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BLITZKRIEG IN THE PAST

by JOHN YORK CABOT

The guns of the United States Tank Corps faced formidable foes in the jungles of Earth's youth!

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I remember that we had just been issued our new uniforms, and that I had just wrestled into mine and was standing back away from the mirror above my bunk getting an eyeful of myself and feeling pretty classy. Classy and proud as hell to belong to an armored division of Uncle Sam's Army.

This United States Tank division found itself facing something far more terrible than Japs—across a million years of time!

At a quick glance the new raiment looked like nothing more than an olive drab suit of coveralls belted at the waist and strapped to the shoe tops. But my division insignia, stitched to the shirt front, with the lightning bolt of crimson flashing through a triangle of blue, was the thing that really gave the outfit class.

If you've never met a blitz-baby, a soldier of an armored division, you don't know anything about the *real* backbone of this man's army. 'Cause whether the public is aware of it or not, *we* know that the tank corps is the finest, fightingest, classiest branch of the U. S. Armed Forces.

And the U. S. Tank Corps is the finest in the world.

We're going to prove it in Australia, and in Burma, and in Libya. Yes, and we're going to prove it in Norway, and France, and Germany; in the Philippines and in Tokyo.

We'll shove so many tanks at the Nazis and the Japs and the Wops that they'll wish they never heard of mechanized warfare! It'll be blitz tactics by the best blitzers in the world.

And right now, the maddest!

So you see where that puts us. You see why you have to excuse the fact that maybe we're a little cocky, a little clannish, and a little pitying toward the sissies in the infantry, the paratroops, the quartermaster corps, the artillery, and the air corps—just to name a few of the lesser branches of the service.

Hell, all the time you hear statements made to the effect that there is more *esprit de corps*, more first rate morale in the armored divisions of the United States Army than in any other arm of the service. And if you were one of us, you'd believe it.

So there I was, admiring the new togs and puffing out my chest like I said, when into my barracks trooped Rusty Harrigan and Leeds McAndrews.

Rusty and Leeds are my buddies. We three comprise the unit operating one light tank. Rusty is the gunner—and what an eye he has—and Leeds is the guy in the tower who kicks the hell out of my skull while signaling me to turn this way and that.

"Well, well, well," Rusty said most sarcastically, catching sight of my preening. "You gonna pose for one of them covers on a picture magazine?"

Rusty is red headed, Irish, freckled and sharp tongued with his wit. He stands five six in his sox, and has a pair of shoulders that would look large on a guy twice his size.

Rusty also has big, red-knuckled mitts. Hanging loose at his sides they look like twin bunches of crimson bananas. But,

baby, those mitts can caress a motor like a super-skilled surgeon. And they can trigger a machine gun the way I hear Billy the Kid used to twirl a six-shooter.

"So what?" I snapped. "I think they look plenty classy, these new togs."

Leeds McAndrews came in with that mild, drawly voice of his.

"Burt is right, Rusty. Now, we won't be mistaken for common garden variety soldiers."

Leeds is tall and thin. His hair is black and frames a long, somber, studious pan. If you'd put horn-rimmed specs on his nose, he'd look like an elongated edition of Harold Lloyd back in the days of silent pics. Some day he'll be a brass hat, and one of the best damned tank tactic strategists. There's nothing he doesn't know that he can't learn if you give him five minutes to concentrate.

I grinned: "You said it, Leeds. Hell, four days ago some floozie was wandering around camp looking the place over, and she stops me to ask if we're part of the coast artillery. Imagine!"

"And if she sees you in this new Government Issue field uniform and shock proof headgear, she'll want to know if you're first string on the football team," Rusty said.

But I noticed *he'd* donned the new issue, and that *his* barrel chest was puffed out a mile.

"What did you come in here for?" I asked. "Fashion parade?"

Rusty grinned. "I just wanted to tell you that you and me and Leeds are gonna get a chance to get this new issue gear all nasty dirty this afternoon."

"What?" I yelped. We were all slated for town tour that afternoon.

"It's the truth, Burt," Leeds broke in. "Special orders. Our unit has been assigned to test duties this afternoon. We're to report to Major Hobart right after noon chow."

I sat down on my bunk.

"But I made a date, damn it," I grouched.

"So did I," Rusty echoed. "A little southern peach. Boy what a figure!"

Leeds grinned widely. "Thank God I was going to wait and take my chances."

Rusty scowled angrily. "Why in hell can't they get another tank besides ours?"

"We're the best," Leeds said simply.

"Yahh," said Rusty. "We're the top tank team. And what do we get for it? Time off? Medals? Yahh!" He slumped down bitterly on the bunk next to mine.

"There'll be a gold star on your report card, Junior," I ribbed him, "if you just be patient."

"Sometimes," Rusty said morosely, looking at the ceiling, "I think my insides must be shook up like a milkshake, or a Tom Collins."

"With you it'd be more like a Tom Collins," Leeds predicted.

"Bounce, bang, bounce, bang, dust in your nose and your throat. Bounce bang, bounce bang, bounce—" Rusty chanted.

"The needle's stuck in that record," I cut in. "Someone turn it over."

Rusty glared at me. "What I mean," he said fiercely, "is why did I ever get in this outfit anyway?" He shook his head. "Sometimes I think I was crazy to join."

"Why don't you ask for a transfer?" I asked. "There ought to be some lace and lovely branch of the service that could use you."

Rusty sat bolt upright.

"Are you crazy? Do I look like a *walking* soldier?" He demanded. "And besides, what'd happen to our armored division if I quit?"

"That's right, Rusty," Leeds McAndrews said dryly. "You wait until they can find a man good enough to replace you."

"Hah!" Rusty snorted. "I should wait that long!"

It's like that in the armored divisions. Beef, beef, beef. But just offer any one of them a chance to transfer to another branch of the service, and run, mister, run.

Leeds turned away. "Think I'll get back to my barracks," he said. "I want to do some reading." He left.

"Smart guy, Leeds," Rusty observed after he'd gone. "Alla time reading, reading. Hell, I'll bet he's read so much he's hadda start all over again on the books he began with."

"That would be impossible, Rusty," I told him. "Impossible for one man in a thousand lifetimes."

Rusty blinked. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Rusty considered this silently. A great man on a motor, a genius with a gun, Rusty.

"That's a lotta books," he said at last.

I nodded soberly. "That's it exactly." I rose, stretching and yawning. Rusty looked up at me.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"Think I'll wander over to the canteen," I said. "Want to pick up a magazine that's out today."

Rusty nodded, leaned back and closed his eyes....

Leeds and Rusty and I met outside the door of Old Blue Bolt—he's Major Hobart, commanding officer of our Tank Unit—shortly after noon mess.

"Did you call your southern peach and cancel this afternoon's engagement?" Leeds asked.

Rusty snapped his fingers. "Cripes! I knew there was something I forgot!"

I grinned, and Leeds's somber eyes twinkled. We had something to keep Rusty sweating about all afternoon now.

And then the door of the office opened and Old Blue Bolt himself stood there, looking at us with those steely blue eyes of his. He was a rugged, carved out of rock-ish old duck. Former cavalry officer with Teddy Roosevelt at San Juan, he'd won his comish in the Spanish War while still a punk of eighteen. In the World War I, he'd seen action as a Captain in charge of the first tank units of the A.E.F.

His voice was hard, and the words came from him like bits of shrapnel exploding at you.

"Sergeant Joyce," he snapped, "your crew ready?"

We'd all gone ramrod to attention. And now I saluted.

"Reporting, sir," I said.

"At ease," Old Blue Bolt snapped. "Come inside with me."

We entered his office, and he waved us to chairs as he stepped to his desk and pulled several operations maps from his desk. Then he turned back to us, papers in hand.

"I've picked you men for an experimental job this afternoon," he said, "because of your record. Your task won't be difficult, and will consist merely of a routine tank reconnaissance operation—over terrain which we have mapped here."

Old Blue Bolt handed the operational maps to me, and I glanced at them briefly.

"Mechanics are already installing the device you are to take along with you in the M-3 tank I want you to use," he went on. "You needn't be too concerned with its operation—that's more a matter for our testing engineers."

"What sort of a device is it, sir?" I asked.

"A rather startling development in tank radio communication," Old Blue Bolt answered. "If it works." He paused. "However, your job today will not, to repeat, concern operation. We're merely installing the mechanism, turning it on full power, and seeing how it stands up under the actual physical thumping around it will get from standard tank reconnaissance such as you will go through today."

"I see, sir." I declared.

Old Blue Bolt suddenly snapped a salute. "That is all. See you on the garrison grounds in ten minutes. Have your M-3 ready to roll by that time."

Leeds, Rusty, and I were kicking through the dust of the testing grounds three minutes later.

"Why in the blazes don't they put us through the paces right here on the reservation?" Rusty demanded. "Good Lord, this'll be a mere two hundred mile jaunt. A hundred miles each way."

Leeds was looking at one of the map copies I'd given him. He grinned. "You're a little off, Rusty. It'll be a hundred and thirteen miles going, and one-eleven coming back."

Rusty shrugged. "Okay, okay, twenty-four miles more doesn't make it any sweeter."

"Stop thinking about your southern peach," I ribbed him. "This'll just be a jeep jaunt."

Rusty waved a big paw disgustedly through the air. "Yah—a nine hour haul."

"Off again, Rusty," Leeds put in. "Twenty-five miles an hour top in an M-3, you know. Think for a minute we can average that?"

Rusty shrugged his shoulders. He glared at me. "Put me in the steer nest of that bounce buggy and I'll average it!" he promised.

"No thanks," I said. "I want a few bones left unfractured."

The special equipment was already inside our M-3 when we rolled out onto the garrison grounds in it some five or six minutes later. We'd only had time to make the very briefest scrutiny of it, and with the exception of Leeds McAndrews, who whistled interestedly at the sight of the complicated little box of tubes and wires, there wasn't much you could gather from such a quick peek.

"Looks like something outta Buck Rogers," Rusty had grumbled. "Give me a gun any day for simplicity."

"When we clear the reservation I'd like to take a closer look at it," Leeds had said. "I think I've got an idea of what it's supposed to do."

"Rusty'll relieve you in the tower," I promised him, "once we get out of sight. But for godsakes don't try to take the damned thing apart."

On the garrison grounds Old Blue Bolt and several other brass hats waited for us. There was a short, dumpy, bald-headed guy in civvies with them. We rolled to a stop and got out, while they clambered inside the tank for a last check-up. From the conversation, it became evident that the dumpy, bald-headed little guy in civvies was the inventor of the device, and that the War Department was giving him a preliminary test on it.

While we waited outside, I noticed Leeds squinting up at the sky curiously several times.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Stormy weather ahead?"

That's Leeds McAndrews, just like I said. There's damned little he doesn't know a lot about, even to the weather. And he doesn't depend on a bunion for that, either.

Leeds nodded soberly. "We're due for some wet stuff," he observed quietly.

"Hot damn!" Rusty had overheard him. "It'll kill that blank-blank dust." A big grin split his mug.

"And cut down our time," I reminded him.

The grin left Rusty's face. "Hell," he said, "you never win in this man's army."

Old Blue Bolt, the officers, and the inventor were clambering out of the tank again. On the ground, Old Blue Bolt snapped a salute.

"You have your orders, sergeant," he said. "Carry on!"

CHAPTER II

Georgia Disappears

Half an hour later we were making a maximum twenty-five per along a smooth enough dirt straightaway. But the day was a scorcher, and the dust kept sifting through the front vision slot with choking monotony.

I was beginning to agree with Rusty as to his first wish for the deluge Leeds had promised. My back was drenched with sweat, and the perspiration cascaded down my forehead like a miniature Niagara.

Up above me, getting plenty of fresh, clean air on his lean face, Leeds McAndrews had the gall to keep up a cheerfully incessant whistle. And to my right, Rusty accompanied him with a steady monotone of profanity.

Rusty interrupted his blasphemous monotone long enough to chant despairingly.

"Cool," he said. "Clean ... fresh ... cool ... clean ... fresh ... cool!"

"What's eating you?" I demanded loudly.

"I was thinking," he said, "of how nice it wouldda been had I joined the Air Corps insteadda this outfit."

I silenced him with a glare.

"What about that damned rain Leeds promised?" Rusty yelled after a minute or so.

I knocked Leeds' leg with the side of my head. I looked up as he peered down at me.

"Where in the hell's that rain?" I asked.

Leeds grinned. "Another twenty minutes," he promised.

I looked at the operations map at my elbow. Another twenty minutes would find us in rough enough terrain without mud to mess through. I sighed. Maybe Rusty was right. You never really win.

But Leeds had miscalculated, for once. We got our rain in fifteen minutes, not twenty. Got it while we were still traveling the smooth dirt straightaway.

I heard it patter on the tank, lightly at first. But the drops were big, and pretty soon they were coming harder and faster, and all of a sudden the smooth dirt straightaway was covered in a sheeting downpour.

"Turnabout!" Rusty grinned, yelling. He pointed his finger up toward the tower where Leeds was now taking a drenching. "First we bake—then he drowns!"

Leeds kicked my shoulder in a stop signal. We halted a few yards forward. I moved aside, and he clambered down.

"How about Rusty taking the crow's nest while I get a look at the radio device we're lugging?" Leeds asked.

I looked at Rusty, whose face had suddenly gone dark.

"Nuts to that noise!" he protested sharply. "The minute it gets wet up there you decide to change places with me. Yah!"

"There was no squawk when I first mentioned it," Leeds reminded Rusty.

"It seemed like a good deal, then," Rusty countered. "Thought it would give me a little pure air for a change."

Leeds grinned. "In other words you had no objections to it when we were getting started, is that right?"

Rusty nodded, starting to say something.

Leeds cut in. "And in other words you sanctioned a bargain then, but want to back out now."

"Yeah, but—"

"Unforeseen circumstances can't make an agreement any less binding, ethically," Leeds cut him off again.

Rusty muttered something hot. Then he sighed. "Every time I try to argue with you, McAndrews, I lose my shirt." He stood up and moved around, permitting Leeds to slide into the position he'd vacated.

"Up you go," I grinned.

Tight-lipped, Rusty clambered up into the tower. And when he gave my shoulder the starting nudge with his foot you'd think he'd wanted to root a field goal from the fifty yard line.

"Hey!" I yelled. "A little easy there!"

We rumbled off once more, and through my vision slot I could see the rain slashing down even more viciously than before, while the sky grew ominously darker and the first splitting explosions of thunder sounded in the distance.

Above me, I could hear Rusty's faint, wrathful grumblings. Leeds was busy in his inspection of the special radio apparatus, lost in blissful fascination at the intricate arrangement of it.

We clanked along the dirt straightaway in that fashion for another fifteen minutes, while the fury of the rain and the crashing reverberations of thunder grew greater with every passing minute.

Jagged flashes of lightning were now splitting the sky on an average of once every two or three minutes.

Then Rusty was kicking my shoulder hard in a stop signal.

I slowed the tank to a halt.

Rusty's head peered down.

"Do I have to stay up here and be top man on a lightning rod?" he demanded plaintively.

I glanced at Leeds. "How about it? Had enough look-see?"

Leeds looked up. "Eh? Oh—" He grinned. "Tell that red head I'll relieve him in another five minutes."

I passed on the information. Rusty glowered.

"Okay," he said sullenly. "But I'll be counting off them five minutes like a clock."

I glanced at my operations map, and peered out to see our road position.

"That next fork up there," I told Rusty, "is where we go off over the bounding hills and dales. Don't let me miss it."

Rusty muttered something indicating none too pleased agreement and sat back up in his perch.

I started up again, just as a particularly brilliant flash of lightning whitened the darkened sky. I heard Rusty curse angrily in his discomfort.

Leeds looked up. "Wonder if they counted on an electrical storm playing hell with this device?" he asked.

"I don't suppose so," I answered. "Why? Something wrong?"

Leeds shook his head. "It's skittering around like a water bug in a whirlpool," he announced.

I shrugged. "That's not our worry."

"No," Leeds admitted. "No, it isn't." He went back to his study of the device.

I got the turn kick from Rusty, then, and wheeled our M-3 down off the straightaway across a rutted field. The going wasn't too bad, although now and then we made a camel-like lurch as we crossed a narrow ditch or gully.

The thunder was crackling almost constantly, now, and its din, plus the incessant deluge of rain on the tank structure and the noise of the M-3's motor itself, made further conversational exchanges—even shouting at the top of our lungs—more than impossible.

Mentally, I was hoping that the terrain over which we were headed would not become bog and mud too quickly; for the operations map at my elbow indicated that this was just a brief stretch and that we'd emerge on a straightaway again in another few miles.

I shot a glance at Leeds occasionally, and from the expression on his somber, studious pan, he seemed still worried about the operation of the radio device our run was testing.

But that was Leeds, of course. He was that type of guy. Always stewed and fretted over everything, feeling responsible

for the perfection of the smallest details of anything remotely connected with our assignments.

Up above me Rusty had subsided. Or perhaps he hadn't. At any rate the din of the storm and the usual clanking cacophony of our M-3 drowned out whatever profane observations he might have had on our progress.

I was just figuring that the fury of the electrical storm was getting to be more than anyone, even Leeds, had expected, when it happened.

The black storminess of the sky became a sudden, blazing sheet of white flame; and hell exploded with the tremendous crash of a thunderbolt.

I remember the force of the shock throwing me from my seat, and that, with subconscious forethought, I snapped off the power on my way to the tank floor.

Vaguely, Leeds' voice, raised shoutingly, came to me; and I seemed to hear Rusty's angry yelling in the background of fog that was settling over me. It was only later that I found out I'd cracked my head with tremendous force against a turret panel on my right, and that merely the presence of my safety helmet saved me from splitting my skull in two.

Then the lights were out for me completely.

"Here ... no ... rub his wrists first ... yes ... that's ... right. Let me ... better ... beginning ... open his eyes.... Coming around ... now."

Those were the words that hammered at the back of my brain as I began to blink through the fog and regain consciousness. I was aware of Rusty's mug, and Leeds' somber pan both bending over me.

I sat up suddenly.

"Jeeudas," I yelled, "what time is it?"

I must have been blinking foolishly as I gaped around at my surroundings.

"You're not in the barracks," Rusty said, "and reveille hasn't just sounded. Calm down. You're all right. We were just struck by a lightning bolt, that's all."

"Lighting?" I gasped.

"Sure," Leeds McAndrews said dryly, "that's all."

"Wheeeeeeeew!" I ran a shaky hand along my face.

Rusty was grinning now, and he rose, half bending, making me suddenly realize we were still inside the tank.

"How about you guys?" I demanded. "How come you weren't knocked silly?"

"We were knocked flat," Leeds remarked. "Rusty was just clambering down inside to beef about getting relief when the bolt hit. I was banged face forward on my button. Rusty hung on for dear life."

"But the tank," I protested, looking around at the somehow undamaged mechanism inside our M-3, "should have been cindered!"

Leeds nodded. "Thank God it wasn't," he agreed, "even if it should have been. It was just knocked ahead, literally through the air, for a distance of no less than fifteen yards."

I whistled. "Honest to God?" I demanded, shuddering.

Leeds held up his hand. "Honest Injun," he said.

"What about the precious equipment?" I asked suddenly.

Leeds shrugged. "Seems to be undamaged. Can't be sure," he told me. "But I have a funny hunch that it was the cause of attracting the bolt in the first place."

Rusty knotted his red brows in disbelief. "How?" he challenged.

Leeds gave him a look. "I could explain," he said flatly, "but I'd be wasting my breath."

"Yah!" Rusty said scornfully.

I clambered to my feet, aware suddenly that my knees were all of a sudden very rubbery indeed, and stood there in a half bend.

"I better get out and make a check of this blitz box before we try to go any further," I said.

Leeds nodded. "That's a good idea."

Rusty's face was a portrait of disappointment. "You mean you figger on going ahead?" he demanded.

"Why not?" I asked him.

"And hit again by a bolt?" he demanded.

"The thunder's stopped," I said, cocking my head to one side, "and, if my ears and sixth sense aren't wrong, our storm is clearing up."

Leeds nodded in sudden surprise. "Damned if you aren't right," he agreed. "No more rain spattering the sides. Let's pile out and look around while you check the M-3."

Leeds was first up and out. Rusty followed him, and I brought up the rear.

So we got Leeds' choked exclamation of astonishment first.

Then Rusty's hoarse, bewildered bellow.

And then I was looking at it.

Looking at the terrain surrounding us, I mean. The thick, tangled, semi-tropical jungle that stretched for miles to either side. The chalk-cliffed mountains miles in the distance. The utter absence of anything remotely hinting of civilization.

All that—when we'd been crossing the sparse woodland pasture of a southern county before the lightning had struck!

Rusty's choked words formed the first coherent sentence.

"Listen," he grated hoarsely, "this ain't Georgia!"

Leeds got the next sentence loose. "For once in my life, Rusty," he declared, "I agree with you perfectly!"

Nobody cracked wise.

Nobody felt like it. For this was screwy, frighteningly screwy. And all of a sudden there was a fine, cold sweat on my brow ...

CHAPTER III

Centuries Into the Past

By now the sticky sweetness of the lush, strange vegetation hemming in from the jungle all around us was strong in our nostrils. It was an eerie smell. Like a cheap brand of sugary incense.

And then we heard the bird.

At least it sounded like a bird. Not quite, like any bird *I'd* ever heard, of course. It was too loud, too clear, too bloodthirsty a bird scream to suit me.

"Jeudas," Rusty muttered under his breath, "please don't let anybody try to tell me that was a crow!"

I gulped twice, and some instinct made me turn to Leeds for information. "Wh-where are we?" I managed.

Leeds shrugged. "I'll wait for the sixty-four dollar question."

Rusty suddenly rubbed his big jaw along his solid jaw, a shocked, white speculation on his face.

"Maybe," the redhead ventured, "we're," he had to gulp before he could get it out, "d-d-dead!"

I looked at the somehow unnice jungle growth around us, while the memory of the bloodthirsty bird scream still tingled in my ears.

"No," I decided, "this place isn't heaven."

"Wh-who said anything about heaven?" Rusty demanded.

Leeds had turned quietly away while Rusty and I were still rooted in our tracks. He was walking along the natural clearing in which we found ourselves, stopping now and then to glance down at the ground with a studious, unhurried scrutiny.

Rusty and I both noticed him at the same time.

"Who in the hell do you think you are?" Rusty demanded. "Daniel Boone, or the Lone Ranger?"

"I'm the little native boy out of Kipling's *Jungle Book*," Leeds said quietly. "And if you don't believe it," he pointed casually down at something in the soft earth at his feet, "take a look at this."

We were over beside him before the last word left his mouth, standing on either side of him, and looking down askance at the imprint in the soft earth where he pointed.

The imprint of an incredibly enormous animal foot; a print at least three feet in diameter!

In ninety-nine out of a hundred other situations, Rusty's remark would have been howlingly unoriginal. Now it was just unoriginal: "There ain't no such animal!" he gasped.

But Leeds didn't even hear him. He was staring straight ahead, a fixed, grim expression around the corners of his mouth. Staring through the tangled depths of the sickly sweet jungle growth directly ahead of us.

"What is it?" I gasped, startled again. "What do you see?"

Leeds spoke softly. "I don't see anything," he said. "I'm just trying to see what I can see." It didn't make sense, but I wasn't blaming anyone for not making sense at this moment.

"Look." I grabbed his arm sharply. "What do you make of this huge damned animal print?"

"Make of it?" Leeds blinked in surprise. "Make of it? Why, it's a dinosaur print, of course."

"A dinosaur?" I yelped, while the skin peeled icily down my spine. "A dinosaur?"

Leeds nodded. "That's right. Sorry. I thought you'd recognize it. Don't know why I expected you to do so. Sometimes I don't think beyond myself."

"What," Rusty put in, "is a dinersour?"

Leeds explained briefly. "They were extinct centuries ago," he concluded.

Rusty nodded soberly. Then his face brightened. "But, hell, Leeds, this is easy. If them beasts were outta date hundreds of years back, then this *couldn't* be the print of a dinersour!" He beamed brightly at the stunning impact of his own logic.

Leeds nodded sober agreement. "Under ordinary circumstances I'd say you're right, Rusty," he said. "But can you find anything ordinary in these circumstances?" He waved his hand generally, to indicate our situation. "We're hit by a bolt of lightning while crossing a sparsely wooded section of farmland in Georgia," he went on. "Our tank is knocked about twenty feet through the air and lands right side up with no one killed. And when we climb out, we find that somehow we're god-knows-how-many miles from our location, surrounded by territory that couldn't be found in any section of Georgia that I know anything about. It's a cinch it's nowhere within a four hundred mile radius of the county where our divisional headquarters are. In fact," he said speculatively, "I'd be willing to bet there's no wasteland or jungle sections similar to this anywhere in the United States!"

Rusty rubbed his solid jaw with a big knuckled paw. "Yeah," he admitted. "The situation isn't exactly everyday, is it?"

I cut in. "In relation to your last guess, Leeds, where in the hell do you think we are, if it isn't in the U. S.?"

Leeds rubbed a hand across his forehead. "I have to try to figure this out a little, Burt," he said. "Hell, I don't know but what maybe we are still in the United States at that; maybe still in Georgia, even."

"But how could we still be in Georgia," I protested, waving a hand to indicate our surroundings, "when you say, and I agree also, that there isn't territory similar to this in the whole U. S.?"

"It's not easy to explain," Leeds admitted soberly. "But, then, neither is the dinosaur print, or how in the hell we got here to begin with."

"Yeah," I agreed slowly, "I see what you mean."

"Did you ever study geology or historic biology?" Leeds asked with what seemed to be almost casual irrelevance.

I shook my head. "No. Did you?"

"Messing around with odd angles of odd subjects has always been a sort of hobby of mine. Curious information about unimportant—so-called—angles to sciences has always fascinated me."

"Yeah," I nodded impatiently. "I've yet to see anything that hasn't fascinated you. But what's it add up to?"

This time Leeds seemed to reflect before answering immediately; as if he had information that would knock my hat off, but wanted to recheck it mentally for his own satisfaction before blurting it.

Rusty took this silence to shove himself back into the parley.

"All I wanta know," the redhead demanded, "is where we are."

"It's like this," Leeds suddenly said. "All this," he waved his hand to indicate the jungle surrounding us, "plant life and undergrowth is of the most primitive biological type. As far as civilized man knows, this sort of vegetation died out eons back in time. It exists nowhere on the face of the earth as we know it today."

My mind was starting to march around in narrowing little circles trying to follow this.

"Also, we've found the track of a species of evolutionary animal which hasn't existed on the face of the earth in centuries."

"Yeah," Rusty broke in, "a dinersour." He beamed, glad at the opportunity to air his newly found knowledge.

Leeds glanced wryly at him, then went on. "So what does all this point to more than anything else?"

"Huh?" I demanded. "Come again!"

"What one fact in all this big mess stands out most clearly?" Leeds demanded.

"That we don't know where we are," Rusty blurted before I could supply the answer.

Leeds shook his head. "No. The most outstanding thing about this incredibly strange situation and our surroundings is the fact that they couldn't exist—according to absolutely solid, modern scientific fact—in any place other than a world centuries and centuries back in time itself!"

I squinted hard at Leeds. "Sure you didn't hit your head when the lightning knocked the tank through the air?"

"When the lightning, through the presence of a most peculiar radio device, knocked our tank through time, you mean," Leeds corrected me soberly. "I'm not out of my head, Burt, and I'm not kidding. I'm no mental marvel, but what I do know about what we've seen all around us here adds up only to the conclusions I've just handed out."

"You mean," I demanded indignantly, "to stand there and tell me we're centuries back in the past?"

"I mean," Leeds said angrily, "that two and two makes four."

Rusty, who had been following our interchange frowningly, brightened up when it came inside his mental sights. "That's right," he blurted happily. "Leeds is right, Burt. Two and two's four!"

We both fixed him with an impatient glare, and his effervescence subsided.

I turned back to face Leeds.

"Look," I said, "I have a man-on-the-street knowledge of so-called time theories and all that malarkey. I know that a few zany scientists subscribe to them and claim that some day time travel will be feasible. But as far as I'm concerned, that's a lot of junk. Please don't hand me any more of that back-in-the-past reasoning, Leeds. You're too smart for that sort of noise."

Leeds shrugged. "All right, Burt," he said with softly worded surrender, "you explain all this, then."

"Why, it's simple," I said. "This is just, ah, weelll, I mean, that is. Hell, Leeds, dammit all. This is, ahhh ..."

But he had me. As coldly and as simply as that. One sentence was all Leeds had to use in the clinch. And it had punctured any balloons of doubt I might have clung to.

Leeds smiled humorlessly.

"But, Leeds," I began weakly.

And the shot blasted out at that moment, loudly, startlingly, less than two feet from us. We both wheeled to see Rusty, the huge automatic pistol he carried at his belt as a side arm, smoking in his big, red knuckled mitt.

We looked toward the spot where the barrel of the gun still pointed. A spot near a heavy fringe of thick jungle brush.

An incredible, miniature monster lay stretched out there kicking it's nine legs in last dying spasms!

"Damned thing looked dangerous," Rusty commented briefly to us over his shoulder. "Noticed it moving creepy-like through the brush toward us."

Neither Leeds nor I said a word. We moved cautiously over toward the dying creature as Rusty followed, nonchalantly smug over his marksmanship, at our heels.

Leeds held out an arm to halt us as we drew within five feet of the thing kicking there on the soft, black soiled grass near the fringe of the underbrush.

It was about seven feet long, about two feet thick, and maybe three wide. It most closely resembled a gigantic, misshapen, horned toad. Except that it seemed protected by a thick coat of shell-like armor, and had, as I said before, nine legs.

It was flat on its back, now, and those legs were making their last feeble kicks as we watched it wordlessly. Blood was pouring from the huge right eye where Rusty had plugged it.

And then Leeds pointed his finger at a pair of sharp, thin tendrils that ran bug-like from its skull.

"Damned good thing Rusty plugged it," he said softly. "Those waspish tendrils are venomous stingers. Deadly poisonous, no doubt. We might easily have been attacked by it."

Rusty's chest puffed out.

"I seen that turtle armor around it and figgered I'd better not waste a shot on it, so I let 'em have it in the blinker," he declared.

I looked at the ugly creature and shuddered. The legs had stopped kicking, now, and I started in closer toward it. Leeds' hand shot out and grabbed my arm.

"Let it be," he said. "Maybe it's dead, but maybe it isn't quite dead yet. Don't take chances."

I was glad to take his advice. We turned away and went back toward the tank in the middle of the narrow clearing.

None of us said a word. I felt certain we were all thinking pretty much the same thoughts, however. But I didn't count on Rusty's typically unorthodox reaction.

"Well," Rusty said brightly, "maybe we better get rolling again. I missed one date with a southern peach, and I got one lined up for tomorrow that I don't wanta miss."

I looked at Leeds, and he returned the glance with equal amazement, shaking his head unbelievably.

I touched Rusty's arm.

"Look, chum," I said, "don't you get it?"

Rusty frowned. "Get what?"

"The spot we're in," I said. "Weren't you listening when Leeds and I threshed out an explanation of where we really are?"

"Not carefully," Rusty admitted. "I just got the gist of it, and understood that you'd figgered out where we were. Why, are we a long ways from where we wanna be?"

We were patient, then. Oh, so very patient. We told it to Rusty slowly. We didn't use big words. We made it as simple as we could. We repeated it three times, each of us, into his none too shell-like ear. And then we stood back and waited for the great light to break out of his pan.

"Ohhhhhh," Rusty said soberly. "Then we're really in a jam, eh? We're really lost, huh? How long do you think it'll be before we can find our way out of this joint?"

Leeds and I sighed and exchanged glances of frustration. The swift trigger touch in Rusty Harrigan was limited to his finger. His mind didn't have any.

"We'll try again later and it'll seep in over a gradual period of time," I told Leeds.

He nodded agreement. "That's the best way." Then: "What do we do now?"

I looked at the sun lowering fast on the horizon. "It'll be dark pretty soon," I judged. "We have no idea of the territory around us, and scouting it by night, with such pretty denizens of the jungle as we just saw at large, would be a risky proposition. We'd better hole in here in this clearing around the tank. We can keep a brush fire going all night, stand watch tricks in turn, and keep any danger off that way."

Leeds nodded agreement. "That's the best program."

"You mean we gotta camp here?" Rusty demanded.

I nodded. "Exactly."

Rusty groaned. "Whatta dump, and whatta spot to be in!"

I thought of the night gathering over the primeval jungle, and of the huge, incredibly monstrous creatures stalking the darkness in search of food. I thought of the fact that we were thousands of years in the past, utterly lost and at the mercy of a million unknown elements. Something inside me grew cold and shuddered violently. But I managed a grin for Rusty and Leeds.

"That's the height of understatement," I said.

And as if in answer, the blood-hungry bird screech ripped shrilly, half-humanly, out of the jungle depths once more. This time I shuddered outwardly ...

CHAPTER IV

The Neanderthals

We broke out our emergency rations and started a small fire just about the time the sun went down. And as the three of us hunched around the blaze to cheat the growing dampish cold, the jungle began really to come alive with sound.

And the sounds weren't pretty, believe me.

They were the sounds of strange and hungry beasts waking from the slumber of a warm afternoon, stretching themselves in the growing cold and darkness before they began their forays for food.

Leeds felt the danger crackling increasingly loud through the atmosphere, and so did I. But the two of us could only envy the calm placidity with which Rusty accepted the situation. The fact that his almost bovine acceptance was due in a large part to an overwhelming ignorance of the real danger of our plight did little to alter the situation.

After that, pulling out cigarettes, we had a council of war and policy around the fire. Leeds and I, of course, carried on most of the war and shaped the policy.

Rations were the first thing slated for conservation. And an estimate of our supplies was immediately made. After that we figured them out, ounce for ounce, so that we'd get through the next six days on them. Even at that, however, they were stretched pretty thin.

Matches, clothing, medical aid and ammunition rounds were all in order, of course, for we knew our allotments in those items beforehand. However, they, too, were put on a strict rationing basis.

"We'll need 'em for hunting when we run out of food," said Leeds, speaking of bullets.

In his voice and his eyes, however, there was the unmistakable conclusion that we might damned well need our ammunition for sheer self-defense.

"Don't worry about me using more than my share," Rusty put in. "One shot to a target is plenty for old Rusty." Which, thank God, was a fact.

We decided, then, to match off the watch tricks in four hour shifts. I drew the first, from eight to midnight. Rusty was next, from twelve to four, and Leeds was then to take over until eight.

We checked over our equipment on the M-3, getting gear and guns in shape, and then, on my instructions, Rusty and Leeds bedded down inside the tank for some shut-eye.

I took my watch near the fire, a tommy gun nestling in my lap as insurance against any disturbance, and a blanket wrapped around my shoulders for warmth against the dampness of the night.

The stars were out in all their glory, thousands of them, jamming the sky like I'd never seen them before. I speculated for a while about those twinkling dots, wondering how much changing they'd done from this moment in the past up until the twentieth century.

And after a while I began to catch glimpses of the tiny, bright beacons flashing at me from the fringes of the jungle surrounding our clearing. Animals, of course. Of what species I didn't dare imagine. I thought about the dinosaur track a lot, too. Don't think I was forgetting that. I made a mental prayer that the clearing in which we were spending the night wouldn't happen to be the ancient monster's boudoir.

The jungle sounds continued. The queerest, chilliest bunch of noises you've ever heard. Now and then my feathered chum back there in the tangled undergrowth would give out one of those shrill, bloodthirsty, half-humble screeches and set my spine tingling again. I wished to God that he'd go off in some tree and take a snooze.

I thought of a line from somebody's epic poem. You know the one.

"This is the forest primeval."

It didn't help much, thinking that way. But somehow I couldn't get it out of my head. For, if ever there was a forest primeval, this was it.

Of course there was a little bit of mental argument going on in my mind against what Leeds had said. Now that I was alone some of my skepticism returned. But every time it did, the clincher he'd given me, "Go ahead, Burt. You explain it," came back to reaffirm my faith in his theory. And what the hell, wasn't there that track, that print of the dinosaur? And I wasn't forgetting the miniature monster with nine legs, the thing that looked like a nightmarish toad grown a hundred times in size.

Centuries back in the past. An unknown jungle, peopled by unknown monsters, stretching God knows how many thousand miles to every side of us.

It wasn't too pleasant to think about, so I turned my thoughts to nostalgic remembrances of the things we'd left thousands of years away from us. That wasn't any too helpful to personal morale either, and finally I went back to concentrating on the shadows and sounds and flickering eyes around the clearing where we were camped.

The time passed this way until at last it was close to midnight, and I was climbing to my feet, shedding the blanket, and preparing to rouse Rusty for relief.

He groaned a little, grumbling sleepily, but woke at last from my none too gentle tweaking of his ear.

"Huh," Rusty muttered. "Time for my trick?"

"You said it, child," I told him. I shoved the tommy gun into his big and very capable paws.

He stood there, rubbing the sleep from his eyes with the big red knuckles of his right mitt, while he held the tommy gun carelessly with his left.

"When do I wake Leeds?" Rusty demanded foggily.

I was already bedding myself down in the bunk Rusty had occupied. Leeds lay sound asleep a few feet away in a makeshift bunk of his own fashioning.

"Four hours," I told him, "and no sooner."

"Gimme your timepiece," Rusty demanded.

I removed my wristwatch and handed it to him. "Don't know how in the hell the band will fit that wrist of yours," I said. "Don't snap the thing."

Rusty held it to his ear, then grinned.

"Good to have this, huh?" he said. "I mean, out in the middle of nowhere, it's good to have something you can depend on."

"You sound like a magazine advertisement," I told him. "Get out there before the wolves eat our tank up."

"See any wolves?" Rusty said eagerly.

I made a face. "Go out and look. But don't stray from the fire, Red Hoodingride."

"Don't worry about me," Rusty advised, starting up and out the tower. "You guys'll never have a more peaceful sleep than you'll get now, with ole Rusty standing guard."

"That makes me feel better already," I said sarcastically.

Leeds sat up then, blinking and cursing softly under his breath.

"Can't you guys hold your oratorical conventions some place other than the one spot where I'm trying to grab some sleep?" he demanded.

Rusty poked his head down from the tower to ask, "Did I wake yuh, Leeds?"

Leeds glared helplessly up at him.

"No," he answered with acid calm. "No, Rusty. You didn't wake me. I always wake up automatically at midnight just to see what time it is."

Rusty frowned. "Really? What a hellofa silly thing to do." His head disappeared. Then it poked back into the tank again. "Say, what time is it?" he demanded.

I sighed. "You've got my watch," I told him. "When you get to your guard post figure it out on your toes."

Rusty muttered something, and his red head disappeared from the tower opening. We heard him clambering down the tankside a moment later.

"Sorry, Leeds," I muttered.

"S'all right," he muttered. "Don't know how I'd get along sleeping normally, anyway."

There was a silence, and I closed my eyes in the darkness, feeling suddenly tired as hell. I pulled the blanket up over my shoulders and stretched as best I could in the cramped surroundings.

"Leeds," I said after a moment.

"Yeah?" his voice answered sleepily through the darkness.

"How damned many species of animal life do you think there'll be around this neck of time?"

There was another silence for a moment. "Hell," Leeds answered. "I really don't know, Burt. Plenty of 'em. You can be sure of that. I don't think the scientists have ever made any accurate computations."

"This would be a helluva swell spot for a scientist," I thought aloud, "if he could ever get back."

"Yeah," said Leeds, "if he could ever get back."

Another silence.

"That brings up something I haven't wanted to talk about," I said after a minute or so.

"You mean about getting back, of course," Leeds answered.

"Yeah," I admitted. "Think we've any chance, ever?"

This was the longest silence. And when Leeds' voice finally came through the darkness, it was grimly soft. "What do you think, Burt?"

"I don't see how—" I began.

Leeds cut me off. "Neither do I," he agreed.

We didn't say any more after that. Pretty soon I could hear Leeds' breathing coming regularly in sleep, and I lay there in the darkness envying him, his composure, and wondering how in the hell all this came about and where in the hell it would end.

I must have dropped off to sleep on that track ...

A hand was shaking my shoulder roughly, and I said something nasty in my sleep, turning over, then sitting up, blinking and rubbing my eyes.

"Damnit to hell!" I muttered. "This is no time to jar me out of the only decent rest I've had since—"

And by then my eyes were focusing. My eyes were focusing to the extent where I was aware of several unpleasant circumstances all at once. The first being that the interior of the tank was weirdly illuminated. Illuminated by a torch held in a gigantic, hairy hand. The second was the animal stench, the unwashed, wild and woolly odor in the air. And the third was the fact that there were two alien *human* beings standing over me. One of them was the owner of the hairy hand that held the torch. The other, the owner of the equally hairy paw that grabbed my shoulder so roughly. This latter person having, rather than a torch, a huge, ominous, crude club!

"What the—" I started.

But my exclamation was never completed. One of those hairy paws clamped hard across my mouth, and an arm, massively muscled, coiled tightly around my chest, pinioning me helplessly.

I was lifted off my feet, then, and carried bodily from my improvised bunk. Up through the tower, while the torchlight carrier behind me grunted in the background.

Then we were out in the clearing, and I was dumped to the ground. Rusty was there. Flat on his back, hands and arms tied by crude thongs of leather. He was out cold, a lump the size of an egg already swelling on the side of his skull.

I got a better view of our captors, now, both of them.

They were even larger than I had supposed inside the tank.

Huge, massively boned and hairy creatures. Both wore animal skins, Johnny Weismuller fashion, to cover their tremendous bodies. Their skulls were the kind you see on stone-age creatures in museum reproduction cases.

I wondered then, where in the hell Leeds McAndrews had gone. Foggily, I tried to recall whether or not he'd been in the tank when I was jarred out of my sleep by the ungentle gents who now grunted unintelligibly to one another over my prostrate form. I couldn't remember. But it seemed safe to assume that had he been so, he'd be out here in the clearing, captive with Rusty and me.

Starting to rise to my feet, I saw the slight movement made by the club carrying behemoth to my right. I changed my mind hastily, thinking of the lump on Rusty's skull, and went back to my former position.

Bitterly, I remembered the fears I'd held for the animal life around us. It seems I'd never given a thought to cave men.

The Neanderthalish chap with the club made a grunting noise that might have been some communication to his other chum. For the torch-bearing chappie nodded his assent and stepped around behind me.

Warily, I turned, looking back over my shoulder. Turned, to see the torch-bearer's extremely ugly pan split in what was undoubtedly meant to be a grin.

And then I got it.

Hard against the side of my skull, while a million flames exploded in my brain and the stars came out shooting like Roman candles to a pinwheel background of wheeling planets.

The club-bearing brute had used the weapon the moment I'd turned. And as I fell through a million miles of flame splashed darkness, I was fuzzily aware of this fact. And fuzzily aware, too, that I couldn't hang onto my last straws of consciousness any longer ...



CHAPTER V

A Prehistoric Greeting

For lord knows how long, I was certain that I'd been taken to hell. Taken to hell and placed upon a huge spit—like a barbecued chicken—which was driven through the top of my skull and straight through the rest of my body.

The spit was turning me back and forth across a huge furnace of white hot coals, toasting and crisping my body to a delicious golden brown, while savages, all of them looking like cave men, stood happily around the pit on which I was being fried, spittle drooling eagerly from the sides of their huge mouths.

And then I opened my eyes. Opened my eyes to find immediately the physical causes for the nightmare in which I'd been living.

I was stretched out, tied hand and foot, before a huge, roaring bonfire in front of the mouth of a great cave. Close enough to the fire, in fact, to dangerously approximate being spitted over white hot coals.

My back, legs, and forehead were drenched with sweat from the heat of the great blaze. And the aching in my head from the smashing blow I'd received from the primitive war club was undoubtedly the reason for my imagining that a spit had been driven through my skull.

And as for the cave savages, my nightmare had batted one thousand. They were everywhere around the big blaze, and streamed back and forth before the mouth of the huge cave.

None of them seemed to be paying the slightest attention to the trussed form of yours truly; so I squirmed this way and that, until I was able to get a better view of the primitive panorama around me.

My eyes must have been bug-wide, and it's a cinch that my heart was hammering sledge-like in my chest as I lay there on my side, taking a long visual gulp of it all.

There were crudely fashioned ladders running along the walls on either side of the big cave entrance, and by craning my neck until it almost snapped, I was able to see smaller cave openings, perhaps a double dozen of them, at the end of each of those crude ladders.

It was evident that this location was the primeval equivalent of a Park Avenue apartment sector. I got the impression that it was close to a cliff edge, and the additional feeling that there was probably quite a drop down from said cliff edge. It seemed reasonable to assume that for protection's sake this community was built on a mountainside.

And as much as I hated to admit it—for my own peace of mind—the citizenry of this community seemed far cruder than the dwellings they'd fashioned for their ape-like bodies.

The two chaps who'd captured Rusty and me had evidently been just average specimens of this pre-civilized humanity. For there were guys, and gals, moving around the place who were considerably more gargantuan than our original captors.

And the female of the species was repulsive beyond my wildest dreams. I thought I'd seen ugly wenches, but these walked away with last prize for all time as far as I was concerned.

They were all almost as large as their menfolk, and aside from being lumpier generally, if you know what I mean, they were hard to tell from the males.

I had a sudden, wild, foolish nostalgia for the beautiful gals of Georgia. And then I remembered that these, ironically enough, might very well be Georgia peaches of the ummmm-thousand B. C. variety.

It occurred to me, then, that I'd better squint around a bit to see what had happened to Rusty.

Some more squirming around on the earth brought me into the desired position for additional look-see of the territory.

It took me several minutes to scan the territory thoroughly enough to establish the fact that Rusty Harrigan wasn't in evidence.

And then it took an additional two minutes for me to comprehend fully what a hell of a spot I was in.

Leeds had been the first to disappear. I hadn't thought about that since I'd been banged over the bean by the knotty club. But now I gave it some more very serious consideration.

I wondered, among other things, if our cavemen captors had beaten his brains out while he slept. I hadn't thought to see if he, or the remains of him, had been in the tank at the time that the massively muscled brethren had dragged me from the interior of the tank. There hadn't been time for that.

But, too, there had been no sign of him around the clearing when I'd discovered Rusty, out cold and tied like a hog for market, immediately before I'd been sandbagged with an ancient shillallah.

I remembered that Leeds had always been a light sleeper.

Perhaps, on hearing the sound of the scuffle that must have occurred between Rusty and the cave dweller, Leeds had piled out of the tank to see what was going on.

Perhaps he'd even engaged in the scrap alongside Rusty, maybe getting his brains beaten out in the fringes of the jungle.

I shuddered, giving up the mental debate.

But Rusty, where was he now? Had he been more than out cold there in the clearing when I'd spied him with the knot on his knob? It didn't seem likely and I quite frankly hoped to God their club belts hadn't killed him.

Remembering the thickness of that Mick's skull, however, I heaved a sigh of relief and dismissed the thought. It would be utterly impossible for anyone to kill Rusty Harrigan by beating his brains out.

And then it suddenly occurred to me that the redhead must have been stealthily ambushed. For had he seen the two aboriginals advancing on our camp clearing, they'd never have survived two quick bursts from his tommy gun. Rusty Harrigan had the sharpest eye in the service, and the fastest trigger finger. An eye like an eagle—I remembered someone having commented. Then I grinned, recalling Leeds' additional bird-like description of Rusty. And a brain like a wren—Leeds had added.

But eagle eye and wren brain notwithstanding, Rusty was nowhere around at present. And the most disconcerting factor I faced in an entire hodge-podge of impossible trouble was the fact that I now didn't know whether Rusty or Leeds were alive any longer.

So I lay there near the roaring blaze, baking and broiling until my clothes were sticking fast to my body and my face must have been blood red. Lay there and went through a special sort of indescribable torment. Torment which brought into play all my emotions of dread, horrible suspense, futile remorse, and sick fear regarding the fate of the two best guys I'd ever known.

And finally, I don't know how much later it was, I caught sight of thick legs and huge feet moving over toward me. I closed my eyes instinctively as I heard the guttural grunts passed between my approaching captors.

Hands were grabbing me up, then, like a limp sack of flour, and I found myself tossed up onto a broad, unpleasantly odorous, bare shoulder.

Then my insides were getting an unpleasant jolting, while I caught bobbing glimpses of the ground over which I was being carried. Suddenly the ground became stone, and I realized we were entering the large cave which I'd first seen on opening my eyes.

The place seemed illuminated flickeringly in some sort, and I decided it was probably lighted by torches placed along the walls.

We—my carrier and I—must have covered about fifty or sixty yards of caveway before we came to a halt.

I was just wondering what next, when I was dumped jarringly to the stone flooring, narrowly missing landing on my skull.

I was twisting around wildly on the floor, trying to get my snoot off the cold stone, a most difficult maneuver when bound hand and foot, when hands were once again laid most ungently on my carcass and a stone knife cut the thongs binding my aching ankles.

This, to date, came as the greatest surprise of my captivity. I lay there motionless, face downward, feeling that my legs were now free, but dreading to take advantage of the new freedom for fear of some unsubtle trickery.

A huge hand slapped me on the back—an unmistakable signal for me to rise to my feet.

But I didn't move. I didn't turn my face for a gander at the backslapper. I'd turned my noggin once, and gotten a club in the side of the skull for my curiosity.

I could hear grunt-sounds. They sounded slightly annoyed and a little bit disgusted. Probably because I wasn't rising so I could be kicked in the stomach and knocked down again, I figured.

All of a sudden, for no particular reason that hadn't been present all along, I got boiling mad.

I pulled my knees up under me—my arms were still bound by thongs behind my back—and tried the grimly precarious balancing feat of rising. Try to get up without support sometime when your arms are securely tied behind your back.

The first effort wasn't successful, and wasn't funny. I got but several feet from the floor before I spilled over on my face.

There were grunt-noises around me this time that sounded like good, hearty, primeval horselaughs.

I was beginning to turn my slow burn into a boiling rage. And the next try I spread my legs as wide as I could, one in front of me, the other behind. It did the trick.

And as I was on my feet, a hearty paw slammed me hard in the back, while a most familiar voice boomed out jovially.

"Hy-yah, Sarge!"

The voice belonged to Rusty Harrigan!

CHAPTER VI

Enter, a Queen

I whirled around to face him like a dervish showing off, half my brain digesting the sound of that voice, and the other half refusing to believe it.

But it was Rusty, all right. Rusty still with a lump on his skull, and blood caked in those crimson locks of his. But Rusty in spite of hell and high tide.

I was too stunned to say anything immediately. I could only stare at him like a blasted idiot, trying to shift my mental gears to a combination that would handle this impossibility.

For Rusty looked completely unperturbed, utterly at ease, and very much amused with the antics through which I'd been putting myself in the past two or three minutes.

"What," I croaked at last, "what in the hell is this all about?"

Rusty's grin didn't leave. He continued to stare smugly at me. And his self-satisfaction oozed from the tenor of his voice.

"Don't worry about a thing, Burt old boy. Rusty Harrigan of the U. S. Armored Forces is in complete control."

And then I noticed for the first time what sort of a place this cave we were in was; and what sort of companions stood all around us.

The cave was an extraordinarily high vaulted affair, and was some twenty or twenty-five yards wide. Looking back over Rusty's shoulder, I could see the entrance through which I'd been taken into the place. I could see the big, roaring fire still crackling down there at the mouth of it. As I'd originally suspected, huge, crude torches were placed all along the walls to provide the illumination for the cavern.

And gathered around us, all standing a few respectful yards back from Rusty, were at least two dozen aboriginals of the type I now am getting heartily sick of.

Rusty saw my glance, and waved a genial hand at our crude chums and cavern surroundings. He spoke with the air of a greeter presenting the keys to a city.

"Some joint, eh?" he said.

I nodded. "Yeah, and some playmates." I paused to get mad all over again in exactly half a second. "Listen," I thundered, "I want to know what in the hell this is all about! I want you to start at the beginning and bring me right up to this minute, chum. I want a blow by blow accounting!"

Rusty grinned more broadly. "Sure, sure, if you'll wait a minute while I have your wrist thongs cut." He turned, making a cutting gesture with one hand over his right wrist. One of the aboriginals grunted, nodded, and stepped over to me with a stone knife in his hand.

I turned my back and the thongs were sawed through speedily by the razor-sharp edge of the stone.

The aboriginal stepped quickly back to a respectful distance behind Rusty.

"Now," I demanded, rubbing my very sore wrists, "get on with it."

"Very simple," Rusty said. "These babies, musta been a good dozen of 'em, crept up on me while I was standing my watch trick. I never knew what hit me. Guess they beaned me with one of them clubs they carry."

I interrupted him. "For your information there wasn't a dozen of them, Rusty. There were only two. And you must have been plenty alert to let them 'creep' up on you."

Rusty colored, and the smug smirk left his face for a minute.

"Maybe so," he conceded. "I wouldn't know how many there was. Maybe there was thirty."

"There were only two," I repeated.

"Anyhow," said Rusty, "I was ambushed. They jumped down on me from them trees and—" suddenly he stopped, really flushing this time, as he realized his slip.

"Ahhh," I said icily, "down from the trees, eh? I didn't know there were any trees in our clearing. You couldn't have gone just a little bit into the jungle to snoop around, could you, Rusty?"

Rusty looked stricken. "Hell, just thought I'd try a little hunting, Burt. I was keeping my eye on our camp-site all the time, of course, and—"

"Of course," I said frigidly. "Sure. You were standing your watch duty and hunting, too. One eye for each."

"Do you wanta know what happened or don't you?" Rusty demanded, mopping his brow with his sleeve.

"Sure," I said. "Sure, I want to know. And it seems I'm finding out a lot."

"Well," Rusty put in hastily, "it was like I said. Bam, I was knocked out like a light. Then I didn't know no more until I come to in this cave here," he waved his hand. "I wasn't tied up at all. I was just stretched out flat, and some dame was rubbing my forehead gentle-like, bringing me around."

"Some dame?" I demanded.

"Yeah," Rusty said. "Wearing one of them skins they all wear around here, only she had an extra skin." He said the last words in disappointment.

"You mean one of the gruesome, hairy old bags, beef-fisted Amazons they have here?" I demanded incredulously.

Rusty echoed my surprise. "Old bags?" Rusty demanded. "I ain't seen any old muscle bound bags around here. This here dame I'm telling you about was the only woman I've seen so far."

I spied an aboriginal female in the crowd of flatheads behind Rusty and pointed to one.

"What do you think she is," I demanded, "a he?"

Rusty's eyes followed my pointing finger. He gulped.

"You mean," he choked, "that the bulgier brutes around here is women, actually?"

"Elemental, my dear Rusty," I said acidly.

The wench at whom I'd pointed bared thick lips in a gruesomely coy smile, and I shuddered, turning back to Rusty.

"You mean to say it wasn't a dame of that type who was stroking your fevered brow when you regained consciousness?" I demanded.

Rusty raised his right hand. "Honest to God, Burt. This wench I tell you about was a looker, a queen!"

I shook my head pityingly. "You must have been delirious," I scoffed.

"Honest!" Rusty protested.

I frowned. "You certain?" I demanded.

"I'm getting to the point I wanta tell you," Rusty answered. "This dame, this queen-bee, this looker, seemed to be the Boss over all these flat-skulled apes around here."

"They aren't apes," I said. "They're primitives, aboriginals."

"Anyway," Rusty declared, "they look like apes." Rusty had a one-track mind. "And this dame was their Boss, what I mean."

"But why weren't you tied up?" I demanded. "Especially since they took the trouble to knock you out and tie you up in the first place?"

Rusty spread his hands wide. "That's what I'm getting at," he said plaintively. "Doncha see what I mean? The dame fell for me like a load of bricks!"

I could only stand there and gape at the egocentric redheaded mug. Gape, and shake my head slowly from side to side.

"And so that's why you're up and around," I said. "And is that why I've been freed?"

"Why else?" demanded Rusty. "These baboons," he waved his hand to indicate the aboriginals who gaped curiously at us, "were told off by the knockout babe when they tried to push me around. They're scared as hell of her, and have been plenty nice to me, ever since she showed 'em that she wanted nothing but the best for Rusty Harrigan."

Everything was coming too fast and furious now for anything to register definitely. I put a hand to my forehead, and held another up to Rusty to quiet him a few minutes.

Maybe Rusty hadn't been delirious. Maybe everything he'd just told me was true. Certainly, the aboriginals around us were definitely no longer hostile. Certainly, too, Rusty's explanation was as reasonable as anything else that had happened in the last fifteen hours or so.

"Where in the hell is Leeds?" I demanded, switching the tack.

Rusty looked blank. "Isn't he out there, tied up somewhere like you?" he demanded.

I shook my head. And then, briefly, I told him all I knew about what might have happened to Leeds.

Rusty gulped. "Jeeudas," he muttered. "When they brought you in, I felt sure as hell they'd been bringing Leeds in here pretty soon after."

"Unless," I said grimly, "his brains were bashed out in the tank."

Rusty looked sick. He gulped again, as if fighting for breath that had been knocked from him.

"I know what you're thinking, Burt," he said quietly. "If I hadnta been such a damned fool—if I hadn't gone prowling around looking for something to shoot at, none of us would be in this place, and Leeds would be al—" he choked off, unable to finish.

I jarred his shoulder sharply with my palm, and there was a mumbling grunt of interest from the primitives massed behind Rusty.

"Take it easy, redhead," I ordered. "We don't know that Leeds is done for. I've a hunch he's still very much alive somewhere. And, besides, we don't know if this situation is good or bad, yet. Tell me more about the beautiful dame in the animal skins."

Rusty shrugged. "That's about all I know," he said.

"All? Where is she? Where did she go?" I demanded.

Rusty spread his hands, he pointed over my shoulder then.

I turned, looking at the end of the cave to which he pointed for the first time. I'd been facing in that direction when I'd scrambled to my feet, but I hadn't even noticed it when Rusty's voice had boomed in my ear so suddenly.

Now I got my first clear view of the rock-hewn throne dais.

For it was a throne. It couldn't have been anything else. Primitive, crude, yet nakedly majestic, it towered about six feet from the stone base of the dais.

And yet it was small. Small, that is, compared to the size it would have had to be to fit comfortably any creature of the oversized bulk of the aboriginals.

Gaudy colored feather plumage was the crest which haloed the peak behind the throne chair itself, and rich fur skins formed a thick carpet all around the dais.

There was, however, no one occupying the throne at the moment.

I saw the side exit, a cave mouth leading to a smaller cavern corridor, toward which Rusty was now pointing.

"She went out there?" I demanded.

Rusty nodded.

I started forward, and Rusty grabbed my arm just as an ominous snarling mutter rose from the aboriginals behind us.

"Not so fast," Rusty exclaimed.

"Getting too close to that throne business is something these baboons don't seem to like—I know," he concluded, explaining, "I started to follow her."

I shrugged. "Okay. We'll oblige," I said.

Rusty's hand had suddenly tightened roughly on my arm and he drew in his breath sharply.

"Look!" he said hoarsely. "There she is!"

But it wouldn't have been necessary for him to have said a word. For the incredibly gorgeous female creature who had just stepped onto the dais at the end of the cave announced her entrance by the very electrifying savage splendor of her presence!

CHAPTER VII

Ordered to Kill

Even the primitives behind us seemed to be holding the breath in their wide nostrils. And for some reason beyond explanation, my heart was beating at three times its normal quota.

The girl—her very suppleness and grace of action, not to mention her slender, beautifully molded body, proclaimed her as a girl—moved across the dais with such serene assurance, that it was fully half a minute before I was aware she had ascended the steps to the throne chair and was now seated regally there.

"That," choked Rusty, "is the broad!"

But even his Main and Broadway remark couldn't break the spell that had suddenly taken hold of the cave and everyone in it including yours truly.

My jaw must have been fully an inch slack, my eyes ready to be knocked off by sticks.

And then I saw that she was crooking a delicate finger at Rusty and me, beckoning us toward her throne, smilingly.

Somehow my legs found locomotion, and I was but vaguely aware that Rusty moved along beside me as we advanced toward the stone dais and the throne in which the regally savage beauty sat.

I was able to see her face more clearly as we drew closer. The color of her hair, which from a distance had seemed to be burnished copper, now appeared to be rich gold.

Her lips were ripe, and red, and sensuously full. Half-parted as they were in an inscrutable smile, they took on still richer crimson from the milk white purity of her even teeth. Those lips moved then, making sounds that were her words.

But the sounds were nothing like the guttural gratings I'd heard from the thick lips of the flatheaded savages behind us. They were soft and *purring*. God knows I had no manner of telling what those sounds meant, but nonetheless, you could almost subconsciously *sense* their meaning.

Her eyes were luminously commanding, twin ovals of flashing brown passion; her cheekbones high, and ivory cheeks delicately tinted crimson in the almost imperceptible hollows.

And then I was half stumbling on the first steps leading to the dais. Half-stumbling, unaware of anything save the incredible fascination of the girl in the throne chair.

She raised her hand high, then, and I found myself—without thinking—dropping to my knees some five feet before the steps that led to her chair. I remember noticing Rusty imitating my obeisance, his features also transfixed in fascination on the girl.

She dropped her hand, then, and the inscrutable smile left her features. A moment later, and she raised her hand ever so slightly, palm upward. I found myself rising. Rusty similarly climbing to his feet again.

The girl turned her head briefly toward the side corridor from which she had made her entrance. Then she looked down at us again, the smile returning to her incredibly beautiful face.

And from the side corridor there suddenly entered a visibly frightened aboriginal. He looked like one of the two cave creatures who had captured us in the clearing, but I couldn't be certain.

And then, in utter amazement, I stared at what he was carrying in his thick arms.

A pair of tommy guns from the tank!

"Jeeudas!" Rusty exclaimed. "What in the—"

But the *purring* sounds made by the girl's voice then cut him off. She spoke to the terrified primitive, who advanced to within three feet of us, deposited the weapons, and backed frightenedly out of the picture.

I stared at the tommy guns, grateful for the link they'd established with reality. There seemed suddenly to be less commanding fascination in the presence of the girl on the throne dais. It was as if symbolically, those weapons had taken us, mentally at least, thousands of years up through the future, back into the time era to which we belonged.

I licked lips gone suddenly dry, thinking how grateful I'd have been for the presence of those guns when the aboriginals had captured me sleeping in the tank.

Then I found my glance returning to the beautiful features of the girl, and found myself wondering if she knew the power that lay in those strangely shaped clubs three feet from us. It occurred to me, instantly, as if somehow she had mentally answered my question, that she did know; that perhaps Leeds, Rusty, and I had been watched by hidden eyes not many hours before, when Rusty had brought down the weird, nine-legged, giant frog at the fringe of the clearing. Perhaps *her* eyes too had seen Rusty's shooting.

She smiled, as if at me, and waved her hand toward the tommy guns in a gesture that could only mean, "Get them."

I stepped over to the guns, picked them up, turned and handed one to Rusty, who had been right behind me.

"What the hell is this all about?" Rusty muttered.

I shrugged, fondling the gun in my hands.

"I don't know," I said. "But I've got a temptation to use these."

Rusty was shocked. "You wouldn't!" he protested.

"I have a hunch that tells me it'd be a smart thing to do. Right this minute," I concluded.

"On the girl?" Rusty gasped.

I shrugged again, trying to keep my glance from returning to those incredibly beautiful features.

"Why not?" I demanded.

"Why, why she saved us from them baboons!" Rusty protested again.

"For what reason?"

Rusty took his turn at shrugging. "Maybe because we're like her more'n we're like these baboons."

"There's no more than a standard clip of ammunition with either of these guns," I reminded Rusty. "Did it ever occur to you that she's trusted us with 'em because she knows we could only kill a few dozen flatheads before we'd be through?"

Rusty thought this over. Then he glanced up at the girl on the throne. She was still smiling. She held out her hand, as if it had a pistol in it, and pointed it at the stone wall of the cave to her right. I knew, then, that she *had* watched while Rusty brought down the strange frog-like monster not so many hours ago.

"She wants us to try these things," Rusty gasped.

"On the wall," I agreed. "Can you find a target there?"

Rusty squinted. "There's a little, round hollow about six feet up from the floor," he finally announced. "It's about three inches in diameter. See it?"

I strained my eyes for a minute. "Yeah," I said finally.

"I'll make it about six inches in diameter," Rusty announced calmly.

"At this distance?" I protested.

Rusty grinned, raising the tommy gun to firing position. He lined his sights briefly, then triggered the gun in a short, staccato burst which reverberated in the cave like cannon fire.

The aboriginals shrank back in awe. And glancing swiftly at the girl on the throne chair I saw that she was still smiling. From her very expression I could tell that she knew the target Rusty had selected, and had a pretty good idea of what he'd boasted he could do to it.

"Take a look," Rusty told me.

I crossed over to the wall, finding the hollow Rusty had selected as his target. It was almost exactly six inches in diameter, now, and deeper than before!

I didn't have to look further to see that not a single bullet had scarred the smooth wall surface anywhere but in the exact center of Rusty's target.

"As called?" Rusty asked.

I nodded. "As called."

Returning to Rusty's side I had another chance to study the expression of the incredibly beautiful girl on the throne chair. Her smile was even more delighted, now, and her eyes glowed with satisfaction.

"You've pleased Her Majesty, at any rate," I told Rusty.

"But what's the pitch?" Rusty demanded. "Why did she order this exhibition?"

Unable to answer him, I glanced again at the girl on the throne chair. The smile had left her face, and her sensuously full red lips were now fixed in what seemed to be savage anticipation. She was looking past us, down toward the mouth of the cave, where we could hear sudden sounds of commotion.

Rusty and I turned in that direction immediately. The aboriginals between the throne dais and the cave mouth were parting in an avenue down which four of their compatriots dragged two inert, bound bodies.

"I'm beginning to get an idea, Rusty," I whispered quickly. "I think lovely golden locks on the throne intends to make us into a two man execution squad."

The four aboriginals dragging their two captives were drawing closer now. Closer, so that it was possible, now, to make something of the appearance of their captives.

And suddenly I gasped.

For one of those bound captives was Leeds McAndrews!

Rusty saw as much at the same moment I did. He grabbed my arm.

"Good god, Burt!" he choked.

"Take it easy," I warned him through set teeth. "We've got these tommy guns in our hands yet. Let's see what's what."

And then the Neanderthal men were dragging Leeds and the other trussed body past us and up to within two feet of the throne on which the girl sat.

Leeds was out cold, body limp in the thongs that bound him, shirt and coveralls torn, head cut from cheek to temple.

And then I noticed the other captive. Noticed and sucked in my breath in sharp surprise. For the bound victim besides Leeds McAndrews was not another shaggy Neanderthal, even though he was clad in typical loin skin attire and his black hair was matted and shaggy.

"Look at that other guy," Rusty whispered. "He ain't no baboon. Even if he's dressed like one!"

I was trying to figure out this new and very rapid twist to things. Who was the blackhaired young guy in the loin cloth? Had he been captured simultaneously with Leeds, or was he just a captive they'd had around here on ice somewhere?

It was apparent, now, that all the peoples of this past civilization weren't the thick, aboriginal swine that we had first encountered and who now were the majority crowding this cave. The entrance of the sensuously beautiful girl on the throne chair had been the first indication of that. And now the appearance of another less primeval species of human being added confirmation to my first guess.

The girl was speaking now, *purring* of course. But there was a savage venom in the sound words she directed at the four primeval apes who stood over the captives they'd just dragged in before her.

The four turned then, frightenedly, and left the dais with stumbling haste. And then the girl's gaze was fixed on Rusty and me.

She held out her hand, pointing with one slim finger to the two captives at her feet. She *purred* something between set, milk white teeth.

I shuddered, sensing the meaning of the sounds she *purred*. A most unwholesome meaning. A meaning confirming my suspicions the moment I'd seen the aboriginals dragging the captives in through the mouth of the cave.

And then her slim finger was pointing commandingly at the tommy guns Rusty and I had in our hands. There was no mistaking that silent command. It said, "*Kill these two!*"

CHAPTER VIII

Into the Jaws of Death

Even Rusty got the implication of that commanding gesture.

"Burt," he gulped, grabbing my arm, "do you think she means what I think she means?"

I nodded, unable to answer that one lightly.

"What the hell," Rusty muttered grimly, "she's off her trolley."

"Take it easy," I warned him. "Don't lose your head. Sit tight."

I moved over to where Leeds McAndrews and the blackhaired young guy in the loin cloth lay. Bending over Leeds, I grabbed him by the hair and jerked his head back so that I could look into his face.

Looking up swiftly at the girl on the throne, I saw that her expression was one of puzzled watchfulness. I let Leeds' head drop back carelessly, registering an expression of as fierce contempt as I could command.

Another glance at the girl left me in doubt as to how the act was going. But I'd started this thing, and there wouldn't be any sense in dropping the scheme now. Unless she got wise.

I dropped to one knee beside Leeds, looking up for an instant to flash a warning glance at Rusty, who still stood frowningly where I'd left him.

Rusty seemed to catch the signal well enough, so I brought back my right hand in an open palmed arc, swinging it down hard on Leeds' cheek. It shook him. Shook him hard. But his eyelids only flickered. I registered another contemptuous glance for the benefit of the savage beauty on the throne. From the corner of my eye, I could see the trace of a satisfied smile forming on her sensuous lips.

I took a deep breath. I didn't like doing this. But it was the only way I could bring Leeds around without rousing suspicion. And he had to be conscious and on his feet, if we were to get any decent chance at a getaway.

Another open palmed slap, hard. It brought the blood flushing to his cheeks, and this time his eyes blinked more rapidly, stayed open half a second, unfocused, then closed once more.

I followed it with a third slap, stinging, brutal.

It did the trick.

Leeds McAndrews opened his eyes, looking bewilderedly and unbelievably about him.

"Burt," he croaked. "Good god, Burt!"

"Easy," I said harshly. "I hate your guts, understand? For the benefit of the damsel up on that rocky throne chair I hate you enough to want to wake you up before I kill you. Get it?"

I made those words extremely snarly, and added appropriate facial expressions. For the benefit of the bloodthirsty and beautiful savage wench on the throne, of course.

Leeds McAndrews reacted magnificently. Dazed and shaken though he was; bewildered as he might have been concerning all this, he put an instant register of fright on his features.

"Yeah," he said in the tone of a stool pigeon sweating under a police beating. "Yeah, yeah, I get it. You scare the hell out of me. What's up?" He contorted his features fearfully.

"Little cutie pants on the throne wants us to rub you and the young strong man with you. Just to show how well our tommies work," I said wrathfully.

Leeds forced another frightened expression. "It fits in, Burt," he bleated in well-feigned terror. "It fits in perfectly. This dame on the throne is a female Hitler, Neanderthal style. She's a renegade from the primitive tribe that I stumbled on trying to find you lads. A tribe much more advanced than these Neanderthal ape-men with whom she's trying to start a blood-rule. This young Tarzan beside me is a member of the tribe that threw her out. We were caught by a raiding party of your female Hitler's bunch."

I got a swift glimpse of the girl on the throne from the corner of my eye. Her satisfaction was beginning to wane a bit, and I sensed that our act was losing punch. I slapped Leeds hard across the face and stood up.

"Help me drag these two over against the wall," I yelled at Rusty.

Rusty had heard it all, and his eyes were bugging. But he did his best to look savagely delighted as he moved over beside me.

"Take the blackhaired kid, Rusty," I told him. "Slap him into life. He'll have to be awake and on his feet, same as Leeds."

Rusty stepped between Leeds and the blackhaired young savage in the loin cloth, bending over and letting the latter have one hard across the mouth. I had time to notice that it brought Leeds' fellow captive around immediately. Then I had to busy myself dragging Leeds across to the cave wall.

I made it laborious going, and as I did so, loosened the thongs that were knotted around Leeds' wrists.

"That'll leave your hands free to get to work on your leg bonds," I muttered.

"Good boy," Leeds said, and he made it sound like a whimper.

I could see Rusty doing the same stalling with the loin-clothed young savage. Then we were both propping Leeds and the long maned kid up against the wall.



We turned, then, and went back to the place where we'd left the tommy guns.

"What in the hell now?" Rusty muttered as we bent to retrieve the weapons.

I gulped. "Give me a minute to think," I said. "I haven't got it all clear yet. There isn't enough ammunition to blast our way out of here through all those thick skulls. And that leaves just one other solution."

"Jeudas, be fast with it," Rusty muttered. Sweat was dripping down the redhead's forehead.

"You cover up for Leeds and the junior Tarzan," I said. "Keep the apes at bay. I'll handle the girl. She'll have to be a hostage."

I turned from Rusty, then, and advanced toward the throne chair where the girl was seated. I put on my Sunday smile, and hoped to God that the old Main Street charm would work as well thousand years in the past as it had in twentieth century barrooms.

The tommy gun was nestling in the crook of my arm, and as I met the incredibly beautiful savage's eyes, something inside me turned to water and I prayed mentally that she wasn't good at reading minds.

She watched me advance toward her expressionlessly. Her eyes were speculative, and her glance flitted from me to Rusty to the pair of trussed captives lined up against the far wall of the cave for the slaughter.

Several feet from the throne I dropped to one knee. I still kept my eyes fixed on hers, however, in spite of what the effort did to a limp little spot in my stomach.

Then I held out both hands, with the tommy gun resting on them, palms upward.

Quite a gesture. After you, lady. Anybody to be killed, I wouldn't *think* of depriving you of the first shot.

The girl on the throne squinted down at me in surprise. She hadn't expected this. And then the surprise gave way to an expression of curiosity and flattered delight. I had counted on the fact that even the most primitive of women would be both inordinately curious and most susceptible to flattery.

Almost without thinking, the girl rose slightly in the throne chair and reached forward to take the tommy gun from my hands. But I'd figured on that and placed myself so she'd have to—

She stood up and descended one step.

I drew my arms in ever so slightly.

She reached forward, stepping down the second time.

And then I stood up. Stood up and jammed the gun right smack into her naked middle, wrapping one arm around her shoulder and throat as I did so!

"Cover, Rusty!" I yelled.

I whirled, with the snarling girl in my arms, shifting the tommy gun muzzle until it bored unpleasantly into her back. But now I could see the swarming Neanderthals in the cave. And I could hear the ominous, animal-throated growls that rose to their lips as they dully perceived what had happened.

One of them, a huge, lumbering ape, made a rush toward me.

I heard Rusty's gun chatter, and saw the human monster tumble awkwardly forward to the floor, face splattered with his own blood.

That stopped them all for a moment. Even the girl I held as hostage in my arms. She stopped squirming the instant she saw the Neanderthal tumble. Obviously, she had just recalled that the weapon I had pressed into her lovely golden back was deadly.

Leeds had freed his leg thongs, now, and was rubbing the circulation back into his muscles as Rusty continued to keep a covering scrutiny on the white and frightened ape creatures who now milled around uncertainly at a safe distance from us.

Then I saw him turn to the young savage, who had freed himself in half the time that Leeds had. He muttered something to the loin-clothed young primitive, and I had scarcely time to wonder how in the hell Leeds was communicating intelligibly with him, when Rusty yelled in my direction.

"What now, Napoleon? Those damned apes is jammed in this cave. We've not enough ammunition to cut our way through 'em, remember?"

I realized that, of course. The aboriginals were now almost fifty thick, massed between the cave entrance and where we stood on the throne dais.

Leeds shouted, then, gesturing toward the side entrance through which I'd first seen the beautiful savage wench make her appearance.

"A corridor passage," he called. "Yenga, here, knows the way. We'll follow him."

Yenga. I had time to note that man but briefly, and marvel. In that short time, Leeds must have exchanged calling cards with the comparatively civilized young savage in the loin cloth. But it wasn't surprising. Nothing was ever surprising where Leeds McAndrews was concerned. And now I was damned thankful that he was recognized by at least one chamber of commerce in this time era as a right guy. For Yenga, if that was the savage youth's name, was going to be valuable.

The savage youngster in the loin cloth had darted toward the side entrance just off the throne dais that Leeds had indicated. And now, still grappling with my lovely problem, I moved slowly across the stone platform toward that exit.

The savage wench was very still, now, very willing to do what seemed to be the thing to keep her alive. For which I was fortunate. Had she struggled, I don't know if I'd have had the heart to plug her. Women are always women, no matter what heels they may be by human standards. And rubbing out such a beautiful, though malignant, wench, would have taken quite an effort on my part.

None of the aboriginals were making a move toward us. The sight of their fellow flathead lying in a spreading pool of his own blood, had stopped them all. I think the fact that Rusty had killed the guy from such a distance and so mysteriously was really the only factor that kept them from all rushing us at once.

They were scared and bewitched. And the dragging around I was giving their Queen Bee didn't add to the prestige of the primitive young wench, at least in the eyes of her flatheaded aboriginal yes-men.

Leeds, Rusty, and the young Yenga were waiting at the side cave corridor when I got there. Rusty stood outside a little, keeping his gun trained on the mob of primitives.

Leeds had the thongs with which he and Yenga had been bound. Excellent foresight. And now he used them to tie the sultry and savage wench up hand and foot, relieving me of some of my burden and freeing me to use my tommy gun should it be necessary.

Yenga, the young black maned savage, grunted something at Leeds, and I'll be damned if the lanky McAndrews didn't seem to understand the grunt jargon.

"He says we'd better get going," Leeds translated, "but fast!"

CHAPTER IX

Tank vs. Dinosaur

Turning, I glanced down the darkened passage of the cave corridor. From somewhere back at the outlet of it, there came a sudden damp gust of wind.

"What about this dame?" I demanded.

Leeds hesitated.

"We'd better take her along for a bit," he said. "Otherwise she'd be making trouble for us the instant we left her."

I nodded toward Yenga. "How about having your nice little friend carry her awhile?" I suggested. "That would leave Rusty and me free to cover our getaway with the tommies."

Leeds nodded. He turned to the young savage with the long black hair and the surprisingly intelligent face. Slowly, he made a few well chosen grunts. I listened astounded, and was further amazed when the young primitive seemed to catch on. He nodded, stepped over to where the golden haired female tigress lay tied hand and foot. In an instant he'd swept her up over his massive young shoulder and turned back down the corridor.

"You seem to be the interpreter," I said to Leeds. "You move along with Yenga. Rusty and I will cover."

The going was tough through the dark and slippery cave passage. Leeds and Yenga, up in front, stopped every so often to wait for Rusty and me. Only once did a valorous and curious Neanderthal attempt to follow us down the corridor. And when he poked his nose into the entrance, the light behind him outlined him as a perfect target. I brought him down with a short burst from my tommy gun.

It must have been fully five minutes later, after we'd covered several bends and turns in the black, dank passage, that we saw the pinpoint of light that promised exit and escape.

I mentally breathed a prayer of thanks for our having Yenga on our side of the fence. Without him, we'd never have found our way through this labyrinth. Then, some three minutes later, Yenga, with the bound girl still over his shoulder, and Leeds stood waiting at the exit as Rusty and I scrambled and slipped hastily up to them.

The exit to which Yenga had led us was on a high cliff side, overlooking a deep jungle valley. And even as we stood there catching our breath, the loin-skinned lad was pointing down to the right of the valley at an ascending stretch of cleared ground running up toward the mountain on which we stood.

He grunted something briefly to Leeds, making signs with his hands. And while I was waiting for my lean, lanky chum to interpret the primitive jargon, I caught the first sign of what Yenga was driving at when he'd pointed to that ascending stretch of clearing.

There was movement, faint but noticeable, in the tangled jungle underbrush around that clearing. Movement that indicated the presence of something other than animal life. Yenga had dropped the incredibly beautiful savage wench to the ground now, and was grunting something further to Leeds, with additional hand gestures.

"Yenga's tribe is staging an attack," Leeds said, turning to me. "You can notice them over by that clearing, if you look closely enough. They've planned a raid on the Neanderthal bunch we just gave the slip to. That clearing over there leads to the other side of this mountain, or the front of the cave community we just left."

I squinted hard, trying to see something more than just the suggestion of movement that I'd first noticed. Dawn was turning the sky from black to gray, now, and visibility was fairly good across the deep little valley.

"How many of them are there?" I asked.

"Four or five hundred," Leeds said.

"And are they all like Yenga, I mean, somewhat more civilized than those flatheads we just left behind?"

Leeds nodded. "They're a strangely advanced level of society in this primitive world. Pretty far ahead of the flatheads. It's hard to understand how they progressed to the stage they're now in, when the rest of the human element in this time forsaken era are still just a stage past the apes."

"Then they shouldn't have any trouble whipping the flatheads," I said. "Especially since we've got the flatheads' renegade princess neatly tied and out of the struggle."

Leeds shook his head dubiously. "It's not as easy as that," he declared. "I told you that the tribe Yenga is part of numbers some four or five hundred. But I didn't add that there're more than two thousand of these flatheads holding this mountain."

I whistled. "I see what you mean."

Leeds paused a moment. "Our tank," he said, pointing with his finger over the cliff edge, "is down there on the other side of the valley. We're almost out of rounds for the tommy guns, and they wouldn't be enough to handle a couple of thousand Neanderthals alone. Plenty of gun power and ammunition in the M-3, however," he concluded.

"Listen," I began, getting what he was driving at.

"We're fighting men, aren't we?" Leeds asked. "No matter what time era this happens to be, we're still fighting men. We don't know if we're going to get out of this mess we're in, ever. And if we've got to stay around this neck of time from now on in, I think it'd be a good idea to see to it that we'll be living with primitives who have a slant on things a little closer to our own."

"Listen," I picked up where he'd cut me off. "You don't have to talk us into anything, Leeds. Ever since we were clubbed cold by those flatheads, Rusty and I have been aching to get back. How far is the tank, in minutes, mean?"

Leeds looked down across the valley. "About ten or fifteen minutes away, with Yenga as a guide," he said.

Rusty came up beside us. He'd been standing there quietly, listening to us and figuring it out.

"What in the hell are we waiting for?" he said.

Leeds grinned. "I don't know why I thought I'd have to reason with you mugs," he said.

"How about the dame?" Rusty pointed to where the renegade wench of the wondrous beauty lay beside Yenga's feet.

Leeds thought a moment. "Taking her along would only slow things up."

"We'll stick her behind a big boulder," I suggested. "She's tied tight enough to stay that way."

"She'll starve to death," Rusty protested.

"We'll come back for her when we've mopped up on the flatheads," Leeds said. "Then we can turn her over to the tribe she loused on. They can decide their own justice."

"Fair enough," I told him. "Now let Yenga in on it and we'll get started."

Leeds turned to the blackhaired young savage in the loin cloth. He made gestures with his hands, pointed across the valley, and grunted one or two terse sound-words.

Yenga seemed to catch, for his lips went flat against his white teeth in a savagely pleased smile. He nodded his head rapidly up and down.

I turned and looked around the cliff edge on which we stood. There was a large boulder several yards away, and I jerked my thumb at it, then pointed at the girl on the ground.

"Let's file her away for future reference," I said.

Leeds nodded, and with Yenga, lifted the girl and carried her over behind the boulder. Her mouth was tight with rage, and her eyes flashed electrical sparks, but she didn't make any sound.

Yenga and Leeds reappeared from behind the boulder.

"Let's get started," said Rusty. He pointed down toward the cleared, rising elevation at the corner of the valley. "They're getting under way," he said.

We both followed his gesture. Squinting hard, I could see the evidences of motion in the tangled underbrush around the clearing growing more definitely obvious. The motion was toward the mountain where the flatheads, unsuspecting, were

probably still trying to figure out what they should do about the loss of their leader.

"Yeah," I said. "We'd better get stepping."

Yenga took us down a side trail, steep and rocky and hidden by thorny green brush that tore sections of skin from our faces as we moved along its twisting course.

After about five minutes we were in the moist green underfooting of the valley bed itself. And here the going became even tougher. There were vines and trailers that hung low over the scantily marked trail Yenga now guided us along; some of them, almost as if alive, catching and twisting around our legs and arms to further slow up our progress.

Although the sun wasn't up as yet, the very dank heaviness of the jungle around us was hot and humid, so that we were bathed in sweat after five more minutes following the swift, lithe leadership of Yenga.

And it was five minutes after that when Yenga, some ten yards on ahead of us, suddenly disappeared from sight around the bend of the trail.

When we caught up with him he was waiting for us in a clearing. The same clearing in which we had left the tank; and the sight of the M-3, big and tough and deadly looking, was the most wonderful thing in the world.

Rusty put our emotions into words.

"Baby!" he yelled. "Oh, you pretty, pretty, baby!"

Rusty and I and Leeds were all grinning like three idiots as we ran to the side of the M-3. Rusty was first at its side. And the big damned fool draped an arm around the front of it, patting and stroking the steel surface.

"To think I'd ever be glad to see you again," Rusty told the tank. "Oh, you great big beautiful doll!"

"No necking," Leeds grinned. "We've got some fighting to do."

"How'll we get back to those babies?" I asked.

"Yenga can ride the tank and guide us," Leeds said.

I busied myself making a thorough, though hasty, check of the M-3, and found everything still in perfect order. The old gal was raring to go.

Then Leeds was grunting and gesturing and explaining to Yenga exactly what he wanted, and the savage youth was nodding his black maned head excitedly.

Rusty clambered up through the tower and into the tank. I followed him; and Leeds, finishing his explanations to Yenga, hoisted himself up into tower position.

I could hear Yenga taking his place on the front of the tank, and then at Leeds' signal we started up. The sound and feel of something familiar once again was something that brought a lump to my throat. No matter where in the hell we were in time, we were at least once again where any self-respecting tank fighters ought to be—moving out to battle.

Rusty chortled and babbled and acted like a small child with a day off from school as he ordered his guns while we jounced along through the tangled jungle four minutes later.

Yenga was taking us to the flatheads' mountain side cave camp by a different route. And the strong young savage seemed to know what were and were not impassable obstacles for the M-3. He ordered us through certain sections that we crashed over with ease, and sent us skittering around spots that might have held us up for minutes. He was doing a job of it.

And when at last we rolled out onto an ascending stretch of clearing, I knew that we were covering the terrain that led directly up to the mountain stronghold of the Neanderthal bunch. And it was as I turned to Rusty to yell something at him, that I heard the first wild shouts far up ahead of us and saw the swarm of loin skinned savages pouring from crags and

bushes and crannies halfway up the mountain, some eight hundred yards from the Neanderthals' encampment.

I could tell from the very size, swiftness, and grace of them that they were Yenga's tribe, and that the attack on the aborigines had begun!

"Get the lead outta this garbage can," Rusty yelled. "There's fighting starting, and we're being left outta it."

Up ahead, now, I saw the first signs of the burly, flatheaded Neanderthals rushing from their caves, carrying clubs and stone knives, and hefty rocks of no little size.

They met the attack of their less crude brethren with wild fury, and the wave of Neanderthals meshed and locked with that of the attackers from Yenga's tribe.

Yenga's bunch were hurling smaller missiles, rocks about the size of a hand grenade. And I saw the method of their attack instantly. It was obvious that they didn't want any hand-to-hand combat with the ape-like aborigines, knowing that they wouldn't have equal brute strength. As a consequence, they waited until the ape-like flatheads drew within six or eight feet, then letting fly with their grenade sized rocks. Their aim would have put Bob Feller to shame, for one after another, the brutish defenders sprawled to the green moss of the clearing, skulls crushed by the well aimed missiles.

But additional waves of Neanderthal reinforcements were pouring from the caves, and although the attackers carried from five to six grenade sized rocks in crude leather sacks strapped to their sides, they couldn't throw them forever. It was apparent that they'd be out of ammunition shortly, with more and more Neanderthals pouring down to grapple with them.

But the bunch from Yenga's tribe weren't as dumb as I thought they'd be. Evidently they'd realized this would happen, and now they were drawing their lines back in as orderly a tactical retreat as I'd ever witnessed. In their wake they left the dead bodies of more than forty Neanderthals, while only five or six of their own—who'd been unfortunate enough to run out of ammunition too soon—lay dead beside the brutes they'd attacked.

And then Rusty, operating our cannon without orders, let loose with an earth shaking shot that hit far up behind the struggling savages and plowed up a flower of black earth less than twenty feet from the Neanderthals' cave quarters.

It had the desired effect. The ape-like aborigines turned and ran like hell back to their mountainside stronghold. And this gave Yenga's bunch a chance to complete their orderly retreat.

We moved on perhaps another four hundred yards, and I could hear Yenga, still atop our tank, yelling shrill grunts to his tribesmen who had retreated to the brush once more.

I got the stop signal from Leeds.

His head poked down.

"Ask Rusty if he can reach the mountainside where the brutes have their caves from this distance," he said.

Through my front vision slot, I could see Yenga clambering down from the tank and trotting across the clearing toward his tribesmen.

"What's the pitch?" I demanded.

"I told Yenga to hold back his bunch until we give the mopping up orders," Leeds said. "I have an idea. Ask Rusty about that range."

I asked Rusty.

"What the hell," he grinned, "why not?"

I repeated it to Leeds.

"Climb out, both of you," he said, "and I'll show you what I have in mind."

We left the tank and climbed down beside Leeds. He pointed up the ascending section of clearing, indicating the cave community stronghold up there against the side of the mountain.

And then I realized what Leeds was getting at. The entire Neanderthal cave stronghold was built underneath a gigantic overhanging crag some two hundred feet above it.

"Supposing Yenga's bunch, without getting too close, can draw the Neanderthals out after 'em." Leeds said.

"That'd be easy enough," I agreed. "Then what?"

"Then Rusty, banging away with well placed cannon fire, could blast the hell out of that overhang. Those big brutes would be buried alive under God knows how many tons of rock."

Rusty frowned. "We'd have to get up a little closer," he said. "Maybe a hundred yards more."

"But then you could do it?" Leeds asked.

Rusty grinned. "What do you think?"

Leeds grinned back, then turned toward the underbrush where we'd seen Yenga disappear after this fellow tribesmen. He waved his hands four times, semaphore fashion.

"Let's go," Leeds said. "I've given Yenga the signal to start."

We were moving along slowly a minute later, giving Yenga's bunch a chance to get well up to the clearing, close but not too close. Rusty, at his cannon beside me, was grinning delightedly.

"Okay," Rusty said a minute later. "I got range enough."

We halted. Ahead, the wave of Yenga's savage buddies swept up toward the cave community, yelling like hell and hurling rocks. And then it started to rain. Just like that. A deluge, breaking from the gray skies without the slightest announcement. It was a terrific downpour. The sound of it banged like hail against the tank sides.

Rusty cursed. "Makes it tougher," he said. "Can hardly see a damned thing through this!"

But even through the sheet of the downpour, I could see that the Neanderthals were pouring from their cave, rushing out to meet this second assault from Yenga's tribe. And then I caught the faintest glimpse of something else. Something that made me refuse to believe my eyes. I wasn't certain, but I thought for an instant that I'd had a glimpse of the incredibly gorgeous renegade wench up there near the caves. How on earth she'd be found, or returned to her thick-witted subjects, I didn't have time to ponder.

"For God's sake," Leeds yelled down. "Get that range and start hammering away. If you don't hurry Yenga's bait will be gobbled up by those flatheaded slobs!"

Rusty had the cannon trained. And then, as the gun blasted, the entire landscape was bathed in a jagged white flash of lightning, affording us a split-second view of the effect of that burst.

It hit the overhang back and to the right, spraying a shower of rock and slag in every direction, and starting a jagged break along the very base of it.

"Jeeudas!" Rusty muttered. "My eyes are going back on me. That was three feet from where I wanted to place it."

I didn't have time to grin. The next cannon blast shook loose in half a minute. There was no lightning this time to show us its effect, and for twenty awful seconds we held our breath, guessing. The sudden awful crashing that followed a split second later was a most beautiful sound, sweeter than music. Rusty's second shot had done it. The overhang was crashing down with a tremendous roaring fury!

"You got 'em! You got 'em! Oh, you sweetheart!"

It was Leeds' voice, and he was poking his head down from the tower and chortling like a man gone mad.

"You buried the whole damned bunch," he yelled. "There won't be one of 'em left alive!"

But we could still hear it. The noise of the thunderous avalanche started down that mountainside by Rusty's magnificent gun work. It was the wildest, angriest rumble of stone and mountain you've ever heard.

"What about us?" I yelled up at Leeds. "Hadn't we better back out of the path of any complications that the avalanche might start?"

A savagely blinding flash of lightning seared the sky at that moment. It was almost too close for comfort. And then, less than half a second after that, another similar jagged ribbon of electrical fury split the air.

Leeds McAndrews suddenly poked his head down from the tower.

"Burt," he yelled. "Burt, poke your nose out and see what's going on!"

He clambered up out of the way, and I followed him, sticking my head out of the tower. Leeds was pointing excitedly up at the mountainside. Pointing to the bare, scarred side where Rusty's shots had blasted loose the overhang.

Lightning flashes, dozens of licking tongues of them were slashing white hot ribbons at that surface. Hardly ten seconds passed between each one.

"Some mineral, some conductive ore, must have been behind that overhang," Leeds said excitedly. "It's drawing every streak of lightning in the sky toward it!"

"A damned good reason for our getting away from here," I said. "Climb in and I'll wheel this baby around and away. We wanta find some healthier spot in this jungle than here!"

Leeds was grabbing my shoulder, and his fingers were digging hard into my arm. He was pointing again; pointing at the swarms of primitives, Yenga's tribe, dashing down the mountainside toward us.

"They're running away from it, too," Leeds said. "They don't even want to stick around and dance about their victory."

"Once again I admire their brains," I said. "Climb in and let's set a pace for them."

Leeds shook his head. "It's a natural," he said. "It's the only thing near a chance."

"What are you babbling about?" I asked.

"We're going up there," Leeds said. "Over the debris left by the avalanche. Smack up into that electrical storm belt!"

"Have you lost your mind?" I grabbed his arm and tried to pull him down into the tank.

"Don't you see?" Leeds demanded. "It's a chance. We got here through electrical energy waves as they reacted on the damned radio device in our tank. It's the only way we'll ever leave. We can't hang around here for centuries, waiting for another lucky blast of lightning to strike us. We may never have the chance to walk right into it again!"

And then I got it. Got it and felt suddenly weak inside. For even though it was a chance, it was no more than that. It might work, or it might mean the end of all of us. I looked up there at that constant belt of ragged white flashes and gulped.

"Damn you, McAndrews," I said. "Get down into the tank. I'll put Rusty in the tower. See if you can get that damned mechanism in the same state as it was before!"

Rusty poked his head into the tower. "What's up?" he demanded.

"You're top man," I said. "Leeds wants to tinker with the radio device again."

Rusty gave me a disgusted glance. "Are you nuts?"

"That's an order," I snapped.

Grumbling, Rusty changed places with Leeds, and then we were all at stations again, and I was responding to Rusty's starting signal. We lumbered up the inclined clearing, headed toward that flashing fury up on the mountainside, while Leeds muttered frantically to himself and messed around with the radio device.

The aborigines from Yenga's tribe passed us half way along the ascension, going in the opposite direction. The glances they gave the tank were wild and frightened, but the glances they shot over their shoulders at the electrical storm belt up on that mountainside were those of stark terror.

"Anytime anyone ever tries to tell me primitives had no brains," I grumbled, "I'll spit in their eye. That's the direction in which we ought to be traveling."

"But we aren't," Leeds said tightly. "Keep on moving."

By now we were climbing up and over and around the debris and rock left by the avalanche, and it was one solid hell of slam-bang bouncing around we got. I could hear Rusty's profanity tearing loose from the tower.

And then, a scant three hundred yards off from the lightning belt, we heard the noise that was like thunder, trumpeting, and grunting all in one.

It was like no other noise I'd ever heard in all my life. It sounded alive.

Rusty's yell followed it immediately. And we hit an up-bounce an instant later that gave a brief and hideous view of the cause of the noise.

My yell was drowned in the second thunderous roar of the beast that stood less than fifty yards from us, directly between our tank and the flashing lightning fury on the mountainside.

And when I say beast, I mean dinosaur!

My heart was in my throat, and unable to speak, I tugged at Leeds' sleeve, pointing frantically out the vision slot. He leaned over, peered out and saw the dinosaur.

His face was chalk white when he turned to me.

"What a lovely little obstruction we find in our way," he managed.

"Get to post at the cannon," I snapped. Leeds scrambled back to the gun position.

There was another terrible roar from the huge beast, and it started toward us, its long neck and snake-like head swinging combatively back and forth as it sized us up.

"I'm finding a flat spot," I yelled at Leeds. "Then we stop and let that monstrosity make the next move. In a twenty yard range, open up!"

It took another half minute to find the spot I wanted; another half minute and another twenty yards. That left the monster just thirty yards off. It was still surveying us, but moving closer cautiously.

Rusty booted me in the side of my helmet, and I inched over while he came down. Wordlessly, he went to the other gun, as I slid further out of the way. I clambered around and up toward the tower.

"I'll signal from there," I yelled. "I'll have a better view of the damned thing."

I poked my head out of the tower and almost choked to death as my heart skyrocketed up to meet my Adam's apple.

The head of the horrible monster was swinging out on that long, snake-like neck until it was less than thirty feet from the tower of the tank.

I kicked Rusty down below and yelled, "Fire!" at the same instant.

Leeds and Rusty fired simultaneously. And I saw the sudden flash of enraged flame shoot into the queer eyes of the thing as its head snapped up and back and its body recoiled from the force of the gun blasts.

There were two huge rents in the thing's hide. Rents from which poured a bluish ooze that must have been blood.

"Again!" I yelled.

Once more our M-3's guns blasted, and the huge beast thrashed backward, its enormous tail slapping dangerously around, almost swiping our tank, out of existence.

It trumpeted then; that terrifying roar. Trumpeted and started to move sluggishly, limpingly, toward us. There was hell and fury in those wild eyes.

"Give it!" I yelled.

Rusty and Leeds blasted loose again. Blasted loose just as the horrible head of the monster was sweeping down directly at me in the tower. I closed my eyes, and clenched my teeth.

There was an enraged, gurgling bellow from the beast, followed by the sounds of terrible threshing, and stone and slag and rock banged against the sides of our tank.

I opened my eyes.

The dinosaur lay some twenty yards off, twisting and thrashing wildly on its side. But its efforts were growing feebler every second. And I knew we'd finished it off!

We shifted back to our own positions then, with the exception of Rusty, who went up into the tower once more. None of us said a word during this rapid reshuffling. We didn't feel up to it.

Rusty gave me the signal and we were off again, picking our way around the still dying hulk of the huge dinosaur. The rain was lessening in force, and up ahead—a scant hundred yards or so now—the lightning flashes in the area of the cliff scar were less frequent.

Leeds was mumbling and cursing as he saw this, and we were knocking ourselves out, taking it the hardest and the fastest way. Fifty yards, now, and we hung on for dear life as we bounced from crag to boulder to brush.

"Oh, God," Leeds groaned, "we'll never make it!"

And at that instant the white flash of the lightning bolt seared down at us, splitting the rock less than ten feet from the tank. I had a sensation of being hurtled forward, and smashing my head hard against the side of the tank. I could hear Rusty yelling something at the top of his lungs, while Leeds cursed like a madman....

I was dragging my helmet off and sliding along on my stomach to get out of the tower exit. We were flat on our side, tipped completely over, and I could hear the rain still pounding against the metal shell of our tank.

I slithered out the tower and plunked flat on my face into a mire of mud. Then Rusty was helping me to my feet, and Leeds was just crawling out and we turned to help him.

We stood there, then, the three of us, drinking in the country landscape like thirsty nomads rescued from a desert. There was no mountain, no avalanche debris, no stinking sweet primeval valley.

There was just good old Georgia!

Rusty was looking strangely sheepish.

"Look, Burt," he said, plucking at my sleeve, his face struggling between emotions of shame and bewilderment, "I'm sorry I dozed off. Damnedest thing. Never done it before in all my life!"

For a minute I didn't get it. Then I looked at Leeds. There was growing realization on his face. And in the glance we exchanged, there passed a silent agreement to carry it out this way. For obviously, the redheaded lug had instantly decided that what had happened was nothing but a dream!

"You," said Leeds sharply, "and your damned dreams. You're to blame for spilling us like this. You had the tower position."

"Hell," I said to Leeds, "it's just lucky the redheaded ape didn't let us plough head on into a stone wall."

"Ape!" Rusty said, snapping his fingers. "There was guys like apes in my dream. And you and Leeds was there. Damnedest thing, huh?"

It was better this way. My, so much better. For even though Leeds and I knew the facts we'd never be such fools as to put ourselves in line for the booby hatch by spilling such a yarn to Old Blue Bolt. And Rusty, bless his little soul, would have spread the story all over camp. *But*—and I took a deep breath and thanked God—the redhead figured it was all a dream.

"Yeah," I said, feeling the nice, warm twentieth century, Georgia rain cooling my forehead. "Yeah, it was certainly the damnedest thing!"

Leeds grinned at this perfect understatement....

[The end of *Blitzkrieg in the Past* by David W. O'Brien]