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THE "TOMORROW" TRILOGY

DARK YESTERDAY

By

ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

A Renaissance E Books publication

ISBN 1-58873-794-2

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PageTurner Editions/Futures-Past Science Fiction

FIRST BOOK PUBLICATION

ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT'S "TOMORROW" SAGA

Vol. I: Dark Yesterday

Tomorrow

Children of Tomorrow

Vol. II: Thunder Tomorrow

Bright Flag of Tomorrow

Thunder Tomorrow

Vol. III: Sunrise Tomorrow

Sunrise Tomorrow

The Long Road to Tomorrow

ABOUT THIS AUTHOR AND BOOK

Arthur Leo Zagat (1895-1949) was a prolific author, highly regarded for his many fine science fiction, mystery, and weird horror stories during the 1930s and '40s. A graduate of Fordham University Law School, Zagat began to sell stories while at college and never entered the legal profession. Instead, he devoted himself to writing, and with such success that, by the time of his death, he had sold more than five hundred stories and novels. Zagat was best known for his novel *Seven Out of Time*, a tale of seven humans abducted to the far future where they are studied by a highly-advanced race that has lost the capacity for emotion. However, many critics consider his "Tomorrow" series of novellas and novels, written during the late 1930s, in which young Americans lead a rebellion against a foreign conqueror, to be Zagat's finest work. In it, he draws on his experiences in the military during both World Wars for the realistic background and ingenuity with which his young Americans fight a superior foe. Arthur Leo Zagat died on the night of August 3, 1945, bringing to an end a distinguished career in science fiction, and beyond.

The Editors

Note: When this story of the future was written there were no jet planes, no television, no computers, nor many other items that the real future would bring into existence. Women were mostly confined to the domestic sphere and only a few men felt that women were their equals who could accomplish any thing a man could. Minorities, particularly those of non-European descent, rarely appeared or were mentioned in mainstream fiction, and were often caricatured when they did. The stories are based on the science of their era, and do not present a picture of the scientific understandings of today.

PART ONE

TOMORROW

CHAPTER I: THE LOST ONES

Dikar was on his knees, his head bowed against the side of his cot, his hands palm to palm. The fragrance of the dried grass with which his mattress was stuffed was in his nostrils, the rabbit fur of his blanket soft and warm against his forehead. Behind him there were two long rows of cots, eleven in each, separated by a wide space. At every cot knelt one of the Bunch, but the only sound was a low drone.

Dikar's own murmur was a part of that drone. "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And should I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Dikar used, as all of them did, the prayer they had learned before the terror had come. They had never been taught another.

Dikar stayed on his knees as behind him there was a rustle of lifting bodies, a chatter of voices. One cried out, loud above the others, "Hey, fellers!" Jimlane it was. "Who took my bow and arrows and didn't bring 'em back?" His changing voice, deep at first, broke into a high squeal. "If I ketch the guy—"

"They're out by the Fire Stone, foolish." That was Tomball. "I seen you leave 'em there yourself. You'll be leavin' your head somewhere one these days, and forget where. You're sure the prize dummy of the Bunch."

The other Boys laughed, tauntingly. Dikar heard them, and he didn't quite hear them.

He was waiting for a soft hand to stroke his hair, for sweet, low tones to say, "The good Lord bless you, my son, and give you pleasant dreams." He knew they would not come. Hand and voice were vanished in the mists of Long-Ago, curtained from Dikar by the dark Time of Fear before

which, as he very dimly recalled, everything had been different from what it was now. But always, when he had said his “now-I-lay-me,” he waited for them...

"Quit callin’ me a dumby,” Jimlane squealed. “You gotta quit it."

"Who's gonna make me, dumby? You?"

Dikar rose to his feet, sighing, the burden of his leadership once more heavy upon him.

From the blaze on the Fire Stone, a wavering light came in through the unglazed, oblong openings in the wall of the long narrow Boys’ House. It bathed with red the stalwart, naked bodies; nut-brown skin under which flat muscles moved smoothly.

Tomball was out in the space between the cots, his bulging arms hanging loose at his sides, his adolescent, chunky jaw black-stubbled, his eyes, too closely set, glittering between slitted lids.

Jimlane faced him and was little more than half his size. Puny, his hairless countenance rashed with small pimples, the kid's upper lip trembled but he stood his ground in mid-aisle as the other advanced, slow and threatening.

"Yes, me,” Jimlane answered him bravely. “I ain't scared uh you, you big bully."

"You ain't, huh,” Tomball grunted, closing the distance between them as Dikar got into motion. “Then I'll teach you to be."

Tomball had hold of Jimlane's wrist and was twisting it, his shadowed lip curling. The smaller lad's face went white with pain. His free hand twisted, batted at his tormentor's hairy belly. Tomball grinned and kept on twisting. His victim bent almost double, agonized, but still there was no whimper from the youngster...

Dikar's fingers closed on Tomball's arm and dug into the hard muscle. “No fair,” Dikar said. “Break!"

Tomball loosed Jimlane, jerked free of Dikar's hold and swung around. “Says who?” he growled, a redness in his black, small eyes that was not put there by the light. He was a quarter-head taller than Dikar and broader across the shaggy chest, and his thighs were twice the span of Dikar's. “Oh, it's you!"

"It's me,” Dikar said quietly. “And I'm orderin’ you to quit pickin’ on Jimlane an’ on the other little fellows who don't take your guff.” Dikar was lean-flanked and lithe-limbed, his hair and his silken beard yellow as the other's was black, his eyes a deep, shining blue.

"There will be no bullyin’ here, so long as I'm Boss of the Bunch."

Their code, like their talk, had been preserved unchanged from their young childhood, back before the Days of Fear. Isolated, they had no adult models to copy as they grew to young manhood.

"Yeah?” Tomball said through lips thin and straight beneath their sparse covering of sprouting hairs, and somehow Dikar knew what he was going to say next. It had been coming for a long time and now it was here and Dikar was not altogether sorry.

Tomball said it: “As long as you're Boss.” Two gray spots pitted the skin at the corners of his flat nose. “Maybe. But it's time you made room for someone else, Dikar. For me."

By Tomball's increasing unwillingness to obey orders, by his sulking and his endless whisperings with those of the Boys who had to be watched lest they shirk their share of work, Dikar had known the challenge was coming.

He had thought out his answer and was ready with it. "All right," he said, low voiced and very calm. "I'll call a Full Council tomorrow, of the Boys and the Girls. I'll tell you why I think I should keep on being Boss and you'll tell me why you think I should not, and then the Bunch will decide."

A murmur ran around the ring of Boys that had close-packed about Dikar and Tomball.

"No!" Tomball refused. "It wasn't the Bunch decided you should be Boss in the first place. It was the Old Ones." He paused, and a meaningful grin widened his mouth. "Or so *you* say."

"Maybe," Dikar smiled, surprised he could smile. "Maybe, Tomball, you'd like to ask the Old Ones if they picked me to be Boss when they brought us here and left us. Maybe you'd like to climb down the Drop and ask me whether you or I should be Boss from now on."

The Boys gasped in the ring around them, and Dikar's own skin crawled at the back of his neck.

* * * *

Down, down as far as the Mountain Don which the Bunch lived was high, fell the great Drop that fully circled its base. Straight up and down was the Drop's riven rock, and so barren of foothold that no living thing could hope to scale it.

Below, for a space twice as wide across as the tallest of the trees in the forest that robed the Mountain, were tumbled stones as big as the Boy's House and bigger. White and angry waters fumed beneath the stones, and beneath stones and waters were the Old Ones.

Dikar himself had seen these things, from the topmost branch of a certain tree that gave a view of them, but not even Dikar had ever gone out from the concealing curtain of the forest to the brink of the Drop, for of all the Must-Nots the Old Ones had left behind, this was the most fearful; "*You must not go out of the woods. You must not go near the edge of the Drop.*"

Thinking of all this as he stared into the red hate in Tomball's eyes, Dikar asked, "Do you dare, Tomball, climb down the Drop and talk to the Old Ones?"

"Smart," Tomball sneered. "You think you're smart, don't you? You want me to go down there and that way be rid of me. Well, it don't work, see? I'm just as smart as you are."

Dikar spread his hands. "You will not let the Bunch decide between us, and you will not ask the Old Ones. How, then, do you want this thing settled?"

"How? How have you yourself ordered scraps between the Boys settled? Dikar! I dare you to fight out with me, fists, or sticks or knives even, who's gonna be Boss of the Bunch—you or me."

"No fair," Jimlane cried out at that. "I say it's no fair. Tomball's bigger than Dikar and heavier."

"No fair," Steveland yelled. Billthomas yelled, "We cry the dare no fair." But others were shouting, "Fight!" Fredalton and Halross and rabbit-faced Carlberger. "They gotta fight it out. It's Dikar's own Rule and he's gotta stick by it."

Most of the Boys shouted, "Fight!"

"Shut up!" Dikar bellowed. "Shut up, all of you," and at once the yelling stopped. But the ring had shrunk till he could feel their breaths on his back and heard little whimpers in the Boys' throats and read their eyes, shining in the changing light of the Fire. "You dare me fight to decide who'll be Boss," Dikar said to Tomball, taking up the ritual he himself had set. "Do you cry a fight between us two fair?"

A cord in Tomball's short neck twitched. "I cry us equal-matched." (By the Rule, Dikar had a right to appeal to the Bunch from Tomball's lying response.) "If you refuse my dare, Dikar, I will cry you yellow, and," claim the right about which we scrap." Reading the eyes in the ring, Dikar saw that if he appealed and the Bunch said he and Tomball were not equal matched, he might remain Boss in name, but Boss in truth he would be no longer. "That is the Rule you yourself have made." Tomball abandoned the ritual. "And you gotta stick by it."

Dikar's lips still smiled. "That is the rule I have made, Tomball. But this over which we scrap is no bird brought down by an unmarked arrow nor question of whose turn it is to bring water from the spring. Who shall be Boss affects not only you and me, but the whole Bunch. Is it right that it be decided in the way such small scraps are decided?" Dikar pretended to ask that of Tomball, but his eyes asked the question of all the eyes in the crowded circle, and the eyes had already answered him when Tomball spoke again.

"It is right," Tomball voiced the verdict of the eyes. "It is the only way that is right. You gotta fight me or crawl." There was triumph in his voice, and triumph in his swagger. Tomball had weight on his side, and reach and strength, and he knew he was already as good as Boss.

Dikar knew it too, and his heart was heavy, but he smiled still. "All right," he said. "We fight, Tomball. With bare fists."

The Boys hurrahed, the sound like the bay of the dogpack when they've brought down their prey under the trees. Even Steveland and Billthomas hurrahed, and though Jimlane was silent his pale eyes danced with the dancing red light of the Fire.

Dikar listened, thinking what Tomball would do as Boss of the Bunch; whether he would let his pals shirk work, whether he would see that the corn patches were weeded, and the water tank cleaned, and the roofs of the Boys' House and the Girls' House kept patched against the rains and the snows and the cold.

It was worry about these things and others like them that weighted Dikar's heart. He knew how painfully he had learned, in the long years since the Bunch had come to the Mountain, all the many little irksome tasks that must be done for the good of the Bunch; and he remembered that Tomball had always scoffed at them.

For himself Dikar would be happy to be no longer Boss. It meant being lonely—for the Boss must have no pal, lest he be accused of favoring his friend over any other. It meant carrying a heavy freight of care through the day, and lying sleepless through the night, and never knowing rest. It meant assigning the hunters to the chase, whose joys he never knew; to judging the games and never playing them; to punish when Rules were broken but never breaking Rules just for the fun of it and finding the punishment worth it.

"What are we waiting for?" Tomball's growl broke into Dikar's thoughts. "Come on outside and let's go."

"No," Dikar said. "We fight tomorrow, before the whole Bunch. Tonight, now, we sleep. Already it is Bed-Time, and long past."

"I want to fight now," Tomball insisted, standing his ground. "I don't want to wait till tomorrow."

The smile faded from Dikar's lips, and he felt tiny muscles knot along the ridge of his jaw, beneath his yellow beard. "Bed-Time is not my Rule, but a Rule of the Old Ones. Perhaps, when you are Boss, Tomball, you will let the Bunch break it, but I am still Boss, and I do not. To bed, Tomball. To bed, all of you. Right away!"

Dikar's eyes locked with Tomball's, and blue eyes and black held for a long minute and there was no sound in the Boys' House, and no movement at all. Then the black eyes fell, and Tomball muttered, "It's the Old Ones I obey, Dikar, not you," and the ring broke up into Boys hurrying to their cots.

Dikar stood spread-legged, the firelight playing on his tall, well-knit form, his chest moving quietly with his slow breathing, the taut hollow of his belly heaving, his eyes somber as he watched the Boys obey him—perhaps for the last time.

He didn't feel Jimlane's fingers squeeze his. He didn't hear Jimlane's whisper, "I hope you win tomorrow, Dikar. Gee, how I hope you win."

Dikar stood there while the curtains woven from slender withes were dropped over the window-openings, shutting out the red light of the Fire that the Girls tended tonight.

He stood there, unmoving, till the excited whisperings along the walls of the Boys' House had faded, and the scrape of the fur blankets along skin had ended, and there were no more creakings. Then he turned and padded to his own cot, and knelt beside it.

Dikar's lips moved, but the words came. He was sending them out through the wall, past the leaping flames on the great, flat Fire Stone, past the Girls' House into the night-darkened woods.

He was speaking to a Presence there, a Someone he had never seen and never heard, but had always known to be there, because He showed His work in the carpet of the leaves underfoot, in the tall and stately trees, in the wind that rustled through the woods' green roof and the sunlight that shimmered through it.

"I don't care what happens to me tomorrow, Sir," Dikar told Him. "I don't care how much Tomball hurts me, or what he does to me if he wins. It's the Bunch I ask you to take care of. Please, Sir. If Tomball is too strong for me, tomorrow, and he licks me, please make it all right for him to be Boss. Please make him smart enough to be a good Boss. Please make him be a better Boss for the Bunch than me. They're good kids, Sir, the Boys and the Girls, and mostly they obey the Rules the Old Ones left, and You ought to take care of them. You will take care of them, Sir, won't you?"

Dikar's lips stopped moving, but he stayed on his knees a little while longer, his head bent as if he were listening.

He heard nothing but the soft breathing sounds, and the wind's treetop whisper, and the insect chorus of the night.

When at last he stirred and climbed into his cot and drew his fur blanket up over him he was comforted.

CHAPTER II: THE NIGHTMARE THAT WAS TRUE

Sleep's deep emptiness claimed Dikar swiftly and wholly, as always it claims one whose weariness is clean and physical.

A voice came into the nothingness, the voice for which Dikar waited each Bed-Time after he'd said his Now-I-lay-me.

...Mom's voice it was that came through the open door of the dark room where Dick Carr had awakened. Something in Mom's voice made Dick afraid: tears, and a trying hard to hide the tears, and a smile that he somehow knew hurt Mom more than the tears.

"Take care of yourself," Mom was saying, "and come back soon."

Who was going away? There was only Mom and Dick in the flat, and Henry who was twelve, four years older than Dick, and who took up more than his half of their bed. Dick pushed out to wake Henry, and his hand found only Bunched sheets.

Henry wasn't there!

The next minute Dick heard Henry out in the hall. "Sure, I'll come back soon. Don't you worry. This thing will be over in a jiffy, you'll see. We're just being called out because—because the last big drive is on, and they need us in the rear lines so's all the real soldiers can be free to do the fightin'. There ain't nothin' to worry about, Mom. They can't lick us. Maybe they've licked the rest of the world but they can't lick the good old U.S.A. We've won every war we were ever in and we'll win this one—"

"Look Mom, I got to run. The radio said for my unit to be at the Eighth Street Armory at eleven o'clock, and it's four of, now. Goo'bye, Mom."

There was a kiss, and the flat-door slamming shut, and then there wasn't any sound coming in through the door at all and the flat seemed awful empty.

In through the window rang the clatter of feet running in the street. Dick heard it every night, listening to the big boys who didn't have to go to bed early and could play in the street after supper. But Dick knew they weren't playing now, because they all ran the one way and after a little while he didn't hear them any more.

Then Dick lay listening to the thunder that had been in the sky so long he usually didn't hear it. The thunder seemed a little louder tonight, and a little nearer, and more scary. The glass in the window kept rattling and that made Dick look at the window and at the square gold-starred flag that hung in the window.

The star was for Pop. It was to show everybody how proud we were that Pop was a hero. Only Dick didn't quite understand why we should be proud when every window in the block had a flag with a gold star, a lot of them even with two or three gold stars.

What was there to be proud about in your Pop being a hero when all the other kids' fathers were heroes too, and their big brothers, and a lot of their sisters too, being Red Cross nurses and working in ammunition plants that was blown up and all?

Dick wished Pop would stop being a hero and come home.

Mom and Henry said Pop wasn't ever going to come home, but Dick didn't believe that. Dick didn't

believe Pop would go away from them forever and ever.

Now Henry was gone away too. But he was coming back soon. He had told Mom he was, hadn't he? He wouldn't lie to Mom, would he?

Dick heard the sound of feet again, coming down the street. The feet weren't running now. They were marching. Dick knew what feet sounded like when they were marching. He'd heard them before Pop went away, when you could hardly hear them for the crowds shouting and the bands braying soldier-music.

He'd heard the feet marching when Pop went away; there were no bands then, and no hurrahs, and there were hardly anybody in the street, only in the windows a lot of women, waving handkerchiefs, and then holding them up to their faces.

Yes, Dick had heard a lot of marching feet, but they had never sounded quite like these. The sound of them feet wasn't nearly as loud as the others.

Dick pushed back the covers and got to the window. The tops of the street lights were painted black, and the bottoms were blue; so that the gutter was like blue water, deep and awful, and across the street was only a black and dreadful wall.

Down the street came the marchers.

They were boys like Henry, some of them bigger and some smaller, but none of them very much bigger or very much smaller. Each had a gun slanted across his shoulder. Not one was in uniform. They were dressed in their everyday clothes, caps and jackets and pants. Some of the boys wore longies, most wore knickers or shorts, and a lot were barelegged down to the socks folded over the tops of their shoes. They were like a bunch of boys marching out of school on a fire-drill.

They were not playing soldiers. They *were* soldiers, real soldiers. The way they marched showed that, straight-backed, not talking or laughing. Their chins were lifted. Their eyes looked far ahead, to the end of the street and the end of the city and farther still, to the dark night out of which came the sound of thunder that never stopped.

Four abreast they marched, four and four and four, as far as Dick Carr could see. And alongside each tenth four marched a man in uniform; a man with one empty sleeve pinned to the breast of his coat: a man whose leg swung stiff so that Dick knew it was not a leg at all: a man whose face was broken so it was ugly and terrible as a Hallowe'en mask.

For a long time the boys and the broken men marched by, to where the thunder rolled and the black sky flickered with a lightning whose flashes Dick Carr could not see...

(And Dikar's dream faded into sleep's nothingness.)

...And into sleep's nothingness came a crash of thunder, shaking the ground. It shook Mom's arms that were tight around Dick Carr, and her body against which Dick's face was pressed. Out of the corner of his eye Dick could see the pin on Mom's black breast. The pin was oblong, and it had a blue border, and on the white inside the border there were two gold stars. There were two on the flag in the window now.

Dick was scared, but he wasn't bawling. He hadn't bawled when the siren waked him up, screaming in through the window, nor when Mom and he had jumped out of bed, all dressed like the radio said they should be. He hadn't bawled when, the siren screaming like a great devil in the black sky, they ran in the dark street, and then stopped running because all the women and kids were carrying them along in a rush

faster than Dick could run.

No, Dick hadn't bawled even when he and Mom had fallen down the station steps and the old man had dragged them through the big, stiff curtains into the station.

The station was crowded with women and kids, and it was like an ogre's cave. A couple of electric lights made light enough to see them by, but not enough to keep back the shadows that reached out of the enormous black holes at each end of the station, like black arms pawing out to drag the women and the kids into a night that would never end.

The faces he saw were a queer white, and the eyes were too big; and they were sort of hunched, as if they were waiting for something terrible to pounce on them out of the dark.

It came!

Thunder! Thunder louder than before, thunder so loud that when it stopped Dick couldn't hear himself say, "Don't be scared, Mom. I'll take care of you." But Mom must have heard him, because she squeezed him tighter to her and kissed him on top of his head. Then Dick could hear again. He could hear a woman say, "That must have been one them half-ton bombs. They tell me they can go right down through a ten-story building, and they don't blow up till they hit the cellar, and after they blow up there ain't nothin' left of the building or anyone was in it. Nothin' at all."

The old man, who stood by the brown curtain that hung over where the station steps came in, laughed. His laugh was like the cackle of the hens Dick used to hear when Pop used to drive him and Henry and Mom out into the country.

"Yeah," the old man cackled, his eyes kind of wild. "That's right. Ef'n one o' them things hits overhead here they won't even be little pieces of us left ter pick up."

He had on a uniform, but it wasn't like Pop's uniform. It was very faded but you could see it had once been blue. It was ragged and much too big.

There was thunder again, not so loud. "Well," said a woman sitting with a suckling baby in her heavy arms. "I wish one would hit right over us. That would be God's mercy."

"There ain't no God," someone said. "God is dead." Then whoever it was laughed, and Dick's insides cringed from the laughter. It was a woman in the middle of the platform, and she was standing as still as a rock—her mouth didn't move, and the eyes behind the hair that was down all over her face saw nothing at all. "The End of the World is come and it is too late to repent. We are doomed, doomed—"

Thunder again shattering the laughter, but far away now. The woman who sat next to Mom, with a little girl on her lap and another, brown-haired and brown eyed and pretty, on the floor alongside of her whispered: "Poor thing, I hear tell she escaped from Philadelphia after it was surrendered. She got through the lines somehow. Did you hear how they went through all the houses that was left and dragged out-?"

"Hush," Mom begged. "Hush. The children—"

The little girl's mother laughed quietly. "The children will know all about it soon. Yours too. girls or boys, it don't make no difference to those fiends."

"Not mine," Mom said, very low, and she moved a little to show the other woman what was in her hand. It was a carving knife from their kitchen—

"Attention!" A loud voice shouted out of the place where you used to get your change before the subways stopped running. *"Attention, all shelters!"* Dick looked and he saw there was a radio behind the little hole where your money used to be pushed out. *"The raid is over! The raid is over!"*

"It's over," the old man cackled. "And I'm still alive. Eighty-three years old and not dead yet. I allus said I was born ter be hanged."

"-where you are. Remain where you are. Gas-tests are being made. Remain where you are until gas-tests determine that it is safe to leave. Stand by."

"The Government should of gave us all gas masks," grumbled a fat lady whom Dick knew. "Like they did in England." She was Tom Ball's mother and Tom was behind her, hiding his face in her skirts.

"Much good that did England," the woman with the baby said. "Much good anything did England—"

"Attention!" the radio shouted. *"Attention all shelters. Important. An important announcement is about to be made. Stand by."*

"Mom," Dick asked. "What is an important annou—what the radio said?"

"News, son. Big news."

"Good news, Mom?"

"Maybe. Maybe we've won the battle. Maybe we're driving Them—"

"Attention! Attention, all shelters. The next voice you hear will be that of General Edward Albright, provost-marshal-general for this area."

"That's Ed Albright," the old man cackled. "I remember when he was a buck private alone o’ me, the both of us down with dysentery at Key West. In the Spanish War that was, an—"

"Hush. Hush, you old fool."

The voice Dick heard now, coming into a quiet so deep he could hear Mom's heart beating in his ear, was thin and tired, awful tired. *"Our lines are crumbling. Enemy infantry has already penetrated to the outskirts of the city, south and east. The boys, the young women, who have fought so heroically, are still fighting, but there is no longer any hope. Word has come that the columns that were marching to our aid have been completely wiped out by a phalanx of enemy planes."*

CHAPTER III: AFTER ARMAGEDDON

The voice stopped, and there wasn't any sound at all. "We are beaten," the voice began again. "But we shall not surrender. We shall not give over the mothers and the children of this city to the horror that has overtaken the other municipalities that have surrendered."

"My people, when our lines finally break, when the enemy hordes swarm in, I shall press a button on the desk before me to set off mines that have been laid underneath the streets. Every soul in the city will perish in that cataclysm; I, and you, and with us some thousands of those who have made this world of ours a hell."

"Good!" yelled the woman with the babe at her breast. "Good!"

Mom's arms were tight around Dick, and she was crying, but her eyes were shining. "We're going to see Henry soon, son, and your father," she whispered. "Isn't that wonderful?"

And then everyone was quiet again, and the tired voice was still talking.

"To die like that will be, I know, no sacrifice to you who have laid fathers and husbands, sons and daughters, on the altar of your country. But there is one more sacrifice I must ask of you, for your country.

"Somehow, in the maneuvering of the past few hours, a gap has opened in the enemy lines, to the north. It is already being closed, but the terrain is such that a small and determined force may be able to keep it open long enough for a few to escape.

"No troops can be moved from their present positions. We have some arms, some ammunition, available, but no one to use them. No one—except you women who hear me. You mothers."

"That's funny," Mrs. Ball sniffed. "We can escape through a hole if we get ourselves killed keepin' the hole open. The man must be crazy."

"If you mothers can keep that gap open long enough, we may be able to take your children out through it, the tots who are all you have left.

"We may—the possibility is infinitesimal—be able to get them away to the hills north of the city. The chances are that they will die on the way. Even if they do not, it is possible that they will be hunted down and exterminated, that Nature, though less cruel than these hordes that have come out of the East and across the continent from the West and up from the South, will finish the work of our foes.

"But there is a million-to-one chance that the children will come through, and it rests with you to choose whether we shall give them that chance.

"I know that it is a bitter choice to make. I know, mothers, that you would rather that your little daughter, your little son, when I press this button on my desk, go with you into the Outer Darkness where there is peace at last.

"I know how dreadful it would be for you to die not knowing what fate awaits your children, and I should not ask you to make the choice save for this one thing.

"This is the dusk of our day, the dusk of democracy, of liberty, of all that has been the America we lived for, and die for. If there is to be any hope of a tomorrow, it must rest in them, in your sons and daughters.

"If they perish, America shall have perished. 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.

"If you choose to give America this faint hope, if you decide to make this sacrifice, leave your children in charge of the warden of the shelter where you are, and come at once to headquarters to receive your weapons and your orders.

"We have no way of telling what your decision is until and unless enough of you come here to make the attempt we contemplate feasible. We wait for you. Will you come? Mothers, the choice is yours."

The voice stopped, and for a long time nobody moved, nobody said a thing. Then, all of a sudden, all the

women were standing up. All the women were kissing their kids, and then they were going toward the curtain that hung over the bottom of the steps from the station.

They were pushing aside the brown curtain. They were going up the steps.

They were going fast, fast, and their faces were shining as Dick once had seen a bride's face shine as she walked, all in white, up the aisle.

They were all gone, and in the station there were only the kids, and the old, old man in the uniform of faded blue that was too big for him.

It seemed darker here in the ogre's cave. The dark reached out from the great black holes at the ends of the platform. A small, cold hand took hold of Dick's hand. "I'm frightened," the little brown-haired girl whimpered.

"Aw," Dick said, squeezing her hand. "There ain't nothin' to be frightened about. I'll take care of you."

"Will you," she asked in a very little voice. "Do you promise?"

"Cross my heart," Dick said, "I'll take care of you, always and always," and somehow he wasn't quite so frightened any more. "What's your name?"

"Mary Lee. What's yours?"

"Dick Carr."

"Dikar," she murmured, and moved close to Dick, and her head dropped sleepily on his shoulder.

He liked the way she said it: "Dikar," so he didn't bother to tell her it was two names. He said "Marilee" in his head, making one name out of her two, and he liked the sound of that...

And a shadow moved across Dick Carr ... A shadow moved across Dikar, and he stirred and came fully awake out of his dream, and it seemed to him that someone had passed him, moving silently in the night.

CHAPTER IV: WE MEET IN THE NIGHT

Dikar lay in his cot, alert. The sloughing of the wind came to him, and the shrilling of the insects of the night and the breathing of the sleeping boys. There was no sound at all out of tune with the harmony of the dark forest.

Yet Dikar was troubled with an uneasy sense of something wrong.

He tried to quiet himself, tried to find sleep again, sleep and the dream out of which he had wakened. Dikar was desperate to find his dream again, for he knew it was one he had dreamed many times. But always before it had slipped from him in the instant of waking and tonight it was still as vivid in his mind as yesterday.

The small boy of the dream, Dick Carr, was himself in the Long-Ago that had been only a mist of gray half-memories as shapeless as the dawn-haze that drifts in the waking forest. The dream had told Dikar something of himself and something of that Long-Ago, and if he could find it again it would tell him more.

But Dikar could not find sleep again, nor the dream, because his eagerness barred the way, and his sense of something wrong with the night. So he sighed and rose from his cot, making no sound.

He groped for his apron of woven leaves and tied it about his waist, and stole to the curtain of twined withes that closed the door, moving it a little to peer out.

The leafy boughs of a great oak made a roof that joined the roofs of the Boys's House and the Girls's House, at the end where they came nearest the woods. Beneath it the Fire was burning low on its Stone, and a little distance away from its heat Dikar saw the two Girls whose task it was tonight to tend the Fire.

The two Girls drowsed, arms about each other's waists. They had undone their braids, and the hair that cloaked one was black as the night, and the hair that cloaked the other was brown and shining. The black hair swallowed the light, but tiny red glints from the Fire danced merrily on the wavy fall of the brown.

The Girls wore short skirts of plaited grasses, and circlets of woven leaves covered their deepening breasts; but through their cloaks of long hair a shoulder peeped shyly, and a rounded knee, and curve of a thigh.

Now as long as he could recall Dikar had seen the brown bodies of the Girls as they busied themselves with their tasks or tried to outdo the Boys in the Games, and so it was strange that tonight these small glimpses should set a pulse throbbing in his temples, and stir his breast with a not unpleasant pain.

It was to the Girl whose hair was brown that his eyes clung, to her knee and the soft swell of her throat, and the pale oval of her face.

As he looked out at her, he seemed to feel a small hand in his, to hear a very little voice asking, "Will you take care of me? Promise?" For this was Marilee, the little Girl of his dream. Dikar had forgotten his promise, "I'll take care of you always and always," but now he remembered it.

Remembering, he wanted to hold out his arms to Marilee, wanted to call her to him. He almost did, and for fear that he might, looking at her, not longer be able to hold her name in his throat, he tore his eyes from her and turned them to the Fire. Little flames, blue and yellow and red, licked along the sides of a single log that lay across a great heap of orange glowing embers. That log will not last much longer, Dikar thought. I should wake the Girls and tell them to put more on.

Then he thought, no. Let them sleep. I'll do it myself, and with the thought his look went to the pile of logs at the base of the oak.

...To the place where the pile ought to be! There was only one split log there.

Queer, Dikar thought. I sent up enough for the night from where we were cutting them in the woods yesterday—A hand slid past the trunk of the oak, out of the blackness behind! The hand took hold of the one log that was left of the pile and drew it back into the blackness.

A muscle twitched in Dikar's cheek, under his beard.

"Oh," Bessalton exclaimed, the black-haired Girl. "Marilee! We've been sleeping—the Fire's almost out. Quick."

They were running to the Fire, and past it to the oak, and they were looking, dismayed at the base of the oak. "There isn't any," Marilee said, her small face puckered in puzzlement. "You must have put on the last."

"I did no such thing," Bessalton denied. "It was you. You were the last one to put wood

on. Remember?"

"Yes," Marilee said slowly. "Yes, I was the last. But there was more here then. I'm sure there was."

"Looks like it," the black-haired Girl came back, "Don't it? If I did something like that—"

"Oh what's the use of scrapping about it? We've got to get more up from the place where the Boys were cutting, before the Fire burns out."

"We?"

"I'll do it, Bessalton. I know where they were," Marilee said, and before Dikar could move or cry out, she had gone past the oak and the night had swallowed her. The night out of which a hand had slid to draw away the logs from the base of the oak!

Dikar sprang to his cot, snatched up his bow and quiver of arrows, was back to the door and out through it. Bessalton stared at the Fire; she neither saw nor heard Dikar flitting by. Then the damp, fragrant dark of the woods was about him, and the cool softness of its carpet of leaves was under his noiseless feet, and he was a shadow slipping through the forest.

All the Bunch was taught to move in the woods with the silence of its creatures, but Dikar's ears, trained to keenness, caught the barely audible sound of Marilee's progress ahead of him, the flick of underbrush against her legs.

He did not call to warn her, because he needed to know who had lured her into the forest, and why. This was a thing that never before had been done by one of the Bunch and Dikar must find out why it was being done.

Moonlight filtered through the foliage overhead and flecked the night with silver. A small beast scuttered away from beneath Dikar's feet. Marilee was well away from the Houses now. She was almost to the place where the Boys had been cutting—

"Oh!" he heard her exclaim, and then there was another voice ahead there. "Hello, Marilee." Tomball's voice. "I've been waitin' for you."

Dikar froze, as motionless as the tree trunks about him.

"You've been waitin'—" Marilee was puzzled. "Why? Why should you be here, waitin' for me?"

"I wanted to see you alone."

"But—but why do you want to see me alone?"

"Marilee." Tomball's voice was curiously thick. "Do you like me?"

"Of course I like you. I like all the Boys."

"Not that way. Do you like me—like this?" Dikar heard the sound of flesh, and he sprang into the little clearing ahead, and Tomball's hands had hold of Marilee's arms, and he was pulling her to him.

"Stop!" Dikar said, low-voiced, and somehow there was an arrow hooked in the string of his

bow, and the string was tight, and the arrow was pointed at Tomball's back. The bow was long almost as Dikar was tall, and the arrow sharp-pointed with stone. Loosed, it could go clear through a deer—or a Boy. "Let go of her."

Tomball turned on Dikar. Crouched knee-deep in fern there was something about him more animal than Boy. The curling thickness of his lips; the feral look of his black eyes, and the way his neck was tense and corded.

"You—" Tomball grunted. "You again!"

"Me," Dikar said, heavy-tongued with anger. "The Boss. Tomball, you have left your cot before day. You have laid hands on a Girl. For breakin' these Must-Nots you are subject to seven days in the punishment cave, with only water and dried corn to eat. What's your excuse?"

Tomball licked his lips, and straightened. "Nothin'," he said. "Because you won't give me the punishment."

"Won't I? And why not?"

"Because I'm not here, that's why. Because I'm in my cot, asleep. Halross will say so at the Council, and— Carlberger."

"They will lie?" Dikar's brow wrinkled. He could not understand. "They will lie, at a Council?"

"Sure, they will. What are you goin to do about it?"

"But Marilee here will say different, and I."

"Course you will," Tomball grinned. "Why shouldn't you, the Boss of the Bunch and the Boss of the Girls? Why shouldn't you say that I left my cot, and that I laid hands on her, when seven days in the punishment cave on water and dried corn will leave me so weak you'll be sure to lick me, and stay Boss? Will the Bunch believe you, Dikar, when I remind 'em of that, or will they believe me and Halross and Carlberger?"

Dikar felt sick. That any should lie at a Council, that any should talk as he was hearing Tomball talk, was a new and dreadful thing. "Tomball," he cried. "You're foolin'. You wouldn't really say those things."

"Wouldn't I?" Tomball grinned, licking his lips. "Just try me. You're licked, Dikar, and you know it."

Dikar knew it, and he knew that a terrible thing had come among them, and he could not think how to fight it. He was licked—

"Dikar!" Marilee's fingers touched his arm. "Dikar. Hold him here with your arrow while I run and call the Bunch. When they see Tomball here in the woods, he and his pals cannot say that he is in his cot, asleep." She started away.

"Wait!" Tomball's command halted Marilee. "You can call the Bunch, Marilee," he said. "But when they get here I'll tell 'em that Dikar drew his arrow on me and forced me to come here. And Halross will say that, wakin' from sleep in his cot next mine, he saw this, and that Dikar said he would kill him if he did not keep quiet."

Marilee and Dikar stared at Tomball.

"You can't win," Tomball sneered. "I'm too smart for you, see. An' tomorrow you'll find out I'm too strong for you, Dikar. An' here's somethin' else for you to remember, Marilee. When I'm Boss, you better like me the way I want you to like me!"

He laughed, then, and turning his back on Dikar's arrow, and swaggered away; they heard his laugh coming out of the dark woods.

"What did he mean?" Marilee whispered, coming close to Dikar. "He said, 'When I'm Boss.' What did he mean, Dikar?"

Dikar wanted to put his arms around her.

"He meant that we're gunna fight who should be Boss, Marilee. In the mornin, right after Brekfes, you will call a Full Council of the Bunch, an' Tomball an' I will fight who shall be Boss."

Marilee's eyes were upturned to his eyes, her lips were moist and red. "You must win, Dikar," she whispered. "You heard what he said. You *must* win."

The wanting to take her in his arms, the wanting to hold her close to him, was a great ache in Dikar's arms and in his breast, and a weakness in his legs.

"I heard him, Marilee," he said, deep-throated. "I will win."

And then Dikar turned and ran off through the woods, but he looked back over his shoulder at Marilee once and saw the way she stood looking after him, mantled in her brown hair, and he saw the look in her face.

CHAPTER V: THE OLD ONES

When Dikar got back to the Boys' House and slipped inside, all was dark there, and quiet, and Tomball was in his cot. Dikar put down his bow and arrow, and took off his apron. He lay down again, and pulled up the blanket of rabbit's fur.

He lay staring up at the black roof of the house, trembling a little. It seemed to him that he saw Tomball's face there, black-stubbed and small-eyed and sneering. And then it was Marilee's face he saw, the red lips moist, the brown eyes holding his, telling something her lips could not. And looking into Marilee's eyes, Dikar's eyes closed and the nothingness of sleep received him ... And out of sleep's nothingness formed a sky that flared with blue light, and with red, and was streaked with bright yellow that shimmered and faded; and the sky was filled with rolling, endless thunder. Against that terrible sky loomed monstrous black bulks, huge and ominous, hills that overhung a road and a big truck in which Dick Carr was riding.

In the truck kids were jammed so tight they could not lie down, and just could move a very little. Dick was in a corner so that his back was jammed against the iron sides of the truck, and Marilee was jammed against his side, and her head was on Dick's shoulder, and she slept.

Most of the kids were asleep, in spite of the terrible lights in the sky and the awful thunder. But the old man who was driving the truck wasn't asleep, nor the old woman who sat next to him. Ahead of them on the road were a lot of trucks, and behind them were a lot more trucks, but Dick could tell this only by the noise they made, because none of the trucks had any lights.

Dick knew some of the trucks were loaded high with boxes and boxes of things, but most of them were

jammed tight with kids like this one.

"Tom," Dick heard the old woman ask. "Do you think we'll get through?"

"I don't know, Helen," the old man answered. "Only God knows. So you had better pray to God to take us through."

"I can't, Tom. I can't pray any more. I'm all prayed out. God cannot hear our prayers. He has forgotten us, Tom. He has turned His face from us."

"Pray, Helen. Not for you or for me, but for the children in our charge. Pray to God's Son. It was God's Son who once said, 'Suffer ye the little children to come unto Me.'"

"All right, Tom. I'll try."

They didn't say anything more. The truck bounced along, and the red and blue lights flared in the sky, and yellow streaked it, and thunder rolled.

Once the road got steep, climbing up into the sky to what looked like the Jumping-Off Place, and up there against the sky Dick saw things that stuck up out of the top of the black hill. They were just a Bunch of broken poles, black against the blazing sky, but Dick knew that once they had been trees. And to one side there was a chimney sticking up, and Dick knew that was all that was left of a house that the trees used to shade.

Dick started to get sleepy. His eyes closed. The old woman woke him up, yelling something.

"Tom!" she yelled. "Tom! Turn into this side road. Quick!"

Dick's head banged against the truck side, and the kids fell against him, and Marilee woke up, screaming, "Dikar! Dikar!" Dick grabbed hold of her, telling her it was all right, and then the truck wasn't going any longer, and Dick could hear the other trucks going past, somewhere behind.

"You caught me off guard, Helen, and I did it," the old man said. "But why?"

"I don't know, Tom," she answered, talking slow. "I saw the side road ahead and something told me we must turn off into it. It was like a voice in my ear. No. It was more like a voice in my brain."

"You're all worked up, Helen. You're excited," Tom's back moved, and there was a noise of grinding metal. "Watch out behind. I'm backing up to the highway. As soon as you see a clear space you tell me, so that I can back out and get into line again. If we lose the others we won't know where to— And then there was a white light in the sky a light bright as the sun floating down out of the sky.

And there was a new sound in the sky, like a bee, like a giant bee, and it became a roar. An enormous black shape came down under the light, and there was a rattling noise, like a lot of Boys were running sticks along a lot of picket fences, but louder, and there were screams and crashes and the rattling noise kept on.

The rattling noise cut off, and the roar faded and became a bee-buzz again and the bee-buzz died away in the sky. There were no more crashes, and no more screams. There was only the rolling thunder overhead, that never stopped.

Old Tom got down from his seat, and went away into the dark. The old woman sat very still, and all the

kids sat very still, and nobody moved. After awhile the old man was back, and he was climbing up again to the truck driver's seat.

"Well?" Helen asked, so low Dick could hardly hear her.

"None," Tom said. "Not one of them all. We're the only ones left. If we hadn't turned in here—" He didn't finish.

"I guess," Helen said. "I guess God is still listening, up there above the sound of the guns." And then she said, "Where do we go from here?"

"There's a smashed signpost back there, where this road turns off. One of the boards on it reads, 'To Johnson's Quarry.' Do you remember, Helen, my heading a committee once that tried to stop the Johnson Granite Company from cutting down a Mountain? They were defacing the landscape, you recall, and we wanted to preserve the beauties of Nature for posterity."

He laughed. It wasn't pretty, that laugh. "We failed. Recently I heard that they had blasted away almost the entire base of the Mountain, leaving only a narrow ramp by which their trucks could reach their camp at the top. There are probably quarters for the laborers up there, perhaps some supplies. The Mountain, as I remember, is thickly wooded and there's a possibility we may be safely enough concealed there, at least for a time."

"If only we can get through to it."

"We can try. This is a State Park we are in. There are woods almost all the way, and nothing to attract enemy patrols." The truck started running again.

(Dikar's dream blurred.)

The thunder faded out of it, and the dark, and there was sunlight, with green trees, and a wide cleared space with two long houses each side of it, with cots and a warless house at one end in which there were big stoves, and a lot of tables. There were a Bunch of little kids and there were the two Old Ones.

The Old Ones made the kids work. Helen made the Girls make beds and cook and things like that. Tom made the Boys go down the road up which the truck came that first night and hammer deep holes into the hill of rock on top of which the road climbed up to where the trees were. When Tom thought the holes were deep enough he would put fat white sticks into them that he got out of a big red box they had found where the road started to climb up, and little, silvery things on top of the sticks.

When it would begin to get dark, they would all eat, and then the Old Ones would make the Bunch all sit around and they would tell them things.

They called this a Council. At the first Council the two Old Ones told the Bunch a lot of things they should do, and they should not do, and these were the Rules. The Old Ones said Marilee should be Boss of the Girls, and they said Dick should be Boss of the Boys, and of the whole Bunch.

Every morning one of the Boys would climb up high in a tree and watch all day if anybody would come out of the woods on the other side of the fields down there, where Tom and the Boys were working.

The Boys took turns doing this. One day (and this is where Dikar's dream got clear again) Dikar was sitting on top of the tree. The Boys had got through making the holes yesterday, and they weren't down there any more. They were in the front of the house where they slept, and Tom was teaching them how to make bows and arrows. The Girls were in front of their house and Helen was teaching them how to make baskets out of twigs from the bushes in the woods.

Dick was looking at the black smoke, way far off in the sky, that had been there all the time since they came here. He thought about a new Rule the Old Ones had made at Council last night, a Rule they said was most important of all. "You must not go out of the woods," the Rule said. "You must not go near the edge of the Drop."

Wondering why the Old Ones had made that rule, Dick looked down at the edge of the Drop, and at the place where the road climbed up and over it. His eyes went along the road, and across the fields, and he saw someone come out of the woods across there.

The someone looked very little, way down there, but Dick could see he had a kind of dark-green uniform on, and that his face was yellow. Then another one and another one came out of the woods. These were in green too, but their faces were black, and they had guns. All of a sudden there were a lot of them.

Dick yelled down, "Coo-eee! Coo-eee!" and when Tom looked up at him Dick pointed down at the men in the green uniforms and held up his spread fingers and wagged them to show Tom how many there were.

Tom started running into the woods, and then he came out on the other side of them, where the road came up over the edge of the Drop, and he was running down the road. And then Helen was running after him, and Tom saw her. Tom yelled something and she stopped, but she didn't go back.

Tom had a little hammer in his hand.

Dick heard a crack, like a twig breaking, and he looked down and down, and across the fields, and he saw that the men in green had their guns up to their shoulders, and he saw a little white puff of smoke floating away from one of them. Then he saw white puffs come out of all the guns.

Dick looked back at Tom, and just then Tom fell down, but he didn't stop. He was crawling down the road, and Helen was running down it now, running fast.

A lot of cracks came to Dick's ear, and across the fields the air was full of the little white puffs. On the road Helen caught up with Tom and was lifting him up, and then he was leaning on her and the two of them were running down again.

The men in green started running across the fields, stopping every couple of steps to shoot at Tom and Helen, but the Old Ones got down to the bottom of the road, and around inside of where the road started to climb up out of the fields, and the men in green stopped shooting because they couldn't see them any more, but they kept on running.

Dick could see the Old Ones. They were standing near the rocky wall of the hill the road climbed on, Helen's arm around Tom, and the first of the men in green came around to where he could see them.

Tom lifted his little hammer and hit the rock with it. A cloud of dust hid the Old Ones, and Dick heard a boom, and then there was another boom, and another, and one so loud it filled the whole world. The hill the road climbed on leaned away from the rest of the Mountain, and it started to fall.

It fell slowly at first, and then faster and faster, down on where the Old Ones were, and on the men in green, and the noise was so loud Dick couldn't hear any noise at all, and the air was so full of dust it was like night.

The whole Mountain shook, and the tree shook so hard Dick had to grab hold of it to keep from being shaken and his hands started to slip, and...

(Dikar woke.)

CHAPTER VI: SHADOWS AT SUNRISE

Dikar lay in his cot, his eyes still closed, remembering his dream, fitting the things it had shown him into the things he knew, seeing how it explained a lot that had always puzzled him.

It explained the Rule that no fire must ever be made except with wood so dry that it would burn without smoke, and the Rule that no fire must ever burn at night except the big Fire on the Fire Stone, and why the big Fire was set not in the center of the space between the Boys' House and the Girls' House but at one end, where it was hidden from the sky by the spreading leafy top of the giant oak. It explained the Rule that when there was a noise in the sky like a bee buzzing, everyone must run into the Houses or into the woods and stay very still until the sound was gone.

But most of all it explained the Must-Not about going out of the edge of the woods, about going to the edge of the Drop.

They were down there, in the woods across the space of tumbled stones at the bottom of the Drop, beneath which the Old Ones lay. Dressed in green, with black faces and yellow faces. They were in the woods, and in all the far country Dikar could see when he climbed the tall tree, if They saw any of the Bunch come to the top of the Drop and so found out that the Bunch lived on the Mountain, They would come and do to the Bunch what, in his dream, They did to all the kids on that terrible night in the Long-Ago.

Dikar knew now how the Bunch had come to the Mountain, and he knew now that the Bunch could not always stay here on the Mountain. Some day he must lead the Bunch down the Drop, down into the far, green country that stretched away, fold on fold, to meet the sky. And now Dikar was glad that he was Boss of the Bunch, so that he would lead them—

But after this morning he might be no longer Boss!

Dikar remembered that he must fight Tomball over who should be Boss, and he remembered what Tomball had done and what Tomball had said last night, between dream and dream. Dikar threw off his blanket and leaped from his cot, and all down the length of the Boys' House bronzed forms leaped from the cots, and curtains were raised, and the sun streamed in.

But the Boys did not laugh in the sun, and they did not laugh and play jokes on one another as they ran, behind Dikar, out through the door in the wall away from the Girls' House, and through the woods to where a stream leaped from a ledge overhead into a pool below, and ran brawling out of the pool as if eager to reach the edge of the Drop and leap again over it, and smash itself on the tumbled rocks below.

The Boys did not shout as they sprang after Dikar into the icy pool, and none swam near him, and none joined him when he climbed on the stone where the stream came down, and stood there, letting the stream batter him.

But when tingling with the cold of the waters, with the lash of the spray, Dikar ran back through the woods to the Boys' House, little Jimlane came up to run beside him.

"Dikar," Jimlane panted. "Oh, Dikar. They're sayin Tomball is sure to beat you. They're sayin he's too strong for you. An' a lot are sayin it's a good thing, that they're tired of you being Boss, and that when Tomball is Boss we won't have to work all the time, an' we'll have more time for Games, an' for playin' with the Girls."

Dikar ran along, and from his lithe limbs the drops spattered, shining in the sun, and under his yellow beard his jaw muscles hardened, but he did not speak.

"An’ Tomball says he's goin’ to fix me when he's Boss,” Jimlane whimpered. “An’ I'm afraid, Dikar. I'm awful afraid."

Dikar looked down at the little fellow, and he saw the frightened eyes in the pimply face, and the gray, quivering lips.

"Don't worry, kid,” he grunted. “Tomball won't win.” But Dikar wasn't sure.

Somehow Brekfes was over, and the Bunch was gathered in a circle in the space between the Houses, the Girls on one side and the Boys on the other, and Marilee sat in the Boss's Seat beneath the giant oak, her brown hair still unbraided, mantling her, her small face color-drained. Dikar stood before her, and Tomball stood by his side, and Marilee was speaking.

"You fight,” Marilee's clear, sweet voice said, “over who shall be Boss of the Bunch, an’ the Bunch will obey as Boss the one who wins. You fight with bare fists, an’ you fight fair. You begin when I say the word, you end when one is beaten.” Her brown eyes were on Dikar's, and her eyes told Dikar that he must not be beaten. “That is all."

Dikar turned away and walked toward one end of the cleared space about which the Bunch stood murmuring. The grass was cool under his bare feet, and springy.

Marilee had ordered it carefully raked, so that there would be no branches to trip the fighters, and no small stones to bruise them if they fell. Many twigs and leaves and small stones had been raked out of the grass, and so calm was Dikar that he even noted how the stones had been put in a great circle to mark the bounds of the space in which he must fight, and how just beyond the circle the Boys and Girls stood tight-packed.

Dikar came to the end of the space, and turned, and across the space he saw Tomball turning. Fredalton was whispering something in Tomball's ear, and Tomball nodded, grinning with his thick lips.

"Fight!” Marilee cried out.

Dikar started going back toward Tomball, and Tomball came to meet him, half-crouched, his black-stubbed countenance scowling fiercely, great pads of muscle across his shaggy chest, his hairy belly indrawn.

Dikar moved lithely across the raked grass, his beard shining yellow in the sunlight, his limbs dusted with yellow hair.

All at once Tomball was very close, and Tomball's fist struck Dikar's cheek, and Dikar's cheek knotted with the pain of the blow, and his head rocked.

But Dikar's arm jarred with the blow he had landed on Tomball's chest, and then Dikar no longer felt any pain. He stood breast to breast with his enemy, his fisted arms were clubs that pounded the dark face and the hairy body he hated. There was a salt taste in his mouth that was very pleasant, and there was joy in the blows he gave, and joy even in the blows he received.

He made no effort to guard himself from Tomball's blows, nor did Tomball try to guard himself from Dikar's. They fought like the beasts fight, eager only to hurt, eager only to pound the other to submission.

And over them washed the shouts and the screams of the Bunch.

Into a red haze that was all that was left of his vision, Dikar flung arms so heavy he barely could lift them. Somewhere in the haze was a darker bulk that moved about, and it was at this Dikar flung his arms. Sometimes Dikar found it, more often not, and when he missed the weight of his arms pulled him off balance, and he would start to fall, and somehow not fall.

Sometimes Dikar would be struck, out of the haze, and he would sway on his legs that had no strength in them, and almost go down; but he did not let himself because he must not, though he no longer knew why.

And out of the haze came an endless thunder of shouting.

Dikar pawed once again at the vague bulk that was his enemy, and missed, and swayed, and in that instant the bulk struck him, and Dikar's legs folded, and he sank. His sight cleared, and lurching at him came Tomball's red-bathed body, Tomball's distorted face. Somehow Dikar threw a heavy arm at Tomball and struck him, so that as Dikar settled to the ground Tomball staggered back.

Tomball did not fall, but was steadying. Dikar, sprawled on the grass, knew that when Tomball had steadied he would come in again to finish Dikar, and Dikar did not care—

"Dikar!" he heard a high, clear voice above the endless roar. "No!" *Marilee!* "No, Dikar. No!" And suddenly Dikar cared desperately that Tomball was beating him, and his fallen body trembled as he tried to get up, but he had no strength—

"Oh up, Dikar," a voice squeaked, and Jimlane's pimpled face swam over Dikar, close to Dikar's face, and Jimlane's hand was tugging at Dikar's hand to pull him up. "You can lick him now, Dikar." Dikar came up with the pull of Jimlane's hand, Jimlane's fingers closing Dikar's hand into a fist. And Tomball, grinning through the red that masked him, lurched in to beat Dikar down again.

Dikar lifted a heavy arm and flung it at Tomball, and Dikar's fist fell on Tomball's brow. Tomball crumpled and lay, a still heap on the grass, with Dikar swaying above him, arms hanging by his sides, in his ears a deafening roar.

And out of the roar came Marilee, her cheeks rosy, her eyes alight. "Oh, Dikar."

That was all she said, but Dikar straightened, feeling the strength flow back into him, hearing the hurrahs of the Bunch clear in his ears, knowing the hurrahs were for him.

Marilee took hold of Dikar's wrist to lift his arm and cry him the winner.

The color fled from her cheeks and from her lips, and the light went from her eyes as they fell to Dikar's still-fisted hand.

Dikar's eyes went down to where Marilee's eyes looked, and they saw what Marilee's eyes saw. In his fist that had pounded Tomball down was clenched a stone, and there was blood on the stone, Tomball's blood.

Dikar knew now why Jimlane had closed that hand into a fist, why Jimlane, tugging him up, had said, "You can lick him now." Jimlane had—

"Dikar," Marilee sobbed. "Oh, Dikar," and then Marilee was lifting Dikar's arm so that all might see what was in Dikar's fist, and the hurrahs stopped, and there was a throbbing hush.

Marilee's voice was loud and clear in that terrible hush. "I cry Dikar no fair. I cry Tomball the winner of the fight. I cry Tomball Boss of the Bunch."

Marilee threw Dikar's arm from her, and it was as if she threw Dikar from her, and she turned away. Dikar thought he heard Marilee sob, but she walked away from him head high, back proud. Dikar's mouth moved but no words came out of it, and he knew there was no use of his saying that he had not known the stone was in his fist.

A strange, low sound came from the throats of the Bunch, and it grew louder. A stone struck Dikar on the shoulder, and another, and Dikar saw that all the Bunch was bending to pick up stones, lifting them to throw them at him.

"Run!" Jimlane screamed. "Run, Dikar," and Dikar turned and ran, the stones falling about him; ran, staggering, straight at the hating faces of the Bunch, and the Bunch opened a path for him, and Dikar ran into the woods, the stones spattering about him.

Dikar ran in the dim woods till he fell, and he crawled till he could crawl no longer, and he lay still in the woods, and a sick nothingness took him.

CHAPTER VII: THE FAR GREEN LAND

Dikar lived in the woods as the beasts live, and as the beasts' hurts heal so did his. He set snares for the rabbits and the birds that were so plentiful in the woods, and cooked them over his little fires. He found sharp-edged stones, and used them as knives to make a bow for himself, twisting and drying the gut of the rabbit for string, and he made arrows, feathering them, and a quiver out of the bark of a birch.

He hunted with his bow and arrows, and he lay long hours on the mossy floor of a clearing near the top of the Mountain, waiting the little creatures of the forest play, looking sometimes into the great, beautiful eyes of the deer peering out at him from the brush, watching the birds chirp on the tree boughs above him.

It was spring and always the small woods creatures played two by two, and the deer went two by two, and the birds; and seeing this, Dikar would think of Marilee.

Yes, Dikar's hurts healed but the ache within him did not heal.

Sometimes Dikar would climb to the topmost branch of a tall tree that stood on the very top of the Mountain. He would stay there till dark, gazing at the far green land that stretched, fold on fold, away to where the sky came down to meet it. He would think of what he had dreamed the last night he was Boss, and of his thought that some day he would lead the Bunch down into that pleasant land, and his heart would be heavy within him.

Spring warmed into summer, and summer deepened.

Every night Dikar would slip through the woods till he came to where the trees were black against the red glow of the Fire, and he could crouch behind the trunk of some tree and look out into the space between the Houses. He dared not do this till just before Bed-Time, when he knew most of the Bunch were in the Houses and there was little danger of one coming upon him.

Dikar would hear the drone of their Now-I-lay-mes, and he would kneel and say his own with them. With his palms together and his eyes closed, it was almost as if he knelt by his own cot in the Boys' House, almost as if he were still one of the Bunch.

After his Now-I-lay-me was said, Dikar would stay there, listening to the talk of the Boys or the Girls whose turn it was to tend the Fire.

What Dikar heard made his heart heavy. As he had feared, Tomball was letting the Bunch break Rule

after Rule, was favoring his pals and laying double work on those he did not like, was shirking many of the little things that Dikar knew were needed if the Bunch was to be warm and comfortable and safe when the cold came, and the snow.

One of the Rules Tomball allowed to be broken was the Rule that none must leave his cot after Bed-Time. Dikar would see Girls come out of the Girls' House and slip off into the woods, and he would see Boys do the same. Often they had not yet come back when Dikar tired of watching had gone back to the shelter he had woven for himself out of twigs. One thing troubled Dikar above all others. He never saw Marilee tending the Fire. That she was never one of those who went into the woods after Bed-Time pleased him, but it was strange that her turn never came to tend the Fire.

* * * *

One night Dikar heard the reason. He'd heard that, the day he was stoned, Marilee had said that she no longer would be Boss of the Girls, that she had made Bessalton Boss in her place on the promise that she would free Marilee of the duty of tending to the Fire, or of any other duty that would take her away from the other Girls. And that this was because Tomball wanted Marilee to go into the woods with him, and Marilee feared him.

Dikar's throat grew thick when he heard this. Growling, he rose from his haunches to stride out into the light of the Fire and call out Tomball to fight him, not with fists, but with bows and arrows, and knives, in a fight to the death. His rage blinding him, Dikar was caught in a bush he did not see, and before he could get free he heard something else from the tongue of Jimlane, who was tending the Fire with Billthomas and had spoken of Marilee and Tomball.

"If Dikar was Boss again, things would be different, but there's no chance of that, because the minute he shows up the Bunch will stone him again, the way Tomball was ordered, and he would not get away again."

Dikar went cold, remembering the way the stones had spattered about him, and was very still in the bush.

"The Bunch wouldn't stone Dikar," Billthomas said, very low and looking about with frightened eyes, "if you spoke out. Tomball's orders or no, they would not stone Dikar if they knew that it wasn't Dikar's fault he fought no fair."

"I dare not tell them," Jimlane's eyes went big in his white face. "You remember how I told you, and how you said yourself the Bunch would stone me if I told."

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, I couldn't rest, and I went to Tomball and told him, and Tomball beat me till I could hardly walk. That was the time I said I fell into a hole in the woods, you remember. And after Tomball beat me, he told me that if I said a word to anyone else he would kill me, and he would kill anyone I told."

"He did!" Now there was fear in Billthomas's eyes, too, and in his face. "You should not have told me, Jimlane—if Tomball finds out I know—" His voice was still low, but there was a scream in it.

"If only," Jimlane sobbed, "Dikar could some way come back and protect me while I told the Bunch—"

"What's the use of all the ifs?" Billthomas broke in. "Tomball's made sure Dikar would be

killed before you had a chance to say anythin'. The best thing we can do is forget about Dikar, like everyone else has."

"Yes," Jimlane whispered. "I guess so. Dikar isn't one of the Bunch any more and he will never be again."

"Never again," Billthomas agreed.

Now indeed Dikar, rigid in the dark, knew that he was disowned by his kind. He must live out his life alone, a wild beast in the woods—

And then, perhaps from Some unseen Presence in the close-crowding dark, perhaps from within Dikar, a thought came to him. He was no longer one of the Bunch, and so he was not bound by the Rules of the Bunch. He was not bound by the Must-Nots that the Bunch must obey. There was something for him to do, and no Rule to say that he must not.

He drifted off into the darkness, silent as a shadow. But there was no sleep for Dikar that night.

* * * *

All that night, and all the next day, Dikar was busy, cutting down long vines from the trees, testing each one for strength. He plaited the vines, never stopping, never resting, till by nightfall he had made a rope long enough for his need.

When dark came Dikar hung his quiver of arrows over one shoulder, and he hung the great coil of green rope over the other shoulder, and he followed the sound of a stream through the black forest till he came to where the woods ended and there was a little space between the edge of the woods and the edge of the Drop, where the stream leaped out into the night.

Here Dikar paused, and laid the rope down, and passed its end around the great trunk of a tree that grew beside the stream, and fastened the rope with many knots, and pulled on it with all his strength to make certain that the knots would hold.

Dikar bent, then, and lifted the coil of rope that he had made from the vines, and carried it to the edge of the Drop, and let it fall into the dark.

At his feet the rope tautened, and quivered, and below him there was the sound of its unwinding coil thumping against the high, sheer rock of the Drop, and the sound of the stream's waters, falling down and down into sightless blackness. And then the rope at Dikar's feet was no longer quivering, so that he knew the coil was all unwound.

Dikar bent again, and lifted the rope, and moved it over so that it lay in the water where the stream leaped out over the Drop, so that when the sun rose again, all the length of the rope that hung down the Drop would be hidden behind the falling waters.

Then, without pause, Dikar had hold of the rope with his hands, and he was over the edge of the Drop, and the icy waters were rushing about him, were battering him, were fighting to break loose his hold and send him hurtling down into the dizzy dark to smash on the rocks below.

Dikar could not see and he could not breathe, and his hands were slipping on the wet rope. He caught a leg around the rope, and slid. He could breathe again because he hung between the rushing waters and the rocky face of the Drop.

Dikar went down and down, endlessly, down into the black and dizzy darkness, down to where the great

stones lay tumbled, and the waters raged between them, and the Old Ones slept.

* * * *

The sun was high in the sky, but Dikar was concealed in the leafy shadow of a treetop where he lay outstretched along a thick bough. He was peering at a sight that made of his skin an icy, prickling sheath for his body.

The tree was at the other end of the woods through which Dikar had loped after finally crossing the belt of immense stones that lay about the Mountain where the Bunch lived. Some time in the night, sounds ahead, and moving lights, had alarmed him, and he had climbed the tree to wait for what the day would show him.

Dikar, as comfortable there as on his mossy bed in the Mountain forest, had slept longer than he intended. Into his feet had come the sound of marching feet, and he had thought himself back in his dream of the night before his fight with Tomball. But his eyes had opened and the marching feet had still sounded in his ears, and then Dikar had seen those whose feet made the sound.

The tree in which Dikar wakened was at the edge of the woods and the edge of a great, flat field. Not far from the tree wires stretched, one above the other, twice Dikar's height. Fastened to thin poles, the wires ran away on either hand as far as Dikar could see, and the wires were thick with long, sharp thorns that would tear a Boy's flesh to bits.

Beyond this set of wires was another set just like them, as high and as wickedly barbed, and between the two sets of wires stood, far apart, figures out of Dikar's dream.

They were dressed in green like the men in the dream who had run across the fields that now were covered with great stones, shooting at the Old Ones. Like those, their faces and their hands were black, and like those they carried the shiny sticks that Dikar now remembered were called "guns."

But the sound of marching feet came from inside the second fence. A great crowd of people were marching out of some long, low houses that were very much like the Bunch's Houses. Just as Dikar spied them, they stopped marching and stood in a long, straight line in front of the houses.

They were pretty far away, but Dikar could see them, and he could see that they were very thin, and they were dressed in ragged clothes that hung loose on them. He could see that their faces were white, and that their eyes were sunk deep in their heads, and that they were all stooped over as if they were very tired, although it was only early morning.

A voice yelled something, and the white people turned, so that the lines faced Dikar. Dikar saw that the one who had yelled was different. His face was yellow, and he was dressed in green, but there was something different about his green clothes, and he had no gun.

There were other men in green standing around in there. Some of them were black-faced, and some yellow-faced, some had guns and others didn't. One very big one only had green on below his waist, above that he had nothing on. His body was as yellow as his face, and his muscles were bigger than Dikar's muscles, or even Tomball's. He was holding something in one hand. It was long and thin and black. His other hand was against a thick post beside which he stood.

The man in the different green clothes yelled something again, and then Dikar saw two black-faced ones come out of a smaller house to one side, and between them was a white one who was so weak they had to almost carry him. They came to the thick post, and they shoved the white man up against the post with his face to it, and they tied his arms and his legs around it, and then they tore off his clothes above the

waist, and stepped away.

The yellow-faced man yelled a lot to the white people. Dikar could hear him, but he couldn't make out what he was saying. When he finished he made a sign with his hand to the big yellow man.

That one lifted the long, thin thing he held, and it looked like a snake. And he lifted it above his head and it straightened out, and then it came down across the back of the white man who was tied to the post. Dikar heard the crack it made, and he saw the red mark across the white man's back.

And the yellow man lifted the thin, snakelike thing again, and brought it down again, and there was another crack, and another red mark across the white man's back.

Dikar was sick, seeing that. And then he wasn't sick. He was mad. He wanted to yell out, "Stop!" but he remembered his dream now, remembered what the guns could do, and he knew that if he yelled the men between the wires would see him and shoot him down.

Crack, Dikar heard, and *crack* again, and now the back of the man tied to the post was all red, all shining red. But Dikar was on his feet, on the tree branch. He was pulling taut the string of his bow, and an arrow was laid across it.

The big yellow lifted his arm again, but when it fell there was no crack. The big yellow was falling, and the feathers of an arrow were sticking out of his back. Just the feathers.

Dikar didn't see any more, because he was swinging through the treetops, a brown and naked Boy flashing through the tops of the trees, fleeing the death from the guns that he recalled were swifter and farther reaching than any arrow.

Whether the men in green ever thought to look for him in the treetops Dikar never knew.

* * * *

Far away from the place of the thorny wires, Dikar lay on his belly in the tall grass that covered a hill, and he looked down through the grass at a place where two roads crossed.

There stood a pole, high as a tall tree, but there was no bark on it, no branches nor leaves, and because at its top five or six cross-sticks were fastened, and a lot of wires ran from these cross-pieces to other cross-sticks at the top of another pole far away down one of the roads.

Dikar was looking at a rope that hung taut from one of the cross-sticks at the top of the pole. Dikar was looking at that which weighed down the rope and kept it taut.

The thing swung back and forth, back and forth, very slowly in the wind, and rags fluttered about it in the wind, and the rags were no grayer nor dirtier than the thing was. And Dikar saw that the thing once had been a man.

...Dikar came to a place where there was a House all of rock, and it was three or four times as high as the Boys' House, and ten times as long. The window openings in the wall of this House were very high and very wide.

Dikar saw a lot of people in there, and there were white men and women. These were thin and gray and sunken-eyed as those in the place with the wires, and they were pushing around things piled high with heavy loads, and they were so weak they could push the things only slowly. And there were men in green standing around, and these had little guns hanging at their waists, and they held black, snakelike things like the big yellow one held.

And Dikar saw a white woman stumble and fall, and he saw one of the men in green raise the thing he held and bring it down on her, again and again till, all bloody, she pulled herself up on the thing she had been pushing and started pushing it again.

And the other men in green laughed, but the white people just kept on pushing, all stooped over and weak, their eyes like the eyes of the woman in Dikar's dream who stood in the subway station and said that God was dead.

Dikar went far and wide that day, a brown shadow flitting through the fields and the woods, a silent shadow none saw. Dikar saw many things that day, and the more he saw the heavier his heart grew within him. For Dikar knew that the white-faced men and women were his people and that this green land belonged to them and to him, and that the black men and yellow men were They whom the voice in his dream had said, “have come out of the East to make this world a Hell."

Yes, Dikar saw the Hell they had made ... The sky darkened and the night crept out of the Woods, and Dikar lay belly down in tall grass of a field near the woods, head buried in his curled arm, thinking. Last night he had known that he would never return to the Mountain where the Bunch lived, and now he knew that he could not stay in this land that had seemed so pleasant when he had gazed at it from his tall tree in the forest.

Neither there nor here was there place for Dikar. Nowhere was there place for him—

Fingers clutched Dikar's arm, bruising fingers. Dikar rolled over but the fingers held, and there was a growl of words Dikar could not understand, and in the sunless dusk Dikar saw green-clothed legs, and a green-clothed breast, and a black, fierce face goggling at him.

CHAPTER VIII: IN THE TOMORROW

Dikar kicked at the black man's legs, and he saw the black man's hand dart to the little gun at his waist. Dikar kicked again, wrenched loose, exploded from the ground.

Dikar's one hand caught the little gun, his other smashed into the black, goggling face. Somehow the black man was on the ground and Dikar was atop him, and Dikar was clutching the black throat with one hand while the other was smashing the little gun down on the black man's head, smashing and smashing and smashing.

When Dikar fled into the night-shrouded woods he left behind him something that had legs and a body and arms, but nothing that was anything like a head.

Deep in the woods, Dikar found a little cave. He crawled into this and lay there a long time, shuddering. But after awhile he stirred, and he became aware that he still held in his hands the little gun, and he sat up, his eyes widening with a sudden thought.

Dikar hid the little gun under a pile of rotting leaves, and he went out of the cave and prowled about till he was certain that no one was anywhere within sound of hearing. Then he went back into the cave with certain things he had picked up and he made a fire, and by the light of the fire Dikar studied the little gun until he had made out how it worked.

Satisfied at last, Dikar put out his fire and buried it with wet earth, and left the cave. That night Dikar traveled far and fast, but careful to leave no tracks by which he might be traced.

Dikar was going back to the Mountain, and he must not leave any trail the men in green might follow.

* * * *

One more night Dikar stole down through the dark forest to the Houses of the Bunch, but this night it was long after Bed-Time that he did so. This night Dikar did not crouch behind a tree, looking out at the Fire, but crept, noiselessly, along the wall of the Boys's House that was away from the Fire till, under a certain window opening, he came to a stop.

Dikar listened, trembling a bit, and all he could hear was the whisper of wind in the trees, and the shrill of insects in the night, and the soft breathing of the sleeping Boys. Dikar lifted, slowly, slowly, till he stood upright. The ground here was banked against the wall so that, standing, Dikar's belly was level with the bottom of the window.

Slowly, he ran his hand over the sill, and touched the curtain of woven withes; and moved it aside. And then he was peering through, and a fleck of red light was dancing on a sleeping face, and the face was rashed with pimples.

Dikar breathed again. He had remembered right. This was Jimlane.

Dikar got his other hand through the window, and then it was tight over Jimlane's mouth, and Jimlane's scared eyes were staring up at Dikar.

"Listen," Dikar breathed. "Listen to me, Jimlane." Dikar spoke so low that barely he could hear himself, but by the look in Jimlane's eyes he knew that Jimlane heard him and understood.

After awhile Dikar stole away, and for the first time since Tomball had challenged him, Dikar was smiling.

There was green all about Dikar, the dancing, leafy green of the top of the giant oak in which he had spent the rest of that night. He was still smiling when he awoke, but peering through the leaves at the Bunch where they chattered, cleaning up after Brekfes, there was a flutter of some small muscle in the tautness of his belly.

Across the space between the House Dikar spied Marilee talking with Bessalton. Dikar saw how thin Marilee had grown, and how wan her little face, and how her fingers plucked endlessly at her short skirt of plaited grasses, and Dikar's smile faded.

Tomball strode up to the two Girls, black-stubbled as ever. His belly was overlaid with fat, but it was still shaggy with hair, and Tomball's grin was still leering.

Tomball put a hand on Marilee's arm, and Marilee shrank away from him. Under Dikar's yellow beard little muscles knotted to ridge his jaw, and there was a growl in his throat.

Tomball laughed, and then from behind the Boys's House came the loud words of a scrap. "He's mine!" Jimlane's voice piped, and "I say he's mine," squealed the thin voice of Billthomas, and around the corner of the Boys's House the two came, and between them was a half-grown fawn, with a vine wound around its brown neck and trailing, broken, from it.

Jimlane had hold of the fawn's head and Billthomas of its hind legs, and each tugged as if to take it from the other.

"It was caught in my snare," Billthomas piped.

"You lie," Jimlane squealed.

And then Billthomas straightened and cried out. "It's you who lie, Jimlane. I dare you to fight out with me, bare fists, whose snare he was caught in, and whose he shall be."

Tomball's deep-chested laugh came to Dikar's ears, but Jimlane's voice, breaking from squeal to bass and back again to squeal, was answering Billthomas. "You dare me fight whose the fawn shall be?" it said. "Do you cry a fight between us fair?"

And Billthomas: "I cry us equal-matched," and all about were cries of, "Fair. Fair. They're equal-matched!" and the Boys and Girls of the Bunch were running from all over, and crying, "Fight! Let them fight!"

And then the Bunch was crowded in a great circle, and the fawn was tied by the vine about its neck to the Boss's Seat, and Tomball, grinning, was seated in the Boss's Seat, just beneath the oak, and Bessalton was seated beside him, mantled in her black hair, and Jimlane and Billthomas stood before them while Tomball spoke to them.

But Dikar's look was on Marilee where she stood in the crowd, her two long brown braids coming down over her shoulders, her deepening breasts beneath leafy circlets.

Dikar's eyes drank thirstily of Marilee till Tomball was finished speaking and Jimlane and Billthomas were walking slowly, each to their end of the cleared space where they were to fight. Jimlane reached the end of the circle, turned—

The little gun jumped in Dikar's hand, and the fawn, just beneath him dropped, wet-redness streaking the brown neck.

A Girl screamed, high and shrill, and then Dikar was shouting: "Stay where you are or I'll kill each of you as I've killed the fawn. I'll kill the first one that moves."

"Dikar!" Marilee cried, and then she was silent, and all were silent and unmoving, the Boys and the Girls in their jammed circle, Tomball in the Boss's Seat.

"Jimlane," Dikar shouted down into that hush, "tell the Bunch how the stone came into my hand with which I struck Tomball when we fought who should be Boss."

Jimlane, white of face and big of eye, but standing straight, cried out. "I put the stone in Dikar's hand, when he fell at my feet."

"Did I know you put the stone in my hand?" Dikar shouted from the tree.

"You did not know, Dikar. You were blinded with your own blood, and numbed with Tomball's blows, and you did not know there was a stone in your hand."

A murmuring ran around the circle, and a growl, and Dikar saw that the Bunch did not quite believe that he had not known he was striking Tomball with a stone though they had agreed to fight bare fist.

"Jimlane," Dikar shouted. "Have you ever told this thing to anyone?"

"I told it to Tomball," Jimlane cried, "and Tomball beat me for saying that you did not know you fought no fair, and Tomball said that if I spoke to anyone else he would kill me, and kill the one to whom I spoke of it."

"You lie!" Tomball shouted, starting from seat. "You lie, dumby!" Jimlane screamed with terror of Tomball, but Dikar's shout beat down Jimlane's scream.

"Back!" Dikar shouted. "Back to your seat, Tomball, or you die." And Tomball went pasty white under his black stubble, and he slumped down in his seat.

And Dikar leaped out from the oak bough on which he stood, and came down, spring-legged, in the clear space around which the Bunch was jammed, and held aloft the little gun.

"This is the thing that kills," he shouted. "Without it I cannot kill," and then he flung the little gun from him, flung it hard so that it went up on the roof of the Boys' House and stayed there.

"Now I cannot kill," Dikar shouted. "No more than any of you."

"Stone him," Tomball yelled. "Stone him, Bunch. He is none of us and we will have none of him." And Dikar saw the Bunch stoop to pluck up stones. Spraddle-legged, bronze-skinned in the sun, he saw this, and his heart within him died, but he would not move.

"No!" It was a high, wild cry in his ear, and it came from Marilee, and Marilee's was beside Dikar. "I cry no fair. I cry the Bunch no fair, all of you against this one."

"He fought no fair," Tomball shouted, "and so has no right to call for fairness. Stand aside, Marilee, and let the Bunch stone him."

"I will not stand aside," Marilee answered. "Be you Boss or not, till you tell the Bunch why you said you would kill Jimlane if he told his tale to anyone, and would kill anyone he told the tale to. If you still thought Dikar had fought no fair, why were you afraid to let the Bunch hear Jimlane's tale and judge for themselves?"

Now Tomball's little eyes seemed to have grown even smaller, and his mouth was drawn very tight.

"She's right," someone yelled. "Why, Tomball, did you not let us judge for ourselves?"

"Jimlane lies," Tomball answered. "He never told me this tale, and I never—"

"It is you who lie," Dikar cut in. "I say you lie, Tomball. I cry you a liar, Tomball, and I dare you to fight me whether you lie or not. I cry that I fought fair, and I dare you to fight me whether I fought fair or not. I dare you to fight me who shall be Boss of the Bunch. I cry us equal-matched, and if you refuse to fight me I will cry you a liar and yellow and not fit to be Boss of the Bunch and not fit to be one of the Bunch. Will you fight, Tomball, bare fists?"

There was only one answer Tomball could make. "I fight you bare fists, Dikar. I fight you here and now."

And then they were fighting, were clubbing at each other with fisted arms, lips drawn back from white teeth, eyes hating. But Dikar was gaunt and hard-bitten, and toughened by the life he had led since he'd been stoned from the Bunch, and Tomball was fat and slow, and short-winded, and so the fight did not last long. Dikar beat Tomball down, laid him rolling at his feet, and there was scarcely a mark on Dikar when he stood above his beaten enemy and heard the shouts of the Bunch.

"Hurray for Dikar. Hurray for the Boss. Hurray and hurray and hurray."

Dikar scarcely heard the hurrahs. He was peering about for Marilee and he saw her, and he motioned commandingly for her to come to him. She came to him, her white and slender body shining in the sun, her eyes shining more brightly than the sun, and then she was beside Dikar, and Dikar's arm was around her, and he was holding her close to his side.

Under the thunder of the hurrahs, Dikar spoke to Marilee. "Marilee," he said. "In the time I have been alone in the woods I have learned many things—and one of the things I

have learned is that each creature has his mate, the birds and the small beasts of the woods, and the deer. I learned that He who made all things meant this to be so, and meant that we too, each of us, shall have his mate. Marilee, I want you for my mate. He was looking down into her face, and now he waited, with a tightness growing in him that was both keen happiness and fear.

Marilee's red lips spoke. "Oh, Dikar. This that you have learned only now, I have known always. Dikar, always I have wanted you for my mate."

A great joy leaped within Dikar, and he raised his hand and roared, "Shut up! Shut up, all of you." And the hurrahs died away, and the Bunch was hushed, and Dikar was talking into that smiling hush.

"There are many things I have to say to you, and many Rules I shall have to change. All this will come later. Just now I have something to say, but not to you, though I wish all the Bunch to hear it, all the Bunch, and Another."

Then, in that hush, Dikar turned to the giant oak, and to the forest beyond the oak, and his voice was low, and slow, and awed.

"You Whose voice is the whisper of the wind in the trees, and the ripple of the water in the streams and the song of the insects in the night! You, who watch over us by day, and by night! You to Whom we say our Now-I-lay-mes at BedTime! Sir! Look upon me and upon this Girl, and hear me. In your sight and your hearing I take this Girl to be my mate, and none other than this Girl, and to You and to her I promise that all my life I will take care of her and let no harm come near her. I promise that all my life she shall be bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh, all my life and all her life, and always and always."

"Hear me, Sir!" Marilee's clear, young voice rang out. "I shall be this Boy's mate, and none other's, and he shall be bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh, always and always."

And it seemed to Dikar that a soft hand stroked his hair, though it might have been the wind. How could it be the wind, though, that said in his ear, in sweet, low tones, "The Lord bless you, my son, and the Lord bless my daughter."

Dikar had climbed to the topmost branch of the tallest tree in the forest, and Marilee had climbed there with him. For a long time, clasped in each other's arms, they had gazed out on the green land that stretched, fold on fold, to the sky, while Dikar told Marilee of his dream that was not a dream, and of the terrible things he had seen down there.

"Some day, Marilee," Dikar ended. "I shall lead the Bunch down there. I have to, because down there is the America of which the man spoke, and this is the Tomorrow he talked about, and we are the children of yesterday who will reconquer those green and pleasant fields for democracy, and liberty, and freedom."

And all at once there was a light shining on the land down there, a great and golden light that cast no shadows.

PART TWO

CHILDREN OF TOMORROW

CHAPTER I: NIGHT WINGS

"Dikar," Marilee said, low-voiced.

"Of all the day between sunrise and sunrise, I am most happy in this quiet hour just before bedtime." Lying on the grass beside him, the warmth of her love enfolded Dikar like the warmth of the fire behind them and the scent of her in his nostrils was sweet and clean as the breath of the woods that enclosed the wide, long clearing. "I am so happy that I'm afraid," Marilee went on. "Something out there in the night hates to see me so happy."

Dikar's great paw tightened on the slim, small hand of his mate, but he said nothing. "I'm afraid," Marilee's gray eyes widened, "that someday it will take you away from me, and leave me all empty."

Dikar's high forehead was deeply lined with thought, his lips pressed tightly together within his blond, silken beard. From the logs on the Fire Stone the crackling flames leaped high, reaching always for the leafy canopy a giant oak held above them, never quite touching it. The ruddy light of the flames filled the clearing, from the long Boys' House on one side to the Girls' House on the other, from the Fire Stone at this end to the table and benches under the pole-upheld roof of the eating place at the other. The light played on the brown, strong limbs of the Boys of the Bunch, on the slender bodies of the Girls, as they walked slowly or lay, like Dikar and Marilee, in pairs on the grass, murmuring.

Over the clearing the purple-black Mountain hung, and the forest enclosed the clearing with night. The forest was silent with its own queer silence that is made up of countless little noises; the piping of insects, the chirp of nesting birds, the scurry of small beasts in the brush, the babble of streamlets hurrying to leap over the edge of the Drop.

Dikar thought of the Drop, of how its high wall of riven rock completely circled the Mountain, so barren of foothold that no living thing could hope to scale it unaided. He thought of the tumbled stones below the Drop, stones big as the Boys' House and bigger, and of how the water of the streamlets foamed white and angry between the stones, and of how beneath stones and water slept the Old Ones who brought the Bunch to the Mountain in the Long-Ago Time of Fear that none of the Bunch remembered clearly, most not at all.

"Dikar!" As Marilee's head rolled to him, a gap formed in the rippling mantle of her soft, brown hair and a round, naked shoulder peeped through. "You won't let it take you away from me, will you? Will you, Dikar?"

Beyond the tumbled stones, as far as Dikar could see from the topmost bough of the tallest tree on top of the Mountain, stretched the far land where they lived from whom the Old Ones had hidden the Bunch on this Mountain.

"Why don't you answer me, Dikar?" There was sharpness in Marilee's voice. "Don't you hear me? Dikar! What are you thinking about?"

Dikar smiled slowly, his blue eyes finding Marilee. "I am boss of the Bunch, Marilee," he rumbled. "And I've a lot to think about. You know that."

"Yes," she whispered. "I know. But sometimes you could think about me."

"I do. Always." Dikar loosed his hand from Marilee's and, sliding it under her supple waist, drew her close to his great body. "Whatever else I think about, I am always thinking about you too." The trouble within him was a little eased as he looked into her bright and lovely face. "Do I have to tell you that?"

"No," she murmured, nesting warm against him. "You don't have to tell me." She sighed with contentment. Her eyelids drooped drowsily, but Dikar's remained open as his gaze returned to the Boys and the Girls in the clearing.

All the Boys had grown in the long years since the Old Ones brought them here, their cheeks and chins fuzzed, their flat muscles banding torsos naked save for small aprons of green twigs split and plaited. Slim the Girls had grown, slim as the white birches in the woods, and graceful as the fawns that bedded in the forest.

Their loose hair fell rippling and silken to their ankles but as they moved Dikar glimpsed lean flanks, firm thighs brushed by short skirts woven from reeds, ever-deepening breasts hidden by circlets woven of leaves for the unmated, of gay flowers for each who had taken a Boy as mate.

Near the middle of the clearing three or four of the younger Boys knelt, playing with small, round stones the game called aggies. They were beardless as yet, their faces rashed with small pimples, and as they argued about the game their voices were now deep as Dikar's own, now broke into thin squeals.

Abruptly their chatter hushed, and then one of them was on his feet, was running towards where Dikar lay. He was Jimlane, thin-faced, puny, but keenest-eared of all the Bunch.

Dikar put Marilee out of his arms and was rising when Jimlane got to him. "I hear one, Dikar!" the kid gasped. "It's far away, but I hear it."

"Shut up, everybody!" the boss called aloud. "Listen."

There was no sound in the clearing, save for the crackle of the fire. For a long time Dikar heard no sound except the crackle of the flames behind him, the tiny noises from the woods. And then there was another sound, so faint that he was not quite certain he heard it. In the star-prickled sky, it was a buzz like the buzz of a bee although no bee flies at night.

"There!" Jimlane pointed. Where he pointed a star moved, a sparkle of light like a star. "See it?"

"I see it," Dikar said, quietly. Then, more loudly but just as calmly. "Out the fire, Bunch. Quick."

They came running toward him, the Boys and the Girls, and past him into the edge of the woods and then out again, and now each had in his hands a birch bark bucket of earth. Marilee snatched a burning stick from the fire and darted with it into the woods, and the others threw earth on the fire, till the flames flickered and were gone, and the clearing was dark as the forest.

Dikar stared into the sky.

The buzzing was louder now, and nearer. The dot of light came nearer and nearer, moving among the stars, and about it the stars blotted out, and shone again behind it, and now Dikar could make out a black shape in the sky.

"In the houses, Bunch," he ordered, and he heard swift movement in the darkness, the padding of many feet. He was alone, standing under the canopy of the great oak, with the hot smell of burned wood in his nostrils and of baking earth.

The noise in the sky was no longer a buzz but a great roaring and the black shape was very distinct now; its spread wings, its long body, the yellow light at its very tip. Like a bird, it was, but larger than any bird. Its wings lay flat and without motion, like a soaring bird's, but no bird soared so long without wing flap,

no bird soared so straight. It was a plane and there were men in it, and it was flying straight toward the Mountain. At the height it flew, it would just clear the tall tree that stood on the tip of the Mountain.

The roar of the plane beat at Dikar. The plane was almost overhead now and Dikar was afraid.

Dikar was afraid as he was in the dream that so often came to him in his sleep, dream of the dark Time of Fear when was a very little boy called Dick Carr, and the sky over the city would fill with screaming of sirens, and he would run hand in hand with his mother to crouch in the subway, the ground heaving and rolling under their feet. A dream it was, but also a memory so vague Dikar could not be sure which was memory, which dream. But this was no dream, this rattling thunder that clubbed at him out of the sky.

"It will go by," he said to himself. "They always go by."

* * * *

Every once in awhile a plane would fly over the Mountain. At the first sound of it the Bunch would hide—if at night, first outing the fire. The Bunch knew, not quite knowing how, what the planes were, but they were not afraid of the planes. They hid from them because it was one of the musts the Old Ones had left, and the musts of the Old Ones must be obeyed.

No more than the rest of the Bunch Dikar had been afraid of the planes until the day not long ago when he had gone down into the far land from which they came.

Dikar had gone far and wide that day, a shadow flitting through the fields and the woods, a silent shadow none saw; but who had seen white men and women huddled within fences of thorn-covered wire, had seen them beaten by yellow men till the blood ran. He had seen a thing, dried and gray, swing from a tall pole at the end of a rope, and the rags that fluttered about the thing had told him it once had been a man. He had seen white men and women working, thin and sunken-eyed and so weak they could hardly stand; when they fell, had seen them lashed to work again by men dressed in green, black men with yellow faces.

Dikar had seen many terrible things that day, and he had learned how terrible they were who ruled the far land that had seemed so pleasant from his perch on the Mountain's tallest tree.

It was they who rode in the planes, and Dikar knew what it would mean to the Bunch if they found out the Bunch lived on the Mountain, and this was why Dikar was afraid when there was a roar in the sky and a plane flew overhead. But this plane was now hidden from Dikar by the oak's canopy, and the roar in the sky was lessening.

"It's gone by," he said to himself, "like they always—"; The roar in the sky was loud again, the plane, lower now was again blotting out the stars—A white light blazed in the sky, a great white light like the sun! It floated down, making the woods green, filling the clearing with brightness!

Terror was ice in Dikar's veins.

This too was out of his dream, a white light floating down out of the sky, a noise like hundreds of sticks rattling along a hundred fences, screams and crashes, the screams of kids who were fleeing a destroyed city, the crashes of the trucks in which they fled. The truck in which was eight-year-old Dick Carr, in which were Mary Lee and the other kids who now were the Bunch, rocking to a halt on a tree-roofed side road. The two Old Ones stiff with terror on the front seat of the truck...

That white light floating down, showed only an empty clearing, weather-grayed houses about which there

was no sign of life. The light was fading. The black plane was turning again to its course, was blotting the stars no longer, itself was blotted by the purple-dark Mountain. The roar in the sky became the buzz of a monstrous bee. Dikar wiped cold sweat from his forehead with the edge of his hand.

From the plane, held high by the tall forest and steep slope, they had seen nothing of life in the blaze of their white light and they had flown away. But why had they turned back? Why had they lit the clearing with their white light? Always before the planes had flown straight on, over the Mountain.

The bee-buzz in the sky faded to nothingness. The shrilling of insects in the woods began again. Dikar cupped hands about his mouth and called, "Come out. Come out wherever you are."

Forms began to come out of the doors of the houses. Dikar turned to face the woods. "Come out, Marilee," he called through his cupped hands. "M-a-a-arilee."

His shout rolled away into the purple-dark woods, seeking the cave where Marilee hid with the burning stick that must light the fire again, as was her job when a plane came in the night. "M-a-a-rilee." Behind Dikar the Bunch chattered, but no light from Marilee's flaming stick moved among the black tree trunks.

"Ma-a-rilee," Dikar called again, sending his shout into the whispering night of the woods. The woods sent his shout back to him. "Ma-arilee," hollow and mocking, and that was all the answer that came to his shout.

CHAPTER II: TO FIGHT NO-FAIR

Breath pulled in between Dikar's teeth and he was lunging past the oak's enormous bole, plunging into the dark woods. Earth was cold and wet to the soles of his feet. Cold, wet-earth smell was in his nostrils and the green smell of the woods and the smell of mouldering leaves and of the pale things that overnight grew among the leaves. Faintly in his nostrils, too, was the sharp tang of smoke, and that could only be from the stick Marilee had carried off to the cave.

Even to Dikar's eyes, keen as they were, there was no light here, but he moved swiftly, never stumbling, avoiding tree trunks and bushes with the sure deftness of the small woods creatures, no more aware than they how he did so. The ground lifted under his feet, and then there was no longer ground under his feet but rock.

Dikar stopped, sensing walls about him, a roof above him, and so knowing he was in the cave he sought. "Marilee," he called into the sightless blackness. "Marilee. Where are you?"

No answer came. But in his nostrils the smoke-tang he'd followed was sharp, so Dikar knew that Marilee had been here. In his nostrils was the warm, sweet smell of his mate, so that Dikar knew she was still here, somewhere in this blackness-filled cave.

He started moving again, slowly, groping with his feet in the dark. And his feet found her, found her form outstretched on the cave's rocky floor, unmoving even when his feet thudded against her.

"Marilee!" Dikar choked and went to his knees beside Marilee, gathered her into his arms.

She stirred in his arms! "Dikar." Breath gusted from Dikar's great chest at that uncertain murmur, breath he did not know till now had been caught in his chest, "Oh, Dikar."

"What happened to you, Marilee? What-?"

"I—Someone sprang on me from behind, just as I reached the cave and hit me! Dikar! The fire

stick! Where-?"

"Not here. Or if here, gone out. No. Not here. Even if gone out its smell would be stronger—"

"The fire, Dikar!" Sudden terror in Marilee's voice, of life without fire, of food without fire to cook, of winter without fire to warm. She was out of his arms and on her feet. "I've lost the fire, Dikar."

Dikar whirled out of the cave, was running through the woods, Marilee at his side. They burst out of the woods into the clearing and Dikar was shouting, "Get the dirt off the fire logs, everybody. Quick."

Dikar went on without stopping, darting to the door of the Boys' House, into it. He lifted an axe from its pegs on the wall, was out in the open again, was running toward where the Bunch were scooping earth off the piled logs on the Fire Stone.

He shoved through the Boys and Girls, made out, by the dim light of the stars, a log they had uncovered, black, lifeless. His axe swept up, smashed down.

Chunk!

The log split open. Sparks flew, stinging Dikar's legs. He did not feel them. He was staring at the redness from which they had flown, the glowing red heart of the log that still had life in it, the life of the fire, the life of the Bunch. "Dry leaves," he commanded. "Bring dry leaves. Quick! Bring dry twigs. Billthomas! Halcross! Build up the fire. Fredalton! Take this axe and split up one of those logs into little sticks."

Dikar watched Billthomas put dry leaves on the glowing redness, watched the leaves take flame from the log's heart. Watched Halcross feed little dry twigs to the leaves and the twigs catch flame from the leaves, and the sticks from the twigs. The fire grew again on the Fire Stone, and the light of the fire grew again in the clearing, but Dikar's forehead was deep-lined and his eyes were no longer blue, and in the darkness of them was a red light that did not come from the fire.

Dikar's eyes moved over the red-lit faces of the Bunch that stood about the Fire Stone watching the fire grow again; and his eyes seemed to ask a question of each face and pass on. They came to one face, and stayed on it, Dikar's brow-lines deepening.

That face was chunk-jawed, black-stubbed, the eyes too small, too closely set, but what held Dikar's gaze was the odd, leering grin that sat on the thick lips.

Tomball had had little to grin about since the day Dikar had returned from the far land and ended Tomball's short time as boss, forcing him to confess to the Bunch how he had tricked his way to being boss in place of Dikar. Why, then, was he grinning now?

"Do you think it was *he* who hit me?" Marilee whispered in Dikar's ear, "and ran away with the fire stick?"

"Who else of the Bunch would do a thing like that?"

"But why should he, Dikar? He's smart enough to know that if we lost the fire it would be as bad for him as for the rest of us."

"That's what I don't—Wait! I've got a hunch. Look. Walk along with me like we were just talking about nothing important. Laugh a little, you know, and hold on to my arm."

Marilee's fingers were cold on Dikar's arm, but her laugh rippled like a little stream running over pebbles in its bed. They walked slowly away from the fire reached the shadowy edge of the woods, were closed around by the forest darkness.

"Now!" Dikar said, and he was flitting through the forest night, Marilee a silent shadow behind him. It was like her to stay close behind, like her to ask no questions as he ran through the woods to the cave again.

At the cave-mouth Dikar stopped a moment, sniffing the air. "Yes," he said, more to himself than to Marilee. "I can still smell the smoke of the fire-stick. The wet night air holds smells a long time." Then he was moving again, following the sharp tang of smoke in the air, following it away from the cave and away from the clearing.

The scent-trail led him downhill. Soon the laugh of a streamlet came to his ears and then Dikar pushed through tangling bushes and came out into starlight on the edge of the brook that he heard. The smoke smell was very strong here—

"Look, Marilee!" Dikar pointed to a black something at, his feet, half in, half out of the water. "Here is your fire stick." He squatted to it.

"He brought it here to put it in the water," Marilee said, squatting beside him.

"No," Dikar answered, his voice a growl deep in his chest. "No. He slipped on a wet stone and fell, and the water outhed it. See. Here are the marks of his knees on the bank. But he brought it here because this was the nearest open place in the woods, the nearest place where its light could be seen from the sky."

"From the sky? Dikar! What do you mean?"

"I mean that I know now why the plane turned back." Even in the dimness Marilee could see that Dikar's face was hard and still, his lips tight and gray. "If he hadn't slipped and dropped the stick in the water, so that they were not sure they'd seen—" Dikar stood up. "Come," he said, grimly.

When they came again into the clearing, it was filled once more with the wavering light of the fire and everything was as it had been before Jimlane had heard the plane. Dikar paused beside the Fire Stone, stood there straddle-legged and glowering, a muscle twitching in his cheek.

Marilee laid finger tips on Dikar's arm. "There's Tomball," she whispered. "Talking to Bessalton down there near the eating place."

Dikar's gaze moved to where she had said. Bessalton was boss of the Girls and tallest of them, her cloak of hair black as deepest night, her legs long and slender, her hips wide. Tomball was heavy-built beside her, bulging arms hanging loose almost to his knees, great chest black-matted, his belly black with matted hair. Black-haired was Tomball, and squat. He was strongest of the Bunch, and there was shrewdness in him too, a shrewdness Dikar already had learned to fear.

The little muscle twitched in Dikar's cheek. "Marilee," he said, low-toned. "Find Jimlane and Billthomas, and tell them to come to me first chance they can without anyone seeing them."

She slipped away. Dikar watched her, slim and lovely, the fire's red light caressing her, and there was pain in his arms and his chest, sweet pain of the knowing that she was his.

Tomball too watched Marilee, small eyes following her, thick lips a little parted. Seeing this Dikar felt a

tightness in his neck and across the back of his shoulders. His hands closed into fists. If he wasn't boss of the Bunch!

Dikar's hands opened and lifted, cupping around his mouth. "Ho Bunch!" he called through his cupped hands.

The talk in the clearing stopped, and the strollers turned to him. "Bedtime, Bunch," Dikar shouted. "A good sleep and happy dreams to you all."

"A good sleep to you, Dikar!" they cried to him, but Tomball did not cry. Dikar a good sleep as he went toward the Boys' House with the others of the mateless Boys, while the mateless Girls went toward the Girls' House, and the mated pairs went hand in hand past the end of the eating place and into the dark woods behind. Dikar saw Marilee waiting for him by the eating place, but he did not go to her till Steveland and Halross, pimply-faced youngsters whose turn it was to stay awake the night and watch the fire, had taken their places on the smooth bench-rock near the Fire Stone.

"Be sure that one of you stays always awake," he told them. "Be sure to listen always for the sound of a plane in the sky. If you hear one wake the Bunch right away to out the fire."

"Yes, Dikar," Steveland said, his blue eyes wide. "We get you. A good sleep, Dikar."

"A quiet night to you both," Dikar said and went to join Marilee and go with her to the little house in the woods behind the eating place that, when they took each other for mates, he had built from logs to be theirs and theirs alone.

"Dikar," Marilee said, her eyes puzzled in the ruddy dusk that sifted through to her from the fire. "Why didn't you tell the Bunch about Tomball's hitting me and taking the fire stick to where the plane could see it? Why didn't you punish him for it?"

"Would it be fair, Marilee, to say to the Bunch that it was Tomball, when we do not know that it was? Would it be fair to punish him for doing it, when we do not know that he did it?"

"But we *do* know!"

"No, Marilee. We do not. You saw nothing and I saw nothing that would make us sure it was him. Or did you see something—something you have not told me?"

She stopped, Dikar stopped, looking at her face on which the dim red light fell leaving the rest of her in shadow, thinking how lovely her face was, the red light tangled in the cloudy softness of her hair, her gray eyes grave and thoughtful, her small mouth puckered.

"No-o," Marilee breathed at last. "No, I saw nothing that would make me sure it was Tomball. But I am sure, and you are sure, because we know that Tomball is the only one of the Bunch who would do a thing like that. Look, Dikar. Tomball wants to be boss, and if he cannot be boss of the Bunch he would destroy the Bunch, and he would stop at nothing to do it. You know all that as well as I do."

Sadness came into Dikar's face, and trouble in his eyes. "Yes, Marilee, I know that as well as you do. Tomball has always wanted to be boss, and when he couldn't get to be boss by fighting fair he fought no fair, and now that he knows he can't get to be boss by fighting either fair or no fair, he would destroy the Bunch rather than have me or anyone but him be boss. But it would not be right for me to fight him any other way than fair."

"Why, Dikar? If Tomball wants to destroy the Bunch, it seems to me it would be right for you to fight him

any way you can, fair or no fair. Why isn't it?"

The lines were back in Dikar's forehead. Very clearly he knew the answer to what Marilee asked, but it was very hard to think of how to say it in words. "Look, Marilee," he cried.

"When we were littler we played lots of games, and we always picked someone for umpire to see that everybody played according to the rules of the game, because if there were no rules there would be no game. Remember?"

"Yes, Dikar. I remember."

"Now sometimes the umpire himself would be no fair, letting one side break the rules. And then the other side would break the rules too, and pretty soon the game would bust up because with all the rules broken there was no game any more. Right?"

"Yes. But I don't see—"

His gesture stopped her.

"You will in a minute. Look. The life of the Bunch is no game, but it is lived according to rules, because if there were no rules, if every one of the Bunch did just as he or she wanted to, all the time, there would be no Bunch. Now, I don't think you or anybody else would say that if we hadn't lived all these years as a Bunch; sharing what we had, sharing the work, each doing what he can do best, all helping one another; any but the strongest of us would be alive and happy today. Would you?"

"No. We are all alive and happy after the long years here on the Mountain because we have helped each other."

"And played fair with each other. You call me boss and obey me, but you really obey the rules the Old Ones left us and the rules the Bunch has made for themselves, and all I am is an umpire to see that everybody obeys the rules, to see that everybody plays fair. Now, suppose I played no fair myself. Suppose, whenever I felt like it, I broke the rules. What would happen?"

She answered slowly:

"Everybody else would break the rules too. I see. Because if the umpire is no fair, all the ones playing the game feel it's all right to be no fair too."

"Exactly. And pretty soon there would be no rules any more, and the Bunch would bust up. If Tomball is trying to destroy the Bunch, I've got to fight him. But if I fight him no fair, that will destroy the Bunch, sooner or later, much more surely than anything Tomball could do, or anything they who live in the far land can do. Now do you understand, Marilee?"

"I understand," Marilee said. And then she cried, "But you've got to do something, Dikar! You can't let him—" She stopped short, twisted to a noise in the brush behind her. "Dikar! There's somebody—!"

Dikar thrust her behind him. "Who's there?" he demanded, his neck thickening. "Who is it?"

Shadows moved in the shadows of the brush, where the red light from the fire could not reach.

CHAPTER III: THE GUN ON THE ROOF

"Who's there?" Dikar cried again, and then the shadows were coming out into the light, and they

were Jimlane and Billthomas.

"Marilee told us you wanted us," Jimlane said. "We waited till everyone was asleep in the Boys' House."

"Did anyone see you come here?"

"No. They were all asleep."

"All right," Dikar said. "Listen, Jimlane and Billthomas. I have a job for you, but I am not going to order you to do it. I'm going to ask you to."

"We'll do it, Dikar," Billthomas said. He was shorter than Jimlane, yellow-haired, blue-eyed, his skin as smooth as any of the Girls', his movements as graceful. "We'll do anything you ask us."

"Anything at all," Jimlane agreed.

"Wait, youngsters," Dikar warned, "You may not be so ready to promise that when you hear what it is. I hate asking you to do it, but it needs to be done, for the good of the Bunch. It won't be easy. You may be hurt doing it, you may even be killed. Nobody but Marilee and me will know that you're doing it."

Two pairs of bright eyes were fixed on his face. "If it's for the Bunch, we'll do it," Jimlane said. "Whatever it is. Tell us what you want us to do, Dikar."

"Before I tell you, you must promise, cross your hearts and hope to die, that you will say nothing about it to anyone. Whether you will do it or not, you will always keep silent."

"Cross my heart and hope to die," Billthomas said solemnly. "I will say nothing," Jimlane said the same and then the two spat over their left shoulders to show that they could never take back what they had said.

"Now listen," Dikar said when they had done that. "The job is to watch Tomball, by day and by night. You sleep in the Boys' House with him, and I'll always make sure to put you on the same jobs with him, so that part ought to be easy.

"If he slips off any time, day or night, by himself, I want you to follow him without his knowing it. Do you think you can do that?"

"We once followed a deer all day," Jimlane said, "All over the Mountain, and it never knew we was anywheres near."

"I know that," Dikar nodded. "And that's why I picked you to ask first to do this job. I also know you two are champeens of the Bunch at shooting with bonarrers, and that's another part of the job."

The eyes of the youngsters widened, but they said nothing.

Dikar went on. "Keep your bonarrers near you all the time, and if Tomball does go off by himself, take 'em along. If you see him start to make a fire where it can be seen from the sky, or from the kind of woods that will make a smoke go up through the tops of the trees, shoot him in the legs, right away, and out the fire. If he starts to go out of the woods to the edge of the Drop, in the daytime when they who live in the far land might see him, shoot him in the legs and drag him back. Stop him if he does anything else that might show Them that someone lives here on the Mountain. Do you get me?"

"We get you, Dikar," Billthomas looked puzzled. "But all those things are Must-Nots of the Old Ones. Why do we need to shoot him to stop him from doing them? If he tries to, the Old Ones would wake from their sleep under the rocks at the bottom of the Drop and strike him down. He wouldn't dare to do it, and if he tried, the Old Ones wouldn't let him."

"Look, Billthomas," Dikar put his hand on the kid's shoulder. "Do you remember the time when the Bunch stoned me away from the clearing and made Tomball boss?"

"And you came back with a little gun that made a noise and killed our fawn, and you made the Bunch listen to you while you proved why we shouldn't have stoned you away. And then you threw the gun up on the roof of the Boys' House and fought Tomball who should be boss, and licked him. Sure I remember."

"Well, between the time I was stoned away and the time I came back, I went to the edge of the Drop, and I climbed down the Drop to the rocks under which the Old Ones sleep. That is the most terrible of all the Must-Nots of the Old Ones, but they didn't wake from their sleep, and they didn't strike me down. Nothing happened to me. I went into the far land, and I came back, and the Old Ones did nothing to me."

"You went into the far land," Jimlane repeated in awed tones. "Dikar! Did you see *Them*?"

"I saw Them, Jimlane, and I saw many things that made me know how very terrible it would be if they found out the Bunch lives on the Mountain. But the Old Ones did nothing to stop me. The Old Ones sleep under the rocks, Jimlane, under the water that foams over the rocks, they cannot awaken to stop Tomball from letting Them who live in the far land know that the Bunch is here on the Mountain."

"But Dikar!" Billthomas broke out. "Tomball wouldn't do anything like that!"

"I hope not," Dikar answered slowly. "Honest Injun, I hope that he wouldn't. But I must be sure, and I'm asking you two to help me be sure—No wait," he said as he saw their mouths start to open. "Before you answer I want you to remember how strong Tomball is, how he said he would kill you, Jimlane, that time when you wanted to tell the Bunch why they were wrong in stoning me away, how afraid of him you were, that time. I want you youngsters to think of that before you say that you will do this job."

"I've thought about it, Dikar," Jimlane stood very straight in the firelight. "I won't say I'm not afraid of Tomball, but afraid or not, I will watch him, and I will do my best to stop him from doing anything that will hurt the Bunch."

"Me too, Dikar," Billthomas said his voice clear and steady, his eyes steady as Dikar's own. "I am afraid of Tomball, but I will do this job the best I can."

"Good kids," Dikar said. Something had him by the throat, so that it was hard to say it, and he could not answer when the Boys wished him and Marilee a good sleep and slipped away, their naked young bodies ruddy one moment in the firelight, then merged with the noiseless dark.

"Oh Dikar," Marilee's soft voice said in his ear. "They're so young. Are you right in what you are doing?"

"I don't know," Dikar sighed. "I don't know, Marilee." And then he said, "It is a hard job to be boss of the Bunch. A dreadful hard job."

* * * *

Her hand reached up to his cheek, her cool fingers touched it, lightly, "A hard job, Dikar," she said softly. "But it is night, and just past these bushes is our little house, and there you are not boss of the Bunch but my mate..."

He drew her close to him, her softness close against the hardness of his body. He looked into her eyes, and then his head sank and his lips found hers.

A little later they knelt by their bed of pine boughs covered with a white blanket of rabbit fur. "Now I lay me down to sleep," they said together. "An, should I die before I wake..."

What was it like to die, Dikar wondered. He had seen death, of course, a deer killed by his arrow, a squirrel stiff and glazed-eyed under last year's leaves. What was it like to lie stiff like that, never seeing again the flaming colors of the sunrise, the shimmer of sunlight on water, never feeling again the coolness of the wind on one's skin, the warm touch of the rain? "God bless the Bunch," he said, along with Marilee. "God bless Marilee..."

Marilee rose but Dikar stayed on his knees. He heard the piping of the insects outside the little house, the peep of the nesting birds, the whisper of the trees. They were trying to tell him something, but he could not quite make out what it was.

"Poor Dikar," Marilee said. "You're so tired you've fallen asleep on your knees."

"No," Dikar said, rising, nor could he sleep, even with Marilee in his arms, their cover of rabbit-fur warm over him. Something was troubling him. Something that he must do, and he could not think what it was.

He lay wide-eyed, watching the open door of the little house grow pale with the light of the moon that was rising over the Mountain, watching the leaf shadows dance in the pale moonlight. With the moon a wind rose in the forest and the rustle of the treetops was louder, and bough-tips tapped on the roof—

The roof! That was it! Billthomas had spoken of the little gun Dikar had taken from one of them down in the far land, a black faced one, and had thrown up on the roof of the Boys' House and forgotten. Dikar had seen what that small thing could do, and Tomball had seen what it could do. Dikar must get it. Now. Tonight. Get it and hide it...

Marilee stirred in her sleep as Dikar slowly took his arms from about her. She muttered something, but she did not awaken. Dikar stole, more silent than the shadows, through the woods, reached a tree whose boughs overhung the Boys' House, swung himself up into those boughs and from them to the roof of Boys' House.

The moonlight was bright on that roof, every crack in its gray boards, every mark of them, distinct. There were faded, dried leaves on it, broken twigs...

But no gun.

CHAPTER IV: THE SOUND OF GUNFIRE

The sun struck brightness through Dikar's eyelids and though the night had held very little sleep for him, he was instantly awake. He flung out his arm to waken Marilee—found only the fur of the bed-covering!

He rolled over. She wasn't there beside him. She wasn't anywhere in the little house. Dikar was on his feet, his eyes wide, his heart bumping his ribs. The door of the house darkened and Marilee stood there.

"Marilee!" Dikar exclaimed. "I thought—What's the matter?" She had hold of the doorpost, as if to hold herself up by it. There was green under the bronze of her skin and her forehead was wet with sweat. "Marilee!" Dikar made the single long stride that took him to her. "What's wrong with you?"

"Wrong?" Her eyes refused to meet his. "Nothin', Dikar." She laughed, but it was not the merry tinkle that her laugh always was. "Listen, sleepyhead. The Boys are already on their way to the bathing pool." Gay shouts, the threshing of many bodies through the brush, came to him. "Go quick, or they'll be through before you have rubbed the sand from your eyes."

"Marilee." Dikar's hand was on her shoulder. "What-?" She jerked free of his hold, faced him, her lips tight and white.

"Go, you fool!" she yelled at him and thrust past him into the house, threw herself on the bed. "Let me alone."

Dikar stared at her, unbelieving. Never before had she yelled at him in anger, never before had her morning smile failed him. She lay face down, unmoving.

"Marilee," Dikar named her. "If I've done somethin' to make you angry at me, I ask your pardon, but what have I done?"

"Nothin'." He could hardly hear her. "You have done nothin'," she sobbed. "But please go, Dikar. Please leave me alone."

Dikar turned slowly away, heard his name called from outside. "Comin'," he answered red-bearded Johnstone, who called from the little house where he lived with Annjordan, "Last one in the bathing pool's a yellow belly."

They ran through the dew-sprinkled greenery, downhill to where a stream leaped from a ledge into a shining pool that foamed with the flashing limbs, the brown torsos of the Boys of the Bunch.

Dikar dived low into the icy water, swam to the opposite bank, stood up, shaking his head to clear his sight, the shining drops spattering about him. He saw Tomball, squat and shaggy under the foaming waterfall, saw Jimlane swimming nearby. Dikar dived again, swam under water to where the drooping, slender boughs of a willow dipped into the pool and made a screen behind which he came up unseen.

The Boys' House was empty when Dikar went into it by the door away from the clearing, He darted to Tomball's bed, lifted the coverings from it, pressed hands on grass-filled bag under them. There was no hard lump inside the bag. He looked under the cot—a darkening of the light straightened him, whipped him around.

Tomball stood spraddle-legged just inside the open door from the woods. His hands were stretching a bow taut, and laid across the bow was a stone-pointed hunting arrow that could kill a deer—or a Boy.

"Got you," Tomball grunted, his eyes, small and red, hating Dikar. "This is Fredalton's bonarrer. Nobody saw me leave the bathing pool just like nobody except me saw you, an' I'll be back there before they find you." The head of the arrow was pulled back to the curve of the bow's wood. Dikar's muscles tightened to dodge the arrow, but he knew he could not hope—

Whang!

Tomball's arrow was broken in two parts, was clattering to the floor! Dikar threw himself headlong down the length of the Boys' House, tripped over the bow that Tomball had flung in his path. Thrust at the floor to get up and saw another arrow quivering in the wall toward the clearing, saw Tomball dive out of the door toward the woods, got to that door only in time to see Tomball vanish in the brush.

Dikar shook his head to clear it of its stunned surprise that he was still alive, that Tomball's arrow had broken at the exact moment it was loosed at him.

"Dikar!" Billthomas, slender brown body wet-shining, face gray-white, was suddenly there in front of him. "He didn't hurt you?" There was a bow in his one hand, the other reached out to Dikar. "He didn't-?"

"No, Billthomas," Dikar said, guessing now the meaning of that second arrow. "Thanks to you." His voice was steady enough, but inside him he was shaking, knowing suddenly how close he had been to death. "That was as fine a shot as ever was made on the Mountain."

Billthomas' blue eyes shone with the praise. "It was nothin'," Dikar. The sun was on Tomball's bonarrer through the other door, makin' it a good mark, an' I was only ten paces away. Any of the Boys could have hit it."

"How did you come here, just in time?"

"Carlberger ducked Jimlane," Billthomas answered. "While he was under Tomball got to shore. I saw him from the other end of the pool an' I followed, I stopped to pick up my bonarrer where I'd hidden it near by, like you told us to last night. That let Tomball get out of sight, but I tracked him. When I got to the edge of the woods he was already in here, was pullin' tight his bow. But why're we wastin' time? I'll call the Bunch to hunt him down—"

"No!" Dikar commanded. "No, Billthomas. I will not have the Bunch know that one of them has tried to kill an other. For then there will be only two things left for the Bunch to do. Either they must stone him from the clearing; an' that will make certain of his hate for the Bunch, with no hope that he will ever change; or they must kill him, which is worse. That the Bunch shall kill one of themselves coldly and with thought before, is more dreadful than that Tomball should have tried to kill me, excited an' angry."

"But, Dikar-?"

"But nothin'! This is a thing I will take care of myself, in my own way, an' it will remain a secret between you an' me. You will not call the Bunch." Dikar said sharply, his eyes commanding. "You will call Jimlane only. The two of you must track Tomball an' keep him always in sight, but you will not let him know you are around unless he does one of the things I talked about last night, or unless he tries again to hurt one of the Bunch. If that should happen, stop him, but hurt him as little as you can help, an' tell me about it. Get me?"

"I get you, Dikar."

"Then call Jimlane, an' get busy."

"Yes, Dikar." Billthomas was gone into the woods and Dikar heard the trill of a lark from where Billthomas had vanished, three times, and from far off he heard the answering three trills of a lark, and he knew that Billthomas had called Jimlane, and that there would not be a moment from now on that

Tomball would not be under the eyes of the two youngsters. But Dikar's forehead was furrowed and his heart heavy within him as he turned to pluck Billthomas's arrow from the wall and the pieces of Tomball's arrow from the floor, and went out into the woods to hide them.

* * * *

It was queer, he thought, how he had talked to Billthomas the way he did just now, without thinking about what he was going to say beforehand. It was as if someone else had talked with his voice, someone much wiser than he was.

It was queer, too, how he knew now that what he had said was the right thing to say. How he knew now, sure as that his name was Dikar, that what he was doing was the best thing for the Bunch.

And for Tomball too. After what had happened Tomball would stay away from the Bunch, afraid of what Dikar would do if he came back. The youngsters would be watching him, but Tomball wouldn't know that. He would think he was alone on the Mountain, and he would learn what it meant to be alone, as Dikar had, and he would learn what it meant to be one of the Bunch and have a place in its life.

After awhile Dikar would send Tomball word by Jimlane or Billthomas that he need not be afraid to come back, and when he did come back he would be ready to take his place in the life of the Bunch, and he would give Dikar and the Bunch no more trouble.

That was what Dikar hoped would happen.

The Boys came back, shouting and happy, from their morning swim in their bathing pool, and the Girls came back to the clearing from their pool on the other side of the clearing, and they all ate breakfast at the long table of the eating place.

Marilee came to sit beside Dikar when breakfast was all on the table. Dikar looked sharply at her, but her color was all right now, her eyes bright again. She didn't say anything about what had happened in the morning, and Dikar didn't say anything about it, only too glad to forget about it and to let her forget.

It was Steveland who first said something about Tomball and Jimlane and Billthomas not being there. Across the table so that all could hear, Dikar told him that he had sent them on a special job on the other side of the Mountain, a job that might take them three or four days, and that they would not come back till it was finished.

Before anyone could ask what the job was, Dikar started telling what everybody was to do that day, although he usually didn't do that till after breakfast.

There was a lot to do, because it was time to start getting ready for the winter.

Dikar sent some of the Bunch to hunt for deer whose meat would be dried over the fire, and whose skins the Girls would make into clothing against the cold days to come. He sent some to pick berries that would be cooked with the sugar that they'd gotten from the maple trees in the spring, and others to search for honey in hollow bee-trees, and he set some to stopping up cracks in the walls of the houses with mud.

He himself took four of the older Boys, Johnstone and Danhall and Henfield and Bengreen, up near the top of the Mountain, to where some big trees had been blown down by a storm last year, to cut them up into logs for the fire now that they were dried out and would burn well and without smoke.

When they went to the Boys's House to get their axes, Danhall said that it would be a good idea for them to take their bonarrers along too, in case they happened to see a deer or some squirrels, and

Dikar agreed. They hung their quivers of arrows on low bushes, and rested their bows against the bushes, and set to work.

It was shady and cool where they worked, and *the kerchunk-kerchunk* of their axes was a pleasant sound. Soon Dikar had almost forgotten what had happened last night and this morning, and the day seemed no different from all the other days on the Mountain. He liked the way the flying chips shone bright yellow against the dark green of the moss and the almost black brown of the ground, and he liked the way little spots of sunlight filtered through the leaves high overhead and danced on the ground. He liked the smell of new-cut wood in his nostrils, and the smell of damp earth and of last year's leaves, and the sweet smell of the breeze that was like the scent of Marilee's breath.

It was grand to feel the swell of his muscles, their smooth swell in his arms and across his back, to feel the *chunk* of his axe into a great tree-trunk, to feel the wood break apart under his strength; grandest of all to feel the touch of the other sweaty shoulders against his own as together the five would yank and haul at a hewn log.

Marilee and Annjordan, Johnstone's mate, brought lunch up to the choppers—cooked rabbit meat and dandelion greens and blackberries big as the end of Dikar's thumb. Dikar and Marilee sat a little apart from the rest, eating their lunch, washing it down with icy water brought from a nearby stream in a cup of birch bark.

"Dikar," Marilee murmured. "I have often wondered about the Drop." Her finger touched a little blue flower that grew out of the moss by her knee, but she didn't quite seem to know she touched it. "It goes all around the Mountain, it's so high and steep. We were very little, Dikar, when the Old Ones brought us here. How did they climb the Drop with us?"

"They didn't," Dikar recalled his dream, recalled the memory that gave form to his dream. "The Drop didn't go all around the Mountain then. A sort of narrow hill slanted up to the top of the Drop, left by men who had been cutting away rock from the Mountain, the same men who built the houses in the clearing—left cots here, and these axes and all the other tools we use. A road ran on top of that narrow hill, the Old Ones brought us up that road."

"What became of the hill and the road?"

"The Old Ones hid us on the Mountain from the terrible hordes who came out of the East and across the continent from the West and up from the South," (Dikar was repeating words a Voice had said in his dream). "But some of them came to the foot of the Mountain, so the Old Ones brought the narrow hill down, on them and on themselves," he told Marilee what his dream had helped him to remember. "That is why there is no road to the top of the Drop, why the Old Ones sleep under the rocks, down there below the Drop."

"I know you went down there once, Dikar, but you never told me how you got down there, nor how you got up again."

"I plaited a rope of vines, Marilee, as long as the Drop is high. One night I tied the rope's end to a tree and let it down where a stream leaps out and down, so that the rope hangs behind the white curtain of the stream and cannot be seen from below. I climbed down the rope, and by it I climbed up again the next night, having seen what they have made of the far land that looks so green and pleasant from the top of our Mountain."

"You climbed down a rope of vines!" Marilee's hand went to the flowery circlet that covered her breast. "You might have been killed, Dikar!"

Dikar nodded. "Yes, I might have been killed, and I didn't care much whether I was or not. I'd been stoned from the Bunch, remember, and you had cried me no fair. Have some more of these berries, Marilee. They are swell."

"No. You have them." Marilee fed them to Dikar, placing them one by one between his lips. Then they were finished. Dikar lay back, and Marilee lay by his side, quiet and drowsy, and Dikar was dreamily content.

Marilee stirred. "Dikar. Does the rope still hang behind the stream where it leaps down?"

Dikar sat up, pounding his knee with his fist. "Jeeze! It does! I did not lift it when I came back to the Mountain, and I've forgotten it since. I must do that. Tonight I must do it, as soon as it is dark enough that I cannot be seen from below when I go to the edge of the Drop. Do not let me forget."

"I sure will not," Marilee answered. And then, with that curiosity Dikar had noticed all the Girls had so much more than the Boys, she asked, "Just where is the rope?"

Dikar looked about him, thinking how he could tell her. He knew every inch of the Mountain as well as he knew the lines on his palm. "That's funny," he laughed suddenly. "That brook, there, is the very one at whose end the rope hangs. By following it down the Mountain you would get to it. But look," he went on, rising, "the sun no longer strikes straight down through the treetops, and much as I hate to send you away, it is time for work again."

"Yes, Dikar," Marilee sighed, reaching a hand for him to take hold of and lift her by. "Time for work." As she came up she swung close to him, and her arms went around his neck and her lips pressed against his, and they were flame on Dikar's lips, burning flame in his veins. "Oh, Dikar," Marilee sobbed. "I hate not to be with you."

"It is only for a little while," Dikar murmured. "Only till night." He held her away from him, drinking her in with his eyes. "What are you going to do till night, Marilee?" he asked. "I like to know what you do, all the time, because that way I can think myself with you, and am not so lonely for you when we are apart."

"That's sweet, Dikar," Marilee smiled, touching Dikar's cheek with her fingertips. "I shall be somewhere in the woods. Bessalton wants me to hunt for a certain kind of grass that is best for sewing with. Think of me a lot, Dikar," she said, and Annjordan called her, and she was gone.

Dikar and the rest set to work again. Marilee's lips still burned on Dikar's, and the touch of Marilee's fingertips lingered on his cheek, and he would not wipe the sweat from his face lest he wipe that touch from it too.

The *kerchunk-kerchunk* of the axes ran loud and long through the woods, and the pile of cut logs grew slowly but steadily. The beams of sunlight striking down from the leafy roof of the forest slanted more and more, and the shadows lengthened. At last Dikar rested.

"Enough for today, fellows," he said. "Tomorrow we'll—" The words caught in his throat. He'd heard a sound from far down the Mountain, a sound that should not be in the woods.

The sound came again, very far off, but Dikar knew what it was. He'd heard it down in the far land, and once, only once, on the Mountain. That time he'd made the sound himself, shooting the little gun out of the great oak that canopied the Fire Stone.

CHAPTER V: OVER THE DROP

"Come, fellows," Dikar snapped, springing to the bush where hung his bow and arrows, snatching them up. "Quick." He was off through the woods, running down toward along the bank of the stream because there it was clearest of bushes and trees. The other four ran after him.

Long the time seemed, endless, that Dikar ran thus through familiar woods suddenly grown strange and fearful. Dreadful the thoughts that Dikar thought as he ran. Who had shot off a gun on the Mountain? Had that plane, last night, seen something to tell those who rode it that someone lived here? Had they climbed the Mountain, the men dressed in green that he'd seen in the far land, the men with yellow faces and black who were so brutishly cruel?

Never had Dikar run so fast. The others could not keep up with him, so fast he ran, but still he saw nothing but the flicking shadows of the woods and the glinting sun on the stream beside which he ran. The stream was rushing faster now, was hurrying to throw itself over the Drop, just ahead—

Dikar dug heels to stop himself. Something in the water—Jimlane! Jimlane lay face down in the water, very still, and the water that swirled away from the still, small body was pink and dreadful. Jimlane lay in the water, but on the bank of the stream lay Billthomas, limp as an arrowed deer, his side red and terrible with blood.

Dikar dropped to his knees beside Billthomas, and inside him Dikar was cold, cold as ice. "My fault," he heard himself groan. "I set you to watch Tomball, and Tomball had the gun hid in the woods, and he got it and shot you. My fault, Billthomas."

Dikar touched Billthomas, and Billthomas moved under Dikar's hand, Billthomas's eyes opened and stared up into Dikar's face, unseeing. Then they smiled. A faint smile touched Billthomas's gray lips and they moved, but Dikar could not hear what they said.

"What?" Dikar's voice was hoarse, strange to him. "What, Billthomas?" He bent, got his ear near Billthomas's lips.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"Tomball—the faint whisper came. "Went—over Drop—took—Marilee—with him..." The whisper faded, Billthomas's eyes closed.

"What?" Dikar yelled. "What was that about Marilee? Billthomas! Did you say Marilee—?" But he saw that Billthomas did not hear him.

Shouts, exclamations, above him told Dikar the Boys had meanwhile come up. "Jumped over the Drop!" someone exclaimed. "They must be smashed on the rocks—"

"No," something shrieked inside Dikar's head. "Not Marilee!" and he was on his feet, was twisting toward the edge of the Drop.

The stream rushed away from Jimlane's still body, rushed down to the end of the woods. Not five paces away it leaped out—up from where it leaped slanted a thick rope of plaited vines to the great trunk of the last tree of all and it was wound round and round that trunk, tight-fastened.

Tomball and Marilee had not jumped over the Drop—!

Somehow Dikar was at the edge of the Drop, careless whether from below they saw him or not. Dikar

was looking down, his eyes burning.

Down and down fell the white spume of the stream, down and down fell the awful wall of the Drop, gray-shadowed. Far, far below, the stream smashed itself on a great, jagged rock and joined the waters that brawled white and angry among huge rocks that might have been tumbled there by some unimaginable giants at play.

For a wide space from the foot of the Drop the ground was covered by the great rocks, and that space was made somehow fearful by the shadow of the Mountain that lay on it, but beyond it the sun still lay on a green forest that stretched away to the far land.

Dikar's staring eyes found the edge of that forest, found two figures, small as the dolls the Girls used to make out of rags when first the Bunch came to the Mountain. Two figures clambered over the rocks, nearing the edge of the forest, and the one behind was chunky, black-haired, and the one ahead was brown with her mantle of brown hair!

Till now Dikar had clung to a hope that he had not understood Billthomas rightly, that Billthomas had been mistaken, but now that hope was ended. A terrible rage flared up in Dikar, a rage hotter than the heart of the fire on the Fire Stone. He snatched an arrow from the quiver hung on his shoulder, fitted it to his bow.

"This was why she asked me how I climbed down the Drop," ran searing through his mind. "She planned it this mornin' with Tomball. This mornin' she stole from our bed to seek Tomball an' warn him I'd set the kids to watch him, an' they planned then to kill the youngsters as soon as they'd found out how to flee from the Mountain, together."

He had Tomball on the angle of his arrowhead. The muscles in his arms swelled, the bow grew taut. Careful, now. Careful. The distance was great. He must not miss.

He might miss Tomball and hit Marilee.

What matter? She was as much to blame as he.

Dikar couldn't! His fingers wouldn't open on the bowstring, wouldn't loose the arrow that might bury itself in the flesh of Marilee.

But he must! Not because they fled him. Not even because they had killed Billthomas, and Jimlane. Because even if they didn't want to, the men in green would make them tell where they'd come from, make them tell about the Bunch. That thought opened Dikar's fingers.

Whang!

Dikar's arrow flew straight and fast and true—far out over the rocks it veered, was no longer a live and deadly dart, was a dead stick tumbling aimlessly down, a plaything of the wind.

Another arrow lay ready across Dikar's bow, but he did not loose it. No use. They were too far—Marilee reached the woods, and Tomball. The woods swallowed them. They were making their way through those woods to Them—

Dikar turned to voices behind him, saw Danhall and Henfield, Johnstone and Bengreen, huddled just within the edge of the woods, pale-faced, mouths agape, eyes wide and dark.

"Johnstone," Dikar snapped, banging his bow over his shoulder. "Take over as Boss. Take care of Billthomas an' Jimlane. I'm goin' down."

"You dare not," Danhill gasped. "Dikar, you dare not. The Old Ones will strike you—"

"Damn the Old Ones," Dikar snarled and was in the stream, had hands on the rope. He was lowering himself over the edge of the Drop. His legs caught around the vine-rope.

* * * *

The water battered Dikar. The water filled Dikar's mouth and his eyes and his nose, so that he could not see nor breathe nor hear anything but the roar of the waters. The water had a hundred clubs that pounded Dikar, bruised him. Suddenly the water was only a stinging cold spray on Dikar's naked skin, and he was swinging free between the wet-black face of the Drop and the roar of the stream as it fell, and he was climbing down the rope of plaited vines.

This was as it had been that other time Dikar had climbed down this rope of plaited vines, but that time it had been night and once he had gotten through that first rush of waters it had been black-dark. Bad enough it had been to climb down into dizzy dark, but now there was light, and Dikar could see how the Drop came down from nothingness above and went straight down to nothingness below.

He could look down, endlessly down the swinging frail thread of the rope, down to where the jagged points of rock waited for him if he fell, and the stream smashed itself on the rocks as Dikar would smash if he fell.

From the rocks, so far below, there reached up hands that Dikar could not see, and they pulled at him, pulled him down to the rocks, his climbing too slow for them. Dikar wanted to let go of the rope, wild the desire was in him to let go and fall, fast and faster, down to those gray painted rocks.

Dikar was sick, sick with the terror that he would let go and with the wanting to let go. Suddenly his arms and his legs were without strength to move. He clung to the rope, unmoving, knowing that in the next moment, the very next, he would no longer have even the strength to hang on. "Dikar!" His name came through the mists that swirled around him. "Go on, Dikar. Go on." Dikar looked up to the voice, and he saw that it came not from far above, as it ought, but from the rope itself, from Danhall, hanging on the rope not far above him.

Down through the seething waters at the top of the rope, Bengreen climbed, the water streaming from him! They were following Dikar down. Danhall and Bengreen were following him where he went, in spite of their fear of the Old Ones, in spite of their fear of what might await them down below the Mountain. He was their leader, and they followed him—

Strength was back in Dikar's legs and his arms and he was climbing down again, but he kept his eyes on the wall of the Drop and did not look down. And at last his feet found rock beneath him and Danhall was beside him, and Bengreen; and then Henfield dropped off the rope.

"We wouldn't let Johnstone come," Danhall said, squeezing water from his brown beard, "because you said he should be Boss. What do we do next, Dikar?"

Dikar looked across the waste of tumbled rock to where Tomball and Marilee had been swallowed by the woods. "We go after 'em and 'em bring 'em back," he said through tight lips, "or we don't go back ourselves. Come on."

They climbed across the stony space, slipping and falling. When they reached the woods, that seemed no different from their own woods, it was easy at first to follow the trail of those they followed, by the small growth they had trodden down, by twigs bent with their passage. Marilee and Tomball had gone

carelessly, not knowing they would be followed.

The shadow of the Mountain lengthened with the fast-dropping sun, and it grew dim about the four who hunted a Boy and a Girl. The green faded out of the bushes about them, the brown out of the tree trunks. All color grayed in the dimness, and suddenly there were no marks by which the four could tell which ways Marilee and Tomball had passed.

They cast around, their keen eyes searching each depression in the mossy floor of the woods, the way each tiny leaf hung on the brush, but they could find no sign of where Tomball and Marilee had gone, no sign that they'd ever been farther than where a twig pressed into the last mark of Tomball's foot.

The four Boys from the Mountain came together again, and huddled close, and they became aware that the grayling air was chill against their skin, and the forest seemed strangely hushed about them.

"I don't like it here," Henfield said, and it seemed right that he spoke low-toned, as though someone were near to overhear what he said, someone or some thing no one could see. "There's somethin' wrong about these woods. They're too—too quiet." He was yellow-haired as Dikar, his chin fuzzed with what would soon be a beard like Dikar's. "The birds are still, an' the insects, an' I've not seen or heard a rabbit or a squirrel, or anythin' livin'."

"I don't get it," Bengreen was the shortest of the four, his face sharp, his eyes black and deep as a forest pool at night. "I don't get it at all. It's like—like Tomball an' Marilee got this far an' then—then *were not*."

"The Old Ones!" Henfield's voice was thin and piercing, louder it would be a scream. "The Old Ones have taken 'em an' they'll take us. We're lost! Dikar, we're dead an' worse than dead!"

CHAPTER VI: DEATH IN THE WOODS

A chill struck deep into Dikar as he heard Henfield's cry. All his life, all his life that was real to him and not a dream of Long-Ago, Dikar had believed that anyone who broke a Must-Not of the Old Ones would meet with a punishment the more awful because none knew what it was. By climbing down the Drop Marilee and Tomball had broken the most fearful of those Must-Nots.

Dikar recalled that he was the first of the Bunch to have broken that Must-Not, and that he had not been punished. "The Old Ones sleep under the rocks," he snapped, angrily because of the tremble of fear that had not yet left him. "They're not in these woods an' there is nothin' else here that could have taken Tomball an' Marilee without leavin' a sign. Stop talkin' foolishness an' use your eyes, an' you will find some sign of what took 'em, or of which way they went."

"Maybe," Danhall grunted. "Maybe *you* can, Dikar, seein' you're so smart."

"Maybe I can," Dikar answered. "Wait here, an' I'll try." He turned from them, moved to a big tree near which they were standing, ran up into its top as swiftly and easily as any squirrel. Thick boughs made steps for Dikar's feet, leaves rustled against his face, stroked his body, and then his head came out through the roof of the tree into a sunlight strangely ruddy.

The top of the forest stretched away from Dikar, a strange, bright green in that light, and solid seeming. About as far from him as from the clearing to the edge of the Drop, the forest ended and past its end the ground rose in a hill that was neither green nor stone—gray like any other ground Dikar

remembered ever seeing, but a pale yellow that seemed to be striped.

Up through this yellow ground a wide brown stripe curved to the top of the hill, where, sharp-lined against the darkening sky, was a house not as long as the Boys' House but higher, its roof curiously shaped. Midway up the front of the house another roof stuck out, and the outer edge of this was post-propped like the roof of the eating place.

Just above this smaller roof, a row of windows flashed red as though there was fire within, but no smoke rose from the house, so Dikar knew this could not be.

Dikar's eyes came back to the leafy canopy of the woods. A low exclamation guttered in his throat. All that green stretch swayed a little with the wind, but, quarter way between him and the edge of the forest a tree swayed *against* the wind, and then another, just beyond, did the same.

Dikar marked the direction in which the trees moved so strangely, and dropped down to the waiting Boys. "Found 'em!" he cried. "They've taken to the treetops. They're going that way." Dikar threw out his arm to show.

"Come on then," Bengreen cried.

"Not in such a hurry," Dikar checked him. "They don't know we follow 'em, and they'll be going slow, not sure of what is ahead. We can take time to think, and we must, for remember Tomball has the gun and can kill us, one by one, before we get near enough to him to bring him down with our arrows."

"What then, Dikar?"

Dikar told them the plan that had come into his head, and, as he had ordered, they spread out wide either side of the path Tomball and Marilee traveled, wide of each other because that way there was less chance of making noise to warn Tomball. Then they moved in the direction those they hunted moved, swift and soundless as when they hunted a deer downwind.

* * * *

Now that Dikar was alone he needed no longer to pretend to be unafraid. These woods were fear-filled, as Danhall had sensed, but not for the reason Danhall had named. The Old Ones did not prowl them, nor were there any other strange beings in them that could make a Boy vanish.

The dread that lay heavy here was the dread that lay over all this far land, of Them who were more cruel than any beast, of their fists and whips and guns and the fearful things they did to the people who once had lived peacefully in this land.

There was no longer an endless, rolling thunder in the sky, such as Dikar remembered from his dream of the Long-Ago, but in the sky was a dark, dark cloud, unseen but very real, that laid over all the land, over the forests and the fields and the cities, a night of the soul that had lasted long, too long.

Only on the Mountain had there been any light, this long time, any hope of a tomorrow. Dikar was thinking of his dream, as he ran naked and silent through the woods, was thinking of the Voice he had heard in his dream, the Voice that had spoken to the mothers who, with their very littlest children and the very oldest of the men, were the last ones left in the last city untaken by the hordes, the city there no longer had been any hope of saving from them.

"This is the dusk of our day," the Voice had said, "of the America we lived for, and die for. If there is to be any hope of a tomorrow, it must rest with these little children in an

attempt to save whom you are about to sacrifice yourselves. If they perish, America shall have perished. If by some chance 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 little children of whom that Voice had spoken, all of them who survived the flight from the city, had grown now to be the Bunch on the Mountain. And now, when almost they were ready for their task of bringing that tomorrow to these once green and pleasant fields, two of them swung through the treetops to betray them to their enemies, and destroy them.

It was of this that Dikar thought as he ran through the woods. Had Tomball been only his own enemy, only one who had taken his mate from him, if Marilee had been only the mate who was false to him, Dikar would have sent Danhall and Henfield and Bengreen back to the Mountain and pursued them alone. But it was the enemies of the Bunch he hunted, the enemies of an America, love for which, though he had never known it, was part of Dikar's blood, part of his breath, part of his soul.

And so Dikar came to the edge of the forest and fell to his hands and knees and crawled a little way out into the high, yellow grasses that striped with yellow the hill beyond the forest, and lay there waiting.

Somewhere in these grasses, Dikar knew, along the front of the woods, lay the three others, their eyes on the tops of the trees, on the green brush that met the grasses, arrows fitted to their bows, as his was. For this was his plan.

When Tomball and Marilee came to the edge of the woods, and came out into the open, the nearest Boy would shoot them down at once, before they were seen, before Tomball had a chance to use his gun. That they would come into the open, Dikar did not question. Had not Tomball tried, last night, to show the flame of the fire stick to the plane? Tomball was not afraid of Them. Tomball had come down to the far land to look for Them.

If only it did not get too dark to see Tomball, and Marilee, before they came out of the woods. The sun no longer lay on the grasses here. It just touched the roof of the house, there on top of the hill, soon would leave that too.

The sun no longer lay on the grasses, here where Dikar hid, but the hot smell of the sun was in his nostrils, and the ground was still warm with it. The ground was warmer than the ground on the Mountain ever got, it was warm as the body of Marilee when Marilee lay against Dikar's body, and the scent of the grasses was like the scent of Marilee's breath.

A lump rose in Dikar's throat. He was waiting here for Marilee, waiting to send an arrow into her slim, brown body. As so many times he had waited hidden in the forest to kill a deer, he was waiting to kill Marilee.

In that very instant that her lips lay on his, burning, Marilee had been thinking how she would find Tomball, how she would tell him of the rope that hung over the edge of the Drop! With her arms about Dikar, she had planned how to help Tomball kill Jimlane and Billthomas!

If ever anyone deserved to be killed, it was Marilee!

The ache in Dikar's breast was not an ache but a terrible, tearing pain—his muscles tightened. His head lifted, his lips tight-pressed within his beard, his nostrils flaring, ears and eyes straining.

Dikar started to ease, tensed again. No, that rustle in the treetops was not made by the wind. It came nearer. Nearer. Something brown, moving, showed among the leaves. Vanished. An arm it had

been, of this Dikar was sure, though he could not be sure whether it was Marilee's or Tomball's. They had come straight to him. He it was who must kill Tomball. Who must kill Marilee.

The pain within Dikar was as if someone had plunged an arrow into his vitals, was twisting it—

Dikar saw a form, crawling out on a thick bough. It was screened by the leaves at first, then Dikar saw black hair, a thick-lipped face. Tomball! Peering out of the tree with narrowed eyes. Dikar leaped erect, his bow taut—

Whang!

A feather quivered where Tomball's eye had been. Tomball, sprawling, black-shaggy, tumbled out of the tree, thudded into the brush beneath. A scream, a Girl's scream, came out of the tree and Dikar had another arrow laid across his bow, was tautening his bowstring once more. Shadowy in the treetop he could see Marilee. Marilee's voice came out from among the leaves. “Dikar!"

Marilee was out now, where Dikar could see her plain. Erect on the bough where Tomball had been, she held to an upper bough with one hand, stretched the other out to Dikar.

She was crying his name again. Her long hair was caught back among the leaves out of which she'd come, and Dikar could see her satin body, her lovely body he had held in his arms. His eyes fastened on the flowery circlet over Marilee's left breast. He would shoot her there—

"Dikar! What are you doing, Dikar? You're not going to—" Marilee's cry was checked by the arrow that was in her side, caught by its head in her flesh. She swayed, started to fall. Dikar's shot had gone wrong!

Dikar hadn't shot at all. *His* arrow was still across his tautened bow! Marilee fell! She caught the tree's lowermost bough with blind hands, hung from them, red streaking her side from where the arrow was caught in it. Someone else had shot her with that arrow. One of the other Boys. Marilee's left hand dropped from the bough by which she hung. The right hand let go and she fell—

Into Dikar's arms, somehow he was under the tree in time to catch her. Her weight crashed him down into the brush, but he fell sitting, with Marilee in his arms.

"Dikar.” Her lips were white, her nostrils flaring. “You killed Tomball.” There was pain in her brown eyes, but they were shining. “I'm glad. He was awful. I saw him shoot Jimlane and Billthomas, an’ then he turned the gun on me—said he'd shoot me if I didn't go with him. He had the gun an’ Jimlane's bonarrer, an’ he'd found the rope long ago. First I was going to let him—kill me—but then I went with him, hoping to get a chance to take the gun away from him an’ shoot him before—before—he told Them—"

Marilee's voice, strong at first, faded away. Her head rolled sidewise to Dikar's shoulder, lay there. She lay limp in Dikar's arms, as so often she'd lain asleep. But she wasn't asleep now. She was—

"Dikar!” Danhall was standing above them. “I was too far away to hear what she was saying.” Dikar hadn't heard anyone come up, but Danhall and the other two were there. “I shot her. I couldn't hear what she was sayin’ to you, thought you were holdin’ your arrow because you couldn't get a clear aim at her. I could, so I shot her. Can you forgive me, Dikar? Can you-?"

"Forgive you, Danhall?” The words fell like stones from Dikar's lips. “You didn't know—Sure, I forgive you for killin’ Marilee."

"Killin' her!" Bengreen exclaimed. "Bunk! She's not killed. Look at the way she's bleedin'. I've killed too many deer not to know bleedin' stops when one's dead. She's alive, you nuts, but she won't be alive long if you keep on sittin' there, holdin' her like a ninny an' lettin' her bleed."

"Not dead," Dikar whispered, staring down at the redness that welled out of Marilee's side and ran down over his thighs. "She's not—"

He could think again, could move again. He lifted Marilee across his arms, laid her gently down on a bed of soft moss near the foot of the tree out of which Danhall had shot her, knelt again.

"Find me some of those leaves that stop bleedin'," he threw over his shoulder.

"Quick." He saw now that the arrow had gone deep in Marilee's side, but its point had hit bone and so it had not gone in far enough to kill her, not even far enough for its barbs to be held except by a little skin. Dikar pulled the arrow out, flung it away. Blood spurted and he put his hands down on the wound, pressed.

"*Lift han's up, you fella!*" a new voice ordered, hoarse and terrible. "Hurry befoh you get one big lot lead in you."

Dikar's hands were red with Marilee's blood, but the bleeding had stopped and if he lifted them it would start again. He turned his head to say so, saw a great long gun pointing from out in the light, saw the black hands that held the gun, and the man against whose shoulder the hands held the gun.

The man stood straddle-legged out in the yellow field. He was dressed in dark green, and the little round things that held the green together were yellow bright in the fading light. His black face was flat-nosed and shiny, animal like. His thick, purplish lips snarled like those of a wildcat, just before it pounces on its prey.

CHAPTER VII: REFUGE

The brush rustled, a little way from Dikar, where Bengreen and Danhall and Henfield had been looking for the leaves Dikar needed. "Come out you fella," the black man ordered. His big eyes, that had too much white in them, moved back and forth a little and his long gun moved back and forth. "Come out fom dere."

Dikar's heart bumped his ribs. Neither eyes nor gun were moving quite to where he was. The black man hadn't seen him! The black man was out there in the light but Dikar, bent down behind the tall brush that marked off the field and the woods, was in the deep shadow of the woods and so the man with the gun hadn't seen Dikar at all.

Arms above his head, Bengreen came out in the field, and Henfield and Danhall came out beside him. "Stop dere," the man said, and the look on his black face, gaping at them, was funny. "Wat kind fella you are?" the black gasped. "W'ere your clo'es?"

"What clothes?" Bengreen asked, grinning. "This ain't winter, is it?" Dikar looked down at his hands. They were red with Marilee's blood but she wasn't bleeding any more. If he took his hands away she would start bleeding again, and she would die.

"You one fella tink you smart, huh?" Dikar heard the black man's hoarse voice, but Dikar was remembering what he had seen men like him do to white women, that dreadful day when he had been in this far land before. Better for Marilee to die than that. "But Jubal smarter," he heard. "Jubal know you 'scape from one fella jail camp an' take all clo'es off so if you get

killed nobody know wat guards you pay to let you 'scape. See? No use try fool Jubal. You tell Jubal were you come from, so Jubal get rewahd, an' Jubal make fings easier foh you."

Dikar took his hands away from the wound in Marilee's side. "A good sleep to you, Marilee," he whispered. "A good night. I'll be with you soon."

"Were you come from?" Jubal asked again, slow and hoarse, and there was something in his voice that made Dikar shiver. A gust of wind brought the smell of Jubal to Dikar, and that was worse than his voice.

Dikar pulled an arrow from his quiver, looked around for his bow. "If we told you," the grin was still in Bengreen's voice "you would know as much as we do," Dikar remembered that his bow was out there in the field, dropped there when he jumped to catch Marilee. The arrow was no good without the bow.

"Wat you gonna know after Jubal blow you to little pieces wit' dis gun? Don't fink Jubal, no do it. T'ree more dead 'Merican make no diff'rence, Jubal kill plenty already."

"Go ahead. Blow us to pieces an' see if we care. I dare you, an' double—" Dikar didn't hear the rest of what Bengreen was saying because Dikar had slithered silent as a snake, behind the great trunk of the tree. And now he was erect, was leaping high to the tree's lowermost bough, was lying motionless along that bough while all about him was the rustle of leaves, loud and terrifying,

"Wat dat," he heard Jubal's shout. "Wat dat in de tree?" All of Dikar, inside him, pulled together, waiting for the thunder of Jubal's gun, waiting for Jubal's lead to tear through him, but he managed to make a sound through his rounded mouth, the "koooo-hooo" of an owl.

"Nothin' but an owl, Jubal," Danball laughed. "Ain't you ashamed, bein' scared by an owl?"

Dikar slid along the bough, slowly, very slowly, very carefully, and now the tree's leaves made no more sound than as if the wind were blowing through them.

"Jubal no scared," the black's voice came up to him. "Jubal not scared of not'in', but you better be big fella scared of Jubal. You tell were you come from, bef'oh Jubal count five or Jubal shoot. One on end, with yella hair, first. All right. One—"

Dikar could see them now, through the leaves, the three Boys from the Mountain standing in a line, their arms over their beads, brown and naked except for their little aprons, Jubal, spraddle-legged, black and huge, his eyes small now, and red, his long gun butted against his green shoulder and pointing straight at Henfield.

"Two—"

The Boys were under the tip of the tree boughs, but Jubal was farther out in the field, seven paces at least. Dikar slid further out along the swaying bough.

"Three—"

Dikar was almost to the end of the bough, and it was bending with his weight. If Jubal looked up now, he would see Dikar, couldn't help but see him.

"Four—"

Dikar, gathering his legs under him, saw cords stand out on the back of the black hand whose finger was curled around the little thing on the gun that, pulled, would shoot it off. Jubal was going to say five now, and then—

"No," Henfield screamed. "Don't shoot. Don't shoot me. I'll tell. We're from—"

Dikar leaped, the whip of the bough added to the lash of his muscles sending him out, far out over the heads of the Boys. He hurtled down, straight down on top of Jubal, pounding the black down. Thunder deafened Dikar but his hand slashed down, the arrow clenched in it, lifted and slashed down again on the heaving, screaming thing beneath him, and warm wetness spurted over Dikar's hand and that which was beneath him heaved no longer.

Dikar was on his feet, and the Boys were around him, jabbering words he could not get. Dikar saw Henfield's face, eyes still wide, mouth still agape. Dikar's hand lashed out, slapped, open-palmed, across Henfield's cheek.

"You yellow-belly," Dikar heard himself say. "You lousy yellow-belly," and then he was striding, stiff-legged, back to Marilee, was once more kneeling beside her.

Marilee lay on the green moss, terribly still and terribly white except where the blood was scarlet on her side and browning at the edges. Browning! The blood flowed no more out of Marilee's wound. She'd stopped bleeding—

But Dikar saw the pale nostrils flutter, and he breathed again. Her wound, he saw, had closed of itself. That was why she'd stopped bleeding. The wound wasn't bad, Dikar saw now. Many of the Bunch had been hurt lots worse and none had died...

"Here's your bow, Dikar," Bengreen said, bending to him, "An' Jubal's gun." Dikar looked up.

"You keep the gun," he said, "an' take the Boys back to the Mountain. Go in the tops of the trees, that way you'll leave no trail. It will be night very soon now, an' you have a good chance to get back without their bein' able to follow you."

"To follow us!" Bengreen exclaimed. "What about you? What about Marilee?"

"Marilee can't be carried through the treetops," Dikar sat back on his haunches, "without openin' her wound, an' so she will surely bleed to death on the way. If we make somethin' on which to carry her along the ground, we will make so many signs that we would lead them straight to the Mountain. So Marilee must stay here. I will stay with her, but I promise you that if they come, they will not find either of us alive. Now go, Boys. The quicker you start, the better your chances. Go."

Bengreen shook his head. "No, Dikar. We do not go without you an' Marilee. But you are right about leavin' a trail to the Mountain if we carry her, so we must stay here with you. I must stay, I should say. I have no right to speak for the others."

"You speak also for me, Bengreen," Danhall said. "I do not go back to the Bunch without you an' Dikar and Marilee."

"I speak for myself," Henfield stood straight in the forest shadows that had grown so dark that he too, seemed a shadow. "Dikar! You slapped my face. You called me a yellow-belly. Did you have a gun pointin' at you? Did you bear a voice count, 'One, two, three, four,'"

very slow, and know that when it counted five, you would die?"

"No, Henfield."

"Then what right did you have to slap my face and call me a yellow-belly?"

"I suppose I had no right, Henfield. I suppose I was no fair."

"You had no right, Dikar, but you were right to call me that. I was a yellow-belly, but I am not, and never will be again. I looked death in the face, and I did not die, and I never again will be afraid to die. Dikar, will you let me stay with you and Bengreen and Danhall and Marilee? Because I want to. I want to very much."

Dikar lifted to his feet, put his arm around Henfield's shoulder, and smiled. "You are no yellow-belly," he said, very quietly. "But I will not let you stay, and I will not let Bengreen or Danhall stay. The Bunch needs you three, and you can do nothing by staying here. I am still your Boss, Boys, and I order you to go, and it is for the good of the Bunch that I order you—" Dikar whirled to a rustle in the brush, saw that a formless shape blotched the fading yellow of the field beyond, saw that Bengreen and Danhall had their bows lifted, arrows across them.

"Don't shoot them things off at me," the shape said, its voice thin as a Girl's but higher-pitched and very tired sounding. "Not that I got much to live for, but I'm a friend, and I came to help you."

"Don't shoot, Boys," Dikar said, and moved nearer, peering. He made out that it was a woman who stood waiting for him, her dress gray and shapeless about her thin, bent frame, the skin of her face stretched tight over the bones beneath, her hands like birds' claws, her hair brown as Marilee's, but drab and lifeless. "You are white," he said. "You are not one of them." In one of her hands was something Dikar could not make out.

"No," the woman laughed, and the sound of her laugh sent a chill through Dikar. "No. I'm not one of them. My name's Martha Dawson and I was born in that house on the hill, and my father was born there, and his father before him. But who and what I am doesn't matter, and it's better for me not to know who you are. I can see that you must have escaped from one of their concentration camps, and I came down to warn you to get away quick, before the patrol comes along to change the guard here, and finds you."

"I can't go away," Dikar said. "My Marilee is hurt too bad to be taken away."

"Your who?" Martha Dawson looked in the direction Dikar had motioned. "Oh. The Girl who fell out of the tree. I heard her scream and I looked out of the window and saw you catch her." She was bending over Marilee. "She is hurt bad, isn't she? She must have been cut by a stone when she fell. Oh, the poor thing."

The woman went down on her knees, putting what she carried down on the ground. "So pretty too, and her hair's long. I never seen—Why, she has no clothes on, only this queer grass skirt. You all must have been hiding in the woods a long time. Yes, I can see that you were. You look too well fed to have been living on the scraps they give us. Your wife has lost an awful lot of blood. She is your wife, isn't she?"

"My—" Dikar checked himself. He'd remembered what "wife" meant. It was the same as mate. "Yes. She is my wife."

"I thought so when you called her 'my Marilee.' Well, don't you worry about her. I saw the way you fought the soldier and I thought one of you might be hurt, so I brought some stuff along. I'll just put a plaster on this cut to hold it together, and then you can carry her up to the house and I'll fix her up right."

"Carry her-!" The way Martha Dawson's hands were working at Marilee's side, Dikar knew that she could heal her, but—"But won't They find her there? Won't that get you into trouble with Them?"

"I've had trouble enough. A little more won't hurt. Besides, I don't think They'll find her, or you neither, unless they search a lot harder than they have already—Oh!" She rocked back on her heels, her eyes widening. "But they will. They'll find that soldier dead in the field and they'll know I couldn't have killed him but they'll be sure I know who did it."

"We can hide Jubal in the woods."

She shook her head.

"No. That won't do. They'll see the blood all around here, and they'll find him, never fear, them blacks is like Indians. Oh goodness. I don't know what to do."

"I do," Dikar exclaimed. "Look, Martha Dawson. One of us wanted to give us away to them and we had to kill him. By the calm way the woman had acted when she saw how bad hurt Marilee was he knew he could tell her that without her getting excited. We'll fix things so it will look like he shot Jubal with an arrow, that Jubal killed him with his gun before he died."

"Good!" The woman nodded. "That will do it. But you better carry your wife up the hill while your friends are fixing things. We'll go up by the road, the way come down, so as not to leave more tracks than can be helped."

* * * *

Dikar told the others what to do and then he picked Marilee up in his arms, and went to the road, Martha Dawson beside him, went up the road toward where the house was a pale glimmer in the deep dusk that now had come down over the hill and the fields. just as they reached the house, Dikar heard a shot, and he knew that Tomball had no face any longer, knew that Bengreen was laying the long gun back in Jubal's dead hands, and that Danhall and Henfield were wiping out as much as they could of the marks that would show there had been more there than just Jubal and Tomball.

Martha Dawson opened a door for Dikar, and he went into darkness that smelled a little like the eating place on the Mountain. The door closed behind him, and he felt a hand on his arm.

"Bring her upstairs," the woman said. "This way."

Dikar didn't know what she meant, but he went the way her hand guided him. His toes struck wood, and he half stumbled. "Come on," the woman said, tugging at his arm.

"But there's somethin' in the way here. I can't go any further."

"Something? Oh dear Lord! Don't you know what stairs are?"

"Stairs?"

"Wait. I'll strike a match." Dikar stood stock-still, listening to the sound of her going away from

him. He didn't like this place. He was afraid of it. It was too closed in. He could hardly breathe. The woman was coming back, and there was a strange, scratching sound and then there was a little flame growing on the end of a tiny piece of wood in her hand, and her other hand was cupped over it, and she was looking at Dikar as if she'd never seen a Boy before.

"Don't know what stairs are," she said again. "Well, I never-! Look. There they are in front of you." Dikar looked and he saw a kind of hill built out of wood. "Hurry and take her up, before someone comes."

Dikar climbed up what Martha Dawson called stairs, and came to a level place, and they went along the level place, and came to more stairs that he climbed. At the top of these stairs they came into a big room whose roof was high in the middle but slanted down low towards the sides, so that there were hardly any walls at all except in one place where the wall was made higher to make space for a little window.

Dikar stood still, Marilee nestled in his arms, and looked around him. By the light of another match Martha Dawson held he saw that the room was full of tables and little benches, and boxes, and a lot of things Dikar had never seen before, all old-looking and dirty and piled every which way on top of one another, right up to the roof. So full was the room that Dikar couldn't see where he was to put Marilee.

"Wait," the woman said and went past Dikar to a box that stood on end in the middle of the pile's front, a black box almost as big as she was. She knocked on this in a funny way.

The box moved—not the box but the side that was all Dikar could see of it. The side swung out on one up-and-down edge, like a door, and inside the box was a tall man with a thin white face and gray hair. The man was stooped over, and his eyes, deep-sunk in his face, glittered in the matchlight like the eyes of animals glitter in the night-blackened woods.

The man saw Dikar. His lips pulled away from his teeth and his hand came up, and in his hand was a little gun that aimed right at Dikar.

CHAPTER VIII: SEARCH

"It's all right, John," Martha Dawson said. "They're all right. They escaped from a concentration camp, and this young man's wife is bad hurt and I've promised to hide her here with you."

The man John peered past Martha Dawson, looking more closely at Dikar. "From a camp?" His voice was deep, much deeper than Dikar thought could come from so thin a chest, and it was a very tired voice. The woman moved so that the match light from inside her cupped hand fell on Dikar. "Aye, I see now. I could only see a black shape in the dark, and I thought that I had been betrayed, and that they had forced you to show them where I was."

"Never!" Martha Dawson cried out, and then. "Who would betray you, John? Who would tell them you are here?"

John looked at her, and Dikar saw that there were deep lines in his face, lines of pain, and that his lips were gray. "I've just had bad news, Martha. They raided zee-seven this morning, so suddenly there was no chance to blow it up, and they took Ed Stone alive. But we're keeping our friends standing. Bring her in here, my friend," he said to Dikar, moving back into his box. "Bring her in."

John's voice came out of blackness inside the box, but something in that voice told Dikar he need not be afraid of him, nor of anything in the blackness, and he went into the box carrying Marilee. Martha Dawson's match went out, and Dikar stopped short, the blackness thumbing his eyes.

Martha Dawson pushed against Dikar's back, and he got moving again, and the other side of the box wasn't there, as he'd expected, but he went right on into a feel of bigger space. He heard sound of door-closing behind him, felt a hand on his arm stopping him, and then there was light.

The light came from a shining thing that hung by a wire over Dikar's head, and Dikar saw that he'd gone right through the box into a room hidden behind the pile.

"Lay her there," John said, pointing to a bed that stood against one side of the room. "It's clean and comfortable, I assure you."

Dikar put Marilee down on the bed, and Martha Dawson was beside the bed. Her hand took hold of Marilee's wrist and she seemed to be listening for something, and then she smiled and said, "Her pulse is strong." She put her hand on Marilee's forehead, and said, "She has no fever at all."

Dikar didn't know what the words meant, but he knew that Martha Dawson meant that Marilee would be all right, and breath hissed from between his teeth. "Martha," John said. "You'd better go down and make some hot water to wash her with, and bring it up with the iodine and bandages. You ought to have light on down there anyway, or our sweet guardian might start wondering what you're up to."

Martha (the man called her that, Dikar noticed, instead of the longer Martha Dawson) looked queerly at John. "Our guardian won't notice anything," she said. "He's dead. This young man killed him."

"Ah," John nodded. "That means trouble, of course. Well, we can only hope and pray as we've done all along. Go on, my dear."

He moved, and there was darkness again. Dikar heard the boxdoor open and shut. The light came back, and Dikar was peering around the room, so much in it strange to him.

There was the bed on which Marilee lay and a little table in the middle of the room, and a little bench with a back. The wall of the room in which was the door was covered with things Dikar vaguely recalled were named "books." The roof slanted down to the wall opposite this, and this was low except for a narrow space where it was built higher to make space for a window, but the window was covered over with a gay-colored, thick rug so that Dikar couldn't see them.

But it was at the fourth wall at which Dikar stared longest. A narrow table along the full width of this. Under the table were a lot of small black boxes, and on top of it was a jumble of wires and black boards standing up and lying down, and round things marked with little white lines, and a lot of shining things like what hung from the ceiling and made light in the room. In the middle of the wall above the table was something that Dikar recognized.

It was from a thing like it that the Voice in Dikar's dream had come, the Voice that had spoken about the dusk that had come to America, and the tomorrow that might never be. Dikar remembered the name of this thing, and said it aloud.

"A radio," he said.

"Yes," John said. "And now you know that you're in one of the stations of the Secret Net." His hands went wide. "The oldest of them, my friend. Five years I've operated it from here, five long years since I escaped from a concentration camp and in all the five years I have not seen the sun. In those five years I have had from that loud speaker"—he pointed to the thing on the

wall that Dikar had recognized—news of the unearthing of hundreds of our stations, news of the death of hundreds of our co-workers. Time and time again that speaker has brought me word that we were almost ready to rise against the invaders, and time and time again it has brought me word that they had found our leaders and hung them, and that all the work was to be done over again.

"Yes," John said. "This is the oldest of the stations, now that at last Ed Stone's gone, and I am the luckiest of the agents of the Secret Net, but tonight, my friend, I somehow have a feeling that my luck has run out. Perhaps that is only because I am tired and hungry, for Martha dares not bring me food until dark. They do not, I know, suspect that I am here, but they know I am alive, somewhere, and always they keep a sentry, out there in the woods, watching my wife and waiting for me to contact her." He smiled, and his smile was bitter. "That is why they have permitted her so long to live on here, unmolested. But I must hear your story. I thought that the prison camps were now too well guarded for anyone to escape from them. How did you and your wife manage it? What camp do you come from?"

Dikar shook his head. "We come from no camp. I don't even know what you mean by that word, camp."

"You—you don't! You're American, aren't you?"

"Yes," Dikar said. "We are American." He knew, without just knowing how, that he could talk to this man freely and that it was important that he talk to him. "We come from the Mountain, off there beyond those woods."

And then Dikar went on to tell John about the Bunch, and about how they came to live on the Mountain, and about their life there.

John listened without interrupting, except to ask a low-toned question or two, when Dikar stopped, and soon after Dikar started talking, Martha came in and listened too, while she tended Marilee. Dikar told about his dream, and how he had come down into this far land and seen what went on here, and how he had gone back to the Mountain.

"I knew then that somehow, sometime, I must lead the Bunch down off the Mountain and try to take back this land for America," he came near the end of his story. "But I could not think how we few could do anything against the black and yellow men when you who are so many could do nothing against them. Perhaps you can tell me, John?"

"Perhaps I can," John said, his eyes shining. "I must think. But you did come down again to us, Dikar. (Dikar had told them his name.) And without any plans. Why did you do that?"

Dikar told him about Tomball, and what Tomball had done, and how Tomball died.

"There you are," John turned to Martha. "There's the innate depravity of human nature for you. Here are these youngsters who were isolated from the world when the oldest of them was only eight, who grew up together in such an ideal communion as man has not known since Eden, and yet a renegade turns up among them who would sacrifice them all because his personal ambitions were thwarted. Doesn't that make you despair, my dear?"

"No!" Martha answered, her hands still busy with Marilee. "No, John. Because if Dikar's story has in it one black-souled renegade, it also has in it forty who have worked for one another and lived for one another, sweetly and unselfishly, from childhood to young man- and womanhood. Because it has in it courage and loyalty and self-sacrifice and love that was not taught out of books. Despair,

John? No. Dikar's story gives me new hope, new courage."

John moved to Martha, where she knelt by Marilee's bedside, and laid his hand on her head. "I'm wrong, Martha. You are wiser than I. Far wiser—"; Just then Marilee stirred, and her eyes opened.

"Dikar," she whispered. Then, faint in her voice: "*Dikar!*"

Dikar leaped to her. "It's all right, Marilee. Everything is all right. We've found fr—"

"Hush," John broke in. "Quiet. Listen." At once the room was throbbing with silence.

Into that silence, well-muffled, came the sound of men's voices, shouts. "The patrol's here," John said low-voiced. "They're looking for the sentry you killed. You'd better get downstairs quick, Martha. They might come to ask you about him."

Martha was on her feet, her face set, her hands trembling. John's arm went around her, and he was holding her close to him. He was saying something Dikar could not quite make out, and then they were apart and Martha was going toward the door, straight, trembling no longer. The light went out, and the door opened and closed.

"Let's take a look outside," Dikar heard John say, and he heard him moving in the darkness. Then there was pale light in the darkness, starlight breaking the blackness of a wall, John's hand blotching it as it held aside that which hung over the window.

Dikar darted across the floor and was pressed against John, looking out.

Just below was the smaller roof Dikar had seen from the woods, and below that, yellow light lay on the ground. Down at the bottom of the hill, bright lights danced in the yellow grass and on the brush and trees at the edge of the woods. Black against these lights were the forms of men, and it was from these men that the shouting came.

"Look," John whispered, "there in the wheat." Dikar saw the black shape of his finger pointing, and looked in the direction the finger pointed.

Where the finger pointed, in the middle of the field, was one man who did not move. The arm held a light, and the light was on his face, and Dikar could see that the face was round and yellow. The mouth of that face was a straight, thin line and the eyes were slanted slits in the yellow skin, and there was a look on the face that made Dikar afraid.

"That's Captain Li Logo," John said. "He's provost for this district. He's shrewd as a fox and cruel as a tiger. It's hard luck that he had to come along with the patrol, on this night of all nights."

Dikar felt Marilee press against him from behind. "Go back to bed, sweet," he said. "You'll hurt yourself more."

"I'm all right, Dikar," Marilee whispered. "I feel fine. And I want to see too."

A louder shout came through the window. "They found the body," John said quietly but, pressed against him, Dikar could feel that now he was trembling.

The lights moved together, clustering at one place just at the edge of the woods. Captain Logo went down to where the lights clustered, and the babble of shouts from there stopped, and all Dikar could hear

was a single high-pitched voice.

"I'll open the window," John said, "if you'll let me get at it." Dikar and Marilee moved back a little.

"Are you sure you're feelin' all right?" Dikar whispered under cover of a scraping noise in front of them.

"Sure. The woman gave me something to drink, before I quite woke up, and it's made me all warm inside, and strong again."

Cold wind came in on them, and the sounds from outside were louder, the sound of that single high-pitched voice, but Dikar could not understand what it said. Then there was another shout, hoarse like Jubal's, and a light showed within the edge of the woods, and Captain Logo went in there.

"They've found Tomball," Dikar said. "We'll soon know if we've fooled them."

Logo's high voice stopped the shouting again. The other shapes were separating. They were running back and forth in what John had called wheat, their lights shining on the yellow grass, and on their black faces. They were all dressed in green, like Jubal, and had queer round things on their heads, and they all had long guns like Jubal's.

"There are seven of them," Marilee said. "I counted."

One of the lights stopped, suddenly, and the one that carried it bent low, and straightened again, and as a shout came from him Dikar saw what the light shone on.

"Jeeze!" he grunted. "It's my bow. I forgot all about it. There was one by Tomball, so now they know there was at least one more of us."

Captain Logo came to the black who had found Dikar's bow, and he looked at it, and then he put his band to his mouth, and there was shrill sound from him. The blacks all came running to him, and clustered about him a minute, and then they were all running up the hill toward the house, their long guns in their hands, slanted across the front of them, their lights out.

"That's torn it," John said, low-toned. "They're coming to search the house, and they're certain to find this hideout. My premonition was right. My luck has run out. Well," he said, pushing back from the window. "There's only one thing left to do."

"What?" Dikar asked.

"To let them get inside," came the answer in John's tired voice, "and then push a button on this radio table, a button that will blow the house and everyone in it to pieces. If you kids are afraid to die, you can get out by this window and surrender, but I wouldn't advise it. No," he sighed. "I would not advise you to surrender to them."

"Wait," Dikar said. "Maybe—" He was still looking out and down. They had reached the house, and had stopped in front of it, and Li Logo was saying something to the black men he bossed, was waving his arms around. "Maybe something will happen to save us yet. Maybe they'll go away without searching the house."

"Not Logo," John answered. "Not when he's on the scent of something. But I'll wait as long as I dare."

Down below, the black men were separating. One moved a little away from the house and stood in the field, his gun in his two hands, looking watchfully around him. Two went one way, one another, and disappeared around the corners of the house.

"They're going to watch," Marilee whispered, "on all sides to see that nobody gets away."

An owl hooted, somewhere in the dark. The three blacks left went with Logo under the little roof that stuck out from the front of the house, and there was the sound of knocking from down there. The sound of knocking was in the room! Dikar whirled around.

"It's all right," John said. "I've just turned on the speaker system—something that lets me hear everything that happens downstairs—"; He checked as another voice came into the room. It was Martha's voice.

"What shall I do, John?" she asked, very quietly.

"Let them in, dear, as we always planned," John answered her, just as quietly. "And—Martha. I'll meet you—on the Other Side."

"On the Other Side, John dear," Martha's voice came through the knocking.

There was the sound of footsteps going across the floor. There was a rattle, and the sound of knocking stopped, and Dikar heard a door open.

"Good evening, Missee Dawson," he heard Captain Logo's voice, very gentle, very smooth. "So sorry I must bother you, but I wish to come in with my men. You have no objections, of course."

"Of course I have objections, but they won't do me any good, will they?"

"Sorry, no. So very sorry." Feet trampled, many feet. Then, "Well, Missee Dawson. Where is he?"

"He"? I don't understand."

"You understand quite well. One of my men was murdered, down there in your field, some time today. He got one of the assassins, but there was another. That other is your husband, come home at last. I want him."

"Go ahead and look for him, if you think he's here. Search the house."

"I do not wish to bother. You will call him to surrender."

"I will not."

"I think you will, Missee Dawson," and then there was a scream in Dikar's ears, a scream loud and shrill and very dreadful. "So sorry," Captain Logo hissed. "So very sorry."

CHAPTER IX: TOMORROW WILL COME

Dikar heard that from the sill of the window on which he was crouched Marilee's hand was pulling John's hand away from the button on the radio table. "Shut the talkin' thing off," Dikar heard her whisper, as he'd told her to, and while she was telling John the rest of what Dikar had told her to, Dikar dropped to the little roof below. He crouched out there, looking down to where, quite suddenly, quite silently, the black who watched the front of the house had crumpled into the wheat.

"Hooo-" the hoot of an owl came from his lips, and "Hooooo-" came an answer from near the still, black heap in the wheat. What little sound Dikar made jumping from the roof to the ground was covered by Martha's screams inside the house. The yellow light from the house's windows glimmered on the naked brown skin of Henfield, lifting up out of the wheat to meet Dikar.

"There were four outside," Dikar whispered.

"We got 'em all," the answer came. "I took two and Bengreen and Danhall each took one. Two other shadowy forms rose out of the wheat beside them. What next, Dikar?"

Dikar hooted twice, then whispered his plan. "Give me your bonarrer, Danhall," he finished. "I'm a better shot than you." He took them, turned to the open door of the house, where Martha's screams had stopped.

The door was wide and Dikar could see everybody in the room inside. One of the blacks had hold of Martha. The top part of her clothes were torn and a knife in Li Logo's hand was red-tipped, and now Martha's flesh was bleeding, but Martha and Logo and the blacks were looking at the stairs that came down out of the roof of the room, at the gray-haired man who stood halfway down the stairs, hands behind his back, tall and straight and proud.

One of the blacks held Martha and the other two pointed their long guns at John, but it was Logo who spoke to John, what he said coming clear and distinct to Dikar. "Ah, John Dawson," Captain Logo said in that soft, thin voice of his. "I thought your wife's screams would bring you out of your hole."

Once more Dikar hooted, and in the same instant he loosed the arrow, and the twang of his bow was joined by the twang of two other bows in his ears. Inside the house the three blacks crumpled to the floor, an arrow in each of their backs, and John's hand came out from behind his back and the little gun in it flashed fire, and Captain Li Logo was down on top of one of his blacks, but his head was lifted, his eyes looking hate at John.

"So sorry," John Dawson said. "So very sorry, Captain Li Logo," and his little gun flashed fire again, and Li Logo's head fell down, and he was as dead as the men he had bossed for the last time.

* * * *

The cool, green-smelling dark of the woods closed around the five from the Mountain, and around John Dawson and Martha. The Bunch would have wondered, could they have seen, what strange, heavy loads they were that the Boys and John carried, and they would have wondered at the light without fire that came to life in the hand of Marilee as she followed behind Martha and the men, smoothing out such signs of their passage through the woods as she could.

"Eight rifles, nine revolvers, and all the stuff necessary to rebuild my wireless," John chuckled. "Quite a beginning for what we'll need to bring *tomorrow* to America, as you put it. But you did a good job with your bows and arrows, you four."

The pallid, gaunt man seemed now to have found a new vitality; he walked with the step of a young man, and the memory of horror no longer lived in his eyes.

"We did only our best," Dikar muttered, looking back uneasily. "Martha said their blacks are good trackers. Is that right, John?"

Thunder blotted out the start of John Dawson's answer, a great clap of thunder from where they'd just come, and back there the sky was lit with red light. And then the sky was black again, and the thunder had ended, and John was chuckling.

"Yes. Dikar," he said. "Their blacks are good trackers, but I doubt very much that they will be tracking us. Now you know why I had you carry all the corpses into the house. It was already mined, as you know, and I set a time-fuse before we left, and all that anyone will ever find back there will be a big, charred hole in the ground and a mass of fragments too small to be identified. It isn't the first station of the Secret Net that has been blown up during a raid, and not the first in which everyone, prisoners and raiders, have perished. That is what they will think happened there, and they will not bother to look for Martha and me, nor will they ever know you and your friends were there."

"Ah," Dikar said, and felt eased. There was yet a long way to go to the Mountain, and there was still all these people and all these things to be gotten to the top of the Drop, and the load on his shoulders was heavy, but when he thought of what they would do with the load, of all the plans John and he would make, the load and his heart were light as the feathers of a bird.

* * * *

The sun struck brightness through Dikar's eyelids and woke him, and though the night had held very little sleep, he was instantly awake. He flung out his arm to waken Marilee found nothingness—remembered that he had given his place in the bed in his little house to Martha Dawson, was back again, for this night, in the Boys' House.

Dikar leaped from his cot, and all around him the flashing brown bodies of the Boys of the Bunch leaped from theirs, and there were shouts of welcome to him, but Dikar ran out of the house and through the woods toward his little house, and Marilee. He went quietly when he neared the little house, and stood in the doorway peering in, and then his heart bumped his ribs as he saw that only Martha was inside on the bed.

"Where's Marilee?" Dikar demanded. "Where's my Marilee?"

Martha smiled at him. "Come in," she said. "Come in, son, I want to give you a little piece of advice."

Dikar went in, wondering, and squatted on the floor by the bed. Martha's fleshless hand reached out and took his, and she said, very softly, "Listen son. Don't bother your Marilee mornings. And be very gentle with her, very tender."

"I am," he said. "I try always to be."

"I know," Martha answered. "But try harder now. Don't mind it if she is irritable with you, and unreasonable, and angry over trifles."

"What do you mean?" Dikar cried. "What are you talking about?"

He had drawn taut now, staring at her and fear had come suddenly into his eyes.

"Go ask her," Martha said. "She is the one to tell you what I mean, though I had to tell her, myself, this morning. You children," she said, and there was a wetness in her eyes. "You precious infants. Go, Dikar, I hear her outside."

Dikar rose and he went out again, and Marilee was coming toward him out of the bushes, and her face was greenish as it had been the morning before, but her eyes were shining. "Dikar!" she

cried, lifting her arms wide to him, and Dikar ran to her. "Oh, Dikar. I have something to tell you."

And then Dikar was holding Marilee close, close to him, and she was whispering something in his ears, and his heart leaped within him and in his veins his blood ran laughing and glad as the streams that laugh down the Mountain.

But after awhile Dikar sobered, and his face was grave, his voice solemn. "Now indeed, Marilee," Dikar said, "I must work hard for the day when I shall lead the Bunch down from the Mountain to an America retaken for freedom and liberty. For you and I, Marilee, were the children of a dark yesterday, but ours must be the child of a bright and shining tomorrow."

THE END

(What can these Children of the Mountain do to free America of the Terror? Watch for the next great novel of Dikar, Marilee and the Bunch, Thunder Tomorrow.)

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