



"Get her started," Stevens grunted; "I'll stay here and hold 'em off"

Gambler's Throw

Treachery adds to the perils that make a seething volcano of the Florida isle where a racketeer is "entertaining" a maddened, desperate group of kidnaped millionaires

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LEADING UP TO THIS INSTALLMENT

ON a lonely isle among the Ten Thousand Islands of the Gulf Coast of Florida, the pale, old-young racketeer Limpy Ashwood, a British war veteran who has gone into crime for sport, has imprisoned a group of kidnaped millionaires. They are One-shot Lucci, number one gang leader of Chicago; Hamilton, New York textile king who keeps from

madness by playing solitaire; Mallory, Manhattan stockbroker-sportsman; Williams and Martin, of Chicago.

The others present are Nancy Wentworth, beautiful young actress; and three men who came to rescue her—Jerry Calhoun, young aviator; his rich friend Emory Battles; and Federal detective Stevens.

The September heat, and monotony,

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are driving them desperate, while Ashwood sits back and studies their reactions. He is collecting big sums from their relatives, and plans to sail away with Nancy after he tires of watching his prisoners. He brings a minister, Dr. Tillington, to marry Nancy to him; but Jerry gets to the minister first, and persuades him to wed Nancy to him instead. Ashwood seems to take his temporary defeat in sportsmanlike fashion.

Jerry overhears One-shot Lucci persuade Ashwood's gangsters to double cross their chief and support Lucci. Hamilton goes mad, kills Williams and a guard; but he is caught and tied up by Jerry and Stevens, who fall heir to the guard's automatic.

CHAPTER XX (*Continued*).

THE LID BLOWS OFF.

THE living room was still deserted. Jerry and the detective stepped out on the porch, looking toward the north where, near the end of the long, narrow island, the hangar nestled beside the inlet. To the west the Gulf of Mexico was a mighty expanse of black, through which cut the shimmering path of moonlight. To the east, the sheltered water which separated them from the nearest islands was as smooth as a lake of molten pitch.

From the direction of the hangar came a dark figure, making no effort at concealment.

The sound of voices could be heard from the westerly corner of the porch. The footsteps of two men crunched through the sawgrass and the sand. Those would be Ashwood and Emory. Jerry decided, returning from their stroll.

The flyer crouched a little, sensing an approaching crisis. The three walking men would reach the porch steps simultaneously. He felt Stevens's arm brush against his side and heard the faint metallic click of a safety catch. He could see the cripple's white hair, now, almost within reach from the porch rail. Suddenly the two strollers stopped. The white head turned toward the oncoming figure.

"Who is that?" Ashwood inquired.

"It's me, Lucci."

"Have you forgotten that I told you to remain in your room at night?"

Stevens, on hands and knees, crept toward the rail, Jerry close at his side. Jerry's pulse pounded. If he could but warn Emory of the peril that faced him, there in the dark!

"Ah, to hell with you and your orders!" snapped the Italian. "Stick 'em up, quick! I'm covering you and aching to drill you both!"

Jerry, peering through the interstices of the railing, could see the glint of the moonlight on the blue steel of the Italian's automatic. Emory and Ashwood had seen it too. Their hands were up.

"You are indiscreet, Lucci," the cripple told him coldly. "Have you forgotten my guards with their machine guns?"

"Not by a damn sight!" retorted the gangster. "They are *my* guards now! Since you are fading outa the picture they are joining my mob, starting now. Listen, Limpy, either you're hooking up with me, or I'm going to bump you off, here and now, see?" His voice was malignant.

Jerry had no doubt that he would carry out his threat. Although the moonlight made any target deceptive, the man was but twenty feet away and could hardly fail to hit the mark.

"Drop your gun, One-shot!" Stevens did not raise his voice, but the effect of his words was almost magical. Ashwood and Emory jumped in surprise.

There was a crimson spurt from the Italian's automatic. The bullet spatted between the two crouching men on the porch. The gangster, with a curse, turned and ran at full speed toward the hangar, zigzagging and dodging behind the slender trunks of the palms as he continued his precipitous flight through the darkness. Ashwood's gun flamed once, twice.

"Better cut it, Limpy," said the detective, "you'll need your cartridges. Wish you could get my old revolver from the feller who frisked me. These new-fangled automatics are always jamming at the wrong time. I could of winged that bird, then."

His voice was mildly regretful as he fussed with the instrument in his hand. The cripple gazed wonderingly at the porch.

"And they say there's no Santa Claus!" he marveled.

"Better come up here and let's talk it over," suggested the old man casually. "There'll be hell popping tonight, young man."

THE screen door squeaked on its hinges. Jerry spun around, his muscles quivering, tensed for sudden action. Then he relaxed. It was Alfred the steward. He glanced at the two vigilant men.

"Beg pardon, sir," he bowed, an anxious frown on his usually expressionless forehead. "I was looking for Mr. Ashwood, sir."

"Here I am, Alfred," called the cripple, limping up the steps. "What is it?"

"Sir, I must tell you that the other

servants have all gone down to the hangar. I'm afraid there is trouble, sir. Here is a revolver. You will need it soon, I think."

"Good boy, Alfred. Better keep the gun. Any more of them around?"

"No, sir. I had this hidden under my mattress."

"So the whole outfit has deserted, eh?" The leader's voice held a tinge of regret. "I had thought they were loyal."

"They were, sir," the steward assured him, "until that Italian told them they would be arrested as soon as you left. Since they knew I would not join them, they did not trust me. I do not know their plans, but I think they are going to steal the planes and fly away."

Ashwood turned to the others.

"Alfred was my batman during the war," he explained simply. "We can count on him."

There came a series of staccato snapping noises, as though an ox driver were flicking his whip about their ears. The five dived unceremoniously for the shelter of the living room. From the easterly corner of the house, the knife-like flashes of a machine gun stabbed the darkness.

"That's the guard on the inshore beach," said the cripple. "Seem to be pretty well surrounded, don't we?"

The hall leading to the guests' rooms resounded with the rush of feet. Jerry started for the corridor, but was met by a rush of men—Martin, Mallory and Dr. Tillington. All demanded an explanation of the gunfire at the same time, drowning out Jerry's impatient questions until at last he shouldered his way through them and ran at full speed toward Nancy's room.

Her door was locked. He pounded on the panel, calling her. There was

no reply. He hammered with redoubled force, being conscious of a gnawing fear in his heart.

He took three steps backward, then hurled himself against the door like a human battering ram. The center panel splintered and the door sagged on its hinges. He kicked it into the room. He stood there, briefly glancing at the untenanted bed and the wide open window.

He dashed to the sill, to find the screen missing. He leaned far out, peering about until his eyes became accustomed to the darkness. A hundred yards to the north, three dark figures could be seen running toward the hangar. Jerry placed one hand on the sill and vaulted out on the grass.

At the same instant, Stevens burst into the room, just in time to see Jerry's hand flash downward out of sight. With an agility that was amazing for a man of his years, the detective slid out of the window to the ground where, not thirty feet behind the running pilot, he took up the chase.

THE two gangsters were half-carrying, half-pushing the struggling girl. Their progress impeded by her efforts to break away, Jerry was able to close up on them with every forward stride. Then, far over to the right, a machine gun stammered into action.

The pilot heard the whining drone of the bullets as they whipped through the palm leaves just over his head. With despair in his heart, he flung himself on his face. Another dozen feet and he would have been cut in two.

"Guess you flying fellers didn't learn much about the war," panted the detective, crawling up to him on hands and knees. "You were outlined against the Gulf as plain as in broad daylight."

"We've got to rescue Nancy!" declared Jerry vehemently.

"Sure," agreed the imperturbable voice, "but we can't do it if we're dead. Come on, let's crawl a bit."

A burst of firing sounded from the house behind them, echoed from the east by the chatter of a machine gun. Their progress was so slow that, time and time again, only the calm presence of the detective prevented Jerry from rising and making a dash in the face of certain death.

The flyer thought of Emory, back there in the beleaguered house, and was torn between the desire to go back there and fight by his side and the certainty that his duty lay in rescuing Nancy from Lucci's gangsters. Well, he would be back soon, if he lived. Emory and the others would be able to hold their own for awhile.

The vibrant roar of an airplane engine thundered through the night. Jerry identified it as that of the amphibian. The two men who carried Nancy had disappeared in the shadow of the hangar. In a few minutes it would be too late.

He attempted to rise, but the iron hand of the detective pushed him down. At redoubled speed the two scrambled on hands and knees through the sand and lacerating sawgrass.

The roof of the hangar could now be seen at the edge of the inlet which almost bisected the narrow strip of land. From the open door a wide white apron of light shone across the black waters, to be reflected on the silvery wing of Emory's monoplane, which stood on the hard sand, thirty or forty feet to the west of the building.

Sudden hope surged into Jerry's heart. He hastened his pace, veering slightly to head toward the plane. The broad single wing loomed larger and

larger as the two silent figures approached it. The popping of the amphibian's motor rose into an ear-splitting thunder as she taxied out into the inlet. Now, if ever, was the time to run for it. The guards were likely to be watching their ship rather than standing fast to their posts.

"Come on," Jerry whispered. "Make a dash for our plane."

The detective grunted inarticulately. The flyer rose from his crouch like a sprinter at the starting gun. Half the distance had been covered when a man appeared straight in front of him, gun outstretched, muzzle not six feet from Jerry's eyes. There was a sharp crack from behind the running pilot and the ominous figure before him crumpled.

Another man blocked his path, a guard who stood guarding the monoplane. But his attention was upon the flickering flames of the amphibian's exhaust which could be seen drawing a varicolored line through the darkness. With all the momentum of his plunging body, Jerry leaped for the guard. The two went down in a tangle, scrambling around beneath the shadow of the great wing as each sought to free himself of the other's clutches.

Stevens, arriving almost as they fell, brought the butt of his gun down with a hollow thwack upon the gangster's head and in the next instant jerked Jerry to his feet and shoved him into motion.

IN another moment, Jerry's flying feet had reached the step which led to the cockpit door. As he fumbled for the handle he became conscious of an unbelievable number of flashes and spurts of flame which seemed to come from all sides. The sharp *slap-slap!* of bullets was almost continuous.

He wondered how so many shots

could possibly miss him. It seemed to take hours to open the door. Stevens's voice, calm and matter-of-fact, came to his ears through the inferno of sound.

"All right, son. Get her started. I'll stay here and hold 'em off."

He might have been discussing the heat, for all the strain in his voice, thought Jerry as he squirmed into the pilot's seat and reached for the starter.

Cold perspiration drenched the flyer's face as it occurred to him that the guards might have disabled the engine to prevent just such an effort to capture her. No use worrying about that now. The next few seconds would tell. The whirring, churning noise of the turning motor sounded dead and cold. Not a kick out of her.

The heavy crash of Stevens's automatic came from almost beneath the cabin floor. The old man was still alive, then, probably crouching behind the right wheel as he held the mob at bay. Great old fellow. Didn't like adventure, eh? Why in hell didn't the engine start? Churning, churning—would she never fire?

Jerry jazzed the throttle desperately, ducking instinctively as a bullet tore through the wall of the cabin and snapped close by his head. A gust of flame belched crimson from the slowly revolving motor before his eyes. Ah, she'd make it! No. Churning, churning, every second dragged itself into an infinity of time. Steve's gun still barked. Another bullet and another raked the cabin.

Another ball of flaming gas ballooned from the exhaust stack. Then the engine roared, backfired, missed and suddenly burst into full-throated, rhythmic life, causing the plane to vibrate in every inch of her fabric.

Steve's figure appeared in the door-

way. Over his shoulder, guns stabbed the night with their vicious points of scarlet. Jerry, trembling with eagerness to push forward on the throttle, watched the old man hesitate, turn back and fire a full clip of cartridges. Then, carefully closing and latching the cabin door, the detective took his seat.

The great monoplane rolled forward over the hard-packed shell, slowly, lumberingly at first, bumping and careening prodigiously. A man appeared directly in front of the glistening, whirling arc of the propeller. He turned to run. The propeller missed him, but there was a sudden jar as the ship rolled faster and faster.

Then she was free, an earth-borne monster no longer, a joyous, vibrant, birdlike thing hurtling with a roar through the air. Jerry held her bow down to gain flying speed, then pulled her back into a screaming zoom. When she had almost fallen off on her left wing he snapped her out and leveled off to look for the amphibian.

Stevens's steady forefinger pointed slightly to the left. Jerry banked over to follow a faint red line of exhaust fire. As he straightened out again he glanced down and backward toward the house. From a row of windows on the east end of the low building he could see the tiny pin-points of flame from the guns of the besieged. From three sides came answering flashes.

He repressed an impulse to fly over the attackers, to do something to divert those dotted lines of machine gun bullets which he knew were cutting through and through those thin walls which sheltered his friend. But an instant's deviation from his course would allow the swift amphibian to escape into the night. He pushed against the throttle to assure himself that it was wide open.

"Guess I'll see if they've left us the Thompson gun." Stevens's voice came clearly through the muffled roar of the engine. The insulated walls of the cabin had been a wise bit of designing. The pilot nodded as the old man eased himself out of his seat and disappeared in the blackness to the rear.

THE exhaust flames of the amphibian were clearly visible now, and

Jerry knew that he was gaining, slowly but steadily, upon the northward-speeding plane. Below, the shimmering, silvery waters were dotted with hundreds of tiny islands, some of them mere tufts of mangroves growing down to the water's edge, others miles long, outlined by sandy beaches against which long parallel rows of phosphorescent breakers beat in from the Gulf.

Even as he glanced below, the pilot saw the coast of the mainland approaching from the right, the edge of thousands of square miles of flat, uninhabited desolation.

The amphibian veered to the left, heading slightly offshore. Jerry gained during the change of course.

Stevens slid back into his seat, nursing his beloved sub-machine gun. He squinted ahead at the fleeing plane.

"How long?" he inquired tersely.

"Ten or fifteen minutes, rate we're going now."

"I'll want to poke this gun out of the window."

The pilot showed him a sliding panel in the non-shatterable glass and warned him against firing through the arc of the propeller. Then both lapsed into silence, their eyes fixed upon the irregular blur of black which was slowly resolving itself into the 'distinguishable outline of the amphibian. A sudden stream of spitting fire shot from the rear of its fuselage.

Jerry watched it carefully, holding it steadily to his course. Time enough to dodge the machine gun when he could see the tracer bullets. The detective slid open the glass panel and inserted a clip of bullets into the breach of his gun.

"Going to be a mite awkward," he observed peevishly, "to stop them without making them fall. Don't want to hit the pilot, or the girl, either."

Jerry saw a luminous streak of gray smoke draw a straight line from the gangster's flashing gun to a point a scant six inches from the monoplane's left wing tip. The gunner was getting the range. The smoking line veered inward, following the line of the wing, the bullets disappearing within the leading edge of the thick structure and reappearing from the trailing edge.

That would never do. Jerry pulled hard back on the stick, and the ship zoomed vertically for a hundred feet, leaving the line of death far below. He straightened out, still watching. Up, up came the tracers. He swung to the right, then plunged downward, gaining perceptibly upon the amphibian.

Stevens, his gun ready, paid no attention to the other's bullets, nor to the violent motions of the cockpit. He waited calmly for an opportunity to shoot without endangering the girl or causing a fatal crash. Twice he had pushed the snout of the gun through the orifice in the windshield, only to hesitate and pull it back to his lap.

The tracer bullets had been coming from a point just behind the pilot's cockpit in the bow of the other plane. Nancy was probably confined in the main cabin within the fabric-covered fuselage, to the rear of the cockpit. Jerry could see every detail of the ship. The tracer bullets were almost constant. He avoided them automatically.

"What shall I aim at?" inquired the puzzled detective. "No use killing the girl so's you can rescue her."

"Wait," snapped the pilot as he pulled back into a zoom. Full two hundred feet above the amphibian he leveled out and held her to her course above and slightly behind the lower ship.

"I'm going down," he declared. "We'll dive straight across her top wing. Shoot at her propeller."

Stevens nodded silently and pushed the muzzle of his gun through the panel. Jerry pushed on the stick, and the plane seemed to drop from under the two men as she hurtled downward like a falling projectile. The amphibian appeared to float up to meet them.

JERRY, leaning forward in his seat, watched the enemy ship with half closed eyes. He must miss that upper wing by inches only. The tracer bullets from below were sweeping the monoplane from wing tip to wing tip as the gangster gunner kept his finger clasped tight on his trigger.

Down, down. Funny, how long such a short dive could take. The tracer bullets annoyed him. They seemed to draw a ruled line between his own eyes and the other fellow's gun. He wondered vaguely why he hadn't been riddled with lead.

The luminous dial of the altimeter suddenly disappeared from the instrument board. Something else, too, had disintegrated as the gangster's bullets crashed through the panel. He could not stop to see what it was. No time for anything but to dive as close to that upper wing as he could. Must give old Steve a good target. Then he became aware of a new sound, a continued *tac-tac-tac* as of a steel riveter at work. It was Steve. Attaboy, Steve!

The long, broad upper wing seemed to leap upward at the bow of the plunging monoplane. Jerry pulled back desperately, wondering if he had waited too long. As the nose lifted, he listened for the crash that would mean the end of everything.

Steve was straightening up, pulling his gun barrel out of the panel. Jerry's breath whistled between his tight-shut teeth. They were clear! Missed a collision by fractions of an inch.

"Get it?" he demanded.

"I dunno. Usually do."

It was all of a night's work to the detective.

The monoplane was level again. Jerry banked hard over to return to the attack. The dark bulk of the other ship became visible. The pilot slapped his companion on the back.

"Look!" he shouted. "They're gliding!"

The amphibian, her exhaust pipes streaming flame, was gliding in a long, thin quarter-turn, her pilot obviously trying to reach the sandy beach of the mainland. Jerry measured the distance with his eye. Yes, they might make it. He must beat them to it. With his own engine on full he swung toward shore in a terrific power-dive, hoping against hope that he would find the beach suitable for a landing.

The gangster had switched off his motor. Without the drag of the propeller, the five-hundred-horsepower engine would have speedily raced to destruction.

Jerry thundered past the slowly gliding plane. With his own mighty engine wide open, he was covering two feet to the gangsters' one. Down, down, with the wind shrieking through the struts, the monoplane vibrating in every square inch of her structure.

There was no time to drag the beach

to find out if the sand was soft or hard. He'd have to chance it. He closed the throttle and pivoted the ship around on her left wing tip. Then, kicking the rudder pedals hard right and left to kill her flying speed he dropped wheels and tail-skid on the sand.

The heavy plane lurched sickeningly. Jerry braced himself, thinking that she was about to dig in and roll over. She lurched once more, then rolled heavily to a full stop.

Stevens was out of the cabin before the pilot had cut the switch and snapped open his safety belt. Handicapped though he was by the heavy machine gun, the old man was as agile as a monkey.

The amphibian had just landed on the water, forty or fifty feet from shore and was now drifting in toward the beach under the forward momentum of its landing speed. With engine dead and its crew silent it looked like a black ghost ship in the night.

"ONE shot out of that gun," Stevens called, "and I'll give you the works."

There was no reply. The plane, its forward way almost lost, was inching across the last few feet to the shore.

"Throw your machine gun overboard." The detective's quiet voice carried far across the still water. "I want to hear it splash."

Still that eerie silence hung over everything. Jerry felt a tingle run through every nerve-end. The air seemed full of static electricity, like the moment between a sharp flash of lightning and the resulting crash of thunder.

"Duck, son," warned the detective, as his heavy hand bore hard down on Jerry's shoulder.

A vivid sheet of flame from the

amphibian's bow split the darkness. It seemed to be reflected instantly in a stabbing fire from close to the pilot's side. The whine of bullets filled his ears. As Jerry fell on his face, spatters of sand filled his eyes, mouth and ears. The reverberations from the machine gun fire died away into silence, utter and absolute, and he could hear the even, regular breathing of the quiet man at his side.

There was a heavy splash from the direction of the amphibian.

"That was the Tommy gun," came a strange voice.

"Where is One-shot?" demanded the detective, tersely.

"On the floor of the cockpit; him and Sam. You got 'em both."

"Another \$150,000 shot to hell," mourned Stevens. "Money goes awful quick around here."

Jerry, scrambling to his feet, raced down the beach, brushed past the gangster who, his hands in the air, was wading through the shallow water, and climbed into the cockpit.

Carefully avoiding two dark, twisted figures on the floor, he worked his way through the maze of seats, control wheels and wires to the cabin door. Breathless, he clattered down the three steps into the blackness of the commodious compartment within the fuselage.

"Is that you, Jerry?" Nancy's voice was brave.

"Yes," he replied briefly, choking back the rush of words that came to his lips. In that instant he knew that he loved her, worshiped her. What use to try to keep his thoughts away from her, to try to ignore her very existence? He had loved her ever since he had first looked into those eyes, candid and level as a boy's, back there on the Merrick Road.

He clenched his teeth to prevent himself from telling her, while she waited so silently for him to find her there in the inky darkness. His wife! That spoiled it all, for had he not promised to have it annulled? How could he tell her that he loved her now, when her heart would be warm with gratitude toward him? And when they were back in New York, she would be Nancy Wentworth, not the helpless, frightened little girl of the tropics, but the self-reliant, light-hearted musical comedy star, beloved by all the world.

His groping hands touched hers. They were icy cold and clutched his own with remarkable strength.

"Nancy," he whispered, "are you all right?"

"Yes, Jerry," she replied calmly. "Except that my ankles are bound and I am tied to this seat."

His skillful hands untied the knots and unsnapped the safety buckle. He could feel her breath on his cheek as he bent over her to help her to her feet. She would never know the struggle he was making to keep himself from seizing her in his arms and smothering that glorious red mouth with his kisses. His wife! What a grim joke!

"What are you laughing at?" she demanded.

"I'm not laughing," he snapped shortly. "Let's get ashore."

CHAPTER XXI.

BACKS TO THE WALL.

"WELL, Ashie, old bean, it won't be long now!" Emory Battles's smoke-begrimed face broke into a wide-mouthed grin as he rolled over on his side and looked at the man who shared the shelter of the up-ended living room table.

The cripple ducked behind the heavy shield just as it vibrated under the sharp smack of a bullet. His pale, lined face was drawn with fatigue, but the dancing light in the blue eyes was undimmed as he returned the other's smile.

"One would think, my dilettante friend, that you looked forward with pleasure to dying." Ashwood's drawling voice had lost nothing of its mocking brilliance. He reached for a cigarette from Emory's case.

"From where I lie," he puffed, "it looks as though we would be able to hold them off about thirty more minutes at the longest, and then only if we are able to continue keeping them from passing to the rear of the house and surrounding us."

"Hell, they may all have sunstroke within the next thirty minutes," retorted Emory, squinting cautiously over the top for a brief glance toward the hangar which, in the first faint pastel tints of the dawn, looked strangely peaceful in comparison with the wrecked living room behind him. A bullet snapped by and he dropped his head unceremoniously. "You picked out some pretty fair sharpshooters when you organized your mob, Ashie," he declared ruefully.

"As ye sow, so shall ye—" pronounced a resonant voice from the center of the room.

"Please, please, Dr. Tillington," interrupted the cripple. "Spare us, on a morning like this, from triteness! If I hear just one more such quotation, I shall froth at the mouth and bite somebody!"

"Give us another then, Reverend," Mallory's voice was malicious. He slipped another clip into his hot automatic and peered out of the broken window at the other end of the long

room. "All right then, if you won't, how about another little highball?"

The Rev. Dr. Tillington's long face was a study in mixed emotions as he measured three fingers of rye in each of several highball glasses, squirted the siphon and crept on hands and knees to pass the sparkling drinks to the vigilant men behind their improvised defenses.

"Cor', that's good!" murmured Alfred, the batman, as he sat up behind the overturned couch and drained his glass. The steward's face was ghastly pale. His left arm, roughly bandaged in torn sheeting, showed as a great splotch of crimson against the background of his white service jacket. A semicircle of empty clips was mute evidence to the fact that he had been a bulwark of strength during the long night's siege.

Martin, as usual, was silent. Propped on one elbow behind a parapet of chairs at the northwest corner window, he drank his highball greedily, then rolled over on his stomach and fingered his automatic lovingly.

EMORY, sipping his liquor slowly, gazed across the room at the strange, silent man with something like wonder in his eyes. Who would have thought that that taciturn, prosaic little real estate promoter would have his bright moment of cold-blooded, death-defying courage? Three hours before, Emory had watched Martin vault out of his window, sprint across fifty feet of bullet-swept sand, and retrieve an automatic dropped by a dead attacker. Hardly a chance in a thousand he had had, yet his action had been spontaneous and unhesitating.

"Tired of being shot at without being able to shoot back?" he had explained grimly to Emory, who had raced across the room, leaned out of

the window and whisked him back into the relative security of the barricades.

"You tell 'em," Emory had whooped. "Nothing like Chicago experience during a gang fight!"

Whereupon, the little fellow had glared at him as though resenting the reflection cast upon the city in whose real estate he had dealt.

And Mallory! There was another study in psychology. He had burst out of his room, cold sober, and at the first massed attack upon the house he had been quietly efficient, firing steadily, accurately, as though shooting at clay pigeons on a range.

Yet even through the hottest moments of the fight Mallory had never ceased digging at Ashwood with his scarcely veiled insults. Unfortunately for the stockbroker's intentions, however, the cripple enjoyed his sallies, retorting the cleverly pointed barbs that never failed to penetrate the other's thick hide.

Oh, yes, it had been a merry little night! Perhaps of them all, Dr. Tillington had been the outstanding hero. A man of peace, unable to have secured one of the all-too-few automatics had he wanted it, the minister had stood sentry-go over the two corridors leading to the rear wings to make sure that none of the gangsters had succeeded in slipping between the house and either beach for a flank attack.

The man was frightened; that was obvious. That very fact made his assumed indifference real heroism. He had bandaged Alfred's arm when the attackers were almost inside the room. When that almost-successful charge had been repulsed, Dr. Tillington had volunteered to make coffee in the dark and eerie kitchen.

Now, in the growing light, Emory could see him wince as an occasional

bullet buried itself in the scarred wall opposite a window. Yet he had done his duty throughout the long night, even to the extent of preparing, somewhat against his will, alcoholic refreshment for the beleaguered men when they demanded it.

But most of all, it was the minister's tender watch over the unstrung Hamilton which had inspired even the insolent Ashwood's grudging admiration. Still tied with the bonds that Stevens had wound round him, Hamilton lay in coma, from which he had emerged into a few moments of wild delirium when the fighting had reached a crisis.

Yet through it all, Dr. Tillington had soothed him with never-flagging patience, crawling over to him at frequent intervals to see if he still slept and if the barricade of furniture and mattress still sheltered him from stray bullets.

"How much ammunition left?" called the cripple, sliding his empty tumbler toward the minister. "Alfred?"

"Only two clips, sir."

"Martin?"

"Four clips."

"Good. Mallory?"

"Three."

"Battles?"

"The same."

"That makes twelve. I have three myself. Fifteen in all. We'll have to go easy from now on. Don't shoot unless you know you can drop your man."

"**W**HY in hell doesn't Stevens come back?" grumbled Mallory. "With his machine gun we could run the blighters off the island!"

"Are you asking me a riddle?" retorted Emory sarcastically. For the

past three or four hours, he had tormented himself with the same question. What could have happened to the two men? Had the machine gunner on the amphibian brought them down? Or had they, perhaps, themselves been captured on the beach and taken away, with the girl, as prisoners? Or were they somewhere down among those palms, the first victims of the gang's treachery?

"You know, Mallory, just as well as the rest of us, that Stevens will come if he can, and so will Jerry. Be your age, man, and stop asking silly questions, or I'll come over there and slap you down till you can't get up."

"Tut, tut," chirruped Ashwood delightedly. "Keep the home fires burning and all that! Nothing makes me feel as much at home as to hear the amiable Mallory passing the time of day with some one. I believe he misses his sweet-tempered Italian."

Mallory and Emory subsided, the former muttering angrily, the latter with his good humor restored by the cripple's bantering.

Emory, his eyes just over the chipped edge of the table, gazed steadily toward the hangar. Out of pistol range, five men stood in a little group, talking. As he watched them, curious, he saw two of them pick up a machine gun and tripod and walk in a wide curve toward the easterly side of the house. Then, just within range, they mounted the gun on its tripod and lay down.

The other three separated, two of them dodging behind one tree after another until they had worked their way as close to the house as they dared. The fifth pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and advanced boldly, waving the white bit of cloth.

"Far enough, Mueller," called Ash-

wood as the gangster reached easy hailing distance.

"Come out on the porch, Limpy," yelled the lone man. "I want to talk to you."

"You hardly inspire me with confidence," retorted the other, "while you have a white flag in one hand and a gun in the other."

Mueller placed his automatic upon the ground at his feet. Ashwood limped out on the porch. Under his straightforward gaze, the man with the flag of truce shifted about uneasily.

"Limpy," he said at last, "we don't want to hump you off, but we want two-thirds of all the jack you got in the house. We'll take your word how much you got."

"Aren't you flattering?" mocked the slender, white-haired man from his exposed position on the porch. "I've been giving you all half of it as it came in, now you want two-thirds of my half. Just a little grasping, aren't you?"

"You'll have plenty left," the other evaded.

"Mueller, aren't you the man who persuaded the others to join Lucci's mob?"

"What if I am?"

"Nothing of importance," replied Ashwood evenly, "except that I'm going to write your name on a bullet. You've always made trouble, Mueller, wherever you have been. You'll find life very tiresome, so I'm going to do you a favor and end it for you before you leave this island."

"What about the jack? Are you going to kick in? If you don't, we'll charge the house and take it all."

"Charge if you like," retorted the cripple indifferently. "I'd advise you, Mueller, to remain behind a tree."

A sudden flush suffused the gang-

ster's face. So quickly that the eye could scarcely follow his movements, he dropped the flag and scooped up the automatic.

Emory, crouched behind his table, felt his own gun kick back in his hands. He saw Mueller stand upright, rigid, a look of astonishment replacing the rage on his stolid features. Standing still as a statue, the man dropped his gun, coughed and suddenly pitched forward full length upon the sawgrass. His outstretched fingers clawed the sand for a moment; then he lay very still.

A GUST of machine gun bullets rattled against the side of the house and knocked chips from the porch rail. Ashwood turned, calm and unhurried, and strolled back into the living room, where he took his place beside Emory.

"Much obliged, old thing," he said quietly. Then, turning toward the others: "They'll be coming, now. Don't let one of them slip past the house. We can't have an attack from the rear."

"How about another drink?" demanded Mallory. "I'm so dry I have to prime myself to spit."

"Reverend," smiled Ashwood, "to your duty as bartender!"

Emory fingered his trigger impatiently as he watched men scuttle from the shelter of one palm to the next, always working closer to the house. A tall glass was placed by his hand.

"Happy landings, Ashie!" he nodded, catching the other's eye. Ashwood's face was transformed. No longer mocking and cynical, it was alight with excited anticipation of the mêlée which was to come. Wiped clear of its hard lines, the cripple seemed to have lost twenty years of his age.

"Cheerio, old top, here's to the next war!" Ashwood drank deep.

Emory stared over the barricade. The attackers were making their way forward with infinite caution, taking advantage of every shelter.

"Listen, you fighting cock," said Emory, hitching himself closer to the other, "there's only one thing that'll keep me from kicking off with a smile on my face."

"And that is?" invited Ashwood quietly.

"I'm so curious about you that I'm itching all over. Since we'll all probably be bumped off during the next twenty minutes, can't you tell me what turned you from a damn' good partner on a binge, as you were back there in London, to a hard-boiled egg such as you are now?"

The blue eyes clouded as Ashwood regarded Emory uncertainly, then glanced out at the slowly advancing enemy. He looked thoughtfully at Mueller's sprawling figure.

"I owe you something," he acknowledged slowly, "so I suppose I may as well tell you. Some time before our little party together in London, I met a girl who drove an ambulance for the Overseas Club. Saw quite a bit of her. Asked her to marry me. Two nights after that evening of ours which ended in the fight with the M. P.'s, she stole some important military papers from my tunic pocket and disappeared. Only saw her once, years later, in Berlin.

"Some days after she took the papers, an important attack was smashed to bits by the Germans. My fault, you see. They cashiered me, blaming me also for several things I hadn't done. I had no defense. Spent a year in the Tower of London. Got this short leg trying to escape from

hell. Six months after the Armistice. I was pardoned. My friends had forgotten me, they had dropped me from my clubs." His face was set grimly as he went on:

"I sort of drifted around like a pariah. Needed excitement. Had no respect for justice, consequently none for the law which administered it. War taught me proper value of human life, which is less than nothing. Played the 'Lone Wolf' racket for a while. Then, as an experiment, I organized my mob—who, by the way, are beginning their attack."

HE turned abruptly and fired three shots as fast as he could pull the trigger. Emory, getting into action, saw two men stumble and fall. One pushed himself to his hands and knees and dragged himself back toward shelter.

Then the battle became general, but to Emory it was a matter of himself, alone, against half a dozen. He was conscious that to right and to left, guns barked. That was incidental. The only matter of importance was his own effort to keep that group of men from reaching the porch.

The leader charged desperately, zig-zagging as he galloped ahead of his comrades. Emory wished to stand up and shoot it out with him, but from the shelter of the palms, a machine gun sprayed his window with leaden hail and made it very difficult for him even to raise his head for pot shots.

A dozen more steps and that chap with the contorted face and staring eyes would be able to duck beneath the ledge of the porch. *Note!* Emory's gun smacked against the palm of his hand. The man's face was suddenly suffused with a huge crimson smear. His onward pace did not falter.

Emory fired again, aiming at his body. He knew that he had not missed yet somehow, incredible as it was, the fellow came on. He crashed full against the front of the porch, the momentum of his charge carrying him headlong through the splintering railings.

He fell sprawled, his head and shoulders on the porch, his waist and legs dangling over the edge. He took a long time in dying.

Emory heard Mallory cursing in a monotone, on and on, endlessly, flatly, interrupted only by the heavy bark of his automatic. Ashwood was silent, his mouth set in a twisted grin, firing slowly, carefully, wasting not a single shot.

• Somebody behind Emory shrieked in agony, but there was no time to look around to see who had been hit. Running men were falling in the sand, some to get up and resume the charge, others to drag themselves away or to writhe and twist where they lay.

The two machine guns hammered relentlessly, monotonously. They irritated Emory like two persistent mosquitoes on a hot, sleepless night. It would be, he thought, those two machine guns that would eventually turn the tide of battle against the defenders. Their bullets spattered through the room, the thin sides of the house forming no resistance to their steel jackets. Only the heavy barricades stopped them.

Emory glanced again at Ashwood. The cripple grinned, pointed at his automatic, then to a scattering of empty shells and held up three fingers. Three shots left. The pilot had lost count of his own. He only remembered that he had used most of his last clip.

All at once his ears became attuned to a new note in the battle. He had

been hearing it for some time, but it had not penetrated into his consciousness. That throbbing, vibrant beat—an airplane engine, of course! He listened again: the monoplane. No mistaking that uneven, pulsing drone.

"Hey!" he shouted above the din of battle, "the plane's back! Jerry and Steve!"

He looked back at his window. A man stood there, framed in the splintered sash, crouched, face distorted into a mask of frenzy, his automatic foreshortened into an ugly round hole as it pointed straight at Emory's head.

The flyer braced himself for the shock. His own gun was swinging upward with the speed of light. Still he knew he would be too late. He could see the forefinger tighten on the trigger. Then, suddenly, the man pitched over on top of him, drenching him with warm, sticky blood.

Emory squirmed from under, glancing at the cripple. Ashwood winked.

"We're even!" he called.

"Much obliged, old top," roared Emory, but the other seemed not to hear. He was using his last shot to stop a man who would have reached the barricade in another five steps.

ABOVE the all-pervading roar of the airplane engine, Emory could hear the steady hammering of its machine gun. The sound of wind screaming through wires and struts came to his ears. Then he saw the plane, as it dived through his range of vision.

For an instant he thought that it was falling, that it would crash headlong into the clump of palms which sheltered the nearest enemy machine gun. But just as the propeller seemed about to cut a swath through the leaves, the nose lifted and the plane zoomed

clear, up and up until, whirling around on one wing tip, it dropped again to the attack. The hidden machine gun was silent.

The ground in front of the house seemed magically cleared of running men. The huddled figures lay where they had fallen. The wounded twisted spasmodically where they lay in the direct, hot rays of the sun.

The plane dived at the tree behind which the second machine gun had been mounted. Emory saw, now, the muzzle of Steve's gun projecting from the panel in the windshield. He glimpsed Jerry's head outlined in the window. Was there a third head in that darting, zooming, wheeling ship? It had zipped out of sight before he could make sure.

Ashwood rose, slipped his hot automatic into his shoulder holster and stretched, glancing about the room. Then the hard lines reappeared in his face as he glanced toward the far end of the room. Emory, getting on his feet, saw Alfred, the faithful little steward, lying motionless in a welter of blood.

The minister, his face ashen, was crossing his hands and drawing a sheet over his still body. Ashwood limped across the room, looked down into the lifeless face and turned away.

"Let's pass out a round of grog, Ashie," suggested Emory. "I think we've earned it."

CHAPTER XXII.

AFTER THE STORM.

STEVENS pushed his well-scraped plate aside with a sigh of complete contentment.

"Now the excitement's all over and I've had my breakfast, I think I'll go and have a little nap. It's another hot

morning and I'm not as spry as I used to be. Getting too old for this helling around all night. You young fellers better take the speedboat and screw a spare propeller on that airplane we left on the beach. Might take a couple of sandwiches along, too. That baby we left with the plane might be feeling a little peckish by now."

He grinned comfortably at Nancy who, flushed and triumphant after the praises which had been lavished upon her cooking, looked adorable in her borrowed cook's costume.

Even the taciturn Martin had been almost garrulous when a well-heaped plate of scrambled eggs and Irish bacon had been placed before him. The minister, after eating prodigiously, declared that a dish of such food would make a new man out of Hamilton, and departed for the sick man's room, carrying a well-heaped tray.

The detective wandered to the door of the wrecked living room and surveyed the scene of desolation. In the reaction from the battle, it had been easy to forget the splintered walls and the ominous pools of blood.

"Glad I wasn't here last night," he observed judiciously. "Can't say I enjoy a ruckus any more. Must have been pretty good while it lasted, though. See you later."

"There," declared Jerry thoughtfully, "goes a real man. Did you ever see a bird shoot so fast in your life?"

"He's had more fun the past few days," stated Ashwood, smiling, "than he's had for ten years. For all his moaning about peace and quiet, that old fellow would rather fight than eat. And the funny part about it is that he doesn't realize it."

"If you'll excuse me," said Emory, rising, "I'm going to find a desk and write a letter. Back 'in 'arf a mo'."

"I'll ease out and see if the boys have cleaned up properly," decided the cripple. "Want to come along, you two?" He looked at Mallory and Martin so meaningly that they started, guiltily, from their chairs and followed him precipitately. Then, suddenly, Mallory returned.

"Here," he said to Nancy, "give these to the minister on the consideration that he'll keep his yap shut. If he thanks us, I'll tear his hide off, inch by inch."

As he retreated, she glanced at the two little slips of paper he had thrust into her hand. She looked at Jerry in astonishment.

"Look at these," she murmured and passed them across the table. They were two checks for twenty-five thousand dollars each, drawn simply to the order of "Dr. Tillington's church."

"The fight last night seems to have restored Mallory to something like normal," observed Jerry. "If it has done as much for Hamilton, we'll have a lot to be thankful for."

"The minister has finally agreed," said Nancy, "that if Hamilton wakes up in his right mind, nobody is to tell him about Williams and the guard. Their deaths will be explained as part of the general fight last night."

JERRY fell silent, his thoughts wandering. In another few hours they would be on their way back to civilization. In another week, perhaps, this glorious girl would be back on Broadway, charming the hearts of audiences, forgetting the fact that she had been, once, in name, at least, Mrs. Gerald Calhoun.

He had made his promise and he'd live up to it. Mrs. Gerald Calhoun! Well, it was something to have been able to do her a service, to have known

her at all. Their eyes met. A slow flush crept over her lovely cheeks. She rose hastily.

"And now, young man, you are going to help me with the dishes," she informed him, her eyes sparkling at his moody countenance. "Some of the men are staying here until Steve sends a boat down from Fort Meyers, so we must leave everything spick-and-span."

Rather awkwardly he stacked a pile of dishes and carried them into the kitchen. She watched him, a soft smile on her lips.

"How dare you put them into the water without scraping them! It's going to take me some time to train you, but I'll do it, yet!"

He was halfway back to the dining room when he suddenly turned around, marched over to her and grasped her roughly by both shoulders.

"What did you mean by that?" he demanded.

"You men are so awkward," she parried, not meeting his eyes. He shook her, furious.

"Now you listen! If you think you're going to taunt me, I'll shake you till you can't stand up! Isn't this whole business hard enough for me without your joking about it? Don't you know that I have every legal right to take you in our plane and carry you away to a place where you'll never see New York again? Don't you know that I'm trying to be a gentleman and keep my promises? You know I love you, so why try to plague me with it? You know that I worship you, your marvelous eyes, your saucy little nose, your kissable lips—and you laugh at me!"

A soft, slender hand crept up to his mouth and pressed hard against it with surprising strength.

"Jerry, you're so dumb!"

He sputtered and shook his head, trying to speak.

"Are you really," she asked softly, her clear eyes meeting his at last, "going to cast me off and divorce me?"

He stared incredulously at her, unable, not daring, to believe his ears.

"You're a beast!" Her voice shook a little. "Married two whole days and you haven't kissed me once!"

He reached for her hungrily and if his hard-muscled arms all but broke her back, she made no complaint. But, of course, she couldn't. Her lips were sealed.

AT length, it may have been five minutes later or an hour, Nancy

Wentworth Calhoun pushed her husband away, straightened her hair and said:

"Now, my husband-who-has-just-come-to-his-senses, shall we finish our housework?"

"One more kiss!"

"Not until you return with another load of dishes."

"Heartless!" he grumbled, but hastened for the dining room.

Just as he was scooping up an armful of plates and cups his eye fell upon a large square envelope. Upon its face was his own name.

Anxious to return to Nancy, he grabbed a handful of plates and raced back to the kitchen. Before she again forced him back to work, he remembered the envelope which he had stuffed in his pocket. Thumbing open the flap, he withdrew the inclosure and stared, puzzled, at Emory's familiar handwriting. Why should Emory write?

The first half dozen words riveted his attention.

"What's the matter, Jerry?" Nancy was alarmed at his expression.

"Here, you read it to me." He thrust the letter into her hand, and she read:

DEAR OLD TOP:

It's almost time to shove off for New York, and, eventually, Boston. But I can't stick it, old-timer. I'm a restless bird of passage, a changeling child in a family to whom there is no world beyond Beacon Hill. I crave new scenes and new doings. It would never occur to me to fade out of the picture without you except that I know what you are too goofy to realize—that you are going to stay married.

So, old man, after these many years, we've come to the parting of the ways which comes inevitably when a girl makes a trio out of a duo. You and Nancy—a great pair, old man! You'll settle down.

Between pals, distance does not count. We'll drift together, old son, from time to time. I'll drop in on you, put my muddy feet on your mahogany desk and tell you how I got my tan and my touch of malaria. And you'll tell me how your tailor fusses about your respectable bulge.

You'll be sorry for me and I'll be sorry for you. And maybe, in all your conventional happiness, you'll envy me just a little. You'll smell the smells of burned oil and exhaust gas and you'll feel again the kick-back of a gat against your palm and you'll wonder where I am and what I'm doing. And that's the price, you'll pay, old man, for your happiness. But, as the old *cliché* goes, you can't have everything.

Remember, Jerry, how we'd roll the dice when we faced a difficult decision? Gambler's throw, one roll? Well, I've rolled 'em, and I'm joining up with Ashwood for a bit of a whirl somewhere. Next to you, he's the gamest little fighting-cock I've ever known. Unlike you, he has no future—in which he resembles me. So we're off, Jerry, on another gambler's throw. Off to somewhere, God knows where. But we'll have fun, Jerry, the kind we had

in the war—the kind we've had these past few weeks.

You're an ornery cuss, Jerry. You fight too hard and too often. You look like an easy-going guy, but you're hell on skates when you get riled. And it's tough to have to shove off without you.

Listen, old top; we're swiping the speedboat, Ashie and I. With a couple of hours' leeway, we'll be off in the amphibian and you won't be able to catch us in the monoplane. Give us a break if you can. If not, we'll try to make a race of it.

I'm helping Ashwood to escape, thus sacrificing the \$250,000 offered for his arrest. On the other hand, I relinquish, gladly, my share of the \$600,000 you and Steve will get for rescuing the others. If you'll sharpen your pencil, you'll see you get more out of it the way it stands. (Who pays the reward for your wife?)

Slap Steve on the back for me and tell him that, so far as his conscience is concerned, he can sleep in his little house amid the pecan grove with the assurance that Ashwood won't operate again in the U. S. A. Elsewhere—who knows? Maybe we'll roll the dice again.

Best regards to yourself, old man. See you again, some time. Until then, happy landings.

EMORY.

P.S.—Kiss Nancy for me. If I hadn't lammed away I'd have done it myself.

"The last part of the letter sounds interesting," said a voice from the doorway. Nancy and Jerry wheeled around to face Stevens. The girl passed him the letter. He read it.

"How long they been gone?" he asked very quietly.

"Haven't a n y idea," confessed Jerry.

"Better give 'em a couple hours more. No sense in loading the dice on 'em."

The old man strode to the door.

"After all," he said, "it's 'Gambler's Throw!'"

THE END.



Tim's attempt to make friends with Pootch was disastrous

Pootch, Lover of Gold

Gold makes trouble, as Jake Schmidt and his little fellow-pro prospector Tim Donovan learned in the Australian bush; but they were to have even more trouble over their curious black cockatoo mascot

By WYMAN SIDNEY SMITH

POOTCH was not the kind of a bird any one except big Jake Schmidt would pick for a companion. He was unruly, temperamental, grouchy and mean. Technically he belonged to the genus *calyptorhynchus funereus*, but in other words he was just a common red-tailed black cockatoo of the Australian back country.

Big Jake had discovered the red-tailed, glinting-eyed rascal on his last trek into the "never-never" prospecting for gold in that desolation. Dust devils chased each other across the endless monotony of the landscape and Pootch was the only living thing Jake had seen for days.

The disgruntled cockatoo had evi-

dently got into a fight with his flock or had fallen foul of some blackfellow's boomerang, for Jake found him with one wing broken and one leg twisted. Jake set the wing as best he could and took Pootch along for company.

"Son of a devil, you get well," he informed the bird. And Pootch got well. He never used his wings again, but he skipped and jumped around camp until he could run as fast as Jake could walk. When he didn't want to be handled, he could even keep out of Jake's clutches.

Jake spent hours trying to make Pootch talk, but the stubborn old rascal refused to utter a syllable.

Jake was buying grub for another