

There Are No Crooks

A STRANGE STORY OF THE UNDERWORLD OF SAN FRANCISCO

By Frank R. Adams

SOME streets are essentially men's streets. Women shun them instinctively—all but Salvation Army lasses. Even the so-called daughters of joy hasten to more lucrative primrose paths. For the men who sift from the sunlight above down into those thoroughfares are penniless dregs—the unemployed who have ceased to care, the hopelessly sick who wait there because of the human companionship, or unsuccessful minor criminals who are not clever enough to make a good living by their wits.

In such streets are great crowds but little movement. Men stand in groups, or, if they walk, seem to have no objective and no incentive to get anywhere.

Some alleys in Limehouse are like that. So is the waterfront at Le Havre; so are parts of Eighth and Ninth Avenues, New York; State Street, south of the Loop, in Chicago; and Third Street, San Francisco, in the neighborhood of Market and Mission.

Nominally, at least, there is no more liquor in San Francisco; but there still are bars, with all the old paraphernalia of beloved memory. Only hot dogs, pork and beans, corned beef and cabbage, liver and onions—all the most valiant of the lunch-counter standbys—are served across mahogany counters that are beginning to lose their luster. Near-beer foams deceitfully in the old schooners—but that's all, it just foams. The French plate mirrors bear, in white paint, the legend of the menu. Sawdust is still on the floors, though Heaven knows why, because sober men can hit the cuspidors; and the stained and cigar-burned tables are the altars of continuous games of rummy—not for keeps, however, if you mind the conspicuous signs which order: "No gambling, gents!"

Into the Blue Grass Bar, which is one of the Third Street hangouts above sketched, stepped a young man who was much too well-dressed for the society of that place. It is possible, however, to wear good clothes without being offensive to those who are in rags. The secret of this is not to display kid gloves, a cane, a stiff white collar, or jewelry.

This young man carried a cane, but obviously for use, because he leaned on it constantly. Otherwise he conformed strictly to the canons. His shirt, with collar attached, was of brown flannel, darker than the army kind. His suit was brown also, but of a lighter shade, and made of some soft goods like camel's hair, which looked well without appearing too recently pressed. The coat

fitted snugly across a pair of powerful shoulders. Everywhere else his clothes seemed a little too loose, as if once he had been a larger man than he was now. His eyes were sunken a bit, too, as if nature had begun to collect a debt long overdue.

The double wicket doors swung to behind him, and he stood scanning the faces of the men in the card game and at the bar. The apathetic ones, the old ones, the sick ones, he passed up after a glance; but at last his eye lit with satisfaction. From a distance he carefully surveyed a man who sat alone at a table.

Excepting himself, the object of his appraisal was the only person in the place who had recently had a haircut. Aside from that, the man seated was not noticeable. He had not been shaved within twenty-four hours, and his clothes were frayed. There was a three-cornered tear in his coat sleeve.

The man at the door chuckled to himself, and, passing by several other tables where there were vacant seats, he went direct to the object of his approving scrutiny.

"Sittin' for company, old-timer?" he asked pleasantly. "If you are, I'm here. What'll we have?"

"Not any more of this stuff, stranger, if it's all the same to you."

The original tenant disdainfully indicated a pinkish liquid in a glass on the table before him.

"You're pining for a real drink, I take it," the brown-toned young man hazarded. "In your own estimation, do you think you could be trusted with a secret?"

The stranger nodded.

"All right!" He summoned a waiter and pointed to the pink lemonade. "Joe, feed this to the cat, and bring me and my friend"—he paused to accent the words "my friend"—"bring us a couple of transformers that will step up the juice to around twenty-five hundred."

The waiter nodded and departed.

"My name is Kingbeck—Dick Kingbeck," the newcomer offered.

"Mine's Peter Haegel."

Kingbeck acknowledged the courtesy.

"A man's a fool these days to invite a stranger to drink with him, I suppose; but I knew you were all right the minute I saw you." He searched the impassive face of his newfound friend for a reaction to this speech, but there was none. "I've got a kind of an intuition that

protects me. I can spot a cop or a detective as far as I can see one."

The waiter returned with two glasses apparently containing ginger ale. The man who called himself Haegel lifted his glass and smelled of it.

"You can drink it," Kingbeck assured him. "It don't contain more than one-half of one percent of wood alcohol. It takes three or more of 'em to kill you. I've tried that many without any luck. You're a stranger?"

"Yes."

"Got a job?"

"No. How are things here?"

"Dead. Nothing doing. There hasn't been anything in my line for months. I'm an electrician. What's your trade?"

"Just a laborer—anything."

Kingbeck glanced at the other man's hands, but made no comment.

"Here's how!"

He raised his glass.

The other man sipped and made an involuntary face.

"It is vile stuff," his host admitted. "I thought you wouldn't be used to lightning. I'm glad you're not. My advice to you is to lay off the moonshine. I suppose you think it's a little late in the day for me to be springing that, but I'm a lot older than you—"

"I don't think so," Haegel interrupted quietly. "I believe we are about of an age."

"Perhaps, if you measure forward from birth," Kingbeck conceded. "I was measuring backward from death." He smiled at the other's quick glance of interrogatory appraisal. "Partial paralysis, with complications of one sort and another," he explained. "A good nervous shock would short circuit my whole works. I don't mind much. I've done nearly everything I want to. Of course I'm lying, but it's better to kid yourself. A good bluff shuts off sympathy, and that hurts worse than anything else."

The young man in the brown suit seemed inclined to talk, and asked no confidences in return, so Haegel listened listlessly to an engaging account of a life that seemed to include a knowledge of all the less reputable localities in the western hemisphere, from the old French quarter of Montreal to the native distilleries of Guatemala and on south to the gay capital of Brazil. Once he had been a professional wrestler—now all he had left was the shoulders—and he had traveled a good deal in pursuit of matches.

"It has taken me thirty-one years to find out what I know of the half of the world we live in, and over there is Europe, Asia, and Africa that I will never see. I'm curious. Know anything about any of them, stranger?"

"A little about Europe; but I only saw it in war-time."

For some reason or other, Kingbeck smiled approvingly at that remark.

"I thought perhaps you had. I'm glad. What say to having dinner with me at my flat?"

When the other protested politely, he brushed the objections aside with—

"A meal's a meal these days, especially when you haven't a job. Besides, I've got a reason for wanting you to come."

Peter Haegel finally consented, and his new acquaintance tucked him under his arm, so to speak, and carried him off through a more or less unsavory neighborhood to a not distant apartment hotel. Kingbeck's flat was on the third floor, and was reached by a rickety, rattling elevator which guests operated themselves.

"I can't climb stairs," he explained, unlocking the door.

II

THE apartment which they entered was ordinary enough, not ultramodern, but, by comparison with the entrance to the building and the dingy public halls and stairways, quite cheerful, well and tastefully furnished, and softly lighted, mostly by floor lamps. A woman's hat and coat lay on a davenport.

Haegel started to back out of the door.

"I didn't know you were married," he said.

"I'm not—yet," Kingbeck returned. "That coat and hat belong to a young woman who is my—but I'd rather not explain who and what she is until you have met her. If you wish to clean up before dinner, I can even lend you a razor."

Peter Haegel, as he labored with laudable industry before a bathroom mirror, removing whiskers and even some stains which he had carefully put on by intention several hours before, wondered what sort of a household he had stumbled into. He smiled, too, at his own puzzled face, and was frankly glad that it was a nice face, with steady and smiling gray eyes, even if the nose was a little large and the mouth wide, practical, and full of white, serviceable teeth.

He felt that he must still be young and foolish to care how he might appear before a person about whom he knew nothing except by premonition. He grinned appreciatively at the reflection which he addressed as "you damned fool!"

In keeping with his clean face, Peter squared his shoulders as he stepped into the living room. Kingbeck was there, and—

"Rosa, this is Mr. Peter Haegel, of the United States Secret Service."

The girl said nothing, but extended her hand.

Peter could only stammer a conventional greeting. He had received two knockout blows in swift succession, one of them the fact that Kingbeck had named his profession, and the other Rosa herself.

Rosa was like a topaz, with vivid autumn-gold hair and dark blue eyes that had, nevertheless, lurking fire in them. Perhaps her most deadly weapon against Peter's heart was her mouth. A man could never be cruel to a woman with a mouth like that! It had a short upper lip and a delicious curve that looked as if it would tremble if you spoke a harsh word. She wasn't a raving beauty, really, but she had no need to be. Her wistfulness did the trick—that and a certain forecasting of sex in the soft lines of her figure.

Her dress was of knitted silk, orange color, with cuffs and a collar of black, the latter high around her neck and buttoned over on the side. It was too much color and not the right material or cut for a housedress, but no one could quarrel with the effective simplicity of it.

"Before we go in to dinner," Kingbeck was saying, "Rosa wants me to tell you that she cannot speak to you in the ordinary sense. When she was a child, her vocal chords were paralyzed in a curious way which she will perhaps tell you about herself some day; but after you have been with her a little while you can tell exactly what she is saying if you keep your eyes on her lips. It doesn't take any extraordinary skill as a lip reader to understand her, because she makes every word quite distinct. I am going to place you on this side of the table, opposite to Rosa, so that you can see her lips. I am so used to watching her talk that I can almost understand her if I can see the tip of her ear."

Rosa's lips moved in dumb speech as she smiled.

"Did you understand that?" Kingbeck demanded of Peter.

"I'm not sure. I thought she said, 'I do not wag my ears like a donkey.'"

"Correct! That's just what she did say."

Rosa clapped her hands in pleased applause.

From that point the dinner proceeded merrily. Peter was glad of a legitimate excuse to watch his hostess's lips. Every moment they fascinated him more. Hers was a sweet, unspoiled mouth, if ever there was one.

Several times she said something which Peter did not catch. The first time he turned to Kingbeck for interpretation. The latter laughed.

"She did not intend that you should understand. Rosa and I are so accustomed to lip reading that we can converse back and forth in a sort of shorthand of our own, scarcely moving the lips at all. It was very rude of her to use it before a guest. What she really did was to thank me for bringing to dinner the nicest young man she had ever met."

Rosa laughed again.

"Wait!" Kingbeck ordered. "I'll scold her!"

He turned a severe face toward Rosa, and fixed her with a compelling eye for a few seconds. Peter saw the corners of his mouth twitch occasionally, but there was no very definite movement of the lips.

Rosa understood, and finally she turned to Peter and apologized—wordlessly, of course.

"I am very sorry, Mr. Peter Haegel, that I was rude to you. I shall not say anything nice about you again until after you have gone home."

The speech charmed him. The use of his full name, the lurking element of intimate teasing in it, made him feel all warm and crinkly around his heart. What sort of a witch was this girl?

Peter did not consider himself especially susceptible, and just now he was on duty and officially suspicious. He filed the question away in his mind for future reference. It certainly was impossible to answer it while he was engaged in the fascinating business of watching her lips.

When dinner was done, Kingbeck ordered the girl from the table much as one might instruct a child to retire.

"You will have just time enough to put on that new dress we got yesterday," he said. "That will do very nicely for the wedding."

Peter thought he caught a look of dismay, of the recrudescence of a fear that had been temporarily banished in the girl's eyes. Perhaps he was mistaken. At any rate, she made her excuses and left the table docilely enough.

III

WHEN they were alone, Kingbeck looked at his guest quizzically.

"Now ask the questions," he suggested. "I'll answer all of them that I can."

"Whose wedding?" sprang first to Peter's lips.

"Mine," replied Kingbeck—"mine and Rosa's." He paused to give Peter time to comment. "I thought you would disapprove. I do myself, but there is a reason behind it, just as there is a reason behind every human action, if you look far enough. Ask your other questions. Perhaps we can get at the explanation all in a bunch."

"How did you know who I was?" Peter demanded.

"I told you I could spot a cop—remember? And you smiled to yourself when I said it to think how you were fooling me."

Peter held down his anger, which threatened to rise, and continued:

"What sort of a crook are you?"

The other smiled tolerantly.

"I don't call myself a crook at all, but I will admit that I am one of the men you were sent out to bring in. I am interested in merchandizing the more or less medicinal product of the oriental poppy."

"Why, in God's name, if you are an opium smuggler, did you bring me to your hangout and introduce me to you—er—"

"It is because of Rosa that I brought you here and practically placed myself in your hands. Take a cigarette, and I'll try to tell you what I mean between the lighting of it and the last puff."

Curious language from a crook. Just what sort of a game was he facing? Peter cautiously touched the outside of his own coat pocket to see if his automatic was there. It was.

"In the first place," Kingbeck began, "there are no crooks. There are no villains in real life. Perhaps you know that already. I think you do. Some men are merely confronted with handicaps, with problems, that they cannot overcome by means approved of by the laws according to which we are supposed to live. In other words, if you look back far enough, and with sympathy enough, you can find the reason why any enemy of society has become—let us say an evader of the law. I can only illustrate by my own life, but because I know the facts in one case I can understand many, and can forgive. It is too bad that the judges who sit upon the benches of our courts are not all men who have been through hell themselves.

"I was in the army. A great many of us who have trouble with the police were. I only served on this side, though, and I came out of it much as I am now. Not all of my disability was contracted in the line of duty, strictly speaking, and our benevolent government turned me loose to shift for myself, without making any provision to insure my honesty. I'm not complaining. According to law, there was no other way.

"I could not practice my trade. As I told you, I cannot climb, and any shock, even an extraordinarily loud noise, upsets me so that I go all to pieces. God knows, I curse myself, but I know from experience that I can't hang on.

"What was I to do? I had to live. At first I very nearly didn't. Then, when prohibition came on, I found that there was an easy profit in acting as middleman between those who had contraband liquor and those who wanted it. That was in New York, and it tided me over a summer. Later I came out here. I thought the climate would perhaps help me to get well. It didn't, but that doesn't matter now. I met up with a bunch that was peddling 'snow'—running it across from Mexico, you know. I wouldn't play that game—not at first. I didn't see much harm in selling hooch to old booze-fighters who aren't happy without it, but I drew the line at making it any easier for fools to acquire the drug habit. Later, however, I stepped over the line that I had drawn. Everybody has certain limitations, beyond which he will not go, or thinks he won't go; but sometimes something comes along and forces him over.

"In my case it was Rosa. She came to me six months ago. I wasn't living here then—just had a hole in the wall to sleep in. She was out of luck. There'd been a tenement fire in the neighborhood, and she'd lost her

folks—never has explained much about it; but, anyway, she asked me to shelter her for the night. She wrote it on a piece of paper when she found I couldn't read her lips. You've seen Rosa. You know what you would have done.

"I found her a place to stay, and then lay awake all night thinking about her. I suppose I began to fall in love with her even then. For the life of me I couldn't see what was going to become of her. Handicapped by her lack of speech, and also by her beauty, there was no ordinary employment open to her.

"Finally I hit upon the curious plan under which we have lived. I offered her a job myself. Guess what? As my nurse. Told her I was sick—that was no lie, either—and said that I needed someone to take care of me. I knew it was the only way she'd accept anything from me. The next day I went out and rented this flat, and that's what she has been doing ever since—taking care of me."

Peter Haegel considered.

"You two have been living here together all alone?"

"Would you criticize me for that? What could anyone say of her here that wouldn't be better than what they would say if I had let her go? But no one says anything. I've pretended to be more of an invalid than I really am, and she is my nurse—that's all.

"But all this takes money. I couldn't earn enough, even by bootlegging. So I became a snow merchant. When you come to a place where it is the good of humanity against the only thing in the world that you really love, humanity loses out every time. I told her the money came from the government because I had been disabled in the war, and she doesn't know to this day anything like as much as you do about me. With a little luck she never will.

"The next thing you want to know is why a physical and moral wreck like myself dares to marry a girl like that, especially when he knows, as I do, that she doesn't care for me that way. Here's the answer to that. I carry ten thousand dollars of war risk insurance. Somebody is going to get that pretty soon, but I can't leave it to her unless she is my wife. There's that!"

"But I still don't see where I come in on all this," argued Peter Haegel.

"You will. I picked you out deliberately. Someone else will have to look out for her very soon. Whom do I know to trust her to? No one but the scum of the city—not a soul who is on the side of law and order. I wouldn't leave a dog to the mercies of the men I do business with—especially a dog with the money she is going to have. There's some beside the insurance. I've been laying it aside for her. It's in an account in her name at the Day and Night Bank. There will be a lot more after tonight. I've got thirty ounces of—but you're not interested in that."

"I am—very much interested," Peter Haegel insisted.

The lame man laughed.

"Officially, yes, but not really. The question right now is, will you take charge of Rosa, temporarily at least, and see that she gets a square deal out of life? The money part is all attended to—I've traded the last shreds of my decency for that; but there has to be a strong man to protect her from more dangers than ordinarily lie in the path of a girl. You can do it. Will you?"

Haegel smiled his slow smile—an illuminating smile that made his rather stern face positively boyish.

"I've got many things to do tonight," Kingbeck urged; "but before I go I want your word."

Haegel did not answer immediately even then. When he did, he said:

"In your reckoning, haven't you overlooked the fact that perhaps there are policemen who will stick to their duty, no matter how much their sympathies and their inclinations may drag them away?"

"Are you that kind of a policeman?"

"I am. I was sent out to bring you in, Kingbeck, and I'm going to do it."

Peter Haegel finished his speech with his automatic in his hand, pointed suggestively at the other man's third vest button; but Kingbeck made no move.

"I thought you were that kind of a policeman," he admitted dryly. "That's why I slipped the cartridge-clip out of your automatic when your coat was hung up while you were shaving."

The Secret Service man did not lower his gun.

"There's one cartridge in it," he retorted evenly. "I always carry one loaded in the barrel, besides those in the clip."

Kingbeck lifted his eyes from the gun muzzle and gazed thoughtfully at Haegel's impassive face. At length, with a sigh, he relaxed.

"I'll take a chance that you're a liar, Mr. Haegel. If you've got that cartridge you say you have, shoot and get it over with. I won't go with you any other way."

Haegel slowly lowered his gun and dropped it on the table.

"You win! There's no cartridge in the barrel, and I don't know that I could use it if there was."

"Thanks. You'll take care of Rosa?"

"I'll do my best."

"Good! You won't lose anything by it, because Rosa's gratitude is worth trading your soul for. Look at your gun."

Haegel picked up the weapon curiously.

"Why, the cartridge clip is in it!" he said.

"And was all the time. You may need it later, so shove it back in your pocket."

IV

THE doorbell rang. The colored maid came from the kitchen somewhere in the rear and admitted a man wearing a clerical costume.

"Mr. Freeman," Kingbeck introduced him. "Rosa goes to his church every Sunday—to pray for me, she says."

"She does," confirmed the minister. "I often see her lips moving right in the middle of my sermon, and I can't help reading what she says."

"If you can," mused Kingbeck, "perhaps God understands her, too. I shall need it."

Mr. Freeman had the good sense to say nothing. Rosa came in just then.

Her wedding dress was blue—dark blue, just a solid color silk, cut modestly high like a schoolgirl's frock. She was quite pale, and her eyes were troubled, but her lips smiled, and she kept her glance resolutely on Kingbeck, as if to catch his slightest command.

"Come!" said her benefactor, almost roughly. "Let's get at this. I have a great deal to do tonight."

The minister marshaled them before him conventionally, and the colored maid was called in. She and the Secret Service man were to be the witnesses.

The service had proceeded as far as "Do you, Rosa, take this man—" when the door opened noiselessly, and into the apartment stepped three men. One was gigantic and dark-skinned; the other two were squat, thick-set white men, ugly of jaw and long of arm. The colored man—if he was that—affected a touch of the foreign in his manner, as if, at least to himself, he was a prince of Morocco.

"Mos' sorry," he murmured apologetically; "mus' interrup'." His voice hardened perceptibly as he continued, speaking specifically to the groom. "Rosa, she my girl. You have understand that, Kingbeck, but you forget. I marry her myself right now!"

Haegel reached toward the pocket of his coat, but Kingbeck stopped him with a sharp negative movement of his head.

The two white men arranged themselves on either side of the minister and forced him to the door.

"Wait outside in the street for a few minutes," their chief commanded; "but do not let him go. He will perhaps be so good as to continue this wedding elsewhere with another bridegroom."

When the Rev. Mr. Freeman had been led, protesting, from the apartment, and the door had closed after him, the quarter-breed—for so Haegel judged him—smiled indulgently at the man whose plans he had so neatly frustrated.

The latter turned a thoughtful eye upon the colored maid, who shrank visibly at the cold threat of the glance.

"So!" murmured Kingbeck. "You were the one who told!"

The maid slunk behind the man who was partly her own color, and, slipping through the open door, clattered down the stairs in terror.

The master of the situation laughed.

"For some time, Kingbeck, I suspec' you are traitor. Tonight, when I see you with Secret Service man, I know so. Yes? I not trus' you no more. You know I could kill you an' your friend so ver' quietly nobody ever suspec'?"

"Not me, you couldn't!"

Haegel sensed the menace of something he did not understand, but his spirit refused to yield before the will of this apparent monarch among lawbreakers.

"Hush!" counseled Kingbeck. "He is right. This building belongs to him and is full of his spies. You wouldn't have a chance against him. I'll do what you wish, Sala."

"Ver' good! I think so. But I don' trus' you, all the same. You too damn clever!"

"Thanks, Sala. This compliment from you warms my self-esteem, and encourages me to work for you with redoubled vigor."

Kingbeck was standing by the window, which looked out upon the street three stories below. Something he saw there attracted his interest, and he directed Rosa's attention to it.

"Those men of yours, Sala, are being very rough with a minister of the gospel down there."

Sala only grunted without making any move to look, but Peter Haegel moved over to the embrasure and gazed below.

Mr. Freeman stood there in the light cast from the entryway of the building, looking up. His arms were pinned to his sides by Sala's aides, but they were not watching his lips. His lips were moving. Haegel could not catch the words that he was trying to make soundlessly, and turned to Kingbeck to see if he was getting it.

Strangely enough, the latter had lighted a match, as if to ignite a cigarette; but there was no cigarette in his mouth, and as the match flared to its greatest illumination his lips framed the sentence:

"I do."

The match burned out, and Kingbeck lit another, which he held in front of Rosa's face for a second.

Peter understood. Kingbeck and Rosa were being married without the use of a spoken word.

At the end Kingbeck turned and kissed the girl reverently on the brow.

"Now we're ready, Sala!"

The big man regarded his henchman suspiciously.

"You too damn willing. Remember, no more tricks!"

"Right-o, no more! The last one is played between you and me, Sala. Let's go!" He moved to the door. "I can't walk down the stairs, and the elevator is only safe

for two, so Rosa and I will ride and meet you two gentlemen on the ground floor."

"No," countermanded Sala. "I ride with you. No more tricks!"

"Just as you say," conceded the lame man. To Peter Haegel he said: "I trust Rosa to your care," and added soundlessly: "Forever!"

V

THE tall Sala and the broad-shouldered Kingbeck entered the rickety elevator, and the door slammed shut after them. There was a curious smile on Kingbeck's lips as he started the mechanism.

The car began to wheeze and rattle as it sank below the floor. Two-thirds of the way to the next landing it stopped.

The voice of Sala rose in angry complaint, and that of Kingbeck replied in soothing mockery. Then the elevator and the shaft itself began to shake and rattle with the sound of a physical struggle.

"Beat it, Haegel!" came the panted command of the lame man. "I can hold the car here until you get away, I think. Use your gun, if you have to, but don't come back. Goodbye!"

The significance of the strategy was quite clear to Peter's mind. Whatever other opinion he might have of his recent host, he could not help but admire the bravery and the spirit of sacrifice which prompted him to lock himself in the narrow confines of an elevator cage with a man of Sala's physical proportions and apparent strength.

The orders he had just received were in the nature of a dying behest—Peter knew that, and he did not hesitate to act upon them. He could not help Kingbeck, but perhaps he could save Kingbeck's wife, who was clinging in bewilderment to his arm.

Rosa's life had suddenly taken an unexpected and sinister turn. She who had been sheltered from even the knowledge of the evil which beset her benefactor, now her husband, was face to face with all the hideous consequences of sin and crime.

"Come on, Rosa—quick!" Peter ordered peremptorily.

Half dragging her, he started down the narrow stairs.

Part way to the next floor they passed the stalled elevator, and had a momentary glimpse of the two men inside the rickety cage fighting for possession of the control lever and threshing about like a couple of tigers in a trap.

Doors on the second floor were cautiously opened, and kimonoed tenants were peering timidly to see what the noise was all about, but at the sound of a shrill whistle all disinterested spectators withdrew suddenly, and doors were slammed shut and bolts hastily thrown.

Peter did not know what the whistle portended, but he slipped his gun out of his pocket and loaded the barrel for the first shot.

Below, at the entryway, was the sound of running feet, first across the corridor and then on the stairs. As Peter rounded the turn in the stairway to the main floor, there was an explosion just ahead of him, and a vicious bullet whanged into the plaster over his head.

He jerked Rosa back around the turn and opened fire pointblank at two men who were coming up, shooting as they climbed. Alone he would have faced them both, and, trusting to the advantage of shooting down, would have made a dash for the open air; but he could not subject Rosa to the certain danger.

Behind him, on the landing just above, he heard doors being unbolted again. Across his mind flashed the recollection of Kingbeck's statement, earlier in the evening, that the entire building was tenanted by underlings of the ruthless Sala. It would never do to be caught in a crossfire from above and below at the same time.

So he emptied his automatic down the stairs, and, picking Rosa up across his shoulder, beat a swift retreat back to the third floor and into the apartment they had just left.

As he stood in the door, listening for the sounds of pursuit, he saw the top of the elevator cage sink swiftly from sight, and a second later there was a terrific crash as the lift platform struck the basement. The cable had given way under the strain of the struggle which had been taking place in the car.

The thought sickened him for a moment, and almost paralyzed his initiative. There seemed little doubt that the word with which his newfound friend had entrusted his wife to him—"forever"—had been prophetic.

Peter's jaw whitened as he set his teeth. That trust should not be in vain!

He closed the door, perhaps as much to shut out the thought of the horror out there in the elevator shaft as to protect them against the attack which must surely come.

The lock and the bolt on the door were flimsy affairs, no safeguard against violence. Peter reinforced them by dragging all the movable furniture over and piling it against the panels. Rosa, as soon as she comprehended his intention, helped him, tugging with feverish energy at the heavier pieces, such as the piano and the davenport.

"Is there a backdoor?" he asked Rosa.

She shook her head, but took his hand and indicated that he was to follow her.

She led him through the apartment to the kitchen. A sliding panel revealed a descending rope in a narrow shaft.

"Dumbwaiter, eh?"

Peter seized a knife from the kitchen table and hacked the rope in two.

"There's that, for a few minutes at least! Now to get help. Is there a telephone?"

Rosa piloted him silently to an instrument in the hall. Peter picked up the receiver and began pumping the handle up and down rapidly, in the hope of attracting the attention of the operator more quickly than usual. There was an ominous and sickening lack of sound in response to his efforts, and at last he gave up.

"Cut off, of course!" he muttered. "And probably there wasn't a policeman near enough to hear the riot, or anyone else who would dare turn in a police call for a disturbance in this neighborhood!"

By this time there was a persistent hammering at the front door. Peter examined his barricade. It would hold for a little while at best—that was all.

As he stood there trying to think if there was anything further he could do to stave off the fate which seemed to be closing in on them, the glass in a framed picture on the wall splintered noisily and dropped to the floor.

With his eye he measured the location of the picture and its angle with the front window.

"Firing from the house across the street!" he decided. "Turn out the lights."

Rosa obeyed. The features of the room were blotted out. There remained only impenetrable darkness, broken by a gray patch at one end, where the window let in the feeble radiance of the street.

VI

THE situation seemed suddenly very serious indeed. Everything that he had done so far was merely to stave off the ultimate disaster for a few moments longer. No outpost, ringed by machine guns, was ever more surely doomed to extinction than were they, marooned in this unfriendly neighborhood and surrounded by enemies who, for their own sakes, could not afford to let them escape.

In the darkness the nearness of the end seemed more nerve-sapping—darkness and silence, save for the splintering of wood around the door, which was evidently being forced with a jimmy.

Rosa felt it, too, because instinctively she found him and touched his hand. Her own hand trembled, and Peter threw a reassuring arm around her. Her fright brought home to him again the necessity of maintaining his own courage.

"We can't get out by ourselves, so there's got to be a way to signal for help," he told her in her ear, more to reason the thing out for himself than because he expected her to help. "Ships at sea have their wireless, armies their rockets and flares; savages have their signal fires, and—"

Across the gray patch that was the window appeared the legs of a man, dangling from above. The apparition paralyzed at once Peter's mind and his organs of speech.

The legs came down lower and lower. They were feeling for the sill as a footrest.

Peter released Rosa from his arm and reached wildly for a weapon. His hand encountered the piano stool, which they had not added to the barricade because of its negligible weight. He picked it up over his head, basketball fashion, and let drive at the window. It struck in the upper sash, drove through with a crash of glass, and landed in the pit of the intruder's stomach.

Perhaps the surprise helped to loosen the man's grip on the ledge above. At any rate he hung for a moment, scrabbling frantically, and then dropped backward out of sight.

Peter brushed cold beads of perspiration from his forehead with his coat sleeve. It was not the first time that he had been in a tight place, but the sheer ruthlessness of passion and the instinct of self-preservation, even when encountered in himself, appalled him. Why, that man had been a living, hating thing a second before, and now—

"Look out! Behind you, Peter!"

He turned, without questioning the fact that the warning had come from the lips of Rosa in spoken words—lips which had hitherto been dumb. Later he had time to thank God that in the moment of supreme need she had been able to make the superhuman effort that overcame the handicap under which she had labored for years.

With all his fighting animal instincts now aroused, he sensed that the enemy whom he turned to meet had a knife in a hand upraised. Clutching at random, Peter encountered the descending wrist, which he grasped in the circle of his own powerful fingers.

But his new assailant was not dependent upon weapons alone. He was a strong man, as strong as Peter himself, and he circled Peter's neck with his other arm in a choking embrace.

From war-time experience, Peter knew an Apache trick or two himself, and with his free thumb he put enough pressure on the other man's eyeball to cause him to break the throat grip.

Even while fighting for breath and life, Peter's mind was dealing with the separate problem of how his assailant had entered the apartment. The front door still held, though it was splintering, and no one had got in through the window yet. Then he hit on it.

"The dumbwaiter shaft!" he cried out. "Pour hot water down it—acid, ammonia, anything!"

He heard Rosa moving to obey, and devoted himself wholeheartedly to a desperate effort to extract the breath of life from the man who had been about to strike him down from behind.

Interlocked, they crashed to the floor. Peter felt a sharp stab in his arm, and thought for a moment that his antagonist had managed to get action with his knife as they fell. The crackle of glass under them, however, offered the true explanation. They had fallen near the spot where the picture frame had been broken, and a splinter of the glass had pierced his skin. The cut smarted and was bleeding, but was not serious.

By a lucky chance Rosa found the running water in the kitchen sink almost boiling hot. She emptied a dishpan full of it down the dumbwaiter shaft. A howl from below advertised the fact that she was "on target," and the sound of a heavy body slipping and falling indicated that the enemy had found it advisable to retreat hastily.

But her mind was not on the action and reaction. While she poured hot water resolutely down the shaft, she was repeating to herself:

"Ships at sea have their wireless, savages their signal fires—"

There she halted, just as Peter Haegel had done.

Signal fire—why not? There was no telephone, and the policeman on the beat was either in cahoots with the lawbreakers of the neighborhood or too worldly-wise to take a hand, but in the city there was one group of fighting men who let no consideration interfere with a call to duty, who never hesitated for anything—neither danger nor politics.

And there was a way to call to them, to signal for assistance. It was a trifle drastic, but the case demanded a desperate remedy. The sound of the two men panting and tearing at each other in the next room spurred her to the execution of her mad idea.

She began lighting newspapers and throwing them down the dumbwaiter shaft. The first one went out. The next she saturated first with a little kerosene, which she kept for cleaning furniture, and it sailed, a flaming torch, down the grimy flue. Other papers which she threw after it caught fire readily from the first, and the shaft made a fine chimney.

A wave of heat and acrid smoke drove her away from the opening and to the kitchen window for a breath of air. She lifted the sash. The outlet was just what the fire needed, and with the added draft it began to roar and crackle like a forest conflagration. There was a red glow behind her, which outlined her head to the woman who was leaning out of the window across the alley and wondering if anybody was getting hurt in the fight going on over at the Hillbilly Flats.

That red glow and the cloud of smoke coming out of the window decided the hitherto listless neighbor. It was all very well not to take sides in a gang fight, but a fire was another thing. Twenty minutes' neglect might wipe out the entire community.

Instinct overcame caution. She turned from her window, screaming "Fire! Fire!" and ran to the telephone.

The smoke in the kitchen was becoming too thick for endurance. Besides, she might be needed; so Rosa slipped through the door into the living room, and closed it tight behind her to keep out the smoke as long as possible.

As she entered, the noise of bodies thumping on the floor ceased. There was a long-drawn sigh to replace the sound of panting breath, and then nothing more. The insidious attack on the door still continued, but in the room itself comparative quiet reigned.

Rosa knew that the battle had terminated one way or the other. The terrifying question was, which way? Was the man who had given that sigh friend or foe? In the darkness she had no means of knowing. She moved noiselessly to the electric light switch, and stood with her hand on it, but did not turn it on.

From far off came the faint clamor of the fire department sirens. They were coming. God grant it was not too late!

Rosa stood in an agony of indecision. She could hear the cautious movement of someone on the floor—the victor in the struggle which had just ended. Whichever one it was evidently did not know that she had come back into the room. Whether to reveal herself or not was the question.

The problem was still undecided when the circle of light from a pocket flash gleamed for a second in the corner of the room nearest the window—gleamed and went out, then came on again steadily.

The illuminated spot rested for a moment, and then began traversing the floor, as if searching for something. At last it stopped, and in the light glittered a short, ugly bladed knife.

A hand reached down and picked it up—a powerful, dark-skinned hand.

The light went out, then reappeared a second later more to the left, and rested this time upon the bruised and battered features of Peter Haegel. His eyes were closed, but he was breathing faintly—that could be seen even by the limited radiance of the flash.

The other man was now in front of the window, outlined against the gray light of the opening. Rosa saw his arm raised slowly, as if to strike. She screamed and turned the electric light switch.

The blinding glare of light revealed a room full of drifting smoke, and, by the window, like a giant in a fog, a man with arm upraised.

The arm which held the knife aloft was descending to strike; but suddenly it grew limp, and the blade clattered to the floor, followed after a second by the swaying figure of the owner.

Rosa was partially conscious of having heard the bark of a rifle from the house across the street just as this

happened. Her light had offered Sala's own men a target!

The girl fainted as the fire department motor-trucks drew up thunderously before the building.

VII

AT the hospital Haegel and Kingbeck occupied adjacent cots. They were both conscious, although Kingbeck was in pretty bad shape from the shock and the fall. The surgeon who had just been examining him shook his head at the nurse as he walked away.

"Well, policeman!" Kingbeck hailed his neighbor. "I let you in for something, didn't I?"

Peter Haegel smiled back, disarranging the strips of adhesive plaster which indicated the best routes across his face.

"I didn't mind doing it for you—and for Rosa," he said.

"Oh, so she has pierced your rhinoceros-hide heart, too, has she? Every man who has ever seen her has fallen for her one way or another, including Sala."

"Who disproved your theory that there are no villains?"

Kingbeck searched the Secret Service man's face with that same quizzical, tolerant smile that he had worn earlier in the evening.

"Who are we to judge, Mr. Policeman, when neither of us has been damned by a careless ancestor? Had all of his blood been either white or black, perhaps he would not have felt himself the object of the mistrust of both races."

Came Rosa to the hospital ward—Rosa, shaken and pale, but wearing the wistful, hesitating smile that made you want to shield her from all harm even if your own body was battered out of the semblance of the image in which man was made.

"Dick!" she whispered.

"Why, Rosa!" he said, his voice breaking a little with excitement and tears. "You spoke—out loud!"

Rosa did not explain, but Peter did, very soberly.

"There has been a miracle, Kingbeck. In the darkness up there she had to speak to save my life—to warn me, and God gave her the power."

The girl shook her head.

"No, there has been no miracle. I have always been able to talk."

Kingbeck was puzzled.

"But why did you make me think that—"

"To gain your sympathy," she replied miserably, "as a means of worming myself into your confidence."

Kingbeck said nothing, and asked no further questions, but turned his face away to hide his eyes and the place where his quizzical smile used to be.

Peter Haegel was not so easily satisfied.

"You're on Federal assignment?" he questioned.

She answered by handing him her identifying papers.

"But I don't understand why you let this thing go so far," he debated. "You must have had evidence enough to convict him months ago. Why didn't you turn him up?"

"Could you have done it?" Rosa's lips trembled as she looked at Kingbeck's back, now turned resolutely toward her. "Could you have done it if he had been gentler with you than your own mother, if he was the only man who never tried to take advantage of your supposed helplessness, if he loved you as he used to love me, and if you finally came to love him as I—"

"Rosa, my dear!" The tears were welling frankly in Kingbeck's eyes as he turned toward her once more. "Let me look at you. My God, it's so! Mr. Policeman, you were right—there's been a miracle, but it's a greater one than you thought, a greater one than I've ever dared

to dream. Tell that surgeon that he needn't shake his head about me any more. I couldn't die now! Rosa, girl of my heart, bend over me so that I can see you through my tears. If I can get well some day—do you suppose you could—"

He stopped doubtfully.

"Dick, dear, are you meaning this for a proposal?"

"God love you, yes!"

She shook her head.

"I'll never marry you, if that's what you mean."

And then, when Kingbeck tried to swallow the hurt that had come suddenly into his throat, she shrugged her shoulders and laughed, as she addressed Peter Haegel and the world at large.

"Heaven help me during a long life! The man has forgotten already that we were married this evening!"