirty-seven dollars," he finally acknowledged.

"Then show your sanity, son, by passin' it over!" was his enemy's equally cool-noted suggestion.

But the second man promptly objected to any such extortion.

"Cut out that small stuff, Pip. We've gave this boob a nice little river trip around the island, and he's welcome to it. Only, when we bump into the slip over there and go ashore for that coffin, he sits tight here, keepin' an eye on our craft until we come back. Then we puts him ashore and he ambles down to his steamer. Ain't that reasonable?"

The other man grunted, though it was not altogether a grunt of assent. A moment later he nosed in closer under the shadow of the wharf ends and shut off his power.

“Take off your shoes, bub,” he commanded, as they swung in along the darker edge of a wharf slip overshadowed by a warehouse.

“My shoes?” asked Laban. “What for?”

“For insurance,” was the answer. “I’ll just carry ’em wit’ me to make sure yuh’re here when we happen back.”

Laban unlaced his shoes and none too graciously surrendered them. He felt suddenly and ridiculously helpless without his footwear.

“What’s that for?” he demanded, as the boat owner thrust a lead whistle into his hand.

“Blow ’er, just once, if anything stirs along this end o’ that pierhead. We got a coffin to carry out, son, and it’s got ’o be done quiet and respectful like.”

The other man chuckled. “We must sure handle old Square-Face respectful,” he announced while making the boat fast.

Laban watched them as they clambered up the splintered wooden timbers. He saw them circle off in the uncertain light, moving from shadow to shadow as they drew nearer the gloomy mass of the pier shed. He was shivering by this time, and an added numbness seemed creeping up into his body by way of his thinly stockinged feet. He knew what he’d be getting out of it all—he’d get a sweet old cold, likely as not, and have to dose himself up on quinine; and the quinine would make his ears ring, and that would interfere with his receiving; and his new captain, ten to one, would regard him as a second-rate operator who ought to be aboard a coal tub.

He tried drawing his feet up and sitting on them tailor fashion. But this failed to warm them, and his resentment at being so arbitrarily robbed of his shoes grew stronger with his growing discomfort of body. The more he brooded over that deprivation, indeed, the more sullenly burned his anger against the two bullies who could take such liberties with his person. They seemed to think that they owned him, body and soul. He didn’t approve of all this uncouth talk about coffins. It was an unreasonable hour to joke about caskets and burial services.

Then a sharper tremor went through the pinched tide-way of his body, for the head and shoulders of a man appeared black over the string-piece directly above him.

“Throw me up that coil o’ rope,” was the curt command from the man leaning down over the basin side, and Laban knew it was the owner of the

boat who had come back.

But Laban was less interested in rope coils than in his own unmerited discomforts.

“How long are you going to keep me waiting here?” he demanded, drumming with his feet against the boat bottom in an effort to restore circulation to his shaking body.

“Yuh’re lucky to be alive!” said the quietly malignant voice above him. “I said to throw up that rope! D’yuh understand? I want that rope, and I want it in a hurry!”

Sullenly Laban reached for the rope coil and tossed it up to the waiting figure.

“Yuh sit there, or I’ll drown yuh when I get back!” was the parting warning as the man with the rope withdrew once more into the semi-darkness.

Laban, already weighed down with an accumulation of obvious injustices, found that parting message a highly objectionable one. So now they were talking about drowning him! They had carried him off a prisoner, and taken away his shoes, and bullied and berated him, and tied him down on the outskirts of an absurd midnight adventure in which he had no earthly interest. It was a queer city, all right, this city into which he had wandered a stranger, where they wouldn’t even let a man sleep or eat or make his way peacefully to his boat!

Then he started, involuntarily, as a sound came to his ears. For that sound, he felt, was a revolver shot, dull and flat, like the blow of a hammer on a hardwood plank. He could not be sure. But curiosity, touched with something a trifle less impersonal than curiosity, overcame his mounting lethargy. And he was tired of inaction.

He glanced guardedly about, padded along the swaying craft with the pointed nose and scrambled up the rough timbers of the basin side. He crept forward noiselessly in his stocking feet, keeping to the shadows as much as he could. He stopped short when he came to the pier shed. He hesitated for a moment, for he knew that with any advance he was skirting the fringes of danger. But it was too late, he felt, to draw back. So he worked his cautious way toward the river end of the warehouse, rounded it and came to a door which stood slightly ajar. The lock of this door, it was plain to see, had been forced.

The door itself was open just enough to permit Laban's body to squeeze through. So, after listening for a moment or two, he entered the high-vaulted warehouse that loomed above him as ominously dark as a mine drift. The minute he did so his nostrils were assailed by the contending heavy smells of jute and soured molasses drippings and spices and undressed pelts. He found himself in a rough-floored aisle between towering bastions of barrels and cases and corded bales. He thought for a moment that he saw the flash of a light between barred windows far down the shed. But it showed only for a second and was gone again, and he thought as he moved slowly forward that he was in a kingdom of utter and unbroken silence.

But Laban realized, as he stopped to listen for the third time, that he was wrong in this conclusion. For through that echoing cavern began to creep a faint noise, the nature of which he could not understand. It reminded him a little of the bubbling of water. Then it took on a vague rhythm that made him think of sewer-gas intermittently forcing its way through a drain trap. Then it reminded him, as he crept still closer, of the soft suspiring of a locomotive with its throttle closed and its fires banked. Then it became something almost human, disagreeably suggestive of the strangled breathing of a patient emerging from an anesthetic; and he stopped short at that in an effort to locate the source of the sound.

As he did so he saw the momentary flash of light again, but this time much closer to him. He beheld a widening luminous ray flower out of the blackness and fall on the muffled face of a man in a sitting posture. This man was so heavily lashed to an upright timber that it appeared, in that momentary flash, oddly like a capstan. The light wavered down over the closely roped body, and then, as quickly as it came, it went out again. As it did so Laban heard the sound of a voice, quiet and vindictive, and he recognized it as the voice of one of his enemies from the power boat.

"Cut out that croakin', you Swede, or I'll put you to sleep!" were the words which came to the listening youth's ears; and that listening youth knew, even before the rhythmic gurgling began again, that the sound came from a man tightly gagged and trussed to one of the shed beams.

That man, he surmised, was the night beak, the watchman, the guardian of that storehouse, whom they had only too plainly overpowered. They had him tied and bound and half-choked with their crude gag between his distended jaws. And Laban, remembering occasional visits to a dentist's office, when his own jaws had been kept pried apart until his throat was filled with saliva, felt humanly and unhappily sorry for that prisoner. As he moved forward again, groping along a viscid tier of molasses barrels, he

stepped on something soft, something that flattened under the weight of his lightly planted foot.

He stooped low and examined this something. He turned it over and caressed it with interrogative fingers. He felt the glazed peak of a cap. Attached to it he felt a metal shield and a row of metal numerals close together. Still again he explored its lines and contours, and this time he understood what it was. It was something that went with a uniform. It was the cap of a police officer.

That discovery both fortified and disturbed him. He found it reassuring to remember that the arm of the law was somewhere there about him in the darkness. But if a policeman was there, why was he satisfied to take no hand in the situation? And what had reconciled him to the loss of his helmet?

Laban, as he asked this, caught a more comprehensible sound out of the darkness. It was the sound of a human grunt, the preoccupied grunt of a body straining its uttermost. Then came the squeal and whine of steel against steel, as though some one were crowbarring open a door or forcing a lock from its fastening, and then the grunt again, but this time with a note of satisfaction in its timber.

“I got ’er open,” announced a quiet voice out of the ensuing stillness. “Bring your lamp here.”

“Wait a minute,” said a guarded and more guttural voice. “I want ’o get a flash on that cop and make sure he’s anchored.”

The light this time flowered unexpectedly on Laban’s left. Against the heavy framework of a movable gangway, as cumbersome as a dinosaur on wheels, he caught sight of a second figure, tightly trussed and gagged. This second prisoner, however, was in a standing position. Closely roped up as he was, there was less of humility in his rigid blue-clad limbs, and out of the broad Celtic face, across which the straps of the mouth gag cut, burned a look of stubborn hate. The eyes narrowed but did not blink at the insolent flash of light into their depths.

The man holding the pocket lamp said nothing, but once convinced of his prisoner’s helplessness, snapped out the light and felt his half-stumbling way toward what Laban accepted as the broken door of the pier’s strong room.

“What’ve yuh got?” he asked as he pushed this door open.

The answering voice was muffled and remote, but not untouched with exultation.

“I’ve got the casket.”

“But are yuh dead sure it’s the right one? This’d be a sweet night’s work, wit’ a stiff on our hands we wasn’t acquainted wit’!”

“It’s the only one!” This was followed by sounds of straining and grunting. “Feel the weight o’ the old bird! It’ll take the two of us to get ’im out!”

There was the sound of a stumble.

“What’re yuh fallin’ over there?” was the whispered challenge.

“Your gat,” was the other’s answer.

“That’s the cop’s gun. Get it out o’ the way and gi’me a hand here!”

“Just a minute!” The light winked and went out again. “Hully gee, but we’ll have a whole fam’ly to bury this night, Dutch! There’s eight cases o’ Three Star in here ag’inst the side wall!”

“We’ll need it, after takin’ a chance like this. So let’s get busy before I’ve druled my joints dry. Get a hold!”

Laban, crouching in between his molasses barrels, could hear them trudge heavily past him. He could hear their labored breaths and smell their sweaty bodies as they lugged their ominous burden down the rough-floored aisle. But it was plainly too much for them, for with renewed grunts of distress they came to a stop and eased themselves.

“We’ll just about earn this by the time we get it out into that kicker,” complained one of the men.

“And we’ve still got the boob out there to figger on,” the other reminded him.

“I know what that boob’s goin’ to get,” was the first man’s coolly malignant retort. “He’s goin’ to have his light put out wit’ a tap on the bean or he’s goin’ into Kruger’s cellar. We’ve got ’o bury that robin until there’s no chance of a blow-over!”

Laban heard that muttered speech. He both heard it and understood what it meant. It meant taking away his last chance of getting aboard the *Aleutiana*. It meant robbing him of the one thing that he valued in their phantasmal world of phantasmal intrigues, and he stood watching them as they moved forward again. He stood watching them, with his teeth set, as they rested and once more stumbled on. Then he slipped out of his shadowy corner and groped his way slowly forward. He waited to make sure his

enemies were out through the broken pier door, and then he pushed forward again. He had to be infinitely cautious, for collision with some loose piece of merchandise, he knew, might spell disaster. He worked his way on until he came to the wheeled gangway, where he felt about until he found the pinioned upright figure.

“It’s all right, officer,” he whispered as close to the other’s ear as possible. “I’m helping you. But I want to get your gun back first.”

He padded on from side to side until he came to the metal-sheathed door of the ruptured strong room. He explored that door with his finger ends, found it had been secured by a huge padlock which had held a heavy-angled hasp over a staple of three-quarter-inch steel fastened to the equally heavy door frame. He found, too, that it had been officially sealed, apparently by some inland revenue officer. But that flimsy ribbon of metal had been easily enough ruptured.

The door itself was intact. It was the huge padlock which had been twisted and broken into uselessness. The distorted ruins of that padlock were even at the moment indenting their sharper angles into one of Laban’s shoeless feet. But he gave little thought to this, for he remembered that his time was short.

He ran about in little circles, in frantic and ever-widening little circles, with his hands outstretched and his knees bruising first against a chair and then a row of wooden boxes slightly bigger than suit-cases. This failed to bring him what he wanted. So he dropped to the floor and writhed and padded from wall to wall, for more than ever now, he knew, his time was short.

He found the service revolver he was in search of—found it where it had been kicked into a corner, thrust it down into his hip pocket, started up, and suddenly shrank back into that corner again. For a soft thud warned him that his enemies had returned; a soft thud like that of a knuckled hand coming into unexpected contact with a metaled surface. He heard guarded footsteps, the kick of a shoe toe against a chair leg, and a duet of deep and slightly husky breathing.

“Don’t show that light again,” said a voice. It was a slightly petulant voice, but it impressed Laban most as being disturbingly close to him. “I’ve got the boxes here. Come easy!”

The ensuing silence was broken again by a scuffle and thud and curse.

“What’s that?” said the first speaker sharply.

“I stumbled over those damn shoes,” muttered the other man, as he apparently groped forward again and came into collision with the box row.

But Laban, at the moment, was more interested in the information about his lost footwear. He wanted those shoes back. He wanted them tremendously. Yet close as they lay to him, he could conceive of no way of recovering them. So he merely shrank back into his corner, where his body came into contact with a broom leaning against the wall corner. He possessed himself of that broom; he scarcely knew why. But it was a weapon of a sort, if the worst suddenly came to the worst.

“We’ll get the whole eight out o’ the shed,” the voice within three paces of him was saying. “We’ll get ’em clear, and then we’ll pass ’em on into the kicker.”

Laban waited until he knew they had stooped in unison over the boxes. Then, with one finger touching the wall, he slipped along the floor as quietly as a cat until he came to the open doorway. Without quite knowing it in his excitement, he still carried the broom in his hand. He was unwilling to drop it now for fear of noise. So he held it in his left hand as with his right he quietly swung the iron-sheathed door shut.

He could hear the two men grunt a little as they lifted their boxes and started forward in the darkness, advancing with an exploratory sort of sliding step which easily enough announced their approach. So Laban, knowing his next movement could not be a silent one, promptly clapped the heavy iron hasp through its heavy iron staple. Then, remembering the broom, he just as promptly poked the long handle of that humble domestic utensil down through the projecting end of the staple, where it served to hold and lock the hasp.

He knew, even before he heard their blows and futile tugs at that barricading door, that he had them as he wanted them; that he had them locked safe and sound in a bonding room lined with its fire-proofing of substantial sheet iron. So he struck a match to make sure where the barred windows stood in the room, for through those windows, he remembered, they might still try to send a bullet after him. But his course to the gangway, he saw, was entirely under cover. So he hurried toward it, taking out his pocket-knife as he went.

“We got ’em, officer!” he exulted as he cut away the sodden gag. “We’ve got ’em! I’ve locked the two o’ them up in the bond room!”

He could hear the gasp of relief from the thick throat, the deep breath of the cramped body, as the tiny knife-blade sawed through the coils of rope and the huge shoulders heaved and freed themselves.

But instead of moving, the released patrolman merely leaned against the gangway and quavered. Then he spat softly.

“Just a minute, me lad, and I’ll be all right.”

“And here’s your revolver,” prompted Laban, reaching out for the shaking big hand and directing it into contact with the extended firearm.

“Ah!” murmured the agent of law and order on whom had been heaped such enormities. As his big fingers closed about the waiting stock he repeated that monosyllabic “Ah!”

That repeated interjection, quietly as it was uttered, gave Laban a feeling in the pit of his stomach more disagreeable even than hunger. He was reminded at the same time of certain predicaments of his own.

“What d’you want me to do next?” he asked, backing away a little.

“There’s a watchman here somewheres, me lad. Get him loose,” answered the other, once more in full possession of his voice. “No; leave him be. For you’ll need a light and they’ll see it. That’ll give ’em a chance to shoot from the window.”

“I’ll risk it,” announced Laban, for an idea had come to him.

It had just occurred to him that he might quietly slip that watchman’s shoes from his feet before he cut the ropes from his body. A pair of brogans, after all, was not an extortionate price for personal liberty; and Laban began to feel that the time was about ripe for his withdrawal. He couldn’t afford to get tied up with the law and its demands. His ship sailed at six o’clock sharp, and above and before everything else, he had to be aboard that ship when she sailed.

“It’s a brave lad you are,” he heard the policeman proclaim out of the darkness.

But Laban, as he retreated, knew that it wasn’t altogether the truth he was hearing. He even found himself without the courage, on second thoughts, to creep forward to that trussed watchman and rob him of his footwear. Instead, he swung about through the aromatic piles of merchandise and worked his way quietly but quickly toward the river end of the pier shed.

He was not even clear of it before the stringed bulbs high up in the vaulted gloom sprang into light, at the same time that the alarm gong at the street end of the shed began its brazen clangor for help. But Laban neither hesitated nor looked back. He ran out through the still open side door, scuttled across the wharf planks and threw off the line that held the narrow-nosed power boat to the string-piece. Then he dropped lightly into the waiting boat, poled it about and let the ebbing tide suck it across the slip. He poled his craft outward along the shadow until he found fairway again, and once more let the tide carry him past dripping piles, making sure of his contact with what was stable, for he knew nothing of the engine and its workings, and had no wish to veer off into the open river. He drifted under the rusty stern plates of a liner, missing her projecting screw-blades by not more than a handbreadth. Then he swung into darkness again, and out again into a slip bordered by a higher and newer pier which completely blocked his path.

So preoccupied was he in making a landing, as he brought up at a lighter grinding against the pier side, that he paid no attention to the solitary figure indifferently observing him from the fresh-hewed string-piece high above him. He had made the boat fast and clambered up to the pier floor, in fact, before he even became aware of this second man's presence.

That second man, however, gave scant attention to the fugitive in stockinged feet. He seemed intent on his own strange ends as he solemnly took off his hat, placed it on the string-piece, buttoned his coat and contemplated the black waters of the slip.

Laban, as he stopped to study that somber and silent figure, found his curiosity suddenly deepened into alarm.

"What are you doing there?" he called out sharply as he ran forward, and he had to repeat that question before the man on the lip of the pier so much as turned to observe him.

"That's my business," the morose stranger observed, as he once more fell to studying the slip water.

"But you're not going to throw yourself into the river there?" asked Laban, with a touch of incredulity.

"That's exactly what I'm going to do," quietly retorted the other. "And I wish you'd go away and leave me alone."

"But you can't do a thing like that!" protested Laban. "It's—it's insanity! It's cowardly!"

The stranger turned slowly about and contemplated him.

“Say, did you ever go a day and a half without eating—without a bite? And not a hole to crawl into? And not a nickel left for a snuff of snow?”

Laban suddenly stooped down in the uncertain light and indulged in a pointed inspection of the morose-eyed stranger’s footwear.

“If you’re down that low,” he promptly announced as he stood up again, “I’ll give you five dollars for those shoes of yours.”

The stranger turned slowly about and studied Laban. Then he just as deliberately studied his footwear. Then, chancing to observe that the would-be purchaser was without shoes of his own, he slowly shook his head.

“It’s not enough money,” he stolidly maintained.

“Then make it ten dollars,” conceded Laban.

“Let’s see the color of your ten.”

Laban produced the ten dollars. He produced it and paraded it before the lack-luster eyes of the other.

No further words passed between them. But the older man slowly and somewhat creakily lowered himself to the pier floor, removed his worn footwear, and extended one hand for Laban’s money at the same time that he extended his other hand with the shoes.

Laban, having surrendered the money, took possession of his dilapidated prizes. They were not particularly appealing to the eye, and they were considerably roomier than he might have wished. But there was something mysteriously fortifying in finding sole-leather once more between his *plantar fascia* and the uncertainties of Mother Earth.

The barefoot man, he noticed, had removed his hat from the string-piece.

“And now what are you going to do?” asked Laban, observing that a little of the lassitude had gone out of the other’s movements.

“I can eat again,” impassively remarked the shoeless one.

“Then why not come and eat with me?” the hungry youth companionably suggested.

The doleful figure shook a doleful head.

“One of those West Street bulls’d only pinch me for gum-shoein’ with a bare heel at this time o’ the night. And I know a nigger who can shoe me at

sunup for six bits. So beat it, son, and good luck to you!”

“The same to you!” called back Laban, already moving eastward along the empty pier.

X

Laban canted off across the asphalted wastes of West Street, striking south. A police wagon went clanging past him as he reached the sidewalk. That prompted him to tool his course away from the river for a block or two, when he turned south and hurried on until he came to a street-car track. Here he turned east again, and boarded a car.

He looked out when his car stopped at the next corner, and there he saw something which made his eyes widen and his pulse quicken.

What he saw was a Child's restaurant. It was a restaurant looking warm and opulent and indescribably appealing behind its white façade and plate-glass and its pyramided grapefruit and its hot plate of greased iron where a white-clad attendant was already browning wheat-cakes and flipping them over as nonchalantly as though all New York were cobbled with them.

Laban made for the car door. He dropped from the car platform with countless talons of hunger clawing his vitals. His mouth watered as he approached the white-framed window, where he watched a creamy liquid from a white pitcher solidify into mahogany-tinted disks of close-grained deliciousness.

So intently did he watch that process, and so determinedly did he make for the door a moment later, that he saw nothing of the unobtrusive but keen-eyed figure lounging back in a doorway not thirty paces from the albified front and the lighted window of the all-night restaurant. It was a good place to keep watch, as the unobtrusive figure promptly corroborated by sauntering casually westward and disappearing through the side door of a chocolate shop, where he talked briefly but earnestly over the telephone.

But Laban's mind was set on only one thing. It was set on the long-deferred and the all-obliterating intention of eating, of filling the empty void which yawned under his vest front, of ending the ventral aches which were now beginning to leave him a little dizzy in the top story.

He sat down at a glazed table flanked by a row of empty chairs, took an oblong bill of fare from its neatly nickled holder and solemnly consulted the printed lines thereon.

He was still consulting that delectable column when a surprisingly fresh-looking young lady in a surprisingly fresh white uniform, having placed

silverware and a white paper napkin in front of him, stood expectantly at his shoulder.

“Bring me,” the tired-eyed young man slowly and emphatically instructed her, “coffee and wheat-cakes, and corn-beef hash on toast, with a poached egg on top of it, and some of those country sausages, and a rasher of bacon on the side, and a double portion of butter cakes with maple sirup.”

“Will that be all?” asked the girl at his shoulder, with a perfectly grave face.

“No, it won’t be all,” responded Laban, with an equally grave face. “For after that I want a coffee cake and an extra cup of coffee, and after that I may possibly want something more. But I can’t stop to say what it is now, for I’ve been on a hunger strike, and the sooner I get busy at breaking it the better.”

He took out his gold-filled watch and consulted it. The hands showed twenty-five minutes to five. There was a subway to Brooklyn, he had been told. He would make inquiries about it after he had eaten, for he had to be aboard, he reminded himself, at six. But before everything else, he intended to eat.

He began at the wheat-cakes, which disappeared like snow before one of his own western chinooks. Then he investigated the corn-beef hash embellished with its plump poached egg. He had hopelessly undermined the egg and ordered a second cup of coffee when he wakened up to the fact that he was no longer sitting alone at the white-glazed table. A heavy-bodied man with a blue jaw had casually seated himself at Laban’s right at the same time that a lean-faced man with a cigarette took the chair immediately on his left. But Laban, who had other things to think of, kept on with his eating. They were, he had seen at a glance, utter strangers to him.

“We’ve been looking for you,” quite unexpectedly announced the man with the blue jaw.

“And it has been some hunt,” continued the thin-faced man with the cigarette.

Laban, with a noncommittal eye, looked from one to the other. Then he turned to the man with the cigarette, as seeming the more companionable of the two.

“Who are you?” he asked, in the act of determinedly stowing away another forkful of the corn-beef hash.

“I’m Bagley, the leg man of *The American*,” was the prompt and not unfriendly response.

“I don’t know what a leg man is,” Laban remarked, directing more attention toward his forkful of hash than toward the newcomer on his left.

“It means a newspaper reporter who works in the open, away from his office,” that newcomer patiently explained. “And the gentleman on your immediate right is my good friend Lieutenant Tiernan, of the Central Office.”

Laban obliquely inspected the man on his right, saw that he was not in uniform and refused to be impressed. His night in that city of anomalies had left him a bit skeptical, and he promptly announced the same to the two men so intently watching him.

“This is my fire badge,” explained the man who had called himself Bagley. “And I guess, Terry, you’d better show him your shield.”

Laban indifferently inspected these tangible and apparently authentic credentials. Then he proceeded to sugar his coffee.

“And what do you want?” he inquired, as he proceeded to stir the same.

“I want you to come down to headquarters with me,” was Lieutenant Tiernan’s altogether unexpected and altogether unpalatable response.

Still again Laban took out the gold-filled watch and consulted it.

“I’m sorry, but I haven’t time.”

“And why not?” was the officer’s ponderously patient query.

“My ship’s sailing at six,” explained Laban, “and I’ve got to be aboard her.”

The two men exchanged glances across what remained of the corn-beef hash. Then the man from the Central Office laughed. It was not an unpleasant laugh. But it grated on Laban for the simple reason that he entertained no idea as to its cause.

“But that’s not the important thing,” averred the lieutenant.

“What isn’t?” asked Laban.

“The time your ship sails—or any other old ship sails. That’s nothing to us.”

“But it’s something to me,” asserted Laban.

“Maybe it is. But there’s bigger things than your ship, son, and you’re up against ’em right now.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean you’ve got considerable explaining to do before you get off this island,” announced the officer, with a hardening of the lines about his blue-jowled face.

Laban’s face also hardened. He was about to speak, but the thinner man stopped him.

“Wait!” he said.

Then the man called Bagley turned to the officer in plain clothes.

“Wait a minute, Terry,” he still cautioned. “Let’s see if we can’t get at this thing from the other side. You’re Laban Lindhagen, aren’t you?”

“I am,” acknowledged Laban as he finished up a butter cake.

“And you landed at the Grand Central Station last night with a package which was intrusted to you by a soviet courier who was intercepted at the border.”

“It wasn’t a package,” corrected Laban. “It was a pocket-camera. And I’m not sure about the soviet-courier part of the thing, for the man was a stranger to me.”

“A complete stranger?”

“I didn’t know him from Adam! And I wish I’d never even seen him!”

Again Laban was not altogether ignorant of the exchange of glances between the two men flanking him. But he went on with his eating.

“What did you do with that camera?”

“I checked it at the down-stairs parcel room of the station and mailed the claim check to Mr. Wu Fang Low down in Pell Street, as the man on the train had asked me to do.”

“No, you didn’t,” promptly asserted his questioner.

“Well, I thought I did,” contended Laban. “But when I got to the hotel I found I’d checked my own camera, which was a ringer for the one that had been left in my care.”

“Ah!” said the officer and the newspaper man, in one and the same breath.

“And what did you do then?” demanded Bagley.

“I found the second camera was packed with a lot of cut stones that had been dipped in wax. So I put ’em away where they’d be safe. A couple of things had happened, you see, to make me feel they might be interfered with. And I intended to keep my promise, for——”

“But where, man, where!” cried Bagley.

“The same place where I put the bunch of jewelry that was shoved in through my bedroom door,” explained Laban, reaching for his coffee ring.

Bagley’s fingers were clutched on his coat sleeve. “Where?” he demanded, shaking the coffee ring out of Laban’s grasp.

“I put ’em down one of the bedposts.”

“Down a bedpost?”

“Sure! I dropped ’em down inside the foot post of that big hotel bed, and screwed on the top again.”

“And they’re there now?” asked Bagley, wide-eyed, and once more on his feet.

“I don’t see why they shouldn’t be,” contended Laban.

Bagley sat down and then stood up again. There was a small dewing of moisture on his thin-wrinkled forehead.

“Quick, Terry, get back to the Colbridge and check up on this! You’ve got the room number. Get Boomer out of bed again if you have to. He’ll understand. I’ll sit here with this Swede until you get back. But for heaven’s sake, make it brief!”

The officer was off at a nod, moving with a celerity unexpected in one so heavy of frame.

“I believe I’d like another cup of that coffee,” explained Laban as the wrinkle-eyed Bagley once more seated himself beside him.

The leg man of *The American* inspected him. That inspection began as one of resentment, but ended up as one of perplexity.

“Of course,” he finally announced. “Go ahead and eat and drink until you explode, if you feel like it. You probably deserve it. You must have had rather a busy night.”

“I have,” acknowledged Laban.

“That’s what I want to get at,” explained the other man. “I want you to tell me just what’s happened. I’ve been working on the other end of this muddle, and I want it straightened out. So spill it, son. Begin at the first and give it to me as it came.”

Point by point Laban explained to him what had happened that night. He explained it briefly and more or less brokenly, for there was a good deal of it that was incomprehensible to him. Occasionally his interlocutor would stop him with a question or two; now and then he would fall to wagging his head; and once, with his eyes fixed on Laban’s, he ejaculated under his breath, “You unimaginative young Swede, you!”

But Laban, having finished and having noticed the other man’s nervous glance down at his watch, remembered about his boat and asked what time it was.

Bagley, however, did not give him the time. For at that moment Lieutenant Tiernan, of the Central Office, stepped in through the restaurant door. Bagley started to his feet, but the officer waved him back.

“It’s there!” he announced, as he sank into a chair. He was smiling broadly, if a little wearily. “It’s there—the whole bunch, and the whole Detwiler haul on top of it!”

Bagley’s face looked pinched in the light of the white-glazed arc lamps.

“Who’s got ’em?” he asked.

“Boomer’s stowed ’em in the safe until the commissioner himself gets down. Can you beat it?”

He blinked meditatively at the restive-bodied Laban, who once more rather irritably consulted his watch.

“Can you beat it?” repeated the man from the Central Office, with what seemed altogether foolish impressiveness.

Bagley joined him in his contemplation of the young radio officer.

“What’re you going to do with him?” he asked with an impersonality which Laban was tempted to resent.

“Do with him?” echoed the equally impersonal lieutenant. “What good is he to us? We’ve got what we’re after and the case is closed.”

“All right, Brother Laban,” announced Bagley, stowing away his watch. “We’ve just got forty-five minutes to get you aboard that boat.”

“You can’t make it!” proclaimed the police officer, without emotion.

“But I’ve got to make it,” protested Laban; “and I’d like to pick up my suit-case on the way.”

Still again the two men sat studying each other.

“Couldn’t you do it with the captain’s car?” prompted Bagley. “The nut almost deserves it!”

Lieutenant Tiernan, as he rose to his feet, seemed to be hesitating. But he nodded the next moment in a sort of grim assent which Laban couldn’t quite account for.

“Get ready,” he proclaimed. “I’ll be back here in exactly two minutes.”

Laban solemnly verified his check reckoning, paid for his breakfast and pushed two nickels out toward the young woman in white.

“I’m going over there with you,” announced Bagley as he ushered the now slightly plethoric youth into the closed car waiting at the curb.

Laban had stood somewhat abashed at the prospect of invading a police car, which he had pictured as a cardinal red Juggernaut with a big brass bell crowning its cowl. But instead of that it was merely a dark-paneled landaulet with an intricate silver coat of arms adjusted to its radiator and an inviting slope to its upholstery.

“You know, I can’t quite understand all this,” complained Laban as they sky-hooted down the twilight canon of a steel-tracked street where, from an occasional corner, a traffic policeman gravely saluted.

“Then I’ll make it a little plainer to you,” said Bagley. “That soviet bunch have been trying to get the pick of the Romanoff crown jewels into this country for the last ten months. They failed at the front door, for three hundred men have been watching for that shipment for five months. So they tried the back door. Your friend on the train, coming in by way of the Pacific and Canada, had both the Winter Palace and the Kremlin stones packed away in that camera case he passed over to you when one of the Treasury men spotted him as a Red at the border. He took a chance, of course, but he had to. Somebody aboard that train wired on ahead, I suppose, and they made ready for you. They laid their ropes, but you fooled them with your check-room stunt.”

“That was an accident,” interrupted Laban.

“We know it now. But they didn’t. And while you were toting all that stuff around as though it were a bag of peanuts, you——”

“What was that stuff worth?” Laban still again interrupted.

“That’s hard to say,” explained Bagley, “in dollars and cents. But Krassin and the rest of them counted on raising nearly four million dollars on the collection. Then, as I was going to say, they used Limousine Sadie as a stick-up and she laid for you outside the station. Sadie, I’ll explain before you stop me again, is really a Magyar Jewess named Ruzenka Fanazick who did secret agent work over here during the war—and was good-looking enough to get away with it—and then turned to gay-cattin’ for Barinoff. I don’t know how hard she vamped you, son, but apparently you didn’t rise to her hook. So she did the best she could and steered you for the Colbridge. She wanted you planted there for future use. And the letter you got there, you’d find if you cared to investigate, had been hurried out to about every hotel in the city.

“But there’d been a leak somewhere, and those other two, Matesta and Hwoschinsky, got the tip you were carrying the Romanoff jewels into the city. So that put them on your trail as hot as Sadie and her side partners. Then you bumped into a real robbery at the Colbridge. It wasn’t a hold-up, as Tiny Detwiler told you, but a window job by a couple of ledge flies working with her, a sneak thief’s clean-up out of a Brazilian coffee-planter’s suite. She got cornered, and backed into your room. Then you double-crossed her by stowing her loot and she saw she couldn’t force your hand. So she pulled her old matrimonial-agency stuff by steering you up to an Avenue house with a crooked care-taker and the owners abroad. There old Pop Strevel, alias Parson Sam, was getting ready to squeeze the truth out of you; but the Barinoff bunch were watching all the time, and after they’d played for time enough to get a counterfeit claim check printed and passed in at the Grand Central room, they butted in and Tiny let you out by the roof line. One of Barinoff’s men in the meantime got the camera on the fake claim check. We know that, because a couple of Tiernan’s men nabbed him just as he was waking up to the sad fact it wasn’t exactly the camera he wanted. Old Wu Fang Low thought it was Sadie who’d hung the Indian sign on the scheme, and, of course——” He broke off short and stared out through the slightly misted window-glass.

“Hello, here’s the bridge—and I’ll be darned if that isn’t daylight showing up over the Brooklyn water tanks!”

“How are we for time?” asked Laban as they arrowed on in disregard of all traffic laws.

“You’ll just make it,” averred Bagley, with his watch in his hand. He sat holding the open-case timepiece until the minute hand and the hour hand made a vertical line across the dial.

“But those two men in the motor-boat,” questioned the preoccupied youth. “Why were they taking chances like that to get a casket out of a bond room?”

Bagley’s smile was a restricted one.

“It’s what we all take chances for, my son, in a land of drought like this. Your friends were a couple of river pirates, after a cache of confiscated De Kuyper gin. The assistant steward of that Dutch liner had tried to get it in on a funeral permit. But he overloaded his casket and they nipped him in the act.

“They put it under guard in the bond room, along with eight or ten cases of cognac they’d dug out of the coal bunkers; and the smell of stuff like that was just a little too strong for your water rats!”

“But d’you mean to say that nice girl who called herself Gale—Gale Rimelander,” persisted the somewhat abashed-eyed Laban, “was nothing more than—than a tool in the hands of a band of sneak thieves?”

Bagley laughed as he put his watch away.

“She’s some chicken, is Tiny! And you’re not the first man she’s hypnotized into swallowing that Fifth Avenue stuff. Why, son, when you come to think of it, you’re lucky to——”

He stopped and looked out.

“And how’s that for more luck?” he suddenly demanded as they swung about and rumbled out on the pier planks beside a new white freighter where an officer from the bridge was impassively calling down, “Let go your stern line!”

Four feet of open space yawned between the backed gangway and the closed deck rail. But over this Laban first threw his suit-case and then his own tired though triumphant body.

“Good luck and good-by!” he heard Bagley call after him.

It came to Laban rather remotely, however, like a voice from another world, a world from which the *Aleutiana* was already edging slowly away.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *In Bad with Sinbad* by Arthur Stringer]