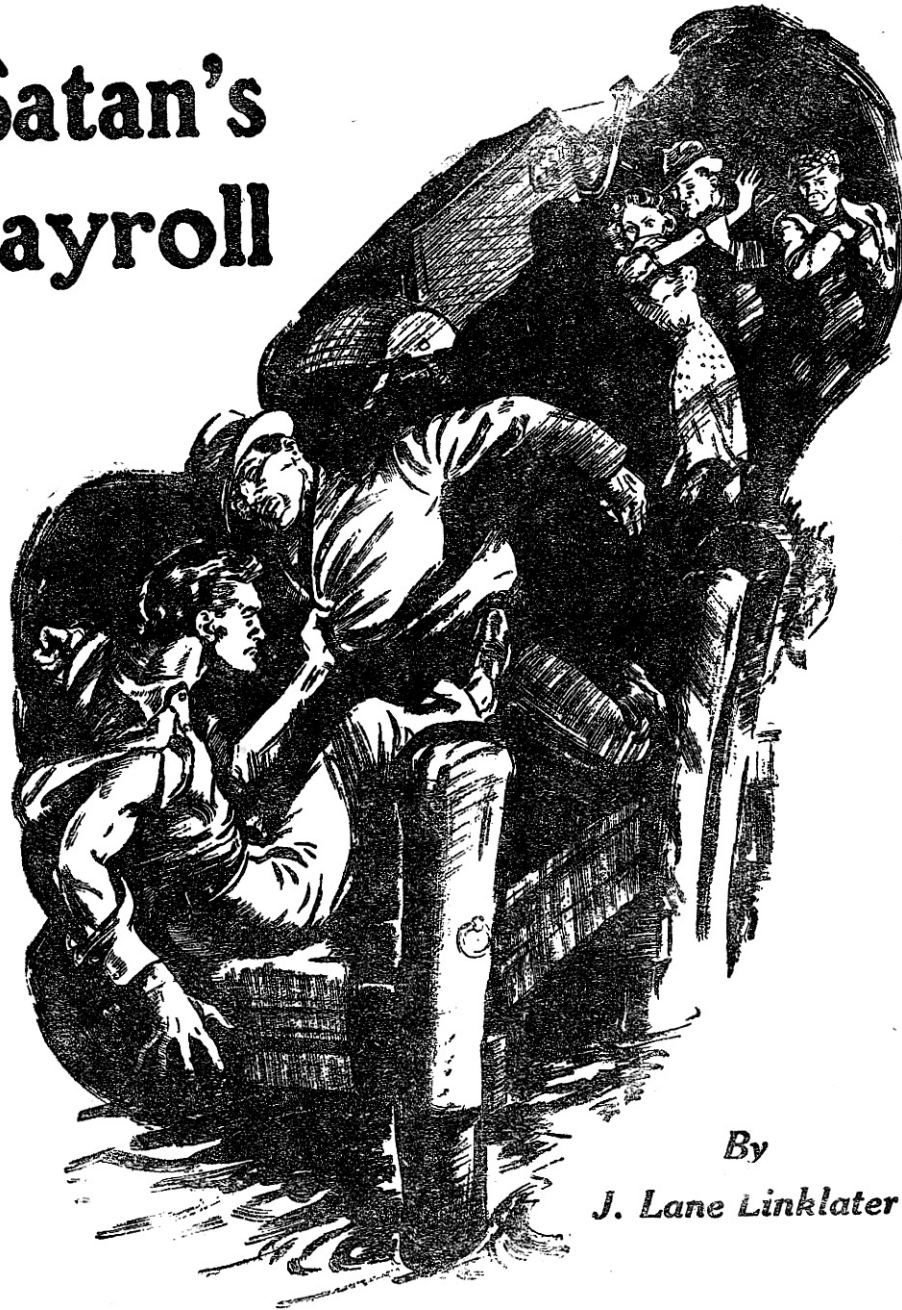


Satan's Payroll



By
J. Lane Linklater

Little John was broke, hungry, and jobless. And he grabbed at the chance to accept a stranger's promising proposition. But Little John didn't know that the job would bring him blows and bullets—instead of grub and greenbacks.

“LITTLE” JOHN was just coming out of an employment agency on Howard Street when the stranger spoke to him. The stranger was going to offer him a job, but Little John didn't know that.

The idea of offering someone like Little John a job had been born not long before in the shabby semblance of an office several blocks away. There were three men in this office: Daconi, a fairly tall man with a thin pointed nose and wary

eyes; Louis, a slender young man who had an easy cunning smile; and Tyson, a very plump, fat-faced older man with a sharp weasel-like gaze.

"It's gonna be a tough job," Daconi had just said, "getting that girl down over the bluff and along the beach. It's close to a thousand feet down the bluff to the beach."

"We can rope her arms," Louis suggested, "but keep her legs free, and make her walk. You can walk down ahead of her and hold one end of the rope, and I can walk behind holding the other end. Doing it like that, she can't make a getaway."

"A good idea," approved Tyson.

Daconi's grin was sarcastic. He said: "Sure. A good idea—for you. You'd be safe enough. But that footpath down the bluff is narrow as hell, and slopes out over the beach in places. It's bare there, too—no brush to hang on to. If the dame jerked on the rope, she'd go over—and so would Louis and me!"

Tyson shrugged. But Louis nodded—he understood the danger. A thousand-foot walk down over the edge of a steep bluff in the darkness of the night, by way of a tricky footpath, was hazardous enough, even with no one to watch but oneself. And not one of them—Louis, Daconi, or the big-bellied Tyson—was an outdoor man; each one of them was in fear of the hazards of nature.

"That little fool is likely to try anything," Daconi muttered.

"And Latch would be sore as hell if we didn't get her down there," added Louis.

Tyson chuckled. "Not only that," he said, "but we got to meet him with the girl, or we don't get the dough."

They were silent for a little while.

From where Tyson was sitting, behind a scratched desk, he could see the reversed letters of his name on the glass of the door:

MAX TYSON—ATTORNEY. The nature of his law business was sometimes a matter of keen interest to the police.

Presently Daconi spoke again. "How about getting some guy to do the job for us—some big dumb guy that's used to climbing around a hills?"

The others thought about that for several silent moments.

"Might work," agreed Tyson presently. "Some big punk that's hungry."

"Great stuff," approved Louis. "But we'd have to croak the guy when we was through with him."

"That's settled then," said Daconi. The necessity of croaking the guy wasn't important enough to call for discussion. "We ain't got much time. It'll be dark soon. I'll go up to the slave market right now and see if I can pick a guy up."

"Be sure he's hungry," warned Tyson.

Daconi grinned. "Dumb guys are always hungry," he said.

DACONI went out. And a few minutes later he saw Little John. Daconi had to look up at him because Little John was five inches higher than six feet. He had oxlike shoulders, and hands that looked like chair-bottoms for size.

"Hello, brother," Daconi said smoothly. "Looking for a job?"

Little John gazed at him in his slow deliberate fashion, and then nodded. He did not speak. He was not much good at talking, and when he did say anything it was in a queer stilted way as if he had been trying to read books in his spare time. The truth was that he needed a job quickly. He had always worked in camps—lumber camps, railroad camps, construction camps, camps of all kinds.

And when he returned to the city at the end of a job, usually with about three months' wages in his pocket, it might take him three days to get robbed of his money;

three days, but not more.

For the last three days he had been trying to get a job in a shipbuilding plant, but he was always asked for his birth certificate. It bewildered him. Anyhow, that created too big a problem for Little John, since even the name of the little village in the middle of Europe where he had been born had been long lost to his memory.

"Okay, big boy," Daconi said heartily. "I can fix you up with a good job right now."

Little John hesitated a moment. Then, silently, he moved along with Daconi. They walked to Fourth Street, and down Fourth Street several blocks until they came to an old two-story building. A stairway led directly up from the sidewalk to the second floor. Here was a small corridor, off which were three rooms.

Daconi led Little John into one of the rooms. Behind a desk was a very plump, fat-faced man with small sharp eyes. The fat of his face wrinkled in a complacent smile as he saw Little John.

The younger man, Louis, was not present.

"This," Daconi said to Little John, "is Mr. Tyson."

"Mr. Tyson," Little John repeated very respectfully.

Tyson said: "What's your name, my man?"

"People call me Little John. I am put down on the payroll as John Jack. My name was long—very long—so I am just put down as—"

"That's very good," Tyson said, beaming. "You belong here in San Francisco?"

"I belong—anywhere," said Little John.

"But do you have folks here, or friends?"

"No people of my own," Little John said sadly, "anywhere."

"That's too bad," Tyson said with great sympathy. His gaze was running up and down Little John's giant frame with peculiar satisfaction. "Well, we have a very good job for you, Little John."

"I like to work," Little John said.

"Nothing hard about this," Tyson assured him. "And we'll have a big feed for you later!"

"I would like to eat," Little John requested, "before starting."

"No time for that now," said Tyson. "But a swell feed later—and twenty bucks a day!"

Little John said nothing. And, for a moment, the others said nothing either. Tyson and Daconi were looking at each other, as if to say: "Perfect! Very big, very strong—and very, very dumb!"

"You can start right in," Tyson went on. "Take Little John to the plant," he said to Daconi.

Daconi took Little John out to the corridor. There were stairs running down to the back of the building. They went down and came out on a rear yard, which was adjacent to many other rear yards. The yards were littered with old boxes and refuse. They pushed through gaps in ancient fences and presently came to the back entrance of a building similar to the one they had left.

AS DACONI glanced about quickly, he saw that there was no one in sight. It was dusk now, almost dark. They could hear the traffic on the street on which the building faced, but no one could see in.

Little John stood waiting patiently.

Daconi snapped his knuckles against the door three times. In a few moments footsteps slurred toward the door from the inside, and it was opened, carefully.

Louis was standing just inside. He smiled at Daconi, and then at Little John. Little John noticed that he kept one hand in his coat pocket. Louis let them in and gently closed the door.

“John,” said Daconi, “this is my pal, Louis.”

Little John gazed at Louis blankly. “All right,” he said. “But where’s the job?”

Louis laughed softly. “Right this way,” he said.

They walked through an unfurnished dusty room and up a dingy stairway. In a moment they were in a bedroom. On a bed a girl was lying. She was, so far as Little John could see, a pretty girl, with brown eyes. Her ankles and arms were tied with rope, and there was a cloth about her face, so that she couldn’t talk.

Little John stared at her. Then he started toward her. Louis stood in his way, and he stopped.

“Wait a minute,” Louis said quietly. “Leave her—”

“But it is not right,” Little John said stolidly.

He started forward again. Louis’ hand came out of his pocket. A gun pressed against Little John’s side.

“Better do as Louis says,” Daconi said from the doorway. “If you don’t, it’ll be too bad for you—and for the girl, too.”

John hesitated. “But the job,” he said. “Where’s the job?”

Louis stepped away from him, sat down on the bed, still facing Little John, with his gun on his knee.

Daconi closed the door and came in. He said soothingly: “That’s right. You do the job the way we want it and everything’s going to be okay.” He looked at his watch. “The boss is about due. You can start your job now. Pick up the little lady.”

Little John stood in deep thought. He

glanced slowly about him. Louis was still fingering his gun. Daconi, too, now had an automatic in his hand.

Abruptly, Little John strode to the bed, reached down his massive hands and lifted the girl in his arms. She was helpless, and seemed like a baby cradled against his chest, but he had never seen so much defiance in anyone’s eyes.

“Okay,” Daconi said sharply. “We go out the way we came in.”

Little John went down the stairs and out of the house again. Daconi went ahead of him, and Louis just behind him. It was quite dark now. They moved cautiously around to the side of the house, into a narrow driveway.

A large touring car was waiting there. Tyson was in it.

They all got in. The girl was sitting beside Little John, leaning against him. He wanted to tear her bonds from her, but he knew that these men would take such a movement as a signal to harm her as well as him.

They drove away, down through the neck of the peninsula. The men sat easy, yet tense, and silent. Little John lost track of time. They drove for hours, south, close to the coast, the headlights carefully dimmed. There were times when Little John could hear the surf beating against the shore.

It was very late when the car turned into a rough road, and then across a field. Presently it stopped.

Tyson spoke: “Okay, boys.”

They got out. A cold sea breeze swept in on them. They were on a high bluff. Far below, and out toward the west, Little John could see the movements of the water in the moonlight.

TYSON spoke to Little John, and his voice seemed hushed. “Here’s the biggest part of your job. There’s a beach

down below here—nearly a thousand feet down. There's a narrow footpath over the bluff, and it's damn near .straight down. You carry the girl."

Again, the girl was in Little John's arms. The moonlight was just bright enough to make the footpath dimly visible. Daconi went ahead. Little John followed with the girl. Then came Louis and Tyson.

It was a difficult descent. The footpath was never much over a foot wide, and often sloped a little outward, over the beach below them. Carrying the girl, in itself, was child's play for Little John—like carrying a doll. But the uncertainty of the sloping uneven path, and the lack of anything upon which to hold, called for iron muscle and steady nerve.

No one spoke on the downward climb. Presently they arrived on the beach below. The girl had lain quiet in Little John's arms. She had produced a queer feeling in him. He had never before held a girl so close to him. This one, he felt, was unafraid, dauntless, yet he wanted to protect her.

It was a boulder-strewn beach, the boulders practically covering the beach, slime-covered, slippery. Little John stood at the foot of the path, waiting. For a little while the others stood still, too, sweating and puffing.

"Up that way," Tyson directed presently.

Little John proceeded doggedly, the others close to him. It was painfully slow progress. There was no straight walking, only continual climbing over boulders. They went on for about half an hour, coming then to the end of the beach, and up into some woods.

In the woods was a cottage. Daconi unlocked the door and they went in. Two oil lamps were lit.

There were three rooms, roughly furnished. Each of the small windows was

carefully blacked out. Little John, still carrying the girl, was ordered into one of the rooms, in which were a couch and two chairs.. He laid the girl gently on the couch.

The others followed them into the room.

Tyson chuckled. "That's most of your job done," he said pleasantly.

"Then," said Little John, "I may go now?"

"Not yet. We might need you some more. Besides, Latch will want to see you." Tyson grinned. "Latch will get a big kick out of you, Little John."

Little John shrugged a huge shoulder. He had no intention of leaving the girl, anyway. The others quietly left the room, and he could hear a key rasp in the lock. He looked about the room. There was one window. He went to it at once. Just beneath it, no doubt, was the ocean.

The girl on the couch stirred. Little John turned and approached her. Obviously, Tyson and his men no longer were concerned about keeping her bound, and Little John quickly cut her ropes.

She sat up, stared at him. It was the first time he had seen her clearly. She looked prettier now, in spite of the sharp-rounded chin and the utter lack of fear in her eyes. But she was very small and seemed, to him, helpless.

It took her some time to get her breath. "Who are you?" she said then.

"I am put down on the payroll," Little John said, "as John Jack. I was hired by these men to do a job. I did not know what the job was. Now I would like to help you."

The girl laughed. "I think they're going to kill me," she said.

Little John gazed at her unbelievably. "Kill you!"

There was wonder in her eyes as she looked at him. "Did you ever hear of Bill

Latch?"

Little John shook his head.

"But don't you ever read the papers?"

Little John shook his head again. "Not much. Only books—"

"**W**ELL, Latch is a big-time crook," the girl told him. "I was with him for a while. He got me before I was old enough to know what it was all about. I ain't trying to alibi myself, but I never had folks to put me right. But I got wise—and then I quit him!"

Little John nodded. He said: "You are still only a child. And there are bad people in the world."

"You bet there are! Latch is one of the worst. But I kept out of his way. Then he got my brother Jim mixed up with him—and Jim got croaked. I got sore then and went to the cops with some stuff I had on Latch. He was pinched on a murder rap."

"That," Little John said solemnly, "was a good thing."

"Sure. But he made a getaway."

"He escaped from the police?"

She nodded her thick reddish hair briskly. "You see the setup now? This place here is a hide-out for Latch's crowd. I ain't never been here before — didn't know just where it was. They nabbed me and brought me here to meet Latch. He'll be showing up—maybe coming up the coast in a boat. He—"

The door opened suddenly. A man was standing in the doorway. He was strongly built, but a little too fat. His eyes were dark and hard. The brow over the left eye seemed to be pulled so far down as to almost conceal it. The right eye was open wide, as if to take in everything there was to see.

He was looking at the girl steadily.

"Okay, Latch," said the girl cheerily. "I'm here!"

Latch's thin-lipped mouth shaped in a

humorless grin. "Yeah," he said. "And you ain't gonna like it!"

He entered, snapped the door shut behind him. Slowly, he approached the girl. She did not retreat.

Latch's hand shot out, grasped her wrist, twisted it.

"You dirty little double-crosser," he said. "I've got you—"

Little John's left hand descended on his shoulder, spun him around like a top. Latch stared at him for a moment, then his hand went for his shoulder holster. Little John's right fist jerked forward, crashed against Latch's jaw, sent him sailing backwards against the wall. For a moment he lay stunned.

Little John stood in the center of the room, staring at him in dull anger.

"Look out!" the girl cried at Little John.

Latch was moving again, his hand sneaking for his gun. But Little John did not move. The girl ran between them, shielding Little John. Latch cursed her thickly.

"Get the hell out of the way," he snarled, "or I'll get you right now!"

The girl laughed. "I'm not afraid of you! Go ahead and—"

The door was flung open again. The others rushed in, Daconi first. Latch hesitated, struggled to his feet, stood uncertainly.

Latch's wide-open right eye looked murderous. Blood was streaking down his face. Then, suddenly, he grinned.

"I almost made a mistake," he said. "There ain't gonna be any stiffs for the cops to find this time!"

Little John gazed at him unwaveringly. "You are a madman," he said.

Latch roared. "Sure. I'm crazy—crazy like a fox! Why did I get knocked off on that last job? Because I was fool enough to leave the stiff right in plain sight, right

where I croaked him! I always done it like that—thought I was being smart. Well, no more!”

Tyson cackled from the doorway. “You’re right, Latch,” he said. “Never let ‘em find the body!”

LATCH was glaring at the girl again. “You doubled on me—and without you the law ain’t got a thing on me. So you’re just gonna disappear—and you ain’t coming back.”

The girl laughed, too. Little John looked at her admiringly. She jeered at Latch: “Are you coming with me, punk?”

“Part way,” said Latch. “We’re gonna load you with lead—inside and out! And we’re going to take you five miles out to sea and leave you there. The stiffs never come back when they’re fixed that way!”

Little John said again: “You are a madman.”

Latch leered at him. “I’m sure glad the boys brought you along, chum. The boat is a quarter of a mile from here. We can use you to tote the little cat along. Let’s get going!”

Tyson spoke quietly from the doorway. “We ought to eat first. The stuff’s all ready.”

Latch didn’t hesitate. “Sure,” he said. “Let’s eat.”

“We promised Little John a feed, too,” Tyson added.

Latch laughed loud. “Why, sure,” he said heartily. “Give him plenty.” He spoke to the girl. “You, too.”

“I ain’t eating with you,” she snapped.

“I do not want to eat,” said Little John.

Latch chuckled. “That’s okay. But we always eat good here. Keep a lot of stuff on hand all the time.”

In a moment or two, Latch and the others had left the room. Again, the key turned in the lock.

Little John stared at the closed door.

“Pretty tough bunch, huh?” said the girl.

“Bad,” muttered Little John. “But the fat one—he’s too—”

“Tyson,” The girl laughed. “He’s yellow, but he’s the worst of the lot. And he’s sure handy with a tommy gun. They probably got one on the boat, too.”

Little John wagged his head.

“You should’ve eaten, big boy,” the girl reproved him.

Little John was silent. . . .

Presently Latch returned, with the others. “Let’s go,” he said.

The girl laughed at him. “The big boy ain’t ready to go.”

“He’ll carry you,” Latch said savagely. “You’ll let him carry you, or I’ll drill *him* right here. And he’ll carry you, or I’ll drill *you* right here.”

The girl smiled at Little John. “We don’t care, do we, big boy?”

But Little John shook his head. “I don’t want to see him shoot you,” he said.

The girl stared at him, as if surprised, and a little disappointed. But Little John simply reached down and picked her up. She struggled a little at first, then rested quietly in his arms.

They went out, along a narrow hallway to a rear door. Daconi led the way. The others followed Little John, close behind him.

A footpath led away from the house, through the woods. Someone behind Little John turned on a dimmed flashlight, keeping Little John in the light. He trudged on, the girl held close to his breast, and in a little while they emerged on a small sandy beach.

A twenty-foot power boat was tied to a small landing wharf. They walked several yards past the wharf.

“Set her down,” Latch ordered briskly.

Little John held the girl a moment longer, and then dropped her lightly on her

feet.

“THE tide ain’t full in yet,” Latch went on. “We can drill these two right here on the sand, and in a couple of hours the water will wash away all the evidence. Then we can tie ‘em both up in some old canvas, leaded down, and throw ‘em on the boat. That way there won’t be no blood either.”

“That’s the idea,” approved Tyson. “No evidence—and especially no bodies!”

Louis and Daconi were standing back a little. The light of the moon filtered through the clouds and showed them standing darkly, each holding an automatic.

There was silence then for a little while. Little John watched the others, the girl at his side. Quietly, as if they knew what to do without talking about it, they were edging together.

Soon they would be almost side by side—Latch and Louis and Daconi—with Tyson a little apart from them, all facing Little John and the girl. Behind Little John was the ocean, lapping gently into the tiny cove in which the boat was moored.

It was clear to Little John that there would be no more talk. He felt bewildered. There was only one definite thought in his mind; that he had carried this girl here, and that it was his duty to carry her away again.

“All okay, boys?” It was Latch talking. His voice was low, yet with a queer high-pitched note in it—a mad note.

The others mumbled a response.

Little John sighed heavily. And as he sighed, his left hand swept around and caught the girl at the side of the head. She went down as if struck by a falling timber, and lay still.

Latch cursed hoarsely, started forward. Little John surged toward him. Latch stopped in his tracks. Flame leaped from

his gun, but Little John kept going, closed in on him, swept him into his arms, crushed him. Latch gasped, dropped his gun.

There was a crackling sound, as of bones crushing. Latch was wriggling feebly. Little John loosened his right hand, snapped upwards with his elbow. Latch went limp in his arms.

“Let him have it!” It was Tyson shrieking. But Little John was shielded by Latch.

Tyson started to run for the protection of the boat.

Suddenly, Little John dropped Latch on the sand, reached down and scooped up Latch’s gun.

Both Louis and Daconi fired at him, wildly, but he went forward again, as if singing lead meant nothing. He was holding Latch’s gun by the barrel, making no effort to fire it. Again, they both fired. He was up to them now. Holding the gun in the flat of his hand, he smacked it against Louis’ head.

Louis went down without a sound.

Daconi was swinging around, taking quick aim, but in an instant Little John had whirled. Again came a sickening crack, and Daconi dropped.

Daconi lay on the sand, moaning curses. He was still clenching his automatic, trying to lift it.

Tyson, from the boat, yelled at him shrilly: “Aim for his belly, you fool!”

Little John was about to turn. Daconi’s gun flamed once more. For a little while John stood quite still. His hand fumbled near his middle.

“You got him, Daconi!” Tyson yelled exultantly. “You got him!”

But Daconi was silent now, and very still. It was quiet. Then something broke the silence; it was the girl’s voice, calling feebly.

STEADILY, but slowly, Little John swung about and went to the girl. She was trying to get to her feet, but he reached down and took her in his arms. In the moonlight, she looked very pale, but there was a smile on her face.

On the boat, farther back down the beach, there was silence. No word came from Tyson. Then came sounds — indefinite, threatening sounds.

The girl spoke in a low voice to Little John. "I heard a bunch of shots. Didn't they hit you?"

"Maybe," Little John said deliberately, "once. But I think they were too full of food. And these wicked people—they aim for the face, which is all right when the victim is shut up in a room or a car, but not—"

"But I heard Tyson yell to shoot you in the belly. How about that?"

"I feel a little tickle there," Little John admitted.

"A little tickle!" gasped the girl.

"A shot in the stomach," said Little John, "is very bad—unless the stomach is empty. Then it may not damage so much."

"You mean your stomach is empty?"

Little John drew the girl closer. "These men," he said, "made the mistake of choosing one who is out of work. I have eaten nothing in three days!"

The girl sighed. "What now, big boy?"

"I carried you here. Now I carry you back!"

"Not so easy," said the girl. "It's going to be tough. We can't make the woods from here without going past the boat—and Tyson's there with the machine gun!"

Little John stood the girl on her feet again. "You stay here," he said.

She caught his arm. "That empty stomach of yours," she said, "ain't going to help you against a machine gun. And that's one thing Tyson can handle okay. He can drill us—"

Her voice was lost in the sudden menacing crackle from the boat. At the same instant, Little John's hand slammed her down into the sand, and he dropped beside her. Bullets sang over their heads, then abruptly ceased.

The girl said nothing more, but lay close to Little John. Little John glanced about. Obviously, there was no escape anywhere in the little cove except back by way of the woods, and it was impossible to reach there except by going past the boat.

And there was no spot in the cove that wasn't within reach of the machine gun.

The moonlight made every object visible.

Not over twenty yards away, the boat bobbed gently against the ten-foot wharf, the platform of which hung over the water, perched on timbers sunk into the soil. The worn timbers swayed and creaked. The outgoing tide tugged at the boat and strained the stout rope that held it.

There was no way of getting at those ropes without being completely exposed to machine-gun fire at close range.

The girl whispered to Little John: "Tyson is moving the machine gun forward so he can hit us lying down!"

Little John said: "You stay here."

He started forward on his stomach. She jerked at his sleeve.

"Don't do that! He'll get you—"

"You stay here," Little John said again.

THE girl sighed a little, as if, for the first time in her life, it pleased her to obey orders. Little John moved forward, toward the boat. His form was like a great sea monster's, wriggling across the sand, every movement taking him away from the girl, nearer the wharf.

He vanished into the water.

At the same moment, the machine gun again tore the silence into shreds.

Obviously, Tyson had seen Little John and was aiming at him; lead splintered the top of the wharf.

The girl lay silent, her body taut, eyes straining for a sight of Little John.

Presently the machine gun was quiet again. The seconds wore on. No movement was visible.

The girl's gaze never wavered from the spot at which Little John had disappeared. If some of that machine-gun fire had caught him, he would never come out of the water.

Then, presently, a giant form emerged, crawling out of the surf. Soundlessly and slowly, but very steadily, it moved, crablike, toward the girl. Soon it was beside her.

The girl spoke low: "You all right, big boy?"

"Be quiet, and very still," cautioned Little John. "Keep your face well down in the sand, or—"

Again the machine gun sang out. The sand just beyond them, and around about them, spurted up as bullets hit.

Then, once more, there was quiet.

The girl, lying close to Little John, held her face obediently against the sand. She did not look up for a long time, until Little John spoke again.

"It is all right now," he said.

He got to his feet and lifted her up. She was in his arms again, cradled against his chest.

She exclaimed in astonishment: "The boat is—is on the way out to sea!"

"Yes," said Little John.

"And it's towing something along with it. What—"

"The wharf," said Little John. "It was easy. The Wharf was old, and the timbers loosened by the tides. I could not get to the ropes, but I got under the wharf—and moved it from its foundations."

He was walking up the beach, carrying her. She laughed against his shoulder. "Cripes!" she murmured. "What this guy can do on an empty stomach!"