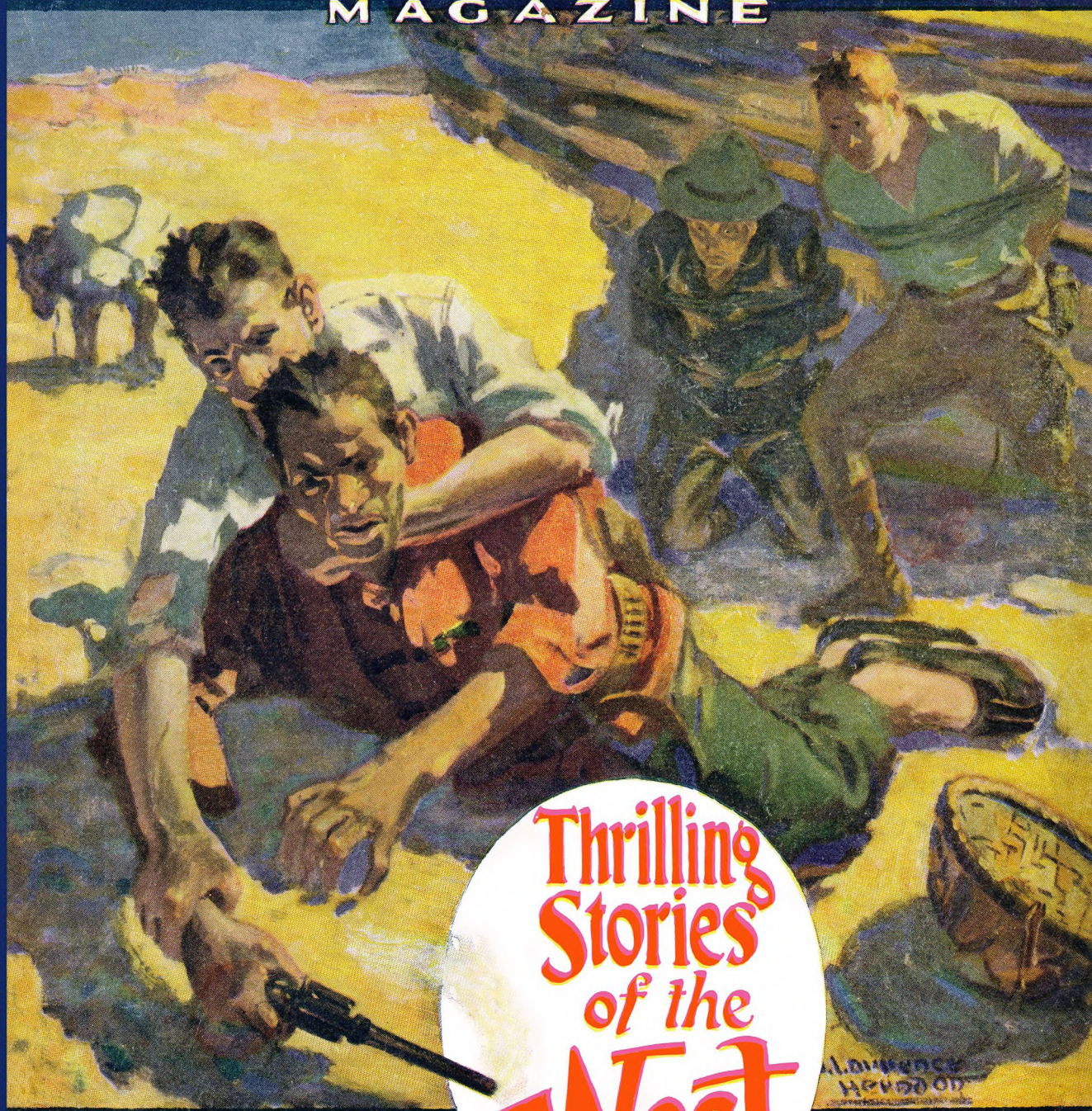
Price 25 Cents
OCTOBER 1926

THE Illustrated BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE

M.S.E.



Thrilling Stories of the West

Lemuel De Bra, H. Bedford-Jones, Clarence Herbert New, Calvin Ball, George Allan England and Others

$500 Real Experience Cash Prizes

OCTOBER 1926 THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE VOL. 43 No. 6

You Girls who like to Draw!

Opportunity Is Knocking at Your Door

Miss Hazel Smith drew the small picture at the right before studying with us. The large drawing she made recently. Note the wonderful improvement accomplished through our training. Miss Smith states, "I have found the Federal Course an excellent 'all around art education' of very practical value, commercially. From a selling position two years ago that paid me $18.00 a week, I am now making $60.00 and $70.00 a week doing the kind of work I enjoy. In a day I often make more than I did in a week, two years ago. The Federal Course has been invaluable in placing me in this position."

Miss Smith is one of many girl students who have found our art training a quick and pleasant road to success.

Do You Like to Draw?

If you are one of the few so favored by nature, why not make the most of your talent? Follow your natural bent and take the surest road to independence—a pleasant road—earning money by doing the thing you like.

An Uncrowded, Unlimited Field

Publishers, each year, buy millions of dollars worth of illustrations for magazines, newspapers, etc. Illustrating is the highest type of art. Women are well fitted for this work and have equal opportunities with men.

Federal Training Gets Results

because experts have prepared the course, over fifty nationally famous artists having contributed exclusive lessons and drawings thereto. The Federal School is a higher class institution giving practical art instruction by mail. It is nationally known through the success of its students, many of whom do work for the best magazines and newspapers. You can learn at home during spare time. No previous training necessary.

Send Today for "A Road to Bigger Things"

A Free illustrated book which you should read before deciding on a career. It tells about illustrating as a profession, about the famous artists who have helped build the Federal Course and shows remarkable work by our students. If you like to draw, just write your name, age and address in the margin and mail it to us and we will send you the book, **free.**

Federal School of Illustrating

10026 Federal School Bldg. Minneapolis, Minn.

SPECIALIZATION

This is an age of specialization in every field of activity. So complex is civilization and so keen the competition in the affairs of men, that success and happiness are assured only to the man or woman who knows his craft—his art—his business.

If you would achieve success, you must first be trained. In the old days training was only acquired by years of arduous apprenticeship. Now in these days when education is so far reaching, there are schools organized to teach in a comprehensive way every specific line of endeavor.

ART SCHOOLS Schools of Design — If you have a desire to paint, draw, design clothes or hats, then an art school or a school of costume design will help you to put your talent to profitable use.

CONSERVATORIES OF MUSIC — If your inclination is to sing or play the violin or piano, then a conservatory of music is what you are looking for.

SCHOOLS OF DOMESTIC SCIENCE — If you have a knack for cooking or running a house, a school of domestic science or housecraft will train you to do it in the best possible way.

DRAMATIC SCHOOLS — You may feel the lure of the stage or the movies. There are a dozen different schools of dramatic art or stagecraft that will give you the necessary training.

PROFESSIONAL SCHOOLS — Possibly your interests are more practical. You may want to be a druggist, or a photographer, an electrician or an accountant. There is a school for every one of these fields of work.

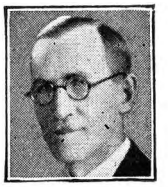
All these vocational schools are advertised in THE RED BOOK MAGAZINE. If you are undecided as to what school to choose, write us and we will be glad to advise you.

Address The Department of Education

The Red Book Magazine

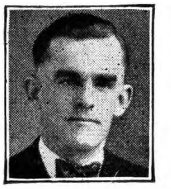
Aeolian Building **New York City**

J. E. GREENSLADE



FRANK WALSH
Springfield, Mass.

I was clearing around $1,000 a year when I was enrolled with N. S. T. A. I have increased my income to $7,286. I now own my home, drive a nice car, and have a summer camp. My grateful thanks to N. S. T. A.



JAMES JACOBSEN
Winchester, Ky.

When I took up the N. S. T. A. course, I was selling shoes for $35 a week. Now I am earning an average of $135 a week. I attribute this remarkable progress to N. S. T. A. training.

F. B. ENGLEHARDT
Chattanooga, Tenn.

Without this training I would still be working for the other fellow. This year I will make close to $7,000—some increase since my enrollment.

C. W. BIRMINGHAM
Dayton, O.

A few years ago I was working in a shop for $15 a week. Immediately upon completion of my course I was offered a position through N. S. T. A. My earnings were from $5,000 to $6,500 per year. Today I am earning $7,500 per year.

You're Fooling Yourself

-if You Think These Big Pay Records Are Due to LUCK!

But don't take my word for it! When I tell you that you can quickly increase your earning power, I'LL PROVE IT! FREE! I'll show you hundreds of men like yourself who have done it. And I'll show you how you can do it, too.

I'LL come directly to the point. First you'll say, "I could never do it: These men were lucky." But remember the men whose pictures are shown above are only four out of thousands and if you think it's luck that has suddenly raised thousands of men into the big pay class you're fooling yourself!

Easy to Increase Pay

But let's get down to your own case. You want more money. You want the good things in life, a comfortable home of your own where you can entertain, a snappy car, membership in a good club, good clothes, advantages for your loved ones, travel and a place of importance in your community. All this can be yours. And I'll prove it to you, Free.

First of all get this one thing right: such achievement is not luck—it's KNOWING HOW! And KNOWING HOW in a field in which your opportunities and rewards are ten times greater than in other work. In short, I'll prove that I can make you a Master Salesman—and you know the incomes good salesmen make.

Every one of the four men shown above was sure that he could never SELL! They thought Salesmen were "born" and not "made"!

When I said, "Enter the Selling Field where chances in your favor are ten to one." they said it couldn't be done. But I proved to them that this Association could take any man—regardless of his station in life, regardless of his present job, or lack of selling experience—and in a short time make a MASTER SALESMAN of him—make him capable of earning anywhere from $5,000 to $10,000 a year. And that's what I'm willing to prove to you, FREE.

Simple as A. B. C.

You may think my promise remarkable. Yet there is nothing remarkable about it. Salesmanship is governed by rules and laws. There are certain ways of saying and doing things, certain ways of approaching a prospect to get his undivided attention, certain ways to overcome objections, batter down prejudice and outwit competition.

Just as you learned the alphabet, so you can learn salesmanship. And through the NATIONAL DEMONSTRATION METHOD—an exclusive feature of the N. S. T. A. System of Salesmanship Training—you gain the equivalent of actual experience while studying.

The N. S. T. A. System of Salesmanship Training and Employment Service will enable you to quickly step into the ranks of successful salesmen—will give you a big advantage over those who lack this training. It will enable you to jump from small pay to a real man's income.

Remarkable Book, "Modern Salesmanship" Sent Free

With my compliments I want to send you a most remarkable book. "Modern Salesmanship."

It will show you how you can easily become a Master Salesman—a big money-maker—how the N. S. T. A. System of Salesmanship Training will give you years of selling experience in a few weeks; how our FREE Employment Service will help select and secure a good selling position when you are qualified and ready. And it will give you success stories of former routine workers who are now earning amazing salaries as salesmen. Mail the attached coupon at once and you will have made the first long stride toward success.

National Salesmen's Training Ass'n

Dept. R-76

N. S. T. A. Building, 1139 N. Dearborn, Chicago, Ill.

National Salesmen's Training Association, N. S. T. A. Building, Dept. R-76 1139 N. Dearborn, Chicago, Ill.

Send me free your book. "Modern Salesmanship," and Proof that I can become a MASTER SALESMAN.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....

Age.....Occupation .....

THE BLUE BOOK

KARL EDWIN HARRIMAN, Editor
DONALD KENNICOTT, Associate Editor

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A Memorable Short Novel

Short Stories That Are Worth While

THE CONSOLIDATED MAGAZINES CORPORATION, Publisher, The Blue Book Magazine,
36 South State Street, Chicago, Ill.

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Vice-President

Office of the Advertising Director, 33 West Forty-second Street, New York City, N. Y.
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MAGAZINE

OCTOBER, 1926

Special Notice to Writers and Artists: Manuscripts and art material submitted for publication in The Blue Book Magazine will only be received on the understanding that the publisher and editors shall not be responsible for loss or injury thereto while such manuscripts or art material are in the publisher's possession or in transit.

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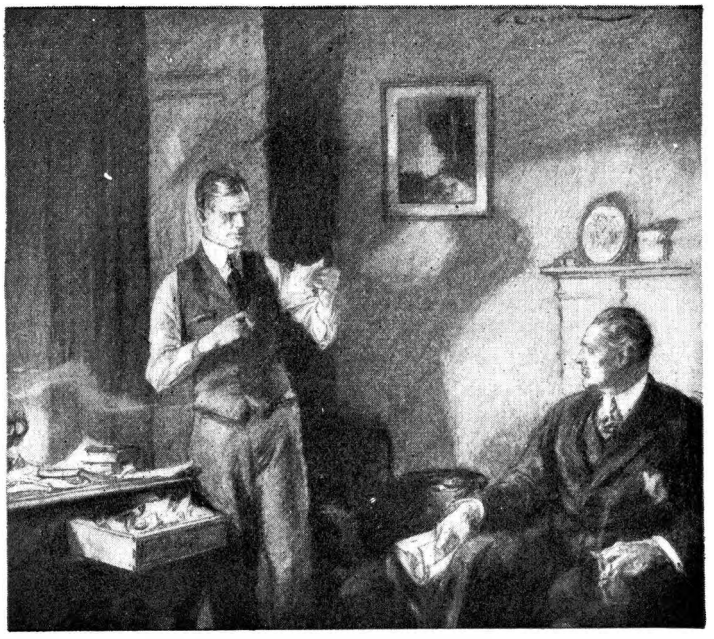
THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE is issued on the first of the month preceding its date (October issue out September 1st), and is for sale by all newsdealers after that time. In the event of failure to obtain copies at news-stands or on trains, a notification to the Publisher will be appreciated.

Advertising forms close three weeks prior to the time of issue. Advertising rates on application.

SO FEW MEN CAN DECIDE!

Can you?



"He pulled out a wrinkled bit of paper more than four years old."

THIS HAPPENED only a few weeks ago.

A man who had been promoted to a new position, with much larger income, sat talking with a friend. "It's funny what little things influence our lives," he remarked. "Three years ago I was reading a magazine and clipped a coupon from an advertisement—something I almost never do. The coupon put me in touch with the Alexander Hamilton Institute, which laid out a definite course in business reading for me.

"The first time the president of our company ever indicated that he was conscious of my existence was about a month later when I ran across something in my reading that happened to be of very immediate interest to him. From that moment he began to look on me as something more than just a name on the payroll. You know what's happened since; and the whole thing started really when I happened to clip that coupon."

The other man sat quiet a moment. Then he rose and, walking over to the table, pulled out the drawer and produced a wrinkled bit of paper.

"I clipped one of those coupons once," he said, "but I didn't do anything more about it. Here it is" . . . he held it out . . . "more than four years old."

That little incident reveals one of the fundamental reasons why some men go forward and others do not. Up to a certain point all men are interested in their business future. They will read about success and talk about it; but at that point they divide sharply into two classes. One group merely talks; the other acts.

Think of the four years that have passed since that man clipped that coupon. In that time, Charles E. Murnan, who was a clerk in a retail store became vice president of the great United Drug Company. He says: "I would recommend the Course to anybody, if he had to borrow the money to take it."

In that time, J. A. Zehntbauer, who was a wholesale dry goods salesman, became President of the Jantzen Knitting Mills of Portland, Oregon. He says: "I would be making a conservative statement if I should say that 50% of my success could be attributed to my contact with the Alexander Hamilton Institute."

And all this while the man who was interested, but lacked the power of decision, has gone along with petty salary increases. Four years of little progress, when he might have made a direct short cut to executive opportunity and increased earning power. Some day he will arrive, but he has sacrificed the joy of succeeding while he is still young.

* * * * *

This is not an advertisement in the ordinary sense. It is a business editorial. Two men will read it. One will say "That is interesting. I suppose I really ought to be doing some kind of business reading." He may even go so far as to clip the coupon, but it will never be mailed. At the critical moment of decision he will be tried and found wanting.

The other man will say: "This thing involves no obligation or cost. The Course has helped more than 250,000 men to shorten their path to the top. It may or may not be what I am looking for; but at least I have a duty to myself and my family to investigate." He will clip the coupon and *it will be mailed.*

There's nothing mysterious about the Institute's training, nothing sensational, nothing faddish. Simply by teaching men, in a few minutes of regular, pleasant reading the fundamentals of all departments of business, the Institute equips its subscribers to direct the men in those departments to their profit.

You have decision. Will you let us lay before you a definite plan of business reading, worked out by men who have made an unusual business success? With the plan will come a book of facts and letters which will answer all your questions. Give one evening to it; decide, alone in your own home, without haste or pressure. Whatever your decision, we are satisfied; we ask only for an invitation to mail you the facts.

Alexander Hamilton Institute

Executive Training for Business Men

In Australia:
11c Castlereagh St., Sydney

Modern Business

In Canada:
C. P. R. Building, Toronto

ALEXANDER HAMILTON INSTITUTE
678 Astor Place — New York City

Send me at once the booklet, "Forging Ahead in Business," which I may keep without charge.

Signature .....
Please write plainly

Business Address .....

.....

Business Position .....

THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE
Vol. 43 OCTOBER 1926 No. 6

Fiction Folk Who Are Real

"THE public," wrote an acute observer recently, "is so fond of fiction that it makes imaginary characters out of real people. Nobody takes the President, the Vice-President, the mayor of his town, the champion prizefighter, or the leading movie queen or 'leader of society' as he or she really is. We must each of us make of each of them an imaginary hero or heroine, villain or adventuress.

"While we go on making real people imaginary, the story-teller satisfies this human instinct by making imaginary people real. And so we pay less attention to eminent persons in the arena than to fictional creations.

"Every business man is either a Babbitt or not a Babbitt. Every crime requires a Sherlock Holmes or a Craig Kennedy. Every problem must be disposed of by Mr. Dooley or the man that Al knows so well. Every criminal in good clothes is a Raffles, every mischievous boy a Penrod. Every idealized child is Peter Pan. The man of the sea is Lord Jim or the Sea-Wolf. Women range from Ma Pettingill to Tess of the D'Urbervilles, from Tish to the Lady in the Green Hat."

SO in choosing stories for your delectation in The Blue Book Magazine, one of the first demands we make of an author is that his fiction characters shall seem real—that for the moment at least they shall move living and lively through our imaginations.

Calvin Ball's quaint garage mechanic Ed, for example—does he not stand out more vividly in your memory than hundreds of flesh-and-blood people you have met? And Clarence Herbert New's Free Lances in Diplomacy—Lord Trevor and Lady Nan, Lammerford and Abdool—are they not vividly alive and convincing, even though their exploits seem now and then to transcend probability? And so too with Go-getter Gary, and Ned Coffin of the good ship *Argentine Liberator,* and many another.

WE wish in particular at this time to call your attention to some new and delightfully real people our readers are to meet next month. There's a mining engineer named Wayne in William Byron Mowery's splendid novelette "The Arnold Legacy" who is one of the finest fellows you have ever known. Roy Norton's fascinating novel "The Great Samarkand" is narrated by a jewel-expert who is at once a most unusual fellow and also an entirely recognizable human being. And in H. Bedford-Jones' second "Trail of Death" story, "Over Abbeville," you get better acquainted with his mysterious and venturesome central character—and will like him still more.

And so on through the magazine—from the lovable "old grad" who makes a strange confession in Homer King Gordon's stirring football story "A Pledge Redeemed" to the two funny protagonists of Whitman Chambers' motor comedy "The Tub Plays Sheik"—you will find the characters, living, breathing folk, picturesque, lively, eminently well worth knowing.

—*The Editors.*

Photo by Ed Irwin

CUSTOMS LINE-RIDERS

"It was nearing dawn when Dothan saw Tripton draw up. . . . . By the water-hole was a galvanized-iron post supporting two steel signs, white enamel with figures and letters a dark blue. The top sign bore an arrow pointing south, and read: 'Deadman's Tank—10 Miles.' Beneath was another sign: 'WARNING! Do not attempt this route without AN AMPLE SUPPLY OF WATER—United States Geological Survey.'"

Frontispiece to accompany "Evil Treasure," beginning on page 144

"My Lord, it's Father!" cried Molly.

Thrills come to the reader thick and fast in this spirited story of the men who go up to the sky in airships.

Sky Scrapes

By BRUCE GOULD

Illustrated by William Molt

THE second that O'Shane hit the flying line that morning I could see what had happened. He was a-grin from ear to eyebrow. He grabbed my hand and executed a ring-around-the-rosy.

"It's my honeymoon hop today, old boy," he said, pumping the old arm and hugging me so I was embarrassed right out there in plain sight before thousands of officers and men, and even in front of the cadets in the bull-pen.

That told me Molly had said "yes" at last. Why not? I'd been looking for it for weeks. But I imagine O'Shane actually was surprised. We're all kind of blind when it comes to that. And she had led him a chase.

But O'Shane was the sacred Hindu idol of the air-station at Key West, the pick of the pick of that daredevil circus of flying fools, and possessed of a curly-haired, fine-drawn Irish handsomeness that would set any woman's heart palpitating.

It's never been properly told—the story of O'Shane's honeymoon hop. Here and there at the air-stations I rehear bits of it, because it's become history and legend and a bit of flying gospel to those few naval aviators who haven't gone back to mufti. But it's only those of us who hang around Key West still in our green uniforms, remembering the glamorous challenge of the service in war days and waiting for something to happen, who really know the inside.

And I think it's likely I'm the one to tell it—as I was an eyewitness and the confidant of O'Shane as well, so I can tell you just as he could, his feelings right through it all. Maybe I can tell it better—O'Shane wasn't so long on talk, especially about himself.

He wouldn't, for instance, tell you the women were all crazy about him, though a blind man could see it. And there were some women worth looking at twice around Miami, where the naval officers used to swagger up and down the streets in their green and silver uniforms. How they made the gawky marines look withered—though I'll not deny I've met some handsome devildogs!

As for Molly—well, O'Shane had wooed and won the darling of the Atlantic fleet

and of its admiral, by Irish blarney, daring and sheer melting sincerity. His competitors included every eligible bachelor in the wardrooms.

Molly Emery was the daughter of Rear-Admiral Emery, and, tradition said, the private reason why half the naval officers were so loyal to the flag. O'Shane had pulled off an aërial courtship only an aviator in love could possibly get by with, without bumping off. And Cupid was flying in the cockpit. Molly was as crazy about O'Shane as he was about her.

So I wasn't surprised to learn that she had at last said yes, though Molly was a born witch, and wouldn't have given in till every barrier she could put up had been stormed and taken. But I pretended to be absolutely swept off my feet with astonishment, while Mark was standing there hanging onto my hand like an idiot.

"Beyond cursing that you didn't break your neck before she accepted you," I said, "every bird here wishes you all the happiness in the world, old boy." And O'Shane knew there wasn't any personal rancor in my words, because he had seen a picture that usually rested in the old breast pocket; and he had even admitted that, next to Molly, she was probably the most beautiful girl in the world. But that's a story in itself!

He stood there grinning like a Cheshire cat.

"When?" I asked.

"Tomorrow."

It was to be one of those flashing, glittering, glamorous military weddings, that we half laugh at ourselves now for being so sentimental over. There was enough tragedy, pity and beauty about them in those days, though.

"This is my last hop before I take a nose dive for the altar," said O'Shane. "My honeymoon hop! Action's what I need. Time's got to fly, and so have I. That's my ticket. Then two weeks' leave, Molly —and paradise."

BROTHER, it was a day for flying! Blue and gold, and the sun striking splinters of crystal from the water along the crescent beach. White, fat clouds scudding in the sky, and just the flickering of a breeze—oh, a glory of a day!

Scenting something in the wind, the flyers straggled up to thump Mark on the back and invite themselves to the wedding. Bud Emery was there with the other cadets, giving O'Shane a half boy, half man-to-man smile. Because he was the baby of the squadron, only eighteen, and because he was Molly's brother, he was the pet of the station. And the way he idolized O'Shane was something to see.

"I'm taking my solo hop today, Mark," he says, trying to sound casual. "Me and Danny." That was his buddy among the cadets. "We're both soloing today." O'Shane gets serious for a moment and says: "Well, old boy, steady is the word!"

"Steady it is," says Bud.

"Heads up at all times," puts in Danny.

But O'Shane couldn't keep sober for long. He picked out the best ship on the line, and ordered Boots to tank her up with gas and oil.

"Today I'm a flying fool in cap and bells," he said. "Watch me play tricks with those clouds up there. Keep an eye out for the silver linings. I'm going to turn 'em inside out."

"If you run out of gas, tumble right down," growled the flight commander. "We can't spare a man to send up after you."

"Don't trouble yourself," said O'Shane. "Run a can up the flagpole, and I'll pick it off on my way down."

"Don't be a German ace," warned Buck Curtis, an old buddy with special privileges. "These wild-eyed cadets have put so many busses in the bay now that we're short of crates. We can't spare a good ship."

"Keep your iron crosses," laughed O'Shane, moving up beside the tail of the "29," where I stood watching Boots set everything ship-shape. O'Shane patted the rudder affectionately as he might have patted the sleek flank of a thoroughbred.

"Great little boat," he said, warming up to it. The rippling bay caught his eye. He smiled, apparently fascinated by the play and color of the whitecaps.

Boots waded out to the engine, sloshing in the water swishing about the slender outlines of the pontoon.

It was all so clean and smooth and eager, as though the spirit of flight had given life to the raw stuff of struts and linen. There was a lift about it—you know what I mean. O'Shane patted the rudder again as though it could understand.

"How's she tuning up, Boots?" he asked.

"She's a screaming beauty, sir. Motor's turning up sixteen-fifty r. p. m., if you need it. Sound as a nut. Pontoon's dry as a bone. Balances like Bird Millman."

I guess I've always been a little soft-headed about O'Shane. But he was the flyingest flyer I ever knew. He may have broken a few rules in his time, and set reckless examples for the cadets, but he's the kind of lad that carries Old Glory round the world on a radiator. And when he taught a cadet to stunt, from then on the lad was as safe in the air as a canary in a cage.

I never liked him any better than I did then. He was drunk with joy about Molly's saying "yes," and threw off good spirits the way an idling motor sprays fire. He was buoyant, happy, care-free. He wanted to paint the old sky red. Thinking of him winning Molly, I couldn't blame him.

"Whirl her around, Boots!" he shouted. "I'm out to curdle the Milky Way."

"You can do it with this baby, sir," says Boots. "She's r'arin'!"

O'SHANE leaped from the beach onto the pontoon, and crawled into the rear cockpit. Soberly he tested the controls, gave an eye to the instrument-board, and carefully snapped on his lifebelt. He was nobody's fool about fundamentals. Satisfied, he slipped on his goggles, swept the bay with his eyes for other planes, and gave old "29" the gun.

The Suiza pulsed into sudden life as the rich shot of gas filled the cylinders; eight exhaust-pipes snorted fire and brimstone; a whirl of salt spray spattered against my face as I ducked my head against the slip-stream blast; and "29" roared away from the beach like a thoroughbred leaving a picked field, and straining at the bit.

"She's off!" yells Boots.

"Look at that flying fool pick her off the water," cries Buck.

"The boy is certainly hop-singin' along," I said.

The beach lined up to admire.

Before the plane had shot out ninety yards, O'Shane zoomed her high off the water for a good five hundred feet. The wings fluttered a bit, but she took the leap gracefully. It was a pretty stiff climb even for a Suiza, and he eased up on her promptly. The nose still lay well above horizon, pulled up to the final inch of efficient climbing. He was handling her the way you see a knowing jockey straddle a fiery stallion. He began to soar in long sweeping spirals.

Overhead, other motors droned and whined in snarling monotone. Airplanes were darting from all points of the sky, silver arrows in blue infinity. But almost every eye on the beach was on O'Shane. Even the mechanics at work in the hangars invented reasons for poking a head outside. The word had quickly passed around to all hands that O'Shane was making his honeymoon hop, and fancy flying was expected.

Beside me on the beach Bud and Danny stood huddled together.

"That's flyin'!" one breathed, their young eyes following O'Shane almost with reverence. I remembered it was their day for solo hops, and a little scare went through me at the sight of that blind hero-worship.

"Lads," I said, "don't get nutty ideas. You've got a good seven years' time to catch up with O'Shane, and don't go and try to be doing it all your first hop out. Get it?" I fixed a stern eye on them.

"Sure," said Danny, hardly knowing I was there, paying no attention to me with his eyes glued on O'Shane.

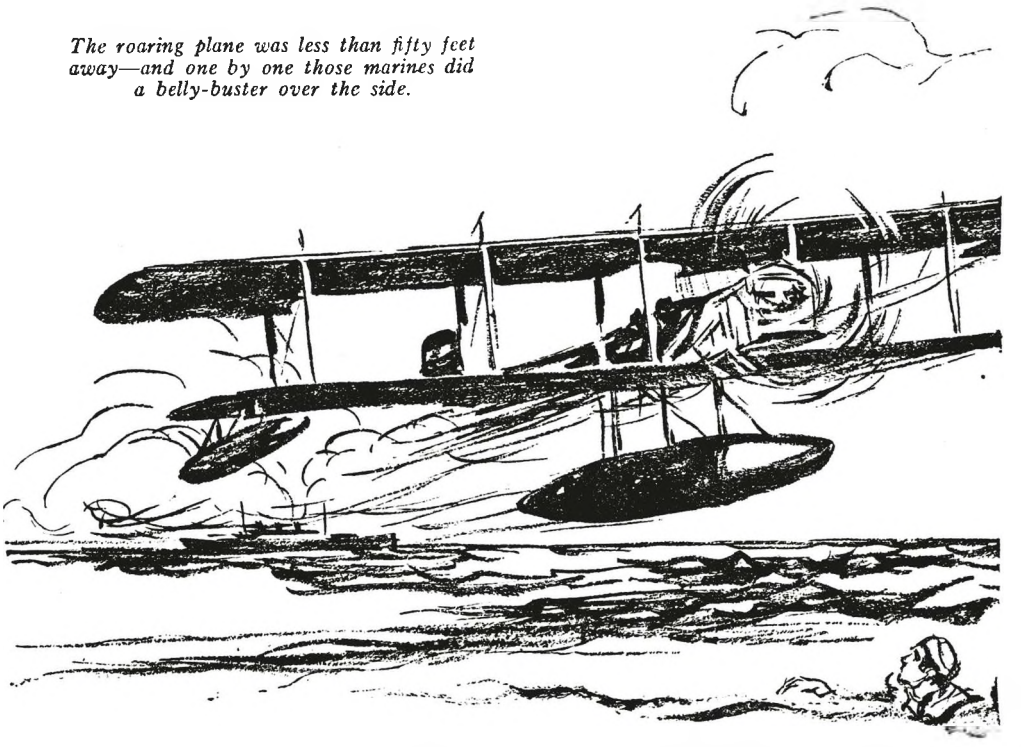
O'Shane made air history for the station that morning, all right. Not even the later mad, joyful stunting on the two days of the Armistice, when O'Shane was overseas, held a candle to O'Shane's stunting then.

With full gun on, it didn't take him long to climb ten thousand feet, just below the two-mile level where the ninety-mile gale blows steadily from the south. He was still far under the fleecy mare's tail scud which formed a sort of big top for his aërial circus. No doubt he'd have gone higher, but you can't do much in a ninety-mile gale in the way of stunting.

Pausing a moment at the top of his swift climb, he swung the nose around toward the sun. And then, gracefully, he dipped the plane three times into its rays. He plunged down into the trough of space and rose up sharply, and repeated the action twice more before he leveled out and turned a quadrant. The propeller as it swung away from the light sobered to a bright, steady blur of space-annihilating motion.

The rest of the planes in the sky had evidently caught sight of O'Shane, and suspecting from his movements that he was about to put on an exhibition, had given him a well of sky all to himself. A moment of suspense, and he touched off the fuse. The aërial fireworks exploded.

The roaring plane was less than fifty feet away—and one by one those marines did a belly-buster over the side.



His amazing descent seemed like a sentence of death, punctuated with loops, falling leafs, upside-down flying, snap stalls, flipper spirals so tight they made dizzy watching, and tail-spins for filigree work. The fact that the plane stuck together at all was a marvel, for a seaplane's pontoons make stunt-flying specially difficult, and specially perilous. I'll bet some of the Kiwis watching him woke up nights later in a cold sweat with the nightmare idea they were his passengers. A cat baiting a mouse couldn't have raced to more places at once. He seemed to be playing hide-and-seek with himself. The plane came down, zigzag, straight, tumbling awkwardly—the guy wires screaming madly.

We on the beach were having the time of our lives just watching him; so you can imagine the intoxication he was getting from it. He must have been fair mad with joy. Bud and Danny at my side were sunburning their throats, and breathing hard with admiration and envy.

Picking himself out of a tail-spin at five hundred feet, O'Shane leveled off and came skimming toward the beach. He was heading directly for the top of the lookout tower.

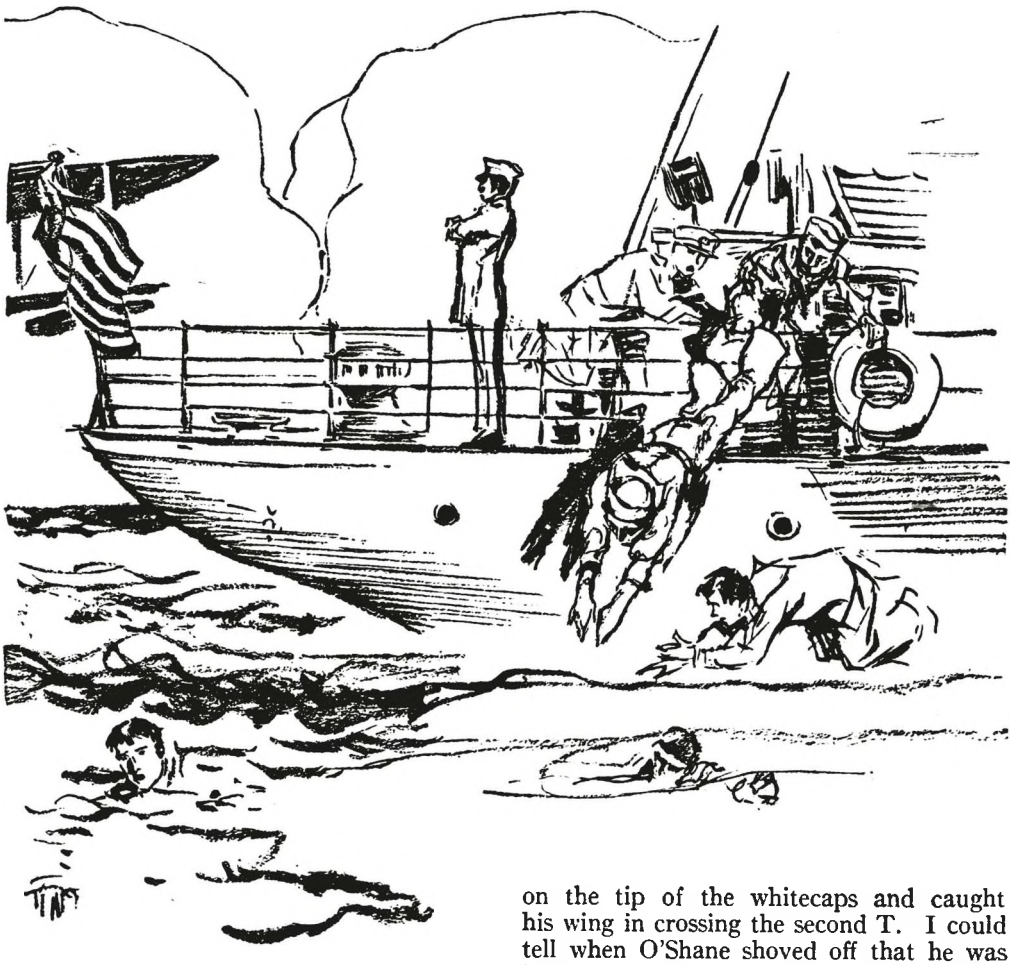
Here were quartered four seamen, their heads in a perpetual hornet's-nest high up in the air. Motors roared past them every minute. Watchfully they scanned the flying course for planes in distress, waiting to give the sign for instant rescue. I don't need to tell you that seconds meant the difference beween life and death to a fallen aviator.

Their challenging position on top of the wooden cage constantly tantalized our impulse to zoom them. We roared with laughter as we saw that O'Shane was yielding to temptation. Straight at them he went, apparently intent on carrying them all away with a scoop of his wing. One of the lads evidently decided that Fate had called his number, for as O'Shane's pontoon tore away a bit of loose, flapping tarpaper from the roof of the tower, he fell into the arms of his fellows in a dead faint, and took a sock of cold water in the face before he blinked foolishly and joined in the laughter.

Then O'Shane did a tight figure eight around the Skipper's flagpole. Next he nosed toward the secretary's quarters in the Y building, and the building squirted out its frightened occupants like so many slippery melon-seeds.

Circling swiftly, O'Shane brought his plane over the bay again and started a vertical sideslip. A gasp went up from the beach. He was sliding directly into the choppy waves.

"O'Shane, my lad, hold hard!" shouted



Buck in real anguish, foolishly against the roar of the motor.

And then he laughed with relief and chagrin at his own emotion. He saw O'Shane, after a second in which he seemed to have lost control and during which he might have leaned over the side and scooped up a cup of water with his hand, pull himself right out of the grinning teeth of the whitecaps.

Just as his left wing drooped to touch the water, he gave her easy left rudder, flipped up the drooping wing, and came out smooth and even, flickering along just above the smiling whitecaps. A shout of applause wavered along the beach, and O'Shane vibrated his throttle in a staccato roar of acknowledgment.

BOTH Cupid and St. Patrick must have been riding with the lad. The station had never seen madder stunting since Trenton cracked up trying to write his name on the tip of the whitecaps and caught his wing in crossing the second T. I could tell when O'Shane shoved off that he was in a mood to put his head in a lion's mouth, or chase a herd of elephants through a jungle. I felt myself sort of wishing that the old boy had his stomach full by now. I found myself saying over and over again in my mind, though I don't exactly believe in telepathy:

"O'Shane, my lad, what say you call it a day? Easy is the word and Molly's waiting for you."

It was just about that time that a small hand was slipped through my arm, and there was Molly herself beside me.

"I just dropped down to see Bud off on his solo," she said, as though there were no other reason in the world for her to be around there, and daring me out of her gray eyes not to believe her.

She was loveliness itself that day, pretty as usual, of course; but it wasn't quite that —a little shy and humble, as a very wonderful girl can be when she has finally accepted some man, and yet proud, too, with a full sense of the value of all she is giving.

"I bought my trousseau in two hours,

and I guess that's the record," says she, trying to be offhand about things. "Look, there goes Bud!" Frantically she waved him off as he went, just busting with pride the way a kid does when he first has a plane all to himself.

Bud seemed to be getting up all right, and Molly didn't give any signs of going, so I showed her where O'Shane was flying. He had just been attempting to scrape the paint off the serried roofs of the hangars—dipping and rising over their curved backs like the crest of a swift wave. Now he was climbing again, with a few flippers for trimming, and was just wheeling his nose away from the station fifteen hundred feet up, when we could tell, just by the way he pulled up his plane suddenly, that he saw the same thing we did.

All white decks and gleaming brass fittings, a trim little launch had just rounded Hooker's Point and was putting in toward us across the bay.

"That must be a bunch of marines," said Molly. "Wonder what they're coming here for?"

Molly had no more use for a leatherneck than the lowliest gob in the navy. Moreover, there was a lively row going on between our station and a marine flying outfit across the bay, and she felt the rivalry as keenly as any of us. Officially we were brother officers in practically the same service, but that only lasted as long as the heavier gold braid was around.

FOR a moment O'Shane rested motionless, suspended against the blue of the sky; it was as though he hung, playing with a fascinating idea, dallying with it, tasting its full savor in anticipation. Then the plane seemed to quiver with eagerness; he pulled up its nose slightly, as though rearing back for a thrust. And like a fire-tipped arrow, he drove straight at the tiny launch.

He was dropping on it from over fifteen hundred feet, with gun full on. The nose was pointed down at a forty-five-degree angle. The plane streaked through the decreasing space like a tracer bullet. Guy wires, strained to the uttermost, screamed and whistled a devil's tune of danger.

"What's Mark going to do?" gasped Molly.

"What're those blinking marines going to do when he comes whistling down on them?" I retorted, chortling heathenishly. "Haircut and shave they'll get, I'd say."

"Don't you think maybe he'll give them a little tonic, too, just because he's a generous barber?" asked Molly.

I tried to frown at O'Shane's prank for the sake of the cadets in the bull-pen, but I couldn't. The marines rated it after the razzing they'd given some of our flyers. The beach just started to grin all along the line, thinking of the charivari O'Shane was about to give those bimboes. If they didn't duck for cover below decks on the double, they'd see a bit of flying—a mark to shoot at when they got back to their own field.

Of course, it was against regulations for an aviator to zoom even so trifling a matter as a fishing smack. Men have been beached for that. But we were mindful that the lads on whom O'Shane was dropping at a hundred and seventy-five miles an hour had only recently badgered the life out of our slow-moving bombing squadron when a bunch of marines in speedy pursuit planes ran across our men above the clouds, safely out of sight from both stations. So, regulations or not, O'Shane was just repaying a compliment, and he was just the man we'd all have selected to scare them to death in the most punctilious manner, with strict accord to navy etiquette and ésprit de corps.

"Merry salt whales," said Buck, near me, "this is rich! The way he's feeling today, I'll bet he curls their hair, and puts it up for them in starched rag ribbons."

"Watch him stand the golden rule on end," I told Molly. "He'll show 'em how to do as you've been done by."

"I almost wish he weren't flying today, though," said Molly. "The Skipper may see him, and you know the orders against zooming. Father's the crankiest of anybody about it."

"The Skipper's ashore," I assured her. "He went into town early this morning. Everything's sitting pretty."

The exhaust pipes were blazing like a blast-furnace as O'Shane shot down at the launch. In his seething descent he couldn't, of course, make out the individuals aboard, nor identify the tiny flag at the bow.

I could imagine him sitting clear-eyed in the cockpit, with a steady hand on the controls. He could shave the hair off a frog's back without breaking the skin, with his plane. But of course the passengers on the launch wouldn't have the same confidence in him I did. They had what you might call a decidedly different point of view.

Perhaps the marines may have thought at first that they would stand their ground, but when the half-dozen officers on deck saw the whirling propeller of that roaring monster no more than a hundred feet off, they forgot they were flyers themselves and acted just like any plain disorganized human beings. The blazing beast meant death to them, and their exalted feet forgot the best marine traditions.

Down they dropped, flat on their bellies, and hugged the deck like so many leeches.

At the same instant O'Shane zoomed high above them, clearing them by yards. But the officers, with their faces glued to the deck, could probably feel him singe their hair and slither along their spines.

In the hasty scramble back to poise and dignity I doubt whether the junior officers aboard offered their superiors the appeasing courtesy of regaining their feet first. From where we stood, they seemed all to bunch up together like so many camels.

OF course they were boiling over with rage. No doctor swallows his bitter medicine with more of a smile because he prescribes it for others. The fact that O'Shane, being such a magnificent flyer, was giving them a little more bitter dose than they had treated our men to didn't diminish their anger. They were popping mad on that deck, like corn on a hot pan.

And so, when O'Shane turned to wave mockingly, he could see, just as plain as we, their clenched, shaking fists; and being an Irishman with a flow of certain words on rare occasions, he could probably imagine what they were saying.

They were so hopping mad they probably didn't realize their shaking fists were a dare for him to return. Thinking themselves safe, they redoubled the pantomimic ferocity of their threats. Actions speak louder than words, and there was no doubt that these officers were yelling defiance at the top of their lungs.

Well, nobody ever got away with putting a chip on his shoulder in front of O'Shane.

More, he was flying his honeymoon hop, and he had openly bragged that neither man nor devil could cramp his act. He yielded to the tempting invitation, and carried his acceptance back in person.

Swiftly he gave her hard right rudder, and spun his plane about on her ear. His right wing dipped, flicked the top of the whitecaps until he leveled off again, and headed back for the launch.

THE beach was getting a big kick out of it, clustered together in small groups, and watching every move. Not all the thousand or more there were flyers, but they felt as one, and had hotly resented the marines' ragging up in the clouds. The pilots who had been zoomed had just decided to get O'Shane a watch, ostensibly as a wedding present, but really in token of their heartfelt appreciation for his revenging them. He was certainly returning the razzberries with liberal sprinklings of sour cream.

Then at the peak of our triumph, Molly suddenly became a sagging weight on my arm as she pointed wordlessly to the launch, speeding nearer and nearer.

Admiral Emery, apparently attracted by the excitement, was coming up on deck from below.

"My Lord, it's Father!" cried Molly.

"The Skipper—my God!" groaned the beach in anguished chorus.

If O'Shane had turned to look at us then, he would have thought the whole beach had gone mad. Arms waved wildly, signaling warnings. It must have looked like a voodoo revival-meeting.

But perhaps O'Shane, if he saw us at all, only thought we were waving him on.

For he was shooting straight for the launch now, skimming the water by inches. The throttle was wide open, and the motor was roaring like mad with the water as a sounding board. It must have seemed like the monstrous drums of death to those now rigidly astonished officers on the bare unsheltered deck of that launch.

They must have decided that O'Shane had gone off his chump. Not that they knew then who the pilot was. It was almost an axiom that a first-rate flyer was a trifle "dizzy." At least they knew that sane men didn't attempt to scare the lives out of their own admirals. Not that they calmly reasoned all this out! But in the few seconds they were given to do any thinking, I suppose they about reached that conclusion.

Speeding toward them, the roaring plane was flying so close to the water that unless it rose suddenly and swiftly it would shave everything clean off the deck of the launch. It was less than fifty feet away, the propeller cutting down the distance like a whirling knife-blade.

Casting all thought of rank and dignity to the winds, one by one those marines did a belly-buster over the side. They took

no time out for a swan dive, either. They just plopped.

Admiral Emery was the only one left. And you couldn't help feeling a wave of admiration for the old boy, even though you knew the very grimness with which he stood his post would make it harder on O'Shane when it came to the court-martial.

The plane roared at him, but he didn't flinch; and seemingly it was only inches away when O'Shane picked it up in a quick rise.

It must have been just as O'Shane zoomed high over the launch, passing over the struggling and sputtering heads in the water, that he recognized his future father-in-law standing there still and lonely on that empty deck.

For we saw him lean out as though to give a mocking salute; and we saw that same gesture frozen in place.

HE knew he was in a jam. Not even O'Shane rated getting away with that kind of a joke. It was something like a private on parade stepping out of ranks to make a pass at an officer who turned out to be General Pershing. Everybody had seen it, so it couldn't be shelved and forgotten. It looked so serious I didn't quite like to think what would happen.

But the beach, meanwhile, in spite of itself had burst out into a roar of laughter. They knew the bedraggled marines looked funny tumbling overboard, and funnier still as they scrambled back, trying to be dignified and looking like so many dripping scarecrows.

Not a smile was left on any face, however, when the marines trooped sheepishly ashore in all their trickling, squunching, ridiculous misery, led by Admiral Emery, his face all marble wrinkles. Every man stood still as a statute as he passed, knowing it was as much as his rank was worth, almost, to budge. And by that time, anyhow, we were all thinking of O'Shane and the court-martial that was as certain to follow as beans on pay-day.

O'Shane knew, of course, by then, that he had poked his head into the cannon's mouth and found that it worked. It must have been the thought of Molly which drove him aloft again to stay away from the penalty of his rashness as long as possible.

When he went up, he acted like a man at war with himself. He handled his plane as though he were undecided whether or not to break his neck. He first did a loop at five hundred feet and barely pulled himself out of it before hitting the water. He was almost crude, for a finished flyer, in his savage revenge upon himself. The despairing virtuosity he displayed was pathetic.

He was climbing again now, nearing ten thousand feet, his speedy plane racing upward in long sweeping spirals. The two or three other planes circling the course were thousands of feet below where he darted like an angry wasp, except for one slower bus wabbling around at eight thousand.

Bud left the bull-pen, where the cadets usually clustered to jabber and brag, joining us and taking his sister's arm. He'd gotten through his first solo safely, but thought of that was lost in the agony Molly must be going through. Maybe he thought he'd divert her mind by pointing out the plane beneath O'Shane.

"That's Danny," he said, "trying to fly higher'n I did. But I bet he wont make it, not in that old crate. I got to eighty-five hundred."

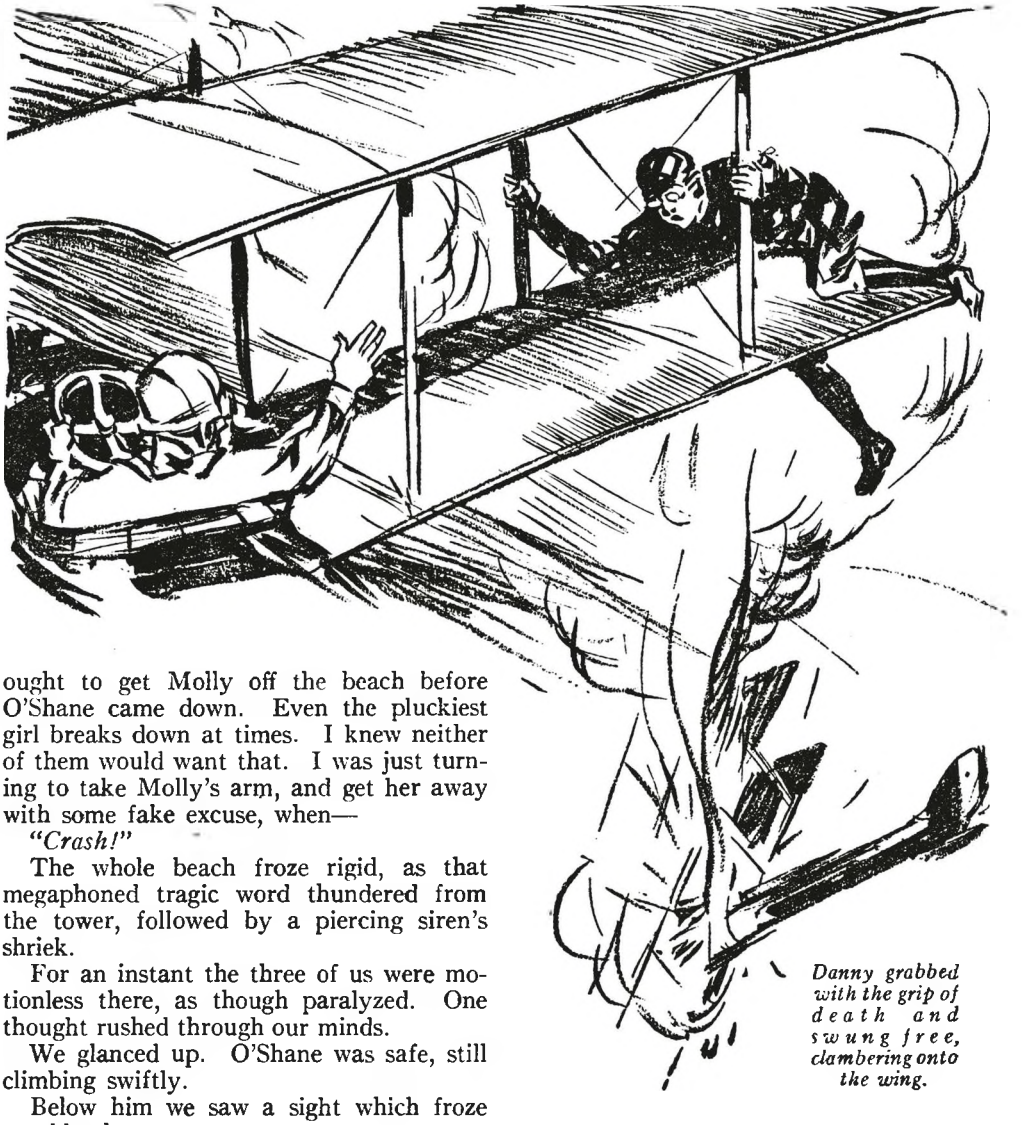
"If he goes much higher, that gale will pick him up sideways and he'll find himself tumbling around over Miami before he knows it," I growled, not being particularly interested in kids at the moment.

"Gettin' blown to Miami wouldn't make Danny sore any," Bud said. "He's got a girl there. It's an ill wind—"

"Son," I cut him short, "nobody's worrying about Danny just now, nor the bull-pen altitude record he's trying to make." It was rude, but I couldn't be watching my manners just then.

MY heart was up there with O'Shane. I couldn't blame him for trying to fly away from the troubles he knew were his when he landed again. Molly wasn't saying a thing. But I could guess she was wondering how much good her arms around the admiral's neck, and a little daughterly sobbing on his shoulder, would do. It did no harm to wonder, particularly as there wasn't a chance in the world of her resorting to tactics like that—not Molly. But she could think about it. It helped a little. I was thinking like a fool myself—about everything from swearing out an affidavit that O'Shane was in quarters all the time with double pneumonia, to fixing up the records to show that I was flying his plane, not he.

It began to occur to me that maybe I



Danny grabbed with the grip of death and swung free, clambering onto the wing.

ought to get Molly off the beach before O'Shane came down. Even the pluckiest girl breaks down at times. I knew neither of them would want that. I was just turning to take Molly's arm, and get her away with some fake excuse, when—

"Crash!"

The whole beach froze rigid, as that megaphoned tragic word thundered from the tower, followed by a piercing siren's shriek.

For an instant the three of us were motionless there, as though paralyzed. One thought rushed through our minds.

We glanced up. O'Shane was safe, still climbing swiftly.

Below him we saw a sight which froze our blood.

"My God, Danny!" moaned Bud. "His plane's afire!"

A red spurt of flame fluttered from Danny's right wing—the ghastly nightmare of every flyer! Against the glistening silver of the wing the curling flames stood out like menacing fingers. In imagination we could feel the hot blast as it drove past Danny's terrified face. The licking, fiery gates of hell had opened to swallow him up.

All alone he hung in the sky, miles from where we could stretch out a hand to save him. Danny—a kid on his first solo hop—barely able to fly, and now his plane was burning out from under him thousands of feet in the air! It was burn or jump. Either meant the end. We could only watch, and die by inches with him.

The pipe-line running down from the top wing gravity tank must have sprung a leak and the gasoline had caught fire from the exhaust. It wouldn't take long for the fire to mushroom through the whole wing with that kind of a start.

Everybody saw the flaming plane. The beach recovered from its first shock—began to seethe with life and purpose. A scurry of human beings shuttled back and forth, weaving together the details of the rescue squad. There wasn't much chance of doing anything, even if the plane didn't explode when it hit the water. But no chance was too little to grab.

Gongs were clanging; orders rang out; two officers raced toward the hospital plane hard by the boathouse. Cadets had leaped to the wings and tail, ready to shoot

it down the greased skids into the water. The pilot spun the propeller and snapped on his goggles. From the hospital ran a doctor. He could be seen dodging between the buildings, on the dead run for the beach. A minute or two would mean life or death in such a crash, if there was any chance at all.

With a roar the plane took off to circle about where the ruin of the burning plane would likely be wrecked. Two small boats with fire apparatus and first-aid kits shot out from the boathouse.

The best gesture we could make. That was all. And it was all hopeless.

Our hectic, driving energy down below hadn't touched the flames up there in the sky. We were part of another planet, as futile as though looking at him through a telescope. We were rushing around because we couldn't stand still. It helped us but it didn't help him. In a few minutes that throbbing plane in the sky would be falling like a blackened cinder.

Bud gripped my arm. His eyes were devouring space and seemed glued up there on the buddy we all knew was fighting for life. "He hasn't got a parachute," he said. His soul withered in his eyes.

Time seemed to spin out, though in reality only a few anguished seconds had passed. In moments of crisis a split second can be an eternity. It was so then.

"He's got a fire-extinguisher," said Bud.

"Might as well have a club as that squirtgun," I retorted angrily, though I shouldn't have been sore at Bud for hoping. If the flames were inside the cockpit a fire-extinguisher might have done some good. But this fire was eating up the right wing. Anything you'd squirt at it would blow right off into thin air.

Besides, a fire in the air nine times out of ten drives even an old flyer crazy. Danny hadn't even gotten his first wings yet. He'd lose his head, go mad, and jump.

Every second I was watching him I expected to see him throw himself suddenly over the side rather than burn with his ship. But I guess he had more nerve than most of us.

He stuck. He'd shut off his motor when the fire first broke out. Now he tried the only stunt that gave him even a fighting chance.

The plane flipped over into a left sideslip, right wing up, carrying the flames away from the rest of the plane. As his plane slid hurtling downward, the rush of wind kept the fire away from the fuselage and him. The gathering speed increased the wind. The full hurricane of it might snuff out the fire before it was too late. It was a fighting chance, at least.

In this time he'd lost no more than a thousand feet. Everything was happening at breakneck speed, though it seemed slow enough to us enduring the agony of helpless watching.

Between heaven and earth, a tiny rider in the sky, he was dropping with express speed. But the spreading flames dropped with him foot for foot, riding his wing like a fiery incubus, tearing at the thin fabric, devouring the wooden framework beneath, ready soon to eat the wing completely away, drop it off and leave the plane, a crazy thing, to careen idiotically until it crashed into the bay.

Any second the sky would burst into a sudden splattering of flames. Flying fragments would spray the air. Then, seconds later, the roar of the exploding gas tanks would reach us as the debris floated down to the water. Danny would never even be found.

We couldn't lift a finger. Useless to send the fastest plane on the beach up after him. Before it could reach that height, the fight would be won—or lost. It was maddening to be so helpless.

Nearer the bay, he might have dropped quickly down, stuck his ship on the water and dived for it. Seven thousand feet was too high. Luck, fool luck, had to be riding with Danny.

He was sliding down faster now, right wing well up, his speed increasing. But the flames were streaming out from the trailing edge of the wing. He was holding her tight in the sideslip, hoping against all the chances in the world Fate would throw him an ace. God, the pluck that kid had, sticking like that! Grim as death he was racing for his life!

Molly was pointing above Danny's plane, gripping my shoulder to attract my attention. "Look at Mark!" she gasped. I could feel a shiver run through her body. "He sees Danny!"

I CAUGHT my breath. O'Shane was swinging around; new purpose in his maneuvers. Had he seen Danny's plane in flames beneath him? About three thousand feet below it was now, swiftly sliding sideways, one wing a blazing torch.

"O'Shane sees him. He's going after

him!" you could hear men shouting all around.

"What can he do, you fool? There's not a chance," said one.

Fast as events piled one on another then, they impressed themselves on my mind like the working of a slow motion picture. Actions flashing by miles a second seemed drawn out to infinity. Dread weighted every second with leaden feet. Life seemed under a microscope.

O'Shane's plane nosed over and dived with the motor full on like a bullet. Screaming, it raced down through the sky. Space between the two machines collapsed like a crushed accordion. The guy wires were stretched shrieking nerves. The wings threatened to twist off the tortured body. His speed only increased.

FOUR thousand receding feet his plane tore downward in a darting moment—a moment ticked off slowly in dragging, anguished seconds. He flashed past the burning plane so fast it stood still, and then seemed to be climbing in the sky.

Abruptly, like a man cracking a whip of lightning, O'Shane snapped off the motor, pulled up the nose taut, and skyrocketed upwards in a sharp arc towards Danny.

He was flying as though wings grew on his back. With matchless skill, he had dropped through the sky, and, at the exact second, pulled up below Danny to lose his terrific speed as he climbed. Seizing the quickest way to annihilate the distance between them, he was risking his life to take it.

Uprushing slower and slower, and dropping down with increasing speed they steadily drew together. Danny's plane was sideslipping toward the bay like a crazy comet, the fire devouring one wing. In seconds, Danny's end was bound to come.

O'Shane, climbing up in the tight arc of his swing, increasingly lost his tremendous momentum as the planes neared each other. He had gauged his position in the air and the speed of his return climb perfectly.

Two hundred feet short of sheering together, O'Shane threw up an arm in a curt, arresting gesture toward his right wing. Almost immediately the two machines floated into the same level. I held my breath, fearing a crash. Both planes seemed on fire; the flames of one could be seen through the other.

Momentarily, they hovered alongside, and from below it seemed impossible to avoid colliding. Danny's plane was out of control. He didn't dare take it out of the sideslip or the fire would reach his gas tank and blow up at once, scattering flaming shrapnel into O'Shane's ship. O'Shane, coming up from that terrific dive, had lost his speed so he was ready to slide off into a spin. Another second and the two machines would tangle together in a hopeless burning mass in midair. As O'Shane hung over Danny they could not be separated.

The burning plane slid slowly down into view below O'Shane, its right wing all aflame now.

As his plane topped Danny's, he partly opened up his motor again to keep from spinning. He flipped over into a sideslip which was part nose dive and part squash. Then, following Danny's every move as he dropped, O'Shane played with the half-open gun to hold his equilibrium and regulate the speed of his drop as he nursed himself into position near Danny but out of reach of that menacing wing.

It looked like a race as they slipped neck and neck down through the sky. They had lost about two thousand feet more in the intervening seconds. The planes swelled before our eyes. The bodies of the flyers could be seen as they worked.

With an uncanny, nerve-tensing skill, O'Shane was easing his plane quickly down —down—down—and forward, jockeying for place. He half slipped past Danny's plane and held his position. His upper wing worked over and hovered above the lower wing of the doomed plane. As he maneuvered he kept his ship drifting downward at the same speed the other plunged.

For the space of a lengthy second I don't think anyone on the beach breathed. Molly's fingers twisted tighter into my arm. I held Bud's shoulder in a vise. We hung on a thread between fear and hope.

In that second O'Shane fell back a foot or two as both machines dropped faster and faster. Flames from the burning wing licked hungrily out at his plane as he hung grimly on. Skillfully, he slowly dipped the tip of his right wing nearer and nearer. Danny was now standing in his cockpit.

Down swept the wing in a quick, graceful, certain curve coolly measured in inches —heedless of the threat of death by fire or crash. An iron nerve was pushing life back within Danny's grasp. In a final tilt, the lower wing tip settled to within his reach.

Sky Scrapes

From the grave Danny's arms and fingers sought with desperation for life. He found the rear wing strut sinking to his hand. He grabbed it with the grip of death and swung free of the cockpit, clambering onto the wing with kicking legs and eager, clutching arms.

As he swung up, O'Shane lifted his right wing high and swooped away from the burning tomb in a tight and beautiful left spiral. The maneuver swung him swiftly away from the doomed ship. Until all danger of a crash in the air was past he did not straighten out into a smooth glide.

The deserted ship flattened out from the sideslip into a wavering nose dive, with the flames already licking the fuselage where the gasoline tank was stored.

Silent as death a moment before, the beach exploded like a rocket, and surely some of that mighty yell from the bottom of every heart must have reached as high as the recording angel. From sheer relief everyone went mad and yelled as though he were crazy.

Molly was kissing me hysterically as though I were O'Shane himself, while I was trying to ignore the way Bud was caving in my back with thumps like kicks of a mule.

It was Admiral Emery who picked Molly off me, and I flashed him a smile as I reached round to disengage Bud while I still had a vertebra left. I suppose the admiral had been standing right beside us all the time. Molly turned to him now, put her arms round his neck then and there, and gave way to tears of joy.

I guess she must have whispered something in his ear too, for he patted her head as he suddenly turned to me.

"When Mark comes down," he said, and his voice was kind of choked up, "tell him it's my orders to start his honeymoon furlough today."

Up in the air O'Shane had held his plane in a long, smooth glide while Danny shuttled through the guy wires from the wing tip, and tumbled into the front cockpit. Now he was bringing his ship down quickly in a flipper spiral, ready to set her up on the beach in front of the tower.

Molly looked up as O'Shane was heading for the beach, just in time to see the end of Danny's plane. Halfway down it seemed to shudder in the air, hesitate, and then with a splash of fire and flying sparks it exploded with a roar and showered pieces in every direction.

The Trail of Death

This fascinating story "West of Plymouth" is the first of a remarkable new mystery series by the favorite Blue Book Magazine writer who wrote the Detective Clancy stories.

By

H. BEDFORD-JONES

Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson

DURANT lingered at the rail, in the nook behind the starboard ventilator; apparently staring out at the wide Atlantic, he was in reality watching the couple just beyond him. He could not hear their words, was not trying—he was watching the look of startled anger on the face of the woman. Now, abruptly, they swept into louder speech, in rapid French, and the wind brought a scrap of it to Durant.

"I shall have nothing to do with it, nothing!" she said. "It is too much—"

"But you will!" returned the man. He was large, heavy-jawed, burly, aggressive in his manner. "It is understood. Before we reach Plymouth. I'll let you know when to act."

He turned away from her with a little bow, and strode up the deck. Durant glanced after him, amused in a contemptuous way by the brutal power he showed in every word and gesture. And the woman caught his look—stared full at him. She was obviously startled by seeing him there, comprehending that he must have overheard some of their talk.

Then, to the astonishment of Durant, she came directly to him, leaned on the rail, looked him in the eye, and plunged into it midway.

"You heard what was said?" she demanded in French. Durant smiled slightly.

"Yes, madame." He did not say he had heard only a little. He was curious.

"That is very good of m'sieur," said a voice from behind.

"Then—you will warn that M. Lewis?"

Ah! He might have known, thought Durant. This Lewis and his wife were the talk of the ship—loud-voiced tourists, both.

"Why should I bother?" he answered cynically.

"Because I ask you to," she said.

Durant hesitated, then shook his head. "There is little I would or could refuse to the Baronne Glincka; but I refuse to warn a fool of his folly."

The eager, sky-blue eyes widened. "That is not my name!" she exclaimed.

"No?" Durant smiled again. "Dear madame, you look very like her. Shall I tell you a little story?"

"Do." She squared away at the rail, looking sidewise at him, then down at the water.

"I was a poor clerk in Paris," said Durant. "After the war I stayed there, got a job in an American bank; I had nothing to go back to at home—my health was broken; I was penniless. I did not live—I existed. It was struggle. The American who lives in Paris on French pay has a hard time of it, madame. Well, three times a week the Baronne Glincka came into the bank."

HE puffed at his pipe, looking at the horizon. She stole another sidelong glance at his profile—thin, clear-carved, harshly strong.

"She was very beautiful," went on Durant calmly. "I asked who she was, found she was an American girl who had married a Russian and had left him shortly afterward—an unhappy baroness, like most of them! Whenever she came into the bank, it was like the sun breaking through clouds. I never spoke to her, she never saw me—that was all of it. Yet you remind me of her very strongly."

"Yes?" said the woman softly. "It is a compliment you pay me, monsieur! And if I may ask, why are you not in the bank now? Why are you going back to Paris?"

Durant laughed. "A distant relative died and left me some forgotten land in Florida. I went home, sold it, became moderately rich, and am going to Europe to enjoy myself for a few months in the same places where I worked and starved. That's all."

"Oh!" She was silent a moment; then she turned and faced him again, gravely. "And you overheard what was said. You are discretion itself, M. Durant!"

He swept her a slow look, astonished. "You know my name?"

"Certainly. Would I not remember a face that I saw three times a week—in a Paris bank—if I encountered it aboard a boat? Certainly."

Durant met her eyes, found them laughing frankly at him—yet found in them a certain desperate gravity that startled him. What was it she thought he had overheard? Such a woman as this lined up with a gang of steamer crooks? Impossible! And yet she was his baroness, no doubt of that!

"If you don't warn Lewis, what can you do about it?" she asked abruptly.

"Why should you, of all people, want me to warn him?" asked Durant.

"Do you think I'm in it willingly?" she demanded with scorn. "Do you think I'd decoy a man, let him be murdered? Yet—"

"Don't let it worry you," said Durant quietly, though the word had sent a thrill across him. "I'll have to mix up in it, I suppose, and warn him off."

"That is very good of m'sieur," said a voice from behind. "But now, madame, I must tell you that your cabin is ready. May I escort you below?"

Durant turned and saw the burly-jawed man just back of them. The woman went deathly white, then forced a smile, and opened an astounding attack.

"I must present an old friend, Boris," she said. "M. Durant, an American detective, who tells me that we must drop our plans or he will warn M. Lewis. I think, M. Durant, you know who my cousin Boris Makoff is?"

"Quite well," said Durant, falling into the game. The sky-blue eyes blessed him for his quick wit.

The two men bowed slightly, regarded each other steadily, Durant with his invariable cynical calm, Boris Makoff with thinly veiled hatred, animosity, fury.

"Very well, m'sieur," said the Russian in a throaty voice. "We abandon our plans. Will you take my arm, madame?"

SO they went away, leaving Durant to lean on the rail and get the mental kinks straightened out as best he could. Detective, eh? Clever dodge of hers! She had to save the situation somehow, since Makoff had sneaked up on them.

"And now, what the devil sort of game have I butted into?" Durant asked himself.

The Baronne, as he already knew, was listed aboard as Mrs. Robinson, and traveled alone. Here was her cousin—a cousin by her unfortunate marriage, no doubt—and she was obviously afraid of him; and Makoff planned on murdering Lewis. But why? Lewis was an alert Mid-west wholesaler, abroad on vacation, rather vulgarly intent on having a good time—but no fool. And certainly without obvious reason for being murdered.

Durant knocked out his pipe, with a feeling of sharp regret. This American girl, this baroness with her delicate beauty, her air of laughing poise, had typified something in his life; now he felt his ideal cheapened and brought low, and it put him in savage humor. To find her linked with crooks!

The first dinner call had sounded. Durant, who was at the second service, strolled into the smoking-room, ordered a drink, and sat watching the groups around. There in a corner were Lewis and his wife, several others with them—loud-talking, blatant, careless of money—the type of American, thought Durant disgustedly, who made his countrymen a byword abroad. As he looked, Makoff came up and joined the group, being welcomed boisterously. Durant put down his drink and went below to dress.

He knew no one aboard, had sedulously remained aloof, regarding what went on around him with his detached and slightly bitter air. The one-cabin *Tyrania,* already several days out from New York, had shaken down by this time; the cockney stewards knew just whom they could insult with impunity; the officers knew just which pretty girls would flirt nicely; and the passengers were finding each other out.

His cabin was forward. As he left the curving staircase and started for it up the port passage, he almost collided with a woman—Baroness Glincka.

"Oh! I had to see you," she exclaimed softly, catching at his arm, her voice thrilling him as it pleaded: "Just a moment—you must be careful, careful! I can't explain now—your life's actually in danger—can you meet me tonight on the boat-deck? About ten?"

"With pleasure," said Durant. "At ten on the boat-deck, forward?"

"Yes—and be careful!"

She turned and was gone past him. He went on to his cabin, thoughtfully. Certainly she was no person to lose poise very easily—yet this warning had been excited, desperate! When he had dressed, Durant stopped in at the purser's office, just now deserted, and inquired if anything were known of Boris Makoff. The purser gave him a keen look, then shook his head.

"Little enough, sir. Russian, I suppose; rather decent chap, I believe."

"He's traveling alone?"

"He has a cabin with another chap of the same stripe. Why? Any trouble?"

"Not yet." Durant met the purser's eye and smiled.

"Oh!" The other leaned forward confidingly. "None of my business, of course—but if I were doing the spotting, I'd say cards. What?"

"Great is the Anglo-Saxon understanding!" said Durant solemnly. "I expect

you're right. But I shall call on you later, if I may."

"Anything from drinks to dueling pistols," said the purser cheerfully, and Durant went on down to dinner, the bugle having just trilled out its message.

FROM his table at the side, with other single misfits, he saw Baroness Glincka come down, as he had seen her come each night, to the Captain's table facing the stairs. A little stir arose, always, when she came thus: women followed her with their eyes; men looked once and then stole glances afterward, for she was gowned to accord with her rare beauty, and her slender grace seemed perfection. But tonight, watching that slim figure of deeply rich blue and silver, with its crown of pale golden hair, Durant's cold gray eyes narrowed. One of a gang of crooked Russians—that was all!

Dinner over, Durant went to the smoking-room and put his pipe to work, over his coffee. He was watching several American girls exchange sprightly repartee with the steward, and thinking it was no wonder that the latter was a much spoiled cockney, when Boris Makoff appeared and silently glided into the seat opposite him.

"Well, Mr. Durant?" said the Russian in English. "Is it possible for us to arrive at an understanding?"

"Quite," said Durant. "What is incomprehensible to you?"

"Your occupation and presence. Is it connected with me?"

"Not in the least," said Durant, feeling amused by the game and falling into it with good will. He met those smoldering, dangerous, aggressive dark eyes with whimsical gaze. "Is my presence disturbing to you?"

"Then you're guarding Lewis. That's it, eh?"

"That's it," said Durant calmly. "Without his knowledge, you comprehend."

Makoff laughed suddenly and leaned back. "So that's it! I was afraid they'd send some one. Well, you're content if we give up the idea, are you?"

"Entirely," said Durant.

"And no word to the British people at Plymouth?"

"Not a word."

"If you've not already spoken to the officers here—"

"I haven't had reason," said Durant, with an appearance of frankness. "I only happened to overhear your talk today, remember. If you're willing to make the trade, all right. Leave Lewis alone, and I'll leave you alone."

"Done with you," said Makoff, and rose. Then he paused, looking down. "Tell me one thing! You're booked for Plymouth. Are you going on to Paris with him?"

"Why?"

"Perhaps for your own good."

"Then—no."

"Very well." Makoff smiled. "That's all right. I only wanted to warn you against Paris; I am not alone, you see. I find you reasonable, but my companions are prejudiced against the police, and Paris might be very unhealthy for you. Then it's understood?"

"Quite," said Durant.

The Russian nodded and departed.

Durant smiled to himself at the whole business. A detective, indeed! Evidently he had filled the bill in a satisfactory manner. He wondered why Lewis should be guarded, why anyone should seek to murder the man.

Leaving the smoking-room for a turn on deck, he sought his favorite spot—the well-deck forward, dark, deserted, quiet. He pushed open the swinging door from the cabin passage, stepped outside. Just to his right a match blazed, under the dark overhang of the bridge-deck. Then something struck him.

IN that first sharp moment of darkness, Durant's life was saved only by the fact that he was filling his pipe, holding in one hand a flat tobacco tin.

He went down under the impact of a dark figure; the tobacco-tin was crushed against his white dress-shirt. Just what was happening, he could not tell, except that he was being very neatly and efficiently assaulted—he was already hard at work as he struck the deck, the other man on top. He got his knee into the side of his assailant, rolled clear, caught a low and bitter oath; then was up and plunging at the other man.

Durant got him in the darkness by sheer luck, back-heeled him, took him over his hip, threw him headlong. The man came down with a crash, and lay motionless.

Startled, angered, puzzled, Durant stood looking around for a moment, then pushed open the swing-door into the cabin passage, and let some light on the scene. At his feet was the tobacco-tin; driven through

one side of it and impaled there, was a heavy sheath-knife. Durant picked it up, extricated the knife with some difficulty, and went to the sprawled figure.

The man was a stranger, small and dark, senseless but apparently unhurt otherwise. No diagrams were necessary, however. Durant perceived that this must be Makoff's traveling companion, and he had certainly been intent on swift murder. Only the opportune tin of tobacco had foiled him.

"You're a fine crook!" reflected Durant, thumbing the knife and finding it razor-edged. "I expect you've worked this little trick before, eh? Well, you're not going to get off cheap this time—"

He glanced around, then knelt above the upturned face of the assassin. He touched the knife-point to the man's brow, and the skin slit apart to the touch; another cross-mark, and Durant rose, grimly satisfied. The watches had just changed, and undoubtedly the man would come to himself before being found.

"And if you want to talk, then talk!" said Durant, and chuckled. "Meantime—"

He turned and left the forward deck, heading for the deck above, then aft. He knew just where to find Boris Makoff.

WHEN he came into the smoking-room, Makoff was just entering from another door, with Lewis and his wife and an American girl. Durant caught the eye of Makoff and made a slight gesture. While the others found a table, Makoff excused himself and came over to Durant.

"Yes? You want to speak with me?"

"Not particularly—I merely want to give you this little souvenir. You might recognize it."

Durant held out the knife. They were standing alone before the wide stone fireplace with its crimson electric display. Makoff took the blade and compressed his lips as he looked at it. Then his gaze leaped up.

"Well?"

"Nothing." And Durant smiled thinly.

"Nothing? But—what's happened?"

"Nothing so far as I'm concerned. Perhaps your friend will differ. Good night."

Leaving the knife with the puzzled Makoff, who quite evidently knew nothing of the attempt at murder, Durant nodded and turned away. He felt certain the Russian was not playing a part. He read the man for a brutal enemy in every sense of the term, but by no means a cowardly one. Makoff had not instigated the attack.

Who, then?

"Something fishy in the air," reflected Durant, taking an empty corner seat. He found his clothes quite uninjured, as he believed, and fell to conjecturing what could be behind the whole matter. The key to the mystery might be Lewis—or it might not. Well, he would know at ten tonight what it was all about. Or would he?

Another twenty minutes; then Durant rose and sauntered out. He thought that one or two people glanced at him curiously as he went out, but not being overly self-conscious, paid no attention.

HE sought the after companion and mounted. On the *Tyrania,* the boat-deck deserved its name, holding only the wireless cubby and some officers' quarters forward, and being devoted largely to deck sports. It was now dark and empty. As Durant sauntered along, a shadow detached itself from a ventilator, and he caught a briefly subtle snatch of perfume.

"Well met, even before the time, monsieur!" came the voice of the baroness. She swung in beside him and took his arm. A sigh escaped her. "I was afraid—I do not know what to say to you. It is very difficult."

"I imagine so," said Durant dryly. "I've had a couple of very pleasant interviews with your charming cousin." He felt the sharp clutch of her fingers at his arm, and her voice came with an edge.

"Boris! What did he say?"

"He leaped at conclusions." Durant laughed with unaffected amusement. "He thinks I'm actually a detective watching Lewis. We made a bargain. He's to leave Lewis alone if I leave him alone. That is, this side of Plymouth."

"Ah! I'm sorry you were drawn into it," she said softly. "It was the first thing that came into my head to say—for your sake. You'll warn Lewis?"

"There seems a good deal to warn him against," said Durant rather bitterly. "He acts like a fool."

It was her turn to laugh. "Lewis? Yes, that's his play—it's the best thing he does! He can play the loud-mouthed tourist to perfection! But tell me something. Just where is your real interest in all this?"

"I'm not sure." Durant was startled and

Durant's life was saved only by the fact that he was holding a tobacco-tin.

amazed by her words. Obviously, she thought he had dropped on to a good deal more than he had really heard. He must keep his wits about him now—he shifted to personalities. "Perhaps because of you."

"Don't be disappointing," she said a trifle coldly. "It was a pretty story you told me about the bank-clerk and the beautiful lady—but such things don't happen."

"So I've found," said Durant brutally. "When the beautiful lady turns out to be one of a gang of crooks, it's apt to wreck illusions."

The shot went home, as he knew by her silence. They paced up the deck together and then turned, before she spoke.

"Because the bank-clerk did have illusions—and because they may be wrecked —would he care to hear the truth?"

DURANT'S nerves quivered warning. The truth! How much of the truth could he expect to hear?

"It would be a very great compliment, Madame la Baronne," he said.

"Irony? That is a little unworthy of you. But the poor Baronne—you should feel sorry for her, instead of hating her! Imagine her married to a worthless rascal by title-hunting parents, a girl too silly to refuse; imagine her husband later dead of sheer excesses, leaving her a fortune, position in the world, everything one can buy—nothing one can want! And then—"

She caught her breath, paused a moment. Then she lifted her head, and in the starlight he saw the glint of tears on her cheek.

"Imagine Boris coming," she said, and her voice held a low, tense note of anger. "Imagine his having proof that her husband was not really her husband—that he had been married in Russia—that her money and position were false, her whole life wrecked and ruined—if Boris Makoff spoke the word! What would you have done?"

Durant forced himself to speak slowly.

"I see. In her place—I suppose—I should have paid."

"I paid." She paused, then broke out fiercely, swiftly. "Paid in money, every month, almost every week! Paid in giving introductions, paid in a dozen ways! It was a terrible choice. I had no escape. I was surrounded by his friends and spies. Then I had to come to America, introduce him there, let him drain my bank account. Well, my bank clerk, there is your beautiful lady—who seemed so happy!"

Again there was silence. Durant found his armor shattered; it was characteristic that he said nothing direct, but went about his business in his own manner.

"Why would Boris so readily make terms with me?" he asked.

"He is afraid of American detectives," she said promptly. "He has built up elaborate plans for the summer's work in Paris; he fears lest a breath of suspicion ruin them all. Despite his way of making a living, he is a gentleman in our Russian sense—"

"If you said 'our American sense' I'd like you better," he intervened bluntly.

"Yes," she returned, accepting the re-

buke. "Well, he knows little of real detectives—he knows the Continental kind, who are different; he is afraid of the brusque, businesslike, brutal American detective of whom he has heard. If he made a bargain with you, he'll keep it."

"I rather think he will," and Durant chuckled. "What sort of evidence does he hold against you? Documents?"

"Yes. I have seen copies of them. I have sent money, much money, to my husband's real wife—what else could I do? She is in Vienna, quite content with things as they are. She was a singer; now she is in the Opéra in Vienna. Her marriage to my husband was a secret one, so she has never taken his name. She, too, bleeds the beautiful lady—"

"Through Boris?" asked Durant quickly.

"Of course. You think I'm a fool for yielding to blackmail? You think—"

"Be quiet," said Durant absently. "Let me get this straight in my mind, now."

IN reality he was sparring for time, fighting to a decision, and was careless how brutal or rough his words might seem. Perhaps she sensed something of this behind his air, for she remained silent. Presently Durant spoke.

"What's the name of this other woman?"

"Elsa Swinger. Her stage name is Elsa Moscova. Some of my money has gone to bring her to Paris in the course of the summer—you know they'll let anybody sing there that can hand over the cash. The government runs the Opéra and the Opéra Comique—"

"I know, I know," said Durant, tucking away the names in his memory. "Hm! Young lady, you're in a bad hole, and if some one doesn't throw you a rope, you'll be in a worse one."

"Oh, I'm not asking for any rope!" she cried, with a tang of anger in her voice. "I'm ripping away the veil of the beautiful lady, so that the bank clerk may see her as she is—"

"Nonsense," intervened Durant calmly. "What'll the end be?"

"That I'll grow desperate enough to defy Boris—let him blacken my name, disgrace me. And he'll do it. He's that kind."

"He looks it. Hm! Well, you'll do no such thing. The bank-clerk is in the game now—"

She halted, and her fingers gripped into his arm.

"No!" she exclaimed vibrantly. "You're not! That's what I had to make clear to you. You don't know the sort of men these Russians are. And they've others associated with them. You are not in the game, understand? I don't want your help, I wont have it! It's absolutely useless. You would be a fool to mingle in such things. You would only ruin me and—"

"You calm down, now, and be sensible," said Durant, imperturbably. "I'm not such a fool as you think me, and I've been so long in France that I'm pretty well on to the hang of things. What you want or don't want, has absolutely nothing to do with it. The thing is—what *I* want!"

She laughed, unexpectedly. "You're queer! You have such confidence—"

"With reason," said Durant, and his voice was grim. "I've been the under dog, I've been knocked about; I can sit on top, now, and see the hidden wheels go around. Well, I'm footloose and free, and have a little money to spend. My health's back. I had a romance, too, but that was long ago—she died."

"Are you so old, then?"

"Twenty-nine—and seven of those years in France."

"And I'm four years younger than you," she said, reflectively. "No, no—we must forget all this! It's just for tonight, my friend."

"You'll learn differently," he replied. "I'm going to play your game for you."

SHE halted again, whirled, faced him. "You must not!" she exclaimed sharply. "I mean it—mean it!"

"And I mean it," said Durant deliberately.

"You don't dare! I—I'll never speak to you, never recognize you, again!"

"That's nothing to me," said Durant, though he lied when he said it. Against his inflexible wall, she broke suddenly, seized his hands, implored him.

"No, no, please! For my sake, you must not! Because I like you a little, because I was proud of your silent admiration, because I always knew you were looking at me when I came in the bank—ah, you must not! Will you not listen to me?"

"No," said Durant calmly. "I am listening only to myself. Today has been a day of surprises, of astounding revelations—why, I do not even know your name! No matter. I have found something to do, and I mean to do it. That's all. Shall we go on walking?"

A couple had appeared, coming along the deck, low-voiced. She took Durant's arm and they walked on. He felt a shiver run through her.

"Cold?"

"Afraid! You have spoken your death-warrant."

"Bah! The thing's settled, so now let's forget it." Durant lighted a cigarette. "About Lewis—"

"It's not settled!" she exclaimed. "I forbid it! Remember—"

"It's settled. Let's not have any hysterics or dramatics; I did think you were above all that."

"I am, usually. That's why Boris finds me of such use."

"And why I shall find you of use, perhaps. Let's get back to the business in hand, for I need some information. This man Lewis—"

They were passing the wireless house. The door opened, and flooded them with light, as the wireless officer came out and headed for the ladder. The woman halted suddenly, drew away, and Durant found her looking down at his dinner jacket.

"What's happened? You've torn the whole side of your coat—no, it's cut—"

Her voice died on a note of sharp interrogation. Durant felt for the rip, and found it was a large one. He laughed a little.

"I'm wondering! I put my mark on a fellow tonight—he'll remember me. He had a knife, and didn't use it well enough. Inefficiency never pays—I'm afraid that's my motto in this world. I'm usually efficient. Sometimes I fall down hard, being human—"

"This man—not Boris?" she exclaimed, shaking his arm to silence him.

"No."

She freed herself abruptly. "There! I told you so. Now—obey me, and keep out of it! It's your only chance. I'll try to save you—keep out of it! Good night."

And she was gone before he could stop her, before he could speak, leaving him standing there alone; gone like a frightened wild thing into the darkness.

DURANT had made his decision, had determined on his course; it remained only to put his scheme into execution. Also —the affair of Lewis. This puzzled him hugely.

On deck next morning he encountered Mrs. Robinson, as she was known aboard, walking with two attentive tourists. The sky-blue eyes dwelt upon him reflectively, without emotion; she nodded in a cool, distant manner as though she barely saw him. Durant smiled and went his way. He knew now she had told him the truth the preceding night—moved by sea-madness, perhaps, or by heaven only knew what!

"Whether she wants me in the game or not," he thought, "she's given me something to do—and I'll do it!"

Later in the morning, he saw Lewis heading for the smoking-room, alone, and promptly collared him.

"Lewis! My name's Durant. Can you spare me ten minutes?"

"Time's free," said Lewis cheerfully. "Want to get in on the Rotary luncheon tomorrow, do you?"

"No, thanks. Come along and order a drink."

"Best thing I do."

Lewis was a small man, with an expansive manner, snappy gray eyes behind black-rimmed spectacles, and a bottomless well of frothy conversation. Durant was wary of him, however, after that one remark the baroness had made, and he began to see the little Rotarian in a new light.

"In business?" demanded Lewis, when they were seated and had ordered. Durant met his gaze, unsmiling.

"In other people's business, mostly," he said, and did not miss the alert change of expression. "Meet me halfway, Lewis, and I can do you a large-sized favor."

"Are you making a proposition?"

"No. I expect you to make one."

"Oh! That's the best thing I do. Financial?"

"I leave the details to you," said Durant, and decided to end the sparring. "You play your part well, but there's been a leak. I play my part equally well—but I'm selling out. I know the whole thing. What's more, I know the whole thing on the other side as well; I can even name the exact day and hour when you'll be quietly put out of the way. Now, if you think I'm worth having as an ally, speak up."

Lewis took off his spectacles and laid them on the table. It was as though he took off his assumed personality with them. His gaze leaped out at Durant, and his voice became charged with a new and dangerous softness.

"Is this a threat, Mr. Durant?"

"Yes. The threat of standing by, of doing nothing, or saying nothing. It is the

most deadly possible threat, under the circumstances."

Lewis nodded slightly, as though he could well comprehend this. He made no pretense at evasion. Durant's words had been calculated to show that evasion would be wasted time.

"I should like a little more definite—er—information to go on, before making any proposition," he said reflectively. "You intimate there is another side?"

"One at least—one very certainly," said Durant. "As to a third side—"

"Ah! That's where I need information," snapped Lewis with sudden energy, and a blaze came into his eyes. "They've double-crossed me?"

Durant smiled. "Want everything for nothing, do you?"

Lewis leaned back and chuckled, as the steward set down their drinks and took Durant's coin. "No flies on you, eh?" he observed. "Here's how!"

"How!" echoed Durant. Then: "Well, think I'm worth a bid?"

"Yes—if I could depend on you. References?"

Durant drew out his wallet. He was playing a game in the dark, but the stake of all crooks was measured by the dollar sign.

"My bank-book," he said, handing it across the table. "You can judge by that whether I'd find it worth while to sell you out—and by your estimate of me personally whether I would do it if I could."

Lewis glanced at the little book, whistled, handed it back. His eyes dwelt curiously upon Durant for a moment.

"Do you want money?"

"Not if you can offer something better. I've a rather large-sized game of my own to play in Paris."

"Hm! Not against the syndicate?" said Lewis shrewdly.

"Against your friend Makoff."

"Oh!" Lewis sat back and stared. "Hell's bells! I begin to see a few things."

"So you think," said Durant dryly.

"What can you guarantee?"

"To save your life."

Lewis put his hand across the table, and Durant met a quick, energetic grip.

"Done! I'll make you two propositions. First, a ten-per-cent split, if you want cash. It should run around ten thousand. Second, I'll be in Paris two months, and as you may know, I have friends there; if your business doesn't touch the syndicate, I'll throw my personal help and my influence into your side of the scales."

"Agreed—Number Two suits me," said Durant. He leaned forward and spoke rapidly. "I'm in Makoff's confidence; he thinks I'm a detective after you. His game is to get you before we reach Plymouth. Others are with him. Suppose you leave that end of it entirely to me, Lewis."

"Very well. I thought this Makoff was a society bird—he played me for a sucker, all right enough! Who's the third party? Somebody split on me, that's sure."

"I'll probably know later," said Durant easily. He saw that Lewis was inwardly hot with excitement. "How do you know I'm not a dick?"

Lewis laughed. "I know every one of 'em by sight, man! Do you think I take any chances in this sized game?"

"Then tell me something, for my own curiosity. Just how do you expect to get away with it on the other side? By help of the syndicate?"

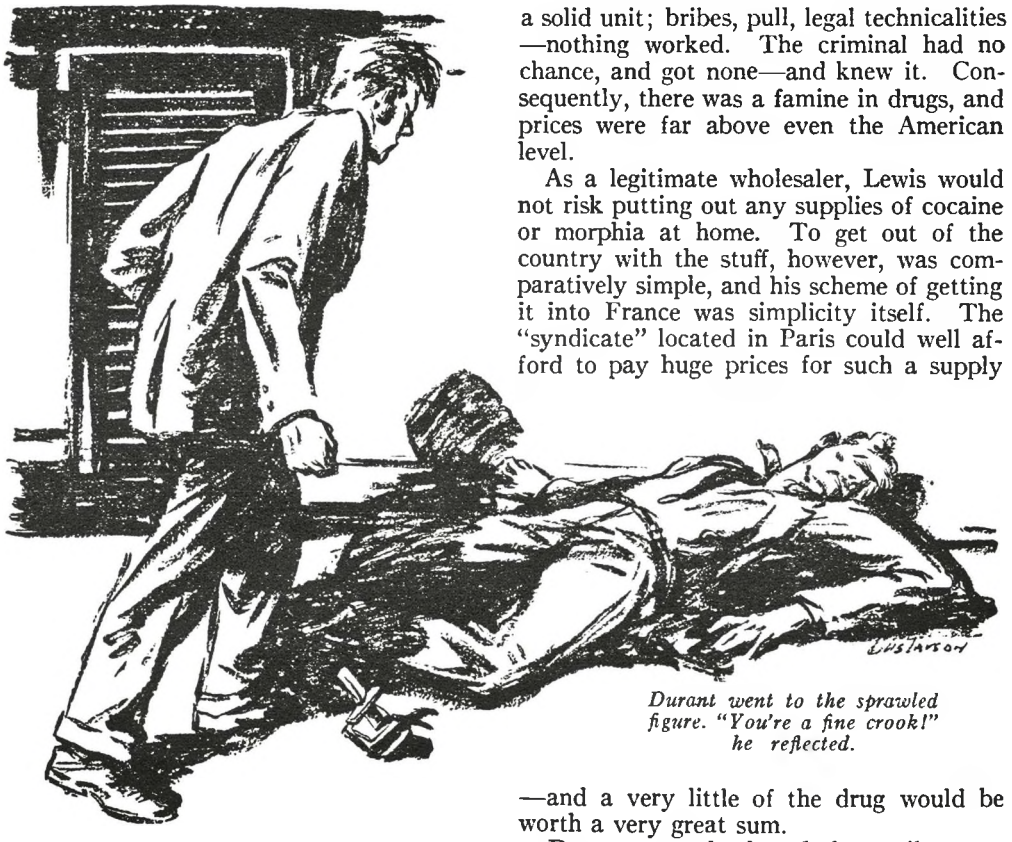
"Partly, not altogether." The sharp eyes of Lewis flitted about the almost deserted smoking-room. "My own standing as a wholesale druggist, for one thing, helps a lot. I've got three suitcases of quinine preparations, samples—and you can't tell the stuff from quinine except by testing it. I come over several times a year, and make it a point to know the Customs men at Plymouth. They're easy; getting through there is no trick at all. Then to London, and straight on to Paris by air. You probably know the arrangement between the air-lines and the Customs at each end? No examination—no passengers bothered, unless they're positively suspected. And of course, I'm not suspected, or I'd have to quit work at once. Two of my suitcases, in case of anything going wrong, have some dutiable stuff. The third carries all the real dust. The others may get examined—it wont. Risk, you see, is reduced to a minimum."

"Yes." Durant nodded, giving no hint of his inward exultation, his startled realization. "You're safe enough so long as no word gets out. I learned of it through Makoff. Well, I'll have more information for you tonight or tomorrow. Meantime—"

"Makoff's coming now," shot out Lewis swiftly.

"All right. Let him see us part on very friendly terms. If he asks, say that I'm a business man you happened to meet—"

"I savvy." Lewis fell into his boisterous



Durant went to the sprawled figure. "You're a fine crook!" he reflected.

manner instantly. He clapped Durant on the shoulder, wrung his hand, spoke loudly. "And don't forget about that Rotary dinner tomorrow! If you don't check in, you're up against it! See you later, old chap." And Durant departed, apparently without seeing Makoff.

THANKS to his general knowledge of things, he had the whole enterprise now at his fingertips. The astounding audacity of it made him marvel.

"And I'm a partner in the deal!" he reflected, staring out at the ocean from the forward rail. "If anyone had predicted this, I'd have called him a liar—or smashed his face. And now I've got to put it through. I've got to! Lewis is the one man whose help in Paris will be invaluable. I've got to put it through—"

Yet he rebelled; his whole nature rebelled against it. Against Makoff, he must fight fire with fire, and the flame-thrower was here in his very hands.

He knew well enough what exceedingly active steps had been taken in France of late, against drug-using. There it was not as in America. There, the organization of justice from detective to supreme court was a solid unit; bribes, pull, legal technicalities —nothing worked. The criminal had no chance, and got none—and knew it. Consequently, there was a famine in drugs, and prices were far above even the American level.

As a legitimate wholesaler, Lewis would not risk putting out any supplies of cocaine or morphia at home. To get out of the country with the stuff, however, was comparatively simple, and his scheme of getting it into France was simplicity itself. The "syndicate" located in Paris could well afford to pay huge prices for such a supply —and a very little of the drug would be worth a very great sum.

Durant paced the deck until noon, grappling with the problem. This alliance with Lewis was vitally necessary to the future; yet, like every decent man, he regarded those engaged in the drug traffic as worse than reptiles, and to find himself pledged to it was repugnant beyond words —it was an impossibility!

He had no need to ask where Mrs. Lewis stood. That good lady was undoubtedly in entire ignorance of her husband's game; she was too obviously rattle-brained to share his secret, too intent upon the quest of shipboard pleasure to have any hidden worries. With her as his companion, Lewis had an excellent foil.

The first luncheon call shrilled out—and as it sounded, Durant found the solution to his question. He stood staring out over the sea, startled; could he manage it? At first flash, it was impossible. Then the means presented itself—he saw broadly how the thing might be arranged. Details would depend on events. A laugh broke from him.

"You seem quite cheerful about it," said a voice at his elbow. He turned to see Makoff standing there, narrow-eyed, hostile, sneering. Instantly Durant caught the man's arm.

"Just the person I wanted to see! Come along into the corner, over here. I want to have a talk with you."

"And I with you," growled Makoff. "What do you mean by carving crosses in people's foreheads, eh?"

Durant chuckled, as they sought the forward corner of the deck, by the ladder going to the well-deck below. Here they were alone, out of the crowd.

"Is he a friend of yours? Then he's learned not to try and put a knife into me. Look here, Makoff, I've something more interesting to talk about. I suppose you know who hired me—the syndicate at the head of things in Paris?"

Makoff stared at him, black eyes suspicious, heavy features gloomy.

"Yes. What about it?"

"Well,"—Durant lighted a cigarette and looked the man in the eye,—"it's occurred to me that I might be making a fool of myself for the amount involved. In the first place, I'm getting little enough for the job. In the second, I want to go to Paris, and couldn't very well do that if I antagonized you and your crowd. In the third, I know all the arrangements that are to be made regarding the stuff, between Plymouth and Paris—I even know how it's packed. Does all this suggest anything to you?"

It did—no doubt of that!

Into the eyes of Makoff leaped that same sharp, startled gleam that had shone in those of Lewis—a light of calculation, of pleased surprise, of swift appraisal.

"You're in earnest?" he returned, scrutinizing Durant closely.

"I'd hardly suggest it unless I were," said the latter dryly.

Suddenly Makoff broke into a laugh, and comprehension filled his gaze.

"So that's it, eh?" he exclaimed, with swift amusement. "What did she say to you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Bah! You've been smitten by those baby-blue eyes of Helena's—they all are! Well, so much the worse for you. What do you want?"

"What am I worth?" said Durant calmly. He was not ill-content that Makoff should jump at conclusions—though they were rather close to the truth, they were not so close as they might have been, fortunately. Makoff now could not see the wood for the trees.

"That depends," said the Russian slowly.

"Not entirely," returned Durant. "The stuff is worth close to a hundred thousand dollars. You don't know half as much about it as I do—in fact, you'll fall into the very trap that's been laid, without my help! And after Plymouth, you'll have no chance whatever of getting the stuff."

"Why not?" snapped Makoff.

"Because a man from Paris will be there to meet Lewis. Now, do you want to bargain?"

Makoff, impressed by the fact that he was facing decision, did not hesitate longer.

"Yes," he said. "Meet me at two o'clock in the smoking-room. But I warn you—I can't be answerable for Paul, after what you've done to him! My promises won't bind him."

Durant shrugged. "Then let him take the consequences, if he's not satisfied. Two, then!"

BORIS MAKOFF had evidently thought things over and reached a definite decision. With him, despite his bluff brutality, decisions were not always definite—there was an oily streak in the man.

"I'll make you a fair proposition," he said flatly, seated across a table from Durant. "Ten per cent if we land the stuff, and a definite place in Paris as long as you want to stay there. I can use you this summer."

"What about protection?" asked Durant. "They'll know I've double-crossed them, and they aren't any gang of angels."

Makoff smiled thinly. "Don't worry—they wont start anything with me! You can count on full protection. But there are two ifs. One—if we don't land the stuff, you get no cash. The other, as you know, is Paul."

"Accepted," said Durant. "Now, about getting the stuff: I've a scheme, provided it looks good to you."

Makoff nodded inquiringly. Durant went on: "You planned to murder Lewis; quite needless, I assure you! He has three sample suitcases, probably in the hold. He would not encumber his cabin with them, and has enough nerve to risk their remaining in the hold—the labels would help him with the Customs, too. One of those suitcases holds the stuff."

"Good!" said Makoff, an avid gleam in his eyes. "That is easily arranged—I can go to the hold in his name, examine the three—"

"And," cut in Durant, "bring the one

which contains all the same preparation! Two have mixed goods, for Customs examination; the third contains what we want, and nothing else. Bring it to my cabin. I'll have everything ready to effect a substitution; in half an hour you can return the suitcase to the hold. How will you get it through the Customs?"

"Bah! I'll take it on to Cherbourg. With American tourists, no examination is made."

"Very well. Let me know in advance; and arrange to keep Lewis occupied—"

"Leave it all to me," said Makoff, with a smile. "I have a little genius along these lines, my friend! It is understood, then. Meantime—ah! Let us seize the opportune moment, for here is Helena—"

In fact, the Baronne had just entered. Makoff rose and beckoned. She came toward them, and the Russian, kissing her hand, presented Durant as though introducing a warm friend.

"Charming madame, allow me to present my associate and companion, M. Durant! You did not know they had idealists in America? But it is true, I assure you. M. Durant has an ideal, and for its sake he has sacrificed certain scruples and is to be associated with me in business, in Paris. I trust that we shall see much of him there. Will you permit me to leave you in his company for the moment? *A bientot,* dear cousin—"

And Makoff swung off, with a wink and a smile at Durant, who knew that he was being thus rewarded, in the Russian's opinion. He met the inquiring gaze of the baroness, and laughed.

"Poor Boris! He leaped to the notion that I was infatuated with you and therefore wished to join his little group of friends. Come, Helen, sit down! Isn't it refreshing to hear yourself called Helen once more, after some years of Helena?"

AS though against her will, she smiled a little, but shook her head.

"Are you so blind?" she said, regarding him gravely. "I've told you it was impossible—"

"And I've proved that it wasn't," he said cheerfully. "Young lady, brace up! I've secured a powerful alliance for our work in Paris. I've become a partner of Lewis. I've become a member of your pleasant cousin's gang. And all since our little talk! That, I believe, is fast work."

"It's dangerous work," she said, her blue eyes widening. "But—do you mean that you will help Lewis?"

"And become a dope-handler? Not much. Leave it to me. Now, aren't you going to be a little agreeable—"

"I am not!" she exclaimed. "I warned you—I told you not to be so mad! You'll only make things worse for me, and destroy yourself. Stop now, before it's too late!"

Turning, she departed abruptly. Durant gazed after her, then shrugged.

"With a little care, the game's won," he reflected. "But it takes care! Now, here's my chance to destroy Makoff, wipe him out at one crack—but it would gain me nothing. What I'm after is to save Helen, get her out of his clutches; and I can't do that by putting him away. No! All I can do now is to play out this little comedy, and look forward to Paris; and that's going to be quite enough of a job. I have to keep in with Makoff, keep in with Lewis, play both ends against the middle—and not make myself a drug-handler. Hm!"

That evening he ran into Lewis, who promptly dragged him off to the stern, on the lower deck, which was quite deserted. Lewis eagerly demanded to know who had given away his game to Makoff.

"I didn't dare try to find out," said Durant. "It was somebody at the Paris end. Makoff wants to pinch the stuff himself and take it. He may manage it—I can't answer for that. All I guarantee, remember, is to save your life. By the way, I'm now a member of Makoff's organization. It's very handy."

Lewis swore softly. "I have half a notion that you're double-crossing me, Durant!"

"Suit yourself. You'd think again if you saw the chap with Makoff—I think Paul is his name. Probably a Russian. He nearly did for me with a knife, and I marked him for life. He'll try again before we reach Plymouth, I imagine."

Lewis whistled. "And they're after me?"

"Were. I've pointed out they'd be fools to face a murder charge—it'd mean English courts, you know. Wouldn't matter much if this were an American ship, but none of these birds take any chances with British justice."

"True enough." And Lewis chuckled. "Well, watch yourself! See you later."

FOR the next day or two, Durant rather kept to himself. He encountered the Baronne several times, but her air was

distant, and he made no endeavor to win her over, realizing that she was thinking more of him than of herself in the whole matter. Then, on Saturday, came abrupt action.

That night was being held the fancy-dress ball of the voyage. The whole ship was in commotion; costumes were being prepared, wind-curtains being stretched along the deck, and all hands busy. When the steward brought a note, Durant sensed instantly that Makoff was seizing the opportunity. The note read:

Three sharp your cabin. Be there. B. M.

Durant thoughtfully tore up the missive. He had a two-berth cabin to himself, had secured a large amount of baking soda from the dining steward, and was ready enough for what might happen—yet anything might happen! There was the danger. One detail amiss would bring the whole structure crashing down, unless handled right. And at three this afternoon—well, Makoff was sharp enough to seize the right time, and should put the deal through in good shape.

If Durant was entirely calm, others were not. He was leaving the dining-room after luncheon when, on the stairs, the voice of the Baronne reached him. He halted, saw her there at his side, and offered his arm. She accepted, smiling, but when they were up a few steps, her hand gripped his arm hard.

"You must get out of it!" she said rapidly in French. "Do you understand? Anything may happen—anything! Paul is not to be trusted. He has been using heroin—he is a madman! He attacked you before, because Boris had been cursing you—"

"My dear girl," said Durant composedly, "do you always get so excited?"

"Oh!" She drew away a little. "Don't you realize—it's for your sake—"

"Thank you. Of course I do, Helen." He laughed, urged her up the stairs. "But sit back and look on at the game, now! Give me a chance. You'll see I'm not a bad player. Do your part, and leave the rest to me. One of these days we'll be working together in Paris, on the biggest game of all for you—the game of freedom! Meantime, calm down and trust to me. *Au revoir!*"

So, at the top of the stairs, he left her swiftly, lest she go into further protest. But he did not neglect her warning. Paul was a dope-fiend, then! That explained a good deal.

AT two-thirty, Durant was esconced in a corner of the smoking-room. In another corner, Lewis and his wife, another man, and Baroness Glincka were enjoying an enthusiastic and heated bridge game. Makoff was not in evidence. Another twenty minutes, and Durant departed to his own cabin.

He was passing the purser's cubby when that officer hailed him.

"I say, Mr. Durant! Any trouble with those chaps we were speaking of the other day? I hear one of them's been keeping to his cabin with a bandaged face—eh?"

Durant nodded. "Rather a bad sort, to tell you the truth. Drug-fiend. Nothing to make any trouble about, though—I took care of him, thanks."

He laughed and passed on, but the incident was destined to bear fruit.

Indeed, as he waited in his cabin, it suddenly bulked large, yet he could not fit it quite into the puzzle. Then, abruptly, came a knock at his door, which was pushed open, and a man entered.

It was the man Paul. He was a smallish, slender man with dead-white features and black mustache and eyes; the still unhealed scar on his forehead stood out vividly. He set down a strapped suitcase, and glared at Durant with vicious eyes.

"I'll come back for it in fifteen minutes," he said; then a snarl burst from him, and he volleyed out a string of oaths in French. "You species of animal! When this is over I'll attend to you, me!"

He slid out and slammed the door viciously.

Durant glanced at his watch, slipped the door-bolt, jerked the suitcase to his bunk, and fell to work. In the lock was a key, which Makoff must have left there—the Russian was clearly provided against all contingencies. When one plays for a hundred-thousand-dollar stake, details are looked after.

Opening up the suitcase, Durant found it carefully packed with small boxes wrapped in oiled silk. Each little wooden box was marked with similar labels:

G. C. Lewis Wholesale Drug Co.
Quinalid Cold Preventative
Keep Dry.

Durant moved with expedition. In ten minutes he had emptied the cocaine into the baking-soda boxes, substituting the soda for the forbidden drug. Then, leaving the suitcase ready to close, he slipped from his cabin and hurried to the purser's cubby. That gentleman was just closing up for the day, but greeted Durant with a smile.

"What'll you have?"

"Help," said Durant. "The chap you spoke of just now will be in my cabin in about three minutes, and I want to give him the scare of his life. Come around and knock at the door, and say you're making a search for drugs—understand? I believe he's loaded down with cocaine."

"Man, that's not my business!" the purser objected.

"Mine either, except that we'll have some fun with the rascal. Will you do it?"

"Right-ho. Three minutes!"

Durant returned to the cabin, and saw Paul approaching down the corridor as he did so. He darted in and began to close the suitcase. A moment later, the Russian entered and then bolted the door.

"Ready?"

"All but," said Durant, awkwardly buckling the straps of the suitcase.

"What were you doing at the purser's office?" demanded Paul in a low voice, his scowling gaze fastened on Durant. The latter glanced up.

"What's it to you?"

"Sacred name of a dog! One of us, are you? Not likely! Well, try any tricks and you'll get it a bit sooner, that's all. I'll attend to you in good time—"

"Don't be a fool," snapped Durant. "Here's the suitcase. Here," and he pointed to the pile of baking-soda boxes, "is the other stuff. What's to be done with it?"

"He's coming for it," snarled Paul. "Should have been here now—I'm to get the suitcase back. All right."

The purser hurtled into them and grappled for Paul.

He came forward, then whirled around. A loud, authoritative rap hammered the door. "Who's there?" demanded Durant.

"Open!" said the purser's voice. "I hear you've got some dope in there and you'll have to submit to search—open up, now!"

The bolted door shook under heavy pressure. Paul stared, open-mouthed—and Durant's fist knocked him sprawling in a limp heap against the door.

Swiftly, Durant swung open his port, already unscrewed. As the purser shook the door, he flung out the packets of cocaine in a swift stream. The last gone, he stepped to the door, unbolted it—

Paul had him then, rising suddenly, viciously, pistol darting out, spouting flame, gripping for Durant's throat as he fired. Just a fraction of a second—Durant thrust the arm aside with his own, deflecting the bullet; then he was flung backward. The purser, hurling himself against the now unbolted door, sent both men staggering, hurtled into them, grappled for Paul.

The pistol spoke again, a muffled report this time, as the three crashed down in one tangled heap. Durant, cursing his ill luck

in failing to knock Paul clear out with that one blow, wrenched clear, leaped up. He saw the purser struggling under the limp, sagging body of Paul, saw Makoff standing in the open doorway, saw the passage outside filling with excited passengers and stewards. Like a flash, he was at the door.

"Quick!" he said to Makoff. "Write Paul's criminal record and name—get it to me!"

Then he slammed and bolted the door, just as the purser gained his feet.

"A damned ruddy cockeyed joke, that's what it is now!" said the purser, when he had turned over the body on the floor. "Shot himself, eh? Now we're in for it, old son! Jolly well in for it, blast the luck! Explaining no end, and the Old Man to do it to—blasted cockeyed joke, I call it!"

Durant stooped. Paul had shot himself, certainly by accident in falling, from throat to brain—had died instantly. Exploring the man's waistcoat, Durant half produced a morocco-cased hypodermic outfit, then pushed it back and rose.

"I'm sorry," he said coolly.

"Damme if you look it," said the purser, listening to the growing uproar outside.

"Well, I didn't expect this," observed Durant. "As it's turned out, however, it's not so bad—"

"You'll change your mind quick enough," snapped the purser. "There's the Old Man now—blast it! He'll raise hell."

The confusion outside quieted. A sharp, firm rap at the door. Durant opened, and the Captain stepped into the cabin. His gaze swept from the body on the floor to the purser. "Well?" he said. "What's it mean, Tommy?"

"It's entirely up to me to explain, Captain," said Durant. The skipper turned, looked at him, met his gaze for a moment.

"We haven't room to turn around here—can we go to a quiet place? I'll give you a statement covering the case. If you'll be good enough to have the ship's doctor verify the cause of death, and examine this man with particular attention to the fact that he's a dope-fiend, I think you'll be quickly satisfied."

"Right. We'll go to your office, Tommy," said the Captain. "Here's the doctor now."

ANOTHER rap. The doctor entered, was instructed, and the skipper led the way from the room. Outside, the crowd was being cleared from the passage by stewards. Durant's gaze swept around anxiously—if Makoff failed him, all was lost.

An instant later, they passed the Russian in the passage. Brushing by, Durant felt a paper thrust into his hand. He halted.

"Captain! Will you ask this gentleman to accompany us?"

Makoff assented to the request at once, and Durant breathed more freely. The one great danger now was that suitcase in his lower bunk—it must be got rid of without a moment's delay. The four men came to the purser's office, entered by the side door, and found a stenographer at work. The Captain curtly ordered him to remain and prepare to take down statements.

Durant, as he took a chair, calmly inspected the paper in his hand, then glanced at Makoff.

"May I ask, sir," he said, "whether you occupied Cabin 82 A, with a man named Dobreff?"

"I believe that is his name," said Makoff. "He is a stranger to me."

Durant smiled. The Russian was taking no chances, evidently.

"You know nothing of him, then?"

"Nothing."

"That's all, then. Thank you very much indeed! By the way, I got a suitcase from the hold—it's in my bunk. Will you be good enough to have it taken back for me? I'll keep that bridge engagement this evening during the dance. Sorry to have bothered you, Mr. Makoff."

Makoff departed. The Captain locked the door, then looked at Durant.

"What's all this, sir?"

"Ready?" Durant glanced at the stenographer, who nodded. "My name is Ralph Durant, Cabin 8A; American. I have no occupation, except that of private detective, largely for my own amusement; what you would call in England a criminal investigator. In Cabin 82A on this ship was a man named Paul Dobreff. Purser, look up his nationality, will you? I might say that Dobreff is known to the police in Paris as Paul Mirkovitch and has twice served sentences—once for assault, once as a drug-peddler. He is also a drug-fiend."

The purser, who had been going through his sheets, looked up.

"Paul Dobreff, age 38. Born a Russian, traveling under French papers," he said curtly.

"Some days ago Dobreff, whom I suspected of annoying a lady aboard, took my advice badly," pursued Durant. "When he

learned that I knew his real character, he went for me with a knife and cut my dinner-jacket. I had it repaired by the ship's tailor, who can probably substantiate this item. I knocked Dobreff about a bit, and he's kept his cabin since—in fact, I cut his face rather badly. I spoke to the purser about it, I think."

"Correct," said the purser, staring hard. "No details, though."

Durant shrugged. "What need? Well, Dobreff said today he wanted to see me at three o'clock, and acted rather ugly. I had threatened to turn him over to the police at Plymouth. So I asked the purser to knock at my door and pretend he was searching for drugs—meaning to give the man a thorough fright. When the purser did so, Dobreff hauled out a pistol and went for me—he shot once, then the purser broke in, all three of us grappled, and in falling Dobreff shot himself. That's the case, Captain."

"Hm!" The Captain lit a cigarette and looked at the purser. "What about it?"

"Correct, sir," said the purser. "Only, I didn't know Mr. Durant was a 'tec—he put it up to me as a joke."

"To avoid trouble if possible," put in Durant.

"Otherwise, he's right enough, sir. There was a shot before I entered. When I came in, Mr. Durant was locked with Dobreff, who held a pistol. The second shot was fired as all three of us struck the floor."

A rap at the door. The ship's doctor came in, with a parcel. He opened it silently and displayed the hypodermic outfit, a small morocco case containing a white powder, a large sheath-knife, and a pistol.

"Cocaine," he said, touching the case. "Hypodermic. Pistol fired twice. The man was under the influence of the drug—a confirmed addict. From the condition of the wound and direction of the bullet, he doubtless shot himself; the pistol was firmly gripped in his hand."

"Very good." The Captain stood up. "Mr. Durant, will you be good enough to come to my cabin in an hour's time? We'll want your signature; may need other statements later."

"I'm entirely at your disposal, Captain," said Durant, and departed. Upon reaching his cabin, he found the suitcase gone.

"WHAT the devil happened?" asked Lewis. "All sorts of stories flying around—suicide, attempted robbery, murder, whatnot! Give me the low-down, Durant."

Durant had just dropped into a seat opposite the other. The first dinner call had sounded, and the smoking-room was nearly deserted.

"Well,"—and Durant smiled,—"the man was a crook of the first water—a bad 'un! The play was to be made for your shipment today or tonight; I was to take part in it. When I realized there was no other way out of it—well, I carried out my contract with you."

"What!" Lewis stared. "You—croaked him?"

Durant shrugged. "The evidence shows that he committed suicide. They'll keep an eye on his roommate, Makoff—who wont dare attempt a thing. I've scraped through very well. Your life is in no more danger. My guarantee is made good. Satisfied?"

Lewis set down his glass and rose. "Durant, you're a wonder! Yes, I'm satisfied. Here's Makoff now, with that woman he's always hanging around. Are you safe with him?"

Durant glanced at Makoff and Helena, coming toward them across the table-scattered room.

"For the moment, yes," he responded, and rose to meet the others. "You'll join us in a drink? Sit down, Lewis, don't rush—"

"Must find my wife and dress," demurred Lewis. "Hello, folks! Sorry to miss the chance at liquor, but we'll make up for it tonight. See you later, eh? Right!"

He breezed away. The Baronne took the chair Durant held for her. Makoff gave the steward an order, then sat down and fastened his dark gaze on Durant.

"Well? Speak plainly. What happened?"

"We lost," said Durant, conscious that the woman was staring hard at him, her blue eyes very anxious. "Lucky to scrape through at all, Makoff. You made a terrible mistake in not bringing that suitcase yourself. It was fatal to send Paul with it."

"Did you kill him?" snapped Makoff, an ugly note in his voice.

"No. He went off his head—wild! He pulled a gun on me, and shot. The purser was going by, came in, helped grapple with him. We went down in a pile, and Paul shot himself. Now," and Durant met the dark, suspicious eyes with steady gaze, "get the idea out of your head that I'm double-crossing you, Makoff! I can take you

straight to the Captain if you like, or the ship's doctor, and he'll substantiate that the death was accidental suicide."

"I've already asked the doctor," said Makoff, and relaxed in his chair. "You're clear. But where's the stuff?"

"In the sea."

"What?" The Russian sat bolt upright. "You're joking?"

"Not a bit of it. With those boxes of stuff lying there, and an investigation—why, it would be folly! I dumped them out the port—my own money with yours."

Makoff sat back, speechless, suspicious, struck by consternation. The steward set down the ordered drinks, and Durant paid. Then, when the man had gone, he pushed a key across the table to Makoff.

"My cabin key. Go down now, if you like, and look. That amount of stuff couldn't be hidden. I've only cabin luggage. Satisfy yourself, if you doubt me."

With an effort, Boris Makoff pulled himself together, reached out for his drink, downed it at a gulp.

"Name of a name of a blue!" he ejaculated. "No need; you're not lying. A hundred thousand dollars dumped into the ocean! This makes me sick. What are you laughing about, you!"

Durant chuckled. "Why, I was wondering what Lewis would say when he turns over the stuff to his syndicate—and finds it's all baking soda! I can see the humorous side of things."

"I can't. Not when it's cost me a hundred thousand dollars!" growled Makoff, and rose. "Sacred name of a dog—dumped into the ocean! And Paul dead!"

"I'm here to take his place," said Durant, and smiled. "You're the bungler, for sending him to me when you knew he was so uncertain! I flatter myself that I've done pretty well."

"Yes," said Makoff, with a nod. "Well enough—I grant you it was good work to handle those ship's officers. Me, I'm off to dress. Excuse me, madame. I have no heart for dancing tonight—sacred name of a dog! Dumped into the ocean!"

He departed, muttering to himself. Durant looked after him, then turned and met the sky-blue eyes of the Baronne fastened upon him, half in wonder, half in fear. He lifted his glass.

"You're satisfied, Helen? Then—here's to Paris!"

A smile broke in her eyes, and the glasses touched.

Lotor the Bandit

Here's a fine wilderness excursion for you by the naturalist author of "The King Bull" and "Clownface, Fighting Fool."

A QUIET, awe-inspiring as the interior of a vacant cathedral, filled the far-vaulting canopy of tropic-like verdure along the ancient Smoky Hill where it flowed majestically eastward to some distant tributary of the Father of Waters. A few days previously, a mighty cloudburst had literally denuded the shores of all animal and most plant life. Even many who were expert swimmers and divers were smothered in their dens by the deluge; and starvation ran riot in the wake of the watery avalanche—one of inscrutable Nature's ways of providing room for expansion.

Now a flinty boulder, the size of a bushel basket, long undermined by incessant though imperceptible erosion, tumbled unexpectedly down the steep incline and dived into the water with a loud splash.

At the sound, a least bittern, wading fearlessly in a bed of yawning mussels, spearing excitable little waterdogs, leaped into the air after three long strides and one barbaric *yarrawp* and flapped laboriously upriver. An overwrought red squirrel ran reluctantly away through the treetops, chattering a blatant remonstrance to all in hearing. Then the profound hush of suspense again held sway.

But almost immediately a plainly audible scratching echoed from the upper branches of an aged elm, where it leaned at a perilous angle over the river. And presently a stout form like a diminutive bear backed down the trunk, glancing nervously at the earth over one shoulder

By DAVID BAXTER

and the other, the custom of all relatives of the bear when descending a tree.

At the base, the stocky figure paused to survey the scene with lively interest a moment before walking gingerly but confidently out upon a pebbly beach, where the shadowy outline took the definite shape of an unusually robust raccoon wearing an exceedingly black mask or patch across his eyes—a flimsy disguise not entirely unlike the mask of a conventional road-agent or bank-robber.

Holding his bushy white-ringed tail straight out behind, he moved with a bruin-like shuffle along the ledge, sniffing right and left with his grain-leather nose, his wide-set eyes, dark twin pools, scanning every foot of the surroundings, the powerful digits of all four feet analyzing each pebble and fragment of drift with which they came in contact.

Here was *Procyon Lotor* the bandit—he of the insatiable curiosity, who often allowed his inquiring disposition to run away with his uncommon intelligence. In fact, it was his abnormal curiosity that had brought him scuttling down out of the elm tree, where he had drowsed all day in a hollow limb formerly occupied by his mate and five offspring; he wanted to see for himself what had caused the small tumult that had aroused him.

Keen of scent, acute of hearing, sharp of vision, and above all, possessing a sort of mutable mind which permitted him to profit by experience, this husky fellow was feared more for his buccaneering propensities than for his occasional killings. He must have been aware of the terror enshrouding the district; like other inhabitants, he must have received the message through the same channels of animal telepathy. Yet he displayed not the slightest fear as he strolled along in plain sight of all night-visioned folk.

Presently a banded brown moccasin, unusually short for its girth, unusually graceful for its length, swam out from the other bank, saw the furry robber, tacked swiftly and passed on up the river with as little effort against the current as if it had been gliding on oiled glass, head high, watch-jewel eyes glittering cold defiance, forked tongue flickering noiseless mockery.

Lotor gave no heed to the sinister swimmer, save to mark its sinuous course out the corner of his eye as he continued to explore every nook and cranny of the beach, feeling and smelling with unabated eagerness. Then, a minute or so after the passing of the snake, a long-drawn squeak of mortal fear pierced the darkness, followed quickly by another and yet another, each cry telling the hopelessness of some unfortunate sufferer.

THE fur-clad bandit snapped to attention like a well-trained soldier. His eyes glistened with a desire to know. His motto being to run and see, he set off at a graceless gallop in the direction of that plaintive call for help.

Meanwhile the tipping crescent moon soared higher over the adjacent plains, slanting a clear radiance through openings in the foliage.

A hundred paces upriver, where a previous flood stage had hewn a tilting shelf of cracked gumbo an inch above low water, a monster frog squatted in gross indulgence, gazing sleepily through a sparse growth of cattails, too fat to maintain his usual alertness, too indolent to seek a safer ledge; sufficient unto himself, he inherited the folly of those thus accursed.

Suddenly his protruding eyes opened wide in quick amaze which turned to deathly fright as he realized too late what was upon him. Before he could hurl his unwieldy bulk into the river, the cambric-needle fangs of the brown moccasin closed over his head with the stroke of a gopher-trap. Whining with pain and fear, he kicked and lunged in utter futility.

Back and forth along the ledge the two struggled, savagely, bitterly. The snake, having tackled more than he bargained for, could neither swallow nor disgorge.

Lotor the bandit parted a fringe of saw-grass to look curiously down at the baffled moccasin. The frog was still moaning weakly, though he had almost stopped struggling. Feet foremost, the coon slid down a sharp incline, bounced erect, seized the snake by the nape and twisted the stupefied frog out of his living snare.

With a mighty surge, fear now replacing rage, the frantic serpent freed himself from the black hands of Lotor and swished into the water, a flexible arrow shot from an unseen bow.

Mildly vexed, Lotor eyed the widening ripples a moment, then calmly proceeded to wash his ill-gotten plunder by dousing it in the river, scrubbing vigorously with either hand; he always washed his food if water were handy; if not, he scoured it on his breast hair.

Apparently past resistance, the green-coated amphibian bulged surprisingly, wriggled spasmodically and was gone, swimming madly before his hinder legs had even touched the water! The coon sat back on his haunches and stared at each of his empty palms. Then he washed them as unconcernedly as if nothing had happened; he listened intently, cocking his broad, sharp-muzzled head to each side with bird-like inquisitiveness. But only the treble gurgle of the restless current answered his unspoken inquiry.

LOTOR scrutinized a jungle of bulrushes opposite; he measured the heights of trees around him; he studied the water stream as far as he could see, but that was in the direction of the cloudburst; he found the entire prospect uninviting. Nothing moved but discarded leaves occasionally drifting down to alight with a faint hiss as they struck the water.

Scratching his head thoughtfully, turning his masked face upstream, he finally shuffled along in that direction, leaving behind a pattern of small-bear tracks in the mud. The only creature in sight in all that crooked corridor of trees, despite his muscular build and the suggestive mask, he seemed quite frail and friendless.

Having fully catalogued the water-level, he climbed to the first terrace, hand over hand, up the runner of a woodbine, in a four-handed monkey fashion. Here a narrow path conformed closely to the reverses of the Smoky Hill, sometimes virtually hanging over the water, often fenced off by a palisade of rank grass and weeds. Nothing escaped the bandit's critical attention; everything was suited to his investigation. Once his delving fingers uncovered a great rhinoceros beetle crouching in fancied security beneath a new catalpa leaf; a quick rolling between flattened palms soon caused the huge bug's shell-wings and meatless legs to fly in all directions, while Lotor sat down in his favorite posture, lolling back against a tree.

Later, soft footfalls in the path ahead foretold the approach of some lone wayfarer; what a chance for a lone-hand hold-up!

Lotor turned an ear and harkened to the padding steps. Then quickly shifting to the other side of the tree, he waited. And directly, loping around a curve, there came a timid cottontail carrying a portion of breadroot in its teeth.

Lotor the bandit hopped out into the middle of the path, pounded the ground furiously with both front feet, growling doggishly the while. Which was enough for the scared rabbit, who dropped the root and scurried back around the bend.

It was a typical hold-up, although the robber merely sniffed the prize in disdain and wandered on up the trail.

Shortly he stopped to cogitate the chattering protests of a red squirrel, which came to him from beyond the stream—and which, in a few moments, changed to a wild cry of despair. Something dreadful had happened to that squirrel! Carefully parting the grass screen with both hands, Lotor gazed long and earnestly over the

river but could visualize nothing to warrant going over just then.

PERHAPS an eighth of a mile farther up, an impatient freshet had, sometime before, mowed a disastrous swath athwart a small peninsula. Here the bandit climbed atop the barkless skeleton of a prostrate black walnut, just to obtain a view from that elevation, just to see!

A flat silt-bed next invited inspection, and so he scrambled down to poke around the bits of drift and miniature dunes. A number of flat rocks, an inch or so under water, caught his roving eye. From the down-current side he waded carefully out. Walking on his hinder legs, stepping high to prevent roiling the mud, he approached the first rock, extending his arms downward after the manner of a hump-shouldered old man trying to corner some small animal. Deftly tilting the rock to grab quickly beneath it, he brought forth a huge, slapping crawfish armed with ugly clutching pincers—which he instantly rolled between his palms to remove the objectionable legs before splitting the shell and picking the tender white flesh.

Circling wide each time, the fisher bandit looted four more rocks before his craving for this sort of food was appeased. Then he soberly wet his hands and mopped his bewhiskered face.

Later, coming to a place where the bank settled to a longer slope and the pathway ascended to the second terrace, Lotor espied a smooth-shell snapper-turtle standing erect and greedily reaching for the leathery leaves of an overhanging plant. He rushed forward, hissing and spitting like a peevish house-cat; but with unbelievable dexterity for a creature so immobile, the snapper flung backward into the stream and disappeared, scarcely a ripple indicating the spot.

THE robbery had failed, but the bandit was not one to long mourn failure. Gesturing manlike indifference, he set about finding more tractable dupes. Up the steep grade, through a thicket of dogwood to the open country skirting the river, he toddled with the awkward gait of a cub grizzly.

Outside, the earth lay serenely beautiful in its solitude. And so infinitely peaceful was this far-flung flat world that the grayish-brown quadruped paused inert at the edge of it to contemplate the softened grandeur awhile before emerging from the shadows.

Presently his sensitive faculties detected again that pleasant presence, that perfume of edible substance, which had beckoned to him from the land of short grass more than once in the last few days. And now, as before, the scent was warm, tempting —aye, compelling. But it was seldom that he ventured out into the uncovered spaces: it was so endless in the wan moonlight—hazardous, too, perhaps, for one could be seen so far.

But at last his innate curiosity overcame his ordinarily sound judgment; he moved softly out of the trees onto the illimitable mat of buffalo sod, his quivering nose still glued to that invisible thread of live scent. Ten paces—twenty—then he crouched.

That haughty drummer of the plains, a male grouse, in a mottled attire of brown and blue-red plumage, stood statuesque in the pale light, a frozen image of ineffable pride. Proud in actuality was this noble cock in his war-bonnet of evanescent hues, a fitting sentinel for the demure hen and her nest of pearly eggs so securely hidden in a circular clump of Indian tobacco-weeds.

The bandit weighed his chances for roguery: her head tucked snugly under one speckled wing, the prairie hen slept with supreme confidence in her mate's vigilance; something out farther, out where sporadic bunch-grass threw off inky shadows, something had caught the male's attention, befuddled his keen alertness momentarily, causing him to forget the nearer source of danger.

Stealthily the four-handed outlaw advanced, step by step, until within no more than a yard of the slumberer. Then a whirlwind rush, a spluttering cackle, short but powerful wings beating frenetically, and the deafening rumble of departing pinions. Bounding through the ring of weeds just as the hen launched a roaring ascent, Lotor had clasped her in a tight embrace. He danced a space in high glee at the completeness of the maneuver, in spite of the fact that she nearly carried him off his feet! He enjoyed frightening his victims fully as much as the booty—in proof of which he soon permitted the frantic fowl to follow her deserting consort where he could yet be heard thundering over the dusky landscape.

Turning his attention to the grass-lined

nest, the raccoon soon became so intent on a feast of eggs that he failed to note the approach of his worst foe, a gaunt, buff-gray coyote, a surly villain who sneaked noiselessly from an ambush of needle-grass where he had been stalking the prairie chickens for the last half-hour. Disgruntled and in a savage humor, he was bent on punishing the one who had dared to interfere with his plans. Who did a thing like that must fight!

But the jocund bandit was also a fighter. He stood his ground, coarse back-hair bristling, tail puffing, eyes glinting fire, exchanging angry glance for angry glance with the medicine dog. He held no fear, apparently, for he leisurely licked the last vestige of egg from his chops, although it was hard to see how he expected to come off anything but second in an affray with an animal three times his size.

His gaunt antagonist sneered openly, his pale yellow orbs glowing like blown coals, his guttural growl boding ill for the bandit. But Lotor could snarl menacingly too. Hissing the hate of a viper, spitting the scorn of a wildcat, he pranced forward.

The coyote leaped, intending to fasten his tusks in the neck of his opponent. But the 'coon was too smart and too nimble: he ducked under the clicking ivories; his claws seized the larger beast by the ears and he insinuated himself between the long front legs! Here he clung burrlike while he cut the coyote's chest to ribbons with his non-retractile hinder claws. To the shaggy ears he clung during the entire battle.

It was as pretty an exhibition of infighting as the river folk had ever witnessed. And when at last the coyote was too exhausted to continue, the raccoon released him and coolly sat down to cleanse himself of blood not his own.

Now the booming voice of a great horned owl echoed down the river like the distant gong of a giant clock striking the hour of two: *"Whoooooo! Whoooooo!"* A querulous whippoorwill sent back an eerie query: "Why whip?" And closer at hand came the startling *"Wheee"* of a departing screech owl.

Perhaps an hour afterward Lotor the bandit sprawled upon a huge shoulder of the lower terrace overlooking the slow-rolling current. Well fed and entirely satisfied with the world in general, he stretched flat on his stomach, his forelegs straight out in front, his hindlegs straight back, a position completely characteristic of his tribe. So rapt his gaze, it was almost as though his brain were striving to break through a veil that barred him from actual thought.

JUST then, across the river, a slender catlike figure came out of the bushes and ran with a swift undulating movement up the sloping trunk of a fallen locust. Into the secretive greenery overhead it faded as silently as it came. There was a serpentine sameness to the size of neck, body and head. The pink shoebutton eyes, placed close to the tip of its nose, gave to the pointed face a cast of crafty cruelty quite repellant. Indeed, so weirdly constructed was this ominous creature, that its lank arching body would pass through any aperture that would admit its head.

Up to nearly this hour, from the close of day, the velvet-clad cutthroat weasel had been putting into effect such a reign of terror as the denizens of that sector had never before experienced.

He passed through the district like death itself, chilling all of the night's activities by his odious presence. And well might the Smoky folk be fearful, for this assassin killed almost solely for the taste of fresh blood; he cared little for the blood, even less for meat; to kill was the dominant urge.

When he ran with that evil, rippling movement up the dead tree, opposite where Lotor had robbed the moccasin, he turned his ratty eyes neither right nor left; he was then trailing a fresh scent, which had just drifted down from an immense cluster of dry leaves in a three-way crotch of an oak tree's sturdy branches.

The four inmates of this crude domicile were stirring in restive impatience, and this very restlessness was their undoing, since it amplified a hundredfold the scent that had betrayed them.

Up the furrowed bark went the weasel in a series of queer, jerky leaps, higher and higher, around and around the trunk in a winding circle, pausing only in a near crotch to sniff tentatively at the mass of leaves.

The eldest squirrel, who had been on guard at the entrance, burst from the nest in wild alarm and raced to the end of a bending limb, at the same time scolding vociferously in an endeavor to lead the weasel astray. But the weasel was as cunning as he was murderous; he paid no attention to the threadbare subterfuge. Plung-

ing through the small tunneled opening in the leafy house, he dispatched the whole family with a single rip at the neck artery of each member.

By uniting the prowess of all, the family might have escaped, might easily have slain the ghostly demon. Had they not been so paralyzed with fright, they could have at least put up a stiff resistance. As it was, they fought back weakly, one at a time, and thereby succumbed to the inevitable.

At the farthest end of the swaying limb the older squirrel hopped up and down, barking in impotent hostility, trying to put on a bold front but ever ready to flee as soon as the bloodstained despoiler came out. He turned and fled down the sagging limb. He leaped outward and downward in a fearless spread-eagle dive for the drooping branches of a neighboring tree—up which he flashed, vainly hoping he had outwitted his pursuer!

The weasel's larger cousin, the pine marten, would have duplicated the hazardous jump, hot on the heels of the flying red squirrel, but the Albino took no such risks; he ran back along the limb and down the trunk to the ground, head-first, after the way of most arboreal plunderers. In an inconceivably short time he was up the next tree, close on the trail of the squirrel, almost as quickly as if he had leaped. In fact, so swiftly did the killer come upon him, that the tree rodent fairly shrieked in his fear. Hysterically he sailed out and down to another limb, terror robbing him of half his customary ability, the cutthroat close behind!

In and out, up and down, through the lofty lanes, the pair sped. It was as though the smaller reddish creature towed the larger one by an invisible but ever-shortening cord, until, bereft of the last semblance of reasoning, the squirrel took to the earth, where the savage was even more at home—where the weasel anticipated the squirrel's every move with that uncanny sagacity which characterizes the unerring pursuit of his species.

A thin, abruptly ceasing screech, which carried clearly across the river from the heart of a choke-cherry thicket, signified the end.

A FEW minutes later, while the moon, a silver sickle mounting steadily in a navy blue sky, brought a slight diminishing of the gloom beneath the foliage, the weasel, crimson-lipped, looked keenly about for more throats to sever. Upstream he turned, long neck and supple body looping forward like a monster measuring-worm.

Some distance ahead stood a group of maples, probably two dozen in all, each bearing in its upper branches from one to ten crude structures of dry twigs, and each partially dead from the very presence of these makeshift nests. While a rank odor permeated the vicinity, and the ground coated with chalky offal denoted the erstwhile home of a colony of herons, there was now only one nest in the whole heronry occupied—by a female and her belated hatch of three clownish youngsters.

These young herons, or pokes, as they were commonly called, were too large and angular to hover properly, so the mother merely squatted among them, peering fearfully about in the darkness, her poniard beak thrusting here and there as if pointing the direction for her glassy eyes. She was anxious to keep the family intact; in another day or two the ugly fledglings could fly to safety on pinions as yet untried. Now they sat hunched and helpless in scant, loose-set plumage, depending solely upon the grace of nature.

The watchful parent shifted uneasily when the weasel entered that district; she shifted again, more restless, as he neared the heron roost. And with each movement dry sticks fell from her aërial raft and rattled audibly earthward, sounding dreadfully loud in the breathless stillness. She listened intently: to her super-tuned ears came the long-expected sound of sharp claws ascending steadily, growing louder and yet more loud.

Extending her double-curved neck, the female heron peered over the edge of the platform into two baleful glow-spots spiraling the trunk with that spurting ascent of predatory climbers. It was the cutthroat, she knew! Death was certain unless something turned him aside.

The swift stabbing of a sharp bill, a succession of heavy wing-strokes, then the older bird employed her last defense: the emptying of the contents of her stomach into the grinning countenance of the murderer! But this extraordinary defense only served further to infuriate him; he leaped to the staging amid a babel of squawks and unwieldy flappings, and soon dispatched the entire clan, while a stream of loosened twigs clattered to the earth.

Hardly had the scarlet-lipped killer descended when he scented a covey of

quail, close-bunched, facing outward beneath a wild-plum bush—the custom of Bob White and his crew when weathering a storm or anticipating danger at night.

The cock was wide awake! His soft whistle awakened the rest, who crowded more toward the center of the circle; they dared not fly lest they dash out their brains against protruding limbs in the darkness, so like a living thunderbolt was the flight of these daylight folk.

Without remorse the nocturnal destroyer slew this most defenseless of all feathered tribes. Albeit he was but obeying the mandate of an ancient curse placed upon all *Mustelidæ*—marten, fisher, otter and mink: the willful killing of innocent brethren of the wild.

As he came from this butchery, running his carnelian tongue around his scarlet jaws, the multi-murderer picked up the hot track of a brush rabbit who had chanced to pass near by. Around trees, over windfalls, through a small savannah of wild millet, horror-driven, the hare fled. And soon, right behind, dodging when he dodged, swerving when he swerved, came the ghastly nemesis!

It ended like the rest, in cold assassination, when the short-tailed runner foolishly dived into a discarded den hole instead of taking out for the open country at the crest of the embankment, where few indeed were his match in a foot race.

Leaving the rabbit with its throat cut from ear to ear, the weasel loped hopefully upriver, now on the first terrace, now close to the water, always smelling, alert to slay. Like all ruthless killers, however, he was at heart an arrant coward. When he met a fellow cutthroat, or one of the wild kindred sufficiently armed to combat his savagery, he shamelessly sidestepped the issue. And so he did when, directly, he came face to face with that self-centered road-hog, the black skunk; his aggressive spirit deserted him when that silken battle-plume sprang erect in patent warning; mild as a tame tabby, he circled the immaculate dude of the animal world!

Just then the resounding tocsin of the great horned owl reverberated through the wood. The booming challenge spurred the weasel to greater haste. For this also was one who brought out all the cowardice in the small beast's fierce make-up. He literally wilted, guiltily avoiding the white moon-mottles lying in his path. Like an elusive goblin he scudded from cover to cover when the slow fanning of thick wings told of the near passage of the flying tyrant of the night. And only when certain the owl had left that environment did he reappear to continue the hunt.

THUS on one bank of the Smoky did the more deadly animal follow his natural bent, to slay, while the bandit in fur pursued his career of petty freebootery on the other. Lotor, always robbing but seldom injuring, like human bandits often found his loot worthless. The cutthroat, never playing with a victim, a sincere murderer was he.

Nearer daybreak, the raccoon came down through the early mists that gathered and spun in aimless wraithlike wisps on the water. Well pleased with the proceeds of a night of looting, he jogged along silently, his ingrained curiosity nevertheless still lacking something of being quenched; he still wanted to know what had been happening on the north bank, the cause of the despairing cries, of the blood-smell now strong in the air. Excellent swimmer though he was, he now sought a way to cross without a wetting.

A lank poplar had measured its practically limbless length entirely across a narrow neck of the stream, forming a natural bridge, which Lotor soon discovered and utilized.

The moment he set foot on land, his incessantly busy nostrils picked up a strange admixture of odors, which he paused to consider a few seconds ere he climbed the sodden bank. He was ever unafraid but not always incautious, when the unconquerable desire to see urged him forward.

Above and beyond a ridge crowned with smartweeds, lay a narrow washout of clean sharp-sand. Down it a foolish and very obese cinnamon opossum, with ten furry counterparts clinging to various parts of her person, came waddling demurely. A dunce she was, in the presence of extermination, her pink-shell ears and black snout contrasting oddly with her brown-tinged coat of disreputable white fur.

She paused midway of the wash to winnow the fog-laden air with her extremely moist nostrils; instinct warned her to beware. But before she could retreat, a lithe body bounded out upon the nude sand and hurled itself a half-second later, upon the hapless tribe! Fiendishly it fastened blood-caked jaws in the throat fur of the

mother, gnawing in silent fury! Her disheartened hisses, her puny growling, were as futile as the twitter of a sparrow. The bane of the opossum family, which is the lack of a will to fight for life, prevented the older animal from more than a feeble pretense of resisting. Then, in conformity with this futile heritage, she relaxed into that clever mimicry of death which had saved her life on more than one occasion; she reasoned, perhaps, that what is dead will not be killed.

The ruse failed to deceive the weasel; he merely used it as an opportunity to slaughter the younger generation first. One of them had crawled on unstable legs to the edge of the weed thicket, but before he could escape, the cutthroat was upon him in two arching bounds.

Just then the weeds opened and there stepped forth a masked figure of comparatively huge, forbidding aspect.

The weasel backed, but not for long! A vengeful flame flickered in his reddened eyes. He leaped in all the insane ferocity of a miniature leopard, squarely into the face of Lotor the curious.

Unfooted by the impetuousness of the attack, the bandit fell into his favorite fighting posture—supine, with all four feet working like revolving scalpels. Few of the vicious slashes struck home, however, for the weasel had wormed in too close to the raccoon's body!

The bandit sputtered and spat and bounced, but the white leech clung and dug at his throat. He wrestled all over the lot, but the weasel only gouged the deeper. The long white body was so slim and pliable, Lotor could not embrace it nor yet shake it off! Nor could he pry his own strong jaws under the weasel's head. In deeply profane gutturals he finally subsided and fought with more silent and grim desperation.

Things had begun to look bad for the jocund bandit! Fatigue grew more apparent while his strength seemed to be failing.

The whole community vibrated with the din. A scared coot shot from under a reed-draped ledge to run flapping up the river, a single protesting note trailing arear. A black-banded badger, ready to retire for the day, shot into his hole backwards, with astounding accuracy. An immense horde of bone-picking crows arose from the treetops, cawing loudly as they wheeled in a sable swarm through the morning twilight.

Anon the bandit relaxed, whimpering defeat, and emitting a growl of triumph, the throat-cutter fiercely pressed the advantage.

Two black very human-like hands crept slyly upward to shut with a snap around the slender white neck of the weasel. Ten black fingers began to put a suffocating pressure on the weasel's windpipe—an emergency for which the latter seemed unprepared. The affair suddenly resolved itself into a life and death struggle twixt cutthroat and garroter!

Then the posterior fingers of the bandit, also wide-spread and capable of grasping large objects, came slowly up like the slow bending of a steel spring, to grip the weasel around the flanks and tear him loose with the abrupt recoil of a ten-gauge gun. Nature had called the killer's turn.

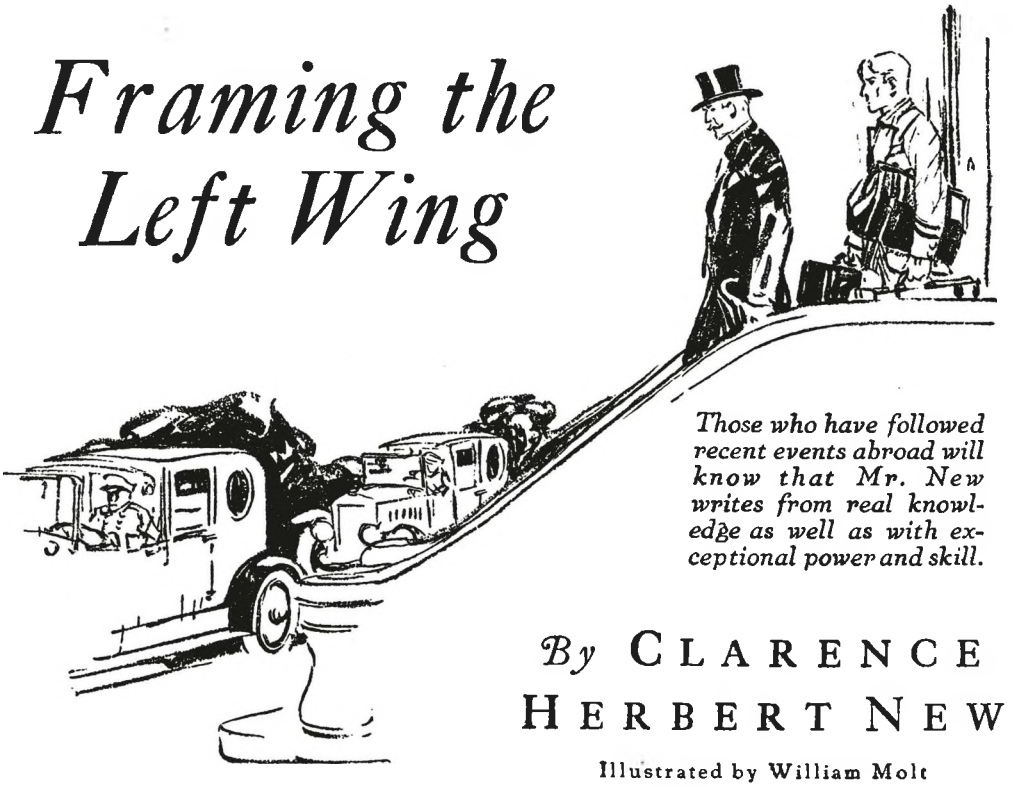
WITH appalling vindictiveness, Lotor choked the last breath of life out of the sinister villain in velvet, throwing his carcass aside as nonchalantly as he would a bit of silver birch bark or other useless toy that might have excited a passing fancy.

Sun-up found him squatting on a gravel bar, the personification of drollery in disguise, dabbling his slender fingers in a foam-flecked eddy where it swirled in the lea of a drift jam; he had finished the last of a painstaking toilet and nothing about him indicated the narrow escape of an hour previous; it was only another incident in his checkered career, to be saved by his own superior intellect.

Peace had again possessed the valley. A solitary thunder-pumper, long of legs, longer of neck and scant of body, sent forth his unmusical, though rhythmic: *"Plunk-er-plunk, plunk-er-plunk!"* Which queer cry might have been a rod or a mile away, so ventriloquil were the vocal powers of that weird bird. A brilliant blue kingfisher winged by in a joyous dipping flight, and a long-tailed mocker filled the leafy domes with bubbling exuberance: The wanton was no more!

Lotor the bandit shinned to the dizziest heights of a tremble-leaf cottonwood and turned his wondering gaze to the north where lay the Smoky Hills basking in that elusive bluish haze by which the aborigines had named them. Some day, under the stress of curiosity supreme, he would go and see why; now he must sleep in preparation for another night of jesting banditry.

Framing the Left Wing



Those who have followed recent events abroad will know that Mr. New writes from real knowledge as well as with exceptional power and skill.

By CLARENCE HERBERT NEW

Illustrated by William Molt

THE Trevors and their house-guests had been in the gallery of the House of Commons through the whole of that last eventful evening when it was found impossible to reach an agreement which might have stopped the great strike —in fact, they had spent an hour or so in the gallery during each evening of the previous week, because their friends Senator Burwood and his daughter, from Washington, naturally had been very much interested in this phase of British politics. Not far from where they sat, in the mass of spectators who crowded every foot of available space, were three men who occasionally muttered to each other in low tones but lost not a word of what was being said on the floor of the House, below them. Catching a glimpse of their faces, Countess Nan touched the Earl's knee with one finger as she leaned closer to the Senator and whispered:

"When you get the chance to do so unobserved, take a casual look at those three men in the front seats a little farther along—two of them with red neckties—dressed rather better than you might have supposed, considering who they are."

After a moment, the Senator nodded.

"Those three are the real leaders of the Extreme Left—the 'direct-action' crowd," Countess Nan continued. "Wormser—McSwinnerty—Kalovitch. You rarely come upon their names in the news-sheets, never see anything but hurried and very poor snapshots of them. They never appear in the Labor Congress or at any of the conferences with the Government; yet they are the men actually in control of the extreme radicals. The supposed leaders who appear publicly and are quoted in the news-sheets merely carry out the orders of these three —and we happen to know that it is they who have secretly forced the hands of the union leaders in this decision to bring about a general strike. The matter could have been adjusted any time this last month without the strike had it not been for their inflammatory work among the irresponsible masses. I'll tell you more about them when we get home. Meanwhile—you'll see the discussion on the floor of the House comes to nothing this evening. If there's any indication of reaching a settlement, those men will quietly leave the gallery and find some means of blocking it. By morning, every city in the British Isles will be tied up by the greatest strike in history; there is now no way of preventing it. And the most exasperating part of the situation is that none of the labor unions except the Reds actually want the strike

or had any idea of going that far. British labor always has had a bit of horse-sense, with enough vision to see that a strike of any such magnitude will cause suffering and deprivation among the laboring classes before anyone else, and to a far greater extent."

EACH of the four had opportunity for studying the radical leaders at fairly close range, unobserved, and were possibly the only persons in all that crowded gallery who knew the men for exactly what they were. Before midnight, when there was no further hope of averting the strike, they went home to the Earl's famous mansion in Park Lane, where they found Earl Lammerford of St. Ives and Sir Abdool Mohammed Khan—old family friends. After a light supper, the party went into the big Jacobean library for their pipes and cigarettes.

The two Americans were seemingly more apprehensive concerning the strike than the others. "I suppose it's just my imagination, Trevor," remarked Senator Burwood, "but I've a feeling that the city is almost deathly still at this moment—for London! There is the occasional muffled rumble of a motorcar running down the Lane from Marble Arch—but otherwise, scarcely a sound. No bells, no whistles from the Thames, no honking—"

"Aye—they'll have stopped the busses and the Underground by now. This strike will tie up possibly ninety per cent of the activities which produce sound and vibration. You'll be noticing it, increasingly."

"Well—but how long is this to go on? Can't last indefinitely, you know! Your Government said tonight that there would be no compromise, that parliamentary government would be upheld; but—are you really in position to stand pat on that? If your entire country can be put out of business like this, what assurance have you that you're strong enough to cope with it?"

"The phlegmatic common sense which is as much an underlying trait among the British masses as among the aristocracy. The outcome of this big strike depends, I fancy, upon one feature more than anything else. Governm'nt will cope with it because labor itself will back us rather than go over to a Soviet—but it will be either a most serious matter, or one of but a week or so, according to the amount of real influence those radical leaders have among the whole Labor Party. If they can stir up the masses to rioting,—armed resistance to our attempts in the way of keeping the necessities moving,—we come very close to a temporary revolution. But if leaders like MacDonald and Thomas can hold their men to the passive resistance they claim, the strike will stop inside of two weeks."

"Coming right down to cold fact, a strike of this size is really pure anarchy—isn't it? The paralyzing of an entire nation by a body of men who have no grievance of their own—do it merely as a sympathetic club loaned to a very small body of men who claim to have one?"

"No blinking the actual fact! It's out-and-out defiance of organized governm'nt. But when Parliament passed that act, awhile back, removing the strike from all damage-suits under the charge of conspiracy, it opened the door to a stretching of the strike privilege way beyond what Parliament intended. Sooner or later, that act will have to be repealed, I fancy."

"Getting back to those radical leaders we saw tonight—is there no way of handling them separately, removing *that* danger from the situation?"

"Well, Senator, we've been giving some thought to that ourselves. It would clarify the situation a lot. What would you suggest?"

"Arrest those three men at once, and jail them—convict 'em of conspiracy after this rumpus is over—or treason, or sedition; give 'em twenty years!"

"It's not as simple as that, old chap! That puts them in the position of persecuted martyrs. Undoubtedly they've anticipated some such action—issued their orders, made arrangements for subordinates to handle things temporarily. No, that would have the effect of increasing their influence not only among their own crowd but with the whole Labor Party. We can't even be certain of stopping the half-million rubles voted by the Moscow Soviet to help this strike—because there are too many perfectly legitimate banking methods of getting the cash into this country in the form of drafts or bills-of-exchange for presumable industrial use. You've put your finger upon the one thing to be done in the next three or four days—put those men out of business in such a way that it nullifies their influence, without doing them any personal injury. But it'll take a deal of thinking to work out a practical scheme. Hmph! An idea just occurs to me. . . . .

H-m-m—on the face of it, the thing's too screamingly ridiculous. And yet—I fancy it *might* be worked—"

"What is it, Trevor? Go on! Tell us!"

"No. I'll go over it with Lammy and Abdool—if I decide by morning there's a possibility of putting it through. If they think favorably of it, an' we make the attempt, I'll go into the details after we've started the thing far enough so that no careless word may block it. But I don't mind giving you a hint, if you'd like something to think about overnight. You'll not discuss it outside of this house—mind! Well—you've heard of the crowd who caught a chap they were fairly sure had been up to some devilment, but had no proof of it? And the sympathetic bystander who shouted: 'Don't throw him in the pond! Oh, *don't* throw him in the pond!' Remember that, don't you? That bystander's psychology was absolutely correct. Nobody had dreamed of throwing the man into the pond before he spoke—or thought there was evidence enough to warrant going that far. But—eh? You and Miss Dorothy might see if you can fit any such application to the case of these Radical-leaders during the next day or so."

AS it was then one o'clock in the morning, Countess Nan went up with her guests to their rooms—leaving her husband with Lammerford and Abdool in the library for a final pipe before they retired. These two old friends knew the Earl so well that they could usually tell by his manner when he really had a big idea and when he was more than half indulging his weakness for joking—but in this instance they were somewhat in doubt. Presently, Earl Lammerford remarked:

"If it's a joke, old chap—let's have it! I fancy I can appreciate any sort of humor which has a bearing upon this strike—particularly if it contains the germ of an idea which might be useful."

"Well—suppose you and Abdool fill in a couple of the necessary requirements—as a starter? If you can do that satisfactorily, why—I'll not say the scheme is altogether impracticable, after all. For example, we must have a man so closely identified with the steadier wing of the labor element that any betrayal of that party by him would appear unthinkable: a man who has risen to a position of more or less independent means by his own efforts, is generally respected as an honest man by Conservatives and Radicals alike, but at the same time, one who believes that the end justifies the means to some extent. That is—he is on record as being opposed to the Extreme Left with its policy of 'direct-action'—but conceivably might be argued over to that view if he could be made to believe it the only practical course. In short, just about the last man in the United Kingdom who might betray his party and following to the Governm'nt or the Conservatives. Can you name such a man—off-hand?"

THEY smoked over this in silence a few minutes.

"H-m-m—I fancy that Samuel Teddars, M.P., might come pretty close to filling those specifications. Do you agree, Abdool?"

"It is even so, Huzoor. The name of the man was almost upon my lips—for seest thou, in every particular that My Lord hath mentioned, the man hath matched it in his character and beliefs."

Sir Abdool rarely dropped back into the vernacular save when he was alone with these two old friends—in fact, he was now upon all occasions the typical well-bred Englishman of the aristocracy rather than the Afghan prince.

"Is it in the mind of the Thakur Bahadur to enter upon some dealing with that one—to the confusion of himself and his party?"

"No—if I successfully forge a letter from him to another man, whom we have yet to find and agree upon, then show that letter to three men and subsequently destroy it, I shall want nothing further from the Honorable Teddars, M.P. And inasmuch as the only evidence will be destroyed, I fancy no harm will come to him of it in the final show-down. It seems to me that there must be some correspondence with him in our files, here, because I found the money to obtain a patent and develop an invention of his sometime ago. If we don't go to smash on the rocks of radicalism, Teddars should be a wealthy man in the line of machinery-building, because he's a sound mechanic all through. . . . . Ah, just as I thought! Here are half a dozen letters from him—two in longhand, the others typed, but signed by him. We'll say the first requirement has been filled.

"Now, I want another man, so pronounced a Conservative that he leans over

backward in that direction: a man who hates Liberals and Radicals so bitterly that he can scarcely discuss a question with one of them without losing his temper and becoming abusive; a man who'd much prefer using bayonets instead of arguments with all radicals—and yet has a cool enough head most of the time to make rather convincing speeches in Parliament without being called to order by the Speaker; the sort of man any Radical likes to bait in a public place—yet wouldn't risk being found with him clandestinely. Seems rather like a large order—doesn't it?"

"None but a short-sighted fool would talk that way, Kalovitch! This is no time to change governments!"

"Why, no, George! Several of the old-time Conservatives run pretty close to that. Sir Penton Marshall is perhaps the more pronounced of the lot. Wouldn't you consider him so, Abdool?"

"Aye—and especially from the fact that he has made his fortune in trade. A baronet of the strictly leisure class would have merely academic convictions, from theory and hearsay—inherited beliefs. But Sir Penton has been all through disastrous strikes among his various works—hates strikers and the Radicals who put them up to it worse than so many cobras, because they're everlastingly stopping production and causing a greater wage-loss to their own families than the cost of mill-stoppage. His convictions are well known all through England and in many of the Continental cities also. He'd like to call in the army to settle a strike, any time—and it chafes him like the devil because we don't reach adjustments that way in these modern days."

"Hmph! Rather odd that each of us should hit upon the same two men. Sir Penton was the one I had in mind when I gave you the specifications—though as you say, there are others who'd also fill the bill, or very nearly so. Very good! Now, let's consider Marshall and his town-house, just off Belgrave Square. He bought it years ago when the neighborhood was more fashionable than it is now. Each of us has been

in that house a number of times. We know Sir Penton, his attractive wife and her even handsomer sister, his son and daughter, and some of their more intimate friends—Lady Mae Weatherby, for example. By the way, can either of you account for that friendship?"

"Only on the basis of their being girl and boy together up in Derbyshire—and that he considers her radical views merely a pose which she'll get over presently. She's by way of being a parlor-Bolshevist, if one takes her seriously; they get angry enough at each other to throw things, at times—then calm down and laugh it off. Either she's a bluffer who never means half she says, or else she's a dangerous person for Sir Penton to have about his house. She knows, and goes to the East End to confer with, more of the Moscow Reds than any other woman of the aristocracy in London—and she stays in Marshall's house as a guest for weeks at a time. She could, if she wished, tell him a lot about the Reds that he'd be dev'lish pleased to know. She also could tell them a good many things about him and his mills which they'd pay her well to give them. But I've not heard that she's done either—doesn't consider it sporting, I fancy—possibly loyalty toward an old playmate. The woman is potentially so dangerous that she intrigues me, an' I've wasted more time in watching her than possibly she's worth."

"Lady Mae is about the only dangerous element in the scheme I had in mind concerning Sir Penton. You see, I know the man and his little mannerisms so well—know his family, his house and his servants, have in my files good photos of the four or five Marshalls—that I was thinking of impersonating him in his own house during a few hours upon one of the next three evenings. I fancy there wouldn't be the slightest diffic'lty except in the case of Lady Mae Weatherby—if she happens to be staying the night when I drop in, and finds opportunity for a tête-à-tête. Of course, Lady Marshall knows her husband more intimately than anyone else—if she's the observant sort, which I rather doubt; but Lady Mae would be constantly recalling little tricks of the boy she formerly knew and getting her own amusement out of seeing them crop out occasionally in the mature man. She might, any time, pop questions unexpectedly which one simply couldn't answer without risk of blundering. Sir Penton, as I just happen to know, left for Scotland two days ago and isn't likely to return for a week. There was a walk-out in two of his Scotch mills as part of the general strike, but he had foreseen this and procured men to keep the plants running. They're pretty rabid up there—more likely to make serious trouble than here in London.

"Aye, he'll be having his hands full for the remainder of the week at least! So that's that. The next consideration is accurate knowledge of where Kalovitch, Wormser and McSwinnerty may be found at certain hours each day—their habits, temperament, little mannerisms—all that sort of thing, d'ye see."

HERE Lammerford protested: "I say, George, you'll not risk impersonating either of that lot, I hope! With Sir Penton, it's merely a question of nasty publicity in the news-sheets if you're exposed by any chance—but with those Reds, your life wouldn't be worth a thr'penny-bit! An' the object you have in mind would be very dearly purchased at that cost—there's no good enough reason for running such a risk. We're not at war just now!"

"Don't borrow trouble, Lammy—I'd no thought of putting myself in their shoes. A mechanic, now, who works his way into their confidence—or a valet with a personal message from some toff—that's something else again. Practically no risk of discovery, because they'll have no evidence that I'm not what I claim to be—can't prove it. In fact, all of us might try that little adventure together—as workingmen who happen to know that one of us is 'in service' with Marshall and can vouch for him—whatever the situation appears to demand. Some of the F. O. men told me that those three have been making their headquarters at a certain 'pub' in Mile End Road, Whitechapel, but sleep at a house in Hackney which is a rendezvous of the Moscow crowd. Doubtless they'll be pretty much all over the city while the strike is on—directing their gangs one place or another. With transportation all tied up, that means they'll be going about in a high-powered car. We must know that car when we see it, and have a cheap-looking one of our own to keep track of it—a flivver rather better than it looks, but no distinguishing marks. And I fancy that if we're of the same mind in the morning, we'd best make a fairly early start from Abdool's house on Park Street, back yonder."

LONG before the Senator and his daughter thought of getting up, the two Earls and Sir Abdool breakfasted in Sir Abdool's house—which was built upon a plot taken from the rear of the Trevor property and connected with the mansion by an underground passage beneath the gardens—and left for the East End in an old car, dressed as laboring men of different trades, with minor changes in facial appearance that would completely have deceived anyone who knew them. It had been decided that Lammerford should impersonate the serving-man from Sir Penton's house, in order that Trevor's movements should not be hampered by changing from one character into another when there might be little time to do so. Their idle strolling about the East End—sometimes in the secondhand car, sometimes parking it at the curb and walking down to groups on a side-street—was no more than what thousands of the same class were doing, night and day, while the strike was on. Presumably they were themselves strikers, and each of the three had carried union cards in his pocket for several years. In any unexpected emergency, the cards always were guarantees of supposed reliability and affiliations.

At the pub in Mile End Road they were told that Kalovitch and McSwinnerty were organizing a lot of their executives in an old warehouse overhanging the Thames in Wapping, and that Wormser might be found somewhere in the immediate neighborhood, if wanted for anything in particular. As each of the supposed workingmen had been in that same old warehouse at night upon former occasions when discovery of their real identity would have converted them into corpses floating down the Thames with the tide, they had no difficulty in finding the place and making their way to the upper loft where the three leaders sat at a large table upon which were spread Bartholomew plans of London and the suburbs. Near the dormer window at the farther end, were stacked some hundreds of cases containing automatic pistols and the cartridges for them—which had been raised by the rusty iron crane, outside, from a dingy little tramp-steamer that had slipped alongside the bulkhead during the previous foggy night.

Although her size would have seemed much too small for any serious menace, that little tramp, none the less, had managed to arm at least eight thousand men who were being instructed to scatter all through the city in groups of a dozen or twenty, and mingle with the crowds of strikers at the gathering points. Twenty armed men in a crowd of several thousand can easily—if they've been told how—make it appear that Government snipers are shooting into them with the intention of picking off leaders, and work that same crowd up to a frenzy of retaliation. It has been done in city rioting again and again.

Kalovitch, from years of experience with that sort of thing in Russia, evidently was the instructor that morning. Group after group stood around the big table while he drilled and questioned them until even the thick-headed ones got some idea of how easy it was to start serious rioting in any crowd. McSwinnerty then described certain distinguishing marks upon a number of motorcars which were being used to convey the various executives about the city in carrying out a carefully organized campaign of interference with all Government efforts to break the strike.

IT was just as two men and a woman, coming up the stairs to the loft, had stopped behind the others to listen when Kalovitch was impressing upon his followers that they should not be too hasty in starting trouble.

"For—look you," he was saying, "if we make the strike appear too serious at the start, the Government will concentrate a large force of troops in the city at once and probably get control of the situation in spite of us—before we have had time to show these slow-witted fellows of the unions that they've simply got to back us up. Once we can make them see that, we shall be stronger than any force Government can bring against us—we'll have the whole country by the throat! So—have patience; be ready to act when you're instructed to do so, but not before. We will decide when just the right moment arrives—"

The two men squeezed through the crowd until they stood facing the Red leaders at the other side of the table, with the woman just behind them—and Kalovitch, with a crafty smile, recognized them as delegates representing several of the unions.

"That's good advice, Kalovitch—if ye will also tell them that they'd best make no move at all if there seem a reasonable chance o' reachin' a settlement with Governmint. We dinna weesh a civil war, ye

ken—nor a bluidy revolution o' onny sort. Ye'll best mak' them understand we're law-abidin'—puttin' through a strike o' passive reseestance. The minute ye use foorce in onny organized way an' bring aboot serious fightin', ye lose tha seempathy o' a' guid folk that mak' up tha bulk o' tha population. We're gi'en them sair inconvenience tha noo—an' if it has the appearance o' revolution, they'll turrn ag'in' us altogither!"

"McClintock, it's just because your crowd are failing to realize what conditions you've actually brought about that we're organizing to take advantage of them. Man, have you no taste of power in your mouths this day? Labor has throttled the whole country within one minute by the clocks! You've paralyzed all commercial activity as it never was paralyzed before! You have it now in your own hands to get everything you want! They admitted in the House that it was 'either parliamentary government or an alternate government!' Well, the one sort has been a failure as far as labor is concerned; let's try the 'alternate' for a while and see if it's not a better one!"

The other delegate protested: "None but a short-sighted fool would talk that way, Kalovitch! This is no time to change governments! You'd have us set up a Soviet here, I suppose—put bloody-minded dictators over us instead of a cabinet that we can put in power ourselves an' pull down if they don't suit! This is a matter between British labor and its own government, in which it has fair representation, mind you! Here'll be Lady Mae Weatherby, with us—representin' a part of the British population who we can have with us or no, accordin' to whether we show sense in the matter or not. • —Will Your Ladyship give him an idea of just where you stand?"

LADY MAE was not backward in expressing herself.

"That's partly what I came here for! You understand, Kalovitch, that I consider myself a Socialist. I am strongly in sympathy with what British labor is trying to bring about for itself—better wages, shorter hours, better living conditions, as much profit-sharing as the trade will permit. It gets down to that, you know—what the trade will permit. Labor must understand the part which unrestricted competition plays in the profits of any trade. If there's not enough profit in a certain line, it's a case of shutting down or else reducing expenses all around. And the class I represent is trying to get employers and employees together in a discussion of these points—so that the employers shall not make too high a profit at the expense of the men, and the men shall not choke the business to death when there's no profit in it. Fighting, revolution, changing the form of government, doesn't help the points at issue in the least. Will you tell me if you seriously intend to use force—and go on as far as revolution?"

"The revolution is bound to come sooner or later, madame—there is no stopping it! Merely a question of when—that's all! The time is past when the masses will submit to being ruled by the classes—"

"But can't you see that the masses are ruling themselves in any parliamentary system of representative government?"

"They are represented—but they don't rule! Because there are too many shopkeepers among the people who place capitalism before the greatest good for the greatest number!"

"Oh, nons'nse, man—nons'nse! I see we'll never agree as long as your head is full of that idiotic twaddle—and there's no point in arguing with you."

THE Red leaders glanced at each other and grinned in a disgusted way. They had no wish to continue the pointless discussion any more than the woman had—so they civilly waved her aside and went calmly on with their very efficient organization. In that they showed whatever genius they had—the devil himself scarcely could have perfected plans more likely to make the strike a serious tragedy which would drive a wedge between the Labor Party and the Government and leave them farther apart at the end, instead of coming to the better understanding which seemed almost in sight. Lady Mae and the two delegates found themselves edged out of the front row into the background—and presently they went down the stairs and left the building with the determination to bring about a conference among the leaders which at least would have some effect in curtailing the worst efforts of the Reds. When they had gone, Trevor—as a supposed mechanic—bent over Kalovitch's shoulder and told him in a low tone that there was a friend of his who had a message for the three leaders which he wished to deliver as soon as they could listen to

He laid the note in the fireplace —holding her at arm's-length.

him, confidentially, in some corner. As the leaders had been working without any let-up since early morning and were quite willing to knock off for sandwiches and a mug of ale before going on with the remainder of their followers, Kalovitch pointed out a small table at the other end of the loft and told the supposed mechanic to bring his friend there for a drink with them. When he had done so, Trevor walked off to join the others—and Lammerford, who had managed a really close resemblance to one of the men in Sir Penton's employ, told his story.

"It's this w'y, sir, d'ye see. H'I'm in service at the town-'ouse of Sir Penton Marshall, who, as you may 'ave 'eard, is by w'y of bein' quite of the h'opposite party to yourself, sir. Well, d'ye see, Sir Penton, 'e 'as received a communication from a Member of Parliament who is most prominent h'in the Labor Party—most uncompromisingly so. In this letter the Member chap says 'e is comin' h'over to Governm'nt side, an' 'as means to force 'is following to call h'off the strike providing 'e can h'arrange with you an' these 'ere parties with you to stop the agitation until a more favorable time. 'E says as how a thousand quid for each of you—a personal matter for your own pockets an' nobody the wiser—would settle the matter. An' 'e 'as placed the three thousan' quid h'in Sir Penton's 'ands to be delivered to you with no stipulations or h'agreements whatsomever. Sir Penton, 'e is much h'averse to 'avin' dealings with your party of h'any sort, d'ye see—but 'e will do h'anythink w'ich may call h'off the strike. 'E 'as been at 'is mills h'in Scotland, h'as you may 'ave 'eard—but 'e is now h'on 'is w'y to Lunnon an' will see you at 'is town-'ouse near Belgrave Square at ten this h'evening, if h'all three of you will come to 'im there. 'E 'as no h'idear of bargaining with you 'imself—but simply wishes to 'and h'over the money w'ich 'as been pliced in 'is 'ands for you without h'any stipulation."

There was a moment of silence as Kalovitch and his associates digested these statements, glancing furtively at each other. If nobody among their following knew anything about it, they were not averse to pocketing a thousand pounds each—they certainly could use the money. Then again, it was obviously for their interests and the success of their activities to get all the information they could in regard to this traitor who proposed selling out his

following. What the consideration was in his case, this serving-man hadn't mentioned—probably didn't know; but judging by themselves, they were certain it must be a weighty one to induce a Labor leader in Parliament toward any such treachery. There seemed, however, some risk in going secretly to Sir Penton's town-house—the whole proposition easily might be a plant to capture them and put them out of business. Wormser unexpectedly asked the serving-man what guarantee they had as to personal safety, inasmuch as it wouldn't do at all to take any of their own following into their confidence.

"Sir Penton foresaw that h'objection, sir. H'I was told to mike this suggestion: That you write a letter h'addressed to yourself an' give it to one h'of your trusted men—to be returned when you get back 'ere at h'any time before one in the morning. H'if you 'ave not turned h'up by that time, 'e is to h'open the letter. In it, you s'y you 'ave a rendezvous at some pub with Sir Penton to discuss the strike—but that you fear they may h'abduct you—lock you h'up in 'is town-'ouse. In w'ich case, your men are to come in force an' 'ave you h'out, d'ye see. H'of course nothink is further from Sir Penton's mind than h'any personal h'attack h'upon you, but a note h'of that sort would provide h'ample protection, in a manner of speaking, d'ye see."

"Yes—that should be sufficient, I think. We really have no idea that Sir Penton has any trickery in mind—because he simply couldn't afford it. I suppose if all three of us can't go, either one would do to discuss the matter and get the money for the others?"

"No sir—h'I did not understand h'it that w'y. The Member chap would 'ave no guarantee that the h'other two got their money—that Sir Penton 'ad not pocketed their share—or that the one of you w'ich took the three thousan' quid might not keep h'it h'all for 'imself."

"H-m-m—I think we catch the point. He's not so far out, at that—when it comes to satisfying the turncoat who's putting up the money. Very well—suppose you meet us, Jorkins, at O'Rourke's pub in Mile End Road at half after nine this evening. We'll have a car, and you can take us to the house. Mind you don't fetch us on a fool's errand, or it'll be the worse for you! We'll leave the letter, as you suggest."

As a matter of fact, leaving any such letter was about the last thing they'd risk doing, and the supposed Jorkins knew it as well as they did. With the class of men who made up their following, they wouldn't have trusted a single one not to open and read that letter as soon as they were out of sight. So, armed with a brace of automatics apiece, they took whatever chances of foul play there might be, feeling reasonably confident that if they were really taken to Sir Penton Marshall's town-house, there wouldn't be the slightest effort to molest them. They did, however, take the precaution of looking up the number in the directory and driving past the house that afternoon to familiarize themselves with its appearance.

In discussing the money, they saw no reason why they shouldn't take it for their own pockets if it was given to them unqualifiedly. If the turncoat Member chose to consider them men of honor in money-matters while betraying their own following on the other hand—why, he deserved losing the cash. To their way of thinking, it was much more honorable to keep faith with their following and pocket his unrequested bribe for their own personal use. But they were quite well aware that a secret visit to anyone of Sir Penton's known political views would compromise them with their own men if they were seen.

During the day, the Free Lances were taking their own measures to insure their *being* seen that night. Trevor and Sir Abdool discussed the three leaders with a number of their executives—asking each man if he were quite sure that neither of the three could be bribed to sell them out. The general impression among the more intelligent of the Reds seemed to be that the leaders had so much more to gain in cash and property after the Government had been overthrown that they wouldn't jeopardize their chances by running risks for a little ready money—but even they admitted that it was difficult to say what any man might do if the stake appealed to him.

BY nine o'clock Trevor was perfectly made-up as Sir Penton—sitting with Sir Abdool in one of his cars by the curb a few doors away. He was about to drive up and enter the house when they got a jolt which came near upsetting the whole scheme. The front door was opened by the venerable Hoskins, and Sir Penton himself came out—the butler following with his bags down to his car, which rolled up at the moment. Evidently the Baronet had

done precisely what Trevor was going to claim that he had done—run down hurriedly from Scotland upon some important matter which he appeared to have finished, and was now on his way north again. In the close glimpse the two had of him as the car passed, they noticed that he was wearing a suit so nearly a duplicate of the one Trevor had on as to render it unlikely that even his family and servants would spot any differences. (Knowing him as well as he did, Trevor had selected a suit which was cut from the same cloth as two of the Baronet's.) If their surmise as to his destination was right, the Earl would be safe enough in going back to the house within the hour—though if Sir Penton should happen to have forgotten something, and return, there was no telling what complications might occur—with the three Reds due at ten!

After considering the chances all round, they decided that Sir Abdool had better park the car near by—then slip around to the side of the house where he could look in at the study windows and be ready to act if Trevor suddenly needed him. The Earl then walked up to the front door and rang the bell—handing his hat, top-coat and umbrella to Hoskins as the door opened, with the somewhat jerky remarks:

"Had an appointm'nt for ten this evening, Hoskins—slipped my mind entirely—just happened to remember in time! There will be three men calling—Mr. Kalovitch, Mr. Wormser and Mr. McSwinnerty. Quite possibly there may be impostors calling who will use their names—so at first you will say I'm from home—in the North. But if they say they have an appointm'nt with me for ten, admit them, fetch them directly into the study. Her Ladyship is not in the house, I suppose?"

"No sir—they left just after you. None of the family at home except Lady Mae, who just went up to her room for some music and will be down presently in the drawing-room."

"Very good! You'll say nothing to her about my return. If I can get through with those men before midnight, I'll have another try for gettin' away. As soon as they leave, you may fetch me in a bit of something to eat—with my hat and top-coat. Tell Jorkins and the maids I'm not to be disturbed. See that nobody interrupts us when those men arrive. . . . . I fancy that'll be the car just stopping outside. You know what to say to them."

RETURNING for the moment to the old warehouse that afternoon: the repeated questions of Trevor and Sir Abdool, as supposed mechanics, concerning the good faith of their leaders, made one of the Reds finally ask them what put such an idea into their heads. After some hesitation, Sir Abdool said:

"It's like this, d'ye see. Ye mind the tall chap I was talkin' wit' this morning? 'E's by way of bein' second man in the 'ouse of Sir Penton Marshall—the bloke what would set the sojers on us if 'e could. I knows this 'ere Jorkins from doin' a job in the 'ouse sometimes on the service-lift an' drains. Well, d'ye see, 'e comes to me, 'ere, an' 'e says, says 'e, that 'e's a message for Kalovitch an' the other felleys. So I tikes 'im over to where they're eatin' an' a-drinkin' h'of their ale—an' this Jorkins, 'e starts a confab wit' 'em. I passes h'up that w'y oncet or twice, an' h'I 'ears 'em s'yin' they'll go to the 'ouse wit' 'im this evenin' h'at ten. Now, wot I wants to know is wot Kalovitch an' them other felleys would be doin' confabin' wit' a bloke like Sir Penton Marshall—who, that sime, h'I've 'eard a-cursin' of 'imself purple when 'e's talkin' of the workin'-folk h'in 'is mills? Wot could they' be doin' wit' 'im a-tall h'if they was straight-like? Tell me that!"

"Aw—you didn't hear straight! They wouldn't be doin' nothin' like that! W'y—they wouldn't trust the bloke that far!"

"But they're goin' to, all 'e sime! Git a car an' folley 'em this night—see where they go! I'll meet ye near the 'ouse—an' I'll bet ye this sov. they goes h'into that 'ouse for a pow-wow!"

FOR half an hour they wrangled over the absurdity of this, but in the end, the mechanic was so positive of what he had heard, so evidently knew where Jorkins was in service and where the house was situated, that they took up his bet and followed his suggestion, just on the chance that he might be right. Consequently they distinctly saw their three leaders get out of their car at the Baronet's town-house, parley a moment with the butler at the door, then go in as if they really were expected. The thing seemed incredible—especially when Sir Abdool silently appeared from the back of the house and said he had seen them with Sir Penton in his study. To make sure there was no mistake, they waited in the shadow of some trees until they saw the men come out again.

Inside the house, the supposed Sir Penton had received his visitors courteously, offered them whisky and cigars, and convinced them that he had left his own affairs in Scotland for the purpose of running down to keep the appointment.

"My position as regards your party, gentlemen, is too well known to permit of any belief that I would offer to have any dealings with you, politically. But this letter from Mr. Samuel Teddars, M.P., conveys a possibility of reaching an agreement in regard to the strike which, in my own interest, and that of my party, I cannot disregard. If he will, and *can*, do as he says—call off his own unions—it certainly isn't asking too much of me to hand you the cash he sends on the remote chance that, after accepting it, you may feel disposed to abandon hostilities for the present at least. Whether you do or not, is none of my affair. It doesn't interest me overmuch, because, with Teddars' crowd out of it,—and others who will quit after he has done so,—I don't see how you can muster enough strength to prevent the country from returning to business-as-usual. You—er—I suppose that one or more of you will be familiar with Mr. Teddars' handwriting—not?"

"Aye—the bloody traitor! I know it well! 'Tis no longer than yesterday gone I'd a note from him sayin' he was in favor of stickin' it out—after tyin' up the whole country!" (This from McSwinnerty.)

"Then you might glance over this letter from him and see if it looks genuine. It's signed merely with his initials—I'll confess I've been somewhat in doubt that he would risk sending anything of the sort—though the three thousand, in hundred-pound notes, seems convincing."

"Aye—it'll be his writin', fast enough! I'll swear to that! The bloody turncoat!"

"Well—his action doesn't appear really sporting to me, though it's to our advantage. But on the other hand, this strike is costing Labor millions each day it goes on—it will mean increased suffering for all the working classes. Perhaps it might be considered that Teddars is more nearly a patriot with the good of his followers at heart by stopping the thing now, before it has gone too far? Probably you'll not agree to that—and it's of no consequ'nce. The intimation that you three will sell out for a thousand pounds, each, seems to me wildly absurd—because I've had some dealings with your crowd and know that you hope to gain so much more that such a sum would be trifling. I really can't imagine what he expects to gain by giving it to you. Frankly, if a man insulted me by offering any such bribe, I'd take it for myself as some compensation for the insult. At all events, here are the notes—which you will please count. No receipt is required, because there must be no record of this transaction. There's no stipulation as to what you are to do—or not do. Obviously, Teddars couldn't possibly give you the money direct—so I was selected as the intermediary. When you take the notes, my part of the transaction is ended."

"And—if we refuse to accept them?"

"You can't very well do that. I should be obliged to drop them from my car into the street some foggy night for any disinterested party to pick up. Teddars and I are strongly opposed in politics, though I rather like him socially. I can't go to him with three thousand pounds in cash—nor can I leave him under the impression that I have kept the money for myself. I'd have to dispose of it to some one he never intended to have it. As far as I'm concerned, I can do nothing but hand you the notes. You may toss them in the street when you leave here, if you wish."

THERE seemed to be no room for argument. A thousand pounds for each man was a thousand pounds for his own pocket, and nobody the wiser. Sir Penton had said that he himself would take the money in like circumstances. So each of the three stuffed the notes into his pockets, took a final glass of whisky and a few cigars. Then the Baronet accompanied them to the front door and stood there shaking hands with them, for a moment, in the bright light from the hall lamps. When he returned to his study, Lady Mae Weatherby sat in a chair at the other side of his desk, calmly smoking a cigarette—but not as self-possessed as she wished to appear. Her foot was nervously tapping the floor—and he was observant enough to notice it.

"Hello, Mae! I fancied it was you at the piano in the drawing-room just after I returned. But I had an appointm'nt with those bounders, so didn't look in."

He rang for Hoskins to fetch something to eat at once. "Will you have a bite with me before I make another start?"

He appeared to be entirely at his ease, though slightly hurried. It seemed to her

that she never had seen him looking so well—so completely master of himself and his affairs. There was a vague something—she couldn't decide what—which appeared slightly unusual. But she set this down to natural reaction from the sort of interview she had just overheard and didn't give it another thought until the astounding truth came to her sometime later.

"Was that conference supposed to be entirely private and confidential—or did you forget for the moment the other door into the drawing-room? I thought it was burglars when I first caught the murmur of voices from your study—opened that door a crack, and was completely floored when I saw you sitting there after you had left for Scotland! Then—that gang of Reds you were conferring with! I talked with them this morning at Wapping—couldn't move them in the slightest from their insane preparations. Of course I got the story and your side of it as the discussion went on—but it's not conceivable that Teddars wrote you that letter or sent that money! May I see it?"

"Faith, you may *not!* I doubt, myself, that Teddars ever wrote the thing. It has served its purpose—and must not be left lying about as evidence against a man whom I believe to be entirely straight."

He laid the note in the fireplace and touched a match to it—holding her at arm's-length when she would have snatched it up.

"Penton—just what do you mean by that: 'It has served its purpose?' Served *what* purpose? There is something here which I do not understand at all!"

"Oh—quite so! I know ye'd not betray my confidence, Mae, if I tell ye that I fancy the following of that precious three will be 'throwing 'em in the pond' inside of twenty-four hours. They were seen coming here for a secret conference with me—and leaving here. They were seen through this window stuffing hundred-pound Bank of England notes into their pockets—a much larger denomination than they could use for distribution among their following. So—just sit tight, an' see what happens to them."

"Aye—it'll be his writin' fast enough! The bloody turncoat!"

"You—you mean—that you've actually *framed* them, as the Americans say in their news-sheets?"

"Who—I? Now, now, girl! Would ye have me compromise myself by any such damagin' admission? I'm but an humble instrument—a go-between—a philanthropic manufacturin' body! Now I'll be off—must be in Scotland for dinner tomorrow evening—there's much to be done up there, whether the strike is called off or not. Good night to ye, Mae!"

HE was out of the house—into the car which stood waiting for him at the curb, and driving off—while she walked slowly back to his study with her mind full of the thousand questions she had meant to ask. When Sir Penton returned at the end of the week with absolute denial—and corroboration from his chauffeur—that he had come back a second time, that he knew anything of an interview with the Reds, his servants thought he must be crazy. But Lady Mae, in the privacy of her room, whispered to herself: "My word! If that man was *not* Penton—who *was* he? He was a wonder!"

During the war Earl Trevor—foreseeing the possibility of some emergency which

might stop news-publication in England for a while—had built a thoroughly equipped printing plant in Calais, using it most of the time for turning out plate-matter for the great news syndicate which he and Countess Nan controlled. So when their London news-sheets were shut down by the strike, their leading Conservative evening paper managed to get out abbreviated editions in Calais and send them across the Channel by airplane in time for reasonably wide distribution. As these editions were the only ones which did get about the city, except a few of the Labor sheets, they were eagerly read by all classes and passed from hand to hand. Upon the evening following the conference at Sir Penton's town-house, they appeared with a half-column leader on it, from which the following paragraphs are taken:

> It is a serious mistake for anyone in the Labor Party to attach political importance to this conference, if indeed it actually occurred. We have positive assurance from Sir Penton Marshall that Kalovitch, Wormser and McSwinnerty never have been inside his house, to his knowledge. He has been in Scotland the entire week—can prove this by hundreds who have seen and talked with him there. If these men were seen entering and leaving his house, as it is claimed, it is clearly improbable that it could have been for an interview with Sir Penton—though the officer on duty is positive that he saw him coming out of the house upon the night in question.
>
> The point is, however, that Sir Penton's political beliefs are so widely known as to make it simply incredible that he could have made political overtures to such men as these Radical leaders. If the interview did take place,—and Sir Penton is denying it because he considers it entirely a private matter,—it was doubtless some personal affair which had nothing to do with the strike. As for the statement that the Radicals left the house with hundred-pound notes stuffing their pockets, is there any evidence whatever that they might not have had the money when they came there? Hundred-pound notes are not, to be sure, the denomination one carries about for daily spending—or for distribution among political followers; but various commodities are sold and paid for in bills of that size when the payment is a large one—for convenience in handling and banking. Is it conceivable that these men had anything of high enough value to sell Sir Penton—for which they might be paid in notes of this size? Absurd! If the incident occurred at all, which is more than doubtful, clearly it could have had no political significance.

LATER in the evening the Government radio service broadcasted a few remarks upon this conference—following the line of the Conservative sheet that it must have been a strictly personal matter which bore no relation whatever to politics or the strike. But by that time, the Labor sheets had picked up through their reporters what actually had been seen—and they printed the bald facts without any editorial comment whatever.

That night the warehouse at Wapping was fairly seething with indignation over the conviction that the Red leaders were as crooked as so many wriggling snakes—men who would sell out their own children for a price. There was no direct proof of that, but the campaign of the Extreme Left became increasingly lukewarm as the definite strike-settlement approached. At dinner in Park Lane, the following week, Senator Burwood and his daughter were feeling much relieved over the situation—but they couldn't understand how the Radical menace in it had fizzled out so tamely.

"You said something, Trevor, about an idea you had for making those scoundrels 'throw their leaders in the pond'—but the only news we've seen of them at all is this cock-and-bull yarn about some interview with an ultra-Conservative which he swears never happened."

"And which the whole Conservative Party swears never happened. Absurd! Never *could* have happened! But the joke of it is that the entire Labor following believes it did happen and that it was a hundred per cent political—with hundred-pound notes falling all about like snowflakes. Burwood, I fancied you Yankees had the sense of humor an' that it was only Britishers who never could see the point! You must have English blood somewhere—what?

"If you'll think it over a bit, you'll see that leader in the Conservative sheet, an' the broadcasting, in the position of the 'sympathetic bystander.' They protested too much. Had it been the Labor sheets which printed that leader, it would have helped those Reds rather than hurt them—but coming from the Conservative side, it was a diff'rent proposition altogether. And there's but little diff'rence, d'ye see, between the 'pond' and 'political oblivion.' Kalovitch and the other two haven't as much influence left today as the man who swore the world was going to end two years ago. Without the influence and organizing ability they certainly had up to last Wednesday, there is no further menace in this strike. Its dangerous element has been extracted."

The Break in the Chain

A remarkable mystery story, wherein a judge who had sentenced a man to be hanged receives a strange visitor.

By PAUL F. MACKEY

FOR more than fifteen years Judge Latislaw had occupied the bench as trial judge in a Midwest city. During the latter part of this period my relations with him had been very cordial. And one evening he conducted me to his bedroom which he used also as his den.

Leaning forward in his comfortable rocker, he opened a table drawer at his side and handed me an old coin, apparently of bronze, about the size of a silver dollar, but so marred and discolored that the impression on it was almost defaced. I was gazing at the coin speculatively when he began telling me the most amazing story I have ever heard:

He had sentenced a man to be hanged, though the proof of guilt had been built almost solely upon circumstantial evidence. He had come home much disturbed on account of it. With the possible exception of a servant, he was alone in the house, his wife and daughter being on a summer vacation while the house was being renovated. The windows were open, but only a slight breeze stirred the curtains. Unable to concentrate on his magazine, he arose restlessly, and switching on the electric fan, strolled through the rooms to study the blending effect of the newly papered and painted walls. He returned to his bedroom still with the train of elusively annoying doubts in his mind.

Again he went searchingly over each link which had fastened Hornsby's guilt. Each part seemed sound, though when viewed as a whole, there remained an ineradicable doubt which he could not analyze. Perhaps it was pity for the man that was beating against his citadel of logic.

A HARSH, close-fisted old bachelor had been Quigley Bottonfield, whose body had been found in his office chair, his throat cut. The room had been occupied as his office and living-room. The chair was close by his large roll-top desk, near which on the wall was a telephone; the receiver had been removed from the hook and hung down against the wall. A pool of blood was on the worn carpet; some drops were beneath the telephone. A long hunting knife was found in a crumpled fold of the leather chair, on Bottonfield's

right side. Bloodstained fingerprints were on it. His death might have been taken for a suicide, had not a drawer of the desk been found open and papers from it scattered over the desk and floor.

Hornsby had been identified as leaving the house hurriedly at the time this condition was discovered. In his pocket were found several past-due notes for large sums payable to Quigley Bottonfield. They were secured by a mortgage on Hornsby's house, as an examination of the Recorder's books disclosed. Hornsby finally admitted his theft of the notes, but explained he had come to Bottonfield's house to obtain an extension of time for payment, and upon finding Bottonfield dead, he had rifled the drawer for his notes and fled. He denied having touched Bottonfield, and knew nothing as to the cause of his death. He admitted having picked up the long-bladed knife from the desk, and in sheer nervousness had dropped it upon hearing the door squeak, although only the wind had caused it; he was there about ten o'clock at night, as Bottonfield was so often away until late in the evening.

As Bottonfield was rich, though miserly, no motive could be found for suicide; on the other hand, Hornsby was in great financial difficulties and much depressed on account of it. The jury did not doubt that Hornsby had murdered Bottonfield, and should pay the penalty. And yet Hornsby might not have been guilty. Over and over, Judge Latislaw shifted these facts in his mind, and so absorbed was he that he did not hear the hall clock strike midnight.

He had sunk back into his chair with half-closed eyes gazing into the mirror door of his bedroom closet.

SUDDENLY he sat bolt upright and stared into the glass. For several seconds he remained rigid, though he was as much fascinated as alarmed, for the Judge was not of a nervous temperament, nor had he ever held life too precious to hazard a risk at times. From a remote corner in the mirror he saw a dark, shadowy form emerge, draw itself erect slowly, and fix a piercing gaze upon his back. Gradually the Judge distinguished the ungainly stooped figure of a man approaching stealthily from the adjoining room, where a window had been left open. In one hand was clenched a long-bladed knife.

The Judge regained his feet just as the man by a swift stride confronted him. The man was tall and lank, with an expression of terrible sternness upon his gaunt, deep-furrowed face. Holding the knife threateningly, he motioned for the Judge to follow him. On close scrutiny, Judge Latislaw now to his utter astonishment recognized Hornsby, who was supposed to be locked securely in a prison cell awaiting the date for the infliction of the death penalty. The Judge, of course, was unarmed; he offered no resistance. The man stepped back a few paces, and stooping, wiped his knife upon the corner of a rug by the door, leaving a stain of blood.

"Come with me," he said, straightening up quickly. "I'm going to show you."

Fearful and yet curious, Judge Latislaw slipped into his shoes and his coat and led the way as directed, out of the front door, Hornsby maintaining a grim silence.

They reached the street. Hornsby walked back of the Judge a couple of feet, watchful, occasionally reaching out and touching the Judge's arm to indicate the direction at street-corners. They followed side-streets which were dimly lighted and quiet. Reaching a very old and dilapidated section of the city, the Judge divined for the first time Hornsby's intentions. He was being conducted to Bottonfield's house: a dingy, three-story, detached red-brick house sitting back of an untidy front yard inclosed with a rusty iron picket fence. In a few minutes they were there. Hornsby now stepped forward. The front door opened upon his turning the knob. Advancing down a short hall, they came to the foot of a narrow staircase which Hornsby mounted first, the Judge following close behind; Hornsby kept glancing back to see that Latislaw was at his heels. At the top landing he seized the Judge by the arm and drew him back to the rear of a dark, narrow passageway, where Hornsby paused abruptly and lighted a match. They were standing before a small closet door.

"What next?" asked the Judge, deadly resolute; but Hornsby muttered something unintelligible in reply as he opened the door and thrust in his arm to the back wall of the closet against which some old clothes were hanging. Something yielded to his touch, and a door opened in the rear. The Judge followed through the cramped passageway. They stood in a small, stuffy room in complete darkness. Again Hornsby struck a match and lighted a candle on an

old-fashioned walnut bureau with a first-rate mirror. The floor was bare. In the corner was an ancient, iron-bound chest, its lid open. Hornsby pointed to it.

The Judge observed a stout tray flecked with gleaming gold-pieces among some old coins. Bottonfield may have been a coin-collector, thought the Judge, surprised. Grasping the Judge's coat lapel, Hornsby drew him toward the window, the only one in the room. It was narrow and tightly shut, but the glass of the upper sash was broken irregularly, and fragments lay splintered upon the floor. Spots of blood were on the window-sill and the floor beneath it. Latislaw gazed bewildered, but he had time only to take a glance, as Hornsby almost savagely seized him by the arm and drew him from the room. The door closed behind them with a muffled click, leaving no trace of anything but a hall closet cluttered with old garments.

They retraced their steps down the stairs, at the foot of which Hornsby drew the Judge to a door in the hallway. He almost pushed the Judge forward as the door seemed to open before them. They were standing now in the room where the supposed murder had been committed. Hornsby held a lighted match in his hand; he appeared weirdly forbidding in its reddish glare. Latislaw stepped forward curiously, with an eerie feeling. Suddenly he halted, and a clamminess swept over him. There in the chair, just as described in the trial of the case, was Bottonfield's crumpled body, cold in death, stiff blood on his neck and brown flannel shirt.

WITH a quick glance at the body the Judge turned to question Hornsby. At that moment he felt that the presence of another would have stiffened his nerves a bit. But in the same instant the match in Hornsby's hand faded out.

"Hornsby!" cried the Judge, staring in the darkness at the spot he had last seen his companion, but no answer came. He waited a few moments, then called again—but he was alone in that uncanny place.

A flash of lightning now gave him a glimpse of the ghastly interior of the room. Feeling along the wall, he unlatched a window and raised it. Clambering out upon the narrow porch, he made a hasty retreat to the sidewalk and retraced his steps toward his home.

"I must notify the sheriff at once," he muttered as he went along. "How in the world did Hornsby get out of jail? He didn't kill Bottonfield; I'll have that execution set aside tomorrow." The whole situation had become clear to him. Bottonfield was making a visit to his secret room that night, and had tried to pry open the tight-fitting window with his knife. He fell against the window-pane and broke it. His jugular vein cut by the glass, he hurried downstairs to call for help over the telephone, but sank weakened into his chair before getting a response. Hornsby, finding him dead, had helped himself to his delinquent notes.

His thoughts thus occupied, the Judge some twenty minutes later discovered himself fumbling for his latch-key in front of his own door. The light was still burning in his room, and the electric fan going as he had left it. It was now raining, and while he was hastening to close the windows, the telephone rang from the hall.

"Is this Judge Latislaw?" came a familiar voice.

"It is!" responded the Judge.

"This is Owensby, the sheriff."

"Oh, yes, Bill, I didn't quite get you at first." The Judge's habitual calmness had been much ruffled.

"Been trying to get you for two hours—it's pretty late, but I knew you'd want to know. Say, Judge, the prisoner, Hornsby—well, he died at twelve o'clock tonight. His heart failed him—plumb scared to death, I guess."

"Was he in jail?"

"What's that, Judge?" came the rather injured tone.

"Well, well, the poor fellow's better off. Glad you called me. I was still up reading—guess I didn't hear the phone."

He hung up the receiver, but it was several moments before he withdrew his hand from the hook as he continued to gaze into space. . . . .

Suddenly the Judge turned in his chair and pointed to the corner of the rug on which he had seen the blood-spot.

"I took it to a chemist," he said with a whimsical smile, "and they told me it was paint. You remember my house was being repainted at that time."

"But what about this coin?" I asked, eager to know its connection with the story.

With a gesture of apology, he resumed:

"That same night the house burned down and the executor of Bottonfield's will gave me that coin. It was found in the ruins after the fire."

She took the ring off and flipped it in my direction.

The Thinker

A new and specially diverting tale of Ed the garage mechanic and his Caroline, beloved because he could never tell what she would say or throw next.

By CALVIN BALL

Illustrated by F. J. Hoban

PEOPLE who are figuring to go into matrimony usually practise up for such an event by doing a little trial fighting beforehand, and myself being no exception, and having a fiancée named Caroline, I finds myself in trouble a while ago.

How it happened was that Caroline kept harping to me on the subject of why don't I try to boom up business in the garage. As I am only a mechanic in this garage which her father owns, I told her he is the one to boom it. This kept up for a good many days.

She had a chance to pick at me because I board with the family, and as it's a country garage they live upstairs over it. She finally got a habit of spending evenings telling me new ideas on how to drum up more business, not listening when I told her I was already overworked, and when I ask her why didn't she talk about it to Herman,—Herman being her father,—she said he wouldn't listen to her advice as he didn't have confidence that she had a sound head. I told her I had confidence that she had one, and this was the point where there was a flare-up; and after a good many other facts were stated between us, she at last took off the ring and flipped it back in my direction.

The aim was bad and it hit the floor, rolling into the corner back of the bookstand, and from then on it stayed there, while a refrigerator atmosphere settled down between us on the subject. Every day I would look to see if it's still there, and she would also look on the quiet, nobody speaking except when it's necessary, until it finally comes to be a serious question of who is going to pick up the ring.

In a week Caroline hints in a roundabout manner that she would accept it back if I would pick it up, but on account she was the one that put it there, I insists she had to do the picking up herself, because

I don't believe in anybody being stubborn.

WHILE the ring circumstance was dragging along, a new stranger drifted through, named Ralph. Plenty of hobo ramblers go footing it through, most of them looking for farm work—but not looking too hard or they might find it—and as the tree in front of the garage is an ideal location for a afternoon nap, there is usually somebody under it. That's how we caught Ralph.

He was holding down the shade for several days, circling around like a clock, keeping the tree between himself and the sun, and at meal-times doing his cooking in a tin can, because the less a man has in the U. S. A. the lazier he is allowed to be. It gives me a tired feeling to see anybody loafing while a mechanic like myself has to put in full time tooling a wrench, and when I squints through the door one noontime and sees the sleep wizard is beginning to stir around, I walks over toward him. By the time I got there he was sitting up in the grass, running his fingers through his hair and blinking his eyes in a sleepy way.

A close-up showed him to be a small one, and skinny. About five feet tall, I judged, but still looking able to stand a day's work, provided somebody was slick enough to talk him into it. I figured his age at twenty-some.

When he heard footsteps he twists his head in a slow manner, at the same time yawning, and after taking his time about it, says, "Good-morning!"

"Things look restful around here," I remarks. "You oversleep?"

"A man needs plenty of sleep," he answers, fastening his eye on me and doing another arm stretch. "It looks like a nice day."

"A few minutes more and you'd have clean missed it," I says. "I'm not disturbing you, am I?"

He lifts up a hand with the palm out, which looked like some kind of a signal meaning "no."

"The sun's warming up, and I'm about ready to chase up a little something to eat," he tells me. "I been thinking about going to work."

"You seem to be thinking it over in a thorough way," I says, "as I been looking at you for a couple of days. Don't jump at any job too hasty."

His eyes blinked kind of skeptical, like he's not sure whether I mean it, but seems to take me serious.

"I wouldn't move hasty," he agrees. "It don't pay to hustle yourself into something thoughtless. The time to think is beforehand, and take plenty of time."

"You're doing that O. K.," I says. "The grass is wearing a little thin out here; you figuring on putting in another night?"

"The fact is, I've about come to a decision," he answers; "and if the boss sent you over to ask about it you can tell him I'll be ready to start work this afternoon as promised."

At first I didn't see what he meant. The Weary-Willy attitude always ruffles me pretty bad, and I had been ready to treat him to a free lecture on enemies of society and what is a parasite, as I been reading up on the subject lately, but the crack about starting work was a statement that got my attention.

"What boss you referring to?" I inquires.

"The garage boss. He was at me yesterday to go to work."

For a minute I stands there without speaking. Herman has been promising long enough to get another mechanic to help me, and I now remember what he said this morning about having his eye on a good man for the place. When he said it I figured he meant some lively nut-spreader from Junction City; and I patted myself on the back, thinking how I would be easing out of the rough jobs from now on. It never struck me he'd pick a wash-out like this one. I narrows down my eyes at him.

"Are you telling me you're the one the boss has hired?"

"We had a agreement to such effect."

I FOLDS up my arms and looks him over. Unless I've lost my gift of good judgment he was the hobo type which never works except when they work you out of a meal and keep going, and what Herman's idea could be in hiring such a misfit was harder to know than who killed the cock-eyed robin.

Some rough statements popped into my head, but I kept myself from saying them, figuring that Herman was the proper party to talk to, and also it doesn't pay to go jumping at strangers, even when they're small ones, as I have found out from experience.

"It's a job which means work," I says, pointed-like.

"I'll fit in," he tells me with another yawn. "I'm not so much on the heavy work, but am good in the thinking line."

"You're also pretty fair in the sleeping line," I says. "This will be a big change for you; we set the alarm clock at six."

The personal feeling about loafers was beginning to show itself in my voice, so deciding the best plan was to leave him before a conflict blows up, I turns back toward the shop.

NOBODY being in the garage, I walks through and upstairs to the rooms where the family lives, and like I expected, Herman was in the dining-room taking it easy with a newspaper. He takes a slant at me around the side of it.

"Herman," I says to him, "did I hear you mention this morning about you're hiring a new man to help out?"

He shakes the paper, and as he folds it up he coughs in a guilty way.

"The fact is, I already hired one," he tells me finally.

"Who did you hire, Herman?"

"Well, it's a young man named Ralph who I met lately."

When Herman sees I'm standing there waiting for further facts he tosses the paper on the table.

"The truth about it, Ed," he says, "is that Ralph is the one who has been resting up in front of the shop the last couple of days; and I expect you'll kick about it, because when it comes to kicking you never miss a chance."

I moves in front of Herman with my eyes on him square, and from the way he wont look at me it's plain he felt guilty about the bird he has hired.

"When it comes to kicking I wouldn't miss a chance, Herman," I says; "especially when it's a tramper like the one in front. He is a professional hobo, Herman, and for every day's work he does it'll take somebody two days to make him."

Herman holds up a hand at me.

"I don't expect him to do much work, Ed. What we need him for is to think, and that's Ralph's special line. The garage isn't showing the profits it ought to, as you already know, and what he claims is that it needs brains. And as that's the kind of work he's experienced at, I figure it's worth while giving him a trial."

"You think the cuckoo can use his head?"

"There's nobody else around here who can, Ed, and I talked with him long enough so I feel sure about it. Caroline has also looked him over, and as she's been interested in this subject, she insists to let him try. He already mentioned that half the machines which stop here for gas don't know we got a garage inside because there's no sign up in front to tell them. So I phoned a painter in Junction City and we'll get a sign up quick, and it'll be a big one. It'll mean more business and jump up profits. He's got other ideas also, and will think up new ones as we go along. Unless I miss my guess we'll be taking in plenty of extra repair work, and business is ready for a boom."

I looks over Herman close.

"Who's going to do all this extra repair work, providing it comes in?" I questioned.

Herman kind of rubs his chin and fastened his eye on the end of my shoe.

"I was thinking you'd get along for a while, Ed, doing a little work of evenings, and the new man helping some, and later we'll see."

"Herman," I says, "this game of me doing all the work has been going on for a long time, and if you think it's going to be a friendly situation with somebody sitting around on salary thinking up new ways to keep me moving, then you could guess at it again. But don't think I'm kicking. It's your garage, and I'm only explaining my attitude, which I could give you a tip that if I resign it will happen sudden."

When I gets back to work in the garage I was in a state of mind where it wouldn't take much to make me mad.

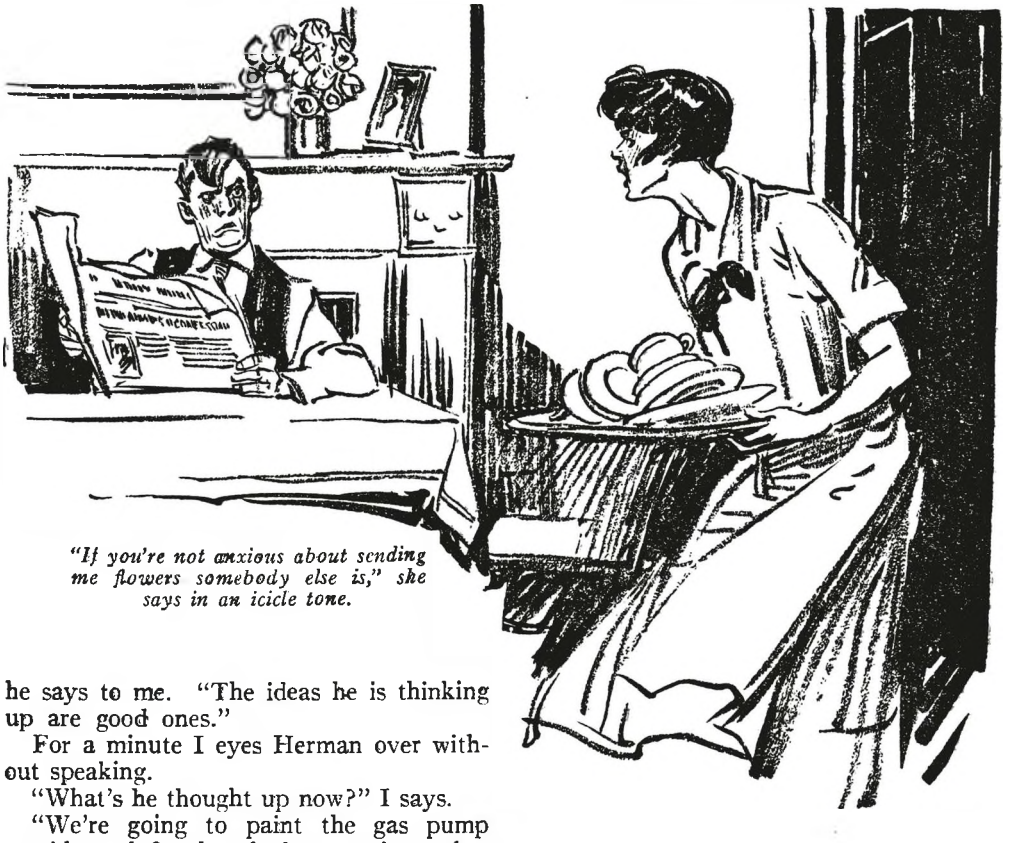
At one o'clock while my attention was buried in a carburetor, the door clicks and the heavyweight thinker slid into the room. Fiddling on with the carburetor job, I watches him out of the edge of my eye as he strolls around running his eyes over the tool equipment and in general sizing up what kind of a layout he is in.

With slow motions he reached the spot where I was working and stands kind of listless, looking on. I keeps my gaze on the work and didn't look up. He takes a long breath once or twice which I thought he was going to say something, but it being a effort to talk, he at last drifts past me into a opposite corner where he settles himself into a chair and lights up a cigarette.

Aside from a little finger movement when he rolls and lights up a new cigarette, he showed no action. Later on Herman walks in and for some time sits down beside

him talking in a earnest way but in low tones. From the way Herman was waving his hands, though, it was plain he was interested, and when he afterwards stopped at my bench he had a pleased expression on his face.

"It looks like we have made a find, Ed," he says to me. "The ideas he is thinking up are good ones."



"If you're not anxious about sending me flowers somebody else is," she says in an icicle tone.

For a minute I eyes Herman over without speaking.

"What's he thought up now?" I says.

"We're going to paint the gas pump outside and fix the platform so it catches the eye. Neatness is what attracts customers, Ed, and means a big percentage. We been too slack on appearances, and you can see this advice is sound."

"Did he think up who's going to do this pump painting?" I asked.

Herman looks down at the cheroot which he is rolling between his fingers.

"We'll get along," he says; "I could lend a hand myself if it's needed, which I hardly think is necessary, Ed, as you'll have some spare time Sunday."

"I thought so!" I says. "Has he thought up any others?"

"We'll keep you posted on changes which are coming, Ed. A special discount on overhaul jobs is a point which we'll have handbills printed to that effect—also lay in tourist goods for sale, as that's another profit we been missing. It's a turning juncture for the garage, Ed, and the foundation of it is somebody who can think."

It's not my nature to have a jealous streak in me when I see somebody else working up a success, but I will say that during the two weeks the thinking wonder named Ralph was getting his hand in, I came around to a attitude which was not friendship. I noticed he didn't get his hand into any grease. His plan was to sit around and boom business—and Herman backed him up.

At first I figured the cuckoo ideas would turn out to be the kind of bunk schemes that looks good when you say it, but never works out practical, but I got to admit something began to stir up business.

The idea to make a free camping-ground came in his head along toward the end of the first week, and when he got it going with tourist cars parking overnight beside us, and Ralph out among them evenings talking them into overhaul jobs and why don't they buy new tires, also passing around bargain price lists on repairs, the

business took a upward bound which surprised me. This business increase was O. K. for Herman, but for me the more it boomed the deeper I got in overtime labor. I finds myself spending meal hours with a wrench in one hand and a sandwich in the other, and knocking off at night so late, and starting mornings so early, that I had to wiggle fast to keep the two from meeting. In between-times I would grab a minute for a quick look back of the book-stand, but the days kept going on and she didn't pick it up yet.

Things came to a limit when Ralph at last thinks out the plan of a loose hose on the gas pump so when a machine stops to fill up there's a delay on my hands long enough for him to distribute handbills and talk hard on the subject of special prices.

After a half-day of this game I corners Herman in the garage.

"Herman," I says, "if this thinking weasel could handle a chisel the way he can sprout up new ideas we wouldn't be six days' work behind in our turn-out, and going on seven. Things are coming to a crisis stage with me, Herman, as it's now at the point where I don't have time to dash upstairs for sleeping purposes until it's time to wash for breakfast, and if this is what you call a business boom you can go ahead from now on and good luck!"

Herman opens up his eyes at me surprised.

"What you mean, Ed? You quitting again?"

"It is permanent, Herman, and this is one time when I mean it."

"You've been saying that right along, Ed."

"And there's only one reason why I didn't do it," I says; "and you know what reason that is."

"Which one?" he asks.

"I mean Caroline," I says; "if I didn't have any plans about getting married to her, you wouldn't catch me in the same neighborhood with a expert trouble-maker like the one you've got named Ralph."

Out of his vest pocket Herman fishes up a loose-leaf cheroot of the special seven-cent variety which he smokes, and holding it out towards me he treats me to one of the smiles which he uses to spread out oil on water.

"Why don't you calm yourself down, Ed," he says to me, "and light up a cigar so you could smoke into a better frame of mind?"

"I couldn't do it with this brand, Herman," I says; "and seven cents' worth of cheroots is not going to pull wool any longer on my eyes."

Herman had his eye on me in a keen way, and from the manner I was spattered with grease and the tone of voice I spoke in, I saw he was beginning to understand I meant business.

"I'm always ready, Ed, to do the square thing in a level way," he tells me, "and if you claim there is too much work piling on you it will be fair for me to hire on a extra mechanic. When I drive into Junction City this week I will try to look up help; and so you should be satisfied, Ed, as this is very handsome."

He holds out the match he has lighted, insisting I've got to puff, which I didn't want to do, but went ahead anyhow, as when Herman talks like this anybody knows how it is.

HERMAN sure is an artist at smoothing things out with me, and the future promises about getting help might have been a success like it has been many other times in the past, except that in the evening I found something in the dining-room which looked to me like I am past the limit. If my eyes didn't fool me it was a bunch of hothouse posies!

It was standing on the chimney shelf where Caroline keeps a picture of herself, and as I have a good head for seeing through things it didn't take long to figure out that somebody has been making flower advancements to Caroline, and with the way Ralph has been stepping out lately in sport model coats and fancy ties, and hanging around evenings when Caroline was present, it was a clear fact that he was the guilty hairpin.

Caroline was rustling dishes on the table, and in a busy way moving back and forth to the kitchen, not paying much attention to me on account the ring is still there, and she has got plenty of independence.

When she finally stopped in the room I looks up over the paper I was reading, and in a casual way makes a hint on the new decoration of flowers.

"It looks kind of fancy," I says to her, at the same time turning over a leaf and shaking up the paper like I'm not so much interested in flowers.

She didn't answer, but from the quick look she gave the flower bunch it was clear she caught the meaning; so after folding

over a couple more pages I adds on another statement.

"You probably been buying flowers," I suggests.

Caroline finally answers, but it was in the kind of cold-water tone which has been the habit since the ring disagreement started.

"*I* didn't buy them," she says. "They were given to me."

She kept on moving dishes as though the point is not important.

"Maybe a gift from Herman," I mentions.

"Maybe," she says.

"This doesn't sound definite," I says.

"Are you interested about it?"

"I have got curiosity."

She turns around to go into the kitchen, but at the doorway she stops.

"I haven't been seeing any flowers with your name on them of late, Ed," she says to me in the same icicle tone; "but you could be sure that if you're not anxious about sending me flowers then somebody else always is."

When she swung shut the door it banged harder than usual, and by adding on this fact to other things, it gave me a nervous feeling that the disagreement was turning out more serious than I expected. I takes another peek back of the book-stand, as I noticed she had been moving furniture and cleaning, but the ring's still there, and the floor swept up to within a inch on all sides of it. It would be a simple thing for her to pick it up, but it's a miracle how stubborn-minded some people can be.

My principle always is that the best way to settle up trouble with the opposite gender is to stay independent until they finally make a overture of peace. It has worked with Caroline up to date, but when a fox like Ralph is wedging himself into the family circle and now starting the flower racket, it's a case for quick action, because it's bad enough to have the thinker type shoving you into second garage place without also starting a matrimony freeze-out. At the same time, I didn't touch the ring, as that's the way I am.

I COULD hear Herman downstairs where he was hammering at something, and while I am not the kind who runs to the boss every time a new trouble starts, I figured it was a emergency where something had to be done. Seeing me in the door Herman straightens up from his work looking surprised to see me.

"You back again?" he questions.

"It's an important matter, Herman," I tells him, "which concerns a domestic future, and I know you wouldn't get an impression that I am all the time complaining."

"You keep up a good average, Ed; what kind of a kick are you up to now?"

Herman switches the cheroot stub to the other side, rolling it around like he does when he's doubtful. The subject had to be broke on him, and I figured the short way is the easy one.

"Herman," I says to him, "the question about this thinker individual has gone deeper than anybody figured. There is a development upstairs that would surprise you, Herman; the truth about it is that somebody is sending bouquets to Caroline, and it's a plain case who he is."

For a lengthy period Herman stands looking at me.

"Well, Ed," he says finally, "is it a law against sending flowers to somebody?"

"Then you admit Ralph is the one!"

"Maybe he is, Ed. Could I stop it?"

"Have you forgot, Herman, that Caroline and me have a long-standing agreement on getting married, and do you favor a skin-game cut-in like this?"

Twisting his face into a kind of frozen smile, Herman stretched out his arms like a speaker.

"Are you blaming me about it, Ed?"

"You are the one who is paying wages to keep this Ralph wonder around, and what I am now asking for, Herman, is a plain statement from you on whether Ralph is the son-in-law prospect, or is it me?"

Herman drops down his hands.

"This is one time, Ed, where you're kicking to the wrong party."

I feels myself flare up.

"I know the right party to kick," I says, "and he's one of the thinker type. I been playing this game long enough, Herman, and the time is here when Ralph and me have got to come to a understanding. Where is he?"

Herman shrugs his shoulders.

"All right, Ed. He's outside by the camping-ground drumming up more business; but remember, Ed, he is one of small size, and don't let me hear you getting rough."

The gas pump platform which stands between the garage and the camping-ground is a favorite loafing-place for Ralph while he burns up cigarettes and thinks. I

finds him sitting there leaning comfortable against the pump stand and breaking the rule about smoking on top of gasoline, but on account he had his eyes half closed when I stopped in front of him he didn't recognize it was me until I mentions it.

"I'm doing a little planning," he speaks up; "and didn't see you on account my thoughts was in the air."

"If you drop some of that fire around here," I says, "there'll be other things besides thoughts in the air. Is this a plan about work?"

"It's my latest one, and a winner if it works out."

"I am the one it will maybe work out," I says, "and I have come to a conclusion, Ralph, that you have gone far enough."

I was looking at him in a hard way, and as this was a new manner of speaking to him, and rough, he seems a little puzzled. Flipping some ashes into the grass he waits for a further statement.

"You are getting out of the business field," I continues; "and from certain signs on a shelf upstairs it looks like a personal situation."

HE stops moving all at once, still holding the cigarette out in the air, and his eyes kind of blinking at me. "What certain signs you referring to?" he inquires.

"It's no use running around the bush, Ralph, and when somebody has a assertion to make it's a good policy to say it plain. You're starting a bouquet racket for Caroline—is this a fact or isn't it?"

His face didn't change expression, as he's got a poker one anyhow, but with a keen eye for such matters I saw it was a touchy point, and the careless tone of speaking didn't fool me.

"Which racket about Caroline you referring to?" he asked.

"I mean the freeze-out racket," I says, "and you ought to know, as you're working it. Maybe nobody's mentioned the fact, but I was a old-timer here a good while before you drifted in, and when you start handing out flower presents to a certain party upstairs, it's time you added another sign to your collection, which you could mark it, *No Trespass.*"

He gets a hurt smile on him as he shakes his head.

"Do you take flowers serious, Ed? It's just a indication of being polite, the same as the other time when I sent a box of bonbon goods."

I opens up my eyes.

"You been giving candy presents!" I exclaims.

"What is the difference?"

It was news to me about the bonbon goods, as Caroline certainly must have kept it out of sight, but the fact that he's been trying these tricks was enough for me.

"Look here, Ralph," I says; "I don't know what kind of a underhand campaign you're trying, but if there's any more secret facts about Caroline, this is the chance to speak up, and do it quick."

His eyes get round.

"Is this a threat? Because if it is, Ed, I didn't think you were this kind. You don't speak to Caroline except when necessary, and now you're kicking about somebody who does. It looks something like a dog in a manger, Ed, and it wont work with me, because I will tell you the truth that I have already asked a certain question of Caroline; and now you have got the facts."

I stares down at this undersized individual, and for a time couldn't catch up a normal breath. It didn't look reasonable that things have gone so far. When I at last spoke, it was in a ugly tone.

"What certain question you mean?"

"It's a question which she's going to give a answer tomorrow."

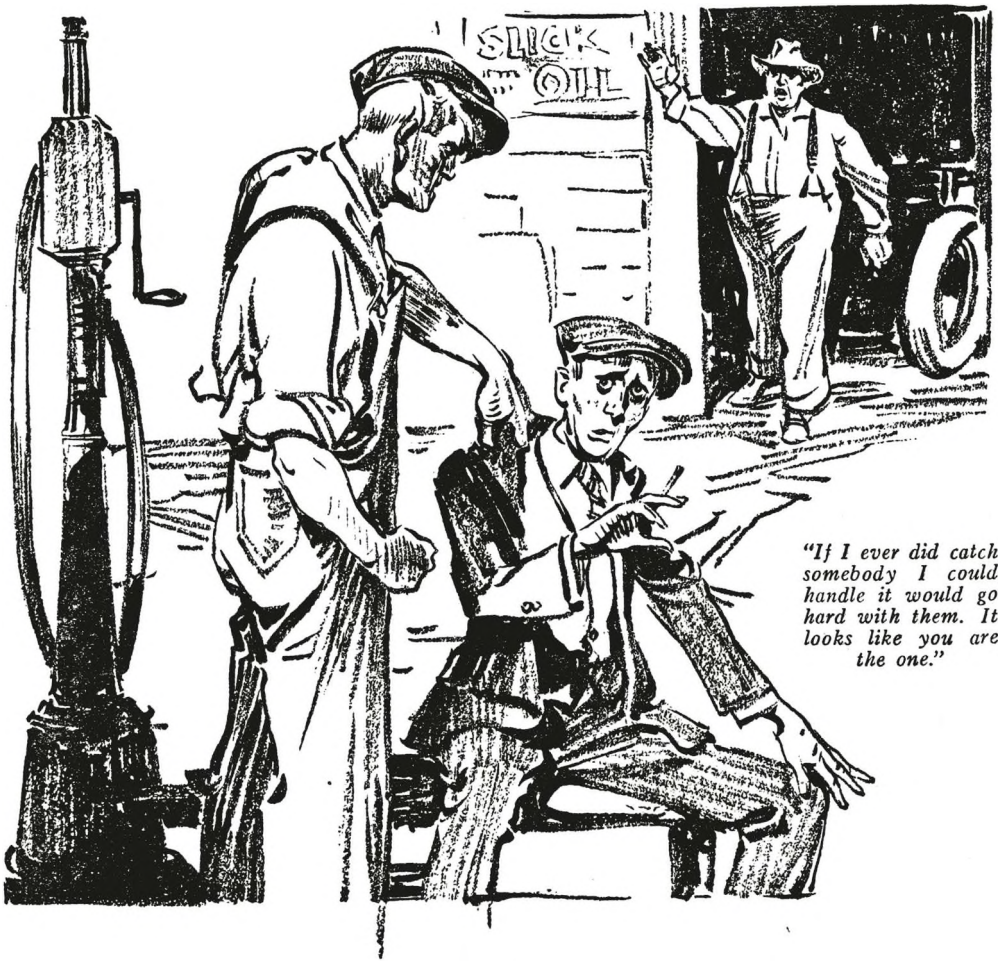
"A question about matrimony?"

"You have guessed it correct," he says.

It is a fact that I didn't think Ralph was speaking the truth at this point, or there would have been a quicker explosion than there was. Having been in the mechanic trade a good while, I've had plenty trouble with different crookers about one thing and another, but as I am one of small size myself, everybody who comes along is big enough to whale me, and many have. It was a new experience to have a five-footer and skinny trying to do me up, and lying in the bargain, and when I looks down at him I had a sudden feeling that it's a act of Providence with which I could even up a general score.

Without speaking about it I reaches down, and catching a grip under his collar I gives the coat a double twist, pulling him to his feet. He makes no protest, but his face settled into a scared look.

"This is a new event," I says rough. "I been claiming a long time that if I ever did catch somebody I could handle it would go hard with them, and it looks like you are the one."



"If I ever did catch somebody I could handle it would go hard with them. It looks like you are the one."

It would have been a hot time for Ralph, except that at this juncture my bad luck started. I hears a holler from the garage door where Herman must have been keeping a eye on me. By the time I slackened up on the coat collar Herman was beside me.

"So you would take a advantage like this, Ed!" he exclaims. "Jumping on a featherweight! I am surprised at you, Ed, and if this trouble is about Caroline, as I think it is, you are the one who is in the wrong."

I dropped my hands and let Ralph settle back to his seat against the standpipe, but I was mad in a thorough way, and Herman saw it.

"How do you figure *I* am the one who is wrong, Herman?"

"It wasn't my place to mention it before, Ed, but the fact is that matrimony is a personal deal, and I happened to have information that Ralph has already popped a question to Caroline, and tomorrow will get his answer. In such a circumstance you are stepping over the boundary line when you start grabbing people, and if you are as sharp as I think you are, you will settle up this fighting spirit and come down to a friendship understanding."

My tongue wouldn't wiggle, as I stands there looking from Herman to the platform shrimp. It's a well-known saying that women are a fickle class, but how Caroline could take up a interest in a drifting cuckoo like this was hard to understand. I am the kind, however, who can look a fact in the eye, and I have always got to give myself credit that in a emergency I can use my head. Herman was still waiting to see which way I'd jump, and the first thought that struck me was to throw him off the trail.

"This puts a new face on the question," I says, putting a mild tone in my voice.

Herman breathed like it's a relief.

"I thought you'd take such a view, Ed."

"It's a free country," I continues, keeping up the bluff that I was satisfied; "and if the Ralph and Caroline situation is like

you say it is, then I am the first one to say shake a hand."

This line of talk kind of convinced Herman that the trouble was settled, and as I was beginning to show a friendly attitude toward Ralph, Herman finally goes back in the garage.

WHEN he was out of sight I turns to this weasel Ralph, and still using a friendly tone, I suggests to him we could take a stroll and settle up the fine points. He looked kind of skeptical at first, but I persuades him, and we started across the field in a general direction toward a grove of trees the other side of the flats.

It is not my nature to have a mean disposition, and so far as I can remember I have never lifted a hand against anybody of smaller size than myself. But the fair-play rule is one that has exceptions like all others, and in the present circumstance it looked to me like a case where a individual would be justified in some direct action without rules; and also as I have been caught for a goat myself many times in the past, with nobody mentioning about fair rules, I figured Ralph could do the same.

We keeps up a friendly conversation till we got to the grove, and when we turns the bend so the trees are between us and the garage, I finally slackened down the pace and looks around. Ralph was beginning to notice that we had turned into a lonely spot. When he observes the garage is out of sight and nobody visible but ourselves, he brings himself to a stop.

"Maybe we'd better start back," he suggests.

"It wouldn't be necessary," I says.

"Where we going?"

"We wouldn't have to go any farther," I says; "as this spot looks O. K. to me."

It being evening it was getting pretty dark by this time, but was still light enough so I could see that Ralph was bleaching a shade or two paler. He had his cap in his hand, and from the way he twisted at it, he must have been nervous.

"Ralph," I says, "you have probably noticed we have got ourselves into a location which is out of earshot, and it is now a painful duty to tell you that somebody is in for a spell of bad luck which would surprise you."

He was by this time beginning to see through matters, and when he starts edging backward like at any minute he might break and run, I steps in front of him.

"Who you mean?" he questions in a squeaky tone.

"I wouldn't mention any names," I says; "but if you are the high-power thinker you claim to be, you might be able to think it out for yourself, except that in this case you will not have time."

Being close to him I had again got my fingers twisted up in the sport model, and this time nobody near to holler I am jumping on a featherweight.

IT was a surprise at this point when Ralph gets a sudden attack of the shakes, and maybe I didn't hear any teeth rattle but it sounded like it; anyway all at once he was talking fast like they do in a third degree, giving out a set of facts which opened up my eyes.

"—And I am a goat," he adds on at the end; "because Caroline is the one who got me hired, and also she's the one who's doing this thinking and not me, and Herman takes her ideas serious when he thinks they are coming from a expert like me, which I am not a expert, so let go my collar."

I tightens up the hold, his necktie getting mixed into it and wrinkled, but not stopping for details.

"What about the flower bunch?" I demands.

"She gave me the money to buy them and also the bonbon goods."

"Did you ask her a question as claimed?"

"It's her orders that I had to hint to you about I asked this question, which it's a fact I didn't ask it, and I don't know the reason except she says if it don't make you pick it up, then she don't know what will—and could you loosen up, as the coat wont stand it tighter."

I drops my hand, because when a individual is as scared as Ralph was, he is certainly speaking truth.

"Ralph," I says, "the garage is in one direction, and the opposite way is the railroad track leading out of the country. Which way you think you better start?"

"The railroad track," he says quick.

So that's how it happened Ralph disappeared kind of sudden, but I never gave the facts to Caroline; and when I returns to the garage I at last picked up the ring, which settled the matter permanent. I always claim you have got to humor the opposite gender—and if it's necessary supply bonbon goods besides.

"She'll run to three or four million, sterling, just as she floats. I say! If pirates hadn't gone out of fashion—what?"

Illustrated by Ellsworth Young

The Cargo Boat

By

STEPHEN HOPKINS ORCUTT

This latest of Mr. Orcutt's "Tales of the Merchant Marine" has one of those exceptionally ingenious plots and dramatic climaxes that have made these stories so notably attractive. Mr. Orcutt knows the sea and sailor-men well—and the fine art of story-telling.

THIS story properly begins on a sultry morning when the latest addition to the Oriental Fleet of the P. & O. had passed Sabang, at the top of Sumatra, and was heading down Malacca Strait for Singapore.

In a corner of the upper deck, at some little distance from the other deck-chairs, three men were comfortably smoking, taking an occasional glance at the Sumatran shoreline through prism-binoculars. They were middle-aged men, dressed in excellent taste—apparently men of affairs and comfortable bank-accounts. To all but a keen student of human nature—such, for example, as some one of the Indian secret service—they gave the impression of education and breeding. The secret-service man, though admitting all this, would perhaps reserve a mental opinion that some bygone ancestor in each family might have been a buccaneer of the Spanish Main. Presently one of them focused his glass upon a good-sized cargo-boat coming up the Strait.

"That's the James Weir house-flag and funnel—from her size, probably the *Argulema*. When we were at Colombo, she was reported loading at Penang with rubber for London. She's loaded down to her Plimsoll, too! I say, you chaps—any idea what that boat is worth, just as she steams?"

"Must be seven thousand tons, I'd say—carrying a bit more than that, deadweight. If it's all rubber—well, it would run into money, I fancy—a million or so, at least."

"You'd have done better to figure a bit with your pencil, Crawsby. Including the boat herself, she'll run to three or four million, sterling, just as she floats—an' Lloyd's pocket a neat sum for insurance, at that. I say! If the jolly old pirates hadn't gone out of fashion—what? Capture that boat on the high seas, transfer the rubber—an' tell the Master to go hunt for another cargo! What?"

"What good would all that rubber be to a pirate? He's not in trade—can't go into any civilized port—where could he sell it?"

"London! Hamburg! New York!"

"Stolen rubber? Openly?"

"Why not? A jolly lot of the rubber shipped from the Straits an' Eastern Archipelago has been stolen once or twice before it gets on board a ship. How could one possibly identify it?"

"But the ship's manifest would show from what port it was shipped! Without the proper documents, nobody would risk buying it—"

"With the demand for rubber what it is today? Price goin' up all the time! Why, man—load it from scows or cascoes at any little coast *barrio* in the Islands, in small quantities, an' get the nearest consular agent to fill in a certificate saying you got it from one of the Malay sultans! There's enough wild rubber all through the Islands to account for small shipments."

HERE the third man interposed: "Aye—but it has a diff'rent appearance from the cultivated Straits latex—"

"Oh, fake it, man—fake it as the Malays do! Just a little smear of top rubber over the pancake, or smoke it a bit. The shipping takes a bit more thinking to get by the customary red-tape—but it's bein' done every little while with other things more diffic'lt to handle than rubber. You could land rubber anywhere in the United States an' get a bigger price than in London, unless I'm entirely astray on what I've heard concernin' the demand over there. But of course the proper way to do it would be to have your ship's papers in shape to enter any of the big ports and discharge wherever your supposed consignee wished to have it for transshipment."

"Hmph! The more you go into it, Kempton, the more it looks like a possible speculation—after you've taken the stuff from the other boat! That would take some doing, I fancy!"

"Oh, well, if you really care about going into ways and means, suppose we block out a tentative scheme, just to pass the time. Nothin' else to do this hot morning, have we? At the start, we know exactly what stake we're playing for—three or four million, sterling. There'll be no gettin' around *that,* because it's cold fact! If we were sitting in at any card-game in the smoking-room, we'd naturally have to put up a bit of cash for the chips before we could play at all. Very good! In this rubber game, the chips would be—what? Let's consider that.

"In the first place, there'd have to be a man fairly well known at some of the larger banks in London as a person of affairs, handling quite a bit of American business. Crawsby could fill those qualifications easily enough and work it so that no complicity could be proved against him afterward.

"Next, there would need to be a package of first-class securities worth from ten to twenty thousand pounds, to offer as collateral to be held by some bank in escrow to bind the purchase; returned by the bank to the purchaser when he has paid over the purchase-money on bills-of-lading at port of delivery before he gets the rubber. Either of us three could put up the twenty thousand pounds in securities. Divided in three, it wouldn't break us if we lost—"

"But, I say, Kempton! Do we understand that, if I'm that London agent, I actually agree to pay over three or four million sterling on delivery of the rubber?"

"The American syndicate you represent does, of course."

"But all three of us don't run to such a sum as that!"

"If the bills-of-lading are not presented at port of delivery an' no rubber reaches there for delivery—well, the syndicate pays nothing until it does reach there—naturally. No delivery, no pay! An' the agent's collateral returned to him by the London bank, eh?"

"But, I say! Where the deuce is the rubber, you know?"

"Snitched en route—after the time-honored custom of pirates."

"And that'll take a bit of doing also!"

"Say fifteen thousand Straits dollars for a gang of Malays who'll fight anything for a hundred, each, an' never know what becomes of the rubber; add twenty thousand more for time-charter on our steamer, with crew who'll keep their mouths shut because we can probably transfer the stuff without their knowing just how crooked the transaction is—have the Malays take it in cascoes to some little *barrio* where it'll look as though it came down from the Sultan's trees in the regular way. We might eliminate the Malays altogether as fightin' men—fancy I could use 'em in a way that seems far better. At all events, say the chips are likely to cost the pirates a matter of forty thousand pounds, all told,—half of

which they'd quite possibly get back,—to win four millions, sterling. I'd say that at even fifty thousand for chips it looks worth the gamble—an' a few thousands more would make the scheme almost fireproof."

So much for the casual, chance way the thing started—neither of the three men really in earnest at the time—but chewing over the possibilities in it, a few months before any part of the plan began to affect the ship or the people this story is chiefly about.

THE cargo-boat *Argentine Liberator* had been loading rubber for London off the few nipa houses and godowns which called themselves the port of Lauang, up the Peninsula—the shipping point for the Malay State of Bungi-Trelak and, sometimes, the neighboring interior states. Three thousand tons of top rubber had come from the Sultan's plantations and two thousand more from his neighbors—all consigned to his London agent, who usually sold his shipments long before they arrived. It had taken ten days to get all the rubber down from the plantations and stowed in the *Argentine's* holds, but Captain Connyngsby expected to get away by midnight of the last day.

During the loading the Captain and his officers, with some of the passengers, had accepted the Sultan's invitation to run up for a night at the latter's palace forty miles back from the coast, going up in small parties on different days. His Highness afterward came down for a last dinner on board—but when he did turn up in his motorcar, it was with news of business changes which completely upset the steamer's itinerary. Going up at once to Connyngsby's cabin, he showed him a cable from his London agent—a message which the Captain didn't fully grasp at first.

"He's sold your rubber for a first-chop profit—aye. Well, you'll find no fault with that, I fancy—eh?"

"Scarcely. But you're overlooking the port of delivery, old chap! 'Delivered f. o. b. San Francisco—drafts in exchange for bills-of-lading on delivery.' "

"But—my word! That means that you're to pay the freights—just about double the rates to London—and transship there to a Panama boat!"

"You're daffy, man! You've not got it yet! This rubber is not going to London at all! It's been sold for delivery at San Francisco, via the Pacific—"

"Oh, the deuce! You mean that we have to unload the stuff again an' leave it here—go to Colombo empty except for the China stuff an' pick up anything we can get on the way home?"

"Nothing as bad as that, I hope. It's up to your owners, Brock and Company. I want you to have the cargo and my agent is trying to arrange so that you do get it. He understands that side of it perfectly—in fact, he knows Sir Jason quite well and has gone up to Liverpool for a conference with him—"

Just then Fowler, the third mate and radio-operator, came up to the Captain's door with a message which he had received from Liverpool, relayed from the big Singapore station. Connyngsby read it over twice before he comprehended all of the changes in his movements.

CONNYNGSBY—STR. *Argentine Liberator*
LAUANG, MALAY PENINSULA.
Transfer China cargo for London to *Peruvian Liberator*, Singapore—passengers if desired. Proceed San Francisco with rubber —via Philippine port designated by shipper sailing Singapore. He loads hemp and sugar in vacant cargo-space.
BROCK & CO., LIVERPOOL.

"My word! With the detour, that makes the mileage a bit over what it would be to London via Suez—you'll pay us a thousand or so more in freights!"

"Too small to consider against the price I'm getting in San Francisco—but it's a bit better for you than if you took it to London; and my agent agreed with Brock that he would pay the cost of transshipping the China stuff at Singapore, also any refund which may be claimed on passage-money."

DINNER was lively that evening, inasmuch as the total change in the boat's movements upset the passengers' arrangements to some extent and caused considerable discussion.

They were told that the *Peruvian Liberator* was only a year older than the *Argentine*, and about the same size, with passenger accommodations fully as comfortable and that, even with their number added, her list was not yet entirely full. (The agents, of course, had asked for radio advices as to just how many were transferring.)

Miss Betty Stevens, who had been ordered off on six months' vacation to avoid a nervous breakdown, and a Mr. Fernshaw of London—a confidential agent for Lloyd's

—were the only two left of the original passengers who had sailed from New York, and had expected to go in different directions after reaching London.

Fernshaw, of course, was subject to cabled orders from Lloyd's when any special case came up in which his services were needed—but his movements were left a good deal to his own discretion as time had proved that, on one steamer or another, he often smoked out plots for criminally obtaining marine insurance which would have cost the underwriters millions, if successful.

With Miss Stevens, it was merely a question of where she preferred spending the rest of her vacation, which was scarcely more than half over. So it took the two of them but a moment or two for their decision to remain on board, as far as San Francisco anyway, which would leave them but five days from New York or twelve from London, if they concluded to disembark then.

A married couple who had come aboard at Hongkong and were taking a year of recreation were surprised at this decision—then won over to staying aboard and continuing a cruise which, from the limited passenger accommodation, was more like yachting with friends than being merely passengers on a liner. The four, after some good-natured chaffing, persuaded a handsome widow of thirty—wealthy enough to go where she pleased—to join them, which left but three of the London passengers to be transferred at Singapore—much to the agents' surprise.

AFTER dinner, the Sultan prepared to say *au revoir* and return through the jungle forty miles to his capital, Bulangor—but Coffin, the acting-mate, demurred at this. Turning to the Captain, he said that with the change in destination it made no difference whether they pulled out for Singapore at midnight or after breakfast—and that it was too risky a proceeding for the Sultan to go that distance through pitch-black jungle roads in a motorcar. He had never attempted such a thing before—for like all of the Malay rulers, he had his enemies—and the jungle itself was full of dangerous animal and reptile life.

"Why not stay aboard us, Your Highness—in your old room with a steward specially detailed to wait on you? Then go up by daylight after we leave?"

The Captain endorsed this heartily, and the Sultan seemed pleased at the invitation.

"Why, thank you; I find that an attractive proposition, and we can discuss the change in plans more fully. —You were about to ask me something, Coffin?"

"If I've got the proposition straight, sir, it seems to me that the purchasers of your rubber have a cinch. You take all the risk of delivery—pay all the charges—and they don't put up a cent until the stuff is handed to them in Frisco. Your agent must have a lot of confidence in their responsibility!"

"Perhaps I forgot to mention that the purchasers have placed in escrow with the Bank of England, first-class securities amounting to twenty thousand pounds, to bind the purchase. If they default in payment or any part of the agreement, I retain my title to the rubber, undisputed, and they forfeit the securities. Of course no irresponsible speculator would have any such sum at his command to put up with a Bank as solid as the 'Old Lady of Threadneedle Street'—whose manager stands no nonsense from anybody! Can you see anything wrong with that arrangement?"

"No, I can't. That makes it look pretty straight. There's no question, then, that this boat is carrying something which is strictly and unquestionably your property until it is delivered and paid for in Frisco? Is that right?"

"Precisely. Any question that may come up, or any instructions asked, are referred to me directly. My bankers in San Francisco—correspondents of the Bank of England—are to receive the money in Captain Connyngsby's presence, and I'd appreciate it if you, and Swain, as purser, would accompany him as additional witnesses. That makes it iron-clad. One of you *might* die before he would be called upon to testify anything in relation to the matter—but it's not likely that all three will."

"Then I don't see but that Your Highness is fairly well protected. If anything happens to the ship, Lloyd's will reimburse you. And we're responsible to both in seeing that nothing serious *does* happen to her, within ordinary human reason. By the way, how does this Philippine shipper happen to know about our change in destination—and ask for tonnage to Frisco?"

"I don't know all the details myself—but my agent's cable gave me a fairly clear idea. He's instructed to spend a hundred dollars upon a cable any time rather than have it ambiguous. Naturally, he knew that he was upsetting Sir Jason's shipping

"Suppose the Argentine were captured at sea? Then there'd be no sixteen millions to pay!"

arrangements quite a lot, so he wished to present as much argument as possible in favor of the switch. Probably he went to the Maritime Exchange to find what was offering from the China Sea to the Pacific Coast, and found everything in sight already fixed by the American, Canadian and Japanese boats; then dug up this planter, who would appear to have quite a number of acres under cultivation on one of the still undeveloped islands in the Philippine group, and agreed to fix a couple of thousand tons for him—possibly all he has to ship just now. It's all quite clear and simple enough, is it not?"

"Seems to be, sir. We're satisfied if you are."

SINCE the Singapore agents had little time to advertise for passengers to San Francisco, they didn't book any—but two men came aboard for the short trip to Manila, en route. The Philippine planter turned up with his luggage before they had finished transferring the China shipment to the *Peruvian Liberator* at one of the Tanjong Pagar wharves—and when they pulled out, late in the afternoon, he came up to the chart-room with Captain Connyngsby to locate his shipping-point for the sugar and hemp.

"It'll be on the coast of Negros Oriental, as you see, Captain—about a third of the way down—twenty miles south of Hibayo, which is itself merely a *barrio* on Tañon Strait. Plenty of water all through. My plantations lie some ten miles back from the coast, at the foot of the hills. We float the stuff down a good-sized creek on bancas drawing not over two feet, loaded, and stow them on large cascoes at the mouth until our deep-sea tonnage comes along to pick it up. You can anchor in twenty fathoms, fairly close up, a couple of miles north of the creek, which has rather shoal bars at its mouth. There are but five little *barrios* in the fifty miles below Hibayo—one of which is the collection of huts for my peons where the creek comes down. I sent a radio to Bacalod two days ago that you would take the shipment—my comprador runs around the north end of the island once a week for mail and supplies—he'll get the message to McGovern, my manager, before you arrive. At least all of the hemp should be ready to load at once, an' I'm hoping we'll not delay you more than a couple of days getting the sugar down. Preferably, the sugar had best go in the lower hold—but you doubtless have a 'tween-deck in which you can be stowing the hemp."

The planter, Mr. Trumbull Clive, was a rather convincing person in a quiet, affable way. Garbed in well-cut white linen, he gave the appearance of being stout until one happened to stumble against him; then his supposed flesh proved to be muscular tissue as unyielding as oak. If the man were in as good condition as he seemed,

he would prove formidable in any mix-up—weighing, as he did, about fourteen stone. In the evening he asked Mrs. Bently, the handsome widow, if she played the piano, and he sang to her accompaniment in a rich and well-placed baritone.

The two passengers for Manila were strangers when they came on board, but Norgood had met the planter in the Tanglin Club upon one occasion and told the other passengers that while Clive had few acquaintances in Singapore, the impression was that he had been quite successful and stood very well with the banks.

All of this tended to establish Clive's status beyond question in the minds of everyone on board, except Miss Betty Stevens and the acting-mate, Ned Coffin, who were rather annoyed at themselves for doubting the man in the least; there was so obviously no reason for it. After dinner, with Singapore five hours behind them, Betty went up to her deck-chair, which she'd had the steward place in the farthest corner aft, where one of the quarter-boats somewhat obstructed her view—but prevented any of the other passengers from choosing a spot within hearing, if she lowered her voice. Presently Coffin came down from the bridge for his watch below, and sat for a while on the footrest of her chair —the two being thorough pals by this time.

"NED," remarked Betty, "I heard you telling the Sultan, just before he went ashore, that you and the Captain were satisfied with this deal if *he* was. You'd been digging into him rather persistently for details, too, if you remember. Well, I heard most of your talk and no doubt I'd have said the same thing myself. Yet I can't get the foolish idea out of my head—for some reason, I feel as though I were not satisfied!"

"H-m-m—you and I have a way of registering impulses from the same kind of a hunch, Betty! On any practical or theoretical basis, I can't see why His Highness isn't protected from any sort of likely contingency. But I seem to get a faint odor of something not quite right—as the man said when his car ran over a skunk. What the devil *is* it?"

"See here! When that stuff gets to Frisco, it will have to be transported at least a thousand miles before it reaches any collection of plants that consume crude rubber in any such chunks as five thousand tons. I'm quite familiar with all branches of rail-transportation in the United States and familiar with the usual commodities carried. John W. Hollis practically controls three big systems, himself—and, as you know, I'm his personal secretary, living on his private car for months sometimes. Now the purchasers of this rubber can't get rail-transportation anywhere near as low as ocean freights on five thousand tons. If they had a plant right there in San Francisco, there might be some sense in it, because they wouldn't have to pay any freight—"

"Where do you get that idea? The Sultan actually pays the freight, of course—but you can gamble that the 'overcoat' was in the bill when his London agent quoted his price to that syndicate. He naturally figured his profit on top of the c. i. f."

"Then by having it delivered at Frisco, they pay a little more freight than it would have cost them had we gone direct from Gibraltar to New York instead of London —and probably a lot more rail-freight than it would have cost them from New York! That Frisco delivery sticks in my mind! Before the rubber gets to a plant where it is going to be manufactured, the purchaser is going to pay one or two hundred thousand dollars more than if we had gone to New York via Suez and Gibraltar. Why? Admitting that the Americans are mighty short of rubber and paying whatever they have to pay to get it, I still can't see any reason why they should unnecessarily soak themselves those extra thousands!"

"Suppose the syndicate is building a big plant to manufacture tires, hose and motor-fittings in Frisco—or somewhere around the Bay? They'll have hydro-electric power in three of the cities within a year or so. Power from oil-engines is getting cheaper all the time."

"H-m-m—that's the only thing, Ned, that would make the deal plausible. Only it seems to me that Mr. Hollis would know of any such proposition if it were contemplated. As a matter of fact, I can't actually swear that some Pacific Coast enterprise isn't in position to chew up five thousand tons of crude rubber at this moment, but I haven't happened to hear of such a one."

"All right! We're both open-minded upon that point, and willing to be shown. But let's take the opposite side and see what it looks like. That purchasing syndicate has got to cough up to the Frisco bank

about sixteen million good American dollars before it gets this rubber. Do you believe that any combination of plants within a thousand miles of the Pacific Coast is in a financial position to hand over that amount for a single shipment of one commodity?"

"Suppose this syndicate is buying for speculation?"

"Then they're on the wrong side of the United States—as you so clearly figured out a moment ago! The point is—if no Western concern is in position to pay out sixteen millions for one shipment of rubber and if the syndicate is playing a losing proposition in San Francisco delivery—where's the joker in the deal? What's the object?"

"Suppose the *Argentine* were captured at sea, with passengers and crew landed in some out-of-the-way place? Then there'd be no delivery in San Francisco and no sixteen millions to pay; the syndicate would be 'waiting at the church'—possibly just as well satisfied, at that!"

"Betty, you've been reading too much Sabatini—we'll have to withdraw those books from the ship's library until you go ashore. Joking aside, though—I'm not so sure that it couldn't be done, by some such scheme as those fellows tried in coming after the Hongkong and Shanghai's gold shipment on the way up from Batavia. Of course that sort of thing is a negligible chance in these days, for it costs too much to carry it out. If it could be done—well, it would explain the whole deal—fit in every piece of the puzzle. It's rather a crazy hypothesis, though we haven't the slightest ground for it that I can see. . . . . I say! Let's go up and have a pow-wow with the Old Man in his cabin!"

WHEN they joined the Captain and put before him the discussion they'd had, just as it worked out, Connyngsby methodically filled his favorite pipe and lighted it, as he thought over one point after another which they had made.

"This deal is a bit unusual, of course—still, it's the sort of thing which is done perhaps oftener than one might think. When the Sultan explained it, I could see that if we still carried the cargo, any course but due east across the Pacific would be out of the question; freights would be simply prohibitive any other way. The question as to where it went after reaching San Francisco didn't come up—I never gave it a thought, for it was really none of my affair. But I fancy Miss Betty's not so far out in sayin' there'll be a thousand miles of rail-freights before the stuff gets where it's to be manufactured—an' that, d'ye see, begins to give the whole deal a somewhat diff'rent appearance. It's quite possible that some Yankee combination is contemplatin' putting up a very large plant near Frisco or Los Angeles—but if they do, they've still to pay big freights on the steel they use from the Eastern plants an' a good bit of coal aside from their hydro-electric power, when they get it. On the other hand, if it was never intended that our rubber should reach San Francisco at all, that would answer every question an' account for everything which seems odd about the deal. I'm not sayin' it's in the least probable—but, my word! I scarcely know what to think!"

"Suppose we figure that it really is going to be taken from us in some way, sir—and see if we can't work out a plan to prevent it?"

"Aye, Ned—it's but sound common sense to do that, at all events! First, then, as to our crew. We may depend upon our Lascars in any contingency, I fancy. They've been through cholera an' mutiny with us—tested forty ways. An' we've kept that chestful of automatics with which Finnston was goin' to arm the stokers when he tried to steal the Bank's gold shipment. At the first indication of another steamer gettin' too close, we can pass out those guns to the Lascars and any others we're sure of. Then we turned over the stokers an' stewards that Finnston bribed to the Hongkong authorities and shipped others in their places. Mac an' I personally examined each man we took on, an' looked up his references. They're a picked lot; I fancy we may depend upon 'em—the stewards also. Tommy Swain thinks he can answer for all of 'em. One of the cooks an' two pantrymen were given shore leave in Singapore before we went up to Lauang, and got into a fight—the cook was too badly knifed to leave the hospital before we cleared, but he sent a Jap in his place—a chap he'd known for some time an' worked with on another boat—happened to be in Singapore lookin' for a job. Swain questioned him pretty carefully—asked the British India agents about him. They said he'd been considered a first-chop cook on one of their boats—an' he's certainly made good since he's been aboard of us. He

couldn't be mixed up in this rubber deal, because at the time he shipped we'd no idea the Sultan was going to load us with his rubber—nor had our owners, either. That accounts for the officers an' crew. As for the passengers, five out of the eight are old shipmates with us. Clive appears to stand too well with the banks and be known as a Philippine planter to be implicated in anything like piracy. Norgood appears to be known in Singapore. He an' Smith might be in on this deal—but I'd say it was doubtful. Assuming that they are, there's not one chance in a thousand that they could buy over any of our crew whom we couldn't handle, easily."

"The only danger I see, Captain, is that of another steamer running us down and threatening us with a couple of six-inch guns if we didn't put the stuff aboard her."

"Well, let's consider that, Betty. First place, by keeping thirty miles farther out from the Borneo coast than steamers usually go on this course, until we're approachin' Balabac Strait, it would be very difficult for such a boat to locate us unless Fowler were givin' our noon position to somebody over the radio—which he's certainly not doing. If we spotted a boat's smoke on the horizon, astern, it would be a simple matter to find out whether she were really doggin' us—then radio for assistance before she came up, or back-track her at night. No—if anything of the sort is going to happen, it's far more likely while we're anchored, takin' Clive's sugar an' hemp aboard. Very good! We'll anchor in not over fifteen fathoms—then if we're sunk, the masts an' top of the funnel will be stickin' above water. The pirates would have to come alongside to shift the rubber from our holds to theirs—in that case, we're armed an' can give a good account of ourselves. If they lay off a couple of hundred feet an' threaten to sink us unless we hoist out the rubber into some sort of barges, we'll tell 'em to go ahead with their guns. Before they could get a divin' outfit to salvage the rubber, we'd have one of the Yankee gunboats on the radio before we sunk—an' our own divin' outfit from Manila while the patrol was protectin' us. Chances are they wouldn't actually go as far as sinking us, because they'd know all this—know that with the rubber once under water they'd never get it. Seems to me they're more likely to board us at night with a pretty large force an' attempt taking the ship."

"Would you be willing, sir, to let McTavish and me work out a scheme, if we can, as an extra defense against boarding?"

"Quite so! Anything Mac approves is likely to be sensible and effective—as a matter of fact, I'd say the same about you, Ned. The more you can think up in the way of defense, the better for the boat!"

COFFIN found the chief engineer in his room at the after end of the starboard gangway opposite the engine-room door on the upper grating, trying to figure out something—and gave him the gist of what they'd been talking over in the Captain's cabin.

"Weel, lad—I hae been figgerin' an' figgerin', ontil I've covered foor sheets from ma pad,—sheer willfu' waste o' gude paper,—speerin' whether or no I c'd see onything but sair loss in freights to the purchasers in this deal. If it'll be piracy—aye! 'Twas well thocht oot—an' may succeed gi'n they've covered ev'ry point. But tha Old Mon's plan is recht—'twill gie them sometheeng to do in tha takin' o' us!"

"There's another idea occurred to me, Mac—I think it might work, in a pinch. The piping for the winches runs along the main-deck scuppers from where it comes up out of the boiler-room—and there's another line on the boat-deck connected to the little donkeys that work the hoisting-tackle for the two big motor-launches. Now could you connect, in the next thirty or forty hours, short lengths of armored hose to that piping at various places, with reducing couplings that would answer for nozzles? The idea, of course, is two jets of live steam in each of the 'well-decks' and four on the boat-deck—jets which could be swung around with the armored hose to cover almost any point on the ship, and directed over the rail into any boats alongside."

"Weel—there'll be no mechanical diffeeculties. Happen we hae some hundr' yards o' steam-hose, below—which must be handled wi' care, ye mind, if ye w'u'dna be scalded, yersel'. An' couplin's aplenty—aye. 'Tis no' sae bad idee, lad! Aye—'tw'u'd peel tha hide frae ony mon tha steam hit. But suppose one or mair o' tha pirates happen tae be aboord us, noo? W'u'dna they suspect something when they ken what 'tis we're connectin' up?"

"Possibly—but there's a reasonable enough answer for that. Say we've a radio that we may be sent to a port somewhere

north of Vancouver Island for lumber—pretty sure to run into heavy snow—going to test out a scheme for clearing the decks of snow with live steam instead of taking several hours to shovel it over the side. Owners' orders—you don't know how well it will work, but are obliged to make the test. If it happened to be zero weather,

Swain whirled about, his gun in his hand, but Coffin spoke quietly through the port.

I guess it would leave the decks a sheet of glare ice. But with heavy, packing snow, the temperature is usually but a few degrees below freezing—and then it *would* work. That explanation ought to get by, hadn't it?"

"There'll be little question as to that—parteecularly, as we are no' supposed to anteecipate onything like piracy. Aye—'twill do verra weel! We'll hae tha couplin's connected by tha morrow nicht."

BY the second night out, Mr. Trumbull Clive had increased the favorable impression of himself on board. A quiet man of obvious substance, he seemed, with a sense of humor and a fund of experiences worth listening to if one could drag them out of him—he never volunteered them; also a bit of a gourmand: he liked to eat and when the food displeased him, he grumbled a little to his nearest neighbor in an undertone; when some dish tickled his palate, his satisfaction was quite pronounced. At the second dinner, there were chickens roasted in olive oil which pleased him mightily. He asked the saloon steward who waited on him which of the cooks was responsible for them—and upon being told that it was the Jap who had come abroad at Singapore, sent five Straits dollars down to him.

"Gad! I'd like to have a chat with that chap, sometime! He has imagination! You rarely find a cook on an English boat who knows how to roast chickens Spanish fashion. Faith, I've a number of my own recipes I could give him! He's a *chef!*"

"I fancy you might talk with him, sir, when he's off watch—down in the afterwell; tomorrow afternoon, possibly."

"Righto! Here's a crown for you, steward—you might step along an' tell me when he's below there. I'll write out some of my recipes an' give 'em to him."

All this caused some amusement, mixed with casual interest, to the others at the table. Clive's interest in food seemed a normal everyday trait which everybody accepted at face value. Even the four or five who were looking for trouble failed to consider the fact that the planter's chat with the Japanese cook gave him the best opportunity he could have wished to perfect certain sinister arrangements.

Clive had what appeared to be a short but interesting chat with the fellow on the following afternoon. About two o'clock of the morning after, in thick monsoon weather, an indefinite shape climbed to the

boat-deck without being seen and slipped along the port-gangway, forward, until he came to the window of the planter's room, which, owing to the limited number of passengers, he had to himself. Evidently the man was expected. The blind slid noiselessly back and a hand came out with a package about six inches square—a wooden box containing capsules, each capsule filled with enough of a drug to produce a certain effect for so many hours. Two capsules would lengthen the effect. Four would be a dangerous dose. All this was specified in very careful directions, typewritten, inside the box. Then the ghostly figure slipped away in the mist and got to his own quarters below, without being seen by anybody.

ON the afternoon of the sixth day out, the steamer anchored in fifteen fathoms off Mr. Clive's shipping-point and blew three long blasts on her whistle, according to his instructions. There were no cascoes in sight, so he asked the Captain if he would send him down to the mouth of the creek in one of the boats. Connyngsby had a motor-launch dropped into the water with Jennings and one of the Lascars. They afterward reported to him that there were a dozen nipa huts at the mouth of the creek and four or five cascoes, one of them loaded with sacks of crude sugar as nearly as they could judge. A white man in khaki breeches and puttees—Clive's manager, McGovern—stood waiting for him at the little wharf and said two cascoes would be alongside the steamer before dark; two more, with hemp, probably before the next night. Jennings and the Lascar remained in the launch but overheard every word. Then McGovern wanted instructions about something else and the two walked up the little road as far as the bancas inside the creek, where they talked for twenty minutes or so after which Clive returned and got into the launch.

This had the appearance of perfectly straight business, as Clive had described it on the way up. When he returned, Connyngsby said to Coffin and Betty Stevens that if they were to be attacked during the loading, it would undoubtedly be by parties unknown to the planter—and he was beginning to think they had been over-apprehensive. But Coffin had his Lascars get the hatches off the Number Three Hold, take the canvas off the winches and turn the steam on—rig the loading-lights and cast the derricks loose on the sampson-posts. When the bugle sounded mess-call for dinner, he made out with his glasses one of the cascoes just coming around the point three miles away, and told the bo's'n to let him know when it was alongside, but to prevent any of its crew from coming aboard.

Apparently the Jap's artistic soul was expanding, for there were several dishes appetizing enough to tempt a dyspeptic—the coffee, stronger than usual, had a perfect flavor. While there were exclamations of pleasure from both tables, Coffin tasted a teaspoonful of his coffee. It certainly was better than they usually had—but it seemed to him that there was a slightly peculiar taste. He took another teaspoonful and rolled it over his tongue. Then suspicion shot through his mind in an almost paralyzing way. He glanced at Clive, down the table. The planter looked slightly ill, saying to the steward that something he ate at tiffin had disagreed with him—he'd have just a cup of tea, some toast and a mango or orange. That settled it in Coffin's mind, though he hadn't suspected Clive before.

Catching McTavish's eye as the chief engineer was lifting his cup to his mouth, he shook his head slightly and, tapping his own coffee-cup with one finger, shook his head again—then pointed to Jennings, the assistant engineer, and indicated by a very slight motion of his head that Mac was to stop him also without attracting attention. This by-play was so slight that nobody else would have made anything of it—McTavish himself would not have understood it if they hadn't discussed the piratical possibilities. Coffin, knowing that every instant was vital, did some quick thinking to pick out the officers most urgently needed to fight the emergency. With his napkin in his hand, as if just rising because he wanted to ask a question, he stepped across to Connyngsby's table and whispered to him:

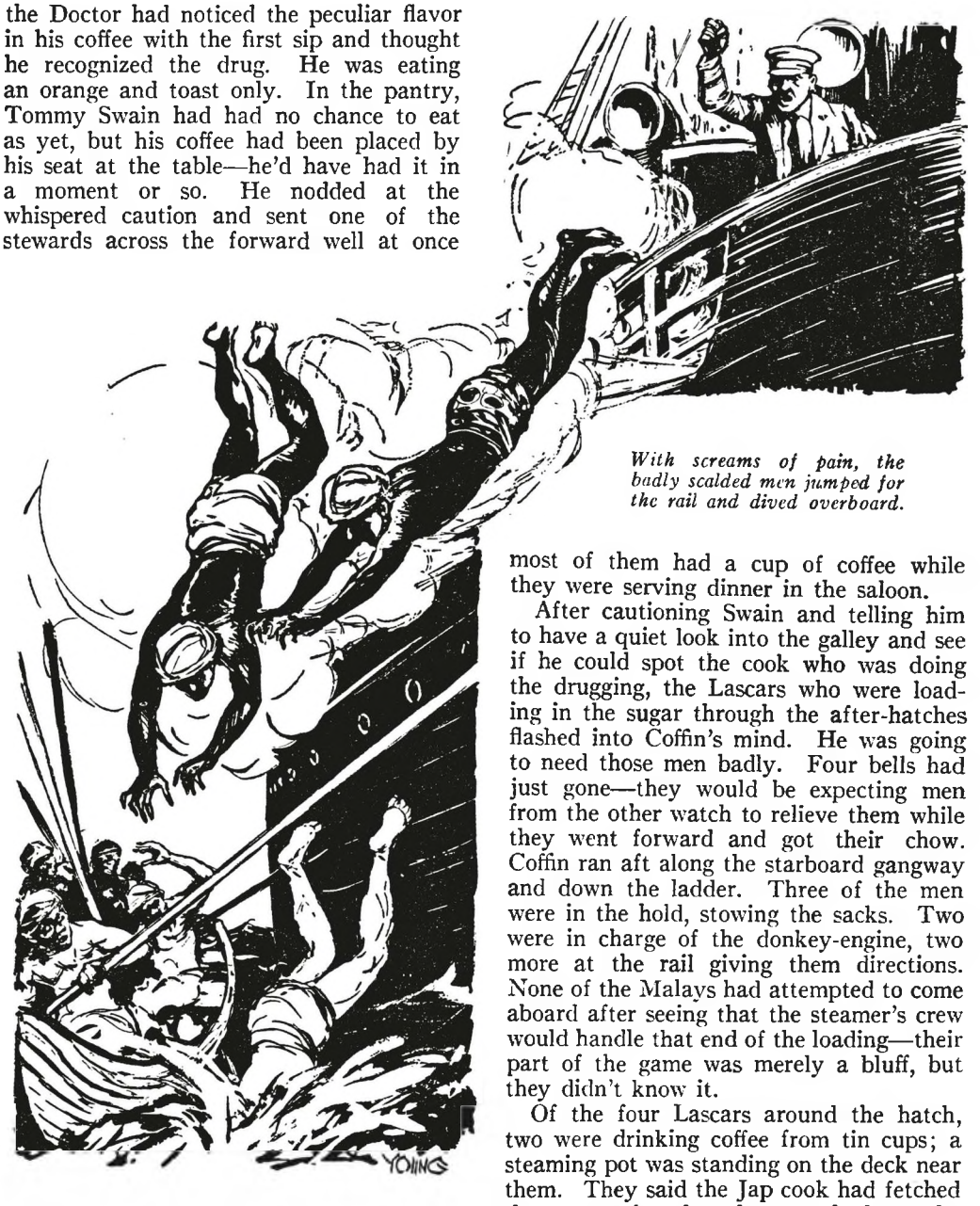
"The coffee and some of the food is drugged, sir! Don't swallow a thing except tea, fruit and toast. Pass the word along quickly if you can without attracting attention!"

"But Ned! I've had half a cup already!"

"Then Thayer and I will work over you as soon as possible!"

Stepping down to the foot of the table—cautioning Betty Stevens as he went—Coffin whispered to Doctor Thayer. But

the Doctor had noticed the peculiar flavor in his coffee with the first sip and thought he recognized the drug. He was eating an orange and toast only. In the pantry, Tommy Swain had had no chance to eat as yet, but his coffee had been placed by his seat at the table—he'd have had it in a moment or so. He nodded at the whispered caution and sent one of the stewards across the forward well at once



With screams of pain, the badly scalded men jumped for the rail and dived overboard.

to the forecastle. The Lascars had a brick platform and ovens in their quarters for their own native cooking—but coffee was passed out of a large port in the galley and carried across to them. The steward found that all had taken a little of the coffee—some more than others—but he stopped their taking any more. By the time he returned to the pantry, he could scarcely keep his eyes open, himself. The stewards messed after the passengers—but most of them had a cup of coffee while they were serving dinner in the saloon.

After cautioning Swain and telling him to have a quiet look into the galley and see if he could spot the cook who was doing the drugging, the Lascars who were loading in the sugar through the after-hatches flashed into Coffin's mind. He was going to need those men badly. Four bells had just gone—they would be expecting men from the other watch to relieve them while they went forward and got their chow. Coffin ran aft along the starboard gangway and down the ladder. Three of the men were in the hold, stowing the sacks. Two were in charge of the donkey-engine, two more at the rail giving them directions. None of the Malays had attempted to come aboard after seeing that the steamer's crew would handle that end of the loading—their part of the game was merely a bluff, but they didn't know it.

Of the four Lascars around the hatch, two were drinking coffee from tin cups; a steaming pot was standing on the deck near them. They said the Jap cook had fetched the pot, saying that the mate had put the other watch at work for'ard, so it would be another hour before they were relieved—and they were glad to get the coffee. The mate told them that the whole crew had been drugged—that he was going to need every man who could stand on his feet. Pouring the coffee into the scuppers, he called down the hatch to find out how many sacks of sugar had come aboard. The Lascars told him that the Malays had

taken their time about getting the matting off the load in the casco—the slingful which had just come down being the first of the lot. He had them hook it to the tackle again and hoisted every sack over the rail back into the casco—not knowing what to expect in the way of trouble, he was taking no chances of high-explosive being concealed in the sacks. Until he needed them, he told the Lascars to hide in the shadows after putting on the hatch-covers, and tie up the drugging cook if he came anywhere near them. Then he ran along the main-deck gangway to find Dr. Thayer, who had been given the former mate's room opposite the galley door. Locking himself in when he saw his friend overhauling the medicine-chest, he asked:

"Any idea what the drug is? Laudanum?"

"Not laudanum or chloral-hydrate. Either would have acted much quicker than this is doing. I'm fairly positive I recognize the odor, though it's hardly strong enough to be noticeable. East Indian drug—vegetable—often used in Oriental intrigue. When administered in coffee, the stimulating effect of the beverage makes the stuff act like a delayed fuse—it's nearly half an hour before you're conscious that something has happened. After that, you're unconscious before you know it. Depending on the size of the dose, you're 'out' for anywhere from eighteen to forty-eight hours—but if you don't come out of it in thirty, it's more than even chances that you never do. The antidote, as far as medical science has found one, is soda bicarb in strong black coffee—or another common drug administered hypodermically. Neither is injurious in moderate quantities—so I'm going to try both. But Tommy will have to make a lot of fresh coffee himself, in order to be sure there is none of this East Indian stuff in it. Now—any idea just where you're at, Ned?"

"I'm beginning to feel frightfully tired, and I had less than a couple of teaspoonfuls! Feel as though I'll keep on my feet all right but I'll have to keep pushing myself when I'd rather sit down. Everybody who had more than I did, though, is going to be simply 'out' in five or ten minutes. I'll have left you, Tommy Swain, five of the Lascars, and possibly Mac and Jennings if I caught them in time—if they didn't get the stuff in food. If they're 'out' there'll be only eight of us all told, to hold and handle this boat against a possible attacking force of sixty or eighty, who probably wont turn up for another hour but will be alongside inside of three!"

"How about getting up the mud-hook and beating it right now?"

"That means an experienced navigator on the bridge—two first-chop helmsmen in the wheel-house—one clear-headed engineer, two greasers and three stokers, below, and at least four deck-hands. That's the absolute minimum on a boat of this size, and then it's a helluva risk! Weather's too thick to see lights unless we're right on top of 'em—navigation is dangerous all through the Philippines. And they've probably got a steamer somewhere near with a gun or two on board. Connyngsby was dead right on some of his dope: if we're going to be sunk, we'd better stick to this fifteen fathoms where the ship and cargo can be salvaged! Two miles farther out, you get over a hundred fathoms. Let's try to keep Mac and Jennings on their feet—then you get after the Old Man, Fowler and the bo's'n, while I find out whether that damned cook got at the stokers and greasers, too. After that, see what you can do with the Lascars. Passengers will have to sleep it off—we'll get 'em into their rooms if possible! If I stopped Betty Stevens in time, she'll help us with the women! Now get busy!"

IT was much as the mate feared when he got below—McTavish and Jennings were slowly walking about, but would be useless for two or three hours. The cook had gotten into the stoke-hold with the story that the men wouldn't be called to mess for another hour—and had left a pot of coffee there also. All of the stokers and greasers had had a cupful—most of them were already stretched out on the deck-plating.

Going up to the saloon again, a glance made Coffin fairly sick. Connyngsby and the passengers were sitting helpless in their chairs with arms and heads sprawled upon the tables, breathing heavily—unconscious; the second assistant engineer and Fowler also. Four of the stewards had lain down upon the saloon deck-runners, sleeping heavily. Going forward to the fo'c'stle, he found two of the Lascars trying to walk about until Thayer got to them—these were the ones the steward had stopped after a couple of sips. The rest were sprawled about the deck—completely "out."

As the mate came back across the "well"

he got a clear view of the galley through the largest bulkhead port, with Swain standing in the doorway looking at the cooks and their assistants lying upon the galley floor and upon the one Jap cook who seemed to be keeping his feet with difficulty, leaning against the carving-table. Swain, knowing exactly where the provisions were kept, stepped inside, reached up to the rack for two large coffee-pots, and then went, not to the box full of ground coffee, but to the locker in which there was a sack of whole coffee beans. As he filled the pots with these, his side was turned toward the cook. Coffin, who was watching closely, saw the man pull an automatic from inside his blouse. Without hesitating a second, the mate, outside in the darkness, fired through the port—and the cook crumpled down upon the deck. Faithful to the men who had bribed him, he would have killed any officer who seemed to have escaped the drug, had he got the chance. Swain whirled about, his own gun in his hand, but Coffin spoke quietly through the port:

"Close call for you, Tommy—but I've stopped the drugging and killed a cobra. Examine that coffee to be sure that none of the stuff is in it—then make a strong black lot of it! Get some to the two Lascars first! The Old Man's 'out'—and we haven't time to work over him just now. Get those spare guns from his room and arm every man you find on his feet—but pass the word for everyone to keep out of sight until we see what we're up against! Don't give 'em a chance to pick off any of us! Damn it all—who could have foreseen any such game as this?"

CLIVE had gone up to his own room after a swallow of tea—he wasn't quite sure how far the cook had gone in what seemed to be a pretty thorough job. When he heard the shot, it gave him an unpleasant start. He had two guns under his coat but had hoped to put the scheme through without bloodshed. Piracy for millions was one thing—like any game for high stakes—but murder was something he'd fully intended to avoid it, if possible. Knowing the cook's instructions, he supposed that one of the officers had escaped being drugged and simply had to be eliminated—it never occurred to him that his tool had been the first victim of the plot. So he remained quietly in his own locked room. McGovern knew exactly what he and his Malays were to do when they came alongside for the rubber—and while Clive was considering this, a bump against the steamer's plating told him that the man had arrived with the empty cascoes.

Clive had dropped a pilot's ladder over the side when he came up from the saloon. McGovern, followed by twenty Malays, came aboard in as matter-of-fact way as if he were transshipping goods in a perfectly legitimate manner—as his Malays supposed he was. Having been supplied with data concerning the ship, he switched on the loading-lights of the forward well and ordered his men to get the hatches off and turn the steam into the donkey-engine, then swing the derricks outboard for hemp slings in the cascoes and start getting the rubber over the side into them.

Coffin, in the shadow at the top of the starboard ladder, began calculating his chances for a surprise attack. Evidently McGovern, seeing nobody about, took it for granted that the drugging had been a complete success and saw no necessity for being on his guard, with the superior force he had. Running noiselessly aft to where he had posted two of the Lascars, Coffin instructed them to slip along the boat-deck to a position where they could direct one jet from the steam-hose over the side into the cascoes and another at McGovern, with any men near him. Waiting until he saw live steam spurting from the other side of the midshiphouse, he turned the cock of the one at the top of the ladder and caught the two Malays at the donkey-engine, also the men working just below the hatch. With screams of pain, the badly scalded men jumped for the rail and dived overboard. McGovern reeled drunkenly across the port-gangway, firing blindly in every direction, and fell into the water. The men in the cascoes were frantically shoving off from the steamer with their long sweeps to get away from the terrible steam which parboiled great patches of skin on their almost naked bodies. Looking out of his window on the deck above, Clive's first impulse was to sneak aft to the radio-room and call up his steamer, anchored ten miles down the coast—knowing as he did that nearly everyone on board was out of commission for at least twenty hours. But he was too careful to risk it. The officers and crew of his chartered steamer would consider loading rubber from cascoes an ordinary, customary proceeding—but taking it from another steamer and putting it in their own holds was altogether fishy; it

would make every man of them a witness against him.

Had Coffin started a gun-fight, the crowd of Malays would have considered themselves attacked without the slightest excuse and would have fought until the mate and his few men were wiped out—but the steam was an utter surprise, probably the only thing which would have defeated Clive's plans. Again, had McGovern gotten his men together in the darkness and murk, incited them to getting revenge for their scalding, waited an hour or two and then sneaked back, climbing aboard on all sides, he would have had the game in his own hands—it was as close as that. But he was convinced the drugging had failed and that the whole crew, armed, were waiting for him. Had he brought the other steamer alongside, nothing could have stopped him—but his neck would have been at the mercy of every man on board. They would have demanded—and taken—more than half the loot.

As it was—he and Clive could sit tight. The only witness on board who could have testified against them was dead. Clive even had the calm assurance to ask Connyngsby, when they started for Manila, if he really refused taking his sugar and hemp to San Francisco—he'd actually had the stuff alongside to ship! They might suspect what they pleased—but they hadn't a shred of evidence against Mr. Trumbull Clive, who phlegmatically went ashore at Manila, saying that he could be reached through his bankers at any time if his testimony were required.

Meanwhile there had been several interesting radio exchanges:

H. H. The Sultan of Bungi-Trelak
Bulangor—Malay Peninsula.
Attempted piracy of rubber, Negros Island. Suggest inquiries Frisco Banks. Advise destination. Connyngsby, Master.

Connyngsby, Master.
Str. *Argentine Liberator*, Manila, P. I.
Impossible to locate purchasing Syndicate. Bank of England turns over to me twenty thousand pounds securities. Where is rubber now? Bungi-Trelak.

H. H. The Sultan of Bungi-Trelak
Bulangor—Malay Peninsula.
We have rubber on board intact. Advise destination. Connyngsby, Master.

Connyngsby, Master.
Str. *Argentine Liberator*, Manila, P. I.
Proceed London via Singapore, Suez. Congratulations. Brock & Co., Liverpool.

By

H. Jefferson Reid

The swift-moving story of an ex-service man and the exciting events that won him a place in the newspaper game.

Special

"YOU here again?" grumbled the diminutive city editor of the *Herald,* in evident dismay.

"My shadow chased me in here, Mr. Hoyt," I replied, feebly attempting to smile. But at the same time my heart commenced a rapid descent in the general direction of my feet. Failure to land this job would precipitate financial catastrophe. I had always secretly nursed a journalistic ambition; since my discharge from the service, the fire of this ambition was suddenly fanned to a conflagration. Though I had been conspicuously unsuccessful in every other line of endeavor, I felt certain of success as a newspaper man.

Shortly after my arrival in Sneezeville I made the rounds of the three local newspapers. Two of them told me, without beating around the bush, that there wasn't a chance. The third one, Hoyt of the *Herald,* gave me sufficient encouragement to keep me pestering the life out of him nearly every day, fairly begging him to put me on his staff. Now my funds were running so low that I couldn't have financed a boarding-house for fleas.

For the last three days I had lived on one meal a day, and on the occasion of this particular visit to the *Herald's* offices I was tenderly nursing the last of a proud line of quarters.

"I told you to come back in a couple of weeks, Reid," snapped the man who unwittingly held my future in his grasp. "Did the time fly or do you need a course in memory-training?"

A big lump formed in my throat. Then,

Extra!

"We can't leave him here!" the ruffians said.

in almost the same instant, a hitherto unknown courage surged through my veins.

"Look here, Mr. Hoyt," I exclaimed in a tone of voice vibrant with determination. "I've got to get a job on this paper, and I aim to get it—right now. Do you realize that I've been begging you for a chance on this paper for the past six weeks?"

"Yes. And I also realize that you've annoyed me almost as much as the static in my radio. I told you I'd give you a job as soon as there is one open," snorted the city editor.

"Well?" That's as far as I could get for the moment, racking my brains for additional verbal ammunition.

"Well—there isn't!" The blow landed squarely on the jaw, stunning me. But I was in no mood to take the count.

"Then you've got to make one. Think of it—this paper employs a couple of hundred men. Do you mean to sit there and tell me you haven't room for one more? I'm not asking you for a hundred a week."

"Ahem, that's gratifying, anyway."

"All I ask for," I continued unabashed, "is a white man's chance and a living wage. Now, will you give me a job, yes or no?"

"Damn it, man, I wish I could, if it was only to show you that I really admire your perseverance. But you see, Reid, I can't overstep my budget. I'd have to fire some one to take you on. Come back again in a few days and I'll see what I can do for you."

Then, as I was ready to leave the office, he looked at me somewhat queerly. I found out later that he noticed a suspicious moisture in my eyes and that my hollow cheeks attracted his attention.

"Say, boy, have you got enough to eat for a few days?" he inquired in a kindly tone of voice.

"I guess I can get along all right," was my casual reply.

"Reid, you're a damned liar, and you know you are. You can't practice perseverance on an empty stomach."

His hand emerged from his pocket, clutching something crisp. "Take this," he said, "and buy yourself a decent feed. The world looks far better after meals than before. I know."

My eyes grew dim. That annoying lump came back into my throat, choking back words of protest. It suddenly dawned on me that newspaper people were not nearly as hard-boiled as they try to appear.

"Come back to see me in a couple of weeks," said the little city editor, by sheer force of habit.

IT did not take me long to locate a catch-as-catch-can lunch-room. And it took even less time to invest part of Hoyt's five-dollar bill in an impressive array of Southern dishes. Feeling much better, and—for the present at least—without a care in the world, I walked leisurely through the business section of Sneezeville, treated myself to a package of cigarettes, and allowed my thoughts to wander at will.

In my mind's eye I saw the editorial offices of a great newspaper. Reporters and copyreaders and make-up men scurried hither and thither. Telephones rang intermittently and a general excitement prevailed of which I did not sense the cause. All of a sudden—who comes running into the room but Yours Truly!

I spoke a few words to the city editor, who appeared to have been waiting for me. The latter grabbed a telephone and sent this laconic message to the composing-room foreman: "Get ready for a special extra!" Then to me: "All right, let's have your story, Reid. Make it snappy!"

Then, after a while, I seemed to hear excited voices on the streets, yelling loudly: "Special Extra! Murder!"

I MUST have been completely in a trance for it was now pitch dark and I was at least two miles out of the city limits. I tried to pull myself together, tried to convince myself that it was only a dream. Was it? Surely, it must have been. I was on a lonely country road and not in a newspaper office. The echo of that thrilling "Special Extra! Murder!" still rang in my ears.

There it was again! I heard it distinctly, although muffled at times. "Murder!" Say, *that* was no dream! A thin stream of ice-water seemed to trickle down my spine. I was now wide awake. Instinct told me that something was wrong somewhere, seriously wrong.

"Help! Murder!" Groans followed which made my ears wiggle. I was frankly scared—and yet some mystic power, some impelling influence, made me run in the direction from which the frantic calls had come.

About a hundred yards up the road I came to an abrupt halt and barely had time to jump behind a tree. Less than a dozen feet separated me from a touring car. As the headlights were shining the other way, I was comparatively safe from detection. Excited voices were engaged in subdued argument.

"We can't leave him here!" one of the ruffians said. I had become convinced by now that a crime had been committed, and I was too late to help the victim, but just in time to help bring the perpetrators to justice.

"What are you going to do?" another voice answered; "take him to the nearest hospital or police station, you —— fool?"

"Well, the only way that I can see out is to hide the body out there in the bushes, not too close to the road—but for God's sake let's make it snappy! Then we'll drive the car to Fall City and jump the A. B. & A. midnight freight. Get all his belongings?"

"Yep, I even took all his papers in order to make it harder to identify him. Come on, let's get it over with."

Peering from behind my tree, I could barely distinguish the outlines of a limp form as it was lifted from the machine and carried into the underbrush. Quick thinking was required to decide what I should do. I admit that I felt somewhat inclined to run back to Sneezeville as fast as my legs would carry me. All of a sudden, however, the dream came back to me, and I saw the words *"Special Extra"* in blazing letters before my eyes. That did the trick. And thereafter I was never in doubt.

In far less time than it takes to tell, I was crouched on the bumper at the rear end, holding on with all my might. And I got settled in my uncomfortable quarters none too quick, for the rustle of twigs told me of the return of the murderers. They jumped into the machine, started the engine and—well, it's a wonder I am here to tell the story. They went at a dizzy clip for at least thirty minutes—when they finally came to a halt I was bruised and cut and groggy.

THE two men alighted and, after holding a whispered conversation for a few moments, hurried away in the direction of the freight yard.

It took me at least two minutes to collect my wits sufficiently to look around. About a half a mile distant I saw some houses and street lights. So that was Fall City. Well, I thought, if a town has a name, it must also have a sheriff or a policeman.

Without pausing for breath, I ran all the way to where I had seen lights. Pulling out my watch I saw to my terror that it was but fifteen minutes before midnight. I had to act quick. Luckily, it took only a few minutes to locate the chief of police in his home. He was only half dressed. But when he opened the door and saw my muddy face and listened to a few words of what I had witnessed, he did not pause to grab his coat and cap.

We could hear the whistle of the mid-

night freight in the distance when we approached the freight yard. From there on we had to move cautiously. At first I feared that the murderers might have changed their plans and gone elsewhere. We strained our eyes in the semidark, there being but one arc light in the freight yard. Suddenly I saw two silhouettes huddled near a water tank and I grabbed the chief's arm, bringing him to a stop.

The sound of the freight's whistle grew louder and louder. A faint humming on the tracks told us of the train's approach. Describing a quick flanking movement we reached the rear of the tank.

"Hands up!" barked the chief, covering both men with his pistol. "Stick 'em up good and high!"

The rumbling and whistle of the approaching train rapidly became a deafening noise. It could easily be seen that the criminals were desperate enough to take a chance on boarding the freight despite the threatening pistol.

"Here, son! Quick! Put the handcuffs on 'em," the officer yelled.

Although I had never before come in contact with this particular kind of bracelets, I succeeded in locking the right wrist of one to the left of the other and then barely had time to drag both men and myself from the tracks as the freight went rushing by.

A trip to the police station followed, and here I elaborated on my tale, recounting all I had seen and heard. The papers in the pocket of one of the thugs established the victim's identity. He happened to be one of Sneezeville's most prominent citizens. A large amount in cash and some jewelry also was found on the prisoners. As soon as the latter had been securely locked behind bars, the chief insisted on taking me to a local physician for first aid. A thin stream of blood kept on trickling down my forehead from a scalp cut, sustained while hugging the rim of the spare tire. But I had other plans. Those tantalizing words *"Special Extra"* seemed to be constantly before my eyes.

I MANAGED to get Hoyt of the *Herald* on the phone and gave him a brief but accurate account of the murder, omitting no details such as the victim's name, the location where the crime had been committed, and so on. He instructed me to accompany the chief and the coroner to the scene where the body still lay hidden and also to wait at the Fall City police station for the arrival of a photographer.

"Reid, listen here: You hustle and get all the facts you can and then come back to the office with the photographer just as quick as you can."

My eager ears fairly swallowed his words. They seemed incredible.

"And now look here, son," Hoyt said with a hint of satisfaction in his voice. "Remember you're doing this as a reporter for the *Herald*. Hurry back and you're hired."

"Hurrah!" I yelled at the top of my voice, causing the chief to inquire if I always celebrated a murder in such a vociferous manner.

"Hell, man! They may have taken one life, but they sure handed out a new lease on mine. Chief, meet Reid of the Sneezeville *Herald!*"

He merely shrugged his shoulders, not knowing what it meant to me. "You reporters are a queer bunch," he muttered.

THE *HERALD* was the first paper to carry a complete account of one of the most brutal murders in the county's history. The entire front page was taken up by photographs of the slayers, the victim and the spot where the body was found. The photographer had to be routed out of bed to make these flashlight pictures.

But what pleased me most of all was the headline of the extra, as well as of the regular morning editions:

PROMINENT PHYSICIAN MURDERED
HERALD REPORTER'S QUICK WIT CAUSES ARREST OF SLAYERS LESS THAN ONE HOUR AFTER CRIME

After my night's work was all done, sporting a mile of bandages around my discolored head, I accosted Hoyt to thank him for the job. He was still busily engaged in editing additional copy on the tragedy which through sheer luck I had been instrumental in solving.

"Fine work, Reid!" he said, without glancing up from his work. "Come back to see me in a couple of weeks."

"What? S-s-say—y-y-ou told me—" I could get no further.

"I told you you were hired. And I mean it. I am merely handing you a couple of weeks' vacation with pay to recuperate. You can't interview anybody for a newspaper, with a plowed-up map like yours!"

By

ROBERT AMES BENNET

This swift-moving novel of an Eastern gunman's adventures in a Western feud is by the gifted author of "The Forest Maiden," "The Blond Beast," "Hidden Trails" and other noted books. You will find it a real delight.

Go-getter Gary

Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson

The Story So Far:

AS gunman body-guard to a prominent personage back East, he had earned the name of Go-getter Gary. And when slow recovery from a bullet-wound sent him to the West to recuperate, he found exercise for his peculiar talents all too soon. For he stumbled, first thing, into a lively little cattle-war, and the way of it was this:

A chance acquaintance had told him he could find employment with one Vance Austell, owner of the "Hat-on" ranch, but his first meeting with Austell was unfortunate. Leaving the train at a little New Mexican town, he looked about for some one who could direct him, saw no one, and made his way to a tumble-down store. And there in the back room, he came upon Austell and a weakling young ranchman Jack Royd in a violent quarrel. Austell had encouraged Royd to drink heavily and had won all his money—and his ranch to boot—at poker. And entering the store behind Gary came a fellow-traveler from the train—Royd's sister Connie.

Gary's quick wit and the presence of the girl saved that situation. Then Deputy-sheriff Lobo Leet, a henchman of Austell, allowed Gary to attempt making his way on foot over the long desert miles to the ranch. He was picked up exhausted by the Royds and left at Austell's ranch, but found scant hospitality there. The Hat-on cowboys gave him an outlaw horse to ride and he barely escaped with his life. Austell hired him finally—as a gunman to aid him in his quarrel with the Royds. But as soon as opportunity offered Gary left Austell's place and sought out the Royds. He found they had discharged their few employees and were about to acknowledge Austell's poker-claim to their

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Gary broke the sudden hush: "Wy's gun just slipped out of his hand."

property by abandoning it. He persuaded them, however, to stay and fight, and himself enlisted under their banner as gunman extraordinary and at large. *(The story continues in detail:)*

CONNIE had climbed back to the wagon seat. She untied the reins, but paused with her foot ready to throw off the brake.

"That pinto, Jack—not vented. Gary—that's your name, isn't it—did Vance give you a bill-of-sale?"

"No, Miss Royd. But he told Pete and all the rest of them I had won my choice of his horses."

"He might deny it. There'd be only you and Pete. All his punchers would be apt to back him. They're a hard lot. It's not worth the risk to you. We have plenty of horses. Jack will pick you a string of gentled ones. Tie your reins to the horn and turn the pinto loose."

Gary started to obey. What Miss Connie said was law. He remarked as he tied the reins: "Do I send back the boots and leather pants too? Pete gave them to me, along with the saddle and other things."

"Pete? Then the riding-rig is yours. Shift it to my sorrel, Jack."

In trying to swing off with a flourish that would cover his weakness, Gary landed in a stagger. The girl saw.

"Hold on, Jack," she said. "Boost him up here, and sling his rig on the load. Don't blush, Gary. It's nothing to be ashamed of, after being thrown by an outlaw like Gentle Annie."

Jack had stripped the saddle and bridle from the pinto with a quickness that astonished Gary. He tossed them up on the loaded wagon. A friendly slap of his hand on the pinto's rump sent the animal loping off across country toward the Haton ranch.

Connie threw off the brake, clucked to her horses, and swung the lead team around with easy skill.

From the crest of the rise Gary saw a split in the trail only a little way ahead. He had been so near to it, yet had stopped to consider turning back. His interested look caught Connie's attention.

"That left fork is the road to the Tonto," she said.

"Yes, Miss Royd—Pete told me. Only

the railroad map seemed to show the Tonto Basin in another part of your State."

"It is. Drake came from the Basin—was born there. When he started out on his own hook he devised his brand from his initials, T N, with a half bar, like a toe, at the right foot of the N. So the iron reads 'T-N-toe'—'Tonto'; and he goes by the same name. It's thought he left the Basin because of killings in a sheep war. Though that was nearly twenty years ago, he is still a good man to leave alone. Even Vance usually takes care not to rile him."

"Why not get him to go in with you against Austell?"

Connie smiled. "'The colt asked the cougar to help hunt the lobo wolf!' Not that Jack is so much a colt."

She glanced back to where her brother was wrangling the scattered remuda.

"No, Jack is more a mule, with a pair of hard-kicking heels. Vance wont have too easy a rush trying to wolf him off his range. But there's no chance of a hitch-up with Tonto Drake. Jack sided with Vance, last calf round-up, in a dispute over a maverick."

"A what?" asked Gary.

Instead of gibing at his ignorance, Connie graciously explained how, on open range, the only means of telling the ownership of a young calf is the brand of its mother. When a calf is not branded before the cow stops suckling and guarding it, all proof is lost, and the unbranded animal is known as a maverick.

Stock-growers' associations have various rules for the disposal of mavericks. But on this isolated remnant of the open range there were only the cattle of the Hat-on, the Box R and the Tonto irons, and the custom of their owners regarding mavericks was to follow the dangerous practice of "finders, keepers."

"Can't say that looks promising," said Gary. "Two gangs of them, and our side only a two-spot. The play for Jack and me is to get them scrapping, but take ringside seats ourselves. The more they punish each other, the better for us."

Connie showed less interest in the scheme than in the schemer.

"Aren't you traveling rather fast with your 'us?' You heard we've laid off all our men. The last ones rode in to the rails yesterday. Jack and I waited only to load such of our belongings as were worth hauling away. That was why we dropped you at the Hat-on, the other day."

Gary slipped in a word: "It saved my life!"

"No trouble at all," she replied. "But our plans were already made to pull out, else we'd have taken you home with us. This quarrel with Vance, though, is none of your affair. Jack is the best rifle-shot around here. You are a tenderfoot. If he can't hold his range against Vance single-handed, he can't do it with only an inexperienced Easterner siding with him. It's a needless risk for you. I should have realized that at once. I'll stop now and have Jack rope a gentled pony for you to ride in to the rails."

"Please don't," begged Gary. "I have played a lone hand so long, I'd like to side with your brother. Perhaps I can't do much with a rifle, but if it comes to gats! Anyway, he might feel better to have even what you call a dude for company after you leave."

The girl's smile showed both appreciation and amusement.

"That's fine of you, Gary, though you seem unable to realize how far Vance may try to go. But there's no need for you to stay. It can't be that you suppose for a moment I'm going to run away and leave Jack alone, with this coming up!"

"That settles it," he said. "I'm going with you if I have to walk it."

This time she did not smile. Her look went beyond mere pleasure. But all she said was to repeat that odd saying of her brother's: "You'll do to take along."

CONNIE turned the talk to other subjects.

As a stranger to the cow country, he would naturally be interested in learning about it. She explained in detail how the three brand-owners ran their cattle on their common winter range—this country ahead, in the midst of the great triangle bounded by their three ranches. But when the shallow water-holes dried up in the spring or early summer, each threw his stock in on the range adjacent to his owned land, where the deeper tanks were located.

As the heavy, short-legged Herefords could not cover ground like stringy longhorns, the number of each herd was limited by the amount of grazing within eight miles or so of its home water. The Box R had to keep below two thousand head. The Tonto might run twice as many during good seasons. But Austell could always count upon water and grazing for

more than five thousand head, thanks to the other holes he owned south of the railroad.

At the end of the calf round-up, which was almost due, the cattle could be cut according to brand, and each herd driven to the range near its owner's private water-holes. After that the herds would remain separated until the fall rains again tanked up the holes on the winter range. This desert stretch of joint range was too wide for any cattle other than longhorns to stray across during the dry season.

"I see," said Gary. "Our game is to shoo your cows home before Austell can get here with his gang to hijack us. Once we have the beef locked in your stockyards, he'll have to use lead keys to get them out."

Connie smiled at his ignorance. "Given two weeks and two dozen riders, we might do it, boy. As is, we'll have to let Vance and Tonto help us round them up."

AT noon Connie halted for the midday meal and Gary learned the meaning of a "dry camp." Connie drew water very sparingly from a keg in the rear of the wagon. The horses received none, not even the wagon teams.

Mid-afternoon brought the party to a slough where the horses drank their fill of green-scummed water. Gary said nothing but sighed inwardly with relief when Connie told her brother she had driven enough for one day. Soft as were the springs of the wagon seat, it had no back. He lay down beside the wagon and at once fell asleep.

When he wakened, the desert air was keen and chill, and stars spangled the blue-black sky. He mistook the faint glimmer on the horizon for the twilight of night-fall, until a cup of coffee was pressed to his lips and he heard Connie's quietly urgent voice:

"Drink it and roll out, boy. Daybreak's almost here. We'll have to travel. Jack back-trailed. There's a fire at Curlew Slough."

Gary gulped the coffee and struggled out of the blankets that had been wrapped around him. Jack was hitching the double team to the wagon. At a low-spoken order from him, Gary tossed his blankets up on the wagon and climbed to the seat after Connie, who had stopped a moment to empty the coffee-pot grounds upon the embers of the tiny cow-chip fire.

She gathered up the reins and threw off the brake. The wagon lurched into the shallow ruts of the road and creaked away from the water-hole in the dim starlight. Some time passed before Gary could make out her brother, trailing behind with the horse herd.

At last the ghostly shadows of gray dawn stole away like the yapping coyotes before the red flash of approaching sunrise. Connie began to glance over her shoulder at the back-trail. She was already using the long-lashed blacksnake wagon-whip to flick the horses into a trot on the level stretches.

She handed Gary a can of hasty-pudding. After eating the half-cooked corn-meal, he slewed around in his seat to act as lookout. But more than an hour passed with no sign of pursuers. The moving objects that he noticed far off to the side of the trail Connie told him were bunches of cattle.

Sometime later the straining teams tugged the wagon up the rocky bed of a cleft that cut the rimrock wall of a mesa. The grade was so steep that the teams had to make frequent stops for wind. From the last halt, at the top, Connie turned and pointed down at the plain below. Six or eight horsemen had burst up out of a tree-filled arroyo and were racing for the cleft at full gallop.

"So this is the answer," said Connie. "They were so sharp they cut their own fingers. Planned to ride around and head us. Pretty clever of Vance. If Jack hadn't seen their fire, the scheme would have worked. We'd have dragged home at a walk and found Vance in possession."

Jack had seen the trailers even sooner than his sister. He hazed the remuda up past the wagon and pulled his rifle from its saddle-boot.

"Haven't another of those, have you?" asked Gary.

"Two—bottom of the load."

"Then lend me yours. I can hold the gang here while you and Miss Connie make your get-away."

"You've got your nerve, dude!"

"No—I think I can handle a rifle, all right. It would be a favor, after the way your sister pulled me from under the buzz birds."

"You can't ride," said Jack. "How about driving?"

"I've seen how it's done."

"All right. If you want to help, take the reins. Connie will wrangle the remuda. Can't take the risk of Vance rushing you.

We've got to get back in possession of the place."

Connie thrust the reins into Gary's hands and sprang down to throw a saddle on the horse that Jack roped for her. But she did not mount.

"Go on with the wagon," she directed Gary. "I'll wait with Jack to see if Vance wont back up."

Gary tied the reins and jumped down beside her. The set of his jaw told her it was no use ordering him back. They followed Jack, who had walked along the side of the cleft to a natural parapet on the edge of the rimrock.

The horsemen had already reached the foot of the cleft. Jack drove down a bullet that splashed on the stones a few yards ahead of the galloping band. The foremost rider halted, waved for his followers to hold back, and rode on up the cleft alone.

Jack glanced around and saw his sister at his elbow.

"Hit out," he ordered. "They may circle around to the west gap."

"Easy enough to beat them if they do," replied Connie. "Watch out they don't sneak off or try to rush us. I want to do the talking. Promise! I believe I can manage him. You surely don't intend to start anything, if you can help it, when we're so short-handed."

"Well—" hesitated Jack. "I'd shoot it out, right here and now, if it wasn't for you. But as it is—Lord, if only you were a boy!"

"I know. You'd be foolish enough to make the first killing—start the war. There'll be none at all if I can help it. Remember, you're to stay quiet."

JACK muttered an "Uh-huh," but kept his rifle-sights upon the upriding horseman. His sister waited until the handsome florid face of the rider was so near that Gary saw the smile on the small red mouth. She then stepped out on the rock edge, with a quiet command:

"That's near enough!"

Austell's hand swept up to bare his yellow head to the sun.

"Connie! This is great luck! Didn't hope to see you this side the ranch."

"I understand. You hoped to get there first."

"To welcome you home!"

She countered the apt reply no less readily: "It's the owner who welcomes guests. Jack still owns his homestead. A contract for a deed does not pass title even when there's a valid consideration."

The young cowman's smile became tinged with cynical amusement. "So that's it. He thinks he'll welsh!"

Connie thrust her hand out sideways to forestall an angry outburst from her brother.

"Jack will settle with you about that some other time, Mr. Austell. It has nothing to do with the present situation. The ranch is still in his name and in his possession. Until it is deeded to you, I shall consider it my home."

"It's yours for keeps, in your own name, Connie, if you'll take it from me as a gift. That's what I came to tell you when I heard from your laid-off punchers you were going away."

"Thank you for the offer, Mr. Austell. But I'd rather have Jack keep his ranch."

Though Gary's head and shoulders had been in plain view all the time, Austell pretended to have only just seen him.

"You picked up the lunger!"

"After you half killed him with Annie and kicked him out," countered Jack.

Connie turned to silence her brother. Austell lifted his sombrero to put it on. From behind the broad brim he gave Gary a significant look that carried a reminder, a promise and a threat. Then he replied to Jack in rather an injured tone:

"The dude said he had ridden. I of course thought he meant he could ride. As for me kicking him out, that's a lie. Sick or not, from now on he'll have to be careful how he behaves. He's not a fit associate for you."

"That is for me to decide, Mr. Austell. Now, if you will excuse us, we should be going on home. Good-by."

He took the dismissal with unexpected readiness.

"Good-by, Connie. Next time we meet, you may be willing to accept what I offer. If you ever need help, you'll find me always ready to side with you, and I'll think over what you said about the Box R remaining your home. I've never claimed to be an angel. But some day you may find I'm not so black as Jack has painted me. *Adios.*"

Behind his doffed hat he gave Gary another glance of mingled threat and promise. Gary made no response either by word, sign or look. As well to let the hirer think that his intended tool might still go through with the deal. Miss Connie did not want a fight. It could wait.

CHAPTER IX

AS Gary expected, when Austell reached the foot of the cleft he at once led his men off homeward on the long road across the winter range.

Connie thought her talk had persuaded him to take the back-trail. She even voiced a doubt whether he was as bad as she had believed. Here was an opening for Gary to explain the real reason for Austell's going so readily. But somehow he could not bring himself to tell that the briber expected him to murder Jack.

The shame of admitting that even a man like Austell could have thought him such a cold-blooded killer was what had kept him silent regarding it when he first fell in with the girl and her brother. This silence had now helped avert the fight that Miss Connie did not want. Jack most surely would have seen red if he had known the truth.

On the other hand, Gary realized that his failure to tell put him in an awkward jam. It left Miss Connie half convinced she had misjudged Austell. Yet if told now, after so long a delay, both she and her brother might think he was cooking up the story to keep them bitter against the man who had threatened him and said he lied. A man's tongue was all too apt to get his foot into muddles.

Presently Connie motioned toward Gary as she spoke to her brother. "If I'm to ride round-up, you'll need him on the wagon."

Gary hopped up on the footboard to take the reins. He felt strong after his night's rest. As the four horses strained against their breast-straps he threw off the brake and cracked the whip. After a last glance to make sure the Hat-on riders were not attempting to circle, Connie rode ahead to watch how the new driver came along. The precaution proved needless. He had noted most of the tricks of her skillful driving, and got along fairly well.

Both teams were still pulling strong when at last the road dipped into a narrow valley where a tiny creek dribbled down a cleft from pine-crowned heights to feed a large reservoir. The tank was dammed with a stone-filled log crib. Corrals bordered the bank. Beyond them, three log cabins stood in the shade of the black oaks and cottonwoods beside the creek.

After the desolate arid stretches, foul sloughs and thorny growths of the desert they had crossed, Gary did not wonder that Connie called this green little oasis "home." When he helped her and Jack unload the wagon, the furniture proved to be as plain as it was scant. Except for a few old Navajo rugs, there was nothing to compare with Austell's mahogany furniture and expensive decorations. Connie had only a few prints to hang on the rough log walls, and cheap chintz curtains for the little slide windows. Yet somehow the place looked far more cosy and better furnished than Austell's cluttered quarters. It really was a home.

The bunkhouse differed little from the one at the Hat-On except that it had a clean smell and was built of pine logs instead of adobe bricks. He slept heavily and rolled out in the chill of dawn, eager to earn his board. Connie's cooking was simpler yet more attractive than Pete's.

Jack sent him out with a team and log chain to haul in pine logs that had been shot down a dirt slide from the north butte top. They were to complete the stone-filled crib with which Jack was raising the level of his dam. Gary soon found how to hook the chain on the butts and drive so they did not snag on scrub or rocks.

He came in at sundown aglow with delight and wonder over the marvels of this desert paradise—only to learn that his stay in it was at an end. Jack had fastened in the back end of the wagon a queer high box with a let-down table-board front. Connie was filling this box with food and kitchen ware, while her brother stowed other supplies and kegs of water ahead of it in the wagon-bed.

These indications of an early departure prepared Gary for Jack's curt explanation: "We'll pull out at daybreak. Wont hurt to be the first outfit on hand. No telling what Vance has up his sleeve."

"What d'you say we again meet his ace in the hole with a flush that's not a bob-tail?" Gary replied.

Jack grinned. But Connie looked troubled as she went to tack on each cabin a "No Trespass" notice signed by her brother as owner. Jack took a similar notice to set up on a stake at the dam.

IN the morning Gary helped Jack hitch up the double team by lantern light. Daybreak found the outfit under way, Jack riding ahead and Connie trailing the wagon with the reduced remuda. Jack had picked

out only two strings, of seven horses each, but they were the best cow horses in the herd.

Rather late in the afternoon, the nearest slough on the trail was reached. Here the little party went into camp to wait for the other round-up outfits.

Before dawn Jack rode south to watch for the Hat-on crew. Gary had the pleasure of a whole day alone with Connie. Most of the time she made him lie still in the sun. But this was varied with instructions how to run a camp, and with riding-lessons on a wise old circle-horse.

Grazing was poor near the slough. Now and then strings of cattle came in sight, heading for the water. But every bunch sheered off in another direction. Connie explained that the range stuff had seen riders so seldom since the beef round-up on their home ranges, that they were afraid of the wagon outfit.

At noon of the third day Jack galloped in from the south with word that the Hat-on was coming. It was Austell's regular round-up outfit—chuck-wagon and riders—only he brought a larger crew than usual. They might rush past the slough and try to outrace Jack to the Box R. But that had to be risked. It was too late now to draw back. The only thing was to sit tight and wait for Austell's play.

He came dashing along the trail less than half an hour after Jack, but alone. As he pulled up beside the wagon, he gave Jack a genial wave of his hand, shot a hard glance at Gary, and swept off his hat to Connie.

"Howdy, folks!" he greeted. "All set for the round-up, I see. My outfit will stay at Curlew Slough till the Tonto joins up. Thought you'd rather have it that way, Connie."

"Thank you," she replied with cool politeness.

He glanced toward the scant remuda of hobbled horses, and spoke to Jack: "Expect your riders soon?"

Connie answered for her brother: "Jack and I will do the Box R riding. He'll pay you and Tonto for the extra work thrown on your outfits by our shortage of hands."

"No, he'll not," replied Austell. "This round's on me. No trouble. You'll allow an old friend the privilege, sooner than ask any favors of Tonto Drake. I happened to bring along four more men than usual."

"I—that is, Jack—will pay the wages of your extra men."

Austell threw up his hands in mock surrender.

"You're bound I sha'n't have any chance to prove I'm Jack's friend. No use repeating how Lobo Leet would have trimmed him for keeps, and probably would have wound up by plugging him, to boot. Long as Jack was dead set on gambling, I gave him a square game. All you need do to get back everything he lost is agree to accept it from me as a free gift."

"I have already told you I couldn't do that, Mr. Austell, even if it wasn't Jack's property."

The boldly ardent blue eyes hardened as they turned to stare at Jack and Gary. But the red lips remained smiling.

"Have it your own way now, Connie. I see I've been so lied about that you'll not believe anything I say. I'll have to wait and prove by my actions that I'm Jack's best friend. *Adios.*"

As the visitor swung his horse around and rode off, Gary saw a shadow of doubt darken the girl's steady eyes. But she did not call Austell back. Her brother grinned his approval.

"That's topping 'em off, ol' gal! Only thing, now, he's apt to turn his wolf loose."

BUT nothing happened to disturb the peace of the Box R. Austell and his men neither came near the camp nor circled around it. Connie rode south to watch for them during the afternoon, and Jack lay out near Curlew Slough all that night.

He came in soon after sunrise with the news that the Tonto outfit had joined up and was trailing the Hat-on toward the east gathering-ground. He ate his breakfast while Gary broke camp, and Connie used her brother's night horse to wrangle in the remuda. She and Gary together then hitched up the wagon teams.

A short drive, after noon, brought them to a big shallow water-hole. The other outfits were already camped, well apart, above the edge of the sink on the far side.

Between the rim of alkali-whitened dry mud and the green-scummed water stretched a broad band of fetid mire decorated with skeletons picked clean by coyotes and buzzards. Out of this bog-trap, riders were roping a few freshly mired cows that had been too weak to struggle back through the belly-deep mud, after quenching their thirst.

One rider coiled in his rope and skirted around the sink-edge, sitting like a rock to

the heavy trot of his big gray horse. Even from a distance Gary knew that he had never before met the man. Near by the red blotch of the rider's face turned into a mass of freckles that looked like rust-spots on a mask of solid iron. The ragged fringe of coarse hair that showed below

"Yuh little cuss!"

Strange to say, Connie seemed to take this as a compliment.

She smiled again.

"Just you wait. You'll see I haven't forgotten how to ride this soon. I'll show you my dust."

"Go get him!" demanded Austell. "Here, take the ring."

the slouchy hat-brim was of a vivid carrot hue.

By all the rules of nicknames, the visitor should have been called "Red." But Jack, warily watchful of that grim freckle-blotched face, greeted him none too cordially: "'Lo, Tonto. Been waiting for you two days."

The visitor rode past him with no more than a morose glance of his badly squinted eyes, and drew rein before Connie. He glowered at her only a trifle less crabbedly. She looked up, with her quiet smile.

"It's our fault, coming ahead of time, Mr. Drake. Wont you step down and visit?"

"Howdy," he grunted, ignoring the invitation. "Austell says yuh haven't brought your quota."

"He has exceeded his, and Jack offered to pay the wages of the extra riders."

"Four men and him. Should have six. Yore new hand's only a pilgrim."

"He's our wrangler, Mr. Drake. I'm Jack's other rider."

Drake scowled. "Woman on round-up! Ought to be strung up."

Connie looked neither shocked nor indignant. The hanging evidently was not meant for her.

"Don't blame Jack," she replied. "He couldn't help it. I made him bring me."

THE cowman grunted and reined his horse around. His slaty eyes met Gary's gaze with a look as cool and alert as Gary's own. No one knew better than Gary how to read such eyes. One glance at them told him that Tonto Drake was a born gun-fighter—a man to be handled with gloves. No less certainly, Drake perceived the same in Gary's blue-gray eyes. He glowered.

"Tenderfoot—hell!" he muttered. "Hear yuh pack two."

"Yes."

"Mebbe need 'em. Jack be damned. But her— Don't let that Hat-on boss get behind yuh."

"I'll not if I see him first."

Drake put his horse into its long-striding heavy trot. Jack came around to Gary.

"Whee—gosh! Tonto condescends to talk to a dude! Didn't want to take you on as a foreman, did he?"

"Not quite yet. Austell must have told him I carry a pair. He advised me to keep the Hat-on gang in front."

"Told you so, Jack," crowed Connie. "He'll not side with Vance. If he wont back us, he'll at least stand clear."

"Ought to back us," grumbled Jack. "If Vance puts over his grab for my holdings, he'll be big enough to hog the whole range —crowd the Tonto out."

"Not unless he first gets behind Drake," replied Gary. "Our own play is to see he doesn't get behind us either."

"Oh, no," said Connie. "Even if Vance is all I've been thinking him, he's no dry-gulcher. If it comes to the worst, he'll face Jack and give him a chance to draw."

Gary started to answer this, and thought better of it. The longer trouble is put off, the more apt it is to fade away.

CHAPTER X

FOR several days Gary saw little of Jack and Connie, and less of the bosses and men of the other outfits. From dawn to sunset the riders kept on the go. They circled out for miles to round up and drive in bunches of cattle, only to shift to fresh horses and lope away again.

A few of the older men kept the fast-swelling herd together on the overgrazed land near the water-hole. Except at night and meal-times, the only men at the wagons were the cooks and the sleeping night-wranglers. Tonto Drake had gruffly accepted pay from Connie for the privilege of throwing the Box R horses in with his remuda.

The second day, having nothing to do, Gary went around the sink to visit Pete. The next morning he surprised his bosses with unsettled coffee, burnt bacon and half-done flapjacks. Even Jack grinned and choked down the mess. Gary had more time and coaching for the next two meals. They were fairly eatable—and they saved Connie the task of cooking, after her hours of hard riding. He of course never could learn to cook as she did, but Pete's helpful lessons and recipes enabled him to turn out dishes good enough for hungry riders.

At last one afternoon he ventured to attempt a prune pie. Such work called for intense concentration. Yet in the very midst he noted instantly the rider who came slanting down the west slope of the basin. He scraped the dough from his fingers and put on his coat.

Austell greeted him with that lip-smile unshared by the hard blue eyes. "All dressed up for company, I see."

"I'm the reception committee," replied Gary. "What'll you have today?"

"A show-down, you drag! What's holding you? I know you haven't spilled the deal. If you had, he'd 've broken in two first time he saw me. You've kept your lip buttoned. But all this hanging fire? Didn't figure you had a yellow streak."

GARY'S finger itched. Why not settle it right here and now? But no. That would mean open war. It would bring the whole Hat-on gang down on Jack. Anything that hurt Jack would hurt Jack's sister. The play was to side-step—to put the thing off as long as possible. He met the hirer stare for stare.

"Your word is no better to me than mine is to you, Austell. How could I know I'd find the money where you said you would plant it?"

Austell drew a platinum ring with a big solitaire diamond from his fob pocket.

"The money is in your suitcases where you cached them. Take this ring. It's worth your pay and more. It's what I've bought for the girl I'm going to marry. If you find the money, leave the ring in one of the suitcases. If you don't find the money, leave nothing—keep the ring."

"How do you know I wont double-cross you?"

"Because you're a wise bird. You know I'd get you, even if I had to swing for it."

"Wont you be risking the rope for your share in getting him?"

"No danger. I've sized you up. It's not your first case. You'll make your getaway, all right. Anyhow, I'd risk hell itself to get her. She's cut out for me. And she'll be a lot better off married to me than scrimping along with him. He's a grouch, and he keeps himself broke at poker. I've got plenty. I'll treat her like a queen."

Gary felt no surprise at this outburst of confidence. He knew that almost all criminals seek to justify or excuse their felonies, not only to others but even to themselves.

"I get you," he said.

"Then go get him!" demanded Austell. "Here, take the ring, if you wont take my word about the money."

IT was time for a little by-play. Gary widened his eyes and shrank back.

"Nix, guy! Ditch the sparkler! Don't you know a blue one's a hoodoo in a bump-off deal? Forget it."

"Trying to slick out of the deal, are you?" charged Austell.

"I'm trying to keep my neck clear of the noose," rejoined Gary. "It would have been in, and yours too, even without any blue-diamond hoodoo, if I'd bumped him

off before, I learned the lay of things so I could make my get-away. How do I know you didn't plan to give me a surprise party at the cache with a sawed-off shotgun? That would have saved you your roll and won the jane by bumping off the bumper who'd bumped off her brother."

Only eyes as quick and sharp as Gary's had seen in the hard blue eyes told him Austell was no less crafty than bold. The man would stop at nothing. What if the idea came to him to shoot Jack in the back and frame the stranger for the murder? Better open war than such a chance. The threat gave Gary a good excuse for a sharp retort.

The bullet grazed Gary's left cheek, but he did not dodge. He stood rigid, his hands high, gazing unflinchingly into the murderous eyes.

could have caught the slight flicker of betrayal behind the stony blue surface of Austell's eyes.

"You're not fool enough to believe I'd think a two-gun killer like you would walk into any such trap. Come clean, now. You know you can use the money. What's hung you up all this time?"

"Had to learn to ride," answered Gary. "It's too easy to wire ahead and catch a man on a train. For another thing, I couldn't have dug up any alibi if I'd bumped him off out there, all alone with him and her."

"Seems you can dig up plenty of alibis for hanging fire," jeered Austell. "I'm calling you for a show-down. Is it a go now, or do you lay down on the job?"

"I'll move when I'm good and ready, not before."

Hate and menace flared in Austell's eyes.

"If you're planning to double-cross me, I'll squash you like a blood-sucking tick!"

Gary felt cooler than ever. He could have kept right on stringing the yellow-haired young devil. But that flicker he

"I wouldn't whine about double-crossings or yellow streaks, you yellow pup! First place, I never hired out to you. Second place, I'm not in the business of killing men for a card sharp who hasn't nerve enough to swap lead with the man he tinhorned."

The gaff was intentionally barbed. Had others been within hearing, it must have stung Austell into throwing his gun. The handsome florid face went scarlet; the blue eyes blazed with deadly anger. Yet the hands remained motionless. Gary saw that the young cowman was even more dangerous than he had surmised.

The small mouth drew up in a sneer.

"Thought I'd shuck it with a two-gun killer, did you? Thought I'd give you the chance to plead self-defense. You *bobo!* I've told my men you've threatened me. Shoot me, front or back, and they'll drag-hang you before sundown. Maybe you begin to savvy I've got you hog-tied. Take your choice. Get him and your pay, and *vamoose,* or side with him and get yours, same time he gets his."

"Excuse me, but wont you please take your doll and go home?" appealed Gary. "I'm making a pie—a *prune* pie!"

This time Austell went white. His right hand twitched; his fingers crooked. Yet he still did not clutch for the pistol hilt. As the other hand started the horse off with a slight movement of the reins, Austell spoke in the unnaturally quiet, airy tone of anger too great for violent outcry.

"You yellow quitter! Haven't even nerve enough to shoot me in the back. You'll wish you were in hell!"

GARY watched him out of pistol range, and calmly returned to the making of his pie. He baked it in the Dutch oven with a cow-chip fire. Between times he examined his pistols and oiled the rifles.

The pie came out so well done that Jack sniffed as he rode into camp. Connie had left him and gone to chase a wily old renegade Texas steer that they had seen at a distance after rounding up a bunch of cows. She did not come in until quite a while after sundown.

The look in her eyes told Gary that her slowness over coming for her plate was not due to weariness. Jack had already started to battle his food. He bolted down two helpings and waded into the pie.

"Um-m-m! Some chef we've got, Connie. This aint stuff to throw away."

She did not reply. He looked at her, and for the first time saw the trouble in her eyes. "Say, ol' gal! What's up? Lose that renegade longhorn? Never mind. Three to one he was a Tonto or Hat-on leftover, not ours."

"No," said Connie. "I had a long run. Then he hid in an arroyo. But I worked him out at last. Coming in, I met Vance and Wy with a bunch."

Something in his sister's tone brought a frown to Jack's always rather sullen face. "Vance? The yellow skunk! If he said a word to you—"

"Wait! Not that," broke in Connie. She flushed hotly. "He—he asked me to marry him, Jack—begged me. It's a wonderful ring. The trouble isn't that he's not—not sincere. It's just the other way."

"Other what?"

"He offered to do anything I asked him. Insisted upon giving the Box R to me or back to you, and—"

"How generous!" gibed Jack.

"And also give me a third share in his own iron," went on Connie.

"With him to manage it all and pocket the profits."

"No, he even offered to make a before-marriage agreement that half of all Hat-on profits should go into my separate bank-account."

Jack's lips puckered in a soundless whistle. "Great snakes! I knew he was hard hit, but I never guessed it was that bad."

"Oh, it's bad—and he's worse!" cried Connie. "When he found he could not buy me even with all that, he tried another way. He said he was legally entitled to take possession of all your cattle, and if I did not accept his ring before the cutting begins, he'd put his iron on every Box R cow and calf and steer."

JACK dropped his emptied plate and drew out his pistol to make certain it was fully loaded.

"Tomorrow," he muttered. "We've finished combing the east end. Cut starts at sunup."

"But Jack, unless Tonto Drake sides with you—"

"Him? He'll sit back and wait to pick up the remains."

"Jack! Oh-h!"

The dread in the girl's eyes forced open Gary's tight lips.

"Leave it to me, Miss Connie. Just say I'm fired. I'll go around and razz Austell for lying about me to you and Jack."

"But he hasn't."

"That's true so far as his saying I'm not a fit associate for you. None of us men are. It was other things he hinted about me. That's enough excuse to start a rough-house. There'll be no come-back on Jack. I'll first give the Hat-on gang to understand that Jack has kicked me out and I'll as sore at him as at their boss."

Jack's jaw had sagged. It tightened with a snap. His eyes gleamed with mockery.

"Is it a fourflusher who's tooting, or just a dam'-fool greenhorn? Not counting Pete and the nighthawk and the men riding herd, Vance has nine to back him."

"Yes?" said Gary. "Well, I've known of one gat-handler standing off fifty police and shooting his way clear. What's it to you, anyhow? I'll take care of Austell and enough more of his gang to tone down the rest. Having lost their boss, they'll be glad to take wages from you."

All the derision had gone from Jack's eyes. He stepped over the dying fire and

thumped the back of his lone employee. "You—son—of—a—gun!"

Gary stood up to give him a casual handshake. "Good-by, Miss Connie. I'd like to thank you—"

"No! Stop him, Jack. Wait, Gary. You're not going!"

"It's only a small return for that buzzard business."

But Jack had his arm in a grip that he was not strong enough to break.

"Let go—let me go," he urged.

"Like fun I will!" said Jack. "Not till you promise to behave. If you wont—if you go to buck Vance's game—I go along."

That settled it. Gary sat down, feeling he had misplayed. He should have said nothing and slipped off without their knowing what he intended to do. He might have known that Jack would want to sit into the game.

As for Connie, he saw the change in her eyes. As her alarm over the danger to him faded out, her concern gave place to aversion.

"I didn't understand about you before," she said. "I suppose Jack will have to keep you on until he can hire other men."

She turned and walked off into the dusk, leaving Gary speechless. It did not lessen the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach to have Jack thump him again and say that the fool notions of a girl did not matter a bean. That was not true. The opinion of Miss Connie mattered more to him than all the world.

CHAPTER XI

AT daybreak Jack brought three of his horses from the Tonto remuda. Two were trained cow-ponies. The third was the gentled circle-horse on which Gary had practiced riding.

Jack had rolled out at one side of the blankets spread on the ground under the wagon. Gary crawled out at the other side. Connie permitted him to cook the breakfast. Until her brother came with horses, she did not leave her tent in the wagon-bed, made by stretching the tarpaulin from the seat to the top of the chuck box. Her manner toward Gary was neither friendly nor cool, merely reserved.

She remained silent until, after the hasty meal, Gary was first to start saddling. Then at last she spoke:

"You can stay in camp, as usual. Your horse is not trained for cutting-out work. Even if he was, you can't rope."

"I've asked him to tend our brand-fire," put in Jack. "You never like to hear the calves blat or see the iron sizzle. All you need do now is cut 'em out and rope 'em. Gary and I'll do the branding."

"Well, if you're not taking him along to —to do what he talked about."

Gary could not resist a return thrust: "Are my orders to wait until Austell takes first crack at Jack?"

"Oh, no, no indeed! If he—but he'll not do it. He'll never even think of doing it!"

"Maybe not with you in sight," qualified Jack. "Don't worry, ol' gal. If there are any fireworks, it'll be Vance's fault. I've no hankering to buck as big an outfit as his is this year. Same time, he's not going to put over any funny business on me. Come to think, I guess you're the one who should stay in camp."

Connie's reply was to throw her saddle on the smaller cow-horse.

JUST at sunrise they reached the bedding ground, where the night guards still held the big herd. The Hat-on and Tonto riders had already arrived and gathered fuel for the fires to heat their branding-irons.

As Jack and his two followers appeared, Austell signaled Drake with the old Indian sign for a talk.

Drake left his outfit and rode around the herd to see what was wanted. Though still at a distance, Gary perceived the strategy of Austell's move. He wanted Drake as a witness for something, but he wanted him without the Tonto men. It gave the Hat-on owner odds of ten to three, even in case Drake should make the improbable jump of backing Jack and his lone sider.

Jack would have led his followers past the Hat-on bunch, but he turned in when Drake seconded Austell's call and signal with a brusque jerk of his thumb. To the plainly apparent annoyance of Jack, Connie rode forward knee to knee with him. Austell and all his punchers were afoot, and Drake had dismounted. The men shuffled forward to gather in an open group behind their boss, with the air of half-indifferent onlookers.

Austell doffed his hat to Connie. His tone was stiffly polite: "Good morning, Miss Royd. No need of your stopping.

I merely want a word with Jack and Tonto about the cut."

Connie met this by swinging down to stand close beside her brother.

Gary would have preferred to stay in his saddle, where he had a perfectly clear view. But he did not know how his horse would behave if a gun should go off. The old bronco also might go off, or at least crowhop, and Gary was more accustomed to meeting trouble standing on his own feet. He dismounted, with a careful imitation of Jack's careless manner, and casually shifted to one side where he could see every man in the group behind Drake and Austell.

Jack was the first to speak: "Well, let's hear it, Hat-on. Tonto'll agree with me there's no call to delay the cutting."

"None at all," agreed Austell. "This is only to explain a small matter to him—your transfer to me of all Box R stock. I want him to read the bill-of-sale. Here it is."

DRAKE waved back the outheld paper. "I aint a law-sharp."

"At least you see it's his signature," said Austell, holding up the opened document.

"Aint interested, Austell. 'Tend to yore own business. I'll mind mine."

"That's what I'm going to do. Only I've shown you this bill-of-sale so you'll see you're not called upon to horn in when I enforce my legal rights."

"As how?"

Austell fixed an appealing glance upon Connie: "I'd still be only too glad, Connie, to give all back to him, if you'll agree to—"

"Chop off!" broke in Jack. "She gave you her answer. We're talking about this fake bill-of-sale."

"Fake? You can't deny your own signature."

"I can prove the lack of consideration."

Austell gave Tonto Drake a side-glance. "He means he can prove it's not what the courts would call a legal consideration. He staked his cows to me in a poker game, and I won."

"By stacking the deck," put in Jack.

"I played the game straight," asserted Austell. "I gave Jack a square deal, and I've offered to prove it by giving him back his stakes."

"Yes, you have!" jeered Jack. "You'd swap a two-bit piece for a double eagle—you'd give the Box R for Connie. Thanks! Only thing, the Box R's not yours to give. It cuts no ice that a card-sharp can stack 'em on me when he's got me half soused. Just you get it straight and final, right here and now, all bets are off in a crooked deal."

"I'll show you! I played square, and I'll collect!"

Drake spat and grunted out his disgust: "When I was yore age, Austell, we shot it out and did the talking afterward."

Austell's flushed face darkened to crimson.

"He's got me hog-tied and knows it. Even if she wasn't here, he's her brother. But I'm going to begin collecting what I own, as I told her I would if she didn't agree to my proposition."

He turned to Connie with a last glimmer of hope. She only pressed closer to Jack. It was the last straw for Austell. He raised his voice to call over his shoulder:

"Get that, boys? Your orders are to stick the Hat on every Box R critter—cows, bulls, steers and calves."

"Sure. We get you, boss," replied Wy. "Le's hop to it."

Jack suddenly stepped so close to Austell that their faces were not a foot apart.

"Try it," he said. "The first Hat I see on a Box R, we shuck it."

Austell neither spoke nor moved. He was staring over Jack's shoulder into the dread-darkened eyes of Connie. It was Wy who made the first move. Gary saw the big foreman's hand clutch downwards. The instant the six-shooter cleared its holster his shot sent the weapon whirling.

Gary broke the sudden deathly hush with a quiet reassurance: "Steady, all. Nobody's going to get hurt who doesn't ask for it. Wy's gun just slipped out of his hand again. I was too far away this time to keep him from dropping it."

The touch of humor brought a grin to more than one hard face. Yet many hands continued to hover over holsters. The Hat-on riders were a tough lot. Austell had hand-picked every one of them. It was not Gary's banter that kept those itching hands from jerking downward. It was not even the pointed muzzles of the automatics that he had popped out of his side pockets. What held the bunch was the extreme quietness of his tone—the absolute stillness of his body.

It was plain that the Hat-on men were only waiting for their boss to make the

first move. Gary felt sure that Austell was quicker on the draw than Jack. His play would be first to nail Austell, then clean up as many of his gang as possible. No two men could hope to overcome such odds. But with both Jack and Austell dead, Drake might give Miss Connie a square deal.

Horror had held the girl motionless when

AUSTELL was in an awkward corner. Gary had the drop on him and his men. Now Drake had lined up against him. That lessened the odds. There were several notches on Tonto's old gun. But it was to Connie, not the red-headed squint-eyed old killer, that Austell turned.

"It's you that's got me, Connie," he said. "You've got me throttled with a silk noose.

The instant that Gary had pulled the trigger of Jack's forty-five the second time, both guns were dropping from Leet's hand.

her brother advanced upon Austell. But her nerves were first to give way under the strain of that deathly hush. She flung herself at her brother and Austell—she thrust between them and clutched at their arms. Each jerked back to break free from her frantic clutch. She cried out to Drake:

"Stop them—stop them! Oh, please—please stop them!"

"Hell!" growled the grim old gun-fighter. He swung around in line between Gary and Jack. "Say whoa to yore bronc's, Austell. Round-up's no place for a woman. Just the same, the gal's here, and she's apt to get hurt."

"Don't saddle it on me," replied Austell. "Say whoa, yourself, to Royd's killer."

"Yore foreman pulled first. All the kid done was make him drop his gun. Back up on that order of yourn. If yore bill-of-sale is good, not branding his stuff right off wont lose 'em to yuh."

You'll not accept what I offer as a gift, and I can't take what I own without a fight with Jack."

"What you don't own," put in Jack.

"All right," replied Austell. "It's on you. It's you who're asking for it. You think you'll take advantage of being her brother. You know it bars me from shooting it out with you. That leaves me only the one play. You can keep your cows by proving in court you're a welsher."

Jack's ruddy-brown eyes went bloodshot. "You four-flusher! Go ahead—sue! I'll—"

"Choke that blat!" roared Drake. "They's been too much squaw-jawing a'ready. The gun-play's called off. Le's get to the cutting!"

Austell turned again to Connie. "That goes with me. If there's any shooting, Jack or this city killer of his will have to start it. I'll wait and collect my winnings with a court order."

Drake was already shouldering Jack toward his horse. Connie followed her brother, without replying to Austell by so much as a look.

All this time Gary had stood motionless, never for a fraction of a second relaxing his watch. He did not stir until Austell and his men turned away to light their branding-fires.

CHAPTER XII

AUSTELL made no attempt to brand any Box R stock. He merely ordered his men not to do branding for Jack Royd. As a result, nightfall found the Box R far behind the Tonto and Hat-on in the number of steers and cows cut out of the general herd and number of calves branded.

The situation would have been even worse if Connie had not hired Drake's night wrangler to give up his day's sleep. He rode herd on the Box R cattle that were cut out. By nightfall Gary was so utterly tired from holding down the calves dragged to the fire by Connie and Jack that he could hardly ride back to the wagon.

They had quit sooner than the other outfits, so that Jack could get something to eat before going to relieve the Tonto night wrangler. The plan was for him to ride herd as sole night guard until relieved by Connie at midnight.

While he was bolting down the hasty meal warmed up by Connie, Pete came shuffling around the sink from the Hat-on camp. On his shoulder he carried a bundle that looked like a bed-roll. A visit from the cook of another outfit so late in the day was a most unexpected surprise party. When he sat down on his roll beside the fire and took a critical look in the coffee-pot, Connie's curiosity overflowed.

"We're glad to see you, Pete. Only, the Hat-on may object if it is their supper you've brought us in your pack."

"No ma'am. Their night wrangler's tending it. I gave Austell notice at noon, when I learned how you was fixed. He can get him another cook. I aint too proud to ride night-herd and wrassle calves. Tol' you I was a waddy 'fore I rose to chefing. Snare me a right easy night-hawse, Jack. My bronc'-busting days is done."

"Say—" Jack looked from the new volunteer to Gary, and then to his sister. "I caw, Connie. It's your crow. Seems like your investments pay dividends."

"Aw, forget it," said Pete. " 'Sides, I couldn't stummick the yellow boss no longer, nohow. Just was sticking on 'cause he raised me ten bucks for the round-up."

"We'll see that you don't lose by it, Pete," promised Connie.

He shook his head and went to toss his roll on the wagon-seat. Gary finished the food that had been brought to him by Connie. Though the desert still flared in the red splendor of sunset, he crawled into his blankets, already half asleep.

The night's rest brought him renewed strength for another day of the hard, hot, dusty work. Though both Jack and Connie had spelled Pete at night herding, all three came to the cutting-ground brimful of energy.

The Tonto nighthawk felt the need of sleep. He refused to day-herd longer than until noon. Jack said that Connie would then have to shift to a circle-horse and ride off its legs to keep the increased Box R herd together. That would leave only him and Pete to go on with the cutting and calf-roping.

An hour before noon they stopped for a cold snack before making the change. In the midst of the meal Austell and Drake jogged around the dwindling common herd, followed by Wy and three other Hat-on riders.

Jack, Pete and Connie stood up. Gary remained as he was, sitting in the hoof-trampled dust beside the branding-irons that glowed red in the rebuilt fire. He needed all the rest he could get, and he could shoot from there if necessary.

But even the slight effort of putting his hands in his pockets soon looked to be an unnecessary waste of effort. The punchers halted several yards away. It promised to be more of a "hat-off" than a Hat-on day. As Austell came on with Drake, he met Jack's hostile stare and Gary's alert watchfulness with a bland greeting:

"Howdy, Jack! Howdy, kid!" Then his hat swept off to Connie. "Excuse my bothering you with my company. But Tonto says one of his guards told him you were riding night-herd."

Connie's tone was almost frigidly polite. "I fail to see that anything I choose to do is any concern of yours, Mr. Austell."

"You know different," he replied. "You and anything that concerns you means everything to me, Connie. That's why I let Pete go. He said he would undertake all your night-herding."

"Do you expect thanks for that? Pete came to us because he wanted to; not because you were willing. He would have come anyway."

"Perhaps *he* would; but not these four top riders I've brought you."

JACK put in his word in no uncertain tone: "You're welcome to go t'other place and take your riders with you. We're not feeding out of your hand—not yet awhile!"

"I savvy, old grouch. Rather than let me prove I'm your best friend, you'd let Connie work till she dropped. Well, you're not going to do it. Tonto, you tell him."

Drake did not trouble to look at the owner of the Box R. His squinting gaze was fixed upon Connie.

"I aint in on any friend stuff," he rumbled. "It's biz with me. Yore outfit's behind on its cut. Drags the round-up. Yuh agreed to pay four of his peelers."

"That's true," agreed Connie, quick to see the point. "Wait, Jack. We can't break the bargain. It's a business deal, not a favor from Vance. We pay the four men and work them as long as we need their services to carry on our share in the round-up. That includes paying Vance for their board and the use of their mounts."

At Jack's frown of hesitation Drake grunted and spat. "Take it or leave it, Royd. Only, yuh aint going to tie us up. We'll go ahead, and let yore cows drift."

"No need of that, Mr. Drake," said Connie. "We're hiring the four hands from the Hat-on. Isn't that so, Jack?"

Though her brother's look became still more sullen, he jerked his head in a reluctant nod.

There could be no mistaking the genuine pleasure of Austell's smile. He beamed upon Connie.

"Thanks for that! It doesn't matter how you've taken them on, just so you're saved from trying to do the work of two men."

She smiled back at him, still cool but no longer coldly polite.

"Oh, well, perhaps one man's work is enough for a girl my size. Wont you have a ham sandwich? You too, Mr. Drake."

"Et a'ready," gruffly declined the old squinter. He reined his cow-pony around and trotted away, untying his rope from the saddlehorn. Austell, however, smiled gratefully and took from her hand the sandwich she held up to him.

"Don't care if I do," he said, his eyes glowing down at her upturned face. "It's months since I last tasted your cooking."

He took a bite and swung down beside her, murmuring a half audacious, half apologetic: "Hope you don't mind. My ma taught me it's not good manners to grab it and run."

"Why not?" inquired Jack. "That's the regular lobo way, aint it?"

Austell made a very good show of hurt friendliness. Connie blushed and turned upon her brother.

"That was uncalled-for, Jack! It would be more in keeping for you to set to work with our riders. We've delayed the cut too much already."

NONE too willingly, Jack climbed into his saddle and went to lead the four Hat-on punchers into the midst of the dust-shrouded milling herd. Pete gave Gary a meaning look as he heaped fuel upon the fire. With so many ropers at work, the irons would need a great deal more heating. After doubling the size of the fire, he hastened to mount and ride off to relieve the night wrangler.

Gary had not stirred. He had seen from the deliberate way Austell nibbled the sandwich that the visitor intended to draw out his stay to the limit. Until the food had all been eaten, Austell was the guest of the outfit and Connie his hostess. Austell had been shrewd enough to take advantage of the law of hospitality.

Bad enough that the yellow-headed devil should presume to take such advantage of a lady. What hurt, though, was the way she smiled back at him. He had asked about her post-graduate course at normal school, and she was telling him many details.

Gary suddenly cut in:

"You're quite right, Miss Royd, in thinking poetry should be taught as poetry and not as raw material for lessons in grammatical analysis. Pictures are painted to be pictures, not samples of paint."

Connie's eyes widened with astonishment. Austell's narrowed. He smiled mockingly.

"Oh, mammy, hear the funny phonygraph! It talks just like a dude highbrow."

"It can say other things, Mr. Hick," Gary returned the banter. "It can tell the lady all about how the boss of the Hat-on mistook me for a killer and tried to hire me to murder her brother!"

The bare statement was enough to send

Connie shrinking back from her guest, the pupils of her eyes dilating with horror. For a moment Gary thought he had his man hipped. But the flare of deadly hate in the blue eyes flickered out before they turned to look at Connie. The hand that had started for the gun under Austell's armpit, stopped half inside his shirt, to press upon his chest.

Gary was quick to read the change in the girl's expression. All that she had seen was Austell's look of appeal and indignant remonstrance, accompanied by the melodramatic clutch at his heart that appeared none the less a sincere gesture of distress. Gary could not hold in his disgust.

"That's his gat he's reaching for, Miss Connie. Only he hasn't nerve enough to pull it on me."

"It's true," admitted Austell, with unexpected frankness. "He has told the truth—for once. I started to shuck it, but quit cold. I'm not going to give a two-gun killer his chance to murder me. Maybe he hasn't told you he's Gary the Gat, the notorious Chicago bad-man."

"Half a truth makes the crookedest kind of a lie," replied Gary. "You're blowing a smoke screen to cover your attempt to hire me. Listen, Miss Connie—"

"No! no!" she cried. "It's impossible! It's unbelievable! It can't be—or you'd have told us when you told about his cheating!"

AUSTELL flung out his hand in a gesture of passionate indignation.

"My cheating? Another lie as raw as this last hunk of locoed perjury! Even if you still believe I'm bad, Connie, you know I'm not yellow. If I wanted Jack killed, I'd do it myself."

"You'd have done so after you tinhorned him, if I hadn't sung out," put in Gary. "You had him covered. I saw you waiting for him to reach for his own gun."

This won a blink from Austell. Yet in an instant he twisted the disclosure both ways in his favor:

"Hear that, Connie? If it's true, I could have drilled Jack, but didn't. If it's not true, we have this gat bird nailed as a liar. The locoed *bobo* wasn't there. Ask Jack. When he paged you, his voice came from halfway across the store. Ask Jack."

"That's an easy one," Gary replied. "I jumped back from the inside door and threw my voice behind my hand."

For a fraction of a second he permitted his glance to flick away from Austell. But it did not meet the look of friendly understanding that he expected to see in Connie's face. Her eyes were clouded with trouble.

"But," she faltered—"but I saw you myself, nearer to me than to the inside door."

"I shifted toward you before you could blink the sun-glare out of your eyes," Gary explained.

Austell chuckled his derision. "Mighty quick slick wiggling for a sick snake, Connie. Maybe he'll tell us the why of the lie, or the why of the wiggle. It's beyond me."

"I always side-step trouble when I can," replied Gary. "If I had butted in, it might have jarred you into drilling Jack and trying to drill me. My plan broke up the act."

"And you didn't even whisper what you'd seen—same as you kept mum over my alleged attempt to hire your gun. Good Lord, Connie, his stuff is still thinner than all the lies against me about that outlaw bronc' of mine. The bronc' was given the walking death by the kicked-out buster who laid it on me—just the way this lying killer lays on me his own bid for me to pay him to get Jack."

Connie stared from one to another, her eyes wider than ever with doubt and horror. "You say that he—that he offered—But he came to help us, and—and we had picked him up, when he must have died!"

"You don't expect gratitude from a city gangster, do you—a rat-alley bad-man? But you see now why I gave him that ride on Gentle Annie. I thought it would lay him up until I could think of some way to road-runner the rattler into striking himself with his own poison. But he sneaked off, soon as I turned my back, and came to poison you and Jack with his lies against me."

Gary did not bother to answer the cleverly garbled assertions. He flicked his left hand. "That's enough, Austell. You'll peddle no more of that dope."

"Why not?"

"Two good reasons. Fade out now."

Gary had in mind only to wing his man. But Austell must have believed that the Chicago gunman was all he had charged him with being. He must have thought Gary hankered to bring their feud to an immediate crisis, regardless of Connie's pres-

ence. He turned away from Gary's immobile poker face and unblinking gaze.

"If I was Lobo Leet!" he muttered. "Connie, you know it's because of you I can't smash this rattler now. You heard his threat to murder me. That backs up my word against his about the—"

"Where'll you have it?" asked Gary.

As Austell stepped behind Connie, Jack

Gary ordered Austell to get Leet's keys and unlock the handcuffs.

and his four Hat-on men came *yip-yipping* with a big bunch of cut-out cattle—steers, cows and calves. Connie ran for her horse. Austell sprang behind his own horse. At the same moment Wy rode between him and Gary, dragging a calf on his rope.

Austell vaulted upon his horse to spur away. Gary quirked his lips and pulled a white-hot branding iron from the fire as Wy jumped off to kneel on the neck of the thrown calf.

CHAPTER XIII

GARY had time only to see Connie ride off toward camp. She was going away from him, but in the opposite direction from that taken by Austell. More than this he lacked time either to note or to think about.

As fast as the calves were branded, one of the men threw them into the Box R herd, along with the cut-out bunches of cows and steers. The other outfits were working at the same rapid rate. By sundown the common herd had dwindled away like Gary's strength.

Jack himself drove off the last batch of the day's cut, leaving Gary to ride back to camp alone. He found Pete cooking supper. Connie had replaced him, to take the first watch on night guard. The heavy sleep of exhaustion overcame Gary before he had finished his meal.

He woke at sunrise to find himself alone. At another time they might have let him sleep because he was not a well man. But this was different. He knew that Jack had been kept from calling him because of what Austell had told Connie. Both, therefore, believed the accusations—at least enough to doubt his trustworthiness.

That hurt. It hurt so much he had trouble in choking down the food that had been left for him beside the ashes of the breakfast fire. He concluded that it meant his services were no longer wanted—that he was discharged.

Some one had brought in his horse and tied the animal to one of the rear wagon-wheels. Gary cinched on his saddle and rode off to get his walking papers. He found the cutting-ground in a wilder flurry than ever—horns clashing, cows and steers bawling, calves blatting, punchers dashing through the midst of the milling

herd with yips and yells and swinging ropes. The cattle had been held on the overgrazed ground too long. Every owner was in a hurry to get his herd cut out and trailing for its home range.

It was no time for talk. As Gary neared the Box R fire, Jack came running to thrust a cooled iron into the coals and snatch out one that was only red-hot. He glimpsed Gary through the smoke and dust.

"Hop to it, you!" he yelled. "Hot 'em up—hot 'em up!"

Brusque as was the command, Gary jumped to obey with eager willingness. Jack had not tied the can to him yet! For the time being, at least, he could keep on helping Miss Connie.

By midafternoon the fast work brought an end to the cut. The Tonto and Hat-on had already started to drift-graze their herds toward the home ranges. All riders not needed for the drive were circling for a last sweep around the east end to pick up strays and work them across for the west end round-up. Wy and his three loaned mates went off with these line-riders.

Jack headed the last Box R bunch north and ordered Gary to break camp. Gary found the other camps gone. By the time he had the wagon loaded, Pete appeared with the two teams and the spare saddle-horses of the remuda. The bushy-whiskered cook was even gruffer than usual, but that might have been due to overwork. In reply to Gary's questions, as they hitched up the teams, he muttered that Connie had ridden herd all night and come in to sleep after Gary left camp. At noon she had gone again to help Pete hold the restless herd.

The moment Gary took the reins, Pete rode off ahead to pilot him, at the same time wrangling the remuda. They did not come up in sight of the Box R drive until near sundown. Even then Gary saw Connie and Jack only at a distance. They kept trailing along, instead of stopping to bed down the herd for the night.

THE course of the drive was more west than north. It brought the herd to the Box R road soon after sunset. Pete ordered Gary to camp at nightfall. He himself rode on to help with the drive. Ahead, over the dust-cloud of the herd, Gary recognized the trail-gap mesa.

He drove steadily along while the shadows of twilight deepened. At last the herd melted away in the dusk of the plain, though the mesa top loomed fairly clear against the sky. The trampling hoofs had so blurred the road that Gary no longer could see the shallow wheel-ruts in the gathering gloom.

He stopped beside a growth of scrub mesquite and hobbled the horses before unhitching them. He also gave each a bucketful of water from the last unemptied keg in the wagon. The supper he cooked was long overdone before Pete trailed back on a night-horse, one of the broncos that could see unusually well in the dark.

"Got the herd bedded down on the mesa," he explained. "Best of grass, and they savvy water's ahead. All the same, I got to night-guard to keep strays from trying to back-trail. Tag along at daybreak. Bosses went on to headquarters."

While explaining this, Pete packed up food and drink for two meals. He rode away into the blackness. To be left alone did not of itself matter to Gary. He had already become accustomed to the hush of the desert night, broken only at long intervals by the hoots of owls, the yaps and wails of coyotes. There was nothing to fear from the desert animals. Even the big stock-killing lobos shied clear of men.

He wakened in the chill of gray dawn, caught the hobbled horses, hitched up, and started on along the trail. Water and a cold snack did him for breakfast. Yet, early as he made the head of the mesa cleft, the herd had all risen from their bed-ground and streaked out. None of the cattle had lingered to drift-graze. The cows had hidden their calves in the scrub and joined the rush of the steers for water. Gary saw not a single head of the herd until, as he brought his trotting team to the saddle above the home valley, he met the nimblest cows back-trailing to their calves.

Jack was at work notching logs to extend the top crib on his dam. He paused only long enough to shout a curt order for Gary to refill the water-kegs. Neither Pete, nor Connie were in sight anywhere around the buildings. But before Gary had filled the last keg Pete began to fetch out food supplies. He told Gary to go in and eat.

Though Gary loitered over the meal, not even Jack came to join him at table. When he went out, he found Pete hitching up a fresh four-horse team. Jack was no longer working on the dam. At Gary's question Pete nodded toward the back trail.

"Him and Miss Connie took the whole remuda and hit out. Don't want to give

the Hat-on no chances to rustle our cows."

Gary forgot his disappointment in his concern for Connie. This cattle-culture was a hard business—hard even for a man. He already knew he would like it, if only they would let him stick around. But it was far too rough for a girl—for any girl—much more so for a real lady like Miss Royd.

He remarked this aloud when Pete joined him on the wagon-seat for the ride back. Pete grinned at his greenness.

"If it's riding you mean, Miss Connie was born in the saddle. You seen her rope and you seen her come in fresh as Jack from a long day's circle-riding. What's more, she can top-off most bronc's. 'Taint strength that beats outlaws; it's having the savvy to outguess'em."

Gary flicked the rump of the off leader with his whiplash.

"I know I don't belong when it comes to riding or roping. Guess I'm too old to learn it. Only—I can handle a gat."

His quick eye caught Pete's almost imperceptible twitch away from him. His cup of bitterness brimmed over.

"Say, this is getting too thick! First Miss Connie, then Jack gives me the cold shoulder. Now you act like I'm a rattlesnake. D'you mean to say she swallowed Austell's lies?"

Pete tried to cover his uneasiness with a sulky protest: "I aint said nothing. You got no call to jump me."

"I'm asking," Gary replied. "What you and Jack Royd think loses me no sleep. But I can't stand having *her* believe what's not true about me."

"Well—" Pete's beard bristled from the tightening of his jaw. "Aint it true you're the guy they call Gary the Gat?"

"What if I am? That doesn't prove me what Austell called a bad-man."

"Don't say it does. Only, how about the bottle your 'gat' label has been stuck on? Miss Connie remembers reading a scarehead article about you, time you was shot. Made you out the worst killer in Chicago. Mind, I aint saying it's true. Needn't blame me—you asked me whyfor Miss Connie's shying clear of you."

"All right. That's enough," said Gary.

He remained silent until, after twilight, they saw Jack and Connie back-trailing. Pete told him to stop for the night's camp. After halting the team, Gary pulled out his roll.

"Tell me the cash value of the layout you let me have when I made my get-away from the Hat-on."

Pete started to protest, but met Gary's gaze. He made a hasty estimate of the clothes and riding gear. Gary handed over three banknotes, with a cool-toned: "Keep the change."

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN Connie and Jack came up with the remuda, Gary pointed to the old circle-horse he had ridden.

"What's your price for the red pony?"

"He might fetch forty or fifty dollars in a fair market," replied Jack. "Why?"

Gary held out two twenties and a ten. "Just put your what-you-call-it vent brand on him."

Jack backed off. "He's yours without the money. I don't care what you are; you helped us bluff Vance. We'll vent the bay for you next time we brand calves."

"Not unless you take the money, Mr. Royd. I've learned what you and Miss Royd think of me."

"You didn't learn it from us," said Jack. "And I told Pete not to blab. Anyhow, you earned the old bronc', driving and cooking when we hadn't another hand."

"That is true," confirmed Connie. "Only, we would not have needed any help from you if we had left the country, as we intended. What to do now is the question. If you are all that Mr. Austell alleged, how can we believe what you told us about his cheating at cards?"

Gary felt himself go white. She had really been taken in by that faked write-up! He replied as steadily as he could:

"I would stand pat if it were only Austell's word against mine, Miss Royd. But Pete says you saw a newspaper story about me when I was shot."

Connie blinked with distress. "Oh, then it *is* all true! You really are—are what they called you!"

"They call me Gary the Gat. As for the rest of that story, it was cooked up by the blackhand bootleg ring."

"But it was in one of Chicago's leading newspapers."

"Owned by the ring, Miss Royd. Didn't you read the accounts in the other papers?"

"No, I wasn't in Chicago. The people I boarded with at teachers' college had come from your city. They still took that paper."

This corked the bottle. Gary tightened his lips.

"If you don't believe what I've already told you, it's no use my pleading not guilty. That's why I want the horse."

"Well, if you're set on quitting—" said Jack, unmistakable relief in his tone. "Tonto was sending a man to the rails. I asked him to wire along the line that I could use four or five riders. If they turn up tomorrow, I'll not need you."

"Thanks," said Gary. "I'm not setting up to be worth much as a cowboy. But that doesn't bar me from wiring for affidavits that I'm straight. Which will you have them from—bank or newspapers, prosecuting attorney, judge, or chief of police?"

"Sa-ay, boy, you're one peach of a bluffer, or you sure got a come-back coming!"

Connie followed up her brother with a like reserve, differently expressed: "We would be glad to learn it is all a mistake."

Had she said, "We will," Gary could have smiled. But the "would" implied doubt of his ability to make good. That jab hit him hardest of all. He turned to Jack.

"I'll have the papers mailed to your sister. It's not my custom to crowd in on other people's parties. My ticket is still good for California. Don't bother. Pete will catch my horse for me."

"Hold on," said Jack. "If you can show us, it'll not only clear you but cinch Vance."

"Yes? Well, all I ask is for you to keep on standing pat till you get my proofs. Hold your cinch on the cattle and water-hole. They're yours. As for me, I made a mistake. I don't belong. It's my fade-out."

This time it was Connie who protested. "Wait. You'd get lost, trying to make the rails by a night ride. Besides, we—we'll need you if no riders turn up."

Gary gave in. She had asked him to stay. The excuse she gave was thin; and her wish for him to stay therefore meant that she did not altogether disbelieve him. She wanted time to consider. "It's your asking," he agreed. "I'll stay over."

During the night he heard voices. They were low-toned but unexcited, and all soon drowsed off. At dawn he found five strangers rolled in their blankets behind the wagon. Pete, already cooking breakfact, told him they were former Box R hands who had been taken on by the Diamond K outfit, sixty miles west.

"Soon's they heard, they jumped their job and their hawses and kept coming till they got here," Pete wound up. "Smelt my cooking."

Gary did not smile at the cook's humor nor at the wild scramble of the punchers that followed Pete's loudly bellowed: "Gr-r-rub pile!" The nimbleness of their rush proved that not a man among them had been stiffened by the sixty-mile ride. Like Connie and her brother, they were desert riders, born to the life. Gary felt more an outsider than ever.

While they wolfed down their food, Jack wrangled in the remuda. As the men waddled out to rope their choice of horses, Gary spoke to Connie.

"No more need of me now."

"But—but your horse isn't vented yet."

"If you think anything at all is necessary, you can write me a bill-of-sale while I saddle him."

Connie was not so easily dodged. "Why rush off? Vance may think you're running away from him."

"What if he does? I'm not coming back."

"Well, then—" She flushed and looked away, only to turn back and face him with her usual frank, unwavering gaze.

"I can't ask you to come back, even if you send proofs. That would not be fair to you. I—I could have nothing to do with a—professional gunman."

THE vague yet startling consciousness of another meaning behind the surface meaning of this gripped Gary as if a hand had clutched his naked heart. Why should she imply that he might be thinking she felt any more than a friendly interest in him?

But that was impossible—sheer fancy!

"I understand," he said. "It's why I told you I'm going on to California. Good-by, and many thanks for letting me stay this long."

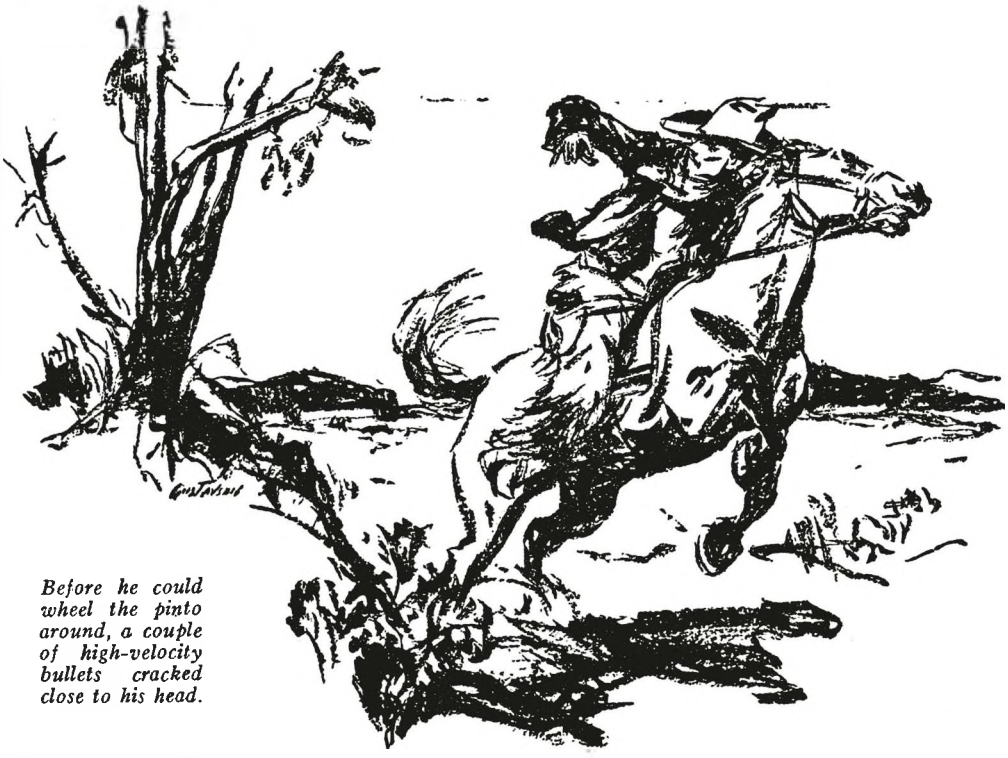
"No, you're not going now. It was just that I did not want you to misunderstand. But about your side of it—"

"Don't worry about me, Miss Royd. I've played a lone hand all my life."

For once she evaded. "It would be a favor if you would drive for me today. The west-end riding is harder than the east."

He bundled his blankets and tossed the roll into the wagon.

Connie tagged on at the end of the line of riders that strung out after Jack to



Before he could wheel the pinto around, a couple of high-velocity bullets cracked close to his head.

make contact with the Hat-on line, east of the trail. Pete explained that Tonto riders would make similar contact on the south. The dragnet line would circle all mid-range stock and throw them across the road, to be rounded-up with the west-end bunches at the last water-holes.

Gary's instructions from Connie were to follow the road as far as Curlew Slough. Such driving was now not difficult for him. He rattled along at a lively clip, with Pete jingling the remuda close behind. But fast time as they made to Curlew Slough, they found the Hat-on and Tonto wagons there ahead of them.

To kill time, Gary saddled a gentled horse and took over the care of the remuda. Pete had discovered that the new Hat-on cook was a former acquaintance. After a visit with his fellow hasher, he set to work at his own chuck box.

Gary was still wrangling when, late in the afternoon, bands of cattle began to string over the low desert swells east of the road. Sight of the wagons sent them angling away from the slough, but all drifted to the west side of the trail. The later bands came in bunches, on the run, heads down and tails high. Here and there behind them yipping riders jogged into sight on jaded horses.

Once in sight of the slough, the punchers all slanted for the Hat-on wagon. Two that came down the trail from the north proved to be Austell and Wy. They swung out to look at the Box R wrangler.

" 'Lo, kid," greeted the big foreman. " 'Gratulations! Yuh shore's riz in the world—all the way from cookee to day wrangler in one hop."

Gary smiled. "Thanks. No doubt your boss will agree with us that there's nothing like holding the right cards—and the gats."

Wy's face darkened, but Austell's smile merely broadened.

"You're funny, Gat—you don't know how funny. I'd like to laugh at the funniness of you, if it wasn't so sad. Fact is, I feel sorry for you—a lone, lorn dude maverick dogie out here in the rude wild and woolly West, among us roughneck longhorns. Don't reach for your popguns, please. Wy will tell you I've come out of my way to do you a good turn."

"Small favors thankfully received," replied Gary.

Austell nodded to his foreman.

"There! Didn't I tell you, Wy? He's plumb grateful! Listen, Gat. We've all come to love you, all of us cow-persons. But you remember Lobo Leet. Well, it seems he didn't like the cut of your ears. I've heard he figures on trimming them to suit his fancy taste."

"How nice of him!" murmured Gary.

"Yes, indeed," agreed Austell. "Lobo's

a nice two-handed one, like yourself. Only trouble, if he's had a swig or two extra, the joke may be on him. He might trim your *inner* ear, instead of the outer one."

Gary widened his eyes and sagged his jaw. "Oh, dear! What would you advise?"

"You'll have to excuse me," begged Austell. "I'm free to say I wouldn't shuck-it with Lobo, any more than with you. I never counted the notches on his guns, but I've heard that the left one alone outscores all the notches that Tonto can brag of. If I were in your boots, I'd make my get-away while I could. I'd *vamoose pronto.* But it's up to you whether your streak is yellow—or red."

"He is still the deputy sheriff, isn't he?" inquired Gary.

"What of it? He wont insist upon formalities."

"Yes, that's the way he struck me. Good-by."

"He bullied Sutton into making him deputy. Get him, and we'll get you his star."

"Good-by," Gary repeated.

Austell rode off, as black-faced as his foreman. Gary smiled. All that work to shoo him away, when he already had planned to call at his cholla-jungle check-room for his suitcase and railroad ticket!

Yet—did Austell really want him to run? Rather than have him make his get-away, would he not prefer to have him get out of the way? What better means for that than a run-in with Lobo Leet?

It was a clever trap—a "heads I win, tails you lose" toss for Austell. As he must have figured it, the result would be lead and flowers for Gary the Gat, or lead and flowers for Lobo—and the gallows for Gary.

Cool common sense told Gary to provide himself with a canteen and otherwise make ready for a get-away at nightfall. By circling around to cut the road two or three miles south, he could dodge the Hat-on gang. At dawn he could leave the trail and drift west to the railroad station beyond the one where Lobo waited for him. It was always best to side-step trouble.

CHAPTER XV

SHORTLY before sundown Jack and Connie and their five punchers came stringing in from the north. They corraled the remuda inside a rope stretched from the wagon around a circle of stakes already set up by Pete.

Gary noticed several riders coming from the Tonto wagon. As they passed the Hat-on camp, Austell and his men trailed in behind them afoot. The crowd was too large for an ordinary conference on round-up plans. Connie called Jack's attention to the fact. He lined out his men in front of the wagon.

The length of Lobo Leet was in his legs. Astride his horse, he sat only a trifle higher than the solid, upright figure of Tonto Drake. But Gary had Austell's talk fresh in his mind. He was first to recognize the deputy sheriff and guess the object of the visit.

Too late now to run! He stepped off to one side, well apart from Connie and Jack.

As the visitors drew near, Leet swerved his horse toward Gary and swung off with the animal between them. Austell walked forward to stand beside Drake. All their men hastened to shift out of line with Gary and Leet.

The deputy came around his horse and slouched forward to within three paces of Gary.

"Hell-o, dude," he greeted. "I heard tell yuh done bragged yuh was looking for me."

"Not at all," replied Gary.

Leet snarled with the ferocity of his lobo namesake: "Yuh sneaking skunk! Call me a liar, will yuh?"

"Hardly that, officer. I merely stated I have not been looking for you."

"Huh, trying to wriggle outer it, yuh miser'ble dude rattler! Think yuh aint knowed out here, do yuh? Crawled outa yore town rat-hole to shoot up the cow-country and steal hawses. I'll show yuh!"

The intent to egg him into a gun-fight was as plain to Gary as it was raw. The fellow was one of the old-type gunmen who killed for the pleasure of killing. He now was trying to rasp his man into making the first move, not only to give himself the plea of self-defense, but even more to gratify his vanity by showing the onlookers that he was quicker on the draw.

Gary saw the trap. Even if he won with the gun, he would lose with the law. There could be no plea to justify him. He would have resisted an officer. He stood motionless and put a cool question:

"Have you a warrant for my arrest?"

"No, I haint, yuh yeller cur," taunted

Leet. "I don't need no warrant to take a measly quitter what aint got the nerve to throw his gun on a rabbit."

With his unwavering gaze looking into the murderous eyes of the killer, Gary asked another cool question:

"Are you here as an officer to arrest me, or did Austell hire you to come and murder me?"

That shot hit the mark. Leet did not blink, but his muddy eyes flickered betrayal of his uncertainty whether to throw his guns or to jeer.

From the side came Drake's harsh command: "Nope, Austell. It's Lobo's deal."

Austell shouted an indignant protest: "But he lies! I never sent for Leet. You just told me the deputy has a wire from Chicago that the Gat is wanted for murder."

"Get it straight," corrected Drake. "I told yuh he says he got a wire. I aint seen it yet."

"You haven't?" Austell raised his voice. "Leet, I'll not stand for any lie that I'm trying to frame this killer. If you have any such telegram as you claim, I demand that you show it."

"Huh," grunted Leet. "I'm dep'ty. I don't take no orders 'cept from Sutton."

Drake let out a bellow: "Show yore wire, or back up!"

Leet backed to get his horse between himself and Gary, then faced the old cowman.

"Want to get leaded too, do yuh?"

"Shell out!" roared Drake.

Austell sprang between the angry men.

"Hold on, Tonto. I think Mr. Leet will oblige us if we ask it as a favor, not as an order."

"Uh—that's diff'runt, seeing's yuh're asking perlite."

A flip sent a yellow envelope darting from the shirt pocket beside the deputy's star. While it was still in the air, Leet whirled to glare at Gary. But Gary had taken care to make no move.

He could easily have shot Leet through the head, over the high withers of his horse, while the bully was looking at Drake. Leet was doing his utmost to find an excuse to kill him. He might do it even without an excuse. Gary faced the probability with no weakening from his decision to take what came without resistance. He must prove to Connie that he was not the kind of professional gun-user she believed him to be.

Balked again, the deputy advanced upon Gary the second time. And again Drake interfered.

"Hold yore hawses, Lobo. We'll ask Miss Connie to read us yore wire."

"I—I'd rather not," replied the girl.

"Well, then, it's up to you, Royd."

"Why not yourself?" asked Jack.

"Aint got my reading-glasses. 'Sides, the kid belongs to yore outfit."

"He's leaving," Jack hastened to explain. "Would have quit last night, only Con—only we kept him on long enough to drive the wagon today. I needed Connie for circle-riding. But he's not a Box R man now. So, as long as you forgot your specs, I'll read the wire for you."

At a sign from Austell, Wy picked up the yellow envelope and went to meet the advancing owner of the Box R. Jack took out the telegraph form and glanced at the top and bottom.

"It's addressed to 'Deputy-sheriff Leet' and signed, 'Chief of Police, Chicago.' Reads: 'Man described as Gary the Gat notorious killer; wanted for murder; one thousand reward dead or alive.' "

Gary thought he understood. He smiled into Leet's menacing eyes.

"I'm your prisoner, officer. I'd rather make it alive. There'll be no need of requisition-papers. All I ask is to get back to Chicago and face the charge. It's only a frame-up of the—"

"Frame-up?" snarled Leet. "Yuh lying skunk! I'll show yuh! Shuck 'em, yuh yeller-streaked rattler!"

NOTHING would have given Gary greater pleasure than to have met the challenge. But he could not forget Connie. His hands thrust up instead of down. They were already above his head when Leet threw a gun and fired.

The bullet grazed Gary's left cheek. But he did not dodge. He stood rigid, gazing unflinchingly into the murderous eyes of the two-gun man, his hands high. At any instant the drawn six-gun might belch out another shot, this time aimed either to kill or to maim. Gary saw the venomous eagerness of its owner. The muddy eyes glowed red with blood-lust.

Yet it did not seem possible that any officer could shoot a man down without provocation—a man with his hands up. A sharp sting at the bottom of his left ear told him the mark at which the first shot had been fired. The bullet had nipped the ear

lobe. He had not felt it at first, owing to the numbing effect. The next bullet might clip his other ear.

From off to the side came the derisive shout of Wy: "Go to it, Lobo! Yuh've ear-notched yore maverick. Now put yore running-iron on him."

The well-meant encouragement missed its mark. It broke in on the killer's mounting lust to murder. Gary saw that it brought him back to the realization that there were onlookers—witnesses. Both the Tonto and the Box R outfits might not relish seeing an unresisting man shot down, even though he might be a criminal. But to haze him was a different matter. He might yet be tantalized into showing fight.

Out flipped the deputy's other gun. A bullet thudded in the dust between Gary's feet.

"Dance, yuh coyote!" Leet yelled. "Hop high. Show the lady an' gents how yuh dude-jazz."

The invitation was punctuated by a bullet that struck under the toe of one of Gary's big old boots. The shock wrenched his foot sideways. But he did not jump. The next shot took the heel off his other boot.

He called out approvingly: "Slick work, Officer! I'll not be able to run away after you've shot my feet off."

Leet paused to level the long barrels of his revolvers at Gary's belt.

"Huh! Sass me, will yuh? I'll show yuh. I'll shoot out yore damn'—"

He choked off short, his tobacco-stained lips agape. Connie had stepped in front of Gary. She spoke with scornful indignation:

"You coward! No matter if he is a murderer, he surrendered. His hands are up."

Leet's astonishment heightened into amazement.

"Coward—me? Why, ma'am—why, yuh seen him yore own self. Tried my dumdest to prod him inter shucking it. Gave him first move, an' the yeller skunk quit cold!"

"He surrendered to you as an officer. You've no right to torment any prisoner. If there aren't enough white men here to see that you treat him fairly, I'll attend to it myself."

JACK had recovered sufficient breath to put in his say: "Aw, chuck the sob stuff, Connie. You'll be weeping next over a popped rattler."

"Not if he wears a deputy's badge," she flashed back. "An officer has no more right to maim or murder people than has anyone else. That was Father's motto. If this prisoner is a murderer, he ought to be hanged; but he's first entitled to fair treatment and a fair trial."

"That goes, Lobo," said Drake. "I don't cotton to losing time and court costs over hanging killers or hawse-thieves. Only, this kid aint done no killing 'round here. Quit yore fooling and get down to business."

"Yes, Miss Royd is right," chimed in Austell. "But be sure you take no chances with your man, Lobo. He's greased lightning on the draw."

Leet met the warning with a derisive grin. He holstered both of his guns and drew out a pair of handcuffs. He met Connie's indignant gaze with a look of mock humility. "Please, ma'am, cain't I put the hobbles on yore killer kid? It'll keep him from being tempted to git hisself hurt trying to *vamoose.*"

Connie flushed and stepped aside. The deputy jerked his thumb at Gary.

"Flop down yore wings, killer—I aint scairt of yuh. There aint no man alive kin beat me to the draw. Put 'em down an' come a-crawling to git yore classy plat'-num wrist-rings."

Without the slightest relaxation of his caution, Gary moved forward and slowly brought down his right arm, straight out before him. Leet scowled.

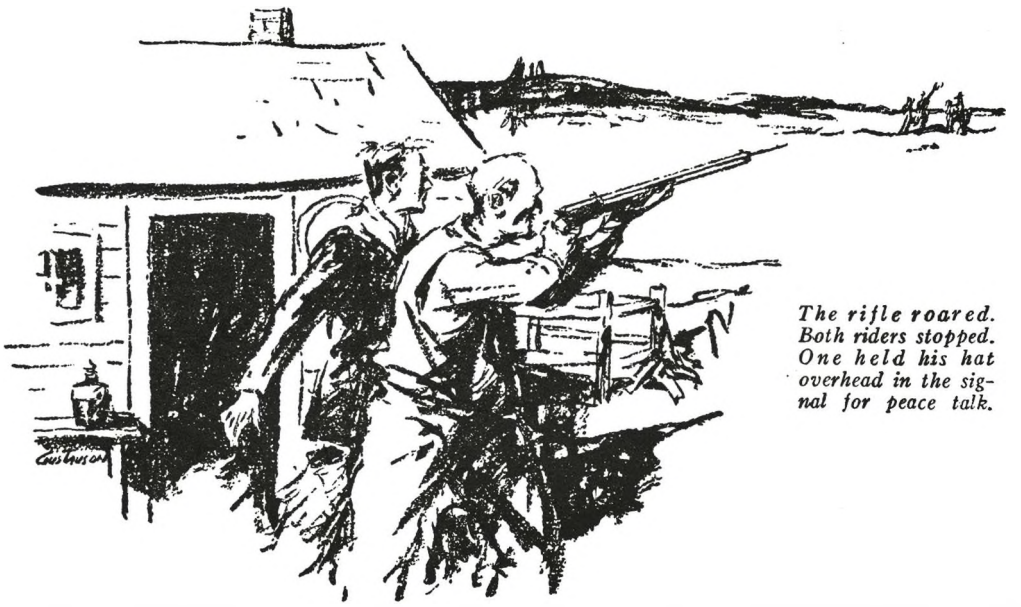
"Both of 'em, yuh yap!"

Gary lowered his left arm until it was side by side with the right one. Not even so willing a killer as the two-gun deputy could find a pretense that the prisoner was trying to draw. He spat his disgust as he snapped the handcuffs upon Gary's sunburnt wrists.

"Bah! Took him for a reg'lar bad-man. He's only one of them sneak alley-rats. Aint got nerve 'nough to pull a gun on a man as kin shoot. For two bits I wouldn't bother to frisk the pup."

With seeming carelessness he reached out to take the automatics from Gary's pockets. Gary hardly could hide his contempt for the over-confident fool. Had he wished, he could easily have snatched one of the front-slung six-shooters and given its owner what he deserved.

Yet was he himself not the bigger fool? Connie had turned away. As Leet drew back with the pistols, he grinned and muttered a low-spoken taunt:



The rifle roared. Both riders stopped. One held his hat overhead in the signal for peace talk.

"It's a dead cinch now, you *bobo*. Trailing yuh to the rails, all I got to do is plug yuh—an' tell 'em yuh made a break to git away. Savvy?"

GARY'S first thought was to call this out to the crowd and ask for a safety guard. But he had reached his limit. He was fed up. Connie had stopped Leet's abuse of him. Yet even she believed him a murderer. As long as he had the name, he might as well have the fame. Also it was clear that Austell had hired Leet to commit murder. Guard or no guard, the deputy would find a way to shoot his prisoner.

A side-glance showed Jack standing apart from the crowd. Connie was going past him to the wagon. Gary looked back at Leet.

"Will you call it a break if I ask my boss for my pay?"

It was time for the killer to cover up his animosity toward his prisoner.

"Hop to it," he said. "We got to hit out for the rails pronto."

Gary walked toward Jack, taking in the exact position of Austell and each of his men. He drew close to Jack, with his manacled hands outstretched.

"That was a stall about my pay, Mr. Royd. You don't owe me a dollar. What little I have done is nothing to your saving my life. But wont you give me a good-bye handshake?"

Had Jack responded, Gary was prepared to tell him about Leet's murderous intentions. It offered a last chance to side-step the issue. Jack, however, was the one to do the side-stepping. Against Gary's hopes, though fully in keeping with his expectations, Connie's brother sullenly refused his hand and turned away. That left only the other course open.

With his hands outstretched as if in pleading, Gary stepped still closer to Jack. A moment later he bounded clear and whirled to face Leet, with Jack's pistol in his right hand.

Leet was no make-believe gunman. His guns were already flipping from their holsters. Four shots crashed out so close together that their reports blurred into a single roar. The side-jump to clear Jack from danger was all that saved Gary. Even at that, one of Leet's bullets singed Gary's scalp and the other scraped along his ribs.

Yet the instant that Gary had pulled the trigger of Jack's forty-five the second time, he jerked around to face Austell and his gang. Both six-shooters were dropping from Leet's hands. Not even a two-gun killer can hold his guns with a bullet through each arm.

CHAPTER XVI

FORTUNATELY for Austell and his men, they were either too astonished or else too discreet to reach for their guns. Gary was on edge. He did not know whether he could count upon even the Tonto outfit remaining neutral.

Drake had called down both Leet and Austell. But the disabling of the deputy

sheriff by the man accused of murder might cause the old cow-man to see the situation from another angle. Gary's watchful gaze took in all the Tonto bunch, along with the Hat-on gang.

He could not look around at the Box R men. For all he knew, they might be as keen as Austell to shoot him down. Not that any one of them could feel any friendship for a two-gun killer like Lobo Leet. But their boss had suffered the indignity of having his gun taken from him. Also there was that reward named in the telegram—"a thousand, dead or alive."

Quick action was the only way to guard against the chance of being shot in the back. Gary sprinted to Leet on the toes of his bullet-scored boots. A horrified cry from Connie told him that she, like the men, thought he was running in to finish the helpless officer.

Most certain of all present that this was what was coming to him, Leet dropped to his knees. Like many other killers, his heart failed him when he found himself helpless in the face of death.

"Don't shoot—don't shoot, feller!" he begged. "Lemme live! I—I aint fit to cash in!"

Gary smiled his contempt into the glaring, terrified eyes of the bad-man, as he ducked low.

"Get up, if you want to live," he ordered.

Leet staggered to his feet. Gary straightened at the same time, coming up without Jack's pistol but with one of his own in each hand. The shift was so swift and unexpected that neither Austell nor his men had time to make a move. Leet, standing erect, made a perfect shield for Gary's back. Gary eyed the bunch over his leveled pistols.

"Listen, Austell," he said. "You crowded me into this. Now I'm in bad with the law. I could have put both shots into your hired killer's solid bone head as easily as where I did put them. He got a whole lot less than what he asked for. Yet if I should surrender now, I'd probably get a life sentence for winging an officer. I'd sooner go out, right here and now. If you don't want to go out with me, you'll talk turkey. Come here!"

AUSTELL reddened deeply, wavered, then obeyed. As he came forward, Gary backed away with the still obedient Leet, until he had Jack and his men within the field of his vision, along with the other outfits. When Austell drew near, Gary ordered him to get Leet's keys and unlock the handcuffs. This was done with the pistol muzzles jammed against Austell's belt.

Freed from the handcuffs, Gary frisked Austell and stepped clear to center his gaze upon the crowd. Leet made a whine:

"Aw, say, bo, I'm bleeding like a stuck pig. Aint yuh going to let me git my busted wings tied up?"

"Only one is broken. The other is just punctured," replied Gary. "Maybe Miss Royd will do the tying. Ask her."

Leet made a shambling run for the wagon. Gary cut short Austell's attempt to follow.

"Wait! I've been named a horse-thief. Do I need to call on Pete in order to prove that you told your men I had won my pick of your horses? Kindly speak loud enough for Mr. Royd to hear."

Austell's flush deepened. But he must have already seen quite enough of Gary's gun work.

"I said it," he admitted.

"All right," replied Gary. "Tell Wy to beat it P. D. Q., rope the horse I chose, brand him as sold, and fetch him to me."

This was stiff riding. Austell hesitated. Then he met Gary's eye. He called out the order. As Wy loped off on a horse borrowed from a Tonto rider, Gary casually asked the value of the pinto.

"I paid two hundred and twenty for him," Austell claimed.

Gary nodded. "That's little enough. Make out your bill-of-sale for the amount. —Mr. Drake, just a minute. Please don't go. There's no need for anyone else to stay, but it would be a favor if you and Mr. Royd would witness Austell's sale to me."

"Don't care if I do," agreed Drake. "He slicked me on a steer deal."

A low-spoken command from Gary forced Austell to order all his men back to their camp. Though Gary was not now as desperately ready to shoot as he had been, neither his look nor his tone betrayed the fact to Austell. As the Hat-on punchers straggled away, Drake dismissed his own men. That left only Austell, Drake, Jack and the five Box R riders.

Yet Gary never for a moment relaxed his watchfulness. After pocketing both pistols, he kept his hands on their hilts except when Drake passed over to him the witnessed bill-of-sale, written in indelible pencil.

"Is it O. K.?" he asked.

Jack answered for his hesitating fellow-witness: "Yes. It sells you that pinto, fully described—price two-twenty."

Gary drew out banknotes with his left hand until their amount totaled the sale price named. He shoved them into Austell's half-closed fist.

"Here's your money. I accept nothing from you, either as a gift or upon non-legal considerations such as poker winnings. You'll now wait till I receive my horse. Much obliged, Mr. Drake. No need of your staying."

"Plenty of time, kid. I aint in no hurry."

Something about the old cow-man's rust-spotted iron face told Gary that the Tonto owner was hugely enjoying the discomfiture of Austell. Yet the two of them squatted on their heels beside Jack to discuss the procedure of the next day's round-up.

PETE was busy over his simmering pots. The Box R men had started to pick level places to spread out their bed-rolls. Gary drew back where he could keep watch on every man and at the same time see Connie at the side of the wagon. She had stanched both of Leet's wounds, and was now setting the broken bone with stick splints.

By the time she had the arm in a sling, Wy came galloping through the twilight with the pinto horse in lead. When Drake said that the lightly burned Hat-on vent brand would do, Gary gave Austell leave to go with Wy.

For the first time in Gary's experience, Drake's cast-iron face bent in what might have been a smile. The cowman spoke loud enough for everyone at the camp to hear:

"Better tote yore busted wolf back to yore camp, Austell. Wont be room for him at mine. I'm telling this kid he's welcome to loaf with my outfit long's he's a mind to. Allus did like a young cuss with nerve. What say, kid?"

"I could say my thanks, Mr. Drake, but it will count more if I act them. That means I'll head for the railroad as I intended. Austell may be able to make trouble for you if you shelter a man who has resisted an officer and is charged with murder."

The suspicion of a smile left Drake's morose face. He squinted hard at Austell.

"Ugh—jest let him try it once!"

Gary hastened to cut in before Austell could reply to the challenge: "No, Mr. Drake. You'll have to work with his gang, as well as with Mr. Royd's men, until the end of the round-up. After what's happened, I'd be a monkey-wrench in the machinery."

"Say, boy, you aint only got sand, you got the savvy. Here's luck!"

As the old gun-fighter spoke, he heaved up on his bowlegs and waddled over to offer Gary his hand.

Wy had helped Leet upon his horse. He walked away with the horse in lead, leaving his own bronco to his boss. Austell mounted and swept off his hat toward the wagon.

"Good-by, Connie. Let me tell you I've not yet recorded that contract and bill-of-sale, and I don't intend to. Now that our visitor from the East has been shown up for what he is, you may give me a chance to prove that other lie about the tongue-cut bronco."

"I would be glad to know you didn't do it, Vance. But until you can bring me the proof—"

"Yes!" he agreed. "I'll wait. But right after round-up I'll run down the other liar, if I have to follow him to hell. Till then, *adios, querida!*"

Spanish was a stranger tongue to Gary than was Greek. But Jack's angry frown, no less than Austell's ardent look and tone, told him that the boss of the Hat-on had used uncalled-for terms of endearment to the lady of the Box R.

"Fade out," he ordered. "Make it what you call *pronto,* or I'll wing you like your deputy gunman."

Austell dug in his spurs. Tonto Drake had swung into his own saddle. As he followed Austell, he looked back to squint at Gary with that grim hint of a smile.

Gary watched Austell out of pistol-range. When he turned about Jack had gone to the cook-fire, where the men were waiting for Pete to fill their plates. Connie had climbed into the wagon to put away her first-aid kit.

Gary noticed the care with which Pete and the punchers made a show of unconcern over his presence. Jack also avoided his gaze. Their certainty that he was a killer did not tend to lessen the bitterness of what had gone before.

"Don't bother to fill my plate, Pete," he said. "I'm on my way."

"You can't go without eating," muttered

Jack. "It's a long ride to the rails for a—an Eastern man."

"Well—I rather think I'll ride lighter without your food. But if any of you would like to ride in with me, you're welcome to come along and collect that thousand-dollar reward."

The offer won stares of surprise from all. One man mumbled: "I aint lost any bear."

Jack had more nerve than caution. He blurted jeeringly: "You figure Austell will try to dry-gulch you. Lot of good your pistols would do against a rifle a quarter-mile off! I'll loan you one of my rifles, but none of my men. Can't afford to lose them."

"Guess I can side-step the Hat-on gang," replied Gary. "At least odds are better than they would have been if I had let your sweet deputy sheriff escort me. He promised to make sure of my making a break to escape."

"What! So that was why you broke in two, was it? Why didn't you tell me and Tonto?"

"I tried to blossom out to you, but met with a frost."

The flush this brought to Jack's sullen face soothed Gary's soreness like balm on a bruise. He added quickly:

"It's all right. You had that telegram to go by, whether or not it's a fake. As for my asking company to the railroad, I thought I'd like a witness to tell you and Miss Connie I'd taken the train for Chicago. But that would prove nothing. What's the use? Here's your chance to cart me in dead."

He turned his back on the bunch. Connie was getting down from the wagon. He went to her with Austell's bill-of-sale open in his hand.

"Before I go, Miss Royd, may I endorse this pinto-horse paper over to you, instead of paying cash for the horse I've been riding?"

SHE gazed up at him with an odd mistiness in her ruddy-brown eyes. But her voice was clear-cut, almost hard. "It's no go. Your pinto is worth four or five times the value of the old circle-bronc'. Besides, the bay is yours anyway. You've already earned him."

"We differed about that before. I understand, though. It does not matter that I'm in debt to you for saving my life. You refuse to take anything from me. You believe what they've framed against me."

Connie's misted eyes suddenly glistened with tears. She thrust up her hands, palms outward.

"Oh, go away! Please, please go! Can't you see? Even if—if it's not true, you're none the less a gunman!"

Gary could have retorted that the same was true of any policeman, marshal, sheriff or soldier. But who was he to question her likes or dislikes? The fact that he loved her as he had never before believed it possible for a man to love any woman—even that gave him no claim on her. What little he had done for her brother was nothing to what she had done for him. Besides, he was an outsider. He did not belong.

"Don't cry, Miss Connie," he tried to soothe her. "I'm going away—for keeps. You'll not be worried by the sight of me again."

The look in her suddenly widened eyes puzzled him. Was she sick—about to faint? He caught one of her hands. It felt as cold as ice.

"Pete!" he called. "Rush a cup of coffee. Miss Connie's sick."

"No!" she gasped, "not—sick! Go!"

He felt certain now that it was all due to fear and loathing. She believed him to be a murderer. It was the way any girl could be expected to behave if her hand was grasped by a hand smeared with red.

When he reached the pinto, which Wy had left hitched to the corral rope, two men were slapping his saddle and bridle on the docile horse. As they lashed his bedroll behind the cantle, Pete came to tie a canteen and bag to the horn. He smeared resinous salve on the raw burn of the pinto's vent brand while muttering gruff words of advice:

"Best shy the trail all the way in, kid. They'd get you any time after moonrise. Back-trail and circle east. At dark line out with the North Star behind you—that one I showed you t'other night."

"Thanks for the tip," said Gary. "Double thanks for doctoring the horse."

"Hold still," replied Pete, and he dabbed salve on the lower part of Gary's ear. "Lucky for you, Lobo aint such a fancy shot as he brags. He on'y nicked the edge."

Gary looked toward the fire. Jack was sitting on his heels, cowboy fashion, with his back to the corral. One of the two men cast his rawhide lariat and noosed the old bay circle-horse out of the remuda. Gary saw and understood.

"Turn him loose," he directed. "The Box R owes me nothing, and I'm taking no gifts from Jack Royd."

He drew himself up on the pinto and walked him away along the back trail through the fading twilight.

Behind him he left the cheerful fire-glow, the companionship of men, the one girl in all the world. Ahead stretched his lonely trail into the dusk of the desert nightfall.

CHAPTER XVII

BEHIND the first rise north of Curlew Slough, Gary turned off-trail. But contrary to Pete's advice, he swung to the left—westward, not eastward. This was owing to his innate wariness, rather than to any doubt of Pete's good faith.

He reasoned that the Hat-on gang, like Pete, might figure on the fact that the cross-country route east of the trail would be straighter and easier going. The west half of the winter range was more hilly, and a fugitive starting on that side would either have to cut across the trail or else make a big curve to parallel its westward bend.

Gary kept the Pole Star over his right shoulder until the moon rose. After that he veered to the south. He kept as near to a southerly course as he could. But he had already learned why Pete had advised circling east of the road. In the uncertain light of the quarter-moon the pinto had a very hard time picking his way over the broken ground and through the growths of scrub and cactus.

At last, fearful that the horse might injure himself, Gary halted him and got down to wait for daybreak. It was a chilly vigil. A fire might have betrayed him to Hat-on trailers. He could have used his blankets, but if caught with the bed-roll open, he would have had to abandon it to make a quick get-away.

The gray light of dawn found him shivering. He mounted and rode on. Within the first minute he cut a trail that wound off to the west. This undoubtedly led to the Tonto ranch. Gary headed along it in the opposite direction until he saw the fork of the Box R road. From the rise above the fork he saw, clear cut against the dawn sky, the butte that marked where he had found the trail when coming across country from the Hat-on.

By heading due south he struck the butte at its west base. There he left the pinto picketed in a bunch of tall grass and started up the butte. Even the lower slope proved stiff. Atop that, when he made the rim-rock cliffs, he had a dizzy climb from ledges to crevices and crevices to ledges. But his lungs worked well in the cool dry air, and his muscles proved they had regained much of their normal strength.

Soon after the sun flared above the eastern horizon, he crawled up over the edge of the butte's pine-covered top. He ran across the flat summit to peer down from the brink of the opposite cliffs.

From his high viewpoint the desert below him lay outspread like a map. He could look down into every arroyo and hollow, over all rock combs, and into the midst of the scrub growths. The trail twisted along like a scrawl made by a child with a draughtsman's double pen.

A moving speck on the map fixed Gary's glance. A close look showed him that the speck was a man slinking up out of an arroyo. Then he sighted the larger figure of a horse and rider galloping down the trail from the north. Some signal must have passed, for another man came out of the arroyo with two horses. He and the first man mounted and raced across the trail in a line that would bring them around the south flank of the butte.

Farther out on the desert Gary glimpsed other dots under the sunrise glare. All were moving southwards. The first rider kept on the trail. It was clear to Gary that several of the gang had been "laying" for him, on the trail and out east of the butte. He had sidestepped all of them by circling to the west.

But now one of their scouts had cut his trail, either near the forks or to the north, and had seen where he had struck across for the back of the butte. All were now racing to head him off—to get between him and the railroad. He should have ridden straight on across country, instead of climbing the butte.

The chance to make the station was now lost. He had no rifle. As Pete had said, they could keep clear of his pistols and pick him off from a safe distance. Yet there still might be time for him to slip past those two west flankers of the gang and slant for the next station.

He ran back across the butte top and scrambled down the cliffs with a rapidity that would have been foolhardy had not his every nerve and muscle been tensed to

concert pitch. Owing to the lack of the heel that had been shot off his right boot by Leet, the plunge down the steep slope below the cliffs gave him more difficulty than the precipice. He had several slips and two rolls that gave him a number of hard bruises and a bad wrench to his right ankle. None, however, checked his limping rush on down to where the pinto stood cropping the coarse grass.

LIE started his flight at the swiftest gait he had ever ridden. A shallow draw to the southwest promised both cover and easy going. The illusion lasted hardly a half-mile. Broken ground forced him to rein in the sprinting pinto. Then came an arroyo with so steep and deep a bank that not even a seasoned range-rider would have ventured the jump.

Down the arroyo the bank looked less sheer. Gary turned that way. A growth of chollas swung him up the side slope of the draw. The rise brought him in sight of the two flank riders, less than a half-mile away. They were racing west from the southwest corner of the butte. Before he could wheel the pinto around and down below the top of the rise, a couple of high-velocity bullets cracked like blacksnake whips close over his head. He shifted along behind the slope to peer through a screen of mesquite scrub.

One of the riders had headed straight toward him. The other was slanting to cut him off from his southwest course. No chance now to slip past them. The only way of escape lay in a quick retreat.

The pinto sprinted back to the patch of sacaton grass even faster than he had come. From there the back-trail was much slower going. Gary wisely let the pinto set his own pace. He continued to do so even when, as they topped a rise, a bullet splashed on the ledge beside them. The first rider had halted on the rise above the arroyo.

Though the pinto's sprint had widened the range by an eighth of a mile, the second rifle-bullet punctured the crown of Gary's hat. The third scorched his shoulder blade as he flattened forward on his saddlehorn. The assassin could shoot a rifle! None too soon, the pinto bounded down below the crest of the rise.

The rider would of course sprint up the draw to regain the ground he had lost. The pinto was picking his way across the rocky bed of the barranca at the head of that barrier arroyo. A little distance up was the end of a long trough that Gary had followed when approaching the butte from the north. The ridge on the west side of the trough sloped down to a great open flat.

Gary knew nothing about horses, but he did know men. Austell had picked the pinto as a gift for Connie—a peace offering. The horse must therefore be an exceptionally good one. Alongside the other horses even Gary's untrained eyes had seen that he had "class." One of the punchers had spoken of him as a thoroughbred. Gary had heard the term used by men who bet on race-horses. He was now racing for his life. He staked it on the pinto's speed. Instead of making for the shelter of the trough, he guided the pinto out upon the open desert.

The gift horse needed no urging. Once on the flat, all that Gary had to do was lean forward in the saddle. The pinto thrust forward his sleek muzzle and lined out at a speed that would have hurled Gary from the saddle had the ground called for any sudden swerves.

THE pinto was still racing when the nearer pursuer crossed the barranca and halted again to fire. He shot as fast as he could aim. Bullets struck all around Gary—behind, before, on each side. But only one came uncomfortably near. The range was too great for close shooting. The pinto had widened it to a full three-quarters of a mile.

Still Gary let the overwilling horse race on across the flat. In his ignorance he would have permitted the thoroughbred to run himself to death, had not a backward glance shown that the pursuer was fast falling behind. The bronco had come down to a lope.

Gary could not believe that any desert horse would have given out so soon. He suspected that the pursuer had settled down for a long chase. He pulled the pinto in to the same easy pace and veered a little more to the west of north. His course of action had already become fixed in his mind. He knew where he was going and was on his way.

On the far side of the desert flat rose a long fishback ridge, or small sierra, too high and steep for passage. When near enough to perceive this unpleasant fact, Gary slanted more northwards, to round the barrier. As he neared the turn, a spent bullet

thwacked in the road beside him. The pursuer had known of the ridge and angled straight for the north end of it. The cut had regained for him some of his lost ground, but not enough to bring him within dangerous range.

In circling to round the tip of the ridge Gary struck into the Tonto trail. He gave the pinto another run, in case the pursuer knew of other cut-offs, and then settled down again to the long-distance pace. A shift to single-footing rested both him and the pinto.

The ground became more and more broken. After a while Gary stopped on a high rise to wet his dry throat with a drink from the canteen. The relief of this suggested that he wet the dusty nostrils of the pinto. He could not give the animal a drink, owing to the bullet-holes in the crown of his old hat. Yet the gentle thoroughbred nuzzled his cheek as if grateful for the smaller favor.

The caress brought Gary his first knowledge that a horse could be a man's friend. He was still stroking the velvety muzzle when he saw the pursuer top a rise nearly a mile to the rear. But he did not start on at once. The drink had made him aware of his hunger. He opened the bag that Pete had tied on the saddlehorn, along with the canteen. As he expected, it held food. He gave the pinto a biscuit, and leisurely climbed into the saddle to eat as they loped on along the trail.

Several more miles rolled back from under the nimble hoofs of the pinto before Gary looked down into a grassy basin where two adobe huts and a small corral stood on the edge of a large seepage pond. From a distance the place looked as deserted as it was desolate. What if Drake had left no caretaker at his ranch?

To the south and west towered mountains that seemed to bar escape. If there was no Tonto man at the ranch, there was no chance of finding a rifle. Perhaps the pursuers had taken their time because they knew that their man was running into a trap.

Gary called upon the pinto for fast work over the last mile. But he slowed the swift run down to a lope as they neared the big water-hole. A man had slouched from the doorway of the nearest adobe hut to peer at him. Later on Gary learned why he had attracted this attention. A range rider seldom runs his horse without urgent cause.

As he drew near, he saw that the caretaker of the ranch was a toothless, broken-down old buckaroo. But even a wreck of a man was better than a deserted ranch. Gary drew rein before the old man to ease his stiff and aching body down from the saddle.

"Howdy," he gave the Western greeting.

"How," grunted the caretaker, none too cordially, his rheumy eyes on Gary's town coat and shirt, which contrasted oddly with the rest of his rig.

Gary tried again: "Mr. Drake said I'd be welcome. I winged Deputy-sheriff Leet. This sunup the Hat-on gang headed me off from the railroad. I have no rifle. One or two of the gang have been following me."

"I savvy," replied the old fellow, his sour face mellowing. His gaze had fixed upon the pinto's fresh vent brand. "Used a runnin'-iron, I see. Purty slick work for a bid."

As Gary did not know that a running-iron was the straight iron rod used by most rustlers for brand-blotting stolen stock, he said nothing. The caretaker went on with growing warmth of approval.

" 'N yuh say yuh winged Lobo Leet. Wa-al, now, that haint doin' so worse. My name's Bill."

"Mine's Gary. Glad to meet you, Bill. But it's good-by if you haven't a rifle. I'll have to fade out. There come both of my shadows. What show is there to get over the mountains to the railroad?"

Bill grunted and shuffled into the hut. When he came back his gnarled fingers held a high-power rifle.

"Wanter git 'em, er jes' want 'em ter *vamoose?*" he asked.

"*Vamoose,*" replied Gary.

The rifle roared the instant its butt touched the old buckaroo's bent shoulder. Both riders stopped. One held his hat overhead in the signal for a peace talk. The rifle spoke again. Its second bullet must have carried an emphatic refusal to parley. The Hat-on men whirled their horses and raced away on the back trail.

"Reckon they-all sorter got a idee us'ns haint ter hum ter vis'ters," observed Bill. "Come in an' sot yuh down. I'll tend yore hoss. Yuh look purty well ganted-up, kid."

BUT Gary insisted upon doing his own off-saddling. That rounded out his favorable introduction to Bill. The old-timer accepted him as if he belonged. Nor did he become offish even when, before the day

was out, Gary admitted his greenness with regard to many ways of the cow country. Bill denied the tenderfootedness of a pilgrim who could outshoot a two-gun killer like Lobo Leet and get away with a thoroughbred bearing the brand of Vance Austell.

Instead of jeering, he set to teaching his visitor all about "cow." On the third day Gary would have started for the railroad to mail certain letters that he had written with ink-pot mushroom juice on some ancient flyspecked writing paper hunted out by Bill. But Bill insisted upon his visitor staying to hold down the ranch while he himself negotiated the difficult mountain trail short-cut to the rails.

By the time Bill came back, Gary had split a good part of the woodpile into kindling without chopping off his foot, and could noose a corral post on an average of two out of three casts.

Bill had him haze in a bunch of saddle-broken horses and practice roping them. Gary then had to ride each of his catches. But the old man started him off with easy crowhoppers, only gradually working up to the stiffer broncos. Luckily for Gary, there were no Gentle Annies in the bunch.

Along with this practice in roping and riding, Bill entertained his visitor with endless tales of the good old days when the open range extended all the way from Mexico to Canada. He had come with Drake fro[illegible] Tonto Basin. His accounts of range wa[illegible] and bad-men wound up with the detailed story of how Drake had acquired the last five notches on his gun.

The grim recital of battle, murder and sudden death, of gunfights, slaughtered sheep and dry-gulching, fully explained Connie Royd's belief that Tonto Drake was a good man to leave alone. It also explained why Drake had offered shelter to the tenderfoot who had outshot a deputy sheriff.

Though the squint-eyed gun-fighter cowman had added no notches to his gun since shifting to his present range, Bill "calc'lated" that his boss would be as ready as ever with the old six-shooter if given real cause. Twice during the past two years he had come within an ace of plugging the boss of the Hat-on. He held to the old Western belief that a man had the right to make and execute his own law.

The climax of this fine novel of the West comes in the next installment. Be sure to read it.

Bust One for Clementine!

When Clementine squalled "Hit it!" Septimus Elmo was wont to bust it, right! Don't miss this joyous story of Septimus, Clementine, and frenzied baseball.

I USED to know Pat Durrigan when he was catching for John McGraw in those days before the Polo Grounds were entirely inclosed with seats. Instead of out in deep right-center field as at present, relief pitchers were warmed up then behind the far end of the grandstand. Pat, as a catcher, frequently had to do duty in the bull-pen. After he had his pitcher about ready to go in, he would peddle the warm-up ball to a kid for a quarter, and buy a beer with it.

After general indolence and beer had made him too big and slow for big-league duty, he strayed off into the bushes, and it must have been all of six years before I saw him again at the annual meeting of minor leagues in Chicago. Of all the mass of his rib-wearying bush-league experiences, he seemed to take the greatest pleasure in recounting to me this bit dealing with the year he spent managing at Little Rock, in the Southern League.

WELL, Frank (he said), Fourth o' July had came that year and my outfit hadn't been doin' nothin' much. I'd had a lot o' hopes for 'em when the year opened. They was young and hustlin', and four of 'em the year before had pounded the apple for three hundred regular. I would have swore by my infield. Dib Haynie had first; a little chatterbox named Bill King was on second; Stokes had short and Bob Steele third. The pitchin' was fair, and my outfield wasn't turnin' nobody's hair

Lever grabbed me by the shoulder. "What you tryin' to pull off?" he says.

By PAUL BRUINGTON

Illustrated by F. J. Hoban

gray but the pitchers' we met. Sure, we had a tough break early in the year when Tom Blessin'ham busted his ankle and it swole up on him big enough to fill a sailor's britches. I had to go in and catch then, and I was pretty big and stiff, and wasn't hittin' 0 eight.

Still, we wasn't gettin' anywheres. We'd wrassle with a game and hit the skids with it more often than not. We dropped more games by one or two runs, and whenever we went into extry innin's, the game was as good as in the bag for the other club.

We had a workin' agreement with Mac and the Giants and kep' sendin' up calls for help, but we'd might as well of ast the Queen o' Labrador for ball-players. Mac was tryin' to win a rag hisself and wasn't turnin' loose nothin' that a high-school club would of had.

When Bless got so's he could hobble about a bit, I and the boss put a railroad ticket in his pocket and sent him down to the Cotton States and over to the Sally and tol' him to look around and see if they had any pitchers there that could retire a side oncet in a evenin's work. Every so often we'd get a letter from him, sayin' the guys he was seein' wouldn't make no bank-rolls leave home. He wanted to come back in, because his leg was about well, but we kep' him at it.

I give in after that double-header I had to catch on the Fourth. It was so hot in Memphis that day that I must of lost fifteen pounds by sweatin'. I wired Bless to come in. "But," I says, "when you get back in South Arkansas, stop off at El Dorado and look over a guy named Newton."

He seen Newton work, decided he was too light, and was about to leave, when the man who was runnin' the team ast him to wait till the nex' day and look over a fella from Stephens who'd be in to pitch for 'em. "This guy has a parrot he allus takes ever'where with him," the manager says, "and the bugs'll swarm this lot to get a look at the pair. I never seen 'em fail."

Well, Bless had such a good time at the game the nex' day and liked this here guy's looks so much that the game wasn't hardly over before Bless nailed him.

"Say," says Bless, "how'd you like to play ball with Little Rock in the Southern?"

"Why, fine," says the rookie. "I could make some money then, couldn't I?"

"Now, they is some talk," says Bless,

"of 'em startin' to pay pitchers, and I think I can get a little somethin' for you if you'll bring that bird along."

"Well, you just try to sep'rate me and Clementine," he says, "and somebody'll get busted sure."

So Bless took him in tow and wired me at Nashville that he was joinin' us with a pitcher.

That was good news to me. We was havin' a awful road trip. We was throwed for a settin' o' eggs that afternoon, and our pitchers was bein' shot off the hill as fast as they could mount it.

Then this here Bless and his rookie blowed into the Tulane at Nashville our last night there. They wasn't nobody in the lobby but I and Dib when they busted in. Bless was smiles all up and down his face.

"Well," I says, "Bless, is that Newton?"

"No, he aint exactly Newton," Bless says, "but he's a fella from the same club."

"But didn't I see in the papers this mornin' where the St. Looey Nationals has grabbed Newton?"

"I could of had him," he says, "but I passed him up. I got a better pitcher here."

"Yeah," the rook speaks up for the first time. "I'm a better pitcher'n Newton. I can hit that apple."

"You're just the boy," I says. "We can use good, modes' pitchers. But what is that air thing on your shoulder?"

"Why," he says, "that's Clementine!"

"Well, now, Clementine and I aint turned no tricks together, but it looks like to me it's a parrot," I says.

"Even if you aint hittin' the size o' your hat," says Bless, "I can see your eyes aint gone back on you altogether. It is a parrot!

"I know, Pat," he states, "you don't allow the guys to have their wives along with 'em, but this here is a good sort o' parrot, and you wont mind her."

Wife was right, I come to find out. All women ought to wish their husband was as faithful to her as that there Lever was to that bird o' his, Clementine.

I TOOK the rookie up to room with me, and put Bless back again with Dib. Before we turned in that night the guy says to me: "Have you got any good pitchers in this league?"

"Too damn' many good ones," I says, "for my battin' average."

"Well, I want you to work me against them that aint so good. I like to hit 'em," he says.

"You wont have to hit," I says. "All we want you to do is pitch."

"But I don't like to pitch," he says. "I like to hit."

About that time the parrot o' his opened up with a whistle that would of waked up the Red Sox.

"Hit 'at apple!" the beast cries out.

"That's all right, baby." The rookie turned to the bird, who was settin' on the head o' his bed, and says: "I'll bust 'em!"

"Now, listen, frien'," I says, "can't we get along without that animal in this room? I don't like pets or umpires."

"You say anything about that bird," the rook pipes up, all huffed, "and I'll bust you one—for her. Like I hit them baseballs."

Then he picked her up and looked at her like he thought her good enough to eat. Finally he set her down on the bedstead again. I didn't care to argue the matter with him any fu'ther that night, so we turned in.

About eight the nex' mornin', when I was gettin' in my best beauty-licks, I hearn the dangdest racket a fella ever run across this side o' a riot.

"Roll out, Sep!" the parrot was hollerin'. "Polly's hungry; Polly's hungry's hell." And she kept it up, and when the rookie just turned over to go back to sleep, she fell down on him and grabbed a bill full o' his hair and started tuggin' and haulin'. Then she'd let up and begin again tellin' him to roll out.

"Sufferin' umpires!" I raised up and says. "Can't you stop that blame' to-do?"

"I reckon not," he says. "They wont nothin' do her now but for me to get up. And you'll have to get up too, because she's goin' to start talkin' now."

Talkin' was exactly right. It was Sep this, and Sep that, and Sep le's go out to the park, and Sep another cracker, and Sep all up and down the room. I could of shot her quicker'n I would a quail.

"I don't reckon you'd sell that thing?" I says.

"How come?" he says.

"I know a cat that's hungry," I says.

"Listen here," he says, settin' her on his shoulder, "you wouldn't ast a man to throw his wife to a cat, would you?"

"You wouldn't have to throw some of 'em very far," I says. "Just give 'em a

sort o' push, they're so close to already bein'—but," I says, seein' he wasn't wisin' up, "what is the connection between that parrot and a fella's wife?"

"Well," he says, "this here's my wife."

"Well, she certainly talks enough to be a wife," I says, "and besides that, she's the first I ever see who admits what she really is." But I'll say again that they aint many wives whose husbands tries to please 'em as much as Septimus Elmo Lever done that bird o' his.

About ten that mornin' he comes to me and ast: "I can go on out to the park now, can't I?"

"I wouldn't go sight-seein' so soon," I says. "I may use you a little today, and I don't want you all tired out. Wait till we get to Memphis, and I'll take you through Jackson Park there, and through the zoo, where your wife can see some o' her sisters and brothers. And then there's Fores' Park in Little Rock, a very nice park," I says.

"What you think I'm talkin' about?" he says. "I mean when are we goin' to the ball-park?"

"Jeest," I says, "we aint playin' three games today!"

"Well," he says, "at El Dorado I allus use' to go out about this time and get some hittin'."

"But," I says, "it's only about five hours till game-time. You better wait till tomorrow and get up early and make a day of it."

"That's too much," he says. "I wear the shaggers out before then. Three hours is about all they can stand."

"You must be quite a hitter," I says.

"Last month I got a hit," he says; and I looked at him, but I seen he wasn't jokin'.

WELL sir, we got that rook and his bird out to the park that afternoon, and I want to tell you things juned around. The first thing Sep done after gettin' his monkey suit on was to set his frien' and best companion down on the roof o' the dugout. There she set at first just like any other o' them birds you ever seen, quiet and modes' and blinky-eyed as you please, not sayin' a word or makin' a sound.

She looked some like she'd been halfway through a cotton gin, if you ast me. Some o' her feathers'd been lost, and most o' her tail, and it looked like she was bald-headed. Sep said a hawk'd got a hold o' her there when she was in a tree in front o' his house one day. It must of been a hawk with a grudge, too. But they wasn't nothin' wrong with her tongue, I should hope to tell you.

THE Vols was gettin' their hittin', and them as was waitin' their turn come over to look at our freak.

"Is this here the bird 'at says, 'Nevermore'?" one of 'em ast.

"And is this the nighest thing to a chicken you Chicks could get?" somebody else says.

"Well," I put in, "I reckon we'll have to take our parrot over to Atlanta to feed her."

"And why's that?" ast Dode Green, their second sacker.

"Aint that where the Crackers is at?" I says. That got a rise out of 'em.

"Yeah, but the beast'll starve to death if she has to wait for you Chicks to scratch enough Crackers to make a meal out of," says Dode—he was their second baseman. "Them in for first money, it looks like, and you dudes in the second division."

"Then why don't you guys Volunteer to help us?" I ast. Volunteer's their nickname, you know.

"We would, but we been Gulled," Dode comes back. Mobile'd just took second place away from 'em that week. All o' us was feelin' pretty good and was thinkin' up things to say about her.

The gong rung in a few minutes and we started our hittin'. I had Lefty Ross tossin' 'em over, because they was usin' their bearcat that day, a fella who had a ball fast enough he didn't have to pray. Lever picked up a stick like he was expectin' to hit with us, but I tol' him I'd ride him on a rail if he didn't beat it to the outfield and shag.

"I just thought I'd bust one for Clementine," he says.

"I'd let you," I says, "but we got only about two dozen balls, and we can't afford to lose none."

After Lefty'd been out there about ten minutes I sent this Sep out to loosen up. When he begin chuckin' a few in front o' the dugout, his bird found her tongue again. She walked over to the edge o' the dugout and started sayin' a few things. She called his name, and ast how he felt, and whistled, and carried on. Ever'thing in the park what had eyes and ears turned

'em in that direction then. The fans'd been eyin' her before this, but now they got up and left their seats and crowded back o' our bench.

All the time this Lever was servin' 'em up to us, this here bird kep' up her chatter. Didn't none o' us take more'n his three cuts that day. We whanged at the first three to come in reach and went back to look at our bird.

Well, it was a funny game that day. I and the infielders jawed more and felt a little more like reachin' fu'ther on the hard ones. I beat out a smack to deep short, and I know you wont see that again before kangaroos starts carryin' bibles. Still and all, Clementine wasn't sayin' nothin' all that time. She shut her trap and almost went to sleep when Lever was out o' sight. That didn't make no diff'rence much. She was there where we could see her.

We found this here Ellis for three runs in the third. Nothin' fluky, either. I carried the third run over on a sacrifice fly to the outfield. Tex Irvin', their right fielder, had the ball in there on the crow-hop, but I slid in hard, knocked the catcher over and he dropped the ball. I've forgot who was the catcher just now. But it looked like luck was breakin' for us. It wasn't all luck, though. I made a good slide.

We picked up a couple more in the fifth. Dib Haynie hung into one and knocked it over the short wall for a home run with one duck on the pond. Things rocked along until the seventh before the Vols got their bats in action. They jumped on Jake Flowers for a pair then; in the eighth they added a couple more. That put us only one to the good.

It was Jake's turn to hit in the first o' the eighth, but I sent up Jim Barnes to swing for him and tol' Lever to go warm up with Bless.

"Well, here goes one for Clementine," says Jim.

"You needn't mind," says Lever. "I'll crash 'em for her.

AS soon as this rookie poked his head out o' the dugout, Miss Clementine poked her head out o' her feathers and started limberin' up too. So does the fans; they started rootin' for us to beat the band. It was the old life then. Burns pulled a swingin' bunt down the line and beat it out hands down. A minute later he caught 'em with their britches at half-mast when he stole second with nobody away. The nex' two was easy, but Dib stang a line single to left. By the time the catcher had took the throw home, Burns was dustin' a run out o' his pants. That put us two to the good and only three more darkies to shoot down. The bugs in the royal palace was on their toes.

Just before we took the field Bless come up to me and stuck out his left hand. It was red and puffed up and quiverin' and looked feverish.

"Why, Bless," I says, "why didn't you tell me a spider'd bit your hand?"

"Unless you put a couple o' sponges in that mit," he says, "the same spider'll bite your hand."

"Oh," I says, "you just been out o' the game awhile and your hand's tender."

"Sparrow grass!" he says or somethin' like that. "You'll see!"

The first guy up for them was their little lead-off man, who crowded the plate close, and I was afraid Lever'd be scared o' hittin' him, so I called the rook in and says: "Put all you got on the first pitch and get it in clost to his chest and he'll drop back."

He did, and the little duck at the plate didn't try to take it off his shoulder, either. That ball come up there actin' like a sunfishin' cow-pony, buckin' up so much it bounced off the top o' my glove and hit my mask.

OVER on the dugout I hearn that parrot squall out for all she was worth, "Hit it!" Then she whistled. I thought Lever'd taught her to say that like a catcher does tryin' to rattle a batter. Huh! That mangy animal on the dugout roof was hollerin': "Hit it! Hit it! Hit 'at apple!" all the time that guy was up. And when he whiffed, she says: "Hell!"

I took time out and went over and got that other sponge Bless recommended.

The second hitter stood as far back in the batter's box as he could and made a hard target to pitch to. The rook called me out and says: "Can't they make that guy stand closer?"

"It is a little unhandy," I says, "to pitch to him, but he don't have to stand no closer unless he wants to."

"Well, why can't I throw one back o' him and make him get up in there right?" he ast.

I looked at Lever, but I seen he meant

it and wasn't jokin' a bit. Nor was his parrot in any too good a humor that nobody wasn't hittin' none. Her language was soundin' more and more like she'd had sailor upbringin'.

He set three down, all right, but the last guy just tapped one o' them fast ones, and it flew down Bob Steele's way at third like it was aimin' to undress him. But Bob grabbed it, stuck it in his pocket and started for the waterworks. Ever'body was leavin' to change right quick and get somethin' to eat before we had to catch a train, when Lever come runnin' up to me and grabbed me by the shoulder right hard.

"What in hell you tryin' to pull off?" he says. "Don't I get to hit none?"

"Why, in this league," I tol' him, "we don't play no more'n nine innin's if one side is ahead."

"Well, why didn't you put me in earlier?" he says. "I tol' you I like to hit. I only play ball so's I can hit 'em; I like to see 'em ride."

His bird was whinin': "I don't like you; I don't like you. You wont hit none for Polly; I don't like you." They must be some woman in that bird after all, I says to myself.

"Now, see there," he says, pointin' at her on his shoulder.

"What of it?" I says.

It seemed like to me he would of felt good over his showin', but he didn't, and was only tryin' to calm down his bird with words like them a man uses to his wife when he gets in about three A. M. after gettin' lost in the wilderness o' two trees in his front yard.

The bugs swarmed down on the field to get a close look at Sep and his bird. They kep' tryin' to talk to her, but she had no words for 'em and was just whinin' at Lever for throwin' her down the way he done and, in gen'ral, actin' offended.

"You say anything about that bird," the rook pipes up, "an' I'll bust you one."

In the clubhouse while we was dressin' they was a new feelin' among the gang. Some was tellin' the rook what a swell fast one he had, and the others was just jawin' at the bird, and in all of 'em I could see a great improvement in spirits.

NOW, besides the help that guy's pitchin' give us and the way his bird friend helped our pepper, the pair of 'em turned out to be the swellest drawin'-cards ever a club had. Every park in the circuit, and specially at the Rock, was filled to the bustin'-point with bugs to see 'em work. And wherever we was, it was just like playin' at home. The rootin' was for the bird and Lever. O' course, since she wouldn't have nothin' to say unless Lever was in

sight, I had to keep him warmin' up in front o' the stands a lot and use him only to pitch an innin' or two every so often. They was one club owner that sent his manager to ast me to promise to let Lever pitch at least one innin' all the four days we was in his town so's he could advertise the fact.

That disgusts me and I tol' this here manager to tell his boss to go chase hisself or hang the ice out to dry or somethin'. It made me sore. I said, tell him I'm runnin' the Chicks, and just now I'm runnin' 'em towards first place.

But I used him pretty frequent anyways. He learnt slôw, and didn't have no motion a-tall with a man on base, and sometimes they stole his very britches off. But they couldn't steal first on that fast ball, I mean to say.

It was Lever hisself who made me change him into a regular pitcher and start games.

"I don't get to hit none a-tall this way," he wailed. "I like to hit." He sulked continual when I shot him in for only a innin' or two.

I'd allus used pinch hitters for him before, and it was durin' his first whole game at home that I got to see him use a bat for purposes it was never intended for. He made the dangdest flop o' hittin' ever a man did see.

He walked to the plate with the bases drunk in the secon' innin' that day, with two away. "Now's your chancet to get that blow and sew up your own game," I says.

"Yeah," he says. "I'll just crack one for Clementine."

CLEMENTINE was givin' him advice from her perch. The way she acted then beat anything she ever cut loose with when he was in the box. The bugs come to life, too.

I could see Lever was nervous as a man on the gallows when he stepped up there. A girl gettin' her first kiss in public couldn't of acted no worse.

But Lever wanted to smack that pill the worse kind, and on the first pitch he made a wild sasshay with his bat, missin' the agate, I should guess, no more'n a foot. The bat slipped out o' his hands and come near carryin' the pitcher's legs away.

We was dyin' laughin' on the bench. We watched him go for a couple more, one maybe three foot over his head and the other a bender in the dust. When he come back to the bench for his glove, he says: "Hell, I ought to of got on that second one. It was just like the one I hit last month."

"Well, Sep," I says, between laughs, "I hope you don't miss heaven that far when you die. If you do," I says, "you'll hit hell a-bustin'."

His bird was terrible disappointed. She didn't give him much encouragement the rest o' the day when he was in the box and later growed pretty indifferent to him when he was at bat. She figured, I reckon, that Sep was throwin' down on her. But he'd got her into that mess hisself, talkin' about hittin' around her so much, and learnin' her to root at him to hit it.

It was a pipe, though, him winnin' that game. We hustled for him, and he throwed some balls that hustled by them batters, too. Durin' the closin' innin's I thought to myself I'd try out his hook, and I can tell you it was O. K. That big stiff had a hook that made Niagry Falls look like the bed o' the river, as the boys used to say.

But that night Lever was about the most dejected fella who ever tried to cry on my shoulder.

"Come alive, Sep," I says. "I aint askin' you to do no more'n keep on pitchin' like you're doin'. We hire them other guys to make runs."

"Yeah," he says, "but I want to hit 'em. Clementine don't like pitchin'; she wants me to bust 'em."

"You aint goin' to let what that bird wants ruin your rest, are you?" I says.

"Oh," he says, "Pat, why can't I hit these pitchers? I used Dib's bat oncet, and Bob Steele's oncet, and Heinie Jansen's. It looks like the ball is big as a house to them guys, but it looks no bigger'n a pea to me."

"That's all right, boy," I says. "Don't you mind about this hittin' business. I'll have you in the big time in another year. Leave them poor outfielders hit who can't do nothin' else."

"Well," he says, "Pat, unless I can get to hittin' 'em, I reckon I'll have to beat it back to El Dorado. I can bust them pitchers down there. Clementine and me can have a good time, even if we don't make no money."

"What sort o' breeze is this here you're shootin' me?" I says. "Goin' back to that burg when you're winnin' ball-games in the

Southern, and've got all the fans crazy about you? But if you're crazy about hittin' that much, get in there at battin'-practice and swing with the rest o' the boys."

That happied him up more'n anything I could of said. He stood in there and cut and slashed like a wild man, but he aint hit nothing yet more'n a pop that I know of. Between times up there he'd start pepper games and just bunt a few. Him and his bird got on well then.

"I'm gettin' along so well," he tol' me one day, "I'm goin' to be playin' outfield for you soon. I'd like that; hit ever' day then."

Can you beat it? A guy who could pitch like him raisin' a big roar because he wasn't a Ty Cobb at the plate! I wanted to have his head looked into, suspicionin' somethin' more serious'n I already seen.

WELL, he got in a few more games, and what's more, won 'em in a walk, but he didn't even foul a ball. They'd throw him a hook and he'd blame' nigh spike his back collar-button; they'd throw him just a reasonable fast one, and he swang like he'd twenty minutes for dinner or else it was a hangin' offense to take his punk off his shoulder.

I thought his heart would break one day when Dib got about eight hits in a doubleheader. Clementine, o' course, had come to know Dib and recognized him when she saw him at bat. Now, before then she'd never had a word for nobody but Lever, and when she whistled after Dib's homer, with no Lever in sight, they was misery in that Sep's heart.

He got desperate and ast Dib to learn him how to hit.

"Now," says Dib, lyin' like a snake, "I'll tell you how I got my start. I quit eatin' soup, for it seems like soup clouds up your eyesight and makes you swing a little off true; and I left potatoes alone and also all kinds o' meat. You wont find eggs do you any good, and coffee's just plumb terrible hard on a fellow learnin' to hit. Only I wouldn't state java's quite as harmful as milk or ice-cream or them soggy vegetables you get. And whatever you do, lay off all kinds o' pies and cookies and fresh fruit."

Lever's jaw dropped open like it'd come out o' place, Dib says, and he says: "Well, what *can* a fella eat, then?"

"Why, ball o' buttermilk!" says Dib, "I just named off a half a dozen or so things. They must be ten thousand diff'rent kinds o' dishes. I should say prunes, and rockyfort cheese, and dill pickles—oh, things like them. It takes a course o' trainin' for a hitter to get hisself in good physical shape. Now, after he oncet gets *right,* he can eat anything he wants to, even things like salads and corn-bread, and it wont hurt him. I eat anything now, and I bet when I'm a hundred they can roll me up to the plate in a wheel chair and I can bust 'em."

"Well, I'll try it," says Clem. "Le's see —no meat, no—"

"And here's a thing," Dib broke in, "you ought to do right away so it will be in shape when you are. Get you a good, new bat, one that suits you to a T, and bone it up right good. Then you pick out a little kinky-headed colored boy and get him to take it home and sleep with it a couple o' nights, keepin' it right in his bed with him. It seems like that sort o' soaks base hits into a stick and draws the blood right out."

I could of wrang Dib's fool neck for that stunt, because he must of knowed the rook'd do ever'thing he said. I found out what was the matter with him about a week later when he was lookin' like a whisper and weakened so much towards the last part o' the game that he didn't have no more juice on his fast one than a glass-arm' guy. He was near workin' hisself to death, too, with his battin'-practice. I found out he'd bought the bat and found the darky to sleep with it. But all that cost him was a stole bat.

However, we was makin' tracks all that time.

We'd grab a bat and say: "Well, here goes one for Clementine." And somehow they went. After Lever'd been with us a little more'n a month we found ourselves buttin' heads with the Pels for second place.

I wont never forget the time we played the Atlanta outfit at home durin' the first home stay after Lever joined us. The fans and papers was already boomin' rag for us. All three Little Rock papers run her pitcher and had over it, "Polly Wants a Cracker," or "Does Polly Go Hungry With All Them Crackers in Town?" or something like that.

Yeah, and it was while them Crackers was in town that their big hitter put a bug in Lever's ear. Them days our birdmaster was askin' ever'body in the league

who had better'n a three hundred average to learn him how to hit. Some of 'em let him down easy, but some of 'em didn't. This Cracker slugger, Dug Moore, got to talkin' to Lever downtown one night and in a jokin' way ast him why he didn't ease up when he was in the box so the other guys could hit 'em and then Clementine'd be pleased next best to his hittin' 'em.

"By goodness," says Lever, "that is a idear!"

I found out about that talk later.

But not before it'd caused us some grief! I was handlin' Lever the nex' time he worked, and before the water'd got hot in the first innin' I seen he didn't have no stuff. Even as weak a outfit as Axelton loaded on him like a ton o' Irish confetti. I ast him if his arm was right.

"Oh, yes," he says. "Oh, I never felt better."

"Haven't you had enough, though?"

"No," he fired right back. "Let me have 'em. Anyways, I don't never like to be took out."

"I don't give a damn what you like," I says. "We need this ball-game."

"Well," he says, "if you guys'll get me the runs, we'll win. See that Clementine?"

I don't see why I didn't catch the drift o' his last remark then and there, but I didn't. I figured he had more sense. But I never was very good at figures. Clementine was havin' a peach of a time, all right. For the first time since Lever'd been with us she was gettin' results on her cry o' "Hit it!" on ever' ball he thrown. In the third them Axelton guys very near wore our plate out comin' across it from third base before I could get him out o' there. He didn't like the hooks, but he could of went to grass and died a cow for all I cared, if he couldn't pitch ball.

THE nex' time I give him a chancet we was on the road and batted around in the first innin'. When Lever come to bat, ever'body in the park got the biggest surprise o' their life. He tried to fall away from a hook, and somehow or other his bat nicked it by accident. The pill shot away into shallow right for a hit.

He like to of not remembered that folks usually ran on a hit. And when he got on first we didn't tie a rope on him, and he jogged down the line and got picked off by twenty foot. When they tagged him out, it made him so mad he would of licked their first-sacker if the base ump hadn't grabbed him and held him till we could lead him back to the bench.

His madness cooled down a little on the way back, and when he got to the dug-out and hearn Clementine givin' him a warm reception he started beamin' again.

"Well, I stang that one," he says, lookin' proud.

"Yes, you did," I says; "blood on that one."

"And I just learned how to hit a curve ball," he says.

"Since I got to hittin' 'em," he says a minute later, "don't you reckon some big league club'll pick me up before long?"

"Oh," I says, "why, they's no doubt about it. It wont be long now."

"I think I'd like to go to Pittsburgh," he says.

"And why, may I ast," I says, "do you specially want to go to Pittsburgh?"

"Why the Pirates needs a *pi*rot mascot, don't they?" he says. "Else why didn't they call theirselves Chicks or Pels or Robins?"

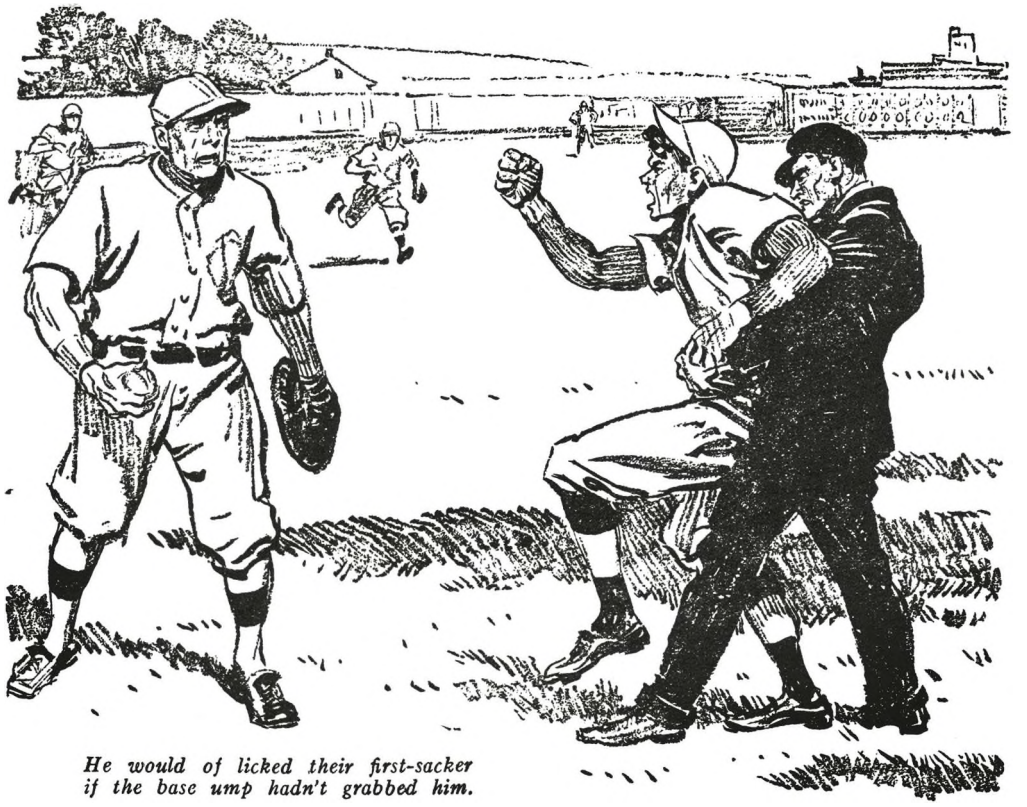
I had to laugh at the guy then, but I says: "You got a head on you, boy. But you better get to pitchin' better ball than you did your last time out or they wont want you at Derail or Finn Switch."

But he didn't pay me no mind. He'd found the secret for keeping Clementine from sayin' at him: "Polly don't like you —Polly don't like you," and about the fourth innin', the way he was throwin', he couldn't of injured a plate-glass window. For the nex' two weeks he couldn't pitch for sour beans. We took to the road, and he lasted only three innin's against the Pels, and four against the Gulls and two in Birmin'ham.

"Oh, I'll be all right when I get my battin'-eye back," he says, and he thought he'd got it when he dribbled into a double play in Birmin'ham and squelched a young rally. He come back to the bench, smilin', and says: "Well, Pat, I'm gettin' my eye on 'em, anyways."

"It must be a glass eye you're gettin' on 'em," I says. I must of been right, because he lined into a triple play in Mobile. The way he was messin' things up when we got a man or two on was somethin' else for me to worry about. O' course we wasn't doin' well, and the boys was almost gettin' panicky.

I wouldn't of used him a-tall at Atlanta that trip if it hadn't come down



He would of licked their first-sacker if the base ump hadn't grabbed him.

to it that I just had to. And I reckon it was the luckiest thing I ever done, for it helped another piece o' luck a little later on to work. The first three'd been big-score games, and I'd used ever'thing on our staff, 'cep' Gally, and his arm was sore again, as usual.

So I got ahold o' this here Lever and give him a talkin' to. I tol' him that unless he give them guys a trimmin' that day he'd be beatin' it back to El Dorado faster'n Cobb could steal home on a full wind-up. They'd whipped us two games already—if we curled up before 'em again, all we could of hoped for was second fiddle.

"We'll trim 'em," he says, "because I think I'm good for a couple o' base hits myself today. I'm about due."

"No," I said, "they're still rulin' out base fiddles as bats, so we aint countin' on your help much in that line."

Well, he went in; and for three innin's you aint seen any prettier pitchin' than he put up. Ever' guy o' theirs had might as well of brought a feather fan to bat with. We chased a couple o' runs over—I needn't say without his help, but I ought to say because he struck out and didn't hit into no double play.

After two was down in the fourth, Dug Moore come up again. The first time he'd went down swingin', and this time he'd took a couple o' strikes before he pulled his stunt. He walked out a little ways towards Lever then and says right low, and only loud enough for me to catch this: "—and I'll bust one for Clementine."

He busted one, all right, for Clementine, and for them who come in later and for a record, too. Lever dinked him one just fast enough to hit and not half fast enough to miss. Dug must of drove it a mile over the fence.

When we set the nex' man down, I ast Lever, I says: "What in hell did you ease up on Moore for?"

"Oh, I never eased up," he says. "I tried to give him my change o' pace and it slipped."

"But I called for a fast one," I says.

"Oh, no you didn't," he says. "You wiggled your finger; you didn't hold it still."

"Oh, yes, I did," I says. "Get mixed up that way again, and it'll cost you only twenty-five bucks."

He didn't get a chancet to make that same mistake twicet, but he got terrible mixed up in another way in the first half o' the fourth, and it made I and the rest o' the boys so glad a little while after it happened,

and gladder before the year was over, that I could of hugged him.

In that innin' he grabbed about half a dozen sticks and started swingin' 'em and tol' me, he says: "Pat, I only fouled one last time; this time I'm goin' to kiss one for Clementine."

"If you don't win this game," I says, "I hope you have to spend the rest o' your life kissin' her."

"Oh, I'm goin' to crack it," he says.

"Hop to it, then," I says; "but be careful you don't kill some infielder with one o' your hot drives."

POP BOY was in there workin', and was good. The first thing he throwed Lever was a fast one, high and inside. The guy went after it like he was killin' a snake and fouled it just enough to hit the catcher's mast. That cheered him up, and when Pop Boy come back with one still faster about knee high and over the outside corner, Lever give a lunge for it.

O' course, he swang late, and only managed to touch it a-tall just before the catcher was ready to grab it. The pill wasn't hit hard, but I could see it was comin' on a line toward our dugout, behin' first base. Us guys ducked, but it didn't come on the bench after all. It landed up on the roof, and the nex' thing we knowed I hearn a parrot-squawk o' "Hit it!" choked down her throat, and this here green parrot was knocked clean off the far end o' the dugout.

Well, the lot was full o' fans, and they all hushed right up and never said nothin', and it was still as just before a storm. I jumped off the bench to run to the bird, but before I could get there Lever'd ran over faster'n he ever hoofed it to first on his two hits.

Us players ganged around and looked at Lever down there on his knees with his friend and actin' almost as crazy as a loon, for he thought she'd hearn her last music. And I tell you, I thought the same. She didn't have no wind in her, and no life, only limp. The white fillum was openin' and shettin' over her eyes slower and slower.

Dib and me looked solemn at each other, shakin' our heads like some*body* sure enough had curled up. "Lever wont be worth a damn now," I says to him.

"Yeah," he says, "you're right. I reckon we'll have to shoot Lever now."

And for Lever hisself, it looked like he was goin' to blubber right out any minute. He was busy fannin' Clementine with his cap and talkin' to her frantic-like. After about a couple o' minutes I couldn't see no fillum a-tall over her eyes. Her snout of a mouth hung open. Her tongue hung out, and she made sounds like a man gaggin'.

Lever bellowed for some water, and I elbowed my way through and fetched him a dipperful. He took it and started pourin' it down sort of easy over her head and neck.

Talk about a cat's nine lives! I'm a bull yearlin' if I'd trade a parrot's one for the whole nine. Them birds is harder to kill than a bad reputation o' never hittin' three hundred. Now, this Clementine had no sooner felt that awful cold water on her than she wriggled around and opened up a eye and said to Lever in a garglin' sort o' voice: "Whattahell! Whattahell!"

Lever looked at her and laughed a little bit and thought to hisself that if that little bit o' water'd helped her that much, the rest of it ought to do her up like the drum before Patty started work on it. So he soused her again.

SHE come out of it then, I hope to tell you, and said some awful things while she was tryin' to shake the water out o' her feathers, weak as she was. She calmed down in a few minutes and give a long whistle.

And then Lever made the great sacrifice, with his tongue, even if he couldn't never do it at bat.

"I wont never get another base hit," he says. "If I go to them Pirates, they needn't expect me to get my regular base knocks. I never could run bases much anyways. Been picked off both times."

And the fella kept his word as long as I ever seen anything of him. After that, he hit natural. By that I mean he missed ever' ball he swang at by a good foot. And instead o' this "Hit it!" he put words in Clementine's mouth which says: "Strike him out!" And some batters in that Southern League knowed some grief the rest o' that year.

But that night, while I and him was gettin' some grub, he says to me: "Well, Pat," he says, "this'll sure hurt us. You've lost a hitter."

"Don't you worry about that, boy," I says in reply. "I'd trade a hitter for a pennant any year."

This, a grim story of a desperate night at a lonely station, is by the gifted author of the Bennington stories, "Pod Bender & Co.," "Vikings of the Ice" and many others.

At Plug 47

"Be good, an' we wont hurt you none," says a feller standin' by the cot.

By GEORGE ALLAN ENGLAND

Illustrated by William Molt

STORY? Oh, sure. Course, I got a story. They most gen'ally asks you for one after they've handed you out a feed. Yeh, I've padded the hoof a good bit, now an' again, though not so much lately—so I'm used to tellin' stories for my grub. No reason why I shouldn't tell you one.

Mighty good of you to pick me up in your auto an' bring me here to your camp. Swell place you got—lake, an' all! Yes, sir, I'd been hikin' since five this mornin'. All the grub I had was some huckleberries I picked along the road. Man my age, nigh on to seventy, that aint so much fun. Feet gets mighty sore. Not much used to walkin'—a railroad telegrapher sets down most of the time, y'see. But when that Clareton branch line shut down, I was out of a job. The autos done that. They're closin' lots of branch lines, the autos an' busses is. I tried to land another job, but who wants a man my age? So I hit the road.

But speakin' about stories. . . . .

Plug 47 was the name of the place. Way out west of Kinney, on the U. P. Platte River off about two mile south. Prairie, y'know. No company but coyotes, prairie-dogs, owls an' side-winders. Them's a kind of rattlesnake, an' healthy to leave alone. Snow an' blow in winter—snow'd drift right over the fences they'd put along the track, an' cold enough to freeze the ears off a brass monkey. Nebraska winters is no joke. Course I had good coal,—all I wanted,—an' a base-burner. But I've seen it so cold in the station, day an' night for a week, I couldn't melt ice off the floor. Frost like fur on the windows.

And in summer—hot? Mister! Scorch you right up to a frizzle! Not a tree nor nothin', only sagebrush an' tumbleweed. Just prairie, with dried-up buffalo-grass. Bad stuff if it gets afire. You could see further an' see less, than any place in the world. An' so hot I've seen a coyote chasin' a jack-rabbit, both doin' their damndest—an' they was both walkin'!

Just a water-plug. No town, no houses. Only the station, the shed where I kept my coal an' switch-lamps, an' the water-tank with a windmill to pump the water from a drove well. She'd pump all the time the wind blowed, which was pretty much continual. Sometimes the tank'd run over, an' then again there wouldn't be no water at all, so I'd wire in to Kinney or Bentonville an' the engines'd get it there.

Did you ever set an' look at a windmill, for months an' months—or years? You'll think funny things, watchin' a windmill spin round, if you watch it long enough. It'll say things to you. The creak an' the

spin of it'll get to talkin' to you, sayin' things over an' over, when you're all by your lonesome, if you know what I mean.

It was bad, all right, out there at Plug 47. Bad, lots o' ways. But the hold-ups was the worst part. That's what I'm comin' to, pretty soon. That's what the story's about—a hold-up. Queer things'll happen in this world, wont they? If you read 'em in a book, you'd say they couldn't. But they do, sometimes, just the same.

Yes sir, I got a pipe, but no tobacco. Thanks! I sure would like a smoke. Let's see, now. . . . .

OH, yes, hold-ups! They'd average mebbe two a year. That was a proper good place for hold-ups. Single iron, y'understand. Pike, we called it, too—what you'd call a one-track line—in them days. There was a sidin' at Plug 47. Lots of times trains would pass there. Most gen'ally freights would take the sidin', to give passengers the clear. Sometimes passengers would take the sidin', too, to let expresses by. I see two or three passenger-trains stuck up, on the sidin'. Takin' up a collection, the stick-up men called it.

They'd ride in from God knows where, at night—mebbe three, four, five of 'em. Bad men; just as soon shoot as eat—sooner, mebbe. I see a lot of shootin' at Plug 47, in my time. See a good many get theirs: wounded, an' some killed, too. Some right lively scraps, but *I* never got shot. Best way is to do as they tell you. Oh, sure! I never was no hero. Fact is, I was allus nervous-like, an' I got more nervous, out there. The windmill used to get my goat. And gettin' stuck up, now an' again, made me jumpy. Once wouldn't of been so bad, but after a while it got on my nerves.

No, sir, I never had no gun. Why, if I'd had a gun an' reached for it, I'd of been a dead man in a minute. Better off without it. Them bad men, they don't shoot you if you're unarmed, not if they can help it. Don't you reckon there's some good in everybody, even a train hold-up man? They might be decent enough, only they got in with bad companions an' got led away by 'em, and the like o' that. I try to think so, anyhow. . . . .

What's that? Why didn't I get transferred some other place? Oh, I don't know—pretty fair pay, an' I didn't like to kick. Might get somebody sore on me, an' I'd lose my job. I sure needed the job, with a sick wife to take care of. But she didn't live at Plug 47. I should say *not!* No place for a sick woman. She allus had a bad heart, or somethin', after Simmy dropped out of sight. If she'd been with me, even if she could of stood it—which she couldn't—an' there'd been a hold-up, it would of finished her, likely. Any shock would—that's what the doctors said, anyhow.

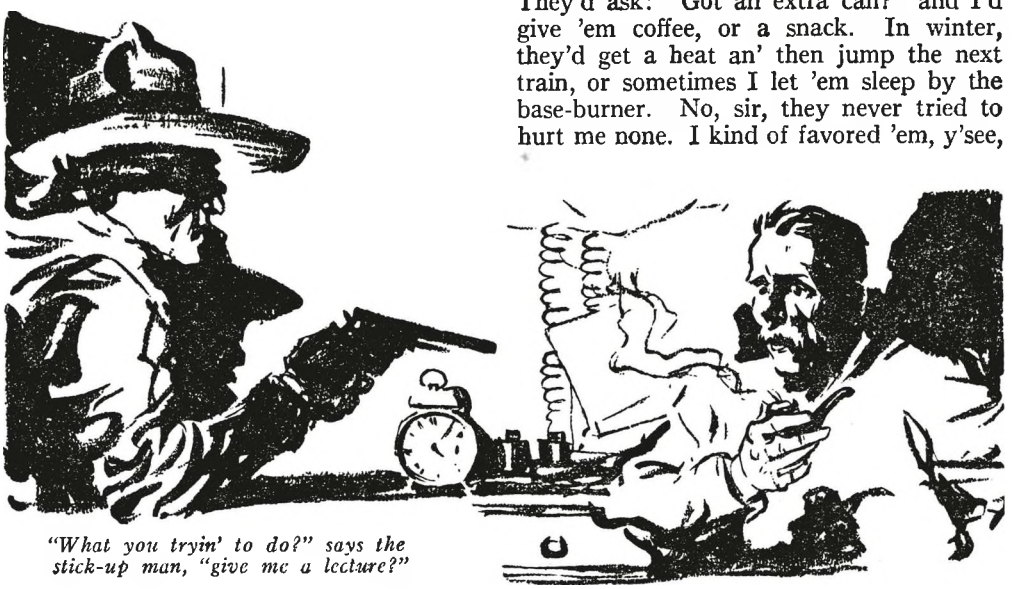
I figgered she was better off back home in Painestown, Ohio. I sent her most of my envelope every month—sometimes all of it. Course, I didn't have no expenses to speak of, at Plug 47, so I could take care of her, pretty good. She was better off at home, where she could have her hens an' her garden. Flowers too—she allus liked flowers. I remember she had all kinds. I planted some, myself, at Plug 47. Took some seeds out to Nebraska, one time I visited her. But they most all withered up an' died. I done best with sunflowers; they could stand the heat. I watered 'em every day, an' they'd grow uncommon tall. It done me a world of good to see them sunflowers. Made the place homelike, kind of. I see you got flowers here. Swell place you got—the lake, an' all; lots o' water, and no windmill to bother you an' make you think queer things. . . . .

Simmy? Oh, that was our boy—Simon, his name was. He was all the family we ever had; just that one. We allus called him Simmy. He ran away from home when he was fourteen, an' never wrote nor come back.

Me an' my wife, we allus figgered he must of got killed, some way. She took it pretty hard, an' that's what made her sick. But she kept hopin' he'd show up, sometime. Mebbe that's why she fussed with the flowers so much, so it would look kind of nice an' pretty at home, if he ever come back. Women's funny, that way. They got ideas.

I didn't take it so hard—men don't. Boys come an' boys go, but the world keeps on and trains keep runnin'. All as really matters is your signal, throw the order-board, pay attention to "31"—that means "For Order." Things like "Copy three, for Number 10" gets to be more important than boys that don't never come back. You got to keep telegraphin' train-orders, whatever happens—that is, till the autos an' busses close down your station; an' then you hike the roads an' eat huckleberries, if you're lucky enough to find 'em.

SO I stayed at Plug 47, year in and year out, with only a week or so at home every summer. I watched the windmill, an' you'd be surprised the queer things it said to me. But that was a good, easy job. Good chance to pound my ear a lot! Just had to tend the tank an' switches, lamps an' so on. Reckon I changed a lot. The cold an' the heat sort of pucker a man up, dry him up, like. That, and growin' whiskers, makes an awful lot o' difference.



"What you tryin' to do?" says the stick-up man, "give me a lecture?"

Take it by an' large, though, it wasn't too bad. I allus got enough to eat, anyhow. Years an' years, though—exceptin' when I was home—I never et to a table. Reckon I've et out of pails an' baskets most all my life. Slept on a cot, too. Fill up the old base-burner in the station, roll up in the blankets, set the alarm-clock so I'd be on hand when anythin' was due, an' let the blizzards howl! Not too bad.

Sometimes the trainmen would bring me out papers from Kinney, or throw off a bundle of 'em for me, if they didn't stop for orders. They'd bring out my grub from the railroad eatin'-house there. I'd wire in what I wanted. Sometimes I'd blow myself to what we called a chunk o' bull or a chunk o' slaughter. Fresh meat, y'understand. When a freight would lay on the sidin' for a while, I'd broil a steak in the firebox. I'd cook murphies, too, an' boil coffee with live steam at the injector. Engine-crew, they'd sometimes have a bite with me. They liked me, most of 'em did. Oh, now an' again, things was kind o' sociable at Plug 47!

There'd be a train-rider once in a while —what you'd call a hobo, same as I am now. As I didn't have much to do but put in my time, I'd be glad to talk to 'em. They'd ask: "Got an extra can?" and I'd give 'em coffee, or a snack. In winter, they'd get a heat an' then jump the next train, or sometimes I let 'em sleep by the base-burner. No, sir, they never tried to hurt me none. I kind of favored 'em, y'see, on account of Simmy. I'd think mebbe Simmy might be a train-rider, himself, somewheres. What I done for any 'bo, seems like I kind of done it for Simmy. Crazy idea, mebbe. Oh, sure! But you know how 'tis—a man'll think things, when he's most allus all by his lonesome with a windmill, in a place like that.

One thing, in the summer I'd often set an' look at them sunflowers, an' think about my wife. And then I'd think about the railroad eatin'-house, an' how if I was there I'd order a couple o' moguls, string o' flats on the side, an' cut the cow's ear off the java-train. Eh? Oh, pork-chops, flapjacks an' black coffee, that's all. But about that there hold-up, now. . . . .

It was in July, or mebbe August, I sort of forget which, in '90—or was it '89? I don't just remember. Fact is, there's lots o' things a man'll forget, when he gets towards seventy. But anyhow, I remember that hold-up pretty good. A hot night, bakin' hot, with a red moon and the coyotes howlin'. I was asleep on my cot, with the door an' all the windows open. No use to lock up, was there? The coyotes wouldn't never come in, to bother you. An' if stick-up men come, they'd bust in anyhow. They'd smash the door an' windows, an'

then you'd have a mess to clean up. So it was better to leave things wide open, besides gettin' a breath o' whatever air there was. Which wasn't mostly none at all.

Anyhow, I was sleepin', with my clock set for 1:20, so I'd be up in time to see Number 16 go through flyin'. That was a westbound through passenger, with an express-car an' sleepers. First thing I know, somebody's pokin' me in the ribs, an' I wakes up sudden.

"Hello!" says I, wakin' up quick, like I allus done. "What's wanted?"

"You be good, an' we wont hurt you none," says a feller standin' by the cot. I allus slept with a lamp lit, and turned down low. So I can see he's tall an' got a mask on, made of black cloth with holes cut for his eyes. "Get up!" says the feller, proddin' me in the ribs with a gun. "Get up, an' be good!"

"Another hold-up?" says I, settin' up on my cot, in my shirt-sleeves and stockin'-feet.

"You're a good guesser," says the man. "There's three more of us, outside." I sees another man in the station door, an' hears a horse whinny, out back. "Get up an' haul her down!"

"Gosh," says I, "I was havin' a fine pound!"

"Never mind about that," says the feller. "Haul her down!"

Eh? Haul her down? Oh, that means turn the red on a train—stop her.

"An' no funny business, neither," says the man, "if you want to keep healthy."

"All right," says I. "But wait till I get my shoes on."

"Get a move on!" says the feller. "Don't stop for no fancy knots!"

I PUTS my shoes on, an' ties 'em. Scared? Oh yes, some—not very much, though. I been held up so much, y'see. And I knew if I didn't start nothin', they wouldn't hurt me. So even though I was sort of weak in the knees, I stood up an' made out to even smile.

"This hold-up business," says I, "is gettin' to be kind of a habit with you fellers."

"None o' your lip!" says the man. "Go on, haul her down!"

"All right," says I, an' walkin' in my little office where the lever an' the telegraph is, I throws the red. "There you are," I says. "Put that gun away, if you don't mind. You make me nervous."

"You're a cool star," says the feller, but he shoves the gun back in his holster. "Set down an' keep quiet, an' we wont hurt you. We got nothin' against you, personal," says he. "It's the train we're after. How's she runnin'? On time?"

"Ten minutes late out o' Kinney," says I. "You don't care if I smoke, do you?"

"Smoke away an' be damned," says he. "Only, if we hears that there telegraph-instrument clickin', you'll smoke in a hotter place 'an Plug 47—so watch yourself! Savvy?"

"Oh, sure," says I. "I savvy." An' I sets down in my little office, lights my pipe and goes to smokin', peaceful an' quiet-like.

The feller walks to the outside door, an' I hears him talkin' with one or two more, outside. I can't hear what they're sayin', but after a while the feller passes along in front o' the station, an' walks down the cinders towards the water-tank. Then he comes back an' asks for a pail.

"How d'you get water out o' the dog-goned tank?" says he. "Our horses is pow'ful dry, an' so are we."

"Been ridin' far?" says I.

"None o' your damn' business!" says he. "Give us some water!"

"All right," says I. "Only, you don't have to get it from the tank. There's a pipe laid to the station here, and a fasset at the end o' the buildin'. Here, take this pail."

I gives him a galvanized iron pail, an' they all waters up, horses an' all. I sets down again in my little office, an' smokes some more, an' thinks hard. I could think better, them days, than what I can now. You know, when a man gets along in years. . . . .

It's now 1:10 A. M., an' Number 16'll be along in twenty minutes, or less, mebbe, if she aint too heavy an' can make up time. She's already pulled out o' Kinney, an' no way in this world to stop her till she gets to Plug 47, even if I was a hero an' wanted to get shot up. What'll I do, though? How'll I keep the express-car an' the Pullmans from bein' robbed, an' mebbe some o' the train-crew or passengers killed? That's the question! Thanks, I *will* have another fill o' your tobacco, if you don't mind.

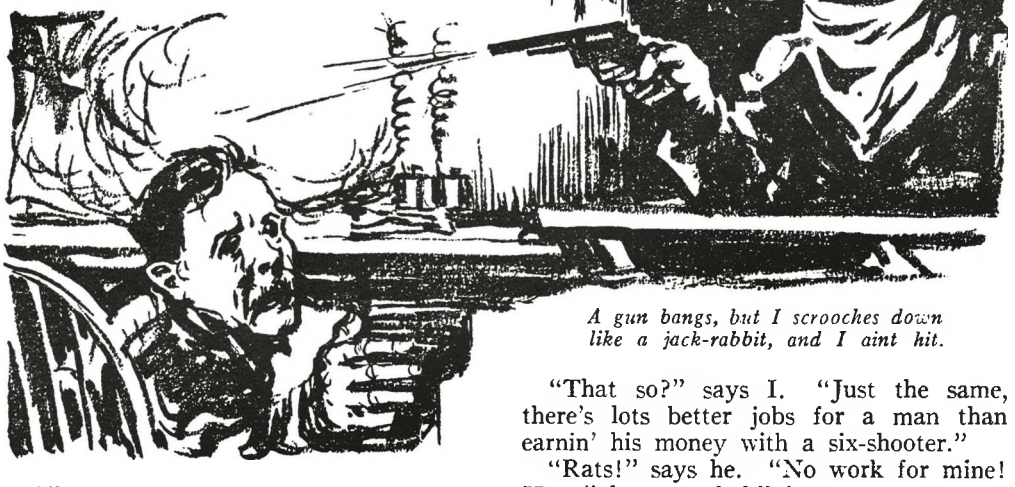
WELL, sir, as I sets there thinkin' an' smokin', another of the four stick-up men keeps walkin' back an' forth, along the cinder-path between the buildin' and

the irons. There's enough light, take the moon an' my lamp together, so I can see him kind o' dim. He's straight an' withy-lookin', an' he keeps singin' kind of soft to himself:

"Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie!"
The words come low an' mournfully.
He thought of his home an' his loved ones nigh,
As the cowboys gathered to see him die.

"Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie,
Where the wild coyotes will howl o'er me.
In a narrer grave, just six by three,
Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie!"

But the cowboys now, as they roam the plain,
They mark the spot where his bones were lain.
In a narrer grave, just six by three,
They buried him there on the lone prairie.



A gun bangs, but I scrooches down like a jack-rabbit, and I aint hit.

All of a sudden he stops singin', comes to the window and stands there lookin' in at me. His eyes is queer an' shiny through the piece of cloth he's got on for a mask.

"How long, now?" says he.

"Just a few minutes," says I. An' right then my alarm-clock goes off with an awful clatter.

"What the hell's that?" says he, reachin' for his gun. "Burglar-alarm, or what? If you tries any funny biz—"

"You sure must be more nervous'n what I am," says I, "not to reckonize an alarm-clock when you hears one."

"Oh, is that all?" says he, kind of relieved.

"Yeh, that's all," says I. "You're some singer, aint you?"

"Don't you get funny with me!" says he, threatenin'-like.

"Who's gettin' funny?" says I. "I mean it. I like that there song. Used to know it, myself—'Oh, Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie!' I like that part about how he thought of his home an' loved ones dear. He'd of done better to of went along home, that there bad man would, than get shot up an' buried where the wild coyotes would howl over him! That's a fact, he would."

"What you tryin' to do, anyhow?" says the stick-up man. "Gimme a lecture, or what?"

"Mebbe," says I.

"Well," says he, "all you gimme is a pain!"

"That so?" says I. "Just the same, there's lots better jobs for a man than earnin' his money with a six-shooter."

"Rats!" says he. "No work for mine! Here," he says, holdin' up a gunny-sack, "here's the best way of collectin' pay—best for a live man with guts!"

"Is that really the way you feel about it?" says I. "If you could get a good job railroadin', or somethin', an'—"

"Oh, for Jeeze sake!" says he, plumb disgusted. "You talk like a missioner, or some o' them damn'-fool sky-pilots. Plenty of 'em has whined over me! I'd rather have coyotes, any day—yes, sir, even over my grave on the lone prairie. No job for mine! A short life," says he, "an' a merry one. That's me all over!"

"Don't say that," says I. "You're young, yet, an'—"

"Yes, I'm young," says he, bitter. "I'll cash in young, too, with both my boots on. I don't want to never get to be a busted-down, wizzled-up old bunch o' whiskers an' misery, like *you!* What's

more," he says, "a feller that's already done time in the pen, like me, what chance has he got, anyhow?"

"You might have a chance," says I, "even at that."

"The hell I would!" says he. "Supposin' I quit this here game, an' got a good job? How long before some fresh guy, or sheriff or cop'd blow along an' say: 'Hello, jailbird!'? Then where the hell would my good job be? No, sir," he says, "you can take your good job an' hang it on a tree, an' good night to you! Hello, what's *that?*"

"That," says I, "is just Number 16, whistlin'."

IT was, too. She was all of ten mile east yet, but out there on them Nebraska plains at night, you could hear a locomotive whistle a devil of a long ways.

Now Number 16's whistle drifted off acrost the prairie, faint an' far, like a ghost of a sound, kind of. She was whistlin' for the crossin' at Two Brothers' Ranch, just t'other side o' Lodgepole Crick. And my heart kind of stopped a minute, an' then pounded hard, 'cause I knew pretty soon there'd be doin's at Plug 47.

'Twouldn't be very long, I knew—with all them miles of straightaway track—before Alf Elding, who was most gen'ally engineer on Number 16, would sight my red. I could kind of foresee how he'd jam in the throttle, when he'd get near the sidin'-switch, and reach for the air. And after that—

The young feller, he was thinkin' about the doin's, too. He coughed sort of nervous, fixed his mask a little, an' loosened his gun. Then he walked off down the cinders, with the gunny-sack in his left hand. I heard him an' the others talkin', but what they said I couldn't ketch.

I got busy, then. Takin' a chance? Oh, sure! But after what the young feller had told me, I didn't mind *that!* I throwed off my sounder-switch an' turned down the adjustment-screw, so the armature wouldn't be vibrated by the magnets. Then I put my left arm on the desk an' leaned my head on it, like I was dead tired and layin' there, goin' to sleep again. I got my right hand up an' opened my switch-lever, an' then got hold o' my key. Just a little bit of a finger-motion, hid by my arm an' hand,—no hand-motion at all,—an' I could shoot the Morse along fine, though slow. I looked as harmless as a basket of kittens. But all the time I was callin' for help—callin' to beat the band.

Thing I had to do, first, was clear the wire, make everybody else stand aside an' give me the right o' way to the dispatcher's office at Kinney. I had to take a chance I was clearin' it, y'see, 'cause of course I couldn't get no answer. So I give the call that gets reckonition over all others—the wire-testin' character. That's the figger "nine." In the Morse, it's *dash-dot-dot-dash.* I made it about ten or a dozen times, slow an' stiddy. I felt sure that'd clear the line for me.

On top o' that, to make surer, I sent "All copy!" three times. That's often done, y'understand, when there's somethin' extra important on the wire. That'll make most every operator set up an' listen. Everythin' was silent on my instrument, all the time. The vibratin' armatures on my relay an' sounder, I had 'em screwed down, y'see. And even if them hold-up fellers had came an' looked in at me—which they didn't, bein' too much took up with the train comin'—I don't reckon they could of seen I was sendin'. Just my fingers movin' a teeny mite, like that.

Anyhow, after I felt tol'able sure I had a clear wire, I called the dispatcher's office at Kinney. His call was *"Dx."* So I called, *"Dx, Dx, Dx."* An' then: *"Help, help. Robbers. Rush men. Ct hear U. Hold-up. Using key only. Dt ans. Rush help."*

Then I quit. I'd done all I could. I'm all kind of trembly-like, for if them hard-b'iled fellers ever finds it out, they'll shoot me like a coyote. An' I aint no hero—not whatever. But anyhow, it's done. An' the chances is there'll be a fight, an' somebody'll get killed at Plug 47, right out there on the lone prairie.

I gets up an' walks out o' my little office an' to the door o' the station. "Somebody's goin' to get killed," that's what I'm thinkin'. The windmill's spinnin' in the moonlight. You can hear it creak, round an' round. It keeps sayin', "Somebody killed, somebody killed." Funny, how a windmill talks. I wonders who it'll be that gets killed, as I walks out on the cinders, where I can look east'ard along the iron.

Way, way off, I can hear Number 16. It's kind of like a little murmurin', acrost the prairie. She's in sight, too. You can see a devil of a ways, out there on them Nebraska plains. I told you that before,

didn't I? Miles off, there's her headlight glimmerin' on the iron, blinkin' like a little star. There's other stars, too. Little pale ones. An' the big red moon. It's kind of a pretty night, for Nebraska. There's coyotes howlin' at the moon, somewheres out back, an' some more down by the Platte River. I hears one o' the horses whinnyin' and stompin'. I'm scared, that's a fact. Somehow I never heard them coyotes sound so lonesome-like. I takes to shiverin'; can't light my pipe, even, my hand shakes so.

"Here, you son of a pup!" says one o' the stick-up men, from down by the windmill. It's the young feller, too. "Get back in that there station!" He's got his gun in his hand. You can see the moonlight flickin' on it. He covers me. I can see him, kind of dim. One o' the others is by the coal-shed, an' the two others is beside the water-tank. "Get back in the station," the young feller says, "an' stay there, damn you, if you don't want to get hurt!"

So I goes back in, an' waits. What else can I do? I'm askin' you, now.

AFTER a spell, Number 16 comes rollin' up, an' I hears the air grind. Then there's two shots, an' then some more. I hears hollerin', down the track, an' somebody shoots again. Yes sir, I'm shakin' all over, an' I got chills, but I'm sweatin', too. I stays in the station—don't even dast to put my head out the door. What's the use of committin' suicide, as you might say? I haven't even got a gun.

There's plenty of doin's, down to the train. I don't know just what, but I can hear some shoutin', and then another pistol goes *whack!* Then for a spell, things gets kind of quiet.

"They're goin' through the train, now," thinks I. In my mind I can see one of 'em holdin' up the con', the engine-crew an' trainmen with a gun, while the other three goes through the Pullmans. Or mebbe they've a'ready shot the express-messenger and are gettin' ready to blow the safe. Can't tell, exactly. Anyhow, they're busy takin' up their collection. That's a bet.

Seems like it takes a most God-awful time. Mebbe fifteen or twenty minutes, or some such a matter—but it seems years! I thinks: "Where the devil's the help that's comin' from Kinney? There'll be a loose engine sent out. It oughta do sixty or seventy an hour; oughta be here, by now!"

An' she is, too. Oh, sure, here she comes, hell-roarin'! No headlight on her to warn the hold-up men—just runnin' by moonlight and takin' chances! I reckon the hold-up men is too busy to hear the exhaust. But I hears it, all at once. Then it stops, sudden. There's a squeal of brakes, and a whole lot of shootin'.

There's men yellin' and hollerin', and shootin' by the wholesale. Some bullets zip through the station. I ducks down in my little office, under the telegraph-desk. That's the safest place. No, sir, *I* aint got no hankerin' to get shot. Not with a sick wife to take care of, an' no insurance. Besides, what could I do, if I went outside? By the racket, there's fifteen or twenty men come on the loose engine, and they're armed like a whole regiment. It's their job, aint it? Let 'em finish it!

They finishes it, too—in good, bang-up style. What can four men, even bad men like that, do against fifteen or twenty? Not much! I hears some cussin', an' men runnin' along the cinders.

"Damn you for a double-crossin' pup!" somebody hollers in my little office window, and a gun bangs in there, like a cannon. One of 'em is tryin' to shoot me, but I just scrooches down an' hides, like a jackrabbit in a hole, and I aint hit. Then the man runs on again. I hears the horses whinnyin', and there's a sudden hammer of hoofs. Then the hoofs fades out acrost the lone prairie.

There's more shoutin', though, from the rescuin' party. A lot o' people tumbles into the station, and I comes out from under the desk. I'm all dusty, scared stiff, and tremblin', but they slaps me on the back an' calls me a hero—which I aint, whatever.

It'd take too long to tell all of it, the next couple of hours or so. But anyhow, there aint nobody killed, of the train-crew, passengers or rescuin'-party. Two or three is wounded, yes sir. But there's a doctor aboard, an' he patches 'em up under the dim little light in the station. I wires in to Kinney what's happened, and how all's clear again. After a while the loose engine an' the men goes back to Kinney, an' Number 16 pulls out again, westbound. Oh yes, there's some money give me: sixty-eight dollars an' fifty cents; an' there's talk of a gold watch, later—which I never got.

Anyhow, I'm left alone, after a while. Eh? No sir; no danger the hold-up men'll

come back an' bother me none. They're scared bad. *They* don't want nothin' more, round that there section!

After things is all quiet again, I sets down in my chair by my telegraph-instrument, lights my pipe, an' thinks. It comes early mornin'. The moon goes down, an' it gets kind of light along the prairie. There's sort of a cool breeze, too, and I'm powerful glad the night's over. Some night, mister!

I gets up, goes down to the switch, puts out the lantern an' brings it back to the shed. The windmill is talkin' away, talkin' away to itself—an' to me. When I opens the shed door, I sees a man's boots. Then I sees the man. It's one o' them hold-up fellers. He's layin' on the coal, dead.

THAT'S what he is, sir, dead as a door-nail. He's shot plumb through the neck, and he's bled all over my coal. I reckon after he got shot, he run for cover. Got in the shed, shut the door, an' fell down on the coal-pile. That's how it must of happened.

I turns him over, and it's the young feller I was talkin' to about gettin' a job. He aint got his mask on, now—I don't know where it is.

I stands an' looks at him a spell. "A short life an' a merry one," that's what he said. Well, I reckon he's had it, all right! I looks at him a spell, an' thinks—just thinks. . . . .

Then I buries him. I takes my coal-shovel, goes out back on the prairie a piece, an' digs a grave for him, in among the sagebrush. You know that prairie earth—it's easy diggin'. Makes me sweat some, though, to dig the hole big enough. I aint very strong, but I keeps on, an' makes a proper good grave.

Then I goes back to the shed, an' drags him to the grave. Can't carry him; he's too heavy for me. So I has to drag him, his boots makin' two long lines in the dirt. The sun's just comin' up, red as blood, along the edge o' the lone prairie, as I gets him to the grave.

I sets down on the mound of earth a spell, to rest an' cool off—an' think. I looks at him. Fine-lookin' young feller—strong, too! But I reckon, by the appearance of him, he's been hittin' the booze, an' so forth, quite hard.

After a while I drags him in the grave. With his boots on, too, same as he said he wanted to be buried. I puts the sixty-eight dollars an' fifty cents in too, 'side of him. Seems like there's blood on all that money. I wouldn't want it, would I, now? I shovels the dirt in on him an' on the money. I packs the dirt in good, so nothin' wont dig him up. Them coyotes, y'know. . . . .

I fills in the grave level, an' scatters the rest o' the dirt all 'round, so nobody wont suspicion nothin', even if anybody ever come there, which there don't. Then I goes an' gets a sunflower an' puts it on the grave. That's the best I can do. Take a chance there wont nobody see it. Let it lay there a day or two, anyhow. Who's to know?

The sun's up quite high, now, an' I goes back to the station. I sets down in the door an' watches the windmill whirlin' round. My head feels whirly, too. You'll have queer thoughts, sometimes, watchin' a windmill. The windmill seems like it's singin'—keepin' time to somethin' that's goin' round an' round in my head, an' has been—off an' on—ever since. The windmill, and that somethin' in my head, is singin':

"Oh, bury me not on the lone prairie,
Where the wild coyotes will howl o'er me!"
In a narrer grave, just six by three,
I buried him there on the lone prairie.

YOU got a fine place here—lake, an' all. Wish't *I* had some place like this to settle down. But—

Anyhow, I sets there in the door, thinkin', and the sun gettin' hotter an' hotter.

"This here's the best way out of it, I reckon," thinks I. "My wife, she wont never know nothin' about it. I'm mighty glad. If Simmy had of been only wounded,—an' captured,—the news of it would of got out. She might of knowed. I'm glad."

She never did know nothin' about it, neither, my wife didn't. She died sudden, about two years later, still waitin' among them flowers at home in Painestown. Still waitin', still hopin' Simmy might come back sometime. I reckon she died kind of happy.

I was happy, too, settin' there in the doorway, lookin' at the windmill, singin' with the windmill, an' thinkin', all to myself. Funny thing though, aint it, how a man could be so happy, just after he'd buried the only son he ever had—out there on the lone prairie?

"Ef you don't like my packin', do it yourself!" exploded Sam.

Oltimer

The thorough-going Westerner who wrote "The Voice" and "The Comeback" was in excellent form when he wrote this memorable story of two old prospectors and their burro.

By JOE MILLS

Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson

THE magic glow of the rising sun tinted the foothills and the sage-covered plains below, overlaying their dun-colored sides and faces with warm ochres, mystic amethysts, and red-violets. It shone against the windows of the little adobe saloon, transforming those usually dull and vacant panes into sheets of burnished copper, enticingly aglow. And touching the commonplace figure of Mike de Luca, as he stood in his doorway watching the old prospectors packing for their annual expedition into the "high country," it gilded his swarthiness with ruddy charm. Most of all, perhaps, it transfigured the grizzled and tattered old prospectors, and their mangy little pack-mule, their ragged, dirty bedding-roll, their smutty coffee-pot and frying-pan, into colorful figures of romance.

"You'd think ter see 'em hurryin'," grinned Mike, watching the trembling haste of Long Jim Ballard as he balanced the bedding-roll across the burro's back, "that they knew jest where there wuz gold waitin' fer 'em!" He laughed as he recalled that with just such eagerness the now ancient ones had started out every spring for the last twenty years.

"Sam," quavered Long Jim to his partner, "where in tarnation's the bacon? . . . . Now whut you wanter kick Oltimer fer?"

"Ef you don't like my packin', do it y'self!" exploded Sam, much to the amusement of Mike—and he deserted his job, to lean against the doorway.

The little burro turned an inquisitive head toward him.

"Take that, you consarned jackass!" Sam growled, as he struck the pack-mule a resounding blow with his open hand.

"Don't, Sam!" remonstrated Long Jim.

"There you go," grumbled Sam, "takin' up fer that damn' ornery mule!"

The sun had cleared the horizon now; the white light of day revealed the foothills and the mesa, the saloon and the mine dumps, raw and naked, but its early enchantment still clung to the prospectors and their burro.

Long Jim Ballard was, as his sobriquet implied, very tall, raw-boned and angular. His shoulders, unlike those of most tall men, were square, and he bore few marks of his seventy-five years of toil and exposure. His hands, at the ends of long bony arms reaching nearly to his knees, were gnarled as pine knots, and almost as hard. Contrasting oddly with the stubble of red beard scattered in patches on his lean brown face was the thatch of snow-white hair, long untouched by the shears, which straggled from beneath his battered hat. Crow's-feet wrinkled his face. His dark eyes, always half-closed, crinkled humorously, and gave him the look of ever being at the point of laughter.

Big Sam Jeep was a striking contrast to Long Jim. He was short and squat and unkempt. His little blue eyes glared, hawk-like, from either side of his hooked nose, giving him the expression of being always about to pounce upon some unoffending prey. His loose-lipped mouth was stained with tobacco juice and gave frequent utterance to profanity. His bearing was of a man who sought—and found—trouble.

THROUGH twenty years of spring-hopes and fall-failures, these two had been partners. For twenty years, as the wintry snows of the high country had driven them down out of it, they had come shambling back into the scarred and smudged mining camp, "holin' up" till spring, pottering about the mines, picking up what work they could get; saving, scrimping, sacrificing—at least Long Jim did—to get enough money to buy the coveted, necessary grubstake the subsequent spring. This year, as usual, Big Jeep had saved nothing. He had squandered his depended-upon earnings faithlessly. But Long Jim had produced a greasy old pouch and poured its jingling contents out on Mike's counter. He had looked up fearfully from the scattered coins into the saloonkeeper's swarthy face.

"How much kin you let us have, Mike?" he had begged. "You see Sam aint got nothin' this year; he's had hard luck—"

Mike had nodded quickly, impatiently, cutting off further excuses. Twenty times he had heard the same story; Long Jim's faithful attempt to cover up his partner's selfishness. But Mike too had felt the golden glow of the prospector's dreams—he too had the daring and the faith of the adventurer. He always staked them to another chance.

Now the little cavalcade—which might have seemed dingy but for the glamour always cast about seekers for the hidden, golden wealth of the earth, the cloak of romance wrapped about dreamers and seers of visions—was ready to start. Miners on their way to work called after them good-naturedly.

"Goin' to hit 'er this time?" chaffed a mucker.

"So long, Jim! Hope you come back with that three-thousand-dollar ore you been telling us about!"

And they passed on, tolerantly and amusedly skeptical.

The partners were at last on their way, headed toward the Continental Divide. They knew devious ways in and out and over the lower ranges. They had rambled over this region for a hundred miles around. They had dug many shallow holes, following up surface leads of promise. Each hole was a potential mine, each lode a bonanza strike. Often, before their diggings were waist deep, they had stopped to argue over the location of their ore mill and the platting of the town which would naturally follow. Scores of times their hopes had died as the false leads pinched out. But each time revived hopes sprang up as they gazed at the higher mountains beyond.

"We've gotter git over the Divide this time." Jim paused in the trail, raising his eyes to the jagged, saw-toothed tops of the loftier peaks. "Been wantin' ter see whut's on t'other side, all these years." He swept up an abnormally long and bony arm toward the goal of his dreams.

Big Jeep, twisting his mouth spitefully, turned toward him.

"There you go," he railed, "—blatting about t'other side ag'in! Twenty year you been hollerin' ter go where you aint. Ef you was over there, likely as not you'd be squawkin' ter git over here." Sam spoke not from conviction nor even from disapproval—merely from the unamiability of his nature.

Long Jim was unresentful.

"Sam," he answered mildly, "I've got a hunch we're a-goin' ter hit it this time. We've 'bout prospected this here side out—we got ter hit it on t'other side." His old voice cracked with emotion. He was always thus eager, with perennial enthusiasm, always entertaining a dream or a "hunch" that they were about to strike it rich.

Big Jeep glared at him contemptuously, and hurled a rock at Oltimer.

Ahead of them they drove the little pack-mule, laden with all their common possessions. Two soiled bedding-rolls, a chunk of salt meat, some flour and a slab of bacon, a battered, blackened coffee-pot, and frying-pan, Sam's pick, Long Jim's shovel, a drill, a hammer, a few sticks of powder; these were the meager, lowly tools with which they purposed to open up the gold mines of the earth. With such inadequate equipment they dared the unmapped wilds beyond the trails. To just such humble agents has the earth often yielded up her treasures.

"Jest wait till I can stand, an' see what happens!"

For months they would somehow subsist, adding to their poor grubstake with trout from the streams, or rabbits which sometimes they could trap in the rocks. Once in a while they might be lucky enough to knock over a young grouse or ptarmigan with a well-aimed stone.

Oltimer, the pack-mule, had once had a plushy coat of tan, but sun and storm had frayed and faded it until now it matched the sage where he spent so much of life seeking out the sparse grass. His ears wagged back and forth as he walked; his eyes roved the trail and the ground adjacent, hunting provender. He was undersized and agate-eyed, but his deliberate movements, as though life had taught him that there was time for everything, gave him a poise which resembled dignity. He kept ahead of his ancient masters, halting frequently to crop the grass beside the trail, or sometimes slyly edging off the path to reach some tempting green shoot. Often he stood still, in wise—and at most times, in silent—contemplation of the peaks beyond. But at other times he lifted up his voice, and so stirred Big Jeep's seething wrath to fresh violence. Many stammering starts he made in his efforts to tune up his vocal cords.

"Wah—aw—a-a-a-ah!" he would begin, the raucous, penetrating notes setting the echoes to jangling among the cliffs. His voice was rusty and squeaking, out of control, like the unused hinges of an abandoned door. Then, as though not quite satisfied with the pitch, he would begin again: *"Wah-a-a-e-eh-aw!"*

Times without number he got no farther.

"Godalmighty, cut the bazoo!" Big Jeep would roar, and start for him with his pick-handle.

"Sam, don't you hit him!" Long Jim's quavering voice grew firm. The old man gave way to his partner's quarrelsome aggressiveness in all things save one. He could not bear Sam's abuse of the little pack-mule.

But Oltimer was not without experience. And pleasurable and relieving though his song was to him, he usually sang with discretion and expediency. Wisely he chose the time and place for his outbreaks: they came at such moments as caught the big man far away, or found Long Jim's protecting body between them. Not that he

went unscathed; sometimes he failed to dodge a rock, hurled with deadly intent at his head; other times Big Jeep took evil advantage of a narrow, rocky trail, and made up for unavailable opportunities by beating him wickedly.

Oltimer kept a wary eye upon his enemy. At his approach he shuffled away with timely, unconscious dignity.

SO the ill-assorted party made their way toward the goal of Long Jim's desire. It was late summer before they straggled to the top of the Continental Divide—"the Great Divide," as they called it. Beneath them countless cañons dropped away. The distant roar of falling water rose to their ears as slowly they prospected their way down into the dark, unknown valley below, following a ridge that separated parallel cañons.

Long Jim was happy. For twenty years he had been trying to surmount the Divide and to try out the unexplored region on "t'other side." Now he was content.

This was a land of many waters. Scores of streams headed among the snowdrifts that gave it the name of Never-Summer Land. Out of the main river the prospectors panned a thin trickle of wet, yellow sand.

They headed upstream. At every small tributary they turned aside, testing its sands, but returning eventually to the main stream.

"She's somewhar high up," cackled Long Jim. "We'll find 'er yet!"

They trailed the gold as unerringly as a hound on fresh scent. If traces in the main stream grew faint, they circled about, turned and twisted in search of their quarry. When they came to a sandbar glinting with color, the pursuit passed on upstream. The side streams proved barren, showing only slight traces. The river was beginning to cañon up, retarding their progress. All at once it too turned barren. Painstakingly they panned every small tributary, and in a brook tumbling out of a narrow, dark cañon, they finally found pay gravel. Feverishly they worked up its course, following the flakes of yellow dust intermingled with its sands. Presently these failed—they had evidently passed the point where the pay sands entered the rivulet.

"Lead must be right clost," Jim yelled excitedly. "Bet she's a hummer, too!"

Ten yards back from the stream they found the lode. Crumbling, gold-flecked quartz showed beneath the cañon wall.

"We've hit 'er! We've hit 'er!" And Long Jim capered stiffly about, tossing his hat high into the air.

"Hold yer yelps!" advised Big Jeep.

There they made camp, constructing a lean-to of spruce boughs beside the lead. It was a pleasant camp; the golden brook dashed past, babbling of the speckled trout leaping in it. High cañon walls shut out the winds and protected them from the precipitous summer rains.

They drilled as deep into the lode as was possible with their limited tools, then packed in the hole the precious powder they had hoarded during all those searching weeks, and lighted the fuse.

They literally held their breath as they waited for the shot to fire. When it did, while its detonations were still echoing among the cliffs, and fragments of rock were still falling, they hurried back to the spot. Long Jim grabbed up one of the richest fragments of quartz and pulverized it, then carried the gravel to the brook. Sam went with him, but sat on his bedding-roll beneath the lean-to watching his partner's testing of the specimen. Oltimer, experimentally nosing the gold-pan, followed his protector, casting cautious glances rearward toward where his enemy reposed indolently.

The old prospector squatted at the edge of the stream and filled the pan with water. Carefully he rocked it, crooning softly to himself. The burro waited expectantly, his long, twitching ears pointing forward.

The sun was going down behind the Divide when Long Jim straightened wearily. His big hands trembled as he tilted the pan to catch the evening light. Then he jerked off his hat with such a shout that Oltimer leaped away in fright.

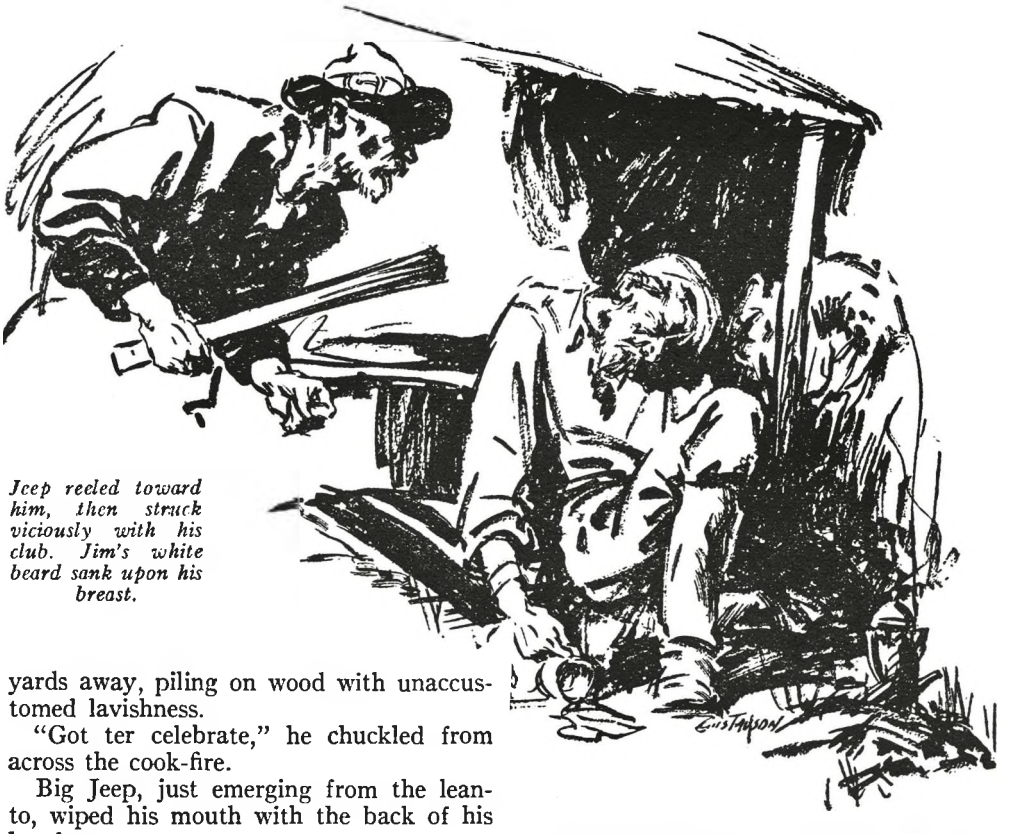
"Sam! Sam! She's rich!" His voice cracked with excitement. "We've hit 'er fer sure certain. Look—there's a lotta pay dirt in it!"

He shoved the pan into his partner's lap, expecting a shout of joy.

But Big Jeep, after a skeptical glance into the gold-pan, and a suspicious grunt, sat in silence.

His partner's face fell. He quietly gathered up the scattered quartz, putting the richest of it into an ore bag.

At length, when it grew dark in the cañon, he cooked their supper. When it was ready to eat, he built another fire some



Jeep reeled toward him, then struck viciously with his club. Jim's white beard sank upon his breast.

yards away, piling on wood with unaccustomed lavishness.

"Got ter celebrate," he chuckled from across the cook-fire.

Big Jeep, just emerging from the lean-to, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Sure we must!" he agreed boisterously.

Long Jim cast a sharp, troubled glance at him.

"Sam, you been drinkin' the liquor we been savin' ag'in' sickness! You—" But Big Jeep had turned back beyond hearing into the lean-to.

IN the darkness preceding dawn Oltimer brayed mightily. Again and again he pointed his black muzzle toward the summits of the higher mountains, and startled his masters out of their sleep. Long Jim, too excited to drop off quickly, as was his habit, had lain awake long after his usual bedtime, but he roused up at the burro's first call. He sat up stiffly, drawing his thin, ragged blankets closely about him, and listened to the insistent braying.

"Sumpin must 'a' happened," he worried.

"Damn his wuthless hide—I'll learn him to keep his bazoo still at night!" growled Sam, stamping out angrily.

The dingy little mule continued to harry the heavens.

"Take that—an' that!"

Resounding whacks came out of the darkness.

"Ouch! Oh-h-h—damn him, he kicked me!"

Long Jim found his partner rolling on the ground, with one knee gripped tightly in his hands.

"Too bad!" he sympathized.

"Jest wait till I can stand, an' see whut happens!" Even as he spoke he rummaged in the dead pine needles for a stone.

Oltimer, who recognized hostile signs, hastily disappeared into the blackness up the cañon.

Old Jim helped his heavy partner to their rude shelter. There he lighted the inch-long remnant of candle and rubbed the injured knee with some of the liquor he had rescued from Sam's "celebration."

Just before daylight they were awakened again by the burro's insistent braying.

"Whut in time ails him?" Long Jim asked anxiously, as he listened to the prolonged echoes.

"Nuthin' ails him! It's jest his mean cussedness." Big Jeep cursed as he gingerly felt his sore knee.

Before they finished breakfast it started snowing.

"That's it!" rapped out Jim. "That's whut he's been tellin' us—a storm comin'." He peered in apprehension at the darkening sky above the rim of the cañon wall.

Oltimer approached cautiously. Jim pretended not to know he was near. The

burro nudged him gently in the back. The old man slipped half a flapjack behind him.

"Don't waste grub on a wuthless skate like him!"

"Jest a bite wont hurt."

"You make me sick!"

Again Long Jim felt a suggestive nudge.

"Better git back," he admonished in a low tone.

Between the cañon walls the snow came softly sifting down. Sam paused in his vehement denunciation of Oltimer and gazed inquiringly upward.

"Means business, by heck! Reckon we better be gittin' out." He glanced furtively at his partner, looked long at their new-found lead, then shuffled toward the lean-to.

"Sam, stop yer drinkin'!" Long Jim's voice trembled. "You know we only brung thet licker 'long for med'cin'. Aint no tellin' when we'll hev ter have it. You been drinkin' ever since we struck it rich."

His partner held up the half-empty bottle, eyed it captiously, replaced the cork; then reluctantly he shoved it under his bed-roll and stalked back to the fire.

Oltimer interpreted the silence as a truce, and ventured back, approaching at a dignified, slow walk, apparently innocent of all memory of former hostilities but nevertheless swinging wide of Big Jeep as he went up to Long Jim. The old man set down his unfinished breakfast and turned toward Sam. The burro edged forward.

"Git back, you infernal ole hell-cat!"

Long Jim turned, and grinned broadly at sight of his cleaned plate. "Wall now, don't thet jest beat all?" he began.

A chunk of sharp, broken ore thudded against the outstanding ribs of Oltimer. He whirled about, nimbly dodging a barrage of stones as he retreated to the shelter of a small spruce thicket.

"Sam! For God's sake, don't! Oltimer's one of us. He's packed our things faithful fer mos' twenty years an' hadn't orter be treated so." Long Jim followed the mule to the thicket.

Blood dripped from a ragged gash in the burro's side.

"Pore little feller!" soothed his master, as he bathed the wound.

The storm was on in earnest now. It shrouded the peaks, and filled the cañon with a steady stream of snow.

"Purty late ter be so high up," Jim commented, as he watched it from the protection of the lean-to. "We aint got much grub left, neither."

"You're always blubberin' 'bout sumpin," growled Sam. "First you go an' feed thet damn' jackass all our grub, then you set up a holler 'bout it bein' all gone. You even grudge me a little licker ter celebrate with."

Long Jim's dark eyes focused upon his partner.

"Sam," he said quietly, "you aint y'self since we struck it. You been downright disagreeable. Never see you act so. Cain't you stand it to be rich? Now we got plenty, wouldn't think you'd grudge Oltimer a bite er two."

"You make me sick!" Big Jeep reiterated impotently, and plunged his hand beneath his bed.

"Sam," said the old man with tragic finality, "I wish ter God we'd never struck it. We've been partners this long time; we're too old now ter change. The trail is gittin' sorter hard fer us, we're thet old. But we don't hev ter take the trail no more once we git back with this sample ore an' git things settled an' divided."

THE day darkened. Clouds flowed into the cañon and shut out the light. The snow piled down steadily, hour after hour. Long Jim plodded forth from their shelter to measure its depth.

"We got ter git soon's it lets up," he reported. "More'n a foot deep now. Likely be more'n two feet by mornin'."

"Let 'er snow," hiccoughed Big Jeep, as he once more lifted the bottle.

They sat in silence as early darkness shut down, Long Jim worried and anxious, his partner moody and truculent.

Morning found no abatement of the storm. The snow lay knee-deep about camp.

Oltimer stood beneath the small spruces, hopefully awaiting a summons to breakfast. The spruces had been inadequate protection, for their overladen boughs had slid their surplus load onto the little mule's shivering back. Now it was piled high with wet, clinging snow. As the warmth of his body had melted the adjacent layer, the water ran down to the ends of his shaggy coat, and there formed shimmering icicles, freighting him down with a fantastic crystal fringe. Hungrily sniffing the smoke, he watched Long Jim build a tiny cooking-fire beneath the lean-to. Jim boiled the coffee-grounds left from the day before—it was all they had left. This, with flapjacks, comprised their breakfast.

Oltimer impatiently awaited an invitation to the meal, but finally, despairing of it, he let his hunger overcome his caution, and shuffled forward uninvited.

The pick-handle cracked sharply upon his hoary head. He stood stunned a moment, then staggered blindly against the cliff.

Sam moved to follow up his attack.

"Git back!" warned Long Jim. "Git back, I tell you!" Catching up his shovel, he raised it high, threateningly.

Jeep snarled: "I'll git you both!" and started for him.

The shovel came down like a flail, and

Oltimer raised his voice in a long, derisive, "Wha-he-haw!"

Jeep sprawled in the snow. When he regained consciousness, Jim was pouring weak coffee into one of the tin cups.

"This'll fix you up," he invited hospitably, holding out the cup.

Jeep reeled toward him, made as though to take the proffered drink, then struck swiftly, viciously, with his club.

Jim's white head sank upon his breast. Slowly he stretched back upon his blankets.

BIG JEEP posted a crumpled location notice, first laboriously and illegibly affixing his name to it. Then he hurriedly packed all the grub, abandoning the now useless coffee-pot. The bag of choice ore he tied upon the pack-mule along with the food. Once more he drank, stowed the bottle inside his shirt, and turned his back upon camp.

"Git ahead an' break trail!"

The ever ready pick-handle thudded against Oltimer's rump, and he plunged forward, stumbling over the hidden rocks and scattering snow wildly.

Sam's plan was to regain the crest of the Divide and drop down on the other side, for he felt sure that once through the pass he would leave the storm behind. On the other side of the Divide lay low country, foothills and plains, and he knew that the descent from the arctic altitude to a lower and warmer atmosphere would be rapid.

The snow was deep, soft and fluffy, as that of early winter storms is apt to be, and progress was slow. They trudged along, the little burro ahead breaking a trail, sweating and snorting, the man likewise puffing but having the advantage of the broken trail. Long weary hours they toiled upward. When at last they passed through the ghostly trees of timberline they emerged upon the knife-like summit of the ridge. Here the clouds were solidly banked against the Continental Divide by the wind driving them down from the north.

Oltimer, wise in the ways of trailing, had kept a canny eye upon his master all the way up the mountain. Whenever the club was lifted, he had simultaneously shot forward beyond reach. He contrived to keep ten feet between himself and the panting man behind. He also took advantage of every exposed boulder and protruding timberline thicket to lighten his pack.

They had just gained the summit when Jeep addressed him in a burst of profanity: "What'n hell you rubbin' the pack fer, you damn' ornery hell-cat?"

The shifty mule dodged, and the club cracked down upon a boulder.

No sooner had he avoided the blow than Oltimer wheeled and darted past the man down the slope up which they had just climbed so laboriously, his pack flapping grotesquely, his big ears pointed straight ahead. From time to time, where footing permitted, he spun around on his front feet, and launched accurate, lightning kicks at the ore bag, already loosened by premeditated jamming against a tree.

After him lumbered Big Jeep, apoplectic with rage. He brandished the broken pick-

handle murderously, halting madly now and then to search the snowy trail for a stone.

Where the trail squeezed between a boulder and a timberline tree, the dangling pack-rope caught, and brought the runaway to an abrupt stop.

"I'll learn you ter cut back on me!" Again and again the punishing flail came down upon the flinching beast held captive by the snag.

ONCE more they were toiling upward. Now the man hung onto a rope tied around the burro's neck, thus forcing the bruised little animal literally to drag his heavy body up the trail. They were forced to make frequent stops for breath, so exhausting was the labor. Sam used these respites for a pull on his bottle; and once Oltimer faced back down the trail in the direction of the deserted camp, and sent forth a long-drawn, entreating petition into the storm.

Big Jeep lurched up the trail with threatening club. The burro leaped, and the man, caught off his balance, was jerked flat and dragged for a couple of rods.

"You're the contrariest damn' critter!" he sputtered, his mouth full of snow. "Jest you wait till I git you cornered!"

Oltimer persisted in scraping his pack against the upthrusts of rock, but the man was now too drunk to notice. Finally the bottom of the ore bag was ripped open and the precious, gold-flecked quartz strewn in the snow. This lightened the pack of a hundred pounds of dead weight. Now there was only the bedding-roll and the grub.

Big Jeep, stumbling, panting for breath, hurling insults and threats to which the plodding little mule gave no heed, began to feel the reaction of the alcohol. When they neared the pass, the snow lay belly-deep to the burro. Oltimer struggled forward, slipped off the trail. He fought his way back with the aid of the man's strong pull on the rope.

Sam left him standing bogged down in a drift, and went ahead to break trail. A hundred yards more would put them through the deepest of the snow. After that it would be downhill and easy going.

"Jest wait till I git the trail broke and we're goin' downhill, *then* try any of yore monkey business!" he threatened darkly.

He floundered along for a hundred yards, then paused to look below. The foothills were bare and brown, save for green patches of forest. The sky was clear; the storm had only touched the heights.

"Coupla hours an' we'll be out of this. Then, by—"

His mouth remained open. He stared incredulously at the empty trail. Oltimer was gone. Cursing, he plowed back over the stretch he had just opened.

Relieved of the ore, the mule had made surprising speed. He was far down the back trail when the man appeared against the skyline.

"You ol' devil! Jest you wait till I git aholt of you!"

Oltimer stopped and twisted sidewise in the trail. He swung his huge ears forward, and spread them far apart, as though thoughtfully considering what had been said. Then, tilting his head rakishly, he raised his voice in a long, derisive, *"Wha-he-haw,"* much in the same spirit as a small boy puts thumb to nose. As Jeep made a move to descend, he whirled agilely about, and went galloping downward.

Big Jeep started after him, breathing heavily, panting out maledictions with what little wind he could muster.

"Ef it weren't fer the grub I'd let the damn' cuss go. But I've got ter hev grub. An' thet high grade'll fix me fer the winter."

He stumbled, pitched headlong, and lay still. After a time he stirred, staggered to his feet, and swayed about unsteadily. He faced the pass, then looked back vindictively at the disappearing burro.

"Too fur back," he mumbled. "Never could make it. Hev to take chances on strikin' a settlement somewhar."

The clouds closed in again. Blinding snow, driven by an arctic gale, swirled about him as he climbed toward the pass. Night came quickly. Already inky blackness was in the cañons below.

He got off the trail, stumbled, and fell into a smothering drift. Frantically he fought his way up out of it. He struggled on, regained the pass, started down-hill. Deep, clinging snow dragged at his legs. Floundering, stumbling, now sinking to his waist, now fighting free, he quickened his pace. He had to live now—why, he was rich! The gold was all his—Long Jim'd never get out . . . . his head—

"Wisht I'd 'a' kept ahold of thet ornery cuss," he muttered. "Bet he's follerin' me right now—jest contrary!" He staggered drunkenly, then halted uncertainly.

"Storm's changed direction!" Moistening a finger with his tongue he held it out before him. "Wind's sure shifted—comin' in frum the east, now. Huh!"

He altered his direction and reeled on. The slope was suddenly precipitous. He lost his balance repeatedly. All at once, as he slipped, he felt the loosened rocks underfoot glide with him. He was tobogganing! He realized he was riding an avalanche, and terror vivified his brain. He cried out in a frightful, ghastly scream. . . . .

LATE that morning Long Jim recovered his senses. Through broken storm clouds overhead the sun peeped down into the cañon. For some time he lay still, trying to remember what had happened. His head thumped painfully and he was aching with the cold. He groaned and fumbled at his covers.

"Sam!" he called feebly. "Sam, what's happened—did a slide smash the lean-to?"

Silence except for a camp bird flitting through the trees.

"Oltimer! Oltimer!" he whispered. "Better be careful—" He stopped, bewildered.

"I been dreamin' er sumpin," he babbled on. "Reckon maybe perhaps I got hit when we set off the shot."

He lifted a hand to his aching head.

"Fix the fire, Sam. I'm cold."

For hours he tossed about in delirium, but when the sun crept toward the west, he was sitting before the fire. He remembered. He shivered, glanced about apprehensively, and put more wood upon the fire.

The grub was gone. He was snowbound. He caught sight of something on a near-by tree; he fished his specs out of his pocket, fitted the bows over his ears, and tried to make it out. Failing, he got stiffly to his feet, steadying himself against the lean-to, then floundered through the piled drift for a nearer view.

NOTICE OF LOCATION

The old prospector could not read it plainly, but he knew that was what it said. Many a time he and Sam had put location notices up. But the name on the bottom? He peered closer.

"Cain't make it out, but they's only one —must be his, I reckon. Sam surely wouldn't jest sign his'n. . . . . Wisht ter God we'd never struck it!"

His loyal old heart still stubbornly defended Big Jeep.

"What'll I do?" he mourned, as he rocked slowly back and forth before his fire. "Aint got no grub, an' I'm weak as a cat. Dunno how long I been laid out." He shivered and drew his ragged old blankets closer about his shoulders.

When the sun dropped below the cañon rim, he had come to a decision.

"Got ter git out while they's a chanct." He nodded doubtfully into the fire. "Longer I put off startin', less chanct I'll hev, 'thout grub!"

Pathetically he watched the coffee-pot come to a boil. He lifted it from the coals, sniffed hungrily at the faint odor it gave off, and set it down to cool.

"Nothin' much left—third time," he deplored, but he drank the coffee-tinged water. When he had emptied the pot, he set it carefully down and arose.

He tied and rolled his bed, lifted it with an effort, staggered a dozen yards and sank to his knees.

"No use—I cain't carry it!"

Without the bed-roll, he managed to make the broken trail that led up to the pass. Overhead the wind roared, and scurrying clouds blotted out the top of the Divide. When he had gone fifty feet he had to rest. Only a moment, and he was on his way again. He rested often, and for longer periods as the trail steepened.

Darkness overtook him, spent and weary, not over two miles from the lean-to.

"Ten miles to the top," he panted weakly. "I cain't ever make it!"

But he fought gamely upward until, too exhausted to move, he sank down in the soft snow, holding his throbbing head in his gnarled old hands. Scarcely conscious, he dimly saw the wintry sunset flare over the Divide.

"Wha-ee-ah! Wah-eee-awh!" Long Jim heard that familiar bray in his dreams. It was repeated again and again, coming nearer and nearer.

He felt a nudge at his elbow. He stirred uneasily. Another nudge. He blinked open his eyes, and looked into those of Oltimer. He reached up long, bony arms and clasped them around the burro's neck.

The rosy glow of the setting sun tinted the mountain tops and the heavens above. Down the trail, holding his head proudly erect and carefully picking his way, went Oltimer, bearing the limp form of Long Jim back to the deserted camp.

Evil Treasure

By LEMUEL DE BRA

Illustrated by William Molt

DOTHAN, chief inspector of the Federal dope squad at San Francisco, dodged out of the rain into a gloomy Chinatown stairway. Up and down the street, shutters were being put up over show-windows, doors locked and shades drawn; for it was nearing four o'clock—when the Chinese quarter takes its "evening rice." Dothan, knowing he might as well quit for the day, flipped a cigarette from his pocket and waited for his working partner Ornery Thompson to show up.

As he lounged there in the shadowy stairway, his hands in his pockets, his peaked cap pulled over his dark eyes, Inspector Dothan was a perfect picture of a "hoppie" waiting to connect. His slight figure, his naturally pale face, and the trick he had of assuming a tense, hungry look, had deceived many a dope-peddler and tenderloin tough.

A moment later Inspector Thompson slouched into the stairway, shaking the rain from his coat-sleeves and stamping his wet shoes on the floor. A husky chap, with stubborn reddish hair showing beneath his dingy hat, and an old overcoat sagging from his big shoulders, Thompson passed easily as a dangerous coke-addict. Which Ornery Thompson was anything but!

"To the devil with Chinatown and everybody in it!" spluttered Ornery. "I wish I never had to smell the place again. Shoot me for a loon if I don't resign before—"

"Say," Dothan broke in with one of his lazy smiles, "who's been feeding my little playmate raw meat?"

Ornery shoved his big freckled hands deep in his pockets, and scowled.

"Dothan, it isn't raw meat that's bothering me. It's this cursed raw weather! I'd like to go where it wouldn't rain for six months, and where it's so blamed hot you could fry eggs on your hat!"

"Rain or shine, the old town suits me," said Dothan. "Did you see any life around Bock Ching's joint?"

"Not a flutter! Dothan, that's a bum steer you got. Bock Ching is too confounded lazy even to change his mind. All he does is sit by his window and smoke and—"

"And hatch up schemes that others put through for him. Right now he's planning something big. He—"

HERE Dothan fell silent as some one passed the stairway. It was a man with saffron face and Oriental eyes. He wore a heavily padded, black satin blouse, tight-fitting black trousers, and rubbers over felt slippers. Dothan got just a glimpse at his face; then the umbrella he carried hid him from view.

"What's the matter?" asked Thompson. "You look as if you'd lost something."

Dothan did not reply. A frown darkening his face, he stepped quickly to the entrance and looked down the street. A moment he stood there, a puzzled look in his eyes; then, motioning to Thompson to follow, he stepped out into the rain.

"What's the big idea?" Thompson asked quietly when he caught up with Dothan. "I never saw that Chink before. Did you?"

Dothan did not take his gaze off the man he was following.

"This is a new one on me," he told Thompson, speaking so that no one on the street could overhear. "I got just a glimpse at his eyes as he passed. I've seen Chinese with eyes like his, but not often—in fact, so seldom that I wanted another look. Now I'm convinced. Notice how he walks!"

Thompson frowned. "He walks the same as any other Chinese, far as I can see."

"No, he doesn't," Dothan contradicted. "At least, not like a Chinese of his age. A

An enthralling novel of adventure in the desert—a story of dark contrivings, daring ventures and violent events, told with all the verve and power of the man who wrote "A Thunderin' Thriller" and "The Return of Stiletto Sofie" and "Crooks is Crooks."

"Reach!" he snapped. Dothan eased Tripton to the ground.

man of his age who sticks to Chinese clothing never gets over the 'feel' of those heelless slippers they wear so often. Long after they adopt American shoes, they continue to curl their toes with every step, and lift their feet high. This man doesn't."

Thompson was quick to note that this was true. Neither did the man walk with that swinging shuffle so common among the older generation of Chinese, the head bent, hands held across the stomach as though tucked in long sleeves, the legs swinging loosely from the hips. And yet there was a suggestion of stealth in the man's walk as he hurried down Clay Street and out of Chinatown. When he stopped at Kearney, and looked north for a car, Thompson caught Dothan by the arm.

"Say! You harboring the wild notion that this bird isn't a Chink?"

Dothan smiled.

"You're right the first time, Ornery! He may be Japanese, but I doubt it. I'm curious to know what he is and why he's togged up as a Chink. Since he's going our way, we'll tag along."

THEY did not have long to wait for a Third and Townsend car. Dothan watched the man closely as he got on. He did not tumble on hurriedly and awkwardly, as most Chinese do. When he asked for a transfer, Dothan observed that he spoke fair English; but when he specified that the transfer was for "out Mission," he betrayed to Dothan that he was

not a native of the city. A native San Franciscan, not being required to name his destination, merely crooks a finger at the conductor—and gets his transfer.

The two inspectors sat down where they could keep their man in sight without appearing interested. At Mission Street they got off and followed as he boarded the first outbound car. Dothan thought nothing of it when the man got off at Seventh and Mission and entered the post office; but when he avoided the mail corridor and entered the elevator, Dothan got a surprise. Signaling Thompson to take the stairs, Dothan got behind two newspaper reporters and a court clerk and followed them into the elevator.

THE upper floors of the San Francisco Post Office Building are occupied by various Government agencies, the most important of which is the United States District Attorney. Because their work made it necessary for them to be in close touch with the Commissioner and the Attorney, the office of the United States Narcotic Agent in Charge had recently been moved from the Customhouse to the Post Office Building. It occurred now to Dothan that the man in Chinese clothes might be an under-cover agent employed by the Department of Justice or the Immigration Bureau and that he had come to see the District Attorney. As that idea grew in his mind, Dothan lost all interest in the affair, and was glad that his chase had not led him out of the way to his own office. He called his floor and got off.

Some one got off behind him. Dothan looked around; it was the "Chink." His umbrella hooked over his left arm, the man walked past Dothan without a glance, and down the hall to the main entrance of the Federal narcotic squad. When he had read the inscription on the glass, he opened the door and walked in!

Astonished and mystified, Inspector Dothan stood for a moment staring at the door that had swung shut behind the man he had followed from Chinatown. In the confidence of Chief Narcotic Agent Blount, familiar with every detail of the office, Dothan knew that this man had no connection with the dope squad, and all his suspicions came back to him stronger than ever. Who was this man? Why was he masquerading as a Chinese? And why had he come to Dothan's office?

While Dothan stood there, Inspector Thompson came skipping up the stairs.

"Ornery!" said Dothan, "beat it for your office! Phone Winifred to hold off that Chink until I see the Chief!"

Inspector Thompson went at once to the door at the left of the main entrance. This was the room used by the field men. Dothan went to the door on the right of the main entrance. This was the private office of Narcotic Agent Blount. The Inspector tapped a signal on the glass. The lock, operated by an electric cord running from beneath Blount's desk, began clicking. Dothan opened the door and went in.

Mr. Blount was alone, his gray head bent over his desk, his big hand swinging in bold, blunt strokes as he signed the day's mail. He glanced up at Dothan, then went on with his work.

The office phone jingled softly. Agent Blount flung down his pen and answered. Dothan, standing at Blount's shoulder, could hear Winifred's cautious voice plainly.

"Mr. Blount, there's a Chinese waiting to see you. He says his name is Ah Sam, and that he could tell his business only to you. Inspector Thompson asked me to say you were busy, and I have done so."

"I'll call you, Winifred." Mr. Blount hung up, and turned to Dothan questioningly. He knew that Inspector Thompson and Dothan had been working together.

"Ah Sam," Dothan repeated thoughtfully. "That's not much of a name. About the same as saying 'Hey, John!' Chief, I'm mighty curious to know why that man has called to see you. I spotted him in Chinatown and followed him here." From a drawer, Dothan took a bottle of colorless liquid, and a cloth. "I want to get a picture, and several good prints. And while he's talking, take a good look at him."

Agent Blount gathered up the unsigned mail and put it in a wire basket. "Why do you want me to look at him, Billy?" he asked. "Is he a dope, a peddler, or do you think I've seen him before?"

"I don't know, Chief," Dothan evaded.

Agent Blount's desk had been placed so that he sat with his back to the window. At his side was a chair used by the stenographer, members of his own force, and others whom he knew. This chair Dothan now removed and placed against the wall. The visitor would have to occupy the chair across the desk from Blount, and would have to sit facing the light. Moistening the cloth with the oil

in the bottle, Dothan carefully prepared the edges of the desk where the caller would be likely to put his hands. That done, he got an ash-tray, prepared that in the same manner, and placed it out of Blount's reach, but near the vacant chair.

"All right, Chief," said Dothan. "Hook up the wire, and we're ready."

BLOUNT switched on the dictaphone concealed beneath the desk, then turned to the phone. Meanwhile, Dothan opened the door of what appeared to be an ordinary wardrobe closet. Two or three coats and hats hung on the closet walls, but no doors or other openings were visible. Dothan touched a spring lock, and the rear wall swung open. Dothan stepped behind it, and the wall clicked shut.

Agent Blount lifted the receiver. "All right, Winifred; send Ah Sam in. Then stay on the wire."

Winifred Ellsworth needed no further instructions. She came in with the visitor and drew out the chair opposite Blount. When she was sure that Ah Sam had noticed the open closet, obviously empty, she picked up the mail Blount had signed, then, on her way out, passed the closet and closed the door. Back at her own desk, she put a fresh cylinder in the dictaphone and opened the switch. Then she clamped the head-phone over her ears. While she listened to the conversation between Agent Blount and the visitor, the dictaphone would make a record for future reference.

Inspector Dothan, in the meantime, had opened the wall door again and was in the closet. Removing the slide that covered a small hole in the door, Dothan focused his camera, equipped with special telescopic lens, and took several pictures of the man sitting opposite Agent Blount.

That done, Dothan settled down to listen.

CHAPTER II

IT is nothing unusual for Chinese to call at the office of the Federal dope squad. They come for various reasons: some to plead for a countryman who is in trouble with the Government over narcotics; others, occasionally, come to inform on drug-smugglers or peddlers. Had it not been for Dothan's interest, Agent Blount would have taken Ah Sam's call as a purely routine matter. Now he leaned back in his chair and studied the visitor carefully.

He saw a man of medium height, of slender but wiry build, and with strong, nervous hands. His face, naturally dark, gave evidence of an outdoor life where the sun is hotter than it ever gets in San Francisco. The eyes, also dark, were unpleasantly murky; but the man's gaze, as he looked steadily at Blount, was engagingly frank and penetrating. His coarse black hair had been carefully combed pompadour, which added to the sharp, intensive expression of his narrow face. While the Chinese blouse made the man's shoulders appear narrow and sloping, Agent Blount detected powerful muscles moving beneath the satin.

Mr. Blount had dealt with crooks of all kinds for over thirty years; and while there was something about this man that puzzled him, he immediately marked "Ah Sam" as a clever and extremely dangerous Chinese criminal.

"Did I get the name right—Ah Sam?" Blount asked courteously.

Ah Sam nodded. "That is correct, sir. And you are Mr. Blount, narcotic agent in charge?"

"Yes." Blount observed that Ah Sam spoke excellent English for a Chinese, that his quiet voice suggested good breeding. "You live in San Francisco, Ah Sam?"

"No sir. I live in Mazatlan, Mexico. I am an importer of Chinese goods. A few days ago I came to San Francisco, partly on business, and partly to visit my cousin. No doubt you know my cousin—Bock Ching?"

Bock Ching! Agent Blount found it difficult to conceal his sudden interest.

"I have heard of him, I believe. What can I do for you, Ah Sam?"

Ah Sam smiled. His murky eyes sparkled with a shrewd look.

"My cousin warned me that you do not think very well of him, Mr. Blount. It may be that you are right. That, I do not know. But this time, in sending me to you, Bock Ching has shown an inclination to do the right thing."

Blount did not know what to say to that, so he remained silent. Opening a drawer he got out a box of cigars. Ah Sam declined with another of his aristocratic bows. Blount took a cigar, tore off the end with his teeth and struck a match. The cigar in one hand, the flaming match in the other, he bent over the table toward the ash-tray Dothan had prepared.

Ah Sam picked up the tray and placed it in front of Blount who dropped the match in it, then, being careful not to touch the part touched by Ah Sam, moved it aside out of his way.

"You will pardon me, sir, if I ask you a few questions," Ah Sam began, smiling. "I am not familiar with the procedure of your Government, and while I have implicit confidence in you, of course, I cannot set aside my native Chinese caution. Will you tell me, Mr. Blount, what reward the Government pays for information leading to the discovery of smuggled narcotics?"

"I can't answer that off-hand," Agent Blount parried. "It depends on a number of things. Sometimes the case has to be referred to the Department for special ruling. What have you in mind?"

"I will get to that later, please. Another question! Supposing I guide you to a quantity of smuggled narcotics, what assurance can you give me, in advance, that the Government will pay me a reward?"

"You could put in a claim for ten per cent. If the claim is just, it's usually paid without delay."

"I presume that your recommendation in the matter would have considerable weight?"

Blount smiled. "Naturally."

As Sam appeared to consider a moment, his long, powerful fingers drumming on the edge of the desk.

"Very well, Mr. Blount, I'm satisfied. And now I will not keep you long. About a month ago, possibly longer, smugglers stole a thousand ounces of morphine and heroin from a Mazatlan importer. In trying to get across the American border, one was shot and killed. The others became lost. Two perished in the Sunken Desert. The survivor buried the drugs and started out for Calzona. He—ah—died before he got out of the desert; but before he died, I found him, and he told me the story. I can lead you to the spot where the thousand ounces of morphine and heroin are buried. Does that interest you?"

IT had become quite dark in the office—the drizzle outside had turned to a steady downpour. Agent Blount got to his feet and switched on the lights, and sat down again.

"Naturally, I'm interested in that case," he told Ah Sam. "We were advised of the robbery, and the Customs line-riders were told to be on the look-out for the stuff. You say it is buried in the Sunken Desert? That's away over by Calzona."

"Yes." Ah Sam's murky eyes sparkled knowingly. "You are wondering how a Chinese importer living in Mazatlan, Mexico, happened to be in the Sunken Desert. I will tell you. For several months I have been interested in a mine in that section. I had gone to Calzona, engaged a horse and was riding out to the mine. It suited me to choose the shortest trail, which leads across the north end of the desert. There I found a countryman stumbling through the sand and almost insane with thirst. I gave him water and cared for him.

"I did not question him, but he seemed to think that he was going to die and wanted to reward me. So he told me the whole story.

"He said that he and four companions planned the robbery. One was an employee of the drug-importer, and he knew just when they received large shipments of narcotics, and when they were reshipped to hospitals and drug-stores in Mexico. So they planned the robbery at a time when they were sure of a big haul. They got, as I have said, a thousand ounces of morphine and heroin. What would that quantity be worth here, Mr. Blount?"

"Around fifteen thousand dollars wholesale. That's the legitimate price, of course. In the hands of smugglers and peddlers it would bring from fifty to a hundred thousand."

Ah Sam's eyes gleamed. "That's quite a fortune! However, there's blood on it. Ah Chuck told me that the night of the robbery, the dishonest employee was stabbed to death by a watchman and that the watchman was himself killed by one of Ah Chuck's men. Ah Chuck and the three remaining men then left Mazatlan with the stolen drugs and hid on a ranch until they felt it was safe to travel. While there, they divided the drugs into four packages which they wrapped in oilskin. Then they struck out.

"The night they crossed the border, one man was shot and killed by a Customs line-rider. Ah Chuck had the nerve to stop and take the dead man's package of drugs; then he and the two other men fled. When morning came, they found they were lost—and about out of water.

"During the following three days one of Ah Chuck's companions went mad and cut his throat, and the other one tore off

all his clothes and fled, naked and screaming, into the desert. Ah Chuck buried the four packages of narcotics, and started out for Calzona.

"He was about gone when I met him. He told me the story, as I have said, and wanted me to accept a half-interest in his buried treasure. Not knowing exactly what I should do, I humored him, and he finally told me where the drugs are buried. I have been through the desert, and know the spot well. I gave him food and water and told him to go on to Calzona and wait for me there, which he seemed willing and able to do. I then rode on to the mine, attended to my business in two days, and started back to Calzona.

"Three miles from where I had left Ah Chuck, I found him—dead. After getting safely through miles and miles of horrible desert, all of Ah Chuck's schemes had been put an end to by a rattlesnake. I buried him, and went on to Calzona, and left shortly for San Francisco. Here I told my story to my cousin Bock Ching, who advised me to see you."

"That was right," said Blunt, but more than that he did not know what to say. He could not get over the feeling that something was wrong with Ah Sam and his story, but neither could he find any tangible grounds for his suspicion.

WHILE he was considering the matter, the telephone rang. Blount answered with some impatience.

"Mr. Blount," Winifred's voice came over the wire, "Inspector Dothan just came in. He wants to see you."

"Send him in!" Blount hung up, and turned to Ah Sam. "My chief field inspector is coming in. Feel free to say anything you wish before him."

The man's eyes tightened perceptibly, but he smiled. As the door opened, he turned to face the newcomer. He saw a young man, slender, quick-moving and well-dressed. His dark eyes, shadowed by shell-rimmed glasses, were snapping with life.

"Dothan," said Blount, "this is Ah Sam. You remember the case of the thousand ounces stolen in Mazatlan, of course. Ah Sam says he knows where the stuff is buried."

"Good!" exclaimed Dothan. "When do we start?"

Blount hesitated. He knew, of course, that Dothan had heard everything Ah Sam had said. He knew also that Dothan had not showed himself without good reason.

"The stuff is buried in the Sunken Desert, away down near the border, *in the Calzona division,*" Blount explained, looking steadily at Dothan.

"Oh!" breathed the inspector. "Not so good!"

Blount looked at Ah Sam.

"The case will be handled, but it may have to be referred to the Calzona division where it belongs. Just what is your proposition, Ah Sam?"

Ah Sam made an expressive gesture with his shoulders.

"My proposition is very simple. I know that Sunken Desert region very well. I can guide you to where the drugs are buried, but I am sorry to say that I could not tell you so that you could find them. I ask the usual reward in order that I may be paid for my time and trouble."

"How far from Calzona is it?" asked Dothan.

Ah Sam sat back in his chair, frowning thoughtfully.

"Really, I don't know," he said, shaking his head. "It will take us about four or five days to get there. We will have to outfit for at least ten days. It is a very difficult and a very dangerous trip."

"It's worth it," Dothan said. "Mr. Blount, I suggest that you ask Ah Sam to call in the morning at ten o'clock. By that time we'll probably have an authorization from Washington to make the trip."

Blount nodded. Ah Sam arose.

"Very good, gentlemen," he said, bowing. "I will be here promptly. Thank you."

Ah Sam looked at the two doors, one opening into the hall, the other into the main office. Dothan, for reasons of his own, stepped forward quickly and opened the hall door.

"Ho hang la," said Dothan, his gaze on Ah Sam's face.

The visitor started sharply, but recovered at once. Again he bent his head in a graceful bow. *"Ts'ing la!"* he said, with musical intonation, and left.

Dothan came back to where Mr. Blount sat. "Chief," he said, "our friend gets those difficult Chinese tones very good—*for a Mexican.*"

Blount stared; then his big hand struck the desk.

"Billy! That's the thing I couldn't puzzle out! He isn't Chinese; he's Mexican!

Did you know that when you saw him in Chinatown?"

"No, but I suspected something. He could get by almost any place with that face and manner, but he made a mistake when he showed up here."

"But what's his game?" demanded Agent Blount. "He tells a good story. Why does he want *us* to go after that dope? Something queer, Billy. Are you having him followed?"

"Ornery is trailing him. Said it was

after hours, and threatened to resign, as usual, but he went. Hatfield is in his laboratory now, developing the three photos I took of our friend. I'm going to phone him to come for the fingerprints."

In response to Dothan's phone, a wizened little chap with thick glasses sidled in apologetically and obtained the ash-tray.

"It strikes me as blamed fishy that a Chinese importer living in Mazatlan, Mexico, would be interested in a mine near Calzona," said Dothan, consulting a wall map after half an hour's earnest discussion; "but that doesn't get us anywhere. The whole story is phony except that there was a robbery and that the thousand ounces never showed up here. I have a hunch that our friend Ah Sam planned that robbery himself. And I'd like particularly to know why he's afraid to go near the Calzona Customs office. However, we may as well quit guessing until Hatfield comes."

"Here he is now," said Blount as the office door opened.

But it wasn't Hatfield; it was Ornery Thompson. He was dripping wet, and his blue eyes were gleaming angrily.

"I tailed that bird," he began bluntly. "Went straight to Chinatown. Lost him at the corner of Clay and Grant. I was moochin' along looking for him when some one touched me on the shoulder. I looked around. It was the Chink. What do you think the big stiff said? 'Go back to your office and tell Mr. Blount that unless he keeps his hounds off my trail, he'll never find that treasure!' That's what he said!"

Dothan and Blount looked at each other, astonished, but before either could speak the door was flung open. It was Hatfield. He was swinging his arms excitedly. "I can't believe it!" he exclaimed. "It's incredible! And yet—"

With an emphatic gesture, he slapped a sheaf of papers on Agent Blount's desk.

EAGERLY, Narcotic Agent Blount and his two inspectors bent over the identification records Hatfield had brought. Here, with the fingerprints and photographs Dothan had secured, were old prints and photographs and other records from the Government's files. Blount poked a big finger at the name heading these records.

"José Montano! Why—he's dead!"

"Exactly!" wheezed the little record clerk. "But the dead walk! José Montano, alias J. Martinez, alias Joseph Martin, alias a dozen other names, smuggler, bandit, murderer, is alive. He was here,

right here in your office. He sat in that chair and looked you in the eyes. He put his fingers on that ash-tray. And the prints do not lie. José Montano lives!"

"José Montano!" echoed Dothan. He was looking hard at Agent Blount, his black eyes flaming. "José Montano was shot and killed in Calzona two years ago. Why, I have met people who were proud of having seen his grave in the Calzona cemetery!"

"Not quite two years," Hatfield corrected, pointing to the record. "See! *'Killed by Immigration Inspector Robert Tripton, while resisting arrest on charge of smuggling Chinese from Mexico. Calzona, March 10, 1924.*"

She opened the dictaphone switch and clamped the head-phone over her ears.

"You've made a mistake," Blount said curtly. "The prints you found on that ash-tray can't be Montano's."

"What led you to Montano's file?" asked Dothan. He had great confidence in the little record-clerk's accuracy. "With the prints of only one hand, you couldn't get a classification that—"

"If you will only let me talk!" Hatfield pleaded. "Listen! On the top of the tray was a good print of the thumb, and underneath were fair prints of the four fingers, all of the right hand; but as Dothan has pointed out, without the print of the other hand also, I could not make a classification that I could depend on as an index to my files.

"So I turned to the pictures, which were now ready. At first I saw nothing; but when I had blocked off the Chinese blouse, something about the man's face struck me as familiar. I recalled Chinese whose records we have; a twenty-minute search of the files left me empty-handed, but still sure that I had seen that face. Then I began going over my foreign file, Spanish, Greek, Italian, Mexican, and that led me finally to José Montano. Since I knew that Montano was reported dead, I was about to pass on to other records, when I noticed this." Hatfield flipped the pages until he came to the Bertillon records. He pointed to a sentence and read aloud: *"Scar three-eighths inch, palmar sides first and second fingers right hand, made by knife."*

Dothan, anticipating Hatfield's discovery, snatched up the prints they had found on the ash-tray. With the pocket microscope he carried, he examined the prints of the first and second fingers. What he had mistaken for a mar in the print was plainly revealed as scars. The way the two pointed to each other indicated that they had been made at the same time, apparently by a knife-blade drawn lightly across the two fingers.

"Ah!" breathed the record clerk. "Now you see what I mean! Well, when I had identified the scars, I studied the prints. And the prints of José Montano's right hand are identical with the prints your visitor left on that ash-tray!"

"Chief, I believe he's right!" exclaimed Dothan. "Look at the picture!" With a small card Dothan blocked off the Chinese blouse, leaving only the head showing. He held that beside a profile of José Montano. The likeness was unmistakable.

Blount picked up Montano's file and began reading aloud. What he read was an amazing record of border crime.

CHAPTER III

JOSÉ MONTANO—that was believed to be his real name—was half Indian and half Spanish. He had been reared by an American rancher in Sonora, Mexico, who had sent him to an American college, then given him a year's travel abroad. On his return to Mexico, José underwent a startling reversion. In a fit of senseless anger he killed his foster-father, stole everything of value, set fire to the ranch buildings and then, with a few trusted companions, fled to the mountains. From then on, José Montano rode at the head of the most ruthless gang of bandits and smugglers that ever infested the border. Many killings were charged to his band, and half a dozen cold-blooded murders had been traced to

Montano himself. He was engaged in smuggling Chinese across the border when it was reported that he had been killed. Blount could find no details of Montano's alleged death.

"Easy enough to get that," Ornery Thompson spoke up. "We can wire Immigration Inspector Tripton, at Calzona. He ought to know, since he is the one who shot Montano. Winifred has gone for the night, but I can rattle off the wire if you say so."

"I don't think that is wise," Dothan objected. "We're up against something that must be handled with kid gloves. For one, I'm convinced that the man masquerading as Ah Sam is really José Montano. That means that we are dealing with an extremely clever and dangerous criminal. That he came here to our office, and wants us to go with him into the Sunken Desert, supposedly to get those stolen narcotics, proves that he has hatched some daring scheme whereby he intends to use us for his own profit. If we go making inquiries at Calzona, it may leak out—and that may ruin everything."

"Ruin everything!" exclaimed Blount. "Damn it, man, he isn't going to get a chance to ruin anything but his own devilish schemes! When he walks in here tomorrow morning, we'll arrest him. *Then* we'll wire Calzona."

"That's just what I was afraid you'd say, Chief!" exclaimed Dothan. "You'll get Montano, all right; but we'll never get the thousand ounces of dope."

The Chief frowned. "Do you mean to tell me, Billy, that you'd be damn' fool enough to go with that devil Montano into the Sunken Desert for that junk and—"

"And take the chances of getting back," Dothan finished, smiling.

Blount stared hard at his chief inspector, and slowly the look on his face softened. "I—I don't blame you," he mused. "If I were ten years younger—"

"I wont go!" declared Thompson. "I wouldn't go out into the wilds with that coyote for all the dope in North America. I'll resign first."

Blount looked at Dothan. "Want him to go with you, Billy?"

"He wouldn't be of the least use to me," Dothan lied glibly. "I'll think it over carefully tonight and let you know in the morning who I want to go with me. I'll be mighty anxious to see that telegram from the Department."

The telegram, in response to the one Dothan had sent, was delivered promptly at nine o'clock the following morning. The Chief read it, and passed it to Dothan. Dothan read aloud.

" 'In view of peculiar circumstances given in your wire, you are authorized to direct Chief Inspector Dothan and such other officers as you choose to proceed to Calzona division for purposes named. A copy of this authorization should be attached to each officer's claim for reimbursement of expenses incurred on trip.' "

"That's just like them!" blurted Ornery Thompson, waving his big freckled hands angrily. "We're going to risk our lives to get a hundred thousand dollars' worth of smuggled dope for the Government; and all they can see in it is our expense-account! Watch me go the limit this month!"

"You aren't going!" exclaimed Dothan.

"Of course I'm going! Do you suppose I can stay here and see you go alone on a trip like this? I'd resign first!"

"Very well," smiled Dothan. "That's settled." He glanced at the clock. "It's almost an hour before Montano—or Ah Sam as we had better get in the habit of calling him—is due. Chief, supposing I take a run up there and talk with Bock Ching? If Ah Sam is there, I'll say you sent me to tell him we're ready to take up his proposition. If he isn't there, I'd like to hear what Bock Ching has to say about his *cousin*."

"Good idea," Blount approved.

DOTHAN left at once, although he knew that it was early for Chinatown. He was glad to find that Bock Ching had taken down the shutters and opened his store for the day. This store was a nondescript affair, the merchandise exposed for sale being only a few dollars' worth of teas, Chinese candies and preserves. Bock Ching, it was freely rumored, had learned the secret of acquiring wealth without bothering much about the troublesome business of buying and selling merchandise.

Just inside the door, to the left, was an easy-chair where Bock Ching spent most of his time smoking his queer old pipe, and reading, or pretending to read, while he watched the passing throng of Chinatown. He arose quickly as Dothan entered; but if he recognized the Federal officer, his yellow face and bronze eyes did not betray him. He was dressed as Ah Sam had been the afternoon before—in black satin blouse,

tight-fitting trousers and felt slippers. His bushy hair was streaked with gray but the face, especially the gleaming eyes, showed no signs of age. A particularly noticeable thing about Bock Ching was his nose. Although his face was narrow, he had the flat nose of the round-faced type. It was an odd combination, and it gave his thin lips a sinister expression, bitter, sardonic, and cruel beyond measure.

"Good morning, Bock Ching," said Dothan pleasantly. "Is Ah Sam in?"

Bock Ching shook his head, smiling, while his gaze clung to Dothan's face.

"I am ver' sorry," he said in his clipped English. "My cousin go out. You leave message?"

"It is important," Dothan evaded. "Do you know where Ah Sam lives?"

"He is staying with me for present. Jus' now he go out on bi'ness. You from Gov'ment office?"

"Y-e-s," Dothan admitted cautiously.

"Then I am to say this: Ah Sam expected you, but he sorry had to go out. He'll be at your office as he promised."

Dothan was chagrined. Ah Sam had foreseen the officer's call and had prepared Bock Ching for it!

"Tell him, please," said Dothan, "that I wish he would not wait until ten o'clock, but come as soon as possible."

With that, Dothan left, certain that Bock Ching was already on the way to some back room to give Ah Sam his message, if, indeed, Ah Sam had not been listening all the time.

By nine-forty Dothan had his desk cleared ready for two or three weeks' absence from the office. Since rush trips to the border, and even into parts of Mexico, were nothing unusual in Dothan's work, he had no need to purchase any special outfit for a desert trip. He could reach his hotel in ten minutes, and be ready to leave in ten minutes more. He went into Mr. Blount's office to wait for Ah Sam.

Ten o'clock came, but not Ah Sam. At ten-fifteen Blount, Thompson and Dothan began to wonder if he had become suspicious and skipped.

At half-past ten, Agent Blount declared he would wait no longer. José Montano was not going to slip out of the Government's hands so easily. He ordered Inspectors Dothan and Thompson to go to Chinatown at once and get the man who had made a fool of them. With some reluctance, since he still believed that Montano would come, Dothan took his gun and handcuffs and left with Ornery.

They found the front door of Bock Ching's store unlocked, but Bock Ching was not there. Dothan picked up the long pipe standing in the corner by the chair and found the bowl was still warm. He laid down the pipe and started for the rooms back of the store.

Beaded portières concealed a narrow and gloomy hallway. On each side of the hall was a door, locked. At the end of the hall a door stood open, showing a room dimly lighted by a gas taper.

"Bock Ching!" Dothan called, then again; but there was no answer. Cautiously he stepped through the doorway.

In the center of the room was a table bearing the remains of a meal. On either side, against the wall, was a bunk. One of these bunks was empty. On the other lay a man, his eyes closed, his hands folded across his chest.

"Watch my back!" Dothan ordered quietly. He stepped forward and turned up the gas. The light revealed two things —that the man's forehead was smeared with blood, and that it was the man Dothan believed to be the bandit and smuggler—José Montano.

CHAPTER IV

MYSTIFIED and dismayed, Inspector Dothan stood for a moment looking down at the man on the bunk. What had happened? Had Bock Ching done this?

A swift but thorough examination only added to the mystery. The only wound was the one on the head. This was clearly a bullet wound, but it was a mere scratch, although it had bled freely. It started at the temple, grazing the eye-socket, and passed above and beyond the ear. Ah Sam had been close to death; but also he had been very close to being missed entirely. Dothan could not believe that such a trifling wound would cause unconsciousness.

He was about to send Inspector Thompson to telephone for a doctor when he heard the front door thrown open. Some one came hurrying down the hall. Dothan, whose experience in Chinatown had taught him caution, stepped back and waited.

Into the room, tossing his hands and clicking his tongue excitedly, came Bock Ching. He stopped short at sight of the

two white men; then a look of understanding flashed into his eyes, and his flat nose seemed to tighten as with caution.

Close behind Bock Ching came a well-dressed Chinese with gold-rimmed spectacles over his keen black eyes. This was Doctor Quong Ho, whom Dothan knew well. The Chinese physician saw Dothan, and widened his slant eyes expressively; but he made no comment on finding the Government men on the scene. He placed his medicine case on a stool by the bunk and looked at the wounded man.

Presently the Doctor broke out in clattering Cantonese, and turned to open his case. Bock Ching snatched a bowl off the table and handed it to him. Into the bowl Doctor Quong poured a quantity of black liquid with a pungent but sweet odor. Lifting Ah Sam's head, he poured the medicine into the wounded man's mouth. With a choking gasp, Ah Sam opened his eyes.

A moment later Doctor Quong had bathed and dressed the wound and was snapping his medicine case shut. "He has lost much blood, but is not hurt," he told Dothan. Then he said something in Cantonese to Bock Ching, and left. Dothan looked and caught Bock Ching staring at him with venom in his bronze eyes, and his nostrils drawn taut above his cruel mouth.

But Dothan did not intend to be hurried away. He got out a cigarette and calmly lighted it at the gas taper. "I am very sorry, Ah Sam," he said. "Tell me what happened."

"*Haie!*" broke out Bock Ching before the wounded man could speak. "It was very amusing. After you left this morning, I went down to Wing Hop's to order some more preserved loquats, as I have been out for several days and my customers keep asking for them, although I do not understand why anyone should eat preserved loquats when they can get preserved dragon-eye fruit, which is just as cheap and much better. Well, I was coming back from Wing Hop's when I met my cousin Ah Sam, and we walked along together, since we were both going to the store. As we were passing through Hongkong alley by the silk and jade shop of Moy Kee Him, I happened to observe a *tong* man who has many times threatened to kill me, although I never did a wrong to him or his family, neither to any member of his *tong*. Before I could warn my cousin, the *tong* man drew a revolver and fired. I ran. A long time I waited here for Ah Sam, but he did not come. When he did come, he was holding his hat tight over his head. He sat down there. I asked him what was the matter. He took off his hat, and fainted. So now you know what happened. The *tong* man, who does not even know my cousin, shot him instead of me. It was very funny."

"Yes—it was," Dothan said slowly. He had listened patiently to Bock Ching's wordy explanation because it told him a great deal more than Bock Ching realized.

DOTHAN looked down at the man on the bunk. His eyes were closed; his breathing was deep and steady. Obviously he was weak from loss of blood. There was an ashen color in his dark face which seemed to accentuate the high cheek-bones. It was the Indian blood in this man, Dothan reflected, that made it possible for him to pass as a Chinese.

"Ah Sam," said Dothan quietly, "do you feel like talking?"

Ah Sam's murky eyes opened, and again that sharp, intensive expression came into the man's face. "I am all right, Mr. Dothan," he said. "I regret this incident very much, but it will not interfere with our plans. What word did you hear from Washington?"

"We have authority to go. That's why I came here early this morning. Since we are going, we should like to go as soon as possible. Tonight, if you can. The Sunset Limited leaves at six-fifteen."

"Very good. I attended to all my business this morning and was on my way here when,"—Ah Sam's gaze flashed to Bock Ching,—"when this unfortunate accident occurred. I can leave this evening; but can you secure accommodations on the Limited at this late hour?"

"Not ordinarily," admitted Dothan, wondering if Ah Sam hadn't made a slip in betraying his knowledge of American trains. "Our office can handle it, however."

Ah Sam closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them suddenly. "Did the officials at Washington say anything about my reward in their telegram?"

For reply, Dothan took out a copy of the message and handed it to Ah Sam. Ah Sam's eyes widened, but he said nothing. He seemed to take a long time reading the message.

"Mr. Dothan," he said finally, "what does this mean? 'In view of peculiar circumstances—' What 'peculiar circumstances'

had you mentioned in your telegram?"

Dothan had prepared himself for that question. "Ordinarily, this case would have to be referred to the Calzona division. We asked that we be given special authorization to handle it because we were afraid that if we passed you on to some one else you might decide to drop the whole thing, and the Government would be the loser."

"I see." The man's eyes contracted. He looked at Inspector Thompson. "You gave Mr. Blount my message last night?"

"He did," Dothan spoke up quickly. "You must understand that we have dealings with all sorts of people, and that we have to use every precaution. You could not expect us to take the word of a perfect stranger on a matter that will cost the Government a great deal of money."

"I understand, sir. How many men shall you take?"

"Inspector Thompson and I are going," Dothan replied. He did not think it best to explain that at Calzona he expected to secure the services of a Government man who knew the Sunken Desert as well, or better, than José Montano knew it.

There was some further talk; then it was agreed that Ah Sam would meet the inspectors at Mr. Blount's office at five-thirty and proceed from there by taxi to the train. When Dothan and Thompson left Bock Ching's, they went down Grant Avenue until they were sure Bock Ching was not having them watched. Assured of that, Dothan hunted up Squadman Darwood, of the Chinatown plain-clothes force. He found the officer in a cigar-store on Jackson Street.

"Hello, Darwood," said Dothan. "How're tricks? Any shooting scrapes lately?"

Darwood, a quiet, dark man with years of Chinatown service to his credit, returned Dothan's greeting pleasantly. "Not a thing doin', Billy! Chinatown's gettin' too tame for us, eh?"

"Sure there wasn't a *tong* shooting this morning?"

"If there was, I'd a' heard of it. Why the curiosity?"

"Maybe it was a firecracker I heard," Dothan evaded, and passed on.

Back at their office, Dothan and Thompson had a long talk with Agent Blount. There was no doubt in their minds that Bock Ching's story of the *tong* shooting was all false. Whoever had taken a crack at the man masquerading as Ah Sam had got away before anyone even knew there had been a shot fired. And Ah Sam, for reasons of his own, had made no complaint.

"Bad mess, Billy," growled Blount; "but we're into it now, and guess we'd better see it through. You still think that bird is José Montano?"

"I do, Chief. But I'm not afraid of him, and I've no idea of dropping this case. The only thing that's worrying me is this: Has some one else spotted Montano? Or was he really shot by mistake?"

Blount gave it up. He suggested that Ornery Thompson be sent to watch Bock Ching's place, but Dothan advised against that. Both Bock Ching and Ah Sam had "made" Ornery. Accordingly two undercover men were called in from other cases and sent to Chinatown, one to watch the front of Bock Ching's store, the other to keep an eye on the alley entrance.

At noon one of these men phoned in that a limousine taxi had stopped in the alley back of Bock Ching's, and a Chinaman had hurried out and got in. Bock Ching had tossed the man's bags after him. The taxi drove off, and Bock Ching slammed the door shut—all in less time than it took to tell it.

However, the agent had "made" the taxi and called at the taxi office. On showing his credentials, he had been informed that the car had been engaged to take a passenger to San José.

Mr. Blount slapped the receiver back on the hook with an emphatic gesture. "That's the end of it, Billy! Our bird's skipped."

The phone interrupted. Blount answered. Dothan heard the voice of Bock Ching, speaking now in his cautious, clipped English:

"My cousin ask me to say he ver' sorry. He go San José on bi'ness. Thought you watch fo' him at San José station. He say he get on train there."

"Clear enough," spoke up Ornery. "He wanted to beat it out of town before that bird took another shot at him. I don't think we need to worry about him. He'll hop on at San José, all right."

THEY had finished dinner when the train stopped at San José. There, two cars apart, Dothan and Ornery watched the people boarding the train. No one resembling Ah Sam was among them. Dothan waited until the train was moving, then swung on and went back to his section. Across the aisle from Dothan and Thompson was the section that had been pur-

chased for Ah Sam. It was still empty.

Dothan, perplexed and half-angry, did not know what to do. He was trying to figure out the best course of action, when the Pullman conductor came through. Dothan heard his name called, and was handed a telegram.

"From the Chief, I bet," said Ornery. "He's got the low-down on our friend and is calling us back."

Dothan tore the telegram open, and read:

San Francisco, Cal.,
April 11th—6:25 P.

W. J. Dothan
Board Sunset Limited No. 102
Unavoidably delayed but will meet you Border Hotel Calzona Friday night. Until then vitally important you not discuss matters with anyone.

AH SAM.

"Unavoidably delayed!" Ornery repeated quietly. "I wonder if that bird with the gun trailed him clear to San José?"

Dothan shook his head. "He never intended to meet us here. This telegram was prepared in advance by Ah Sam, and filed in San Francisco, probably by Bock Ching, ten minutes after you and I got on the train."

Ornery took the message from Dothan's hand and read: "'*San Francisco—6:25 P.*' Ah! You're right, Billy! But what does it mean?"

"I don't know. This is Tuesday. We arrive in Calzona Wednesday night. That gives us two days to look the town over and get our bearings. For one thing,"—Dothan lowered his voice,—"I want to take a look at José Montano's grave. Also I want a talk with Immigration Inspector Tripton who—"

Dothan broke off quickly as Ornery gave him "the office." Evidently Ornery had overheard something said by a man in the section behind him—a man who had got on at San José.

"Not an hour ago," he was saying. "Understand it was some Chink who came down from San Francisco this afternoon. Got him square between the eyes."

"*Tong* affair, I suppose," another voice spoke up.

"No. Seems to have been a private quarrel. Neither Chink was known in San José; at least the dead one wasn't. The Chink who did the killing has vanished. He was wearing a bandage over his forehead. Just a disguise, I suppose."

Dothan and Thompson looked at each other, but there was no need for words.

José Montano, smuggler, bandit, murderer, had added another killing to his already long list.

CHAPTER V

CALZONA, at the end of a spur branch south of the main line, is a typical desert border town, flat, dusty and, most of the year, insufferably hot. Its main street, originally named by some Mexican don *Avenida Sanchez,* and shortened to "Sanchez" by American cow-men, winds crookedly through the town east and west. In the center of the town, on the north side of Sanchez, is an old frame building housing the Immigration and Customs offices for that district. Flanking the Government building on its left are the stables and the garage where the mounted inspectors and line-riders keep their horses and flivvers. Adjoining the building on the right is the Border Hotel.

The scene, as Dothan and Ornery Thompson looked out their windows the morning after their arrival, was in strong contrast to what they had left only a few hours before. Just across the street was a row of old buildings, most of them adobe. Saloon signs still hung over the false fronts of several stores, most of them still vacant. Ornery pointed out a billiard-room run by a Japanese, a pawnshop run by an Armenian, a cold-drink stand operated by an Italian, a laundry run by Chinese, and a garage whose proprietor bore an American name though all the helpers in sight were Mexicans. Moving along the rickety board walk, unhurriedly, were men in khaki, boots and sombreros; back in the scant shade squatted a half-dozen Papago Indians, some in overalls, and others sporting gayly colored blankets.

Beyond the town, far on the southern edge of the gray desert, they could see a brush-covered ridge that ran east and west. Westward this ridge rose slowly, grew darker and darker as the mesquite gave way to piñon, and ended abruptly where the Devil's Own range thrust up its fang-like peaks.

To the east the ridge dropped down a gradual slope, spread out in a low bench, and finally vanished in the glittering dunes of the Sunken Desert.

Through the center of this ridge, and

"Watch my back!" Dothan ordered, as the light revealed the man's forehead smeared with blood.

straight through the broiling heart of the Sunken Desert, ran the international boundary-line between United States and Mexico.

"On several occasions," Ornery Thompson began, mopping his brow with a big handkerchief, "I have *perspired like a gentleman;* but you can shoot me for a stray cat if this isn't the first time in my life that I ever *sweated like a horse*—and before breakfast, at that! Boy, this must be a busy town—they get up so confounded early."

"They get up early in order to get their work done in the forenoon while it's cool," Dothan explained. "We'll do that, hereafter."

"While it's cool!" gasped Ornery. "Ye gods, man! It's hotter than the gates of doom right now. I'd give my month's expense-allowance for one good gulp of dear old San Francisco fog!"

"You'll feel better after breakfast," smiled Dothan. "Let's go!"

"All I want for breakfast," growled Ornery, "is a bowl of cracked ice. For lunch I want a cold bath, and for dinner I'll take a piece of ice-cream. When do we see Tripton?"

Bob Tripton, Immigration Inspector in charge, had not been home when Dothan and Thompson had arrived the evening before. The office, of course, was closed. Inquiry at Tripton's home disclosed the fact that he was expected on the morning train, having been called to Phoenix several days before. It was Dothan's plan to have breakfast, then meet the train. Ornery complained about the unnecessary exertion, but he trailed along.

The station was on the edge of town, a block and a half north of the hotel. It was a squalid affair, a faded, sunburnt yellow, wallowing in the heat-waves that quivered over the gravel and steel. A few people were waiting in the scant shade in front of the station. Among them Dothan noticed a man peddling shoestrings. He looked like a Mexican; but on drawing nearer, Dothan saw that although the man wore shabby overalls, cotton shirt and shoes, he was Chinese. As their gaze met, Dothan started. He had seen opium-smokers of the worst kind; but this was something worse than anything he had ever beheld. The face was hideously gaunt, the skin drawn like parchment over the bones. And out of that face, sunken eyes blazed with a piercing intensity that was terrifying.

"Friend o' yours," Ornery whispered. He liked to poke fun at Dothan for his interest in things Chinese. "Better speak to him."

Dothan had no intention of speaking. They went on to the shade and waited there for the local. It came presently, discharging a few passengers, Tripton among them.

Bob Tripton was a tall man with a military bearing. Years of service under the blazing desert sun had stamped his dark face with a perpetual scowl; one of his many hand-to-hand fights had left him with a badly crumpled nose; a smuggler's bullet had given him a puckery, dead-white scar across his left jaw. Along the border the smugglers will tell you: "Watch out for Bob Tripton! He looks like hell—and shoots worse!"

Dothan had met Tripton several times at Mexicali, Yuma and other border towns. He introduced Ornery, and the three went to the Immigration office. Tripton glanced at the litter of papers on his desk, shoved them back and got out his pipe. The pipe going, he rested his feet on his unanswered correspondence, and gave Dothan a sharp look.

"When the Government's crack dope dick from San Francisco comes away down heah, an' he looks me up fust of all, they's somethin' up. What is it, Billy?"

"Just a dope-case we're working on, Bob," Dothan evaded. He had perfect confidence in Tripton and would have confided in him only for one thing: He wanted to be in a position to tell Ah Sam that he had obeyed the warning in his telegram not to discuss their business with anyone. "We're just killing time while waiting for another party who is due here Friday night. Besides, Ornery has always wanted to see the man who put José Montano out of the running, so I promised to put you on exhibition."

Tripton made a deprecatory gesture and changed the subject. Shooting smugglers was all in the day's work with him. However, Dothan deftly managed to bring him back to the story of José Montano.

"They wasn't much to it," Tripton said. "The boys had Montano's Chinks rounded up over west in a place we call 'the Trap.' A mile further on I had Montano an' one o' his Chinks cornered in an old cabin. They was some shootin,' an' when it was over, I found Montano dead on the floor with a big chunk o' his face tore off with a rifle-slug. That's the gun right over there." He pointed to a rifle standing in a corner.

"And the Chink?" pursued Dothan. "You got him?"

"Yeah. His face was all blood, but he wasn't hurt much. I remember him because he turned up missin' that night when we counted noses. Never heard nothin' of him, so I reckon he fell in one o' them holes over in the Trap."

Dothan lighted another cigarette.

"I suppose quite a few people who knew Montano came to see his body that day?"

"They didn't get no chancet," Tripton replied. "He was in bad shape, so we took his papers an' planted him afore mornin.' Afterward, some friends o' his'n had a stone put up. You can see it in the graveyard just east o' town."

Dothan said they might get out that way, but he had no intention of doing so. He felt certain that beneath that stone, erected by José Montano's "friends," lay only the body of the unfortunate Chinese whom Montano had used to bring about his own escape.

"Bob, supposing this case we're on calls for a trip into the desert," Dothan said after a silence; "could you lend us a good man?"

TRIPTON shook his head. "Sorry, Billy; but I just couldn't do it. Have you tried the Customs?" Dothan hadn't.

"Then I can save you the trouble. They aint got a man to spare. Every border man the hull outfit o' us has got is working on a dinky rum-smugglin' case over Devil's Own way."

Presently the two visitors arose to leave. Tripton repeated his regrets over not being able to give Dothan a man, but he offered to lend him horses, and to help with the outfitting. Dothan thanked him, and proceeded to the Customs office.

Here Dothan merely paid his respects to the deputy in charge. Since he had no orders to do so, he did not discuss his reasons for being in Calzona. He asked if much dope was getting across, and mentioned the thousand ounces reported to have been stolen by smugglers in Mazatlan. The deputy pursed his lips thoughtfully, shook his head, and assured the narcotic agents that nothing was getting across in *his* division except a little liquor. Dothan thanked him, and left.

"Now that the cool of the day is over,"

said Ornery with heavy sarcasm, as he mopped his streaming face, "supposing we go to the hotel for a little siesta?"

"On the contrary, we're going to get two horses from Tripton and take a ride," Dothan declared. "I'm glad we have a chance to toughen up a little before we hit out for that long trip into the desert."

"Is it so bad as that?" Ornery asked, affecting a deeply worried look.

"It's worse. When hardened desert-rats who have lived around here all their lives become lost out there and go crazy with thirst and the heat, I'm thinking it'll be no picnic for two tenderfeet like us fresh from the fogs of San Francisco."

Ornery gasped, but before he could threaten to resign, they were back in Tripton's office. Tripton gladly had two horses brought out for them; and the rest of the forenoon Dothan and Thompson spent in the saddle. They went out again in the evening, riding far out into the desert, and did not return until long after dark.

Another trip was planned for the following morning, but as Dothan went down to breakfast, he was given a telegram. He had wired Agent Blount in code that they were on the job and gave his address where he could be reached. Supposing that this was some word from Blount, he opened the envelope. To his surprise, it was from Ah Sam; but the message was even more astonishing. It ran:

> Without mentioning our specific business, please confer with local Government officials and secure four saddle-horses, three pack-burros and ample supplies for two weeks' trip. Also make every effort to secure services of Immigration Inspector Robert Tripton, as he knows every step of our route and is the only Government man who does. Owing to extreme hazards of trip I consider it vitally important to secure Tripton's assistance. Be ready to leave Friday at midnight.

Dothan went on to the dining-room. It was empty. He slapped Ah Sam's telegram down on the table in front of Inspector Thompson.

"Ornery, that releases me! Now I can go to Bob Tripton and lay all our cards on the table!"

Ornery read the message and his blue eyes flashed.

"Friday—at midnight!" he repeated. "What a perfectly vulgar hour for decent folks to start on a trip! And see here, Billy! You can't tell Tripton everything! Notice Ah Sam says: *'Without mentioning our specific business.'* "

"Ah Sam can go to a certain place not specifically mentioned in polite society," Dothan retorted. "See here, Ornery! Bob Tripton is the man who is supposed to have shot Montano. Now, do you think I'm going to ask him to go with us into the Sunken Desert with Montano disguised as a Chink—without first putting Bob wise to just what we're up against?"

"No," admitted Ornery, "you couldn't do that." He ran a freckled hand through his stubborn red hair thoughtfully. "Billy, if that bird really is José Montano, it sure looks like he is cooking up a sweet mess of deviltry. I'm beginning to suspect that this story of buried dope is all the bunk, and that this trip into the desert is a trap."

"Maybe. But use your homely mug for eating purposes for a while. I'm anxious to see Tripton. If he—"

DOTHAN fell silent as the clerk entered. He came to their table and laid another telegram in front of Dothan. Dothan waited until the clerk had left, then tore the envelope open and shook out the message. This is what he saw:

> After special Mazatlan Sam here reputation in named end you treasury he Chinese one stop Calzona Bock quote left agent replied importer year has stop Ching be I Moyer quote in stop mining has in careful wired at Ah business good interests cousin Sanfrancisco nine. ABIE.

This, of course, was a code message. The sender, "Abie," knew that Dothan understood this to mean A. B. Agent Blount!

The message, itself, Dothan recognized as one of the simple codes used frequently by Government agents in communicating with field men. The advantage in this form of code is that the message always carries its own key—the last word.

The word *nine* told Dothan that in preparing the telegram Agent Blount had written it in plain English but had taken care to have *the same number of words to each line.* Also he had spaced the words so that when the message was completed it looked like a list of words arranged in columns.

Counting the words in his first column gave Agent Blount his key-word—*nine.* This word he placed at the end of the last column. He then put the message in code by copying the words as they appeared in each column.

To de-code the message, all Dothan had to do was to rearrange the words in columns of nine words each. As he read them off, Ornery wrote. The result was this:

After	you	left	I	wired
special	treasury	agent	Moyer	at
Mazatlan	he	replied	quote	Ah
Sam	Chinese	importer	in	business
here	one	year	stop	good
reputation	stop	has	mining	interests
in	Calzona	stop	has	cousin
named	Bock	Ching	in	Sanfrancisco
end	quote	be	careful	nine

That done, Dothan then read aloud—and with growing amazement:

"'After you left, I wired Special Treasury Agent Moyer at Mazatlan. He replied: "Ah Sam Chinese importer in business here one year. Good reputation. Has mining interests in Calzona. Has cousin named Bock Ching in San Francisco." Be careful!'"

CHAPTER VI

ORNERY made some remark, but Dothan apparently did not hear him. He read the message again, his dark eyes burning. Then he drank his coffee and arose. A moment later he and Thompson were in earnest conversation with Immigration Inspector Tripton.

Dothan's first inquiry was naturally about Ah Sam. Tripton had seen Ah Sam, knew him to be a resident of Mazatlan, Mexico, with mining interests somewhere east of Calzona. Tripton believed that everything about Ah Sam was all right, but he couldn't be sure. The man had a status in Mexico that entitled him to entrance into the United States. He had the required Section VI certificate from the Chinese Government, and the proper visa from the American consul at Mazatlan. On these papers he had been admitted at Nogales for the purpose of going on to Calzona to attend to his business. It was news to Tripton that Ah Sam had gone on to San Francisco, but there was nothing illegal about it. He had paid no particular attention to Ah Sam when he saw him, but was sure he had never seen the man before.

Then Dothan told about Ah Sam's visit to Blount's office, the photographs, the evidence of the fingerprints—everything that he knew or suspected about the man who claimed to be Ah Sam, but whom Dothan still believed to be José Montano.

Bob Tripton got out his pocket-knife and began scraping out the bowl of his pipe. His eyes were like pin-points of blue flame; his homely face looked as if some sculptor had fashioned it from cold granite.

"It could be," he decided finally; "yes, *it could be!* You see, I never had seen this Montano but oncet before that mornin' we planted him. None o' us had any idee there might be some shenanigan about it, so we chucked him away without botherin' to fix up his face none. And mebbe it wasn't his face! Mebbe them papers we found on that body, an' the duds we found 'em in, had been put there by Montano. Yes, mebbe it was the pore Chink we planted—while Montano skun out that very night!"

"Do you think you would know Montano now?" asked Dothan.

With his thumb Tripton packed his pipe carefully. He shook his head.

"I wouldn't say, Billy. Two years is a long time. I'm right keen to take a good look at this Ah Sam when he gets off the train tonight. Meantime,"—he picked up the telegram Dothan had received from Ah Sam,—"I'll be getting them supplies ready so's we can get off tonight."

"Then we're going?" exclaimed Dothan. He had been afraid Tripton would advise against the trip.

"Of course were goin'!" Tripton snapped. "We'll go jus' where this *hombre,* Ah Sam wants us to. An' if he does turn out to be José Montano, *we'll come back with him!* Savvy?"

"I savvy," smiled Dothan. "But don't forget that I want to bring back those four packages of dope also. At street prices, there's quite a fortune in that stuff, and I don't want to see it turned loose. It strikes me that our cue is to go easy and not tip our hand. I'm thinking you had better not make any effort to identify Ah Sam until tomorrow morning. Then, when it's daylight, you can get a good look at him without rousing his suspicion."

TRIPTON smoked over this a moment, then approved of the suggestion. Accordingly, Dothan and Ornery went alone to meet the train that night. Since the coming of this train was the event of the day in Calzona, there were quite a few people waiting at the station.

"There's your friend," Ornery said, nodding toward the gaunt-faced Chinese peddling shoestrings. "He doesn't seem to do any business, but he sure sticks on the job. Looks like a hoppie. Wonder where he buys his stuff?"

"I don't care whether he buys it or steals it!" retorted Dothan. "Let's stick to the job in hand. Here's the train!"

Before the train came to a stop, passengers began alighting. There were miners and cow-men returning from Phoenix, traveling salesmen, three or four women, half a dozen Mexicans, a Hindoo in a white turban and cool white linen, and a few Indians. There was no one who looked like Ah Sam.

"Bunked again!" grumbled Ornery. "You can shoot me for a sand-snipe if—"

Dothan broke in with a laugh. "Come on, Ornery!" he said quietly. "I have a hunch so big it hurts."

They hurried up the street to the hotel. Looking through the window, they saw several people standing by the desk waiting to be given rooms. Among them was the man with the white turban. Notwithstanding the turban, Dothan now recognized him.

"I had almost forgotten," Dothan whispered to Ornery. "The San José police sent word out to look for a Chink with a bandage around his head. They want him for killing another Chink that night we came through San José. Well, there he is!"

A bewildered look came over Ornery's face; then his blue eyes struck fire. "Sure enough!" he exclaimed softly. "The classy stiff with the pillow-case around his head! If that aint a peachy make-up! Well, what's the next move?"

"Just wait. He'll leave word for me."

Dothan's reasoning was correct. When the lobby had been cleared, he went in and asked for his key. In the box was a sealed envelope. Opening it, Dothan found a hastily scribbled note asking him to call at Room Eleven. But when, in response to his rap, the door of Room Eleven was opened, Dothan got a surprise. The turban, the white linen coat, were gone. The man who smiled, and motioned Dothan and Thompson to enter, wore a long yellow robe, while a single strip of white cloth encircled his dark head.

"Good evening, Ah Sam," said Dothan. "I saw you get off the train, but when I saw you had disguised yourself as a Hindoo, I thought it best to wait until you sent for me."

Ah Sam gave Dothan a flashing smile. "You have keen eyes, I perceive! And I suppose you are wondering why I assumed the garb of an East Indian. Well, I will tell you. Be seated, gentlemen."

Ah Sam quickly set out two chairs. He placed them so that Dothan and Ornery would sit with their backs to the one window, and their faces to the lamp on the old-fashioned dresser at the head of the bed. Ah Sam sat down on the bed. He took a pack of Chinese cigarettes from his blouse and offered them to his two visitors, who declined. A cigarette going, Ah Sam spoke with what Dothan considered well-assumed frankness.

"It may seem very queer to you, but what I am going to tell you is the truth. In San José I had another unfortunate experience with our *tongs.* A *tong* man evidently mistook me for some one else,

for he came at me with a knife. He attacked me so suddenly and so viciously, that I was compelled to shoot. Realizing then that I would be detained for questioning, which might drag out for weeks, and that it would ruin our plans, I fled. When I saw a Hindoo at the San José station, it gave me the idea of adopting that disguise.

"So here I am," he ended abruptly, with an expressive shrug of his shoulders. "And now tell me: you received my night-letter?"

Dothan nodded. "Inspector Tripton has everything ready and is going with us. We are ready to start at midnight, as you requested."

"Excellent!" Ah Sam ran his fingers through his coarse, black hair bristling above the white cloth. "There will be a moon about twelve. We can travel during the cool of the night and rest our horses, and ourselves, during the heat of the day. I suggest that we retire at once and get what sleep we can before time to start."

This met with Dothan's approval. Tripton had gone home, saying he would sleep until eleven-thirty unless Dothan called him before. Accordingly the two Government men arose, said good-night to Ah Sam, and left. After paying their hotel bill, and leaving a call for eleven-thirty, they went to their rooms.

These rooms adjoined each other at the front of the building on the first floor. Ornery's was Number Six; Dothan's Number Seven. For the sake of coolness and convenience, they had opened the connecting door.

With his packing all done, Dothan partly undressed, blew out the light, and lay down on his bed. As was his habit, he put his pocket flash-lamp under his pillow.

"Say, Billy," Ornery's sleepy voice floated through the open doorway, "I'd give my month's expense account to know what we're getting into."

"Go to sleep," Dothan told him.

There was a long silence. Then:

"Say, Billy, how the Sam Hill do you get out of a place like this in case of fire? I aint seen—"

"Kick out the window screen and slide down the porch roof," Dothan broke in sharply. "If you don't go to sleep, I'll illustrate it by throwing you out the window."

ORNERY said something about resigning, but Dothan was too near asleep to care what it was. Afterward—a long time afterward, it seemed—he thought he heard Ornery still talking. Slowly Dothan was dragged out of the sound sleep into which he had fallen; and gradually he realized that what he heard was not Ornery's voice.

Then, of a sudden, Dothan was wide awake, staring up into the dark, every nerve tingling with excitement. The sound that had aroused him was at the window. Some one was very cautiously removing the screen.

Dothan got his flashlight from beneath his pillow. His gun lay on a chair, just out of his reach.

There was a moment of silence. Turning his head, Dothan could see only a jumble of shadows at the window, could distinguish nothing. He wondered why a thief had chosen his room. Probably the porch across the front of the building invited night prowlers. He decided to wait until the man was in the room, then surprise him.

There came a clicking sound that Dothan could not identify. Following that, something *plumped* on the floor. It was not like the fall of a dead weight; it was something thick and heavy but *alive*.

Instantly, Dothan sat up. As he swung out of bed, he reached with one hand for his gun. With the other he shoved on the switch of his electric torch.

At the window, plainly visible in the cone of white light, was the gaunt yellow face of the shoe-string peddler. Apparently he was in the act of putting the screen back in its place. As the light struck his eyes, he dropped the screen and vanished. There was a scraping sound on the porch roof, then silence.

In the instant that the shoe-string peddler's face showed at the window, Dothan could have shot him. Astonishment, curiosity, kept him from pulling the trigger. Why on earth had that old Chinese done this? And what had he put through the window?

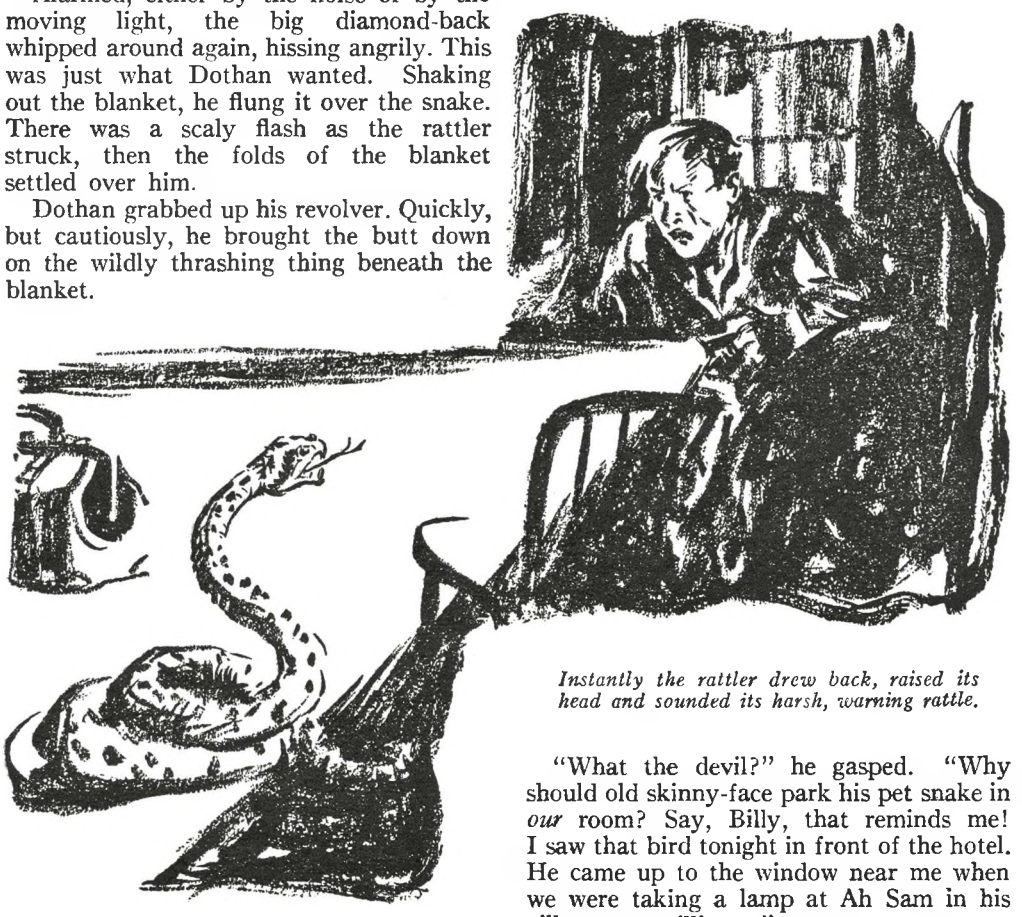
Dothan swung the flash lower. At first he saw nothing; then, at the edge of the circle of light, he saw a moving shadow. He centered the light on it. Halfway between the window and the bed, gliding swiftly toward him, was a huge rattlesnake.

Instantly, as though angered by the light in its eyes, the rattler drew back, raised its head, and sounded its harsh, warning rattle. For a moment Dothan sat

motionless, as though fascinated by the hideous thing—the scaly body looped and ready to strike, the stubby gray tail vibrating, the little eyes glittering evilly. Then, as the snake turned as though to crawl away from the light, Dothan quickly laid down his gun and snatched a blanket off the foot of the bed.

Alarmed, either by the noise or by the moving light, the big diamond-back whipped around again, hissing angrily. This was just what Dothan wanted. Shaking out the blanket, he flung it over the snake. There was a scaly flash as the rattler struck, then the folds of the blanket settled over him.

Dothan grabbed up his revolver. Quickly, but cautiously, he brought the butt down on the wildly thrashing thing beneath the blanket.



Instantly the rattler drew back, raised its head and sounded its harsh, warning rattle.

A few determined blows, and it was all over.

A careful search of the two rooms assured Dothan that he had nothing more to fear. Shutting off his flash, he went to the window. In the faint starlight, he could see the outlines of the porch. There was no one on the roof. The street below was quiet. The only light was in the Italian's cold-drink stand, where some one was shaking dice.

Dothan looked at his watch. It was eleven o'clock. He went into the other room. More than a little angry that Ornery had slept through the whole thing, Dothan shook him awake. Ornery swung his feet to the floor, rubbed his eyes and grumbled.

"Listen to me!" snapped Dothan. Quickly he told what had happened. At mention of the rattler being dropped through the window, Ornery snapped his feet back into bed.

"What the devil?" he gasped. "Why should old skinny-face park his pet snake in *our* room? Say, Billy, that reminds me! I saw that bird tonight in front of the hotel. He came up to the window near me when we were taking a lamp at Ah Sam in his pillow-case millinery."

Dothan was silent a moment, a curiously tense look on his face. "Get up and dress," he said shortly. "I'll be right back." He stepped quickly to his own room, finished dressing, and went downstairs. The night clerk, a stupid-looking Mexican youth, was behind the desk, too sleepy to realize, or care, that the oil lamp was smoking. Dothan brought him quickly to life with a dollar tip.

"I have been expecting a caller," Dothan said, "an old Chinaman who peddles shoestrings. Has he been here?"

"Si, señor!" the clerk replied quickly. "But he did not ask for you; he ask for

the—w'at you say?—the Hindoo. I tell him Numba 'Leven."

"Number *'Leven,*" echoed Dothan thoughtfully. "Did he go up?"

"No, *señor.* He went away quickly."

"What time was that?"

"Not long ago. Mebbe one hour."

Dothan went back upstairs. Ornery had drawn the shades and lighted both lamps. He was standing in the middle of the bed lacing his boots while his eyes were on the shadows beneath the dresser.

"I think I've solved part of the mystery," Dothan said quietly. "That old Chink asked the number of Ah Sam's room. The clerk told him *Number 'Leven.* The Chink then went out and put that deadly thing in my room—*Number Seven.* Understand?"

"That's mighty careless of him," grumbled Ornery. "But what's he got against Ah Sam?"

"That's what I'm going to try to find out. You get everything all ready. What we're going to check with the hotel until we get back, leave in the room. What we're taking with us, carry downstairs. I'll speak to the clerk about getting rid of that rattler and attending to the blanket. When you see Ah Sam, tell him we'll stop here for the two of you. I'm off to see what Tripton knows about the shoe-string peddler."

TRIPTON roomed at a private house a block east of Sanchez. Dothan found him in the kitchen drinking coffee, and gladly accepted the invitation to join him. Between sips of the scalding hot coffee, he told what had happened. Tripton was inclined to accept Dothan's explanation—that the old Chinese had made a mistake in the room number.

"But that aint drawin' no trumps," Tripton went on, shaking his homely head. "I can't just place this here Chink, but I'm sure o' one thing. He aint been sellin' shoestrings at the depot more'n a month, or I'd 'a' knowed about it. I could ask Hank Wylie, the agent, an' he might know. But I'm thinkin' we'd better not nose around too much right now. We'd better stick to the main deal. I'll leave a note for Inspector Pete Emery to look up your friend while we're gone. So finish your coffee, an' le's hit the trail. I'm itchin' to take a look at this *hombre* you think is José Montano. If I recognize him—*an' he sees I know him*—they aint no tellin' what might happen!"

CHAPTER VII

FAR in the east, beyond the yellow dunes that marked the rim of the Sunken Desert, there was a hint of the rising moon when Dothan and Tripton, each leading a saddle-horse, rode up in front of the Border Hotel. Behind them came a Chinaman whom Tripton had addressed as Sing, a shriveled individual astride a sleepy pony. Sing was leading the three pack-burros.

Inspector Thompson and Ah Sam, each carrying a small bundle, were waiting in front of the hotel. Without any unnecessary conversation Tripton indicated which horse each man was to ride, and stowed the bundles on one of the pack-burros. Dothan could not help noticing the ease with which Ah Sam swung into the saddle, and the graceful poise of the man as he sat his horse. He noticed another thing. Ah Sam wore shirt and belted trousers with a revolver swung low on his right side; but his hat made his whole appearance Chinese. It was a round, acorn-shaped affair of straw, and the down-turned brim kept his face in shadow.

Dothan, with some experience in the desert, had pared his own clothing down to the irreducible minimum; and under his advice Ornery had done likewise. They wore cotton shirts, broad-brimmed hats, light khaki trousers and laced boots. Each carried his .38 Government revolver in a holster, and a canteen.

Tripton and Ah Sam took the lead. This was Tripton's arrangement. Dothan and Ornery, following, were to keep an eye on Ah Sam. As they started out, Dothan heard Ah Sam ask something about the "extra man." What Tripton replied, Dothan did not catch, but he saw Ah Sam turn around and look at Sing.

Two blocks down Sanchez Street they turned south between rows of cottonwoods.

Gradually the road dwindled out to little more than a broad trail. Also it kept swerving to the east; and presently Dothan realized that for some time they had been riding straight toward the rising moon.

They rode on for hours, crossing alkali flats where the moonlight was almost as bright as day, winding through shadowy patches of old mesquite, picking their way over low benches strewn with boulders, and plowing through stretches of deep sand.

It was nearing dawn when Dothan saw Tripton and Ah Sam draw up. Dothan and

Ornery had lagged behind a hundred yards or so. Sing, with the three burros, was behind them. Watching the two men, it seemed to Dothan that they were having an argument about something. Then both men dismounted. The horses buried their noses in a water-hole. Tripton and Ah Sam waited for Dothan to come up.

"We're leavin' it to you," Tripton said. "Shall we stop here for breakfast? Or shall we rest a minute, have a drink, then hit out ag'in while it's cool? Reckon you're purty tired, eh?"

Dothan dismounted and looked around. By the water-hole was something he had not expected to find this far from main-traveled routes. Anchored to redwood blocks was a galvanized iron post supporting two steel signs, white enamel with figures and letters a dark blue. The top sign bore an arrow pointing south, and read: *"Deadman's Tank—10 Miles."* Beneath that was another sign:

WARNING!
Do not attempt this route without
AN AMPLE SUPPLY OF WATER!
United States Geological Survey

"We're tired, of course," Dothan said, "but we didn't come out here to loaf. Let's have a drink and keep going. The sun will be up before long."

Tripton grunted over his cigarette. "Ah Sam," he said, "just whereabouts do we go down in that devil's griddle? Any place I ever heard of?"

Beneath the shadow of his acorn hat, Ah Sam flashed Tripton a mocking smile.

"Mr. Tripton, you have heard, of course, of *the Stone Snake?"*

Tripton's lips tightened over his cigarette. "I've been there—twicet."

"This will be your third time," said Ah Sam, still smiling.

"And the last, I hope," Tripton added. "Well, le's get goin'! Soak up an' fill up, for there aint a drop o' water 'tween here and Deadman's Tank."

WITH the coming of day, the desert showed its teeth in real earnest. There would be no more cool valleys and shadowy knolls such as they had passed through during the night. Ahead, and on either side, lay a flat and barren waste shaped like a huge saucer. The trail wound down into this saucer and vanished in the shimmering heat-waves that already were rising from the sand and rocks.

About an hour had passed when Tripton spoke to Ah Sam, and dropped behind. Ah Sam and the others kept on. As Dothan rode past Tripton, the immigration man signaled for Dothan to send Thompson ahead. Tripton then waited for Sing, and rode with him. Dothan, seeing through Tripton's ruse, slowed up to let Thompson and Ah Sam get ahead.

A half-hour later Tripton rode up to Dothan's side. Thompson and Ah Sam were now a full hundred yards ahead.

"It's him," said Tripton quietly. "I might not ever made him if you hadn't told me, but after what you said, I could see it real plain. However, I wanted to hear what Sing had to say before spillin' my observations to you. Sing told me right off that Ah Sam is a fake."

"Better keep Sing away from him," Dothan warned. "He might arouse Montano's suspicions."

"Leave that to old Sing," returned Tripton shortly. "Say, what do you figure is Montano's game?"

"I've done a lot of thinking about that the past three or four hours, Tripton. And I can't figure it. Sometimes I think this story of the thousand ounces of dope is only a bait to get us into his trap. But that doesn't seem reasonable. What has Montano against me? I never saw him before that day he showed up in Chinatown."

"Mebbe it's me that Montano is hankerin' to mess with," suggested Tripton. "And mebbe that Chink partner o' Montano's is the one who wants your scalp."

"Bock Ching? That may be; although I've never done him much harm. Never had much on him. Say, what's *the Stone Snake?"*

"Rock formation over in the God-forsakenest corner o' this hell-hole. Lot o' sandstone ridges stick their backs up through the sand; and one o' them the sand-storms an' sulphur winds have whittled at until it looks jus' like a danged rattler with his jaws half open. We ought to strike it tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night? Why, that's less than two days on the road! Montano told me it was four or five days out from Calzona."

"Either he wanted to play safe in the matter o' supplies, or he's lyin' for some reason. Say, Billy, if you think this tale o' the thousand ounces o' dope is the bunk, why not grab Montano right now while the

grabbin' is good? Why wait until he's got us where he wants us?"

"I've thought of that," replied Dothan after a silence, "but I don't like to do it. Once we show our hand, that ends my chance of finding that dope—even if it is here. Let's go on and see what this leads to. There are three of us—not counting Sing."

"Suits me," said Tripton; "but don't forget that when we get to *the Stone Snake,* we'll be within jumpin' distance o' the Mexican line."

The Mexican line! Where José Montano once led a band of border wolves! That was something Dothan had forgotten.

CHAPTER VIII

THE outcropping of sandstone ridges where Deadman's Tank is located can be seen on clear days from the edge of the saucer. Dothan, peering ahead through the quivering heat waves, would have said it was no more than three or four miles to the tank if previous desert experiences had not prepared him for the telescopic desert air. As it was, the gray-white cliffs played tricks with his vision. Now they appeared a mere blur against the shimmering horizon; now they stood out sharp and clear; then—suddenly—they vanished utterly.

It was slow going, now that they had dipped into the "devil's skillet"—as Tripton called the saucer. There were stretches of deep, fine sand where the sweating horses, for all their desert breeding, floundered and stumbled; there were wind-swept lava flats where the sun glared back at them from what appeared to be a river of broken and glowing hot glass, and over which the horses picked their way cautiously; and there were sudden monstrous gashes across the desert floor as though the heated earth had cracked open, and which necessitated wide detours.

It was near noon when the worn horses and equally worn riders slumped to a halt by the formation known as Deadman's Tank. This, to Ornery's surprise, and to his outspoken disgust, was no tank fashioned by man; it was a natural tank cut in the sandstone rock by the elements, and which caught and held the water that fell during the rainy season. It was perhaps ten feet in diameter, and appeared to be only five or six feet deep. At the bottom was sand and gravel—absolutely dry.

"Don't worry about that, Ornery," said Dothan. "Just watch Sing."

Sing had got a short-handled shovel from one of the pack burros and jumped into the tank. A few minutes' digging, and he had a hole that slowly filled with water.

"They was an old prospector who got lost around heah oncet," said Tripton. "By the time he stumbled onto this tank, he was purty nigh gone. That was jus' after the rains, an' the tank was over half full o' water. The pore devil leaned over to get a drink; an' he was that far gone he jus' flopped in head-first an' drowned. That's how come the place was named Deadman's Tank."

"I see," muttered Ornery, making a wry face over the cup of water Sing had handed up to him. "And judging from the taste of this stuff, the old fellow is still in there some place."

"Oh, this aint bad," Tripton smiled. "An' it aint so good. Now, what I call real good, fine-flavored desert water is where you have to fish out a couple o' dead rabbits an' mebbe a dead snake or two before you can get a drink."

Ornery sat down in the shade and mopped his face. "Excuse me, sir! And don't regale me with any more dissertations on what you like in water flavors. Me—I was wishing the other day I could go where it would be so hot I could fry eggs on my hat, and where it wouldn't rain for six months. Well, I don't want any eggs, thanks; and I'm wishing it would rain ice-water."

Tripton was gazing narrow-eyed at the horizon off to the south. "We're likely to get rained on, all right," he said, "but it wont be what you want. It'll be hot sand. They's a purty bad sandstorm sweepin' this way."

Dothan had been about to mention that. He had been watching the gray-red haze rising in the south. It seemed to be coming toward them. By the time Sing had breakfast ready, it was clear that they were in for it. They hurried through their late morning meal and packed down for the storm. There was a moment's warning—a sifting of fine dust that swirled over them—then a veritable shower of hot sand. They could do nothing but lie down and make the best of it, for the fine sand seemed to drift in everywhere.

Two hours later the storm ended abruptly. Half smothered, Dothan and the others jumped up and ran, gasping, for the

Tripton dragged the dead Chinaman clear of the sand, then dropped on his knees beside him. "Shot three times," he said.

tank. It was drifted almost full, and it was over a half hour before they had it cleared and could get water.

AT four o'clock Sing served coffee again and they broke camp. Until dark they rode steadily. The heat, the blinding glare, the choking dust that lingered after the storm, were almost unendurable. Tripton warned Dothan and Thompson to go sparingly on the water, as they would not reach another water-hole until the following morning. Too tired to talk, they ate and flung themselves down to sleep.

Dothan was aroused by Tripton shaking him by the shoulder. Confused for a moment, he raised on one elbow and looked around. The desert seemed weird and strange, so ghastly white was the moonlight. From far away, out of the desert silence, came the melancholy howl of a coyote.

Then, hearing Sing speak to the burros, Dothan turned his head. He saw, near him, a man sitting on the sand, his hands clasped over his knees, his bare head bowed so that his face was in shadow. He was smoking a cigarette, and as he drew on it, the tiny glow lighted the man's face and set his eyes gleaming. It was José Montano—as much a part of the desert as the desert itself.

Seeing Dothan looking at him, Montano put on his Chinese hat and arose. Dothan jumped up and aroused Ornery. Cold coffee was passed around; then they struck out again. This time Dothan maneuvered to be in the lead with Montano.

"Ah Sam," said Dothan, "when will we get to the place where the smuggled drugs are buried?"

Montano flung his cigarette stub away. "If we have no bad luck, Mr. Dothan, and if we keep the pace we've been going, we should reach there some time tonight. Why?"

"Tonight? That means only two days from Calzona. I thought you said it was four days."

"I said you should count on four days. You know,"—he flashed Dothan a smile,—"you never can tell what might happen on the desert."

Something in Montano's tone caused Dothan to look around quickly; but Montano was now looking in the opposite direction, peering intently at something a distance off the course they were following. Presently he swung his horse in that direction, rode a few paces, and stopped. Before Dothan could follow, Tripton had dashed up to Montano's side and dismounted. When Dothan and Thompson reached the scene, the two other men were bending

over something half covered by the sand. At sight of it, Dothan could not restrain a startled gasp. It was the head, shoulders and arms of a man. The face, yellow and ghastly in the moonlight, was clearly Chinese.

Tripton caught the dead Chinaman by the shoulders, dragged him clear of the sand, then dropped on his knees beside him. A moment later he jumped up.

"Shot three times," he said. "All near the heart. Whoever done it wanted to be plumb sure. Buried heah 'bout two weeks, I reckon. That sand-storm uncovered him or he might 'a' laid heah for two centuries."

DOTHAN looked quickly at Montano. The bandit was staring down at the murdered man. His eyes were glittering, his nostrils taut above parted lips. Dothan resolved to play a bold hand.

"Look here, Ah Sam! You told us that Ah Chuck went into the desert with three men. You said one was killed by a Customs line-rider, another went crazy and vanished in the desert, and the other cut his own throat. *Which one is this?"*

A look of bitter hostility flashed into Montano's eyes as he faced Dothan, but it vanished quickly. The bandit shrugged his shoulders.

"I gather from this," he spoke calmly, "that if this is one of Ah Chuck's men, it is the one who went mad. Looks like some one had to slay him in self-defense."

"I suppose you're right," said Dothan quickly. He knew this was no time to arouse Montano's suspicions; but he felt certain that the same thought that came to him had also come to Montano. Somewhere there was treachery. This man had not been killed in self-defense; he had been murdered. Montano, it seemed clear to Dothan, suspected Ah Chuck had done it. Or was this Ah Chuck—and the story of his death from snake-bite all a lie?

Tripton searched the dead man's clothes but found nothing. They got the shovel and scooped out a grave in the sand. Ten minutes later they were on their way again.

It was nearing dawn when Tripton again maneuvered to have Montano and Thompson ride ahead while he and Dothan dropped behind.

"Billy," said the immigration man, "I don't quite savvy this mess. Listen to me a minute. If that there dope was buried *after* all the Chinks was dead but one, how come the dope is way over there by *the Stone Snake* an' one o' the dead Chinks way up heah?"

"I thought of that. And the only way I can answer it is that the dead man is Ah Chuck, and Montano must have murdered him."

"That's another thing I wanted to mention. Might mean nothin', an' it might mean a lot. Ah Chuck aint no uncommon name at all, but I intended to tell you that they's an Ah Chuck lives in Calzona. Used to get snakes for Chinese medicine-makers. Quiet sort, an' I never paid much attention to him. But that *hombre* we planted back there aint him. And Sing says he never seen him before. What do you make of it?"

"I give it up," concluded Dothan. "Say, have you any idea that Montano suspects we've recognized him?"

"Not the slightest. But I'm gettin' real nervous to have that hornet where I know he can't sting. We'd better plan right now to grab him the minute he spills the exact location o' that dope."

Dothan agreed to that readily enough, and presently he and Tripton separated again. Thompson dropped back to Dothan's side. They talked over the situation so that there would be no slip-up when the time came to strike.

"We'll stop pretty soon for breakfast," Dothan said; "we'll loaf around the water until about two o'clock; then we'll strike out for that place they call *the Stone Snake.* Tripton says we've made enough time traveling by moonlight that we can do that and still reach our destination before dark. I wont ask Montano where that stuff is buried, but the minute he lets us know where it is, both Tripton and I will cover him. You take his gun. And see that you don't make a mismove. We're dealing with a man who thinks nothing of murder."

"I know that. And the thought of what he might do almost kept me awake nights. Think of us sleeping with—"

"You needn't worry. We didn't think it necessary to say anything to you about it, but Tripton and I arranged to take shifts sleeping. We don't think Montano will start anything until we get to *the Stone Snake,* but we didn't intend to take foolish chances."

"By the way, Ornery," Dothan added coolly, "wouldn't this be a good place for you to resign?"

"You go to thunder!" snapped Ornery.

CHAPTER IX

AT sunrise they reached the spring where they were to get their last water. This was no more than a mere trickle oozing out of a patch of salt-grass, but it was water. And around it were stunted mesquite that afforded some shelter from the sun. Horses were cared for and breakfast eaten; then all lay down to get what rest they could before time to start on.

Dothan, tired and hot as he was, nevertheless was in no mood for sleep. Experience had taught him that the time to be most on the alert for trouble is just when trouble seems most unlikely. They had planned well, and everything was going along smoothly—altogether too smoothly, Dothan thought.

Dothan turned to face the bandit. He was sound asleep. And he was still sleeping when, near two o'clock, Tripton aroused the camp with an order for everyone to "soak up an' fill up."

"The worst o' the hull trip is ahead of us," Tripton said as they finished off the meal Sing had prepared. "They's no water around *the Stone Snake*. We got to make a dash there an' get back to this spring. So I'm suggestin' we travel light. Sing can stay here with his horse an' two o' the burros an' all the supplies 'ceptin' what we have to have today an' tomorrer." He looked at Montano as though wondering what he thought of that suggestion.

José Montano had finished his coffee and was rolling a cigarette. He looked up now, his murky eyes half closed. Dothan, Thompson and Tripton were seated in a half-circle facing the fire over which Sing had cooked bacon and coffee. Sing had eaten and was attending to his burros. He was perhaps twenty feet from where Montano sat.

Montano stood up, the unlighted cigarette between his lips.

"Yes," he said, "it's a good plan to leave Sing here." With that, his hand moved as though to take a match from his pocket. Instead, he fired from the hip. A flash of flame, a roar, and Sing clapped his hands to his head and pitched on his face in the sand.

The thing was so unexpected, so brutal and incredible, that for a stunned second not one of the three men made a move. Which was exactly as José Montano had planned. With a lightning leap, he struck Tripton a smashing blow back of the ear, throwing him against Dothan and interfering with Dothan's draw. Then, standing behind, and over, the three men, Montano shoved the muzzle of his gun against Dothan's head. "Reach!" he snapped.

Dothan had sense enough to know that resistance was futile. He eased the unconscious Tripton to the ground, then raised his hands. Thompson, his freckled face livid with fury, slowly shoved his hands above his head. Montano took their guns and tossed them some distance behind him. He searched Dothan's clothes for hidden weapons but found none.

"Get up!" he told Dothan. "Take that rope from my horse. Step lively—and no tricks!"

Dothan got the rope. With Montano watching every move, Dothan was compelled to bind Ornery's arms behind his back. After cutting the rope, Montano searched Ornery's clothing. Then Tripton was searched and tied. Dothan came next, and Montano did a good job of it. With the three men bound, Montano slipped his gun back in its holster, got a canteen of water, and poured it over Tripton's opened eyes. Roughly, Montano jerked him to a sitting position.

"Gentlemen," said Montano, gesturing elaborately, "be seated."

Dothan sat down. Ornery remained standing. He was staring at the crumpled form of the dead Chinaman.

"Sit down," repeated Montano.

ORNERY looked at him, contempt, loathing written on his face and in his flashing eyes. "You dirty, cowardly murderer—" he began, but got no further. Montano struck, a lightning-swift blow from the hip. Ornery staggered back, his mouth and nostrils bleeding. "You dirty—coward —" he flung at Montano through cut lips.

Montano struck again, and this time Ornery went down. But he did not stay down. Handicapped with his arms bound behind him, he floundered around in the sand, got to his knees and struggled to his feet. His eyes blazing, his lips spitting blood and sand, he looked Montano in the eye: *"You damned cowardly murderer! That's what you are!"*

Montano stared, a queer expression on his face. Then he smiled. *"Por Dios!* My hot-headed friend, you have more nerve than sense! I wish I had a dozen men like you. Wont you do me the honor to sit down so I can talk?"

"Sit down, Ornery," counseled Dothan. "No use getting beat up now."

Ornery caught the signal in Dothan's eyes, and sat down. Whereupon Montano sat down in the shade facing his three prisoners, removed his Chinese hat and calmly lighted a cigarette. He was a picturesque figure as he looked around at the Government men, his dark eyes gleaming, the barbaric pompadour above the dusty bandage he still wore around his head.

"As I was saying, Tripton," Montano said coolly, "I agree with you that it is best to leave Sing here." He smiled at his own ghastly joke. "Hope I didn't hurt you much? I see you're bleeding a little."

Tripton gazed back at him with contempt in his eyes, and held silent. Montano shrugged, and went on:

"I seem to be slightly unpopular in this company! Well, I shall tell you something that will make you hate me even more. Señor Tripton, you have not forgotten the famous bandit José Montano? You thought you killed him, but you didn't. What you thought was the border bandit, what you buried back there in the Calzona cemetery, was one of my smuggled Chinese. I,"—he gestured proudly, and bowed,—"I am the bandit—José Montano."

Stony silence greeted Montano's boastful admission of his identity. Montano, surprised, and somewhat abashed, misread it.

"Ah! I see you do not believe me. But I speak only the truth. I escaped that night and fled to Mexico. My partner, Bock Ching, had a cousin in Mazatlan named Ah Sam, who used to give us valuable information. It happened that Ah Sam wanted to go back to China; so we let him go, and I took Ah Sam's place, his name and his identification-papers. My Mexican and Indian blood made it possible for me to live in Mazatlan as a Chinese. No one knew my secret except Bock Ching and a few Chinese who attended to certain business matters for me. About a year ago, to further certain of my plans, I started an importing business. Several months ago I found it advisable to acquire mining interests just south of the Mexican line with Calzona as the nearest rail point. That gave me a legitimate reason for making frequent trips from Mazatlan to Calzona.

"Then I began to plan what you would call 'the come-back of José Montano.' And I resolved that it should be something worthy of my reputation. As a starter, and to furnish me with ample working capital, I planned and put through that drug-robbery. I told you, Dothan, that four men started out from Mazatlan. The truth is that only two left from Mazatlan. They went to my mine just across the border. Ah Chuck and Lee Moy, both from Calzona, met them there; and the four started back across the desert. One was killed by a line-rider. What happened to the others, except Ah Chuck, I don't know. Ah Chuck says they perished in the desert."

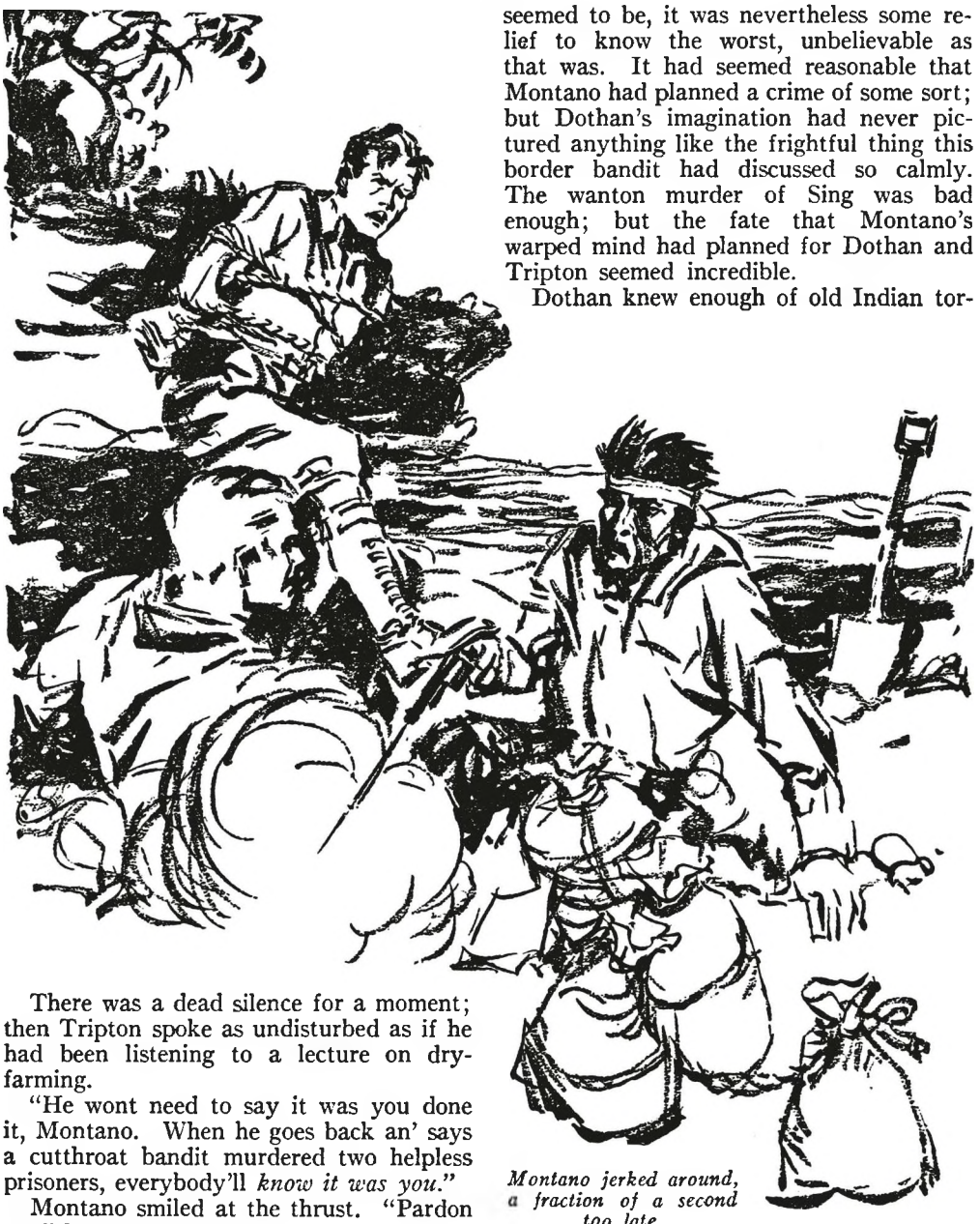
MONTANO shrugged his shoulders expressively, and lighted another cigarette. "As for Ah Chuck, I can answer for him. After I had persuaded him to tell me the exact location of the smuggled drugs, I tied him up and rolled him into that rattlesnake den just beyond Deadman's Tank. Probably you know the place, Tripton. The Chinese frequently go there to get rattlers for use in making their medicines.

"Well, it didn't seem advisable to start out for those drugs so soon after the killing of one of my men by a line-rider; so I went to San Francisco to confer with Bock Ching. When I told him what had happened, he made a suggestion that appealed to my sense of humor. He made other suggestions that finally gave me the idea for the most daring and sensational *coup* ever known in border history.

"I found that Bock Ching felt about Dothan the same as I feel about Tripton. I'm not afraid of you, Tripton; but putting you out of the way would be a splendid advertisement, and would save me much annoyance in the future. So, like an inspiration, it came to me how we could rid ourselves of your meddling, stage a fitting come-back for José Montano, get my smuggled drugs out of the Sunken Desert—*and all at the expense of the United States Government!*

"Ah! I see that the astute Mr. Dothan is beginning to understand! Clever scheme, eh? And both of you walked into my trap!

"Well, one thing more! We are going on to *the Stone Snake.* We shall dig up the thousand ounces of smuggled drugs. Then,"—he looked at Ornery,—"we shall bury the clever Mr. Dothan and the fierce Mr. Tripton—and leave the desert. You, my high-tempered friend, can go back to San Francisco and tell the world that *José Montano has come back!*"



Montano jerked around, a fraction of a second too late.

There was a dead silence for a moment; then Tripton spoke as undisturbed as if he had been listening to a lecture on dry-farming.

"He wont need to say it was you done it, Montano. When he goes back an' says a cutthroat bandit murdered two helpless prisoners, everybody'll *know it was you.*"

Montano smiled at the thrust. "Pardon me," he purred softly; "it seems I did not make myself clear. I haven't the slightest intention of murdering two helpless prisoners—as you put it. I am going to do exactly as I said—*bury them!*"

CHAPTER X

FOR obvious reasons, Dothan had listened closely to everything José Montano had said. Hopeless as the situation seemed to be, it was nevertheless some relief to know the worst, unbelievable as that was. It had seemed reasonable that Montano had planned a crime of some sort; but Dothan's imagination had never pictured anything like the frightful thing this border bandit had discussed so calmly. The wanton murder of Sing was bad enough; but the fate that Montano's warped mind had planned for Dothan and Tripton seemed incredible.

Dothan knew enough of old Indian tortures to picture just what Montano meant. The two men would be bound, and stood upright in holes dug in the sand. The sand would then be packed around them, covering their shoulders and leaving only their heads above the ground. Unprotected from the burning sun, they would suffer horribly from heat and thirst until madness, then death, came to their relief.

And looking at José Montano, Dothan saw that this was no gruesome jest. The

man was in dead earnest. Now that he had discarded his pretense of being Chinese, it seemed that his face had undergone a striking change. His murky eyes were gleaming with a wild light; his dark face mirrored a cruel and wanton nature. A man of education, of some culture, there was yet some kink in his mentality that had caused his reversion to the wild barbarism of his Indian ancestors. Dothan realized that, and knew that any plea for mercy would fall on deaf ears.

Presently Montano flipped his cigarette stub over his shoulder, and arose. Getting out his knife, he stepped behind Dothan and cut the rope that bound his arms. "Get up!" he ordered, and gave the Government man a savage kick in the ribs.

Dothan could not stifle a gasp of pain. He tried to rise, but his numb arms crumpled, and he fell on his face in the sand.

Montano laughed.

"It pleases me, Mr. Dothan, to make use of your valuable services," Montano said coolly. "And I think it will amuse Bock Ching greatly when I tell him all about it. What I want you to do is to see how fast you can dig a grave for this dead Chink. There's the spade. Get up—and get busy!"

Dothan, angry, but determined to keep cool, got to his feet. He faced the man who had kicked him.

"You've had your say, Montano; now listen to me a minute. Oh, don't bother to draw that gun! I'm not going to jump you now. All I want to do is to tell you a few things, to knock some of that conceit out of you. I want you to know that, while you had us guessing as to what your game was, you never fooled us for a minute. I spotted you for a fake that day in Chinatown. I followed you to our office and warned Mr. Blount to watch out for you. While you told your pack of lies to him, I took three photographs of you. When you handed Mr. Blount that ashtray, you left your fingerprints. With the photographs and fingerprints we identified you as the bandit, the murderer, José Montano."

Had the situation not been so tragic, Dothan could have laughed at the expression on Montano's face. His mouth agape, he was staring at Dothan, incredulous, astounded.

"You—you knew me?" he gasped finally. "And yet you—you came with me—"

"Certainly! I'm not afraid of you, you jackal. We came with you because we wanted that thousand ounces of dope. And we wanted you. Sometime we'll get you. Maybe not this time; but Tripton and I are not the only Government men. Killing us is not going to save your hide. Some day you'll hang for the murders you've done, for the killing of this unarmed Chinese, and for the murder of that Chinese in San José."

"Ah!" breathed Montano, cool once more. "So you knew about that? It appears that a great deal of valuable information is going to be lost—with you. For a moment I was in the mood to compliment you on your bravery in coming here with me; now I am in the mood to pity you for your folly."

"My folly," said Dothan quietly, "was in not making a prisoner of you when I had the chance. I can't help feeling that I'm partly responsible for Sing's death. But I did what I thought was my duty. I was told to get that smuggled dope. I never dreamed that you would wantonly murder an unarmed man like that."

WITH that, Dothan deliberately turned his back on Montano. He picked up the shovel, walked some distance out in the sand away from the spring, and began digging. It was a heavy shovel, and the feel of it in his hands sent hope leaping through his mind. If Montano only gave him half a chance—

"You're a brave man, Dothan," said Montano. "You and your friend Tripton deserve something better than what I had planned. I shall think that over. Meanwhile, let me warn you. I can draw faster than you think. If I had not known that, I would not have trusted you with that shovel."

Dothan did not deign to reply. He was digging steadily. Tripton and Ornery, their arms still bound, were watching Montano. He had removed their cartridge belts and picked up their guns. Now he got a piece of canvas from one of the packs and wrapped it carefully around the guns and belts.

When Sing had been laid away, and the sand leveled over his grave, Montano indicated a spot nearby and told Dothan to dig there. "We'll bury your guns there," he explained. "You'll never need them again, and I might."

A part of the supplies were disposed of in the same manner; after which Montano

led Sing's horse out in the sand away from the spring and shot him. Packs were stripped from two of the burros, and both shot. "We don't need them," Montano told Dothan, "and I can't see them starve out here."

Dothan looked at the bandit, and won dered. He could murder his own kind in cold blood; but he couldn't see a horse or burro suffer!

"What we need mostly is water," Montano said. "We'll need food for all of us going. Coming back," he added with significant emphasis, "we'll need supplies for only myself and my hot-headed friend who is glaring at me so fiercely. So fill up every canteen, Dothan, and pack that one burro. It's time we were on our way!"

The burro packed, Montano got a rope and told Dothan to mount his horse. After securely tying Dothan's left foot to the stirrup, he ran the rope through a ring in the cantle, and flung the rest of the rope on the ground behind Dothan's horse. One at a time, then, Montano freed Tripton and Ornery and tied each man's left foot to the stirrup. Then he got the rope that trailed from Dothan's saddle, attached it first to Tripton's saddle, then to Ornery's, and then to the pack-saddle on the one burro. Thus his three prisoners had the freedom of their arms, but they were bound to their saddles, strung together with the rope, and anchored to the pack-burro.

Satisfied that everything was secure, Montano mounted his horse, took his place beside the pack-burro, and gave the word to start.

DOTHAN'S thoughts, as the procession moved forward, were anything but cheerful. He knew from things Tripton had said that there was only the re motest chance of them meeting anyone. They were heading now into a part of the desert seldom visited, even by prospectors. From the spring where they had camped, trails led east and west; but southward there was no marked trail.

Like a cat that plays with its intended victim, Montano had provided each prisoner with plenty of water. Had he denied them that, the trip would have been impossible; for the heat, as they advanced into the heart of the Sunken Desert, was frightful. Up from the south came hot, sulphurous winds that burned their nostrils cracked their lips, inflamed their eyes, and intensified their thirst. The plucky little horses, accustomed to going hours without water, stopped frequently from sheer fatigue. Once Montano halted by a patch of barrel cactus, hacked off the tops and permitted the brutes to chew the watery pulp; but mostly he proved to be a hard driver, holding them to a killing pace.

Dothan saw *the Stone Snake* shortly after they left the spring, but it was late in the afternoon before it appeared to be any nearer, and it was near sundown when they reached it. At some distance, the sandstone ridge was startling in its likeness to a huge rattlesnake with half-open jaws; but as they drew near, it became only a weather-beaten ridge of stone with a queer wedge-shaped gash cut across one end. On the east side of this gash, in the long shadow made by the sinking sun, Montano halted his prisoners, and dismounted.

"What a monument!" the bandit exclaimed as he approached Dothan. "Now that I see it, I cannot resist the temptation to carry out my original plan." He drew his revolver. "I'm taking no chances with you now, Dothan. Don't forget that. Bend over and untie that rope. The rest of you wait."

Dothan obeyed. His foot freed, he dismounted, led the horse farther down in the shade of the ridge, then, at Montano's command, freed Tripton.

"He can't get both of us," Tripton whispered. "I'm goin' to—"

"I can get both of you before you can move out of your tracks," Montano spoke up. "Dothan, take that rope and tie your forgetful friend's arms behind his back. He should know how a whisper carries here. Quick, now! And you needn't be too particular. He wont be able to move after the sand is packed around him."

Dothan, hoping against hope that something would happen to give him a chance, tied Tripton's arms. He was slow at it, for his hands seemed strangely weak and trembly.

Tripton tied, Dothan unslung his canteen and took a long drink, knowing he must keep his nerve, must husband his strength. If he saw a chance to fight, he would; if he saw no chance, he intended to fight anyway. Anything was better than the fate that madman had planned.

"I'm going to take that firecracker back with me," Montano said, nodding toward Ornery; "but until I'm done here, I don't want to be worried about him. Tie him up."

ORNERY'S arms were tied; then he was seated on the sand with his back to the sandstone ridge. At Montano's command, Tripton sat down beside him. The horses and the pack-burro were led to the shade where Dothan had put his horse. Montano, keeping a safe distance from Dothan, and holding his revolver ready, pointed to the shovel sticking out of the pack.

"Get that, Dothan!" he ordered, his voice betraying suppressed excitement. "We shall now dig up the treasure in drugs that Ah Chuck buried here. Step off five paces east from the tip of the snake's lower jaw. Then dig!"

Dothan did not move. He looked at José Montano, and a strange feeling of unreality swept over him. Was this all a nightmare? Would he wake up back in Calzona, or in their camp by the spring? He looked around at Tripton and Ornery. Their arms bound; they were sitting up stiffly, their faces tense, their eyes narrowed. Back of them was *the Stone Snake;* all around them the desert still smouldering from the heat of the afternoon sun.

"Well?" There was the smoothness of sharp steel in Montano's tone.

Dothan turned to get the shovel. Something warned him that this was not the time to make a stand. Montano was ruthless, mad. To oppose him now would be only to throw his own life away without helping his companions. He counted off the paces, and began digging.

Montano drew near, his gaze on the hole at Dothan's feet. Dothan worked slowly, and watched. If he could only get in one lick with that heavy shovel!

He looked up presently to see Montano frowning.

"You've missed it. Ah Chuck said five paces east, and two feet deep. You're over two now." He looked at the point of the ridge, mentally measured the distance from it to where Dothan had been digging, and shook his head. "There's something wrong. Looks like you're on the right spot. Try it a little deeper."

Dothan straightened up, took off his hat and flung it beside Ornery. He mopped the sweat and dust from his face and eyes. He edged a step nearer Montano, but the latter cautiously moved back.

"See here, Montano," Dothan began earnestly, "just what is the idea? Surely you know as well as I do that the dope is not buried here?"

Montano's murky eyes narrowed with suspicion. "What do you mean? Ah Chuck told me he buried it there. What do you know about it?"

Dothan, still holding the shovel, stamped the loose sand off his shoes and stepped into the shade—nearer Montano.

"Ah Chuck was no fool," he said, thinking faster than he ever had before in his life. "He knew he couldn't trust you. When you insisted on knowing exactly where he had buried it, he told you the first thing that came into his mind—*the Stone Snake.* But listen to me a minute. His three companions were dead, or at least they had vanished, *before* he buried that stuff. We found one of the three away back there about halfway between the spring and Deadman's Tank. Doesn't that give you any hint?"

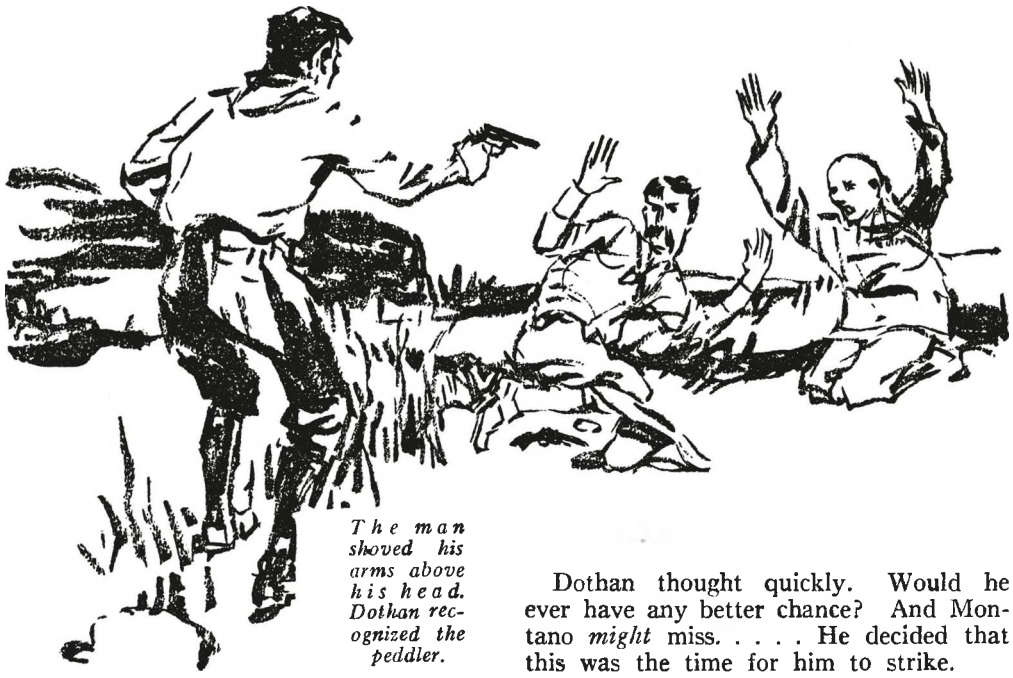
MONTANO scowled, but remained silent. Dothan shifted his feet, edging a little nearer. His suspicions as to what Ah Chuck had done were very hazy; but they gave him something to talk about while he watched for a chance to catch Montano napping.

"Don't you see, Montano, that since Ah Chuck was traveling toward Calzona, the stuff couldn't be buried here? It would be somewhere beyond the place where we found that dead Chinese. The most logical place would be some spot near Deadman's Tank. Then—"

Suddenly, Montano stepped back. He gestured threateningly at Dothan with his revolver.

"You've talked enough, Dothan! That stuff is here. Ah Chuck told me that after the last Chink vanished, he tried to travel with all the stuff, and got lost. He was traveling at night and didn't know how to use the stars. When he wound up here at sunrise, he knew he had been going south instead of north. So he buried the stuff here and struck out again for Calzona. You just keep digging around that hole—and keep your distance. Understand?"

Reluctantly, Dothan went back to work. He began widening the hole. The dry sand, whipped about by frequent storms, was loosely packed; but, greatly to his surprise Dothan's shovel suddenly drove into sand that evidently had been dug up very recently. "Here's something!" he called out to Montano, hoping to draw him near.



The man shoved his arms above his head. Dothan recognized the peddler.

Montano did not move. "You'll find four packages wrapped in oilskin. When you've found them, get back out of my way."

At that instant, Dothan's shovel struck something solid. He had almost made himself believe that Ah Chuck had buried the stolen drugs over near Deadman's Tank. Now, to his amazement, he pried out of the loose sand the four oilskin packages. They were tied together with a small rope. Stuck beneath the knot was a sealed envelope.

"Get back!" ordered Montano. "I'll take a look at that. Then—you can go on digging."

Dothan stepped back. Montano, a puzzled look on his dark face, snatched out the envelope, turned it over, frowned, then put one corner between his teeth and with a savage jerk tore the envelope open. He took out a soiled sheet of paper, and began reading.

Dothan edged forward. He was standing with his back to the sandstone ridge. Montano stood by the oilskin packages, facing Dothan. A frightful expression had come over his face as he began reading the letter. Dothan, curious, and watchful, moved nearer.

At that, Montano looked up.

"You fool!" he flung at Dothan savagely. "Do you think I don't know what's in your mind? Make one step nearer and I'll break one of your damned legs with a bullet!"

Dothan thought quickly. Would he ever have any better chance? And Montano *might* miss. . . . . He decided that this was the time for him to strike.

But the unexpected intervened. From the dunes just east of the sandstone ridge came a blank report. A bullet clipped through the letter Montano was reading, barely missed Dothan's head, and *plunked* against the ridge behind him.

Montano dropped the letter, and whirled. He may have seen a wisp of smoke over the sand ridges, for he fired quickly. But Dothan saw only that Montano had turned, was crouching on the sand not ten feet away.

There was no time to make a swing with the shovel. Dropping it, Dothan made a wild leap. Montano jerked around, but he was a fraction of a second too late. A bullet tore through Dothan's shirt-sleeve; the flame and smoke almost blinded him; then the two men rolled over in the sand. As Dothan caught Montano's wrist and, for the first time, felt the bandit's muscle, he realized he was in for the fight of his life.

CHAPTER XI

THAT fight, however, did not last long. With a yell, Ornery got to his feet, followed closely by Tripton. A bullet from the dunes whistled between them and whanged against the sandstone ridge as they ran to help Dothan. At the moment Dothan and Montano were thrashing about in a cloud of dust. Dothan's right hand gripped Montano's right wrist, the hand in which he held the gun; his left arm was

wound around the bandit's neck. As Ornery pounded up, there was another blank report from the dunes, and Dothan's left arm went suddenly numb and useless. Montano twisted free, throwing Dothan over on his back. He held the muzzle of his gun within a foot of Dothan's head—and pulled the trigger.

Ornery, at that precise instant, did the only thing possible. His arms still bound, he struck out with his foot. The toe of his boot caught Montano on the wrist; and the .44 bullet, intended for Dothan's head, plowed into the sand. Overbalanced by his savage kick, Ornery pitched over onto Montano, knocking him flat.

As Montano fought to extricate himself, Ornery saw that his kick had done double duty. Montano had lost his gun. It was lying in the sand just behind Dothan, who was struggling to his feet. Montano, with Ornery now sitting on his legs, struggled furiously. He started to launch a blow at Ornery's face, but saw his gun within reach, and his arm flashed out to get it. "Sit down!" shouted Ornery, and drove his boot into Montano's face. Montano fell back, and Tripton instantly pinned him down.

Dothan gained his feet and in a flash took in the situation. "Get up, quick!" he shouted, picking up Montano's revolver. "Get behind the ridge! I'll handle him!"

Ornery and Tripton sprang up, and ran. As Dothan jerked Montano to his feet and started him around the ridge, a stream of shots spattered against the sandstone. Ornery, just rounding the tip of the ridge, crumpled and fell sprawling. Tripton stopped; but at a shout from Dothan dodged back out of sight. Dothan, safe behind the ridge, slammed Montano face down in the sand. "Land on him quick, Bob!" he cried, and ran back to get Ornery; but Ornery, very white, and using language that wouldn't go well in a Government report, had rolled behind the protection of the ridge.

"I'm all right, Billy!" he said, spitting sand. "Get out your knife!"

Dothan already had his knife out. He began cutting the ropes from Ornery's arms. "Where are you hit?" he asked.

"None o' your damn' business!" snapped Ornery, and jumped up. "How's your arm?"

"Not serious," Dothan replied, and turned to free Tripton. That done, he ripped off Montano's cartridge-belt and reloaded Montano's gun. "Tie him up, fellows," he said; "and keep out of sight."

"What are you aimin' to do?" demanded Tripton quickly. "An' who's shootin'—"

"I'm not sure," Dothan replied, buckling on the cartridge belt, "but I got a hunch so big it hurts." He stepped to the open jaw of *the Stone Snake* and sent two bullets singing over the dunes. They brought a quick answer. Dothan dodged back out of sight. "Stay right here and find some way to keep them busy," he said; "and get that letter if you have a chance."

With that, Dothan ran toward the south, following the crooked line of *the Stone Snake.* He had noticed a low place, a hundred yards or so distant, where he thought he could cross over to the other side. Reaching the place, he was not disappointed. He scrambled over, and, bending low, ran for the nearest sand dune. As he ran, he saw that the firing had not stopped. Also he noticed that the horses and the burro were standing—as though a little shooting was nothing in their lives.

GAINING the top of the dune, Dothan rose cautiously and looked around. He could see no one. Beyond the dune on which he stood, were others. These ridges of drifted sand followed the general line of *the Stone Snake;* and as Dothan saw this, he saw his opportunity. Whoever was doing that shooting was in the hollow between the first and second ridge of sand, unless the drifted smoke deceived him. By crossing over beyond the second dune, which he could do here unobserved because of the curve in the ridges, he could creep up on them from the rear.

His plan made, Dothan struck out, running as fast as he could in the loose sand. A few minutes later he crept up to the top of the second dune. Between him and a glorious sunset was *the Stone Snake,* the body black with shadow, the edges burnished with the gold of the setting sun. Between him and *the Stone Snake* was a low ridge of drifted sand. Lying flat on this ridge, not a hundred feet from Dothan, were two men. They were facing *the Stone Snake,* and with revolvers, keeping up a desultory fire. Near by, in the hollow between the dunes, were two horses.

Swiftly, Dothan crept over the ridge. His feet made no noise in the loose sand; the sun, in his face, threw no shadow ahead to betray him. He was within twenty feet of the men when one of them,

turning around to reload his gun, saw Dothan. He was a white man with a thin, hooked nose over a smut of black beard—a man Dothan had never seen before.

"Drop it!" ordered Dothan, and ran to the top of the dune so that Tripton and Ornery could see him. The man dropped his gun and shoved his arms above his head; but at the sound of Dothan's voice, the other man whirled and fired. A bullet whined past Dothan's head. He shouted an order, but it was ignored. The man raised his smoking revolver, took careful aim.

Dothan fired. The heavy bullet knocked the gun out of the man's hand, sent it spinning over the sand. As the man stared dully at his bleeding fingers, Dothan recognized him. It was the shoestring-peddler.

For a long moment Dothan looked at the gaunt face of the Chinaman, a strange suspicion creeping into his mind; then picking up both guns he thrust them beneath his belt. Looking around, he saw Tripton running toward him.

He turned to the white man. "Who are you?"

The man's hooked nose twitched. "Find out, damn you, if it's anything to you!" he flung out savagely.

"I don't think that will take long. Tripton probably knows—"

"Tripton!" The man snapped around. A dismayed oath burst from his lips. "Tripton!" he gasped. "That damn' hell-sizzlin'—" He turned to Dothan. "Say, are you a Gov'mint detective? Say, I been lied to, I have—lied to like hell! I—"

Tripton came up at that moment. "Here's that letter, Billy. Thompson is takin' care of the prisoner. Who you got here? Well! My old friend Crazy Keswick! Up to mischief again, eh?" He looked at the Chinaman, then turned quickly to Dothan.

"Know who this is?"

"That's the shoestring-peddler I told you about, the man who put the rattler—"

"Read that letter," Tripton broke in.

Dothan looked at the letter. It had been hastily scribbled on a sheet of paper torn from a cheap tablet. Near the center was a hole made by the first shot fired from the sand dune.

Ah Sam—
These boxes are empty. I left them here so I could laugh at you before I killed you.
AH CHUCK.

"Ah Chuck!" Dothan looked around at the Chinaman. "I had begun to suspect something like this. Where'd you put the stuff you took out of those four packages?"

Ah Chuck ignored the question; but out of the corner of his eye, Dothan saw Keswick glance quickly at their two horses. Tripton must have seen it also, but he started at once to get them.

"I aint got nothin' to do with this dope-business," Keswick declared. "I wrote that letter for the Chink. That's one decent thing I can do. But I didn't know I was gettin' mixed up with Tripton an' Gov'mint detectives. Ah Chuck was payin' me a thousand dollars to help him get that dope an' fight off the bandits he said was tryin' to steal it. I—"

"Did you know that one of the men you shot at was the bandit José Montano?"

Keswick gasped. "Hell, no! I knew there was a Mexican fixed up like a Chink. But—" He looked around at Ah Chuck accusingly. But the look on Ah Chuck's face was unmistakable. Whatever he knew about Ah Sam, it was clear that he did not know the man was José Montano.

At that moment Tripton shouted something and started to lead the horses up the dune. At the same time, Dothan heard a shout from the sandstone ridge. He looked around. Ornery was standing by the snake's jaws, waving his arms frantically.

CHAPTER XII

MONTANO had been securely bound, but Ornery had been left without a weapon. When he saw two other riders hurrying down from the north, he decided to take no chances, and shouted to Dothan. The men, however, proved to be two of Tripton's riders. Tripton had left word for them to follow him into the Sunken Desert if they showed up in Calzona before he did. Not being sure that they would come, he had said nothing to Dothan about it. Since Dothan's party broke trail after that sand-storm, the two men could follow them easily. They had orders to lag behind and wait for a signal, but had heard shooting and decided to investigate.

"You'd 'a' come in right handy earlier in the day," said Tripton; "but we can make use o' you now. You can take charge o' these three prisoners while we cook supper. Fork over all the spare water an' grub you got. Also we got some wounds to

look after. Dothan is nicked in the arm. That Chink there has a bad hand. An' Ornery—where was you hit?"

"You fellows are too blamed inquisitive!" snapped Ornery. "But I suppose I have to tell you. You'll see it, anyway. Just as I turned around the point of that ridge, a bullet hit the tobacco can I had in my hip pocket. It knocked me down—and tore out the whole blamed seat of my pants. Now, are you satisfied? All right; let's rustle supper!"

While supper was being prepared, Dothan took a look at the thousand ounces of morphine and heroin he had come so far to get. Ah Chuck had shifted it from the four packages into two. They weighed almost thirty-five pounds each. It was the biggest "catch" Dothan had ever made.

They lingered over a hearty meal; then, with only the stars to guide them, struck out on the long trip back to Calzona. During that trip, Dothan, keeping Keswick and Ah Chuck apart, and talking first with one then the other, managed to get the whole story.

It was a strange story of intrigue, treachery and bloodshed; and the truth was stranger than the maze of lies José Montano had woven around his amazing plot. After one of the four smugglers had been killed by a line-rider, the remaining three became afraid to go on with the contraband; so they planned to hide the stuff and later go back and get the smuggled drugs for themselves. Accordingly, they buried the four packages by *the Stone Snake,* then started for Calzona. Later, Ah Chuck and one of the other men—Lee Moy—schemed to kill their companion, which they did. That was the man Dothan's party had found with the three bullet wounds in his chest.

THEN the two men went on cautiously. They knew that Ah Sam was to meet them some place near the edge of the desert. Both knew that Ah Sam was not Chinese, but only Bock Ching knew his real identity. Between Deadman's Tank and the rim of the desert they saw some one. Thinking it was Ah Sam, Lee Moy hid. Ah Chuck went on, met Ah Sam and told him all his companions had perished in the desert. Montano, suspicious, applied a little torture and frightened Ah Chuck into telling the truth about the hiding place of the smuggled drugs. Montano then bound him and threw him in a rattlesnake den, from which Lee Moy quickly rescued him. Ah Chuck had been bitten, but that was nothing new for him and in a week he was practically well again.

Meantime Montano had gone to San Francisco; and Lee Moy, feeling that their only safety lay in killing Ah Sam, had followed. He shot at Montano in San Francisco, and again in San Jose, where Montano killed him. Montano, however, had not recognized Lee Moy and was totally unaware of the plot Ah Chuck and Lee Moy had hatched.

Ah Chuck, not knowing when Montano might return, had spent his time at the Calzona station as a shoestring-peddler. He had seen Ah Sam disguised as a Hindoo before, and recognized him. That night he put the rattler in Dothan's room, thinking he was putting it in Ah Sam's room. A little later he saw Ah Sam and the others start out. He recognized Tripton but had lied to Keswick about it.

Keswick, knowing the desert, and traveling light, cut across one corner of the desert and got Ah Chuck to *the Stone Snake* ahead of Dothan's party. There Ah Chuck, with Chinese cunning, had left the empty packages and the letter for Ah Sam. With their horses ready, they intended to shoot Ah Sam, then flee, certain they could escape in the maze of dunes east of *the Stone Snake.* But their aim had been poor on account of the sun in their faces, and they had been mystified by the queer actions of Dothan's party. They had just decided to keep shooting as long as they could see, then escape under cover of darkness, when Dothan crept up behind them.

At Calzona, Dothan sent a code message to Agent Blount and within an hour got word back that Bock Ching was under arrest. Dothan showed the wire to Montano. They were keeping him in the Calzona jail under heavy guard.

Montano's hand was perfectly steady as he handed the message back. "Well," he said, a far-away look in his murky eyes, "there's a tombstone out there in the cemetery with my name on it. Go ahead and have me hanged; I'm ready."

A few days later, with the prisoners and the smuggled drugs in the hands of the Calzona officers, Inspectors Dothan and Thompson started for San Francisco.

"Say," grinned Ornery, "wont that old fog and rain smell good? Man, if I had to chase crooks down in this neck of the woods all the time I'd resign."

This amusing little "romance of roguery" pleasantly recalls certain activities of "Huckleberry Finn" himself.

A Great Show

By George H. Wooding

IT was in October of the fall of 1914 that I first met Tom Hansen. He was sitting on a baggage-truck with his blowtorch and tool-bag alongside him at the little station of a one-horse town in Canada as, tired of eating cinders and dust, I decided to leave the blind end of the express car on which I had been riding for a hundred miles. "Looking for a job, son?" he asked as I leaned against the truck.

"I am looking for food first of all," I answered. "I haven't eaten since yesterday. After I eat I might talk about work."

"Wrap yourself around that," he said, as he pushed his lunch-box toward me. "Know anything about plumbing?"

"Not a thing," I answered; "except I got a lift once of half a hundred miles from a guy in a flivver."

"Good," he answered, "that's experience enough. I'm looking for a helper. Mine quit about a week ago—we went out on a little time together after we cashed our monthly checks, and he got sick and left. But you look to be made of tougher stuff."

Tom Hansen, I soon learned, was plumber and tinsmith with a range of about eighty miles of single track on a certain Canadian railroad. A good plumber and a good guy was Tom Hansen—his one big fault being an occasional spree. He was just getting over one of these when I met him and "hired on" as his helper. He stayed as sober as a deacon the first two months I worked with him; then about New Year's he fell off the water-wagon with a dull thud, or to be truthful we both did, and then for about two weeks we had a hilarious time until our funds began to run low.

About three weeks from the day we took our first drink and started out to scatter our hard-earned savings, we found ourselves "stony broke" about a hundred miles away from our pike in a half-grown town that I will call Brilly, although that is not the town's real name. Brilly was a logging and lumber town of perhaps three thousand population, connecting with our road at Filion by a single-track branch.

NECESSITY, it is said, is the mother of invention—and often necessity is also a friend in time of need, for she will bring

forth any neglected or slumbering talents a person may possess. I never yet would have known of Tom's ability as an actor if we two had not been broke that time up at Brilly. We were sitting in a deserted car-knockers' shack out at the edge of the town when Tom suddenly said: "Red, skip over to that building across the way and bring me the best parts of that circus poster—take it down as carefully as you can. Get some of the big red and blue letters and the pictures of the dancers. Don't ask any questions—anyway, not now. I have a scheme whereby we eat."

I salvaged such parts of the circus poster as I could get loose and brought it to Tom, who already had out his mucilage can and tin-snippers.

THEN for the next hour I watched entranced as Tom snipped and glued together as nifty a show-poster as I had ever gazed upon—ten feet away you could not tell but that it had come fresh from the lithographer.

There was a gold-braided brass band playing valiantly in front of a great theater, there was a grand lady of queenly mien being carried on a canopied throne by dusky slaves, there were dozens of pretty girls and dancers, and fun-makers by the score; while over and below the poster pictures Tom had skillfully put together large red and blue letters heralding the coming of the show to Brilly for one night only something like this:

ONE NIGHT ONLY
at
BRILLY TOWN HALL
TAKEM and LEVUM'S COMEDY SHOWS
20—PEOPLE—20
WATCH FOR THE DATE

"While I concoct the handbill matter," said Tom, "you scout around town and see if you can find a printer with a tin roof that needs fixing. Tell him that if he can keep a still tongue in his head and will print us several hundred 'throwaways' we will fix up his roof drier than Noah's ark; he also gets in the show free. If you are lucky in doing that, then locate the town hall and town clerk—I'll do the rest. Get some dignity in you, for we are going to pull off a show in this man's town in a few days and an actor must have dignity."

"But where are you going to get the show people?" I asked.

"Never mind that part yet," answered Tom; "never start your blowtorch unless you are sure you have your soldering-iron along. Now run along and do as I ask you; get some worthwhile dope."

The long and short of it was Tom was going to give the town of Brilly a comedy show in their town hall—and he and I were the twenty people! As an actor I was a good tinsmith's helper. I had never done anything in the acting line in my life except blow a harmonica and take a few dance-steps, but Tom was boss and I was there to stick with him—and we were broke.

We were lucky, for I found a printer who was one good guy and a regular sport; also the roof of his building was tin and it leaked like a flivver's frozen radiator. We fixed it up fine and in return our printer friend let us stay in the rear room of his building, and even advanced us a stake for grub; while the several hundred small handbills he put out for us were a work of art, proclaiming to all and sundry that Brilly was to be honored by "the appearance for one night only of Takem and Levum's great consolidated musical comedy show—fresh from a year's metropolitan success and now on its way to play before the crowned heads of Europe, with a carload of people and two cars of scenery. Positively the only stop between the metropolis and the point of embarkation." That last part of the bill was correct—it was our only stop.

Tom hired the hall. I don't know how he got away with it without a down payment—it may have been his cast-iron nerve or it may have been our imposing posters. We were scheduled to show on a Saturday night when the town usually was full of logging-camp men. As we had about a week to wait, after we had distributed our advertising matter we lay low in the rear of the printshop, where Tom was busy every minute drilling me in dance steps and a lot of foolish vaudeville chatter from an ancient joke-book that Adam must have left under the apple tree in the Garden of Eden. He fashioned some costumes for us too; one in particular I remember was a checkered housedress. I wondered where he got it—I found out later!

The one evening train into Brilly was due at nine-ten, but as it was a mixed passenger and freight it was nothing new for it to be as much as an hour late. Tom, I later realized, had based his plans on its probable late arrival.

At seven o'clock that Saturday night when we went to open the town hall we found nearly two hundred people already there, clamoring for admission.

"I'll sell the tickets," said Tom. "You steer them to their seats. The first twenty seats are reserved at a dollar, all the rest for first come at fifty cents."

UP that way they pay off mostly with silver, so by eight o'clock Tom was weighted down with about three hundred "iron men." The show was scheduled to start at eight-thirty, so about that time Tom called our printer friend to stay by the door and take care of the late comers while he and I went backstage, where he blackened me up to represent a Southern mammy all rigged out with the checkered dress. Tom, garbed in tattered clothes, was to take the part of a wandering darky minstrel, although all the musical instrument we owned was a battered harmonica.

We found the bunch willing to be pleased with most anything in the line of entertainment, for we got quite a hand when we came out and sang a little ditty together, dancing a few steps afterward and winding up the act with a lot of foolish patter and bewhiskered jokes. We then put on a local act where two kids for a dollar prize try to see which can eat a pound of dry-as-dust crackers the quickest, using a couple of prominent townsmen as judges. Then Tom, still in blackface, made a little speech along this line:

"It has never been the policy of the Takem and Levum consolidated shows," said Tom, "to do other than exactly as they advertise. We have never yet had a single complaint from any town we have showed in and we would be happy if when we leave your town all you folks feel that you have had your money's worth. We must ask your kind indulgence, though, for perhaps an hour. The other eighteen members of our company are expected to arrive on the nine-ten train and I am told the train is about one hour late. My partner and I will now change our costumes and a little later give you the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet; by the time that is over, I trust the rest of the company will be here. I thank you!"

I never really did understand whether Tom intended staying any longer or not; but I think not, because of his reference to the Romeo-Juliet act.

I was busy pulling the checkered dress over my head when I heard a woman's excited voice in the hall:

"I tell you it's my dress they are using —I would know that pattern anywhere! There isn't another like it in Canada. Aunt Fanny gave it to me a year ago last Christmas. They stole it off our clothes-line about a week ago. Jim says they look like the same two hoboes that were hanging around the railroad yard. You let me go backstage and within five minutes I'll prove it's my property!"

"What does it mean?" I asked Tom, who I noticed had lost his usual composure and was just a trifle pale. "It means," answered Tom, "that as far as we are concerned the show is over. Get the tool-bag and blowtorch and follow me down this fire-escape. Easy now, no noise!"

When we got out on the fire-escape, we found it had grown much colder. A high wind had arisen and snow was spitting through the air. In our hurry we left the window open and the wind bellowing out the stage curtain gave the audience the tip that something was wrong, thus robbing us of a possible fifteen-minute headway. We were scarcely halfway down the main street when we heard a lot of commotion and racket around the town hall entrance. "Get into high," said Tom, "they're after us!"

We struck out to the north of town on a sort of deserted highway—where it led to we did not know. Tom was weighted down with the silver dollars and I still had the tool-bag and blowtorch. We were not making very good time but were feeling somewhat easier in our minds, when suddenly we heard the deep bay of a dog perhaps a mile to the rear.

"We're sure out of luck," said Tom. "They've got dogs on our track now!"

ABOUT ten minutes after we first heard the dog bark we came to an old sawmill spanning the creek. It was a ramshackle two-story affair long out of use. The little stream which flowed under its lower story and once turned its wheels had already frozen and would bear our weight. There was a set of dilapidated wabbly stairs which led from near the edge of the creek ice to the upper story.

"Pokeepsie!" said Tom, as we drew near the building.

"We are a long ways from Poughkeepsie!" I answered.

" 'Pokeepsie' is Indian for 'here we

rest,'" retorted Tom. "Bring the tool-kit and that old water-pail to the upper story —that dog will be here within ten minutes!"

Starting the blowtorch, Tom got out his soldering-kit. I asked no questions as he began soldering a tube hose-connection at the base of the water-pail. This done, he had me go down and break the ice and fill the pail from the creek. I had scarcely got upstairs and closed the trapdoor when we heard the big hound sniffing below. Tom got a cover for the pail and set the blowtorch to heating it; then he got out the long slender hose that all plumbers carry, and connected it to the pail.

We then took up a floor-board. The big dog seated on the creek ice at the bottom of the stairs growled and snapped as we poked the steam hose down, but as he felt the warm steam around his hindquarters, he seemed pleased. Soon the steam melted the ice so that tiny rivulets of water began to run and form little pools.

After about ten minutes Tom withdrew the hose and as the weather had grown still colder it was almost no time before the dog was frozen tighter to the ice than any vise could ever have held him. Then you should have heard him howl! We stood it as long as we could. Finally Tom went down and chopped him loose. He was so scared I think he must be running yet!

We had intended getting away at daybreak—but at daybreak it was snowing and blowing fiercely. This probably helped us more than we realized, for it blocked any attempt of the townsfolk to look for us and gave them something else to think about. We had nothing with us to eat, and by night we were so hungry we could have eaten the dog if he'd stayed.

However, that night the storm petered out and the following day we sneaked through Brilly with a snow-shoveling outfit on a work-train. When we got back to our pike we found our services were no longer required on the railroad, so we lit out for Quebec and there started in to enjoy ourselves and spend the three hundred "iron men." This we managed to do without any great difficulty—I think it took us about two weeks. I remember we had ten dollars each when we parted, and I started back for the States via freight train.

I never saw Tom again, but I heard he went across with a Canadian regiment and was "snuffed out" on the other side. He was sure one fine guy!

On the Coblentz-Metz Express

By

Frederick C. Painton

THE story I have to tell is the most dramatic and thrilling incident of a not unadventurous life. The trouble, however, is that the yarn is but half complete. Somewhere in the archives of the French secret service is one part. Also, quite probably, the leaders of the German monarchist movement could reveal important facts. That is why, as you will presently see, I can give only fragments,—almost unrelated blocks,—of a gorgeous mosaic of intrigue.

Shortly before the Armistice I had been transferred to the staff of the Stars and Stripes, the official newspaper of the American Expeditionary Forces. After a few uncomfortable weeks in the Argonne during October and November of 1918, I had followed the advancing army of occupation to Luxembourg, Trier, and thence to Coblentz. Here I remained in charge of the trucks distributing the newspapers to the bridgehead troops.

Now it happened that in January I was hastily called to Paris—something to do with spare automobile parts—and on a gusty Friday afternoon I entered the Coblentz *Bahnhof* to board the Coblentz-Metz express.

I spoke no German and had for my credentials—aside from my army passes—only a French *ordre de transport* which became effective after we crossed the temporary frontier this side of Metz where France flew the tricolor over the recaptured

This curious mystery of the Great War is one of the most fascinating of the many we have read. Perhaps you too could tell such a Real Experience of your own to match it.

provinces. Therefore, having no reservation, I entered the first empty compartment, prepared to hold my ground and answer *"nicht versteh' "* to all questions.

Presently the train jerked slowly into motion. Soon we were gliding through the snow-shrouded yards, the rumble of wheels deadened by the quilt of snow.

I was reading a current popular magazine when the chief figures in this little drama came in. The door swung open and a woman entered; then a man, with his *"Pardon, m'sieu!"* He asked if the compartment were reserved and upon my shaking my head, they seated themselves opposite.

THE woman—I really should say girl, for she was no more than that—was dressed in a peasant costume. I thought her a Luxembourgeoise as, unwrapped of her coat, I saw the tightly laced bodice, the flaring multicolored skirt and clumsy shoes of her class. Why I thought her a Luxembourgeoise I cannot say, except that having been recently in Esch and Luxembourg city, perhaps I remembered the quaint costume. However, the Alsatians are similar in appearance—so for that matter are the French provincials.

Her face, I saw, was pretty, but not with the Latin petiteness. Rather was she Nordic, with dark brown hair peeping from under the white headdress, oval face, fair skin, and blue eyes under dark brows.

The man was a *poilu*, a French *caporal*. His sky-blue uniform was dingy, his *kepi* battered, his leather unpolished. I found him small even for a Frenchman. Coal black eyes, nervously alight, glowed in an olive-tinted face and a flowing black mustache, neatly trimmed, underhung a beaky nose. He was a Latin, a Frenchman—on that I'd stake my life.

They fell at once into conversation, talking in low tones in a tongue I took to be German, since it was filled with gutturals and harsh consonants. However, it may have been a patois of Luxembourg or Alsace—I am no judge of such things.

I began to inspect them from under cover of my magazine, not for any other reason than the idle curiosity and general character-guessing one indulges in when killing time. It was then that I closely noted her face. Peasant faces are usually red, a blowzy red in the wintertime, for exposure and hard water affect them. This girl's face was smooth, and though without make-up, still it was fresh and glowing. I noticed her hands. They were dirty, as are all peasant women's hands; and they were red, for it was cold and she wore no gloves. Yet the skin was finely grained, of a texture you will never find among women who carry wood and dig in the earth. They were the smooth type you see in America —or among the upper classes abroad.

Once the man pulled a map from his pocket over which both pored in some excitement. Then they burst into a salvo of

gutturals of which I could make nothing. Shortly afterward she opened a huge bag—well, it was not exactly a bag nor yet one of these great pouches that peasant women carry. The receptacle was of leather, with heavy round ribs, perhaps a quarter of an inch across, running down its length.

From it she pulled several papers which they both scanned; then they resumed the interminable conversation. The Frenchman appeared to speak the tongue with great facility.

We were speeding down the Moselle valley part of the way. I remember the vineyards which made the hills appear like sprouting sticks. These hills were so steep that they had to be terraced, so the peasants could reach their vines. Upon the tops of many of the hills squatted turreted castles, like hens on a nest.

Time passed. I think I dozed for a while.

WE reached the frontier—the name, I believe was Pearhl or something of the sort. At any rate, it was here that French soldiers boarded the train and examined it thoroughly. A brusque sergeant entered my compartment. With a glance at my olive-drab uniform, he dismissed me. He nodded to the French *caporal.* To the young Luxembourgeoise he spoke gruffly:

"*Votre passe, madame!*"

The girl fumbled in the capacious bag and produced a paper. The sergeant glanced over it perfunctorily—then suddenly he stopped, eyed it closely, eyed the girl, and frowned.

Now my French is such as one learns in eighteen months of overseas service with no previous grammatical background. So you must accept my free translation of the French that followed.

"This pass is no good," said the sergeant, scowling. "Perhaps, madame, you have another."

The girl did not understand. Turning to the little *caporal,* she spoke rapidly to him in the guttural patois they had been using.

To my amazement, the little Frenchman turned from her, pulled his mustache, shrugged his shoulders and, with his eyes upturned to the sergeant, said: "I do not understand her."

"Come, come, madame," cried the latter angrily. "Your pass, please."

By this time other soldiers had gathered in the doorway. Passengers paused curiously. By dint of signs the girl understood what was expected of her. Again she thrust her hand into the big-mouthed pouch. The handful of papers that she handed to the sergeant received scant attention. He handed them back with a sneer.

"None of these are good here, madame. I shall have to remove you from the train," he said harshly.

She shook her head wonderingly. A frown marred her fine forehead. Her pretty face was overcast with anxiety. Once more she turned to the little Frenchman and spoke in a quick pleading voice.

He moved away from her abruptly, exclaiming impatiently: "I do not know what she is talking about!"

I recall I was amazed—even angry—with him, and was on the verge of telling the sergeant what a colossal liar he was. Just then a tall, well-dressed woman edged into the compartment. She carried her head high, with a well-bred mien. She was not young, for gray hair showed beneath her hat.

"Perhaps I may be of help," she said in French. "I speak German."

The sergeant bowed. The tall, slim woman came closer to the little peasant girl and spoke rapidly, apparently in German. She moved even closer until the Luxembourgeoise was hidden from my sight. But I heard the girl's voice, a high lilt of relief in it as she responded.

Then I saw the tall woman turn as if to speak to the French sergeant. From her left hand, hanging at her side, out of view of the sergeant or those in the doorway, jutted a paper. Quickly the peasant girl took it and slipped it into her bag.

"She did not understand what you wanted, *mon* sergeant," said the gray-haired woman. "She has the pass in her purse."

PAST the sergeant stepped a short, squat Frenchman in civilian clothes and derby hat. He glanced quickly at the little *caporal,* who turned away his eyes.

"Yes, madame!" he cried. "She *now* has a pass—since you were so kind as to give it to her!"

There was a sudden intake of breath. No one moved. Then the derby-hatted man spoke again.

"You, and you, and you," he said, pointing to all of us save the sergeant of the guard, "will remain in this compartment

until Metz is reached. The guards have orders to shoot if you leave."

Wow! I did not fear for myself. My special newspaper passes, my other credentials, were bound to bring my freedom on inspection. But the girl—the *poilu*—the gray-haired woman! I know now that drama, adventure—aye, possibly tragedy—surrounded me. But at the time I was merely curious and very excited.

OUR trip to Metz was completed in dead silence. Presently we entered the station, the exits and other signs still in German. At the car-stair a squad of French infantrymen surrounded us and marched us off to the *chef de gare's* office.

The unobtrusive-looking French civilian took charge.

First he searched the gray-haired woman, out of whose ashen face dark, flaming eyes smoldered contemptuously. He did not seem alarmed when he uncovered nothing. It was as if he thought perhaps the peasant girl had passed the documents.

"You next," he said to the girl. Tearing open her big bag, he strewed its contents on the floor. He found nothing. Next, deliberately, he had her clothing removed, piece by piece. He felt it, tore it, crumpled it, until he was certain nothing was sewn in the lining. Then for the first time I saw a puzzled, baffled look on his face.

His eyes encountered those of the French *caporal,* and as the *agent* watched, the little *poilu's* glance traveled slowly in an arc until it came to rest on the bag; then he shrugged. None of this was lost on the girl, whose nudity was covered by a soldier's overcoat. The color drained from her face, but she said not a word.

With deft fingers the secret-service man—for such he undoubtedly was—destroyed the bag. He ripped out the lining, smashed the catch, tore out everything but the leather itself. He found nothing. Again his eye traveled to the *caporal,* who once more fastened his eyes on the leather shell. Out came the *agent's* knife. Quickly he slashed the leather criss-cross.

In my eagerness I stepped forward, halting as I felt the muzzle of something hard in my side. However, I had seen the searcher pull out a tightly rolled sheet of flimsy paper which had been shoved into one of those wide leather ribs.

With the discovery, the girl suddenly became maniacal. She sought to reach the little *caporal,* crying: *"Canaille!* Beast of a traitor!" and a hundred other expletives—*all in French!* Then I heard her scream to the gray-haired woman: "He mismanaged the passes deliberately—it was a plot!"

What plot? Why did she hide her knowledge of French before? Why—

The stolid detective waved to the guards to take her into another room.

"And you too," he motioned to the gray-haired woman, who haughtily swung after. "French justice plays no favorites," he added.

I was afire to know what the letter contained. It would solve, I felt, some of the snarls of this drama of which I had seen only the second act.

"M'sieu," I cried in my stumbling French, "what did the letter say?"

He turned suspiciously. "And you, *peut-être,* are one of them!"

I shook my head impatiently and pulled from my tunic my *ordre de transport,* and special travel orders signed by command of General Pershing himself.

"In America I am in civil life what you call a journalist," I cried excitedly. "Tell me the story—what did the paper say?"

The little Frenchman smiled wearily and shook his head.

"My son," he said, "such things are for the Government's eyes only—but if it will content you, you may know that this woman was a German monarchist spy. She was carrying word to the Germans and traitors in Alsace and Lorraine to be prepared to rise—William was to come back from exile. She would, perhaps, have gone on to Doorn—though others will have reached there by now. France must protect the German republic! But they will pay . . . . so *voilà!* We have saved the day—for the present!"

THIS was in 1919. In 1920 the *Kapp Putsch* broke—and failed. Evidently this *coup* postponed it only a year. I never knew what happened to the two women; shot, most likely—the French are not finicky in such matters.

The secret-service man and the little *caporal* went out together, talking amiably, so I suppose he was the "inside man," though how or why I don't know.

That's the devil of coming in between acts. Many an idle moment I've spent since, trying to piece it all together—only to fail. Always a bristle of question-marks remains.

Bringing Home the Butter

A stranded youth's daring business venture in Alaska after winter had closed down came close to the brink of disaster.

By **Ben F. Baker**

SOMEWHERE in Siberia there is a town which lays claim to being the coldest spot on earth. I have forgotten the name of the place and probably couldn't spell it, anyway; but three times in the past twenty years I have read boastful dispatches from that burg that told of temperatures of seventy below zero or worse. Once the figures were seventy-nine. Seventy-nine degrees is too low for me. Probably twenty times I have seen the glass register sixty-five; three different winters I have seen it at seventy; and once—

Circle City, usually called simply "Circle," lies at the head of the Yukon Flats, about a day's mush from the arctic circle. Prior to '96—which was B. K., or Before the Klondike—we had but two steamboats on the river, belonging to rival trading companies. In '96 one of the companies increased its fleet one hundred per cent by putting on another boat, named the *Bella*.

On her first upriver trip she made it as far as Circle, where she froze in and wintered, but at that, she arrived at Circle with no more than half her original cargo. Her skipper, convinced that his boat was riding too deep to get through the Upper Flats, dumped the other half on the bank about two miles above Fort Yukon, covered the stuff with tarpaulins, left a caretaker in charge and came on. Fort Yukon is about eighty miles downstream from Circle.

That fall and early winter I worked for the company that owned the *Bella* as clerk and warehouseman in their Circle store. The rush for outfits was finished the second week in December, and, being a chechahco in Circle, I was promptly "laid off."

But I had learned a thing or two while

working in those warehouses. For one thing, I learned there was no butter in stock; also, fairly reliable report had it that the opposition company was likewise butterless. But the *Bella's* manifest, which we warehousemen consulted occasionally, showed that twenty half-barrels of butter, each containing sixty two-pound rolls packed in brine, had been dumped off at that cache above Fort Yukon.

Now, a couple of barrels of that butter would make a big hit in camp along about Christmas time. More than that, the *hombre* who freighted it in would win himself a nice fat wad of freight-money. Therefore, the morning I got laid off at the store I made the manager a proposition which he snapped up pronto. I agreed to deliver in Circle, before Christmas, two barrels of butter from the cache, for which I was to receive freight-money at the rate of fifteen cents a pound straight, barrels, brine and all.

Lacking dogs or sled or even a fur sleeping-robe of my own, the next move was to go out and borrow a whole trail rig and outfit, which I did. While I was at it I rounded up the best in camp: five big, shaggy malemutes, each from a different team and each the pick of that team; a Yukon basket-sled, a parka of reindeer calfskin and a seven-by-nine red fox robe—this last from my next-door neighbor, Pete-the-Pig. Everything first-class—and none of it mine!

The morning after getting the outfit together I was on the river ice, Fort Yukon-bound. As I look back, it seems to me that about all I had in the venture was a chilled-steel gall, blissfully ignorant youth—I was just turned twenty—and abundant good health.

THERE were no houses, no shelters of any kind between Fort Yukon and Circle at that time, but for all that, I had with me neither tent nor tent-stove. I aimed to "siwash it." To siwash it means to throw some boughs or a tarp on the snow alongside your banked fire, roll up in your robe, fully dressed, and flop. Sometimes you sleep a little bit, siwashing it, sometimes you don't.

I made it to the cache late in the evening of the second day, despite the rough ice and the fact that the dogs were working together for the first time. The thermometer said twenty below that evening, and twenty-five the next morning, which was fine and dandy for that time of year. So I lost no time—loaded with two half-barrels of butter and a case of gin for one of the Circle hootch mills, I was back on the river ice, Circle-bound, before six o'clock in the morning.

Camp outfit and all, I figured the load at five hundred fifty pounds. That was plenty light for those five big dogs and I expected to make it home in four easy days. But I had grub and dog food for six days, for in the North you never can tell.

We jogged right along and soon I was "warm as toast"—sweating, almost. But as day broke and the light advanced it seemed to me that the air was fast getting colder.

Rounding a bend about ten o'clock I happened to look back. A thick wall of mist hung over the river behind me. That told me I was in for a dude of a cold snap and that bank of cold-fog meant that the temperature was already at least forty below zero.

For a minute I considered turning back to the cache and the caretaker's warm cabin; then I remembered the bunch in Circle and that Christmas butter on the sled. But right there on the ice I dumped that case of gin!

All afternoon it got steadily colder; still everything was jake so far, and I knew we were a good twenty miles nearer home when we left the ice and made camp under a big spruce early in the evening.

I gave the dogs an extra big feed of dried salmon, and myself took on a whale of a cargo of moose meat, scalding hot tea and hardtack; then rolled up in the Pig's robe as near to the banked fire as I dared get. I slept a little, in fits and starts, as did the dogs.

I'd like to remark right here, that when I crawled out of that robe next morning I knew it was cold—no fooling! As soon as I stood up I heard something: *h-i-s-s, h-i-s-s.* It was my breath freezing as I exhaled. When you hear that you can bet your shirt that it is sixty below or worse.

There was no loafing around that camp! Breakfast was cooked and gulped, dogs harnessed and we were on our way in half an hour. Move, and keep doing it, was our best bet in such weather; and the dogs knew it as well as their driver. They showed it from then on until the end of the trip, by the way they leaned against their collars.

Because of the intense cold the load dragged a lot harder than it did when we left the cache, so I rigged up a neck-rope and pulled too. That helped keep me a bit warmer, besides easing up on the dogs some. They were going to need every ounce of strength that was in them, I knew.

We pegged right along, though slower than on the previous day. Stopping at noon, I made and emptied a big pot of tea and ate a flock of hardtack, for that noonday meal was vital and must not be missed at any cost. Eat and eat plenty, is the musher's creed in the North—stoke the firebox or the fire goes out.

All that day came the regular *h-i-s-s, h-i-s-s* of my freezing breath, but we plodded steadily on, hanging to the ice a good hour beyond the regular camping-time because we dreaded the long, bitter night around the fire even more than we dreaded the trail.

I was pretty well numbed through and weary when we camped under another big spruce that night, and the fire, no matter how high I built it up, failed to warm me. I curled up in the robe and lay down, but not for long—up and replenish the fire, into the robe again; up to the fire a few minutes later, chilled to the bone. Stamping, beating my back and breast with flailing arms, tending the fire hour after hour, it seemed nothing I could do would keep me warm. The dogs, poor devils, were getting theirs too; all night long they milled around the fire, lying down, getting up, whining and holding up first one foot and then another.

THE morning of the third day I was a bit dopey as we took the ice; also the dogs began to act up. They wanted to go back downstream and for the first time I had to use the whip. Finally they gave in and started. Hour after hour we plodded stupidly on, cold, miserable and utterly weary. A quick fire on a sandbar for tea and hardtack at noon; then again on and on. It was about dusk when something happened which I had been trying to keep from thinking about ever since the cold snap fell; something old-timers told about around the saloon stoves: I began to "feel cold inside."

At once I made for the timber, built two roaring fires and stood between them—singed all the hair off that borrowed parka, but finally began to feel the heat. Then supper and afterwards back between the fires, shivering, dozing, feeding the fires, dozing, shivering. All night the dogs whined, bedded down, rose, and bedded down again, never lying in the same place two minutes at a stretch.

The next day passed in a daze. I know we got going and that, come night, I made camp. Of the night itself I recall nothing except that after a long, long time we were on the trail again; but I must have fed the dogs and myself, else we could not have lasted out the first hour on the trail, that fifth day.

That was the last day, the fifth. About all I know of it is that we stumbled along hour after hour, the dogs continually stopping, and I had to use the whip each time to get them started.

BY and by things began to get misty. Trees on the bank seemed miles away; the dogs were just a faint blur of whining, moving shadows. Finally the dogs stopped for the last time; no amount of whipping would move them. They were done.

I remember my arm gave out. I dropped the whip and staggered toward the sled, intending to lie down on it, for suddenly I was warm all over and deliciously drowsy. But I never made the few steps to the sled. Out of the mist came a shadowy, moving figure, then another and another. Then a voice, "Yeh, it's the kid—grab him before he falls!"

I was in my own cabin and bunk when I woke up. Pete-the-Pig was fussing around the stove.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Four o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

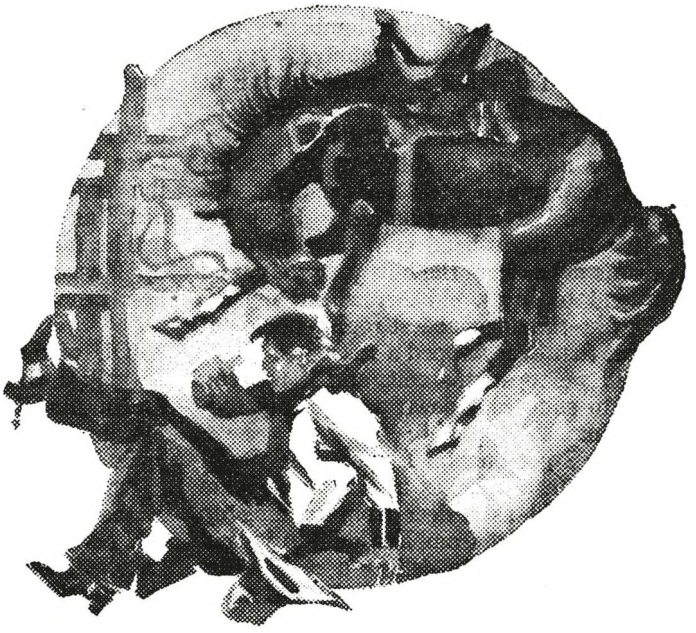
"Tomorrow afternoon?"

"Yep. You been sleepin' and shiverin' and sweatin' since we picked you off the river, three o'clock yesterday."

"How are the dogs?" I asked. "And how cold was it?"

"Fine. Not even a frost-bite on any of 'em, or on you. Weather's broke now—up to thirty below since this morning. Say kid, know what you was tryin' to do? Tryin' to drive right on past town! Goofy! Billy LeClair happened to step outside for a minute and heard you out on the river, swearin'. Cold? Yeh, it was, kinda—seventy below, steady, for three days and nights. And she was even seventy-three when we went out there and got you. Say, kid, why in hell didn't you ditch that butter somewheres?"

A Kansan here tells the story of his boyhood experiences in the gentle sport of bronco-busting—and of his exciting meeting with an old enemy at a rodeo.



The Arrowhead Colt

By **A. W. Hawes**

WE first noticed the peculiar markings on the Arrowhead colt when my father and I drove the range mares in from the hills. Among the black, bay, and sorrel colts, he certainly loomed up.

His coat shone brown with a reddish tinge, but what captured my eye was the white arrowhead-shaped blaze on his forehead. It pointed down at his brown nose, with a barb pointing toward each reddish-brown ear. He also had three white stockinged legs, with the other leg so dark it was nearly black. Of course he was known from then on as the "Arrowhead colt."

Later the Arrowhead colt and his mates were weaned, branded, and turned back on the range, where we saw them only at intervals, and then at a distance.

When the Arrowhead colt was three years old, I had just turned eighteen, and like most of the young fellows around our part of the country, I had a four-year-old horse, absolute faith in my ability to set the bad ones, and a reputation to uphold among the neighbor boys.

Every so often we boys would "gang up" at some ranch and hold an unofficial rodeo. We generally started out by riding a few colts, mules, or steers, and ended with a good old-fashioned wrestling or boxing match.

Frequently we found a mule or colt that refused to be ridden by a bunch of amateurs, even if it was just for fun; then some of us would lose a little of our self-confidence—also some hide.

I HAD commenced to harbor an idea in my head that I could just about fork any of them and get away with it, when one Sunday several of the boys came jogging in, and suggested we have a little excitement to liven things up a bit.

We flipped a coin to see who would ride first, and I came out the last one to ride.

Two of the boys rode a pair of work-mules that were tied in my father's barn, and a couple more tried to prove their claim of being bronc'-peelers, on a couple of two-year-old steers we roped for them in one of the corrals.

One of the boys rode his steer until the bucking had subsided to a lumbering gallop, when he slid off and mounted the corral fence. The other boy tried to give us an exhibition of dry-land diving which he seemed to understand thoroughly.

It was my time to ride now, so I said: "Boys, now watch your uncle show you a thousand-dollar ride for nothing. I'm going to ride the Arrowhead colt. We just got the colts down from the hills yesterday, and I intend to break old Arrowhead myself, and make the doggonedest roping-horse out of him, that ever flopped a steer."

Well, we roped the colt, and it took all hands to snub him down and get my saddle on him.

Before I got on him I figured he would put up quite a fight, as he was three years old, and wild as a deer from running up in the hills; also from his build I judged he would be able to deliver a real battle, with his long neck, short back, and well-tapered legs.

WE worked him into the large corral and two of the boys got on their horses to pick him up when he was through pitching. I took my chaps up a notch, saw that my spurs were tied down so they wouldn't roll up instead of staying down in place when I scratched him, stuck my foot in the stirrup, and with the hackamore rope and saddlehorn in my right hand, and his mane in my left, I swung into the saddle as light as a feather, so he would stand until I got all set.

"What do you say?" asked the boy who had him snubbed to his saddlehorn.

"Let him go," I said, "and try to keep him headed away from the gate."

He slipped the rope loose, jerked the blindfold from the colt's eyes, and started for the gate.

The Arrowhead colt whirled around once, then stood absolutely still, except that I could feel him tremble.

"That looks like a thousand-dollar ride!" yelled one of the boys.

"Well, if he don't want to pitch I aint going to make him," I answered.

Just then the colt threw down his head and started across the corral in a series of stiff-legged jumps that are not particularly hard to ride, but seem to jolt a fellow all over. About halfway across the corral he whirled, and back he came "trying to swaller his head," as one of the boys said afterward. After the second whirl he got down to business and I began to fear I had over-matched myself.

His bucks instead of propelling him forward, landed him back of his former tracks. He went high, then seemed to come back under me. At the third or fourth jump after he started in earnest I grabbed for the saddlehorn, and "got a handful of dirt," as the saying is.

The fall didn't hurt me, but when I got up I wasn't quite so sure about being the best bronc'-buster around those parts.

YOU ought to have heard the boys yell! "Best thousand-dollar ride I ever saw for nothing," cried one. "Crawl back on him and show us what a five-dollar ride looks like!"

One of the boys shook out his rope, and as the Arrowhead colt ran between him and the corral fence, dropped it on him, and snubbed him up. They worked him up to the gentle horse until they had him up short to the horn, and a blindfold over his eyes again, then one of them asked: "Shall we unsaddle him, or do you aim to tackle him again?"

"You just hang on to that misguided plow-horse," I said, "until I get a-straddle of him again. I don't intend to let any cross between a work-ox and a lumber-wagon throw *me* off in the dirt, even if it is Sunday!"

Well, I eased up on him again and once more they turned him loose. He didn't go through any preliminaries this time, but lit right in to his peculiar style of pitching high and lighting back of where he started from. After about four jumps I was again a spectator instead of a performer and this time I hit the ground hard. I got up slowly, and acknowledged that the first victory undoubtedly belonged to the Arrowhead colt; but I resolved then and there to ride him, if it was the last thing I did.

After the boys joshed me good and plenty they pulled out for their homes, and I walked stiffly and painfully to the house.

SEVERAL days afterward, I got the Arrowhead colt in the big corral by myself, and decided to try him again, when the boys wouldn't be present to witness any further humiliation, until I got onto his style of pitching.

After quite a bit of trouble I got him saddled. Swinging into the saddle I pulled the blind from his eyes and away we went. I'm not sure, but I think I lasted three

jumps. Try as I might, it seemed I couldn't stay with him when he came back under me with that left-handed pitching of his, as I called it. I roped him again, and left him tied to the corral fence.

Later that day, when there was nobody around, I tried him again, but with the same results. After he threw me the first time I just couldn't feel as sure of myself as I did when mounting anything else.

I tried him several times more that summer, but I always came out second-best. I wouldn't admit I was afraid of him, but he sure "had my goat." Somehow I didn't make as good a ride when I got on him as I did on other horses, and away back in my mind I always half-expected to get thrown. My father and the men on the ranch got to calling him "the Kid's hoodoo."

That fall my father sold a bunch of young horses, and the Arrowhead colt was in the bunch. I felt chagrined that he was leaving the ranch without being ridden, but I was also glad to see him go. With him gone I figured life would be sweeter, as I would be saving myself lots of falls and bruises. I wouldn't have to see him in the corral or charging around in the horse-pasture, head up, mane and tail flying —and each snort a direct challenge to me!

Later on my father talked to the man who had bought the colt. This man said the Arrowhead colt had developed into a regular outlaw-bucker, and had been sold to a man who made it a business to furnish outlaw horses for rodeos.

A COUPLE of years after this my father sold most of his cattle, keeping only a few of the best-bred Herefords. Wages were high and cattle prices low, so my father and I were kept busy looking after our ranch and what cattle we had left. We let all the hands go, and I was busy from early until late. About the only diversion I had from hard work and long hours in the saddle was the Cattlemen's Carnival, which once a year was staged at a small town about fifty miles northeast of our ranch. It always lasted three days and everybody flocked in to town for a big time. In the afternoons they had roping, riding, and bulldogging contests and at night a big free dance.

I now had a string of relay horses that managed to get in the money a couple of times, also a roping-horse that was hard to beat.

The summer I was twenty-three, my father came home from town one day and brought a handbill advertising the Cattlemen's Carnival, which was to take place about a month later. It seemed they had been doing a lot of advertising in other sections of the country, and were to have some extra features added to the program which would make the carnival that year a record-breaker. The purses for the cow-pony and relay races were double what they had been the preceding years and they were offering five hundred for first money in both the roping and riding contests.

I began at once to work out my string of relay horses, also giving my roping-horse a little fast work now and then. I knew this money was large enough to attract the attention of several professionals, and I probably wouldn't have a "Chinaman's chance" of getting in the money, but I had confidence in my relay horses, and with luck, I might accidentally get in on something else.

I arrived in town three days before the carnival started, so my horses would be rested and accustomed to the change in surroundings, but there were others already there before me in readiness for the big event.

THE first day was a good one. The weather was about right, and everything went off smoothly. The first event was the roping contest, and the first man tied in forty-one seconds. The second man was over a minute, so that let him out for that day. I was the third man up.

The man working the door of the chute asked me if I was ready, and I yelled, "Let him go!" He stepped back, opening the chute, and out came the steer with the hazers giving him a good start. When he crossed the starting line it was my signal to overhaul and rope him as quickly as possible. My horse rapidly closed the gap separating us, and when I was close enough I threw, catching the steer around the horns. I jerked the rope tight, held it out away from my horse's legs, gained about ten feet on the steer and turned my horse at nearly a right angle. That brought the rope from his horns down along his side and around his heels. My horse was running hard, and when he hit the end of the rope it flopped the steer about right.

I slid off my horse, and ran toward the steer, tugging my short tie-rope from under my belt, where I had it stuffed. I

had made a good catch, and had thrown him perfectly. I was feeling jubilant over the showing I had made before older and better ropers, but I was too swift in feeling elation. As I leaned over to tie the steer, he made a lunge and up he got, leaving me standing there with the tie-rope in my hand. By the time I could get back on my horse and throw him again, enough time had elapsed so I was clear out of the money for that day.

When the riding contest came off, the mount I had drawn was a chunky iron-gray horse that put up a real battle, but I managed to stick it out and scratch him regularly.

THE second day I got fourth place in the roping and in the bucking contest. My horse was a bay gelding by the misleading name of "Dead Easy," but he didn't try to live up to his name at all. Lunging, pitching, and sunfishing, he tore across the arena at a speed that took the best I had to keep up with him. I was certainly thankful when the judges fired the pistol, and a couple of pickup men swooped down and picked him up.

The third day was the big day when the finals would be ridden and the contest decided. I didn't place in the roping contest. My horse got me up close enough, and I made a careful cast, but failed to connect.

I jerked down my second rope and caught the steer around the neck, but when I swerved to one side to throw him, somehow I caught a finger in my rope where it went around the horn, and the jerk of the steer at that precise second broke my finger between the knuckle and first joint. I tried to tie anyway, but it failed to hold and the steer got up.

The finals in the bronc'-riding contest followed the roping, so I beat it over to where the doctor kept himself handy for just such emergencies as this.

While the M. D. was patching up my finger one of the boys came up and said, "Boy, you've sure drawed a good one today—he's plumb pizen!"

"What horse is it?" I asked.

"You've drawn Hell Diver," he answered.

I had heard of this horse before and it seemed reasonable the judges saved him until the last day when the finals would be ridden.

While I had never seen this horse I had heard that when he lit in to drive a fellow's spine through the top of his head, it made hitting the ground seem like a most desirable thing to do.

During the time I was undergoing repairs, a couple of helpers had snubbed down the redoubtable Hell Diver, and had put my saddle on him.

The Doc gave my finger the finishing touches just as the announcer called my name and the horse I was to ride. I turned and walked over to him, crawling in the saddle while one man kept his head eased down to the saddlehorn of a gentle horse and two others sat their horses, waiting to start him toward the center of the arena.

"Say when," said the man holding him, and I replied, "Let him go!"

They jerked the blind from his eyes and turned him loose. The hazers tried to start him toward the center of the arena but he elected to do his stuff right there, and do it he did—he required the very best I had in me.

After he pitched furiously in a spot no larger than twice his own length I could hear a roar from the grandstand and I knew we must be putting on some show.

The applause from the crowd affected me like a college yell does a football team, and I rode as I had never ridden before.

Finally he broke, and tore across the arena with the speed of an express train. I heard the judge's pistol crack. I hung on the best I could but of course could make no headway holding him. My nose was bleeding violently and I was nearly at the end of my strength. When he reached the corrals at one side of the arena, he whirled short, slipped and fell, pinning my leg to the ground.

Luckily, I had presence of mind enough to raise up all I could and pull down on the saddlehorn so he couldn't get up.

HELP immediately rushed in from all sides. One man grabbed his head and turned his nose skyward, while others boosted him up enough to drag my leg from under him.

"Hell Diver is one bad horse, and you made a real ride. You'll get first, I'm thinking," said one man.

The man holding Hell Diver stepped back, and the horse lunged to his feet where he stood with forelegs wide apart and nostrils distended, puffing from his recent exertions. I looked him square in the face, my first good look at him.

It was the Arrowhead colt!

The remarkable adventure of a novice in the Canadian Mounted Police who let his man escape —and caught up with him again after many days.

Bread upon the Waters

By J. A. Browne

I WAS born in one of the Royal Irish Constabulary barracks in Ireland, quite a number of years ago, my father being in command of the same, and eventually getting to the age when youngsters decide on what profession they will follow later in life, I decided definitely that I would never become a policeman. Fate, however, plays us all strange tricks.

When I was nineteen years of age I came to Canada, and after turning my hand to various jobs I took up a homestead in the bush country and in the hunting season acted as guide to big-game hunters.

In my travels through this tract of bush country I occasionally came across a detective from police headquarters, which was the main city of the Province two hundred miles distant. I was able to help this detective in his investigations by giving him information regarding the shortest trails and quickest routes, and one day he asked me if I'd care to join the police department.

At first I laughed at the idea of becoming a policeman, but a few days later I wrote to the Chief of Police, applying for a position.

The answer to my letter was a request to proceed to headquarters for a personal interview, so I went to the city and interviewed the Chief. My height, weight, education and knockabout experience were all in favor and I was placed on the force.

After a few weeks of routine work in the city, doing team work with the older mem-

bers of the force and getting "wised up" to the Criminal Code, I was outfitted and sent north to my old hunting-grounds.

One day in my mail from headquarters I received a warrant for the arrest of one Henri Laroque, wanted on a charge of theft. It was not a serious case, according to the charge on the warrant.

I proceeded north to an Indian reserve where I obtained the services of an Indian with canoe; thence upriver to the lumber-camps where I had been informed Laroque was working. I soon located the camp in which Laroque worked and, leaving the Indian with the canoe, I mooched around until I ran across my man. He was trimming a fallen tree and was not aware of my presence until I spoke to him, but he looked very uneasy when he saw my uniform. I read the warrant to him and informed him that he was under arrest.

He looked for a moment as if he was going to say a lot, but evidently thought better of it. In answer to my question as to his belongings, he stated they were in the bunkhouse. I told him to proceed there and I would follow on his heels. I did not handcuff him, as there were some big logs to clamber over and I figured as long as he did not carry gun or knife, I would take a chance.

We had gone only a short distance, my prisoner happening to be on top of a huge log and I about to follow, when a cry of "timber" came from my left where men were felling timber. I looked to see which way the tree was being felled, when suddenly I felt a terrific impact and was borne to the ground with all the breath knocked out of me. Laroque had seen his chance and jumped at me feet first from the log upon which he had been standing. Before I could do anything to recover, Laroque was "putting the boots" to me in severe style as I lay helpless on the ground; and when he finally left me, I was in a badly beaten-up state.

After a while I managed to crawl back painfully to the place where I had left the Indian and canoe. The Indian took me home and put me to bed, after which he got a doctor from a point about thirty miles south to come and attend to me. After the doctor's examination I had to keep to my bed for over three weeks.

NEEDLESS to say, I felt cheap over the way Laroque had got the better of me, and keenly conscious of what the other lumber-jacks—who had seen the affair—would think of me. They had not interfered and I had not requested their assistance. I brooded over my humiliation all the time I was confined to bed, and when my Chief wrote me inquiring the whereabouts of Laroque so that another officer could effect his arrest, I wrote in reply that Laroque was my meat and that I would get him as soon as I was able to travel. I intended not only to arrest Laroque but also to square accounts with him.

When I was able to get about again I made various short patrols and in spare moments did a lot of boxing with a friend who possessed a set of boxing-gloves. Boxing was an old pastime of mine and soon I felt in "A-1" condition. Then one bright day I set out again in search of Laroque, finding him working in a camp about five miles farther up the river from the spot where he had beaten me so badly.

I did not take any chances with him this time, but drew my "gat" and told him I'd let daylight through him at the first sign of any funny work on his part. Nor did I permit him to get his clothes, but at once headed him toward the river where I had left the Indian and canoe.

On the river-bank at this spot was a level area of grass, about two hundred feet long by one hundred feet wide. I halted him here and made him hold his arms aloft while the Indian searched him for weapons. A sheath-knife was the only thing the Indian found and I instructed him to throw it in the river. This done, I told Laroque to sit down, take his boots off and hand them to the Indian. When he had obeyed my instructions, I took off my tunic, hat and boots and gave them, with my "gat," to the Indian. I then told Laroque that I was giving him his chance to beat me up once more, but this time in a square fight; if he succeeded he'd have his chance for a clear get-away, as the Indian would not interfere.

Laroque was very much amazed at the whole proceeding and appeared to be rather uneasy, but when I advanced upon him in fighting attitude he came right into action.

The fight which followed although of short duration was a fierce affair. Laroque was a natural fighter and shifty as a cat. However, I had brooded so much over my previous beating, and consequent ridicule, that I felt no real pain from the blows he inflicted. I simply waded into him and swapped punches until I had him groggy,

then I marked him good and plenty before knocking him out. I then bathed my cuts and bruises with water from the river and donned my clothing once more. By this time Laroque was stirring, so I threw some water over his face, handcuffed him and placed him in the canoe.

On our way to the city many curious glances were bestowed upon us, also in court a few days later, as the marks of our fight were still plainly visible. Laroque was sentenced to nine months in jail and I escorted him from the courthouse. When about to pass through the iron-barred gates of the jail, Laroque turned to me and said: "You fineesh with me now, but me get you some day—me feex you good!"

I smiled at him and as I handed him over to one of the guards I said, "This is a special friend of mine—give him hell!"

I then returned to my northern territory and promptly forgot all about Laroque.

For several months afterward I was kept busy on various cases. One day I landed in the city with two prisoners and being in need of various things from the big stores, I obtained permission to stay in the city for a few days.

During my second afternoon in the city I was walking along the main street when who should I see coming toward me but Laroque. He had evidently not seen me as yet and the threat he had uttered as he entered the jail came back to me in a flash. I quickly decided I would stop him and have the matter out with him, so took a few more steps and stood directly in his path. He halted, looking at me in a puzzled manner. I reminded him about his threat to "fix" me, and told him we might as well settle the matter right there. He grinned very sheepishly and said, "Jail no good, me nevair want any more jail." I could see that he evidently had no intention of making good on his threat, so we conversed awhile in a friendly manner.

Laroque informed me that he had been set free three days previously, but felt like a lost sheep in the city. He wished to get to some lumber or construction camp, but his total wealth amounted to fifteen cents.

I considered the matter and really felt sorry for him as he appeared to be so out of place in the city, so I took him to the hotel where I was staying and told the hotel clerk to fix him up with supper, bed and breakfast.

Next morning, after breakfast, I took him to a railway employment office and got him booked for a construction camp near Calgary. I would not give him any money for fear he might squander it on booze, but when his train pulled out I was there to wish him farewell—and in doing so slipped a five-dollar bill into his hand telling him it would buy him tobacco until he drew his first pay.

Tears came to his eyes, and he gripped my hand hard as he said: "Henri give you dirt first time, but Henri no forget this—you damn' good fellow!" I told him to forget it, wished him the best of luck, and jumped off the train which was by then moving slowly out of the station.

The months rolled swiftly by; the World War broke out and as it did not finish in a few months I obtained permission to join the Army. Soon I was sent overseas.

I was there for three and a half years. After the Armistice was signed I obtained leave and proceeded to England, where I married the girl of my heart, whom I had met on my first leave from France.

EVENTUALLY I was returned to Canada, my wife accompanying me, and after a fortnight's holiday I reported to headquarters to resume my old job. As I felt I would be a little rusty on my work after such a spell of Army life, I was retained at headquarters on plain-clothes duty until I picked up the work again. However, I made good in my plain-clothes work, and received instructions to remain at headquarters.

Everything went along very smoothly for a time, then my wife contracted a prolonged illness which caused weeks of anxiety and considerable expense. I had to make promises on my pay for months ahead to meet expenses, and when I got about level with the world once more she had another illness which necessitated a delicate operation by specialists. If a local doctor could have performed this operation I might have made arrangements to pay the expenses in installments, but having to send her south to world-famed specialists, I required five hundred dollars in cold cash.

I needed that money in the worst way, but I had absolutely nothing I could realize on and money was very scarce among the few friends I had made since my return from overseas.

I was sitting at my desk at headquarters one day, in the depths of despair. I had exhausted every possibility of getting the

required amount speedily and I could put no heart in my work at all.

Suddenly a timid knock sounded on the door. In answer to my "Come in!" who should walk into the office but Laroque! The same old Henri—no visible change in him with the exception of his clothes, which were better than I'd ever seen him wear.

WE had supper together, and he told me of his life since last I had seen him. From his story it appeared that when he got to that construction gang near Calgary he became very chummy with two brothers named Duprey who were also French-Canadians. The Dupreys, who had done quite a bit of prospecting in their time, turned back to the old game when reports were received of gold discoveries north of Le Pas. They took Henri along with them and the three struck things rather lucky, although they did not make a fortune. Henri had admired a photograph of a sister of the Dupreys; eventually he met her and married her, and at the time of telling me this story, he was going to join his wife who was staying with friends in the western part of the Province. He apparently was comfortably settled and had not a care in the world.

In return, I told him of going to the war, of getting married, and of my wife's illness—also of the operation required and my hopeless financial state. Henri sympathized whole-heartedly and we finished up by having a couple of drinks together and wishing each other the best of luck. Henri was leaving the following morning early so I would not be seeing him again. I felt I really liked him, and when I parted from him I was in a much more cheerful humor than I had been for days.

Next day when I arrived at the office, I found a special messenger waiting for me, with a small brown paper packet. My name only, in very poor writing, was on the packet. I signed the receipt but on opening the packet had to undo so many rolls of brown paper to get at the real contents that I began to believe some one was playing a joke on me. Finally I came to a tissue-paper wrapping and in this I found a roll of paper money with a slip of paper on which the following words appeared: "I say one time I no forget, I say now I no forget." This was signed "Henri Laroque."

To say I was astonished was to put it mildly. I counted the bills and found them to total five hundred dollars.

I sat down and wiped my brow in amazement, then swiftly reviewed the past:

"Here's a man who beats me up when I attempt to take him prisoner, with the result that I am confined to bed for three weeks. I then arrest him again and in square fight give him a good beating. He then threatens to fix me when he comes out of jail. By sheer coincidence I meet him just after his sentence is served, find that he has evidently given up any idea he had of 'fixing' me, and as he's down and out I feel sorry for him and spend a few dollars on him. Then to cap everything, nearly five years afterward he gives me five hundred dollars as a return for my alleged kindness. Can you beat it?"

He did not leave me any address, and I could not possibly find him. There was only one sensible thing to do and I did it—I used the five hundred for the operation on my wife. It proved successful and she has been in perfect health ever since.

If I ever meet Henri again, I certainly shall try to express my thankfulness in some adequate manner. I often think of him and my best wishes go out to him always. He has certainly proved the truth of that old saying: "Cast your bread upon the waters, and it will return to you after many days."

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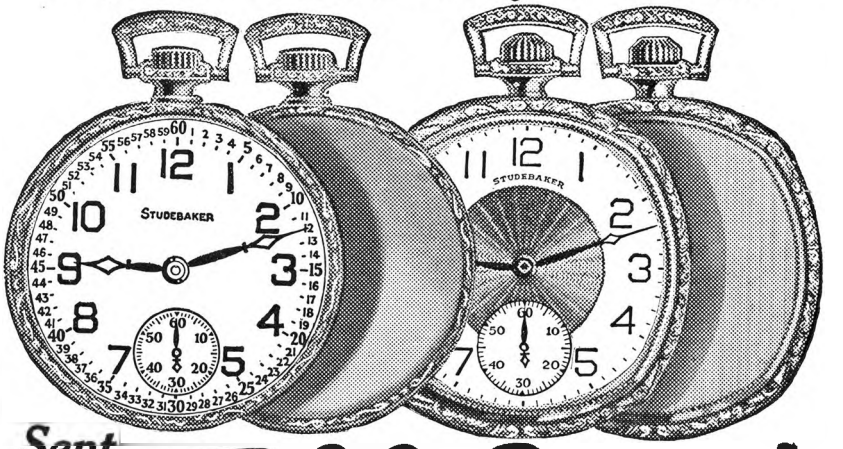

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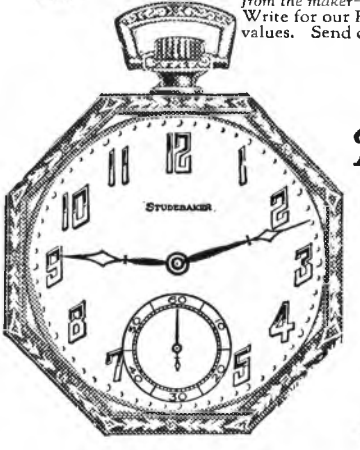

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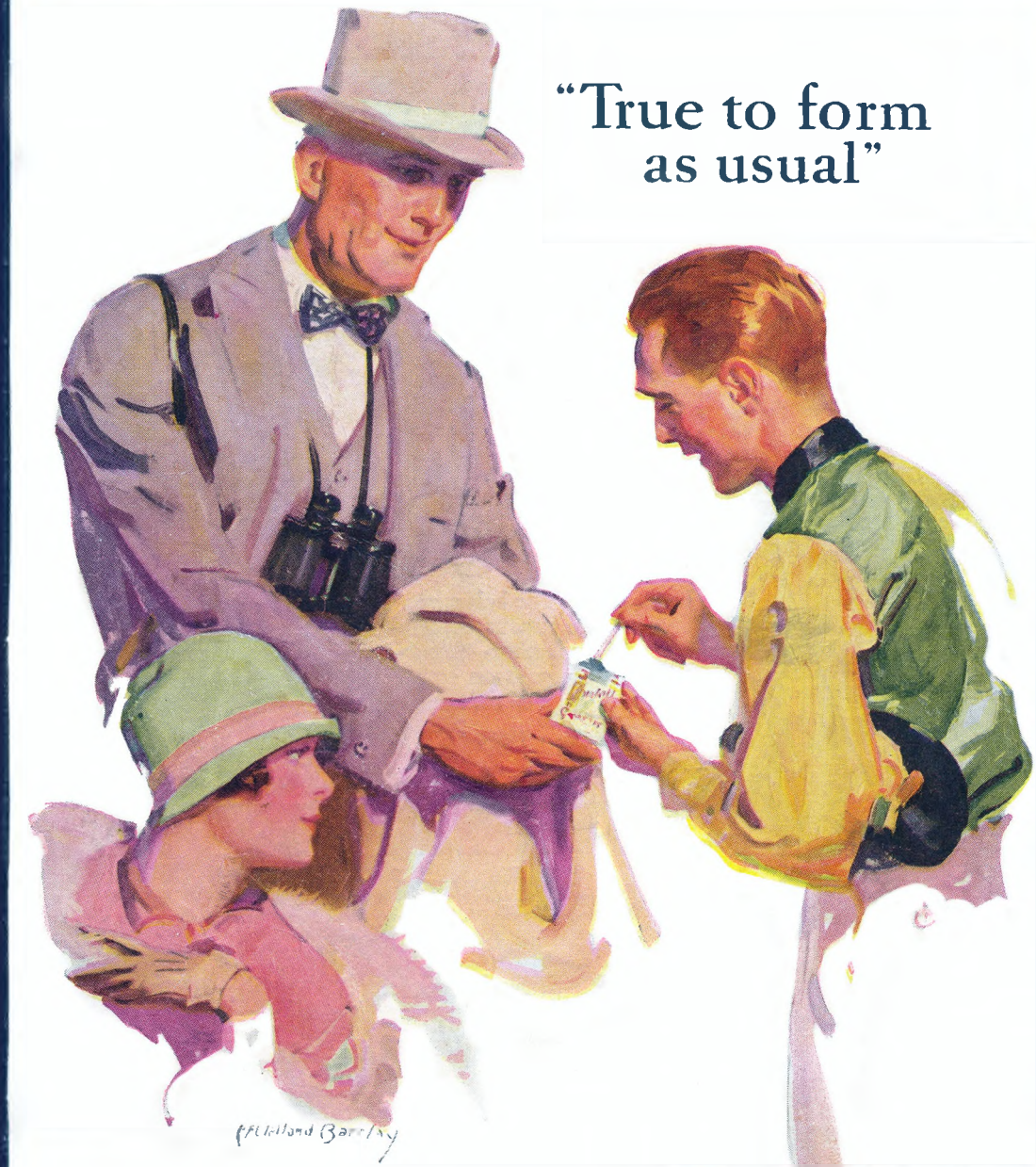

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