

MAR. 16

FLASHING NOVEL OF CALIFORNIAN ADVENTURE by JOHNSTON McCULLLEY

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ARGOSY



WEEKLY



*Freedom Shall Not Die -
All the World Will Hear*

THUNDER TOMORROW

Complete Short Novel by Arthur Leo Zagat

ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

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Cover by Marshall Frantz
Illustrating Thunder Tomorrow

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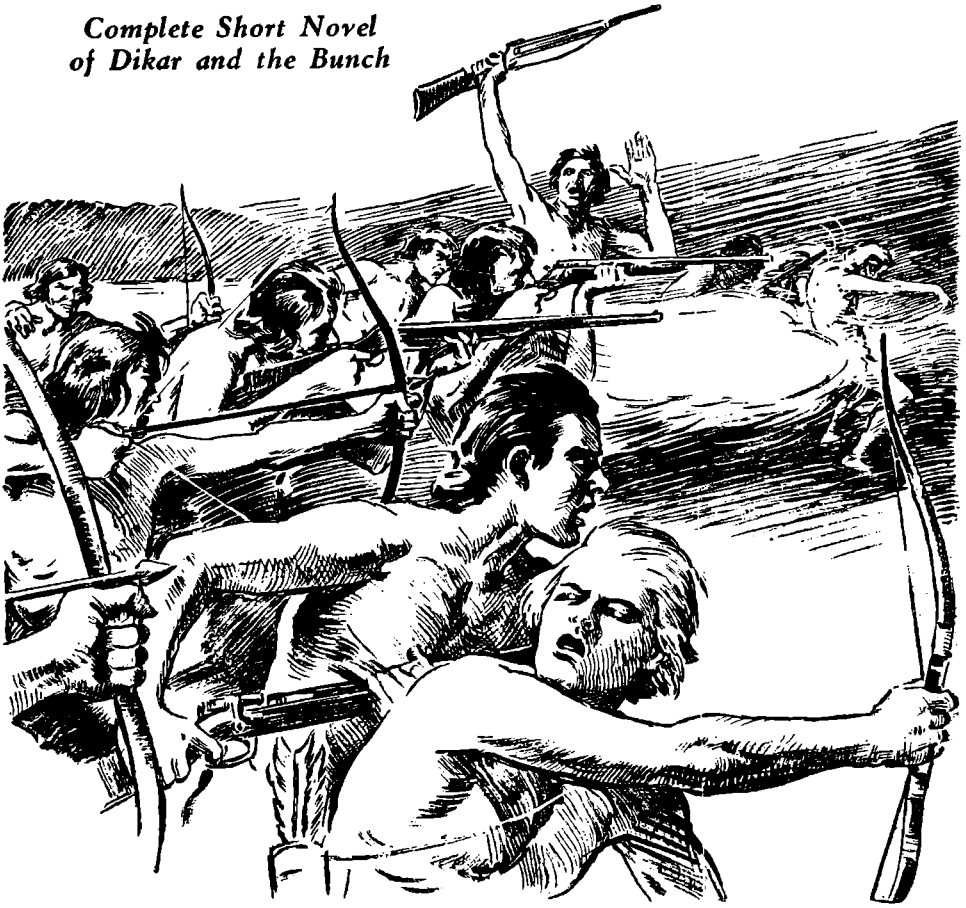
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*Complete Short Novel
of Dikar and the Bunch*



Thunder Tomorrow

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

Author of "Bright Flag of Tomorrow," "Seven Out of Time," etc.

PROLOG

DICK CARR was four years old when the hordes of the Asiatic-African Confederation, having swarmed in triumph over Europe, began to attack our own country, from the south and west.

Of all this, and of the long and desperate defense that followed, Dick Carr had, of course, no comprehen-

sion, and hence when he became the almost legendary person we know as Dikar, he could not remember clearly that terrible past. But Dikar has vague dream-memories, of being always hungry, of being always afraid, of the thunder always in the sky, getting nearer and nearer.

The sharpest of his memories is of a siren howling like an enormous devil in the sky while he runs through the



Fiercely the Bunch charged the Asafric guards of West Point

It is the voice of America, this thunder, lifted against an alien and savage tyranny. For tonight Dikar leads his army-with-banners into battle, and the hope of Tomorrow shall be proclaimed with guns

street, holding on to his mother's hand so the other running women and kids won't separate them. They get to a dim cave that once was a subway station, and they all crouch there in the almost-dark, while the earth shakes with great thunders.

In the station is a little girl, brown-eyed, brown-haired and pretty. When Dick shyly asks her name she runs the two names together, making one of them: "Marilee." And from Dick's two names she makes: "Dikar."

The thunders stop at last, and from the radio in the change booth a Voice announces that America has been vanquished. Yet there is, the Voice says, one last hope.

"A small, but determined force may be able to keep open a certain gap in the enemy lines, to the north, long enough for us to take your little chil-

dren out through it. We have some arms and ammunition available, but no one to use them except you mothers who hear me.

"It is a bitter thing I ask you to do," the Voice goes on. "I should not ask it except for this one thing. If there is to be any hope of a tomorrow, it must rest in your little sons and daughters. If they perish, America shall have perished indeed. If through your sacrifice they survive, then in some tomorrow we cannot foresee, America will live again and democracy, liberty, freedom shall reconquer the green and pleasant fields that tonight lie devastated."

The Voice stops, and the mothers go out of the station, faster and faster, and there are tears in their eyes but their faces are shining. . . .

Later that same night Dikar is in

a truck moving through a dark that is terrible with rolling and imminent thunder. On the driver's seat are two old people, Tom and Helen. The truck is jammed full with kids and in Dikar's arms sleeps Marilee.

They ride for a long time and come at last to a mountain. All around the mountain the rock has been quarried away so that cliffs rise to a great height, unclimbable except where a narrow ramp slants up to a clearing. Here the men who worked the quarry once lived in two long, many-windowed houses.

HELLEN teaches the girls how to cook and to sew, and Tom teaches the boys how to make bonarrers and hunt with them, how to catch fish and make fire. The old ones make a lot of rules for living on the Mountain, a lot of Musts and Must-nots, and they say that because Dikar is the oldest he shall be Boss of the Bunch. And though the Bunch do not know it, Tom has planted dynamite at the bottom of the narrow hill that slants up to the Mountain.

One day a band of Asafric soldiers approaches the Mountain, and Tom and Helen rush down to meet them. Then, when the tumult of a great explosion dies away, Dikar sees only tumbled stones down there, nothing moving. The soldiers are under the stones, and under the stones are the Old Ones.

There is no longer any way to climb the Mountain without help from above, and the Asafrics never find out the Bunch live on the Mountain.

Now the Boys have grown tall, clean-limbed and slim-hipped; and they prowl the Mountain naked save for small aprons of split twigs deftly intertwined. The Girls are clad only

in thigh-length reed skirts, their deepening breasts covered by circlets of leaves. Laughing-eyed and lovely the Girls have grown, but to Dikar the loveliest of all is brown-haired Marilee, whom he has taken as his mate.

Their life on the Mountain is a good one, and to all except Dikar the Mountain is their whole world. But Dikar wonders much about the Far Land that lies green and pleasant-seeming at the foot of the Mountain.

FINALLY Dikar goes down into the Far Land, four of the Bunch with him, and they fight and kill a small troop of Asafrics. The Boys bring back to the Mountain a man and woman of their own people. Johndawson and Marthadawson. From these Dikar learns of how the people of America are enslaved; and he learns that America's greatest need is for a leader against the oppressors.

Johndawson has brought to the Mountain a curious device called a radio with which he can listen to the talking of the Secret Net, a far-flung band of brave men who risk death and worse to keep hope alive in the hearts of the Americans. One day this radio tells how Normanfenton, who may be the leader America so terribly needs, is a prisoner of the Asafrics and on a night very soon will be brought along a road not far from the Mountain. Dikar decides to go down to where Normanfenton will pass and see if by chance the Bunch can rescue him.

Down there Dikar is captured by the Beastfolk, men and women who, having escaped the Asafrics, skulk in the wild woods around the Mountain. Hunted and starving, these have become as mindless and savage as the beasts. They are about to kill Dikar

when Marilee, who has trailed him unseen, saves him and makes friends with the Beastfolk.

The next night Dikar leads the Bunch down from the Mountain. Aided by the Beastfolk, they hide in the dark tops of trees, and from there they rain arrows on the trucks carrying Normanfenton and the Asafric soldiers who guard him. Leaping from the trees the boys savagely attack the soldiers; and Normanfenton is rescued.

By dawn the Boys are back on the Mountain, with them Normanfenton and four of the Beastfolk—Nat and Walt, Ruth and Marge; and in the woods of the Far Land they have left no traces that might give away the secret of the Mountain.

In that gray, cloudy dawn, it seems to Dikar that he hears again the Voice of long ago:

" . . . In some tomorrow we cannot foresee, America will live again, and democracy, liberty, freedom, shall reconquer the green and pleasant fields that tonight lie devastated."

CHAPTER I

BOSS OF THE MOUNTAIN

"**I**N some tomorrow we cannot foresee," Normanfenton repeated Dikar's recollection of what the Voice said that dreadful night long ago, "'America will live again . . .'"

For days Normanfenton had lain very sick on a cot in the Boys' House, but now he was better. He and Dikar had walked deep into the woods, while Dikar told how the Bunch came to the Mountain, how they'd lived here, and why he had led the Bunch down from the Mountain.

"The good Lord grant," Normanfenton whispered, "that at last that tomorrow has come."

"I—I'm not sure I really remember the Voice, or if I only dreamed it." Dikar's nearly naked body was sun-browned, his hair and curly, silken beard bright golden in the sun, his eager eyes blue as the sky. "But I am sure that if we just stay here on the Mountain, safe an happy, while those things are goin on down there, we will be doin awful wrong." He stopped talking. Normanfenton wasn't listening to him.

A strange, far-off look was in Normanfenton's deep-sunken eyes. His thin lips were moving, but Dikar could not hear the words they made. The words weren't meant for Dikar. They were meant for Someone neither he nor Normanfenton could see but Whose nearness Dikar sensed in the sun's warmth, in the birds' singing, in the earth-smell of the woods.

They had come into a level part of the woods where there was hardly any brush. The dark trees marched away from them into a dim and enormous space that was filled with a strange, almost frightening hush. The trunks of the trees rose, without branch or leaf, to the rustling roof of the forest. In places, there far above, frost had thinned and painted the leaves so that the sun, striking through, made patches of flaming color, brilliant reds and yellows and glowing purples. One of the light-beams struck full on Normanfenton.

Clumsily built as he was, there was something about him that reminded Dikar of the giant oak in the Clearing, something of the same gnarled strength, of the same enduring patience. He was naked above the waist, and his tight-drawn skin was criss-crossed with scabbed grooves where Asafric whips had cut, the marks of Asafric chains were still raw on his

bony wrists; but his great, black-bearded head sat proudly on his bony shoulders and the suffering and sadness lined deep into his face was not suffering nor sadness for himself.

It seemed to Dikar that very long ago he had seen a face like Normanfenton's on a wall—in it this same tender sadness. Words echoed inside Dikar's head: *Oh Captain, my Captain, the fearful trip—*

A scarlet bird streaked under the forest roof. A white rabbit scampered across the leaf-strewn forest floor. The words slipped from Dikar and the remembrance of that long-ago face faded away. Normanfenton stirred, turned to him.

"Yes," Normanfenton said gravely. "If we just stay here on the Mountain, safe and happy, we shall be doing something awful wrong."

"Then let's get started! Let's go down to the Far Land an start fightin to take back America."

"Softly, lad, softly." A gentle smile came to Normanfenton's lips. "That's an army they've got, son. Those blacks are the best soldiers the world has ever seen, and the best equipped. Yee Hashamoto, the Viceroy—the Boss of the whole business—is as shrewd and cunning as he is cruel, and the Yellow officers under him are no man's fools."

"But—"

"And so we must plan carefully, very carefully." Normanfenton's shoulders were stooped a little now. "I must—Do you mind, Dikar, leaving me alone for a while?"

"Sure I'll go," Dikar answered. "Sure, Normanfenton. Anyways, I ought to go see how the Boys are gettin along with the new little houses they're buildin for you and the four Beastfolk." He started away, his feet

making no noise, his bow, an arrow fitted into it, ready in his hands against the chance that he might come upon a deer.

The ground started to slant downward and the brush became thicker, so that Dikar couldn't see very far. It was cool here, where the sun never reached, and the earth-smell was blacker, the forest smells tangy with the spice of berries and of certain leaves his feet crushed—Dikar stopped still, suddenly, not a muscle moving, head canted a little, nostrils flaring.

A HEAD of him, hidden by the netted greenery of the bushes, there was sound of a big body moving. It might be a deer, but the wind was from Dikar, and a deer would have scented him and fled. A human then? But none of the Bunch would make so much noise moving through the woods.

Whatever it was, it was coming toward him. The fingers of Dikar's left hand tightened on the half-round wood of his bow. The right hand drew the shaft of the arrow back.

Close to Dikar the bushes threshed. A shadow darkened the interlaced leaves of the brush. The leaves parted.

"Oh!" A girl screamed tinily, staring at Dikar with big, frightened eyes. "You—" Not a Girl of the Bunch, but Marge, Nat's mate, only her head visible. "You were going to shoot that thing at me."

"Not your fault I didn't," Dikar said gruffly, lowering his bow. "You have no right bein here. You were told to stay in the Clearin unless one of the Bunch is with you."

"I know." She pushed through the bush into the little space where Dikar was. "But—but I had ter be alone. I just had ter."

When he'd first seen Marge, in the

cave in the Far Land where he'd been trapped, she'd been covered by dirty rags, her hair tangled and dirt-matted, her eyes dull and without hope. Now, dressed only in a skirt of long grasses and leafy breast circlets, she was white-skinned, no tired heaviness any longer in the way she moved but a slow grace. Her hair, short to her shoulders, had been washed and brushed with straw stubble till it was alive and shining, its reddish glow gathered into the single, brilliant spark of the scarlet flower she'd placed in it.

Pale and thin her face was from starving, but it was high cheek-boned, full-lipped. There were grimy streaks on it.

"You've been bawlin'," Dikar observed. "What's the matter?"

A sob swelled in the shadowy hollows of Marge's neck. "Matter?" she gulped. And then, fiercely: "Nat's the matter. That sweet husband of mine. He—he's been bangin' me around again. He kicked me. Look." She put her left foot up on a moss-covered stone beside Dikar, parted the reeds of her skirt with quick, angry fingers. "Look at this."

Dikar bent to see, and her arm lay warm against his chest. On the pale round of her thigh, high up, there was a dark blue mark.

"Kicked me there." Marge's voice was low, husky. "An' why? Just because I was sayin' how wonnerful I think you are."

Her head twisted to look up into Dikar's face, very near, and her lips were a little parted and very red, and her eyes were like deep, green-flecked pools. "That's no lie, Dikar. I do think you're wonnerful." She swayed a little and was leaning against him, her skin hot against his. "I could go for you in a big way, honey."

"Nat shouldn't have kicked you," Dikar said gravely. "I'll have to tell him that's a Must-not of the Old—" He whirled at a sudden crash of the bushes behind him.

It was Nat, his big chest matted with black hair, his little eyes red. "I figured you right, you damn tramp," he rumbled, deep in his throat. "You and your mealy-mouthed boy friend. Sneakin' off—"

"Nat!" Dikar snapped, hearing Marge moan with fright from where she'd fallen when he turned. "I don't understand what you're sayin, but I don't like the way you're sayin it." The cords in his neck were tight. "Marge didn't sneak anywhere. She came to the woods to be alone an—"

"Alone!" Nat laughed shortly, but there wasn't any fun in his laugh. "Alone with you, you mean."

"That's silly." Dikar wanted to punch the black-stubbed face that leered at him. "She didn't know where I was and even if she did, why should she want to find me?" He could not punch Nat here. It was a Must that any fighting should be done in the Clearing, before the whole Bunch and according to the Rules. "We met accidental."

"You're a liar," Nat said flatly.

THAT was a Fighting Word and if any Boy of the Bunch had said it to him Dikar would have had to dare him to a fight before the Bunch. But Nat was a stranger on the Mountain. Maybe he didn't know he had said a Fighting Word.

"Marge me met accidental," Dikar explained patiently, "an' she was showin me the mark you made, kickin her. We do not do that on the Mountain, Nat. We do not hit a Girl.

"What the rule is in the Far Land I

do not know, but here on the Mountain you will obey our Rules. You will not kick Marge again. You will not hit her. I tell you not as Dikar but as Boss—”

“Boss, hell!” Nat snarled. “You’re not my Boss, mister, and what’s more—”

“I am Boss of all who live on the Mountain.” It was hard to talk low and calm, but Dikar made himself. “As long as you live on the Mountain I’m Boss of you an of Marge—”

“An’ you can take her any time you’ve a mind to, huh?” Nat grunted. “If you think you can put that over on me, mister, you’ve got another guess comin’.” His hands were knotted into fists at his sides and the muscles in his arms were bulging. “You yellow-bellied, lyin’, sneakin’ wife-stealer, if you didn’t have them arrows in your hands I’d—”

“Try it!” Dikar threw bows and arrows from him. “Try it, I dare an double-dare you.” All of a sudden he’d forgotten that he was Boss, forgotten the Rules, in his blinding rage. “Come on and see whether you can,” he said, thick-tongued, his fists up to meet Nat’s lunge.

“I’ve got them, Dikar!” a clear voice called. “I’ve found the healin leaves for Marge’s hurt.” A slender, lithe Girl was between them, rounded limbs warm brown, brown hair rippling in an ankle-long mantle about her, eyes gray and cool.

“See.” She held out a bundle of dark green leaves. “They’re hard to find this time of the year an I had to look far, after you told me to get them.” Marilee turned to Nat. “You steep them in hot water, Nat,” she said, “and then you bathe the place with the water and all the soreness will go out.”

The dark Beastman stared at her. “Yeah. Yeah, I know. That’s witch-

hazel.” He took the leaves from Marilee, saying, “Thanks.” Then he was saying to Dikar, “Gees, guy! Why didn’t you tell me your wife was here too?”

“But I didn’t—”

“You ought to hurry,” Marilee interrupted Dikar. “The quicker you bathe the hurt, the better. Go on, Marge. Go with Nat and he’ll take care of you.”

Marge looked kind of funny as Nat helped her get up. She looked kind of angry. But Dikar forgot all about her when the bushes came together behind the other two and only Marilee was left here with him.

He put his arm around Marilee, drew her close to him. “How did you know to bring the healin leaves?” he asked. His heart was pounding with her nearness to him.

“I was in the top of that tree, right over there, sunnin myself, when you met Marge.” Marilee shivered a little. “Oh Dikar! I’m afraid for you.”

He laughed. “Silly. Nat’s no one to be afraid of. I can handle—”

“Not Nat, Dikar. It isn’t Nat I’m afraid of for you.”

Dikar’s brows wrinkled. “Not Nat. Who then, Marilee?”

“Marge,” Marilee whispered.

“Marge! Why should I be afraid of Marge? She’s only a Girl.”

Marilee kissed him for answer, and then was laughing, and no matter how much Dikar teased she only laughed the more.

CHAPTER II

ARMY WITH BANNERS

“COME in,” Normanfenton’s slow, tired voice said the next morning. “Come on in, Dikar. You’ve kept us waiting long enough.”

Dikar had stopped in the doorway of the little house the Boys had built for John- and Marthadawson, waiting till the outdoors brightness should die out of his eyes and let him see inside.

All he could make out, as yet, was four shadowy shapes, and, to one side, a bunch of little yellow lights. The yellow lights were the bulbs of the radio Johndawson had brought from the Far Land. Above the shelf on which were the bulbs and the other strange parts of the radio, Dikar knew there was a big round hole in a black wall, and from this there came a flickering whistle like the trill of a certain brown-feathered bird that nests in the Mountain's woods.

"I'm sorry," he said, stepping inside. "I had to settle which of the Boys should go huntin today an which had to stay in the Clearin an put up the racks for the Girls to dry the skins on."

He could see them now, Johndawson sitting near the radio on a stool made from a half-log, the others around a table. "Then Bessalton, Boss of the Girls, had a talk with me about how much more berries an fruits an meat will have to be fixed up for this winter than we've always done, an— Well, there were a couple other things I had to take care of."

"This being Boss seems to keep you very busy." Johndawson smiled. He was tall as Normanfenton, but his hair was all gray and he had no beard. "I wonder how the Eunch would get along if anything ever happened to you."

"Oh, they'd get along all right," Dikar answered. "Someone else would be chosen Boss, that's all. Most likely he'd be a better Boss than I've been."

"You're very modest, old man," Walt said. He had changed almost as much as Marge since Dikar first saw

him in the Beastfolk's cave. He was still little and thin and pale, but he was very clean now. Like Johndawson, he'd scraped off the matted beard he'd had and you could see that he wasn't much older than Dikar himself. He and his wife Ruth were a lot different than Nat and Marge; Dikar liked them a lot better. "Well, pull up a stool and join our Council of War."

A big piece of grayish-white birch bark was spread on the table, its curling corners held down by little stones. On the bark Walt had drawn with a burned stick a kind of picture of the Mountain and the Far Land around it. Not really a picture, because you couldn't know what all the lines and queer marks meant unless you were told. Walt called it a map.

"I know what a Council is, of course," Dikar said, sitting down between Normanfenton and Nat, "but what is war?"

"Fighting," Normanfenton replied. "Fighting and killing, not one man against another but whole nations. All right-thinking men hate it, Dikar, but sometimes they have to take part in it to keep other and worse things from happening to them and their dear ones, or to free themselves of these worse things."

Dikar nodded. "That's what we're going to do against the Asafrics. War."

"Right," Walt said. The whistle from the radio broke off, started again. Johndawson hunched up, listening to it. "Righter than rain." Walt's face was all tight-lined, but it looked as if there were a light inside it, shining through. "At last we're planning to war against them, instead of snapping at their heels and then cringing beneath their lashes."

"We've decided one thing, Dikar,"

Normanfenton explained, "while we were waiting for you. All through this state forest," his bony forefinger pointed to tiny bunches of wriggy lines on the map that meant the thick woods surrounding the Mountain, "men are hiding."

"Like Nat and Walt were," Dikar said, nodding, "when Marilee and I found them."

"Exactly. Give them leadership, and they'd make a nucleus for the force that we must build if we're to accomplish anything more than the sporadic raids such as your Bunch carried out in rescuing me. We're going to try and get them together."

"Swell!" Dikar exclaimed. "I'll go down there tonight an'—"

"The hell you are," Nat snarled. "They'd eat you up before you had a chance to open your mouth. That's my job. Soon as it's dark, I—" A choked sound from Johndawson cut him off.

EVERYONE twisted around. The radio's whistle stopped. Johndawson stared at the round place out of which the whistle had been coming, his face taut.

The sudden quiet throbbed in Dikar's ears. "What have you heard, John?" Normanfenton asked, low-toned. "Tell us."

Johndawson's gray lips moved but made no sound. Then they moved again and his voice was flat, queerly frightening.

"That was National Prime," he said. "The chief of the Secret Net. He was speaking directly to all stations of the Net. He was telling them—" His wrinkled hands closed hard over the edge of the radio shelf. "He was repeating to them a proclamation the Viceroy seems to have made yesterday."

"Yee Hashamoto's always issuing proclamations," Walt grunted.

"Not like this one." It seemed to Dikar that Johndawson didn't want to tell them about it, was using all his strength to make himself do it. "It starts off with a warning that the Asafrican Confederation's Supreme Council is displeased with the state of things in the North American Province. The sporadic outbursts of rebellion, the constant sabotage of railroads and highways, in factories and mines and oil fields, have cut our production too far to be further tolerated—"

"And so they're lengthening the hours of enforced labor still more," Walt put in. "Probably abolishing all days of rest. I heard rumors—"

"No." Johndawson shook his head. "No, Walt. Hashamoto is demanding that every American take an oath of allegiance to the Confederation, that we vow implicit obedience to its edicts and renounce all acts of rebellion."

"So he demands it," Nat growled. "So what? He's been tryin' ter put that over for years."

"We're given a week to decide whether we'll take the oath or not," Johndawson kept on, as if he hadn't heard Nat. "If we do, unanimously, an amnesty will be granted to all previous rebels. Further, the Asafricans will permit us to institute a system of self-government, nominally autonomous but strictly supervised by the Confederation and subservient to its edicts."

"Complete and abject surrender," Normanfenton exclaimed, "dooming America to be a vassal state, an enslaved colony, forever. Our people will never consent."

"If we do not"—Johndawson seemed anxious now to finish—"in a vote to be taken one week from today, or if we do and thereafter a single in-

cident of rebellion or sabotage occurs, a new policy of dealing with us will be instituted.

"First: All persons now held in concentration camps and prisons will be put to death. Second: No Americans will be permitted to live in individual homes. Families will be broken up. Men will be herded in one set of barracks, women and infants in a second, children between the ages of two and twelve in a third—"

"Great God above!" Walt groaned.

"Any community where this or any other Asafric order is resisted," Johndawson continued, with great effort, "even by one person, will be bombed mercilessly until every house in it, every living being, has been destroyed. But that's not all."

"Not all! Isn't it enough?"

"Enough, Norman?" The gray-haired man's mouth twisted. "No matter what they do to us, if we still have refused to accept the status of slaves, they haven't yet accomplished the efficient exploitation of our country for the benefit of their millions, have they?"

"No." A sudden horror leaped into Normanfenton's eyes. "How?" he cried sharply. "How do they mean to do that, John?" But Dikar knew he'd already guessed the answer.

"**H**OW?" Johndawson gave it. "Shipload by shipload, they will bring over their own hordes to take possession of America. District by district they will populate our cities and towns and countryside with their black- and yellow-skinned masses. District by district they will empty America of Americans, carry our men and women and children to the starved deserts and flood-drowned plains of Asia, to the fever-infested, insect-rid-

den jungles of Africa, to the earthquake-racked islands of the Pacific."

"So that's the choice they've given the people of America," Normanfenton whispered. "Eternal slavery or exile . . ."

"They'll fight," Nat broke in hoarsely. "Cripes, Americans is different from them cattle over there. They'll never give in. They'll fight till they're all killed out."

"We'll know soon," Johndawson said, heavily, "whether they will or not. Hashamoto gave a month for them to answer him, but—" All of a sudden the radio was whistling again.

"Hush," Johndawson hissed. He was tensed, listening.

The rest were listening too, though no more than Dikar did they understand what they listened to. A rustle of leaves came in through the windows. Girls were singing at their work in the clearing. Boys, bringing in an arrow-slain deer, called happily to one another. The windows were bright with leaf-flecked sunshine. But in here was only shadow and pale faces, and the unending thin pipe of the radio.

Johndawson started translating out loud what the radio was saying. "My friends of the Secret Net—National Prime—for years we've lived in constant, imminent danger of death. For years we have endured such hardships as men will willingly endure only for the sake of their God or of a country they love only next to their God. Each morning for years we have heard the roll of our dead.

"'Because they died, my friends, and because we lived with death, the spirit of liberty did not die in America. Because of our work, the Asafrics have enslaved only the bodies of our people, not their souls. All the fearful years we have kept alive in our op-

pressed countrymen the desire and the will to fight for freedom.

"'And so, fellows of the Secret Net, when we heard this ultimatum of the Asafrics we knew that on us had been laid in great part the burden of determining how the ultimatum shall be answered. Our duty, if there is no longer any hope of release, is to urge our countrymen to choose the lesser of the two evils with which we are confronted.

"'Terrible as it would be to live forever as slaves, would it not be better so to live in this land where we were born than to be torn from it and carried off to die in exile. This question a little while ago I put to you, and now you have all flashed your votes to me, and here is the result.'"

THE flickering whistle stopped. Breath hissed from between someone's teeth. Dikar's heart was pounding against his ribs and his palms were wet with cold sweat.

The whistle started again—and stopped. Johndawson said nothing.

"Spill it," Nat grunted hoarsely.

The voice in the room wasn't Johndawson's. "Three hundred and fifty-seven voted. All but two said—surrender." Johndawson's hand made a curious sort of movement, as if he were pushing something away from him.

Walt laughed. "They'll do as the Secret Net says." His laugh made Dikar feel cold all over. "That's the end, gentlemen," Walt said, "of our Council of War."

"Well," Nat said, shrugging, "I guess we're pretty lucky we're here on the Mountain. Seein' how the kids been safe here so long, I guess we can get away with it too."

Normanfenton wasn't moving, and

wasn't saying anything. He no longer reminded Dikar of the great oak in the Clearing. He was more like one up near the top of the Mountain, from which lightning had stripped the bark and the leaves so that its wood was all gray, the life all gone out of it.

The lump in Dikar's throat, that was keeping him from talking, broke. "Look," he said. "Look, Johndawson. Didn't they say they're givin' up because there's no hope, no more use hopin'?"

Johndawson nodded wordlessly.

"But—" Maybe he was wrong. He must be wrong. These men who knew so much about so many things he couldn't even understand—they must be right. "Oh, never mind."

"Say it, Dikar." Normanfenton was looking at him a queer way. "Say it."

"I—I was just wonderin. If there was hope . . . If we could give em some reason to hope—"

"If we give them a reason to hope!" Normanfenton whispered. All of a sudden he jumped to his feet, his eyes shining, his face shining. "You're right. You're all-fired right, Dikar!"

He swung around to Johndawson and his long arm was pointing to the radio and his voice was loud and clear again. "Send it out, John. Send it out all over the Net, all over America. Tell them that an army is forming to battle the Asafrics, an army with banners.

"Tell them—tell them that the first blow will be struck tomorrow. Tomorrow night. Say that if they listen tomorrow they will hear the sound of the army marching, the sound of Freedom's host, marching—"

Johndawson grabbed the round black handle of a little orange-red bar that was hinged to the radio shelf. He jerked it up and down, fast. Blue sparks crackled around the bar, sparks

of blue light that didn't seem as bright as the light in Johndawson's face.

"An army with banners," Walt said softly.

CHAPTER III

SEEK THE FAR LAND

"**B**UT Dikar," Marilee exclaimed. "What can you do by tomorrow night big enough so that hearin of it, the people of the Far Land will get back the hope they've lost?"

All day Dikar had stayed with the others in Johndawson's house, talking and planning and so he hadn't till now had a chance to tell her about it all. "It's got to be awful big," she went on, "bigger even than takin Normanfenton away from the Asafrics. It's got to be something only an army could do, an we few are no army."

Right after supper Dikar had asked Bessalton to excuse Marilee from cleaning up and the dishwashing, and they'd come here to their own little house in the woods beyond the Eating Place.

"No, we're no army," Dikar murmured, lying close by Marilee on their bed of pine branches while he watched the grayness of just-before-night creep silently in through the open doorway. "But we plan to do what would be a big thing for even an army."

"What?" Marilee's head rolled on his arm that pillowed it, and her breath was warm on Dikar's cheek, and the smell of her breath was sweeter than the smell of the drying pine-needles. "What do you plan?"

"I love you, Marilee," Dikar said dreamily. "More an more every day. I love you."

"Dikar!" Her hands pushed against his side, hard, pushed her up to a sitting position. Her eyes flashed angrily;

her mouth quivered between anger and laughter. "If you don't stop teasin an answer me, I'll—I'll—"

"You'll what?" Dikar demanded, sitting up too. "What will you do, Marilee?"

"I'll stop lovin you."

"No." He smiled, putting his great hands on her warm arms and holding her so. "That you can't do. You can't ever stop lovin me or I you as long as the streams run down the Mountain an the trees reach upward to the sun. It is because they are what they are that streams run down an trees reach upward an it is because we are what we are that we love each other, my Marilee."

Her eyes filled with tears, and then they were big and frightened. "Why do you say that?" she cried. "Dikar! Why do you look at me like—like you're goin away tonight an never coming back, an are afraid you'll forget what I look like?"

"Silly." He smiled, but he kept on looking at her the same way. "I *am* goin some somewhere tonight where you cannot go with me, but I'll be back in the mornin."

"You're goin away," Marilee whispered. "You're goin down into the Far Land, Dikar."

"Yes," he answered, low-toned. "I'm goin down into the Far Land tonight an you must not follow me like you did that night we first met the Beast-folk. Do you understand? You must promise me, cross your heart, that you will not follow me. I must think only of what I've got to do an not worry that you're trailin me. Promise me that, right now."

"If you'll tell me what it is you go to do. It's somethin about your plans for tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Yes. Look here, Marilee. You

know how, when we have snowball fights in winter, one side builds a fort with snow an the other side tries to capture the fort?"

"Of course I do."

"Well, there's a place called Westpoint not far away from here on the river Johndawson's told us about, an the Asafrics have made that place into a fort big almost as half this Mountain. It's there the soldiers live who rule all this part of the Far Land around here.

"They keep lots of guns there, little guns like the soldiers on the trucks had an guns big as trees, like those that made the thunder I remember from the long-ago Time of Fear before we came here to the Mountain. It's a very strong fort, Marilee, so strong that only an army could capture it, but tomorrow night we're goin to try an capture it."

"**WE'RE** goin to—!" Marilee gasped. "But Dikar! Even in our snowball fights we always pick lots less Boys an Girls for the side that's in the fort because the fort makes that side so much stronger. There at Westpoint all the hundreds an hundreds of Asafrics are in the fort an we'll be just a few tryin to capture it. Just the Bunch."

"Not just the Bunch, honey. Nat's goin down to the woods below the Mountain to try an get the help of the Beastfolk who're hidin there, an we're pretty sure we can get em to help us."

"But even then we'll be awful few, an we'll have only bonarrers an knives against their guns."

"We have guns too. The eight long guns Johndawson calls rifles an the nine little ones he calls revolvers that we brought from the fight down at his house in the Far Land. They tell me

there are a lot of old soldiers among the Beastfolk who'll know how to use them."

"Eight rifles an nine revolvers! It's crazy, Dikar! It can't be done."

Dikar's fingers tightened on Marilee's arms, and in his face the lines tightened. "It's crazy and it can't be done, but it's *got* to be done. The only way we have even a little chance of doin it is by pullin some stunt like the one we pulled to rescue Normanfenton. To do that we've got to find out all about Westpoint, an that I can do best of all. That's why I'm goin down to the Far Land tonight."

"But if the Asafrics catch you—"

"They won't," Dikar said, hard toned. "Look, honey." He was, getting to his feet and pulling Marilee up with him. "We've argued like this all day, just the five of us. If more knew about it we'd argue longer an do nothin. That's why we're callin no Council of the Bunch but keepin it secret from em till the last minute, an that's why I'm askin you just to give me your promise not to trail me down in the Far Land."

"I promise, D'kar," Marilee said. Then her arms were around him, holding him tight to her, and her lips were on his lips, burnin'g.

And then she was whirling away from him, was plucking his sharp hunting knife from where it hung.

"Marilee!" Dikar cried. "Don't!" But he saw now that she'd snatched from the wall his bow and quiver of arrows too and was holding the weapons out to him.

"How can I keep you?" she said, deep-throated. "Go fast an safe, an come back fast an safe to me."

As Dikar went out into the darkening woods, there was a great gladness in his heart that he had Marilee for his mate.

THE Mountain loomed above him on his right, a vast and rustling blackness. Girls' laughter, Boys' happy shouts, came from his left where the Bunch played games by the light of the great flames on the Fire Stone at the end of the Clearing.

A moment or two later Dikar caught the smell of newly cut wood. By the wavering, leaf-shadowed firelight, he saw he'd come abreast of the little house just built for Nat and Marge. Maybe Marge wasn't letting Nat go. Dikar decided to make sure, veered toward their house. A curtain of deer-skin hung over the doorway.

Dikar called, low-toned, "Anybody inside?"

He heard someone moving inside and then, just the other side of the curtain, a whisper, "Who is it?"

"Dikar. Has Nat gone?"

"Sure." The curtain pulled aside and dim firelight stroked Marge's white form. "Sure he's gone," she whispered. "Come on in."

"No," Dikar answered. "I—I have to—"

"Scared?" Her hand caught his arm. "You mustn't get cold feet now, after bein' smart enough ter send him away?" Her eyes had a hungry look in them and her low voice was queerly husky. "You mustn't be scared of me." Her lips were half-parted and moist.

The clinging touch of her hand made Dikar feel creepy. He reached his own free hand across to it, pulled it loose. "Please, Marge," he said. "I've got somethin' important to do. I haven't got time—"

"You haven't!" She jerked her hand away. "You damned pup." A word Dikar didn't know spat from her suddenly white lips. "So I'm not good enough for you, huh?"

"Why Marge," Dikar said, puzzled.

"You're no different to me than any of the other Girls. I—"

"Damn you!" she shrieked and her hand slapped stinging across his cheek. It started to slap again but Dikar caught its wrist, twisted it just enough to make her arm so stiff as to hold her away from him.

"I don't know what's makin you act like this," he said, tight-mouthed, "and I haven't got time to find out. I've got somethin' important to do, an—"

"Important!" she panted, the hunger in her eyes turned to hate. "Go an' do it, then, but don't come crawlin' back ter me when you're done. Beat it, d'you hear. On your way." She jerked loose and the skin curtain dropped.

Dikar stared at it, rubbing the slapped place on his cheek. All of a sudden the whole thing struck him as very funny and he laughed aloud. Then he turned and hurried off to where he'd told Normanfenton and Johndawson to meet him, a little clear space near the latter's house.

THEIR faces, just visible in the starlight, were drawn and anxious. "We've been talking it over, Dikar," Normanfenton said. "We're wondering whether we're right in letting you go down there alone. Do you understand what the Asafries will do to you if they catch you?"

"I understand it won't be anythin' nice," Dikar answered, quietly, "an I don't want any more talk about whether I'm to go or not. You said you would show me how to tell my way by the stars an that's all I want to hear."

"All right, son," Normanfenton said. "If you're bound and determined. You remember we showed you on the map that West Point lies a little north-east of where you'll be when you've climbed down the vine-cable?"

"That's right."

"Now then, look up at the sky, the way I'm pointing." Dikar did so, and Normanfenton went on to show him how the stars made certain pictures in the sky, how he could find one star that was called the North Star, and how by that star he could always tell which way to go.

Dikar listened hard, so hard that when he heard the threshing of someone moving around in the bushes he didn't even wonder who it might be.

Then Normanfenton had finished and Dikar was saying goodbye to him and to Johndawson, and he was alone again, going down toward the edge of the Drop and the place where he would climb down to the Far Land.

It was black dark here, but he knew by the slant of the ground how to reach the place where a streamlet leaped far out over the edge of the Drop and fell to the rocks below, hiding behind its fall the rope of vines by which he must climb down to the Far Land.

The golden sparkle of the stars broke through the thinning end of the forest, and then Dikar was out of the woods. The stream was at his feet. He could see the thick, twisted rope of vines that slanted down from the tree where its upper end was fastened, to vanish into the waters just where they leaped out over the Drop.

Bending to take hold of the rope, Dikar felt the skin at the back of his neck prickle. He sniffed. There was a smell of the breeze that ought not to be here, the smell of a human. Muscles along his jaw-ridge knotted. One of the newcomers to the Mountain must have been here at the edge of the Drop not long ago. He must find out which one, when he got back tomorrow, and order punishment for him.

Thinking this, Dikar lowered his

legs over the lip of the cliff, caught them about the rope and slid down fast through the smother of water, stopped his slide as soon as he could get breath again, started going down more slowly, hands and legs working together in smooth rhythm.

The rope swung back and forth with his weight. It twisted around so that Dikar saw one minute the pale, rough face of the cliff, the next the foaming waters streaking down, to smash themselves on the tumbled, giant rocks below. Dikar wanted to look down at those rocks, but knew he must not. They were terribly far below, and between him and them was only this thin rope of vines. Even the thought of the awful emptiness beneath him dried his throat with terror.

Down he climbed, slowly, the rope swinging more and more as he went down so that now at the end of each swing Dikar could look up along the cliff and see its top, and the star-dusted black of the sky.

Something blotched the stars, just beside where the stream foamed white over the cliff-edge. Dikar swung under the veiling waterfall, swung out past it. It was a girl peering down, something flashing in her hand. As he swung back, Dikar carried memory of her with him. She was short-haired. She was Marge!

He swung to where he could see her again. She was bending down. The thing she held was a knife. It was reaching down into the seething water—reaching for the rope.

"Don't!" Dikar yelled. "Don't!"

She kept on reaching.

Her voice came screeching thinly down to him. "Laugh at me, will you? Laugh now, why don't you?" Dikar, swinging back under the water, couldn't see her, but he could feel a quiver in

the rope, a quiver that told him she was cutting it.

He looked down. The stones were still dreadfully far below.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEVIL WEARS GREEN

IT FLASHED through Dikar's mind, too late, that it had been Marge in the bushes while he was talking to Normanfenton, that she'd heard enough to learn that he planned to climb down here, had hurried here while they talked of the stars and been hiding in the woods when he got there. He'd heard her, even smelled her, but hadn't paid attention to it because he could not dream that anyone on the Mountain would want to hurt him.

There was no way he could save himself. Even if he could swing himself to the face of the cliff before the rope was cut through, there was no handhold there.

"Marge!" he yelled up. "Wait, Marge—" He swung out from under the waterfall yelling, "Don't cut it, Marge," and saw that she wasn't cutting, that she'd lifted and swung around to the woods.

Another Girl leaped into view, clutched at Marge's knife-hand. A Girl whose long hair swirled about her. Marilee!

Dikar started climbing up again, his haste tearing his muscles, tearing his breath from him. He swung out from under the water's veil. Looking agonizedly upward, he saw the Girls locked together on the very edge of the cliff, their bodies straining, their feet slipping in the water. He swung back, and this time did not swing out on the other side far enough to see up.

Dikar couldn't see what was happening up there. He couldn't see what was

happening to Marilee. He could only climb, frantically, breath sobbing from him.

A scream cut through the roar of the outleaping waters. Down through the torrent a dark something fell. It shot past Dikar, went spinning on down, a screaming Girl who plunged into the brawling spray of pale waters on the rocks so far below.

She had whirled down past him too fast for Dikar to see who she was. Marge—or Marilee.

For an endless, sickening moment the strength was out of Dikar's hands and legs. His grip on the rope was loosening. Then he had his strength back and was fairly hurling himself up the shaking rope, up into the smother and batter of the waterfall, and then he was kneeling solid rock under rushing water, was heaving erect.

Half-blinded, he saw the form before him only hazily, but he could make out an upraised arm, the flash of starlight on polished steel. His hand dashed the blinding wetness from his eyes.

"Marilee!" Her name burst from his chest in a great shout of thankfulness. He was crushing her quivering body to him, sobbing out his relief and his joy into the fragrant smother of her hair. "Oh, Marilee."

"I didn't break my promise," he heard a small voice say. "I really didn't, Dikar. I promised not to trail you down into the Far Land, but you said nothin about what I should do on the Mountain. I wanted at least to know that you climbed down safely so I trailed you down to here, stayin far back behind you so you wouldn't know I was doin it. If I hadn't—" She broke off. Dikar stopped her shuddering with the tight hold of his arms and his kiss on her cold lips.

"No." Her hands on his chest pushed her free of his hold. "Don't kiss me." Her eyes were big in the pale oval of her face, big and staring. "How can you kiss me, Dikar, when I've just killed a Girl?"

"Listen," Dikar said. "The Old Ones taught us that killin is wrong, but the Old Ones themselves killed the Asafric soldiers to save the Bunch, an that wasn't wrong. What you just did isn't wrong, because you had to do it to save me. You had to kill Marge to save me," he repeated, "an that wasn't wrong."

"Poor Marge," Marilee whispered. "Poor, poor Marge." She was staring at the edge of the Drop over which she'd seen Marge fall.

"How did you know yesterday to be afraid of her for me?" Dikar asked. "How did you know that she would try to kill me?"

Marilee's eyes came back to him. "I didn't think she'd try to kill you, but I knew she'd hurt you some way, you bein what you are an she what she was."

"What she was? I don't understand."

MARGE was sick, Dikar. Not in her body but in her mind. Ruth told me that Marge an Nat once had two little children, a boy an a girl. One night Marge came home from somewhere they call church meetin, an found that the Asafrics had taken Nat away because he'd been doin' somethin for the Secret Net that he hadn't told her about. The Asafrics had burned down their house, an in what was left of the House Marge found her children dead.

"Nat escaped from the Asafrics an sent for Marge to come to him where he was hidin in the woods. She went

to him, but she blamed him for what had happened to her children an hated him, Ruth said. To get even with him Marge started bein in love with every man she saw an if they wouldn't be in love with her she hated them too an did everything she could to hurt them.

"Nat had an awful time with Marge, Dikar, but he stood for it because she was his wife an he loved her."

"Loved her, Marilee? A queer way he showed his love for her, bangin her around."

"Nat is a rough man, an he isn't very smart. He thought that was the way to cure her. . . . I—I don't know how I can tell Nat—"

"You mustn't!" Dikar said quickly. "He must never know how she died, an the Bunch must never know, or this thing will always be between him an the Bunch. We'll just let everybody think she wandered off into the woods an fell over the edge of the Drop. Don't you see that's best, Marilee, for Nat? An for you?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, Dikar. I see."

Dikar hated to leave Marilee with that look of pain on her face, but every moment he stayed here would make leaving her even worse. Swiftly he bent and got his hands on the rope and saw that Marge's knife had barely scratched it; he started down again, climbing into the black dark of the Far Land.

Down in the Far Land the woods were very like the woods of the Mountain, the sounds and the smells of them the same; but there was a feel of fear in these woods and there was a strangeness that made Dikar think of the dreams he sometimes had in which endlessly he ran from a blind and voiceless something that pursued him.

So that he might watch the stars and know his direction by them, Dikar traveled not on the ground but in the top of the forest, running along boughs, swinging from one treetop to another by his long arms. All the Bunch could go as fast this way as on the ground, and faster.

A very long time Dikar went like this through the night. He could not go straight because he had to go around mountains higher than the Mountain from which he came, and he had to wade or to swim across streams, but always he guided himself by the North Star.

Once the Beastfolk smell came very strong to Dikar and, startled, he made a wide curve to get past it. Once, high in a tree, his reaching hand found a nest, and there was a sudden furious beat of wings about his head, so that he missed his hold and fell, and barely caught the tree's lowermost bough in time to save himself dropping five times his own height to hard ground.

All of a sudden Dikar came to the edge of the woods.

He was halfway up the side of a mountain. Right below the tree bough on which he lay, a wide road glimmered pale in the starlight, and beyond the road was a drop.

Dikar looked down that drop, and gasped. Down there was water! Not a stream like those on the Mountain, but water wider than the Mountain is high. It was black as the sky, and it had no ending.

"When you come to the River," Normanfenton had said, "you'll be very close to Westpoin."

This was the River.

"Go North along the River," Normanfenton had told him. Dikar started going along the edge of the woods, a little in from the road. He moved

more slowly now, took more care not to make any sound, because now he was near Wespoint and the Asafrics would be watching to see that no one was too near.

PRETTY soon he came to the end of the woods and had to go down. The mountainside slanted steeply down to the road and the bushes were not very high. Then there were no bushes and the steep ground was all queer flat stones that slid on each other when Dikar tried to walk on them.

He grabbed backward for the last bush and held on to it while he looked around for an easier way to go. Below him was the road, where he would be seen from a long distance. The steep slant above Dikar was covered with the little, sliding rocks. Ahead was a shoulder of the mountain, around which the road curved.

Sound was coming from beyond that curve, a humming kind of thunder, low down and rushing toward him. Dikar had heard that rushing sound not long before, waiting in the treetop for the rescue of Normanfenton. It wasn't thunder. It was the sound of a truck.

It was very loud now, just around the mountain's shoulder. There was sudden light on the road. Dikar pulled on the bush to drag himself back behind it. The bush came to him instead, and the stones were sliding out from under him, and he was slipping down to the road with a terrible clatter of stones around him.

The light hit him, blinded him. He couldn't get his feet under him. Something screeched crazily, right over him, and there were shouts all about him. Dikar stopped sliding, jumped up.

"Stand still or I shoot!" a high, thin voice yelled. Dikar blinked into light

coming from two great round things. The light was blotted by the figure of a man, coming toward him. The man was black against the light, and Dikar could make out that he was shorter than any of the Boys of the Bunch and that in his hand he was holding one of the little guns called revolvers.

Dikar stood very still, because he knew what the revolver could do to him.

The man stopped in front of Dikar. He had a queer, frightening smell. His voice was thin and high-pitched like a Girl's and it was very frightening too. "What are you doing here?" he demanded. "How did you get through our pickets?"

Dikar was too scared to say anything in answer.

"Sullen, are you?" The man got taut all of a sudden, as if he'd just made out something surprising about Dikar. "So! You are almost naked—armed only with bow and arrows and a knife. The tale Captain Senshi of the ambushed convoy told was true, then. It is too bad he's already been executed. But Colonel Wangsing will be interested—very interested." The man chuckled; then he was yelling, "Bomo! Gullah!" and other words Dikar couldn't understand.

Two other men came running from behind the light, very big, their smell different from the first one's, stronger and even more frightening. One of them snatched away Dikar's bow and quiver of arrows and plucked his knife out of his apron cord. The other grabbed Dikar's arms from behind, pulled them together in back of him. Dikar felt something cold snap around his wrists, and the man let go. Dikar tried to pull his wrists apart. The cold thing bit into them, held them together.

"Yess," the first Asafric hissed.

"The commander will be very interested in knowing that a band of naked savages do roam these woods. He will want to know where they are hiding—"

Dikar was glad now that he hadn't been able to talk. Maybe he could fool the Asafrics into thinking he couldn't talk; that way he could get out of being made to tell about the Mountain.

"Bomo—" Once more the Asafric made sounds that seemed like words but were no words Dikar had ever heard before.

The two others took hold of his arms, pushed him toward where the light came from. The light wasn't in his eyes any more and he could see that the short man, who must be the boss, was yellow-faced, flat nosed, his eyes narrow and slanted, his clothes green.

Bomo and Gullah wore green clothes too, but they were blacks. Their faces were shiny, their lips thick and purplish, their eyes small and red and fierce.

The truck to which they pushed Dikar was much smaller than the ones that had been filled with soldiers guarding Normanfenton. Its sides were very high and painted green, and sticking up out of its middle was a bigger gun than any Dikar had seen yet. A third black sat in front of the gun. The yellow Asafric got into the truck and sat down alongside of this one. The two other blacks opened a door in the side of the truck behind the gun and made Dikar get in. They followed and sat down one on each side of him. Their boss said something, and the truck made a terrible noise and was suddenly alive and moving.

A scream tore at Dikar's throat, but it made no more than a rasping sound. He was scared. He was more scared by the truck than he had been when he

saw Marge cutting the rope above him, or when he saw the Asafric coming at him with the revolver in his hand.

CHAPTER V

WALLS OF WEST POINT

ONE of the Asafrics jabbered something and the other laughed. They weren't afraid of the truck, Dikar told himself. They knew it couldn't hurt them. If it wouldn't hurt them it wouldn't hurt him. He was still cold, his skin was still wet with the sweat of that moment of terror, but he was no longer too scared to know that the truck was turning around in the road, was laying its lights on the stony mountain shoulder from behind which it had come.

It roared around the shoulder—Dikar's mouth dropped wide open and something that was not fear caught at his throat.

Far ahead a hill loomed against the gold-sprinkled sky and out of the hill grew a house, high and straight-outlined and grim but somehow strong, somehow beautiful.

Gazing wide-eyed at this, Dikar realized that this was a thing Americans had built. Things like that I too can learn to build, he thought, and so can the Boys of the Bunch. Then he remembered that though the house had been built by Americans, the Asafrics had it now. He remembered that it was the fort called Westpoint. Its beautiful strength was strength against America.

The truck ran faster than a frightened deer, toward the fort. The road curved, and curved again, and into the truck's lights there leaped pale shapes like huge half balls. Sticking out of these shapes Dikar saw guns like this one in the truck.

The great, gray house was high and dark over the truck. The truck stopped. Black Asafrics, holding rifles, sprang out of the shadows, huddled around it. A yellow-faced Asafric without a rifle appeared. He started talking to the yellow-faced one in the truck.

Officers, Dikar thought suddenly, remembering that Normanfenton had told him the bosses of soldiers were called that. The yellow-faced men were the Asafric's officers.

The two officers talked in words Dikar didn't understand. The soldiers, eyes little and red and fierce in their shiny black faces, peered at Dikar as if they'd never seen anything quite like him before. The new officer went into the house. The first one got out of the truck, stood by it, smiling to himself as if he'd done something smart.

The other one came out again, said something to him. Bomo and Gullah made Dikar get out of the truck. All four of them went into the house together, the officer in front, the two blacks on either side of Dikar. The tremendous door closed, and it seemed to Dikar that it shut out all the world that he knew. That it shut out all hope.

Instead of the vast, high space Dikar expected, he found himself in between gray stone walls that ran on and on, no further apart than the ends of the two long rows of cots in the Boys' House. The roof over his head was no higher than the roof of his and Marilee's little house. In the roof were stuck lighted bulbs very much like the ones of Johndawson's radio. They threw shadows on the walls and the shadows ran along and dipped in and out of many doorways that were closed by wooden doors.

The air in here was so thick that it choked Dikar. The smells of the Asafrics were so strong that they made

him sick. The feet made sound on the stone floor, all together. *Thud, thud, thud*. The sound rolled away and came back, and it was a very dreadful sound because it was out of the Time of Fear, long ago, the sound of marching.

THEY marched on and on, and came to the end of the long, narrow space. Here there was a kind of rough hill that Dikar had learned, in John-dawson's House in the Far Land, was called stairs. They went down the stairs. At the bottom they came into a stone-walled room where there were a lot of Asafrics. Someone yelled and the Asafrics jumped up and stood stiff and straight, all except the one who had yelled. He came to the officer and jerked his hand up to his forehead and down again.

The officer talked to this one a minute, and went away with Bomo and Gullah. The Asafric took hold of Dikar and made him go across the room and through a door studded with iron. There was darkness beyond it. Out of the dark came smells; of wet stone and dead animals rotting, of dirty men.

The Asafric pushed him ahead. Their feet made squidgy sounds on a stone floor that was wet and cold and slimy to Dikar's feet. There were other sounds all around him, little whimpers and moans, and someone sobbing. Dikar's eyes got used to the dark. There was a very little bulb in the roof of this place and by its dim light he saw that he was going between two long rows of up-and-down iron bars.

Living men were behind the bars. It was they who made the little creepy sounds. They had the shape of men, but their faces, hairy, twisted, were the blind and terrible faces out of nightmares.

The *thud, thud* of marching feet came toward Dikar and the Asafrics. Another Asafric was approaching them. He had a revolver stuck in his belt and alongside it hung a bunch of little irons. His hand grasped a short, thick club. As he came nearer Dikar noticed that he was brown-faced, not black like the other Asafrics.

"Washton," the Asafric with Dikar said, "this one fellah special prisoner for Colonel Wangsing. Something happen to him, all our skin get flogged off. Unstan'?"

"Yassuh, Sahgent," Washton answered, his eyes gleaming white in the dimness as he goggled at Dikar. "Ah unnerstands. You wan' him put in a cell by hisself?"

"That be best."

"Nummer 'leben is empty. Down heah." Washton started going back the way he'd come. Dikar and the other Asafric following. They stopped again. The brown Asafric picked out one of the little irons from the bunch at his belt and stuck it into a hole in a plate that was fastened to the bars here. "D'yuh think he needs de han'cuffs kept on?"

"No. I take 'em off." Dikar felt the iron bands come loose from his wrists. Washton pulled at the bars and about four of them swung out together, like a door. A hand on his back shoved Dikar through the opening and the bars clanged shut behind him.

Dikar stood still, rubbing his aching wrists and breathing hard. He heard whimperings all about him. He heard the sound of the Asafrics' feet going away. The door through which he'd been brought in here thudded shut. Dikar whirled around, grabbed the bars, shoved at them.

They didn't move. Dikar pushed hard, but they didn't move. He shook

them, and they made clanging noise, but he might as well have been trying to shake the thickest tree trunk on the Mountain.

He twisted, ran along the bars—banged into a wall of solid iron. He ran the other way, four steps banged into another wall. Fingers seemed to be choking him as he spun and ran straight back from the bars and had hardly got started when a third wall stopped him, this one of wet, slimy stone.

Dikar spun around, leaped for the bars, grabbed them with his great hands, twisted them, shook them. "Let me out!" Dikar bellowed, above the sound of the bars. "Let me out of here. Let me out!"

A yowl answered him, high-pitched, wordless, the yowl of some mindless beast. Other bars clanged in the dimness. "Out," Dikar shouted. "Let me out," and there were other cries and other clanging bars and Dikar's shouting was only one sound in a shrieking, gibbering, caterwauling chorus.

CHAPTER VI

MIDNIGHT RIVER

"SHUT up!" someone yelled, up near the door. Where the yell came from there was sudden quiet, and then a dull thud as of wood on bone. A scream shrilled, and afterward it was quieter, so that Dikar could hear the pound of running feet and the sound of blows.

Washton came in sight. He was running along the bars across the corridors from Dikar's cage. His club struck through the bars, and Dikar saw the head and the body it belonged to, sink down. Now Dikar's were the only bars that clanged, his the only voice that shouted.

Washton twisted around, jumped toward him. Dikar's hands darted out through the bars with the swiftness of a snake's strike, grabbed Washton's club-wrist and his other arm in a rip that squashed green cloth into flesh.

Pain twisted the brown Asafric's face. "Let me out," Dikar panted. "Let me out of here or I'll tear you to pieces." The club fell to the floor.

Washton's eyes seemed about to pop from their sockets. A whisper came from between his lips. "Lemme go. Dey're openin' de door. If dey see dis dey'll put udder men in heah an' I won't be able to do nothin' foh you. Lemme go, quick."

Surprise at this brought Dikar back to his senses. Killing Washton couldn't get him free, not with all those other Asafrics guarding the only way out. Washton jerked loose, grabbed up his club from the floor, turned toward the door that was opening now.

"Trouble, Washton?" a voice called. "Need couple fella help?"

"Nossuh," Washton called back. "Dis new bird just took a notion to raise a ruction, but ah's got everything under control now."

"You keep dem fella prisoner quiet, you hear me, or I tell big fella captain flog you."

"Don' worry, Sahjent, dey'll be quiet, beginnin' right now." The door thudded shut. "Phoo," Washton whistled, turning back to Dikar. "Yoh shoh come near ballin' up de detail." He looked furtively about him, came closer to the bars. "But yoh gimme a chance to bop dese udder poh guys to sleep, so's ah don' hafta worry 'bout dere seein' how I get yoh outta heah."

"Get me out—" Dikar gasped. "Who are you?"

"Benjamin Franklin Geo'ge Washin'ton Smith's de name ah was christ-

ened," the Asafric whispered. "But ah'm known as Ex-eighteen to de Secret Net."

"But—but you're an Asafric soldier!"

"Shoh, Shoh ah is. Dat's de beauty pah't of it. See, w'en de Asafrics fust came, dey figgered us cullud people would want to jine up wid dem against de whites, and dey sent out word we'd be welcom. Dey foun' out dey figgered wrong.

"Dey foun' out we wuz Americans fust an' cullud after. But dah wuz some of us got de notion dat we cud mebbe fight 'em better from de inside, so we did jine up."

"But suppose they found you out?"

"Dem what dey fin's out," Washton said, "takes a long time to die, but dem what dey don't jus' keep on wukkin'. Lots uh de sabotage dat's been happenin' is de wuk of cullud men. But me, ah reckoned dat so long's I wuz in his heah foht, de bes' thing ah cud do wuz fin' out all about it, whah at de machine-gun nes's an' de big gun 'placements is, an' whah at de sentry posts is, an everyt'ing like dat. 'Bout a month ago dey transferred me to dis prison-gyard, but—"

"Wait!" Dikar broke in, excitement shaking him. "You say you know all about this fort?"

"Shoh ah does, but what's de use? Dah ain't nobody to who what ah knows is any good an' dah never will be now, after dat las' proclamation. Dah ain't even no America no mo'—"

"Yes there is!" Dikar broke in, his voice hoarse. "There's still an America, Washton, an there's an army formin to fight for it. An Army with banners!"

"Glory be to the Lawd!" Washton's hands lifted above his head, palms upward. "An army with—"

"Hush," Dikar hissed. "Hush up an listen to me." He hung to the bars with his hands and talked fast. "That army is goin to try to capture this fort, tomorrow night. They need to know all about it, an you can tell em. You got to get to em an tell em."

"Shoh, Shoh I'll tell em. I'll get you out an'—"

"No! You mustn't waste time tryin to get me out. I don't matter. Listen. I'll tell you how to find em—"

"You'll show me how to fin' em," Washton broke in. "Dat'll be quicker an' surer." He was fumbling his little iron into the hole in the plate on the bars.

"De Lawd forgive me foh doubtin' Him," he chanted, "w'en I was give dis detail in heah, an' fixed a way to get out a heah, an' den de only ones dat wuz sont in heah wuz so crazy dah wahn't no use gettin' em out. Ah shoulda knowed He'd sont me here to fix de way an' in His own good time he'd send me de pusson t'wuz impolitant to ge: out."

THE bar-door swung open and Dikar started to go out. "Wait!" Washton whispered, pushing him back. "It's in dis cell." He came into it. "Dat's whah ah put yoh in heah." He'd left his bunch of little irons hanging from the hole. "Stay here an' lissen," he whispered, "an' if you heah someone openin' de dooh f'om de gyard-room, yoh call me quick."

He went on into the cell and Dikar stepped a little way out of it. Dikar was trembling as he peered through the dimness at the face of the iron-studded door way up there, and he could hardly breathe. Listening with all of him, he heard only a mutter of voices beyond the door, but from inside the cell he heard the thud of

Washton's feet, heard a scrape of stone on stone.

"All right." Washton was pulling Dikar back into the cell, was pulling the bar-door closed. "Ah's ready." He stuck his hand through the bars, twisted the bunch of little irons, took them in and fastened them to his belt again. "Dat'll maybe hol' dem a few minutes we'll need bəd." He grabbed Dikar's elbow, pulled him toward the back of the cell. "Come on. We gotta hurry."

There was a big, square hole in the stone floor of the cell, and the thin stone that had covered leaned against the back wall. "Down in dah," Washton whispered. "Jump down. Hurry! Foh de Lawd's sake hurry!"

Dikar jumped down.

His feet found earth before his head went down below the cell-floor. Washton jumped down alongside him. Together they pulled the thin flagstone over and let it down, stooping down into the hole under it. It scraped into place, and the blackness was so thick it was like thumbs pressing against Dikar's eyeballs.

"We's gotta crawl disway a space. I'll go fust, but you foller me close." Dikar felt Washton start moving forward. Dikar stooped, found a tunnel, and was crawling after Washton.

In a couple of seconds the narrow earth-lined burrow bent sharply. When Dikar got around the bend it wasn't earth he was crawling on, but stone rounding down like a trough, wet and slimy as the cell-wall had been, and the smell here was sickening.

"Dis heah is a old sewer," Washton's whisper came back to him. "Ain't used no moh. When ah was just a kid, ah he'ped build de new one an' close dis one up, so ah knowed jus' whah it wuz an' dug right to it. It runs down

to de River. Oh Golly! I never thought to ask— Can yoh swim?"

"Yes," Dikar gulped, thinking of the Bathing Pool in the woods. He was choked up and sick and dizzy and it was all he could do to keep crawling.

The sewer pitched downward, more and more steeply, till Dikar was holding back to keep from sliding into Washton. He crawled on and on, only the sounds Washton made below him telling him that he was not alone.

After awhile there was a new sound far ahead, a gurgle of water. It got nearer, and the slant of the sewer lessened, though it still ran down. Water splashed, right ahead.

"Stop!" Washton called back. "I got to get my shoes an' some my cloe's off. I can't swim in 'em." After a little time Washton said: "Okay. Come on," and they were crawling again.

"Keep yoh haid up, boy," Dikar heard. "High's yoh can." He lifted his head a little and it bumped against the roof of the sewer. His hands, then his knees, went into the cold water. He heard Washton splashing, ahead of him. The water was cold, so cold that it hurt. It came up along his arms, his thighs, lapped against his belly.

Abruptly he bumped into something. It was Washton—Washton was motionless, right ahead of him.

"What is it?" Dikar gasped.

"It's high tide," Washton's choked tones came back to him. "De river fills de whole sewer." Teeth chattered through the words. "We's gonna have to dive unner an' I don' know how much funder it is. I don' know can I hol' my breath dat long."

"We haven't come this far," Dikar said, "to get stuck. I'll go ahead and see how far it is, an then I'll come back an get you."

"All—all right. Yoh go ahead."

It was a tight fit, but Dikar managed to squeeze past Washton's quivering, cold form. He crawled on, and the water came up over his head. He backed a little, filled his lungs with the thick, foul air, went forward again, crawling fast as he could under the black, icy water. The cold was in the very marrow of his bones. His lungs were bursting with held breath.

There was a glimmer of light in the water, vague, foggy. Dikar pushed forward faster. Black lines striped the misty glow. His head banged against something; his groping hands seized iron. Iron bars.

Iron bars closed off the end of the sewer. They closed Dikar off from the River and the way back to the Mountain. They trapped him in here to die like a rabbit in a caved-in burrow.

This truly was the end.

CHAPTER VII

LEAD US TO TOMORROW

DIKAR'S brain swelled till it seemed to be bursting his skull. His chest heaved agonizingly, his fingers closed on the bars, wrenched at them. The rust-roughened, misshapen iron cut his flesh and the pain of that merged with the great pain that was his body.

Dikar's feet found purchase on the stone of the sewer floor. His banded muscles were ropes tearing his bones apart. The iron gave a little, a very little, but there was blackness in Dikar's open eyes. Blackness was welling up within him, and the iron's strength was draining his strength from him.

The time was short.

A grating sound was water-loudened in his ears. The pound of his blood was a gigantic hammer inside his head. He had no strength longer

to fight the bars. No strength longer to hold his breath—

Something pressed against his side. Something touched his hands. He was falling down into a swirl of black waters. He was falling forward into a black oblivion, losing his grasp on the iron, losing himself in despair and defeat—

Breath burst from his tortured lungs and suddenly, miraculously they pulled in air.

Cold, clean and crisp, the air knifed Dikar's chest, tingled in his blood, drove the blackness from his brain. He could see a glint of golden light on tossing, black waters, a vast black loom high above him.

"Yoh all right, boy?" Dikar heard a sputtering whisper. "Are yoh all right?" It came from a face bobbing in the water, very near to him, a brown and anxious face.

"Washton," he gasped, treading water. "You didn't wait for me to come back. You came an broke the iron."

"Shucks," the brown man whispered through the gurgle of water. "When yoh didn't come back ah had to come after yoh, didn' I? But it wahn't me broke de lock of de gratin'. Ah couldn't never uh done dat. Yoh had it loose w'en I got to yoh, only yoh wuz pullin' instead uh pushin'. . . . But we's t'rough, dat's de main thing, an' we's got to get 'way from heah befoh some sentry spot us. Which way, boy?"

Dikar's gaze climbed up the immense blackness that rose sheer from the River's edge till it reached the star-sprinkled, glorious sky that he'd thought never to see again. He found the star patterns that Normanfenton had shown him, found the North Star. "This way," he murmured, and started swimming.

The cold water stroked Dikar's sides and he felt like shouting with the joy of being free again. Eeside him swam Washton, shadowy in the River, and Washton was his friend. To be with Washton was good, like being with one of the Bunch.

"WHAT'S yoh name?" Washton asked, swimming alongside him. "Yoh know yoh ain't tol' me yoh name yet."

"Dikar."

"Dikar what?"

"Just Dikar. How much further do you think we ought to swim, Washton?"

"Stop a minute." Washton lifted his head, treading water, peered at the dark land along which they'd been swimming, peered back the way they'd come. "We's come funder dan I t'ought; tide mus' be runnin' out. I guess we's pas' the las' line of the fort sentries. Go any funder we might run into some patrol from Highlan' Mills. Dis is good a place as any." He started swimming again, angling for the shore and Dikar followed.

They climbed up on a shelving beach, shook water from them, started climbing. The rocks were steep here, but there was plenty of place for hand and foot and they got to the road atop the drop without much trouble. The road was empty when they darted across it; they plunged into bushes the other side of it.

Washton glanced back. "Golly," he exclaimed. "Look at the marks our wet feet left out dare on de concrete. Any car comes along, dey'll know we's passed his way."

"Don't worry about that," Dikar answered, slipping through the bushes. "We'll soon be in the woods." He makes an awful lot of noise, he

thought, even more than the Beastfolk. "Then we'll climb up in the trees and go that way, and nobody will be able to track us."

"Huh!" the other grunted. "Climb up? Foolishment yoh is talkin'. Maybe ah looks like a monkey, but I sho can't climb around in de tops of the trees like one. Ah's havin' trouble enough gwine along dis flat groun' wid de sticks an' stones cuttin' mah stockin' feet."

"You can't— Well, we'll just have to go along the ground then." This was bad. If the Asafric trackers were as good as Wangsing seemed to think, they'd trail them to the Mountain. "An hope no one does come along before our footmarks dry."

They reached the edge of the woods, went into its shadowy blackness. Dikar stopped. "I'd better go back, though, and wipe out the marks we left coming here from the road, so some tracker don't pick em out. You wait here."

"All right," Washton whispered. "But don't be too long. I—It's awful dahk, heah, an' it's just come to me dat dey says dese heah woods is ha'nted."

"I'll hurry," Dikar whispered, slipping away. The traces of their passage were plain to his eyes: bent twigs, trodden grass, stones disturbed. He followed them closely to the edge of the road, started to return, brushing up the grass-blades with his fingers, replacing the stones, doing as well as he could to straighten the bushes.

He whirled to a sudden burst of threshing in the woods he'd just left. That fool Washton was—

"Who dah!" a startled voice called from the dark forest edge. "Han's up or I shoot."

Shoot; Washton had no gun. Dikar stooped lower beneath the screening brush.

"**H**OL' yoh fiah, soldier," he heard Washton say. "Ah's a friend. Ah's Private Washington, Fust Compn'y Prison Guard."

"Advance, friend," the other voice said, "an' gib countersign."

Dikar worked forward, his movements making only a whisper of sound. "Ah ain't got de countersign," Washton was answering. "Ah's just' proj-eckin' 'round, seein' could ah fin' a high-yaller pretty. Ah's all alone."

That last, Dikar knew, was for him, to tell him the Asafric hadn't seen him, that he had a chance to slip away while Washton kept the soldier talking. Dikar could see them now, two figures blacker than the forest darkness. A single ray of light glinted from the Asafric's pointing rifle.

The Asafric was still suspicious and hostile. While Washton lied glibly, Dikar was gliding through the bushes, angling away from the two toward the woods behind the man with the rifle. Just as he reached the nearest tree and ran up its trunk, the black soldier announced: "I take you to captain fella. Start marchin'."

The bough along which Dikar crept swayed under his weight, rustled. His lips puckered, gave forth the sleepy twitter of a wind-disturbed bird. "Golly," Washton was pleading. "Yoh ain't gonna turn me in, is yoh?"

Dikar dropped from the bough he'd reached, straight down on the shoulders of the Asafric. His heels kicked the rifle from the soldier's hand. His thighs clamped on the black's startled throat, and then they were crashing down to the ground. Washton snatched up the rifle and pounded its butt down into a heaving chest.

There was crunch of bone caving in. Dikar felt the body beneath him go limp. He rolled away. The rifle lifted

and fell again. The head on the ground was distorted, ghastly.

Dikar jumped up, blurted, "Come on!" and they were running into the woods, away from the thing that lay unmoving in the forest brush.

"Golly," Washton gasped. "Ah thought ah was a goner den."

It was weary, endless, that journey through the forest. Bad enough it would have been if they could have gone straight, but Dikar insisted on leading Washton long distances in the beds of streamlets, even though this took them out of their course, insisted on walking across whatever stretches of hard, bare rock he could find in the darkness. A number of times, when they came to fallen trunks or low trees, Dikar made him climb up on these and make his way along them as far as he was able.

"We're leaving tracks they can follow anyway," Dikar explained, "from where they find that sentry we killed, but by doin these things we're makin it harder for them. They'll have to wait for full daylight to start, an maybe they'll not be able to find the Mountain till night. That's all we can ask."

"**I**T IS all we can hope for," Normanfenton agreed, when they'd reached home at last, and Dikar had told his story to the Council of War sitting together again in Johndawson's little house. "But it means that the secret of the Mountain is a secret no longer, that succeed or fail in what we attempt tonight, there is no longer any safety for your Bunch here on the Mountain. It means the end of your life on the Mountain."

"It means we've got to succeed." Marilee said, her eyes flaming. Dikar had found her waiting sleepless for him at the edge of the Drop when he

came up over it in the dawn, and she'd brought hot food in here for him and Washton to eat while they talked.

While Dikar told his story she was binding cooling herb-leaves on his wounds and was caressing him furtively with tender, proud hands. "An it means that there will be no argument now that the Girls can't go with you, since you can't leave us here for the Asafrics to find. We must go along."

"That can't be helped," Johndawson agreed. "But of course you'll stay back out of the fighting and—"

"We'll stay out of no fighting," Marilee flashed at him. "We're few enough as it is, ever with the Beast-folk Nat has gotten to promise to help us. There's no Girl in the Bunch who cannot steal through the woods as silent as any Boy, who cannot handle a bow and a knife as well as any Boy.

"We worked together with the Boys, an played together with em, an it is our right to die together with 'em, Dikar," she turned to face him, "I dare you to say it is not our right."

Her eyes flashed.

"It is your right," Dikar said gravely, "I cannot say it is not. You Girls of the Bunch will be figured in on our plans for the fightin the same as us Boys. But there's somethin I've just thought of.

"While the Asafrics are only just started trackin me an Washton, they may guess that our hidin place is here on the Mountain an send planes to see what they can find out. I want you to go an tell the Bunch that they must act all day today like the 'Ware plane' cry had been given.

"No one must be in the Clearin an nothin must be left lyin around there to show that people live on the Mountain. There must be no fires lit today. There must be no woodchoppin. Go

quick an see that the rules are carried out."

As Marilee hurried out to obey him, it seemed to Dikar that a light had gone out of the house with her. "That's most likely the last order I'll give as Boss of the Bunch," he sighed, looking after her. "Because, Normanfenton, when we leave the Mountain tonight it is you who'll be Boss of us, an of all Americans."

The tall, sad man's gnarled hand dropped gently on Dikar's shoulder. "God grant, my boy," he said gravely, "that when I come to the end of the task He has laid upon me I shall as richly deserve His, 'Well done, good and faithful servant,' as you do, havin come to the end of yours."

There was a moment of silence in that greenwood room. The bony, gray hand pressed hard on Dikar's shoulder and fell away, and Normanfenton turned to Walt, who'd finished marking on a map and stood waiting.

"Well?" Normanfenton asked.

Walt's hands closed hard on the edge of the table, but it was Nat who answered, his voice hoarse and rasping like a crow's caw. "There ain't no well about it. The way they got themselves fixed up, with their picket lines an' their machine-gun nests, we ain't got a chance of takin' that place."

"That's right," Walt agreed. "If what this man tells us is true, an army equipped with all the modern devices of war might capture it after a long siege, but for our few to attempt it is plain suicide."

"The wisest thing we can do," Johndawson said, his face gray and empty of life, "is to flee from this Mountain and try to get through to another hiding place. We'd need a miracle—"

"Then we'll work a miracle," Nor-

manfenton cut in, "if that's what we need. Gentlemen!" He stood, tall and gangling, his shoulders stooped, and his voice was quiet. "We are here not to discuss whether or not West Point can be taken, but to decide how we shall take it."

Deep in his somber eyes a fire glowed and it seemed to Dikar that, very slowly, the eyes of the others caught that spark.

CHAPTER VIII

WAR CRY!

IN THE dark of the woods Dikar knew that to any but a wildcat's eye he must seem a part of the tree whose rough bark pressed his back. He knew that the Asafric who paced the wide sentry path that ran all around the outer works of West Point could not see him. But Dikar was afraid.

What Dikar feared was that the Asafrics had caught the smell that was so strong in his own nostrils, the smell of the Beastfolk who waited far back in the woods for the time to take their turn in the plan the Council of War had made.

The smell was so strong to Dikar that even though Normanfenton and Johndawson and Washton had told him over and over the Asafrics could not smell it, he still could not believe this. He could not believe that the soldiers had not heard the Beastfolk noisily following the advance of the Bunch from the Mountain. He could not rid himself of the dread that the Asafrics were fully warned, that they had laid a trap for the Americans.

It must be so.

Suddenly Dikar stiffened. An owl had hooted, faint and far away. The sound was repeated, a little nearer,

and once more, nearer still. The hollow night-voices ran swiftly toward him through the blackness, and now it was his turn and Dikar hooted.

The Asafric stopped short, turned his head toward the sound. Dikar's skin tightened across the back of his shoulders and his bow came up, arrow nicked into its cord. The hoots ran away from him through the forest night.

The sentry shrugged uneasily, started walking again. Breathing once more, Dikar counted the owl-hoots till they ended. He smiled grimly in his covert. All the Boys of the Bunch were in place. Each had sighted his quarry.

The Black was hardly ten steps away now and in the glimmer of starlight he was a perfect target. Dikar's lips puckered, sent into the night-silence the shrill, far-carrying whistle of the treetoad. It ended with the twang of his loosed bowstring.

An arrow shaft quivered in the Asafric's green breast and the soldier's knees folded. He fell, the loudest sounds of his death the thud of his body on the ground, the clink of his rifle's barrel on a stone.

There had been other twangs, other thuds, in the still forest. Twenty-one times in that moment winged death had struck. A gap twenty-one times a hundred steps in length was made in the outer line of West Point's defenses, but the only sounds had been these small, quick ones.

That was the beginning.

Darting to the motionless body on the path, Dikar thought how strange it was that so many men could die so silently, how much stranger that the Bunch, whom the Old Ones had taught to kill only for food should have killed so many men. But there was a greater need for this killing than hunger.

DIKAR unsnapped the bullet-filled belt from around the flaccid corpse, plucked the rifle from the ground. Breathing hard, he darted back to the tree that had given him covert, pounded the heel of his hand against its trunk to make the thumping sound of rabbits stiff-legged in their midnight dance. Then he whirled, sensing a presence that had been heralded by no sound.

"Dikar," the vague figure breathed. "Oh, Dikar. I was so afraid he saw you when you hooted."

"But he didn't, Marilee." His arms ached for her, but there was no time for that. "You must hurry." He thrust rifle, bullet-belt, into her hands. "You know what you Girls are to do. Take these back to Normanfenton for the Beastmen who know how to use them; tell him he can start bringin em up now as far as this patch. Hurry, Marilee."

Her lips burned on his and then she had flitted away, but there were other shadowy forms here now, and from the smaller of these came an excited whisper.

"I got mine in the neck, Dikar, an he went down pullin at the arrow. He—"

"Hush, Billthomas," Dikar hissed. "That's gone an past now, an we've got to get movin. You got your knife in your hand?"

"Yes, Dikar."

"An you Carlberger? Your knite ready an your bonarrer slung so you're free to move quick an noiseless?"

"Yes, Dikar." He could see only that they were slim and not very tall, but he knew they were all beardless, stripplings. How was it with the older Boys of the Bunch, Johnstone, Henfield, Patoshay and three more? Were they

gathering each their own couple of youngsters?

The *chrrr* of an angered skunk broke from Dikar and was repeated from the darkness six times. He had his answer.

"Don't talk," Dikar whispered. "Don't even breathe if you can help it. What we've just done was like pickin berries compared to what's ahead."

"Let's go," little Billthomas exclaimed. "What are we waitin for?"

Dikar made the treetoad whistle again and they started across the sentry-path. Three shadows making no more sound than the shadows of the leaves about them, they filtered through the woods. Beyond the woods there were only bushes on which the stars laid their betraying glimmer. But the enemy would have had to be very near to know that these humans stole through this undergrowth.

The bushes frayed out, and now there was nothing but a hillside covered with long, dry grass. All the Boys' woodland skill could not keep this stuff from rustling as they snaked through it. Dikar's throat went dry. His forehead was banded with tight iron. On that long journey through the woods, yesterday, Washton had told him what a machine gun could do.

He touched Billthomas, crawling next to him, with a quick hand. Billthomas stopped, lay flat. The rustling that Carlberger made was silenced. Dikar lifted his head, slowly, till his eyes were just above the grasses.

The Asafric smell that had stopped him came from the pale half-round of a stone machine-gun nest, mounding up out of the hillside. He could see the guns sticking blackly out of long, narrow slits in the round wall. He could see, low down, a square, yellow glow that was the open doorway.

Let the soldiers within one of those pillboxes get the slightest hint of danger, Washton had told him, and an iron curtain would close that doorway, blazing light would flare across the hillside and the guns flail it with a rain of bullets. Dikar and his fellows would die but, worse still, the alarm would be given to the hundreds in the fort. They would come awake—and the surprise attack on West Point would have failed.

"Your only chanct," Washton had explained, "is to get inside dat pillbox and kill de eight sojers dat'll be in dere befoh dey knows whut's comin' off."

TWO things the Boys had in their favor. The Asafrics in the pillbox depended on the picket line for warning of attack, and because of what had just been done they would get no such warning. And the Boys crawled through the dry grass with hardly more sound than the wind made, sliding by over their heads.

They made even less sound than the wind, moving again at the signal of Dikar's touch. Head down again, Dikar no longer could see the pillbox, but after a while he could see a yellow glow filtering through the blades of grass.

The frightening smell of the invaders was strong in his nostrils, but the noises that came with the smell were not voices; they were only the noises that people make when they sleep.

The light was very bright. Dikar's head lifted again. His eyes blinked right into the doorway itself. He sprang up, went through the doorway, saw a huddle of sleeping forms, felt rather than saw the other Boys leap in beside him. One of the Asafrics stirred. His head lifted and his fierce

little eyes stared into the eyes of Dikar.

The soldier's mouth gaped open for a shout. Dikar's knife slashed across the black throat. Another form stirred, started to lift, sagged down with Dikar's knife buried to the hilt in its breast.

Dikar tugged his weapon loose, twisted to meet the next enemy. There was none. There was only a tangle of black corpses on the cots and on the pillbox's stone floor. The two other Boys, their naked skin red-painted, their knives dripping red, were staring at Dikar.

"We—we've done it," Dikar stammered, not believing it himself yet. "We've done it." He was sick, remembering the feel of his blade sinking into a man's flesh. "We've taken the—"

Billthomas' mouth twisted and he started laughing. His eyes horrible, his face grimacing, he laughed, thin and high and so loud that it must be heard even in the great building at the middle of West Point.

"Cut it," Dikar snapped. His open hand slapped hard across that frightening, crazy laugh, stopped it. Billthomas' eyes didn't look so terrible now, but Carlberger was staring at his own knife, his Adam's apple gulping in his throat.

"Pull yourselves together," Dikar gasped. "We've got to—"

A rattling, loud chatter from outside cut him off. Terror froze Dikar. The shape had made this same noise, the black shape that in his dream-memories swooped out of the sky down on a long line of trucks carrying children and flew away again, leaving wreckage and still corpses behind it. He turned, sprang to the doorway of the pillbox, stuck his head out and

saw white light laid on the hillside, just where it rounded from sight to his left.

Rain was beating down the grass there—there was no rain. A figure sprang up from the ground, was outlined black against the light, a naked Boy with full-bent bow. The figure crumpled down again, the life out of it.

"Patoshay," a voice said, and Dikar realized it was his own voice. "His squad weren't as lucky as we were." The chattering rattle died away, but the white light stayed bright on the hillside and from within the pillbox a strange, tinkling, insistent noise was coming that Dikar had never heard before.

He whirled. Carlberger was gaping at a little red box on the inside wall. "It's coming from that, Dikar," the youngster gasped, pointing at the box. "Look! It's alive!"

On top of the box a little something between two shiny round things, was fluttering and it was this that made the sharp noise. Dikar jumped to it, struck at it with his knife, struck again. The box split open, showed rolls of orange red wire inside. The noise had stopped.

"It won't hurt us now," Dikar gasped. "It's dead."

The rain-spatter outside stopped suddenly. Billthomas stuck his head out of the doorway, pulled it in again, and his face was as gray-white as the stone behind him.

His voice held terror.

"They—they're coming," he gasped. "The Asafrics."

SOMEHOW Dikar was back at the doorway, was looking out. Out there in the white light, where Patoshay had died, three Asafric soldiers

were coming at a trot, rifles in their hands, bags that looked very heavy slung to their belts.

One of the Asafrics shouted, jerked his rifle to his shoulder. It jetted flame. A bee hummed past Dikar's ear. He pulled his head in, glanced up for the iron curtain Washton told him about, saw it and pulled at it. It came down with a clang.

"That'll stop em," Dikar panted. "They can't shoot through that an they can't shoot through these walls."

"They can shoot through those holes when they get close enough," Carlberger said, thrusting a shaking hand at the slits out through which the guns stuck. "When they get close enough they'll shoot through them an kill us."

Dikar sprang to the one that would face the Asafrics, stooped a little, saw them. They were still coming, but they were bent way over and moving slowly, as if they were scared. The *were* scared, he realized all of a sudden; they were scared of these machine-guns.

But Dikar knew they didn't have to be afraid of the machine-guns. No one in here knew how to shoot them.

Dikar's bow was in his hand, he was fitting an arrow to it. He knelt on the sort of stone shelf that held the gun's spread legs, aimed his arrow through it, loosed it. It hit the ground short of the Asafrics, but that told him what he needed to know. That was how far the thickness of the wall would let him send an arrow.

There was room here for only one to handle a bow. "Get at the other holes, you two," he ordered, very quietly. "In case they work around. Don't let an arrow go until they've come within thirty steps."

The Asafrics came on slowly. Dikar

waited, blood thumping in his temples but his fingers very steady on the wood and the cord of his taut bow. A black reached the spot where Dikar's first arrow had fallen, passed it.

Dikar's bow twanged.

The Asafric pitched forward into the long grass, was hidden. Dikar knew he had not missed. He slapped a third arrow into place, looked for the other Asafrics. They had vanished.

Breath hissed from between Dikar's teeth. He couldn't have killed all three with one arrow. Where were the others then? The grass out there was swaying against the wind. Of course. They had dropped down into the grass. They were crawling up on the pillbox the same way the Boys from the Mountain had.

Dikar let his arrow fly. It hit in back of the place where the grass was moving. The Blacks had already come too close for him to hit them, low down as they were. Now he couldn't even see the grass moving to show where they crawled. They'd gotten so close that the edge of the shelf cut off his view of them. The machine-guns, slanted down outside the wall, could have raked the ground, but the attackers were safe from arrows.

"They'll have to rise up to shoot into here," Dikar spoke his thoughts aloud. "They'll be so close then it won't be any trick to plug em. Watch carefully, fellows, an keep your bow-strings taut."

They waited.

The iron curtain over the doorway cut off sound from outside, and no sound seemed to come in through the slits. Dikar could hear only the heavy breathing of the other Boys, the *thump, thump* of his own heart. This waiting was hard, harder than the fighting had been.

SOMETHING round, black, small as a ball, shot up across his slit; sound, gigantic, deafening sound, blasted into the pillbox. A red flame-sheet across the opening blinded Dikar. A new choking smell was in his nostrils. Smoke eddied in the slit and cleared away—and then there was another black ball, another blast of sound, another sheet of flame.

The Asafrics weren't going to rise up and try to shoot in here. The black balls were the bombs Washton had talked about. The blacks were lying safe in the grass, and were throwing them at the slits. Sooner or later one of the bombs must come through and explode inside here and then there would be no one left in here alive.

Well, Dikar thought, we've tried, anyway. We've tried our best.

"Dikar!" Carlberger screamed from the slit through which he peered. "There's more Asafrics, hundreds of them, coming out of the woods. The rest of the Bunch must have been licked even before they got started. Look, Dikar. Come here an look. The Asafrics are running down the hillside. They're shootin' their guns—"

"Shoot your arrows at em," Billthomas yelled. "Shoot as fast as you can, fellows. Kill as many of em as we can before we die ourselves."

"That's right," Carlberger yelled, laughing wildly. "Fight em. Fight em till they have to kill us to make us stop fightin. Shoot your arrows, fellows. Shoot fast an straight!"

CHAPTER IX

THUNDER IN THE NIGHT

DIKAR bellowed, whirled and leaped across the pillbox. His hand shot out, struck Carlberger's shoulder and sent him sprawling.

"No," Dikar yelled. "Don't shoot. Don't shoot, you fool kids." Billthomas goggled at him as if he'd gone crazy. "They're not Asafrics. They're our friends, shootin' at the Asafrics with the guns we sent em by the Girls."

"Friends," Carlberger repeated, staring up at Dikar from where he'd fallen atop a dead black. "I--how do you know, Dikar? I saw em an you didn't."

"You said they were shootin' as they came." Dikar was pulling at the iron curtain over the doorway, trying to figure out how to raise it. "Asafrics wouldn't be wasting bullets on this stone house." The iron started to slide up and machine-gun chatter came through the opening, but there was no crack of rifles. "So I know they must be Americans shootin' at the ones who were tryin' to kill us."

Yellow light spilled out over someone lying crosswise in the grass just outside, a silent rifle jammed against his shoulder, Dikar grabbed for his knife—saw who it was.

Johndawson's head turned to him. There was a red streak across the stubbled cheek, but the gray-browed eyes were shining. "Dikar, my boy!" he exclaimed. "You're all right!"

"Yes." The light reached another man in the grass beyond Johndawson, a man covered with rags the color of dirt, his head a mass of dirt-colored hair. "But I've seen Patoshay die," Dikar said huskily. Beyond the Beastman, he saw other black forms in the grass, starlight glinting on the iron of their rifles. "An I suppose Steve-land an Halross are dead with him."

The rifles were all pointing in the direction of the pillbox from which the death spray had stopped coming. "Why aren't you shootin' at the soldiers who killed em?" Dikar demanded.

"Because it's out of range, and if we tried to get nearer we'd all be wiped out." Johndawson hitched a little closer. "Too bad that one held out. We're stopped cold. The other five were taken as easily as you took this—"

"Are you sure?" Dikar broke in.

"Of course I'm sure. We'd just reached the picket-patch when we heard the firing break out. Washton scouted ahead, came running back to tell us that only one nest was resisting. Those of us who had guns came at the double-quick, picked off the Asafrics who were lobbing bombs at you—"

"Good thing you did," Dikar muttered. Then, "We've got six of the seven pillboxes that Washton's map showed guard the houses where the Asafrics live, in a curve from the River to the woods. That means we've got six times eight more rifles, an six times three machine guns, with plenty of bullets for them all. Why do you say we're stopped? Why can't we go on the way we planned?"

"The biggest reason's that that pillbox is right spang in the middle of the line, and we can't go on and leave it behind us. That's the first rule of warfare—"

"Then we've got to take it," Dikar interrupted. "An quick." He dropped to his knees, started crawling out into the open.

Johndawson caught hold of his arm. "Where are you going?" he demanded. "What are you up to?"

"I'm goin' to fix those soldiers who killed Patoshay. Listen," Dikar whispered, his lips white with thinking how the bullet storm had beaten his friend to the ground. "You see how that star there is just startin' to drop behind a thick tree-bough. Watch it, and when it shows again under the

bough, have your men start shootin at the pillbox again and rushing toward it so as to make the Asafrics start shootin back at you again.

"Get as close to the farthest reach of their bullets as you can an keep makin believe you're goin to rush further, but don't do it. Understand?"

"Yes, but what will you—?"

"You'll see." Dikar wrenched free, was creeping fast around his own pillbox. He came to what he was looking for, the corpse of an Asafric soldier.

THE bag Dikar took from the dead man's belt was very heavy with the hard, round things it held. The grass through which Dikar crawled, circling far down the hillside and around the white flood of light, was sharp-edged, cutting, and its rustling was terribly loud in his ears.

His course rounded over the swell of the hillside and he saw the white mound of the pillbox from which had come the bullets that killed Patoshay. Dikar started climbing the hill again, keeping just beyond the edge of that fatal blaze of light.

A shot rang out from where he'd come. Someone shouted. There were more shots, cheers.

Rrrrrcht rrrrrcht—a machine-gun started its chatter. Another joined it. Those guns were on the other side of the pale half-bell; on this side there was nothing.

Dikar sprang to his feet, ran straight for the pillbox, plucking an iron ball from the bag he carried. His teeth found the pin Washton had told him about. He reached the pillbox, peered in through the silent gun-slit in this side. He saw five Asafrics crouched low over their chattering guns. He pulled the pin with his teeth, threw the bomb in through the slit, pulled

another's pin and threw that in. Then he dropped to the ground.

Dikar heard a dull thud. It wasn't very loud. It wasn't loud enough. The bombs hadn't gone off.

Something was missing. It was the terrible white light. The night had closed in on him. The Americans' shots were still cracking, but the machine-gun chatter had stopped. Queer. Dikar pushed hands against the ground, pushed himself up along the stone, got got his eyes to the slit again.

Smoke stung his eyes. Through his tears he saw only blackness inside the pillbox. There was no sound from inside there. No voices. No movement. But there was a smell of blood and of burned meat.

An arm was laid across his shoulder. "You've done it," Johndawson said. "You've done it, boy. You've wiped them out, complete."

There were other men around Dikar, when he turned. Normanfenton. Walt. Washton. Men, rags fluttering about them, were streaming out of the woods and across the bare hillside. The men were cheering. Even in the dim starlight Dikar saw that their hairy, starved faces were alight.

"Walt!" he heard Normanfenton snap. "John! Don't let them all crowd together. Get them split up, an even number to each pillbox. Distribute the rifles and ammunition you find there, and have the gun crews start unfastening the machine-guns so that we can take them along with us."

Johndawson and Walt ran away. "We've found enough old soldiers in the lot," Normanfenton said to Dikar, "to make crews for all the eighteen machine-guns we've captured. There isn't a man in the outfit who doesn't know how to handle a rifle. We've got our army now, two hundred desperate

fighting men, and thanks to you and your Bunch, we've got them armed."

"Two hundred." It was Washton who spoke. "Shoh, Ginerl. Yoh'so got two hunnerd sojers an' dey'll fight like wil' cats." He'd appeared from nowhere, it seered. "But dey's still near two thousand down dere in de barracks. Dey's awake now, an dey knows somet'n's up. Listen."

Normanfenton stiffened. From far off there came ringing, brassy notes. "A bugle," the Leader muttered. "Blowing *To Arms!* Turning the garrison out. This is as far as we'll get by surprise. What we win now, we'll have to fight for."

"An yoh'd better win it foh de dawn," Washton added. "Cause soon as it gets light enough, de planes is gonna start flyin' ovehead an' layin dere eggs on us, an' dat'll be de end uf us. Dey'll smash us to—"

"Here, you." Normanfenton whirled to a number of figures that were coming near. "You Boys! Run to the pill-boxes and tell everybody to line up, right away, for an advance. Hurry!"

THEY darted away and the Leader turned to Dikar again. "They must have been awakened by the sound of the firing. I'm going to press the attack before they realize exactly what direction it's coming from. They can't know—"

"Dey does know," Washton broke in. "Dese guys telephoned— Oh golly!"

He was staring upward at a new sound in the air, a high-toned *wheec* that made Dikar's blood run chill, though he didn't know what it was. It rose to a scream.

Then a crash.

Fire fountained out of the ground, halfway down the hill. A wind, almost

solid, jolted Dikar against the pill-box. Then it was gone.

"They're shelling us," Normanfenton muttered. His hands cupped around his mouth. "Shelter, everybody," he shouted. "Everybody in the pillboxes."

Another *wheeeee* screamed through the night, another fountain of fire burst up out of the ground, nearer. Normanfenton had Dikar by the wrist and they were running, Washton beside them, down the long line of pill-boxes, shouting that order. All around them were men running.

The air seemed full of the fearful screaming of the shelling. The hillside was alive with flame as they tumbled into the last stone nest and crushed into a jam of men who stank with the Beastfolk smell.

"We're safe here," Normanfenton panted. "The concrete will protect us." The sound the shelling made outside was like a drumming thunder now. "But we'll never get our men alive through that barrage. It will hold us here till daylight and then the bombing planes will finish us off."

Washton pulled down the iron curtain, his face greenish instead of brown. "Oh golly!" he chattered. "Ah done tol' you de big guns is fixed so's dey only kiver de River, but ah clean forgot de anti-aircrafts on de roof of de main buildin'. Dat's whut's shootin' at us, de Archies up dah on de roof of de biggest house in de reservation."

"The biggest!" Dikar grabbed his arm. "Washton. Is that the house we escaped from?"

"Shoh! Shoh it is. But—"

"An we're right near the River here!" Dikar swung around to the Leader. "Normanfenton! I'll stop those Archies for you." He raised his voice.

"To me Boys. To me, Boys of the Mountain. There's work for us."

The thunder was rolling over the pill box. Normanfenton jabbered something at Dikar, but Dikar had eyes only for the naked Boys who pushed to him—Bengreen and Johnston and Fredalton and Danhall.

"We're here, Dikar." Johnston, red-bearded, freckle-faced, spoke for them. "What do you want us to do?"

"I want to lead you to a place you may never come back from," Dikar answered. "I want to lead you to a place where this fight must be won or lost—and if it's lost, we will be lost, all of us, with no hope of livin. Will you follow?"

"Lead, Dikar," Johnstone smiled, "an we follow. You know that. You know you didn't need to ask."

"I know," Dikar agreed, pride swelling within him. "All right, then! We're swimming the River. Make sure your knives are fastened so you don't lose em. I'm afraid we'll have to leave our bonarrers, though. With the cords wet, they'll be no use—"

"Hey, mister," someone called hoarsely from back in the crowd. "Here's the Asafrics' raincoats on the shelf here. They'll keep your bows dry if you wrap 'em up in—"

"Good," Dikar snapped. "Pass em to us. We'll wrap our bonarrers an tie em to our backs." Twenty willing hands were helping. Normanfenton touched Dikar on the shoulder.

"You've done wonders, boy," the Leader said. "But I can't see how you expect to—"

"I can't either," Dikar answered. "But we'll make a good try at it." He jerked away, pulled up the iron curtain from over the doorway. The thunder of the shelling rolled in, deafening.

"LOOK," Dikar shouted to the Boys. "You can count the time between when the shells fall, in the space from here to the River." One crashed as he spoke. "One, two, three, four," he counted and a thunder-peal drowned the "five."

"You see? We've got to get across that space an into the River in the time you can count four. I'll go first, then Bengreen, Danhall, Johnstone an Fredalton, one by one. Meet me in the River when you get there."

"If we get there." Brown-haired Fredalton grinned. "I never won a race yet on the Mountain, but I bet even a deer can't run as fast as I'll run when it comes my turn."

Dikar looked into Normanfenton's tight-drawn face. "We'll stop those guns for you," he cried. "The minute they stop, you bring your men on." A shell crashed as he said this last and Dikar whipped around, was out of the pillbox, was running across ground so torn up it was like no ground he'd ever seen. He dived into the black River.

He came up just in time to see Bengreen spring, out of the heart of a flame-fountain into the River. The thunder was deafening, the thunder of the Asafric shells. Danhall plunged into the River, the water splashing high over him.

"What a bellywhopper he took," Bengreen chuckled, treading water beside Dikar.

"Here's Johnstone," Dikar panted. "Now Fredalton, an we'll all be through." Shell-sound rolled away. Another shell crashed down. "The kid must have missed his turn," Dikar muttered. A third shell spouted flame above them.

"Fredalton never could run as fast as the rest of us," Johnstone said. "He

couldn't run fast enough to—"Thunder blotted his voice out.

"He's go—No!" Diker yelled. "Here he is!" A dark shape hurtled from the bank into fire-reddened foam. "He got through." A head came up out of the water and it was black-haired, brown-skinned.

"It's not Fredalton," someone gasped. "It's Washton."

"Shoh nuff it's me." The brown man grinned. How did yoh-all expect to find yoh way widout me to show yuh?"

"I was wondering about that," Diker murmured.

"Well," Washton answered, "Ah's heah now, so less get stahted."

"Come along, fellows." Diker gave himself to the stream. This swimming wasn't like last night's, he thought, trying not to think about Fredalton. Last night had been black; tonight the glare of the shells flickered like red heat-lightning overhead. Last night had been quiet; tonight the thunders of the guns rolled overhead, the thunders that must be silenced if America was to have a tomorrow.

Those thunders were still rolling when they reached at last the place where Diker last night had strained at an iron grating and almost drowned. The thunders were still rolling, but the stars were paling in the sky to which the vast black wall rose, and across the sky was stealing the first faint leaden light of the dawn.

"Lemme go fust," Washton whispered. "Ah knows just whah Ah left my bunch of keys, an somebody else might kick 'em away. Dey's gonna come in mighty handy."

They did. When the five Americans had crawled up the long sewer, had climbed up into the cell of Diker's terrible memories, a key from that bunch opened its door so swiftly that

the Asafric who'd taken Washton's place had no time to cry out before Diker killed him. Another key opened the door at the end of the corridor, and the Boys leaped through, knives ready.

There was no one in the room beyond that door.

"Gineral call mus' have blowed," Washton grunted. "Ev'body out under full arms." His white grin flashed across his face once more. "Oh golly! Dat means dis whole buildin' ain't got nary sojer in it, 'ceptin de ones wuhkin de Archies on de roof. It means we's done gonna get to de roof widout havin' to fight no one. It means we's gotta chanc't, a good chanc't, to get away wid dis crazy stunt."

CHAPTER X

OUR GREEN, OUR PLEASANT LAND

THEY had climbed up and up, it seemed forever, up hill after hill of stone stairs. Now there were no more stairs, and they were huddled against a door, and from beyond the door came the thunder of guns.

A window in the wall behind them was paling with the dawn.

Diker got his hand on the handle of the door, turned it, opened it slowly. He saw a wide, flat space. He saw guns bigger than any he'd ever seen before. Black against the paling, ominous sky, their mouths belched lightning and thunder as sweating blacks served them.

"Let's go," he whispered, and he was through the doorway and the other Boys were through it and beside him; they were drawing taut the cords of the bows they had unwrapped sometime during their long climb.

An Asafric saw them. His mouth

opened in a scream the thunder drowned and he pitched forward, an arrow in his throat. Dikar was snatching arrows from his quiver, was sending them flying at the milling mob of green-clad soldiers as fast as he could, and each was finding its mark in black or yellow flesh. The guns were silent, suddenly. The big guns were silent, but revolvers were barking lead at Dikar and the Boys.

He snatched at his quiver, found no arrow there. "Come on," he cried and, knife in hand, he was running across the roof, straight toward the few Asafrics who were left. He glanced sideways and saw only Johnstone, red hair streaming, running beside him.

The others—something searing hot hit Dikar in the shoulder. His left hand hung limp, but his right drove his knife into an Asafric. He twisted, was borne down under the man's body. He heaved it off, rolled free, saw a contorted, yellow face, saw a revolver jabbing at him. Then a black something was between Dikar and gun-flash, was tumbling . . .

Dikar was on his feet; he hurled himself at the Asafric officer, batted aside the gun and got his hands on the man's throat. Something snapped between his fingers. The eyes were glazed suddenly, the body hung heavy from his hands.

Dikar let it drop, wheeled to meet the next attack. There was none. No one else stood erect on that roof. A silence, terrible after all that noise, surrounded him, and a terrible gray light lay on the twisted bodies that crowded the rooftop.

He was alone. His body was netted with pain, his flesh torn by bullets and knives. There was no strength any more in his limbs. But the guns were silenced.

Dikar's tired eyes dropped to the roof at his feet. Washton lay there, eyes open, brown forehead lined deep with agony, hand pressed to a side from which blood welled between the fingers. It must have been he who had jumped between Dikar and the Asafric's revolver. He had taken the bullet that was meant for Dikar.

"You—you shouldn't have—" Dikar's voice was cut off by a new sound, a sort of roaring not far distant. He turned wearily to it, saw a great bird soaring, a plane taking off to fly over the Americans who must be moving now from their pillboxes, who would be a fair mark now for the death-thunders the plane could send down on them. There was another . . .

"DIKAR." The Voice croaked at his feet. "De Archies . . . take me . . . to dem. Hurry."

Dikar bent, lifted the brown man, carried him tenderly to where the big guns, silent now, thrust their black barrels over the low roof-wall. Just behind the guns a clump of great, black horns opened mouths to the sky and a jumble of wires coiled from them to the guns.

Three planes were roaring overhead now, circling.

"Put . . . me . . . down," Washton gasped, each word a separate agony, "by de automatic . . . range finders."

Dikar realised he meant the horns. He obeyed. Washton's bloody hand came away from his side, fumbled with something at the base of the horns. There was a whirring sound somewhere. The guns were moving. They'd come alive and were lifting. Were swinging their barrels towards the circling planes.

"Dat lever," Washton groaned, pointing. "Pull . . . pull it."

Dikar was afraid of the moving guns, but he jumped to the stick at which Washton pointed, grasped it, pulled at it.

Thunder crashed. The guns belched fire, smoke. Little white clouds appeared suddenly in the sky where the planes were. The planes weren't there any more. There was only a rain of black bits from where they'd been, and in one place the black body of a man, whirling over and over in the air.

Dikar's legs buckled. He slid, slowly it seemed, down to the roof. He was sitting on the roof and he was looking at Washton. He started to say something to Washton—didn't say it. Washton wouldn't have heard him. He was dead.

Consciousness ran out of Dikar like sand runs from spread fingers.



Dikar lay on a cool, white bed and Marilee sat on a chair beside him. "There aren't many of the Bunch left, Dikar," she was saying, "nor many of the Beastmen, but we've sent out word

all over America that we've taken Wespoint from the Asafrics, an there is hope in America again.

"From all over this part of the Far Land the people are flockin in here an there are many men among em who know how to fly the planes, an shoot the big guns. We've just got news that the Asafrics are comin up from New York to take the fort back, but we're ready for them.

"The planes are ready for em, an the big guns that cover the River, an the Archies that cover the air an the mountain passes through which the Asafrics must come. We'll meet em with the thunder of the guns we've taken, Dikar."

"Yes, Marilee," Dikar murmured, his voice still weak. "We'll meet em with the thunder of guns, Marilee. We'll be makin thunder tomorrow, thunder of freedom, thunder of liberty that is not dead, that will never die."

"Thunder tomorrow, Dikar," Marilee whispered. "Thunder of hope, tomorrow, for our green and pleasant land."

THE END