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By BRAD KING

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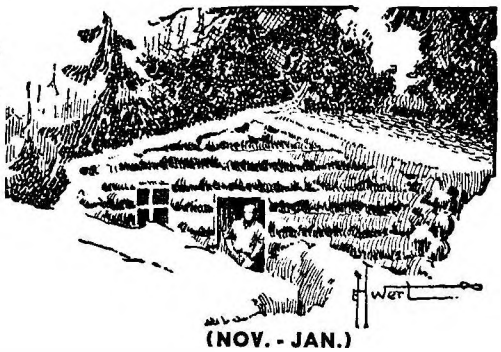

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THREE THUNDERING NORTHLAND NOVELETS

FOUR THRILLING WILDERNESS SHORT STORIES

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Valley of The White Death

By BRAD KING

Fremont and Marlin spoiled for the bewitching half-breed daughter of Pierre LeFleur . . . Fremont, the killer, and Marlin the reckless adventurer. With fear and trepidation Corporal Warren watched the storm brew, then burst as a Northlands fur prize was dangled before the jackpot winner.

A Novelet of Frozen Trails

THERE was something wrong with Frontenac; Corporal Andrew Warren of the Royal Northwest Mounted sensed it as he mushed his huskies over the high barren ridge which protected the small trading post from the sharp winds that whipped over the bay.

He was not surprised. For a year now he had been expecting violence to blaze forth at the small post which rimmed the hinterland. He pulled his dogs to a stop in front of LeFleur's. A faded sign half hidden by the swirling snow proclaimed the Frontenac Fur Company.

Warren felt somebody was watching him. He called a "hello" and a muffled shape came toward him in the gloom—one of Pierre's Indians to take his dogs.

Then someone else was coming toward him, bent low against the stinging flakes, and a thin voice said "Andy, is that you?"

When he answered in the affirmative he heard a faint "Thank God," and then she was in his arms, crying gently on his shoulder.

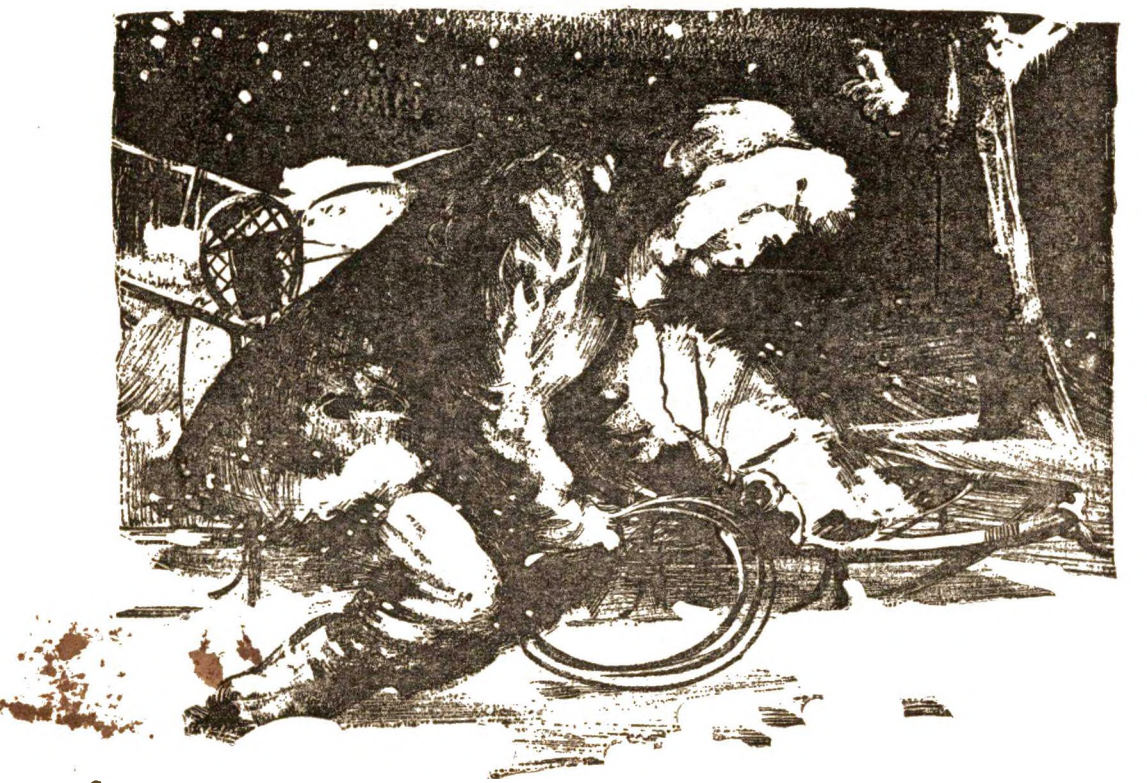
"Mary, honey!" Warren exclaimed. "What the trouble?"

"Jerry. He hasn't come back."

"From where? How long?"

He had known all along that when trouble broke here this girl's brother, Jerry Marlin, would be in it. And Bart Fremont, the towering dark-faced trapper whose record in Calgary had inspired the Corporal's surveillance, and fears.

"Since Summer. He went North toward the mouth of Kiotka Creek. The snows started flying and not a word from him."



"Now, now," Warren said soothingly. "There's still time for him to come in. Perhaps his traps were running full and he wanted to make a killing before—"

"No," Mary Marlin interrupted. "He wouldn't stay out this long on his own. Not with Theresa here. And Bart Fremont."

Andrew Warren was forced to nod agreement. That added up. For over a year dark-eyed Theresa LeFleur, half-breed daughter of Pierre LeFleur, had flitted between Fremont and Marlin. She was the type of wench any two men would fight over. And when one of those two men is known to have been tried for murder and trap-running, a policeman can only watch the storm brew with fear and trepidation. Especially when the second man is the younger brother of the girl the officer loves.

"Come on inside and tell me about it," Warren suggested, pulling her toward LeFleur's trading post.

"Come in, Corporal." Pierre LeFleur had the door open for him, struggling to hold it against the driving flakes. Mary seemed reluctant to enter, but Andrew drew her in. He shook hands warmly with the bearded French trader who had built this trading post on the west bank of the Hudson Bay, far enough to the frozen and uncharted north to be beyond the hard-dealing, monopolistic practices of the bigger companies.

The steam from the wood stove blinded Warren for a moment; when he rubbed it aside he saw two men and a woman sitting by the stove.

"Hello, Fremont," he said curtly to the big narrow-eyed man who gave him a grin that was more of a leer. He nodded to the other man, a Cree. Probably one of Fremont's trappers.

Bart always kept several Indians running his lines for him. And a French-Canadian from the Saskatchewan, Jules Domingue, whose record was no cleaner than his own.

Domingue now came into the big room, small and sallow, an untrimmed mustache on his upper lip, his eyes looking away from the corporal as he muttered a greeting. Behind him walked Theresa LeFleur, bold and provocative. She smiled at Warren.

"You're getting prettier every year, Theresa," Warren conceded. "Too damned pretty."

He was stripping off his parka and soaked moccasins. LeFleur pulled up two chairs.

"Now, Mary," the corporal said crisply, "what's this about Jerry?"

Before these men, she controlled her grief and worry.

"He hasn't come in, that's all. He left in the Spring as usual. He has never been gone this long before."

She talked in a dull monotone. Her eyes wavered between Corporal Warren and Bart Fremont.

"There is cause for worry," the trader LeFleur, edged in. "Sacre Dieu, he carry only enough grub for month or so."

Warren's glance met Fremont's. The dark-faced giant squirmed. "I tell you, I ain't seen Marlin," Bart volunteered.

"No one has accused you—yet," Warren said quietly.

He walked to the window and looked out at the swirling snow. For a month the winter had been piling up. It was unlike Jerry Marlin, or any white man, to run traps right through this bitter bleak season. A man holed up in a good cabin, with plenty of food, could laugh at the winter. But such a man would have expected to stay out, and would have prepared for it.

"What do you know about Jerry, Theresa?" Warren demanded.

THE girl shook her head and shrugged her slim shoulders. She was a wild pagan beauty, no doubt of it. She dangled Fremont at the end of one string, Jerry Marlin on another. But, if she was loose and free with them, it had come only in the past year. Her father's stern control kept her straight.

"As soon as the storm clears," Warren said to Mary, "I will look for your brother. But I don't like to believe anything has happened to him. He knows this country. He can get through where other men can't."

That was true. Marlin was no chechako. He ran trap lines in the wildest country, and he brought back bales of furs where even Crees got nothing for their pains but wolves and caribou.

Warren turned to LeFleur and Fremont. "Better run on home, Mary," he suggested. "I'll join you later—if I may?"

"Of course, Andy. I'll have tea ready."

She went out the door with her eyes dry but her chin quivering. Her worry and grief was unmistakable. And Mary was not a girl to be easily alarmed.

Warren turned on Fremont. "What do you know about strychnine poisoning, Fremont?"

Bart leaned back in his chair and grinned. "I know it can be done, that's all."

"Do you know it is being done—and *here?*"

"I know nothing about it. Nor about young Marlin. Don't try to pin anything on me, Redcoat. I'm minding my own business and I don't want any trouble with you."

"Pierre," Warren said gravely to the bearded trader, "There are poisoned furs coming out of the Kiotka. We know that for a fact."

The Frenchman scratched his bushy head. "Mon Dieu, Andrew, you don't think I know anything about it!"

"I didn't say that," Warren answered quickly. For many years Pierre LeFleur had played straight with the Mounted. They respected the grizzled Frenchman who had built this isolated post, taken a Cree to wife and lived on the isolated bay shores.

"Fremont, when did you last go south?"

"Last Winter," the big man drawled insolently. "I didn't buy any strychnine there, if that's what you mean."

"That's what I meant," Andrew admitted.

For a year the Royal Mounted had kept its net spread. For two seasons poisoned furs had shown up in warehouses, but by the time they had been discovered it was

too late to identify the trading post which had sent them in.

The dragnet was out in earnest this winter. The poisoned pelts showed up each spring. Corporal Andrew Warren, relieved of his patrol duties, would spend the winter here at Frontenac. And the man he and headquarters both suspicioned was Bart Fremont.

"Who ships your furs down, Fremont?" he asked sharply.

He knew the answer to that already. Fremont took his own furs to Hogshead Bay. There sold them to the Great Northern Fur Company. They had searched Bart's shipment the Spring before. Not a poisoned pelt in the lot. But a small shipment for a man who did nothing else but trap and who had a half-breed and several Crees working for him. The police guessed Fremont had other outlets for his pelts.

Bart stood up.

"No use to argue with you, Redcoat," he sneered. "When you get something on me, come around."

With a nod to Domingue and the Cree trapper he pulled on his parka and strode out. Theresa disappeared from the room shortly after, and did not return.

"Friend LeFleur," Andrew said quietly, "We have dynamite here."

He could trust this grizzled trader.

"Oui," sorrowfully answered the Frenchman. "Theresa, she cannot make up her mind."

"You have strychnine, of course?"

"Certainement."

"I'll have to require you to keep a record of all your sales," Andrew said sternly. "There must be no exception, Pierre."

"Oui," shrugged the trader.

ANDREW lit his pipe and smoked quietly. He was eager to be with Mary Marlin. There would be hot steaming tea, feminine curtains, a homey comfort—and Mary.

But he wished further talk with Pierre. And a Mountie learns patience. Pierre might find some of the questions Andrew intended to ask embarrassing.

A hail from outside caught such a question half-formed on his lips. Into the post dashed a Cree. One of the tribes which hung around Pierre's post, a relative of the trader's wife.

"Man come through snow."

Andrew pulled on his parka and stepped outside. The only light was a faint shimmer as the moonlight severed the swirling snow. Over the ridge sped a dogteam. They could hear an occasional yelp. Then a man's shouting.

"It is Jer-ree," grunted LeFleur.

Andrew nodded happily. At least this crisis was averted.

"Marlin," shouted the corporal. "Is that you, Marlin?"

"Of course," the cheery voice came back. "Half-froze. Who is it? Warren?"

A shape stole to their side. Theresa, wrapped tightly against the cold. Andrew turned. There was another shadow. Fremont was watching from the darkness.

The huskies reached the light and Andrew saw they were weary. They fell to the snow, snapping pettishly at the Cree who took charge of them.

The parka-clad driver stepped from his sled and stumbled toward them. Andrew caught his arm.

"Boy, I'm glad to see you," the corporal said cordially. "Your sister is worried frantic."

"Am—a little late," gasped Jerry.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Warren. "Hurt?"

Jerry was wavering on his feet.

"No, just hungry. And tired. Be all right."

And, to belie his own speech, Jerry Marlin promptly fainted. Fainted dead in Corporal Warren's arms.

Mary's brother had revived quickly after several cups of steaming tea and a strong drink of brandy. His face was pale

and gaunt, with a summer's beard rough and scraggly.

"What is this, Jerry?" demanded Warren.

"Nothing, Andy," the youth smiled. He was no more than that, twenty-one. "Ran out of grub. Been on lean rations the past month. Just stayed out too long."

"What was the idea?"

It seemed to Warren that Jerry's eyes avoided his gaze. "Oh, just busy. Good tracks. And thought the snow would break."

Andrew frowned. Good tracks! The pelts rolled behind Jerry's sleigh had been hauled out at Pierre's and counted. A poor catch. And Corporal Warren had studied them and had known that they were summer furs, all of them. Rank, scrawny furs. The otter and muskrat had not donned their winter coats when Jerry had trapped them.

"Why didn't you bring your furs in with you?"

Jerry gave him a sharp glance. "Are you buying furs, too?" he demanded. "I thought you were a policeman."

"Jerry!" his sister reproved him.

"Oh, sorry, Andy," the youth apologized quickly. "I'm on edge, I guess. What I need is a long sleep."

"That you do," Corporal Warren agreed. "I'll clear out."

He returned to the trading post. Again he examined Jerry's furs. LeFleur always handled the youth's catch.

"Not much here, is there?" he asked.

"Just summer stuff," Pierre nodded.

Warren didn't like it. There wasn't a cagier man with his traps in the entire Kiotka country than Jerry Marlin. Supported himself and his sister in good fashion with his catches. Had a small balance to his credit at Pierre's from the previous season in addition to a bank account at Calgary. The Marlin cottage was furnished with mail order stuff freighted in by dog-team. Nothing pretentious, but comfortable and nice. Few trappers had as much.

The next afternoon Jerry announced that he was going back out again.

"Time's wasting," he explained. "I have to get back to my lines."

He was in LeFleur's buying supplies. Warren noticed that he was laying in heavy, including meats. This was strange. A trapper usually killed his own meat. During the winter game was easy to keep, just cache it outside, away from the wolves, and let it freeze.

His sister protested but Jerry was unmoved. In fact, as she continued her objections, he became very irritable.

"I tell you I have to get back, Mary. Now don't ask any more questions."

Another woman sought to influence his decision. Theresa LeFleur. Warren overheard snatches of their talk. Theresa was pouting. Evidently Jer-ree did not care so much for her. He stood firm against this attack also. As a result Theresa spent most of her time with Fremont that day, tossing her head and looking off whenever Jerry's eyes turned in her direction. Which was often.

All of this was none of Warren's business. He could wonder at what mysterious attraction was pulling Jerry back into the snows. He did not believe it was all caused by Jerry's desire to return to his trap lines. But it wasn't the role of a Mounted policeman to object to a man's trapping.

One thing he was called upon to decide. Jerry wanted to buy strychnine and the trader wouldn't sell it without the corporal's permission.

Warren consented. LeFleur sold him ten grains. No man would poison enough game with that to justify the trouble.

"You're not suspicioning I poison game, are you?" smiled Jerry. "That's more in Fremont's line."

Bart heard the taunt. "Some day, Marlin, you're going to talk too much with your mouth."

A chuckle was Jerry's answer. Warren studied Mary's brother closely. The youth seemed to be in good humor. His face was still thin and peaked. He had lost weight during this autumn and early winter. But certainly his spirits were high.

Warren followed him out of the trading post.

"Why not give me an idea where you're heading, Jerry?" he asked. "Mary might get worried about you. Where could I find you?"

"I'm trapping beyond the Kiotka," Jerry said hesitantly, looking around first to see if anyone was in earshot. "Just over Kickapoo Falls."

Andrew frowned. The Indians called

this the "Valley of the White Death." Very wild and rugged country. Streams froze over in winter and there was very little muskrat or otter. In fact, except for the Crees, no one ever trapped there.

"You couldn't be bringing pelts out of that region, Jerry," the corporal protested.

"Watch me," grinned Jerry. "Don't worry about me, Andy; I'm all right. I'll be back in the spring. You'd better attend to your own knitting; if you ever let Mary go back for a visit, somebody will take her away from you."

"What about your own business? Do you think Theresa is going to twiddle her thumbs all winter with Fremont around?"

The good humor left Jerry's face. "I'll have to risk that."

His dogs were ready. He held out his hand. "Take care of Sis," he grinned, nodding toward Mary who was walking toward the sled.

Then he kissed his sister, waved to Theresa who was watching from the trading post porch, and cracked his whip over his dogs.

His sled mounted the ridge and disappeared from sight.

With a shrug of his shoulders, Corporal Warren turned to Mary.

"Don't worry about him," he advised, noticing her expression. "Jerry can take care of himself anywhere, anytime."

"I guess I am being foolish," the girl said with a wan smile. "But he is acting so strange. Nervous. Jumpy. He isn't like the old Jerry at all."

"Maybe gal trouble," said Andrew, glancing toward the trading post, where Bart Fremont had joined Theresa on the porch. "I'll see you after awhile."

II

HE went inside to talk to LeFleur. The Frenchman bought from a dozen or more trappers. Warren wanted their names and what they usually caught during a winter.

Andrew did not notice that Fremont left Theresa and strode toward his own cabin. Here a half-dozen teams of huskies yapped in their pens. And here was the stench of furs from a small warehouse back of Bart's cabin.

And here Jules Domingue waited.

"Well?" asked Jules.

He was a little man, but lithe and powerful. "There's something rotten about this," frowned Bart. "Marlin says he is going into the Valley of the White Death. There ain't enough fur there to keep a man busy."

It was a small isolated valley, shut in on all sides by high steep bluffs. In wintertime these were impassable.

"He's lying," Jules said firmly.

"Do you figger," Bart asked slowly, "that he's working with the Mountie? Do you figger he is doubling back and trying to check our lines?"

"I don't believe he is working with the Mountie," Jules said. "But he ain't lost any love for you. If he could prove you were using strychnine, he would do it."

"He's got me nervous. It ain't like him to chase off and leave me an inside track with his gal."

"How long is that gonna last?" grinned Jules. "You've been courtin' that squaw two winters now and you ain't made headway yet?"

"I'm not wasting much more time. She'll be in this cabin by spring."

A soft laugh was Jules' answer. The little man took his hunting knife out of its sheath to sharpen it on his boot soles.

"You'd better get after Marlin," Bart said after a moment. "Track him and see what he's up to."

Domingue's eyes gleamed. "I thought you'd get to that sooner or later. You want Jules to handle him so you can have the squaw."

"No," growled Bart. "I can handle him. I tell you that gal is as good as mine. If Marlin is just trapping, let him alone. I don't care how many pelts he brings in and I don't want trouble with him. But he is acting mighty queer, Jules. He would look at me and chuckle to himself just like

a cat who has grabbed a mouse. Gloating, that's what he was. He knows something."

Jules nodded and slipped the knife back in its sheath. "I'll follow him," the half-breed agreed.

He slipped out of the settlement a half-hour later. On snowshoes. Food for a few days on his back.

"Don't let him see you if you can help it," Bart advised.

"He'll never know I'm anywhere around," Jules promised.

When Warren asked about Jules the next morning, Bart merely grunted.

The Mountie repeated his question.

"If you want Jules, go find him."

A HALF DAY'S travel above Frontenac, where the small river was crowded between towering rough-faced walls so steep that the snow did not cling to them, there was a crack in the north face of the wall. Gaunt black ramparts broke away to reveal an opening, snow-floored, narrow, serene. Here the fading river tumbled from higher than a man's head—Kickapoo Falls.

Skirting the falls—a heavy treacherous portage which took Jerry most of the day—a man dived into a gloom that never saw the sun, himself and his dogs dwarfed by the ugly porphyry cliffs. The shore line was barren, for the race of its waters and its rock face had won over a stubborn Nature, and nothing grew here. Below the ice, the rumble of the boiling waters was constant, filling the canyon mazes with its whisper.

Jules Domingue watched while Jerry made his laborious portage. Then the half-breed, making up with his light shoes what he had lost to the dogteam on the straightaway, slipped through the canyon. Jerry was already camping for the night. Jules threw up a temporary shelter, cursing Bart's nervousness for sending him on such a mission. Not once had Jerry shown an inclination to double back into the bay region where the Fremont trappers plied their nefarious and ugly trade. Whatever mad business Marlin was bent upon, it had nothing to do with Bart Fremont.

Still Domingue followed. He was curious. The next morning they rolled through a different country, bleaker, rougher, colder, lonely as the stars. Black spruce snarled the twisting river shore. There was no game here. Marlin left his pursuer far behind on the frozen wastes and Jules had to plod along a cold trail.

Jerry Marlin, unaware of any pursuit, drove his dogs heartlessly. They were five matched sons of a Coronation Gulf husky mother, big-boned and raffish looking. By dusk the next day he left the river bank for a series of jack pine ridges that rose higher and higher. Then he reached a deep valley tucked away in the folds of this bleak country and pulled up at a cabin which almost hugged the steep barren slope, as lonely as a ship on an ocean.

Before he unhitched his dogs he ran down a twisting trail that aimed at a jut of rock in the steep slope and disappeared beyond it. The trail showed no track, but Jerry was not satisfied until he reached the drifted mouth of a tunnel in the rock face of the cliff. Ten feet into that tunnel was a heavy timbered door padlocked to a spike driven deep into the living rock. He paused there, breathing hard, and saw the padlock undisturbed. Nor were there any new marks on the ancient plank door. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Nobody had discovered his secret.

He went back to his team, whipping the huskies into the dog pen. Then he lit a fire in the small cabin. A smile curved his lips as he unpacked his sled. On the pine board which served as a mantel lay several chunks of raw ore. Jerry studied them again. Gold, no doubt of it. Rich ore.

Jerry Marlin had found this abandoned mine shaft two years before. At first he had examined it only out of curiosity. He was a trapper, not a prospector. The story had been plain to read. Up on the slope the prospector had found color against a porphyry-diorite dike; had figured the pay off would be at the foot of the vertical dike, and so came down below and put in his tunnel, cutting upcasts and crosscuts around the foot of the dike. Then had abandoned the claim as worthless.

Jerry, studying the layout of the dike, recalling the mineralogy he had learned in his brief schooling, decided to try an experiment. The gold signs atop the slope were unmistakable; below, in the abandoned tunnel, they were nil. He had guessed the turn the dust-studded porphyry-diorite dike had taken, a vertical slope toward the north.

At first he had worked casually, even with a chuckle at his own expense. Then more zealously. Even though his supplies ran out, he refused to leave until he had confirmed his hunch—that gold was there. The original prospector had missed the vein.

Then back to Frontenac with his poorest fur pack in many seasons. And to Pombec to find that the original prospector was an Irishman who had drifted on.

But under mining laws, Jerry could not file on the claim until it was legally abandoned, which would be in February. Mining laws favor the original staker. A claimant has to put in only sixty days work on a claim the first two years, ninety days the third. What he does in one year is allowed to carry over into the second.

This was the third year. As yet the original prospector hadn't shown up. If the Irishman didn't return by February to re-file or resume work, this tunnel belonged to Jerry Marlin.

ALREADY he had worked it, through the previous summer, gambling that this year would pass without a challenge to his ownership, but taking no chances. He had portaged a summer's grub, traveling at night to keep other roving trappers from guessing his destination. He had singlejacked instead of blasting, afraid of the noise. He had hunted moose with a bow and arrow for the same reason. He had done the tail end of a summer's work living on blueberries, saving what meat he had for his dogs, and the drive back to Frontenac for winter supplies.

He had spoken to no one about the claim. Not even to Mary. There must be no slipup. A careless word might bring the Irishman back to his claim. Gold news travels fast, unbelievably fast.

He had only this winter to go. Another sixty days. His eyes sparkled as he played with the ore specimens. This gold would buy many things. Perhaps a trading post of his own. Trapping was no life for a married man.

A half-mile away Jules Domingue, trapped by the darkness, camped for the night. Mon Dieu, a man was mad to come into this region. Domingue dropped birds with a crooked stick and nursed his small fire behind a rock ledge. The bitter cold angered him. Fremont had certainly sent him on a fool mission.

Though impatient to be at work on his claim, Jerry arose the next morning and started running his traps. He must keep up a pretense of working his lines for the benefit of any casual passerby. Domingue watched him from above with unblinking eyes. What manner of a man was it who sought to trap here.

Jerry worked slowly, unaware he was being watched. He was a little careless with his sets, which the astute Domingue noticed. Actually Jerry did not care whether his lures produced furs or not.

In mid-afternoon he crossed Jules' back trail.

A lone man on snowshoes! He went back toward the river, pretending to be busy with his sets. The trail had carefully followed that of his sled made the day before.

Then, of a sudden, Jerry had the feeling that he was being watched. As yet the canny Jules had not shown himself, but an alert man in the open knows when eyes are staring over the sheltering ridges at him. He went on with his traps. Returning to the sparse timber clinging to the bluffs, he set his last trap. Then he shouldered his rifle and made for the cabin as if through for the day.

At the first thick patch of spruce, he hid and waited.

Jules was right behind him. Jerry let him pass.

The pursued was now tracking the pursuer.

Satisfied that Jerry had gone to the cabin, Jules settled down for the night. Cold and hungry, the breed built a fire of jackpine. Jerry, watching from a snowbank, smiled in satisfaction. That would make a snapping crackling fire. Would fill the night with sound to cover the noise of Jerry's approach.

Jules worked swiftly. Stretched a tarp on three poles slanted into the snow. Threw up a spruce bough bed. Then pulled off his cap and parka and bent over his fire.

Gently Jerry stepped forward. He saw that the breed was repairing a snowshoe with babiche, or rawhide which he was softening in his boiling water.

Jules did not seem to hear him but sud-

denly the breed, without looking up, made a grab for his rifle, lying on the spruce bough bed. Jerry sent a quick shot into the tarpaulin.

Thus warned, Jules stood up. Jerry came close to the fire, his rifle covering Fremont's henchman.

"Well, Domingue?"

The breed didn't answer. Jerry kicked Jules' rifle out into the snow.

"Sit down," he ordered.

Domingue obeyed. Jerry squatted on the edge of the spruce boughs which the breed had cut for his bed.

"Who sent you up here? Fremont?"

"I was looking for fresh country to trap," Jules said sullenly.

"And you just happened to be on my trail? Talk fast, Jules. And talk straight."

"This is free country. Why shouldn't I come up here?"

"Why should you follow me?"

"Why not? You bring out good fur catches. I wanted to see your lines. Then I'd know where to work."

Jerry studied him thoughtfully for a moment. Jules was lying, of course. But what to do about it? Probably Fremont had sent him out to find Marlin's lines with the intention of stripping them. Perhaps Jules had been set on his trail for all winter just for that purpose.

But what to do with him? Jules had violated no law. Jerry wanted to shoot him, as he would want to kill any man who threatened his possession of that abandoned claim. But he wouldn't. He had gone over that a thousand times sitting by his fire at nights. Even if the Irishman showed up to repossess his claim, unaware of its worth, Jerry wouldn't kill a man for the gold. Or would he? He knew, looking at Jules, that he wouldn't kill Domingue at least.

In that moment of indecision Jules leaped at him. Leaped over the fire with the quick agility of his kind, striking out with heavy boots as he learned in the timber country.

Jerry brought up his arms to ward off the cruel blow and the rifle was knocked from his hands. That was what the breed had been counting on. He rolled off Jerry, lunging for the gun. Jerry came over on his side, grabbed the breed by the shoulder and held him, and with the other hand reached for the gun. They lay there side by side, fighting to reach it, the breed kicking wildly.

Suddenly Jerry let go. Domingue reached the rifle, and then Jerry lunged on him. The breed heaved himself to his knees, Jerry on his back, and swung the gun, butt foremost, over his shoulder. It caught Jerry in the neck and he was knocked backward. And then Jules came to his feet. Jerry scrambled up, swinging savagely. His blow caught Domingue flush behind the ear, and the half-breed staggered and fell, the gun slipping out of his hands.

But Jules was up to meet Jerry's rush. They stood there, knee deep in the snow, slugging wildly at each other, the breed grim and silent.

Jerry kept crowding Jules back. He had a heavy weight advantage; it was worth plenty in this unsure footing. Jerry smashed through the breed's guard with savage blow that brought blood and a gasp of pain.

Domingue fell backward.

Remembering those deadly feet, Jerry did not crowd him. Jules came to his knees, lips parted in a snarl.

Marlin feinted toward him. The breed lashed out with his boots.

He threw himself upward with the savagery of his attack. Jerry sidestepped and struck heavily. Domingue flopped backward, his neck jerking like a dying chicken's.

And lay moaning on the snow.

Jerry realized what had happened. Jules had fallen with his arm pinned under his body.

The breed's left arm was broken.

Jerry grasped him by the shoulders and dragged him over to the spruce bed. Jules was whining piteously. But his eyes were stubborn, unafraid. Marlin wouldn't desert him and wouldn't deny him help. It was a code that all men lived up to in this country, one that Jules would have obeyed himself. And, knowing it, he wouldn't talk.

Despite a dead weariness Jerry set about cutting a crude splint with the half-breed's axe. He was too weary to derive much satisfaction out of the fact that he had taught Fremont's spy a lesson. It was an expensive lesson for them both, for he

would have to carry Jules back to Frontenac.

III

IT was a strange sight when Jerry pulled into Frontenac five days later. Jules, in a high fever, lay in the carriole. It had been five days of hell—five days of breaking trail, of hunting dog food each night because Jerry couldn't overload his sled, and of stopping a half-dozen times a day to heat rocks so that the breed's arm would not freeze in the frigid cold that gripped the land.

A dozen times each day Jerry told himself that he was being a damned fool, that it would be far easier to let Domingue die.

But the traditions of a country die hard, if at all. Jerry mushed his weary dogs into Frontenac and deposited his burden at LeFluer's post.

"He was snooping around my trap lines," he explained to Andrew Warren. "I broke his arm in a fight."

Frement was not there, was off with his Cree trappers running winter lines near the bayshore.

"Pull out before Fremont gets back," advised Warren. "I don't want trouble between you two this winter."

"I'm going back in the morning," Jerry promised.

He spent that evening with Theresa. Gone a long time, he had many questions to ask. Had she fallen for Fremont. She tossed her dark head. What concern was it of his? He stayed away with his traps all the time.

"I'm coming back in the spring, Theresa," he promised. "This is going to be my best winter. I'll have money to set up a trading post. No more trapping."

"Why don't you get Indians to run your lines for you?" she pouted. "Bart, he isn't gone all of the time. Theresa gets lonesome."

"Will you wait until spring?" he demanded.

She looked off a moment. He waited breathlessly for her reply. When she looked back he saw his answer in her eyes. Without a word, he caught her to him. Theresa surrendered to his kiss.

Pierre LeFleur was already asleep when the young people returned to the trading post. He dressed grumpily and sat with Jerry around the red-hot sheet-iron stove.

"I hated to get you up," Jerry apologized, "but I'm leaving early in the morning. I want to buy a few things. But first, I want to talk to you about Theresa."

LeFleur's deep-set eyes flamed. His pretty daughter was a grievous problem She was at the age when some man would claim her. Already many had tried. But none had offered marriage. Even Fremont had not considered that. She was a half-breed, a plaything.

"I want to marry Theresa," Jerry said simply. "In the spring."

LeFleur's pipe dropped from his fingers. Marriage! As any young man should ask a woman's hand—man to man.

"I haven't made too much money," Jerry said humbly. "But this winter—my lines are looking good, Mister LeFleur. I believe I'll come out this spring with a stake. A surprising big stake. I can build a post of my own and give Theresa the kind of life she ought to have."

LeFleur still couldn't trust himself to speak. A respectable marriage for his daughter! To a young man who talked of her so reverently; He sighed.

"Her mother is a Cree. Does that make a difference?"

"I know that," smiled Jerry. "I've known it for years."

"And your sister? Will it be a happy marriage, son?"

"Hasn't yours been?" Jerry shot back.

Pierre nodded. "I've no complaints," he said quietly. He rose and extended his hand.

"I will be proud to have you as a son-in-law," he stated in a voice that quivered with emotion.

Nothing would do Jerry but that they arouse Mary and Corporal Warren and break the news to them. And out came Rosemanche, Theresa's Cree mother, a little bewildered by it all.

It was a sleepless night for Jerry. But a glorious night. He took the trail back to his claim with a song on his lips.

That night Fremont returned.

First, he heard from Jules Domingue that Marlin had attacked him and had broken his arm in the fight.

Then, from Theresa, he heard that she was engaged to marry Marlin. The nuptials would be in the spring.

FREMONT sought out the grizzled trader. They were alone in the post—Bart sent the half-dozen Crees loitering around the stove out with a curse and a command.

"What is this?" demanded the black-bearded man. "Marlin don't get the girl."

"He has asked for her," shrugged Pierre. "She is willing. She will wed Marlin in the spring."

"I know enough on you to ruin you," snarled Bart. "What if I told Warren you were working with me on these poisoned furs? That we traded pelts, and I sent yours in under my name so the Mounted won't get their hands on any evidence. And you sell my strychnine-baited pelts?"

"It would go hard with Pierre," admitted the trader, puffing quietly on his pipe.

Then, gently: "It would go hard on Bart Fremont also. I am only selling the furs. *You* are doing the poisoning."

"You're selling me the strychnine," growled Fremont. "We'd suffer together, LeFleur. Then would your precious daughter marry a white man? Marlin must be crazy to be thinking about marrying a breed anyhow."

Pierre stood up and knocked the ashes out of his pipe. Not a line in his wrinkled face betrayed his anger.

"You must sleep upon this, Bart," he advised calmly. "Your neck is also in the noose. To betray Pierre is to, as you say it, cook your own goose. We shall talk again."

"Damned right we'll talk again," snapped Bart. "I don't intend for Marlin to have that girl. You can put that in your pipe and smoke it, LeFleur."

Back at the hut Jules told him of Marlin's cabin in the Valley of the White Death. How Marlin was carelessly baiting his traps.

"He won't get a skin all winter the way he's working," predicted Jules.

Fremont brooded. What was Marlin up to in the hills? He rolled himself in his blankets and resolved to set out early the next morning for the Valley of the White Death.

LeFleur accepted the announcement with a calm nod. Bart ordered supplies for a week and Pierre stolidly took cans and packages from his shelves.

It was barely daylight. Corporal Andrew Warren, sleeping in the small cabin that served as the Mounted's headquarters in Frontenac, had no idea that Fremont was setting forth on Marlin's trail.

He paled when Pierre told him of it, an hour after Bart had sent his dogs mushing over the ridge.

"That means trouble," he muttered. "After last night . . .!"

Pierre nodded.

Warren returned to his shack and hitched up his dog team. When Mary came out to express concern, he reassured her.

"I'll do the best I can. If I can overtake Bart, I'll put him on a peace bond. Maybe hold him all winter."

He stopped at Pierre's post for more supplies—tea, tinned meat, sugar. He was loading his sled when a Cree tore up. He was on snowshoes and the Indian's face showed evidence of a hurried trip.

"Please, Corporal Warren."

And he stammered out his story. A member of his tribe had been killed. Randolph McGregor, who ran a trading post across a finger of the bay, forty miles distant, was holding the guilty man in chains. The Cree had come for the Corporal.

Warren nodded. The feud between Fremont and Marlin had to wait.

"I'll go to McGregor's," he promised Mary, "and cut across country to the Valley of the White Death. I won't be over a day or two behind Fremont."

"Hurry, please," the girl whispered. "I'm afraid of Bart Fremont. And of Jerry. I don't want anything to happen that will upset his happiness. Or ours."

It was the closest to a promise she had ever given him. Warren hesitated. Mary had held him at arm's length for a long time.

With a chuckle he reached over and kissed her parka-coated head. It was more than a chuckle, it was a chortle. And a promise. This was not much, but it would have to do. For a while.

BART FREMONT rested his dog team below Kickapoo Falls and from then on traveled cautiously, skirting the ridges and moving higher on the bluffs, away from the low winding river. Jules Domingue had described the location of Marlin's cabin; Bart stuck to the high

ground until he reached the bluff where the Irish prospector had discovered gold color, which looked down upon Marlin's cabin.

It was almost dark when Bart made a cold camp. The next morning he was awake early, stiff and chilled. No thickness of furs or blankets could completely shut out this cold, but he had not dared to build a fire. He waited, hungry and miserable, until he saw Marlin come out of the cabin and followed the winding trail down to the tunnel mouth.

For a moment Bart couldn't understand what had happened. He had lain in his ambush gripping his rifle tightly as Jerry had walked straight toward him. Then, beneath him, Jerry had simply disappeared.

After a few moments Bart stole down the bluff. And saw the open tunnel door.

"I'll be damned!" he exclaimed.

He had never thought of this. Talk of gold hadn't been heard around Frontenac in several years, though it was known that prospectors still drifted through the Valley of the White Death.

Indian legend had this hidden valley a myriad of bonanzas, but no valuable ore had ever been brought out of it to Bart's knowledge, and most of the claims had been abandoned. Some gold yes, but too streaked, too poor in quality. Machinery might make something of it, but the valley was isolated and difficult to reach. No prospector had ever panned enough to make it worth his while.

He slipped inside the tunnel with his hand on the trigger of his rifle. Jerry was bending over, his back to the tunnel door, unaware of Fremont's presence.

It took Bart a moment to realize what Marlin was doing. Then he saw that Jerry was baiting caribou scraps with strychnine. A scurrying above Bart explained why this was necessary. There were rats in this mine as big as a small otter.

"Well, if it ain't Marlin!" jeered Bart, his rifle poised for a sudden attack when Jerry discovered his presence.

Marlin started and the caribou scraps dropped from his hands.

"Fremont!"

"Now this *is* a surprise," chortled Bart. "All busy digging gold, ain't you. Throw me over a piece of that ore."

He waved toward Jerry's crude windlass and pan.

Marlin had no choice but to obey. Fremont examined the specimen carefully, making sure his rifle was ready for a quick shot. His narrow black eyes gleamed. He knew good streaks when he saw them.

He studied the tunnel. Over head-high, wide enough for several men to walk abreast in. Dynamite had been used here once.

"You didn't do all this yourself, Marlin?"

"It's no business of yours," snapped Jerry. "This is my claim. Get the hell out of here."

"So this is why you ducked out of Frontenac in such a hurry? And where you've been hiding out? And why you roughed up Jules. You'll pay for that, Marlin."

"I don't want any trouble with you, Fremont," said Jerry, trying to hold back his anger. "I didn't intend to break Domingue's arm. And I carried him into Frontenac myself."

"Yeah," growled Bart, "you did."

But he wasn't worrying about Jules. His piggish eyes were roving over the tunnel and his evil mind was at work. So Marlin had a gold claim that was paying off! Funny there had been no talk of it at the post. And why should Jerry keep up his pretense of running trap lines?

But, even over his greed, Fremont felt his cold and hunger.

"I had a cold camp last night, Marlin. I need tea and grub. Suppose you amble up to the cabin and cook up some."

"Go help yourself," Jerry said curtly. "There is food in the cabin. Help yourself and then get out of here."

"You don't understand me, Marlin," jeered the dark-faced man. "I'm staying around here a spell."

"The devil you are! Fremont, if you don't get out of here and . . ."

Fremont raised his rifle. "Start walking, Marlin," he ordered. "Back to the cabin. I'm giving the orders."

Jerry paled. Fremont was perfectly capable of shooting him down, he was sure of that. He trudged back up the winding trail. Bart at his heels.

"Pretty cozy," said Bart as they stepped inside. "This fire looks good."

Fremont settled back in Jerry's only chair and watched while Marlin rekindled the fire, put on water to boil and broke out a fresh tin of beans. He had found out Jerry's secret.

THE urge was strong to simply pull the trigger, kill Marlin on the spot and return southward to file on the claim. Yet something told Fremont that this wasn't the proper procedure. No moral code stopped him; it was his fear, and his cunning. He had a wholesome respect for Corporal Andrew Warren of the Royal Mounted; he felt sure that somehow, someway, Warren would eventually discover the crime and bring Fremont to punishment. The Mounted had a way of doing that. Fremont did not want to cross their trail.

Yet, on the other hand—he could not sit idly by while Marlin profited from a gold strike that might be richer than anything Fremont had ever dreamed of, certainly more profitable than running poisoned pelts through a dragnet that was getting tighter and tighter.

While Fremont pondered, Jerry brewed tea and boiled beans. The young prospector was thinking also. While Fremont was wondering what to do about Marlin, Jerry was trying to figure out some way of ridding himself of Fremont. He could not allow the man to return to Frontenac even if Fremont were willing. Once there Fremont would spread the news; and perhaps the original Irish prospector would come back to recover his claim. Anyhow there would be a gold rush. There would be nothing to keep a man from filing on this claim. Jerry had not done that. The claims bureau would send a notice to the original filer. Perhaps the Irishman's whereabouts were unknown and such a notice would never reach him. But Marlin didn't care to take a chance.

The tea was boiling. Fremont drank it gratefully. Then Jerry took the beans off the fire.

He saw his opportunity. Instead of emptying them into Fremont's plate, he threw the boiling mass into the man's dark face. Bart screamed in pain and went over backward, the rifle dropping out of his hands.

In that moment Jerry was on top of him.

It was a struggle, even with Fremont blinded by the pain. Bart was a bigger man. Once, swinging blindly, he landed a solid smash into Jerry's face that sent Marlin spinning.

Fremont came to his feet. Had he been able to see, he would have probably emerged on top. But while he floundered Jerry seized the iron pot in which the beans had boiled and crashed it against Bart's head.

The black-faced man dropped to the floor, out like a log.

Jerry stood over him, panting, uncertain. Fremont was not dead. His burn was not serious. But here he lay, and what to do with him, Jerry didn't know.

First, while deliberating, he tied Fremont with strips of rawhide. Then used

lard to treat his face. Bart regained consciousness with a moan. Blood dripped from the cut on his head; Jerry washed and bandaged that while the dark-faced man swore.

"Where is your dog team?" Jerry demanded.

Bart told him, up on the bluff, the huskies tethered to an aspen thicket. With a curl of his lip for a man who would seek comfort for himself before attending to his dogs, Jerry returned with Fremont's dogs and sled. He loosened the prisoner's bonds and permitted him to eat, then retightened them carefully.

"What are you going to do with me?"

Jerry shook his head. He didn't know.

With dogged determination, he returned to his tunnel while he deliberated. The easiest way out was to kill Fremont and bury him under these icy wastes. Or to plead self-defense. It must be known in Frontenac that Bart had set out after him. It could be proved that Bart was insanely jealous because Theresa LeFleur had consented to marry Jerry in the spring. Jerry could even go a step farther and say that he had charged Fremont face to face with using strychnine bait, and that the big man had tried to kill him to prevent detection.

Character witnesses would strengthen Marlin's case. All he would have to do was to return to the cabin, shoot down Fremont; then go back to Frontenac and let Warren taken charge of the case. There were still signs of a struggle in the cabin. Jerry could testify that, after striking Fremont with the iron pot, he had seized the rifle in the struggle and shot the bigger man. No jury would convict him. There might not even be a trial.

But this plan had two drawbacks. In the first place, it involved murder. Brutal murder. In the second, to make his own case stronger, Jerry must return to Frontenac at once, and tell his story completely—his finding the abandoned claim, his feverish digging, his jealous protection of his secret. That would start gold rumors flying throughout the North country. Sourdoughs wouldn't be held back because of the bleak cold winter; nothing ever held them back. The Irishman who had the prior claim might return and . . .

Neither of these would do. Jerry groaned and swung his pick harder. He wished he could force himself to kill Fremont and hide the man's body. It would be easy. Drive back down the trail and strew wreckage of sled and skeletons of dogs over one of the sharp bluffs, pretend ignorance of Bart's whereabouts, and trust cruel Mother Nature to cover up evidence of the crime.

That was the easy way. But he couldn't take it.

What he did was to harness Fremont's dog team the next morning.

To his own sled!

Then he took the pack Fremont had brought from LeFleur's, emptied its contents on the table and examined them. An unopened pack of sugar, unopened pack of tea, matches, a kettle, a box of shells, a knife and some salt. Two bannocks, a tin of meat, an extra blanket. He added more meat and bannock.

"Whatcha up to ?" growled Fremont.

Jerry sat down and brought out his pouch and filled his pipe carefully.

"You and I are going on a trip, Fremont."

"Trip? In this weather?"

"Yep, it's cold," Jerry agreed. "But I'm not throwing away my work here. You're not going back to Frontenac and talk about my gold strike."

"Hell, I won't talk. Honest, Marlin. Just gimme my dogs and I'll strike right back and . . ."

Jerry was cold to his pleading. "I can't trust you, Fremont. Another eight weeks and I don't care how much you talk. I'm fixing you up—for eight weeks."

"How?"

"We're going to cut across the rim toward the bay," Jerry grinned coldly. "It's hard going, especially in this weather. I'm going to set you loose about two days from Randolph McGregor's—on snowshoes. It will take us six days to get close to Mac's. You can work your way there. Mac always sends his furs out in the spring. You can go out with him. I'm giving you about three days grub and no gun. Maybe Mac will sell you some dogs and you can try to get back sooner.

"You're a damned fool if you do. You can't stand this cold. You can't break a trail in this weather. I can. So can Andy Warren. So can some of these Crees who do your dirty work for you. But you've always sat in LeFleur's trading post during

the winter while somebody else froze and half-starved out in the cold. You won't try to make Frontenac before spring."

All the bluster had left Fremont's face. He licked his lips.

"You mean you'd turn me loose back there on the divide without dogs or grub or gun!"

"I'm giving you grub." Jerry pointed to the table. "What you brought from Pierre's plus some of my own. You'll have my snowshoes. You can make it to Mac's."

"Hell, I'll get lost!" wailed Fremont. "Look, Marlin, I ain't a trail man like you are. I'll lose my way."

"I'm carrying you clear to the bay north of Mac's. You can follow the shoreline. It's slow and it's rough. But you'll get there."

"It's murder, Marlin," protested Bart.

"I don't give a damn if it is," Jerry said coldly. "Are you ready to travel?"

A HARD three-day snow had slowed them, so that on the evening of the sixth day they lacked a half-days travel from the bay shore. It had been a slow puzzling job this trip. Jerry had traveled it in summer, going the opposite direction, and then had made his way by tell-tale landmarks. When the creeks petered out into streams, memory faded, and there was only the tilt of the land, the shape of the country and the gaunt bony ridges to guide them over the right trail to the bay.

Three nights out Jerry relaxed his vigilance momentarily. Wood was scarce, with aspen thickets buried under heavy drifts, and while he was floundering through soft snow knee deep, his rifle fell from his cold hands and dropped into the snow. He retrieved it successfully and returned to the camp with a handful of aspen chunks.

Fremont was watching from the sled, a grin on his lips. Jerry chopped the aspen, then laid down the axe. All of this time he was careful to keep his rifle right by him. Not since leaving his cabin had he given Fremont an opportunity to jump him, keeping the dark-faced man bound at night.

Fremont edged toward the axe. Reached it without being challenged. With a roar he picked it up.

"Now we'll see who's top dog?" he shouted triumphantly.

Jerry raised his rifle. "One move towards me and I'll drop you, Fremont," he snapped. "Don't tempt me."

"With that rifle," croaked Bart. "I saw it fall in that snow drift, Marlin. You won't shoot anybody with that gun until you dry it."

Jerry turned the barrel, pulled the trigger. There was a dull click. He lowered it.

His dejection lasted only a moment. As Fremont came a step closer he turned back to the fire.

"You got the axe, Fremont. I'm not fighting you."

"What's to prevent me from bashing your head in?"

"Nothing," grinned Jerry, "except that you'll starve and freeze to death. Could you find your way back to Frontenac? Could you go on to McGregor's? Sure, you're top man. Take over."

Fremont lowered the axe.

"I'm through guarding you anyhow," added Marlin. "If you act decent, I'll carry you on to the bay. Otherwise you stay here."

"One blow from this axe and . . ." growled Bart.

"You stupid ox, you're helpless without me," snapped Jerry. "Take that axe and cut wood with it. Do something useful."

Fremont obeyed. From then on Jerry did not even have to take the precaution of keeping his rifle near him.

Working together, they reached the bayshore, camped that night on the frozen hummocks of a muskeg in a tight tangle of scrub tamarack that broke the wind. Jerry cut some brush for their beds and stretched the tarp behind it.

Fremont was weary, but more cold than tired, and he obeyed Jerry's command to rustle wood against the cold night ahead of them. Whatever ideas he had of breaking away, of overcoming Marlin, had long since vanished. Marlin as a man he did not fear, although Jerry now had his rifle ready to shoot. But there was another fear. There was not a single axe mark, however gray, that showed someone had been here before them. It was this fear of that vastness and solitude that made him obedient and harmless.

In the morning Jerry tossed Fremont the small pack and the snowshoes.

"You're on your own," he said curtly.

"Follow the shoreline south. You can't miss Mac's."

All the fight had gone out of Fremont. He had lain awake the night before dreading the moment when Marlin would set him free. He could have seized the rifle in the darkness and made Jerry prisoner, but he had no heart for such a task. For the first time in his life Bart Fremont, powerful and unscrupulous, was helpless. He only whined another appeal to Marlin to let him return to the cabin. Or to carry him on to Mac's with the sled and dogs.

"I'll make it worth your while," he offered. "I'll split my winter's take with you. And next spring I'll clear out of Frontenac and never come back. I promise, Marlin. I swear I will."

Jerry chuckled. What a coward. What a cringing coward when confronted with forces that he could not conquer by nefarious practices.

"Good luck, Fremont," he said.

And cracked his whip over the huskies. Fremont stood trembling and watched him disappear over the next ridge.

Then, a catch in his throat that was almost a sob, he started down the bayshore. Fear drove him on; he wore himself out that morning. Not until mid-afternoon did he dare to stop and eat; by then he was completely overcome and couldn't go on.

He remembered how Marlin had thrown up a camp. A tangle of scrub tamarack, it was everywhere. A fire. Brush for his bed. The tarp stretched behind it to shut out the wind.

Fremont worked feverishly. His fingers were numb and shaky with fear. He dropped several matches into the snow before one struck. The tamarack sputtered up. Bart hugged the blaze.

Then he opened his pack. Confidence rippled through him with the waves of warmth. Here he was with food, a fire and tea. He put snow on the fire to melt and boil, emptied in tea.

That Marlin! Bart warmed his bannock and opened a tin of meat. The tea was boiling. He emptied in sugar.

It was cozy here. The wind was dying. He lay back against his bush bed and cursed himself for being so humble before Jerry Marlin. The tea helped to restore his morale, even though it scalded his tongue.

Perhaps, from Mac's, he could go back and . . .

V

CORPORAL WARREN'S business at McGregor's was only routine. One Cree had killed another in a dispute over a trap line. McGregor, a grizzled Scotchman, had promptly held the offending party. He kept his Indians in line, did this bent trader who was past sixty, but still as hardy as any younger man.

Warren listened to both sides of the story. The killer was docile. Warren sympathized with him.

"I think it will be self-defense," he told the trader. "Charley is a good Indian, isn't he?"

"One of the best," McGregor answered.

"I'll parole him to you for the rest of the Winter so he can run his traps," proposed Warren. "In the spring, when he brings his pack down, we'll have a hearing. See if that is all right with him."

McGregor, who was acting as interpreter, explained to the Cree. The Indian nodded and answered back in a rush of feverish speech. He was not afraid of the white man's law. The white men in the red coats

were always fair with his people. He would return to his trap lines and trouble no one.

The next morning Warren set out for the Valley of the White Death.

It was a new trail for him. McGregor could help him little.

"Most of the men," explained the trader, "follow the bay north to Sanchaw Creek and then cut due west. It's rough country, however."

Corporal Warren speedily realized this fact. The bay was frozen over and he could run his dogs at a speedy pace. But that meant following the shore's dipping and turning, wasting precious miles. That night he camped in a cove no more than ten land miles from McGregor's. But it was the safe route, and he was too late to prevent any immediate bloodshed between Marlin and Fremont anyhow.

Near mid-day he veered closer to the shore, searching for a cove that would protect him against the chill breezes sweeping across the bay. He sighted a tell-tale black spot where the snow had melted. The tamarack meadow around indicated cover. Coming closer, a half-dozen small pieces of charcoal indicated a recent fire.

Not until Andrew Warren had broken off tamarack to start his fire did he notice the human foot protruding through the mound of fresh snow, and the half-hidden pack.

Fremont was dead. Scooping back the snow with the dead man's snowshoes, Warren discovered his pack, his kettle, his plate and brush bed.

Here Fremont had died, evidently in the midst of eating. With a soft curse Corporal Warren set about piecing together the story.

The dead man's face contradicted Warren's first theory—that he had died from cold. A freezing man is a comfortable man, and a happy one. Bart Fremont had died an agonizing death. There were marks on his throat to indicate that he had clawed in his pain.

There were no wounds. No bruises. Finally the methodical Warren reached the inevitable conclusion.

Poison.

He tested the opened pack of sugar.

Strychnine.

The sled carried a double burden as Warren followed Sanchaw Creek until it disappeared at the brink of the divide. His second passenger was a dead man.

And Warren drove to arrest on sight—for murder—Jerry Marlin!

JERRY saw the sled and team coming across the white ridges and was waiting with rifle ready. Another five weeks left; he would hold off any curious traveler with rifle fire if necessary.

But he lowered the gun when he recognized the team of huskies. Corporal Warren's white-breasted lead dog was famous throughout the country. Fremont's corpse, wrapped in furs, did not attract his notice as he ran out and lent a hand to the tired parka-wrapped man breaking trail ahead of his equally weary team. Fresh snow had caused the corporal to take the trail ahead of his lead dog, sparing the huskies the tiring task of breaking down the fresh fragile crusts.

"Andy! What pulled you up here?"

Gone was his resentment against this unexpected visitor. Andrew Warren he could trust—even with his precious secret.

For answer the corporal, without waiting for food or warmth, whipped the fur robe from Fremont's body.

"That, Jerry," he said accusingly.

Marlin's eyes leaped from the corpse to Andrew's face. "I see," he mused. "And you think I did it."

"I do, Jerry," Warren said in the same calm firm voice. "Strychnine. You bought poison from Pierre LeFleur."

"Strychnine!" exclaimed Jerry Marlin. "But . . ." and swiftly he sketched what had happened. Fremont's visit to his cabin. Their trip across the divide. Bart's fear of the open trail.

"I felt a little guilty at first," he smiled. "I did leave Fremont just two days from McGregor's. I was sure he could make it; all he had to do was to followed the shore line. But this poisoning . . . I didn't do that, Andrew."

Warren's eyes swept the cabin, the twisting trail leading down to the tunnel mouth, the bleak bluffs beyond.

"How's trapping, Jerry?" he asked quietly.

With a sheepish grin Marlin told the truth, that he wasn't trapping at all except as a pretense, that he was mining gold out of this abandoned claim. He even

showed the Mounted the tunnel.

"That's why I had to get Fremont out of sight until February. If the original prospector hasn't showed up by then, this claim is mine. Think of it, Andrew. I'm rich."

Corporal Warren sighed. "That will make it only harder in court, Jerry."

"Court!"

"Yes. You had a motive for killing Fremont. The motive is even stronger than I thought. You had the opportunity. You were known to have purchased ten grains of strychnine. It's a strong case, Jerry."

"But I tell you I didn't . . . you know me, Andy. I wouldn't *poison* a man. To tell you the truth, I did think about killing him. You know what a rat he is. Always after Theresa; I could have killed him with my bare hands for the way he acted with her. But strychnine! No, Andy. I'm not that type."

"*I* know it, but a court doesn't. Who else saw Fremont in that time? There were no tracks anywhere. A roving Cree trapper might have wandered into his camp, but I doubt it. According to your own story, Fremont was on the trail one day. It's a strong case, Jerry."

The youth's face paled. He was beginning to realize how strong it was. He couldn't deny the motive. Nor the opportunity. Perhaps the evidence against him was only circumstantial, but it was strong enough to place the burden of proof on him.

"I bought the strychnine to poison rats," he murmured. "They were all over the mine tunnel."

"Can you prove that?"

Jerry shrugged his shoulders. "Rats always go off to die. Strychnine isn't like shooting 'em. I know I've killed dozens of 'em with my poisoned bait. But there aren't any lying around."

"I guess not," Andrew sighed. "I have to take you in, Jerry. You know how this hurts me."

"Look, Andy," appealed Marlin. "Let's hole up here another thirty days. I'm not resisting arrest. The cards are stacked against me, but I'm willing to stand trial. I'll beat it somehow. I'll get a lawyer from Quebec. But I've *got* to protect this mine. You hear me, I *got to!*"

"I can't do that either," the corporal said sternly. "I can't show you any consideration."

And he took a step forward. "Jerry Marlin, I arrest you in the name of the Queen for the murder of Bart Fremont."

Jerry paled. His lips twitched. His eyes flashed fire. Then, of a sudden, he was moving forward, an insane gleam in his eyes.

Warren's automatic leaped out. "Don't get any foolish ideas," he warned.

With a shrug of his shoulders Jerry stopped coming. "You got the drop," he muttered. "But I promise you, Andy; we're not into Frontenac yet."

WARREN had the huskies harnessed and the sled packed. And Fremont's corpse stached inside the cabin against his return in the spring.

"It would make it easier, Jerry," he said, "if you'd take your own sled and go along quietly."

"So it would," Jerry agreed. "But I'm not making it easy, Andy."

He was still in handcuffs. Corporal Warren had offered to remove them in return for his promise not to attempt escape, but Marlin refused. He would, he told the Mountie, get away at the first opportunity.

Andy sighed and bundled him in furs. He had added two of Jerry's dogs to his team but even then the load was heavy for the huskies. The trip back to Frontenac would not be easy. This was the dead of winter; soft snow fell each night to be blown into tiny atoms the next day by the powerful winds which swept down from the Arctic. Following even a clear trail was a task of no mean proportions.

But Corporal Andrew Warren cracked his whip over his huskies and set the sled in motion. He would carry in his man.

The first half-day was easy; the wind had cleared the highlands of snow and the huskies made fast time on the heavy smooth crust. But, reaching the river bottom, Warren encountered deep snow and had to break trail ahead of his dogs. That night they camped above Kickapoo Falls. Even with the rapids frozen over, Warren must make a portage.

"How are you going to get me down the bluff?" Marlin grinned.

He lay on his sled, covered by robes,

and chuckled as Andrew Warren pitched camp, built a fire and even fed him. He had warned the Mountie; he would have to be carried in as dead weight.

"I can carry you if necessary," Warren said grimly.

"It will be necessary," Jerry promised. "I'm not taking a step back under my own power."

The next morning the corporal began the portage. First, he manacled his prisoner to a tamarack.

"You'll get cold," he grunted, "but I can't help it."

Then he led the huskies down the 20-foot precipice. Some leaped willingly, others had to be picked up and carried. It was mid-day when the corporal had finished carrying the sled and supplies.

Marlin was blue with cold.

"This—is—no—way—to treat—a prisoner!" he chattered.

But he was grinning about it. He realized he had given Warren no other alternative.

"Now you go," growled Warren. He was tired, dog tired. And he resented having to handle his prisoner like a sack of grain.

He pushed Jerry backward and caught his feet.

"Hey, don't pull me like that . . . I'll get . . ."

"This way or walk," Andrew growled.

Jerry offered no further protest.

A foot at a time he was pulled downward. Twice Andrew had to stop him from falling. But finally they reached the bottom and Warren made camp for the night.

"Only three more days to Frontenac. I'll be glad when this trip is over, Jerry."

Then his face clouded as he thought of meeting Mary—telling her that Jerry was accused of murder.

"And yet I won't be," he murmured.

That night a fresh blizzard struck. It was the coldest night Andrew Warren had ever spent in the open. The precipice saved them from the full force of the wind but, even with this protection, they lay awake shivering through the long dark hours. No manner of a fire or cover could keep them warm.

The morning broke gray and bleak. Full two feet of fresh snow covered the trail, hiding tell-tale landmarks, obliterating level patches where the dogs could have made good time.

The wind had shifted to the south and was in Andrew Warren's face as he started breaking trail. By mid-day he had not made over a mile. Frequently he floundered into deep drifts shoulder-deep and had to follow a zig-zag direction that ate up time, but not distance.

He camped early, completely worn out. And worried. At this pace they would not reach Frontenac for a week or longer. And their supplies would not hold out over three more days. Unless the weather broke, they were in for a rough time of it.

His blood-shot eyes regarded Jerry with undisguised hostility. If Marlin would spell him off at breaking the trail, and walk behind the sled the rest of the time, they would go faster. Marlin's cooperation might mean the difference between making it to Frontenac and giving out here in the snowy wastes, perishing from fatigue and exposure and lack of food.

Jerry's grinning face filled him with fury. Marlin was counting upon this. Was willing to play a most dangerous game, of waiting until the Mounted had to surrender and set him free.

That, Warren promised himself, would be never.

The wind seemed stronger to him the next morning. It swept through his furs, leaving him completely chilled only a few moments after taking the trail. The dogs crept along low and missed the full fury of the blasts. Flying snow stung his face even through the thickness of his parka. But he kept stumbling along. And his lead husky, the famed dog with the white chest, was right in his wake.

Such was the fury of the snow and wind that there was little distinction between daylight and darkness; he had no idea what time it was when he made camp. The tamarack was mostly covered over by the deep clinging white blanket; he camped at the first patch he saw.

He had to rest before he could muster the energy to cut wood. He pulled Jerry close to the fire.

"Damn you, get warm," he growled.

And he lurched off into the greyness, gun over his arm. Perhaps there would be no game, but their larder was running low.

Any sort of a kill would help. Only another day's ration's left, and God only knew how far it was to Frontenac.

He heard a shout behind him and whirled. What he saw filled him with dismay.

The sled was burning!

And Jerry Marlin, who had rolled off into the snow, was laughing hoarsely.

He ran back cursing.

"Now carry me into Frontenac," sneered Warren's prisoner. "Carry me the rest of the way."

Andrew regarded the crackling flames and then looked down at Jerry.

"You fool," he said slowly, "you've signed our death warrant."

"I told you," Marlin gloated triumphantly, "that you wouldn't take me in."

VI

THE next morning Andrew labored with the few resources at his command. The iron runners had not been harmed; he rescued them from the embers and started stripping tamarack bushes. He took a fur robe which had protected Jerry and cut it into strips.

"You'll get cold," he grunted, "but it's your fault."

By night he had constructed a crude sled. There was only a handful of provisions left. Tea fortunately. And the small iron kettle. But the tinned meats were lost in the fire. Cold and hungry, Andrew slept in catnaps, rising every few minutes to rekindle the fire.

The sled was wobbly and barely carried Jerry's weight. The crude harness, only bits of which had been salvaged, enabled the huskies to swing from side to side. Their progress was ant-like, and wavered from ridge to ridge. That night there was only tea, and it very weak. In another day they would have only melted snow.

"You damn stubborn fool," growled Jerry. "You'll kill us both rather than give in."

"That's right," Andrew said calmly. "I'm your match, Marlin. Either you go into Frontenac as my prisoner, or you don't go in at all."

Jerry huddled in his single robe without answering. For another night the corporal had to sit by the fire, dozing when he could. The huskies howled in their snow bins. They were cold and hungry. The last fish had been thrown to them the night before.

Before daylight Jerry sat up. "I can't sleep with those damned dogs howling," he complained. "In another day, Warren, they'll be after us."

"Probably," the corporal agreed.

Jerry struggled to his feet and held out his handcuffs. "Take 'em off," he growled.

"You mean that?"

"Yes, dammit," Marlin croaked. "I'm not going to die out here. We're several days out of Frontenac. You've been off the trail since yesterday morning."

"I was afraid I was," said Andrew, struggling with the handcuffs. "How far off?"

"Several miles. West."

Now that he had decided to give in, Jerry surrendered completely. He was a better man on a cold trail than Corporal Warren. He had mushed across this North country for years, getting pelts where no other white man and few Indians dared to go.

"We'll scrap the sled," he grunted. "We can take what wood there is and make snowshoes."

"We could make better time with the sled," Warren pointed out.

"Yes, but what do we eat?" Jerry snapped.

"You mean the dogs!" gasped the corporal.

"Of course I mean the dogs. I'm hungry, Warren. I've never eaten husky meat before, but I'm willing to start right now."

Warren was hungry, too. He offered no objections.

They drank the blood, and both felt better. They took turns at pulling the team of huskies behind them. Each day their load grew lighter.

Like two drunken men they reeled closer and closer. The last dog was gone, and their makeshift snowshoes crumpling under them, when they wearily breasted the ridge that protected Frontenac from the bay winds.

Warren pulled up, struggling with a sudden decision.

"You can go back, Jerry," he proposed. "I'll turn in my resignation. Go on back 'til your claim deadline has expired."

Jerry hesitated. The temptation was strong within him. But, after a moment's thought, he shook his head.

"We've come this far. We'll go on."

Thus Corporal Warren staggered into Frontenac with his prisoner.

Mary was one of the first people he saw after locking Jerry in the small office-jail. He explained finding Bart Fremont's body, and the evidence against Jerry that had compelled his arrest.

"I had to bring him in, Mary," he murmured. "Once, after getting him here, I was willing to let him go. He wouldn't let me."

The girl's face was chalk-white. "Of course, Andy," she said gently. "It was your duty."

"He has his claim," Andy explained. "I'll hold him here until after February first. Then, before taking him to the post, you and I will file for him. That will save his mine."

"We'll need it," Mary nodded. "It will cost money to fight this case."

"I'll get a leave of absence. I'll go with you to Quebec and we'll hire the best lawyer in Canada."

"I know we can depend on you, Andrew," Mary murmured.

"And—my bringing in Jerry—won't make any—difference?"

"Of course not."

Those three words, more than a night's sleep and a hearty meal, served to revive Corporal Warren.

He called upon his prisoner. Jerry was still sleeping.

"Sleep long time," explained the Cree who was serving as temporary jailer. "Miss Theresa come. He still sleep."

"Let him," grinned Warren. "He deserves it."

He walked toward the trading post. Theresa ran toward him, reaching him fifty yards from where Pierre LeFleur stood on the wide snow-swept porch.

"Is there nothing we can do?" the girl wailed. "You know he did not kill Bart Fremont. You know it."

"I'm afraid there's nothing," Andrew sighed.

"First Rosemanche died!" wailed the girl. "Then Jerr-ee. Oh, Corporal!"

He put his arm around her and she sobbed on his shoulder. Pierre LeFleur regarded him with deep somber eyes.

"Sorry to hear about Rosemanche, Pierre," Andrew said sympathetically. "How did it happen?"

In broken tones the French trader told how the Cree woman he had taken for a wife years before had contracted pneumonia, and had died before help could be brought.

"I'm sorry, old man," Warren murmured. He knew that, different from most Northmen who took Indians as wives, Pierre had loved Rosemanche. And had been a kind husband to her.

"Now all that's left—is the la jeune fille," Pierre whispered, nodding toward Theresa.

Andrew nodded. Trouble had certainly besieged this lonely post during the winter.

Pierre raised his head. His deep eyes studied Andrew's face and there was a strange gleam in their blackness.

"What is it, Pierre?" Andrew asked.

The trader shook his head. It was nothing.

A customer came into the post; Pierre motioned for Theresa to attend to the transaction. He sat puffing his pipe, a far-off look in his eyes. Warren pushed closer to the cast-iron stove and respected the Frenchman's silence.

Finally the Mountie spoke.

"It would be a good idea to confess, Pierre."

The Frenchman did not raise his griz-

zled head. "I won't try to bluff," murmured Warren, knocking the ashes out of his pipe. "I doubt if I ever could prove that you put strychnine in Fremont's sugar."

Again no reply.

"But Theresa—she is all you have left, Pierre. If you don't confess, if you deny this hunch of mine, I've no choice but to send Marlin into trial. And I think he will be convicted, Pierre. Then you have ruined your daughter's life. Then you have thrown away all you ever lived for."

Now Pierre stirred. Those sunken eyes fastened themselves on Warren's face.

"How did you know this?" he asked. It was a gentle question, not a demand.

"I don't know it," Andrew shrugged. "Deny it, Pierre, and I'll never mention it again. But it's the only way it could have happened, unless Jerry *did* kill him. I don't believe that."

Pierre looked around him. The Cree customer had gone out and Theresa was rearranging stock on the shelves.

"Tea, Theresa," called the trader. "Tea for myself and the Corporal."

She moved hurriedly to obey. The twin tragedies seemed to have quieted her, Andrew observed. She had grown up. She would make some man a good wife.

"Do you know about the furs?" Pierre asked gently.

"I know nothing," Andrew said crisply.

"Times were hard," muttered Pierre. "I wanted money to send Theresa away. I wanted to send her back to France to my people. With a dowry. I didn't want her growing up out here—a half-breed. Back there are no color lines. Back there she would be respected. Any man's equal."

Andrew nodded. Theresa brought the tea. Sugar and condensed cream on a tray. Pierre stirred his spoon around in his cup.

"That would take money. I had much strychnine on hand. Bart Fremont came. I knew he was baiting traps with poison. The Mountie followed him. You were suspicious of Fremont. He had no way of getting his furs down the bay to the warehouse."

Andrew nodded again. "For a price I agreed to help him. I traded him furs. I have been here long time. Nobody search Pierre's furs. The Frontenac Fur Company was known as square outfit."

Pierre sipped his tea. "Then Theresa fell in love with this boy. He surprised me by wanting to marry her. Fremont wanted her—for his own evil desire. Fremont left here to kill Jerry Marlin. I saw it in his eyes."

His hollow gaze met Warren's. "I did not kill him because I was afraid of myself," he stated simply. "I put the strychnine in his sugar because of Theresa. And her young man. I am not sorry, Corporal. He was an evil man. Now, perhaps, my girl can be happy."

"That she can," Andrew nodded. "Jerry Marlin found a gold claim and . . ."

He was interrupted by a violent sputtering. Pierre LeFleur was clawing at his throat.

"Pierre!" shouted the corporal, seizing the old man and shaking him.

"Sorry, Corporal," whispered the trader, now grown limp and hoarse. "Sorry. But . . . better this way."

Theresa ran to her father's side. For a moment she cried with her dark head against his. Then she stood up, and faced the corporal.

"He told you?" she quivered.

"Yes. Had he told you?"

"No," she murmured. "No," she said sternly. "But I saw him. I did not stop him because I was afraid, too—for Jerry. But I would have told. I knew that some day I would tell."

"His confession is enough," Andrew said. "You needn't tell your story."

He looked down at the trader's lifeless body. By what must have been a superhuman effort, Pierre had shaken off the expression of agony and had died with a smile on his bearded lips.

Andrew handed Theresa the keys to the one-room jail where prisoners at Frontenac were temporarily kept.

"Go see Jerry," he said gently. "I think it's time for him to wake up."

BLIND MAN'S DEADFALL

By DAN CUSHMAN

Bring in blind Joe Tobas or let the Mounted be the laughing stock of Peace River was the command thrown at reluctant Corporal Mike Barry.

INSPECTOR MOORHAVEN of the Northwest Mounted Police noticed the shocked expression on the corporal's face, and smiled.

"Really now, Barry! A person would think from that expression that I was sending you for the devil—horns, hoofs and all. Blind Joe Tobas is a bad one, but you've brought in a good many who are worse."

"It's not that—" And there Big Mike Barry cut himself off. He had been on the point of asking the Inspector to send someone else, but now he stood extremely straight, lips pressed tightly together. "It's nothing," he finished in a tight, husky voice.

"Out with it, man!"

"It's nothing, sir."

Inspector Moorhaven went on, "Don't let the little matter of his being blind cloud up your sporting blood. Tobas is tough enough—eyes or no eyes. He proved that when he shot Miller. They say he can shoot by sound like another man can by sight. Better than most. Caxon saw him shoot silver dollars by their jingle over at Hudson Hope two years ago. And memory!—the Indians call him 'the man who sees with his feet.' Follows a path once—*once*, mind you—and always afterward he can travel it as fast as a man with eyes. You'll remember, Barry, that he didn't have much trouble getting away from that marshal over in Porcupine. Just be careful he doesn't treat you the same!"

"I'll take all necessary precautions."

Moorhaven tapped his fingers on the desk, "The Mounted would be the laughing stock of the Peace River country if you let that blind man slip through, Barry."

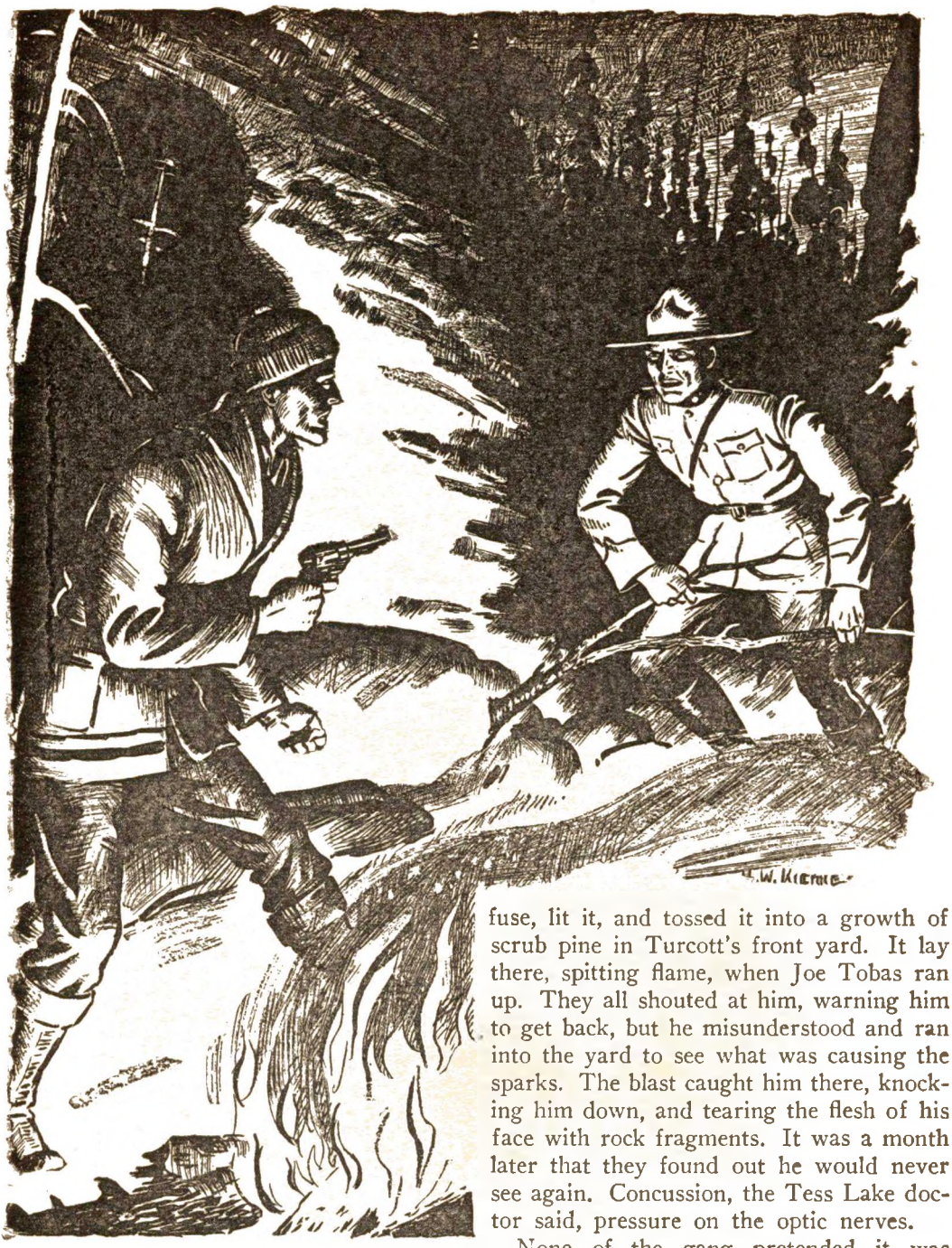
"I'll bring him in."

"Good!" Moorhaven squeaked around in his swivel chair, and that was the end of it. Corporal Mike Barry fumbled for the door to let himself into the outer office. He walked blindly across the yard, climbed the steps to the log barracks, and entered his quarters, closing and bolting the door.

Mike Barry wanted no interruptions. He wanted a chance to think this thing out. He sat on the edge of his cot for a few minutes, then, with sudden decision, he sprang up, found paper, pen and ink, and scribbled a note to Inspector Moorhaven. "Having found myself no longer able to fulfill my duties . . ." It was a request for his retirement. He read it over, and sat back down, staring blankly out of the window.

Blind Joe Tobas! Mike Barry had known him when he was just "Joe Tobas" with eyes like anybody. They had been kids together back in the little logging town of Tess Lake. Grown up together—friends, most of the time. And then Paulette came along—Paulette Burdeau, of the dark hair and quick, French eyes. After they met Paulette, things hadn't been the same between Mike and Joe. Mike still tried to be friendly, and they still ran around with the same bunch, but Joe managed to keep his distance, and several times Mike heard small, vindictive things that Joe had said behind his back. It made Mike feel bad, but he couldn't exactly blame him. Maybe he'd have acted the same if Paulette had preferred Joe—but she didn't. She was Big Mike's girl from the start.

And then Joe lost his eyes. Mike sat there in his room, remembering every small detail of the night it happened. The gang was going home from a dance at the school hall. They were a wild crowd, as boys of eighteen or twenty are apt to be when they've grown up in a lumbering town, and one of them, Sib Smith, was carrying a stick of dynamite in his pocket. When they came to the cabin of an old



bachelor named Turcott, one of the bunch, Chuck Haffey, shouted:

"Sib, let's see that stick of powder. I want to see old Turcott jump."

Turcott had set the police on them for some prank a month before, and this seemed like a good chance to get even. As it turned out, Chuck didn't understand priming the dynamite, so Mike took over the job. He attached a cap and a foot of fuse, lit it, and tossed it into a growth of scrub pine in Turcott's front yard. It lay there, spitting flame, when Joe Tobas ran up. They all shouted at him, warning him to get back, but he misunderstood and ran into the yard to see what was causing the sparks. The blast caught him there, knocking him down, and tearing the flesh of his face with rock fragments. It was a month later that they found out he would never see again. Concussion, the Tess Lake doctor said, pressure on the optic nerves.

None of the gang pretended it was Mike's fault more than anyone else's. It had been an accident—foolish, certainly, but still an accident. Joe Tobas, however, said otherwise. He told everybody, even the boys who had seen it, that Mike had deliberately thrown the dynamite at him. Day after day he stuck with the story. He would feel his way along the muddy street of Tess Lake and tell everyone he met how Mike Barry had blinded him. Why? He

told that, too. Mike was jealous over Paulette Burdeau. Then Joe would laugh, and twist up his skinny face, and point at his staring eyeballs, "And now guess what! Now she won't have me because I'm blind! She's Mike Barry's girl for sure. That's a woman for you!"

Maybe he believed it himself, Mike didn't know. Anyhow, he found plenty of others in Tess Lake who were willing to believe. It got so Mike hated to walk down the street for the way people looked at him.

That winter he worked in the woods and came out with a $700 stake. He took the money around to Joe and tried to give it to him so he could visit a specialist down in Vancouver. But Joe cursed him, and swung a blow with his heavy, white cane that split the skin on Mike's forehead.

"Do you think your dirty money can pay for my eyes?" he shrieked.

So Mike took the money over and gave it to Sib Smith, and later on Sib passed it on to Joe, letting him think the boys had raised it in a collection. Joe took the money, but he never got around to making the trip to Vancouver.

Mike didn't see much of Paulette after that. It seemed like everyone was watching them, and talking about them when they were together. So he went east to the forestry college for a while, and later on he took training down in Regina and joined the Mounties. That had been four years ago. This spring, with only a year left of his enlistment, he had gone back and asked her to marry him. Yes, she had waited. Paulette was that kind.

Through these years Blind Joe had knocked around from one lumbering town to another, doing about the only thing a blind man could do—he tended bar. Then he went up to the gold camp of Porcupine, beyond Finlay Forks, and started a saloon of his own. He hadn't been the Dominion's ideal of a business man, and there were lots of rumors about him being middleman for a gang of sluice robbers. The Inspector finally sent a plain clothes detective named Miller to get the facts. He'd about gathered enough evidence to convict the whole gang, but somehow Joe found out who he was, and one night when he came into the saloon Joe drew his gun and shot him through the heart. Yes, Joe was that good with his gun—he shot from sound like most men did by sight.

"Joe Tobas wasn't really guilty of that murder!" Mike started at the echo of his voice after the long silence. He went on, talking to himself after the manner of men who spend lonely weeks and months on the trail. "No, I'm the one who is really guilty. If it hadn't been for me, Joe would still be able to see. He always wanted to be a lumber grader—he'd probably be earning his living that way back in Tess Lake right now."

Slowly then he tore up the paper he had written a few minutes before. That would be the easy way—just to quit. It wouldn't have helped Joe Tobas.

He started that afternoon. Stevens took him up the Peace in the police launch as far as Parle Pas rapids. There he found a Beaver Indian who paddled him upstream as far as the big rapids in a cottonwood dugout. He walked on to the Forks, borrowed a canoe, and pushed on up the swift Finlay until he reached the great outpourings of gravel which marked the mouth of the Omineca. There he cached his canoe and took the trail to the gold camp of Porcupine.

Jed Hooker, marshal at Porcupine, had an idea Blind Joe was hiding out at Dad Anse's trading post over on the Takla Lake side of the mountains. Mike caught a few hours sleep, and then pushed on. He was in a hurry, for it was late September, a risky time of year in this high country of British Columbia.

About noon next day he reached a long, wooded slope which looked down on Takla Lake. He sat there for half an hour, thinking. Finally he removed two of the cartridges from his revolver, dug the lead from them, and packed the cavities with dry moss. He then reloaded them in the first two chambers of the magazine. No matter what happened, even though it meant his own life, Mike knew he must not kill the man he had already made blind. The gun would do quite well for a bluff, and if it came to shooting—well, a Mountie can miss a couple of times as well as anybody.

DAD ANSE'S post was built on a long, treeless wedge of land where Kansa Creek flowed into the lake. The main

building was a log store which had started out as a one-room cabin, and thence had wandered on through several additions. On one side stood the usual cache house, its high stilt legs covered with flattened tin cans to foil the claws of packrat and carcajou.

Mike bent low to keep from sight and followed a dry channel of the creek until he was at such an angle that he could approach in the partial concealment of the cache house. He didn't want to give Dad Anse a chance to warn Joe.

He reached the store building and stood for a while, listening. There was no sound. He went quietly around to the front. The September freeze had killed the mosquitoes and bulldog flies, so the screen door stood open. He looked inside. Blind Joe Tobas was sitting there, half turned from the door, holding a book. The slight shuffle of Mike's foot caused him to leap and spin around, his hand flashing to the automatic at his waist. But Mike was ready for this. One long stride, and his hand closed on Joe's wrist with the power of a sprung wolf trap.

"Take it easy, Joe."

Joe Tobas stood still for a while, the muscles hardening in his thin face. At last a smile twisted his lips, his fingers relaxed, and the gun clattered to the floor.

Mike released him and scooped up the gun. "You're under arrest for murder, Joe," he said.

Joe didn't answer for a while. His lips still smiled, but his eyes shone hard as vein quartz as he stared off toward the wall beyond Big Mike's shoulder.

"You!" he finally said in a voice that glittered with the old hatred.

Mike answered softly, "Yes. I'm sorry."

Joe laughed. It was a harsh, unpleasant laugh. It was the laugh of a man who believed the world hated him, and who hated the world in return. "You're sorry! You trail me here, to this jump-off to nowhere, and tell me you're sorry!" He groped around until his hand came in contact with the sleeve of Mike's field jacket. "You're a policeman now! Yes, I'd heard. Ah!—feel the fine material in that coat! What a handsome devil you must be when you're on parade in your scarlet coat. I'll bet the women go for you. A hero! And you'll be an even greater hero when you get back. You can throw out that big chest of yours and say: 'See me! I'm a brave policeman. I put out a man's eyes, and now I go out and capture him so we can make him jig on the end of a rope!' "

"Never mind that, Joe. There's nobody listening except the two of us, and we both know that dynamite was an accident." Mike's calm, friendly tone only seemed to enrage Joe the more.

"Only an accident, you say! I suppose I shouldn't mind losing my eyes seeing it was only an accident!"

"Joe, for God's sake—"

"Do you know what it's like to be blind? Do you know what I've gone through because of that 'accident' as you call it? Do you know what it is to go for weeks, and months and years with everything black as the inside of a mine? I'll tell you what it's like, Mountie! You get so you crave to see things like an opium-eater craves snow. You want to read—you saw me just now, feeling the pages of that book . . ."

Mike listened quietly until Joe was through. Then he noticed Dad Anse, a little, stooped man with bristly gray hair, hurrying up the path from the canoe dock, so he snapped a set of handcuffs on Joe's wrists.

Dad Anse didn't seem to be much surprised at Mike's being there. He asked what charge they had against Joe, fried flapjacks and bacon, and sat across the rough-board table watching while Mike ate. By that time it was late afternoon, and Dad Anse said:

"Better wire your prisoner to the bunk yonder and spread your robes here tonight, Mountie."

But Mike had no intention of staying over. Throughout the day he had watched a cloudbank gathering in the northeast, its hue becoming deeper until it was the blue-gray color of bullet lead—a bad September sign in a country where killing frosts are common in mid-August. Even in summer it was a hard two hundred miles between the headwaters of the Omineca and Parle Pas—and in winter it was a desolate, rocky hell.

So Mike thanked his host briefly, made a pack of Joe's few belongings, and within the hour had started back with his prisoner.

After a mile the trail slanted uphill

through timber. It was rocky here—hard, zig-zag traveling even without the complication of leading a blind man. And Joe made no attempt to cooperate. He walked hesitantly and slow, cursing back any attempt Mike made to assist him. He staggered and stumbled over every rock, and each projecting root, until it seemed that instinct told his toes where to find them. Sometimes he wandered from the trail to collide with trees, and every hundred yards or so he insisted on pausing to rest. Mike realized that all this was an attempt to stall, but he said nothing until they camped that night, a scant four miles above Dad Anse's post.

As he made shavings for a fire, he said good humoredly, "You know, Joe, I'm going to get you out if I have to carry you on my back like duffle."

Joe merely stared blankly and made no answer, so Mike went on, "I don't want to make it tough on you. Believe me, Joe, I'd rather have been sent for the worst man in the north than you."

"Thanks," sneered Joe. "I never realized I was so dangerous."

"It isn't that, and you know it. Listen, Joe—I have more than a thousand dollars saved up. I'm going to take it down to Edmonton and hire you the best lawyer I can for that amount of money. I know it will never make a difference in the way you feel about me, but I thought I'd better tell you. In the long run, Joe, it will be better for both of us if you just go along without trouble."

MIKE lit the shavings, and in a minute the fire burned up warm and bright. Then, with the flames glistening from his staring eyeballs, and bringing to sharp relief the thin, evil lines of his face, Joe Tobas commenced to curse. Enunciating each word with a cold incisiveness, he went through his obscene, barroom vocabulary, calling Mike by names he had never been called before—that no other man on earth would have dared call him now. But from Joe he took the abuse stoically, like a man tied and helpless might take spittle in the face.

When Joe had finished he went quietly about the task of baking bannocks, frying bacon, brewing tea. When the meal was ready he placed it on the ground before Joe's knees, and unlocked the cuffs. He took no chances, however. He know that Joe would miss no opportunity to escape, so as soon as he was through eating Mike replaced the cuffs, and that night Joe's ankles were secured with a fine, steel chain.

Next morning when Mike awoke it was still dark. A peculiar, grayish darkness it was, and from it came the slanting movement of a million-odd particles of snow.

It was a temptation to turn south, get one's back to the gale, and chance a journey down Takla Lake and on to the railroad. But that was a long journey. Instead he chose the steep, shorter route by which he had come.

The fangs of the storm were bared to them when they reached the trail along a treeless ridge. After a couple of miles, Joe stumbled and sat down, hunching his back against the wind. Mike tried to urge him, but he only cursed in a dull monotonous voice.

"You'll freeze! The trail takes up a gulch in another mile. Come along, man—"

"Do you think I'm so big a fool I don't know what you're about?" Joe replied. "You and your thousand dollars and your Edmonton lawyer! Did you think I swallowed that syrup? I know why you brought me up here! You want to get me far enough away so you know I'll freeze when you turn me loose—then you can say I died after I tried to escape, and people will say it served me right. But I'm not going to fall for it. I can still find my way back to Dad Anse's from here . . ."

Mike tried to force him to stand, but he only hunched farther forward and dug his heels in the snow. If it had been another prisoner, Mike would have lashed him with the cold chain, and driven him like a whipped dog—but with this blind man he was helpless. At last he lifted Joe and carried him across his shoulders to the protection of the gulch. Joe must have become cold for he decided to walk for a while, but after a few miles he again crouched obstinately in the trail, so Big Mike carried him again. Toward night they crossed the divide to the headwaters of the Omineca.

They found shelter in a little gully with sheer rock sides and a bottom grown thick with rose bramble. Mike tramped down a place for the camp and built a big fire from

the branches of a dead pine. The walls of the gully were a scant twenty feet apart, and soon the reflected heat was melting the snow, sending little trickles down to hiss in the fire.

It was so hot that Mike stripped off his greatcoat when he cooked supper. His service pistol was in the pocket, but Joe was sitting ten or twelve feet away on the other side of the fire, so he had little to worry about. As had been his habit, Mike unlocked the cuffs while Joe ate. Joe was still eating when Mike had finished, so he stood up and started tramping down a place for their beds.

Joe munched slowly, staring off into the dark. Mike bent over to toss aside a dead branch. While in this position, turned three quarters away, Joe Tobas sprang forward, hurtling the fire.

MIKE spun around and waited, thinking Joe was making a dash for freedom. Instead Joe pounced on the greatcoat. He thrust his hand quickly in the pocket, drew out the revolver, then sprang back, its barrel leveled.

It had happened quickly. The space of a second or two—that was all. And now, after the swift movements, the two men stood quite still, facing each other. The fire snapped, and the storm whined overhead, bending the scrub pine. Then, in a slow, scarcely audible voice, Mike said:

"How did you know where to find my coat?"

Joe Tobas laughed. The close, stone walls made it echo, and gave it a ringing, madman's quality. Joe took a considerable time to get his laugh out, then he spoke in a tone of mock seriousness.

"How did I know? Why, because I have sixteen senses that the ordinary man doesn't. Haven't you heard that? I'm the man who finds his way through the woods without a guide, just by the feel of my toes. And not only that—I shoot silver dollars by their jingle, too! I'm a ring-tailed wonder, I am!"

"You can see!" said Big Mike slowly, as though his mind was having a hard time digesting the fact.

"So you finally discovered that! My congratulations, Mountie! You fool!—of course I can see. I could see all the time. My right eye came out of that blast with a few nicks from the pebbles that made it a little hazy, but my left was never better."

"You can see!" Mike repeated this, his tone containing no amazement now, only a deep loathing. "And you pretended to be blind all this time. God, how you must have hated me!"

"I hated your guts! And I wanted others to hate you. I ran you out of Tess Lake, but I still wasn't satisfied. I wanted to finish you for good, but the way never came handy. And then you came bumbling over to Dad Anse's, and I knew I had you." Joe Tobas chuckled. "This is to easy! I'll finish you off, and nobody will miss you for a month. By that time I'll be down through the Takla Lake country to the railroad, out to Prince Rupert, and maybe on my way to the Orient."

"No, Joe!" Mike's easy tone returned now. "No, you won't do any of those things."

"I won't? Maybe you think I won't kill you!"

"You *won't* kill me."

Joe Tobas smiled. Slowly, like one wishing to contemplate a great pleasure, he hefted the revolver for a moment. He thoughtfully racked back the hammer, aimed at Mike's heart, and pulled the trigger.

The gun roared to life, sending a streak of burning powder to Mike's chest. Joe waited for him to drop, a triumphant smile twisting his lips. But Mike did not drop.

The smile was gone from Joe's face now. Baffled and unnerved, he retreated. He pointed the gun again, but it did a St. Vitus dance in his fingers. He tried to steady himself and aim, but his hand only shook the worse. When Big Mike charged the gun roared again at point blank range.

Mike flung Joe Tobas to the ground, wrenched the gun from his hand.

"It won't hurt my conscience to shoot you now, Joe, so don't try anything more," he said. "It won't hurt my conscience to take you back, either, nor to be present at your hanging. There were two blanks in the magazine, Joe—two blanks so I wouldn't have to shoot you if you made a run for it. It's strange how the breaks come up sometimes, if you wait for them!"

Hoss Skipper On The Liard

By MICHAEL OBLINGER

They told him he wasn't wanted on the Liard—but Webb Martin only laughed and plowed on through Dever's evil empire.

WEBB MARTIN recalled Jules Dever's threat as he streaked into the clear, caught up the fallen mail-pouch without dismounting and struck back for the hill. It was there his pack-train, ten ponies, had bolted when a rifle-bullet had zipped from the underbrush at the side of the trail, slightly wounding one of the ponies. The crash of the runaways, the bang and clatter of busting packs was heartbreak even for a veteran hoss skipper like Webb. But the realization that most likely this was Dever's work made things look tougher still. Dever wouldn't stop with just one crack at him; he'd throw in everything he had.

One runaway had turned left across the clearing. The others had broken blindly into the bush, scattering in every direction. Webb had seen the fallen mail-pouch and had rescued that first. From experience, he knew that heavy saddle-packs bumping into trees would break cinches on all ten saddles. He was freighting this shipment to Fort Liard and it consisted mostly of hundredweight flour and sugar, but there was hardware, too—heavy stuff such as stoves, broken down and crated for trail transport. One parcel, he'd carefully wrapped himself before starting, was window-glass and he could imagine what was happening to that.

Webb stopped his horse on the trail. Right here was where it had happened. Hid among thick trees to the left of the hill, his attacker had fired into the pack-train. The bullet had missed Webb's head. No chance to run the man down except on foot. That wasn't advisable either while the ponies dumped precious company freight into the bush and, finally kicked and bucked to hell and gone—until, trembling and snorting, they settled down to graze.

Some of them'll be miles off, Webb thought bitterly. I'll have to comb the underbrush for every parcel lost. I'll have to find and mend every blamed saddle before I can go on.

Then he said aloud, "Blast that black-mugged crook! Blast him!"

He heard a sound close and dug for his gun. For a moment, the weapon glinted in the northern sunlight, then his arm tugged, his hand jumped. He stared at clutching, empty fingers. The report of a rifle battered the silence, then shivered into a series of echoes, short, sharp. Jules Dever stepped into the trail ahead. A blunt head on a lean neck, a square jaw covered with blue-black stubble. Nasty little eyes shaded with puckered lids and brows prickly with black hairs straight as porcupine quills.

No beauty, Jules Dever. Yet here was a man who had drive, power and influence, crooked though he was. From the spoils of the North he'd cut more than his share, recklessly and ruthlessly. Somewhere in that blunt, close-cropped head were plans, Webb had heard, for a private wilderness empire extending from the Liard to the Peace and west to the Inside Passage. He was making those plans materialize, too. Webb had never crossed him until Dever's attention, taking an unexpected turn, had fallen upon the tempting little figure of Nancy Parks.

Webb's eyes smoldered. He was reliving their clash at Trucking Portage just three days before.

"Keep away from here," Dever's voice had cracked threateningly, "or damn you, you're through packing in this country for good."

Webb had knocked Dever down, splitting the man's chin. The marks from that mighty whack hadn't healed over yet, Webb saw.

Dever was grinning. He could afford to. He'd about evened the score.

"Nice going," he said.

Webb nodded. "I was expecting something," he said. "Underhand."

Dever laughed. "Private party, just you and me. No witnesses. Nice country for this sort of thing."

"Sure," Webb admitted. "Sure it is. Stampeding my pack-train was a bush-bum's trick. Dirty. If that's the way you want to fight, I'll remember."

Dever's eyes studied Webb's speculatively. "I could have killed you," he said. "Now look, let's be sensible. You've got a nice business you're welcome to. I'll pay for the damage and loss o' time. Also, I can use you now an' again for some special work. Best pay. I need a hoss skipper pretty bad. There's only one condition—"

Webb interrupted him. "Nancy!"

"Yes."

"She wouldn't have you," Webb snorted. "Not now or ever. I doubt if she'd have me. But I'll see her if she'll let me and you can go to hell!"

DEVER dropped the barrel of the rifle in the crook of his arm.

"If that's the way you want it," he said, "I won't press you. But think it over. Better to use your head than to go out of here broke."

"I'm not broke yet."

"I can bust you."

Webb shrugged. "Maybe. But if I have to go, I'll go out of here—clean!"

Holding his rifle at ready, Dever stepped over and picked up Webb's gun. Watching Webb, he leaned the rifle against his chest, extracted the cartridges from the revolver, slipping them into his pocket. At the same instant, Webb dug heels into the roan's flanks. The pony reared, wheeling toward Dever. The man leaped back. Grabbing Dever by the scuff of the neck, Webb dragged the body fifty yards, stopped, slid from the saddle. He still gripped Dever's collar. He was jerking the man to his feet to get a better crack at him, when the cloth tore. Rolling away, Dever plunged into a thicket, Webb after him. He snatched at the scrambling body and missed. Before he could follow, Dever was racing off through the bush.

Eyes smarting, Webb stood watching

Dever disappear. Then he went back, holstered his gun, tied Dever's rifle to the saddle. Mounting, he rode hard south along the trail to the spot where, earlier in the morning, he had forded Packrat Creek.

Nearing the ford, his lips quirked with satisfaction. Smoke in soft, curling spirals, rose from a small cabin's mud-chimney to drift away through the pines. Two prospectors lived here, Mark Brent and Steve Wilson. They were working the creek to grubstake for a long prospecting trip into the mountains.

Hearing him, Brent and Wilson stepped out through a door so low both had to stoop.

In the lead, Brent, a rangy, thin man with red, wiry beard, exclaimed, "Webb Martin—you back! What's happened?"

Webb told them. Then he said, grimly, "I've got to have help, fellas, worst way."

Wilson, short and chunky, patted his freshly-shaven chin. "That's too bad. It'll take three of four days to locate them ponies an' find all the stuff. It's a job."

"Sure it is," Webb agreed, "but I'll pay you well. It will help toward that grubstake."

Brent hesitated. "We're grubstaked already," he said.

"They told me at the portage you'd be here for another month," Webb frowned. "I don't understand."

"We got the money now," Wilson said. "Jules Dever lent it to us when he came by late last night."

Webb started. So Dever was oiling his way."

"Look here," he said, "I'm in a hell of a jam. Not only the freight, but the mail. One registered sack and another pouch full of letters. I'm delayed already. I'll give you double pay for the time you work."

Wilson shook his head. A half-smile lighted Brent's red face. "Sorry," he said.

"I'll triple it," Webb pleaded desperately.

Then he stared. The partners turned and walked into the cabin. The door closed. Webb spat in fury and swore. He touched heels to the roan, following a foot path to the trail. There he drew up, wondering if what he saw in his present desperate state was actually what he saw or not. Two riders forded the stream on horseback, a man past middle-age and a girl in jodhpurs and leather jacket. A cap perched jauntily on the bright gold of her hair. Suddenly, she had raised one arm in a gay salute, calling out:

"Hi there! You, Webb."

Nancy Parks and her father, Jason Parks, crossed the creek. Webb met them at the turn in the train. For a moment, his eyes met Nancy's. Suddenly the rage in him was stilled.

Parks said, "We didn't expect to meet you. Heard you were pushing through fast to the Liard. Where's your outfit?"

"Scattered in the bush," Webb answered.

"Oh, Webb!" Nancy exclaimed in sympathy. "Isn't that provoking? Did your ponies get scared? You can never trust a cayuse."

"No, you can't," Webb said.

"I'd offer to help you," Nancy's father said, "but I'm due at Beaverlodge tonight to meet Mr. Dever."

Webb opened his mouth and shut it. Dever . . . Dever! No matter which way he turned, that name . . . Dever. Damn the man, he had his fingers in everything.

With an effort, Webb raised his glinting eyes toward Parks. Nancy's father was a retired H. B. factor, who'd taken up mining in a small way. He owned properties on the Mackenzie and recently had hired an engineer from Montreal to report on the possibilities of a copper claim he had on the Liard. But Webb wondered what business he might have with Dever.

Then Parks spoke, "Dever has a pretty good proposition for me. We're planning to form a company—"

"You'd better watch him," Webb cut in. "Dever has formed companies with other men before. Then he squeezes them out one way or another."

"I don't believe everything I hear," Parks said stiffly.

Nancy glanced sharply at Webb. "Mr. Dever has been very nice to us, Webb. I don't think you ought to repeat what scandalmongers say."

Webb flushed. "I'm only telling you what I know. Exactly what I know. If Dever is nice to you, he has a personal and selfish reason."

"That's not fair, Webb," Nancy said, pressing her lips.

"All right, you can think so. But I'm not wrong."

"You certainly are," Parks said coldly. "Now listen, young man, we have to be getting along quickly. If I were you, I'd keep my tongue in my head."

"And my head on my shoulders," Webb said angrily. "Dever tried to shoot it off this morning."

Parks' cheeks flamed. "You lie!"

"Father—please!"

Webb swung his horse ahead of them. He couldn't trust himself to speak. He wouldn't look at Nancy. He could feel his jaws look stubbornly. As the roan headed up the trail, a voice, Nancy's followed him:

"Webb—stop! Don't go yet. Don't—"

He could hear it no longer. The roan was pounding the trail. On either side was a dense wall of trees, a running, almost fluidlike green. Ahead was black track and more green. Now he was low in the saddle, feeling the flat of the wind strong against him.

"I didn't think she could fall for that crook," he blurted. "Her old man, too. Lots of help I got on that trip." His lips curled scornfully. "Dever!" he said.

TOWARD evening Webb had found four of his horses, brought them to a meadow, circled by bush, about a mile from the trail. Hobbling the runaways, he wrapped his two mailsacks in tarpaulin and hid them in a clump of willows a few rods from his temporary camp. At the camp he pitched his silk tent and threw in a hamper of grub, axe, a sack of flour and other odds and ends he'd picked up and brought here, shortly after he'd returned from his meeting with Nancy and Jason Parks.

It occurred to him he'd been pretty lucky in tracking down four ponies so quickly. Possibly before morning he'd have all of them. It was the time of the midnight sun, thank God. He could keep hunting through the hazy interval of twilight and the succeeding red-flaming dawn. Other meadows lay to the west. The six ponies might be there. The only worry he had was that they might have joined a wild herd.

That would be tough. It meant he'd have to split the freight, cache half of it and come back as soon as he could. He'd be out the time, the cost of the horses and—piled high over these losses—the hard cold cash to the Hudson's Bay Company in payment of parcels lost, broken or damaged.

One shot from the barrel of Dever's rifle had done all that. Dever owed him plenty. There had to be a settlement. Before that blasted crook ran him out of the country, he might have to do some more running himself.

Then Webb remembered Nancy. Why was it his mind always kept turning toward her? There was one girl he meant to forget. Quick! Any girl who said Dever was nice had something wrong with her.

Webb rode westward. Two horsemen came out of the sun. Behind them, trotting docilely from lead-lines were his six remaining pack-ponies.

Webb halted as they approached. He didn't know those riders and, apparently, they didn't know him. One was a half-breed, the other a white man with sharp blue eyes and a thin, pointed nose.

The white man greeted him. "You lookin' for strays, too, neighbor?"

"I've been looking for these strays," Webb answered cordially. "Sure glad you found them. I'm Webb Martin, carrying freight and mail to Ford Liard. These ponies bolted from the trail."

"Not these ponies," the man said. "These are mine."

Webb looked at him. "Yours!"

"Right."

"Are you joking?"

The white man's sharp eyes glinted toward Webb. "What for would I joke?" he demanded. "You think I don't know my own train?"

Webb said, "So you're working for Dever, too, eh? By God, everybody is. What do you plan to do with these runaways, if it's any of my business?"

"It ain't."

Webb glared. "Hand me those lead-lines, damn you! Turn your dirty face south and hit for the bush. You too, Nitche!"

Webb flourished his gun. For a moment, sharp blue eyes nicked angrily at Webb.

"I ain't scared o' that thing," the white man said. "You ain't got the guts to kill. You don't want your name mixed up in murder."

"Who told you that?'

"Never mind."

"Cocky, aren't you?" Webb said. "Look!

I'm not even going to count four. I'm going to count two. ONE—"

The half-breed started first. His companion wasn't far behind. Webb caught up the lead-lines, tied the two ends and dropped the loop over the saddlehorn. Next he unslung Dever's rifle and clipped off the white man's hat. The breed wore his too low on his head for Webb to take another chance.

Convinced that Dever was behind this latest ruckus and might soon strike again, Webb returned to camp. There he hobbled the ponies and ate a cold supper. Ready with the rifle, he walked back toward the bushline, looking carefully for skulkers.

He saw no one. Pretty quiet there in the woods. On the meadow behind him, the ponies munched grass. The evening hush had closed in. Any sound, however slight, came over the sounding board of still air, unmuffled. For a time Webb sat in the shadow of a rock, listening. He could hear his watch tick.

"I'm danged tired," he thought. "Wish I dared to sleep."

Commencing to drowse, he roused himself and went back to the tent. On the grass outside, to his amazement, was the stamped-out stub of a hand-rolled cigarette. A pipe-smoker himself, Webb stared. Then he puckered his lips and scrambled inside.

Nothing had been touched. Everything just where he'd left it. He stroked his chin. Odd! His mouth relaxed, then suddenly tightened.

"God," he said, "I never looked to see if the mail was all right!"

The sack of registered mail was gone! Five thousand dollars in currency in one single package consigned to the Hudson's Bay Company from the Bank of Montreal. Letters, too, with contracts, checks and important papers. Moisture dripped from Webb's face as he stooped in front of the willow clump and yanked out the remaining sack containing first- and second-class mail and parcel post packages.

IN silence, he stumbled back to the tent. He threw in the sack, took a hitch in his belt. His temples throbbed.

"Going to lose my mail contract. They'll think I'm the thief. Dever knows how to bust a man's reputation to hell. In addition, he's ruined me, just like he said he would."

In the northwest, clouds rolled up over the horizon, blood-red. Twilight caught their reflection on its dusty face. Webb shivered. It looked like an ill omen.

Suddenly, he recalled his meeting with Brent and Wilson, the two prospectors near the ford. In urging them to help him, he'd stressed the importance of getting through quickly to Fort Liard. Unthinkingly, he'd told them about the sack of registered mail. Had they followed him? Were they the thieves?

Down on the meadow, one of the ponies raised his head, snorting. Webb caught up Dever's rifle. Plainly now he heard pounding hoofs, then a lone rider came into view. He put down the rifle, bleakness in his eyes and rebellion in his heart.

She needn't come and try to sweeten him with her wiles.

He didn't speak as Nancy rode up and dismounted.

"Webb!"

"Well?"

"I want to apologize."

He said, "Who told you I was here?"

"The men who found your pack-ponies, Webb," Nancy answered. "We didn't have to go to Beaverlodge to meet Dever. We overtook him on the trail."

Nancy dropped the reins over her pony's head. She did it gracefully. Then she approached, walking lightly, all the weight on her toes. The soft curve of her cheeks shaded into the dusk. It made the twilight seem like a part of her.

In front of Webb she paused. "I guessed you—your feelings were hurt," she said. "So I came to tell you I am sorry. I had to sneak away."

"You were foolish," he said.

"Mr. Dever was busy talking to Father and they didn't see me go."

"They'll worry about you," Webb said.

"Webb, why are you acting like this?" Nancy demanded. "What have I done?"

"Nothing at all," Webb said. "Your apologies are accepted. Now run along."

"I can't go yet, Webb," Nancy pleaded. "I had to find you and tell you what—what's happened. You were right about Dever. I overheard those two prospectors, Brent and Wilson, talking about Dever's deal. You see, Webb, we all went back to

their cabin for supper—Dever, Father and myself. Then those two men who found your six cayuses joined us."

Webb nodded. "Go on, Nancy. What did those prospectors say?"

"They were talking about their forthcoming trip to the hills," Nancy Parks answered.

"Everyone knows about that," Webb said, disappointed. "They were here panning the creek for a grubstake. Then Dever lent them money."

"Those men are working for Dever," Nancy told him. "They never panned the creek. And as for that mountain trip, it's just talk. A month ago, they went to the mountains and staked out three perfectly worthless claims. Dever has a title to those claims and now calls them mines— the Red Bird, Blackjack and Silver City."

"I don't get the connection," Webb said, "but go on, Nancy."

Nancy hesitated. "Are you still mad at me, Webb?"

"Of course not."

"Sure?"

"Nancy, I'm the one who ought to apologize," Webb confessed. "Look! I was all upset. And I despise Dever. And I was afraid he might ruin your father in some crooked deal.'

Nancy placed a small gloved hand on Webb's arm. She said, shakily, "It is a crooked deal, Webb. Those prospectors didn't know they had an eavesdropper. I'd gone down to the spring for a drink. The path goes past the small barn where they keep their pack pony. Brush grows thick along the path. They were near the barn talking and I heard them mention my father's name."

"So you stopped to listen?"

"That's right. And what I didn't hear! Those worthless mines are all located on the Mackenzie, not far from the property my father owns.

"That gold-bearing claim where that mining engineer from Montreal your father hired—"

"Yes, Nancy interrupted. "His name's Silas Benton. Father just received his report, but Jules Dever received one, too. Father's claim is very rich, but the report Benton sent us is not too favorable. You see, Dever has him fixed."

"Fixed!" Webb gasped.

"Yes, they're working this deal with the help of the two prospectors."

"I get it," Webb said. "An old trick—a nasty trick—but it works. Benton gave Dever glowing reports on the Red Bird, Blackjack and Silver City. All worthless. Prospects at your father's mine, according to Benton, are only fair. Naturally your father won't object to including his property in a syndicate of the four mines. That way there'll be a neat little division of your father's rich claim. Dever and Benton will be his partners. Eventually, with more crooked manipulating, Dever will own it all."

"I'm afraid so, Webb."

"What do you plan to do?" Webb said. "Seems to me the first step is to teli your father."

"I can't even talk to him," Nancy said. "Oh, Webb, I've tried. But Dever is always there. Father's so enthusiastic about this new company, as he calls it."

WEBB'S worried fingers ruffiled her hair. "Let me think," he said.

"Just before I left the cabin," Nancy said in a strained voice, "a Mr. Withers came. He's a lawyer. He's going to draw up the papers."

"Withers handles all of Dever's dirty work," Webb said. He stopped. Should he tell her everything? "I think—" he began.

"Yes, Webb?"

She couldn't see his tightening lips. But, apparently, she sensed the tension in him.

"What's wrong, Webb?"

"I don't think I ought—"

Her hand gripped his. "I can take it, Webb. Is there something you suspect?"

"Yes. But I may be wrong, so we won't—"

"Please!"

Webb capitulated. He said, gravely, "Dever isn't just an ordinary crook, he's a murdering crook. You probably think that money is Dever's only motive in cheating your father."

"Well, isn't it?"

"No. He wants that mine—sure. But there's something he wants even more."

"What do you mean?"

"You!"

"Me!" Nancy gasped. "Why, Webb, that's silly. It's preposterous. I wouldn't marry him if—"

"Quiet!" Webb said. "Let me finish. I know he wants you. He told me. He'll move hell to get you. Lie—cheat—murder. and if anything should happen to your father, I'm not so sure he won't have his way."

"You—you suspect he might even have something happen to father?" Nancy asked, incredulously.

Webb soberly inclined his head. "If the way he's been acting lately is anything to go by—yes. He fired his rifle into my pack-train. He ordered his men to stop me at all cost, so I'd lose my mail and freighting contracts. He even had someone steal the registered mail. It'll ruin me."

"Oh, Webb!"

"But I won't let him ruin you, if I can help it," Webb said, grimly. "Or your father. Wait 'til I sling on a saddle. We're going over and mix up in that deal."

"You mean at the cabin?"

"Yes," Webb answered. "It's our only chance."

"Broad daylight in twenty minutes," Webb said. "Just time enough to get over to the cabin without being seen. We'll leave the ponies here."

Nancy got down. She watched Webb tie the two cayuses to separate trees. He could see her pressing her lips nervously.

"Afraid?"

"Just a little, Webb. Have you a plan?"

"If you can call it that. I want you to walk in first. You'll be safe. Better make some excuse or other. You went for a ride and took the wrong turn. Anything. It will explain your absence."

"That part will be easy," Nancy said. "But what about you?"

"I'll step in quietly a few minutes later."

Nancy caught her breath. "But they'll shoot."

Webb shook his head. "No, Dever will be on his best behavior in front of you and your father. He won't start anything inside. When I leave the shack is when they'll try to get me."

"But you may not be able to get in," Nancy said. "Some of the men may be outside."

"I'll get in," Webb said.

They went on, separated, and Nancy stole ahead. Following her a short distance, Webb squatted down behind a bush where he had a view of the front of the cabin. On a bench, near the door, a man sat, rifle across his lap. Webb recognized him at once. He was the white man who'd tried to steal those six cayuses. The half-breed, the man's partner, stood thirty feet away solemnly whittling on a stick. His knife had a long, sharp blade. Walking down the path toward the barn, were the two prospectors, Brent and Wilson.

Nancy nodded to the guard at the door and walked in. Webb heard the latch click. Obviously, Dever's confidence with Parks and the lawyer wasn't over yet. To have privacy, he'd sent his four helpers outside.

Webb frowned. "Nancy was right," he muttered. "Maybe I can't get in."

Crawling back to the shelter of the bush, he made a wide detour and approached the barn. A small stack of hay stood outside. Brent and Wilson had thrown themselves down on it.

"I'll be darned if I want to stick around here much longer," Brent growled. "It don't take all night to sign a few papers."

"His orders," Wilson said.

"He can go to hell."

Wilson closed bleary eyes, trying to sleep. Brent sat up to light his cigarette. The match dropped from his fingers into the hay. Dry threads of grass flamed. Brent struck out the blaze with the flat of his hand, swatting furiously.

"You danged fool!" Wilson snarled, bolting erect. "Want to burn up that—"

He paused and glared at Brent. Webb found a club and wriggled toward the haystack behind them. Suddenly, he rose, moving cautiously around the side of the stack toward Brent. Brent saw him just before Webb struck. He opened his mouth, rolled his eyes and tumbled toward Wilson. Wilson tried to jump. The club mashed down on his skull.

Inside the barn, Webb found a hayfork, returned and mounted the stack. At the fifth jab its tines struck something. Webb knelt excitedly and parted the hay with his hands.

It was there—the registered mailsack!

He dropped the hay back over it, for he had to move fast. In Brent's pocket he found a stack of bills. In Wilson's, another. Certain it was at least part of the five thousand dollars consigned to the Hudson's Bay Company from the Bank of

Montreal, Webb slipped both packets into his pocket, changed hats with Brent, and hurried to the corner of the barn.

"Hi, there, yuh damn Nitchie!" he called, imitating Brent as well as he could. "Come here!"

The half-breed was slow. Pigeon-toed, he walked on the path looking like a bulky shadow. His knife clicked. He still whittled. Webb ground his teeth in impatience.

OUT OF SIGHT, club ready, Webb shook the moisture from his face. When the half-breed stepped around the corner of the barn, he'd let him have it.

Webb staggered back. Lightning quick, the breed had flipped the knife in the split second before the club hit him. Also he'd ducked his head. The blow had glanced along the left temple and ear, crashing on the man's shoulder. Knocked down but still conscious, the Nitchie tried to roll to one side. Webb sprang after him. The end of the club whacked down solidly on hard ground. Squirming around, the half-breed was darting to his feet when Webb tapped him out, then grabbed convulsively for the knife sticking through the skin of his own side.

The encounter with the half-breed had brought Webb in view of the guard. The white man probably suspected he was Brent but came running, anyway, roaring, "Leave that breed alone, you danged hot-tempered—"

Suddenly, he discovered his mistake, jerked up his rifle. Webb fired from his hip. The guard twisted sideways and fell in the brush. Webb raced past toward the shack's door. It opened while he was still thirty feet away. The figure in the opening was Dever's.

"I'll drill you!" Webb panted, keeping him covered. "Step out on the stoop."

Dever obeyed, cursing.

Webb said, "I'm holding you on suspicion of robbing His Majesty's mail. One time Dever you went too far."

Gun sticking in Dever's ribs, Webb slapped the man's clothes. In a coat pocket was another stack of currency similar to the two he'd found on Wilson and Brent. But there was this difference—around Dever's was part of a torn paper wrapper, an address, and the black numbered stamp of a registered parcel.

He grinned showing it to Nancy and Parks. "I can tell you why he didn't destroy that wrapper," he said. "To understand you've got to know the man, his methods. He wanted that wrapper so he could plant it in my stuff somewhere. His boys would have handled that job secretly just before I hit Fort Liard."

"It would have looked bad for you, Webb," Nancy said. "Now I guess father will forgive me for walking in on them a few minutes ago, snatching up all those legal papers and stuffing them in the stove. They were starting a new set, Webb, when we heard that shot."

Parks' amazement was subsiding. He found his voice. "I can hardly believe it!" he gasped. He turned angrily confronting the fat, red-faced, perspiring lawyer.

Dever's attorney gulped, wheezed, then recovered his composure. "This comes as a shocking surprise to me," he said. "But I'm sure there's some mistake."

"Your mistake," Webb said. "Just walk out the door and keep going."

Withers went gladly, mounted his horse hitched in the yard and rode hurriedly away. While he was doing that, Parks returned with a rope.

"We'll tie up this scoundrel," he said.

"Yes," Webb nodded. "And a few more back at the barn."

Later, when they had returned to the cabin, Parks said, "I'll ride to Trucking Portage to get help, Webb. Then we'll gather up your freight and start you off for the fort. I want to tell you, young man, I'm deeply grateful."

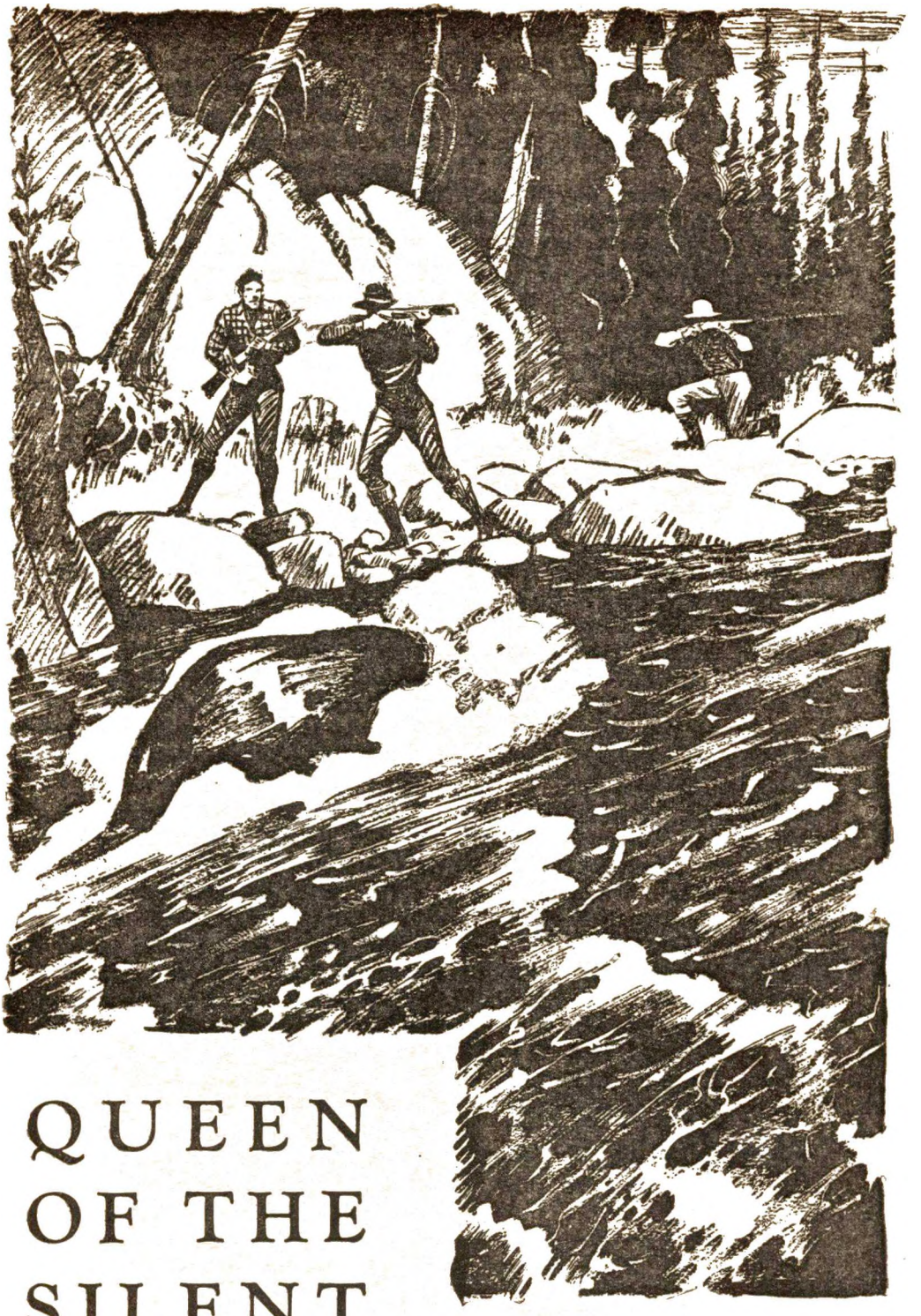
"We certainly are," Nancy said.

Webb flushed. He couldn't think of anything to say. He looked at Nancy. Nancy smiled and turned expectantly toward Parks. Parks leaned forward and patted his daughter's arm.

He said to Webb, "You've saved me a lot of money, my boy. More than I can ever repay. For that reason I'm taking care of any losses you may have on this trip."

Before Webb could answer or even shake his head, Nancy pressed a small firm hand over his mouth. Then she laughed up at her father.

"This is the only way to handle a hoss skipper," she said. "You've got to use force."



QUEEN OF THE SILENT MUSKEG

By R. S. LERCH

Great Slave Lake guarded well its mystery of fabulous wealth. But it was Diamond's job to get through —against the white woman who ran with the wolves and a fair-haired girl hiding an icy devil in her calm young breast.

WHITEHORSE DIAMOND had heard of it first on Kirkman Creek. Mushing toward Skagway, he had picked up another bit from an Indian on the ice-bound Nordenskiold. And a third fragment was contributed at Lake Laberge by a wandering Eskimo from Fort Yukon.

It was then that Whitehorse began to put some credence to this mysterious and unexplainable singing of the wilderness grapevine. He knew the north, had often heard the grapevine's humming with countless wild tales, and had never known when its rumors were not founded on at least some slight basis of fact.

That the site around which had sprung this strange new legend was wild country somewhere north of far-off Great Slave Lake only added to its strong appeal to Whitehorse Diamond. He was restless, felt a sense of frustration, a threat of stagnation in this peace and quiet.

The legend of a white woman who ran

with wolves and lived in the heart of a great swamp, of the giant who ruled there, of the fabulous wealth in the recesses of this muskeg, wealth that was not gold or fur, but was black and hard and shining, and of the sure and horrible death from the fangs of the white wolves awaiting any who dared enter the wilderness empire, caught Whitehorse Diamond's imagination.

He had contemplated going outside. Now, however, there would be no search for excitement in the cities to the south. He would pass through them on the trail of the black wealth guarded by white fangs.

But at Juneau he found a month-old letter waiting for him. The geologist, Cuyler Nordyke, wanted Whitehorse to meet him in July at the source of the Yellowknife. Nordyke asked Whitehorse to wire an answer to Winnipeg.

"There's a tough job ahead, Whitehorse, and there are those who may try to stop me. I travel alone and therefore I need a fighting man with me—I need you. If you come there will be further instructions waiting you at McMurray," the letter had concluded.

Those last sentences decided Whitehorse Diamond. What the job was or who might try to stop Nordyke, had not been mentioned. But Whitehorse wired his friend an immediate acceptance, then booked passage on the first boat heading for Seattle. The legend of the swamp and the white wolves was put aside.

It was on the boat, traveling southward along the inside passage, that he met the girl. She was small, tanned, with alive, dark eyes, soft brown hair, and a quickness of movement that indicated vitality and endurance. Her rather generous mouth and squarish chin just prevented her from being beautiful. The ship's hostess had introduced her as Vesta Farquar and the name "Farquar" had rung a tiny, distant bell in Diamond's mind, but he could not pin down the memory. She had, Vesta said, been visiting a cousin in Juneau and was now on her way to spend the next several months with an aunt in Seattle.

They were in the main salon and a dance was about to start. But dancing was not one of the big man's accomplishments. Vesta Farquar looked up at Whitehorse, saw his embarrassment, and understood. She laughed, a low, throaty, and reassuring sound.

"It's too nice out on deck to waste time dancing," she said. "The moon's nearly full."

Gratefully, he followed her to the rail where they watched the rugged, cliff-girt shoreline drifting past. Finally she turned to him.

"I've heard of you, of course. "Whitehorse Ed Diamond! There was the time you followed a murderer deep into the Endicotts, hard on the polar sea, and brought him back with his legs frozen to the hips, and your own left arm tied to your side, with a ragged knife wound in it that he had inflicted.

"And the time you waded into a score of drink-crazed Dog Ribs up on Great Bear Lake to rescue a squaw they had bound to the door-jamb of a burning cabin. And your gold discoveries, the men you've grubstaked, the dog-team races you've won, and the unexplored country you've entered and returned from where other men had gone in and were never seen again.

"You're quite a legend yourself, in the north, Mr. Diamond. Now I suppose you're going back to have your fling at civilization. You wouldn't be heading for the wild country east of the Rockies this late in winter, or you'd go up the Porcupine and across Rat Portage to the Mackenzie."

Her last two sentences did not have the tone of light conversation. They seemed to imply that she was more than casually interested in his movements. Whitehorse had been thinking of the unknown mission to which he was committed and the statement of his old friend that he would be watched and stopped. It was nonsense, he knew, to connect this girl with any of Cuyler Nordyke's enemies, but the thought had occurred and his natural caution dictated his reply. He grinned.

"To tell you the truth, Miss Vesta, I don't know what I'm going into—only that I'm not pausing long in civilization, and there will be no 'fling' for me. I'm on just another trail. But let's forget me. You already know so much about me and I know nothing about you."

She smiled, and if there was disappointment deep in her eyes at the meagerness of

the information Whitehorse had offered she did not reveal it. But she apparently could not be still for long. Now and then a shade of what Diamond thought was worry crossed her face. She took his arm suddenly and turned away from the rail, her restlessness manifest in the quick movement.

"Let's walk. I can think better when I'm in action," she suggested.

WHITEHORSE nodded. He could understand that—he was the same way. She did not return to the subject of Diamond's plans. Nor did she tell him anything more about herself except that she had been in the north country before, and loved it.

After they had parted Whitehorse wondered at the strange, unaccountable stirrings within him. He'd been attracted by women before, though not so much as they had been attracted to him. But this was somehow different. This was an emotion whose increasing strength began to scare him.

It was with almost a sense of relief that he stood alone at the ship's rail and watched the reflection in the sky of Seattle's lights as the ship drove up Puget Sound. During the days that had passed, though he had seen her not too frequently, Vesta Farquar, with her vitality that matched his own restlessness, had got into his blood more than he dared admit even to himself. Now, however, he determined to give his whole attention to the unknown and dangerous task ahead. A day or two for outfitting in Seattle, and he would be heading eastward.

"You're anxious for the trail. I can understand that. Do you leave immediately?"

The quiet voice from behind him did not surprise him. He had sensed her presence though he had not heard her approach. He half-turned and gave voice to his thoughts as she joined him at the rail.

"Almost. I only remain in Seattle long enough to pick up an outfit. You see, I have to be on the Athabaska by the break-up if I am to reach Nordyke on the Yellowknife in time. Cuyler Nordyke is an old friend, a geologist I've traveled with before."

The intake of a quick breath, and her silence, checked further speech and drew his gaze at her. He first noted her fingers. They were gripping the rail so hard they were bloodless, and when he looked up into her face she was staring out into the night and there was no expression there other than a firm compression of the lips and a darkness in her eyes there he could not read.

"Cuyler Nordyke," she whispered. Suddenly she smiled slightly and turned to him.

"He was a friend of my father's, and it startled me for a moment to hear you mention him. You're following him north, then?"

Something in her tone called up a belated caution in Whitehorse and under his breath he cursed his slip.

"Just going on a trip of exploration with him, I imagine. He gave me no information in his letter," Whitehorse said casually. "But there's one thing I'd like you to give me, if you care to. It's not likely that I'll be gone more than a couple of months, and I'll probably be returning this way. I'd like the name and address of the aunt you're visiting in Seattle."

"Of course," she returned instantly. "I hope you won't forget it, because I'll look forward to hearing about your latest adventure. Come inside and I'll write it down for you."

In the salon she handed him a slip of paper on which she had written the requested information. And then she said good-bye, holding out her hand and looking up into his face with her dark eyes dancing a little, as if in amusement, but shadowing something more serious behind their surface laughter that he tried to understand and could not.

"We dock in an hour," she explained, "and I haven't even begun to get my things together yet. These last days have been glorious, and I won't forget them soon. All the luck in the world in your new adventure, even though it is just a camping trip as you suggested."

And then she was gone, and Whitehorse Diamond didn't know whether he was relieved or not.

It wasn't until he was on the eastbound train out of Seattle that he knew he wasn't relieved. She rode in his thoughts almost half way across the continent and continued with him into the north. It wasn't

until he left Edmonton far behind and each hour took him deeper into the wild that he got rid of her. He reached Waterways three days after the break-up on the Athabaska.

There he purchased a birch-bark canoe an Indian had just finished making for his own use. It was a good, carefully constructed, sixteen-foot craft. He moved over to McMurray before noon and went to the H-B Company post to purchase his supplies.

Bruce McCabe, the trader, let out a yell of greeting when he looked up from his desk behind the trade counter and recognized his visitor.

"Whitehorse Diamond! About time you was showing up. You been gone two years. Where've you been, what you been doin', who've you tangled with?"

Whitehorse grinned. "No time now, Bruce. I've got to be on Great Slave in about a month. Just came in to say howdy, stock up on supplies, and find out if there's any mail waiting for me."

OLD McCabe grunted. "Always on the go. Don't you ever settle in one spot for more'n an hour? Yep, there's a letter for you. Came last week. That's why I figured you'd be along soon," and he turned toward his desk and brought out a long, thin envelope from one of the pigeon holes.

Whitehorse examined the envelope before slitting it. It had been postmarked at Winnipeg, but there was no name or return address on it. He opened it and drew out a single sheet of paper on which was a short message.

"Definite evidence of surveillance. I only hope they're not on your trail, too. I don't anticipate any real danger though until I reach the Yellowknife. I'm going in by way of The Pas, Fond du Lac, and Thekulthili Lake. If you find me gone, or my camp wrecked, or anything has happened to me at the mouth of the Yellowknife, dig under the ashes of my camp fire. There will be further information and a map there, together with instructions on how to carry on for me."

The note was unsigned, but there could be no mistaking the handwriting.

His face a mask, Whitehorse Diamond finished reading the note, then lit a match and watched paper and envelope burn on the floor of the trade room. When only ashes were left, he stepped on them and looked up to find McCabe watching him quizzically. The little Scotsman turned toward his shelves, reached behind a stack of cartridge boxes, and produced a revolver in a shoulder-holster.

"I got a hunch you might be interested in this, Whitehorse. Latest model Colts, with a new-type, spring-clip holster to be worn under the shirt."

Whitehorse grinned as he took the weapon from the leather, balanced it, and tried the action. His eyes were dancing when he had finished.

"You've made a sale, Bruce. And I've a hunch I'll bless you for it before this trip's over. Now for provisions, I've got to be fifteen miles downriver before I camp for the night.

"Funny," McCabe said, "that's exactly what another party told me two days ago. Travel down the Athabaska's sure starting early this year."

Whitehorse leaned forward. "Give," he said tersely. "Who?"

The little trader looked at him without winking an eye. Finally McCabe spoke.

"I hold on to my health, the respect of my friends and my enemies, and the confidence of the Company, by keeping my mouth shut and not mixing into what's none of my affair. That same protection from me belongs to you the same as it does to anyone else, when it's requested of me. I've no notion that this man ahead of you even knows of your existence, or is interested in it if he does know. I was asked to keep silent about his movements. How much beans, bacon and flour and coffee, tea, sugar, and baking powder you want?"

Heat flared in Diamond's eyes for a second; then his grin came back.

"Okay, Bruce," he said. "I'm askin' you to keep my movements to yourself, too. Now let's get stocked up."

II

WHITEHORSE ED DIAMOND made close to twenty miles before he eased his canoe to the west bank where a dead pine windfall afforded plenty of dry wood for his fire. The nights were chilly yet, for though the river was clear, the ice was not entirely out of the air.

His meal finished, he sat and looked into the bright flames while his thoughts traversed the trip from Juneau to Seattle once more. The moon came up and its path across the water ended where his birch-bark was overturned.

The fire died and Whitehorse automatically added a couple of chunks from the pile at his side. He didn't even hear the hoot of a horned owl from the ridge behind his camp. The mysterious man who had preceded him was two days' travel away and there was no need for caution yet, and so he gave himself over to complete and absorbing reverie.

But he did hear the series of crashes from the river edge. Automatically he rolled out of the fire light. In his hand was gripped the new Colts he had purchased at McMurray. A new laugh greeted his reaction.

Standing at the water's edge was a girl clad in smoke-tanned buckskin. At her feet was her own canoe, overturned, and irreparably ruined, and in her hand was the axe with which she had just smashed ribs and bark and thin, cedar planking with three swift strokes.

Whitehorse stood up slowly. He had been startled by the noise, but now he was stunned by what he saw.

"You!" he cried in disbelief.

The throaty laugh of Vesta Farquar rose again as she faced him, her eyes dancing with a touch of excitement, but at the same time wary and not entirely friendly.

Diamond took a step toward the girl.

"Wait!" Her command, sharp, threatening, halted him.

"I've just had an accident with my canoe. It will now be necessary for me to continue my trip as your guest. Fortunately, my supplies and equipment are at my camp a half-mile downriver, where I've been waiting for two days."

Light suddenly shown strong in Diamond's mind. "You're the 'man' Bruce McCabe said had gone on ahead of me. You told him to let me know that much, and no more. What's your game?"

She looked at him speculatively, her head held a little to one side.

"Do I continue with you, in your canoe, at least as far as the Great Slave?" she asked.

"You do not," Whitehorse returned. "This is no excursion I'm on. I'm going into danger. It's not too far for you to walk back to McMurray."

"It's much too far, because I'm going north," and she paused again, still watching him speculatively. "And you'd be surprised how well I can take care of myself."

"So?" Whitehorse's voice had become soft. He took a stride toward her.

"Hold it." Her swift movement and her command came at the same instant.

She had leaped from beside her broken craft and now stood with axe poised above his own fragile canoe.

"I can smash this more completely than I did mine before you can reach me," she snapped, and there was no banter in her voice this time.

After a moment she resumed more calmly. "I've learned one thing about Whitehorse Ed Diamond. His word is as inviolate as his oath. Do you give me your word that you will let me accompany you north? Or do I smash this canoe too and cause you a delay that may ruin your plans?"

Whitehorse drew a long breath. Finally he shrugged his shoulders.

"Okay," he said resignedly. "You win."

She laughed again. "You wanted me to join you all the time, didn't you?"

DAY followed eventless day as they forged north down the Athabaska. Diamond, studying the girl every moment, learned exactly nothing. And on her part, she learned little from Whitehorse Diamond. Leading questions were shunted aside by both. She paddled bow expertly, and helped with the simple camp chores with the efficiency of one accustomed to the trail. A sort of watchful, armed truce had settled between them and neither spoke unless necessity demanded.

At length, late in the day, they reached the southwestern tip of Lake Athabaska. Without explanation, Whitehorse kept paddling, cutting to the west bank at the mouth of the Slave. In the late evening they passed Chipewyan on the far shore without pause. The girl made no objection, or asked the reason. On down the Slave they continued and in turn Fitzgerald, Fort Smith, Salt River, and several lone cabins were passed without stopping.

Finally, a week ahead of the time he had set for completing the trip, they reached a point where the river turned westward. Ahead lay Resolution and the broad, shallow reaches of Great Slave Lake, and straight north across the lake from the mouth of the Slave was the Yellowknife and Whitehorse Diamond's objective. He turned the canoe to shore before the log buildings of Resolution came into view.

During the preparation of supper the girl was more than usually quiet; so much so that Whitehorse noticed it and a vague disquiet gathered to a ferment within him, an unrest that had nothing to do with the suspicion in which he held her, or with the object of his trip. The evening meal was over and they were seated before their little fire, she gazing unseeingly into the glowing coals, he now and then darting a glance toward her. He was often on the point of speech, but never quite managed it. Suddenly she turned to him and he was startled at the suspicion of moisture in her eyes.

"You've never trusted me, have you?" she asked quietly.

Startled, he made no answer until he gained complete control of himself.

"No. No more than you have trusted me. Why should I when you lied to me about staying with your aunt in Seattle, then followed, or rather preceded me, after learning who I was going to meet and where, and then tricked me into taking you along so you could watch and learn what I was up to? I know nothing about you, or the reason for this wild plan you've put in motion. Can you blame me for not trusting you?"

She shook her head. "No, I suppose not. But I've learned as little from you, though I might have learned more—any girl, traveling for weeks alone in the wilderness with a man, might have—but I couldn't do it. You see, Ed Diamond, I've come to respect you, even though I'm now convinced you are my enemy, and I yours."

"Enemy? I think you'd better explain that." Whitehorse tried to make his voice harsh, but didn't succeed very well.

"I can't. I only hope you'll think kindly of me when this tangled crow's nest is all straightened out." There were tears in her voice now.

Diamond cried, "Vesta," and got quickly to his feet. She looked at him strangely and stood up. He took two long strides and stood before her. The next instant his arms were around her, drawing her close. She strained away for a moment, and suddenly all struggle went out of her firm, yet pliant body.

Her head was tilted back a little and she was looking up at him, her dark, expressive eyes wells of emotion. Her hands reached upward, the fingers locking behind his head and no shock of bullet or club had ever more completely blanked out conscious thought than the long pressure of her lips against his.

At last she drew away a little and again hid her head against his chest.

"Be good to me, Whitehorse," she murmured. "Don't hate me—and be patient."

"Hate you?" he repeated. "Girl—I love you. Don't you understand that?"

"I've known it since—before we reached Seattle, yet I had to do what I've done—and that has only made it more difficult. Let me go now, Ed—and please don't—hate me."

HER HANDS were pressing against him. He released her immediately and she turned and made her way to the grove of spruce in which she had spread her sleeping robe. He looked after her. At the edge of the trees she turned around. He took a step.

Her entreating, "Please—no," halted him. She disappeared among the trees.

How long he remained awake that night Whitehorse never knew. He slept finally. The sun was shining in his eyes when he opened them. It was much later than usual, but the quietness struck him like a sudden blow. Vesta Farquar should be stirring up the fire and setting the coffee pail.

He looked around. There was no sign of her. He threw off his blanket and went quickly to the clump of spruces. Her sleeping robe was gone, so was also a little pack containing her personal effects. He went back and saw that the canoe was still at the water's edge, but a few of the supplies were missing.

He immediately returned to the evergreen grove. Patiently, he read the sign. At the north side of the grove he studied the vaguest of impressions in the grass. The blades had already almost completely straightened. She had been gone for hours,

and to trail her would be impossible. Her moccasins and light step merely bent the grass blades without breaking or bruising them. Within a hundred yards there would be no trail. He returned to the camp and prepared his breakfast automatically, trying to understand—and failing .

After the meal he sat by the fire. There was no hurry; he was days ahead of his meeting date, thanks to the added paddle in the bow. Questions kept recurring to him. Who was she? What had he known about the name "Farquar" that made it vaguely familiar? Why had mention of the name of Cuyler Nordyke so startled her? Why had she insisted on joining him? What had she meant when she said she was convinced they were enemies; when she asked him to be patient; when she begged him not to hate her?

He cursed and got to his feet, took a turn around camp, and fought his battle to put the poignant memory of her sweetness and the mystery of her behind him, and to regain his old zest for adventure among men. This experience was new to him, and he didn't know how to combat it. At last he gave up and began to pack his equipment. It was already late in the afternoon. And, strangely, when he ceased to fight he won a measure of the peace of mind he had been seeking. The belief came to him that somehow, somewhere, he would see her again. With that nebulous assurance, he was able to concentrate a little more on the task before him.

If those who would seek to follow or interfere with his friend were men of the north country it was probable they would visit Joe Pike's roadhouse, on the north short of Slave River, near the mouth and across from Resolution. It had been his intention to drop in there on his way to his friend's camp and see what he could learn. That thought recurred now, and he held his light craft close to the north shore.

He lifted the canoe onto the beach and walked up the trail to the sprawling log cabin. He could hear voices inside, the high laughter of one of the half-breed girls, and a man's coarse voice. He swung the door open and stepped into the main room, a faintly sardonic, dancing light in his eyes, a careless, provocative half-smile on his lips.

Bald-headed, flat-faced Joe Pike was behind the bar of hewn logs. He let out a yell of simulated cordial greeting when Whitehorse stepped into the room. Diamond's grin widened and he nodded to the proprietor. Then his glance slid to a rear table where four men and a girl were seated. His veiled eyes swiftly studied the reactions on their faces as they recognized him.

He knew them all, more about each than they realized. Their leader would be bewhiskered Gunflint McGuire, who had one arm around the pretty half-breed squaw. Facing McGuire across the table was Falcon Chambeau, dark of face, with a falcon's lean, hooked beak and black, piercing eyes. On the right of the French-Canadian was Jake Tenny, small, wiry, and venomous. At Chambeau's left was Indian Pete, a breed with all of the vices of white and Indian and few of the virtues, and hating the mixed blood in him because he was accepted by the better class of neither race.

Hostility showed plainly on each face but the breed's. His features expressed nothing. But it was the swiftly changing expression of McGuire that interested Whitehorse Diamond. There had been surprise shifting to hostility, and then a quick noticeable change to something very like cordiality. He raised a beefy hand in greeting. "How, Whitehorse." Diamond nodded and turned toward the bar.

"A pint of private stock, Joe—and take it from that cupboard below the back bar. My insides are tender tonight."

Pike let out a boom of laughter. "You never was tender in any part of you, inside or out, Whitehorse." He went to the cupboard and returned with a bottle of bonded liquor and a clean class.

Whitehorse took the bottle and glass and walked to a table a little distance from the others. As he crossed the room he glanced out of the window in the side wall to a grove of spruces. He thought he detected someone among the trees. He sat down at the table, ran a thumbnail around the lead seal, drew the cork, and filled his glass. He downed the drink and knew that this was what he had needed since the evening before. He poured another, then looked up into the heavy, grinning face of Gunflint McGuire.

"Squat, Gunflint," he invited. "Another glass, Joe."

"Success to both of us, Whitehorse," McGuire rumbled.

Diamond nodded. "I'll drink to that," he said, and raised his glass.

As he did so his gaze slid over Gunflint's shoulder. His eyes narrowed the merest trifle and there was a split-second of hesitation before he deliberately downed the drink.

He had looked out of the window and into the dark eyes of Vesta Farquar. There was nothing soft or yielding in her expression now. If contempt could have seared, Ed Diamond would have become a cinder. Her face disappeared almost immediately.

Whitehorse made no move to leave, or gave any visible indication of the quick stab somewhere inside of him. He was playing a dangerous game against ruthless adversaries, and he was waiting for them to show their hands.

III

GUNFLINT McGUIRE leaned across the table and spoke in a low voice, his little eyes glinting with what he imagined was an expression of friendship.

"I knew you'd show up sooner or later, Whitehorse. You've run down more than one grapevine rumor, and this one's got them all beat. Maybe we've got more complete dope than you have. And maybe we can get together with you. I'd rather have you with us than against us—I'll admit that."

McGuire leaned back then and waited, watching Whitehorse. Diamond inwardly jerked to increased attention. He had forgotten the legend running along the grapevine. The sudden thought that it might tie in with Nordyke's mission opened new vistas. But none of this showed on his composed features. He returned McGuire's gaze steadily.

"Go on, Gunflint."

McGuire leaned forward again.

"Well, we know this much. There's a million in the center of that swamp. It ain't gold, and we don't know just what it is, but it's there. I got word clear up in Juneau from a big-shot in Montreal to get busy. We headed for here right away. Ain't been here more'n a week, waiting for the break. Nobody's ever been to the heart of that muskeg, and no one knows the way. But there's a map coming up, and when we get it we'll be able to get in, locate the claims, bring out samples of whatever it is, then sell the claims for enough to make us millionaires for life. Just as easy as that," he finished triumphantly.

No emotion of any kind appeared on the face of Whitehorse. He was remembering the instructions of his friend in that note mailed to McCabe at McMurray.

"This map?" he asked. "If nobody's ever been in there, who drew it? And how you going to get it?"

Gunflint gave a broken-toothed grin. "Oh, somebody's been in, all right, but he don't count. Getting the map? Easy. A little fellow, a scientist, is bringing it up. That's what we been waiting here for. This is th' logical way in and he'll sure pass here. It'll be a cinch to—" and McGuire halted, his eyes getting wide, then swiftly narrowing. "To find the spot with that map," he finished in an altered tone that indicated the conclusion was not the one he had intended to give Whitehorse.

But he had given himself away. He had suddenly remembered that Whitehorse had been associated with Nordyke before and had at last realized why Diamond had come to the Great Slave. He tried to make his next words as hearty as had been his invitation to join his party, but his voice betrayed the threat underlying his words.

"Don't want to rush you into this, Whitehorse. And like I said, we'd rather have you with us than bucking us. Think it over and let us know which side you're on."

His last sentence was loud enough to carry to the other table, and he arose to his feet. He made a slight gesture with his left hand, partially hidden from Diamond. Immediately the others arose and began to spread apart. The set-up was plain to Whitehorse as he, too, rose to his feet. Now that he had exposed his hand to the wrong man, McGuire didn't intend that man to leave the roadhouse—not under his own power.

There was a half grin on Diamond's rocky face.

"I don't have to think it over, Gunflint. I'm on the other side, and you realized it after you'd tipped your hand. Hold it, the rest of you."

The spreading movement ceased, but

hands began to inch toward concealed weapons. Whitehorse watched the right hand of Indian Pete.

"I'll add this," he went on. "If Cuyler Nordyke gets so much as a scratch from any of you, I'll hunt that man down and kill him, and then I'll hunt down each of you in turn and give you the same dose, if it takes me the rest of my life."

He began backing to the door, his gaze never leaving the men before him. Behind the bar Joe Pike stood stiffly, with hands in plain sight, palms down on the bar. McGuire cursed. Chambeau and Tenny watched Whitehorse with menace in their eyes. Only the swarthy breed acted.

His hand came from behind his back in the sweeping motion of an underhand cast, and a knife blade glittered in the light of the hanging kerosene lamps. The cast was never completed. No one could later swear that they actually saw the movement, but the right hand of Whitehorse Ed Diamond seemed to twitch, and then it held a Colts from whose muzzle a single burst of fire spurted. The clatter of the knife on the puncheon floor was almost drowned by the breed's cry as his left hand whipped across to grip his shattered right. The door of the resort opened and closed and only the four renegades and the proprietor were left in the room.

Whitehorse, circling a little to keep trees between himself and the cabin, quickly made his way to his canoe. There were but few hours of darkness and he knew he had to make the most of them. He saw two men hurrying to the river when he drove his canoe away from the shore, and knew that they were going to break out their own canoes to trail his. It was probable that the other two were quickly making up packs. With two men at the paddles of each of the pursuing canoes, Whitehorse knew that he had little chance of outrunning them.

SOON the river widened and ahead lay the vast stretch of open water that was Great Slave Lake. He swung his canoe sharply to the right, hugging the shore. Keeping to the shadows, he followed the uneven serrations of the southern shoreline hour after hour. The overcast sky, with a hint of rain in the air, cut visibility over the open water and he could not see if the others were on the lake. If they had not noted the direction he took there was a chance they would think he had turned back upstream to intercept the geologist. But there was little hope that he would have that much luck. One of them would have been watching his movements from the instant he left the roadhouse until he disappeared around the first bend of the river.

He traveled long hours each day, holding close to the south shore. Not once did he catch sight of any of McGuire's outfit. When he reached the east arm he turned straight north, keeping to the cover of countless islands. At length he came to the mouth of the north arm.

The last four days had been overcast and rainy. Several times he had the impression that he was being trailed, and once he thought he saw something dark move silently from sight, shrouded in the mist that hung over the water.

There was always the chance that McGuire, if he had learned that Whitehorse had not turned back up the Slave River, had figured out an alternative route, the one which Nordyke had actually taken. The Yellowknife River, McGuire knew, would be the waterway closest to the mysterious muskeg. The cunning renegade would then guess that Whitehorse was to meet his friend somewhere along the Yellowknife. If they arrived at this conclusion they would not have to take on the difficult task of trailing him.

It was just a couple of hours before sunset when Whitehorse reached the river. He swung into it and his sharp glances examined the near shore. He saw no sign of a camp and within a half-mile he reached a small stream running into the larger river. He hesitated here a moment. He saw the spreading greenery of huge birches a quarter-mile up the river. A good camp-site. On the point of exploring the spot, a distant hail switched his attention to the main stream.

Whitehorse turned.

A mile away a tiny figure on the beach was waving. Diamond bent to the paddle and within a quarter-hour stepped out of the canoe and shook hands with a little, gimlet-eyed, gray-bearded man whose lined

and weathered face gave strong indication of the many wilderness trails he had followed.

"Been watching for you, Whitehorse. I'd know your shape and your posture in a canoe as far as I could make out the craft. Been here for days. Camp's back in those pines," and he led the way from the shore, carrying Diamond's light pack.

Whitehorse swung the birch-bark over his head, smoothed out the small furrow left by its stem, and followed Nordyke, stepping carefully on rocks where he would leave no trail. Nordyke had dropped the pack and was adding dry alder to the coals of the fire. The wood flamed brightly, giving off practically no smoke, and the geologist hung the coffee pail over it and broke out freshly-baked bannock. Whitehorse took a side of bacon from his pack and cut slices into a frying pan. Little was said until the meal was finished, Whitehorse merely recounting his experience at Pike's roadhouse.

"Figured the Consolidated would have scum on my trail. That's the way they work," he nodded.

Whitehorse leaned back and lit his pipe.

"Now suppose you tell me what it's all about. All I know is what I learned at Pike's. Your letters didn't tell me anything."

"Didn't dare put it in writing. Was suspicious that even my mail was watched. Well, here's the lay-out, and it goes back some five years."

The little man paused, sitting very still and gazing into the dying flames of the fire. He seemed to be living in the past, and Whitehorse surmised that his thoughts were not all pleasant. At last he raised his head and looked at his young companion.

"I HAD a friend, a factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, in charge of a thousand square miles of this part of the Northwest Territories. No more upright man ever lived, yet he was discharged in disgrace for supposedly trading in whiskey with the Indians through a third party, getting their furs and selling them to a rival company, then sharing the profits with the man who did the actual work.

"I've never for an instant believed he was guilty, but strangely, he put up little defense at the Company trial. The third party was never found. My friend went broke paying back what he was supposed to have stolen, and thus avoided prison. He and his daughter disappeared five years ago and no one has seen them since."

"I have—at least I've seen one of them," Whitehorse interrupted tensely.

He was leaning forward and staring hard at the geologist, while the incredulity on his face slowly changed to comprehension.

"What's that you say?" Nordyke snapped.

"I've just remembered where I'd heard a name before. This factor was Lawson Farquar and his daughter was Vesta Farquar?"

"How did you know?" the geologist cried.

Whitehorse then told of the legend of the humming grapevine, and of the girl who had accompanied him from Juneau to Great Slave Lake.

"I don't see it all, yet, but I do understand this; she knew of you coming, somehow, and thought that I might be on my way to stop you, or to steal whatever it is you are after. She wanted to be sure, and she meant to prevent me, some way, when she was sure. But go on with your story."

The little man nodded. "Perhaps you're right—in the essentials at least. As I said, no one heard from the Farquars for nearly five years. Then last winter I got a letter and a map. The letter said Lawson was sending me two boxes of specimens for analysis, and the map was to be used to guide me and to plot out the claims that would be filed if his surmise of the wealth he'd found were correct.

"But I received only one box of specimen. The other had disappeared completely. It wasn't long, however, before I had a suspicion of where it went. A representative of the Consolidated approached me, hinting at a deal. I had the map, you see. Naturally, that told who had stolen the second box. Also naturally, I told him where to go and immediately wrote to you. Now then—" and he quit talking and turned to the site of a former campfire.

With a sharpened stick he dug into the ground, then clawed up the earth and ashes. A foot down he uncovered a small, steel box. Lifting it from its hole, he pried open the cover.

"You won't need this explanation," he said, and tossed several folded papers into

the fire. "This, however, is the map. Study it until you know it thoroughly, and then hide it—even from me. What you've told me is convincing evidence that the enemies are close on our trail. If I should be captured and I don't know where the map is, I can't answer their questions even if I weaken under what they may do to me. We'll need that map, to plot the claims in the heart of the unsurveyed swamp."

Whitehorse looked at the map, traced on oiled paper. "I know that swamp," he murmured, "but I never knew there was that large an island in the center. And I never knew that meandering river, which isn't any faster than a slough, went clear across the muskeg."

At last he arose.

"I'm going to hide this—where it will always be with me, but where not one man in fifty would be able to find it. I'll be back in an hour or so," he said, and turned to his hidden canoe.

At the little stream he had been on the point of exploring when Nordyke's hail had diverted his attention, Whitehorse Diamond headed away from the Yellowknife. Twenty minutes later he had a small, smokeless fire burning in the center of the birch grove.

Once while he worked he thought he heard a dry stick breaking under the foot of some animal, and he looked around quickly. There was nothing. The country was open and he was able to see clearly.

He worked swiftly. Disquiet had crept over him and he felt an unaccountable urgency spurring him on. When he had finished he started back to camp with long swinging strokes that sent his light craft skimming across the water. The brief night was over and daylight was again flooding the wilderness. It had taken him longer than he had planned, and the thought occurred that what he had taken for the breaking of a twig might have been a distant gun-shot.

He didn't pause to carry his canoe into concealment when he beached it this time. There were too many marks on the narrow, gravelly beach. He ran to the clump of pines. No one was there. But someone had been. The place was in complete disorder. Packs were ripped open and their contents scattered. The little tent had been torn from its pegs and the geologist's sleeping bag ripped to shreds, the down covering the nearby pine needles like snow. His own and his friend's rifles were gone, as was his reserve supply of ammunition for the Colts.

Whitehorse studied the signs with all the care and skill of a Cree tracker. In one spot he picked up an empty cartridge case. It was a 30-30, the caliber of Nordyke's rifle. At last he straightened. There had been three, possibly four men at the sight. One of them had not entered the grove, but had remained on the beach watching, he now knew, for his own return. Despite all his caution, he had led Gunflint McGuire and his wolves directly to the camp of his friend, and they had chosen the exact moment to strike when they could not fail.

One other fact hit Whitehorse—his friend's foresight in having him hide the map without revealing where it was concealed. McGuire and his gang had taken Nordyke instead of the map. The thought of what they would do to the little geologist to make him cough up the secret wasn't nice.

IV

THERE was the faintest of rustling branches at the outer edge of the grove. A twig snapped lightly. Whitehorse spun around, his Colts leaping to his hand. A broad, white head appeared low to the ground and the next instant a big, white animal, half Siberian and half Arctic wolf, came into camp. Behind him Whitehorse caught sight of a moving form, a slight, lithe form in smoke-tanned buckskin. The huge animal showed its teeth in a soundless snarl, and crouched, its greenish eyes fastened on Diamond's throat. From the figure nearing the camp came a calm command in a voice Whitehorse Diamond would never forget.

"Steady, Chief. He's our friend. We know that now."

The wolf-dog straightened, whining a little at the sound of the voice. Whitehorse slowly returned his gun to its holster beneath his shirt.

She came in quickly. "I didn't reach here in time. I've been home and brought Chief back with me. But I was in time to see which way they went. Cuyler Nor-

dyke told them the correct way to go; I could see that when they took the portage. Undoubtedly he figured that if you couldn't trail him you'd take the same course, and so have a chance to come to the rescue."

"Then you—don't believe—" Diamond began, the pull of her coming back to him with a rush.

"What you read in my face when I let you see me at the roadhouse window that night? No—I wasn't far away—I saw what happened afterward, and heard part of it. Then I headed straight for home—overland. I can do that, you know. No one else could find the trail through the swamp. After I'd reported to Dad, I came back to find Mr. Nordyke's camp, but was too late to help him."

Whitehorse had hold of the essentials now, and already his course was mapped in his mind.

"Tell me the trail," he snapped. "Time may mean everything. They'll stop at no kind of torture to make Cuyler tell what he doesn't know; the hiding place of his map. And this time you don't go with me," he finished almost savagely.

She shook her head in agreement. "No. You'll not need help, I think; not after what I saw in the roadhouse and also just now when Chief appeared. You'll be going with the current after your portage to the other river, too."

Swiftly she gave the directions, finishing with a warning about a rapids on the river, with a twenty-foot falls at the end, and a description of the spot on the right bank where he must make the portage. Scarely had she finished when a rifle-shot sounded between them and the river.

Whitehorse leaped forward, putting himself in front of the girl, and once more his gun was in his hand. He saw nothing move, and it was only when he crouched lower to look beneath the branches of the trees flanking the faint trail from the river that he caught sight of the motionless white shape lying across the trunk of a fallen tree.

"Set-gun, meant for me," he snapped suddenly. "And Chief was nosing along the trail and it got him."

He hurried toward the motionless white form. Before he reached it he saw the splash of blood on the back of the animal's head. It grew larger as he watched and when he halted he saw the ragged tear in the skin.

"Chief's not dead," he said. The blood's still flowing. Creased, I think. Back where our tent was is a little canvas sack with the contents dumped on the ground beside it. Bring them to me, Vesta. Hurry, while he's still unconscious."

When he heard the girl's moccasined feet running back toward the center of the grove he slid a hand between the dog's forelegs and felt the chest. The heart was beating strongly. He examined the wound. The bullet had cut through the scalp, leaving a wide gash. Pressure revealed no break in the skull.

The girl came up with the contents of the bag. Whitehorse took a curved needle and a gut suture from an oiled envelope. With quick, gentle fingers he brought the edges of the wound together and sewed them in place. When the knot was tied he straightened and let out his breath. The dog raised and turned its head and its tongue gave Diamond's hand a quick caress.

"Why, he was conscious all the time you were working," the girl cried in amazement.

Diamond stroked the dog's muzzle gently with his fingers.

"What an animal," he breathed.

"Whitehorse," she said quickly. "If you save Cuyler Nordyke and my father from those—those wolverines—Chief is yours."

Diamond looked up. "That's a bargain," he instantly agreed.

Then he looked around and saw the muzzle of an old rifle in the center of a thicket beside the trail. A cord ran from the trigger close to the log he would have had to step over if he followed the trail. He pointed to it.

"If I hadn't wanted to keep from spoiling the sign, and so paralleled the trail instead of walking in it when I was examining the spoor, that shot would have caught me in the groin," he explained.

Then, looking from the dog to the girl, "Rest here with him for an hour. The blood'll be well clotted by then. He'll be all right. And now I've my own trail to take, and I'm late getting started."

Whitehorse didn't see the slight start of the girl, the checked gesture of affection as she started toward him. His mind was already on the manhunt and that fact was

revealed in his set features and the predatory gleam in his eyes. Vesta Farquar laid a hand lightly on his arm.

"Watch yourself, Whitehorse—and—God go with you."

Whitehorse came back to the present for a brief moment.

"I'll make out—but you go back home and wait for me. Don't mix in. If that bull, McGuire sees you—"

"He's already seen me, knows me, wants me—if you only knew," she breathed, loathing in her voice and expression.

Diamond's answer was something between a growl and a curse. He pressed the fingers on his arm briefly, then whirled and was gone, working his way through the thickets just off the trail.

WITHIN an hour he saw the tall pine with the square, high boulder beside it on the left bank that marked the carry to the river that would take him to the muskeg. At the foot of the pine he discovered the signs the others had left in passing. They were comparatively fresh. Turning the canoe over his head, he took the faint trail at a trot. A half-mile up a gentle slope and another half-mile down, and he set his craft into the water at the edge of a swift-moving, winding stream less than fifty yards in width.

He paused to look around. Nowhere on the trail had the party ahead of him stopped. Here the spoor all showed that they had put off immediately. If they had paused to question Nordyke, or to torture him for the map to check the course he had told them to take, it had not been on this portage. Whitehorse recalled the next portage, around the rapids and the falls. There, he felt certain, they would go to work on their captive. He stepped into the canoe and shoved off.

As he drove ahead he shot quick glances around, and at each curve of the river swung to the outside that he might catch the broadest and quickest view of the course ahead. He could not be far behind the others, for they had little more than an hour's start.

Soon he heard a low murmur that grew and deepened in volume and tone. He was approaching the rapids the girl had told him about. The shores on either side steepened and ridges drew in close to the water's

edge. The current quickened. Ahead was a sharp bend and he could see the upward slant of the river as the water piled against the low cliff on the outer edge.

He remembered the girl's description. A hundred yards beyond the curve would be the rapids, and the portage would be on his right, starting from a sandy beach and working upward through a grove of pack pine. On the left there would be no landing spot, for the cliff rose from the water's edge. Beyond the foot of the portage there would also be a cliff on that side, and the rushing water between these two perpendicular walls would comprise the half-mile of rapids.

He took the outside of the curve, the canoe banking on the piled water and shooting smoothly into the straight run for the rapids, and in the instant of rounding the curve he saw the picture exactly as Vesta had described it. The curve negotiated, he started to angle toward the belt of pines.

And then he saw something else. Movement—in two places. Two men stepped out from behind tree trunks and there were rifles cradled in their arms. Immediately Diamond recognized the French-Canadian

Falcon Chambeau and the breed Indian Pete. Pete's right hand was bandaged, but he seemed able to handle the gun easily with his left.

Whitehorse kept the canoe headed for the portage for a few more rods while his mind raced. They were not pointing their rifles at him. They would want him alive. Besides, it wasn't necessary, yet. He must land, and in landing he would be helpless to defend himself. There was nothing he could do? Whitehorse suddenly grinned and put more power behind his paddle strokes.

Chambeau and Pete stepped down to the shore, waiting, and there was a gleam of white teeth in the hatch-edged face of Falcon as he grinned. The movement of his lips showed he was forming words, but above the roar of the rapids his voice came to Diamond only in a thin shout. He had said something about "Welcome—," mockingly.

And suddenly Whitehorse answered with a ringing, laughing, taunting shout of his own, and in the same instant shifted from his knees to a crouch, and gave his paddle a wide sweep outward and straight back to the stern of the craft.

The bow of the canoe swung abruptly into the current and for an instant the craft threatened to be borne sideways. A quick twist of the paddle blade brought the stern over and the canoe straightened, directly in the swiftest water, and shot like an arrow past the astounded pair, heading between towering walls into the mist and white water and the waiting teeth of protruding rocks.

SOMETHING plucked at the canoe and a sliver appeared on the gunwale. Too late, the pair at the foot of the portage had recovered from their astonishment at his action and had brought their rifles into play. Whitehorse could not hear the reports, but he saw that sliver, and then something jerked the collar of his shirt. There was no more flying lead. The walls of the gorge now hid him from the foot of the portage.

Whitehorse Diamond lived sixty years in the sixty seconds it took to run the rapids. Paddling savagely to keep steerageway, to hold the canoe into the center of the current, he stared through the mist and leaping water ahead. Rock fangs loomed and he pointed the bow toward the nearest. The current shunted him aside without swinging the canoe broadside; that would have meant inescapable death. Rocking, pitching, swaying, the craft acted like a lunatic on a spree, while death and obstruction reached for it.

And then for a brief brace of seconds there was smooth water, curving abruptly downward and disappearing ahead. Beyond that there was nothing to be seen but the tips of trees. The crest of the falls. In the center was a slight V in the falling water, and beyond the falls a quick glimpse of drifting foam showed the current was divided, swinging from the center to each side and joining again at the far end of the pool. That meant but one thing to the river-wise voyageur. A section of the lip of the falls had broken off and now lay like an upward thrust knife to impale anything coming over the falls.

Reaction was instant with recognition. Whitehorse Diamond shipped the paddle and rose from his crouch, balancing with hands on the gunwales, and leaning forward slightly. The slightest miscalculation in timing would mean death. If the desperate chance he had to take were to succeed he must be perfect. But even a perfect performance was not insurance against death. Everything depended on the depth of the pool and the nature of its bottom.

The bow shot over the lip of the falls in the exact apex of the V. Whitehorse's hands left the gunwale while he balanced lightly on the balls of his feet. In the exact instant when he felt the greatest pressure against the canoe bottom beneath him, when a split instant later there would be no support at all, he shot outward ahead of the falling birch-bark in a long, clean dive beyond the crashing turmoil of water at the foot of the falls.

There was a brief view of the jagged, saw-toothed rock section and of the canoe, a broken mass of wreckage, sliding down its side, and then Whitehorse cut the water. Down and down he went while he tried to arch his back and kick upward. His finger-tips touched sand and he began to shoot to the surface.

The instant he broke water he turned and fought his way back toward the falls in a desperate crawl. It was not too dif-

ficult, for the current was negligible in the pool, but time meant success for his gamble. That broken lip of rock had told him there should be a narrow cavity behind the falling water which would give him a shelter unsuspected by the killers.

His fingers touched the edge of the broken ledge and he gripped it, drew in a deep breath and pulled himself beneath the falling water. It all but smashed him loose from his hold. His feet came up and touched the rock and he let go with his hands and thrust hard ahead. His body straightened and his fingers touched slimy rock. They hooked in a crack and he pulled. Quite suddenly all resistance ceased. He was free of the weight of the cascade and in a twilight zone that was as unreal as the aberrations of a nightmare.

He lay gasping while he examined his surroundings as best he could in the unnatural light. He discovered he was stretched out on a rock ledge from which, some three feet behind him, rose the serrated and cracked cliff that formed the falls. At length he got up cautiously and began to work his way along the wall toward the western end. Each step had to be made with the utmost care lest he skid off the slimy ledge into the wall of falling water. As he advanced he discovered he could see better. That meant the veil of water was thinning, that he was nearing the edge of the river. Finally, where there was a slight depression in the cliff, he halted, leaning back against the wall.

He found he could look out over the pool, could see its eastern border mistily, and could clearly examine the western shore. A windfall lay in the water of the west shore and cradled in its skeleton arms was the birch-bark canoe. It was a broken thing now, riding low in the water, and exposing a gaping hole in its bottom.

Whitehorse shifted his gaze to the foot of the portage on the opposite shore. He could just distinguish several men through the mist. They were moving along the shore, apparently searching for something, for they kept looking out over the pool as if trying to see into its depths. Diamond knew what they were looking for—his own smashed body.

Three of them reached the far end of the pool and suddenly the arm of Indian Pete pointed across toward the windfall. The glances of the others followed his gesture and they saw the broken canoe. Little Jake Tenny's and Gunflint McGuire's mouths opened and Whitehorse knew they were laughing. Even the poker-faced breed's lips parted to show his white teeth in a grin of satisfaction.

There was other movement on the portage. Gray-haired Cuyler Nordyke, carrying a heavy pack, was staggering to the water's edge while behind him followed Falcon Chambeau with a rifle cradled in the crook of his left arm. The geologist swung down the pack and the three below returned to the portage. Whitehorse saw, then, that they had already carried down their canoes and equipment. Within minutes they had embarked and were moving downriver, and out of sight.

WHITEHORSE waited a quarter of an hour, and then worked his way to shore, and when he saw that the canoe was securely lodged against the windfall he lay down. It was not until he had reached solid ground that he realized how weak and beaten he was. But his restless mind and the fact that every minute the others were drawing farther away, would not let him remain long inactive.

He finally rescued the canoe and examined it. The thin, split-cedar planking was shattered, but none of it was lost. This was also true of the broken ribs. The outer shell of the craft, the birch-bark, was split and torn from gunwale to gunwale. It would not be impossible to fix, but it would take time. He saw the paddle floating at the water's edge beyond the windfall. Securing it, he turned to making the necessary repairs.

Spruce roots were gathered and put to soak. Chunks of dried spruce pitch were collected in a hastily fashioned bark rogan. A thick, long section of bark was pealed from a white birch. Then he was ready. With his pocket knife he scraped the bark from the spruce roots and split them to make his heavy thread. He punched the broken planking and the rib end back into place. Then, with the smallest blade of his knife as an awl, he sewed a strip of the heavy bark on the inside of the canoe to another piece on the outside, drawing the spruce-root thread as tight as possible, and binding planking and ribs in place.

This done he found a thin, flat rock with a shallow depression in the center. He built a fire under it. While the rock grew hot he carefully wiped his revolver and cartridges dry and ran a piece of his dried shirt through the barrel.

When the rock was hot he poured his collection of spruce gum into the depression. When that was bubbling, he scooped it up with a stick and worked it into the seams along the stitching. It was a crude job for there should have been one part grease to eight parts pitch to make the seam smooth and to keep the pitch from cracking, and he should have had something to strain out the bits of bark and other impurities collected with the gum. But it would have to do.

He floated the canoe. Tiny streams of water seeped through in two places. He took the canoe out after marking the spots, and collected more pitch. The second time he floated it was water-tight.

It wasn't until he had paddled a little way and the anxiety about his craft was allayed that he began to realize how near exhaustion he was. It took an effort of the will to keep going, and he had likewise to constantly fight the desire to sleep. The thought of those ahead, driving straight for the heart of the swamp, and of the gallant girl who had fought so hard to prevent what had already happened, and who would fall into the unholy hands of Gunflint McGuire, kept him going.

The character of the river gradually changed. It broadened, branched meandered, and began to grow sluggish. The ridges bordering it became hills and the hills became flat. At last he realized that he had entered the muskeg without knowing just when it had happened.

Only tamarack and swamp spruce surrounded him. Brouse, sphagnum moss, and deceptive humps of vegetation that looked solid but in fifty percent of the cases were not, showed between the trees. The river, too, had become a mere slough, narrow and without perceptible current. Worse, it divided every few rods. A man without a detailed map could be lost in it, could circle a dozen times in a quarter-mile radius and never know it, for everything looked alike and there were no landmarks.

One fact Whitehorse Diamond did remember from the map. The course lay along the main current of the stream until the higher ground of the island in the center was in sight. He rested his paddle and looked over the side. The canoe quit moving and no perceptible drift told him which way the current moved, or even if he were in the main stream where there was movement. But he saw, in a moment, what he was looking for. There were long, narrow blades of swamp grass under the water. They were bent toward the bow of the birch-bark. He was still in the main channel and heading in the right direction.

How long he kept going he did not know. He did not even know whether he was getting any place. At times he could have sworn that, though the canoe moved, it was on a treadmill. Every feature of the country always looked exactly the same. That time was passing he finally realized when the sun sank below the northwestern horizon and it began to grow dusk. Three times he had come to slumped over the thwart in front of him while the canoe rested motionless against the brouse at the edge of the stream. With twilight deepening to darkness, he rubbed his eyes and looked around more searchingly.

Ahead the river made one of its turns, this time to the right. But on the left, between him and the turn, he saw his first broad-leafed foliage. Small clumps of alderbush and moose maple dotted a low mound no more than a hundred feet in diameter.

He knew he could not go on. Even were his objective but a quarter-mile away and he made it, he would only be easy prey for the wolverines he was trailing. He reached the mound and dragged the canoe out of the water, then crawled to higher ground and collapsed, asleep before his body finally settled.

He awakened like a wild animal, all at once and completely conscious of his surroundings. It was still dark, so he knew he could not have been unconscious more than two or three hours. Something must have got through to his subconscious, some warning that startled him to wakefulness. His hand went instinctively to the gun in the clip holster while he looked out over the level, tree-dotted muskeg.

Something moved among the trees out in the swamp, something white. He caught

the same movement from a second ghostly shape at another point; then a third, and a fourth. They seemed to be closing in on him. He shook his head and got to his knees. His brain was clear and he felt a little rested. The legend he had heard in far-off Yukon Territory recurred to him, the legend of a woman who ran with white wolves in the heart of a great swamp.

Then sound came to him, the "chunk" of a hastily and incautiously wielded paddle being plunged into water. He switched his gaze toward the bend in the river. A tiny, twelve-foot canoe was rounding the curve and putting all her strength into the sweep of the paddle was the girl who traveled with the wolves.

When she was almost opposite the mound he called, "Vesta."

Her paddle twisted and swung the bow toward him while a faint, "Thank God!" whispered up.

She leaped out, at the same time whistling sharply. The wolf-dogs converged on the mound.

"You're—all right?" she asked breathlessly as Whitehorse arose. "I heard them say you'd been smashed to a pulp trying to run the rapids, but I got a chance to have a word with Mr. Nordyke and was assured that no river could kill Whitehorse Diamond while he had a canoe under him."

"I'm all right, was just all in. They've got your father? They've reached the island?" he asked.

She nodded. "But they didn't find me. They'd already reached it when I arrived, just at dusk. Cuyler Nordyke, at the last, tried to lose them in the swamp, but that Indian was too cute—he thought of keeping to the main channel by studying the bend of the weeds under the water."

She paused a second for breath, then continued swiftly.

"They never saw me, and I had a chance to listen and to creep up behind Cuyler Nordyke and have that word with him. They haven't found the fortune they think is there, and they're going to torture both father and Mr. Nordyke for the secret. I crept around and let the dogs out of the pen and reached my little canoe at the opposite end of the island, then came hunting you. Nordyke suggested it. We must hurry or it will be too late. They are both old men and—can't stand—much."

Whitehorse looked down as something nudged his leg. The magnificent leader of the wolf-dogs, Chief, was standing beside him, gazing up into his face. He glanced at the girl.

"May I?" he asked.

She nodded and he started toward the canoe, calling to the dog. The intelligent animal hesitated while it looked toward its mistress. Vesta made a gesture and it immediately followed Whitehorse and jumped into the bow of the canoe as he floated it.

"You keep behind me and drop way back soon as you've shown me the shortest way to your island," he commanded.

She made no reply other than to indicate a little rifle at the bottom of her craft. She recommended a short route at the second branching of the river ahead. Within a half-hour Whitehorse saw a reddish glow low over the swamp. It increased in size and brightness until he recognized it as a fire. The flames played over the trunks and spreading branches of birches and elms.

Whitehorse knew the men he hunted, especially the breed, and he knew what that fire meant. He began to shoot the canoe forward with heaving strokes of the paddle. Chief flattened his ears as he gazed ahead and tested the wind with twitching nostrils, and the rumble deep in his throat became a savage snarl as it reached his gleaming teeth.

V

THE bow of the canoe lightly touched the shore of the island. Chief leaped out. A low command from Whitehorse checked the wolf-dog as it started forward. Like a stalking Yellowknife, Whitehorse Diamond moved among the trees toward the fire.

As he drew close he saw that a pile of wood, as yet unlit, lay at the foot of a sapling stake at one side of the large fire. The group was in a clearing in front of a two-story log cabin occupying the highest spot on the island.

Falcon Chambeau was leading a giant of a man toward this stake. The man's arms were bound at his back and his white hair was darkened by clotted blood. His craggy features were set in determination and his

compressed lips formed a thin, bloodless line. Swiftly, Chambeau bound the captive to the sapling.

Jake Tenny, Gunflint McGuire, and Indian Pete squatted a little distance from the sapling stake. In front of them was the geologist. Sickness was in Cuyler Nordyke's eyes and there was no blood in his cheeks. Gunflint arose and stepped forward, facing the man at the stake.

"The end of the trail, Lawson, unless you talk. I'll ask just once—where's that fortune?" He turned suddenly to Cuyler Nordyke. "Or maybe you want to talk before your friend starts to roast?"

"SILENCE!"

The command crackled from the lips of the white-haired giant, and then his face was once more set in harsh lines. McGuire whirled back toward him, rage contorting his features. Then Lawson Farquar spoke again.

"It's the end of the trail whether I talk or not. We both know that. You've been waiting a long time for it, Gunflint. Even if we tell what you want to know it won't save us. You wouldn't dare let us live. I've overstayed my time on this rotten planet anyway. Light the fire and see if you can make me talk. I'll see you in hell afterwards."

Whitehorse Diamond lowered his left hand to the wolf-dog crouching by his side and felt the stiffness of the animal's hackles. The rumble that had started from its throat died. Whitehorse slid out his revolver as Chambeau bent to ignite the tinder before the stake.

And then a racing white shape appeared among the trees across from Whitehorse. One of the wolf-dogs, running low, shot into the firelight. Two long leaps and it reached Chambeau and both rolled on the ground. Chambeau screamed and the scream died in a blood-choked gurgle.

Indian Pete came to his feet and raised a cocked rifle with one hand, aiming it like a revolver at the wolf-dog. Whitehorse fired twice. Venomous little Jake Tenny whirled toward Whitehorse, cocking the rifle he held at hip height. A lance of fire spurted from the darkness across the circle and Tenny staggered, then swung his rifle toward the slight form kneeling at the edge of the firelight. Whitehorse fired twice more.

Gunflint McGuire had picked up his own rifle. Then he dropped it and shoved his hands above his head. The wolf-dog had quit worrying at the throat of the lifeless Chambeau. Tenny and Indian Pete lay on the ground, their sightless eyes staring at nothing in this world. Whitehorse moved in, Chief at his side, and from across the fire the figure of Vesta Farquar, her light rifle held ready, entered the circle.

Lawson Farquar turned to Whitehorse Ed Diamond.

"I owe you an explanation. My gratitude you'll have as long as you live." He paused and made a gesture toward the bound Gunflint near the little group.

"My stepbrother, the man who sold rotgut to the Indians for their furs and traded the furs to rivals of my company. I was blamed, and my mouth was sealed because my mother still lived and begged silence from me to save her 'erring baby.' He was in Juneau when Vesta was there and when she found he'd left suddenly she followed on the next boat on a suspicion that he'd discovered our secret."

He paused, then addressed McGuire. "You'd have tortured me to learn that secret, and then have killed both me and Cuyler. Cuyler, he's worked hard enough to learn the truth. Tell him."

The little geologist grinned as he faced the captive. He gestured to Gunflint's feet where, for several yards, the surface soil had been scraped away to expose shiny rock almost as black as coal.

"There it is McGuire, and unless I'm much mistaken it's the finest and only large deposit on the North American continent. Chromite, my avaricious renegade, the ore from which chromium is made for the compounding of high-grade armament steel. You and your dead scum were going to torture us to find out where it was while you were walking all over it."

Gunflint McGuire stared hard at the little geologist, then snorted as a thought struck him.

"And th' map that was to give exact locations for the recording of the claims, so they'd be sure to cover th' deposit? You ain't got that, so you ain't any better off than me. You ain't goin' to kill me, I know that, and I got just as good a chance—"

"Have you?" Lawson Farquar interrupted calmly. "You have only one chance,

the chance to stay on this island, a captive, until a fresh map is made and the claims recorded."

Whitehorse Diamond arose and spoke for the first time.

"Nope," he disagreed. "He's got one other chance."

WITHOUT explaining, he turned to the canoe he had carried up to the clearing. With a sheath knife taken from the dead breed he chipped away the pitch from a square of birch-back in the bow of the craft. When the bark was lifted there was revealed beneath it not the planking of the canoe, but the original bark. Between the two layers was a flat piece of waterproof paper. Whitehorse took this and walked back to the group. He stood before the captive, slowly turning the paper in his hands. Finally he thrust a hand toward Farquar.

"Got a pencil?" he asked.

Farquar placed one in his hand. Looking at the blank side of the map, Whitehorse said musingly. "This document isn't quite finished. There isn't any writing on this side of it."

He reached forward with the sheath knife then, and cut the thongs around McGuire's wrists. Surprised, the captive brought his hands in front, flexing the fingers. Whitehorse thrust the map, the square of birch-bark, and the pencil under the captive's nose.

"Finish it, Gunflint. Write out a complete confession that will clear Lawson Farquar with the H-B Company. Put in everything." He paused, then slid the razor-edged sheath knife under Gunflint McGuire's nose.

"Or, by God, I'll scalp you alive."

Startled McGuire looked up at the man above him. He looked long into the eyes of Whitehorse Diamond, and what he saw there slowly drained the blood from his cheeks. Fumbling a little, he put the square of bark on his knee, with the paper on top, and began to write. When he had finished and signed it, Whitehorse handed the paper to Farquar.

"Read it and see if it covers everything," he said.

Lawson Farquar read while the others watched him. Finally he nodded his head. "It does. At last—thank God—I'm a free—" and then a black cloud exploded.

Gunflint McGuire had risen stealthily during the reading. Now he lunged forward, snatched the confession and map, and whirled out of the firelight, raced across the island, and headed out into the swamp, leaping from one hummock of safety to another.

Whitehorse fired one shot and Gunflint jerked, but kept going without loss of speed. The second time Whitehorse flipped the hammer it fell on an empty chamber. And then McGuire was lost in the darkness.

A whine of eagerness drew Diamond's gaze down to his companion. Chief was looking out over the swamp, teeth gleaming. Whitehorse shot out a pointing arm. "Get him, boy. Go get him."

The wolf-dog raced away in the dark. Thirty seconds later a wild scream cut the night, rose to a thin thread of sound, and died. Whitehorse Diamond left the group and disappeared in the dark. Ten minutes later he and Chief returned. There was blood on the wolf-dog's muzzle and blood on the oiled paper Whitehorse held out to Lawson Farquar.

"Ed Diamond!"

At the ringing voice, Whitehorse turned to face Vesta Farquar.

"My promise. Remember? Chief is yours, and he's the finest and most intelligent wolf-dog ever bred. I never realized it until now."

Whitehorse gave her a slow smile. "I knew that when he lay still while I sewed his scalp, then afterward licked the fingers that did it. But—but I can't take him."

The girl stared at the big man. Whitehorse added slowly, while the faintest trace of a grin trembled at the corners of his mouth. "My price for my services has gone up. I can't take Chief—unless his mistress goes with him."

"Oh—you—you."

Little Cuyler Nordyke chuckled, and Lawson Farquar let out a giant roar of laughter.

But neither Whitehorse Ed Diamond nor the girl heard them. She was coming toward him with shining eyes, and he was waiting for her, scarcely believing that he'd had the nerve to make the proposition, or that she had had the courage to accept it.

The Tie-Cutter

By WILLARD LUCE

All hell's rivermen couldn't stop the march of the Utah Central Railroad . . . not when they were forced to buck the unreasoning loyalty of stout Finn Mowery.

WES HERRINGTON'S fancy vest, tall beaver hat and long black coat looked out of place up there in the timber. But Herrington himself did not. He was a big man, as big as any tie-cutter on the mountain, as big even as Finn Mowery whom he was tapping on the chest with the back of his hand.

"That's what I said, Mowery, a thousand dollars—*cash.*"

Finn Mowery leaned on the handle of his broad axe and studied Herrington through eyes that were an exaggerated blue in contrast with his rusty complexion. "And just what might a boat-runner be wantin' with railroad ties, me lad?"

"Never mind what I want with the ties, Mowery. I'm offering you a thousand dollars. That's a damn sight more than the railroad'll give you. And I'm offering you cash." Herrington put the long slender cigar back in his mouth and rocked on his heels while he let it sink in. "That's better than stock which won't be worth the paper it's printed on unless the railroad's completed, and . . ." Herrington leaned forward again tapping the tie-cutter on the chest. ". . . I can tell you for certain, Mowery, the Utah Central will never be completed."

Finn Mowery leaned his broad axe against the log he had been hewing. He placed his index finger carefully against Wes Herrington's white vest. "I'm a railroad man, lad, and you're afraid of the railroad, afraid of what it'll do to your ore boats out there on Great Salt Lake, afraid it'll either make you lower your cutthroat prices or drive you out of business. And that, lad, is exactly what it will do." Mowery's eyes were getting icy. "Now, lad, be gettin' the hell off this timber land before I break your blasted neck!"

The skin around Wes Herrington's eyes tightened. "It'll take more than a circus freak to break my neck, Mowery," he grit-

ted. "Just remember that, if ever you try it." He reached up and caught Mowery's wrist, jerked it from his chest and flung it down. "Just remember that, too, when you try to deliver your ties."

He strode angrily away.

Finn Mowery stood there, broad and straddle-legged, and watched him go, feeling at once a contempt for the man and an envy for the man's body. Not that any man in the Wasatch mountains had a finer body than had Finn Mowery. Across his bones were bulging muscles that could move twice the weight another man the same size could handle. But with that power there was a slowness that comes from too much exercise. Muscle-bound, they had called it in the circus where Mowery had once been a strong man.

But Mowery no longer worked for the circus. He was a railroad man now, and proud of it. The fact that the Utah Central was paying in stock and not in cash was the thing that Finn Mowery liked best about the job. Someday he would have a good interest in this line.

That is . . . He stood thoughtfully, his broad face serious while he considered Wes Herrington's threat. He had nearly enough ties to fill his contract now, but they had to be delivered. And if they were delivered by the 10th of the month, Finn Mowery had an option on a contract to furnish five times the number he was now furnishing. That contract was what Finn Mowery wanted, what he had to have if he were ever to be a real owner in the Utah Central.

He shook his head savagely. Wes had made no idle threat, but five days was little enough time to finish cutting the ties and deliver them, without spending half of the time worrying about it.

Mowery picked up his axe and went back to work.

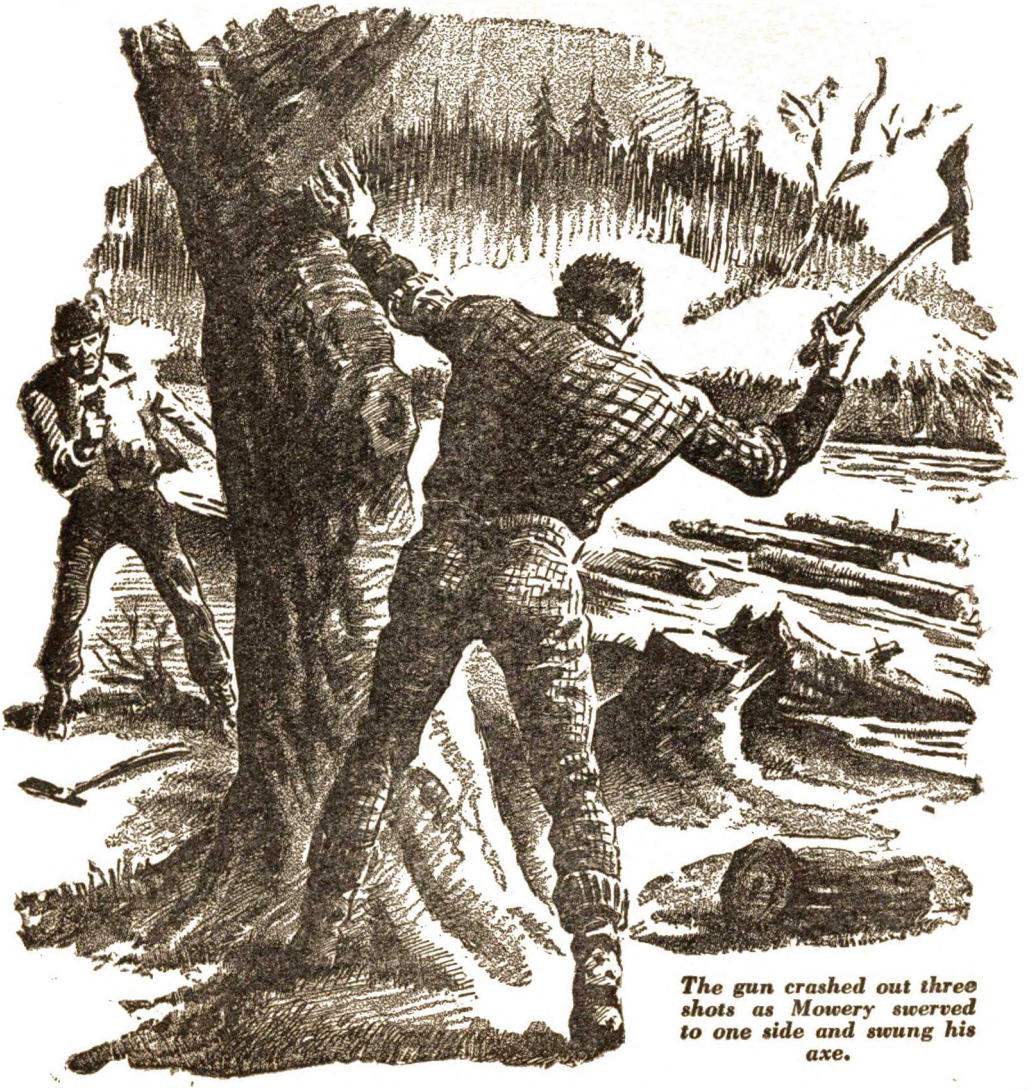
Early the following morning Mowery

drove his four span of mules across Beaver Creek, swollen high by the rapidly-melting snows. The water washed hard against the boxes of the two wagons hitched together and loaded high with green ties. But the gravel creek bed held the wagons up better than did the ground still soggy from the recent winter.

Mowery pulled the mules out of the creek and up the sharp hill to the two ruts that served as a road. Here he stopped to let the mules blow.

TWO HOURS later Mowery neared the canyon having made better time than he had expected. The canyon was a deep narrow gorge through which the South Fork of the Ogden River ran. High up on the rocky side hill a narrow road had been blasted. Once through this Mowery would have no trouble getting his ties delivered, at least the two wagon loads he had here and his others were all piled and ready for easy loading.

The mules rounded a curve. Fifty yards in front of them a tall man suddenly leaped up from where he had been squatting and raced down the road. Slamming his foot down on the brake rod Finn Mowery jerked back on the reins and twisted them about the rod. He snatched up the Winchester from the ties beside him and dropped to the ground, his eyes searching for more of Wes Herrington's men. For the man still making his awkward run down the rough road was Charlie Spencer.



The gun crashed out three shots as Mowery swerved to one side and swung his axe.

a Herrington bully-boy, who had been a prizefighter back East.

Suddenly Spencer threw himself out of sight behind a huge boulder.

Finn Mowery sprang away from the wagon and towards a clump of spruce. In mid-stride the earth suddenly leaped sideways sending the tie-cutter sprawling face-down on the rocks. He rolled over to see a piece of the mountain flung upwards. The rumblings of the explosion came out of the dust and the rocks.

Then suddenly smaller rocks were falling about him like hailstones. The mules were fighting and twisting in their traces, swinging to get away from the rocks and the sound of the avalanche racing towards the canyon bottom.

Mowery fought to his feet, groping his way to the wagon. A falling rock smashed him on the head making a nasty bruise. But he got the lines. He fought the mules, cursed them, and talked to them. They kept swinging, swinging around to get away from the danger ahead. The front wheel backed against the side of the wagon box. The farther the box tipped the harder Finn Mowery fought.

Then the wagon went over. The weight suddenly gone, the mules leaped forward tearing the front wheels from the wagon and breaking the reach. Mowery leaped out of the way to keep from being run over. The mules raced into the timber, spurred on by the crash of the second wagon.

Mowery stood and watched them go while anger moved through him. Suddenly he swung about and caught up the rifle. Already Charlie Spencer's long legs had carried him far down the canyon. Mowery dropped onto his knee and emptied the Winchester knowing how futile the act was.

Spencer hurried a little faster.

Mowery stood up and the silence hit him as hard as had the sound of the explosion before. The road was completely obliterated. Far down the canyon the tons of rock were piled high at the river's edge.

Mowery turned to his wagons. They were smashed and twisted and broken. If not entirely, certainly they were beyond repair in five days. And somewhere off in the timber his mules were racing and tearing their harnesses to bits.

Mowery stood there and surveyed it all, his eyes bleak, his huge shoulders sagging as though the weight of his thinking was that heavy. Five days would have been short enough to make the delivery; but now with the road out, his wagons smashed, and his teams scattered, it seemed utterly impossible.

But there was in Mowery's giant body and stubborn spirit the power to move mountains. His blocky jaw set itself in hard, square lines beneath the stubble of red beard. He swung around and set off with a determined stride following the path of destruction left by the mules.

That day and the next Mowery drove himself mercilessly. That huge body of his had but one speed and it continued at that speed almost without rest. Mowery tore the wagons apart and made one from the two. He ripped the harnesses, trading a piece here and another piece there until at last he had enough for two of his teams. But not an ounce of work did he put on the road. Foolish it would be to put his efforts rebuilding a road that another stick of powder could take out seconds after it was built.

Late the second evening, Finn Mowery loaded the wagon high with ties then made his weary way back to camp in the gathering darkness.

Off to the right he heard the faint chopping of the cutter's axe. He stopped and frowned. This was his timber land and there was none other close enough to hear the cutter at work. Then Finn Mowery shrugged. Time enough later to worry about someone cutting his timber. Right now he had worries enough trying to deliver the ties already made.

Mowery made a fire that night, one large enough to cook the meal his ravished muscles demanded. Large enough, too, for those back in the timber to see him by and to know that he was in camp. All during those last two days Finn had been watched; little things that he had seen and little things that he had heard had told him so.

And now he wanted them to see him and to know he was in camp.

AFTER he had eaten he threw himself down on his bed and slept as though drugged for two hours. After that time,

groggy and aching in every muscle, he forced himself to his feet once more.

He harnessed the mules, wrapping the chains in burlap to deaden the sounds. He drove them rapidly to the wagon load of ties and pulled it back to Beaver Creek. Here he deliberately unloaded the entire pile of ties into the stream's icy waters and watched them disappear down stream.

He chuckled softly, his heavy lips formed into a smile, as the last one splashed water onto the opposite bank. "A railroad tie ain't so big," he told himself, "that it takes an ocean of water to float."

Later he loaded the other ties and brought them down to the creek and dumped them in. And after that he threw himself again on the bed for another two hours sleep.

Even before it was light the next morning Finn Mowery was moving down Beaver Creek. The first half-mile was clear of ties. Then he found them all piled hard and fast against a tree recently felled.

Mowery chopped savagely for an hour before the jam was broken. And then another mile along they piled again.

Finn cursed with the zeal of an Irishman full of wrath, remembering the chopping he had heard the night before, and knowing Wes Herrington had outguessed him again. The tree lay completely across the stream its lower branches reaching to the gravel on the bottom. The ties hit these branches pulling the tree still lower into the water. Then the slower ties piled on top of the first until the tree was almost lost beneath them.

This jam was even harder to break than the first one. When it finally broke Mowery rushed to keep in front of the ties, knowing full well that many delays like this and he would never deliver his haul on time.

Beaver Creek joined the South Fork of the Ogden and the water became swifter and deeper. Some distance below the forks he came upon the third tree blocking the river channel. The signs here were fresh. The dew had been knocked from the grass and the trampled blades still lay flat against the earth.

Mowery didn't stop.

He pushed forward even faster. His hands gripped the axe handle and there was a hard setness to his face and to his eyes. Finn Mowery knew who was responsible and he hoped to hell Wes Herrington was the man doing the cuttin'. But he knew it wouldn't be. Herrington didn't do his own dirty work; he hired someone else.

Farther on Mowery heard the sounds of an axe. A little later when the chopping stopped, he heard the crash of the tree above his labored breathing.

"I'll break his blasted neck!" Finn Mowery promised.

He rounded the bend as Charlie Spencer swung his axe to his shoulder and started on. At the sound Spencer whirled. Dropping his axe he grabbed at the gun stuck in his belt. The gun crashed out three shots as Mowery swerved to one side and swung his axe. Blade flashing in the sunlight, it flew from his hand straight towards the boatman's body.

Spencer threw up his arm and twisted to the side. Then Mowery following the axe in, caught his gun, and ripped it out of his hands.

"And now, lad, I'm goin' to be givin' you the damndest beatin' you ever had in your life." He heaved the gun out into the stream.

Spencer laughed. "So the circus gorilla thinks he can fight!" Spencer's black eyes flashed. The grin on his face indicated a love for a good fight, a sadistic joy in smashing another man's face to pulp. He closed in fast and hit Mowery three times and moved back out of range before Mowery's muscles could respond to his needs.

Spencer's teeth flashed again and his harsh laugh rang out. "See what I mean?" And he jabbed another left into Finn Mowery's face.

Mowery knew then that he had a fight on his hands, a fight he hated. One that all men slow of muscle hated. Charlie Spencer had the reach and the speed and the skill. As long as he could keep out of Mowery's grasp he could cut the tie-maker to pieces and never be touched.

Mowery closed in and Spencer hit him again. Mowery came on and the boatman hit him one, two, three, going backwards and keeping from Mowery's huge hands.

Mowery still moved after him going faster now. Spencer hit him again, then braced himself. His fist shot out with all the power he had in it. It sank deep into

Mowery's stomach, forcing the sound of pain through his clenched teeth.

Mowery's fingers caught the edge of Spencer's belt. Spencer jerked and twisted trying to get away. Then he pounded Mowery's face with both fists.

The Irishman fell to the ground and dragged the other with him. His arms closed around Spencer's long body and tightened until the other was sucking for breath. It was a steady pressure that grew and grew. Sweat came out on Spencer's dark face as he fought the bands around his body. He screamed, "Don't! For God's sake don't. I—I—." There was a cracking sound as his ribs gave way. The air gushed out of his lungs.

Mowery went suddenly sick at what he had done. He stood up. "I'll be sendin' someone after you, lad. Just remember one thing, when you're a shootin' at another man—don't miss."

He picked up his axe and got the ties started again and after that found no more trees blocking the river channel. The ties went through the canyon, raging wild, but the water was deep from the fast-melting snow and the ties made it without being smashed to kindling wood.

By noon they were at the Middle Fork of the Ogden. Mowery swung away from the river and made his way to a timber camp. Here he got a bite to eat and told the cutters that Spencer with a couple of broken ribs was up at the mouth of White Tail draw. They promised to go up and bring him down.

Mowery went back to the river and followed it. Occasionally he had to herd a stray tie back into the deep waters but mostly they had taken care of themselves.

Late that evening he eased himself down on a rock to rest the tiredness of his body, for even muscles such as his grew weary.

Far out past the town of Ogden lay Great Salt Lake glittering in the late sunshine. In the salty waters were little specks moving northward. Wes Herrington's fleet of ships hauling silver ore from the Oquirrh Mountains south of the lake.

FINN MOWERY sat there and watched the specks while resentment and hatred grew inside him. Wes hated the railroads —at least the Utah Central which stood a good chance of destroying his shipping business or at least causing him to lower his cutthroat prices—and so he hated Finn Mowery. And the Irish cutter hated anything that stood in the way of the railroad and so he hated Wes and he hated the stern-wheeled steamboats that moved mountains of ore from the south to the north.

But mostly he hated Wes Herrington, hated him for the man he was, hated him because of the underhanded, throat-cutting methods he used to gain his ends. Hated him most of all because he stood in the way of the railroad Finn Mowery was building.

At last Mowery stood up and came off the hill and followed the river into town. On the south bank of the river a huge crowd had gathered.

Out close to the river stood Wes with Rex Balder, the tie inspector, and a marshal. They stood a little way from the crowd and not a part of it. Wes Herrington was talking, addressing the marshal but his voice going out to the crowd. "I tell you a man's responsible for anything he puts in the river, responsible for any damage it does. I want him arrested."

From the stirring of the crowd, Mowery knew that they were with Wes. Even Rex Balder said, "That's right, Wes, he is responsible. How valuable is the ship?"

"It's worth five thousand dollars." Herrington put his cigar back in his mouth and hooked his thumbs in the armholes of his fancy vest.

"But hell, man," Balder protested. "They built *The City of Corinne* for only four thousand. You haven't got a boat that's half as valuable as . . ."

"That boat is worth five thousand dollars to me, Balder. I would thank you if you would keep out of this. After all I only asked you to identify the brand on the ties so I would know who was responsible." Wes put his hands behind him and rocked back and forth on his feet.

The full significance of this suddenly hit Finn Mowery. He started to move away then stopped and went back. He tapped a man on the shoulder. "What is it that all the excitement's about?"

"Some tie-cutter turned his cut loose from up above somewhere. They smashed in the hull of one of Herrington's ships and sank her to the bottom. He's madder than a wet hen about it, and I can't say as I blame him."

Mowery nodded. "That I can't either."

He started to turn away and the man caught sight of his axe. "Say, you're a tie-cutt, ain't ya?" When Mowery nodded, he added, "Ya ain't Finn Mowery, are ya?"

Mowery just smiled and backed off into the gathering darkness. One by one the crowd turned to look after him until one of them yelled, "By God, it *is* Mowery!"

The tie-cutter whirled at that and rounded a corner. He leaped a fence and cut across a backyard, coming up against the pig-pen and chicken-coop in the corner. He crossed through the pig-pen and dropped down in the alley behind, turning then toward the huge barn with its bulk standing black against the night.

The mob went through the alley, They rushed after him, calling and yelling at each other like a pack of hounds close on the scent, the marshal and Wes Herrington urging them on.

Mowery went up into the hayloft. He pushed his axe down the back of his belt and climbed to the hayfork trolley. Working his way overhand to the end he pulled himself up to catch the edge of the roof. Once on the roof he crawled near the center where he lay flattened to the boards.

The mob went through the valley, searching carefully until darkness settled completely and they went away believing him gone.

Hours later with the weariness gone from his body, Finn Mowery came down and made his way carefully toward the river. Back of him Ogden lay in darkness save for what light filtered through the clouds from the moon. But the wolf cry of the mob drifted to him, telling him that the search was still going on.

Wes would see that it didn't end too soon.

Mowery moved forward, his axe held ready in his hands and his eyes searching into the shadows. He reached the river and a voice came out of the darkness at him. "Hold it still, Finn Mowery, or I'll blast you to Kingdom Come!"

Mowery went over the bank, the air above him suddenly ripped apart by gunfire. He landed on a narrow beach between the bank and the water. He came to his feet and sprinted along it until he stumbled over a rope anchoring a rowboat to the roots of a cottonwood tree.

Mowery tore the rope free and shoved the boat into the current. Above him the gun crashed out again smashing little geysers of water at him. The river was fast and Mowery's powerful arms on the oars soon carried the boat out of range. The shooting stopped and the refreshed cry of the mob took its place.

Finn Mowery bent over the oars and pulled at them as though trying to burn the pent-up anger from his body. But there was no burning it out. He passed the junction of the Weber and Ogden and the hatred was stronger than it had ever been; mixed with it was a growing suspicion.

IN all this distance he had found no sign of an ore boat sunk in the river channel. It was even possible that Wes Herrington had lied about it all, merely to delay Finn Mowery, merely to stop him from delivering his ties on time; maybe hoping to scare him out of the country for good.

The more Mowery thought of it the more possible it seemed to him.

The cry of the mob had long ago been lost with the distance, but Mowery still pulled his oars with the same anger-filled steadiness.

He was near the lake when a bulk suddenly loomed ahead of him. He put his weight on one oar to swing the boat aside. It swung slightly then crashed full on into the upper deck of the ore boat resting on the river bottom.

The impact twisted the rowboat, turning it over and spilling Mowery into the icy waters. He grasped at the ragged edges of a hole which his ties had smashel into the side of the hull. The current pushed him hard against the boards and he could feel them breathing in and out by the push of the stream.

Mowery pulled himself upwards until his head broke the surface. He climbed out of the water and onto the upper deck which was still above water. Here he stripped off his clothes, still working with the feverish anger driving him. He lowered himself over the edge and felt his way completely around the twenty-foot hole in the side of the ship.

He came up and went down again, and still once more before he was satisfied.

Then he pulled his half-frozen body onto the upper deck.

"You can mark my word for it," Mowery told himself. "Wes Herrington ain't takin' no chances. Mighty important it must be to keep me from deliverin' my ties on time. But I'll be deliverin' 'em, all right. On time, too." They still had to be gathered and towed twenty miles southward along the lake.

Then suddenly he became conscious of new sounds. He swung around toward the lake. The moon broke through the clouds and threw the ship anchored close off-shore into sharp relief.

Mowery stood there listening to the calls of the men, to the sounds of the rowboats, to the sounds of the timbers bumping against the side of the ship. And the full significance of it hit him with the force of an icy wind.

"By the gods," he whispered incredibly. "They're stealin' my ties!"

Ignoring the cold, Mowery twisted the water from his clothes and put them back on, still working with that unreasoning anger driving him on. He tore the bindings from one of the rowboats which Wes provided for lifeboats and shoved it into the water. A moment later his bulging muscles were sending the boat down the Weber River toward the ore boat out on the lake.

AND so he pulled up to the stern of Wes' ore boat, unarmed and alone. He fastened the rowboat and climbed the wheel to the lower deck, the noise of the loading covering any sounds he made.

As he stepped down on the deck he heard sounds behind him and whirled facing squarely into the gun held by a boatman. Mowery lowered his fist for a smashing blow. The boatman grinned. "Just try it, you muscle-bound gorilla, I'd like to see you." Then he raised his voice. "Herrington! Herrington! I've got Mowery. Fifty dollars, you said." Mowery shifted his muscles and the boatman lowered his voice again. "Go ahead and try it, I'd like to see . . ."

The boatman made one mistake. He remained too close to Mowery, close enough that the tie-cutter's hob-nailed boots went out and tore the flesh from the man's shins. Then Mowery hammered him across the side of the head and tore the gun from his hand. He caught the boatman by the clothes and lifted him above his head.

"Don't!" the boatman screamed. "That water'll break a man's . . ." His scream was suddenly snapped off, ending with a gasp as he crashed into the buoyant waters.

The ship was in an uproar, the air filled with sounds of running feet, calls, and the rapid dip of paddles as those in the boats hurried to get in on the run.

Mowery moved over the ties that had been piled on the lower deck. One overzealous boatman rushed down the stairs and Mowery shot him before he was halfway down. He went over the side, screaming as the salt cut into his wounds.

Mowery climbed a pile of ties close to the edge, reaching the rail of the upper deck and pulling himself up. He moved across the deck toward the one lighted cabin on the ship.

Wes was in the cabin, standing by the table, his one hand fastened in the pocket of his vest, the other drumming softly on the hardwood table. No one else was in the room.

Mowery stepped quickly through the door and kicked it closed behind him. While his foot was still in the air and still in contact with the door, Wes smashed out the light. Three bullets from Herrington's small caliber gun poured into Mowery's chest before his muscles would respond to carry him out of danger.

Mowery's .44 blasted out, sounding like cannon fire in the small confines of the room. He fired twice then heard the boatman laugh from the side of the room.

From outside came the calls of the boatman. Somewhere a man on the boat slipped and went overboard, cursing the burn of the water in his eyes and in his nostrils.

Feet pounded on the deck, coming closer.

Those were the only sounds in the room as Mowery waited, knowing full well now that he was too slow to ever kill Wes Herrington with a gun.

Mowery moved carefully to the side of the door. A man kicked it open and leaped quickly to one side. Mowery still waited, behind the door now. Moonlight was seeping into the room through the open doorway. The silence was heavy, even the men on the deck had stopped moving.

Suddenly Wes laughed and poured lead into the door from a heavy caliber pistol this time. He leaped sideways with smooth, quick movements, still squeezing fire from his gun. His foot hit against a chair. He crashed against the table, carrying it to the floor with him. He scrambled out of the wreckage to his knees, then Finn Mowery's body hit him full on, smashing him to the floor and pinning him there.

But the fight wasn't over. Wes was big and he was as fast in a rough and tumble as he was with his gun. He beat Mowery across the head with the gun barrel. Then Mowery got his hand and pounded it against the floor until Herrington's grip was lost and the gun skidded across the room.

Wes got a fist free and pounded it into Mowery's face. Mowery felt the strain then, the strain from his muscles exhausted from the day's efforts and weakened by the lead in his body.

He had to whip Wes soon or he would never make it. Suddenly he released all holds and his hands shot for the boatman's throat. They clamped down like a steel vise. Wes fought with the fury of a man condemned to death.

Mowery lifted his head from the floor and smashed it back on the boards. Time and again he beat Wes' head against the floor until the boatman went limp and the fight died with him.

On the deck the boat crew milled around unable to see the men in the cabin and uncertain as to what to do. Then someone yelled, "Rush 'em!"

Mowery rolled off Wes' body. His hands, weak and shaking, searched over the floor for Wes' gun. His fingers closed over it and brought it up. Lead tore into the boat crew coming through the doorway.

The mob suddenly melted leaving three of their members sprawled on the floor.

Some time later there was an excited jabber of voices. After a little someone called, "Mowery."

"Yes?"

"This is Sheriff Foster, Mowery. I'm coming in."

Finn Mowery knew the sheriff and he knew his voice. "Then be a comin' in Sheriff. I've no fight with the law."

The sheriff and his deputies and the boat crew all crowded into the cabin. They found a lamp and got it going. While the boat crew patched up their comrades, Sheriff Foster worked on the tie-cutter. "It don't look so good for you, Mowery."

"And why not? Herrington was stealin' my ties. A man's got a right to protect his property."

"What about Herrington's boat? Your ties sunk it and Herrington's crew says he was just taking the ties for damage."

Mowery raised up on an elbow. He squinted up at the sheriff through his bushy brows. "Look here, Foster. A railroad tie ain't so big. It's just eight feet long, and eight inches thick, and maybe ten or twelve inches wide. A stick that big ain't going to bust in the hull of a ship—not without a mite of help it ain't."

Sheriff Foster pulled at his mustache and frowned. "I don't get it. Herrington certainly didn't sink his own ship."

"And that he did." Mowery twisted under the sting of whiskey in his wounds. "Every rib in the boat he sawed off clean, leavin' only the boards that a match-stick could smash in. And all just to keep me from deliverin' my ties, knowin' if the railroad wasn't started soon she'd die of her own accord. Wes Herrington didn't—"

Sheriff Foster suddenly turned and there were guns in his hands. Guns appeared in the deputies' hands, too, and the boat crew backed against the cabin wall. "Peters, you're a good swimmer. Take a couple of men and go up and see if what Mowery says is true. If it is we'll run every damn boatman in the country out on rails."

Mowery sighed and felt the weariness again in his body. He looked up at Rex Balder, the tie inspector, who had come in with the sheriff. "I don't think I'll be a-deliverin' those ties by the tenth, Balder. I just . . ."

"Don't worry about that extra contract, Finn. It'll be yours if you deliver the ties on the tenth of this month or on the tenth of next."

The smile on Finn Mowery's lips was faint. "And a month of sleepin' I could be usin' fine right now" He closed his eyes with the full intention of using it all.

Wood-Rats Bite Deep

By FRANK C. ROBERTSON

There wasn't a chopper in the Idaho Panhandle who dared stand up to Guy Bash, bully-boy of the mountains. No one but slim Hubert Moore, a wood-rat who'd never had a fight.

THE seven-foot cross-cut saw sank through the yellow-pine log like a bread knife through cake. Hubert Moore loved the song it sang, and thought no sight prettier than the long, red ribbons of sawdust which only expert sawyers could tear from the heart of a tree. There were no better sawyers in the Idaho Panhandle than Hubert and his pardner, Joe Banks. The saw dropped half an inch with every stroke — but neither of them were satisfied.

Joe took the saw while Hubert looked at his watch.

"Nine minutes and forty seconds to saw that cord."

Joe scowled. "Hell, we beat that yesterday. I thought you were draggin' your feet."

Hubert smiled. "This log must be tougher than it looks. Remember, we made our seven-minute record in tamarack."

"It's not the timber," Joe insisted. "Them two Lancaster men can cut a cord in under ten minutes, but we don't know how much under. We gotta do better." He started impatiently toward the next tree they intended to fell.

"Wait a minute, Joe, I've been doing some thinking."

"Maybe that's what's the matter," Joe said with heavy irony. "You wasn't built for that."

Hubert smiled a little wearily. He could read Joe's mind like a book. Joe wouldn't say it, but he was blaming Hubert for the poor showing. Poor showing! There wasn't more than four wood-choppers in and around Wood City who could do that well! Yet undeniably they had sawed a cord of wood in the same kind of timber in less time. Hubert knew that Joe was to blame. No, not Joe, but the years of hard work and exposure that were creeping up on him.

Joe was forty. He was still the finest woodsman Hubert had ever known, but he had slowed down and didn't know it. Once he had been the best saw filer in the country, but quite often now Hubert surreptitiously touched up a saw after Joe had worked on it. Joe's eyes just weren't what they used to be.

What worried Hubert worst of all was that Joe frequently complained of a pain in his left side, and several times he had observed Joe turn pale and stop work to press his hand over his heart.

"Just gas on my stomach," Joe would say. "Don't tell Rosa or Annie anything about it."

It was this barely perceptible failing of Joe's that had made Hubert think — that and Joe's daughter Annie, who was just about the finest person in the world according to Hubert's tally.

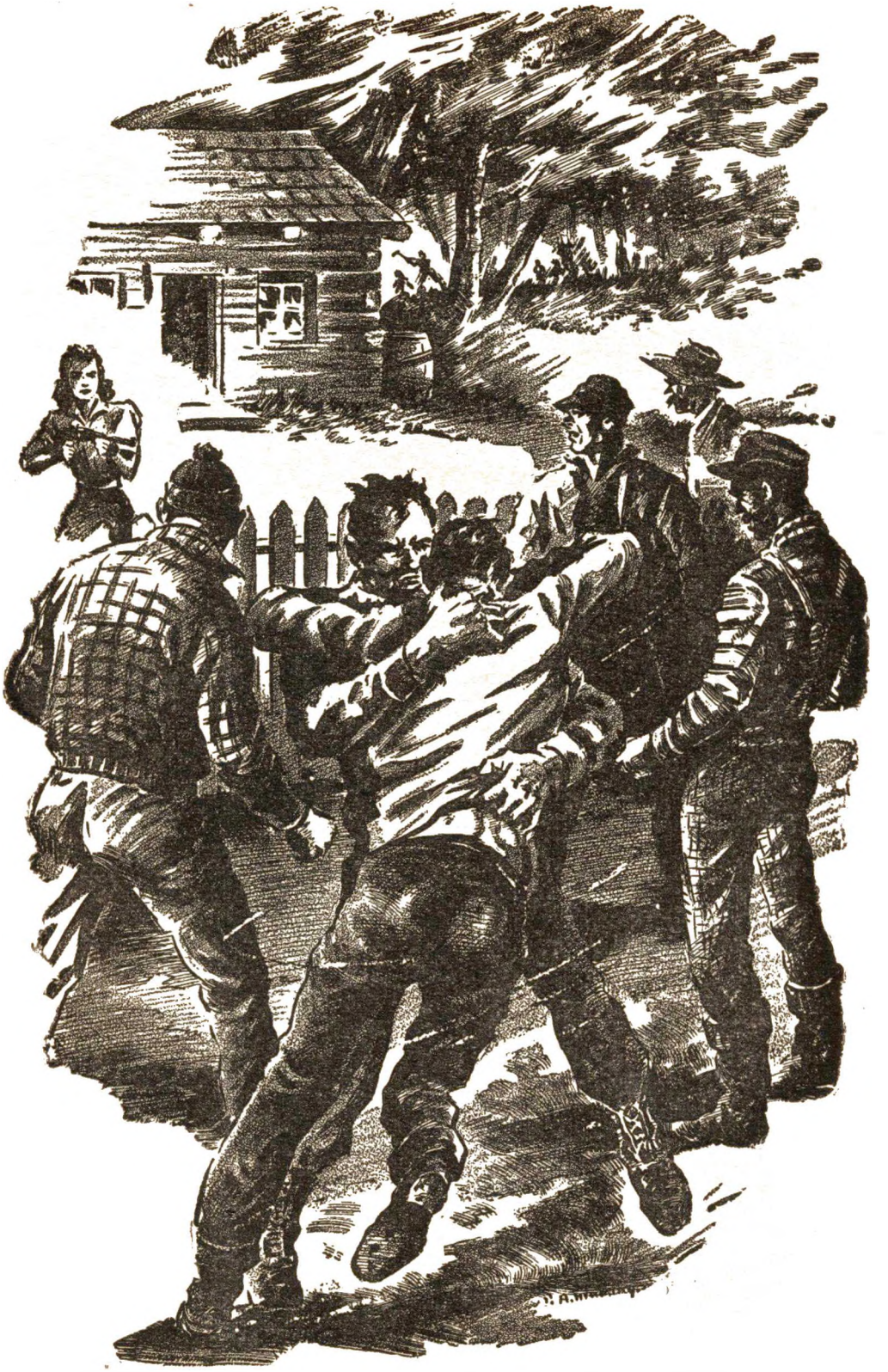
"Joe," he said, "I'm sick of cutting cordwood for six-bits a cord."

Blank amazement came over Joe's rugged face. "Sick of cuttin' cordwood!" he exploded. "Why, you young whippersnapper, you ain't even learned how yet and the two of us make more money than anybody in these mountains and you know it."

"I know," Hubert said gently, "and for every dollar we make for ourselves we make three or four for old man Lancaster and Guy Bash."

Joe snapped, "To hell with that. They only *sell* wood. We *make* it."

Two men couldn't have been more unlike physically and temperamentally than these two. Joe, a tall, thin, rangy black-eyed Kentuckian, talked incessantly and lived to display his physical prowess. He was the best rifle shot in the mountains,



Annie's voice came from just inside the yard gate. "Stand back, you men. Let 'em fight. I'll shoot the first rat that moves."

and he had once whipped Guy Bash, the recognized bully of that part of the Panhandle; but the great pride of his life was that he and Hubert could chop more cords of wood per day than other men. They had never been beaten. Where Hubert was calm and even tempered Joe was likely to blow up at any moment.

Joe was forty; Hubert fifteen years his junior. Joe was two inches taller than Hubert, but Hubert was the heavier. Hubert had been Joe's partner since he was eighteen—the only man Joe had ever found able to keep up with him at the other end of a cross-cut saw. Now he was frankly disgusted by the seeming apostasy of his protege.

"We make the wood, Lancaster makes the profit," Hubert repeated stubbornly. "Thanks to Guy Bash and those tough lumberjacks they've imported from the Coast he not only robs us, but everybody who buys wood. I'm going to do something about it. I'm going to town."

JOE looked as if the younger man was suddenly bereft of his senses. "Don't tangle with Guy Bash," he warned. "I'm the only man ever licked him, an' I'm not sure I could do it again. I don't want to have to take any fight off your hands."

"I'll try to handle my own fights, Joe."

"Bah! You never had a fight in your life."

"I'm going to persuade the Palouse Prairie wheat ranchers to buy their wood right here in the timber and ignore Lancaster's woodyard in town," Hubert stated.

Joe stared incredulously. "It can't be done. Guy Bash would kill you."

"I'm going to try."

Joe started to argue, and lost his always violent temper when thwarted. It was the first time he had ever been mad at Hubert—simply because it was the first time Hubert had ever failed to yield.

"If you quit me for this damn' fool thing you can stay quit," he roared.

"I'd hate that, Joe, but my mind is made up."

"Then pack your stuff an' git out of my house. What's more, don't ever come back. What's more than that, don't ever come hangin' around my daughter."

Hubert carried his tools to the Banks' house. A quarrel with the man who had been like a father to him was the last thing he had expected or wanted. He hoped Joe would come around, but Joe was a stubborn man who long clung to a grudge. But he was fed up on robbery and tyranny.

"Why, Hubert," Joe's wife Rosa exclaimed, "is Joe sick?"

"He's all right, Rosa. Maybe it's me that's all wrong, but I've quit."

Rosa's exclamation brought her daughter Annie in from another room. She was a tall, straight girl, very much like Joe in looks and manners. Considerably older than the rest of the Banks' brood she had learned to bear responsibility beyond her years. Hubert Moore thought a lot of her, but had never found the words to tell her so.

"You mean for the afternoon don't you, Joe?" she asked.

"I've come to pack my things. Joe told me never to come back."

"You quarreled?" Annie gasped. "You and my dad quarreled!"

He tried to make them understand he was doing it for Joe, and the dozens of other poor families living on the slopes of Ladybug Mountain who eked out the most meager kind of a living, and were contemptuously termed "wood-rats" by the people who lived in town. But when he tried to put it into words the whole scheme sounded preposterous.

They understood only one thing. It would bring down upon him the wrath of Guy Bash, the most feared man in the country.

"Dad was right," Annie declared. "How can you be so foolish? You're not a smart man like old man Lancaster, and it takes money to go into business."

"I know, but I've got right on my side, and a sensible idea."

"Sensible!" Annie's black eyes blazed with scorn. "If you won't think of yourself think of dad. He whipped Guy Bash once—the only man who ever did it." Her voice held an unconscious ring of pride. "But dad was years younger then, and Bash had been trying to pick another fight with him ever since. It's why dad stopped drinking, and why he never goes to town unless he's sure Bash won't be there. If you do this crazy thing it'll give Bash the

excuse he's been looking for to beat dad up, and maybe kill him."

"It won't be Joe's fight," Hubert told them gently, "it'll be mine."

"Yours!" Annie's voice ripped into him with scorn. "When did you ever have a fight?"

Hubert went into his room and packed his trunk. He came out wearing his Sunday suit. He could hear Joe talking to the family in the kitchen.

"I'll have somebody call for my trunk and tools," he called out. After a moment he added. "Well, good-bye."

There was no answer.

IT was eight miles to Wood City. Hubert was half-way along when he was overtaken by Guy Bash. Bash was a big man, built much like Hubert except considerably heavier. Both were on the stocky plan. Bash was unduly proud of his barrel chest, bulging calves and forearms. Once he had been a "wood-rat" like the rest, but since he had become foreman over Cyrus Lancaster's crew of independent wood-choppers he wore good clothes and drove around in a black-topped buggy.

"Hi, Hubert," he called jovially, "jump in."

Hubert got in. Bash had always treated him with a sort of tolerant amusement notwithstanding the feud with Joe. Hubert had never threatened his supremacy as bully-boy of the mountains.

"How's Joe?" Bash asked.

"Fine. He's still too tough for me."

Bash laughed, and said surprisingly, "Me, too. The only man I ever took a lickin' from. But I'll git back at him another way when you fellows go up against my men, Marsh and Trego, at the sawin' contest next week."

Hubert gave a start. He had forgotten about the contest at the Pioneer Picnic. He and Joe had won so many times that it had lost its novelty for him, but it was still the high-spot of the year to Joe.

"Got money up?" Hubert asked.

"Plenty. Them town sports think you fellows can't lose, but I know Joe is slippin'. And my men are plenty good."

"We just took it easy last time because there was no competition," Hubert said easily. "I know I've not slipped—and Joe is still a better man than I'll ever be."

Bash suddenly threw his free arm over Hubert's shoulder.

"I like you boys," he said. "Me an' Joe were good friends once. I wish you'd tell him I'd like to bury the hatchet. If he'll be friends I can put you both in the way of some big money. Them boys of mine will win or lose—just as I tell 'em."

"I'm afraid you'll have to make your peace talk direct to Joe," Hubert said curtly.

He was glad when they reached town. He walked past Lancaster's woodyard, where hundreds of cords of pine and fir cordwood was stacked up for sale at around five dollars a cord. Even at that price it was cheaper than any other fuel. Not only did the residents of Wood City and the adjoining towns have to burn wood, but there were hundreds of wheat farmers on the Palouse Prairie who had no other choice than to buy their wood from Lancaster.

And Lancaster paid the men who chopped it a measly seventy-five cents a cord if his teams hauled it in, and only about double that amount if they hauled it themselves. Nobody would go into competition with him because of Guy Bash and his gang of bullies.

In the Star Saloon Hubert met Jim Grant, one of the bigger Palouse wheat-growers whom he had often worked for during harvest. It was a lucky break.

"Jim," he said after they had had a beer, "you and your brothers use a lot of cordwood on your ranches. You pay Lancaster five dollars a cord. Would you go eight or ten miles further if you could get it for half that much?"

"I certainly would," the rancher laughed. "What's the catch?"

"None. Us wood-choppers get six-bits a cord in the timber. If we don't own our own timber claim we have to pay ten or fifteen cents a cord stumpage out of that. We could let you have wood for from a dollar and a half to three dollars a cord depending on quality and distance," Hubert said.

Grant was interested. He liked Hubert, and like any farmer was interested in saving a dollar.

"The trouble is, Hubert," he pointed out, "we can't just go huntin' all over the mountains for a load of wood. We know

Lancaster robs us, but the wood is where we want it."

"I thought of that. You've always got a lot of extra teams except in planting and harvest. You could send a few of them and some men up there to bank the wood out on a good road, and we'd pay you for the work," Hubert argued.

"It sounds all right except for one thing, Hubert. We can't do business with every Tom, Dick, and Harry up there. We want to know where the wood is, and for sure we can get it. In other words, there's got to be a dealer up there. If you'll be that dealer we'll be glad to be do business with you," Grant declared.

HUBERT had never thought of himself making profit out of helping his friends, but Grant was right. It would take money, and his savings amounted to just eight hundred dollars.

"I can get some wood by making an advance," he said grimly. "We can start. When the choppers find out they can get twice as much for their wood, and you fellows can still buy fifty percent cheaper something is bound to happen."

"There certainly will," Grant chuckled. "Lancaster and that gang of baboons that Guy Bash bosses will raise hell."

"I know what I'm getting into."

"By Gadfrey, Hubert, you *mean* it!" Grant exclaimed. "I don't know what it may cost me, but I'm with you. I'll pay you in advance for what wood me and my brothers buy, and I'll help you get orders from every rancher on the prairie."

They shook hands.

"Lancaster won't like it," Grant reminded. "I wouldn't like to have Bash and his thugs beating up any of our teamsters."

"There are a hundred of you buyers and a dozen of us sellers to every hoodlum Lancaster has brought in here," Hubert said. "We don't have to be robbed if we don't want to be. That's what I've been thinking. Are we free-born Americans or not? We get to vote for McKinley or Bryan, whichever one we want to, but that don't make us free if we just set down and be robbed."

All the pent-up resentment in Hubert poured into his speech. His talk with Grant had cleared his mind. He had a program now, and he knew what he was doing.

A commotion in the street took them outside. Four of Lancaster's tough timberjacks had just stopped a wagon loaded with cordwood. The driver was a cantankerous old man named Carter who lived little more than a mile from Joe Banks. He had a big family of boys who chopped wood, and he was one of the few who refused to sell to the Lancaster woodyard.

One of the hoodlums suddenly jerked the old man out of the high seat of his California wood-rack. Carter's foot slipped on the tire, and he fell headlong. The bully kicked him in the ribs while he was down and the other three began to heave four-foot sticks of cordwood in every direction.

When Carter got up the bully, a huge fellow known only as "Wisconsin," pinned him against the wagon wheel and drove a fist into his face.

Hubert Moore, the man who never had had a fight, ran across the street. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Guy Bash watching proceedings from the doorway of another saloon.

Hubert had never had a fight, but there was a chapter in his life that few knew anything about. He had been raised in the timber in western Oregon by an uncle who had been hell on wheels. Old Ty Moore was a mountain wildcat who would rather wrestle than eat, rather fight than wrestle —and he had taught his peace-loving nephew all the tricks.

Hubert seized Wisconsin by the collar and turned him around. The other hoodlums stopped to watch. "Going a bit far ain't you, Wisconsin?" he queried mildly.

"Stay out of this, chump," Wisconsin growled. "Ole Carter just got stuck an' we're helpin' him lighten his load."

"They're stealin' my wood," Carter sobbed through his bloody lips.

Wisconsin drew back to hit the old man again, found his wrist trapped in a grasp of iron. Hubert's heart was beating like a runaway pump. He didn't want to fight, but he was in too deep now to back out.

"Why, damn yuh," Wisconsin mouthed and swung at Hubert with his free hand. Hubert ducked the blow easily, gave a sharp twist and tripped the man backward. Wisconsin emitted a wild yell as he fell

over a single-tree under the heels of Carter's off horse. The animal humped up, tried to kick, and planted a shod-hoof on Wisconsin's hip. Again Wisconsin yelped with pain as the sharp calk ripped through his flesh.

The other three toughs piled off the load and rushed. Hubert set himself, ducked quickly and lunged forward. Unable to stop, the leading timber-jack found himself sprawled across Hubert's back. Hubert caught a swinging arm, gave a mighty buck, and sent the fellow flying through the air to land heavily on his back in the street.

The other two stopped in amazement, and just then Guy Bash yelled, "Hold it!" Bash was grinning as he came up. He clapped Hubert on the shoulder. "Damned if that wasn't purty," he beamed. "Licked two of my best men an' never hit a lick. And here I been thinkin' you was tame as a kitten."

"I am, Guy," Hubert replied. "I hate trouble. Climb up, Carter; I'll hand these sticks up to you."

"An' what's he going to do with 'em?" Bash queried softly.

"I'll give you five dollars for the load, Mr. Carter," Hubert said.

"I'll take it," the astonished Carter said.

Bash, looking more amused than angry stood back and watched while Hubert tossed the four-foot sticks up to Carter on the wagon.

Hubert handed the old man five dollars, and turned to Jim Grant. "You want this load, Jim?" he asked.

"I'll give you six dollars if you'll haul it over to my wagon back of Lauder's Feed Store," Grant replied promptly.

Hubert took the six dollars. He was in the wood business! "If you've got any more wood chopped, Carter, I'll take it," he said. "I'll give you a dollar and a half a cord in the timber, two and a quarter banked out on the road."

Guy Bash's huge fists clinched, and his eyes slitted dangerously. Then he jerked a thumb at his men, and they marched away toward old man Lancaster's office.

"Well, Hubert, it looks like you're in for it," Jim Grant said. "And crazy as it sounds I believe you'll make it stick."

There were a few other "wood-rats" in town. They bombarded Hubert with questions. Was it true that he would pay them double what they had been getting from Lancaster?

"I can't buy all your wood at once," he told them. "I've got to get orders from the prairie. But I will advance you two-bits a cord for all you've got chopped to bind the bargain."

"Don't drag your feet," Joe sneered as he took the other end of the saw.

"An' take the responsibility for it gittin' burned up?" a man asked.

"Yes," Hubert said impulsively, "I'll do that."

"Say," said a man named Boyle, "is your pardner, Joe Banks in on this, too?"

"I'm in it alone, but if you'll stick with me and stick together old man Lancaster will have to come up or go out of business."

The men loudly agreed to stick, but Hubert saw a toady edge from the crowd and hightail toward the woodyard.

"Watch yourself, Hubert," Jim Grant advised soberly as they parted. "Lancaster hasn't a scruple in the world, and Guy Bash won't stop short of murder."

Hubert took a room at the Palouse House, and was amazed at the way plans seemed to fall into line in his head. He had brooded for weeks without getting hold of anything definite, but now he knew exactly what he was doing. Already he had been approached by business men in town who were secretly tired of Lancaster tyranny, and his henchman Bash's bullying. If the "wood-rats" would just stick by him he could cut off Lancaster's supply at its source, except what Bash's crew could saw and split, and that would be a comparatively small amount.

But he wasn't fooling himself. The road ahead would be rough and rocky. He would have to fight terrorization and superior resources—and Guy Bash. Bash was a dangerous, unscrupulous fighter, trained in the toughest of logging camps. He used fist, club or gun, and had been known to wage battle at long range with a rifle.

He wasn't surprised when he opened his door to admit a small, furtive wood-chopper named Phil Hurley who was contemptuously known as "Bash's dog." He wasn't one of the hoodlums, in fact owned a timber homestead just up the creek from Joe Banks' place, and had a family.

"I'm your friend, Hubert," he whined. "I don't want you to git into trouble. Come on over to the Star with me an' patch things up with Guy. He's agreed to be reasonable."

"You tell Guy if he wants to talk to me to come over here," Hubert said curtly. He wasn't falling into any such palpable trap as that, but the prospect of being beaten to a pulp by Bash and his bullies made him actually sick at his stomach. He wished that he had a gun.

In the morning he hired a horse and rode out on the prairie. When he returned three days later he had a satisfactory number of orders for cordwood. The next day he planned to see the woodchoppers around Ladybug Mountain.

He was handed two notes at the desk. The one he opened first said merely, "Please call at my office at your earliest convenience," and was signed, "Cyrus Lancaster."

The other, written in a steady, schoolgirlish hand read, "Hubert: I've got to see you at once. I'm staying here in town with my aunt, Mrs. Shaw. Annie."

She must be pretty angry, he thought. She hadn't even written, "Dear Hubert." He wished she could realize that he was doing it more for her and her family than for anything else.

The way to the Shaw place led past the woodyard. It was after six o'clock, and the help had gone home, but Hubert saw Lancaster's bald-head through a window and went in. The cordwood king was a dried-up little man of sixty with watery eyes that were as small and cold and hard as the ends of forty-penny spikes.

"So you're the laddy-buck that's goin' to put me out of business," he said with a mirthless and almost toothless grin.

"That has never been my intention," Hubert denied.

"It had better be if you intend to go into the wood business. There ain't room for two."

"I think there is."

"Pish, and tush! You have shown a little enterprise—something I never knew any other wood-rat to do—so I can use you in my organization. What do you say to managing my yard here at a hundred and twenty-five a month. That's good wages.

It was good wages; more than Hubert expected to make in the wood business. "I'm not for sale, Mr. Lancaster," he replied.

The old man half rose and shook a skinny finger in Hubert's face. "Things happen to people who git in my road," he squeaked. "You're a fool."

Hubert walked around a bit to cool off before he arrived at Mrs. Shaw's. Annie

had been watching for him, and she took him around to an arbor in the rear. He was pleased that she didn't seem angry.

"When are you coming home?" she asked.

He liked the way she said "home." It seemed to him that no place could ever be home to him when Annie was not. He smiled his shy, wry smile. "When I'm invited I reckon, Annie."

"You know it's your home any time you want to give up this crazy idea about buying cordwood."

He felt suddenly dismal and lonely. "Is it so crazy to want to get decent pay for the work we do?" he asked.

"No, but you can't do it. It will only get you into trouble. Hubert, I've got something bad to tell you. Dad and Guy Bash have made up."

"What?" The idea of Joe being friends with the man who had been his worst enemy, and who was now Hubert's worst enemy was demoralizing.

"That man has hated Dad ever since their fight, and he still hates him. I know he does. Dad would never have made up with him if he hadn't been mad at you."

"How did it happen?"

"Phil Hurley said Guy wanted to talk, and dad told him to come ahead. Bash is a smooth talker. He said how sorry he'd been there ever had been trouble, said he wanted to be friends with the one man who could whip him. But even then dad didn't loosen up much until Bash began to talk about a sick cow. You know how dad is—thinks he can cure any animal. He went over to Bash's place, and since then he's been with him half the time."

"And I suppose Joe has sold his wood to him."

"Yes, for a dollar a cord."

"I could give him two dollars."

"And get him burned out," she said angrily. "And beaten up. You know as well as I do that dad can't whip Guy Bash again. You'll get all these people burned out."

He seized her arm. He had discounted the danger of fire because that was the common enemy of every woodsman. What burned foe would also burn friend. "Is that what Bash said?" he demanded.

She jerked away angrily. "I didn't hear him say it," she denied vehemently.

He started away, but she called him back. "Dad says he'll never speak to you again, but he expects you to saw with him in the contest at the Pioneer's Picnic next week. Will you do it?"

"If he likes, yes." Hubert hesitated a moment. There were many things he wanted to say to this girl, but he couldn't find the words. He walked away.

Winning that sawing contest meant much to Joe, but only Hubert knew how far Joe had slipped. If they lost Joe would believe to his dying day that he had been double-crossed.

II

HUBERT spent the night before the Pioneer Picnic with one of his best friends on Ladybug Mountain, a Swede bachelor named Sven Ericksen. It was only a couple of miles from the Banks' place, but Hubert hadn't seen Joe or any of his family since his talk with Annie in Wood City.

He had been more successful than he had hoped in lining up the wood-choppers. Sven had been a great help because many of them were Swedes who spoke very little English. They had shied away from signing contracts so Hubert had made them a small advance payment and taken their word for delivery. His savings had all been used up.

For this one day, however, he hoped to forget the wood business and enjoy himself. He didn't have any money up on the sawing contest, but he had all the incentive he needed to want to win. He knew that Joe, as a rule, bet ten or twenty dollars on himself.

The picnic was always held in Pioneer Grove, some five miles from Wood City. It was the one time of year when townsmen and woodsmen got together on terms of equality.

Since neither Hubert nor Sven owned a horse they started out rather early. Hubert had already sent his saw down to the grove, but he said, "Sven, would you mind walking a mile further by the Banks place?"

"Nod at all," Sven grinned. "Und Aye bane glad to valk alone if Miss Annie bane

valking vit you."

"I just want to see Joe."

Annie was at home, and she ran out to meet them. Hubert saw that something was wrong.

"It's dad," she replied to his question. "He didn't come home last night."

"Where is he?"

"In Wood City. He went in yesterday with Guy Bash. About two o'clock this morning Phil Hurley stopped and told us dad was staying in town. Hurley said he would give us a ride to the picnic this morning. There's something wrong. Dad never stayed all night in town in his life."

Rosa Banks joined them. She said, "That man Bash has done something to him. Joe hasn't taken a drink since the day of that fight with Bash, but now that they're friends—"

If Joe was drinking the sawing contest was already lost.

"Hubert," Rosa said, suddenly starting to cry, "you and Joe have got to win that contest. Joe has bet everything we own on it, even to the cow."

Hubert was stunned. "You mean the place here?" he gasped.

"Everything."

"But for God's sake why did he do that?"

"It was Guy Bash's influence, of course," Annie said bitterly. "Him and his flattery. Bash told him that he has been talking up those men Marsh and Trego to get the city sports to bet on them. But he told dad his own money was on you and him, and he would see to it that Marsh and Trego lost."

Hubert groaned. "Don't he know he can't trust Guy Bash?"

"He wouldn't have listened to him if it hadn't been for you," Annie charged.

"We'll try to win," was all Hubert could say.

"Py, golly, Aye bane tank mebbe Yoe git beat opp," Swen said.

Hubert had been thinking the same thing. "You're a good woodsman, Sven. If Joe ain't able to saw you'll have to be my pardner."

"Aye am no Yoe Banks," Sven stated truthfully.

Lemonade stands and other concessions were in operation when they reached Pioneer Grove. Many of the town people had not arrived, but the "wood-rats" were coming in over the dusty roads, by wagons, on foot, or on horseback.

There would be several hours of oratory and other entertainment before the sports began. Sven soon found some Swedish friends, and Hubert was left alone. He had seen nothing of Joe, but Guy Bash and his crew of hard cases hadn't showed up either.

Hubert walked over to where the logs that were to be sawed had been carefully blocked and measured. Each two-man crew was to saw a sixteen-foot log into four-foot lengths. The logs were of yellow pine, and as near the same size as could be got. Each one was about three-foot thick at the butt, and they tapered very little. The cuts had been marked, and each log had a number cut in the bark. Hubert found his own saw there and it was sharp. He rejoined the crowd in time to see Joe Banks' family arrive in Phil Hurley's wagon. Annie met his gaze, but made no sign. She and her mother hurried over to the picnic grounds carrying baskets filled with good things to eat.

Then, just as they were singing the Star Spangled Banner, Bash and his crew of timber-jacks dashed past the grandstand waving whiskey bottles and yelling at the top of their voices. Bash led the procession in his buggy, with Joe Banks in the seat beside him. His crew of twenty-odd men followed in two light livery wagons.

Joe wasn't yelling, but he was waving a whiskey bottle, with a frozen grin on his face. His eyes were bloodshot, and his rumpled clothes showed that they hadn't been off all night. He was still drunk.

THE National Anthem wavered and dragged. It would have perished had it not been for the clear, unwavering voice of one woman who refused to recognize the presence of the hoodlums. Bash and his men were gone before the marshals of the day could do anything about it.

Hubert followed the rigs to where the men piled out and tied their teams. He wanted to talk to Joe, but Rosa was ahead of him and she took Joe away. Hubert made no effort to follow. He was turning away when Bash called to him. He stopped. Bash came up, linked his arm through Hubert's and led him aside.

Hubert wasn't being led into any ambush. "What's on your mind, Guy?" he asked.

"That contest. Joe ain't in such good shape. In fact you boys ain't got a chance to win—unless I gave Marsh and Trego the word to keep a stroke or so behind."

"I thought you'd promised Joe that."

Bash laughed. "Joe bet his house and his land and his livestock, and even borrowed two hundred in cash. But I didn't bet anything either way."

"Meaning what?" Hubert felt his throat go suddenly dry.

"Meanin' that your only chance to keep Joe from losin' more than he's got is for you to turn over all them orders you got for wood an' go plumb out of business."

Hubert realized his choice: Let Joe be ruined, or let the rest of his friends down so that Lancaster could go on with his highhanded, double-headed robbery.

"I'm still in the wood business," he said flatly. He felt Bash's arm tense, then the big man abruptly let go and walked away.

He sought the contest officials. "My pardner is sick," he told them bluntly. "I want to substitute Sven Ericksen."

The officials conferred, and agreed that the substitution could be made—providing Joe himself agreed.

Hubert started toward the picnic grounds where the people ate, but met Annie coming to look for him.

"Dad's sick," she told him desperately. "He says he'll be all right, but he won't be good enough. What are we going to do?"

"I've arranged to get Sven Ericksen."

"But you've never sawed with him! You won't have a chance!"

"He'll be better than Joe, but Joe has got to agree to it. You try to talk him into it."

"He'll never agree to it. He says Bash has promised to see that Marsh and Trego keep behind, and you can still beat the other teams."

"Bash lied," Hubert said. "He just now offered to have them lose provided I'd go out of the wood business."

"And you wouldn't do it?" she asked incredulously. "Not when you know it will ruin dad—and—and end everything for us?"

He said urgently, "I couldn't do it, Annie."

"Hubert Moore," she said bitterly, "I hate you. I never want you to speak to me again."

He watched her walk away with dumb misery in his heart. She turned back and said, "You've at least got to have something to eat. Mom said to tell you she was waiting lunch for you."

"Tell Rosa I said thanks," he replied.

The crowd pressed in against the logs. This was the big event of the year for the men of the mountains. Marsh and Trego, two burly loggers from the Pacific Coast were already there, as were two other teams of local men whom Hubert and Joe had beaten many times.

Sven was on hand, looking half-scared to death. The teams drew lots for logs, and Hubert drew the log branded number four.

Then Hubert saw Joe forcing his angry way through the crowd. "What the hell is this?" Joe bellowed. "Who says any damned Swede can take my place?"

"I do, Joe," Hubert answered. "You're in no condition to work."

"Drunk or sober I'm a better man than

"You'll start no back-fires here, Bash—not while I'm alive, you dirty murderer."

you ever was, an' you know it," Joe roared. "I bet my home on this, an' I won't trust no Swede. I wouldn't trust you if I could find anybody else."

Annie and Rosa had arrived. Hubert shot them an appealing glance, but their faces were stony.

"On your marks," the referee ordered. "There's other contests comin' up. Can't waste all day on this."

Guy Bash stood ten feet away. There was still time to make a deal, but Hubert picked up his saw without looking at the man.

"Don't drag your feet," Joe sneered as he took the other end of the saw. Hubert said nothing.

"All set. Go!" the referee yelled, and four sets of rending steel teeth tore savagely through the bark and into the sapwood of the trees.

IT was skill rather than brute strength that counted here, although there had to be plenty of muscle, wind, and endurance to back it up.

Hubert caught the rhythm of Joe's stroke at once, and they were off to what seemed a good start. But at once Hubert realized that something was wrong. Everything depended on the cut being no wider then the thickness of the saw, yet they were tearing out a third more sawdust than they should have been doing for the depth.

"Hell, didn't you file this saw?" Joe rasped.

Hubert nodded, saving his breath. The saw had been in fine condition. He knew now that the drag teeth must have been tampered with during the last hour.

They had planned to set a steady rather than a fast pace on the first block, gradually increasing it on the next two, but before they were half through Joe was crowding. The sweat was standing out on his face in great drops, and his eyes were getting a glassy look.

Hubert gave up trying to hold it down; his arms and torso swung back and fourth as Joe stepped up the tempo. Even so Marsh and Trego finished a stroke ahead of them, and leaped to their next cut.

"Rest," Hubert snapped as their first block fell. With a pocket wrench and a spider gauge he swiftly aligned the drag teeth that had been monkeyed with. It cost precious seconds, while Joe raged at him to hurry.

Joe's hands were trembling, and he was panting heavily when he seized his saw handle. Marsh and Trego had their mossback saw buried in the log before Joe and Hubert got started. It was a lead which Hubert saw no way of making up.

"Come on, come on, pick up your feet," Joe growled, panting hard between each word.

There were men there who had been woodsmen all their lives, but never had they seen sawing such as this. Banks and Moore, almost hopelessly behind, were sawing wood as they never had sawed before. Inch by inch they gained on the leaders until almost the same distance remained to be sawed in each log.

Guy Bash was first to recognize the danger. "Bear down, you fools," he yelled at his men. "Lose this race and I'll break you damn' necks."

And then Marsh and Trego began pulling ahead again; not because they were sawing faster than they had been, but because Joe's wind was gone. The saw had been running practically level, but now Joe was bearing down too hard as it came toward him, starting to rock up and down, that quickly became one sideways. It wasn't the drags that were making a wide slice now, but the fact that Joe had lost control of his nerves and his muscles. And still the last two blocks had to be sawed in two.

Joe and Hubert were only a few strokes behind when they started the last cut, and the other two teams were still on their second block, but Hubert knew that they were beaten. Guy Bash knew it, too, for there was malignant triumph on his face as he yelled encouragement to his proteges.

Joe was all in. No longer their saw rang with perfect rhythm. Joe's saw handle quivered with every stroke. It was more than last night's debauch; it was Joe's age suddenly catching up with him.

"Listen, Joe," Hubert pleaded. "Hold your end steady, let me do the work."

If Joe heard he made no sign. He wouldn't quit. Doggedly he pushed down on the saw as it went away; crazily he jerked it back. They were sawing like rank amateurs.

Joe's eyes were completely glassy; each

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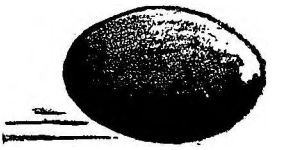

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breath was an agonized sob. Hubert knew that Joe would never last. He might collapse any moment; might suffer a fatal heart attack.

"Lay off, Joe, let me finish alone?" he pleaded.

"To—hell—with you," Joe husked out.

Deliberately Hubert braked down on the saw. Joe tugged at it in vain, then half-fell forward across the log.

"You—you dirty quitter," Joe sobbed. "You yellow dog."

The crowd fell silent, sensing drama they didn't quite understand. Hubert freed the saw as Marsh and Trego finished in triumph. He shouldered the saw and walked away. He met Annie's eyes just once. They held bitter contempt.

"Now you wood-rats can see what kind of a skunk you've been tryin' to tie up with," Bash shouted. "He quit cold on his pardner because Joe wouldn't fall in with his scheme to make money off you suckers. And he knew Joe had bet his place."

Hubert started to turn back, saw that the men who had just recently hailed him as their financial savior were looking after him with cold hostility. He shrugged, and trudged on.

III

THE cordwood deal, Hubert supposed, was dead as a petrified tree. The woodchoppers would turn against him, and contrive to keep the advances he had paid them. He would be financially ruined.

He had had all the picnic he could stomach. He cached his saw, and was about to head for town when he heard Sven's voice.

"Vait a minute. Aye know it was ole Yoe who giff oud. Aye tank you und me could uff bead de hail out of dem. You yust go back to my house and make yourself at home. Me, Aye tank Aye got some squirrel viskey und yump around a leetle yet."

"Thanks, Sven, but I think I'll go on to town," Hubert declined.

It was hard for a man to lose his dreams; especially dreams that included a woman as lovely and capable as Annie Banks. Hubert trudged on beside the dusty road to Wood City. Any number of rigs passed him before he got in, but nobody offered him a ride. Nor would he have accepted one.

He was right at the edge of town when Guy Bash passed him, with Joe Banks and Phil Hurley in the seat beside him. Evidently Hurley had left his wife to drive his wagon home, and Joe was probably going in to sign the deed to his land. Hubert knew that such a deed wouldn't be legal without Rosa's signature, but she would do whatever her husband told her to do. And for this calamity he was blamed.

There was no sleep for Hubert that night. He was wide awake at four o'clock in the morning when the clerk knocked at his door.

"Your friend Banks is calling for you at the hospital," the fellow said.

Hubert leaped out of bed and flung open the door. "What happened?"

"Seems he got into a fight with Guy Bash and got carved up with a knife," the clerk replied laconically.

Hubert dressed hurriedly and ran most of the way to the hospital. He knew Dr. Carruth. "Will he live, Doctor?" he pleaded. "He was my best friend."

"I can't say, Hubert," the doctor replied. "It's a miracle he's alive now the way he was cut. One slash just missed his jugular vein, another actually exposed his intestines, and he was stabbed in a lung. Besides that he has cuts on both arms and legs."

"His legs?" Hubert mumbled.

"He tried to defend himself with his feet after he was down."

"Where was the fight?"

"Back of Lauder's feed store. Phil Hurley told me about it. They had been drinking at the Star, and started home. When they got to where Bash's team was tied Joe suddenly wanted to fight. Phil says Guy tried to talk him out of it, but Joe grabbed the neck-yoke of the buggy and hit Guy over the head and shoulder. Then Bash went to work with his knife. Phil says he got him to stop by yelling that it was him who was getting cut."

"He lied," Hubert said stolidly. "They tried to murder Joe."

"I don't know. Bash had quite a bruise on his shoulder, and a black eye. Joe insists on seeing you. You mustn't stay but a minute, and try to keep him from talking."

Joe lay swatched in bandages from head to foot. He tried to grin.

"Don't talk, Joe," Hubert said.

"Gotta say this, Hube. Wasn't your fault—we lost. Mine. I been—damned fool."

Dr. Carruth took Hubert outside. "He may live," he consoled. "He's tough."

If Joe lived he would go after Guy Bash, and probably get himself killed—unless somebody took the fight out of Bash first. Hubert still had a job on his hands.

The next morning he met old man Lancaster on the street. The old man jeered like a croaking crow. "Changed your mind about the wood business, ain't you?"

"Yes, I've changed my mind, a second time," Hubert said. I'm buying wood."

"Why, you cheap wood-rat, you couldn't buy a bolt of calico," Lancaster howled. He was too little and old to fight with. Hubert hired a horse and rode out on the prairie. He found Sven waiting for him when he got back at nightfall.

"Py golly, Hubert, eef you vant any wood you batter gat a yump on," Sven reported. "Guy Bash an' Phil Hurley dey bane oud makin' dem fallers sign contracts."

"Contracts? For how much?" Hubert gasped.

"Sax-bits. Dey tell us eef ve don't sign now ve don't gat but saxty cents."

The very men who had promised Hubert their wood were now signing contracts to sell for half of what he had offered them; signing because they had lost faith in him, and because they were scared.

He had arranged for enough teams from the prairie to haul in a hundred cords of wood the next day. Now it looked as if they would get no wood.

"Me und some Svede fallers gat some vood," Sven said. "Und old man Carter an' a few more close py say dey took yore money, und dey von't go pack on dere vord."

"Come on, Sven, we're hiring some horses and getting out there," Hubert declared.

Sven wasn't used to horseback riding, so they took a slow pace until Hubert noticed a rosy glow far up ahead.

"Dot's fire!" Sven yelled. "De timber is on fire, und eets on my place."

THEY whipped up to a run. Had Guy Bash done this thing? Even Lancaster should have been concerned in saving timber, yet there was an unlimited supply further back which he could get, while the wood-rats who owned this land, or had bought stumpage would be left with nothing but charred and blackened stumps.

They could see occasional red sheets of flame under the high-reaching orange glow as the fire leaped wildly through the tree tops. It looked to Hubert as if it had started on Carter's place, but there seemed to be to be an independent fire around the home of a Swede named Mitright. The fire was headed directly toward Joe Banks' place, and Sven's place was right in its path.

One fire could be an accident, but not several of them. This seemed peculiarly designed to wipe out a triangle of fine timber on the base of Ladybug Mountain, where lived the wood-rats who had remained loyal to Hubert.

The only good road in that part of the country ran beside a creek which passed by Joe's house. The fire could be stopped there, if it couldn't be controlled before, but a lot of fine timber lay between.

Sven galloped on toward the fire line, while Hubert went on to the Banks' place. He knew that Rosa was in town with Joe, and he had to warn Annie and the children to go to a safer place.

He wasn't the first there. As he pulled up he saw a large bunch of men just across the road—Guy Bash and his crew of hoodlums.

"Hey, Hubert, come here," Bash roared. He had not been badly hurt in his fight with Joe or he wouldn't have been there.

Hubert waited in the yard, and Bash swaggered forward, followed by at least a dozen of his men.

"You better git these people to leave here, because we're startin' a back-fire, an' it'll get almighty hot," Bash said.

"You can't start a back-fire here," Hubert retorted. "The place for a back-fire is up near the fire. where Sven and the others will already have it started."

"Too much timber and brush for it to do any good there," Bash stated. "Soon as Phil Hurley gets here with some coal oil to soak our torches in we're startin' a back-fire all along the road."

"And ruin four hundred acres of good timber!" Hubert protested. Then he thought of something else. Sven and the others would be starting back-fires up ahead, and before they knew it they might be encircled by the back-fire which Bash proposed to start. It was murder—and Guy Bash knew it. Yet he and his men would claim they were only using approved methods to stop a forest fire. The other consequences would be an accident.

"You'll start no fires here, Bash—not while I'm alive, you dirty murderer," Hubert said. Joe's rifle was inside, Hubert turned to get it, but Bash rushed. Hubert had to stand and fight.

Bash had never considered Hubert a worthy adversary for his fighting talents. Hubert had no other idea than that he would be ganged-up on and killed by the hoodlums.

It was his first real fight. He knew a moment of burning throbbing excitement and he wondered if it was cowardice. Then Bash's fist struck the side of his face, and he became utterly cool. He had parried just enough to keep from being knocked off his feet. The blow hurt, but suddenly he knew exactly how he was going to fight Bash, so long as the others left them alone.

Bash rushed again. Hubert chopped a short, stiff left into the bigger man's face, but failed to stop him. Then Hubert stepped in, snuggled his head against his big foe's shoulder and pumped punches into the midriff with both hands.

Bash hadn't been expecting that, and he clinched. He didn't know that wrestling was Hubert's game. His shoulder had been hurt in the fight with Joe and he couldn't exert the usual pressure he used in a bear-hug; nor until then did he appreciate the tremendous strength of his younger, smaller opponent. They swayed sideways, and forward and back. Bash butted Hubert's jaw with the top of his head, and for a moment of blinding pain Hubert could only hang on. Then Hubert thrust a thumb between two of Bash's ribs and gouged with all his strength.

Bash yelled, and the pressure of his arms slackened for just a moment. Hubert whirled and threw Guy over his head with an old-fashioned hip-lock. Before Bash could get to his feet the hoodlums, led by Wisconsin, Marsh, and Trego surged forward.

Annie's voice came from just inside the yard gate. "Stand back, you men," she said steadily. "I'll shoot the first one of you who moves."

They stopped. They could see the rifle in her hands, and she was known to be almost as good a shot as her father—the best in the country.

Pride and elation swept over Hubert. Annie wasn't bluffing. She would hold those men off, and he could settle the score with Guy Bash. He didn't wait for Bash to get set on his feet. This was intended to be dirty business, and he remembered how Joe Banks had looked in the hospital. It was no time to think about fair play or mercy. He stepped in and knocked the powerful bully dizzy with sledge-hammer rights and lefts.

BASH went down, rolled over swiftly and came up with the knife that had butchered Joe Banks gleaming in his hand. Annie screamed a warning. The timberjacks started forward, and she fired. A man screamed as he went down with a bullet in his leg, and the others stopped.

Hubert leaped into the air and kicked as Bash charged in. It was an old lumberjack trick, perfectly executed. The toe of his shoe struck Bash's bared forearm and sent the knife spinning through the air. The big man's right arm was paralyzed from the kick; his left had been weakened in the fight with Joe. He seemed to realize his helplessness, and turned to run. Hubert was too fast. He fastened a crotch and collar hold on Bash, lifted him off his feet, and deposited him astraddle and face down upon the sharp pickets around Rosa Banks' house and garden.

Bash screamed with pain and fright as he felt himself being impalled upon the pickets, with Hubert's hundred and seventy-five pounds on top of him. Hubert, the mild and quiet man who had never been known to fight, seized Bash by the hair and drove his bleeding face down upon the pickets again and again until Bash sobbed and begged for mercy. And meanwhile Annie just as coldly held the other men at bay with her rifle.

Finally Hubert tumbled the man off the fence. "Answer my questions, Bash, or

back you go for another ride," he said. "Who started those fires?"

"I did, Hubert," Bash moaned.

"Did Lancaster pay you to do it?"

"Yes—yes he did."

The hoodlums, all but the man who had been shot, faded back into the night. None of them had homes or families here. Betrayed by their own boss, with the threat of arson hanging over them, they knew that the faster they got out of the Panhandle the better.

Hubert advised Annie to let them go.

A few minutes later Hubert caught Phil Hurley when he drove up with a five-gallon can of coal-oil. Hurley had never been a fighting man. It took little time to get him to sign a confession that Bash had ordered him to buy coal-oil and prepare torches hours before the fire had started. The wounded timber-jack, who turned out to be the unfortunate Wisconsin, likewise signed a confession. Bash, with only one hope of cutting down his term in prison, placed all the blame he could upon old man Lancaster.

People from further away who had seen the fire were passing, and Hubert stopped some of them to witness the confessions, and help guard the prisoners. Hubert went on to help fight the fire and found that Sven and the others already had it fairly well under control, yet they had to fight the fire all night to make certain.

Hubert was a weary, and smoke-blackened individual when he got back to the Banks place in the morning. Annie met him at the door, a cheery smile on her face.

"We owe a lot to you, Hubert," she said. "Mom won't even have to sign that deed now, because Wisconsin admitted that he tampered with your saw, and that makes the contest void. Oh, Hubert, I was such a fool."

Tears from Annie was something Hubert wasn't used to. He found himself wiping them away with his handkerchief, patting her on the back, and finally kissing her.

"What are you going to do, Hubert?"

He was full of plans. He knew that now he could get capital to buy Lancaster's woodyard. Running it would be a good job for Joe, who had always had a hankering to get a job in town. He would still buy and sell cordwood in the timber at decent prices.

But all he said was, "I'm taking you and the kids down to Wood City to see how Joe's getting along. Then we're getting married."

"But where will we live" Annie gasped.

"In town. Nobody is ever going to call my wife a wood-rat."

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of NORTHWEST ROMANCES, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1944.

State of New York, County of New York, ss:

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared T. T. Scott, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the NORTHWEST ROMANCES, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher Glen-Kel Publishing Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Editor, Jack O'Sullivan, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, T. T. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Glen-Kel Publishing Co., Inc., 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y. J. G. Scott, 670 Fifth Avenue, New York 19, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stocks, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is . . . . (This information is required from daily publications only.)

(Signed) T. T. SCOTT,
Business Manager.

Sworn and subscribed before me this 22nd day of September, 1945.

(Signed) W. B. BULLOCH,
Notary Public.

(My commission expires Feg. 11, 1947.)

THUNDER POCKET

By STUART FRIEDMAN

The white Yukon will cleanse a man's heart—if only man will let it. But it was young Gibbs' luck to meet the exceptions. . . . Anson and Catlin, greed-boys of the North.

ERIC sat for a moment just staring across the desk at Anson. The muted crackle of wood inside the squat office stove was the only sound. Eric fumbled in his mackinaw pocket, got out the makings, then stood up slowly. He knew the blood had come flaming into his face. A corner of Anson's mouth quirked in amusement at the clumsiness of his fingers in rolling the smoke.

"Thanks, Anson. Thanks for everything," Eric said tightly. "I discover the mine. I solve the problem of getting the copper ore across Thunder Gorge. Now we're ready to operate and," he paused, took a deep breath, "and you shove Catlin in over my head. After *one week* in Alaska. I knew you were tough, Anson. But—"

Eric broke off, clamped the cigarette in his lips. Anson stretched his arm lazily to one side, pushed a matchhead against the cherry-red belly of the stove.

"You've been lucky and you let it swell your head—out of all proportion to what's in it," Anson said. He moved the match across toward Eric's unlighted cigarette. Eric snapped a thumbnail to a match of his own.

"I'm stupid, too," Eric said. He shifted his glance as Catlin moved. Catlin reached down the desk with a handkerchief, carefully brushed Eric's spilled tobacco to the floor.

Catlin settled primly back in his chair. "I'm sure Mr. Anson didn't mean you were stupid," he said, his pink mouth curving in a placating smile, his eyes raised beseechingly. "You mustn't think that, Mr. Gibbs. And you mustn't think harshly of me."

"No, you mustn't," Anson's deep voice mocked. "You must simply be man enough to acknowledge your limitations."

"Then, I take it you want me to resign," Eric said. "This—this making me subordinate to a man that—that is completely unfitted—"

"Unfitted?" Anson's heavy iron-gray brows lifted. He leaned forward, braced his bearlike forearms on the scarred walnut desk. "Sit down, Gibbs. I'm talking. I'll review your history . . . all right, stand up . . . but listen. I yanked you raw out of college, paid you to come up here. You'd spent four years learning to know the difference between grass and an outcropping of copper. So, when you spotted an isolated slope with patches of what natives had assumed was grass, you investigated. Which was your job. You found copper. A damn fine deposit—"

"Damn fine," Eric snapped. "And damn inaccessible. A Dall ram couldn't get back through those mountains to that copper. To get to it I had to go north over the Chinni Saddle, then east, then zig-zag across the toe of the glacier, back through the foothills—eight days of it. *Now* I can bring the copper straight out here to the river. Across a chasm of a thousand feet. The walls of Thunder Gorge, in case you forget, drop a straight 2,500 feet on one side, and the opposite one is so jagged—"

"I've seen it. And you did your job in stringing steel cable for the ore buckets across it," Anson said stonily. "Did your job, Gibbs. I hired you because you had the training to overcome natural obstacles. Now, I grant we can raft the ore from here to the railroad, and from there down to the Skagway ships . . . but we've still got to get the ore *here.* In other words, we need labor, we need equipment," Anson said, nodded to Catlin. "Tell him."

"You see, Mr. Gibbs," Catlin said, placing the tips of his fingers delicately on the edge of the desk. "To pay the workers, money is required. Also money is needed for equipment, building, materials, food, tools—"

ERIC'S eyes narrowed. "That's enough, teacher. Stupid as I am I can understand. . . . Listen, Anson, what's the idea? I know we need money. Prospects have been coming all summer—I've talked to at least twenty possible investors. They were enthusiastic when they left me—"

"Were they?" Anson grinned. "When they reached my office in Seattle—those that troubled to come—were very doubtful. They certainly didn't invest. Now, Gibbs, I've been financing what labor and installations you've made so far—but without backers I can't go on."

"I don't understand how they could have cooled on the idea so fast," Eric said, shaking his head. "Certainly not all of them."

"I know you don't understand, Gibbs," Anson said. "You're all right in your line. But selling, obviously is not your line. Maybe these people thought you were one of them. You weren't, I know. Your plan for getting that ore to market was and is sound. But evidently you didn't convince anybody that . . . but what's the difference? The fact remains . . ."

"That we need money," Eric said. "Of coure I wouldn't dare ask you, boss, why *you* didn't convince these prospects. Thought that was your kind of work."

Catlin cleared his throat, scooted back and forth on his chair. "Mr. Anson has asked me to deal with the next group of prospective financiers for our project," he said apologetically. "Several are due this afternoon, and I feel confident that, with the cable in place and the ore buckets navigating over it I can convince people—"

Eric laughed harshly. "Convince them that they see what they see? You, Mr.

Anson was holding the sides of the canoe and screeching, "But I can't swim, Gibbs. I can't."

Catlin, are obviously cut out for selling mining stock."

Anson snapped to his feet, fists clenched. "Catlin's my man. That's the way things stack up, Gibbs. I'm tired of listening to your whining prattle. I want Catlin on this for the simple season he'll be trusted."

"Meaning I won't be trusted?" Eric said slowly. He let his half-burnt cigarette drop. He rubbed his palms on the coarse wool of his mackinaw, rolled his shoulders. "That it? That's your reason?"

"Exactly. I don't trust you myself."

Eric flexed, then spread his fingers. "I've got a contract," he said, half to himself. His fists knotted. From the corner of his eye he saw Catlin scurry out of his chair, back toward the wall, moving as always on soundless tiptoe. Anson was scowling, waiting, challengingly. "I won't bust my contract," Eric said. "You can't force me. Anson, you're not so shrewd as I thought. I'll take humiliation; you didn't think I had the guts to. I have, mister. And some to spare. Enough to hang around and find out what the hell your real reason is for wanting me out. It's not that you don't trust me, Anson."

"Calling me a liar?"

"In college I learned to say prevaricator." He saw Anson's heavy, weather-cracked underlip slide forward speculatively. A faintly swaying snakeline of smoke from the cigarette he had dropped rose before Eric's face. Without shifting his glance, or changing stance he broke the smoke column with a blow of his breath. Anson's thick shoulders lifted in a brief shrug, his fists unclenched.

Eric let his eyes lower. He moved his boottoe and mashed the cigarette into the rough puncheon floor. Anson apparently was feeling for matches in his vest, for he had put a cigar in his mouth. Anson turned slowly, bent toward the stove. There was a sudden hissing orange flare, and Anson's powerful body made an abrupt spin. His left hand held a blazing bundle of matches. He hurled them viciously at Eric's face. Eric tried to dodge. His hands struck wildly. The fire came at him like a swarm of angry bees.

Simultaneously, half a dozen flames stabbed pain in his cheeks. Half-blinded by fire and shock, he stumbled back, clenched his eyes shut. One burning stick fell into the loose collar of his lumberjack shirt, wedged against his throat. He clawed at it, but the sulphur fire seemed to cling, leechlike, like an ember buried in his flesh. He felt it still when the match was gone, and the shudders raced on tortured nerves up and down his body. Then his skull seemed to explode as Anson's massive fist smashed into his chin.

Eric struck out, his fist skinning along the left side of Anson's weaving head. Then he caught a slamming blow in the stomach, and almost in the same instant Anson drove one straight up under his diaphragm. For a hazy moment Eric couldn't breathe, then his breath came back in a coughing gasp, and he lunged, too wildly. Anson dodged to the side. Suddenly something flat, hard, struck thudding against the back of his skull. Catlin had done that, he knew. Catlin, the sickly, scared, prissy little tiptoe-ing half man. Eric fought agonizingly against the sudden swelling blackness that rose, draining his strength. He clawed the air helplessly, his fury a sickening ache in him. Catlin! He'd half pitied the creature. Anson was different. Anson was smart and brutal, and he'd outwitted Eric. But Catlin was nothing but a sneak, and to be beaten by him was something Eric didn't intend to take. But he couldn't help himself. He was falling . . .

Pain jabs in his side brought Eric to blurry consciousness. Anson stood over him, kicking his ribs and looking down at him along the short barrel of a Derringer .41.

"Get up. Get up," he ordered. "And take it slow. Sit there at the desk . . . Catlin, you got that resignation out of my gear yet? Make it quick. You too, Gibbs."

Eric watched the gun. Anson backed out of reach. Eric got up, sat at the desk. Catlin rolled a pen toward him, put a typewritten sheet before him gingerly, then retreated.

"It's all typewrote up and waiting for you to sign . . . your resignation."

Eric took the pen, then focussed his aching eyes on the typed sheet. The first two paragraphs he saw, scanning swiftly were simple. . . . But the third!

"Don't strain your eyes!" Anson said abruptly. The thick gun muzzle was pushed against his neck. "Just sign!"

"I won't. This says I'm resigning because you caught me stealing. I'm damned if I will—"

THE gun muzzle pressed harder against his neck, the bulge of the front sight just touching the lower bone of his skull. Anson didn't speak.

"Don't boss," Catlin cried. "Let me tend to it. Goodness, what difference would it make if he signed it or not. Haven't I done all right with his signature before. . . ."

"Before?" Eric cried. "When? When—what, you damn sneaky little forger."

"Shut up," Anson said. "I can kill you here easy as not. It'll be a little troublesome getting your dead carcass past the town out to the wilds . . . but not impossible. Take your choice. I'm giving you a fighting chance. Once I get you away from this deal you'll be alive anyway. A fugitive—but fugitives sometimes do well enough . . . all right, Catlin. You sign it. Then get moving. You'll just about be able to get downriver in time to meet the train and your prospects. And remember, get to that spitfire first. Stall her. Don't mention me. Find out if she's talked. Probably has. She may have snarled us completely. If so, just play dumb as usual—and say all you know is there was trouble with Eric Gibbs. Then show all of them his resignation. Got it?"

"Yes. Yes. Now her name again—uh—Adele Me—"

"Shut y' mouth. All right, Gibbs, come on, peaceful down to the landing."

"All right," Eric said quietly. He went out with Anson a pace back of him.

There was no one nearby. A quarter-mile upstream—they wouldn't be heading that way for it led to the railroad—was a group of Tlingit women at their laundry on a sandbar overgrown with brilliant purple vetch. Eric let his eye follow the new corduroy road of birch log which ran from the landing here, up the slope between stands of solemn dark birch and on to the terminal of the cable which threaded back to the mine. Three miles out a crew of Indians were working on the guttering for the road. The air was sharp and clear in clean sunlight, and the valley was at its best, its graceful rolling plains vivid in color. Frost touched buckbrush flamed in wild scarlets and orange. As Eric stepped into the cedar log canoe he looked dully toward the mountains, thrusting magnificently above, their great masses jaggedly etched in the sun, their peaks clean, shining like stupendous beacons. These things, as much as the mine had become part of him, symbolizing a thousand inexpressible ideals. Men like Anson and Catlin were a violation of every decent hope for development of this rich, virgin land. The mark of their breed was like scum on fresh snow, that would gradually pollute the whole mass.

"Take the bow paddle," Anson said curtly. Eric took his place, felt the craft wobble as Anson moved to the stern position. In a moment they sliced into the broad, swift, willow-lined stream, reached the center current. The water was crystal clear. It was glacier-fed and deadeningly cold, and a small chill wind soothed his face. His gray eyes watched the gravelly bed bleakly.

"Dig with that paddle," Anson shouted angrily.

Anson was in a hurry, Eric knew. He turned dragging his paddle. Anson bent instantly, caught up the short weapon at his feet. Eric turned front again. He heard Anson swearing behind him, his paddle hissing in quick angry strokes trying to right the boat, bring her bow back around from its heading toward the far bank. The job was a tough one without Eric's help. Eric smiled thinly, tensed himself without visible movement.

It was obvious he couldn't span the length of the boat, reach Anson before Anson could grab the gun. And from the bow Eric knew it would be impossible to capsize the boat. But there was a chance . . . if his aim was good enough. . . . Eric stood up, half-turned. Grasping the paddle in both hands, holding it straight out, he swung it like a bat, let it fly, whirling at Anson. Anson jumped forward, half crouching. But the flying oar struck the side of his head. Anson dropped his own paddle, flung his arm up defensively before his face. But only for an instant. Then he was on his knees, hunting for the gun. Eric was half-way to him by then. He finished the distance in a single leap, piling atop Anson's beefy figure. Anson got his fingers to the stock of the gun.

Eric knocked his hand away with a lightning jab of his fist.

ERIC got the gun, backed away slowly, watching Anson. Anson got to his knees, panting, his hands holding both sides of the boat. The canoe was rocking badly, and moving steadily downstream.

"You fool," Anson said. "Now we haven't a paddle. What if we can't get out before Toklat Falls—"

"I can get out," Eric said. "But Toklat's a long way. Meanwhile, Catlin started to say a name. Adele something—I don't know any Adele M. But you were furious with Catlin, afraid he would *say* that name in front of me—"

"It's no one you know," Anson said, his voice higher than usual. *"How* are you going to get us out? How? Listen, Gibbs, you can't bluff me—"

"Bluff?" Eric said puzzled. "And did you say how am I going to get *us* out? I didn't say *us*—now answer me! Why did you care if Catlin said the name of this Adele Me—? You had the gun."

"I didn't want trouble with you. I only wanted to get you the devil away from the mine," Anson cried. "I didn't want to kill you, just get rid of you . . . and you can't leave me to die—You hear? Gibbs, you're human—"

"Was the girl's name, Meek? Would she be a relative of Harry Meeks? Eric said harshly. The canoe lurched in a small eddy, then, bobbing, was caught broadside by the turn of the current. The canoe swung suddenly as the main impact of the water caught the stern. Eric saw Anson's fingers clench the sides tighter, his eyes darting wildly. As the boat completed the swing, Anson looked with miserable fixity up at Eric. The canoe's stern was foremost now, and Anson rode backward. He sat rigid, as though fearing to look around.

"I can't swim," he cried hoarsely.

"I can," Eric said. He grinned. "Now about Meeks? Is she Harry Meeks' wife or sister, or what? I'm beginning to wonder, the more I recall of Harry Meeks. He was here a month ago. He was damned enthusiastic about putting money into the mine. *You* say he, and all the rest of them were *not* enthusiastic by the time they got to you in the States. But this Harry Meeks —I can't believe he suddenly changed his mind. You know what I think, Anson? I think he bought. And not only *he* bought—"

"All right. He did. Several did," Anson cried. "What do you care? Look, let's get ashore. I'll cut you in on it. All you have to do is help with this hellcat, wild-woman sister of Harry Meeks. Reason with her—"

"Go on," Eric said. Then casually, "We seem to be moving faster—can you hear Toklat Falls yet?"

"No. I can't. There's thousands and thousands in the deal. I'll put your share in writing. 50%. You only need to get the girl aside, and convince her we're okay. Tell her that it's *my* shares in the mine I'm selling now—"

"Then you've really sold all the rest—you were holding 51%, I thought. The control. This Harry Meeks said he wanted the whole remaining 49% when I talked to him."

"He did buy 49%, Gibbs. He did. Then this sharp devil of a sister of his found out I was soliciting to get other backers to come up, now that the cable is strung," Anson said grimly. "She figured I was selling out her brother—and she wouldn't be placated. Now she's coming up on the train—I found that out. She's with the new prospects—five of them. Five men, I tell you, who are as good as sold, Gibbs. Look, Gibbs, every damn one of them will buy when they see the practicability of your cable and ore buckets. Gibbs, I was wrong. Ungrateful to you. Play with us, play along. You'll be rich."

Eric shook his head. "I understand," he said. "Mister, I understand. Are you ready to tell the whole truth, or do I let you smash to hell across Toklat? Choose. How much of the mine have you really sold—and how much more of it do you intend to sell before you clear out?"

"So far," Anson said desperately, "I've sold 392%. I sold eight of them 49% each. I think I can manage to get each of these new prospects to buy—if that spitfire hasn't wrecked it."

"Eight people already own a half of this mine apiece. *Eight* halves you've sold. At a capitalization of $50,000—half would be about $25,000. In other words you've so far sold $200,000 worth. Now you plan to get each of five more suckers alone and sell

him another half—" Eric stopped, let his breath out slowly between clenched teeth. "I was an officer. Did Catlin forge my signature on all those extra stock certificates? Did he, damn you?"

Eric braced his feet against both sides of the bottom of the boat. He began to sway from side to side, making the boat rock nearly to the waterline both ways.

"Don't do that! Please don't do that!"

"Sweat! Let the yellow ooze out of you —I'll put this boat on the bottom, Anson. Did he forge my name on that stock? Did he?"

"Yes. Yes. And on letters, too—I'm sorry—"

"Also he's forging my name to a confession of theft. If I confessed that much, it would be easy to put all the rest of the blame on me—while you get out rich, and free—the mine will lie useless—"

Eric stopped talking suddenly. Anson's expression of fear had dissolved. Anson was staring beyond him—upstream. Then Eric heard it. The wind had been coming from downstream, and so he hadn't before. It was the muffled purr of the launch. It was coming nearer, the sound deepening subtly with the approach. Catlin should have been taking the launch upstream, to meet the train. Eric spun. The launch's dark high prow came at them swiftly, gashing a foot-high V of white froth in the icy water. Her engine was wide-open, and Eric saw that Raven Claw, one of the wild-eyed drunken troublemakers was at the wheel. Raven Claw was laughing, exulting in his sense of power in the tough, fast boat.

"He's drunk. He'll run us down. . . . He's stolen the launch . . ." Eric shouted, then froze. Anson had seen what he hadn't —a rifle barrel, gleaming like a gold saber under the sun. Almost out of sight, Catlin was squinting along its sights.

Eric dropped to the bottom of the boat. He saw the instant's wisp of smoke from the muzzle, at once vanished by the wind. The shot was inaudible. But the launch raced nearer, the gun-barrel wavered, feeling its way toward his body, pausing. Then like a thing alive it jumped slightly, and this time Eric could hear the harsh *crack.* He heard the bullet, just above, like the slash of a bow across taut gut. Then the launch was so near that Eric could see the expression on Catlin's face. Catlin raised his hand in a signal to Raven Claw. The launch's engine cut out abruptly, leaving a threatening wake of quiet. The launch slowed into a smooth glide. Catlin's cheek pressed to the rifle stock as he waited for a steady shot.

ERIC rose suddenly from his crouch, fired at Catlin, and at the same time dove into the water. He swam straight for the launch, stopped an instant under the slight bulge of her sides, pulled out of his mackinaw. He heard Catlin shout, come scrambling forward.

"Right there!" Anson yelled. "Almost to the front—get up there with that rifle and shoot straight!"

Eric was out of the coat when he saw the gun-barrel angle down at him. He took a breath, dove under the launch, found the keel, pulled himself along it to the stern. The current pushed at him, the numbing cold of it through his logged clothes catching the muscles of the small of his back like a claw. A sudden bursting concussion of water smote his eardrums, tore loose his grip on the keel. The engine had been started again, throwing up a blinding white churning in the clear water. Eric knew the launch was moving, the prop spinning at deadly speed. He felt his body rising. He clawed down, straining to reach the bottom. He couldn't see and the roaring under water was deafening. He couldn't seem to get down. And the prop above would slash him to ribbons. Eric blew out all the breath in him. He could feel himself sink.

The pressure mounted by the second. His chest seemed pinioned under the slow crushing movement of a glacier. Yet he clung to the bottom. The launch had passed. Again its engine stopped. They waited above. He began to claw his way along the bottom, broadside of the current. But the willow protection of shore was far away. Too far. His lungs were burning, and his body felt paralyzed from the cold. He had to have air. Nothing else mattered now. It was air or death. He thrust himself to the surface. Then at last—air, blessed life again, and he was fighting his way with desperate overhand strokes toward the shore. He didn't know where the launch was, or if they were firing at

him. His heart hammered, and every muscle responded.

He came to waist-deep water, and a grove of willow lay just ahead. The rifle cracked from out on the water, raising a hissing spout a dozen feet beyond. He got to his feet, ran in a siz-zag line through the shallows. He reached the grove, ran deep into it, then stopped, panting. He was shuddering uncontrollably with the cold. He waited for what seemed hours before the launch started up again. He listened as it headed upstream. For a while it was over. But there had to be a showdown. They would kill him on sight, if he stayed in the vicinity of the mine.

The afternoon had been long and tedious. But now the waiting was about to end. It could only end explosively. Eric knew that. He paced and smoked dangerously near the ominous brink of Thunder Gorge, staring in fascinated horror down that sheer bleak face of granite. He sent the cigarette sailing, watching it drop far into the dead shadows of the bottom. A steady muted rumble rose from the forbidding granite chasm—a thunder channeled out of a distant valley, and caused by the constant crumbling of tons of ice from a glacier-head into Chitina River. Eric shrugged brusquely, filled his lungs with the high thin air here in Thunder Pocket. In this sheltered depression on the lip of the gorge were the tool, provision and machinery sheds. And the terminal of the ore-bucket cable. The strands, lighted orange in the late sun, ran straight across the thousand-foot mouth of the gorge to steel anchors in the granite shoulder opposite. From there, the cable led back to the mine. Here beside him were the ore buckets, one already hanging by its single wheel to the upper cable truck. The lower, cable by which the buckets were pulled, was rigged to the bucket. Eric had tested it several times, and had ridden to the mine and back in it.

He paused, frowning . . . there were voices now. The party was coming up the slope on the log road—the prospective backers, herded by Anson and Catlin. Eric knew the girl was with them. He had got a message to her by one of his trusted Tlingit Indian friends. The man had reported to Eric that he had been able to deliver the note to her, unobserved, just after the launch returned from the railroad. Eric didn't know Adele Meeks, but he had been afraid for her. He'd told her exactly what she was up against. He'd warned her that she must pretend to be convinced of Anson's honesty.

Then he saw her for the first time. She walked with Anson as they came over the crest, and down between the walls of Thunder Pocket. She was laughing and it was a pretty sound. It fit the spirited loveliness of her tanned face. Not even the clumsy canvas parka and Arctic pants could disguise the thoroughbred grace of her slender young body in motion. He knew her alert eyes had already found him . . . before Anson did. Maybe he was imagining an instant's shadowing of fear—Eric fingered his .45, holstered at his side. His jaw tightened as he started forward. The five men prospects and Catlin had come in view, close behind Anson and the girl. Anson saw him then, stopped.

Eric ran forward, waving his left hand. His right he left casually near the gun.

"Hello, there!" he shouted. "Bringin' more folk up to see our fancy diggins, Mr. Anson—?"

Anson stood working his mouth, his eyes fiery.

"They told me you high-tailed downstream," Anson muttered in low threat.

"It's what I told them to tell you," Eric said tauntingly. Then, louder. "Why, if it ain't Adele Meeks, Harry's baby sister. Why you and me, you might say is right near partners, don't you?"

"Partners, Mr. Jorrell?" she said, loud enough for the others to hear. She winked boldly at him. "What do you mean, partners, Mr. Jorrell."

"You won't get by with it," Anson warned.

"Watch, mister. Just watch," Eric said in a swift undertone. He scanned the gathering audience who were beginning to exchange frowning glances. "Why," Eric said expansively, "I bought into this diggins, too. Got 49% of her. Same as your brother Harry. Make us partners, don't it?" Eric stopped, pretended to catch sight of Catlin for the first time. Eric pointed at him. "Why, hello there Gibbs. Showin' this fancy construction work of yours off to y' friends. Glad to meet up with you gents—"

Catlin cried. "I'm not Gibbs."

"Certainly he's not!" Anson roared, "This man is Gibbs. Calls himself Jorrell. He's the crook—"

Eric laughed uproariously. "Y' hear them, Miss Meeks? Them two is the joshingest folks—right off they change m' name to Gibbs for me."

"I don't think it's funny," Adele Meeks said. She faced Anson furiously. "You have been lying to me. I *know* my brother's friend isn't lying. Mr. Jorrell has been like one of our family almost. . . ."

ANOTHER voice, that of a stocky, gray-mustached man, spoke out. "Mr. Anson, this seems to corroborate what Miss Meeks suggested on the trip up. Not ten minutes ago you and this fellow of yours—this Gibbs or Catlin, as you call him—said that 51% of the mine remained in your hands. You said you were selling out. But it is rather obvious you have nothing left to sell. . . ."

There was an angry mutter of agreement from the other prospects.

"We'll see you in jail, Mr. Anson," Adele said. "And your little friend, too—"

Anson laughed edgily. "I still have 51% of the stock of this mine," he said. He looked slyly at Eric. "Mr. Jorrell, I see you're armed. Please draw your weapon and cover that man!"

His voice ended in a shrill note, and he swivelled and pointed directly at a stunned, sickly Catlin.

"Watch him," Anson pleaded. "Be ready to shoot. He has a gun. Has been forcing me to go through with this—here—here, I'll show you—his picture. He's an ex-convict, a forger. He's got some scheme—maybe he forged some stock certificates. I'm innocent."

Catlin screeched like a woman, leaped forward, his hands clawed. "You're the crook. I've done only what you—"

Anson's huge fist mashed into the pink mouth, silenced the words. Catlin fell, spitting blood, crying in pain. Then he dove, locked his arms around Anson's knees, throwing him to the ground. Anson clubbed at his back and head with vicious, punishing blows. Eric drew his gun.

"Adele, all of you, get on back—get back over the top and down the road. One of them may be armed," he said hastily. "There'll be shooting—go—hurry."

They needed no urging. Eric watched the strange fight. Catlin had been beaten loose, but he came back clawing, and spilled the heavier man once more. Catlin sprang away this time before Anson could strike. He made his feet, then kicked with all his power. His boot hit Anson's groins. Anson rolled, lay a moment on his side, legs drawn up, his face in agony. He moved not at all, as Catlin kicked at his back time and again, crying out like a furious, whimpering animal. The blood was smeared on his lips and chin, and some of his teeth had been knocked out. Eric held his gun ready, but made no move. Anson was still lying quiet, his moan blending weirdly with the thunder rising from the gorge a dozen feet away. Abruptly Anson sat up. He had a gun in his hand. He fired point-blank up at Catlin. Catlin fell on him, locked his arms around Anson's head. Blinded, Anson rolled, struggling to free himself.

Eric crouched, then sprang at them, caught at Anson's gun before he could send another shot. Anson clung to it. Anson freed himself of Catlin. Catlin was bleeding from the chest badly, and he made no effort to move again. Eric knew he was dying. Anson got to his feet.

"Drop the gun," Eric said.

"We'll do it at the same time," Anson parried.

"All right. At the count of three. One . . . two . . ."

Anson's gun roared. But it was a fraction of a second too late. Eric had leaped to the side, fired. His bullet went through Anson's head. "How many times did you think I'd fall for your tricks?" Eric said softly.

He joined the others, looked back down into Thunder Pocket. "You saw it?" They nodded.

Adele Meeks scanned him inquiringly. "You're not hit?"

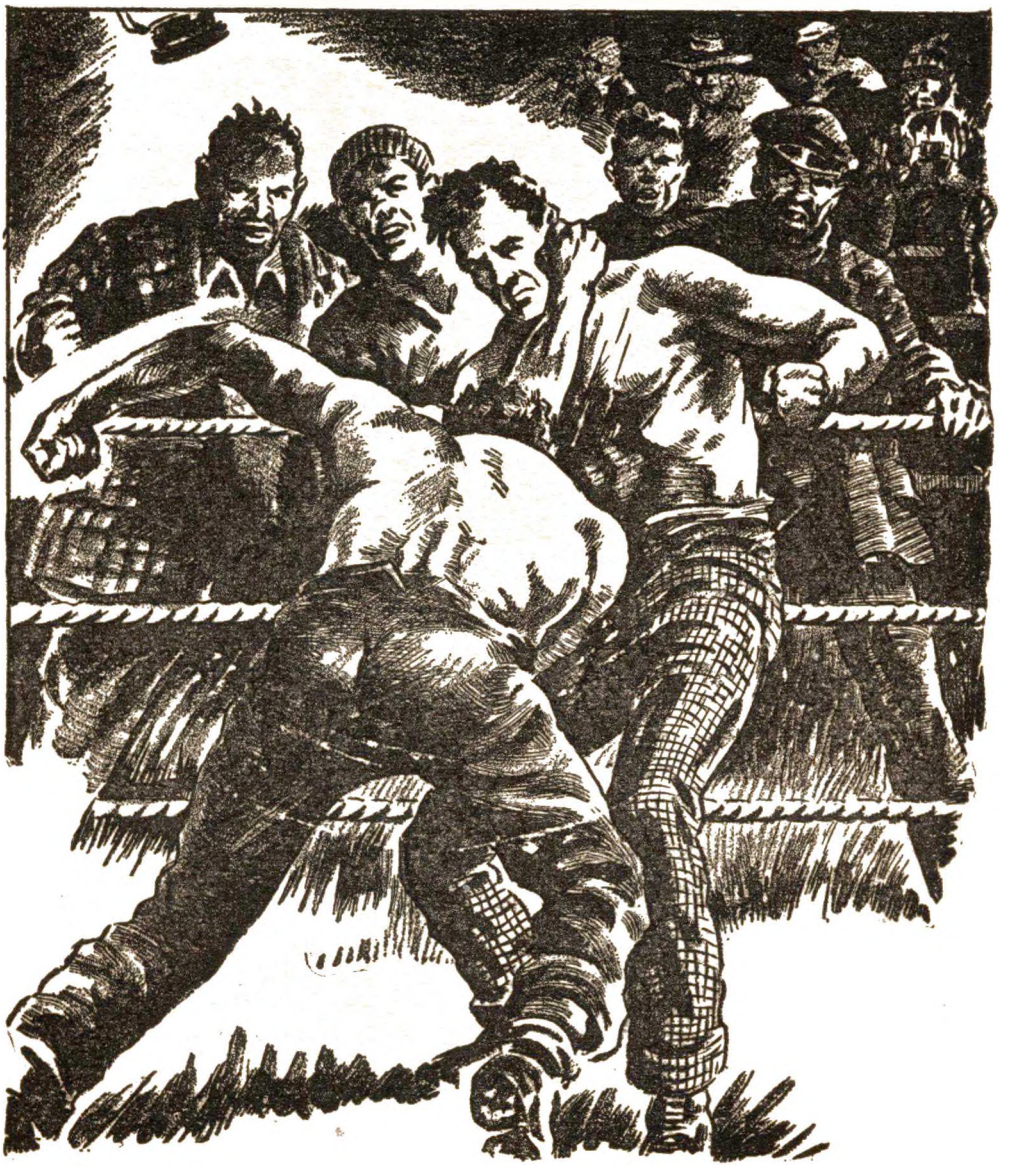
"No. . . . Gentlemen, I'm Eric Gibbs. I'm sure you understand now why I had to get out of the spot they had put me in. I felt certain that if the pressure was turned their way, one of them would break," he said. "The only way I could confront them and stay alive was to do it this way—before witnesses."

Blood On Stonega's Timber

By CURTIS BISHOP

The Stonega was a lumber-pirates' paradise, a hell's acres ruled by drifters, Wobblies from the inland empire, men against the world, leaping at the commands of flint-fisted Boulain and razor-sharp Chandler. But the grinning young fugitive raised his war-flag there, dared the timber-mad killers to blast him out.

Northwest's Feature Novel



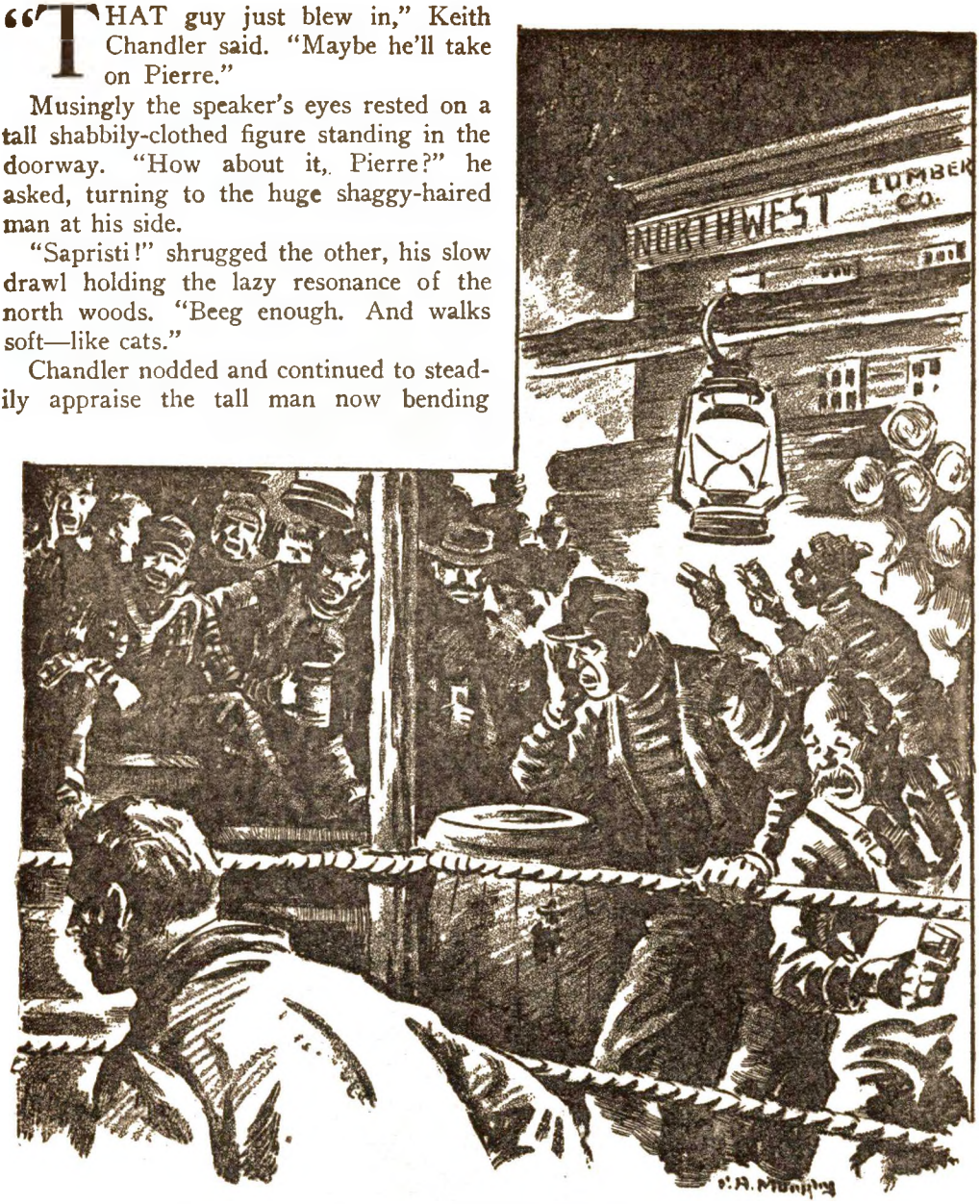
Like charging bulls they met in ring center. Their fists were like vicious flails, unmerciful pistons of destruction.

"THAT guy just blew in," Keith Chandler said. "Maybe he'll take on Pierre."

Musingly the speaker's eyes rested on a tall shabbily-clothed figure standing in the doorway. "How about it, Pierre?" he asked, turning to the huge shaggy-haired man at his side.

"Sapristi!" shrugged the other, his slow drawl holding the lazy resonance of the north woods. "Beeg enough. And walks soft—like cats."

Chandler nodded and continued to steadily appraise the tall man now bending



toward the grateful warmth of the sheet-iron stove in Clancy's saloon.

"Looks wiry," he murmured.

And the newcomer to Three Rivers did look like a man who could hold his own in a fight. At the most he could not have been over twenty-seven, but thick black eyebrows that met in a heavy horizontal line, a square clean-cut jaw and quirked lips made him look even older. A gray cap was pulled low over his eyes and ears and, though Clancy's saloon was warm, he held his short mackinaw tight around him as if it would take long for him to thaw out.

"Couldn't be one of the Stonega boys," said Chandler. "Ever see him before, Pierre?"

"Non," shrugged the big French Canuck. "He blow in, as you say. Look for job mebbe. He new here . . . mebbe he fight Pierre. He not know better now."

Keith Chandler, field superintendent of the Great Northern Lumber Company, could not help but smile indulgently at Pierre's bland self-confidence. Boulain had never lost a fight in the north woods and never expected to lose one. Towering a half-head over Chandler, and as broad in proportion, he looked more like a grizzly bear than a human.

Clancy's was crowded and more were coming. For three hundred and sixty-four nights of the year Three Rivers was a sleepy straggling little Canadian town sulking at the junction of the three streams from which it received its name. There were a hundred-odd dwellings, most of the plain frame variety, a wide thoroughfare with side streets leading off that were no more than trails, and a single imposing structure—the heavy-timbered office and warehouse of the Great Northern Lumber Company.

But on one night, this night, Three Rivers was very much alive. Then the Great Northern crews swept out of the deep forests to celebrate the end of their fall cutting, and by custom all timbermen from as far up as the Stonega headquarters joined them. From out of the hills, from the deep timber country, men gathered, coming by skis and snowshoes and dog teams, leaving their solitary cabins to celebrate the end of summer and autumn cutting, and to throw one big binge before going back to the loneliness of winter that lay ahead.

All kinds of men were coming—dour Scots from the upper Stonega, breed and Indian trappers who didn't belong to the lumber clan but were welcome anyhow, wiry French Canucks from the Blue's headwaters, and, of course, the Great Northern crews led by burly black-eyed Pierre Boulain, the prize bully of the woods country. There were always music, a game of red-dog stud, fiery brands of whiskey and tired-eyed red-lipped girls who came up from Steinway by boat to make this first night of winter one to remember.

THE Great Northern was host. It was a tradition that went back beyond Keith Chandler's tenure as field superintendent, but which he had carried on enthusiastically. Huge roasts were sputtering over glowing coals in the Great Northern's yards and a barrel of whiskey sat ready for tonight's barbecue. Ten husky lumberjacks had promised to square off in five-round bouts, with Chandler as referee, and bets were being taken at Clancy's as to the winners. The Scots from up the Stonega backed their men as zealously as did Chandler's Great Northern crews.

But this year the main event had not been scheduled. No one had come forward to challenge Pierre Boulain.

And Chandler, who had inaugurated these fights, was anxious to get big Pierre a match. The annual "shindig" wouldn't be the same without Pierre in action.

The Great Northern superintendent continued to study the tall stranger to Three Rivers who was now sitting close to the stove and looking about him through half-closed eyelids. Chandler downed his drink and went over.

"New here, aren't you?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Looking for work?"

"Yes."

"I'm Chandler of the Great Northern."

The superintendent hesitated, waiting for a glitter of recognition in the newcomer's eyes. Surely every timberjack had heard of Keith Chandler, who was performing production mircles for Great Northern.

But there was no answer. The stranger did not seem impressed. Chandler's lips went tight. His was the air of one to whom the world has been kind, and from it he has gained an easy assurance and a kind of aggressive affability. But perhaps his most discernible feature was a vaguely sardonic droop to his left eye, while the voice itself, as if in contrast, was carefully modulated—the voice of a man who knew the full value of an engaging personality.

"You a timber man?"

"Yes."

"You look husky enough. Can you handle your fists?"

The grey-eyed man's lips quirked. "I'm not in the habit of running."

"Good. I'll pay you fifty bucks to fight Pierre here," and he waved toward the big French-Canadian. "That'll give you a stake. Then you can see me later about a job."

"Fifty dollars," murmured the newcomer, appraising Pierre with speculative eyes.

"He's rough," smiled Chandler, following the other's gaze. "The Great Northern throws a blowout every year for the boys, our men and any timberjack who cares to come. Free food and whiskey. Good clean fighting. Pierre is champion of the Three Rivers country. Nobody has ever licked him."

"Fifty dollars," the stranger repeated. He was tempted.

"Mebbe seventy-five will sound better," offered Keith. "The boys will be disappointed if Pierre doesn't fight somebody."

"I'm out of shape," parried the grey-eyed man.

"It's only five rounds," shrugged the lumber boss.

"Just five rounds."

Obviously the stranger was wrestling with the offer. He didn't want it; yet he didn't want to turn it down. He needed the money. Chandler chuckled.

"One hundred bucks. That's my final offer."

"I'll take it," was the prompt answer.

"Fine. What's the name?"

"Townsend, Clay Townsend."

"Fine, Townsend." Chandler held out his hand. "Good luck to you. Pierre, come meet your opponent."

The big jack ambled forward.

"If you're not afraid of him, Pierre," grinned Keith, "we'll consider the match as good as set."

"Pierre afraid!" scoffed the huge man. "Sacre Dieu! You joke, Meester Chandler."

"Of course I joke, Pierre. Be over at the yard tonight, Townsend."

"I'll be there."

Pierre held out his hand. "You eat good," he advised. "Much food. For after Pierre hit you, no food taste good. No whiskey taste good. You like only sleep."

Townsend smiled.

"We'll see."

ALL THROUGH the afternoon men passed in and out of Clancy's swinging doors. The news was announced gaily to each new arrival—a fight for Pierre Boulain. The big Canuck did his training there at the bar, throwing back his shaggy head and laughing gaily at insinuations that this newcomer would strip the mythical crown from his head.

"By Gar," he yelled, "I knock him into middle of next week."

Chandler bought most of the drinks. He was always an affable host at these blowouts, even to the dour Scots from up the Stonega.

The lumberyard was thrown open now. A ring had been built in its center and there were long tables piled high with platters of barbecue and pickles and rolls. The whiskey barrel did a landslide business as jacks wash down their food with raw straight whiskey. Townsend stood aloof, a half-smile on his lips. Already men were passing out from too much liquor.

A hundred lanterns lit the ringside. The first two fighters slammed and butted to a draw. There were jeers and catcalls as Chandler announced the decision.

Then a lanky Scot outscrapped one of Great Northern's woodsmen and Chandler groaned to the audience.

"This hurts me. One of my own men licked. But it took a friend from up the Stonega to do it. The winnah—Sandy Cameron."

The Stonega men were not affected by these friendly overtures. They well knew that Chandler had no intention of relenting in his efforts to drive them to the wall. Those kind of speeches were just for tonight.

Bets were paid off. Then a Great Northern jack whipped a Canuck. And a breed battered a Chandler man unconscious in the second round.

Townsend stirred. Chandler was calling for him. And Boulain was swaggering over from the whiskey barrel.

A path opened. Men stood back and eyed him curiously. Chandler caught his arm and helped him into the ring.

"The challenger, Clay Townsend."

There was a ripple of applause. The lumber boss turned to the other corner. "The champion, Pierre Boulain. Five rounds. The fight will be held up ten minutes while you make your bets."

"Hell, start 'em hitting," a voice shouted back. "Nobody gonna bet against Pierre Boulain."

Chandler grinned at Townsend. "Care to bet on yourself, Townsend?" he demanded. "Five to one."

"I'm flat."

"You got a hundred bucks coming for this fight. Five to one. You win and get five hundred."

He had purposely raised his voice. He was heard by half the men in the lumberyard. Townsend glared back. Chandler was using this way to get out of paying the hundred. The man called Townsend was flat broke. He had taken this offer because a hundred bucks meant a grubstake. Something to eat on until he found a job.

But he couldn't back down, not before these jacks.

"I'll take it," he said coldly.

No one protested that the referee shouldn't bet. Chandler held up his hands.

"Townsend has just bet a hundred dollars on himself. Anybody else? I'll give five to one."

There was Great Northern money everywhere, Chandler's jacks jumped to their feet waving their dough. This was payday; they had money left. They waved it tauntingly in the faces of the Scots.

Only one of the Stonega men arose to grab the bait. He came forward and bet with Chandler, disdaining the other Great Northern men.

"I'll take fifty."

"Only fifty," sung out Chandler. "How about it, you Stonega men? Five to one on my woods boss. Fifty bucks already with Jamie MacDougall. Anybody else . . ."

Townsend stood up. He was bare to the waist and his flesh showed goose bumps from the cold night air.

"Let's start the fight," he snapped.

Chandler didn't heed him. "No other bets? Nobody wants to bet against Boulain?"

"Ye've got one bet," growled Jamie. "The man wants the fight started. Call it."

Chandler shrugged his shoulders. "Sure, sure. Ready, Pierre?"

The woods boss grinned. "Certainement."

"All right, come out here. Both of you."

II

THERE was a quick silence as these two big men left their corners. Boulain flashed a confident smile, standing with his barrel-chest arched in conscious self-esteem. Shoulders and chest were dotted with tufts of coarse black hair, adding to the savage quality of the man.

Across the ring Townsend stood, motionless and imperturable, hands hanging idly at his sides, waiting for Boulain's rush. There was only the faint creaking of temporary wooden benches as bodies suddenly were tense—no other sound.

"It's daft you are," whispered another Scot to Jamie MacDougall. "The mon is too spare."

"Aye," nodded Jamie, eyes shining. "But look at him. Not afraid, that one."

It was true; Townsend was not afraid. Boulain came over slowly, seeming to swagger as he crossed the ring.

Then, like a cat, Townsend struck. Twice in sharp staccato his hands lashed to the other's jaw, whipping Boulain's head back, wiping that fixed smile from his face.

Caught by surprise, Pierre stumbled to the ropes and with a roar every onlooker leaped to his feet.

Two red welts stood out just below Boulain's cheek. With a snarl, he lowered his head and charged. Townsend met him. Instead of giving way, he planted both feet into the tarpaulin and stood ready for the onrushing muscle-menace. Toe to toe, shoulders forward, heads bowed, they stood slugging it out—Pierre Boulain, the unbeaten champion of the north woods and this rather lean man who had drifted in out of nowhere to fight the Great Northern's touted woods boss.

Their fists were like vicious flails. Both men were landing. Townsend was staggered by a savage jolt to the face but he only shook his head and ripped a dozen punishing blows into the body of his scowling antagonist. Twice around the ring they fought.

Then the timekeeper remembered the bell. Cries of delight rocked the circle of timberjacks as Townsend came to his corner.

It was empty. He had brought no second.

Quickly Jamie MacDougall leaped through the ropes. "Mon, you're a bonnie lad," chortled Jamie, wiping at his face with a towel.

The frowning Keith Chandler did not fail to note that the loudest yells came from the Scot lumbermen.

The bell again. Like charging bulls both men met in the center of the ring. This time it was Boulain who struck first. Lunging with all the strength and powerful shoulder and body, he hit Townsend high on the left cheek and hurled the challenger back from the sheer force of his impact. With a growl of savage joy Pierre rushed. There against the ropes Townsend had to fight for his very life, bent back by the other's weight, his breathing short and gasping, sweat streaming into his eyes.

As he fought he was conscious of the

dull aching in his head and the slow leaden movements of his feet. Clay Townsend was in no condition for such a fight and he knew it. But, gritting his teeth, he gathered his strength and caught Pierre's chin with a wild lucky punch that reeled the big woodsman. Townsend came out of the corner standing up, and again the Scots yelled fiercely.

Pierre, reeling under that punch, closed in. He clinched and, as Chandler pulled them apart, Boulain rammed Townsend twice with his heavy skull. Confused cries arose from the Scots but Keith waved them to silence with an indulgent grin. Rules were not to be taken too literally in this north country.

Once more they clinched, broke, fought fiercely for that fraction of time remaining before the bell. Then, as the gong sounded, Townsend staggered back to his corner, wet and glistening with sweat, gasping for breath, haggard and dog-tired.

"Mon," asked Jamie, "are you all right?"

Townsend forced a grin to his bruised lips. "Doing—all—right."

"You are in no shape for such a fight," MacDougall said sternly.

Before his second could protest further, the bell clanged and there was Boulain tearing across the ring at him. Townsend's battered brain flashed a warning. He must put up his hands. He must get going. He struck with all strength, grazing Pierre's chin, taking a blow in his chest that sent him to his knees. Dimly he heard men shouting and stamping. He came up clawing out with both right and left hand.

"Now," he whispered to himself. For he was reconciled to his inevitable fate. Pierre loomed just ahead of him, dark and glowering, and he waited for the crash to come. While he was waiting he fought back with everything he had.

Something clanged from far off. Somebody caught his arm. It was Jamie.

"Mon, mon, you're a fighter. Sit down, that's a bonnie lad."

TOWNSEND licked his lips. He had lasted another. Too soon came the bell. Out he staggered.

Chandler watched nervously. This was the fourth. Only two more rounds to go.

More important than losing the money was the prestige. Among these rough men of action, timberjacks who risked death a hundred times during the long cold winter and almost every moment during the hazardous spring drives, brute strength was important. Chandler did not keep Boulain as woods boss because of his intelligence. Pierre ramrodded the Great Northern jacks because he could whip any of them, and dearly loved to prove it. Scots and French breeds cutting timber for themselves gave way before the Great Northern gangs for the same reason.

Thus Chandler had been anxious to secure a match for Pierre. He wanted it impressed upon these men again that his woods boss was king of the lumber country, the bone-crushing mauler whose path they had best avoid.

And here, out of nowhere, came this man who looked leaner than he really was, to battle Pierre to a standstill!

Boulain had the edge, yes. Snarling his fury and impatience, he was hammering the stranger mercilessly. But Townsend stayed up, and the bell clanged for the end of the fourth round and Chandler went to ierre's corner and growled.

"Get him out of there."

Pierre nodded. "Thees time. He weaken."

Clay Townsend didn't want to go out at the bell. He was licked and he knew it. The boxing skill he had acquired in college and nurtured through ten years of rough-and-tumble existence had kept him on his feet. But he had lost his speed, and his style of fighting demanded speed. Now he could only meet Boulain toe to toe and slug it out, and in that type of battling Pierre's superior strength would win out.

But, with a sigh, Townsend went out to meet the French-Canuck's rush. Had this not been the north country, Clay would have tossed in the towel and apologized for his weariness. No man would have considered him afraid. But here—judgments were quick and harsh.

For a split-second his vision was clear and his feet had their speed. He sprang like a maddened panther at his great adversary, beating him back with a volley of body blows, driving Pierre into the ropes, bringing the cursing, stamping mob of men to their feet until now they surged forward to the ring, where these two fought like snarling animals beneath the lights.

Chandler's nervousness increased. Only seconds left, and this man finishing in a blaze of fury!

Then—and Clay Townsend felt it coming—that mist closed in on him again. His feet were leaden weights. Something dripped over his cut lip, and he felt the salt taste of it in his mouth. Blood—he must be hurt. Half blinded, he turned, met a crashing impact on his jaw, and fell prone.

As if from a great distance, the sound of Chandler's counting came to him while he struggled to his feet. About him was bedlam, but he could hear nothing. Another crashing blow. This one doubled up his knees and lifted him clear off the floor. Shaking his head, Townsend made one last agonized effort. Halfway he rose, faltered, and then dropped face downward.

Something cold was pressing against Townsend's eyes. He pushed it off. There it was again. His lids flickered. "Don't," he murmured, and then he was conscious and looking up into the worried face of Jamie MacDougall.

"Aye," said Jamie, "you're all right. You had us worried there a moment."

Clay sat up. He recognized the room—the back of Clancy's saloon. Now someone handed him a glass and he sipped the red-hot whiskey. It made him cough.

"Sorry about your dough," he whispered haltingly to Jamie. "I couldn't stand up any longer."

"You made a gr-rand fight," Jamie assured him, rolling his "r's" in the way of the upriver Scots. "Sure, we have no complaints. Come up to the bar now and have a drink on Jamie MacDougall."

Before Clay could struggle to his feet a white-haired little man came into the room carrying a small black bag. Behind him was Chandler.

"Better let the Doc look you over, Townsend," Chandler said curtly.

Clay nodded. The physician unbuttoned Clay's shirt, and, carefully, unhurriedly, with stethoscope and long accustomed fingers, he examined Clay's chest and shoulders. Once he nodded in satisfaction.

"Nothing broken," he said to Chandler.

Then, with a little sigh. "Have you been ill?"

"Yes."

"Recently?"

"Yes. I've been out of bed about five days."

"And you had no more judgment than to fight Pierre Boulain?" fumed the doctor. "How much weight did you lose?"

"About fifteen pounds."

JAMIE MacDOUGALL was staring down at the man he had seconded. "Mon, did you hear that!" whispered the Scot. "Just out of bed and he almost whipped Pierre Boulain."

Now the physician stood up. "He's all right," he told Chandler. "He doesn't deserve to be. But there's nothing wrong that food and sleep won't cure."

Chandler nodded. Townsend buttoned his shirt and stared up at the doctor. The physician's thick white hair was worn straight back from his broad forehead. Kindliness and a quiet wisdom lay in the doctor's eyes—and yet there was a fragility, something haunting.

"You're Doctor Randall, aren't you?"

"Why, yes."

Townsend stood up. He was pale and a little unsteady on his feet but he grinned at the physician.

"Tell your daughter hello for me," he said in a queer voice. "I think she'll remember me."

And, giving no explanation, not answering the surprise in Dr. Randall's eyes, he went into the main room.

Here, at the bar, the Great Northern men were toasting Pierre's health. Drawn apart, drinking together, talking in low tones, were the Scots from the Stonega headwaters. Pierre sighted Townsend and bellowed a greeting.

"You can walk, frien'? You are lucky man. Not often men fight Pierre and walk away."

Clay held out his hand. "You fought a good fight, Pierre. Congratulations."

"Ah, you one good sport," beamed Pierre. "Here, frien', you have dreenk on me."

Clay accepted. He gulped the hot whiskey and then turned. Chandler was standing there, an inquisitive frown on his face.

"A word, Townsend?" the Great Northern superintendent said curtly.

Clay followed him away from the bar. "You just asked Doc Randall about his daughter? Do you know her?"

"Yes."

"Where did you meet her?"

"Oh, I've forgotten right now," Clay said easily.

The frown on Chandler's face deepened. "Did you know Miss Randall is my fiancee?" he snapped.

"No."

"She is. I don't like for her name to be bandied around in a saloon, Townsend."

Clay shrugged his shoulders. "I said nothing I'm sorry for, Chandler. I merely asked her father to remember me to her. Is it a reflection on her character that she met me—once?"

"It could be," was the curt answer. "I don't want Miss Randall's name associated with a drifting timberjack."

"That's up to her," Clay said carelessly.

He started to turn back to the bar but Chandler caught his arm.

"Mebbe you'd better clear out of here, Townsend. Mebbe this isn't your country."

Level gray eyes looked back at the Great Northern superintendent. "I'll take my time, Chandler. Plenty of time."

Townsend returned to the main room of the saloon. He ached all over from the beating he had absorbed. And the quirk on his lips was caused by the realization that he had gotten absolutely nothing out of this night's fight except bruises.

MacDougall left his Scot friends and shook his hand. "Mon, you fought a good fight," he said. "I'm proud to know you."

Jamie was a young man, in his mid-twenties, but seemed to be the leader of the haughty aloof men from up the Stonega who felled their own timber and floated it to market, scorning the Great Northern timberjacks as mere hirelings.

"A drink, mon," offered Jamie.

Clay nodded. A hush fell over the Chandler timbermen as the young Scot pushed the newcomer toward the bar. Room was made for them. Evidently Great Northern men were no more friendly toward the Scots than the Stonega men were to them.

The whiskey felt good. It seemed to Clay Townsend that he was getting warm for the first time in days.

"Where now, mon?" Jamie asked.

Townsend winced. Where now indeed? He had lost the hundred dollars that would have given him a stake. He was flat broke without a place to sleep or the funds to eat.

"The doctor," said Jamie, rolling his "r's", "hinted you need rest. A few days at my cabin would help you, mon."

"Thanks," Townsend said gratefully, "but I can't take you up. I've already cost you fifty bucks."

"It was worth it," Jamie shrugged. "You fought Pierre to a standstill. And with rest you'll fill out. Maybe you can fight Pierre again."

"No," said Clay. "I hold no grudge against him."

"I have a sister—a lass named Bonnie," Jamie said slowly. "She can cook with the best in the woods country. We are lonely up there."

Clay hesitated. This offer was tempting. The ache in his ribs and the emptiness in his stomach warned him that he couldn't keep going. His head spun now from the effects of this one whiskey.

"Don't insist, MacDougall," he smiled. "It's hard enough to turn you down now."

"Then it's done," cried Jamie. "Look, mon," he said anxiously as Clay weaved as they walked back to their table, "it's a rest you need. We sleep tonight in the Great Northern's shed. Blankets all over the floor. You need that now. I'll see you in the morning."

"I do need sleep," Clay murmured.

Behind Clay a moving barricade was beginning to swirl out into the current.

And, with an apologetic smile, he stumbled out of the saloon and toward the big shed where a score of drunk men were already snoring away.

The celebration went on without him. The Scots left earlier than the Great Northern's crew; Pierre Boulain and his timberjacks caroused until dawn. Many of them started back for their camps on snowshoes and skis without touching a blanket. But they were hardy men and could shrug off the loss of a night's sleep. Sapristi, it was worth it. Every Great Northern blowout got better and better.

III

MORNING broke cold and pale but Clay Townsend slept on even while the other timbermen, including Jamie MacDougall, stirred and went on about their business. Jamie had supplies to buy at the commissary. With tight lips he paid the price Great Northern demanded. All lumbermen could purchase supplies here, but there were two prices—one for Chandler's men, one for the independents.

The sun was high in the heavens when Clay stirred. He was stiff but rested, and some of the pains in his chest had disappeared. His stomach was empty so he accepted Jamie's offer of breakfast.

"You get all of my first million," he grinned at the young Scot.

Jamie shrugged his shoulders. "Aye, a man needs a friend sometimes. I have."

"You've got one—if you ever need me," Clay said earnestly.

He wolfed down flapjacks and bacon and coffee and stepped out of the commissary feeling like a new man. Jamie had forgotten tea and had to return.

Bonnie will murder me," he wailed.

Townsend waited. He was standing there when he heard her exclaim: "Robert!"

He turned. And he was conscious for the first time that the frame building before which he stood bore a sign "office," which meant that here Keith Chandler schemed and worked.

He felt his heart pounding at what else he saw. Framed in the doorway stood a girl. Slender and dark-haired, dressed in the woolen mackinaw of heavy winters, she paused in trembling amazement, her shadowed eyes upon him, her lips a little parted, and now as one who awakens from a trance she raised a tremulous hand to her throat.

It was a gesture that carried Clay back to a place that was not Three Rivers, and to a time that was not winter, and his heart tightened with an old memory. Silent, immobile, they stood, beyond the reach of words while the blood receded from her cheeks, leaving the skin creamy white, like ivory.

"I asked your father to remember me to you," he said slowly. "Seeing me shouldn't be such a shock."

"He said a drifting timberjack named Clay Townsend asked to be remembered," she said tonelessly. "I didn't connect the two."

"There isn't much resemblance," Clay shrugged. "Men are sometimes changed. Why shouldn't names be changed, too?"

"Robert . . . did anything happen . . . why this alias? And why up here . . . you of all people . . . drifting . . . a timber bum?"

He grinned. There was no humor in this smile. "Men blow up," he told her. "Things happen that make them lose their perspective. Perhaps I drank too much. Perhaps I waited too long for you to answer my letters."

"Robert, I'm so . . . don't make me feel so . . ."

"It's over" he told her with another shrug. "I'm through waiting. There is only a man named Clay Townsend. You have no hold on him, nor he on you."

Her face whited. "You put it brutally, Robert."

"Clay Townsend," he corrected her.

Not until that moment did he notice that Keith Chandler had stepped out of the office and was listening to their talk. Grace Randall now was aware of her fiancee's presence.

"Mister . . . Townsend," she whispered, "is an old acquaintance."

"I gathered that," Chandler nodded. His eyes blazed at Townsend.

"The shindig is over," he said harshly. "Now this town is for Great Northern men. Don't overstay your welcome, Townsend."

MacDougall was plodding up on his snowshoes. "Just leaving," Clay said curtly. "Thanks for the hospitality,

Chandler. Maybe I'll see you again."

Grace Randall took a step forward as the lean man turned. She started to speak, but her lips only moved soundlessly. The man called Clay Townsend did not look back, but followed right on the young Scot's heels until both disappeared in the tall timber.

"MON, this is home," Jamie said proudly. "And this is my wee sister—Bonnie."

She was a thin pale-cheeked girl with big somber eyes that regarded the newcomer questioningly.

"Townsend is going to stay with us a few days," said Jamie in explanation. "He needs a bit your good cooking, lass. And rest."

"Aye," Bonnie nodded.

Jamie's cabin was newly-built, of stout logs with a hewn floor, with a huge stone fireplace in which a comforting fire crackled, with hewn chairs and tables and shelves. This young Scot was an artist with an axe evidently there was nothing he couldn't manufacture out of raw timber. Jamie pulled off his mackinaw and motioned his guest to a chair. Clay sighed. The long hike through the snow had tired him. And yet there was a great feeling inside, as if his lungs were grateful for having breathed the fresh clean air.

Bonnie, he noticed, must be in her 'teens. Her brother had not exaggerated her prowess with a skillet; Clay ate a supper until he was barely able to walk back to his chair. Jamie produced an extra pipe and they smoked until the darkness was deep and heavy outside. Then the young Scot knocked out his ashes and motioned it was time for bed.

"We get up early, Clay," he smiled. "One has to, to keep up with the Great Northern."

Townsend nodded. His host had been silent since mealtime, staring into the fire and smoking and thinking. That suited Clay. He had plenty of sitting and thinking to do himself. There was an extra room and he rolled in the clean blankets and was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

The sun was high when he awoke. Bonnie told him that Jamie had been gone for hours. He ate a steaming breakfast and helped himself to the young Scot's tobacco.

"You are certainly good to a homeless man," he smiled at the girl.

"You are a friend of Jamie's," Bonnie shrugged. "We Scots have few friends from the outside."

He nodded. Already he was getting an idea of how these few timbermen battled the Great Northern's two-fisted crews.

He walked outside. The snow was drifting down lazily, curling up in restful drifts, clinging to leaves and twigs. He heard the ringing of an axe and made in that direction.

Jamie was toiling away with two other Scots. At his approach one of them leaped for a rifle, then lowered it sheepishly at MacDougall's word.

"Mon, give us a yell before you come close," Jamie said.

Clay nodded. He did not ask questions. Evidently the feud between the Stonega men and Chandler's hirelings had reached this stage, where the Scots worked with rifles nearby.

He offered to help but Jamie refused. Rest, mon, the Scot urged. He walked back to the cabin and insisted on assisting Bonnie with supper. Again the table groaned from the weight of food. The young Scot was a good hunter and the smokehouse back of the cabin was strung with venison hams, moosesteaks and all kinds of small game. Jamie downed his food with a ferocious appetite. Then, as the night before, he settled in his chair and smoked. Clay helped Bonnie clear the table and dried the dishes for her. Jamie did not seem to notice this by-play.

Then Clay sat by Jamie and also smoked.

"That was prime timber you were cutting," he ventured.

Jamie nodded, eyes shining. A timber man liked to talk about nothing better. Then the Scot's face clouded.

"Aye, but we may pay a price for it," he grunted. "Chandler has sent us word that we are cutting in *his* woods."

"Are you?"

"Who can say," shrugged Jamie. "Once we cut where we pleased and when we pleased. Then Chandler came here to be Great Northern's superintendent. Once we cut almost side by side with his men, and there were no hard feelings. But now

—Chandler made a deal with us. The north bank of the Stonega was ours, and we could float our timber down to the junction of the rivers in peace. The south side was his, and he would use Fontaine Creek to carry his logs to Three Rivers. Now we are on the south side. There will be trouble."

Clay nodded. Jamie sighed and re-lit his pipe. "We would like to keep to our bargain. We did not care to come this far south. But we were forced to."

Another nod. "The flood comes quick up here," explained MacDougall. "If our timber isn't ready, or if it jams, we miss the flood. Last year we did, and the year before. Our logs jammed just this side of Three Rivers. My father was killed trying to break that jam."

Another puff, this time savagely. "Chandler claims we are breaking our word. So we are. He broke his. He promised not to interfere with us. But each year something happens to keep our logs from reaching the Blue along with his. His timber rolls into Steinway with the full force of the flood and ours is far behind. Last year we had to calk and push our logs clear into Steinway. We didn't meet our contract. Chandler got it instead. We had a poor season."

"But cutting here," he continued, "we miss one bend of the Stonega where our logs used to jam. We are a full day closer to Three Rivers. Chandler's crews were further up Fontaine Creek and there is no reason for trouble between us. Except he claims this timber as his own and is pulling his men back and working across Fontaine and toward the Stonega. Mon, he is an ugly competitor. It was only two weeks ago that Sandy Cameron was threatened by Pierre himself. Chandler then sent us a warning himself. Told us to get across the Stonega where we belonged. We aren't going."

He knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "We're staying," he said grimly. "If it is war the Great Northern wants, they can have it."

Off he stalked to bed. Townsend followed shortly.

DAYS drifted by. Clay regained strength at an unbelievable rate. His gaunt frame filled out. He spent his time cutting firewood and cleaning up around the cabin. He suggested, and his offer was accepted, that he carry a hot lunch to the Scots working closer and closer to the Fontaine's north bank instead of them carrying food in the early morning and eating it cold at noon.

He observed the Scots' work with wise eyes. They were timber men. They were felling their logs and building their roads at the same time. Spruce beds formed a crude highway that would carry their sleighs when frozen over.

Each of these was his own boss. Jamie MacDougall directed their cutting and staked off the lumber roads.

Tramping further away, Clay confirmed Jamie's story. The Stonega made a U turn, and by crossing to the south the Scots avoided this bottleneck. Once he heard ringing sounds just ahead of him and knew the Great Northern men were working closer. He turned back.

Bonnie's shyness had disappeared and she seemed to enjoy having him around the house. He sensed her loneliness and tried to make himself companionable. He told her about Quebec and Steinway and the other cities. She listened with shining eyes. He was shocked to learn that she couldn't read or write. He set about correcting this shortcoming.

Jamie noticed, and awkwardly expressed his gratitude.

"You are good to the lass, Townsend. She has been lonely. And neglected. We have been too busy."

"I need to do something to pay my board," Clay grinned. "I'm eating like a grizzly bear."

"And you're looking like a healthy mon," said Jamie.

"Good enough," said Clay, "to start using an axe Jamie. I'm your man the rest of the winter."

"I cannot pay a man," Jamie said curtly.

"You didn't ask to be paid for your hospitality," Clay shot back. "Who said anything about money?"

Jamie smoked his pipe in silence a moment, then nodded: "If you want it that way."

The next morning Clay took his turn at chopping away at the forest giants. But shortly before noon he re-donned his snowshoes and raced back to the cabin. The

Scots were spoiled to their hot lunch and Bonnie had promised to have it ready at high noon.

When he returned to the clearing he was told that Jamie had gone ahead to survey a road bed. He pushed through the fallen spruce to find the young woods boss.

Jamie lay beneath a spruce thicket, his body half blanketed by soft falling snow. A red circle of crimson showed against the gleaming white.

Quickly Clay felt the fallen man's pulse. Breathing. Then his eyes studied the snow around him. Two trails led off to the south, toward the Great Northern cuttings. Here the three of them had talked a moment. The slow falling snow had not completely obliterated all signs.

There was an ugly gash in Jamie's head. Clay guessed that it had been caused by a rifle stock. Calling help, he began to drag Jamie back toward the clearing. Two other Scots ran up and the three of them carried the unconscious woods boss to his cabin.

There Clay examined him more closely. The white-faced Bonnie was hovering near, her eyes more somber than ever.

Clay started buckling on his snow shoes. "Give him sips of whiskey," he ordered Bonnie. "Wash his wound with cold water. Keep damp cloths on his head to keep his fever down."

"Where are you going?"

"For a doctor," he answered jerkily. "Your brother is going to have a close call."

Sandy Cameron, one of the timbermen who had helped him bring Jamie back to the cabin, caught his arm.

"What doctor? Do you mean the Great Northern man?"

"Yes, Dr. Randall."

"He won't come," Sandy said bitterly. "Once before we sent word to the Great Northern. Chandler gave some excuse, but the doctor didn't come."

"He'll come," growled Townsend, "if I have to drag him."

He raced through the drifts faster than he had ever traveled on snow shoes before. Thickening snow only made him increase his pace.

He reached Three Rivers just after dark. He realized with a grim smile that he had kept up a racer's pace all afternoon. And that, in his anxiety to bring help for Jamie, he had forgotten to eat lunch.

He found Dr. Randall's cabin, just across the single wide street from the Great Northern's office, and knocked. Grace opened the door.

"Why, Robert . . . you . . ."

He pushed by her. "Is your father home?"

"Why, yes. I can . . ."

Dr. Randall came into the room wiping bread crumbs from his mouth.

"It's that chap Townsend, isn't it? How are you?"

Clay stood with legs set firmly on the floor. "I've been up in the Stonega region. One of the Scots, Jamie MacDougall has a crushed skull. Can you come right away?"

"Of course," the physician said quickly. "Get my parka, Grace. And send after the dog team."

"I had understood," Clay said coldly, "that you refused to treat Stonega men. That you were hired by Great Northern."

Dr. Randall was pulling on his coat. He turned. "See here, young man," he snapped, "I have never refused to help a human being. No calls from the Stonega men ever reached me."

"I had an idea," murmured Clay, "that they didn't."

GRACE reappeared pulling a fur parka over her mackinaw. "The sled will be ready in a minute, Father. You'll want your instruments."

"Yes, of course."

"Are you going?" Clay demanded of the girl.

"Yes."

Then, face flushing: "Have you any objections?"

"My daughter is the best nurse in the woods country," the physician explained proudly. "Many a man owes his life to her. I think she does the patient more good than I."

There was a stamping outside, then a knock. "Come in," called Grace, busy with her father's instruments. The door opened and in stepped Keith Chandler.

"I heard you wanted a sled. Any of the boys hurt?"

Then he saw Townsend and his eyes narrowed. "Still around, Townsend?"

"One of the Scots," hurriedly explained Dr. Randall. "MacDougall didn't you say?"

"Yes," nodded Townsend. "Hit from behind. Rifle stock or gun butt. Two men jumped him."

"Indeed?" asked Chandler, raising his eyebrows.

"You wouldn't know anything about it, would you, Chandler?" demanded Clay.

"No," shrugged the superintendent. "I don't doubt my boys did it. The Scots were told not to cross the Stonega."

Clay did not press the issue. Dr. Randall and Grace were ready to travel. Outside the big company sled was waiting, with a crack crew of husky dogs and a breed driver. The Randalls took up the seat, Clay rode behind, standing on the runners.

Conversation was impossible. Several times Grace turned. Once she pushed back her parka hood as if she had something to say. Clay did not bend forward and she changed her mind.

The huskies ate up the distance as long as they could travel the main trail, wide and hard-packed by commissary sleds. Then it was slower. It was past midnight when they reached the McDougall cabin. Bonnie greeted them with a quick shy smile that disappeared in favor of a worried sob.

Clay put his arm around her. "There, honey," he said soothingly, "he's all right."

Grace Randall gave them a quick glance, then stripped off her outer garments. Already her father was at work, unwinding the crude bandages with quick practiced fingers and peering down at the wound. He sighed, and bent over to listen to the injured man's pulse. It was quite a few minutes before he spoke.

"He has suffered a serious wound. It may be concussion."

He reached for his satchel and, with his injured man's pulse. At last he nodded. thick hair. After a moment he turned upon Bonnie.

"Girl, you go to bed," he said gruffly. "We can do everything for your brother that can be done."

Bonnie obeyed. Clay watched for an hour or more as Dr. Randall fought for Jamie MacDougall's life, then fell into a troubled sleep himself, sitting in his chair by the fireplace.

A gentle touch on his shoulder awoke him. Grace was holding out a cup of coffee.

"Flapjacks in the kitchen," she smiled.

The smile did not hide her fatigue. Clay looked outside. The snow was swirling down thicker and faster than ever but it was day. Evidently Grace Randall and her father had been up all night. The physician was still sitting at the bedside, taking Jamie's pulse.

"How is he?" Clay whispered.

"Dad will keep him alive," was the proud answer. "Several times last night we thought he was a goner. But he's picking up. Just sipped some broth."

IV

THE door leading to Bonnie's room was open. The Scot girl had fallen across the bed without undressing and was still sound asleep.

"Poor thing," sighed Grace. "She must have had a dreadful afternoon."

Clay helped himself to flapjacks and bacon. He was starving. Grace watched him eat with worried eyes.

"Are you always hungry, Robert?"

"Seems like it," he grinned. "But the name is Townsend. Clay Townsend."

"Are you ever going to tell me why?"

"Probably not," he shrugged.

Dr. Randall came in for breakfast. "I think he has passed the crisis," he said, addressing his daughter rather than Townsend. "I have to get back. But this man needs good care for a day or two. Perhaps you'd better stay, dear."

"Yes, Dad," Grace agreed.

"And grab a nap while Townsend is awake," he advised.

He ate his breakfast hurriedly. A breed woman was expecting a baby, he explained to Townsend. A doctor, he added, couldn't always humor himself.

The door closed behind him. Grace refused to meet Townsend's glance.

"We need firewood," she said. "We must keep boiling hot water on hand."

Bonnie awoke, refreshed from her long sleep, and almost cried when she learned that her brother would live.

"You owe his life to Dr. Randall and his daughter," Clay said tersely.

Several of Jamie's neighbors came over. Clay talked to them outside. Jamie wouldn't receive visitors for several days. He told them of Dr. Randall's answer to his charge that the physician had refused to treat Stonega men. There were mutterings.

"Boulain came over this morning," said MacTavish, who was acting woods boss. "Warned us to go back across the Stonega. We aren't going, Townsend. From now on we'll work with men standing guard."

Clay studied their faces. Tense men. Determined men. He sighed.

"That means more men will get hurt. I don't think Chandler will back down."

This grey-eyed man had come into their midst as nothing more than a homeless starving drifter, but they had a quick respect for him. He had a quality of leadership, and now, though he had never done a full day's work with them, they turned to him for advice.

"Should we try to pull our logs back to the Stonega or to Fontaine Creek?"

Clay hesitated. The Fontaine was now the nearer. And its flood came first by a full day; he had learned that in his short time in this country. But to push toward Fontaine Creek was to challenge Great Northern to a showdown. Chandler's crews would fight for him, no doubt of that. And would fight dirtier than the Scots.

"I'd advise you to go back to the Stonega," he said after a moment. "Jamie, I know, was dead set on fighting it out this winter. But it'll be a month at least before Jamie can wield an axe."

"We had talked about that," nodded MacTavish. "All of us were of that mind. And we have decided to do Jamie's cutting for him. Every man can work an extra hour until the lad is up and about."

"I'll do that," Clay said quickly.

"Good lad," beamed MacTavish. "A friend of Jamie's is a friend of ours, Townsend. Remember that."

"I shall," Townsend nodded.

He hurried inside when he heard a faint scream. Grace Randall was struggling with Jamie in the center of the floor. The Scot's face was burning, his eyes vacantly bright, and in spite of the girl's desperate efforts he was making for the door.

As one might lift a child, Townsend carried MacDougall back to bed and held him there. For a moment Jamie struggled, crying out weakly in delirium, then his body relaxed and he lapsed into unconsciousness again.

"If we can break his fever," whispered Grace, "it's a good sign."

The three of them stayed close. The physician's daughter fed the patient snow and laid snow-cold cloths on his head. Jamie babbled in new delirium.

"Boulain, Boulain. We go on, Boulain. The Scots push on to the Fontaine's banks. You have not kept your bargain, Boulain. Stand back there, Pierre. Come a step closer and . . ."

His voice died off. Clay looked at Grace Randall.

"That is a pretty good indictment of your fiancee's company," he said bitterly.

She tossed her head. "There are two sides to every question, Robert."

"Townsend."

"All right — Clay. There are always two sides."

She was tired and her face wore a worn look. She had been awake, and under tension, for a long time.

"I have a side," she said slowly. Her eyes seemed deep-sunk and burning. "You never cared to listen."

"I don't now," he said coldly.

"But you will listen," she cried. "I didn't answer your letters, Robert Clay, because I dared not. In the rush of meeting you, and falling in love with you, I forgot that I was engaged to marry another man. When I returned here I realized what I had done. I didn't answer your letters because that seemed to me to be the easiest way."

"For you perhaps," he pointed out. "Not for me."

"I had a choice. You wouldn't have understood. You don't know. I have to marry Keith Chandler!"

"Why? Is his word law on weddings as well as timber cutting?"

GRACE bowed her head. For a moment she avoided his accusing eyes. Then she raised her head. "We have not always lived here," she explained. "Once Dad was a practicing physician in Toronto. When my mother died—ten years ago—

he went to pieces. He was outcast by his profession. His license to practice was cancelled. He was dying—from dope and heartbreak."

"Dope!"

"Yes," she admitted. "Finally he turned to the lumber camps. The Great Northern gave him a job. Not as a doctor, he couldn't practice. But as a cook's swamper. He washed dishes. They let him bandage cuts and things like that. Keith Chandler came up here as superintendent. Keith took an interest in my father. Keith used his influence to get him re-instated and appointed company doctor here. Dad is happy. Keith restored his self-respect. Nothing we can do in return is — too much."

"But you don't love Chandler?"

"No. I've fallen in love only once, Robert. I have told only one man I love him. You know who that man is."

There was a cry from Bonnie watching at Jamie's bedside. The Scot's lips were moving. And his eyes were open.

"Townsend, Townsend?" he was whispering.

Clay grabbed his hand. "Steady, old boy. You're doing fine."

"You're—looking—after—Bonnie?"

"She's fine. And I'm cutting your timber for you, Jamie. Just take it easy now and rest yourself."

"Aye," said Jamie. "Aye."

He had pushed off his blankets. Grace Randall pulled them back over his shoulders.

"He's all right," she said gently. "His fever has broken. From now on it's just the question of waiting until he gets well."

There was a sob from Bonnie. And the thin little Scot girl slumped to the floor and raised her eyes in silent prayer.

"If I could borrow some snowshoes," said Grace Randall, "I'll go back to Three Rivers."

"Not today," Clay objected. "You must be dead-tired."

She was. But she shook her head. "I don't want to stay," she murmured. "It's not easy—here."

Clay nodded. He could understand that.

"Are you going to cut Jamie's timber for him?"

"Yes."

Her eyes studied his lean face. "You're a strange person, Robert Clay," she murmured.

"Townsend," he corrected her. "Clay Townsend."

"Clay Townsend," she added, "is even stranger still."

THE days flew by for Clay Townsend. He was out before dawn swinging his axe with the Scot timber men, and he matched them stroke for stroke until the early dark set in. Then back to the neat warm cottage for a hearty meal and a smoke with Jamie before bedtime. Jamie mended rapidly. A week after his injury Dr. Randall came up, examined his skull, and predicted he would be back in the woods within another two weeks.

"A man is a wonderful animal," murmured the physician. "When he has lived cleanly, he has an amazing constitution."

His eyes twinkled at Townsend. "You're looking better than when I first saw you," he observed.

"I feel better," Clay smiled.

He did. Each morning he gloated over the stinging cold, the crisp air, the strength and the energy that was his. Clay Townsend had not known these things for several years. He had not realized how much he had missed the woods. And a dozen times each day he promised himself he would stay here. Regardless of what came, he would stay.

Soon Jamie was walking out to inspect the cutting, bringing their lunch as Clay had done. His eyes gleamed as he saw the size of Townsend's cut.

"The lad swings a mean axe," grunted MacTavish.

"Aye," echoed Sandy Cameron. "It has been as if you were here yourself, Jamie."

Jamie asked why they were cutting back toward the Stonega instead of pushing on toward the Fontaine's banks.

MacTavish explained.

"I didnae mean to run from Chandler," said Jamie, lapsing into his brogue. "It is too late now. But next winter we cut south. No man will stay us."

"Aye, next winter," agreed MacTavish.

Jamie insisted upon swinging his axe before many days. At first he must rest for a while in both morning and afternoon, but his kind of man recovers fast

once he has returned to exercise. Within another week Jamie was as fit as ever.

And to the MacDougall cabin came a visitor.

He called from afar. "Hal-loo!"

Jamie shouted back.

"Pierre Boulain. Come for talk with Townsend."

"Come on," Jamie agreed.

Pierre came into the clearing, waddling along on his snowshoes. A grin covered his burly face.

"Pierre call so you no shoot," he smirked. "You Scots bad fellows."

"We're going to get worse," Jamie said curtly. "Someday I'll settle with you for nearly crushing my skull, Boulain."

"Oh, that," shrugged Pierre. "Too bad. But you come across Stonega, Jamie. You boys keep cutting back, nobody hurt. Pierre obeys orders."

"Yes, I know that."

"What do you want with me?" demanded Clay.

"Big boss want see you. Right away."

"Then let him come out here," snapped Townsend.

"He want talk with you," grinned Pierre. "He say tell," and he leaned closer until he was whispering in Townsend's ear, "Robert Clay come to Three Rivers right queeck."

Clay frowned. What had Chandler found out about his past? He leaned on his axe. In the past few days he had been toying with a scheme and this conference with the Great Northern superintendent might provide the answer.

"All right," he said shortly. "I'll be right with you."

He turned to Jamie. "I've given you a jump," he said quietly. "Now I'll pull out, Jamie. For a while at least."

Jamie nodded. "It is grateful I am to you for staying so long," stated the Scot. "You are a top man in the woods, Townsend. No wonder Chandler wants to hire you."

"Pierre didn't say that," objected Clay.

"But I can guess," Jamie said bitterly. "He hires the best men he can find. Pays good. Closer and closer he pushes us. But you can tell him for me that we'll get our logs out this Spring."

"Look, Jamie," Clay murmured. "I don't deny I'm thinking about hitting Chandler up for a job. And I'll give him a day's work. But as far as I'm concerned, these woods are free and you are the best friend I ever had."

The Scot actually blushed. "Aye," he said soberly. "The same for me, Townsend. Good luck to you."

"Tell Bonnie good-bye for me."

Jamie fumbled in his pocket. "Little money I have indeed, Townsend, but I owe you something and . . ."

"MacDougall," growled Clay, "put that money back in your mackinaw. Damned quick."

Jamie looked up, startled at first. Then a smile lit up his somber face. "Aye," he agreed.

V

PIERRE led the way through the Great Northern cuttings, moving with long strides. Townsend panted from exertion as he kept on the big French Canadian's heels. But he had time to look around with interest, and approval, at the timber crews felling the forest giants with clock-like regularity. They would work furiously until the big freezes. Then, when the spruce roadbeds were coated with ice, sleds would pull the heavy timber to the creek bank and there the stricken titans would lay until the ice cracked and the spring floods came tearing down to carry them off.

"Hear you damn good man with axe," grunted Pierre.

"Not bad," admitted Clay.

"You fill out some. Mebbe next shindig we fight again. Betcha Pierre have more trouble whipping you."

"Maybe we will," grinned Clay.

"Or before then," the big man offered quickly. "Pierre like fight. Anytime."

"Mebbe."

"You come with us," grunted the heavy foreman. "Scots no good. Lose money. Chandler pay good. Treat men good. We work like hell but we play, too."

"Maybe," Clay murmured.

They camped that night in a temporary cabin along the main route. Sleds passed them going in both directions. Clay had to admit that Chandler kept his organization working smoothly.

The next morning he confronted the

Great Northern superintendent with a questioning smile.

Chandler leaned back in his swivel chair and studied Townsend a moment without speaking. He had a smile hovering around the corners of his mouth, a gloating smile. Like a cat which had just trapped its mouse.

"So you're Robert Clay?" he murmured.

"Perhaps," the lean man parried.

"You have a nerve," Chandler said softly. "You steal five thousand dollars of the Great Northern's money, leave Quebec just in front of the Royal Mounted and hide under an alias. Where? Right here in a Great Northern district, and you come right into our camp and fight our prize woods boss."

"I was just drifting," shrugged Clay. "I was headed for the gold fields and was flat. You offered me a hundred bucks to fight Pierre. I took it."

"And lost it betting on yourself," grinned Keith.

"I didn't want to do that," shrugged Townsend. "You goaded me into it. I couldn't refuse to bet on myself before all the men."

Chandler nodded. He continued to study his man. What he had learned about Robert Clay, alias Clay Townsend, disturbed him. Robert Clay had been field superintendent of the Hudson Bay area, the northern district. He had made a brilliant record and had been brought into the home office as production manager for the entire company. Then he had succumbed to temptation and had appropriated five thousand dollars of company money. His discharge had been quick and final despite his previous record, and a warrant sworn out for his arrest. He had left Quebec just ahead of the Mounted. Somewhere between there and Three Rivers he had shaken his pursuers off his trail.

"Besides," grinned Clay, "I thought it was rather clever. The Great Northern is looking for me. Who would think of finding me right in their own woods. Actually I meant to hit you up for a job, Chandler. I went out to MacDougall's to recuperate from the beating Pierre gave me. And the hardships of the trail."

"You've been cutting for MacDougall," Keith said shortly. "My men tell me you're better with an axe than Jamie."

"I was the best hand Great Northern ever had," was the quick answer.

"You were that," Chandler conceded. "The company was sold on you. You were a chump to throw your future away for five grand."

Townsend's fingers drummed on the superintendent's desk. "Did you get my name from Miss Randall?"

"No. I overheard her calling you 'Robert.' That and the Clay made me suspicious. I wrote to Quebec for a picture. You haven't disguised yourself, Clay."

"No," he admitted. "I didn't think it was necessary."

"What's this about a job with me?" demanded Chandler. "Do you think I would trust you?"

"Why not?"

"The company wouldn't," grinned Keith.

"I'll do the work," shrugged Townsend. "I'm the best road-crew man in the North, Chandler. I've had the training—both college and practical experience. And I know the ropes."

"I'm not denying that you're a timber man," Chandler said irritably. "The company set you up as a little tin god to all its superintendents. I don't deny I could use you. My record is good now but you could help me. Your job is still open. They say that old McGill won't appoint a successor for another year anyhow. I want that job, Clay. I've worked like hell to get it. For five straight years Great Northern logs have been first into Steinway. We've grabbed the cream of the contracts because of that."

"I've heard that," Clay nodded. "I've heard also that log jams on the Stonega help you along."

"A smart man," smiled Chandler, "takes advantage of the breaks. The Scots have had a hard time, yes. Accidents throw them off schedule."

"They sometimes happen," murmured Clay.

"You should know," shrugged Keith. "Don't tell you ran your Hudson Bay district like a Sunday School picnic. The lumber you turned out—I almost equaled your record last year, Clay. With the breaks, I might make it this Spring."

Jamie's body was half covered by soft snow. A red circle haloed his head.

TOWNSEND did not answer. "So you want a job?" Chandler said slowly. "All right, you get it. You're my road-crew boss, Clay. Or Townsend. Clay Townsend."

"Clay Townsend," the lean man nodded.

"I want production," snapped Keith. "I want to beat your record this spring."

Clay nodded.

"For a while," Chandler said coldly, "I was afraid I couldn't trust you. But now . . . I don't see any reason why we can't work together, Townsend. In return for your brains and experience, I offer you protection—from the past of Robert Clay."

"That," Townsend nodded, "is the deal I want."

"In return for that," the superintendent said harshly, "you are my man. Get that, Townsend, *my* man. Not Great Northern's, mine. And the moment you slip or try to doublecross me, I'll have the Mounted right here to grab you."

"I understand that," Clay agreed.

"Fine. Go check out what you need at the commissary. You're bossing the road crew and nobody will interfere with you, not even Pierre. I'll pay you well, Townsend. Better than you think."

He buttoned his mackinaw close around him as he left the superintendent's office, a smile curving his lips. So he was road-crew boss with the Great Northern! Back where he had started ten years before. He wandered toward Clancy's saloon.

Grace Randall, coming out of her father's house, stopped him.

"How's Jamie?"

"Fine," he smiled. Then, embarrassed: "Your Dad is a great doctor, Grace. And he's right, you're the best nurse in the woods country."

"We help all we can."

"When is the wedding?" he demanded in a changed tone.

"I don't know," she said, looking off. Her eyes came back to his. "Can't you be friendly—even for a moment?"

"No," he said promptly. His eyes gleamed.

"You'll be glad to know I'm working for Chandler," he said.

"No," she answered slowly, "I'm not glad."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm going to marry Keith," she murmured. "Someday I'm going to marry him. And with you working for him—up here—I'm afraid—for Keith."

"Thanks," he chuckled.

Meanwhile Keith Chandler was explaining to Pierre Boulain that he had appointed Townsend road-crew boss.

"He's smart, Pierre. Give him a free hand."

"Mon dieu!" exclaimed the surprised woods boss. "Just like that, we have new road-crew boss. Mebbe me take orders from him. Mebbe one of them whip tar out of him."

"I doubt that," Chandler said dryly. "I'm not even sure, Pierre, that you'll do it again."

"Sapristo! You joking, boss?"

"No," Keith answered, "I'm not joking."

WITHIN a week's time Pierre had to admit that the new road-crew boss knew his business. Realizing that he had to win the confidence of his men as well as to ease Pierre's suspicions, Townsend set a terrific pace. He was on the job before daylight and worked until after dusk, following right on the heels of the surveyors, felling timber, laying long corduroy roads that wound through the forest down to where the ice of the river gleamed. Along these roads, heaped high with spruce logs and pine, the loggers' sleighs would later come, gathering up the winter's crop into huge skidways to await the spring floods. Now the river lay motionless, as if, too, awaiting the time when men would use its rushing snow-fed waters to carry the winter's cut from out of the hills.

Yes, they watched Townsend. All of them. There were mutterings at first at his position. Then skepticism. Finally growing friendliness. This grey-eyed man had a way with him. He was a lone wolf, silent and brooding. But he worked as hard as he asked his men to work, and that was the code of the lumber country.

In his turn, he studied Chandler's organization. He had a chance to form some estimate of the rank and file that made up the Great Northern's army of woodsmen. They were carefully chosen —from the wildest and most discontented elements. Wobblies from the inland empire, breeds from the reservation, drifters, men against the world, men who wanted to forget, who came to town seldom and stayed only long enough to transact their business. Misfits. Twisted types of men whom life had bruised and embittered.

It took a Pierre Boulain to run them, a tough, flint-fisted man who could beat them to a pulp if they disobeyed an order, or were slow with their obedience.

Strangely enough, Clay Townsend did not receive a personal challenge. Usually that was the first thing hurled a new foreman—an invitation to prove his right to the job. Perhaps it was because these men had seen him fight Pierre Boulain for five bitter rounds, and knew that now he was in better physical shape. Perhaps it was because they sensed he was one of their kind, except endowed with qualities of leadership and a timber sense. They lost their distrust of him, for here was one who could handle an axe and saw with the best of them.

Pierre was delighted. He reported back to Chandler that the new foreman was accomplishing a production miracle.

"By Gar," beamed the big grizzly, "he best dam' timberman I ever saw."

Chandler frowned. He had expected this. But it worried him. Could he trust Clay? A thousand times he assured himself that this man who had taken the name of Clay Townsend could do nothing else but play Chandler's game. A letter or a message to the Royal Mounted and Townsend would be out of his way.

"Sapristo," said Pierre. "We set record this spring. Big record."

Chandler smiled. This was an irony of fate. The job as production manager of Great Northern, Robert Clay's old job, was being held open. The board of directors said they were studying prospects. If he, Keith Chandler, could up with a record cut, he would have the inside track. The old Robert Clay would help beat Robert Clay's production record.

"How about the Scots?" he asked anxiously. "We have to beat them to the flood water."

Pierre's face shadowed. This big bear of a man was loyal to Chandler down to his boottops. He fought the Great Northern's battles as ferociously and as tirelessly as he conquered a rebellious timberjack. In this giant French Canadian Keith Chandler had the perfect tool for his plans.

"They cut fast, too. They got less skidding. Mebbe so the Stonega flood first. You never can tell."

"We have to beat them to the Blue," snapped Chandler.

The Stonega River, down which the

Scots floated their timber, and Fontaine Creek, the Great Northern's passageway, emptied into the Blue River at Three Rivers. Each Spring it was a furious fight for flood water. Only the first rush of the Blue was strong enough to sweep the swirling timbers into Steinway, the market. The side that got their timber to the Blue first won—the race against time, the race for the best contract. The side that lost would probably have to pole their timber down the Blue by hand, a long costly process.

"Ye get to the Blue first," Pierre nodded. "Pierre see to it."

Chandler hesitated. He didn't like to trust the big man with such an assignment. Townsend could handle it better, without leaving tell-tale evidence. But he couldn't count on Townsend—at least not yet.

Even as Pierre and Chandler talked, Clay was paying a long overdue visit to Jamie MacDougall. The young Scot greeted him with reserve.

"So you're road boss for Chandler? I hear you're ahead of schedule."

"Yes, Jamie," Clay said softly. "I'm working for the company. I'll do the best I can."

"Aye," shrugged Jamie. "A mon can do no more."

"'Tis a shame," the Scot said after a moment, "that we cannot live and let live. There is timber for us all. Before Chandler came we worked with the Great Northern. We held our logs up one spring at Three Rivers until the Great Northern's timber got there. We didn't want to hog the flood water. It cost us—for both of us had to pole some of our timber into Steinway. But we didnae mind. It was the way to live."

"Yes," agreed Clay, "it is."

"I don't believe," Jamie murmured, "that you would help Chandler with any of his underhanded schemes, Townsend."

"Not a one," Clay agreed. "You can depend on that."

When he returned to his cabin he found Dr. Randall and Grace at the camp. A timberjack had suffered a crushed leg and the company physician had been forced to make an amputation. Grace was pale from the strain.

"It was—awful," she sighed.

"Brave fellow didn't wince," said her father. "Townsend, I never stop admiring these timbermen. Toughest breed in the world."

"Yes," added his daughter. "They can forget anything."

Her glance raked Clay's face as she spoke. His lips quirked. Unquestionably this was a message meant for him.

AS the Randalls started to leave Grace looked his way again.

"You might help us hitch up the dogs, Clay," she said lightly.

He obeyed. Silently. She stood waiting, but he said nothing.

"You are a hard man to deal with, Robert," she murmured.

"Why?"

"How many messages must I send you? Are you so indifferent to what is going on?"

"I'm laying out roads," he shrugged. "I don't know much about what is happening in Three Rivers."

"I was supposed to marry Keith Chandler this Winter. I didn't. Doesn't that mean anything?"

"How can one tell?" he asked calmly. "One time I see you and you tell me positively you are going to be Mrs. Chandler. The next time you reprove me because I didn't know you had changed your mind. I haven't a crystal ball, Grace. The only things I know are what I see and what people tell me."

"I didn't marry him," she repeated. "I told him we had to wait at least another year."

"What does that mean?" he demanded.

His voice was casual but inside his heart was thudding like a high-powered engine thrown into high gear.

She passed a weary hand over her face. "Robert, you know what my problems are. I told you. I had hoped—you would do — something about them — that you would help me and . . ."

"Your gratitude to Chandler? I can't help that. It's a noble sentiment."

"You're mocking me, Robert."

"Clay, please. Or Townsend."

"All right, Clay. You were here. I felt for a moment . . . you came . . . because of me."

He was standing with legs set apart,

shoulders low, quirk on his lips. "At the risk of appearing ungallant," he said slowly, "I didn't come up here—because of you."

"Then why did you come?"

"So you can carry the message back to Keith Chandler?" he demanded. "How do I know you're not playing again, Grace? Maybe this is just another interlude. Chandler is back in Three Rivers, and you have a few moments to spare."

Her face turned white. "You can be the most despicable man, Clay. I hear rumors about you, ugly rumors."

"What?"

"That you are Keith's new trigger man. That you are bossing the wildest gang in the Great Northern. That trouble is coming with the Scots—and you will start it."

"I had observed what type of man you fell for," he countered. "I'm trying to pattern myself after Chandler. Isn't that good strategy?"

"No. What I can tolerate in Keith I could never forgive in you."

He grinned. Some of the hardness left his face. "I'm sorry, Grace. I talk too much."

"No. I ask too much—that you forgive, Clay."

"Can I ask one thing?"

"Yes."

"You put Keith off this year. Can you wait another Spring?"

"Why?"

"I can't tell you that."

SHE studied his face a moment. "I shouldn't have asked," she murmured. "I'm tied up between two debts, Clay. I'm confused. I don't mind telling you it's killing me. But I can certainly hold Keith off. Right now it's set for next Winter. I'll make him wait."

"Good."

He turned on his heel and strode toward the camphouse.

"He is," murmured Dr. Randall, "a strange man."

"Yes," agreed Grace with a catch in her throat. "He certainly is."

Dr. Randall cracked the whip over the huskies and the sled moved toward Three Rivers.

"There are rumors about him," he said gently. "Have you heard them?"

"Someone tried to tell me," the girl nodded. Then, fiercely: "I wouldn't listen. They were ugly. He is all I have left to believe in."

Two days later Chandler drove up to camp. His eyes gleamed in satisfaction as he saw what had been accomplished. Pierre had not exaggerated; this was by far the biggest cut of timber to come out of the North country. And Clay's roads earned his special approval. They had been laid out to utilize every inch of downgrade, to minimize every hard pull.

He called Townsend aside.

"You have done a top job," he said. "There will be a bonus for you."

"I can use it," Clay nodded.

"We have the timber cut and ready. There is just one other thing, Townsend. We must beat the Scots to Three Rivers."

"Is that my job?" Clay demanded. "I can't hold their timber back."

"Can't you?" asked Keith. "What if I told you there was a thousand dollars in it?"

"I would still have to have an idea how it could be done," shrugged Clay.

"The Stonega is a crazy stream," said Chandler, eyes boring into Townsend's. "There are several deep gorges. Timber across there, fresh cut, would throw up a jam. Right about Three Rivers is a fine place."

"Last spring," murmured Clay, "it was higher up, wasn't it?"

Chandler started. His lips parted in a smile. "Yes," he admitted.

"And what if I refuse?" Clay demanded. "I don't like it, Chandler. The Scots were good to me."

"The Mounted will be more hospitable," shrugged Keith. "They'll furnish you bed and keep for a long time. Probably twenty years."

"You drive a man hard," Clay said bitterly. "Isn't work enough?"

"No," Chandler answered quickly.

Then, more genially: "Look, Townsend. I've got to set a record this spring. I haven't told anyone up here about this, but my uncle is a big man with Great Northern. Owns forty per cent of the stock. I've got an inside track on the job you threw up. If I deliver, I put the bite on Uncle Franklin."

"I see," Clay nodded. "But, Chandler,

this will go on and on. One dirty job will lead to another."

"No," promised the superintendent. "Do this one, and I'll call it even."

"Your word on that?" Clay asked.

"My word," assured Keith. "We'll shake on it.

Clay looked down at the outstretched hand with a hard smile. "No," he decided. "I'll do it, but we won't shake hands."

"Have it your own way," shrugged Chandler.

VI

THE long winter was passing. Cold, glittering days were giving way to the first heraldings of spring. Already a soft haze lay like a curtain over the valleys and the last waning snowstorms brought only wet flakes that melted swiftly in the sun. The terrain was a clinging mixture of snow and water and the roads that had stretched like gleaming ribbons over the foothills were fast becoming impassable bogs of mud.

Spring was coming early. Chandler could thank Townsend and Boulain, who had driven his crews relentlessly, that his timber would be ready. The Great Northern had hoped to find the Scots caught napping but MacDougall's clan were also set.

And now the ice was thinning. At night loud rumblings rose from the deep basins, as if once more the river had become a living, throbbing thing, impatient of its long slumber, eager to be gone. Logs were hurried down over roads that each day became more impassable. The teams could haul for only a few hours in the morning; the slush froze over lightly each night, only to melt hours before noon, and the steel runners of the sleds and the sharp-shod hoofs of the horses cut up the roadbeds until they were useless until morning came again.

Along the banks of Fontaine Creek the skidways piled higher and higher. Long before dawn the jacks were out on the roads rolling logs with canthook and peavy, skidding ties and poles down to the stream bank.

Then suddenly, overnight, the ice broke. For two days a warm chinook had been blowing, rapidly rotting the covering of snow and ice. Trails and logging roads were transformed into rushing streams, mud-brown torrents, all hurrying toward Fontaine Creek, where long cracks spread like giant cobwebs across the ice. And many times during those two days rose the deep, unforgettable turbulence of tons on tons of snow grinding its irresistible way down the slope of the mountains, hurling high into the air a cloud of white thin mist as it plunged into some gulch or hidden canyon.

With the first rumblings, Townsend and a half-dozen men slipped away from the Great Northern camp. Pierre Boulain waited up for their return, aggrieved that Chandler was trusting this new man over himself.

"It's fixed," Clay said tersely.

"Good," nodded Pierre. "I go in tonight and tell Chandler."

Shortly after midnight the end came. Above the wind and the rushing of waters in a million streams, a splitting roar ripped its way through the night. A crash like thunder, a booming resonance that swelled and rolled back into the dark forest, and the big streams stampeded like millions of wild cattle.

Townsend was asleep when the roaring came. Leaping from his bunk, he found the camp cooks were ahead of him, and Pierre out first. Men, sleepy and muttering, crawled out of their bunks.

The ice was going out!

Gulping hot coffee and grabbing food from the cook shack, the experienced timberjacks raced to their posts. They loomed like ghostly shadows against the snow as they rolled log after log from off the sleds and out along the rollways, prodding them with canthook and peavy, keeping them moving, guiding them over the edge of the stream until by dawn the surging creek was dotted with tens of thousands of logs that bobbed and bumped and whirled down that yellow foaming stream.

The drive was on. The headwaters were already in motion and the crest of the flood on these tricky dangerous rivers never lasted long enough. The cooks brought steaming pails of coffee, thick slaps of beef and buttered bread and men gulped food as they worked. No sparing either beasts or men. Heartbreakingly the

drivers flogged their horses through morasses of half-frozen mud.

Each hour the river was rising. By noon it had torn away the plank bridge below the camp. By nightfall the logs were swirling toward Three Rivers, racing along with a tide that moved faster than men or horses could go.

Now the timberjacks were strung out along the creek bank. Here a man leaped out on the bobbing crest of logs and broke a small jam. Ahead of him another crew of lumbermen darted across the slippery treacherous surface.

Keith Chandler, coming up from Three Rivers, could not complain. The Great Northern timber was moving as rapidly as the flood waters would carry it.

Up the Stonega the Scots went through the same ordeal. And Jamie MacDougall breathed the same sigh of satisfaction.

Down the Blue swept the French and breed loggers, but they were behind as usual. The Blue was only a splash in the forest until the Stonega and Fontaine Creek joined it.

NO man nor woman in Three Rivers slept that night. Sleep was impossible when the drive was on. Once annually this north country town burned and glowed wiah excitement. Dr. Randall was raced from one place to another. Men did not escape physical injury in this awe-inspiring stampede of heavy timber. His daughter was with him, bandaging wounds, rubbing with arnica and liniment.

Then, as morning broke, they could see far up the swelling yellow crests. Here both the Stonega and the Fontaine leveled out, sweeping straight for the Blue's wide banks, proving that a straight line is the shortest distance between two given points. The Stonega had the deepest banks and the smallest channel. Hence the fastest water. By morning it was plain that Jamie MacDougall and his Scots were out in front, a mile ahead of the first Great Northern logs.

Jamie was grinning in triumph as he ran along the river bank, here leaping out to straighten swirling timber.

"This year we make it," he yelled to Alexander MacTavish.

"Aye," the older man grinned back, breathless from his own efforts.

Then, breathless with haste and the long, slippery climb, Sandy Cameron, pointing the first timbers, ran up. "The logs!" he screamed. "The river!"

Stark panic lay in his voice. "What is it?" roared Jamie. "The gorge. The logs are jamming!"

He gasped out the last fateful words with a supreme effort. "Jam!" cried Jamie.

He ran ahead, MacTavish and Cameron at his heels, other Scots pushing behind.

Here, just where the steep banks of the Stonega started dropping away into the levelness of the Blue's basin, three huge fir logs were lodged on half-submerged rocks. A glance told Jamie that they had been felled here, without being cut loose from their stumps. About them the foaming water swirled, while from upstream hundreds of logs and ties were rushing like an advancing army against the newly-made barrier. Already caught in the swirl, timbers had piled up like giant matchsticks, and above them, fed by the crews, logs and ties and lodgepole posts were adding to the jumbled mass.

With a cry of rage Jamie dived forward, and, racing across the spray-drenched ramparts of the jam, started prying frantically with peavy and picaroon to set the interlaced timbers in motion. Other Scots raced up until a score of them were hurrying back and forth over the ever-growing jungle of wool, forcing the weight of their straining bodies against the nearer logs, seeking to raise them, but without success.

Tears flowed like rain down Jamie's cheeks as he labored. So near—the mouth of the Stonega was not a mile distant. A half-mile further and the steep banks would have been cleared and nothing could have stopped the timber.

Steadily the jam gained. Held back in its course, the water rose, piling the logs higher and higher, until the vertical face of the jam towered twenty feet above the stream—a frowning wall of intermingled spruce and pine, logs and poles, the white peeled surfaces of countless ties gleaming and wet in the sunlight.

Keither Chandler came to look upon the jam and could hardly suppress a chuckle. Clay Townsend had done his work well.

Then there was a shout from the banks far below, where the people of Three Rivers watched with breathless expectancy.

Jamie turned at the shout. Here the Stonega and Fontaine Creek were less than a mile apart. Sweeping around a bend of the latter stream came the first wave of Great Northern timber.

And, racing down the banks, came the Great Northern's weary but exultant lumberjacks. In their lead, swinging his peavy around and around, was big Pierre Boulain.

Jamie quivered in rage and disappointment. The Great Northern logs would reach the Blue first, turn south with the onrushing current and pour toward Steinway.

Now the task of Pierre and his jacks had been accomplished. Their timber was in the main channel. It had the full crest of the flood behind it. Nothing between Three Rivers and Steinway would stop it.

The Scots bent their heads and toiled away, cursing the luck that had beaten them still another spring.

Chandler stood bareheaded on the river bank and waved at his men. Their drive was over. As the first logs rushed by him the Great Northern superintendent ran over to the Stonega jam.

"Can we help you, MacDougall?" he demanded of the perspiring Jamie.

Jamie laughed bitterly. "Mon, it's generous you are. Now you will help us. *Now!*"

"Take it or leave it," shrugged Chandler. "I'm not offering out of personal feelings. But it's the code of this country to help clear a timber jam and we're ready to do it. Every man of us."

"Aye," growled Jamie. "And it is the timber country way to *make* a jam.

"What do you mean?"

The Scot waved toward the three felled firs. "You know what I mean, Chandler."

"Look, MacDougall," blustered Chandler. "I won't stand for any of your insinuations. Every spring you Scots lose in the race for the river. Every spring you claim foul play."

"Let the mon help," put in Alexander MacTavish. "We must clear this jam, lad. Another day and we'll never reach Steinway."

Jamie nodded. "Aye," he agreed, a lump in his throat.

At orders from Chandler Pierre Boulain raced up with his timberjacks. Out over the logs they raced, striving mightily to achieve the impossible. The jam grew higher.

MacTavish caught Jamie's arm. "Powder, lad," he screamed. "'Tis no other way."

Jamie sent Sandy Cameron for dynamite. He and three Scots went wearily back over that precarious foothold where, along the further bank, they placed long, slender sticks. Pierre pulled the Great Northern men back. Scots and Chandler's men watched from the river bank.

Clay Townsend ran up as Jamie finished setting his last stick. His road crew had been bringing up the tail end of Great Northern's logs.

"Will it work?" demanded the lean man.

"Who can say?"

Clay studied the jam with experienced eyes. "If she starts," he said, "she has to keep moving. Three or four good canthook men can do the job."

"That means working right under the jam," shrugged Jamie. "I cannot ask a man to do that."

"I'll do it," Clay snapped.

"And I," put in Sandy Cameron.

Jamie's eyes lit up. "Aye," he said, "we'll try her."

And the three of them raced out onto the jam.

Pierre Boulain was standing by Keith Chandler. "Sacre Dieu," scowled the big woods boss. "What is these? We have the Scots shut off. Their logs would stay here forever."

"I don't know," muttered Chandler, his face dark with rage. "But I can promise you I'll find out."

MACTAVISH touched off the blast. There was a terrific roaring and high above the gorge the sky seemed suddenly crowded with whirling spinning ties and shattered logs, while the whole world re-echoed to the din of sound that rolled up from the river. From both banks a shout arose—the jam was beginning to move forward, grinding logs and ties beneath its crushing force. It moved slowly, inch by inch. For a second it hung.

In that second Jamie MacDougall, Sandy Cameron and Clay Townsend dashed beneath the face of the timbers

and threw their canthooks recklessly, pulling out logs, forcing them downstream, digging at the very foundations of the jam. About them the roar of grinding, tumbling timbers dulled the ears, while, from either bank, pop-eyed loggers and townspeople watched in anxious silence. Grace Randall came to stand by Keith Chandler's side.

There was a sudden lull. The roar of grinding logs almost ceased. Near its center, the jam began to bulge. Clay Townsend shouted a warning and, throwing away his canthook, dived for the closest bank. Behind him raced Sandy Cameron and Jamie MacDougall.

The jam was breaking, and theirs was a desperate flight for life. Logs dropped around them as the pileup overflowed. Clay was struck by a whirling timber and almost went down. His flailing spikes caught another log and he pulled himself up. Onto the muddy bank. Even there he couldn't stop. He floundered up its side and didn't dare look back until he was atop the bluff. Sandy Cameron was behind him, floundering like a walrus. Clay turned. The jam had broken.

But Jamie MacDougall was gone!

They could see him now hanging precariously to a swirling log. The full force of the breaking jam hadn't struck. Caught by a backwater eddy, he was being pulled toward the far bank.

Clay started forward. "No, Robert," screamed Grace, catching his arm.

He pushed her aside, and went racing over an uncertain foothold of drifting poles and ties.

Logs were tumbling from the head of the jam and one, striking the water almost as his feet, blinding with spray, almost felled him. But his caulks caught another grip and he went lurching on. Now he had Jamie's bent figure in his arms. Then, stilling the shouts and cheers from the banks above, the wall of logs ripped forward just ahead of him, closing his pathway, while behind him, a moving barricade was beginning to swirl out into the current. He was cut off.

Clay looked around him. It seemed to the men watching from the bank that he was calm, even indifferent to the danger that confronted him. Then, holding Jamie's body over his shoulder, he started climbing hand over hand up the very face of the trembling jam.

No man dared rush to his aid. Any second the timber jam might break. Any living thing upon it or beneath it would be instantly crushed. The pileup of logs was stirring. It would go leaping off into space. It seemed hours passed. Actually it was only a matter of seconds.

Each step Clay took brought him closer and closer to safety. And yet each step brought closer and closer the moment when the logs would grind out of their locks.

Sandy Cameron raced for a rope and, with several Scots helping him, tossed it to Townsend. Clay caught it, wrapped it around his waist, kept climbing.

Almost at the top. With one last effort he reached upward to seize a projecting log, but as his fingers closed over it a shiver ran throughout the whole bulging mass and now, like snow before a furnace blast, the great wall of tangled timbers melted. With a roar that filled the canyon and a splash that rose high as the banks, the jam crumbled into a thousand grinding, splintering timbers.

"Pull, mon!" shouted Sandy.

Strong hands rushed to help them. Now dangling in space, spinning and turning, Clay Townsend and his burden were out of reach of the threshing logs.

More eager hands caught him as he swung toward the bank. Jamie was taken from him and Dr. Randall made a hurried examination.

"Stunned," said the physician, after feeling the Scot's pulse.

A whirling log had evidently struck Jamie's head a glancing blow. But this injury was minor compared to what might have happened. In a few moments Jamie was sitting up. A smile curved his lips as he watched the last straggling logs pour through the canyon and into the wide waters of the Blue.

"Mon, you did more than save my life," he told Clay. "Whatever we get for our logs, we owe to you."

"That will be little enough," sighed Sandy MacTavish.

FOR again the Scots had lost the race to the Blue. The swift-breaking flood was already waning. Much of their tim-

ber would lie in shallows and back eddies until they retrieved it painfully and slowly. And then, at market, they would suffer because their logs were water-soaked.

The Great Northern timber, rushing along with the flood crest, would bring top prices.

The Scots hurried off to eat and then start downriver in small boats. For the Great Northern men, the job was finished.

Clay Townsend found Keith Chandler standing at his side. "Wanna see you—alone," growled the superintendent.

Clay nodded and followed Keith into the office. "Yes?" he asked calmly.

"So you're a hero," sneered Chandler. "You broke the jam for the Scots. You saved the life of their woods boss."

"Why not?"

"Why not!" screamed Chandler. "I had them where I wanted them—in the hollow of my hand. Without any timber on the flood crest, they would have had to deal with me on my terms. And MacDougall—the one man who keeps them fired up. You pulled him out of the jam. Townsend, it would have been worth a hundred thousand dollars to Great Northern if you had 'tended to your own business."

"I promised to jam the Scots' logs," shrugged Clay. "I did it. I pulled MacDougall out of the river, yes. I would do that for any man, Chandler."

"I'm afraid," the superintendent said slowly, "you're not my kind of man, Townsend. For awhile I thought you were. I think we had better split up."

"I think not," Clay said coldly. "I like it up here."

"Tell that to the Mounted," snapped Keith.

"I shall," Clay answered promptly. "I shall also tell them how that log jam formed. The Scots have their suspicions. But they can't prove it."

"Every man who helped you will swear you're a liar," growled Chandler, breathing heavily.

"Oh, no," was the confident answer. "I didn't take the bullies Pierre picked, Chandler. I took my own men. They've worked for me all winter. I haven't asked them yet, but I'm sure they'll stand by me. My men always have."

Chandler's lips whitened. Clay grinned.

"I'm staying on, Chandler. As road crew boss. I like the work. I even like working for you."

"Damn you, Townsend," rasped the superintendent. "If you push me too far, I'll. . . ."

"I'm not pushing you," Clay said. "I did a dirty job for you. You gave me your word you wouldn't ask me to do another. Remember that?"

"I remember," Keith agreed.

"Then we're even. Your timber will get to Steinway first. I'm mainly responsible for that. If it hadn't been for me, we wouldn't have made this early flood. Act your age, Chandler."

The superintendent nodded, his lips tight. He knew when the upper hand was against him.

"Oh, yes," drawled Clay. "I'll want a few days off. Have a trip to make."

"All the hands are entitled to a few days off," Chandler conceded. "Your check will be ready in the morning."

"I'll pick it up later," shrugged Clay. "See you next week."

And he strode off. He borrowed a canoe from one of the other timbermen and started downstream. Already the Blue was dropping. Before many miles he was among Stonega timber being tossed up on the shore by the receding current. He swept by them in the darkness and on toward Steinway.

Jamie MacDougall, red-eyed from loss of sleep, weary from long hours working the logs, did not see him pass. Twenty miles down from Three Rivers only a few logs were bobbing along in the waning current. Timber-wise Clay Townsend could see that most of the Scot's cut would be a total loss, unless reclaimed at much trouble and expense.

It would take dredges and winch lines to retrieve those logs sinking into the shallow muddy banks. Jamie and his men, by working madly, could keep some of the timber pushed out into the stream and it would reach Steinway.

But for another season the stout Scots had failed.

CLAY TOWNSEND swept on by them as they worked and out of sight. The weary Stonega men finally gave up and slept. That sleep was costly,

more logs were left stranded by the receding flood. Throughout the next day and the next they toiled.

In that short time the Blue had returned to its banks. Downstream the first rush of logs reached Steinway. Picked crews of men held them in sluiceways while deals were completed. Keith Chandler had the satisfaction of getting the highest prices for his raw timber.

Jamie, disconsolately coming into Steinway with only a portion of the season's cut, anticipated no ready market for even his best timber. The logs that lay in the muddy bogs left by the Blue's flood must be reclaimed and then sold at a discount.

But there was a pleasant surprise waiting for the young Scot. A representative of the Canadian Investment Corporation approached him with a generous offer for the salvage timber. Would take over the job of reclaiming it as well, leaving the Scots free to return to their Stonega country and start another season's cutting.

Furthermore, the Canadian offered to buy their next year's timber on option.

Jamie did not hesitate. This deal was far more generous than he had expected from any buyer. The Scots celebrated in Steinway that night, roaring out their songs and stalking the streets with arms around each other looking for fights. They had staved off disaster. Their cooperative efforts had resulted in money in the bank.

Next year, they promised each other, rolling their "r's" more and more as they drank, they would beat Keith Chandler to the Blue flood.

Back upstream now, pulling heavy equipment behind them. Jamie could not resist crowing over Chandler.

"We came out fine," he told the Great Northern superintendent. "Once again you have failed to crowd us against the wall."

"I'm happy over your good fortune," lied Keith. "I want my timber first, naturally. But this feud is of your own making, MacDougall."

"Hmph," snorted Jamie. "I advise you, Mister Chandler, not to throw up any more log jams. You might be interested to learn we spent some of our profits for guns and ammunition. We know how to shoot. And—this Winter—we're cutting south of the Stonega and floating some of our logs down Fontaine Creek."

Keith Chandler dropped his mask. "That will be over my dead body, MacDougall."

"We would prefer it so," Jamie shot back.

When he had gone Keith Chandler sat a long time at his desk scowling blackly at the empty walls. From Quebec he had learned that the appointment of a successor to Robert Clay as production manager would be postponed yet another winter. He could gloat over setting a new production record for any of the company's districts, but the successful defiance of the free Scot timbermen took the edge off that triumph.

So they would move south of the Stonega and try to run their spring logs down Fontaine Creek! The Scots' country was closer to Three Rivers than the Great Northern cuttings. If Chandler permitted them to cut south, they would inevitably hold back the Great Northern logs, and sweep to the prize markets before Chandler's men could get going.

He sent for Pierre. He and the big French Canadian talked a long time. Then Pierre left on an unexplained mission. When he returned, a week later, he brought a score of men with him. One look at those men and one knew why they had been hired. Some of them had been lumbermen—once. But it was not for their skill with an axe that Pierre Boulain had sought them out on Chandler's orders.

Jamie MacDougall wanted a showdown this Winter. The Scots would get it starting right away. In hot, dry, humid summer.

VII

CLAY TOWNSEND returned from his trip south. Men were milling uncertainly around Three Rivers. Some crews were out marking timber for the winter cutting, but the bulk of the men were idle, doing small jobs around the main camp, helping to prepare axes and other equipment for the big season ahead.

"We have a small camp up on Tiratte Lake," Keith Chandler said curtly as Clay

reported to him. "I'm sending you up there. In charge."

Clay grimaced.

"You have done good work," Chandler gloated. "You deserve a promotion."

Technically it was that. He was being made a woods boss. But Clay knew the real reason why Chandler was sending him away from Three Rivers.

"Afraid I'll get in your way?" he asked softly.

"Exactly," Chandler shot back. "There isn't room in this camp for both of us, Townsend."

"I see," Clay mused. He stood up. "I'll have a day or so—business to see to. Any hurry?"

"Yes, I'm in a big hurry," frowned the superintendent.

"Oh, the timber can wait that long," was the airy retort. "I'll need some things at the commissary."

"Get what you need. I'll honor the list."

Clay sauntered toward the mess shack. What was up that Keith Chandler wanted him out of Three Rivers in such short order? He had believed Chandler would be eager to capitalize for another season upon his leadership of men and ability to lay out log roads. Townsend's efforts had been single-handedly responsible for setting a new production record. Yet now, with the gloating smile of a Cheshire cat, Chandler was ordering him away from Three Rivers, to the Tiratte Lake camp twenty miles distant.

Years ago Great Northern had stripped this district of virgin timber. Second-growth spruce and pine was cut annually, but in small volume. Probably not over twenty men manned the Tiratte post.

He could not bring himself to calling upon Grace Randall. He was eager to see her, for that reason he loitered around the camp, a dozen times pacing down the long street between the commissary and Chandler's office. Each time he passed directly in front of the Randall cottage. Surely she would notice him. And surely she would come out and call after him.

He met Pierre Boulain. "So you go upriver," smiled the grizzly. "You eat good. Sleep good. Then, by Gar, you come back and fight Pierre at shindig."

Clay could not dislike this big man whose only crime was his devotion to Keith Chandler. At Chandler's word, Pierre would kill or maim any man, including Townsend. He was dangerous. But he was also likeable. And, different from Chandler, he was willing to fight face to face. Left alone, Pierre would have chosen that way. He would have gone barging into the Scot camp and scattered them by brute force.

Finally Clay had his reward. Grace Randall was waiting at the gate when he walked back by the physician's cottage.

"I had hoped to see you before you left," the girl murmured. "Keith told me you were transferred to Tiratte. Congratulations on the promotion."

"I can't get much satisfaction from it," he shrugged. "The shift is to get me out of the way rather than to reward me."

"Yes, I know," Grace nodded. "And I'm afraid I'm the cause of it."

"You!"

"Yes. Keith told me he wouldn't wait until Spring for his answer. He insists we get married this Winter. In fact, at the shindig."

"I see," Clay murmured. Yes, that was it. Partly, Keith Chandler was going to ship him upcountry and then put pressure on Grace Randall.

"What did you tell him?"

She hesitated. "I didn't," she sighed.

His grey eyes raking her face were filled with bitterness. "I suppose," he said harshly, "there is no use asking for another of your promises."

HER eyelids flickered. "You're not very charitable toward people who are weak, are you, Clay?"

"This is no country for a weak man. Or woman. I doubt if there is any country for them. Life is here, Grace. We have to meet it."

"Do you meet it, Robert Clay?" she said gently.

He started at the look on her face.

"Keith told me," she added. "You are up here under an alias because of your own weakness. Your own fear."

"Is that what you think?" he demanded.

"Oh, I don't know what to think," Grace Randall moaned. "I wish you had never come to Three Rivers, Robert. It was all settled, and I was reconciled to

it if not happy over it. And now—"

Clay Townsend seized her hand. "Let me ask one more promise, Grace. And ask that you keep this one."

"What is it?"

"Will you keep it—if you make it?"

"Yes."

"I can count on that?"

"Regardless of what happens," she said huskily, "I will keep it—if I make it."

"Will you promise to keep an open mind about this—Chandler and me—until you hear from me again?"

"How long will that be?"

"I can't say for sure. But don't marry him until you see me again."

"I'll promise that," she said.

There was no doubting her sincerity. For the first time in many months Clay's face relaxed into a gentle smile.

"Good," he said.

Now a load was lifted from his shoulders. Now he could go on to the Tiratte camp.

He rode one of the company's horses, a chestnut mare. Several miles out from Three Rivers he veered from the trail and cut through the open woods toward the Scot settlement.

He found Jamie directing his men as they marked timber for the fall cutting.

The Scots had come to this country first, and it was true that the best of the virgin timber was in their section. Now Jamie was marking trees across the Stonega. By mid-winter they would be cutting in what Keith Chandler considered Great Northern's territory. By mid-winter, Clay observed, the open fight would come.

The rumor had already reached the Scots that he was going to Tiratte. Jamie commented upon it surlily.

"Yes, Chandler wants me out of the way," Clay said.

"Why?" Jamie asked bitterly. "Is that your reward for jamming our logs?"

"Are you sure I did that?" Clay questioned.

"Aye," Jamie nodded. "We have ways of finding out things. We could nae prove it in court, of course."

Clay looked off, then back to the young Scot's angry face. "I won't lie to you, Jamie," he said quietly. "I won't deny my guilt."

"Twice," Jamie said stiffly, "you have lent me a helping hand. Once you saved my life for sure. For those favors I am grateful to you, Clay Townsend. But they can nae make up for what I consider a sneaking trick against my people. You have come this time as a friend. But do not come as such again."

"I can't blame you," Clay murmured. "For what I may have done for you—forget it. You were a friend of mine, Jamie MacDougall. You still are—whether you like it or not."

He stepped outside the cabin and climbed into his saddle. He had ridden only a few hundred yards when he heard someone calling behind him. He turned. Bonnie MacDougall was racing through the trees after him.

"What is it, lass?" he asked, dismounting.

"Is it true what Jamie said?" she demanded. Tears had splashed down one cheek. "That you are no longer our friend?"

Clay patted her shoulder. "Can you keep a secret, honey?"

"Aye."

"I am the best friend your brother and his people ever had. And if he ever needs help, or you, get word to me as fast as you can."

"Aye," said Bonnie, her eyes shining.

"But don't tell your brother what I said—for a while."

"Aye."

She stood looking after him as he rode the chestnut into the darkness and emptiness of the big timber. Then, a smile curving her lips, she returned to the MacDougall cabin.

Meanwhile, at Three Rivers, Keith Chandler received the reports that the Scots were marking timber across the Stonega. At the rate they were moving through the forest, they intended to cut to the north bank of Fontaine Creek.

Pierre Boulain waited for the orders that would send him and his prize bullies smashing into the Scots' ranks. But, instead, Chandler gave strict orders for the Scots not to be molested in any way, and for the Great Northern surveyors to mark still farther south.

"Sapristi," frowned Pierre. "I do not get it."

Chandler smiled. They were sitting together in the superintendent's office. Out-

side, the air was hot and dry. The hot chinooks of mid-summer had dried the forest until duff and needles were like tinder. Here, Chandler knew lay a weapon which if wisely used could break down the crumbling defenses of the Scots.

Boulain listened and his eyes took on the look of a hunting animal that has at last sighed its prey. More than once he nodded, and his thick lips parted in an admiring grin. At the end he rose.

"Mon Dieu," he whispered, "you have the brains of the devil."

CLOUDLESS days followed while hot dry winds blew up from the south. The first fruits of that conversation between Boulain and his employer leaped up a week later.

Jamie MacDougall was sound asleep when Sandy Cameron aroused him.

After listening a moment the young Scot slipped on his clothes. Sandy raced to wake up other Scots.

Fire!

Dawn was still two hours away but, climbing a broad bench overlooking the surrounding country, Jamie saw a thin trickle of flame rising up on the motionless morning air. He ran toward it at a fast trot. A dead spruce snag was burning. It must have smoldered for hours and now, fanned by the first morning breeze, was beginning to throw flames high up into its dry, twisted branches. Jamie brought down the spruce with a few strokes of his axe and heaped dirt around the burning wood, smothering it out.

The young Scot returned to his cabin without giving it another thought, except to congratulate Sandy upon his alertness. In dry hot summer, fires were apt to break out anywhere, anytime.

But next day no less than three conflagrations had to be checked by the Scots. The crews worked with shovel, axe and saw throughout the day and by midnight managed to get a fire-line about the last of them. By morning all danger was past.

But Jamie couldn't dismiss this second outbreak so lightly. Guards were posted for all-night watching. The damage was negligible but an entire day's work had been lost. There was no sign that the fires had been set by human hand.

But was it mere coincidence that the flames broke out on the North bank of the Fontaine? With the wind from the south, as it would be all summer, there was no threat to Great Northern timber. The conflagrations would spread North and West, into the heart of the Scots' lumber. If able to gain enough headway, they would threaten the very cabins of Jamie MacDougall and his men.

This was just the beginning. All through short windy July the plain between Fontaine Creek and the Stonega was never free from the blue haze of smoke that warned the hard-working Scots that the forests were burning. Jamie and his men had no choice but to stage a long hard fight against what every timberman fears above all else—a crown fire. As long as the flames were kept on the ground, they could be controlled. But once they gained sufficient headway to start sweeping through the treetops, there was no checking them.

The haze of smoke grew thicker and thicker. Week by week the blazing suns of July and August were drying up the parched grasses. The thick ground cover of pine needles was like tinder. The whole region had become a gigantic match box.

If the Great Northern men were setting the fires—which the Scots believed but could not prove—they were endangering millions of feet of valuable timber. Keith Chandler, Jamie was sure, would chance that to accomplish what he had failed to do in three previous seasons—wipe out the Scots. He was breaking them by the simple process of damaging the timber they had already marked and of keeping them so busy fighting fires they could not start their Autumn cutting. Not one tree had been felled as mid-August neared. And the Scots, who had not had a peaceful night's sleep in over a month, who had fought fires the clock around, were dog-weary.

Twenty miles away, on the shores of Lake Tiratti, Clay Townsend saw the wisps of smoke and heard the report that conflagrations were plaguing the Scots. It was a joke with the Great Northern men, who were loyal to their company and who were innocent of conspiracy.

Clay could stand it no longer. Declaring that he was swinging through the woods for a survey of second-growth timber, he slipped away from the sub-camp

and cautiously made his way to the Stonega region on foot.

He stayed hidden while Jamie and his red-eyed tired men extinguished another fire, set five hundred yards north of Fontaine Creek. Then, studying the ground around the aspen thicket where the flames had started, he sought proof that the blaze had been set by human hands.

The fire must have started within ten feet of the trail and, backed by a light wind, spread fanwise into a cluster of young growth. Happily the Scots had felled the burning aspen before the flames spread into high timber.

Up and down the trail Clay Townsend's eye roved, but although the earth was fairly soft and undisturbed, he could find no sign of either human footprints or horse track except for the fresh cleat marks made by the Scots.

Then he started. Beneath an aspen leaf, just where the fire had begun, he picked up the charred remnants of a dozen matches lying in a little pile.

He searched further. Fifty feet away, in a patch no larger than a man's hand, the pine needles had been burned and in the center of that tiny burn lay a bundle of blackened matches tied together by a piece of twine.

Evidently the bundle of matches had been ignited and tossed into the needles. Clay fell on his hands and knees and studied the trail closer. He found a large indentation, roughly round and indistinct, and nodded.

A horse's track. The marks of a horse whose hoofs had been wrapped in burlap!

He followed the trail back toward Fontaine Creek. It was lost momentarily at the water's edge but, splashing across the now shallow stream, he picked up the tracks on the other side. A hundred yards from the bank were signs that here the firebug had wrapped the burlap around his mount's hoofs.

From there on the trail led plain as day toward the Great Northern camp.

Clay Townsend thought a long while. Then he slipped back across Fontaine Creek and made camp in an aspen thicket atop a high ridge. For two days and nights he kept his lonely vigil — unrewarded.

Then, toward morning, he heard splashing in the creek. He stole forward. A silent massive shape loomed up before him; just in time he dived into a sheltering thicket. Horse and rider plodded noiselessly by him. Running on his toes like an Indian, he kept close behind. He could not identify the rider hunched low in the saddle but he was a big man. Perhaps Pierre himself. Clay Townsend's fists clenched. He hoped so. Before he left this country he wanted the pleasure of a return bout with this big grizzly.

Across spruce ridges, down a valley thick with pine. Closer to the Scot's camp. Then there was a scraping sound and Clay saw a bundle of fire fly through the air. The rider turned and started back down the trail.

Clay quickly pulled into a spruce and waited, crouching like a tiger. He sprang, catching the rider's shoulder, pulling the man from the horse.

"Sapristi!" a voice roared out.

Clay chuckled in delight. As he had suspicioned, Pierre Boulain!

Pierre wrenched free of his clutches and came up snarling.

"Mon Dieu, you want another lesson, Townsend? I'll teach you to stay out of Pierre's way."

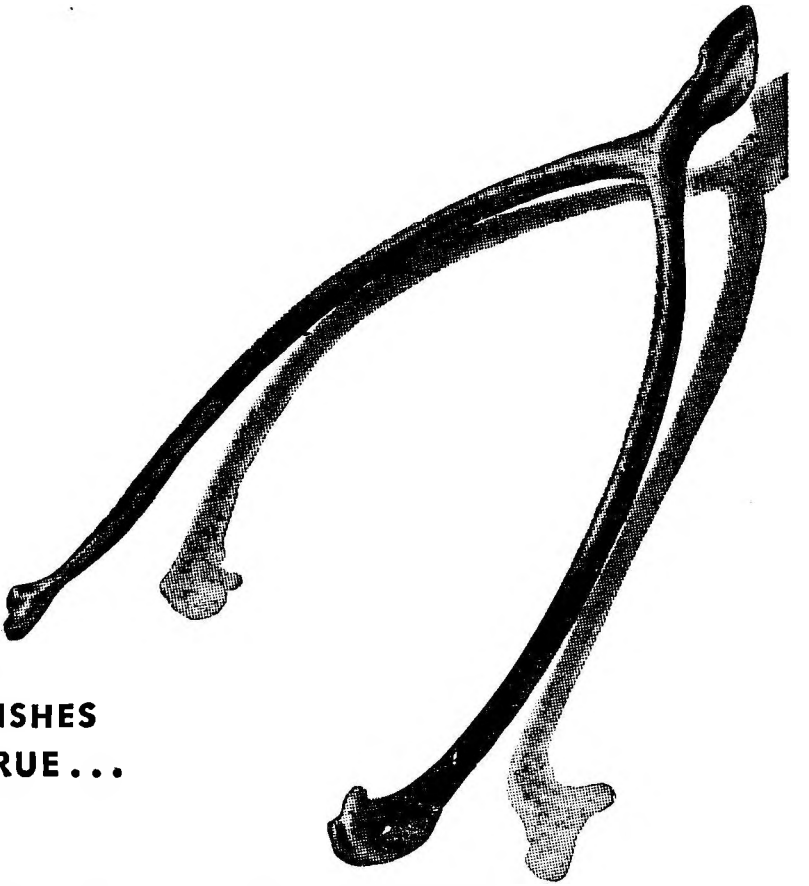
And he lumbered forward, shoulders hunched, long arms swinging down almost to his knees.

Clay met him with a right that straightened up the big man. Pierre growled and closed in. The darkness would work against Clay Townsend, the lighter man. And there was no referee, no bell. He would have to fight this bully of the north under timberjack rules, which meant nothing was barred!

"Pierre feex," Boulain grunted.

And a cuff from his left hand sent Townsend reeling. Pierre seized him around the waist and flung him backward. Clay brought up his knee in a quick lunge and Pierre groaned and stumbled backward. Townsend drove home a right and left before the French-Canadian recovered.

But Pierre shrugged off these blows like a duck shakes water off its back. In he waded again, big, menacing. Clay hit twice and felt the salty hot taste of blood in his mouth as Boulain's knuckles raked his lips. Clay reeled and Pierre brought up his knee in a savage thrust. The man



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called Clay Townsend knew then that he was fighting for his very life.

VIII

THE Scots hesitated long before sending for Dr. Randall to treat two of their number who had suffered painful burns. Jamie MacDougall was dead-set against it, but Alexander MacTavish insisted. MacTavish had been woods boss before a stiff shoulder had caused him to relegate this responsibility to Jamie.

"But I'll nae go for him," growled Jamie. "I'll ask no favors of the Great Northern."

MacTavish went. The physician nodded. "Of course. I'll answer any call, anytime."

Grace came with him. A dozen of the Scots required treatment of some sort, although only two had been burned seriously.

One, Sandy Cameron's younger brother, was in a serious condition. At his own suggestion, Dr. Randall and his daughter spent the night in the Scot's clearing.

Jamie surrendered his room, stalking off to stand guard throughout the night. They did not dare to leave the forests unwatched for a single night. With the hot dry chinook sweeping from the south, any of these conflagrations might swell into a crown fire.

Dr. Randall arose every two hours to put new dressings on young Cameron's burns. With the heat, and the smell of smoke drifting up from the south, there was no sleep in the clearing.

Two hours before dawn Jamie aroused the other Scots. A dozen blazes were flaring up.

At that moment Pierre Boulain dropped Clay Townsend with a savage right hand and, with a cry of delight, dived upon his opponent. Near them the blaze set by the handful of matches was leaping up from the dry pine needles.

But it was not this fire which was to swell until it was tearing through the treetops, driven toward the Scots' clearing by the hot hustling breeze. A half-dozen men had ridden across Fontaine Creek with Pierre, likewise carrying matches tied together by string. Now they were splashing back toward their camp, and removing the gunny sacks from their horses' hoofs.

These fires James MacDougall saw, and, with his weary red-eyed timbermen, moved to intercept.

The shouting and stomping brought Grace Randall out of bed. Toward the south was an eerie sight. The wind was rising and, driven before its swelling force, grey clouds of smoke were rolling up and she heard the nearing crackle of flames. Beyond the clearing the trees were waving with their draft, and against the dull murky sky she saw the red glow of the approaching wall of fire. Frantically she ran back to the cabin, arousing her father and Bonnie.

At the same time Jamie raced back.

"We're doomed!" he shouted hoarsely. "Everybody out. Toward Stonega."

MacTavish was by him. "She's jumped into the tops," shouted the white-haired Scot.

All of them knew what that meant. A crown fire—leaping from treetop to treetop, sweeping destruction in its roaring path.

There was no time to gather up household belongings. Women and children were pulled away still in their night clothes. Stout men shouldered the two injured timbermen and ran with them. Bonnie caught Grace Randall's hand as she stood motionless in horror.

"Come," said the girl.

Behind them was the dominant rolling as of a thousand distant drums that seemed to fill the very sky.

Still carrying his black bag, Dr. Randall raced in their wake. Grace turned to wait for him. At that moment he lost his balance as he stumbled over a stump and fell heavily. He was up immediately, but in that perpetual twilight as the roaring fire cast its light through interlaced branches of fir and spruce, Grace saw that he had injured his ankle.

"Go ahead, Grace," he panted. "You can't do any good here."

She cried out but Jamie and Bonnie MacDougall were beyond hearing, unaware of the physician's helplessness.

"I won't leave you," she cried. "Lean on me, dad. We can make it. Come on, I can stand it."

And, leaning heavily on his daughter's shoulders, Dr. Randall hobbled on. Once he stumbled to his knees and for a tor-

tured second all hope left Grace's heart, but doggedly he pulled himself to his feet again, and in another moment they were scrambling down the moss-covered banks of the Stonega River.

THEY waded waist-deep into the stream, plunging down it until they found a huge boulder jutting out, extending half-way to the other bank. Feeling her way along the granite face of the rock, Grace pulled her father under its shelter, a semi-cave within the stream itself. Above them a narrow slit revealed the smoke-laden sky.

"If the smoke doesn't get us," she panted to the physician, "we can make it."

Dr. Randall coughed an assent. The first wall of flame came lashing at them. With a roar the heavens had turned from lurid brown to a blaze of yellow light, and across the river the air was filled with thousands of burning brands floating down like a glittering shower of fire from the blazing sky. Wave after wave of heat surged over them. It was stiffling within that narrow space. Again and again father and daughter lowered their heads under the water. Blue-gray clouds of smoke rolled in upon them, blinding them, gripping their lungs. The fire had swept by them but the oceans of smoke in its wake threatened their existence.

Clay Townsend was tiring. He twisted free of Pierre Boulain's clutching arms and rolled out of reach, then came slowly to his feet. The wind was sweeping the flames away from them, but it was deadly hot in this inferno, and smoke clouds tugged at a man's lungs, making breath hard and precious.

Pierre had him again. Two hairy arms wrapped about Clay's waist, bending him backward, locking the two men together. Pierre threw the weight of his huge body upon Clay, hoping to batter the breath from his lungs. Then, as Townsend lay beneath him, the big man raised one fist high and brought it down with all the driving power of his huge frame straight into Clay's unprotected face.

But Clay was not yet through. He whirled, twisting with a savageness that threatened to break his own spine. He broke free, and, before Pierre could stagger up, he flung himself upon the giant's back and forced his own right arm beneath Pierre's chin in the dreaded stranglehold. Slowly Pierre rose to his knees, the great cords of his neck swelling with the pressure of that punishing grip. Stifling, his mouth opened and his face grew darker until the close-set eyes had become two spots of red that glittered evilly under the low wet forehead.

His strength was prodigious. Clay felt his grip breaking, and he would have thought that he could take such a hold and choke any man to death. In spite of his straining, his fingers slipped.

And Pierre seized him and flung him away bodily. He landed against an aspen clump, and Pierre charged with the ferocity of a grizzling bear. Clay met him. Boulain had broken the strangelehold, but it had cost him precious strength. His blows had lost their devastating power.

Both men were weaker. They had lost all sense of time, were like animals that clawed and growled, struck, turned and struck again. The wind was whistling in Clay's throat and Pierre's breath came in long, whining sobs. Once more they broke, once more Pierre came charging. This time Clay Townsend took a step forward. He met the rush more than half-way. Pierre floundered from a right and a left. Then, as he fell back, Clay caught his throat again.

"This time, Pierre," he growled. "This time."

He pushed the French-Canuck backward. Pierre's eyes rolled. He flung his arms. He pulled Townsend's hair. His fingernails ripped a gash across Clay's face.

But Pierre knew he was through. He whimpered.

"Sapristi, don't kill a man."

"Why not?" demanded Townsend. "Isn't killing too good for a man who set fires?"

There was faint grumble in Pierre's throat; his voice wouldn't register.

Clay relaxed his grip.

"Mon Dieu," whispered the grizzly, "it was Chandler. Chandler, he order me to set fires."

"Will you face Chandler with that?"

He tightened his grip as he barked his question. Pierre nodded.

Clay stood up, reeling from his own faintness. "Then you can live, Pierre," he grunted. "But if you back down and don't

tell your story, I'll choke you to death with my bare hands.

"Oui," whispered the beaten woods boss.

Clay looked around him wildly. The fire had swept to the north, terrifying in its proportions, coloring the early dawn with a brilliant crimson tinged here and there with splashes of yellow.

He looked down at the panting Boulain. No time to carry his victim into Three Rivers. And no way of tying him. With a shrug he darted through the smouldering embers.

There was more important work to be done. It was obvious that the Scots' clearing had gone up in flames. Perhaps he would get there in time to help a trapped soul.

He had to pursue a zig-zag path through a hell of smouldering stumps, along a fire-drenched terrain whose heat burned even through his heavy soles. He saw the charred masses of embers that had just a few hours before neat comfortable homes.

Shouting at the top of his voice, he picked his precarious way through the awful blackness dotted here and there by stubborn wisps of fire. He reached the Stonega River, and saw that the crown fire had leaped over it, and into the timber beyond.

He leaped into the water and started splashing across. Just then he heard a faint sigh. He shouted again, and there was an answer very near to him.

And thus he found Grace Randall and her father hovering under the shelter of the huge boulder.

"Robert!" sighed the girl. "Thank God."

She was unable to move. It took all of her strength to keep her father's head above water. Dr. Randall had fainted, and only his daughter's determination kept him from slipping free of her clutching hands and into the water.

CLAY relieved her of this burden. He pulled Dr. Randall up on the bank and chafed his wrists until the faint flush of blood returned to his lips. Feebly the physician opened his eyes.

"What a fire!" he sighed. "We must get busy, Grace; there will be many people hurt."

"Not for you to worry about," Clay said crisply. "You're going into camp."

And, carrying him as he would a sack of grain, Townsend strode back toward Fontaine Creek. Skirting the burning timber, they made their way over ashes that were still warm out to the main logging road.

A shout from far-off stopped them. Keith Chandler came racing down the road on horseback.

"Thank God!" he cried when he recognized Grace. "I heard you spent the night in the Scot clearing and I've been scared to death."

Then he saw Townsend, and fell back a step. "What are you doing here, Townsend?" he demanded.

"Right now I'm going into camp and treat a hundred burns or so," Clay said calmly. "Then you and I are going to have a little talk."

There was a queer gleam in Chandler's eyes. "Talk?"

"Yes."

"What have you . . .?"

Grace interrupted him. "Don't stand there arguing," she said fiercely. "Get a buckboard. I'm afraid dad is hurt bad."

"I'm all right," whispered the physician. But his ash-grey face belied his words.

Clay took charge of the weary doctor. An ankle was sprained, necessitating heavy bandaging. All three of them were suffering from small painful burns. He helped Dr. Randall to the bed and held a bottle of brandy to the old man's lips.

"Drink," he ordered. "You need it."

The doctor obeyed. Color returned slowly to his face.

"You look," he murmured, "as if you need treatment yourself."

Clay nodded, suddenly consciousness of his weariness. Grace Randall took charge of him, treating his burns with oil and bandaging cuts from Pierre's huge fists. Several spoonfuls of brandy made him so sleepy he could keep his eyes open no longer. With a sigh he gave up, and sank back into deep slumber.

Grace looked down at him with shining eyes. Whatever he had done that had sent him into the north country under an assumed name, he was her man. She was sure of it. She would tell Keith Chandler so at the first opportunity. She bathed and dressed her own burns and joined the two men in deep tired sleep. Throughout the

long day there was no sound in the Randall cottage but the heavy breathing of three weary people.

She awoke first. At first she couldn't understand what had aroused her. It was much like a nightmare, a memory held over from the awful early morning. Men shouting, the crackling of flames, the shrillness of a woman's scream.

She looked outside. The Great Northern office and yard was going in flames. And, milling outside, were men carrying rifles. She recognized Jamie MacDougall as their leader and then saw, with a gasp of horror, that Keith Chandler was being pushed toward the burning buildings by three grim-faced Scots.

She touched Clay's shoulder and the lean man was awake immediately. He took one look and growled "I should have known it" and went hurrying toward the fire. Grace followed.

Jamie MacDougall saw him coming and spoke to the Scots. They turned and waited, dogged determination written on their faces. Jamie took a step forward.

"For what you've done for me and mine, Townsend, you will be spared our wrath. But think not of interfering."

Keith Chandler tried to pull forward but he was tied tightly. His face was white with fear.

"Don't let the devils hang me, Townsend," he babbled. "That's what they intend to do—hang me."

Clay nodded and kept walking closer. The Scots fell back and let him pass.

"What good will come of this, Jamie?" Townsend asked.

"Do you think a mon can fire our houses and our timber and live?" Jamie shot back. "Perhaps you are guilty as well, Townsend. It is my advice that you clear out while you have the chance."

"You are violating the law yourselves," Clay said, motioning toward the burning office and timberyard. "You have fired Great Northern property."

"Aye," shouted a Scot. "And 'tis sad we are that the fiend Chandler wasn't in the flames."

"Can you prove Chandler started the fires?" demanded Clay.

"Aye, to our own satisfaction," snapped Jamie. "Perhaps not a court of law. But up here—tonight—*we* are the law."

Shouts from behind him indicated that his neighbors from up the Stonega approved of his intention.

Clay held up his hand. "Men, will you trust me?"

"No," a dozen voices shouted back. "You are Chandler's man. You jammed our logs last spring. Except for Jamie's intercession, we would hang you with Chandler."

"Jamie," asked Clay, "will you ask them to trust me?"

"Mon, are you daft?" demanded the Scottish woods boss. "At this moment, when our homes are in ashes and our timber ruined, do you think we want to listen to words? 'Tis ruined we are, and it is this black scoundrel's doing. And maybe yours."

"No, not mine," denied Clay. "Jamie, I'm asking you again. Trust me. Ask your men to trust me."

Jamie stared back at him, eyes deeply sunk, lips quivering. "Why? For another fire? All of us might have been burned in our beds."

"For the third time, Jamie," Clay said quietly.

THIS man had saved his life. This man had looked him in the eyes and admitted his guilty role in starting their timber jam. But this man had also risked his own neck to move their timber.

"Men, will you listen?" Jamie called out in sudden decision.

There was a chorus of "no's." Then Alexander MacTavish held up his hand.

"Jamie is our duly elected leader. If he says to listen, we will."

"Talk fast," Jamie snarled in Clay's ear. "This blackguard must meet his doom before dark."

Clay nodded. Raising his voice, waving his arms, he turned upon the angry Scots.

"Men, you know me as Clay Townsend. You know that I came into Three Rivers a year ago penniless, jobless and hungry. That I fought Pierre Boulain and was beaten. That I regained my health at Jamie MacDougall's house and became a Chandler man. Most of you know, or suspicion, that I caused the lumber jam last spring and . . ."

"Aye, we know."

"And that you will pay for, Townsend."

"Let me go on," he roared out over the

hubbub. "What you don't know is that I arranged for the purchase of your timber by the Canadian Investment Corporation. You lost but little. The loss was absorbed by Great Northern itself."

"Who says so?" roared out a Scot.

"I do," Clay shouted back. "The name 'Clay Townsend' is an alias. I am Robert Clay, General Production Manager of Great Northern."

"Aye, and a fugitive from justice. How about the money your stole?"

"I stole no money," Robert Clay smiled. "I am no fugive from justice. Rumor reached us of the unscrupulous tactics being displayed by our superintendent, Keith Chandler. To fire him was not easy, for his uncle is our biggest individual stockholder and would not listen to charges against his nephew. Finally it was decided that I should come up here to get the proof. The story of my embezzlement and discharge was made up so as to lull Chandler's suspicions. It was not likely that I wouldn't be recognized."

Now there was silence about him. These men believed him.

"From this moment," he shouted, "I am taking charge of Great Northern's investment in the Three Rivers country. There will be no charges brought against you for burning our office and yard. We had that coming to us. Your timber is ruined, but every man of you is cordially invited to work Great Northern timber south of Fontaine Creek, and you will receive your prorata pay on a cooperative basis, just as you've worked together. By next summer, perhaps we can secure virgin timber.

"Anyhow, from this day on, the feud between Great Northern and the Stonega Scots is over. We will help you get back on your feet. And from then on, we will always be a good neighbor."

Another stunned silence. Then a yell went up. It spread rapidly to other lips.

"Aye, spoken like a man," roared Alexander MacTavish.

"What about Chandler?" shouted Sandy Cameron.

"Chandler will pay the price for his crimes," promised Robert Clay. "I have the confession of Pierre Boulain that he started these fires at Chandler's orders. There is my own testimony that Chandler ordered me to fell the firs in the Stonega, creating the timber jam. Turn Chandler over to us, and we will see that he faces trial."

"Aye," shouted a score of happy voices.

But in their excitement they had relaxed their vigilance over the white-faced criminal. He twisted free of Robert McGregor's arms and, with a curse, raced for the river.

His defiant shout floated back as he hit the water.

Jamie MacDougall was the first man to act. He ran toward the river bank, his rifle ready. Squatting, waiting, he studied the placid surface. Chandler's head bobbed up, far out in the stream. Jamie fired.

Then they waited. Keith Chandler did not come up. Jamie finally lowered his gun and looked up at Robert Clay, standing by him, with a curious look in his eyes.

"He said we'd float our logs down the Stonega over his dead body," the young Scot murmured. "Aye, that we will."

Robert nodded. He turned, and realized that Grace was there and had heard every word.

"You shouldn't be here," he reproved her. "You could have been spared this."

"I wouldn't have missed some of it for anything," she smiled back. Then, with a shudder: "Keith's death, yes. It was horrible. But your speech to the men. And the way you made them listen to you."

She added in the next moment, her eyes shining: "You make everyone listen—and believe, Robert."

There was no Pierre Boulain to thrill the timbermen of all nationalities and stations when they showed up at Three Rivers for the annual shindig. Nor did Robert Clay, the new champion of the big pines, demonstrate his fistic skill.

As a substitute, there was a wedding. And a farewell party—for Mr. and Mrs. Robert Clay, returning to Quebec.

WHO'S WHO *on the* GRIDIRONS

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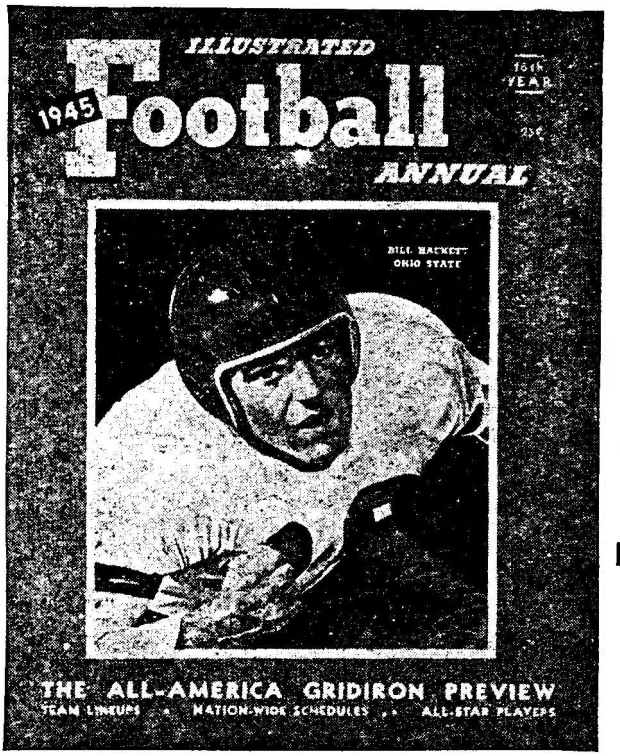

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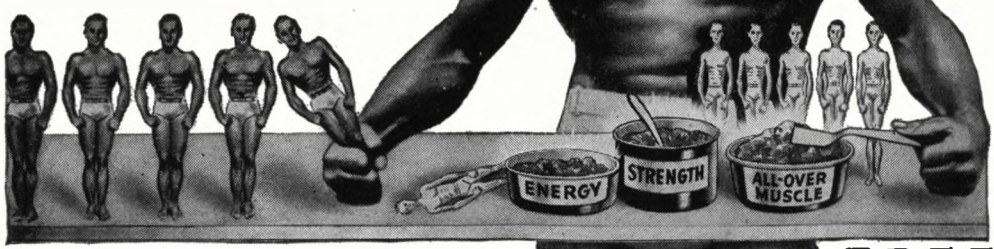

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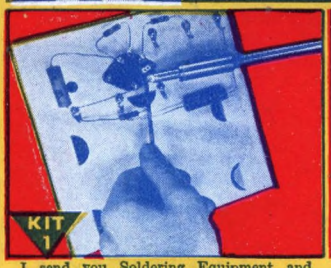

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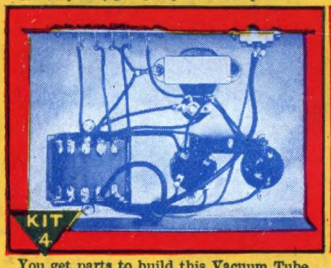

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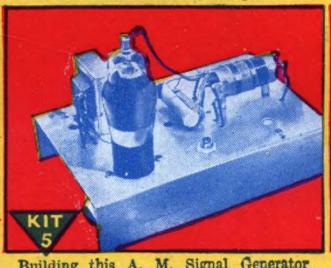

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