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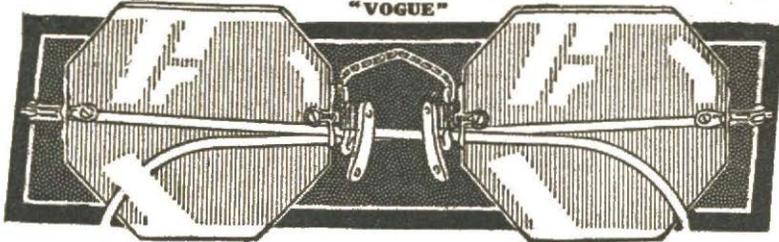
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THE YUKON

By Walt Munson

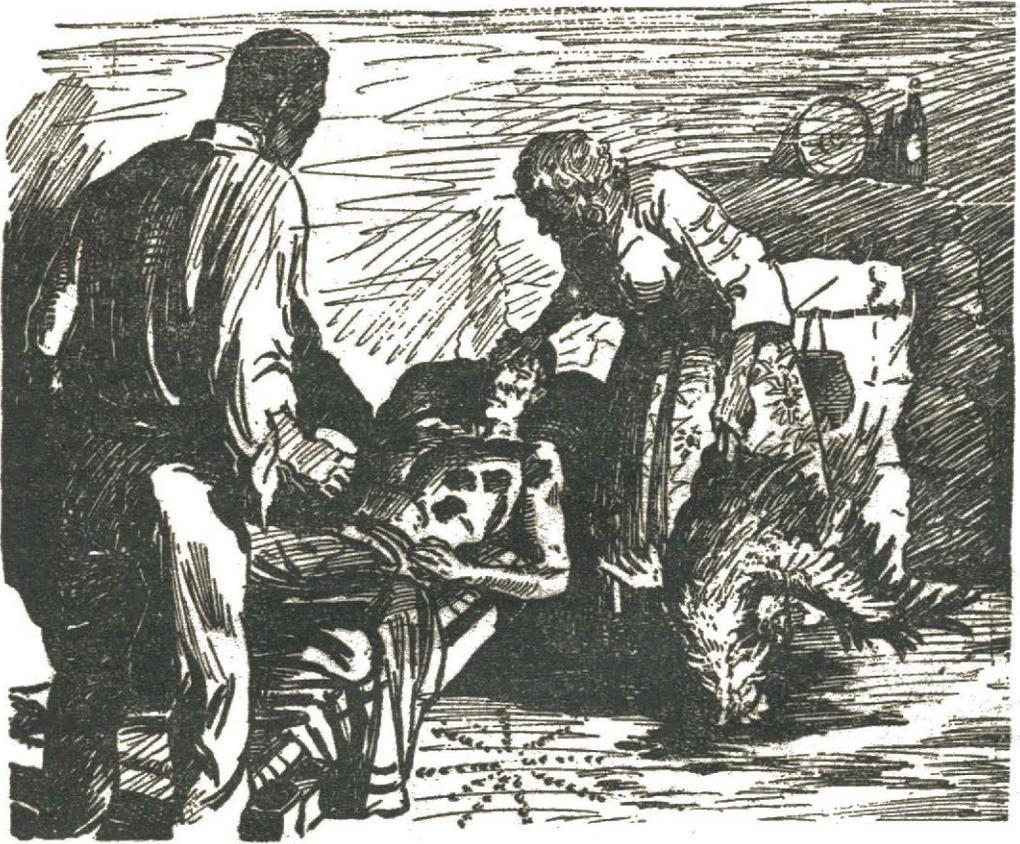
DARK cliffs rise in a jagged line,
Holding the river between high walls;
Salmon leap in the swirling foam,
Fighting the riffles below the falls;
Ospreys perch in a storm-bent tree—
The Yukon flows to the Bering Sea.

Wild fowl swarm on the sandy flats,
Far to the north where the stream sprawls wide;
Grizzlies fish from the gravel bars,
Plunging their paws in the shallow tide;
Twilight blends into dawn at three—
The Yukon flows to the Bering Sea.

Spruce woods blanket the Rampart slopes,
Thrusting their spears to the hard blue sky;
Snowdrifts glint on the distant peaks
Where a flock of arctic terns flies high;
Sourdoughs camp, making bread and tea—
The Yukon flows to the Bering Sea.

Gray wolves harry the caribou,
Feeding in herds by the delta shores;
Channels twist through the low coast hills
Where flatboats pass, bearing mail and stores;
Rolling, surging, at last set free—
The Yukon flows to the Bering Sea.

REVOLT IN THE



Two pals stick together, regardless of the

CHAPTER I. DEAD MAN.

THE old countess was dead among her monkeys, and a revolution was ready to blow off in the republic of Las Cuevas. I didn't know anything about either one. I thought I was going to go on flying for Gulf Airlines the rest of my life, and be glad to have cakes and coffee. I even thought Mike Font was just a greaseball. Of course, I knew he was the best airplane mechanic around the field, and a darn good guy. Still, I thought he was

just another mug like me, working at his job and getting along the best he could. It all goes to show you how wrong a man can be.

I'd known Mike Font for about two years, and for a year of that time we'd been pretty thick. He was the kind you get acquainted with slowly, and the kind you stay friends with a long time. He didn't talk very much; never talked about himself at all. I'm just the other way: talk too much all the time, about everything. Mike stood for that, and when he opened up he had more to say than most people I've met. Everybody in the flying game

TROPICS

By James Clarke



grimmiest warning men have ever received.

has been around more or less. But Mike had kept his eyes open, where most people go places and never see anything but what fits in with their own job. It was a relief to listen to some one who had something else in his mind besides how the weather had been between Dallas and New Orleans, or some new low-wing ship. You can get tired of anything, even flying.

What I'm trying to do is explain why I had a mechanic for my best friend. But you can't explain friendship. The more you talk about it the less sense you make. Take my word that we were friends,

and that Mike was a great guy, and let it go at that.

Mike lived in the old French Quarter in New Orleans by himself. One night we'd been to the movies, and he asked me to come down for a little snort of something. It was a hot night, the air felt almost thick enough to swim in, though the time was only about ten o'clock. The French Quarter has very narrow streets. The buildings are old, with overhanging balconies and deep stone doorways. The houses are one to four stories, and there is hardly any space between them. It's a queer part of town. There isn't any-

thing like it anywhere. At night the shadows are thick and you never can tell just exactly what shape anything is. Some people—sensible people, too—claim to have seen ghosts in those old houses. I never did, but even when I wasn't thinking about how the streets looked, that part of town made me feel funny, especially on a hot, close-pressing summer night.

AS I said, I hadn't noticed that the street made me feel queer. But when I saw the crowd at the corner in front of Mike's house, I knew that I'd had a hunch for quite a while that something was going to happen. We both stopped. I glanced at Mike, but it was hard to tell how he felt at any time.

A cop came down the street at a dead run, and the crowd opened to let him pass.

"Come on," Mike said, and that was queer, because he wasn't a fellow to get mixed up in things that were none of his business.

He wanted to see this, though. He went straight through the crowd, elbowing his way in. I followed him. A man was lying on the pavement with his head up against the curb. The cop was bending over him, hiding the man's face.

Then the cop straightened up. "Nothing in his pockets," he said. "He must have been robbed. Some Negro done it, I guess."

The man was small and foreign-looking, very dark, with a big black mustache. His throat had been slashed clear across. The cop's knee touched the body and moved it, but the head didn't move. It was nearly cut off. The gash looked like razor work.

Mike was staring down at the dead man as if hypnotized. The man was

bad to look at, and I thought the sight had shaken Mike up. I touched his arm and said, "Let's go."

Mike shook his head. "Wait," he said.

For ten minutes or so he moved through the crowd, asking questions. He was very cool and calm. The people we talked to were kind of jittery. One woman started having hysterics and had to be taken away. Nobody knew much. That part of town is very quiet at night. There had been a scream and the man was found lying there in the gutter. Nobody had seen who slashed his throat. None of them had ever seen the dead man before. It was queer. This murder didn't seem to have any reason.

By the time we heard the police ambulance coming, Mike was ready to go. We climbed up the stairs to his apartment, and I was glad for the bright lights. Those old buildings are too high-ceilinged and gloomy. You need plenty of light. Mike had put these in himself.

He went to a cupboard and got out a bottle. The light was strong enough to show that his face was gray. I saw that his way of moving was more calm and steady than usual. Some men are that way; the more pressure is on them, the cooler and steadier they get. He started to pour me a drink, but changed his mind and corked the bottle again. He handed it to me.

"Take it along," he said. "I hate to ask you to go, but I want to get to bed. I've got kind of a headache to-night."

I put down the bottle and looked at Mike—gray eyes, very wide apart. Except for the scar running from under his hair and down his left cheek, his face always reminded me of a statue's. Features clear and well-cut, but the whole thing having

a smooth look. Once in a while, when talking, his face came to life. Usually it was just as calm and set as if made of metal. Except for the grayness, I couldn't have told there was anything wrong with him, right then.

"You haven't got a headache," I said. "It's something about that dead guy in the street that's on your mind. If you don't want to tell me what's the matter, O. K. But we've been pretty good friends, Mike."

He looked at me a minute more, then shrugged his shoulders.

"That's right," he said. "There's no use trying to run a bluff on you, Jack. I'm asking you—as a friend—to go. And I'll have to ask you not to come back. From now on—except on the job—nobody's going to be safe where I am."

TO have a friend of yours stand up and tell you calmly that your life isn't safe anywhere around him, is something that no ordinary man is ready for. I thought: is he kidding? But he wasn't. A man had been killed outside not half an hour ago. All of a sudden it came over me that I didn't know a thing about Mike Font.

"Look," I said. "If you're in some kind of a jam, I'm going to stick around. I may not be much good to you, but I'm certainly not going to take a run-out powder if you're in trouble."

Mike took the bottle out of my hand, poured two drinks, and sat down.

"You're too stubborn," he said, "to keep out of the way until I make you see that you can't possibly do any good. You won't understand all I'm going to tell you, but maybe you'll get enough to be reasonable."

"In the first place, my last name isn't Font, but Fontes. First name

Miguel, not Michael. That surprises you, because you think all Spaniards have dark eyes. My ancestors came from the state of Asturias, where there's very little Moorish blood. I was born in Las Cuevas."

Mike stopped to sip his drink. I knew Las Cuevas was an island down in the Caribbean. An air-mail service had just been started between Florida and there. But it was certainly a jolt to find that Mike came from a place like that. He spoke English without any accent at all, and acted like any other American. He went on talking.

"Don't think I'm being high hat when I tell you about my people. It's all part of the picture. The Fontes family used to be the most important people in Las Cuevas. My grandfather's name is a kind of legend down there. He really started the revolution which freed us from Spain—gave all his money, burned down his country estate when the Spaniards had him surrounded, and was finally shot. They've got statues of him all over the place.

"My father was secretary of foreign affairs, and could have been president if he'd wanted. He died a comparatively poor man because he never would take any graft when he held office. I was a young child when he died.

"My aunt brought me up. She belongs to the society branch of the family; has four titles that rate pretty high in Spain, and more money than anybody in Las Cuevas. She's a grand woman, but a little peculiar. Twenty years ago she shut herself up in her house to watch her monkeys. She's crazy about them—has more than any zoo in the States. Since I left, she's hardly ever gone out of the house.

"Probably all this sounds impos-

sible to you, because you don't know the Latin Americas. They aren't like this country a little bit. You'll just have to take my word. Probably you're wondering how a man with all the family I claim to have comes to be a greaseball tinkering airplant engines. I'm coming to that.

"Not very long after my father died, the present president came into power in Las Cuevas. Within three years he was dictator. He has some ability, but he's bad clear through. The only things that really mean anything to him are money and power. He stays in power by graft and force.

"The people of Las Cuevas have been trying to get rid of him for a long time. We tried when I was in the university. Being the grandson and son of patriots, people expected me to do something. It was part of the family tradition, and in my blood, too. I went into the movement with everything I had—which was mostly energy and enthusiasm without much sense.

"We began with students' parades, and ended by raising a small army in the outlying districts. The president let us go just so far, and then stepped on us like you'd step on a bug. Some of the leaders were shot, more of them shut up in federal prisons. Las Cuevas federal prisons are old Spanish castles and forts with regular dungeons and sea gateways where a man can be tossed out to the sharks. Some lads that were in school with me are in those prisons to-day.

"The president didn't dare shoot me, or imprison me, because of my family. Public opinion would have been roused too much, and my aunt's money could have damaged him. She was very fond of me then. But I was too dangerous.

ONE night I ate a fish and only lived because my old Negro nurse knew an antidote for the poison it had been doped with. I was sick for over a month, as it was. The president sent me flowers; but when I was well enough to go horseback riding, somebody shot my hat off my head.

"My friends got me out of the country, then. It was the best thing to do. If I stayed, I'd be killed sooner or later. And I wouldn't be any good dead.

"The War was going on. I went to France and flew with the French. One day in a dog fight my controls were shot away and I crashed. I came to a month later. This crack in my head"—Mike touched the scar with his fingers—"was beginning to heal, but they thought I was a little crazy. You see, they had me down on the cards as somebody else. Miguel Fontes was reported killed in action. I was supposed to be another man.

"I tried for a while to make them understand, but they thought the crash had knocked something loose in my brain. And after a while I decided that the death of Miguel Fontes was a good thing. If the president thought I was dead, I could do a lot more in Las Cuevas. So I let the mistake ride.

"After the War I came back to Las Cuevas and looked up my old friends. It wasn't hard to make them believe I was alive. The Fontes family all have faces a lot like mine. But the president was too firmly in the saddle for anything to be done. None of my friends was in a position to finance or put over a revolution. We decided to wait.

"I couldn't do anything for a living except fly, and I couldn't go to my aunt without giving the whole show away. Flying in Las Cuevas

would have made me conspicuous, so I came up to the United States, to wait until things were right at home.

"Things never have been quite right, so far. The president's grip has grown tighter and tighter. He has an uncanny way of knowing who are his enemies, and either getting rid of them, or making them helpless.

"I flew mail for a while. But there's been so much publicity about flyers that I had to quit. I can't afford to have my picture printed. So I've been working as a mechanic for the last three and a half years. Every year, except this year, I've made a trip to Las Cuevas.

"You remember when I was away last year? I went home for two weeks, then, and nearly stayed. It looked very much as if affairs were shaping up so that we could do something. The country is awfully poor—which is more the fault of the president than anything else. The people are miserable and desperate. And the president has grown more ruthless as he has grown older. The man has a brutal streak in him which makes him do things that are hard for an American to believe. Las Cuevas can't stand very much more.

"I would have stayed, but an army officer whom I'd known as a boy recognized me. Just when the myth of my death could have been useful, it was destroyed. I had to leave the country between night and morning.

"Ever since then I've kept in close touch with my friends, expecting to be called back at any time. We can't communicate by letter or telegram because the president keeps a secret censorship on all communications. My friends send over messengers as sailors, as tourists, as anything.

"That man we saw in the street with his throat cut was the chauffeur

of a doctor who is working for liberty in Las Cuevas. He must have been—there can't be any doubt of it—on his way to me with a message when he was killed. And he must have been killed by somebody who followed him under the president's orders. Nothing else is reasonable.

"That can only mean one thing: some sort of crisis has arisen in Las Cuevas, and that the president will use any means to keep messages from reaching me. He is not afraid of Mike Font, but he is afraid of Miguel Fontes. The very name is a symbol in Las Cuevas. If I were blind and half-witted it would still be a symbol. Very likely the president knows where I am. And it's more than likely he'll try to kill me before I can get back to Las Cuevas.

"There you have it, Jack. That's why I'm asking you to keep clear of me. This is not your trouble, but mine. As a friend, I ask you to stay away from danger."

Through the cigarette smoke I could see that Mike's face had lost some of its bronze-image look. He really meant what he'd just said. He wanted me to clear out. I reached for the bottle.

"Right now," I said, "we're going to have a drink. And then I'm going to lie down on this cot of yours and get some shut-eye. I've got to fly a ship to Memphis at six a. m., and it's late."

"As for keeping away from you, I reply in the immortal words of the Governor of South Carolina: nuts! In the first place, I don't think your president would dare have you bumped off here in New Orleans. And in the second place, I was too young to get into the War. If you think I'm going to duck out when there's a chance of being in on a perfectly good revolution, you're as goofy as they thought you were after

you crashed. Here's mud in your eye."

Mike looked at me, slow and long. Then he grinned—which is a thing he seldom does, but which makes you know more than anything else that he's a good guy. He shrugged and lifted his glass.

CHAPTER II. THE HAND.

THERE was rain during the night; but when we got up at five o'clock the sun was shining. I guess no place is prettier than New Orleans in the very early morning of a clear summer day. It looks new, somehow.

I felt good. I didn't remember about the dead man, nor what Mike had told me, until I was nearly dressed. And when I did remember, it seemed like some bad dream. There was the light coming in the windows, and there was Mike, looking just as natural as always. We neither of us mentioned the night before.

Mike's apartment was on the second floor. It had two entrances: one by the regular stair, and the other by an outside stair leading down from a balcony to the big paved courtyard in the center of the building. Mike's was the only apartment which used that stair.

I went down first, making a lot of noise with my shoes, and feeling healthy and all right. I got clear to the bottom—and stopped. I put my hand on the rail to hold myself steady, because I felt kind of sick. And I've seen too many accidents to get sick easily.

On the rain-washed flagstone, just inside the stair entrance, was a Negro's hand. It had been cut off at the wrist, and the flesh was still raw and red. Face up, it showed the

funny way the skin in a Negro's palm is lighter than the rest, as if the color had worn off. The reason it looked so bad was because it looked so natural and human. I couldn't move.

Mike came on down and stopped beside me. I turned toward him, but his face didn't show anything at all. He stood looking for a minute, then moved past me and stooped to pick the hand up.

"This is for me," he said.

There was a garbage can in the court. Mike put the hand in, covering it up with a piece of paper. We walked through the Quarter, not saying anything. I couldn't see the town or the sky. I walked by instinct; and all the time that hand was a picture in my brain.

We ordered coffee and doughnuts in the Morning Call. The coffee was thick and strong. When I got some in me I shook loose from my daze.

"What do you mean—that hand was for you?" I asked.

Mike quietly stirred his coffee. His hand was steady.

"It's a warning," Mike said. "The Italians are civilized, so they use a picture of a hand. The Negroes are savages, so they send a hand. This means that I'd better not try to go back to Las Cuevas. It means that I'd better leave this part of the States. It isn't any joke."

It hadn't looked like any joke, believe me. Nobody who was fooling would cut off a person's hand.

"But who sent it, Mike?" I said. "I never heard of anybody doing a thing like that."

"You don't know Las Cuevas. The Negroes in my country are a lot closer to the jungle than those in the United States, Jack. They still have their old religion, and their own organization. It's all under a pretense of Christianity, but it's just

as African as ever. This hand business is a sign of a Negro secret society. They're called Nyanyigos. As slaves they brought the society with them out of the Congo—if that means anything to you. I've only heard of their sending a white man a hand once before. He was killed two days later.

"Jack, if you really are a friend of mine, you'll stay clear of me. How do you suppose I'd feel if anything happened to you?"

I'd got hold of myself, by then. These Las Cuevas Negroes are men, and no more, even if they do cut off hands and put them on doorsteps.

"Tie a can to that," I said. "They aren't going to get us—either of us. Bring on your Nannygoats. I'd like to see what they look like."

I didn't know then how much I was going to see of a good many things. We finished our coffee and started for the field in Mike's car. I asked him what he was going to do about this hand business. Mike shrugged his shoulders. Now that I'd found out he was a Latin American, I noticed that he shrugged his shoulders a lot.

"What can I do?" he said. "If these Negroes make a slip, I might have a chance to get them jailed. Otherwise, I'll just have to wait for what happens."

"Do you really think," I said, "that the President of Las Cuevas sent these Negroes over to get you?"

Mike said: "I told you before that you have to understand Las Cuevas to know anything about this. We have a forty per cent Negro population in our country. The Negroes are a big force. Besides, it's much smarter of him to send Negroes than a white man. There are so many Negroes in New Orleans that a black man is less noticeable than a white."

That was perfectly true. Adding

Negroes to New Orleans' population is about like adding drops of water to a stream. They mingle and disappear.

I FLEW up to Memphis, stayed overnight, and came back the next day—Wednesday. Our company had lost some of its mail contracts, and I'd been taken off my old run to hop passengers around. The Memphis trip was special. Other days I just flew sight-seeing tourists over the city. It was dull and monotonous, and by the time Friday rolled around I nearly wished something would happen to Mike—to bring a little excitement.

It's bad to make that kind of a wish. Afterward, it's likely to make you feel pretty low. Friday afternoon I took three school-teachers, an old lady and gentleman from Des Moines, and a futuristic artist up for the usual tour. The right wing motor developed a knock, so I cut the flight a little short and ran the ship over to the shop.

"Mike!" I yelled.

Another mechanic, by the name of George, came out.

"Mike ain't here," he said.

"Huh?" Probably I batted my eyes.

"He come back from lunch," the mechanic said. "He was working in here by himself. I come over to borrow a cigarette, and he'd gone. That's all I know. His car's gone, too."

I went over to the office. The manager was out, and nobody else knew anything except that Mike had gone. For a minute I thought that maybe it wasn't anything, much. Maybe he was sick, or needed a little sleep. Then I remembered that hand. Besides, Mike had never knocked off work in the middle of the day, before.

"Listen," I said to the assistant manager, "I'm going back to town. That ship of mine's got a loose bearing in the right wing motor and George can't get it fixed before tomorrow. Tell the boss, will you?"

They didn't know, and I didn't know, that I was just about through as pilot for Gulf Airlines. But that's the way life is. Important things sneak up on you.

A cab took me as far as Jackson Square, in the French Quarter. I walked the rest of the way to Mike's place. He wasn't there. The woman who owned and kept the house hadn't seen him. I went up to the public library, where Mike sometimes spent an afternoon, but he wasn't there, either. Then I got out my car and started an aimless chasing around the parks. I didn't think I'd find Mike. Even if he'd decided to take an afternoon off just for fun, I probably wouldn't find him. But it gave me something to do.

EVERY couple of hours I'd stop by Mike's apartment again, to see if he'd come back. By the time dinner was over, this business had begun to get on my nerves. If anybody had told me the afternoon before that I'd be jittery because I didn't know where Mike was, I'd have laughed. But I'd seen that man with his throat cut. I'd seen the hand. Those things were too real to get away from.

About ten thirty in the evening I went up the back way and pounded on Mike's door, for maybe the sixth time. I didn't expect any answer; just knocked to make absolutely sure. I was busy thinking about what I'd do if he didn't show up at all that night. I could tell the cops; but they wouldn't believe my story about Negro secret societies and

revolutions. By the time they got really on the job, it might easily be too late.

I was just turning away from Mike's door when I heard a scuffling sound in the shadows up the balcony. I whirled round and reached out, more by instinct than anything else. My hand closed on an arm, and I pulled.

The next minute I was looking into the funny face of the Negro woman who took care of Mike's place for him. She was about forty years old, wrinkled, homely, good-natured, and about as dangerous as an old shoe. She was rolling her eyes up at me—scared. I let her go, saying I was sorry.

"Th-that's all right," she said. "I—I was hopin' you'd come, Mr. Jack. You seen Mr. Mike?"

I shook my head. She put her head down on her shoulder, with her arms folded about her, and began to rock back and forth, moaning. I shook her by the shoulder.

"What's the matter with you?" I said. "What do you know about Mike?"

"Mr. Mike was a nice man, and he's dead." She started to rock and moan again.

"Stop that," I said. "And talk sense. What do you know about him? What makes you think he's dead?"

"D-don't you say I told you, Mr. Jack! Don't you tel! no police. Them foreign blacks are bad."

"What foreign blacks?"

"Them foreign blacks that live in that house on Rampart Street. Mr. Mike went in there. My brother-in-law seen him. He ain't come out. Mr. Mike's dead—he is. D-don't you tell nobody I told!"

I finally got her to tell me the location of the house. Then I gave her a dollar and promised not to let

anybody know she'd talked to me. Most Negroes are deathly afraid of the police. It took a lot of courage for her to talk to me at all. But the Negroes were "foreign," and she wasn't going to have them "harm Mr. Mike and get away with it."

I DROVE up Rampart Street until I located the building; a huge, ramshackle old tenement which ran for a whole block in a squalid part of town. It looked like a regular rabbit warren.

Then I went to police headquarters. I'd flown the chief on a special trip to Florida, so I got more action than just anybody. They took me in to the lieutenant of detectives who made a specialty of Negro crimes. I didn't tell him much; just that Mike had gone into the building looking for somebody, and hadn't come out. That was enough for him, though.

"I know the place," he said, getting up and reaching for his hat. "It's a hangout for some pretty bad boys. We'll go up there and take a look."

He was like a doctor, who has looked a man over after a bad crash; didn't say whether he expected Mike to be alive or dead, or whether we'd find him at all. I didn't ask. We went up in my car. On the way, the lieutenant explained that the less fuss we made, the better luck we'd have. Negroes being afraid of police, everybody in the building would disappear if we took more men along. That's why he'd wanted my car, instead of a police machine.

They hunted their holes quick enough, as it was. As soon as we stepped inside the building, you could hear doors slamming all over the big barn of a place. As we started along the hall, three or four dark figures went scuttling away

from us and disappeared. There was a yell or two, then quiet—a terrifically ominous quiet.

The lieutenant walked straight along the dark, dirty hall until he came to a red curtain hanging against the wall. I couldn't see any reason for it, but he stopped, looked the curtain over, and suddenly gave it a jerk.

There was a scrawny, yellow Negro behind the curtain. He was trembling all over, but he had an eight-inch clasp knife in his hand. The lieutenant caught the Negro's wrist with his right hand at the same time he pulled the curtain aside. He was used to this sort of business.

He twisted the yellow boy's wrists till he hollered and dropped the knife. Then he started asking him what had become of the white man who came into the building about four that afternoon. The yellow boy, when his teeth didn't chatter too much, swore that he knew nothing about any white man. The detective kept asking him, getting more hard-boiled all the time. But the yellow boy wasn't telling anything. Finally the detective turned his head toward me.

"Well," he said, "somebody killed him. This boy will do as well as anybody. Let's take him along. Jury won't take more than five minutes to order him hung."

The yellow boy started pleading then. The lieutenant began to drag him along the hall, and he yelled. He said he'd tell all he knew. The lieutenant stopped.

"Honest, captain," the boy said, "I never seen no white man. But don't take me. Ah only shoot craps for my livin'. All them real bad darkies lives upstairs."

The lieutenant let him go. "Don't you ever let me catch you with a

knife again," he said. "Or you'll wish you'd never seen a knife."

The lieutenant turned to me.

"That's the most we'll get out of any of them. Let's have a look upstairs."

IF there had been a light in the second-floor hall, the Negroes had put it out. The hall ran down the center of the building, with rooms opening off each side. In two or three places it twisted, for no good reason, and went on again. The lieutenant's torch didn't show more than twenty feet ahead. There was trash on the floor, and every door was closed. The detectives took a police pistol and another flashlight out of his pocket and handed them to me.

"We'll have to look in all these rooms," he said. "You take the left side."

I've shot pistols just for amusement; but I'd never before hunted anything with one—let alone a man. I took a tight grip on my weapon and went up to the first door.

"If you find anybody, holler," the lieutenant said.

I turned the knob and gave the door a gentle push. "Come out of that!" I said. There wasn't any answer. I shoved the door open and flashed my light inside. I couldn't see anybody. I went in, snapped on the electric light, and looked under the bed and behind a curtain that was hanging across a corner.

By the time I'd gingerly gone into three rooms, I was getting used to it. The way I was doing was too slow. The lieutenant was already three rooms ahead of me. I began throwing the doors open at one shove, and walking right in. The lieutenant found a family in one room, and after a while I came to a locked door. But the Negroes in-

side opened up, and they all seemed harmless. We went on.

Opening doors got to be mechanical. The hall didn't seem to have any end, and I quit expecting to find anything dangerous. If anybody was in a room, the door would be locked. If not, it opened. We'd left the lights on in the rooms behind us, and only needed our flashlights when we went into new rooms. They were all unbelievably dirty. Some of them had no windows at all. But I wasn't interested in making notes on the way the inhabitants lived. I wanted to find Mike.

I don't know what made me do it. You never can tell, in such cases, whether a hunch tells you, or whether you hear a very slight noise or see something unusual. Anyhow, I turned the knob of a door and shoved, as usual. The room inside was dark. I'd found such rooms before. But this time, instead of going in, I stepped back, without even waiting to snap on my flashlight.

If I'd waited that half second I'd have had my throat cut. As it was, the razor only slashed through my coat and shirt and made a slight cut diagonally across my chest. I heard the Negro grunt as the cloth ripped, and his swing carried on out into the air.

As I said, I'm not much used to guns. And when I needed it most, I forgot that the pistol was in my hand. I jabbed out with my right. The gun struck the man's face with a crack, and my wrist was wrenched. But I felt his head snap back.

The next minute there was a shot, and the hall was suddenly full of a man's screaming. Before I could do anything else, the lieutenant was beside me. There was a sharp sound, and a moan.

"Any boy that moves," the lieutenant said, "gets shot!"

He went on into the room where the men had been and snapped on the light. It revealed two Negroes at my feet. One was sitting slumped against the wall, unconscious. The lieutenant had hit him on the head with his gun. The other was writhing around on the floor, holding his side. I didn't know just exactly how it had all happened.

The lieutenant came back and looked at the men. "Help me drag 'em in here," he said.

He took the wounded one by the feet and hauled him on into the room. I took the other. He was a big, heavy Negro with shoulders like a stevedore. The lieutenant cut the clothes off the one who had been shot, and looked at the wound. It was bleeding a lot, but didn't look very dangerous. The Negro's eyes rolled around, but he didn't seem afraid. He seemed to be looking for something he could use to kill us. He looked bad.

The lieutenant turned the other one over and took a careful look at him.

"This is luck——" he began. Then he saw that my clothes were slashed. There was blood on them, by then. "You hurt bad?" The lieutenant jerked the clothes away from the slash before I could answer. "Scratch," he said. "Luck is right! I was way up the hall when you opened that door, but there was light behind you. I saw this boy make a pass at you, and saw you sock him. Then the other one came out with a knife. I just did have room to shoot him between you and the wall. But that's only part of the luck.

"Know who these boys are? The big one's a bad actor we've been looking for all over Louisiana. He killed a girl and then killed the cop who came after him. We thought he'd

gone to New York. The other one's a pal of his. What a break!"

"Yes," I said. "It's good luck for you, and for me. But we haven't found Mike yet."

CHAPTER III. FIVE WOUNDS.

THE lieutenant left me to watch over the two prisoners while he went down to telephone for a police ambulance. "If the big one moves," he said, "sock him again. Don't take any chances with that baby." But he didn't come to. The lieutenant must have hit him an awful rap.

When the lieutenant came back, he had finished with the prisoners, for a while at least. He gave them only a glance, and said:

"I got the idea from the way you talked that you didn't want to tell any too much about your friend. That's O. K. with me. But if we're going to find him, I've got to have some more to work on."

That was a smart cop. I'd gone to him with the idea of telling as little as I could. But he was a good guy, and I'd decided different. I said:

"There isn't anything I can't tell you, but it's a long story. You probably wouldn't believe it anyhow. The main thing is that some foreign Negroes were after this friend of mine, or he thought they were. He thinks they are the same ones who cut a man's throat down in the Quarter, Monday night.

"A Negro saw my friend—he's an airplane mechanic by the name of Mike Font—come into this building. The Negroes say 'foreign' Negroes live here. I figure that Mike came here looking for them."

"What do you mean, 'foreign' Negroes?" the lieutenant asked.

"From Las Cuevas. They've got

a very big Negro population down there."

The lieutenant nodded. "I know. We get hold of one, once in a while. That's enough to start on. I'll get a squad up here and we'll go through the building. It's time to clean this place out, anyhow. Maybe your friend's here, maybe not. I kind of hope not."

The ambulance came and took the prisoners away. Then the lieutenant phoned again. A uniformed squad came in a car. A crowd of Negroes across the street watched us.

The lieutenant divided the squad into four details; to cover the two main floors, the basement, and attic. He told them to bring anything that looked like stolen goods, all the booze they found, and all weapons to a room downstairs.

"If you find any one with a gat or a knife," he said, "pinch him. If you find one that looks foreign—or even a country boy—bring him to me."

It was amazing the amount of stuff that was found in that place. There was a still in the cellar. Dope was found in three rooms. Everything in the way of loot from gold watches to washing machines with the price tags still on, came into the room where the lieutenant stood checking them over. It seemed as if every thieving, tough, knife-toting, no-good Negro in town had roosted there.

But they didn't find Mike. I stayed with the lieutenant for a while, watching. They brought in a couple of Negroes who didn't look quite like the ordinary New Orleans brand. But the lieutenant said they weren't the kind of Caribbean blacks that came from Las Cuevas.

I got nervous, the work went so slowly. After a while I began roaming around. I was trying to think

what we could possibly do next, and not having much luck. Mike had come in here, but he hadn't come out. That was as far as I could get.

I'D been down past the room where we found the two thugs, and started back to the stair. There were three stairs; the one nearest to me was in the center. I'd just about reached it, when one of the cops hollered down from above.

"Hey, there's a dead guy up here. He's white!"

The cop sounded just like he was telling us he'd found the extra bottle of ginger ale in the ice box. I went up the steps three at a time. The old building echoed every sound. I could hear men coming from all over.

The cop hadn't touched Mike. He lay face down in the middle of a bare room. The back of his white linen coat was a smear of dust and blood. The bone handle of a knife was sticking out from under his arm, near the shoulder. His body didn't twitch with any sign of life, or lift with breathing. He lay heavy, and soft, and still.

Somebody came whirling through the door, shoving me aside. It was the lieutenant, though how he'd got up there so quick, I don't know. He dropped on one knee beside Mike and wrapped his handkerchief around the knife. He pulled the knife out, then turned Mike over.

Before, he'd been quick and abrupt in his movements. Now he worked as gently as a nurse. He picked up Mike's wrist, feeling the pulse. Then he pulled back his clothes, touching his heart. He straightened up, looking at me.

"I can't tell," he said. "He might be—I can't tell if there's any pulse or not. McKane, go phone for a doc and the wagon."

When the ambulance took Mike to the hospital, I rode in it. Looking the room over for clues was a cop's job, anyway. Mike was still alive when they took him in to the examining room, but very low. The house physician came out and asked me if I knew anybody who'd give blood for a transfusion. I asked if I'd do, and they took a test.

They put me on the table beside Mike about one thirty in the morning. After it was over, I went to sleep. I woke up late in the morning, feeling a little bit wobbly in the legs, but all right. A nurse came and told me I could have lunch with a couple of the doctors. They were pretty cheerful.

"It's wonderful," one of them said, "how much the human animal can stand and still live. Your friend was stabbed in five places—somebody sank a knife into him five times without once reaching a vital spot. It's remarkable!"

"You mean," I said, "that Mike's going to be all right?"

"Sure," the doctor said. "He'd lost enough blood to kill some people, but that was the main trouble. He's got a good constitution. All he needed was the start the transfusion gave him."

THE lieutenant came around late that afternoon. They let us both go up to see Mike. He looked as white as the sheet he was under, and hollow-eyed, but otherwise himself. We shook hands without saying anything. What was there to say?

Naturally, the detective wanted to know what had happened to Mike, but thought he ought to know more of the history of the case first. Mike nodded to me, and I sketched in the main outlines.

"It sounds goofy," I said to him at

the end, "but these things really happened, believe it or not."

"It don't sound goofy to me," the lieutenant said. "I was in Las Cuevas six months, myself. But the politics don't matter to me. You guys can go bomb the Las Cuevas capital tomorrow, for all I care. What I want to do is get my hands on these Negroes. Let's hear how it happened, Font."

Mike was so weak we had to bend down to catch what he said. He started out by saying that he'd been a fool; which was so, in a way, and not so in another.

All the morning before he'd had a feeling that he was being watched. He couldn't see anybody around the shop, and thought he must be getting nervous on account of finding the hand, and all. But no matter how hard he tried to get hold of himself, he kept feeling that somebody was around watching him.

At noon, he always went down the road a few hundred yards to a hash house. The place was crowded, because some factory hands from a near-by factory ate there. Mike was eating, and telling himself that he'd better get more sleep, when he heard a voice say something in Spanish. He turned quickly—enough to see a Negro Mike was sure came from Las Cuevas. He could tell by the Spanish cast of the features. The man disappeared after Mike had gotten just one look at him.

Mike got up and tried to find the Negro. He looked all over the hash house; even went out into the kitchen. He couldn't find hide nor hair of the Negro. He got hold of the manager of the place, but of course he didn't know anything.

So Mike went back to the field. An air field is a hard place to hide. There's too much open space, and what buildings there are, are too

new and efficient. Mike gave a look around, and went back to work.

He was alone in the shop, and after a while got interested in the job he had on hand. He forgot about the Negro for a little while. All of a sudden he heard the manager outside yelling:

"Get down off of there! What do you black apes think you're doing?"

There were sounds on the roof—feet running. Mike went out with his spanner still in his hand. As he got to the door, the manager said:

"You better run! You better run so far you have to take a train back!"

When Mike got around where he could see, two Negroes were pulling into an old car parked beside the road. The manager was perfectly calm, by then. He asked Mike what in thunder a couple of Negroes were doing on the roof.

Mike had an idea, but he didn't tell the manager. He got into his own car, and took out after the two as fast as he could travel. He figured—and he was right—that these were Las Cuevas Negroes. There was a ventilator which passed through the shop roof above where Mike worked. It was a good guess that they'd been up there most of the day, waiting for a chance to shoot Mike, or maybe drop a knife on him.

THE two Negroes crossed the river, and drove through town till they came to the building on Rampart Street where we had found Mike.

That, he said, was where he'd been a fool. He wanted to see where they went, and he had some idea that he could take them both single-handed. He followed them in, and trailed them upstairs.

They shut the door of their room. Mike pushed it open. He didn't have a gun, but he had stuck the spanner

in his coat pocket. He poked it against the cloth, and told the two to put their hands up.

They put up their hands all right, but Mike never got a chance to speak to them again. An arm went around his neck, and he felt the knife. He tried to fight, but the men jumped up. He only remembered one thing more. The one who had stabbed him from behind was a woman.

When Mike had finished, the lieutenant laid a greasy bundle on the bed. He unwrapped it, taking out the things one by one; some nail parings, some hair, a big iron nail, some funny-looking seeds, and a silver image of a saint.

"That mean anything to you?" he asked Mike. "It's all I found in the room."

Mike nodded. "Sure," he whispered. "All the Nyanyigo Negroes carry those. They call 'em *orisha* bags. Sympathetic magic, and all that stuff. The saint is Santa Barbara, but they call her 'Shango.'"

The lieutenant folded the things into the cloth and got up.

"I think we can find them," he said. "You take it easy and get well. We'll put 'em away. Can't afford to have foreign blacks raising hell over here."

He did put them away, too. But before Mike got up from bed to appear in court, some important things had happened. Not anything exciting, but important to me.

The first thing was that I bought a plane. It wasn't any too fast, and it wasn't fancy; just a good, substantial crate that would fly and keep on flying till you got where you wanted to go—always providing the luck was with you. I had saved some money—just because it seemed like a good idea—and sunk the most of it in the ship.

Why? Because I had a big hunch

that Mike and I were going to Las Cuevas. It took quite a while for me to realize that the cockeyed things that happened, and the things that Mike told me, were real. I'm just an ordinary man who works for a living, and presidents and murders are out of my line. But once it really percolated to my brain that the Las Cuevas dictator had tried to kill Mike, I knew we were only at the beginning of something. If the message the man who had his throat cut carried was important enough to get him killed, Mike was wanted over there, bad. A plane was the best way to get us across the water.

I didn't tell Mike. He'd have argued that I shouldn't do it, and he had enough on his mind for a man with five knife stabs in his body.

The second thing was that I resigned from Gulf Airlines. When Mike came out of the hospital, the Las Cuevas Negroes hadn't been captured; and even if they had been, I wouldn't have felt right about leaving Mike alone and helpless in the apartment. It wouldn't have been comfortable to spend the rest of my life knowing that he had been killed because I didn't stand by.

MORNINGS, when the doctor came and plenty of people were around the house, I went out to work on the plane. The motor needed Mike's expert hand, but by hard work I got it into fair shape. I went all over the rigging, fitted in new gas tanks, and even bought some navigating instruments.

Mike was just able to sit in a chair when our detective friend phoned that he had some Negroes for us to look over. They were the ones, all right. Mike recognized the two men and the woman at first glance. Except that their features had a Spanish cast, they didn't look much dif-

ferent from other Negroes. I mean, there wasn't any explanation in the way they looked for what they'd done.

Mike said that they were normal Las Cuevas Negroes. The fact that they belonged to the secret society was enough explanation. Their beliefs and ceremonies and all that would make them do almost anything. Mike wasn't surprised, either, when they wouldn't tell who sent them to New Orleans, or why they'd attacked him. We spent a good part of two days at police headquarters, trying to get it out of them.

"What I can't figure out," Mike said, "is how the president of Las Cuevas got Nyanyigos to come clear over here."

It was a long time before we knew the answer to that one. The three Negroes were held over for trial on the charge of assaulting Mike.

Life got kind of monotonous after the trial. I had a little more work to do on the plane, but Mike didn't have anything to do. As he picked up strength, it began to get more and more on his nerves. He was bothered about all this trouble coming out of Las Cuevas, too. Sometimes he'd sit for an hour at a time, brooding about it.

One day he said:

"Jack, I've got to go to Las Cuevas. Something's going on over there that I ought to know about. If the president thinks I'm important enough to kill, I'm needed. I don't know how I'm going to get over without being caught, but——"

"I know how you can get to Las Cuevas," I said.

Then I told him about buying the plane. Mike sat looking at me for a minute.

"The devil you have!" he said. "The devil you have." He got up and stuck out his hand. "Jack," he

said, "you're a darn fool, but you're a swell guy. Maybe—maybe some day I can make this up to you."

CHAPTER IV. TAKE-OFF.

WE drove out to the field and Mike gave the motor an hour's work. He got her running like a twenty-jewel watch. About three in the afternoon I took her up, and at four I set her down on a small field at Pensacola, on the northern Florida coast. The fellow who ran the field was an old friend of mine. He lent us his car to go to a restaurant.

Mike had sat up all the way from New Orleans, listening to the motor. He looked kind of gray around the mouth, but he said he was O. K. That's all he did say till we were through eating. He looked across at me.

"Jack," he said, "I don't like seeing you get mixed up in this. There isn't any need for it. If the signs mean anything, there's bad trouble coming up in Las Cuevas. I haven't got much chance of coming through alive—and you won't have, either."

"Don't be a sap and think you've got some kind of duty to do because you're a friend of mine. Use your head and get out of it while you can."

There wasn't any use trying to laugh it off. Mike was too much in earnest. I couldn't think of anything much to tell him. So I just said, "Nothing doing."

Mike never referred to the subject again.

At five o'clock I taxied across the field and swung the ship into the wind. A full load of gas, made the ship heavy and sluggish under my hands. We took a while to get altitude. When I leveled off I saw the

man who ran the field looking very small in front of his hangar. Then we headed out over the Gulf of Mexico.

Not very many people have flown an ocean, and the Gulf comes pretty close to being one. I never had before. It's something that gets to you. You hop off into space; blue, empty water is under you; ahead the distance is shiny white at the place your range of vision stops. You know where you're going, but you aren't sure you'll get there. All you've got is wings, an engine, and navigator's equipment. And you've got to stay up, and get some place, or else—

For me, it was even more like jumping off a cliff than that. I was leaving everything I knew; my own country, my job, my friends. I was going into something that I knew nothing about, except what little Mike had told me, and the hot stuff that had boiled over from the Las Cuevas pot and spattered us in New Orleans. And what I knew didn't look very good. All Mike had promised me was that I'd probably be killed. All I'd seen was a dead man and Mike cut up very badly with a knife.

I'm not ashamed to say that I was scared. I was in this thing up to my neck. I couldn't back out, now. And the fact that I had no idea of what might happen made the future look worse.

Mike had gone to sleep before we were well in the air. He'd driven himself after his strength was all gone and he needed a lot of rest. We'd plotted out the course together, and I was fairly sure I could keep on it. But when it came time to land, I was going to need his help. I wasn't very sure he'd be able; not even sure that he wouldn't be ready for the hospital again.

AFTER a while the sun began to go down. I'd settled down to the grind by that time. Didn't think much, any more, but only kept the ship pointed the right way and watched the altitude. After dark, flying got to be more routine than ever.

I should have known better than think Mike wouldn't be on the job. Along late in the night, when all my muscles were feeling the cramp, and I was beginning to get sleepy, he touched me on the shoulder. He yelled into my ear that he'd take her for a while. We traded places.

A pilot will usually feel a little bit jittery when somebody else is flying. You know how you feel in an automobile with a strange driver. It was funny, but I didn't have any doubt that Mike could fly. I'd never even watched him handle a ship, but I just knew he could. And I was right. When I woke up from an hour's rest, the ship was plugging along as steady and even as a bus on a boulevard.

We raised the coast of Las Cuevas a little after dawn. It was pretty weather, blue and bright out over the sea, with the sun making glints on the waves. Fishing boats from Las Cuevas were spotted around here and there, like a kid's toy fleet. After a while the island began to show green, against a big bank of white clouds rising behind it. Mike was flying. He passed back a scrap of paper.

"I don't like those clouds," he said.

I didn't know anything about Las Cuevas weather conditions, but if Mike didn't like the clouds, I didn't either. We planned to go down on a sugar plantation which was part of Mike's aunt's estate. It was inland a little, and about fifty miles along the coast from the capital. I

wrote a note to Mike, asking how near we'd come to striking the right place. He said it looked from where we were as if we'd just hit it on the nose.

That's as far as our good luck carried us. The tall clouds behind the island rose up and spilled over. By the time we were over the coast line, a big rainstorm was galloping to meet us. It came too fast to go around it. All we could do was try to climb out.

The ship wouldn't climb fast enough. In a few minutes she was rocking and pitching in the middle of that rainstorm. Lightning was ripping out of the middle of it to add to fire hazard. The pelt of drops blinded us beyond a few feet, and the cross currents tossed us around. Mike was fighting the ship with everything he had, but there wasn't much he could do.

Then we were through and riding calmly again. But we weren't through with our trouble. We'd lost our bearings and had no idea of where we were. To make things worse, the ground was obscured by a woolly fog. Just about then Mike switched to our second reserve tank of gas—the last.

There's an old story that two aviators ran out of gas and kept flying around until they starved to death. It isn't true. When you're out of gas, you come down, no matter where you are. There was about an hour of flying in the reserve tank—no more.

MIKE started back, following the storm which was moving on out to sea. But the fog followed the rain. So Mike flew down on top of the fog, making wide circles to find a hole we could look through and find out where we were. There wasn't any hole, and by then,

over half our time was gone. If we didn't want to make a dead-stick landing we'd better be going down. Mike wrote me a note:

There may be jungle, or swamp below. We might even hit a river. How about it?

"Let's go," I wrote back. The sooner we got it over with, the less time we had to think.

But Mike was thinking about a different thing than I was. He wrote:

Where are the parachutes?

Mike had been talking about bailing out. I'd been talking about trying to land. I knew there weren't any parachutes. I'd left them till last, and in the hurry of getting away, I'd forgot to put any in. I scribbled a note to tell him about it. Mike wrote back:

Then you'd better take her down. She's your ship.

He meant that we'd almost certainly crash, and I had the right to wreck my own ship, Mike knew the country, however, and I had a hunch that he was a better pilot, anyway. I told him to go ahead.

We went down through the fog in wide, flat circles. We were as blind as we'd been in the rain. The farther we went, the thicker the fog seemed to be. It's plenty bad to come down blind when you have some idea of what the country is like underneath. But to drop into a place you know nothing at all about is a flyer's favorite nightmare.

The time came when I expected every minute that we would hit something. We'd been coming down a long time. But we kept on circling round and round as if there wasn't any bottom to the cloud bank at all.

The more I looked for some sign of the ground, the less I could see.

Then Mike suddenly gave her full gun and zoomed up. I still couldn't see anything. But the ship jerked and there was a sound of breaking as our landing gear brushed through the top of a tree. Mike leveled out.

I could see the trees below us, now. Mike flew right along the tops. But they looked strange, like something growing up from the bottom of a lake. The mist hung to them. We flew along quite a while without coming to any break in the forest. But we couldn't keep going for very long.

Mike turned to the right and put the ship into a sideslip. He pulled her out of it, and we were flying below the level of the treetops. I could just make out a stream below. There was room enough to follow the stream, but no more.

Mike gave an exhibition of ship-crashing. He flew down till the wheels almost touched the water. He eased over to the left till the wing tip almost scraped tree trunks. Then he cut the motor, nosed the ship up to stop our headway, and brought her over in a sideslip. The wing struck the stream bank and started to crumple. I covered my head with my arms.

CHAPTER V. WHITE MAGIC.

WHEN I awakened I was lying on some mud. Over me was a heavy-leaved tree of a kind I'd never seen, dripping water in my face. Just beyond my feet a brown stream was running slowly by, making a lazy eddy around the wreckage of the plane.

I turned my head to see Mike. He sat a little way off, with his back against a tree. He had taken off his coat, unbuttoned his shirt, and loos-

ened the adhesive tape which held the bandage over one of his wounds. Mike had his head bent, watching the blood ooze out slowly and making a red spot on his side.

I sat up, feeling a little bit dizzy, but not very much hurt. At least I couldn't locate any particular place where I was damaged. Mike looked up and grinned at me.

"Is it very bad?" I said.

Mike shook his head. "Nothing much. This rip in me was the longest one, and it pulled open. I got kind of wrenched when we hit. But I'm all right. How do you feel?"

"O. K.," I said. "Nothing wrong at all."

Mike grinned again. "Put your hand to your head."

I felt my head and found that there was a furrow in the scalp about two fingers wide. It ran up into my hair, and was bleeding a little.

"I washed it," Mike said. "You're lucky. A wing strut went through the cabin. It just grazed you and knocked you out. If it had hit square it would have gone through your head."

I slapped at a cluster of mosquitoes flying round my head, all trying to light and bite at once. Mike was replacing the bandage.

"What do we do now?" I said. "Can't stay here."

"You don't know how right you are. I don't recognize this place, except that I know it's somewhere in the jungle belt between the plantation where we wanted to land, and the hills. The first thing is to find some kind of a trail."

He put one elbow down and tried to lift himself. He tried twice, but sank back each time. By then I'd gotten over to him.

"You'd better lie still," I said. "How the devil did you get me out of the plane?"

"I let you fall part of the way," he said. "And I wasn't so weak then. This bleeding takes the strength out of me."

Behind us, the jungle was too thick for anybody to get through without cutting his way. The other side of the stream looked the same. I got Mike across my back, and started upstream, wading in shallow water. It was tough going. The bottom was muddy, and I'm too tall for my width to make a good weight lifter. I couldn't keep this up very long. The jungle was steaming as the mist rose, and very still.

I thought that, and a minute later I almost fell over a dugout. A big Negro was standing in it, with a fish spear poised over his head. He turned to look at us, showing the whites of his eyes. The first thing I thought was: this is a Nyanyigo. But while I was wondering how I could draw my gun without dropping him, Mike said, "Hombre——"

He went on talking in Spanish. The Negro was scared at first, but after a while he began to talk back. Mike said:

"He'll take us to his village for fifty cents, American. It's only a half mile."

THE Negro put us both in the dugout and stood in the stern while he poled upstream. After a ways he ran onto the bank and picked Mike up. We went down a narrow green trail and came to a collection of huts built out of odds and ends of lumber, branches, and mud. One had a corrugated iron roof. The Negro carried Mike in and put him down. An old man with a fine, Spanish face that looked funny under his woolly hair came forward. His voice was deep and gentle, and the Spanish sounded kind of like a song.

"It's all right," Mike said, after they'd talked a minute. "We can stay here."

The big Negro picked Mike up again and carried him to a crude bed in a corner.

Mike slept till nearly night. Then he woke up long enough to ask for a drink of water, and dropped off to sleep again. I might have known what was coming by the way his face was flushed.

In the morning he was burning up with a fever. For the first few hours, his mind was all right. Then he went goofy. I didn't know what to do. I'd gone back with a Negro to the plane and brought out the things we'd left, so Mike had clean underwear to lie in. We'd brought an extra set of bandages along, and of course I put those on. But the wound which had pulled loose still bled, off and on. The edges of it looked bad.

It was the wound that kept Mike's fever up: I knew that much. But all the medicines we had were some disinfectants and physic pills. What good were those? For two days Mike tossed on his bed and talked wildly. I tried to remember enough Spanish to ask for a doctor, but couldn't seem to make the Negroes understand. I didn't believe there was one within fifty miles of the place, anyhow.

During the second night I made up my mind to start out the next day to try to find a medico myself. A narrow road led out of the village and through the jungle. Nobody had come down that road since we'd been there. But it must lead some place. Of course, I might run into the wrong fellow and bring a squad of soldiers to arrest Mike. But that would be better than having him die in this mud village.

His fever still ran high in the

morning. If there was any change, it had gone up. But I didn't start right out. While I was disinfecting Mike's bad wound—the only thing I knew to do—and having a tough time because Mike thought he was on leave in Amiens and tried to sock me for an M. P., an old woman came in.

The old boy who owned the house, and seemed to be headman of the village, tapped me on the shoulder and showed her to me. She looked to be about ninety-five years old. I didn't know any one face could have that many wrinkles. Her hair was like white, curly cotton. She had a big hand-woven basket on her arm.

They both talked fast and made a lot of gestures to tell me that she'd come from another village to doctor Mike. It seemed as if they were trying to say that she was a great doctor. You wouldn't think of letting an old Las Cuevas Negress doctor a friend of yours. Neither would I—if I knew any other way to help him. This was a jam. I stepped aside and waved my hand to tell them she could go ahead.

First she took some leaves and powdered roots out of her bag and made a poultice of them. Mike was thrashing around in bed, still fighting M. P.'s. When the old woman finished, I went over to the bed, all set to hold Mike down. But the old woman waved me back. She spoke to Mike in Spanish, almost whispering. Mike lay still, then said, "*Quien?*"

The old woman spoke again. Mike turned over to look at her. As she talked, the wild look went out of his eyes. When she started putting the poultice on his wound, he lay as still as if she'd been his mother, and Mike a ten-year-old kid.

After she'd dressed Mike's wound, the old woman put a big black pot

on the fire and took more stuff out of her bag. It would take a botanist, and maybe a biologist, too, to tell what went into that pot. All I know is that the odor of it drove me farther and farther away until I went to sit in the doorway. I didn't want to leave these Negroes alone with Mike; not being any too sure they wouldn't try something that would kill him.

WHEN the brew was finished, I didn't know whether I wanted them to use it on Mike. It was a kind of reddish-black with stuff floating in it. They made signs to show me it was for Mike to drink. I had a bad minute. If it killed Mike, I'd be responsible. But the fever would probably get him anyway. That kind of a situation isn't in the rule books. I told them to go ahead, and crossed my fingers.

The old man held the cup while the woman went to Mike's bed. She didn't touch Mike, but dipped into her big bag and took out some grain. She made a pattern on the dirt floor in front of the bed, something like a wheel. As she worked, she muttered. There were half a dozen Negroes in the hut, but they didn't make a sound.

When the design was finished, the old woman stepped aside, still muttering. A big red-and-gold rooster came walking past me. That wasn't unusual; chickens had the run of the hut. But it did seem funny that they let him peck at the grain she had so carefully put down. The rooster went round the rim of the wheel, pecking at the grain.

When he got to the bed, the old woman's skinny hand shot out and grabbed the rooster by the neck. She held him up, chanting something in her cracked old voice.

Then, very quickly, she drew a knife and cut the rooster's throat.

It was all a lot of hocus-pocus, but by that time it had me feeling kind of solemn. I don't know why, unless it was that the Negroes seemed to believe so much in what she was doing. The way people feel will make an impression on you. The old woman held the rooster up between her hands, letting it bleed on the ground. Then she dipped her finger in the blood and smeared it across Mike's forehead. Another Negro woman carried the bird out, and the old man brought forward the drink. The old woman, talking all the time, held the cup to Mike's lips. He drank it without any fuss.

In a few minutes Mike went to sleep. I sat near him, watching. By that time, I'd got over the effect of the hocus-pocus, and I was up in the air. Nothing that looked and smelled like that drink could do a man any good. At first Mike's breathing was heavy and rough. Then it got quieter and fainter. At last I could hardly hear it at all. I said to myself, "Uh-huh! You fool, you've let them kill Mike. There isn't a thing you can do now. It's all over."

And just about then, Mike began to sweat. Water poured out of him like he was a sponge, and somebody was squeezing it. The Negroes all started talking at once; they sounded very happy. The old woman came forward. She stood looking at Mike, not touching him, for a long time. Then she nodded twice and went out.

Mike sweated and sweated. I didn't know one body could hold that much moisture. And as he sweated, his breathing came back to the normal rhythm of sleep. After a while I put some dry clothes on him, and he didn't wake up at all. He slept all night.

When I came over to him in the morning, he looked up and asked me what day it was. He was himself again; and so much better that his face even had some color. I told him it was Thursday, and explained about his fever and the old Negro woman. Mike nodded, as if he knew all about that kind of stuff.

"Some of these old women," he said, "know plenty about herbs and rule-of-thumb medicine. They work remarkable cures, sometimes. The ceremony goes with the medicine. You'll have to get used to that kind of thing, Jack. Las Cuevas is a pretty primitive country. Superstition is as much a part of things as palm trees and the Spanish language."

My Spanish improved while we were in the village. I'd studied it in school, and being with people who spoke nothing else made me pick it up. I got so I could talk to the Negroes.

They were more out of touch with the outside world than any people I'd ever seen. The village stood in a cleared patch of a couple of acres. The jungle crowded close all around. Mike figured that the nearest town was a good thirty miles away. Other villages like this one were scattered here and there through the jungle. The people lived on what they raised themselves, and on what they could shoot in the jungle or catch in the streams. Weeks and months would go by without anybody coming from the civilized districts.

Naturally, they didn't know a thing about what was going on. They didn't even know who was president. We had absolutely no way of finding out what we were up against; what news the dead messenger had brought, or why the Nyanyigos had tried to kill Mike. We couldn't get in touch with

Mike's friends, either. We just had to wait there until he got well enough to travel—and take our chances.

CHAPTER VI.

THROUGH THE JUNGLE.

MIKE got well fast, but before he had all his strength back, I was plenty restless. The quiet monotony never broke. Heat and mosquitoes ran me ragged. The day I met the man in boots I was wandering around the edge of the clearing, half wishing I was back in New Orleans. If this was what we'd come for, I'd rather be flying sight-seers.

I heard a noise and stepped over to where I could see the trail. The Negroes never made any sound when they walked. The fellow coming was a Las Cuevas Spaniard; young, well set-up, and wearing high, laced boots and a khaki shirt.

He hurried up to me and asked if I was an American. I told him I was, and asked him what he wanted. He took a deep breath.

"I am looking for one man by the name Miguel Fontes. He is here, no?"

I was going to stall him off till I found out who and what he was. But just then I heard Mike's voice behind me.

"He's all right, Jack, or he wouldn't have come alone." Mike shot a string of Spanish at the man. He rushed past me, and a minute later was pumping Mike's hand up and down. Mike introduced him to me, and we went into the hut.

This fellow was an engineer working on a new road not far away. He was in with Mike's friends, and it's a darn good thing he'd come. Word had reached the president from New Orleans that Mike and I had left by plane. Fishing boats had reported

us over the coast before we got lost in the fog. The president had sent two hundred men into the jungle to look for the plane, and had thrown a cordon around where we were in a thirty-mile circle. It was just luck some patrol hadn't found us before.

Mike's friends were looking for us, too. They'd got word to this engineer, who had heard a rumor of our being in the village from the Negroes working on the road. He'd come right over.

He told all this in a rush of Spanish. I had to work to follow him. Mike asked:

"But why all this excitement about me? Why should he turn the army out to look for me?"

The engineer opened his eyes wide, looking very surprised.

"But you are Miguel Fontes," he said. "He thinks you have come to lead the revolution."

"Now we've got it," Mike said. "The time is nearly right to strike. That's the message the man carried. He was killed, you see, so I didn't know."

"I don't know about the message," the engineer said. "I am a small cog in this machine. But the time is very near, now—a matter of weeks, perhaps days. The president knows. But he hasn't been able to find the leaders or crush the movement, in spite of the reign of terror he has made in the country. Of course he would be most desperate to stop you from coming here."

That didn't make any sense to me, until I remembered what Mike had said about his father and grandfather. The family name carried a lot of weight in Las Cuevas. Still, it seemed as if the president was going to an awful lot of trouble for just one man. We didn't know everything yet, by a jugful.

The engineer promised to get

mules and a guide for us that night. We were going to try to make a small city in the mountains. The people were strong for the revolution, and Mike's friends had a sort of district headquarters there.

WE left just before midnight, and took the narrow, twisting jungle trails at a steady jog. Our guide was a light-brown Negro with a scar-split upper lip. He looked plenty tough, but he knew his business. He led us through the jungle in a night so thick you could feel the dark and he never hesitated until we came near the cordon of soldiers which hemmed us in.

We turned off into a trail so narrow that vines and branches swished my face. It led into an open space. We made camp there, and slept for a few hours. It was bright day when we went on.

Along toward noon, the guide got off his mule and shinned up a tall tree. When he came down, he had a long powwow with Mike. It seemed that we had to cut our way through. The trail turned off in the wrong direction.

Mike and the guide each had a machete hanging to his saddle; heavy-bladed knives, the length of a short sword, but wider, and the same general shape as a bread knife. Mike told me to lead the mules. I wouldn't be any good at the other work.

He was right. It takes skill to handle a machete. The guide stepped up to the jungle wall and began to hack. He cut through a heavy vine and advanced by the width of his body. Mike followed, clearing away the smaller stuff. It was pretty to watch them. The blades rose and fell as steady as loggers' axes. And it was wonderful to see how they cut a notch through

growth that would have stopped a tractor.

The sun stood straight overhead when we came out into a wider trail. Mike's face and arms were scratched as if he'd been dragged through barbed wire, and he was pretty well licked down. Even the guide had had about enough, but Mike went on by himself.

Mike said, "I've sent him to get some Las Cuevas hats. We leave the jungle pretty soon, and might possibly meet a patrol. We've got to look like natives."

"That's O. K.," I said. "But how are we supposed to get through this cordon of soldiers? Get down on our knees and look like wild goats?"

The tropical sun had made Mike's face more smooth and bronze-appearing than ever. Right then he looked like a grinning idol.

"We're past the cordon," he said. "We've just cut our way through a piece of jungle that's supposed to be impassable. They won't be looking for us."

All afternoon we climbed hills that finally got to be mountains. This country was safe because hardly anybody lived in it. The sun was just setting when Mike pulled up on the rocky shoulder of a peak.

"There's Cobre," he said.

The town was on top of a round hill, a compact group of buildings that all seemed joined together. The low sunlight struck against one side. The stone glowed with a dull, coppery shine. All around, Mike said, were ledges of this red-brown stone which had some element that made it glisten. *Cobre* means copper. They'd named the town for the color.

We went down into a steep-sided canyon while the guide went to the town by himself. It's a good thing he did. The lad he brought back to

take us on in said that Cobre was under martial law: Soldiers patrolling the streets and arresting people every day. Nobody could go in or out without a pass.

The lad got us in through a gap in the old wall the Spaniards had built around Cobre in the early days. He was about eighteen, and named Ramirez; a level-headed, able sort of a kid whom I liked right away. His father was going to put us up in Cobre.

When we finally got to the Ramirez house, three men were waiting. They came up one at a time, threw their arms around Mike and patted him on the back. I thought they were crazy till I remembered that they were Latin Americans. They don't mean anything more by those demonstrations than we do by shaking hands.

I was so tired I only got one thing out of this meeting: They were more than glad to see Mike. His coming put heart into them when they needed it. And the Fontes name really did mean something. They treated Mike with more respect than I'd ever seen given to any man. I thought of the stories of Prince Charlie Stuart coming back from France to lead the Scotch against England. Mike's coming meant the same thing to these men.

CHAPTER VII.

OVERSTUFFED VIDAL.

I MET the three men again the next morning, and made up my mind that it would take different men to put over the revolution. Señor Ramirez, our host, was a fine-looking old man with a white beard and polished manners. He'd been a figure in national affairs, once. But his day was long past. A man with a stocky, powerful body, dark face,

and square jaw was an ex-army officer named Manuel Melendrez. He looked like a fighter; a valuable man in action, but not one you'd pick to organize and lead a movement like this. The third was a fat man. His name was Francisco Vidal—called "Pancho." Two things about him were noticeable: His head looked like a shiny brown ball set on top of another ball that was his body; and his eyes were very live and bright.

Pancho Vidal came out with Mike and me to the garden. He was a lot smarter than he looked. He said:

"I noticed you sizing us up. We don't amount to much, the three of us. We're small potatoes. Wait till you get to the capital. You'll see the real boss."

Pancho Vidal had already begun making arrangements for getting us to the capital. He wanted to know what had happened to Mike and me before we reached Cobre. Mike started telling him. But he got only as far as our finding the man who had his throat cut.

"So you don't know," Pancho said. "Mike, your aunt died over three weeks ago. You're the last of the family and the heir to everything she had. That's what that man was sent to tell you. The president would like very much to take your inheritance in the name of the State—since you are supposed to have died in France."

That was the answer to a lot of things. If Mike once got all that money, he'd be plenty dangerous to the president. The old countess had been the richest person in Las Cuevas. And the president could very well use the money himself. No wonder he'd strained himself to get rid of Mike.

"Has he got the estate?" Mike asked.

Pancho Vidal shook his head.

"This will be hard for you to understand," he said to me. "Remember, this country is not the United States. It is a tropical country, and it's all mixed up. We have the Negroes, who make jungle gods out of saints. We have walled cities like Cobre, and old Spanish families whose ways are odd as a city wall, and sometimes much stranger.

"The strangest of all was Mike's aunt—the Countess Fontes. In her youth, she was very beautiful and a figure in society both here and in Europe. In her later life, she cared for only two things, Mike and her monkeys. After Mike left, she paid attention to nothing but the monkeys. She had hundreds of them. She pampered and petted them. Some even had rooms of their own, and servants.

THE countess was not stupid. She watched her pets, and studied them. Scientists used to come from all over the world to talk monkeys with her. She knew a lot about them, and the things she could do with them were truly marvelous.

"For this, the Negroes—and our more ignorant people of Spanish blood—believed that she was a witch. They feared her and her apes. The legends grew and grew until nothing in the great house seemed human to these people. Especially they feared a huge chimpanzee who is now quite old. They think he is a demon with a man's soul.

"They have reason to think so, now. After the countess died, the president had a guard of soldiers thrown around the house. He thought he would get the countess's will and destroy it. She always, till the day she died, believed that Mike would come back. The will was

never changed. It happened that I took it into my head to go the same night to get it and preserve it for Mike.

"I went to the house with a ladder. It was easy to get over the wall, because the soldiers were afraid to go nearer than across the street. When I got inside the grounds, all the monkeys started to gibber and yell. It was a terrible sound. I was afraid.

"I said to myself, 'Pancho, these are only monkeys,' and went on. There was a light in a downstairs room. When I saw the light, the monkeys had grown quiet. It was very still. I heard a human scream, and silence again.

"I couldn't go on. I went back over the wall. Early in the morning servants, who come regularly in the daytime to feed the monkeys and go away again, found the president's man outside the house. The great chimpanzee had strangled him.

"The president sent another. He also was strangled.

"That is why the president hasn't taken Mike's estate yet. Nobody will go near the house. Those who know the chimpanzee isn't a demon are afraid of him as an animal."

Mike sat quiet a while when Pancho was done. Then he said something we were both going to remember a long while afterward.

"My aunt always said I didn't appreciate her monkeys. Said I didn't know what wonderful animals they are. I guess she was right."

PANCHO VIDAL was a kind of contact man. He went everywhere, carrying important messages, helping organize, collecting information. He told us things that the president had done to the country, and about his own adventures. He'd been in a dozen hot spots. He kidded about everything.

But through all his talk the misery and fear and oppression which were bringing this revolution on, showed darkly. He talked about taxes which kept the people on the edge of starvation; grafting officials who took what the tax collectors left; spies and mounted police who could pull a man out of his bed at midnight and stand him against a wall next morning; men who simply disappeared, and were never heard of again. It was a little too much for me really to grasp, then.

Mike and I couldn't even stick our heads out of the house during the two days we were in Cobre. Pancho Vidal made good company. He could talk as well about New York or Paris as about Las Cuevas. But he was at his best when he yarned about the humorous side of revolution.

"Scared," he'd say. "I shook off five pounds—a pound a minute."

He was a funny egg. I liked him a good bit by the time we left Cobre.

On the second night the Ramirez boy, Emilio, took Mike, Pancho Vidal, and myself down by the same way we'd come into Cobre. There were mules waiting for us. I cursed under my breath, but Pancho Vidal heard me.

"You don't like mules? Neither do I. More dangerous than guns. They go off at both ends. If they don't kick you, they bite chunks out of you."

I told him they didn't have to do anything. Just riding on them was enough to cripple me. He laughed as he swung up into the saddle.

"That's the advantage of being fat," he said. "You have upholstery where it does some good—over-stuffed Vidal, that's me."

All the first night after we left Cobre, we talked and amused ourselves. The mountains were prac-

tically deserted, and safe. Pancho Vidal and Mike sang Las Cuevas songs, all about love and death. Pancho said that was all that really mattered to a Las Cuevan. He kept us laughing most of the way.

The second and third nights, though, were different. We lay up in a small house away from the trail all the first day. From a window, I could see the ground slope gradually away to level country checkered with sugar-cane fields. It looked thickly settled, and they told me it was. Mike said the sea was beyond, but out of sight. All through the country we had to cross, mounted police were patrolling the roads.

Our luck held up. On the third night Emilio Ramirez turned back. We walked across a field to where some tall pines were growing on an eight-foot bank. We stood in black shadow and looked out over the sea. There wasn't any light anywhere, except the big, soft southern stars. And the sea was calm. Little waves hit the shore with an easy splash.

"Thirty-seven minutes," Pancho Vidal said, shoving the luminous dial of his watch back under his cuff. "Gentlemen, sit down. You can't hurry a clock."

We were supposed to make contact with a coasting steamer, here. It had to be done by time schedules, not signals. This beach was patrolled by mounted police all night. Pretty soon we heard them trotting by on the sand below, and four black shapes showed for a minute. The quiet settled again. It got to be past time for the shore boat to come.

I JUMPED up when something scraped loudly on the sand below. I couldn't see a thing, but the cry of a sea bird came from the beach. It was a signal. We went

down and men carried us to a beached boat. We were "señores" and not supposed to get our feet wet. It took two of them to carry Pancho out.

We sat in the stern while four sailors pulled out into the darkness with a long, steady stroke. The steersman stood up and pointed. I saw a light, very low on the water. It wasn't long, then, before we were climbing over the ship's side.

Some men were waiting for us on deck. One of them yanked Pancho aside and started pouring Spanish at him. The light fell on his face, showing clear-cut features and a close-trimmed black mustache. He was young and lean. He looked tense, as if he was wound up all the time. Right now he seemed to be giving Pancho hell. The words poured out angrily. Pancho took it. He stood with his head bent down and a little to one side, not answering. Finally he said, in English:

"Ramon, you forget that we have friends with us."

The fellow straightened up with a snap. He seemed to forget all about Pancho.

"Ah," he said, and rushed up to shake Mike's hand. He made a regular speech. When he finished with Mike, he made me a speech in English; all about how grateful he and everybody else were that I'd come. The fellow could handle language all right, and he looked smart. But his talk sounded like he'd made it all up before and memorized it. He was Pancho's cousin, Ramon Vidal.

The ship got under way, and the captain showed us down to a narrow, stuffy cabin with two bunks in it. It didn't look any too clean, but a bed was a bed. We got into pajamas and lay down for a smoke before going to sleep.

"Mike," I said, "what's this Ra-

mon egg got against Pancho? He seemed right hostile when we came aboard."

Mike blew smoke through his nose and sat quiet for a minute. He said:

"Ramon's probably bawling Pancho out right now. He's sore because Pancho arranged to have us taken to the capital by boat. He thinks it was too risky. The boat was held up, and pretty nearly missed the schedule.

"Of course, Pancho did the best thing he could. We haven't any time to lose. It doesn't mean much. Ramon's always giving Pancho hell for something. He's been doing it ever since they were boys. He's one of these thin, nervous guys who never rests and hardly ever laughs. He's all right; has brains and works hard, but he thinks everybody that doesn't agree with him is a fool."

Mike lay back on the bunk and blew smoke at the ceiling. I could always see the thoughts going through his mind till they fell into place.

"Ramon," he said, "is a fair sample of one sort of man we have in Las Cuevas. He comes from a good family; he's inherited brains, and nerve, and energy. But he's inherited pride, too. He's always carrying a chip on his shoulder. Besides that, he's arrogant. He doesn't care whom he steps on, but if anybody even looks sidewise at him, Ramon gets sulky and sore. In other words, he's an aristocrat, with all the faults and good points of aristocracy.

"It's people like him who make it hard to put over anything in Las Cuevas. Take this revolution; we've got to depend on every man of brains and force who's with us. But those men have got to work together, whether they're butchers or sailors, or sons of rich families, they all have

to take their place in the organization and do their job.

"And believe me it's tough to get them to do it. I found that out before. It's one of the main reasons why the Latin Americas have never advanced any farther than they have. Now"—Mike sat up straight in the bunk—"my most important job is to keep the men in this movement together and working for one end until our work is done."

This guy—Mike Fontes—had been an airplane mechanic three weeks ago. Now he was gathering up the loose ends of a revolutionary movement, getting set to lead the people of his country in a war to establish a new government. I thought of him as I'd known him in New Orleans. Then I looked at him, sitting up in his bunk. In a way, he seemed to be an entirely different person. There was more to him than there had been.

ALONG about three in the morning, the captain knocked at our door. He was sorry a thousand times, but we couldn't sleep any more just then. The ship was going to make a small port, and we couldn't be found by customs and immigration men. Mike would stay in the galley, pretending to help cook the crew's breakfast. Being an American and noticeable, I'd have to be put entirely out of sight.

The place they picked for me was a paint locker up forward. It had a grating through the bulkhead which was supposed to let in air. Maybe it did. There was no light, and the closet was too narrow to lie down in, or even sit. I had to stand there for three hours and a half. By the time we were at sea again, I had all but passed out from the fumes of paint, and plenty weary. Don't let any body kid you; the horrors

of revolution aren't all in getting shot.

Along toward noon I had to go down to that locker again. It was worse, because of the heat. But this time we didn't stay in port so long, and a couple of slugs of Las Cuevas rum put me back in shape. The ship had dropped Ramon Vidal at this port, and Pancho was back in form. We spent the afternoon with our feet on the rail and tall glasses in our hands, listening to him yarn about his Paris days, and doping out a scheme for getting Mike and me ashore without anybody seeing us.

We passed between the two headlands about nine o'clock. Customs and immigration men came alongside, and I went down to the paint locker. It didn't take long for the red tape to be got through with. The officers left before we got to our berth. But there would be more of them when we docked.

Mike, and Pancho, and I went down into the hold. One piece of the cargo was a sideboard about two hundred years old. The Spaniards who established plantations in Las Cuevas did everything on a big scale. They had plenty of money and lots of slaves. Houses were as big as palaces. Furniture was oversize to fill the huge, high rooms.

This sideboard, made of Las Cuevas mahogany, was over six feet long. The drawers were deep; and it was addressed to a member of the president's cabinet who carried on a side business in antiques which he sold to Americans. That's where the laugh came in. Pancho had thought up the scheme.

Two sailors who could be trusted to keep their mouths shut, helped us uncrate the thing. Mike got into the middle drawer and we shoved it in. A couple of wedges kept it open a crack to give him air. Then I got

into the drawer below. It was pretty uncomfortable, because I had to turn my feet sidewise, but not so bad as the paint locker.

The sailors crated the sideboard again. Pancho stood by, wisecracking with us until the ship came alongside the dock. Pretty soon we heard them getting a rope sling around the sideboard. The stevedores talked and laughed, working slowly. Somebody let out a yell.

The sideboard jerked, lifted a little, and in a minute we were in the air. It was kind of like going up in an elevator, except that the darn thing kept spinning around. And after a while we swung sidewise over to the wharf. They let us down with a jolt that shook every tooth in my head.

Pancho's scheme was good; anything addressed to a cabinet member was O. K. with the customs men. They didn't even examine the sideboard. We started to move. By the sound, I knew a horse-drawn dray was taking us.

When we stopped, I listened. Sure enough, there came the sound of voices as if arguing, and just afterward, the faint noise of scuffling. That was as scheduled. Pancho Vidal had gone on ahead to get hold of some able-bodied revolutionists. They waited in a dark street and replaced the driver of our dray with one who knew where to go.

An hour later we stopped. The capital of Las Cuevas is a big city, and we'd traveled clear across it. I felt us bump up over something. Then a heavy door slammed and men with hammers began ripping off the crate. I heard Pancho Vidal's voice.

The drawer was jerked open and I came falling out like a comedian in a bedroom farce. Mike had better luck; they lifted him down. Pancho and another man picked me up,

apologizing for the clumsiness of the workmen.

We were in the courtyard of a very high house. In the faint light I couldn't see the top, and two sides were blank and dark. Pancho turned me around and we started inside. Mike and the other men were already on their way. The stranger was a small, slight man with a limp in the left leg.

CHAPTER VIII.

BOSS OF A REVOLUTION.

I DIDN'T really see the boss until the next morning at breakfast. He and Mike went into conference right away, and they had plenty to talk over. I had something to eat with Pancho, and turned in right afterward. The horse dray had taken the sideboard on to its right owner long before.

A Negro servant in a white coat showed me to a high-ceilinged room overlooking the court from the second floor. Mike and the men were sitting at the table. They got up. Mike said:

"This is my friend, Jack Adams. Jack, Señor Cruz Lopez."

The man put out a small, brown hand; but his grip was quick and strong.

"I'm very glad to see you in Las Cuevas." That was all he said, but it meant more than all of Ramon Vidal's flowery speech of welcome. This man was somebody. He was small—even for a Las Cuevan—but that didn't make any difference. His smooth-shaven, square face and brown eyes were impressive. Except that he was dark-skinned, he had the looks and manners of a big-time American business man. He talked quickly, as if he couldn't waste time on too much unnecessary politeness.

The Negro set a tropical fruit called a *mamay*—not "mammy"—in front of me. It looked like a melon, except that the meat was bright pink and tasted sweet; good, once I got over the shock. While I was digging into it Mike, and Cruz Lopez took up their talk where they had left off. Mike said:

"I'd be a fool to offer you advice, especially when I don't know any more than I do. But it looks to me as if my aunt's estate would help a lot. It amounts to a lot of money, and she always kept a big cash balance. The one thing we lack is money. Our revolution's running on a shoe string. Wouldn't it be good business for me to make my claim good before the president gets his hooks into it?"

Cruz Lopez's smile was short, and seemed grim to me.

"Of course, the money would help," he said. "But it's out of reach for the present. Our friend, the president, would never let you appear in court more than once."

"But," Mike argued, "if we could get the will and put it up for probate, I could stay out of sight."

"You'd have to appear. Remember: you're supposed to be dead. It would take months to prove your identity, even if you could get the will."

It wasn't my turn to talk, but this will business had been on my mind ever since Cobre. I said:

"Mr. Lopez—this may be dumb—but I can't understand why the president hasn't taken the will already. He could send a couple of squads of soldiers up there to use tear-gas bombs on the ape, if necessary. If his men are afraid, he could bring Americans down to do it."

Lopez held a match to his cigar. "He hasn't done anything like that," he said, "because he's afraid to kill

the chimpanzee. He has trafficked with the superstitions practiced on this island until they've taken hold of him. There's another reason, I don't believe even Mike is aware of: The president of Las Cuevas has Negro blood in his veins."

That jolted even Mike. He stared at Lopez as hard as I did. But you couldn't doubt the man's truthfulness. He wouldn't make such stuff up unless he was crazy, and he was far from that.

MIKE got over his surprise and was thoughtful for a little while.

"So," he said, stirring his coffee, "that being the way it stands, I'd certainly like to try to get my hands on that will."

Lopez shook his head, decisively.

"Impossible, Mike. Even if you got it, I couldn't let you take the risk of going into court. We need you too much."

Mike smiled. "It seems to me that you are perfectly competent to handle this revolution yourself. I'm a child, compared to you."

Lopez shook his head again. "I am an executive, yes," he said. "I can plan, and direct. But I can't lead. I'm precise; I calculate and weigh chances. That is not what is needed in a leader such as we must have.

"We need a man whom the people will follow, one who will fire them, rouse them out of the stupidity of their misery; one who can make death seem a little price for freedom. They followed your grandfather. They would have followed your father. I think they will certainly follow you."

For a minute his feelings had flared up in Lopez. His speech was fiery and oratorical, but he meant what he said. The flare died down,

leaving him brusque and businesslike as before.

"I'll plan it," he said. "You lead it."

"That's a load of responsibility to put on a man," Mike said. "I may not be able to do it."

Lopez smiled his grim smile. "That's the price you pay from having been born into a family of great men. If you succeed, you carry on what's called a glorious tradition. If you fail, you're a weakling unworthy of a great name."

He left us, then. Mike and I sat quiet, thinking. After a while, I said:

"What was he, Mike, before he started doing what he is now?"

Mike smiled a little. "Cruz Lopez was a broker, doing a small export business in pineapples and oranges. A crisis—like this revolution—certainly shows a man up for what he really is, doesn't it?"

Mike was thinking about himself, compared to Lopez. He was wondering if he'd be able to come through when the time came. It was tough on Mike to saddle him with so much. I was glad I wasn't in his shoes.

But I was glad that I'd been there to see Cruz Lopez pass the leadership to Mike. Cruz had built this movement from the bottom. It was his revolution. And he was the one who really directed everything. Yet he was stepping aside to let another man carry it through the final spurt, because he thought Mike could do it better. And he was passing up all credit for what was done, too. If we succeeded, Mike would be the hero—not Lopez.

It was time, I thought, for me to do something for Mike's country, too. I'd been thinking about it for several days.

"Look," I said. "I was a sap to

come over with you. I wanted excitement, and I thought maybe I could do some good. But I'm just in the way. Every move you make causes somebody trouble because I'm along. Get me aboard a ship, and I'll scam back to New Orleans."

Mike looked at me a minute, to see what was in my mind. It surprised me—the way it always did—when his smooth, set face cracked in a grin.

"You aren't going to run out on us now, boy," he said. "Don't kid yourself. You're going to be the air force of this army."

RIGHT away I began to see how good this man Cruz Lopez really was. The building we were in dated back to Spanish colonial times. It had been a government building, half residence and half office, for some official. That's how it came to have offices and living quarters both, and to be built around a court. The door we'd come through was a twelve-foot high carriage entrance on the street. It hadn't been opened in fifty years before.

Nobody who wasn't told could even guess that the whole place was honeycombed with revolutionist offices. On the ground floor, fronting the street, were stores and other legitimate business places. On the second floor, also on the street, were legitimate business offices, including Lopez's brokerage. When I say "street," I mean the main thoroughfare which ran past the front of the building. Being built through a whole block in the form of a hollow square, the place also faced another street. But that side had been originally used for slave quarters and supply rooms. Now a few small shops were there, and poor families were living in the rest. Living quar-

ters occupied the whole inside of the second story facing the court. There was an unused attic.

What only the few people in the know ever guessed, was that every business office on the second floor connected with rooms used for the revolution's business. Lopez's brokerage, for instance, had an outer office which really was for brokerage. Beyond it was a big room where several clerks worked. Lopez's secretary sat there. Anybody who wanted to see the chief had to talk to her. Lopez—except when he showed himself in the front office for effect—stayed in a smaller room beyond.

The smartest thing of all was that nobody lived or did business in that whole building except people in sympathy with the revolution. Lopez had taken a long time to move out those he didn't want, and get picked men in, but he'd done it. From the jeweler on the main street to the Negro postman on the other side, they were all for the revolution. Lopez could use any of their rooms, any time he wanted to.

He needed plenty of room. This wasn't any half-baked, flash-in-the-pan uprising. It was the work of years. Everything had a department—finance, personnel, ordinance, intelligence—with one man responsible. Cruz Lopez held all the threads in his hands.

Pancho Vidal, I found, was chief of intelligence. He spent most of his time in the field, leaving the office work to others. The department worked, too. Hardly a day passed without somebody reporting in with information about the movement of government troops and other things Lopez needed to know.

They went right out again on the same job that had taken Pancho away. If Mike was to count for any-

thing in action, the people of Las Cuevas had to know that he was alive and with them. So Pancho and his men were ranging up and down the country, spreading the report that old Miguel Fontes's grandson had come back to lead them to freedom.

THE other departments were plenty busy. Cruz Lopez never seemed to sleep, and Mike put in just about as many hours, talking to people, studying maps and plans; getting a good working knowledge of how things stood and what was to be done. Everybody worked. They were finishing up the organization, and planning the campaign. Tying up all the loose ends before the big blow-off. It took everything everybody had because the work had to be done so secretly, and because the revolutionary forces were so scattered. Men were stationed in all parts of the country. They recruited troops and did what they could to have railroads and boats and trucks and supplies ready when the time came.

The main problem, now, was arms and ammunition. As soon as he knew for certain that Mike was in the country, Cruz Lopez had sent a messenger to his agent in New York. This man had most of the available money in bank there. When he got the message, he was supposed to put all the money into equipment and send it by boat as quick as he could.

The organization in Las Cuevas had to be ready to start things the minute the guns came. There wasn't any place to store them. I didn't have any doubt that things would be ready. The way Cruz Lopez's outfit carried on was wonderful.

There was a slight hitch, though, on the Saturday after Mike and I

reached the capital. I was in the middle room of Lopez's office suite, talking to his secretary—do I have to tell you she was good-looking?—when Ramon Vidal came in. He walked right up to the girl, without even so much as noticing me, and said something I couldn't catch. He spoke sharp and quick. The secretary said:

"Mr. Lopez is busy."

Ramon Vidal's face got hard. "Go at once and tell him that I am here," he said. "My business is of the utmost importance."

"I'm sorry," the girl said, "but you'll have to wait, Señor Vidal."

Ramon's nostrils drew in and he leaned across the desk. I thought he was going to bawl her out. But he snapped up straight after a minute, and marched off to a chair, holding himself very stiff. When he saw me he just barely nodded. He was so mad his face was white.

When Ramon finally went in to see Lopez, I said to the secretary. "Kind of high and mighty, that lad."

She smiled. "Ramon's business is always important. He thinks he's the only one who works. We don't pay any attention to him any more."

If I'd had to work with Vidal, I'd have paid attention to him with a sock on the jaw. He ordered everybody around except Lopez. And he argued with Lopez. Two or three times during the next few days he came out of the chief's office white and muttering to himself. Lopez had put him in his place.

CHAPTER IX.

WHAT REVOLUTIONS ARE FOR.

THE plane I was given made me wish I'd never learned to fly. It was an old, open-cockpit, two-place crate some barnstorming American pilots had abandoned

in Las Cuevas. The engine never had been much good, and had been mistreated plenty. The rest of the ship was beginning to fall to pieces. But there was too little money in the treasury to buy a better one, and I was supposed to start the revolution.

The government had an air force of seven ships—five of them stationed just outside the capital. If I could get my old crate into the air, I was to fly over the hangars and drop bombs. I'd run from any ship that got into the air, and try to come back later with more bombs. I didn't see much chance of coming out of it alive; but at least I knew how to lay an egg where it would do some good. My training was with the army.

The job now was to get the plane in condition to take the air at all. She was in an old shed out at the edge of the Las Cuevas suburbs; a place where nobody would be expected to bother us. My two assistants—who knew one end of the wrench from the other, but not much more—met me out there every morning.

I had to ride the street car; it took two transfers, and a five-block walk at the end. We knew that the president had broadcast my description to the police and the army. But one American looks a lot like any other to a Las Cuevan. They probably wouldn't spot me so long as I kept out of trouble.

Going back and forth by street car gave me a chance to see the city. It's hard to believe how poor those people were. At first I didn't see what Mike and Pancho meant when they said that the president had run the country down to the place where misery was more common than anything else. There were good stores in the business section. I heard music. People talked and laughed.

Then I began to see below the surface. I began to notice faces drawn and hollow-cheeked with hunger. I saw how many were barefoot, and how many in rags. One afternoon, from the car window, I saw a crowd. People got on the car, talking about it. A man had died of starvation and they were taking him out to be buried. Such things were happening all the time.

That wasn't all. As I got inside the life of the city more, I realized that people were desperate and afraid at the same time; desperate because of their condition, afraid because of the heavy-handed policing under the president's order. You could see it in their eyes, and hear it in the tone of their voices when they talked together. The whole capital was as tense as the wires of a plane in a power dive.

I saw other Americans; some tourists, and some business men living in the capital. I wondered if they knew they were sitting on top of dynamite with the fuse lighted. My whole slant on this revolution began to change. I'd come over for the fun of it, and to help Mike out, Now I began to understand how Mike, and Lopez, and the others felt.

In the back of my mind had been the notion that it was crazy and childish to have a revolution. I hadn't really believed that a president could be so bad; or anyway so small and low-down as to do the things they told me this man had done. Now I realized that Las Cuevas was a small country. The president could and did do what they had said. And the only way to get him out was to rise up and put him out by war.

I had these things shown to me clearer still. On my trip back from the plane a man got on every day at my first transfer point. I recog-

nized him as a fellow named Garcia, who had an office in the headquarters building. The first time he got on, he walked right by me without speaking, though I'd met him in Cruz Lopez's middle office. When I spoke to Mike about it, he said that the man was working with us. It would be bad if we were seen talking together.

So we rode in every afternoon on the same car, not noticing each other. At least we pretended not to. I watched him quite a lot, just curious about what he did and where he was coming from.

I WORKED late, and sundown caught me on the way home. Twilight is short in Las Cuevas; it's day, and in a few minutes it's night. I was standing on the gravel patch at the transfer point. Twelve or fifteen people were waiting for the car, including Garcia.

A Negro in patched, faded clothes came slouching up. He didn't look any different from other Las Cuevas Negroes of the working class. There was nothing about him to notice, except the way he stared. He stood at the edge of the gravel and looked at every man in the crowd, including me. His eyes fastened on me with a fixed, tense gaze, and passed on.

He looked at Garcia for a long time. His eyes traveled on, then came back. He took a step or two toward Garcia, and stood staring again, with his head stuck forward.

He'd been carrying a paper parcel held against his belt. He dropped the parcel, and yanked out a machete from his pants leg. Without any sound at all, he jumped at Garcia.

I acted quickly, without thinking. When the Negro jumped, I started. I was carrying a ten-inch section of heavy brass pipe that had to be re-threaded. When the Negro swung

up his machete, I came down with the pipe. He dropped.

For a minute the whole crowd stood with their mouths open, not moving or speaking. Then they all seemed to jabber and group around us at the same time. I bent down to see if the Negro was dead. But I felt a hand on my shoulder. Garcia was practically jerking me to my feet.

"Vamos!" he said, waving his hands kind of helpless as he tried to make me understand. "We run like hell."

I didn't know what it was all about, but I got up and ran with him. My legs are long, and I made good time going down the block. Garcia was right with me all the way. We shied off from a cop at the corner, went around the block, and fell into a taxi.

Garcia was winded from his run, and badly scared—more so than seemed called for. Even when he got his breath back his explanation wasn't very clear. He said that socking the Negro would get me in very bad if I was caught. The president had sent the Negro to kill Garcia because he didn't contribute to the National Defense Fund—whatever that was. The Negro was a Nyanyigo.

We left the taxi and walked a couple of blocks to headquarters, going in by the back way. Cruz Lopez was in the court. He didn't seem much surprised when Garcia told him what had happened.

"The president," Lopez said, "has suspected Garcia for some time. He hasn't been able to get any evidence against him, though Garcia provides transportation for us. All the same, he wants to get him out of the way.

"He used a method he's used before. A person whose loyalty is suspected is asked to contribute to this

National Defense Fund, which the president puts in his pocket. Often—as in Garcia's case—he is asked for an amount which will ruin him. If he doesn't pay, he disappears, or is found dead."

"What I don't understand," I said, "is where he gets all these Negro killers. Three of them came to New Orleans to bump Mike off."

"I told you," Lopez said, "that the president has involved himself in Negro superstitions very deeply. For some time he's been a member of the Nyanyigos. In the old days, the initiation ceremony of the Nyanyigos included an assassination. The new member simply went out and killed whoever he felt like killing."

"The president has revived the custom. But he has refined it. Nowadays the new member kills a man selected for him. And the president does the selecting."

"In other words, he has a crew of assassins scattered over the country who will do any desperate act in a sort of religious frenzy."

"It's a very terrible thing, Adams. The whole country is slipping back into a barbarism which belongs to the African jungles. No man in Las Cuevas—even the president's closest advisers—ever feels quite safe these days."

After that, I worked on the plane only at night. And when I went back and forth across the city, I looked over my shoulder and got wall-eyed trying to watch both sides. With such things going on, the revolution couldn't start any too soon for me.

I got the plane finished. At least I hoped she'd fly. I didn't dare try a hop to sea. Cruz Lopez had things rounding into shape, too. The day after I finished with the ship, he gave out the rank, position

and duties of everybody important. Final orders would follow later.

THAT evening, Lopez, and Mike, and I settled down for a quiet drink after dinner. It was the first time they had let down at all. Lopez looked dog-tired, and I could see how he enjoyed relaxing with a pony of brandy at his elbow while he talked about seeing a show. And I could see that he was sore when Ramon Vidal came busting into the room. He started talking in Spanish, but Cruz Lopez stopped him. Ramon drew himself up.

"Very well," he said. "Since you give this American a more important place in your councils than myself, I suppose I must speak English, Señor Lopez, I must protest this!" Ramon smacked a paper on the table in front of Lopez. "It is—it is an indignity to order me to serve with the supply department. I demand a regiment!"

Lopez just looked at him. He said: "Sorry, Ramon. But you aren't a soldier. I've given you the job where you can do the most good."

Ramon got white. "But I cannot accept this service! I wish to fight. It is not fitting for me to do this. Pancho is to be an officer of the staff——"

That was a little too much for Cruz Lopez. He'd stood a lot from Ramon, and wasn't taking any more.

"Señor Vidal," he said, "it's none of your business what rank Pancho has. Now stop bawling like a spoiled kid and go do your job. This isn't the time for foolishness."

Ramon stood very straight and stiff, looking at Lopez. His white face was so tense his thin mustache quivered. He didn't speak again, but turned sharply on his heels and

walked out of the room. When he was gone, I said:

"That guy's more trouble than he's worth, if you don't mind my saying so."

Lopez shook his head. "Ramon's all right. But he's all run down and ragged. He takes everything too hard. He's not himself."

Everything was set for the revolution to begin. We were only waiting for the guns. Believe me, the next couple of days were tense in the headquarters building. Lopez believed that the guns had been sent. His New York agent was on the level. But nobody was sure. No messages could be trusted to the mails or cables. We had to wait for a messenger. He should have arrived before.

I WAS talking to Lopez's secretary, which was a habit I'd got into. It was evening, but her hours were long. Mike and Lopez were in the inner office. A man who lived in the tenement part of the building came in. He spoke to the girl, talking very fast and excitedly. She sent him in to Lopez right away.

In a minute Lopez and Mike came out, the man following. Mike said: "Come on, Jack."

The girl said. "Let me know, will you? I'm so excited I could scream."

I didn't know what on earth she was talking about. We went down to the bare room where the man lived with his wife and five kids. A skinny Negro with a lot of kinky hair curling close to his head was sitting on a heap of quilts which did duty for a bed. He got up, grinning and bobbing his head as he answered Lopez's questions.

"Is the barber coming?" Mike asked.

Lopez whirled and spoke to the

man who had come for them. But before he could answer a barber came in the door with an old-fashioned basin full of water, and barber's tools. The Negro sat down again and the barber started cutting his hair.

"Mike," I said, "what is this, anyhow? Why do we come down here to watch this black brother get his hair cut?"

"Wait."

The barber lathered up the black boy's head and whetted his razor. He began shaving the head in long swathes, running from back to front. Cruz Lopez stood over him, looking down at the scalp as it was exposed. He was nearly all shaved before I saw what Lopez was looking at. Crosses and dots and circles, were written all over the Negro's scalp in green ink.

Lopez took out a notebook and walked around the Negro, copying the marks off the skull. When he finished, he fished out another small notebook and compared what was written in them. I tumbled to it; the marks were a cipher. Lopez was decoding it. He looked up at Mike. His short, grim smile passed over his face.

"The ship with the guns is due off the coast between dark and nine o'clock the evening of the twenty-eighth."

Day after to-morrow. That meant the revolution would begin. But there weren't any cheers in that room. Mike and Lopez knew too well how serious a thing they were doing. I felt kind of dazed and bewildered. It was all so different from anything I'd ever imagined being mixed up in. Finally Lopez said:

"Now if Pancho Vidal will only come. What do you suppose is keeping him?"

We all turned when the door opened. It moved inward slowly, an inch at a time. When a wide crack showed, a broad, fleshy, smiling face looked in.

"Did some one," Pancho said, "ask for Overstuffed Vidal?"

CHAPTER X.

FIGHTING AT HEADQUARTERS.

I COULDN'T go to sleep that night. Revolutions being new to me, I was kind of excited. I sat up, trying to read a book and not getting far with it. After a while a knock came at the door. It was Mike. He shut the door and sat down. I waited for him to talk.

I hadn't seen much of Mike since we came to the capital. We'd both been busy about different things. Looking at him that night, it seemed to me that he'd changed. His face was still like a bronze cast, but different. He looked older, for one thing. And he looked—this is hard to describe—as if he'd grown. He'd always been a little out of the ordinary, if you really looked at him. Now he looked like somebody important. You got a feeling of power. It was as if Mike was filling out to carry the load they'd put on him.

He started to talk quietly, but with a lot of feeling behind his words.

"I don't like it," he said. "Jack, I'd give up every chance I have of getting my aunt's money, I'd go back to being a greaseball, I'd dig ditches, if there was any way of preventing this revolution."

He stopped. I wondered for a minute if he was afraid. But it couldn't be that. He said:

"You've never been in a war. You don't know what it means to see your friends go down with lead in their guts. And even that isn't the worst of it. People like us can usu-

ally make a choice. We can get out of things like this and keep from dying—if we want to.

"It's the ordinary, dumb, hard-working people who don't know what it's all about that I'm thinking of. They'll fight, some for the president and some for us, because they're talked into it. They'll die without really knowing what it's for. They don't care who's president. All they want is to be let alone, and have a chance to live.

"Cruz Lopez figures that if we strike a series of quick, hard blows, the president's power will crack. The army will come over to us and we'll finish quickly. But even if everything works well, it means a lot of fighting, and a lot of people dead. It's hell; having the responsibility of stirring up a thing like this. I wish"—his lips twisted in a sort of a smile—"I wish Ramon Vidal had it to do. He'd like it."

"Well," I said, "suppose we don't do anything? Suppose the president stays in office and things ride along the way they are?"

Mike shook his head. "I guess," he said, "it's worth some killing to get him out. I think the people would be better off under anybody else. I wish it didn't have to be done, and yet I'm glad we're going through with it. That man does things you can't stand for. Young Emilio Ramirez was shot against a wall at Cobre last Tuesday."

"But he was only a kid!" I said.

"He was not the youngest who's gone out the same way," Mike told me. "During the revolution, while I was in the university, a lad of sixteen went into prison, for nothing more than rioting. He's there yet."

Mike sat quiet for a long while. Finally he got up.

"I'll have to quit thinking about it," he said. "I'll go get some sleep."

At three o'clock the next afternoon, work at headquarters had practically stopped. A lot of the people had already gone. The rest of us were to go soon. In Cruz Lopez's middle office, a few clerks were fooling around, waiting for the word. Cruz Lopez and Mike, and the heavy-shouldered ex-army officer, who had come in from Cobre, were in the inner office going over last minute details of the contact between the guns and the army. They were to land the guns, equip the men and attack a government arsenal at dawn of the next morning.

Pancho Vidal had gone to sleep in a chair in the middle office. Cruz Lopez's secretary and I were standing at a window, not talking. We felt kind of badly because we knew we might never see each other again.

A queer thing happened. Traffic, which was very heavy in the street below the window, began to thin out. It quit altogether. For a minute I saw nothing moving in the street at all. I couldn't figure it out.

Then the girl grabbed my arm with both hers. Her eyes were staring wide, and her mouth was open to scream. But no sound came out of it. I looked where she was looking.

Soldiers were marching up the empty street in column of squads.

The girl let go my arm, ran over, and started shaking Pancho Vidal by the shoulder. I crossed to the door of the inner office and jerked it open.

"Soldiers coming," I said shortly. "They're right outside."

Cruz Lopez stared at me for a minute. He passed the back of his hand once across his eyes. Then he got up. Mike and the army officer were already on their feet. None of them said anything.

When we got back into the center office, nobody was there. All traffic

noises having stopped, the street outside was very quiet. We could hear the soldiers halt, and the rifle butts rap on the pavement. Cruz Lopez stuck his head into the outer office.

"Everybody's gone," he called. "Good!"

We went from the middle office to the long corridor, and down the back stair. When we came out into the court, all that was left of Cruz Lopez's office staff was there. The girl was there, too. They all stared at us, as if asking what to do. Before anybody could speak, there came one shot from the street behind. Pancho came running out from the tenement wing of the building.

"Soldiers are in the street behind, too," he said. "They just shot a man who tried to run out. Everybody who isn't under suspicion has been told to stay quiet."

TWO men came out of the tenement wing behind Pancho, and joined us. The rest of those living there would say they knew nothing of the headquarters and try to make their innocence keep them out of trouble. A smashing noise made me turn around. In the big carriage gate we'd come through the first night, was an ordinary-sized door. Somebody was pounding on it, probably with a rifle butt. The door had heavy iron bolts. It would take a while to break it down. Cruz Lopez said:

"This is my fault. We're caught. I didn't think they'd surround the building."

We could hear feet going upstairs. It was a faint, far-off sound from the other side of the building. Mike touched Cruz Lopez on the shoulder.

"We'll be all right," he said.

There was a button—an ordinary doorbell—by the side of the door

we'd come out of. Mike reached it in three steps.

"There's a bomb——" Pancho Vidal began.

Mike's thumb had pressed the button. A muffled roar came. The ground shook under us, and glass fell out of the windows. Tiles began sliding off of the roof. Judging by the noise, Cruz Lopez's office suite had been blown all to pieces.

The sound hadn't died away before Mike was back. "Come on!" he said. He ran to a door, jerked it open, and disappeared. We followed him. The place was a storeroom for a wholesale grocery. It ran clear through from the court to the street, a long dim room full of odors. Mike was standing by the front windows, which were dirty. Nobody else was in the room.

When we got to him, Mike said, "Those with guns will go out first. The rest follow. Make for the store directly opposite."

There were about ten of us, in all. Four had pistols—Mike, the army officer, Pancho and myself. Mike pulled the door open and ran out into the street. The army officer was next. I went after him.

Mike had thought quickly. In front of the main part of the building, no soldiers had been stationed. They'd expected us to try to get out—if we tried at all—toward the wings, which was natural. Now soldiers were coming up from both sides, to see what the explosion was about. But they weren't expecting a fight. They carried their rifles at trail.

I saw Mike stop in the middle of the street. An officer had run ahead of his men. He stopped, pulling at his pistol. Mike shot him just as he got it out. The ex-army officer had stopped and began shooting at those who came from the left. I stopped

near him and aimed at a man who was putting his rifle to his shoulder. I missed. The army officer shot him. The soldiers on our side drew back a little. Others, coming forward, ran into them, causing confusion. I glanced around. No one else was coming from the headquarters building.

I could see the last of our people on the sidewalk in front of the store on the other side of the street. Mike and Pancho were moving toward the store, firing as they went. The soldiers were firing, too. One of Cruz Lopez's clerks spun round and dropped to the sidewalk. As I passed him, I saw that he'd been shot through the head.

I DON'T know how I got ahead of the army officer, but I did. He was the last one in the store. It was a long, narrow room with counters running its full length. Our people were going out a door at the back. As I went through the store I saw a pale, scared face rise up from behind a counter and disappear again. It was funny, but I didn't have time to laugh.

When the army officer and I got to the door, Pancho and Mike were standing by it. Mike said:

"Cruz Lopez is shot. We've got to stop them. Got to have time."

He started to get down behind a counter, ready to make a stand. Pancho said:

"Take him, Manuel."

The army officer was as strong as he looked. He picked Mike up bodily by the shoulders and swung him through the door. That left Pancho and me. We ducked down behind the counter just as two soldiers came in the door. They fired. The lead struck the wall behind us.

Pancho got one, firing from around the counter. The other came three

or four steps into the store before I dropped him. No more came just then. I could hear Pancho's teeth chatter.

"I w-wish I wasn't so scared," he said. "It spoils my aim."

More soldiers came past the windows. I took a quick shot and hit the first one to appear in the door. Pancho swore. His gun was empty. I pulled the trigger again, and the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. Two soldiers were cautiously advancing through the door. More were behind.

"Go ahead," I said to Pancho. "I'll be out right behind you."

He said, "You Americans are too damn polite. Lock the door as you go out."

Before I knew it, Pancho had stepped clear of the counter. He ran toward the soldiers with his empty gun in his hand. The soldiers raised their rifles and fired. Pancho staggered, but he went on. The soldiers' guns had bayonets fixed. The last I saw of Pancho he was almost on top of them.

I snatched the key out of the door and slammed it behind me. As I locked it, a bullet went through so close to my head that the splinters brushed my ear. I looked around. There was nobody in the alley, which ran from street to street back of the stores. I stepped away from the door and looked to the left, then to the right. I couldn't decide which way was the shortest.

A sound like a snake hissing made me turn around. A woman was leaning her head out a doorway. She had stringy hair and a tired face. She beckoned with a fat hand. When I came up to her, she pulled me through the entrance, whispering Spanish I didn't understand.

This was a stair entrance, without any door at the foot. As we climbed,

it got gloomier and stuffier. Having just come out of the light, I couldn't see anything when we got to the top, except some low windows at the far end. Mike's voice made me jump.

"Are you hurt?" he said.

"No," I said. "But Pancho's dead. He stayed in the store. Who's here?"

Mike, the army officer, and the girl were in the loft, which was a wholesale millinery workshop. Cruz Lopez's secretary had led them to the place. A girl she knew was working there. They'd brought Cruz Lopez up with them. Mike said he thought Lopez would die. The clerks had run down the alley, leaving Lopez on the ground. Mike didn't know whether they'd got away or not.

"We've got to get out of here," he said. "They'll search all buildings within blocks. We've got to take a chance and leave Cruz here. But we can't all be hidden. Margarita will stay to take care of Cruz. She can pass as one of the millinery girls."

Margarita was the secretary. As the three of us started down the loft, she came from behind piles of hats, where she'd been tending to her chief.

"Wait," she said. "You can't go out like that."

She straightened our ties and smoothed our coats into place. Her mouth smiled, though it trembled, and tears were running from her eyes.

"Now," she said.

At the end of the loft, six or eight women, with parts of hats in their hands, stared at us. There was a stair near by. We went down and into the street without meeting anybody. As we went along the street, everybody seemed to be looking at us. We went for five blocks, away

from the fight. Then we came to a movie house. People were just going in for the first show.

CHAPTER XI.

FIFTY MEN FROM COBRE.

WE got tickets for the balcony. Few people were up there. We sat on the front row and at one side, where we could talk without anybody hearing us. We'd hardly sat down before Mike said:

"There's a phone in the foyer. I'm going down and call Garcia."

Garcia had got hold of a tug. Cruz Lopez had planned to go out in it himself, to meet the arms shipment. Mike and Manuel would have gone by land. For the first time it occurred to me that the president might have sent an army detachment to capture the revolutionist troops which were waiting. Probably he had. Probably the tug had already been raided.

The picture flickered on and on. I didn't see it. Pictures were going through my mind, clearer than those on the screen. My mind kept ranging back and forth, from what might be happening down the coast, to what had already happened. The picture which kept coming back was Pancho Vidal running toward those bayonets.

Mike came back. He said: "They must not have known about the tub. Garcia said nobody'd been there. Now we've got to get down to the men, and save them if we can."

"If I can get the plane into the air, she'll take us," I said.

"I thought of that. I told Garcia to send a man to meet me near the shed, with all the cartridges for .45 and .38 pistols he can lay hands on."

It was smart of Mike to remember that my gun was a .38. We de-

ecided to go out to the plane separately. That way one, at least, was fairly sure to get through. By now, they'd be looking for us all over the city.

Mike went first. Manuel followed him. I sat through another reel. At that, I was the first one to get to the shed. I circled and came up behind it, looking around pretty carefully. But they hadn't heard about the plane either. Nobody was there.

I'd fixed up a carrier for my two bombs under the fuselage. They weighed a hundred pounds apiece, and with the extra weight of Mike and Manuel the ship was going to be overloaded. I began siphoning off gas to lighten her.

Manuel came in pretty soon, looking down at the bruised knuckles of his right hand. A cop had stopped his taxi for speeding. Manuel got out and socked him. That's what made him late.

It was quite a while before Mike came, but he'd used his head. He brought along the Negro fireman off the tug who had carried the shells from Garcia. The plane had no starter. We needed an extra man to pull the chocks.

Mike and Manuel wedged into the rear cockpit. I got out front and swung the prop to get compression. I flipped her over. She started, but died before I could get into the cockpit. It took me three tries to get her running, and I was sweating plenty. Even when it was running its best, the old motor sounded like a coffee mill. But she just had to take us—that was all.

I let her run a long time to get warm. Then I yelled to the fireman. He jerked the rope, pulling the chocks from under the wheels. We lurched out of the shed and down the field. If my ship had felt dead

under my hands leaving Pensacola, this one felt like a mummy. But the field was long, and I finally got her off, flying just over the rooftops.

WHEN I got enough altitude to turn and head down the coast, I started looking around for government planes. That sweet thought had been with me for quite a while. Knowing that a revolution had been about to come off, they wouldn't be likely to let a strange plane fly out of town without finding out about it. I'd painted the old crate the government's khaki color, but that wouldn't be any help now. If a fighter with a machine gun came, that would be just too bad.

But there was no other ship in the air. It was funny, but I was too thankful to wonder why. We staggered along down the coast toward where the troops were supposed to be waiting, at the terrific rate of eighty miles an hour.

Cruz Lopez's plan had been to take twenty men with him on the tug. They'd form an armed guard when the guns were landed at a little town which had a fair harbor. A few revolutionist men had been hidden in this town to meet them at the dock. The main body of troops—about two hundred—were waiting in the canabrakes and gullies of the coastal plain south of the town, and in the woods behind the plain. Fifty men from Cobre were near the town. The plan had been for them to come in, load the arms on freight cars, and head south toward the arsenal, picking up the rest of the troops as they went.

The railroad followed the coast, and a good highway paralleled the tracks. I followed the railroad. Not seeing any government planes in the air, I flew over the little town to see what went on there.

Plenty went on. I flew pretty low. Looking down we could see a long line of government troops drawn up across the square. More troops were in the streets. That meant that the revolutionist men hidden in the town were undoubtedly captured. And it meant plenty of trouble ahead.

I flew on, following the road. The first thing I saw was five government planes flying low over the edge of the woods and back and forth over the plain. I saw one dive on a patch of wild cane, and heard the *tac* of a machine gun. From far off came the *wham!* noise of an aerial bomb. That was why no plane had come up to stop us. They were out here, trying to drive the revolutionists from cover. Little black figures ran from the patch of cane and dived into a gully. The plane circled and came back after them. There was nothing for me to do but fly on.

Pretty soon I came to a long line of trucks in the road. They'd stopped, and soldiers were getting out. As we flew over, the front line had formed, and was marching in extended order toward where the revolutionists were hid. For some reason or other, the Las Cuevans polish their bayonets. The sun glistened on steel all along the line.

I passed the front trucks, but didn't turn. There was a railroad train pulled up ahead. The troops had gone from it, and were already well on their way. I could see some of them going through a field of cultivated cane. But I didn't stop for them, either.

Ahead, and to the right I could see the red-and-white pennons of a cavalry squadron. They were moving at a trot, and any fool would have known what they were doing. They were flanking the revolutionists on this side. Part of them

would go round to the rear, cutting off our men entirely.

The cavalry was in a fairly narrow road. I came down to about two hundred feet, and flew along the road. As I passed the tail of the column, the horses jumped. But the men thought I was a government flyer because of the color of my ship. They waved at me.

Over the center of the column, I let go my first bomb. The explosion rocked the ship, but I didn't look back, then. I was busy letting the second bomb go.

I banked in a short turn and came back. The road under me had been torn clear away in two places. All around the craters were bodies of men and horses. What was left of the cavalry was milling around and around like so many ants. I zoomed and headed away from there.

I felt the ship rock. Manuel was standing up. He yelled in my ear:

"Back—go back toward town! My Cobre people are there."

I TURNED and flew over the cane country. The government infantry had advanced quite a way. I saw some revolutionists running, dodging from cover to cover. What could they do with machetes against all the equipment of modern warfare? But there were some brave men down there. In front of a tangle of wild cane and underbrush, two government men fell. The others halted. The revolutionists came out the back, running for another place to hide. One of them—probably some officer with a pistol—had shot down the troopers. They were putting up what fight they could. I've never wanted anything so badly as I wanted a machine gun then.

Still flying low, I came to a lane leading diagonally from the town to-

ward the back country. Manuel stuck his fist in my back, and stood up again to point. I saw an open patch of ground beside a strip of jungly-looking cane growth.

I nosed down. The open patch was small, and looked pretty soft. But it had to do. I came back into the wind, cut my motor, and set her down in a pancake. I'd been right about the ground. The wheels went into it like plowshares. For a second it seemed that we'd nose over. But the undercarriage wrenched off one side, instead. Sometimes bum equipment does you good. We settled over, slow and easy.

We'd no sooner come to rest than a bullet struck the cowl in front of me. I ducked down in the seat just as another went through the fuselage. Our own men were shooting at us from the cane. They thought this was a government ship that had been forced down.

Manuel had on a white shirt. He ripped it off and held it over his head. The firing stopped. We climbed down and went toward the cane. A big hulk of a man in a high straw hat came out slowly, holding his pistol on us. He looked as if he'd shoot, white flag or no white flag. Then he recognized Manuel and rushed up to pound him on the back.

A dozen or so more men came out of the cane. They had dark, heavy faces and ragged clothes. They looked a little bit wild. They were mountain men. Two carried hunting rifles. The rest had only machetes. They all had stolid, sullen expressions. The big man said to Manuel:

"You see we are beaten. We can't fight without guns. We must either be killed here, or put in jails. There is no hope."

"There is hope," Manuel said.

"This man"—he put his hand on Mike's shoulder—"is Miguel Fontes, grandson of Miguel Fontes. He has come from America to lead us. We will save ourselves and perhaps the rest."

The man came close and peered into Mike's face. He stepped back with a wondering look on him.

"It is true," he said. "You are not dead. You have come back to us."

A sound was coming overhead that Mike and I knew too well. I'd forgotten about the government planes, for a little while. This one was a fighter. It passed right overhead, the pilot looking down. He must have come to find out who had been forced down here; or maybe he'd seen what I'd done to the cavalry. He flew on for a little, then turned short and came back toward us. There was no doubt about what he was going to do—rake us with his machine gun.

Men started diving back into cover. Mike said, "Give me that gun." He grabbed a rifle from a man's hand. The plane was close, now. I ducked back into the brush under the tall cane, and watched.

Mike stood alone. In his civilian clothes he looked like he'd just stepped up to a trap-shooting range to try a new gun. I could just see the pilot's head above the cowling. He was a little to Mike's right. Mike fired and missed. The machine gun began to stutter from the plane. Mike took a step with the rifle still at his shoulder. He fired again quickly. The plane flew straight on. It crashed into the top of the cane.

The men set up a yell. They went to the plane and came back with the pilot's gun. Mike had shot him through the head. But the machine gun was a wreck.

Mike handed the rifle back to the man who owned it. All the men

groped around, staring at Mike. They didn't come close. It was as if they were a little afraid of him. Mike didn't make any speech about every man doing his duty. He looked over the country in front of us. The government troops hadn't got very near this place, yet. The sun was just beginning to go down. Mike said:

"Bring all the Cobre men here to me."

They gathered in the open space, coming from all around in little groups. They stood off and pointed Mike out to each other. When they had all come, Mike asked Manuel to form them into ranks. He stepped out in front of the line.

"We can't fight without guns," he said. "We have been betrayed, and can't get the guns that were sent to us. We'll have to ask the government men for some. I think they'll give them to us. You mountain men know how to argue."

All along the line they grinned, white teeth flashing in their dark faces. Manuel gave an order. They formed in column, and set off toward the north—in the direction of the capital—at a double I could hardly keep up with.

ON our left the sun was nearly touching the top of some low hills. On our right, the government troops were beating the canebrakes. We could see the low sun gleam on their bayonets. They didn't see us. We were far away, and keeping to cover as much as we could. And the Cobre men's clothes blended with the growth.

We'd gone about a quarter of a mile when Mike ordered a halt. Right ahead was the flash of bayonets again. This was a column, coming from the north to flank the revolutionists on that side. Mike said:

"Here come our guns. We'll wait for them in that gully."

The men broke ranks and dropped down into the ravine, which ran parallel to the line of the government soldiers' march. I waited with Mike until they were all in the gully. They seemed to have dropped silently into the earth. When I got down, I found that the gully was a tangle of vines and small brush.

Mike sent his orders down the line. The men were to stay quiet until he gave the word, then come out yelling like fools, and attack. All with guns were to start shooting.

The officer commanding the government detachment was careless. He didn't expect any revolutionists to be this far north. And he didn't expect a fight from any he met anywhere. He marched his men in column of squads. He had no flankers, scouts, or advance guards out. I lay at the lip of the gully beside Mike, watching.

The column came to the head of the gully and began to pass about thirty yards to the side of it. The officer evidently had a notion that there might be stragglers in the gully. He halted his men, and sent two over to look in. We could hear him give his orders. His men were talking and laughing. They looked to be almost twice as many as we.

Mike yelled: "Now!"

I went scrambling up over the edge just behind him. The men were right with us. The yell they let out made the hair rise on the back of my neck. All along our line I heard the single cracks of what guns we had. The two soldiers who had come toward us went down. Some in the column staggered and dropped. The Cobre men went forward with a rush, yelling and waving their machetes.

But it takes a while to cover thirty yards. The government officer went down his column, waving his arms. A few of his men broke, but the rest deployed and brought up their guns. A ragged volley caught us at close range. Our whole line seemed to stagger.

It swept on. I shot a man who was aiming at me. Then I stopped, to use my pistol to the most advantage. Ahead of me it was machete against bayonet. And the bayonets weren't coming out so well. The soldiers hadn't had time to get set. And they were demoralized by the sudden yell and the wild charge of the Cobre men fighting for their lives.

Mike was here, there, and everywhere, shooting where it would do the most good. But he was less and less needed. The government troops began falling to their knees and holding up empty hands to ward off those cleaving machetes, by surrender.

I looked around and saw that Manuel had the government leader by the neck, shaking him the way a police dog kills a rat. Manuel stopped shaking and let him go.

"Surrender!" he roared. "Your lieutenant says you surrender."

The soldiers dropped their guns and raised their hands. Mike formed them in line and had his men go down it, stripping them of everything usable. Then Manuel took a squad and herded them into the ravine, while Mike saw to it that every man had a rifle, ammunition, canteen, and food. He put me in charge of the machine gun they had, with men to carry and set it up. There wasn't any too much ammunition, but we were in a lot better shape to fight than I'd ever hoped. Our casualties were only two killed and five wounded. The wounded could walk.

The sun was just beginning to slide behind the hills when we started back toward the timber line, traveling at that fast double.

CHAPTER XII. "JUST BEGUN."

THE main danger, now, was from the planes. As we went farther back, the cane grew scarcer. The ground began to rise, and we finally came to a stretch where nothing grew except very low bushes. Beyond that was timber.

But the government planes were busy. As we got into the open space, I saw them diving and hedge-hopping to the south, chasing revolutionists from cover. They weren't looking for any one so far north as we were. Some revolutionists started to cross the open stretch at the same time we did—running. They looked very small in the distance. A plane dived toward them with machine gun going. We could see a gap open in their line. But they went on. When the plane turned and came back, they had reached the woods.

Manuel dropped back from the head of the column and jogged beside me. He seemed perfectly at home, as if this kind of thing was a day's work, just like digging a ditch. He waved an arm toward the place where the revolutionists had disappeared.

"Most of them should have made the woods, by now," he said. "There were more in the woods than in the plain below. And very few will surrender. They're more afraid of what the president would do to them as prisoners, than they are of the planes."

"These men of yours certainly are wild cats in a fight," I said.

Manuel looked down the ragged line of men in tattered clothes, most

of whom marched barefoot. He grinned, as if he was proud of them.

"Cobre men," he said. "Mountain men. They were born to fight. Their fathers died in the front line of revolutionary armies, and their grandfathers before that."

A plane had seen us, and headed this way. Manuel turned and thumbed his nose. He yelled to the men:

"Get going!"

They looked over their shoulders and made a rush for the woods. All along the ground behind us were glitters of light where the men had thrown away the bayonets. Machetes for them. We saw the plane whip by from the edge of the woods.

This was an open woods. Mike took us south along the edge of it, traveling steadily at the mountain men's jog trot, which had me panting like a gaffed fish. Pretty soon an order from Mike passed down the line, and men began to drop out, one at a time. Looking back, I saw that they'd lain down in the edge of the woods, with their rifles in front of them. They were about fifty yards apart.

We began to meet straggling revolutionists. Mike would halt long enough to send them on their way up the hill. These men had broader faces and flatter noses than the Cobre people. Their skin was a different kind of dark. We went on, leaving men strung out behind us. When we came to where a spur of the hill pushed the woods out into the open space, Mike dropped back to me.

"Set the gun up here," he said.

The column, about half of what it had been, went on. I prowled around till I found some rocks down at the point of the woods. They made an almost perfect machine-gun emplacement. We'd have cover and a wide

angle of fire. And Mike had picked exactly the right place. To reach the woods on either side, men would have to come past me, giving me a chance to rake them.

WE set up the gun. I sat down. The Cobre men squatted back on their heels. I gave them American cigarettes. They grinned, thanking me. One of them said fighting was a lot of work, he'd be glad to get back to his farm.

The sun had dropped behind the hills, by then. The woods behind us were dark. But the hill shadow didn't fall on the open space in front of us. It was all light, there. Again I saw polished steel glisten. The government men were coming out of the cane patches. I looked right and left. They were appearing all along.

The open space varied from five hundred yards wide, to three. As the soldiers came out into it, they looked just like a kid's army of lead soldiers. They were small at that distance, and their uniforms looked neat and pretty. They moved so orderly, too. As they came out of the cane, their officers formed them in line.

Way down at my left, where the open space was narrowest, a rifle cracked from the woods. The firing ran all along the line, sounding like a string of firecrackers with the fuses set so they'd go off one at a time.

Out there in front, the line of soldiers stopped. The Cobre men kept shooting. Some soldiers went down. The same idea seemed to hit them all at once. They flopped out of sight in the low bushes.

The Cobre men didn't need to be told to save their ammunition. They were hunters. For a while it was

very quiet. Then lead began whining and ricocheting among the trees. A twig was struck over my head and leaves came drifting down. Another bullet whined off the rocks. This was just foolishness. The troops couldn't hit any of us. My men were both grinning.

I guess the officers out in front couldn't get it through their heads that so many armed men were in the woods. They seemed to think that their five-minute fire had driven us out. The whole line got up and came on again.

The deliberate, accurate shooting of the Cobre men began. All along, those soldiers in pretty, neat uniforms went down.

Now their officers began to take us seriously. When they got up again, they came forward with a rush. They covered twenty-five or thirty yards, and hit cover again. Down to the left they were within two hundred yards of the woods. For the Cobre men, that made them an unmissable target. When they got up again, men fell fast. The line didn't go so far.

When they rose to try it again, a lot of the soldiers weren't having any more. I saw one officer, almost in front of me, whip out his sword and lay around him. The sword rose and fell three or four times. His men got up, then. The officer ran on ahead of them, waving his sword. It was the kind of flourishing, picturesque thing only a Latin American would do, nowadays. But that was a brave man. He was courting bullets—and got one. His men went to cover when he dropped.

The officers got the soldiers to their feet once again. Now they were only a little over a hundred yards away from my gun. I leaned up against the rock and gave them a semiautomatic burst, moving the

piece back and forth over a wide angle of fire. As I watched them go down, I thought of what Mike had said, "The dumb, hard-working ones, that will never know what it's all about." But I couldn't do anything else. They were trying to kill us.

The machine gun finished that charge. They broke and ran, pushing each other out of the way to get back into the cane. Our man followed them with lead till they disappeared. I didn't fire the machine gun again. There was no use.

Quiet came down into the edge of the woods. Out in front I could see a few men crawling. But there was no other sign of battle. It was almost dark, now. The planes had gone away. They wouldn't be any use at night, in this kind of fighting. My men lay down where they could see out over the open space; soldiers enough to take it easy when they had the chance. I tended to the gun.

WE'D broken out some of the government rations and started eating. One of the canteens was full of rum. It tasted good. Mike came out of the trees behind us. The Cobre men were at attention, standing back a little. He told them to sit down. He squatted down on his heels, just like the Cobre men.

"How did it go?" he said.

I told him, all right. They couldn't stand up to the machine gun. Mike nodded.

"I saw them break here, first," he said. "A machine gun not expected will break the morale of most any troops. But they'll be back."

Mike stopped a minute, marking on the ground with one finger.

"They'll be back," he went on. "And they won't be back for fun.

The officers would never dare go back and tell the president they were beaten off by a handful of rebels. They'll keep coming till they dislodge us. We've got to hold them as long as we can. It's going to be tough, being night."

He turned to the men, and spoke in Spanish. "You men of Cobre are good fighters. When the government men come back, we've got to check them long enough for our friends to get away. *Sabeis?*"

They nodded, grinning. I said:

"Mike, why didn't you give those stragglers we met some guns and make them fight?"

"Notice they were different from these Cobre people?" he said. "They have Negro blood. When they feel like it, they'll fight like hell. But you never can tell when they'll feel like it. That's what's the matter with these government troops. Cobre men are part Indian. They'll never quit fighting till they're told."

He disappeared into the woods, on his way to inspect the other half of the line. We settled down to wait.

What came next was a jolt. There was a dull, loud noise, and a minute later a *wham!* of explosion on the hill back of us. The Cobre men jumped up. More or the same noises came from left and right. One of the Cobre men said, "Cannon!" His voice sounded as if he wanted to run and was just able to hold himself.

I told them to sit down again, that the big guns were shooting over our heads. By the sound, I figured that some field pieces had been mounted on railroad cars and run out here. They were going to blow us out of the woods, if they couldn't drive us out.

The guns kept banging away. But they were so far from having our range that we quit bothering about

them. There was enough to worry about. The government infantry would attack again pretty soon. I didn't see how we were going to start shooting until they were right on top of us. Then it would be too late.

THE government very kindly gave us light. I'm not kidding. They must have got mixed up, or else the artillery officer wanted to show what pretty fireworks he had. Two star shells went up, one right after the other. They burst over our heads, making plenty of light. A double line of infantry men was advancing toward us about a third of the way across the open space.

There was a short, wild yell from the edge of the woods. The rifles crackled, almost together. The long lines wavered, stopped, and went to cover.

I guess the star shells were fired for the artillery to get our range better. Not having any field telegraph set up, they got off their time schedule and made all this light at the same time the infantry attacked. That kind of thing happens in the best wars. Anyhow, they kept shooting star shells. And the Cobre men kept firing.

But this wasn't like the first attack. As Mike said, they hadn't come for fun. The two waves kept advancing. I turned the machine gun loose on them at two hundred yards. They didn't run this time.

The star shells left off for a little while. When the next one went up, the first wave was so close I could nearly see the men's faces. I gave them a full burst, sweeping the gun back and forth.

I blew a hole right through the line in front of me. But to the left and right they kept coming. This

time they didn't dive for cover. In a minute, they'd advanced until they were passing me. I swung the gun to the left and let go. The burst emptied the drum, but the work it did was terrible. The line seemed to have melted. As I was getting another drum in place, I saw a few soldiers reach the woods, far down. But there weren't enough to stand up to the Cobre men's machetes.

By the time I got the drum in place, the government troops on my right had almost reached the woods. The second wave had come up to a point opposite us. I raked the front wave first. When I turned loose on the second wave, they broke and ran.

But one of my men was cussing a steady stream of Spanish—which is a language for fancy cussing. He was working his rifle as fast as he could shoot. As I swung the gun round, I saw a squad of troopers almost on top of us. The officer had his pistol in his hand peppering the rocks in front of us. One of the men was throwing a grenade.

Just as the grenade landed behind us, I got the gun around. The squad disappeared like ants with a hose turned on them. I brought the muzzle to bear on the second wave which was attacking along my left flank.

Then the star shell faded and everything was black. On both sides I could hear shots and the Cobre men yelling. They were telling each other to fight like hell. The yelling changed. It sounded like it had when the first star shell showed them what to shoot at—joyful. The yelling kept up for a little while more. After that, quiet.

IN the quiet, I heard a groan behind me. One of my men was on the ground. I lighted a match and bent over him. The grenade had torn away part of his side. The

other man and I propped him against a tree and gave him a drink of rum. It was the best we could do. He wouldn't live long.

I heard a new noise. The other Cobre men and I straightened up and looked at each other. A shell had landed behind us—close. In a few minutes another came. Then another. Each was closer. We heard the third one whine, and the earth jarred under our feet. The star shells had given them our range. If we stayed here we'd be blown to pieces.

A man came out of the trees calling: "Señor Americano!"

"Here."

The man came up to me. He said, "We are to fall back. Coronel Fontes says to fall back."

Mike had gotten to be a colonel in the last hour, but I didn't even have time to grin. I gave a last glance at the wounded man. He was dead, with his head hanging forward, a peaceful smile on his face.

Back in the woods was a knot of maybe fifteen Cobre men. I heard the man who had come for us say, "The American is here."

Mike came up to me. He said:

"Jack, they've turned our flank on the south. Probably they've turned the other one, too. We're being pinched in from both sides, maybe surrounded.

"The best way is to fight our way through in small groups so they can't concentrate on us anywhere. It's every man for himself. You'll lead this bunch here. If you can get through and over the hills, scatter and hide yourselves till things quiet down." He put out his hand.

"You've been a damn good friend to me, Jack. If one or both of us doesn't get through, I want you to know that what you've done means

a lot to me. If we do get through, I'll really try to tell you."

We shook. I said, "Be seeing you, fellow."

Mike turned to the men. He said: "You men of Cobre, this American will lead you over the hill. When you get clear of the troops, go to your homes and wait quietly. This is not the end of the revolution. It has only begun."

He was gone.

CHAPTER XIII.

MACHETES AGAIN.

FOR a minute, I just stood there looking around. I'd never even bossed men in civil life. How did you lead men in a fight, anyhow? As so often happens, circumstances showed me what to do. This circumstance was a shell. It landed close enough for us to feel the concussion. We had to get out of there pronto. I told the Cobre men to come on, and started straight up the hill.

One field gun was methodically shelling this section of woods, feeling for us. The whine of a dropping shell seemed headed right for us. I yelled to my men to hit the ground. Lying flat, I felt the earth jar under me, and a roar in my ears.

I got up and asked if anybody was hurt. The Cobre men called each other by name. All were accounted for. We started on again. The burst had started a small fire behind us.

Another shell came whining down. This one was going to hit us for sure. I didn't have to tell my men to flop. This time, my eardrums seemed to cave in. I was jolted numb. For a minute I lay there, not knowing whether I'd been hurt. I decided that I wasn't, and got to my knees. One of my men yelled. "Look!" he said.

I raised my eyes and saw a big tree, blown loose from its hold on the slope, falling. It would hit right where I knelt. The firelight behind made it a big black shape slowly toppling through the air. I got to my feet.

It seemed that I ran slowly. I felt the way you do in a nightmare, when something's chasing you and your feet move like lead. The big tree crackled as it came down faster. I heard the crashing of branches. Then I sprawled forward on my face.

Two of my men picked me up. They asked if I was hurt. When I got my breath back, I told them, no. My left shoulder was bruised where the end of the limb had struck me, but that was all. The Cobre men answered to their names again. All there. I was the only one to be even touched.

We went on up the hill. The shells fell behind us, now. The gunner had been moving his range downward, trying to reach the edge of the woods. We were past that danger.

Ahead, soldiers might be coming down. I didn't know. Maybe they hadn't got around this far, yet. All the same, it was a good notion to go carefully. The Cobre men didn't need to be told about that. The way they moved through the dark woods was wonderful; no noise, no hurry, yet I had to almost run to keep up. I couldn't move anywhere near as quietly as they did. We went up and up for quite a while. The going got steeper all the time.

One of my men dropped back from a few yards up the slope. "Oye!" he said. "Listen!" The rest of the men had stopped. It was quite still. Up above us I heard branches breaking. More of the same noises came from left and right. A line of soldiers was working down the hill.

There wasn't time to plan. I did the first thing that came into my head. I called all the men to me, and asked if there were any wounded. Two had been hurt earlier in the fight. I put those in the center. I formed the others around them in a V. It was exactly like the old flying-wedge formation used in football. When my Spanish ran out, I shoved them into place.

But they caught the idea quick enough. I'd figured on being the point of the V, myself. Not that I wanted to; but I was supposed to be leading them. They wouldn't let me. This was machete stuff, they said. A tall, rangy fellow about twenty-two—he'd have made a great tackle—took the point position. I was on one side, in the middle. They passed me a machete belonging to one of the wounded men. It felt heavy and awkward. The men had all slung their rifles across their backs.

WE started on, moving very slowly and quietly. The noises had come down almost to us, in the time we took to get formed. A voice spoke, just ahead.

"Who's there?"

The Cobre men didn't yell. The V plunged forward, moving as fast as the steep slope would let us. Dark shapes that were men appeared between the three just ahead. I saw the big lad on the point swing his machete. The V plowed on. Three or four shots came close together. One of my men screamed. We were right on top of the men who had fired. They were coming in, now. I saw a bayonet poking in toward me.

I grabbed the bayonet with my left hand, not knowing anything else to do. I swung the machete, trying to cut the man down. Missed him.

The soldier hadn't locked his bayonet in place. It came off in my hand. He drew back. I shifted my machete to my left hand, on the outside chance of being able to draw my pistol and shoot him before he shot me.

I didn't need my pistol. The Cobre man next me reached out and slashed the soldier across the neck. All along the V, machetes were swinging. Shots came out of the dark. I couldn't tell whether the cries and groans came from my men, or soldiers.

All this time the V had been moving, slowly, but covering ground. Now we were through the line. Our speed picked up. Behind us, I could hear officers yelling and men milling around in the underbrush. They were turning to follow. Their shooting was wild. They couldn't see us.

The wedge stopped. One of my men said, "Shall we show them a little mountain shooting?"

"One volley—all together," I said.

While they spread themselves into a single line, I wondered how I'd happened to say what I did. It had just come into my head. At that, the idea wasn't bad. The soldiers were still sampling around, trying to get started, when the volley ripped down the hill. By the sound, a few had been hit, and they were all confused.

Mike's idea had been good. Small parties could cut their way through as we had, and would be hard to follow. Large bodies of troops are unwieldy in broken country. We had some advantage.

We reached the top of the hill, dropped down a little and climbed another. We were still on the second slope an hour after passing the government line. We stopped to rest, and believe me, I needed it. The Cobre men were still going

strong. We passed the canteen of rum from hand to hand till it was empty, then started on.

At the top of the second hill we rested again. By that time I was moving mechanically, too tired to much care what happened. We were still in woods. One of the men—the sergeant who had asked if they were to shoot—came up to one. He said uncertainly:

"Pardon, señor; but at the foot of this hill we come to an open valley. It might be best for the men to go on by themselves. Alone, we can reach Cobre."

I told him it was O. K. We went on. One by one the men would trot up to me, say, "*Adios, señor. Hasta luego*"; which means, "Good-by, mister. I'll be seeing you," and disappear. Finally there was only one left. He said:

"I know this country very well. We will go together to a place where we can hide through the day."

Believe me, that was good news. I was ready to drop where I was. And it was decent of this man to stand by and show me where to go. I understood later that they thought it was an honor to be with me, because I was a close friend of Mike's. When we came to a half-ruined hut clear over on the other side of the valley, the fellow wouldn't hear of my taking the first watch. I flopped on the floor. The last thing I saw was the shape of his hat, as he sat in the doorway, against gray light coming up from the east.

WHEN I awakened, a man was standing over me. I sat up on one elbow, reaching for my gun. The man grinned. He was ragged and bloody and one arm hung in a sling made from a leg of his pants. But Manuel was a sight for sore eyes. He said:

"That man of yours is a good thief. He's got coffee already."

I smelled it as I rubbed my eyes and sat up. "Where's Mike?" I said.

The grin went off Manuel's face. "I don't know," he said. "I haven't seen him since last night when we retreated."

We went outside. The Cobre man had coffee cooking on a smokeless fire of dry sticks under the wall. The hut was on a slope. Across the valley, on the side of the hill I had come down last night, I saw the pennons of a cavalry detachment. But they were a long way off. We ate government rations and drank coffee.

I was thinking about the last words I'd heard Mike say, "Remember, the revolution is not ended. It has just begun." Last night, in the fight, it had made me feel swell to hear him. I'd thought there really was some hope. To-day, as I remembered, I felt low and sad. Mike may have believed the revolution was just beginning. As far as I could see, it was washed up.

In the first place, the army was broken to pieces and scattered. The same thing had happened to Cruz Lopez's whole organization. Somehow—and this was something I wondered about plenty—the president had found out just where our people were and what they were doing. He'd broken the whole thing up at one blow. It was a better than fifty-to-one bet that the shipload of arms would be captured within two days; if it hadn't been already. That wiped out the treasury.

On top of all that, Cruz Lopez was probably dead. And if Mike was still alive he was going to have to keep hopping like a flea or be caught and shot against a wall. Pancho Vidal was dead. It looked like everything was done for.

I SAID to Manuel, as if I'd been talking instead of thinking, "Anyhow, that was a darn good scrap we put up last night."

Manuel nodded. He'd been thinking, too, though not about the same things. He said:

"The people would follow Mike into anything, now. I heard the men talk, last night. They think he's come to save the country. And they think he's a little more than human. It's on account of his grandfather, and all that. The Fontes men have always been set up on a pedestal. With Mike leading them, they think they can do anything."

"Then you think we aren't licked?" I asked.

Manuel looked down the valley toward the capital. "If Mike is still alive—and stays alive—we aren't. The president is strong. He has the Negro part of our people under his thumb. They fear him, and do what he says. Being in office gives him a lot to fight with, besides. But Mike—Mike's a strong man, too."

Looking at Manuel, I saw that he had been bitten by the same bug as the men of Cobre. He didn't know what Mike could do. But Mike was a Fontes. Manuel believed in him. It wasn't reason. It was faith.

"I've got a hunch," I said, "that Mike would try to get back to the capital. It's the best place to work from. We've got to try to find him. Do you think we can get into the city through these soldiers?"

Manuel nodded. He looked down the slope of the valley. Below us, on a road which ran along the foot of the hill, a farm wagon was moving slowly. The load showed green. One man was driving. Manuel beckoned to the Cobre man.

"See that farmer down there?" he said. "Do you think you could get his wagon and his clothes?"

The Cobre man spat on the ground. He hitched up his wide belt, with the machete slung to it. "Why not?" he said, and started down the hill.

In about half an hour the wagon, pulled by two mules, creaked up to the hut. The Cobre man jumped down from the seat. His dark face was split across by a grin.

"I didn't have to kill him," he said, tapping the handle of his machete. "He had a soft skull."

Manuel took off his torn, blood-stained clothes and put on the farmer's loose jacket and baggy pants. The clothes fit tightly on Manuel, but he looked like a farmer. The Cobre man, without weapons, would pass for an ordinary upcountry peon.

The load was green corn, tomatoes, and cucumbers. I covered myself up with fresh vegetables, leaving room to breathe. I had the two pistols and machete. Manuel and the Cobre man sat on the driver's seat. Manuel yelled to the mules. We creaked down the hillside, on our way to the capital.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BIG APE.

THE next afternoon we reached the army outpost on the road at the edge of the city. We'd traveled steadily most of the night, stopping just long enough to rest the mules. Most of the way, I'd been sitting out in the open, only ducking down when we met people. There weren't many people on the road.

We knew these soldiers must be part of a guard thrown clear around the city. It was certain that the capital would be under martial law, since the battle. Everybody going in or out would have to account for himself. And they'd be on the lookout most of all for survivors of the

revolutionary army. We were driving right up to them with Manuel and the Cobre man in plain sight, and me under a few cucumbers. But we had to take the chance. Mike might be needing some help plenty bad.

I was sweating some when I heard the wagon stop. I could hear the soldiers talking together. They sure chattered fast. I couldn't tell what was being said. Then one of them asked Manuel who he was and where he was going. Manuel told him he was taking his vegetables in to the market. He said the Cobre man was working for him. The soldier said: "Give me a couple of tomatoes."

The vegetables stirred over my head. Then the soldier said, "Go ahead."

When we'd gone a little way, Manuel turned around.

"Something is funny," he said. "Those soldiers were so busy talking they didn't care who we were or what we had in the wagon. They're all up in the air."

I had to keep down out of sight, now. After a while I could hear regular street noises. Manuel and the Cobre man were talking. I couldn't hear what they said, but something had waked them up.

We were well downtown when Manuel turned and said:

"I think you can come up with us, now. The soldiers are just talking to people. The police, too. Come up and see if you can make anything out of it."

I threw off the vegetables and lay still a minute. Then I heaved myself up slowly, as if I'd been asleep on the load. I sat up with Manuel and the Cobre man. The streets were full of people. They all seemed excited, and all along, little groups of them stood on the sidewalks talking. A squad of soldiers drawn up

outside a branch bank had broken ranks, and the men were chatting with civilians.

I noticed another thing. Though the people were excited, the tense, strained, afraid look had left their faces. I listened to them talk. Their voices sounded different, too. They were too excited to do their regular business, and expectant besides.

We came finally to an open vegetable market, where wagons like ours were drawn up around a long building. We backed in. The farmers selling their produce, and the customers were all talking, too. Manuel got hold of the farmer next to us the minute he hit the ground.

"What's happened?" Manuel said. "What's going on in the capital?"

The man turned on Manuel as if he thought he was dumb. "Haven't you heard? Look—José, here's a man that hasn't heard! Let me tell you: Miguel Fontes, grandson of Miguel Fontes, has come. He's up at the Countess Fontes's palace, walking in the garden with the big monkey."

WE left the wagon and mixed with the crowd, trying to find out more. We heard some strange things, but the queerest stories came from the Negroes and half Negroes. They were the most excited. The yarns ran about like this:

Mike had come down out of the clouds during the battle—which was true, but the way they told it, you'd have thought he came on his own wings. He'd taken fifty men, unarmed, and beaten off two thousand government troops, killing about a thousand. Then he'd come back to the city and gone at night into the house with the big chimpanzee that had already killed two men. In the morning, people had seen him walk-

ing in the grounds with the ape. Nobody else had ever done that but the countess, who was a *bruja*—a sorceress. So Mike must have some of her power, too.

It was goofy, but they believed it. You couldn't talk to them and not know that they believed. They thought Mike could do things no natural human could do, because he'd gone into a house with an ape. It seemed impossible that the whole city could be so stirred up over such a thing, until I remembered that Mike's aunt's big house had stood empty for weeks without any one daring to shoot the chimpanzee. Superstition ran in and out of all the life of Las Cuevas. It was a strong element. The president himself had been all mixed up in Negro magic; he'd used it for his own ends.

I didn't try to puzzle things out, then. Mike had said I'd never understand Las Cuevas. Mike was alive. That was enough for one afternoon.

When the farmer called the Fontes house a palace, he wasn't far wrong. It had once been in open country. Now imitation French and Italian villas were all around; big houses, but compared to the Fontes estate, they looked small. The grounds were big enough for a city park, and the three-story house might have been a hotel. There was a small crowd of people clustered at the big gate, staring in through the bars. But the guard of soldiers was gone.

Mike must have given orders about an American. The uniformed Negro who came out of a lodge gate to answer our ring took one good look at me and let us in.

Mike was sitting on a terrace, on the shady side of the house. He got up and came to meet us. Manuel

went Latin American and patted him on the back. It looked as if he was making sure that Mike was real. None of us said anything.

BEHIND Mike I saw a French door pushed open. The big chimpanzee had come out to see who was here. He came toward us, swinging along on two legs and one hand—or paw, or whatever you call it—knuckles down. If ever a brute looked mean, it was this one. He crowded up close to Mike and watched us with an ugly look on his ugly face. The long black hand hanging down opened and shut as if he'd like to get it on our throats. Manuel stood rigid, as if he just was able to keep from running. I didn't feel comfortable.

But Mike spoke to the ape as if he was a person.

"Alfonso, shake hands with our amigos. Gentlemen, Alfonso."

The big ape stood up and held out his hand. He stood almost as tall as Mike. The "hand" was hard and hot, and could have crushed my hand to powder. Manuel didn't like this a little bit. He put out his hand slowly, and was sweating when the chimpanzee dropped it. Alfonso sat back on his haunches and scratched, paying us no more attention.

"He needs flea powder," Mike said. "The servants haven't taken good care of him."

He was just another pet animal to Mike; but not to Manuel. He wiped his forehead and looked at the ape as if he wished he'd go away and stay.

We sat down and the servants brought us drinks. They moved softly and looked at Mike out of the corners of their eyes. We made Mike talk first. All I can say is that I'm glad I didn't have to do what he did.

After he left his men in the woods, Mike met an army lieutenant who had become lost. He was about the same size, so Mike persuaded him—the same way our Cobre man persuaded the farmer to give up his wagon—and took the lieutenant's clothes. He came back to the capital with part of the army.

By the time he got to town, Mike knew what he was going to do. He'd learned on the way that the shipload of arms had been captured off the coast. The revolution was washed up. To get it going again, money was needed. And the only money in sight was the countess's estate.

So Mike came out to the house. The soldiers on guard let him pass because of his uniform. He got into the grounds through a small back gate he'd fixed as a boy to open from the outside. The minute he got into the grounds, all the monkeys started to yell. Mike said he'd never heard them yell so before, and hoped he never would again.

Even though he'd lived there as a boy, the house seemed desolate and strange. Old Spanish houses in the tropics are weird any time. There wasn't a gleam of light around the place. It smelled queer.

Mike went through the big, dark rooms and up the stairs. He lighted a couple of candles over the desk in his aunt's big bedroom—the old countess never would have anything to do with electricity. He sat at the desk until he heard a noise. The ape was standing in the doorway, looking at Mike the way he'd looked at us.

Mike got up and went toward him. The ape came to meet Mike. He stood up and put his arms around Mike, feeling him. He ran his hand down the back of Mike's head and neck, and even patted his cheek.

Mike had to stand quiet all the time he did it. He talked to the ape, calling him by name. Finally Alfonso sat back and put up his hand to shake. He remembered Mike. Mike found the will in a wall safe he knew about. The countess had left everything to him—with a provision that her monkeys be taken care of.

It was when he'd read the will that Mike decided to stay. He was the last Fontes in Las Cuevas. It didn't seem right to dodge and hide any longer. He was going to meet what came from now on in the open.

SO far, nothing had happened except that the servants had all come back. Those that tended the monkeys came early in the morning. They saw Mike with Alfonso, and in a couple of hours all the countess's big staff was in the house, wearing the Fontes livery, and doing their work as they always had. That was all. The president hadn't made a move.

Manuel grunted. "He wouldn't dare," he said. "Away from this house, he might do something. But this house—people are afraid of this house."

"I guess that must be the answer," Mike said. "Anyhow, I'm going to stay here. There's something else you'd like to know. Ramon Vidal hung himself yesterday. He was the one who betrayed us to the president. Afterward, he couldn't live."

"I guess," I said after a while, "that killing himself was the best thing Ramon could do. I'm glad Pancho won't ever know about it. Pancho was—they got him, didn't they?"

Mike nodded, halfway smiling. "He was practically spitted on those bayonets. On the way back from the battle a man told me the last thing he said:

"'I always knew I was born to be a pintushion. Overstuffed Vidal is——'"

That was the way Pancho should have gone out, kidding about it. I'd thought a lot of that guy. I had to quit remembering things about him.

"Mike," I said, "I don't think this revolution's in such bad shape. A funny thing's happened. All over the city people are talking about you, and how you've taken over this house with the ape in it. They think it's a kind of a miracle. The Negroes are saying that you're a witch doctor, or something.

"There's more to it than that. They expect you to do something. They don't know what, but they're all up in the air as if plenty were going to happen in Las Cuevas. I wouldn't be surprised if you'd have a lot easier row to hoe than Cruz Lopez did. Manuel says that the people who were with us before—the Cobre men, for instance—would follow you into anything."

Mike sat forward. "Tell me more about this," he said.

We told him what we'd heard down in the city. Manuel knew more than I. The people were his countrymen and he could tell how they felt. He said that Mike was undoubtedly the most powerful man who had risen in the country since the president came into power.

"Another thing," I said. "It looks to me as if the president's slipping. Neither the soldiers nor the police are on the job, to-day. They ought to be arresting people right and left. But even Manuel and I got by."

Mike sat quietly looking through the big gate. You could see the red roofs of the crowded part of the city shining far away. He said:

"I'm going down to see the president. Maybe we're nearer the end than I ever hoped."

"You're what?" I asked.

Mike half smiled at me. "I'm going down and talk to the president."

"But look," I said. "You won't come back. He'll have you bumped off, if he doesn't arrest you and kill you later. You're fairly safe as long as you stay at this house. Don't be a fool, Mike."

Mike stood up. He said, "There won't be another day like to-day. I can't pass up this chance."

He went into the house. Manuel sat staring after him with his mouth open. I guess I was doing the same.

CHAPTER XV.

"VIVA FONTES!"

WHEN Mike came back to us, he was wearing a uniform.

Do you remember the French aviation officers who came over during the War to help us build planes? That's the uniform Mike was wearing; light blue with the small French kepi. The ribbons of two decorations were on his chest, and a service ribbon. There isn't a more striking uniform made; and Mike was born to wear one. His aunt had saved it.

But the uniform wasn't the thing that struck me most, as he came up to us. Twice, now, I'd seen Mike Fontes change. He'd been an ordinary, hard-working airplane mechanic, first. After we left Cobre, I knew he was a man you'd count on to help put over a revolution. Just before Ramon gave the show away, Mike seemed to grow and fill out to shoulder the responsibility they'd put on him. Now he had changed again. He was all he'd been before, and more. He was the descendant of a line of great men. Generations had gone to make Mike the man he was. He was big, now, bigger than Cruz Lopez.

He looked and moved about the way he had before. He spoke quietly. It wasn't anything you could point at, and say—that's the difference. I just saw and felt the power of him. I guess that's what the men of Cobre had felt when he lifted them out of themselves in the fight. Only now there was more.

And as he stopped beside us, I knew that this was Mike Fontes's big day.

Manuel had accepted what he was going to do. Anything Mike said or did was all right with him. He said:

"You are going to ask the president to resign?"

"Yes," Mike said. He turned to me and grinned, suddenly. I knew he was Mike Font, still, though the change was real. "You're wondering why the devil I put on this uniform," he said. "It's not so foolish as it seems. We Latin Americans are people who love shows. What I have to do is make this as dramatic as I can. I've got to give them a good show."

He led us around the house to the driveway. A big, open carriage was waiting there. A Negro in the Fontes uniform was on the driver's box, and a pair of beautifully groomed, big black horses were hitched to it.

"My aunt kept her stable," Mike said. He grinned. "This is a swell outfit for a flyer to be riding in. I've sent for a taxi for you two. Follow me down. Come into the capitol building behind me."

He got into the carriage and rolled down the drive. A taxi backed in and picked us up. We went slowly out of the big gate and down the street about twenty yards behind.

While I was around Mike, I'd been as bad as the Cobre men. He hypnotized me. I thought he could do anything. Now that I was away

from him, this seemed crazy. Word that Mike was in the streets would travel fast. The president knew he was dangerous. And Mike, in his uniform, riding in the carriage, was as conspicuous as a fire engine. There didn't seem a chance of his reaching the capitol building, let alone coming out of it.

At that, this was the nerviest thing I'd ever seen a man do. In action, you have so much to do you can't feel the full strain. You're fighting the danger. Lots of times you've got to have courage to save your own life. But Mike was riding into reach of the president, sitting down. There wasn't a thing in the world he could do to save himself. It was suicide; and I knew Mike didn't want to die.

AS we got down into the main part of the city, the streets became more crowded. When we finally reached the business section, people jammed the sidewalks. They stood packed like sardines, watching us go by. It was as if we were a parade. But there was no yelling. Nobody made any sound at all.

I sat with my back stiff and my hands gripping the seat. Any one of those windows, any of the balconies overhanging the street, might have a man with a rifle. I kept my eyes on Mike's back, rising up above the carriage. He was a target nobody could miss. My hands got cold and numb, because every minute I expected to see him sag with a bullet in him.

We went on and on, the carriage rolling slowly ahead. The few soldiers we saw, and the police, were watching just as hard and just as silently as the people. It was as if a crowd at a football game had suddenly grown still because the next

play would decide who won. Only the silence was stiller than that. And it was more tense.

Mike's carriage stopped in front of the capitol building. He climbed out. Out taxi slid in behind. Mike, all by himself, began climbing the steps. We followed a couple of yards behind. There weren't any people here. The broad marble steps were clear, except for two lines of soldiers along the edges. They stood stiff and motionless, watching us. All of a sudden I realized that I was dirty and ragged, and that Manuel had on a farmer's cotton clothes.

The big lobby of the capitol building seemed empty, except for a couple of page boys. Mike spoke to one of them. The boy came forward slowly, as if he was afraid to move. Then a man in civilian clothes came from somewhere. He went up to Mike. When he talked, he seemed nervous, and very polite.

Mike turned and started up some stairs. The man came over and took us into a waiting room. He was very polite to us. He went away. Manuel said, in a whisper:

"That's a member of congress."

The room was very bare, and the chairs were hard. My muscles ached from sitting so stiffly, but I couldn't relax. I couldn't help thinking about Mike and what was going on upstairs. There was nothing in the room to look at. As we waited, the time stretched out till it seemed forever.

I HEARD feet on marble floors and leaned to look out. Mike and two men came down the stairs. As they came across the lobby, I saw that the men looked like important people. They stopped near the door of the waiting room and talked a while. Finally the men bowed to Mike and Mike to them,

all very dignified. Mike looked in the door and jerked his head.

We came out. As we came up to him, Mike said to the men, "Until eight this evening."

Manuel was staring at the men. He gripped my arm. "The tall one is minister of war. The other is head of the treasury."

The war minister said, "*Si, señor*, until eight." He bowed to Mike.

"We'll go together, now," Mike said to us. His face had a glow. His eyes were very bright. He went out the door and started down the steps. Mike said:

"The president has promised to leave the country within twenty-four hours. To-night we meet to form a provisional government."

I don't know whether the news had traveled ahead of us, or whether Mike's coming out of the building alive and unguarded told them the president was through. But as Mike spoke they started to cheer. All down the block a roar went up against the buildings.

"*Viva! Viva Fontes!*"

Mike stood up in the carriage and bowed to them as we drove off. He had to keep on bowing. If the president intended to have Mike shot on his way home, he was out of luck. The crowd would have torn apart anybody who harmed Mike.

During one of the times when he wasn't bowing, Mike said:

"He was broken. When I came into his office, I knew that the president was finished. He knew it himself. His greatest power has always been with the Negroes. The army and police, and government favoritism have helped. But his real hold on the country has been through the Negro superstition. He's used their simplicity and their savage beliefs the way he used the Nyanyigos.

"Now, his hold on them is broken.

When they found that I could go into my house and live, the superstition through which he'd worked on them turned against him. All the hidden forces of Las Cuevas are working for us, now. He agreed to go, gladly. The people of Spanish blood hate him to the last man. He's afraid for his life. More has been accomplished in one night and a day than we could have done in a year of plotting and killing."

Mike stood up to bow again to the yelling crowd. When he sat down he was grinning. It made me feel as if I knew this guy, after all.

"It's funny," he said, "that what finally broke the president should have been a big ape."

IF you'll look up the figures, you'll find that Las Cuevas is in as good shape as any country to the south of the U. S.—better than most. Currency at par; industry and agriculture doing well; no strikes, riots, or revolts.

The people are happy. When I think back to the fear, suspicion, and misery that rode them during my first weeks in the country, it seems like a different place. You hear real laughter in the streets, now. The music and gayety isn't hiding anything you'd be afraid to see.

Why shouldn't Las Cuevas be all right? The ex-president was assassinated on his way to Europe—by a Negro. Nobody ever found out what for. Nobody cares much. Cruz Lopez is president, and he's a darn good president, too. Margarita, his secretary, hid him and nursed him through those few days when nobody knew what was going to happen. Then he went to a hospital. He came out in time to take office when the provisional government had held elections.

Mike could have had the job, but he didn't want it. He repeated what Cruz Lopez himself said one day in the old headquarters building: Mike could lead the people in desperate times. But Cruz Lopez is an executive, and that's what any country needs to run it—an executive who is fearless and honest.

Mike divides his time between

being minister of foreign affairs and taking care of his estate.

I help him do that—at least Mike says so. I have charge of his sugar and coffee plantations. I don't fly any more. My wife's afraid to have me—my wife, Margarita—the girl that helped win a revolution. You birds who understand women, figure that one out!

ACTION

ADVENTURE

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always comes through with a good yarn.

In the April 1st Number

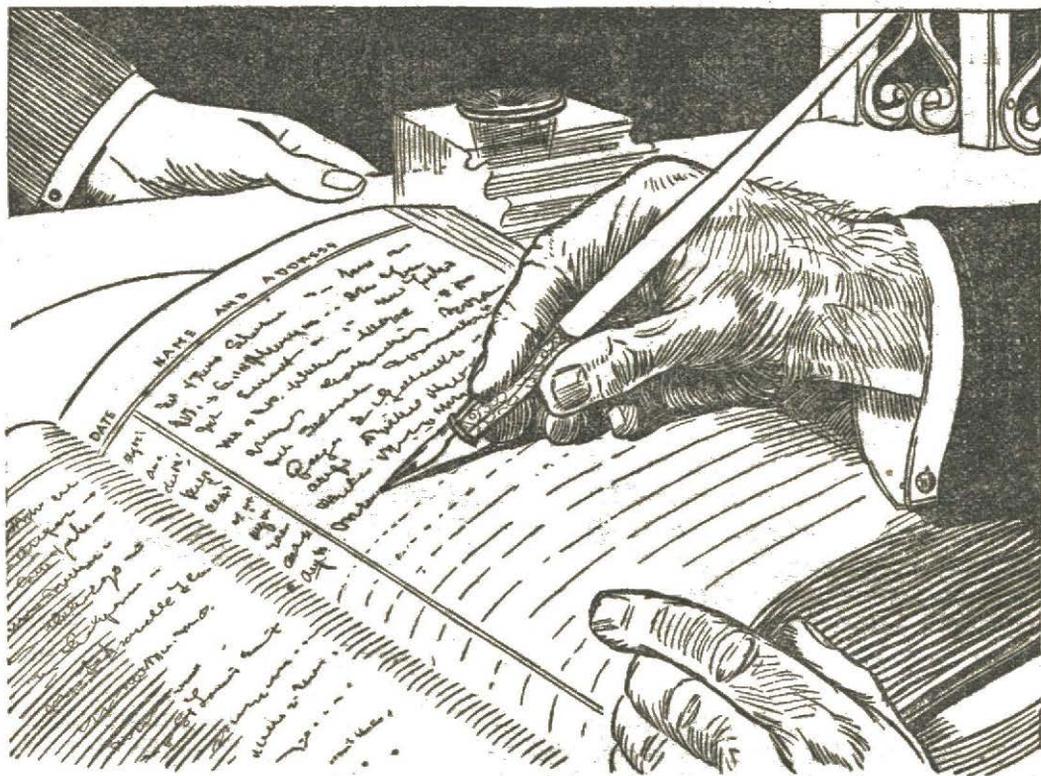
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A moving and powerful novel about two brothers: Fred, a successful planter just returned from Indo-China; and George, a young wastrel engaged in counterfeiting with a gang for whom he is destined to be the fall guy. When Federal authorities close in, the young man is "murdered" and spirited away to the tropics, where his brother gives him his chance to make good. What happens when a counterfeit bill turns up at a Caribbean port? With what success does an asphalt detective make his way through jungle fastnesses on the trail of the "murderer" and the counterfeiter? Why does a tribe of savage Indians stake the detective to its ancient altar as an offering to jungle insects and poisonous snakes? How does George, making his get-away to rejoin his gang, prove his right to be called a man?

YOU MUST NOT MISS THIS NOVEL



If you think a guy's on Easy Street, look at his

HANDS

By Frederick Nebel

FITCH, the house officer, had stopped and put his hand on the doorknob. Perspiration glistened on his chubby face and his eyes were mournful orbs. He swung the door inward, retained his grip on the knob, and pressed his body back against the panel so that Ivers and Cassidy could enter.

A small rooster of a man with a lofty red nose began spouting immediately. "Inspector Ivers, this occasion is a most regrettable one. I will say that during the twelve years I have been manager of this hotel

nothing of this sort—nothing, sir—has ever threatened the high standard of respectability which was inaugurated at the hotel's inception, and which I have diligently endeavored to maintain as zealously as my own personal character and deportment. It is so extraordinary, so complete a shock, that——"

"Mr. Prouty, I believe," Ivers said. He lifted his chin toward uniformed Sergeant Gross. "Hello, Gross. Where's the body?"

Gross swung a sidelong glance into the adjoining bedroom.

Prouty spluttered, "This is trag-

edy for the hotel, for me! Never during my twelve years as manager, has such a——”

“Doctor was called, I suppose,” Ivers asked.

Prouty’s pince-nez shook and flashed.

Fitch said hoarsely, “One of the house doctors—Doctor Albion. He had to leave for a regular patient in the hotel, but he said he’d shoot back if you want him.”

“What’d he say?”

“It looked like—well, heart failure or something, offhand, he said.”

“Yeah, that’s what *he* said,” Gross intoned heavily.

Ivers went past Gross saying, “What’s eating you, sergeant?”

“Pike the stuff I laid on the desk there.”

“Hey, Ben,” Cassidy called.

Ivers went into the bedroom, unbuttoned his overcoat and knelt down beside Cassidy.

“Funny hands,” Cassidy said.

“Why?”

“For a guy living in a swank apartment like this.”

“Yeah,” Ivers nodded. “I see. These hands have seen hard labor, huh?”

“And not in the long, long ago. Shoes are new. Look at ’em: still clean on the arches. The guy’s all skin and bones, too. Look at this inside his coat collar: size, and lot, and price tag still on it.”

Ivers looked up. “How long has this man lived here, Fitch?”

“A week to-day.”

“Know anything about him?”

“No. Adams down at the desk said he had a kinda Dutch accent. And he had all his meals sent up. Pio, the waiter, served him, said he always looked sick.”

“Where’d he come from?”

“We don’t know.”

“Got a register, haven’t you?”

“He just signed himself ‘John Meyer, City.’”

“Who found the body?”

“Well—I did. That is, I was called up. Pio brought a meal up at six, but he couldn’t get in, so he told the head steward and the steward called me. I got a house key and busted in and—and there he was, like he is now.”

Ivers rose, said, “You called us, Fitch. What makes you think this isn’t death from natural causes?”

“It was Sergeant Gross got suspicious.”

Prouty bristled in Ivers’s path. “Inspector, I take your man’s attitude as an insult——”

“Please.” Ivers went around Prouty and asked, “What’s the matter here, Gross?”

Gross jerked a red thumb toward the living room. “On the desk, inspector. Lamp it.”

I V E R S strode into the living room, picked up a chair, and thumped it down in front of a desk. In an orderly row on the writing leaf were a pocket comb in a leather case, a half-empty box of Egyptian cigarettes, a small cardboard box, a long sand-colored envelope with the hotel’s name in the upper left-hand corner, and a man’s gold ring set with a ruby.

Gross was pointing. “The ring there, the butts, and the comb were in the stiff’s clothes. There ain’t nothin’ else. There ain’t no identification in the whole shebang. The little box there was on the floor by the guy and so was that envelope. There’s a thousand bucks in it.”

“Who’s Doctor Kinnard? It says on this box——”

“One o’ the hotel doctors.”

“Where is he?”

“He went out, I guess. Doctor Albion handled this hurry call.”

"This box contained——"

"That," said Prouty behind Ivers, "is nothing. That box contained a simple and harmless headache remedy."

"I see." Ivers laid down the empty box, picked up the envelope. "And this contains a thousand dollars. What's your theory, Gross?"

"Hell, inspector, I got no theory. I just seen the guy cold on the floor and that empty box and the thousand bucks, and I begin to think maybe there's somethin' ain't on the up and up."

Ivers tipped the chair up on one leg, swiveled it and brought it down to face Prouty and Fitch. "I get it. You gentlemen are all in a sweat because you think maybe Doctor Kinnard had something to do with this."

Prouty jerked his head back. "Nothing of the sort."

"I understand." Ivers held up his palms, cracked a wry, tight smile. "Prestige of the hotel. Naturally. Well, that may be swell for you, but—— Hey, Cass, buzz the district attorney's. They may want to take a look at this. Buzz the morgue, too, and get the medical examiner over here. Now, when, Mr. Prouty, did Doctor Kinnard last visit this man?"

Prouty spluttered, "Do you mean to stand there and tell me——"

"I mean to stand here and tell you that I think you're beating about the bush. You, Fitch, maybe you know."

"Uh—he was in here——" Fitch's harried look swung to Prouty, swung back to Ivers. "He was in here half an hour before Pio, the waiter, brought up the food. Pio came in at half past five to get Meyer's order. He always came in at half past five. Well, he came in at half past five and Doctor Kinnard was here."

Ivers put a dark level stare on Prouty while saying to Fitch, "Thanks."

Prouty opened his mouth twice, but said nothing.

AT nine o'clock next morning Ivers entered his office, bringing with him a breath of the cold outdoors. He slipped a hanger into his overcoat, looped it on a three-pronged rack, and set his gray Homburg on top. He opened a window a matter of six inches, went toward his flat-topped desk rubbing his palms together briskly and wearing a fixed meditative stare.

Tufts, his clerk, looked in and said, "District Attorney Cochrane."

"Shoo him in."

Homer Cochrane was a large-bodied man whose overhanging paunch swung heavily from side to side as he came in through the open doorway. "Good morning, good morning, Ben. Lovely, lovely weather we're having." His voice was high and honey-smooth, and flowed from a small mouth smiling in a huge pink-cheeked face.

"Have a seat, Homer," Ivers said shortly.

"No, thanks; thanks, no. I shan't be but a few moments. I know that the duties of the head of the detective division do not permit of casual interruptions. About this hotel case, Ben. I was sorry I could not get around last night, but I was guest of honor at the Fifty-five Club, and I find it necessary sometimes as a public servant to bow to the overtures of society."

"You can look over my own report. The chief has it."

"Yes, yes. Thanks so much." Cochrane's oily voice dovetailed smoothly into a beneficent tenor. "How unfortunate, how very, very unfortunate. I hope, my dear Ben,

you haven't given anything to the press as yet."

"Nothing."

Cochrane's voice bounded with optimism. "Excellent, excellent! Doctor Kinnard spoke with me over the telephone this morning and gave me the details, and I assured him that you were the soul of tact and understanding. I also spoke with Mr. Prouty, the manager, and reassured him along similar lines."

Ivers cut in, "I wouldn't go too far reassuring people. This case has a dirty twist I don't like, and I'm waiting for Kinnard now."

"Surely you entertain no doubt of his sincerity. Why, Ben, Rush Kinnard is a member of all the clubs to which I also belong, and——"

"You carry a large financial interest in the hotel company. I get you, Homer. I get you exactly."

Cochrane smiled benignly, spread his broad pink palms: "After all, Ben, we are all one big family: the district attorney's office, the police department. True, I have a certain interest in the hotel company, but I am primarily concerned with the welfare and the good professional name of Rush Kinnard. A splendid, a dashing fellow with a great career before him. You wouldn't go out of your way to raise this mediocre case to unwarranted heights and involve my good friend in a web of unfortunate circumstances, would you, Ben?"

"Go out of my way?" Ivers tossed a letter into a wire basket marked "Out" and chopped off a short laugh. "Man, this case walked right up and smacked me in the face. No, sir, Homer! The circumstances under which John Meyer's death occurred demand I dig down. And when I dig, I dig."

Cochrane chided softly, "Ben—don't be the everlasting stormy

petrel. Who is John Meyer? Not one iota of identification as to whence he came, whither he was bound."

"That," Ivers clipped, pointing a pencil, "is just what interests me: Who is John Meyer? Nothing doing, Homer. This case isn't going to be pigeonholed and you can stand there and talk yourself blue in the face, and it still won't be pigeonholed."

Cochrane made his small mouth smaller, thinner. "I am asking, Ben, a favor."

"I knew that when you came in here. You're asking me to chuck over what I think's a case, and I'm telling you that you're up the wrong alley. I'm no politician, Homer. I'm a cop. And therein lies the difference between you and me."

"You're stubborn, Ben," Cochrane flared.

"If that's all, Homer, I'll be seeing you again sometime."

Cochrane pursed his lips, turned. His overhanging paunch swayed from side to side as he strode out.

THE telephone bell rang and Ivers grabbed it. "Hello, Musgrave. . . . Yes, I remember it. What about it? . . . The hell you say! . . . Well, notify Everaugh and tell him to come down and identify it."

He smacked the receiver onto the prongs: lifted it and called the chief. "That ring we found on Meyer, chief. . . . It corresponds with the description of the one was stolen along with ten thousand in cash and personal papers, two weeks ago from Mark Everaugh, 810 Windemere. . . . Yeah, I told Musgrave to notify him."

He hung up.

"Doctor Kinnard," said Tufts from the doorway.

"Send him in."

Kinnard was tall and young. He came in briskly, the collar of his ulster turned up around his neck. He was a handsome man, high strung, with wiry eyebrows and a tawny mane of hair that bunched thickly over each ear.

"I'm sorry I was not at the hotel last night when John Meyer was found dead."

Ivers tapped his chin with a pencil. "Sit down, doctor."

Kinnard took the chair opposite Ivers.

"Now, doctor"—Ivers planted his elbows on the desk, held the pencil erect—"what was the matter with Meyer?"

Kinnard had nimble lips. "He complained of a frightful headache. He was not a well man physically. Undoubtedly he was a consumptive, and not in the early stages. And his heart was pretty bad."

"How many tablets did you give him?"

"Six. I prescribed one immediately and one every hour until the pain should stop."

"You gave him these at about five thirty last night?"

"Yes."

"The box was empty, doctor, when we found it."

"Sometimes, if a pain is severe, a man may lose his head and ignore instructions."

"That number—would six tablets taken at once have a fatal effect?"

"Most certainly not."

"Ever attend him before?"

"No."

"Ever see him before?"

"No."

The pencil rose and came down sharply to the horizontal. "I want the truth, doctor."

"I'm telling you the truth."

Ivers leaned back and held the

pencil between two forefingers, looked over it with narrowed eyes. "You realize, I suppose, that it's only your say-so we have that the box contained completely harmless tablets."

"Why should I say so if it hadn't?"

"I don't know—yet."

The nimble lips snapped over even teeth. "It seems to me that you're trying your damndest to make a mountain out of a molehill!"

"You let me be the judge of that." Ivers tossed the pencil to the desk, growled. "Don't be a fool! Out of a clear sky comes a man named John Meyer. He dies. Beside him is an empty box with your name on it and an envelope containing a thousand dollars. We can't find you any—"

"I went to dinner and the theater, and a night club afterward. If it's an alibi you want, that's simple."

Ivers said, "I've ordered an autopsy, of course."

Kinnard's lips tightened and a shadow flicked his eyes. "Of course," he said. "Naturally."

Ivers rose. "That will be all for the present, doctor. I expect you to stay in the city. Thanks for coming down."

"Don't mention it," Kinnard said tartly.

THE Municipal Free Barracks, on the East Side, were two warehouses leased by the city and furnished with two thousand folding canvas cots that each night supported the bones of the homeless and destitute.

Ivers dropped out of the police automobile, entered a door, and climbed a flight of wooden stairs to an office at the top. A red-faced chubby man in vest and shirt sleeves looked up from a roll-top desk

through a cloud of smoke issuing from a corn cob pipe.

"Well, inspector!"

Ivers kicked the door shut. "Hello, Rafferty. I've been to practically every dump in the city and now I'm here." He slapped a photograph of John Meyer on the desk. "Take a look at that, Rafferty."

"This guy looks dead."

"It was taken at the morgue last night. Ever see him?"

"Think I have."

"What's the guy's name it looks like?"

"Schwartz. They used to call him Dutchy Schwartz. He was on his uppers, poor guy. A lot of things the matter with him. He useter threaten to bust a bank or somethin'. He'd been out of work for six years, except odd jobs like shovelin' snow or diggin' ditches or maybe choppin' wood. Left a frau and a gang o' kids somewhere in Germany. He was a harness maker, and imagine a guy with a trade like that in these here days. Croaked, huh?"

"Yeah."

"I was speakin' to a guy named Joey Fink just tother day. Him and Dutchy used to sleep side by side, one watchin' the other on and off so's nobody'd swipe their duds. It's gettin' terrible here, inspector. The boys are sleepin' with everything on, even shoes now, and, by Jiminy, if one night last week a guy didn't have his shoes swiped right off his feet. Charity! Yeah—and a lot o' boloney chucked in with it. Y' know"—Rafferty leaned back—"when you asked me about Dutchy I thought, well, Dutchy went and took a bank after all."

"This other man, Rafferty, this what's-his-name—"

"Joey Fink?"

"Uhuh. Where could I locate him?"

"Oh, he gets around here pretty regular. Sometimes he flops on the Army, but we see him two or three nights a week."

"Look here, Rafferty. Get hold of him as soon as you can and send him over to headquarters."

"Sure thing."

"Thanks," Ivers said, and opened the door. "Hard winter, eh, Rafferty?"

"Ask me, brother. I know!"

When Ivers got back to headquarters Tufts said, "There's a Mr. Everaugh came to see you, inspector. I put him in your office."

Everaugh rose when Ivers entered and said, "I didn't mean to disturb you, inspector, but—"

"Bosh! Glad to have you drop in. Take a seat."

"I want to thank you, inspector, for having recovered my ring. It is an old and valued keepsake."

Ivers turned, slapping cold hands together. "I'm glad you got it back. It was quite an accident, and according to the report you made two weeks ago there were some personal papers and ten thousand in cash stolen at the same time. I've got a man on the job now looking for the rest of the loot."

"Thank you."

Everaugh had not sat down. He was a tall spare-boned man of fifty-odd with a high, narrow forehead from which hair the color of cigarette ash grew crisply backward. A clipped mustache followed the straight line of his upper lip. His gray eyes were keen, and he had a military bearing carried out by broad, erect shoulders and a straight back.

Ivers dropped into his chair and lighted a long cigar. "Let's see—your house was entered through a French window off the library. You and your wife were at the theater

and the two servants had been dismissed for the night. The small japanned box containing the money, the ring, and the papers was in your library desk under lock and key. The drawer was unlocked by the thief, the box forced open and cleaned out."

"Yes; exactly. There'd been a rumor of a run on the bank, and I withdrew ten thousand dollars merely as a safeguard, so that my cash would not be tied up. I intended keeping it in the house only until the scare died down."

"These personal papers, Mr. Everaugh; what were they?"

Everaugh covered a slight clearing of the throat with a bony hand. "If you don't mind, inspector, I'd rather not divulge their contents unless necessary."

"That's O. K. by me, but as we may regain the rest of the loot you'll have to identify them in order to claim them. You can rest assured that anything of an embarrassing personal nature will be kept secret by me unless I have to use it as evidence."

"I should prefer waiting, then, until such a time. I'd rather not describe the contents unless I have to. The very personal angle of those letters is of no value to any one but myself. So if you will pardon me I——"

Ivers shrugged his shoulders, said, "Of course."

"Thank you again. And good day, inspector."

As the door closed behind Everaugh the telephone on the desk rang and Ivers, still staring curiously at the door, picked up the instrument and said, "Ivers talking. . . . Yeah, Coghill; it's about time you decided to call up. . . . What about it? . . . You're sure of that, eh? . . . Swell!"

DILLON braked the car at the entrance to the hotel, and Ivers stretched his legs on the way to the hotel entrance. He pushed through the revolving doors and headed toward the lounge.

Cassidy was coming from the elevator bank, and when they met he said:

"Going places, Ben?"

"And maybe doing things. What about the apartment?"

"There was no more dough bunked there. But get this: the stationery in all those transient apartments is white. Fitch told me. Well, the stationery on the residential side—the Annex—is kind of tan. Like the envelope with the dough in it. Kinnard lives on the residential side."

"That's an idea. Get going, Cass. I'll meet you in the car."

Ivers went on through the lounge. He passed the elevator bank, turned right and walked down a corridor until he came to a door bearing two brass name plates. He knocked and a girl in a white uniform opened the door.

"I want to see Doctor Kinnard," he said.

"He's not in at present. Doctor Albion, however——"

"No. I'm Inspector Ivers. D'you know where I can find Kinnard?"

"He stepped out to lunch. He'll be back directly, and if you will leave a message——"

"Tell him to come to police headquarters right away."

The girl said, "Yes, I'll tell him," and Ivers turned and strode back to the lobby. Going out through the revolving door, he caught a glimpse of Kinnard entering in another of the four compartments. Ivers went around with the door, back into the lobby, and caught Kinnard by the elbow.

"Doctor——"

Kinnard stopped and faced about. "I'd like you at headquarters," Ivers said.

"The autopsy?"

"Yes."

Kinnard's smile did not come easily, but he said, "Why, yes, of course."

They crossed the sidewalk and entered the police car.

Kinnard took off his hat, ran his hand back through his tawny mane of hair. His voice shook. "What did they say?"

"Poison. I haven't the full report yet. Bad news, huh?"

"Yes," said Kinnard, "it sounds like bad news." His voice was far away, but suddenly it burst out close to Ivers's ear. "But it's ridiculous! Those tablets——"

"I know, I know about those tablets. You say they were harmless, but the autopsy says different. I'd like to believe you, doctor, but what the hell?" Ivers warped his glance toward Kinnard without turning his head. "Mistake maybe?"

"Nonsense! Utter nonsense! I never make mistakes!"

Cassidy had twisted around in his seat and was thrusting an arm backward. "Here, Ben."

"What's this?"

"I got a friend at the bank. I just remembered."

Ivers took a slip of paper from Cassidy's fingers, unfolded it, and read:

On Nov. 10 Kinnard drew \$1,000 in cash from the West Side Mercantile Trust.

KINNARD'S tawny mane of hair was disheveled. His large, long-fingered hands gripped the arms of the chair in which he sat, his shoulders were pressed hard against the back.

Ivers sat on the edge of the desk,

one leg swinging, the other doubled up with his fingers interlocked around the knee. "This is murder, man! You can protest all you want. You can tell me you're the swellest physician in this city and a dozen others. It still remains a fact that John Meyer was poisoned. I don't care if he was a nobody. I don't care who he was. A life's a life and murder's murder."

"Circumstances!" Kinnard panted. "Circumstances!"

"Circumstances warrant that I arrest you. Nine out of ten arrests are made on circumstances."

"I never killed that man! I——"

"You drew a thousand dollars from the bank. It happens that you drew it on the day John Meyer died. Maybe that's coincidence. The money was found in an envelope that came from the Annex side of the hotel. Maybe *that's* coincidence. But I'd like to see anybody try to make me believe it."

Kinnard caught his breath, pressed his body harder against the back of the chair.

Ivers swiveled around and planted both feet on the floor. He leaned forward and tapped Kinnard's knee. "Doctor, you gave Meyer a thousand dollars. Why?"

Kinnard whipped breathlessly to his feet and cried, "What a dirty, contemptible business you're in, persecuting a man——"

Ivers was up straight and eye to eye with him. "Now why did you give John Meyer a thousand dollars?"

Kinnard stepped back. "All right. I'll tell you. I did give Meyer a thousand dollars."

Cassidy turned from the window. "What for?" Ivers clipped, crowding Kinnard.

"Letters."

"Go on."

"Unfortunate letters. Letters I once wrote to a girl. The letters—she sold them to a man. Meyer stole the letters from the man. I gave him a thousand dollars for the letters."

"And poisoned him so there'd never be a comeback!"

"I didn't. Meyer robbed the house one night on his own, and in the loot he stole were these letters. One of them was written on my stationery. He approached me. He said maybe they would interest me. I bought them."

"Where did this robbery take place?"

"At the house of a man named Mark Everaugh."

"And do you mean to stand there and tell me it was coincidence again when Meyer robbed that house on his own initiative and then approached you with the letters—your letters?"

"Call it what you want."

"I know what to call it—a confounded lie! You sent Meyer to rob that house!"

Kinnard's voice grated, "I didn't! I did not!"

"What interest had Mr. Everaugh in these letters?"

Kinnard slumped back to the chair, groaned and held his head in his hands. "I had been in love with his wife. He told me that if I ever took her from him he would use those letters to ruin me professionally."

"So you hired Meyer to steal the letters and forestall that. Cass, get Kinnard a drink."

TUFTS knocked, opened the door, and said, "There's a goofy-looking guy out here wants to see you. His name's Fink."

Ivers went out of the office and closed the door behind him. A

bearded spectre of a man stood in the outer office ducking his head politely and staring with round, frightened eyes.

"You knew Dutchy Schwartz, didn't you?"

"Y-yes, sir."

"All right. Sit down, sit down. Nobody's going to hurt you, Fink. D' he ever tell you he felt like robbing a house?"

"Well, just talkin' like a guy will when he's down and out, inspector. Y' see, Dutchy he had a wife and kids back in the old country. He couldn't do for 'em. And he was a worryin' kinda guy and it always worried him. And he was sick most o' the time. Once a photygrapher from the newspaper came to the flop and took pictures, and he took Dutchy's because Dutchy said he'd take any guy's place in the 'lectric chair for a thousand bucks to send his family. Well, the newspaper printed it and his mug and we all kinda kidded him about it. Though he was really serious."

"When did this appear?"

"'Bout two weeks ago."

"And when did you last see Dutchy around the flophouse?"

"Let's see. Well, I figger about ten days ago. But the day before that he got a letter from home. It was in German, so he read it out loud to me. And one of his kids needed an operation bad. And the same time he got another letter, but he don't let me read it. And then he vamosed."

"And that's the last you saw of him?"

"Well, no. It's about three days after that I see him again. But I hardly recognize him. He's dressed up in a Sunday-go-to-meetin' suit. I ain't sure it's him yet, so I foller him, thinkin' if he struck it rich I could mooch a buck off him. It's a

lot of traffic, though, and I have a hard time keepin' sight of him.

"And then what? Why, then suddenly he meets a guy on the corner o' Central Avenue and Sixth Street. He don't stop, but I can see the guy fall in step with him. So I stop. Hell, I ain't the guy to disgrace a pal, me bein' in rags and all."

"Would you recognize the man if you saw him again?"

"Me? Sure!"

IVERS came into Everaugh's library nonchalantly. He paused to turn and close the door, then swung about again and strode across to the desk at which Everaugh was sitting.

Everaugh rose, bowed stiffly, sat down again, saying, "Do be seated, inspector."

"I must ask you over to headquarters," Ivers said.

"Dinner's at seven. If you are aluding to the property that was stolen I'll be happy to come down in the morning."

"This is urgent, Mr. Everaugh. It can't wait till morning."

"May I ask why?"

"I'm trying to find out the man another man saw walking down Central Avenue with Schwartz, alias John Meyer. He was the man we found your ring on. He also stole letters from you. We know the contents of those letters."

Everaugh sighed. "I'm sorry, inspector. I had hoped it would be unnecessary to reveal the intimate correspondence of Doctor Kinnard."

"I've a car outside waiting."

Everaugh squared his shoulders, said, "So be it," and rose. "I'll get my coat and go there with you directly."

Ivers put his hand on the telephone, lifted it. "You'd better get in touch with your lawyer," he said.

GENTLEMEN of the press —" The desk lamp glowed warmly on Ivers's palm-downward hands and the inch of starched white cuff protruding from each blue sleeve of his suit.

"His real name was Gustav Schwartz," Ivers said, "a saddle maker from Munich, Germany. You'll remember his picture in a recent issue of the *Mail* and his statement that accompanied it. This was considered a joke. A lot of wise-aces kidded Schwartz; none knew he was really in earnest and that he was ready to sacrifice his own life so that his family could get sustenance.

"One man didn't think he was kidding. That man dropped him a note at the flophouse. He signed no name. He just wrote, 'Meet me at the corner of Central Avenue and Sixth Street this Wednesday night, at nine p. m. I will carry a silver-knobbed cane. This will be to your advantage. Tell no one.' At nine that night Gustav Schwartz met Mark Everaugh."

"The rubber goods man?"

"Yes. Schwartz at first refused to accept Everaugh's proposal. But finally he was won over when Everaugh raised the ante to ten thousand dollars. Another man would have taken the cash and lammed. But Schwartz must have had a twisted streak of honesty in him. He did what he was paid to do. Everaugh laid the plans. He gave Schwartz ten thousand dollars and Schwartz sent it off to Germany.

"He put up at a swell hotel. He had three hundred to spend on himself. He had directions. The day before his death he telephoned Doctor Kinnard, who came to his apartment, and Schwartz, acting under directions given by Everaugh, told Kinnard he had crashed Everaugh's

house, stolen money and some jewels, and incidentally some letters. Kinnard recognized the letters. Schwartz asked a thousand dollars. Everaugh'd bought them from a woman to use against the doctor. And why?

"Well, Kinnard and Mrs. Everaugh—she's young—were in love. Everaugh knew it and threatened to use the letters if she ran away with the doctor; which, by the way, she'd threatened to do more than once. Everaugh's threat held good for a while, but gradually he saw that it was waning and that his wife was drawing away from him. He took it into his head to get rid of Kinnard, and his idea of revenge was to have Kinnard pull a life sentence in jail.

"He had a swell idea. A knock-out. When Kinnard returned to Schwartz's apartment with the thousand bucks it was half past five. Schwartz had set that time so that Kinnard'd be there when the waiter came in for the dinner order. He complained of an awful headache and asked for a remedy and Kinnard gave him some tablets. When Kinnard left with the letters Schwartz, still carrying out Everaugh's instructions, took all the tablets and a dose of poison Everaugh had supplied him with two days before. When the waiter returned at six with the meal he couldn't get in. He

got the house officer. They found Schwartz dead."

"Can you tie that!" a reporter exclaimed.

Ivers said, "It's a lulu. Everything was built up logically to chuck suspicion against Kinnard. Two weeks before the death Everaugh reported that ten thousand bucks, a ring, and some personal papers had been stolen. Cute? The ten thousand wasn't stolen. It went to Germany. The ring came back to Everaugh and implicated Kinnard stronger than ever. Everything jibed. I was ready to swear that Kinnard was guilty, but if any of you print that I'll take a poke at you."

A reporter asked, "But what do you think really helped you turn this trick, inspector?"

"The hands," Ivers said. "Cassidy called my attention to Schwartz's hands. They were rough, calloused, unkempt. Not the hands of a guy on Easy Street. And Sergeant Gross helped. He was the first to get suspicious of the circumstances under which the body was found. And a guy named Joey Fink. Put him first. He was Schwartz's pal."

"How about a picture?" a cameraman called.

"Nix. A kidnap case just came in and I'll probably be up all night. Come on, gang, shove off. Beat it!"

In the next Complete

a novelette by

KENNETH KEITH COLVIN

HOUSE OF THE STRANGERS

Ivory means death on African jungle trails. This trail leads to the guest house of a savage tribe, a strange house that contained an ominous secret, and foes of the witch doctor slept there only once!

If a man can't
shoot, he can't be
a gunman.



GUN KINSMEN

By Forbes Parkhill

VANCE HONSEN was too busy building up his little cow outfit to take any part in the range feud between the big Cross L and 4T Ranches. He was in his thirties, and had a wife and a six-year-old daughter to hold him steady. Folks liked him. He needed the money which the part-time job as deputy sheriff paid—eight to

twenty dollars a month on a fee basis.

These were some of the reasons why the sheriff had appointed him deputy in the remote end of Pioche County, which was some ninety miles from the county seat. The Cross L and the 4T were always slapping lawsuits on each other, due to their range feud, and the sheriff couldn't bother to send a regular

deputy ninety miles just to serve the papers.

It was handier to appoint a resident deputy, mail him the papers, and pay him service fees. It wasn't good politics to take sides in the range feud by naming one of the quarreling ranchmen deputy, so Vance Honsen was picked. Because the sheriff requested it, the forest service let Vance cut in on the telephone line to the ranger station, so he could get emergency calls.

But until the range feud flared forth with the killing at Thompson Siding, Vance had received but two emergency calls. Vance was just finishing breakfast when one short and two long rings told him he was wanted at the telephone.

Holding the receiver to his ear, with an elbow braced against the log wall of the living room, he said, "Yeah," about a dozen times, and rubbed the peeling skin from his nose. His complexion was very fair and wouldn't take a tan, and his skin was forever red and peeling.

"Shucks, mom," he said to his wife, as he replaced the receiver and hitched up his pants. "Storekeeper says they's some kind of a fuss over at the Siding, and I got to traipse over and fix it up. And me figgering to change the salting grounds this morning!"

"Now, you be careful, Vance," said the missus, with a worried glance at her strapping husband as he buckled on his cartridge belt. The missus was little, and wiry, and nervous, and chipper, like a sparrow. She was thirty-odd, and even in her apron was still almighty pretty in spite of eight years at hard kitchen labor, helping her man build up his outfit.

"Shucks!" was all that Vance replied, grinning. He didn't tell her

there had been a killing at the Siding. What a body didn't know didn't hurt 'em. He grabbed his six-year-old daughter by both her beribboned pigtailed and with awkward gentleness tilted up her chubby face.

"Lookit here, Honsen," he told the kid with mock ferociousness, "you mind your mom, now, or I 'low I'll paddle you when I get home!"

She knew well enough his ferociousness was all make-believe, and she showed it with a grin. The kid had been christened Shirley, which was a name the missus got out of a book. Vance didn't like the name, and wouldn't use it, but always called her by her last name, which distressed her mom exceedingly. Twice a day he threatened to paddle her if she didn't mind, but he hadn't gotten around to it, yet.

OUTSIDE, Vance swung into the saddle on Bryan, his silver gelding, and took off across the flats toward the Siding. Pretty soon he turned in the saddle, bracing himself with his right hand on Bryan's rump, and looked back. It always gave him a heap of satisfaction to look over his little place.

That four-room log house wasn't much, alongside the huge buildings of the Cross L or the 4T. But he'd built it himself, every lick. He wasn't the kind to let his missus and kid live in a soddy—stout, seasoned pine logs, and with a shingle roof!

The barn, the corrals, the fences—he'd built 'em all, unaided. He'd dragged the sagebrush off that patch with a team hitched to a railroad rail, and dug the irrigating ditch from the creek, and now it was mom's garden patch.

Vance looked at his hands. Ten years ago, when he'd been riding for the big outfits down Yampa way,

there hadn't been any callouses on those hands. Soft as a woman's, as a cowboy's should be. A cowhand would see himself somewhere else before he'd build fences, or pitch hay, or disgrace himself by milking a cow.

Calloused hands don't make for quick shooting. Now that Vance was called upon to settle up a gun fuss, he wondered how much of his skill with a .45 remained. In the old days, there wasn't a man in the Yampa country he couldn't shade.

He still packed a gun, not because he was a deputy, but because a gun is a tool of the cowman's trade. He needs it to kill rattlers, or, sometimes, to put a leg-busted steer out of its misery. He remembered now that he hadn't fired his revolver for weeks.

There had been a time when he was almighty proud of his skill with a .45, and had used up a box of shells a day, practicing. Once he had signed up in a range war, drawing double wages because of his excellence as a gun wrangler. There had been an all-day battle, with lots of excitement and glory while it lasted.

There wasn't much glory about digging post holes. But then, after the fence was built, you *had* something. And, building a line fence was a heap of satisfaction, when you're building it for your own self. More satisfaction than when you hired some one else to build it, anyway. To Vance, his line fence had become something more than so many stout posts and so many spools of wire. It was a symbol of accomplishment.

VANCE found a crowd in front of the general store at Thompson Siding. The store, with a raised platform across the front and a tie rail at the side,

was the most imposing of the score of buildings which made up the town, which had grown up about the loading pens at the railroad siding.

"Howdy, Vance," called Duke Schester, big, bluff, and beefy, and the owner of the 4T. He advanced toward the tie rail, where the deputy was dismounting. "One of them Cross L hands tried to kill one of my boys, name of Sweetwater. Sweetwater shaded him. Clear case of self-defense. Ask anybody. Ask Squint Cale, hisself. Have a cigar?"

"No, thanks, Duke." Vance hitched up his pants. He singled out the owner of the Cross L, a lanky individual with a stringy tobacco-stained mustache, slouching on the store platform.

"How about it, Squint?" asked Vance.

The owner of the Cross L shrugged.

"Duke's talking true, Vance. That's about the size of *this* case, I reckon."

Vance frowned and rubbed a bit of peeling skin from his sunburned nose. He didn't like the way Squint emphasized the word, "this." It portended trouble. Vance knew both these ranchmen. Bitter enemies, always feuding. This killing might have been the spark in the powder barrel, starting another day-long battle between the two crews, such as the one in which Vance himself had participated, years before. And yet, somehow, it had missed fire.

"Duke" Schester and "Squint" Cale had been waiting here an hour, maybe, with members of their crews. An outsider wouldn't have spotted them as enemies. Neither was the kind to rant. Vance asked if any one else wanted to spill another version of the shooting. None did.

"Where's this Sweetwater who did the killing?" he asked Duke. He'd

heard of Sweetwater—a kid gunman, reputed to be lightning on the draw, imported recently by Duke as a sort of ace in the hole in his feud with the Cross L.

"He's setting inside the store, Vance, waiting to tell you his story. C'mon."

Sweetwater was in the storekeeper's office, tilted back in a chair, spurred heels on the desk, reading the *Record-Stockman*. He was a redhead, and his hair was curly. Vance got the shock when the youngster swung around in the chair, grinning, and said:

"Hello, Vance. Long time no see yuh. Been meaning to drop in on yuh. How's tricks?"

Vance stood and rubbed his nose vigorously and stared. Finally:

"Howdy, Bud. What sort of devilment you been getting into? Tell me about it." An instant later he added, as if in warning: "I'm deputy sheriff, you know."

"So I hear, Vance." The young gunman drew forth the makin's and began to build himself a cigarette. "'Twas this a way. Me and this Cross L boy got to auguring about one thing and another. He called me a dirty name, and I called him a dirty name. He reached for his gun, and then I reached for mine. And—well, yuh taught me to be almighty quick on the draw, Vance."

The deputy questioned everybody concerned, but at the end of half an hour learned of nothing indicating the shooting wasn't what the beefy 4T owner claimed it was: a clear-cut case of self-defense. When Squint, the victim's own boss, admitted it, there seemed no doubt remaining.

"Aw, shucks!" Vance announced finally. "I can't see any case against him."

"I had a hunch you'd see it that a way," remarked Duke, with a

chuckle. The chuckle irritated the deputy.

"Lookit here, Duke, you've got another guess coming if you think I'm turning him loose just 'cause he's my kid brother! If I figgered he was guilty, I'd slam him into jail just as quick as I would—well, you, or anybody."

"Sure, sure!" agreed the ranchman. "I know you would, Vance."

"Just so nobody else will figger I'm showing him favors 'cause he's my brother, I'm going to take him back home with me, and phone the sheriff. I'll let him decide whether to hold him. Duke, you and Squint take your boys and shove the Siding behind you, so they won't be any more gun play."

"Aw, say, Vance," protested the beefy Duke, "I got a jag of long yearlings down in the pens that got to be loaded. Me and my boys got some real business to 'tend to."

ON the way back to the ranch Vance and the kid brother whom he hadn't seen in years rode for some time in silence.

"Shucks!" said Vance at length. "I didn't know you was the gun slinger folks call 'Sweetwater,' Bud. How long you been gunning for a living, kid?"

"Two-three year, Vance. What yuh taught me about wrangling a gun has come in mighty handy. I don't guess they's anybody savvies as much about handling a six-gun as yuh, Vance. Less'n it's me."

"Been doing pretty well, Bud? Having lots of fun? Making plenty money?"

"Uh-huh. Cleaned up eighteen hundred dollars last summer. I don't guess yuh can beat that for easy money."

Vance rubbed his nose. His ranch hadn't shown that much net profit

in any single year since he'd started on his own.

"Got it salted down in the bank, Bud?"

His brother grinned sheepishly. "Figured I could build myself rich at chuck-a-luck. Lost every dime. But I'm drawing double wages. Don't guess I'm a top-hand speculator."

"How many notches you got on your gun, Bud?"

Bud reddened. "I don't notch it. Don't believe in it. Too much like bragging. But I could cut four, counting this'n to-day. And every one made his play first, so I done it legal. Thanks to the lightning draw yuh taught me."

"Shucks! Don't thank me, Bud. I'd liefer of started you on the whisky habit when you was in diapers, Bud."

"I don't guess I savvy what yuh mean, Vance."

"I mean, it's a rotten business, Bud. It's swell to make twice as much money as the boys that sweats for their wages. It makes you feel pretty big to know that everybody's scared of you, 'cause you're a dead-shot gun slinger. But shucks! It's a rotten game, Bud—rotten."

"What yuh trying to do? Sling a sermon into me?"

"Ain't a big brother got no rights, Bud? If he can't preach at you, who can? Listen, kid. Did you ever see a crack gunman with a beard?"

"No. But why—"

"Because they don't live long enough to grow one. That's why. They get killed off while they're young. Some one always comes along who's a mite faster. Either that, or they don't dast let tother feller draw first, and then—shucks! The law skids 'em through a gallows trap. I hate to think of you dangling at the end of a rope, Bud."

The youngster laughed easily. "I don't guess that'll ever happen to me, Vance. I'm gosh-awful careful."

"You got red hair, Bud. Redheads are quick on the trigger. Sometimes they go off half cocked. But that ain't all of it. What if the witnesses are all friends of tother feller, and swear he didn't draw first? I know a gun toter that was framed that a way. He was lucky. He dodged the noose, but he's spending the rest of his life behind them high gray walls at Rawlins."

"Forget it, Vance. I'm old enough to—"

"And another thing. You can hold your own in a fair fight. But fights ain't always fair. Gunmen like you are marked men. Don't think Squint has forgot to-day's killing. He's going to get even—if he can."

"I can take care of myself, Vance. What'd yuh have me do? Tuck my tail betwixt my legs and run?"

"I'd have you quit this gun game before it's too late, kid. Like I done. Settle down. Make something outa yourself." They had emerged upon the flats, from whence the buildings of his little ranch were visible.

"Yuh quit it," said Bud. "Where did it get you?"

With a sweep of his arm Vance indicated the layout. "That's what it got me. All mine. A iron of my own. Wife and kid. Money in the bank. Independent."

THE layout which Vance had built himself, and of which he was so proud, must have looked pretty mean and scrubby to his brother. Things don't look the same when they aren't the product of your own toil.

"Nice little place," agreed Bud pleasantly. "Yuh must 'a' worked like a dog, Vance. Yuh got money in the bank, but likely the bank holds

a note that keeps yuhr nose to the grindstone to meet the interest. Yuh're really working for the bank, Vance. Come a bad drouth or a panic, and the bank'll own this place, and yuh'll find yourself tossed out on yuhr ear, broke, all yuhr work gone for nothing, or to make some pale-faced banker richer. No, I don't guess I'm cut out for this kind of a life."

Vance heaved a sigh. "Lookit here, Bud. My place is getting too big to handle all by my lone. I got one hand working for me, but he's proud, and he won't lay a hand to anything that ain't riding. Leaves all the dirty work to me—his boss. Whyn't you sling in with me, Bud? I'll take your note for a third interest in the place, and you can pay me as you work it out. Maybe you'll find a nice girl to team up with, and you'll——"

"That's mighty swell of yuh, Vance. But I don't guess I'm the marrying kind; or the working kind. I make more money this a way, and I don't have to work. Maybeso in a coupla year I'll buy yuh out, and retire."

That last crack hurt. Vance shrugged. "Shucks! In a coupla year you won't be alive to buy anybody out, Bud. Lookit your set-up at the 4T. Your boss, Duke Schester, figgers that 'cause you're the brother of the deputy sheriff, you can get away with anything. He'll prod you on to do more of his dirty work, and then——"

"What d' yuh mean, dirty work?" flared Bud indignantly.

"Shucks! Don't try to kid me, Bud. I been in the gun game, and I know. You deliberately started that fuss with the Cross L boy, 'cause you knowed you could shade him to the draw. You knowed he didn't have a chanct again you, even

though he gave you a legal out by making first grab. You didn't play fair, kid. You knowed the deck was stacked in your favor."

Bud flushed angrily as they drew up at the log house. Vance's daughter ran out to meet them, lugging a puppy under one arm.

"This is your uncle Bud, Honsen," Vance told the child. "Say 'howdy' to your uncle, honey." But his daughter clung to his leg and hid behind him shyly, and refused to say a word.

"And this is the missus, Bud," Vance went on proudly, as his wife came to the door, her bare arms covered with flour. "My kid brother that I've told you so much about, mom. How about a snack to eat?"

Vance put in his call to the sheriff. As he expected, his superior told him it was useless to hold the gunman. Mom heard him make his report, and so learned what had happened. She stared at Bud in frightened silence as she prepared an early lunch, but he finally won her over by carrying water from the spring and making up with the child. As is the custom, Bud had hung his belt and gun upon a peg inside the door.

The brothers continued their argument during the meal, but Vance failed to persuade Bud to quit the gun game. Bud refused an invitation to stay overnight, saying that Duke needed him at the Siding to help load. This, Vance knew, was a stall, for a gun slinger isn't employed to do real work. When Bud strolled outside to take a look at his brother's place, Vance said to the missus:

"He's a swell kid, mom. But he's heading hellward, and it's all my fault. I blame myself 'cause I'm the one that taught him to shoot. Shucks! I wisht I knew how I could bring him to his senses."

"If he couldn't shoot, he wouldn't be a gunman," replied the missus with indisputable logic. "Why don't you take his gun away from him?"

"Shucks! He'd just get another," shrugged Vance as he went outside to join his brother.

The sight of Bud buckling on his gun belt as he prepared to depart left Vance mightily worried. He was afraid the Cross L boys would be laying for the young gunman who had killed their buddy. He wanted to keep Bud out of trouble, if he could, for he blamed himself for starting the kid on the career of a gun slinger. After milling it over for half an hour he worked himself up to such a pitch that he swung into the saddle and took out after him. He wanted to be on hand when Bud reached the Siding.

VANCE found the dusty street deserted and decided to inquire for Bud in the store. He dismounted at the tie rail at the side of the building, then heard the door slam. Just as he rounded the corner he saw Squint Cale, his spurs jingling as he headed toward the opposite end of the platform.

Vance was going to sing out and ask Squint if he'd seen Bud. Then he decided it would be unwise to tip the boss of the Cross L that the young gun slinger had come back to the Siding. He watched Squint descend the steps at the far end of the platform and vanish around the corner.

The very next instant the ranchman reappeared, backing around the corner, hands raised shoulder high. Vance heard him call:

"Don't shoot, Sweetwater! I——"

His terrified plea was cut short by the bark of a gun. Squint staggered backward, tearing at his shirt front with clawing hands. He tripped on

the lowest step and sprawled across the corner of the waist-high platform.

As Vance whipped out his gun and sped across the platform it flashed upon him that he was ten seconds too late. The owner of the Cross L had been shot down while his hands were in the air—cold-blooded murder!

Vance leaped across the sprawling body and down the steps, and at the corner collided with Bud with terrific force. The youngster's gun was in his hand, and he was cursing.

Vance had little time to think. He knew Bud was lightning fast with his .45. He didn't know but that the crazy fool might turn the gun upon him. He wasn't taking any chances. He didn't want to die. He didn't want to kill Bud. He brought the barrel of his heavy revolver crashing down upon the kid's skull.

Bud pitched forward, struck the steps, and rolled down just beneath the dead Squint, his gun falling in the dust at his side. The beefy Duke Schester came running around the corner of the store, gun drawn. He seemed startled to see Vance, but bawled out:

"Squint wished it on hisself, Vance! He was laying for the lad. He played for his gun first. Sweetwater beat him to it. Another case of self——"

"Shucks!" spat Vance, his voice drawn and tense. "Didn't I see it with my own eyes, Duke? Don't try to kid me."

"What you going to do about it?" Duke asked doubtfully.

"Do about it? They's just one thing to do. I'm deputy sheriff, ain't I?"

Bud groaned and stirred feebly. Duke said: "He's your own brother, Vance."

Vance rubbed his nose with his

left hand, nervously. "He killed Squint without giving him a show."

"A fine brother, *you* are! It'd tickle you to get a chanct to yank the rope that hangs him, wouldn't it? Your own kid brother!"

THE pit of Vance's stomach felt cold and roily. His peeling red face was splotched with white, but he didn't know it. Never in his life had he been faced with such a choice. Duke's words stung like the lash of a quirt. He flinched.

"He'll have to take his medicine, Duke. I warned him. He knowed what he was up against."

Bud was mumbling and groaning. His eyes were still closed, but one groping hand felt of his head. Said Duke:

"Nobody will hold it agin' you, Vance, if you look tother way while I take him away. I'll smuggle him across the border."

Vance groaned as loudly as the slowly reviving Bud. He was torn between terrifically impelling desires. He shook his head and gulped out: "Nope."

"Don't be crazy, Vance," urged the ranchman. "D'you want him hanged? 'Cause he shore will be if you arrest him. D'you want folks to point you out as the feller that hanged his own brother? D'you want 'em to shame your wife and your little girl by saying that they're kin to a hanged murderer?"

Vance's face was ghastly as he stared at the beefy ranchman. Bud opened his eyes and sat up, bracing himself with one arm on the ground. Duke went on:

"You say Squint didn't make a play for his gun. I reckon you didn't notice it very clost, did you? Didn't notice it's half outa the holster. Look!"

Vance didn't note the crafty ring in Duke's voice. He turned to peer at the dead ranchman. Suddenly he felt a gun jammed in his back. His own .45 was wrenched from his hand.

"I hate to do this, Vance," Duke was saying. "But if you ain't got any human feelings for your own blood kin, I reckon it's up to me to help the kid outa this jam."

He backed away from the disarmed deputy. Bud was struggling unsteadily to his feet. "C'mon, kid," said Duke. "Let's get going."

"Ain't you forgot something, Duke?" asked Vance quietly.

"What?" asked the 4T boss doubtfully.

"This!" cried Vance, diving for Bud's fallen gun.

It was years since Vance had shot it out with another man. His hands were calloused, his fingers clumsy. He didn't know how much of his old-time speed and accuracy he still possessed. He knew only that the confident Duke had lowered his own gun and had given him a chance.

Things happened so swiftly that even the watching storekeeper couldn't tell afterward exactly what took place. Bud, staggering to his feet alongside the body of Squint, had heard the tag end of the argument. Dazed as he was, he realized that his brother was bent upon holding him for the law, and that Duke was equally determined to rescue him.

Vance swept Bud's gun from the ground with a lightning-swift motion. Whatever speed the years had cost him, he was still far superior to Duke, who was just a fair hand with a gun. His finger squeezed the trigger while the weapon was still sweeping upward through the air, a sliced second before the startled Duke got his own gun leveled.

To Vance's consternation, the hammer clicked upon an empty chamber. The next instant the air was quivering with the crackling roar of a .45.

Vance realized that the beefy Duke was down on the ground. Bud was crouching by the side of his brother. From the muzzle of the six-gun in his hand a faint streamer of blue smoke floated languidly upward. With a motion so incredibly swift that it almost defied the eye to follow it, the young gunman had snatched the weapon from the holster of the dead Squint, and had turned it upon his boss!

"I couldn't let him plug yuh, Vance," Bud was saying thickly as he turned to his brother. "I don't guess I——"

Vance was dumfounded. The startling turn of events had left him all of a muddle, as dazed as Bud had been a few moments before. From the corner of his eyes he saw Duke roll over and raise his revolver.

He cried out in warning, and sprang toward the rancher. At his cry Bud leaped violently sidewise with the quickness of a cat. Before Vance could reach him Duke collapsed. Vance kicked the gun from his fingers, although he thought Duke now was dead. He whirled about to face his brother.

THE weapon had fallen from Bud's hand, which he was holding in front of him, examining curiously. It was badly mangled. Duke's bullet had passed from back to palm, shattering the bones leading from the wrist to the index and middle fingers.

"Funny," Bud was saying, as if he were puzzled. "Doesn't hurt a bit. Just feels sort of numb. Like my hand was asleep." He was squeezing his wrist with the other

hand to stop the flow of blood. The storekeeper bounced out on the platform, spouting questions like a geyser. Up and down the dusty street men had appeared as if from nowhere, and were running toward them. Vance was rubbing his peeling nose with his left hand.

"I can't get it through my head," he muttered. "I just can't get it through my head. Can you get it through your head, Bud? The way I seen it happen, it just don't make sense. Why did you——"

"Duke wanted me to pop Squint off," interrupted Bud absently, turning his crippled hand back and forth and examining it with a slightly bewildered expression. "Said he was in the store, and I could nail him as he come out. I didn't want to. Then Squint come round the corner, and Duke jabbed me quick and said 'Get him!'"

"I don't guess I kept my head very well. Went off half cocked, like yuh said I might. Got excited, and shot while Squint had his hands raised. I mean, I *tried* to shoot, but the gun didn't go off, somehow. But another gun banged away, and Squint dropped. Then somebody pistol smacked me over the head, and I keeled."

Vance drew in a long, quivering breath and hitched up his pants. A great light was beginning to dawn upon him.

"Shucks, Bud! The missus, she said that if you couldn't shoot, you couldn't be a gunman. Reckon she thought she was going to keep you outa trouble when she unloaded your gun! If it was empty, you didn't shoot Squint. 'Twas Duke that done it!"

"Uh-huh," agreed Bud. He was bending over, holding his mangled hand clamped between his knees. "Yuh smacked me 'fore I had a

chanct to explain. I could hear yuh and Duke auguring about it, but I was too dopy to do anything, at first.

"Duke wanted to get me away from you 'fore I come to, and spilt the beans. He'd egged me on, and when he seen my gun wouldn't work, he nailed Squint hisself. I don't guess he thought he could make *me* believe I'd killed Squint, though maybeso that was in his mind. Maybe he figgered I'd skip the country and take the fall for him, if he 'rescued' me. He had to do something when he seen I was coming round."

Vance nodded. "You was the only one that knowed he was the one who shot Squint. He had to hobble your tongue, somehow. It wasn't friendship for you that made him pull that rescue stunt. He was trying to save his own hide, Bud. Shucks! If he'd snaked you away from me, and you hadn't agreed to take the fall for him, he'd 'a' put a bullet through your back, I betcha!"

The shock-numbered nerves of Bud's gun hand were beginning to func-

tion again, and he grimaced with pain.

"When I seen yuh grab up my empty gun, Vance, I knowed yuh didn't have a chance. I knowed he'd drop yuh with his first shot—less'n I could beat him to it. So I grabbed the .45 out of Squint's belt—his carcass was on the platform, waist high, right 'longside me, and I nailed Duke 'fore he could nail yuh. Being as he killed Squint and was trying to kill yuh, I don't guess yuh can clap the law onto me for it, can you?"

"Not so you can notice it, Bud! Lemme see that mitt. Hm-m-m! The missus says, 'If he couldn't shoot, he wouldn't be a gunman.' You won't lose them fingers, but they'll always be stiff, Bud. Shucks! Reckon your gun-slinging days are over, kid."

Bud inspected his mangled gun hand carefully.

"After seeing how close I come to getting framed, I don't guess I mind so much, at that. Say, Vance—is that offer to buy in on yuh ranch still open?"

KELLY GOES THROUGH

By SEVEN ANDERTON

A two-fisted novelette. Many men went up the Napo River; none returned. Kelly, American adventurer, and Ben Brodersen, a giant Swede, undertake to find the scourge of the Amazon country and uncork the Napo!

In the April 1st Number of Complete



EASY GOLD

CHAPTER I. THE KILLING.

THE stinging stream from a gash on his forehead blinded and maddened Tom Akley. The last blow had done it. The big man had a horseshoe-nail ring on his left hand. It cut cruelly. Panting, Tom leaned heavily against the end of the box car, bracing his arms against the lurching support. The big man crouched, his arms swinging far down, like a gorilla's. He'd be charging in a minute; charging and battering with pile-driver blows of his great fists. Tom realized he could expect no fair play,

no mercy. Mike Lever, two hundred pounds of bone and muscle, didn't need to know about such things.

Akley's eyes shifted to the door of the box car. It was open a crack, letting in cold light and frosted air. It showed a panel of distant, wheeling mountainside, its down-plunging whiteness patched with gray faces of sheer granite and darkly spiked by dwarfed pines. The floor of the car shut off the purple-shadowed depths; but far below was a wedge of rock and ice, where another mountain started up on this side, rising with swift, awful steepness.

Akley thought he could reach the door, but to leap would be merely an exchange of brutal mauling for



A trail of
danger leads
to a strange
goal.

were chapped, and bleeding a little. Tom had hit them once, hard. The pain of twisting them seemed to remind Mike of that. He lunged.

Tom scurried aside, barely escaping a thick-armed clutch. He heard Mike grunt and curse as he collided with the end of the box car. That impact did not hurt Mike; it only infuriated him more. He spun around, charged again, forcing Tom into a corner. He pressed close, driving his fists—left, right; left, right—with steady persistence.

By William Bruner

certain death. He had stood up against Mike for long, bitter minutes now, though he wasn't built to take such punishment. He didn't even know why the fight had started. Certainly Mike, mean drunk and half crazy, couldn't have said.

Burly "Butch" Tyron, who leaned against the door, was the third occupant of that swaying, squealing car. He didn't seem to notice Tom's brief, supplicating glance. This was none of Butch's funeral. He stood with hands thrust into the pockets of his threadbare green mackinaw, an interested but unconcerned spectator.

Mike's smoky eyes held a malicious squint. His cracked, swollen lips parted in a wolflike snarl. They

back as he could, but he had little chance of defending himself against Mike's savage attack. The man was too big. Still, the bruising force of the man's blows was goading Tom beyond all reason. He gave up trying to protect himself, fighting back as best he could. Mike laughed scornfully.

Tom leaned hard against the corner and struck with every last bit of his strength at that leering face. Mike bellowed; closed in. Tom felt his knuckles and his whole forearm go numb, and he knew brief exultation. He'd hit something! Then a savage blow caught the side of his head. Shuddering blackness closed over him, and the mighty rumble of

the freight became a remote thing, fading altogether with a last sharp smash of sound.

A SHAKING, more insistent than the constant jar of the freight, brought Tom Akley back to noisy reality. It was nearly dark; only a weak gray spread of light came through the partly open door. Tom saw the face of Butch Tyron pushed near his own. Butch grunted when Tom's eyes opened.

"C'mon, bud!" Butch said. "If you know what's good for you, you better snap outta it—quick!"

Tom licked bruised lips. His mouth was dry as cinders, and a miserable pain throbbled inside his head. He ached in a dozen places, and he wanted nothing more than to shut his eyes and sink back to healing stupor. But the urgency in Butch Tyron's voice aroused and frightened him.

"Where's Mike?"

Butch jerked his head. "Done for," he said tersely.

"Done for?" Tom lifted himself shakily, trying to understand, and trying, at the same time, to keep his elbows from wobbling so uncertainly under him.

"He's dead, kid," Butch elaborated. "You better pull yourself together an' come along."

Tom got to his feet, somehow, and stood staring stupidly. A few yards away he saw a dark and massive sprawled thing. Life was gone from it. Tom recognized that stark fact, even in the dim light, for the body shifted inanimately with each lurch as the long freight bored ever higher into the Sierras.

Tom knew no sense of horror. He was merely incredulous.

"Why," he protested, "I couldn't—I couldn't 'a' killed Mike."

He might as well have denied that

he could move a mountain or wrestle with a cloud. It wasn't possible. But there was Mike's lumpy form, and plainly it had no life.

"Not except on a fluke," Butch admitted. He pointed with a scuffed shoe. "See that nail? Butch went over backward that last wallop you give him, an' the nail punctured right into the base of his neck. It done the trick." He considered, making a lump in his unshaven cheek with his tongue. "I ain't gettin' paid for advisin' you, but if it was me, I'd haul outta here pretty quick."

"I don't know," Tom Akley said.

He saw the Law, organizing to hunt him down; he saw somber rooms crowded with stern-faced men; and behind all this, he saw gray prison walls.

"I don't know," he repeated.

Butch Tyron caught his arm. Butch was almost as big, almost as hard as the dead man, and his blunt fingers pressed harshly into Tom's slim arm.

"You listen to me!" he grated. "Don't be a sap! Maybe you can prove this was an accident. Maybe."

Butch shouted, making himself heard above the grind of the freight. Only a fool would stick and take the rap for something that couldn't be helped. As for Butch himself, he was dropping off when the train hit the next long pull. When the body was discovered, he said, there'd be no end of hell for every man on the freight, and Butch wanted none of it.

"You string along with me," he urged. "We'll light out for the placer camps an' pan us some gold until this blows over."

Tom wavered. Butch succeeded, at last, in stampeding him, merely by talking about what else they might do, and pointing out probable conse-

quences. Sure they could roll Mike Lever right out of the car and let him topple down the mountainside. What then? Bodies had a mean habit of turning up. Mike's might be found to-morrow.

They'd know, then, where the murder had occurred. Butch always spoke of it as "murder"; and in that light, certainly, it would be viewed by the authorities. They'd locate some one who'd seen a big guy and a slim young fella in the box car with Mike. And then they'd locate the big guy and the slim young fella. Oh, if some one should see that body go pitching out, the same thing would happen, only a whole lot faster.

As the freight puffed and wheezed on its last strenuous pull to the summit, Butch Tyron and Tom Akley dropped out of the box car. There was not enough momentum to throw them, but they toppled face down, only a few feet from the clattering trucks.

They had picked a dark patch. That was Butch's idea. A man walking there might have stumbled over them, they were so dimly visible. The biggest danger, in the moment of leaving the freight, seemed safely to have been passed. It was hardly likely that any of the scores of floaters, or any of the train crew, would see them now. All those men would be seeking shelter from the bite of the chill wind.

Yet Tom Akley began to believe that the last of that long string of cars would never roll past. A locomotive pounded near and snorted by, working titanically. Tom wondered if it was a Molly or a Mike. The ground trembled, and heat came down in heavy waves from the engine.

There were more cars, dozens of them, all clanking and clicking over

the rails; and another Molly or another Mike. Tom had not been at this thing long enough to know, off-hand, which was which. Only a few weeks had passed since he had got his final pay from a rueful boss. Tom had put the truck he drove in the company garage and turned over the keys. Tom thought of California and started west. The idea, evidently, was not original. The sight of scores of others like himself on every freight, east and west-bound both, had not encouraged his hopes.

Only a few weeks. A good bed and three squares a day. A nice town and a nice girl—a girl who had said, as they walked home one evening from a talkie, that she liked him because his eyes were blue, because his brown hair had a wave pressed in it from the way he wore his hat, and because he never took things too seriously. She had told him that. And now a dead man was bumping over the divide; and he, Tom Akley, had done the killing.

The glimmer of caboose lights snuffed out behind a curve. Butch Tyron got to his feet, brushing mud-stained hands.

"There goes the crummy," he said. "C'mon."

They walked all night.

CHAPTER II. MIDAS RIVER.

THE sun stood high. Tom Akley was wondering how he could drag himself another yard when he and Butch stumbled out of a sharp cut and found themselves on a road. It disappeared quickly in the tall pines; but it went somewhere, and showed signs of recent travel.

Butch sprawled on a warm slab of rock and began taking off a sodden shoe. Tom just sat there. He had

washed at dawn. The cold water took away the visible stains of his fight in the box car, but getting rid of his worry was not so easy.

He was hungry. It was a day and a half since he passed through the small Nevada city where a white-haired marshal met the freight. The marshal came down to see that the many hobos it carried did not get up into town; but he did his best for them, and dished out a good stew with thick slices of bread. When the freight pulled out, he made sure that every man was back on it. Those little places couldn't have twenty or thirty panhandlers roaming around every time a train went through.

Butch thrust out a wet foot. A worn sock revealed cramped toes and an inflamed heel.

"Look at the size of that blister!" he said, almost proudly. "Heck, it's bigger'n Mt. Whitney."

Tom did not answer. Butch glowered, thrusting out a thick lower lip.

"Listen," he growled impatiently, "you gotta improve, see? We'll be sittin' pretty after we hit one of these gold camps. Them folks won't care if somebody's been found dead in a box car. They'll be interested in gold—an' if anybody's cleanin' up, we will, too!"

The hard certainty in Butch's voice made Tom lift his eyes. He caught an expression of greedy craftiness on his companion's black-stubbed, somewhat full face. It was gone instantly; Butch substituted a twisted grin.

Tom had to hand it to the big man. He was good-natured in his own bitter way. His humor was contemptuous, and respected nothing. Butch lacked Mike Lever's brutality, perhaps; but Tom was beginning to believe that he was as dangerous, as selfishly evil.

"Sure," Tom agreed, trying to force conviction into his voice. "We'll make out."

"I got nearly ten bucks," Butch said, groping in his mackinaw pocket. "Nearly ten bucks—an' this!"

He showed a .32 caliber automatic. Tom stared at the gun, at Butch. Somehow, he knew Butch would not hesitate to use that weapon.

"I—I didn't know you had any money," Tom said.

"Do I look like a fool?" Butch shoved the automatic out of sight. "There's plenty guys'll bump you off for what you got, kiddo. What they don't know ain't goin' to hurt you."

They rested, and the warmth of the sun was good. They had known tough going during the night. The mountains were soggy from the melting of the heaviest snow in years. Water dripped everywhere. It hadn't been fun to splash through those icy streams, with the temperature only a few points above freezing.

Presently they were listening, almost unconsciously, to a new sound. It was like the water noises in a way; and yet it differed in being unsteady and more strident.

"Sounds like a car," Butch said.

A lusty curse justified this surmise. Butch pulled on his shoe. He and Tom walked down the road, leaving their blanket rolls on the rock. Around the first bend they came upon an old man and his loaded truck. The rear wheels had spun deeply into the gravel of a stream bed. One of the front wheels stuck up in the air, clear of the ground.

The old man sat on his high seat like a parrot on its perch. Like a parrot, too, he was edging from side to side, trying to get a comprehensive view of the situation. He had

no hat, and his head was quite bald, and browned like a cinnamon bun. From high-laced boots to wool wind-breakers, he was liberally caked with red clay. When he saw the two men, he stopped his annoyed fidgeting and gaped at them, showing a set of surprisingly white and even teeth.

Tom wanted to turn, to flee into the sheltering pines. The presence of Butch was the only thing that stopped him, and he told himself savagely that he could do nothing more foolish. To run, to act in any manner but naturally, he realized, might well turn suspicion his way. He knew this; but he knew, also, that to appear unconcerned when he met people was going to be the hardest task of his life.

"Well, howdy!" the old man greeted. "Maybe you ain't no answer to a prayer, but I sure was hopin' some one'd come along about now an' help me out."

Butch stopped near the roadside and leaned against a tree.

"We're pretty hungry."

"I got grub," the old man said. "It's a swap."

TO free the truck wasn't much of a job. Tom and Butch waded into the stream and lifted on the side that was bogged down, giving the other wheel a chance to do some work. The truck slithered up on the bank when the old man gunned the motor.

He built a fire, then, and started water boiling for coffee. Before long he had browned bacon in strips on a tin plate; and eggs were sizzling in deep grease. He talked as he worked. His name, he said, was Charlie Malden, though folks mostly called him "Pop."

He had just been to town to attend to some business, he continued,

and to lay in some supplies. His shack was thirty miles up the road, beyond Midas River camp. So many people were trekking in now that they had renamed the place Depression Hollow. It was like old times, with certain deplorable differences. You knew, nowadays, that the likker you got wasn't much good, and people didn't explode with their money.

"Hell," he said disgustedly, "they play penny ante!"

"We're headed for the placer mines," Butch said. "Anybody makin' money at it?"

Pop Malden clamped his teeth and looked distressed.

"They're allus comin' out," he explained apologetically, adding: "All depends. Like anythin' else, some men make money an' some don't. If you know how, you maybe got a chance." He glanced at Butch with shrewd brown eyes. "It's plenty hard work, mister."

"Well, any work's hard," Butch growled. "How's chances for a lift?"

"First rate. Give me a hand every time I get stuck, an' I'll carry you right to Depression Hollow."

The camp on Midas River was not what Tom Akley had expected. It was bigger, for one thing. He had not wholly believed that people were flocking to the gold country, but it appeared to be true. Men on the freights had talked at length about placer mining. A few declared they were going to give it a try. Others scoffed and said it was better to stick to the rails, where you got handed some stale bread now and then.

Tom had not put much faith in the possibility of digging nuggets out of the sand. It sounded too simple to be plausible. But, looking down on the Hollow from the shelving road, it appeared that many people had come with high hopes. Tents

thrust up everywhere. Some were brightly new; others grimy and stained. A number of newcomers were sleeping in their cars for lack of better accommodations in this grubby settlement.

The river, flowing full and clear, came out of a gap and curved several times across the Hollow. That was the Midas, Pop said, pointing out the permanent buildings of other days, which were crowded in the shelter of a hill. All were darkly weathered; and though several leaned to the point of momentary collapse, not one, evidently, was too ramshackle to be without an occupant.

A crowd of people stood before the largest building, which bore, in tall, scaling letters, the simple assertion, "Store." They appeared to be excited about something, and were listening to the words of a man who had mounted the steps.

"Looks like trouble," Pop Malden said hopefully.

It was. Pop's arrival, with two strangers, scarcely halted the proceedings, though almost every one waved the old-timer a greeting. Without getting down from the truck, Pop and his riders listened. The thickset man on the steps shook a brawny, muscle-knotted arm. It was fuzzy with coarse red hair.

"This thing," he bellowed, "has got to stop! When most of us ain't pannin' more'n enough to keep goin' on, we can't stand for crooks stealin' what we take. We got to organize! We got to be our own law."

Tom Akley cringed in his place between Butch and Pop Malden. Law! Would he know terror every time he heard that word? Again he had a blind, mad impulse to flee, until he noticed that people were not watching him, but the stocky man on the steps.

POP listened a while, rubbing his bony chin. Then he climbed down, motioning for Butch and Tom to follow, and skirted the crowd. Another old man with high boots clattered after them when they entered the store. It was Wes Larrum, the proprietor, more interested in possible sales than in the fuss which was being made outside.

"More sneak-thievin'," Wes Larrum explained. "They're tryin' to organize vigilantes. Trouble is, everybody's aimin' to be in on it, so I sure-enough don't expect it'll do much good."

"I don't expect," Pop Malden agreed. "To hear 'em tell it, there's been a heap more nuggets swiped than has been found."

"What you mean?" Butch demanded. "Ain't they cleanin' up?"

"Not so's you could notice it," Pop said. "Them that work average maybe a dollar a day. Ain't much, but it keeps 'em goin'."

Butch showed his disappointment. "For cripe's sake!" he growled. "When you picked us up, you claimed a guy had a chance."

Pop nodded. "I said if he knowed how. Most these folks ain't doin' so well 'cause they hate calloused hands and sore backs, an' they don't like gettin' off where it's too lonesome. Only natural, when they don't clean up big in a couple days."

Butch grunted his disgust and started toward the door. "I'll look it over," he decided. "Thanks for the buggy ride."

Tom started after him, not knowing what else to do; but Pop stopped them both.

"I'll tell you like I tell the others," he said. "Look in places which ain't been worked over time an' again, but first find out what you're lookin' for. An'," he added, eying Butch's

wide shoulders appreciatively, "I'll make a deal with you. My place is four miles past where you can drive in a car. Help me pack this stuff in, an' I'll put you up for as long as it takes an' show you the tricks of the game."

Tom thought of the rimming, snow-patched mountains. Though it was warm, now, in the Hollow, there'd be a sharp wind blowing by sunset. The many blanket rolls which he had noticed spread under trees hadn't looked any too comfortable. Grub and a place to sleep weighed pretty heavily against a little work. And, too, there was that urge to get away from people. Too many were here, and their very numbers filled Tom Akley with terror. It would take only one to find him out!

"We better do it," he urged. "We've got everything to gain."

Butch nodded slowly. "Yeah," he agreed. "Everythin'."

Under Pop's supervision, they got what little equipment they needed from the gloomy, cobwebbed store. Pop was choosy, but Wes Larrum was anxious to please. The storekeeper evidently had not got over having a lot of people come to Midas River and call the old camp Depression Hollow. Wes had been enjoying a depression since the last gold boom petered out. This new influx wasn't doing him much good, he related sadly, shaking his graying head despondently.

"It's always somethin'," he lamented. "Now, here's a nice gold pan for you. Positively guaranteed to produce a swarm of nuggets every time."

"You're a liar," Pop said amiably, "an' it's too bad. For a pan like that would save a heap of work."

The crowd was still outside when they returned to the truck. A cou-

ple of men wanted to hear Pop's say, It was brief.

"Organizin' vigilantes is a great idea," he told them, "if you're lookin' for more trouble than you got."

That view met with scant consideration. The big man on the steps waved his hairy arms.

"You'll think some different," he shouted, "after you been robbed a couple times!"

"Wouldn't be surprised," Pop agreed mildly. "Shucks, maybe I'll be your first customer!"

He chugged away, with Butch and Tom at his side. The narrow, rough road followed the river through the gap, sometimes rising several hundred feet above the stream. Tom wondered that Pop's old truck didn't rattle to pieces. Pop's driving, too, left much to be desired. It made no difference to him how near the edge he went, just as long as he didn't slip off.

They stopped, finally, in a little glen. The river boomed, frothing over great boulders. Pop removed the spark plugs from the motor and dropped them in his pocket. Just locking a car, he explained, wasn't much use in a far-off place like this, if any one was of a mind to steal it.

Tom selected an ambitious load and followed the prospector up the trail. Butch shuffled behind, far from overburdened. The going was easy, save for one place, where the path narrowed and hung precariously over a deep, dark pool.

"Look out you don't slip," Pop warned. "The water's plenty deep, so's you won't get smashed, but the current would hurry you right out an' break you up agin' them boulders. It's a bad spot."

With that advice, Pop trotted across with utter unconcern. Tom Akley grinned. He sure liked the old man.

CHAPTER III.

FLIGHT.

WITHIN a week, Tom Akley had acquired a stiff back, blistered hands, and quite a working knowledge of surface panning. He knew that it was the fine flaky gold which he must seek at first; flourlike particles which collected at the heads of bars and small islands, and which picked up and went elsewhere at each high water. Spring run-offs had replenished the likely spots, and Tom saw his little mound of yellow grains slowly increasing, with a much larger pile of black sand, which Pop told him he should save. There was invisible gold in that, too.

Heavier pieces were at bed rock, or buried far under gravel and boulders. That meant back-breaking labor with pick, hammer, and chisel. Down deep nuggets might be found, and crevices packed with the precious stuff, which you lifted out with a tablespoon; but Pop advised getting the hang of swirling the pan before trying for bigger pay.

"You won't lose so much, an' it's the little specks that keep you in beans."

Butch Tyron wasn't doing well, but neither was he working hard. Each morning he started out, bragging his expectations; but when twenty-dollar nuggets didn't turn up promptly—and they never did—he got discouraged and spent most his time lying in the sun.

They stayed on with Pop Malden, paying him in gold for the grub they ate. The old miner enjoyed having company, he said, and the single room of his cabin was large. It was built on a small flat, just above the sluices, and wasn't much on looks, being part log, part weathered board, and part anything else that hap-

pened to be handy. Inside, it was almost painfully neat, with everything in order. Even the truck's spark plugs had their special can, reposing on a shelf above Pop's bunk.

Malden's workings were his own, and he promised to make it all right with the holders of adjacent lands if either of the newcomers found gold in sufficient quantity to justify the building of sluices. All property thereabouts was private, but the owners were generally more interested in the certain profits of orchard and ranch than in gold. Most of them were willing to take a percentage, however, if any considerable amount of color showed up.

Tom liked it up there. Working hard, he seldom thought of Mike; and he would have forgotten the killing altogether had not Butch reminded him of it now and then.

As it was, Tom's conscience did not bother him; his only concern was over getting caught. He had not meant to kill Lever. That was an accident for which he was not sorry, for Mike might have crippled him for life had the fight ended otherwise. But the possibility of being found out remained hauntingly with him; he wondered bleakly if he could ever overcome it.

Even when "Slim" Bradley passed through on his way to Depression Hollow, Tom had to fight an impulse to run. He knew that the tanned, young prospector couldn't possibly have knowledge of what had happened outside, for Slim was eager for week-old news. Yet Tom read suspicion in his brown eyes, when only friendliness was there. It was with distinct relief that Tom saw Slim Bradley shoulder his light pack and take the down trail.

Butch grinned wolfishly.

"Still scared, ain't you?" he asked

contemptuously. "Well, son, try an' get it under your hat that nobody knows but me, an' you'll rest easier."

That advice, somehow, was not reassuring. Nobody knew but Butch! Tyron made it plain, without putting it in so many words, that he might talk unless Tom strung along and did as he was told. Gradually, Tom began to perceive that his companion's motives had not been wholly unselfish; and so, from feeling grateful, he began to regard Butch Tyron with growing hatred.

One moment he wished that Butch would go away, and then the possibility would fill him with terror. Butch was the kind of wise guy who would hint mysteriously at his knowledge until every one had a good idea of what he was talking about. Let him get one of his windy spells, Tom reflected morosely, and the sheriff would be around pretty soon.

Tom wondered why the big man hung on. Butch had lost all interest in panning for gold. Pop didn't admire the way he was doing and told him so. Butch merely chuckled.

Slim Bradley came back from the Hollow with news. Trouble was spreading down there. One man had got shot while attempting to protect his findings, and there had been small robberies. The vigilantes had organized and were going strong, with the result that every man feared his neighbor. People spent most their time establishing alibis. Pop shook his head.

"Them vigilantes mean well," he said, "but they're too blame enthusiastic. I'd rather take my chances with the crooks."

Slim agreed, but it didn't make much difference to him. He was thinking of pulling out for Nevada in a few weeks. The placers there,

down around Unionville, were not so well worked over. In any case, fewer people had flocked to them in the so-called "unemployed" gold rush. All things considered, he seemed to think that a man would have a better chance over that way.

"Any vigilantes there?" Butch asked.

"Hardly think so. Not enough people. If any one tries to pull a fast one, they got too good an idea who it is."

"Be sorry to see you go," Pop said, "but I'll fetch you out when you're ready. Guess I'll be due for a trip to the city about that time."

Pop explained that he did not fool with the gold buyers who visited the revived camps. They paid between fifteen and eighteen dollars per Troy ounce, and Pop saw no reason why he shouldn't take the few extra dollars he could get at the San Francisco mint and have him a good time.

WHEN Slim started for his camp, Tom went with him, to help carry the load. He liked Slim. Had circumstances cast him with a fellow like that instead of like Butch, he might have found real enjoyment and satisfaction in his new surroundings. Slim had Pop Malden's easy-going manner; he took things as they came.

Bradley's place was on a fork of the Midas, five miles above Pop's diggings. He showed Tom a trail which led over the mountain to Terryville, but it was such hard going that it was rarely used, though Terryville was quite a lively place and on the railroad.

Tom did not stay. He wanted to get back to Pop's camp before sunset. Slim shook hands, thanking him for the lift.

"I'll be looking for a partner," Slim said.

That was all. The way of these people was not to ask questions or to suggest how another might conduct his affairs. Tom regretted that he couldn't take the young fellow up then and there; but Butch and the knowledge he held stood between him and the future like a barrier.

Tom was still trying to figure a way out of the situation, which was steadily growing worse, when he neared Pop's camp. He saw Butch, fishing off a big boulder. Butch motioned.

"Got no license," he said, "but I don't reckon a murderer an' his accessory need to worry about the fish an' game laws. Have a seat, kiddo. I want to talk with you."

Tom sat on the boulder at Butch's side. Butch pulled in his line.

"I come here," he said, "lookin' for easy gold. Far as I can gather, most folks is just makin' a livin' wage. Some are doin' better. Pop Malden ain't no pauper. I don't figure on goin' away from here empty-handed."

"You going away?" That, at first, was the only idea which registered with Tom Akley. If Butch pulled out, Tom could head for Nevada, leaving no trail that Butch could follow, and meet Slim Bradley there. He knew something of placer mining now; enough to make a go of it.

"You said it was six months since he's been to Frisco. Six months!" Butch's little, black eyes glittered greedily. "Get the idea, son? That means he's got considerable gold hid away some place. Look!"

He pulled a couple of yellow, water-rounded pellets out of his pocket. They were about the size of peas—far larger than anything Tom had discovered.

"I copped these from behind one rifle in Pop's sluice," Butch went on. "There must be a lot of pay in

that gravel he's workin'. He's cleanin' up the sluice now, an' is plannin' on runnin' it another couple weeks before he starts for Frisco. Chances are, though, he won't be startin' for Frisco!"

The rush of the mountain stream got inside Tom Akley's head. He stared at the man who sat next to him on the large boulder, and felt sick.

"You mean"—his lips seemed stiff, his voice sounded far away—"you mean," he repeated desperately, "you'd kill old Pop Malden for his gold?"

Butch Tyron's laugh was contemptuous, hard.

"I wouldn't be killin' him because I liked him, would I?" he demanded. "But Pop's got good sense. Chances are he'll listen to reason."

Tom was silent. He did not know what to say. He had given Butch credit for some sense of decency; he had not believed the big man could go so far.

"You can't do that, Butch!" he protested at last. "Not after the way Pop took us in——"

Butch laughed harshly. "Took us in' is right!" he grated. "He let us think this country was yaller with gold, figurin' we'd bite an' help him get his truck over them roads. Well, I came after easy gold. If I can't find it, I'm gonna take it. And," he added savagely, reaching out and catching Tom's arm in an iron grip, "you're gonna help me!"

"I can't."

"Soft, ain't you?" Butch snarled. "Oh, yeah! So soft you can kill a guy an' think nothin' of it. I guess they found Mike long ago. I guess they'd be real interested in knowin' who bumped him."

"The vigilantes——"

Tom broke off. He knew that was no argument. Butch snorted.

"They just clutter up the scenery," he said. "We'll take the truck an' be to hell an' gone before they ever know anything's happened. We'll light out for them Nevada camps Slim Bradley was talkin' about, an' clean up there the same way."

TOM scrambled to his feet. Knuckles showed whitely on his clenched fists. He licked his dry lips, enraged over his own helplessness.

"I can't do it!" he shouted. "I tell you, Butch, I can't do it!"

Butch didn't even bother to get sore.

"Oh, yes you can," he said mildly. "What's more, if I catch you tryin' to warn Pop, it means finish for both of you. Better get that straight, kiddo, because it's final!"

Pop was cleaning up the sluice when Tom and Butch returned to camp. He was jubilant as he showed a considerable pile of free gold. There would be still more, he said, when he pressed the amalgam from the mercury in the riffle notches.

"It looks," he declared, almost losing his teeth in the wideness of his grin, "like I got me some real pay gravel this time."

Butch clapped him on the back. "I hope so, Pop," he said. "I sure do!"

Tom prepared supper and ate in miserable silence. Pop did not notice; Tom had never been much of a talker. Butch kept his eye on both of them, seeing to it that they didn't get together while he was out of earshot.

Tom mulled over the situation, trying to find some solution. His thoughts went round and round, getting nowhere. Regardless of what happened, he couldn't throw in with Butch. Yet he could not warn the miner, for he believed Butch's grim

threat. For a mad moment he thought of making a break for it, and trying to get down to Depression Hollow. He decided, dismally, that no good could come from such an attempt. Butch would either hurry through with his plan, or he'd simply wait for the vigilantes and tell them of the killing on the freight. Whichever way he turned, he saw immediate and exceedingly serious trouble.

They went to bed, as a rule, shortly after dark. Tom's last job was to fetch water for morning use. He took the bucket and started for the door, half expecting Butch to call him back. The big man didn't notice him; he was avidly watching while Pop poured the new-found gold into an empty coffee can.

Tom did not quite realize what he was doing until hours later, when, breathless and weary, he was forced to rest on the high trail which led toward Terryville. Getting out of Butch's sight brought an overwhelming sense of relief. It was as though a physical load had been lifted, leaving only an impelling desire to escape. Once outside the cabin he had dropped the bucket and fled, not even stopping at Slim Bradley's cabin, but skirting it widely.

A slender moon showed in the western sky. Stars flecked the near-seeming vault of the heavens. Panting, Tom lay on his back, trying to convince himself that he had done the best thing, the only thing. Butch would not dare make a move, he told himself fiercely, not knowing where Tom had gone. He caught at that vast improbability and cried out that it was truth.

Utter stillness was damning refutation. He heard no stir of breeze, no trickle of falling water. The quiet got him. He jumped to his feet and staggered on.

"Pop can take care of himself," he said aloud. "He'll be all right!"
Silence.

CHAPTER IV. VIGILANTES.

GRAY faintly streaked the sky when Tom reached Slim Bradley's cabin and pounded on the door. A wide-awake voice instantly answered.

"Who's out?"

"It's Tom Akley." Tom hammered again. "Hurry!"

The door opened, vaguely showing Slim.

"What's all the fuss?"

"It's Pop Malden," Tom said miserably. "Butch is planning to rob him—kill him. I—I got scared and ran away. I couldn't make it stick. I had to come back!"

"You ran away?" There was no surprise, no condemnation in Slim's low voice. It seemed that he merely wanted to get the facts straight.

"Like a rat. I was halfway to Terryville. You come with me. Maybe it ain't too late. Maybe Butch got cold feet!"

Slim slapped on his boots, a pair of pants, a shirt. As they hurried down the trail, Tom pantingly told the whole of his execrable story, omitting no detail and sparing himself no blame.

"That might 'a' happened to anybody," Slim said. "You were in a pretty tight hole. A fella can't tell how he's goin' to act until the time comes."

"I ran away."

"You came back."

They pushed on. Tom had no thought of weariness, though every muscle ached. The Midas became something you could see, with its rushing white water, as the dawn light spread. For all his freshness, Slim found difficulty in keeping up

with Tom, who let fear and remorse drive him on.

As they neared the bend which cut Pop's place off from the upriver view, Slim halted, catching Tom's arm.

"Listen."

Above the thunder of water, Tom heard a confused, angry shouting. Many men! That could mean only one thing. Tom tore away from Slim's grasp.

"Butch has done it!" he cried.

Slim made vain effort to catch Tom again. But Tom was running with legs given strength by despair. Slim pounded after him, but could not gain an inch.

"Come back here, you fool!" he shouted. "If anything's happened to——"

Tom Akley heard no more. Rounding the bend, he came upon the flat. A great fire burned near the cabin. Angry men milled around it, black and grotesque against the blaze of red light. Some one stood on the cabin steps, talking loudly. When he paused, the others shouted and shook their fists.

Tom raced across the flat, past the sluice, up to the fire. He caught the arm of the first man he reached.

"What's happened?" he demanded breathlessly. "Where's Pop Malden?"

The man stared stupidly. "I think they killed him," he said.

Tom shoved through the crowd of men, making for the door. The man's words seared through his brain.

Half dazed, sick with horror and his own galling cowardice, he made the steps. No one paid him much attention; each man was listening to the enraged speaker:

"We got to get these men," he was saying. "We got to run them down like the dogs they——"

Tom mounted the first step. Some one appeared in the door. It was the husky, thickset, sorrel-haired man who had been doing all the talking the day that Tom had passed through Depression Hollow. He raised one of his apelike arms.

"Little less racket, boys," he called. "Pop's in a pretty bad——"

His eyes widened as they fell on Tom Akley. Disbelief, quick triumph, towering rage showed in quick succession on his beef-red face. He bellowed and lunged, clasping Tom in a mighty and crushing grip.

"You!" he shouted, almost incredulously. "By all the holies—boys, I got one of 'em! I got one of 'em!"

Tom heard a rabid cry. The men surged toward the steps. He squirmed, but the big man's arms held with the cruel tenacity of a bear trap. He did not think of his own peril; his full concern was for Pop Malden.

"Is—is he hurt bad?"

"You ought to know," the red man said grimly. "Shootin' him in the back! Be a wonder if he ever comes to!"

Something seemed to die inside of Tom Akley. He sagged, until the big man was supporting most of his weight. He had run away. Now he was back, and it was too late. He might have stopped this thing. He might have tried, at least. But he hadn't. He'd been nervous for his own neck. He had run away and come back too late.

THE men wouldn't let Tom inside, though it was all the red man and a couple of sturdy aids could do to keep him from being seized and mauled by the others. As though it were something happening to some one else,

Tom caught phrases, snatches of angry argument.

"String him up!"

"What'd he come back for?"

"Must 'a' figured he missed some of Pop's gold."

"Where's the big guy?"

One clear, hot protest came from Slim Bradley. "He couldn't have shot Pop Malden. He didn't have a gun. He wasn't even here——"

Slim was booed down, his voice lost in a welter of angry shouting.

The men numbered about thirty. They were sullen and bitter. Most of them knew Pop and liked him. Some had suffered losses from the gold thieves. Practically all favored immediate punishment. The few dissenters were silenced by gruff demands as to why the vigilantes had organized.

Slim made a vain attempt to get them to consider, to listen to reason. All the while a couple of men were searching for rope. They found nothing usable. Some one suggested that they take the prisoner to a gulch just above Depression Hollow. A big oak grew there, and its nearness to camp would make the example more impressive. All would be able to see.

The red man, "Rusty" Echols, finally consented to listen to Slim. A debate grew out of the argument, and virtually constituted a trial. The young prospector's story sounded pretty weak. If Akley had run away, why had he come back? That's what Echols wanted to know, and that was something beyond Slim's power to explain. And couldn't he have run away after the shooting, just as well as before? To Echols, it was a case of cold feet, and a mighty sorry effort to establish an alibi.

A couple of men were left to look out for Pop. Tom heard that the

old man was breathing with great difficulty, and that he probably wouldn't last until sunrise. The rest took the down trail, half of them in front, the other half behind the prisoner. Rusty Echols kept a firm grip on Tom's arm, and Slim hurried along at his side, still trying to make the leader see this thing straight.

"If he was guilty," Slim insisted, "he'd went out with Butch."

"You'd 'a' thought so," Echols admitted. "They must 'a' had some other plan. That's what made us suspicious in the first place—when Pop's truck went through camp like a bat outta hell. Pop always stopped, no matter how big a hurry he was in, to see if any one wanted something in town. That was about midnight. A couple fellas walked up to Pop's to see if anything was wrong. They found Pop lyin' on the floor, shot in the back, an' his place blame near tore to pieces."

Tom didn't listen after that. It was hard to get what they were saying with the river pounding at his ears and regrets roaring in his head. The whole world was gray, now, and birds were beginning to make their early-morning fuss. The bright stars faded; a few more were missing every time you looked up. Tom guessed it was foolish to be noticing these things; but at the end of this trail there was a big oak, and the Tom Akley who'd be swinging from it pretty soon would never know them any more.

A couple of following men had guns. They crowded close where the trail became narrow. When they reached the place above the deep pool, every one took great care not to slip. Tom remembered how easily Pop Malden had trotted across, bent over with the weight of supplies.

"Be careful, now," Rusty Echols said.

Tom almost laughed. That was funny, all right; telling a man to be careful so he could make sure of getting hanged.

He could see the place where Pop had left his truck. It hadn't done much good to take out the spark plugs. Not with Butch knowing where they were kept. And Butch, even now, was making a clean getaway. Maybe Tom deserved hanging; he didn't know. There was, of course, the matter of Mike Lever's death. But it wasn't right for Butch to get away.

They were on the highest and narrowest part of the trail. Tom took scarcely a glance at the dark, swirling water far below. Rusty Echols was busy, for it wasn't easy to hold on to a man and keep your own balance at the same time.

THE notion and the decision to act on it came almost at the same instant. It mightn't be nice to be battered and broken against those great rocks, but anything was better than hanging. Tom pressed close against the wall of the ledge, letting his right arm drag. Rusty had his left arm twisted around in back, and was gripping the wrist. Tom hoped the big man wouldn't be dragged off the ledge. He had nothing against Rusty Echols.

Tom leaped. The jerk, as he pulled free from Rusty's hold, sent him spinning. As he plunged, canyon walls, pool, and sky twirled around like a pinwheel, with him in the center. That only lasted a couple of seconds. He struck the water feet first, so that he wasn't knocked breathless, and immediately the swift current caught him, rolling him over as he lunged bottomward.

He clawed to the surface, already numbed with cold. Dizzily high

above, he saw a line of white faces peering down at him. The vigilantes were shouting, pointing. A couple of them were aiming guns. He heard rapid, sharp reports, and the echoes blended with the river's tumult.

They didn't even come close. It is hard to shoot down, like that, and Tom was bobbing like a cork. Of course, any shot might be a lucky one. Then an eddy caught him, hurried him into a channel where the water poured out of the pool, and he was swept away with awful speed. He was cast into a welter of froth, sucked under, slapped against the rocky bottom. The click of rolling stones beat sharply at his ears.

He struggled desperately to gain the surface. His lungs ached; his chest felt as though it were being caved in by terrific pressure. He reached the top, gasped, choked. The river hurled him against a great boulder, knocking the breath out of him and pinning him there for a moment. A bullet pinged off the granite just above his head. He shoved against the rock's smooth side, was snatched away, and tossed against the canyon wall. Suction pulled him down and did not let him up again until he was hurled over the lip of a falls.

Tom Akley remembered nothing clearly after that; it seemed he had never known anything but the fury of the stream. The vigilantes were lost to sight; no man could race against the river's speed. His body no longer ached in specific places; it was a unit of intolerable pain.

Respite came at last. He found himself floating in the gentle backwash of another pool. Unlike the one he had leaped into, this had sloping sides. Tom gave a few feeble kicks and reached the rocky edge. He hauled himself out, dropping exhausted on the shore. Unconscious-

ness swooped on him. He grimly fought it off. He couldn't stay there. Those men would be along soon, and their thirst for vengeance would not be slaked by the fact that their victim was already half dead.

He swayed to his feet and staggered away, forcing himself toward the dark shadows of the sheltering pines.

CHAPTER V.

THE TRAIL.

LATE in the afternoon Tom awakened, acutely aware of an ache in every muscle. Painfully sitting up, he listened intently for a long while. He caught only gentle sounds which carried no alarm. If the vigilantes had come in pursuit, they had passed him by.

He wondered bitterly how Butch was making out. All right, probably. Fellows like Butch usually got along.

Usually they got along, Tom thought grimly, but Butch Tyron was one man who was in for a jolt. When Tom had torn from Red Echols's grip, burning resolution seared like a hot, bright flame in his mind.

He was going after Butch, and he was going to bring him back.

Consequences loomed large, but they didn't matter. Butch was going to pay, and pay heavily, for what he'd done to Pop Malden. After that, they could give him the works for killing Mike Lever; they could do anything they liked. It wouldn't make much difference, Tom thought morosely. To go on, forever haunted by the fear of capture, was worse than any punishment he could name.

He scrambled out of the gulch, finding progress so difficult at first that he doubted his ability to travel a hundred yards. But movement eased his aches, restored circulation

to numbed muscles. He turned east, going deeper into the mountains.

Tom did not live in the days that followed. He existed. He pushed on, begging food when hunger overcame his fear of facing people, or taking odd jobs at small, isolated ranches when they were offered him.

Tom compelled himself to believe that Butch would go, as he had planned, to the Nevada placers. The lure of easy gold would be strong for the big man; he'd be right there, like a buzzard attracted to carrion.

Tom made his weary way to three small camps before he learned that there had been robberies at Folly Gulch.

Folly Gulch was a cluster of tents, located in the sage-spread foothills of tall mountains which formed the western side of an extensive desert valley. The sun blazed intolerably, and a parching wind blew always, carrying a load of alkaline dust. It was anything but livable there, but its two dozen tent dwellers hung on, because they could pan a few dollars' worth of gold each day, or because they had no other place to go.

Tom arrived around noon, being fortunate enough to catch a ride; and from the garrulous old-timer who picked him up, he learned more about the gold thefts. A couple of men who holed up in the mountains were responsible, and their usual system was to waylay miners who were returning to camp with their day's pannings.

Efforts had been made to catch them, but without success. Whole regiments could have hidden in the canyons, and armies would have been required to drive them out.

"You don't"—Tom put the question half fearfully, so much had the answer come to mean to him—"you don't know who they are?"

The old-timer's face cracked into

a contemptuous grin. "Nobody knows them two," he said. "They think they're real, sure-enough hard customers. Both of 'em wear masks! One's a big hombre; other's just mid-dlin'. They'll haul freight pretty quick—soon's they realize they'll starve to death if they depend on robbin' us pore miners for a livin'. Or maybe," he added hopefully, pointing at a glaring alkali sink just south of camp, "they'll try to cross some place like that an' fall into the quicksand."

He went on to explain that the sink was treacherous because the sun baked a brittle, salty crust over the whole thing, making it impossible to know where it was solid and where it wasn't.

Tom was scarcely listening. He was wondering if the big hombre was Butch Tyron. It had to be, he told himself—had to be!

THERE was quite a stir in Folly Gulch. One of the traveling gold buyers was there. Tom had seen him at another camp. He was a little, sandy-haired man with shrewd, blue-green eyes. "Shylock" Riggs, the miners called him; but for all that he was fair, paying the men as much as he could for their laboriously washed gold. He drove an enormous old touring car which bounced slowly and stiffly, but dependably over the desert roads.

Tom did not remain long in Folly Gulch. Indeed, he hurried away almost immediately, his heart pounding with sudden fear, for one of the first persons he saw was Slim Bradley. Slim failed to notice Tom, for which the fugitive was thankful. Though he knew Slim was not the kind to give him away, Tom was afraid others from Depression Hol-low might have come with him.

So Tom took to the hills. He had no plan, save to hide out some place and wait for the gold thieves to appear. He picked, therefore, a high point from which he could see far in every direction. Below him, the table-flat sink glittered like a silver dish, with only a few black dots here and there—where clumps of sage tried to grow—marring its crystalline surface. Folly Gulch resembled a handful of yellow pasteboards on the gray-green reach of foothills. The dusty road was a long scar in the sage. And everywhere the eye turned it was conscious of furnace-like heat, streaming endlessly from a copper sun.

Tom baked for a couple of hours. Then a speck came down the road, with a spreading tail of dust behind it. As Tom watched, it resolved itself into Shylock Riggs's car. He followed its lurching course, for it was the only moving thing; and thus he witnessed, from his high place, the whole of Folly Gulch's first major crime.

It didn't take long, and distance reduced the actors to insect size. Even so, Tom would have sworn that one of the men who rushed into the road was Butch Tyron. He saw Riggs step down from the car, after it was stopped; saw him hand over something, and heard a couple of faint shots as the robbers blew holes in the tires.

Tom feared they would shoot Shylock Riggs, too, but they didn't. They scurried away, heading for the mountains, while Riggs shook his fists in impotent anger.

When the gold bandits disappeared into one of the many draws which snaked down through the hills, Tom rose from his hiding place, starting on a long diagonal for the mountain gorge toward which the two men appeared to be

heading. One driving thought possessed his mind: to head them off! He did not consider that he was unarmed, that Butch was likely to murder him on sight, that they were two. He considered none of these things, lost as he was in savage elation.

He had found Butch Tyron at last!

A thousand obstacles blocked his path. It was impossible to push directly through the sage; it grew haphazardly everywhere, knee-high and waist-high, making a straight course out of the question. There were dozens of draws, deep and precipitous, to get across; areas of steep sand dunes on which Tom seemed to scramble endlessly without making a foot of headway, and the broiling heat was no mean handicap.

Yet, when he came at last to the gorge, the only fresh tracks he could discover led outward. He climbed the side, leaving the bottom where he was too likely to be trapped, and pushed on. Below, he saw a weed-grown road which hugged the rocky wall, but he thought nothing of it. That country was a maze of such roads, wandering endlessly and going nowhere.

The canyon was silent. Slanting sunlight gave its upper walls a ruddy tinge, but darkening shadow claimed the boulder-strewn depths. Night would fall in an hour or so, and Tom had yet to catch a glimpse of the men he hunted.

A hawk suddenly screamed, whirling from its high perch. Tom jumped. Any sound in that still, stony world was enough to set the heart thumping. He laughed shortly when he discovered the source of the raucous cry. Getting scary as a rabbit, he told himself.

A little farther on, the canyon lost its sheer walls; it widened into a bowl-shaped inclosure, with a carpet

of deep grass and a scattering of scrubby trees on the sides. A half dozen small washes emptied into the place, offering as many handy exits, for a man could disappear into any one of them and leave no trace of his going. Altogether, Tom decided, an ideal place for holing up.

AS Tom stared down into this natural amphitheater, his eye was caught by a fleeting glint of sunlight on metal. Even as he looked it disappeared, as the setting sun dropped below the upper rim. But something—probably something of importance—was in that clump of brush. Deciding to see what it was, Tom plunged recklessly down the slope.

Tom found a car in the thicket, so cleverly hidden that accidental discovery from the bottom of the bowl would have been impossible. It was a big machine, of a make noted for its speed; but that was not what most interested Tom Akley. A green mackinaw was draped over the steering wheel—and that mackinaw belonged to Butch Tyron!

The back seat of the sedan was filled with food. Blankets were scattered on the ground, and a considerable pile of ashes indicated that the two men had camped here some time. Poking around hurriedly, Tom discovered a small spring, which accounted for the dense growth of brush; and the mouth of a mine, many years unworked, which was doubtless responsible for the old road he'd noticed.

Tom struck a match and went into the mine. It ended where hope had ended, fifty feet back. There, only partly concealed by a jagged hole, he discovered a coffee can, of the kind Pop Malden had used. It was heavy. Tom jerked off the lid. Gold—tiny flakes and marble-sized nug-

gets—glowed softly in the pale match light.

The flame came down and burned Tom's fingers as he stared. He dropped the match, remembering that his margin of time was scanty, that his discovery here would unquestionably result in his death.

Hugging the coffee can under his arm, he hastened outside. At a rough estimate, about a hundred dollars' worth of gold was in that can; and Tom was willing to bet that most of it had been Pop Malden's. Well, it wouldn't do Pop any good, now; but at least Butch was going to pay for his crime.

As yet, Tom had no plan for capturing the big man. Making plans, when the enemy was armed and numbered too, was not exactly easy. But possession of the gold gave him the glimmerings of an idea. With it, in case things went wrong, he could at least buy temporary safety. And in the meantime, it wouldn't be a bad idea to keep Butch from getting away.

Recalling Pop Malden's system of keeping a car from straying, Tom got a wrench and removed the spark plugs, dropping them in with the gold. It was while he rummaged swiftly, hoping to find a gun, that he heard voices. He clamped the hood down, and with a last look to see that nothing was unduly disturbed, he climbed breathlessly out of the bowl.

He had barely reached the rim when the men appeared. There was no mistaking Butch's beefy frame. The other man was just ordinary—from that distance, at least. Tom crouched down and watched.

"Well"—Tom could hear Butch's harsh chuckle—"here we are!" He put a metal strong box on the ground near the ash heap. "We'll have to bust this open an' see how much we

got. From the heft of it, Mr. Caldwell, we didn't do so bad."

"I'll say," Caldwell agreed. He had a nasal, nervous voice, which the steep sides of the bowl caught and lifted plainly to Tom's ears. "I think we better pull out, Butch, while the going's good."

Butch snorted. "While the pickin's good, you mean," he growled. "Hell, no! We'll grab us a couple more gold buyers first. If it's a posse you're worried about, I can show you a dozen places where we'll never be found."

"How about the car?"

"We won't be out anythin' if they locate that," Butch answered. "An' it ain't no job to swipe another." He got a hammer and began to beat on the lid of the strong box. "Meantime, till they come after us, we'll park right here."

That was enough for Tom Akley to know. He slipped away, hoping they would not discover that he'd been there. Well, if they missed their coffee can and their spark plugs, they'd have to start out on foot, and that was some consolation. They could no longer be a hundred miles away in a couple of hours just because they had got scared off.

CHAPTER VI.

AMBUSHED.

CREEPING off, with Butch in plain sight, was the most galling thing Tom Akley ever had to do. Unarmed, he could see no other way. He had not, since leaving Midas River, ever made enough to buy a gun; he had scarcely made enough to keep from going hungry over the long miles afoot, by gift rides, or on freights.

Now, he had gold. There'd be some one in Folly Gulch who'd swap a pistol for an ounce of the yellow

stuff. He'd have to go there, he decided, in spite of the many risks. What if he ran into Slim Bradley, or some one else from Depression Hollow? What if they got suspicious about the gold itself, and accused him of the afternoon's robbery? Worst of all, what if Butch discovered that his coffee can was gone, and suddenly pulled out?

There was no other way. Tom resolutely faced toward the glimmering lights of Folly Gulch. The moon was almost full; it silvered the sage, and put a gun-metal sheen on the mountaintops. The big sink, still aglow, looked like another moon which had fallen into the valley.

The sink, and something the old-timer had told him about it, reminded Tom of a half-formed scheme. He detoured toward it, found a long stick, and ventured out on its flat surface. The salty crystals crunched beneath his feet. He jabbed the stick ahead of him, feeling out a solid path. Sometimes it broke through the sun-hardened crust with a curious ripping sound, and Tom could feel the heavy suck of the quicksand underneath.

He only went a couple of hundred yards, to the first tall clump of dead brush; and there he carefully hid the coffee can, keeping out a few of the larger nuggets.

Though the hour was not late when Tom reached Folly Gulch, most of the tents were dark. Walking stealthily between them, Tom found the one which the old-timer had, that morning, pointed out as his. Dim, orange light showed through the canvas. Tom patted the flap, interpreting the ensuing growl as an invitation to enter.

The old-timer—Hines, he'd said his name was—looked up from the paper he was reading and stared at his visitor in surprise.

"I'm darned!" he muttered. "Wondered what become of you; thought most likely you'd got lost in the crowds of this great city."

"I left kinda sudden," Tom admitted, wondering how he was going to explain his errand, and deciding the best thing was to blurt it out. "I came back because I've got to have a gun!"

Hines straightened up on his canvas cot and picked a pipe off the box which served as a table. "You're figurin' on shootin' somebody?"

Tom shook his head. "I'd like to, but I want this gun to keep from getting shot." He groped in his pocket and pulled out a palmful of nuggets. "I'll swap you these," he said urgently. "Twice what a gun's worth!"

Hines let his pipe clatter on the ground. "Boy," he murmured, "you're a fast worker. Or maybe"—quick suspicion flashed across his dry, sharp face—"maybe you're one of the fellas who stuck up Shylock Riggs."

"Would I be coming here after a gun if I was?" Tom cut in quickly. "If this turns out right you'll know where I got this gold. If it doesn't—well, you won't be out anything." He thrust the gold close under Hines's beaklike nose. "How about it?"

Hines held out his cupped hands. "I got a sweet-shootin' six-gun," he said. "I guess it's a deal."

The gun, as the old-timer claimed, was a good one. Tom's only wish was that he'd had it that afternoon.

"They get much from Riggs?" he asked.

"'Bout twenty-five hundred bucks in all, gold an' bills. The thing that made him sore was, they blowed holes in his tires."

"He was lucky they didn't blow holes in him."

"Yeah." Hines squinted at Tom. "You'll be, too, mister. Riggs has gone for the sheriff, but they can't get back till mornin'. If I was you, I'd wait."

"They might get away." Tom grinned; Hines wasn't so dumb. "I'll be seein' you."

"Hope so," the old-timer said doubtfully. "Remember, the best idea is to shoot first."

THE moon was dipping low when Tom again plodded toward the hiding place of the two men. This time he followed the gorge road; there was nothing to be gained by taking the more difficult rim. His whole body was sluggish from weariness, but Tom's elation overcame that. When a man has lived for weeks with one driving idea, its fulfillment means something.

"I'll take him back," he told himself. "I'll have him sewed up so tight pretty quick—"

The bloodcurdling scream which cut through the night put Tom's nerves to rasping. A shadowy something soared toward the moon. Tom swore under his breath. It was the hawk again!

The bird kept up its shrill scolding, swooping down into the canyon and then flapping away. Tom decided that this must be its regular hangout, but he felt like taking a shot at the thing. It had no business scaring people out of their wits.

He pushed on quietly, and the hawk's cries ceased. Just a little farther, he could see the widening of the gorge where it spread out into the bowl. He proceeded very slowly, listening for any whisper of sound; but, with the quieting of the hawk, the night's utter stillness returned. Surprise, he told himself, would be half the battle won.

Pausing to make sure nothing stirred in the bowl, he crept stealthily toward the thicket which concealed the camp.

Something snarled over his head. An instant later, a gunshot sent echoes booming across the bowl. Tom leaped like a startled deer. That bullet had come from behind!

He whirled about, catching the blaze of the next shot. It came from high on the canyon wall. He pulled his own gun and let go at the spot, but he stopped with one futile bullet. The man—Butch or Caldwell—was safely hidden by a buttress of rock.

Tom started to run, charging for the other side of the bowl. Lead snipped after him as he swished through the long grass. Then, from the direction of camp, another gun started to bark. Caldwell's nasal voice came from above:

"There's only one!"

"Get 'im!" Butch bellowed from the camp. "Bring 'im down. Don't let 'im get away!"

Tom made the far side, with bullets screaming after him from two angles. They whined, like deadly little insects, as they bored through the air. Tom dove for the shelter of the nearest tree. As he faced around, a bullet kicked stinging bits of gravel into his face.

With something like sick emptiness, Tom realized that Butch had put it over on him again. He hugged the ground; but even in the moonlight the tall grass could not hide him from Caldwell's searching aim, and the gnarled tree trunk was scarcely wide enough to shield his head.

He took a couple of quick pot shots at the man, knowing, as he pressed the trigger, that the gesture was useless. Then, as Butch broke from cover and came lumbering to-

ward him, he had to turn his attention to the big man.

Butch was not taking undue chances, but each yard he gained added greatly to Tom's peril. The only possible escape seemed to lie over the rim of the bowl, and that looked horribly remote. Yet, with the guns of two men spitting death at him, it appeared to be a chance he must take.

Curiously, Tom discovered that he was not afraid of death; but the thought of failure filled him with unmeasurable bitterness. He swore savagely that he would not, could not lose.

Scrambling to his feet, Tom started the long, deadly climb. A cluster of trees might shelter him here and there, but they grew far apart. He stumbled upward, while lead snipped after him, pinging off rocks from one side and from behind.

Once a whirring ricochet nipped his thigh and sent him sprawling. He gasped with the first stab of pain, floundered to his feet, and panted on.

He remembered, oddly, his struggle in the swift current of the Midas. Then, as now, everything had been against him. To-day it was slippery grass instead of sucking water which flung him helplessly; once more men were firing at him with murder in their hearts, and again he had as little chance to fight back. But he had gotten away that time. Maybe it had been luck. Maybe the luck would hold.

Tom was no more than a couple of yards from the first clump of trees when some speeding, metal-hard thing struck his head, plowed with sudden, fierce heat across his scalp. It did not hurt, after that first impact, but it stunned, leaving him with a vague, confused impression that his feet were dragging while

the rest of him rushed on. The feet tangled, stopped going altogether, and he knew he was falling, with darkness coming up to meet him like a swelling, tarry pool.

He heard one last thing—Butch Tyron's triumphant bellow—and he wondered, dismally, if this were the end of his long trail.

CHAPTER VII. WITHOUT A GUN.

TOM AKLEY was first conscious of a splitting headache, and then of numbness in his ankles and wrists. He was alive, he realized with some wonder, but a prisoner, bound hand and foot.

He opened his eyes. A small fire threw flickering light on the faces of his two captors. They were talking angrily, and Butch shook his big fist under the other's thin nose.

"I'm runnin' this show, Caldwell," he growled. "Get that straight."

"Maybe so," Caldwell said. Tom, studying him through slitted eyes, did not like his looks. He had a ratty face; his eyes were a pale, almost yellow, brown; and his loose lips curled in a constant sneer.

"Maybe so," Caldwell repeated, "but you ain't always right. I'm thinkin' this is one of the times. We better blow while we can."

"Not while there's so many obligin' gold buyers around," Butch said. "We're as safe here as we would be any place."

"With that kid around?" Caldwell's laugh was high-pitched, sharply scornful. "Butch, you're achin' for trouble. That kid knows who you are. Better give him the works. If he gets away, your name's mud."

That tickled Butch. "He's scared to death of me," he chuckled.

"That's what gets me. Why the heck did he follow me here?"

Tom saw no point in delay. He couldn't pretend unconsciousness very long. He cleared his throat.

"I'll tell you why, Butch," he said. "I came to take you back to Depression Hollow!"

Both men jumped to their feet. A shot could not have startled them more. Butch swaggered over to where Tom lay, and nudged him roughly with his shoe.

"So you snapped out of it, huh?" he muttered. "'Bout time, kiddo. We was just figurin' on bumpin' you off to put you outta your misery."

"I still claim it's a good idea," Caldwell insisted.

Butch wheeled on him. "Will you stop bleatin'?" he grated. "I told you I was runnin' this show, and I meant it." Facing Tom again, he squatted down. "I ought to kill you, at that," he went on, "for beatin' it like you did. What I don't savvy now is why you come back."

"I told you, Butch," Tom said. "The vigilantes almost strung me up for what you did to Pop Malden. I mean to take you to Depression Hollow and clear myself."

Butch laughed explosively. "Fat chance you got! The nerve—after all I done for you!"

"You did plenty. That's why I came after you myself, instead of lettin' a posse do the work." There was a deadly monotone to his voice. "I want to make sure."

"Posse?" Caldwell repeated. "Say, Tyron, if there's a posse——"

"How do you know one's comin'?" Butch demanded.

"I was in Folly Gulch. Hines told me that Riggs went for the sheriff right away. There'll be a big bunch of men, most likely. They don't stand for much foolishness in this State."

"I'm tellin' you," Caldwell said, "if you got an ounce of sense, you'll get rid of this fella and make tracks. Even if they can't find us, it ain't easy walkin' over this desert."

Butch frowned at Akley. "If I thought you was lyin'—"

"It's your own funeral if you do," Tom said, managing a grin, "and I hope you'll feel that way about it. You'll know for sure by morning, if you stick around."

His main hope, he felt, lay in stampeding the two men. Caldwell was already nervous. If they became convinced that a posse would soon be on their trail, they might not be so anxious to leave a dead man behind.

Butch looked at the sky. It was just beginning to show gray. He swore and turned away suddenly, kicking more wood on the fire.

"If we're goin' to beat it," he told Caldwell, "we'd better be startin'. Anyhow, we can always come back."

He inspected his gun, and the one Tom had got from the old-timer. Caldwell followed suit. Then they worked together, very hurriedly loading the car.

"We don't want to forget the rest of the gold," Butch said, when everything was packed except two small hand bags. "Get it, Caldwell, an' we'll split now."

Caldwell pulled a flaming stick out of the fire and went into the abandoned mine. He was back within a few minutes, his pale eyes wide.

"It's gone!" he gasped. "Somebody's been in there an' took it!"

"You're crazy!" Butch grabbed the torch and lunged into the tunnel to look for himself. He was out almost immediately, his full face livid with rage. Forgotten for the moment, Tom lay flat on the ground, watching breathlessly.

"It's gone, all right!" Butch

roared. "What did you do with it, you dirty, double-crossin'—"

"I didn't touch it, Butch!" Caldwell cried. "I'll swear, I didn't—"

"You lie!" Butch's hand started toward his automatic. Caldwell saw that quick motion, caught at his own gun. A double report sent echoes smashing across the bowl. Caldwell jerked, bent over, and collapsed. Butch stared at him a moment, cursed.

"Cripes!" he muttered. "If I don't have some swell side-kicks! One runs out on me, an' the other tries to gyp me."

TOM looked at Caldwell's still form. "I guess he's dead," he said.

"Sure he's dead. Well, you know a lot, now, fella. You might as well know the rest. I killed Mike Lever, too!"

Tom Akley stared.

"You killed Mike Lever?" His mind raced madly, trying to grasp the full significance of that confession. It made an un hunted man of him, if ever he could prove he had nothing to do with the shooting of Pop Malden. And then reality came crushing down on him. The look in Butch Tyron's eyes was murderous.

"I killed him," Butch repeated. "With this same little gun. He had ten bucks I wanted. Anyhow, he was bugs. He'd 'a' turned on me after he finished you."

If Tom Akley had been free at that moment, he'd have done some killing on his own account. Butch was leering at him, carressing his automatic ominously.

"I wouldn't, Butch," Tom said quietly. "Not yet. You'll never get away."

"No? The hell I won't! I got a car, ain't I?"

"Sure." There was a quality in

Tom's voice that made the big man listen. Tom was talking for his life, and he realized it. "Sure, you got a car. But remember what you did to Caldwell. When you killed him, you lost all chance of getting the gold—providing he took it."

"What you drivin' at?" Butch picked up the two bags and dropped them in the front seat of the car. "I should worry about a hundred bucks. I got Caldwell's share now, ain't I?"

"Just the same," Tom persisted, "it's too bad you killed him. He didn't steal the gold. I took it!"

Butch Tyron spun around. "You?" Then he laughed. "Quit your jok-in'," he added. "It ain't respectful."

"I can prove it; because I took the spark plugs at the same time!"

The big man jerked the hood open, swearing loudly when he saw the plugs were gone. Fury twisted his round face as he pointed the gun at Tom's eyes.

"You got just about a minute," he said, "to tell me where them plugs are!"

"I don't need that long, Butch." Tom grinned exasperatingly, though he knew that this was the moment which would tell the tale. And now that he knew he could clear himself, too, of the killing of Mike Lever, he wanted desperately to live. He held a slim hope for himself. If Butch, fearing the posse would soon be coming, wanted that car badly enough—

"I don't need that long," he said again. "I hid them down in the alkali sink—and that place is full of quicksand. Nobody could ever find 'em but me!"

"Yeah? An' if I kill you, I don't get 'em?"

"That's the idea."

For a long moment their eyes locked. Tom could see nothing in Butch's but rage and bitter hatred.

The man's trigger finger moved, ever so slightly.

Butch hesitated another second, then slowly lowered the gun.

"You win," he said sourly. "Maybe you'll tell me how come?"

"Life insurance," Tom grinned. "I saw the holdup this afternoon. I tried to head you off, and got here first. I found the car, the gold. I couldn't stay because I didn't have a gun."

"An' you took the plugs so's we couldn't drive away?"

"Right. Just like I took the gold to buy myself off in case something went wrong. I didn't think it would; but it did."

"I'll say it did!" Recollection of Tom's capture almost restored the big man's good humor. "That hawk gave you away, kiddo. I never did hear such a screechin' as it put up. Gave us plenty of time to get ready for you." He shoved the gun in his pocket and brought out a knife, cutting the ropes which bound Tom's feet. "C'mon," he ordered, "an' let this be a lesson to you. Don't try to put anything over on Butch Tyron."

It took a good deal of pushing, at first, but they managed to get the big car rolling down the old canyon road. Butch let it hurtle along, loath to use brakes when momentum meant so much. Tom, his hands still tied, braced as best he could with his feet.

They nearly met disaster several times, but finally they popped into the wash and coasted to a halt in the deep sand, less than a mile from the sink.

"Remember," Butch said as they climbed out of the car, "it's all off with you, mister, if you don't deliver them plugs."

Tom nodded somberly. He knew it was all off with him, anyhow, un-

less he did something mighty quick. It began to look as if all he'd get out of the spark-plug business was a short delay, for Butch was not the man to let him live when he possessed so much deadly information. He had knowledge of one shooting, had witnessed another, and had heard an admission of a third. Still, Butch pretended, elaborately, that Tom would go free when the plugs were turned over.

"You'd better take a rope along," Tom suggested, "and untie my hands. There's a lot of quicksand. It'd sure be too bad if you fell in and I couldn't pull you out."

Butch bared his teeth in a mirthless smile. "Wouldn't it, now?"

Nevertheless, he rummaged in the car until he found a light rope, and he also loosened Tom's hands. They walked to the sink in silence. The sky flamed with dawn; and the sink, catching the changing lights, glowed like an opal.

TOM found the trail of holes he had made in the night, when he crossed that same perilous stretch jabbing a stick before him. Some were mere pits in the salty surface; others showed dark blots where moisture had welled up when the stick broke through.

He knew what he was going to do. He was going to get Butch close to one of those dark spots, and then he was going to tackle the big man, gun or no gun. If a fellow had to die, it was better to die fighting.

Butch followed so closely that the gun sometimes prodded Tom's back. The big man did not like his surroundings; the rasp of breaking crystals underfoot got on his nerves, and he was frankly afraid of the quicksand.

"I don't see," he growled, "why

the hell you hid them plugs out in a place like this."

Tom did not answer. They were halfway to the clump of dead sage where he had concealed the coffee can. Straight ahead, the sun was just poking above a notch in the eastern mountains. It sent a long shaft of golden light streaming across the sink. He glanced toward Folly Gulch, but the town was hidden. Tom wished that it was not. It might help if some one were to see those two moving specks on the white expanse of the sink, and come to investigate. He halted.

"What's up?" Butch demanded uneasily.

"I'm not sure about the way," Tom said. He faced around.

"You better be," Butch snarled, jabbing at Tom's middle with the gun. "You——"

Tom dropped the rope and leaped. He caught Butch's gun arm the instant before the weapon went off. Powder smarted his face, but the bullet missed.

Butch cursed and tried to jerk away, but Tom hung onto that arm with every bit of his strength. It was not easy, for Butch, too, was fighting for his life. They scuffled over the flat surface, Tom clinging desperately, Butch as desperately trying to break free.

"You—you little whelp!" Butch raged. "I'll get you for this!"

"I'm takin' you back, Butch," Tom panted. "Back——"

Butch slugged, kicked, gouged with his free hand. Tom clamped his teeth and tightened his hold, trying to bend Butch's arm back so that the gun would fall; and always he attempted to force Butch toward one of those wet patches, where thin crust hid a treacherous bed of sand.

The furrow in Tom's head began to bleed, and it ached agonizingly.

Actually, the pain proved a stimulant, lending him a savage sort of strength. For all his greater bulk, Butch could not throw Tom aside.

And so they wrestled for possession of that gun, weaving back and forth, slipping with increasing frequency because their effort was greater and their caution less. When they did fall, it was heavily, with Butch on top. The gun went slithering out of his hand, spinning close to the spot of moisture. Tom saw it through a haze of pain; the breath was knocked out of him. He knew what would happen. If Butch went after it—

He felt Butch's big fist smash alongside his jaw, felt his head thud sharply against the salt crust. The world blackened for a moment; then he saw, with clear, hate-sharpened eyes, that his enemy was heaving off, getting up. Tom scrambled aside, jerked to his feet. Butch faced him, breath coming heavily through twitching lips.

"Ain't you got enough?" the big man asked. "Do I have to whale the life outta you?"

"I going to take you back, Butch," Tom said. His voice sounded like the far-away quaver of a stricken man. He lunged again, dodging the lashing arms which came up to meet him, smashing in a couple of vicious blows of his own. He saw a crack open above Butch's eye and let down a stream of red. As the big man backed away, he smeared it with a trembling hand.

Tom started another mad charge. Butch bellowed like a tormented bull, and like a matador bent on the final thrust, Tom closed in. Butch tried to smash him off, but his sweeping blows lacked direction. Tom, for all his fury, fought with skill, sending in a stinging jab here, a solid punch there.

Butch fled at last, running for the gun. Tom shouted an involuntary warning, but it came too late. With a sound like the amplified ripping of silk, the thin crust gave way, and abruptly Butch was floundering knee-deep, thigh-deep in a pool of wet, gray sand.

He screamed in utter terror, fell forward. More of the crust crumbled away, but the wider spread of his weight kept him from sinking so fast. His reaching hands touched the gun. He flipped it up, fired.

The bullet whined over Tom's head. He dropped to the surface of the sink, stretching for the rope. Before Butch pressed the trigger again, Tom sent an end of it snaking toward him. Butch forgot his gun for the moment, and clutched at the rope with pitifully eager fingers.

"I got you, Butch!" Tom said. There was no triumph in his voice. This moment, as he had imagined it, was to have been sweet. Instead, he knew only a tremendous weariness, like that which comes with the finishing of a staggering task. Tomorrow he might know elation, but not now.

"I got you, Butch," he repeated slowly. "Toss that gun here and I'll pull you out." He began to gouge notches with his heels. "Shoot at me again, and you sink!"

Butch tossed the gun. It fell near Tom's feet. The big man's face was white with terror. He could not bend forward any more, for he had sunk nearly to his armpits.

"Pull me out," he croaked. "For Heaven's sake, hurry up an' pull me out!"

THE posse came upon a strange sight that early morning, and suddenly found itself without a job to do. It was impossible not to notice the two men on the

dazzling surface of the sink. They hurried out, but cautiously, to investigate; and came upon Tom Akley, who was laboring mightily to rescue his prisoner from the sand.

Their arrival was the first knowledge Tom had that they were near. He looked up, hot, tired, and sore. Shylock Riggs was there, and the sheriff, and Slim Bradley. They wanted to help, understanding nothing, but Tom shook his head.

"Hear what he has to say first," he told them.

There was not much fight left in Butch Tyron. He answered Tom's sharp questions, and when he had finished, the sheriff knew about Mike Lever, and how he was killed by a bullet in his neck instead of a nail; and they knew how Caldwell had died, and how Pop Malden had been shot.

"He killed 'em all," Tom said. "He killed 'em. I nearly got strung up for one job and he had me thinking I'd done the other. That's all. I said I'd take him back, and I will!"

The sheriff—a lean, gray man—started to protest, but Slim Bradley interrupted.

"There ain't no need," he said. "Pop's all right, he'll soon be running his sluice again. When he came out of it, he told what happened. And the vigilantes were pretty glad you jumped in the river instead of letting 'em hang you.

They felt right bad, at that, after they cooled down. They thought you'd drowned."

Tom simply stared, at first, and then he was too weary to grin much. His first quick thought was that he'd had all this chase, all this hardship, for nothing; and then he saw the folly of that. He was clear of the Mike Lever business, and need never be haunted by guilty fear again. But best of all, Pop Malden was still alive.

"Then you can have Butch," he said slowly, addressing the sheriff. In that moment, he felt a little sorry for the big fellow. "I guess you got plenty on him."

"I'll say we have!" Shylock Riggs declared explosively. "What I want to know is, where's my gold an' money?"

"In the car," Tom said. "The car's in that big draw, yonder. You'll find Caldwell clear up at the head of the canyon. That's all—except Pop's gold and the spark plugs. They're hid in that sage."

"Spark plugs?" the sheriff asked curiously.

"That's a long story," Tom told him, "and I'm most dead for sleep."

Slim Bradley gave his slow smile.

"I'm still looking for a partner," he said.

Tom grinned. "I guess you got one, Slim. That is—if I ever get rested up."



TWO-WAY VENGEANCE

By Harry Harrison Kroll

A last laugh that didn't "come off."

BIG "Red" Needham hated Dave Wrenne with an absorbing hatred that waxed more bitter as the days went their way.

It started the night of the big dance at the new State Line sawmill shed. The old mill had burned.

When the new mill was up, but before the machinery had been put in place, Ram Turner conceived the idea of having a "hell of a big blow-out"; and employed a jazz band from Mobile to supply the music, and invited all the loggers and bosses and good-looking piney woods girls, and



swells from Mobile that Turner knew, and on the floor of the big new mill a dance was pulled off that was to be long remembered in the Alabama and Mississippi piney woods.

Red Needham was the new sawyer of the outfit. Six feet four, and big of muscle, he was as good-looking as the law allowed a man to be. And he was arrogant and swaggering, as men are apt to be when they are good and know it.

Dave Wrenne was a slim, friendly young fellow, rather say-nothing by nature, and with quiet laughter in his brown eyes. Well educated, too, but made no show of his learning. He was the son of R. W. Wrenne, a St. Louis lumber retailer, who was a silent partner with Turner in the State Line Lumber Co. Dave had come down to master the lumber business from the stump to customer.

The jazz band was doing great work, and had just swung into a haunting waltz. Ram Turner stood under an orange Japanese lantern, his florid face beaming with gratification. Swaying couples came and went under the long line of lanterns. Suddenly Melissa Turner, his nineteen-year-old niece, appeared. She was a La Gatta girl, stepped in the life from a cigarette poster, minus the smoke.

"Hi, old snookums!" she greeted Ram, and he put his arm around her.

At that second Mr. Red Needham bore down upon them, with a possessive gleam in his eye for Lissa. He was on the verge of doing the cave-man stunt and sweeping her off into the eddy of couples when genie-like Dave Wrenne appeared and beat him to it.

Red Needham stood for a moment paralyzed, his jaw unlatched, his big

hands opening and shutting in rage. Nothing like this in his lady-killing experience had ever happened before. Emotion always blinded Red, made him giddy. He stood swaying with unseeing eyes, felt the hot blood of jealous anger pound in his temples. Then he caught himself. If there was anything Red was sensitive to, it was the ridicule of others—and he had an impression Ram Turner was grinning. He turned on his heel and made off.

Later in the evening Red did cut in on the girl, but Red was not a cutter. He was a gobbler. Either a girl was his, or he'd have none of her. With most girls this was easy; but Lissa was not one you could snap your finger at and say loftily, "I'll have none of you." She eluded him, more often than not reappearing in Dave Wrenne's arms. It drove Red to a blind, seething, jealous hatred.

So the feud between him and Wrenne began.

The mill had been running less than two weeks when Ram Turner, who was an inveterate poker player, stopped Red one day as he stepped from the sawyer's cage. "Ever take part in a little game, Red?"

Red grinned. "Sure, chief."

"How about coming up to the hotel to-night?" He nodded toward the mill-town hotel near by.

"You bet! And," he added, "I'm chain lightning with the cards, chief!"

"Yeah? Eight o'clock's the hour."

When Red entered the hotel room he glowered at sight of Dave Wrenne. Turner, and Meeker, the mill foreman, made up the group. The game ended at three o'clock next morning. Red staggered out of the smoke-blue room with a new hatred. He had lost two months' wages, and four hundred in cash he'd

brought from Moss Point, his last job.

Moving dazedly down the dark corridor, he swore. "Something's crooked about that damn game! Turner and that Wrenne's crooks! I'll get 'em, yet!"

A FEW days later, Dave Wrenne, in the silence that followed the shutting down of the big engine at twelve, heard the talk. Several of the men were lounging around the gang saw.

"Boys, did you know that big band saw," the lank figure pointed into the gloom of the shed, "is a killer?"

"What you mean, 'killer'?" asked another voice.

"That band saw's killed a couple men, that's what I mean!"

"Aw, get out!"

There was a hush. Dave Wrenne continued to listen. He knew the way men, wherever they and their machines have mated, have of creating legends around the insensible things. One summer, working with a steam-shovel outfit between college terms, Wrenne had seen two accidents. The shovel became known as a killer, and after that it was difficult to get men to work around it.

"All right, ask old Ram Turner himself! See what *he* says, by hell!"

By the end of the week Dave had heard the legend up and down the runs, down at the planer, and around the dry kiln. It was an unhealthy omen. On some of his best cuts Ram Turner had options expiring within a year. The burning of the mill had lost valuable time. One evening Dave went up to the row of dwellings above the mill where the important workers lived, and entered the Cape jessamine retreat where Turner dwelt. He found the heavy man smoking in the gloom on the porch swing.

"Come in, Dave."

Dave took the chair Turner shoved out to him. "I've been hearing talk, chief, that this band saw ybu bought from the Vinegar Bend people after they cut out, and put here in the new mill, is a killer."

"Where'd you get that stuff?" growled Turner, sitting up.

"Everywhere—up and down the runs, all over."

"W-well," and Turner sank back, "I'll give you the low-down, if you're hearing talk. It was a big Negro from the turpentine orchards, that first got killed. Fellow named Jameson was sawing for the Vinegar Bend people. He saw it, but couldn't tell how it happened. The Negro lost his balance, and the carriage slung him into the band. Jameson told me afterward he mopped his face and they drug Jabbo out, and there wasn't nothing left of him but bark edge. You remember Christmas four years ago, when we had such a cold snap all over the country?"

"Yes," nodded Wrenne.

"Well, the next accident happened in that snap. Young white fellow was setting blocks. Escaped convict from a Mississippi prison turpentine orchard. Ice was shelling off the logs as fast as they snatched 'em out of the pond. The boy slipped on the ice on the carriage—and when they picked him off from where the carriage had slung him, his skull was broke. He died the next day. That," he concluded, "is the tale. I'd hoped it wouldn't mess up with us, but if it's here we got to do something about it."

"If there's any trouble getting men to set blocks, or dog, I'd as soon shift to one of the places as not," volunteered Wrenne.

"You're not superstitious?"

"Not in the least."

Red Needham was off the job for two days after that, and Turner sent Dave to saw part of the time. When Red came back, he turned purple when he learned that Dave had been filling his shoes.

"The bus-eyed rat!" Red snarled. "He can't saw no more'n my granny's tomcat!"

One evening Dave, coming over from the hotel after supper to do some work, found rheumatic old "Dink" Keefer, the night watchman, just punching his clock at the furnace-door station. The ancient man peered at Dave.

"Howdy, young feller!" He sat down on the fireman's bench. "Say, my dummed laigs ain't whut they used to be. By durn, it's hell when a man git's old. Say, bub, you know about this here sawmill being a killer?"

Dave sat beside the old fellow. "Sure, I've heard it. But I don't take any stock in the yarn. I've heard tales like that before. Machines are killers when men forget their business."

"Yah, mebby so, but Pink Brown, what's been dogging, just said you wouldn't catch him on that carriage no more!"

Sure enough, the next morning "Pink" failed to appear. Meeker, the mill boss, motioned to Dave, down near the gang saw. When Dave went to him, Meeker said:

"Climb on the carriage, Dave, and pinch hit for Pink. Turner said to put you on, in case——"

"O. K.," nodded Dave.

Red Needham, seeing Dave climb on the carriage, stared, rubbed his eyes, then a wicked grin overspread his face. The sawyer ran the carriage crazily all day, flinging his signals so fast that Edwards, the block setter, could not catch them half the time. Half a dozen times

Red stopped the carriage and came down and swore blackly at Edwards. The block setter, being a small man, while Red was a great big fellow, kept his jaw. But the next morning, when the whistle blew, he failed to show up for work.

Dave took Edwards's place. There began a mad scrap between Red and young Wrenne. Dave's eyes were keen, and he took the signals as fast as Red flung them out. So, all during the hours, the great carriage zoomed back and forth, back and forth.

MEANWHILE, out in the woods, cutting went on rapidly, because Turner had given orders to make things fly. Options expiring soon, and unforeseen delays that might add to difficulties. Going out to the camps one day, Turner looked the felling and logging and loading over. He bellowed to Williams, the woods boss:

"Dig right in with both sets of teeth! Put the saw gangs right up that creek among them big pines, and let's get them first." He pointed to the twin pines, where tradition said the last surrender of the Civil War had occurred. "Whack them two buddies down! Look how the lubber heads lean against each other!"

"O. K.," said Williams, and examined the two straight pines, whose trunks clung together forty feet above ground, and seemed to lie in repose in each other's embrace. "They are right funny now, hugging like that, ain't they?"

"They look like a pair of sweethearts," sniggered Ram Turner.

"Damn if they don't!" acknowledged Williams.

"Well, they been hugging each other long enough, now. Lay 'em low. Whoa!" Turner added, in after-

thought. "This is them 'surrender pines,' ain't they?"

"That's them."

"Well, them Yanks had a way of driving spikes and irons in trees, to tie their hosses to. When I was up in Tennessee working at a saw-mill, I seen one torn to finders when they was sawing a big oak that the Yanks had filled full of slugs of iron. When you cut these here pines, be on the lookout for any old iron."

"I'll have the boys look to that, chief," promised Williams.

Later the woods boss told the tale at the camp, and guffawed at the king-pin's superstitions. From the bull pen of the camp the tale followed the log train back to the saw-mill town. There it went to the table of the hotel, and there Red Needham heard it, and nearly split his fat sides laughing at the fool old Ram Turner was.

But Red's face abruptly grew sober, as an idea hit him between the eyes.

"Say," he asked the man next to him at table, who was telling the joke, "when are they cutting them trees?"

"Right off, I think."

"Fetching 'em right in from the woods, do you reckon?"

"Think so. Turner wants to get all the fine timber as fast as he can, so if he gets caught short on his options, he won't lose anything but sorry timber."

When Red went to bed that night, with the poker game doing a red-hot business in the room overhead, the plan hit him like a thunderbolt. Suppose, he reasoned, that through a combination of circumstances, Dave Wrenne got killed on the carriage? Say that the band saw broke and cut his chittlings to hash? That would be revenge enough. Not only on

Wrenne for causing that girl to kick Red, but it would even up the score Red had against Turner for cheating him at poker. A sword of vengeance that cut two ways.

Everybody would say, of course, that, if Wrenne got killed on the carriage, that it was the "killer." Most persons would firmly believe this, and for the bulk of the mill workers that would settle it.

But Turner would be sore as hell, because the mill would have to shut down for repairs, and the king-pin would ask a lot of questions, and if he found the least flaw, he'd raise hell and put a chunk under it. In the end Red might find his business in a jam. That disposed of any crude work in this scheme. It had to be air-tight.

Red continued to figure, and plan, and scheme. He had been sawing nine years now, in one-horse outfits in the piney woods, at big circle saw-mills, at band mills. Once he had seen a circle saw bust to slivereens by the saw hitting a railroad spike in a log. The flying sections of steel struck two workmen, cutting them both badly and one so severely that he later died. He recalled a story told him by the night-shift man at Moss Point how a band saw had cracked once, and but for a miracle would have whittled the block setter into beefsteak.

"The only thing that saved the block setter was," the sawyer explained, "that the saw was mid-length of the log, halfway between setter and dogs. Otherwise that steel snake would have wrapped itself around a man and what it would have done would be nobody's business!"

When Red Needham at last turned over to go to sleep, it seemed to him that Fate had taken charge of the matter.

THERE had been, all along, short intervals of shutdown of the mill for minor repairs and adjustments, and one of these occurred the next day. In the strange quiet that attended the stopping of the engine, men's talk came curiously in the hush. Dave Wrenne got off the carriage and went down to the water barrel at the far end of the shed. Red descended from the sawyer's platform, an elevation manned with levers to handle the carriage and other adjuncts, and mounted the carriage. For a long moment he stood there, contemplating the possibilities of his idea. He imagined that ribbon of steel biting into two inches of iron. The explosive snap, the writhing band twisting and flinging from the spinning pulley. Dave Wrenne throwing up his hands to ward off the terrible thing. His body, perhaps cut and gashed beyond recognition, lying in its blood on the floor. Men gathering about, murmuring in undertone, "It was the Killer. I could have told him so." So vivid was it that momentarily Red was dizzy, and he had to grab the lever to steady himself.

When he opened his eyes, for an instant, the sunlight, the moving figures of men, the rumble of lumber buggies up the yard runs, and the distant noise of the planer mill, had the unreality of a dream. He dropped off the carriage and went back to his cage.

If Red had needed anything to strengthen his resolution, it presented itself that noon when Melissa came to the mill in her roadster and, mounting the stairs to the shed, gave Red a brief eye and impersonal smile, and took old Ram and young Wrenne home to dinner, as if those bums could not walk to the house!

"Hell fire and fried billy goat!" Red swore in disgust and anger.

Red lost another month's wages in I O U's to Turner that night in the poker game. It sickened him with rage, and he descended the stairs to his room in a blind anger. He lay on his bed and brooded. What if the mill was forced to shut down, and Turner's options expired before the cut was finished? Red, if he could interest sneaking capital for the scheme, could buy up the options ahead of Turner and mash the lumberman.

"I'll do it, if I can!" he made up his mind. "I'll play sick and go to Mobile, and see a feller or two I know that have some cash!"

When he returned to his job three days later, Red discovered that Wrenne had been sawing in his absence, and doing a pretty slick job of it, too. It made Red swear blackly, because he was already glum about failing on the money prospect. "Too slim a chance," his men had told him.

That evening at sundown, Red, hearing the twin trees were on the trams, went around the pond when the whistle sounded to make sure. There they were—the pines under which the last surrender of the war was said to have taken place. Red had no interest in history, but he was deeply interested in the alibi he would have about Yanks driving iron into trees.

The following morning he observed that the logs had been unloaded and rolled into the pond.

The element of time was a vital factor in the probable success of Red's plan, for Wrenne might be shifted any day from the carriage. It was in Red's favor that none of the men wanted now to dog or set blocks. One evening at quitting time Red went down to the two big Negroes who poled logs from the pond on to the conveyer.

"Boys," he directed, "the last thing to-morrow evening get those twin pine logs up, will you?"

"Sure, boss," promised one of the blacks.

When the whistle shrilled late the next afternoon Red saw the logs coming up, and one rolled on the ramp which fed the carriage. He grinned.

SOMEWHAT late after supper Red slipped by way of the lumber yard and ran from the hotel to the mill. The shed was dark. The only light was from the furnace room, where steam was kept up all night. Creeping the length of the mill, he paused at the carriage, where he stepped the distance between block and rear dogs. The huge ugly head of the steam crane, that handled logs as if they were match stems, loomed out of the black hole close to the carriage track. Red caught it and swung over on the logs, leaping along to the top. There he flashed his light on the twin log.

Once he stopped, when he heard the hollow echo of old Dink Keefer's steps, going on his rounds. Red had no fear that the ancient man's eyes would see anything. The steps went away.

Red dropped down on the log, and sat in a deep study. His plan was as certain, he figured, as any human scheme can be. There is always the element of uncertainty in man's plans.

He rose and slipped to the saw-filing room, to which he had a key. There he had hidden a two-inch auger and a coupling pin, a trifle thicker than two inches at the head. The pin he had secreted under a bale of junk in a closet. It was a relic he had salvaged some days before from the junk at the time this plan had occurred to his mind.

He fumbled the pin in his hand, wiping the rust off with a rag, till the metal looked like old mummy flesh pitted with smallpox. He judged this was the way metal looked when embedded in wood.

He returned to the log and fell to work. Setting the auger so that the hole would correspond to the position of the block setter, he bored to the hilt. Then he set the pin in place, tapping with a rubber-covered wooden maul. The pin sank in two thirds of the way, then tightened as the thick end filled the hole.

Red continued to tap, until the wood fuzzed, yet deadening the sound. Toward the end of the hour he began to watch for old Keefer's return.

He saw the glow of Keefer's lantern. The man came, walking with unwonted alacrity. Red dropped below the log and waited till the glow disappeared.

He then rose and resumed his labor. He had to strike with considerable sharpness now, because of the wedge effect of the pin. Now and then Red mopped his face, for it was hard work, and he was impatient. The last few inches were literally hell to drive in, and once again Red had to hide from the watchman. At last, after a very long while, in which he used his flashlight time and again to check the slow disappearance of the pin, he drove it home. He cursed under his breath, and looked at his watch.

"Hell!" he muttered. "Past midnight!"

It dawned upon him that old Keefer had not made a round at eleven. The old man was rattling on the job. Red peered over at the hotel. The window of the room where the great poker parties took place was dark. Somebody had gone broke earlier than usual.

Red now computed the time of day when the log would hit the carriage. Just about eleven o'clock to-morrow morning. That was well indeed.

By using the steam crane, he could place the log just right. In the morning he'd give setter and doggers hell. And he would save the side of the log with the iron slug for the fourth round. By shooting the carriage at terrific speed till saw engaged pin, then at the precise second snatching the lever that slackened the speed, the trick would be turned.

The impact of saw against the pin would almost certainly smash the band in a thousand flinders. The temper of the band, the high speed at which it ran and the force of the carriage, and the resistance of the pin, would all contribute to a common result. The unbroken portion of the band would fly around the pulley and coil like a serpent of doom, and cut Wrenne to mince-meat. Besides, the quick slackening of speed, at a time when Wrenne probably would release hold of the lever in a reflex of self-protection, would sling him off, and break his neck or crack his skull. There could be no failure in such a murderous scheme.

It would be over in the twinkling of an eye. The accident would be the work of the Killer. The iron bar would be accounted for as the work of the Yanks. In years to come men would wag their heads and tell the tale: "I knew him well, and he was the third to be laid out by the Killer——"

But more than this, Turner would have a hell of a job getting men to work at the mill, especially on the carriage; and the outfit would be shut down for several weeks. So far Turner had not bought an extra

band, in the rush of other affairs; the filing was done at night.

Thus would Red be a winner all around.

THE next morning everything moved according to schedule.

At eleven o'clock two smaller logs lay between carriage and death log. It was a time of day when men who ate breakfast by lamplight had growling stomachs and nerves raw from hunger.

Red, if a trifle shaky for want of food, was otherwise cool and calm. His heart beat scarcely above its wonted tempo. Back and forth zoomed the carriage. The singing steel bit with mellow whine through the pine.

Abruptly, at eleven ten, the whistle signaled stop. Red hadn't counted on this. A second's thought told him it didn't matter. Turner approached the carriage as the hush of slowing machinery possessed the shed.

Ram stopped at the base of the sawyer's platform. "Red, come down and swap places with Dave." His eyes were chilly, direct; his lips wore a kind of smile.

For a second Red gulped. "W-what——"

"You heard me. Drop off there, and let Dave take the saw."

Something inside of Red grew tight; a wave of cold swept over him. He cursed. "What the hell—what's the big idea, anyhow? Say, what's the big idea?"

"Just want you and Dave to swap places, is all." And there Turner stood, waiting with the fixed look of unexpected doom. He was grinning now. Men moved in, as if to hear. Men do that in the monotony of ceaseless hours of labor in a saw-mill. Turner took advantage of it. "You're not a coward, I hope!"

"Coward!" Red bit out the word. His eyes narrowed almost to blindness. "What you mean, coward?"

"Ride that carriage, then!" He exploded in sarcastic laughter. "If you're not skeered of the Killer, come down and ride that carriage!"

The men, drawing nearer, broke out in goading guffaws. It was the way of rough men, when one man calls another a coward. It bit Red to the soul—perhaps because he was, despite his great size, at heart a veritable coward. He let out a great oath, which made the men laugh the louder. Dave had dropped off the carriage, and now stood at the bottom of the steps leading to the sawyer's stand.

Turner yanked his arm in a gesture. "Come down, Red. You gotta sight us, if you ain't a coward!"

"Come down, Red!" shouted a voice. "Crawl off yur high hoss and ride the Killer!"

"Ride the Killer, ride the Killer!" they began to chant. They roared in raw laughter as they chanted. "Red, ride the Killer and sight us!"

Red tugged at his collar and gulped. He looked at the log. If he refused, the men would rag him to death. The story would spread all over the pine belt. Turner would fire him; other boss men would ask, "You the feller that wouldn't ride the Killer?" Besides, to refuse would amount to a confession. They'd demand to know why. Why? The taunting sniggers of the men goaded him. At that moment Melissa Turner appeared from the saw-filing room. She seemed a part of this terrible conspiracy. Red heard her clear, daring voice; she put her hands on her slim hips and dared him with level eyes.

"Mr. Needham," she stated, "is not afraid of the Killer." There was a delicate contempt in her voice as

she nodded toward the motionless carriage.

A brave man would not have got on the carriage. But cowards often do what brave men will not dare. They shut their eyes and act, driven by the force of what those around will say if they don't. Battles have been won by this sort of cowardice.

Red drew a sharp, quivering breath and came down. In his mind dim plans milled. He might jamb the blocks. He clambered on the carriage. Wrenne could not saw fast. It would soon be noon. By killing a little time, the log would not be rolled on. As the laughter rose and fell. Red turned upon the audience, passing a slow hand over giddy face.

"Lemme see the whites of the eyes of the liar that says I'm skeered!" he bellowed.

"Just till noon," said Turner.

The machinery began to hum, the sound mounting to a roar. The carriage zoomed. Wrenne acted like a demon—sawed with the reckless energy of Red himself. Red hung weakly to the lever, setting to Wrenne's signals. He saw the watching girl; he saw old Turner. Red, giddy and blind, scarcely realized the intervening logs had been kicked out of the way and the fatal log rolled on, till it was done and the carriage was hurling back and forth.

Too late—too late.

In a state of paralysis Red clung to the lever. The log fell into place. Three sides, he could see the bare side to come last. His horror-pooled eyes focused; in five seconds the screaming band would bite the iron pin; the writhing ribbon of steel would wrap Red's defenseless body. His eyes went blind; his head reeled. Everything welled up in him as the carriage raced into the saw.

Red never knew what happened, for

he lost his grip in a blindness of fear and horror. When they picked him off the floor, where he had been slung when his hand relaxed, his skull was bashed in, and blood smeared his mop of red hair. The singing band had swept through the log, and absolutely nothing had happened, except the section of bark edge went blithely down the rolls toward the slab pile.

The accident of course brought the mill to a quick stop, and men who a moment since had been grinning now stood with eyes large with horror. Melissa fell back, covering her face. Turner, with an oath, his full, red cheeks abruptly colorless, stepped up and was the first to grab hold of his sawyer.

Wrenne, even whiter of face, clattered down from the sawyer's platform. Men improvised a stretcher. They carried Red Needham across to the hotel, while some one raced for the doctor. All over the hushed mill men's voices, low, said:

"It was the Killer, boys, I told you so."

IN the shadow of the Cape jessamines, Ram Turner, Melissa, and Dave stood in a brief huddle. Melissa said:

"If I'd known it was going to turn out like that, I wouldn't have gone

a step." She shivered with lingering horror. "You two said it was a joke."

Turner said impatiently, "Well, how could we know the cowardly fool was going to fall off there and break his skull? When Dave and I caught him last night, while Dave was pinch hitting for old Keefer, and I was coming back from a little game, and watched him put that iron slug in place, and figured out about what he was up to, how could we guess he couldn't take his own medicine? The fool, I thought he'd break down and confess! At least we could have the laugh on him when the slab fell off and there was no iron slug in it. But the cussed idiot—why, he was as white as a sheet, just before he tumbled off! I verily believe he was dead before he rolled off!"

"Well," Melissa wanted to know, "what happened to the iron slug, if you two saw him driving it in?"

"Hell!" swore Turner. "Dave and I got four blades about three o'clock this morning and rolled the slugged log off, and put its twin in place of it! There was no slug, that's what is——"

A man appeared at the gate.

"Mr. Turner," he called. "Red Needham's dead." Then he added solemnly, "The Killer got him!"

Jim-twin Allen rides the danger trail

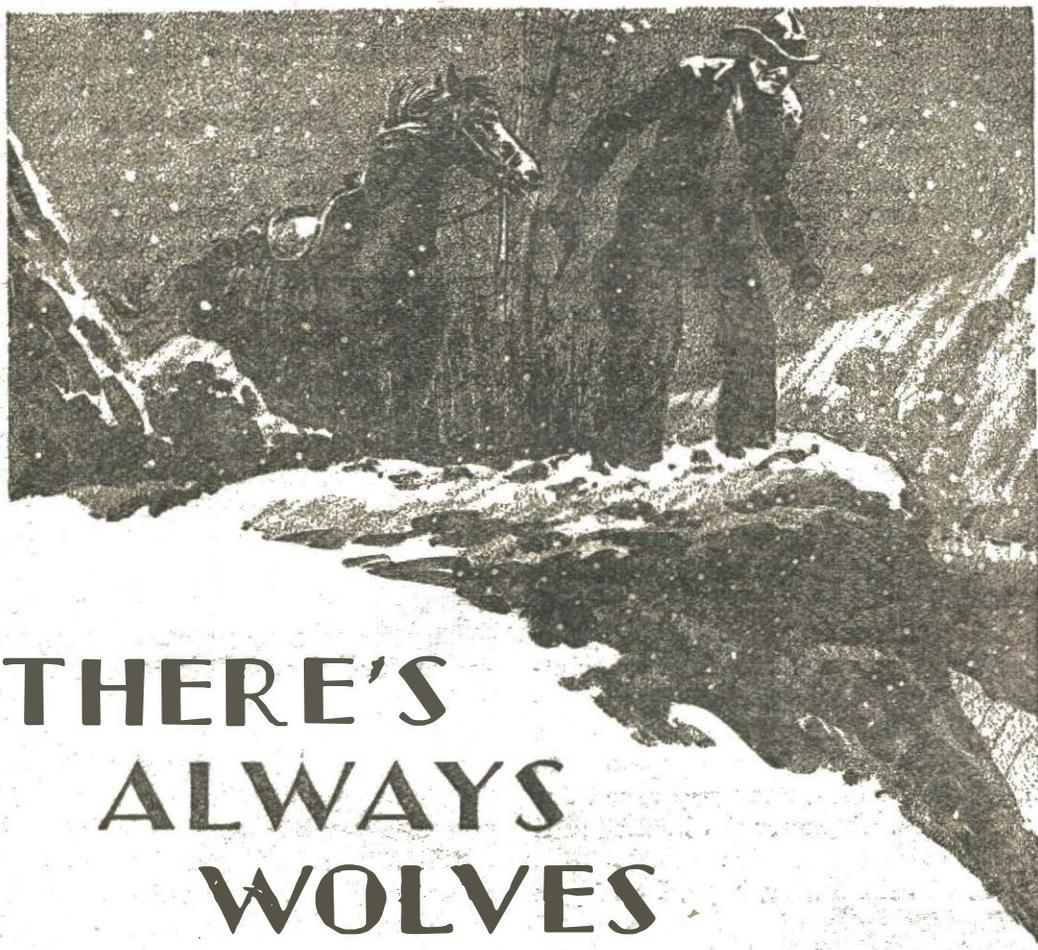
in

HAL DUNNING'S

FOR A FRIEND

A novelette with a punch in every paragraph.

In the next Complete



THERE'S ALWAYS WOLVES

By Hal Dunning

CHAPTER I WOLF'S WORD.

JIM-TWIN" ALLEN heard the first warning sound while he was sitting in front of the camp fire in the clearing. Instantly he was on the alert, and he brought his hands closer to his pair of six-guns. Being wanted as an outlaw, with rewards offered for him dead or alive, his first thought was that some one was making an attempt to capture him.

The noise had come from behind, so faint that a man without Allen's sense of hearing would not have no-

ticed it at all. Now it was gone, and there was no sound except the bubbling of the coffeepot on the fire. The small clearing was near the edge of a woods, where he had made camp the previous evening. The warm sun was just rising over the hills and beginning to take the chill out of the air. Having selected a lonely, remote spot, Allen was startled to think that some one was near.

King, Allen's shaggy wolf dog, jumped up from the spot where he had been lying near the fire. His hair bristled and his yellow eyes gleamed, and Allen knew he had caught the hidden man's scent.



The White Wolf and his forest brothers on the trail of a treacherous coyote.

Princess and Honey Boy, his pair of grays, were standing near by, watching him anxiously. Allen did not move until he heard another noise, the snapping of a twig behind him.

He spun about, swiftly drawing his six-guns. This time he was able to place the noise exactly. It had come from a clump of trees about fifteen yards away. Crouching, he leveled his guns at the spot and commanded:

"Take hold of your ears, and come out!"

He was surprised that his order brought no response.

"Shucks, King, it mustn't be anybody tryin' to grab us, or there'd be plenty of lead-slingin' by now," he remarked softly. "Maybe we're mistook about this."

Even as he spoke Allen caught the first glimpse of the man who had made the noises. He was lying prone on the ground, arms extended and fingers clawing. His head was raised, and he looked toward the clearing with agony in his eyes.

"Gosh, he's hurt," Allen exclaimed aloud.

REASSURED, Allen quickly holstered his guns and hurried forward. He stooped, grasped the prone man's shoulder, and turned him face up. He was middle-aged, with a broad face and a square, strong jaw. He was wearing a heavy sheepskin jacket, and

the front of it was darkly stained about a round hole. The fabric was torn and rubbed as though the man had dragged himself a long way.

"He's been shot. Gosh, he's pretty far gone," Allen told himself.

The man's hands and face were blue with the cold. His eyes fluttered open as Allen unbuttoned the jacket and inspected the wound. He said in a husky, gulping whisper:

"Stranger—help me. Help me."

"You better save your breath," Allen answered quickly, appalled at the severity of the man's injury. "You've lost lots of blood and you've plumb froze. I'll take care of you."

Allen, despite his small size, gathered the man into his arms and carried him toward the camp fire, though he staggered at almost every step. Lowering the man to the ground where it was warm, he poured a cup of steaming coffee, and began forcing some of it through the bluish lips. The man raised a shaking hand and pushed the cup feebly away.

"No use—stranger," he gasped. "I won't last much—longer."

The man was dying. His wound was so deadly, and he had suffered so severely from exposure, Allen marveled that he was alive now.

"You got to help me—stranger. You got—to take it back to—Madge."

"Sure I'll help you," Allen declared. "Go easy and tell me what you want me to do. You better start by tellin' me who you are and how you got shot, though."

"I'm Ash Cameron. Own the—Forty-four Ranch near Seminole. Pike shot me—Alaska Pike—left me for dead. He never got the box. I hid it soon as I knowed—he was trailin' me."

Ash Cameron was summoning his last strength to speak, and his

broken words were backed by a grim determination.

"I had the—box with me," the rancher went on with a terrific effort. "I saw Pike trailin' me and—knowed he was after it. I hid it and went on—tryin' to lose him—but he got me. Soon as he—found out I got rid of the box—he went off to hunt for it—leavin' me for dead.

"I started back for it—but I couldn't make it without a hoss. Pike shot—my hoss, too. Seein' the smoke of your fire, I come here—to ask you to get that box and—take it back to Madge."

"Where is it?" Allen asked.

"Two trees growin' out of rock—right this side of—Double Pass. It's under—flat stone. Will you—do it, stranger? Take it back—to Madge?"

"I reckon I will," Allen answered.

"Promise me."

"I promise."

"You're a real—gent, stranger. Look out for Alaska Pike. Guard the box—with your life—for it's all Madge has got in the world—now."

Ash Cameron's eyes closed. Allen had been supporting him, and the rancher went limp in his arms. King, who was watching from a distance of a few yards, raised his head and howled dismally. The man was dead.

Allen came to his feet with a sigh. "Gosh, he was meanin' to hang on till he told somebody, and he did. Poor fellow, he had plenty of nerve. Hush up, King!" he ordered as the big dog howled mournfully again.

"I reckon he told me everything he could, but he never said what's in that box," Allen thought. "It must be somethin' mighty important or valuable, because this Alaska Pike coyote killed him tryin' to get it. And he said it's everything in the world Madge has got. Wonder who Madge is?"

Allen's heart was warm with admiration for Ash Cameron. Cameron must have been shot the previous evening, and must have struggled all night to find some one who might help him. Knowing he was dying, his final thought had been to aid Madge.

"He died like a gent, and he must have lived like a gent. I'll sure do what he asked me to," Allen declared solemnly.

ALLEN immediately broke camp, with the intention of going at once to Double Pass and getting the mysterious box from its hiding place under the flat stone near the two trees. Before leaving the clearing he performed, as best he could, the last rites for Ash Cameron, carefully burying the rancher under a pile of rocks. Riding Princess, with King trotting alongside him and Honey Boy trailing behind with the pack, Allen rode west.

Though not thoroughly familiar with this section of country, he judged that Double Pass must lie among the rocky hills which shadowed the horizon ahead. The sun was higher now, and the air was warmer, but there was a promise of colder weather to come. The ground was bare, for the first snow had not yet fallen this far south.

"I reckon we should be headin' down country, only all the sheriffs along the Rio 're probably expectin' me to show up, and it wouldn't be healthy," Allen remarked to Princess as he rode. "Honest folks has homes to keep warm in, but outlaws like me have to take things as they find 'em along the long trail."

Allen was riding across a shallow, open valley, the floor of which curved down gently from the rocky range. He jogged along at a steady gait, entirely alone in that broad

scene. When he was about halfway to the hills, however, he glimpsed a movement ahead.

It was a rider, and Allen's attention was attracted because the man and horse were zigzagging back and forth. He watched as he rode on, and saw that the rider was studying the ground as he worked out into the valley. Sometimes he circled; sometimes he slipped out of the saddle and studied the hard earth. He was so intent on what he was doing that he did not notice Allen's approach until Allen was within a hundred yards of him.

Then he climbed onto his horse's back quickly, and turned. He rode off rapidly a short distance, but stopped and turned again. Evidently he had reconsidered his first notion of avoiding Allen. Allen waited curiously as the rider came toward him. He did not understand the man's strange movements.

"Howdy, stranger," the rider called when he was close. "You see anything of a stray hoss around here?"

He was a broad, heavy man. He seemed to overflow his saddle, and his weight told heavily on his horse. His face was triangular, his chin being sharp and pointed. His deep-set eyes regarded Allen suspiciously as he asked his question.

"Nope, I ain't seen any stray hoss," Allen answered, turning Princess toward the man. "What kind of an animal is he?"

"He's—why, he's a cinnamon bang-tail," the man answered hesitantly. "He's—he's got a white star on his forehead. He's a good hoss, and I don't want to lose him. I'm tryin' to pick up his trail."

"Has he been loose long?" Allen asked.

"No, he—he broke out of the corral last night." On sudden thought

the rider added, "My name is Jim Jerry, and I've got a ranch on the other side of Rock River."

"I'm headin' that way, and if I happen to see your cinnamon, I'll try to rope him and take him into town with me," Allen offered.

"Thanks," Perry said shortly. "I reckon I better be headin' on afore the danged brute gets clear across to Mexico."

He turned and galloped away at top speed. Allen watched him curiously a moment, then went on. As he jogged toward the hills he watched Perry until the rider disappeared. He shook his head and remarked to Princess:

"What that gent told me don't sound just right, old lady. He sort of hesitated when he talked, like he didn't know the color of his hoss, or what kind of markin's is on it. He didn't seem to be so awful sure of his own name, either. He never mentioned the name of his ranch, like a rancher naturally would, and he sure changed his mind quick about where to look for the hoss. He was searchin' for sign pretty careful here, and now he's a couple miles south.

"I reckon worryin' about Jim Jerry and the hoss ain't helpin' us carry out Ash Cameron's dyin' request, though. Keep runnin', you bag of bones."

PRINCESS maintained her pace tirelessly, while Honey Boy kept his distance, and King stayed by Allen's side.

Presently Allen was riding into the foothills of the rocky range. He rode parallel to them, searching for Double Pass. It was almost another hour before he located the peculiarly formed passage through the hills.

It was a narrow cut through the hills with a tower of thin rock

through its center, dividing it along most of its length. Satisfied he was on the right track, Allen turned back to find the two trees Ash Cameron had described.

He found them almost at once. They were gnarled and stunted, growing out of a cleft of a rock in the form of a V. When he reached them he dismounted, and searched for the flat rock. He was not long in finding it. It lay at the base of the boulder, and his keen eyes detected at once that it had recently been disturbed.

He dug his fingers under and raised it. Beneath it was a small, square, paper-wrapped package, in a scooped-out hollow. It was not more than eight inches square and two inches deep. As Allen raised it, the paper came loose. He peeled it off and saw that the box was of reddish-brown leather, the lid being fastened with a small brass hook.

He released the catch and raised the lid, revealing a layer of fluffy white cotton, which he lifted out. What he saw underneath made him gasp. Spread on another layer of cotton, glittering in the light of the sun, was an array of uncut gems—blood-red rubies and sparkling diamonds, brilliant emeralds and others such as Allen had never seen before.

"Gosh, they're plumb blindin'," he exclaimed aloud.

He started to count the gems, but soon gave up; there were more than a hundred. They were of various sizes, and seemed to glow with a living, colored fire. Allen did not doubt for a minute that every one of them was genuine. The contents of the box must be worth a fortune. He gazed at them with unbounded admiration, but suddenly he closed the box with a snap and jumped to his feet.

"Gosh, it's plain enough now why

Ash Cameron wanted to get these back where they belong. I could look at 'em all day, but I better be sloping out and findin' the woman he said to give 'em to."

He was reaching for Princess's reins when there came a sudden and startling interruption.

Upon the rocky hillside sounded the booming report of a gun. Allen's back was turned to the source of the explosion. Instantly a bullet clicked into the hard ground almost at his heels. At the same time King gave a sudden, pained whimper, and sprang aside. Allen whirled, drawing both six-guns, and leaped for the shelter of the boulder.

He risked raising himself for a fraction of a second to peer at the hillside. He could see nothing but the jagged rocks; there was no sign of the man who had fired at him. He dropped back immediately, to wait for developments. As he did so, King brushed against him and whimpered again.

"What's the matter, old fellow?"

King was crouching low, with one forepaw lifted off the ground. Great red drops were falling from it. Allen's wolfish eyes gleamed coldly, as he realized that King was hurt. He examined the wolf dog's foot tenderly, and was vastly relieved to find the injury was not serious.

"Gosh, pardner, you got the bullet that was meant for me," he exclaimed in a flat tone.

A LLEN'S face looked as old as the surrounding hills, and as hard as the rocks that composed them. Though he realized the dry-gulcher had not intended to hit King, the fact that the dog was wounded filled him with anger. King and his grays were Allen's only companions, and they meant more to him than anything else in the world.

COM—9B

Gripping his guns, he raised slowly to snatch another look at the hillside.

"Stay right beside me, old fellow," he cautioned the dog softly. "I'll fix up your paw soon's I get the chance."

He realized that the attack was connected with the box of gems. In his quick duck for shelter he had dropped the box, but it lay safely within reach.

"It can't be nobody else but that skunk, Alaska Pike," Allen reasoned. "He's probably been lookin' for the box around here ever since he shot Ash Cameron, and he saw me get it." Then a new thought struck him. "Nobody's seen me around here but that gent who called hisself Jim Perry. I reckon he wasn't huntin' for any stray hoss, and Perry ain't his name at all. He's Alaska Pike, and he was tryin' to pick up Ash Cameron's trail so it would lead him to the box."

Allen's uncanny intuition made him sure he had found the truth. This meant that "Alaska" Pike, or Jim Perry as he had called himself, had watched him from a distance and trailed him back toward the hills. He was hidden somewhere on the hillside now, waiting for a chance to take another shot at Allen.

"That coyote is sure a cold-blooded killer!" Allen exclaimed aloud. "He murdered Ash Cameron to get the stones, and now he's aimin' to bushwhack me."

Allen was at a disadvantage. Though he was safe as long as he stayed behind the boulder, there was no way of leaving its shelter without exposing himself to another bullet. Pike, on the other hand, was securely hidden and was in such a position that he could see Allen the moment he might try to make a break. Realizing this, Allen looked

about, striving to find a way of escape.

"I won't stand a chance of deliverin' the box, like I promised Ash Cameron, unless I can get through the pass," he thought quickly.

He determined upon a subterfuge. It would involve a grave risk, but there was no other way. Still holding his twin six-guns tightly, he raised himself again. He deliberately exposed himself to the guns of the man hidden on the hillside.

His move brought an immediate result. Two loud reports sounded. Allen was watching carefully, and leaped back, but not before he located the spot from which the shots had been fired. He saw the puffs of smoke spring into sight at the edge of a tooth-shaped projection half-way up the mound of rock. Pike was hiding behind it, that much was certain.

Then Allen rose again. This time his guns went into action before another attack could be launched at him. He fired so rapidly that smoke and flame seemed to pour from his guns in a steady stream. He saw chips of stone fly from the tooth, and knew that now Pike must be huddling behind it to escape the hail of lead. Grasping the opportunity, Allen swiftly continued with his planned moves.

He snatched up the box, leaped onto Princess's back and kicked her ribs. The old gray jerked into a gallop that carried him rapidly toward the base of the hills. Honey Boy bolted along behind, and King limped after him as fast as he could. Allen kept his eyes on the rock, and when he glimpsed a movement behind it, he fired again.

Another bullet came from Pike's gun, but the shot flew wild. Princess bounded toward the pass, giving all her strength to the run. Allen's

quick move put him almost immediately in a position from which Pike's gun could not reach him. He did not slow down, however. He kept the old gray racing straight for the pass.

It was not many minutes before Allen, grays, and dog hurried out the other end of the pass, and found smooth, open country ahead.

Finally he pulled rein and stopped, sure that he was far out of reach of the bushwhacker. His first act was to examine King's injured paw and bandage it tightly with strips torn from his bandanna. Then he climbed onto Princess's back again and grimly hurried on, with the box of gems buttoned snugly inside his jacket.

CHAPTER II. CORNERED.

AFTER noon Allen rode into the town of Rock River, a busy, neat little cowtown on the eastern bank of the swift-flowing stream. He jogged past the crossroads and dismounted in front of the Corral, a large structure which housed a bar.

"Reckon I'd better ask some questions afore goin' on, old lady," he remarked to Princess as he tethered her. "The woman I've got to give the box to might be in Seminole, where Ash Cameron come from, and she might not, so I've got to find out."

He stooped and ruffled King's collar affectionately before going on. Ordering the dog to stay beside Princess, Allen crossed the street. Almost opposite was a square building, with a large door on which the words were painted: "Rock River National Bank." Across the door a board was nailed, and on it was the crudely lettered word: "Closed."

Allen gave it only a glance and went on toward another small building on the front of which was a bulletin board covered with placards.

It was the sheriff's office. In front of it Allen paused, looking at one card which was more prominent than any of the others. It read:

\$16,000 REWARD
For the Capture of
JIM-TWIN ALLEN
Dead or Alive

"Anythin' I can do for you, stranger?"

The words were addressed to Allen by a man who stopped at his side. He was short and chunky, with a bulging chest and great hairy hands. His face was good-natured, and there was a genial light in his blue eyes. Seeing Allen pause in front of the bulletin board, he had crossed the street from the Corral to make his inquiry.

"I'm lookin' for the sheriff," Allen answered.

"Sheriff Norton ain't in town," the stocky man answered. "He's gone down to Seminole on official business, and left me in charge. I'm Dusty Madden, his deputy."

Allen grinned, wondering what Deputy "Dusty" Madden would do if he realized he was talking with the notorious outlaw whose name stood out above all others on the board. Allen's youthful appearance was completely deceiving, and few ever suspected his identity if they did not know his name. He often depended upon this for security, and he never failed to appreciate the humor of the situation.

"I reckon you can tell me what I want to know, Madden," he remarked. "I want to find out if anybody around here knows a gent named Ash Cameron."

"Sure, I know him well," Madden replied. "He owns the Forty-four spread, down by Seminole. He was in town just yesterday mornin'. If you want to see him personal I reckon you'll have to wait a space till he gets back, for he left here to go to Fanstock and catch a train East."

Allen grew solemn. "I was wonderin' if you could tell me about a woman he knows named Madge."

"Madge Cameron is Ash's wife," Madden explained. "If you want to see her, she's on the Forty-four now, I reckon."

"That's what I wanted to find out," Allen declared promptly, relieved to have obtained the information. He hesitated, then decided to tell Madden what had happened. "I reckon Ash Cameron won't be comin' back no more. I found him out in the valley, dyin'. I was with him when he cashed in."

"Ash Cameron's dead!" Madden asked quickly, dismayed. "Why, that's a powerful shame. Cameron was one of the finest gents who ever lived. How'd it happen?"

"A skunk named Alaska Pike shot him," Allen declared in a flat tone.

Madden's surprise turned to bitter indignation. "Alaska Pike? Why, the low-down coyote. He was in town yesterday, and left right after Ash did."

"Yeah, he trailed Cameron and shot him and left him for dead. Cameron told me about it just afore he died."

"Pike's a killer, all right," Madden exclaimed. "I always said he should be looked out for. Why'd he kill Ash Cameron, kid?"

"Tryin' to get a box Cameron had with him. Cameron outwitted him, though, and hid it so Pike couldn't find it. Cameron told me where to get it and with his last breath he

made me promise to deliver it to his wife. I'm aimin' to do that pronto."

"A box?" Madden repeated. "I remember Cameron carryin' a little package with him when he left here. You got it now?"

"Yeah," Allen answered, and drew the jewel case from inside his jacket. "He said it's mighty important, and I've got to take it to Mrs. Cameron no matter what happens."

"Gosh, I'm sure sorry to hear Ash is dead," Madden exclaimed regretfully. "It's lucky you found him afore he died, and he told you who shot him. I'm goin' to go lookin' for Alaska Pike pronto, but I reckon you better turn the box over to me, and I'll take it down to the Forty-four and tell Mrs. Cameron what happened."

"Nope," Allen refused with a shake of his head. "I promised Cameron I'd deliver it myself, and I ain't goin' to let it go out of my hands."

"You mean you don't trust me to keep it safe?" Madden demanded. "I reckon I can take care of it lots better than a little underfed kid like you."

ALLEN'S refusal was so blunt that Madden immediately realized the hopelessness of arguing with him. He hesitated, then glanced across the street at a man who was just coming out of the Corral. He immediately called:

"Stanley! Chris Stanley, come over here a minute."

Stanley immediately turned toward Madden. He was a tall man with a ruddy face. His boots were highly polished, and he was wearing a black bearskin coat. Madden immediately told him of Ash Cameron's death, and Stanley expressed his sincere sorrow. Turning back to Allen, the deputy explained:

"Stanley owns the Circle S spread,

right next to the Forty-four. He's been neighbors with the Camerons for years. If you won't give me the box with the gems, kid, maybe you'll ride back with him when he goes."

"I reckon he can't do that, Madden," Stanley answered. "I'm leavin' town right away to go to Tuckison. My brother's plenty sick, and I've just got word to come in a hurry. I won't be gettin' back to my ranch for maybe more'n a week. I reckon somebody else better go along to the Forty-four with the kid, though, to make sure the box gets there safe, because it's powerful important."

"Those gems are an inheritance that Mrs. Cameron received from her older brother about ten months ago. He was a jeweler in New York, and he collected those stones. Each of 'em is perfect, and mighty valuable. When he died he left 'em to Mrs. Cameron, sayin' in his will that she was to keep 'em and not sell 'em unless circumstances forced her to."

"I heard Mrs. Cameron received an inheritance, but I didn't know what it was," Madden remarked.

"They didn't want word to get around, so they never said much about it. A few folks knew it, though. I'm one and I reckon Alaska Pike found out about it somehow. Mrs. Cameron kept 'em in the safe in the bank until the bank was closed up, then she got 'em out and kept 'em on the ranch. Right afterward somebody tried to steal 'em, but didn't get 'em. I reckon now it was Alaska Pike did it, but nobody knew at the time."

"Mrs. Cameron wanted to keep the gems just as they were brought to her, because her brother spent years collectin' 'em. The bank goin' broke put the Forty-four in a tight place, though. The State examiners, when they took charge, began collectin' all

notes and demandin' all mortgages be paid up, so the bank could be liquidated. The only way the Camerons could raise the money to pay the mortgage was by sellin' the stones, and they decided only a couple of days ago to do it."

"That's why Ash Cameron was headin' East, then," Madden said.

"Yes, he was takin' the gems to Chicago to sell some. They had to have the money by the end of the month. Alaska Pike must've found out about Ash's plans—and now poor Ash is dead. Lucky he kept Pike from gettin' the stones, otherwise Mrs. Cameron would lose the Forty-four, after devotin' years to buildin' it up."

"Has she still got time to get the stones to Chicago, somehow, and sell 'em?" Madden asked.

"I reckon so, only she'll have to hurry. She's one of the finest women in the world, deservin' of the best, and it would be a shame if the ranch was took away from her. She wouldn't have anything left, and she'd have a mighty hard time gettin' along on that ranch, now that Ash is gone."

"Then there's all the more reason for me livin' up to my promise. I'll take the stones to Mrs. Cameron pronto," Allen declared.

"Yeah, but it wouldn't be safe to let you take 'em alone," Madden spoke up quickly. "Alaska Pike wants 'em bad, and he ain't apt to let 'em go so easy. He might make another try to get 'em, and if he did you wouldn't stand a chance agin' him, kid."

Allen smiled slowly at this. "He's already tried to get 'em from me since killin' Cameron," he remarked, and went on to explain the attack on him just after locating the box in the hidden spot under the boulder near Double Pass. He had scarcely

finished his account before Dusty Madden exclaimed excitedly:

"That settles it. Pike knows you've got the box, kid, and like as not he's waitin' for another chance to get it away from you. I'll ride with you to the Forty-four to make sure you get the box to Mrs. Cameron safe."

"Sure suits me," Allen agreed promptly, "only we better be startin' pronto."

"I'll be all set to go as soon as I find Ed Nash and put him on the job of findin' Alaska Pike's trail in the hills. Ed is Sheriff Norton's second deputy. I'll be ready in a few minutes," Madden said hurriedly.

SATISFIED with this arrangement, Allen went about making his own preparations before starting the trip. As Stanley hastened away, he went to the hitchrack where he had left his grays and King. He inquired of the barkeep in the Corral and learned that an old doctor lived down the street. Allen found the doctor at home, told him of King's injury, and obtained his permission to leave the dog there while he was gone. Before he left, Allen ruffled King's shaggy collar and spoke gently in his ear.

"Sorry, old fellow, but this is one trip you can't make with me. Your foot's too bad for much travelin' until it heals up. I reckon I won't be gone long, though."

Then he hurried into a stable on the opposite side of the road and dickered for Honey Boy's keep during his absence. Striking a bargain, he ran into a near-by restaurant and out again carrying two large apple pies. When the grays saw him coming with the pastry, they tossed their ears and nickered yearningly.

Broadly grinning, Allen broke the pies into chunks and fed them to his

horses. Their teeth snapped wickedly as they gulped down the sweet stuff. Allen's performance attracted a laughing crowd, but he paid no attention. When the pastry was all gone Allen licked his sticky fingers and led Honey Boy to the stable.

The younger gray snorted angrily when he realized he was going to be left behind, and Allen had difficulty getting him into a stall. At last he managed it, and hurried back to where Princess was waiting. Dusty Madden had found Ed Nash, and was talking with the second deputy in front of the sheriff's office. Nash mounted his horse and rode quickly out of town toward the rock hills, while Madden rode to Allen's side.

"Reckon we're all set," he announced.

Under his left arm he was carrying a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun. Around his waist hung a huge cartridge belt partly filled with twelve-gauge shells. Besides this he was carrying a regulation six-gun. When Allen saw all this armament he grinned broadly.

"Looks like you ain't goin' to take any chance of Pike's gettin' the box," he bantered.

Madden flushed. "I ain't packin' all this hardware because I'm afraid of Pike, kid. I used to be the shotgun messenger on the stage, and I'm right handy with it, that's all. Besides, I'd rather use it than a six-shooter. It can do plenty of damage and disable a man without killin' him, and I don't hanker to kill nobody. I'm a deputy, with the law on my side, but all the same I don't aim to kill any man if I can help it."

"Yeah, I know how you feel about takin' a man's life," Allen answered in a low, sad tone that made the deputy eye him curiously.

They started off together, heading north. Allen kept the precious

box buttoned snugly inside his jacket as they rode. The sky was overcast and gray now, and the feeling of a storm was in the air. At the same time the wind was shifting, and the temperature was rising slightly, and Allen judged that before long snow would be flying. They were a mile outside of Rock River before Madden spoke again.

"This skunk called Alaska Pike had hard feelin's agin' Ash Cameron. Pike was workin' on the Forty-four until about a week ago. He's a mean critter, without any heart in him. Cameron spoke to him more'n once about mishandlin' hosses afore the real trouble broke out between 'em. The break come when Pike killed one of Cameron's best mounts.

"Pike was drinkin' that day and feelin' uglier than usual. He'd come in from ridin' fence, and I reckon he'd been spurrin' the hoss too hard. One of its sides was bleedin', and it was mighty skittish from such mean handlin'. Pike started to get off near the corral when the hoss shied and knocked him down. There happened to be a hammer lyin' handy, and Pike grabbed it. He's got a temper like a devil, and he hit the hoss on the head afore anybody could stop him. The hoss dropped dead on the spot."

"That shows he ain't fit to live," Allen declared tonelessly.

"It sure didn't set right with Ash Cameron," Madden continued. "He seen it happen. He went right up to Pike and told Pike he was goin' to settle things then and there. They had a terrible fight. Cameron was hurt bad, but Pike got the worst of it. When it was over, Cameron ordered Pike to get off the Forty-four and stay off. Pike cursed Cameron and swore he'd kill him. After that Pike hung around Rock River, drunk most of the time, probably

waitin' for his chance to get back at Cameron.

"That's the kind of a coyote we're up agin'. You were plenty lucky to get away from him the first time, kid. The next time you might not come out on top. He's a big, powerful brute, and if he didn't shoot you dead he'd break you in two with his bare hands."

"Maybe not," Allen answered quietly. "A wolf can drag down a bull moose. Pike's goin' to pay for his killin's sometime, and there's always wolves in the foothills."

Madden peered at Allen again, strangely. To his surprise he saw that Allen's face was no longer that of a carefree boy; it looked bleak and old and inhuman. Allen's voice sounded flat and emotionless, and caused a cold shudder to pass down Madden's spine. For a long while after that they rode on silently.

CHAPTER III.

LEFT FOR DEAD.

SNOW began falling in large flakes as Allen and Madden followed the course of the rushing river. There was no wind, and the snow whitened the ground immediately. It sifted out of the sky at a prodigal rate, and stuck moistly to whatever it touched. Allen and Madden turned up the collars of their jackets and kept going at a steady gait.

"Reckon it'll be pretty deep by the time we get to the Forty-four," the deputy declared, lowering his head. "We've got about ten miles more to go."

"Shucks, Princess and me're used to it," Allen answered briefly.

They found it necessary to shelter their faces with their hat brims, and could give only occasional glances at the trail ahead. Madden

knew it well, however, and had no difficulty leading the way. They kept close to the bank of the river, along which great boulders were piled in confusion, growing white under the layer of sticky snow. They traveled without talking, hurrying as best they could.

Then, suddenly, came the crackling report of a gun, muffled by the thickly falling flakes. It came without warning, from a point not far away. At the moment Allen and Madden were both leaning forward in their saddles while the snow plastered itself against them, and were utterly unprepared for an attack.

The instant the shot sounded, a moan came from Dusty Madden. He slumped forward in the saddle, quickly braced himself, and reached for his six-gun. The butt of it was covered with snow, and his fingers were suddenly weak. It slipped out of his grasp and fell to the blanketed ground. Allen, at the same time, snatched at his twin guns, kicked Princess's ribs, and spun around.

"Quick, get behind the rocks," Madden gasped.

For a second Allen did not respond. He peered about, ready to answer the attack, but he saw no sign of the assailant. There were many places among the outcropping rocks where the dry-gulcher might be hiding. That the man who had fired the shot was Alaska Pike he could not doubt. Pike, as Madden has feared, had spied on them and trailed them in another attempt to steal the box of precious stones. He was hiding behind one of the rocks now, waiting for another chance to shoot.

Glancing aside swiftly, Allen saw that Madden had fallen forward and was hanging to his horse's mane. On the back of Madden's jacket was a

splotch of red. Realizing that the deputy was badly hurt, and that he was at a grave disadvantage in the open, Allen whirled again, snatched up the dangling reins of Madden's pony, and spurred toward the bank of the river, pulling the other horse after him.

He was less concerned with finding protection for himself than about the safety of the box, and Madden's wound. He sped toward a group of pointed, fingerlike rocks rising almost at the very brink of the river bank. As he pulled to a stop behind them another shot rang out, and the bullet glanced off one of the rocks.

Allen jumped off Princess's back. At that moment Madden groaned again, and his hold on his horse's mane loosened. He would have spilled off the saddle and fallen to the ground if Allen had not caught him. Allen lowered him gently to the snow. The deputy's eyes opened wide and he gasped for breath.

"Don't let him—get the box, kid!"

Then a shudder went through his body. The yellow gleam in Allen's wolfish eyes grew deeper as he realized that Madden was dead. Allen straightened, gripping his twin six-guns, and peered around.

"Stay where you are, old lady," he cautioned his gray. "We'll be eatin' lead pills ourselves if we ain't careful."

Allen was still unaware of Alaska Pike's exact position. Since the killer might be huddled behind any one of a score of rocks, he could not guess from what point the next attack would come. Crouching, he looked around in the hope of finding some way of working along the river bank and increasing the distance between himself and the gunman, while keeping out of sight.

He was dismayed to find that he

had unwittingly put himself in a pocket. There was only a narrow strip of ground between the tall rocks which protected him and the chasm of the river. The water was rushing past ten yards below, through a channel that sloped steeply on both sides. Allen knew at a glance it would be impossible to cross the swift stream.

At the same time it was impossible for him to move either up or down along the brink of the chasm. On each side the rocks projected behind the edge, forming a high barrier. Though it would not be difficult to scale either of them afoot, there was absolutely no way of getting a horse across them. Allen knew that to crawl away without Princess would be suicide, for Pike could swiftly ride ahead, overtake and corner him.

"Gosh, old lady, we sure put ourselves in a bad hole," he gasped, when he realized his predicament. "It looks like the box is nearer bein' lost right now than it ever was afore."

ALASKA PIKE was crouching behind a boulder almost opposite the rocks sheltering Jim-twin Allen. He was able to see that Allen's retreat was cut off. He grinned evilly, realizing he had his man cornered.

"Reckon those pretty little stones ain't goin' to get away from me this time," he thought gloatingly. "All I've got to do is wait for the kid to show hisself, and put a bullet in him."

Feeling sure he would succeed, Pike didn't hurry, but made the most of his advantage. He looked around and carefully sized up the situation. Within a few feet of him was another big rock, and a yard farther on was another. He judged that it

would be easy to shift position without being seen, and gradually work closer to Allen so that he could make a surprise attack from a new angle.

He reached the next rock at a single bound and dropped behind it. He knew that Allen had not seen him, and would not suspect that he was shifting. Still, he considered the next step cautiously before taking it. Then he raised again, crouched to jump, and leaped to a spot behind the next boulder.

In this slow, deliberate manner Pike gradually worked himself fifty yards downriver, ducking from the shelter of one rock to another. Each time he settled, his thick lips spread in a crafty grin, and he congratulated himself. During all the time it took Pike to cross that distance, piece by piece, not a shot was fired, and neither man caught a glimpse of the other. Pike and Allen were playing a waiting game, but Pike was steadily strengthening his position.

At last Alaska Pike found himself near the brink of the river chasm, and almost within reach of one of the projecting rocks which hemmed Allen in. He could still see the entrance of the pocket in which Allen was imprisoned, but at the same time it was far less likely now that Allen would see him. Finding less caution necessary, he began moving more frequently, and in longer jumps. Presently he was crouching at the base of the projecting rock, on its outer side, knowing that Allen was separated from him by only a few yards.

He held his gun ready in his right hand, and his lips formed an evil grin, as he climbed the side of the rock. There were many footholds, and the thick snow deadened the sounds he made, so that even Allen's keen ears could not detect them. Inch by inch he crawled higher, un-

til he was almost at the peak of the projection. Then, slowly, he raised himself so that he could look down into the pocket.

Allen was standing behind one of the fingerlike points, his guns in his hands, motionless and waiting. The long silence puzzled him, but he had decided to take no foolhardy chances by showing himself or firing first. His back was turned to Pike, and he was entirely unaware of the killer's nearness.

PIKE found his long-sought opportunity at that moment, and grasped it. He raised his gun and fired point-blank at Allen. The explosion rocked through the white silence like a clap of thunder. He knew instantly that he had hit Allen.

A cry came from Allen's lips as he leaped away and whirled in mid-air. He came to his feet facing Pike, and saw the man standing on top of the projection, but he was stunned by the surprise of the attack and by the bullet which had struck him. He jerked up his twin guns to fire, but at that instant Pike shot again. One of Allen's legs buckled under him. He fell to the snow and rolled over.

The next instant he was clawing desperately for support on the edge of the chasm. In leaping back, he had come very close to the brink, and his fall threw him halfway over it. The snow slipped under him, and a patch of loose shale broke away. He dangled there a moment, hanging to a sharp edge of stone with his fingers. Then his strength left him, and he let go.

Alaska Pike saw Allen spill over the brink and disappear. His ugly grin grew wider as he clambered down into the space which had held Allen prisoner. Princess shied away from him, her whole body trembling;

she tossed her wicked head and bared her teeth with a vicious snap. Pike snarled and swung his gun at her savagely, then he stepped to the edge of the chasm and looked down.

Allen was lying motionless, on his side, at the edge of the water. His two six-guns had fallen from his limp hands and lay in the soft whiteness beside him. There was a fresh wet spot on his jacket, and the snow was colored a bright red under him. A harsh, satisfied chuckle came from Pike's throat.

"I reckon it takes more'n a kid like you to lick me," he declared triumphantly to Allen's still form.

He considered that, having now removed the last obstacle from his way, he had better hurry. The trail between Rock River and Seminole was much used by travelers, and some one might come riding along soon. Though this was unlikely during a storm, Pike realized it was a possibility and that above all he must not be seen on the spot. His intention was to get the box of precious stones and make a get-away as fast as possible.

A glance around the space behind the tall rocks showed him the box was not anywhere in sight. He advanced toward Princess very cautiously, growling threats at her, and caught her reins. Holding her head down with a powerful arm, he quickly searched Allen's saddlebags and blanket roll. Only a moment's inspection was enough to tell him the box was somewhere else.

Deciding it must be on Allen's person, he lowered himself cautiously over the edge of the chasm and began crawling down the steep slope. He was able to find footholds, and lowered himself to the edge of the water without great difficulty. Alaska Pike grasped Allen's shoulder, turned him face up, and imme-

diately saw the shape of the box inside his jacket. With a throaty ejaculation he tore open Allen's jacket and snatched up the case.

He quickly opened it and tore out the upper layer of cotton. His face darkened and his eyes shone with savage anger. The box was empty!

He stared at it a moment, stunned, before fully realizing that the gems were not in the case. With a wrathful gesture he snatched out the bottom layer of cotton, only to find nothing. Without a doubt there was not a single gem inside it.

"Got 'em hid, have you?" he snarled aloud, staring down at Allen's limp body.

He tossed the box aside angrily, and began a search of Allen's jacket. He probed into the pockets and found a few odds and ends, but no precious stones. He dropped the stuff into the snow as he dug it out, then thrust his fingers into the pockets again, but without avail. Nothing else was in them.

PIKE'S anger increased. He continued the frantic search by emptying the pockets of Allen's vest and patched overalls. He found some money in small amounts, and other knickknacks, but not a sign of the precious stones. When he straightened, face reddened with rage, he was sure that the object of his search was not in any of Allen's pockets.

"I'll find 'em!" he swore savagely.

He was determined not to overlook any possible place Allen might have hidden the gems. He felt over every inch of the little man's body, and even pulled off Allen's moccasins, without locating a single stone. At last he straightened again, convinced that they were nowhere on Allen's person.

"He had 'em, all right; he wasn't

carryin' any empty box with him," Pike snarled. "He never left the place behind the rocks once he got into it, so they must be up there."

Abandoning Allen, he climbed the slope laboriously and crawled back to the level ground. Immediately his eyes lighted on the body of Dusty Madden. Feeling sure he would find the stones in the deputy's clothing, he began another search. He spent a long time at the task and left no possible hiding place untouched, but he found nothing he wanted. All the while his anger mounted, and his anxiety to leave the scene increased.

Turning away from Madden, he looked around the small open space with red-shot eyes. A new thought struck him, that Allen had hidden the jewels in one of the crannies of the rocks. Pike saw no place, however small, where the smooth snow had been disturbed, and knew that Allen could not have buried the stones without leaving telltale traces, but he began another search regardless. Even though hunting under the snow was an irrational procedure, he was driven to a frenzy by the thought that he had again been outwitted, and was crazily determined to overlook no possibility however unlikely.

He dug into the cracks of the rocks, pushing his fingers into them as deep as he could. Gradually he worked over every crevice in the one projection and then, with a snarl of rage, turned to the other. His examination of them brought absolutely no results.

He stepped back and then began a search of the ground. He snatched up the snow in great handfuls and flung it aside, and scraped the ground clean as he went along. In his anxiety and fury he was scarcely sane. He did not stop searching the

ground until he had cleared the entire space behind the rocks by brushing the snow down into the chasm after sifting every bit of it between his fingers.

Baffled and frustrated, he sprang up, his eyes flaring with a mad light. Again he realized that to remain on the scene was dangerous. Some one was almost sure to come along the trail, in spite of the storm, before night came, and even now dusk was beginning to darken the sky. All of Rock River must know of Ash Cameron's murder by now, and Pike was sure he was being looked for. When Allen and Madden failed to appear at the Forty-four, an alarm would certainly be sent out. Pike realized that, unless he wished to run the risk of being captured and hanged, he had better leave the country as fast as possible, whether he had the gems or not.

Still, he paused, trying to think of some new place in which he could search for the stones. Try as he might, he could not think of one. Apparently he had exhausted every possibility. He swore bitterly. Then, an incurable thief at heart, he looked around for something else he might steal.

In the snow beside Allen lay the small amount of money that had been taken from his pockets, and his twin six-guns, but Pike decided they were not worth climbing down and up the bank again for. He had found little of value in Madden's pockets, and scorned the stuff. Then his gaze turned to Madden's shotgun, and lighted with avarice. He unstrapped the boot, unbuckled the deputy's belt of shells and fastened it around his own waist. Seeing nothing else he wanted, he hurried back to the trail.

His horse was hidden behind a boulder not far away. He hastened

to it, cleaned the snow off the saddle, fastened Madden's gun in place, and mounted. Then he spurred his horse and galloped across the open country toward the north.

CHAPTER IV. THROUGH THE SNOW.

DARKNESS settled rapidly, and the snow continued its heavy fall. In the open space behind the finger rocks Princess moved about nervously, tossing her head and baring her teeth when the smell of blood came into her nostrils. As the coating of snow grew thicker on her she shook herself like a dog. Standing on the edge of the brink, she looked down at the still form lying below and whinnied as though pleading with Allen to get up and come to her.

The sound was the first Allen heard as consciousness returned to him. Even before he opened his eyes he tried to answer, but his lips barely moved and his voice was scarcely a whisper. Then he became conscious of the river rushing past, and gradually remembered where he was and what had happened. The thought that Alaska Pike may have found the gems filled him with a grim, new strength.

He opened his eyes, stared up into the black sky, and brought himself to his elbows. There was a throbbing pain in his side where Pike's bullet had hit him, and when he moved it grew more intense. As his head cleared he dragged himself to his knees and feebly drew his jacket tightly about him. He was stiff with the cold and could scarcely change his position, but he raised his head and saw Princess gazing down at him.

"Reckon I ain't dead yet, old lady," he managed to say.

Knowing he was still too weak to attempt to climb up the wall of the chasm, he settled back. Because of the cold he could examine his wound only briefly, but he determined that it was not gravely serious. The bullet had passed through the soft flesh just above the hip bone, but blood was no longer flowing. Allen stuffed his shirt around it, buttoned up his clothes, and struggled to his feet.

His first attempt brought on a spell of dizziness which forced him down. After a while he made a second try and this time succeeded in staying up. With all the strength he could summon he began the climb. Each time he found a foothold he was forced to pause, hanging to the sheer rock until he could lift himself a few more inches. When, at last, he wriggled over the edge of the chasm, he sprawled out again, while Princess danced around him and nickered joyfully.

It was not long before Allen found enough strength to stand again, and slowly move about the pocket in an attempt to learn what Alaska Pike had done.

Venturing out to the trail, he followed with his eyes the tracks in the snow that Pike had left. He saw that they led to a near-by boulder, then off toward the north. He tottered back to Princess and supported himself on her, breathing hard.

"We got to—traíl him, old lady," he said brokenly to the gray. "He's killed two men now—and I ain't goin' to stop followin' him—till I present him with a harp."

Princess squealed as though in heartfelt agreement with this plan. Allen, however, could not bring himself to leave the spot without first doing all he could for Dusty Madden. He untied his blanket, and spread it over the deputy, then weighted it down heavily with

stones. The snowfall meant that wolves and coyotes would soon be foraging for food, and the blanket would protect Madden from them. That done, Allen turned back to Princess. She stood perfectly still while he pulled himself laboriously into the saddle.

"Get goin', old pie-eater," he gasped, leaning forward and bracing himself.

"We sure owe it to Ash Cameron and Dusty Madden to get that skunk, old lady," Allen declared grimly as the gray sped along. "And we've got to get the stones back to Mrs. Cameron, too."

THE snow seemed to fill the night with a soft glow in spite of the heavily overcast sky. Allen's keen eyes easily distinguished Pike's trail. Princess ran with her head down, as though following a scent like a bloodhound. As the long minutes passed, Allen's strength steadily returned.

"He's got a big start, old lady, but you're a better hoss'n his is," he declared while the gray twitched her ears to listen. "Keep goin'."

Princess maintained her speed tirelessly, following the marks in the snow without Allen's direction. Her ability to track was almost human. For more than an hour she raced along, across the valley, into a wood, and then out again. Though the falling snow was gradually making Pike's trail more indistinct, it still could be seen. Allen watched it intently.

"Gosh, when he got this far he began to slow down," he exclaimed suddenly. "I reckon his hoss was tirin', and he thought he was safe and not bein' followed. We're gainin' on him now."

As he went on, Allen's conviction became firmer. The length of stride

of Pike's horse showed plainly that it had traveled through this section at a much slower speed. Princess, on the other hand, increased her rate of travel as soon as Allen spoke to her. She went like the wind, with mane flying and hoofs pounding almost soundlessly in the snow. Allen kept peering ahead, knowing it would not be long now before he sighted the fleeing killer.

At the end of another hour he caught his first glimpse of Pike in the distance. Pike was traveling up a hillside, all unaware that he was being trailed. Allen saw immediately that the outlaw's horse was laboring, negotiating the climb with decided difficulty. Encouraged, Allen kept his gray running without loss of speed, and moved his hands toward the butts of his twin six-guns.

Pike passed out of sight over the hilltop as Allen began the climb. For a few minutes the killer was lost to view, but only until Allen reached the crest. Then he saw Pike traveling across the little valley beyond, still moving slowly. Just as Allen started down, Pike looked back. The next moment the outlaw was spurring his horse savagely and racing away.

"Gosh, he's seen us now," Allen exclaimed. "I reckon he won't be travelin' much farther, though, 'cause his horse is about wore out."

Pike was, in fact, forcing his mount brutally. The animal was in poor condition, due to his careless neglect of her, and had already reached the last of her strength. In spite of this, Pike dug his spurs deep, with such cruel thrusts, that the beast raced on in agony.

Pike's horse struggled up the far rim of the low valley and passed from sight again. A few minutes elapsed before Allen could reach the

high ground and see beyond. Then he was momentarily dismayed to find that Pike had disappeared, for the outlaw was nowhere in sight. Immediately Allen saw the tracks in the snow curving away toward the edge of a wood, and swiftly turned in that direction.

Almost at once Allen pulled sharply on Princess's reins and drew her to a stop, staring at a large black form lying in the snow. It was Pike's horse, trembling and panting, ridden to her limit. Unable to go another step, she had dropped, utterly exhausted. Allen's eyes filled with pity as he glanced at the animal and realized he could do nothing to help her.

Pike's footprints led straight from the spot where his horse had fallen, toward the blackness of the wood. Allen swung Princess immediately in that direction. Even as he turned the silence was broken by the blast of a gun. A flash of fire came from among the trees, and a bullet whistled past Allen's head.

Princess instinctively began leaping from side to side as she ran. Though Allen was in the open, the gray's zigzagging movement made a difficult target of him. Two more reports rang out as Pike fired from his shelter, but both missed Allen by inches. Princess bounded on and ran into the thicker darkness under the snow-laden trees, while Allen hunched forward, holding one gun ready for instant action.

PIKE had turned and run deeper into the wood. His tracks were clear, but the blackness was so intense that Allen could not see them for more than a few yards ahead. As he followed, Pike fired twice more. His bullets hit the trunk of a tree behind Allen. Turning, he ran farther, with desperate

haste, while Allen turned in the direction from which the shots had flashed.

The limbs of the trees were loaded so heavily with the wet snow that they drooped far down, blocking the way. Princess jumped past them with the agility of a goat, but some of the branches brushed against Allen, and the dislodged snow came pouring down on him. The lower branches sprang up, struck higher ones, and in an instant a veritable avalanche was dropping, blinding Allen and stopping him for the moment.

"Gosh, I can't ride you any farther, Princess," he gasped.

He slid out of the saddle and crouched a moment, trying to locate Pike ahead. He did not see the outlaw immediately. The old gray whinnied a sharp protest because she could not go on, but Allen silenced her with a sharp command. At once two more loud explosions sounded as Pike fired from a point ahead. Allen ducked low, unhit, and began to run forward.

The two men traveled through the woods rapidly, with Pike shifting from tree to tree about fifty yards ahead of Allen. Allen followed like a ghost, keeping himself protected as much as possible. Though his movements were quick, they were deliberate and sure, and he was like doom itself in the relentlessness of his pursuit. He gave no thought now to his injury, but pressed on.

Each time he crossed an open space, Pike fired at him. Allen was a baffling target, and in his desperate hurry Pike shot wild. He had brought Madden's sawed-off shotgun with him and carried it in one hand while gripping his six-gun in the other. Having emptied the six-shooter he paused and brought up the shotgun, but he lowered it im-

medately, knowing Allen was too far away for it to be effective. Hastening on, he reloaded his six-gun.

He cursed himself for not having carried Allen's guns away with him. As he moved he tried to find a fortified position from which he could keep Allen off, but none presented itself. In spite of this he believed that sooner or later he would drop Allen, then he could take Allen's gray and get out of the country. He kept working deeper into the forest, while Allen darted along behind him.

During the chase Allen did not fire a shot, for he was too wise to waste bullets, and Pike was not close enough for accurate shooting. He shifted into a protected position, stopped, and looked around. He sensed other presences in the darkness, and in a moment distinguished a stealthy movement off to one side. Then two glowing spots of yellow shone in the darkness, and two more.

"Wolves," Allen gasped.

As Allen hurried on, the shadowy shapes of the wolves followed at a distance. Their eyes gleamed in the night like yellow fire. Sometimes they ventured closer, but each time Pike fired they retreated. Allen knew that at the first opportunity the pack would rush in to kill. Pike also saw them, and grinned malevolently, sure that before long one of his bullets would give them something to satisfy their hunger.

TURNING, Pike found himself on the edge of a large circular clearing. In it the snow lay smooth and white. Since crossing the open space would make him a target, he began to shift along its fringe. At once he stopped, appalled. Directly ahead, among the trees, he saw the yellow eyes of the wolf pack glowing. The beasts were

motionless now, watching him. He dared not go closer. With a shudder he whirled and began to hurry off in the opposite direction.

Again he found his way blocked. Other eyes gleamed in his path, even more of them than on the first side, blinking on and off in an uncanny manner. Pike snarled out an oath when he realized it was impossible for him to move around the edge of the clearing in either direction. With Allen behind him, he was forced to take the chance of crossing the open space.

He sprang away and ran at top speed, taking the shortest way. When he was almost in the center of the clearing he stopped short, frozen with fear. At the very spot he was hurrying toward he glimpsed a quick, black movement, and then yellow spots of light appeared. The pack had moved forward and barred his way.

With a terrified glance backward, he started off at another angle. Again he drew up abruptly. Wolf eyes were shining ahead of him again. In a rage he whirled, looking all around. The clearing was now almost surrounded by the beasts. Their eyes were gleaming from almost every spot among the trees. Following their instinctive pack tactics, they had quickly formed a circle, and soon would begin closing in.

Pike ran crazily, seeking a way out of the clearing. There was only one path which was clear of the menacing wolves, and that lay in the direction he had come. Gripping his gun, he started toward it, but once more he stopped. Another gray shadow came into the open, but this time it was not a four-footed wolf. It was Jim-twin Allen, and Allen was moving with the slow deliberation of doom.

An insane cry broke from Alaska

Pike's lips. He jerked his gun toward Allen and fired twice. He saw Allen leap aside swiftly, then come on. Desperately he took aim and pulled the trigger of his six-gun again. No report sounded this time, only the click of the hammer falling on an empty shell.

Pike's six-shooter was empty. He hesitated for one terrified moment, expecting Allen to grasp the opportunity and drop him on the spot. But Allen did not fire. He did not even have his guns in his hands now. He was walking toward Pike with slow, even steps. Then another terrified shout came from Pike, when he saw that Allen's eyes were shining with yellow like those of the wolves at the edge of the clearing.

Alaska Pike raised the sawed-off shotgun, and leveled it at Allen. His panic momentarily increased when he saw that this gesture did not stop Allen's relentless advance. Allen kept coming straight on, step by step. Then Pike's eyes gleamed with evil triumph. Allen was within range of a shotgun now, and a perfectly open target. Pike's fingers tightened on both triggers of the gun. He took careful aim at Allen, and pulled the triggers.

Two dull clicks sounded. Pike was dazed and dismayed when neither barrel discharged.

PIKE lowered the gun with an enraged bellow, and opened the breech. He pulled out the two shells, dropped them, jerked two more from the belt he had strapped around his waist, and slipped them into place. Swiftly he raised the gun and aimed again. Almost instantly he pulled the triggers.

But the result was far from what he expected. Neither of the fresh shells exploded. He tried again, with no more success. Allen was

still yards away, advancing at his slow, deliberate pace, and Pike knew he had time enough to change again. He inserted a third pair of shells into the gun, and a third time tried to fire them. Twice after that, in quick succession, he pulled back the hammers and squeezed the triggers. Nothing happened.

Pike was overwhelmingly bewildered. Allen's slow advance toward him held him with a terrible fascination. Within ten feet of him Allen stopped, and spoke in a low, flat voice.

"You're cashin' in now, Pike."

And then Allen chuckled. It was an animallike, throaty sound which sent a chill of fear down Alaska Pike's spine. He dropped the shotgun and reached quickly into a pocket of his jacket; when he swung up his arm he had a long, gleaming knife gripped in his hand. With a shrill shout he threw himself forward, slashing at Allen.

Allen jumped aside, but Pike was desperately quick and caught hold of his jacket. He swung the knife up again, but Allen's hand shot out and gripped his wrist. For a moment they struggled together, then they dropped to the ground and rolled in the snow, kicking and squirming frantically. Alaska Pike's strength was tremendous, and Allen was still weakened by his wound, but Pike soon learned that sheer power would not win this fight for him. Allen was like a furious little animal, wriggling so bewilderingly that Pike could not hold him.

Allen kept his grip on Pike's arm during the first minute of the encounter, but then Pike tore his hand free. He made a terrific, savage thrust at Allen. Allen seemed to disappear from his grasp like magic, and the blade passed harmlessly through the air. Then Allen leaped

quickly, and Pike was overcome with the ferocity of the attack. Again they rolled over, kicking madly, each striving for the advantage.

Suddenly a gasp broke from Pike's thick lips, and his hold on Allen loosened. He clawed at the snow. Allen had deftly deflected the last thrust of the knife, and Pike had driven it into himself. The killer groaned again, and went limp, as Allen dragged himself up. He was panting and so weak he could hardly stand.

Then a dismal, prolonged howl broke through the stillness. Allen turned to see dark forms rushing from the fringe of the clearing. The wolf pack had found its opportunity and was charging. At the first scent of blood they turned into a mad-dened horde. Before Allen even realized what was happening they were upon Pike. Two of the beasts turned on Allen and leaped, and their white fangs flashed toward his throat.

He drew his six-guns like lightning, and fired. The wolves which had attacked him dropped into the snow. Allen backed away, guns ready. The crashing reports stopped the rush of another pair which was turned on him. Allen left the spot as swiftly as he could. The rest of the pack flung itself on the two which had fallen, and for the time being their attention was turned completely from him.

He ran weakly to the edge of the clearing, then back along the trail he had made. The terrific effort expended in the fight made him stagger and stumble. Soon he heard a squeal and knew that Princess was near. She came trotting toward him, and he flung himself against her for support. As soon as he was able, he pulled himself onto her back and rested, breathing hard, and listening

to the savage noises of the wolf pack in the clearing.

He did not move until the sounds died away. Then he began picking a trail toward the clearing, choosing a path that Princess could follow without difficulty. When he reached it, he rode to the spot where the fight had occurred. The wolves were gone now, and the night was silent. Allen slipped out of the saddle and stooped.

The snow was trampled in a great circle, and stained with red. Allen picked up Madden's shotgun, opened it, and drew out the two shells remaining in it. Then he groped about, picking the other shells out of the snow. With a shudder he took up the belt which Pike had stolen from the deputy. He was very careful to find all the shells the gun belt had contained before he straightened. One by one he stored them in his pockets.

When he pulled himself again on Princess's back, the old gray turned and trotted out the clearing, taking the trail she had already made. Allen hung to her back weakly, his broad mouth forming a dreamy grin.

"There's always wolves—in the foothills," he said in a husky whisper.

DURING the early morning Princess trotted up the road of the Forty-four outfit near Seminole, with Allen still clinging to her back. Allen had fought to retain consciousness and had just barely succeeded in finding the way to the ranch. It was Madge Cameron who first saw him.

She was a kind-faced, gentlemanly woman, and was working in the kitchen when she looked through the window and saw the snow-covered horse and rider outside. She called for help immediately, and Al-

len was carried into the house. He had strength enough left to open his eyes and ask in a gasp:

"Are you—Ash Cameron's wife?"

"Yes," the puzzled woman answered.

Allen pushed one hand into his jacket pocket and brought out a fistful of shotgun shells. He pushed the pile of black cylinders toward Mrs. Cameron weakly.

"Then these are yours. I promised—to bring 'em back."

"But—why——" she began to ask.

"Cut 'em open," Allen told her and then, able to ask no more, he collapsed.

Mrs. Cameron knew nothing of what had happened, and was completely bewildered. She thought Allen was delirious from exposure but, after he was placed on a cot, she decided to do as he said. When she cut open one of the shells with a knife, a gasp escaped her. No powder spilled out of it, and no lead shot, but a dozen glittering gems rolled into her palm!

She quickly split open every shell and found each of them filled with the precious stones. She realized then that something had happened to her husband, but though she was tremendously concerned she forgot everything in an effort to care for Allen. He was put to bed, and a doctor was called. After his wound was dressed, he rested more easily. Days passed while he lay half-conscious, but at last, thanks to Mrs. Cameron's kindly care, his strength returned and he was able to tell his story.

Mrs. Cameron listened to the details and stanchly kept back her tears. She had the courage of a true frontier woman and displayed it. Allen learned that she had already sent her foreman, Luke Bealls, whom she completely trusted, to

Chicago to sell the gems, because necessity demanded it, even though she did not yet know exactly what had occurred. Allen found a warm admiration for the stanch woman.

"Was they all there?" he asked anxiously, when she told him this.

"Every one," Mrs. Cameron declared. "But why did you do it, you poor boy? You almost died getting them back to me, and I appreciate it with all my heart, but I can't help wondering why you took such a terrible risk for a woman you never saw."

"Shucks, I gave Ash Cameron my word I'd do it," was all the answer Allen gave.

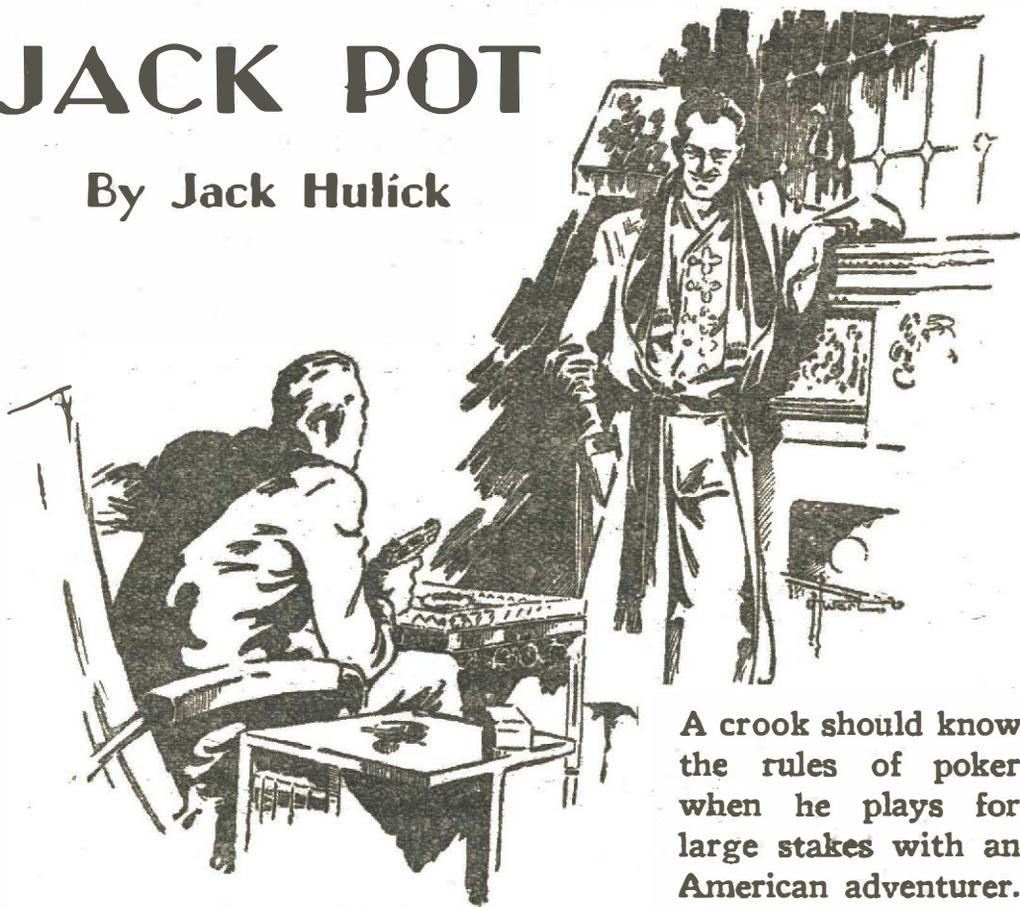
When she pressed him for details, he explained how he had outwitted Alaska Pike. While waiting behind the rocks on the edge of the river he had realized that the odds were heavy against him and, to keep his promise, had cast about for a way of keeping the gems out of Pike's hands. Working quickly, he had removed the buckshot and powder from the shotgun shells carried by Dusty Madden, put the stones in the shells, and plugged them up again. He had thrown the shot and powder and shells which remained into the river, so as to hide all traces of what he had done. He had scarcely completed the task when Pike had shot him from behind.

Allen recovered rapidly, but Mrs. Cameron insisted that he stay longer. She was eager to repay him, but Allen would accept nothing, saying her kindness and the pleasure of staying in her home a while was enough.

Neither Mrs. Cameron or any one else in that country ever dreamed that the footloose boy who had saved the precious stones, simply because he had given his word to deliver them, was a notorious outlaw.

JACK POT

By Jack Hulick



A crook should know the rules of poker when he plays for large stakes with an American adventurer.

FALCONER'S cool gray eyes betrayed no surprise as he entered the hotel lounge and greeted the young woman whom he had met the previous night over a gambling table. One look at her strained face, and he knew why she was calling on him during the mid-morning.

Mary Cummings was slender and pretty, with a subtle touch of style about her that would make people look twice even here in smart Paris. Her eyes were dark, and dark hair showed beneath her snug hat. Her lips were red, but she used no rouge. She might have been twenty-five, though Falconer had the impression that she was younger.

She shook her head as Falconer extended a silver cigarette case; she

was studying his face intently. It was a pleasant face, rather handsome. His features were sharp and strong, and his eyes reflected the forceful intelligence that played behind his high, wide forehead. Kit Falconer looked like a gentleman, which he was. He did not look like an adventurer, which he also was.

"I wonder," said the girl suddenly, "if you'll offer me a cigarette when you learn why I've come here?"

"Why not?" Falconer's smile was as pleasant as it was inscrutable. That smile had often flashed across the green baize of poker tables, to baffle men skilled in reading faces. Falconer considered it bad policy to show his thoughts or feelings at any time.

"Last night," said the girl, speaking slowly and with effort, "I lost

twenty thousand francs to you at baccarat. I gave you a check for that amount."

She paused, waiting expectantly, but Falconer made no reply. Then very quietly she let fall:

"The check was worthless."

Falconer lightly tapped the ash from his cigarette. It was what he had expected to hear. He had heard it before from men and women who had been made reckless by the intoxicating whims of Lady Luck. They invariably woke up cold sober next morning, with the tearful plea that the check not be presented for payment.

"Tell me about it," he suggested.

Mary's story varied from the usual story only in detail. She was a model at a very exclusive gown shop. They had queens for customers. The models looked like queens should look, but they weren't paid like them. Thus when Mary Cummings had played baccarat at the Moulin d'Argent the previous night, her supply of francs had been decidedly limited. She had played with fair success for a while, it was true. The trouble was, she hadn't known when to quit. And when she had lost her money, she had lost her head. Or maybe it was the other way around. Anyway, the check she had given Falconer was not worth the paper it was written on.

"And so," Mary concluded haltingly, "I thought—that is, I wondered, if you would just keep the check until I can redeem it."

She sat very still, looking very hard at the floor. There was something of the suppliant's humility in her attitude. Falconer liked it that she did not weep, or use a woman's tricky game of coaxing. He looked at her, mildly curious, but saying nothing.

"I could pay you back a little at a

time," she murmured, when the silence finally became awkward.

"Twenty thousand francs? That's a lot of money—when your salary's paid in francs, as yours is. By the way, where did you get the check blank? Do you have an account at that bank?"

She shook her head. "I don't have an account anywhere. That's why I was gambling. I thought I could win a little money, enough to go home on. I'm very tired of it here. She hesitated, then reluctantly answered his second question: "Mr. Idlinger gave me the check."

A tiny gleam stirred in the depths of Falconer's gray eyes.

"Who?" he asked.

"Charles Idlinger. He was our host last night. Do you know him?"

"Slightly," admitted Falconer.

"He's a friend of one of the girls at the store," explained Mary. "I only met him last night. He's nice, but there's something strange about him, too."

Falconer ignored her comment. "I remember," he said, "that you dropped out of the game and left the table for a while. You came back when I took the baccarat shoe. Did you talk to Idlinger in the meantime? In other words, did he suggest that you use a worthless check?"

"Well—yes," she admitted. "You see, he offered me money to continue playing. When I refused it, he suggested the check. He said there wouldn't be any harm in it; I was certain to win if I played long enough. The other men in the party said so, too. I was so excited, everything was so confused, that I hardly knew what I was doing. I know that sounds silly, but it's so."

Falconer nodded.

"How did you know where I lived?" he asked after a moment.

"That was easy, in this city where every one is registered with the police," she replied.

Falconer rose abruptly, took a few steps, then came back and stood looking down at her. His gray eyes were narrowed a little with intent peering, but his face told nothing. It seemed that he was not going to speak again, but just stand and look. Mary stirred uneasily. She picked up her hand bag, opened it, lifted her head, and raised the little mirror. Wandering fingers touched her hat and hair.

Then she, too, stood up and faced him. Her dark eyes were steady and mildly direct. Words were not necessary, and none was spoken. Falconer merely opened his cigarette case and held it out to her. She looked at him searchingly for perhaps half a minute. Then, as broken smiles came and went on her rougeless lips, she took a cigarette.

"I'll keep it, as a reminder," she said, and dropped it into her hand bag.

"Meet me here at six o'clock tonight," he requested.

SHORTLY before noon, a taxi rolled up before an apartment building in the fashionable Parc Monceau district. Falconer alighted, carrying a cane and wearing a flower in the buttonhole of his neat, dark, double-breasted suit. He had a weakness for good clothes, and other such luxuries.

A housekeeper admitted him to Idlinger's apartment, an outlandish place, affecting the extremely modern in decoration. Idlinger tried to give the impression at all times that he was a gay son of gay Paris; an idle spendthrift with an ample income. Falconer, however, happened to know the man was a thorough-going rascal, who lived by

blackmail and extortion. And on one occasion, the police had strongly suspected him of being a master fence for stolen and smuggled jewels. Only lack of evidence and the best criminal lawyer in Paris, had saved him from formal arrest. Otherwise, his record was clear, for he was a shrewd, cunning man.

Idlinger was a tall man, with pale-blue eyes, an aquiline nose, and a wide mouth topped by a trim mustache. His clothes had been chosen with taste and discrimination, and somehow expressed the poised arrogance that was the keynote of his personality. Most people would have called him a handsome man. Yet Falconer, looking at the puffy bags under his eyes, wondered how Mary Cummings had ever been induced to join a party given by this man.

Falconer knew the man with whom he was dealing, and acted accordingly. He flung one leg over the corner of an angular table, fixed his cool gray eyes on Idlinger, and came to the point without any delay.

"Last night," he said, "I dropped something like twenty-five thousand francs at the Moulin d'Argent—roulette. Twenty thousand of it was in the form of a check I'd won earlier in the evening. I just went there to take up the check, but the manager told me you'd bought it."

"So I did," admitted Idlinger readily, meanwhile studying Falconer's face closely. As usual, it told nothing.

"You bought a worthless piece of paper," stated Falconer.

Idlinger fitted a cigarette into a ten-inch holder, lighted it, and dropped the match on the floor. He rubbed the flame out with the tip of his highly polished shoe.

"I know," he then said, and looked Falconer squarely in the eyes.

Falconer nodded. "I'd like to think, Idlinger, that you were playing knight errant to a maiden in distress. But the rôle doesn't suit you. You deliberately framed Miss Cummings, as I suspected from the first."

"I can't see that my affairs concern you."

"I lost twenty-five thousand francs."

Idlinger shrugged. "It's all in the game."

"But not when the game's crooked. I happen to have learned that the baccaret shoe was stacked, and the roulette wheel energized."

FALCONER was bluffing, but he was on fairly safe ground. Places like the Moulin d'Argent are prepared to control their games, in case luck runs too heavily against the house. To have a game thrown his way, Idlinger had only to make his bribe large enough. And since Idlinger did not deny it, Falconer knew that his chance shot had gone home.

"It was all too pat," he continued. "I won until I'd got Miss Cummings's check; then lost until you got it. What your game with her is, I don't know or care. I suppose there are lots of ways you could use a clever, pretty girl in your schemes. It so happens, however, that I have a particular aversion to the badger game, particularly when I'm used as a cat's-paw. That's where you slipped."

"Your part in it was unintentional and unavoidable," explained Idlinger, and going to a desk, took out a large pocketbook. "I'll settle your losses, since that is of no significance to me."

"Right. And I'll take it just as I lost it—five thousand in cash and Miss Cummings's check," said Fal-

coner, and knew he was wasting his breath.

Idlinger, with a sheaf of thousand-franc notes in his hand, turned sharply.

"Are you joking?" he demanded.

"Look at me again if you think so."

Idlinger did look, then closed the pocketbook with a decisive snap. His face tightened, his blue eyes glittered coldly.

"I thought you had more sense than to try anything like this with me. I have the check, and I'll keep it. I offered to cover your loss, and you refused. The matter is closed."

He jerked sharply at a bell cord, and the housekeeper brought Falconer's hat and cane. He took them, then stood tapping the table with the end of the stick. He was smiling pleasantly.

"Being a Frenchman, you don't know anything about poker, of course," he said slowly. "It's a card game, but you really win or lose according to how well you can read the other fellow's face—or keep him from reading yours. Sometimes you play for what is called a jack pot. A jack pot is usually rich, because a player must have jacks or better to open it."

Falconer put on his hat, walked to the door, opened it. Then he paused.

"It's too bad you don't play poker, Idlinger. Because, you and I are going to play poker—soon! For a jack pot!"

FALCONER had accomplished his purpose in going to Idlinger's apartment. He had wanted to know definitely whether Idlinger had framed Mary Cummings. He had not believed for a moment that Idlinger could be bluffed into handing over the worth-

less check just then. Idlinger would be a tough nut to crack.

"Well, the harder the nut, the shorter the stroke," reflected Falconer, as he sought the wide square before the Trocadero, and settled down at a sidewalk café.

He sat a full hour at a little table, sipping cognac, watching the people, and gazing at the delicate tracery of the Eiffel Tower cutting the sky before him. He looked very idle, and indeed he was, physically. Falconer had learned that the mind works best when the body is relaxed.

At two o'clock he left the café and made his way to the Rue de la Paix. Here he drifted along in the stream of the afternoon crowd, pausing now and then before the windows of smart jewelry stores. He lingered before the austere windows of Chantocé's, a firm which was doing business when Napoleon was emperor of France. He seemed fascinated by the glittering display in the window. Actually, he was trying to spot the inevitable plain-clothes guard in the passing crowd, and if there was more than one.

Presently he went inside. The store was small and richly furnished. There were no show cases; only glass-fronted cabinets which held a few very select items. Three suave, shrewd-eyed salesmen, dressed like fashion plates, bowed from the waist. One of them stepped forward, took swift note of Falconer, and decided he was an American millionaire. Falconer confirmed the impression when he asked to see strand pearls, making it clear that price was no object.

Strings of pearls fit to grace the neck of a queen were displayed, but the millionaire was not satisfied. He finally confided to the salesman that he wanted something "different." He whispered the name of a reigning

opera star, and tipped the fellow a wink. The salesman seized the bait and swallowed it.

"Monsieur wants something individual? *Eh bien!* We will create it for him. Our artists are unsurpassed. Step this way, monsieur, and we will discuss it in private."

They retired to a small room at the rear of the store, obviously intend for just such use. The salesman brought several trays of unmounted pearls from a safe, and laid them on the table before Falconer.

"Chantocé's, monsieur, has the finest assortment of pearls in all Paris," the salesman boasted.

"That," responded Falconer, "is why I came here. I want a small but very choice collection. Something that won't bulge the pocket."

Kit Falconer made no perceptible movement, but the salesman suddenly found himself looking into the business end of an automatic pistol.

"Take it easy," advised Falconer quietly. "Don't try to push any buttons, or in any way signal for help."

The salesman was paralyzed. He couldn't have pushed a button if he had wanted to.

"This—this is incredible!" he gasped. "You must be insane. No man has attempted to rob Chantocé's in half a century. There are alarms, guards, automatic door locks. It is impossible!"

"Impossible, perhaps, if I were to try to get out alone, leaving you here or elsewhere," corrected Falconer calmly. "But I shan't go out alone. You're going with me, through the store, out to the curb. And you're going to stay with me until I find a taxicab. Moreover, you're going to smile and talk, and look just as happy as if you'd sold the stuff I'm going to take. I know you're going to do this, because, while I shan't have this automatic

in my hand, I'll have something equally as affective."

That "something" Falconer drew from his pocket. It was a vicious little pistol disguised as a fountain pen. He held it out, so that the salesman could see the bore and know it was genuine.

"Let me say here," continued Falconer, "that while I value my life greatly, I value my freedom more. I won't hesitate to shoot. I've done it before, with this very pistol. Now take a good look at me, and make up your mind whether you'll play the game my way."

The salesman looked at Falconer's thin features, set hard as stone; at his gray eyes, cold as diamonds. The salesman had never played poker. He nodded in hopeless agreement.

"As you wish, monsieur."

FALCONER seemed to know his business when picking out pearls, for he chose chiefly black and green ones. Being more fashionable at the present, they were consequently more valuable. When he had laid aside a certain number, he asked the salesman for an estimate of their value.

"Perhaps a million and a half." The man almost groaned.

"In francs? That sounds like a lot, but it isn't. We'll make it two million." And Falconer added several more to the group. He then wrapped each one carefully in cotton, and wrapped the whole in his handkerchief. The little bundle made no bulge as he slipped it into an inside pocket.

"Now, then," he said, fixing the salesman with an indomitable eye. "We're going. And remember what will happen if you so much as bat an eye the wrong way."

They sauntered out to the curb, and the salesman obediently signaled

a taxicab. A broad-shouldered fellow—the plain-clothes guard—appeared, and stood by at a discreet distance. Not that he thought there was anything wrong; he simply wanted his employers to know he was right on the job at all times. Falconer paused once more with his hand on the open cab door.

"You'll probably think I'm crazy," he said. "But the truth is, I'm not stealing these pearls—simply borrowing them. You'll have 'em back before six o'clock to-night, so don't worry too much. Many thanks."

Falconer got quickly into the cab, stuck his head out and gestured good-by with his fountain pen, to the huge amusement of the snobbish fellows watching from behind the curtains of Chantocé's austere windows. Then with a cloud of smoke swirling behind, the car swept into the swift stream of the boulevard traffic. Falconer heard the salesman's first shrill yell of alarm, saw the dumfounded guard fumbling wildly for his pistol; then heard and saw no more. He was safely away.

Two blocks away, Falconer cried out sharply, flung the driver a large bill, and leaped from the cab before it could stop. In the next forty-five minutes, he changed cabs four times, did a good bit of walking, and finally arrived at his hotel by way of a bus. He was confident that he had left no trail for keen-witted French detectives to follow.

"So far, so good," he smiled as he entered his room.

Falconer placed the pearls and his two pistols on a table. Then he lighted a cigarette and relaxed. When he stirred at last, it was not to examine the pearls, but to slip out the magazines of the pistols. Both were unloaded. He loaded them now, however, for he was going after fish of another fry.

At four o'clock Falconer reappeared in the hotel lobby. He had changed into an inconspicuous gray suit, and left his cane behind. With the aid of a sizeable bank note, he persuaded the switchboard operator to make a telephone call for him. He himself made another call in the privacy of a booth. This done, he left the hotel.

Falconer had dealt the hands in the poker game he had promised Idlinger. The game itself would be played soon.

IDLINGER stood in the doorway of his bedroom. He was humming softly to himself and polishing his finger nails. His hands, showing white against the cuffs of his dark suit, were strong and graceful. Idlinger was proud of his hands, and took good care of them.

A timid knock sounded at the entrance door. Idlinger's face lighted up. He flung the nail buffer on the bed, swiftly touched up his mustache, then strode to the door and swept it open.

"Sorry to disappoint you," Falconer said dryly. "You were expecting Miss Cummings, of course. I know, because I had the switchboard operator at my hotel call you and tell you that. I wanted to make sure you sent your housekeeper on an errand. She's gone, I see."

Falconer sauntered into the big room, quite as if he were an invited guest. He sat down in a chair, lighted a cigarette, and looked calmly at Idlinger. Idlinger had not moved. His face was set in heavy, square lines, and his blue eyes were narrowed dangerously. A full minute passed before he closed the door, quietly, and came up and stood before Falconer.

"What do you want?"

"Miss Cummings's check and ten

thousand francs cash. The extra five thousand is for the trouble you've given me."

Idlinger blasted Falconer with a curse that showed what kind of a man he was under his polished exterior.

"I've had enough of this nonsense, Falconer. Clear out!"

"When I'm ready and not before," replied Falconer, and though the words had no particular emphasis, it was plain that he was not to be intimidated. He tossed a small bundle onto the table. "Here, take a look at this."

Idlinger swayed forward a little, his strong white hands flexed as though to fasten on Falconer's throat. The impulse found outlet in another violent oath. He turned to the table, literally ripped open the little bundle, and tore apart one of the cotton pellets.

Idlinger stiffened as though he had suddenly come upon a dead thing. He stared hard at the glowing black pearl before him, then cautiously twisted open several more of the little pellets. He did not pick them up to examine them; he knew precious gems, and thus knew at a glance that they were genuine and of rare quality. He was utterly astonished and showed it.

Idlinger turned presently, leaned back against the table, and regarded Falconer doubtfully. He seemed to want to speak, but apparently didn't know what to say. There was a long silence. Then Falconer looked at his watch and came to his feet abruptly.

"Those pearls," he said, and his voice was sharp, "were stolen from Chantocé's an hour ago. By this time, the entire police department of Paris is on the lookout for 'em. If you're in any doubt about it, call up headquarters."

A slight furrow came between Idlinger's eyes, but he said nothing. Falconer waited a moment, then continued:

"At the same time the switchboard operator called you, I telephoned police headquarters. I told them to send a detective here at exactly five o'clock. I made no explanations. Now get this: you can turn Miss Cummings's check over to me, and I'll get rid of the detective on a pretext; or you can keep Miss Cummings's check, and the detective will find Chantocé's pearls in your apartment."

Falconer looked at his watch. "It is now fifteen minutes until five o'clock. Therefore, you have fifteen minutes to make up your mind. I'm not hurrying you. But let me remind you, that ever since you slipped out of that jewel fence charge, the police have been trying to get the goods on you. There it is, two million francs' worth."

FALCONER then sat down and lighted a fresh cigarette. Idlinger did not move for perhaps half a minute. Then he slowly straightened. He might have been preparing to bow to a beautiful lady, so assured was his manner. All anger had passed out of him. An amused smile played beneath his carefully trimmed mustache.

"Clever," he conceded shortly. "A play after my own heart. I've heard you were as cool and clever as the devil himself, and now I believe it. But your bluff is no good with me. What will you tell the detective when he finds you here. That you stole the pearls? Hardly! You overlooked a point, my friend."

"I overlooked nothing. You never heard of the devil setting a trap for himself, did you?"

Idlinger laughed heartily. "No,

no! The bluff is no good," he repeated. "And I'll wager francs to sous that your 'detective' is none other than the charming Miss Cummings, come to help you out."

"Have it your own way," shrugged Falconer indifferently, and picking up a magazine began to turn the pages. "You still have thirteen minutes to think it over. Only let me warn you not to let an appreciation of your own cleverness get the best of your judgment."

Still chuckling, Idlinger fitted a cigarette into a holder, lighted it, then stood leaning against the mantelpiece. Soon, however, the humor passed from his face, and he was eyeing Falconer soberly, reflectively. One, two, three minutes passed.

Then a shadow of a frown crossed Idlinger's face. He cast a furtive glance at the door. He smiled self-consciously as he realized what he had done, and again fixed his eyes on Falconer. Falconer continued to look at the magazine. The pages rustled as he turned them.

Again Idlinger frowned, and this time the furrows were a little deeper. He looked at the door, and cocked his head slightly, as though listening. Falconer closed his magazine, tossed it away, and looked up. The coolness of his gaze bit into Idlinger. He moved away from the mantelpiece suddenly, with a twisting movement of his body, as if he was trying to shake off something.

"This farce has gone on long enough," he snapped.

"Five minutes more," said Falconer composedly, and tapped his watch.

Idlinger's pale-blue eyes played slowly over Falconer's face. He tried in vain to probe that inscrutable mask. He wanted just the tiniest glimpse into Falconer's mind; something to allay the doubt and

suspicion that were slowly mounting higher in his own troubled mind. Was it possible that Falconer was not bluffing? Had the fool really brought the police here, risking both their necks, just because of that fool of a girl?

Idlinger moved toward the table. Falconer, watching him, read his intentions as surely as if he had shouted them aloud. Falconer came to his feet, an automatic in his hand.

"Stop! Right there!" he rapped. "One pistol is enough for both of us."

"I was just going after a cigarette," said Idlinger sullenly, and jerking around as if in a huff, stood before the mantelpiece again.

Their eyes met, and held. Neither man spoke, neither moved, and the silence that took possession of the room was profound. Idlinger tried to look indifferent, but the attempt was unsuccessful. He cursed once or twice to relieve his feelings. The tension in the room heightened rapidly as seconds ticked into minutes.

Idlinger jerked suddenly as if he had been stuck with a pin. There was a knocking at the door, loud and heavy. There had been no warning footsteps in the hallway to prepare him for it. His eyes darted to the door, then back to Falconer's face. Falconer looked at him like he was sighting down a rifle barrel.

"Well?" he demanded softly.

It seemed an eternity before Idlinger answered. In reality, it was a matter of seconds. Then he whirled toward the desk, drew out a pocket-book, and with fumbling hands thrust Mary Cummings's worthless check and a five-thousand-franc note at Falconer.

"Ten thousand francs," Falconer drawled.

Idlinger cursed viciously. The knocking came again, louder, more

insistent. Idlinger added another note. Then Falconer swept the pearls into his pocket, and stood back. With his pistol, he gestured to Idlinger to open the door.

Idlinger reached the door in swift strides, paused long enough to throw out his chest and lift his head, then opened the door. He stepped back instantly as though somebody had struck him violently in the face.

Mary Cummings stood in the doorway—alone.

HALF an hour later, having procured wrapping material at a tobacco shop, Falconer sent a parcel to Chantocé's by special messenger. Mary Cummings stood beside him, her dark eyes bright with excitement.

"You know," she was saying, "I was terribly frightened when Mr. Idlinger opened the door. I thought for a while he was stark crazy."

"He was," insisted Falconer. "And by the by, this five thousand francs I gouged Idlinger for, is yours. You're going to buy a ticket home, and there's no 'ifs' or 'ands' about it. Understand?"

"If you insist, yes," she agreed. "But you haven't yet told me what was in that package you just sent off."

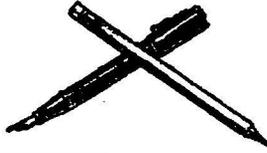
"That," said Falconer solemnly, "is a jack pot."

"A what?"

"I see you're not a poker player," he observed, and as she shook her head: "Neither is Idlinger. Have a cigarette?"

Mary took one and dropped it into her hand bag. The smile she gave Kit Falconer made him feel very lonely. He wondered if the police would continue to look for Chantocé's robber after the pearls had been returned. He rather hoped so.

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 Stories, 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.

J. W. S., Kansas: You could have copied any newspaper article and I still could have made an analysis of your writing! This is not a guessing contest which calls for cleverness in reading between the lines. First, I look at the writing without reading the text; then I glance over the text to see what questions are asked or what problem is presented. Does that answer the question in your mind?

It is interesting to note your skepticism and then to see your cramped letter formations which are an indication of the cautious and suspicious mind.

The variation in slant is another interesting sign, for it ties up with your half-sarcastic, half-serious, and

of fact; I can easily see where and perhaps ability might be true traits of letter forming though. That you do a "reading" from the phrasing, and information enclosed in

naïve letter. You are really a very naïve person, but are afraid of being "taken in," so put up your defense

of skepticism and kidding. The t-bars show that you are rather easily influenced in spite of your stubbornness and closed mind. Why don't you admit your characteristic inconsistency and loosen up? You need expansion, but are afraid of it because you are not yet sure of your emotions, and your mind isn't thoroughly trained and disciplined.

I hope that you will have a chance to do newspaper work later as that will give you the training for writing which you need. You are intelligent and talented, but need to adjust your heart and head more harmoniously.

J. P. G., Mississippi: I wish you had told me from what it was that you wanted to make a change. It is possible that you might be doing the right type of work and are just restless.

Dear Miss Spencer.

The time has
make a change— please
opinion on what I was
of doing successfully—

Your firm, simple script with its printed letters shows that you are the constructive type. There are many things you could do, and do equally well. Your dignity and personal charm suggest work which brings you in direct contact with people, although you are the self-centered, self-sufficient type. You could do interior decorating, architecture, designing furniture, or any of the applied arts, and you could

also teach. The latter might not appeal to you, but if the subject was highly specialized you would find teaching congenial.

You have a very clear, concise mind, are good-natured, indolent, and very set in your ideas and habits.

F. B. S., New York City: I wish that you could study medicine. You would make a brilliant doctor and surgeon. Isn't there some way you could get your degree while working in the medical department? I know it isn't easy to break into a profession after one is married and has a family, because the daily bread must be earned and that leaves very little time for study. However, you have so much ability that I am sure you could do the almost impossible.

Married but the girl I
just met in my needs.
I would not hesitate
Believe that marriage and
life means much to get
a child. In other words
I am really should offer

The speed, rhythm, pressure, and letter formations in your writing all point to analytical powers backed up by great mental energy. You think and act rapidly, are impatient of stupidity and are usually miles ahead of the average man. Your temper is a result of the pressure under which you work and drive yourself.

If you can't go into medicine or progress further in the work you are already doing, select something which is as near to what you do now as possible. You have plenty of ability and will succeed in any ordinary job, but you should have some-

thing which will tax your full capacity.

W. S. S., New Brunswick, Canada: Your trick of inclosing the second and even the third letters of a word within the capital is rather interesting to consider in conjunction with the rest of your rather open script.

Miss Shirley Spencer. ;
 Dear Miss S,
 would you
 analysis of my writ

For some reason you are not entirely frank. You hide your real feelings from people even though you appear to be very friendly and expansive.

Great personal pride and ambition are reflected in the very high, large capitals and the large e which lifts its head above the other small letters. You are the promoter type—could do publicity work, selling, and managing.

R. C., New York: Your writing is rather odd as it combines thickened strokes with the uniform office script. I'm glad that you told me you had done soldiering and been a lumberjack, because I was curious to know what had left its mark in your writing. I couldn't very well reconcile the fact that you were an

office manager with your style of writing.

*Do not spare me any
 you discover faults or defects
 characters as expressed by my
 but just give me exact
 discover in it.*

Your material appetites are very strong. A sedentary job will not satisfy you for long unless you get regular exercise outside and are able to express one side of your nature in a normal, healthy way. On the other hand you have mentally adjusted yourself to office work and have a good mathematical mind.

It is necessary to send a stamped, self-addressed envelope and coupon with each specimen submitted for analysis.

If the readers have questions about graphology which they would like answered in the department, I'll be glad to explain any points whenever possible.

Handwriting Coupon for Street &
 Smith's Complete Stories

This coupon must accompany each specimen of handwriting which you wish read.

Name

Address





GET TOGETHER!

What the Reader Contributes

THE circumstances which surround a story and a play have much in common—more than the general reading public realizes or is willing to admit. Perhaps the public does not realize its own contribution to the success of a fine piece of fiction. It is a well-known fact that often a good play in the hands of incompetent actors falls flat; and, on the other hand, a poor play is often a success because of the high talent of the actors. Actors and author must work together if the play is to be an all-round success. Something of the same kind is true of a good story; a writer's success in

the last instance depends largely on the response of the reader.

Bring two strangers together, introduce them, and give each some hint of the other's job and his background, and the two men ought to be able to exchange opinions and find some common level of interest. If they fail to draw mutual sparks and to create a common ground of interest, the reason of their failure to talk and to like one another will usually be found in the cold nature and unsympathetic response of one of the two men. You can talk to a man for a certain length of time, but if he displays a lack of intelligence or understanding, as well as a thick

wall of prejudice and provincial narrowness, you refill your pipe and turn to your newspaper or the dog that has just trotted into the room. The dog may have no mind, but he has an instinctive response to friendly advances, and the wagging of his tail is much more encouraging than the dull or hostile look in the eye of the man to whom you have addressed your remarks.

The case of reader and writer has much in common with these two men. In each instance a friendly and well-intentioned third person brings them together. His only interest and expectation are that the two strangers and the reader and writer should find a common ground of enjoyment and increase their stock of ideas and their fund of general knowledge.

THE editor's concern, in the present instance, is wholly with the writer and reader. He is the official third person who makes the introductions, and he never undertakes these introductions without carefully weighing the "goods" of the writer. Unless the writer, in the editor's judgment, has a story worth the reader's consideration, the editor never attempts these presentations. The editor has to read dozens and dozens of stories before he finds a story which he thinks has that peculiar merit and those fine points which hold a reader's interest and compel his liking. Obviously not all of us are interested in the same things or like the same people, and on this account the editor must be a man of wide sympathies and general likings.

Certain stories will appeal powerfully to one set of readers, and another type of story to another set. The editor has to reckon with this variety of tastes in making up each

issue of the magazine. What he wishes to point out here is the need of the reader to keep an open mind and not to condemn a story in advance because he senses it has a background which he does not like. The background is not an integral part of any story.

A READER frequently betrays his limited intelligence and his blighted emotions when he dismisses a story as a "hunk of cheese" without being able to advance one single cogent reason for his sweeping condemnation. The editor is not here attempting to force any story down your throat; he is only trying to point out that the reader's narrow prejudices and silly sentimentalities frequently stand in the way of his pleasure and enjoyment. The writer is only a gifted and talented man who understands human nature and realizes its temptations. He must have a mind above the average and an understanding and sympathy for his kind. His story unfolds the dramatic presentation of a series of situations in which any one of us might be caught. If the reader is lacking in understanding, in sympathy, in a fine regard for character and a code of square dealing, naturally he will dismiss many stories as "tripe" without even reading them.

THE editor of Complete can only trust that the readers of this magazine will come to the reading of the stories with open minds and a disposition to like rather than dislike its contents. Any reader who is disposed to regard favorably the stories in this magazine will eventually come to realize that he has increased the pleasures of reading and opened up new windows on the human scene.

BEWARE RUPTURE

THAT "DOESN'T BOTHER MUCH"



Suction Cell Retainer is the newest invention for rupture. No bulk, no slipping. Holds and lets Nature heal.



Light as a Feather

Yet... Holds Rupture!

An Ohio Scientist Is Now Helping Nature Rescue Thousands Of Rupture Victims. No More Cruelty. No More Cumbersome Contraptions of ancient times. His new appliance works without embarrassing bulk, without leg straps or springs or bars or leather. You will be astonished at its tiny size, its revolutionary coolness and convenience. His test offer actually includes an extra appliance sent to you absolutely FREE. Mail coupon today for the most astounding rupture information you ever read. It is Free and will come in plain cover.

Now rupture victims can abandon the needless pain and discomfort of torturous trusses. Science has at last developed a tiny, comfortable appliance of tremendous interest for every rupture sufferer. This device is called "Suction Cell Retainer." It has been developed and perfected as a result of having made more than a million rupture appliances. With it comes an astounding natural help for putting real strength into the abdomen, so as to aid Nature in preventing recurrence of rupture.

Results with Suction Cell Retainer are often so remarkable, so quick, so simple, that you too may marvel. It has no leg straps. It expands and contracts as easily as your own flesh. When you walk, run, bend, or exercise it tends to squeeze itself, not the part of your body it rests against. It is so entirely lacking in bulk and weight that even some ruptured men's wives have not known they were ruptured.

PERSONAL GUARANTY

Suction Cell Retainer must give the results that you expect or you simply return it. If your rupture is not actually and positively reduced in size during the free trial we allow, send it back and demand the return of your deposit as agreed. If 30 days trial are not enough, write us and we will extend the time to 60, 90 days or even four months if you desire.

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