

JANUARY

# STREET & SMITH'S

# Complete

## MAGAZINE

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**GREEN EMPIRE** by Edmund S. Whitman  
LOVE AND BIG BUSINESS IN THE TROPICS!



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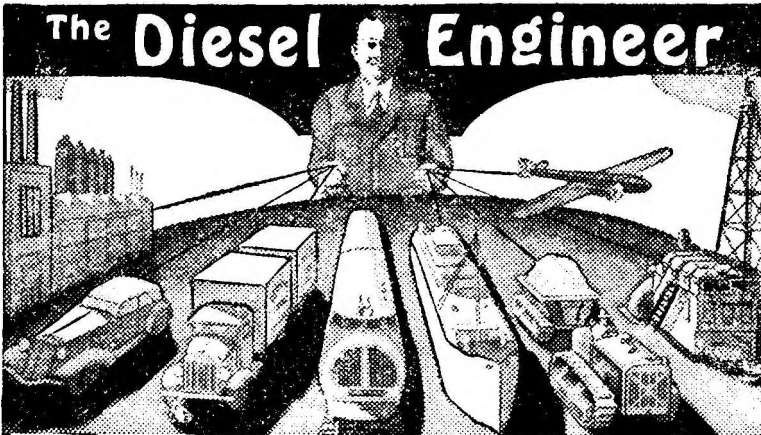
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# STREET & SMITH'S Complete MAGAZINE

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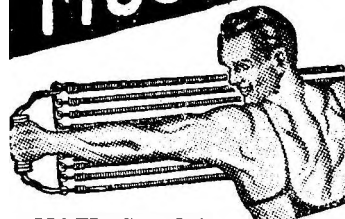
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# Green Empire



By Edmund S. Whitman

## CHAPTER I. BLIGHTED YOUNG MAN.

**J**OSE'S was a speakeasy—this was back in 1929—and all us newspapermen hung out there. So did the Latin-American colony and the tropical boys up from the Caribbean.

New Orleans is full of all of them. As for the fourth estate, this particular morning the ranks were thinned by one more member.

I had just been canned!

"Draw us another, José," I said. Now that I had finished telling him what a poison sac the night editor was to boot me out for being scooped. I felt less bitter, and had arrived at the point of hanging over the bar doing tricks with the dice cup.

"Better make it a seidel this time," I amended, as the genial little Costa Rican ambled to the spigots, "and I won't be worrying you so often."

He reached for a whisky bottle.

"Beer, my man," I corrected him. "Not whisky. Do you think I'm mad? Scotch at ten in the morning!"

"*Si, mi general,*" the crazy ape was saying. "Your bottle. Nobody has touched it. See? The special mark I made——"

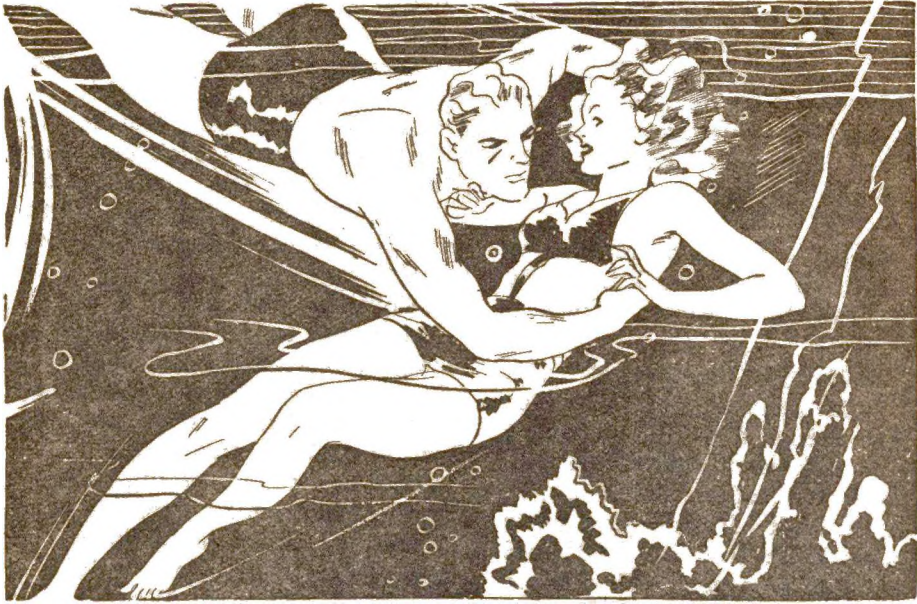
I speak plenty of Spanish myself. So I got all the chatter. Naturally I was curious to know who was so important that old José would jump through hoops. Moreover, I hadn't heard any one come in, and crashing the gate at José's was some job.

"Who is this man?" was snapped out in crisp Spanish behind my right ear, and it concerned me. "I thought I told you to keep this place cleared out to-day."

Boy! Was he the executive! But I remembered I was fired, and for the first time in a long while unafraid of any man.

"He's all right," José replied nerv-





### High adventure in the tropics.

ously. "I know him well. He's just a——"

"Just one of the great army of the unemployed," I finished pugnaciously, swinging around to face this man. The Pinckney jaw was thrust forward, I fear. I always get that way, and it never pays—too inviting. "So what?"

I was sorry for the flare up as soon as I got a good look at him. A florid man of indeterminate age with the direct blue eyes that bespoke years of wind and rain and sun. A shapeless suit, none too clean, hung loosely from powerful shoulders. His fine Panama was battered and stained. A sandy bristle fringed his jaw. But his eyes held me.

"No offense, son," he boomed. "Have a shot and forget your troubles."

"Thanks," I mumbled, grinning. "Newspapermen are sponges at best; canned newspapermen have absolutely no scruples and no manners."

"You speak good Spanish," he

said, waving away the apology. "You can always get a job."

"Spanish," I replied bitterly. "That's what got me the boot. I was supposed to be the bright boy on assignments where Spanish is involved. City desk gives me all the interviews with deposed Central American presidents and big shots from the Caribbean. And I covered the water front last night all right, all right." It was a relief to gripe to somebody about it. I took another pull at my beer. "Yeah. Sent down to Julia Street to meet the *Santa Catalina* just up from the Republic of Comayagua, with fifty thousand bunches of bananas and a sorehead Irish planter who tried to chisel in on the banana big time down there and got the worst of the——"

José signaled frantically, trying to shut me up. But I had already spilled it.

"So they fired you," the general finished. He hadn't seen the signal.

"Heming's the name," he said suddenly, and without cause so far as I could see. "Jeremiah Heming."

"Pinckney," I replied, bowing and giving him the elaborate Spanish punctilio. "Steve Pinckney, at your service."

**Y**EAH," I took up, anxious to get the subject back into safe channels. "Fired. Over a girl."

"A girl! You don't say." His voice invited me to carry on. But all of a sudden I decided I didn't want to talk about her. She was just too wonderful. After all, it wasn't her fault. First thing I knew I was back on thin ice, and José was nervous as a cat. What could I do?

"It was the girl's father I was sent to interview," I said. "But he no sooner warmed up to some cock-and-bull yarn about how he and the President of Comayagua both got a raw deal at the hands of the big banana interests than the girl stepped into the picture. I didn't come out of the ether until this morning. Meanwhile, the other rags all ran front-page stories. I got mine an hour ago when I tried to get past the city desk."

Heming nodded sympathetically. José filled my glass. The atmosphere was relieved. Why, I didn't know.

"Me get past that desk? Never," I went on. "The boss held my eye in that fishy stare from the time I entered the room.

"'Good morning,' he smirks in a loathsome voice. 'And how is Sleeping Beauty this morning. Fully refreshed and prepared to hand in a fine yarn on Branigan for last night's edition, no doubt. Just a mere twelve hours late, that's all!'

"'Lay off, will you,' I beg. 'It's too hot for sarcasm.'

"'Sarcasm?' he snaps in a rising voice. 'On a hot day like this, too. Too hot for sarcasm. Too hot for work. You run on back home and rest some more. Take the boss's car. Take a week off. Take off all the time you want. Just don't come back.'"

Heming was amused.

He started to ask more questions, when all of a sudden I sensed electricity. Doors started to slam, curtains were snatched across windows. Spanish snapped and crackled.

"Bald-headed *carajo!*" I heard Heming shout as he slammed down a receiver. Then he bellowed for José. They went into a huddle. I dipped into the beer. When I came up for air they were beside me.

"Listen, son," Heming was saying. "How'd you like to meet that girl again?"

"You mean the girl I met last night? You mean—"

"Sure. I mean Mike Branigan's little girl—America."

Flabbergasted? Worse than that.

"Secret service is watching me from across the way. Nothing important. But I can't have certain visitors who are planning to see me here. I've got to get word to 'em. The girl knows the whole story. You wander out and tell her that I sent you. The message is that she is to go back where she came from and tell the gang to wait for me there. I'll be along later in the day. Get it?"

Get it? I got nothing. What was this—a frame? It couldn't be. José hadn't lured me into his dump. But I wasn't concerned with the element of chance that had brought me another opportunity to see America.

"Listen, son." Heming's big hand



toyed with my lapels. His pale eyes bored straight into mine. "Think plenty about the girl, but don't get any bright newspaper ideas. I gather you're sore at your paper. Keep that way. All a false move would accomplish would be to get you in bad with me—and that means the girl, too. Get it?"

I nodded and gulped the last of my beer.

"And another thing. Get it out of your thick skull that Mike Branigan is small potatoes. Got that?"

"I'll say!" I started to hotfoot it out the door.

He grabbed me.

"Listen, dub. Take it easy." His voice was soft, like a kitten's paw—and with all its hidden implications. "Use your bean. People don't rush unless there's a reason. You'd be picked up right quick and tracked. Go easy."

"Sorry," I mumbled. "It's the girl." I grinned. "Where do I go?"

"That's more like it. Corner of Canal and Carrollton. Big green roadster. America Branigan will be waiting. Good going. Use your bean. See you later."

**I** SCUFFED along, outwardly very much the blighted newspaperman, but inwardly every inch the giddy young swain. If I hadn't been so girl-crazy I would have sensed the possibilities of the story I had stumbled across. Whoever said love was blind wrote himself an editorial!

After a couple of corners of window-shopping, I slouched into a store and bought the morning paper. I couldn't see anybody tracking me. So I wandered up Howard Avenue and headed into the intersection of Carrollton and Canal. Heart hammering? Not much!

There was the roadster all right.

And there at the wheel was somebody with a jaunty little cap over her right ear.

"Hi, Nellie!" I said, hopping onto the running board.

Those inscrutable black eyes, those silken lashes, that cute little nose—oh, you know what I mean. I forgot everything.

"Oh," she said. "It's you."

"Gosh!" I babbled. "You're beautiful."

"You better run along and peddle your papers," she said. "I'm waiting for somebody."

"I'm fired," I said happily.

"I'm waiting for somebody," she said patiently. Obviously she didn't believe me. Last night I had been every inch the newshawk—that is until I fell into her toils—and to-day I was fired. You couldn't blame her.

"Heming sent me," I said. "He wants you to go back and tell the gang to wait until later in the day. He will join you as soon as he can give the secret service the slip. Get it?"

"I'll phone him!" she snapped.

"Sure," I said. "Don't trust me. Maybe I'm a dick myself. There's a drug store just up the street. You can phone him from there. He's at José's." I opened the door for her.

You really couldn't blame her for being suspicious, the way I handled it. And the funny part was that I didn't have the foggiest idea what was in the wind. All I knew was that the principals were plenty interesting. Some Central American deal probably, with a banana plantation background.

"I watched America march into the drug store. Then I started after her. But before I had taken five paces I stopped and turned back to the car. What Heming had said about Mike Branigan came from the heart. And I had read the story—

the one I had fumbled—so I knew that a trick had deprived him of banana holdings which he evidently had no intention of relinquishing without a scrap. Here was a chance for a job or a story, and the girl was right in the picture.

I flung a furtive glance over my shoulder. Nobody was in sight. I raised the lid of the rumble seat, hopped in and pulled down the top. I jammed my angular frame down somehow and slipped a piece of the newspaper against the lock so I wouldn't be trapped in that cage. Then I waited, my heart pounding.

## CHAPTER II. GOING PLACES.

**I**F you ever had to fold six feet of bony anatomy into the leg space of a rumble seat on a sticky Louisiana noon, and ever had to hold it there for nearly an hour, you can appreciate what I went through. America was gone quite some time before I heard her light tread and felt the car leap away under her touch. She could drive, that girl—and apparently with no regard for traffic signals!

Curiosity and lack of air finally got the better of fear. Cautiously I raised the seat and looked around. We were southeast of the city and in low, bushy country. We rode a good distance after that; I simply hauled my head back like a turtle on the defensive. It was a miserable trip; the sweat poured down, tickling me where I was helpless to scratch. But after a while the car stopped, and America got out and everything was quiet.

For a long time I stayed there, listening. I could hear nothing. Finally I lifted the cover a few inches, peered about, saw nothing,

but marshland and a few trees. Encouraged, I worked my head out. Off to one side I sensed, rather than saw, the water. I jumped out, shut the rumble and slipped into the underbrush.

There was an excuse for a path leading into the thicket, which I tried to keep in view as I skirmished along toward the water's edge. The mosquitoes swarmed, but I dared not even thwack the back of my neck for fear of revealing an alien presence. At last I reached the water, and there, not fifty feet distant, was the clew I had been seeking.

A trim speed boat, slender and white, which I shrewdly suspected could show her heels to practically any cruiser on Lake Pontchartrain. It took no great imagination to visualize her slipping away in the dusk, bound on some secret mission involving lives and property down in the Caribbean.

All I could do was squat there and take it from the bugs until something happened. I could only pray for the sun to sink, so that I could slip aboard from the off-shore side. To attempt to do so with America lolling around on the after deck would be sheer suicide. Meanwhile Heming's "gang" might arrive. All I could do was wait.

The sun subsided by inches. The mosquitoes were awful. A deep hush pervaded the bayou.

Presently America flipped her glowing cigarette butt over the side and went below. In a moment she was up again, with a light cape flung over her shoulders. Without a word to anybody, assuming there might be others aboard, she skipped to the dock and disappeared up the path. Then I heard the purring of her motor fading down the road in the gathering dusk.

**A**LMOST audibly the darkness swept in across the bayou. I took off my shoes and socks, held them to my chest and started to wade. The purchase was so slimy that before I could help myself I was submerged and swimming. So I headed out, then closed in on the speed boat from the offshore side.

Remind me to get rubber-soled shoes on future gumshoe expeditions. When I reached one dripping arm cautiously to the deck with the shoes, one bounced into the scuppers and made a noise.

"Damn!" I mumbled.

"Here," growled a deep voice, above, "give us your hand."

The invitation was superfluous. He grabbed my wrists in a bone-cracking grip and hauled me, dripping and shapeless, over the side.

"You again, huh?" Branigan was big; over six feet and barrel-chested. But somehow I wasn't worried. Mike just wasn't a bully.

"I lost a scoop last night," I gulped. "Got the gate for it this morning. All because of your daughter——"

He roared.

"So to make up for lost time you shine up to Jerry Heming, get him to pour out his heart, learn about my plans and come down to pick up the loose threads. Very commendable. They'll give your job back all right when you turn in this story. *When and if!*"

We started aft.

"Mr. Branigan," I commenced, "I made a damn fool out of myself last night over your daughter. Call me a sap if you want. I say that anybody who wouldn't have done just what I did wouldn't be human. However, I wasn't satisfied with getting fired. To-day, purely by chance, I ran into her again. I knew nothing of your plans, still know nothing.

Heming merely asked me to deliver a message—a message that meant nothing to me when I delivered it, and still means nothing. I no sooner came face to face with your daughter than I went haywire a second time. I found a chance to crawl into her rumble seat. Then I crawled out and hung around, waiting for something to happen. She went away, so I decided to come aboard. You know the rest. Now work me over."

He cleared his throat.

"Listen," I blurted, "I'm not afraid of you. I'm not afraid of Heming. I don't think either of you will exterminate me. And while I don't know what you're up to I could make a pretty shrewd guess after the stories I read this morning."

"Give a guess." Shaggy brows bent fiercely above me.

"All right. You want to crack down. You want to get a hold in the banana belt again. And the only way you can is by doing what was done to you."

"Namely?" He was interested all right.

"Namely—to overthrow the government that ran you out."

"So what do I do?"

"You hire soldier-of-fortune Heming." I was thinking fast and desperately. "And you're off to the front-line trenches."

"Bright boy."

"Bright enough to make you a good liason man!" I snapped. "You haven't enough good-looking daughters to sidetrack every newspaperman. I got hooked, and I'm not sorry. But you talked fast and loose to the rest. So fast and so loose that the United States put secret-service men on Heming's trail—probably on yours. Now I'm fairly wise to the publicity game. I speak Spanish. I'm free, white, twenty-one and then



some, unattached, and unemployed. Take me with you."

He was going to say no. I could see it coming. I went to work on his vulnerable spot.

"America's the trickiest name I've ever heard of for a girl," I mused out loud. "Fits her somehow—perfectly. How in the world did you happen to hit on it?"

Mike expanded his chest. All was forgiven.

"Her mother was the most beautiful woman in Costa Rica. They're Americans down there just as much as we are up here. And the day the girl was born I got my final naturalization papers." He spread out his big freckled hands. "It was inevitable."

We had a drink.

"How'm I going to know you won't spill this story?" Mike asked. "My whole future is staked on the success of this deal."

"Take me with you," I said. "Don't let me out of your sight." I was going to elaborate on my usefulness when pencils of light cut through the trees. The green roadster was back.

I HEARD America's voice call "Mike," then Heming's hoarse: "Mike, hell's loose!" and then they were all swarming aboard the boat at once—America, Heming, a small, dry Latin with big brown eyes and gray hair, and a couple of others.

"What's up?" Mike asked.

"A wild-goose chase all over the lot," Heming blurted. "We had the devil's own time shaking the dicks off Don Antonio. Didn't we, doc?"

"We had difficulty getting away," the Latin stated in precise English. "At any moment an operative may trail us down here."

Then they saw me.

"Why you dir-tee, double-crossin' little——"

"Easy," Mike cut in. "He's all right. America brought him down." She blew up.

"Sure you did, honey," Mike roared. "Only you didn't know it. The lad's daft on you. He couldn't bear the thought of being separated. So he crawled into the rumble seat when you came down this afternoon."

"I wish I had known it." Her voice was icy.

"He wants to go with us," Mike announced. "Any objections?"

There were plenty.

"Think it over," Mike went on. "We can't drown him here. Can't tell who might 'a' seen him get in the car the way we're being traileed. We can't turn him loose. He knows too much. We've got to take him."

"I can use him in Comayagua," Heming said suddenly.

"Cannon fodder?" That was my contribution.

"You guessed it," Heming snapped.

"He's bright," Mike said. "Let's get going."

A deck hand was called up from below and sent ashore to drive the car back to the city. I slunk back onto a seat, clammy and subdued as we wheeled out in the bayou. Branigan himself piloted the craft at high speed through the intricate waterways, the path illuminated by one powerful searchlight. He knew the route by heart. The very set of his thick shoulders and the jaunty way he wore a stained yachting cap made him look like a man who knew where he was going and how to get there.

We were suddenly in darkness. Mike flipped off the light and the blackness of the night seemed to solidify around us. There was nothing in the masses roaring past to in-

dicate where we were. We were all tense and restive.

We swung into the powerful river. No longer did our motor fling sharp reverberations against encroaching banks. We were on the Mississippi and heading toward the delta.

There was a muffled tinkling of bells, a shape loomed up close by, words were exchanged.

"What goes on?" I whispered, to the person nearest me. America. I wouldn't have spoke if I had known that.

"You wouldn't be interested," she said acidly. "Much." She paused while the acid ate in. "That's just the cruiser that will take the gang down to the tropics. Press items of interest in connection with her would be the following: one, her engine room is armor-plated, and two, she's being loaded to the gunwales with machine gun ammunition and other assorted armaments."

"You going?" I asked.

"You wouldn't be interested." I couldn't see her face, but it was even money that her lower lip stuck out a foot. Her tone tipped me off; she was eating her heart out to go, but Mike wouldn't O. K. it.

I buttonholed Branigan as he directed the unloading of cases from the speed boat and onto the *Mosquito*.

"Do I get to go?"

He didn't answer.

"Your daughter could keep an eye on me. That would be your insurance. Then, when the fighting starts, Heming can see that I die a hero's death. Between those two times I'll try to sell you my merits. You haven't any too many men anyway. All right?" I took a deep breath. "She's a swell girl." I heard myself add.

"You're telling me?" Mike growled.

What a vibrant, fragrant creature she was. I could feel her tremble as she hopped up to sell her bill of goods to Mike.

My eyes were sufficiently accustomed to darkness to see what she was up to. She was on tiptoe, whispering in his ear.

"That's a filthy trick," I said sourly.

There was no answer.

"All aboard who's goin' aboard," somebody gritted down hoarsely from the deck of the cruiser.

Mike sprang into action. He whacked the girl much as a mother bear her cub.

"Up you go," he said gruffly.

I followed, skinning up the ladder to the *Mosquito* in double-quick time. Mike followed.

There was a final whispered exchange. Then the small boat drifted astern and was swallowed up in the darkness. We were on our way.

### CHAPTER III.

#### GENERAL JERRY.

ON the evening of the fourth day out of New Orleans, the *Mosquito* fetched the island of Motrilla off the coast of Comayagua. Heming—who, I found out, was called Jerry—and Branigan had been confabbing mysteriously, poring over charts and maps. But I was far too busy falling in love with America to pay much attention to them. That girl was a source of never-ending delight—and anguish—to me. We would sit side by side for hours, dangling our legs off the taffrail of the boat, idly trolling with hand lines.

"I don't see why Jerry wants to take the *Mosquito* so far off her course," the girl said. "We could have made Trulo on the mainland, if

we hadn't swung east to these islands."

"Maybe Jerry needs men or water—or ammunition."

She laughed. "Nothing to that. You'll see."

"Let's go swimming," I proposed. "I'll ask for shore leave."

"Something tells me there'll be no time for play."

"Well, I'd rather be turned down in a request to swim with you than be permitted to go with all the bathing beauties in Hollywood," I put in desperately.

Branigan called for her then, and I was left with both hand lines and a full heart. We were drumming past the cays at close range. In the brilliant tropical sunset they were wild and beautiful. The sea floor was silver smooth, relieved by trceries of feathery coral where iridescent fishes nosed about. What a part of the world for a honeymoon!

America was back. There were tears on her cheeks.

"I can't go," she said miserably. "Damn it!" Mike had told her that she would have to wait at Motrilla until the tumult and the shooting were over.

"Gosh," was all I could mumble. "That's tough."

"Just my luck. This is the dead-end place in the world. I'll die by inches. So make it fast, Stevie." She patted my bare arm and smiled. It never occurred to either of us that I should stay with her.

We didn't waste any time at Motrilla. Mike took the kid off in the dinghy. He knew everybody in the silly little village.

Mike came back in no time, looking grim and miserable. He blew his nose loudly, a signal that the least said about America the better. He was particularly short with me,

as though I had in some way contributed to the girl's misery. That was encouraging.

THE maneuver looked crazy to me: all night we had lazed along toward Trulo, but Jerry hadn't any intention of taking advantage of the cover of night. I pointed out that we were but a handful after all, and that the *Mosquito's* white hull would loom up like a spotlight in the daylight.

"We ain't strangers!" Jerry snapped.

That didn't make sense. Jerry didn't shape up to my conception of an intrepid leader by a long shot. He was illiterate, uncouth, and irrational. And he stood in dire need of a hair cut. Had it not been for Mike and Don Antonio I wouldn't have given thirty cents for the expedition.

Too late now for anything but action. There was the town sprawled along the mountainside in tiers of red-roofed stucco houses. Crumbling ramparts encircled the harbor and led to a rickety dock flanked by municipal buildings. Here again Jerry seemed guilty of poor strategy: he disregarded the fortification, piloting the *Mosquito* up to the dock in sublime disregard of the grim turrets above.

"See that big barn." He pointed to a rambling wooden structure half-way up the hillside. "That's our meat—the comandancia." He glanced at my face and followed my eyes to the turrets. "We ain't strangers," he repeated. "Besides, them cannon ain't been loaded for a couple hundred years."

I noticed that a machine gun had been mounted on deck and covered with a tarpaulin. We managed to put on all the appearances of a cruise party, especially since Jerry



had gone below at the sight of a khaki-clad figure moving out along the dock.

"I am inspector of customs," the official stated pompously. "Nobody land until all papers inspect."

Don Antonio slid down in his wicker seat behind a newspaper.

Branigan gave the inspector a cordial hand aboard and escorted him below. "Tie her up, Steve," he said, over his shoulder. "I'll do the same below." A broad wink accompanied this. The inspector was putting his neck right in the noose.

Jerry came bounding up from below, and started handing out arms.

"Well, don't be standing there like a flock of flat feet! Come and get 'em! We're goin' to work." He flung me a carbine and a cartridge belt. "There you go, son. Now, do as I say."

Ashore the natives stood scratching themselves and staring.

Jerry hopped nimbly to the dock and we scrambled ashore in his wake.

"Mike, you take the machine gun and keep her trained on the comandancia. Don't shoot unless we get in a jam. Don Antonio, you can get into your frock coat and start memorizin' your speech——"

Branigan and the ex-president almost saluted. Jerry was dynamic, now that he had his teeth into real danger.

"The rest of you bums," he belted, "come on!"

I trotted beside him as he strode off the dock, elbowing his way through a crowd of jabbering natives. Behind us was our army of half a dozen drifters picked up on the docks in New Orleans. That was all the army we had as we set out to conquer Comayagua.

We were up the funny cobbled street. A crowd of shouting people

was at our heels. Others ducked into doors or ran screaming in front of us. There were no soldiers in sight.

"Good publicity, this crowd," said Jerry, puffing from the hill. "They'll think they're part of our army."

WE turned a corner and there lay our objective—a squat building behind a wire fence. And beyond it, down the far slope leading to the Carib village, was the slaughter house, its eaves heavy with disconsolate black buzzards.

"They see us, but won't shoot," said Jerry, pointing toward the comandancia. "They'll all be on our side in a minute, so don't let's waste good men. It's bluff that does it in these affairs." He turned to the small group around him. "You guys load and get ready. Train on the slaughter house and, when I give the word, pick off a buzzard apiece."

Then he faced the rabble that had retreated behind a protective corner. In his mightiest voice he belted: "*Viva Doctor Don Antonio Castro! Presidente de esta Republica ahora!*"

How the crowd responded. I learned later that they had a real affection for Castro.

Jerry let the demonstration sink into the minds of those within the comandancia, then he yelled to us: "Let 'em have it!"

He drew his derringer and swept the nearest eaves of the slaughter house, bowling over several birds and putting the rest into an uproar. We all fired a round, then reloaded. Mike, down on the yacht, must have been nervous. Perhaps he misinterpreted the firing. He let go his machine gun, the steel bullets raining off the comandancia roof.

That was all that was needed. The

garrison came out like rats from a burning warehouse, some armed, some not; some dressed, others stripped to the waist. One resourceful sergeant was tearing a blue cord off his peaked straw hat and tying a red one in its place—blue was the government color, red the color of Castro's old party.

Jerry stamped into the building, pushing the soldiers aside. "Name of Doctor Don Antonio Castro, your new president," he shouted, "I take this comandancia! And where the hell is the comandant?"

"*A sus ordenes, mi general,*" said a soft voice.

We wheeled. The comandant could have popped us both off as easily as we had bowled over the buzzards. But he didn't. Maybe his keen sixth sense just told him that ours was the side to be on. And it was. By now the Plaza de Armas was thick with shouting people, all yelling *vivas* for Castro.

"Beat it down and get the doctor," said Jerry to me.

Before I could move there was a fresh burst of cheers from the crowd, and in an instant I saw Mike's head looming above it. Don Antonio was beside him. They pushed their way into the comandancia and Mike dropped a riot gun on a table with a relieved sigh. "There was no holding him," he said, "so I had to come along."

So fell Trulo. Casualties; seventeen buzzards.

We slipped away at dusk with everything well in hand except Jerry. He had been busy all day personally superintending the cutting of all telegraph wires, posting guards, and drinking white eye. Now, as we cruised swiftly toward Puerto Caballo, he was loudly pointing out the efficacy of fraternizing with the boys in the cantinas. I

was feeling pretty chipper myself.

"General Jerry," I kidded. "Bleary but belligerent."

"If it means what I think, Steve, you said a mouthful!" he grunted.

Triumphantly, he sprawled out, and our tactical officer slept.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### IN THE BAG.

**W**E were really in a revolution against the Tropical Banana crowd, which had run Mike Branigan and Don Antonio out of the country just to acquire greater banana interests and better concessions from a controlled government. Now he was talking back.

"We've got a foothold now," he said, as we all huddled around him on the dark after deck. "So far's I can see, nobody in the country has any idea of our plans or whereabouts. Jerry severed the lines of communication so Trulo won't be heard from until long after we've reached Porto Bello. If we can catch 'em flat-footed there, Jerry will tie up the Tropical's activities by taking their locomotives and recruiting their labor. Then you, Don Antonio, will make your triumphant march to San Sebastian. After that, we're sitting pretty."

"Only one thing," I put in. "Those secret-service operatives in New Orleans. Why were they watching?"

Mike pulled at his pipe.

"Tropical squealed to Washington," he explained. "What of it? We gave 'em the slip, didn't we? They don't know what's up or where we are?"

I knew more about secret service than Mike did. They didn't give up that easily.

"If Tropical posted Washington

they must have represented you as a dangerous influence on the stability of the Comayaguan government. The state department's policy with regard to the republics of Central America is to recognize any government in power and to lend its good offices toward blocking any revolutionary movements. That's probably why you were being watched. You probably threatened the Tropical people when they ran you out."

"Sure," Mike said. "I did. But what of it? They have no line on us." I detected anxiety in his voice.

"I think Stefano takes a sound view," Don Antonio said in his careful English. "Let him proceed."

"Nothing," I blurted, suddenly self-conscious. "Just let's get to Bello and on to San Sebastian quick as we can. We've been out of sight for nearly a week. If it is discovered that the *Mosquito* is gone, the state department may have a gunboat on the way. Maybe it's at Bello right now!"

Mike jumped up and roared for Jerry. "He's got to hear this. He's got to lay his plans right now!"

"Why not let him sleep it off?" I asked.

"No time. We'll be off Bello before dawn!"

Jerry came stumbling up.

"All right, all right," he growled. "I figured all that. We're gonna land at Bello before sun-up and we'll have the town by the heels before anybody knows it. Then, if there's a gunboat in the bay, we'll run Don Antonio on up to the capital and burn all the bridges behind him. Now lemme sleep!"

**A**N hour before dawn we were called to the after deck. Danger and high adventure closed about us in fleecy blankets of offshore mist.

COM-2

"Town's on the flat," Jerry growled. "Harbor's landlocked and ships can't be seen until they round the point. We'll drop a landing party this side of the point and take the town from the flank. Mike, you go on to the pier. If the gunboat's there go on over and stall 'em. Show that you're aboard, see? Otherwise anchor right off the comandancia. Be ready to work on 'em if you hear us shooting. That'll trap 'em."

Mike roared approval.

"Great stuff, Jeremiah! A genius! Heaven's gift to the banana industry." He pounded Jerry, he pounded me. He was in rare humor.

Jerry's plan didn't look altogether water-tight to me. There didn't seem to be any provisions made for the unforeseen.

"Not to chuck any bolts into the wheels or anything," I said, "let's just suppose the plan doesn't work. There we are ashore and out in the harbor is our boat. What do we do then?"

"Get wet!" snapped Jerry.

We couldn't see the bluff that marked the entrance of the harbor, but we could hear the dull pounding of the waves. As we crept closer the bulkhead of rock loomed up like Gibraltar. Then we could smell the seaweed that clung to its fissures; the sob and suck of the sea came mournfully to our ears.

"Ebb tide," observed Jerry. "That's a break for us!"

The dinghy was lowered and we scrambled down, eight of us including Jerry. The ghostly outline of the *Mosquito* quickly faded into the mist and we were shivering in darkness with nothing to guide us but the ever-increasing noise of the breakers.

The noise of the breakers grew louder. The boat scraped upon a sandy beach. Almost as if our land-



ing had been a signal, the dawn broke. Fingers of light began to probe the horizon, palm trees and a stretch of beach came out of soft focus into relief; the sky, first black, then gray, turned blue and revealed a row of clouds marching along. Full daylight brightened the sky before we left the beach.

Jerry put us in single column and ordered us to follow his footsteps. Then he set a swift pace right along the narrow margin of the beach, where the waves dampened and packed the sand. In no time we clipped off the mile or so, toward the town above which wisps of wood smoke were beginning to rise. The comandancia and customhouse were in full view, rambling wooden structures with red tin roofs, and farther along the beach a long dock protruded into deep water. Tied to the off side was a yellow banana boat; but no gunboat. Between us and the banana boat, moving into position opposite the comandancia, we saw the *Mosquito*.

"Come on," said Jerry. "Let's make this snappy."

We cut across the beach and into a grassy street of the native village. Our arms clanked as we ran, and even though we were only eight the sound was exciting. A few natives spied us, but they slipped hastily into their houses.

"See that?" I panted. "That looks bad."

"Looks good," Jerry breathed. "They're helping us out."

He halted suddenly and ducked into a mud hut. I saw a red ribbon, our colors, fluttering from the door. In an instant he was out, beckoning to the rest of us. We dashed in. It smelt of sugar cane, rum, coffee, beans, thatch, and wood smoke—and men. There were twenty or thirty men in that small hut, all armed.

JERRY was talking excitedly to one of the men, who was distinguished from the rest by a tatter of uniform and a pistol belt. While he talked more men poured in, all with red cords on their hats, or red cords tied around their arms. Recruits. So the news was out.

"Steve!" Jerry called.

I jumped to his side.

"Can you swim?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"The cat's out," said Jerry. "Gonzalez has signed a loan agreement with Washington and there's a gunboat on the way."

My heart dropped with a thump. Gonzalez was the president that Castro was out to depose. "Does that mean it's all off?"

"Hell, no! The gunboat ain't here yet and the agreement ain't ratified. Gonzalez is going to swing the big stick over his congress to-day, but if we can take Bello before congress meets, and get word of it up to San Sebastian, they may hold out. But we've got to do it and be off for the capital before the Tropical crowd can get the gunboat here. These birds tell me it's only three hours away."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Swim out to the *Mosquito* and tell Mike the Tropical crowd has been tipped off. They figure us for an attack on the dock, so there's only a couple of dozen men in the comandancia. The big force is hiding in freight cars out on the dock. We can take the comandancia in ten minutes. That'll make the force on the dock come back to attack us. We'll just walk in the back door. But Mike won't know we're in and he'll start firing on us. Tell him to go on toward the dock and open up on the freight cars. They'll run back to the comandancia and then we'll let 'em have it."

"Pretty smart," I said admiringly. "Shove off!"

I ran out into the street, which was now milling with people. They were still quiet, though. Even when I began tearing off my shirt they raised only a low shout. I came out on the beach and kicked off my shoes. Then I saw, at the edge of the water, four or five soldiers with blue hatbands. They were staring at the *Mosquito*.

There was no turning back. I sprinted across the beach.

They were still engrossed in the yacht and the sand padded my footsteps. I lifted my knees high as I reached the water and fought through the shallows. Then the sea floor fell from under me, and I plunged into the water. I heard a shout as I dove.

I had little breath left after the sprint. I came up and heard something spatter in the water near me. There were three or four more shots and I dove again. When I came up the shots were wilder.

"Mike hauled me aboard. "Hurt, son?"

I shook my head.

The look of concern on his face changed to a grin. "Those bozos couldn't hit an elephant with a boot-jack. If they could shoot straight they'd have killed one another long ago and there wouldn't be any more revolution. What's up?"

I told him just in time. There was a flurry of shooting in the direction of the comandancia, not more than a dozen shots in all, and then a burst of cheering. Mike rang for full speed, and we headed for the dock. Don Antonio appeared on deck.

"Well, Stefano, back so soon? And wet? I hope our plans have not gone wrong."

There was worry in his voice, but he spoke calmly.

"They're changed," I said, "but we've practically taken the town. Jerry's in the comandancia and we're going to smoke 'em out of the dock. The whole country's for you! And there's no gunboat—yet."

We swung wide around the banana boat and nosed in toward the base of the pier. Mike rang for half-speed astern and the *Mosquito* came to a shivering halt. Mike threw the tarpaulin off the machine gun and sighted on a string of five or six wooden freight cars.

"I hate these things," he said. "Too many gadgets."

There was nobody in sight on the dock. Even the boat seemed deserted. They were expecting us, all right.

"I'll give 'em a trial round," said Mike.

The machine gun sputtered. He was aiming just above the tops of the cars.

There was a volley from the cars. I heard bullets flying and the clatter of them against the boat. I dropped to the deck. Then there was a single report behind me and I turned and saw Don Antonio, standing erect in his frock coat, aiming another shot at the car tops.

"Give it to 'em!" I whispered to Mike. "One of 'em might hit the old boy."

Mike trained his gun full on the cars and swept them with a steady stream of bullets. When the noise had died out there was not a single shot in return. Instead, I saw soldiers swarming out of the cars and running back toward the comandancia.

"Trapped!" I yelled. "We've got 'em!"

They had gone only about fifty yards when Jerry cut loose with a

volley from the comandancia. The running figures halted, stood as if bewildered. Mike gave them another scare, firing high. Jerry replied. Suddenly the soldiers began throwing down their rifles, waving their arms in the air. Then, from the beach where they stood, came their high-pitched, hysterical cry, achieved with some unison:

"Viva, Castro!"

That's how we took Porto Caballo. The Republic of Comayagua was in the bag.

Mike was hit in the arm.

## CHAPTER V.

### PICNIC.

**I**F America could only see this!" I was standing beside Mike Branigan as the skipper brought the *Mosquito* to her berth at the pier. Jerry had augmented his army to a hundred or more and was proudly marching them out on the dock.

"Viva el presidente!" bellowed Jerry, clicking his heels together and saluting the grave figure in the frock coat. Don Antonio acknowledged the tribute and the army responded with many vivas.

In the midst of the hysteria with wildly excited natives, streaming out on the pier, our attention was distracted by a staccato *bup-bup-bup*. It was a gasoline motor car which was geared to the railroad track, equipped with flanged steel wheels. Two men in linen were driving it out on the dock through the crowd of shouting people.

"Oh-oh," Mike said.

"Who's that?"

"Alligator Bradley," Branigan said. "Tropical's general manager."

"Not the man who——" It didn't seem possible such a slender little

man could swing a revolution and run out a man like Mike.

"Yep. He's the one who ran Castro and me bow-legged. Now it's our turn." He signaled to Jerry and raised his voice. "Hey, Jerry! Look who's here!"

"Alligator" Bradley and a younger man passed by Jerry Heming without so much as a word. Jerry gave a Bronx cheer to express his deep pain at the slight. The soldiers howled. Evidently not popular, this Alligator.

"Hello, Branigan," Bradley drawled, as he boarded the *Mosquito*. They made no attempt to shake hands.

"What do you want?" Mike growled. I had to admire the little man, there was an aggressive set to his narrow shoulders and sharp chin. Thin lips, bloodless and cruel, curled in a mirthless smile.

"Rather I should say what do you want? You and your hoodlums?"

"Bananas!" Mike exploded. "And I'm going to get 'em."

"Ah, sure. You can carry a deck-load of a hundred bunches maybe on this tub——"

"Cut it!" Mike snapped. "I mean business. You and your cousin came out to say something. Say it, and get out!"

So the young one with the stoop shoulders and pasty face was his cousin. I disliked him instinctively.

"Still the same amiable chap. Soul of hospitality!" I had to admire the man's courage. Mike took a step toward him. And instead of the young one coming up to the older man's side, he stepped back. That disgusted me plenty.

"All right," Bradley snapped, his little eyes blazing. "You're late. President Gonzalez signed the loan agreement this morning. That means Washington will back up the



constituted government and will regard the landing of expeditionary forces as a violation of the neutrality laws." He flung a contemptuous hand at Jerry and the army, now busily entraining.

I WAS watching this activity with growing uneasiness. My place was on that train.

"You're lying about that loan being signed." Nothing indirect about Mike.

Before Bradley could reply, I horned in:

"Excuse it, Mike. This doesn't seem to be my party. I got business ashore." I nodded toward the train. "All right?" My heart was pounding with excitement. Old Don Antonio was climbing up into the caboose and soldiers were swarming up into the banana cars, hoisting up their women, jugs of rum, baskets of chickens. A regular picnic. And I wanted to be at Jerry's side when he stormed San Sebastian. Maybe some local news photographer would be around. America would love a picture of me at the head of the parade.

"I took the precaution of ordering a gunboat, too," Bradley went on, appraising me with a single sweep of his eyes. "Be here any time now. I'm afraid I'll get the horse laugh for asking for protection. You know I rather expected you'd come down with something a bit more impressive——"

"We're not doing bad," Branigan said softly. "Trulo's ours. So is Bello. And San Sebastian will be in a few hours."

"O. K., Mike?" I blurted. "They're shoving off."

"You're staying," he said. I was halfway down the gangplank when that command cracked down around my ears.

"You're kidding!"

"Stay here."

"And miss all the fun? Nothing doing. They need me——"

"If you're going to work for me you've got to learn to take orders." Mike was hopping angry. Later on, I learned it was because I had put him in the position of having to discipline me before the enemy. But I was seeing red just then.

"First you leave America over at Motrilla so she misses all the fun, after she came down and did her share. Now you'll keep me here polishing brass, I suppose!"

I would have given anything not to have spoken those words. The instant they were out I knew I had made a terrible mistake.

"Sorry," I mumbled, unable to look the chief in the eye.

"America? Really?" This was the young one speaking. "Haven't seen her since college prom last June. How's the old girl?"

"You won't be interested," I snarled, glad to find a legitimate outlet for my fury.

"Wait till she hears about her brass-polishing hero's triumphal march on the capital," he crowed.

Branigan caught my hot eyes with his cool ones. His face was stern and strangely pale. But he let a faint smile play around his lips for a split second.

"You can work him over, if that'll help, Steve," he said gently.

It took me a couple of seconds to get this. Then I whirled for that bag of jelly beans, but he was already down the gangplank.

I stumbled below and sulked. Bradley went ashore right on the heels of his cousin. Then I heard Mike bellowing good wishes to his army. There was no end of cheering and shouting. The locomotive threw three staccato blasts against

the mountain wall, couplings clanged, wheels squeaked—the army was off!

## CHAPTER VI.

### KIDNAPED?

SOMEHOW, Mike managed to scare up one of those gasoline motor cars on railroad wheels. He called me on deck and we went ashore, leaving the *Mosquito* under heavy guard.

"San Sebastian?" I dared to ask hopefully.

"Forget San Sebastian. Jerry'll fix that up. You and I have work to do. I brought you down here to learn something about bananas—not revolutions!"

We were scooting through Bello now, past the Tropical layout, through the intricate railroad yard, past a dump where buzzards foraged. Then we roared across a bridge and I could look down into a swirling, coffee-colored stream.

"But I don't see how we can forget it!" I had to shout to make myself heard above the roar of the car as we ripped through the jungle. "Why bother to come down at all? Here we knock off the two important seaports and get in swell shape to take the capital—then we stay behind. What for? To inspect banana farms?"

Mike didn't answer at once. We sped through lanes of banana trees. Abruptly then he applied the brakes and we came to a screeching halt. The car was rolled onto a siding and Mike plunged at once into the heart of the farm. He peered up through the leaves, he smelled the loamy soil, crumbling it between his fingers, he laid out imaginary waterways and bridges. I was dead on my feet, my face and hands cut by underbrush when we finally came to a large thatch hut in a clearing

where the plantation owner lived. Mike saluted the occupants heartily, and was welcomed. The clean-swept dirt floor was cool. It was very pleasant to sit on a soap crate in that dim hut, watching the procession of children, pigs, dogs, and chickens as they passed through the place.

We had black coffee. Then we shook hands gravely and bowed our way out of the hut, everybody pouring out all the friendly phrases that came to mind.

"They're all sore at Bradley," Mike said, as he plunged into the farm. "Ready to break their contracts if Castro gives 'em a legal way out."

"If Castro gets in," I mumbled.

Mike stopped.

"Listen, son. You talk too much. You're too persistent." He waited until this sank in. Then he started to hike again. "But I like it," he went on. "All you need is training. You'll be all right." He stopped again and thrust out his jaw at me. "Listen, you crazy ape. Do you suppose I wouldn't be at San Sebastian this minute if that was my place? But my job is to stall off the gunboat when it comes in."

"What good am I at that?"

"Your job is to go back to Motrilla and get the gal. Feel any better now?"

At dusk we crossed the bridge and rolled back into Bello. Mike stopped at the radio station to learn the latest from San Sebastian.

"No word from the capital yet, Mr. Branigan," the operator reported. "Did you get your other message?"

"What other message? We've been out in the bush all day."

"It's not an official message," the operator replied. "Just a note flashed over from Motrilla." He

seemed embarrassed. "Mr. Bradley said we should tell you just in case you——"

"In case what?" roared Mike.

"Well, sir, it's about a young lady over there. She disappeared. Went off in a boat with some people. Mr. Bradley thought you might want to know."

"Gone off, you say. Gone off with whom?"

"I don't know really. Neither does our Motrilla operator. He just saw them leaving in a launch and reported the incident to us. He tells everything that goes on over there. There's so little——"

But Mike was dashing out the door. I caught up with him outside. He was muttering: "Damn that guy! If there's some trick in this I'll wring his neck. What do you suppose——"

I didn't know. I only knew that all sorts of queer things were going on inside of me and I was seeing America's sweet face as clearly as though she were there in front of me. Then I got it.

"My fault," I blurted. "I told Bradley that you had left her on the island for safety."

"Never mind. Come on."

**W**E ran through the street, elbowing people out of our way, and soon were in the strangely quiet Tropical section. Mike went up the steps of a big frame house, knocked once on the door, then opened it and strode in.

In the front room were Bradley, a woman I supposed was his wife, and two naval officers. At the sight of Mrs. Bradley, Mike stopped, took off his hat and gathered himself together.

"Sorry to break in this way," said Mike, "but I just got a message from one of your radio operators that my

daughter had left Motrilla. Do you know anything about it?"

Bradley was suave. "I hope there's no cause for alarm," he said. "Won't you sit down?" Then he went through the ceremony of introducing his wife and the officers and Mike had to stifle his impatience and present me. The elder of the officers was Commander Pierce of the gunboat. Mike appealed to him.

"My daughter was to have stayed in Motrilla until I returned. If she's left, something must have happened to her. It's your duty to help me find her."

"But perhaps she left of her own accord."

"She wouldn't. I told her to stay."

"I am very sorry. I don't see what I can do."

"You can send your men out to search for her. You can send the gunboat out to search the bay."

Bradley broke in, still smiling. "Really, Mr. Branigan, you don't expect the gunboat to leave here in the present unsettled state of things. After all, you are not without responsibility for it."

"If this is a game——"

"The navy," said the commander stiffly, "would lend itself to no plot. I shall be glad to send a detachment of men to look for your daughter along the beach. But my duty is to remain in this port."

There was nothing more to say. After all, this was Mike's own doing, and if America was lost it was probably his fault. Not that that made it any easier.

Bradley escorted us to the door. He stepped out on the porch behind us, seeming loath to let us go. Mike turned and faced him.

"I wish I could help you," Bradley said. "Of course, my own men will keep a lookout. If it only were not for this revolutionary scare—and,

of course, it has no chance of success."

"Meaning what?" Mike said.

"The United States will never recognize your crowd, even if they should take San Sebastian. If this movement were only disbanded——"

"Then what?"

"Then perhaps the girl——"

I watched them there in the half-light on the porch. They stared straight at each other and neither dropped his eyes. Finally Mike spoke, and his voice was strangely soft.

"Bradley, if you're holding my girl in the crazy hope of blocking this revolution it won't do any good. I couldn't call it off if I wanted to."

"You do me a great injustice," said Bradley.

"The wires are cut."

"They have been fixed."

"What's happening?"

"They're still fighting in San Sebastian."

In the midst of this crisis I didn't regret missing the only real fighting of the revolution.

"What could I do?" Mike asked.

"Perhaps a message to Señor Castro, advising him to accept a post in the government. The president might even be persuaded to grant you certain concessions——"

There was a long minute of silence, then Mike said:

"If this is all a trick we'll just let it pass as part of your game. But if you have done anything to my daughter I promise you I'll ruin you. And if she's hurt in any way—even so much as a tiny scratch—then I swear I'll stamp you out."

He turned on his heel and walked down the steps. I was at his side; he was walking fairly slowly now, trying, I suppose, to make up his mind whether this was all a lie or whether Bradley had really dared

to kidnap America. We went aboard the *Mosquito* and cast off immediately. There were three men in the engine room and Mike and I could take turns at the wheel.

For hours I sat near him in the pilot house, watching his broad shoulders move as he handled the wheel, watching the grim expression of his mouth and chin and the intent look of his half-closed eyes. He said nothing. Every hour or two I would offer to take the wheel and he would shake his head impatiently. I suppose the act of steering kept him from tearing his hair. As for me, America had suddenly become the most valuable individual in the world.

All night long I recalled her every look and gesture. Bitterly I regretted mentioning her name in a fit of passion. I was to blame. Every turn of the propeller said: "Blame! Blame! Blame!" Then the black turned to pearl and the pearl to gold. The island loomed through the dawn mist. We landed. Mike and I hurried through the small silent street and banged on the door of the house. An old man finally opened it and blinked at us, while Mike shook him.

"De lydie?" he said, in his queer island English. "She say you send for her. She gone."

## CHAPTER VII.

### LOVERS' QUARREL.

PORTO BELLO, as dawn was supplanted by early-morning sunlight, was something worth looking at. But we were in no mood to revel in pastoral beauty. All night we had drummed about the great Bay of Honduras, pursuing and overhauling small craft in a futile effort to locate America. Now we were cutting back to port,

the *Mosquito's* nose sluicing through cobalt waters.

Mike drove the ship to her berth at the dock. The fact that the banana boat was gone and that the gunboat had disappeared meant nothing to him at the moment. His eyes sought a fifty-footer answering to the name *Jane Esau*. That coast-wise launch had called at and departed from Motrilla very secretly the day before.

"There she is!" Mike bellowed, pointing down the dock. "I'd know her anywhere. That's the *Jane Esau!*"

I poised on the prow of the *Mosquito*, tensed for a leap to the dock.

"Hey, you!" Mike accosted a soldier slouched on some burlap bags. "How long's she been in?" He pointed toward the launch.

"Since late last night, *compañero*. *Viva, Castro!*"

Mike groaned.

"The launch, not the president. When did the launch get in?"

I didn't hear the reply. I was on the dock, sprinting along, the wind whistling in my ears. Castro was in! Jerry was in! We were made! All we needed was America.

The *Jane Esau* was rocking gently as I took her deck in my stride. I went below, blinking and coughing in the dark, filthy hold.

"The girl!" I shouted, to a solitary native sprawled in a bunk built into the wall. "What did you do with her? Where is she?"

Startled, he rose to his elbow, then sank back and shrugged his shoulders against the pallet.

"Quién sabe?" His voice was surly. "No speakee Eengleesh."

I didn't feel like arguing. I grabbed him by the hair and shirt and yanked him out of his bunk with all possible brutality. The

shock brough a sharp cry from his throat.

"Speak Spanish, then," I growled, in his own language. "You got that white girl yesterday. Where is she?" I shook him until his head bobbed crazily.

"Ashore," he managed to blurt, his eyes bulging. "She is safe. Señor Bradlee——"

One of Bradley's rats. Mike would love that. If she had been harmed——

I couldn't see Mike anywhere, so I hotfooted ashore and headed for the long, screened clubhouse on the beach. It was a property of the Tropical crowd, but we were in now. To hell with the Tropical Banana Co.!

Voices, music, laughter drew me to the corner of the porch. Unmindful of my unkempt appearance, I burst through the door and thundered down the veranda, shouting America's name.

"For Heaven's sake, Steve, what's the matter?"

America was dancing, mind you—and with young Bradley.

"You're all right, then?" I grabbed her hands, breaking up the dance. She was safe after all—and beautiful. It was the beauty that first set me back in my place. All of a sudden I realized how lovely and cool and clean she was. Then I noticed how immaculate and poised her escort was. My face, sharp with worry, started to burn behind its two day's growth of beard. My baggy linen trousers were stained with grease. I was a mess.

**W**HATEVER is the matter with you?" Her voice had a touch of irritation in it. "What have you been doing to get in such a condition?" Then she started to laugh. "Oh. Out celebrating



Don Antonio's triumph in a local bar."

"Sure," I said. So that rat Bradley had told her I didn't go to the capital with General Jerry. "Sure. Whooped it up plenty. Haven't even been to bed."

I rested my hot eyes on her as the full measure of her contempt darkened her face.

"Dance, darling?" Bradley laid a hand on her arm and made as if to swing her away.

Red flashes crossed my vision. The old temper was crackling.

"Get out," I said, pointing an incredibly dirty finger in his face. "Get out before I throw you out!"

America whirled between us and struck at my hand. I jerked it aside and she missed. I laughed. Now she was furious.

"You'd better sober up," she snapped, "before Mike sees you in this condition. He's got an opinion of beach combers."

"Beach combers! That's hot!" I shouted. "Wait till you see him."

"If you are intimating that my father——"

"Yes, I'm intimating that your father," I mimicked her voice, her stance, and her gestures, only my voice was louder, "spent the whole night beech combing. For you—darling!"

Bradley stepped around from behind her skirts.

"Here you," he said gruffly. "You can't——"

I poked at him, but America's wiry body flung against me and broke the force of the blow. She was in my arms for a second—an infinitely sweet second.

Even as she struggled to get away, I could see Bradley hurrying along the veranda, fussing with his clothing.

Then Mike came thundering in

and I sat down at a little table, suddenly all in. I was too miserable to notice that America was standing in front of me, trying to shield me from his scrutiny.

He smothered her in a quick embrace, then drew back and tipped up her flower face, studying her eyes.

"You all right, kid?"

"Sure, Mike."

"Don't lie. There's trouble in your eyes. What did they do to you?" Mike didn't know we had been fighting.

"They? Who? What are you talking about?"

"Didn't Steve tell you?"

"I don't know what either of you are talking about. All I know is that they came to get me yesterday in the launch you sent over. We got lost a while, but there was a radio on board. About midnight we picked up the signal and came in. Al Bradley very kindly met me on the dock and put me up here."

Mike sat down and swabbed his face with a foul bandanna.

"Well, I'll be——" He surveyed the kerchief and instinctively hid it in his pocket, glancing up to see if she had noticed it.

"Think you could recognize the men who brought you?" he asked casually.

"Why, certainly. But what's it all about? What's the mystery?"

"No mystery," Mike said softly, wearily. "You were just kidnaped. And you would still be if Castro hadn't made the grade. Steve and I have been on the *Mosquito* the last twelve hours looking for you."

Revenge was sweet. She'd have to make up now, and I was all set to play the baby.

"I'm terribly sorry, daddy." She stood over him, petting his shaggy head.

"That's O. K., kid," he smiled. "And maybe Steve could use a little of that."

She started over, obedience and instinct outweighing for the moment the scene we had just stormed through. But one look at my face stopped her.

"He's acted like a tramp to my friend," she said. "He came in here and tore into us. He can apologize to Al Bradley before I care to have anything to do with him."

Mike roared. He lined it up as a lover's quarrel.

"I'll look him up," I mumbled bitterly. "And when I find him I'll bust him in the nose."

And with these genteel words I put my head in my arms and went to sleep at the table.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### BANANA KING.

**W**AS America sore? She wouldn't so much as look at me, even after she, Mike, and I boarded the *Mosquito* for a cruise of inspection. I'm no mean hand at sulking myself once I get my back up; and Al Bradley had just what it takes to get a rise out of me. If ever I knew a weak dish of tea, he was it.

She nearly drove me crazy, perched gracefully at the after rail, with her bare legs swinging as she paid out her hand line. There were certain silky curls at the nape of her neck that made me wild to throw my arms around her and whisper words of love into her ear. And yet the tortures of the Inquisition couldn't have made me do it. Every inch the whirlwind lover—that was old Steve Pinckney!

"Now, Steve—time's come for action." Mike was in rare humor. That meant talk, and lots of it. I

pulled myself out of the realm of fancy with an effort and concentrated on his words.

There was one other Caribbean port in the republic—Caballo. Too insignificant to warrant our capture, it was yet destined to be vitally important to us.

"It's to be our headquarters," Mike confided. "We're on our way to give it the once over. It's only a few miles away. I used to ship bananas out of Caballo."

"You mean it has a dock and a railroad?" I asked, because I gathered it must be nothing but a gathering of thatch huts such as those I had seen all along the coast. "What sense is there in having two ports so close together?"

"No sense," Mike replied cheerfully. "Lots of things go on down here without making sense." He squinted toward the shore. "Look there, Steve. See that cut in the mountain range?"

Sure enough, I could see a gap in the mountain wall.

"Remember the river we crossed yesterday on the motor car? That's the Oloa. It comes down through that pass. The low river land is the banana land. Originally the banana development was all on the right bank for the simple reason that the government years ago built a railroad from Caballo, along the river and up to a flourishing city called Bonito. So when bananas were developed, the government railroad shipped 'em and the government built a dock to permit banana boats to load."

I nodded.

"Well, when the government saw that there was real money in the business, it began to clamp down on companies such as the Tropical. The charge for hauling and dockage went up and up. And when Trop-

ical tried to build its own dock and other quarters in Caballo real estate went sky high. Get it now?"

My blank face was eloquent answer.

"Tropical decided it would be cheaper to operate on the left bank of the river, even including the expense of building a railroad of sorts and constructing its own pier and all that. So they searched for a decent harbor, and Bello was the answer."

I could see the bar now, where the Oloa emptied into the sea. Obviously no port could be built at its mouth, as there was no protection whatever from the terrific pound of an angry sea.

"So we're going over to Caballo," Mike mused. "You'll love it. A rotten dock, a rotten hotel—the Palace, of course—and a town full of cantinas."

"Sounds attractive," I said. "Go on. Tell us more. We're listening." For some perverse reason I felt like teasing the girl.

I could see America bristle. She yanked viciously on the cord and sent the spinner flashing through the air.

"She'd be just lucky enough to catch a tarpon by some kid tactics like that," I observed with gleeful realization that I was being one hundred per cent obnoxious.

"Leave the kid alone," Mike said. He winked at me.

"Oh, all right," I put all the sulkiness I could muster into my voice. "Go on with your banana story."

"All right. It's understood that

we're setting up headquarters in Caballo. It was too insignificant for us to have to capture, but it's all for Castro. We'll be royally received there to-night. Hi, America!" He winked again. "Got any beer aboard? Get us a couple of bottles. There's a good girl."

"I'm busy!"

"Steve'll hold your line for you, won't you, Steve?" He motioned me over. This quarrel pleased him hugely.

I sprang to her side. I'd had enough fighting and was all for making up.

"Sure thing," I said, kneeling beside her. "Let me take it." I laid my hand over her little mitt. "Darling," I whispered in her ear, "forgive me?" It was very faint, but it was the best a Pinckney could be expected to say.

"Don't darling me!" She flung herself away and left me with a hand line, and a rankling feeling. After all, there was no call for her to throw that 'darling' approach back in my teeth before Mike.

Right there I decided I was off women—permanently!

GO ahead," I said over my shoulder, ashamed to show my face.

"Where was I at?" Mike said. He sounded embarrassed, too.

"You were talking about Caballo and the Oloa."

"Well, you see, Tropical now operates on the left bank and has its own railroad. We're going to operate on the right bank and use the

## DO YOU KNOW—

1. Of what species does the male bear the infant young instead of the female?
2. If mental telepathy is given scientific recognition?
3. The meaning of the word "Es-kimo?"
4. How much actual cash is in circulation in the United States?
5. If it is possible for an individual to incorporate himself and sell shares in that corporation?
6. If the beaver uses its tail for any purpose other than swimming?
7. If bulls "see red?"

Continued on page 29

government road. That's simple enough."

For a while we sat there in a silence that grew more and more uncomfortable as America prolonged her stay below deck.

I looked back to see why Mike was so quiet. His face was lined and strangely troubled.

"You two kids sore?" he asked.

"Nothing much, I guess," I mumbled. I couldn't tell whether America could hear from below or not.

"She's crying," he said softly. "You better make up."

I started to get up. Crying? It tore at my heart to think of those dear eyes swollen with tears.

"Not now," he counseled. "Not just now. She'd never forgive you if you caught her crying. Shows she's fond of you. Wait a while.

Catch her by surprise. Take a page out of Jerry's book."

"Your book, I'd say!" That pleased him. Mike was a big baby about some things—America for example.

The atmosphere was cleared now that he had got his worries off his chest.

"Your first job will be to work on land grants," Mike stated happily. "It's a dirty assignment."

Then he went on to explain that the government never sold its land outright to foreign interests. And for every parcel of banana land leased, the government would set aside an equal parcel which could only be worked by a native.

"So what?" I said.

"So the natives merely grow bananas and sell them on a contract basis to people like Bradley."

"And how do you propose to chisel in? If the natives are under contract to Bradley, what'll you do—take out naturalization papers?"

"I put Castro in, didn't I?"

"Oh."

The *Mosquito* rounded the point then and Mike rang for half speed ahead. We idled along through the lime-colored bay and alongside a spindly dock. America came up and

blinked mistily at the dazzling beach against which the breakers flung their spray.

"Come on, kids, let's go ashore."

Mike was as excited as a boy with a new bicycle. He waved at the throng of friends and officials who were there to welcome us ashore.

America would not go. She said she'd prefer to stay aboard and fish. That suited Mike.

"You want to stay with her, Steve?"

I thought fast.

"I'd like to, boss. But my place is with you, isn't it? There may be work to do. You said something about recruiting labor for your farms and to load your boats."

"Yeah. That's so. Better come along." He studied my face. "Say, you're a hound for work. And not even on the pay roll. Need any money?"

"What for? You're feeding me."

"That's so, but you ought to be drawing a salary. How about two hundred and fifty a month to start?"

"Two dollars and fifty cents a

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8. How many hairs there are, as an average, on the human scalp, and do the numbers vary according to the coloring of the hair?
9. How rapidly human hair grows on the scalp?
10. What constitutes bad flying weather in commercial aviation?
11. What two famous liqueurs take their names from religious orders, and the origins of the two?
12. How old is the profession of plastic surgery?
13. What word "tenor" means, and why this term was used?
14. Why a hen cackles after laying an egg?

Answers on page 127

month if you say so," I answered fervently. "It's not the salary I'm interested in—it's the project. Let's leave it at that.

He liked the attitude.

Ashore we were swept triumphantly into a stem-winding automobile and driven to the Palace Hotel. It was a big, creaky, wooden structure, indescribably sordid, with walls plastered with liquor lithographs and halls decorated with rubber plants and slot machines. The bar was in an uproar; bronzed men in boots and riding clothes milled around the tables and the rail, all in festive mood.

"Branigan!"

"Hey, Mike!"

"When do we eat?"

"Yeah, bananas!"

They were all around him, then.

"Swell work, fella."

"And that old devil Jerry is chief of police—how's for making me ambassador to Paris?"

"Speech!"

"Speech from King Mike—the big banana man!"

Next thing I knew they had him up on the bar. These men were *glad* to see Branigan. He made a fine figure up there, too. There was power and dignity in the bulk of his shoulders against that mildewed mirror.

"I'm no big banana king," he began bluntly, holding his hand up for silence. "And I'm no orator."

He waited patiently for the ovation to die down.

"All I want to say is this: you boys who helped me when I was here before are going to work! I have been instrumental in restoring to rightful power a man loved and respected by his fellows. But I am not asking favors for this. I have never asked for anything. Lots of people think they can take wealth

from Latin America by sheer right of conquest. Look at the pirates. Now you can take it from me that there will be nothing like that as long as the Branigans are in the banana business. We'll pay as we go—and we'll still make good."

It was effective. The cheering and scuffling were resumed and it was only by much battling that I finally won my way to Mike's side.

"Good going," I gasped. "And what now?"

"Line 'em up and get their names and records," he grinned. "We'll be ready for 'em in a week. See you on the boat for dinner."

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE WAY UP.

FOR some weeks I had to exist at the Palace Hotel. Whoever designed that shack had a colossal conception, and it was sublimely executed. The problem must have been to erect a structure with twenty-four strictly airless, sunless rooms with but one exposure, and that on a stagnant lagoon. Every morning I would yank open the medicine closet for my razor and things only to expose eight or ten nervous roaches. One, a hard-shelled devil about the size and complexion of a cake of kitchen soap, would bristle his whiskers and show his teeth. He liked the taste of my shaving cream and was prepared to fight for the right to nibble around. We got to be real pals in time. I called him Frank; he just had that look about him.

Cooking, loving, fighting, and singing all took place in the patio directly below my room.

Yet despite the wrangling, the horrible phonograph records, and the lusty brawling in the bar, I was happy at the Palace. Maybe it was



because I was important: I had a temporary office on the ground floor, and the respect with which I was held by the banana workers who crowded around to get on the roll, was impressive.

For a week I slaved over the payroll. Then I plotted out the boundaries of various land grants.

Once I had all the properties checked and listed, Mike had me prepare formal leases on all the parcels whose soil analysis and other investigations indicated first-class banana land. He even made me use paper stamped with the seal of the Republic of Comayagua. Nothing was missing—except the signatures!

"Come on out the line," Mike boomed, one blistering morning. "Show you what we're doing." We hopped into his motor car and rattled over the ancient steel for twenty or thirty miles, winding along within sight or smell of the river all the way.

Our car screeched to a halt at a junction point where saddle mules and one of our overseers awaited us.

"You wait here for Bradley," I heard Mike instruct the young man. We swung away then down a narrow trail and into the bush. Branigan turned in his saddle. "Didn't know we were going to have such a distinguished visitor, did you?"

I asked the obvious question. Any time Mike put a question to me, it was my cue to rise to the bait.

"I arranged it. I want Bradley over to see what we're up to. He won't like it. Maybe he'll complain to the government."

"In other words, that's what you want him to do." I didn't know what it was all about, but it was evident that Mike expected me to help build up the situation to Bradley's utmost displeasure.

For a while we rode along the

boundary of an old banana farm. I could see the rusty railroad spur running along under the trees.

"Interesting thing about bananas," Mike remarked, over his shoulder. He reined up. "Bananas are planted by putting roots—like potato eyes, only about the size of a football—in the ground. Many shoots spring up from each planting. The practice has always been to trim most of these shoots back, thus diverting he strength into five or six trees. "A tragic waste of plant life I call it."

We rode on through the heat waves, our animals plodding along the narrow trail.

"You're about as communicative as an unattached radio," I complained.

The land to our left had never been planted to bananas. This was a plot I had recently been ordered to check on for Mike. It had been a governmental timber property, sold years ago to a man who had worked all the rosewood and mahogany off it and who had been delighted to sell it for a decent figure.

Mike suddenly set a pace. We booted our animals into an unwilling trot and bore down on a labor camp of thatch huts—a scene of wild activity. There must have been a couple of hundred peons and scores of pack animals, moving in and out of the banana farm on the right. Mules scuffed along, laden with young banana trees the roots of which were still dripping damp earth so recently had they been dug up. Men were digging long rows of holes, twenty feet apart. Others were stolidly swinging machetes through the underbrush, clearing the way for narrow roads and the plantings being hauled in by the mules.

"Well," Mike said, indicating the activity with a flick of his hand, "that's it."

**B**EFORE I could ask Mike what "it" was, our attention was drawn to the figures appearing through the clearing. They were Bradley and our guide.

"Nothing doing, Branigan," Bradley said, without so much as a glance at me. "It won't work. I'm sorry for you——"

"And my heart bleeds for you, too," Mike growled, "so we can cut the expressions of sympathy."

Bradley's cheek burned with growing anger.

"Think you can transplant growing trees and save six months on production time, eh? It's a crazy notion. And besides you can't buy banana trees from these planters. You know they're all under contract to Tropical. I'll protest just as a matter of form."

"Why don't you?" Mike said. "Write Castro a note and tell him the sad story." He leaned forward and slapped a fly on his animal's neck. "And be sure to point out that Branigan isn't buying bananas at all. Just a lot of young trees."

"A technicality!" Bradley snapped. "You can't get away with it. I'll protest. I'll tie your assets up in a double bowknot." He swung his mule's head around. "And if that doesn't work there are other ways we have down here of dealing with people who violate the laws."

"Sure, you kidnap their daughters." Mike was bristling now.

"Beat it, Bradley," I said, riding between them. "You don't like our methods and we don't like yours."

"I'll say I don't. I don't like the crazy way you're trying to undermine the morale of my overseers by paying higher salaries. I don't like the——"

"Beat it," I said again. I was getting angry myself. Yet I had to ad-

mire the man's courage. There was no absolute fear in him.

"Just keep on this side of the river, I'm warning you both," he flung at us, as he started away.

"You're equally welcome over here," Mike bellowed.

"Don't forget to water your precious transplantings," he shouted, from the edge of the clearing. He and Mike were acting like a couple of kids—each determined to have the last word. "It forgets to rain down here for six months at a time."

Mike just sat there, his blue eyes resting on Bradley's retreating figure.

"Well, I guess he'll complain all right," I finally interrupted his day-dreaming. "And suppose he gets an injunction of restraint and does tie us up?"

"Six months at a time," he soliloquized. "No rain. That's true. And banana plants by chemical analysis are ninety per cent water." The blue eyes sought out mine. "Steve, you know I think we've got something there. I think Bradley left a thought with us."

I laughed.

Mike came back to earth abruptly.

"About the complaint and the injunction. Fat chance of Don Antonio doing anything to put a crimp in our expenditures. The government needs the money. That's the argument I advanced to Castro yesterday. I pointed out how Tropical was crippling the potential earning power of the native planters because there was nothing in the contracts to force Bradley's people to buy the entire output. I'm trying to work him around to the point where he will revoke those contracts. I'll slip in with new ones, offering a higher unit price per bunch of fruit and committing myself to take the entire output. This transplanting gag

is just to keep us busy and to get Bradley to bring up the matter. Then the government will investigate the present contracts."

It didn't take any giant intellect to visualize the sudden enormous control of banana output that would accrue to any man putting this over. We seemed definitely on the way up.

## CHAPTER X.

### TRIUMPHANTLY MAD.

AS the year drew to a close, I took time out to do a little writing. The first since the city editor had done me the favor of canning me. This attempt was only an annual report.

"Thought you might like it—you know, to show the bankers or the *politicos*." I handed it over, all done up in a fancy binder.

Mike gave me a check for a thousand dollars. Most I ever got for any piece of writing.

We had a model banana division. Twenty farms, all under long-term lease, each capable of producing a total of fifty thousand bunches of fruit a week. And it was the best grade fruit coming up from the entire banana belt. We knew it was better than Bradley's stuff and Mike gloried in the knowledge that the brass hats in the Tropical organization up North must be putting the screws down hard on their manager.

The banana jobbers were complaining about the poor grade Tropical was shipping. And the claims coming in against Bradley's unsatisfactory shipments was hurting. Tropical stock dropped steadily and Mike picked up an occasional block.

"Just to keep 'em worried," he explained. "And in case I ever want to attend one of their stockholders' meetings to hear the board bawl Bradley out."

COM-3

In the middle of the rainy season Mike came into the office, his slicker glistening with water, and told me to get my things. That's all he had to say. I knew something was in the wind.

We rode the full fifty kilometers up the railroad on his motor car. He smoked and fumed all the way, urging more speed out of a motor boy already near the point of distraction. The windshield streamed, rain beat relentlessly on the roof of our car, steam rose from the soggy banana land.

At the end of rails we clambered out.

"Start the launch," Mike ordered the boy.

The launch was open and the mechanic had a devil of a time getting her started. Finally the sporadic coughs became a steady pur. We shoved off into the swirling, coffee-colored water.

"Cross the river," Mike said.

"Where to, boss?"

"Anywhere we can get up the bank."

He lapsed into silence. Once he saw the head of an alligator nosing about. His hand went to his holster.

"Guess not," he grumbled. "Don't want to attract any undue attention. But I just naturally want to plug any alligator!"

Up the red, slimy bank we crawled to the comparative shelter of some banana trees.

"Know where we are, Steve?"

"Sure. We're in the Tropical zone of protection where we have no business."

"Don't take on like that. This isn't land owned by Bradley's crowd. This is independent property. Just like ours."

"You said it. Just like ours. And you wouldn't like it a bit if Bradley came messing around."

Mike had started through the farm, slopping along the rain-soaked bridle path.

"That's just what he's been doing," he said grimly. "And he gave me an idea." He waited for me to splash up to him. "Listen, Steve. All this property way up at the end of Tropical's line is owned by independent planters. And not under contract."

"The hell!" It was news to me. "But Bradley buys fruit up here. Why he gets a sweet cargo out of this scetion. Look at those bunches hanging. Best land in his division."

"Yeah. He buys up here all right. But here's the catch. He only buys up here when the output of the farms owned by his company can't take care of market requirements. He doesn't bother with contracts because he's got 'em where he wants 'em. It's his railroad and there's no other way to get the fruit out—yet."

Mike slogged along for a mile or more, finally coming to the Tropical rails. Turning inland, he walked the ties until we came to a drab thatch hut.

"Joaquin Morales lives here," he told me. "He's the owner of this property. Come on in. Maybe he's got a shot of *guaro*."

**W**E shouted and entered the smoky hut. Dirt floor, jerked meat and peppers hanging from the rafters, crude tables and chairs. The acrid odor of roasting coffee stung our nostrils.

We sat around with Joaquin and his señora, drinking the fiery sugar liquor and learning how poor business had been. Less than half his output sold in six months.

"What can we do? We cannot get our fruit down to the steamers except over the Tropical railroad. As

you know, it is impossible to lighter it down the river."

"Why?" Mike snapped.

So that was his crazy notion. Going to build rafts and haul downstream.

"No way of getting lighters back once they're down."

"We can buy tugs."

Joaquin shook his head.

"No, señor. Even then it wouldn't work. The bar is too shallow at the mouth of the river. It would take a week to get the floats out to the ship's side—and there's no dock."

"You see," I said.

"How'd you like to sign a five-year contract to deliver all your fruit to me." Mike didn't require an answer. That look on Joaquin's face was eloquent.

"No promises yet—just keep your mouths shut," Mike cautioned them. "Not a word." He turned to me. "Draw up contracts and we'll see." We got up and shook hands with the ecstatic farmer and his wife.

Before we returned to our boat we had visited every farm owner in the block of four great plantations along the river bank.

"It looks crazy to me," I said, as we went back through the gray afternoon. "It won't hurt Tropical much right now to deprive them of fruit, they can't sell anyway. And it'll break you to have to buy the entire output and have it rot on the farms."

"Who says it'll rot? We can sell it once we get it on our boats."

"Sure. But how are you going to do that? The law says that nobody can build a railroad on Bradley's side of the river within ten miles of his zone of protection."

"Now you're getting somewhere, Stevie. Just define the zone of protection."

"Five miles inland from the rail-

road right of way," I answered crossly.

"Inland. Yeah. But how about this side?"

"The river bank," I answered. "So what?"

What a scheme! The man's daring left me speechless.

A pontoon bridge from our end-of-rails across the river to the farm land we had just vacated! Light engines to haul fruit on flat cars, to be reloaded on our side onto regular fruit cars.

"It will cost a fortune," I whispered. "And suppose it doesn't work? You'll be under contract for countless thousands of bananas that you can never lift."

"Yeah. That's why I'm not signing—yet. The only way I can afford to buy those bananas is if I can get 'em out. It's the bridge I'm going to gamble on. Materials, labor, and all. They tell me that the steel can be used for railroad maintenance even if the bridge is a flop. So I won't be out much there."

The more I thought about it the better it sounded. I guess my face started to clear up. Mike was all set for my unqualified indorsement. Then I thought of something.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What's Bradley going to do when he sees you building this bridge? Sit back and twiddle his thumbs? Not that bird."

"Bradley won't know anything about that bridge until it's up. We'll erect it overnight. And I'll take precautions to see that Bradley and some of his boys out in the bush, who might hear or see things, are busy that night."

It was one of Branigan's maddest yet most triumphant stratagems. Everything went off like clockwork. Overnight the bridge was thrown up and a dinky engine and ten train

cars puffed across to the Tropical zone of protection. Then and there the contracts were solemnized and Mike picked up fifty bunches from each farm and pompously hauled them back to his line.

Bradley, we were informed, nearly had a stroke!

## CHAPTER XI.

### COUP.

THERE was a time when I would have sworn the newspaper game was the least regardful in all the world of a man's private life and time. That was before I became Mike Branigan's right-hand man in the banana industry.

Months fairly raced by as our banana division gradually took shape. Everything Mike did turned out just right. The man's business instinct was uncanny.

Branigan went North several times with America. Each time he returned it was with some triumphant report. And all the while his bananas were bringing the same market price as Bradley's.

We had been chartering small steamers whose holds were ventilated mechanically. There were always some of these lying idle at New Orleans, Mobile, or Galveston, and Mike never had trouble chartering whatever tonnage was necessary to lift his output. Then Bradley pulled a fast one; he chartered all the available ventilated tonnage even though he couldn't possibly use it. Result? Our fruit ripened and rotted on the dock at Caballo.

Mike was off to New Orleans in a flash.

"Be damned if he gets away with that. Same stunt he tried with the native planters—tying up the output and then not using it. We ironed

that out. We'll iron this out, too. Watch my smoke!"

In two weeks I received a wire from Newport News signed Brani-gan. Ten words, no more, no less. All it said was:

GOT THREE BOATS THAT WILL GIVEM FITS BE RIGHT DOWN

Scrapped torpedo boat destroyers! No ventilation, but what speed!

"Steve, this is the grandest one yet." Mike threw his powerful leg over the desk corner. "No ventilation—that's true. But we'll just cut our fruit a bit greener. And here's the pay off. These torpedo boats can knock it off to New Orleans fourteen to twenty hours faster than any scow in the Tropical fleet. Get it?"

"Sure. You've got faster toys than Bradley and can rub it in."

He waved my flippancy aside.

"It means that we can time our cuttings and our loadings to coincide or even follow the Tropical's by a few hours. And our cargo will get to market first. We can plug the fruit auction or flood the interior trade whichever offers the best price. We'll skim off the cream, son."

That will give you an idea of the fits he was throwing into Bradley month after month.

It was after one of his sudden jumps North that he returned with the explanation of the cryptic remarks and daydreams he had gone in for the day Bradley had come over to crab about our transplanting stunt.

"Steve, this is Joe Parker," Brani-gan burst into the office with a retiring-looking man who peered at me from behind thick glasses. "Put him on at four hundred a month. Start that last Tuesday. That's when I yanked him out of the onion farms

at San Antonio. Did you know they have the greatest onion farms in the world in Texas, Steve?"

No, I didn't. And what of it? Paying this owl four hundred a month sort of burned me. I wasn't getting that much.

"Tell him, Joe. Tell him." You never saw such a joyful expression on any man's face. Like a kid with a new toy.

"Irrigation," Joe said.

We spent the next ten days chugging up and down the Oloa, probing inlets, testing the silt. Joe was all business. Mike was interested in plugging alligators, and I was always fishing shards and old pots out of the Indian graves along the banks. But our irrigation engineer finally ordered pumping plants and cement, laid out a system of lateral ditches and presented the whole thing, costs, methods and all to Mike along with his resignation.

"I'm going back to onions. Too many bugs and too much heat for me."

**T**HE luck of the Irish was with us—as usual. No sooner had Mike put thousands into this irrigation venture, than the drought commenced in earnest.

Six weeks passed without a semblance of a rain cloud. The river fell alarmingly, creeks dried to glazed bed rock, the countryside withered to a sickly yellow and the rich green banana leaves on the far bank turned rusty, shredded to crisp brown strips devoid of all water. Naturally the banana bunches were utterly unmarketable.

Maybe the steady throb of our pumps wasn't sweet music! It was miraculous the way the water responded to the gravity system laid out by Parker.

"Man, oh, man!" Mike crowed, as



we rode through one of the irrigated properties. "Wouldn't Bradley love to see this water gleaming on the ground no matter where he turned! Why, Steve, the output of these irrigated farms will be worth its weight in gold as long as the drought holds out. We'll make enough plus on this fruit to offset the loss we take on our dried-up stuff. But Tropical hasn't a marketable bunch in the whole division!"

The brassy days wheeled by, the horizon unrelieved by the semblance of a cloud. Heat waves pulsed across dry plains. Roads and trails wound through vast stretches of baked underbrush. Dry, choking dust lay thick underfoot and along the paper-thin leaves.

Bradley, we learned, was so desperate that he had even employed some professional rainmakers who came down and shot off rockets from the hilltops.

"And Bradley's a practical man at heart," Mike pointed out. "So you can appreciate that he must be suffering the tortures of the damned—which is just as it should be!"

## CHAPTER XII.

### ONE CRACK TOO MANY.

**T**WO dates that mean "lids off" in Central American are their Independence Day and Christmas. In neither instance is there any unusual climatic build-up, such as terrific heat or sleigh riding. This happened to be *la dia de Independencia*, and all I recall about the weather is that it was hotter than the hot boxes on the hellbound train—if that means anything.

The Branigan Banana Co., ever the patriotic body, and particularly since there happened to be no fruit ship at the dock, was assembled in part to play baseball, sing songs, and

dispatch beer—with vigor and in volume!

We had a two-story structure on the beach where employees stayed during their occasional visits to port. The "Mad House" it was called—justifiably. I had the unique misfortune to occupy the three choicest rooms, overlooking the Caribbean. But small comfort could be derived from the billowing scenes of the infinite sea when the halls were alive with half-naked hoodlums charging about in a mad quest for fresh shirts, tooth paste, razor blades, shaving cream, and other accessories. Not being a purveyor of wholesale drugs and toilet articles, I locked up at an early hour in the morning and sneaked down the beach to Mike's house.

America was in port! She had returned on the S. S. *San Sebastian* the previous day; but I happened to be out the line at the time, checking up on the labor situation, so I hadn't seen her. Secretly I was glad I had the excuse. We were still at odds over the misunderstanding that had had its origin over at Bello, when I had found her dancing with young Bradley.

Young Bradley! He had been there when the ship docked. And from what the gang told me, he had anticipated her arrival by several days and had registered at the Palace. I hoped he had my room and that the roaches were working overtime on his hair tonic. He was the type who bore down on that commodity.

Bello at eight in the morning was heavenly; an early sun was still low enough in the eastern sky to illuminate the feathers of spray flung up by the breakers as they thundered onto the shore. I cut through the palm-bordered cement sidewalk Mike was so proud of; he liked it

because it was rounded instead of flat and would therefore drain off the water and withstand the erosive action of the seasons. But he and his engineers neglected to take into consideration the fact that it was just like walking on the partially revealed surface of a gigantic sewer pipe. Because it was the only cement sidewalk in Bello, it got a lot of patronage. But I hated it cordially and always took to the beach.

Jerry had taught me the way to hike up a tropical beach; just within the dampened area, where the sand is firmly packed. Not that I had far to go. Mike's house was built on the point and I could see the swimming raft bobbing up and down a couple of hundred yards out in the water before his beach path. A solemn procession of pelicans skimmed the waves.

I couldn't see how this young Bradley fitted into the picture. Mike loathed him. What America could see in him was beyond me. If it had been any one of several very presentable young chaps we had on the pay roll, I would have suffered in silence. As it was—

"Hello," I said to Mike, as I opened the screen door and stepped into his cool porch. "Where's America?" I lowered my voice. "Put up that magazine and tell me how I stand."

"Terrible," he whispered. As he spoke he leaned half out of the swing and peered through the blinds into a bedroom. Evidently she wasn't looking; he spat through the screened porch and relaxed again. "Hey, America!" he bellowed. "Steve's here!"

"So I gathered," came a crisp voice, from the rear of the house. "And as for you, Branigan—spit through that screen just once more and you're ruined."

"Come on out," I shouted. "And be in a bathing suit."

She appeared, almost at once.

"Oddly enough, I am," she said.

Paw through the magazines and look at the niftiest models in advertised bathing suits. They'll give you an idea.

"America!" I exclaimed, starting forward.

"That's the nicest you've been to me yet," she said. "But you're still on the probation list. Where's your suit? You can come with us."

"Suit's inside," I managed to say. I kept one in Mike's shower. "But who's us?"

"Al's coming over to take me in," she replied, flopping in the swing and lighting a cigarette. "But you come, too." Her face was red, but she carried it off.

"Can he swim?" I shouldn't have said it.

America was the most distracting thing you ever saw. Curled up there, her fine, slim legs tucked under her and those Branigan eyes blazing, I tell you she would challenge any man to try to dominate her.

"Just so long as he can swim," I said desperately, "no use for me. No place even."

"Put on your suit, you big baby," Mike growled. And I did.

"Don't go beyond the raft," Mike cautioned us, when we left. "There're sharks in the deep water."

**T**HAT beach was unusual. The sea floor, of spotless silver sand, sloped gently to a depth of ten or twelve feet, then a sudden sand bar bulked up pretty nearly to the surface. This was just beyond the raft. Beyond the bar the sea sloped at once to steel-blue deeps, filled with a nameless dread and peopled with swift bodies, in-

credibly swift. Yet that submerged bar blocked them.

Following America out the beach path, I could have kicked myself. I knew she was a swell kid, and yet, just because she stuck up for a person I couldn't see, I had to act sore. I wanted to take her little mitt and race into the breakers with her instead of slinking along after her like this.

She flashed through the shallows, then abruptly flung herself forward, cutting through a curling breaker. I watched her shake her hair back from her eyes as she stroked powerfully out to the raft. I crashed into the sea and stroked out in a vicious light-beat crawl to bring up alongside as she streaked out of the water and onto the raft in a single movement of her arms.

"Pretty fast, aren't you?" she said, honest praise in her voice.

"In the water," I said miserably. "But who wants to be a fish?"

There was the glint of a smile in her eye. If Bradley hadn't started up his senseless bellowing on the beach at that moment, I might have gotten somewhere.

"Hey, Sammy!"

"Where does he get that 'Sammy' business?" I grumbled, as she beckoned him out.

"America—Uncle Sam—Sammy," she said, in a voice of carefully sembled patience, "since you must know."

I laughed. She didn't like it, either.

Bradley pulled up alongside, throwing a baleful look out of a pale face toward me, but turning the charm faucet on full blast for her.

"Need any help getting out?" I chirped.

"Hello, darling," he gasped, ignoring me.

They chatted for a while as I

tested the springboard. Al finally made a crack.

"What are you doing over here?" I put bluntly. America bustled. I couldn't help it. She didn't know this bird.

"Jealous?" he sneered. "Where were *you* last night when Sammy came in?"

"Working, up the line, if you must know!" I snapped. "Up *our* line, not yours."

America hopped up.

"Come on," she said.

The crazy little fool dove out toward the bar. She emerged and clambered up on the submerged bank of sand.

"Come on!" she shouted. She was all set for the deep water.

"Hey, you!" I shouted, jumping up and snapping my fingers. "Young ape!" That got her attention. "Come back here."

A hand clawed at my shoulder. A jar-of-library-paste complexion suddenly pushed up against mine.

"What do you want?" I was exasperated.

"You can't talk to my girl like that!"

I shoved him into the sea off the deep side.

"You!" I howled at the girl. "Come back here!"

I don't think she saw me push Al in the water. And now he was swimming out to her. Naturally she figured he was game for a swim out beyond the bar, and that I wasn't.

"Come on, Al," I heard her say.

FOR a moment I thought of going on back and leaving her with the lump of lemon gelatine. Then Mike's warning came to me.

"Hey, you! Yes, you!" She knew I was bellowing at her. "You come

here. Hear me? Come here!" I put all the executive ability I had into it. "I'm telling you—come *here!*" I pointed to the raft at my feet. "At once. And you heard me!"

She dove into the deeps beyond the bar.

I watched Al. He had just reached her. He clambered out onto the bar, blinked at me, blinked at her lithe form cavorting beyond the barrier.

"Tell her to come back here," I shouted to him, "or I'll come and haul her out by the back hair."

For a second I thought he was going to transmit the message to her. But she was too far out. He looked at her, then back to me, then out again. I was watching him like a hawk.

He screamed suddenly, and dove into the water.

There was terror in that voice. And there was the fear of death in his swimming, which by the way, was toward the raft.

I made the bar in a single plunge and was up on the bar before Bradley had even climbed onto the raft. America was some fifty yards beyond the bar, her face turned shoreward in curiosity at Al's disappearance and my arrival.

Then I saw, from that vantage point above the sea's surface, the lithe, purple-silver body, nosing about some ten feet below the surface of the water—and not more than thirty feet from those flashing white limbs of hers.

Somebody, somewhere had said that sharks were cowards. That came automatically. Have you ever screamed or howled or threatened when you were scared to death? Ever make a ferocious, fanatic, wild pass when you had nothing behind it but your nervous system?

That's what happened. I flayed my arms, leaped as far out as I could, damned near reached the shark, and let out a scream that scared even me. Once in, I couldn't see the shark, but there were no end of minnows, silver jets flashing to left and right in wild effort to escape.

Can you believe it? She fought me! I grabbed her and battled all the way back to the bar with her. By that time I was so keyed up with artificial strength that I flung her over into the shallows. Head over heels she went, back toward the raft.

Maybe she was stunned; I'll give her the benefit of the doubt. But was I any hero? No. Al Bradley hopped in and helped her back to the raft. Shark? Absurd. She would have seen it. Or Al would have.

"Al did," I observed grimly. "His face was white as chalk."

"I had cramps," he lied, with dignity. "That's why I came back. If there had been a shark, I'd have——"

"Hopped in and torn the fins right off him," I finished. That crack finished me. I swam to shore thoroughly sour and shaken.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### FIRE!

**T**HE glittering days wheeled past. There was never a cloud to break the coppery monotony of the horizon.

Mike and I spent much time out on the farms. Weeks of drought had enhanced the importance of the irrigation project. Yet even our farms lay parched and burnished under the severe punishment. At long intervals a faint breath of wind out of the south would rustle the sea of drooping fronds.

"I don't like it," Mike grumbled, mopping his face with a horrible red

bandanna. "One thing about this country I don't like. It never does things in moderation. When it decides to go dry it does it in a big way. Seven weeks now without a drop of rain."

"We've got good fruit," I reminded him. "It costs something to pump water, but we're more than getting it back in better prices in the New Orleans market. Don't forget that."

"I'm not forgetting it. And neither is Bradley."

I didn't get the significance at the moment. Exactly ten days later the overseer of Bridge Farm—one of our best irrigated properties—telephoned hysterically to report a fire.

There was something splendid and barbaric about Mike Branigan that horrible day. He swept implacably through the listless labor, whipping them into heroic tasks.

Ever see fifteen hundred seared acres, crackling with tinder-dry undergrowth suddenly leap to flame? Ever see green growths quiver and go limp before the onrush of a wall of flame? Ever see wild-eyed animals come charging through the scrub, blindly fleeing a fire?

Down came row after row of banana plants. Many precious bunches toppled as the machetes swung feverishly along. Rakes hastily hauled undergrowth and trash aside. Money and labor, sweat and property were dedicated to the grim task of making a fire break so wide that the flames could not jump it. Under Mike's leadership men worked like demons, stripped to the waist, their brown bodies gleaming with sweat, skin caked with falling ash and debris.

"Hold you responsible for the first hundred yards!" Mike shouted, to the nearest of his overseers. "You," he bellowed to another, "the next

hundred yards! And you, the next! Now watch it! Fight it!"

He worked his way from group to group, his vitality defying the ever-growing power of the flames. At times he would disappear in a swirl of smoke, the sound of his hoarse shouts and curses lost in the hiss and snap of the boiling sap and furious roar.

Inferno on earth! A searing sun overhead, a moving wall of flame scorching its way through the parched undergrowth, a sinister screen of scarlet bellying and waving against the sky.

He sent me to the nearest telephone to call for reinforcements.

"It's serious, son. Get every laborer in the division. Order up a train with plenty of drinking water and grub." Then he was back in the midst of it again, seemingly impervious to the terrific strain.

By nightfall, with the sky aglow, we had a solid phalanx of men stretched from the banks of the Oloa clear to the foothills, three miles away. Already the burned sector, with its black stumps of dead trees, was crisscrossed with fire breaks which had proven useless.

"Be damned if I can see how the fire keeps jumping ahead like that," Mike growled, as he stood beside me. "We've pumped our irrigation ditches full, and it just hops 'em."

We watched a long train of flat-cars back up to the fire line and unload two hundred fresh men. Hoarse shouts, galloping mules, engine whistles—all the sounds and actions constituted a pageant of color and excitement.

**M**IKE'S spirit kept step with the expansion and damage of the fire. Hour by hour he directed the campaign, falling back when he had to, stubbornly

holding to a fire line as long as it was humanly possible.

At one stage in the fire development—two days after the flames had been reported—it looked as though Mike had conquered. He had the flames trapped between two wide fire roads. Men worked up toward the flames from all sides, steadily subduing it. Then bad news!

"Fire's started in three places down in the next farm," an exhausted overseer reported. Apprehensively we watched Mike's tired, ash-streaked face.

"All right, men," he said quietly. "Get a detachment down soon's possible. Have them report to me there." His great body drooped as he turned to the motor car. I went along with him.

"A tough one to fight, Steve," he said, as he rested his head on his cupped hands. The car was jogging along in the early moonlight, down past rows of still-green fruit. We saw a lone figure plodding along about a mile before the new location of the fire. Mike braked his car down to a halt.

"Where's the fire?" he asked the peon. "How much has it spread? Who discovered it?"

The man looked startled and puzzled.

"Quién sabe?" he finally mumbled.

We were under way again.

"Why should he get sore about it?" Mike puzzled. "Nothing to say but 'who knows.' And yet he must have been there. He couldn't get by without seeing the fire. I wonder—" The car came to another sudden halt. Mike snapped on the reverse and we raced back up the track. But the man had disappeared.

"What's the idea?" I asked.

"I got to thinking that that fellow wouldn't talk to me like that if

he was on my pay roll. I was just wondering."

"Wasting your time," I assured him. I had seen that fellow before. He must be all right. "That's one of our men. Probably dead tired and trying to avoid going back to work."

For three days we continued our losing fight as the fire continued to desolate our finest irrigated acres. Bradley couldn't have had a better break. The finger was certainly on us.

The next afternoon a fresh complication arose. Wind. For the first time in weeks, a scorching breeze swept down the valley, driving lumpy clouds across the leaden sky, whipping up the flames to a veritable wall of fire. Dense clouds of greenish-yellow smoke drove out across us, clouds of ashes burned our arms and necks, and stung the wet, naked bodies of the workers.

Mike licked his cracked lips, blinked red eyes, and roared his commands and encouragement even as the wind achieved gale force. We fought on, driven back yard by yard, then section by section, and finally forced to relinquish tools and supplies in the face of that furious advance of flames.

I was at Mike's side as the line finally broke. On all sides men ran while the sky was blotted out by the smoke. The noise was terrific.

"Listen!" Mike bellowed, seizing my arm.

Faintly at first, then growing, came the unmistakable sound of men cheering. It was a moving sound, taken up and relayed by a hundred throats. It gathered force until the peons were all screaming and howling. It was a cheer of triumph.

A new sound! The sound of hiss-



ing as rain and fire met. For thin, cold drops were now angling through the smoke, gathering force, growing in volume.

The men went wild. They raced down the track, leaping to feel the cold, clean drops on their blistered faces and bodies. They scuffled and danced, all caught up in the mad, passionate flare of released spirits.

One look at the sky told us that the drought was over. Rain was going to fall for some time. The fire fighting was definitely over.

Together we rode down the track, through the cheering men. Everything was steaming and dripping in the dusk. Faces could not be readily seen. Yet I thought I detected one particularly familiar face, with an expression strangely out of keeping with the others.

Not until we were back in port, shivering and cold, did I mention it to Branigan.

"Coming down the track I saw that same fellow you stopped the other day. Couldn't place him, he looked so gloomy. But now I remember."

"The 'quién sabe' chap, eh? Well, I don't care now, but I would have liked to talk to him. If it wasn't that you recall him as one of our men I would have suspected him of being a fire bug. There were lots of funny things about the spread of that fire. Bradley—"

"I've got it!" I shouted. "Bradley. Yes! The same." I grabbed Mike by the arm. "I said he was one of our men because I recognized his face as familiar. But he's *not* our man. He's Bradley's. That's the man I throttled down in the bunk room of the *Jane Esau*! That's the mug who abducted America. That's the man who's been firing our property!"

## CHAPTER XIV.

### HURRICANE.

IT'S one thing to ride through a tropical rainstorm in a covered motor car, with perhaps a flask of brandy to scare off the malaria. The wild, rain-swept night we all returned to Caballo on those flat cars none of us suffered with undue comfort. Men huddled on the boards, their charred rags running with water.

Mike strode over recumbent figures, flexing his arms about his barrel chest, bellowing to the engineer to crack her wide open. Great jets of fire plumed up through the stack, throwing weird patterns of yellow and red against the streaming rain. The train rocked along, screaming around bends, crashing into lanes of arching plants and then into the clear once more, along the river which seethed under the pelting of the storm.

As we approached port the offshore wind freshened and the scent of the sea cut through the odor of jungle soil. Finally, as the lights of town twinkled ahead, the roar of surf could be heard above the clatter of the train.

"This night has hardly started!" Mike was shouting. "We'll be lucky to have a roof over us at dawn."

"Cheery soul," I replied. "How am I to interpret that? You mean we'll be up all night nursing this flock?"

He didn't have to reply. I got it all by myself.

The wind was gale force now. It came booming in from the black void above the sea, flinging the rain aside.

"Know what?" Mike said, as the train rattled into Caballo. "I want you to set up a ration of grog for these lads. I'm going on down to

the dock. You meet me there when your job is over."

We came to a screeching stop in front of the *Adios, Amor* cantina and I hopped off, organizing the half-dead men into groups of twenty. Then I crashed into the cantina. At my order one man from each pathetic group came forward and received a three-gallon jug of rum with instructions to return to his group, work it over, and then get under cover.

Stolidly, patiently, the men stood around, gurgling the fiery liquor, passing along the jug. I watched them long enough to assure myself that the distribution system was working. A bill was then produced, which I signed with specific instructions not to deliver any more.

"Bring it around to-morrow to the Branigan Banana Co. and we'll cash it. Now close up, before you get blown away."

The wind was booming great guns by this time, ruffling the thatch roofs of the huts with great rude fingers.

It was a terrific blast freighted with salt spray, through which I struggled toward the dock. The rain blinded me. I stumbled along the rails, listening for possible banana trains which might be shunting loaded fruit cars out on the pier. I remembered that there was supposed to be a cargo loaded.

Not until I arrived at the entrance to the pier did the full import of the storm drive through me. The beach was boiling, seas whipping in over the bar. I tore my fascinated eyes from this stamping maelstrom of sea and blinked through the stinging rain out to the pier head. Waves were breaking high over the cook-house and pilot's office. The banana conveyors stood gaunt against the flood lights. And out there in the

night, wallowing horribly, one of our steamers was struggling to gain headway. She was taking the sea directly on her beam, the whole hurricane deck in view as she rolled to leeward and revealed a row of tiny, dripping lifeboats. Everything but the masts disappeared; she was lost in a trough between two mountains of seething water.

I found Mike grimly watching the drama.

"Looks bad!" he shouted. "She was at dock, in the midst of taking on a load of fruit. Her head of steam was low. Too much sea and wind now. Good ship, too. Once ashore she's done for."

**E**VEN above the storm we could hear the clatter of loose crockery and metal as the ship wallowed in the trough. Desperately the ship struggled for headway, almost powerless to resist the terrible inward drive of seas which exploded across her bows in a grand burst of white.

She yawed badly under this pressure, lunging, staggering like a defeated fighter. Suddenly we both realized she was doomed.

"The crew!" I screamed. "She's going on the bar. They'll never live in that sea!"

We could hear ship's bells then. Mike got it first.

"Ringing for reverse!" he belted. "Going to try to come back through the channel. Figures on beaching her, I guess!"

Hurricane! Wind mounting to a wild crescendo; seas lashed to titanic fury. The dock swayed on the pilings.

"What's the need of reverse? She'll come in all right without any help."

"On the reef, sure. Skipper's going to try to keep her nose out and

back her into the channel. Then he'll swing her."

With incredible speed the ship backed down with the storm. Relentlessly the seas struck her, sending her reeling and dripping. Five hundred yards. Four hundred. Would she make the channel? It looked like it. Three hundred. Two hundred.

"Look out!" Mike roared. "She's going to crash us!"

We wheeled and raced through discarded bananas, over boxes, beside cars. Then, as by a common impulse, we stopped and turned.

The stern had missed the pier by inches, but the ship was helpless to avoid the dock as her nose swung before the blast of wind and water. She struck the pier head with a grinding smash that buckled the pilings like match sticks. We could feel the dock beneath us shiver and yield to the blow. She was piled up, striking again and again as the water raised her clear and then drove her down again, crumpling the pier head more and more.

"She'll keep that up until she hits the shallow water!" Mike screamed. "Dock's a wreck. Boat's gone. Two more are out there somewhere. Nice break for Bradley with that protected harbor of his!"

We could see the crew swarming over the side now, leaping to the dock, scrambling along the partially submerged rails, faces drawn with fear. And little wonder, what with the hurricane, the flying spume, and the terrific pounding of the helpless vessel against the pier head.

Each succeeding wave drove the ship farther ashore, destroying more and more of the dock. Two of the big steel banana conveyors were already twisted and crushed.

The wind had passed the zenith of intensity by the time the ship

grounded. She was still pinioned against the broken pilings, which saved her from keeling over. There was nothing to do now, but wait until those black mountains of water subsided.

"Larsen will stay aboard," Mike said. "Those square heads can't be pried off their bridges. And the crew'll go back soon's they find the ship's still above water."

Mournfully we trudged shoreward. It had been a terrible day and night. Exhausted as I was, my sleep was disturbed by wild dreams of a helpless ship riding a blazing sea, her keel on fire, and her crew drunk.

It must have been near dawn when I fought through to full consciousness. Something was preying on my mind. What was it? I lay there in the darkness, listening to the surf, listening to the wind and the wild beat of my heart. My heart! That was it.

I sat bolt upright, cold perspiration on my forehead.

Where was America?

Had Mike, too, forgotten in his anguish that America and a girl friend from New Orleans were out at the islands on the *Mosquito* that afternoon the storm first shipped out of the north? What chance did the *Mosquito* have out in that sea? What sort of haven did those tiny flat islands have to offer? It wouldn't have surprised me if many were completely obliterated by the waves. Even Motrilla was probably a shambles of collapsed houses and drifting wreckage.

I started to call Mike. What was the use though? He couldn't do anything anyway until the sea abated. Besides, he might have some message I knew nothing about. But there was no more sleep for me. I lay there tossing and turning, waiting for the light of a gray day.

CHAPTER XV.  
MURDER.

I FOUND Mike pacing his porch at six a. m., haggard and nervous.

"Had your coffee?" he asked shortly.

"Where's America?" I came back.

"She's all right. Over at Bello. She wired me last night before the telegraph system went." He ordered breakfast on the porch. We sat there gloomily, staring out over the beach strewn with wreckage.

"That's a relief," I mumbled. "That storm was nothing for the *Mosquito* to be playing around with." I studied Branigan's face as he sipped his coffee. "What are you worried about then? That?" My gesture toward the dock was eloquent.

He nodded.

"That—and a lot of more damage. We can't load bananas without a dock. At least one ship's shot to pieces, too. Maybe more. And there's no telling the extent of the damage to the farms."

"Must be O. K. in the interior," I assured him. "Otherwise the overseers would have made the night miserable with their phone calls."

"Every wire in the path of that hurricane was blown down," Mike replied tonelessly. "Come on, let's take a look."

Mike's motor boy was waiting at the tracks. We hopped into the motor car and ran through the town to look over the damage. The hotel was a shambles, and practically all the thatch-covered houses had been stripped clean of their roofing. Corn patches and gardens were leveled to the ground. The whole town was a wreck.

Out on the dock we were so engrossed in going over the damage,

that we didn't notice the *Mosquito* until she had come well around the point and was bearing down on her berth halfway down the dock.

Young Bradley was aboard. He looked pretty seedy. A fairly rough trip I surmised. The sea was none too quiet even yet. America and her friend looked fit, though.

"Oh, dad, it's awful," she said to Mike. "We came as soon as we dared. Mr. Bradley sent junior to look after us." A furtive smile played over her face.

"I'll bet he was a comfort," I said softly. I watched him clamber onto the pier. He ignored me entirely, but spoke to Mike.

"Tough break," he said. "You got it all, too. Nothing but a little wind over our way. Harbor's full of broken-down ships. One of yours limped in, by the way. Looks as though she had been keelhauled."

His little eyes were taking in everything as he spoke.

"What are you going to do, dad? Can you operate? Have we got any fruit left?" America looked at me as she asked this last question.

I shrugged.

"There was some left when we came in last night," I said. "A few farms that were overlooked by our fire-lighting friend from dear old Porto Bello. The same man who so courteously brought you over from Motrilla. Remember?"

Bradley affected superb indifference. He just didn't know what I was talking about.

"Let's get going through the farms," Mike cut in. "I'll set labor to work on the dock and we'll check for wind losses in the interior."

"You've got some all right," Bradley assured him. "We had none, but our field men phoned that they could see blown-down stretches on your side of the river."

"Our bridge farms on the other side are all right then," I said to Mike. I knew that was a touchy point with Bradley. "We can hold up the market with that output while we whip our other properties into shape."

Bradley glared at me, but said nothing.

"Let me go, too, dad," America pleaded. "You'll be gone so long—and you're tired. I can help. I know I can."

Mike couldn't see it.

"Please, Steve." She was working on me now. "You'll need help with your reports and all that."

I tried to tell her how rough it was, but she would go. I was crazy to have her, only wild horses couldn't have made me say so.

The upshot of it was she sent Gloria and young Bradley back to Bello, with the promise that she'd join them later in the week.

"Glad you got shut of him," Mike told us, when the others had gone. "Old Alligator just sent him over to see how badly we were hit. I don't want him snooping around."

America took it from him. If I had said something like that she would have flared up. I had pretty well come to the conclusion that she was in love with him.

**A**T noon we got away. A thin, cold drizzle was falling as we started disconsolately for the farms. We were packed and dressed for several days in the bush. For the first twenty miles the track led through swamp and jungle. But once we got into the farms our worst suspicions were justified.

"Afraid of this," Mike said. "The way the mountain range runs, I figured the wind would have to come up the valley. Darn funny it didn't hit the other side though."

"You can't blame the Bradleys for that, can you?" America put to me, with a triumphant glint in her eye.

I didn't reply to this, for the very good reason that I had no answer. We were at the boundary line of the farms now and we all stood up to get a better view of the damage. Through the silver mantle of rain stretched a scene of complete desolation. Not a tree, in the thousands we could see, was left standing.

Carefully we surveyed the ruined farm. None of us said a word. We just sat there. America stretched her hands out and took one of Mike's and one of mine. There was comfort and courage in her touch.

"Now you see why the men didn't send somebody in to report the damage," Mike finally broke the silence. "Trees are blown across the track in such numbers that they haven't been able to clear it." True. We were helpless to travel on.

America scrambled out and stood there in the rain.

"Shanks mare." She grinned. "Let's get going to the overseer's house."

The motor boy produced three machetes and we set out, chopping a path through the wet vegetation.

"No use trying to salvage any of this fruit," Mike said. "All we can do is get the blow-downs cleared away and give the young shoots a chance. If the whole banana belt on this side of the river is flat, we're going to have to depend on our fruit from the bridge farms to supply the entire market."

For perhaps two hours we worked forward, a humid rain sapping our strength. I never realized how fiercely tiring the mere act of chopping could be. America stood it magnificently.

Some three miles up the track we gained the overseer's house. No-

body was home but the cook, a depressing creature in an indescribably filthy Mother Hubbard, her kinky locks swathed in a damp towel to drive off "de fevah."

"You come tru de bush wid dis girl?" she crooned.

We asked where the overseer and his assistants were, and as she served us steaming black coffee, we learned that every able-bodied man had long since gone on up the line to start clearing the track and estimating the extent of the damage.

There was no siesta for us that day, or for several days thereafter. But don't think for a minute that just because a fine drizzle of rain was steadily falling, and there was no sunlight, that it wasn't suffocatingly hot and that we didn't need the customary noontime rest.

**H**OW America stood it I don't know. We knocked off ten grueling miles, straight up the track, before dusk warned us not to try to go much farther. Still there was no sign of a living person, no indication even that others had blazed a trail through the débris.

"We'll call it a day at Palo Alto Farm," Mike said. "There's something funny. Our men have gone on up the line. Afoot, surely. But how?"

America pointed toward the big drainage canal which ran parallel to the track, about a hundred feet to our right.

"Maybe they crawled up the ditch. It's sloppy, but there's only a few inches of water in it. They could make better time that way."

As we approached the frame house set back from the railroad, darkness was swiftly gathering in the leaden sky. There was no cessation to the rain. We were thoroughly wet,

thoroughly exhausted, thoroughly miserable.

Fortunately the cook had worked for Mike years ago, and she turned the deserted house upside down in an effort to make us comfortable. We raided closets and swollen bureau drawers, found dry odds and ends of clothing and hung up our soaking garments to dry.

America was dead tired, but refused to accept any special privileges. She was pathetic-looking in a huge khaki shirt. We all turned in right after dinner, having ordered breakfast for six a. m. To start before sun-up was useless, because nobody could proceed through that mess without light.

We achieved fifteen miles the next day, through the rain and the wreckage. The third day our bodies were so stiff it was agony to swing a machete. Still we pushed on, past thousands of desolated acres. Sometimes Mike and I would strike down a road to be sure that the back sections of the farms were flat, too. Invariably they were.

On the fourth day, about noon, we heard the distant sound of voices and the methodical chopping of organized labor. Eagerly, but still with a feeling of dread, we pushed on.

"Glad to see you, sir." The overseers pressed about Mike, trying to make light of the tragedy of the storm losses, trying to minimize the hardships to which they had been exposed. "We're all clear from the bridge down to this point. We'll push through in another two days. The telephone men are working down behind us."

There was a hand car on the spur. Mike ordered it out, manned it with a crew of natives, and we three climbed aboard.

"Concentrate on the clearing,"

Mike instructed the men. "We're going on over the bridge and take a look at our good farms. I want to be sure that they're not damaged. And I want to get an estimate of output. We'll be back later."

It was about ten miles to the bridge. The men pumped with a will though, and we flashed over the glistening rails at a good rate.

The steel trceries of the bridge now loomed through the pearl-gray mist. The hand car creaked up to the switch. We all got off and lent a hand to lift it across. None of us had a key to unlock the device.

"It's a good piece of construction, this bridge," Mike boasted, as we rumbled over the Oloa.

"Just as well," I pointed out. "Otherwise it would never withstand that action."

We all craned over the side, studying the angry, swollen stream as it eddied and flooded about the foundations in great coffee-colored whirlpools. Already the rains had lifted the river's surface many feet.

"Must be raining hard up in the interior," Mike observed.

AS we gained the far end of the bridge, Mike saluted the watchman posted there. He was a giant Jamaica Negro and one of Branigan's most trustworthy men. Mike had assigned him to that lonely job when the bridge was first thrown across the river.

Despite the gloomy weather and the terrible days we had undergone, it was downright cheerful to find ourselves once more running through farms where banana trees once more arched overhead, and where glistening green fronds, dripping with water, partially concealed the bunches of fruit.

We stopped to talk with each of the contractors. Mike was under ob-

ligation to buy their output, but all were eager to cooperate by putting off their fruit cuttings as long as possible in order to give us a chance to get the dock repaired. They all told us how they had heard the hurricane howling up the valley across the river and how fortunate they and Tropical had been.

We had a meal with Juan Escobar, at the end of rails. It was the first cheerful party we'd had since the storm. Juan and his señora bustled around the hut; booting children and chicken aside as they extended their hospitality. Above the charred rafters and smoke-stained thatch overhead, the rain pattered monotonously. But we were warm and laughing.

There was a dull boom from the valley. It rolled like thunder, seeming to gain power for a moment before it died away.

"Thunder," America observed.

"*Que dice?*" inquired Juan, whose face was clouded with trouble.

We translated her remark.

"Oh, no," he said. "Not thunder." He shook his shaggy head in a fierce gesture of negation. "Not thunder," he repeated stubbornly.

Mike quietly put his cup on the saucer.

"Come on," he said shortly.

It was the bridge all right. The first foundation was torn away and the water swirled over it. The steel structure had toppled. Now it lay, twisted and ruined, in the river. And there we were in the Tropical zone of protection.

"Where's Robinson, the watchman?" I asked, as Mike clambered down to the water's edge, where we had last seen the Negro.

"I'd guess he was floating down the river by this time."

"Floating?"

"Sure. Dead bodies float," Mike



said bitterly. "And they'd never have gotten away with this if Robbie was alive." He poked around with his foot, where the earth had been scarred by terrific scuffling. There was fresh blood on the path. "Done with machetes probably," he said. "Maybe they shot him in the back first. Then they blew up the bridge." His face was awful to see; I couldn't bear to look at his eyes.

I scrambled up the red mud bank and joined America. Her face was white and drawn. She was shivering. I unbuttoned my slicker and wrapped my arms around her. She leaned against me and we sat there like a couple of frightened kids, while Mike stood bareheaded below us, paying silent tribute to a faithful servant who had laid down his life for his master.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### AMBUSHED.

**A**T evening we arrived in Bello. Not the triumphal entry that we had once made, when Jerry took the port by storm. Mike Branigan was withdrawn, silent and morose. I was numbed by the shattering extent of our losses, but America's condition occupied my mind to such an extent that I didn't dwell on it.

Mike had telephoned Bradley from the farms; just told he would be in port as soon as transportation could be arranged. Bradley sent out his own car and had his nephew on hand to see to our comfort at the guest house. We got America into bed at once, had dinner, and went immediately on to Bradley's house. Mike wanted me to stay with America, but she was asleep even before we were through dinner. So I went along.

"Bradley," Mike said, in a cold,

impersonal voice, as we three sat in his tent, "I'm coming right to the point. You destroyed my bridge today."

Bradley sat quietly, a paper-cutter idly swinging in his fingers.

"You fired my farms," Mike went on. "You agitated my labor, sent spies through my properties to study my agricultural methods, even employed men to mishandle the ventilating process on my ships in the hopes of prematurely ripening my cargoes."

"He also tried to abduct your daughter," I contributed.

Mike nodded.

"All through?" Bradley asked quietly. If Mike's cold fury intimidated him, there was no outward manifestation. The little man with the weasel eyes had nerves of steel.

"No, I'm not!" Mike snapped. "I'm not through. And I'm not going to get through! I've come down here just to tell you that you can't break me. Call it a threat if you want to—but remember: you've got to stop your murder and your arson and your sabotage. You've got to stop or you'll force me to meet you with your own weapons. And if you do, I'll personally rub you out. Is that clear?" He had risen, his great hands gripping the arms of his chair until the knuckles stood out white and hard.

"Sit down, Branigan," Bradley commenced. "You know you don't frighten me. I'm not afraid of you—I'm sorry for you." He didn't look at either of us, his eyes were on the paper cutter, which he twisted in thin, white fingers. Suddenly he whipped the bronze blade forward and pointed it at Mike.

"You're about washed up," he said. "You came down and took what you wanted by political means, by force. And then you tried the same tactics

agriculturally. And you failed. You made enemies down here. The political party you deposed know that their leader was put down by you—a foreigner. They know you have been getting rich on their land. Naturally they have struck back. That's why your daughter was kidnaped. That's why your farms were destroyed by fire and your bridge dynamited——"

"How do you know my bridge was dynamited?" Mike snapped, his eyes blazing.

"Why—uh," for a split second we saw the look of a hunted animal at bay on the ascetic face. "Why you just accused me of blowing up your bridge."

"I did not. I said you destroyed it." Mike smiled mirthlessly. "But go ahead with your pretty story. Don't mind an occasional slip."

"Don't be upset by the odd coincidence that the man who fired our farms also happened to be on your boat, the *Jane Esau*, when Miss Branigan was abducted," I observed.

Bradley let his little green eyes play venomously on me.

"You'll be out of a job soon," he said to me. "I can use you over here, I think. Come and see me."

I told him what he could do.

"You're in the hell of a fix," Bradley went on, ignoring my retort. "Both of you. Your dock's a wreck, your ships are a mess, your farms are flat. Now your bridge is gone and you have no way of getting out the fruit on your bridge farms, although you are under contract to buy the entire output. Banking conditions are extremely stringent up North. You'd better——"

He picked up the telephone when its jangle at his elbow interrupted his summary.

"For you, Branigan," he said. "Sounds like your daughter's voice."

Mike betrayed his feelings for the first time. There was fear in his eyes and his voice as he leaped for the instrument. He started to say something to Bradley, but at the last instant decided not to.

We listened to the one-sided conversation, watching Branigan's face as he talked and listened.

"Let's go," Mike said to me, replacing the receiver. "The kid's sort of delirious. Touch of malaria, I guess. Too much exposure for her."

"The facilities of my dispensary ——" Bradley commenced.

"No, thanks," Mike said. "We'll run on over to Caballo and put her in the hospital. That's one of our investments."

"Better take my covered car," Bradley said. "Save time. I'll send my nephew along to drive it back. Motor boys are off duty now."

"I'll order my own car over," Mike started. "And meanwhile I can clean up my affairs with you."

"How can you?" Bradley asked. "Your lines are all down."

"I'll take America over," I said. "Sooner the better. We can make it in an hour and a half. You can stay and clean up here."

AMERICA was flushed, hot and delirious. We bundled her up and I packed her in the back seat of Bradley's sedan. Young Bradley was at the wheel. A steady rain was sifting down, pattering on the roof of the car.

"Send my car over for me, Steve," Mike said. "I'll come on over tonight. I'll be waiting here at the station or else I'll be with Bradley." He kissed America tenderly. "Take care of her, son," he mumbled.

Bradley showed up then, his slicker streaming. He handed me a bottle of quinine pills.

"Sooner she starts taking these the better," he said. "I just got them from the dispensary."

We clanked out of the terminal and plunged into the jungle night, bound for Caballo over the government bridge.

We rocked along at a well-sustained clip, the reverberations of our engine hammering against the jungle surrounding us. Our searchlight cut powerfully through the silver rain, revealing the gleaming rails for fifty yards ahead. Once Bradley had to apply the brakes with a nerve-shattering squeal of steel against steel. A mountain cow was on the tracks. We came to a full stop and I opened the door, preparatory to chasing her off the rails. At my approach, and with the lights dimmed, she lumbered into the jungle and I returned again to the car. As I closed the door I could have sworn that I heard, far ahead in the night, the dim sounds of another motor car, driving on over the bridge.

Who could be going over to Caballo on a night like this? And what for? Twice I started to speak about it, but both times something happened to shunt me off the subject.

Bradley reduced his speed as we traversed the bridge, but once across he opened the throttle again, only to slam on the brakes as a sickening lurch sent us sharply off the main track, head on into the black jungle, hub deep in mud and our bumper smashing into a thicket of trees. The lights went out, the motor stalled. In less than five seconds we had been shunted off the main line, down a short siding and off the rails entirely, into a dark, dripping banana farm.

"The switch was open!" Bradley gasped. "Why the hell can't you people keep your switches policed?"

I hadn't realized until then that we were in our own property. I was too worried about America. But she was too sick to realize that we had had an accident.

My first thought was that the car ahead must have gone off the track, too. But where was it? Or had the switch been tampered with after it had passed the junction point? I clambered out to see what I could discover in the rain and darkness. Before poking about in the bush I groped my way back to the track and felt around for the lever that throws the switch.

I struck several matches, which promptly fizzled out, what with the rain dripping off my hat and down from the jungle overhead. Irritably I flung my campaign hat aside and struck another match against the box.

There was a crackling sound, a thousand red pinwheels flared across my eyesight and a dreadful searing pain crashed down my spine. I fell forward across the tracks.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### "THEY'VE GOT US."

I CAME to with a knob the size of an egg on a skull that felt as though it were filled with liquid fire. Blood was caked down my back. My clothes were wet and musty. To move was an agony. And there was a sickening blank in my life between the instant I had been felled at the switch and the present.

America! Had she been taken on to the hospital? Where was young Bradley? Where, for that matter, was I? What had happened? And why?

I lay on my back and set my befuddled mind to the problems that confronted me. First of all, the

night was still pitch dark, and raining. I could hear the patter of drops on thatch; that meant I was in some hut. I lay there, trying to accustom my eyes to the darkness, trying to blink away the red mist which hung across my vision every time I closed my eyes. I listened; the river was just outside. And the jungle encroached on the shack from all sides—I could hear the rustling that every man knows who has slept in the jungle.

I cleared my throat, more to give myself courage than through any necessity.

"Steve. Is it you?"

America's voice—soft and pathetic.

"Yes." I whispered. "Where are you?"

She kept talking, guiding me by the sound of her voice, as I dragged myself to her side.

"Are you all right, darling?" I asked. I patted her, felt that she still had the robe in which we had wrapped her, noticed that she was still trembling.

"Let me try to warm you," I said, putting my arms around her. "And here—take a couple of these." The quinine pills had rattled in my pocket as I pulled myself up beside her.

Bradley had expressly given them to me. Just a thoughtful gesture? Or could it be that he had engineered this whole affair and the quinine indicated that he wanted America to live?

"What happened?" I asked. "We ran into an open switch just by the bridge and I was knocked out—"

"I was delirious at the time," she said. "I remember going off the road, but I was so engrossed in trying to keep warm that I didn't think about it. Then some men came and carried me out of the car, down a

path into a native boat—a dugout. They pulled the robe up over my head so I couldn't see anything. I just huddled there in the boat while they fussed around, putting you and Al aboard."

"Al? What happened to him? Where's he?"

"He's in this room," she said. "I don't know what they did. He never spoke or made a sound. But he's alive. Listen—you can hear him breathe."

I could hear the regular breathing of a man in untroubled slumber. Still, it was worth an investigation. And my strength was returning rapidly.

I found his body in a far corner, and shook it.

There was a groan and a curious flopping around. I felt around for his arms, couldn't find them, then realized that he was wrapped up securely in a burlap bag.

"All right," I growled. "Lie still, will you? It's me—Steve." I managed to extricate him and remove a gag from his jaw.

"They jumped on me as soon as I came to see where you were," he explained at once. "Jumped on me, slugged me, and did me up. Then they slung me in the boat and we were on the river a couple of hours anyway."

"Going up or down?"

"Don't know. There were paddles used. I could hear them. But not a word was spoken that I could hear. No chance in the world to identify them."

"We'll see about that in the morning," I said grimly.

"Must be nearly dawn now," Al whined. "And I feel terrible."

"How about the kid?" I snapped. "Think it's a picnic for her?"

"She's got that quinine," he grumbled.

"Sure. She's fine. And as soon as it's light we'll send her out in the bush to rustle us up some breakfast."

I RETURNED to America, put my arms around her and whispered some silly incoherencies in her ear. I didn't want to talk about our predicament until daylight. Already I could make out the doorway, which framed a rectangle of slightly lighter darkness than that within the shack.

At dawn I was up and beside the brown river, where I stripped down and cleaned my wound and myself as best I could. Now that there was daylight, several things were obvious; we weren't on the river, but a lagoon estuary. The shack was an old neglected squatter's place. The absence of any clearly defined path and many other indications pointed to the assumption that it hadn't been occupied for some years. Whether we were upstream or below the bridge I had no way of knowing. All I could see on all sides was jungle.

The fine rain fell steadily from a sodden sky. I shivered and hurried inside again. But one glance sufficed—there was no firewood there.

"Be right back, darling." I bent over the girl. "Going to scare up something to start a fire."

She was crying silently. And the terrible chill was shaking her again. I stripped off my slicker, wrapped it around her, yanked the burlap bag from under Bradley's head, and did all I could to make the poor kid less miserable.

Despite the rain, there was plenty of dry fuel in the jungle. Old manaca palm leaves and rotten branches lay underfoot. The manaca trees arched to a height of fifty feet; the bamboo-ferns thrust ten-inch

trunks up to a height of ninety feet. The bamboo was a godsend—there was an endless supply of water in its giant stems.

Stumbling along with a great armful of branches, I had to dodge trailing vines and growths which drooped downward like cables from the spreading limbs far above. Although only a hundred yards from the shack, I might have been in another world, so encompassed was I with vegetation. There was no escape from the hut by land. Our only chance was by the river.

The malaria was raging through America's veins. A glazed look in her eyes and a hectic flush told me of the vital importance of getting her to a hospital.

As I built a fire in the old mud-baked oven, my mind was busy on the problem of how to get into contact with civilization. The only out that I saw was to swim the lagoon to its mouth and then float down the river. Eventually I would arrive at the bridge—provided we had been carried upstream—or else I would come to the river mouth, a point on the beach about midway between Bello and Caballo.

"I'm going to swim across the lagoon and the river," I told Al, in a low voice. "You stay here and see that America takes her quinine every three hours. Keep the fire going. If you have brains enough, get her something to eat. You can tap the bamboo for drinking water. There's a gourd out back that'll do for a cup. See that she gets water when she takes her pills. Here's my knife."

Can you imagine it? He gave me an argument.

"Leave me in a shack with malaria?" he whined. "While you go out and do the big hero act, huh?"

I didn't hit him—too tired, I guess.

"All right," I said wearily. "You do the swimming and I'll stay. You would have torn the flippers off that shark so you won't worry about the alligators. They wouldn't bite a blood relative, anyway!"

He decided to stay. I sent him to search for dry fuel, so I would have a few minutes with America.

"You lie here and keep warm, darling." I whispered, kneeling beside her. "I'm going to get Mike. Al will look after you all right."

THE water was warmish and stagnant. It smelled of rotting vegetation, but I kept my head well out. If there were any alligators they minded their own business. It rankled me that my strength was so limited; I had hoped to make the lagoon entrance before resting. But as I passed from opening to opening I learned that we were farther from the river than any of us had estimated. All day I paddled along, the rain hissing over that green-scummed brakish surface.

The steady drip of rain, the leaden tone of sky and lagoon, and the mechanical, almost silent way I swam, all played a part, I am sure, in minimizing my presence in the alligator-infested water.

Dusk thickened the atmosphere before I dragged my clammy body out of the water. It had taken all day to negotiate the land-locked waterways of that lagoon. A thinner consistency of the water, a sudden chill, and a distant murmur all told me that the point ahead was the real mouth.

I lay for a while on the mangrove roots, too tired to even survey the surroundings where I was destined to spend the night. But for the knowledge of America's dire need

and my sudden importance in her life, I would have remained right where I was, helpless before the marching attack of mosquitoes and crabs.

Head throbbing, muscles aching, and thoroughly chilled, I crept in under the heavy jungle vegetation, anxious to find a dry place to lie down for the night before dark. The *matapalos* were everywhere—"tree killers"—hugging parasites which had fascinated and repelled me ever since Mike first pointed them out. A petty seed lodges far up in the branches of some monarch of the jungle and quietly nourishes an insignificant body from the plentiful sap of the giant host. Then tiny, gradually lengthening air roots dangle down, growing until at length a tender strand finds the earth and anchors in it. Now the tendrils spring up from the soil and creep up the tree, little twining fingers that quickly turn to choking arms which throttle the tree to death. It shrivels away to nothing, leaving as a monument of its death a colossal lattice of empty arms, clutching at the hollow—ten feet in diameter and a hundred feet high—where once flourished the host which fed it.

I poked around until I found a monster *matapalo*, where the latticed branches were far enough apart to permit me to wriggle through into a snug, hollow trunk where I curled up and slept almost instantly.

CROAKING herons awakened me at dawn. So incongruous was my self-imposed trap and so cruelly stiff my bite-swollen body, that it seemed impossible to ever get out of that tree.

Through early-morning mists and the inevitable fine rain, I could just discern the blue-green vegetation on the far side of the muddy river. It

looked like a banana plantation; if so, it was one of ours, but I couldn't be sure.

"Here goes," I said to myself, stripping off my undershirt and tying it to a prominently protruding limb. I slipped into the cold stream, struck out and felt the power of the water carry me downstream.

Noon.

I was exhausted, but I was across.

Two o'clock.

I had penetrated the banana farm from the river edge to the rails.

Three o'clock.

A farmhouse at last. I recognized it as being one of the closest to Caballo. That was a break.

I must have been a mess, hair matted by foul water, stubble on gaunt jaws, seminaked body ravaged by vermin and slashed by the jungle, a knob on my head and muscles twitching with exhaustion.

The overseer recognized me.

"You know where she is?" he gasped.

"Sure. Get Branigan on the phone and hurry up."

The cook brought me hot coffee and some enchiladas that I wolfed, while the farm man bellowed for a connection. In a daze, I lay on the bed, listening to his voice.

"Life or death!" I summoned the strength to shout. "Hurry it up!"

The overseer slammed down the receiver and came into the bedroom.

"Mr. Branigan's in Bello. Jerry Heming came down yesterday from San Sebastian with a force to search for you. Somebody killed him. Then Mr. Bradley offered to put his entire labor force in the jungle if the Branigan Banana interests would sell out.

"Are they trying to get Mike on the phone? Isn't there a line through to Bello?"

The telephone bell jangled. I

staggered over and picked up the receiver.

Mike was pretty well broken up. I could tell by his toneless voice.

"She's all right," I reassured him. "Meet me at the bridge soon's you can. Bring hot drinks, food, and a doctor. I'll get a boat. Hurry up. Don't agree to anything."

"I've already signed," he said. "They got us, Steve. We're washed up. Let's get America and get out of here."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### SITTING PRETTY.

**Y**EARS mellow a man. Hates dwindle, hazards fade, conflicts lose their importance. Only one thing about the passage of time: it cannot dim the camaraderie that exists between people who have faced a common danger.

Witness the three of us on the *Mosquito* some three years after our sorrowful departure from Caballo. Here we were steaming around the point, actually entering Caballo's harbor.

"Our coconut trees—those along that horrible hump-shaped concrete path of yours that was supposed to shed water and thereby withstand the ravages of time—are thriving at any rate," I observed, in a somewhat involved sentence to Mike.

"Best concrete walk ever constructed in the tropics," Mike replied. "Like the Appian way. It takes a master to negotiate it."

"And a giant to conceive of its engineering principles," I added.

We were all in rare humor. Our first visit to the old dump in three years. I couldn't help making one comparison: just as those three years had added to the beauty of this port, so they had treated America. Lovely? She was the most glorious-looking person you ever



saw. She was a great contrast to the pitifully wan figure we found that drizzly, dreary afternoon our dugout carried us back to the hidden shack in the lagoon.

I thought Mike would have apoplexy when he got over the shock of finding America shivering on that dirt floor, alone, inadequately protected, desperately ill.

Bradley had gone. And he had taken for personal protection not only her medicine, but also most of her clothing, including the raincoat in which I had wrapped her. This was definitely proved, because young Bradley was found, weeks later, dead in the jungle.

Old man Bradley held it against us, that was the peculiar part about it.

"Explains everything," Mike had said, when the news of it came to us up North. "I always figured Bradley staged that kidnaping. He was willing to sacrifice his cousin in his desperate effort to bring me to terms. He struck when I was weak. Losses, financial difficulties, the murder of Jerry Heming—all these piled up before he proposed to put his labor in the jungle to find you, and that in exchange for my signature."

"At least it showed that he wasn't a murderer at heart," I had pointed out. "He kidnaped her once before, but he delivered her when he saw the futility. And that second time; he even provided medicine and his cousin to prove that he meant no personal harm. True, young Bradley didn't get conked on the head the way I did. But I was no blood relative. It's a wonder they didn't dispatch me entirely."

"Bradley needed you to look after things," Mike had told me affectionately.

"Anyway nothing could be

proved," I had replied, touched by his remark. "He had us cold. And if I hadn't gotten across and established contact with you, he would have brought help, as soon as he drove his bargain with you. I only curse myself for sleeping that night on the shore of the river instead of swimming it and getting word to you in time to save our banana company."

I REVIEWED this as we sat there on the aft deck of the *Mosquito*, watching Caballo take shape.

"You did a man's job," Mike said, patting my arm. "It was only poor old Jerry who had to pay. And he was destined to lay down his life for some cause. None better than the salvation of my girl, I guess."

It was quietly spoken, with enormous Irish sentiment, but utterly from the heart.

What had happened was that Mike, learning that our car had never arrived at Caballo, wired to Jerry to come on down and bring his special police force to go to work on the case. What Branigan had in mind was to bring Bradley to terms. But Jerry couldn't believe the man capable of such duplicity and had deployed from that point at the bridge where we had been ditched. Then they found him, lying face down on a banana plantation with a machete cut through his throat. That's what brought Mike around. That's when he met Bradley in his office and signed over his entire interests for one hundred thousand shares of Tropical stock, with the proviso that he would never again engage in another banana business. That was Bradley's bargain; his entire labor force was at Mike's command to scour the jungle for his daughter.

"I can understand how you were willing to sign, all right," I said, as we eagerly watched for first sight of Mike's house on the beach, "but what hunch ever prompted you to sell your stock interest on the open market as soon as you hit New Orleans? What intuition told you the markets of the world were going to take such a terrible flop? Or was it just spite?"

"I was having plenty of trouble with my own finances," Mike answered. "You didn't know it, but the banks were being prodded to tighten upon me. I wasn't just fighting Bradley in Comayagua. I had the Tropical gang up North on my hands, too. And when my tropical troubles piled up they put the clamps on hard. That gave me a tip on money conditions."

Perhaps you heard about it: Mike was one of the handful of men who liquidated his stock just before the slump. All those terrible, black years, he had his fortune in cash and government bonds.

**P**RETTY good job of repairing." Mike studied the dock where one of his old banana boats was loading. "Reënforced concrete. Cost Tropical a pretty penny."

He ordered the skipper to circle around the bay, but not come to berth.

"We're not landing, kids," he suddenly informed us. "Just stopping for a look."

"Sentimental duffer, aren't you?" I complained. "Won't even let us roam the beach and renew our youth. Swell vacation cruise this turned out to be."

America was trolling off the back end of the boat, the set of her back indicating her annoyance and disappointment.

"We're going over to Bello," Mike mused, lighting his pipe and propping his feet on the rail. "You'll love it. Swell banana port."

"All right. We've been there. What's the game? Going over to pay Bradley a social visit?"

"If you only kept in touch with banana events instead of writing books, you'd know that Bradley is not at Bello."

"Since when?"

"Since I kicked him out!"

America tied her line to the rail and turned around.

"Run down and get some beer, there's a good girl." He grinned.

"I will not!" she snapped. "I'm in on this."

"Steve'll watch your line, you'll you, Steve?"

I sprang to her side.

"Sure thing. Go on, darling."

"Don't darling me!" She flung herself away, eyes blazing.

Mike roared. "No beer—no yarn," was his ultimatum.

"Go get that beer," I said in a low, firm voice. "And hurry it up!"

She got it.

"Yep," Branigan beamed, drinking his beer from the bottle. "I booted him out in directors' meeting."

"Directors' meeting? What were you doing there?"

"Electing myself president of the Tropical Banana Co., what do you suppose?"

We waited.

"I've held out on you kids because I wanted to surprise you," he went on, almost apologetically. "And I wanted you to share my triumph with all the excitement and thrills you both deserved. That's why I didn't tell you sooner. Besides it was only confirmed to-day, so you know it as soon as anybody not on the board."

It sounds like a fairy story. But

it was simple enough. Mike had merely liquidate his holdings and stood by while Tropical stock dropped to less than a quarter of the figure at which he had sold. Then he quietly contacted the big stockholders—Bradley hadn't been producing the fruit anyway, so they were receptive to Mike's policies—secured their proxies, bought up four times the stock he had originally owned. Then he was a controlling stock interest.

"You should have seen Bradley's face, when I strolled in and laid my cards on the table! He hit the ceiling. And when I told the board my first official act would be to remove him, he foamed at the mouth. Right away he brought up the agreement I had signed whereby I agreed not to engage in another banana enterprise. I pointed out that this wasn't another banana enterprise, but the identical one."

"In again, out again, in again, Branigan," I said. "And this time the big squeeze."

That gave me an idea. I went over to America and wrapped my arms around her.

"You nice, tender female," I commenced, "you're rich. Do you realize it? The daughter of the president of the great Tropical

Banana Co. Dear heart, do I love you?"

She squirmed out of my arms.

"Go away, you loathsome fortune hunter."

"A nice, plump heiress," I went on, "young, fairly good-looking, terrific temper, snappy black eyes, decidedly kissable mouth"—I showed her what I meant—"and rich beyond the dreams of avarice. Yum-m-m!"

Young Michael started to howl just then. Little beggar inherited his father's appetite and his mother's temper. And he always broke up things just when they were taking on pace.

"Go to your infant, woman." I shoved her toward the cabin. "Me and the president have business to discuss."

She brought young Mike up to watch the sun set behind the mountains. Swiftly, silently the dusk swept over the sea. I felt a great welling in my heart, a feeling of utter oneness with these people—the intimacy that only comes with the sharing of high adventure together. I admired my father-in-law more than any man on earth; I was madly in love with my wife and cub; I considered myself a hell of a fine banana man. So wasn't I sitting pretty?

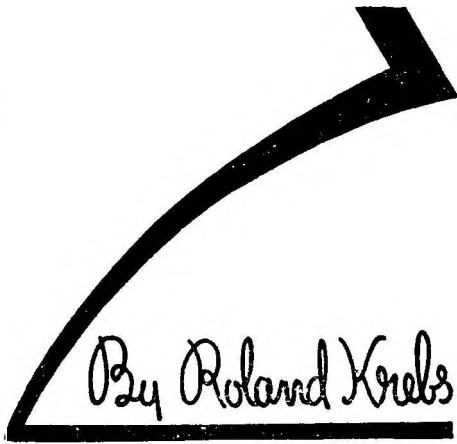
*At Best it's  
a gamble*



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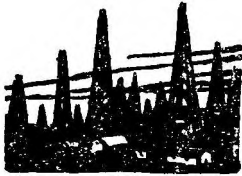
**PROBAK JUNIOR**



# Capers



*Economists figure that women spend eighty-five cents of every retail dollar. We take it that the economists who figure that are bachelors—or else can't count.*



**T**HERE are about three hundred thousand oil wells in America. Their combined annual output is but a drop in the bucket compared with the oil produced by candidates in the few weeks immediately preceding election day.



One nice thing about an oil well is that you can turn it off. Another is that it may run out of oil. A good oil well *looks* promising and a candidate *is* promising—from morn till night.

If you asked Selim Palmgren, famous Finnish composer, "what's in a name?" he probably would reply, "Consonants!" Palmgren was born in 1878 at Bjorneborg. He went later to Helsingfors. He studied under Wegelius and Petzet and collaborated with Ansorge and Busoni. He married Maikki Jarnefelt. He wrote two operas, "Daniel Hjort" and "Peter Schlemihl." We imagine it would be a great treat to Mr. Palmgren to meet somebody named Smith or Jones.

*We suppose Palmgren has felt all his life that he could look in any direction and see his Finnish.*

Still, Wales does a whale of a better job on names than Finland does. They told us in "Mother Goose" that "Taffy was a Welshman and Taffy was a thief." We believe that Taffy also was a ss-ss-ssttut-ut-stutterer.

# and Catcalls

For example, take the mountain, Plinlimmon—but take it easy or you may fracture a jaw or snap a vocal chord. Plinlimmon is known also as Pumplumon, Pumlumon, Penlumon, and Plynlimmon. Near it are the towns of Machynlleth and Llanidloes. Five streams have their origin in Plinlimmon. They are the Rheidol, Llyfnant, Clydedog, Wye, and Severn. This neighborhood was the scene of a war between Cyweilog and Hywel-ab-Cadogan. This was in the valley of Cwm Hir and near the inn of Steddfagurig. Past the inn flows the Blaen Gwy toward Pont-rhyd-galed, near to which is a pool called Pistyll-y-llyn.

After wading through that slough of syllables, one understands why the Prince of Wales prefers to live in London.



Don't you wonder how they train a train caller in Wales? And how anybody understands him after the train caller is trained?

*New Jerseyites who live in Whippany, Weehawken, Watchung, Wanaque, Totowa, or Metuchen can hardly sniff at Wales.*



In Africa they have the Pluto monkey (*cercopithecus leucampyx*), which has—steady now!—a violet face surrounded by whiskers. When Nature feels called upon to produce something with a violet face she should surround it with a high board fence instead of whiskers.



It must be tough for a person who doesn't drink liquor to meet a violet-faced monkey and have the feeling that he should quit drinking, but can't quit because he's never started.

With a magnificent display of will power, *der fuehrer* of this department has fought off the temptation to make some smart crack about pink elephants and lavender giraffes in connection with the violet-faced monkey.

A violet-faced monkey never has to admit, "Was my face red!" Nor can he feel blue. Even when they're inexperienced, you can't call these monkeys green.



By William Freeman  
Hough

## Along Came Peter

**H**IGHWAY patrolman, Peter Farno, gave the throttle another twist and glanced at the speedometer. It registered seventy, and still the black, tortoise-shaped sedan held its distance. It was just loafing along, Peter knew; making a monkey of him and his straining motor cycle.

They zoomed around a banked curve and dipped into a long, tree-lined avenue. This was a stretch of

Girls do the darndest things.

mountain highway frequented by those car owners who had been guaranteed a hundred miles an hour or more. The needle of his speedometer quivered around seventy-seven, the very best he could do. The late afternoon sun, stippling the highway with bars of red and gold, was hard on the eyes and very confusing. Peter muttered a curse and bent lower.

Suddenly the sedan began to slow

down. A guilty conscience or a glance into the rear-view mirror had tempered the terrific pace. Peter held on until he could see the license plate perched above the sloping fender. It was a dealer's number; and Peter felt a tug of suspicion. His siren whined a warning, and, at the sound, a slim, brown arm came out of the car window in a stopping signal. He slid past, curved in and brought his motor cycle to a halt before the sedan. As he walked back, the car's driver stuffed a compact into a hand bag.

"Please, Mr. Officer, I know I was going too fast, but my maiden aunt in Spokane is dying and the children are calling for me."

"Maiden aunts don't have children—or shouldn't."

"Said he of the morals squad." When Geraldine Jordon smiled, a certain muscular formation in her cheek fashioned an enticing dimple. As a matter of fact, nature had stunted very few of the desired specifications for female desirability. She was entirely enticing to Peter Farno.

"Look here, Jerry," he said severely, "you were doing better than seventy."

"Puhlease, Peter!" Stenciled brows arched in protest.

"But you were," he insisted. "And I think you knew it."

"Be tactful but firm—Rule No. 87-A. Have a cigarette, Peter darling?"

"Not mixed with powder, lipstick and—all the rest of it. I take mine straight."

"Big he man!" She leaned from the window to dab with a bit of lace at the corner of his mouth. "Mustard," she declared. "You've been eating Otto's hamburgers again. You know what they do to your digestion."

"They don't upset me half as much as you do, Jerry."

"Me and the hamburgers." She sighed mockingly.

"You went past Otto's place so fast I didn't even see who it was."

"Over the hump at sixty. I tell you, Peter, these new Slip-streams are the top."

"You'll ruin a new car driving it that fast," he warned.

Jerry Jordon pointed to an elaborate speedometer. "Twelve hundred miles on it, my dear. I had the boys jack it up in the shop and run it for three days. Besides, you can't freeze these new-type pistons."

PETER FARNO glanced up and down the highway; not a car in sight. He reached in and took one of her hands.

"Jerry," he said, "won't you promise me——"

"Oh, Peter!" Her eyes dropped demurely.

"—not to drive so fast," he finished. "I know you can handle a car like nobody's business; but supposing you met somebody ironing out one of these curves? Or what if a tire should let go? It gives me the jitters just to think of it. I couldn't stand it if something happened to you."

"Of me you sing, Petey."

"I've pulled so many out from under smashed cars," he went on. "And all because some one was careless."

"I don't usually go in for lectures, darling."

"Can't you be serious just for a minute?"

"Yes." She withdrew her hand. "You didn't come to our new car opening last night. And you promised me."

"I wanted to, Jerry, but——"

"We had the classiest showing in



town. Dad sold four new Slipstreams himself. And we had dancing, and punch, and eats. I looked my eyes out for you."

"Strumheller broke jail at Ellensburg last night, and I had orders to hawk this highway for him."

"Strumheller?"

"You know—the egg that kidnaped the girl in Salt Lake. They caught him in the desert after he'd killed an officer. Brought him to Ellensburg, but he busted out. He's plenty bad."

"And you didn't catch him again? With all those buttons and that bright badge? Oh, Peter, I'm disappointed in you."

"I haven't seen him," he fended.

A car, driven by a bareheaded youth bore down on them from the east. The boy grinned as he passed, going well within the speed limit.

"Are you really going to Spokane?" asked Peter.

"I'm headed that way."

"What for? Just another one of those sudden notions or did you have words with the pater?"

"Call it just a notion," she said.

"You do the darnedest things," Jerry.

"That's a very common way of putting it, my dear. Dad says I'm unpredictable."

"He ought to know. But Jerry, you're getting an awful late start. These mountains will be dark in another hour. Why don't you lay over at Wenatchee?"

"It's a thought."

"I ought to be thinking for you all the time," he declared. "Jerry, when are you going to calm down and—and—"

"Settle down? The idea chills me, Peter dear. I'm having too much fun."

The sun bars across the pavement had faded, the blue slit at the end

of the mountain avenue had become dark. Peter sighed and let his foot fall from the running board.

"You'll be coming back in a day or so?"

"That depends, Peter."

"On whether you drive like a sane person. Well, you'd better be getting along."

"Said he, growing tired of the unsatisfactory conversation." She pressed the foot throttle and the motor responded with a silky hiss. "I'll be worrying about you, Peter."

"Worrying about me!"

"Yes. Those hamburgers. It's my motherly instinct."

"Oh, for—"

"Pete's sake," she finished. She slipped the gear, guided the sedan around his parked motor cycle and sounded the twin horns. In a very short time the black car had blended with the gathering shadows.

PETER FARNO mounted his two-wheeled steed, swung about and headed westward. Of course he was thinking of the self-sufficient girl who, by this time, was careening around the curves that bordered Lake Keechelus. He rode along so slowly that he roused the ire of two motorists who had caught up with him. They dared not pass an officer on those mountain curves.

The evening was quite dark when Peter entered the driveway leading to Otto's Place. He climbed upon the stool he had left so hurriedly. Otto, his fat face red with excitement, waddled in from a back room.

"It's a telephone call I got for you just now," he panted.

"Yeah?"

"It's dot Strumheller again. He comes right into Easton und takes a coups car standing by a gas station. Right now he iss headed diss



way, und dey want you shouldt stop him."

Light from the single globe hanging above the lunch counter slanted across Peter's solemn countenance. The skin across his blunt chin was very tight. Without a word he slid from the stool and turned back to his motor cycle. Quietly he coasted from the yard and into the highway. With lights on he drifted eastward.

Peter wasn't particularly optimistic about his chances with Strumheller. There would be cars on the highway. He could stop them all, of course. Strumheller might have armed himself again, and the man was a cold-blooded killer. But it was a part of Peter's job, and he'd go about it just as earnestly, just as bluntly as he did everything. At one time Jerry Jordon had told him that his approach was entirely too blunt. That was when he tried to sell cars for her father.

In the next five miles he met three cars, none being coupés. He came to the long, straight stretch lined by trees, traversed its length without seeing a car. He went on to that portion of his patrol where the highway curved in and out around Lake Keechelus. The water was dull silver far below the shoulder of the road. And then was a long, level strip with Easton at the end of it. He kept on until he saw the lights of the town blinking beyond the webbing of a bridge. Strumheller was smart; he'd taken some side road immediately after leaving Easton. Peter was both disappointed and relieved. Wheeling about, he headed westward again.

**A**T the first curve west of the speedway stretch he saw the coupé. The sharp angle of the curve had been straightened the season before. The old road, sepa-

rated from the new only by a shallow, concrete gutter, angled sharply into a cut bank. An unknowing driver, traveling at high speed and at night, might very well fail to follow the pavement. And this, apparently, was what had happened.

The coupé had split the gutter, bounced to the right and headed into the old road. After going less than fifty yards it had crashed into a large boulder that had toppled down from the high bank.

Peter propped his motor cycle so that the lights would bear full upon the wreck. Loosening his revolver he walked forward. Though a front wheel had been smashed the coupé had not turned over. He circled it warily, peering into the dark interior. There was not a sound or a movement of any kind. Strumheller, if he had been the driver, had disappeared.

Peter tried to fix the time of the wreck, and came to the conclusion that by driving very fast Strumheller could have reached this spot before Peter had passed eastward. That meant many wasted minutes. Strumheller could have flagged any of several cars he had met. There was but one thing to do: get back to Otto's Place and warn the boys on the west side of the hump.

In returning to his motor cycle Peter saw, under the glare of the lights, the tire tracks of another car. They were at the junction of the old and new road, and they were made by new tires. He followed them until they turned up a sharp incline. He saw that the car had been going in, for the soft dirt had been kicked back by spinning wheels. He knew this side road very well, and his heart began to churn in alarm. Many times that summer he had sent his motor cycle up that rutted road to Sam Jordon's camp.

He tried it now, a moist palm twisting the throttle. He made the first steep slope all right, but struck a loosened stone at the top. Peter did a nose dive into the tangled brush. Crawling back to his kicking machine, he shut off the lights and ignition. With his electric torch in one hand and his gun in the other, he started on up the twisting ruts on foot. The log cabin was a scant quarter of a mile away, but he was breathing heavily when he reached the level spot beside a gurgling stream.

There was a light in the cabin, a rather indefinite, flickering light such as would reflect from a fireplace. He rounded the cabin and came to the shed in the rear which served as a garage. In the shed was Jerry's black sedan.

At the front of the cabin Jerry paused briefly to rub the moisture from his palms. He listened carefully and heard not a sound. Then he knocked.

A moment dragged by, then sounded the cautious steps of some one inside. The iron hasp on the door lifted but fell back immediately.

"Who is it?" came a muffled voice.

"Peter," he said.

"Oh!" The door was opened a crack and Jerry Jordon peered out with round, inquiring eyes. "How did you know—"

"Saw your tire tracks," he explained, and walked past her.

She stood with her back to the door while he cruised the room. He opened the door to the kitchen and closed it again. He passed to another door leading to a bedroom.

"Peter, what on earth is the matter with you?"

With a hand on the doorknob he looked back at her. "All alone?"

"Why, who else would be here?"

With a sigh of relief he walked back to the old couch which stood before the fireplace. The flames, kindled with the remains of an orange crate, struggled for a hold on a back log. She walked to his side and he drew her down beside him on the couch.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"In coming here? Oh, I got to thinking after I left you, and decided to spend the night here. I'm very unconventional, you know."

"Humph!"

"He grunted in disgust. But it saves a hotel bill. Why not?"

PETER stared at the fire. There were questions he wanted to ask, but questions involved explanations on his part. Besides, Jerry never gave adequate answers. He stretched out his legs and reached for a cigarette.

"You really shouldn't stay here very long, Peter."

"It'd be unconventional," he agreed, with a grin.

"But I want to get to bed so that I can get an early start in the morning."

"Have a he-man cigarette?" He offered his package.

"They're hard on my girlish tissues, but—"

He held a match for her and noticed that she puffed nervously.

"You sure must have been hawking the road to see my tracks turn off the highway." She squirmed into a corner of the couch and gazed at him anxiously.

"Yeah." Her nervousness belied her casual observation. He began to sense that something was wrong.

"Did you really have to go to Spokane?"

"Dad has a branch agency there, you know." She was rubbing a black spot in the palm of her hand.

"Burned?" he asked solicitously.

"Just soot. I'll never learn to build a fire, Peter."

A mouse rattled some papers in a corner and her head jerked spasmodically. For a time she listened intently.

"Jerry, did any one stop you on the highway?"

"Stop me? Oh, yes; a fellow by the name of Farno. A highway patrolman, I think, or pretends to be." She giggled, and Peter glanced sharply at her. Jerry despised giggling.

"That all? I mean, that was the only time you were stopped?"

She feigned concentration. "I think so. But perhaps you'd better see my attorney."

Peter flicked his cigarette at the fireplace. It landed on the stone hearth, rolled and came to rest near the butt of another cigarette. This one was made of brown paper, hand fashioned and only half smoked. His eyes narrowed. Abruptly he stood up and Jerry watched him anxiously. He paced the length of the room and back. Returning to the couch he sat down quite close to her.

"Don't be afraid, Jerry," he said in a low voice. "Just tell me where he is."

"Why, Peter Farno! Are you insinuating that—"

"Don't stall," he broke in gruffly. "Tell me where he is and then duck down in this couch so you won't get hurt."

Jerry Jordon sighed wearily. "You may as well come out, kids," she called. "I can't fool this hawkshaw any longer."

Slowly the bedroom door beyond the fireplace opened, and a boy and a girl stepped timidly into the room. Peter stared at them with amazement.

"Mr. and Mrs. Henry Simpkins," said Jerry, with a wave of a hand. "Bride and groom. Just married. And so what, Peter?"

"But I thought—"

"Really?" She stood up. "Join us on the couch, children? Family party, and all that. This is Peter Farno, big bad wolf of the highway. Sorry, kids, but it happened. I told you you'd be safe here unless he started rooting around."

"What's the idea?" Peter said.

"A long, sad tale, my dear, but I'll tell you if you'd like to know."

IT was very apparent that the bride had been weeping; her eyes were red and so was her nose. A pretty little thing, and a kid, true enough. As a matter of fact, Mr. Simpkins wasn't troubled with a tough beard. He had round, fawnlike eyes, just now filled with a hurt expression. His face was thin and white. The last person in the world to snort defiance, and yet he made some such noise as he sat gingerly on the edge of the couch. His bride snuggled against his rather inadequate chest.

"Sweethearts since infancy," said Jerry. "Last spring, when I was in Spokane, they told me their troubles, and I agreed to help them when and if they made the fatal leap. You see, Peter, Kitty is the daughter of George Lake, our branch manager in Spokane. When it comes to terrible tempers, George is the original Mr. Bangs. He snorted fire and brimstone when he learned his child wanted to marry Henry.

"Well, this afternoon I got a phone call from the kids saying they were married and wanted to leave town before the storm struck. So little Jerry did her part. She met the Spokane train at Easton to-night and brought them here. Being op-

timistic that way, I promised them peace and quiet until Kitty's pater broke down and offered the usual blessing."

Peter grinned. "A good place to ride out the storm," he said.

"Then you haven't been sent to take us back?" Henry Simpkins couldn't prevent his lower lip from trembling.

"Certainly not. I don't know anything about it. You're white and twenty-one, so——"

"But he isn't, Peter," Jerry broke in. "Neither one is of legal age. George Lake will have the marriage annulled if he can, and this is one marriage that must not be annulled."

"Oh," said Peter softly. He reached for a cigarette.

"Have one of mine," Henry Simpkins offered eagerly.

"Thanks." The cigarette was one of the more common brands. Peter rolled it between his fingers while his eyes sought the brown butt on the hearth. "Well," he said, rising to his feet, "I'll be rolling along. Got a job to do yet to-night. But before I go, I want to ask about that brown paper cigarette there on the hearth. Know anything about it, you folks?"

Kitty Lake sobbed aloud. "Tell him," she begged. "Please tell him."

Her husband looked at Jerry. Jerry looked at Peter.

"Peter, we got into a jam here."

"Where is the man?" he asked grimly.

"In that closet off from the kitchen. I—we dragged him in there just before you came. I was trying to think what to do when you knocked at the door."

"The fellow got nasty," Henry Simpkins said huskily. "And——"

"I saw a wrecked car there in the old road," Jerry interrupted, "but I thought the driver had gone on up

the highway for help. We found him here in the cabin."

"He'd been drinking," said Henry.

"Found a bottle dad had left here," added Jerry. "He sat here on the couch drinking and smoking. He had a gun." She twisted her fingers. "Finally he said he was going to—to——"

"He threatened the girls." There were tears in Henry's brown eyes. "He was going to take Kitty first. And—and when he stood up——"

"Yeah?" Peter prompted.

Henry looked at Jerry. "When he stood up I hit him and knocked him down."

"I think he's badly hurt," said Jerry, in a low voice.

PETER looked first at one and then another. Abruptly he turned and made his way into the kitchen. He was gone but a minute.

"Do you know who he is?" he asked.

They shook their heads.

"It's Strumheller. And he's dead."

Henry Simpkins flinched and his face became pasty.

"The man who broke jail in Ellensburg, Peter?"

"The same." Peter gazed down at them. He was thinking swiftly. "Look here, you kids. There's no use worrying about what's happened. Strumheller had it coming to him."

"But it means that Henry and Kitty will be found!" cried Jerry. "Then there's all the publicity. George Lake will be furious."

Peter shook his head. "There's just one thing you folks have got to do. Keep your mouths shut. Tight! I'll find Strumheller in his wreck. See?"

"You mean——"

"I mean I'll lug him down to the

old road and put him in his car. He was killed when the wheel struck the boulder. Get it?"

"Oh, Peter, you're a darling!"

"Just promise me not to say one word about it. The law is so damn particular about these things. You never saw him. Understand? He wasn't up here at all. If they learn the truth my name is mud."

"We promise, Peter."

"All right. Now, Jerry, I'll have to use your car to get him down to the highway. I'll bring it right back."

"I'd just as soon drive," she said.

He shook his head. "Just get the car out of the shed and drive it up to the back door. I'll do all the rest."

They went out the front door together and made their way around the house. Jerry went on to the shed, started the car and tooted it around to face the descending road. Peter stood at the rear door. There was a large, limp bundle near his feet. He left it momentarily and approached the car. Jerry slid out to stand beside him.

"I'll say this much," said Peter. "Henry Simpkins lied like a man."

Jerry nodded mutely.

"That kid couldn't knock over a feather duster in a strong wind.

Strumheller is a big brute. Just how did you do it, Jerry?"

Jerry Jordan was suddenly very weak in the knees. She leaned against him, clinging to his arm.

"He had his back to me," she choked, "facing the kids. I stooped down and picked up the heavy poker from the hearth. I didn't know I hit him so hard, Peter."

"You didn't, Jerry. It was his head striking the corner of the hearth that did for him."

Her shoulders were quivering and he put a steadying arm about them.

"When it was done I realized that I was in a real jam. I was worried sick."

"And then along came Peter, eh?"

Her answer was muffled against his breast. They stood silent for a long moment while the motor in the car purred silkily.

"Peter, I don't believe I want to be called unpredictable any more. It isn't as much fun as I thought. Some day I might get into another jam, and you wouldn't be there to help. I've a real suspicion that I'll always need you."

"You mean, Jerry, that you—that we——"

Her head bobbed against his breast. "I do the darnedest things, Peter."

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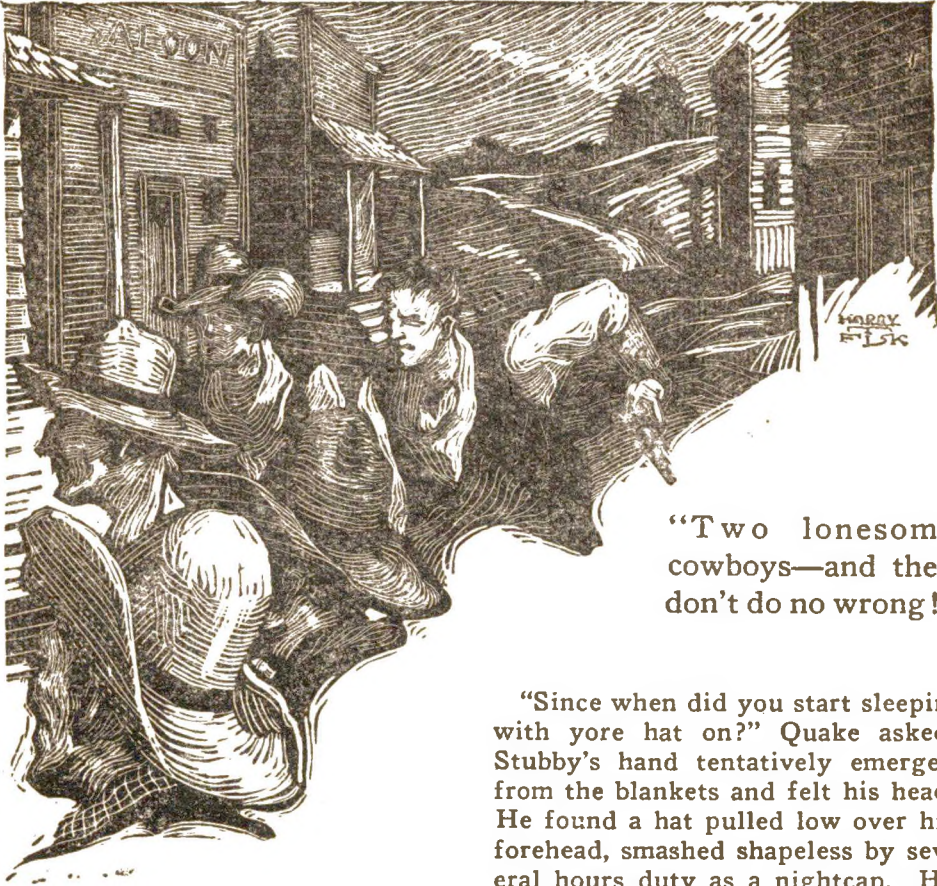
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# Dis, Sheriff!

By Terry Mathers





“Two lonesome cowboys—and they don’t do no wrong!”

## CHAPTER I.

### REDEYE IN STRANGE PLACES.

**I**N the second floor corner room of the Comanche Head, “Quake” Aspen lay in bed, smoking quietly, observing occasionally the inert form in the bed opposite him. He ground out the cigarette butt on the floor without rising, then whistled shrilly.

“Stubby” Buttrick lunged to a sitting position and surveyed the room with sleep-bleared eyes.

“Good mornin’,” Quake drawled.

“Is it?” Stubby inquired sourly. “Show me one danged thing that’s good about it.” He flopped back.

“Since when did you start sleepin’ with yore hat on?” Quake asked. Stubby’s hand tentatively emerged from the blankets and felt his head. He found a hat pulled low over his forehead, smashed shapeless by several hours duty as a nightcap. He took it off with some tugging, then squirmed deeper into the bed.

“And boots?” Quake inquired.

Stubby felt his feet, lay still a moment, then sat erect again.

“Well, deputy, it’s a fine mornin’,” Quake went on.

Stubby blinked. “Wrong. I was Pancho Villa last night, I kinda remember.”

“Uh-huh. What’s that dingus on yore shirt?”

Stubby fumbled at his chest, touched the surface of a shiny badge.

“Where’d I git that?” he asked tonelessly.

“I reckon the sheriff had to pin it on you last night to git you on the law’s side.”

Stubby grinned. "Reckon he's sore?"

"If he ain't sore, he's mighty stiff—after that beatin' up you give him."

"Whoa," Stubby said. "Say that ag'in."

"I say I reckon he oughta be mighty stiff. One thin' sure: he's got two as good black eyes as was ever give a wood rat, and a nose considerable different from what it was yesterday mornin'."

Stubby whistled softly. "What was you doin'?"

"I was holdin' off the customers of the Last Stand with two six-guns."

Again Stubby whistled. "Is there a back door in this here hotel?" He got to his feet and looked out the window. "Well, there ain't no mob out front waitin' for us."

"That's right," Quake answered. "I reckon you can't lynch a deputy sheriff."

Stubby turned his pleasant, round, blue eyes to his partner and looked at him thoughtfully. "You ain't serious?"

Quake nodded. "You got a badge, ain'tcha?" He swung his feet to the floor, raised himself into a tiptoe stretch that put his height conservatively at six feet six, and looked at Stubby out of gray, twinkling eyes, although his knifelike face was sober.

"There ain't no sheriff alive that's gunna refuse to deputize a drunk man at the end of a gun, is there?" he asked.

Stubby turned to the street again. "No," he said absently. "Now, as I look at it, there's a heap of plumb restless folks down there. You don't suppose——"

"Let's go see," Quake said. "If they're on the prod, we might's well go to them as have them come up here and git us."

THREE minutes later they emerged cautiously on to the street. People passed them, some smiling openly, others staring at them with curiosity and some with covert hostility.

"It ain't us," Stubby said, breathing a sigh of relief. "Somethin' has sure happened, though. Might be a gold strike up in the hills."

"They'd all be up there if there was," Quake said. "Let's eat."

They crossed the street to the Hankow Restaurant, which was run by two Chinamen, and sat down at the counter.

"Four orders of hot cakes and sausage and six cups of coffee, Sam. Start the coffee comin' now," Stubby said.

"Cleam ina coffee, sheliff?" the Chinese asked.

Quake nudged Stubby. "He's talkin' to you, sheriff."

Stubby flushed. "Make it black," he said, and the Chinese departed.

"How'd he know?" Stubby growled.

"He seen ycre badge, I reckon. Besides, you was in here last night and told him at the first sign of a tong war in this town you was comin' in and hang him by his thumbs."

"They're the only two in town, ain't they?"

Quake nodded. "They tried to tell you last night they was brothers."

A groan issued from Stubby. "Let's hit the grit. I got a hunch I ain't goin' to last long as a deputy after that sheriff sees me."

"Uh-huh. We'll stick around, though."

"What's eatin' you? I thought we was headin' for Wyoming."

"We was," Quake corrected. "But I sorta like this place. It's a nice restful town. Like what I read in



a book once, it's 'strangely interestin'."

"What's interestin' about it—outside of the fact they got a deputy sheriff here that they've known all of half an hour?" Stubby asked.

"Well, you take the sheriff," Quake said. "He's interestin'. He's the first lawman I ever run across that took water in front of a crowd from a stranger."

"What's he like?"

"Plenty salty, locked to me. Old Indian fighter, likely. Thin, stringy, tough as a latigo and about that color. That's what's so funny. You was havin' a merry hell of a time at the bar when he elbows his way up to you along with a nice-lookin' kid for deputy. He says to you, 'The curfew's blew a long time ago for you, little feller. You git to bed.' You jest looked at him a coupla seconds and then knocked him clean across the room. The kid went for his guns and I laid him across the wrists with mine. I was lookin' for the lights about that time when you walks over and dumps a glass of beer in the sheriff's face. When he come to, you told him you'd like the job of curfew officer in this town, so's he might's well deputize you. He done it right there on the spot, the hull danged crowd as witnesses. Soon's he'd finished you orders him home to bed along with his deputy."

Stubby groaned. "Then what?"

"I had the crowd covered and we ducked out the back door. You wasn't in any shape to ride, I could see that. So I unhitches a couple of hosses tied at the back door, runs them out front and scares them down the street. The hull crowd that was sober enough to ride runs them two hosses out of town in the dark while I takes you next door, over to the hotel, and dumps you in bed."

"And yo're wantin' to stay?" Stubby moaned.

"Uh-huh. I'm curious."

"What about? What they'll do to me when they catch me?" Stubby growled. "That ain't curiosity; that's jest an unhealthy meanness."

"No," Quake said casually. "I'm jest wonderin' about why the sheriff murdered his deputy last night in front of a witness."

STUBBY searched his companion's face in puzzled wonder. He was about to speak when their food was brought to them and he waited until the Chinese was out of earshot.

"You had a nightmare," Stubby said softly. "I thought you said we went over to the hotel and went to bed. The sheriff didn't murder him there in the saloon, did he?"

"We did go to bed," Quake said. "You did, anyway. I set up a while waitin' to see if any one was comin' after us when they discovered there wasn't anybody on them hosses."

"And you seen a murder?"

"That room we took had another window besides the one that looks out on the street. Mebbe you didn't see it?"

"Mebbe I couldn't," Stubby said dryly.

"Anyways, that window looks down on the Last Stand—on the office, I mean. Side window. Well, you and me come in the hotel the back way and get us a room. I never lit a light. I was lookin' down out of the window at the last of the crowd when I seen the sheriff walk into the saloon office along with his deputy."

"They never rode after them two hosses?"

Quake shook his head. "They jest give orders to get you. Then they come into the offices of the Last

Stand. Sort of heavy feller sittin' in there. I hadn't seen him before all evenin'. The three of them talked and finally got to arguin', the big feller and the sheriff agin' the deputy. All of a suddenlike, the sheriff whips out his gun and lets the deputy have it. Five shots, not four feet away. He gives the deputy a kick after he's down. The big boy goes to the door. I reckon he was tellin' them two bartenders to keep their mouths shet and to fergit about the shots. I reckon there wasn't nobody else in there."

"They was all lookin' for me?" Stubby growled.

"Uh-huh."

"And you want to stay?" Stubby said again, but his interest was up. "What did they do then? I don't see——" He raised his head, his fork poised, listening.

"Do you hear anything?" he asked Quake.

"Uh-huh. And that would be about us," Quake said. He was already on his feet now, behind the counter. He took his plate and coffee cup and placed them carefully on a shelf under the counter out of sight. Then he walked rapidly to the front of the restaurant, still behind the counter, and lay down on the floor.

Stubby looked puzzled a moment, then continued eating as a crowd approached, crashed open the door and flooded into the restaurant.

"That's him," one man said.

There were about thirty of them, Stubby judged, all silent men and serious. A tall, white-haired man was the spokesman: he had the appearance of a prosperous rancher with his soft and expensive black hat, soft and expensive boots, and ivory-handled six-guns.

"Stranger," he said to Stubby, "you played hell this time." The

crowd now stood in a half circle about Stubby, still silent.

"Are you comin' to jail, or do we have to take you there?"

"Neither," Stubby said, stuffing his mouth full of hot cakes. "A deputy sheriff takes orders from the sheriff, don't he?"

"I'm tryin' to do you a favor, hombre, even if I don't like yore looks," the old rancher said. "We're tryin' to get here ahead of a lynch mob. I dunno, but what that's foolish, though."

"I dunno, but what it is," Stubby agreed. "What's the matter?"

The old rancher laughed shortly. "The deputy sheriff was killed last night, the sheriff was shot up bad, and the Bonanza Girl pay roll they was bringin' down to the bank was stole."

"How much did they git?" Stubby asked, pouring a half pitcher of sirup on his cakes.

"That's what we want you to tell us," an angry voice said, from the crowd.

"Meanin'," Stubby said, "I killed the deputy, shot the sheriff, and got the pay roll."

"That's about it," the old rancher said. "Now are you comin' or are we goin' to take you?"

**S**UDDENLY a voice called out from the front of the restaurant.

"First one of you lays a hand on him is goin' to get burned."

They turned and saw a tall figure slouching casually on the cigar case, two guns resting easily in his hands.

"Now git out," Quake said coldly. "I don't know which is worse—you or a lynch mob. I can't see the difference. Now lay them guns on a table and high-tail it outa here."

Not a man in the crowd made a move.

"All right," Quake said. "If you can't talk, mebber you can count. I'm givin' you ten seconds to clear outa here."

"You better git," Stubby advised them solemnly. "He can jest count to four."

"All right, men. Let's go," the old rancher said. He addressed Quake. "I reckon you'll never leave this here town alive, so it don't matter much."

"No, it don't," Quake agreed. "Not to you, anyway. Now git."

The crowd laid their guns on a near-by table and filed out the door, past Quake's calm glance.

When they were gone, he rummaged through the desk behind the counter until he found a pencil and some paper. He scribbled a note.

"Come on," he said, to Stubby. "We're leavin'." Both of them went back to the kitchen.

"Sam," Quake said, to one of the frightened Chinese who had been watching the scene through the glass in the kitchen door. "You take this note over to Mrs. Mahoney. And don't show it before you git there."

The Chinese nodded and left immediately, while Quake and Stubby stepped out the back door.

"Jest how do you aim to get across the street to the livery stable?" Stubby asked.

"I don't. I'm tryin' to find the jail."

"Jail?" Stubby asked. "I thought that was what we was tryin' to dodge."

"That old boy was dead level," Quake said quietly. "In a danged few minutes there's goin' to be a mob after our hides and I reckon the jail is the safest place to be right then."

"All right," Stubby growled. "It won't be the first one I been in, but danged if it ain't the first one I ever hunted for."

## CHAPTER II.

### PATIENTS IS PLURAL.

QUAKE and Stubby cut across back lots and fences, working up the street.

The sheriff's office was a small, one-room board shack, behind and adjoining which was a jail twice its size, built of double thick adobe. Their dash from the back lot of a hardware store to the shack did not go unnoticed, and while Stubby was getting down a couple of rifles from the gun rack and hunting ammunition for them, the cry went down the street that the two desperadoes were holed up in the sheriff's office. The crowd collected quickly, headed again by the old rancher.

"Hey, in there!" he called.

Quake motioned Stubby down beneath the window out of range of possible shots, then stepped to the door, a rifle slacked in the crook of his elbow.

"Where's the short feller?" demanded the old rancher. "We're gonna git him if we have to burn that shack down."

"Is Mrs. Mahoney in the crowd?" Quake asked calmly. The crowd muttered at the irrelevant question.

"She's coming up the street now," some one called.

"You stay right where you are until she gits here," Quake said. "If yo're goin' to lynch us, there'll be plenty time afterward."

The crowd fell silent, ceasing their milling as the fat, rolling figure of Mrs. Mahoney left the board walk on the opposite side of the street and crossed the dusty road to the sheriff's office.

"Mrs. Mahoney," Quake began, "that white-haired feller has got somethin' to tell you."

"What is it, Angus?" Mrs. Mahoney inquired.

"I'm warnin' you, young man," the old rancher said hotly, "there ain't no wimmen in this town is goin' to stop us. All our law around here has been murdered off and we're aimin' to square it, legal or illegal."

"Never you mind the wimmen, ye old Scotch fool," Mrs. Mahoney roared, in voice of brass. "Say what ye're goin' to say."

"I'll tell you what!" the old rancher roared back. "We're gonna see justice done. The Bonanza Girl buckboard was held up last night—Bat Coggins and Nick Crater guardin' it—and Coggins was murdered and Crater's unconscious over at Doc Follet's now with bullet holes in him. Not only that, there was thirty-eight thousand dollars stole."

"And ye think these boys done it, is that it?" Mrs. Mahoney finished.

"Danged right," some one in the crowd said. "They stole two hosses to do it with. Then they've got the gall to come back here and——"

"Shut up!" Mrs. Mahoney roared. She glared at them.

"What time was this holdup?" she asked.

"They was expectin' the money in by twelve," the old rancher said. "Jim Flare waited at the bank till twelve thirty, then he saddled up and started out to the mine. Skirtin' that slag pile jest above the old powder shack he run onto the team and buckboard, empty. Quarter mile up, he found Coggins and Crater."

"If he met the team that close, it couldn't have been earlier than quarter to one then, could it?" Mrs. Mahoney asked.

"That's about it," the old man replied grimly. "This ruckus over here at the Last Stand come off about eleven with these two hombres fightin' Coggins and Crater and then jumpin' town on stole horses. Bat and Nick couldn't ride after 'em be-

cause they had to leave for the Bonanza Girl. Them two ditched the boys a coupla miles outa town, circled around and held up Crater and Coggins."

"You old fool," Mrs. Mahoney shouted, "ye ain't got a sheep's sense. This big feller here was playin' pinochle with me from a little after eleven till one."

The crowd was silenced.

"What about the little feller?" some one asked.

"He was snorin' not ten feet away from me," Mrs. Mahoney retorted.

Quake looked at her closely, managing not to betray any surprise.

"Now if there's a man of ye that doubts me word, I'd like to hear from the likes of him," Mrs. Mahoney challenged. She looked over the crowd contemptuously.

"But we seen them leave town on horses," a voice said.

"And who seen 'em?" Mrs. Mahoney asked.

**I** DID." It was an unshaven cow-puncher who spoke, his thumbs hooked over his belt, staring insolently at her. "I was the first one out the door and I seen those horses cut out from behind the building, them two jaspers crouchin' low in the saddles, and head out south. They took off across country at the forks and I tracked 'em three or four miles before I lost it. They was circlin' north, then."

Mrs. Mahoney snorted. "Ain't ye the one, Jim Goss, who thought ye seen a bear a couple of years ago over in the Fernandez Mountains. If I'm rememberin' rightly, ye got off your horse, made a circle on the bear, and when ye thought ye seen him ye shot. Ye found ye'd killed yore own horse, didn't ye?" The crowd roared with laughter and Goss faded back from the front ranks.

"Who saw 'em now?" Mrs. Mahoney inquired again. "There ain't a man in the crowd of ye that could track a steam roller across a field o' daisies, so don't try that ag'in. Who saw 'em?" She paused and Quake could hear the uneasy shifting of feet. "No one of ye," she declared emphatically. "And if it's me yo're askin', I'd say for ye to get down on yo're knees and thank Heaven ye got some one on the law's side in this country now who can drink ye down and whip ye drunk or sober. And as fer ye, Augus McDonald," she continued, "if ye watched yore own mine like ye do the business of yore betters, ye wouldn't be givin' a hang if the Bonanza Girl was stuck up three times a week. Ye could well afford it. Now begone with ye, ye bullies and sheep."

There is something in the righteous anger of a good woman that every man fears; the men in this crowd were no exception. They scattered, grumbling and growling, but it was obvious that there was not a man among them who had the courage to doubt Mrs. Mahoney's word.

Once inside the sheriff's office and seated in the swivel chair, Mrs. Mahoney surveyed the room with a critical eye.

"You couldn't be my mother that I never seen, could you?" Stubby asked fondly, grinning at her.

"I could, but I'm sure I wouldn't," she retorted, smiling also.

Quake rolled a cigarette and studied it before he put it in his mouth and spoke. "Jest who won this pinochle game you and me was playin' last night?" he asked.

A quick smile spread on the broad features of Mrs. Mahoney. "That's the best part of always tellin' the truth," she said. "When ye lie, people believe ye. I knew if I told

'em ye was both in bed and that I seen ye go, they'd think ye snuck out on me. Ye didn't, because I heard ye snorin', fit to wake the dead."

Quake nodded, searching the plain, honest features of the woman.

"I reckon we'd 've had a tough time provin' that, though," Quake said. "When I sent you that note, I knowed you was the only alibi we could scrape up, but dang me, you got me to wonderin' where I really was last night."

She nodded. "Ye'd have a tough time provin' ye had a soul in this town," she replied, then paused and looked them over with her shrewd, friendly eyes. "But I'm thinkin' ye're two that can do it. Where ye from?"

"We started out on the Mild River in Canada, danged if I remember when, and we jest come from Old Mexico. We wasn't urged," Stubby answered.

"I know," Mrs. Mahoney said, sighing, "and ye'll be lightin' out ag'in as soon as ye can leave here respectable, with it safe to turn yore backs to a crowd. Yo're all alike, a worthless lot that's more afraid of a decent woman and a home than ye are of any jail in the West. I know yore breed."

**S**TUBBY started to protest, but Quake cut him off with a wave of his hand.

"I reckon yo're right, ma'am," he drawled. "And if you was wearin' pants, you'd make it three." She grinned in reply and nodded. "But we're aimin' to stay here a little."

"Because ye can see a good fight in the offen', unless I'm mistook."

"Uh-huh. Partly." Quake looked her steadily in the eye. "Here's the layout." And he told her what had happened the night before.

"Aye," she said, when he had finished. "And now, what do ye want of me?"

"Who's the big feller in the shirt sleeves?" Quake asked.

"Shag Parsons. Owns the Last Stand and is the biggest blackguard unhung," she replied instantly.

"And who's the old rancher, McDonald, who's so dang set on givin' a necktie party for us?"

"He ain't a rancher. Was; but he's runnin' the Bonanza Girl, now."

"And who was the deputy?"

"Bat Coggins, a good kid. It will break his sister's heart when she knows it, and I'm thinkin' she does, by now. It was a bit of politics that hooked him up with that murderin' Crater. Last election, it was a cattlemen's sheriff against a minin' sheriff. Always is, for that matter. Parsons set himself up for the cattlemen, but there wasn't a decent rancher who'd vote for him. So the good cattlemen compromised with the minin' men and swung their support to Crater, if he'd appoint a cattlemen's deputy. He done it, too, appointin' young Bat. It's been a long quarrel in the county between the cattlemen and the minin' men as to who'd have the law."

Quake listened carefully. "And Crater's the minin' sheriff?"

"Sure," Mrs. Mahoney said. "Show me another county that would send a sheriff and a deputy to guard a measly mine pay roll three miles."

"You mean jest the sheriff," Quake corrected. "The deputy was dead."

Mrs. Mahoney nodded gloomily. "And what do ye plan to do?"

"Arrest Parsons," Stubby said. "He saw it."

Quake shook his head slowly. "You'll never make it stick. Besides, you ain't even sure yo're goin' to stay a deputy."

"Aye," Mrs. Mahoney said gloomily. "Show me a man in town that would take the word of ye two. They don't know ye, and they more than half believe ye did the killin' and the robbin', I'm thinkin'."

"No, they wouldn't believe us," Quake said. "Parsons would deny it and every coyote behind the bar would swear he didn't hear a shot. They'd turn on us and lynch us shore for tryin' to unload the murder on Parsons." He stood up. "I reckon the sooner we find how we stand around here, the quicker we kin pull out."

"What are ye goin' to do?" Mrs. Mahoney asked.

"I'll be lookin' you up, Mrs. Mahoney, and the next time I'll shore see if you kin play pinochle," Quake said evasively.

"I'll take the watch off ye any day," Mrs. Mahoney said, rising.

Quake looked at her, his eyes crinkling in amusement. "And chain, too, I reckon."

She left the shack.

"A good woman," Quake said pensively. "I wonder, now."

"What?" Stubby asked.

"I jest wonder if ye ain't playin' into each other's hands. She wants us—or else why did she pick us out of this jam?" He scratched his head thoughtfully. "And I reckon we'll be usin' her."

They left the office and crossed the street, then turned down to the livery stable a block away.

"Where we goin'?" Stubby asked.

"First, we're goin' to see whether yo're still a deputy. I reckon that's goin' to make some difference."

**D**OCTOR FOLLET'S house was a small, white frame affair near the end of the main street, shaded by tall sycamores. The doctor greeted them at the door,

an old man with iron-gray hair, a lined, homely face, and sad eyes.

"Reckon we could see yore patient, doc?" Quake asked. "This here is the new deputy sheriff," he added, indicating Stubby. "He'd sorta like to git some orders."

The doctor smiled and shook hands. "He's unconscious. But you can see him, if that will help any." He looked shrewdly at his two callers. "I've already heard something about you two."

"And I'm bettin' it ain't any of it good," Stubby growled.

For reply, the doctor laughed softly. "You're unfortunate in stop-ping at such an—an—well, impetu-ous town."

"I been wonderin' what the word was," Stubby said.

The doctor led them through the front room and office out onto a screened porch containing three beds.

"This is Pay Dirt's hospital. And there's Crater," he said, indicating the far bed.

Quake recognized the sheriff immediately. His tanned skin looked startlingly dark and healthy against the sheets as he lay motionless, his eyes closed, his hawk nose pointing upward above a ragged, full mustache of sand color.

"He don't look sick," Quake volunteered. "Where'd they git him?"

"One shot in the shoulder," Doctor Follet said. "I suppose his unconscious condition is from loss of blood. The wound itself is not serious, but losing blood is a different matter."

Quake strode to the bed and looked down at the figure. Gently, he pulled back the covers and pinched the side of the sheriff. A red mark appeared, then faded into the startling white of the skin of his body. Crater did not move.

Quake looked searchingly at the doctor, who returned his stare good-humoredly.

"Uh-huh," Quake said noncommittally. "I reckon if he's still out, there ain't much use of our stayin'."

When they had closed the door on the porch and were in the office, Quake faced the doctor.

"What's the low-down, doc?" he asked softly. "I ain't grass green. He didn't lose a pint of blood and you know it."

The doctor shrugged. "I didn't say he did," he replied cautiously. "I say the loss of blood is the only way—besides shock, of course—to account for the unconsciousness." He peered keenly at Quake. "You seem to be mighty curious."

"Uh-huh. And you ain't?" Quake replied.

"I'm curious about everything," the doctor said slowly. "Everything, that is, that affects my own life. Outside of that, I'm not."

"Mebbe I'm that way, too," Quake said. "Or mebbe a double lynchin' don't affect my own life?"

"I'd say it did," the doctor replied, laughing. "It doesn't mine, however. And a man pretending unconsciousness doesn't affect it much more."

Quake agreed with a nod of the head. "I see." He smiled slightly. "Say, if you had another man come in here that pretended to be unconscious, would that affect you?"

The doctor's eyes held Quake's for a few seconds, as if searching for a meaning.

"Say, if some one was to bring word to you that there was a man jest outside of town who'd been kicked by a horse, or fell off a horse. Do you think you could bandage him up so no one could see his face and put him in the hospital?" Quake continued.

The doctor suddenly smiled. "Why, yes. I think if I was called to help a man whose name I did not know and found him unconscious, and if his companion told me he had been kicked in the face by a horse, I believe I'd bandage him and put him in the Pay Dirt hospital."

"Alongside the sheriff?"

"Alongside my other unconscious patient."

Quake grinned. "And now, do you mind if I jest take a look at the sheriff's clothes?"

"Not at all," Doctor Follet replied. He opened a closet door and took from the floor a bundle of clothes, which he gave to Quake.

"All the valuables, of course, have been placed under lock and key. I can't let you see them, naturally."

Quake nodded as he unfolded the bundle. The coat was an old blue one, the left shoulder stiff with dried blood. Quake examined the bullet hole carefully, then seemed to lose interest. He thanked the doctor; and Stubby, who had been silent so far, followed him out the door.

"Thanks, doc," Quake said. "I'll be visitin' yore patients."

"Patient," the doctor corrected. "There's only one."

"Patients," Quake repeated. "Because there's goin' to be two."

### CHAPTER III.

#### FIVE ON HORSEBACK.

**O**NCE on their horses again, Quake headed out the road toward the Bonanza Girl.

"Now would you mind tellin' me jest what in hell you were talkin' to him about?" Stubby asked.

"Yo're goin' to git kicked in the face in about half an hour," Quake explained. "The doc will come out

and bandage you and then take you to the hospital."

"And jest who's goin' to kick me?" Stubby asked.

"No one. That's the funny part of it. You jest go to the hospital and lie down."

"Yo're a jump aheada me, partner," Stubby said. "What's this all about?"

"Why nothin'. Only Crater's fakin'. He ain't lost any blood to speak of. You pinch a man that's lost a lot of blood and his skin shows almost blue. If that doc wasn't a white man, I'd say Crater was never shot at all."

"What's that got to do with me layin' in bed with my face wrapped up!"

"Only this," Quake said. "Crater's fakin' that for some good reason. He wants it to look bad. Sooner or later—if he runs his bluff out—he's goin' to talk. Who to? Parsons, Coggins's sister, anybody that comes in that he thinks has to be put right on his side of the holdup yarn. Yo're goin' to lay there and listen. Nobody'll know you with that mug wrapped up and if they think yo're unconscious—which ain't far from the truth most of the time—then they won't be shy about talkin'. Sabe?"

They were topping a small rise at the edge of town when Quake said to Stubby: "Git off that horse and lie down on yore face."

Stubby obeyed. A buckboard pulled into sight from behind a clump of cottonwoods a quarter of a mile up the road, a boy driving it. As he pulled nearer, Quake hailed him and he stopped.

"Know where the doc lives in town, bud?"

"Shore."

"Then you high-tail it in and git 'im. My partner got pitched off his



horse and it looks like he got his neck broke."

"Gee," the boy said in a low voice. "You want me to take 'im in with me?"

"I'm scared to move 'im until the doc comes," Quake said. "You tell him to hustle out, and much obliged."

"Shore. Giddap you," he urged the team, which was soon in a trot.

Quake sat down by Stubby and they both rolled cigarettes.

"Jest what do you aim to do while I'm in the hospital?" Stubby asked. He looked at Quake sourly. "I reckon you'll see jest how much you kin eat while I'm gittin fed outa a medicine dropper. Soup. And twict a day."

"Uh-huh."

"But what are you aimin' to do?" Stubby persisted.

"Jest look around."

"And git shot up for yore pains."

"Uh-huh. Mebbe."

"Then what?"

"If I don't turn up to-morrow night," Quake said, "you go see Mrs. Mahoney. I reckon she'll know where I am better'n I could tell you."

"Because you don't know yore-self. Is that it?" Stubby asked.

"That's jest about it," Quake assented calmly.

"If you ain't about the cheerfulness ijt that ever walked into a noose," Stubby growled. He threw away his cigarette and looked his partner in the eye. The look was solemn, serious. "Say. Let's clear outa here. I don't like anything I seen around here, except Ma Mahoney and Doc Follet. And I notice they ain't sayin' a thing and they're doin' less. They're jest waitin' for a couple of jaspers like you and me to git our heads blown off to prove what they been thinkin'

right along. Dang it, man. It ain't any of our business. We can be twenty miles from here by night in the high hills, if you jest give that danged stubborn word of yores."

"Uh-huh," Quake drawled. "I shore wouldn't want to leave here without knowin' a few things. If I remember Crater shootin' that young Coggins kid and don't do nothin' about it, I'll jest nacherally be tempted to shoot every sheriff I see from now on, jest on suspicion." He looked at Stubby and amusement lighted his gray eyes. "Anyway, you ain't goin' to high-tail it outa here and leave the wimmen and kids of Valencia County defenseless, are you? Not to mention all them merchants with their thousands of dollars sunk in moldy bacon and blue-sky minin' stock. Why, yo're the only law in this country, young feller, and yo're aimin' to run away. Why, when you leave, the law walks out and——"

"If you'll jest shet up, I'll stay," Stubby growled. "Only, danged if I kin make sense out of huntin' trouble when all my nacheral life I been jest a halfa jump ahead of it huntin' me."

"Uh-huh. Well, you'll be safe from trouble in that hospital, unless you jest go to sleep and fergit to listen. That is, you'll be safe if the doc ain't changed his mind. He may look at yore face ag'in and decide he'd be doin' everybody a favor if he jest chloroformed you and got it over with."

Stubby was considering this as the doctor's buggy came into sight.

"Howdy, doc," Quake greeted him. "Here's the corpse. See what you kin make outa that face."

Stubby submitted to the bandaging, which, when finished, left him nothing but a crack to breathe through and another to eat through.

Then Quake led him to the buggy, the doctor following, and when he was safely seated, Quake tied Stubby's horse with a lead rope to the buggy.

The old doctor picked up the reins and looked at Quake. "I don't know what you're about, young man—don't even know your name. But if you're about what I think you are, I wish you good luck."

"Thanks, doc," Quake answered. "I reckon if I don't have good luck, I'll be applyin' for that third bed of yores and needin' it danged bad." He looked at Stubby sitting placidly on the seat, his head a great white bundle. "I wouldn't feed him too much, doc. Jest a bowl of soup a day until he talks sense."

Stubby swore blisteringly beneath his bandage as they drove off.

**M**EBBE he's lucky, Jake," Quake muttered to his horse. "Mebbe we'll be wishin' we was in his boots." Jake flicked an ear in reply as Quake turned and headed up the road.

Ahead of him, sandwiched between flanking hills, the road threaded a way up a canyon, climbed the tortuous slope to the east, plodded past a group of sun-seared red buildings which Quake supposed was the Bonanza Girl.

Quake's intention was to see McDonald at the Bonanza Girl first, and if the old man was sufficiently cooled off to talk reasonably, then ask him a few questions, most of them pertaining to the robbery. Several things needed answering. Was McDonald the sole owner of the Bonanza Girl? Did he trust Crater, the sheriff? How many people knew the pay roll was coming to town at that hour? Why didn't McDonald go along? And many another.

As he pulled up out of the canyon, Quake noted idly the powder shack mentioned by McDonald, then the slag heap of an abandoned mine just over the brow of the hill. A quarter of a mile above this, Quake remembered, was where Flare had found Crater and the riddled body of Coggins.

Four hundred yards or so above the slag pile, Quake saw where the buckboard had been turned around, doubtless by Flare, who had caught it below and driven it up, to find the two men on the road. The road was narrow in this place, having been blasted out of the hillside, so that only a few feet clearance lay between an abrupt wall on one side and an almost sheer drop into the canyon on the other. Quake could see where the back wheels of the buckboard had gone off over the edge as Flare, in his excited attempt to turn it around, had sawed the buckboard back and forth, depending on the weight of the horses to keep it from going over.

He dismounted and examined the ground. He soon saw that men on horses could not have staged a hold-up in this exact place, since there was not room for both the buckboard and the horses. But here were the tracks of the buckboard's turning and here were the tracks of Flare. Quake convinced himself by investigating the upper edge of the road next to the wall. It was soft sand and it held no tracks. If there had been holdup men—and Quake doubted it—they could not have used this side of the road as their hiding place, while awaiting the coming of the buckboard. And had they been standing on the canyon side of the road, they would have been without shelter and in plain sight, fair game for a man who was reasonably fast on the

draw, as most Western sheriffs were.

It was useless to try and read any story into the tracks on the road. Several fair-sized boulders had been placed at the curve here, as insurance against the slipping of heavy ore wagons over the cliff. Quake sought until he found in the sand the imprint of where a man had been sitting against one of them. Here, he judged, was where Crater had sat after he had been shot, where he had waited for help that was sure to come. A dark spot on the ground corroborated Quake's judgment: it was blood. It was a big spot and Quake scraped the surface sand away carefully to see how deep the blood had seeped in. He laughed softly when the top layer of clotted sand pulled away to reveal clean dry sand immediately beneath it.

"Plugged it with his handkerchief, then wrung it out on the sand to make it look like a gallon. That would make his stall good if anybody tried to check it."

**Q**UAKE rolled a cigarette and, sitting against a rock, re-enacted mentally the hold-up as it had been related to him. It didn't ring true. But where was any unshakable evidence that could be shown to a thick-headed and suspicious group of townsmen? His proof that Crater had lost little blood would be of no use. A merchant didn't know how much blood a man could lose and still carry on. It took a man who had been shot himself to prove that to his own satisfaction. And the absence of tracks in the logical hiding place would be little better proof. They could say Quake had covered them himself, so as to make the holdup appear impossible. What was needed was a bit of proof they had to believe.

It was around here, unless he was wide of the mark.

He threw away his cigarette and leaned over the cliff, scanning the canyon bottom. Then he got his lariat from the saddle, looped it around one of the biggest rocks, tested his weight on it, then dropped over the side of the cliff and let himself down. Four feet from the end of the rope he touched the ledge he had seen from above. Flattening himself out, he moved to the right ten feet to where the ledge was wider, then worked his way down the steep, sloping wall, feeling for holds with infinite caution and searching out every inch of the wall that came within range of his sight.

Forty feet from the canyon bottom he found his proof, clinging to the branch of a cactus hidden behind a round boulder.

It was a vest, old and worn, with a hole at the left shoulder high up. The hole appeared to be burned, for it was large and the edges were charred. Quake held it in his mouth and started the tedious ascent to the trailing rope.

He rested on the ledge a moment and took the time to fold the vest tightly and cram it in his hip pocket. Then he started up the rope, hand over hand.

Halfway up, he felt the rope being pulled by some one at the top. Quake cursed silently. He didn't care to have this knowledge of the vest shared with any one.

As his head rose over the edge, he saw five horsemen, guns drawn, watching him. The man who had been pulling him up was across the road, leaning on the rope.

Quake rose to his feet.

"Thanks, pardner," he said evenly, to the man on the end of the rope. "That's tough goin', hand over hand."

ONE of the men laughed shortly. Then Quake stiffened as he heard a girl's voice.

"Is that the one, Tad?"

"I reckon it is, Miss Virginia. That's the sober one."

"Then you better get his guns," the girl said. Quake had mistaken her for a boy. She was dressed in faded range clothes.

The man with the rope, on foot, started for Quake.

"Jest stop right there," Quake said calmly, his hands swinging slowly close to his guns. He moved them slowly, knowing that one quick move might bring down the fire of all of them. The man paused, something in the tone of Quake's even voice making him hesitate.

Quake turned to the girl.

"Is this a bushwhackin'?" he asked dryly. "Because if it is, I reckon I'm not so slow that I can't git a couple of you."

"Don't be a fool, man," put in the man who had been addressed as Tad in a not unkindly voice. "There's three pair of guns on you."

"That's my lookout," Quake replied. "I'm still askin' what this is. If you give the word, I'll make my play and we won't waste no time."

"We're not going to kill you, if that's what you think," the girl answered coldly. "But if you don't give up those guns, we will. You see, you have our word if you give them up. If you don't, one of us will get you. Even a killer like you can't be that good," she added contemptuously.

"I'm still askin' what this is," Quake repeated, ignoring her thrust. "And somebody better talk quick—or shoot quick."

The very daring of the speech seemed to take time to seep in. One man with holstered guns threaten-

ing three with drawn guns. The girl was aware, suddenly, that she was dealing with a man who meant business.

"People claim it was you and your partner who dry gulched my brother Bat, last night. We want to talk it over is all, and we're not afraid to shoot."

Quake nodded agreeably. "That was mighty easy to say in the first place," he commented. "You can do yore talkin' right here. And I reckon I'll keep my guns."

Quake had dismissed from his mind the man who had pulled him up after he noticed that he was unarmed. Quake's command to stop had arrested him halfway across the road, and he had stepped back to his old place once more, idly coiling up the rope. But casually fumbling with the rope, he had made a knot, then a loop and now had a very efficient short lariat in his hands.

The man known as Tad had been watching him carelessly and now realized his part was to keep Quake's attention.

"Mister," he said to Quake, "I got a nacheral dislike to arguin' with guns. You throw them guns away and we'll throw ours. Only, danged if we'll do it first."

"I don't see no difference between gettin' beat up by four husky hombres like you and gettin' cut down with guns. No, thanks. I'll keep my——" He heard the warning whistle of the rope and streaked for his guns as Tad held up his arm, ordering the other men to hold their fire. The rope settled viciously just below Quake's waist, freezing his draw. Keeping the rope taut, the man pulled Quake across to him, flipped out both guns on the ground, kicked them behind him, then unloosened the rope.

"Yo're fast," Quake said to him,

grinning. Then he turned to the girl. "I reckon you can shoot now, any time."

It was a cold sneer the girl gave him. "Tie him on his horse, Chuck," she ordered the cow-puncher, who had thrown the rope.

#### CHAPTER IV.

##### A RESCUE NEEDED.

**Q**UAKE'S thoughts were dark and bitter as the girl took the lead end of the rope and they started up toward the Bonanza Girl. He did not know where they were going and he cared less. Anywhere they took him, it would mean that he would be a carefully guarded prisoner. He thought bitterly of what he had said to Stubby about going to Mrs. Mahoney in case of his disappearance. She could not possibly know of his whereabouts.

"Where's yore partner?" Tad asked. Quake judged him to be the foreman. He had a quiet, middle-aged look of sobriety, and dependence, and honesty. A good man, Quake concluded, and likely a good foreman, for Quake guessed he was at the head of these cowmen, since he wore the air of authority and took orders from the girl. All their horses were branded Rocking K.

"I reckon you'll have to find that out," Quake replied. "He ain't here and I reckon that's lucky for him."

"I reckon it is, too," one of the men growled.

They did not turn in at the Bonanza Girl, but continued up the road to the top of the mesa, then left the road for a trail through the timber of the mountain foothills. An hour's steady riding brought them to a shack in the timber by a spring. A line camp, Quake judged, since there was nothing but the shack and a shed for horse shelter.

They dismounted and Quake was led inside. The thickness of dusk was settling about them and a lamp was lighted. Two bunks built into the wall, a rough table, and two chairs was the furniture.

Quake was manacled to one of the uprights on the bunk while the cow-puncher named "Chuck" started to prepare a meal. The girl watched Quake as he rolled a cigarette and lighted it with his free hand. With her hat off, Quake could see that she was lovely, even if hate for him did harden her face. Her hair was as wind-blown and natural as summer wheat. And Quake saw nothing but character in those violet-blue eyes that stared at him, and in the straight full mouth that was somewhat contemptuous of him, and in the delicate line of the jaw that was now determined and forceful.

He decided to let her speak first. He knew if he forced the conversation it would appear that he was overanxious to prove his innocence.

Under the girl's cool stare, he studied the rest of them, Chuck and the other two, who had been taking care of the horses a minute before, but who had come in silently and seated themselves by Tad. They were just run-of-the-mill, thirty-dollar-a-month cowpokes. Loyal, good hands, who shared the same opinions as their employers and who would fight with and for them to the last breath.

The conversation was sparse. Quake was given a generous helping of beans, and bacon, and coffee. The rest ate in silence, speaking only when they wanted food.

When the meal was finished, the men rolled cigarettes and stared gloomily before them.

"Well, Miss Virginia. What's the next move?" Tad asked.

"I'd like to hear what he has to

say for himself," the girl said, looking at Quake.

"Mebbe you wasn't in town this mornin'," Quake said. "If you had been you'd 've heard Mrs. Mahoney tell my side of it. I reckon that's all there is to tell." He looked her steadily in the eye, but her gaze did not waver.

"Not quite all," the girl corrected. "Mrs. Mahoney said she was playing pinochle with you from eleven until one, didn't she?"

Quake nodded.

"Was she?" the girl asked.

Quake shook his head. "No, she wasn't—even if she said she was. I took my partner over and put him to bed after that posse run them hosses out of town. I was awake for mebbe an hour before I turned in. I didn't know but what somebody saw us and would spread the word around that we was in the hotel."

"Then why did Mrs. Mahoney lie about you?" the girl asked.

Quake shrugged. "I reckon she knew we was both in the hotel and she wanted to shut that mob up for once and all."

He could see the contempt mounting in the girl's face.

**S**O you can see it's no use lying?" she said. "Chuck rode in from Globe last night about midnight and put up at the Comanche Head. Mrs. Mahoney had to get out of bed to give him a room after he woke her."

Quake nodded. "And I reckon she seen him leave town early, so she knowed he wouldn't spoil her story there at the jail."

"Yes. He heard about the murder and the holdup when he went to get his horse at the livery stable this morning. He rode right out to tell me, and we heard what Mrs.

Mahoney had told the lynch mob at the Bonanza Girl as we rode in," she said.

"And when you seen my rope over the cliff and recognized me, you figured that all you'd heard was lyin' on Mrs. Mahoney's part and you aimed to square it yoreselves. Is that it?"

She did not answer.

"So," Quake continued. "I'm goin' on a necktie party jest because nobody seen me go to bed? Is that it?"

"Not a necktie party," Tad put in. "Geronimo country, east of here, has a law force that ain't all shot and killed. We're takin' you over there where you ain't got a soul to lie for you."

"Look here," Quake said. "If I did that killin', and shootin', and robbin' would I come right back into town and git a room? Would I let my alibi depend on a woman I never seen before in my life—a woman who, if she was goin' to lie at all, would lie in the favor of you folks that she knows, not in favor of a stranger? That don't take much figgerin', mister. Use sense."

"We don't know why Ma Mahoney lied, but we aim to find out," Tad said slowly. "As for you comin' back into town, that's jest a smart play to throw 'em off yore trail. You was jest lucky enough to pull it."

Quake looked at the five faces intent upon him. He wondered if he should tell them about the murder of young Bat.

"All right," Quake said suddenly. "Here's what I know. Mebbe you won't believe it, but it's true."

They looked at him intently and Quake knew they all thought he was about to confess. But he went on, his voice contained and even.

"Yore brother Bat was killed——"

"Shet up," a voice cut in from the door. All eyes turned to see Stubby standing in the doorway, six-guns steady in his hands.

"If there's a hero in the bunch of you," Stubby said calmly, "let him go fer his guns."

He waited a few long seconds and Quake felt the hackles rise on his neck. But these men were not killers. They were sensible, and there was no mistaking the steel behind Stubby's voice.

"Don't say no more, Quake. We got the proof in sight." He did not take his eyes off the men seated around the table. "You, miss. You set right where you are. The old feller there. Start slow, cross yore hands in front of you, pull yore guns and lay 'em on the table. Move fast and I'll cut down on you. Take the rest of their guns, butts out and put 'em on the table. And remember, I said slow."

The foreman did as he was bid under Stubby's steady eyes. When he was finished, Stubby holstered one gun, gathered the guns and belts from the table and threw them out the door.

"Now untie him, mister," he said to Tad. Again slowly, the foreman crossed to Quake and cut his bonds. Quake immediately got his guns and belt which were on the peg above the stove and strapped them on.

"I'm sorry I had to do this," Stubby said, "but yore horses is loose. I drove 'em off. We don't want to be followed to-night. I reckon you'll see us both to-morrow in town. Mebbe you'll believe us then when we tell you that bush-whackin' and pay-roll robbin' ain't in our line."

Quake studied Stubby's face before he addressed the girl. "I didn't git to tell you about who murdered yore brother. If I did now, I reckon

you wouldn't believe me because I couldn't prove it. But be in town to-morrow. You'll find out then."

"If you two are there," the girl answered scornfully, "I think I will."

"You be there, jest the same," Quake said.

"I wouldn't make a break for them guns if I was you," Stubby said. "Not until you hear our horses, anyway. I git nervous in the dark."

WHEN they had put a sound distance between themselves and the shack, Stubby reined up.

"Well, dang me," he drawled. "It ain't even safe fer me to leave you alone, I kin see that."

"Lay off," Quake said. "Why are you here? Has anything happened?"

"Not yet, but it will," Stubby said, all the taunting gone out of his voice. "We got over an hour yet, before it does."

"What?" Quake asked.

"I'm comin' to that," Stubby said. "But listen to it from the start. I laid up in that bed for two hours, jest sweatin' for a smoke and some one to talk to, when the sheriff makes a try at comin' to. He gurgles and moans and calls for help, and I damn near died tryin' to keep from laffin' out loud. The doctor he comes in and quiets him and, a half hour later, who do you think comes in?"

"Who?"

"Parsons."

Quake was silent a minute. "All planned out, huh?"

"Shore. I dunno how the sheriff knew what time it was, but he guessed it pretty accurate."

"Did they talk?"

"Did they? Parsons come in and asks the sheriff how's he feelin' and

all that, real politelike, like he was visitin' his best girl down with a bad nose cold. The doc leaves the room, like we'd arranged, and then I didn't hear a thing. Then the sheriff speaks up, and says. 'Oh, he's out cold. Some waddy got his face pushed over by a hoss.' Parsons had likely motioned to me, asking, without speakin', who I was. 'You sure?' he asks, real doubtful. 'I'm sayin' so, ain't I?' the sheriff says, impatientlike. 'I heard the doc say his nose was spread behind his ears and that he'll be dead by midnight.' That eases Parsons off and he set on my bed, lowering his voice. 'It couldn't 'a' worked prettier,' Parsons says. 'Anybody suspicion us?' the sheriff asks. 'Not a chance,' Parsons comes back, 'only them slick jaspers we was goin' to hang it on never even left town. They stayed in the hotel all night.' Then he tells the sheriff about Ma Mahoney squeezin' us outa that jam. 'I know,' the sheriff says. 'They was in here this mornin' and that long-legged so-and-so damn near pinched my side off seein' if I'd lost enough blood to be passed out.'

"Think he got wise?" Parsons asks. 'Hell, no,' the sheriff says. 'He ain't got brains enough.' 'Well, they jumped town, anyway,' Parsons said. And then the sheriff says, 'Did you bring the money?'

"Money?" Quake asked. "You mean the pay roll? They brought it in there?"

"I'm gittin' to that," Stubby replied. "The sheriff asks for the money and Parsons says, 'Sure.' 'How much?' the sheriff asks. 'Twelve thousand six hundred and sixty-six bucks,' Parsons says. 'Ain't that right?' 'Lessee,' the sheriff says, 'one third of thirty-eight thousand. Yeah, that's right.

Give it here.' I heard something pass between them. 'Now,' says Parsons, 'where is the jack? Where'd you hide it?'"

"Wait a minute," Quake said. "Wasn't that a third of the pay-roll money Parsons give to the sheriff?"

"No," Stubby said. "Them three fellers—and I never heard who the third one is—don't trust each other as far as they could kick an anvil. What I make out of it is this: these three hombres plan the holdup, with the sheriff playin' like he's shot and goin' to the hospital after hidin' the pay roll. But he don't trust the other two. The money's got to be hustled out of the country before some one stumbles across it, and the sheriff has to stick to his bed to make the story look good. To keep the other hombres from double-crossin' him, he makes them fork over his third outa their own pockets. If he don't, they'll take the money and likely jump the country, leavin' him in bed. So he gits his third before he tells 'em where the money's hid. And they know he can't cross them, because he's in bed and will have to stay there, and they could come right back and git him."

"Uh-huh. Takin' no chances trustin' each other," Quake observed.

"That's about it. But who's the third feller?"

"I dunno. What's yore guess?"

"I ain't guessin'. We're findin' out to-night," Stubby said.

"To-night?"

"Yeah. Remember where that slag heap is on the way up here?"

"Uh-huh."

"Jest over the hill is the old abandoned mine that made it. In them buildin's is where Crater hid the money. He told Parsons he high-tailed it over the hills, hides the



pay roll and comes back and waits for the bank guy," Stubby explained. "But there's jest one funny thing about it. The sheriff was shot. He really was, because I heard the doc dressin' his shoulder and talkin' about it to the nurse."

"That's easy," Quake said. "He shot hisself."

**S**TUBBY was silent a moment pondering this. "But, dang it, man, that coat of his was drilled neat as a pin. He couldn't shoot hisself without burnin' it."

"It was a warm night and he never wore that coat," Quake said. "He jest took a coat along. He was wearin' a vest. I got it right here. He burned a hole in it a yard wide with his shot. When he seen that would give him away, he took it off, throwed it down into the canyon by the road, soaked his coat with blood and cut a hole in it. Then he put it on and waited." He told Stubby of finding the vest.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Stubby said softly. "He's a right serious holdup man, ain't he?"

"I reckon it made a good story," Quake said. "Coggins dead and him shot. A suspicious doctor might have noticed that Coggins had been dead goin' on an hour, but hell, a doc ain't goin' to suspect a sheriff, specially when there ain't a man goin' to back him up."

"I reckon he knows we'll back him up," Stubby said. "If we don't, he's in for a heap of trouble. When Parsons left, doc comes in and give the sheriff a shot of some sleepin' dope, because in half an hour the old boy was snorin' like he never seen a bed for a week. That was to give me chance to clear out. It was lucky, because Parsons tells the sheriff that at nine o'clock, him and the other fella will have the money

and if it don't check right, he'd be back pronto."

"And how'd you find me?" Quake asked.

"Seen Ma Mahoney, like you said. I snuck in the back way. I told her as much as I knew, and she said: 'You high-tail it up to Bonanza Girl and ask for Miss Petty. She's a bookkeeper up there and so danged snoopy they ain't nothin' goes on she misses. If that long-legged partner of yours passed there, I'm bettin' she could tell you the color of his eyes and where he bought his boots.' So I come up to the Bonanza Girl and sees her. McDonald wasn't in or I reckon I might have had a little trouble. Shore enough, this here Miss Petty seen you tied on a horse being led by a girl and prodded on by four other jaspers. She said it was young Coggins's sister. I found out where their spread was and started out to see if I couldn't catch up with you. It was still light and up on top the mesa I picked up the tracks of yore horse. He toes in considerable with his right hind foot, the foot that's got that barred shoe on it. When I seen you leave the road and take this timber trail, all I could do was follow. I was jest about ready to turn back and meet Mr. Parsons myself, when I seen the lights of that shack. I got close enough to understand the layout, so I beat it for the corral and run them horses off and come in to get you. And now, dang it, what happened to you?"

Quake told him briefly of his capture after he had discovered the sheriff's vest. They were approaching the Bonanza Girl now and could see the dim night lights and occasional moving of the watchman's torch as he made his rounds. They left the road, skirted the Bonanza Girl on the far side, then rode up

the hill beyond it and halted their horses in a small draw, out of sight. The night was moonless, but the stars were bright. The abandoned mine loomed squarely against the sky as the two worked their way cautiously to it. It was a barren building with no trees around it, the roof sagging, the windows glassless pits in the weathered board.

"I reckon if we want to see this party, we'd better git inside, hadn't we?" Quake asked.

Stubby grunted assent. After waiting a few moments to make sure that neither of the pay-roll sharers were there before them, they entered the building. When their eyes became accustomed to the gloom, they saw they were standing in one large room. A door opened onto a shed at the rear.

"This ought to do," Quake said. "These here cracks are wide enough so's we kin see what's goin' on. And made sure that door don't squeak." Stubby tested the door, working it back and forth until it moved silently.

Then they squatted on their heels in the dark, waiting.

## CHAPTER V.

### CURE FOR HORSEKICK.

**S**OON they heard the gravel crunch outside, and Stubby whispered: "I reckon they'll be together. They shore wouldn't trust each other to come alone."

Quake nodded in the dark. "I'm jest wonderin'," he said. "It seems danged funny if they trust each other like they do why the third feller wasn't there to hear where the cash was hid."

The approach of the visitors silenced them. Their faces glued to a crack apiece, they saw the bulk of one man loom up in the door, fol-

lowed by another. Then the door was closed and a light was struck. Parsons lighted a small lamp and by its dim glow, they could see that his companion was Angus McDonald, the reputed owner of the Bonanza Girl.

"All right, Angus," Parsons said. "Here's the last chapter. That was a soft twelve thousand, even if it is goin' to cost us almost half that to buy Crater in again next election."

"The robbin' blackguard," McDonald growled. "He'll make more off that graft than we get out of this."

"Oh, it's worth it," Parsons said, laughing. "We might get another chance like this when he's in again." His hearty laugh was mechanical and smooth, the laugh of a man who makes it his business to be pleasant. He was a big man, with a fine head of raven-black hair. His body was blocky, gone now to flesh, but it was still the body of a tremendously strong man.

"Well, let's get the box and forget the bloody fool," McDonald said. "Where'd he say it was?"

"Over in that north corner against the wall under the second board. Here, take the light." Parsons handed him the lamp and McDonald went over to the corner, knelt on the floor, and pried loose a board. Parsons's hand stole inside his coat and a smile played on his features. McDonald ripped out the board and lifted out a tin box, then drew his gun, resting it snugly in his palm.

"Don't move, Mac," Parsons said silkily. "It might mean that you'd die a few minutes early." McDonald froze in his position and slowly turned his head to Parsons.

"What is this, Shag? Murder?" McDonald asked slowly.

"Shag" Parsons nodded agreeably.

"That's a nasty word, Mac, but that's about it."

"The double cross, eh?" McDonald asked, in a tight voice. "Is Crater in on this?"

Parsons shook his head. "Just me. And it's just my money." He walked closer now, so that his back was to the door leading out to the shed. "You see, I saw Crater hang the dead wood on young Coggins, so he won't talk. And he won't ask for a split. Thirty-eight thousand for me. No one will miss you, Mac—except Ma Mahoney, who owns the damned mine. And she'd be better off if you was out of the way. See how it is?"

McDonald's face was like chalk and his hands trembled. "Shag, yo're cuttin' yore own throat. We could have pulled this job off a coupla more times."

Parsons shook his head. "The Bonanza Girl will close now, Mac. Ma Mahoney can't take that sort of a lickin' only once. And she only needs to once, because I've let it be known that I want to buy it. And I can't use a crook like you, Mac." A tone of curiosity came into his voice. "You never knew what you were playin' with, Mac, when you teamed up with us. Why didn't you stay level and make Ma Mahoney some money. There ain't a soul in town besides us knows she owns the mine, and people thought you was straight as string. I reckon that's why Ma hired you, because no one would leave the danged thing alone if they knew a woman was runnin' it. But you were different. You was respected, Mac, and feared. Anybody'd think twice before they lifted a pay roll from you. But it was yore danged greed, man. You'd take a widow's lawful money, and what for? Just so's you could pile it up and watch it grow, never

spendin' a cent. Well, Mac, we're much obliged to you for tippin' us off to the pay roll. I'm sorta sorry I have to do this, but business don't mix with sentiment."

McDonald licked his lips. "Shag, you can't get away with this. There's people in Pay Dirt that would turn over heaven and hell to find my murderer."

PARSONS'S laugh showed his confidence. "I thought of that, Mac. They all know yo're a little bit odd. After I shoot you, I'll pour this lamp oil on your clothes, then set fire to the building. If they ever do identify you, they'll think you jest stepped through the floor, knocked yourself out and upset the lamp in the bargain. There wouldn't be anything queer about you being over here: every one knows you take odd walks at odd hours." The lightness was suddenly gone out of his voice. "Throw that box up here."

McDonald tossed it out in the middle of the floor, never taking his eyes from Parsons's face. "But, Shag—"

"Cut it," Parsons clipped out. "I'm talkin' from now on. Kick a hole in that rotten board there and leave your foot in it."

Quake eased the door open and stepped out behind Parsons.

"You've said enough, Shag," he drawled. Parsons whirled, but he was stopped midway as Quake's gun barrel crashed into his skull. He melted to the floor. In that second and a half, McDonald, feared gun fighter of a gun fighter's country, summed up the whole situation and acted.

It was that careless moment that Parsons's cool nerves had never allowed him: the time for a fighting chance. He went for his guns, his

hands a blur. Quake, his right side turned to McDonald, saw the movement, and his left hand, swift as thought, streaked to his hip and flame coughed low across him, just as Stubby's two guns roared out of the darkness in the doorway.

There was something indomitable in the way McDonald—his guns not quite clear of their holsters—pushed back against the wall by the vicious impact of the three slugs, fought to clear his guns. He was dead already, but it was his last struggle of hate against mankind that finally brought his guns clear. But they were too heavy. His muscles corded with the effort, his face contorted and his eyes glazed, he tried to raise them, then sagged loosely down the wall to the floor.

"He had nerve," Stubby said quietly.

"Yo're wrong, pardner," Quake said gently. "That was gunman's nerve. Jest like whisky nerve. He made his play because he couldn't face what he knew he had to if he lived."

"I reckon yo're right," Stubby said. "Jest the same, if I had my choice, I'd ruther it would have been that coyote Parsons."

"Me, too," Quake said. He stepped over to the tin box, opened it and noted without interest that it was filled with bills of various denominations in neat, compact piles. Stubby joined him, looking curiously at the loot.

Suddenly, a voice froze them. "Jest set there. Move and yore dead."

They did not even turn as they felt their guns being flipped from the holsters and two gun barrels drill their backs.

"Now, git up," the voice said. "And hoist yore hands."

They turned, their hands in the

air, to face Tad, the Rocking K foreman, and the girl.

"What is it this time?" the girl said. "Two more murders?"

She looked at Parsons and McDonald.

"There's the holdup money," Quake said, indicating the box with a motion of his head. "And now if you'll take us to town, I'll show you the man that killed yore brother."

THE calmness in his voice arrested the girl. She looked at him with frank wonder in her eyes, which soon, however, gave way to contempt. She went over and looked at McDonald and turned, her face white, to Parsons. Then she addressed Quake again.

"Are you trying to buy your way out of the guilt of killing this man, the rightful owner of the money, by holding the knowledge of my brother's death over my head? Because, if you are, it won't work. I'll see a killer like you hung if I never know about Bat." Her eyes flashed in anger and there was hatred in her voice.

"Miss," Quake said earnestly, "I'm not tryin' to get out of this killin'. I did it and for a good reason. You don't like me, I know, but be fair. I saw the murder of yore brother with my own eyes. So did that hombre on the floor there—Parsons. When he wakes up and gets the layout, he'll want to shoot us first thing. And I reckon you wouldn't care much if he did. But remember this. Parsons won't tell you the truth about yore brother. Never. And if you shoot me, you'll never know. I'm not askin' you to let us free. Turn us over to the law, but first, do what I'm goin' to tell you." He paused, watching the girl's hostile face. "You frisk Parsons there for any sort of weapon. Then, no mat-

ter how much he yells, you tie him up, same as you tie us. And don't pay no attention to what he says. I don't care whether you believe him or not, but you've got to do what I say. Tie him up with us and take us all three to Doc Follet's."

There was a gravity in Quake's speech that did not often get there; he saw that the girl believed he was serious.

"You'll have us jest the same," Quake went on. "Here or there. Only, down there, I've got proof of yore brother's murder. I'll show you who done it. Here, I haven't."

"Why should I tie Parsons up?" the girl asked. "It looks as if he and McDonald were trying to capture you two when you came back for the stolen money. What right have I to tie him up?"

"None, I reckon," Quake said, his voice normal again. "Only you found four men here, one dead, with stolen money on the floor. You got a right to suspect all three. All right, tie us up and take us to Doc Follet's. That's where the sheriff is, anyway. And, on top of that, you'll find out about yore brother."

The girl was frowning, the temptation to believe this sober-looking cow-puncher struggling within her. Then Stubby broke his rule of always letting Quake do the talking for them.

"Miss, you do it. You'll never regret it. Tie him up and take us all. Give us yore word you'll do it."

The girl looked at Tad.

"Kin I put my hands down now," Stubby asked politely. "I never made you hold yore hands up to-night, remember."

A trace of a smile played on the lips of Tad. "Back up then and put 'em down. And jest remember, I'd a gang sight rather shoot you two hombres than not."

Then Tad looked at the girl, who was still undecided, still looking at him.

"Why not, Miss Virginia," Tad said. "It will make Parsons sore, but then he ain't often very thoughtful of other people hisself. And that seems to be part of the bargain if we're goin' to find out about young Bat. And I believe this long-legged feller here knows."

"Then do it now," Quake said crisply. "Parsons is comin' to." He looked steadily at the girl, again. "Give us yore word, miss, one way or the other. And I'll give you mine that you'll find out about Bat."

She hesitated a moment and Parsons groaned.

"I'll do it," she said. "You've got my word."

An audible sigh escaped Quake. "Miss, our horses is behind that small hogback over to the east, pulled up in a draw. You git the lariats while this here fella keeps us covered."

She looked at Tad and he nodded, then she left.

"Remember, mister," Quake said evenly, "we've got yore word. He ain't goin' to like this and he's goin' to talk." He indicated Parsons, who groaned again now and sat up, surveying the scene in bewilderment. Suddenly he smiled.

SO you got them, Winslow," he said. "Thank Heaven." He rose unsteadily to his feet and Quake could almost see him stalling for time in order to perfect his story. When he spoke again, it was with confidence.

"Mac and I walked in on this tall fella diggin' for money under the floor there. We had him covered when somebody slugged me from behind. That's all I remember." He looked about the room.

"So they got Mac?" he said. He turned to Quake and Stubby. "You damn murderin' hounds. What did you do?" he said to Stubby. "Slug Mac from behind while yore partner cut him down?" He turned to Winslow, rage flaming in his face. "Give me a gun, Tad. I'd feel a lot safer with one around these two."

He strode toward Winslow, as Quake called softly: "Watch it."

Tad's gun edged around to take in Parsons. "Shag. There's some-thin' funny goin' on here, and I reckon you'll have to be goat—at least for a while. Yo're gonna be tied to a horse, Shag, same as these fellas and yo're comin' to Doc Follet's."

Parsons's face was a mingling of expressions, but he controlled himself.

"Why, Tad, are you crazy? What are you takin' me for? And at the point of a gun, too. You think I murdered Mac?"

Tad looked sheepish at this gentle reproof. "I give my word, Shag. That's all."

"Why, come, man," Shag said good-humoredly. "Did you give yore word to these killers?"

Tad nodded.

"So they are to be favored instead of the man who tried to capture them and get back the stolen money? It looks like you aren't being square, Tad."

The old foreman writhed. "I can't help it, Shag. I dunno why, now, but I give my word and I gotta go through with it."

"But to killers, man!" Shag expostulated. "That's like promisin' you won't kill a man when you know he'll draw a gun on you as soon's yore back's turned to 'im." He took a step closer to Tad.

But Winslow was adamant. He nosed his gun up and stepped back.

"Shag, use yore head. One step closer and I'm gonna cut down on you. I mean it."

"Stout fella," Quake muttered.

The girl stepped through the door now, taking the situation in at a glance. Parsons bowed politely to her and spoke up.

"Miss Coggins, Winslow here wants to take me to town as a——"

"I know," the girl interrupted. "Please don't talk. You're going to town that way, just like he said."

"But why?" Parsons protested heatedly.

"You, jasper," Quake cut in coldly. "If yore so dead set on seein' justice done and yo're convinced we're guilty, I'd think you'd be danged glad to do these people that favor, outside of bein' willin' to free yoreself of suspicion, because they're dead set on justice, too. What have you got against goin' three miles tied on a horse?"

Parsons's rage flamed up again. "Why, you dirty, murderin'——"

"Quiet, Parsons," the girl called. "There's something in what he says, too. We just aren't taking chances is all."

"But——" Parsons began.

"Come along, Shag," Tad interrupted. "We're goin'. And if you make a break, you'll git it jest like you was the one that killed young Bat."

"Oh," Parsons said, with a start. "Maybe that's why I'm being taken to town."

Tad bit his lip with chagrin at the information he had let slip.

"Miss," Quake said. "You and yore foreman are goin' to talk yoreself right into a hole. You both better keep still."

The girl flushed and her eyes flashed at Quake. "You seem to think you're doing me a favor instead of my doing you one."

"I am," Quake answered calmly, "if you two kin keep yore mouths shut long enough, I aim to show you."

"But——" Parsons began again.

"Miss," Quake interrupted, "if that jasper opens his mouth ag'in, jest have yore foreman wrap a gun barrel around his head. I'm tellin' you straight. When we git to town, that jasper can talk hisself blue in the face."

The girl turned to Winslow. "You do that, Tad." Then she addressed Parsons. "Whatever you have to say we'll hear in town."

**T**HE trip into town was slow. Only once was the silence of the night broken, and that was when Quake spoke to Tad.

"Mind tellin' me, Winslow, how you found us?"

"I reckon not," Tad said after a moment's thought. "My horse comes to a whistle and another follered him in, so that give us two horses after yore partner had drove them off. Miss Virginia took the other one. She had got to figgerin' and decided that you was lookin' for somethin' this afternoon when we found you down in the canyon. She thought mebbe it was the money and that you'd go back for it, so we high-tailed it down there to see. We was lookin' all around there when we heard them shots come from over the hill. Then we come over."

"Uh-huh," Quake said. He smiled to himself, but did not speak again.

When they drew up to Doctor Follet's, the girl dismounted at Quake's suggestion and got the doctor, who helped untie them. The three prisoners were herded inside.

"Let's go out on the porch," Quake suggested. "I reckon we'll need the beds."

They filed out onto the lighted porch. Mrs. Mahoney was sitting in a rocker by the sheriff's side, and she grinned broadly as she saw Quake and Stubby.

"So you found the trouble you was lookin' for?" she taunted. Quake gave her a brief smile.

They were freed from their bonds by the doctor, as Tad guarded the door.

"Is there any reason why he shouldn't be awake, doc?" Quake asked, indicating the sheriff. The doctor shook his head. Quake walked over to the bed, grapped the sheriff by the front of his nightgown and hauled him into a sitting position. Then he slapped him across the face several times. "Wake up, sheriff," Quake growled softly, "or I'll make it harder next time." The sheriff remained motionless and Quake gave him a stinging blow on the cheek. Slowly his eyes opened and Quake could see a flaming hatred smoldering deeply in them. Quake turned to the astonished girl.

"There's yore murderer, miss. There's the man that killed yore brother."

The group was stunned to silence for a few seconds. Suddenly, the voice of the sheriff snarled: "That's a lie!"

Quake ignored this and turned to the sullen Parsons. "Shag," he said familiarly, "you saw it. But let me tell you something first, Shag. The money that was in that tin box was fake. It was torn up newspaper. If the doc here hadn't given Crater a shot of dope this afternoon to put him to sleep, he'd be out of the country now with that thirty-eight thousand and the twelve and a half thousand you give him this afternoon as his share." He paused, watching this news take effect on Par-



sons. "Now, Shag," Quake asked softly. "Try and remember. Didn't Crater cut down on young Coggins last night in yore office?"

Parsons's face was contorted and swollen with anger. "Why, you damned, double-crossin' rat, Crater," he muttered thickly.

"It's a lie, Shag. That money's good. A damned——" the sheriff began, but he cut himself short, realizing he had betrayed himself.

But Quake was looking at Parsons.

"Do you want to see the money, Shag?" Quake said softly. "I'll get it for you if you do."

"Yo're damn right he killed Coggins!" Parsons exploded, hate raging in his eyes. "Killed him in my office because he wouldn't join us in the Bonanza Girl holdup."

A little moan of grief came from the girl, but Quake did not look at her. He ripped the bedclothes back from the sheriff's bed, fumbled around the bottom, finally bringing forth a wad of bills. These he tossed to Parsons. "There's yore money, Shag. That pay-roll money was good money, too. I jest wondered if you wouldn't likely lose yore temper if you knowed you'd been crossed." He smiled amiably at the astonished gambler.

But Parsons was whipped, too beaten to protest. He listened with vacant eyes to Quake's chiding voice.

Quake turned to the girl. "There, Miss Virginia. Do you believe us now?"

She nodded mutely. "But I don't understand it all."

**Q**UAKE told her about it from the beginning. He drew the vest out of his hip pocket and showed them the burnt hole.

"That's what I was lookin' for

when you found me," he explained.

The sheriff had been listening with his face sick and white from fear as his carefully laid plans were recited by Quake, with his perfect knowledge of the circumstances. When Quake was finished, he turned to Crater.

"Did I miss anything, sheriff?" he asked. The sheriff shook his head in negation.

Quake looked at Mrs. Mahoney. "And yore Bonanza Girl is on a runnin' basis ag'in, Mrs. Mahoney, though why you ever picked a hombre like McDonald to run it beats me. You shore can't pick yore men."

She grinned amiably. "Don't ye be thinkin' I can't. I knew it was him from the first. I was just waitin' for a couple of brisk lads like ye two, who was lookin' for a fight, to do the hard work for me. I'm gettin' too old, and besides, I'm a woman. I couldn't have done it myself, I'm thinkin'." She rose and from the folds of her dress drew out a six-gun, handing it to the doctor.

"Here y'are, doc. I didn't need it after all." She grinned. "Here that little feller went and left Crater without somebody to look after 'im. I knew we'd need him for evidence, so I just come as a sort of nurse."

The girl, who was calm now, walked over to the sheriff. He could not look her in the face.

"Why did you kill Bat?" she asked. "I want to hear it from your own lips."

"We wanted him to jine us," Crater said huskily. "He wouldn't do it and threatened to give us away to the town. We got to arguin', and I lost my temper and shot him. That was jest after them two left the Last Stand with the hull town after 'em. I knowed if I let 'em

make me take water, they'd have to leave that night, and that's jest what we wanted. After I shot Bat, there wasn't nobody around, so Shag and me took his body out the side door of the office and put it in the buckboard behind the saloon. Then I drove out to the mine, got the money from Mac and come back to where I said the holdup was. I hid the money, dumped the body out on the road, shot m'self in the shoulder and drove the buckboard off. That's about all there is to it," he finished, his voice trailing off into a shamed whisper.

The girl turned away from him with loathing, tears in her eyes. She came to Quake. "I—I don't know how to thank you. I don't even know your name, but you've done more for me—"

"Shucks," Quake said. "It's nothin'. I jest wanted to see things get straightened around."

"And you, too," she said, to the embarrassed Stubby. "If there's any good come out of Bat's death, it's been my meeting two such fine men as you."

Stubby flushed in embarrassment, muttering an answer. Then he clapped on his hat and hitched at his pants. He strode over to the sheriff's bed.

"I reckon I'm the law around here now. You git a pair of pants on you in three seconds or I'll walk you down to the jail nekkid. I don't care if the doc says you can't do it, you're goin' to."

Tad gave Stubby and Quake their guns, then escorted the broken Parsons into the next room. He was followed by the two women.

Stubby looked at the doctor speculatively. "Doc," he said cautiously. "When you fed me to-day through that little glass thing, what was the stuff I et?"

"Did you ever taste it before?" Doctor Follet asked.

"No," Stubby said, his brow wrinkling with thought. "But I sort of thought it tasted good."

"It's expensive," Doctor Follet said gravely. "I don't think you could ever afford to eat it again." He paused. "Are you sure it was new to you? Never tasted it before?"

"Danged sure," Stubby said. "What was it?"

"Whisky," the doctor said. "That's always been a sovereign cure for snakebite."

"Horsekick," Quake corrected, ginning.

"And horsekick," the doctor added.

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# Dances are funny

By C. S. Montanye

**B**ILL MORAN strolled down the street. His hat was on the side of his head. He whistled. The day was pretty good. Overhead were clouds, the sky looked like rain, but to Bill the weather couldn't have been better. Twenty minutes before, Art Glaston, his manager, had told him he had gotten the contender for the light-heavyweight title for him.

A drop of rain hit Bill in the face. He snapped down the brim of his hat, squinted at the sky and chuckled. From now on every day would be a sunny one. Ever since he had embarked upon a pugilistic career, he had dreamed of a chance to meet and mix with Eddie Shaw.

At Elton Street, Bill Moran turned left. The thoroughfare was quiet, lined with boarding houses. He continued on, hands in his pockets, until he reached the middle of the block. He leaned against the iron railing in front of an areaway and looked hard at the basement window.

"Dixie," Moran called. "Hey, Dixie!"

The window opened. A girl looked out. She was pretty. She had dark-brown hair. Her eyes were blue and her lips red and curved. She was about twenty. Dixie Moyer held down two jobs. From nine to five she was a stenographer at the bank. From five on she helped in the management of her mother's boarding house.

"Hello, Bill. Don't you know enough to come in out of the rain?"

"Is it raining?" Bill held out one of his big hands. "You're right, it is. Guess I'll take your advice."

"Crazy," Dixie scoffed, laughing.

She gave him her usual admiring look when he came into the house. Moran was an inch over six feet. He was wide at the shoulders, narrow at the hips, all sinew and muscle.

Bill lifted her from the floor by her elbows, kissed her, and put her down.

"I've got some grand news, honey. Guess what?"

She looked up at him.

"You're going to fight Eddie Shaw."

"Who told you that?"

"You did."



A palooka who just couldn't understand.

"Me? I never——"

"Your face did. If you hadn't gotten the bout why would you be whistling in the rain?"

Bill drew himself up.

"On the twenty-fifth, honey! At Stever's Casino! What could be sweeter? I'm going to lay this Shaw like a carpet. Then, Art says, he'll get me the champ within a year."

"That's swell," Dixie said enthusiastically. "How about to-night? Going to the dance?"

"Yeah. But it'll be my last one for a while. Art's taking me to Wildwood for the training grind." His face shadowed. "That means I won't see you—only now and then—for a month."

"That'll be tough, won't it?"

Bill reached out and grabbed her.

"I'll say it will. Honey, you know how I feel about you. You're tops. I couldn't get along without you. I'd be like a ship without a—a——"

"Rudder?"

"That's it. Look. It won't be long now. I smack Shaw away, knock the champ goofy, get myself a lot of dough and go to housekeeping with you."

Dixie rubbed her cheek against his coat.

"So it's as easy as that?"

"It's in the bag."

"I'm not so sure," Dixie told him. "Usually, when things seem so simple, they turn out to be so much the other way."

"This one won't," Bill assured her.

**A**BOUT nine o'clock, Bill Moran went back to Elton Street in a taxi. Dixie was dressed, waiting. He handed her into the cab.

"Poppyland," he directed the driver. He put his arm around Dixie. He was still glowing with the news of the afternoon. "Gee, baby, you're sweet. I can't get over it. You're my gal. Mine, ail mine. What did a big gorilla like me ever do to deserve you?"

"I wonder." Dixie laughed.

"Pretty soon," Bill continued, "we'll be rolling around in our own wagon. No more taxis. I'll be sitting up there at the wheel of the biggest car money can buy. You wait and see."

"I like little cars," Dixie said.

Bill went on, sketching a word picture of what would happen when he got the championship. Dixie didn't seem much impressed. She kept clinging to his arm, laughing at his extravagant promises.

"All right, enjoy yourself, but wait and see," Bill told her.

Poppyland was the largest and best dance hall in town. It boasted a hot band. They had lucky number dances. They gave away twenty dollars each night in special door prizes. The crowd was always a young bunch. They brought their own liquor and had fun.

Bill recognized people he knew. There were several men who had worked with him at the rolling mills. One was Len McCabe. McCabe had been his foreman. Bill never had liked him. For one thing McCabe had played favorites at the mills. If he liked a guy he gave him the breaks.

To-night McCabe was with a small blonde. She was painted and powdered. She wore long, dangling earrings. She had a blank smile and an empty expression. On their table were a couple of quarts of whisky and a bottle of ginger ale.

"That's Rose Hamilton," Dixie said to Bill, with a nod toward the blonde.

"She ought to get back in the funny papers," Bill said.

"She's been running around with McCabe for a year."

"I don't admire her choice," Bill said shortly.

**E**VERY second dance revolving colored lights were on the floor. The crowd liked that. It gave the fellows a chance to kiss their girls. It was lots of fun.

"My last dance until after I take Eddie Shaw," Bill told Dixie. "Going to miss me, honey?"

"Lots."

"Not as much as I'm going to miss you."

"How do you know?"

"Because," he said gravely, "I love you more than you do me."

She smiled slowly, half to herself.

"Is that what you think?"

Bill leaned closer.

"Isn't it a fact?"

Dixie half closed her eyes.

"That's my secret."

The evening wore away pleasantly. A couple of times Bill saw McCabe in the throng on the floor. He had a strangle hold on the blonde. He was pretty well oiled. The blonde looked tight, too.

"That's what liquor does," Bill said, filling his glass with ginger ale. "I suppose they think they're getting a kick out of it."

"I'm glad you don't drink," Dixie said.

"I wouldn't if I could, and I can't because booze and boxing gloves don't mix. How about another dance and then leaving?" He looked at his watch. "Gosh, it's almost two o'clock."

"And to-morrow's another day," Dixie murmured, getting up.

The dance was one with the colored lights. Bill followed the custom of the place and kissed Dixie in between the lights and shadows. The crowd was so thick that moving was difficult.

A stout youth, trying to do the Lindy, collided with Bill. Bill knocked against the couple behind him. The stout youth apologized profusely. Bill grinned. The next minute an angry voice spoke sharply beside him:

"You big goof! Why don't you look where you're going?"

Bill turned around. McCabe's girl friend gave him a blazing stare. She lifted her left foot and rubbed the instep.

"I'm sorry——"

The girl's painted lips curved in a sneer.

"That does my foot a lot of good."

"What's the matter, babe?"

McCabe pressed in. The girl told him.

"Look at my stocking, Len. He almost drew blood."

Dixie pulled at Bill's arm.

"Come on, don't say anything more, Bill."

McCabe heard her.

"Yeah? Don't say anything more? Well, I've got something to say. No clown's going to give my sweetie the foot and get away with it!"

"Please come," Dixie whispered.

Bill stood still.

"Wait a minute, honey. Don't be in such a hurry. I've told this lady I'm sorry. I want to find out what more she wants."

McCabe took a step closer. Other couples noticed his attitude and stopped dancing to watch. McCabe's red face became more florid.

"I'll take care of this party, babe."

Dixie's whisper was a pleading request:

"Bill, he's drunk! Don't have any——"

Bill's blood flamed. He had never liked McCabe. To have the man bowl him out in public incensed him.

"Just a minute, Dixie. I want to see what he thinks he's going to do."

McCabe's arm drew back. He unleashed a swinging uppercut. Bill shifted and let it whistle by. At the same time he struck with his own left. The blow didn't travel more than a few inches. His fist crashed against McCabe's jaw. As if kicked by a mule the man hurtled backward. He struck a table, slid off, and collapsed on the floor.

A couple of men pulled him to his feet. Bill stood in the same position. He was conscious of Dixie's pale face and wide eyes.

"Got anything more to say?" he asked McCabe.

There was no answer. Bill turned

to Dixie. He said something about finishing the dance. She shook her head.

"Take me home, Bill," she said faintly.

THE next morning Bill Moran left for Wildwood. Art Glaston and the rest of the training retinue crowded into two automobiles. When they reached the Turnpike, Moran looked back. Rain was still falling. The smoke from the mills hung in a heavy pall over the town. It was a cheerless, gray day. He felt its melancholy. He had hoped to say good-by again to Dixie, but she had already gone to her office. Last night's farewell hadn't been any too satisfactory.

Moran settled back against the worn upholstery.

"Dames are funny," he said to Glaston.

"You're telling me, Bill."

During the month Moran only saw Dixie week-ends. He trained religiously. His physical condition was a hundred per cent, but he had to improve his boxing. He had to tune up his left and learn how to cover. Shaw was big time.

"How'm I doing?" he asked Glaston, a week before the fight.

"You'll win."

Bill stretched his long arms.

"You bet I will—in the first frame!"

He got back to town the afternoon before the big bout at Stever's Casino. As soon as he arrived he slipped away from Glaston and hurried to Elton Street. This time he didn't whistle. He leaned against the iron railing of the areaway. He looked at the basement window, trying to see the figure of a girl inside.

"Dixie," he called. "Hey, Dixie!"

The window opened. Dixie looked out at him.

"Bill! When did you get back?"

"Ten minutes ago. Can I come in or do I stand out here and talk?"

"How are you?" she asked, when he took her in his arms and kissed her. "You're as brown as an Indian. I think you've grown. You look bigger."

"I feel great," Bill said.

He fumbled in his pocket. Finally he found the envelope he wanted. He handed it to Dixie.

"What's this, Bill?"

"Your ringside seat, honey."

She opened the envelope and took out the ticket.

"Bill, you're sweet. I've never been to a real fight. I'm so excited."

"Root for me, honey, to-morrow night. I can't miss with you there."

"You must win," Dixie said, her cheek against his.

**B**ILL saw her when he climbed through the ropes the following night. She looked small and out of place in the crowd. He waved to her from his corner. Then he temporarily forgot her in the press of what was to follow. He stared over at Shaw. The contender was big. He looked fit. The gallery and rear seats were a smear of faces. Art Glaston shoved Bill's rubber tooth-protector into place.

"You get him, Bill, and I'll get the champ.

Bill nodded. Again he looked down at Dixie. He saw her pretty, intent face when he shed his bathrobe and walked out to the center of the ring to get the referee's final instructions.

Almost immediately the bell rang, they touched gloves and the fight started.

From the first minute of combat Bill knew he was Shaw's superior. His blood flamed with the heat of battle. He waded in, shooting his

punches from all angles. Coolly, like a tiger stalking its prey, he maneuvered Shaw back to the ropes, got his guard down and slammed a hay-maker off his jaw. Shaw got up at the count of nine. He was groggy, glassy-eyed.

Bill measured him. He sank a left to the stomach. Shaw doubled up. He went down for the count of nine a second time. Gately, Shaw climbed to his feet. Bill whipped a hook to the face. Blood spurted from Shaw's nose.

Bill wasted no more time. Another left to the jaw caved in Shaw's legs. A great outburst of whistling and cheering rocked the Casino. This time Shaw didn't get up at the count of nine. The referee finished tolling off the seconds. Still Shaw lay in a huddle on the canvas. Then the referee went over to Bill and lifted his right arm in the symbol of victory.

Instantly the ring swarmed with people. Art Glaston threw the bathrobe over Moran's shoulder.

"Nice work, Bill. A clean kayo. Two minutes and ten seconds. Are you the next champ or are you the next champ?"

Gradually Bill's mind cleared. He went back to his stool. He spit out the rubber tooth-protector. He craned his neck looking for Dixie, for her happy smile, her congratulatory wave. But her seat was empty.

"Where's my gal? Where's Dixie?" he asked quickly.

Glaston peered over her shoulder. "The dame ducked out when you belted Eddie's beezer. Dames are funny," he added.

Bill went back to the dressing room. Newspapermen wanted to talk to him. A crowd of admirers waited outside the Casino. He pushed a way between them. He managed to shake them off. He

dodged around a corner and hurried to Elton Street.

The sky was full of stars. The evening breeze was soft and bland. Bill didn't notice it. He wasn't aware of the night's splendor. It might just as well have been raining. He sensed disaster. He couldn't understand it, couldn't place it. When he reached the Moyers' boarding house he ran up the steps and rang the bell.

Mrs. Moyer opened the door, a shout, motherly woman. She wore spectacles and had a young-old face.

"Dixie get back?"

"She's gone to bed," Mrs. Moyer explained.

Bill looked blank.

"Gone to bed—when I've knocked the contender out! You're kidding." He glanced around, half expecting to see Dixie smiling at him from a shadowy retreat.

"Dixie told me to give you a message." Mrs. Moyer's tone was low and clear. "She said when you came I should tell you she made a mistake. She doesn't want to see you again. She says she'll write you a letter to-morrow!"

**T**HE latter part of that week Bill Moran and Art Glaston left Ironton for New York. Important matters awaited them in the metropolis. The champ was ready to sign for a mid-winter title bout at the Garden. There was money to be picked up in Manhattan—some radio broadcasting, an engagement at a moving picture theater on Broadway, dinners and a couple of lunches where they wanted to hear Bill talk.

The city greeted him with a roar. He felt lost. He was a small frog in a huge puddle. Bill was bewildered, out of place. For the first time he

realized how much of a hick he was. Even his clothes stamped him. Glaston studied him.

"Snap out of it, Bill. You're somebody now. You're the next champ. You're making important jack."

Bill knew what was the matter. He had lost Dixie. Nothing else counted for much. The sheer savagery and tiger ferocity that had made everything possible had been responsible for his loss. Without Dixie he actually was the rudderless ship he had mentioned that happy afternoon.

Glaston was shrewd. He didn't overlook any bets. When Bill made all the money he could in New York, Glaston arranged a trip out to the coast.

The months dragged wearily past for Bill. He went from snow and ice into the sunny reaches of California. But he wasn't happy. He felt he'd rather be back at the mills, working under McCabe. He would have gladly exchanged fame and fortune for the old days. For a while he hoped against hope that Dixie would write. He couldn't understand it. Why should she give him up because he had won a fight? It didn't make sense.

"For the love of Pete," Glaston said to him once, "will you pull yourself together and quit mooning about that Ironton dame? With all the swell-looking janes running around loose, why worry about a small-town doll like her?"

"You don't understand," Bill said.

"You bet your life I don't," Glaston replied. "But I do understand this. If you don't get that moll off your mind by the time you meet the champ you'll have the same chance of copping the title as a paper collar in a forest fire."

"I'll win," Bill said.



Glaston lighted a cigarette.

"That's what you think."

The week after New Year's they left for the East. They pulled into New York in a heavy snowstorm. The dampness and cold penetrated. It got into Bill's bones and equaled the chill in his heart. With the big fight a fortnight distant, he went up to Lake Placid for conditioning.

He told himself he was going to win the championship. Nothing could stop him. He was at the peak. He was fast and deadly. The irony of it made him smile. He was going to use the trade that had cost him Dixie Moyer to triple his earnings.

**B**ILL returned to New York on the eve of the fight. Art told him the ticket sale was tremendous. Everywhere Bill went he was recognized and spoken to. People slapped him on the back and wished him luck. Telegrams from the towns he had visited poured in. His pals in Ironton wrote and wired. He made a final radio broadcast in which he was interviewed.

The immensity of New York's great hippodrome of sports surprised Bill. When the semi-final was over and he went into the ring with Art and his seconds he was almost awed. He had never seen such a packed place.

"Remember," Art said, kneeling beside him. "Take it easy. Let him come to you. Box him. Don't get in close. You can win if you wear him down and soften him up for your left."

Finally, after a long wait, the clang of the gong came. Bill slid into action. He was never better. His body, tanned by the California sun, was a graceful machine. The champ looked heavy around the middle, not properly conditioned. Bill smiled to himself. It was going to

be easier than the Shaw bout. Why wait and stall along for endless rounds?

His first punches brought weak returns. Bill's lips curled back. A champ? Bill led with his left. He countered and closed in.

The crowd screamed his name. Leather thumped against leather. He put everything into his punches. Queerly they didn't do the same thing for him they had at the time of the Shaw encounter. For some reason he couldn't get them through. Then, surprisingly enough, a glove smashed against his face. When Bill dropped his guard with a grunt another glove arrowed into his stomach.

A thousand lights broke before his vision. He tried to go into a clinch. A bedlam of sound roared in his ears. The champ wouldn't let him hang on. He careened up against the ropes. A ferocious left to the jaw filled Bill with nausea. He was on his hands and knees before he realized it. He heard the referee's voice. He shook his head to clear it. Something warm was dripping off his chin. When he looked at the canvas he was surprised to see drops of his own blood.

He got to his feet. He felt numb. He wanted to punch, but his arms wouldn't obey the orders of his mind. Another cruel, lancing blow and his legs gave way. He pulled himself up from the floor at the count of nine. He realized he had made a mistake. The champ was no false alarm. He was a powerful hitter, a knock-out socker. Bill was all through. There was nothing he could do about it.

Gamely he reeled to his feet. He lurched out from the ropes. He pawed feebly at the air. The shouts and yells were thin and far away. He saw the champ's face dimly. Two

eyes peered into his. They were killer's eyes. He waited for the bell. Why didn't it ring? If he could only stick it out.

A wave of darkness went over Bill. He lay almost in the center of the ring. His face and arms were sticky with blood. He couldn't get up. It was no use. The fight was over. His chance had come and gone. Somehow that didn't bother him. Losing wasn't as tough as he had thought it would be. He felt himself being picked up, half carried to his corner.

"You dumb cluck!" Art Glaston was saying. "You blew the title because you didn't listen! I told you to—"

**B**ILL hurried down Elton Street. The winter sky was colored with the faint afterglow of the sunset. He touched something in his overcoat pocket. He hoped the eye he had had painted in New York didn't look too bad. He squinted at the horizon. Clear to-morrow and warmer. He whistled through his cracked, swollen lips.

When he reached a house in the middle of the block he leaned against the areaway railing. Through the frosty basement windows he could see a figure moving around. Bill's hands tightened.

"Dixie!"

She opened the basement gate. She took him into the front room and helped him off with his overcoat. She stood on tiptoe, looking him over as if she had never seen him before.

"I got your letter in New York," Bill said. "I took the first train."

"Bill! Poor Bill!"

He held her to him.

"What do you mean—poor Bill? If you still love me and if you still want to take a chance and get married, why should I be poor Bill? This is the happiest moment of my life!"

She laid her warm cheek against his.

"Mine, too!"

After a minute Bill laughed.

"I don't understand, honey. I win a fight and you give me the air. I lose a fight and you want me back. How do you figure it?"

Dixie touched his puffed lips. She looked at his painted eye. There was something enigmatic in her expression.

"You wouldn't understand, Bill," she said slowly.

Bill shook his head. Then he took her in his arms again.

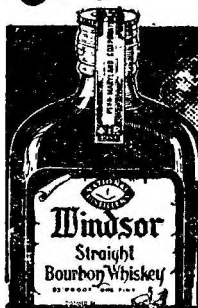
"No, I guess I wouldn't. Dames," he said, "are funny."

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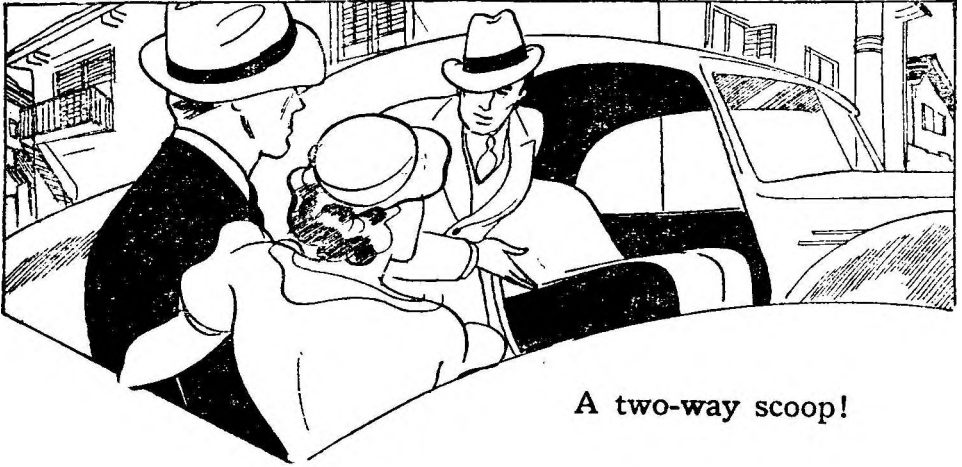


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A two-way scoop!

# Beware of Trails

**P**ERHAPS Tomasso would not have lived long anyhow. On the East Side the "tough" ones frequently prosper, but as frequently they die young. However, Tomasso Amato might still be alive, a scourge of the wise money and a problem to the police, if he had not fallen in love with a girl. "Skinny Dave, the Sage of Suffolk Street," once remarked, "A racket guy that falls for a dame is gettin' ready for an embalmer." Dave is over fifty and still unmarried.

Rutgers Street is in the heart of the lower East Side, a short, wide thoroughfare which ends at the East River. The buildings fronting on the river are ancient and crumbling from decay, but it is as cool there as on Riverside Drive. And if you seek excitement, this is where you can find it, night or day.

The house in which Phil Shaw was born is in the middle of the block. "Wireless" is his underworld nickname, bestowed on him because he is a newspaper reporter. Mrs. Shaw has steadily refused to move out of the neighborhood, which is full of memories dear to her.

Considering his early associations, Wireless is a pretty decent fellow. He has no police record. He is very popular in the neighborhood, in spite of his college education, because he never high-hats his friends and it is known he has no confidants on the police force. To have reached the age of twenty-six, pursued an honest vocation, and yet be at peace with everybody—neighbors, racketeers, police—is conclusive evidence that Wireless must be a "right guy." Many of his enterprising neighbors made a great deal of money suddenly, but many of them

are now enjoying epitaphs, whereas Wireless is still alive, a smiling, slender, cheerful fellow, with something in his gray eyes that discourages presumption.

"Fluffy" is his girl's pet name; on formal occasions, Gertrude Charlotte Rawlins. Like the Shaws, the Rawlins family were of the old settlers. A slim girl, with dark, vivid eyes.

This Sunday afternoon in September, she called for Wireless, and they strolled up the street, bound for anywhere or nowhere. A pale-blue roadster was parked near the corner. One glance was sufficient to stamp it as the property of a "wise guy."

"There's the darling boy again," murmured Fluffy, and if she were perturbed you could hardly blame her. Tomasso Amato was a bad actor, if ever there was one, and he had fallen for Fluffy, and fallen hard.

No one had ever accused Wireless of being a coward, but he certainly did not enjoy this particular encounter. Whenever possible, he steered clear of trouble.

"Hello, Tommy!" Wireless would have continued walking after the greeting, but Amato got out of the car. "How's everything?"

**A**MATO deliberately finished lighting his cigarette with a jeweled lighter before replying. He was tall, well-built, very dark, with a heavy scar above his left eye. "How're you, beautiful? All alone, I see?" He ignored Wireless completely.

"So your eyesight is failing?" commented Fluffy. "Or maybe you've never been introduced to Mr. Philip Shaw?"

"Just a little cockeyed." The

gunman grinned amiably. "Makin' any money, Wireless? How about throwin' a party to-night?"

Wireless replied briefly: "I can't afford it." Which happened to be the exact truth.

"Want a loan?" asked Amato, contemptuously. He stuck a hand into a pocket and with some difficulty extracted a roll of bills that made Fluffy gasp. Her amazement gratified Amato hugely. Back into the pocket went the wad, and he began drawing bills of large denominations from other pockets. "I can let you have a C if you ain't paid your rent, Wireless."

"No, thanks. I wouldn't be able to pay back the hundred after I spent it."

"Couldn't pay back a hundred dollars?" Amato sneered openly. "Hell, what kind of a guy are you—broke, with money all around?" A man and a woman, evidently slummers, were walking along the other side of the street, the woman carrying a small, well-groomed Pomeranian. "See that mut, Wireless? Grab him and throw him into my car, and I'll give you fifty. What do you say? Too yellow?"

Fluffy turned on him, her dark eyes blazing. "I can tell you what he'll say. He'll say he's no crook or dog-snatcher—or baby-snatcher, either." That Amato had kidnaped a six-year-old girl was known, although it had never been proven. "What he gets he works for. You heard of that thing they call work, didn't you?" Mounting anger made her reckless. "What have you ever done that makes you think so well of yourself? Held up a few stores with a gun in your hand against some

fat man who had nothing. What's brave about

By Andrew I. Albert

that? Let me see you take it from some one hard before you stick out your chest and crow."

His face dark with anger, Amato moved suddenly toward her. But, as suddenly, Wireless was in front of him.

"Just a minute, wise guy!" cautioned Wireless. "Just look who's coming down the street—and keep your hands out of your pockets."

Amato looked and his face changed. His glance rested on Kelleher, and Kelleher is the crazy detective who doesn't know what fear means. Even the toughest are afraid of him; no one ever knows just what he will do next. He has been known to call a certain unsavory gentleman away from a table where he sat in full dress, surrounded by worshipping women who think a gangster a hero, take him into a private room, beat him up, and send him back with blackened eyes to reap further adoration. How Kelleher has avoided being killed is one of the East Side mysteries.

When the detective reached them, Amato was back in his car, smiling insolently. Kelleher nodded pleasantly to Wireless, glanced at Amato with cold, speculative eyes, and walked on.

"Why don't you call him, Wireless?" sneered Amato.

"Because he's no whistle blower, and you know it!" snapped Fluffy.

"No, he ain't no whistle blower. He wouldn't live long if he was. He ain't anything far as I can see."

"Thanks!" Wireless stared at Amato with fathomless eyes. "And now, if there's nothing else pleasant you want to say, Fluffy and I will tear ourselves away from you."

Amato looked at Fluffy with hot eyes, as she took Phil's arm, and Fluffy, small and erect, looked back with frank dislike.

"So you think I pick only the easy ones?" he asked slowly. "Got me down as yellow, hey?" After a slight pause: "Who do you call hard? Wireless?"

**F**EAR came into Fluffy's heart, fear for her man, for she understood Amato quite thoroughly. Her brain worked fast.

"No, not Wireless. He's too easy, and you know it. Besides, he's broke. I'd think you were pretty good if you could get money out of one of the big shots in Schmidt's crowd."

"Schmidt's gang, hey? Well, which one of Schmidt's gang do you call hard? Maybe I'll do a job just to change your opinion of me, beautiful. Which one of Schmidt's mob do you call real tough?"

"Well, if you're asking me, I always heard Big Dutch was real tough," replied Fluffy, craftily.

A long moment Amato stared at her, and he was nobody's fool. But he had that craving for glory which makes boys of seventeen and eighteen the easy homicidal tools of older racketeers. He should have been past that stage, and he probably was, only he wanted Fluffy. He released the brake and shifted the gears, and as the car started, he said: "Maybe you'll be hearing something soon." Just the right kind of exit for the gang hero he pictured himself to be. "And after that maybe I'll come back just to grab you for my frail, Fluffy."

Wireless was beside the car in a moment. "You may be grabbing a coffin for yourself, Tommy. And I don't mean maybe."

With one violent motion, Amato slammed on the brakes. His black eyes glared into those of Wireless.

"When I'm ready, I'll come back," he announced, lighting another cigarette. A little ashamed of his weak-

ness, he blew smoke into Wireless's face, and added: "And if you get hard, Fluffy 'n' me'll bring you a lily."

"I'll be waiting for you," said Wireless.

"Tell you what I'll do!" Amato glanced at Fluffy as he spoke. "I'll send you word before I come. Give you a chance to get ready. That's fair enough, ain't it? So long!"

After Amato had disappeared, Fluffy said anxiously: "Do you really think he means it?"

"About taking Big Dutch or about taking you?"

"Well, either one."

"Just a lot of hot air." But Wireless was not at all sure; he was merely trying to comfort her.

Later Fluffy telephoned a friend of "Big Dutch," but he only laughed at her.

**I**T'S all underworld history, now. The way Amato snatched Big Dutch was ridiculously easy. He simply went to the hotel where the gentleman made his home, took the elevator to his room on the sixth floor, knocked at the door, until Big Dutch called, "Who's there?" The hour was nine o'clock in the morning, and that's midnight in racketeer circles. Amato said, "Telegram," and Big Dutch opened the door. The rest was simple. With two guns leveled at him—Amato had brought along his friend, Tony Scarsi—Dutch could do nothing but swear and fume and obey. After he had dressed, the three men went downstairs peacefully, past the clerk at the desk, and into Amato's blue roadster.

All of which was nervy enough, but what followed is even more incredible.

By noon of the same day everybody but the police knew that Amato

had snatched Big Dutch, and a new era in profitable crime had begun. It paid to kidnap racketeers like Big Dutch, because they had ready cash in quantities.

The streets were full of killers looking for Amato. Money and glory awaited the fortunate gangster who should bring him in, dead or alive. Not only Schmidt's mob, but other mobs who realized the same stunt might be perpetrated on them, were looking for Amato. Meanwhile, the partners of Big Dutch waited for the ransom message.

On Tuesday morning, at the unearthly hour of seven, Schmidt and four of his associates sat in a room on the first floor of a quiet hotel near Broadway. Each man was a killer, tried and proven. Besides Schmidt, there was "Blackie" McGuire, "Scar" Fusco, Mike Horton, and, of course, Schmidt's bodyguard, "Two-feet" Caporri. These are names unfamiliar only to those who have lived all their lives in the sticks. They were as deadly a group as could be found anywhere within the city, and a human life meant as much to them as the life of a fly.

With them was Wireless, there to get a scoop for his paper, and to whom the special privilege had been accorded because Fluffy had attempted to warn Big Dutch.

Shortly after seven the door opened, and in walked Mr. Tomasso Amato, perfectly cool and unconcerned. He paused to light a cigarette, pulled out a chair, sat down, and wished them all "Good morning!"

"I've got Big Dutch!" he added.

That was no news to the five, who waited silent. Nor could Wireless help admiring the man's courage.

After a while, Amato added. "If I ain't back in two hours, Big Dutch is dead."

There was no doubt in anybody's mind that if he did not return in two hours, Dutch would be very completely dead.

The big, gray-haired man at the head of the table spoke tersely. "How much?"

"Fifty grand," was the prompt reply. "All in fives, tens, and twenties. Big Dutch will be out in an hour after I get the dough."

And so it came to pass. Amato got his fifty thousand, and left. Before he did so, he walked over to Wireless, and whispered: "I'll be coming for Fluffy—soon."

An hour later Big Dutch was at liberty.

The gray-haired man asked Phil: "What did he say to you?"

Reluctantly Phil told him. He hated to bring Fluffy's name into the matter at all, but he had no recourse.

"When he shows up," Schmidt instructed, "you pull down the blinds of your front windows all the way. That'll be the signal."

At nine o'clock in the evening of the same day, Fluffy was called to the telephone. Wireless, standing beside her, started to tease about a new sweetheart, but stopped at the look of fear in her face. She put the receiver to his ear and a familiar voice became audible.

"I didn't pick them so easy when I snatched Big Dutch, did I? Now I'm coming for you, just as I said. Tell Wireless to stick around if he wants that lily. But nothing ain't going to stop me from making you my dame, beautiful."

Wireless pushed Fluffy behind him as if Amato were already there.

"Listen, Tommy! You've got plenty of nerve, but don't get soft in the head. You've got a bad case of swelled head, just because you got away with it, once. I'll stick

around to take care of Fluffy until you're knocked off. And that won't be very long unless you take a trip far, far away. They're looking for you, Tommy. Keep away from here; you'll get nothing but hard knocks down here."

"I told you I'm coming for Fluffy—and I'm coming." There was a click.

"Do you think he means it?" Fluffy was a little white.

"He means it all right. But he's a fool if he comes down here. I have a notion Schmidt's crowd are all around, waiting for him, since I repeated his brag that he's coming for you."

Nevertheless, Wireless was worried and puzzled. That Amato had brains and nerve, he could not doubt; the kidnaping of Big Dutch had proved that much. And he seemed so entirely certain that he would be successful in taking Fluffy. There must be a reason for his confidence; what could it be?

"Listen, honey, suppose you go away for a week?" Wireless said.

"I'm staying here, with you," replied Fluffy, firmly. "He means to kidnap me, but he means to kill you—if you interfere."

**A** WEEK passed—seven days of tension, fear, and worry. Wireless slept in Fluffy's home and carried a revolver, something he had never done before. Fortunately Fluffy's mother, Mrs. Rawlins, was deaf, and partially paralyzed, so that she knew nothing of what was going on. They were painting the Shaw apartment, Wireless told her, hence his taking up sleeping quarters in the Rawlins's home. The old lady smiled and played at being chaperon, even though she was sure to fall asleep

at nine, and wake up, poor lady, at three in the morning.

"What I'm afraid of," remarked Wireless, looking anxious and harassed, "is that I'll lose my job. I've been away a week. If it weren't for that Big Dutch scoop I got for the paper, I'd have been fired by this time." He looked out of the window at the traffic, at the people milling back and forth on the narrow sidewalk, at pushcarts, wagons, trucks, and automobiles.

"I think you ought to go back to work." Fluffy's eyes embraced him in loving solicitude. "He's probably on his way to San Francisco by this time, and even if he isn't, he wouldn't dare try anything during the day, with all these people around. And at night you can be here with me. Now don't you think it's sensible? With so many people in the street——"

"Perhaps you're right." Wireless's eyes wandered from the restless crowds below to linger on the peddler who was selling fruit from a truck across the street. Funny kind of a vehicle to be used for that purpose. Usually venders of this sort used a horse and wagon. And the front part of this truck was heavily inclosed; the rear was open and loaded with fruit. There were two men on it. One of them started across the street, carrying a basket of peaches. Wireless stared at him; he looked faintly familiar. Rough clothes, heavy, unshined shoes, an old cap, but there was a certain swagger.

He was coming right toward the house, and, as he raised his head, Wireless stepped back swiftly.

"Now, darling, right into the bedroom for you." He pulled the astonished girl with him.

"What—what——"

"No time to talk. Hurry! It's Amato. He's coming up."

Fluffy started to scream, but he put his hand over her mouth. "Don't, dear! You'll put him on his guard. Even if you scare him away now, he'll come back. We'll never be safe." He pushed her into the bedroom where her mother lay sleeping.

Then he went back and pulled down the blinds of the two front windows. From one of the bureau drawers, he got out a .45 automatic, and hurried to the entrance door.

There came the sound of heavy footsteps up the stairs, and a hoarse voice crying out unintelligibly in the jargon of the East Side peddler of fruit. Suddenly the voice was stilled, and Wireless waited tensely. He saw the handle of the door turn softly, and a weight was pressed against the door. It did not yield; the door was locked. Next came the sound of a key softly inserted in the lock. Swiftly, Wireless retreated a few feet to where a door opened into another bedroom.

**A** GUST of wind swept the long hallway as the entrance door was opened. Stealthy footsteps shuffled forward. They stopped a moment, then came nearer. A crouching form was at the bedroom door, and two gleaming eyes glanced in, looked about. Behind the bedroom door Wireless held his breath and waited. The man advanced on his toes, passed the door, and very quietly Wireless came out behind him.

"Hands up!" he shouted suddenly, his automatic leveled and ready. As he shouted, he stepped back into the room and sank to the floor.

Instead of obeying, the man whirled and blazed away. Wireless shot once, upward from the floor, and the intruder cried out, and his



automatic dropped with a clatter. For a full minute Wireless waited, then dashed out quickly, picked up the automatic, and stood over the racketeer.

"Get up, Tommy!"

Slowly the gunman rose to his feet, leaned against the wall, and stared at Wireless with expressionless eyes. Blood flowed from a wound just below his right shoulder.

"I didn't think you had the guts," he said defiantly.

From behind him, Fluffy cried out anxiously: "Wireless!"

"I'm all right, dear. Get back."

Amato called out: "Hello, Fluffy!" He turned toward her. "I told you I'd come for you, beautiful. And I did get Big Dutch, didn't I?"

"Why don't you leave me alone, you fool!" she cried out frantically.

"Don't worry. He'll let us alone after this." Wireless's voice was full of grim meaning.

"Going to finish me, hey?" If Amato felt fear, he did not show it.

Wireless said: "You're a brave guy, Amato. No, I'm not going to finish you. You wouldn't understand it, but I can't shoot down a man who's wounded and unarmed. Funny, isn't it?"

"It ain't funny, it's dumb. If it was me, you'd be full of lead and I'd be on my way—with Fluffy."

"I guess you're right. Just the same, I can't do it. Listen, damn you: I'm giving you a chance for your life. I don't think it's much of a chance—but it's a chance. You're going out of here, and when you get out on the street, run like hell to that truck of yours. And bad luck to you—I think they'll get you, just the same."

He backed toward the door and out of it, Amato following slowly. At the stairway Wireless let his enemy precede him. The two men

went down the stairs. They reached the street.

"Now," said Wireless, "get going!"

Amato looked at Wireless with murderous eyes. "I'll get going all right. But I said I'm going to get Fluffy, and I will. And there'll be a lily for you, too, Wireless, and a swell funeral, for being good to me. I keep my promises."

"You may not keep this one," predicted Wireless grimly. He was looking up toward a window in the house across the street.

A crowd had begun to collect, attracted by Wireless's gun, but they remained at a safe distance. Amato's eyes followed Wireless's glance, and he broke into a run toward the truck, shouting hoarsely. The man on the truck shouted back urgently.

There came the *rat-a-tat* of machine guns from windows on both sides of the street. Amato whirled about, crumpled, sagged down. A woman screamed. The truck started without warning, then ran onto the sidewalk and into a plate-glass window. Several dark figures converged toward it, and there came the vicious crackle of revolvers.

Upstairs, Fluffy was waiting, white of face.

"They got him," Wireless whispered.

"Yes, I saw." She shuddered. "But I'm glad you didn't do it." She lifted her face to be kissed. "He was crazy about me, wasn't he? Are you?"

"Yes, dear." He kissed her absent-mindedly. "I'd got to get to the paper. This scoop ought to make up for a week's absence, don't you think?"

The city editor thought it did, but Fluffy didn't care what he thought. Do men never think of anything but business?

"This daring young man——"



# Girl in the Sky

By Robert M. Ross

**A** FRIENDLY Florida morning—the kind that becomes altogether too familiar if given any encouragement. The sun reached out from above the steaming bayou to add some withering touches to an already finished landscape. Down the regularly divided acres of Paradise Park and across the concrete highway that separated them from Palatial Heights, the blistering heat brooked no interference. The sole living man in the landscape had been reduced to a resigned hulk.

The man, appearing to sleep, didn't. He was stretched under the canopy of an airplane wing and, at the moment, reminiscing on a frozen foot he had experienced two winters before.

A far-away hum began to drum into his ears. He recognized the sound as an automobile, and spitefully hoped it was another Indiana tourist who did not know that the road pitched unceremoniously into a swamp two miles farther on, and that he would be forced to retrace his route to Miami.

The approaching racket was patently not inspired by Fenner, general director and sales staff of Paradise Park. For this current annoyance was accompanied by the rattle of a loose rear bumper.

By sheer force of will, he aroused enough curiosity to turn his head in the direction of the pike as the car hove into sight. He had been right about its not being Fenner's car, although it was the front bumper that rattled.

"Rocky's" vision was limited, and he caught only a fleeting glimpse of the vehicle; but having satisfied himself that it was driven by a man and not a woman, he relapsed into his previous state. When the car stopped in front of the sign, "Free Airplane Rides," he refused to move. The youngster would read the smaller type, "with every option on Paradise Park property," and continue.

The arrested progress, however, was permanent. The motor ceased. He is out of gas, wants to know where he is, or will offer me fifty cents for a five-dollar hop, Rocky guessed.

"Catching up on your home work?" The musical lilt of the voice bolted him into a sitting position. He blinked uncertainly—not at a boy, but at an entirely feminine person with a short-clipped black bob.

"I—I—I'm sorry," he stammered. "I thought you were a boy."

"I'm sorry, too," she mocked. "What do you like—curls?"

"No, I ain't so partial to curls," Rocky explained lamely. "I was just surprised about you being out so early."

"I'm always out early."

"In that case you ain't a native." He laughed, regaining some of his composure.

HER attention had strayed to the red cabin monoplane. "What kind of ship is this?"

The flier grinned. "I never introduce her to strangers."

"Correct." She had a breezy manner. "I'm Fay Wright. And you?"

"Rocky Calvert." The girl showed no reaction to the name. He preferred it that way—new territory. "She's an Alkron."

"What a pretty name—for a pretty ship." Then she added, apologetically. "I suppose I should have recognized an Alkron, but I don't know a thing about aviation."

Rocky patted the fuselage affectionately. "I think she's pretty. She's got me out of pretty close shaves. Once, in the national air derby, I had to set her down on a ferry in the Mississippi River."

"Wasn't that awfully difficult?"

Rocky nodded his head modestly. "Probably would have been for some. Course, I give the ship a lot of credit. Another time I lost the undercarriage and had to land upside down."

"Marvelous." Rocky felt he detected a note of genuine admiration. "I wish I knew something about flying."

"None of us too old to learn. I'm not, and I got fifteen thousand hours in the air."

"Why, that's weeks and weeks."

Rocky waved a brown hand. "Oh, not all at the same time."

"You must be a very famous pilot," his guest suggested breathlessly.

"Oh, I don't know. Naturally, since I invented the rear glide I suppose lots of people have heard of me. It's just like an ordinary glide, you know, except there's a knack in doing it tail first."

Fay cocked her sleek head. "Say,

they must pay you plenty to fly here."

"Not as much as I could get in exhibitions. It's a good living, though." Rocky grew confidential. "You see, you can lease this sod for a dime a ton since the big boom blew up. Fenner, the boss, sells thirty-day options on lots for fifteen dollars each, and I get five of it. Every sucker earns an airplane ride. If they don't sell their options or take up the two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar lots later on, they ain't out much, and I give them a nice hop to boot."

"Say, that's a new one." Fay whistled. "Any one else doing it?"

"Oh, the idea ain't exactly original with us, only maybe my reputation draws a few more."

"Don't they give you competition across the road?"

Rocky sneered. "Palatial Heights? Naw, that's dead. Even the name is rotten. They call it a heights, and it's two feet under water whenever there's rain. We at least give them a swell name."

The girl looked out through the heat waves quivering from dusty weeds. "Yes, you give them a swell name."

If there was anything Rocky enjoyed more than an appreciative audience, it was a comely, appreciative audience. This one met specifications. He waxed both confidential and expansive. "How about a little flight?"

Fay drew away timidly. "In an airplane? Well—well, thanks, I couldn't. As a matter of fact, I'm deathly afraid of them. Besides"—glancing hurriedly at her wrist watch—"I have to get home. Maybe some other time."

Rocky walked with her to the car. As he held her arm she made him feel cool again. He had a weakness for small, helpless women.

"When will I see you?" he asked, when he had stowed her in the dilapidated roadster.

"Real soon." She smiled brightly. "I'll be back. Do you mind cranking?"

"Surely not. I want to fix this bumper sometime, too. You know," he added authoritatively, "there're lots of jobs you need a man for."

"I'll let you know when." Her departing wave just bordered on coquetry.

**A**FTER the flivver had hammered off and he was left alone in Paradise Park, Rocky questioned whether he had applied the necessary pressure. The girl could match curves with the best of Miami's pulchritude.

"She reminded me," reflected Rocky, "of a dew-covered rose." The dew dried abruptly and the rose withered. Even a poetic thought could not resist the heat. He hastened back to his haven under the wing.

Later on there was scant leisure for thoughts of Fay. Fenner brought out his first prospects at three o'clock and, from that hour on, business developed so rapidly that the general director twice tardily discovered he had sold options on the same lot.

"See your own lot from the air, my friends. See it from above, as we who love Paradise Park can see it. Picture, my friends, perhaps not next year, but two or three years in the future, Paradise Park dotted with pleasant homes and happy children. You are arriving by air shuttle, only a few minutes' ride from your work in bustling, ever-growing Miami. Go up there, friends—after you have bought your option—and see the city at your elbow."

Rocky was relieved to get off the

ground, away from the unctuous pater, but he had to admit that his employer did a smooth job.

From an altitude of five hundred feet he saw a taper wing Meteor come in for a landing on Palatial Heights and attached no significance to it. Visiting pilots had arrived and departed before. They were a great deal like migratory ducks.

Not until Fenner began to lose a grip on his crowd did Rocky's attention wander to the enemy's tract. A large banner had been unfurled to advertise aerial acrobatics as a daily attraction. Very scornfully, Rocky watched the herd of sight-seers and prospects trickle away by twos and threes. Some of them who had made the trip in a Fenner-chartered bus acted a bit sheepish.

"A very, very dirty trick," commented Fenner, mopping the sweat from his brow.

Rocky glowered as the orange Meteor shot into the air. Even though the performance was good, he wasn't going to like it. The craft climbed almost vertically for four thousand feet, then leveled and fell off in a wing-over. Rocky was not much impressed. He had viewed the barrel rolls, the Immelmans, and spins of a hundred different pilots; but suddenly his wavering interest froze. The Meteor was executing a violent sequence of inside-outside loops.

"I wonder," said Fenner, thinking business aloud, "whether that Kansas could be sold the Miami post office."

"He's going to lose a wing," agonized Rocky.

Fenner continued to talk shop. "When I pluck them they are lucky to get off with any feathers at all."

Rocky's feet raised spurts of dust in the sand. A few moments before he had thoroughly hated the other

flier; now he was merely inordinately angry with him.

The wing of the Meteor didn't drop off. By the time Rocky reached the fringe of applauding Palatial Heights spectators, the plane had whipped through a power dive and swung around for a neat three-point landing.

Rocky accepted the display of absurd recklessness as an affront to his profession. He pushed through the crowd to the be-goggled pilot.

"You fool!" he roared. "A Meteor ain't built for those tricks. You ought—"

The words broke off with the sharp silence of the cut motor. He looked not at the downy cheeks of a scrub aviator, but at Fay.

"Oh, hello," she said cheerfully. "It's old famous, himself."

Rocky hesitated. With a man he would have kept on going, lurching forward with a well-equipped right. He couldn't do that to a girl. The whole disastrous day—bragging to a skilled flier about landing upside down and spilling the real-estate scheme so she could chisel a job—engulfed him and left him frustrated and confused.

The girl swung her cream-colored jhodpurs over the edge of the seat. She appeared ridiculously small and effeminate, but Rocky backed away.

"If you'd just teach me that rear glide," her taunting voice tagged after him, like a horror in a nightmare, "I'd really have something to show the customers. Not now, though. I must meet my public." The tourists closed in around the slender form.

"These options are a bargain at any price," Rocky heard her say. "We're making them ten dollars each for a limited time only. We need money for a big development. At present I have been advised by

one of the leading bankers not to discuss details."

Rocky slunk back to Paradise Park. Unaware that a new force had entered the realty market, Fenner was juggling in his mind the relative appeal of the post office or a city park to the Kansan.

**W**HETHER the Kansan eventually bought the post office, the city park, or both, Rocky never knew, for the following day even Fenner became alarmed. Abandoned, they witnessed the queues of tourists mass pop-eyed beneath the aërial calisthenics of Fay Wright and later invest in Palatial Heights money that should have gone into the Paradise coffers. And they soon learned that the acrobatics were restraining their trade in more ways than one.

Fenner buttonholed one of the sheep who had become lost from the girl flier's herd. "Now that you've seen it done, how would you like to take a flight with Paradise Park's expert pilot?"

The prospect was firm in his refusal. "You take too blamed many chances in them things," he said.

"Oh, our Mr. Calvert doesn't go in for stunting," Fenner reassured. "Just a steady, easy trip so you can see our property."

"Nothing doing. I don't think she done all that on purpose."

Fenner returned to where Rocky was wasting a poisonous stare at the distant head of Fay Wright. "Can you do any of that stuff?" he inquired.

Rocky pinned him with a scathing glance. "In a cabin monoplane?"

Fenner dropped the subject.

Rocky would have sworn that the Meteor could not stand the gaff. His feelings on the matter were a maze of contradictions. When he saw the

trim, poised girl on the ground he prayed the wing would flutter off; when the craft was twisting through the air, he prayed it wouldn't. Somehow the ship came through daily performances in one and the same piece and as indifferent to Rocky's thoughts as its pilot.

At this time a new trouble arose to beset the barnstormer. On the few flights he did squeeze from the more venturesome tourists, he noted a foreign and discordant sound in the Alkron's motor. He was not long in diagnosing its cause. Flying off the dry, sandy subdivision, the carburetor had sucked up a dangerous amount of dust with the probability that some of the abrasive substance had entered the crank case. He approached Fenner.

"How much have I got coming?"

The real-estate man looked up from moody contemplation of unsigned option blanks. "Four hundred and twenty-eight dollars."

"I figured it at four thirty-two, but I won't argue," said Rocky. "I got to pull into Miami for a top overhaul on this motor. They'll have to pull it apart and clean it. I'll be needing the dough."

Fenner studied a moment. "O. K. Call at my office to-morrow."

Rocky took off for the Miami airport the next morning. Spotting the Meteor where it had been staked down for the night, he quelled an impulse to slash a few patterns in the tail. He set the Alkron down at the airport, tentatively contracted for the mechanical work at the shops, and went immediately to Fenner's office. The interior was dark and a sign, "Gone to lunch," hung on the door.

Rocky made five trips back to the office before the light definitely dawned. Fenner had gone to lunch, all right—presumably in New York.

A telephone call to his rooming house indicated that the real-estate agent had left with pronounced finality.

In the first calm analysis of his reactions, after the proper number of drinks, Rocky was not ungenerous with Fenner. The director general at least had never pretended that he would not kick a friend in the pants, when and where necessary. It was Fay Wright who came in for his mounting vehemence; Fay had clipped him in pride and pocket-book, and was now seriously jeopardizing his future. Unfortunately for his designs to square accounts, he was hailed shortly by "Slip" Mahaffey, a regenerated barnstormer who had obtained a private flying job with an Eastern banker.

Slip's greeting was effusive. He inquired regarding the welfare of his pal and got it, liberally seasoned with oaths.

"Gee, that's tough," commiserated Slip.

The pair remained in silence unsullied save for an occasional "Hey, waiter." Finally, Slip had an inspiration. "How many more hours will that motor stand?"

"Maybe thirty, maybe none," Rocky replied. "Why?"

Slip leaned forward. "Ever hear of Savaridge?"

"Don't know as I want to," Rocky said morosely.

"Well, there's two of them. Savaridge, Florida, and Savaridge, Michigan."

"They got kind of separated, didn't they?"

"That's the answer. Fifteen hundred miles. The Florida one is trying to promote itself as a hotbed of sunstroke, and the Michigan one claims its chilblains are second to

none—so as to attract tourists. They've hooked up in a stunt in order to show the difference in climate, and there's an air race from one to the other. A thousand bucks cash prize and not a crate in the race you couldn't give a fifty-mile tail wind to."

Rocky shook his head gravely. "Nope. I still got a hundred dollars and I ain't seen much of Miami. Hey, waiter."

WITH barely enough money for gas, Rocky left the next day for Savaridge. The weather was almost as thick as his tongue, but he viewed it with a certain malicious satisfaction. A few hours of the driving rain and Fay Wright would need a rowboat on her Palatial Heights development.

The Alkron made good time across the sodden Florida countryside, and inside an hour Rocky sloshed to a landing. Slip had been right about the contestants. None was capable by reputation of more than one hundred and twenty miles an hour at full throttle.

His plane staked at the rim of the field, Rocky met the manager of the race, a garrulous young man who rattled off the conditions.

"Your own entry swells the list of starters to nine," he said. "You have no doubt been informed that the purpose of the event is to carry one of our home-grown grapefruit to the city of Savaridge, Michigan, just as Apollo bore the golden fleece. You will recall in mythology——"

"Any entry fee?" broke in Rocky.

"None whatever. Now, as I explained, in this modern version we have taken from the Greek——"

"Where do I sleep?"

The rain continued spasmodically, yet decisively, for two days. Rocky

spent the period on his motor, repairing as best he could the ravages of Paradise Park's heat and sand. While he worked, Fenner's injustice was forgotten. Fay Wright might also have been added to the faded corners of his memory had not the young lady put in a personal appearance on the evening before the race. Rocky was so startled that he dropped his wrench and almost tumbled from the ladder on which he was perched.

"Say, rear-glider," she called, wrinkling her nose in a manner that Rocky, under normal circumstances, would have classified as "cute," "I want to apologize."

Rocky's face contorted. His vocal cords twitched, but no words developed.

"I thought everything you told me was the bunk," the girl went on, ignoring his indisposition. "I was wrong. This dew storm sure played hob with Palatial Heights. You can't sell sites in a wading pool, and gossip gets around. I had to give it up." She sighed. "Well, the kid has to eat. This race looks like easy money."

Rocky groped for a reply, his mind as empty as his hands. Savagely he climbed down and retrieved the wrench. By that time Fay had retreated, leaving only the haunting echo of her merriment, which was as well for the escutcheon of good, clean sportsmanship.

The barnstormer spent a bad night. He could imagine the unholy glee of Slip Mahaffey and other air veterans over his defeat by a girl; yet there apparently was something in the cards that made this chit his Nemesis. He considered withdrawal, but his financial requirements were too pressing.

The take-off was at six o'clock in

the morning. From his cabin monoplane, next to last in the file of starters, Rocky watched those in front soar away into skies that were soft and rosy. He estimated the capabilities of each rival and found them wanting. Back of him, however, grinning an impudent challenge whenever he caught her eye, was Fay. Usually the Meteor's greater speed would not have bothered him; the craft would require frequent stops for gas; but he could not shake the belief that there was his particular jinx.

**A**T the starting line, Rocky impatiently accepted his grapefruit and the best wishes of the local citizenry. He was anxious to be off; to put as much territory as possible between himself and the Meteor. The finish of the race, he was instructed, was not at the Saveridge, Michigan, airport, but at a banquet in the McDermott Hotel. There, whoever finished first, would deliver the grapefruit and thus blast into bloom the annual winter fête of the hamlet. Rocky set his brakes, advanced the throttle, and waited for the flag.

The Alkron's wheels had scarcely left the ground when the craft began a short, graceful arc that placed it on course. The air was calm. Rocky pulled the control against his chest and sought the tail wind billed in the weather reports.

Glancing down at the diminishing field, Rocky observed the Meteor trundle into motion. Ahead he could distinguish the Gull that had taken off two minutes previously. Thereafter, checking his instruments, he settled to the task of going places in a hurry.

The Alkron came down at Atlanta for fuel. Rocky had passed four of



the planes in the race, three below and one above. The Meteor, streaking to the East, had left him behind, but none of these brushes was important.

From Atlanta he followed a familiar course over wrinkled Tennessee and Kentucky. There had, thus far, been nothing disturbing in the performance of his engine. At Cincinnati, however, where he donned a heavy flying suit, he added the precaution of a parachute.

The afternoon weather map at Cincinnati revealed fringes of a low pressure area around his destination. Rocky chuckled. The heavier the going, the tougher for Fay Wright.

Across Ohio and into Michigan Rocky flew under ominous clouds. A storm was building up, and on the ground trees and streamers of smoke leaned at right angles. The force was behind him. His air-speed indicator climbed to a one hundred and sixty.

Night lifted from below and enveloped the Akron. Rocky snapped on the dash lights and verified the instruments against his watch. He was oblivious to his early misgivings. At the present gait, he would be landing in twenty minutes; but as he counted the thousand dollars and rehearsed a few well-chosen words of gratitude for his benefactors, a hoarse clamor shook his motor. Rocky's brow furrowed beneath his helmet and he eased the throttle. Then, as his worried gaze picked up the lights of Savaridge and the slim finger of the bay that separated them from the mainland, an explosion burst in his face. A cascade of oil vomited back over the windshield. One of the bearings, worn by the infiltrated sand, had given away. Left to its own devices, the piston had promptly smashed through the cylinder head.

Cursing his luck, Rocky cut the switch and pushed his control wheel forward for the landing. At any other moment he might have welcomed the unbroken, chalky expanse ahead of him. Now he merely drew on his stock of ruthless expletives. It was that girl. He had been crazy to think he could outfly a jinx.

The Akron crunched to a stop on the shore of the bay. Nine miles away Rocky could see the gleaming needles Savaridge pricked on the ice. Angrily, the pilot forced open the door of the plane and climbed down. The wind snatched at him and he clung tightly to a strut.

As he shrank against the cabin, the throaty exhaust of another plane pierced the howling wind. The landing lights of the Meteor blinked gloatingly down upon him and slipped ahead.

**R**OCKY made a frantic effort to reach the damaged cylinder. He had no purpose in view, but any plan would have gone awry. The dangling ring of his parachute rip-cord snagged on a rocker arm and the big bag billowed out of the pack on his back. With the report of a shotgun, the silken folds filled and, before he realized what had occurred, Rocky was sliding across the ice at the van of a fifty-mile gale.

Slivers of ice bit into his face as Rocky writhed helplessly. He struggled to free himself, but the chute glued the straps of the harness taut at his shoulders. The seat of his leather suit became uncomfortably warm. He subsided and wondered irritably how long it would take to roast to death.

Not until the parachute caught on a pier at the Savaridge water front did Rocky manage to unloosen the harness. His pants were smolder-

ing and he plunged hastily into a convenient snowbank. Sitting there, his head in his hands and his body tortured by the pain of seared flesh, the fantastic, careening slice began to make sense. Fay had landed at the airport seven miles south of the town. He could yet beat her to the hotel. All he needed to clinch the victory was a grapefruit.

A few minutes later, a man in a leather flying suit, decorated with crusts of ice, confronted a taxi driver on the water front.

"Fruit store and then the McDermott Hotel, quick."

The driver decided one of them must be crazy, but it was a poor night for fares, and he couldn't afford scruples. At the store Rocky snatched a grapefruit, tossed a coin to an astonished clerk, and dashed back to the cab.

Five hundred and thirty-six representatives of Savaridge's first families acclaimed Rocky when his appalling figure entered the ballroom of the McDermott Hotel. The audience was doubly glad to greet the winner; he halted the speaking program. Staggering a little, he reached the reception table.

"Here's your damned grapefruit," he announced grimly.

From the rear of the room fresh pandemonium arose. Rocky wheeled. Swinging between the tables in a bulky aviator's suit trotted Fay Wright.

"How did you get here?" she demanded hotly. "Not by the airport."

Rocky smiled condescendingly at the girl flier before he turned back to the judges.

"I slid across the bay at the tail of my parachute," he explained. "There's nothing in the rules that says you got to land at the airport."

The judges agreed. Fay's belligerent expression drooped. "Guess

you win. Hey, wait a minute." Her eyes had fallen on Rocky's grapefruit. "Weren't the rules that we bring in a Savaridge, Florida, grapefruit?"

Rocky started. What the devil was she driving at?"

"True enough," replied the chairman of the committee.

"Well, how come this one carries a California brand?"

The chairman picked up the memento and examined it.

"That's correct," he declared finally. "We'll have to award the cash prize to Miss Wright."

ROCKY lolled the next day in the McDermott's most expensive suite. Every move was a pain and a pleasure; a pain because of his de-skinning, and a pleasure because of the contents of the messages heaped before him.

"Will give you five hundred dollars for endorsement of non-rip trousers," said one telegram. "If you were wearing Leech suspenders, your name worth three hundred dollars. If not, admit nothing to contrary until our agent gets there," said another. A third read. "Your feat applauded by press and pulpit. One thousand dollars says first thing you requested was a Calm-O cigarette."

Roughly adding the preliminary offers in his head, Rocky found they totaled three thousand dollars, ample for a new motor and whatever less technical matters his fancy dictated.

Then, his exultation changed to gall, as he broke open an envelope attached to a small package. The inclosed message read:

This arnica may come in handy. You remain the peer of all rear gliders.

Fay.



# By the Book

The real story.

By Kerk Rogers

**W**O, sir! You got it all wrong. Cap Allen was one of the best men this coast-guard outfit ever seen, mister, and don't you let anybody tell you different. Yes, I know they hove him out on his ear on account of that drownin' down here to the West Gap, but *I* know why. Listen, you don't work as mate under a skipper for near onto six years without you get some idea of the kind of man he is.

They called the young fellow "Wade." It was when he come into the unit that things began to go haywire. Little things at first, then bigger ones, and all because the cap didn't seem to give a damn what happened. And if it wasn't that he give me permission to tell you and no one else, you'd go right on thinkin' like the rest of them—that he *didn't* give a damn. But he says to me: "Billy, if Eddie ever comes around and wants the real story about this, you tell him. But don't you never tell another livin' soul." I'm kinda glad he did say that, be-

cause I'd hate to think that you'd turned against him, too. You and him used to get along.

Anyways, the night Tommy Wade lit on the West Gap, the Old Man called me into the office and introduced us. Then he says: "Take this young feller up and show him a place to sleep." When I got back to the office to report that the new hand was all set, the cap was just sittin' there in the rocker,

"Billy," he says, "don't ever get hitched."

"Me, hitched? With a mug like mine?" I says. "Don't make me laugh."

Then he kind of snapped out of it and laughed a little, but not like he did before.

"What the hell's eatin' you, cap?" I asks. "You ain't hitched, be you?"

He shook his head slow, like a bell buoy turnin' in a sea. "No," he answers, "I ain't hitched—not to no woman, I ain't."

"Well, what can you be hitched to if it ain't a woman?"

"You can be hitched to lots of

things, Billy. Love, hate, anger, and pleasure, and duty. Yes, duty. And if you don't keep your lines clear they all foul up together. That's what makes life, I s'pose."

I never thought of it that way before, Eddie, but he come pretty close to hittin' the nail—at any rate in his own case, he did. Me, I ain't worried much about such things, but from that time until a year had went by, the West Gap was a rotten outfit. You know what I mean. Instead of the inspectin' officers comin' down and sayin' what a neat station we had here, they'd look at Allen and at me, and shake their heads. Nothin' serious, understand, but just kind of lettin' down all around. And the cap, he spent more an' more time wanderin' around the station, not givin' no orders, but watchin' young Wade and ridin' him sometimes.

Wade'd come to me now 'n' then, kind of puzzled, any say: "Billy, d'you know what in hell the skipper's got against me? I know I been a farmer, but ain't I learnin' good? He keeps lookin' at me like I was poison."

"He's queer, and that's a fact, Wade," I'd say, "but I don't know what we can do about it."

**Y**OU talk about learnin'. Eddie, that kid picked up coast guardin' better'n any youngster ever I see. He was smarter'n salt water on a boil: pulled bow oar in the boat drill, took his patrols and watches like a vet'ran. And you know, like I do, that the no'th patrol in winter ain't no kid stuff. But no matter how good he done, the cap never gave him no encouragement. He'd just watch him with that queer, dead stare, then go wanderin' off.

One day he got me madder'n a wet bee, and that night, when we was doin' log transcripts in the office, I

turned round from the typewriter, and says:

"Cap, maybe you're gonna bust me outa the service for what I'm gonna say, but I'm gonna say it and you're gonna listen. I think you're a pretty rotten skipper. I don't know what you got against young Wade, but, for a kid on his first hitch, he's picked up more about the racket than any other guy would in ten hitches. He's smart and he's able, and he's fair eatin' his heart out for a commendation from you. But you treat him like so much gurry. If I was him I'd up and take a sock at you. Service or no service. Now then, I've said it, and you can bust me if you wanta."

I sat there for what seemed to me like an hour, all the time feelin' like I was haulin' on the lanyard of the beach gun with eight ounces of powder in her and wonderin' where she'd bust, then Allen commenced to smile, easylike. It's the first real smile he'd cut loose in a year. I'll be damned if in a second or so he didn't laugh out loud.

"Billy," he says, "you remember last year when this kid come here I said somethin' about bein' hitched? Well, I guess one of the lines is kinda payin' off free, thanks to you. Go call the kid in here. I'll give him a commendation."

Mister, that's just what he did. The kid sat there between us, where the light hit his face full, and at first he was scared like he'd come up for a deck court. Then cap says:

"Billy, here, tells me that you've been doin' pretty good."

The kid, startled, looked at him. "I hope so, sir," he answers.

"Your darn right he has, cap," I cuts in.

"Well, then, Wade, I called you in here to tell you that I'm glad you've caught on so good."

"You could see the kid's face shine. But all he says is: 'Thanks, sir. That means a lot.'"

The cap smiled again—that's two times in one evenin'. "I've got something else to tell you when the time comes," he goes on, "but that'll keep. If anything bothers you, come in and talk it over."

Honest, Eddie, that kid went out of there walkin' on air. But no sooner was he gone than the cap swings round on me. "Now, you meddlin' fool," he roars, "get out of here!"

**F**ROM that night until the day of the blow and the drownin' the cap called me in every now and then to talk over young Wade. He even got to talkin' about recommendin' the youngster for a ratin' when the time come. And the cold look in his eyes ain't so often there.

You remember the blow? Up till the night that hit, the cap was doin' a lot better, but when the wind struck he got moody again, worser'n I'd seen him for months. Not a damn thing could I do to snap him outa it, either. I noticed him tremble now and then whenever the breeze felt like it was gonna take station and all into the bay.

"Billy," he asks, "how're the boats?"

Then I saw what was hittin' him, or I thought I saw. The lifeboat was out of commission over to the harbor, and the motor surfboat was out of the water, her engine bein' down to the yard for overhulin', so we was left with a couple of dories and the pullin' surfboat in the boat room of the station. It would be tough if we got a job offshore.

"Don't let 'em worry you, cap," I says, tryin' to ease him. "Anythin' too far off we'll call the Well-

man station and they can take it in their lifeboat. We could use the pullin' surfboat if we hadda."

"And just about where would we launch her?"

I could see what he was thinkin'—that cove of ourn ain't no place to launch in an easterly.

"Let's not hunt trouble, cap," I says.

Young Wade had the tower watch next mornin', and, believe me, it took nerve to stay up there with the whole thing swayin' like a drunk. And who the hell should blow in about nine thirty, but a couple of brass hats from headquarters, on an inspection trip. I didn't think much of their comin' then, but lookin' back on it, it seems like everything built up to wreck old Allen. The brass hats hadn't been there more'n half an hour, when we heard young Wade's voice shoutin' down the tube to the mess room. We all went aloft to see what's broke loose. The inspection officers came up, too, along with Cap Allen and me.

Now where that yacht come from I'm damned if I know, but there, out on the east'ard, and not so far out at that, was a little thirty-footer layin' in the trough of them seas. And let me tell you, mister, they was seas, too. And that yacht was a goner 'less we got to her damn quick. There wa'n't no sense thinkin' of the breeches buoy, because she was fillin' with every sea. It was a case of her sinkin' long afore she struck the rocks. It was a boat job, and us with nothin' but the pullin' surfboat, and the white foam runnin' back a half mile outa our cove. You know that cove as well as I do, mister, and you know that there wa'n't one chance in a million to put off in the boat, yet there wa'n't no chance to run down the shore. The yacht was too far gone.

I passed the glass back to Cap Allen, and I says: "Shall I break out the boat, cap?"

But the Old Man, his face grayer'n a gull's wing, says: "No, Billy. There ain't a chance. We can't get to her. There ain't time to get the Wellman station, and we can't put our boat off."

For a minute I couldn't believe my ears. Then I shout: "What the hell do you mean, cap? You can't do that. It'll bust you!" I even forgot the brass hats behind me, until one of them says, cold and flat:

"It certainly will. You know what the book says, Allen: 'The statement of the officer in charge that he did not try to use the boat because the sea or surf was too heavy will not be accepted; attempts to launch must actually be made.' And also the book says that: 'The senior officer present shall have charge of operations.' I am your senior, and I order you to break out the boat, although if you were a real coast guard I wouldn't have to."

There ain't no backtalkin' a order like that, and I get ready to go below, but Cap Allen swings round on the brass hat, and shouts:

"To hell with you and your books! I ain't killin' my men to go off in that!" He pointed down to the cove.

The looey turns to me. "You will take the full crew and try to launch the boat. If Mr. Allen is afraid, he can stay here on watch. We'll talk to him later."

Well, what the hell could I do?

"Aye, aye, sir," I answers, not forgettin' the book, either. "C'mon, Wade, let's go!"

At that, merry hell breaks loose up there in the tower.

"You can't do it!" the cap roars. "You ain't goin' to take that kid off there!" And he jumps by the officers and shoves between me and

the hatchway. "Take all the rest, Billy, but leave Wade here. He ain't goin', I tell you! He ain't goin'!"

**H**ONEST, Eddie, the cap's face was right crazy. His eyes were wilder'n a bull's, and when one of the brass hats tried to stop him, the cap clips him on the chin. But Wade ends it all.

"Get out of my way, cap!" he shouts, and when the Old Man still didn't move, Wade give him a shove from behind and rushed by him to the hatchway. The cap just collapsed on the bench and watched Wade go.

Me, I don't scare too easy, but when I took one look at that cove, I tell you, I felt like my knees was gonna shake apart under my boots. You didn't get the whole of it from the tower, but when we wheeled the boat out and ran her down to the edge of the beach there wa'n't one of us who wasn't bitin' pretty hard. You'd look out to seaward and see nothin' as high as you looked, only a comber curlin' down on you and right behind it another one. You couldn't even look off to see if the yacht was still floatin'. There wa'n't no such thing as waitin' for a chance. There wa'n't no chances. The tops of them waves'd shred off like tearin' cloth and wrap around your face, and you'd spend a second or two wipin' the wet off so's you could see. And all the time I was seein' the cap's nutty eyes and hearin' the cold voice of that looey.

"Unload!" I order, and the eight of us took the wheels off the cart and slid the boat to the beach.

"Take—life preservers!"

"Take—oars!" To tell you the truth, Eddie, I almost give up then and there. There wa'n't a chance. But the guys grab the oars and lay

'em thwartships. I get a quick look at Wade's face as he done it. Believe it or not, the kid was smilin'—kinda grim, I'll admit, but smilin'. He had the stuff.

I waited for what looked like a slack between the seas, but I knew I was only kiddin' myself, then I shout:

"Go!"

I tried to time her so that we went down the backwash, prayin', as I tumbled in and grabbed the steerin' oar while the boys gave way, that we'd get way enough to ride the next sea. It wa'n't no go. I saw the next sea comin'.

"Hold her!" I shouted, but it ain't no use. Wade's pullin' bow oar, a-hangin' on like death. He goes higher and higher. For a second the boat stood end on end, with the men starin' out like they was froze there. Then she pitch-poled. The last thing I saw afore I jumped was that pointed stem post comin' over back of Wade's head, with the gray-green of the sea swellin' behind it. Even in the water I heard the crunch as the boat comin' over caught up with Wade and took him on the sou'wester.

Well, somehow we got ashore, and somehow we got Wade's body outa the mess of kindlin' wood that had been the boat, and lugged him up to the station. He wa'n't a pleasant sight, but mashed up as he was, there was still a little smile around his mouth. The brass hats and Cap Allen help us take him into the office—only the cap didn't help much. He just walked along behind, laughin'. That laughin' was worsen' anything ever I heard.

"Shut up, mister," one of the brass hats ordered him, but Cap Allen answers:

"Go climb a rope, you damned murderers!"

Then he laughed some more.

"Take this man and lock him up, mate," the other brass hat ordered me, but the cap answers him, too.

"Ain't no need of it. It's all over now. Billy, tell 'em to leave you and me and Wade alone for a minute. Then they can do what they want."

I JUST looked at the brass hats. They nodded to me and went out of the office, where we'd laid Wade's body on the couch. Then I swung round to the Old Man.

"Cap," I says, "don't go on like this no more. Apologize to these birds and they may recommend clemency due to something or other. You've busted every rule in the book and socked a superior officer. Don't do anything else."

But the cap just passes me by like I was a channel buoy, on his course to the couch. Then he kneeled down and looked into Wade's face. For a minute I didn't know what to do, then I touched him on the shoulder.

"Take your hands offa me, Billy!" he shouts. "Nobody's gonna touch me till I'm through with Wade. Then I don't give a damn!"

"But listen, cap," I said, soothin'. "Wade's dead. It's tough, I know, but——"

At that he starts laughin' again, and if Wade'd laughed it wouldn't 'a' sounded no worse.

"Tough!" he hollers. "What the hell do you know about it—you and the rest of the murderin' crew around here? You killed my son. Understand? My son! And I never had chance to tell him."

"Your what?"

"You heard me!" The Old Man was ravin' now. "The kid that killed my wife when he was born. The kid I tried to keep away from salt wa-

ter. The kid I sent up to Ed Wade in Vermont, because I wanted him clear of the sea. But he come back to it, Billy, and I hated him for it till you made me see it. And now you've killed him!"

Then, sudden, he went calm and began to chuckle. And then I see the whole thing, but I couldn't say nothin'—I just went out and left him kneelin' there. But I heard him call me as I went down the hall, and I hadda go back. Heaven knows I didn't want to.

"Billy," he says to me, "you remember I asked you once if you was hitched, and then I spoke about gettin' your lines fouled?"

"Sure, cap," I says. "I remember."

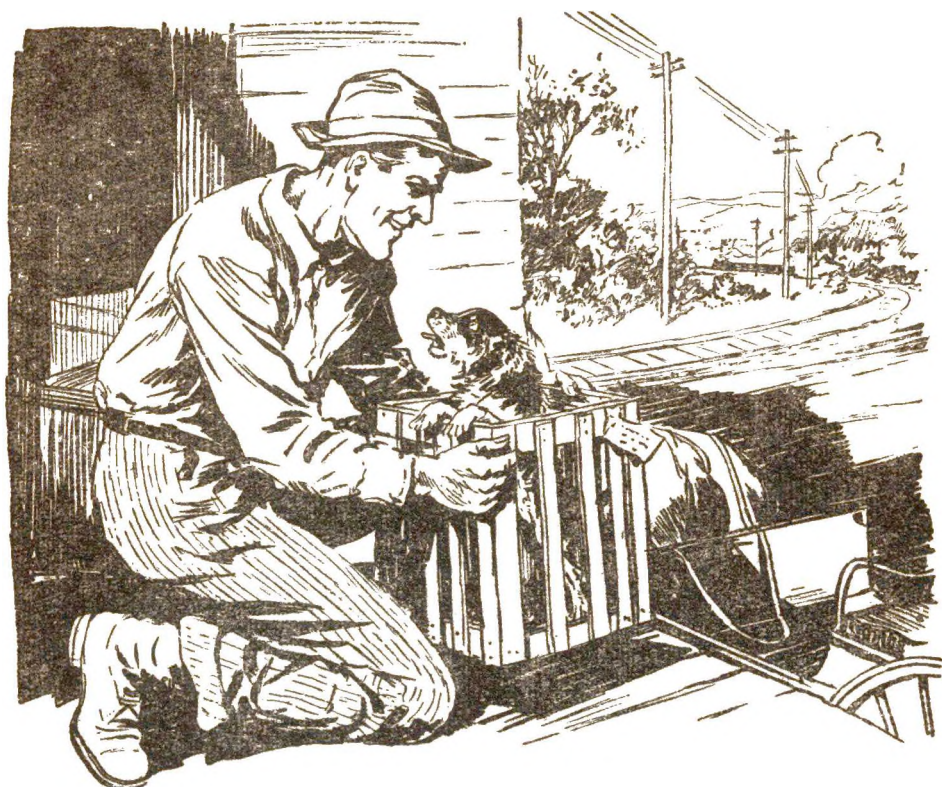
"Well——" he says, and hesitates. "Billy, I guess things is straightened out now. I never should 'a' sent him away. I never should 'a' got angry with him for nothin'. I should 'a' had guts to tell him. But you don't guess he knows, do you? You don't guess he knows how yellow his old man was, do you, Billy?"

## ANSWERS TO "DO YOU KNOW——"

Questions on pages 28-29

1. After the eggs have been laid, the male seahorse carries them in a pouch in the abdomen. After forty days they hatch out.
2. Doctor Alexis Carrel, the noted scientist of the Rockefeller Institute, stated that he had conducted experiments which proved conclusively that the projection of thought from one mind to another was a scientific fact.
3. "Eskimo" means "eaters of raw flesh;" among themselves they are called Inuit, which means simply "people."
4. The actual cash in circulation in the United States is to the value of \$5,625,000,000.
5. Bill Quon, a native of Canton, China, incorporated himself in order to have sufficient funds to continue his college studies. He sold shares in himself to many friends and to the Chinese ambassador, Doctor Sao Ke Alfred Sze.
6. Experts, after much watching, have come to the conclusion that the beaver uses its tail for swimming only.
7. Bulls do not "see red." Practically all animals are color blind. Any bright color will attract their eye, but the actual color does not register as such.
8. There are approximately one hundred thousand hairs on the average human scalp. Redheads have more, blondes have less.
9. Human hair on the scalp grows approximately one inch in six weeks.
10. In commercial aviation rain is no longer considered a hazard. There are only two real obstacles to flying—fog and ice. Fog is truly dangerous only where it obscures the place where the plane is to land. The ice hazard is somewhat under control, due to "ice-breakers" on the modern planes.
11. Benedictine and Chartreuse. Benedictine was originated by a member of the order of St. Benedict at the abbey at Fecamp, by Dom Bernardo Vincelli in 1510. The original formula for Chartreuse was a prized possession of the d'Estres family, and eight years after the death of Gabrielle d'Estres, her father, the *maréchal*, presented the recipe to the Carthusians. They have been making the liqueur since 1607.
12. The "Aryveda," a sacred journal of the Hindus, reveals that plastic surgery was attained in India more than twenty-five hundred years ago. It was practiced there with great skill. The method then used was used in the World War with virtually no changes.
13. "Tenor" is derived from the Latin "teneo" and means "I hold." In early church music the tenor held or carried the melody.
14. The hen originated in the jungles of India. It was the habit of the fowl to wander away from the flock when laying an egg. It would then cackle to make the flock reply and thus signal its whereabouts.





# Interlude

By Lee Willenborg

A man's best friend—and  
his "friend."

SHE was the "runt" of the litter. There was nothing about her to indicate her royal blood. Looking at her, it required plenty of imagination to vision her tall, lordly father, or her beautiful fiery mother. And runts didn't get far at the Rossmore Kennels. "Doc" Beardsley,

her particular tender, was told to "get rid of her," which meant selling her for a few dollars, or giving her chloroform. Neither idea hit Doc very hard.

There was a backwoods fellow—half farmer, half trapper—whom Doc knew. To this fellow, Dave Harding, Doc immediately dispatched a scrawl describing the runt

as a real hot collie, a daughter of the great Rossmore Rex, and "a bargain at twenty-five bucks." Harding reacted just as Doc hoped he would. The runt was speedily crated and trundled off to the railroad station.

"That's a sorry-lookin' tyke," the baggageman declared.

"Sorry, hell!" Doc retorted loyally. "She's a daughter of royalty."

"Kinda skinny," the baggageman said.

"Sure," Doc admitted. "A seven-weeks-old collie ain't supposed to look like no hippopotamus."

There being no snappy comeback to this statement, the baggageman hoisted the runt into the coach. Within a minute or two, the train began to move, and presently was clicking over the rail ends. The runt gazed about her strange surroundings with wistful eyes. Her baby nose registered many smells. None of these were familiar. The express messenger leaned over and read the address on her crate. It was a strange town.

"Some place in the sticks, I guess," he said, grinning at the pup. "A tough break for you, sister! Herding sheep or cows for some dumb yokel in the tall grass."

The runt's tail thumped the crate floor because of this friendly voice. The messenger rubbed her silky ears.

An hour later, she was taken off this train and placed upon a much smaller one. This train lurched and swayed, and ran much slower than the first one. Hour after hour it hammered along, stopping every few miles at some tiny station. At one of these, late in the afternoon, the runt was unloaded.

A tall, slim man, in rusty clothes and a battered felt hat, picked up the crate and carried it to a mud-

spattered buckboard. Hitched to this vehicle was a hammer-headed, shaggy horse with a moon eye. Harding lifted the crate to the floor of the buckboard. Then, with a few deft motions of his toil-hardened hands, he pried off the crate bars. Ever since he had picked up the crate, this stranger had kept up a patter of soothing talk. Now that the crate was open and he got a fair look at the runt, he laughed.

"'A bargain at twenty-five bucks,' eh?" he said softly. "Well, mebber you got qualities that don't show at first flush."

He untied the horse, got into the buckboard and picked up the reins. Then he lifted the runt into the seat beside him. The road soon narrowed to a rutty trail, and the houses of the tiny settlement dropped behind. Harding began to talk.

"You're a birthday present, pup," he said. "A gift to a young feller about twenty years old. He's a good boy, too, even if he is my son. But he's got a honin' to be a singer. Them fine opry singers earns plenty money, I guess. Not many of 'em gets to be opry singers, though. That's the hell of it."

The runt liked this tall backwoodsman. He smelled of tobacco and sweat, which was the proper smell for a man. She liked his eyes, and his voice; but the thing that really attracted her was his "aura." It is the thing every dog capable of a deep and abiding affection is attracted by. Harding knew nothing of this, of course. The general crestfallen air of this pup; the appealing wistfulness in her sad eyes had aroused his pity.

"Guess they ain't very friendly to a runt like you, over to Rossmore Kennels, eh?" he asked. "Well, now, you just forget it. We ain't stylish and uppity out here in the

brush. We're just plain folks, and we ain't cussin' you because you ain't as handsome as your brothers and sisters, see?"

**R**AY HARDING made a fuss over the pup when the buckboard drew up in front of a lonely cabin at sunset. But his demonstration had a hollow note, even when Dave showed him the runt's pedigree papers. Dave sensed Ray's lack of enthusiasm, and swallowed his own disappointment with his stoicism. Nor did Ray show any increasing interest as the pup grew in stature and understanding.

They named her "Molly."

There were, besides Dan, the hammer-headed horse, two scrubby brindle cows and a dozen hens. Molly soon learned that the hens were "forbidden" and beyond her jurisdiction. But it was only a short step back into her cattle-herding ancestry to understand the cows. Before the frosts came, Molly could fetch them in, no matter how far they had strayed. She spent long hours in the woods learning much about the small, wild kindred. She loved to range through the woods and lush valleys and lonely upland meadows. And she grew prodigiously. By the time the snow fell, she was almost the size of a year-old dog. But, if she loved the summer and autumn woods, she absolutely reveled in the snows. Following Dave on his occasional trips over his trap line, she was completely happy. In this rough, hardy life, her coat of gold and sable and white developed into a shining, rippling glory. It was Dave who provided her food; it was he who brushed her religiously every day; it was he who trained her. And it was to Dave she responded. Not that she was unfriendly to Ray.

She regarded him as part of her master's property. More important than the horse, or the cows, or hens, of course; but not rated with Dave in importance.

As spring neared, Ray became increasingly restless. Several times Dave felt that Ray was upon the very edge of revolt. It was the singing business, of course. And finally, one day, it blazed out openly.

"I wish you'd got a radio instead of this worthless dog!" Ray declared. "I could have heard all the good singers that way."

"I thought of it, son," Dave answered, keeping his voice low and even by an effort. "I figured a radio would make you feel more dissatisfied than not."

"Forget it, dad," Ray urged with sudden remorse. "Maybe you're right, at that."

**D**URING late summer two fishermen stopped at the cabin. Coming through the still afternoon air was a voice, singing—a voice uncultured and crude, yet with something in it that made Alfred Mendelsohn cease paddling. His friend, Eston Scott, smiled at him, as the singer ceased, and Mendelsohn made his way up the sloping bank. Scott beached the canoe and followed without a word.

Dave Harding, with his usual open-handedness, invited the strangers to supper. That was the wilderness custom. Mendelsohn at once plunged into the matter of Ray's singing. According to his notion, Ray's voice had distinct promise. It was still crude; it was in need of polishing. Ray was delighted. After supper, he sang a half dozen songs. Mendelsohn nodded slowly.

"Yes. Richland could make a

singer of you, I'm convinced of it," he said.

But Richland—whoever he might be—was high-priced.

"Couldn't I sorta mortgage my future to get the lessons?" Ray asked.

"Why don't you stake the boy yourself?" Scott cut in.

Mendelsohn shook his head.

"I don't do business that way," he said. "It makes obligations and unpleasantness. No. We'll have to find some other means."

Ray, absorbed in Mendelsohn's words, had missed the long, appraising glances Scott had given Molly. So his announcement came as a surprise.

"I'll give you a thousand dollars for that collie," he said coolly.

For a moment, no one said anything. Then Dave, with a queer huskiness in his voice, said:

"Why, stranger, Molly ain't worth no thousand dollars."

Mendelsohn shrugged.

"If Scott says she is, it is true," he declared flatly. "He knows collies."

"Would you mind if I sold her, dad?" Ray demanded.

A quick stab of resentment went through Dave. But there was no visible sign of any emotion in his weather-beaten face. His hand went down and rubbed the base of Molly's ears.

"She's your dog, son," he said. "Reckon you can do as you please with her."

Nor did Dave display any feeling next day when he and Ray knocked a crate together and loaded it into the buckboard. Molly sensed Dave's reaction far more keenly than Ray. She knew something unpleasant was in the wind; something that was about to cause suffering. She tried to tell these stupid humans that she

wasn't so keen to get into the crate. She whined and licked Dave's hands, misery in her dark eyes. It got Dave's goat. He lapsed into a moody silence as they drove toward the settlement. Ray's enthusiastic chatter irritated him. He went through the mechanics of loading Molly's crate on the baggage coach and bidding Ray good-by.

From the open window of the passenger coach, Ray called down:

"Soon as I make good with Mendelsohn, I'll buy you any dog you pick, dad."

"So long, son," Dave replied hoarsely. "Take care of yourself."

THE train was just outside a small town some fifty miles from Chicago when there was a series of terrific bumps which bounced Molly from one end of her crate to the other. There sounded a long hiss of broken air brakes and escaping steam. Silence. Molly's crate was wedged between a huge carboy of some chemical compound and the wall of the car. One of the bars of the crate was smashed, and presently she scrambled out and stood upon the tilted floor of the car. As soon as the wreck had bumped to a stop, the baggageman had given his car a quick glance, turned and left, banging the end door behind him. This was dead against the rules; but this baggageman was young, and had never been in a wreck before. The tilted floor and the sliding side door, he had forgotten completely.

As Molly scrambled out of her broken crate, this door began to slowly open. Molly moved toward it. Then the door was pushed wider by a muscular hand, and the head and shoulders of a man appeared in the opening.

This sudden appearance of "Buck"

Washer was no accident. At the point where Molly had been transferred from the spur of the main line, Buck had seen her. And he hadn't forgotten. Buck was the kind of a man who never forgets things that he covets. He had recognized Molly's class and breeding at a glance. Luck had broken his way, and he climbed swiftly into the car.

"So you're loose, eh?" he said in a friendly voice, holding out a hand toward Molly, palm up.

She wagged her tail and smelled the extended hand, politely. In another moment, he had pried the name plate off her collar with his knife. He closed the door, and found a six-foot length of light rope that he cut from a battered trunk. This he fastened to the collar on Molly's neck. Next he found her crate, and tore off the address tag. Then he opened the door and gave a quick glance up and down the track side. He gathered up the rope.

"Come on, Molly," he said. "We get off here."

A crowd of people were swarming about a coach two cars ahead. But Buck and Molly turned the other way. Ten minutes later, they passed from sight around a curve and struck across a gently rolling valley toward a strip of woods. At twilight they emerged from this shelter and made their way into the small town.

There now began a life for Molly as different from her routine at Dave Harding's lonely backwoods farm as possible. Her really active life with Buck was carried on at night. Seated beside him on a lumbering five-ton truck, they rolled over smooth, hard highways. Sometimes they went slowly and with no lights; other times, they bowled

along at forty miles an hour, the headlights cutting twin funnels of light into the gloom. Molly delighted in these swift runs in the night, and barked her pleasure. Her exercise was nothing like the long gallops across the rugged uplands about Dave's farm. Usually an hour or so a day was the extent, now; just enough to keep her in shape physically. In his rough way, Buck was fond of her. He groomed and brushed her every bit as carefully as Dave had done. And her food was of the best. She liked Buck; not with the fierce, compelling passion Dave had inspired, but friendly enough to get on well with him.

Summer gave way to autumn, and autumn, in turn, to winter. There were cold fogs and lowering clouds, but no intense cold. Then one night their truck pulled up at a road house. Molly followed Buck into a back room of this house. The blinds were closely drawn, and, around a green-covered table, sat a half dozen men under a bright, dark-shaded light. The room reeked of tobacco smoke, and liquor, and sweat. Molly saw her master join this ring. The men's voices were not loud; but now and then were tense with feeling. She heard the whisper of dealt cards, the clink of chips. These, being meaningless to her, she presently found a cool corner near the door and curled up for a nap.

SOME hours later, Molly was awakened by Buck stooping over her and snapping on her leash. He passed the end of this leash over to a strange, swarthy man.

"This is your new boss, Molly," said Buck.

That she had gone into Ben Korac's possession to square a hundred-dollar bet on the wrong flush,

Molly, of course, had no understanding. She followed her new owner to a long-snouted, powerful-looking coupé near the door. Snow was falling in large, lazy flakes. Molly was delighted. She loved snow. But Ben cursed.

"A man's a sap to live in this rotten climate," he grumbled, as he released the brake and slid in the clutch. The car fairly leaped at the road, and then straightened out and tore off into the night. Sixty, seventy, seventy-five miles an hour, the speedometer ticked off. Molly had never experienced such speed; the excitement of it impelled her to bark sharply. An evil grin appeared on Ben's face.

"Like speed, eh?" he drawled. "Most females do."

Presently the car slowed up and turned off the wide highway. For a mile or two, it continued on this byroad. Then it slued to a stop in front of a pretentious, sprawling house of white clapboards. Ben sounded a signal with his horn, and a minute later a man loomed up through the snow-ladened murk. There were no words between Ben and this man.

Molly paused to sniff at the snow. Ben jerked sharply on the leash. The dog followed, resentment rising at Ben's rough tug upon the leash.

Ben's ideas about dogs were almost a total loss. Outside of feeding them, he knew nothing. On this scant knowledge, he proceeded to act at once. He went to the kitchen of his road house and got a large steak. This he proceeded to cut into pieces, which he fed to Molly, bit by bit. Molly bolted the morsels, one by one. When they were all gone, Ben gave her a bowl of fresh water. Then they went into Ben's office.

"Now," he said, "we'll see how smart you are. According to Buck, you're a wonder. Sit up!"

The last words rose to a sharp command, Molly cringed. She had learned no tricks. The harsh voice repeated the order. She knew she was expected to do things; but what? The dark eyes were full of questions; but Ben, his normally sullen mind inflamed by the rotten liquor he had been drinking, missed them.

"So?" he grunted. "Bull-headed, eh? Well, we'll see about that."

He picked up the leash he had un-snapped from her collar a few minutes before, a stout length of braided rawhide. He doubled it, the ends outward, the middle of the leash in his swarthy hand. Then he cut Molly: a sharp, vicious stroke, squarely across the face.

**I**N her short life, Molly had never met cruelty. She was puzzled. Again the leash descended, harder this time. The blows hurt cruelly; but it was not the physical pain that Molly minded. Behind her was a long ancestry of thorough-breds, whose gameness and courage were unquestioned. And behind that was another thing that Ben's blows aroused—hatred. It blazed up so suddenly that it cut through Ben's stupid brutishness with startling clarity. One moment, Molly was a cringing suppliant, begging for mercy; the next, she was a long-fanged killer, stabbing with her lean jaws at Ben's throat.

Her first leap was short. Ben staggered back, his right hand whipping into his shoulder holster for his gun. Like a mad wolf, Molly leaped a second time. Ben threw up his left arm to protect his throat. But he miscalculated one thing—her weight. Ben felt a hot, stab-

bing pain, as Molly's teeth cut into his left arm at the elbow, and tore it clear to the wrist. Then Molly's sixty pounds hit him full in the chest. He went over backward. There was the loud report of his gun, a muffled crack as the back of his head hit the edge of the desk. Then silence.

A voice called, and Molly heard footfalls nearing the office. The door opened, and a hard-faced chap ran into the room.

In an instant, Molly decided what to do; and, in the next split second, acted upon it. Straight toward the newcomer, she leaped, her lips lifted in a rasping snarl. He dodged aside with a gasp of astonishment. His right hand, too, moved swiftly toward his left shoulder; but Molly had passed him and leaped down the hall. In his haste, the man had left the outside door unlatched. A friendly puff of wind now blew it wide, and Molly flashed through it—free!

The snow was falling faster, and the wind was quickening, sweeping across the wide flats in heavy blasts that bit pleasantly upon Molly's overheated and racing blood. For a mile she ran straight into the tearing storm at full speed. Then, satisfied that the hateful Ben and his hard-faced aide were not pursuing, she slackened her pace. She was ten miles away before she paused in a grove of cottonwoods that lined a tiny stream. She drank from this stream and then, crawling into a screen of scrubby willows, she went to sleep.

**D**AWN broke, crystal clear and cold. The wind had ceased. The air lacked the deadly frost of her old home with Dave in the north country. But it was a keen day. And, aside from a

slight ache in her cheek, where the snaffle of the leash had caught her, she felt perfectly fit. There was, however, a radical change in her, mentally. Her one-time perfect faith in the kindness of humans was no longer perfect. It is not good for domesticated animals—men or beasts—to give way to the "killer" impulse. It rots discipline and destroys values. Molly could not reach any great height of philosophy, of course. About all her late experience had done was to plant the seeds of caution and distrust. At mid-morning, a snow plow, hitched to a snorting tractor, moved into view on the highway. Molly watched the billowy clouds thrown up by the plow for a minute. Then, after it passed, she moved toward it across the open fields. Behind this plow, the going was much easier. But presently the road bent away in a wide curve, and once more Molly took to the open fields.

At noon when she felt the first urge of hunger, it didn't worry her. To pick up a rabbit would be no great trick. But there were no rabbits. Keen huntress though she was, her nose discovered no slightest scent of rabbit. Into every possible cover she ranged without success. She moved back once more to the highway. Motor cars and trucks began to appear in increasing numbers. The houses along the highway became a solid line. The first of the outlying arc lights suddenly flickered into life in the early twilight. Humans, swathed in heavy garments, were passing up and down. Above the reek of the coughing motors was an odor of food smells. Molly's hunger took on a sharper edge. Ordinarily Molly would have attached herself to one of these hurrying humans who, she shrewdly guessed, would lead her to



food. But the memory of Ben Kocratic was still fresh. And the increasing throng of hurrying humans was confusing. Molly turned this way and that to avoid them. Presently she turned into a dark alley. The smells here were less alluring and it led to a less lively street. The houses were smaller, and set in tiny yards that Molly could have cleared in a single leap. From one of these came a man. He was of slight physique, but moved with a quick smoothness that was almost furtive. He saw Molly, and stopped.

"Come here, boy," he said softly.

Molly paused. Her instinct told her that this man was friendly. She moved forward. Then the memory of Ben flashed through her mind, and she stopped.

The man held out his hand, palm up. Molly approached warily, ready to leap back at the first hostile movement. The man said:

"Some one used you dirty. I know the signs. And you run away, sure. Served the rotten coward right."

The man turned without a word—and Molly followed. At the door of a dingy butcher shop, they halted. The man opened the door and Molly sidled through. The butcher wiped his hands on a soiled rag.

"Well, Slim, what's yours?" he asked.

"Gimme a good big steak, Joe."

"Swell-lookin' dog you got there," the butcher remarked.

"I'm boarding him for a friend," "Slim" said.

"Oh, yeah?" the butcher answered, with a knowing leer.

**S**LIM HAGGERTY was a professional burglar. Molly could not guess that. It would not have made any difference if she had. He lived in a second-story rear room

of a smelly lodging house. The room was poorly furnished. But it was neatly kept, and very clean. Slim cooked half of the steak on a small gas stove. The other half of the steak he fed to Molly, much the same as Ben had done. With this difference: While Molly bolted the meat, he studied her. Somebody's pet, this dog. And a thoroughbred at that. Ought to be a reward for her. For an hour, Slim pored over his pile of old newspapers. He found nothing to establish Molly's identity. He studied the collar, from which the name plate had been removed. Stolen, sure. During this paper perusal, Slim had smoked many cigarettes, dropping the ashes and butts into a teacup without a handle.

His first impulse to sell the dog began to give way to something quite foreign to Slim's cool, unemotional nature, as the days passed. Coming home from his lonesome, predatory labors to find a welcome from Molly warmed him strangely. Slums, an orphanage, and reform prison had not furnished Slim with many of the gentler vistas of life. Up to the time of Molly's arrival, he had regarded affection as the weakness of saps. Since Molly's advent, he had pulled off two daring and extremely profitable "jobs"—jobs that had netted him close to ten thousand dollars. They moved into better quarters, where Slim posed as a "remittance man" who had got himself into disgrace with his family.

"I'm not using my real name, even," he said with a fine air of wistful regret, his fingers playing about Molly's silky ears.

This impressed the landlady. But she wasn't so sure about the dog.

"Let's leave it this way," Slim



suggested. "Take us on trial for a week. If you can't stand for the dog, then O. K. But I can't give her up, see? She's about the last link of the old life I've got left."

Almost the first thing Slim did after this change was to buy a radio. Fussing with the dial one wet night in early spring, he paused at the announcement of a new singer on the Pep Cigarette Hour.

"Radio friends," came the announcer's purring voice, "Pep Cigarettes have a brand-new treat for you. None other than Mr. Ray Harding, radio's newest singing sensation. Discovered by the XYZ studios, Mr. Harding has taken the radio world by storm."

During this outburst, Slim had left the machine, moved over to the table, and lighted one of those Pep cigarettes.

"Radio friends," the announcer went on, "meet Mr. Ray Harding, who will sing his way into your hearts just as sure as Pep cigarettes are America's favorite smoke! Mr. Harding."

"Rats!" muttered Slim.

"Hello, radio folks!" came a throaty baritone. "After Mr. Prentice's flattering introduction, I guess the best thing I can do is sing. If you like my offerings, would you be good enough to write and tell me so? Just a post card! Thanks a lot! All right, Lew."

**W**ITH the first syllable of Harding's voice, Molly got to her feet with an eager whine and trotted over to the cabinet. Slim watched with sudden interest, and a flicker of understanding flashed in his eyes.

"So he's the guy they stole you from, eh?" said Slim quietly, when the crooning came to an end. "Let's

see just how is the best way to get at this thing."

Slim was keen and quick, and possessed of a lively imagination. Ordinarily he could think a thing to its logical conclusion; now, strangely enough, he found the "logical conclusion" blocked by a wall of emotion.

"At best, I couldn't win more than a couple hundred reward money," he muttered. "To hell with it!"

Like most gentlemen of his profession, Slim was not inclined to work as long as he was in funds. He had lived in poverty most of his life, and, up to now, he had considered this poverty a handicap. He now began the startling discovery that money has its drawbacks. He was footloose and in funds, and yet helpless to get at the things he had always wanted. He was not a "lone wolf" by nature; coldness and selfishness had been acquired. Slim couldn't "afford" friends; they were dangerous luxuries. And now, with the average perversity of humans, he began to long for friends. He knew that Molly's steadfast loyalty and sweetness of spirit had been the opening wedge. But again the habitual coldness asserted itself. One more big job and he could do about as he liked, always, of course, with one wary eye on the police. It was a bold job he planned; the holdup of an exclusive gambling joint. It would take the last ounce of skill and nerve Slim possessed. Very carefully, Slim planned it, studying every angle with consummate care. After two weeks of stealthy spying, in which he learned the identity of the customers of this gambling joint, he had a break of luck. He applied for—and got—a job as porter. He told his landlady about it, with his usual disarming frank-

ness, and added nonchalantly that it was "only temporary."

Well along in June, Slim decided to pull it off. The night was hot. Occasional mutters of distant thunder came through the still, oppressive air. The play in the gambling rooms was brisk. Slim had timed his shot for midnight.

There were two rooms devoted to play on the ground floor. The smaller of these contained the safe and cashier's desk. Slim began his operations by closing and bolting the door that connected these two rooms. The rear street door was already open and wedged.

His voice, ordering each and all to get their hands up, cracked like a pistol shot. Swiftly he herded them to the far end of the room, their faces to the wall. His deft fingers opened the unlocked safe and began stuffing the bills into his pockets. The rifling of the safe of its big bills had been the work of a few seconds. It had been ridiculously easy. He straightened up and turned toward the door. Then came a sound that stunned him. The loud, joyous bark of a collie! For a moment, he seemed paralyzed.

"Don't move!" he rasped out.

Molly cringed at his unexpected harshness. Slim turned the gun toward her. For an instant, a queer, sad look came into his eyes. Then he pulled the trigger. A yelp of pain from Molly, the quick echo of Slim's retreating footsteps. Then there was a vast confusion of sounds, and presently Ray Harding, bending over Molly with a cry of recognition.

**T**HE newspapers made a great story of the robbery. And every one carried Molly's part in it, with a prominence second only to that given the popular radio

singer, Ray Harding. Daily bulletins appeared with the latest developments in Molly's recovery—"gush" columns on Ray Harding's devotion to this great dog, Molly. The story—strangely correct—of this great dog being sold to educate Harding was printed everywhere.

Slim read all of these with sardonic amusement, especially those items regarding Harding's devotion to Molly.

"Rats!" he sneered contemptuously.

The only thing that really interested him was Molly. He knew she wasn't fatally or even dangerously hurt. He had been mighty careful about that.

"But what else could I do?" he asked himself miserably. "I couldn't make a get-away with her along. The landlady had no business to let the dog out. She might know she'd trail me. Soon as she's well, I'll get her back, somehow. This radio singer ain't interested, on the level. This devotion stuff is just a lot of bologna that gets him advertising, the big cluck!"

By easy stages, Slim had traveled westward in a modest secondhand car, so like thousands of others that it excited no notice. Two weeks after the big gambling-house job, he was an inconspicuous member of the teeming thousands of East St. Louis. The news stories of Molly and Ray Harding had, of course, speedily died. No mere collie, regardless of royal lineage, could hope to make the front page and hold it for more than a day or two. And, as for radio singers, they were too common to get into the news dispatches unless they pulled something very unusual.

Slim had one quality that made for greatness—tenacity. Long after the gambling-house robbery had

been forgotten, Slim doggedly scanned the Chicago papers. And finally, late in the summer, his determination was rewarded. A single stick of type, on the radio page, advised that:

Molly, the collie pet of Ray Harding, was shipped to Barry, Canada, recently, to regain her strength on the farm where Ray Harding was raised.

"It ought to be easy from here on," Slim muttered. "A thousand-case note will buy anything from a backwoods farmer."

HE wasn't careless in his preparation to repossess himself of Molly. He knew descriptions of himself had been broadcast. He bought secondhand fishing tackle and cheap clothes. He sold his car and bought another one equally shabby in appearance, but with a much more powerful motor. He bought and studied several maps, and memorized the layout. The travel-stained stranger that pulled into Barry in a dusty car, one evening some five days later, really knew more about the physical peculiarities of the surrounding country than the oldest inhabitant. When he rented a canoe next morning and paddled off upriver, nobody paid any particular attention. To them, Slim was just another fisherman from the States. The fact that he hired no guide proved he was stingy, but not less mad than the average.

His paddling wasn't very good. Slim had to take the risk of that. In that, he gave the inhabitants credit for too much keenness. His awkward efforts with the paddle only amused them. As he gradually drew away from the settlement, he became conscious of the peace and quiet of this slow-flowing stream

and its tree-lined banks. In his twenty-eight years, he had never known absolute calm, either mental or physical. The air, too, had a crystal clarity, totally unlike the air he was used to. It soothed him strangely.

He ate lunch under a great wide-limbed sycamore that stood on a grassy bank. He rolled a cigarette afterward, and smoked it deliberately. And then, in this drowsy peace of noonday, a sudden disturbing thought struck him.

What if Ray Harding's relative—father or uncle or whatever—refused to sell Molly?

Down in the Loop, such a thought was idiotic. Up here, it didn't seem at all strange. He flipped away his cigarette impatiently and got back into the canoe. Presently he rounded a bend and saw the river widen. And across this wide space came the challenging bark of a collie. Slim smiled, and pointed the canoe toward the dog's voice. He knew that bark. Molly didn't come very close, as Slim stepped out and drew the canoe up on the beach. She only barked at intervals, and, though her tail wagged uncertainly, she kept looking back toward the cabin. Slim spoke to her, using the name he had always used—"Pal." She didn't respond. Then he called her "Molly." Still she remained unconvinced by his friendliness. Then suddenly, Slim understood. The wind blew from her toward him.

"Soon as she gets my scent, she'll know me," he said to himself.

HE was wrong. Molly knew him before his feet had reached the shingle of beach. A man appeared in the cabin doorway. He spoke to Molly. She leaped away with a glad bark. Slim moved slowly toward the cabin.

"You don't seem nervous meeting dogs, stranger," Dave Harding greeted.

"Well, that's easy," said Slim. "Collies are my business, in a way. Come here, Molly."

She went to him obediently enough; but there was no gladness, no welcome, in the dark, expressive eyes. Within a second, she had turned back to Dave.

"That's a fine dog, mister," said Slim.

His voice sounded hollow and far away.

"She is," Dave agreed. "This is the dog that feller shot when he held up that gambling joint in Chicago some time back. Mebbe you read about it. The papers was full of it for a couple days."

"Yes," said Slim, "I read about it."

"Funny thing about this dog, Molly," Dave went on, with the talkativeness of a backwoodsman.

At mention of her name, Molly laid her chin on Dave's knee and looked up at him. So a man might have looked at his god, or at a woman he loved beyond reason. Slim saw the look. Few things, indeed, that his dark, restless eyes missed. Dave related all the details of Molly's purchase, the accidental visit of Mendelsohn and Scott, and his son Ray's sensational rise to

fame. For a moment, black murder welled up in Slim. A careful shot, and this gabby yokel would be rubbed out. Then a quick get-away with Molly. But that wouldn't win him anything he wanted.

"Wonder if I could trouble you for a drink of water?" Slim asked, when Dave's long discourse finally ended.

"Sure," Dave agreed, and went inside the cabin.

"Can you show me a good spot for fish?" Slim asked, handing back the tin cup.

"Well," said Dave, "the best spot I know of is 'bout a mile downstream. There's a row of big willows 'long the south bank. Anywheres near there it's real good."

"Much obliged," said Slim, and turned away.

Dave followed him down to his canoe.

"I got a extra bunk in the cabin, if you happen to fish too long, and don't want to sleep out," Dave said.

"Thanks," Slim answered.

For a moment, the impulse for murder returned. It vanished almost at once. Slim shoved off. As he reached the bend, he looked back. Dave waved an arm; Slim waved back. But Molly stood looking up at her master. Then Slim turned away and disappeared around the bend in the river.



**You cannot afford to miss the February  
Complete**

# YOUR HANDWRITING TELLS

Conducted by *Shirley Spencer*

If you are just starting out to find your first job; or if you are dissatisfied with your present occupation and are thinking of making a change; or if the character of your friends—as revealed in their handwriting—interests you; or if, as an employer, you realize the advantage of placing your employees, in factory or office, in positions for which they are best suited—send a specimen of the handwriting of the person concerned to Handwriting Expert, Street & Smith's Complete Magazine, 79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y., and inclose a stamped, addressed envelope. All samples submitted will be analyzed by Shirley Spencer, and her expert opinion will be given, free of charge.

The coupon, which you will find at the end of this department, must accompany each handwriting specimen which you wish to have read. If possible, write with black ink.

Your communications will be held in strict confidence. Only with your permission will individual cases be discussed in the department, either with or without illustrations. It is understood that under no circumstances will the identity of the person concerned be revealed.

Miss Spencer will not assume any responsibility for the specimens of handwriting, though every precaution will be taken to insure their return.

E. W., Colorado: It isn't often that one sees t-bars like yours, or y-loops to match! All those curlicues are amusing and show an odd sense of humor and a peculiar twist of the imagination.

*Dear Shirley Spencer,  
Having read your department  
first time, I have decided*

These show that you are not practical, so none of the usual type of work would suit you. Whether or not you could write fiction would depend upon your opportunities for training and experience. Certainly you are not lacking imagination. It takes the form of dreaming, however. You need to take a job which

will give you practical experience in writing for publication.

Private G. W. E., Hawaii: Your small, compact script shows tech-

nical skill and mechanical ability, so you are in the right field.

You are extremely cautious, thrifty, reserved, except to a few persons, and have strong material tastes. Your will is firmer than is usually found in those who write the same type of script. A little expansion would help you socially.

Thank you for your kind wishes. I'm glad to hear from beautiful Hawaii.

*no just how to begin my  
what to say. But anyway,*

L. J. D.: Your signature is typically that of a bank clerk, the smooth-flowing, rhythmic business script; but the rest of your handwriting is entirely different. It is a very cramped, self-conscious style showing immaturity and lack of courage. Yes, I can see that you are rather neurotic. Can't you do something about it? A young man of twenty-four ought not to allow himself to indulge in these tendencies.

*bank routine has become  
and more irksome than*

Naturally, the work you are doing would not seem congenial, but quite frankly, nothing would seem suitable while you are in your present mental state. I think a scientific trade would be much more interesting to you than bank routine.

Your t-bars are weak and thin, indicating lack of will power.

A., Regina, Saskatchewan: Yours is a very unusual and interesting script. I think I know why you are not completely satisfied as a druggist. You have a great deal of artistic talent and should be doing something creative. I don't suggest that you change your work, but that you develop a hobby which will satisfy the artist in you.

*with the pen you are, would not  
of writing to your point*

You have dramatic ability, are constructive, and could do display work, commercial art, or any of the arts which require a constructive mind. Your type does not take

kindly to routine and must have a frequent change of occupation. When you feel the urge for these changes, seek an outside interest which will stimulate you, and maybe you could gradually make your artistic hobby a full-time vocation.

Miss H. M. M., Vermont: I think I know where your trouble lies. You say you have no trouble making a keen impression on first acquaintance, but that your personality does not stand up under continual association.

*my I can draw things to you  
I enjoy the comment ya*

Your writing is that of an extremely sensitive, impressionable person who does not dig below the surface, and whose emotions are not deep. This is why you cannot find real love and your romances fade into friendship. You live on the surface. I suggest reading good literature, giving yourself more completely to the problems that touch your friends deeply, and not make the mistake of using clever talk as a means of making an impression. Real depth of character counts in the end—as you have found out.

Miss C. B., Saskatchewan: Yes, stenography is suitable for you. Your small, regular writing shows

*as here. She is very sharp  
& even if there is a struggle*

that you have excellent powers of concentration and a mind for detail.

The reason you find fault with your younger sister is that you are naturally a rather fussy person about small things. Those very small, closed letters reveal a certain narrowness. You are extremely neat and orderly, conscientious, thrifty, and conventional.

V. S., Chicago, Illinois: Your writing is rather undeveloped, but shows excellent possibilities for commercial art or one of the constructive arts. You are in the in-between stage—neither a fully developed artist nor a commercial type.

*enough to interpret  
"scrawl" in regard*

You are rather stubborn, as the blunt and elongated terminals reveal. You prefer to work independently and are capable of doing

so. I doubt if marriage would be entirely suitable for you at this time. You should develop your talent, then you will have a more definite character and personality and know your own mind better.

From time to time letters have come without stamp or coupon, or without sufficient address. If you have not received an answer to your request, please write again. All requests must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope and coupon. Canadians may send loose stamp or coin. Other foreign readers please send International Postal Coupon.

Handwriting Coupon for Street & Smith's Complete Magazine.

This coupon must accompany each specimen of handwriting which you wish read.

Name.....

Address.....

Complete Stories "hits the deck" with both feet in this story of the New Orleans water front.

## BOOZEHEAD

By James Clarke

Hard-hitting, hard-drinking Carey Hunter takes the bumps from a night-club frail with "take me" eyes, and goes "over the levee." Now a sucker who likes his liquor goes one way—straight to the D.Ts. Carey Hunter did his handsomely, until one morning he saw a pair of brown eyes through the haze. And then— Well, that's the story you're going to rave about when you read it in the February

## Complete Stories



***Be remembered for a year!  
Give a gift as up-to-the minute as 1936!***

Christmas is the season of gifts. An appropriate and happy Christmas present for a man or woman, young or old, would be a year's subscription to this magazine.

## THREE MINUTES WITH YOU

**T**HE editor of this magazine has made his resolution for 1936. He renews his policy of giving Complete readers the best of modern fiction, fiction keyed to the fast pace of the world in which we live. This is the year 1936.

Our times demand that a man keep on his toes, always ready to take the offensive against malign forces—racketeers, corrupt politicians, exploiters of the credulity of the public. In every walk of life men and women are forced into situations from which the modern “hero” alone can save them.



**C**OMPLETE will feature stories about this hero—the modern detective, wisecracking and nonchalant; the big-city reporter, hard-fisted and always ready to take a chance; the worker, who dares the bowels of the earth and the depths of the sea; the real waddies of the West, who do more than just fork a bronc and shoot off six-guns; the girl of to-day, as clever as her brother and usually more dangerous; aviators, sailors, gentlemen rankers out on a spree! All these and more will make the pages of Complete the fiction thrill of 1936.

The February number of Complete may surprise you readers somewhat. The magazine is returning to its old title, "Complete Stories." This need not trouble the old readers, who have stuck by the magazine through its many changes. As for the new readers—well, you people will only have to read the February number to know that you have that one

magazine which is completely individual, completely satisfying, completely a "high" in fiction.

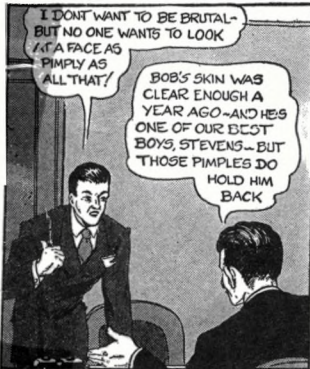
**W**E can only blow our own horn when we *know* we've got the goods. Listen to some of the fiction aces we've been holding up our sleeve for this sparkling, red-blooded February issue: "Boozehead," by James Clarke—see page 142 for more information concerning this yarn; "Switched Licenses," by C. S. Montanye—a jam that you and you and I might get into when we think we've found an easy way to make the grade; "Murder Below," by Donald Barr Chidsey—movie stars, college heroes, diamonds, and murder on the golden sands of Waikiki. These, with a sprinkling of unusual short stories and the usual unusual Complete features! What more could any one want?



Get Complete and give yourself a real  
New Year!



# *we have to hire a boy with a Skin like that?"*



I DON'T WANT TO BE BRUTAL— BUT NO ONE WANTS TO LOOK AT A FACE AS PIMPLY AS ALL THAT!

BOB'S SKIN WAS CLEAR ENOUGH A YEAR AGO—AND HE'S ONE OF OUR BEST BOYS, STEVENS— BUT THOSE PIMPLES DO HOLD HIM BACK



MR. STEVENS WANTS A BOY SENT DOWN TO THE TRAIN TO MEET HIS DAUGHTER AND CARRY HER BAGS — DONT SEND BOB!

OH, THAT'S A SHAME! I'M GOING TO TELL DOBBY ABOUT FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST!



AFTER LUNCH— SAME DAY— DID YOU SEND FOR ME, MISS BARNES?

YES, BOBBY, I DID. SEE, I BROUGHT YOU THESE! MY YOUNG BROTHER HAD SKIN LIKE YOURS AND FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST DID WONDERS FOR HIM— YOU TRY IT!

2 WEEKS LATER



BOBBY!

OH, BOBBY

ANYBODY SEEN BOB?

BOBBY'S A REGULAR PRIMA DONNA NOW. YOU WERE RIGHT ABOUT HIS BEING THE BEST BOY HERE— EVERYONE WANTS HIM, NOW HIS SKIN IS CLEARED UP!

## Don't let adolescent pimples keep YOU from getting ahead!

Important glands develop during the adolescent years—13 to 25. This causes disturbances throughout the body. Harmful waste products in the blood stream irritate the skin, causing pimples.

Fleischmann's Yeast clears up these adolescent pimples . . . by clearing the poisonous skin irritants out of your blood. You look fresh, clean, wholesome once more.

Eat Fleischmann's Yeast 3 times a day, before meals, until skin clears.



*—clears the skin*

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood



