

For those of you who may be sentimentalists about what you'd do if you could live your life over again, here is the real lowdown about that . . .

SECOND CHANCE

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Illustrated by SUMMERS

THE boy was twelve, and running for dear life. Behind him came the sounds of half a dozen pursuers, the faintly sticky slap of leather soles coming down on summer-hot blacktopping and the sharp explosions of breath let out and sucked back in quickly as out-of-condition bodies forced muscles angrily beyond normal limits of endurance.

"There goes the little bastard now!"

"Don't let him get away!"

A scant hundred yards separated pursued from pursuers. The boy stopped at the mouth of an alley, panic stealing logic as he glanced over his shoulders at the boys coming up quickly behind him. He darted into the alley, rounded a curve, and realized too late that he was in a dead-end. Boxes and trash were piled against the wall; a fire-escape

beckoned invitingly just above. He scrabbled up the side of the pile, then realized his mistake as it began to shift beneath him. He leaped for the fire-escape ladder, his fingers brushing the lowest rung just as the pile collapsed, carrying him down and burying him.

"Where the hell is he?"

Hands started pulling at the pile, tearing away debris. The boy bit down on his lip, and closed his eyes against the inevitable.

"Hey, here he is!"

They grabbed him and pulled him out. A palm slapped across his cheek, forcing his eyes open.

"Okay, you little sneak. What's the big idea? Why'd you rat to the Principal?" He shook his head.

"Come on, dammit! Talk! You were talking enough yesterday!"



"Ah, you're wasting your breath. Come on, let's do what we came to do and get it over with."

"Okay, if that's the way you want it."

JOHNSON winced, as the first of the blows fell. The picture on the screen seemed far away, but the memory of physical pain was suddenly freshened. As hands and feet lashed out, repeatedly, raining down a storm of punishment on the quivering mass of flesh in the center of the picture, once-tortured nerves twinged in sympathy.

"Brutal little monsters, aren't they?" said Cavendish.

"I got back at them," said Johnson. "Every last one of them. I was the last kid they beat up."

"Mmmm. Still, that didn't change the fact that you had already received a nasty beating yourself. No matter how sweet revenge, wouldn't it have been sweeter to have avoided the beating altogether?"

Johnson massaged his crippled hand as he watched the tortured boy make a break away from his tormenters. A foot shot out, and the boy went sprawling. His chin hit the pavement; only the adult saw the biggest of the tormentors bring booted foot down on pathetic fingers. The foot twisted, and the man looked away.

"Shut it off!" he shouted.

"Certainly." Cavendish reached out and the screen went dead. Getting up, he went to the bar in the corner of the room and returned with a tumbler half-full of amber liquid. "Here, you need this."

Johnson tossed off the drink, gasping as the liquor burned its way down to his stomach. "Ahhhh!" He wiped his mouth on the back of his good hand.

"What do you think of my little machine, Mr. Johnson?" Cavendish settled himself behind a cluttered desk, hands folded over his paunch, looking extremely satisfied with himself. Pointed mustache and faintly slanted eyes heightened the effect of a cat with a stolen canary.

"Your gadget is effective," admitted Johnson. "Just how powerful is it?"

"Fifty years seems the limit it can probe. I've tried increasing the power, but beyond fifty years things quickly fade away into a gray fog. That's why I wanted to see you so urgently. Another few weeks, and this particular event in your life will be irrevocably lost." He glanced at the crippled hand. "Considering the direct consequences, I thought it would be a good place to start."

"Assuming that I want to have anything to do with this at all."

"Of course," said Cavendish,

blandly. "Everything is always an assumption."

"Your machine. It can actually send me back through time?"

"In effect, yes."

"I don't believe it."

"I think you do, Mr. Johnson. You want to believe it, therefore you do believe it. A man like yourself, aware of missed opportunities . . ."

"I haven't missed many chances in my day," said Johnson. "If I had, I'd never have become what I am today."

"Rich."

"I'd rather call it powerful."

"As you like." Cavendish shrugged. "After all, what is money but power? With it, you have the power to do things, make a living, run a business, increase your standing in the community. Without it . . . Everything becomes negative. You have the power to die, but nothing more."

"You need money, too."

"Of course. I've never denied it. Science has never been a particularly profitable field of endeavor—at least, not on my level. For you, science has made money. For me, it merely uses it."

"You want money from me."

"Naturally. You have enough for both of us."

BUT why me?" asked Johnson, suspiciously. "Why not someone else? There are other men as

wealthy or wealthier than I—Reading, Blackwell, Morgestern, just to name three in this very city."

"Yes, I considered them—all of them, and many others besides. It really made no difference which one I finally selected. I chose you, Mr. Johnson, for just one reason—the scene just witnessed."

"All right. You've aroused my interest. Now tell me just how your time machine can help me."

Cavendish winced. "Please, Mr. Johnson, I do not have a time machine."

"You just said you can send me back through time."

"In effect, Sir; in effect. Physically, no. My machine—temporal transgressor I call it, for want of a better term—my machine has the faculty of liberating a certain part of the human id, the conscience, the soul, if you please, and casting it adrift on the broad temporal stream. A strong will can direct this liberated 'something' against the general drift of the temporal stream, forcing it backwards against the natural current. Back through time, as it were."

"And just how does this help me?"

"From the limited experiments I have been able to perform with available funds, I have found that, shall we say from now on, for simplicity's sake, the Id,

tends to gravitate to early versions of itself. Apparently there is some sort of force that binds the Id with itself. At moments of crisis, this force is strongest."

"And you want me to be a guinea pig for your experiments."

"Crudely put, Sir."

"But the truth."

Cavendish shrugged. "Consider the benefits to be reaped."

"As yet, I have seen none," said Johnson, bluntly. "Suppose you enlighten me some more."

"Opportunities . . ."

"We covered that before."

"But have we? Consider, Sir; you are wealthy, powerful, in spite of your, ah, handicap." He glanced away as Johnson inspected his hand. "Just think what might have happened had you not been injured? Who can say what new avenues might be opened to you?"

"How much?"

"Then you'll do it?" asked Cavendish, eagerly.

"Perhaps. How much do you need?"

"I have my equipment all ready. But I need a great deal of power to operate it. You are one of the directors of Public Power; I need your signature on releases for the necessary leads and, of course, the power itself."

"You shall have them. When can we be ready to operate?"

Cavendish pursed his lips.

"With PP technicians running in the new lines—three days."

"Very well. I'll be back."

T. ARTHUR JOHNSON had not, as he had told Cavendish, been a man to pass up an opportunity. Forty years of fighting and clawing his way up through the jungle of business competition had sharpened his senses and heightened his awareness of what one fatal mistake could do.

Still, no man is infallible; all miss out on something, sometime. Some men go through their entire lives making the wrong decisions; they end up failures.

T. Arthur Johnson was a qualified success. Qualified, for, although successful he might be, as a man he was not happy. It is rarely that the two go hand-in-hand. Happiness and success often seem to be mutually exclusive goals. Yet contentment is a close cousin of happiness, and many let themselves be satisfied with second best.

After checking with Cavendish to find out just how much time would have to be invested in the experiments, Johnson arranged his affairs into the hands of several trusted managers—trusted because they were owned, body and soul, by Johnson. On the morning of the third day, as the last of the Public Power trucks was leaving the warehouse in which Cavendish had

set up his laboratory, Johnson presented himself at the door.

AH, Mr. Johnson." His eyes lit up. "Right on time. I suppose you are as anxious as I to get on with the experiments."

"Time is valuable," said Johnson. "I don't believe in wasting it. Shall we get on with it?"

"Of course."

The lab seemed little changed from Johnson's earlier visit. An adjustable lounge chair had been set up near the screen; from it, lines ran into a panel of equipment that the industrialist found incomprehensible. At Cavendish's gesture, he sat down and permitted electrodes to be attached to his head and arms.

"Comfortable, Sir?"

"Quite."

Cavendish adjusted switches; the screen came to life, showing the earlier scene with the youthful Johnson just beginning his dash into the alley.

"We regress some twenty-seven hours more," he said. The scene dissolved and was replaced by one with the boy in a classroom. The clock on the wall read three-thirty; school had been out some fifteen minutes. Timmy Johnson placed the last of the erasers in the blackboard trough and checked the stack of workbooks with his eye, stopping to shift the top one a quarter of an inch into better alignment.

"We are now approaching the crisis point," said Cavendish. "The blending of the adult Id with that of the boy will enable you to control the actions of the boy."

"Get on with it!" said Johnson, impatiently, anxious to have the affair over with.

"Very well." Cavendish closed several switches and the hum of vast amounts of power pouring into the little room rose until it set the hackles of the men's necks rising. Still it rose, until Cavendish closed one final switch—

ALL done, Mrs. Taylor."

"Thank you, Timmy." She glanced up from the stack of papers and smiled at the boy. "I swear, I don't know what I'd do without you. You're the best helper I ever had."

Timmy glowed at the praise; he felt the back of his neck warming. It was fun helping her out, no matter what the other kids said or thought. He scuffed the toe of his sneaker against the heel of the other one. "Well, I guess I'd better be getting home, Mrs. Taylor. Mom usually wants me to run to the store for her after school."

"All right, Timmy. Good night."

"Good night." He lingered in the door for a last smile from the woman, then ran down the stairs to the lockers on the basement

corridors. He stowed his books in his locker, then twirled the dial on the combination lock, bought with money saved out of his allowance.

Timmy started towards the exit, when suddenly he heard voices coming from the boys' shower room.

"Aw, come on, Janie! What's the harm in having a little peek?"

"With your big eyes, Danny Grissome, a lot!"

Raucous laughter. "I guess she told you that time, Danny boy."

"Yeah? Well, I'm gonna see what I came down here to see, whether you like it or not, Janie. Now come on!"

"No! Keep your dirty hands off me, Danny Grissome!"

Heart pounding in his breast, Timmy edged towards the door of the shower room. From the voices, he knew there were at least half a dozen boys inside. The door was slightly ajar; the school was supposed to be empty, so the boys had been careless. Placing his eye to the crack, Timmy tried to make out what was going on, but his field of vision was too limited. All he could get were vague impressions of bodies moving back and forth.

Frustrated, he leaned his weight against the door. Suddenly it swung in, and he fell after it.

"Hey, who's that?"

Rough hands pulled him to his feet.

"Ahh, it's Teacher's Pet Johnson. What are you doing here, stupid?"

Timmy panicked. "I saw what you were doing!" he piped. His voice was shrill with fear. "I'm going to—"

Something clicked.

"Yeah?" demanded Danny. "What are you going to do shrimp?"

"I . . ."

Timmy shook his head; his eyes took on a faraway expression.

"Hey, what's the matter with you, shrimp? Wake up."

Something clicked again, and the adult Id settled into control of the youthful body. T. Arthur Johnson looked out on the situation confronting Timmy Johnson and came to a decision. It was not the decision the boy had—would—make of his own volition. But, then, the adult Johnson had one important advantage over his juvenile counterpart—he knew the certain and distasteful consequences of the boy's activities.

"Well?" demanded Danny. "Get with it, kid. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to tell Mr. Arkins—unless you let me watch too!"

HOW's your hand?" asked Cavendish, as he unsnapped the electrodes.

"Hand?" Johnson looked at first one then the other. "What about my hand?"

Cavendish looked, then shook his head, puzzled. "That's funny. Now where did I get the idea that something was wrong with your hand?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Johnson, getting up and stretching. He felt tired, more tired than he could remember having been in a long time. The feeling had become alien to the desk-bound man, but it was simply physical exhaustion. He yawned. "How about a drink?"

"Of course." He retreated to the little bar and came back with a generous slug in the usual water tumbler. Johnson tossed it off, sighed, and wiped his mouth.

"Well?" demanded Cavendish.

"Well, what?"

"Don't keep me in suspense!" begged the little man. "What was it like?"

Johnson considered. "Nostalgic, I suppose. Everyone would like another chance to revisit his childhood. You've proven that your time machine—Pardon me. Your temporal transgressor, works. But as to your idea that events can be changed—well, consider me from Missouri."

"But the machine does work," insisted Cavendish.

"I've already said that," said Johnson, irritated with the little man. Cavendish seemed much

more pushy than he had at their first meeting. Johnson had never cared for that type of person, perhaps recognizing too much of himself reflected in the other personality.

"The next part should be simple, then," said Cavendish. "All we have to do is find a suitable crisis point in your life, and send you back. Once you have changed it—made a different decision—then you'll see."

"Perhaps," said Johnson, a strong doubt in the back of his mind. "Have you picked out such a suitable crisis?"

"I think so." He turned to the screen, and began adjusting the dials. Gray fog swirled mistily across the face of the tube, resolving momentarily into brief scenes as the scientist searched for something in particular. At last he grunted in satisfaction, and straightened up.

"Here we are." He sharpened the focus, and it became Johnson's turn to grunt in surprise.

"Damn you!"

THE scene was dimly-lit, obviously happening late at night. Two youths in their late teens were busy at the rear door of a service station, while another kept peering around the corner, keeping an anxious eye out for passers-by. At last the lock of the door gave way to their efforts, and all three slipped in-

side. Cavendish turned a dial and the picture followed the actors into the interior of the station.

One of the figures produced a pencil flash; by its thin beam, they made their way past a store-room piled high with cases of motor oil and transmission fluid and into the garage part of the station. One of the figures stopped by a stack of tires and a heated argument broke out, soundless though it seemed to the watchers in the future. At last, one prevailed over the other and they continued their search of the station, stopping at last by the register. One of the boys punched it open, and scooped up a small handful of bills, only to have disgust register on his face when they turned out to be all singles.

In the meantime, one of the other boys was forcing the coin box on the cigarette machine. He scooped silver into his pockets, then turned to the soft drink machine at its side.

Sudden light glared into the station, blinding the boys. They stopped dead in their tracks, as they tried to shield their eyes from the glare. Then, panic-stricken, they broke for the rear and the door they had forced to gain entrance. The figures were lost for a moment, but soon reappeared, shepherded none too gently by several men in blue. The station's own lights came on.

Cavendish suddenly felt pity for the aged man and switched off the picture. Without asking, he refilled Johnson's glass.

"No one ever knew about that," said Johnson, softly.

"Your family did a good job of hushing it up," agreed Cavendish.

"We served our time, though—nine months in that stinking county jail, after time off for good behavior." He shuddered. Across two-thirds of a lifetime, the memory was still painful.

"It kept you out of the service, didn't it?"

"Yes. My folks always claimed I spent the time bumming around the country. They said ill health kept me out of the Army. People never believed them, though. They seemed to know better."

"Definitely a crisis in your life?"

"Most definitely," agreed Johnson.

"Then if I send you back to the time when you and your companions were planning this adventure, and you succeed in talking your younger self out of it, you'll be convinced that what I say is true?"

"Yes, that'll do it."

"Good! Events can be altered; time is not immutable!" The little man's eyes gleamed fanatically; Johnson for the first time debated the wisdom of letting

himself be strapped in under his care. But Cavendish was already adjusting the electrodes; he finished, and turned on the power source.

"I'll send you back to that afternoon," he said. "The three of you are gathered in the back room of Cook's News Shop."

"I remember," said Johnson.

HI, Danny."

"Hi," said the leader of the three, looking up. "What do you want, Janie?"

"Oh, nothing," said the girl, tossing her pony tail back over her shoulder. "But I'll settle for a coke."

"Be my guest," said Danny Grissome, digging a dime from his pocket. "But be a doll and drink it at the counter, hey?"

"What's the matter? My company not good enough for the big shots?" She sniffed, but accepted the dime.

"Your company's fine," said Grissome. "But we're busy—man-type busy. So later, hey? Later."

The boys watched her flounce sensuously through the archway separating the back room from the front section of the store, and knew as they watched that she was fully aware of their eyes on her. Danny's tongue darted over his lips; he sighed.

"Man, I gotta get me some more of that. But not now. We

got things to talk about now. Important things, right, Art?"

Johnson tore his eyes from the girl. "Uh, yeah, Danny. Sure. Anything you say."

"That's right. Anything I say. And don't you creeps ever forget it."

"So who's arguing?"

"Nobody, Flip—not yet. But I got me a feeling all of us in our little group aren't happy. Right, Art?"

"I didn't say that," protested Johnson.

"That's what it sounded like to me."

"So excuse me for living." He shrugged. "All I said was that I don't go for that kind of jazz. It spells trouble, big trouble. C—O—P trouble."

"Ahhh, you're a real nervous nelly, Art. I tell you, this place is a leadpipe cinch. He leaves the money in a register my baby brother could walk off with, and the lock on that back door is made out of bubble-gum. Now all we gotta do is wait till about midnight, after the patrol car swings through. It doesn't come back again for forty minutes, and that's more than enough time for what we want to do. What do you say?"

"I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it. Just do it. Now, what do you say?"

"Well, okay."

"Good! Danny settled back

and slapped the table. "It's settled, then. Flip picks us up here at eleven thirty and we drive over to Blandina and park behind the billboard on the vacant lot the next block down. Now don't either one of you creeps go fouling up this deal."

"What's to foul?" said Flip.

"Yeah, you're right. What's to foul?" He slapped the table again. "Hey, who wants a coke? I'll buy." He leaned around the corner of the booth and whistled. "Hey, Janie! Fun time! Tell Sandy to fix us three cokes and come on out and join the party!"

ART JOHNSON rounded the corner and approached the coke shop, hands sweaty in anticipation of what was going to happen within the next hour. He wished there was some way for him to back out of the situation and still manage to save face, but it was too late. The pattern was set, and events would ride out to their inevitable climax.

Then—

Something clicked.

The youth paused in mid-stride and nearly stumbled. His eyes took on a faraway look. A boy and girl came out of the shop arm-in-arm and nearly walked into him.

"Hey, stupid! Watch where you're going."

"Sorry," he muttered, shaking his head.

"Some people," said the boy, "live in a fog." The girl giggled, and Art pushed his way into the packed interior of the shop.

"Hey, man!"

Danny was holding a booth open. Art pushed his way through the crowd and slid in beside him.

"You're late," said Danny. "What happened?"

"The old lady stayed up to watch the eleven o'clock news. I had to wait until she was in bed."

"Well, it's a good thing you made it. We were about ready to take off without you. Come on, Flip; let's move out."

"Just a minute, Danny."

"Yeah?" The boy paused, half-risen out of his seat. After staring at Johnson's face, he sat back down again. "What is it, Art boy?"

"The deal's off. I'm cutting out."

"What?" He shook his head in disbelief. "You crazy man?"

"No. That's why I'm cutting out." He sighed. "I didn't like this deal from the word go. You knew that."

"Yeah. But I never thought you'd go chicken on us, Art boy. Not on old Danny. That's me, remember? Danny Grissome. What I say, goes. Anything I say goes. Right, Flip?"

"Right, Danny."

"Right, Art boy?"

"Not right, Danny," said Johnson, softly.

"You mean it. You really mean it!" He shook his head, sadly. "What's the world coming to?"

"No good end, most likely," said Johnson. "But I don't intend to mess myself up any sooner than I absolutely have to."

"I dunno." Danny shook his head again. "You don't talk like the same Art boy I know. Hey, is that you, hiding inside that mess of goody-goody talk, Art baby? Come on out and join the party."

"No go, Danny." Johnson shook his head. "If I'm not the same Art boy, it's because I finally woke up."

HOW did it go?" asked Cavendish, as he unclipped the electrodes.

"Go?" Johnson shrugged, then stretched and yawned widely. "I guess it went all right. I haven't seen Danny or Flip for forty years. Wonder what ever happened to them?"

"Ended up in jail, most likely. But what about the crisis? Did you succeed in avoiding it?"

"Crisis?" Johnson peered at him through narrowed lids. "Are you daft, man? What crisis could there possibly be in a bunch of kids getting together in a corner sweet shop?"

"But . . ." Cavendish shook his head. "Things did change!"

"What changed? Name me one

concrete thing that's different than it used to be."

"I . . ." He shook his head. "I can't."

"Of course you can't. And for the very simple reason that nothing did change. I'm still the same man I always was. And you'd better start coming up with some concrete benefits from this gadget of yours. You know I put myself into hock to raise the money you needed—I told my wife I was adding another franchise to my line. If she finds out her jewels were hocked for me to play around with a time machine, instead of a new line of cars, she'll flip. So how about it, Cavendish? Some concrete results next time."

Cavendish went to the bar and returned with a generous slug of whisky.

"What's this?" said Johnson.

"Why, your drink."

"Drink?" He snorted. "You know I don't drink, man. Have you gone completely daft? I haven't touched alcohol since I was a youngster."

Cavendish seemed near tears. He drank the whisky himself, then turned back to the machine.

"What are you up to now?"

"I'm looking for a suitable crisis point." The screen wavered, then filled with a group of men in uniform—heavy winter garb. They were clustered around a small fire in a cave; one seemed

to be heating coffee in a tin can. Johnson sucked in his breath.

"You know what is going to happen?"

"Yes, dammit! You're a devil!"

"Perhaps." He sighed. "I sometimes wonder . . . But no matter." He adjusted the picture, and events flowed forward a few hours. The soldiers were now at the base of a snow-covered hill. Above them, gaunt and bare, the timber-line beckoned with obscenely stretching limbs.

Suddenly a flare shot up from someplace to the right of the little band. Its eerie glare picked out unexpected shadows among the trees above. One of the soldiers, facing the prospect of near and immediate personal death for the first time in his life, panicked and began spraying the tree-line with his grease gun. Branches and splinters of wood kicked out, until the Sergeant reached out and slapped the gun from the boy's arms.

THE men waited until an unheard signal sounded; then the Sergeant waved them on up the hill. Slowly, cautiously at first, they made progress through the protecting trees. But then they reached the timber-line and froze. Cursing, the Sergeant moved from man to man, shoving them out of the false protection. At last he came to the boy who had fired earlier.

Just as the older man placed his hand on the boy's shoulder, the boy twisted and broke away, running madly down the hill . . .

"That's enough, damn you!"

Cavendish turned off the picture and came back to Johnson's side. "They court-martialed you, didn't they?"

"You know they did," he said, dully.

"You were unlucky, that's all. Many a soldier spooks his first time under fire. A lot of them run away."

"How many of them run right into the arms of their Commanding General?"

"Unlucky," said Cavendish.

"They kicked me out," said Johnson, bitterly. "A dishonorable discharge—'cowardice in the face of enemy action'. Said I was lucky I didn't face the firing squad."

"Officers are human, too," said Cavendish. "In times of stress, they tend to panic."

"They were 'making an example of me'," said Johnson. He laughed, a humorless sound that grated on the ears. "Some example. It took me twenty years to live it down."

"But people do forget, eventually."

"Not all of them."

"Shall we get on with it?"

"Of course, man. This is what I have been waiting for!" His words were sharp and impatient.

HHEY, Art! Got a butt?" "Yeah, sure." Art Johnson scabbled around inside his jacket and came out with a crumpled pack of cigarettes. He passed them over.

"Thanks, buddy. God, but it's cold here!" He stripped off one glove and warmed the palm of his hand over the glowing coal of the cigarette. "Now I know what they mean when they call a place Godforsaken."

"Ease off there, you two!" Sergeant Stebbins glowered their way. "You want every chink in Korea to hear you?"

"Sorry, Sarge," muttered the cigarette-bummer. He dropped his voice to a whisper. "Hey, Artie! I hear some of the guys in Fox company are making book on how many of us live through the day."

"Yeah?" Johnson shook his head. "Some characters'll bet on their own mother's funeral."

"Or their own." The boy giggled. "Wouldn't it be funny if the winners couldn't collect because they were all dead?"

"A real scream," said Johnson, sourly. "Look, let's change the subject, huh?"

The boy shrugged. "Sure, Art. Anything you say."

They lapsed into silence, and Art Johnson considered the improbable amount of circumstances that had brought him to the base of this numbered but

nameless hill half across the world from home. There was nothing of home here, and he felt the lack mightily. There was a very good chance that before another few hours had passed, he would be dead. And then he would never see home again.

He shivered. The thought frightened him. He didn't want to die. Not that he supposed any of the other men wanted to die either. But they were remote, other beings, alien in Art Johnson's world. What they felt he could not guess; what he felt he knew.

And he did not want to die!

"Hey, Art!

"Uh, what is it, Tooey?"

"Chinks, I think. Up there in the trees. God, they're sneaking down!"

"Where? Dammit, where?" He thumbed the safety of his grease gun, and brought it up to bear on the trees. His fingers tightened around the stock; the trigger started to depress—

Then—

Something clicked.

"Jesus, Artie, they're coming!"

Art Johnson's eyes took on a faraway look. His fingers loosened their death grip on the gun. He shook his head.

"Artie!"

"Shut up, Tooey!" Reaching out, he slapped the boy's face. "You're imagining things."

"But they're up there, Artie!" whimpered the boy.

"Sure they're up there. But not where you think they are. They're dug in, in the caves. And it's going to be up to us to dig them out. Now snap out of it!"

SUDDENLY a flare shot up from somewhere to their right. It whistled, then popped, the white light hurting their night-adjusted eyes. A moment later, Stebbins whistled and the men started moving up the hill.

They paused at the timberline, and Stebbins cursed, moving from man to man and urging him out of the false protection of the trees and onto the broad expanse of boulder-pocked snow. Above them, another two hundred yards, black dots against the snow showed where the caves were waiting for them. Johnson could visualize the little slant-eyed men within. He flopped to his belly and wriggled forward. Suddenly he stood up and dashed twenty yards, then flopped again as bullets whined through the space occupied by his body bare instants earlier.

He lay there, face pressed into the snow, until the muscles of his legs started tensing of their own accord. Then he was up again, and running for dear life.

Gun fire was bursting all around now, a seemingly solid screen of lead pouring down

from the caves. But the men were getting through the barrier; one slammed into the rock wall beside a cave mouth and started unlimbering grenades, tossing them in as quickly as he could pull the pins. Seconds later a vast tongue of fire roared out, melting the snow and scorching the barren earth beneath.

The fire probed down the hill as the side around the cave shook and roared. The fire reached and passed over Art Johnson, lying in the snow, fingers digging at the rock beneath.

By its orange light, the spreading circle of red around the soldier blended into the artificial coloring of the snow.

JUST think of it!" Cavendish pounded his hand on the desk. "The chance to go back and correct our mistakes, live our lives over again. The opportunities missed, the chances passed up, the decisions made wrong—all can be changed."

The man in the chair swirled the dregs of the whisky in the bottom of the glass. "Go on, Cavendish," he said. "You're keeping my interest."

Cavendish flushed. "Thank you, Mr. Blackwell. I knew a man of your position would not pass up an opportunity like this. Why, this is another chance to make the world! A second chance!"

THE END