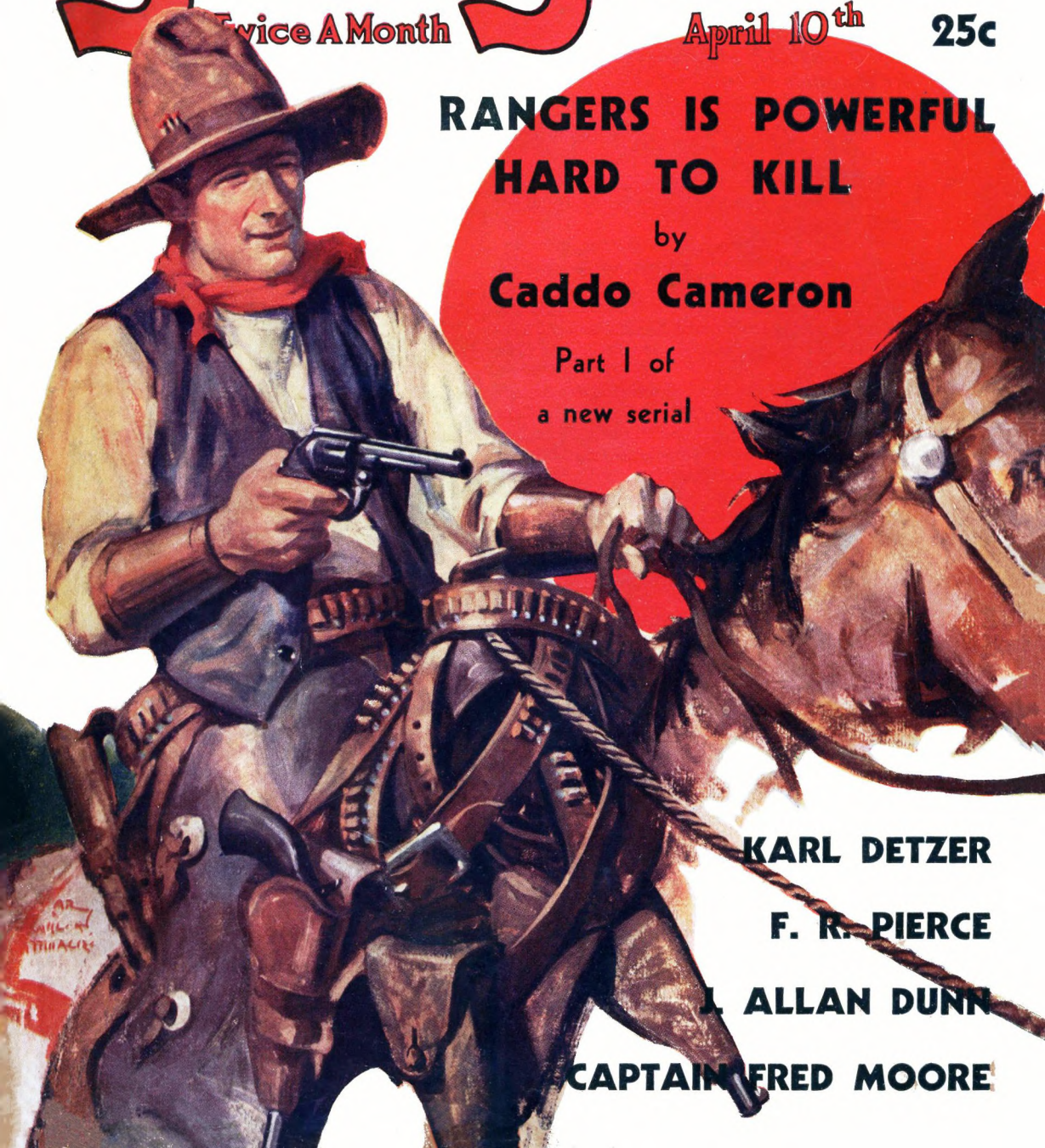
A Dynamite Drury Novelette by L. PATRICK GREENE

A New Serial; Four Complete Novelettes; Many Short Stories

Short Stories

Twice A Month — April 10th — 25c



RANGERS IS POWERFUL HARD TO KILL

by

Caddo Cameron

Part I of a new serial

KARL DETZER

F. R. PIERCE

J. ALLAN DUNN

CAPTAIN FRED MOORE

SHORT STORIES. Issued semi-monthly by DOUBLEDAY, DORAN & COMPANY, INC., 501 Franklin Ave., Garden City, N. Y., and entered as second-class matter at the Post Office, Garden City, N. Y. YEARLY SUBSCRIPTION PRICE—In the United States, Mexico and American Possessions, $5.00 per year; to Canada, $5.50; and to all other foreign countries in the Postal Union, $6.00; price payable in advance, and including postage.

NELSON DOUBLEDAY, *President*
RUSSELL DOUBLEDAY, *Vice-President*
JOHN J. HESSIAN, *Treasurer*
LILLIAN A. COMSTOCK, *Secretary*
L. J. McNAUGHTON, *Asst. Treasurer*

50c A WEEK

Latest Popular Lady's Baguette Wrist Watch or Modern Man's Watch. Beautifully engraved and chased Chromium finished link bracelet to match. Tested and regulated movements. Guaranteed perfect time-keeping and satisfactory service. Free material for two years.

Exquisitely designed Lady's solitaire Ring or Gorgeous Man's Ring. Beautifully chased. Set with a full cut Simulated Diamond of dazzling radiance and blazing blue white fire. Simulated Diamonds are pure white, full 24 facet cut, glitter with sparkling brilliancy. You will be amazed with its similarity of a perfect cut, flawless, genuine diamond costing hundreds of dollars. To advertise our Simulated Diamond Rings, we will give the above described Baguette Watch or Modern Man's Watch, on each ring purchased and paid on our liberal easy weekly payment plan.

Send only name and address. No papers to sign, no references required, no red tape. Just state size of ring or send strip of paper for measure. On arrival pay Postman $2.00 down. Then you send us 50c weekly, full price only $9.95. The Watch will not cost you anything on this offer. Price you pay is for the ring only and you get the watch without extra cost. Act now! Rush order at once. Mention watch and ring wanted and ring size.

FASHION JEWELRY CO., 154 NASSAU ST. Dept. 146, New York

Help Kidneys

Don't Take Drastic Drugs

Your Kidneys contain 9 million tiny tubes or filters which may be endangered by neglect or drastic, irritating drugs. Be careful. If functional Kidney or Bladder disorders make you suffer from Getting Up Nights, Nervousness, Loss of Pep, Leg Pains, Rheumatic Pains, Dizziness, Circles Under Eyes, Neuralgia, Acidity, Burning, Smarting or Itching, you don't need to take chances. All druggists now have the most modern advanced treatment for these troubles—a Doctor's prescription called Cystex (Siss-Tex). Works fast—safe and sure. In 48 hours it must bring new vitality and is guaranteed to make you feel years younger in one week or money back on return of empty package. Cystex costs only 3c a dose at druggists and the guarantee protects you.

ANY PHOTO ENLARGED

Size 8x10 inches or smaller if desired. Same price for full length or bust form, groups, landscapes, pet animals, etc., or enlargements of any part of group picture. Safe return of original photo guaranteed.

47c

SEND NO MONEY Just mail photo or snapshot (any size) and within a week you will receive your beautiful life-like enlargement, guaranteed fadeless. Pay postman 47c plus postage—or send 49c with order and we pay postage. Big 16x20-inch enlargement sent C. O. D. 78c plus postage or send 80c and we pay postage. Take advantage of this amazing offer now. Send your photos today. Specify size wanted.

STANDARD ART STUDIOS, 104 S. Jefferson St. Dept. 5M-H, Chicago

MERRYMAKERS: Avoid Accidents, SOBERUP

Take SL Powders before driving home. They immediately relieve the head, nerve, stomach and sweeten the breath. Recommended and prescribed by local physicians. Send for a supply and be prepared not to suffer from the after-effects of a nerve-wracking hangover. Astonishing results. $1.00 per box (1 dozen).

SL LABORATORIES, Dept. A

7568 Hollywood Blvd. Hollywood, Calif.

BECOME AN EXPERT

ACCOUNTANT

Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn $3,000 to $15,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. Only 14,000 Certified Public Accountants in the U. S. We train you thoroly at home in spare time for C. P. A. examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C.P.A.'s, including members of the American Institute of Accountants. Write for free book. "Accountancy, the Profession that Pays."

LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 475-H, Chicago

The School That Has Trained Over 1,350 C. P. A.'s

PREPARE FOR

Better JOBS and BETTER PAY!

A real opportunity exists for those who Learn Drafting Now—drafting leads most industries in recovery today!

Learn Practical

DRAFTING *at Your Home From an* ENGINEER!

I'll teach you on practical work, a method successful since 1900, and furnish you all tools, also drawing table. Earn while you learn in your spare time. No High School or previous experience needed. Write TODAY for FREE BOOK on Draftsmanship. No obligations. Please give your age.

FREE BOOK **ENGINEER DOBE** Div. 30-34 **LIBERTYVILLE, ILL.**

TOBACCO HABIT BANISHED

FOR THOUSANDS OF MEN

QUICK, SURE, LASTING RESULTS

in most cases **Tobacco Redeemer** relieves craving for tobacco completely in a very few days. An absolutely safe, dependable, and thoroughly reliable treatment. No matter how long the habit, or in what form used, all craving for tobacco usually vanishes when this pleasant, inexpensive treatment is used according to simple directions. The treatment has helped thousands and should help you. Your money returned without argument or question if not satisfied. Write for free explanatory booklet and proof of what **Tobacco Redeemer** has done for men addicted to the tobacco habit. Send post card or letter today.

NEWELL PHARMACAL CO.

Dept. 600 Clayton Station St. Louis, Mo.

BECOME A SUCCESSFUL

DETECTIVE

Earn Big Money—Travel or Work at Home—Experience Unnecessary. Train Yourself for Secret Investigation and Confidential Work. FREE Detective Paper and Particulars. Write Today to

NATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM

Dept. 425-F Fremont, Nebraska, U. S. A.

FREE! PEN PALS

Honorary membership card in worldwide fraternal organization of correspondents and sample copy of unique I. X. D. PEN PAL MAGAZINE (free of charge), together with full details on how to receive a shower of letters and cards from all parts of U. S. and foreign countries sent upon receipt of 10¢ coin (or stamps) to cover mailing cost. Learn about this fascinating hobby; harmless and intensely interesting pastime. Write today!

IOTA XI DELTA

416 S. Dearborn St. (Suite 320), Chicago, Illinois, U. S. A.

NO JOKE TO BE DEAF

—Every deaf person knows that—

Mr. Way made himself hear his watch tick after being deaf for twenty-five years, with his Artificial Ear Drums. He wore them day and night. They stopped his head noises. They are invisible and comfortable, no wires or batteries. Write for TRUE STORY. Also booklet on Deafness.

Artificial Ear Drum

THE WAY COMPANY

737 Hofmann Bldg. Detroit, Michigan

INVENTORS

TIME COUNTS

in applying for patents. Don't risk delay in protecting your ideas. Send sketch or model for instructions or write for FREE BOOK, "Patent Guide for the Inventor" and "Record of Invention" form. No charge on how to proceed. Prompt, careful, efficient service.

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN AND HYMAN BERMAN

1879 Adams Bldg., Registered Patent Attorneys, Washington, D. C.

One Cent a Day Brings $100 a Month

Over One Million Dollars in cash benefits have already been paid to one-cent-a-day policyholders by National Protective Insurance Co., the oldest and largest company of its kind.

Their new policy pays maximum Principal Sum benefits of $4,000, increasing to $6,000. Maximum monthly benefits of $100 are payable up to 24 months. Large cash sums are paid immediately for fractures, dislocations, etc. Also liberal benefits are paid for any and every accident. Same old price—just one cent a day. Age limits for policy—men, women and children—ages 7 to 80 years.

SEND NO MONEY

For 10 days' free inspection of policy, simply send name, age, address, beneficiary's name and relationship. No application to fill out, no medical examination. After reading policy, which will be mailed to you, either return it or send $3.65 which pays you up for a whole year—365 days. Write National Protective Insurance Co., 406 Pickwick Bldg., Kansas City, Mo., today while offer is still open.

Make $18.00 Weekly at Home

ADDRESSING and MAILING POSTCARDS and LETTERS. Experience unnecessary. Steady work. Supply furnished. START NOW. Complete particulars send 10¢ to cover mailing expenses.

NATIONAL INDUSTRIES
17 Locust Dept. 25B
Springfield, Mass.

AMAZING NEW BUSINESS
Sell to Stores

Get Set for Life!

HANDLE BIG-PAY ROUTE

Good pay right from start. Place famous line 5¢-10¢ Counter Card. Goods with steady store customers. 200 fast-selling products including Razor Blades, Aspirin, Chocolated Laxative, on sales-making counter displays. Up to 140% profit for you and merchant. No experience needed. Big catalog. Samples FREE. World's Products Co., Dept. 4855, Spencer, Ind.

Learn Public Speaking

At home—in spare time. Many overcome "stage-fright," gain self-confidence, and increase their earning power, through ability to sway others by effective speech. Write for free booklet, *How to Work Wonders With Words* and requirements.

NORTH AMERICAN INSTITUTE, Dept. 1184
3601 Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois

LAW

STUDY AT HOME

Legally trained men win high positions and big success in business and public life. Be independent. Greater opportunities now than ever before. Big corporations are headed by men with legal training. Earn **$3,000 to $10,000 Annually**

We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL.B. conferred. Successful graduates in every section of the United States. We furnish all text material, including fourteen-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 64-page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send for them NOW.

LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 478-L, Chicago

BE A RAILWAY TRAFFIC INSPECTOR

A FIELD WHERE PAY ADVANCES ARE RAPID

GOOD PAY for reliable, active men—19 to 50—trained as *Railway and Bus Passenger Traffic Inspectors*. A growing field and constant demand. Upon completion of our short, home-study course, we place you at up to $125 per month, plus expenses, to start, or refund tuition. Ambitious men advance steadily. Fascinating, healthful work. Free Booklet. **STANDARD BUSINESS TRAINING INSTITUTE, Div. 1304, Buffalo, N. Y.**

Be Your Own MUSIC Teacher

LEARN AT HOME

by wonderful improved method. Simple as A. B. C.—a child can learn it. Your lessons consist of real selections instead of tiresome exercises. When you finish one of these delightfully easy lessons you've added a new "piece" to your list. You read real notes, too—no "numbers" or trick music. Method is so thorough that many of our 700,000 students are band and orchestra LEADERS.

PLAY BY NOTE
Piano, Organ, Violin, Cornet, Mandolin, Harp, 'Cello, Trombone, Flute, Clarinet, Piccolo, Saxophone, Ukulele, Guitar, Voice and Speech culture, Harmony and Composition, Drums and Traps, Banjo (Plectrum, 5-String or Tenor) Piano Accordion, Italian and German Accordion.

Be Popular

Everything is in print and pictures. First you are *told* what to do. Then a picture *shows* you how to do it. Then you do it yourself and *hear* it. In a few short months you become an excellent musician—the life of every party!

Free Book and Demonstration Lesson

You may quickly become a fine player through the U. S. School home study method. Write at once for our Illustrated Free Book and Free Demonstration Lesson. Please mention your favorite instrument and write your name and address plainly. Instruments supplied when needed, cash or credit.

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC
8894 Brunswick Building, New York City

BE A RADIO EXPERT

Learn at Home-Make Good Money

Mail the coupon. Men I trained at home in spare time make $30, $50, $75 a week. Many made $5, $10, $15 a week in spare time while learning. Get facts about Radio's opportunities and my practical 50-50 method of home training. Home experimental outfits make learning easy, practical, fascinating. Money back agreement protects you. Mail coupon for free 64-page book.

J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 6DM
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.
Send me your free book, "Rich Rewards in Radio." This does not obligate me. (Please write plainly.)

Name..... Age.....

Address .....

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

Play the Hawaiian Guitar like the Hawaiians!

FAMOUS NATIVE HAWAIIAN INSTRUCTORS teach you to play this fascinating instrument. ONLY 4 MOTIONS—No previous musical knowledge needed. OUR 52 EASY LESSONS teach you the enchanting music you hear over the radio.

GIVEN *when you enroll* **—a sweet toned HAWAIIAN GUITAR, complete playing outfit and carrying case.**

WRITE AT ONCE for attractive offer and easy terms.

FIRST HAWAIIAN CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC, Inc.
9th Floor, Woolworth Bldg. Dept. 700 New York, N. Y.

Approved by New York State Board of Regents

TIRE PRICES CUT!

on GOOD YEAR GOODRICH-FIRESTONE FISK-U·S· AND OTHER FAMOUS MAKES

Here are the outstanding standard brand tire bargains of the year, repaired by the improved "criss-cross" method and by skilled workmen. You take no risk when you buy from York, the old reliable tire house with 19 years of service in this field. Thousands of tire users throughout the U. S. declare our tires give them LONG, SATISFACTORY SERVICE. Buy Now—at these reduced prices and SAVE MONEY.

$1.85 29x4.40-21

$2.15 28x4.75-19

We Receive Hundreds of letters like this

"I bought a 34x4½ of you 3 years ago and it is on my truck yet and good for another year."—John H. Silverthorn, Mich.

Don't Delay — Order Today!

BALLOON TIRES

Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$1.85	$0.85
29x4.50-20	2.55	.85
30x4.50-21	2.10	.85
28x4.75-19	2.15	.95
29x4.75-20	2.20	.95
29x5.00-19	2.55	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.55	1.05
5.25-17	2.60	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.60	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.60	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.60	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.90	1.15
5.50-17	2.95	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.95	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
6.00-17	3.10	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.10	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.10	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.10	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.25	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.35	1.35
6.00-16	3.65	1.45

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$1.85	$0.76
31x4	2.65	.85
32x4	2.65	.85
33x4	2.65	.85
34x4	2.90	.85
32x4½	3.00	1.15

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$3.70	$1.65
32x5	3.75	1.45
34x5	3.95	2.00
32x6	7.25	2.75
36x6	9.00	3.95

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.25	$1.65
6.50-20	3.60	1.95
7.00-20	4.85	2.95
ALL OTHER SIZES		

Size	Tires	Tubes
33x4½	$3.10	$1.15
34x4½	3.10	1.15
30x5	3.20	1.25
32x5	3.40	1.45
35x5	3.55	1.65
24x7	$9.95	$3.25
38x7	9.95	2.95
36x8	10.65	3.95
40x8	12.65	4.15

Size	Tires	Tubes
7.50-20	$5.40	$2.75
8.25-20	7.60	3.95
9.00-20	9.40	5.65
10.75-20	12.95	6.45

DEALERS WANTED

SEND ONLY $1.00 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered. ($4.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct 3 per cent if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. ALL TUBES BRAND NEW—GUARANTEED—HEAVY GAUGE CIRCULAR MOLDED. Guard against price advances. Order Now. We agree to replace at half price any tire failing to give 9 months' service.

YORK TIRE & RUBBER CO., Dept. 3843
3833-39 Cottage Grove Ave. Chicago, Ill.

TYPEWRITER PORTABLES

10¢ a Day-Easy Terms

REMINGTON-UNDERWOOD, ETC., and easy terms on limited supply only. All brand new, up-to-date 4-row keyboard. Fully guaranteed.

FREE! Complete HOME Typewriting COURSE

Brand New NOW ONLY $17.95 & UP

SEND NO MONEY—10 Day Trial

Send for special new literature and money-saving, easy pay plan with 10 day trial offer. Also amazing bargains in standard size, rebuilt office models on FREE trial offer. LIBERAL ALLOWANCE—on your old typewriter during this sale.

International Typewriter Exch., 231 W. Monroe St., Dept. 492, Chicago

WORK FOR THE GOVERNMENT

START $1260 to $2100 YEAR

Common Education Usually Sufficient

MEN—WOMEN

Mail Coupon Today SURE.

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. C271, Rochester, N. Y.

Sirs: Rush without charge, (1) 32-page book with list of U. S. Government Jobs. (2) Tell me how to get one of these jobs. Send sample coaching.

Name.....

Address.....

A Baby In Your Home

Scientists now state that "Complete unity in life depends on sex harmony" and that the lack of it is the one greatest cause for unhappy marriages. Also that every woman "has the capacity for sex expression" but too often she is undeveloped or suffering with general female disorders, which rob her of her normal desires. During an experience of more than 35 years specializing in the treatment of diseases peculiar to women, I developed a simple home treatment which has brought new hope, health and happiness to many thousands. Many who had been childless for years became proud and happy Mothers. Husbands have written me the most glowing letters of gratitude and now I want every woman who is run-down or suffering from female disorders to learn about this splendid treatment, and how she may use it in the privacy of her own home.

Get This Knowledge FREE

In my two booklets, which will be sent in plain wrapper, I intimately discuss many important subjects relating to the female sex that are vitally interesting to every woman. They tell how you too may combat your troubles as thousands of others have and often again enjoy the desires and activities of Nature's most wonderful creation—a normal, fully developed vigorous woman. I will gladly send both books postpaid Free. Write today. **DR. H. WILL ELDERS,** Suite 682-P, 7th and Felix Streets, St. Joseph, Mo.

STOP Your Rupture Worries!

C. E. Brooks, Inventor

Why worry and suffer any longer? Learn about our perfected invention for all forms of reducible rupture. Automatic air cushion acting as an agent to assist Nature has brought happiness to thousands. ***Permits natural strengthening of the weakened muscles.*** Weighs but a few ounces, is inconspicuous and sanitary. No obnoxious springs or hard pads. No salves or plasters. Durable, cheap. **Sent on trial** to prove it. Beware of imitations. Never sold in stores or by agents. Write today for full information sent free in plain envelope. All correspondence confidential.

BROOKS COMPANY, 174B State St., Marshall, Mich.

MEN SAVE 75%

—Buy your Drug Sundries, Specialties, Supplies, Blades, etc., direct from manufacturer through our Mail-Order Dept. All personal items are mailed postpaid by us in plain, sealed package. We have everything. Send for *Free,* illustrated mail-order catalog.

THE N-R MFG. CO., Dept. H-37, Box 353, Hamilton, Ont.

WANTED!

ORIGINAL POEMS, SONGS

for Immediate consideration

M. M. M. PUBLISHERS

DEPT. NS Studio Bldg.

PORTLAND, ORE.

Learn Photography at HOME

Splendid opportunities. Prepare quickly in spare time. Easy method. No previous experience necessary, common school education sufficient. Many earn while learning. Send for free booklet "Opportunities in Modern Photography", particulars and requirements.

AMERICAN SCHOOL OF PHOTOGRAPHY

2601 Michigan Avenue Dept. 1184 Chicago, Illinois

GOVT. JOBS

SALARY TO START $90 to $175 MONTHLY

MEN. WOMEN

Age Range 18 to 50

( ) Village Carrier	( ) POSTMASTER
( ) P. O. Laborer	( ) Seamstress
( ) R. F. D. Carrier	( ) Auditor
( ) Special Agent	( ) Stenographer
( ) Customs Inspector	( ) U.S. Border Patrol
( ) City Mail Carrier	( ) Telephone Opr.
( ) P. O. Clerk	( ) Watchman
( ) Matron	( ) Meat Inspector
( ) Special Investigator	( ) Secret Service Opr.
( ) Typist	( ) File Clerk

INSTRUCTION BUREAU, Dept. 112, St. Louis, Mo.

Send me FREE particulars "How to Qualify for Government Positions" marked "X". Salaries, locations, opportunities, etc. ALL SENT FREE.

Name.....

Address.....

MAKE MORE MONEY

Taking Orders For The NIMROD Line

Earn more every day in the year representing old established firm with a complete line of fast selling necessities: Dress Shirts, Work Shirts, Polo Shirts, Neckwear, Underwear, Dresses, Hosiery, Swim Suits, Smocks, Pajamas, Sweaters, Pants, Belts, Play Suits, Overalls, Raincoats, Suits, Shoes, Uniforms. Everything guaranteed. Experience unnecessary.

Write quick for FREE SALES KIT.

NIMROD CO., Dept. 75,
4922-28 Lincoln Ave., Chicago, Ill.

DEAFNESS IS MISERY

Many people with defective hearing and Head Noises enjoy Conversation, Movies, Church and Radio, because they use Leonard Invisible Ear Drums which resemble Tiny Megaphones fitting In the Ear entirely out of sight. No wires, batteries or head piece. They are inexpensive. Write for booklet and sworn statement of the inventor who was himself deaf.

A. O. LEONARD, Inc., Suite 23, 70 5th Ave., New York

FOREST JOBS

available at $125-$175 per month, steady.
Cabin. Hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify at once.
Get details immediately
Rayson Service Bureau, B-52, Denver, Colo. © 1935

FREE TRIAL — SORE STOMACH—BOWELS CAUSED BY OVER ACIDITY

MUCOUS OR SPASTIC **COLITIS**

ENTROMUL, a new scientific formula, is bringing amazing relief in mucous or spastic COLITIS of non specific origin and attendant symptoms, such as: Indigestion, Gas, Bloating, Constipation and other Stomach and Intestinal Aggravations following diet abuse and excess acid reactions within the digestive tract. Write today for Free Trial Package and Illustrated Booklet.

ENTROMUL CO., Dept. K2, 2147 W. Washington, Los Angeles, Calif.

BIG PAY EVERY DAY

SELL AMERICA'S FINEST STYLED QUALITY SHIRTS

Ties, Hose, Underwear too. Shirts with new Trubenized Starchless collar. All garments GUARANTEED 1 YEAR. Low Prices. Big Cash Commissions; Cash Bonuses. Complete Outfit FREE. Write today. Dept. N4.

QUAKER, Broadway at 31st Street, New York.

Be a High School Graduate

High School education is very important for advancement socially and in business and industry. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now.

You can complete our simplified High School course at home as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Many finish in 2 years or less. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares you for entrance to college. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma awarded. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. *Single subjects if desired.* Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.

American School, Dept. H-439, Drexel at 58th, Chicago

Train for ELECTRICITY IN 12 WEEKS AT COYNE

I'll Finance Your Training

I don't care whether you are 16 or 40... If you are dissatisfied with your present job... if you are out of a job because you lack specialized training... if your future is uncertain... then mail the coupon today and I'll send you all details of my "Pay-Tuition-After-Graduation" Plan whereby many get Coyne practical training first—then pay for it in easy monthly payments starting 5 months after they start their training or 60 days after their required 12-weeks training period is over. Many find that increased earnings pay for their Coyne training in a very short time.

MANY EARN $30, $40, $50 AND UP A WEEK... Others Go in Business and Make Up to $5,000 and More a Year

Here is your opportunity. Every day brings new developments in Electricity—opportunities for trained men to earn real money in a fascinating, interesting, well-paid field. Here at Coyne you are trained on real electrical equipment in the Great Coyne Shops in 12 weeks—you Learn by Doing; not books. You don't need previous electrical experience or a lot of book learning, the Coyne way. Many earn while learning. Free Employment Service for life after you graduate. Right now I am including additional instruction in Diesel Engines, Air Conditioning and Electric Refrigeration at no extra cost. Mail Coupon today and I'll send you all details, along with my big free book of facts.

SEND NOW FOR FULL DETAILS!

Mr. H. C. LEWIS, Pres., COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
Dept. 46-66, 500 S. Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.

Tell me how you will finance my training at COYNE and send me the BIG FREE Illustrated book on ELECTRICITY.

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

Mail in envelope or paste on postcard

HOME-STUDY BUSINESS TRAINING

Your opportunity can never be bigger than your preparation. Prepare now and reap the rewards in earlier and larger success. *Free 64-Page Books Tell How.* Write *now* for book you want, or mail coupon with your name and address in margin *today.*

O Higher Accountancy	O Business Mgm't
O Mod. Salesmanship	O Business Corres.
O Traffic Management	O Credit and Collection Correspondence
O Law: Degree of LL.B.	O Modern Foremanship
O Commercial Law	O Personnel Mgm't
O Industrial Mgm't	O Expert Bookkeeping
O Banking and Finance	O C. P. A. Coaching
O Stenotypy	O Business English
O Rail. Station Mgm't	O Effective Speaking
O Paper Salesmanship	

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
Dept. 475-R Chicago

FACTORY TO YOU

NEW REMINGTON NOISELESS PORTABLE

10-Day Free Trial Offer

10¢ A DAY

AT LAST! The famous Remington NOISELESS Portable is yours for only ten cents a day. Brand new. Not rebuilt. Standard keyboard and every modern feature. Free carrying case and typing course. 10-Day free trial. You don't risk a penny. WE PAY ALL SHIPPING CHARGES. Act now! Write Remington Rand Inc., Dept. 147-4. 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y.

BIGGEST AND BEST—ACTION

Short

TWICE A MONTH

CONTENTS

ADVENTURE, THRILLS, MYSTERY

Stories

HARRY E. MAULE, *EDITOR*

Title Registered in U. S. Patent Office

APRIL 10th, 1936

Vol. CLV, No. 1 Whole No. 727

Badger and Blizzard, Top Hole Texas Men, Prove Conclusively That—

RANGERS IS POWERFUL HARD TO KILL

By CADDO CAMERON

Part I

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCING TWO DEAD MEN

HOWDY, Mister! Who takes care of yo' dead men in this here town—please, sah?"

The rolling bass that boomed the question was a voice suited to the man—big and broad and loaded with deviltry. In the glare of the Panhandle sun, he stood out in sharp contrast to his lanky companion who sat his horse in somber silence. The speaker's deep-set black eyes danced as he slouched in the saddle, fingered a healthy mustache, and smiled innocently at the man perched on the top pole of the Casota Livery Corral fence.

The man on the fence returned the greeting, but took his time about answering the inquiry while he let an eye drift lazily over the two riders in the road before him, and the three ponies they were leading.

It was plain to see that one of the led animals was a pack horse; but the other two were not, for they wore stock saddles. And hanging belly-down across each saddle was a man—a dead man!

The man on the fence took a middling-big bite off his plug. Presently he tilted his Stetson, scratched his head with the fingers of the same hand, and drawled, "All depends, stranger. How many you got?"

As though he were apologizing for poor shooting, the newcomer replied seriously, "W-e-l-l, right this very minute we ain't got more'n two."

Gazing off toward Casota proper a quarter mile or so away, the tall rider seemed to be lost in study of the low buildings surrounding the square.

"That all? *Mmm-m-m,*" cogitated the man on the fence. He deliberately spat straight at a lizard sunning itself in the dust, watched it mill around in confusion, then slither out of sight—and went on. "Such bein' the case, I reckon Long Tom Baker is the feller that'll have to take 'em off your hands. He's the marshal."

"Sounds sensible," the man with the bass

voice said solemnly, but there was a twinkle in his eye. "Whereabouts does the marshal most generally do his drinkin' at this time of day?"

The man on the fence glanced up at the sun which had slid past the half-way point, gently eased his length off the fence, spat straight at a grasshopper ruminating on a post six feet away, watched it flutter to the ground and shamefacedly crawl under a dusty weed, and allowed, "He ain't particular—I'm him."

CHUCKLING appreciatively, the other politely brought his horse around—left side to the marshal, and stepped off; but his partner ignored this range courtesy and swung to the ground on the far side of his mount. Not a single move in these maneuvers escaped Long Tom Baker. His frosty eyes took the visitors to pieces when they led their horses to the side of the road, dropped reins and went about loosening their cinches.

Each of the men was dressed in the

Brains and Guts Sure Pull Like Hell in Double Harness

working clothes of a cow-hand; but there was an air about the broad-shouldered rider who did the talking which seemed to tell the world, "Look me over, fellas! I'm all slicked up for a fight or a frolic, so let'er go, Gallagher!" His Stetson had seen better days, but there was nothing apologetic about it, for it rode at a happy angle on his curly black hair and carried itself with all the insolence of a forty-dollar top-piece, making no effort to hide a good-natured face that a woman might find pleasing to the eye. After one glance at the pair of wood-handled Colts—worn low and tied down—the old bull-hide chaps, the careless swing of the mighty shoulders, the reckless smile and flashing teeth, Long Tom leaned against a post and thought, "There's a he-wolf and he's snooty as hell."

When the stranger affectionately slapped his big black gelding on the neck, it stamped a foot and tossed its head as much as to say, "I'm a-rarin' to go, so when you start yo' play make shore to deal me in."

The other newcomer was as long and lean and somber as his companion was broad and muscular and gay. At first glance—as he loomed over his partner like a sandhill crane over a prairie dog—Long Tom thought his unusual height made him look all ganted up and puny; but a second look convinced the marshal that he was as wiry as a hungry lobo, and most likely as strong and spry as a panther. His long, mournful face was decorated by a drooping, red mustache and his pale gray eyes were separated by a nose fitted to the rest of the man—long and sad and bony. He carried a single Colt, but cuddled in the crook of his left arm when he rode up, was a battle-scarred Winchester; and he wore the look of a fighting man—shrewd and fearless and perhaps ruthless, a man who said little, but said it regardless. Long Tom quickly branded him as "a bull boa-constrictor packin' two inch fangs and plumb pizen."

This stranger's lanky strawberry roan carried its bony head straight to the front, like a horse that would go about its business with grave unconcern.

In a few moments the broad man came over and put out a large hand. "Marshal, shake hands with Ezekial Jedekiah Coe. . . . I'm powerful glad to meet you, sah."

And he went on quickly with a careless nod toward his silent companion. "This here two-legged brute with the sunk eyes and lantern-jawed head is my vallie. Dan'l Shadrach Wilson is what his mammy called him back east in Kaintucky where we was both foaled."

Long Tom acknowledged the introductions by ceremoniously shaking hands with both men, grunting, "Howdy, fellers."

"Yes, sah," Coe went on. "And that there black, fo'-legged devil is my Sunday hoss. Belial is his name."

The marshal sent an admiring glance at the horse. "Plenty of daylight under him. Shore looks like he might live up to his name, all right."

"I'll tell a man he does!" declared Coe; then with a sly glance at Wilson and a wink at Long Tom. "That there slab-sided crowbait is his nag. He calls the critter Cactus 'cause his bones is so all-fired sharp."

Wilson fixed Long Tom with a cold eye and spoke up in a voice that was thin—very near to being squeaky. "He's a liar, Marshal. My hoss's name is Solomon." Having spoken, he turned away and resumed his contemplation of the dusty, unpainted town.

A smile twitched at the corners of Baker's thin lips as his eyes darted from one to the other. Although he was acquainted with their breed of men, these individuals had him guessing. Hooking his thumbs in his cartridge belt, he began carelessly. "W-e-l-l, now—Mister Coe and Mister Wilson—about them corpses. If you don't mind——"

Coe spoke up quickly. "Ex-cuse me, Marshal. Coe and Wilson is our ranch brands all right, but folks just call us Badger and Blizzard. They's our road brands and a heap easier to read. Yes, sah.

Badger Coe and Blizzard Wilson—that's us."

Long Tom took time to digest this information. He could see that a little curiosity might go a long way with these two strangers, so he decided to let the dead men rest in peace for a spell—sort of waiting on their owners' pleasure as it were, "Right sociable names, I'd say; easy to remember. If you're figurin' on beddin' down in Casota tonight, this here corral is a good place to put up your hosses."

Badger and Blizzard traded quick glances, and as usual Badger did the talk-

ing. "We'll be right proud to accept yo' invitation, Marshal. Reckon we better haze them two walkin' hearses inside befo' they start a stampede."

"Might be a pious idee," agreed Baker, opening the gate.

AT THIS point the proprietor came waddling out of the blacksmith shop, which occupied a shack attached to one corner of the corral. He was short and fat, with a face like a full moon, and his name was Bud Tucker.

Bud took one look at the walkin' hearses, and dropped the hammer he was carrying. His eyes and mouth got round and he exploded—"Wh-e-w-w! I'll be everlastingly——"

"You shore will—Bud Tucker," Long Tom cut in quickly. "Ain't you never seen no dead men before?"

Tucker gulped and stammered, "C-course I have, Tom. B-but them fellers is—is ——"

"Them fellers is deader'n hell—that's all!" snapped Baker. "Meet a couple of likely-lookin' visitors, Bud—Badger Coe and Blizzard Wilson."

Bud came out of his trance with a jerk and shook hands; but the look of disbelief never left his face, and his eyes rolled from the dead men to the strangers, and back again.

"Lead them corpses into some empty stalls, you durned hyena!" growled the marshal. "D'you want all Texas to come a-boilin' down on us before we're ready for 'em?"

Tucker complied with the order in a hurry; then he hustled around like a fussy old woman helping his guests stable their horses and treating them with more respect than Long Tom had ever seen him show toward anybody—man or beast.

Marshal Baker squatted on his heels and pretended to whittle, but his mind wasn't on his whittling. From the corner of his eye he watched the strangers, and he didn't overlook the fact that while they worked, one or the other was always facing in his direction.

The careful rub-down the newcomers were giving their horses struck Long Tom as being significant. He noticed how particular Badger was about massaging Belial's rippling leg and shoulder muscles, and presently he ruminated under his breath, "A smart feller, ridin' with his chin on his shoulder, won't ever let his hoss stiffen up."

Bud came puffing past and stopped long enough to whisper out of the corner of his fat lips, "Whoinhell is them mavericks, Tom?"

"Damfino," mumbled Baker, going on whittling.

Blizzard went about his business without any fuss, and with the sure, quick movements of a man who wasted no time or effort upon false motions or useless speech; and the dour Solomon met his owner half way by accepting these attentions with no outward signs of pleasure or displeasure.

In the adjoining stall, however, an en-

tirely different state of affairs existed. Badger kept up a running fire of more or less affectionate profanity at Belial, to which the latter responded by occasional playful nips at his perspiring master.

"Hey! You apron-faced maneater!" roared Badger. "If you don't quit chawin' on my rump, I'm a-goin' to salivate you shore! H'ist yo' leg befo' I cave in yo' paunch. That's it. Now be still. Marshal, just feast yo' optics on seventeen hands of the best damned hoss flesh in the entire State of Texas."

A disdainful, high-pitched, "Huh!" came from the neighboring stall, whereupon Badger favored the officer with a prodigious wink.

He rumbled on, "Yes, sah! At eatin', drinkin', runnin', fightin', bitin', kickin', clawin', and valuable all-'round cussedness, this here black rascal has whopped hell out'n every last fo'-legged crittur that has ever crawled him. And I'm backin' him to——"

"Git mauled plumb to death if he don't quit tryin' to steal Solomon's fodder," came from the next stall, Belial having poked his silky nose under the partition in the manger for no reason whatever.

Before Badger could answer this threat, an in-grown curiosity got the better of Bud Tucker and he made a remark Tom knew was downright foolish and powerful careless, "I can't quite make out that there black's brand. Must be a mountain hoss from somewheres out Californy way."

Any Canadian man should have known better than to go hinting around trying to find out where a stranger got his horse; that is to say—unless he was hankering after trouble. Long Tom missed a stroke in his whittling when Badger stopped work suddenly, pulled his hat down over one eye and stared slaunchwise at the fat liveryman. Right there and then it was plain to see that Bud felt his saddle slipping and realized that it was too late to do anything about it.

"Now Mister Bud Tucker, ain't that just too bad!" rumbled Badger, evidently trying to talk sugary and sounding nearly as sweet as a mad bull. "What're you figurin' to do about it?"

"No-noth-nothin'," stuttered Bud, red in the face.

Promptly Long Tom snaked the poor cuss out of the quicksand that was about to swallow him. "Don't pay the crittur no mind, Badger. He chawed loco when he was a yearlin' and ain't never been quite right since then."

Badger didn't say anything to this; but Bud afterwards swore that the look the stranger fired at him, cut no less than five pounds of beef off him.

In a moment Badger snorted and went back to work.

Bud tried to say something, talking so fast the words piled up and tromped on each other like stampeding steers going over a bank.

Once more the marshal helped him out. "Slope!" Tom barked, and Bud did—pronto.

LONG TOM went on with his whittling and Badger went ahead with his currying as though nothing had happened to get him riled. In the act of prying a pebble out of the frog in Belial's near hind hoof with his bowie knife, he glanced up at the marshal and said, "By the way, Tom. A fella done lied to us somethin' scandalous."

Baker very carefully finished a long, thin shaving. "Wouldn't be surprised. Once in a while you're bound to come across a feller that will do that in spite of everything. How come this'n lied to you?"

Hitching up his heavy cartridge belts, Badger moseyed out of the stall. "Well, you see it's like this; we met him down the trail a piece, and he up and told us there wasn't any law in Casota. But the minute we drift in here, we run slap-dab into a marshal—so he lied."

The tall, loose-jointed Baker turned his hawk face to Badger and gave him a queer stare; and there was a flavor of pride in his voice when he spoke. "Hell, man! I ain't no regular law officer. Don't wear

my badge half the time. It's on my other vest this very minute."

"So I done noticed," softly murmured Badger. "But you're a marshal—regardless."

Cocking an eye at Blizzard who now stood a short distance away—Winchester across his arm—Long Tom uncoiled from his heels, took a fair-sized bite at his plug, and drawled, "Yesss, but I'm sort of a accidental temporary marshal you might say, so don't let it worry you none."

Badger's mustache failed to hide an innocent grin. "But I'm skeered of accidents, Marshal, 'cause sometimes they're powerful embarrassin'."

Baker's cold eye roved over him from spurs to Stetson. "Ye-a-h, you're a skittish lookin' colt."

"Know them fellas?" asked Badger with a careless nod toward the dead men.

"Uh-huh."

"Friends of yourn?"

"Nope—not 'specially. Just so-so."

"Was they leadin' citizens in this here country?"

The marshal watched a tumble-weed come fogging across the road from the open prairie beyond, and wind up against the corral fence. "W-e-l-l, it all depends on how you figger. They was leadin' gunslingers, all right. And I reckon they was kinda friendly with a leadin' citizen, too."

Badger carefully built himself a smoke. "Do you suppose he'll be upset about what happened to 'em?"

Blizzard shifted his rifle to his other arm and appeared to be listening closely.

Long Tom's accurate spitting completely upset an industrious tumble-bug, and he eyed it thoughtfully while it searched blindly for its ball. "Cain't never tell for shore. If you drilled them fellers, he may come at you with his guns a-smokin' soon as ever he finds it out. And then again, he may wait as much as two-three hours. You just cain't tell about him."

"Is that a fact? He's sort of a uncertain cuss—huh?"

"N-nope. Better figger he'll be all-fired certain."

Long Tom got the idea Badger was having a hard time squelching a laugh when he asked, "I'm more consarned with yo' feelin's, Marshal; so I'd take it kindly if you'd say what you calc'late to do with me and him, providin' you find out we did make them corpses."

Baker yawned, stretched his six-foot-two, hooked his thumbs in his belt, and fixed Badger with a frosty eye.

"There was two of you-all?"

"Yep, Tom."

"And two of them?"

"Yep."

"And you didn't bushwhack 'em?"

"Not by a damsite!"

Tom's long fingers twisted at his stringy mustache. "They packed plenty notches on they six-shooters."

"Do tell?"

"Uh-huh. And wherever I happen to be range-boss, folks just naturally have to kill their own snakes."

BADGER studied the marshal quizzically for a moment, and a wide grin slowly made its way across his face. "Tom, I shore call that a right neighborly way of talkin'."

Blizzard didn't say a word. Not a fraction less than four inches taller than the officer, he stood there looking down—boring holes in Long Tom with his steady eyes. Baker decided a man could read feelings on that stern face about as easily as he could read Apache sign on a granite ledge; and he couldn't help thinking, "It'd be mighty hard to lie to that there ranny and not git caught."

"I'm all tuckered out," Badger went on, "and I've got me a burnin' thirst that I want to git shed of. Lead the way, Tom, and while I'm recuperatin' at the bar, I'll elucidate the subject of them dead men."

Without a word Long Tom nodded and started for the gate. He took half a dozen steps before a thought struck him and he turned to fire Badger a sharp glance.

"Reckon I'd oughta tell you fellers that this is a hair-trigger town, and she's chock full of men—all kinds of men."

Badger's face lighted up. "Bully! I'm plumb starved for human sasiety. Been traipsin' 'round with Blizzard too long. He ain't noways human, talks too much."

The marshal lingered for a second, then set his jaw and said, "All right, it's your funeral. Want to fetch your corpses along?"

"Reckon that'd be a good idee," agreed Badger, winking at Blizzard when he turned to get the ponies.

Baker caught the gesture and the thought flashed through his mind, "That there wampus cat would laugh with a rope 'round his neck and a bullet in his gizzard."

Bud—who had been hovering somewhere in the background—waddled over to open the gate and Long Tom stepped through like a thirsty longhorn heading for a water-hole five miles away. The strangers followed, leading the two ponies with their lifeless loads. Tucker's staring eyes never left the dead men and his face wore the hungry look of a man dying to go along, but afraid to do it.

A FEW rods down the road they met three riders who hailed the marshal, glanced at the bodies, and cussed softly. Long Tom silenced their excited inquiries with a grunt—no more. Whirling their broncs in the dust, they joined the procession and brought up the rear. Badger caught a whispered word now and then, hut couldn't make out what they were saying.

As he stamped along in the dust, his eyes were busy examining the approaching town and his thoughts were busy with the stories he had heard about it and the mission which brought him to it.

He knew that to the northward lay "No Man's Land"—a home range for outlaws, a sanctuary where they foregathered to traffic among themselves, to fight and to kill their own kind, and to plan future depredations upon the society that had cast them out. A dangerous country for them, but nevertheless—a hunting ground for those fearless officers who were given to taking the law into their own hands and hanging onto the trail of their man regardless of state lines, boundaries, governments, and such artificial barriers.

He knew that to the east there was the Indian Territory, or the "Nations" as most folks called it; a stamping ground for horse and cattle thieves, whiskey peddlers who shot and knifed in the back, straightforward murderers, and renegades of every description; a land where a "wanted" man

might build himself a dugout in the blackjack hills, on the edge of a willow thicket, or in a creek bank, and hole up until Kingdom Come with never a chance of being smoked out. A country through which roamed many silent, mysterious killers whose fame was unsung for the reason that they were too smart to seek the transient glory which would have been theirs in a more populous community; men who killed their victims in solitude, and found praise for their bloody deeds in the seclusion of their own evil thoughts.

He knew that to the southward stretched the Llano—a cruel land which no other than a man with guts and a horse with bottom could cross; a region of waterless plains and rugged canyons, where a long rider might lose his pursuers, or his life, or both.

He knew that to the westward was a land of great distances, whose far-flung mountains, gulches, plains and deserts bred a breed of warriors famed for their skill with weapons and their disregard for human life.

And he knew that throughout the length

and breadth of the land, wherever men holed up in dugouts, squatted around camp fires, rolled in their tarps, and loafed in bunkhouses, they were talking about the epidemic of horse and cow stealing that had hit the country on the grandest scale the West had ever known. He had seen eyes grow hard and gun-hands get nervous when tales were told about whole crews being wiped out and trail herds just naturally evaporating. He had heard that mountain horses, horses from Montana, Wyoming and other northwest points were mysteriously showing up for sale through the Nations clear down to the Red and across into Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi—and vice versa.

And he knew something that most people did not know: that the nearby country north and east of Casota was where the thieves met to swap stolen stock; that the town was in effect the capital of the rustlers' kingdom; and that somewhere in the vicinity was the man who had the brains to form a great criminal organization and the strength to control it.

AS THE tireless Panhandle wind whipped dust around his boots and the town came nearer and nearer, Badger vividly recalled the final instructions Blizzard and he had received from Captain Henry Clay Houston at Ranger Headquarters in San Antonio a short time before:

"I hate like hell to stack you fellers up against a job that's big enough for forty men, but we ain't got 'em to spare so you'll have to go it alone. Rampse into that damned country and get the skunks who murdered Sergeant Jimmy Hawkes; and while you're there, bust that gang of thieves wide open. If you see that you can't get enough evidence to hang 'em, plant a row of dead men from Kansas to the Gulf! By God—that'll stop 'em!"

"A row of dead men," grimly mused Badger, now conscious of the hackamore rope in his hand and the pony with its burden close behind him. 'Well, we done got a damned good start!"

They were not making the mistake Jimmy had made. He had gone north as a Ranger—openly. They came as outlaws, wandering gunmen, killers if need be, with nothing on their persons to mark them as law officers.

Badger thought they had one friend in the community—the party who had written Headquarters about Jimmy's murder. It had been an unsigned letter, giving a countersign whereby Rangers might make themselves known, and directions for meeting a friend of law and order. The letter had emphasized the necessity for caution, closing with the statement that the writer wouldn't live a week if it became known that he had written.

Would they be able to find this unknown friend, thought Badger. Who was he? It might be anyone. It might be the stern, tight-lipped marshal striding along beside him!

Thus far Baker hadn't used the countersign, and Badger decided to wait a while before testing him; let him make the first move, if he were the one.

The town sprawled before him and he fell to reading the signs on building fronts: "The Panhandle," 'Red Ann's Retreat," "Corrigan's Rest," "The Longhorn Bar," "Mustang Saloon and Dance Hall," so the names ran; and at that he couldn't see all sides of the square. But what he did see brought to mind something a bone-seasoned old cowhand who had ranged far and wide, once told him; and he smiled grimly at the memory of the ancient twister's exact words: "Boy, Casota is a shore 'nuff scorcher! She was borned with her boots on, and a fo'ty-fo' tied to each laig."

AT LENGTH they reached the square and Long Tom Baker slowed down. He ambled along in the ankle-deep dust, sober face pointing straight up the middle of the street and as steady as a rock—saying nothing to nobody. Even his jaws stopped working.

There were men walking the dirt sidewalks, leaning against porch posts, sitting

on their heels before building fronts, and lounging in doors. From all around the square came that conglomeration of sounds that formed the voice of the frontier saloon in mid-afternoon; but as the cavalcade progressed, its passage was marked by the sinking of this voice to husky murmurs or absolute silence. All eyes were leveled on the street, but there were no yells, no running hither and yon, and no questions; for at a time and in a country where human life was cheap and any man might be dangerous, smart men had learned to blindfold idle curiosity and to hobble reckless speech.

The wind that created and whirled little dust devils across his path and carried the smell of horses and stale liquor, also brought to Badger the malicious whisper of danger lurking near, and it made his nerves tingle. His alert glances caught no sign of open warfare; only a cold neutrality—a certain detached watchfulness. But he knew that—at the proper time—these men would spare his life with lazy unconcern, or they would undertake to hang him with hilarious enthusiasm—in which event he wouldn't have the majesty of the law to aid him, for he had deliberately discarded that protection.

Now, they were simply waiting.

They might have slipped into Casota unnoticed, but that was never Badger's way; he went out to meet trouble. And he intended to meet this first test with a smashing blow that would at once establish them as men of parts in the estimation of this wild community, or gain for them six feet of earth in its Boot Hill.

So with an easy but quick movement, he loosened his guns in their holsters and let his fingers touch briefly the bowie knife in its scabbard at the back of his belt. A quick glance over his shoulder found Blizzard stalking along behind, hat pulled low, rifle across his arm, saying nothing, seeing everything, and evidently ready for anything.

At a well and trough in the center of the square, two half-drunken men were watering their horses and talking louder than they realized, while they followed the procession with side-wise stares from beneath lowered hat-brims. The wind brought Badger snatches of their conversation:

"That there buckskin is Chuck Prentiss' hoss, but all I can see of that dead man is his legs and the seat of his breeches, and I don't know Chuck well enough to tell whether it's him."

"Reckon it's him, all right. And that paint is Chickasaw's pony."

"Shore is," the first speaker agreed. "Them fellers must've bushwhacked Chuck and Chick."

"Hell yes! Wonder if Cal is in town."

"Yep. And he's been liquorin', too."

Badger thought, "Chuck Prentiss—Chickasaw—— And who the hell is Cal?" But he wouldn't ask. He would just wait—and watch.

They plodded on even more slowly, as though the marshal was purposely keeping the dead men on exhibition.

At the hitch-rack in front of a saloon, a tall cowboy was tightening his cinches. The two ponies and their burdens caught his eye. He loosened the latigos; stepped away from his horse and slouched against the rack, facing the street with hat pulled low. Then he built a cigarette in the careless way of a man who has suddenly changed his mind and wants to hide the fact.

A stirrup and fender and a large white spot on the paunch of the paint pony were smeared with dark blood, and dust and flies had gathered. A lanky hound trotted up and sniffed, and whined—then slunk away and crouched. Its watery eyes followed the dead men, and its nostrils quivered.

Badger saw this, and heard one woman on the sidewalk nervously tell another, "Looky there! That's Widow Grant's dog. One day when he was celebratin', Chickasaw creased that pup."

Chuck Prentiss' body was tied on in a way which allowed his boots to thump together when the horse walked. Badger listened to the monotonous tinkle of the spurs, the *clack—clack—clack* of the dead

man's heels, and muttered under his breath, "It's too damned quiet."

THE marshal led the way toward a long, low frame structure crouching at a corner, to a certain extent isolated by vacant lots on either side and distinguished from all the other buildings in town by a heavy coating of sky-blue paint—its luster dimmed by layers of dust. A single star of darker blue stood out on the false front, and the words, "THE LONE STAR."

As they neared the building, Badger cast a hasty glance around him. Along the sidewalks and across the square, singly or in small groups, men ambled toward the corner—moving lazily, carelessly, and silently—but nevertheless gravitating in that direction. He wanted a drink; his mouth was dry.

In front of The Lone Star, several men stared coldly at the strangers while they tied the ponies at the rack—evidently more interested in the newcomers than they were in the dead men. Curt nods greeted Long Tom, but not a word was said and he strode in to the bar. Badger and Blizzard paused at the door to take stock of their surroundings.

They were surprised to find the long room floored and ceiled with surfaced lumber and its walls neatly papered in quiet colors. A bar of dark, polished wood and a back-bar of the same material—fitted with a large mirror—extended along one side of the front half of the room—startling luxury where they might reasonably expect to find two-by-twelves on barrels or boxes, or a bar of rough pine construction at best. The rear half of the room was occupied by gambling paraphernalia of all descriptions, most of which was deserted. A row of large, oil lamps with reflectors that glistened, hung in the center overhead and additional smaller reflector lamps were fastened along the wall, between the windows.

A dozen or more men were clustered around small tables, squatting on their heels against the wall, and lounging at the bar—all watching the door, some openly and others covertly.

Five men at a poker table folded their cards and negligently twisted around to watch the door.

Two burly bartenders with heavy mustaches swept bar-towels across a clean

surface and eyed the strangers at the door.

While one hand absently flipped the wheel, a flat-chested roulette dealer kept his expressionless face turned toward the front.

There was no talk or laughter; not a sound, and the atmosphere was stifling—so very still, as it is immediately before an electrical storm breaks over the prairie. Badger couldn't help thinking, "Damned fine cyclone weather we're having."

Anybody could see that everybody was waiting for something to happen.

Stimulated by the danger of the situation, Badger's humor bubbled to the surface and he suddenly decided to call for a showdown in a fashion all his own and in keeping with the rôle he was playing. Swaggering up to the bar, he flipped out a gold piece with a magnificent flourish and rumbled. "There she is, Barkeep! We're a-drinkin' her up."

HE FOUND every eye upon him when he turned away from the bar and rested his elbows upon it; and he knew this was the test. In another sixty seconds the room might be spluttering with laughter or boiling with war, and it was up to him.

Shoving his weathered hat to the back of his head, he broke into a contagious smile and his deep bass rolled out. "Come and git it, fellas! The drinks is on us!

Me and that there red-headed pelican just finished hazin' a pair of corpses into camp, and our tender lily-white souls is howlin' for a whole slew of good company and powerful stimilants to h'ist us out of our gloom."

The crowd caught its breath and more than one man muttered an oath, for this announcement came as a surprise to everyone—with the possible exception of Blizzard; he was never startled by anything Badger did. Men shot inquiring glances at Long Tom—growled among themselves—hesitated, and shuffled their feet.

Badger continued to smile and roared out again, "Liquor up, boys, and then listen clost while I tell you how come them dead men!"

Taut as a fiddle string, he waited for a moment—half expecting that at any instant a leader would declare himself. Where was "Cal"? Where were the friends of the dead men? Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Blizzard—left side to the room, rifle across his arm, as hard and cold and barren of feeling as a dead cottonwood in a winter gale.

A moment later he chuckled and went on as though there had been no delay, loud enough for everybody to hear: "Barkeep, make shore the boys git whatever and howmuchever they want. And just ladle up a double helpin' of that there fo'ty-rod liquor for the marshal here. He's the gent that welcomed me and Blizzard to Casota. Likewise—he's a-fixin' to bury our dead."

Badger almost held his breath when the bartender slid the bar-bottle and a glass to Long Tom. The officer hesitated for an instant, then sedately poured himself a drink.

And that did it.

By one's and two's they began edging up to the bar; and three or four who had an ear to the ground outside, slid through the door and joined the procession. Shortly every man of them had his feet in the trough except four surly-looking individuals at a table, and two fancy sports holding down chairs tilted against the wall.

Badger ignored the men at the table, but for a split second he permitted a steady eye to rove over the two gladiators. Their velvet vests, red sashes, and silk shirts hadn't experienced much of a cow-hand's rough work on the range; and the two silver-mounted, pearl-handled guns each of them wore were plenty ornamental. He knew their breed; paid gunmen who wouldn't work and always preferred to shoot their victims in the back.

Presently he glanced along the line-up at the bar and cautiously heaved a sigh of relief. There was a mischievous twinkle in his eye when he muttered to Long Tom, "Got 'em all but six, which ain't noways a bad cut."

"Wait!" warned Baker out of the corner of his mouth. "Them fellers is likely to blow you to smithereens any minute, even if their lead steer ain't here yet."

"Oh, Lo'dy, Lo'dy!" moaned Badger, rolling his eyes. "Who is he?"

"Cal Webb."

"Right clever name, but it don't mean nothin' to me."

"It will before long."

"How come, Tom?"

"He's the bull-rattler of this whole country, and he's hell on wheels when you git him riled." Tom made circles with the bottom of his glass, and spoke softly. "Them dead men was his clostest friends, and I've heard him offer to bet they could lick any six men in the Panhandle with guns or knives—'cept one."

"You don't say? Who is that one 'special fella?"

"Oh, he's a innocent little cuss. You'll meet up with him."

Badger grunted and ran an eye along the bar.

The scrape of sliding bottles and the clink of glasses, now mingled with an occasional cough and husky sighs; and voices rose in friendly conversation, peaceful profanity, and healthy laughter. Everybody at the bar appeared to have forgotten the dead men before the door.

Evidently Long Tom Baker saw and

heard all this, for he inspected a brimming glass with an affectionate eye, turned it round and round with loving fingers, and spoke his piece with downright conviction: "Brains and guts shore pull like hell in double harness."

Badger grinned.

Blizzard sniffed.

"Here's how, boys!" roared Badger, downing his drink. "Woof, she sizzled when she hit bottom! Make-'aste, Barkeep, and gimme 'nother one to quench my flamin' innards." He was making another move toward keeping the crowd in a good humor, so as to have a free hand to deal with trouble when it came later, as he knew it would. "Ah-h-h! That's better. Now fellas, I'll tell you-all where we found them corpses. Gether 'round. You see, it's like this: me and him was moseyin' along the trail, gentle and peaceable like, when——"

"Whoa-a-up!" cautioned a low voice. "Here come Fancy and Cal."

All eyes switched to the two men entering the room. Everything else was forgotten, and glasses hung in mid-air.

Unnoticed, Blizzard slid along to the end of the bar and took a stand near the door with his back to the wall. Badger slouched where he was, thumbs hooked in his belt. A grim little smile played around beneath his mustache, and sparks danced in his eyes while they rambled over the newcomers from Stetsons to spurs.

WELL over six feet, broad shouldered, slender flanked, and dressed in flashy range clothing—the man in the lead made a magnificent figure. Heavy blond hair, worn rather long and curling up over his ears, framed a smooth face with even features—the face of a man who was handsome and knew it. Badger thought, "There's just the kind of a vicious fella you could spot as a horse-mauler a mile off."

One glance at the tall stranger's flashing eyes and tight lips told him that the man was looking for trouble; and furthermore, that he was the breed of lobo who would shoot a fellow down just to see him kick.

For an instant Badger turned his attention to the large man's companion. He was unusually small and seemed to move with the effortless grace of a cat and almost feminine daintiness. Blue eyes—large and soft—were set in features of cameo regularity to create the face of a young musician or painter; and there was an indefinable air attached to the man that promised extraordinary pride in race or breeding, and absolute control of all human emotions. Badger decided, "That there leetle red-head is as purty as a picture, but he's as cold and hard as hell." Although he wore range clothing, it fitted perfectly and there was no clash of colors; his shirt was white silk, his neckerchief black, and his black Stetson and filigreed boots evidently were the best that money could buy. Gold-mounted, ivory-handled six-shooters swung low on each thigh—convenient to his small, white hands with tapering fingers and pink nails. Badger knew men, and he promptly concluded that those fancy weapons were not worn for decorative purposes alone.

There were hard men in that room; men who acknowledged no superiors other than those whom they knew to be more deadly than themselves; men who spoke up when and where their fancies dictated, but they all fell silent when these two entered. And with the exception of the marshal, Badger sensed a definite movement away from where he was standing.

Looking neither to right nor left and speaking to no one, the big man strode in until he came to a halt before Badger and Long Tom. Hands on his hips, he gruffly demanded, "Tom—who in hell killed Chuck and Chickasaw?"

Unperturbed, the marshal brought out his plug, regarded it with calm deliberation for a moment, and drawled, "Mister Cal Webb, this is Mister Badger Coe. He might know somethin'."

Webb's eyes blazed at Badger and he started to speak, but Long Tom went ahead

quietly, nodding toward the small man. "And Mister Coe, this other gent is Mister Fancy Chase."

Badger quickly put out his hand with a polite greeting, inviting the newcomers to have a drink on him. Webb appeared neither to see the hand nor to hear the invitation, but Chase daintily accepted the great paw. A faint smile played at the corners of his full, red lips as he nodded thanks while moving over to the bar.

Badger returned the smile and deliberately let his eye wander toward Blizzard for the evident purpose of calling attention to that worthy. Chase seemed to understand and followed the glance, whereupon he found himself nailed by a stare from eyes like hovering hawks, and the muzzle of the rifle on Blizzard's arm apparently was aimed at the third button on Fancy's silk shirt. Chase's smile stretched a trifle, and he inclined his head graciously as much as to say, "Nice work. I'll behave."

WEBB'S impatient growl brought Badger around to face him. "What the devil do you know, stranger?"

"Well, now—Mister Cal Webb," rumbled the Ranger, cocking his head insolently, "it bein' my misfortune to be a pore, ignorant cuss—I don't know much. But I do know that them two skunks out there committed suicide!" And he added softly, "Was they yo' muley pets, Mister Webb?"

Smothered exclamations and muttered curses came from the crowd, while spurs tinkled and boots scraped the floor as men backed away; for they knew there could be but one answer to this challenge.

More than one eye rested on Badger with a new respect—an unspoken acknowledgment of his courage.

Splotches of red came and went in Webb's smooth cheeks, and the flat gray of his eyes lost the little warmth it had. His thin nostrils were white and trembled, and he muttered huskily, "Suicide hell! The likes of you had better not try to make a fool out of me! Who are you anyhow?"

One man sighed, one cleared his throat, and others stood with heads thrust forward and teeth clenched—like fascinated spectators at the approach of Death. And in more than one hard face, there came a fleeting sympathy for this genial stranger who appeared to be one of their own kind; a poor fool who was throwing away his life by daring to call a man whom they all feared.

Badger saw Cal's hand hovering at his waist, fingers working nervously, but he continued to stand at ease with thumbs hooked in his belt, and it was afterwards said that he looked as harmless and innocent as a little calf when he answered softly, "Why, I don't noways mind tellin' you, Mister Webb, that me and him is rovin', ramblin' missionaries, a-preachin' the gospel of peace and good will——"

He stopped abruptly, for a gun appeared in Cal's hand with the speed that had made him famous, even in this land where speed with a Colt was no uncommon thing.

At the same instant, a gnarled fist swept up and crashed into Webb's soft cheek; a vicious blow that crunched when it landed. The skin burst and blood flew from

the ragged flesh. Like a tawny panther shot and dying in mid-air, his body hurtled against a table and bounded to the floor. A flailing boot splintered a chair, the room shook, and glasses clattered behind the bar. Cal's fingers twitched, his mouth dropped open, and a crimson stream trickled down over his colorless lips.

For a moment, nobody moved or dared to speak. The barking of a dog and the neighing of a horse rode in on the whispering wind. The dealer absently spun his

wheel, and the ball clicked with startling clarity.

"My God," an awed voice broke the silence, "Cal's face is plumb mashed in!"

"Hell's fire!" a man muttered hoarsely: and another voice whispered huskily, "Two inches lower and it'd tore his head plumb off!"

Half crouched, knees bent, hands poised over his guns, Badger sent a lightning glance around the semi-circle of amazed faces. He wouldn't draw first, but he was inviting them to start their play. Instead of hostility, he saw only wonder and disbelief, and he relaxed with a grin.

He stepped forward quickly and bent over to get Webb's gun. Without warning, one of the two dandies behind him whipped out a Colt!

Badger's broad back was an easy target. The six-shooter snapped up. Windows rattled in response to a deafening crash. The dandy spun around and fell on his face. His toes beat a tremulous tattoo on the floor, his fingers crooked like claws, and his nails dug into the boards. Blizzard's hand sped down and up, feeding his hungry rifle.

The dealer flipped the wheel, and the ball clicked merrily.

Chapter II

INTRODUCING A GIRL

WHEN Blizzard's rifle spoke, Badger whirled with all the speed of that pugnacious denizen of the prairies after which he was named. Waist high, the muzzles of his guns threatened the room and his keen glances darted from man to man, searching the faces around him.

An instant later his teeth flashed in a reckless smile, and he rumbled softly, "Better set tight, fellas! My double-jinted pardner is gittin' riled and he might hurt somebody."

For a brief moment, every eye was on the somber face of Blizzard who towered through the smoke over all the others—looming gaunt and fierce and merciless.

Badger's thoughts raced at break-neck speed while he cautiously backed to the wall. He knew there were a number of men in the room who would carry on the fight; he could see it in their faces. They were not cowards. Momentarily they were paralyzed by the speed with which Blizzard had struck, but the effect of that shock would wear off at any instant; and he knew the odds would be tremendous.

He had to think of the right thing to say and do.

"Reckon they's plenty men here to wipe us out, fellas," he went on easily, bringing his right-hand gun to bear upon a bony, fierce-looking man who wore the earmarks of leadership. "But we'll shore take a whole slew of you along for company. Somehow I can't figger that good men oughta die on account of this here wuthless skunk."

A shadow of indecision or uncertainty flitted across the bony man's face, and Badger realized that the issue hung in the balance; a few seconds would settle it, and he held his breath.

But for the moment he had entirely overlooked Fancy Chase.

Daintily touching his lips with a white silk handkerchief, the little dandy came away from the bar toward the center of the room, and spoke up quietly. "As far as The Lone Star is concerned, boys, the first act of this show is over." His voice was soft and even, but there was something about it that left no room for argument. "In my opinion, these two strangers fought fairly according to the code by which we're all governed—the right of every man to protect his life and the life of his friend."

He paused, and his large blue eyes danced around apparently looking every man in the face in an unspoken invitation to start a fuss about it, and hoping he would. Long Tom Baker ambled out onto the floor with loose-jointed ease and took a stand near Chase, thumbs hooked in his belt and a dry grin tugging at his lips.

The arrival of help from this unexpected quarter took Badger by surprise and he

could no more than stare in amazement at the two men who had suddenly stepped between him and probable disaster. Why should the little dude take their part? He had come in with Webb and apparently they were on good terms. It stumped Badger, but he wasted no time trying to find the answer.

His first concern was how the crowd would take Chase's interference, and right there and then he got another surprise. He saw hard men, big men who could handle the little fellow with one hand, avoid those level blue eyes and edge away—some grumbling and others smiling sheepishly—and he holstered his guns.

Presently Chase went on in friendly fashion. "Some of you look after Cal, for he needs attention. And, Slim—I wish you and Monty would carry Mex's remains over to The Panhandle. I'm sure that's where Cal will want the body taken."

A number of the men started to carry out his orders, but he stopped them with a gesture. "One moment, boys." Cocking a humorous eye at Badger, he spoke in a more or less judicial tone. "As legal owner of this establishment, I've suffered the loss of a perfectly good chair; and as illegally appointed justice of the peace of this community, I hereby fine Badger Coe the sum of two dollars—he being the principal contributing cause of my loss. This fine will be turned over to the house to assist in paying the cost of drinks for everybody. Step up to the bar, fellows, and name your poison."

THAT broke the tension. A gale of laughter followed—Badger's roar sounding above all the others.

"Much obliged, Jedge!" he boomed, handing over the two dollars. "A fella shore gets a-plenty for his money in this town."

"Don't mention it, Badger," answered Chase dryly. "Any man is liable to get what's coming to him in Casota."

While everybody else headed for the bar, Badger stopped facing the little man. Tilting his Stetson, he scratched his curly pate and regarded Fancy with a humorous twinkle in his eye. "D'you mind sayin' why you done it?"

Chase's large eyes opened even wider. "Why I fined you? You broke my chair, of course."

Badger's great shoulders shook with laughter. "By dogies, my mammy allus told me I asked too many fool questions!"

Fancy smiled queerly and lowered his voice a trifle. "Furthermore, I suspected that in about another second you'd turn this place into a slaughter-house."

"Who? Me?" exclaimed Badger, feigning astonishment. "Why—I'm as gentle and peaceable as a leetle——"

"Rattlesnake in dog-days," Chase cut in pleasantly.

He glanced over to where two men were picking up the Mexican's body. There was a large spot on the floor, and a dark stain had spread over the front of the gunman's gaudy yellow shirt. Fancy made a little gesture of distaste, and smiled facetiously when he said, "Look what you did to my floor." His eye followed the dead man for a moment, and then he favored Badger with a dry grin. "Red blood on a white shirt isn't an unpleasant sight; but on yellow—the colors clash."

Badger thought, "Cold blooded as hell." Aloud he chuckled, "Glad you told me. If I ever come a-gunnin' for you, I'll wear me a yaller shirt so's to make you drill me through the breeches."

"Don't—please! Anything but that," laughed Chase, walking away.

Badger joined Blizzard at the bar and turned to watch four or five men who had placed Webb on a poker table. They took turns working on him with water and raw liquor, spelling one another frequently so as not to miss any of the goings-on at the bar.

One of the interested spectators was a man pointed out as Washita Charley—a grizzled, hard-bitten old cowhand wearing the look of one who bent his neck to no man and feared neither God nor the devil.

Presently Cal mumbled something and sat up, and Washita came over to the bar cackling to himself. "They drenched him with enough snake medicine to resurrect a plumb dead man," he rasped out, reaching for a glass. "In all my bawn days, I never seen the beat of it—fellas. I done seen rannies clawed by grizzlies, gored by buffaler, and kicked by mules, but none of 'em stopped anything harder than this here big fella's fist. Lawsy me!"

"Mebbe so," Badger heard a voice mutter near at hand, "but I shore as hell wouldn't want to be in his boots."

AT THE moment, the thought uppermost in Badger's mind was where to find the unknown author of the letter. When he used the words "rovin', ramblin' missionaries" in addressing Webb, he gave the countersign. Everybody must have heard, but no one responded. He was about ready to start out on a round of the saloons, when Webb slid off the table and headed for the door.

Cal walked like a stringhalted horse with the blind staggers. One eye was entirely closed, and that whole side of his face resembled nothing human. The other eye was puffed and blood-shot and as vicious as the eye of a hydrophobia cat with a leg in a steel-trap.

Badger watched his every move like a cat.

Abreast of where they were standing, Cal stopped. He said nothing aloud, but the stare he gave them was such as to cause one man to whisper to another, "Them fellers had certain better high-tail it for the tall timber!"

However, Blizzard didn't appear to be at all interested, and Badger merely grinned at Webb.

"Look out!" someone muttered. "Here come more trouble a-hellroarin'."

The sharp click of heels sounded on the porch, and men shied away from the door to let a small, dark, female figure come pacing into the room.

"Howdy, men!" a throaty voice called out. "I'm looking for two gents who call themselves Badger and Blizzard."

A number of men acknowledged her greeting, and everybody looked at Badger; but he didn't realize it. Instead—he found himself gazing hypnotized into two of the largest, blackest and most disturbing eyes he had ever seen. In a daze he saw the rest of the face and concluded it was pretty, but the eyes threw him. Right there and then he was gripped by a strange experience; he could think of nothing to say, and his chin sagged.

Fortunately Chase's cultured voice broke the spell. He swept off his Stetson and said, "How do you do, Miss Ransom! If I'm not mistaken, you were looking at Mister Badger Coe."

At this Badger snapped alive. He quickly unbolted his top-piece, exposing a shock of curly black hair, and bowed politely. "Yes'm! I'm Badger Coe. You'll have to ex-cuse me for actin' sorta flabbergasted-like, but my mind bein' kinda dallied 'round somethin' else—I wasn't what you might call expectin' you. Whatcha drinkin', Miss?"

Blizzard snickered, and Badger got redder than ever, realizing he had stepped through his headstall when he asked that fool question. It was plain to see that the girl was dying to laugh and about ready to break loose; but at that moment she caught sight of Webb, which was all that saved the balance of Badger's self-respect.

"Why—why—whatever happened to you?" she asked Cal—surprised but very cold and formal, and not at all sympathetic.

Webb choked back a growl, swallowed once, and sidled toward the door.

"Mule kicked him," squeaked Blizzard, putting on more color when the girl looked his way.

She whirled on Cal and snapped out at him, "You can stand hitched for about two minutes, Webb, because I want you to hear what I've got to say."

He mumbled something, but made no move to leave.

Putting out a tiny gauntleted hand to

Badger, she told him cordially, "I'm Belle Ransom, Mr. Coe; and I came in to thank you and your friend for saving the life of our old foreman—Chilblain Jones."

By this time Badger had recovered his equilibrium, and he was inspired by a devilish determination to redeem himself in the eyes of the spectators. Thoughtfully fingering his mustache, he inquired, "Chilblain Jones? Lemme see—oh, yes, I remember now. Why, that wasn't hardly anything at all, Miss Ransom. Blizzard here, he's done forgot about it already; and me—I had a hard time tryin' to figger what you was drivin' at."

His face was wholly innocent and guileless, and for a moment she gazed at him uncertainly. Then she laughed right out. "Oh, I almost believed you! You are funny."

Badger tried to look hurt. "Why, Miss, I allus knowed one look at Blizzard would make most folks laugh, but——"

Chuckles arose on every hand, and Blizzard looked murderous.

She shook her head vigorously. "No, no! You know well enough what I mean. Sometime this morning you killed two of the most dangerous gunmen in the country, and by the middle of the afternoon you pretend to have forgotten all about it. Fiddlesticks!" Nodding at Blizzard she asked, "Is this your absent-minded friend?"

"Yes'm, that's him—Blizzard Wilson."

BELLE offered her hand, and as Badger afterwards described the encounter, "Blizzard kinda sagged against the bar, like a crooked fence rail with its top end on fire. He had plenty trouble findin' a place for his front feet, but did manage to shake hands all right; and befo' it was over, you could see he wouldn't noways have minded doin' it again. Shore enough, there was somethin' about this here leetle gal that made a right-thinkin' sort of a fella set his saddle easy, after the fust jump."

In the meantime Badger also kept an eye on Webb and Chase, and later in the day he confided to Blizzard, "When he sized the gal up, Cal's ornery eye and no-count mouth told me all I needed to know about how that there fella's mind runs when good-lookin' women folks is around. Fancy was a-wearin' kind of a dreamy look, like a fella that dotes on purty things —settin' suns, runnin' hosses, female fig-

gers, and such-like; and right there and then I swore he was a eighteen-carat gent —far as women is consarned."

After a friendly word or two, which put Blizzard as much at ease as he ever would be in the company of a pretty girl, Belle turned away and faced Webb. The fingers of her right hand were hooked in her belt near the handle of the six-shooter it supported, and she peevishly slapped one leg of her divided skirt with the quirt on her left wrist.

At this point Badger was treated to another surprise. Before his very eyes, this neighborly girl was changed into a thoroughly dangerous woman. Her big eyes narrowed and hurled feline cussedness; her full lips became thin and cruel, and a face that had been warm and mirthful, grew cold and merciless.

He muttered to himself, "Lawdy, Lawdy! A she-wolf!"

Boots scraped the boards and spurs clattered as some men nervously shifted their feet, and others actually moved away from behind Webb.

Fancy Chase wore the rapt expression of a man drinking in the beauties of an approaching storm; but anger and cruelty were pictured on Webb's mashed-up countenance, and Badger moved out from the bar so as to have a clear view of the man.

Cal growled down at her, "There ain't no

call for you to go on the prod, Belle Ransom——"

"I've plenty of reason to."

"—simply because a couple of my men went gunnin' for that old killer of yourn. If——"

"He isn't!"

"—there's a t'rantler in Texas—he's it!"

"You're a liar!" Her voice was low and colorless, and it gave the listeners a chilly sensation. "Chilblain Jones isn't a killer. I'll admit he has been a gun-fighter since he was old enough to thumb a hammer, but he's no gunman."

Webb interrupted with a disdainful grunt.

"He wouldn't think of shooting an unarmed man," she went on. "He isn't like the coyotes you hire."

Cal tried to speak, but she stopped him with a fierce gesture. "Listen to me! I made Chilblain come to town unarmed, thinking that would keep him out of trouble. I didn't imagine there was a man in the Panhandle who'd be mean enough to crawl him when he wasn't heeled. But I didn't know how dirty your outfit really is. An inch lower, and Chickasaw's bullet would have killed him like a dog!"

Badger watched the crowd closely to see how this announcement was received. Evidently that sort of business didn't meet with universal approval, for a number of men regarded Webb with frank disfavor. He just stood there, as dumb as a fishing-worm.

THE girl continued with a quick nod toward Badger and Blizzard. "These two strangers came up out of a draw in time to stop the slaughter, and they sure did it. When your brave killers stacked up against honest-to-God gun-fighters—see what happened to 'em! Chilblain saw it all. These men gave 'em an even break and beat 'em to it. You'll find both of 'em shot from the front." She whirled on Badger. "Won't he?"

"Shore 'nuff, lady!" he answered, tugging at the lobe of his ear and pretending to think. "As I recollect it, he'll find that my man—that's the breed—got two fo'ty-fo's in the middle of his paunch, about two inches above his breeches. Blizzard's man—he's the roan—got a Winchester slug plumb center, right smack through the wishbone."

Badger finished speaking, looking straight at Webb; and the wicked stare he received in return told him plenty. The thought flashed through his mind, "He's a smart, tricky skunk, and he ain't no coward. Gotta watch him like a hawk."

As Cal made a move to leave, Belle Ransom lowered her voice and told him levelly, "From now on, I'm fightin' back!"

Webb brought a silk neckerchief to his lacerated face and grunted something, looking at his boots.

The girl stepped closer and glared up at him. "I'd like to tell you to go for your gun," she murmured in a husky contralto.

Cal threw back his shoulders and started for the door. "Huh! You know I ain't shootin' it out with no woman." And he added viciously, "But I'll be mighty accommodatin' to your men folks."

"He ain't got no gun now, lady," snickered Blizzard in high glee; then he pulled in his neck like a dry-land turtle.

All eyes were on the girl. A smile played at the corners of Fancy's mouth, and he gracefully rolled a smoke with fingers that were slender and tapering.

"Damn this skirt," breathed Belle with a sigh as she watched Webb walk away.

Quickly turning to Badger, she went on in more normal tones, "You heard the promise I made to Webb. I don't know who or what you are, or where you came from; but I do know you're fighting men. So I'm offering you and Blizzard Wilson a job helping me to keep that promise. What do you say?"

Again this extraordinary girl had Badger at the point of being flabbergasted, and he sent an appealing glance at Chase. That fastidious individual appeared to be having no end of fun, but he offered no help; so Badger had to go it alone. "W-e-l-l, you

see it's like this—Miss Ransom. Me and Blizzard has been workin' powerful hard for years, and now we're—we're kinda rangin' wide, seein' some of the country and a-spendin' our wages, you might say. Course, if any of them coyotes crawls you——"

"On second thought," she cut in seriously, "I shouldn't have asked you. It was you who smashed Webb's face for him—wasn't it?"

Badger was the picture of innocence. "Oh, I jest sorta slapped him, but he lost his balance and plumb ruint one of Fancy's cheers. I had to pay for the cheer—durn it!"

Everybody chuckled and Belle's eyes danced, but she went on soberly. "And you have killed his men. No, it was unfair of me to ask you, for if you stay in this country three days you'll be dead men. You ought to get out right away."

Badger shoved his Stetson to the back of his head and tried to look surprised. "I'll declare! Is that a fact? Jest when we was takin' a likin' to this here Panhandle country."

"If it wasn't for that," Belle continued, ignoring his exclamation, "I'd like to have you visit us, anyhow. We've got the best colored cook in Texas. But I know it wouldn't be safe for you to——"

With a doleful shake of his head, Badger interrupted. "Ex-cuse me, lady! You've done done it now. Blizzard is willin' to resk my scalp and mebbe his own any day, jest to get at some gen-u-wine vittles. We'll shore come!"

Her face lighted up and she answered quickly, "Good! Anybody can tell you where to find the Double R."

Long Tom glanced across at Chase, one eyelid drooping solemnly. Badger caught the gesture.

After a little smile and a nod that took in everybody, and a pleasant "Good-bye" to Fancy and the marshal, Belle left the room.

Old Washita Charley followed her trim figure with an approving eye, reached for the bar-bottle with a gnarled hand, and wisely declared in a voice that creaked with the rust of age, "Fellas—thar goes a plumb high-headed filly, and it'll take a close-ridin' buckaroo to tame her. I know—me who is goin' on sixty-five year old and has been bustin' hearts all over the prairie for danged nigh fifty year!"

Everybody at the bar chuckled and went back to the business of drinking; that is—everybody except Badger.

His dreamy gaze followed the girl through the door, across the porch, under the rack, and he saw her every move when she swung aboard a deep-chested blue roan that didn't in the least resemble a cow pony. He watched her spin the horse in the dust, and admired the boneless flexity with which her body gave to its spirited lunge.

Then he drew a long breath and reached for his glass. He absent-mindedly downed one drink, dumped a second one in on top of it, and was pouring a third with a far-off look on his face when Blizzard rowelled him in the ribs with a sharp elbow.

"Stop it—you durned fool," the tall one hissed. "Ain't you got nary a brain left in yo' head?"

Badger came out of his trance ready to fight. "Hey, you long——"

"Be still!" snapped Blizzard, talking so low that no one else could hear above the uproar going on around them. "Fancy and Tom has been makin' medicine over in a cawner, and here come Tom."

"Let him come," grumbled Badger peevishly.

The marshal eased himself in alongside, and for a minute appeared to be principally interested in accumulating another drink. Pretty soon he drawled, "Gettin' noiser'n a stampede in here. I got me a little room in back that Fancy lets me use for a office. What say we take a bottle in there and nuss it for a spell?"

"That's a fust-rate idee, Tom," agreed Badger. "I crave peace and quiet, and mebbe a drap mo' of this here Casota pacifier. It shore is soul-upliftin' liquor."

Trailing along behind while they elbowed

their way toward the rear, Blizzard growled something that Badger couldn't quite catch —something that didn't make sense, about "love-sick young'ns" and "big eyes" and "little feet"—but he knew his neck and ears were red.

The marshal's office wasn't much more than a bare room; but it did have a bunk on one side, a notched and scratched poker table in the center, and several reward notices hanging around on the walls.

Badger grinned when he saw that one of them had a bullet hole squarely in its middle. "Looks kinda like you nailed that notice up with a fo'ty-fo', Tom."

Busy with the bottle, Baker replied without looking up. "Nope. A curly wolf that called hisself Cherokee done it."

"Is that a fact? How come?"

Long Tom carefully poured out three good sized drinks before answering. "Well —you see the notice is about him. He got a squint at it when he was in here two-three months ago, and right pronto he got plumb red-eyed. I tried to tell him that it didn't make no difference here in Casota, and that I mostly use them notices to paper my walls with; they keep out drafts. But he wouldn't listen to reason, so——"

"So what, Tom?"

Liquor slid down Long Tom's neck smooth and easy, his Adam's apple making just one pass at it when a whole drink went through the gate at a high lope. "To this day—the fellers swear that was one of the best buryin's we ever had in Casota."

Badger nodded and sampled his drink. "Reckon I understand. But, Tom, don't you ever arrest a fella to get the reward?"

"Nope—at least not frequent."

"Why not?"

The marshal's tight-locked mouth cracked in a dry grin. "Mostly because if I dropped my loop on every citizen with a bounty on him, we'd lose some of our best men; and Casota—she'd soon be durned nigh depopulated."

Badger's laugh boomed out, and puckery lines showed at the corners of Blizzard's cold eyes.

Evidently Long Tom thought it a good time to change the subject. "You fellers is cowhands, ain't yuh?" he asked offhand.

"Yep—more or less," readily answered Badger. "Me and him has been cow-people off and on for years."

"Been ridin' for some Canadian outfit?"

"Nary a one. We ain't been in this country sence we come through here hide huntin', long time ago."

BAKER studied his visitors for a moment, then deliberately reached into the table drawer and brought out a paper. He ran his eye over it—slowly and carefully—and when he glanced up, a quizzical smile tugged at his grim lips. There was a flavor of apology in his tones when he spoke, which Badger never would have expected from him. "It ain't my nature to want to pry into the other feller's business—got too much trouble tryin' to ride herd on my own—but when you read this here reward notice, boys, mebbe you'll savvy why I kinda wanted to pow-wow with you."

Still smiling, he handed over the paper. Badger and Blizzard didn't read it very rapidly—especially so, since they were keeping one eye on the marshal—but what they did read was interesting.

Sheriff Jack Corliss of a southern county, offered a reward of Five Hundred Dollars each—dead or alive—for two outlaws known as "Buffalo" and "Pelican." The descriptions of these wanted men were given in considerable detail—right down to a knife slash along Blizzard's left cheek and a streak of white hair over Badger's right ear where he had been creased by hot lead. The sheriff went on to say that Buffalo and Pelican always ranged together, and he wound up with a word of caution to brother officers:

"While he is apparently very good-natured and easy-going, Buffalo is extremely dangerous even when disarmed, because of his great physical strength.

Few men are his equals with a six-shooter.

"At any range, Pelican is one of the most deadly rifle shots in the country; and he works his Winchester faster than most men can handle a short gun. Because he has so little to say, this man may strike without warning.

"Both men are utterly fearless.

"With the foregoing facts in mind, adequate precautions should be taken when attempting to arrest the fugitives."

Badger chuckled as he read, thinking, "Jack is shore layin' it on thick. The durned fool is liable to git us drilled. Should've told him to go easy when I asked him to fix this thing up."

When he had finished reading, he glanced up quickly and exclaimed, "I'll be damned! I'd allus figgered there wasn't two other fellas in the whole wide world with carcasses like our'n, but these here specifications shore do fit us to a T—flesh marks and all." Leaning slightly forward in his chair, he added innocently, "Ain't you goin' to arrest us, Tom, and git yo'self them thousand dollars?"

Blizzard said nothing, but there was a frosty glint in his eyes while he waited for the marshal's answer.

Long Tom carefully built a cigarette, and returned with perfect ease, "Nope—hadn't calc'lated on doin' it."

"Why not?"

Baker inhaled deeply and leaned back to watch the smoke float lazily upward. "There's quieter and healthier ways of makin' money than tryin' to arrest hair-trigger gun-slingers. Trouble with them is, when you start in on 'em you got to kill 'em all over, and they can absorb a heap of killin'."

Badger grinned, and Blizzard rubbed his long nose—inquiring dryly, "What do you arrest folks for 'round here?"

The marshal looked Blizzard squarely in the eye and answered soberly, "All depends. But so far, I ain't arrested nobody for bein' a outlaw someplace else. Accordin' to my way of figgerin', just as long as he ain't busted our laws we ain't got no kick comin', and to hell with the other fellers' laws."

"That shore is a mighty fair and square way of lookin' at it, Tom," declared Badger. "Reckon this would be a durned sight better country if every law officer

was as sensible and peaceable as you are."

But as Badger would have said, "Blizzard was a-forkin' his cuttin' pony, a-workin' the herd for facts; and he could hang onto a idee jest like he would a critter—right persistent." So he wanted to know, "What laws you usin' now, Marshal—if you don't mind sayin'?"

LONG TOM filled his lungs with smoke and let his gaze wander through the murky back window, out across the empty prairie. Anyone could see he was dealing his cards cautiously. "Fancy Chase makes all the law we got, and all we need."

"You don't say!" from Badger.

"Uh-huh."

"Is he a lawyer or a jedge, or somethin'?"

Baker answered with a shadow of feeling. "Mebbe so, and mebbe not—nobody knows. Anyhow, he's got more brains in his head than all the law-makers in Austin or Washington; and he savvies this country, and the folks in it."

Badger stroked his blue jaw doubtfully. "He looks smart as hell, all right, and I ain't questionin' his brains, but he's such a leetle mite of a fella. How come some big ranny who didn't happen to like his laws, ain't never reared up and jest naturally stomped him into the ground?"

Long Tom's lazy drawl was matter-of-

fact, but memory brought sparks of enthusiasm to his eyes. "It's been tried more'n once—one time by three fellers simultaneous. We shore had a mighty fine triple buryin', followed up by a rip-snortin' celebration."

"Lawdy! Is he that good?"

"Uh-huh, even better. He's a artist, and makes everybody else look slow as axle-grease." Tom bent over to smooth his pants down into his boot tops. "Fancy's a chicken-hearted little cuss, too; can't noways stand to see folks suffer pain, so he shoots to kill—instantaneous."

Blizzard fired a question at the marshal. "What right has he got to make laws?"

"A better right than them Austin politicians, I'm tellin' yuh," responded Tom quickly. "In the first place he didn't do no stump-speechin' to get the job; and in the second place he knows more than them as has to foller his laws."

"This ain't no organized county, so he couldn't be elected regular," persisted Blizzard. "Did he jest sorta appint hisself?"

Tom shook his head. "Nope—not by a damsite. Folks around here knowed they needed somebody to kinda ride herd on the boys and mebbe hang one of 'em official-like off and on, so they had a meetin'. Everybody agreed that they'd oughta have a feller for justice of the peace that could talk language, so they elected Fancy; and for more'n two year, most of 'em ain't never been sorry they done it."

"Kinda go over some of yo' laws, will yuh, Marshal?" urged Blizzard.

"That's a right good idee, Tom," Badger spoke up; "then me and him won't run no chances breakin' of 'em accidental."

Long Tom said he didn't mind, and proceeded carefully as though he considered it important to make everything clear to the strangers. "We ain't got many laws, and you prob'ly won't find any of 'em printed in statute books; but what we got shore do cover most of the human ailments—you might say. For example—if a feller shoots up a saloon or busts up ary place, he pays fair and square damages to the boss of it, and no hard feelin's. If he bushwhacks, or shoots or knifes in the back, or guns or carves a feller that ain't heeled—we hang him. If he mistreats a woman, good or bad—we hang him. If he is or has been a thief someplace else, that don't bother us none; but if he does any stealin' around here—we hang him. Fact is—we're 'specially careful to hang our local hoss thieves a-plenty. That's about all. Of course, short-card sports and cold-deck artists is always hung if they git caught, providin' the feller that caught 'em don't salivate 'em first."

Long Tom stopped, as though waiting for his listeners' comments. Blizzard said nothing; and for a moment, Badger was silent. It struck him that any man would be compelled to acknowledge the crude justice to be found in the simple rules of conduct Fancy Chase had established for the government of this wild community; and a conviction was growing in his mind to the effect that the fastidious little dandy was a far bigger man then he had thought him to be—and much deeper. Who was Fancy Chase, and why was he there?

"I'd say you're rigged out with some mighty fine laws," he declared with feeling. "Had many hangin's?"

"Nope—not many since I been here."

"Law-abidin' citizens—huh?"

"Not overly so," returned Tom while pouring three more drinks. "Mostly the guilty parties seem to choose gun-smoke and lead instead of cottonwood and hemp. Which suits me better, 'cause it's a lot less bother for everybody."

BOTH Badger and Blizzard agreed that it was, and after emptying his glass, the latter arose. Stretching to his great height, he yawned and said, "Let's feed. I'm so hongry my flanks is stickin' to my backbone."

Badger came to his feet and asked the marshal to go along. But Long Tom sat still. Evidently there was something else on his mind, and Badger wondered what it was. Tilting back in his chair, Baker

let a cold, calculating eye ramble over the visitors.

"Much obliged, but I can't leave here right now. By the way, I been tryin' to figger whether you two wampus cats know just where you stand."

"What d'yuh mean?" snapped Blizzard.

Tom stood his ground, but he called his bets cautiously. "I mean that Belle Ransom might have been talkin' to tease you fellers into comin' out to her place, but she told the truth—regardless."

Blizzard wasted no breath. "We're listenin'."

Long Tom stroked his mustache, and chose his words. "Mex don't count for very much, but when you drilled Chuck and Chickasaw you tromped on the toes of the most cantankerous cuss in this whole country; and when Badger busted his face, yo' death warrants was signed right there and then. That is, of course, if you don't evaporate clean out of the Panhandle before mornin'."

Badger was not very much impressed by the warning. "Who was Chuck and Chickasaw?" he inquired.

"I don't know. Cal brought 'em in here more'n two year ago, and they was his right hand men. Everybody thought them fellers was the slickest gun-slingers that ever hit this country—'cept Fancy, of course."

Badger went into one of his innocent spells. "Jest what would you advise a couple of pore leetle orphans to do, Tom?" he rumbled softly.

The marshal snorted. "I ain't advisin'. But I know durned well what you'll do."

"Think so?"

"Hell, yes! You'll hang around here—honin' for trouble—until you most likely get shot so full of holes yo' hides won't hold hay."

"Sakes alive, man!"

LONG TOM went right on, paying no attention to Badger's outburst. "And if you get tired of doin' nothin' while you're waitin' to get yo'selves killed dead, let me know and mebbe I can help you to pass away what little time you got left."

"That's shore neighborly of you, Tom," declared Badger. "What doin'? Ridin' for some outfit?"

Baker hesitated. "Well, you see—Fancy's got several irons in the fire and I'm devilish busy, so——"

"Deppities?" interrupted Blizzard, quick as a flash.

Long Tom stared at him hard and straight for a split second. "Uh-huh," he drawled. "You might say—deppities."

The visitors exchanged quick glances, and Badger spoke up. "Reckon we'd shore be mighty proud to be yo' deppities, Tom. But befo' promisin' final, we'd ruther graze 'round here for a spell, sorta seein' the country and gettin' acquainted—if it's all the same to you."

The marshal came to his feet smiling, and put out a hand. "Fair enough, fellers. Just let me know when you're ready. Chances are you might live longer in this country, packin' Fancy's iron. And then again—you mightn't; can't never tell about such things."

Hand on the door-latch, Badger turned bashfully to ask another question. "Uh, Tom, who is that there gal—Belle Ransom?"

Blizzard covered his mouth with bony fingers and winked at Tom, but the marshal answered soberly, "She's a right clever little woman, Badger."

"'Peared so to me."

"And she's a rip-snorter to boot."

"Wouldn't be surprised."

"She can ride like hell, and shoot plumb straight and fast."

"You don't say?"

"And mebbe cuss a little."

"I'll declare!"

Long Tom gave Badger a level glance. "But don't make the mistake some fellers has made."

"What's that, Tom?"

"Don't think just because she does all them things, that she ain't as honest as a horse and as clean as a hound's tooth."

"Bully for her!"

The marshal went on dryly. "When such mistakes has been made, they turned out plumb painful, for two reasons—Belle herself, and Fancy Chase backin' her play."

"Fancy—huh?" Badger cogitated a moment. "Is she Fancy's gal?"

"Nope—not yet. Far as I know, she ain't nobody's girl."

"Are her folks cow-people?"

Tom shook his head. "Belle ain't got no folks, but she's in the cow business herself. Owns and runs the Double-R, with the help of that old sidewinder foreman of hers, Chilblain Jones. It's far and away the biggest outfit in this country."

"Do folks 'round here like her?" asked Blizzard out of a clear sky.

"Generally speakin'," answered Baker. "And why not? They know she's square, and they figger she's got all the good looks and most of the money in Texas. Belle's well to do."

Badger wanted to know, "What's the trouble between her and Webb?"

"Reckon you'll have to ask Belle—or mebbe Cal—about that," drawled Tom in the tones of one who was closing a subject. "I been talkin' too damned much."

"Yo' talkin' ain't done nobody no harm, Tom," said Badger at the door, "and we're shore much obliged to you."

And when they were outside, he softly added to Blizzard, "But he didn't do Fancy Chase no good, offerin' us jobs jest 'cause he thinks we're outlaws."

Blizzard was evidently busy with his thoughts. "Maybeso and mebbe not," was his cryptic comment.

WHEN they came out into the room, all the games were going at full blast. The fact that death had stalked through and claimed a victim within the hour, apparently did no more than exhilarate the living. The monotonous monologue of the crap dealer accompanied the explosive utterances of the lanky cowboy with the dice. The toneless clatter of chips mingled with the clink of hard money and the flutter of cards, to form an undertone over which arose the occasional whoops of winners and curses of losers, and the hilarious banter of both; for most of these men played and won or lost with enthusiasm, even as they worked and fought. As a rule, silence was the badge of the taciturn, hard-faced professional gambler, or the reckless layman who had staked more than he could afford to lose, upon the turn of a card or the whim of a wheel.

They reached a draw poker game and Blizzard hung back wistfully. A glance told Badger that the stakes were high, and he knew Blizzard to be a poker player par excellence—but they had plenty of money, so he dragged the tall one away. As they went leisurely along, more than one man nudged his neighbor and pointed them out; for any man who killed Cal Webb's best friends and maltreated Cal himself, was due to be somebody in Casota—while he still lived.

Near a faro layout, Badger caught sight of Fancy Chase talking to the dealer. He waved a large hand and boomed, "Howdy, Jedge!"

The little man's face lighted up and he called out impishly, "Howdy yourself, Buff—or I should say—Badger!"

"Right clever leetle fella," chuckled Badger, moving on.

"Sharper'n cactus and ten times as pizen," declared Blizzard, apparently looking everywhere at once without turning his head.

At the end of the bar next to the door and several feet removed from his nearest neighbor, a sharp-faced, beady-eyed man was drinking by himself. When Badger and Blizzard were a short distance away, he pushed his hat to the back of his head, slammed a fist onto the bar, and roared drunkenly, "Missionary, hell! If that there big buffaler is a parson, I'm the Angel Gabriel fixin' for to toot my hawn!"

A close observer might have noticed that this speech had a peculiar effect upon the strangers. Their heads jerked around to

face the speaker, their lips tightened a trifle, and their eyes narrowed slightly.

The countersign—Angel Gabriel!

"I crave another drink," announced Badger, loud enough to be heard by those near them.

Making his way to that end of the bar while Blizzard lounged along in the rear, he looked straight into the solitary drinker's face and boomed, "Barkeep, fetch us liquor that's fit for Satan hisself! I'm fixin' for to drink with a ramblin' angel! Put her there—Gabriel."

The other growled an oath and shook hands. After a sly glance around, he drunkenly flopped an arm across Badger's shoulders and whispered, "I'm a-leavin' now. You ride two-three hours after dark. Got the directions?"

"Uh-huh."

The next instant they were arguing at the tops of their voices about who would pay for the drinks.

Blizzard ambled over from where he had stood surveying the room—his face even sterner than usual, but he offered no explanation of his apparent concern and

took his drink in silence. Badger and "Gabriel" continued their senseless argument for a few minutes, and then the latter staggered out of the door.

The Rangers were careful to do nothing to indicate that any particular significance attached to this encounter. Their eyes met for an instant, but nothing was said.

Blizzard took his liquor as quietly and coldly as though he were a six-foot-six icicle, hollow inside; but his broad friend was a different proposition. As he once described Badger's drinking, "When he's a-forkin' a alcoholic bronc, he rides loose, standin' in his stirrups and raisin' the long yell at every jump; but at that—nobody ain't never seen him pull leather or roll in the dust."

And the present situation was no exception. This sudden meeting with the unknown writer put Badger on edge, and the scent of approaching danger mingled right nicely with the fumes of the liquor he had absorbed; so the devil inside of him got a whiff of it and commenced to rear and faunch and bawl for action. He craved to talk loud, laugh long, and lie plenty. But his mind was as clear as a bell, and while watching the crowd that now jammed The Lone Star, his thoughts raced fast and furious. He felt that in days to come they would need friends, and he knew that one of the very best ways to corral the friendship of these mixed breeds of men, was to feed their craving for excitement or to tickle their sense of humor. Give him a chance, and he could do both—no man better; and the chance he was hoping for came almost immediately.

Backed up against the bar near them, facing a semi-circle of laughing friends, a large, good-natured cowboy was holding forth in a loud voice anent the manifold virtues of Southwest Texas steers.

"I'm a-tellin' you they ain't no longhawns raised on this here Panhandle Range," he asserted in the tones of one who knew his subject.

"Why ain't they, Longhawn?" inquired Washita Charley from the fringe of the crowd.

"It's plain as the nose on your face," the cowboy answered. "The hawns takes root up here same as anywheres else, but it's so damned dry they won't grow; the hot winds just shrivels 'em up. Another thing that makes it hard for a steer to raise hisself a respectable set of hawns in this country is the grasshoppers. S'pose'n he does happen to strike a wet year and git a pretty fair stand of hawns; soon's ever it dries up, these here man-eatin' grasshoppers lights

on 'em and gnaws plumb down to the quick, and there he is—right back where he started from." The speaker paused to shake his head dolefully. "It shore must be mighty discouragin' to the critter."

The crowd roared its approval.

Hearing Badger's booming laugh at his elbow, the cowboy turned on him and demanded, "Ain't I tellin' the truth, you rovin' moss-back? Don't we grow hawns down south?"

"I'll tell a man you're right, Longhawn! Shake!" and Badger shot out his paw. "I'm Mister Ezekial Jedekiah Coe, gents, a fust cousin of Gen'l Gawge Washington; and I'm shore you'll notice that I'm the palpatatin' image of that there great story-teller."

"'Ray for Gawge!" yelled Washita Charley.

Badger grinned and went on. "Them that know me know I never lie; so perk up yo' ears while I tell you 'bout hawns that is hawns!"

The semi-circle hilariously widened to take in Blizzard and him, and Old Washita bored his way through.

After swallowing another drink at one gulp and sending Blizzard a prodigious wink, Badger told them this story:

"A few year back, I'm getherin' a herd of timber cows for Old Man Clark down in Matagorda County, and I'm workin' a country that ain't been scouted much sence the war. Plenty cows in there that's ten, fifteen, mebbe twenty year old, and has had lots of time to grow hawns and learn how to take care of theirselves without any human assistance. The bresh ain't much more'n ten twelve foot high, but it's powerful thick and heavy so you got to let yo' pony foller the cow-trails to git through. It would've been mighty hard to see anything if it wasn't that the bresh is mowed down for 'bout ten feet on both sides of the trail 'til it ain't more'n three foot high."

He paused to bring out tobacco and papers, and someone asked, "Who mowed the brush?"

"Well, I'll tell you, Sah—them cows done it."

"Musta been all-fired hongry," observed Washita.

"Nope—Old Timer, they didn't eat it. I'm settin' my pony one mawnin' jest befo' sunup, on the edge of a leetle patch of prairie when I seen a old steer breakin' a new trail, so I know jest how it's done."

Badger took time to roll his smoke, and a man in the crowd called out, "Did he have a scythe, Mossyhorns?"

There was a twinkle beneath Badger's heavy eyebrows, but his face was serious. He answered through a cloud of smoke. "In a manner of speakin'—he did. That there old mossback got hisself all set out in the prairie 'bout a hundred yards, then he high-tails it straight at the timber and dives into the bresh head-fust with a snort you could hear a mile. He don't go very far—not over twenty yards—but his hawns mows the bresh down on both sides of his head as far as he does go, eight to ten feet on each side. He backs off——"

A burst of laughter stopped him, for the crowd realized that his steer had at least a twenty-foot spread of horns.

When they had quieted down, he took a long breath and went on with the story. "I'll swear, gents—that there job of work had me mighty nigh throwed for a while. It was like this—I'd see cow tracks goin' up hill and none comin' down, so I'd say to myself, 'That there critter went up and ain't come down, so she's still up,' and I'd ramble to the top of the hill expectin' to find me a cow and I'd find nothin'. All the other boys was havin' the same trouble and it kept up until our ponies is damned nigh tuckered out; then I happened to see a old bull backin' down hill. Right there and then my natural intelligence ontangled the riddle. You see, fellas—them there cows' hawns is so heavy they dassn't go head-fust down hill, 'cause they'll lose they balance and roll head over heels to the bottom—so they has to back down. You're danged right—that's the Gospel truth!"

The roar of laughter that followed was

punctuated by yells of, "Set'm up again!", "Give Mossyhorns room to shake out his loop!", etcetera.

Out of the corner of his eye, Badger caught sight of Fancy Chase sitting on a table near the wall, laughing and talking to Long Tom like he was thoroughly pleased about something.

AFTER allowing time for about one drink, Badger complied with the vociferous demands that he go ahead. "It's easy to see that you gents is lovers of the truth, and that you appreciate the virtue of on-diluted facts—otherwise I'd stop right here. Well, gittin' right down to the kernel of the nut I had to crack—me and my crew finally gethered 'bout fifteen hundred head of them cows and held 'em on a level patch of prairie while I sent one of the boys to town with a chuck-wagon after a load of buckshot."

Old Washita wanted to know, "What was you goin' to do, Badger? Shoot 'em with a shotgun?"

Badger shook his head. "No, sah! I had to trail them fifteen hundred spooky critters over some powerful wild country; and while I didn't noways mind havin' to sew up their eyelids to git 'em broke in while we was holdin' 'em, I calc'lated it was goin' to be damned onhandy and onconvenient to stop at every hill so's to let them there cows turn 'round and back down. So when the buckshot come, I set the boys to work a-splittin' tails," and he paused to take a drag at his cigarette.

Curiosity as well as good-nature had hold of the gang, and there was a chorus of inquiries. A little old man on the outskirts craned his neck and asked, "Splittin' tails? Whatthehell you drivin' at?"

A look of commiseration made its way across Badger's face, and he sorrowfully shook his head. "Ain't you never heard tell of that? Huh! Every cowman knows about it in gen-u-wine longhawn country. Well, anyhow—we'd split a cow's tail, take the bone out, stuff the hide full of buckshot and stitch it up tight—thereby weightin' the hind ends down to balance the front ends. You can betcha we never had no trouble goin' down hills after that!"

Thus he wound up his story in a gale of laughter and yells. Badger could see that his particular brand of humor suited these wild, half-drunken men to a T. It was ridiculous, impossible, and fantastic—but it supplied them with a welcome change from the ordinary, commonplace, practical things that went to make up the hardships of their man-killing work on the range. A sweeping glance around told him that he had done a good job; at the moment he was popular, and they didn't give a hooraw in hell whether he was an outlaw or a preacher.

At length Old Washita Charley made himself heard above the uproar. Pounding Badger on the back, he bellowed, "Hallelujah! Our story-tellin' parson done forked Old Man Truth and rode him plumb into the ground. Gimme likker!"

Men vied with each other in their efforts to buy Badger a drink, but he begged off and wormed his way out, followed by Blizzard. "Let's git shed of this mob," he muttered. "We got to feed and git set to pound leather."

Fancy Chase met them near the door. He was all smiles and his eyes danced; and Badger thought he looked like a handsome, mischievous boy who had just played a trick on someone or was about to do so—rather than like a cold-blooded killer he was supposed to be.

"Permit me to congratulate you, Badger," purred Fancy, offering his hand. "You have brains and you know men."

Flustered by this unexpected praise, Badger stuttered his thanks.

"I hope you're coming back before long," continued Chase.

"Shore thing! We'll be back. Goin' to throw a bait and mebbe look the town over a little."

A shadow appeared to flit across Fancy's face, and he lowered his voice. "May I suggest that—ah—perhaps you will find the

middle of our streets afford the best walking."

Badger threw back his head and laughed. "Much obliged, Fancy, much obliged."

Blizzard fixed the little man with a penetrating stare, but said nothing.

Chase went on in quiet, level tones, "And for your information, The Panhandle is owned by Cal Webb."

"Is that a fact?" exclaimed Badger with a deep chuckle. "Betcha it's a right lively place."

Fancy smiled ever so faintly. "I've no doubt you would find it to be, should you —ah—carelessly drop in."

Badger's booming laugh caused more than one head to turn. "Sometimes me and Blizzard is shore powerful careless, Jedge."

"I'm positive you are," answered Chase soberly.

For a brief instant, Badger stared deep into the dandy's unfathomable blue eyes—but they told him nothing; and he would have sworn he could feel their steady gaze following him through the door.

Out on the sidewalk he growled at Blizzard. "Why did that there leetle devil warn us to be keerful?"

"I can't figger that out—yet."

"And what struck you so sudden-like in there, Old Horse-face? Got a tech of colic or somethin'?"

Blizzard maintained a morose silence for a few paces. "I was a-watchin' Chase when you met Gabriel. It might've been my imagination, but I'd bet a stack of blues he thought there was somethin' queer about it."

THEIR horses made almost no sound as they traveled at a running walk along the sandy cow-trail, and the two riders themselves were silent.

A wise, complacent moon looked down upon them with a crooked grin, as though he knew something they would like to know—which he wouldn't tell. And he impishly touched the land with a tricky light, making hideous things beautiful and beautiful things hideous; painting queer shadows, and laughing at the confusion of men and beasts.

Twenty crazy devils screeched on the right, and twenty more answered from the left; but the riders knew they were merely a couple of coyotes serenading the moon.

A snooty little cricket—thinking he owned the earth—turned himself loose and hurled his voice to high heaven, telling the world how happy he was and defying the old man in the sky; but a skinny, snaky neck curved down and a long beak searched him out, so he ended his song on a high, wailing note and ended his days in the gizzard of a sand-hill crane.

The moon grinned wider than ever.

A young jack kicked up his heels and loped insolently across their path, as noiseless as a ghost. He sat up a few rods away —sassy and brave as anything—like a fellow without a care or fear in the world. In a flash everything for him was changed. A streak of dirty white dropped straight from the moon, and the rabbit floated away in the air. His plaintive little cries came back to the riders—growing fainter and fainter, fading into the moonlght—smothered by the talons of a prairie owl.

The ornery old man up above puffed out his cheeks and his skin got pink; he was dying to laugh.

A penetrating whir-r-r-r burst suddenly from the grass near the trail; unlike any other noise, and the most devilish sound on the plains. A great sidewise leap followed by a wild snort, carried the black far out of the path. Its rider found his right-hand gun in his palm—thumb on the hammer, but remembered in time that he shouldn't fire.

A cloud of disappointment dimmed the face of the malicious moon.

RIDING in the lead, Blizzard brought Solomon to a stop and raised his hand. Badger held his breath and waited. He knew that his friend had the ears of a wolf at any time, and the eyes of a hawk

by day—an owl by night. The horses stood like statues, little ears pointing ahead. They—too, heard something.

In a moment Blizzard kneed Solomon sharply to the right and Belial followed without urging. At a fast walk, they went down a wide ravine that dropped rather steeply toward the level floor of the creek bottom, half a mile away. About two hundred yards down they reached a growth of blue-stem that came well up to the riders' thighs. Without a word, Blizzard stepped off and Badger followed suit. A tap on the knees, a low, sharp command, and both horses lay down.

"Heard somebody ahead in the direction we was goin'," muttered Blizzard.

"Was they talkin' or——"

"Shh-h-h!"

Badger strained his ears. He heard the gentle scraping of dry leaves and the faint crackling of stalks as the breeze whispered its way through the tall grass. The scent of a skunk came up out of the bottoms to mingle with the smell of the dry prairie—dust and dead grass and the faint stench of distant carrion, and the natural odor of the horses at his feet. . . . A pebble trickled down on the left, and he jerked his head around. A wolf flitted along the edge of the ravine—as noiseless as a shadow and as swift—slithering away, looking back. The raucous screech of a prairie owl split the silence and the voices of the night were hushed; the muffled drumming of hooves pounding sand on the trail, rode down the breeze!

The drumming came closer and closer. Both men kept their eyes riveted upon the point where they left the trail. A vagrant cloud obscured the moon for an instant, and Badger cursed softly; then it floated on and left them a fine light by which to see.

Suddenly a rider dashed into view on the rim, followed by two others traveling single file. The horses were stretched in a run, and the riders were bending low in their saddles. To the experienced eyes of the watchers, they wore the look of men who were pursued by something; and they rode as though every nearby clump of grass hid a demon and the devil himself ran at their stirrups.

Badger expected them to flash by; but instead, the leader sat his horse down and the others slid to a stop in a cloud of dust. Bunched closely, they appeared to be holding a consultation; and he clenched his fists, hoping that Belial and Solomon

wouldn't spoil everything by suddenly deciding to get up.

Belial showed signs of nervousness, and Badger growled at him, "Be still, you black rascal!"

He knew the riders above couldn't hear him; but it appeared that they did, for they suddenly turned and came down the draw!

"Godalmighty," he muttered under his breath.

Silently peering ahead, Blizzard sank lower in the grass and shifted his Winchester to the front.

Sliding and scraping over the pebbled floor of the draw and crashing through the heavy grass, the strange riders came on noisily.

Badger was thinking desperately, trying to decide what they should do. He knew that any instant the horses might betray them; nothing could keep the animals down much longer. If they ran they were sure to be recognized, and if they fought the same danger confronted them. The prospects of a fight rather appealed to his mood, but he feared recognition. It would wreck all their plans—ruin everything.

He cursed steadily under his breath, and tried to solace himself with the thought,

"Anyways, we got damned good shootin' light."

For a brief moment, he glanced at Blizzard—a hawk face as steady as a rock, pointing straight up the draw, long neck stretched out, looking for all the world like a hungry bird of prey awaiting unwary victims.

Suddenly the riders stopped. Badger kept his eyes riveted upon them, and listened.

"Reckon we can see 'em from here, and they won't see us," a cautious voice reached him.

"This waitin' here is all damned foolishness—I call it," another complained.

"No 'tain't. The boss wants to make shore and——"

Thrashing around in the brittle grass and making enough noise to abruptly stop the speaker, Belial came to his feet and let out a great snort. At the same instant Blizzard's Winchester roared with a crash that was magnified by the silence of the night—rebounding from the nearby banks with volume fit to shake the earth!

A hat was ripped from one of the riders, and for a breath the three sat their horses as though turned to stone. The rifle roared again, and another hat was flung off—the rider swaying in his saddle and slapping a hand to his head. Then the riders bent low, whirled, and crashed madly up the draw.

In a few moments the three were gone over the rim.

"What the hell's gittin' into you?" growled Badger. "Missed 'em clean!"

"Huh! Didn't try to hit 'em," Blizzard snapped back. "But I come damned close to creasin' one of 'em accidental."

"That's perzactly what I figgered," chuckled Badger. "You jest wanted to skeer 'em away befo' they spotted us."

"Course," grunted Blizzard bringing Solomon to his feet and stepping into the saddle.

"I was fixin' to do the same thing, but you beat me to it."

"Don't stand there and jabber all night," barked Blizzard. "Climb on top of yo' plug and let's ramble."

Badger swung aboard his horse. "You're gittin' too damned uppity," he snarled.

When they came to where the hats had fallen, Blizzard swooped down with a long arm and got them. Then without a word he carefully rolled the two Stetsons and stowed them in his saddle-bags.

"Goin' to give they top-pieces back to them rannies, huh?" asked Badger facetiously.

"Like hell!" avowed Blizzard. "I'm a-goin' to read me them hats by daylight, and I wouldn't be surprised if they tell me somethin'."

Back on the trail again, they loped along northward in silence for a short while.

Presently Badger observed, "Them fellas was shore calc'latin' to get a squint at somebody."

"Uh-huh. And I'm a-wonderin' what we'll get a squint at when we git to where we're goin'."

"So am I. I don't noways like the looks of things."

Another mile or so, and three giant cottonwoods loomed up ahead—a landmark mentioned in the letter. Closer and closer they came, until the moonlight touched their waxy leaves with silver and they glittered like a thousand wicked eyes. A hundred scraggly arms swayed in the breeze—beckoning the riders on. A great limb extended out over the trail. Badger glanced up at it and wondered whether any man had ever hung there, confiding his secrets and dying thoughts to the whispering, gossiping leaves above him.

Then he shook himself and tried to think of pleasanter things.

The main trail continued on top, but a path referred to in the letter broke off to the right and disappeared down a fairly steep slope into a canyon opening into the creek bottom proper. Its forbidding depths were filled with shrubbery, and shadows. Solomon took the path and Belial followed.

At the floor of the canyon the weak trail gave out in a dry, gravelly wash, bordered by willows. Blizzard hesitated until he caught sight of a narrow path leading off to the left, through a dense growth of underbrush and tall grass. They followed it up the canyon, away from the creek, through vegetation often as high as their heads. The light in there was bad.

Badger wondered where they were bound, and how they would find the place when they got there. The rifle across Blizzard's arm looked right comforting. He loosened his six-shooters in their leather, and glanced down at the Winchester riding in a saddle-scabbard under his leg. He didn't know where they were going and didn't give a damn—but he was in a hurry to get there. Evidently Belial felt the same way about it for he was fidgety; but Solomon plodded on, as undisturbed as his rider.

Belial's silky ears were never still, and Badger fell to watching them in the dim light. Forward and back and around—they moved smoothly or jerked swiftly, picking up sounds that were far beyond the range of human hearing. He tried to imagine what story the voices of the night were telling his four-footed friend, and what the horse mind thought of such traipsing around in dark places.

Suddenly the animal's head came up a trifle, its ears shot forward and its nostrils expanded. An instant later Blizzard stopped Solomon in his tracks, and from the way he sat the saddle, Badger knew he was trying to catch the sounds his horse had already discovered.

A horse neighed—the call ringing down the canyon loud and clear.

A little pull on the reins and a sharp word prevented their mounts from answering. Again the call came, and Badger thought it sounded strangely forlorn and lonely. An echo laughed back at them from another direction, and a locoed coyote yapped and yowled from the crest of a distant sand-hill.

THEY went on more slowly, and within three hundred yards came to a comparatively open spot where moonlight streamed down upon them. Blizzard swung out of the saddle, dropped reins, and took a short turn away from the trail—eyes on the ground. Presently he straightened and pointed at a clump of tall bushes that grew against a bench which formed part of the sloping wall of the canyon. Badger stepped off and hurried over to him.

"A passel of men and hosses been stompin' around here not long ago," whispered Blizzard, calling attention to the sign. "Door of a dugout behind them there bushes."

"Yep—I see it," answered Badger. "Stay here."

Walking on the balls of his feet, he quickly slipped around the clump of shrubs and came to a halt before the sloping door of a half-dugout. Bushes cut off almost all the light, but he found a latch and the door swung silently on its leather hinges.

Standing well to one side, he flung it open and called out, "Howdy, Gabriel!"

Every muscle taut—he held his breath and listened.

Mice squeaked and rustled in straw, an eerie sound in that black hole; and a musty smell came up to greet him—an unsavory stench out of pitch darkness. No answer.

Crouching low like a giant cat, and moving as fast as possible so as not to set himself up as a target for a hidden bushwhacker, he darted through the door and down the short flight of dirt steps leading to the floor. The last step gave away beneath his weight, and a wild lunge hurled him into the room.

He crashed headlong into a man!

A fraction of a second after they came together, Badger lashed out a terrific blow. He didn't stop to think that it might be Gabriel. Surprise and the natural instinct of a fighter sped the blow, and he felt his fist bury itself to the wrist in the flesh of a man's stomach. In a flash he jerked sidewise and drew, expecting to hear the

crash of a falling body and the roar of a gun.

But he heard neither. The dank hole was as silent as a grave, and smelled of the earth and molding things. No gasps, or groans, or curses. And yet he was positive no man could stand under the blow. Stunned for an instant, he froze where he was. It was unnatural, like a nightmare—hitting something that refused to fall; and the darkness was so thick it choked him.

Soft, quick steps came at the door. Blizzard held a sulphur match aloft, careless of possible danger to himself.

The light feebly pushed back the inky curtain, slowly—until there stared at him, a bloated face and a protruding tongue, and a body that jerked, and swayed, and twisted crazily!

The match spluttered out.

Black as hell again!

Chapter III

"That was a beautiful draw, Badger.
I've never seen anything faster."

BADGER crouched against the wall, gripping his gun.

A vision of that ghastly face remained suspended in the pitch black before him. Mice squealed in terror, and a bat swished past his cheek. He could hear his heart thump.

Blizzard struck another match.

"Good!" huskily snarled Badger. "Stub of a candle on a table over there," he pointed out; and in another moment they had a light by which to take stock of things.

Slowly twisting and swaying as though tossed by wind in that dead air, and touched with weird colors by the trembling light—a man hung by the neck from the ridge-pole!

Like something alive and devilish, his shadow did a grotesque dance on the wall.

Badger swore with more than usual feeling. "Gabriel—by God! Deader'n hell—pore devil!"

"Shore is."

"I'll be damned! After bein' so all-fired keerful not to let anybody see him talkin' to us, he gits hisself hung."

"Uh-huh. And it all goes to show what we're up against," observed Blizzard thoughtfully.

"Pore cuss! I reckon them damned skunks that done it was a-runnin' from they consciences."

"Nope—probably ain't got none," grunted Blizzard. "I reckon they stayed here longer than they allowed to, and was a-hurryin' to get hid so's to watch the trail. Don't tromp 'round none. Lemme see what I can make outa the sign. They's a heap of tracks in sight."

He went to work at once and the manner in which he did it substantiated Badger's boast, "That there fella scouts with as much patience as a Apache, and a heap mo' savvy."

His long face set in hard lines, Blizzard's narrow eyes seemed to pry into every nook and cranny in the place. The hole was empty except for a rickety, home-made table and a bunk made of poles driven into the dirt walls and floor, and covered with straw. Evidently it had been vacant for a long time, as dust had sifted onto the hard dirt floor. Out of the jumble of boot tracks, one appeared particularly to interest Blizzard and he examined it with extreme care. Taking a straw from the bunk, he broke off pieces the exact length and width of the track and placed them in a vest pocket. There was the mark of a patch on the sole of the boot. After measuring it carefully, he brought out an old day-book and stub pencil, and drew a rough sketch of the patch—scaled to the measurements he had taken.

With a satisfied grunt, he came to his feet and said, "Hold him while I cut him down."

When Blizzard slashed the rope, Badger gently placed the dead man on the bunk. Arms folded, he gazed down at the corpse and observed quietly, "He ain't much to look at and he most likely didn't amount

to nothin' on his home range, but his hangin' shore means a heap to us."

"Yep. Expect he could've told us a-plenty."

Badger drew his bowie knife and cut the rope binding the dead man's hands. "Don't like to talk about a ranny that can't talk back, but this'n don't look to me like a fella that'd have any special love for law and order."

" 'Tain't likely. When he sent for the Rangers he probably wanted to git even with somebody," suggested Blizzard.

"Too bad he didn't write what he had to tell us."

"Uh-huh; but he ain't the writin' kind."

"Go through him and see can you find out whoinhell he is," advised Badger.

At the conclusion of a thorough search of Gabriel's clothing, Blizzard straightened up with a grunt of disappointment. "Not a damned thing on him. They cleaned him."

The Rangers agreed there was nothing more to be learned in the dugout; and while Badger was gone in search of the dead man's horse, Blizzard cut a leafy branch and carefully swept the dirt floor and steps clear of boot tracks. The open space outside was almost as light as day. Dropping to hands and knees, he went over every inch of it. One hoof-print caught his attention, and he carefully measured it with a twig which joined the straws in his pocket. "Some fellas is damned fools," he muttered disgustedly, while ambling over to where the horses were standing at the edge of the willows.

Presently Badger came out of a thicket two hundred yards up the canyon, riding a pony. "Found him all right," he said in a low voice when he rode up; "but he was shore plenty hid." And he added significantly, "It's that there paint of Chickasaw's."

"No!" snapped Blizzard, coming out where he could get a better view of the pony.

"Yep."

"I'll be damned!" Eyes on the horse and long fingers caressing his jaw, he stood plunged in thought for a moment. "This oughta help us find out who he was."

"I figgered it would."

Since it obviously wouldn't be safe for them to take the pony into town, they decided the only thing to do was to turn it loose and let it drift home. Badger removed the bridle and tied it to the horn, gave the horse a slap on the hip, and watched it trot off up the trail.

"He's a shore 'nuff onlucky pony," he observed quietly. "Two fellas has rode him to they doom today."

Grim faced, he turned and gazed toward the door of the dugout. Close at hand, willows chuckled and whispered among themselves. On the far rim of the canyon, coyotes set up a chorus of insane voices.

"Wonder will somebody be sayin' the same thing about our nags a week from now," he added half humorously.

"Yuh cain't never tell in this country," carelessly answered Blizzard.

ONCE out of the canyon, Badger and Blizzard put their horses into a long lope and went piling across the prairie—back to town.

For some time neither had a word to say. They were following the plan they always followed; a plan that had earned for them the reputation of being a good pair to draw to. Cold and hard, and impervious to the influence of either friendship or hate when his work was involved, Blizzard could cut the facts out of a milling herd of lies and pretenses; and he could "dab his line on the truth where the average man would waste his loop and lose the critter in a cloud of dust." It was his job to think and scheme and make arrangements; but when the music started, Badger was sure to be in the first set. Blizzard had been heard to remark that, although Badger was never overly interested in mysteries, no man thought faster than he when the time for action arrived.

Belial and Solomon had pushed several miles of country behind them before Blizzard finally spoke up. "I been thinkin' some."

"I calc'lated you was."

"We done got us a job of work."

"That's what Cap'n Hank allowed when he sent us into this here Panhandle country."

"And it's gittin' tougher every minute."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Badger in mock concern.

"Uh-huh. I can see hell a-boilin' over mighty soon, and we're due to get scalded a-plenty."

Badger grunted. "Bully! I never did like a quiet range. Besides, we been scalded befo' and mebbe we've lost a tail feather or two, but we're still packin' our spurs."

Blizzard stuck to his line of thought. "Somebody in Casota is damned shore the Rangers has come in, and they suspicion we're them."

"Fancy Chase?"

"It might be," answered Blizzard doubtfully. "But he shows signs of wantin' to save our hides, which don't quite make sense if he is the one."

"Mebbe he figgers we're his own private and partic'lar meat."

"Huh!" sniffed Blizzard. "If that there leetle devil wanted to git shed of us, he wouldn't noways mind who done it or how. He reminds me of a iceberg with the sun a-glitterin' on it."

"Hell—you ain't never seen no iceberg," snorted Badger. "What do you make of Fancy, anyhow?"

Blizzard gave the matter some thought. "Whether he's downright crooked or mebbe a leetle straight—I ain't ready to say; but whichever he is, he's a mighty big man. There's jest one thing I'm shore of about him, and that is—if he ever gives you his word, he'll keep it, come hell or high water; and I ain't talkin'."

"As far as you went, I think you're right," agreed Badger; "but you didn't go far enough. D'you know what I suspicion? I'll bet my bottom dollar that that there purty, soft-spoken leetle dude is the boss-bull-rattler of this whole durned country. But I don't think he had anything to do with this hangin'. It don't strike me as bein' his way of doin' business."

"Me neither—in a way," cautiously assented Blizzard. "But yuh cain't tell, 'cause I'll betcha he's got crazy idees in his haid about how to play a slick joke on a couple of fellas."

(*Part II in the next* SHORT STORIES)

COUNTRY BOY

By KARL DETZER

Author of
"Rule of Thumb," and Other Stories of the Michigan State Police

TROOPER BYRNE had started the day in bad humor. To begin with he was fed up on paper work. Every day for a week, eight hours a day, he had sat inside at a desk and pushed arrest slips, complaints, daily report sheets, identification cards, and heaven knew what else, into a yawning green metal filing case; pushed papers into a case, and nothing else.

Certainly he hadn't joined the State Police just to do this. It hadn't been his idea, at least. He wanted to be out, in action, and what, he thought bitterly, did he get? Papers, papers!

And he, alone, of all the men assigned to Manistee post. Nobody else, except the sergeant, of course, was working in the office. Every other trooper in the place was out, early and late, doing this and that, chasing thieves, stopping brawls, hunting lost kids, cleaning up traffic accidents.

It's One Thing to be Laughed at, but Another to Solve a Murder Case that Had the Detroit Police Stopped

There seemed to be plenty of action for everybody else, but here he sat, fussing with papers. And he knew the reason. He was the youngest trooper in the detachment, in point of service. They were breaking him in. On papers!

He looked sidewise at the sergeant. Old Perkins didn't seem to mind inside work. Acted as if he really liked it. Entirely content, apparently, he did nothing but take down the day's list of stolen car numbers in the state that boomed in over the radio desk set. Never even looked up.

Byrne dropped a daily report sheet into the wrong slot, pulled it out, and did it right.

"That is all for now," the voice said over the radio. "WRDS signing off."

Perkins stood up and stretched.

"That's done," he said. He walked toward the window.

A car was passing slowly in front of the post, as if searching its way. Byrne craned his neck. The car was halting on the cinder parking lot.

"Well, well," the sergeant exclaimed as a man got out of the car. "Here comes the law."

Trooper Byrne jumped up. Perkins' voice hadn't seemed quite as forbidding as usual. He joined him at the window. It was an expensive looking machine, steel gray and massive, with Illinois license plates. The man who had climbed out of the right hand door was big, too, and his hair was gray.

"What you mean, the law?" Byrne demanded.

"A cop," the sergeant answered.

"What makes you think—?" Byrne broke off without finishing. He knew what the sergeant would say to that question. He'd bawl him out for asking it. Nor was he mistaken.

PERKINS grunted, "How do I know he's a cop? Well, you learn a lot of things, youngster, after you're off the farm long enough. See that bulge under his arm?"

Byrne forced himself to grin. That's what they all said to him every day, always bringing up the farm.

"That bulge under his arm's a shoulder holster, kid," the sergeant said. "Use your eyes." He looked at the second man, climbing out of the driver's seat. He, too, was a big fellow. He stretched his long legs, taking the cramp out of them. "That other baby," Perkins guessed, "the one kicking his feet now, he's one of these here tycoons of some kind. He's got plenty jack."

He snapped off the radio while the two men mounted the steps. The one he had guessed was a police officer pushed open the door. The other, who was younger, not more than forty-five Byrne thought, stepped ahead of him into the building. Byrne glanced at the sergeant, then used his own eyes. Tycoon eh? With plenty of jack. Well maybe, if Perkins said so. But all he saw on the surface was a man extremely tall, thin in comparison with his companion, with a hard square jaw, and clothes. It was the clothes that told Perkins maybe. They looked expensive. Gray, of good cloth, and a good tailor had fitted them.

The sergeant was asking politely, "Anything I can do for you gentlemen?"

"Plenty sir," the tall man answered. "My name's Hammill. C. Wilson Hammill of Chicago. Firm of Gerdings and Hammill."

"Oh, yes." Sergeant Perkins' hands tightened almost imperceptibly on the paper he was holding. "I know. Gerdings and Hammill Coal company. I was reading ——"

The other interrupted. "About my partner. Yes. Everybody's read about him. The newspapers——" He paused, as if just remembering his companion. "This is Mr. Wilson, Sergeant. Of the Wilson Investigating Service. I've employed him to help me hunt Mr. Gerdings."

"How do you do, sir," Sergeant Perkins said. He glanced at Byrne triumphantly. He'd been right again, his glance said. Here was the law and a tycoon.

TROOPER BYRNE sat down and picked up the next card in the file box, but he didn't actually look at it. The sergeant, he thought to himself, wasn't the only one who read the newspapers. He'd been reading about Gordon Gerdings, too, these past few days. The front pages of Chicago newspapers had had no room for anything else. Gerdings, a millionaire coal dealer, had vanished. One evening last week he had telephoned his wife that he was delayed at his office and would not be home for dinner. Later the same night he had telephoned once more, apparently in a state of excitement or distress, to say that he was called out of town and would be gone several days. He had gone, and hadn't come back. And not only he, but his car was missing.

"It's not like him at all," Hammill, the partner, was explaining now to the sergeant. "He's a steady sort. Always had been. Entirely devoted to his wife. No financial trouble. No reason at all, so far as we can discover, for him to disappear. Or make way with himself. But we haven't heard anything from him. It's eight days now, and, well, we're——"

"Leaving no stone unturned," the sergeant supplied. "Yes, I read that in the papers too."

"Oh you did?" Hammill hesitated, then smiled a little half heartedly. "Well, there's one thing you didn't read," he said. "You didn't read that Gerdings has a shack up here in the woods. I didn't let that get into the papers."

Byrne looked up quickly. Gerdings. Well, he *was* a fool. What would Perkins say to him now? He'd never connected the names. The Gerdings shack—it wasn't a shack, if he knew what shacks looked like —was right up in his own county.

"Up here in North Michigan?" the sergeant was asking. "No, I didn't know that," and Hammill answered:

"Over in the pine plains, on Arbor Lake. Place he particularly liked. Used to go up to it every once in a while. If he was figuring out some deal and wanted to be alone to work over the details, he'd go up there. When Mr. Wilson here heard that fact," he motioned toward his companion, "he decided we'd best check on it."

Sergeant Perkins laughed. "There wasn't any need of your coming all the way up here yourselves," he protested. "You could have called us on the 'phone and we'd have run over there and checked for you."

Hammill shook his head.

"No," he said, "I didn't want to use the telephone. Too many ears. There's always publicity in a telephone and I wanted to avoid that. Mr. Gerdings' family and all, none of us, really, like the way the

newspapers have acted about the whole story. We thought we'd run up ourselves."

Private Detective Wilson, who had not spoken till now, agreed, in a deep rolling voice, "That's right, Sergeant. Too much publicity's spoiled many a case."

Sergeant Perkins showed feeling. "Don't I know that, too?" he said in turn. "It's hurt us often, here. Well, what can we do for you, then?"

"Just this," Hammill answered. "I've never been over there at that lake. Never even have seen the place. It's Gerdings' property, you see, not mine. Don't know how it happened, but I've never been there, don't have any idea where it is. We don't want to lose any time. If one of you could ride over with us now? Show us the way? There's a caretaker. Fellow by the name of Asher. Tom Asher. Used to work for me in town. Gerdings hired him just a little while ago."

Sergeant Perkins glanced thoughtfully at Trooper Byrne.

"You can't telephone him from here either?" he asked.

"No telephone on the place," Hammill said. "Shack sits right in the middle of the land, the way I understand it. Miles from any other house."

Trooper Byrne ventured to speak.

"I know where it's at, sir," he told the sergeant. "I come from over that way, other side of it, really. That's my country."

"You know the Gerdings' shack?" Perkins demanded.

"Heard of it," Byrne answered. He waited for the blow to fall, but Perkins only scowled, putting off any interrogations until later.

"Byrne's just a recruit," he explained to the two visitors. "He's only been off the farm six months. He'd know the way, though. I could let him show you."

"You could?" Hammill rubbed his hands together with satisfaction. "That's fine, Sergeant, fine! You can spare him?"

"Oh, I can spare him, all right," Perkins said.

Byrne pushed the cards quickly aside. He'd forgive any kind of thrust Perkins could make, for the sake of action. Action of some kind, at least. If only to guide a man down a back road. He ran into the lounge room for his cap and pipe. Action! At last!

ANOTHER trooper was just coming in the other door of the room, Ben Brown, returning with his partner from morning patrol. He was whistling, lugubriously, the refrain from "Moonlight Queen."

Byrne grinned at him. "One thing," he remarked, as he hid the tobacco tin away in his cap, "I don't have to stick around in the office and listen to you canary birds sing the rest of the day."

"Know how to stuff your ears?" the other asked.

Byrne grinned again, and ran for the back seat of the big gray car. They could say all they wanted to about his just being in from the farm, he thought, but he wasn't a sheep. And a lot of these fellows were, he'd like to tell them. Did everything everybody else did. Sang everything. Just because some radio tenor introduced a new song last week, was it any reason a man need wander around whistling it all day?

"You take this next road to the left, sir," he bade Hammill, "and then turn right at the schoolhouse."

It was twenty odd miles to the lake Hammill and the detective sought. For half that distance, Trooper Byrne, in the back seat, listened quietly while the other two talked. They weren't mentioning Gerdings. He wished that they would, but they probably had said all there was to say to each other about it long before this. And of course, Byrne reasoned, Gerdings wouldn't be over here at Arbor Lake.

Why should he be? You couldn't expect anybody in his right mind to come out into the pine plains in November when he could be in Chicago. Or Grand Rapids. Or even Manistee. No, there was something screwy about the whole Gerdings deal. The man was dead. Or had skipped off with some money, or maybe run off with some skirt. He'd heard of guys doing that. But they didn't bring 'em to a place as dead as Arbor Lake.

Hammill asked him, "How far is it now, Officer?"

Byrne sat up straight. "If the middle road is open," he answered, "it won't be more'n eight miles. We can stop at that next house," he pointed, "and ask about the road."

Hammill looked toward the right at the place he had indicated. "It doesn't look to me like much of a house," he objected.

"It's the last one we pass before we reach your partner's," Byrne told him.

THE house was, in fact, no more than a shack, of the kind Trooper Byrne called a real shack, covered with tar paper in torn gray strips, yet a radio aerial hung limply from the sagged roof to a dead hemlock tree beside the road, and music greeted them as the car stopped.

Byrne grinned. "Moonlight Queen," again! He'd have to tell Ben Brown how common that song was. A man in overalls opened the door when he knocked.

"Why, hello, Byrne," he said.

The trooper answered, "Hello, Jerry. How are you? Say, tell me, is that middle road open into Arbor Lake?"

The man nodded. "I guess so," he said. "Ain't heard nothin' to the contrary. They was car tracks leadin' in it last week."

"Seen anything of the caretaker from that big house over there?" Byrne asked.

The man shook his head. "Nor hide nor hair," he replied soberly. "Don't know him, anyway. Wouldn't reco'nize him if he was to come face to face with me. He never sticks his nose out the house, I guess."

"I see," Byrne answered, and thanked him. "We'll try the middle road."

He went back to Hammill. He ought to tell him, maybe, that what he called the Gerdings shack on the lake was considerably more than a shack. A Detroit sportsman had built it for a hunting club, years ago, and although it lately had fallen into decay, the new owner, Byrne had heard, this last summer had spent some money on it.

But Hammill must know that. Better than he did, probably.

IN A few minutes," Byrne said. "Here we are, sir."

At the sound of their car, a thin, short man with a bald head hurried around the corner of a big log house. He halted in the bend of the driveway.

"Hello, Tom," Hammill called to him.

The man stared; then came forward at once, with an air of—what was the word? Byrne thought. Deference? That was it. Only, not real. A phony deference.

"Why, good morning, Mr. Hammill!" he cried. "I didn't expect you, Mr. Hammill!"

Trooper Byrne stepped down to the driveway. He'd brought them, all right. Now what did he do next? He walked aside, so the others could talk. Instinctively, as he waited, he looked at the gravel. It was neatly raked and bore no mark of tires.

"Mr. Gerdings here with you, Tom?" Hammill demanded.

"Mr. Gerdings?" the caretaker exclaimed. Alarm colored his voice. "Mr. Gerdings? Why no, sir!"

"You've seen nothing of him?" Hammill demanded.

"Of Mr. Gerdings? Why no, sir," the man replied. "Where would I see him? What's the trouble, Mr. Hammill?"

Hammill hesitated. He finally said, "Well, Tom, we can't find Mr. Gerdings down in Chicago. You've been right here on the place all last week?"

"Why, yes, sir!" the man answered. "Haven't set foot off the place, sir. Not in six weeks!"

"Six weeks," Hammill repeated. He thought it over to himself. "Well, that's that," he said. "We thought he might have slipped up here for a rest."

"Here? Oh, no, sir, he hasn't been here, sir!"

Hammill dug the toe of his shoe into the ground. "I told you it wouldn't do any good, Wilson," he said finally. "I knew he wouldn't come up here. But it sets our minds at rest, at least. Well—" he started back toward the car; after a few steps halted, "we might have something to eat here before we start back, Tom," he said. "We're hungry. Got anything to eat in the place?"

The caretaker hesitated, then he said, "Why, I can fix up something, Mr. Hammill. I've some nice pan fish. Can make biscuits. If you'll wait."

"We'll wait," Hammill decided.

Trooper Byrne walked back slowly along the roadway. Out of habit, he examined it again for tracks, but found none. He stood by while Hammill and Wilson strolled toward the lake shore. There was no use following them. They didn't need him in the least. He'd been just a guide. He

walked after the caretaker into the house. The little man was whistling quietly under his breath, as one will, sometimes, to ease strain.

"Got a radio up here?" Byrne inquired.

"Radio?" the caretaker answered. "No, no. Hate radios."

"You do?" Byrne said. "What's the matter with you? Should think you'd enjoy one, up here alone. What d'you do with yourself all the time? Don't you get lonesome?"

The man shrugged. "Fish a little," he said. "That's most done, though, for this season."

"Don't even get a newspaper?"

"Don't mind that, either."

"If you'd had one, you'd have known this man Gerdings was missing."

"Can't figure why he'd want to run away," the other replied.

"You never can tell," Byrne answered. He went back out-of-doors and sat on the kitchen steps and listened to the man preparing supper. The fellow was whistling again. Whistling "Moonlight Queen." You couldn't escape it. Even here in the midst of the wilderness. And of all the silly tunes.

THE man had whistled it a second time when Byrne got up suddenly and walked down to the lake shore. Hammill and Wilson were sitting silently on the dock.

"What made you think this man Gerdings might come up here, sir?" Byrne asked Hammill abruptly.

Hammill looked surprised. "What's that?" he asked.

Byrne repeated, "What made you think he'd come up here?"

"Why, I didn't," Hammill denied. "I never thought he'd be here. It was Mr. Wilson here who thought that. I told him it was a waste of time to come."

Wilson grinned a little sheepishly.

"That's true," he admitted, "that's just what you said. It'd waste our time. But I thought there was a chance, particularly since he ran up here that time last summer."

"I told you——" Hammill began.

"Oh, I know," the detective answered. "You told me. I admit you were right. I thought, though, if he was figgering out the same business the night he disappeared that he was working on up here so long last summer."

"He was?" Byrne asked. "You mean, he was working on something he'd figured on up here? Still working on the same deal?"

"He happened to be," Hammill answered. "It's unimportant. He's not here." He

turned back to Wilson, and Byrne, feeling rebuffed, left the two alone and walked back across the clearing.

There were old stables at the rear. He wandered toward them, stuck his head into an open double door, and paused, sniffing. They had not been used as stables for a long time. Just smelled empty and dusty. The woods came down close to the clearing here, a heavy second growth of poplars and birches, with an occasional cedar making a dark patch through the thinning yellow leaves. Near at hand an old lumber road, or perhaps, he thought, merely an old Indian trail, led away into the timber.

Trooper Byrne hesitated, looking at it. The traces of the ancient ruts remained, but they were deeply covered with pine needles. He kicked them with his foot. He liked to tramp through pine needles. It was one thing you could do in country that you couldn't do in town. He was about to walk on when he turned abruptly

and went back and stooped down and looked closely at them again. The woods were made up almost entirely of poplars here. The trooper frowned as he examined the needles.

After a minute, he got up and walked more rapidly into the woods, following the ruts. The trail ran a considerable distance, he discovered. He had gone all of a quarter mile along it when he suddenly came to a thicket of cedars in a swampy tract.

Deep in the cedars he found what, for the last half hour, he had expected to find. Evidence. In the form of a large dark car, without license plates.

He searched it briefly. It had been stripped of identification. But its finish still was glossy, indicating that it had been here in the weather only a short time. There was no mark of exposure about it. He searched further. Under the dash he found a pair of holes that had been bored through the foot board.

He got down on the ground, as soon as he discovered them, and looked under the running board on the right side. Sure enough. There, clamped to insulated fasteners, were two metal plates.

"Radio, eh?" he muttered. He lifted a floor board. The battery cage was empty.

He turned hurriedly and started back toward the house.

In the kitchen Asher still was whistling. He had changed to white jacket and trousers while Byrne was gone, and now, when he saw him returning, came to the door and called. Byrne went in quietly. Hammill already sat at the head of the table in the dining-room, Detective Wilson on his right.

"Sit there, Trooper, will you, opposite Mr. Wilson?" Hammill asked.

Byrne sat down. His breath was short. "Getting back to Mr. Gerdings," he asked at once, "he disappeared when?"

"Week ago Wednesday night," Hammill answered, and said to the servant, "That plate for the trooper, Tom."

BYRNE took the plate and tasted the fish.

"What sort of trouble do you think he really was in?" he asked.

Hammill put down his fork and looked at him sharply. "Why, we've gone into all that, Trooper," he said. "Several times. How do I know? There was nothing in the business——"

"Yeh, I know. That's what you said," Byrne agreed. He lifted his own fork again. "But he wasn't up here, you're sure? You haven't been away?" he demanded of Asher, who was bringing in the coffee.

Asher set down Hammill's cup. "Haven't been off the place," he repeated, "haven't seen a human being in six weeks."

"That's a long time," Byrne said. "And no radio."

"No radio."

"Did Gerdings have a radio in his car?" the trooper asked.

Hammill for a moment frowned at his plate. "Yes," he said, appearing to think, "I believe he did."

Byrne took another bite of fish.

"Well," he said quietly, "Gerdings was up here."

Hammill's coffee spilled. "Up here?" he cried. "Why, Trooper——"

"He drove up here in his own car," Byrne said, "or was driven."

The detective grunted.

"Probably," the trooper went on, "there was something up here he wanted, or something he wanted to find out."

Hammill cried, "No, no! He wasn't up here! Tom would have seen him. How could he have come in and gone without Tom seeing him?"

Byrne looked straight at him. "He couldn't have," he agreed. "Tom did see him."

There was a long silence. Hammill half rose from his chair. Then he sat down again. The servant did not move. He stood where he was, coffee pot in his hand.

Hammill snapped, "Don't be a fool, Trooper! Talk sense."

"That's what I am talking," Byrne answered. "You see," he smiled, "I'm just a country boy. Sergeant was bawling me out about it this morning. I don't figure things out the way you city fellows do. But you don't get the country slant, either, and we're out in the country now."

"I think, sir——" Hammill objected.

"Wait a minute," Wilson suggested. "Let's hear what he's got to say."

"Thanks," Byrne said. "You see, sir," he addressed Wilson, "I heard this fellow," he nodded to Asher, "I heard him whistling this afternoon."

The caretaker bridled. "Got a right to whistle, ain't I?"

"Oh, sure. But you were whistling 'Moonlight Queen.' That's a new piece. Nobody'd ever even heard of it a month ago, when last you were off this place. Wasn't ten days ago it blossomed out. On the radio. Understand? Radio. One of these crooners sung it. 'Moonlight Queen.' You were whistling it. But," he raised his voice, "you say you haven't been off the place and no one has been in. And you say you don't have a radio."

Hammill sat back in his chair. He looked relieved. "He wasn't whistling it, then," he scoffed, "unless he heard it last summer."

"Oh, yes, he was," Byrne said, "and it wasn't out last summer."

"Oh, come, come."

"Let him talk," Wilson told Hammill.

"It set me to thinking," Byrne explained. He saw that Wilson, too, had stopped eating, and was sitting back, alert, keeping one eye on Asher, the other on Byrne himself. "Set me to thinking," the trooper repeated, "so I looked around. The gravel in the drive was raked up so neat you couldn't tell how long it had been since a car was in, but that farmer back at the crossroads—remember?—he said one came in here last week."

"That's right," Wilson said. "Maybe he didn't know, of course. But—" he cleared his throat.

"So I went looking around," Byrne continued, "and I found an old lumber trail. But it was fixed up nice, too, just like the gravel drive, so's you couldn't see whether any car had been on it. Only it was fixed with pine needles."

HE WAITED. No one said anything. "Pine needles," he repeated. "Well you know it takes jack pines to make those needles, but there aren't any jack pine around that road. Not enough to put needles in the ruts. So what? Well, I began to walk back along that road." He turned to Wilson. "I came on Mr. Gerdings' car, sir. Car hidden. Radio gone out of it. That radio must be somewhere here in the house."

The detective was half out of his chair, his big face twisted with astonishment. Byrne, following the direction of his eyes, saw Tom, the servant, backing toward the kitchen.

"Just a minute!" Wilson shouted. "Just a minute, you."

The kitchen door slammed. The detective started toward it. Only Hammill did not move. He sat, speechless, at the head of the table, his ruddy face white. Byrne took one look at him, then made for the front door. He heard Wilson shouting in the kitchen, and then the slamming of another door. In the clearing he saw Asher, running toward the edge of the woods.

"Halt!" Byrne shouted. He cut across diagonally in front of the fleeing man. As he ran he pulled out his pistol. He fired once into the ground.

Asher looked back across his shoulder as the shot sounded. Then he stopped.

Byrne slid up beside him. "Hammill will try to put all the blame on you," he said quickly; and then, more loudly, as Wilson panted up. "Get into these handcuffs, Asher. That's it. Never mind, Mr. Wilson. I can handle him. Go back, sir. Back to Mr. Hammill."

To Asher, when the other was gone, he

added, "Hammill'll fix you, all right, big boy! He'll get you put away for life."

Asher dug his heels into the sand.

"He's not going to make me stand the shot alone!" he cried.

"Oh, yes, he is," the trooper said, "all alone. Hammill's got money. He can hire lawyers and dicks. You can't. You're the goat, Asher."

Hammill already was at the edge of the wood, shouting. Asher stared at him and his jaw tightened.

"You mean——?" he began.

"I mean you're the goat," Byrne repeated.

"Asher!" Hammill cried accusingly. "Tom Asher, you!"

"You shut up," Asher answered. "You —you——" he shook his fists at Hammill and the handcuffs rattled, "you made me do it! I'll not stand the rap for you!"

"For me?" Hammill cried.

"Sure, for you! I killed him for you."

"Well, well, well!" cried the astonished detective.

"We'd best get back to post where there's pen and ink," Trooper Byrne said.

BACK at the district post, Asher told his story. He had killed Gerdings. Because Hammill, his old employer, brought Gerdings there, gagged, and told him to. And when Hammill denied it, Detective Wilson walked up and down in the captain's office and put two and two together and swore.

"You!" he accused Hammill. "Kill your partner, and fool me."

"It was like this," Trooper Byrne explained to the inquiring Sergeant Perkins. "I'm just in off the farm—oh, yeh, sure. I can't pick out a tycoon, maybe, or a cop at a hundred yards, just from the way they part their hair or something. But I do know how long it takes, unless you've got a radio, to hear a new song out in the pine plains."

"Yeh," the sergeant agreed.

"And I do know how gravel's never raked over a road that careful like in the fall, just for nothing. And that pine needles don't fall off poplar trees to cover up tracks in a road. So I walk down the road, and well, after I found the car, I——"

"You got a headache," the sergeant interposed. "Well, now that they've both confessed, it's easy. Hammill was dealing crooked with Gerdings. And when the blow-off comes, he hires the caretaker——"

"To let Gerdings have it," Trooper Byrne said. "That's right. He's willing to show you just where in the lake he dumped the body, too. Now listen, Sergeant, I'm tired of filing arrest slips. Listen. I crave action. Tomorrow——"

"Tomorrow," the sergeant told him, "you'll go on with your filing."

THE PEKING PARROT

By WALTER C. BROWN

Author of
"The War Chest of Chang Kai,"
"The Roar of the Dragon,"
"White Magic," etc.

THE Plum Blossom Joss House stands on the south side of Orange Street. It is a plain brick building with unusually dirty windows, even for Chinatown. The only mark of a temple about it is the brass lantern with panes of peacock-blue glass which hangs over the door.

Not far from the Plum Blossom a narrow alley opens into an unsavory square of houses called Peking Court. Wang Wu's store for Oriental art goods faces on this alley. Sergeant "Rocky" Stone of the Chinatown Squad once described Peking Court as "running from bad to worse," for a similar alley at the far end leads into Quince Street, where for years a colony of gypsies kept their turbulent winter quarters.

Now Peking Court was never a good place for a lone white man to go star-gazing, but after the third murder it began to have a bad reputation, a thing not too

When Pekin Court Was Dubbed "Dead Man's Alley" the Chinatown Squad Had to Do Something about Its Sinister Reputation

easily acquired in Chinatown. The fact that two of the victims happened to be white men added to the popular hue and cry. Reporters promptly dubbed the place "Dead Man's Alley," then one of the local papers ran a sarcastic editorial under the sly caption: "Peking—the Forbidden City," and Captain Deever's blood pressure shot up twenty points.

Deever had charge of the 14th Precinct, which included the Chinatown Squad. "And they call themselves detectives!" he snarled with withering scorn to the House Sergeant. "They've got lead in their shoes and solid wood between the ears. The blankety blockheads couldn't find City Hall without a street guide. Where's Stone? Send Rocky Stone in here!"

"D'ja see this?" he snorted when Rocky answered the summons. He hurled the offending paper across the desk and gnawed his cold cigar in savage disgust. "We've got to put a stop to this—short and sharp. I'm not going to stand for Chinks knockin' off white men in my district—even if the white men were a couple of punks who won't be missed."

"So what, Cap?"

"I want you to drop whatever you're doing and take hold of this Peking Court business. Pick out any man on the Squad you want to team up with—Morley's the best, I think—then get your teeth into it. Why can't we get action? Wang Wu's given us a description of the killer. What more do you want—name, address and 'phone number? Don't tell me Chinatown's so big you boys can't spot a six-foot Chink on the streets. Now get out and stay out till you bring me this murderin' yellow-belly."

"O. K., Cap," said Rocky.

CAPTAIN DEEVER grunted and tried to relight his mangled cigar, while Sergeant Stone went out whistling to begin his search for the killer of Peking Court. "The Old Man's been reading the Message to Garcia," he told Detective Morley. "Peking Court is our baby from now on, and God help us if anybody else gets bumped off down there. We'd better skip whatever ground's been covered and start from scratch. And scratch in this case means Wang Wu."

"A six-foot Chinaman," Morley mused. "I don't believe a word of it. Wang Wu must be screwy. I'll bet the old duck was so scared the Chink only looked that big. Probably he'll whittle down to five-foot-four or so when the truth comes out."

"I'll admit I never saw one that tall," Rocky replied, "but that's no argument one way or the other. Well, let's go 'round and buzz Wang Wu again. Let me do the talking, Morley. Chinks are funny about these things—they hate to contradict you, and we want to get at the facts. It'll be a lot easier for our side if this bird really is a six-footer—make him stand out in a crowd like a red lamp-post."

They found Wang Wu in his shop at the entrance to Peking Court, dusting off his gimcrack stock with a turkey wing. *"Mokee kai!"* Rocky greeted, and Wang tucked his hands in his sleeves and bowed three times. Knowing Rocky and trusting him, Wang needed no urging to talk. He told what he knew of the dead men of Peking Court, his round face crinkled into sorrowful lines even as he nibbled bits of leechee and pickled ginger.

Wang Wu, a Cantonese by birth and a man of peace, was most unhappy over the trouble which had come to his doorstep. And doorstep was the exact and literal word, for on opening his back door one morning he had found a man awaiting him there. Not a customer, alas, no, but a strange white man with eyes wide and glazed, which is one of the signs of violent death, and his pockets stripped clean with a peculiar thoroughness. There was blood on the man but none on the steps, which was a good thing for Wang Wu.

"Aiee! Aiee!" Wang had hissed through his teeth as he padded off for the nearest policeman. With the policeman came a crowd. "Thick like new rice in a wet field, *Tajen,* but they buy nothing," Wang

told Rocky, his merchant's soul still bitter at the recollection.

The body was taken away in the black wagon, and before Wang Wu could draw a long breath of relief came a host of White Devils to ask a "hundred hundred" questions. Some of them searched his shop for hidden weapons while Wang Wu stood on hot bricks lest they open a certain red tin box. In this box Wang kept his supply of the forbidden *chandoo* which, when smoked in his long pipe, gave him such pleasant dreams.

At the Morgue they probed a .38 bullet from the back of the dead man's ribs. The shot had gone straight through his heart. More questions for Wang Wu before Peking Court was restored to its customary brooding quiet. In due course a plain pine box went to Potter's Field without benefit of bell, book or candle. Failing all else, the police had found a name for the victim —an official name—"John Doe 128."

Perhaps two weeks later Ying Lee had become curious about a stray dog outside his door. Ying Lee was an apothecary who lived at the other end of the Court. This mongrel dog whined and scratched at his front steps and refused to be driven away. Finally they looked under the steps and found the body of a lean-ribbed Chinaman. He had been there about three days, and the blood on the breast of his blue smock was caked black.

The policeman with the "devil-glass" studied the bullet and pronounced it blood-brother to the one which had ended the career of "John Doe 128." The Tchu Tien Tong dipped into its treasury and saved this unknown son of Han from going down in the record book as "John Doe 129."

THEN came the night when the stars in their courses fought against the tranquillity of the timid and unlucky Wang Wu. He had returned late from a most unprofitable visit to Mark Sin's *fantan* house in Paradise Court. Wang Wu had just put the key in his door when he heard a stealthy step behind him. A figure stood within the light of the lone gas-lamp in the alley, "as tall as *Tajen,* a stranger of the Manchu blood and with the strength of the Dragon. He take up a man's body from the ground and put it to his shoulder like Wang Wu lift this," and he picked up a painted Tientsin statuette by way of illustration.

Terrified, Wang Wu had fled inside and bolted the door. The Manchu had pressed close to the window and looked in, and his face was "the face of Yo Fei, God of Battles and Sudden Death." And when he rattled the doorknob Wang had given himself up for lost, for he knew he had stumbled upon the killer of Peking Court in the midst of his deadly work.

Not aware of what his shaking fingers were doing, he had crammed a triple charge of *chandoo* into his thimble pipe. The Manchu had at last gone away from the locked door, but that night the ghosts of Wang's honorable ancestors had beckoned his drugged soul to cross a line no wider than a hair.

The next morning the third corpse was found in Peking Court, and the Medical Examiner's Office had three bullets standing in a row. Fingerprints and a Rogues' Gallery portrait identified the third victim as a Tenderloin roustabout and small-time pickpocket.

"An evil *feng-shui* has come to live in this place, *Tajen.*" Wang Wu sighed as he swallowed the last leechee. "When dark come Wang burn twice nine prayers before the merciful Kwan Yin."

"You say this Manchu was as tall as I am?" Rocky repeated. "How could you tell that in the dark?"

"When he look in at window, his face come to *there.* Let *Tajen* go outside and stand like he stand."

Rocky made the experiment. "Wang's right," Morley said. "He's called it to the inch. Then the Chink really is a six-footer. Well, this ought to be duck soup."

"I wouldn't bet on that part of it. How come the rest of the boys couldn't spot him? The whole Squad's been on the

watch. He's gone and holed himself up somewhere."

"He's got to come out some time."

"Yes, and we've got to sleep now and then. I can think of better things to do at night than parading up and down Peking Court."

"It's in the bag, Rocky. We'll lay that baby by the heels within twenty-four hours."

But Morley's estimate was a bit optimistic. The twenty-four hours stretched to forty-eight, then seventy-two, and the tall Manchu refused to exhibit his unusual physique along the narrow streets of Chinatown. They scoured every nook and

cranny of the Yellow District from the Celestial Café with its tuxedoed waiters to Yip Gee's dive in Sword Alley, reeking with third-quality *yen* and the devastating white Chinese whiskey.

Then, late on a raw November afternoon a heavy fog rolled in from the Bay and buried Chinatown to the chimneypots in its ghostly gray shroud. Shops and houses became invisible at a distance of ten feet and the street lights loomed like yellow gongs suspended in a smoky void.

Morley fell into a spasm of coughing. "Damn this fog! It's like breathing in a handful of feathers. Come on, Rocky, let's get in out of this and get something to eat. No use hunting the big Chink till this lifts. He could be standing six feet in front of us and we'd never know it."

Within half a block they were lured by a neon sign which spelled "Chop Suey" in glowing red letters. They groped for the door and went in. Wisps of fog gathered around the ceiling lights, the atmosphere was steamy as a laundry, and the few scattered customers had a damp, depressed appearance.

"Bean sprouts, fried noodles, rice cakes and coffee," Rocky ordered.

Morley nodded. "O.K. Make it two."

"Yiss," breathed the waiter, bobbed, and shuffled off. He had spiky gray hair and a pockmarked face.

They had just been served when Rocky heard the door open behind him, and the next moment Morley was pouring the black soya sauce into his coffee. "Hey, look what you're doing!" Rocky cautioned. "Are you crazy?"

"It's *him!*" Morley blurted in a frog-like whisper.

Rocky's glance flicked toward the door. Beyond a doubt it was Wang Wu's Chinaman who had just entered. Tall and powerful in build, his Manchu blood showed in the greenish-bronze of his coloring and in eyes pointed rather than slanted. He wore a heavy robe of dark blue, a round black hat and thick, felt-soled slippers.

"Can you beat that?" Morley whispered. "We hunt high and low for him, then when we give up he walks right into our clutches. There *is* a Santa Claus!"

"Well, stop staring and eat. Do you want to put him wise?"

THE Manchu picked out an isolated table, and a steaming bowl of *om dong* and a pot of green tea were placed before him. His face wore the haughty immobility of a mandarin mask.

"He sure looks like a tough customer to me," Morley whispered. "When and how do we take him?"

"We've got to figure this out carefully. There's lots of time."

"My idea is that we wait outside and clip him quick when he comes through the door. Once we get him down to the Station we can give him the works."

"Not so fast, Morley. I think our best bet is to tail him back to his hide-out. I've got a notion there's more behind this business than meets the eye."

"You're crazy, Rocky. Look at that fog. We'd lose him inside of ten seconds."

"We can keep closer to him in the fog than we could on a clear night."

"Well, you're the doctor, Rocky, but it's playing with dynamite. If he catches us tramping at his heels he'll cut loose sure as blazes, and that fellow shoots for the pump. Better give him the old one-two while we have the chance."

"Listen, Morley, he must figure he's perfectly safe in the fog or he wouldn't have come out at all. He was probably waiting for this to get out and stretch his legs a bit. Now here's the dope. You go out first and stand by to pick him up. I'll give him a few seconds' start before I trail along. If we keep separated he can't give both of us the slip. Hold your rod on him if it'll make you feel better."

"You bet your life I will. Any guy with three notches on his gun's got a nervous trigger finger, and if he makes a wrong move I'm going to let him have it."

At the proper moment Rocky gave Morley the nod, and the detective sauntered out without drawing so much as a glance from the tall Chinaman. Rocky lingered over a cigarette and watched the Manchu finish his tea. There was nothing furtive about his departure, but the fog swallowed him completely three paces outside the door.

Rocky counted ten and followed, soon picking up the soft scrape of the padded soles. The Manchu was heading for Orange Street at a brisk pace. As they neared the alley to Peking Court Rocky closed up the gap until he could make out the flat black shape a few feet ahead.

Suddenly Rocky checked his steps, straining eyes and ears against the thick gray pall. The Manchu had vanished! The only sound in the street was the mournful dripping from moistened roofs and cornices. Morley materialized out of the fog with a cautious whisper. "He skipped into that house. Quick as a flash. Must have spotted us."

A dim purple glow marked the invisible doorway. "That's the Plum Blossom Joss House," Rocky explained.

"Could that be his hide-out?"

"I doubt it. Only the *bonze* and a couple of *buddhistas* live there. They wouldn't want to get mixed up in any gunman's business."

"If the Chink went in to say his prayers —good night! We'll be here for hours. I told you how it would be. We should've knocked him off outside the chop suey joint."

They stood silent as two Chinese drifted down the street, conversing in the high yip-yip of Cantonese. "He may be trying to give us the slip," Rocky considered. "Keep your eye on the front, Morley. I'll go around and see if there's an exit into the Court."

"And if he comes out the front again while you're gone?"

"Follow him till he takes to cover, then come back here for me."

"O.K."

Rocky turned into the alley. The lighted windows of Wang Wu's shop made only a splotch of dull yellow in the thick pool of fog that was Peking Court. Rocky found the back of the joss house. There was an eight-foot brick wall with a door of solid wood, and the door was bolted on the inside.

As he lingered at this gate a harsh, angry scream split the silence, startling with its almost human note. It was the shrill screech of a parrot, impossible to locate in direction, except that it came from above the ground level. Three or four times its shriek rang across the Court, then somewhere in the fog a window closed softly.

IN THE hush that followed Rocky discovered that he was not alone in that place. Quick, nervous steps paced to and fro, like those of one who waited restlessly. Cautiously he moved toward the sounds, but the crunch of a chance pebble under his foot brought the unseen walker to an instant halt.

Standing stockstill, Rocky tried to out-

wait the other. The stalemate was broken from another quarter. Behind him other stealthy footsteps crept past, no louder than a whisper in the ghostly night. Chinese slippers, these last, and Rocky's thoughts leaped to the Manchu. The Plum Blossom gate was in that direction. The leather-shod steps moved off then, and hesitating between the two, Rocky found he had lost them both.

Looking back, he noticed an increase of light at Wang Wu's, and remembered that the shopkeeper wore the traditional slippers of his race. Retracing his steps, he found the shop door open, and Wang Wu outside hastily snapping the locks of the wire screens which he put over his windows at night. He looked fearfully over his shoulder as the tall detective loomed up at his side. "It is *Tajen. Wah!*" he sighed with relief.

"Wang, were you out in the Court just now?"

"No, *Tajen*. Wang come from inside."

"Closing up early, aren't you?"

The shopkeeper pointed to the fog. "It is the Breath of the Celestial Dragon. The wisdom of venerable ancestors whisper it is best to bar the door and close eye and ear to this night. Did *Tajen* not hear the Death Bird call to the evil *feng-shui* of this place?"

"Death Bird? You mean the parrot?"

"Yes, *Tajen*. When the Death Bird calls the *feng-shui* another luckless one is carried off to his ancestors. It was so before, it shall be again."

"You've heard the parrot before? The night you saw the Manchu? Why didn't you tell us?"

"You not ask, *Tajen*."

"That's a fine reason. Who owns this parrot?"

"Wang not know."

"Didn't you ever see it around the Court at any other time?"

"No one can see *feng-shui* bird, *Tajen*."

"Rats! It's just an ordinary parrot. Nothing magic about that——"

A gasping cry cut him short, not from the parrot this time, but from a human throat, a cry choking with agony. Wang Wu squeaked like a frightened mouse and dashed back into the shelter of his shop. Rocky whirled and stood tense, then as the gasping cry was repeated dashed blindly across the Court.

Sounds of scuffling combat guided him until his flashlight cut a funnel through the fog and focussed on the fighters—a writhing black jumble on the worn brick paving. Throaty growls of animal-like rage mingled with groans rapidly growing feebler. "Come on, break it up!" he commanded, raising his gun. "Get on your feet, there, and keep your hands up!"

Rocky recognized the yellow face that glared up into the light. The Manchu sprang to his feet, lithe as a great cat, tall, as tall as Rocky himself. The knife in his hand was dripping red, and his eyes had the jet sparkle of a beast at the kill.

"Drop that knife! Get your hands up! Quick!" Rocky thrust the gun nearer. The other figure lay stretched on the ground, not moving.

The tall Chinaman uncoiled with the swiftness of a cobra. One sudden sweep of his arm sent the flashlight spinning and his iron fist crashed on Rocky's jaw. Head spinning from the terrific jolt, the detective staggered back, and before he could shake the buzzing from his ears the Manchu had plunged back into the sheltering fog.

Cursing softly but fervently, Rocky hunted for his fallen gun and flashlight. He turned the beam on the groaning figure at his feet. It was that of a stocky man, clad in a belted raincoat. As he was lying face down, Rocky could see only a bald head with a low fringe of sandy hair.

"Red Mallon!" he exclaimed when he had turned him over. Mallon was a Tenderloin character of unsavory record.

Red rolled his head, moaning. His coat and vest had been ripped open in the struggle, and his shirt was covered with blood. Rocky slipped an arm under his shoulders and partially raised him. "What's the story, Red?" he questioned. "Spill it!"

"Who is it?" came in a feeble whisper.

"Sergeant Stone. You know me—Rocky Stone."

"Rocky? Listen, Rocky, I'm done for. We've been jobbed—double-crossed by a fence. He's a dirty yellow Chink and he lives in this Court."

"Who do you mean by 'we,' Red?"

"Joe Callori and me. We pulled off a swell job out of town and came back with a fistful of rocks. The stuff was too hot for our regular fence to handle, so Joe gets it into his head to make a dicker with this Chink. I told him all Chinks was poison, but he wouldn't listen to me. I guess he knows better now—they must've got him before they came out after me."

Mallon lapsed into a choking cough and Rocky said, "Take your time, Red."

"I ain't got much of that left and I wanta spill it all. Things are gettin' kind of swimmy now. Anyway, Joe went in to see this fence while I waited outside with the rocks in my pocket. Joe was gone a

long time and when I heard steps I thought it was him comin' back, but it was the big Chink that works for the fence. Before I can turn around he puts his sticker into me and is grabbin' for the rocks."

"I'll fix him for you, Red. What's his name?"

"The big Chink? I don't know."

"No—I mean the fence."

"Gow."

"Gow what?"

"I don't know. Gow is all Joe said."

"And he lives here in the Court? What's his number?"

"14."

ROCKY calculated rapidly. "No. 8, that's Wing Yo—No. 10—No. 12 has the stone steps—No. 14. Why, 14's an empty house, Red. Been empty for a long time. It's boarded up. Are you sure you've got the right number?"

"Joe said 14. Don't let 'em get away with it, Rocky. I wanta get even with the dirty rats."

"Don't worry. Leave that to me. Now, grab me around the neck and we'll get going. You need a doctor."

"There's no use movin' me around, Rocky. I know. I can feel it leakin' away inside. Don't waste no time on me. Go get that Gow, and make him burn for it!"

"Don't argue, catch hold. I can't leave you lying here on the ground."

Over Mallon's protests Rocky got him up and carried him to Wang Wu's store, where he pounded on the door till the moon-faced shopkeeper was compelled to open.

Rocky lowered his burden to the floor, but Mallon was now limp and still. There was no longer a heart-beat. The detective stood up, shook his head and wiped the wet blood from his hands. Wang saw the turned-up eyes. *"Aiee! Aiee!"* he wailed. *"Feng-shui* come with the Breath of the Dragon, *Tajen. Aiee!"*

"Stop that racket, Wang, and make yourself useful. There's a policeman waiting around the corner, at the steps of the Plum Blossom Joss House. It's Morley, the man who was here with me before. Run and bring him back with you. He'll know what to do when he gets here. Tell him I've gone after the big Manchu—he's in No. 14. Remember that number—14! Quick now!"

Wang Wu cast a despairing look at his unprotected stock.

"Go on! Run! You don't need to lock the door. Nobody's going to walk off with anything before you get back."

Wang eyed the dead man once more and darted out, while Rocky cut across the Court toward No. 14, dropping the safety catch on his gun as he ran. *"Feng-shui*

and Death Birds!" he growled to himself. "What this place needs is a good cleaning out with a .38! And this is the night for it!"

For all the outward signs of life, No. 14 might have been an abandoned tomb. He flashed his light briefly across the front. Door and shutters were not only tightly closed, but had rough boards nailed across them. An old "For Sale" sign of painted canvas hung in tatters.

Rocky went through the alley to the backyard. The rear of the house was as

tightly barred as the front. He flashed his light along the wall. A slanting cellar door was firmly bolted. Only the rusty grating of a cellar window was open, and the beam of light revealed a cellar as bare as a bone.

By that time Rocky was convinced that Red Mallon had either mistaken the number of the house in the Court, or that the mysterious Gow had purposely misled them. Nevertheless, he squeezed through the window and went up the cellar steps.

The kitchen and all the lower floor was bare as the cellar. The house smelled of damp mould and musty darkness. A rat scampered through the hall ahead of him. He went on tiptoe, in the dark, and stood at the foot of the stairs. The silence was as thick as the stale, damp air. Hearing nothing, he risked a swift spray of light up the staircase. Cobwebs were thick between the rails.

Up he went, close to the wall, without one betraying creak. The back room was empty—the front room. Then the middle room——

Out of the darkness leaped a five-clawed dragon, glittering, fork-tongued, sabre-toothed. The sparkle of its inlaid surface gave it an illusion of movement that made the scalp tingle. Rocky had snapped off the light in the first startled shock of surprise, before he realized the hideous thing was the decorative figure on a devil-screen.

Standing just inside the door and fully six feet wide, it blocked off the room completely. How and why came such a thing into a house otherwise stripped down to bare walls and rough floors? Inlaid dragon screens were not commonplace objects, even in Chinatown.

ROCKY ventured into that dark room, feeling his way along the wall until he reached a corner. Instinct told him the room was not empty. A species of sinister vibration was alive in the darkness, but sharp as were his ears, he could not catch the sound of breathing.

Clutching his gun in readiness, he pressed the button of his torch again and the room gave up its secret. The wedge of light singled out a face, a face white and still, with glazed eyes that did not flinch from the glare. The man sat in a chair facing a teakwood table, small but elaborately carved. Another chair was drawn up on the opposite side of the table—an empty chair.

The light danced swiftly from wall to wall. Otherwise nothing! Just that one cluster of darkly shining wood behind the menacing screen. Rocky jumped as a raucous scream exploded in his ears. The parrot! The Death Bird whose voice, according to Wang Wu, was herald of death in Peking Court! It had hopped into view on the back of the vacant chair, feathers ruffled, beak open, one lifted talon curling and uncurling.

Rocky drew a quick breath and braced himself for discovery—attack—anything. Nothing stirred. The dead man was derelict in a vacant house which held only a devil-screen, a table, two chairs and a parrot. Rocky went closer to examine Gow's

latest victim. He had no doubt but it was the Joe Callori who had been Red Mallon's partner in crime.

Callori's body had slumped in his chair, arms hanging down loosely. Rocky held his coat open. The square butt of an automatic nestled in a shoulder holster and not three inches away a wet stain spread in a neat circle from a black hole in the vest.

"That makes four in a row," Rocky murmured, "and a 50-cent piece'd cover all the holes. This fellow Gow must be a cross between a rattlesnake and a scorpion. Murder a thief and take away his loot—that's all plain enough to figure—but how the dickens does he get the drop on all these fellows? They can't all be set-ups for gunplay."

He moved off a few paces, studying the grim tableau. "Let's see, now. Callori is sitting here. Gow sat there, behind the table. Gow pulled his gun, aimed and drilled him for a bull's-eye before Callori could put a finger on his own rod. And yet he was suspicious enough of Gow to make Mallon wait outside with the stones. There's a catch to this somewhere!"

One question called up another in Rocky's brain. What had become of Gow? And the giant Manchu who had knifed Mallon and hung that bruised lump on his own jaw? They might have planned it to leave Callori's body in this vacant house, perhaps both bodies, but it was unlikely Gow would have gone away without his parrot. Had they heard the parrot's scream? Did they know he had found their lair? And were they waiting now, hidden, perhaps preparing a trap?

Rocky decided to sit tight and trust to his own trap. Morley would be along any minute if help was needed. The first thing was to clear the doorway, to move the furniture aside. He took the chair by the arms. It refused to budge. He tugged, harder. It was firm as a rock. He tried the table —the screen—Callori's chair. All immovable!

"What the devil does this mean?" he muttered, training his light on the legs. "Well, I'll be damned!" *The furniture was nailed down!*

A sound reached his ear, vague, undefinable, but a sound where no sound had been before. Instantly his torch winked out. A faint glow began to touch the edges of the devil-screen. He hid behind it, watching the hall. Someone was coming up the stairs, someone carrying a candle. The light grew brighter. The parrot screamed. Rocky waited, licking his lips. Slow, deliberate steps—four, five, six, seven —a huge wavering shadow on the wall.

Crash!

A yawning black tunnel opened under Rocky's feet. Swirls of red and flaring yellow circled crazily as he dropped down —down—down——

AS CONSCIOUSNESS returned slowly his first realization was that he was lying face down on a very hard floor. He stared vaguely across a stretch of bare boards at a stub of candle whipped by the draught along the floor. The blood thumped in his aching head and his wrists hurt. There were raw red marks, he noticed, as if ropes had been there recently.

He raised his head and experienced a jolt of searing pain. Then he remembered, the creeping footsteps, the blow from behind—the Manchu's work, probably. He felt his scalp above the right ear—an aching welt, hair matted and sticky with blood. His lips twisted into a wry grin. At least it was better than stopping a bullet. But no more fooling around with that big Chink —the next time he'd open up and let him have it.

Rocky put his head down quickly. The Manchu was there on guard, sitting cross-legged against the wall, like a meditative Buddha, a long pipe in his hands. The last film of haziness lifted from Rocky's brain. He was still in that fantastic room, but chairs, table, screen, yes, and parrot—all had vanished. The only remaining traces were several twisted nails half-wrenched from the floor. The unlucky Callori had

been left behind, too, carelessly dropped in a corner like a bundle of old clothes.

He stole another look at the Manchu. He seemed to be asleep, eyes closed, chin on chest, quite relaxed. The detective snaked his way forward—another foot—another. The Manchu's lids still drooped. Rocky had his eye on the gun tucked in the Chinaman's belt. It was his own!

Stealthily he came up into a crouch, reached out and snatched the weapon with one swift motion. The expected explosion failed to develop. Rocky had the weapon pointed, but the Manchu slumbered on. Then Rocky saw his lax, fallen jaw, the bluish lips, the crisped fingers which clutched the pipe. He jogged his shoulder. The Chinaman toppled over like a sack of potatoes. He was as dead as Callori!

A strange, bitter odor clung to him. Rocky traced it to the bamboo pipe. The bowl reeked of it, and it came neither from rank tobacco nor *chandoo*. Rocky nodded his head. "Poison, eh? You're a fast worker, Mr. Gow, and you sure play both ends against the middle, but the next time you're going to find yourself in the middle or I'll know the reason why!"

But what in thunder had become of Morley? Rocky consulted his watch and got another surprise. The blow on the head had stretched him out for nearly an hour. He opened the front window. Thin wisps of fog rolled in from the Court, but he could see nothing or hear nothing of any activity out there.

Still a trifle unsteady at the knees, he went downstairs and made his exit from No. 14 via the cellar door, which he found unlocked this time, and so back into Peking Court. He had not taken a dozen steps before a light flashed in his face and a voice rich with brogue called, "Stand there now till I have a look at ye!"

"O'Donnell!" Rocky exclaimed.

The policeman loosened his grip. "Praise be! Are ye all right, Sergeant? We've had the divil's own time lookin' for ye in this fog."

"Right enough. Morley around?"

"Over yonder, Sergeant, with the rest of the boys. I'll call him."

O'Donnell shouted into the fog and a voice answered. In a few moments Morley came over on the run. "Rocky! Where in hell did you get to? We've been tearin' the place apart tryin' to find you."

"I was in No. 14, where I said I'd be. Didn't Wang Wu give you my message?"

"In 14? Say, can you beat that? The dumb Chink told me it was No. 40. We've

been turnin' the heat on Ying Lee. Hey, O'Donnell, skip over there and call off the boys."

"Bring 'em back with you," Rocky added; "there's a job for them in No. 14."

"Holy Moses, Rocky, what's happened to your head?"

"Oh, that's my bump of knowledge," Rocky replied and proceeded to sketch in the details.

"The dirty yellow snake!" Morley exploded. "A guy like that makes the Calloris and the Mallons look like gentlemen. The hot seat's too good for him."

"Yes, he rates something Oriental in the way of punishment, something like boiling in oil. But you know the first line in the old French recipe—first catch your mutton."

MORLEY nodded. "He hasn't left us much to work with, and that's a fact. So far we haven't even seen his face. And with the Manchu out of the picture that leaves us almost exactly nothing."

"We could pass him on the street tomorrow and not know the difference. But it's not hopeless, Morley. Not at all. The

smart Mr. Gow made one bad error, and one's all it takes. He took the parrot away with him, and that parrot will live to put the finger on him. Forget about Gow, we'll look for the parrot instead!"

And so it was that Sergeant Rocky Stone set off on the baffling trail of the venomous Chinaman of Peking Court. He brought to his quest the concentration of a bloodhound and the tenacity of a bulldog, but one by one all the lanes of inquiry turned into dead-ends, leaving him only with a cut head and an aching jaw to show for his encounters.

Chinatown had entered into a conspiracy of silence concerning the events in Peking Court. The dead Manchu remained as unnamed and as unclaimed as if he had dropped down from Mars.

"Can't make 'em talk," Rocky told Morley disgustedly. "The way they tell it, they never saw the Manchu before—there never was a Chinaman named Gow——"

"What about the parrot?"

"I'm not saying a word about that. It's my one ace in the hole, and I'm not risking it. If I started asking about the bird, next thing we'd find *it* lying in Peking Court with its throat cut. Then we would be sunk."

"The nailed-down furniture is the angle that beats me," Morley declared. "Why was it that way? Of all the crazy things about this business, that's the goofiest."

"We can't see it, but no doubt there was a reason. Furniture isn't nailed to the floor just for fun."

"Do you think Gow did it so no one could steal the stuff while he was away from the house?"

"But no one knew he was in the house. All those boards would keep out casual prowlers." Rocky shrugged and lit a cigarette. "I don't know the answer. One guess is as good as another."

"For that matter, why did he stop to take the stuff out of the house? He took an awful chance. If Wang Wu had given me the right number I'd have walked in on the middle of the job."

"Well, hand-carved teak has a good value, but nothing to risk your neck over. The devil-screen would be worth some money too, but then what would that be against the package of stones they took from Mallon?"

"It doesn't make sense," Morley agreed.

"I'm working along the theory now that Gow didn't move it very far away. That crack on the head put me away for about an hour. During that time they cleaned out the room and Gow left the Manchu on guard—with a nice slug of poison in his pipe to make sure he'd stay there."

"There were only four pieces, Rocky. In an hour they could have moved them to the other side of Chinatown."

"They could—but what of the risk? Even with the fog, you can't carry chairs and tables and screens through the streets without attracting some attention. And if they bumped into one of our boys anywhere he'd pull them in on suspicion. No, I'll bet a week's pay Gow at this minute is within a stone's throw of Peking Court."

NIGHT and day Rocky continued to haunt the vicinity of the Court, eyes open for the flash of green at a window, ears alert for the scream of a parrot. The Chinaman named Gow might now be calling himself Charlie Lee or Fu Yum, but a parrot remains a green bird with a raucous voice of surprising carrying power. Once indeed he heard such a sound, but on tracking it to its source found it came from an Indian *minah* bird kept by Lee Moy, the flute-playing student of medicine in Quince Street.

Every night Rocky put a bag of leechees in the left-hand pocket of his overcoat and his police .38 in the right. Drifting along, he left a trail of the brittle brown shells through Orange Street, Peking Court, Quince Street, and back by way of Fiddlers' Alley, which was a narrow opening on the south side of the Court. And always Kwan Yin in her infinite wisdom decreed the left-hand pocket alone should be emptied during the long hours.

But the Orientals holding no absolute copyright on patience, in the end Rocky had his reward. The harsh cry of the parrot came to him in Peking Court, then gray with November twilight. The sound was brief, cut off by the sudden closing of a door, and that door was in Fiddlers' Alley. Rocky reached the passage in time to see a vague figure disappear at the far end.

Now Fiddlers' Alley was merely a barren stretch of backwalls and fences. There was but one building fronting it, a dingy structure which had once been stable, then garage, and was now, so far as Rocky knew, disused. A separate entrance led to the upper portion, which had a gabled window on either side of the old loft door with its gibbet beam and rusty pulley.

This time Rocky had no need to debate the issue. He had made a careful selection from the various burglar's tools on forcible deposit at the Precinct. In less than half a

minute the simple lever-lock was picked and he was feeling his way up a rough, dark staircase.

His pulses leaped as the devil-screen confronted him at the top. He thrust his head around the corner of it. Gow was not there, but the carved teak table was, with a chair on either side of it in the familiar arrangement. The parrot was at the window, in a cage of split bamboo. It made angry noises as Rocky appeared.

"Go ahead, squawk your head off," he chuckled, looking around the loft with a slow smile. "There's a cute little cage waiting for your honorable master—one with nice steel bars."

The first thing Rocky did was test the table—the chairs. They were immovable, just as in No. 14. Nailed down! Over in the corner stood Gow's couch, with its intertwined carvings of symbolic bats and legendary *kylins*. A statuette in rose-petal crystal rested on a low stand, and on the table was a stone bottle, a horn goblet, and a long pipe with an ivory bowl.

Gow had utilized only one corner of the loft. The light filtered through windows encrusted with dirt and spangled with cobwebs. Beyond the Chinaman's little oasis of carved teak stretched a fantastic litter of lumber, old trunks, broken tools and mouldering harness.

Rocky had no time to start a search. The door banged below and footsteps mounted the stairs. He faced the devil-screen, gun poised, eyes fastened on the spot where the face of the elusive Gow would at last be revealed.

THE moment came. Gow stepped around the corner of the screen, short, flat-faced, with grizzled hair. His dark, high-collared coat and round black hat lent him a somewhat clerical appearance. His plump yellow hand grasped a varnished walking-stick and on one of the fingers was a square ring of mutton-fat jade.

With a grim little smile Rocky thrust his gun forward. Gow's dark eyes looked straight at him, beyond him, then the Chinaman carelessly brushed past the leveled weapon, tap-tapping with his stick. *Gow was a blind man!*

Rocky stood mute with amazement. He felt somehow ridiculous holding his gun on a blind man. Gow went straight to the parrot's cage, reached a finger through the bars and scratched the arched head, speaking softly to his pet. Then he groped his way to the table and sat down. He poured a yellowish liquor from the stone bottle and sipped it slowly, relaxing with a sigh, eyes fixed on vacancy.

While the detective stood silent in a tur-

moil of indecision, Gow sensed the lurking presence on his dark horizon. His whole body stiffened with the intensity of concentration. Face vivid with panic as the certainty grew, he spat out a shrill phrase in Chinese. Rocky bided his time.

"Who is there?" Gow repeated in hissing English.

Rocky took three paces forward. "Don't move, Gow! My gun is pointed straight at you!"

At the sound of the voice the Chinaman's face became a frozen mask. "Gow is blind. Who are you?"

"Sergeant Stone of the Chinatown Squad. Does that tell the story?"

"Your words cast a long shadow." Gow stood up and bowed gravely in the general direction of his visitor's voice. "The name of this humble person is Gow Yet Fu, who was a Mandarin of the White Button before the regrettable days of the Nanking dogs. You come to make questions about those who have joined their ancestors with unfortunate haste?"

"You've got the idea—on the first guess."

"Gow Yet Fu can make all clear to you. Only unworthy ignorance of your honorable laws has kept my feet from your door."

"Oh, sure!" Rocky replied derisively. "Naturally you have no idea what our honorable laws do with honorable murderers. That's why you cleared out of 14 Peking Court in such a hurry the other night. And that's why I find you hiding in an old stable."

"Haste and fear led my steps from the Middle Path," the Chinaman replied sadly, "but Gow Yet Fu had only those for council. Now wisdom shall rule our words. Blood has paid for blood, but the price of blood must be returned——"

"Don't move! Stay right where you are," Rocky snapped as Gow half-rose from his chair.

"Have you fear of one whose eyes have died?"

"Blind or not, stay where you are. What are you after?"

"At the bottom of the parrot's cage you will find a hollow space. Will you bring forth what is hidden there?"

Rocky remembered most vividly the precisely placed bullet holes in the dead men of Peking Court. Was this a trick to catch him off guard? Was Gow Yet Fu really blind or was it all a wily sham adopted with lightning cleverness when he found himself cornered?

The detective tiptoed nearer, spread two fingers and made a sudden jab at the dark, staring eyes. They stood the test with unblinking fixity.

SATISFIED on that point, Rocky backed to the cage. The Chinaman had not lied. A flat package lay in the hidden place. Rocky opened the wrapper of yellow silk. Between layers of cotton wool nestled a glittering array of gems, white, red, blue, green—pendants, rings, brooches, necklaces,—the hot stones of Red Mallon and Joe Callori!

"You have seen?" Gow inquired anxiously. "Gow's fingers tell him they are jewels, but their worth is hidden from his eyes."

"They're worth plenty, if that's any satisfaction to you," Rocky replied, sitting down and spreading them out for examination.

"They are things of evil. Gow Yet Fu rejoices that the price of blood has passed from his keeping."

"Yes, I'm sure you're tickled to death. It was pretty smart to hand over the stones before I made a search and found them myself. Well, that's only a small part of the story. The main question is, how did you get them? And the answer to that is —murder!"

"*Aiee!* Truth is a sharp sword. It was the servant Yuan who made this great evil. When the master is blind, the *mafoo* is lord of the house."

"And you expect me to believe your Manchu servant killed all those men and you knew nothing about it?"

"Your nimble words speak Gow's thoughts."

"So that's your line, eh? Not bad, but you can't get away with it, Gow. You can't wriggle out of it merely by handing back some of the loot and throwing all the blame on a dead man. You forget Yuan was murdered, too. Either way it comes right back to your door."

"It is not so. Gow Yet Fu came upon the faithless *mafoo* in the midst of his evil work. Yuan was given his choice. He could pay his debt to the broken law in the white man's way or wipe out the stain he had put upon the venerable House of Gow. He chose to pay the debt to his master's house. *Wah!* It was a good choice. It is what your honorable laws call suicide."

"Maybe I'd swallow that yarn, if I wasn't wise to your racket. First you were a fence —a receiver of stolen goods, then you thought up the bright idea of murdering the thieves who came to do business with you and pocketing their loot without paying anything at all. I'm not saying Yuan didn't help you with the dirty work, but you can't palm off the whole job on him."

"Gow Yet Fu make nothing of this talk. How shall the blind keep watch over those who have eyes?"

"All right, if you knew nothing about it, why was your furniture over in Peking Court? You didn't sleep in that empty house—there was no bed. No. 14 was only your murder-trap. I know Yuan killed Red Mallon, for I was there and saw it. But Callori didn't come to No. 14 to see Yuan, he came to see *you*. And he was shot, not in the back, as Yuan might have done it, but from the front, facing *your* chair. And if you weren't in the house what was *your* parrot doing there? I don't know what trick you used to get the drop on Callori, but we'll find that out before we're through with you."

The Chinaman broke into a bland smile. "The blind may kill with a knife, a noose, or a hatchet, if they are swift and clever, but the gun is not for those who live in darkness. On the day of such a deed there will be two moons in the sky. All wisdom has departed from your words."

Some subtle change in the smooth, precise tones struck Rocky's ears. It gave him a queer tingling along his spine. Somehow, by some secret trick, this blind Chinaman had mastered the power to slay, and the deadly execution room of Peking Court was reproduced here in Fiddlers' Alley. Callori had died there, and here he was, sitting just as Callori had sat, armed as Callori had been, distrustful and suspicious. Not one factor was different—and Callori had been shot through the heart!

The impulse to vacate that sinister chair became overwhelming. As Rocky obeyed its blind urging one of Gow's plump hands dropped from sight. Noiseless as a cat, the detective craned forward over the black table to watch.

"Gow cannot learn to trust the darkness," the meek voice went on. "Great fear comes when the hand reaches out and finds nothing to touch. These unworthy sticks of wood must be fastened down or Gow would lose his way even in this small space. Could such a one send a bullet to its mark?"

HAVING asked his question, the cunning Oriental directed his own answer. A stab of flame spurted from the carved side of the table. With the crack of the gun still rattling in his ears Rocky stared at the sudden hole in the back of the chair. If he had stayed there ten seconds longer——!

Gow Yet Fu had leaped up, head cocked, his face writhing with mingled fear, hope, uncertainty. As dead silence prevailed from second to second his twitching face creased into a cruel, mocking smile. *"Hai! hai! hai!"* he cackled in triumph, groping his way toward the other chair.

With grim maliciousness Rocky let him discover its emptiness for himself. Swiftly the Chinaman dropped to his knees, feeling for his victim over the floor in front of the chair.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Gow, but your little trick didn't turn out this time." Rocky's voice was like ice. The China-

man scrambled to his feet, trembling, livid, grasping his stick with shaking hands.

"Now I know why your chairs are nailed to the floor! When those poor devils sat down in that chair they didn't know you had a gun fastened under the table, trained straight at their hearts. What harm could there be in a poor, blind Chinaman? And all you had to do was crook your finger and listen for the body to hit the floor. You murdering devil!"

Frantic with rage, Gow swung his stick at the voice. Rocky leaped inside the blow and took the blind man by the throat. "Try that again and I'll pump your dirty yellow hide full of holes!"

He flung the Chinaman from him. Gow reeled against the table, gasping and choking. Then his shoulders sagged and he raised his hands in a weary and helpless gesture. "The Lords of the Upper Realms have spoken," he said sadly. "The Mandarin Gow Yet Fu bows to their superior wisdom."

It was his last desperate piece of treachery. The yellow stick broke open into a flashing steel blade. Caught off guard, Rocky leaped back before the first vicious lunge, only to stumble over the chair. Placing the sound with uncanny accuracy, the bright steel sang as the blind man thrust and hacked in berserk fury.

Half sprawling between the table and the chair, Rocky threw up his arm and fired as the slim point drove straight at his throat. Gow Yet Fu screamed as the bullet tore through his flesh. His forward plunge drove the thin blade deep into the devil-screen. For a few moments it served to hold up his sagging body. Then the blade buckled and snapped and he dropped in a limp heap.

Rocky got up and turned him over with wary caution. "Hm. I guess you're not bluffing this time."

The parrot was hopping from one perch to the other in his cage, screeching like mad. Rocky looked over at him. "Too late, Poll. He can't hear you now. Your master's gone to face the Lords of the Upper Realms, and I doubt if they'll thank me for sending him along!"

GUNFIRE AT BATTLE ISLAND

By Captain FREDERICK MOORE

Author of "Chinese Cargo," "Cadburn Escapes from Permata," etc.

FROM the big outrigger canoe Cranston picked up a light ashore on Prang Island. It was just after sundown. The sea was calm with big sleek swells. The moon would be up before long. The stars already sprinkled the heaving shoulders of the swells and caught and distorted the constellations.

A second light appeared above the first. Cranston was sure then that he had the exact location of Miss Peabody's plantation house. She made the signal as agreed upon. His next move was to make a landing at the assigned place and avoid being observed by any of the planters on the island, or their natives. Cranston knew what Miss Peabody had not mentioned in her letter, the possibility of danger from Standish. He was Small's foreman. And Major Jimmy Swift, who commanded the police on the big island of Lantu Vanna, sixty miles from Prang, had an idea that Standish needed a little more attention than he had received from the authorities.

The two Malays moved briskly when Cranston gave the order to fill the matting sail and proceed down the coast of Prang Island. They had no idea he had given any heed to the two lights. They did not know that it was his intention to touch the land. They had no knowledge of his connection with the police. They believed that he was engaged in some illegal job. He had paid them triple wages so they would keep their mouths shut both before leaving Lantu Vanna and after their arrival back to the island.

There was danger for Cranston on Prang Island. He was not sure just what the danger was. He was on his way to find out. Miss Peabody did not take the matter as seriously as she should. She was only worried over the fact that her native workers were in frequent panics and might abandon the plantation. Having no white man on the place, and having New England stubbornness, she refused to quit the place. She had a younger brother coming out to the island, she was a good shot with rifle or pistol, and she did not intend to let blood-curdling screams out in her little bay scare her into giving up the copra plantation she had purchased six months before. Three miles from the nearest white planter, she insisted on making a problem for the government, and demanding that Major Swift's men solve it. But as the

major said, she was a heck of a nice young woman, and his secret agents did not have much to do, anyhow. So Cranston drew the job. He knew that the Malay word for battle was *Prang*.

The matting sail filled. The slight breeze was laden with the odors of the jungles lifting to the high hills of Prang. The low-hung stars danced over the waters. The surf on the distant beaches gave off a soothing hum and made a line of white phosphorescence that gleamed against the blackness of the island's outline, visible only as it blotted the stars from a patch of the sky on the horizon.

After all, Cranston reasoned, it was up to the government to protect Miss Peabody. If her natives were driven away another plantation would go back to jungle. The government would lose concession revenue and Prang Island would get a bad name, preventing new planters from taking up land to make money from coconut groves.

The outrigger was on a course now that made the Malays believe Cranston intended to pass the island. They knew it was against the law for any vessel to land on the island after dark in a lonely place. But it was necessary that no one know Cranston was coming. If he sailed into Miss Peabody's little bay, the natives on the place would know a white man had arrived. That meant the whole island would know. And the Malays of the outrigger would have to gossip about their extra pay and answer questions about the stranger they brought, what his business was likely to be, how his father made a living in the distant outer world, and the color of his grandmother's eyes. Those tidbits of information were necessary to natives on islands like Prang. They kept natives sane and content to work on tropical islands where work was a luxury, since it was unnecessary.

CRANSTON had selected the type of vessel which would cause the least possible comment if sighted from shore. Migrant natives, moving from island to island, and turtle fishers, usually used outriggers. Nobody would suspect that a native craft was being used by an officer of the government to land after dark at a lonely spot.

The vessel moved with surprising speed on the light wind. It climbed the great smooth swells with ease, making a merry murmur at the prow and along the flat run of the leeward side. It plunged down the slopes from the rounded crests like a toboggan on an iced way. Astern, at times, it left a double wake, the small hull on the outrigger frame touching water as she slacked her sail and heeled to windward between puffs. The stars were sucked into the swirling line of flaming water, and then danced away from the line, like comets

The South Sea Police, Led by Blood Curdling Screams at Night, Solve Two Weird Mysteries

which had escaped from a nebula and wheeled away to retain their freedom.

For two miles they ran southward, skirting the island. Miss Peabody's double lamps were lost astern. Cranston kept his eyes on the white of the surf line. Breakers were constant on that shore, but no great sea was running that night.

Suddenly he saw a gap in the white line of surf. That meant he had picked up the point Miss Peabody mentioned in her letter. The break was about half a mile long. This meant that the point made a lee by jutting out against the current or the tidal stream. Behind that point Miss Peabody was to meet him. It was necessary to land before she arrived, for he wanted to avoid any chance that his Malays would be aware he was expected on the island.

"Tanjong?" he asked the steering Malay. It was wise not to know too much about the place, though he had studied the chart carefully before starting.

"Ai, tuan, tanjong," replied the man quietly.

"Masok," said Cranston. Accustomed to prompt obedience without question to white men, the man swung his steering paddle, and spoke to the man in the bows. The sail was trimmed a little, and the outrigger headed to pass in the lee of the point. Before long she had the point abeam and then it was a matter of rounding into the still water.

The maneuver was made with the silent skill which only Malays have with a big outrigger. The matting sail handled perfectly. There was no surf behind the point. They ran in with way they had and touched the sandy shingle as gently as if the vessel had been pulled ashore with a towline of twine.

His blanket roll on his shoulder, Cranston was carried ashore. Then, in low tones, he informed the Malays that they should return to Lantu Vanna, know nothing. Gave them each an extra goldpiece to bite upon when they were tempted to let their tongues rattle with a white man's business. They shoved off, paddled out to get the breeze in the sail, and then skimmed away like an albatross flying low and touching the tips of the swells to test his altitude. And by order, they did not head for Lantu Vanna until they were surely invisible from the shores of Prang.

Except for a few fireflies making luminous curves in the thin line of wild coco palms along the beach, Cranston was alone in the dark. He got his pistols from the end of his blanket roll and fastened the open topped holsters to his belt. He paced quietly on the damp sand of the shingle where it was hard underfoot. He took care that he did not become visible against the line of breakers beyond the point.

A bush snapped in the jungle's edge. He counted silently to a hundred and fifty. Then he struck two stones together twice. A bush broke twice. Then he knew that Miss Peabody had arrived to guide him to her plantation house.

An indistinct form moved out from the heavy darkness at the edge of the jungle.

Cranston did not move forward to meet the young woman. He walked away from her toward the point. That was in the direction of her plantation house. She followed him. When he crossed the ridge of the point, he paused a minute, and then headed in for the jungle's edge on the beach where there was surf.

NEITHER could make any mistake about identity. By carrying out Miss Peabody's directions as given in her letter, they avoided any conversation that might be overheard by others. There was a chance that the unknown person who

screamed in the bay at irregular intervals might have seen the outrigger arrive. To capture this mysterious person, it was necessary to avoid any possible chance of being seen, and the last thing he must suspect, they both knew, was that a man had been sent to make an investigation.

Hidden himself in the overhanging fringe of the jungle, Cranston saw the young woman appear against the surf as she passed him. He could make out her rifle, sloped forward over her left arm, ready for instant use.

Moving along the beach alone, Miss Peabody kept well ahead of Cranston. He took as much cover as he could along the jungle. When they had made nearly two miles, she left the beach and led him to a path through a dense growth of bush. He joined her there, certain that while she might have been seen, there was little chance that anybody was aware of his own presence on the island.

"Just keep the path under your feet as you follow me," she whispered. "I'll get you into the house at the end where the veranda is not far from the jungle, and you don't have to pass any clearings. Even if the moon is up, you can't be seen going to the veranda."

He assented and she kept ahead. At times he could not see the woman, but he could hear her push through the brush, taking care not to let branches fly back. Presently he made out the gabled end of a thatched house lifting into the sky.

"I've a private office at this end of the house, where I often spend evenings alone with my radio. My servants do not know I've been away, and I let Ali and his wife off for the evening."

"But I hear voices," whispered Cranston.

"I left the radio running, tuned low. We can talk carefully, but it woudd be dangerous if the set was not going when we talk. Ali's wife sometimes comes to see if I want anything. You can use the office for your quarters while you're here."

Miss Peabody moved up and pushed aside an awning that enclosed the doorway at the head of the steps. Then Cranston, as he followed, saw that the whole end of the veranda was enclosed by split bamboo sun screens. He felt matting under his feet and the odor of sandalwood came to his nostrils, now accustomed to the dankness of jungle air and dead vegetation.

He followed through a door, into a room where there was only the tiny glow of the radio's tuning light. A voice, which he recognized as coming from Australia was giving the prices of copra in Sydney, and discussing business conditions. By the sound of the butt on the matting, he knew that Miss Peabody had put her rifle against the wall. Her arm, caught against the light glow, gestured Cranston to a grass chair near a partly open *kajang* which gave onto the front veranda.

A DRAFT of warm air struck across Cranston's face as he sat. It came from the bay in front of the house. The moon was just rising to seaward, and he saw the coconut grove before the house, the water of the bay with the moon track across it, and all the tangles of shadows made by the moppy tops of the trees, and the copra sheds down on the beach.

She lifted the *kajang* a little. It was a bamboo awning frame laced with flat rattan and hinged from the top of the window frame, opening outward to the front veranda. There was a table and a chair outside the opening and a small table beside the chair in which Cranston sat.

"It's on this side of the bay, along the sandy shore, where the screams come from," she whispered, while the man in Sydney read prices for various commodities in a barely audible voice from the loud speaker. "The other side of the bay, down past my sheds, is nearly all mangrove swamp. There's a small stretch of coral beach beyond the sheds, between. the beginning of the swamp and my buildings on the shore."

Cranston had studied carefully a chart of the water and a map of the land. He

had the lay of the ground in his mind's eye, but he studied the moonlit scenery with interest. It was a beautiful spot in the moonlight. A screaming lunatic by night certainly, Cranston felt, should not be allowed to drive Miss Peabody away from her home and her property. He also felt certain that he had no madman to deal with, but a conspiracy against the young woman.

"What do you think is behind all this you wrote about?" he asked her.

"I don't know what to think. I'm not afraid myself. It's all too silly."

"Not silly if you can't keep native help on the place."

"I know that. I'm ruined as a planter if they all get out. I've already lost ten men. A dozen remain, some with families, but it's touch and go how long they stay if that screaming goes on. I hear they'll all go if it happens once more."

"It will, I'm pretty sure."

"I've put my last dollar into this property. If I could sell at all, it would be at a heavy loss. Nobody would want a place that natives were afraid of, and with prices at the bottom, I'm barely hanging on."

"You ought to have a couple of white men here."

"I know that. But I'm expecting my brother to come out from the States. I can't afford white men not the type I'd trust."

"Got any ideas at all on who's trying to ruin your investment?"

"Nothing that clicks. There're only two other plantations on the island. Small's an Englishman, Hensley's an Australian. Both splendid men, with their families. They'd not be in any such game against me—it'd injure their property too, the whole island, if they sent a man to scream in my bay here."

"What about this man, Standish, Small's foreman?"

"I don't know what to make of him. He's a decent chap of middle age. Been with Small something like a year. He comes over now and then, as do Small and Hensley, and talks sympathetically. He hung around outside a couple of nights, and here on the veranda, watching for anything suspicious."

"Give you any advice?"

"There isn't much to give. Says I might as well let my native workers go, shut up the place, and stay with the Smalls until this thing stops."

"Why don't you do that?"

"I want my own home. I don't like to quit. I can stick things through, now that Major Swift has sent you."

"When was Standish here last?"

"A week ago."

"When was the next series of screams?"

"The night after he left."

"Think he's got anything to do with it?"

"No. You're not suspicious of him, are you?"

"Suspicion is a poor tool in my trade. So is the belief that any person on the island is innocent. I'm here for facts, not to be afraid I'll catch the guilty person."

"I understand that, of course."

"When will he be here again?"

"He's likely to come any time. I got word he might come over tonight. It's about time for the screams again."

"Standish doesn't know I'm here?"

"Nobody knows that, not even my servants. I told the major I'd make sure of that."

"Good. I want to hear Standish talk to you."

"It seems underhanded, not fair to him, to have you listen to him secretly."

"The only way in which it would be against the interests of Mr. Standish to have me listen to him when he knew no other white person was listening, would be the possibility that he advised you against your own interests."

"You *do* suspect Mr. Standish."

"No. Put it another way. I suspect everybody, and that includes Small and Hensley. I'll simply be giving Standish a chance to indicate his innocence by judging his remarks to you."

"But none of us planters is making ex-

penses. The idea that Small and Hensley would want my property, when they find it hard to keep going with what they've got under ruinous prices, just does not make sense."

"No puzzle makes sense until you understand it. You are being terrorized anyhow, your natives are being run off the place with terror. You can't run this plantation alone."

"And nobody would buy it as things are now."

"I'm not sure of that. Standish, for instance, might buy. Have you suggested the thought to him?"

"He has no capital. His wages are half what they are in normal times."

"How do you know he hasn't any capital?"

"He says so."

"Ah, does he? When did he say that?"

"A month or so before this trouble started, as near as I can remember. Small suggested that Standish might buy half of my share and act as my foreman. Standish said at once that he had no money, could not get any, and that he had not been able to save any of his wages, by reason of relations he was helping at home in the States."

CRANSTON shook his head in the glimmer of moonlight filtering in through the slits of the kajang. "Means nothing. Small or Hensley or anybody else that we don't know about, might back Standish, and especially if he could take the property over for a give-away price."

"Just the same, Mr. Cranston, I have a great deal of confidence in the three white men on this island." There was a trace of challenge in Miss Peabody's voice. That challenge had something of a hint that if a police investigator meant her neighbors were to come under suspicion, she was not certain that she had shown wisdom in asking aid from the government.

"I respect you for that," said Cranston. "My trade is regarded by some people as a sneaking profession. I'm supposed to make a living by going about finding that honest men are criminals. But I'm more careful of charging honest people with crime than the average citizen. People who do not perform police duty have a habit of knowing mean things about their neighbors which are not true. I have to deal with facts, while whole communities where I am needed, reek with slander against honest men and women. I'm not here to lecture you on such things, but to relieve you of a nuisance."

"It's more than a nuisance. My savings, my livelihood, is at stake, and my brother's future. It's a mean business, this attempt to drive a woman away from her plantation."

"You have stated it exactly! Men on this plantation would use a rifle on that screamer in the bay. You can't go down there alone at night to shoot this terrorist, who is really working for effect on your natives. It's a cheap trick. But do you know the greatest problem of the police?"

"I couldn't answer that."

"The answer is confidence held by honest people for people who are not worthy of trust. If there is one man among these three on the island you do not want to see arrested, I might as well go back to Lantu Vanua."

"I don't exactly know what you are talking about."

"Small, Hensley or Standish, any or all of them, will be arrested if I find any warrant for such action. I must have a free hand."

Miss Peabody was silent for a few minutes. Then she laughed softly. "I think I know what you mean. You suspect that I'd rather not learn that Standish is connected with this business in some way. That's nonsense, Mr. Cranston. He's a middle-aged man, and, if anything, I've a trace of dislike for him. He's not frank. I've studied him and pretended to lean on his suggestions, just to try and find out what was really in his mind. But he's too elusive."

"He may be too elusive for me. There's

one fact I want to bring to your attention. We keep a pretty good check on the white men in the islands. I've looked into some details about this Standish, at the orders of the major. We can't trace him. He is in the files as having arrived on Prang Island about two years ago on board a copra schooner from Australia. I found, before I left Lantu Vanna, by cabling the skipper of that schooner, a defect in Small's first report on his foreman. That skipper never left any white man on this island, and never heard of Standish."

MISS PEABODY gasped. "What do you make of that?"

"Small was misled. He misled the police by error in his first report on Standish. It was not until I began checking the white men from our files that I luckily reached that skipper in Australia before I came here."

"You could arrest Standish for being here without telling the truth about how he got here, couldn't you?"

"I could, but I won't. That would not solve our problem. I have one question. Has Standish been here with you when there was any of this screaming down in the bay?"

"Yes, and more than once."

"Then there's at least one other white man on the island, and he's probably known to Standish. They're working together against you. Our game is to find out what they want. That means what they want you to do. We already know that Standish has advised you to let your workers go and leave the plantation yourself. He wants you out of here. The next time he has anything to suggest, follow his idea as promptly as possible. Seem to be reluctant to do what he suggests. But do it promptly. I'll stay here alone."

"I'll follow that program exactly. I know now that I won't be driven from my home. Mr. Cranston, I've worked hard for what I have here."

"It's a beautiful spot. When it begins to pay well, you won't have to stay here the year around. You can see a little of civilization."

"I came here because I felt that a South Sea island, which would give me security for the future by providing an income, was out of civilization. But I've had to call on the police to help me keep what I've got."

"There is no such thing as security."

"I can see that now. But I can't understand it."

"It's simple to understand. We in the police know that we are in a constant war, a war against human beings who seek

power. They will destroy anybody in their way. There will always be war as long as that is true. This petty terrorism against you is the result of somebody reaching for power, the power to drive you away and take over your plantation. Lovely South Sea islands can't escape the greed of men seeking power."

"I've certainly found that out, but I didn't grasp the thought in exactly the same way. I'm going to see now about getting you some supper."

"Plenty of coffee, please. I'll do my sleeping in the day. I'll be awake all night."

"I'm accustomed to having something before I go to bed on the table outside that kajang. I'll pass it in to you after the servant leaves the tray."

She went out on the front veranda, and at the far end, rang a bell. Getting an answer from the cook house, she ordered a meal, and returned to the table outside Cranston's kajang. Her chair at the table was so close to the high sill where Cran-

ston sat inside that they could whisper without danger of being heard.

THEY continued their conversation while waiting for the servant. The radio they kept turned low, as protection against any chance of being overheard. A tiny battery lamp on Miss Peabody's table was so arranged that it threw its illumination outward from the house. This increased the gloom inside which concealed Cranston. The moon was so high now that it did not shine under the low thatched eaves at the front of the house.

The servant brought a tray of food, with a pot of coffee, and put it before his mistress. "No more tonight, Ali," she said. He hastened away, nervous in the darkness, for he knew it was nearly time for *hantu* in the bay. The screaming ghost had ruined the nerves of the natives of Prang.

Miss Peabody passed the tray in to Cranston. He continued to ask questions, seeking every point that might be of use to him in resolving the mystery of the place into its unlimited elements.

The little clock in Miss Peabody's living quarters at the other end of the house tinkled eleven times with soft musical notes before they were aware that nearly half the night was gone. She said good night and left him alone on watch, smoking his pipe with a tin cup over it to conceal the burning tobacco.

Before him, beyond the narrow palm grove above the beach, the smooth bay was all aglimmer with moonlight. There was a soft rustling in the palm tops. Lower down, all along the shining beach and on the land sloping toward the sea, there was a misleading calmness. This was because the high ridges which enclosed the bay, and overlapped in reefs, caught the wind from seaward and curved it upward, where it played upon the high jungles beyond the houses. The sound of the wind upon the jungle tops was like the murmur of a distant waterfall. But the palm tops rattled, for they were dry. They had been dry for months. It was nearly time for the wet monsoon.

In less than half an hour Cranston became aware of something moving down in the gigantic lattice of light and shadow made by the moonlight among the palm trees. He saw a man come from the trail which led to Small's plantation, three miles away. The man thus skirted the inland side of the mangrove swamp to the left, and beyond Miss Peabody's copra sheds.

The stranger advanced slowly. He wore dark clothing, not the usual white of a planter making a visit. Cranston reasoned that the stranger must be Standish. And that was precisely the man Cranston wanted to appear at the plantation first of all.

Soon a bell tinkled in Miss Peabody's end of the house. Cranston thought at first that the musical clock was striking again. Then he remembered that an hour had not passed. The bell rang because the man coming up toward the house had touched the tiny copper wire a few inches from the ground, the wire being connected with the bell. This made it impossible for anybody to approach the house from the beach after dark without blundering into the wire and giving an alarm.

"Who's there?" called Miss Peabody.

"Hope I haven't disturbed you, ma'am —it's Standish."

"I'm glad you came. Please come up to the house."

"Didn't intend to call. Just thought I'd snoop around, but if you're awake, I'd like to tell you something, some news I picked up at Small's." Now Standish was in the gravel and coral path and he quickened his steps toward the veranda.

Miss Peabody walked out on the dark veranda and greeted the foreman cordially. He climbed the steps slowly, turning to scan the bay. When he spoke there was worry in his voice—or pretended worry. He dripped gloom with every word. "I don't like what I heard. No need for you to get alarmed, but things ain't so good.

Thought it'd be best if I dropped over this way."

"What did you hear?" Cranston knew that Miss Peabody was pretending to pick up the foreman's mood of impending disaster.

STANDISH hesitated before he replied. He leaned against the stanchions at the head of the steps and continued to survey the bay, as if seeking some proof there of his fears for the young woman's safety. Cranston could see his dark figure, not very clearly, but in a broken and confused mass, for the background of moonlight looking toward the mangroves was a series of bright stripes of light and a chaotic tangle of palm-top shadows and the vertical black lines of palm boles.

"One of Small's natives was over on this side about sundown, and got delayed. Turtle-egging. He come back and said a native boat landed down the shore a piece, down around the point."

Cranston gasped almost audibly in his surprise. He doubted this story of a report by a native. The outrigger had not touched the shore or headed for it until well after dark. And turtle-egging natives did not remain on lonely shores after dark. They feared the evil spirits of the jungles by night and made sure they reached home before sundown. Also, from the point where Cranston's outrigger landed, the logical way back to Small's would be past Miss Peabody's front veranda on the way to the jungle trail past the swamp. Cranston realized that it was likely that Standish himself had seen the outrigger from the hills, far out to sea before sundown, and was suspicious that it had landed. That meant that he was doing prowling on his own account, certainly, he was keeping check on what happened at Miss Peabody's side of the island.

There was no chance of a leak of news from Lantu Vanna that Major Swift had sent a confidential man to Prang Island. Even the two Malays did not know the outrigger's destination when it sailed.

"Oh, Small's native made a mistake," replied Miss Peabody promptly. "I saw a boat before sundown, far out. It was an outrigger that often comes past. I looked at it through glasses. It came in close, but it did not land. I sent a man out on the reef to watch, and he told me it ran to the southward, well out, down the point way."

"'At's a girl!" breathed Cranston.

"I'm glad to hear that the native was wrong," said Standish. And Cranston knew that the foreman told the truth. He was relieved, and for his own private reasons, that no outrigger had landed. And Cranston was likewise relieved. For he knew that if Miss Peabody could convince Standish that the outrigger had not touched shore, the foreman lacked accurate information himself. If he really knew the facts, he could not so easily have been misled. And what Standish had come for, was not so much for the protection of Miss Peabody, or to warn her, but he wanted to end his own worry about the native boat.

"If you don't object," Standish went on, "I think I'd better stick around here tonight. I've got a hunch something'll happen."

"I'd hate to have you lose a night's rest. You'll have to work tomorrow. I know that Mr. Small's in a hurry to get a copra cargo ready. Things have quieted down and my natives are not so jumpy."

"I told Small I was coming. He said I'd better stay if you felt nervous."

"Won't you have a little palm wine and a bite of something? I've got some tinned biscuits, I could have Ali bring something hot——"

"Thanks, I'll sit down, but don't you bother with anything. I had a good snack before I started out. Before I stop here, I'd like to go down and poke around the copra sheds. Just to settle my own mind. I'm a little jumpy myself, but I brought arms." Standish slapped a pistol holster on his leg and moved down the steps.

"I think you're awfully kind," said the young woman. "You can nap here on this

veranda couch when you come back. I don't think it's necessary for you to stay awake all night. The moon's too bright tonight for the *hantu*. Don't you think so?"

A CHUCKLE came from over Standish's shoulder. "This ghost you got here in the bay, ma'am, ain't afraid of moonlight." He was well down in the yard, his lanky figure plain now to Cranston, as it strode away swiftly toward the copra sheds in the direction of the mangrove side of the bay.

There came a gentle creaking along the veranda matting. Miss Peabody was slipping cautiously toward the kajang which concealed Cranston.

"What did you think of that outrigger yarn of his—got from one of Small's natives?" asked Miss Peabody in a whisper through the triangular slit of the out-thrust kajang.

"He knows something, he's worried, but you were clever to put him off the track. He's just going to stick around and make sure. I'd say he's pretty sure somebody did come to help you, and suspects that man is hiding in your copra sheds."

Cranston kept his eyes on the diminishing figure of Standish. The foreman moved in and out among the shadows of the breeze-shaken mop heads of the palms, advancing on the sheds cautiously. He disappeared in the darkness cast by the roofs.

There were subdued noises from the native quarters up from the sheds. Instead of being reassured by the visit of Small's foreman, the natives seemed more nervous than they had been. They seemed to sense in the arrival of the white man a promise of something for the night which they dreaded. Children cried fretfully and were soothed to quiet. The voices of women lifted to nervous stridency.

"Perhaps," said Miss Peabody, "there'll be more screaming for several weeks. If Standish has anything to do with it what he has picked up about the outrigger will make him afraid he'd get caught at the game."

"He'll more than likely want to finish the job of getting you out before somebody does come to investigate, and——"

Before Cranston could finish his sentence, the stillness of the night under the palms was rent by an abrupt scream from the bay. The sound was prolonged in tones of torture. The voice had the appalling quality of anguish to a human soul as well as a human body. It rose to a shrill yelp and then died out in a series of awful gurglings. Cranston could think of nothing so much as a powerful man knifed in the back without warning and his life bubbling away from between his lips as his lungs collapsed under a mortal wound.

Before the awful sound was well started, terror welled up in the native quarters. Women cried out, and the voices of protesting brown men were shaken with panic tones. Children wailed and it seemed to Cranston that all of Miss Peabody's workers shrieked hysterically as their nerves broke. Then the echo of the scream from the bay came down from the hills and faded. The natives renewed their tumult of terror.

There was a crashing of tins from the cook house. Figures erupted into the moonlight and fled for the brush of the jungle. There was a swift whirring of foliage. The rush of the cook and his helpers turned the panic of the other workers into determination to get away. Figures rushed out, yelping, and sped through the grove toward the trail toward Small's plantation.

AGAIN the bay scream came over the water. Cranston located it on the right side of the bay, which was opposite the house, and across from the mangrove swamp. The second scream rose to full-throated power. More natives darted from their houses, women among them now, and made for the trail. Though they feared the jungle by night, they had greater fear of the moonlit bay.

Cranston divined why the screams came from the beach side of the bay. If that sound came from the mangroves, the natives would have to flee toward the screams to get away to Small's.

"Standish's coming back!" warned Cranston. "Now we'll see what he advises. With your natives gone, he'll have things the way he wants 'em. Do whatever he wants, as I told you before."

She moved along the wall of the house back toward her own quarters. She stopped midway at the break in the railing at the head of the steps. All this time there was bedlam among the workers. Men fleeing past Standish as he hurried up from the sheds, gave him no heed when he tried to restrain their flight. He even ran to head off two men, but they fled all the faster for his attempt to stop their going.

"They're bound to go!" bawled Standish from the palm grove. "No stopping 'em. They can't be argued with."

"Let them go, Mr. Standish. You might as well come up to the house."

Ali came running toward the veranda. His wife followed him, babbling in shrill Malay. She was demanding that they leave the place, from what Cranston caught. Ali went back to the woman, protesting against her foolishness. But Ali was hysterical himself. Before Miss Peabody could calm the pair, another scream broke from the bay.

Ali had brought his wife to the veranda. But that third scream was too much for the woman. She jumped the railing and ran down towards Standish, as if going to him for protection.

The foreman spoke to her. She threw up both hands, cried out for Ali, and bolted for the trail. Ali, who had gone after her to fetch her back, was infected by her panic. He followed at her heels, yelping like an injured puppy. They were the last of the natives to go. The wailing of men and women plunging along the jungle trail drifted back to the plantation house on the echoes of the third scream.

"Well, ma'am, that kind of settles it. You ain't going to do any good staying here alone. Mebbe they'll come back, in time, and mebbe they won't."

"I'll have to go to Mr. Small's in the morning," said Miss Peabody. "I can't stand this myself, alone."

"If I was you, I wouldn't wait till morning," said Standish. He stood at the head of the steps, wiping his forehead with his handkerchief.

"I don't like to leave the place without having it properly closed, all the kajangs and the doors."

"I can stay on tonight, ma'am, and you can come back tomorrow and fetch some of Small's people, or some of your own might come back just for daylight. Ali and his woman, anyhow."

Miss Peabody listened to the diminishing cries of her workers. They would soon be in the comforting brilliance of moonlight on the broad beach beyond the swamp.

"Then if you'll stay, I'll get into laced boots and proper clothes for the trail, and get my rifle." Miss Peabody went to her own room. Cranston heard Standish give a sigh of relief. He had won what he wanted, the plantation to himself. He had no idea that his feet were in a snare.

LEANING against the stanchion, the foreman faced the bay. His head was thrust out a little into the moonlight as if he were peering down toward the water to catch sight of something which eluded his eyes.

In a few minutes Miss Peabody came out again. "I'll make it right with you, Mr. Standish, if you find out who's scaring my natives away."

"You've got to find out, ma'am, or sell out." Standish spoke with earnest conviction. Cranston knew that the man had touched the subject uppermost in his mind.

"But whoever bought it would have their workers scared away, too. And who'd buy a plantation that couldn't keep native help?"

"Well, if I had this place, I'd make it hot for that guy that's doing the scaring."

"Would you buy this place?"

Standish gave a light laugh. "I couldn't buy one of your copra sheds. There's a Chink I know who might buy. He'd bring a lot of his people here, and nobody'd drive Chinks out. You've got a valuable place here, soon as times are better. So I wouldn't hurry about selling, if I was you, unless you got a decent price, spot cash down. That's the way Chinks always buy.

They do a lot of bargaining. But when they make a deal, they close it and no more bother."

"I wish you'd tell me about this Chinese a little later. I'm inclined to sell after tonight." Cranston grinned into the darkness. Miss Peabody had Standish by the hand, so to speak, and was leading him down the lane his mind was so eager to travel, a new owner for the plantation.

"I hadn't thought about it much, ma'am. You didn't want to sell before this. The Chink's over in Australia, but I could let him know you want to quit here."

"You can go in the living room and make yourself at home," she said, picking up her rifle. "Help yourself to anything you need. There's a jug of palm toddy I keep for visitors in that cabinet near the big table. The cook house is full of tinned food."

"I'll stay out here on the veranda, Ma'am, where I can watch and listen." Standish sank into a grass chair and put his feet up on the railing. It struck Cranston that the man already had taken on the attitude of the new owner of Miss Peabody's plantation.

"I can't thank you enough for what you're doing for me, Mr. Standish. I might as well go. I'll be back a little after noon. But you won't want to wait that long. I'll send somebody over from Small's at daylight, a couple of his most dependable natives, so you won't have to wait for me."

"You don't worry none about going along that trail? Mebbe I ought to see you past it, to the long beach beyond."

"I'm not a bit nervous. I'd rather you'd stay here and look after the house. It shouldn't be alone tonight, with that screamer down around the bay. Good night." The young woman walked down into the yard and moved at a good pace in the direction of the blackness where the trail began.

Standish rose from his chair and went to the steps to watch the woman go. A few minutes after her form was lost in the dark wall of jungle brush, the foreman turned on a flashlight. He flicked the light on and off and then returned to his chair and lit his pipe.

CRANSTON, his automatics easy in their holsters, watched the bay and the veranda, his ears tense for any suspicious sound. It was half an hour before anything happened—just after the clock in Miss Peabody's room tinkled once. A figure rose abruptly from beyond the vine-clad veranda at the side of the steps which was nearest Cranston.

"So they've all cleared out, hey?" came a hoarse whisper from the man on the steps.

"Got her out at last," said Standish. "Hard enough job, but like I told you, it was just a matter of time." The foreman's voice was subdued, but he made no effort to keep his voice low. This was proof to Cranston that there was no lurking suspicion that somebody might be hidden in the house. And that meant that neither man had the truth about the outrigger.

"Damn it all, it's time they got out! I'm afraid that brother of hers will be along any time, if he didn't sneak in on that outrigger tonight." The newcomer's voice was gruff, as if he had some ailment of the throat. His breath, when not speaking, came with a slight wheezing. He mounted

the steps and was lost in the gloom near Standish. A chair creaked.

"She wouldn't go to Small's if her brother was here tonight. You've got the jumps, Tom."

"You live in that damned swamp the way I do, with a mess of crocodiles and bats and mosquitoes and all kinds of things crawlin' around in the mud o' nights, and you'd have the jumps, too. Easy for you to talk."

"I know it's been tough," soothed Standish. "We had to take our time—and we need a lot more. We don't need to fret. We'll buy this plantation, through the Chink, and nobody the wiser. I can come over here from Small's as the Chink's foreman, and you won't have to live in the swamp any longer."

"Sounds good. But if that brother of hers pops in, she may change her mind. Anyhow, you've said right along she don't want to sell."

"She's ready to sell tonight. You put the fear of the devil into all hands with them yells of yours. I've had some of Small's natives working on these over here for the last ten days, scaring 'em up, and so on. That put the finish on for tonight." Standish chuckled in content at the success of his plan.

"I ain't so sure things'll work the way we want. This drivin' her natives out, might mean she'd sell to somebody that'd make more trouble for us, and then, I ain't so sure the gover'ment won't be over this way to find out what's muckin' things up."

"The police'll be here in time. But we've won, my Chink can always pay more'n anybody else would for the place, and we'll make sure of that. We can afford to pay."

"Well, I got a bellyful o' that swamp, anyhow. I want to take some more of that copper screenin' back with me. I've tried to pinch some for a week, but I didn't want to chance it, way things was haired up around here. Besides, any day some of her natives might trample along into the swamp, and see somethin' that'd steam up their brains, and their mouths." And the man called Tom rose and advanced to the steps.

"Don't bother with screening tonight," said Standish, as he ranged alongside the other. "We need all the dark there is to do some good for ourselves."

"I got four sacks ready to move, only the sackin's kind of rotten, and I don't trust it."

"I'll get the stuff away from the island, never fear. We need all the cash in the hands of the Chink that we can get to him. And that copra boat'll take it next week from Small's. I'll ship to the Chink in copra bags, and he knows what to look for when he buys the next lot of copra."

THEY moved down to the ground. They followed the house, close under the overhanging eaves. Cranston heard the vines rustle as they edged along, making for the nearest patch of shadow from a cluster of palms. The moon was getting low and the shadows were longer in the grove.

Cranston gathered extra clips for his pistols, picked up his flashlight, and took from his blanket roll a cloth impregnated with a slightly odorous chemical as protection against mosquitoes and other jungle insects. He got to the back veranda, hurried along it to the same end of the house from which Standish and the other had left, and watched them go. They appeared intermittently in the moonlit spots, were lost again in shadows, only to emerge for a moment again into light.

They were making for the copra sheds partly built over water on piling. Beyond, was a short stretch of beach. Then the edge of the bay mangroves began, running in a curving line all the way to the headland on that side.

Cranston knew he had to get down to the sheds. He made a quick survey of the best route to follow and get the best cover. He went down to the soft ground, hurried past the cook house and along the workers' shacks. He had under feet that way the packed earth of a path made by barefoot natives.

He gained the cover of the first shed. He listened. A soft swishing sound came to his ears from beyond the other buildings. Hurrying, but careful to make no sound himself, Cranston got to the last building in the line.

Then he made out Standish and Tom moving along the beach toward the mangroves. The beach was mostly small grains of broken coral. It rattled after each step of the men as the disturbed grains fell back into place down the tiny pits left by the tread of feet.

From what he had said on the veranda, Tom, Cranston knew, had some form of habitation in the swamp. It would be difficult to move far in such a tidal swamp. With boats by daylight, and knowing the tangle of vines through the twisting waterways, it was hard enough to penetrate such a place. Yet both men were going in. That meant Cranston had to follow and take his chance on being discovered. In there was the answer to why they wanted Miss Peabody's plantation.

The moon was low to seaward, throwing light against the jungle rim along the strip of beach. Cranston would have no shadows for cover between water and jungle lip. He watched the pair move straight into the edge of the mangroves. They were lost at once in blackness. Then he heard a crocodile bark. The movements of the two men had disturbed the reptile.

Cranston stole along the edge of the jungle. He doubted the two men would have any fear of being followed. They believed the plantation to be deserted. If they did discover him, at the worst his job would be to retreat back to the sheds. The greatest danger was that they would wait for him and shoot from ambush. He wanted to avoid a fight. Information, not prisoners, was what he was after. They would be on their own ground.

Cranston intended to find out where that house of Tom's was located in the swamp. But the risk was great. The others knew the ground. He would be stumbling about where a man could be drowned in any deep pool of mud, trapped in slimy ooze full of vine-like roots and the big mud ponds infested with crocodiles.

WITHOUT being challenged, Cranston reached the wall of mangroves. The odor of tidal mud and rotten vegetation almost overpowered him until he had become somewhat accustomed to the place. Sheltered from the breeze that flew off the sea, the mosquitoes swarmed upon him. He wrapped his head and neck with the prepared netting, and went on.

The soft ground yielded under his feet and made it difficult at times to keep his balance. He could see water all about him among the muddy hummocks, for the surface of the ooze was speckled with light that came through the foliage overhead, making tiny spots of brilliance on the glassy surfaces of the pools.

He found that a rough lane had been cut through descending tendrils over a very narrow path. Vines had been tied along the sides as guide ropes in darkness. They also gave protection against falling off the high path into the mud. The path was not a straight line. It curved and bent and twisted through the mangroves. Cranston made his way slowly and cautiously. The others had moved swiftly, he knew, for he heard nothing of them.

There were times when he heard the splashing of crocodiles. The reptiles were often very close to him. Once the slap of a tremendous tail, as a crocodile changed ends with terrific speed, spattered mud on Cranston's head and shoulders. There were gruntings and snortings, and now and then a rasping bark, as he advanced deeper into the swamp.

Suddenly Cranston stopped. He caught the muffled voice of Standish. At first, Standish seemed to be far away. But as Cranston listened he became aware of the fact that the voice was not many yards ahead. He could not make out the meaning of the sentence which had come to his ears.

Alert, Cranston froze to rigidity, and

listened. He heard Tom's voice, but not so distinctly as the words of Standish. They appeared to be inside some sort of hut. There was a hollow resonance to the tones. And with the words there came a queer clinking sound at intervals. Pieces of metal rattling was all Cranston could make of the clinking.

Then the odor of coffee came out of the damp and stinking air. Cranston's nose caught the sweet scent. The delicious aroma was in striking contrast to the fumes from the lairs of crocodiles and all the crawling things that made the swamp alive with sound.

Sure his automatics were loose in their holsters, Cranston went on, feeling the ground for each step. As he made a turn in the path, he caught a blaze of light that was high above the spots of moonlight on the muddy pools. He stopped abruptly. It was a pale light that glowed with a peculiar deadness, lacking a beam. A disk of light, he discovered, when he had advanced and altered the angle of vision.

At once he knew what that light was. It was the circular glass of a porthole in some vessel. That amazed him. Yet the bay was only a few yards distant, and at a high tide, with the wind right, it would be possible to drag, or winch, a small vessel into the mud of the mangroves.

Cranston stood and gazed at the moon-like face of the porthole light. Its whiteness puzzled him. He could see tendrils falling from above, making what appeared to be straggling lines of blackness, like cracks in the glass.

Cranston doubted that the porthole was in a vessel. More likely, he reasoned, the porthole had been picked up along the beach, out of an old wreck, and used as a window in a shanty built by Tom. The dull whiteness of the light was the result of soaping the glass on the inside.

MOVING forward again, his eyes now well accustomed to the interior of the swamp, Cranston saw a shape loom up vaguely. It was foreign in outline to anything he had yet seen. Then he made out the complete silhouette of a small building. It stood at a crazy angle, as if one wall had collapsed and gone down into the mud. The roof, spotted with moonlight, had an unnatural tilt. And from one end of this singular building, a chimney, absurdly gigantic for such a small building, rose into the mangrove shoots above. That chimney had girth enough for a factory, Cranston told himself, yet it was very short.

He crawled forward now, groping ahead of him, his knees in hard mud where the path came from the side of the building. He came upon a low wall several feet from the side of the building beyond. Under his hands, it proved to be rusty metal. But it did not stand straight up. It sloped toward Cranston. Then instantly he caught the answer to the crazy chimney, the queer tilt of the house, and the soaped porthole light. There was a vessel in there! The supposed shanty was a deckhouse. The chimney was the vessel's funnel. The rusted metal wall was the upper part of a steel bulwark. Then Cranston knew that he was upon a mystery that was more than three years old, the disappearance of an ocean-going tugboat, and two men with it.

"Now," he told himself, "I know who Standish is, and Tom!" He exulted over his discovery. Yet, the hair crinkled along the back of his neck. For he knew that if the two men inside that tugboat happened to find him in the swamp, they would never let him see daylight again.

Standish was saying something. His voice came up from the buried hull. He was below the deckhouse. The voice was muffled. It broke off abruptly, with a startled exclamation.

A whirring noise drew Cranston's attention. It was an alarm clock, without the bell, the vibrating hammer's rod striking against the edge of metal. He drew back from the bulwark top. He sensed what had happened. There was a wire rigged along the bulwark top. The men had copied Miss Peabody's wire strung around her house. They had improved on it, for they

had a buzzer without a bell. Cranston knew that he had encountered the wire unknowingly and an electrical contact was broken down below in the tugboat.

Tom called sharply, "What's that?" He was so alarmed that he was heedless of being heard by whoever had touched the wire.

"Shut up!" warned Standish.

Feet pounded up the ladder into the deckhouse. A slit of pale light showed. It was only the upglow from light in the

quarters below, coming from the companionhood, just opened to let Standish up. Cranston caught the partial figure of the foreman through the opening of the listed door.

"Don't open that door!" pleaded Tom, still below. "You damned fool, don't show yourself." His voice quivered with alarm, the same fear which had shaken him when he heard the buzzer remained alive in his nerves.

There was a clang. Standish shut the metal lined door. A screened porthole in the deckhouse was open. His grumbling voice sifted out into the jungle. "Don't jump out of your shirt. A croc or something bumped into the wire, and——"

"There you go, bein' too cocksure!" Tom's voice rasped with exasperated hoarseness.

"Aw drink some coffee and steady your nerves. And put a stopper on your gab. If there was anybody out there, they'd hear you a mile away. There's a hundred pounds of gin pressure up your gullet, soft and easy, now."

But Tom was not to be restrained. "No crocs ever hit that wire in two years before. It don't make it so just because you say a thing. Soft and easy, hell! That brother of hers landed out of the outrigger, and that's who's out there in the dark." A dish of some sort crashed, probably knocked from the corner of a table as Tom bolted for the companionway. He came dashing up the companion ladder in a frenzy. The buzzer had died away in a few weakening ticks just as Tom threw open the deckhouse door and let it swing free from his hand. It slammed backward against the deckhouse. Tom ducked behind the bulkhead.

THEN a flashlight with a powerful beam was thrust from the shelter of the door's casing. The light almost blinded Cranston. He was in the center of the widened cone of illumination. He knew that he stood revealed in the blaze, in the center of the dike-like path. He could see the bright reflection of the great pools of mud on both sides. They hove up slowly and sank, shaken by the surge of gentle swells in the bay beyond, only a barrier of roots between them and clean sea water. They had an oily ooze upon them. The light made surface insects scamper. But it was only for an instant before Cranston grasped the fact that the light was upon him and that one false step and he was lost in ooze which would suck him down, and if he struggled, he would only go down all the faster.

Cranston's hand leaped to the right holster. Before his fingers clamped on the butt of the pistol he was swept from his feet. He knew what struck him before his knees buckled under a crashing impact. It was the powerful tail of a crocodile that lashed athwart the path.

As he went into the mud, Cranston's arms grappled for the raised path. He sank to his belt. Momentary fear froze him. He knew that the crocodile's purpose was to knock his supper into the mud and shear it in two with scissor-like jaws. He was ready to strike when the flashlight from the

deckhouse scared him. The attack was diverted and weakened by the blast of light, but the flail-like blow of the tail was already started. It was this weakening of the blow that saved Cranston from being hurled out of reach from the raised path. The crocodile changed his mind just as he was striking. He wanted the blackness of the mud pool's depths then, rather than a man for supper.

The great reptile slithered head first down into the ooze. The rush of air from the saw like tail fanned Cranston's cheek. The mud splashed. The hole made by the crocodile as he went down closed with a sickening explosion, like a bag full of air burst by a blow.

Cranston clutched and drew himself up as swiftly as he could. He feared for his legs in the ooze. Standish could be heard bawling questions. Tom, still holding his flashlight upon the path, cursed in amazement at what he had seen. His head and shoulders appeared in diluted gloom behind the flashlight, and Cranston caught the upward surging figure of Standish.

"That damned brother of hers!" yelped Tom. "I told you so! You are the cocksure kid, certain as hell you be, special when you're wrong. I'll show him somethin' he didn't come lookin' for!"

A pistol blast hit Cranston's ears as he struggled up astride the path. The track of the bullet from the muzzle, marked by a yellowish flash, came to his eyes as a lightning bolt glimpsed unexpectedly. The bullet struck in the soft mud near Cranston's head. He was slow now in his movements, like a beetle caught in treacle.

"Stop that shooting!" cried Standish. "Somebody might be back from Small's, and we can——"

"Damn Small!" exploded Tom. He fired again.

"We can get him with a club!" He thrust Tom aside and the flashlight eclipsed. There were a few words of snarling expostulation. Urged by Standish, Tom turned his light on again. The next Cranston knew, he saw the figure of Standish coming over the sunken bulwark. A club lifted, a club painted white, the big wooden bar from the tug's winch. It was kept inside the door as a weapon for emergency. Standish had a use for the bar now.

CRANSTON grabbed for his gun. He was on his knees, balanced across the path. The gun had slime upon the butt. It slipped in his fingers as they put pressure on for the draw. It came free from the holster. The muzzle went toward the charging figure of Standish.

The foreman swung the bar. But his own body threw Cranston into a shadow. The bar splashed down into the mud alongside the path. Standish lost his footing and sprawled on the path. But he was up again. The club swung high, making a white arc to Cranston's eyes, their vision made uncertain by the beam of light playing into them, and mud spatter that trickled down his eyebrows from his forehead.

Cranston's second finger slithered over the trigger of his pistol. He had little hope of hitting Standish. A miss might check him. The weapon leaped in Cranston's hand.

A thin sliver of powder and smoke and lead showed against the illumined spray from the deckhouse doorway—the vague shadow of the pistol's power as it was loosed to save Cranston's life.

Standish straightened up while his arm dropped with the club. There was a thud in the hard path as the end of the bar struck. It missed Cranston by a couple of feet.

"Finish him!" raged the exasperated Tom from the doorway. "You took the bar! What the hell you doin'? Stand there and look at him! He's shootin' at ye! And you hushin' me about Small!"

Standish drew up one foot and turned as if to go back to the deckhouse. He held the foot aloft uncertainly for a minute. Then he lost his balance. He swayed and clapped both hands to the buckle of his belt. His head went down in a curve. He plunged into the muddy pool. He cried out sharply. Mud in his mouth snapped

the cry off short. Then Cranston saw a pair of legs go bubbling down into the light slicked ooze.

Tom peered forward into his flashlight's cone of brilliance. He cursed incoherently. He could not make out what had happened. His neck craned and his head turned like an owl seeking a spot of darkness in sunlight. His eyes could not find Standish.

"Where are you? What's the matter of you? Git back in the light!" Then words failed Tom. Two men had been in the path. One was gone. The muddy pool trembled like shaken jelly. The disappearance of Standish mystified Tom.

Cranston dragged himself to his feet. There was no place to retreat except along the narrow path. To go that way meant a shot in his back. Or if Tom shut off his light, Cranston would be in danger of plunging off the path into muddy oblivion.

There was only one place to go, into the light. The top of the partly submerged bulwark was only a few feet away. With his legs drenched with slime Cranston knew it would be hard enough to make those few feet to the bulwark's upper rim.

Cranston bent forward for the rush while the light held. It might snap off at any instant. Tom lifted his pistol as he saw the crouching figure. Cranston checked his charge. He swung his legs apart a little, feeling with his feet to make sure they held the surface of the treacherous path. He was not steady enough yet to use his weapon on Tom before the man fired. The split second that held a bullet for Cranston must be prolonged. The shock of surprise was what was needed. Cranston yelled the words he knew would delay Tom's shot.

"Karnish, I know you!" That was Tom's real name. The effect was what Cranston desired. Tom's trigger finger froze and Cranston avoided being blasted off the path by a hail of bullets.

THE flashlight snapped off. Cranston supposed the action was normal under the circumstances and that Karnish, though he had held his fire, instinctively wanted himself blacked out. But Cranston was wrong. Karnish, in bewildered astonishment at hearing his real name, dropped the flashlight. It crashed down upon the decking as it went out.

"Acton! Where are you!" bawled Karnish. That was the real name of Standish, Cranston was well aware. Karnish did not know yet that the foreman was gone forever. Karnish expected his companion to come blundering up out of the mud.

Cranston seized upon his chance to get to the bulwark's rim. He charged for it, stumbled over it, sprawled on the slanting mud-strewn deck, surged upward toward the deckhouse door, and plunged through it. He struck Karnish like a projectile. The man went hurtling back. Cranston opened his own flashlight into the deckhouse. Karnish leaped to his feet and backed up against the spokes of the wheel of the tugboat.

"My name ain't Karnish!" the man whimpered. He crouched against the wheel spokes, the hand which held the pistol shaking as he lifted the weapon. He knew he was cornered. His denial of his identity was to gain time and clear his rattled brain. Before he fired he was taken with the desire to know who was before him. He could see in that upglow through the companion, which silhouetted Cranston, the wrapped head and neck of the stranger who knew a name not used for more than three years. He was puzzled, confused, filled with fear, and in dismay that the man who went after Cranston with a club had slipped from sight and sound.

"Your name is Karnish. I've got Acton. There are more of us out there, and we'll take you, too. You're under arrest! Keep that gun hand down!"

Cranston wanted time himself to steady himself. He was not sure of his footing on the sloping floor of the deckhouse. Slime dripped from his legs, making the planks underfoot a sticky mess. That clinging mud as it dripped left patches as slippery as heavy oil on a surface far from level.

Karnish did not obey the order to keep

the gun hand down. It was not to be expected. He could not afford to quit on any man's order. He knew he was recognized. He also knew that a rope's loop waited for him if he ever saw Lantu Vanna again.

Cranston snapped off his light. He threw himself against the outwardly sloping bulkhead by a port light. He was just in time with the maneuver. A tongue of fire snapped at him from the darkness where Karnish stood crouched at the wheel.

Cranston fired at the flame. He heard a pistol drop. Once more he fired, lower this time, in the belief that Karnish had dropped to the deck. And Karnish would fire, and keep firing, as long as he had strength to pull a trigger or a cartridge remained in the pistol's magazine.

Two flashes broke the darkness under the wheel. Two bullets slapped into the deckhouse ceiling. Cranston threw on his light. Karnish sat on the deck, his back against the lower spokes of the wheel, his legs spread, and his gun hand sagged to his knee. His fingers tried to clutch the gun butt that had slipped from them. Head low, he panted hoarsely, and his lips twisted. As Cranston looked, gun ready, Karnish turned on his side, rolled down the slanting deck against the bulkhead, with one cheek resting on a crooked arm. He looked like a man who had lain down for a nap, except for quivering feet. A whistling sound came from his lips, he choked, and his fingers opened wide as he fell back in a convulsion. Then he lay still.

CRANSTON holstered his gun, shut off his flashlight, and leaned back against the bulkhead. He rested a few minutes. His job at Prang Island was finished.

Presently he turned to the open companionway aft. It had no hood, and the dim glow of light came up from below. He went aft, turned forward, and went down.

A coffee pot bubbled on a small mess table, the blue flame of a small alcohol stove flickering, and a bulkhead lamp beyond, making the yellow glare of light which had revealed Karnish and the foreman at the deckhouse door. It was from this cabin that the soaped port light made the illumined disk which had first betrayed the tug's position to Cranston.

On a built-in bunk running fore and aft, there were five canvas sacks. Another was in the gangway past the table. The stained and rotten fabric had broken through and let the contents escape. What Cranston saw underfoot, and strewn on the bunk, he knew to be what the two men wanted to get out of the tug, silver dollars. Some of the coins were blacked by the same moisture which had rotted the sack.

There were smaller bags which Cranston knew contained gold. This made no mystery for him. He had worked on the case three years before when the tugboat disappeared into the South Seas with the two men aboard. Her tremendous treasure of gold and silver, from remarks of the two men on the plantation veranda, was being smuggled in small lots to Chinese, but hidden in Small's copra shipments. A bank balance had been built for the foreman and Karnish, with the Chinese getting a big profit for himself because he did the banking.

It was this Chinese, of course, who was to be the dummy buyer of Miss Peabody's plantation after she and her help had been scared away. Then the two men would have a free hand to get the bulk of the remaining treasure out in copra shipments of their own to the Chinese.

No longer would Miss Peabody's natives be blundering about the swamp. Sacks of gold and silver would not have to be sneaked three miles to Small's. Karnish would not have to live in the swamp. He could live at the plantation house.

Cranston picked up the coffee pot and poured a mug full. It was boiled down now to a thick essence. He needed its kick. As he drank, crocodiles grunted in the greasy hell of the swamp. Nearby, they seemed to be fighting over something. Cranston twisted his mouth in a grimace. He knew the thin margin by which he had

escaped being something that made crocodiles fight.

He put out the bulkhead lamp, turned on his own flashlight and went into the deckhouse. He did not linger there. He made sure that Karnish was safely dead. Then it was a matter of slamming and securing the deckhouse door and hurrying along the elevated path. He had followed it in the dark, now he could use his light. And as he went, he saw the mud pools boil with the scuttling shapes of dragon-like monsters. Their tails slapped mud and slithered down into the quivering ooze.

Cranston fairly ran along that path, though with careful tread. He broke into the moonlight of the beach, turned off his flashlight, and went into clean sea water to rid himself of the muck clinging to his legs and squirting from his shoes at every step.

Refreshed and cleansed, he made for the copra sheds. He could turn in at the plantation house and sleep till morning. Miss Peabody would be back about noon, according to what she had told the foreman.

WHEN he was fifty yards from the nearest shed, he heard the metallic click of a weapon being cocked. He stopped in his tracks. It seemed impossible that he had made a mistake in being sure that only two white men were involved in the treasure aboard the tugboat. Mistakes were dangerous luxuries in Cranston's business. He reached for a gun and out of the corner of his eye estimated the distance to the blackness of the jungle on his right. It was twenty feet away, but with white beach behind him and moonlight upon him, he knew he would make a fairly good target for anybody firing even from darkness where sights would not be visible to the man hidden at the shed.

He stooped and touched a foot. Then he pretended to tie a shoe string. He did not want the man with the weapon in the shed to know the cocking of the gun, if it were that, had been heard. Then Cranston resumed his walk, but he edged in toward the jungle. Though he walked slowly he increased the length of his strides. If he could get to cover before he was fired upon, he still had a chance to get out of Prang Island alive.

"Stand where you are!" The challenge came from the copra shed.

Cranston obeyed, and willingly. For though the voice was sharply commanding and tinctured with that quality which can only be given a voice carrying an order when it is backed by hot lead, the words which came across the beach to Cranston came from the lips of Miss Peabody.

"Hold your fire, please," said Cranston quietly. "I've had a fairly busy night, but I don't want to work over time at the job of getting shot. Didn't you hear the whistle blow so I could come back here and look after your house?"

"I'm so sorry. I heard shots a while back, and I couldn't be sure who it was coming from the swamp."

"Is Standish up at the house?" asked Cranston, as he moved toward the shed. He did not want to tell her all that had happened if he could avoid it just then.

"I haven't been to the house. Didn't go to Small's. Stopped on the trail and hid in a shelter the natives have there to watch the rice crop. Thought I might be a little useful if Standish found you in the house, and I suspected that he might prowl around, especially after what he said about an outrigger landing on the beach earlier in the evening."

"Standish isn't at the house. He was drowned in the swamp, and the man who did the screaming in the bay is also dead. There is nothing more to worry about, Miss Peabody; my job's done, but I'll have to get Major Swift here as soon as possible. I think I can fix up Henley's little amateur transmitter in the morning, and pick up the Lantu Vanna radio station."

She walked out into the moonlight to meet him, carrying her rifle at the slope. Cranston could not help feeling he had made a mistake, when, having been ordered to Prang Island to help a woman who fool-

ishly insisted on running a plantation without white men to help her, he had wished Miss Peabody back in Boston where she came from.

BUT Miss Peabody, all alone with only a rifle, hiding in a native shelter by a rice field, to come back and challenge a man coming out of a swamp after she had heard gunfire, was a woman he could admire. She undoubtedly lacked good sense when she elected to run a plantation herself, and made a problem for the police, but at that minute Cranston had to admit to himself that he had misjudged Miss Peabody. He could not see now any special reason why the young woman should go back to Boston. She fitted nicely into the moonlit landscape of a tropical island with its crocodiles, jumpy natives, and dangerous men with hidden treasure.

"What was Standish doing in the swamp, and why is the screamer dead? Gracious! Were they shooting at you?"

"Not very effectively," he said. "I think you'd better wait till morning to hear it all told. Your nerves have had enough for one night, Miss Peabody."

She laughed. "You leave my nerves be, as they'd say back home. I want to know what happened."

He had to tell her. Miss Peabody was the kind of woman who had to know all, and why, when there was shooting around her property. Boston never thrived on evasive answers, and in particular, the Boston Peabodys.

"And," Cranston concluded, "Karnish was skipper of the big ocean-going tug owned by the government, while Acton worked for the insular treasury. They loaded the tug from the government vaults, killed two men who tried to stop 'em, and skipped port. There was nobody at this plantation then. They made it to this bay, hurled the tug at full speed at high water into the mangroves, and there you are."

She whistled a couple of notes to express her surprise. "No wonder I needed help from Major Jimmie Swift! Catch me running a plantation without a white man again!"

"I think you're wise. But your brother'll be coming along any day now."

"Just a kid, Mr. Cranston, from Boston. Not quite up to going after a couple of dangerous men in a crocodile swamp, and coming out only a little muddy."

"I just happened to have a little luck."

"Not much luck, considering the fact that it was my own foolishness that made it necessary for you to sneak over here and take on a problem that was mostly my fault. If I'd had a couple of men around the place, this Standish and the other wouldn't have tried scaring me out."

"They wouldn't scare you out, it was your help they scared. And don't worry about what I had to do. I like Prang Island, and I've had an enjoyable time."

"Can't you stay a few days, or longer, and see it by daylight?"

"You're very kind. I can. I've a leave of absence that's overdue, and I was about to take it, and then resign from the police."

"Resign? What for?"

"I've saved a little money. Plantations can be picked up for a song that almost anybody can sing, these days, so I thought I'd pick up a plantation, when I found a good one, cheap enough."

"You ought to do well with a plantation, even if it's got a few crocodiles around. Come on up to the house and under the shower and into some clean clothes. I want to ask you about where I can get a man who can be trusted. Do you know anybody that'd suit me?"

"I might think of somebody if I put my mind to it, Miss Peabody," Cranston admitted.

They walked up through the palm grove to the house. The moonlight now was beautiful and all Prang Island was at peace. It was almost as safe a place to live in as Boston, Massachusetts.

THE LAW OF THE TRAIL

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "Black Cat," "Sailorman," etc.

As an Enemy of Evil Doers, Count in the North Itself

ITLAK, the lead-husky, snarled at Pitt as the American moved between it and the fire. Pitt picked up a stout stick of the spruce Hardy, the Musher, had chopped for firewood. Itlak rushed to the end of his leash, showing his fangs and barking in a frenzy of hate.

Hardy was boiling snow-water for the tea, slicing frozen, cooked beans into the skillet. This, with frizzled sow-belly, would make their meal. He looked up at the racket.

"Don't touch that dog, mister." He was a lean, clean-shaven man, weathered and tempered by the North. He spoke mildly but with finality. He did not like his trail-mate, though he had not analyzed the reason for his distaste. He did not want to quarrel with him. That would be breaking a law of the trail, always a dangerous thing to do, for sourdough or chechako. But this was his outfit and he intended running it to suit himself.

"I was jest threatenin' him," said Pitt surlily.

"Don't do that either, mister, please."

"The dog's a devil. There's too much wolf in him."

"He's the best husky I ever had. I ain't had him long. Him an' me is just about gettin' friendly. He ain't got to the place he altogether trusts me, but he will, if he ain't interfered with. He knows you're scairt of him, and he hates you for it when you tease him."

"I ain't scared of man or beast," asserted Pitt.

Hardy thought differently but he did not say so. He believed that Pitt was afraid of something which he was worried might catch up with him. He was not going to probe into that. He had hired himself and outfit to the American purely for the consideration of the money in it.

"I got a good team but Itlak is worth all of 'em put together. He's licked all of 'em; had to, to be the leader."

"They didn't seem to me to make such a hell of a trip today."

"Mister, they've traveled twelve hours, and made close to fifty mile. If you hadn't been ridin' most of the time, it'd have been nigher sixty."

"I'm payin' for it, ain't I? Grub ready?"

They started to eat. The dogs had been already fed, a three-pound frozen

white-fish for each of them. Itlak lay with his team mates across the fire that was reflected in his eyes, and made them seem luminous. They were fixed on Pitt, and every now and then a low growl rumbled in his throat and his ruff lifted.

Pitt was a bully type, big and burly, selfish and sulky. He was little use on trail, clumsy on snowshoes, riding the sled almost continually. He ate like a pig, abusing the food.

His hair was black and his beard and mustache red. His nose was a clumsy beak, three-cloved at the tip. His lips were narrow and made a slit of his closed mouth, his eyes were pale blue, the hue of snow shadows. His forehead was low and there was more skull in front of his ears than behind them.

He had eaten with his mittens on, but now he tugged them off to fill and light his pipe. Hardy looked again at his right hand, without seeming to. It had been burned at one time and had healed with the flesh lumpy and discolored.

The sight of it vaguely stirred Hardy's memory but he let it go, and went on clearing up, seeing the snowshoes set up at the right distance from the fire.

"I suppose," sneered Pitt, *"you're* not afraid of anything?"

"Plenty things, mister, but I ain't scairt of 'em."

"Wolves, eh?"

"I don't like 'em. They ain't ever attacked me. I try to leave 'em alone. They're varmints and they'd raise hell with the dogs any chance they got, 'specially a winter like this, with game scare the way it is. I'm afraid of the weather. Feels like it might shift to the nor'east and that might mean a blizzard. Campin' out, till it was over. We lit out in a hurry, seein' you was so set to get to Nickel City, and I'm feared we might run short of food for the dogs."

"Well, you knew you were short when you started, then. What of it? You know where you're goin' to get more, don't you?"

"There's a tribe of natives where the Flash runs into the Mackenzie. *Utkuhikhalingmuits.* Or they should be there. I did their chief-man a favor or two. If they are there, they'll let us have some dog grub, help us across the Mackenzie. That river don't freeze, mister."

"And if they *aren't* there?"

"That's one of the things I'm feared of," said Hardy simply. "Anything go wrong with our dogs, mister, and we'd be like folks in a small boat in mid-ocean without sail or oar or engine. We wouldn't last long. You couldn't mush ten miles a day."

The blaze burned brightly and there was no wind now. They would have to take some firewood along, Hardy reflected. There was a long stretch ahead, on the pitch to the river, where timber was scarce.

Overhead, the aurora blazed and crackled in arcs of mysterious, shimmering light, that banished the stars. It was fifty below. The dogs lay curled-up, with their brushes plumed over their muzzles.

Pitt arranged his sleeping-bag. He took off the drill parka he wore over his heavy Mackinaw coat. Free of the hood his black hair showed. Hardy regarded him sleepily. He had mushed for most of the twelve hours, brain and body clamored for sleep, now his belly was full and all chores done.

But for a little while he stayed awake. *The black hair, the scarred hand*—they linked up with something in the back of his brain. None of his business. He let it go. His job was to get Pitt to Nickel City, deliver him at Sam Sieman's store. There were things about Sieman, too. It was whispered that the Mounties were keeping tabs on him. Oh, let it go.

Three minutes more, and he lay breathing easily, utterly relaxed and fast asleep.

PITT did not sleep. He could not stop the thoughts from running through his brain, scenes, actions, words in the minutest detail. It was like the flash-back of a film run. He could not control them, he had to herd them, to follow them through.

He sweated in his sleeping-bag, wearing too many clothes. He rolled on his right

side, and his gun ground into his hip. Hardy did not know he packed that rod in the side-pocket of his Mackinaw.

He wanted to get out of this frozen hell-hole of a country. The wilderness froze the rivers to stop them flowing, it froze the sap to thwart the trees from growing, it was waiting to freeze a man's blood the moment he made a slip. It was no place for a white man.

Sieman would take care of him, smuggle him through to Quebec. He could get a steamer there, for Europe or for a Caribbean cruise. Jump from Cuba, or Jamaica, to Trinidad, and then to hell with the G-Men and the Mounties! Venezuela was next door, without any extradition, even for murder, even for Uncle Sam's Public Enemy with a very low number.

It looked as if he were Canada's public enemy as well, the way they worked in cahoots with the U. S. federal officers.

He had had to get out of Skagway after the bolt north, and then, in Otter, out of Alaska and into Yukon in the Dominion of Canada; they had caught up with him, got ahead of him.

Back in Otter. Playing faro at the Northern Lights saloon. Losing his last dollar on the turn of the last three cards. Bartlett had been chummy, taken him to his shack for a last drink. They had several, and Bartlett had cooked ham and eggs. Bartlett, tuning-in on his radio. It had a short-wave, and he was proud of it.

Bartlett talking.

"Never kin tell what you might git, night or day. We got swell stations. KDKA, CKY, CHYC, CNRO and CJCA. Round this time you often git the Mountie reports, from Ottawa. Only last week I was settin' here, listen'-in, an' they broadcast the description of this Purdy, from the States. A wanted Public Enemy. Dodged them all after his last stickup, supposed to have come up to Canada. He is sure one lousy skunk. Kidnaps an' kills the kid before he collects. Shoots up banks. Kills a gal book-keeper, kills his own moll, as he calls her. Now the Mounties have teamed-up with the U. S. A. to deliver him if they ——"

Bartlett, stopping short, was looking at his visitor's hand, his hair. He had dyed it, and the dye was showing at the roots. Some swine had tipped off that he had made it black. Sieman would have more dye, or he could get it. By God, Sieman would come through, with funds, or he'd shake him down, plenty! Sieman had a record. Mixed up in narcotics. But he had to get to Nickel City.

There was Bartlett, plain in the shifting flicker of his brain, awkwardly pouring a drink, changing the subject. But Bartlett had *seen*. He knew Pitt was Purdy. And Bartlett had won that night. He had money on him. Now he was thinking of collecting the reward.

Pitt shot him between the eyes. He got the body into a bunk, covered it up with blankets. Nobody would miss Bartlett for hours, perhaps a day or two.

He took the money he found on the body, hired Hardy the Musher, to take him to Nickel City.

Nobody, he thought, knew he had gone to Bartlett's cabin. Or did they?

AND here he was, sweating, and afraid. Damn the country! Curse the jittering, flaming banners of the aurora that seemed to dance right over him, as if to

proclaim that here was Plummer, alias Purdy, now Pitt.

Curse his scarred, giveaway hand, burned that time when the car caught fire too swiftly. The death-car, the newsmen had called it, when they found the charred bodies in it at the foot of the ravine. He had paid surgeons plenty to work on that hand, but it was a mark he would carry to the grave, the gallows, or the Chair.

He was a fool to dye his hair. It hadn't looked natural, from the first. What if Hardy spotted the combination, and knew about it?

There was no Mounted post at Nickel City. That helped. He had to get there.

The aurora paled, died out. A pallid moon and sickly stars showed. It was getting colder. Weather was making, up there in the Arctic Circle. Chechako though he was, Pitt sensed it.

One of the dogs howled. A sign of death! It was that damned lead-dog, that hated him.

He felt for his gun, and called himself a fool. They needed the dogs. Itlak was the leader.

It was not the dogs. They were silent. But they were awake. He could see their eyes like jewels as they watched the dying fire. Fire was their magic, men their protecting gods, except that there were evil gods—like Pitt, who did not understand them and abused their service.

It was not the dogs! Pitt's blood seemed turned to a clammy jelly, his heart held its beats, then pounded furiously.

He heard the howl again. It was far off, and faint. It rose in a swift ululation to one top note, indescribably harrowing and savage. It held it, throbbing in the hunting hunger-cry; slowly died, like the wail of a ghoul lamenting its lost soul; but eager for flesh, dead or alive.

Then came its echo. It was its fellow. A third and fourth followed, stabbing through the cosmos of Pitt and releasing ancestral and atavistic agonies of apprehension.

Wolves!

Hardy said they never attacked him. That they seldom attacked man. Not a man who was fully alive, and able to defend himself. They had learned the use of guns. Hardy had a rifle on the sled, in a moose-skin case of soft, thick, tanned hide, protection against the frost.

And Hardy was sleeping as sweetly as a kid in its crib. The dogs were not worrying. Why should he?

Pitt would have given anything for a pint of good liquor.

The wolf howls changed. Now it was the general clarion of the pack. They had picked up scent, and it led them far away.

Hardy! Hardy had his money, which had been some of Bartlett's money. Blood-money. He would have to watch Hardy. Suppose he too had listened-in on a radio?

Suppose Hardy had his suspicions—what could he do? Nothing, until they got to Nickel City. What then?

Would Hardy's team be recognized if Pitt brought them in, alone?

Hell! Why couldn't he sleep? Stop thinking.

He was cold, to the marrow. He was sweating, but the sweat was cold.

Well, once at Sieman's—with or without Hardy——

HARDY awakened an hour before dawn, his muscular body active and refreshed, his mind clear, his thought keen as the sound of a new bell. There was a long day ahead, and an early start. The fire was out, but there was enough wood for breakfast. Then he must cut more.

Still there was no wind stirring, but he was conscious of a change at hand. The stars were dim behind a faintly stirring scud.

The dogs were awake, but pretended not to be, snug in their self-warmed hollows.

He felt the snow with the toe of one pac. It was granular, like sugar. Far different from the packed snows of Quebec, of Lake Placid, where dog-races are run with a light sled on runners, and the team in file.

Hardy's sled was a Mackenzie toboggan

of heavy birch-bark, with an uprolled front, like a half-open scroll, that forced down and glided over the slow wave of crystallized snow that steadily surged in front its progress.

It had no runners, the full surface rested on the snow. It was designed for local conditions, just as his snowshoes were. Weight was distributed over the greatest area, and the dogs were hitched to run, fan-fashion, so that no two trod in the same tracks.

They had leather collars, stuffed with moss, leather harness and traces of varying lengths, brought to rings in the front of the toboggan.

The snow was mushy. There was a change of temperature. It would be hard going. The snow-grains would pack between the pads of the dogs. They would get gritty with the rising of the wind. They might abrade the pads. He would have to put moccasins on the team.

All these things ranged through his mind, automatic cerebration, garnered in the routine of years.

Pitt was moody, taciturn, and sluggish. The sun came up, in its short arc above the horizon, before they were ready to start. In three hours it would disappear, and they would travel through the Arctic twilight.

The American watched Hardy narrowly but the musher did not notice it. Unlike Pitt, he was not afraid of man or beast. Least of all of this chechako. Without him, Pitt was practically helpless in this wilderness.

Pitt was afraid, but he did not know his helplessness. His ego was colossal. And Hardy did not know Pitt's kind of man. Spawned of crime, cruel and merciless.

The delinquent sun barely threw shadow. It faintly limned the spruce, it held little warmth for them.

The breath of the dogs was like smoke, that froze in the air and frosted on their fur. They were eager to go.

The sled was packed but Pitt had not yet put on his parka. He stood with his hands thrust deep in the pockets of his belted mackinaw.

"What's the big idea?" he asked, his pale eyes slitted. "Looks like we're headed for Otter."

"You've got it right. I'm calling off this trip."

"You took my money for it."

"I'll give it back to you. Pitt, you left in a goshawful hurry. Roused me out of my bunk."

"Paid your price, didn't I?"

The renegade fingered his gun. Hardy was on—and he was not going to take him back to Otter. He wanted to know if Hardy was armed. These Northern men did not pack guns—in the open. Nor did Pitt. But Hardy might have a weapon—and he was afraid of Hardy in an even break.

"I just told you you'd git it back, at Otter. I ain't chargin' you none whatever for this trip, Purdy," said Hardy grimly. "Couldn't jest place you at first, or remember the right name. It all come to me in the night. I want to find out why you was in such a rush to leave Otter. We'll make time goin' back. You'll do your full share of mushin'. Or you'll trail behind. You won't be ridin' the sled."

Hardy had a knife. It was easy to get at, beneath his parka, but he did not think of it as a weapon. He did not consider the rifle. To him Pitt was harmless and thoroughly despicable. A killer of helpless women and children; of men, when he could shoot them from cover, or in the back. Make Pitt—Purdy—hit trail, and at the end of the sunless days he would be played out. Hardy would not have to bother about watching him while he slept. The musher would not be more than usually tired and his subconscious mind was always an alarm clock, guaranteed to wake him at the right moment when there was anything special on hand.

Pitt fingered the trigger, barehanded. His pale eyes had lost all expression, his mouth curved in a sneer within his red beard.

"What business is it of yours?" he asked. He shifted his feet so as to face Hardy. "The damned fool don't even guess I'm rodded," he told himself.

"Business of every decent man, Purdy, or Pitt, or whatever your right name might be. We don't want your kind up North. I'm goin' to turn you in. Put on your parka."

PITT stooped a little, as if to pick up the garment. The heavy gun exploded dully, muffled by the cloth, as it belched lead and flame. There was a stench of burning wool mixed with the acrid reek of powder-gas, as Hardy went reeling back from the impact of the slug, impelled by the stiff charge, tearing through his vitals.

He was hit low. A floating rib was smashed and the nerve shock helped to bring him to his knees. The bullet had pierced his body in the upper part of his abdominal cavity, at the left. It had gone through his spleen. There was an instant loss of blood.

Hardy was no anatomist but he knew he was badly hurt.

Again Purdy fired without removing his gun. This time the lead crashed through Hardy's shoulder at the top of his upper arm, smashing more bone.

The musher keeled over, fell all asprawl, half on his side, his face to the sky, his snowshoes twisting his legs unnaturally. His eyes still showed a will that fought a losing battle to maintain and express itself. In them was bewilderment and contempt.

Purdy stood over him. The dogs whimpered and yipped. They did not quite know what had happened. If there had been a struggle, if Purdy had his hands in the open, they would have understood. They were still lying down, waiting for the order to mush. Only Itlak got to his feet, with hackles raised, snarling.

"You asked for it, you lug," said Purdy. "So you got it. Wolves don't bother you, eh? By God, they'll bury you!"

He did not notice that the wan sun was veiled, that the wind was beginning to stir in the spruce. The visibility lowered, like a glass bowl into which ink is stirred, leaving transparency, but darkening.

Hardy coughed, set a feeble hand to his side.

"You dam' fool," he said. Then his eyes closed and Purdy's scowl changed to a grin. Back to a scowl again.

All the dogs were on their haunches, looking at him, with their long tongues running in and out, back and forth over their white teeth.

Itlak was tense as a coiled spring, still puzzled, wondering why his master had fallen, hating this man, growing more and more suspicious as the taint of fresh blood grew in the air.

The significance of Hardy's last three words began to reveal itself to Purdy. He was a born killer, his bursts of ferocity innate and cold as those of a fiend. They did not affect his reason beyond the swift desire to slay, the urge to escape from what lay behind him.

Purdy had always reckoned with that fatality, sensed it stalking him. One after one the public enemies, with all their bravados, were run down, exterminated. He

calculated his chances. They rested largely upon how soon Bartlett's body had been found, the Mounted Police been communicated with at the nearest detail to Otter. Also the tie-up of his own absence and that of Hardy.

How long their sign might last, how well the Mounties could trace it, were things he was not good at judging. He was out

of his element up here in the bleak Northland.

THE wind was strengthening. It might help to erase the tracks of the dogs, the smooth sweep of the toboggan. It might also mean the blizzard Hardy had spoken of as possible. Purdy was not weatherwise. It was growing darker and he did not like it.

His handicaps announced themselves.

Where did the Flash enter the Mackenzie? Should he turn north, or south, when he struck the big river; to find the native tribe with the tongue-twisting name.

Would they let him have dog-food, would they turn out to help him across the Mackenzie, without Hardy along?

He knew nothing of the Mackenzie pidgin dialect and imagined he would have to try and make them understand by signs that he had bought Hardy's outfit—for they would probably recognize it.

And they might not believe him.

"You dam' fool!"

Just how much of a fool? He had been forced to kill the musher, he told himself.

He knelt down and opened up Hardy's clothing. He had seen the musher put away the money in a canvas pocket attached to his belt. Bartlett's money. Now Purdy's again.

Blood-money now, beyond question. Hardy lay without movement. The canvas pocket was sodden with the blood that soaked the clothing, the bills were sticky and wet on the outside of their fold. Purdy tried to clean them on the snow.

Itlak was gurgling deep in his throat, giving out guttural sounds like a wolf.

The devil knew!

Purdy slapped out the smouldering fire in his pocket, slapped it with snow. He faced Itlak, who was quivering with ever mounting rage, inspired by the realization that this stranger had laid low the man-god to whom he had so recently given fealty.

Purdy gripped his gun. The dog was dangerous. Hardy had been right, he was afraid of it, scared. But he dared not shoot. Itlak was the leader. The team might not move without him.

They might not move at all. Purdy did not realize that the emanations of fear, swiftly sensed by dog or horse, came from him freely, sour and distinct against the blood-smell.

"You dam' fool!"

It seemed to Purdy that he was terribly alone in this wilderness—that the ghost of Hardy was whispering, taunting.

The sky was lowering. The wind began to moan in the spruces, to roll the sugary grains of snow.

THE dogs sat on their haunches, with their long tongues sliding back and forth over the white fangs, drooling a little, their breath vaporizing; and looked at him. It was almost as if they were laughing at the fool.

He picked up the musher's whip with its thirty-foot length of caribou gut.

"Get up, you mutts," he shouted. "Get up and mush!"

Itlak was still the only one on his toes, stiff-legged, ruff lifting, the throaty roar of hate sounding.

They were hitched, ready to go, though headed in the wrong direction. Purdy did not know whether he should mush ahead. He had to swing them first. They were headed for Otter.

He swung the long lash, that took months and even years of steady practice to handle expertly. It curled back on him and when he tried it again it bit one of the dogs, that yelped, sharply, but did not get up.

He had to get that devil, Itlak, going. No dog was going to get the better of him.

But the wilderness pressed in upon him. Panic touched his soul with icy, paralyzing contact as he looked at the spruce tops bending, tossing, heard the moan of the wind, like the moan of a passing spirit. He was alone in the trackless wild with the man he had killed, and the mocking dogs. Not the roar of city traffic, the chatter of

Tommy-guns, the getaway car, with its motor turning over, breaking into full power; the excitement and bravado of pursuit.

Here was a dead man who seemed different from other dead men, lying stark in the snow, the crumbly, shifting snow. A ghost, speaking in the wind that stirred the spruce. A voice, derisive and relentless and prophetic, sounding in his brain.

"You dam' fool!"

Itlak was at full length of his trace, the longest one, facing the sled. He lifted his lips as Purdy advanced with assumed boldness, whip lifted in his left hand, his gun out in the open, held in his right; unmittened, to handle the trigger. With the temperature nearing sixty below.

Once he got them going—how to swing them? It might be best, after all, to kill the leader.

"Turn round, you lousy cur, turn round!"

Itlak watched like a dog waiting to leap for a choice morsel tossed into the air. He whined now in his impatient restraint, letting Purdy come closer, raise his whip.

Then the husky leaped, hurling its bulk against the man's chest, slashing for his jugular. In mid-air he twisted his muscular body, as a buck hare twists. Purdy had fired. The long muzzle spurted orange flame, the missile seared along Itlak's ribs.

The cold had gripped Purdy's fingers, numbing them. And then Itlak was upon him, his spring balked but still efficient. His fangs tore Purdy's wrist, severing veins and tendons. The gun dropped to the ground and Itlak crouched and rushed, swift and terrible, slashing, and leaping in and out to slash again.

Purdy struck blindly with the whip, retreating, with the team behind in an uproar, up now, at trace-lengths, waiting to get at him. Now they were all wolf, a ravening pack, not with hunger, but with the mad desire to kill.

Purdy tripped over the whiplash and went down. In that second Itlak found his throat, and the rest swarmed to tear him apart.

CORPORAL REGAN and Special Constable Kablala, musher and interpreter to the detail, started twelve hours behind Hardy and the man named Pitt; once the murder and absences had been established.

Regan's dogs were post-bred, post-trained and post-fed. He took with him emergency travel-rations for the team, and carried patent briquettes for fuel.

Kablala was the best dog-handler and trailer attached to the Force. Regan was not far behind him. They were, with the dogs, in perfect training, fit to run, and win, a race with life or death.

They were experts, charged with skill and endurance, knowing with certainty just what pace should be made and how maintained under varying conditions.

They gained two hours travel every day, making fourteen hours, two in the wan sunlight, six in the gray twilight, six after dark. They took two hours for making and breaking camp, cooking and eating, and men and dogs slept every second of the remaining eight.

Every hour they slightly bettered the time made by Hardy. They took turns to break trail where it was necessary, holding on, inured to toil, watching their dogs more than themselves, doing their duty, sworn avengers of the trail.

It was easy for them to determine that Hardy and his passenger were headed for the big river, easy to figure the route with relation to the lay of the land. Beside that there was sign that Kablala saw and followed and Regan verified. They passed the places where Hardy had camped. At the close of the fifth day Regan figured that they had about wiped out the start.

"Tomorrow," he said, as they drank their scalding tea, "we shall catch up with them. We make an early start, Kablala."

Kablala merely grunted. He was taciturn but not sullen. His face with its flat planes—save for the mongoloid cheek-

bones—was weathered to leather, criss-crossed with lines. It was like the skin of a walrus. His beady eyes held the ardor of the chase.

Regan was the better man of the two, physically as well as mentally. The white man's will and spirit topped those of the native. It was he who set the pace and Kablala who grimly held to it.

Kablala was tired tonight, glad that the chase was closing in. There would be fame attached to it for him when they brought in their man—who was a murderer. Promotion numbers for Regan.

He was primed again by morning, handling the dogs while Regan made fire and food. The pale sun was still below the bulge of the earth when they started.

Kablala squinted at the weather. He tasted the wind.

"Blizzard come some time pretty soon. Not come along too soon, I think. Mebbe not come along one time at all."

This information sounded vague but Regan knew it for an exact report of impending conditions. If the blizzard came it would be bad for all of them. Hardy could not be far ahead. The constable knew Hardy and was certain that the musher was in no way an accessory to the man who had hired him.

Kablala went ahead, the dogs straining steadily after him, their plumy tails waving, frosting their coats with the silvery condensation of their breaths as it fell.

The sun made its arc, vanished. They held on in the twilight under a slowly darkening sky and a slowly augmenting wind.

At fifty below, the hearing is intensified to a degree that seems incredible. Men chopping timber can be heard ten miles away. Sight is better, scent far keener.

THE dogs picked it up first, pricking their ears, speeding-up. Regan, mushing now, dropped back to the field. Kablala had also heard it.

Other dogs; not wolves, but huskies, fighting, quarreling, with snarls and howls and a few sharp barks.

Regan got out his rifle from the sled. The excited team whined in eagerness. The sounds came athwart the wind. They died down, grew louder. The constables headed for the clump of spruce.

The huskies of Hardy's team were inextricably tangled up in their own harness. They sat yelping and looking foolish. They were in a huddle and, close by, a *thing* lay mangled on the snow that was pocked with footprints, smeared with blood, with rags of clothing.

All the exposed flesh had been terribly slashed and torn, but there was black hair —dyed hair, and one hand, almost severed from the body, that showed the puckered flesh of a burn.

One dog alone was free. Itlak had chewed through his leash and lay across the body of Hardy, licking the cold face. The husky's belly was bloody from Hardy's blood, where he made a living rug over the disarranged clothing. He hardly noticed the newcomers, so intent was he.

"That dog no howl," said Kablala. "All same Hardy lead-dog. I savvy him, he all same savvy me. He no howl, Hardy no dead."

He was very close to it. Regan gave him first aid.

"If he's got a chance we'll see he gets it," he said. "We'll hit for Atlavik, for the mission hospital. We'll use his dogs, if you can handle them, Kablala. They're fresher than ours."

"Can do."

The grisly load that had been Purdy was loaded on the Post toboggan. Hardy's went first carrying its owner, and in the lead, Itlak, with a nicked side he scorned to notice, forged ahead, clawing hard through the gritty snow, mounting the slopes with love and loyalty and hope surging through him; saving the man-god he had avenged.

A BROKEN CORD

GLANCING over the evening paper I read an item of a young fellow drowning. That death revived in my mind a nightmare of three minutes that I had spent. Death seems always a trifle vague and far away but once an intimate acquaintance has been struck with this god of darkness, one never forgets his closeness. Those three minutes I spent with this unknown personage will always be a lifetime to me. It is often said that one dying recalls his whole lifetime, in a brief flash. That is ridiculous, or I should say in my case it was—I felt like a man going insane, losing all mental balance.

The incident of my approach was simple. There was no overture or fanfare, just a feeling of hopelessness. It happened several years ago in a small silver mine known as the K and S property. I had got a job about a week after the company had decided to reopen this property and begin mining again. During the years the mine had been shut down, the workings had been flooded, so to start the reopening the pumps were working day and night. As the water lowered, the men began to mine in the levels that were dry.

I had worked about three weeks on the surface. That is working on the mine cages, loading tools, lumber, and other equipment at the ground level or surface and then unloading the cages at the various levels underground.

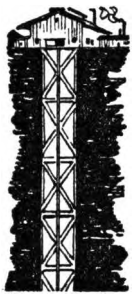
At the beginning of every shift a man was lowered in the cage down the shaft to the water level and that way checked how the pumps were working. It was my turn for the first time to go down and I readily accepted the ride, getting out of an hour's work. I went into the hoisting room to talk with the hoisting engineer and get my orders.

The engineer was Ed Kane, a good-sized jovial Irishman. Asking Ed what the orders were, he replied:

"Well, kid, I'll lower you to the twelve hundred level at full speed and then slack off a bit. I know the water is somewhere between the twelve and the thirteen. Maybe, it is below the thirteen. I will begin to slack off on the speed at the twelve hundred and get slower as you go down, and as the lower deck hits the water reach out and grab the bell cord and jerk it a couple of times and I'll stop. The measurement of the depth of the water can be made on the indicator of the amount of cable on the drum. Be careful, kid, the guides for the cage leave off somewhere below the thirteen and once the cage goes down it doesn't come up."

So out of the hoisting shack I went for my one hour without work. I got on the cage and signalled Ed I was ready and

closed the cage doors tight. The cage started slowly and began to gain speed as it dropped down the shaft. The lights of the stations zoomed by, then the station at twelve hundred level showed through the gratings on the cage bottom and the speed began to slacken. The push and pull of the pumps sounded clearly up the shaft. The cage, continually losing speed, came to a slow steady pace. I reached out and grabbed the bell cord, letting it play through my fingers as the cage descended. There wasn't much use to hold the cord now as it still was fifty to a hundred feet above water. The frayed end of the cord left my fingers. I groped in all directions around the corner of the shaft where the cord was supposed to be. I couldn't realize



that the cord had broken and I had felt the end of it go through my fingers. For a second or two I was bewildered a little and then I realized that I had no way to stop the cage. Though it was going slowly, it was taking me down that shaft, under the water, and off the guides. Ed's sentence of "Be careful, kid, the guides for the cage leave off somewhere below the thirteen and once the cage goes down it doesn't come up" was recalled. Up to this point I never thought of death or of drowning, but merely of the cage being lost and work being slowed up for three or four days while it was being fished out. Now I thought of myself being in the cage and by three or four days I would be one of those blackened and bloated corpses. The two words blackened and bloated seemed to echo in my ears as if someone above me was shouting, "Blackened and bloated —blackened and bloated." That seemed enough, with the thought of death in a minute or two; with my helpless struggle under water trying to free myself from this death trap, to warp my mind.

I knew the cage fitted too snugly in the shaft for a man ever to squeeze out of it. Trying to put into words that hysterical feeling of wanting to wail and cry is difficult. Wanting to shout so Ed could hear me, wanting to pray so God would stop this damn' cage, wanting to do anything but die. Hysterical and cursing everyone, I became a trifle cooler as the first burst of nervous strain passed. I tried to think of some way of escaping, but everything seemed futile.

I THOUGHT of jumping off the cage and trying to cling to the shaft timbering. One look at the timber and its nearness convinced me that being mangled and crushed to death with my arms pulled from my body, and my body cut to bits was no escape. I had seen one man caught by a cage and that glimpse of shreds of clothing, skin and hair smeared with brains quickly put that avenue of safety out of my mind. I talked out loud to myself it seemed for hours, trying to calm myself, preventing myself from losing my mind entirely.

I beat the top of the cage with my bare fists until they were bruised and battered. Trying to break out of the cage that way was hopeless, for those steel shields on the top of the cage were made to resist falling of rock. Rock falling hundreds of feet failed to more than dent the shield so what could my bare fists do—nothing. The pain of bruised hands quickly made me give up the attempt of leaving the grisly cage. More and more the extreme hopelessness became apparent and hope had all but deserted me. The cage barely crept foot by foot toward the fatal water as the engineer expected my signal.

The clicking of the pumps was growing louder, nearer and nearer came the water. Surely and slowly I was being taken to hell. Then the thought struck me—the water

might be below the station at the thirteen hundred foot level. I thought if I leaped like a frog, got clear of the cage and landed on the steel sheeting of the station, I would be safe. Leap like a frog. How many times I repeated that to myself I'll never know but it seemed to relieve the hysterics that once more were gaining control of me. For I knew the odds were against the water being below the thirteen and I knew that I had one chance out of three to get clear of the cage as its swept by the station —that is without being caught by the legs or clothing and being ground to bits. I lit my carbide lamp and hung it on the back of the cage so it would show the face of the shaft clearly. Then I opened the cage doors inward and wedged them securely, flush with the sides of the cage. The clicking of the pumps seemed like thunder to me now and I knew the biggest gamble I had ever taken was about to be. I crouched down, putting my feet against the back of the cage so I could get every pound of leverage from my legs when I dived for the station. It seemed ages that I stayed in this position. My muscles were getting tired from the strain. The station showed up in the feeble rays of my light and I leaped like a frog. It seemed as if the cage, as it passed by, burned my legs. The cage plunged into the water and the captured air fought free and rose to the surface; the lamp spluttered as it was put out—the same as I would have been if the water had been higher in the shaft. A puff and a gasping throaty sound and my life would have been snuffed out.

I crawled up the ladders in the pipe compartment of the shaft to the surface. One look at my white strained face and Ed, the engineer, exclaimed fervently, "Thank God you're alive, boy. I thought that you were a goner when I felt the cage go off the guides."

George Wilburt

FANG PLUNDER

By

HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

Author of "Pusik's Last Stand," "Wilderness Heritage," and Other Stories of the Wild

Usam, Giant Among Wolves, Enforces the Law of the Hunting Pack, But Man He Believes in Leaving Alone

USAM, the big gray wolf leader, bared his fangs in a savage snarl of warning. Two big, young timber wolves were stalking round Usam's kill—a young beaver. The young plunderers were drawing too close to those succulent remnants of beaver when, as though catapulted through space, the big gray dog wolf hurled himself on them, his big jaws side-swiping with lightning-like strokes.

The heavier of the two young wolves whirled and came up fighting, but the savagery of Usam's attack soon overwhelmed him. He slunk away to the edge of an alder thicket, there to flop to his belly and lick his wounds.

Usam chopped about the fragments of his beaver kill, throatily sending out further warnings. These remnants of beaver flesh and fur were for his faithful mate, Otawana.

In spite of his untamed anger, Usam had not attacked the younger wolves with his full force. He could have ripped out their jugulars easily. But he recognized

these two plunderers as two of his own sons —sons of a former litter. By the hunting season, when Usam called in his gray pack, each of these young grays would weigh over a hundred pounds. They had the long lean lines of Otawana, their mother, with their father's massive shoulders and heavy jaws.

Suddenly there was a sound at Usam's back. He whirled, to face Otawana—gaunt and worn from her summer's family responsibilities. Her temper was frayed, for the flies and her whelps had given her a trying day.

Usam bellied down and whimpered. Just for the moment, Otawana assumed the rôle of majesty in the wolf area. Her lips were back. Who were these two young dogs who had dared to venture so close to the den of Usam's mate! She took a few swift paces forward, but at the beaver kill she stopped, while Usam stole to a position between her and the young wolves.

Her jaws began to clamp on soft bone and flesh, such as was left. Usam had eaten more than a fair share of the beaver, but—hadn't Usam killed it! And where is the dog wolf that would have shown more consideration for his mate than Usam showed for Otawana?

Voices! Human voices floating across the beaver flats.

Usam made a signal, and Otawana whirled—leaping toward her den area. Those human voices were getting closer, clearer. Instinctively the gray leader signaled to the two crouching shapes in the thicket. The young wolves melted like phantoms—stealing away through the thicket, to cover; while Usam himself began to circle the flats to fetch up with the scent of the intruding humans. Now he dropped flat. He could glimpse the tall shape of a buffalo ranger, one of the guardians of the large herd of buffalo in the wood buffalo park—one of the greatest herds of bison and wood buffalo in the world.

The big wolf's lips slid back across his fangs. This season, he had chosen the north of Buffalo Lake in which to locate the den of Otawana and her litter. He chose it because of its proximity to the wilderness buffalo preserve. Usam knew, by sign, by instinct, that the snows in the coming winter would be heavy. Much game, moose particularly, had been killed off by a tick scourge. Hunting would be slim during the coming winter. But there was always the buffalo reserve.

The reserve and its majestic four-footed inhabitants was well guarded. Usam knew of the deadfalls, the steel traps, the poison bait and the rifles which protected those shaggy buffalo shapes. But he knew also that there would always be an outcast yearling, or a two-year-old, or aged bull, who would venture away to range alone. Usam was wise to the traps of man. This winter he would hunt the fringes of the reserve—man and his deadfalls notwithstanding.

RANGER STAN KELLY halted in his tracks. He turned to the slender form of his young wife at his side, a sharp exclamation escaping him.

"He's been here, Grace! He's wiped out our beaver colony." Kelly's teeth clamped hard.

"Who, Stan?" asked the young woman, to whom all this talk, and the wilderness, was very strange.

Kelly drew his wife to a seat on a fallen cottonwood.

"*Who,*" he grunted, "is Usam, the great. A devil wolf—one of the biggest pack leaders in the Northwest Territories. Look at those tracks—almost as big as bears'. That cuss is camped around the buffalo territory with but one purpose." The man broke off to touch a match flame to his pipe.

"Yes, Stan, go on," urged his wife. "What?"

"Oh, never mind, hon. No use getting you all scared. Let's get back to the range now. I'll bring an Indian back with me and we'll hunt up the wolf den, the den of Usam's mate—Otawana, the natives call her. She's supposed to be some she-spirit

of a hunting god or something. But before the winter's out she'll be just a plain she-devil round our reserve."

Grace Kelly was interested. So far as Stan had gone, he had opened up the possibilities for a well-flavored northern romance.

"Then if these wolves are so dangerous, why don't you, or someone else, kill them off, Stan?" she asked.

"Humph! Personally, I've never bothered much with Usam and his mate. He's never twice in the same district—that is, two successive seasons. You'll hear some weird tales of these wolf leaders, Grace. Sometimes, in spite of myself, in spite of my experience here in the North, I find myself almost believing some of the myths. It is claimed that Usam can never be killed with a rifle bullet, or trapped. He——"

The man broke off, clamping his pipe stem hard with his teeth. From beyond the flats came the dismal wail of the big wolf dog.

"O-o-o-o—Ah-h-h-h!—Ah-h-h!"

Grace Kelly shuddered and closed in to her husband's side.

"That's him, honey," the man breathed. "You'll always remember that call once you've heard it. He's seen us, and is sending out a warning broadcast to his kin; at the same time, he's trying to draw us away from his mate's den."

Grace Kelly stirred. Somewhere in this wilderness area, a mother wolf was endeavoring to raise a litter of young. Naturally the thought had a different meaning for this young woman than for her husband. After all, this wilderness belonged to the wolf and his kin, and other wilderness folk.

But to Ranger Kelly had fallen the responsibility for the care and preservation of the big buffalo herd. His face was drawn in a deep frown.

"Well, let's get back," he called. "Our pet beavers are gone; and if I don't miss my guess we'll be short plenty of buffalo stock before spring. By George, I'm coming back with a couple of Dogrib nitchies and hunt Usam's outfit down."

"Stan!" The girl caught her husband's arm. "At least give those—whelps a chance to grow and protect themselves."

Kelly pushed himself to his feet and shot a sly humor-flecked glance at his wife. Grace didn't understand. She would learn, though, when she saw a mutilated buffalo carcass or two. Hell's bells! Usam was a plunderer, a devil of the wilds. His pack was a scourge. Kelly knew.

Together the Kellys moved back toward their camp; and in the thickets, slinking along so that the humans were ever in sight or within range of his keen sense of smell,

moved Usam. Suddenly he whirled, and loped back to the den of Otawana. Man had come too perilously close for comfort.

Two days later when Kelly returned with his two Indian helpers, their search for the den of wolf whelps was in vain. Usam had spirited his brood away. They had faded out, to penetrate the big timber where man would never find them. Usam was great, was it not said in the lodges of the Dogribs that there was no greater wolf than he, while his mate was a spirit wolf, the soul of a wilderness god?

Kelly's helpers tried to impress this on their boss, but the big deputy ranger only swore derisively. Before the winter was over he would show these superstitious nitchies just how great was the power of man's rifle and his traps. Usam and his mate must go. And the big wolf dog's handsome pelt would be stretched at Grace's feet before the leaping fire at the cabin.

But the Dogribs shook their heads and made strange throaty clucking sounds. It was not so—Usam would kill heap much buffalo.

B-O-O-O-O-M-M-M! The mighty thunder of tortured ice on the frozen surface of Great Slave Lake reverberated through the wilds like a monster signal gun.

Small wild life shuddered in the thickets. The snows had come, driving down in the teeth of a bitter Barren Lands snorter. And then, in their most mysterious fashion, the four-footed denizens of swamp and snowplain seemed to vanish—all save the lean gray shapes of the wolf packs.

"O-o-o-o—Ah-h-h-h—Ah-h-h!" In that long eerie wail of the wolf monarch, there was a note of despair. As well, it contained a note of majesty. The forepart of the winter had been heartless; the hunting had been slim, and nights long and lean, gaunt bellies had gnawed like the devil, fraying tempers.

Some of Usam's pack were absent. They had broken the rules of his fierce discipline; and among the absentees were his two strong young sons, Utim and Napash.

Usam poured out another call. This time it was his full pack call—full of meaning, command! But there came no answering wail from the wilderness. The outlaws either hadn't heard, or else had chosen to remain defiant.

Otawana leaped to her lord's side and slapped him with her muzzle. She was extremely gaunt and hungry to a point of frenzy. Usam swung, and struck her with closed jaws. She sprang away snarling, and was content to keep a safe distance.

With a throaty call Usam signaled to his pack, those who had stood by. They arranged themselves at his flanks. Now his huge frame stretched and he leaped out into the night, like some big phantom shape, so easy and so graceful was his lope.

It was when Usam felt the flat bed of the frozen Buffalo River under his feet that he brought his pack to a sudden halt. His keen nose had picked up scent both of wolf and of man.

He circled his pack members with short choppy strides. He had hoped that man sign would have been negligible here in this forgotten area. But here was fresh sign, and the scent was strong. At this point the river flowed through the most northwesterly neck of the buffalo reserve. Suddenly the wolf leader's head shot up. On a waft of a southeasterly breeze he caught a new scent, a scent that wrinkled his nose with a most pleasant sensation. It was the warm, pleasing odor of blood, of fresh-killed meat!

But the wisdom of Usam forbade any impetuous move. Though his big gaunt belly craved food of any kind, he stood by. Man scent had been even more predominant than that scent of warm, dead flesh. Danger lurked somewhere near.

Came a throat sound from one of the young dog wolves of the pack who had also picked up the inviting odor of the kill. He bounded forward, but Usam intercepted him in a magnificent leap. His strong fangs flashed, sank. Blood gouted, and then the entire pack was in, a tearing, snarling mass of murderous devils gone berserk at the scent of their mate's blood.

Almost before the young dog had given up his life, there was little of him left but a few scattered bones. He had paid the supreme penalty for his infraction of Usam's disciplinary rules. But now Usam darted in and began to worry his frenzied pack into order. Otawana at his side; in a bloody fracas the big gray drove the lesser members into subjection.

In time the pack hunkered down to lick their hurts, and Usam again took over supreme command. His wisdom was beginning to assert itself—that and his strong plundering fangs. Ahead lay food, plenty of food, but also there was danger.

CLOSE to a small belt of spruces which rimmed the bank of a frozen creek, a man had made his camp. He had chosen a spot which seemed the very heart of the wild. There was a reason for this. Henri Lamotte, renegade half-breed, was a wanted man—wanted by trapper, by native, and by the long arm of the Mounted.

Wolves had been blamed for many of

Lamotte's plunderings. He had lived on the spoils of trappers' takings. Skilled in woodscraft, he could slip a silver fox from a trap and so cover his tracks that no one suspected the marauder.

This winter had been hard with him. There were few foxes to be stolen, the big snows had been severe on all trapping. But Lamotte knew where there was food aplenty. At this season of the year the shaggy wood buffalo were filled with the primitive, nomadic urge to roam over the flats adjoining Buffalo Lake—there where the meadow grass lay green enough and full-flavored beneath the snow. They liked its wild mint flavor. Ranger Kelly and his assistants found it difficult to hold in some young stock, mostly bulls, who persisted in straying off.

Henri Lamotte knew that these young buffaloes roamed this area. What else could one wish for, when times were so lean, than choice young buffalo steaks, washed down by illicit moonshine liquor, without a stock of which the breed never made camp.

Tonight, as the thermometer dipped low, Lamotte drank deeply from his hooch jug. It was of his own manufacture. It gave him a false courage, a courage he needed, for throughout the night he had heard the long, unmistakable wail of Usam.

On a patch of clearing hemmed in by a screen of spruce lay the carcasses of four young buffalo bulls. Lamotte had killed ruthlessly. He could not have eaten this much meat in a whole season, but the thought of easy killing, born of a drink-warped mind, had spurred him to drop all four of the bulls.

He had no use for Ranger Kelly and his men anyhow! He staggered drunkenly over to a small fire and kicked a knot of dry tamarack on to the dying flame. He shuddered, and cursed the weather. His stomach was gnawing steadily, craving food; but he gave it more hootch.

He was suddenly conscious of a stirring in the nearby underbrush. He swung and dived for the corner of his crude log shelter—it couldn't be called a cabin. Surely he had left his Winchester there—but the rifle was missing.

Phantom shapes were moving toward the spruces, flitting on noiseless pads; and then came the rip and tear of hide and flesh, and the grinding of plundering fangs.

To Lamotte's befuddled brain came a flash of memory. He had left his rifle at the buffalo carcasses. He remembered now. While he skinned the legs of a bull —so that they wouldn't be too difficult to handle after freezing hard, he had leant his .30-.30 against a small willow.

But fear now purged the renegade's mind. And there was only one stimulant —his jug of liquor. He floundered into the shelter and grabbed the jug. Giving it a preliminary shake, to make sure that it still contained a supply of the rot-gut, he hooked it up to his lips and drank deeply.

Almost immediately his brain began to throb with a newfound courage.

Wolves! *Nom d'un chien!* What were a few wolves to so great a killer as Henri Lamotte? He seized his camp axe and strode out. Wolves at his buffalo kill! With a growled volley of boastful oaths, he moved on, flourishing his axe.

AT THE kill, Utim and Napash, the sons of the great Usam, were belly down beside a yearling buffalo bull when they caught the sound of approaching man. For days these two youngsters had suffered the terrible tortures of hunger. And now man was coming in to spoil their feast. Man—they had had little experience with this two-legged creature.

There were four other older wolves with Utim and his brother. These were wolves wiser in the ways and wiles of man. At the first strong man scent in their nostrils, they had slunk away. And now Henri Lamotte floundered in, flourishing his axe, yelling.

Utim and Napash snarled. It went against the grain of their young egotism to give up their good food.

Suddenly the half-breed stumbled. His moccasined foot had caught in a knob of surface willow root. He pitched forward. It was then that the instinctive fear of man purged the young grays. They sprang in. Lamotte was staggering to his feet, as Utim and his brother leaped through space.

And then, for a split second, the drunk's befuddled brain cleared. His supply of false courage vanished. His lips parted, but what should have been a shrill scream of terror escaped in a hoarse croak. His axe dropped from his trembling hands—hands flung up before his face. His brain became a sudden blank and his body collapsed.

It was the sudden call of Usam, their father, which put a stop to the young wolves' attack. At the head of his pack, now close in on the buffalo kill, the gray wolf leader had been quick to catch the scent of death. A man was lying dead on the snow.

Utim and his brother backed away. Fear set up a trembling in their limbs. It had been this fear which had set them on in their attack on man. They did not know——

Now they caught the padding of many feet. Usam was swinging his pack along the frozen creek. And then, like a dark ghost shape, the big leader's frame catapulted ahead.

Utim rocked back as his father's fangs struck. Otawana too had leaped in, and her muzzle caught Napash a jolting blow. The wolf leader and his mate intended to show no mercy. These young tyrants had broken all wolf laws. Here was a man shape dead on the snow. Here was dead buffalo, and no call had been sent out to the pack!

The main pack, now joined by the other outlaws, tore in. In a moment the night was a bedlam of snarls—mad pandemonium. Usam still continued to thrash his son; but Utim fought back with the fearlessness and tenacity of his father. But each charge he made was either blocked by a strong set of superior fangs, or dodged by a speed that the young wolf would never match. Usam was meting out discipline; and then suddenly his fangs struck down. Fur and flesh began to rip. Otawana was astride the fallen shape of Napash, when there came from Usam a swift throat sound of warning. The warning had barely been given when night was blasted by the thunder of rifle shots.

Even in the height of battle, Usam's keen senses had served him and the pack well. He had detected the approach of man, while battering down his undisciplined son.

A young she wolf leaped high, and dropped to the snow with a broken back. One of Ranger Kelly's bullets had found its mark. Otawana leaped high and pivoted in mid air. In a flash she was by her lord's side, melting into the scrub. The pack, all save the young she, had vanished.

It was Ranger Kelly who strode in on the grim scene and dropped beside the prone form of Henri Lamotte.

Good God! In all his experience in the wilds, he had never before known a man to be slain by wolves, in spite of all the stories to the contrary. But here was evidence of the ferocity of Usam's devils.

"By the great horn spoon! I won't be satisfied till I get you, Usam," he swore. "Not that it's much loss to be rid of Lamotte, but once you have become a man killer, these wilds won't be safe!"

Kelly was not aware that rot-gut liquor, and not wolf fangs, had killed Lamotte. To him this was the grisly work of Usam and his pack.

Suddenly Kelly made a quick leap for the thicket, but the green eyes he had seen, vanished. Usam had slipped away like the gray ghost shape he was, to take over command of his complete, rebellious pack.

OLD NAPA-MISTOS, the chief bull of the buffalo herd, snorted into the night wind. There was a strong scent of blood and death in the frigid atmosphere.

He tossed his massive head and butted hard a young bull which had crowded to his side. Mistos had recognized the scent of wolf runners who had come down to harass his herds.

But Napa-Mistos was wise. He had been a wild wood buffalo leader long before the great bison herds had been moved down north to the wilderness reserve from the southern plains. He had immediately taken over supreme command of the new herd and the old. Through the process of time, and many hard-fought battles, the bulls of the bison herd had been crushed to a state of lesser majesty.

Tonight, Napa-Mistos was worried. He began to move his herds back toward the compounds nearer the rangers' cabins. He and his kin had come to know the scent of man—to know that man and his kind were their friends. As well, man provided good hay when the big snows made grazing difficult. Only the unwise, the young bulls, or the aged, strayed far off to the meadows, where they paid for their folly with their lives.

Napa-Mistos drove a small bunch before him, his monster shoulders towering over

all other shapes. He buffeted, smacked, and hooked with his up-curved horns.

The terrible long wail of the wolf leader brought the big bull wheeling in his tracks, his nostrils flaring blood-red. Napa-Mistos knew that call. In his old days of wild, wide ranging, he had met up with Usam's pack—even before Usam had become its leader. Then, the buffalo herd had been small, and Napa-Mistos well able to protect his kin. But now his charges numbered thousands, and were widely scattered.

An arc of weird light subtly touched the sky main. It vanished, like some flitting ghost shape, only to reappear with a majesty of color which illuminated the wilderness in an awe-inspiring fantasy of color. Napa-Mistos shuddered. Many were the nights he had known when, in similar setting, beneath the terribly glorious arc of the Northern Lights, he and his kind had taken part in stark tragedy and drama.

He made a low throat sound, ominous and deep, and increased the pace of his herd. He must get the young stock closer to the proximity of man. But some of the calves were finding the deep snow hard to navigate. At their backs, toward the lake area, fifteen phantom gray shapes were being snarled and slashed into running formation by Usam and his mate.

To them, the buffalo scent was tantalizing. But there was also that dread scent of man. Usam had no intention of returning to the scene of the Lamotte tragedy. He was pulling his pack away to some other point of the reserve, with the hope of catching a young bull away from the main herd, away from the presence of man.

THAT last weird call of Usam's had reached Grace Kelly. It had sent a shudder through her, but at the same time had given her a delicious thrill. Grace Kelly had already begun her book of romance and adventure of the North, and Usam was adding a lot of color. In fact, Usam and his mate had become the central characters—since that day when she and Stan had come up on the wolves at the beaver colony. To Grace, Usam was the true monarch of the wilds.

Now crunching footsteps sounded. Grace moved out to meet her husband.

"Stan!" She clutched Kelly's arm. He was carrying a part limp wolf pelt. "It's not his—Usam's?"

"No—not a chance, Grace. But we'll have his before long. Listen, hon," Kelly said crisply. "I've got the goods on that

gray devil tonight. He and his kin killed four young buffalo. But that wasn't all. They stretched the limit tonight, when they killed a man!"

"A man! Who—Stan? Not one of our deputies?"

"No. A crooked half-breed who is, actually, better out of the way. But he was a human being, and when wolves begin that sort of thing, it's high time they were stamped out. I'm starting a drive at once. We'll hound every timber wolf to death. First, I'm going to put a batch of strychnine in those buffalo carcasses at the creek, then we'll get every available man and go hunt them up."

"Stan——" The young woman quivered. She broke off, for words wouldn't frame themselves. This man-killing had begun to shatter her mental picture of the romantic North.

Kelly strode away to put through a call to the Mounted Police Post. A doctor would have to come and hold an inquest on Lamotte's remains. Now, by thunder, the government might see fit to restore the bounty on timber wolves!

As Grace turned to close the cabin door, she caught the mad splash of cascading multi-tinted lights which ran riot through the trees like hordes of ghost shapes, setting up many forms of tragedy in the thickets and snowplain.

IT WAS two nights later when a grim-faced circle of men gathered to hold an inquest on the death of Henri Lamotte. In an outbuilding, a Post doctor had made his autopsy. He strode in and handed his report to the Inspector of the R. C. M. P., whose brows jerked up stiffly.

Grace Kelly had moved into the room.

Inspector Maguire cleared his throat. Grace stirred. She felt that the sentence of death was about to be passed on Usam and Otawana—Usam the man-killer.

"And members of the jury," Maguire intoned. "It has been discovered by post mortem examination that Henri Lamotte died a natural death. Heart failure caused death before a wolf fang touched him. Crude alcohol was largely responsible for his collapse. That's all, gentlemen!"

Maguire turned and shot a glance at the bewildered face of Ranger Kelly.

"But that sounds incredible, Inspector," Kelly said gruffly. "It——"

The inspector shrugged and motioned to the doctor.

"It's true, Stan," the doctor jerked out. "But don't think I've been holding any brief for that wolf pack. You might say that the wolves had a hand in the death of Lamotte—shock, and all that, but the man died from heart failure—hootch, if you like, before a wolf touched him. In fact, there were few fang marks on him. That's all."

Kelly felt a small hand squeeze his arm. He turned to glare into the eyes of his wife. Hell's bells! Grace was actually gloating over the acquittal of Usam. No, Grace wasn't like that, but——

Stan turned.

"Well, I guess I'll accept your report, Doctor. But that doesn't stop me from campaigning against that mad pack of grays. Tonight, or just before dawn, I hope to bag plenty of them. So far, we've kept them clear of the herd. They'll be starving. They'll be back at those four carcasses just as sure as shooting. I'm passin' out an invitation to any of you boys who want some good hunting—you too, Inspector." Kelly turned and flashed the inspector a smile.

Many of those present, trappers, police, traders and the doctor decided to join Stan in the hunt.

Now Kelly was passing out orders to his deputies, ordering a relief guard detail out to the east line.

"Tell Johnson and Martin to come in," he jerked. "Then you two move slowly down toward the buffalo carcasses at the creek. Don't rush it. But be sure the wolf pack gets your scent. They'll be crazy with hunger by now; and—I want them in at that kill by early dawn!"

AGAIN, as though timing their weird dance to fit another dramatic setting, the northern lights frolicked, and splashed the sky with a persistency of effect which drenched the wilderness.

The night was deathly cold, and eerily silent. No sound to break the stillness save the occasional *"whoo-too-whoo"* of great snowy owls which did more to accentuate the hush on the wilds. Only at long intervals came that distant, muffled boom from one of the great lakes.

The long night dragged by. Kelly finally motioned to his company of hunters. Men slipped into parkas and grabbed up their rifles. This was Stan's party. He was leading them to the shoot. Grace Kelly watched them leave, their bent shapes casting grotesque shadow forms. She then moved back to her desk. There could be no sleep for her tonight; a chapter must be written before Kelly returned to announce the death of Usam.

Out near Beaver Creek, in a clearing at the spruces, the carcasses of the buffalo showed up stark in the skylights.

Kelly posted his men in cover, in a part circle back from the buffalo. Now and then a faint stirring of some small animal set the men's nerves tingling. But they waited on—on—through what seemed an interminable age for Usam and his pack.

The arrival of a small cross-fox brought half a dozen Winchesters up into alignment. But at a husky word from Kelly, not a single shot was fired. The fox approached warily, dissatisfied with the multifarious odors in the vicinity. But his belly was gnawing with a fierceness that knew little surcease. He must eat! With a flash of his fangs, he struck at a carcass, and began to pull and rip out strips of frozen meat and hide.

It wasn't long before he staggered away, griping convulsions assailing him. The deadly strychnine had done its work.

The faintest sign of fitful dawn lights had begun to pencil the sky main—fighting to oust the majesty of the Aurora. Stan Kelly shuddered. He and his party were half frozen. The chief deputy ranger growled out an oath. It was evident that Usam had cheated him again. Stan was on the point of getting to his feet when from a point to the southwest there came a long, majestic wolf call.

The ranger thought he heard a chuckle from someone nearby. His lips compressed firmly. By the seven gods of war, that gray pack had bested him again. That call —it was the victory call of a wolf king whose pack had made a kill.

Kelly swore bitterly and straightened.

"Reckon the show's over, boys," he said. "Usam's won another round."

The inspector was striding up, a second Winchester in his hand.

"This rifle belong to one of your boys, Stan?" he asked.

Kelly took a sharp pace forward. One glance at the rifle told him that it didn't belong to any of his men. It must be Lamotte's. Stan swerved over to one of the buffalo shapes. Not before this morning had he seen the buffalo in any other light but the half light of dusk, or at night. He dropped to a knee and ran a hand over the hide. Then he came up, his eyes glaring.

"Well, I'm a—uh—a——"

"What's up?" barked Maguire.

"Oh, nothing much, only it wasn't Usam's gang that killed these bulls. Lamotte dropped them with his rifle. I—by George! I'll have to cook up some yarn for Grace. She'll have the laugh on me for all time. I'd promised her Usam's hide for a rug. Hell, nobody'll ever make a hide out of that old——"

"O-o-o-o—o-o-o-o—ah-h-h!"

Kelly broke off. His hand firmed on his carbine.

"You boys get back to cabin for breakfast," he urged. "There's a chance I might get a shot at that gray devil yet. By now his belly'll be full. He'll mebbe feel sluggish after the gorge."

Without another word, he strode off, his mind filled with one great determination.

NEAR a big bend in the creek, on a stretch of meadow flat, Usam and his mate fought back a pack of infuriated wolves who flung themselves in on a newly-killed yearling buffalo bull. For two hours, the great wolf leader had practiced his whole skill in singling and cutting this youngster out of a straggling herd. Now the gray devil pack wanted to swamp the leader and his mate and take full possession. But Usam had a lesson for them. His majesty must be maintained!

He tossed a lean shape over his shoulder, and when that light colored young dog hit the snow, his jugular was torn out. The pack was subdued, and Usam whimpered to Otawana. Together they flopped to their bellies and drove deep their plundering fangs. Succulent, warm flesh began to find their eager bellies. Madly they slashed and tore, sucking in blood-drenched food. Usam was gulping fast. On the other side of the carcass, snarling gutturally, the pack feasted. This was a great gorge. Again the spirit and craft of Usam had led the pack to a conquest.

Now Usam rolled in the offal. It is a strange characteristic of the wolf. He is in the height of his glory when rolling in the odorous entrails of any kill. Usam hadn't felt so pleased for many weeks. There had been times when he seemed to have lost that great heritage of his fighting, hunting forefathers. But in spite of tremendous odds, he had come through with a feast for his ravenous devil pack.

Again he sank his muzzle deep into the buffalo shape. He chortled deep in his throat as he sucked in more blood. Then he found, and ripped out, a tenderloin, bolting it at a single gulp.

His strong fangs had just ripped out about five pounds of flank meat when suddenly he backed away. His throat bulged, hackles came up. He gurgled a swift warning. Though his nose had been drenched with blood, and with the general multifarious odors of the kill, he had caught the scent of approaching man.

Hurling his massive form high, he pivoted and catapulted into the brush, Otawana streaking to his side like a bolt of lightning.

Usam whirled, and snarled a second warning to his pack. His two sons, Utim and Napash, were reluctant to leave the gorge. But they had felt the might of their sire's fangs, and now they came slinking to the willows, where Usam side-swiped them deeper into cover.

Stan Kelly came slowly round the bend. He caught a dull streak of gray near a thicket. His Winchester boomed, but his bullet crashed harmlessly through the brush.

From deep enough in the cover to be safe, Usam and his mate crouched down to watch their enemy, who now moved in to make an inspection of the wolf kill.

Stan Kelly was gazing down at the tattered remains of the young bull.

Usam watched him straighten and scratch his head. Then he caught the scent of tobacco smoke. Stan wanted a smoke. Perhaps he wanted time out to concoct a story for his wife.

Usam waited for no more. Nudging Otawana in a flank, he moved out to join the pack across the creek.

Dawn had almost broken full when Usam chopped on stiff legs to a rise of land. He flung back his head and poured out a call which seemed to carry to the ears of Stan Kelly, challenge, defiance. It was the victory call of Usam the great:

"O-o-o-o—O-o-o—Ah-h-h-h!"

But to the chief ranger deputy, who got slowly to his feet, there was something else in that call. He breathed it to himself. Most likely it spelled, "R-a-z-z-b-e-r-r-i-e-s!"

WINGED STEERS

By HOWARD NOSTRAND

THE O Bar O ranch house was a one-story building whose architecture, like the castles of England, was a heterogeneous assortment of styles; and for any one who had the ability to read it, a history of the place. Roughly speaking, its floor-plan made a letter E with the bottom leg much shortened. This was the portion that had sprung up in front of the sod hut to which Jeff Carter had brought his wife in the Fifties. Even the hut had left its trace in a slight elevation of ground from which a cocky bantam rooster hopefully issued his morning challenge that never received an answer, and upon which his four wives and numerous sons and daughters scratched determinedly for highly improbable worms.

Time had brought prosperity to Jeff, so he'd built an addition at right angles to his combined living-room, bed-room, kitchen, and even bath on occasion, a long affair with a high ceiling, an open fireplace, and plastered walls.

Then Jeff was gathered to his fathers as the result of trying to gentle an ornery pinto who had ideas; and further improvements were left to Jeff, Junior, the present Jefferson Curtis, who had added the top leg as a bedroom for his daughter, Annie, and her husband, Bill Barker, foreman of the O Bar O. It was familiarly known as "Four-eyed Ranch," because "O-O" looks like a pair of spectacles.

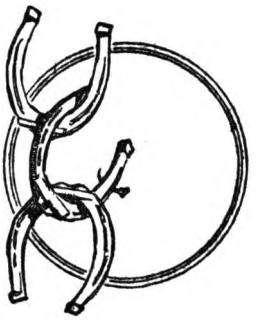
The center wing, known as "Grampaw's Office," was the child of Carter's old age, so to speak; it had been put up a year before in self-defense, because Annie was plumb prolific, and every good cow-man craves some solitude now and again.

To draw these various pieces of construction into a conglomerate whole would have given Sir Percival Wren himself a few sleepless nights, but Old Jeff took it in his stride without so much as turning a hair. When the carpenters had hammered down the last shingle, and the painters had slapped on the last brushfull, he stood off and cocked a critical eye, expectorated meditatively, and remarked to Bill, "She don't look right to me, son. If you take her a little at a time, she's all right, but all together she's kind of disconcertin'—makes my stummick crawl. I got to do suthin'."

He went inside, wrote a letter to his favorite mail-order house; and two weeks later his home was all of a piece, a harmonious unit of green composition shingles —sides, roof, and all.

It was late in the afternoon of a bright October day, when Barker and two of the

Old Man Carter Opined There'd Been No Rustling in Those Parts for Years; but Cattle Continued to Disappear



hands climbed wearily off their horses at the corral. Leaving the task of unsaddling his mount to the others, the big foreman plodded wearily over dusty ground to report to his father-in-law, whom he found in the doorway of his office looking fit to be tied. His scraggly gray hair was standing upright, his jaw was thrust pugnaciously forward, and his eyes had an alarmingly steely glint.

He was breathing so heavily through his hooked nose, that Bill, whose head had been bent down so that he could watch the toes of his boots making little clouds as he scuffed along, suddenly snapped upright when he was still a good fifteen feet off, and stopped to look questioningly at his relative.

"My goodness, Pop!" he said. "You'll be gettin' a stroke—fust thing you know."

Jeff extended a scrawny, trembling arm and held up a small, queer-looking object for inspection. "I'm a-goin' to bust things wide open," he quavered. "I'm a-goin' to raise general and particular hell! I'm —" he paused. "I'm——" His arm dropped. "Doggone, Bill," he went on in a different tone, "yuh gotta make Annie mind the twins better."

The other came over and tried to see what the old man was making all the fuss about. "What they been doin' now?" he asked. "What's that you got there?"

Jeff shoved it toward his son-in-law's nose with such violence that he almost upset the big fellow. "This," he said, "is your durn kids' work."

"Oh," said Bill, "a busted radio tube. They found the old set in the closet, huh?"

"They did like hell," said Jeff, flinging it away, and watching the effect as it dropped behind a fat brown puppy who had decided that the excitement was none of his affair, and had curled up in the shadow of a toy express-wagon. He bounced to his feet, spun around and sniffed the missile, his muscles coiled for a backward spring, if the little piece of bakelite with the glittering metal protruding from it should suddenly come to life and bare its teeth. Finally he gave it a disdainful shove with his snout, sneezed scornfully, and went to hunt out a more secluded spot for his interrupted nap.

JEFF chuckled, said, "Dumb!" and came back to his grievance. "That there thing was from my new eleven tube superheterodyne all-wave receiver in beautiful mahogany cabinet that just come from Chicawgo this mornin'. I was a-waitin' fer yuh to git home so's yuh could help me put it together. I uncrated it, and had everything laid out nice here in the office, and then them doggone kids sneaked in when my back was turned and busted the tubes."

A smile spread over Bill's face. "All of 'em, Pop?"

"Yessir—every last confounded one. I wasn't out to the kitchen more'n a minute —went out fer a screw-driver, the legs was screwed to the bottom of the crate—and as I start back, I hear a poppin' noise and a lot of squealin'. When I open the door, there's Jinny on the floor a-holdin' down the last one fer Billy to whack with the hammer. I was a-tryin' to say, 'Hold on!' but he brang it down afore I could git it past my tonsils. 'See, Grampaw,' they both start a-shoutin'. 'We do this.' So I shooed 'em out, and then I hear you a-comin'."

He began to chuckle, shook his head, and sat down in the doorway, sticking his blue-overalled legs out in front of him. "Doggone kids," he said. "Drive yuh crazy."

"I'll take a run down to town after supper for new ones," said Bill, leaning his shoulder against the green-shingled wall. "I guess they ought to have 'em down there."

The old man had fished a small jackknife out of his vest pocket, and was attempting to open it. "Fergit it, son," he said, not stopping his task, and screwing up his wrinkled face every time he got his thumbnail hooked in the groove and tried to snap the blade out. "Yuh must be wore out, and I been without a radio fer two

weeks now, so another day won't hurt. I'll drive down myself in the mornin'."

After four unsuccessful trys, he exclaimed, "Well, I'll be eternally damned!" Holding up his thumb like a child with a hurt, he squinted at it. "Look at that. Plumb wore down to the root on the balky jigger! Looks like I was gettin' nervous and chawed it off."

He shook his head sadly. "I shore miss that knife I lost a while ago. Had it near fifty years—there wasn't any doodahs on that un. I traded it fer suthin' or other —I fergit—from a Swedish feller. All yuh had to do was push the insides out, flip 'em open, and shove 'em back into the handle; then yuh had a knife that wouldn't fold up on yuh every time yuh tried to use it."

"Yeah, Pop," laughed Bill, "I always been sorry about that knife too. You've aged some from grievin'."

The old man nodded. "Yep," he said, "it is most excruciatingly humorous."

"Let me show you," said Bill extending his palm. The other watched as he took the offending instrument, stooped to pick up a scrap of paper lying on the ground, folded it, slid it carefully under the blade so that the sharp edge was inside the fold; then, grasping the handle firmly, he pinched the edges of the paper together, pulled slowly, and the knife opened.

Old Jeff silently took it back, pulled out a plug of tobacco, hacked off a piece, and popped it into his mouth. After he had chewed for a moment, and had it working to his satisfaction, he rolled it into the usual place so that it made a lump on his cheek, and said, "Yuh don't always find paper so handy. Now, how'd yuh make out with them steers?"

THE big man pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders. "Two gone," he stated laconically.

Jeff spat, shifted his cud to the other side, and stared meditatively off at distant blue mountains deepening to purple in the lowering sun. His son-in-law was watching him, wondering what thoughts were in his old gray knob.

Here he was thirty-three years old, the father of three children, as good a rancher as there was in the state, standing like a kid waiting to get his pants dusted—no more to be trusted than a farm-boy losing cows on the way to the barn from the pasture. Even with the two hands along, he had managed to lose those steers in the eighty miles between the ranch and Taylorsville! He wouldn't blame the old codger if he blew up—first the twins and then this.

Still with a far-off look in his eyes, Jeff spoke, and his voice was as mild as if he were talking to one of the youngsters. "Bill," he mused, "I been drivin' cattle from the time I could walk, and I been seein' cowmen all that time, but I never knowed one any better'n you; so when yuh tell me two more's missin', why I know they's somethin' damn peculiar. We ain't had rustlers around here for years, and I don't know as they ever was so bad. I've moved thousands of head, and only once did I lose any, but it wasn't no two of 'em then—it was two hundred."

He drew his knees up, clasped his arms around them, and leaned back. "This," he said, "ain't rustlin'—this is sneak-thievin'."

The other man flung his arms sideways in the gesture of one who has given up thinking about a circumstance he cannot understand. "But, Pop," he complained, "we didn't take our eyes off 'em yesterday or day before. We held up two-three hours maybe in Jackson Canyon, and then we went on. I counted 'em just before it got dark; as soon as the sun came up, I did it again, and they was missin'. We didn't see a soul durin' the night, not a hint of anybody around, but they was gone. It don't make sense."

"Well," said Jeff, "I don't believe in magic, and I never heard of no cattle sproutin' wings—somebody took 'em."

"Yes, but Pop, how could they? You

can travel around a hundred head in a minute, and there was three of us."

"Then," concluded his father-in-law, "there ain't nothin' to be done. We just call it an act of Providence and fergit it."

"Well, what can we do?"

Jeff stared. Stared until a red glow appeared on the face of the other that rivalled the setting sun. "There's two things we kin do," he said slowly. "You do one, and I'll do the other. You go git a black hair from the tail of a three-year-old mare that ain't foaled yet, tie it in a

true lover's knot, and sing 'Till We Meet Again' sitting on yer haunches by a campfire durin' every night you're on the road; and me—I'm a-goin' to figger this thing out. My brains is gettin' plumb dusty lollin' around here, and they just naturally craves exercise. Right now I'm a-puttin' two and two together. I don't rightly think a man gits the full use of his senses till his body kind of backs out of the picture a bit. Bein' sixty-nine the way I am, I figger I'm just about ripe—matured, yuh might say."

BILL smilingly shook his head. "If you've got no objections," he said, "I'll go along with you. I'd have a God-awful time findin' that mare."

"All right, son—here's the way I look at it. Pretty near all the cattlemen around here ship from Taylorsville, because that's on the main line, but to git there we all use Jackson's Canyon. That means they's a pretty steady run of animals through there at this time of year, like a lot of little streams runnin' all together and aimin' for a low spot."

"The Lazy T outfit went through just ahead of us night before last," said Bill.

"Yep," said Jeff, "that's the way 'tis. Now supposin' you was a feller achin' to git you a few fat steers like we raise round here, and bein' bright, yuh'd managed to figger out a way to fool dumb cow-hands—where d'ye s'pose would be the best place to grab 'em?"

"I know," said Bill. "In the Canyon. That's what I thought last time; so I made sure I'd keep 'em away from the broken country on the north. This time we kept within two hundred yards of the cliff—south of the stream even—and one of us was between 'em and the water all the way."

"But yuh stopped fer a while."

"Sure—everybody does—that's where the spring is, but nothin' could happen there—let me show you."

The big man squatted on his heels, picked up a stick and drew lines in the dust. "Here," he pointed with his finger, "is where we stopped. There's almost straight walls on each side, and it's the narrowest place—six or seven hundred feet maybe. With a man behind the herd, and another up ahead, you can bottle up a thousand head easy."

Jeff looked at his son-in-law with a blank face, then his lips parted to show a double row of beautiful white teeth—the best to be had in Salt Lake City—and he burst into long and hearty laughter. Bill stared at him as if he were watching a man who had got some coffee down his Sunday throat. At last the old fellow calmed down a bit. "That's a right pretty map," he said. "Only it oughta be colored. I like my maps with pink and red and blue in 'em."

Bill smiled sheepishly, but he kept quiet.

"I sure know what the Canyon looks like now," Jeff said. "But you forgot to show where the Injun Cave is, and them blue rocks, and where Jackson's Red Bird Copper Mine used to be.

"O' course," he went on, "I ain't been over the ground for close to four years, and I got to thank yuh for refreshin' my

memory; only I practically built that canyon when I was a kid, and your drawin' of this here map sorta startled me."

He became serious then, shot a sharp glance at the big man, and said, "When you figgerin' on takin' the last of 'em through?"

"Day after tomorrow."

"Well, son, I think the best thing you kin do is to keep yer eyes peeled when yuh come to them cliffs, because I'm willin' to bet yuh a fifty-dollar suit of clothes that's where yuh lose 'em."

"Pop," said Bill grimly, "if I lose another steer, I'll buy you a suit anyhow."

THE following morning at breakfast Jeff announced calmly that he thought he ought to have a vacation. "Haven't been huntin' for years," he said, and he looked straight at Bill.

Bill sat back, gave him a stare as meaningful as he'd received. "It's off-season for almost everything," he said. "Wait until the snow, and we'll both go."

"Kin I go, Ma?" asked Bill, Junior. "Kin I go with Grampaw, too?"

Grampaw folded his arms and surveyed his family. "I am a-goin' huntin'," he said, "today. I am a-goin' by myself because havin' people around me spoils my aim, and because that's what I want to do. I am sound in mind and body, and I will not be dictated to by people half my age, and with less'n half my experience." Here he stared at Bill again, shifted his glance to his grandson, and continued, "You, Billy, kin come with me Saturday, and we'll go see kin we find us some gophers, because I expect to be back by then."

He pushed his chair away from the table, stood up, and delivered his peroration. "Annie, you fix up food for three days, and don't go makin' up a lot of fancy dohickies —I'm not takin' any pack-mule along. I want the same kind of things yer ma use'ta have fer me.

"You," he continued, pointing to his son-in-law, "rope me that black gelding and saddle it. And, Billy, you come with me to my office. While I'm cleanin' my guns, yuh kin be holdin' the rags or somethin'."

At ten o'clock, he kissed the twins and his daughter, climbed upon his steed, said good-bye to everybody, and headed off toward the distant mountains singing to himself, repeating with uncomprehending lips:

"You try somebody else;
I'll try somebody else"——

over and over.

In a little while, he and his mount were a single speck on the horizon, and then they were gone.

BILL was very thoughtful for the rest of the day, but Annie did not connect that fact with her father's departure. The old gentleman was full of quirks; she'd been puzzled by him since her childhood, and like a person living in the shadow of a sphinx—a loquacious and very active sphinx, be it said, but nevertheless a sphinx —the mystery of it all escaped her.

She was bothered because her husband did not eat much lunch and went mooning about—no doubt he was coming down with something. But even him she forgot after a while, because the twins were feeling unusually chipper, and what one didn't think of the other one did.

The next morning the big man left with two helpers, and they moved off with their charges—one-hundred-twenty of them this time—in a cloud of dust that turned to a golden haze. They rode with their whole minds on the aimless cattle, and with their eyes roving around for anything unusual.

Every few minutes they counted. When the tally came out one over, they swore, and did it again; when it was one under, they pricked their steeds to a gallop, joined forces, and all counted together—to find that they still had one-hundred-twenty.

In the canyon they kept their eyes peeled, as Jeff had suggested, and started forward sooner than usual; but when they had moved beyond the towering cliffs, and it grew light enough to be sure of themselves, they renewed counting, first individually, then collectively; and at last they lost some

of their alertness, relaxed in their saddles, let the herd take a little more time. The need for vigilance was over. There were one-hundred-nineteen, and no more.

Eventually they reached Taylorsville, and Bill was standing disconsolately at the gate of one of the loading pens when Pete Harmon of the Z Bar Q strolled over and said, "That pa-in-law of yours is sure a great old customer, ain't he?"

"Why," said Bill, jerking around, "where did you see him?"

"Oh," said Pete, surprised, "I thought you knew."

"Knew!" exclaimed Bill. "No; where is he at—what's he doin'?"

Harmon grinned, enjoying himself and his story. "Why he rolled into town this morning loaded down with shootin' irons in Sam Pfefferman's meat truck—you know Pfefferman, the man who makes the wieners over in Clegg City. Sam's three boys were in the back, all tied up like a string of their own sausages, and with a horse and a steer to keep 'em company. Says he caught 'em hoisting the critter out of Jackson Canyon last night, right under your nose.

"It sounds crazy, the way I tell it, but I guess it's true, because every once in a while I've missed one myself comin' down here; and so have some of the other boys. The sheriff's gone off up there to look things over."

"Doggone," said Bill, scratching his head. "The old galoot! Where did you say he is now?"

"I left him in Clayton's Furniture Store trying to get Chicago on long distance. He was wantin' to buy some radio tubes, but he didn't know the numbers. Said your kids busted 'em up, and he threw 'em away; so he's telephonin' Chicago for the numbers."

"Thanks, Pete," said Bill, heading for his horse. "I know them numbers already—they're as plain as day in the radio. I pointed 'em out to him the other night, but I guess he's gettin' a little forgetful."

JEFF had left the store when his son-in-law got to it, but he'd only gone across the street to the hotel, so the big man hurried over and found him talking with Ab Barker, the proprietor.

"Hello, son," said Jeff. "Take one of them chairs over there and rest your bones. I'll be right over, soon's I sign this here register."

Bill sat down, and the old man finally came over and dropped into another, facing him. "Son," he said, "I got that gelding around in back here, and I want yuh to take it back to the ranch fer me. I ain't been doin' enough ridin' lately, and my rear end's tender as a baby's."

"You stayin' here?" asked Bill.

"Only until tomorrow. I got to catch up on my sleep—I ain't used to no such hours as I been keepin'. I'll get somebody to drive me out."

Bill grinned, settled himself comfortably, and said, "What in hell happened, anyhow? You had me worried, the way you went off."

Jeff snorted. "Worried! Son, don't never worry about me. You see, I remembered that Old Man Jackson had this copper mine back about Nineteen Twenty, and

he had a cable stretched across the canyon from the mine shaft to the cliff opposite, because they was a road there, and he could ship the ore out by truck that way. I ain't been by there much since it petered out, so I didn't know if the thing was still hangin'. It was, but it don't show much from below."

"Oh," said Bill, "that's how it was." He

frowned. "But how did they get 'em out?"

"I'm a-comin' to that. That cable's right across over the narrow part."

"Why yes," said Bill, "so it is."

"Well, I figgered steers don't fly, so I did a little prospectin' around up on top of the cliff, and I found a big steel pulley, a lot of steel cable, and a big piece of black canvas fitted up for a cattle sling; and right then, I knew I was right. I camped down a ways and waited, and along about dark, I snuck back and lay on my belly a-watchin'.

"Pretty soon a big red truck pulls up, and three young fellers gets out. One of 'em climbs up the leg of the cable tower and goes out a little ways over the canyon —he had a little seat hanging from ropes that hooked over the cable, somethin' like that one we had fer Billy afore he could walk—only I found out about that afterwards, because it was dark by that time, and I couldn't tell exactly what was goin' on. I only knew he somehow gits this big pulley clamped onto the cable, slips the other one—the one I seen in the woods—through it, and comes down. Then they sit there a-waitin', watchin' the canyon; and I lie there with my belly gettin' numb, a-watchin' them.

"Finally, one of them says, 'O. K.,' and gits up, hooks the end of the cable to the truck, and drives down the road, goin' very slow. The other two are busy, one climbin' into black overalls, and one blinkin' a flashlight at the truck, which stops. I could hardly make out the one in the overalls at all, because he even had his face covered up; but he hooks himself to the other end of the cable, swings out over the canyon, steadying himself with a hand line; the flashlight blinks twice, and the feller in the truck starts a-backin' her up."

"Well, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Bill. "He dropped right down among the cattle and hooked onto one!"

"I guess so, son," said Jeff. "He was a-puttin' wings on one of them dumb brutes; because the first thing yuh know, here's the feller back agin, danglin' in the air, turning around slow like he'd been hanged—like he would be today, if it was a few years back—before we got so all-fired civilized, and lost our sense of humor. Underneath him is the steer with a bag over its nose, and a nice big belly-band on him, as if he was one of them elephants bein' put aboard of a ship.

"The feller on the cliff tosses out a rope, which is caught and tied, and he swings 'em in."

"He swings all that weight, Pop?"

"Sure—that thing is high up—'bout sixty-five feet higher than the lip of the canyon, and they was only ten feet, mebbe, past the edge. They come over like a penjulum, and the feller that was pullin' snubs the line around a tree and holds 'em there while the truck backs a little, and they come down all of a heap."

Bill shook his head. "They sure went to a lot of trouble for a couple of cattle."

"Oh, I dunno. It was a lot more'n a couple, I figger. We keep a damn sight closer tab than most." He meditated for a space, and then went on, "Two steers is wuth close to fifty dollars—leastways that's the last quotation I heard before the radio give out."

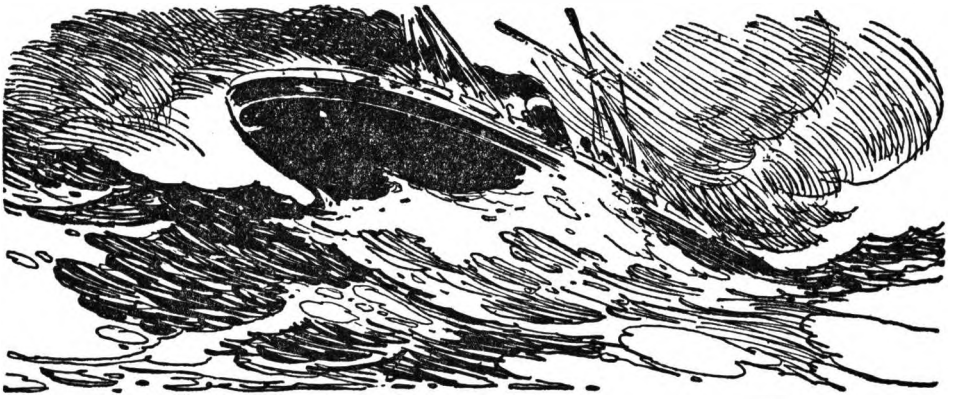
"'Bout that," said Bill.

"Well, we're payin' our hands thutty dollars a month, and found; and that's more'n they'd get anywheres else, and they got to work a whole month to git it. Here's these three Smart Alecs makin' that much in one night."

"I guess that's so," said Bill. "I never thought of that."

"No—but it don't hurt none to start thinkin' now." He got up, stretched, and said, "I'm a-goin' to git me a nap. See you later." As he was starting away, he turned and added, "And don't fergit—you owe me a fifty-dollar suit, and something like fifteen more for tubes and telephone calls, on account of them twins of yourn."

His Was Certainly a Singleness of Purpose—He Meant to Sail the Seven Seas Below Decks



LONG JOHN EAMES

By BERTON E. COOK

Author of "A New High for Lowe," "Cooler Than Coole," etc.

HE MUST have been a throwback from some ancient forebear. Spawn of a Phœnician furler of purple sails, possibly from some later Norse raider. For the sea was born in him, the sea plus a bent for machinery's kingdom of steel.

He landed in the *Lake Forrest's* bunkers before he knew forward from aft. He arrived at the handles of a bunker wheelbarrow direct from the glamor of a high school graduation and speeches about conquering the world. Long John Eames had departed the lure of city career to start at the bottom, a coal passer in a freighter's bowels. Life had begun at nineteen.

John Eames was lucky; he had tumbled onto Terry Regan, oiler. Barely ten minutes before sailing, Regan had led him aboard the *Lake Forrest;* Regan had shoved the close lipped young giant below in new dungarees. He liked the kid's silences, his modesty, his untried physique.

John Eames was unlucky, too. Regan hadn't told him about the Second's good-for-nothing young brother. Regan had omitted to say that the Chief himself had sent that brother back ashore for drinking. He might have told John how the Second was hiding his babbling brother in his room, confident that the Chief would have to come to terms with him the last minute for want of a more decent coal passer.

Regan, however, had told John nothing. He, along with all the Second's watch, despised the worthless fellow, so he had hustled Long John aboard and below to work—to force the hand of Boggs, the second assistant. Boggs, junior, went ashore; Boggs, senior, cursed the lengthy apparition passing coal already. The only reason he didn't run John ashore was that he supposed the chief had hired the greenhorn.

And the only inkling of all this imparted to Long John Eames was in a speech. It was Terry Regan's longest speech to his stop-gap discovery; it was salve to his own conscience, as well, for the grief in store for John. "I'm warnin' yer, kid, ye're in fer a ridin' aboard here. But you asked fer it, you said you hankered fer a license and here's where you start, at the bottom."

"By 'n' by I'll get me books and cram."

John spoke soberly and economically, without inflection. He trundled the barrow into the dark bunker for more coal. Regan climbed back to his oiling—and to wonder about a guy like that. Already talkin' about books and crammin'!

FROM the lofty stokehold entrance, Second Assistant Engineer Boggs leered upon the lad who had replaced his useless brother. All last month through, Boggs had kept his protégé in his own watch where the other fire room denizens dared not report his loafing, dared not refuse to do his passing for him. Boggs resented John Eames; he watched John scoop and wheel and pile coal on the open plates as any passer can—and will if his back holds out. The Second spied on the kid long and often, at times he must have fathomed the dream in the lad's eyes. He cursed Long John, he despised him, he hankered for some flaw in the fellow's work or attitude, some excuse to ride the greenhorn, to blast that dream of career.

John Eames hadn't noticed; he was studying the art of stoking. Coal he moved, yes, but he caught that ceaseless rotation of feed, slice and rake. For he was going through that stage, in turn, on his way up the ladder to a license in the engine room—some day. He rather presumed that engineers would welcome ambition in a coal passer or stoker—if they noticed it at all.

One night came the inevitable. The *Lake Forrest* poked into a southerly below Gay Head. She was southbound, therefore light. Her toe spanked with resounding whacks that sent earthquakes all the way aft to the stokehold. She trembled and reeled—and Eames' barrow zigzagged dizzily between bunker and fire room.

Eames himself wandered. Glows from ashpits danced before his eyes, the whole stokehold kaleidoscoped. His head swam, his stomach dragged anchor. The terrible moment arrived when the kid dropped his barrow handles precipitately and shot into a bunker—that rose with an abrupt lurch of the ship to meet him. He went more than his share of the way. He butted his skull to a wall of coal, he lost all save his bare stomach. While the coal pile above responded to the impact and black dust buried him to the shoulders. It filled his ears and closed them to the chorus of insistent yells out there for more coal.

Scarcely had he emerged from the avalanche when the *Lake Forrest* spanked and hove the other way. She caught him off balance and pitched him headlong again, this time out of the bunker. Into the open he volleyed to new trouble that was worse than nausea or plugged ears. For the watchful Second had heard the stokers' yells and come running below; he had waited long for this moment.

Boggs braced and grunted to the impact of a hundred and sixty pounds of reeling youth. He waited only for the sick youth to drop asprawl, then reached down as an eagle strikes. He clawed hold of the kid, rocked him to his wobbling legs and hove him at the barrow.

"Who ever told you you was a coal passer? Muckle to them handles, keep these firemen supplied. Smartly there!"

"Yes, sir," came thickly from the sooted apparition and firemen guffawed at the first words they'd ever heard from Long John. "I'll be all right d'rectly, sir." While he talked and spat coal, Eames clamped determined fists to the handles. He swayed uncertainly to the lift, but the Second got a glimpse of a will to do that should have opened his eyes.

From that moment, John Eames despised the claws that had roughed him to his feet, the slack, truculent mouth that had cursed him. He despised Biff Boggs. Nor would the Second let him do otherwise. Craftily he stalked the kid, pretended a sort of sympathetic curiosity. Why was Eames here, what was on his mind? It sounded like a truce, but crafty Boggs was merely feigning civility to get silent John to talk about himself.

This from a licensed man, an engineer. John talked. Not extensively because he

simply wasn't verbose; he said it all briefly. "I'm heading for a license up there, sir, in the engine room. Going to get the books and cram, then when I've served out my required time——"

Boggs roared in derision. His roar ended strangely in a fit of resentment. The nerve of this callow kid, telling him, of all persons, that he expected to equal Boggs' rating—after snatching the brother's job! Thus Boggs reasoned. Ah yes, and Boggs' intuition told him that that Long John had the stuff, he'd climb. From stokehold to oiling; eventually to a Third's ticket, then on up to Second. Blast him, his kind might go up to a chief's papers—while Boggs' spineless brother, with the opportunity thrown at him, preferred to drift; while Boggs himself stayed a second assistant. The engineer's blood boiled. The mere sight of Eames roiled him. He drove Long John to his grind as though the kid had committed a felony. And Terry Regan, within earshot, took his own lesson from the greenhorn he had injected into this situation aboard the *Lake Forrest.*

ONE noon off Lambert's Point, the *Lake Forrest* got a coal charter south to the Argentine and three firemen quit her. Eames saw his chance, he would advance to stoker's rating, it would be his first step up. He knew, of course, that

the Second has charge of the boiler room, so he asked Boggs for the job. And Boggs? He shoved a greasy hand into Long John's face and howled, "You bohunk. Git b'low. Learn to pass coal without dumpin' yer dinner into it. Go on, git outa my way!"

Henceforth he withheld nothing. He vented his bilious wrath upon the lad, he drove him unmercifully. Until the oiler who had brought him aboard regretted it. "But I warned yer," said Regan defensively, "I knowed Biff Boggs afore you did. What the hell did yer tell a mutt like him you was aimin' at a license fer?"

"I know," said Long John while the heritage of some forgotten Norse ancestor returned him undaunted to his task in the bunkers.

Good old Regan. He quit the *Lake Forrest* and straightway lost track of the kid he had launched. But the kid lost nothing save verdance. To Boggs' punishment he hardened; through many a month he weathered it, along with bounding deck plates and catwalks awash. Then, quite deliberately, he transferred his rippling brawn, steeled ambition and calloused goat to a South African tramp. Thus, and only thus, did he manage to attain stoker's rating.

Long John Eames fed, sliced and raked his rolling way down the antipodal wastes. Occasionally he swayed to blinding hot furnace maws over mile-long seas—and kept his eye on oilers in his off watches to acquaint himself with their cult.

In due time, he rose to oiler. Out of the grim stokehold at last and the big up-and-down babies filled his admiring eyes. They thrilled him. They were his goal, the symbol of his career, his rainbow end. John Eames studied that engine as a medico studies the human anatomy. He did more; he learned its whims. He became the most curious mind aboard the *Ubangi Prince.* Feed, vacuum and lubrication grew into the young man, they became almost second nature to him while he acquired the expert feel—and it is expert—of huge bearings. While he raced oilcans over cross rods and reasoned why condenser pumps were placed at the very lowest point in the system, Long John's dream was materializing.

Practical books he had, American books. In Cape Town he added certain English, more profound, treatises on steam power.

He put in weeks of contemplation of oil fueling, he grew hungry for more information than his own library afforded. Then he took his shelf of information from the African to the American-Gulf trade, that he might make a Boston library regularly. He proposed, now, to spend his evening shore leaves in that library.

That he did—and he met Olive Lane. Before he realized it, the girl stood on a par with his love for marine engines. Her unwavering eyes and chestnut wave vied with Scotch boiler designs, triple expansion power, coal versus oil fuel—vied for his supreme interest. A miracle had happened, the knight of steam had found his lady fair.

WEEKS and months of this until Olive Lane waxed more than interested. Thoughtful weeks until she said, "This career of yours, John—do you have to confine it to the sea?"

John hadn't considered anything else, of course. "What do you mean by that?"

"Why, there are all kinds of engineering."

"Oh, I see. I'm for steam—steam or Diesel."

"You forget, there are engineers on the land," she ventured carefully.

"Yes, but——"

"But what?"

"We-ell I'll tell you, they go to college for that."

"Yes, that is just what I mean. John, you've saved enough to do what they did. You've got the brains, too."

John guided her across the Boylston Street traffic but himself he could not guide, not inwardly. The suggestion that he could or should alter his plans, his life dream, so readily and radically—or shift plans at all bewildered him.

But Olive Lane had grown upon him, she had become essential. What could he do? He expected to see her between trips, to confide in her as he'd never confided his innermost thoughts to anybody. And yet—and yet she did seem, all at once, to become a huge problem. A delightful problem, too.

Meanwhile John Eames acquired a license, he rose from oiler to third assistant engineer in the *Hacienda*. He ran regularly between a Boston refinery and a sugar port on the back of Cuba. Nor did he relax; he studied for his second assistant's papers with that same unveering zeal—and won them with high rating. Straightway he pointed himself for his next goal, a first assistant's license.

But John Eames had slid a diamond, a Cape Town memento of his that bespoke his instinct for values, slid it onto Olive Lane's third finger. He showed her off to his family, his cup was full. Ah yes, and Olive Lane now cast her feminine eyes into the future. It was to be their future, no less, and she realized more and more poignantly how lonely it must be if John spent weeks at sea, only hours at home with her. Olive Lane wept secretly over the prospect, wept until she dared to broach again her better plan.

"Johnnie boy, we're engaged now, aren't we?"

John dashed aside his mental picture of an ailing centrifugal oil filter aboard the *Hacienda*. "Wha—yes." He gave her elbow a playful nudge to add, "Ask me something hard."

She did. It came like a long impending thunderclap. "John, dear, you've never refused me a single favor so I'm going to ask the biggest one yet." She paused for a good lungful of the fog that was giving them dogdays isolation on the Mall. "I want you to get an engineer's degree at Tech."

John was stunned. His tongue forsook him.

"With your present licenses you'll get a degree in no time at all."

"In what? Marine engineering ashore? Be yourself."

"Don't get hot, Johnnie, I want to see you a top notch engineer where you'll live at home, our home, instead of away off in those grimy ships. Can't you see my——?"

JOHN EAMES heard her out. He tried to weigh the pros and cons. He took the trip south to contemplate upon it, he dreaded the unspoken risk of saying no too abruptly. He feared the possibility of losing Olive Lane and he simply couldn't fathom a world without her.

He came back from Cuba once and they talked. Again, and they talked. In the end, autumn found Long John Eames at Tech. He was what she called being reasonable. What he called being fair. He loved Olive Lane.

Stuffy dry classrooms and parched laboratories. Long lectures, dusty blackboards and untempered youth; unscathed lads who'd never glimpsed the dirty inside of a bunker nor the truculence of a Biff Boggs. Fathoms of theory, abstract math, questions that John Eames had answered in grimy sweat aboard the *Lake Forrest,* the *Ubangi Prince,* the *Hacienda.* So this was Tech to John Eames and he resented it—and wondered where the *Hacienda* might be right this minute. Time and again, day after day, he wondered and sniffed in vain for salty spume at the alleyways' end while he digested courses along with the flocks of embryo engineers. He did more, he comprehended what they, lacking his experience, merely acquired. He saw yachts on the Charles and scorned the toys, he tried in vain to divorce the *Hacienda* from his mind. For he had agreed to get a degree—and Olive Lane secretly marveled at her own success with the man.

Oh, Long John realized the full value of these studies, at times he was even grateful for this interlude—but not convinced withal. Not one wit converted to the possibility of that other dream, that strange fantasy of a life work ashore.

Quietly and defensively, he kept in touch with his former employers, with the wharves. One day he went straight into his examination for chief's license like a hypnotized subject who must follow the gleam on the tiny spoon. And he passed a remarkable examination. In the matter of comparative operation on varied fuels, he revealed an inordinate comprehension.

That much he owed to Tech and that proved the fatal cast of the dice for John Eames. Olive did not know what he had done, this time, because he had dreaded hurting her. Nevertheless, she did discern in him a change that boded ill. She blamed the abrupt change from a life on the open sea to that in closed rooms, she almost suspected that in seeing more of her, now that he was ashore, he had wearied of her. Yet she couldn't understand it clearly and she dared not speak of it to him. She endured the ominous suspense until her anxiety brought courage. The day came when she mustered her forces to ask her Johnnie what was wrong.

Olive Lane never got that far. On that very afternoon John Eames phoned her from a pier. He stated his resolve as something already accomplished, he invited no condemnation, no concession.

"Not really going back on a boat, dear!" It was her turn to be stunned.

Long ere she fully realized it all, John Eames thrilled to the good old throb of the propeller. He was on his way to sea. He was Chief Engineer on the same old *Hacienda* and his reviving young soul diapasoned the stark fullness of its relief. He was back to his dream once more.

CHIEF EAMES went to sea with vastly more on his mind than a girl. It was his first trip as top engineer, it was a precarious venture that hung his entire future in the balance. For the *Hacienda* had just emerged from an overhauling with oil burners in place of coal grates and thus far the burners had been a curse upon her. Eames, with his high rating on comparative fueling in that recent examination, plus his familiarity with the *Hacienda,* had been pitched headlong into the ship's fueling problem on a moment's notice. He was to rectify the curse at the outset of an important new sugar charter—and remain as chief if he rectified it before the concern that had installed it had to be called upon.

John Eames had left the sea, the company, his very ship, to attend a college; today he stood face to face with a problem in that ship that had soured one good chief. If the interlude ashore hadn't broken John's career, this situation certainly must—unless he spotted the trouble. For the ship already had lost valuable time hove to at sea; and today she had valuable, perishable cargo in her hold. John Eames experienced a full realization of what he was doing and marveled at it. He yanked at his new uniform collar, he hitched around in his clothing uncomfortably. He shed the suit like something yet to be earned, shook himself into denim and went below wiping beads off his brow.

He sized up the burners, watched them start off well enough, waited impatiently while the ship put more and more miles between her stern and marine repair shops. The waiting hung him on tenter hooks of anxiety, the waiting and that note of dismay in Olive's voice over the telephone. He began to regret the abruptness with which he had broken the news to her; why hadn't he explained that he'd been hired on the verge of sailing time? Now, he might lose the girl. He dreaded to think of his return to Boston lest the mail for the ship bring back that South African diamond.

John Eames learned very little by asking questions. He was not prone to discussion, he never aired his problems to reap the ideas of others. And today he didn't even search out his three assistants aboard the *Hacienda*. At mess, perforce, he heard glum gossip; the ship had been hove to, fresh from overhaul and hove to! Out came tales of stokehold explosions, arguments about fuels. The mess room became a forum and John Eames cleared out; what did that deck crowd know about making steam anyway?

LONG JOHN EAMES entered the *Hacienda's* power vault as chief. He was lord of it all, a top engineer now. He had arrived. First Assistant Duff turned envious eyes upon the younger man; they beheld only a poker face. For Duff saw only the static moment of a newly licensed chief's first take-over, he knew nothing about Olive Lane, he little realized John's anxiety over her and the diamond and the gamble of career against new burners that faltered.

Solemnly went the new chief down the nearest grilled flight, down by crossrods plunging eighty-odd times a minute. Farther down to pass auxiliary engines. He disappeared into the oblong void at the bulkhead. And Duff began to glimpse success in a new light; he decided never to allow himself to be far away from the big engine's throttle—until this young chief could at least grin.

Eames stood at furnaces. Through peepholes he watched roaring, elongate cones of spiraling flame, he saw Olive Lane in tears, hot tears. She, too, had fire. Was the girl broken hearted or was she angry with him?

Clean fires, these, and steady. No spluttering. But the *Hacienda* was enroute to Cuba in the Gulf and she hadn't yet crossed Massachusetts Bay. John turned away sighing because she fired so smoothly. He decided to try those emergency, extension valves that ranged along the engine room side of the bulkhead above—just in case the trouble should swoop in wholesale.

He climbed the iron ladder out. He turned left—John Eames blinked twice. His hands flexed and became suddenly moist. His blue eyes gleamed like tempered steel and narrowed. His cup of anxiety had filled, all at once, to overflowing at sight of two huge paws on the extension valves. Above them, a head that was flat as a Hog Islander's tumble-home and he recognized it. He remembered that lantern jaw, that slack mouth already framing a foul snarl. The bold eyes were scorning brazenly and glowering in ugly recognition. Biff Boggs of the old *Lake Forrest* was here aboard the *Hacienda*, and a second assistant engineer still!

John's immediate reaction was suspicion.

It was justified by Boggs' every movement, the way he let go of those valves to brace himself, the way he defied and challenged when his new chief had startled him by appearing from nowhere. Ages ago Boggs had resented this young man's ambition, he resented it a thousandfold more now; for Boggs was a Second still.

His own brutishness was partly to blame, his very willfulness more so. Boggs never had taken things as he'd found them, he never would. The miracle was that he'd

retained his rating. From ship to ship he'd jumped, and his jumpings had been hot. It was touch and go, bully and run, with him; nor had he once mentioned the deep, underlying reason for it all. Biff Boggs had a secret fear.

He did not disclose it now. Cursing, he strode farther to port and clomped down a stairway. John watched him out of sight, then he tested the extension valves himself and left the engine room wondering whether they might fail in a pinch—whether Boggs, too, would fail to measure up. Biff Boggs here, eh? The one and only man he had ever learned to despise.

THE ink was fresh on the license of Third Assistant Engineer Morley; he was new. Early in his eight-to-twelve watch off Cape Cod, Morley waited uneasily for a good look at the new chief. In the mess room John had appeared too young, in Morley's eyes, for the peculiar situation aboard here. Hadn't the seasoned Second talked him down at the outset? Boggs was nobody's fool, so Morley was worried; he wanted to hear Chief Eames talk about those cursed burners that misfired in his watches despite the fact that a self-confident, experienced Second worked the suctions that kept water out of the fuel. Morley wanted to know how much this new chief was bringing to the problem, for it was in the Third's watches that the blasted burners always had misfired. Was the new chief going to blame it on him, too?

So the Third stood close to the starboard doorway. His ear was keened to the sounds in the alleyway outside, keened for the voice of John Eames and his opinions. The noise he got, however, was not a voice, it was a backfire in the stokehold. He bolted to the nearest stairway toward the stokehold entrance with visions of seared firemen in his soul. A tall figure whisked down past him and led the way below.

Eames found a V-shaped sheet of iron slammed across the floor. It was an air door. He saw a furnace packed full of wild flames, a draft disk—revolving type—blown back from the plate as far as possible and bent over a connection. Smudge was bluing up against uptakes and stokers were hovering handy to the ladder. Trouble had struck.

He cut the feed to that roaring flame and lost brows and eyelashes before he could get away. Soon as the fire died, he showed the stokers the absolute necessity for airing out furnaces after cutting off the feed.

"Aw, we do all that," one protested.

"Yeah. 'Fore we starts up agin on it an' gives it the blowtorch, another one splutters out. Oh it's some hell round here, once this racket starts, mister."

"So you watch through the peepholes and beat them to it," the new chief prompted.

"Huh. And git meself blowed to hell? Lookit that air door," the third stoker made bold.

Before Eames could speak again, number four quit firing. It spluttered and drizzled oil all through the hot furnace—and John

Eames practiced what he'd preached. He leaped to the feed valve. He took half a turn when the red hot furnace touched off the accumulated fuel. An explosion shivered eardrums, closed eyes, pulsing the racing blood in men's throats. It was terrific. It hove John Eames ten feet backward and plumped him down.

He rose stiffly. He went directly back to the peepholes. He peered into fires one by one while men bet covertly on his imminent destruction. He peered until he caught another burner missing. That burner he scrutinized—not because he was so inordinately bold or foolhardy, but because his career depended upon seeing exactly what was wrong and seeing it quickly. The instant he saw, he shut off the feed. Without another word to anybody, John Eames left the stokehold and went straight to Morley.

"Always happens in your watches, you say."

Morley stiffened. So this chief, too, was blaming it on him. "Chief," said he, "ever since those burners came aboard of us my watch below there has been cleaning, replacing and ducking for their lives. Looks to me like there's water in the fuel, but the suck pump is run reg'larly by the Second and he swears it's not so simple as that. Fact is, he raised hell round here when I fetched him below to see for hisself——"

"I know." John's experience with the trouble below had lamed him; while the Third unburdened his mind, the chief limbered up. And, too, Eames was doing some private thinking; he was recalling the Boggs he'd seen at the extension valves. Boggs had turned tail and gone below that landing to port—to port.

"Third," said he contemplatively, "most of the burners that misfire are fed from which tank?"

"Port one, sir. The Second, he keeps both settling tanks dreened of water, I told you that, sir. He's responsible for the boiler room and all, I look after the lower engine."

"I know," said John again, and he knew —or thought he knew—considerably more than the artless Morley even suspected. For a goat does not suspect; not a human goat, anyway, who is being victimized and cowed into taking the grief.

"Third, go log this."

John Eames dovetailed the facts he had accumulated since leaving port; they were significant facts to the man who had taken the gaff from Boggs in the *Lake Forrest*. John put every stoker on the alert at peepholes with ready hands on the feeds. That done, he went above.

In the engine room again, he turned left. No Boggs was there this time, but it seemed to the young chief as though he could feel the evil, grouty, wilful, invisible hand of Biff Boggs hovering over the scene; somewhere in this trouble Boggs' motive—Eames traced a feed line to the port settling tank. He stopped at the feed pump, inspected it; fuel was moving along there. He went on. He inspected both high and low suctions. The former led out to fires, the latter drew off water from the bottom of the tank. At length John narrowed things down to the suction pump that removes water. This one need run only a short time every second or third day.

And it was running! Very slowly, but running, without the Second or any other engineer watching it, without Morley's even realizing. At this rate, it must have sucked away bilge long ago and be draining fuel itself into the sea.

"Even so," murmured Eames in a puzzled way, "even so, this doesn't account for the water that certainly is going through those burners. It's just the opposite, the reverse—reverse!" He gave that pump a most careful scrutiny and came up all standing. He hustled an oiler up top for Morley and a begrimed Morley came distractedly from furnaces that persistently misfired and smudged.

"Cripes, this is hell!" he groaned behind a gob of waste.

"Third," said the chief slowly, "give this pump the once over. Carefully, now."

Carefully? Morley came up yelping. "This ain't dreening; it's been reversed. It's pumping sea water into the tank!"

"And it is so cleverly timed that nothing happens in the First's watch that comes between yours and the Second's."

"I don't get that, sir," Morley gaped.

"Boggs runs this pump. He times it from the last bell in his own watch, I've seen him come down here to it. He doesn't dare to risk trouble with Mr. Duff, but you're less experienced, so he's set it slow to feed water along with the oil to the burners during your watch. In short, you're the goat here. Why, I do not know yet."

Morley cursed roundly. "Damn 'im, I've took hell from his dirty tongue. Now this."

"Go get him."

Morley blanched. His small, sparse body seemed to shrink; he was no crusader. "He'll be asleep, sir, he's the devil to rouse out. I tried it once before and——"

John Eames caught the Third's wavering eyes. "Bring the Second here to me, mister."

Morley went. He returned with a smoky eye to prove he had roused an irate Boggs. He reported and hurried away to his engine before the Second could arrive.

Boggs came in his own good time. He lurched inside the engine room, squared his broad shoulders and glowered all around. He spotted the chief writing in the log and snorted. Let the cub scribble notes; efficiency guys all scribbled a lot, they were mere pad-and-pencil engineers, book experts. But what the devil would this one be writing, after sending for——

BEFORE Boggs could guess an answer to his own query, the chief turned on him. "Come below with me, mister."

Below? In this eight-to-twelve watch? Not into the fire room, certainly. Thus Boggs made up his mind while John led the way. But the new chief couldn't see the fear flashing in Boggs' eyes. He hadn't learned that Boggs had quit the *Allegash* when her owners had converted her to oil —and come here only to run into another oil conversion. Boggs followed, but he vowed he'd balk at the stokehold entrance.

He did not. Before he could set himself, Eames wheeled right and led the way on to port. And down. Boggs' breath whistled in his teeth; down here, eh? Suspense began to dig into Biff Boggs, he wondered what that timid Morley really knew, and what had he been saying to this lanky cub of a chief? Certainly Eames was neither practical nor experienced enough to spot anything so clever—but they were away below now, already John was turning left.

He halted beside the low suction pump. He waited patiently for the surly Second lagging behind. He obliged Boggs to come close to the slowly wheezing pump before speaking. "You tend this?" he asked.

"It's part of a Second's duties, ain't it—sir?"

"You tend it in the last bell in your own watches—that is, when you do tend it." This was a clever barb, it challenged, and it struck home.

"When I do, huh? Listen, mister, I come to this pump every twelve-to-four watch I stand. In the last bell."

John Eames said coldly, "Rather hoped you'd confess that; once every two or three days should be often enough to draw off the settlings and water. Second, there's something wrong with this pump, notice it?"

Notice! Boggs' nerves jangled, he was on a spot, but for the life of him he couldn't discern whether John knew.

It came crisply. "Second, you have reversed this pump from exhaust to intake. You've deliberately run water in with the oil to the burners in Morley's watches. You're the trouble with the fuel system aboard here, now what have you to say for yourself?"

Boggs had nothing to say. In one tense

instant he fully sensed that his very future depended upon this ex-coal passer of his, this cub chief. He wheeled, drove the heel of his hand to John's nose and hoisted it. Lip and nose parted, John reeled backward with blood streaming to his mouth. And John Eames found his temper. He packed a fist full of the scores of abuses he'd taken from this rascal. He blinked through water-blinded eyes and drove a punch—and Biff Boggs wasn't there.

John cleared his eyes. He looked all around and felt foolish. He was sole alone. He turned to the pump while Boggs, now up top, burst upon poor Morley like thunder. "Listen, you stool, I'm onto you. Playin' up to that kid chief, huh?" He clutched the Third's shirt for emphasis. "I just put that nut in his place, see, and the next time you blab stuff about me or the dam' oil fuel, I'll run you t'hell ashore!"

Morley's blackened eye still stung him, he couldn't see out of it at all—and even if he could have, he was no match for Boggs. So he took what the irate Second chose to render, just as he'd taken it many a time before.

Boggs walked to a rail, stood there a moment and came back with, "You don't understand. They's more to this oil racket than a guy like you sees. Me, I hate oil fuel, it ain't safe, it ain't perfected. Coal's the only steam-maker and coal keeps them lousy stokers to work like they ought to be. Did you ever face a real oil fire b'low there? No, and you never want to."

Scarcely had he said it when a terrific explosion rent the air. It shook the entire aft end of the *Hacienda*. It bowled stokers off their feet. It wrenched one burner clean off its ground joint and let the oil flow straight down to the plates where it spread. The unleashed fire licked out upon it, flames shot into the air, slithered over the plates. The hold filled with blue clouds that volleyed out into the engine room and men scrambled for their lives.

The explosion caught John Eames at the pump. He had righted it. He was drawing water off the settling tank at top speed when the plates under foot shook. A wall of air rocked him, sang in his ears, prickled his scalp. He spat blood from the gash Boggs had made under his nose. He swung about and ran.

While he ran, stokers in choking fumes were shying away from licking flames, fighting for the ladder on their way to safety. One had beaten the others, he had escaped before Morley arrived to haul them one by one out over the coaming. Morley counted. That one man wasn't there, so the Third, with one eye closed and blacker than the smoke, went down the ladder after him.

JOHN EAMES got to the emergency valves outside the bulkhead. He tried in vain to shut off the feed from that port settling tank. The rods evidently had bent and bound in the explosion. John glimpsed crawling, gasping men; he ran on, snatched

an extinguisher and hurried down the ladder while oilers came with scoops and sand, while Duff, standing by up top, yelled for Morley and the chief.

John knew well the danger in front of him; that next burner. and the next, might explode. Nevertheless they hadn't yet, so he stopped the flow of oil at the wrecked furnace front. He coughed and pawed his precarious way to every burner fed from the port tank, he shut them off and wheezed for air.

He dropped to his knees—only to dis-

cover that they were afire. He beat the rags there to smoking tatters, only to discover flames along his upper arms, his shoulders. Blisters were rising and he broke them, raw flesh stung to the acrid smoke. In his blind haste he had worked in intense heat, had blotted up oil to become unwittingly a potential torch.

Still slapping at smoking rags upon himself, he crawled toward the ladder. Air, he must get air into his aching lungs soon. He inched along until his reaching hands touched cloth. Flesh! It was gritty with sand—and more sand coming. Eames moved closer, took a sand shower from an oiler's scoop overhead and felt the length of that body. When he dared open his eyes, he saw Morley lying there. Morley, the little Third who hadn't dared to call Boggs, Morley whose eye had been punched shut by Boggs. And where the devil was Boggs in this crisis?

John tried to lift the unconscious Third. He coughed and gasped over him. He slumped down again, it was useless to hope to move the man up that ladder. Up a ladder? The chief in his half stifled condition began to doubt that he could hoist himself out of this hell-hole. But that Boggs, blast him! He should be here. Duff had the engine, oilers were sanding, but Boggs

---

A blob of more sand covered John's head, but it couldn't bury the grim purpose that had suddenly come over him. For he had divined the probable location of Boggs. He realized, now, why the irascible Second had been feeding water to burners in a little Third's watch. With such thoughts surging through him, John Eames reached the ladder. He climbed with a determination that only a grim errand could inspire. He was going for Boggs, the Boggs who had mauled him in the *Lake Forrest,* defied him here, and all but doubled him over a reversed pump to escape before he could retaliate. The time had come to attend to Boggs!

John poked his head past a scoopful of sand. He went on, he stumbled his way out of a cloud of fumes.

"Here's the chief!" someone yelled to the First.

Eames brushed them away. He gulped air and went on. He climbed up and outside into the starboard passageway. There he filled his lungs with the tang and chill of fresh, sea-borne air while sailors and steward's men crowded the engine room doorway. He drove them off with one hoarse bark and drove himself along the Second's room. The screen door was locked—on the inside, he observed significantly. He crashed his way through that door.

CRAVEN Boggs groaned as though he'd been invalided in the ruckus below. It was a simulated groan, however; he was faking it. John was sure of it, so positive that he made one swoop at the hulk that lay face to the wall. He snatched man, bedding and all to the floor—and Boggs was dressed even unto his dirty boots!

Eames flung the bedding aside. "Onto your feet and out of this!" he barked.

The effect was astonishing, for Boggs came off that snarl of bedclothes fighting. He fought for his very license, this time, fought to silence this young upstart who had ferreted him out, who certainly would tag him with everything that had gone wrong below.

Boggs lashed out with the insanity of a last minute stand. He clawed for a strangle hold. He cursed and growled and lunged in anew when holds failed.

And Long John took a beating. Burns and blisters bled, blows rocked and twisted and staggered him; it was an awful drubbing. And yet, through it all, he somehow managed to put Boggs between himself and the shattered screen door. He took more punishment until he got the Second within half his length of the coaming. Then, quite abruptly, John Eames came to life. He forsook mere defense to let go a lightning thrust of his long, right arm.

The fist smacked sweat; Boggs stopped the totally unexpected blow, bowled over backward and measured his length through the wrecked door. His clothing caught to splintered wood, wire screening interrupted his blows. In one violent heave he came up—only to be knocked down. Time and again he tried it, vowed he'd kill the cub and rocked backward whence he'd come.

But Eames had no mind to disable the man, he had further plans. He punished Boggs into submission, that was sufficient. Then he yanked him afoot and drove him to the engine room. Drove him to the nearest stairway. Down they went. At every landing they fought, off every landing John pushed and drove the rascal. Thus they reached the stokehold entrance.

At that point Boggs balked like a hog on ice. He fought again in a cloud of smoke and chemical fumes—and John drove him onto the iron ladder face outward like a landsman. But the Second descended because there was nothing else to do.

Below in the muck and fumes and sand, Eames relented not one particle. When Boggs spewed foul curses, John closed his mouth; when Boggs started for the ladder, John tripped him to the plates and wiped him around in the slime until he suddenly gave in, stared at the furnaces wild-eyed and became obedient—anything to get out of here.

John Eames made Boggs lift Morley to his shoulder; made him carry the brave little Third up the ladder, out the engine room and away to the steward's room for treatment. When it was done, the new chief led Biff Boggs to his own quarters and rumbled, "Stow your dunnage to go ashore in Havana. You're through aboard here." He stood by to see that his order was obeyed, while raw flesh and sand-filled blisters reminded him that he'd been below while this misfit had hidden in his bunk.

THE *Hacienda* did not heave to at sea because her chief had not forgotten the perishable cargo in her hold. She made half speed while he and his after gang effected repairs and got her ready for the jingler. Then she redoubled speed to make up the lost time. Until Morro Castle's historic grimness softened in the winter's sunlight, until Havana smiled in cooling winds and the *Hacienda* tied up. Tourists were gay over their thumbnail whiskies ashore. Crowds yelled their glee on sidelines at *jai alai*, and John Eames sat in his chief's room aboard ship with his tousled head in his hands. He had solved the *Hacienda's* riddle, he had established Chief Eames at the top of his relentless climb from a stokehole; yet, here he sat, sole alone in a fit of reaction and dread.

John dreaded the return to Boston. Every bag of sugar donkeying into the hatches seemed to warn him that he had chosen between Olive Lane and the sea. The dice had rolled, she was gone. His African diamond would come aboard in the ship's mail as soon as she docked next time—in Boston. Aye, the diamond ring and, possibly, a letter. Within a week, he'd be congratulated by the port chief and cursed by that farewell letter.

A week? His screen door flew open. The officers' mess boy breezed in, scaled a missive at his desk, breezed out, singing.

And John Eames glimpsed the handwriting, the air mail stamp. His shaking fingers made tatters of the envelope, they unfolded the letter. Somehow he managed to read until:

". . . have come to realize, honey, that a man's career can be his choicest right, his own to decide. And his wife's part in it all is to stand with him on that course unto the end. So hurry home, Johnnie boy, I'll be waiting . . ."

Dynamite Drury Decides that They All Had Dust in Their Eyes—and Some of It Gold Dust

Dust In His Eyes

By L. PATRICK GREENE

Author of "The Hill of Death," "Exceptional," and Other Stories of Dynamite Drury of the South African Police

THE brazen blare of a bugle sounded across the dusty parade ground of the British South Africa police. In answer to its summons, troopers—duty men as well as recruits—hurried to fall in for the stable parade which was forming just outside the long barrack hut.

Corporal Smithers looked into the hut to make sure there were no malingerers.

"Hi, Drury!" he yelled, his face purple with indignation. "What do you think this is?"

The man he addressed was sprawled full length on his bed under a mosquito netting. He opened one eye and drawled easily:

"Don't know. Never was much good at guessing riddles. You tell me, Corp. What is it?"

"Stable parade—that's what," the corporal snapped. "And I don't want any of your impudence. Didn't you hear the bugle——"

"Hear too many 'round this darned dump," Drury interrupted. "I'm goin' to complain about it to the C. O. Sure! I heard."

"Then get out on parade—and look sharp about it."

Drury turned over on his back, clasped his hands behind his head and looked up reflectively at a chameleon which was stalking a fly on the outside of his mosquito netting.

"There ain't no sense in hurryin'," he

objected. "Now you look at that feller, Corp. He don't hurry—but he gets his man."

"I'm warning you for the last time, Drury," the corporal said sternly. "Are you turning out for parade, or not?"

"Or not, Corp," Drury replied lazily.

"Are you reporting sick?" the corporal asked desperately.

The red-headed trooper refused to take advantage of the excuse the corporal had offered him.

"Nope," he said. "I ain't reportin' sick. I'm just goin' to have a little nap—then I'll get up."

"Look here, Drury," Corporal Smithers stammered. "I don't want to put you on the peg, but I'll have to if you don't turn

out. Why don't you act reasonably? With your qualifications—you know the country and you speak more native dialects than most of us know exist—you could win a corporal's stripes in no time, and——"

"An' make a nuisance of myself disturbin' a feller's sleep," Drury yawned. "No, thanks, Corp. It don't interest me."

Corporal Smithers sighed.

"Well, if you won't see sense, you can't blame me. Of course I'll have to report you."

He left the hut, slamming the door behind him, ignoring Drury's shout of:

"Hi! Wait a minute, Corp. Want to tell you something!"

THROUGH an open window Drury could see the two long lines of troopers and could hear the buzz of their voices. As he watched, the lines stiffened to attention, the talking ceased, obeying the raucous command of the squat, beetle-browed Troop Sergeant Major.

The roll was called and Drury's absence, to the amazement of the troopers, was not commented upon; nor was the T. S. M. at all interested in Corporal Smithers' explanation of Drury's non-attendance.

After the roll call the orders for the day were read, fatigue parties appointed and duty troopers warned for the day's routine patrols. And then:

"Number 1278, Trooper Drury," the T. S. M. read, "on being appointed Special Duty Trooper, with one shilling per day extra duty pay, is excused all parades, fatigues and routine patrols."

A few moments later the men marched off to the lines where, for an hour, they would groom horses whose coats already shone like satin.

Drury yawned, turned over and went to sleep again.

He needed that sleep. He had only just returned from an investigation to which he had been detailed by the commanding officer who had wished to test the value of using Drury's special talents for special duty only—the exceptional man for the exceptional case, as he put it. On the face of it, the case had seemed an ordinary one, but the developments had taxed the trooper's knowledge of native psychology to the uttermost. Also, he had been forced to trek on foot for a good many miles—and Drury hated walking.

He had counted on a good hour's sleep before the men returned from "stables" and turned the barrack hut into a bedlam of noise. In that he was disappointed. No sooner had the men marched down to the lines when a native orderly, dressed in the blue tunic, khaki shorts and red fez of the B. S. A. N. P. entered the hut and came to his bed.

"Inkosi!" the man said sharply. Drury groaned, turned over and sank yet deeper into the flood of sleep.

"Inkosi!" the native said again and reaching under the netting he shook Drury tentatively.

"What the hell!" Drury exclaimed, coming instantly awake. "Oh," he continued in the vernacular. "It is you, Guffa. Well?"

"The colonel *inkosi,* wants to see you," the native replied. "He said, 'Quickly.'"

"Tell him I hear and obey."

Before the orderly had left the hut Drury was out of bed. Despite his slow, drawling speech and lethargical pose he could be very swift—as dynamite is swift. In less than twenty minutes—bathed, shaved and dressed in the smart uniform of the B. S. A. P.—he presented himself at the office of the commanding officer. He looked efficient; no uniform could have made him smart. His tunic buttons were not burnished, his cloth puttees were not put on in the regulation way, the white patches of his riding breeches needed pipe-claying, his hair needed cutting and, moreover, a lock of it escaped from under his helmet and hung down untidily over his forehead.

"Yes, sir," Drury agreed blandly when the Regimental Sergeant Major commented sarcastically on all this. "An' my nose is too big. An' my legs are bowed—but then, I was born forkin' a horse. An' my

nose *is* useful; it keeps my mouth from getting sun-burnt. An' Sergeant-major, sir, the C. O. wants to see me. In a hurry, he said."

The R. S. M. tugged wrathfully at his mustache and muttered under his breath something to the effect that the C. O. was going balmy and that the force would go to the dogs if any more insubordinate ex-cow nurses were allowed to join it.

A voice from the inner office silenced him.

"Sergeant Major! If that's Trooper Drury, send him in to me at once."

"Very good, sir," the R. S. M. replied and opening the door he ushered Drury into the presence of the C. O.

"I didn't expect to have to call on you again so quickly, Drury," that man said

when the R. S. M. had retired. "But then, we are here to prevent crime and arrest criminals and we do not—er—control the output. There's a little matter at the Star Mine, in the Plum Tree District, I'd like you to investigate. I won't go into details. Sergeant Bland—he's in charge of the post at Mphoengs, two days' trek from the Star Mine—will give you those. But it's serious. Things are shaping up badly at the Star. There have been accusations of robbery and—" the C. O.'s voice took on a still more serious tone—"there have been shootings."

Drury laughed.

"That sounds commonplace enough, sir," he said. "I mean—shooting follows accusations like that as sure as night follows day."

"Not in this country, Drury. Men rarely carry revolvers and still more rarely use them. That's where we differ from your American West. Now I want you to go to the Star Mine and do what needs to be done. Sergeant Bland will be expecting you—at least he will be expecting a trooper to replace the trooper who was wounded trying to make an arrest. Here are your traveling vouchers and a letter to Sergeant Bland informing him that, during the course of this investigation, you rank as superior to him.

"That is all. Good morning and—good luck."

"Thank you, sir."

Drury took the papers the C. O. held out to him, saluted awkwardly, clumsily executed a right-about turn and left the office.

A FULL week later Trooper Drury came to the police outpost at Mphoengs. And he was not in the best of tempers. He had been met at the nearest train-halt, two days distant, by a native constable who had been impudently familiar until Drury fluently rehearsed the man's pedigree by which it appeared that the man's ancestors had been, to say the least, promiscuous. After that the native constable had been properly respectful. But the man's respect could not work miracles; it could not change the mule which had been sent for Drury to ride, into a horse.

Drury was in a hurry, but the mule's best pace was a bone-shaking trot. Also, she had a perverse desire to back into every thorn bush she saw—and she saw many! —greatly to her rider's discomfort. All this Drury could have borne with equanimity had the district been in the fly belt. But there were horses at the outpost; it was the fact that one of them had not been sent for him to ride which was the cause of his ill-temper.

"Hi!" he shouted as he rode up to the neat rows of native-built huts, each surrounded by a circle of whitewashed stones, which formed the police post. "Hi!" he shouted wrathfully to the dapper little ser-

geant who came out of one of the huts to greet him. "What the hell's the idea of sending that wall-eyed, cross grained old cow of a mule for me to ride on? You've got horses at this post, ain't you?"

"We have," the sergeant replied crisply. "But I'm particular about the horses in my charge and until a trooper stationed here proves he knows how to treat a horse—he rides a mule."

At any other time Drury might have sympathized with the sergeant's attitude—but not now; he was too acutely conscious of the uncomfortable two days he had spent on the back of the mule. Worst of all, the animal's slow pace had kept him too long on the road at a time when time *might* be valuable. So he said hotly:

"You knew I was coming—then what's the idea of sending a mule for me to ride?"

"I expected," the sergeant returned icily, "a trooper to replace Trooper Gray who has gone sick. You're not the C. O. in disguise, are you? No. I thought not. Then what the hell do you mean by addressing a non-commissioned officer as you've addressed me? Stand to attention, you lout."

Drury's first angry impulse was to pick up the irate little man and bend him over his knee. Then his sense of humor commenced to function and he laughed until the tears rolled down his cheek.

"When you've finished, I'll begin," Sergeant Bland snapped.

"Darned if I don't think you would," Drury gasped admiringly. "Hell. I didn't mean to get off on the wrong foot. Only—I don't cotton to riding mules."

A NATIVE constable came out of one of the huts and Drury ordered him to take charge of the mule.

"You'll off-saddle and groom the mule yourself," Sergeant Bland said as the native came forward hesitatingly.

"Like hell, I—" Drury began. Then, "Say, I don't know what's the matter with me. I was nearly insubordinate again, wasn't I? But see here. We're talking at cross-purposes. Here—" he handed the sergeant the C. O.'s letter. "Read that and then you'll understand that I ain't, maybe, as uppity as I sound."

When he had read the letter the sergeant handed it back to Drury and repeated that man's commands to the native in stilted, but correct vernacular. As the mule was led away, he scrutinized Drury very closely, then said tersely:

"I am notified that I am to consider you my senior in rank during your investigations of the trouble at the Star Mine. Very well. Do you want the facts of the case now, or would you rather have skoff first?"

"We can have both together, I reckon," Drury replied easily. "But see here, there's no call for you to act as if I had the plague. I——"

Bland ignored that.

"You can have my hut while you're here," he said almost primly. "This is it. You will want to wash up. I'll send my servant to see that you have everything you want. We have skoff at seven."

"Hi, listen," Drury began to expostulate, but the sergeant walked away, his back as stiff as a ram-rod.

Entering the sergeant's hut Drury found in the meticulous neatness of the place further evidence of Bland's routine-ordered mind. Nothing was out of place—and everything had its place.

"Huh!" Drury grunted. "This hut gives me the willies. I bet he parts his hair and goes to bed by numbers."

When he entered the skoff hut some time later, Drury was greeted by Bland with a chilling demonstration of formal hospitality. For a little while they ate in silence, efficiently waited upon by the sergeant's servant.

"That's the best meal I've had in a dog's age," Drury said at length. "Your nigger's a good cook, Serg. Where did you get him?"

"Charles—we do not call natives 'niggers' at my post, Drury—came to me from

Mr. Reardon, the manager of the Star Mine. Why?"

"Just wondered," Drury said airily. "But say, where are the troopers who are stationed here?"

"They're all out on patrol."

"Routine patrols?"

"Of course."

Drury grinned.

"They would be. But ain't you got none investigating this trouble at the Star?"

"No. In my opinion that's blown over. The man who caused all the trouble has left the district. At least—" the sergeant amended cautiously—"I think he has left the district."

DRURY yawned. "Looks as if I made this trip for nothing. But, as I'm here, I'd better go through the motions. What was the trouble?"

"Some of the men accused another group of men of stealing gold from the mine. Then the first group was accused of the same thing by the others. Both parties were wrong, of course—but for a time things were rather awkward. However ——"

"Hi, wait a minute," Drury interrupted. "Was there any gold stolen?"

"Of course not."

"Then why——?"

"It was all a rumor started by a disgruntled miner who had been given notice to quit. But as I was saying, the situation was an ugly one for a time but with the aid of Mr. Reardon I managed to get things straightened out. That's all."

"As simple as kiss your hand," Drury commented idly. "Well, there seems nothing I can do."

"You have your instructions," the sergeant said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Sure. But I'm thinkin' the C. O. sent me on this case so's to get me out of the way. I ain't over popular at headquarters."

"I can well believe that," the sergeant retorted. "And I'd like to know why you were appointed special duty man. Your qualifications are not apparent."

"Ain't it the truth?" Drury chuckled. "Mebbe it's because I act sort of sudden on occasion. I'm called 'Dynamite' by folks who know me real well. About this case now—the C. O. said something about a shooting. What's the dope on that?"

The sergeant frowned.

"Trooper Gray believed that he had sufficient evidence to warrant the arrest of a man named Turner——"

"On what charge?"

"Conduct liable to cause a breach of the law. He was inciting some miners to attack the manager."

"An' what happened?"

"Turner resisted arrest. He fired at Trooper Gray, wounding him in the right shoulder, and escaped. Turner—" the sergeant added as if it explained not only Turner's lawlessness but Drury's unmilitary appearance as well—"was an American, too."

"Hell—was he now? An' what was Gray doin' to let a suspected man get the drop on him like that? I suppose he warned him—hand on his shoulder an' so on?"

"Of course. My men know how to perform their duties."

"*An'* how to stop a bullet," Drury commented. "Say, is this feller blind, or scared of guns or something?"

"He's an unusually good shot with rifle and revolver."

"An' so he got away," Drury said thoughtfully.

"Yes. We were able to follow his spoor for a few miles, then we lost his trail completely. However, unless he's left the district, we'll get him. I forgot to mention that he fired on the men Mr. Reardon led to try to capture him after he had shot Trooper Gray. He's a dangerous man."

"Seems as if," Drury agreed. "Did he hit anybody?"

"Fortunately, no."

DRURY tugged at the lobe of his right ear.

"What sort of feller is this Reardon,

now? What had Turner got against him?"

The sergeant laughed.

"Turner was under notice of dismissal. By way of foolish revenge, he claimed that he had proof Mr. Reardon was defrauding the owners of the mine."

"An' had he?"

"The idea is amusing. Mr. Reardon is a *pukka sahib.*"

"Come again," Drury begged. He was honestly bewildered by the Anglo-Indian expression. "That's a vernacular I don't know."

"He's a gentleman," the sergeant said shortly.

"How far is it to the Star Mine?"

"About forty miles. You're planning to go there?"

"Yep. I reckon I ought to have a talk with this *puk*—with the gentleman, Mr. Reardon. Got to get his statement that things are peaceful. I take it your horse ain't strong enough to carry my weight?"

"Strong enough to carry two like you," the sergeant replied crisply.

"An' fast?"

"*And* fast."

Drury tugged at his ear again.

"I'm trekking for the Star first thing in the morning," he said.

"You're riding the mule?"

"I'm not," Drury said firmly. "I'm taking your horse."

"I'm damned if you are," the sergeant's denial was very heated. "You can have Trooper Gray's horse."

"Is it faster than yours? No. Well—I want yours." His hand went to his tunic pocket. "Would you like to read the C. O.'s letter again?"

"Very well," Sergeant Bland said disconsolately. "But if you don't bring my horse back in as good condition as he is now, if I find the slightest suspicion of a saddle gall on him, I'll——" He did not complete his threat.

"Right. Well, you tell this nigger of yours that I want skoff at half past four tomorrow morning. An' give word to somebody to have your horse saddled ready for me to trek at five. S'long! I'm turnin' in now. No call for you to see me off. Hi, though. I don't know the way to the Star. Suppose you've got a map of the district?"

"There's one in the office hut."

"Then let's go an' have a look at it."

DRURY slept like a log that night. Not because he was tired as a result of the two days' trek on mule back, but because he had a hunch that the morrow would be a full day. And sleep was the best preparation for that. So—Drury slept. But he woke promptly at four the next morning. He was shaved, dressed and in the skoff hut at four-thirty. His breakfast, which he ate by the light of an oil lamp, consisted

of coffee and grilled buck kidneys. He was waited upon by an under-sized, meek-faced Bechuana.

"Where is Charles, the sergeant's boy?" Drury asked.

"He is sick, *inkosi,*" the native replied glibly. "He is very sick." He put two neat packages on the table beside Drury and a thermos flask. "The sergeant *inkosi* tell me to do this for you," he said. "Sandwiches and coffee."

Drury nodded and looked up with a start of surprise when the sergeant, carrying a hurricane lantern, entered. The sergeant was dressed as smartly as if he were going on a ceremonial parade.

"That was a good thought," Drury said, indicating the packages and thermos with a nod of his head. "But hell, man. There

was no call for you to act as a speed-me-on-my-way committee of one."

"I've got up to see how you shape on a horse."

"Well—here's hoping I think as much of your horse as you do. He ought to be a world beater." He looked at his watch. As he did so a native's voice could be heard talking soothingly to a horse.

"Right on time," Drury commented. "Do you run all your affairs on a time table?"

"We are punctual, if that's what you mean."

"Well, that's something new in this country. With most people the day after tomorrow is generally time enough."

The two men rose and went outside.

The eastern sky was brightening and the imminence of the sun's rising made the sergeant's lantern unnecessary. Both men shivered, for there was a breeze blowing and a Rhodesian morning, before the sun is well up, can be very cold.

"Hurry, Guffa!" the sergeant shouted.

A native policeman leading a horse—saddled and bridled—came into view. Both men started at the horse's gait. The animal was lame and as the native halted it just in front of the two men, it raised its near hind leg gingerly.

"What have you been doing to lame the horse, Guffa?" the sergeant demanded hotly.

"Nothing, *inkosi*. *Is* he lame?"

"He is," the sergeant said grimly. And to Drury, "That settles it. You'll have to ride the mule. Gray's horse—I've been thinking it over—is too light for you; and you can see for yourself—my horse is lame."

"Yep. I can see. He's lame, no doubt about that."

Drury went to the horse, spoke soothingly to it in a low voice and ran an expert hand down its withers to its fetlock. He stooped, his back to the sergeant, and seemed to be massaging the horse's fetlock. Then, rising, his hands thrust deep in his breeches pocket, he turned and faced the sergeant.

"It's nothing," he announced. "Bit stiff in the joint—that's all. It'll pass off by the time he's properly warmed up."

"Orders or no orders," the sergeant said positively, "you are not going to ride him. Take the horse to the stable, Guffa. Presently I will come and tend to him."

But before the native could carry out the sergeant's instructions Drury had snatched the reins from his hands and had vaulted into the saddle. The sergeant ran forward and tried to grab hold of the bridle but Drury, bending low, pushed the flat of his hand—so that the heel of his palm struck the sergeant's jaw—full into the other's face, sending him reeling backward. Before he could recover, Drury had spurred swiftly away.

"You cruel swine!" the sergeant shouted. "You ought to be shot for riding a lame animal like that. You——" He stopped abruptly and a puzzled look came into his eyes. "At least," he muttered as if reluctantly admitting the fact to himself, "he can ride."

ONCE out of sight of the police post, Drury reined the horse to a walk and proceeded at that pace for a little while. Five minutes later he halted, dismounted and thoroughly massaged the horse's fetlock. When he mounted again he grinned knowingly; the heat and swelling he had previously detected had disappeared—so, too, had the horse's lameness.

Just as the rising sun, which had been painting the sky with lurid colors, shot above the horizon, Drury turned into the trail which—so a neatly painted sign board told an empty world—led to the Star Mine. And then Drury sat down and rode as he well knew how to ride. He was in a hurry and he wanted to cover forty miles in the shortest possible time. But that does not mean he spurred his horse to a breakneck gallop. Drury was a horseman. He knew how to get the best out of an animal, how

to conserve its strength so that—even at the end of a long trek—it would have a reserve to answer any unexpected demands which might be made upon it.

Drury gave a great deal of thought to the sergeant as he rode, though he seemed to be mentally, and physically asleep, his supple body giving easily to the rocking-chair gait of the horse. The sergeant's attitude puzzled him and he was still without an answer to the riddle when he came to a water hole which, if the police map was accurate, was half way to the mine. It was hidden amongst a patch of thick bush which grew about the base of a gaunt kopje. Here Drury off-saddled, rubbed the horse down, superintended its drinking, turned it loose to graze, and sat himself down where he was screened from chance observation yet commanded a wide spreading view of the country.

The sun was now high in the sky, and the veldt baked beneath its heat, making all shade an illusion.

Drury took the packages of food and the thermos flask from his saddle wallets and considered them thoughtfully, finally deciding he was not hungry and that water would satisfy his thirst better than the steaming contents of the flask. He dug a hole in the sandy soil a little distance from the water hole and drank sparingly of the water which slowly filtered into it, then he sat down again, rolled and lighted a cigarette and stared thoughtfully over the veld.

Here and there, visible only to the keenest of eyes, thin columns of blue smoke rose into the air, marking the location of native kraals. On the far distant horizon the tin-roofed buildings at the mine reflected the sun's rays. And Drury could hear, very faintly, the metallic *tot tot tot tot* of the stamps at the mine's crushing mill. Or perhaps he fancied he heard them, for the sun's heat seemed to have fused all sounds into the somnolent drone of bees.

Drury yawned and composed himself for a short nap, setting the alarm clock of his mind to awaken him in half an hour's time. But scarcely ten minutes had passed when Drury awoke to a consciousness that something was wrong. He passed through no intermediate stage of sleep to wakefulness. Instantly he was physically and mentally alert. He sat up and stared thoughtfully before him, wondering what had awakened him. The horse was stamping uneasily, its head raised, its ears pricked.

Drury's hand dropped to his revolver. It was a gesture that to a casual observer looked to be no more than an adjusting of his belt.

"Funny," he muttered, and then he laughed.

A breeze had sprung up, blowing from the direction of the mine, and dancing over the veld were two dust devils, cone shaped pillars of dust—probably from the mine dump—which the wind had whipped up into the air and was now driving before it; they looked like two gigantic funnels rising from the veldt to the cloudless sky.

DRURY rose and going to the horse, patted it soothingly. As he did so the direction of the wind changed and drove the dust cones directly toward Drury. They advanced with surprising speed, bending and twisting as if they danced to some unheard dance rhythm. When they were not far distant from Drury the wind which had created them ceased as suddenly as it had sprung into being and an avalanche of fine dust was precipitated upon the veld. The air was filled for a little while by a miniature sand storm and Drury, exposing himself in his attempts to soothe and protect the horse, was covered with dust. It filtered between his clothing and his skin. It entered his mouth, ears and nostrils. Some got into his eyes and, for a little while, he was almost blinded.

Rubbing his smarting eyes with the back of his hand, cursing luridly, Drury groped his way to the water hole. Soaking his handkerchief in the water he bathed his red, inflamed eyes. Suddenly he sprang to his feet and whirled round, his revolver

in his hand, ready for action. But he did not fire. Instead he obeyed the curt order of the man who had crept up on him silently. Drury was no reckless fool. The other man had the drop on him and, judging from the hard, cold light which glinted in his black eyes, he would not hesitate to use the revolver he aimed at Drury's middle.

"That's wise," the man said as Drury tossed his revolver on to a clump of grass and raised his hands above his head. "Now turn round—and keep your hands up. I've been on short rations the past few days and hunger plays hell with a man's temper."

Concealing his chagrin, Drury again obeyed and meekly submitted to being thoroughly searched.

"Ah! What's this?" The stranger had found Drury's shoulder holster under the tunic and had extracted the weapon it contained. "This isn't the custom out in this country. You must be a bit of an exception amongst the Mounties."

"That's just what I am," Drury growled. "An exception! Special Duty only! That's me. An' I let a feller get the drop on me like as if I was a green rookie. Can I turn round now, mister?"

"Yes. Say, you're no Limey. American, aren't you?"

"Yep. Same as you. Different State, though. I've been in this country a good many years an' I always reckon I talk like a Limey. But they tell me not."

The other laughed.

"They're right. But listen, we ought to get together. But hell! That's not so simple. You're one of Sergeant Bland's pets."

"Do I look like anybody's pet?" Drury expostulated. "Sure we ought to get together. You're the feller Bland told me about—you're Turner, ain't you?"

"I am. Now then—none of that. Keep your hands up."

"Just as you like," Drury drawled. "Only it looks durn foolish an' standin' here, full in the sun, ain't my idea of the place or way to have a quiet talk."

"Right," Turner said slowly. "We'll go and sit down where you was having a snooze. Go on: lead the way and don't try any tricks. I'll blow your spine into your belly if you're fool enough to try anything."

"This," Drury chuckled as he led the way to his resting place, "is one of the times when I'll take darned good care not to act foolish."

THEY sat down facing one another, Turner with Drury's two revolvers stuck in the belt which supported his tattered trousers. Turner was young, not more than twenty-three or four—but his face was lined with hunger and in his eyes was the desperate look of a hunted animal. His chin was covered with a black, stubbled growth and, Drury guessed, it was only by exercise of great self control that he managed to keep his gun hand from trembling.

Drury said placidly:

"I'll give you my parole for an hour. I ain't in such a hell of a hurry that I can't stay here for a bit an' have a talk with you."

Turner looked at him suspiciously but remarked, "I'll take you on that. But I'm damned if I know what I'm going to do with you after the hour's up."

Drury laughed.

"Murderers don't have much difficulty in disposing of the body in this country," he said lightly.

"I'm no murderer," Turner said shortly as he put his revolver into its holster.

"What you got against Bland?" Drury asked. "He's a smart policeman, ain't he?"

"Smart?" Turner laughed sarcastically. "He can spot a bit of dirt on the tunic button of one of his men a mile away. But he couldn't see a crook even if the crook was sitting right under his nose."

"Meanin' Reardon?" Drury observed. "Well, suppose you give me the low-down on all this trouble at the mine?"

"What's the good?" Turner asked sullenly. "You've heard Bland's tale. It isn't likely you'd believe mine. Anyway—I've no proof, only suspicions."

"I've a few myself. Let's hear yours." But Turner refused to be drawn. Drury continued casually, "Bland reckons you've left the district. Why haven't you?"

"Because I want to be on hand for the show down," Turner retorted fiercely. "I want to see Reardon get what's coming to him. The swine!"

"I wonder," Drury said as if to himself, "if that's what Bland meant by *pukka sahib?*"

"Bland! He thinks Reardon is what Reardon pretends to be. He—say, I don't understand you. You're a trooper. There's a warrant out for my arrest. Bland calls me a dangerous man. Then what's the idea of you playing the friendly game with me? Are you planning to spring some trap?"

"Nothin' like that," Drury assured him. "But say, why don't you give yourself up?"

"And be tried for attempted murder?" Turner exclaimed.

"Mebbe that could be squared. I take it you didn't try to kill the trooper who was set on arresting you?"

"I shot him where I meant to shoot him."

Drury nodded.

"Well—why resist arrest in the first place? Hell! The crime he wanted you for was nothing that couldn't have been settled by a fine an' being bound over, or some such."

"I was a bit hot-headed," Turner admitted. "But——" He stopped and lapsed into a sullen silence, looking distrustfully at Drury and ignoring Drury's attempts to inveigle him into fresh confidences.

"Well, listen," Drury said slowly. "If you won't talk, mebbe I'd better. You may not believe it, but I ain't a regular trooper. I'm ear-marked 'special—for exceptional cases only.' Well, I was sent up here specially to investigate the trouble at the Star. Didn't know much about it when I left headquarters; don't know much about it now. All I got is a lot of crazy suspicions, an' the craziest is that the coffee or the grub—or both—Bland had put up for me to bring along today was poisoned, drugged, anyway. An' I got a hunch that Bland didn't want me to go out to the Star, an' that things ain't as quiet there as he makes out. An' I got another hunch that Reardon, now, is the villain of the piece an'

that he an' Bland are workin' together." Drury laughed softly. Turner was looking less sullen.

"An' what have I got to justify these fool suspicions of mine?" Drury continued. "Nothing much; first of all the sergeant sent a mule for me to ride from the station halt, instead of a horse. That delayed my getting out to the police post. 'Course Bland's explanation for sending the mule may have been the right one—on the other hand, mebbe not. Then he seemed to be too ready to take the part of Reardon against you. I gathered that he didn't even take the trouble to investigate the accusations you made against Reardon. Then Bland's pet nigger servant, Charles, come to him from Reardon. An' Charles, I'm guessing, wasn't at the police-post this mornin' when I left. Another nigger said he was sick. Mebbe. But I'm gamblin' he headed for the Star last night as soon as he heard I was on my way there this mornin'. Sure, I know this is all guess work an' that you ain't listenin' much, or overly interested. But you ought to be. Anyway, here's my biggest bit of proof—

hell, it's my only proof!—that things ain't all as they should be. Look at this."

THIS was a long piece of black silk thread which Drury took from his breeches pocket.

"The sergeant didn't want me to ride his horse out here," he continued. "He didn't want me to be in a hurry. An' this mornin', when his horse was brought up to the skoff hut for me, it was lame. An' I found this thread tied tight round its fetlock. That's what had caused the swellin' an' lameness. Now the question is; did Bland tie that hair round his horse's fetlock, or was it done without his knowledge? If he did it, was it because he reckoned I wasn't fit to be trusted with his horse or because he wanted to delay my getting to the Star?"

"Knowing Lake," Turner interposed, "I can't see him laming his horse."

"You never know. But maybe you're right. An' if you're right this bit of silk was tied where I found it by Charles. Well, that checks up all right if your opinion of Reardon is correct. Well, now——"

"Oh, never mind about all that," Turner exclaimed impatiently. "I'm hungry and thirsty, I tell you. I've been on short rations. All I've had is what I could steal from the corn patch belonging to the kraal at the back of this kopje. White man's grub'll be a life saver after the mush I've been eating."

"An' I tell you," Drury warned, "that you'd better leave them sandwiches an' coffee alone."

"Why?" Turner asked, his mouth now full of food.

"Haven't I told you?" Drury said wearily. "I figure that one or the other, or both, is doped." As he spoke Drury aimed a kick at the flask—the coffee he thought was the greatest danger—but Turner snatched it away.

"None of that," he shouted, and drawing his revolver he balanced it on his updrawn knees. "Another move like that—damn it, man. I'm hungry. Don't try me too far."

"If that's doped, as I suspect," Drury said caustically with a shrug of his shoulders, "it'll try you a darn sight further than I'm ever likely to."

"It isn't and it won't," Turner retorted. He poured out some coffee into the cup top of the flask and sipped it experimentally. "Bit sour," he said. "But good."

He drained the cup and poured out some more. Once again suspicion of Drury lined his face. "What's the idea of trying to scare me with that poison yarn?"

Drury shrugged his shoulders but said nothing.

Turner ate and drank with the gluttonous speed of a half-starved man and then, very suddenly, collapsed. The coffee cup dropped from a hand that had lost power to hold it, his eyes closed and he slumped over sideways to the ground.

Cursing himself because he had not made a more forceful attempt to stop Turner from eating and drinking, Drury bent anxiously over the man. He listened to the beating of his heart and his slow, heavy breathing. He shook him, slapped his face and tried to rouse him—without success. Turner was lost in a drugged sleep.

This demonstration that one of his suspicions, at least, was right roused Drury's wrath and there was a cold glint in his blue eyes which boded ill for the man responsible for the drugging of the food. But just now the disposal of Turner was the immediate problem. Obviously his, Drury's, presence was not wanted at the Star Mine and that made him all the more eager to get there without further delay. He had no intention of staying with Turner until the effect of the drug wore off; on the other hand he could not leave him there alone, neither could he pack him along with him to the mine.

HE FINALLY decided to take him to the kraal Turner had spoken of at the back of the kopje and entrust him to the care of the headman. It was possible, he thought, that the drug used was a native

one; if that were so, the people at the kraal might know of an antidote.

A few minutes later Drury, with Turner hanging limply over the horse's shoulder, rode slowly away from the place. He reached the kraal of which Turner had spoken half an hour later. The headman, a fine old warrior, took charge of the doped man.

"Au-a!" he said, after he and a wizened old hag skilled in the craft of healing had examined Turner. "He will not die. But he will not awaken until the sun is falling to its setting."

"Then I leave him with you," Drury said. "I have work to do. When he wakes, see that he does not leave this place."

The headman chuckled.

"He will not want to leave, *inkosi.* He will be very sick. The sleep medicine always acts that way." As Drury mounted and was about to ride away, he asked, "And where does the *inkosi* go?"

"To the mine—to talk with Inkosi Reardon."

The headman scowled.

"Bring that one back here, *inkosi,"* he said, "and leave him in our care. We will see to it that he never wakes."

"So?" Drury exclaimed. "But the sergeant *inkosi* speaks of him as he would of a man in whom there is no blame."

"Au-a! The sergeant *inkosi*—pardon *inkosi!*—is a fool."

"And not evil?"

The headman hesitated. Then:

"I think not, *inkosi*—save as a fool is evil. Save, because he is a fool, he does not see that Reardon *inkosi* is evil."

"And in what way is Reardon *inkosi* evil?"

The headman indicated a little half-caste boy with a sudden out-thrusting of his lips.

Drury nodded understandingly, and frowned. His opinion of a white man who consorted with native women was a very low one.

"Does the sergeant *inkosi* know of this?" he asked.

"He has been told—but he will not believe. He believes instead the lies that his servant tells him; and his servant is still the servant of Reardon, *inkosi.* And now I think more evil is being planned for at sun up one of my young men saw the sergeant *inkosi's* servant riding to the mine."

"Riding?" Drury questioned sharply.

"But yes, *inkosi.* The Inkosi Reardon keeps a horse for him at the police post."

Drury cursed inwardly. He felt that he had been badly at fault in not making an investigation of conditions at the police post and he wished more than ever that he had prevented Turner from drinking the doped coffee. He considered for a moment waiting until that man awoke from his drugged sleep, but almost immediately decided against doing so. Attempts had been made to delay his arrival at the mine; all the more reason, then, for him to get there with the least possible delay. So he raised his hand in a farewell salute to the headman and spurred swiftly away.

THE sun had set and the veldt was covered with the darkness which is Africa's night when Drury left the cover of the bush and rode along the dirt road leading to the Star Mine. He had changed his plans again soon after leaving the kraal, deciding that it would be better to arrive at the mine unseen, in the darkness. With that in view he had trekked comparatively slowly, taking advantage of whatever the veldt afforded. He reasoned that nothing seriously criminal was likely to be enacted at the mine in the daytime, but at night—specially as the sergeant's "boy" would have reported that he was deep in a drugged sleep somewhere out on the veldt—when the canteen was open and men inflamed with drink, many things might happen.

Before him now yellow blobs of light broke the darkness ahead, marking the location of the white miners' barrack-like huts and the canteen. From the native laborers' compound, some distance to the right, came the sound of singing. Drury reined to a halt and listened attentively.

"Nothin' wrong there, at any rate," he commented as he rode on again. "Them niggers are peaceful an' happy."

Then, suddenly, shouts of angry excited men sounded ominously through the darkness.

Drury cursed and spurred to a fast gallop, trusting to his horse to keep to the road and find safe foothold.

Guided by the shouting he came to a long, low building which was the mine canteen. Judging from the noise which emanated from it a riot was in progress.

Dismounting, Drury ran up the stoep steps and peered through one of the open windows. The canteen was a barn-like structure lighted by three oil lamps hanging from the low ceiling. The place was filled with angry, gesticulating men facing the bar which was just inside the window. And on this bar stood three men; above the head of the center one a noose dangled from one of the roof's supporting beams.

One of the men—he was a tall, hatchet-faced individual, immaculately dressed in white duck, the ends of his mustache curling upward—Drury rightly judged to be Reardon, the manager of the mine. The center man, obviously the prisoner of the other two, was a fair-haired youngster but, at the moment, fear of a violent death had destroyed youth. His hands were tied behind his back and he was gagged. The third man on the bar was a gigantic Boer. He was, although outwardly sober, under the influence of liquor. He held the youngster's left arm in the grip of his ham-like fist. Occasionally he twisted it and grinned with delight at the wince of pain which then contorted his victim's face.

Drury squatted down on his haunches outside the window. He was content for the moment to see and listen, believing that nothing worse was happening than the hazing of a new chum. Just the same he was ready, should the occasion demand it, should the hazing go too far, for one of those devastating moves which had earned for him his nickname.

AS HE watched the man Reardon held up his hand, appealing for silence. He was supported by the Boer who yelled belligerently:

"Shut up, you *verdoemte* fools. Let Baas Reardon speak his say or me, Black Pete, you will have to deal with."

In the silence which followed, Reardon said in a soft persuasive voice:

"Let's have fair play, lads. I know how you feel about this business, but we can't string Martin up without a trial."

"What's the sense o' that," someone bellowed. "We know the young swine's guilty. A trial won't prove him more guilty."

"No," Reardon agreed with a laugh, "but it might prove him innocent."

"Oh, cut the cackle," another miner shouted. "He's guilty. There's the rope. What's the use of wasting time? I'm thirsty."

Reardon waited with an affectation of good humor until the laughter had died down. Then he said:

"No. We'll do things in an orderly manner. There'll probably be trouble as it is when the police get to hear of it. There's a trooper on his way out here now and——"

"One of Lake's pets! It'll be easy to throw dirt in his eyes. He's most likely stopped on the way to clean his buttons. He won't be here until tomorrow."

"It's more likely that he's having a sleep somewhere," Reardon laughed. "Just the same, there's no sense doing things like a lot of madmen. Let's be calm—and just, then we'll be able to tell our tale to the trooper, when he *does* show up, with easy consciences."

"It won't be easy to explain a hanging," a gray-bearded miner said solemnly.

"As easy as that." Reardon snapped his fingers. "Accidents will happen—even in a mine as well run as this. A man can break his neck just as easy falling down a shaft as dropping at the end of a rope. Now then." He stamped on the bar. "I declare the Court open."

"Order in Court!" a drunken voice from the back intoned in a mock serious voice.

"I'll just state the facts," Reardon began.

"To hell with all that," a drunken voice shouted. "We've been through it all once. He's guilty—string him up."

There was a din of shouting at that. Most of the men, inflamed by drink, were for instant execution. A few, a very few, wanted things done in a more orderly way.

"Take the gag out of the lad's mouth," the gray-bearded miner shouted, "an' let

him tell us his story again. Maybe he's telling the truth. Maybe——"

But he was shouted down.

"We don't want to hear any more of Martin's lies!"

"He's guilty—no question about that."

"The dirty swipe of a murderer!"

Once again the big Dutchman backed up the mine manager's appeal for silence.

"Well, gentlemen," Reardon then said, "you know the facts. What's your verdict?"

There was a loud response of "Guilty" accompanied by hilarious laughter which drowned the voices of the more sober miners.

"And the sentence?" Reardon asked.

"Oh to hell with this talking. String him up."

THE Dutchman adjusted the noose about Martin's neck and threw the other end of the rope to some miners in the foremost row, nearest the bar counter. They grabbed it eagerly.

And that was the moment that Drury, convinced now that the men meant to carry the farcical trial to its grim conclusion, decided to take a hand.

He entered the room and fired a shot from his revolver into the air. His voice would have been unheard amidst the uproar, but the report was a challenge the miners answered. The men who had taken the rope dropped it as if it had suddenly become charged with a fatal voltage.

For a moment there was the silence of consternation then Reardon muttered something to Black Pete who shouted thickly:

"*Ach sis,* men, never mind the pretty policeman. I'll deal with him after we have finished with Martin."

As he spoke he tugged at the rope, pulling Martin to the tip of his toes.

"Stop that!" Drury ordered curtly. Then, "Court's closed, boys. Come an' get your drinks. I'm shoutin'."

The men faced him, indecision showing plainly in the way they fidgeted.

"Don't take any notice of him, boys," Reardon said with a sneer. "He sounds like a Yank and we all know they're all talk." And to Drury he said, "You've come at a bad time, Trooper. Martin here is a murderer and the boys mean to see that justice is done."

"That's what I'm here for," Drury interrupted.

"You? We've seen how you troopers handle things! We don't intend to give you the chance to let Martin get away like Turner did. Are we, boys?"

"No." The answer came in an angry full-throated roar.

Reardon smiled.

"You see, Trooper. I've pleaded with the boys to let the law take its course——"

"Yep. I heard you," Drury said dryly.

Reardon flushed.

"Well, there you are. They've been drinking too much to listen to reason."

"They'll listen to the reason I talk," Drury said with a significant glance at his revolver.

Reardon ignored the hint.

"Better let the boys deal with Martin in their own way. He's a murderer and it

would be dangerous to interfere. We'll go and have a drink at my place. You needn't worry. No one will report you for neglect of duty. And if anyone did—I can handle Lake; he'll believe anything I tell him."

"I'll deal with you later," Drury said tersely. "Right now, if you're wise, you'll shut up an' let me talk to the men. Better still, clear out."

Reardon winked significantly at the big Boer who shouted:

"Almighty! If the policeman interferes we'll string him up too. *Ach sis!* Watch. I'll show you how we make *verdoemte* swine like this dance in the Transvaal."

He heaved at the rope.

There was a sharp report and Black Pete gazed stupidly at the blood streaming from his broken wrist. The bullet which had punctured his wrist also punctured his courage and he sat down on the bar counter, moaning loudly and rocking back and forth.

DRURY sprang on to the counter, meeting Reardon's futile rush with a smashing uppercut which sent that man sprawling on top of the miners who had surged forward to grab the rope the Boer had dropped.

"The next man who touches that rope," Drury shouted, "will get a bullet through his thick skull. Now we'll talk."

"Don't listen to him," Reardon shouted thickly, his hand to his jaw. "Get him out of the way and string Martin up. Ten to one this trooper is planning to share the loot with Martin and Turner."

It was a wild accusation, but it sufficed to unite the miners against law and order.

They milled forward in an ugly rush. Bottles were thrown by men in the rear. One caught Drury a glancing blow on the side of the head. Realizing that the time was not ripe for velvet gloved diplomacy, Drury acted.

Three or four well directed shots extinguished the spluttering oil lamps and in the confusion the trooper threw the noose off Martin's neck and cut the rope which bound his hands.

"I'm standing here at the door," Drury called a few moments later, "an' the first man who tries to light a lamp, or tries to rush me'll need an undertaker. Now then, who knows the little ditty about the *Intombi* of Inyati?"

Someone shouted:

"Who doesn't?"

"Sing it then," Drury said with a chuckle. "An' when you're through you can light the lamps. Martin ought to be out of your reach by then. An' don't forget; I'll be right here at the door. Now then:

"'There was an *intombi* of Inyati,
"Who said——"

Without further urging several drink-mellowed voices took up the song and before the first verse was finished the rest laughingly joined in.

Before the second stanza was under way, the sound of horses' hoofs came to some of the miners.

"They've gone," a Cockney called shrilly. "Both the scum are gone." The others gave no heed as they happily bellowed the song which relates the questionable morals of the young lady from Inyati.

Reardon was able to arouse the wounded Boer from his stupor but his attempts to incite the others to give chase to Drury and Martin utterly failed. He looked furtively about the canteen then sidled out unobserved by all except Black Pete.

"What do you want, you oaf?" Reardon snapped as the Boer caught him by the coat collar.

"Where you goin'?" the Boer asked stolidly. "The game's up, not? Almighty! You are not as *slim* as you thought you were, Baas Reardon. That trooper, he is no fool like the others. No. And so you would run away. Good. I go with you. But first you must bandage my wrist. Then when we have eaten and have packed food and drink to take with us we will go."

"It will be safer for us if we separate, Pete," Reardon said smoothly.

"So? I do not think so. Besides, I need money and you know where money is. So I come with you."

"WELL now, youngster," Drury said. "Suppose you tell me all about it."

He and Martin were seated in the midst of a patch of scrub bush about a mile from the canteen.

"Do you think we're safe here?" Martin asked dubiously as he swallowed painfully. "It seems as if I can still feel that damned rope round my neck," he confessed.

"Sure it's safe," Drury said encouragingly. "Even if they came after us—which I doubt—they'd never think of looking for us so close to the mine. An' I understand how you're feelin'. You were having a bad time. It's a damned good job I showed up when I did. Hell, though, I nearly didn't! Wouldn't have if Turner had managed to have his way."

"You've seen Turner then? Did you arrest him? If you did, you made a mistake. How is he?"

"Here, go easy. I'll tell you about him in good time. He's in safe hands."

"Then you did arrest him!"

"Well, I reckon it 'ud be truer to say he sort of arrested himself," Drury chuckled. "But about you. I don't know a blamed thing about you save your name's Martin an' a Camp Court found you guilty of murder."

"I'm not one," Martin began heatedly.

"No. I never suspected you was. Tell me about it."

"Can I have a smoke?"

"Better not," Drury decided. "Don't want to run any chances of being seen an' a match flare or the red tip of a cigarette 'ud show up powerful plain on a dark night like this. Here, chew this mapani gum. That'll steady your nerves."

There was silence for a little while, then Martin began:

"I came up here straight from the School of Mines. My uncle wanted me to make good here—he owns the Star—without using his influence in any way. No one, not even Reardon, knows who I am. Well, I made friends with Turner; he helped me in all sorts of ways and it was he who first suspected that Reardon wasn't straight."

"In what way?"

"We suspected he was making false returns, bilking the pay-roll, overcharging at the canteen and underpaying native laborers."

"That's a hell of a lot to suspect," Drury commented dryly. "Any proof?"

"Turner was getting it—but Reardon was too smart for him in the end and framed that charge against him."

"Any proof of that—that Reardon framed Turner. I mean?"

"No," Martin admitted. "Except that I know Turner isn't a trouble maker. He'd have submitted to arrest, but that would have been playing into Reardon's hands. Reardon wanted him out of the district. And then Lake is such a fool, believes everything Reardon tells him, that he probably wouldn't have been able to protect his prisoner. I believe Reardon would have seen that Turner didn't live to be brought up for trial."

"Maybe not," Drury conceded, thinking of the drugged coffee. "But you're imagining a lot. Go on. Turner evaded arrest and now's a fugitive from justice. I take it, you've still got no proof of the things you suspect?"

"None. But I know where to look for some. There's a gallery, leading off one of the mine shafts, which Reardon won't let anyone enter. Dutch Pete keeps on guard there most of the time. Reardon says the gallery isn't safe. But I've got other suspicions."

"Never mind about that now. Tell me how you came to be mixed up in a murder charge? What's the name of your victim?"

"Schoonmaker. He's in charge of the books. All the money went through his hands—and some of it stuck."

"Any proof of that?"

"Not exactly, but——"

"Keep to the facts, youngster. I've got

a pretty good imagination myself. I'll use it as required. What sort of man is Schoonmaker?"

"A big, strong chap. He bullied everyone. The night before last he was going for the canteen keeper and, like a fool, I interfered. He called me a few names and I lost my temper and accused him of being implicated with Reardon and Black Pete in defrauding the mine owner. Next thing I knew, we were fighting. I didn't stand an earthly chance with him. He could have licked me with one hand tied behind his back.

"Even so, he couldn't fight fairly. Lucky for me, some of the miners interfered when he got too foul. They stopped the fight, but I was still mad and swore I'd get even with him—even if it meant swinging for it.

"Well, yesterday Schoonmaker rode off to the railway halt with a parcel of gold and to bring back the pay roll. He should have returned last night, but no one worried about him when he didn't. We thought that the train was probably late—it often is—and he'd decided to stay overnight at the halt. But when he had not returned by noon today, Reardon sent me out to look for him—after the midday skoff, that was."

"Why did Reardon send you? He knew about the bad blood between you and Schoonmaker, didn't he?"

"Yes. I thought it was funny at the time, but I didn't say anything. I didn't want anybody to think I was afraid of Schoonmaker. As I rode off I shouted to some of the miners that I was going out to get Schoonmaker!"

"Hell, but you're young!" was the only comment Drury made.

"About two hours riding, due south of here," Martin continued, "the trail leads amongst a group of kopjes. When I got there I saw a native leading Schoonmaker's horse. He hailed me and told me that Schoonmaker had been thrown and badly hurt. He said he and his women had carried Schoonmaker to a cave."

"You speak the vernacular," Drury interrupted.

"No. But the nigger spoke English of a sort. Well. I hobbled my horse and Schoonmaker's and followed the nigger up one of the kopjes. It was a steep trail, winding round to the rear, and when we came to a place where it leveled off a bit, I stopped to have a look round at the view. The next thing I knew, my nigger guide had disappeared." Martin laughed self-consciously. "I didn't know what to make of it. I shouted and fired my revolver—all to no purpose. I looked everywhere for the nigger——"

"Except where he was," Drury murmured.

"But couldn't find a trace of him. Then I decided that Schoonmaker had been playing a game on me and climbed down the kopje expecting to find my horse gone and having to walk back to the mine. But it was Schoonmaker's horse that had disappeared. I believed that he had come out of his hiding place and had ridden off to

the mine while I was following the nigger. I mounted and rode back slowly, in no mood to face Schoonmaker's jeers.

"When I got to the mine it was nearly sun down and Reardon and a lot of the fellows crowded about me, wanting to know where Schoonmaker and the pay-roll was."

"I told them what I've just told you, Drury, but it was plain they didn't believe a word I said. I'd just finished when Schoonmaker's horse galloped up. It was wounded in the rump. A bullet had scored its saddle and the saddle wallets were empty.

"Somebody, I think it was Black Pete,

yelled, 'The young swine's killed Schoonmaker and taken our pay. Swing him up.' And that's about all," Martin concluded. "They wouldn't listen to me. They said I'd threatened to kill Schoonmaker——"

"And you didn't?"

"No!"

"Of course you didn't," Drury drawled. "But hell, youngster, you certainly played into Reardon's hands an' it ain't goin' to be so easy getting you out. Now listen, I'm goin' to them kopjes. Maybe I can see—even if it is dark—what you couldn't."

"Do I come with you?"

"Nope. You stay here. I'll be traveling fast an' you'd be in the way. Besides, Lake'd throw a fit if he was ever to know I had a double load on his horse. Hi, what's that?"

They listened and Drury detected the hoof beats of two horses being ridden fast.

"Wonder who they are an' what's their hurry," Drury said. "I've got a hunch that it's Reardon an' that Boer feller—Black Pete, you call him? Yep, an' I'm bettin' they're heading for the kopjes. Right. I'll not be far behind 'em. It'll be safe enough for you to go back to the Star, if you're thinkin' that way, youngster. With them two out of the way, nobody'll interfere with you."

"I'll stay here," Martin decided. "Until sun-up, at least."

"As you like. If I'm not back by then, though, you'd better head for the police post an' bring Lake a-lookin' for me. He'll come—if you tell him his horse is missing, too."

DRURY had no difficulty in following the trail of the two horsemen; nor was he compelled to rely on his abnormally keen ears, for the veldt was now lighted by the phosphorescent glow of the star-filled sky. The light gradually increased—or perhaps it was that Drury's eyes had adjusted themselves to night vision—and at intervals he could see the dark shapes of the horsemen. Their pace never slackened and they headed straight across the veldt to the group of kopjes which looked like a low hanging cloud on the night-shortened horizon.

Drury took advantage of all cover, making detours in order to keep bush scrub between himself and the men, riding along the bottom of the land waves which corrugated the surface of the veldt. He did this to avoid being seen should either of the men turn in the saddle to see if they were being followed. He was on the alert, too, for any change of pace which might have indicated that the men were suspicious. But the smooth rhythm of the hoof beats on the iron hard veldt was unbroken.

"I reckon," Drury mused, "fear of being caught out is riding 'em hard. They knew the game was up when I escaped with young Martin. They ain't got time to look round. They're in a hurry to get to their hideout."

At length, the two men had reached the uneven ground about the base of the kopjes, the pace slowed to a walk and presently Drury lost sight of his quarry in the shadows cast by the hills. For a little while he heard the footfalls—and then silence. He pulled to a halt and decided to go further on foot, first tethering his horse to a tree stump.

"Lucky for the horse this ain't lion country," he thought as he moved on.

HE DETESTED walking and considered it an inefficient way of getting from one place to another. Nevertheless, he now trekked swiftly and silently, avoiding as if by instinct, dried twigs and loose rubble which, had he trodden on it, might have given warning of his approach.

Once he was well within the circle of hills his pace slackened, his precautions increased. He stopped frequently and listened.

Then he heard, somewhere in the dark shadows, the snort of a horse followed by a native's voice talking soothingly.

Drury made his way in the direction of the sound, creeping on hands and knees. At last he saw before him three indistinct

shapes. He crawled forward on his belly, as silent as a chameleon stalking a fly and almost as slowly. The three shapes took form. He crawled nearer. He saw a native squatting on his haunches, holding the bridle reins of two horses.

Five minutes later Drury's strong hands closed about that native's throat, preventing him from shouting his superstitious fear of the evil spirit which had materialized from the darkness, and as effectively preventing a shout of warning when the native realized that his captor was flesh and blood.

Drury whispered fiercely in his ear:

"Do anything to betray me and you die. Is it understood?"

The native nodded and Drury released the pressure of his hands a little.

"I am the law," Drury said. "Listen to the order I give you. You will now lead me, walking as if no danger were near, to the place which hides the white men who have just come here. As you go, remember that I am close at your heels. And if you disobey in any way, I am death."

"I will not forget," the native said in a trembling voice. "Come then."

He led the way up and around a steep, boulder strewn kopje, having first knee-haltered the horses.

After about fifteen minutes had passed the native halted and Drury could hear men talking; their voices seemed to come from the bowels of the hill.

"They are in a cave, *inkosi*," the native said. "The entrance to it is just behind these bushes."

"Lead on," Drury ordered.

AS THEY passed through the cave's opening Drury saw three men seated about the red embers of a fire. And at that moment the tone of their voices changed.

"You're a liar," one man cried passionately. "I've played fair with you and Black Pete, Reardon. I—don't!"

The last was a scream of fear. It was punctuated by a revolver shot and the speaker rolled over backward, a bullet through his brain.

Cursing himself for having delayed the announcement of his presence, Drury shouted, "Hands up, Reardon. You too, Black Pete! You're——"

"Ach sis!" Black Pete wailed. "I told you the red-headed policeman was *slim*, Reardon." He rose and raised his hands above his head. "I told you——"

"Shut up, you fool," Reardon snarled as he too rose and turned slowly to face Drury.

"Drop that revolver," Drury ordered curtly. "You're under arrest for murder —an' a lot of other things, but murder'll do."

At that moment the native dived forward and collared Drury round the knees. At the same moment Reardon fired and Drury felt an air current, it was as cold as death, fan his cheek. He fired and Reardon was spun round by the heavy bullet which took him in the right shoulder.

And now Drury, the native's arm locked round his legs, lost his balance and fell heavily on top of his assailant. As he fell, he struck shrewdly with the long barrel of his revolver. The blow would have broken a white man's skull; it brought instant sleep to the native.

Drury had acted just in time, for Black Pete's right hand had fallen to his revolver holster. He grinned sheepishly as Drury covered him:

"Ach sis!" he stammered. "I am not a fool. I know when I am beaten. I was goin' to give you my popper, that's all, Trooper."

"I'll get it myself," Drury said curtly, and did so. He also disarmed Reardon who, groaning loudly, was beginning to stir with a return to consciousness.

THERE wasn't any fight in any of 'em after that," Drury said, supplementing his written report to the commanding officer. "The Schoonmaker feller was stone dead, but Reardon was able to ride, so I packed the three of 'em back to the Star

that night, collectin' Martin on the way. There was some commotion, believe me, when we showed up. An' I don't think any of 'em at the Star'll be in a hurry to hold a Camp Court again. Pretty sick, they was, when they saw how near they'd come to hanging an innocent man. Oh, an' while I think of it—I let that nigger go after I'd given him two or three licks with my belt. After all, he didn't know what it was all about an' had done nothin' more'n I'd expect a nigger of mine to do. He was loyal an' as soon as he'd got over the first shock he did what he could to help his Baas.

"Well, you got all the facts of the case. Turner and young Martin was right in their suspicioning. Reardon had been milking the mine. Not only had he been holding back some of the takings, but he was developing a shaft secretly which was never mentioned in his reports to the owners. Schoonmaker and Black Pete helped him. Schoonmaker hid the gold in that cave; he stocked the place with provisions as well. It was a good hide up. Plenty of room, too, for their horses. But they couldn't take 'em up in the dark. That was lucky for me. They could have hid up there—there's a good spring right handy—for months an' nobody 'ud have suspected a darned thing. Trouble with them was, they were too greedy an' too clever.

"They got Turner out of the way first—say, I betcha Sergeant Lake still believes in Father Christmas. Leastways, he swallowed every tale Reardon told him. But getting rid of Turner wasn't enough. Martin was getting on their trail too. So they cooked up that plan of stealing the gold shipment and the pay roll, an' then framed a murder charge on young Martin. Hell, they nearly got away with it!

"Just by luck I got to the Star in time. An' when I made my getaway with Martin they saw the game was up an' made a beeline for their hide up. An' say, it was just luck, too, which made me ride away from the Star in the right direction. If I'd gone the other way, things wouldn't have been so easy.

"That Reardon now—a *pukka sahib,* the Sergeant called him. A murdering swine, that's what he is. Hanging's too good for him. He picked a quarrel with Schoonmaker and killed him for his share of the gold. I'm thinkin' he'd have killed Black Pete as well. Pete thinks that, too, an' he's confessed the whole business. Not that we need his confession."

"It was a good piece of work, Drury," the C.O. said warmly.

Drury shook his head.

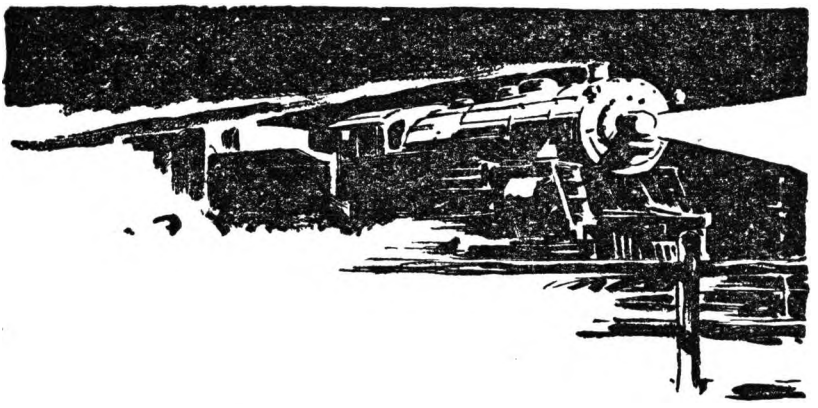
"Just bull luck, sir. Why, luck was with me all the way. It began with me getting dust in my eyes so that I couldn't see a blamed thing an' Turner was able to get the drop on me. Come to think of it, I reckon we all had dust in our eyes over that case—gold dust in Reardon's case. But yes—I was lucky."

"Luck? Maybe, Drury. But you seem to have more luck than most of my troopers. What's more, you take advantage of your luck. Well, is there anything you'd like—a few days' leave, for instance?"

Drury shook his head.

"No, sir," he rose awkwardly to his feet, "but I'd appreciate it if you'd square me with Sergeant Lake. He's reportin' me for neglecting to give his horse proper care. Me an' Turner spent three hours grooming the beast before turnin' it over to Lake, but hell! how was I to know he has his animal's hooves shone with boot black?"

The Brand of Railroading That "Went Out with the Old Time Saloon"



FIRED AGAIN

By CLIFFORD L. SWEET

Author of "A Matter of Records," etc.

BIG DAN HIBBARD climbed the stairs leading upward to division headquarters. Passing along the corridor, he paused once to glare testily at a frosted glass door bearing the legend, CHESTER K. RIDGEWAY, TRAINMASTER. Being the oldest freight conductor on the Choctaw Division, Big Dan had seen that legend change any number of times. And being sore at young Mr. Ridgeway, he hoped fervently he would see it change again real soon.

Big Dan moved on, a derisive sneer raising and lowering his claw hammer mustaches. There was mighty little satisfaction to be derived from firing him, he was thinking. He had been fired before. Three times—or was it four? And by none other than old Jim Kelso, himself. *There* was a man for you!

While old Jim had been liberal about firing him, he had also been lenient in taking him back. That was where he was headed for now—to see Jim Kelso, the super. Lay his troubles before him. Tell him what that young squirt of a trainmaster of his had done. Fired him for——

Big Dan scratched his head and snorted, "What's that confounded word he used?"

Old Jim Kelso didn't mince words. For that matter, he never did. "This is one time I don't see how I can help you out," he said after Big Dan had stated his case and asked for his job back. "Ridgeway says you are guilty of insubordination. That's a mighty serious offense on any railroad."

"Insub——" Big Dan choked on the hated word and muttered incoherently into his mustache. That was the word he had been trying to think of. In the old days you never heard of such a thing. If a brass hat wanted to fire you, he stepped up like a man and did it. He didn't drag in some high-sounding word to hide behind.

"How about my long service?" he demanded. "I've been working for this pike for nearly thirty years. Don't that count for something?"

Old Jim Kelso wagged his grizzled head. In many ways the two were much alike. They were both a little past fifty. Each had that keen look of weathered competence which comes from long years spent

in action. Right there, however, the resemblance ended. Old Jim wore a neat-fitting gray suit and an easy air of assurance. Contact with people of refinement, together with long association with the finer side of life had polished him, smoothed off the angles until there was nothing left of his reckless, boomer days but a memory.

"Times have changed," he said. "But you haven't. You still conduct yourself like a roughneck brakeman. That brand of railroading went out of style with the old time saloons, a dozen years ago."

Big Dan grinned good-naturedly. He was used to being rawhided by his old friend. In fact, he expected it. The other had just so much beefing to get out of his system before he would get down to brass tacks and tell him to go on back to work.

"Maybe I am a roughneck, just as you say, Jim." Dan tilted his chair back and rested his broad shoulders comfortably against the wall. "I'll admit I drink some and raise hell when I feel like it. But you can't say I ever took a drink on the job. And you've yet to catch me acceptin' a call or going out on a run when I wasn't cold sober."

OLD JIM nodded his head. "I know it," he said. "In a good many ways you are the most dependable conductor on the division. And when we have our annual wash-out down on Frog Bayou, I like to see you standing on the dump in that bob-tailed slicker of yours looking after the work train. It gives me a foolish feeling of confidence just to know you are there. But that's neither here nor there. If we wink at such things as insubordination, discipline will soon be a thing of the past."

"Discipline, my eye!" Big Dan hooted. Old Jim's title held no awe for him. "Looks to me more like a scheme to knock a man out of his pension. Work him till he's too old to hire out some'rs else, then kick him out!"

"You ought to have thought about your pension sooner," the super reminded, with no evidence of giving ground. "You're sore because you can't railroad like you —" Old Jim coughed discreetly, "—like we both did thirty odd years ago. I'll admit I was as wild and irresponsible as you were. We drank more than was good for us. Quit jobs for no reason at all and carried on like the hoodlums we were. But there was some excuse for it then. We were young. And railroading was not the highly specialized calling it is today."

Big Dan was not listening. There was a faraway look in his restless old eyes. "Mind the time I took down with the fever in Vicksburg?" he asked. "And you quit your job on the L & N to take care of me? You pawned everything but your overalls and the night shirt I was wearin' before you got me on my feet again."

Old Jim nodded, a retrospective look hovering in his keen gray eyes. "You wasn't heavier than a ten-year-old kid the day I carried you down to the barber shop for a shave," he mused. Then he chuckled. "You remember that time in El Paso? If I live to be a hundred, I'll never forget the time I made eyes at a pretty señorita and got three Mexicans after me with what looked like corn knives. Nor how you waded in, bare handed, and started all three back to Mexico. Lord! You was handy with your fists, Dan."

Big Dan chuckled aloud. There was an immense twinkle in his coal black eyes. "You'd been experimentin' for the first time with tequilla," he said. "You was so tight you couldn't hit the ground with your hat. Recollect the time you got a job on that pea vine over in Louisiana? Then up and quit because they wouldn't hire me because I was still a walkin' skeleton from the fever?"

They laughed together at their recollections. The ties of old friendship are strong. Then Old Jim sobered.

"Those were good old days, Dan," he sighed, shaking his head. "But they are gone now. Times have changed. What I started out to say," Jim dug his thumbs into the armholes of his vest and looked

severely at Big Dan, "is that I quit that foolishness but you didn't. I settled down, got married and came ahead while you stuck right where you were. Your chance to get ahead was just as good as mine, but you didn't take it. Outside of an automatic promotion to running a freight, you haven't climbed an inch. You still toss your money away at poker. You passed up your passenger rights because you were afraid it would cramp your style."

"Them hoot nannies!" Big Dan jeered, scandalized by the mere thought of himself triggered out in a boiled shirt, choked speechless by a stiff collar and effeminized by a blue uniform with rows of brass buttons down the front.

Old Jim smothered a grin behind one hand and reached for a box of cigars which he held out to Dan. The latter peeked inside the box then shook his head. Pulling a hunk of railroad twist from his hip pocket, he stuffed one side of his jaws and eased his eyes around in search of a cuspidor.

"You remember the watches we signed up for, don't you?" Old Jim leaned back

and blew a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. "The ones we got when we first went to work here for the Central Valley?"

Big Dan wriggled a little and nodded.

"Here's mine." Old Jim hauled a silver watch, big as a turnip and shiny as a mirror from his vest pocket. "Where's yours?"

Big Dan averted his sheepish gaze and maintained a stony silence.

"You lost it in a poker game!" the old super snorted. "And so long ago you've forgotten when." The lines about his mouth tightened. "I was just looking over your personal record, Dan, when you came in." He tapped the file of papers in front of him with his finger. "I see here where you have signed up and paid for four watches in the past ten years. The Lord only knows how many before that! Think of it—four gold watches at seventy dollars apiece! All but the last one gone at poker. I'll wager that in each instance your watch followed your pay check. Just because you can sign up for a new one and have it deducted monthly from your check, you throw them away as if they were of no value whatever. Don't you intend to stop that infernal nonsense?"

Big Dan twiddled his foot nervously. A stubborn set was fastening around his lean, hard jaws. "It's easy to rawhide the other feller!" he was goaded into answering. "You got your wife and kids to take up your time. Anyway, I've been figurin' on turning over a new leaf. How about going back to work?"

For a fleeting instant the severe look on old Jim's face melted. But only for an instant. "I'll have to think it over," he replied. "Talk it over with Ridgeway. He discharged you. I'm not going over his head unless he says so. Come back tomorrow."

Big Dan got up and went away grinning. He had listened to just such flimsy excuses before. Old Jim, he knew, had to have some dodge with which to save his face.

ONCE again Big Dan toiled up the steps leading to division headquarters. Although he was broke, a little stiff in the joints and hollow eyed from having sat in front of a little green table over Louie's domino parlor from noon yesterday until nine this morning, there was a jaunty lift to his shoulders.

"Come back tomorrow!" Old Jim had said. "Have to talk it over with Ridgeway."

"Like hell he does!" Big Dan chuckled

to himself. "Jim Kelso is the main ramrod on this railroad."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hibbard," Jim Kelso's sleek-haired chief clerk said when Big Dan asked to see the super. "Mr. Kelso is out of town. No. He left no word about putting you back to work."

Big Dan hated deceit of any kind. It angered him because the clerk had said he was sorry when they both knew he wasn't. His first impulse was to run his hand through the other's plastered hair, ruffle it, then smack the bored face beneath it. Before he could carry out these intentions, however, the full import of what the other had said struck him full force.

Big Dan slumped against the railing that barred his way. Out of town, was he? So old Jim was letting him down. Sneaked away, he did, because he didn't have the guts to stand up, face to face, and tell an old friend he was fired. Left it for a slick-haired clerk to do for him!

Big Dan pulled himself erect with an effort. He threw back his shoulders, clenched his jaws and by sheer will-power forced a don't-give-a-damn lurch into his gait as he left the pitying office force behind. A dogged anger flamed up within him as he descended the stairs. He didn't need their pity. He'd take his medicine—no one had ever accused him of showing the white feather.

Force of habit turned his steps in the direction of the yard-office, a mile up in the yards. The same force would have impelled him to scan the trainmen's board there to see who was in and who was out. Then a listless thumbing through a pack of thumb-smudged letters at the mail box for mail that seldom arrived.

Up through the maze of tracks, Dan trudged. At times his turbulent thoughts broke out in muttered rumblings. Instinct alone kept him clear of shunted cars. When the familiar outlines of the yard-office impressed itself on his consciousness, he froze suddenly in his tracks.

Mingle with his running mates—admit that he was fired—that old Jim Kelso, his boasted friend, had let him down?

Not in a million years! Turning, he shuffled obliquely across a jumble of steel rails that threw back dazzling streamers of morning sunlight. On up beyond the lead he could see the beginning of what later would be the hot shot. His train! They were making it up for some other conductor to take over the road.

Until this moment his future had invited no particular consideration. Now it dawned upon him that he wanted to get away from Belton. For his own peace of mind he wanted to go where he was totally unknown. It did not strike him as being sentimental when he passed up an opportunity to board an extra freight out for a chance to ride an empty in the train which he had piloted so many times in the past.

Arriving abreast of where the engine would stand when his train was ready to leave town, Big Dan pulled out to one side and perched himself on a pile of ties to wait.

The first keen edge of calamity wore off presently, leaving a dull, ruminative ache in his breast.

"So times have changed, have they?" he sneered. "I'll say they have when an old friend gets so soft he can't look you in the eye and tell you he is turning you down!"

A WILD commotion down around the lead presently broke into Dan's bitter cogitations. He glanced casually in the direction from whence the rattle and bang of cars being shunted together had ceased so abruptly. Sardonic amusement twisted his lips into a wry smile. Four cars of coal, all coupled together, were rocking his way at a smart clip. No one was riding them. Evidently they had got past the field man whose duty it was to stop them. Big Dan watched to see the switch engine come tearing in one of its spectacular runs to nab the cars. Instead, his keen eyes discovered that the switch engine was on

the ground. A pair of drivers had climbed a frog!

Slipping off the tie pile, Big Dan stood eyeing the approaching cars thoughtfully. From his vantage point, he could swing onto the cars as they came abreast and stop them with a few twirls of the hand brake. That is, if he wanted to. He wasn't sure he wanted to. The railroad didn't give a damn about him. Why should he risk his life hopping their cars?

Big Dan edged closer to the track. He was the only person now who could head off the cars, prevent them from rolling out of the yards. The field man, he could see, had given up the chase and stopped. Halting the cars, he was thinking, would save the Central Valley the price of four cars and contents and some nut-headed switchman his job.

But Big Dan did not swing onto the cars. At the last minute he climbed back onto the tie pile and sneered derisively as the cars rocked by at slightly increasing pace.

"Go on. Git to hell outta town!" he jeered, shaking his fist at the escaping cars.

The runaway cars were pounding the east switch at the yard limit when a revulsion of feeling hit him. A wave of bitter self-reproach swept him. His face burned. His hands opened and closed in guilty confusion.

"Call yourself a railroader, eh?" he denounced himself bitterly. "Why, you ain't half as important as a button on a railroad man's pants! S'pose a train was comin' up the mountain?"

Big Dan clawed his vest pocket, vaguely thankful that something old Jim had said yesterday had shamed him from staking his watch in the game last night.

"Ten-ten."

He shook his head as if to clear his muddled brain. Number 5 was due here in thirty-two minutes! They were out of Dunbar right now. That was the first telegraph office down the mountain.

At that instant, a hostler stopped the 4268, the engine that was to take out the hot shot, on the dump. Directly across some ten or a dozen tracks from where Big Dan stood shifting from foot to foot. The familiar outlines of the 4268, steamed up and ready to go, fired Dan's brain to act. He crossed the tracks at a swift stride and as he swarmed to the deck of the 4268, a querulous voice yelled:

"Hey, you, git down off that engine!"

Through the far cab window, Dan glimpsed Mose Riley coming from the round house. Mose broke into a trot.

Ignoring the engineer, Big Dan twirled the sand valve and opened the throttle. He couldn't waste time now explaining things to Mose. The steam, he noted flicking his eyes across the steam gauge, was crowding the needle against the pin. The big jack coughed—deep—way down in her vitals. The drivers spun throwing out streams of fire, caught and the locomotive lunged ahead, leaving Mose Riley in a haze of his own profanity.

The cars had rounded a curve a moment before.

Big Dan moved the throttle again and spat into the breeze. He might be out of date, he reflected grimly, but he knew as much about running a locomotive off her feet as any hoghead. Hadn't he run the engine many a time while Mose clipped back to the caboose to eat? He knew enough to tug repeatedly at the throttle and send the big jack thundering across the frogs.

Hitting the east switch, Dan trailed it. Straightening out on the main, he inched the throttle wider. He sagged across the arm rest, hat brim plastered to forehead and peered intently ahead straining his eyes for a glimpse of the cars. The speed of the engine became a dizzy, breathless pace. It was an iron thunderbolt dropping down the mountain side. The cab rocked faster and faster, then became a series of panicky, savage lurches. On the straightaway, the locomotive evened for a moment, heeled and went into the curves wide open with a fierce side to side pitch.

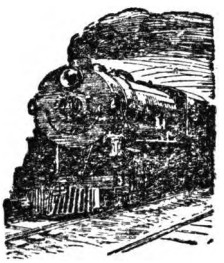
Fence posts, rocks and trees flowed by

in a blurred stream. Two miles from the yard limit board Big Dan got his first glimpse of the runaways. A keen thrill of expectancy ran through him as he sniffed the odor of hot grease drifting back from a blazing journal. An instant later he shoved the nose of the locomotive against the coupler on the rear coal car.

"If them dam' couplers are open," he muttered softly, almost prayerfully.

But one or maybe both were closed. Big Dan swore lustily when, after clapping on the brakes, he saw a gap of blurry ties grow and widen between the pilot and the end coal car. With no one to control the speed of the locomotive for him, he did not have time enough in which to crawl out and open the couplers.

Dan glanced at his watch, an unmirthful grin tugging at the corners of his white lips. Six miles from the yard limit, three



from where he was at the moment, was a hairpin curve. Many trains had taken to the sticks there in the old days before the advent of air brakes and automatic couplers. In desperation, he seized upon a bold course. By crowding the cars to the limit, he figured, they would climb the rails on that sharp curve. Jump clear of the track into Turtle Creek. That event, he calculated, would be but a matter of minutes, seconds maybe, before No. 5 appeared on the scene. Barely time enough in which to stop the locomotive, reverse, and outrun the double header back up the mountain.

A mighty slim margin, Dan admitted to himself, but it was a chance.

He inched open the throttle, notch after notch. Plunging, swaying, exhausts rolling from the squat stack in a smooth roll of thunder, the 4268 dived after the cars like a thing alive. Dan grabbed the whistle cord, pulled it down and looped it under a steam cock. Thereafter, the deep bell notes of the whistle nearly deafened him but he hoped the engineer on No. 5 would hear it and stop. Big Dan felt the tremor when the big jack butted the cars. He widened the throttle to the last notch.

The speed was breath taking. The wind tore at his eyeballs. Stinging tears raced down his cheeks. Grinning like some heathen idol, Big Dan leaned from the lurching cab window and strained his eyes ahead, watching for the first tell-tale glimpse of the girdled oak at the head of a shallow cut. This oak was the landmark—the warning that the hairpin curve was dead ahead. That was where he would shut off steam, deliver the cars into the hands of fate.

Big Dan's first intimation that he had overridden the mark came when the forward end of the head coal car seemed to lift into the air. The next instant the engine gave a sickening lurch, a wounded dip, a racking shudder as drivers lost tractive effort and began to race. In that brief instant after the big jack left the rails, and before she toppled, Big Dan ejected himself through the cab window and joined the birds. The doomed locomotive, tied-down whistle screaming her swan song, leaped into space and rolled from the outside of the curve, while Big Dan sailed to oblivion on the opposite side.

IT WAS several moments later when Big Dan regained his senses. At the first flutter of his eyelids, a relieved voice said, "Thank God, old timer, you're not dead! You sure had a close call."

Big Dan, dazed and numb, was dizzily trying to piece together just what had happened. Slowly at first, then with a rush, it all came back to him. Evidently he was still at the scene of the smashup. He could see a double header with a lot of varnish

cars behind. And over the top of the rails and between a lot of milling feet and legs he could see a fluff of rising steam. Somewhere down there, he guessed, was four cars of coal and a scrap heap that once was a proud locomotive.

Rolling his head, he found himself staring up into the anxious face of old Jim Kelso. Big Dan struggled to sit up.

"Lay still, old timer," Jim ordered, his voice unnaturally husky. "You're skinned from head to foot from combing the right-of-way bank and one leg's broken. Soon as they get here with that confounded cot, we're going to load you into my car. It's on the tail end of No. 5. You sure saved the Central Valley from killing a lot of people today, Dan. We heard you whistling and stopped just in time. If those four cars of coal had hit us——" Old Jim broke off abruptly and shuddered.

"Been kinda bad for discipline, wouldn't it?" Big Dan managed an unsuccessful sneer.

Old Jim shot him a searching look. "What in the devil are you talking about?" he asked anxiously. Then grinning knowingly, he murmured, "Still kinda out of your head, ain't you? We're proud of you, Dan. Understand? And we'll be prouder still the day you're able to take your old run out again."

At that, Big Dan tried again to sit up, failed ignominiously, and fell back panting. "Look here, Jim Kelso," he growled, "I didn't do this to get no job back. I—" it was hard to get wind into and out of his bruised chest. "—I don't want it back. I ain't goin' back. Not after the way you sneaked out of town—left it for a slick-haired clerk to turn me down!"

IT WAS out at last. He'd told old Jim Kelso just where he stood. A great weariness overtook him and, fearful lest he break down and say something he would be ashamed of later, he closed his eyes and turned his face away.

Old Jim fumbled for his hand, found it and gave it an awkward pat. "You old hoot owl," he said, "what in the devil are you jawing about now? You haven't been turned down. I squared it up with Ridgeway for you to go back to work—before I was called away yesterday. Didn't you get my note?"

"Note?" Suddenly Big Dan's eyes were wide as saucers. "What note?"

"Why," said old Jim, frankly puzzled, "I wrote you one. Dropped it in the mail box at the yard-office. Figured that was the one place where you'd be sure to get it."

Big Dan felt a guilty peace steal over him. He was wrenched and broken and full of pain, but he was immensely happy. Old Jim hadn't let him down after all!

"I didn't go near the yard-office yesterday," he confessed sheepishly. "I was so allfired sure you'd put me back to work, I decided to celebrate. I guess you was right, Jim. I am just an old——"

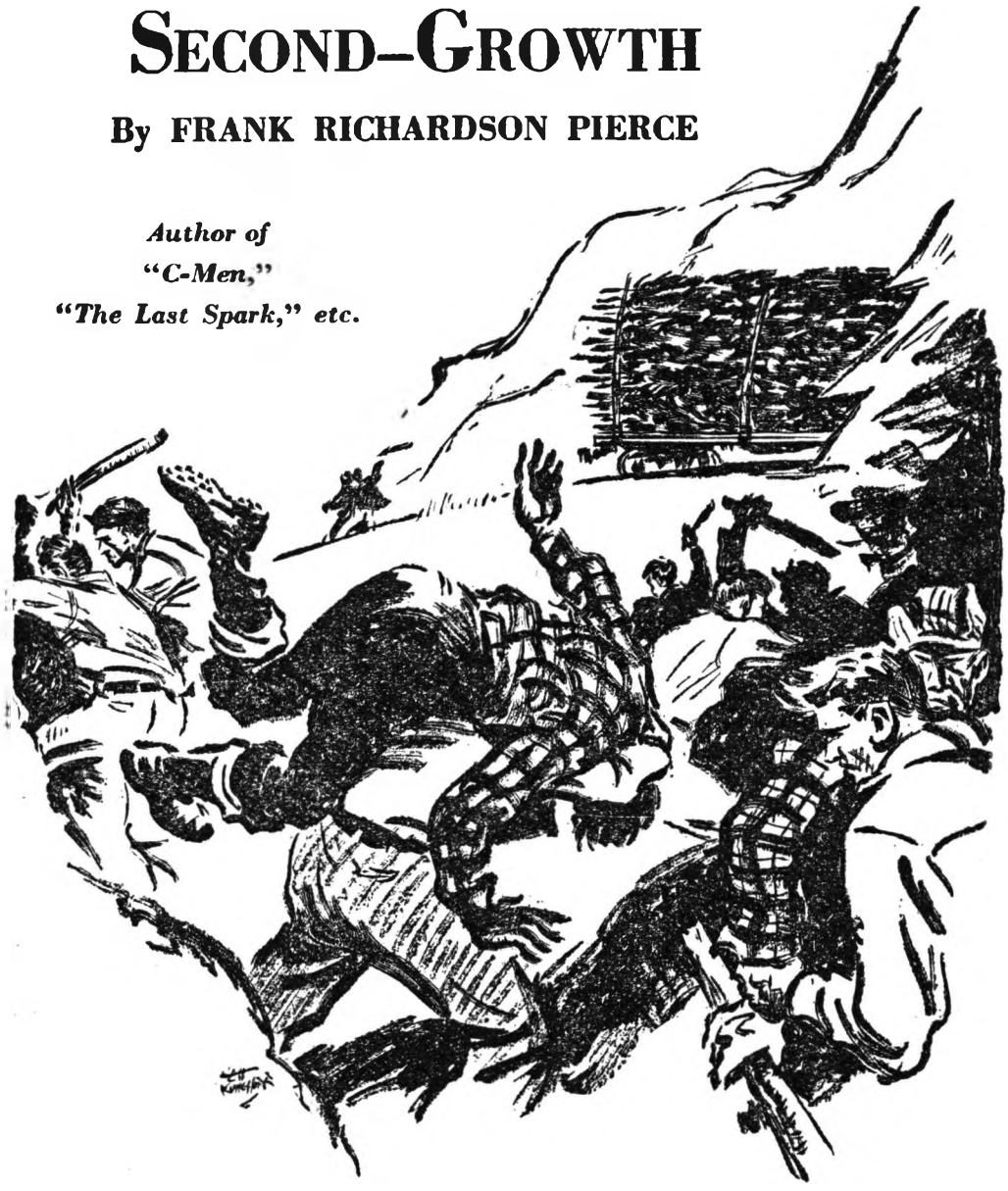
"Lay off that," Old Jim broke in, trying to make his voice sound gruff. "I got onto Ridgeway good and hard yesterday. I found out a thing or two, and so did he. He knows now that refusing to risk your life on a train with a lot of bad order brakes is something besides insubordination. That young galoot isn't going to be half so anxious to ride you old-timers after this. Hold steady now. Here comes that confounded cot."

Donnybrook McDuff Shows Some CCC Boys the Way into Big Business—the Two-fisted Way

SECOND-GROWTH

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of
"C-Men,"
"The Last Spark," etc.



CHAPTER I

SHOP EARLY

DONNYBROOK McDUFF of the Indian River Company, Civilian Conservation Corps, gazed benignly on the boys assembled in the recreation hall. He was as hungry as a she wolf with pups and in a few minutes he would sit down to a Thanksgiving dinner. It did not seem possible anything could arouse the belligerent propensities which had given him his justly earned nickname.

Stirring music came over the radio. Some smoked in contentment as they listened; others read or played cards. Here and there groups recounted adventures

fighting forest fires. Donnybrook sauntered over to the bulletin board and stared briefly at a notice. It read:

"WANTED: Small crew of men experienced in flood control to cut second-growth timber on Grouse Bench. Sixty cents an hour paid to hard workers. Bunk house and cook shack available. Chance to save money. Apply to Herrin Logging Company."

"So old 'Hard Times' Herrin thinks the wood ticks are suckers enough to work for him," Donnybrook drawled. "Well, he's got another think coming. As usual he makes his offer look attractive. Sixty cents an hour pay, free place to bunk down, and if a gang did its own cooking it could make money." Donnybrook favored the offer with a Bronx cheer.

Donnybrook was familiar with Hard Times Herrin's history. Some of Puget Sound's biggest bankers as well as numerous working men had come off second best in dealing with the old reprobate. He had a trick of falling behind with his payroll. Men desperate in their need of work would hang on and hope, then finally quit. Pleading hard times and lack of money Herrin would wear them down until they were glad to settle for thirty-five or forty cents on the dollar.

Guided by a smooth lawyer, whose silent partner not infrequently acted for his creditors, Herrin managed to keep two jumps ahead of legal prosecution.

It was like the man to attempt to reap a new crop of victims in the CCC. Most of the Indian River Company members were trained in flood control work and would be eager to pick up something of the sort when their enrollment period ended. "He'll cut that second-growth stuff, load it onto cars, and ship it down to lower Indian River," Donnybrook reflected. "If set properly the trees will catch sand and silt and build up a dike which will end the floods over Herrin's bottom land."

Floods, he recalled, were all that prevented Herrin from selling the rich bottom land at a big price to dairy ranchers. "Hell," Donnybrook growled after he had considered the offer from all angles, "I wouldn't let my worst enemy work for Herrin."

He was about to leave when a second notice caught his interest. Some wood tick had clipped it from a newspaper, where it was a daily feature. Donnybrook had an idea a fine sarcasm had prompted the man to post the clipping.

It read:

SHOP EARLY!
Only Twenty-two More
Shopping Days
Until
Christmas.

"That's a hell of a clipping to put up here," a gloomy voice complained. "It's cruel. We CCC boys can just barely make ends meet. Then to remind us that Christmas is approaching when we have no money to shop with is going too far."

DONNYBROOK felt truculence rising within him. The speaker stood six feet four inches and weighed nearly two hundred and fifty pounds. Nearly six months work in camp had made him hard as nails and it should have instilled fighting spirit into his character also, but it hadn't. He had arrived, complaining over his lot; he would depart the same way. In an outfit where every nickname is based on sound reasoning, he was known as Weeping Walter Watson. Like begets like. The tough mugs had instinctively gathered about Donnybrook McDuff. For the same reason the quitters and whiners had been drawn towards Watson.

"Quit your bellyaching," Donnybrook growled; "you don't look like you were missing any meals."

"Do you realize that in three weeks—a few days before Christmas—my enrollment ends and that I'll be kicked out," the giant complained. "The camps are all down.

The saw mills aren't running. There's no work to be had. I'll be right back where I started from six months ago. We were just talking about it." Watson nodded towards his gloomy companions. "I don't know what the world's coming to."

Donnybrook felt an overpowering desire to swing on the hulk's jaw for the sheer joy of relieving his feelings and hearing two hundred and fifty pounds of yellow flesh hit the floor. Instead, he studied the two items on the bulletin board. It was strange they should appear at the same time. One warned of early shopping; in a camp where money was scarce the other offered a means of obtaining money. Donnybrook scratched his head. He detected a challenge in the whole set-up.

"Lookin' for a fight, Irisher?" a voice inquired.

Without looking Donnybrook recognized the speaker. He was Morris Goldstein, a pint-sized individual, with black curly hair, an amazing nose, black eyes and a forehead that was plenty wide. The eyes carried the expressive light of a people that has known centuries of suffering, and yet had survived. A gleam of humor lurked in their depths. The depression and a trick of fate had picked Goldstein up from New York's East Side and dropped him down in a Puget Sound CCC camp. To him everything beyond the Alleghany Mountains was the West of song and story. And though he now lived in timber country, he sang almost constantly, "Home On The Range."

"Have you done your Christmas shopping, Morry?" Donnybrook asked.

"Nuts to you, Mick," Morry retorted, "I should shop for Christmas. But by your eyes I could see it, the light of bettle."

"It is battle not bettle, and snake, not snek as I heard you say the other day," Donnybrook answered. "What do you make out of these two notices?"

"Sucker bait, either way you read 'em," Morry answered. "I didn't know it was Christmas shoppin' what worried you. I thought it was them whiners. All the mornin' they've been moanin' over they'll be through before Christmas."

"I have worried over them plenty," Donnybrook admitted.

"Why? It ain't no skin off'n your nose," Morry said. "A few days, and we'll be rid of 'em."

"That's just it," Donnybrook explained. "There have been licked guys come into camp, tripe that nobody wanted around; yellow guys, too. Nine times out of ten they left with heads up and a new lease on life. I hate to think a camp like this one failed to whip Watson and his crowd into shape. We've never been able to quite reach 'em. The fight in 'em has never been aroused."

"The camp didn't have much trouble reachin' your old fight, Mick," Morry observed.

"I had too much of it. I was just a fresh mug. They were going to ship me out with some other trouble-makers," Donnybrook explained. "Then Tim Donovan, with a logging fight on his hands, came along and knocked my block off. It was the best thing that ever happened."

"The Government gets value received from you," Morry said, "but them guys—phooey! May be five cents on the dollar. And that ain't a business. Say, are you listenin' to me, or ain't you?"

"Yes, Morry, I heard you," Donnybrook answered. "But I'm beginning to see a great light. I think I'll cut you in on something. I need Christmas money, and if you don't want to spend your cut for that, save it for Yom Kippur."

"Or may be first payment on a cloak and suit store down by Mill City," Morry said, rubbing his hands softly.

"But first, let's shut Weeping Walter and his gang up," Donnybrook said. "I don't want my Thanksgiving dinner spoiled."

HE WALKED over to the group and scowled. "Listen, you mugs," he rasped, "instead of crying because you're going to be turned out in the cold world

three weeks from now, why don't you beat the gun and get yourselves jobs. Then Christmas will be just another Christmas to you."

"I just told you," Watson began.

"The camps are shut down and on and on and on. Herrin is offering work that's right down your street," Donnybrook interrupted. "Grab it!"

"And work for nothing," Watson sneered.

"If you're suckers enough to let him put one over, you deserve to work for nothing," Donnybrook retorted. "Why not outsmart him? Think it over. I'm going to eat. Now if I hear any more moaning from you birds I'm going to personally knock your blocks off."

"And he'll do it singly or in job lots," Morry Goldstein cut in.

A few minutes later Donnybrook, ably seconded by Morry, led the attack on the

groaning tables. From time to time Donnybrook paused, stared at Watson, then thought of the notices on the bulletin board. "Twenty-two shopping days before Christmas," he mused, "a lot can happen in twenty-two shopping days. And the time to start something is right now."

Chapter II

A WOLFISH GRIN

WHILE the rest of these birds are letting their dinner digest and listening to the football broadcast," Donnybrook said, "suppose we see if we can't sell old Uncle Walter Watson and his fellow slaves down the river?"

"How much do you figure we'll get in commissions?" Morry inquired.

"That depends on us," Donnybrook answered. "If we don't make a hundred bucks each out of the deal I'll be disappointed."

"What makes you so sure?"

"I'm banking on human nature not changing," Donnybrook explained.

"Which human's nature?" Morry pointedly inquired.

"Hard Times Herrin's," Donnybrook answered.

"It's just as I feared, the woist," Morry sighed. "You would tackle it a robber and cut throat what already has trimmed bankers and working men. Do we work with our hands?"

"I don't aim to stain my lily white hands with toil," Donnybrook answered. "If stained at all it'll be with the blood of enemies when the fight comes."

"I should've known you'd figger a fight in," Morry muttered. "It just goes to show you can't make it a sow's purse out of a silk ear, nor even a dove of peace out of a Irisher."

"Before it's all over with, Morry," Donnybrook explained, "you may have to make a trip."

"With an expense account?" Morry quickly inquired.

"Yeah, an expense account I'll check when you get back," Donnybrook informed him.

They struck off through the timber and in due time stopped on a ridge overlooking Grouse Bench. An early day logger had removed the timber from the area, then the winds sweeping from the great fir forest beyond had seeded the ground. The trees ranged in size from three to ten feet high. The foliage was thick and uniform. A passing shower had drenched the stand of second-growth timber and its bright green stood out sharply against the somber green of the main forest.

"A good strong man with a sharp axe could cut several hundred trees a day," Donnybrook observed. "A hard swing at

the base and down she goes. I suppose Herrin expects to kill two birds with one stone. He thins the stand which will make those remaining grow faster, and he gets thousands of trees for his flood control down river."

They continued on to a cleared spot where stood several bunk houses and a completely equipped cook shack. Heavy board walks, deeply chewed by calked boots, connected the buildings. Water dripped from tar paper roofs to the grassy ground and a heavy dampness hung over the spot.

"A good fire will dry things out in a hurry," Donnybrook observed. "And there's plenty of dry fuel in that old shed."

A rusty spur skirted the second-growth and ended near the bunkhouse. Icy spring water flowed constantly from an open tap. "Uncle Tom Watson should get along O. K. here," Donnybrook said. "I just wanted to make sure. Now we'll call on Hard Times Herrin."

DONNYBROOK experienced a pardonable pride in craftsmanship as he led the way over a new forest service trail the CCC had built that summer. It was a broad trail, free from snags and roots. A lot of men and equipment could be moved over it in a hurry should occasion arise. Stout bridges spanned brawling creeks; and cedar logs which would not rot, kept travel high and dry through the swampy areas.

Near the Herrin camp the trail turned sharply and a fork led directly to Herrin's home. A dreary silence, broken only by the moan of wind through the high tree tops, hovered over the place. Long lines of trucks stood on rusty rails. Donkey engines and skidders shunted to sidings, dripped rust. Spark arresters tilted drunkenly from smoke stacks. The bunkhouses were empty, save for one occupied by a crippled bull cook who kept a fire burning.

"Herrin's finished dinner and is in there listening to the radio," Donnybrook said. "Now's a good time to see him."

He led the way up the broad front steps and pressed the bell button. After a brief delay the door was opened by a putty-faced individual wearing tin pants, a soiled white shirt and vest. His huge feet were covered with wool socks which left damp outlines on the floor. Recognizing the CCC uniforms he smiled wolfishly. A glint of satisfaction appeared briefly in the smallest blue eyes Donnybrook had ever looked into.

"You boys are from the Indian River Camp," he said, "come in. I'm Herrin."

"I'm McDuff," Donnybrook answered shortly. "This is Morris Goldstein."

Neither CCC boy offered to shake hands and Herrin waved them to convenient chairs, then settled back himself, placing his feet on a center table littered with lumbermen's magazines. Until this moment Donnybrook had only seen Herrin at a distance. Now he realized the man's face was the most deceptive thing he had ever encountered.

It was the face of a man who might be a whirlwind in the timber, but was dumb in every other pursuit. At a glance one would have declared Herrin honest, and a man who would inspire loyalty in his employes. There was nothing visible to warn those with whom he transacted business.

Knowing his reputation, Donnybrook had come prepared. He now saw the wolfish grin as a sinister warning to one already on guard. The light in the depths of his eyes was both greedy and treacherous.

"I had a notice put up in your camp," Herrin said slowly. "I suppose you are here about a job?"

"No, we're not interested in jobs," Donnybrook answered. "We like the CCC pretty well. It's interesting to take the boys that are down and out and watch them snap out of it with a little help. I'll stay as long as they'll let me. Morry, here, will stay until he sees a chance to go into business. There's a gang you might get if you went down there and talked to them.

They're not due to be discharged until around Christmas. I think it would be a good thing if they left the outfit now and went to work for you. I'm here to tell you how to get them. They haven't much initiative."

"But are they good, strong men, willing to work?" Herrin guardedly inquired.

"You bet your life," Donnybrook answered. "But no guts, if you get what I mean. They're scared stiff at the thought of leaving the organization with no job lined up. We're tired of their bellyaching and that's why we're here."

"A man does get tired of bellyaching," Herrin agreed. He rolled his tongue around in his mouth. It was apparent the situation was shaping up to his liking.

"I might as well tell you the rest," Donnybrook continued with studied hesitancy. "There're stories going the rounds you're a hard man to collect pay from."

He glanced towards Morry Goldstein and it was evident from the latter's expression he thought they were letting themselves in for something when they attempted to match wits with Herrin.

"And my reputation is holding the boys back?" Herrin inquired.

"That's about the size of it," Donnybrook admitted, lifting his innocent blue eyes to Herrin's.

"Here's what happens," Herrin snapped. "I pay better than the going wage. Lazy workmen come up here and loaf on the job, then expect to collect in full. Well, they don't."

"I don't blame you a bit," Donnybrook responded. "A man should give value received."

"And even a little more, maybe, for cash," Morry added.

"If you'd put it up to Watson and the others down in camp," Donnybrook continued, "so they felt sure they'd get their money, they'd be on the job next week. Instead of wages, why not give them a contract at so much a tree, cut and piled on the spur track. Then they could work as fast as they wanted to. The question of hours per day wouldn't come up."

"They would be contractors," Herrin agreed.

"And if they finished by the tenth of December, that'd give them time to do their Christmas shopping with the money they earned," Donnybrook went on. "There was a Christmas shopping clipping beside your notice. Kind of funny, but the two seemed to go together."

"If they worked hard the job could be done by the tenth," Herrin agreed. "That is, the cutting part. Later I'll want the trees worked into a system of diking I am planning."

"That should be a separate contract," Donnybrook suggested. "Now here's what you'll have to do to knock 'em over. Otherwise they won't cut loose from three squares a day and a dry place to sleep."

HE TALKED for five minutes, then departed. Hard Times Herrin reached for the telephone and called his lawyer. "I hope you're not at dinner, Steve," he said.

"Just finished. What's on your mind?" Steve answered.

"It looks as if I'd get my flood control stuff cut for a song. Some of the wood ticks are nibbling. A couple of them were just here from the Indian River camp," Herrin explained.

"Which two?" Steve asked sharply.

"They are called Donnybrook McDuff and Morris Goldstein," Herrin answered.

"Donnybrook," Steve mused. "That smells of the free for all fights the Irish used to get into at the Donnybrook Fairs. And then—— Goldstein. An Irishman and a Jew working together—Herrin, I'd go a little easy there. Normally a McDuff would be gunning for a Goldstein. Why jump on the CCC any way? You can afford to have that second-growth cut and pay for it."

"I've never liked the damned wood ticks and you know it, Steve," Herrin said.

"I know, you expected the whole idea

to flop and now that it's going ahead you're sore." Steve growled. "But hell, I'm forgetting myself. I'm your lawyer, so what is it you want?"

"This McDuff suggested instead of the boys working on a day labor basis, we do it under contract," Herrin explained. "That's better than I hoped for. There'll be no labor leaders or labor liens on my neck. I may want you to run down here any time."

"Give me twenty-four hours' notice," Steve answered. He hung up thinking it was pretty small business trying to get the job done for a song. On the other hand he realized Herrin had built up a fortune consistently following this method. And consistency, he remembered, is a jewel.

SATURDAY morning a dubious group of CCC men, led by Donnybrook McDuff and Morry Goldstein, appeared at Herrin's office.

The lawyer extended a document and while Donnybrook was looking it over Steve sized up the parties of the second part. Weeping Walter Watson's size impressed him, but that was not all. Every organization has its quota of whiners and quitters, but it astounded the lawyer to realize so many could have been concentrated at the Indian River camp. He could understand why McDuff wanted to get rid of them. But McDuff's enthusiasm over the contract was something that puzzled him. He noticed, too, Morry kept rubbing his hands hopefully. "There's a Jewish gentleman who smells a piece of business," Steve muttered. "But he won't get it out of that contract."

"This agreement seems all right," Donnybrook said as he finished reading. "Herrin agrees to stock the cook shack with sufficient food to carry them through. The amount to be deducted when final payment is made. In turn, the boys are to receive nothing until the required number of trees are delivered to the spur track. But there is nothing here covering the failure of Mr. Herrin to pay on the agreed time."

"Just a minute, McDuff," Herrin protested. "I pay, except when men loaf on the job."

"Oh sure," Donnybrook lightly agreed. "But as a matter of business something should be inserted to protect the boys."

"What do you suggest?" the lawyer asked briskly.

"I think Walter Watson and his copartners should have the right to seize the trees and sell them to the highest bidder, or something, in case the money isn't paid twenty-four hours after the contract is complete. Even then they won't have any too much time to do their Christmas shopping."

"Come here a moment, Steve," Herrin said. He drew the lawyer into another room. "That suits me fine. Fix it so they'll have to look to the cut second-growth for payment, and nothing else. That will prevent them attaching my bank account. Of course I'm going to pay the boys—when I get damned good and ready —but——"

"Of course," Steve said quickly.

They joined the others and Donnybrook outlined the clause he had in mind. "I'll take it down to Mill City and have a stenographer retype the agreements," Steve said.

Donnybrook McDuff held the belief that any given CCC company could produce from its ranks a man to fit almost any need. "Is there a stenographer among you men?" he asked.

One of them stepped out. "Retype this contract," he directed, "we want to get things going."

An hour later one by one the CCC men signed the agreement with the exception of Donnybrook McDuff and Morry Goldstein.

The lawyer cornered Donnybrook at the first opportunity. "Just what will you get out of this?" he demanded.

"For one thing, a lot of personal satisfaction," Donnybrook answered. "I hate to see the outfit fail to set men on their feet. After nearly six months training Watson and his friends were a hundred percent loss from the morale standpoint.

It's bad for the CCC to let men like that go back to their homes. Now, they've got a chance to do something for themselves. If they make this hurdle, I won't worry about them." Then Donnybrook hurried off before Steve asked what he would get in dollars and cents.

When well away from the Herrin Logging Company holdings Donnybrook spoke his mind to Morry Goldstein.

"Here's some dough. Light out for California and do your stuff. Wear your uniform. It'll help," he said. "I'll take care of this end."

"Where'd you get the dough?" Morry asked.

"Tim Donovan loaned it to me," Donnybrook answered. "And he said if we got away with this it's a gift."

"The money's a gift or the brains showed in gettin' away with it is a gift?" Morry asked as he jammed the money into his pocket and started.

"Both," Donnybrook answered.

Chapter III

HOLDING THE SACK

DONNYBROOK McDUFF dressed in his best CCC duds and left camp early. It was Saturday and he planned to spend the week end in Mill City. A driving rain, mixed with huge snow flakes, came steadily out of the northeast. It was cold and it would get colder. Possibly the Northwest would have the rare experience of a white Christmas.

A slicker kept Donnybrook dry. He walked briskly down the trail, turned and swung westward over Herrin's property. Presently he stopped. Weeping Walter Watson's mighty shoulders were swinging steadily as he ate his way into the second-growth timber with a double bitted axe.

One cut was enough to topple the average tree. His companions carried the trees to the spur track and stacked them. Each tree dripped with rain and melting snow. To carry one was like embracing a wet sponge.

Donnybrook repressed a grin. Never in his life had he heard such cursing. "Let's knock off," one of them finally yelled. "I'm sick of the whole business."

"I tell you we can't quit," Watson roared. "I'm just as sick of it as you are. But if we quit, we don't get a dime. Thanks to that damned McDuff this is a contract, not day labor. We're contractors, business men or something. We aren't day laborers and there's nothing we can do." He toppled over a ten foot fir and it looked as if someone had turned a fire hose on the man who picked it up.

"Nice going," Donnybrook observed, coming into the open. "You must be three-quarters through your contract."

"Ninety percent through," Watson growled. He leaned on his axe and Donnybrook watched the steam rise from the big fellow's hot body.

"You should have the contract filled by Monday or Tuesday, then," Donnybrook suggested.

"We've been at it night and day. We're tougher'n I thought we was," Watson declared. "Night and day, understand. Drive! Drive! Drive! Now if we don't get our money Wednesday morning, what're *you* going to do about it?"

"Me?" Donnybrook lifted his brows. "Why should I do anything? The contract states plainly what you can do if

you're not paid. Take the second-growth."

"Who in hell will advance us money on a pile of brush?" Watson yelped. "Hell, man, Herrin's the only bird in these parts needin' any flood control work."

"I wouldn't cross any bridges until I came to them," the CCC man advised. He lighted a cigarette and waved airily at the sodden group. "S'long. Let me know how this all comes out. I tried to protect you the best I could."

"We know just how much of a friend of ours you are," one of them shouted. "You've ridden us since the first week we was in camp."

Donnybrook made no retort, but walked to a Donovan Logging Company main line and caught a speeder into Mill City. The town was alive with loggers and CCC men. The Logger's Rest, the toughest spot in town, was lined three deep along the bar and the smoke was thick enough to cut with a knife.

The CCC man's eyes drifted slowly from table to table until at last he found the group he sought. There were half a dozen of them, bearded scowling brutes in their thirties. They drank moonshine, clear as water, from suspicious bottles and talked in low tones. They reeked of rain-soaked, unwashed clothing and sweat. Their thick, wide hands carried the scars of numerous fights—scars made by splitting their flesh against another man's face. Calk marks on their faces indicated each, at some time, had gone down in a fight and paid the price loggers exact from the vanquished.

From their worn, well-greased boots to their rain-stained hats they were loggers and fighters. "Herrin men," those in the vicinity declared. "About the only men old Hard Times ever pays on the dot."

"Look at the mugs," a CCC man whispered. "Who wouldn't pay 'em on time?"

Donnybrook seated himself at an adjoining table and pretended to brood darkly over his beer. Scraps of conversation drifted from the Herrin men. "The wood ticks made a record. I don't know how many thousand trees they've got stacked along that old spur. The Old Man said there'd be nothin' to it, but he wanted us around in case the big guy gets tough when the show-down comes."

"He said they would be through some time Wednesday," another said. "If it was McDuff's crowd it'd mean a fight, but Watson's outfit is going to take it laying down."

Donnybrook had heard all he wanted to hear. He walked over to the table and grinned. "Thanks for the compliment. I'm McDuff. And if it was my crowd, it'd sure mean a fight," he agreed. "At that, you might be surprised."

They exchanged glances as Donnybrook walked off. One of them started after the CCC man, but his companions jerked him back into his chair. "Herrin's orders to lay off fightin' until he's in the clear on this second-growth stuff," they warned.

"I know," the trouble-seeker muttered, "but somehow I've never believed that bird is as tough as he claims."

"He don't claim. Others do the claiming. Have a drink, McGuire," their leader advised.

AT MIDNIGHT Tuesday Watson flung his axe as far as he could throw it. "The job's done!" he said thickly, then reeled towards the bunkhouse. The others followed. Without pausing to remove their sodden clothing they crawled into their bunks, pulled up the blankets and fell into the slumber of utter exhaustion.

It was noon before they emerged, stiff and tired. Somebody made coffee, which they swilled down and felt better. Later they ate ham and eggs and the last of the butter. "The way we hit the ball," Watson said, "I figger we made better'n ten bucks a day. Gents, them's wages."

"We aren't laborers workin' for wages," one of them answered bitterly, "we're contractors. Big shots!" He got up. "Well, let's go over to Herrin's and find out if he's going to pay or stall."

Herrin watched them file out of the big timber, cross the clearing and pound up the steps to the door. He admitted them

a moment later. "What can I do for you, boys?" he blandly inquired.

"We're through. The contract's completed," Watson informed him. "About all that's left is the pay off."

"Through?" He lifted his brows in astonishment. "That is something of a record. It takes me by surprise, in fact. I figured you wouldn't complete the work before the fifteenth at the earliest. My tallyman is away on his vacation. Naturally he'll have to tally the trees as they are loaded onto cars."

"We kept a count," Watson said. "The contract's finished. Our money's due. Nothing was said in the contract about a tally. We want our money."

"Anyone knows some kind of a check must be made," Herrin said smugly.

"Then give us fifty percent now, and the rest when the tally is finished," Watson offered.

"That isn't possible," Herrin said with decision. "You put up no bond to insure specific performance. Withholding cash until a count is made is my only protection. I'll notify you as soon as the money is ready. Good day, gentlemen."

"You ain't goin' to get away with anything like this," Watson stormed. "We ——" The door opened at that moment and McGuire and two of his companions entered the room.

"Oh, you're busy, Herrin," he said with a significant grin. "There's no hurry about our business, so we'll just wait in the other room until you're done with the wood ticks."

"I guess we'd better be going," Watson said. "We've made our demand, and——"

"And—what?" Herrin asked.

"According to the contract we can help ourselves to the trees we cut," he finished somewhat lamely.

"Why, of course," Herrin admitted, "if you don't feel like waiting for your money, help yourself to the second-growth."

In a grim silence the men departed. "Now what'll we do?" one of them asked. "We're holding the sack. And McGuire and his bunch were all set to wade into us if we got tough with Herrin. I came damned near losing my temper."

"We're going to Indian River Camp and have a few words with Donnybrook McDuff," Watson declared. "His brilliant mind got us into this. May be he'll have another brain-storm and get us out of it."

CHAPTER IV

HOME ON THE RANGE

AS WATSON and his companions neared the familiar surroundings of their old home, a voice in song floated through the timber.

". . . the deer and the antelope play.
Where seldom is hoid, a discouraging woid,
And the skies they ain't cloudy all day."

"The word is heard, not hoid," Donnybrook McDuff corrected. "And the last part goes, 'And the skies are not cloudy all day!' "

"It's McDuff and Morry," Watson said. They quickened their pace and a moment later stormed down on the pair.

"Hello," Donnybrook said cheerfully. "Take a look at Morry. He just got back from a few days in California."

"You take a look at us, Donnybrook," Watson growled. "We're holding the sack. Herrin didn't come through."

"Fine!" Donnybrook exclaimed. "I'd have been sick all over if he'd have paid you off."

"And another thing," Watson rasped. "I heard gossip that it was Herrin who put up that twenty-two more shopping days clipping beside his men wanted notice. It was a dirty trick to get us thinking about money to buy things to send home Christmas."

"You're damned right it was," Donnybrook sympathetically agreed. "And I recognized it as such right from the start. First, did you serve notice you'd take the trees if he didn't come through?"

"Yes."

"Then that's all. He's got twenty-four hours. Go back to the bunkhouse and stay

there. Be ready for anything beginning tomorrow evening," Donnybrook ordered. "And keep your traps shut, whatever else you do."

A few minutes after Watson and his bewildered companions had departed, Donnybrook and Morry headed for the Donovan Logging Company's Camp One. Tim Donovan greeted them. "I suppose you're here to tell me Herrin trimmed you," he said.

"No, we're here to borrow some standard gauge flat cars," Donnybrook answered. "Enough to haul away the second-growth Watson cut up there on Grouse Bench."

"Hold on!" Tim Donovan exclaimed. "Not so fast. If Herrin catches a locomotive from the Donovan Logging Company on his steel, he'll grab it. There's no love lost between us, you know."

"But you will risk the flat cars?" Donnybrook countered.

"Sure! They don't carry the Donovan brand," Tim answered.

"All I want is those empties spotted beside that second-growth," the CCC man explained. "It's up to Watson to get the

trees loaded onto them. After that, a man with nerve and a pick handle to tighten brakes can bring the load out. It's a gravity haul all the way."

"There'll be a little matter of what Herrin's mop-'em-up lads are doing in the meantime," Tim suggested dryly. "All right, we'll spot the empties where you want them. We should be in and out before Herrin knows what's up."

"Tomorrow evening as soon as it's dark," Donnybrook said. "Tim, you're a hell swell guy!"

"When it comes to hell-swell guys," Tim replied, "you're deserving honorable mention." He gave Donnybrook a poke in the stomach that would have floored the average man. And Donnybrook countered with a bust on the jaw that touched off the stars.

AS SOON as the twenty-four hour period of grace had passed Watson informed Donnybrook. "I went up to see if he was ready to pay," he said, "and Herrin just laughed. He said I had my remedy."

"You start taking your remedy at nine o'clock tonight," Donnybrook informed him. "That's all for now."

At sundown a Donovan locomotive nosed up to a string of flat cars, coupled up and pushed them slowly to the main line. It was pitch dark when Donnybrook threw a switch and the engine began puffing up the grade that led to Grouse Bench. The pilot knocked down three foot alders that were growing between the ties, and sometimes the ponderous load swayed as the rails sagged.

"This bed sure needs ballast," Donnybrook said.

"That isn't worrying me. The wheel flanges squealing against these rusty rails can be heard clear to Seattle," Tim grumbled. "I'll bet Herrin is standing on his porch right now wondering what the hell's going on."

He opened the throttle wider and pushed the flats to the end of the spur. "There you are, Donnybrook!" he exclaimed. "What you're going to do with that pile of brush is more than I can see. Of course there is some satisfaction in taking it away from Herrin. But it's a lot of trouble and hard work."

Shadows came from the bunkhouse and Watson's huge bulk moved up to the locomotive. "What's next, Donnybrook?" he asked.

"Hop to it and load those cars," Donnybrook ordered.

"It'll take a couple of days," Watson said.

"Hop to it, old son," Donnybrook insisted. "Let her go, Tim, I'm riding with you." He rode to the point nearest the Indian River Camp, then unloaded. "You'll get your cars back sometime," he promised. "Thanks for the locomotive."

At nine o'clock he puffed into camp. "Everybody out, you mugs," he ordered. "And make it lively!"

The sergeant came on the run. "Now what the hell's goin' on this time of night?" he roared.

"Go back to bed, Sarg," Donnybrook answered, "and give us a break. There isn't going to be any riot I am sorry to say. The boys should be back by three or four in the morning."

HE CHASED them into CCC trucks and headed for Grouse Bench until the road ended, then kept them moving afoot until they arrived at the old camp. "String out," he ordered, "and get those trees aboard. Some of you hop onto the cars and stack them. We don't want to leave a tree here."

Each flat car was equipped with high, fence-like sides, and was used mostly to carry mill slabs to the fuel yards in the city. Thus they were ideal for Donnybrook's purpose. They came aboard in a steady stream and the pile along the spur track slowly melted, under the mass attack.

At two o'clock the job was done. "All right, you boy scouts," Donnybrook shouted, "you've done your daily kind deed, light out for Indian River and get what sleep you can."

As the outfit disappeared down the trail to the waiting trucks Donnybrook turned back and looked up the somewhat bewildered Watson. "That was sure swell of the boys!" Watson said, "it'd taken us several days. Now what?"

"Get yourself a pick handle to thrust through the brake wheel and increase your leverage, then see if you can take this string of flats into Mill City," Donnybrook directed. "It's down grade all the way. But for Pete's sake don't let the train get away from you."

"But what's the idea? Nobody there needs trees for flood control," Watson argued.

"All I've got to say is this, boys," the CCC man patiently answered. "If you don't bring these cars into Mill City before six o'clock this morning the chances are your hard work is all for nothing. And another thing, stick close together, I've got a hunch Herrin's planning to stop you. Listen!"

Through the timber came the sharp exhaust of a gasoline speeder climbing a steep grade. Watson released the brake on the forward car and slowly the flats began rolling over the rusty rails. Donnybrook listened a moment. Somehow it seemed as if the speeder's exhaust challenged the scream of flanges grinding against the old spur. With a grin he swung aboard the last car and burrowed into the mass of trees until only his head was visible. Fifteen feet away something stirred. "Who in hell are you?" he demanded.

"Listen, you Irish mug," Morry Goldstein answered, "I should miss a fight like what may happen. Even boys like them bellyachers will maybe fight for something what they own. Maybe it's a piece of ground with a home on it, maybe it's even only second-growth fir trees." He drew a deep breath. "Oh give me a home, where the buffalo roam, where the deer and the ——"

"Shut up," Donnybrook ordered. "Somebody may hear you. This isn't our fight. We're just here to watch the fun, and keep out of sight."

The car swayed dangerously at the first curve, couplings clanked and brake shoes screamed. Rain began falling from low hanging clouds. "I'm wet to the skin already," Morry complained.

Donnybrook said nothing and watched the firs move back in solemn procession. For a moment he thought the train might slip through without resistance, then sud-

denly Watson tightened the brakes until some of the wheels skidded. He slackened away and tightened again. The train came to a jerky stop. His voice floated back. "Get that tree off the track!"

"Come on," Donnybrook said in a low voice, "this is the showdown."

CHAPTER V

PAYOFF

AS THEY jumped to the ground and raced to the brush above the right of way, Watson and his companions left the front car and began tugging at a small tree that had fallen across the track. Suddenly the darkness of a nearby thicket, spilled burly shadows.

"Get the hell out of here," Herrin's voice ordered. "Clear out, you wood ticks."

"Just a minute," Watson argued, "the contract said if we weren't paid we could take the trees."

"What're you going to do with them?" Herrin demanded, his curiosity aroused. "They're no good to you!"

"We're taking them because they're ours!" Watson was silent several moments then repeated, "Ours!" He spoke as if the full meaning of the word dawned on him for the first time. "You lost your rights when you didn't pay, Mr. Herrin. Now we can do anything we want to with them. Throw 'em in the bay if we want to. One thing's certain, you ain't going to have 'em. They're ours!"

"Slap 'em down, boys!" Herrin sharply ordered. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

"We don't want trouble," Watson faltered, "but——"

McGuire's massive fist smashed full in Watson's face. Donnybrook saw his head snap back, and his knees buckle, but Watson did not fall. Again McGuire's murderous right struck the giant. He cried out in agony and half doubled up.

"Yellow," Donnybrook whispered. "Don't it make you sick?"

"It hoits me all over," Morry answered.

"The word is hurts," the other said. "Yes, hurts. I've never seen a man hurt greater."

Watson stood there like a wounded bear, shaking his big head in bewilderment. "Ours," he thundered. "Ours!" The cry was hardly human. Then he whirled on his fellows. "Why don't you fight?" He kicked the nearest man clear of the ground. His open hand cuffed the next in the back of the neck and he almost collapsed. Then Watson, bellowing from the depths of his great lungs, charged McGuire. Twice that logger's fist sank deep into the big fellow's stomach. He seemed impervious to pain.

His fists lashed out defensively and then suddenly he was on the aggressive. Five out of six blows were wild and were hurled aside by McGuire's thick arms. Then in sheer fury he knocked McGuire's guard down with his left hand and smashed his right to the jaw. It was the first clean blow Watson had ever struck. McGuire's feet left the ground a full two feet, his body went limp in midair, then crashed heavily into the brush. The man never moved. "Phooey!" Morry exclaimed in an awed voice. "He must've killed him dead."

AS THEIR leader fell Herrin's gang fairly swarmed over Watson. The latter's companions were in the thick of it, tasting fight for the first time in their lives. And the taste was sweet.

"They've got Watson down!" Donnybrook exclaimed. "They're going to kill him. The whole gang's crazy mad!" Donnybrook jumped into the fight, with Morry at his heels. The former circled the pack like a lone wolf seeking a hamstring to slash.

At every opportunity he lashed forth with a devastating rabbit punch. Then suddenly he dived in, caught Watson from behind and lifted the battered giant to his feet. "Keep 'em off my back, Donnybrook," Watson pleaded, "That's all, just keep 'em off my back."

And back to back they stood for a full

two minutes beating off opposition. Herrin, a rock in the end of a sock, closed in and let drive. Donnybrook's arm caught part of the blow and his head the remainder. The world, blazing with stars, suddenly began spinning.

Herrin drew back once more. Morry jumped the logger from behind, slipped his arm about the man's neck, forced his throat into the crotch of the elbow and hung on. Pawing and gasping, Herrin staggered back, desperately trying to free himself from the tenacious Jew. "This ain't no way to fight," the logger gasped. "Come out in front of me, and fight like a man."

"And let you smear my nose all over my face," Morry countered. "Nuts to you!" He tightened his grasp and went to the ground with the logger.

Donnybrook McDuff saw a blurred figure rise before his eyes, then fall. He turned, groping for others, and found only rain and darkness. He shook his head violently and his vision cleared somewhat. Watson was standing there, a mighty figure smeared with blood and dressed in shredded clothing. "I guess, Donnybrook," he said thickly, "we've got 'em all licked. I see it all now. You got us into this so we'd understand what it is to own something—something that's ours. We ain't afraid of the world or any man in it, now. We'll make our breaks instead of waiting for them. After all, I guess we've cashed in on that second-growth."

"You just think you have, brother," Donnybrook said with a wolfish grin. "This is only the first dividend." He walked over to Morry Goldstein and lifted him from the semi-conscious Herrin's back, then heaved him onto the train. He helped Watson and his companions aboard, then released the brakes.

The train moved slowly downgrade, leaving behind a beaten and stunned group of professional trouble-makers. As the train shot into the last curve, Donnybrook released the brakes entirely and coasted into Mill City.

It was five-thirty o'clock, and the clatter of a switch engine shunting cars about filled the damp air. Donnybrook brought the train to a stop on a siding, then yelled at the brakeman. "These go out this morning. The bills of lading are all made out."

Watson's gang surrounded him, puzzled expressions on their faces as they realized this was not the end of the journey of the second-growth.

"Go over to the Commercial Hotel and wash up," Donnybrook directed, "then come down to the dining room where I'll have breakfast ready."

A long line of plates containing ham and eggs, with side dishes of hotcakes awaited them as they filed into the dining room. "I guess you're out of this feed, Morry," Watson said, eyeing the slab of pink ham on Morry's plate.

"I don't see why," Morry answered. "I like *salmon* and eggs just like the next one. But first a report."

"A report on what?" Watson asked.

"A report on the payoff," Donnybrook answered. "You see from the first I knew Herrin would try to pull a fast one. That's why I kept my mouth shut, and at the same time provided in the contract that the second-growth would become yours if he failed to pay. Then I sent Morry to California to sell every stick you cut. There's a great market down there for Christmas trees running from three to ten feet high. And that's what you've really been working on, a Christmas tree order."

"And Herrin furnished the trees gratis," Watson muttered. "When he hears it, won't it burn him up."

"And he'll hear it," Donnybrook grimly predicted. "And so will everybody in the logging country. With all expenses deducted I figure you boys were making about twenty dollars a day while you worked, not to mention a century each for Morry and me. Well, don't sit there gaping. You've still got time for your Christmas shopping. Besides, your eggs are getting cold."

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

THEIR horses made almost no sound as they traveled at a running walk along the sandy cow-trail, and the two riders themselves were silent.

A wise, complacent moon looked down upon them with a crooked grin, as though he knew something they would like to know—which he wouldn't tell. And he impishly touched the land with a tricky light, making hideous things beautiful and beautiful things hideous; painting queer shadows and laughing at the confusion of men and beasts.

Twenty crazy devils screeched on the right, and twenty more answered from the left; but the riders knew they were merely a couple of coyotes serenading the moon.

A snooty little cricket—thinking he owned the earth—turned himself loose and hurled his voice to high heaven, telling the world how happy he was and defying the old man in the sky; but a skinny, snaky neck curved down and a long beak searched him out, so he ended his song on a high, wailing note and ended his days in the gizzard of a sand-hill crane.

The moon grinned wider than ever.

A young jack kicked up his heels and loped insolently across their path, as noiseless as a ghost. He sat up a few rods away—sassy and brave as anything—like a fellow without a care or fear in the world. In a flash everything for him was changed. A streak of dirty white dropped straight from the moon, and the rabbit floated away in the air. His plaintive little cries came back to the riders—growing fainter and fainter, fading into the moonlight—smothered by the talons of a prairie owl.

The ornery old man up above puffed out his cheeks and his skin got pink; he was dying to laugh.

Pretty good, what? That's a bit from the new serial that starts in this issue, *"Rangers Is Powerful Hard to Kill."* So to the company of men who have written of the West in SHORT STORIES—Mulford, Raine, Seltzer, Jackson Gregory and many distinguished others—we are glad to add Caddo Cameron. Mr. Cameron writes us:

"If you notice that my neck and ears are red and my words sort of mill around at the gate, sidling away and trying to hide behind one another, don't be at all surprised. When getting up to introduce myself to a crowd of fust-rate critics as large as this here audience of SHORT STORIES readers—they ain't no two ways about it, I'm plumb stage struck.

"It might sound right highfalutin for me to say that my father was a Texas beef baron with cows in his brand scattered from hell to breakfast, but it wouldn't be the truth by a long shot. Far as I know, there hasn't been a baron of any description in our family since our forefathers on both sides came over the mountains with Daniel Boone. Fact of the matter is, dad drifted away from Kentucky in his teens to become a laborer on railroad construction gangs that were pushing steel into the West. It wasn't long before he graduated into a wandering cow-hand. Later he became a freighter, driving his oxen over the wild trails of the Southwest—trails that have long since been erased and now

wind and twist only through the faltering memories of those old-timers.

"When I came onto the scene in 1888, he and his young wife were living in a one-room sod shanty in No Man's Land, now the Panhandle of Oklahoma. My earliest recollections have to do with frequent changes of residence, and history-making events; the labors of a country giving birth to an unwelcome child—Big Pastures—and the passing of the open range in the Southwest. Of course, the significance of those events escaped me at the time, but into the retentive mind of a child were impressed scenes that now return with striking familiarity: grim men giving censored accounts of wire cuttings, stampedes, wanton destruction of stock and other property, and casually describing all manner of dangers and hardships.

"It was war between 'free-grass' and 'fenced-range' men, and my dad was one of the latter—his holdings being small.

WITH the best of intentions and at the expense of the Lord only knows what sacrifice, the folks sent me away to school when I was sixteen. But I reckon the prairie wouldn't noways unloose its hold, for school didn't take worth a darn and I was plumb upset by life in a city. So away I went—a stray, drifting to sea, knocking about in the American tropics, working on the relocation of the Panama Railroad while the canal was building, railroading in the States, several more or less unsuccessful stabs at business, always from time-to-time wandering back to the prairie where a fella has room to shake out his loop.

"'*Rangers Is Powerful Hard to Kill*' has no historical worth, but it is intended to be accurate in matters of atmosphere, customs, colloquialisms, and characterization. When I sit down to write about the Old West, first of all I'm fired with a desire to do justice to its people. I don't aim to give you history or detailed descriptions of their often monotonous lives, hardships, and drudgery. I want to entertain you and such things aren't at all entertaining to most folks. I want you to see the high points in the lives of those people, whether they be at play, at work, or at war; and it's my ambition to draw their characters so clearly as to enable you to know them as they were upon such occasions.

"I may describe a cowhand's antics when he is a-celebratin' proper, and neglect to explain how he worked like hell for three months to earn the money he's doing his damndest to spend in three hours. I may gamble with my success as an author by violating certain writing formulae when I temporarily stop the action in a yarn to insert some of the old timers' coarse humor and tall stories; but I'm trying to make those folks live on my pages, and that humor played an important part in their scheme of existence.

"I'm powerful anxious to see you laugh with 'em, cuss with 'em, and fight back-to-back with 'em; and if in the end you admire and love them as I do, I'll be mighty happy.

"So 'long!

"Caddo Cameron"

Hunches

MILES of type have been set, unnumbered books have been printed to record and discuss the superstitions of mankind. Almost as many volumes have been produced to demonstrate the folly of these foibles called "hunches." Nevertheless they persist, and, as *Berton E. Cook* writes us, the hunches of sea-going people have become traditional.

"Now and then it has developed that some of the mariners' quaint superstitions were not so senseless after all," continues Mr. Cook. "Until recent years, for instance, officials who treat the weather scientifically were wont to discount a fisherman's ruling that men must not sleep on deck under a full moon. To do so was to run the risk of becoming moonstruck. It did not so happen that science had ever

In the next issue | SHORT STORIES | *for April 25th*

The Major and Jim, find themselves in Jail—in a good cause

CROOKED BARRELS

A Complete Novel by

L. Patrick Greene

It all started when the lady arrived with $30,000 cash in a brief case—

TOURIST ROOMS

by

Karl Detzer

You can't beat the Old-timers—

The Marshal of Gunsight

by

Harry Sinclair Drago,

etc., etc., etc.

explained such experience, so it was considered a superstition. But a scientific study of moonlight has revealed the fact that the moon does not reflect all the sun's rays with proportional strength; instead, the moon seems to bombard the earth's air blanket with a preponderance of some rays and a scarcity of others between the infra red and the ultra violet extremes. Exposure of some human heads to this condition produces mental upset that labels the victim as 'moonstruck.'

"Fishermen probably knew this effect, at least, before science really got around to reducing the weather to formulae. For weather is the constant concern of their calling. They live by it; by records in 'The Fishermen's Own Book,' a lively percentage of their past numbers have died by it.

"Mariners have their pet avoidances, too. There is one captain who ran in Hawaiian freighters around the Horn for years avoiding the slap of seas against the seat of his trousers. Whenever a sea did catch him from behind, his day was spoiled. Fog has had many a constant sea-goer in constant dread of its dangers. One of the most cheerful shipmates to be found on the run east of New York was a veteran who actually suffered in the suspense of a fog mull. He acted like a cornered animal. Again, there is the second assistant engineer of the *Hacienda* in *'Long John Eames,'* in this issue. He, too, had his pet avoidance. From ship to ship he'd jumped to escape it until the modern trend toward oil drove him to risk the lives of others. Some experienced salts might have advised that engineer to turn fatalist—'When your turn comes, big boy, you'll go out, and not before!'

"Berton E. Cook"

And Another Newcomer

ANOTHER new face is added to the Circle in this issue—that of Howard Nostrand. Mr. Nostrand is also writing of the West, but it is the West of radios and modern roads in the cow-country; yet there is some survival of the days of "Rangers Is Powerful Hard to Kill," especially in the person of the old-timer of "Winged Steers." Here is a letter from Mr. Nostrand:

"Ten years ago I was one of a party of four young fellows who heard the call of high adventure and proceeded to do something about it. We got ourselves a Model T and headed out to see if we could find the place where the sun went down.

"When odd jobs were to be had, we worked; and when there was nothing to do, we cranked up Lizzie and went places.

"In the course of a few months we covered quite a lot of ground and learned a few things: that the Bad Lands are bad because they can't be used for anything—I had thought there was a tie-up between the land and the men living on it; that hair pants are still in vogue and are accepted apparel; that there are plenty of Indians left, even though they don't whoop, and only the squaws paint their faces; that there is an awful lot of territory west of the Mississippi which hasn't changed since the time of Billy the Kid; and that a ten gallon hat is a damned good thing to have on your noodle when the temperature plays around the hundred-fifteen mark.

"Things happened to us, too. There's an old judge in a little town in Oregon who let himself get talked out of showing four roisterers the inside of the calaboose because—well, because we were young, and home was about three thousand miles away.

"Although we eventually returned to the East, the mountains and the plains continued to beckon. One of us heeded the call; he's out there now, working a gold mine—his own discovery—in Colorado.

"We other three have settled down a bit, I'm afraid. We long, but we take it out in longing. *'Winged Steers'* is only a chunk of nostalgia that managed to get put on paper.

"Howard Nostrand"

CCC Prize Letters

HERE are this issue's prize winning letters from CCC camps. Remember, SHORT STORIES is paying $5.00 for the best letter we print each time, and $2.00 each for as many others as we have space for. They should deal with CCC camps, viewpoints and experiences and should be short. Address them to the Editor of SHORT STORIES, Garden City, New York.

This letter wins the $5.00 this time:

The Editor of SHORT STORIES,
Garden City, New York.
Dear Sir:

Upon reading your last issue of SHORT STORIES I discovered something that interested me greatly: your CCC Letter contest. After reading what you wanted in the way of letters, I decided to try my luck on a subject, the topic of discussion at an informal gathering the other evening.

I have been in the C's a little over eighteen months, and this subject has popped up several times, both in camp discussions and in gatherings where the Corps has been discussed.

What I have in mind is this: "What is the attitude of the average American citizen concerning the men in the CCC?" Not what the men in the Corps are doing, or what it is costing the government, but their thoughts of the type of men in the outfits scattered all over the country. True, it is one of the few government projects that has not been raked over the coals by opposing political forces, but that doesn't reveal their thought concerning the men that go to make up the Corps. Do they think of us as fellow humans, who are trying to work for what we get, instead of staying on the outside and living off direct relief? Are we, to them, giving a dollar for dollar return for what we are getting? Are we rough necks? Do they, in thinking of the cost of operating the Corps, think of the thousands upon thousands of acres of timber that have been saved from fire and other destructive forces? Or of the acres and acres of land that is being reclaimed through the work of the soil erosion camps? Or of the numerous parks and public playgrounds that have been improved; the old traditional landmarks around the country that are being preserved for posterity? Of the wild life conservation and migrating fowl protection work that is carried on by the CCC? Or of the hundreds of lives that are saved each year, because of the training one received in the Corps? Are the public awakened to the fact that the Civilian Conservation Corps is not a thing to be dropped in a year or two, but something, now that it is started, that is indispensable? It is not only a builder of men, both physically and morally, but it is the greatest movement towards the conservation of the fast vanishing natural resources of this great country of ours since the creation of the first forest reserve by President Adams in 1828. But let us pray that the Civilian Conservation Corps will have a better fate than that of the government's first attempt at conservation attempted on Santa Rosa Island in 1828.

James B. Unitt

CCC Co. 2740,
Levi Carter Park, SP-7,
Omaha, Nebraska

And the writers of these letters are being sent checks for $2.00 each.

The Editor of SHORT STORIES,
Garden City, New York.

I recently read in SHORT STORIES that you wanted some stories concerning happenings in the CCC, so I will write you a story in which I played a part. I was sent from my home town, Norfolk, Nebraska, to Niobrara. There after passing the physical examinations I was enrolled as a member. After going through all of the various

tricks of hazing I was acknowledged a full fledged member. After getting in condition I was finally with several other boys set to work dragging logs out of the Niobrara River which ran close to camp. This river is not deep but very swift as it enters the Missouri on a decline about a mile from camp. On this particular morning we four boys took an old boat which was tied up near camp, took several short boards of wood for paddles and set out to a log which was floating in the middle of the river. We progressed very rapidly towards the log and were tying it to the rear end of the boat. Suddenly the boat gave a lurch throwing us in the bottom. Our paddles were thrown out of our hands and there we were with no paddles to get back. We tried to row with our hands but made very little headway as the current was too swift, so we discarded our clothes and were going to swim for it. But as we were not very good swimmers we gave up the idea and stayed with the boat, which by this time was quite close to where the river entered the Missouri.

The channel flowed over bed rock and the waves were quite high. We were caught in the main current and took a swift ride. We were whirled around several times, then all of a sudden the boat felt a shock and I found myself swimming in the white boiling water. I noticed the boat with a hole in its bottom drifting towards me. I swam for it and hung on the side for dear life. The other boys were fighting to reach it and I helped some by maneuvering the boat with my hands. They clung on and we were whirled into the Missouri. The brown muddy water did not look any too good as it has quite a few undercurrents and is very treacherous; but an eddy caught us and carried us quite close to the shore. We let loose of the boat and swam for it. We reached the bank very exhausted and quite scared of our close call with death.

Herbert Richter

CCC Co. 751,
Tekamah, Nebraska

10

The Editor of SHORT STORIES,
Garden City, New York.

I have been a reader of your Story Tellers' Circle for many months and have just recently noted that you are asking for letters from the boys of the C.C.C. camps. So here goes:

It happens that I am one of the 33,000 odd Veteran members of the C.C.C. outfits, and first entered the sod busters and wood ticks outfit in '33 in Washington. This was during the time of the Second Bonus march, some 2,000 of us were sent to Langley Field, Virginia, for conditioning. A few weeks there and we went to our first camp in the woods. Since those days I have been in three different camps and have seen many vets come and go.

When one considers the value of the outdoor life as afforded us, it compensates in a way for the isolation that one finds sometimes in the out-of-way camps prevalent in the C.C.C. We have our movies, an occasional vaudeville show, card games, etc., to while away the leisure hours. There's no doubt but that the outdoor life has built up hundreds of the Vets physically, and enabled them to see a new lease on life.

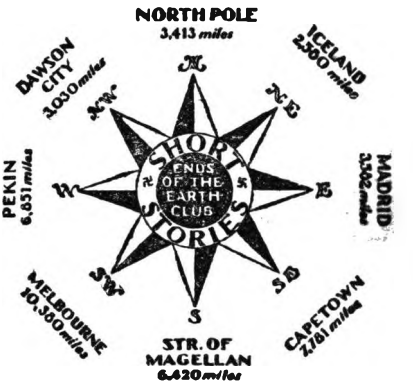
Located here in the French Creek Area we have found some mighty interesting things. One of the most interesting being that of the old Hopewell Furnace, still in existence. From this old furnace many hundreds of cannon balls were cast for Washington's army at Valley Forge, which is just a few miles away. Our outfit is now putting the old furnace in shape so that by the time summer rolls along, tourists may look it over.

The story in your last issue about the foresters, forest rangers and C.C.C. was a corker. Keep up the good work. This is the type of story that really tells the people of the good work that is going on in the restoring of forests of America.

Yours truly,
Drake Albert

Co. 3301, C.C.C. (Vets)
Birdsboro, Pennsylvania

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, % Short Stories, Garden City, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

No hobbies of his own but an offer to help others with theirs.

Dear Secretary:

Now and then I get an issue of SHORT STORIES in Rio City and enjoy it very much.

It amuses me and teaches me a great deal of the English language with which I am not yet well acquainted.

I have no special hobbies but I would like to be of any service to American and foreign members such as exchanging letters, newspapers, reviews, postcards, little coins, stamps and so forth.

Yours truly,

F. A. Silva

Caixa 36, Cataguazes,
E. de Minas, Brazil,
South America

We've heard of collecting photographs, but anyone owning eight thousand is something we haven't heard of before.

Dear Secretary:

I wish to become a member of your club. I have been a reader of your publication for some time.

My hobby is photography. I have been going to sea since 1921 and have been in sixty-three different ports. I have collected some eight thousand photos and negatives. I would like to correspond with members who have photos to exchange. I do not buy or sell photos. I have a wonderful collection which I have either taken myself or have received through exchange.

Yours truly,

William H. Perlman

Seamans House,
550 West 20th Street,
New York City, New York, U.S.A.

Will the wonders of engineering never cease?

Dear Secretary:

Thank you for making me a member of the Ends of the Earth Club.

My most recent experience was cycling through the great Mersey Tunnel. This tunnel is the largest underwater structure in the world, its length being two and a half miles.

There are four lanes in which traffic is allowed to pass, two being for vehicles over thirty miles per hour and two for those under that speed. Fire stations are situated every fifty feet in case of emergency and also two exits to the surface. It took eight years to build this marvel of engineering at a great peril to the men who braved this monstrous task. The opening took place on the eighteenth of June last year by H. M. King George V.

Yours sincerely,

William J. Bushell

120 Morningside Road,
West Derley,
Liverpool, 11, England

Missing Page

Inside back cover

Missing Page

Back cover