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# Short Stories

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## THE DUDE'S TREASURE

*A long novelette  
of the Major*

by

**L. Patrick  
Greene**

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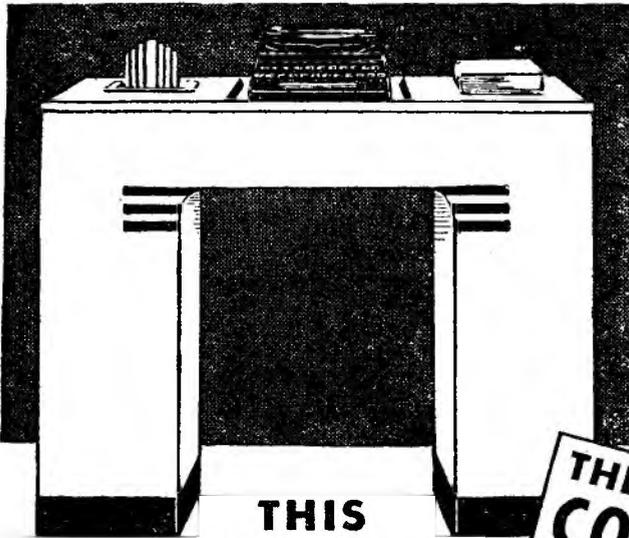
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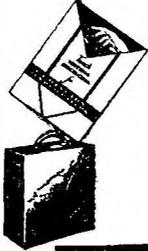
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# Short

Every author's finest and

## CONTENTS

### THE DUDE'S TREASURE

(A Complete Novel)

L. Patrick Greene 5

*The Trouble With the Map of Lost Treasure Was That the  
Bad Men Got to Believing in It Themselves.*

### END DETOUR

Karl Detzer 39

*In Spite of Muck and Weather and Traffic and Railroaders; in  
Spite of a Row With the Contractor, the Young  
Man's Job Was on Schedule.*

### THE FORKED TRAIL

Harry Sinclair Drago 51

*The Drifting Kid Was in a Tough Spot; It Was a Good Thing  
His Old Friends Could Read Sign.*

### CROW MOUNTAIN DIESEL

Ray Millholland 63

*Slim Baldwin's Trouble-Shooting Job Shot Him Up Crow  
Mountain, Where the Air Beacon Was Out  
and Fate Was Closing in.*

### DUE FOR A HANGIN'

(Third Part of Four)

Caddo Cameron 76

*As Far As Trouble Went, Blizzard Remarked That They Had  
Done Swum a Leetle Branch All Right, but Had Big  
Water Ahead With the Sun in Their Eyes.*

**ACTION, ADVENTURE, MYSTERY**

# Stories



latest stories—no reprints

**APRIL 10th, 1939**

**SOUNDLESS SHIP** **Patrick O'Keefe** 122

*Rammed in the Night, the Small Freighter Sank Without a Sound—and Who Was to Say Whether or Not Her Crew Had Perished?*

**WYATT'S CHINK WIZARD**  
(A Novelette) **Captain Frederick Moore** 131

*Wyatt Declared the Chink Was Head of the Tiger Department; Till a Sea Wolf Showed Up.*

**ONE CATTLEMAN'S CONSCIENCE**  
(A Novelette) **Raymond A. Berry** 144

*It Is All Right to Crawl into a Hole and Pull the Hole in After You When You Know You Can Get Out the Other End.*

**ADVENTURERS ALL** **John Gillese** 163  
A Ghastly Adventure

**THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE** 165

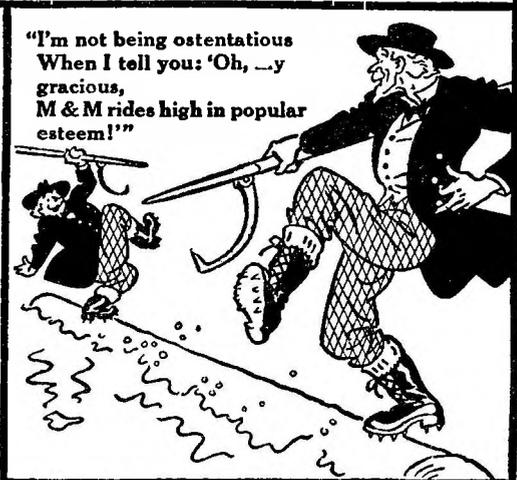
**ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB** 170

**COVER—A. R. Tilburne**

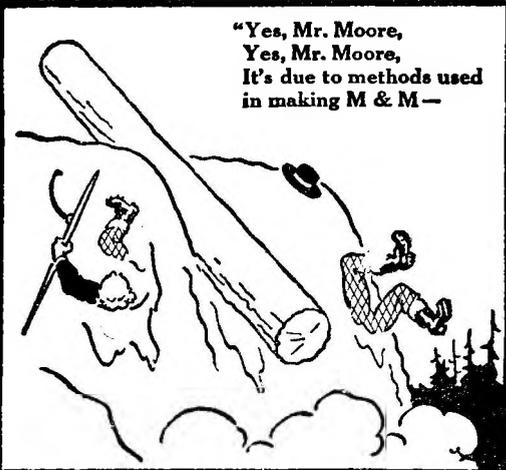
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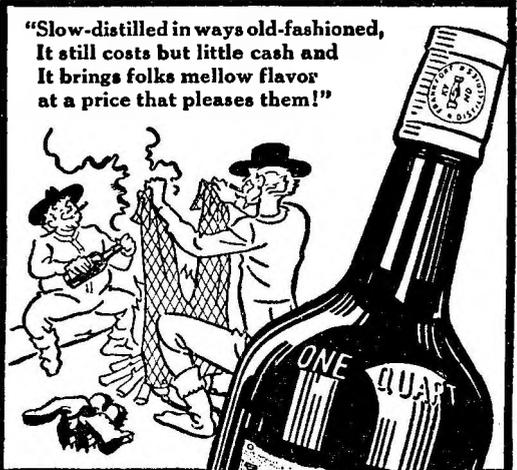
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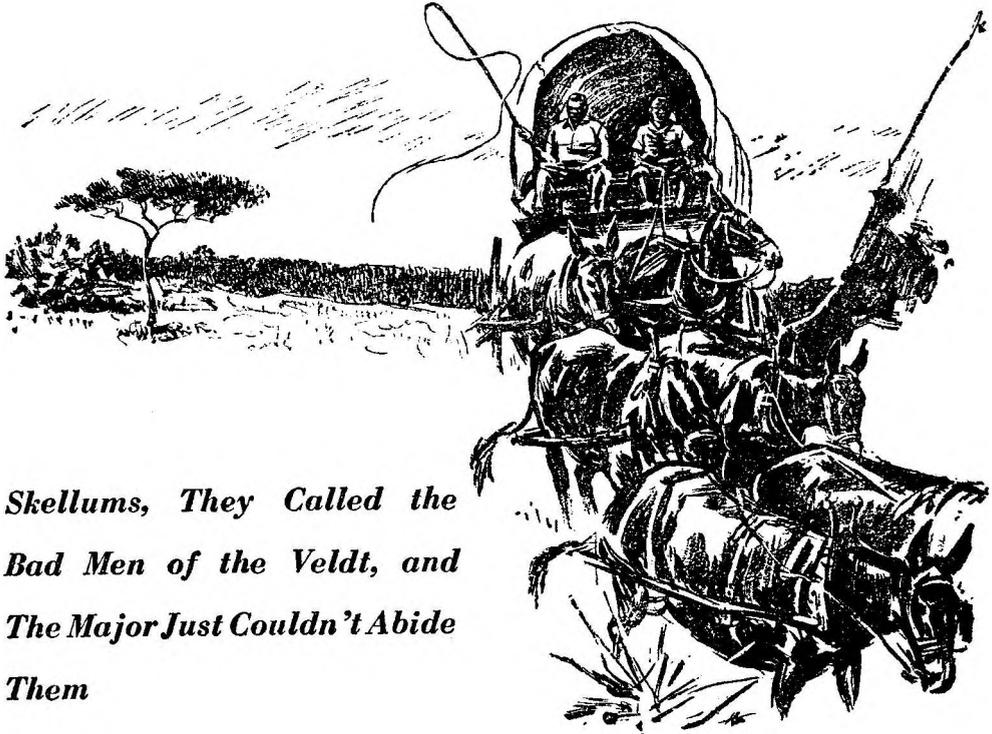
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# THE DUDE'S TREASURE

By L. PATRICK GREENE

*Author of "Major Sacrifice" and Other Stories of the  
Major and of South Africa*



*Skellums, They Called the  
Bad Men of the Veldt, and  
The Major Just Couldn't Abide  
Them*

**T**HE man and his operations were tragically inefficient; the site he had chosen for his outspan proved his ignorance of Africa; his outfit was that of a greenhorn; it was over-burdened with luxurious, non-essential gadgets and lacked many of the prime necessities of camp comfort and safety. His horse and pack mules—their ribs showing, their bellies distended by ill-feeding, scarred by girth and saddle sores—stood in the full glare of the mid-day sun, tethered by short ropes to stakes driven deeply into the ground.

The man was surrounded by a wilderness of desolation. To the north, south,

east and west nothing broke the deadly monotony of sun-parched, barren veldt. The few trees which here and there cked out a parlous existence seemed no bigger and afforded no more shade than tufts of grass. And even near his camp, where a subterranean river came to the surface for a little way, the plant life was unhealthy; its yellow greenness scarred the veldt.

Nothing moved that the man could see: it seemed that nothing lived to move in all that vast expanse of country saving only the man, his animals and a swarm of insects.

The animals moved continually in a frenzied attempt to find ease from the heat

and the torment of the flies; their tails swished, their ears twitched back and forth, they raised first one hoof then another—off-fore, near-hind, off-hind, near-fore—in a kind of grotesque dance as they sought relief from contact with the heat filled ground.

But the man seemed to have risen above bodily distress and he plied his tools—pick, shovel and sieve — in an almost insane effort of concentration; as if by determined application he could cancel his inefficient labor. His eyes gleamed with optimistic hope; he worked as if with the sure knowledge that untold wealth and happiness would follow the next blow of the pick, the next shovel-full of earth he worked through the sieve.

His nails were broken down to the quick, the palms of his hands were badly blistered, his back ached as if a keen-bladed knife were pressing hard against the base of his spine. His clothing was black with sweat, his sun-blistered face was smeared with the evil-smelling soil in which he was digging. He did not think of possible infection or, if he thought of it, he preferred to risk that for, at least, the coolness of the mud at first soothed his burns and, when it hardened, defied the attack of flies.

**F**OR three, four, five days—he had lost track of time—he had been working with this same unflagging, scourging industry. The fruits of his labors were a series of shallow trenches and little mounds of earth which, with the first day of the rains would be obliterated as completely as if they had never been. But the man, losing sight of the purpose of it all, eyed those trenches and heaps of dirt with a glow of satisfaction; as if they, alone, marked successful achievement.

He worked on, doggedly, all through the long afternoon; sometimes whistling, sometimes singing, sometimes talking aloud to himself, cheering himself on to further efforts. He stopped work only when the

nearness of the sun to the western horizon warned him that the darkness of night would not be long delayed. He knew then how very tired he was. Every bone in his body ached and he walked bent almost double, for he could not have endured the excruciating pain the effort of straightening would have cost him. His hands and face felt as if flames were scorching them.

He watered the animals and gave them a feed of mealies, then he ate his own food. He was too tired to wash himself or to light a fire and prepare a decent meal. He took a tin of "bully" from his stores—all that day it had been exposed to the heat of the sun—and opening it he ate mechanically, washing down the unsavory mess with deep gulps of water from a canvas container. The water was unboiled and he disguised its metallic taste by adding lime juice to it.

By the time the sunset's afterglow had faded from the sky he had crawled into his small tent. His blankets were in a disordered heap, exactly as he had crawled out of them on rising that morning, but they were as welcome to him as a down-filled mattress. He stretched himself, laughing wryly at his many aches, then rolled over on his side and was almost immedi-



ately asleep; it was a heavy, soddened sleep.

**A**N ELECTRICAL storm swept the veldt. The flashes of lightning were amazingly vivid and the earth shook to the almost continuous roll of thunder. The horse and mules, terrified, kicked viciously at a fear they could not see. They reared and plunged madly and at last, breaking free from their tethering ropes, galloped madly away.

With the cessation of the electrical storm a terrific wind blew, followed by a calm so great that it seemed as if the wind had created a vacuum between sky and earth. That vacuum was presently filled by a lashing, driving rain. The canvas of the tent sagged with the weight of it and a black stinking flood of water covered the floor of the tent, saturating the sleeper's blankets.

The rain ceased as suddenly as it had begun, the heat increased. The atmosphere in the tent was comparable to the steam-room of a Turkish bath. But still the sleeper did not move, and did not move until another day was breaking.

And then, though his body awoke his mind still slept; his movements were governed by the ghastly, persistent logic of a fever delirium. He crawled out of his tent and rising to his feet staggered forward, his hands outstretched before him as if bearing a great treasure. He laughed and babbled foolish things to the woman to whom he was carrying that treasure; his eyes blazed with happiness. He had not gone many paces when he stumbled over his pick and pitched head first into one of the trenches he had dug. It was now filled with slimy mud. Somehow he extricated himself, crawled away a few paces then collapsed and the swiftly rising sun drew the wetness from his clothes in a miasma of steam.

After a time he rose again, his eyes still blazing, still babbling about the treasure which filled his empty hands. He reeled



over the veldt, his steps uncertain, his course an aimless one; but in his mind he was striding swiftly and strongly toward a definite goal.

Two hours passed and he was still no more than a couple of hundred yards from his camp—for he had done no more than encircle it again and again—when he collapsed, and this time he did not rise, though in his mind he was still marching steadfastly forward.

Then life appeared in that place where no life had seemed to be. Like a blob of ink splashed on to a blue cloth of silk, a black spot appeared in the sky directly above the fallen man. It dropped lower and became a vulture. Others joined it and dropped like stones to the level of the veldt; their appearance was so sudden that it seemed as if they must have been materialized from nothingness.

Presently a flock of the obscenely bald-headed bush scavengers loaded the nearby bushes with the fruit of death. They croaked and bickered at each other, but when they craned their necks and looked down at the prostrate man, their red-rimmed eyes were filled with an unutterable patience. They knew how to wait.

The other bush scavengers were not long in coming to the rendezvous; they were gaunt, stinking beasts with jaws of steel and the digestive apparatus of a garbage incinerator; spotted beasts with coarse hides and sloping hindquarters; ghouls with the tittering laughter of imbeciles.

They snarled and snapped at each other; they made angry futile rushes at the vultures then, despairing of driving the birds away, they formed a wide circle about the man. It was a circle which would narrow, gradually; hyenas also know how to wait.

LIFE also moved across the veldt. It was expressed by a light, tent-topped wagon drawn by twelve mules. They were driven by a yellow-skinned Hottentot. His wound-scarred face was unbelievably ugly, but that ugliness was fully redeemed by the light of devotion and intelligence which shone in his black eyes. He was a small man, not more than five and a half feet, but the girth of his chest and of his abnormally long arms was that of a giant. In his powerful hands he wielded the driving whip with a skillful ease which made light of its twenty-four foot lash and sixteen foot stock.

He plied the whip continually in sheer exuberance of spirits, filling the air with a series of crisp, rifle-like reports. At one moment the lash was snaking out over the backs of the mules to flick a fly off the ear of one of the leaders, the next moment it was recoiling with a double report giving the off-wheeler a gentle reminder that it was expected to pull its weight. Once the lash decapitated a puff-adder which was sunning itself on a rock outcrop.

"I hate all skellum, Baas," the Hottentot observed in explanation and justification.

His baas—all South Africa called him "the Major"—nodded. He held the reins in hands as strong and as capable as the Hottentot's. The sleeves of his white silk shirt were neatly rolled up to his elbows and the muscles of his sun-tanned fore-

arms rippled with every movement of his flexible wrists. His face was shaded by the broad brim of a white pith helmet; but that shade could not disguise the strength of his face. That was indicated by the cut of his jaw and the firm line of his well-shaped mouth. It was the mouth of one who could laugh at his own misfortune and the good luck of others. There was a monocle in his right eye and, somehow, it seemed a part of him and not an incongruous affectation.

For a long time these two trekked in the silence of good companionship. The pace of the mules slowed to a leisurely trot for, in places, the ground was treacherous as a result of the night's heavy, though localized, rain storm.

Presently the Hottentot said, pointing to some distant spot on the veldt:

"There has been a killing over there, Baas. The skellums have gathered to the feasting."

The Major nodded, accepting the Hottentot's statement although, despite his own very keen eyesight and the knowledge to use it, he could see nothing to justify it.

A few minutes later the Hottentot said:

"The skellums are not feasting yet, Baas. They are waiting, I think, for their food to die."

"Perhaps lions are still at their kill, Jim."

"Perhaps, Baas." Then the Hottentot added in tones just as casual, "I can see a white man's camp, Baas. At least," he amended, "I can see a tent! The skellums are close to it."

This awakened the Major's interest and reaching back into the wagon he took a pair of field glasses from their case and focussed them in the direction indicated by the Hottentot's pointing finger.

A moment's scrutiny was all that was necessary.

"We drive fast, Jim," he said quietly as he returned the glasses to their case and bracing his feet he took a firmer grip on the reins.

JIM slammed the whip to the right and left of the mules; the lash flicked the withers of the leaders; it bit hard upon the flank of the lazy wheeler. He called to the animals by name; he talked to them in a crazy love-talk jargon of Dutch, Kaffir and strangely pronounced English oaths. The mules responded by breaking into a fast gallop, stretching out their sturdy bodies, their nimble feet spurning the ground beneath them.

The Major handled the reins with consummate skill; they tied the animals to his will. He swung them round in a quarter circle and headed them for the distant camp. Without checking speed he swerved them round clusters of rock and tree stumps and bush patches too thick to break through. He seemed to have a foreknowledge of every unevenness of the veldt's surface.

"What did the magic glass show you, Baas?" the Hottentot asked.

"A white man's camp, as you said, Jim. And, not far off, a man stretched full length on the ground. Surrounding him were hyenas and vultures."

"Perhaps we are too late, Baas. Beyond doubt the man is already dead."

"If that were so, would not the skellums be feasting?"

"That is true, Baas. But why this haste to save a man from death? Perhaps he is so close to it that he will not thank us for pulling him back. Or perhaps he deserves death. In any case, what matter? Death chases all of his faster than we can travel." The Hottentot laughed and not waiting for his questions to be answered continued:

"But this is like you, Baas. This has always marked your life. We now trek at great speed—and, *ai-e*, even then the wagon nearly tipped over!—risking death in order to take the chance of life to a man who is a stranger. Well, I am content if it pleases the Baas. As—" he chuckled—"most assuredly it does."

He put the whip in the socket and climbed into the back of the wagon. When

he rejoined the Major on the driver's seat he wore a bandolier around his shoulders and in his hands he held a .303 rifle.

"I hate skellums, Baas," he said.

A little later he would have opened fire on the vultures and hyenas which were waiting for a man to die, but the Major restrained him. Good shooting was impossible from the seat of the swiftly moving wagon.

"You might hit the man, Jim," he said.

So the Hottentot waited until they were very close and several vultures, croaking discordantly, had already taken flight. He fired then and brought down one or two of the birds. At the sound of the shots the hyenas loped away—all save one. This one, a gaunt, savage male, bared its ugly fangs in a rage provoked by a knowledge that the oncoming wagon meant that it would be deprived of a meal. It rushed at the helpless man, intent on making a slashing bite before turning tail. As it did so, another report sounded and a revolver bullet smashed into its skull, killing it instantly.

The next moment the mules came to a snorting, steaming halt and the Major, revolver in hand, followed closely by the Hottentot, climbed down from the wagon. As they knelt beside the unconscious man the Hottentot grunted:

"When I am as close to death as is this man, Baas, I shall not want to live."

**B**UT despite his pessimism Jim knew what was needed. He brought a medicine chest from the wagon and blankets and towels. In a miraculously short time he had lighted a fire and put a big pannikin of water on to boil. And then, while the Major was tending to the sick man with the skill of a doctor, nurse and experienced veldt-traveler rolled into one, he outspanned and made camp.

In less than a couple of hours the man had been bathed, his infected burns smeared with a healing antiseptic ointment and—dressed in a suit of gaily patterned

silk pajamas which were much too big for him—was deep in a drugged sleep.

Then Jim served the Major a mid-day meal and ate his own skoff. After that, after assuring themselves that their patient was asleep, the two men went to examine the other camp site. The Major went through the sick man's property hoping to find some explanation for his presence in that place. He found it in the form of a diary, the reading of which brought an expression into his eyes which changed their blueness to a hard, steely gray.

He put the diary into his pocket and went out to join the Hottentot.

"The man must be mad, Baas!" the Hottentot exclaimed. "He has been digging for diamonds, or gold! Here!"

"No. Not mad, Jim. Only a fool."

"How a fool, Baas?"

"Because he believed in the honesty of men, Jim."

The Hottentot laughed.

"I believe in your honesty, Baas, and sometimes in my own. I doubt all other men. Therefore I am no fool. What shall we do with this man's camp gear?" He indicated the litter of the camp with a contemptuous wave of his hand.

"It has no value, Jim. We will leave it. But come! I think it wisest to get the man to a place where he can be properly tended. His sickness will be with him a long time. We will take him to the homestead of the Baas Vanderspuy."

Jim nodded.

"That is good, Baas. The Vrow Vanderspuy will nurse him back to health. Even if she were not indebted to you, she would do that, for she has the gift of healing. But Baas, suppose the sick man is evil. He may do the Vanderspuys harm—for they are both old—when strength comes back to him."

"He is not evil, Jim. I have read his written word."

When they returned to their own outspan they saw that the vultures and hyenas had returned.

The Major drew his revolver in so swift a movement that the weapon seemed to jump from the holster to meet his hand. He fired six shots in quick succession. Three hyenas dropped. Two vultures toppled lifelessly from their perches. The other hyenas loped swiftly away; the vultures launched themselves into flight, looking ungainly and cumbersome, but quickly gaining altitude and speed.

The Major looked somewhat sheepishly at the Hottentot.

"I am ashamed, Jim," he confessed.

"Because you fired six shots, Baas, and only killed five skellums?"

"No, Jim. Because I fired at all. It was the act of a child."

"It was the act of a man, Baas. How often have I said that your only weakness is that you are at times too soft? How often have you stayed your hand and allowed evil beasts—and evil men—to live? I say there is only one way to deal with skellum—whether they be evil beasts or men. Kill them, Baas, for be assured they will not spare you or any other who falls into their power."

"Perhaps you are right, Jim. And now—let us inspan and trek."

AFTER three days of slow and careful travel, making frequent detours to avoid rough country, they came to the well-ordered homestead of Ogom Paul and Tante Vanderspuy. There they were received with sincere pleasure and the good motherly Tante immediately took the sick man into her care.

"Ach sis, man," the old patriarchal-looking Boer exclaimed. "Listen to my good vrow. Give her a sick one to look after and she is as pleased as a hen with a chick. Where did you get him, Major?"

The Major told him of the fortunate chance of travel which had brought him to the sick man's succor; he answered the old man's questions in the Taal, a language he spoke as fluently as he spoke English or any of the native dialects of the country.

"You call it luck," the old man said. "And yet, somehow, I do not think that it is luck alone which always brings you to the help of those who need help. I, for instance, whom you have helped, *know* it is not all luck." He chuckled. "But of that we will not speak. No. It makes you feel uncomfortable. The Good Book says we should not let our right hand know what our left hand does. You better that. *Ach sis*, yes. You wash your good deeds from your memory. But the numbers of those you have helped, they make a mighty army and *they* remember. Now about this sick man; the good wife will tend to him. It will keep her busy and happy until her *kinder* and their *kinder* come to visit us again. His name, you say, is Grey?"

The Major nodded.

"So it is written in the book which gives an account of each day of his doings since he left England six months ago."

"He is so new to the country? Then what was he doing alone on the veldt and in that place where you found him?"

"He was digging for gold and diamonds, Oom Paul."

"Gold? Diamonds?" the old man laughed. "But there is no gold in that place or anywhere near it. Not even Fool's Gold. And as for diamonds—you are joking, Major."

"No. He was working a rich claim. The story is all told in his diary. He had stakes driven in to prove the land was his. Everything was in proper order. The land is very rich in gold and diamonds. It says so in his diary."

"But that is impossible, Major. Everyone knows there is no gold and no diamonds in that place."

"Not everyone, Oom Paul. A man newly arrived from England who is ignorant of mining, would not know. Besides, before he bought the land—paying all he had for it—he himself dug a hole and found quartz rich with gold. In another hole he found diamonds."

"It is not possible," Oom Paul exclaimed

vehemently. "Or, if it is possible, then I will start digging up my mealies tomorrow to see if there are any diamonds and gold nuggets clinging to their roots. But—" he looked thoughtfully at the Major—"somewhere, I think, there is a trick."

"So I think," the Major replied. "The land was sold to him by two men who, they said, were already as rich as they desired. They sold him the land because they liked him! All that he has written down. But the gold he dug and the diamonds—they had put into the land for him to find. That, of course, is not written in the book. That he did not know. So he dug and toiled in the full blaze of the sun, hoping to find the wealth which would enable him to return to his wife and children a rich man. Because he did not know how to take care of himself he almost lost his life as well as his money."

Oom Paul nodded thoughtfully.

"The poor, foolish man. So the land was salted, eh? But is it possible for a man to be such a fool in these days?"

THE Major told the old man of how hard headed business men were often swindled by confidence tricksters using even more obvious frauds than a salted mine.

"Yes," said Oom Paul, "but for such men I have no pity. They hope to get great wealth by giving nothing. In any case, they lose only their money. This poor fool! Almighty! He nearly lost everything. There is no punishment great enough for the *skellums* who defrauded him."

"So I think," the Major agreed. "You see, Oom Paul, I have read the sick man's diary. I have looked into his heart and into his mind. And so—tomorrow Jim and I trek on to Beira."

"To Beira?"

"*Ja!* And from there we will take a boat to Lourenco Marquez, for it is there that the *skellums* hole up."

The old Boer's eyes glistened.

"I wish I were young enough to trek

with you. Those skellums! A taste of the sjambok is what they need and then a rope about their necks—pulled tight. But, man—” he put a fatherly, protecting hand on the Major’s shoulder, “for the sake of those of us who love you, take no foolish risks. Look, you are very rich! Almighty! Besides what you have, the purses of many are open to you. So I say, give this man Grey money. Give him back what he paid for that worthless land. Double it. Give him back tenfold, if you will. And there let the matter rest.”

The Major shook his head.

“I may find a way to do that so that his pride will not be hurt. But it is not enough, Oom Paul. It would leave the skellums free to cheat others. So—I go to Lourenco Marquez to deal with them.”

“Skellums are dangerous on their own ground, Major.”

“I am always careful,” the Major said lightly. “Besides they will not have any occasion to be on guard against me.”

The old man laughed.

“Even the mention of your name, man, will be sufficient to put them on guard.”

The Major shook his head.

“No. I don’t think so,” he drawled in English. “You see, I am such a frightful silly ass of a chappy.”

Oom Paul’s face was contorted with mirth.

“Almighty!” he gasped. “When you talk like that and look like that, even I—who have so much cause to know better—am almost ready to think you are nothing but a fool. And you look so soft! But it is no good, I am not to be fooled. I know all that is only a game of pretend. And those skellum—they too will know that.”

“Perhaps,” the Major said, reverting to the Taal. “But men’s memories are short—so, too, are the lives of skellums. These who now rule the dark dives of Lourenco Marquez may be a new breed. Maybe they do not know me. So, I go to Lourenco Marquez. I need new clothes. I have been away from the *dorps* too long.”

“*Ach sis!* I have heard about that. You ran from the rewards men tried to force upon you—you do not like being thanked. You thought to hide yourself by growing a beard and becoming a *voetganger*. But you found it impossible, eh?”

“I like my ease too much to be a *voetganger*, Oom Paul. And, with all due respect to you, I discovered a beard to be a most uncomfortable adornment.”

He rose to his feet as Mrs. Vanderspuy come out on to the *stoep* where they were sitting.

“The poor man is very ill,” she said, “and will be ill for a long time. But I will nurse him back to strength, you may be sure of that. But dear, it is sad to hear his fever talk! It is all of his wife and *kinder*. He is a good man, Major. And now I will go and prepare a proper meal for you. You are hungry, yes?”

The Major admitted that he was, especially for her cooking which was nationally famous.

She chuckled at his flattery.

“Then you’d better give your good-for-nothing Hottentot work to do,” she said. “For all he’s as ugly as sin, my kaffir wenches flock round him like flies about a honey pot. And I need them to help me in my kitchen.”

“**A**ND I think I will take a dozen tins of this, old top. No. Better make it two dozen. I’m no end fond of mock turtle soup and one can’t have too much of what one is fond of, can one?”

The store assistant opened his mouth to make a protest, thought better of it and added the order to the long list which represented the purchases his dudish fool of a customer had already made.

“After all,” he thought, “I can’t keep on protesting and he won’t listen to advice. He doesn’t need a tenth of this stuff—but he won’t be told. Well, his folly is my gain. My commission on this lot will almost pay the wife’s passage home.”

He looked up at his customer and for a

moment had an uncomfortable feeling that the dude could read his thoughts and was laughing at him.

"Is that all, sir?" he asked.

"By jove, it seems to be," the dude drawled as he glanced at his own checked list. "But I don't know. I'm goin' into the wilds, back o' the beyond—always wanted to go there—into the blue. Wonder if it is? Blue, I mean. Don't suppose there'll be any shops there, what? No. Of course not. And I may be away two or three weeks."

"You've bought enough provisions to last a year, sir."

"No, really? You're jokin'. But better too much than not enough, don't you think? Now let me see; I've tents, mules—what a marvellous shop this is. You sell everything, don't you? But about the mules; they're misbegotten beasts. Are you sure it would be unwise to have horses?"

"You say you are going into the fly country, sir. Horses would be useless there. But you don't need all the mules you've bought."

"Oh, I'll find work for them. Besides, they're miserable beasts and misery loves company. I'm a tender hearted chappy. Now let me see. Where was I? Tents, mules, guns—a bally armory, what?—trek wagon, mosquito nets, water filters — I think I'd better take another of those. Not that I'm over fond of water. Still, a feller must shave. Yes. I think that's all for the moment. What's the jolly old stagger-in' total?"

"It is rather staggering, sir," the clerk said as he passed over the itemized bill.

"By jove! I have been enjoyin' myself, what? Fortunately I cashed one of my credit notes as soon as I landed this mornin'."

He unbuckled a money belt from his waist and opening the pockets poured a deluge of gold coins and heaps of ten, twenty and a hundred pound note on to the counter.

"Take out the correct amount, old chap,"

he said airily. "I'm a perfect fool about money."

"I'd rather you—" the clerk began as he looked rather dazedly at the pile of money. But the dude was reading the directions printed on a water filter and so the clerk carefully counted out the correct sum and returned the balance to the money belt.

"May I suggest, sir," he said, "that you carry less money on your person—"

"By gad," the other interrupted. "That's the first bit of advice you've given me that I'll be able to take. I have taken it, what? I mean—you've taken my money. But, seriously, I feel positively naked without plenty of money in my pocket."

"There are men in this country who would commit murder for less than you now have in your money belt, sir."

"Really? How toppin'! I mean—that's life in the raw. That's what I came out to Africa to see. By jove, yes. My tastes, though you'd never believe it just to look at me, are positively cannibalistic. Now I must toddle along. Thanks no end for helpin' me select my outfit. You won't forget to send the things I specially marked to my hotel; the monocles, tropical clothing an' what not?"

"No, sir. And we'll hold the rest for you as you request. Now if you will let me have your name—"

"What? Don't you know it? And here we have been yarning like old friends. It's 'Sinjun'. At least, that's the way it's pronounced. Don't know why because it is spelled S-T-period. Capital J-O-H-N. And that spells 'Sinjun'. Silly, isn't it? Got it? Major Aubrey St. John. Jolly name, what? Good mornin'."

The clerk stared after him wonderingly. "Who's the dude?" asked a man who had been lounging idly at a nearby counter.

"Major Aubrey St. John," the clerk replied absently. And then, recognizing his questioner he picked up the money which was on the counter, counted it carefully and hurried away with it to the cashier's desk.

"Slim" Lane, notorious in the town of Lourenco Marquez as a pickpocket and a steerer for the more dubious places of amusement, scowled, then hurried out of the store. He had no difficulty in picking up the tall form of the monocled dude and shadowed him to his hotel. Slim, himself, was also shadowed and infinitely more skillfully, by Jim the Hottentot.

**T**HAT same afternoon Slim Lane made his way to a waterfront dive run by "One-eyed Louis." The place was crowded with men and women of all nationalities—and a mixture of those nationalities! Some invited Slim to drink with them; others shouted curses and insults. He ignored them all and made his way to an iron-studded door at the back end of the bar. He rapped out a signal on this. The door was opened and he entered a small room reeking of stale tobacco smoke and the acrid fumes of liquor. He closed and bolted the door—shutting out all sound of revelry from the bar—sat down at the table and poured himself a long drink. He drank with noisy appreciation, then grinned at the three men who were impatiently awaiting his report.

They were three choice rogues, wanted by the police of several Continental countries. They had come to this Portuguese East African sea town having been informed that the officials were somewhat lax in living up to the responsibilities of extradition treaties and were blind to the presence of "wanted" men as long as those men conformed to certain standards of behavior. This did not mean that the wanted ones were obligated to tread a straight and narrow path, but only that they should work under cover and leave Portuguese nationals very severely alone. In addition, a little palm-oil judiciously administered in the right quarters was reputed to help enormously.

Of the three men who listened now to Slim Lane's account of the monocled dude he had shadowed that morning, "Parson"

Moss was perhaps the biggest as well as the cleverest rogue. The least of his crimes was bigamy and if he had any conscience it was so hardened that it was not disturbed by the murders he had committed. "Bully" Hayes, the second man, deserved his nickname and looked it. He was a big, fleshy jewelled man; a personification of bestial, brute force. He was slow-witted but possessed of a low cunning which helped to the preservation of his own worthless carcass. At least it had impelled him to flee from the country of his origin in time to avoid being arrested for a very brutal murder. Also, his flight was just in time to avoid punishment at the hands of the gangster friends of the man he had killed.

The third man, Blai Grove, was of an entirely different type. He was good-looking, well-dressed, with all those hall-marks of what British snobbery attributes to their Public School class. Indeed, he wore the Old Boy tie of a very famous public school; what's more, he was entitled to wear it. He could look a man in the eye with every indication of truthful sincerity. That was his chief asset. It was the stalking horse behind which he plotted crimes unspeakable. And he committed those crimes in order to pander to his evil desires. The face of a gentleman with the heart of a devil is a trite, but very truthful, summing up of Blai Grove.

And, of course, these three were more than rogues. There is invariably something that is likeable about a rogue. There was nothing likeable about these three.

**P**ARSON laughed sneeringly as Slim came to an end of his story.

"You've been drinking again, my friend," he said in a whining, nasal voice. "The man you've described used to be the hero of musical comedies—he no longer exists."

"I don't blame you for thinking that," Slim said. "I wouldn't have believed he existed myself if I hadn't seen him. But it's true. All that I've been telling you is

true. He's a big chap, mind you, and he looks as soft as putty—"

"But he's not," Blaignrove interrupted. "Not soft physically, at any rate. I know the type, Parson. And it still exists. My dear old Alma Mater turns 'em out by the score. Great on huntin', shootin' an' fishin'. They talk as if they had been privately informed by the Almighty that they have been especially created to govern the world and to teach it good form. I've a tendency that way myself. Perhaps you've noticed? What did you say his name was, Slim?"

"Major Aubrey St. John—and he's rolling in money."

"Ex-Guards, I suppose," Blaignrove said. "And a fool, of course, in keeping with the old tradition. Yes. I know the type. A well-stuffed pigeon ready for our plucking, Parson."

"And how are we going to pluck him?" Bully Hayes demanded. "Get him down here, eh, big and strong, is he, Slim? Well, let me get my hands on the pretty dude. I know his sort, too—an' I hates 'em all. They look at you as you was dirt under their feet, or as if you wasn't there, an' they call yer my good man. The scum!"

"You'll keep away from him, Bully," the Parson snapped, "until I say different. One look at your ugly mug and he'd suspect everybody within a mile of you—even if he is as big a fool as Slim says. But we'll pluck him—and not for what he carries in his pocket. We'll bleed him of every penny he owns."

"How?" Blaignrove asked.

"How!" Parson echoed. "That'll be easy. We'll take him out on the veldt and keep him somewhere safe. And we'll hold him to ransom—that's what."

"Kidnaping, eh?" Blaignrove drawled. "Well, why not? It's been done before—no reason why it shouldn't be done again. And, damn it, this country's made for that ramp. But it'll take some careful plannin', Parson."

"Don't I know it. But you can leave the

details to me. I know how to work it. Once we've got him to a good hide-out somewhere on the veldt, somewhere a good way from any *dorp* where there won't be any risk of police interfering with us, I know how to turn the screws. Before I've finished with him, he'll be ready to make over to us every penny he owns."

"You mean you'll torture him?" Blaignrove asked interestedly.

"Something like," Parson agreed. "We might turn Bully loose on him for a start. Bully knows how to beat a man up without doing him any lasting injury. And then—but never mind about all that now. What we've first got to do is make some plan that'll persuade him to go along with us without everybody in the *dorp* knowing about it."

"'Ow about sellin' 'im a gold mine?" Slim suggested timidly. "I should think that claim we sold the Grey chap is ready to put on the market again."

"That's right," Bully agreed with a laugh. "Wonder what happened to him?"

"Who cares?" Parson retorted. "Dead, I should think, else he'd have been back asking us to return his money. Well, how about it, Blaignrove? Do you think this dude'd be interested in a gold claim? Or diamonds?"

Blaigrove shook his head.

"No. He's not that type. He's got plenty of money already—if Slim's story is right."

"An' it is," Slim put in eagerly. "I'll take my oath on that. He's lousy with 'oof."

"Accepting that," Blaignrove continued, "I'm of the opinion that the dude would turn up his nose at gold or diamonds."

"You're talking through your hat," Bully growled. "No man's so rich that he won't fall for more. Why—"

"Shut up, Bully," Parson said with a scowl. "Blaigrove knows what he's talking about. Go on, what's your suggestion, Blaignrove?"

"Well," that man drawled, "I rather fancy that this St. John dude wants some-

thing with adventure and romance at the back of it."

"Then I know the very thing," Parson cried excitedly. "Buried treasure—that's the lay. I always knew that old map I bought from the Professor swine'd come in useful—"

"Oh, that!" Bully laughed mockingly. "I thought I'd die when I heard you'd been taken in with that, Parson. How much did you pay for it?"

"Fifty pounds," the Parson said sourly.

"Fifty pounds," Bully spluttered, "for a worthless map on a dirty piece of paper! And I thought you were *slim*, Parson. Damn it, you fell for that like a greenhorn."

"Laugh, if you feel that way," Parson growled. "Maybe I was a fool to fall for that old chap's yarn. But it was a good one. And he worked it well. Why—the story alone is worth the money. And the way he worked it. Besides; I've got a sneakin' idea there may be something in it. I've been reading it up in the museum—"

Blaigrove interrupted with a chuckle.

"Now don't you get bitten with the treasure bug, Parson. In the first place I doubt if there is such a valley as the one shown in the map. And if there is—I bet there's no treasure there. I doubt if there ever was any."

"All right," Parson admitted. "Have it your own way. Perhaps I'm a fool. Perhaps I know it and don't believe there's any treasure or any valley. Never mind that. But this is what I'm getting at; we'll use that treasure map as a bait to catch the dude. Do you think it'll get him, Blaigrove?"

"By jove it will," Blaigrove said softly. "Worked properly."

"Well, we'll leave the working of it to you. You and the dude are almost two birds of a feather. And once we've got him, we'll go on trek and really look for this valley. It's shown on the map as somewhere near the border, so that'll take us a good way from the *dorps*. And if we

find it, we may also find the treasure. You never know. In any case, we can't lose. We'll be taking one treasure along with us."

"Fair enough," Blaigrove agreed. "And I'll set to work on the dude as soon as possible."

Bully nodded.

"Sooner the better, I say. And as for this valley and the treasure, Parson, all I can say is, if we find the valley I'll help look for the treasure—blast me, if I won't. Yes. And ask your pardon for laughing at you. Anything else?"

"Just this," the Parson said, lowering his voice. "We might as well come to a decision about what we were discussing before Slim came in. Are you all agreed—?"

"To what?" Slim demanded suspiciously.

"Not so loud!" Parson said, looking furtively about the room.

"Oh hell! You're like an old woman, Parson," Bully Hayes said contemptuously. "Who's going to hear wot we say in here?"

"Nobody, I hope. But I'm taking no chances."

"It's like this, Slim," Blaigrove explained easily. "We've decided to break away from Louis. Paying him a fifth share is too much just for the privilege of meeting here. He does nothing and so—" he brushed the palms of his hands lightly together—"in future he's going to get nothing."

Slim whistled softly.

"I'm with you," he said. "But Louis—he's a dangerous man to cross. What he goin' to do about it?"

"We're not telling him, you fool," Parson said.

Slim shook his head.

"He'll find out, though. There ain't nothin' goin' on in this *dorp* 'e don't know about. An' you chaps, you ain't been long in this country. You don't know what Louis can do. He's a devil an'—"

"You've only been out here a couple of years yourself, Slim," Blaigrove laughed.

"Don't talk to us as if you were an old-timer. As for Louis and his crowd of cutthroats—we don't have to worry about that as long as we stick together."

"And we're goin' to stick together," Parson added with a meaning glance at Slim who squirmed uncomfortably in his chair. "So watch your step, Slim. If Louis hears of this, we'll know who told him."

"And I'll have the pleasure of twisting yer scraggy neck," Bully growled.

"But not before I have had a few words with you," Blagrove said easily.

**S**LIM noisily protested his loyalty and was still protesting when the other three rose from their chairs and left the room. He sat then for awhile in a frightened, moody silence. He frequently replenished his glass, drinking himself into a state of drunken coma.

From this he was presently aroused by the entrance of the owner of the dive. One-eyed Louis was a slender, small-boned man, dressed in a suit of soiled white drill. His skin was an oily olive color. Over his left eye he wore a scarlet patch; his right eye was as coldly brilliant as a snake's. His right hand habitually rested on the back of his head and his long fingers continually massaged the nape of his neck. Strangers thought that habit was a nervous tic. But that was before they saw him draw the knife which was sheathed under his coat, between his shoulder blades. Louis' speed in drawing and throwing that knife—with deadly accuracy—had beaten more than one man who prided himself on the swiftness of his gun-play.

Louis closed the door and looked down at Slim who nodded sullenly and reached out again for the whiskey bottle. But Louis' knife, whistling through the air, reached it first. The heavy hilt crashed against the bottle, smashing it.

"What did you want to do that for?" Slim demanded as he stared stupidly at the litter of broken glass.

Louis laughed as he picked up his knife and returned it to its sheath.

"It is my love of the theatrical, my friend," he said. "I am a Latin. Such things are expected of us Latins. We are an excitable race. You understand? Yes? Also—" he sat down at the table opposite Slim—"you have already drunk too much and I want to talk with you. Our three friends—they have gone. Where?"

"I don't know," Slim answered sullenly.

"You don't know—or you won't tell?" Louis demanded and there was a threat in his soft, silky voice.

"I don't know," Slim repeated.

One-eyed Louis nodded thoughtfully, accepting Slim's statement as truth.

"It is no matter," he said. "But now tell me of the new fly you have found to lead into the so cosy web we spin."

Slim shook his head and Louis laughed again.

"No matter," he said. "Perhaps I will tell you. I have very keen ears. You know that, eh? Even when we whisper together in this room, I can hear. But that is not strange, no. After all—it is my room; it was built at my orders. And so, if I arranged that there should be an ear in the wall—that is my affair.

"That is how I know that our three friends have decided to cheat poor Louis. They will no longer pay him the rent—the just rent, mind you—for the use of this room. They are ungrateful—and so very foolish. They have forgotten that the rent they paid also paid for their protection. So—I must withdraw that protection. That is sad—for them.

"And so, now that you have found a very fat pigeon for them to pluck, I am to have none of the meat. So-a! We will see. But you, my friend; do you think you will get your share? No! There is no honor between thieves. I, One-eyed Louis—and I am a thief—tell you that. But, of course—" he laughed—"there is no need to tell you that. You also are a thief.

"And now I tell you that I did not hear

all that our friends—and you—spoke of in this room. For a little while my attention was called elsewhere. But no matter. What I did not hear—that you shall now tell me. What is the name of our new pigeon? Where is he staying?"

Slim Lane shivered.

"I daren't tell you," he said. "You know too much as it is and they'll suspect me of splittin'. They'll kill me—"

"Death, of itself, is not very disagreeable," Louis interrupted lightly. "But the manner death is brought to one—that is something else. I have had more experience in dealing out the unpleasant ways than have our three friends. However—" he shrugged his shoulders—"if you prefer not to talk, it is no great matter. I can find out in other ways what I want to know. It is only that you would have to pay for the trouble it would cause me. I always reward, most suitably, my friends—and my enemies; those who help me and those others who hinder me. Of that you have had proof. Yes?"

"You won't tell them, if I split, Louis?" Slim pleaded.

"No. Of that there is no need. Nor will you tell them. There must be—how did that Yankee sailor put it last night?—no doublecross. No. We will work together, you and I. Now, my patience is at an end. The name of this man?"

"It's St. John. Major Aubrey St. John," Slim said reluctantly.

ONE-EYED LOUIS repeated the name. "Major Aubrey St. John." Then, "Aubrey St. John Major! The Major! But of course. And to think I was so slow. I should have known." He put back his head and laughed until tears ran down his cheeks.

Slim looked at him apprehensively.

"Do you know the dude?" he asked.

Louis sobered.

"Know him? No. It is only that the name reminded me of someone else who is a very comical man. Very! So our friends

are going to take the dude to look for buried treasure, are they? And if they find it, they're going to keep it all to themselves, eh? And if they don't—they still have the dude. And he's a treasure cache worth prospecting. They'll hold him to ransom. Yes? All very easy, and safe and sure. They will make a lot of money. But you, Slim, and myself—we will not be given our share. And they think I cannot force them to—how do you put it?—play square. They are three and I am only One-eyed Louis. Beside, Senor Bully Hayes is so strong. It is sad. It is inexpressibly sad."

But despite his mournful words and expression it seemed to Slim, as he watched the dive-keeper rise to his feet and leave the room, that Louis' shoulders were shaking with laughter.

"He's actin' damned queer," Slim Lane muttered. "He's got something up his sleeve, the oily devil. And me; I'm goin' to steer clear of this *dorp* and stick to easier games in future."

Just then one of Louis' "entertainers" entered the room. She carried a full bottle of whiskey in her hand.

"With Señor Louis' compliments," she said in the clipped accents of the half-caste.

She sat beside him and Slim, responding to the lure of the whiskey and the no less insidious wiles of the woman, quickly forgot the resolutions he had made for his own safety.

That, for Slim, was very unfortunate. One-eyed Louis had got something up his sleeve and had no intention of risking the success of his plans by the existence of a man like Slim. And Slim was not a popular man, not even with men of his own breed, so no one questioned his strange disappearance or the subsequent discovery of his body in a desolate spot beyond the town.

BLAIGROVE had even less trouble than he had anticipated in making the acquaintance of the monocled dude who called himself Major Aubrey St. John.

Winning the man's confidence was just as easy, and before three days had passed they were on a footing of easy friendship. Just the same, Blaignrove did not find it at all easy to dissuade the dude from carrying out his plans for a big game hunting expedition.

St. John had a plan for trapping elephants, lashing them to trees and setting them free again after he had sawn off their tusks. It was one of those impossible, crazy schemes that seem, on the surface, to be quite sound and St. John was so enthusiastic that Blaignrove began to wonder if it would not be possible to modify the Parson's plans. And then, at the last moment, the dude almost tamely surrendered.

He and Blaignrove were sitting in the lounge of the dude's hotel at the time.

"By Jove!" the Major exclaimed. "I think you have convinced me—absolutely. I see now where my elephant huntin' plan would never do. It's a case of—er—putting salt on a bird's tail in order to catch it, eh? I mean—a chappy must first catch the bird before he can put salt on its tail. And, as you say, even if I did manage to round-up a pack—or is it a flock?—of elephants it would be the deuce an' all of a job bindin' each of the jolly old tuskers to a tree. By jove, yes! A colossal task with the bally odds against me, what?"

"But you know, I'm most frightfully disappointed. The chappy who sold me the idea assured me—what with the price one has to pay for billiard balls nowadays, not to speak of pianos, ivory keys, you know—that I'd make no end of money. And now, well — I'm beginning to think the chappy was a bit of a swindler, what? I mean—he sold me a pup, if you know what I mean."

Blaignrove nodded and masked a sigh of relief.

"A chap's got to be careful in this country, Major," he said. "By the way, you don't mind me using your military title?"

"Not a bit, old chap. It sounds deuced natural."

"Well, as I was saying, Major. There are a lot of swindlers about. It's not safe to trust anyone. Why—even if I came to you with some scheme or other you'd be wise to tell me to go and tell it to the marines."

"Oh no," the Major expostulated. "Not to the marines. Poor chaps! They hear so many tall stories." He laughed affectedly. "Good joke that. But I say, Blaignrove old chap, you don't seriously suggest I should be suspicious of you. Why, damn it! I mean, you're a *pukka sahib*. Public School an' all that. I mean, if a chappy can't trust you who can he trust? I ask you."

"Oh well," Blaignrove said. "I didn't exactly mean to suggest that you should distrust me. I only wanted to impress on you the need for caution." He paused for a moment and thoughtfully regarded the man who lounged opposite him and a sneering smile for a moment distorted his face into an evil mask. The Major looked so completely the personification of helpless imbecility. He continued rather anxiously. "Was it very important that you should make money, Major?"

"Oh, rather not," the Major replied quickly. "Quite the contrary, in fact. I'm frightfully well-heeled as our friends across the—er—pond put it. Or do they? I've never heard them. But what I mean, I've more money than I can spend but it 'ud be no end of a feather in my cap if I could make a pile of money for a change, instead of changing money for a pile. Ha! Ha!" He looked anxiously at Blaignrove and repeated his very feeble joke. This time Blaignrove replied with a somewhat forced smile and the Major continued. "You see my family and friends are always pullin' my leg an' sayin' I'd starve if I had to earn my own living. I just wanted to show 'em—that's all."

"I see," Blaignrove said in a tone of sympathetic understanding. "I'm in a somewhat similar position myself. But I'm not really worrying. There are plenty of ways of making money in this country."

**E**VEN had the Major been watching very closely it is doubtful if he would have noticed the signal Blaugrove gave to the soberly dressed Parson who was sitting in an alcove partially screened by a number of tubbed palms. And the Major was not watching. He seemed to be more interested in the pink gin a waiter had just brought him. But when the Parson, who wore a pair of strong-lensed glasses and looked like an absent-minded man of learning, rose to his feet and made a stumbling exit, he said:

"Wonder what that queer old Johnny is doin' in a place like this? I'll bet you anything you like he's an Oxford don."

"You'd lose, Major," Blaugrove laughed. "He's a Cambridge man."

"Oh well, I was pretty close," the Major said. "But it was sportin' of you not to take my bet."

"My dear fellow," Blaugrove expostulated. "A gentleman doesn't bet on a sure thing. You see, I know old Moss. That is I know who he is and what he's doing in this country. As a matter of fact he's a well known character around here. The wonder is you haven't had him bothering you before now. He's quite mad — but harmless."

"A bit barmy, eh? In what way?"

"He's a well known Portuguese scholar and has made a hobby of searching the archives at Lisbon for accounts of the early Portuguese explorers of this country. While doing that he claims to have discovered clues to buried treasure."

"Buried treasure!" the Major echoed excitedly. "Where?"

Blaugrove laughed.

"I don't know. Neither, I think, does the professor."

But if you hang around about this *dorp* long he'll be sure to find you and he'll try to get you to outfit an expedition to look for the treasure."

"By jove! Buried treasure! I wouldn't need much persuading. That sounds the sort of game for me."

"Better leave it alone," Blaugrove warned.

"You mean the Professor chap is a swindler too?"

"Oh no. Nothing like that. Old Moss is as honest as the day is long. It's only that he's a bit mad on the subject of buried treasure. He's the laughing stock of the *dorp*. He's full of wild theories but has no facts to justify them."

"What sort of treasure?" the Major asked. "Diamonds stolen from the Kimberley mine or something like that?"

"No. There's nothing under cover or criminal about the Professor. He wouldn't have anything to do with things like that. His particular bee in the bonnet is the treasure that was lost when the old Portuguese galleons were shipwrecked on this coast."

"Oh!" the Major exclaimed, losing interest. "I don't fancy divin' under the briny."

"According to the Professor you wouldn't have to," Blaugrove continued. "He claims to have unearthed proof that the survivors of several wrecks made their way safely overland to the Portuguese settlements. As a matter of fact that is true. And it is also true, as he says, that in several instances vast sums of gold and quantities of precious stones were saved from the wreck. But—and this is the Professor's strong point—there is no record of any of that treasure reaching the settlements with the survivors. The Professor's theory is that it was hidden somewhere and is still there to be found."

"That sounds feasible," the Major drawled.

"No. It's impossible," Blaugrove objected. "In the first place, even supposing the treasure was hidden, then you can be sure that the men who hid it afterwards went back and got it at the first opportunity. And in the second place—supposing the treasure was hidden and is still there, after three hundred years—where are you going to look for it? The survivors of the

wrecks wandered hundreds of miles—through jungles, over mountains and flooded rivers. They were captured by savages. Some died of fever and starvation. No, Major. It would be easier to find a needle in a hay stack than the treasure buried by the old dons—always supposing they buried any treasure in the first place. You'd have a better chance of making money with that wild elephant trapping scheme of yours than you would investing in the Professor's treasure hunt."

The Major sighed.

"You've convinced me again, Blaignrove, an' I'm no end grateful to you. But what is a chappy to do."

"Oh, something safe is sure to turn up one of these days," Blaignrove said evasively. "But I say, let's go and sit in the alcove—it's cooler there, and safer now old Moss has gone! I swear he'd have talked our heads off if we'd joined him."

HE LED the way to the alcove and, after they had seated themselves, he rang a bell and ordered two more drinks.

"Bung ho!" he said, raising his glass.

"To the other half, old chap!"

They drank and then the Major saw a dirty piece of parchment on the floor beside his chair. He picked it up and opened it gingerly, spreading it on the small table beside him.

"I say," he exclaimed. "This seems to be an old map, or a chart or somethin'."

"Probably old Moss dropped it," Blaignrove said casually. "He's an absent-minded old bloke, always dropping things about the place. He'll probably be back for it presently and act as if it were worth a king's ransom."

"And, by jove, it is," the Major said excitedly. "Look. Here's some Latin inscription and the Professor, or somebody, has given a translation just below. It says:

"'Being sore pressed by savages and besides weak from fever and starvation I, Dom Pedro, Prior of the Order of the Dominicans, and a survivor of the wreck

of the Great Galleon the *Bon Jesus*, decided it wise to hide the treasure. Therefore, taking with me two kaffir slaves, who were Christians, I went apart and hid the treasure of gold and jewelled ornaments. And because flesh is weak, it seemed good to me to make this chart of the place of hiding and pray that should death come to me—as it has already come to the two slaves—it will fall into the hands of Christian men.'

"By jove," the Major murmured. "What do you say to that?"

"The whole thing is probably a forgery," Blaignrove said with studied carelessness.

He held out his hand for the parchment and pretended to examine it—at first casually and then with intense interest.

"I believe you're right, Major," he said at last. "This is an old map. No doubt about that. And it does show where treasure was hidden. Though of course," he added quickly, "I don't suppose it's there any more."

"But it might be," the Major insisted excitedly.

"Yes. It might be," Blaignrove admitted. "However—" he sighed and carefully folded up the parchment — "whether it's there or not, it's not likely to do us any good. We must return this chart to the Professor."

"Yes. I suppose we must," the Major said slowly.

"Of course we must," Blaignrove said sharply. "I mean, well, it wouldn't be cricket to keep it, or even to make a copy of it."

"No. My word, no. A chappy can't do a thing like that. It wouldn't be playin' the game. But look here, you told me a little while ago that the Professor is looking for someone to finance an expedition to go in search of treasure. Well, wouldn't it be in order for me to make an offer?"

"Why yes," Blaignrove said after a moment's thought. "I think that would be quite open and above board."

"Well then, that's what we'll do. We'll take this chart back to the Professor and I'll tell him all about my outfit and suggest that we go into partnership—"

"I don't see why I should come into it, old chap," Blai Grove objected.

"But of course you must," the Major cried enthusiastically. "After all we're both—I hope I am not flatterin' myself—pukka sahibs and, and you had as much to do with the finding of the old Professor's old map as I. Now come along, let's go and find the Professor."

"IT WAS as easy as that!" Blai Grove boasted exultantly that night when he, Moss and Bully Hayes met to celebrate the success of their preliminary planning. "He swallowed the bait—hook line and sinker."

"Sounds almost too damned easy," Bully Hayes growled. "It's like taking pennies off a dead man's eyes."

"A brainier man than the dude would have fallen for it," Parson Moss said quietly. "It was a good bait, well laid and well played. You ought to be on the stage, Blai Grove."

"You did damned well, too," Blai Grove replied. "You acted the part of an absent-minded old professor to perfection. You had the dude eating out of your hand. Damn it, I was beginning to believe you myself before you'd finished. And the best of it is, he himself suggested things to make it easier and better for us; such as cashing all his letters of credit and taking the cash along in case we had to hire a lot of niggers for excavating work, or in case we had to bribe somebody or other. And it was his suggestion that we keep it all dark and leave the *dorp* as quickly as possible."

"How about that, Parson?" Bully asked. "Will we be able to get away tomorrow?"

"No reason why we shouldn't. The dude's already bought his outfit and we'll travel in style, I can tell you."

"And there's every reason why we

should leave the *dorp* tomorrow," Blai Grove added quickly. "The earlier the better. I think I saw one of One-eyed Louis' men hanging about the dude's hotel today. And—"

"Cripes!" Bully swore. "If Louis' on to our game we're in for trouble. He'll be sore if he guesses we're doublecrossing him."

"We'll handle Louis *and* any trouble he may try to give us," Moss said confidently. "But I'll tell you this; once we've cleaned up on this job I'm not coming back to Lourenco Marquez. And, if you take my tip, you two won't come back neither."

"Where the hell can we go?" Bully asked. "I'm keeping out of British territory. I'm too—popular, that's the trouble. There's pictures of me all over the shop. And they're so eager to find me that they print a reward notice under my picture."

"That's true of us, too," Blai Grove said. "But you're right, Moss. This *dorp* won't be safe for us with Louis out for our blood. He's got enough pull with the local police authorities to have us deported—always supposing he doesn't cut our throats first. But hell! There's plenty of room in this country—for the matter of that it ought to be possible to buy a passage on a tramp bound for South America."

"We can settle all that when the time comes," Parson Moss interrupted impatiently. "Now then, I've already hired that half-caste Pete who took us out to the claims we sold Grey. He'll drive the mules and act as guide—and anything else we want him to do. I'll tell him to be ready to start at sunrise tomorrow. And you, Blai Grove, you go and tell the dude the same. There's one other thing, and it's important; there's to be no rough stuff until I give the word. And that won't be until we've got to the place marked on the chart."

"As if we'll ever get there," Bully snorted contemptuously. "I tell you that map's a fake."

"I'm not so sure," Blai Grove said cau-

tiously. "I'm beginning to believe there may be somethin' in it."

"I'll eat my hat if there is," Bully promised.

"We'll hold you to that, Bully," Parson said. "Anyway, Hans seems to know where the place is. He says we can hide up there for weeks and nobody suspect we were there. And if the valley's there—why not the treasure? I don't mind looking for it at the dude's expense. And if we find it, I'm willing to take your share, and yours, Bully—as well as my own and the dude's."

"Suppose we find the treasure," Blai-grove asked. "Are we still goin' to clean out the dude?"

"Hell, yes. Why not?" Parson snapped.

"The way you talk," Bully said, "anybody'd think there was nothin' for us to do except help ourselves to buried treasure and the dude's money. But according to you we'll take two or three weeks to get to them kopjes—well, don't forget none of us knows anything about traveling on the veldt. It was bad enough when we went out with Grey—and that was only four days."

"This trip'll be a picnic compared to that, Bully," Blai-grove said. "First of all, we're traveling in a wagon instead of on horseback. And there's everything you can think of in the dude's outfit. Beds, tents, mosquito nets, water filters, booze and enough grub—expensive grub at that—to keep us in luxury for months. We'll have Hans with us and St. John may be a fool in most things, but he does know about traveling by mule wagon. We'll be in clover, Bully."

"And if you've got cold feet, Bully," Parson Moss added, "you don't have to come. Half shares are better than thirds, eh, Blai-grove?"

"Who's got cold feet?" Bully demanded truculently. "You don't get rid of me that easy, Parson. I'm not Slim Lane. I'm coming—an' I'm getting my full share of whatever we make—from the dude *and* the treasure. See!"

PETE, the half-caste Moss had hired to drive the mule team and do all the dirty work of the expedition, was himself a villainous character. Also he was lazy and—having a memory of the treatment he had received during the last expedition—was not moved by any sense of loyalty toward his employer. And so when a Hottentot approached him with certain suggestions and bribes, when that same Hottentot also proved himself to be an expert with mules and an experienced veldt man, Pete lost no time in presenting the Hottentot to Moss.

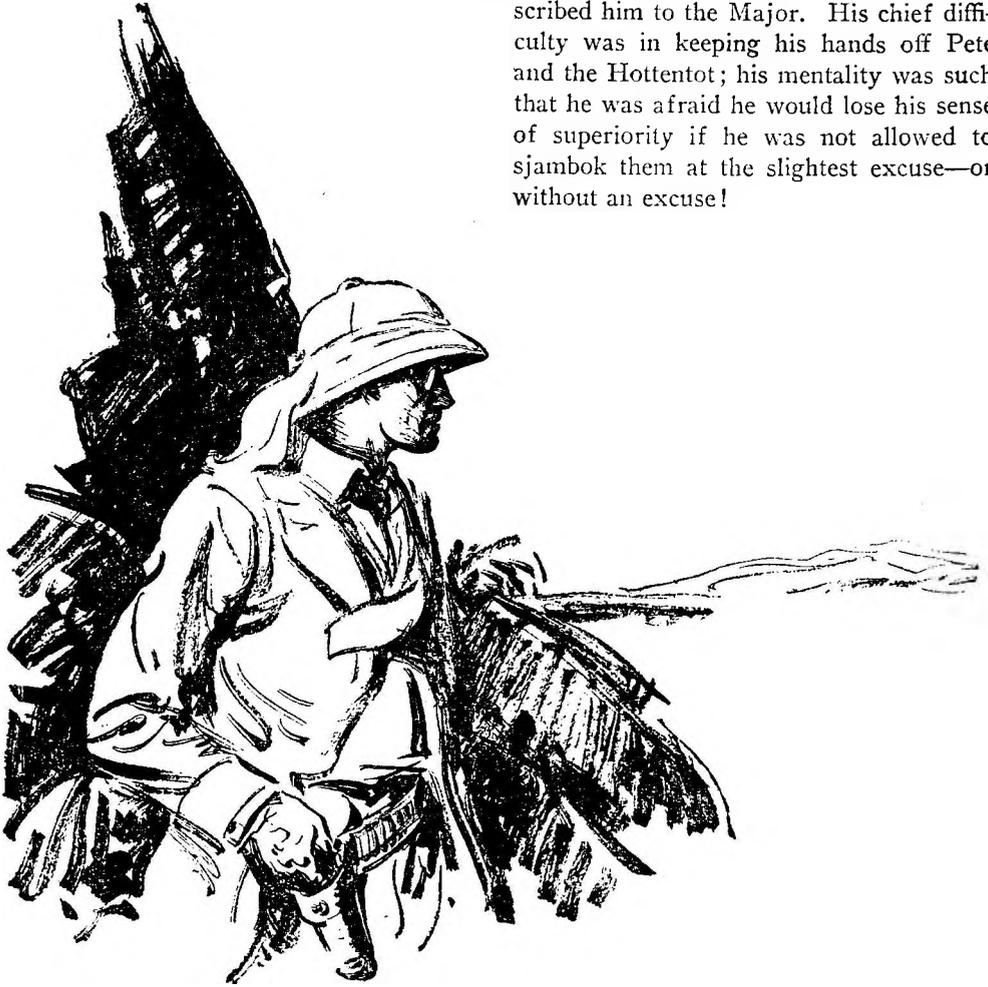
"Boss," he said in his high-pitched, whining voice, "this man Jim is a good nigger boy. For many years I have known him. He is *slim*. He can keep his mouth shut—and he does not speak English or Portuguese. He is safe."

"Well, what of it?" Moss snapped.

"Why, boss, he must go with us. He is a good nigger boy with mules. He wash clothes, cook, make beds—do any damn thing you ask. And there will be much to do with four white bosses who know nothing of veldt travel. Alone I can not do. So—the Hottentot, Jim, he must come too or I do not come."

Faced with this ultimatum on the very morning of the expedition's departure, Parson Moss did not hesitate. It was impossible to suppose that a nigger could interfere with his plans. And so when the wagon, drawn by sixteen mules, left Lourenco Marquez, the driving whip was in the expert hands of Jim the Hottentot while Pete took over the less important task of handling the reins.

The four white men were in the highest of good spirits—the three crooks almost hilariously so. After all, they thought, this was one treasure hunting expedition that was sure of a successful ending, for they were taking the treasure with them! But their elation was not so great that they forgot the roles they had assumed. They believed they were playing for high stakes and were careful to do nothing which



scribed him to the Major. His chief difficulty was in keeping his hands off Pete and the Hottentot; his mentality was such that he was afraid he would lose his sense of superiority if he was not allowed to sjambok them at the slightest excuse—or without an excuse!

might arouse the suspicions of their dupe.

So the Parson played the part of an impractical, absent-minded man of letters given to involved, rambling dissertations which no one listened to or would have understood even had they listened. For the matter of that, it is doubtful if the Parson understood himself!

Blaigröve's role was an easy one. All he had to do was to be his outward seeming self, never permitting the inner evil to break through the cloak of decency.

And even Bully Hayes found no great difficulty in appearing as a bluff, good-natured, practical geologist. "A diamond in the rough," was the way Blaigröve de-

He only slipped once. That was on the first day out when, taking exception to the way in which the Hottentot looked at him, he lashed out viciously with his heavily booted foot. The kick did not land. That was because the Major's fist did, crashing against the bully's jaw.

**H**E recovered consciousness about ten minutes later and having discovered that the dude was not at the outspan, he struggled to his feet and loudly vowed that he was going to get even with the scum who had hit him when he wasn't looking. But the angry threats of Moss and the biting sarcasm of Blaigröve quickly

reduced him to a calmer frame of mind and when the dude presently returned to the outspan, Bully's apologies actually sounded sincere.

During the next sixteen days the treasure seekers traveled at a good average

of the veldt; he saw color and life and movement where the others saw only a dreary, olive-green landscape where nothing lived; his ears were not deafened to the sounds of the veldt by the rattle of wheels, the thudding hooves of the mules



speed, heading south and west. The days were uneventful; the nights passed without incident. Indeed, three of the men were bored by the deadly monotony. But the Major, who knew it all so well, found continual variation in a scene which seemed to remain constant from one hour to another. He saw things the others could not see; his nostrils were filled with the scents

and the wagon's creaking as it lurched over the ground's uneven surface.

Almost before the first outspan was reached he had assumed control of the expedition and the others were content that it should be so. Nor did they question his veldt wisdom or amend their estimation of his mental ability. Had not he told Blai-grove that he had been on many hunting

expeditions in other countries? It was on the seventeenth day of the trek they came to a small green valley and outspanned by the crystal clear stream which watered it. It was, without doubt, identical with the valley marked on the chart as "the valley of the treasure," and for the first time since the trek began there was no need for the three crooks to simulate eager excitement. Even Bully Hayes was now convinced that there might be something.

They all crowded about the map which the Major spread out on a flat topped rock and picked out the landmarks there recorded in the valley itself.

The valley was ringed by kopjes and in the center of the group which closed the northern end was one conspicuously higher than the others; and, crowning the flat top of this kopje, was a rock shaped not unlike a man's head. Bully Hayes was the first to identify this and he danced like a madman. Nor were the others behind him in a demonstration of wild enthusiasm.

"That's where the treasure is hidden," Parson Moss exclaimed excitedly. "See. It says so on the chart. See, here; it says the treasure is hidden close to Man's Head rock. That is Man's Head rock. No doubt about that. There ain't another anything like it in the valley."

For the moment he and his two confederates had forgotten their plot against the Major. That could wait. For the moment they were wholly possessed by the buried treasure fever and were eager to commence their search without further delay and it was with difficulty that the Major persuaded them to wait until the morning.

"If the treasure's been waiting there nearly three hundred years, chaps," he drawled, "it's not likely to vanish during the night. Eh, what?"

The setting of the sun and the sudden fall of darkness lent weight to his persuasions. The three agreed to postpone operations until the morning—but they could talk of nothing else and they were far too excited to do justice to the meal the Hot-

tentot cooked for them. Their sleep was broken by dreams of treasure beyond all reckoning.

They were up and dressed the following morning long before the sun rose. They regarded each other suspiciously—each guessing, and rightly, that the others had hoped to steal a march on him. They were too eager to break their fast and set off as soon as the darkness lifted, laden with digging tools.

"I'll join you after breakfast," the Major told them. "Must look after Little Mary, you know. Besides, I know you'll look after my—er—interests."

He did not fail to note their expressions of amused contempt.

He watched them ford the shallow stream and make their way through the tall grass. Their excited chatter came back clearly to his ears.

"They're having honest emotions for the first time in their crooked lives," he mused. "They ought to thank me—but they won't."

HE shrugged his broad shoulders and applied himself with an unfeigned appetite to the breakfast Jim had prepared for him.

When he had finished he called the Hottentot to him.

"It is time to go now, Jim," he said.

The Hottentot looked toward the treasure kopje. He could see the three men toiling up its lower slopes.

"Yah, Baas. But is it wise?"

"It is the way the game is played, Jim. You have the letter safe?"

"Yah, Baas. And you—you will not forget that those three men are skellums?"

"I will not forget, Jim," the Major assured him gravely.

"And you will remember to treat them as you would treat skellums? You will not fail to deal with them as hard as they would deal with you were you as helpless as they believe?"

"At least, I will not deal with them softly," the Major promised.

"Then now we go, Baas—Pete and I. But you will take care, Baas?"

The Major nodded. There was nothing of the inane dude about him now. He had taken the monocle from his eye and the intelligence which gleamed in his gray-blue eyes more than neutralized the effect of his poppingjay attire.

A few moments later Jim and the half-caste left the outspan. Each man carried a small pack; in addition Jim carried an assegai and several knobkerries. Pete was unarmed.

The Major waited until they had passed from sight, heading out of the valley. Then he rose, buckled his revolver holster about his waist and set off for the treasure kopje.

Because it amused him, he followed the spoor of the three who had preceded him. It demonstrated very clearly their ignorance of Africa, for it was as crooked as a snake's back—especially when the long grass hid their objective from them.

"I believe," the Major observed, "that they would lose themselves even in this tiny valley."

It was obvious, too, that they had found trekking difficult through the long grass; several times they had fallen heavily to the ground, tripped by the stout stems which had become entangled about their feet.

At last the Major came to the foot of the kopje crowned by the Man's Head rock and commenced the upward climb. But he no longer followed the course taken by the others though it was plainly marked for a veldt wise man to see—marks of hob-nailed boots scoring across flat rock; places where clumsy feet had created miniature land-slides; stunted, thorn-armed bushes uprooted by an incautious grip.

The Major had not appeared to hesitate or to examine the face of the kopje, yet he followed the easiest course, avoiding the steepest rises and the places where a loose surface offered precarious foothold. And so he came at last to the flat top of

the kopje, as cool and as immaculate as when he had started from the outspan, his presence unsuspected by the three men who were laboring with pick and shovel in the swiftly shrinking shadow of the Man's Head Rock.

STILL unobserved he stood and watched them for some considerable time. The monocle was in his eye again; it reflected the sun's light, masked every spark of intelligence and made his smile of amusement appear as empty as a half-wit's sheepish grin.

The three worked with the inefficiency of the inexperienced. They got in each other's way; they cursed each other; they groaned and complained of aching backs and blistered hands.

"Well, laddies," the Major called gaily. "An' how goes the labor at the bally old rock pile?"

They looked up with a start.

"About time you came to do your share of the digging," Parson Moss said.

"Hell, yes," Bully Hayes added. "Who do you think you are—you bloody, simpering dude?"

"Tut, tut," the Major reproved mildly. "We mustn't use naughty words; nor must we lose our tempers. And surely—you don't expect *me* to—er—excavate? I mean, it looks like bally difficult work. The ground must be as hard as iron and I don't think my constitution would stand it. No. I much prefer to watch you, laddies. Now, if I may be allowed to make a suggestion—"

Bully Hayes interrupted him with a snarled oath and raised his shovel threateningly. But he responded to the Parson's soft-voiced command and resumed the work of excavation.

"Just the same, Major," Blagrove said, assuming the role of peacemaker, "you can't blame Hayes for losing his temper. You ought to do your share of the dirty work."

"But," the Major protested, "I don't

like 'dirty work'. It gets one's hands and—er—clothing dirty. Not to mention blisters."

"If you expect to split the treasure with us, you'll do your share of the work," Parson Moss said sourly.

"Oh quite, dear old Professor," the Major agreed. "Never shall it be said that Aubrey of the house of St. John is a shirking malingerer. Rather not. And so, my hearties — I'm gettin' quite nautical, aren't I?—you work an' I'll watch and advise."

"And that's all you'll do—*watch*—when we share the treasure, you—" Bully Hayes exploded.

"Oh fie, fie! Let's keep the—er—jolly old old party nautical if you like, but not, if you would spare my blushes, naughty!"

The treasure seekers ignored him after that and redoubled their efforts. They blued the air with their curses; they groaned with the ache of soft muscles; they sweated profusely. Occasionally they stopped to examine the chart and to discuss whether they were digging at the exact spot indicated. Again and again, with solemn dignity they paced off distance, checking and re-checking their results.

**T**HE Major kept up a running fire of comments and suggestions—all idiotically useless—but at last, seemingly tired of the way in which they ignored him, he exclaimed:

"All right! If you've sent me to—er—Coventry, I'll leave you to stew in your own—er—filthy juices. But you know, I came up here to tell you something very important and now I can't remember what it was. No matter. It will come to me in time! Toodleoo! Don't overdo this—er—manual labor on empty tummies."

He made his way down the kopje at a leisurely pace and reaching the outspan he busied himself for a little while in the wagon. When at last he emerged he was laden with firearms and ammunition all

of which he hid in a hollow tree stump surrounded by thick bush. That done he placed a deck chair in the shade, pulled out his revolver and fired three shots into the air—then three more.

Having cleaned and re-loaded the revolver he sat down in his deck chair to await results.

The Major seemed to be asleep when Parson Moss, Blaignrove and Bully Hayes came to the outspan. At any rate he was sprawled full length in his deck chair, his white pith helmet tilted low over his eyes. And he snored raucously.

The approach of the three men to the outspan was laughable because it fell so far short of the silent caution they hoped to achieve. Actually the noise they made would have awakened any veldt-wise man from a sound sleep.

They relaxed their efforts at stealth as soon as they saw the Major.

"Hell!" Bully Hayes swore wrathfully. "He was having a game with us—calling us away with his danger signals just when we was getting to the treasure. I've a good mind to let him have it now."

As he spoke, Bully fumbled with the flap of his revolver holster.

"None of that, you big oaf!" Parson Moss said sharply. "There's to be no killing yet. Not until we've found something. Maybe not then."

"Parson's right, Bully," Blaignrove said. "No sense in making trouble for ourselves or in taking unnecessary risks."

"Risks!" Bully sneered angrily. "You're yellin', that's what. What risks? Who's going to know if I put a bullet through the dude's head?"

"You forget Pete and the nigger."

"I can deal with them. Hell, I owe the dude something—and he's going to get it! But you—I suppose you're planning to give the dude a cut of the treasure."

"Now you *are* talking like a fool, Bully," Blaignrove exclaimed with a laugh. "We haven't found any treasure yet, have we? Where'd we be if you killed the dude now?"

He's our *sure* treasure, isn't he? We're going to milk him dry, aren't we? Well, how can we if you kill him."

"All right," Bully grunted. "But mark this, I've had enough of soft soaping the swine dude. From now on, he's going to get it—and get it rough."

"That's all right with us," Parson said with a laugh. "But now we're here, how about skoff? I'm damned hungry. Where are the niggers?"

"Pete! Jim!" Bully Hayes shouted. "Where are you, you lazy devils? Get skoff."

The Major stirred sleepily. He stretched himself, yawned and placed his helmet squarely on his head.

"I wish you fellers wouldn't make so much noise," he remonstrated mildly. "I was just dreaming of, I say—" He sat up excitedly. "I *am* glad to see you chaps. I was gettin' deuced lonely here all alone. Have you found the treasure?"

"No, we haven't," Moss said impatiently. "What did you fire the signal shots for?"

"What? Did I? Oh yes. I was curious to know how the old search was going. Besides, I was concerned about your—er—tunnies. It's long past skoff time."

"And do you mean to say," Blagrove demanded, "that you fired the danger signal just in order to—"

"Oh no. There was something else," the Major interrupted swiftly. "Something I wanted to tell you. You see, I suddenly remembered what it was I climbed the kopje to tell you. The two boys have gone."

"Gone!" the others chorused blankly.

"Yes. That's it. Vanished. Departed. Skipped it. Gone. It's goin' to be bally awkward and I thought you ought to know."

"You mean they've deserted?" Blagrove asked.

"Something like that. They trotted off as soon as you'd left the outspan looking, I must say, as if they were pleased to shake our—er—dust—off their feet."

Bully Hayes cursed.

"And you *let* them go?" Parson Moss challenged.

"My dear old Professor," the Major replied, "what could I do? Two to one, you know."

"You've got a revolver," Blagrove said hotly. "You could have stopped them. You could have held them until we got back. We'd have made them see reason. Bully, here, has a way of persuading obstinate niggers."

"Yes," the Major drawled softly, "I think I considered that."

The three exchanged dismayed glances. To them, ignorant of the a b c's of camping the desertion of the boys was almost a tragedy.

"But hell!" Parson Moss said finally. "We've got no cause for worry. We're well stocked with tinned grub and the Major—he can do all the cooking and look after the camp. He's experienced in that and that'll be his share of the treasure hunting."

**B**LAGROVE and Bully Hayes looked their relief.

"That's right," Bully said roughly. "Now then, Major. You heard what the Parson said. Get our skoff—and get a move on."

"But of course!" the Major said with a chuckle. "Is this quick enough?"

With a speed which rivalled that of a prestidigitator the Major drew his revolver.

"Hands up!" he said curtly. He fired, giving emphasis to his order, and the bullet kicked up the dust close to Bully's foot.

The three men elevated their hands with an almost ludicrous haste.

Hayes and Parson Moss mouthed obscene profanities. Blagrove's eyes narrowed.

"What's the game, St. John?" he demanded.

"Call me Major—I prefer it. And this is not a game, I assure you. This is in the

nature of a show-down—or perhaps it would be more correct to call it a showing up of three particularly nasty specimens of the stinking family of skellums.”

He silenced their heated responses with a curt:

“Shut up! For the present I will talk and you will listen. When I’ve finished talking, you will work; and *how* you will work. But first of all, turn round keeping your hands still—er—elevated. And, for your own sakes, don’t try any tricks. I’m an A Number One shot at Lloyds—or anywhere else, for that matter.”

As they obeyed he rose and quickly disarmed them, running his hands over their clothing to make sure they had no concealed weapons.

“’Pon my soul,” he drawled as he returned with the confiscated weapons to his deck chair. “You’re very puny skellums after all. No brains, no—if you will pardon the expression—guts; nothing but—in common with all skellums—very greedy appetites. Oh well. Turn round. But don’t talk. Don’t threaten! Don’t even look as if you’d like to kill me! I’m one of those sensitive chappies. I tremble—my fingers worst of all—at unkind looks. And as one of my fingers is resting on the trigger—which is also frightfully sensitive—of my revolver the consequences would probably be disastrous for you—very!”

He looked at them thoughtfully then continued in his labored drawl which now had the bite of sharp-edged sarcasm:

“’Pon my word, I think I’d like you better if you were bigger villains than you really are. What I mean to say, you’re cowardly swine. And such fools. Very wise, of course, when you’re dealing with bigger greenhorns than yourselves. Men like Grey, for example. Ah! That gets under your yellow hides, doesn’t it. Poor devil. He might so easily have died—and you would have been his murderers. And that would have amused you. You took all his money for a perfectly worthless plot of land and you thanked your own par-

ticular nasty guardian devils for sending you so easy a pigeon to be plucked.

“As for my unworthy self; I looked even easier than Grey. Appearances are *so* deceptive, don’t you agree? At least, I hope so. I’d be most unhappy to think I was as big a fool as I look and sometimes act. But I made of myself a good decoy, didn’t I? Slim fell into the trap—and so did you three bright laddies. And so we all came looking for Buried Treasure! How jolly and thrillin’! But of course, I was the treasure and I suppose you meant to bury me. Not so jolly!”

He laughed as he regarded their sullen faces.

“You know,” he resumed. “I think it’s no end amusin’ and I’d like awfully to know just when you—er—began to believe in your own bait. I mean, it’s obvious that you’re now very excited treasure hunters. Or rather you were this morning. But not now, I think. An’ it is amusin’ to know that you are, as it were, hoist with your own petard—you, Blaignrove, will understand the Shakespearean allusion. But of course there isn’t any buried treasure. The map is a—er—fake. Had you closely examined the parchment on which it is drawn you would have known that. But perhaps not. I imagine you don’t know a great deal about water-marks—or water, for the matter. Well, that’s the end of my lecture.” He looked at his watch. “You’ve got just half an hour to get yourselves some skoff. After that we’ll all go back to the treasure hole — and you’ll work. My how you’ll work.”

“You’ll find you’ve bitten off more than you can chew, Major,” Parson Moss said.

“Oh. I don’t think so, old chap,” the Major replied airily. “I’ve got frightfully good—er—molars. And you seem to forget that I hold all the cards—I mean the revolvers and what not. Also—I’ve put myself in charge of the provisions. And, if you don’t work you get no grub—”

During the next three days the men worked from the sun’s rising until its

setting: they worked with pick and shovel on the top of Man's Head Kopje. They worked in the broiling sun with an energy they could hardly have excelled had they known that great wealth would reward their efforts. In addition they groomed the mules and did all the work that the Major judged necessary at the camp; this included the building of a stout stockade about the outspan.

Of course the Major did not find it quite as easy as that sounds. He had several mutinies and strikes to deal with—and he dealt with them in his own inimitable fashion. And when Bully Hayes egged on by the other two, grossly insulted him and challenged him to fight with bare fists, the Major granted him that request with a promptitude which Hayes found rather startling. But the Major completely spoiled Parson Moss' plan by lashing Blai-grove and Moss to the wheels of the wagon before putting himself at Hayes' disposal.

"I don't mind you watching to see—er—fair play," he explained. "But I have no intention of allowing you to take advantage of my momentary pre-occupation with your charmin' friend.

"Now then, Bully, I am at your service."

It was not much more than a momentary preoccupation; certainly it could hardly be called a fight. Despite his size, weight and strength Bully Hayes was little more than the Major's chopping block. He resorted to all manner of foul tricks—but they only served to fill the Major with a cold anger. Bully Hayes suffered accordingly.

Before the fight had been in progress five minutes Hayes was almost blubbering with pain and made no attempt to counter a straight left. He dropped almost before it landed, rolled over on his belly and refused to rise again.

It was necessary, of course, for the Major to be constantly on guard. Even so, had the men been veldt wise he might

have found it impossible to impose his authority upon them. As it was, a few simple precautions proved sufficient. He never allowed them to get behind him, or to approach him too closely. Nor would he permit more than one to go out of his vision at the same time. In addition he tied them up at night—and his hand was never far from his revolver. Lest they should forget or think of taking chances with his aim he gave them several exhibitions of the speed of his draw and of his superb marksmanship.

ON THE fourth morning after the departure of Jim and Pete the Major escorted his prisoners to the top of the kopje and measured off the day's work for them. As soon as they had commenced their futile labor he sat down in the deck chair one of the men had carried up the kopje for him and examined the veldt beyond the valley through his field glasses.

What he saw evidently satisfied him for he smiled and whistled softly.

"How long are you going to keep this up, Major?" Blai-grove asked that evening. By this time he and his companions had learned the futility of curses and truculent language. Outwardly, at least, they comported themselves like broken-spirited men, but the Major knew they were only awaiting an opportunity to get him off guard.

"Do you think you've done enough?" he asked softly.

"Well, haven't we?" Blai-grove countered. "Look at us. We're broken."

"Tut, tut! You underrate yourselves. You're a bit tired, yes. Your muscles ache and your hands are blistered. But otherwise you are in splendid condition—much better than when you—er—entered my employ. And so you think you've had enough!" His voice hardened. "Why you haven't done enough yet to pay for the way you treated Grey. As for the rest of your crimes—I discovered quite a lot about you, you know, while I was at Lourenco Marquez—I don't think you'll live long

enough to pay for those. However—your society is not exactly stimulating an' I'm gettin' tired of acting the part of a policeman. So—you are free to join your friends."

They all sat up excitedly.

"What friends?"

"What do you mean? You'll let us go?"

"Where? When?"

"One at a time," he said calmly. "But yes; if you wish to leave the valley, you may go now, on foot, empty handed."

Their faces fell.

"Where can we go on foot?" Parson Moss demanded. "We'd be lost before we'd got five miles. And how would we get grub—"

"If," the Major interrupted, "you traveled directly north after leaving the valley you'd be with friends in less than three hours."

"Friends?" they echoed wonderingly.

"Yes. Does that surprise you? Or perhaps you haven't any friends. I can understand that. Perhaps I should have said acquaintances. Didn't you know? Really, you should learn to use your eyes—but of course you were much too busy to admire the view from the top of the kopje. That's unfortunate. Yes. But as I was saying your friends have been following us ever since we left Lourenco Marquez. They kept about a day's trek behind us. That was very clever of them. As a matter of fact I've been expecting them to join us long before this."

The three looked at each other in dumb-founded wonder. Then Parson Moss said:

"If anybody followed us—it wasn't our friends. We've got none. You was right there."

THE Major nodded.

"Then, if they are not friends they must be enemies. That follows, I think. Of course I have considered that. And he's a very unpleasant chappy, a perfectly vile enemy. Perhaps you've noticed that little habit of his?"

And the Major stroked the back of his head.

Billy Hayes gasped.

"You mean One-eyed Louis followed us?"

"Exactly. Now—would you like to join him?"

They were silent. Fear filled their eyes.

"If we go—" Blaugrove said hesitatingly—"will you let us have our revolvers?"

"I wouldn't join Louis if I carried a machine gun," Parson Moss growled.

"Nor me."

"Of course I *won't* return your revolvers," the Major said answering Blaugrove. "You'll go empty handed. I have no intention of helping you to reverse the roles we have been playin'."

"Then I'm stayin' here," Blaugrove said flatly.

The Major laughed.

"I rather fancied you'd make that decision. Louis is an unpleasant customer. He has no respect for human life. He kills—very nastily—without a twinge of conscience. And he's specially violent with men he believes to have cheated him—even if they have cheated him ever so little. But, of course, you know that. I can understand that you have no desire to join him. On the other hand, I'm not sure that I want you here."

"Why not, Major? We won't give you any trouble."

"If you sent us where Louis could get at us, it would be murder," Blaugrove added, supplementing Hayes' plea.

"Yes," the Major agreed. "I think it would. And not, exactly, a judicial murder. Of course, I must save you for that. On the other hand—"

"You're saving us for what?" Blaugrove asked sharply. Then added with a wave of his hand. "Never mind. You were saying?"

"On the other hand," the Major continued blandly, "I am wondering what to do with you when Louis and his not so merry men come here." He laughed at

their expressions. "But of course, he *is* coming here. I should be most disappointed if he didn't. You see it's a case of double—or is it triple?—decoy. I made of myself a very tempting bait you could not resist. You—er—lured me with your treasure chart—only in that case the baiter was baited, if you know what I mean. And so we all came to this delightful valley where we form a luscious bait for One-eyed Louis. You see, Louis likes me even less than he likes you. I've interfered with so many of his plans. And now he thinks he has us where he wants us. But, as you've probably observed, I'm a downy bird an' somewhat difficult to catch nappin'.

"It's really amusin'. The skellums gather to the kill. First the hyenas, then the vultures and," the drawl left his voice, his eyes steeled, "I hate skellum."

"You'll need help, Major," Blagrove said. "Louis won't take the bait as easily as we did. He knows you. He'll be on his guard."

"I wonder," the Major commented softly, "if that is really the old school tie speakin' or an attempt to save a very worthless skin?"

"Take it any way you like," Blagrove muttered.

"I will," the Major said and looked at him closely. "So listen carefully; I'm makin' no bargain with you chaps. If you wish to help me deal with Louis it will be for your own sakes—not mine. I don't really need your assistance and whatever you do my plans concerning your final disposition will remain unaltered. Is that understood? Good. Then this is what we must do——"

**W**HATEVER the Major's plan was, it was too clever and too-well executed to be discovered by the two men—both expert trekkers—Louis sent ahead to discover what was happening in the valley.

"You say," he questioned when they returned after they had spent a day and most of a night exploring the valley, "that they

have been digging for treasure on the top of a kopje?"

"Yes, Louis," one of the scouts said wearily. He had already answered that question many times.

"What's more, they've found it," the other man added.

"It's possible," Louis said after a moment's thought. "And the four men are, you say, friends? You make no mistake there?"

"Hell, no, Louis. I told you that we crept close up to the scherm which they've built around the wagon. We heard them talking. We saw them laughing and drinking together. We saw the treasure chest they have found."

"It is hard to believe—that," Louis said slowly. "And yet, perhaps my three friends, seeing there is treasure enough for all, have decided to play straight with the Major. And he—maybe the treasure has made him forget many things. They call him 'Major' you say? And he calls them by the names we call them?"

"Yes, yes, Louis." The two men could scarcely keep their eyes open. "For God's sake—haven't we told you that enough times?"

Louis' eyes narrowed.

"Presently you shall sleep. And this—it is important. The Major, I tell you, is *slim!* I do not wish to walk into a trap. So-a! I ask questions. I ask them many times to make sure you dolts have forgotten nothing. And there is no one else hidden in that valley?"

"No one. We went through it. Save for patches of long grass, there is no place for men to hide."

"And save for the stockade, the outspan is not defended?"

"That's right, Louis. We could have killed the Major and the other three as they sat about the camp fire talking."

Louis' eye flashed.

"It is well for you you didn't," he said softly. "I myself wish to deal with them. Especially with the Major. Well, that is

all. But wait! Tell me again about the half-caste Pete and the Hottentot."

"Pete is dead—a momba bit him. So the talk went. And the Hottentot—the Major sent him to a kraal about seven days trek distant. And it is to that kraal they trek tomorrow. Tomorrow—no, curse it, Louis, today. And you keep us here talking when we might be getting a bit of sleep. I suppose you'll be trekking early."

Louis nodded.

"You two will scout ahead, make sure everything is all right. You'll be on your way an hour or so before sun-up. As for sleep—you can sleep as much as you like after this business is finished and I will not forget you when the time comes to share out the treasure."

The two men stumbled to their bed-rolls, but long after their snores mingled with that of the other six men who followed Louis the one-eyed leader sat beside the embers of the camp fire considering the things his scouts had told him.

"Even if there is no treasure," he finally concluded, "even if that is all a trick of the Major's, there remains Bully Hayes, Parson Moss, Blaignrove—and the Major. For them there will be no escape. I've got them like that."

He made a tight ball of his fist, his eye gleamed vindictively, as with that comforting thought he retired to his blankets.

**L**ONG before the next day's sun rise One-eyed Louis' men saddled up, ready for the trek into the valley. The two scouts, Lake and Baker, had already departed.

By sunrise they reached the narrow entrance to the valley where they halted while Louis listened to the report of Lake and Baker.

"This will be almost too easy," Louis exclaimed with a grin. "They still sleep, you say, and keep no watch."

He led his men forward at a canter. They scattered as soon as they had passed through the bottle neck entrance, following

a prearranged plan and so, in a very little while they came to the outspan and surrounded the scherm unchallenged.

It was then that Louis began to have doubts.

"Fools!" he said to Baker and Lake who rode beside him. "The birds have flown!"

"No, Louis," Lake said. "They are here. See. The mules are in the stockade. The embers of the camp fire burn red. They're still asleep, I tell you."

"Asleep!" Louis sneered. "Then you go and awaken them."

Lake dismounted and entered the stockade.

From where he sat on his horse Louis could look inside. He saw Lake, revolver in hand, climb up on to the front of the wagon look inside and then return despondently.

"They are not there, Louis," he admitted.

"Not there! I said they had flown. You dolt. You and Baker—you are both—dolts. I warned you that the Major was *slim*. But you boasted of your veldt craft. You said you could spy out this valley and no one would know you had entered it. But the Major knew. And so the birds you said were asleep have flown. You fools!"

His hand reached up to the nape of his neck. His fingers twitched.

"Better not, Louis," one of the men said. "A bullet travels faster than your knife."

Louis scowled, saw that they both had him covered and let his hand fall to his side.

"You misjudge me," he said. "Come. Put away your revolvers. We are friends, yes? It is true that I was very angry just now, but with cause. You will admit that? For the birds have flown and the fault is yours."

"They were all here *and* asleep less than two hours ago, Louis. And I'll take my oath they suspected nothing."

"Then," Louis asked with a shrug of his shoulders, "where are they?"

"They can't have gone far," Baker said. "They're in the valley somewhere. Maybe they've gone up the kopje to do some more digging."

Louis nodded.

"Yes. That may be." Then his anger boiled over again. "Scatter and find them," he stormed. "You, Lake, you take two men and go up the kopje. You, Baker; you take two men and ride through the valley—comb 'em out. And remember—you bring them back alive. It may be necessary to ask them questions before I kill them."

As the six men rode off Louis and the two men who remained dismounted and leading their horses into the enclosure unsaddled them and turned them loose, first closing the gap in the stockade.

THE appearance of the outspan did much to allay Louis' anger. There were no indications of precipitate flight.

"Doubtless," he said, rubbing his hands gleefully together, "they burn with the treasure hunt fever and have gone to make sure they have left nothing behind. It may even be that their greed has so blinded them that they do not know we are in the valley. Well—now we will look for the treasure they have already discovered."

As he spoke he climbed up into the wagon eagerly followed by the other two. Its contents were orderly arranged, and there was a profusion of everything needed for a prolonged trek.

"How like the Major," Louis chuckled. "He travels like a soft dude—but in that he is wise. God knows there are enough hardships in this land without adding to them by traveling rough. Ah! What's this!"

This was an antique-looking, iron-bound chest. The lid had been forced open and carelessly replaced. Louis knelt down to open it; the others crowded closely behind him.

All three whirled sharply as a soft, drawling voice commanded them to put up their hands. They saw the Major kneeling

at the back of the wagon. With him were Moss, Blaugrove and Hayes. The four had been hidden under a pile of blankets when the scout had looked into the wagon.

Louis snarled. His hand fluttered above his head and a knife hurtled through the air. But Louis' aim was hurried. He missed his target, the Major, and the knife thudded into Bully Hayes' shoulder. The big man dropped to the ground, groaning that he was done for.

Louis dropped to the ground, crouching behind his two companions, expecting a shot from the Major's revolver to answer his knife throwing. But the two men, their hands in the air, moved on one side in obedience to the Major's curt order. They had no intention of shielding Louis with their bodies. And Louis, cursing them, put up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"Doubtless this matter can be arranged between us, Senhor Major," he said. "My quarrel is not with you—"

"But mine is with you," the Major said. "Tie him up and gag him, Blaugrove. And the other two as well. You go and help him, Moss."

His order was quickly obeyed and the Major, after making sure that the binding and gagging had been efficiently done, expertly cleaned and bandaged the wound in Bully Hayes' shoulder.

"It is nothing, my good man," he drawled, feeling disgusted at the man's craven spirit. "You'll live to hang."

"And now what, Major?" Blaugrove asked.

"We sit still and await events," the Major said calmly. "But I don't imagine the rest will be as easy as this."

The waiting was not long. Presently Lake and the two men who had gone to the kopje returned at a fast gallop. They pulled to a halt outside the stockade and shouted for Louis.

The Major quickly took the gag out of Louis' mouth.

"Answer them," he said grimly. "Tell

them to come to the wagon. Say that you have found the treasure."

Louis gulped and obeyed.

**B**UT something in the tone of his voice seemed to arouse Lake's suspicions. He whispered to his companions who drew their revolvers and leveled them at the wagon.

"Show yourself, Louis," Lake called. "We ain't trusting you."

"They seem to know you very well, Louis," the Major chuckled as he replaced the gag. Then he shouted sternly:

"Hands up! I've got you covered."

The answer to this was three shots and the men dug their spurs into the horses and rode madly away, scattering as they rode, heading for the shelter of a patch of bush.

They reached the shelter without harm despite the fact that the Major and those behind him opened rapid fire.

Blaigrove looked thoughtfully at the Major.

"I didn't expect to hit anything," he said softly so that neither Moss or Bully Hayes heard him. "You didn't trust us sufficiently to give us live cartridges, did you?"

"Hardly," the Major drawled. "Do you blame me?"

Blaigrove did not answer that. Instead he said:

"But why did you miss, Major?"

"Oh, I have a very good reason," the Major said with a shrug of his shoulder. "Does it matter? Their fate is certain."

"And mine?"

"And yours."

Blaigrove nodded and turned away.

Moss came up to the Major.

"It was a mug's game," he grunted contemptuously, "to let them get away. We should have opened fire on them as soon as they came up, before they got suspicious. Now we'll be in for it."

"Yes," the Major drawled. "I rather fancy we will."

As he spoke a number of rifle shots

sounded and jagged holes appeared in the canvas hood of the wagon.

The four men dropped full length to the floor of the wagon where they were protected from bullets by the earth-filled cases with which the Major had made a rampart inside the wagon.

They heard excited shouts and curses. The firing increased in intensity. Evidently the other men had joined their companions and were encircling the camp.

After a little while there was a silence. Then a man's voice was heard suggesting a truce so that they could get together and arrive at some compromise.

"Give us the treasure, and you can go free, Major," Lake shouted.

Again the Major yaggged Louis.

"Tell them," he commanded, "that if they don't surrender, I'm going to kill you—slowly."

Louis obeyed. He pleaded with the men he thought he commanded. He offered them bribes. He begged.

They answered with mocking laughs and once again the firing broke out.

"The treasure means more to them than your yellow hide, Louis," the Major said as he replaced the gag.

He crawled to the front of the wagon and cautiously raised his helmet above the seat of the wagon. Its appearance was greeted by two shots and two jagged holes stained the helmet's pristine whiteness.

**A**T THE sound of a dull *click*, the Major turned sharply to see Moss—an expression of stupid dismay on his face—covering him with his revolver.

"You see," the Major drawled, addressing Blaigrove, "I was wise not to trust you. Don't try to fire again, Moss. Your ammunition is worthless. Didn't you know that? And now—" he sighed—"I've got to gag and truss you."

Moss swore and threw his useless revolver at the Major's head. As the Major ducked to avoid it, momentarily off guard, Moss lunged forward, a knife flashing in

his hand. But at that moment Blaigrove, shouting hoarsely closed with him and the two men struggled desperately. Even as the Major jumped to Blaigrove's assistance Moss struck fiercely and the keen blade of the knife slicked through Blaigrove's ribs, tearing into his lungs.

He coughed painfully, choked and collapsed on top of Moss. The next moment the Major brought the barrel of his revolver down on Moss' head and then, grave of face, he knelt down beside Blaigrove and tenderly withdrew the blood-stained knife.

"I'm done," Blaigrove gasped. "But it was no eleventh hour atonement—this is no death bed repentance. I hated Moss and this is the easiest way out for myself. That's all, blast you."

And so he died.

The Major covered him with a blanket, then bound and gagged the still unconscious Moss. As an afterthought he did the same to Bully Hayes. "Though really," he murmured softly, "I'm bein'—er—ultra-cautious. And now I have to play the game out all by myself—which is what I planned to do in the first place. Just the same, I can sympathize with the way Wellington felt at Waterloo."

At that moment, sounding very faint, coming from a distance, the cry of a go-away bird reached his ears.

He smiled and fired three shots in quick succession. Paused while a man could count five then fired three more.

His shots were answered by a burst of rifle fire.

"That's the way," he called. "Fire away. Make the deuce of a lot of noise—the more the merrier."

But he did not fire again. He sprawled supine, a pillow under his head. His monocle gleamed in his eye and he seemed to be solely concerned with the lighting of the cigarette he had extracted from a jewelled cigarette case.

"It's getting bally warm," he murmured. "Fortunately there are no trees close by

for them to climb—if there were, my position would be untenable. As it is I can only wait. But not long, I hope."

At that moment the cry of the go-away bird sounded shrilly above the firing. It was followed by wild exultant shouts—then there was silence for a little while. That silence was broken by the voice of Jim, the Hottentot, shouting:

"It is all over, Baas. We have them fast bound and gagged. Six of them, Baas."

THE Major jumped to his feet and went to the front of the wagon just as Jim and a party of warriors came up.

"Ou, Baas!" Jim exclaimed with a happy grin. "I have feared for you many times. It is no light thing to make of yourself a bait for skellums. How goes it?"

"We have them all, Jim," the Major replied. And then he spoke to the warriors, thanking them for the assistance they had given him.

"Au, inkosi," their captain said humbly. "What we have done today does not begin to pay the debt we owe you. We are your dogs. We do not look for thanks or reward. The Hottentot came to our kraal and told us of your need. It was our pleasure to carry out your plan!"

"Wu!" Jim boasted exultantly. "And we were very cunning, Baas. For these past three days we have been very close to you. When the scouts of the one-eyed man came secretly to the valley we watched them unobserved. When they crept up under cover of darkness and listened to your talk, we were not a spear's length behind them. And so—the skellums came to the kill and found a lion!"

"It was well done, Jim," the Major said. "And Pete?"

"He will have done what he was told to do, Baas. Have no fear of that."

"It is good," the Major said. "Now have the white men you and the warriors captured brought to the outspan. And let a grave be dug, for one man is dead. And he died a good death, Jim."

THE sun was at noon when a warrior who had been posted as a lookout on the top of one of the kopjes came running with a report to the Major. Things happened very quickly then at the outspan. But there was no confusion. All was done in an orderly manner. While Jim inspanned the mules the warriors bound the Major's prisoners to stout stakes driven firmly into the ground; bound them so securely with reims that there was no possibility of their escape. That done, the Major pinned to each man's shirt front a sheet of paper on which he had written the man's name, his aliases and a brief resume of his criminal activities. At the bottom of each sheet was printed: A PRESENT FROM THE MAJOR.

"All is ready, Baas," Jim said.

The Major climbed up on to the driver's seat of the wagon. Jim, sat beside him, the driving whip in his hand.

The warriors made a big gap in the stockade and then, all save one, hurried away from the valley, shouting the Major's praises as they ran.

Then that one warrior, obeying the Major's order, ran along the line of prisoners, removing the gags from their mouths.

For a little while the men were speechless, they could only gulp, but by the time the native had run to the wagon and clambered over the tail board, they had found their voices.

They cursed the Major and each other. They shouted threats and pleas for mercy. The din they made rivaled the croaking of the vultures and the whining snarls of hyenas cheated of their prey.

The Major's eyes were stern. He tightened the grip on the reins. "*Trck jou!*" he shouted. Jim slammed the big whip and the mules broke into a canter. Skillfully the Major brought them round and headed them out of the valley. His immediate destination was the homestead of the old Boer Vanderspuy.

Just before sun-down Sergeant Burk and eight troopers of the British South Africa Police rode into the valley. They had come

in response to a letter brought to their outpost by the half-caste, Pete.

There had been times during their trek to the valley when they had doubted their wisdom in answering the Major's call; there was always the possibility that the Major was pulling their legs. But when they came to the deserted outspan and saw the bound men they knew it was no leg-pull.

"It's one of the best bits o' work the Major's ever done," Burk exclaimed. "Ah! And the country will be a cleaner place once we've got these skellums where they belong. Wanted men, every man jack of them. Wanted bad, too."

And then, because he was a methodical man and delighted in using the sonorous phrases of the Law he served, he formally and solemnly arrested each man, charging him with the crimes entered on the sheet pinned to his chest, and with others which had escaped the Major's knowledge.

He and his troopers were deaf alike to the offers of bribes and to the curses which assailed them. But when One-eyed Louis sneered: "You can't arrest us, you big lout. You have no authority in Portuguese territory," Sergeant Burk laughed.

"On Portuguese territory is it you are," he bantered. "And tell me now, do you think the Major would make that sort of mistake? The boundary line runs through this valley—didn't you know that? That bit of a stream yonder marks it at this place. And I'd have you know you're on the wrong side of it. Wrong, that is, for you. And so you'll go the way all skellums ought to go — some to England where they'll hang, and one of you to France, and one to Germany. And two, or I'm mistaken, will journey to America when we're through with you. And there you'll sit in a warmer seat than you've ever known before. An' the rest of you—you'll get your desserts. Rest easy on that.

"Now shut up, all of you, or I'll gag your filthy mouths. Paugh! I hate the looks and the stink and the speech of skellums!"



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# END DETOUR

By **KARL DETZER**

*Author of "Siren," "Cross Currents," etc.*

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**J**ERRY ROWE was an engineer, old style. He was A-number-1, all-round, without frills. You knew it when you looked at him, when you watched him sizing up an abutment footing, knee deep in mud on a river bank, or when you saw him checking over a structure plan and profile in the office.

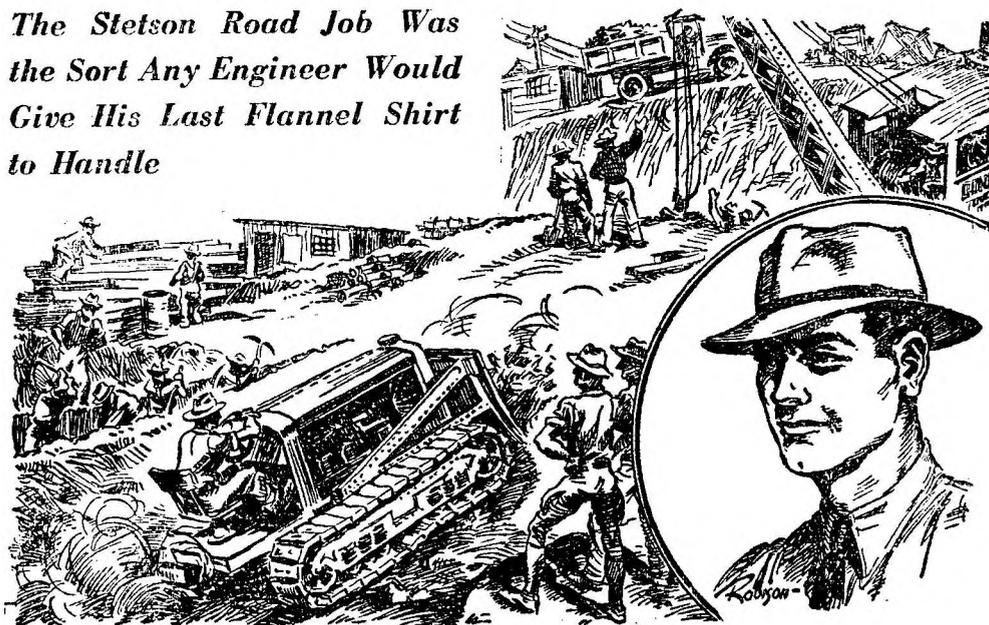
It wasn't his complexion or his clothes or the words he used; it was deeper than that. Men who had worked for him said

there wasn't any kind of bridge job Jerry wouldn't tackle, anywhere, and he never tackled one without bringing it in. He'd bring it in slowly, perhaps, but true and complete, down to the last rivet or the final hand-polish on a concrete face.

But he had two failings. One of these he couldn't help. He was old. Forty-eight, to be exact. That's old today, where highway building is concerned. You have to be nimble to keep ahead of traffic in 1938.

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*The Stetson Road Job Was  
the Sort Any Engineer Would  
Give His Last Flannel Shirt  
to Handle*



The other failing; well, Jerry Rowe refused to admit that it was a failing. He nursed it along, even seemed to be proud of it sometimes. Because of that second failing, he was known up and down Michigan, in road and bridge camps from Keweenaw Point to the Ohio line as "The Duke."

On every job he tackled, he was boss. The whole boss and nothing but the boss, and any contractor who tried to override him found it didn't pay. When he took over a project, he took it over, lock, stock and barrel. He handled it himself, alone, from the preliminary walk-around to the clean-up. Any young fellows assigned as assistant engineers on one of Jerry's projects learned to sit in the office shack and answer the telephone and say, "Yes, sir," and keep out from under foot. Right or wrong, that was Jerry's way of doing things.

And the fact remains, he was forty-eight. Pre-war. He'd begun life carrying chain on one of those western railroads, and he'd been a transit-man in Alaska and a survey chief in Mexico. He knew all about mountains and deserts and canyons, and the best way to climb over a seven thousand foot pass and hold to railroad grades every inch of the way. But chiefly he'd worked on bridges. He could build any kind of bridge and build it right, driven wood pilings or old style wrought iron frames, suspension, cantilever, through-steel arches, deck girders, rigid-frame concrete, any kind.

However, there he was last summer, building three unimportant little thirty-foot spans on relocated Highway 2, in the upper peninsula of Michigan. Any youngster fresh out of engineering school could have handled the job. But the big boss and the chief engineer of the state highway department and the traffic survey chief had a little talk one day down in Lansing, and the Duke went north. He didn't say anything; just piled his gear into a car and crossed the Straits and set-

tled down to an all-summer job, fighting mosquitos and puttering around with three crews of WPA and three separate local contractors, building little bridges over little rivers, and probably remembering the Mississippi and the Hudson, the Ohio and the Red River of the North.

HE CLEANED up the three projects in September and turned in his blueprints, and the big boss called him on long-distance telephone.

"Come down to the office, Jerry, soon as you have the pine cones out of your ears," he said, so Jerry went south again, wondering.

"What's next, boss?" he wanted to know when he got there.

"Nice work you did up north," the big boss said. "Very nice. Takes a little longer, I suppose, when you can't pick your own labor."

"Right," Jerry said. "What next?"

"Smoke?" The big boss shoved a packet of cigarettes across the desk.

"Pipe, if you don't mind," Jerry answered, and got his out, and began to fill it from his old Mexican leather tobacco pouch. "What next?" he repeated.

The big boss seemed to be stalling for time, as if he had bad news and didn't want to utter it. He fussed with a stack of project proposals and shifted aside a photostat of a general structure plan.

"Got a funny one for you, Jerry," he said at last. "Heard about the new Stetson road job down in Wayne?"

Jerry nodded. The whole state knew about that one. It had been in the papers. The Stetson road job was the sort of thing any engineer would give his last flannel shirt to handle. Stetson road and Highway 919 and the Detroit Western Railroad and the Oakland Electric line were all mixed up, down in Wayne County, in a grade separation plan.

The railroad and the electric line ran parallel, northeast to southwest, their right-of-ways adjoining. There were four

hot tracks for through traffic and an industrial siding on the railroad, making six in all. Highway 919 crossed them, running north and south on an undivided grade. A hundred feet north of the railroad, Stetson road crossed 919, and two hundred yards east of that intersection, it also crossed the railroad tracks.

All of them were flat on the ground, too, where east and west highway traffic was forever getting tangled up with north and south, and where both of them mixed it with the railroads. Trains socked trucks, trucks socked cars, cars socked pedestrians.

Road 919 was a four-lane highway, running from the Flint industrial area southward to the Ohio line, just missing Detroit by the skin of its teeth, and was busy day and night with trucks and drive-aways from the motor plants. Stetson was only a two-lane job, not quite so busy, but with rush-hour peaks that crowded every foot of concrete.

That was the set-up for the contractor who would furnish man-power, machinery and materials and for the state engineer who would supervise. Separate the two road grades, with Stetson overpassing. Underpass both highways beneath the six tracks of the railroad and the electric line. Excavate 919, fill the railroad grades, excavate Stetson part way, fill it the rest of the way. Hold to fourteen-foot clearance all around. Build three bridges. But while you built them, keep traffic moving; steam, electric and gasoline traffic. That was the job.

It would cost three-quarters of a million dollars, the papers said, and speed up traffic, and save ten lives a year. The Federal bureau had okayed the project; the ICC was down on paper for it; the railroad and electric companies were both signed up; proposals were printed and distributed; every contractor in the state big enough to tackle it had qualified. Bids would be opened tomorrow morning.

Jerry Rowe remembered to light his pipe. He puffed and stared through blue

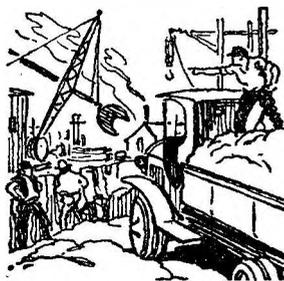
smoke at the big boss, who usually looked so amiable, sitting across the desk. For some reason, though, he didn't look amiable just now. He looked uneasy. As if he didn't like what he was going to have to say next.

**T**HEN he blurted it. "You see, Jerry, Bob Brennan's been assigned as project engineer to oversee for the state."

Jerry leaned forward. It didn't make sense. He hadn't heard correctly. Brennan? That freckle-faced kid? What the hell did Brennan—? No, he hadn't heard correctly.

"What's that?" he asked.

"Bob will be project engineer," the boss made it perfectly clear. "He's fast, Jerry. Nobody in our department can touch him for speed, which is what the Stetson job



needs. He can run circles around all the rest of us. But he's young."

"Yeh," Jerry said.

"That's it, exactly, Jerry. Too young to be turned loose alone on a project as big as this. What he needs is an old head to help him over the bumps."

"I see," Jerry grunted. "I'm to play second fiddle."

Jerry Rowe knew all about Bob Brennan. Why, the kid wasn't six years out of engineering school! He still was full of ideas the professors had planted in him. He'd never been around. Probably never saw a mountain or a desert. The kind who thinks that WPA labor is tough going, because he'd never tried bossing a gang of Mexicans.

"Not second fiddle," the big boss said.

"Your job is to keep Bob from playing out of tune."

"He seems to be doing very nice in this man's outfit without my help," Jerry answered, and picked up his hat.

"Sit down," the big boss ordered. "I want to talk to a couple of fellows outside about some bids. They've been waiting for me. Sit down, Jerry. I'll be right back. Sit down."

He said this last as the door was closing behind him, and when he came in, five minutes later, he was grinning. He walked fast, as if he'd been very busy while he was away, and he went up to Jerry and began to pump his hand.

"Thanks, Jerry," he said heartily, before Jerry had a chance to get in a word. "Thanks a lot. I knew you wouldn't let me down."

**J**ERRY moved into the little office shack with its clean smell of fresh pine boards, down at the Stetson road project, on October first. He was there at six o'clock that morning, a full hour before Bob showed up. That's how he always did; first on the job, last to leave, tending to everything himself. He was sitting on the rough board desk, with the Stetson specifications in his hand, going over them by the light of the lantern on the wall, when Bob walked in cheerfully.

"Hello, Jerry," Bob said. "Early."

"Hello," Jerry answered, shaking his head. "Not early. Just on time." He held up the papers. "I was checking over these spec's. There's fifteen thousand yards excavation, and thirty-eight thousand porous fill. I was thinking, if I'd let the contractor move that excavated earth over for the—" He stopped suddenly and looked at Bob and got red in the face and remembered. This wasn't his job. It belonged to the kid, standing there.

"You were thinking?" Bob prompted.

Jerry put down the papers. "Skip it," he answered. "Guess I'll walk around the diggings. If you want anything—"

"Want something right now," said Bob, who like the big boss wasn't so dumb about men, or roads either. "Want to talk to you. You know more about bridges than I do, and—"

"Yeh?" Jerry broke in. He let himself smile. "Mebbe."

"And I'll need your help. I expect you to tip me off, Jerry, if anything goes wrong."

Jerry didn't answer, just got out his pipe and lighted it. He puffed three times, then asked, "Anything else, Bob?"

Bob had red hair to match his freckles and a snappy temper to match his gray eyes.

"There is—something—else," he said, seeming to hold tight to each word before letting it go. "I expect—co-operation. I've worked for you on two projects, Jerry."

"And on this one, I'm working for you? That's what you're driving at?"

"Precisely," Bob said. "Before, we've done things your way. It was probably the right way, but just the same, you might have listened now and then to a suggestion. On your projects, there was one boss and a lot of flunkies. That's out, here. No flunkies on this job and no dukes, either. I expect you to work for me and with me, not just to say, 'Yes, sir'."

**J**ERRY had to grin, no matter how he felt inside. He couldn't imagine himself saying "Sir" to this kid.

Bob went on, "Understand, though, I'm running the show. I don't want to hear, when it's done, 'Brennan got the credit, and the Duke did the work.' But any time you think I'm wrong, tell me. I'll listen. I don't promise to do it your way, but I'll listen, just the same."

"Sure," Jerry answered, and walked out. The kid didn't mean it, of course. No chief wanted an assistant to tell him how. It would break down discipline. Assistants were on a job to take orders, not to give advice, no matter what Bob was saying;

no matter what the big boss up at Lansing said, either.

When he looked over the ground, Jerry knew what Bob would be up against. Even this early in the day, traffic was rolling thickly on both highways. Before night, barricades would rise half a mile back and detour signs begin to elbow that traffic two miles around. There'd be plenty of hollering right from the start.

Railroad trains, both passenger and freight, roared across the intersections every few minutes; once each half hour a two-car electric clattered past, swaying mightily on its light cinder-ballast track. Jerry knew how the railroaders were going to howl if their schedules were delayed a split-second while track crews, working as fast as a boss could drive them, spiked down steel on a relocated cross-over. Knew just what arguments would crop up; what headaches there would be when the contractor started pouring the concrete abutments in zero weather; what a mess the very first job would be, moving communications lines to clear the right-of-way.

He knew one other thing. He was going to keep his own mouth shut. This young punk, six years out of school, offering to listen to advice! But not promising to take it. The best advice a grown man could give him would be to run along and peddle his papers and let somebody who'd been around do the job. No Dukes on this project, eh? Very well—let him learn. Learn by hanging himself before the winter was half gone. There'd be plenty of rope in these diggings to hang a dozen men.

The first day was only a walk-around. Blueprints in hand, Bob Brennan led the way. The contractor who was low bidder on the whole job followed, and with him his chief; then the manager of the electric line; then a brace of trainmasters, looking glum over what was going to happen to their schedules; and finally the railroad boss from general superintendent's office,

who'd have to stay through the job, seeing that the contractor did things right and fast for the railroad just as Bob saw to it for the state.

Jerry brought up the rear. Not because he wanted to. An assistant's job was in the office shack, wasn't it? But Bob had said, "Come on, Jerry. Let's take a look," and Jerry obeyed.

Only once he nearly spoke out of turn. He started to say, "We'll save trouble beginning at this end," but he stopped himself in time. Let the smart young boss do the figuring. Let him decide which way the contractor should bring in the first loads of porous fill for sub-grade on the temporary run-around tracks. There was only one way to do it right. To his surprise, Bob saw it, too.

"We'll bring that fill in from the east," he said. "Save time. Not interfere with operations."

**T**HAT first night, when the whistle on the locomotive crane sounded six o'clock, Bob left with a roll of blueprints under his arm. Jerry, a little perversely, stayed till seven, checking this and that. He was locking the shack when he saw the new night watchman cutting across the triangle, a time-clock swinging in his left hand.

An old man, of course. Watchmen always were old. That's what you did at the end with untrained men. Jerry saw him take out a small tobacco sack, open it with his teeth, roll a cigarette expertly with his one free hand and strike a match on his thumbnail. He took a deep drag and called to Jerry, "Evenin', sir. You the project boss?"

"Hell, no," Jerry answered, for some reason irritated.

"Thought you was, lookin' at you," the watchman said.

It was satisfactory answer. Jerry took time to explain. "Got a bright young kid for project engineer."

The watchman chuckled. "World's full

o' kids these days. Make us old-timers take a back seat."

Jerry started on.

"You gotta be stream-lined today," the watchman gabbled. "Speed, that's what counts. Kids've got it. Used to have it myself. Me, I used to be an engineer. Damn good one."

"You?" Jerry exclaimed, and made the connection quickly. So that's what you did with old engineers, too.

"Sure." The other grinned. "Why not? Sure, I've built bridges."

"Where?" Jerry asked, but he knew; he remembered the cigarette rolled easily in one hand.

The watchman swept out his right arm carelessly toward half the horizon and all that lay behind it. "Everywhere," he answered. "Panama. Mexico. Would you believe it, mister—what's your name, anyhow? Mine's Charley. Sit down here a minute."

**H**HEADACHES started the second day. No sooner were the detour signs and barricades up, than people began to run around them and down to the diggings with complaints against the state.

"You handle them, Jerry," young Bob said.

Jerry had no objection. He'd always handled his own complaints when he was boss. But what could you expect of a kid? First complaint this time came from a filling station owner, just up the way, inside the barricade. His business halted, naturally, and he asked Jerry what-the-hell about the mortgage, due May first? Jerry couldn't answer.

Nor could he find a sensible reply to the sad Italian from the faded beer garden south of the right-of-way. His customers no longer could cross the tracks, he pointed out bitterly. Unless something were done, they'd soon be drinking their evening beer in another joint, and then what?

Factory managers, whose shipping yards were fed by the industrial siding, found

fault when it was put out of service for nine daylight hours, while a hundred laborers built up the false-work trestle for the first two temporary run-around tracks. When traffic was halted fifty minutes instead of thirty-nine as scheduled, the morning the contractor cut in the run-around on the westbound hot track, railroaders objected. Highway department was jamming steam-line schedules, they yelled.

Jerry consulted Bob about this one, but again Bob said, "I told you to handle it, didn't I?" and rushed off feverishly to something else.

Work did move. Jerry had to admit that to himself after the third day. No two ways about it, Bob Brennan was fast. He kicked the contractor around and bulldozed the railroad and made the electric line yell "Uncle." Three gangs dug in at the railroad overpass and the highway separation, with clamshells, drag-lines and dippers; they drove three thousand feet of timber piles in four short days. They carted out five thousand yards of excavation in three-yard dump trucks almost before you knew they'd gone to work. Jerry watched silently. He wouldn't have let the contractor use three gangs if he were boss; likely to get in each other's way. Besides, how could one project engineer keep an eye on three gangs at once? But before the first hard November freeze, the highways were scooped down to permanent grade and the excavations dug for footings under the four railroad abutments. By December, when the first big snow came down, the footings at the underpass of Route 919 were poured.

Work was slower at Stetson road, but through no fault of Bob's, Jerry must admit. There a bottomless muck hole ate a week off schedule and set everybody's teeth on edge. The contractor saw profits shrinking; workmen complained of cold; railroaders objected to new slow-zone orders, and young Bob, taking test borings morning and evening to find how much slush the contractor still must move before

he was down to the safety point, had less time than ever for fiddling routine jobs.

Jerry took them on. He didn't even report them to Bob. If the kid didn't want to know what was going on, why bother him?

"Some day he'll miss something he ought to know," he thought, and went to work early and stayed late, and in the evenings sat in the office shack and listened to Charley; stayed around nights to get his breath primarily, he told himself; certainly for no other reason, except maybe to make the old man talk.

"Got funny ways of doin' things these days," the watchman would say. "Me, I'm fifty-four, and thirty years ago—— Look, it's amusin, ain't it, me luggin' a time clock when I used to—— Ever tell you how I built the water tunnel at Monterey?"

"In the Sierra Madre?" Jerry asked. "Sure, I was down there, too, before the war. I bridged the Rio what's-its-name?"

**B**UT in spite of muck and weather and traffic and railroaders; in spite of a row with the contractor about the quality of the bank-run gravel in the porous fill, the new year found the job on schedule again. It wouldn't stay that way, Jerry knew. One young kid couldn't have all the luck, no matter how sure he was himself, no matter how the contractor tried to play ball. There'd be delay. There always was. Delay and trouble.

It came in a large package one mid-January afternoon when snow slanted out of the east on a double-bladed wind, and steam from the hot-water tanks at the mixer was freezing against men's cheeks. At one o'clock a truck driver ran toward Jerry, yelling:

"Where's the boss at? The boss? A car runs into the barricade! Runs in and turns over! Can't get my truck past it."

Jerry asked, "Anybody hurt?" and started across the fill.

"Dunno. A lady's a-layin' in the snow!" At two o'clock when Jerry had that mess

cleaned up, he heard fresh bad news. Young Bob and the contractor's boss and the whole crew were up on the falsework, setting nine-by-eighteen inch jackstringers, where the caps on the trestle had started to roll. They still were at it when a yard engine, pushing a string of dump cars along the industrial siding, somehow spread the rails and let pony trucks and drivers down on the ties. That meant more hard work and it was getting dark.

Then at five o'clock, when an eastbound passenger train rolled by on the number two hot track, eighteen minutes late and paying no heed to slow-orders, Jerry heard the strawboss of a labor crew start screaming. After a minute, the time-keeper ran past, yelling in a shrill voice, "Bring stretcher, somebody! Gandy-dancer got hit!"

Jerry ran, too. The clerk was right. A track worker had been a little too slow, or too cold, and the train too fast. It was six o'clock when the coroner arrived.

At seven, when Jerry got back to the shack, young Bob still was there, fussing at his desk. He said, without looking up:

"Trouble, Jerry. We're two days behind schedule."

Jerry wanted to laugh, but he couldn't. His mind still was full of the woman, lying quietly in the snow, and the dead gandy-dancer between the rails. His back was tired from helping railroaders lug wormscrew jacks to the derailed yard engine, so there'd be no more delay than necessary. Still, he wanted to laugh.

"Trouble?" he repeated. "Two days? Well, then, so what?"

Suddenly he didn't want to laugh. Rage came over him; making his face burn and his ears ring. What did this kid know about real trouble? What did he know about a lot of things? If it had been a footing settled in the mud, or an abutment tilting without any warning, or steel work toppling of its own weight—but two days working time! He repeated, "So what?"

"So I'm talking to the contractor in the morning," Bob replied. "His superintendent's got lead in his pants. I need a younger man for that job. Somebody that can step."

Jerry didn't speak for a moment, just stood over the coal scuttle, sharpening his pencil and getting good and mad. When he did speak, his voice had changed. Its tone wasn't second-fiddle, which he'd been practicing all these weeks. It was his old voice, the natural one he used to holler with when men called him the Duke.

"Sure," he said. "Have him fired. Get rid of all antiques! Fire me, too. Have some brat in diapers take over!"

Bob stood up, surprised. "Listen," he said. "I wasn't thinking——"

"Might try thinking some fine day," Jerry broke in. "Wouldn't hurt you any. Get you farther than running circles."

Bob's gray eyes tightened and the freckles stood out sharply on his cheeks. He had a temper, too, and he was boss. He knew better than let an assistant get by with anything. In ten more seconds he would have fired Jerry, and Jerry knew it and didn't care. But in those ten seconds, the shack door swung open and the watchman stood there blinking and grinning a wide, silly grin.

"What do you want?" Bob yelled at him.

"Who, me?" the watchman said, still grinning, and Jerry knew at once. The man was drunk. Drunk on duty, with two highways and a railroad and an electric line to keep an eye on, and the boiler to keep fired all night. "Me?" the fellow repeated. "Nothin'! I'm just a——"

Jerry interrupted, "Get out, Charley. I'll talk to you later," and kicked shut the door. Then he turned to Bob.

"Hold everything," Bob said, and sat down on the work desk. "You don't mean what you're saying. Neither do I. Guess it's just the pressure."

"Just the speed," Jerry corrected, still mad.

"Got to have speed," Bob answered. "Traffic can't wait. Only, no use popping off. I'll try that superintendent another week." He got up and put on his hat. "The watchman was drinking."

"Mebbe," Jerry half admitted.

Bob said, "Can't take a chance with that. Too much depends on a watchman here. We'd best have him fired."

Jerry spoke fast, forgetting he'd planned to keep his mouth shut. The contractor mustn't fire old Charley. "I'll handle it," he said. "I'll talk to him. Give my word, you'll have no more trouble."

Bob put on his cap. "Okay," he said. "Up to you. Haven't time even to think about it. Got to get off my report to headquarters tonight on next half-month's work." He grabbed his briefcase and went out whistling.

**B**OB and the contractor made up their two days, lost three, then gained four, so by mid-February the job was a day ahead of schedule. Everybody was keeping step, even the traveling public which still must detour two miles around. Bob said nothing more about reporting the superintendent, didn't mention old Charley again.

The industrial siding had been finished and cut in on the main line. Concrete was poured on the rigid-arch overpass where Stetson road hopped Route 919. By March the forms came down from the abutments where 919 ducked under the railroads, and four locomotive cranes got ready to pick up the sixty-ton steel girders for the span.

"The kid's had luck," Jerry told the watchman that night. He was careful of his tone, careful that even Charley should sense no envy, no grudging approval in it, none of the confusion that he himself was feeling all these weeks as to method and authority and speed, and who gave orders and who kept his mouth shut. "Looks now, mebbe he's going to lick the job after all," he said. "Bring it in on time, complete.

Soon's the east abutment at Stetson's poured and cured, and deck-girders laid and backfill tamped—not much more to do after that."

Even the weather helped. There had been snow, of course, but not once all winter had the thermometer dropped to zero and stayed there. If it had, the contractor was prepared. Specifications took care of that. He'd mixed his concrete hot; hot sand, hot stone, hot water, too. Mixed it hot and poured it hot into the plywood forms.

Around the forms he'd built a housing of once-used pine, sheathed in canvas, with steam radiation pipes inside, connected with a boiler. It wasn't much of a boiler; only a little twenty-five horsepower vertical outfit, semi-portable, but good enough to keep the housing warm. The temperature must be held fairly constant for eight or ten days while the concrete was curing; not too hot but never below forty. If frost by any chance got in before the abutment cured, the whole job would have to be torn out and done over—and not only the contractor suffer, but the state and traveling public as well.

First thing each morning Jerry would lift a flap of canvas and duck into the housing to look at the tell-tale thermometer. It was one of those double-U tubes, and he could see at a glance any day how low the temperature had been the night before. All working hours, a state inspector stood at the mixing plant, watching proportions, guarding against frost; another inspector, above the forms, kept an eye on the high frequency vibrators, which pounded the wet mud into corners and tight around the reinforcement steel.

**T**HEY were youngsters, even fresher out of school than Bob. Some day, Jerry knew, they, too, would be project engineers. They got on the job at seven every morning and went off skylarking somewhere each evening at six. The rest of the night it was the watchman's busi-

ness to fire the boiler and keep everything right.

Charley never had failed again. Never brought another bottle to the diggings. The boiler did its part, too, but in case it should not, in case a steampipe suddenly should break, there was a stack of salamanders, lined up near the right of way, ready to be dragged in and filled with kindling and lighted.

On the fifth of March, the last pour was finished and the contractor moved out his mixer to some other job across the county. Seven days later Jerry broke two test beams poured from the same concrete and stored inside the housing, to see how it was curing.

It showed strength to spare. He set down the figures in his notebook and went back to the office shack and got out the forms, in triplicate, to make the report on fracture strength for headquarters.

He just had uncovered the typewriter when a boy barged in, saying, "Telegram, mister," and Jerry opened the message and read it, then suddenly felt confused. It wasn't for him. It was for Bob, and had nothing to do with bridge building, either.

A minute later when Bob came in, Jerry said, "You got to excuse me. I opened it by mistake."

"That's all right," Bob said, and read the telegram, and yelled, "Oh, boy! What time is it now? She gets in at six! If I hurry— Oh, boy!"

Jerry stuck the blank forms and carbon paper into the typewriter. "I'm making out the test beam report," he said.

"Ten after five? Bob cried. He dropped his notebook into the field desk and excitedly slammed shut the lid. "Jerry, I'm going to run out early tonight." He searched hurriedly in his pockets. "Where the devil're my gloves?"

He found them, but as he opened the door, a workman ran in. It was a stranger on these diggings, a short man, in fur cap and denim pants, and he tried to stop Bob,

saying, "Listen, Mister. I gotta have——"

"Ask him!" Bob yelled, and waved his glove at Jerry.

He hurried on, and the workman, hesitating in the door, began again to Jerry, "Listen," and again had got that far when the resident engineer for the railroad pushed him aside and burst into the room.

"Just hit a car, west end of elevation," he reported. "Eastbound freight Extra 621. Nobody hurt. Driver jumped."

Jerry stood up. "How'd it happen?"

"Oh, a yahoo drove around the barricade and got on the tracks! My own crew's cleaning up. You state boys needn't worry."

Jerry sat down again. The engineer departed, as hastily as he had entered, and the workman who had been waiting said, "Listen. I come after the salamanders."

"Salamanders?" Jerry repeated sharply. "Oh, no." And then, "Who wants 'em?"

"My foreman," the man said. Over across county. Contractor's new job. Havin' boiler trouble."

"Contractor sent for them?" Jerry demanded. "He knows he can't——"

"Not contractor. Foreman. I got a truck."

"No," Jerry refused. "I couldn't let them go. Against rules."

"You the boss?" the man insisted.

Jerry shrugged. For some reason, he didn't feel irritated any longer when men asked if he were boss. It seemed to make little difference around here, who had the title. "No," he said. "Boss is gone. He couldn't let you take them, either."

"Foreman needs 'em bad!"

"Go 'long," Jerry said. "Get out. Peddle your papers."

**T**HE fellow scowled and backed out, talking to himself. He slammed the door and Jerry finished the test beam report, then looked at his watch. It was a quarter past six. He blew out the lantern and was hanging it on its nail when Charley tramped in.

"Gettin' cold," the watchman said, and shivered, and kicked snow off his boots. "Don't like it. Gets in my bones."

Jerry looked at him. The man acted a lot older than fifty-four tonight. Maybe he'd lied about his age. "Trouble is, your blood's thin," Jerry told him. "Too long in the tropics."

"Feel like goin' back there quick," Charley said.

"Don't start tonight. Not with this concrete still green," Jerry said, and thought. He did lie. He's a lot older. So what? So he hadn't necessarily gone on the shelf at fifty?

At six-thirty he left the project, following a well-tramped, dark path through the dirty, crusted snow. As he passed the closed beer garden, inside the barricades, he felt a stiff wind blowing out of the north. It was getting colder, he admitted. Night like this was bound to be tough on Charley. He remembered his own first winter, back from Mexico. His feet hadn't warmed up till August.

He stopped at a little diner lunch down near the railroad yards. There was frost on its windows and the rich, warm smell of soup came out to meet him when he opened the door. Two policemen sat at the counter, drinking coffee. As he entered one of them said, "Three above zero."

"Three?" Jerry repeated. "Oh, no. Not that low!"

"Dropped seven degrees since half past five," the officer said.

Jerry ate his supper and topped it with an extra cup of coffee. His furnished room was cold when he got there, and he did not at once take off his overcoat. The landlord, hearing him, came to the door.

"Three below," he apologized. "Got the furnace doing all it can. Getting so cold outside——"

"Be all right," Jerry said. He sat down and took out his pipe and opened the newspaper, but instead of reading, thought of Charley, squatting inside the boiler shack, trying to keep warm. A man got

colder, felt so at least, when he sat alone. He'd never asked the old fellow how long it actually was since he arrived back in the north. Years or months?

His own room wasn't warming. He got up at last, at half past eight, and kicked at the radiator, then put on his arctics and wrapped a woolen muffler around his up-turned coat collar and stepped out to the porch. The thermometer registered seven below zero, when he struck a match to light the tube.

He'd go back to the little diner and get a pail of coffee, and Charley could keep it warm against the side of the boiler all night; an occasional nip might buck him up.

Jerry approached the diggings from the south. Highway traffic was detouring unhappily, but he ducked under the barricade. Bending, he saw that one of the five red lanterns was out. He had to take off his gloves to turn up the wick and two matches broke before it was lighted.

THE north wind stung his face with sandy particles of snow, blown from piles of heavy timbers beside the path. He dodged past them into the open. A hundred yards ahead the high railroad fill stood like a snow-topped wall. No trains were passing at this hour. On the tracks half a mile west, red and green switch lights burned steadily, but here in the diggings there were no lights. No movement. No sound, except the frosty brushing of the wind and the crunch of snow under his own feet. Nothing but cold and disorder. He was glad he had brought the coffee.

Where was Charley? Jerry tramped around a Diesel shovel and under its chunky boom. Beyond, at the new concrete abutment, wind rumbled against the protective housing, and frozen strips of torn canvas snapped like small pistol shots. The boiler shack was just to the right. Its tall sheet iron stack tilted slightly against the dark sky. Tomorrow, Jerry thought, he'd tell the contractor. Better rig up some

guy wires and keep it from blowing down. He slipped on ice in front of the shack, and recovering, called, "Charley!" and opened the door.

He knew at once that something was wrong. "Charley!" he shouted. The dark room was cold and smelled of wet dead cinders.

A thick, cheerful voice demanded, "What you want? Who wants ol' Charley?"

Jerry knew at once. Charley had brought another bottle, and he, Jerry Rowe, had given his word to Bob Brennan that it wouldn't happen again.

"Man, your fire's low." Jerry struck a match. The watchman sprawled in a wheelbarrow. Jerry shook him.

"What's matter?" Charley demanded, grinning his silly grin.

Jerry didn't take time to answer. What was the use? It was his own fault. He was the one who had saved the old man's job, let sentimentality rule out common sense; at his age, when even a kid knew better. He set the pail of coffee on the floor, and finding a lantern, lighted it and bent to look into the firebox, though that was not necessary. He knew without looking that the fire was out.

He glanced quickly at the water glass and exclaimed. There wasn't any water. Fire out, no water. Charley got unsteadily to his feet, upsetting the coffee.

"Just goin' to call you," he was saying thickly. "Amusin', ain't it, you turning up? The injector's broke."

"Injector's broke?" Jerry repeated. "What you mean?"

He bent over, finding out for himself. The water intake had clogged, or what *had* happened? Something long enough ago at least for the feed pipe to freeze. This boiler would make no steam tonight. Taking the lantern he ran out of the door.

The tell-tale thermometer in the housing around the new concrete wall showed forty-two degrees. That was low, but quick heat still could save the job.

He dropped the heavy canvas back over the opening and ran again. He'd always known that some time, unexpectedly, there'd be need of those salamanders. But at the south retaining wall, where only today he had counted the stack of iron pots, he halted, astonished and enraged. Had that truck driver actually dared take them? And the pile of hard wood with them?

Behind him he heard unsteady footsteps on the frozen crust; then Charley calling, "Ain't there, boss. Me, I let a feller have 'em."

"Let him?" Jerry shouted.

"Don't need salamanders, with me firin'," Charley said.

He had fallen, and was climbing good humoredly to his feet, as Jerry passed him, speeding back. What should he do? Telephone for help? But what good that? No time now to send for salamanders. No time to fix the injector, either, or thaw the water intake. He barged around a length of drainage pipe, left carelessly in the path, and half-falling, looked down at it. It was eight feet long, of corrugated steel, and frozen to the earth.

**H**E KICKED it free. It took all his breath to drag it into the housing, but once there, he dropped it at the base of the forms and hurried out again. Wood! If he had some quick-burning wood!

He snatched up Charley's coal scoop and with it began to smash the thin pine walls of the boiler shanty. He ran with the first armload, stuffed it into one end of the drainage pipe, kindled a pine splinter and held it beneath a broken board and watched the fire take hold.

The high narrow space inside the housing had filled with smoke when he returned with a second pipe. His eyes watered, so that tears froze on his cheeks. The third pipe was harder to drag. But when he got it in, the air was warming.

Fuel, that's what he needed. The tool-house stood halfway to the office shack. If he could smash it, too, tear it board from

board, drag it here and shove it into the pipes—

The moist air in the housing warmed gradually. Jerry stoked the three fires and stepped outside. He had time now to call for help. He looked at his watch. Ten-thirty. A car was bouncing up Stetson road grade over frozen ruts.

"Hey, who's that?" a voice called, and Bob leaped out. Leaving his engine running, he scrambled up the low retaining wall. On top he halted, sniffing, then recognizing Jerry, shouted, "You! What's burning?"

"Wood," Jerry answered, pointing toward the housing abutment, and Bob exclaimed: "In there? Got that cold in there? It's why I came. Worrying. Couldn't sit through the show." He ducked under the canvas and came out coughing from smoke. "Been down to forty!" he said. "Where's that boiler fire? Where's watchman?"

"Both quit," Jerry answered. "Injector broke, and the salamanders are gone."

"And you did this—alone?" Bob demanded, but before Jerry could explain, a girl was climbing out of the car. A tall girl, slender, bundled head to foot in furs.

She was calling, "What's wrong, Bob? What's wrong?"

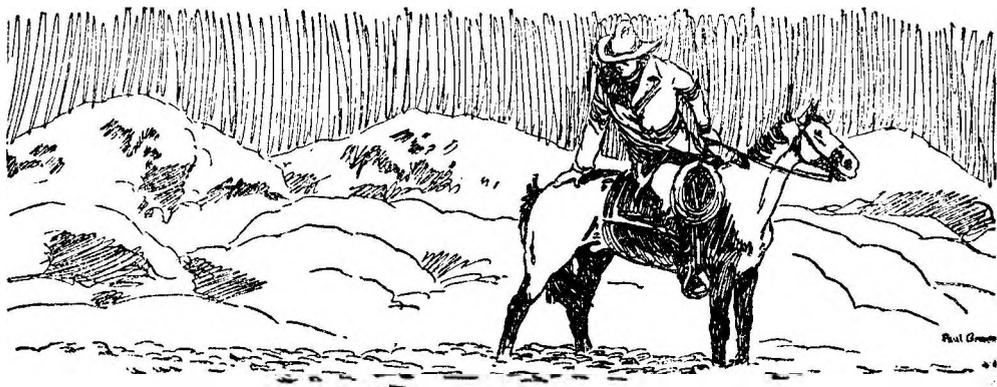
"Take the rest of my life to answer that!" Bob said. "But I'll tell you what's right. This guy here—" he grinned, "and we used to call him the Duke—he saved us from ruin, that's all. My dear, meet Jerry Rowe, best engineer in the state, de-toured down here to show a young punk how." He seized Jerry's hand, then yelled, "Hey, put these on," and ripped off his gloves. "I'll 'phone the contractor."

He ran, as Jerry started to say, "Of course, I was the one kept Charley," but Bob yelled "You? What the hell of it?"

The girl looked after him. "Isn't Bob wonderful!" she said.

Jerry didn't answer that for a moment; then he said, "Well, come to think of it, maybe he is."

*Rusty Was Determined the Kid Shouldn't Take the Wrong Fork; He Sort of Overlooked Himself*



# THE FORKED TRAIL

## A Drifting Kid Story

By HARRY SINCLAIR DRAGO

**I**N THE storm, the Kid was almost on top of the snow-buried cabin before he saw it. Hopelessly lost in these high Greybull Hills, he had floundered on through the drifts, fighting for his life, long after the miserable old crow bait he was riding had folded up under him.

An hour back, night had dropped its quick curtain over this high country. With its coming, hope had flickered out in him; the cold was congealing the marrow in his bones and laying an icy hand against his heart. Wise beyond his sixteen years, he knew it would pull him down before long.

He was past caring very much; the blizzard had scoured his face raw and his swollen, bloodshot eyes ached in their sockets with a throb that made his senses reel. He knew he had only himself to blame for his present predicament, for he had seen these late storms come knifing

down out of the northwest before, raging with mid-winter fury for a few days and tying the land up tighter than a drum, though spring was just around the corner. A dozen times that day he told himself he never should have left the Muleshoe line camp, high up in the Ramparts. The cook had beaten and bedeviled him all winter long, but he was used to it, and he should have stuck it out a few days longer.

The knowledge did him little good now. He knew he was licked, and the feeling persisted as he stood there blinking his red-rimmed eyes at the faint daub of light that outlined the cabin's only window.

"My 'magination's playin' tricks on me," he thought. "I'm beginnin' to see things."

He had heard that men often "saw things" just before they froze to death. But that tiny square of yellow light did not vanish. It seemed to swim in a haze; but it was there, and sucking in his breath

deeply, he got the biting smell of wood smoke.

When his horse had gone down, he had removed the saddle and bridle and slung them over his shoulder. They were there now—his only possessions, and therefore doubly precious. Facing death itself, he had refused to leave them behind. But now in the wave of excitement that swept him he let them slip off into the snow. He tried to cry out but his stiff lips could frame no sound.

"It's a cabin!" he told himself. "I'm goin' to be all right!"

He stumbled forward a step or two and then remembered the saddle and bridle. Slowly he made his way back to them and got the heavy old kak up on his shoulder again. It was only twenty yards to the door.

Exhausted, every ounce of strength beaten out of his thin, undernourished body, he fell against it heavily, his mind a blank.

Small as the cabin was, five men were holed up there. That sound at the door struck the contentment and security from their faces with the speed of lightning. Hands dropped to their guns. One man doused the light. Bodies tense, their eyes slitted with suspicion, they froze in their tracks and listened, the flickering light from the fireplace casting their weird shadows against the wall.

"I don't hear nuthin'," one whispered heavily. His glance went to the man standing with his back to the fire. "What do you figger it was, Rusty?"

"Somethin' fell against the door," the other answered. In years he was the youngest, but he gave the orders here. "Blackjack, you open it and keep in the clear," he said. "The rest of you be ready for anythin'."

Blackjack — he had no other name—lifted the bar and pulled the door inwards. As he did, the Kid tumbled into the room.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Blackjack exclaimed. "It's a kid—jest a boy!" He

closed the door and with the rest stood staring at the still form of the Kid.

"Odd, light that lamp and bring it over here," said Rusty. When Odd Baxter handed him the lighted lamp he walked over to the door and knelt down beside the boy on the floor. A glance brought immediate recognition. "Boys, it's the Driftin' Kid! The poor little devil is about gone!"

"You mean you know him, Rusty?" Blackjack demanded sharply.

"Yeh. You can put your guns away, boys; the Kid's all right." The relief of all but one of the men were apparent. That one, a rawboned six-footer with a hard-bitten face, who answered to the name of Hoss Coulter, was ready with a question.

"What do you mean, you know him?" he asked. "Who is he, anyhow?"

"Just a tumbleweed, Hoss. His folks used to run the stage station at Cain Springs, up in the Sand Hills. His mother died and his old man turned him adrift about as soon as he was weaned. I reckon every round-up cook north of the river has kicked him around for a spell the last three, four years. He was doin' the nigger work for the Slash 8 cook when I was ridin' for that outfit. I kinda fell for the Kid; there's a lot of savvy to him when you get to know him."

**H**OSS was still a long way from being satisfied. "You figger he came here lookin' for yuh?" he asked.

"Sure not. He didn't know where I was." Rusty was peeling off the Kid's stiff-crusted coat. He stopped suddenly and glanced up at Hoss Coulter. He read a definite hostility in the big man's eyes. "Hoss, you got somethin' on your mind. What is it?"

Hoss caught the challenge in that quiet tone, but he did not back away from it. "We're safe here," he growled. "We don't want that kid carryin' tales. If you're smart, you'll tie him on a bronc and git rid of him before he recognizes you."

"He'll never make nowhere if you turn

him adrift in his condition," said Pete Curry. The others were silent. Rusty knew they were thinking of themselves. With men outside the law that came first. Rusty did not hold it against them.

"I'll answer for the Kid," he said quietly. "Fetch in some snow, Pete, and we'll rub the frost out of him. You get me a little whiskey, Blackjack. Suppose you get his boots off, Hoss."

Pete Curry picked up a bucket. The others made no move, their faces dark and inscrutable with their thinking. A smothering tension struck the room. It stopped Pete at the door. In the charged silence, Rusty rose to his feet. A faint ironic smile touched his thinning lips as he faced them. He knew these men for what they were: hard, lawless men, veterans of one outlaw gang or another, but helpless without a leader. It explained why they had turned to him, a novice at their game. They could not have explained such loyalty and obedience as he had won from them. It was too intangible for that; something in the man that defied explanation. They felt it now as his gray eyes drilled into them.

He said, "I told you I'd answer for the Kid. He's stayin' here till he's okay. If that ain't good enough for any of you, there's the door. No strings holdin' you."

The men fidgeted under his gaze. Hoss Coulter shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Rusty waited for him to speak.



"If you say he stays, he stays," Hoss muttered awkwardly. "It was jest that we wanted to be careful. But you're boss, Rusty." Glaring at the others, he bent down

and yanked off the Kid's boots. "Well," he roared, "what you fellas waitin' for?"

THE following morning was well along before the Kid opened his eyes. Cautiously his glance traveled around the cabin and came back to the man who sat on the edge of his bunk. His eyes lost their vacant stare as recognition built up in them. Suddenly then, they were blank again—blank and troubled. He jerked a thumb at the men.

"These gents friends of yours?" he asked under his breath.

Rusty smiled, reading his thought. "They're all right, Kid."

Relief flooded the Kid's face. He sat up and tossed the blankets back. "Gee, I purty near pulled a boner that time," he declared soberly. "Purty near busted out your name before I knew whether it was safe."

"Better take it easy, Kid," Rusty advised. "You were as stiff as an icicle when we picked you up: Never figured an old-timer like you would get tangled up in a Blizzard. How come?"

"Jest driftin' south from the Muleshoe. Lookin' fer a job per usual. This the place I hit last night?"

"Yeh. I'm boilin' the juice out of a piece of beef for you. It ought to go pretty good."

"Swell, Rusty. I can stand a little bracin' up." Momentarily his glance went to the men. He had never seen them before, but he knew right enough who they were; knew he had stumbled into a hide-out. The knowledge impressed him but filled him with only a minor excitement. A stray himself, he unconsciously felt at home in the company of other strays.

"How do your feet feel?" Rusty asked.

"They burn a little. But it ain't nuthin'; I'm purty tough." He gazed at Rusty with a strange wistfulness. "Gee, it's great meetin' up with you again," he said. "I ain't never forgot them talks we used to have." He shook his head at some memory.

"Things has changed, ain't they," he murmured, his tone sad of a sudden. Brushing his mop of unruly yellow hair out of his eyes he stared off into space for a moment. "Gee, I got a awful funny feelin' when I saw your pitcher hangin' in the post office in Brimstone. I watched my chance and tore it down. I couldn't believe what it said underneath—about you goin' bad, I mean."

Rusty Jennings' face was bleaker than he knew. Old memories were stirring in him too. "Maybe I'll tell you my side of that some day, Kid," he murmured.

"You don't have to tell me; I know," the Kid informed him. "Reckon ever'body in the Clark's Fork country knows the facts. You got plenty friends up there, Rusty.

"They ain't blamin' you fer the step you took; they know your brother Harley w'an't doin' no rustlin'. They figger he found out who *was* doin' it and that them depities burned him down and made it appear they had caught him with the goods so as to perfect some friends of theirs. You sure squared accounts with them."

Rusty shook his head grimly. "It's somethin' I don't talk about very often," he murmured. "You're wrong though, Kid, if you think I squared anythin' by rubbin' out those two rats. It would have been just the same if I had cleaned out the whole litter of 'em from the sheriff down. God knows they were all in it, and none of 'em any guiltier than Bret Lafoon himself! No wonder he made an outlaw of me. But that ain't important. Harley is gone, and what I did couldn't bring him back. Guess I'll get your soup."

**T**HE blizzard was still howling. The Kid could feel the cabin tremble under the wild onslaught of the wind. He knew he would have to be moving on when the storm blew itself out. The glances the men flicked in his direction told him plainly enough he was not wanted here.

Pete Curry swung around on his stool and spoke to him. "I found your saddle

outside," he said. "I fetched in. What happened to your pony?"

"Folded up on me. Musta been ten miles from here."

"You're a spunky young critter," Pete laughed. He turned to the others. "Says he toted that old kak for ten miles through the drifts."

"Kids do crazy things," Blackjack declared. "Been better to throw that piece of junk away. The stirrup rings are beginnin' to pull out."

"Why don't you fix it up for him?" Hoss Coulter growled. "Reckon he'll be here long enough."

The Kid did not miss the hostility behind the words. "I'll be movin' on as soon as the storm's over," he said. "I don't want to put you out none."

"You needn't worry about that," Blackjack answered him. "Rusty says you're all right, and that's good enough fer us." And for Hoss' benefit, he added, "I reckon that settles that."

The blizzard blew itself out the following day. A week passed, however, before rain and a warm wind carried the snow off as if by magic. It was time for the Kid to go, but no one said anything about his leaving, and he was far too contented here to mention it himself. In a dozen ways he had begun to make himself useful. But it wasn't only that; he was a philosopher and a diplomat, and he was winning them over one by one, breaking down even Hoss Coulter's hostility, though he little suspected it.

When April came, he had been there almost a month. By then they wondered how they had ever got along without him. And of no one was it so true as of Rusty Jennings. The grass was green now right up to the high snow patches. Once or twice they had seen riders skylined in the distance. This range world was waking up again, and Rusty knew they soon must be on the move.

One afternoon Hoss and he were returning from a long reconnaissance. He

was silent for a long time. "Sumpin' wor-ryin' you, Rusty?" Hoss asked.

"It's the Kid; I got to tell him to go." Rusty shook his head regretfully. "I been puttin' it off a long time."

"I don't know why you got to do that," Hoss grumbled. "He's all right here, ain't he?"

Rusty flicked a surprised glance at him. "So you feel that way about him too, Hoss. In the beginnin' you were so dead set against our takin' him in."

"A man can change his mind, can't he?" Hoss snapped. He heaved a heavy sigh. "Can't figger it out; the little runt's got under my hide someway."

"Mine too," Rusty muttered. "I don't know why he should remind me of Harley; they ain't at all alike. Both young, of course. Maybe that's what gets to me."

"Mebbe," Hoss grunted. And then, "Feelin' that-a-way, I don't savvy why you want to turn him adrift. He's got no place to go. And he likes it here."

"That's the trouble; he likes it too well," Rusty said. "If he sticks here, you know where he'll end up. We owe him a better break than that. He's leavin' in the mornin'."

Rusty told the Kid at breakfast. There was no protest.

"You can throw your kak on one of our broncs," Rusty told him. "I'll side you down through the hills a ways."

**T**HERE was much they could have said to each other; but they could not get it into words.

The Kid felt he was putting behind him the happiest days of his life; Rusty was thinking of the tomorrows and the trails that were closed to him now. Finally, he pulled up.

"I guess this is where I turn back," he said with a little laugh that was meant to hide the constraint that was on him. "I don't suppose I'll be seein' you again, Kid."

"Gee, don't say that!" the Kid protested. "I'll be seein' you again."

"Got any idea where you're goin'?"

"I'll try the ranches along the river. If I don't catch on nowheres, I'll make into Medicine Flat. Sure to hear of sumpin' there." And then with a confident smile, "You don't have to worry about me; you take care of yourself, Rusty."

Rusty nodded, understanding him fully. "Well, so long," he said. "When you begin to get out of the hills, turn that bronc lose. He'll drift back this way and we'll pick him up. So long!"

There was no warning word about being careful to say nothing. None was necessary.

"So long," the Kid answered, moving down the slope. He knew Rusty was sitting there watching him. He wanted to turn and wave a last farewell, but he had been playing at being a man too long for that.

**A** WEEK later the Kid trudged into Medicine Flat. If he was without a job it was not because none had been offered him. He had stopped at the 7 Bar house and Mrs. Button had welcomed him; at this time of the year she always had several weeks work for him. It didn't interest the Kid this spring. He wanted to get to town, where he could learn first-hand what was happening. He knew Sheriff Bret Lafoon well enough to realize the man would never let matters rest as they were between himself and Rusty Jennings. Lafoon was playing too crooked a game for that; he had to get Rusty, just as he had had to get other men who knew too much about the uses to which he put his law badge.

But Lafoon was not the only magnet that drew the Kid to town. Somewhere, striking unexpectedly, Rusty and his men would make their presence felt. He had to know about that. He didn't like to think about it; he didn't want to see Rusty getting deeper into trouble; outlaws always

ended one way. They played a game in which no one could beat.

His first morning in town convinced the Kid that he wasn't going to find a job in Medicine Flat. The situation did not daunt him, ragged and penniless though he was. He could always curl up for the night in some feed barn; as for food, he was an expert at mooching a meal. The only thing that troubled him was how he was to learn what Lafoon was doing. The following day answered that question to his complete satisfaction, for as he was trying to pan-handle his breakfast, a heavy hand fell on his shoulder and he was swung around to find himself facing Nye Hardy, the town marshal.

"You don't have to do that no more in this town, Kid," said the marshal. "We're gittin' civilized; we feed you floaters now. We even fix you up with a place to sleep. Come on, take a little walk with me."

Medicine Flat had no jail of its own, so it used the county jail, which was housed in a little building back of the courthouse. The sheriff had his office in the front room. The town marshal used it as his headquarters too. Lafoon looked up from his newspaper as Hardy marched the Kid into the office. "What you got there?" he asked.

"Jest a range rat," said the marshal. "He was bummin' his breakfast when I picked him up. We'll keep him here two, three days and put a little grab into him. Mebbe I can find somethin' for him to do."

**H**E WALKED the Kid into the back room. The cell doors stood open.

"Well, you got the place to yourself," said Nye. "Pick yourself out a bunk and call it home. I'll fetch you in somethin' to eat directly."

The Kid looked at him uncertainly. "You mean I'm arrested?" he asked.

"Naw," the marshal laughed. "Jest keep-in' you off the street, that's all."

As far as the Kid was concerned it was an ideal arrangement; he was close to Bret Lafoon and he had a roof over his head

and three meals a day to go with it. His fear was that it wouldn't last. Accordingly, he applied himself with a vengeance to making a good impression, cleaning out the cells, sweeping the floor and even going so far as to wash the windows. His three days ran into a week. By then, he was running errands for Lafoon and old Nye and doing all the odd jobs around the jail. He played no favorites, though he hated Lafoon as much as he liked the marshal. One day he heard old Nye say to Bret, "What are we goin' to do about him?"

"I ain't heard no one kickin'," Lafoon answered. "He's earnin' his keep. Let him stay."

It was a reprieve beyond the Kid's fondest expectations. He found living in the jail anything but a dull existence. The drifters the marshal brought in always had tales to tell. But it was the cowboys, freighters and other local disturbers of the peace whom he found the most interesting. He talked with all of them, hoping for some word of Rusty. None came.

It wasn't the only disappointment that came his way. He was watching Lafoon like a hawk, expecting him to have visitors or to drop a word that might give him a lead. The days passed, however, and no one came to see the sheriff on any mission that could not stand the light of day. As for saying anything that might give him away, Lafoon never even came close to it. He put up fresh reward notices for Rusty's capture and often voiced his determination to run him down. It was said openly. The Kid wondered why he didn't do something to make good his boast.

"He's a deep one," he told himself. "Awful cagey about everythin'."

It occurred to him that Lafoon might be suspicious of him. He dismissed the thought; he knew the sheriff was aware of him only when he wasn't on the spot when something needed to be done.

The steer-shiping was on by now. It told the Kid that spring was well along.

He began to long for the high places; but he couldn't tear himself away from Medicine Flat. The feeling was in him that he was sitting on a powder keg; that under the surface things were happening—moving toward a climax—though he knew nothing about them.

WITH the passing days, that feeling became an obsession, keeping him sleepless long after he had gone to bed. It came to a head one rain-slashed night. It was late. Only Lafoon was in the office when the front door opened. The door between the two rooms was ajar an inch or two. The Kid heard the sheriff's chair grate sharply as he swung his bulk around. It was followed by the sharp banging of a desk drawer. And then Lafoon said, "I never figgered you'd make things this easy for me, Flat."

"So you know me," the other laughed.

"Sure—Flat Nose Duval! You here to give yourself up?"

The name meant something to the Kid; he had heard of Flat Duval, rustler and all-around renegade.

"Don't be silly," Duval sneered. "Put up your gun, Lafoon; I'm here to talk business with you. I'm ridin' with Rusty Jennings."

The Kid's heart skipped a beat. Here it was at last!

"Wait a minute," Lafoon snapped. He got up and moved heavily across the floor.

The Kid fell back on his blanket as the big man pushed open the door, a lamp in his hand. Holding it above his head, Lafoon took a good look at him. Convinced that he was asleep, he trudged back to the office.

"Who you got back there?" Flat Duval demanded suspiciously.

"Just the kid who cleans up for me. He's sound asleep."

He closed the intervening door, but the Kid could hear plainly enough.

"What's this talk about you ridin' with Jennings?" Lafoon queried sharply. "You and who else?"

Flat rattled off the names. The Kid caught Lafoon's whistle of surprise.

"How much money is there on them?" Duval asked.

"A thousand on Jennings. That much or more on Hoss Coulter and Blackjack. I ain't sure about the others, but there's a price tag on 'em all right."

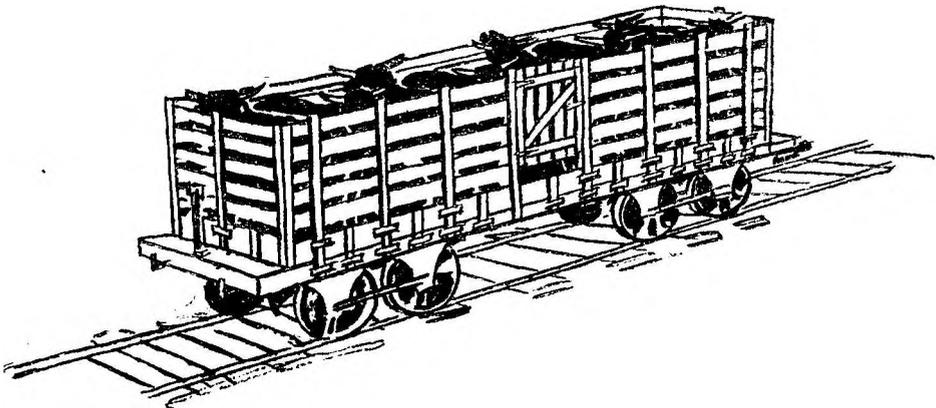
The Kid heard one of them snap a match. It was Duval, lighting a cigarette.

"Well?" Lafoon rasped impatiently. Flat rewarded him with a mocking laugh.

"You sound interested, Bret," he said thinly. "How would you like to split that reward money with me? Split and no tricks, understand?"

"I'm interested," Lafoon ground out.

"It can be arranged," said Flat. "We split even, and the law drops its grudges against me. Is that a deal?"



"It's a deal if I get Rusty Jennings," Lafoon exclaimed venomously. "Where are they?"

"You won't have to go after them," Duval answered. "We got the bank pegged off. We're hoistin' it a few minutes before three tomorrow afternoon. We're goin' to send a light wagon in ahead of us.

"Our rifles will be under the hay in the box. I'll be drivin' that wagon. My bronc will be tied to the end-gate. When I hit town, I'll leave the team in front of the bank, git on my pony and ride around the corner. The rest will be up to you, Lafoon. Git your men posted. You won't have to wait long for the fireworks to begin."

"Right!" Lafoon wheezed in unholy satisfaction. "I'll be ready and I won't waste any time tryin' to take 'em alive. I'll plant a couple men in Charlie Frick's hardware store, two or three inside the bank and one or two in the hotel; and just to make good and sure I'll have a dozen more stretched out on the roof of the barber shop. We'll pour it into 'em front and back."

"I won't be hangin' around to see that," Flat remarked.

"No, I guess not," Lafoon muttered. And then, "You better keep out of sight till things quiet down. Go out to my ranch. Tell Judson I said to keep you there till I come out. In the meantime, you better be shakin' yourself out of here before Nye walks in."

"I reckon that's a fact," Flat returned. The Kid heard him get up. "I'm much obliged for invitin' me out to the ranch, but I'll find some other that'll suit me better." His tone was coldly mocking.

"Suit yoreself about that," Bret snorted. "Before you go, there's a question I'd like to ask you; how did you manage to hook up with Jennings' crowd?"

"That was easy," was the jeering answer from the doorway. "Rusty figgered I must have the low-down on you, I reckon."

Bret Lafoon remained in the office only

a few minutes after Duval rode away. The Kid heard him going down the gravel walk that led around the courthouse and knew he was on his way downtown.

The Kid heaved a mighty sigh of relief. He wanted to be alone. He knew he had to think and think fast. But Duval's treachery and Lafoon's black villainy got in his way and he found it almost impossible to concentrate. One picture stayed sharp and clear in his mind, and it was of Rusty and the others riding in to be ambushed, shot down without ever a chance to surrender. He knew he had to stop them, to warn them some way. How to find a way was his problem.

If they were due to ride into town tomorrow afternoon, it meant that they had already left the hide-out in the Greybull hills. It gave him a clue—at least—to the direction from which they would ride into Medicine Flat.

"It will be the South Fork road," he told himself. "They're east of the Flat, and they'll have to come in that way."

But how to reach them? He knew he did not dare wait at the edge of town for them. It would be late. He realized that whatever he did must not be anything that would arouse Lafoon's suspicion. If he borrowed a horse, or just took one, and got away from town at once he might be lucky enough to escape unseen, but it would not be long before Lafoon discovered that he was missing. It wouldn't take the sheriff long to put two and two together.

"I got to play it smarter than that," the Kid brooded. "I got to stick it out here till mornin', mebbe until noon. I can sneak away then. I won't bother with a horse; I'll hoof it. I'll keep on goin' until Duval passes me. They won't be far behind him."

He knew no sleep that night. When morning came, he was anxious to get into the office. He knew he had to be able to recognize Duval when he saw him. Lafoon kept a file of old reward notices in his desk. The Kid had been over them a num-

ber of times and was sure one of them bore a likeness of Flat.

He located it a few minutes after breakfast and tore it from the file. Lafoon came in then, his beefy face damp with excitement. He stayed only a short time. The Kid knew what he was doing downtown.

**N**YE HARDY, the marshal, showed up a little later. One look at his face and the Kid realized that old Nye was fully aware of what impended. The old man kept a sawed-off shotgun in a closet. He got it out, together with a sack of shells loaded with buck.

"We may have a full house here tonight," he said. "Better stick close to home this afternoon, Kid."

"Sumpin' up?" the Kid asked, simulating a fair degree of surprise.

"Expectin' some visitors," Nye chuckled as he started out. "It was plain enough from his talk that Lafoon had told him nothing of his plans to ambush Rusty and the others. "If I don't git back at noon, you go over to the Chink's and tell him to feed you. Tell him I said so. If you ain't been to the post office yet, you better go now."

The Kid was glad for an excuse to get downtown. A tension thick as butter hung over Medicine Flat. He walked past the bank.

He saw nothing unusual there, but lifting his eyes he saw a man's hat peeping over the roof of the barber shop and realized that Lafoon had some of his men posted already. It was enough to send the Kid hurrying back to the jail, wondering if he could stick it out until noon.

When the clock struck twelve, he could stand it no longer. Heading for the Chinese restaurant, he swung past it and went on to the railroad tracks. He followed the tracks until he came to a creek. It was the South Fork. It swung around town in a wide half-circle. By following it he would cut the South Fork road.

It took him longer than he expected. In making that wide detour he had moved with the stealth of an Indian, and he was just as cautious after he came in sight of the road. He was afraid to travel it boldly. Keeping to the brush he was startled to come upon three saddled horses. One of them was Bret Lafoon's gray gelding.

"They're watchin' the road," the Kid thought. "Lafoon's got it covered way out here."

He edged away undiscovered. The experience made him even more cautious. He traveled slower. When an hour had passed he decided to risk the road. It ran through the first wave of low hills here. Studying the dust, he knew no wagon had passed recently. Reassured, he went on. Ten minutes later, swinging around a curve, he came into full view of an approaching wagon. His first impulse was to leap into the brush. A flash of sense stayed him; if this were Flat Duval, a move of that sort would surely excite his suspicion.

A minute at most and he knew it was Duval. "I hope I'm around when they hang you," he muttered to himself. To his surprise, Duval pulled up his team as he came abreast.

"Say, kid, how'd you like to make a dollar?" he called out.

"Doin' what?"

"Drivin' this team to town. I'm late for some business. You drive in and tie up in front of the bank. I'll meet you there and pay you off."

"You'd beat me out of it, I reckon," the Kid answered.

Flat laughed. "Wise, eh? Well, here's your buck now. What do you say?"

The Kid appeared to be thinking it over. Actually his brain was racing, trying to find a trick or trap in what Duval was proposing. He not only failed to discover one but was suddenly caught by the realization that Duval was unconsciously offering him a means of warning Rusty that could not fail.

"All right, give me your dollar," he said. "I hope it ain't a counterfeit."

"You ain't no sap, kid," was Flat's comment. He untied his pony and climbed into the saddle. "You don't have to hurry the team," he advised. "Just keep 'em movin' along."

"Got to see Lafoon about sumpin'," the Kid muttered as he watched Duval ride hurriedly away. "I don't care how much they change their plans. Rusty will be comin' this way. That's all that interests me."

AS SOON as Flat was out of sight the Kid pulled up and felt in the hay for rifles. They were there, all six of them. Without hesitating a moment he pitched them out into the road, knowing Rusty would see them and be warned. He drove on then. How he was to get past Lafoon without being recognized began to trouble him. To a certainty, Bret would see Duval and flag him. Undoubtedly they had already met.

"They'll be lookin' for me all right," the Kid thought. "Well, let 'em stop me. Their jig will be up before then. When Rusty and Hoss see them rifles in the road they'll high-tail it away from here. They'll know somethin' has gone wrong."

He had to be satisfied with that. After he had glanced back once or twice for some sign of Rusty and the others, a curve in the road shut off his view. He could only go on now. He knew about where he had stumbled on the three tethered ponies. Those men would have him covered for a quarter of a mile before he passed them. Very likely Lafoon had other possemen planted along this road.

"Be funny if Bret was double-crossin' Duval and the checks was down on this wagon," he thought. "I'm sure goin' to have the shirt shot off of me if that's the way it stands."

He couldn't turn back, or run for it; he had to make Lafoon's crowd believe everything was going as they had planned.

Finally, he came in sight of the low bluff on which he knew Lafoon and at least two others waited. A shiver ran down his skinny back. If a slug was going to tear him apart, this was where he'd get it.

But nothing happened. No sound broke the deceptive stillness of this pleasantly warm afternoon. The team plodded on, and the Kid's throat was so tight he couldn't swallow.



His passing was duly noticed. Up on that bluff Bret Lafoon and Flat watched him with slitted eyes.

"It's the Drifffin' Kid all right—just as I figgered from the way you described him," said Lafoon. "The little brat heard somethin' last night as sure as you're standin' there!"

"Throw down your gun," Flat cautioned him. "A shot now would be foolish. Let the kid go; he can't gum up anythin'. I made sure of that when I put him on the wagon. I don't know what he savvies—mebbe nothin'—but I didn't want no one passin' me on that road, with that bunch just behind me."

"I hope you're right," Lafoon ground out. "I'll tear the liver out of him if he's up to anythin'!"

"If he was up to anythin' would he have agreed to drive back to town?" Flat queried contemptuously. "Git your mind on somethin' important, Bret. We'll be seein' 'em in a minute or two."

His minute or two stretched to five, and still it brought no sight of the men for whom they waited. Half-a-mile away Rusty, surrounded by Hoss and the rest,

stared amazed at the rifles that lay in the dust of this road. Suspicion was riding them hard and their faces were flat and tense.

"It's a sell-out," Blackjack growled. "I knew Flat Duval was a double-crossin' rat!" The others would have agreed, but Rusty stopped them.

"It's more than that, boys," he said carefully. "If Flat was crossin' us, he wouldn't have left these guns here where we'd be sure to see 'em. This is a warnin'. Somethin' has gone wrong." He slid out of his saddle and handed the rifles to their owners. Duval's gun he slipped into his scabbard, cradling his own rifle in his arm.

"You mean we ain't goin' through with our play?" Hoss demanded.

"Wait!" Rusty cautioned. "Look here! You all can read sign. Look where the wagon stopped. Flat got down and somebody else got in. Look at those tracks. Flat pulled away from here on his pony. Somebody else is drivin' that wagon."

"What do you think about it bein' a double-cross now?" Blackjack whipped out. "It's plain as day, ain't it?"

"Get your ponies turned," Rusty called out sharply. "We're gettin' out of here in a hurry!"

THEY were almost too late. Lafoon had grown too suspicious of the delay and had called in his men. He had no less than eight possemen on this road. Rifles across their saddle bows, they pounded forward. Suddenly finding their quarry in front of them, they pulled their ponies to a slithering, milling stop.

The sharp flat crack of a rifle broke the quiet of the afternoon. Hard on its heels came a second shot and a third. Hoss Coulter was getting the range in a hurry. Pete Curry was firing too. The rest went into action a split second later.

"There they go, breakin' for cover!" Blackjack yelled. "They don't want none of us!"

"Come on," Rusty ordered. "They're

splittin' up and goin' to ride around us."

"You mean we're pullin' out when we got 'em on the run?" Pete asked incredulously.

"Now!" Rusty shouted back. "This firin' will be heard in town. We'll have an army here in a few minutes!"

Hugging their ponies they raced away. Once they stopped to drop a discouraging fusillade behind them. It had the desired effect.

Flat Duval had not taken part in the brief fight. He rode up to Lafoon as the latter called back his men. The sheriff was utterly beside himself. "That kid spilled the beans," he cried. "You fool, why did you let him mix into it?"

"You mean, why did you let him mix into it!" Flat retorted. "You were the one who was so sure he didn't hear nothin'!"

"That's gab enough from you!" Lafoon thundered. "I'm tellin' you what to do now! You git back to their hide-out. They don't know what went wrong; you'll be safe enough. Stick with 'em until they make another try. Get word to me then."

"What about that kid?" Flat demanded anxiously. "My skin ain't worth a cent if he gets a chance to talk."

"I'll take care of him!" Bret assured him. "You git goin'!"

The Kid had heard the shooting and knew what it meant. He wasted no time deciding what he should do. Unhitching one of the horses, he mounted it bareback and struck off into the brush. He had ten hours of hard riding ahead of him. Somehow, he promised himself, he would make it.

Night came on. He found it full of strange sounds. He was in the hills by now. Seven or eight times he heard distant riders. He avoided them, not knowing whether they were friend or foe. When morning began to break he found himself in sight of the hide-out. On foot, he went to the door. He could hear voices inside and knew no one was asleep. Listening, he made sure that Flat Duval was

there. "Rusty," he called then, "let me in!"

He heard the bar pulled up. The door swung back. Rusty stood there. "Kid, this is no place for you now," the latter exclaimed excitedly.

"Shut the door," the Kid told him. Every eye in the room was on him. The boy's attention focussed on Flat. Duval's face was pasty under its tan. "Hell's goin' to be a poppin' here in a few minutes, I reckon. I been bumpin' into riders all night long. It's a posse, sure enough. Lafoon musta trailed one of you."

There was an awesome calm about him. His eyes never left Duval. It was growing lighter every second.

"There's a little business to be attended to before the ball starts," he went on. "There's a dirty, rotten, double-crossin' rat in this room, and his name it Flat Duval."

**F**LAT had known this was coming. It was inevitable. He had no gun in his hand, but Odd Baxter stood beside him. With lightning swiftness Duval whisked Odd's six-gun out of the holster, raised his arm and fired at the Kid. Rusty was in time to yank the boy aside, but he took the slug in his own shoulder. With one last desperate play left him, Flat leaped for the door. He never reached it. Hoss Coulter saw to that.

It didn't take the Kid long to tell his story.

"Rusty," he begged, "don't stick here! They'll smoke you out. Go while there's time! Please!"

Ten minutes after they pulled away from the cabin they heard the posse's first exploring shots.

"That was a close one, Kid," Hoss grinned.

As they moved on, Rusty discovered that Blackjack was no longer with them. He was giving the order to turn back when the big man rode in among them.

"Where have you been?" Rusty asked in a breath.

"Jest makin' sure that one gent don't trouble you no more."

Rusty nodded silently. Later he said, "Lafoon had it comin' to him."

**T**HEY rode all that day. When evening came they were north of the Greybull. Rusty had been silent for an hour. He had reached a decision that had to be final. He called the Kid aside.

"Well, old-timer," he said, "I reckon this is where we split up. Don't turn back; keep on movin' north. This country is goin' to be poison for you from now on."

The Kid took a long time over his answer.

He said, "It's goin' to be poison for you, too, Rusty. I was kinda hopin' it wouldn't have to be good-by. You ain't got no grudges holdin' you here now." He swallowed hard before he could go on. "I thought you might string along with me. I—I need a pardner. Mebbe both of us might get a fresh start somewheres and— and sorta amount to somethin'—"

Rusty started to say no. He checked the words on his tongue. "You don't know what you're askin', Kid," he got out, finding it hard to hold his voice steady. "I ain't much of a pardner—"

"I wouldn't want a better one—"

"You get movin'," Rusty snapped suddenly. And then, "Wait for me at the bottom of this slope."

They traveled steadily for two days. Crossing a narrow valley, the Kid pointed to a stone marker.

"That's the State line, Rusty," he said.

Rusty smiled at him thoughtfully. "It's a wider line than that for me, Kid. It puts somethin' behind me—somethin' that might have been—that scares me when I think of it. We still got a lot of travelin' to do, but we're goin' to find that country you mentioned—that somewheres where we can settle down and amount to somethin'."

# CROW MOUNTAIN DIESEL

By RAY MILLHOLLAND

*Author of "Outlaw Diesel," etc.*

**I**T WAS getting along toward fall, and Slim Baldwin hops off the train at the Townsley Diesel engine factory, figuring he had a couple of weeks vacation due and intending to pick up his shotgun and mooch one of old man Townsley's cars and do a little partridge shooting up around the Grand Traverse Bay country.

But the minute the Old Man lays eyes on Slim, he crowds him into his private office and kicks the door shut.

"Listen. Last spring you sent in a report that you'd set up that Crow Mountain Model K generating set and everything was okay." The Old Man leaned back in his chair and hooked his big thumbs in his belt and started dusting off Slim with a

stiff look. "Just *maybe* you were ever there at all!"

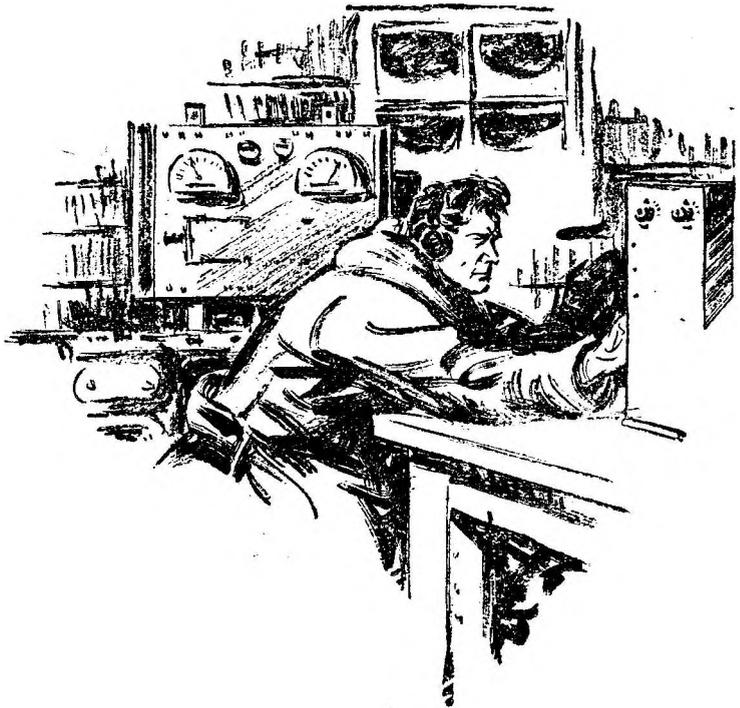
"Maybe you're right at that," admitted Slim, rolling himself a brown paper cigarette. He gave the Old Man a steady-eyed look while he was lighting up. "You never remember things straight after looking into a pair of that kind of blue eyes."

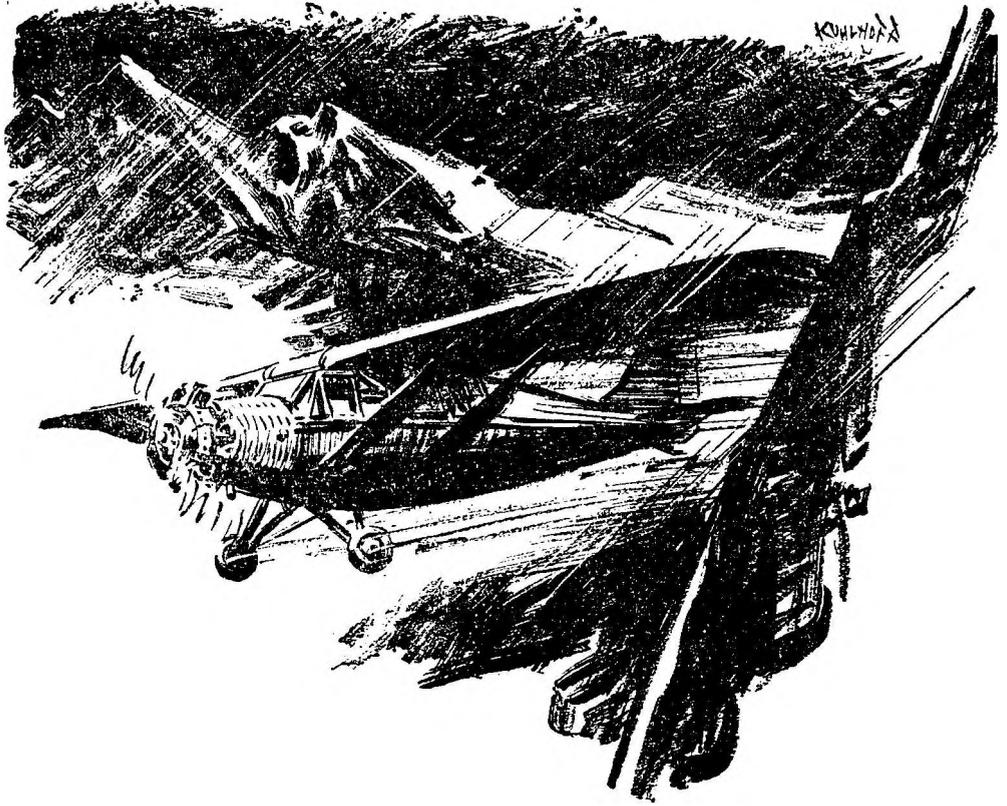
The Old Man snorted, then shoved his chin across the desk. "Since when have you been long enough in one place. Married her yet?"

"Nope. She's Professor Danfield's niece." Slim snapped the ash off the end of his cigarette and took another look at the Old Man. "That's tough going aplenty for her without me doubling it."

Slim was referring to Professor Corn-

*A Lot Depends  
On Whether  
You Are Riding  
the Right Beam,  
Fella!*





wall Danfield, formerly professor of metallurgy at Midwest University but who had gone West, to work out a refining process for a complex tungsten ore vein he had discovered on one of his summer mountain climbing expeditions. The mine was located high up on the face of Crow Mountain. Later the Government decided to build an experimental air beacon on the peak of Crow Mountain and had contracted with Professor Danfield to operate the Diesel generator they proposed installing there as a source of electrical energy for the beacon light and the automatic radio beam. Townsley Diesel Engine Works got the order for that experimental Diesel generator set and agreed to install it and keep it in running order for one year.

But trouble had developed in the engine since Slim was there. That was what Old Man Townsley had Slim in his office for—to explain why.

“Professor Danfield, eh?” the Old Man

was grumbling to himself, still keeping one eye on Slim while he reached out and swept in his telephone. “Get me long distance, Mabel! Dean Tompkins, over at Midwest. And give us a fast cut. . . . Hup! Dean Tompkins? . . . Pretty fast service, eh, Slim? . . . Listen, Dean, I’m calling about a former professor of yours—Danfield. . . . Yup, that’s the man—Cornwall Danfield. I got to wondering if he had a worm in his apple some place—”

Old Man Townsley listened for some time, then clicked his shaggy gray eyebrows together. “Thanks for the information,” he said and hung up with a slow nod for Slim. “Maybe that explains what’s back of the Bureau’s report. Here, read it yourself.”

SLIM caught the letter tossed at him and took his time reading its two pages of single-spaced typescript. “The old story,” he said wearily, and tossed the letter back at the Old Man. “Give a Diesel

to some Eskimo fisherman who can't write his name and he runs her every day for two years without ordering a dime's worth of repair parts. But let some smart gazam who can outfigure one of these electric calculators get his hands on her and the engine falls apart before breakfast!"

"Well, that Crow Mountain engine's down and it's going to be running again, day before yesterday," cracked the Old Man, poking a finger at Slim. "Meaning, you're grabbing the eleven forty-five rattler for Crow Mountain. The Government is holding up an order for fifty more of these units to see how this one is going to perform—a hundred thousand dollar order some competitor is going to take away from us if you fall down on the job just once more!"

Slim caught the eleven forty-five, west-bound. Up in the baggage car rode a chest that contained just about everything in the way of spare parts but a cylinder block casting and a new fly wheel. At the last moment, Slim had dumped in a spare generator armature and a complete set of field coils. Anyhow, he was paying for three hundred pounds of excess baggage when the train pulled out.

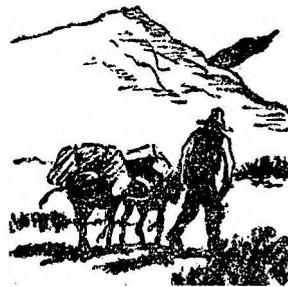
As a usual thing shooting trouble on one job was just the same drill as shooting trouble on another Diesel gone sour as far as Slim was concerned. Well, maybe if the yell for help came from a thousand miles away from the nearest automobile and there was a chance a man might have to make a new spray nozzle on some long-whiskered Chink mechanic's foot power lathe—well, a job like that put it up to you to show your stuff or crawl for the weeds.

But this job on top of Crow Mountain was different. In the first place a woman hanging around an engine got your jaw all tired from biting the heads off the kind of words it took to get a balky engine hitting right again. Her name was Lorna Danfield—Professor Danfield's niece. She had a college degree from one of those

top-notch Eastern women's college where they play something almost as rough as football. Carried a thin white scar over her left eyebrow that must have been sewed up too tight, because it lifted it a little higher than her right eyebrow and showed a lot more of the blue in one eye than the other. Gave her a look—just a hint, understand—that kept you from talking fresh, even after she gave you one of her quick smiles.

Slim had been too busy most of his life to know how to take a girl like that. Information on that subject just doesn't jump off a book page and into your head. One minute she was somebody special to Slim and the next he was remembering she was still a woman. A woman and this Arctic Circle-to-Equator job of Slim's didn't jibe, the way he looked at it, worth two hunks of square-holed brass cash, Hankow money.

**S**LIM got off the train at Bauxite. He threw his tool kit onto the station baggage truck and wandered up three inches of dust they called the main street to the livery stable, where six months before he had hired a pack train freighter to pack



the engine generator set to the top of Crow Mountain.

The corral poles were down and only a freckle-faced kid was around, digging for worms in the damp place under the horse trough.

"Where'll I find Ike Wanders?" Slim asked the kid.

"Busted," said the kid, jumping with both feet on the rusty miner's shovel he

was trying to ram into the hard earth. "When the Government built that truck road from here to the Indian Reservation, it did two things, Judge Evers says. Busted every self-supporting man in Bauxite and give the Indians a billion-dollar road they ain't got no use for!"

"You mean Ike went into the trucking business?" asked Slim.

"That's what he aimed to do," answered the kid, stopping to pick up another worm. "But all them mines and ranches, back yonder, what used to hire Ike to pack in their plunder went and bought second-hand trucks. Say, Mister, want to buy my worms for two bits?" The boy shook out his squirming stock into his hand and showed them to Slim. "They're swell trout bait, hooked to a Colorado spinner. And this is the only place in the state you can get worms—from me, anyways."

Slim passed over a quarter and said, "I'm hiring you to catch me a mess, old-timer. Going to be too busy, myself, getting my plunder packed up Crow Mountain—"

For a hungry moment the kid looked at the coin in his hand, then stiffly handed it back. "I can't take this, Mister. My pop would whale the tar out of me for taking Government money. He's dead against it, pop is."

"Government money?" Slim stared at the coin the kid had handed back, then woke up. "You got me wrong, old-timer. This isn't relief money I'm handing out."

"Well, it's the same thing," insisted the kid, backing away from temptation as Slim tried to give him the quarter again. "It's the same thing, because you're a friend of that interfering galoot up there. Pop says he's to blame for writing Washington and getting that road built to the Indian reservation and busting all the packers around here."

The kid shouldered his shovel and stalked off. Just as he was crawling through a hole in the corral, he turned his head and grinned at Slim. "Thanks, any-

how, Mister! And if you want to go trout fishing some time, why just send word by anybody to Bud Wanders."

Slim returned to the railroad station, to find a small rattle-trap truck backed up to the platform. Lorna Danfield was sitting behind the wheel and smiled at him.

"I saw the train smoke, miles away, from Crow Mountain," she said. "I drove in, just hoping—"

Slim looked up, surprised. "Factory wire you I was coming?"

She shook her head. "No. But somehow I knew it couldn't be more than a day or two longer."

**T**HE way she said that, with her shoulders drooping over the steering wheel of the old truck was hint enough to Slim that it was more than a broken-down engine on Crow Mountain that was troubling her. He trundled the baggage truck down the platform and loaded his chest of repair parts on Lorna's truck.

He offered to drive. But she declined, saying that the road was nothing more than a vague trail in many places and they would save time if she stayed behind the wheel.

After an hour of bumping over a trail, Lorna Danfield stopped her truck.

"Maybe you'd better get out and walk," she suggested, nodding ahead to a sharp bend in the road where it turned the face of a cliff.

Slim looked ahead and saw where the face of the cliff had been crudely blasted away to form the road bed. The ledge formed was so narrow that he couldn't see how the truck was going to get around that corner without the outside wheels sliding off into the canyon below.

"Here's where I drive and you walk, you mean," he said firmly, opening the door and grasping Lorna's arm as he slid out.

She made only a weak protest, surrendering with a tired sigh and watching anxiously as he climbed in behind the wheel.

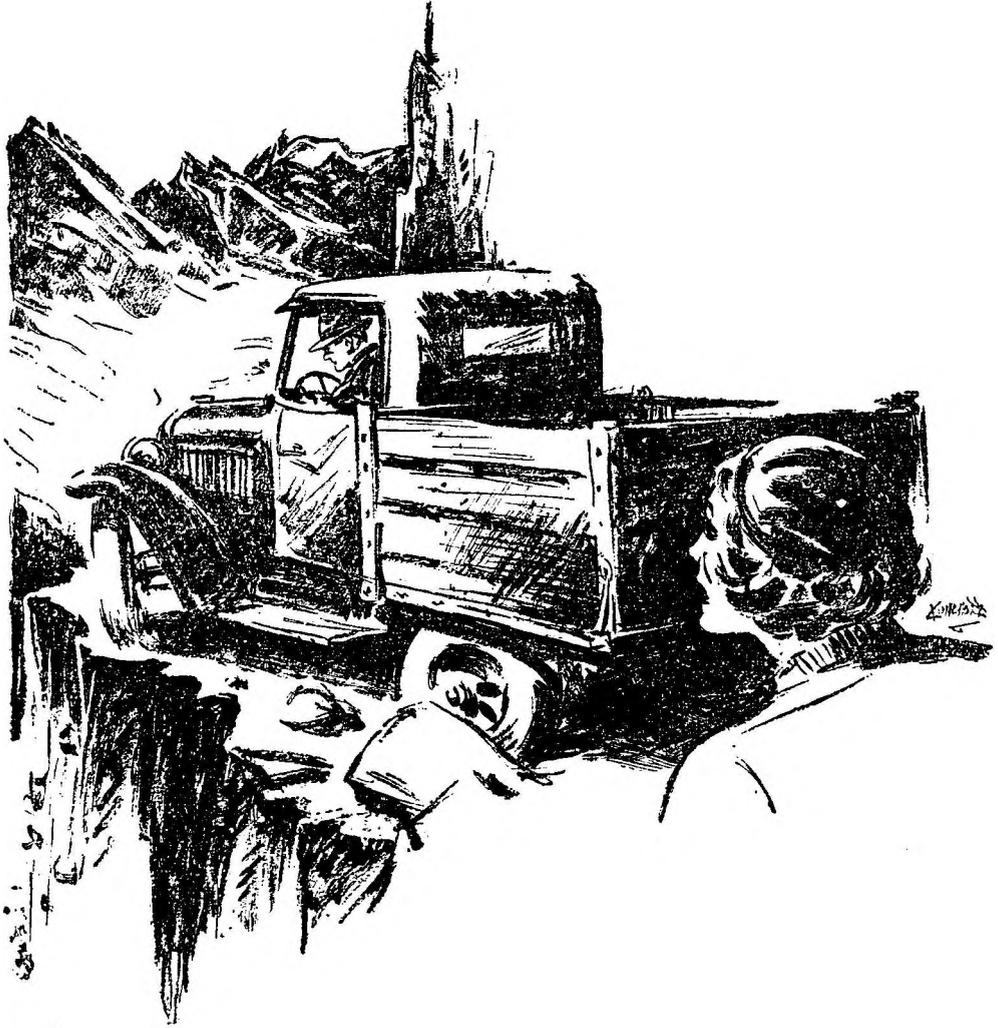
"Keep the inside hub caps scraping the wall," she said. "Two cars of Indians have already gone over—"

Slim nodded and went into low gear, hugging the inside wall and feeling the short hairs on the back of his neck standing straight out as he bumped around the

waited for Lorna to catch up and climb in beside him.

"Now I know why the fenders are off this wagon," he said.

Her hands were clinched tightly in her lap. For the next mile or so she didn't say anything. But when they came to a flat



sharp curve. And when he got to the narrowest part, he couldn't help looking down to his left and thinking what nerve it had taken for a girl to drive past that point on her way down to the station—on the bare chance of finding him there.

Safely on the other side, he stopped and

stretch of sage brush, she motioned to the left.

"We're on Thunder Mesa now. You drive where you please toward those twin peaks ahead—Crow Mountain Pass."

"The world's worst road," commented Slim dryly.

"In more ways than one, I'm afraid," she added quickly.

Slim glanced at her from the corner of his eye. She looked tired and her eyes shifted constantly—ahead—left—right—as though fearful of some expected danger. A pin-tailed grouse flushed ahead of the car and skimmed slowly off to the left over the sage brush.

"Wish I'd brought along my shotgun," said Slim, regretting he hadn't brought it along for more reasons than he could think of just then. He gave her another quick side glance, adding, "Couldn't help getting an earful about this road, back there in Bauxite. They're blaming your uncle for it."

"Yes, I'm afraid they do," she admitted dully. "Almost all the men down there made their living pack-freighting supplies to the mines and the few ranches, back country. Everybody has their own truck now. The packers say it isn't fair, because the mines and ranches could afford to hire them before the road went through, and now they don't!"

"Been any trouble?" asked Slim, beginning to suspect there might be some relation between the packer's resentment over Professor Danfield's influence in getting the road pushed through and the disabled engine.

"Not—not anything you can put your finger on," said Lorna. "Last week there was a big rock slide on Crow Mountain. One boulder that Uncle Cornwall said must have weighed twenty tons just missed the laboratory. Then there's been two slides on the road between Crow Mountain and Bauxite—in solid formations, too, Uncle says."

Slim was thinking it was a Springfield rifle he should have brought along with him. Then maybe some of those tough hombres who started rock slides might not be so brash after a couple of .30-'06 bullets sang "good morning!" past their ears. But he didn't let out what was going on in his mind. He was too busy the last ten

miles dodging boulders almost as large as the truck itself to have much time for conversation.

HE WAS making the last hairpin turn up the side of Crow Mountain when she touched his arm and said apologetically, "Please don't be offended with Uncle. He's—well, he doesn't always behave like he's been doing lately. At least—well, not since—"

Slim waited until he had the truck up the last grade and stopped a hundred yards below the timber line, where a log cabin and two smaller buildings stood on a ledge. Straight up that ledge ran a steel ladder to the tripod of a revolving beacon light.

"Same old story, the world over," said Slim, nodding sympathetically. "I've seen college men—bug hunters, doctors, geologists—on the beach in rags. Every one of 'em had the same story—the going got tough, some place back down the line, and they grabbed for the old bottle. Then the bottle grabbed back and wouldn't let go."

She turned her eyes to his—hurt, shamed. "Then you know why he left Midwest University?"

Up to that time Slim hadn't. He made a guess but kept it to himself.

"I'll be in the engine shack," he told her. "Maybe before dark I can get a line on what's the trouble."

After hearing about those rock slides, he was prepared to find the engine pretty well shot—maybe a handful of sharp quartz sand dumped into the oil pump and all the bearings and cylinder walls cut beyond repair. Instead, he found the engine mechanically intact. It was the electrical generator that was damaged. He could smell the strong odor of burnt insulation as he stooped down and turned his pocket flashlight into the field windings.

He made two trips back to the parked truck, getting a new armature and field windings from his repair parts chest. In less than an hour he had the generator torn

down and was ready to start replacing the short-circuited windings.

"It's a wonder your people wouldn't furnish reliable equipment!" came a hoarse, sarcastic remark from behind Slim.

Slim was prepared for the sight of a sneer on Professor Danfield's lips when he turned; but he wasn't prepared for what he actually saw. It had taken more than just a couple of drinks to turn that thin nose as purple as that and give those bleared eyes such a completely bloodshot appearance. Professor Danfield was standing there with a bottle in his hand and spilling liquor over his left wrist as he attempted to fill a drinking glass.

Slim got up from his knees, took the bottle and glass away from the professor and tossed them through the open door.

"How dare you, sir!" snarled Professor Danfield, striking ineffectually at Slim.

But he offered less resistance than a small boy when Slim caught him by the arm and steered him over to the damaged generator.

"I'd like to know something, Doc," said Slim, with that dry crackle in his voice that meant business. "I'd like to know how come two Number Ten copper wires are in this fuse block instead of the fifteen amp fuses I put here last spring."

**P**ROFESSOR DANFIELD pawed at Slim's hand locked on his arm. "How dare you interrogate me in that tone?"

"You're talking to the wrong guy to get away with a thin bluff," said Slim. He leaned over and ripped off two heavy wires clipped to the side of the switch panel. "I didn't run these leads and I know darned well the Government electrician didn't run 'em, because he left the job before I did. Come on, Doc, we're tracing them out together—"

"I refuse to budge a centimeter!" exclaimed Professor Danfield.

But it did him no good to resist. Slim walked his man out the door and across to the other small log building—Professor

Danfield's laboratory. The wires went through the sash framing and led over to the far corner.

"Now isn't this nice!" said Slim, jerking loose the wire connections from a small carbon-arc electric furnace.

"I've got the whole picture, Doc. You needed better than three thousand degrees heat to reduce your tungsten oxides to the metal. You couldn't get that with an ordinary muffle furnace; so you hooked onto the Government's generator. You jerked more than a hundred per cent overload out of her for a while. Then, blooie, she burned out on you. They can send you up to the Big House for that, Doc—just the same as you'd killed one of the flyers on this route by wrecking the beam and letting him crash into—"

"I didn't kill anybody!" Professor Danfield's face turned gray as he attempted to writhe from Slim's grasp. "I didn't kill him, I tell you—"

"Of course you didn't kill anybody, Uncle Cornwall." Lorna's voice was patiently soothing from the doorway. She looked up at Slim. "I'll take care of him. Go back to repairing the engine, please."

"Don't know as I care to trust him with you," said Slim doubtfully. "When they get the jerks like this, it's only another step to seeing little green lizards—"

"Please!" The look in Lorna's eyes caused Slim to shrug and release his grip on Professor Danfield's arm and go back to the Diesel engine.

He worked rapidly in order to get the generator repaired before dark, finishing up by the light of a miner's candle he found on the battery shelf. He made one more round of inspection with his pocket flashlight before relieving compression on the Diesel engine and closing the starting battery switch.

Slowly the engine flywheel picked up enough speed to snap the first piston over compression. Slim helped it all he could by giving the flywheel a boost with the palm of his hand as he threw off the com-

pression release. The engine fired irregularly for a moment, then began running smoothly as the governor took charge.

Slim straightened up with a sigh of relief. If she hadn't started hitting that first attempt, the battery was so weak it wouldn't have been good for a second one. He stood there, flashing his pocket torch on the small switchboard panel of the generator and adjusting the field rheostat knob until the meter showed one hundred ten volts.

"I've brought you something to eat," Lorna Danfield announced from the door.

He turned, accepting the plate of beans and a cup of rather weak looking coffee. There was no bread or meat on the plate. "Thanks a million," was all he said, and sat down on a box and started eating.

"Our supplies didn't come in on the last train," Lorna was saying, and making a poor job of deceiving Slim.

He looked up quickly. "Why didn't you say you were broke, when I met you in Bauxite? We could've stopped at the store—"

Suddenly he was looking at a girl who was standing rigid with her chin up and her eyes smoldering with resentment.

"I didn't think it was any of your business! Besides, we aren't broke. I've got money—lots of it in the bank."

"That's twice I've been asked to fall for a bluff since I landed here," remarked Slim, nodding as he took another mouthful of beans. "But you aren't selling me that line, sister. You're broke. Broke, because your Uncle Cornwall has boozed up all your money—"

"That—why that's— It's a lie!" stammered Lorna, face scarlet. "You haven't any right in the first place—"

Slim caught her wrist and nodded at the box beside him. "You're not in any college town, sister, where you've got to keep up a front. This is out where you've got to have what it takes to eat, or else. Sit down and spill the truth. Your dad left you money when he died, didn't he?"

"Not much," she admitted with a bewildered shake of her head. "Ten thousand or so—"

"I think I can guess the next answer, too," went on Slim, not so bluntly as before. "And so Uncle Cornwall was made executor of the estate and your guardian—"

"That was two years before—before he left Midwest University," said Lorna dully.

Slim got up and pretended he was busy going over the Diesel generator set, testing the tightness of a bolt here and wiping off a spot of oil from the fuel line pressure gauge. The rest of the story about where her money had gone to was an easy guess. After discovering tungsten ore on Crow Mountain, during one of his summer mountain climbing trips, Professor Danfield had hired a couple of shiftless prospectors to do the required development work. That was plain as daylight from the makeshift way the timbering had been set in the drift shaft, less than ninety feet deep. And the professor himself had said it had taken two years to go that far before the lateral gallery was started.

At that rate, it wasn't long before Professor Danfield's own money was exhausted. But ore was uncovered now—tons of it. What could be a safer investment for Lorna's inheritance than to invest it in getting out the ore? And the professor had helped himself to another drink—

SLIM paused in his work on the engine to peer out the one window of the engine shack.

A cold, fine rain was tinkling against the small panes.

"How long has the light up there been dark?" he asked, still peering upward toward the steel beacon tripod on top Crow Mountain.

"Ten days," answered Lorna, getting up and looking out the door with an expression in her eyes that showed she didn't relish what she felt was her duty. "I must

go back to the house. It isn't safe to leave him alone."

A sudden wave of impatience swept over Slim. He turned, with one hand on the power switch to the beacon light. "Stop worrying about him for once. Sit down and take it easy. I'll be through here in a minute. Then we'll both go."

He threw in the power switch and went to the door, to look up and watch the powerful beam of Crow Mountain air beacon sweep the sky.

"No plane could see that on a night like this before it was too late," he said half to himself. He continued watching the steady gyration of the beam until satisfied the beacon was working properly and then turned to Lorna. "Okay. We'll go to the house now and start the radio beam transmitter. He hasn't jimmied that, I hope."

"No." Lorna's answer carried too much discouragement to be an effective protest. She turned suddenly on Slim. "You men, you don't care, do you? When another man breaks under temptation—discouragement and shame facing him—and it crushes him, you turn your back. 'There's your bed, now lie in it,' you tell him. Not one of you will so much as reach out a hand—"

She broke off with a gesture of defeat and darted out into the rain for the cabin. Slim shrugged, and closed the door after him as he followed.

He found Lorna gathering scattered bits of paper from the floor of the small living room of the cabin. She seemed to prefer to ignore him, so he crossed the room to the radio beam transmitter and snapped on the power switch.

As the transmitter tubes warmed up, he rotated the tuning dial of a small receiving set. "*Da, da, da, dit! Da, da, da, dit!*" came a thin, repeating musical note through the headphone he pressed to his ear. The Crow Mountain radio beam signal grew clearer as the tubes reached working temperature.

He spun the dial to another wave

length and listened to an airliner reporting its approaching arrival to the Salt Lake City control tower: "I'm riding your beam and flying blind as a bat," the airliner's pilot was saying. "Yeah, and I'm glad I haven't got M'Guire's test hop east on a night like this, with that Crow Mountain beam dead. Heard M'Guire squawking in his mike just a minute ago. Something about ice on his left wing, but I didn't get all of it. Okay, Salt Lake. I'll be needing all the candles you can burn down there, in about fifteen minutes!"

Slim put down the headphone and asked over his shoulder, "Where's the Bureau's bulletin file for this station, sister?"

Lorna Danfield was moving quietly across the room when she answered, "Behind the clock. I put on the new bulletin that I got at the post office today. Good night."

"Night," mumbled Slim, reaching for the file board. The last bulletin on the binding posts of the board contained no items that interested Slim. He thumbed back through them for several issues until he came to one that read: "Air route via Crow Mountain closed to transport flying till further notice. Beacon and radio beam at this point temporarily inoperative."

**M**ECHANICALLY, Slim picked up the headphones again and searched back and forth with the tuning dial. He picked up Crow Mountain's radio beam, working smoothly now, and tuned to another wave length.

"—same dope I picked up when I started, Denver!" Slim suddenly heard, catching a fragment of conversation between a plane and the ground station. "Yeah, that's what my bulletin says, Denver. But unless I'm screwy, I'm on the Crow Mountain beam now! '*Da, da, da, dit,*' repeated continuously, is Crow Mountain or I'm flying by the seat of my pants, instead of believing all these gadgets on my instrument panel. Get a check for me, will you? It's creepy upstairs here in the

dark with that Crow Mountain ghost moaning in my ear."

Fifteen minutes of silence followed. Slim left the dial tuned where it was and waited. "McGuire back again, Denver. Any report on that Crow Mountain beam? Gotta have some news soon. Haven't picked up a ground flasher since leaving Salt Lake. Rain every place. No, no ice on my wings now. Just a little creepy, hearing that Crow Mountain beam is all. I hope to tell you I'm holding altitude! I don't like looking these mountains straight in the eye. Okay, I'm not worrying. But dig up a report on Crow Mountain. Patterson is taking over while I hoist a shot of hot coffee. Be with you again at twenty-three thirty."

Slim glanced up at the clock—eleven fifteen. He had another fifteen minutes to wait.

He thought of the test pilot, winging over the rain-drenched mountains, flying by instruments and puzzled by the sound of Crow Mountain's radio beam. Slim was tempted to reach over and pull the switch, leaving the gyrating light beacon still operating but silencing the radio beam. Take the suspense off that fellow's mind up there.

But the mischief was done; Slim realized that it might be dangerous to silence the radio beam, now that it had been heard. When a man flying blind became convinced his instruments were playing tricks on him—

"Mr. Baldwin! *Slim—!*"

Slim whirled. Lorna Danfield was there, clad in a dressing robe and holding her cupped hand around a candle, the flickering yellow light accentuating the alarm in her eyes.

"He's *gone!*"

Slim whipped off his headphones. "You mean the professor? Gone where?" He walked across the room and looked into the professor's room. The bed clothing had been thrown back, and the room was deserted. A blast of cold night air from

the open bedroom window almost blew out the candle Lorna was holding.

"He'll wander off, and fall over—"

Slim caught her arm, checking the sentence unfinished. "Not if I can help it, sister," he promised. "Take it easy. I'll be back with that guy in no time."

**B**UT it wasn't as easy as all that. Slim lowered himself out Professor Danfield's bedroom window, shivering as the cold rain stung through his shirt. It was sleet and black as the inside of a tar barrel, with the wind humming through the steel rungs of the ladder that led up the face of the cliff to the gyrating light above.

Slim steadied himself against the force of the wind by grasping the steel ladder.

Thump! Thump! Thump! Vibrations running down the steel from above. That settled it. Professor Danfield was climbing up to the beacon.

*The guy's got the D.T.s,* flashed through Slim's mind. He started up the ladder after him, locking his fingers around the cold steel rungs and feeling the rough places where the freezing sleet had been broken by the man ahead of him. . . . Once his feet slipped from the ladder. He dangled there, the wind swaying his body as he kept his fingers locked and groped carefully for another footing. . . . Last section to go—

Slim's head appeared above the crest of Crow Mountain. He saw a streak of flame and heard the report of a high-powered rifle split the darkness.

"You can't spy on me like this!" screamed a wild voice against the howling wind. The rifle blazed again. "Laugh, damn you, but I'll get you just the same!"

"Professor!" yelled Slim. "Stop shooting at the beacon! Stop—"

"And you, too!" screamed Professor Danfield, whirling and firing at the sound of Slim's voice.

Slim heard the snap of the bullet and flattened out. Invisible in the blackness,

Professor Danfield came staggering in his direction. Three shots the crazy galoot had already fired, Slim caught himself counting mentally. He slid back down the ladder until his head was below the rim rock. Two more to go before his magazine was pumped empty.

He could hear Professor Danfield screaming incoherently in the sleeting blackness as he stumbled toward the ladder.

"Steady, Doc," he yelled back. "You'll be going over!"

The rifle blazed from not ten feet away. Slim heard a bullet ricochet from the rim rock and go whining off into space. Professor Danfield's advance to the ladder was more stealthy now. He came muttering wildly, breaking out into louder cursing every time the howl of the wind changed pitch.

Slim reached out and felt for a handhold on the rim rock to the side of the ladder—knowing that in two more steps the liquor-crazed man above him would be pointing his rifle straight down the ladder. He just couldn't miss that close!

**J**UST then he heard the metallic clink of the rifle striking the steel ladder a foot or two above his head. Slim locked his fingers in the rim rock and swung clear of the ladder, dangling there against the face of the cliff and not daring to grope for a foothold lest the noise attract Professor Danfield's attention.

It seemed eternity, hanging there by the grip of his half-frozen fingers to the edge of the rim rock—eternity while the rifle barrel was lowered at arm's length down the steel rungs.

Slim felt the searing muzzle-blast along his wet bare arm as Professor Danfield pulled the trigger.

"That settles one of you!" chuckled the insane voice above him. "Now I'll go back for the Eye! I'll get you, too, Eye. Plenty of cartridges for you, right here in my coat pocket. Now which coat pocket? Just

keep spying on me, and I'll show you which pocket!"

It was now or never for Slim. He kicked out sideways with one foot and caught the ladder again. Quickly as he could he flung out a hand and grasped a steel rung. It almost failed him, slipping down to a mere finger-tip grip before he let go of the rim rock with his other hand and pulled himself up and over the edge.

He crouched low, waiting for his heart, laboring in the high altitude, to cease pounding so that he could locate Professor Danfield by the sound of his fumbling with the magazine of his rifle.

Suddenly all sound from Professor Danfield ceased. Slim wormed his way over the cold rocks of Crow Mountain, pausing to lie flat every few feet, to listen. He crawled forward again, feeling ahead with his fingers for a touch and a quick jerk that would drag his man off his feet.

Then his hand touched cloth—wet. The edge of a coat. Slim had a firm grip on Professor Danfield's coat sleeve now. Any rough stuff was going to cost somebody a broken arm.

It was then that Slim heard a drunken snore. Professor Danfield was asleep—slumped down over a rock with his head pillowed on the stock of his rifle.

Slim pulled the rifle out and flung it far out into the darkness. He shook the limp shoulder. "Wake up, Doc!"

"What?" The shoulder stirred under Slim's hand, then relaxed again.

"This is the wrong place to sleep off a jag, Doc," said Slim, shaking harder. "Wake up, I said!"

Professor Danfield sat bolt upright with a gasp. "Who's speaking? Where am I?"

"It's Slim, Doc." Slim kept a tight grip on Professor Danfield's sleeve, not knowing what instant the man would go wild again and jump up and run.

"Where am I?" asked Professor Danfield in an almost cold sober voice as he

groped for some reassurance by touching Slim's fingers gripping his sleeve.

"If you're sober, I'll tell you," answered Slim grimly.

"Fairly sober, I hope, young man," came the bitter answer. "But I don't recall how I got here."

"You were out chasing snakes," explained Slim. "You're up here with the air beacon. Look up there and see—"

Professor Danfield made a sudden but futile effort to escape from Slim's grip on his sleeve. "Why did you follow?" he asked angrily. "Why didn't you let me walk off the edge? I'm worthless, I tell you. Let me go!"

"Seeing as you feel that way about it, Doc—" Slim kept the fingers of one hand locked on his prisoner's sleeve while he stripped off his belt with his free hand.



"There! That'll keep your hands quiet while I use your belt to tie your feet. Sorry, but I'm not in the mood to take any more bad news to your niece."

"For God's sake let me finish it!" begged Professor Danfield as Slim lifted him and carried him to where two large, flat rocks formed better protection from the sleety rain.

Slim turned up the professor's coat collar and buttoned it. "You could do as you damn please as far as I'm concerned, Doc," he answered curtly. "When a man has had all the advantages you've had—knows all the answers and then can't take it — it doesn't matter a whoop to me whether he jumps feet first or dives."

"Then let me do it!"

"Nope. The muss you'd make of your-

self, splashing all over those rocks in front of the cabin down there, is what's holding me, Doc. You don't expect your niece to clean *that* up behind you too, do you? Or are you that much lower than a snake's belly you don't care?" Slim's last question fell like a whiplash across Professor Danfield's face.

"As low as a snake's belly—" Slim felt Professor Danfield's tensed body go limp. "No, I'm not that low, young man. I'll prove to you and the world I'm not that low. I'll—"

"Easy with the promises," said Slim tartly. "I've heard 'em all before. I'll believe easier, watching you put out a little man-acting for a change. And that starts right now. Because I'm leaving you here, while I go below for some blankets. Be seeing you later, Doc."

Slim crawled back to the ladder and lowered himself from ice-coated steel rung to rung, and trying not to let his mind dwell on the fact that he was going to do this all over again when he returned with blankets for Professor Danfield.

Lorna Danfield was waiting at the door of the cabin when he got down. The cold rain had plastered her brown hair against a blanched forehead. She stood there holding a lantern, scarcely able to move her lips for the question: "Is he—?"

"Safe. Up there," said Slim, jerking his thumb toward the top of the mountain. "Get me a couple of thick blankets and a bottle of hot coffee. I'll be going back with 'em, soon's I—"

**H**E WAS too intent on getting over to the radio receiver and clipping on the headphones to finish his explanation.

"It's twenty-three thirty, Denver!" he heard. "M'Guire back. I got to know something quick about this Crow Mountain radio beam. I'm riding it now, trusting to luck of the Irish, fella. Ice on my wings, and bad. I've got to split Crow Mountain Pass to get through the fence. Can't climb over, that's a cinch."

With the headphones still clamped on his ears, Slim reached over and flipped the perforated sending tape off the automatic code key. He pressed shut the contacts and sent a long, whining dash. Then began spelling rapidly in code: "Crow . . . Mountain . . . radio . . . beam . . . talking . . . Okay . . . M'Guire . . . you . . . are . . . on . . . my . . . beam . . . Crow . . . Mountain . . . Op . . . signing . . . off . . . Happy . . . Landings . . . exclamation."

Slim sent a long series of three dashes and a dot and then cut in again: "Heard . . . your . . . squawk . . . to . . . Denver . . . You . . . are . . . getting . . . me . . . okay . . . I . . . see . . . Don't . . . forget . . . to . . . thank . . . the . . . Navy . . . for . . . turning . . . out . . . guys . . . who . . . know . . . code . . . Keep . . . on . . . my . . . beam . . . Irishman . . . Crow . . . Mountain."

Slim started sending the code beam signal for Crow Mountain again, and broke into a tired smile when he heard: "I'm going through Crow Mountain Pass, Denver! So have your lights on, in exactly—exactly one hour." There was a sudden silence from M'Guire's radio. Slim caught himself imagining that even with the headphones clamped on and the moaning wind sweeping the mountain ledge around the cabin he had heard a plane go over.

"Baby, was that a close shave!" suddenly came gasping through Slim's headphones. "It's M'Guire, and still with you, Denver! Just a second ago, we popped out of a cloud bank. Zowie, not a hundred feet under us was the Crow Mountain light! So it was the right radio beam I was riding, Kid. Keep those cow pasture candles burning for me!"

Slim took off his headphones and reached over and threaded the automatic sending tape back over the spool. "*Da, da, da, dit! Da, da, da, dit!*" he could hear buzzing in his phones on the table.

"All set with those blankets and coffee?" he started to ask cheerfully as he turned around. The cabin was empty. He walked to the small kitchen and picked up the

steaming coffee pot from the oil stove and shook it. It was almost empty. "Lorna!" he yelled out the door. "Come down from there!"

"*Coming!*" came a shrill call from up the side of the cliff.

Stumbling over wet rocks in the darkness, Slim reached the steel ladder. "Come down from there! Want to break your fool neck, sister?"

"We're coming!" came the answer.

He could feel the jarring vibrations in the steel ladder getting closer.

"What do you mean 'we'?" he grunted, trying to hide his relief when Lorna Danfield stepped down beside him.

"Why, Uncle and I, of course!" Lorna's laugh was shrill—almost hysterical.

"We left the blankets up there." Professor Danfield was speaking, his voice coming in short gasps, but otherwise precise and restrained. "I'll refrain from excessive protestations this time, young man. But I insist on expressing my thanks!"

Slim felt cold but steady fingers clamp over his hand for a quick handshake. The next instant Professor Danfield was walking rigidly erect into the yellow beam of lamplight flooding the doorway.

"You took an awful chance, sister," said Slim with a steadying arm around Lorna. "But you've got nerve, even if that was a dumb trick you pulled."

Lorna drew free from his supporting arm at the doorway and smiled with an effort. "I thought I was doing all right until that plane roared out of the night and frightened me. Thanks for everything, Slim."

For a moment Slim stood there, feeling a glow on his wet cheek where she had kissed him.

"*Da, da, da, dit! Da, da, da, dit!*" droned the headphones of the radio receiver. Slim looked up at the pencil of light sweeping the black sky and grinned. He tossed a good night salute to the purring Diesel generator in the engine shack and closed the door.

The Hell Roarin' Town of Oxbow Was—

## DUE FOR A HANGIN'

SOMETHING ABOUT THE STORY AND WHAT  
HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

SERGEANT BLIZZARD WILSON and Private Badger Coe of the Texas Rangers have assumed their roles of bad men on the prowl in order to investigate certain robberies which have taken place in the country about the sizzling settlement of Oxbow. They tell Marshal Webb Slayne that he has a friend of theirs—Billy Harkness—in jail, and back up their contention

with a lot of details of the friendship. For, as Blizzard points out to his partner, "We gotta be tough so's to live up to our reputations. We gotta raise plenty hell 'bout Billy Harkness so's to bamboozle folks into thinkin' that he's all we got on our minds. If we do a first-rate job, 'tain't likely anybody will suspicion we're Rangers."

So as added background for themselves they spring a very surprised desperado out of jail, and get into such a fight with the vigilantes that the marshal orders them to

*"Let's Squat and Make Medicine; We Done  
Pried the Lid Off'n Hell!"*



## By CADDO CAMERON

*Author of "Them Damned Twins," "At the End of a Texas Rope," etc.*

### PART III



leave town. Nevertheless, Blizzard suspects the marshal himself, wonders about the status of the gambler, John Smith, and though he is perfectly willing for them to leave town, says that coming back is quite their own affair. Their next activity is the investigation of Dead Horse Canyon and its many tracks of cattle and wagons. They find a cabin wherein they are nearly murdered by two giant Negroes, and upon completion of that fight they find the mysterious John Smith has joined them. Back in Oxbow at Buck Aherne's saloon, they

get into a fight with a freighter and the marshal once more orders them to leave town and this time to "never come back no more."

"Will a hour after sunup in the mawn-in' be soon enough?" drawls Blizzard.

"Shore," says Marshal Slayne.

And looking on once more, with an amused smile on his face, stands John Smith.

## CHAPTER VII

## HELL BROKE LOOSE!

**T**HE echoes of gunfire had scarcely rolled away before the Wagon Yard was jammed with men. They clamored for details of the big fight and craned their necks for a glimpse of the pistoleer who downed Blackie Burns after letting him have the first shot; for such was the report of several unprejudiced observers who swore that Badger made no move to draw until Burns had turned to face him.

But the Rangers got away from there quickly. They left through a side door and by keeping to the rear of buildings fronting on Main Street, made their way unnoticed to the livery corral. The sergeant pulled Badger to a halt near a disabled wagon before they reached Pop Henderson's cabin.

"Let's squat and make medicine," he said laconically. "We done pried the lid off'n hell."

Badger hunkered down beside Blizzard, their backs against a wagon wheel. "Uh-huh, we shore did," agreed the young Ranger, "and we mighty nigh got our tail feathers singed. What next?"

"More trouble."

"Huh?"

"Yep, I see plenty dust up the trail," declared the sergeant seriously. "We're in for it."

"Hell! I thought we jest got out of it."

"Nope, we done swum a leetle branch all right but we got big water ahead and the sun in our eyes," prophesied Blizzard, "and we dasn't throw off'n the trail and wait."

Badger grunted. "If that's so, let's us shuck our clothes and take to the water while we're hot. Me—I figger it don't never pay to wait."

"It shore don't pay when they's another big rise a-comin'," soberly stated the sergeant, "so we're a-pushin' on. Soon as ever things cool off a leetle—in say, ten

fifteen minutes, we sorta mosey back to town."

Badger swore grimly.

Blizzard continued, "I ain't dead sartin, you onderstand, but I got a strong suspicion that when you brought Blackie Burns to grass you tromped on the toes of somebody who's shore enough somebody on this Oxbow range. And what I mean, if he's the fella I think he is we're a-gittin' along. So when we show up in town again, I calc'late that most anything is liable to try to happen to us and if it does, maybe this here fella will tip his hand. Cain't tell."

"Who is that there somebody?"

"If I was to tell you who I suspicion, it wouldn't do you no good and it might do him a heap of harm," drawled the sergeant, "so we'll jest wait until I know somethin' for shore. All I gotta say is, don't trust nobody half as much as you would if you knowed he was the devil hisself. And if you're that keerful you'll still be too damned keerless."

"Say—listen here!" growled Badger. "Is things that bad all of a sudden?"

"Wuss, a heap wuss."

Is that why you lit out at a dead run, a-wringin' yo' tail to beat hell when Webb Slayne told us to git?"

**I**N THAT thick darkness, coiled down against a wagon wheel with his bony knees under his chin and his hawk-like face thrust forward at the end of his long neck, Blizzard looked for all the world like a somber bird of prey pondering the fate of its last victim or planning the destruction of its next. While the fight and death of three men temporarily depressed Badger, the bloodshed merely spurred the stern sergeant toward more diligent efforts to expose and eradicate the lawless influences responsible for it. To this end he would unhesitatingly gamble with his life and the lives of his friends, and take the lives of his enemies without compunction.

He spoke slowly in answer to his part-

ner's question, "Nope, that ain't it. I calc'late that when we git outa town an' come back unexpected-like, we bother Webb Slayne a heap more'n if we was to stand pat and shoot it out with him, and jest betwixt you and me—I'm powerful anxious to see how Webb behaves when he's got a bad case of the bothers."

Nothing further was said for quite a while. From the way he hunched down against the wagon wheel, Badger figured that Blizzard was having trouble with his thoughts and he, himself, was not in a talkative mood.

At length, however, something suddenly occurred to him. "Say—where in hell was Buck Aherne while that there ruckus was a-comin' off in his place?"

"Been wonderin' 'bout that myownself, and I'd give a pretty to know for shore," muttered the sergeant. "This damned situation has got more kinks than a new rope. Buck is mighty nigh the biggest kink and Roma is the contrariest one of 'em all."

"Huh! That there gal ain't noways kinky."

Blizzard arose, stretched, and fed a cartridge into the magazine of his rifle. "Reckon it's time we was on the move. Now recollect—don't you dast to trust nobody, not even me."

Badger stood up and reloaded the empty chamber in his revolver. "Never did trust you none to speak of. Let's ramble."

**B**LIZZARD said he wanted to have a little talk with Old Man Fraser, so they walked straight down the north side of Main Street toward the Sand Hill bar. Although he wouldn't admit it, Badger took seriously what his partner said about the need for caution and he was scarcely less watchful than the lanky sergeant as they ambled along the sidewalk. The street was not built up solid, with the result that houses frequently stood alone, their outside walls buried in shadows fit to hide a man, for the moon had not yet risen. The young Ranger strained his eyes to pierce these

shadows and he noted with satisfaction that Blizzard was doing likewise. Accordingly when a darker figure materialized against the east wall of Hoke Tutter's saddle shop, each of them saw it; and when this figure gestured for them to come, they were instantly on the alert for trickery—Badger with a six-shooter in hand, Blizzard with his rifle under his arm in a position to be brought into action with no loss of time.

They went quickly along the side of the building and soon discovered they were going to meet a woman wearing a plain black dress, holding a black rebozo tightly about her head and face so that only her eyes were visible. She retreated as the Rangers approached, leading them toward the back of the shop and farther away from the sidewalk. They rounded the corner cautiously and found her waiting there.

The woman spoke rapidly in Spanish, "I am Señora Aherne's maid-servant. I have been watching the street for you. She invites you to come to her house and I shall take you there."

To Badger's astonishment, Blizzard answered without a symptom of surprise or a moment's hesitation. "Thank you. Show us the way, please."

Without another word the woman set off at a brisk walk, keeping well to the rear of the buildings facing the street until she came to a point behind the Aherne & Boston store. From there the maid took the Rangers up an outside stairway to the Aherne living quarters on the second floor and ushered them into a small reception hall. She took their hats and glanced inquiringly at Blizzard's rifle. He reluctantly stood it in a corner, then followed Badger into the parlor.

Roma arose from an armchair near a front window that overlooked the street. As she unhurriedly crossed the softly lighted room to greet them, Blizzard thought a good round oath. Never in all his life had he seen a woman as beautiful and stately as she looked in that plain black dress with a touch of white lace at its neck

and sleeves, a garment of such severe simplicity as to be especially striking in a day when women's clothes were anything but simple. Aside from a wedding ring, she wore no jewelry and the sergeant gave her credit for having the good sense to know that she didn't need it. His sharp eyes neglected no detail of her appearance—the whiteness of her skin, the golden lights that danced in her hair, the keen intellect and quick wit that gave life to a face which might have been merely beautiful—and he said to himself, "Lawd have mercy on the pore cuss that she sets out to git."

Motioning the Rangers to a sofa, she took a chair facing them. "I've been sitting at the window watching for you," she said in her low contralto voice, "and I was afraid that Sylvia wouldn't be able to find you in time."

"In time for what, Ma'am?" asked Badger.

He was much more at ease than Blizzard, but less than half as much on guard.

"To keep you from getting hurt," she replied quickly, "or killed, perhaps."

The girl's large, intelligent eyes briefly studied each of the Rangers in turn as though to appraise the effect of her words.

Badger grinned politely. "Lady, that shore was neighborly of you and we're much obliged."

Blizzard slowly crossed one long leg over the other and dangled his boot. "And if you don't mind sayin'—how come you was so sartin we'd git hurt?"

**R**ESTING her elbows on the arm of her chair, Roma leaned forward a little and looked curiously, speculatively at her guests for fully ten seconds before answering. Blizzard would have given anything to know what thoughts were racing through the keen mind at work behind those deep blue eyes, but he wouldn't even venture a guess.

"Oh-h, I heard some things," she said casually, "and I knew a lot more things, so I just put two and two together and

decided that you boys would have to pay a stiff penalty for killing Blackie Burns and Tobe Hicks. And then I heard some more things which proved that I was right. You told Webb Slayne that you'd leave town by an hour after sunup, but you won't live to keep your word if you aren't careful."



Blizzard suddenly found himself very much on edge. This woman knew a-plenty and she had a whole slew of tricks up her sleeve, slick tricks, dangerous to monkey with, and every last one of 'em would work out to her own good and to hell with the other fella for she was as selfish as six hundred dollars wuth of ham and aigs. Damn the luck! And did she know men! All there was to know 'bout the dumb critters. Behaved like she didn't have no idee she was—not purty but plumb beautiful. Didn't spring no feemale doin's on a fella neither. Too damned smart. Jest looked him square in the eye and talked to him like she was a man, talk that sounded straight but—hell! It couldn't be. She was too all-fired purty!

The lanky sergeant reversed his legs and dangled the other boot. "That bein' the case we'll be mighty keerful, Missus Aherne, 'cause we make it a p'int to keep our word—'specially to town marshals."

Roma said nothing, but the way she looked at Blizzard plainly announced that she didn't believe him.

Badger spoke up, "What you calc'late we'd better do, Ma'm, so's to make shore and eat another breakfast?"

The girl didn't hesitate a fraction of a second. She glanced at Badger, then spoke directly to Blizzard, "Kill Webb Slayne and John Smith and you'll be safe in Ox-bow as long as you care to stay!"

Badger dropped back in his chair as if she had struck him in the face. Blizzard nodded solemnly, thoughtfully fingered his mustache, and otherwise gave the impression that her suggestion deserved weighty consideration.

In a moment he drawled evenly, "Sounds sensible, all right, but somehow or other I got the idee that them fellas is friends of you and Buck. Reckon I figgered 'em wrong."

Roma tapped a bell on the stand beside her chair and when Sylvia came, told her to bring liquor. After the decanter and glasses arrived, she invited the Rangers to drink and smoke and make themselves feel at home.

In silence she watched them fill their glasses and light cigarettes, then she remarked in her normal soft, calm voice, "Webb and John pretend to be our friends, but they're robbing us and they'll ruin my husband if I don't find a way of putting a stop to their crooked work, so you see I've got an ax to grind."

A LITTLE smile touched her lips, disappearing as quickly as it came. She continued with pleasing frankness, "Oh, I'd probably warn you anyhow if I knew you were in danger, simply because I like you. But I might as well admit that, first of all, I'm thinking of Buck."

Straight from the shoulder—too damned straight, thought Blizzard. He didn't believe a word she said. Moreover, she seemed to be paying but little attention to Badger—hadn't made a pass at him since they came in; and yet, heretofore she'd worked on the scamp a-plenty and Blizzard knew that it was his young partner whom she expected to influence. Smart, mighty smart!

Aloud he inquired, "Them boys is a-rob-

bin' Buck? Reckon I don't quite ketch on."

Roma's reply carried a world of conviction, "Yes, sir, they're robbing him across the poker table. Buck thinks he's a poker player, but he's a rank tenderfoot in John Smith's hands; and besides, Webb Slayne is in with that crooked tinhorn so Buck hasn't got a ghost of a chance. They play for terrific stakes in their private games and at the rate he's been losing, another twelve months of it will put my husband back on the buffalo range where he started to make money."

Badger made a remark that threw light upon his own feelings, "How come you ain't never made Buck stop his gamblin'? 'Pears to me you can do mighty nigh anything you're a mind to with him."

Her answer was designed to please any man who figured that some day he might have a wife of his own. "If my husband feels like playing poker, I want him to do it. He can take care of himself in a square game."

"If every fella's wife was that sensible 'bout it, this'd shore be a poker-playin' country," observed Blizzard. "Knowin' them scalawags is cold-deckin' him the way they are, how come Buck ain't never wiped 'em out hisownself? I calc'late he's man enough to do it without much trouble."

Roma gestured impatiently with a slender white hand. "That's the trouble! He's so square himself, it's hard for him to think anything wrong 'of a man he likes; so he isn't sure that they're cheating him and he won't make a move without positive proof. And just try to prove anything on a card sharp like John Smith!"

"No Ma'am, I know you cain't ketch 'em 'cause I done lost money a-tryin'," dryly admitted the sergeant. It was on the tip of his tongue to ask her what reason she had to be so sure that Buck was being double-crossed, but he thought better of it since the question might be an embarrassing one and her answer wouldn't mean anything anyhow.

Instead, he wanted to know, "With all the good men you got in Oxbow, 'pears to me you yo'ownself could've had them two fellas run out long befo' this without both-erin' Buck 'bout it, and I'm sorta wonderin' why you ain't done it."

THE girl nodded as much as to say that the inquiry was a natural one. "There are lots of good men in Oxbow, all right, but it'll take more than a *good* man to get the best of John Smith and Webb Slayne. It'll take the best there are and from what I've heard, you boys fill the bill."

Badger grinned expansively. "Much obliged, Missus Aherne."

Blizzard swallowed his drink slowly so as to taste it all the way down, for it was mighty fine whiskey.

"Don't aim to change the subject none to speak of," he drawled, "but I'm sorta curious to find out what you figger is liable to happen to us tonight if we don't take keer."

"Naturally," said Roma. "I know that certain parties have found out that you're going to sleep at the corral and five or six men will be laying for you. They've got orders to take you alive so that you may be hung. I imagine Webb and John want to use you as an example of what happens to men who're foolish enough to buck them."

Badger chuckled quietly.

But Blizzard took it seriously. "That's bad. 'Pears like we might have to grind yo' ax, Missus Aherne. Cain't tell."

When making the remark Blizzard fixed his gaze upon her face, and in his own language he swore to himself that he saw an elusive gleam of triumph flash across it. And for the first time in his life he thanked his lucky stars that he had a dishonest woman to deal with. No two ways about it, he reflected, the only thing to do was to pretend to be as crooked as she thought they were—which wasn't at all hard to do.

He went on to say, "But ever sence I was knee-high to a fishin' worm I been hatin' the sight of a grindstone. Reckon

it's 'cause my old pappy used to set me afire for bein' too sorry to sharpen his ax and scythe and butcher knives and sech."

Resting her chin in her hand, Roma regarded the lanky Ranger shrewdly while a tricky little smile did pleasing things to her firm, curved lips. She said humorously, "But your old pappy didn't pay you for turning the grindstone, I betcha."

"Nary a copper."

"Seems to me that I've heard you boys used to be buffalo hunters. Is that right?"

"Yes'm, we done ripped the hides off'n a whole slew of the pore critters."

ROMA let her golden head sink back against the bright blue plush with which her chair was covered. She gazed at the ceiling for fully half a minute as if buried in deep thought. Without glancing at either of the Rangers, she presently inquired, "Would you like to go out on the range again?"

"Shore would," promptly answered Blizzard, "pervidin' we had a outfit or the money to git one, which we ain't got. Right now we're cleaner'n a hound's tooth."

The girl sat forward in her chair. After a quick glance at Badger she fixed her gaze upon Blizzard. "Just a few days ago I heard Buck say that he'd be willing to outfit a couple of good hunters up to—oh-h, ten thousand dollars, if they'd agree to give him first chance at their season's hides. I know how Buck does business, so I'm sure he wouldn't be in any hurry to have them pay what they owed him."

Badger grinned widely. "Them two hunters shore would be a-swimmin' in luck plumb up to their hawns, and what I mean—I wish they was us."

Blizzard thoughtfully stroked the high bridge of his nose. "Ten thousand will buy a larrupin' outfit all right. Course a fella would have to git everything here and he couldn't do it if he wa'n't safe in Oxbow."

"No," said Roma firmly, "before a wheel was turned, it would have to be known that

those two hunters were perfectly safe in Oxbow."

Blizzard slowly uncoiled from the sofa. He looked down at her with a dry grin, and drawled, "Missus Aherne, you done set my appytite to yowlin' for hump ribs and fat cow. But fust off we gotta take a leetle pazazzar 'cross the country to see a fella who ain't nowadays a Ranger or a sheriff. I allow the buff'ler won't be all gone by the time we git back."

Roma smiled up at him. "Oh no," she purred. "They'll still be here."

The girl arose and walked to the door with them. While waiting for Sylvia to bring their hats, she placed her hand on Badger's arm and said somewhat anxiously, "You will remember what I told you about tonight and be very careful, won't you?"

"Oh shore," declared the big Ranger. He glanced at Blizzard and went on to say, "Sometimes he gits us into trouble 'cause he's so all-fired reckless, but me—I'm a mighty keerful fella."

Roma laughed softly. "So I've heard."

"Uh-huh," drawled the sergeant, "he's mighty keerful not to let Old Lady Peace ketch up with him."

He picked up his rifle and turned to the outside door. With his hand on the knob, he inquired casually, "By the way, I ain't seen Buck 'round town sence supper. Did you run him off or somethin'?"

The girl's bright smile was frankness itself. "Oh no! He left to meet one of his wagon trains that's coming out of Mexico by way of Presidio del Norte and Fort Davis. I imagine he'll find it somewhere between here and Fort Stockton. He may be away several days."

**T**HE Rangers left with a cordial invitation to return whenever they felt like it, and another warning to be careful. They did no skulking behind buildings but took to the sidewalk and headed for the Sand Hill bar a short distance down the street.

Before they had gone ten steps, Pop Henderson spoke to them from a bench

in front of an unlighted store they were passing. "Hold up a minute, fellas," he said scarcely loud enough to be heard six feet away. The old-timer looked all around with exaggerated caution, then continued, "A bunch figgers to nail you at the corral tonight. They ain't there yet but they shore as hell will be. Don't ask me how I know so much and don't argy. Jest recollect what I done told you—we're due for a hangin'. Now git away from me 'cause it's plumb fatal to be seen a-lookin' at you!"

The Rangers walked on.

Badger took a hitch at his gunbelts and growled, "Damned if it don't look like this here town's on the prod."

Blizzard shifted his rifle to his other arm. He stared grimly across the street at the Wagon Yard, and muttered, "Uh-huh, and so are we."

When they reached the Sand Hill porch, which chanced to be unoccupied at the moment, he paused long enough to remark cautiously, "They's plenty sign scattered about, but I cain't read it for hell. We're on a trail that's so hot she's a-steamin', but my nose is a-doin' me dirt 'cause I ain't ketched a scent that I can tie a name to. We gotta make it a p'int to stay alive until mawnin' and by that time we'll know a heap more or a damned sight less'n we know now. You take a stand out here and keep a eye pceled while I go inside and pow-wow Sandy Fraser. Doze off a second and you'll wake up a-swappin' lies with Old Satan hisself."

Badger hunkered down on his heels near the end of the porch in the darkest spot he could find and proceeded diligently to carry out his sergeant's orders. His eyes roamed ceaselessly up and down either side of the street, viewing the most commonplace occurrences with hard suspicion. He knew that when Blizzard talked that way the situation was bound to be critical, for Blizzard didn't scare easily. Maybe he wasn't scared now, but he showed symptoms of being all set to explode if a fella was to strike a match behind his back.

A cowhand, drunk or pretending to be drunk, weaved his way out of the Buffalo bar a short distance down the street on the other side, climbed onto his pony and went whooping past. Badger half expected that hand to pull a gun and cut loose at him, one of the best ways to "accidentally" kill a man and get good money for it. But the hand rode away and Badger momentarily relaxed.

HE BECAME interested in the wordy preamble to what promised to be a fistic encounter between a freighter and a buffalo hunter out in the street nearby, and he wondered whether it would wind up in a shooting scrape with "stray" bullets coming his way. Pretty soon, however, the freighter allowed they'd ought to have another dram before the fight and they staggered off arm-in-arm.

Something moved at an open, unlighted second-story window directly across the street. Badger gathered his muscles to spring from the porch into a deeper shadow alongside the building, because a man with a rifle could be powerful dangerous at that distance with the moon coming up like it was. Then the thing on the windowsill made a dive at something—a cat more'n likely, lost its footing and fell noiselessly to the wooden awning below. The big Ranger gloried in the cat's misfortune.



A few minutes later, during a temporary lull in the town's racket, Badger heard something rustling the weeds down the side of the building around the corner from

where he was sitting. He thought of cats and when he caught the sound of a hiss, he knew it was cats talkin' fight or makin' love. But an instant later he bounced to his feet, his mind completely changed. No Texas cat ever said "Badger! Badger Coe! Come here!"

He looked cautiously around the corner. Goldie! He went quickly to where she was standing in the deep shadow cast by the building.

Goldie wasted no breath in useless salutations and she made no bones about what she had to say. "I'm out to get square with that black devil of a Louie and I don't give a damn how I do it!"

Badger placed a large hand on her shoulder. "Jest take it sorta easy, gal," he said gently. "Mebbe you'd better let me git square with the cuss for you."

His deep mellow voice seemed in a measure to restore the girl's composure. She drew her black fascinator closer about her head until it left only the white oval of her face exposed, and she rearranged her dark cape so as completely to cover her bare shoulders and bosom. Afterwards she peered anxiously past him at the busy street, particularly the front of Louie Bloch's dive on the far side. The dim light was kind to her face and Badger couldn't help but think that she was beautiful in a wild, brazen fashion.

He inquired quietly, "What's old Louie up to now?"

"More dirty work!" she spat. "And I want to see his game busted wide open."

Badger folded his arms and grinned down at her. "Me and Blizzard are the holy terrors that can bust it a-plenty. What is old Louie's game anyhow?"

"Women mostly," she said bitterly. "He's got several houses scattered over West Texas. But he's also in with the vigilantes neck deep."

Badger had a hard time hiding his elation. He asked, "Is Louie the boss of 'em?"

"No, I don't think so," she answered

promptly. "but he's able to get 'em to do nearly anything he wants done."

"D'you happen to know who is their boss, Goldie?"

The girl shook her head. "I could make a guess but it wouldn't be worth a damn, so I'd better keep my mouth shut."

Again she glanced at the street and into the darkness behind her. "What I wanted to tell you is this: they're going to try to catch you tonight—alive, so they can hang you."

Badger nodded. "We done heard somethin' 'bout that already," he drawled, then suddenly he was struck by a thought. "Say listen here, Goldie. Ain't you been talkin' to somebody else and—"

"Yes, I got hold of Pop Henderson and asked him to find you."

"Mmm-huh," mused the big Ranger. "So that's how Pop come to know so much. And by dogies, gal, we're shore thankful to you—no foolin'."

The girl shrugged, half turning away. "Don't thank me. I'm after that damned Louie and I had an idea what would happen to him if you found out that he's mixed up in this trouble you're having. I've got to go. Take good care of yourself, Big Boy."

"The same and more of it to you, Leetle Gal."

He said it seriously for he meant it. Badger felt sorry for Goldie and hated like the devil to see her go back to that Prairie dive, but there was nothing he could do about it. True, he could rampse in there and finish Louie Bloch, but that might snarl up Blizzard's plans and their job had to come first. He went back to his place on the porch, hoping that maybe Goldie would have brains enough to get away from Louie before something happened to her. But of course, he reflected, it wasn't any too easy for a girl like her to get away from a skunk like Bloch in this tough country.

Badger resumed his vigil on the porch somewhat depressed by his interview with

the girl; not as a result of her warning, but simply because he was chicken-hearted where women were concerned. Accordingly, he looked morosely out upon a lively scene such as would ordinarily arouse his enthusiasm—especially if it held the promise of trouble for himself and partner as this one unquestionably did.

He saw that Oxbow had now warmed up and cut loose. Porches and sidewalks in front of most saloons and dancehalls were alive with men moving from place to place—some walking briskly and purposefully as if intent upon reaching their destinations with the least possible delay; others ambling or staggering along, often pausing to talk to their companions or those whom they met, or to mumble drunkenly to themselves; and there were some who moved with that elaborate negligence which may disguise furtiveness and signify watchfulness. Badger found himself wondering how many of these were vigilantes without their gunnysack masks.

And he wished to hell that Blizzard would come so they could get it over with.

In a little while Blizzard came striding along without his customary shamle, his head held high so that he looked even taller than usual and a fierceness in his high-boned face which gave it a predatory, almost forbidding expression. Badger's heart leaped. He saw at a glance that his partner had read sign or caught a scent that he recognized, or maybe both.

"Any news?" he inquired cautiously.

"Plenty, and it's all bad," snapped Blizzard. "See anything?"

"Plenty, and it's wuss."

Jerking his head for Blizzard to follow, Badger moved back along the side of the building where it was darker and they might talk with a measure of security. There he repeated almost word-for-word his conversation with Goldie.

"Mmmm-huh," grunted the sergeant, thoughtfully stroking the stock of his rifle. "Louie Bloch sorta fits into the puzzle all right."

"What'd we better do with the cuss?" growled Badger. "Sashay over yander and clean out his dive and put him onderneath the sod?"

**B**LIZZARD shook his head. "Nope, not right now. We may tackle that leetle job befo' we finish with Oxbow, but it's too early in the game yet. We'll jest leave Louie be and see what happens."

The young Ranger gazed dejectedly across the street at the Prairie. "But damn it, man! I hate to think of what he'll do to Goldie if he finds out she's been talkin'."

"Reckon he's got too much sense to do her any hurt," said the sergeant. "Any Texas man knows that if he mistreats a woman, good or bad, he's mighty likely to find hisself staked out bare-necked on a ant hill."

"Uh-huh, but Louie Bloch ain't a Texas man."

"That wouldn't make no difference to the ants."

Blizzard dropped his rifle into the crook of his arm and turned back toward the sidewalk. "Come on. Let's us ramble."

The big Ranger caught him by the belt. "Jest you listen to me! Where in hell are we a-headin' and what're we goin' to do when we git there?"

"We're a-headin' for nowhere for no reason at all—jest a-headin'," retorted the sergeant grimly, "and the Lawd only knows what we'll do when we git there. Come on."

Badger growled an oath and tramped along beside his partner. Although he learned nothing by asking questions, he knew that Blizzard was deliberately tempting their enemies by openly walking the street and visiting dangerous places, hoping to lure the vigilantes into the open since he believed they were in some way connected with the man or men it was their job to find. Maybe this was the best way to go about it, reflected the young Ranger, but he harbored some doubts on the subject.

Like all high-strung men, Badger was keenly sensitive to the atmosphere in which he moved—often imaginative and inclined to foresee all manner of calamities until the trouble actually started, then he was an optimist who didn't know when he was licked. Tonight he had the same uneasy feeling that tormented him the night he sat in John Smith's house with the knowledge that nine chances out of ten the vigilantes were coming after them. Often he discovered his hand to be resting upon the handle of his gun or hooked in his belt near it, and he found himself walking with that strange alertness in the nerves and muscles of his legs as though poised to halt suddenly or spring to right or left without conscious thought.

No comfort was to be had in looking at Blizzard. The lean sergeant's bony face was pointed straight ahead as if he were unaware of, or contemptuous of the dangerous surroundings; but Badger knew that from the shadow of his old hat, Blizzard's abnormally keen eyes were seeing all that he saw and many more things besides; and he knew that in all probability the sergeant's shrewd mind was identifying with accuracy the things he saw, unerringly classifying them and interpreting their meaning with that cleverness which had contributed so much to his reputation as a man-hunter.

But notwithstanding the confidence he had in his older partner's ability, from time to time the young Ranger wondered whether they were pursuing the right course; whether they were not taking foolish risks by thus parading openly through town, first-rate targets for bushwhackers. And since Badger Coe was every inch a fighting man, he swore to himself that the thing to do was to bust into the Prairie and nail Louie Bloch; then dab a line on John Smith and stretch his neck until he talked a-plenty; and afterwards they'd ought to go get that cat-eyed marshal and thaw him out with hot lead so that he'd talk if he wasn't dead when they got

through working on him, and if he was—no harm done.

No foolin'—he'd fight the whole damned town if he had to, but this pokin' 'round waitin' for the vigilantes to try to snare him and snake him off and hang him had rubbed his nerves until they were raw and jumpy. The way he felt now, it'd be powerful dangerous for a fella to walk up and slap him on the back. Badger cursed under his breath. A mob! And them without a damned thing to show that they were Rangers. A mob would tie the knots and poke fun at 'em while they swore up and down that they were law officers and then laugh like hell while they kicked at the ends of their ropes.

THEY were nearing the western edge of town where Main Street became a trail that continued on past the livery corral. From a bawdy house on their right came music and the laughter of men and women; and from a saloon on the opposite side of the street boomed a drunken hunter's ribald song of the buffalo range, the laughter and applause of his audience; then from behind them came the sharp click of heels on the hard dirt sidewalk.

Blizzard shot a quick glance over his shoulder. "Com'ere!" he snapped, stepping into the shadow of the house. "Goldie's comin' a-runnin'." he added when Badger stopped beside him. "The durned leetle fool, now what the hell?"

A moment later the girl joined them. She was breathless, her lips parted, the hardness in her otherwise pretty face now overshadowed by excitement. Her head was uncovered and her golden hair seemed to have imprisoned a horde of the yellow beams through which she passed while pursuing the Rangers.

"Pop Henderson has gone back to the corral," she exclaimed cautiously, "and I've just heard something which makes me think that one of the bunch saw him talking to you."

"God Almighty!" growled Badger.

"Pop ain't a fighter," she added, "and that's a dangerous gang."

"Too dangerous for you to monkey with," grimly muttered Blizzard. "How long has it been sence Pop went back?"

"Quite a while. I saw him going that way right after I talked to Badger."

The lean sergeant looked sharply at her. "Why didn't you go to the marshal 'stead of comin' to us?"

She jerked her eyes away from his for an instant. "Pop and Slayne don't get along."

Blizzard thoughtfully nodded his head, gazing off in the direction of the corral. Presently he spoke to her in as kindly a tone as his hard voice would permit. "Yes'm, I calc'late they're a bad bunch—too bad for you to tangle with, Miss. Betcha the whole durned town seen you a-trailin' us. Why in h— Halifax did you up and take sech a chance?"

Goldie's large eyes snapped. She cursed, scarcely above a whisper. "I've already told Badger. I'll take any damned chance to send that greasy Louie to hell! And besides, well—" she said it as if ashamed to show a tender feeling, "Pop Henderson is an old man, and he treats me like a lady."

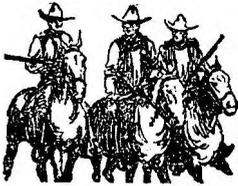
"Uh-huh," drawled Blizzard, "Cain't blame you none for feelin' thataway 'bout Louie, but more'n likely he'll git to hell without nary a shove from you. Now jest you listen to me, Miss. Don't be no crazier than you have to. Don't go nigh that there Prairie j'int no more while Louie is alive and a-sp'ilin' the air 'round him."

He hesitated for the briefest instant during which, it seemed to Badger, he gazed down at the girl with unusual intensity even for him. Then he added, "Go straight to Webb Slayne and tell him to lock you up in the calaboose."

Goldie's hand clenched in the folds of her cape, drawing it closer about her shoulders. It struck Badger that she started to say one thing, then caught herself and said something entirely different. "I wouldn't go to jail to hide from any damned man!"

"Me neither," said the sergeant with a lazy drawl, "'cause I done seen the time when it was mighty easy to git in and powerful hard to git out."

HE deliberated for a moment, running a hand down his long jaw. Afterwards he bent over from his great height so as to bring his bony face closer to hers. His harsh voice demanded obedience, "You rampse over to that there Chapa gal's house. She'll be tickled to have you come. Tell her I sent you and said for her to hide you onderneath the bed. Chapa's got plenty savvy in her purty haid, so you won't no-ways need to tell her nothin' more'n jest



that unless you're a-mind to. Now don't argy! Git!"

Somehow or other the reasonableness of what he said and the propelling force with which he said it, took hold of this hard-case girl. She meekly agreed to obey his command, even thanking him and urging them to be careful.

Badger watched Goldie disappear, then he growled impatiently, "Let's go! We'd oughta been at the corral befo' now."

Blizzard strode toward the street. "If the gang was down yander when he got back, whatever was due to happen to Pop had already happened when Goldie showed up."

The Rangers ambled across the street as though in no particular hurry to get anywhere, then started back up town away from the corral. A short distance farther along, they came to two stores that faced the street less than ten feet apart. The places were closed and that portion of the sidewalk was unoccupied at the moment. After a hasty glance in all directions, Blizzard slipped into the darkness between the

buildings with Badger at his heels. They moved fast and kept going until Main Street was a safe distance behind, then turned right and headed for the corral at a swinging walk.

Badger kept his gaze fixed upon the corral and its buildings, indistinctly visible where they crouched out there beside the trail, their weather-beaten boards and poles now painted in silver by the moonlight. Not far from the cabin the disabled wagon stood on three wheels with one axle on the ground, twisted into a grotesque shape like a giant bug crippled down and left to die on the prairie. Somehow things didn't look just right to the young Ranger, but for the life of him he couldn't at once decide what was wrong. Suddenly it occurred to him; Pop's light should have been burning at this time of night. Regardless of whether the old man was there, he always left a light burning in his cabin until he went to bed.

"Where's Pop's light?" he whispered.

"Been wonderin' 'bout that," answered Blizzard grimly.

An instant later there arose in the corral a loud snort, followed by a crash as if a horse had thrown itself against the side of its stall. Belial! Badger started to run.

Blizzard's bony fingers bit into his shoulder. "Use yo' haid! Don't you dast to git in front of me or I'll beef you cold!"

Badger shook off the detaining hand with a healthy oath, but he made no move to go ahead.

During the space of ten seconds, the lean sergeant stood perfectly still. Badger also strained his ears, but no sound came from the corral.

He knew, however, that Belial's snort and lunge against his stall meant that something had made the temperamental horse very nervous or angry.

"Won't do a particle of good to Injun the place in this light, 'cause if they're there they done spotted us befo' this," said the sergeant quietly, "so we'll make a run for the cabin. Come on!"

AND without another word they went. Having all of a hundred yards to cover, Blizzard unleashed the full speed of his long legs and Badger was five yards behind when his partner reached the corner of the cabin. The sergeant placed his ear against the wall and listened for what seemed a long time. As far as the young Ranger could make out, not a sound came from within. He wondered what in hell they'd find in there.

Presently Blizzard whispered barely loud enough to be heard, "Stay here. I'll take a look see. Shoot fust and then ask questions."

"Huh!" thought Badger, "I won't ask nary a question."

He waited, listening to sounds which he recognized as normal corral noises—the stamping of horses' hoofs, the creaking of a board or pole as an animal leaned or rubbed against a stall partition, but where was the sound of grinding jaws? Some of the horses should be munching hay, since there were at least three or four in stalls in addition to their three animals. Something had upset those horses, sure as hell!

Again came Belial's angry snort, loud enough to be heard up town it seemed to Badger. He cursed silently. That big black devil was ready to explode, no two ways about it. The young Ranger fought down an urge to run to his four-legged friend and find out what was wrong in there. Why was Blizzard so damned slow?

He knew that the sergeant must be moving around in the cabin, but not a sound reached him and for a moment he wondered whether he shouldn't go inside and see what had happened to Blizzard. But he quickly discarded the thought. That lanky cuss could move like a ghost when he had to. Jest a-gettin' fidgety, he reckoned, fidgety as hell.

He turned his attention to his surroundings, picking out places where men might hide even in that bright moonlight. There were those two sheds, one for hay and the other a makeshift blacksmith shop, both

dark inside and fit to hide no telling how many men. And there were an outside haystack, a manure pile, odds and ends of freighters' equipment, the crippled wagon, a wagonbed sitting in weeds that almost reached the top of its sideboards, a pile of firewood, not to mention things that showed up indistinctly on the far side of the corral. The devil, he mused; fifty men could hide around the place, fifty men with gunnysacks over their heads!

For a fleeting moment, fear took hold of Badger and he wouldn't have been ashamed to admit it. Fear of the unknown, the brand of fear that attacks a brave man who is compelled to wait when he wants to go ahead, the fear of a mob to which no man is immune. He felt the muscles in his thighs harden. He felt moisture beneath his hatband. He rubbed the palms of his hands down the legs of his jeans for they were damp. Moist hands were bad for a fella's gunplay.

Damn Blizzard! Why didn't he git a move on?

A minute or so later, as if in answer to his partner's complaint, the lean sergeant appeared in the cabin door. He motioned with his hand and disappeared, making no sound. Badger quickly joined him inside.

THERE was unmistakably a note of excitement in Blizzard's soft whisper. Ain't nothin' here. Pop left a short time back. His pipe's on the table and still warm. Wa'n't no fight in here. Somethin's damned wrong. If they got the old man maybe they're gone, 'cause they figgered he told us and we won't show up. Anyways, we gotta take a chance 'cause they's too damned many places for 'em to hide. We cain't waste time a-scoutin' for 'em. If they crawl us sound yo' warwhoop a-plenty."

No more words were exchanged. Blizzard leaned his rifle against the wall just inside the door. He adjusted his gunbelt, tried his Colt in its holster, slid his bowie knife from its sheath, and pulled his hat

firmly down on his head like a man setting out in the teeth of a gale. Badger made similar preparations, but his hands moved swiftly and without the deliberate care of his older partner's. For now the last vestige of fear had left him. The spirit of adventure drove him, his blood raced, he silently cursed Blizzard for taking so much time.

Soon they were at the small, side gate to the corral. It swung open, dragging and scraping the ground in spite of the sergeant's effort to prevent it. Blizzard slid through, crouched and darted to a vacant stall next to Belial's. The big Ranger shot across the intervening space as swiftly as he could and almost collided with his partner when he plunged into the darkness of the stall.

Blizzard stood very erect, taller than usual, rigid. His hand rested on Pop Henderson's arm, Pop's white head was on a level with his own, and he gazed somberly into Pop's old face—dead!

Badger's heart momentarily stopped. At first unable to see the rope, he nevertheless knew that the dried-up little old-timer was hanging by his scrawny neck from one of the poles above them. The sight plunged him into a seething rage. He clenched his great fists and cursed, his voice so hoarse as to be almost unintelligible. His arms trembled and his knees shook as he lowered the frail body to the ground after Blizzard slashed the rope. He stood up. He stared down at the white head, resting upon straw bedding placed in the stall by Pop himself, bedding for a horse; and while staring one savage thought dominated his mind, "Kill 'em, damn 'em, kill 'em!"

**D**URING that brief spasm of rage, Badger was unconscious of everything but the old man at his feet; unconscious of Blizzard standing straight and stiff beside him, and forgetful of the danger that threatened them.

The sergeant's voice, harsh and metallic, demanded his attention, "And the pore old

fella told us that the town was due for a hangin'."

A moment's pause, then Blizzard continued, "Tust off we'll saddle up so's to be ready to ride when we finish with the skunk that's behind this, then we'll take him to his cabin. Let's git a move on."

So the Rangers moved swiftly. Softly calling Belial by name, Badger slid into the stall beside him. When he placed a hand on the big black's silky hide he found it to be wet with sweat and he felt it twitch with nervous excitement. The great horse swung its head around and touched his shoulder with its muzzle, blowing softly as if it, too, felt the need for caution. Badger hastily untied the hackamore rope from the manger, intending to saddle up outside where it was light. Belial was in a hurry to back out of the stall.

But—before he got clear of the place, hell broke loose!

Dark figures seemed to spring from every possible hiding place as well as from unexpected places of concealment. Badger saw one come up from behind the watering trough, others climbing the corral fence from the outside, some from the feed bin, adjoining stalls, and they even appeared to drop from the shed roof above, until in one mad moment the place seemed to be swarming with men — gunnysacks over their heads, eyeholes like sockets in misshapen skulls.

A sharp voice cried out from somewhere, "Ketch 'em alive!"

Badger dropped the hackamore rope and went for his guns. He managed to snap three shots at elusive figures darting about in the corral before the weapons were knocked from his hands by men who pounced upon him from all directions. From that time on the frenzy of combat blotted out everything except a brief sight of Belial in action. He heard the animal scream, either in pain or rage, and he saw it rearing and lunging and lashing out with front feet while two men held its lead rope. Then he saw the big horse flatten its head

out at the end of its powerful neck, bare its teeth, and plunge at the men. He heard them cry out and curse, saw one struck down by Belial's terrible hoofs, and he saw the giant horse's teeth horribly mutilate the other man and tear the life from him.

The young Ranger let out a mighty yell and plunged into the fight with all the fury of his horse. This mob had come as if in answer to his silent plea when he saw what it had done to Pop Henderson, and the voice of his rage cried out within him more viciously than ever, "Kill 'em! Damn their black souls, kill 'em!"

**T**IME and again he went down beneath the weight of his antagonists and fought back to his feet, using his fists, head, knees, boots, teeth and elbows with the strength of two men and the savagery of a cornered grizzly. His knife was gone but he scarcely missed it. Drunk with rage, fired by the brute instincts of a natural fighter, in this hand-to-hand encounter he thought only of natural weapons. The feel of flesh crushing beneath the weight of his fists, the feel of a man's ribs breaking under the pressure of his arms, the cry or gasp of pain that followed a dirty blow from his knee or elbow, the feel and taste of blood—his own or that of his enemies—intoxicated him, made him insensible to his own hurts.

They tried to knock him out with blows aimed at his head; they tried to get a rope around his neck, arms, or legs; they tore at his hair until he thought his scalp was ripping loose, gouged at his eyes, fastened onto his limbs like bulldogs; but darkness and their own numbers hampered them and few of their blows landed squarely. Adept at the tricks of fighting one against many, Badger used his enemies as shields, launched his wickedest blows at those who were most aggressive, and kept the fight beneath the roof away from the moonlight.

Once he glimpsed a group struggling in front of Solomon's stall, swaying and staggering, going down and coming up—one

remaining down and another dragging himself away, knotting and untangling for an instant only, and he saw a long arm shoot out and moonbeams glance from a flickering blade. Blizzard was a knifer; he'd never lose *his* knife—he'd die with it in his hand. Then Blizzard's battle cry split the night—a weird sound, high, shrill, piercing, like the blending of some plains Indian's war cry with the long drawn out bugle note of a loafer wolf. Answering yells came from town.

Time passed—seconds, minutes perhaps—Badger neither knew nor cared, submerged as he was in a red inferno of fury—curses, groans, gasps, sweat, blood, hate, rage, and with that savage voice viciously pounding at his brain, "Kill 'em! Damn 'em! Kill 'em!"

He worked his way back into Belial's stall. He beat them off for an instant. Again they leaped upon him like famished wolves. He landed a glancing blow beneath the eyeholes of a sack-covered head. The vigilante spun half around staggered, held on his feet by those behind him. In a twinkling the big Ranger clamped his powerful arms about the dazed man and retreated into deeper darkness, all the way to the manger.

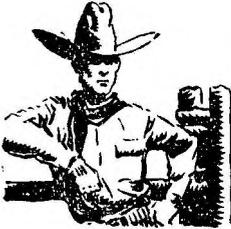
"Hold it, fellers!" yelled his captive weakly. "He's got me in front of him."

The gang hesitated at the entrance to the stall. Badger's prisoner struggled desperately to free his arms, kicked with his spurred heels, but the Ranger's boot tops protected his legs and the man was like a child in the grip of a bear.

**B**ADGER clamped down with a jerk that brought a gasp of pain from his captive. "Be still, damn yo' soul, or I'll break you in two!"

The vigilante momentarily subsided. Badger took stock of things. He saw Blizzard break away from his assailants and leap back into a stall. He heard yells and the sound of men and horses running, coming from town and not far distant. He

saw Belial rearing at the front gate, crazed with fright and excitement; and he saw Solomon standing placidly in a far corner. A moment later his heart leaped, for he saw the mob breaking away. Calling excitedly back and forth, men clambered over the fence and disappeared. Others picked up the fallen and staggered away with them, evidently determined not to leave their dead and wounded behind to be



identified. Badger's captive renewed his struggles.

The big Ranger lifted him bodily and rammed his head and shoulder into the side of the stall. "I'll drive yo' blasted brains down yo' throat, so help me!"

The fellow's knees sagged and unsupported he might have gone down. He mumbled vicious oaths but made no further effort to escape.

A group of riders dashed up to the corral from town and hard upon their heels came a bunch of men on foot, some yelling and flourishing guns, others running silently. They swarmed into the corral. Blizzard strode out to meet them and Badger followed, carrying his prisoner. One of the newcomers who was evidently familiar with the place emerged from the feed bin with a lantern which he lighted quickly. Its beams fell across the faces of Sandy Fraser, Webb Slayne, John Smith, three of the Rangers' freighter friends and a number of men whom Badger didn't recognize.

In response to several inquiries about what was going on, Blizzard sternly pointed to the stall containing Pop Henderson's body. "Jest take a look in yander," he said grimly. "We found him a-hangin' there."

Led by the man with the lantern, they crowded into the stall. After a moment's stunned silence they cut loose and for fully half a minute the air was blue, but Badger didn't once hear the voice of John Smith or the marshal.

Presently Sandy Fraser elbowed his way out of the stall and strode to where the Rangers were standing with the prisoner. The balance of the crowd was right behind him, some muttering threats, others dangerously silent.

The old-timer shook his fist in the air and demanded hoarsely, "Who in hell done that to Pop?"

Without a word Blizzard shot out his long arm and jerked the sack from the captive's head.

Billy Harkness!

Badger released the man and stepped back.

Blizzard's hard voice broke an instant of silence, "Don't know who hung the old fella, but here's one of the skunks that crawled up jest after we cut him down."

Badger had an eye on Webb Slayne and John Smith. Neither had a word to say and their faces showed no change of expression whatever. The marshal stood with arms folded, his cold eyes fixed upon Harkness. John Smith hooked his fingers in the lower pockets of his satin vest, shifted most of his weight to one leg and grinned at the prisoner.

**A**N OMINOUS growl arose from the crowd. At first no words were distinguishable, but the rumblings soon took the form of dangerous threats, "Hang the cuss!" "String him up!" "Use the rope that hung Pop!" "Lemme tie the knot!"

Billy Harkness backed off a step, snatching at his gun. Badger caught his wrist in a grip that he couldn't break. In the meantime Webb Slayne showed the stuff of which he was made. Two long, quick strides carried him to a point in front of the prisoner. There he whirled and faced the crowd. He made no move to draw his

six-shooters. He made no threats, no attempt to intimidate anyone.

He merely hooked his thumbs in his belt and said quietly and simply, "This man is my prisoner."

The crowd instantly fell silent. Some fidgeted uncomfortably in their tracks, others glanced toward town. Badger afterward swore that when the fellow with the lantern moved it so the light struck Slayne's face, he never saw a colder, harder, meaner look on the face of a white man.

Blizzard spoke up, his voice both harsh and sardonic. "He's your'n all right. Jest see can you hold onto him this time."

"I'll hold him," snapped Slayne, "with you to hell and gone away from here!"

John Smith called attention to himself with a merry little laugh. "I seem to remember," he said whimsically to Blizzard, "that when you came here you swore up and down that Billy Harkness was a friend of yours."

"I shore as hell did," barked the tall sergeant, "but the Billy Harkness I know wouldn't never lend his rope to hang a square old man and his own uncle to boot."

The gambler smiled shrewdly. "Oh, now I understand perfectly—yes, perfectly."

While this was going on, Badger had been watching Sandy Fraser. He figured the old saloon-keeper to be an honest man, knew that he thought a lot of Pop Henderson, and wondered whether the old-timer would buck Webb Slayne. Sandy was thinking it over, all right. Badger saw him glance speculatively at each of the men there as if taking their measure, and he saw the disgust on the old man's face when the bunch let Slayne calm 'em down the way he did. Sandy looked over the heads of the others toward the stall where Pop was hung. Perhaps, thought Badger, he could see Pop's white head lying on the straw. The old-timer gazed fixedly into the stall for a long moment. A change came over him. His angular

shoulders went back a trifle. His weather-beaten frame straightened. He grew taller. Suddenly in the lines of his long bony face there was written desperation of a sort and unspeakable ferocity.

Sandy Fraser's gnarled old hand whipped downward to his holster, fast, but slow compared to the practiced and apparently unhurried movement with which Webb Slayne drew his right-hand Colt.

And each of them was slow in contrast to the speed with which Blizzard whipped out his knife and touched its needle point to the marshal's vest, just below his heart.

"Stop it!" snapped the sergeant. "I'll slit yo' heart if you make ary move to hurt that there old-timer."

Both Fraser and Slayne stopped instantly—the former with his hand on his gun, the latter with his weapon drawn but hanging at his side.

Blizzard next spoke to old Sandy, coldly, a bit accusingly. "But don't never think we aim to help with no offhand hangin's. If it comes to that, we're a-sidin' the marshal."

Forewarned by watching Sandy Fraser, Badger went into action an instant before the old-timer made his first hostile move. He jerked Billy Harkness' gun from its holster, having no weapons of his own, and covered John Smith almost as quickly as Blizzard got the drop on the marshal.

When the sergeant finished his speech, Badger drawled at the gambler, "Ain't got no idee where you stand in this here ruckus, John, but I shore don't aim to take no chances. Jest sorta fold yo' arms with yo' hands *outside* yo' coat. That's it. Much obliged, sah."

John Smith laughed as though amused at a joke on someone else. "Damned if I ever saw the beat of it. A man never knows what you two scalawags will do next. But why pick on me?"

"'Cause I'm a-skeerd of you."

"Hell!" said John Smith.

Blizzard stepped back from the marshal

and sheathed his knife. "This here polecat Harkness is yo' man, Slayne, and so is that pore old fella over yander in a stall. We're a-gittin' clean away from this damned town and we ain't a-waitin' for sunup neither."

Slayne holstered his gun. He spoke carelessly, with no sign of hard feeling, "I'd say it's a pious idee after what you been through."

John Smith grinned at each of the Rangers. "I know it's a fine idea for you to leave, after what *I've* been through."

### CHAPTER VIII

#### DEAD MEN'S WAGON TRACKS

WHEN the rising sun sent its beams to scout the country west of Oxbow the following morning, it discovered the Rangers bedded down at Wagonwheel Springs twenty miles from town. Solomon and Belial had their noses buried in good grass on the little flat bordering the pool not far away, each wearing rawhide hobbles and securely staked.

Badger Coe painfully sat up in the middle of his blankets. He reached for his hat and put it on, afterwards tenderly shifting it from bump to bump until it rested upon the least sensitive spots on his battered head.

"Oh, Lawdy, Lawdy!" he groaned. "What I mean, this here Oxbow country shore is a-treatin' me rough."

Making no attempt to sit up, Blizzard slowly rolled his head on the small sack of shelled corn which served him as a pillow.

He looked dolefully at his young partner with the eye which Doc Starke had left unbandaged when he worked them over before they left town last night.

"Quit yo' gruntin'," he commanded. "Old Oxbow ain't even started to tame you yet. She's jest hazed you in off'n the range. Wait until she snares you and chokes you down and laces her wood onto you and forks you and sinks her iron into

you. By that time you won't have a grunt left in you."

Badger pulled first one knee then the other up to his chin, cautiously, for many sore muscles protested against being disturbed. He hugged his knees and grinned at the sergeant, a grin that was off center because one side of his mouth was badly puffed.

"Damned if you ain't purty," he declared cheerfully. "A fella'd swear you been layin' on yo' back a-lookin' up at a stampede. Shore is exuberatin' to git a squint at you fust thing in the mawnin' when I'm sorta stove up myownself. Take back every last word I said 'bout Oxbow. She's a-treatin' me scrumptious."

Blizzard snorted. He ran tender fingers over the high bridge of his nose which was peeled from his eyes to its tip. He made a cautious reconnaissance in the region of the burr of his right ear where a hard fist or a boot had landed. He hoisted the upper three and one-half feet of himself into a sitting position, cursing steadily in low, heartfelt fashion. With some difficulty he crawled out of his tight jeans pants in which he had, of course, slept. He sent a hand down his right leg from his shirt tail to his ankle, pausing at selected points to test black and blue spots which showed through the red hair covering his shanks. He made an effort to wrap a long arm around himself so as to reach a spot between his shoulder blades, but the arm was stiff and he failed to make it. He cussed some more.

Badger laughed.

Looking down at his naked legs, Blizzard spoke as if talking to himself, "These here scratches on my haid and face don't amount to nothin' much, but what I mean I'm damned sorry I won't git to help plant the skunk that kicked me in the shins and then drove a bootheel smack between my shoulder blades and spun 'round like a top. I carved him a-plenty but they toted him away with 'em, damn the luck!"

It hurt him to laugh, but Badger never-

theless cut loose in earnest. He frequently declared that Blizzard was so tough you couldn't hurt the cuss, and thus to see him battered up was something to be enjoyed to the fullest extent. The young Ranger's active mind was already fabricating a tall story to be told with great gusto when they returned to their company.

**S**UDDENLY he thought of something else. "Now what you got to say 'bout Roma Aherne? She told us the truth."

Blizzard seemed to be counting his ribs as if doubtful whether they were all there. "From now on I ain't got nothin' to say 'bout nothin', no time."

Badger's right eye was almost swelled shut and his left looked to have seen hard service. He carefully wiped them with a bent forefinger. "And that there Goldie gal. She told us the gospel truth two times hand-runnin'. What you got to say 'bout her now?"

Blizzard went to lie down again and cursed manfully upon discovering another sore muscle in the small of his back.

"Goldie?" he grunted. "Huh! Ary fella with a lick of sense oughta know better'n to talk 'bout a woman 'cause no matter what he says, she's shore to make a double-bar'led liar out'n him."

Badger started to say something but stopped suddenly upon unearthing a particularly painful spot behind his left ear. He, too, cursed mightily.

Blizzard grinned through a multitude of scratches and bruises. He drawled, "Female loco shore does soften a fella up."

The big Ranger critically eyed the skinned knuckles of both hands, slowly opening and closing his fists and tentatively trying out a few swollen finger joints.

"Uh-huh-h," he growled, "and I betcha them warts on yo' brain is twice as big as they was befo' yo' head took the beatin' it got last night. Here we are, a-groanin' with misery and more'n likely crippled for

life and it's all for nothin', 'cause you ain't found out a damned thing. A Ranger sa'jint! A expert manhunter! Hell! I'll swear Cap'n Hank must've been drunker'n a pickled polecat when he made a sa'jint outa you."

The purpose of this outburst being, of course, to influence Blizzard to talk about what he had learned.

The lanky sergeant let the insult pass. He looked his young friend over with the critical but impersonal gaze of a horse buyer inspecting an animal of doubtful quality.

"Huh-rumpn," he said.

"And likewise, you're a damned liar."

Blizzard fingered his head bandage thoughtfully, as if more than half convinced that he could get along without the thing.

"'Cause you allowed that we'd git the skunk that hung pore old Pop Henderson," continued the big Ranger, "and you never did try to git nobody 'ceptin' a doc to fuss over them scratches you got."

**T**HIS accusation brought the sergeant to one elbow, the light of battle in his eye. "Jest mark my words—we'll git him all right, but he's gotta wait. Seein' Pop thataway made me so damned mad I clean forgot that we still got us a job of work to do and the job comes fust."

"Who is the cuss?"

"I ain't noways sartin yet," declared Blizzard, "and I won't guess 'cause many a man has gone to hell for guessin' 'bout sech things. But I'd shore give a pretty penny to find out what sort of a game John Smith is a-dealin'—square or crooked or jest meejum."

"What did Sandy Fraser tell you 'bout old John?"

"How in hell did you know I talked to Sandy 'bout him?"

Badger grinned complacently. "'Cause I got brains and I done broke 'em to ride or work in harness."

"Maybe them brains of yours is broke

but they ain't gentled by a long shot," retorted the sergeant. "Anyhow, Sandy says that John Smith drifted into Oxbow quiet-like better'n a year ago and got hisself a reppitation fust off."



"How'd he do it? Kiss all the gals or git locked up."

"Huh! That's yo' way of goin' about it, but John Smith—he's a *man*," said Blizzard disgustedly. "John's a-settin' in a leetle game of stud over to the Prairie with fo' five scalawags from here and yander when somethin' comes up and a brace of breed hoss thieves from the Nations crawled him simultaneous. So John Smith gits hisself a reppitation there and then, and the breeds git planted bright and early next mawnin'."

"Purty fair for a starter. Then what?"

Blizzard got hold of his jeans and painfully pulled them on without sitting up, simply by elevating his legs and utilizing the force of gravity as much as possible.

"Nothin' much," continued the sergeant. "John goes and comes a-makin' friends with mighty nigh everybody, and befo' long him and the Ahernes and Webb Slayne and that crowd is as thick as a stampede in a box canyon."

With innocent frankness, Badger declared, "In my day I been powerful thick with a whole slew of folks but that ain't the way I got my reppitation. What else has old John done for hisself?"

Blizzard regarded his young partner with patient indulgence for a moment, then went on to say, "Come to think of it, Sandy did tell me 'bout a gun-totin' Mex monte sharp that strayed over from Monterey.

That there Mex is nine times as crooked as the Pecos and befo' you could say Sam Houston, his game has corralled damned nigh all the money in Oxbow. 'Bout that time John Smith figgers mebbe he'd better pike a leetle monte hisself, so he shows up the Mex's tricks and when the wind blows the smoke away, John's reppitation ain't damaged none to speak of but the monte sharp is plumb ruint. They planted *him* 'bout a hour befo' sundown on a Sattiday."

Badger nodded, not greatly impressed, and waited for the sergeant to continue.

"And bein' a slick and shiny slim fella that don't never git mistook for a grizzly or a buff'ler," drawled Blizzard, "all the gals is a-fightin' tooth and toenail over John but—"

"No need to go no farther. Far as I'm consarned, old John's done got him a reppitation."

"—he don't pay 'em no mind, jest keeps on a-moonin' 'round that there Chapa gal and her every bit as hard to ketch as a cottontail in a briar patch."

"Huh!" grunted Badger. "John knows his keerds but he's got a heap to larn 'bout wimmin. If it was me, I'd rip the briars up by the roots and grab onto the rabbit."

"Uh-huh, and chances is she'd turn out to be a porkypine," asserted Blizzard. "But they's one thing 'bout John Smith that's got me thinkin'. Off and on he goes away and stays for quite a spell and when he comes back he allows he's been a-travelin' for his health. Old Sandy declares that everybody in Oxbow thinks too much of his own health to ask John where he goes for his'n, so I been thinkin'."

"Hell! A gamblin' man has got health to nuss same as a Ranger."

**B**LIZZARD derricked himself to a sitting position with the aid of one good arm and some first-rate profanity. "Mmmm-huh, and a sight more of it I'd say, porely as I am this mawnin'. But every time John Smith comes home he fetches Chapa pretties and things that come from

Old Mexico and no place else, so I been thinkin'."

Badger picked up one of his boots. He turned it up-side-down and shook and slapped it good. "Git outa there vigilantes! Wouldn't be at all surprised to find one of the skunks in my boots or blankets." He suddenly glanced across at Blizzard. "By the way, what did Sandy tell you 'bout Buck and Roma?"

The red-headed sergeant grinned. "Them saddle-broke brains of your'n shore is a-joggin' along. Old Sandy he didn't have much to say 'bout the Ahernes, sorta sidled 'way from 'em you might figger. But he did tell me that Buck married Roma in Chihuahua two year ago when he was down in Old Mexico with a wagon train, and fetched her back with him along with a train load of beans and hides. 'Pears like Roma has lived most of her life in Mexico and she still goes a-visitin' down there ever so often, a-ridin' in a ambulance with one of Buck's trains."

Blizzard eyed his boots rather doubtfully for a moment, then picked up one of them. While shaking it out, he went on to say, "Old Sandy Fraser shore don't never forget nothin'. When I sorta inquired 'round off-hand-like, he recollected two three times when Roma was away and John Smith went a-travelin' for his health kinda accidentally simultaneous, so I been thinkin'."

"There you go a-thinkin'," growled Badger, pulling on his second boot. "All you ever do is think, but me—I'm a man that does things. Right now I'm a-fixin' to make us a pot of coffee that's so damned thick and heavy she'll jar yo' stummick and rattle yo' ribs when she hits bottom. Jest lemme chaw up a chunk of that agitatin' beverage and 'bout a dozen of them cold biscuits I stole from the hotel kitchen last night, and I'm on my way a-huntin' more vigilantes 'cause I'll be needin' exercise to digest my vittles. Roll out and feed the broncs!"

"Tech me and you're a dead man!"

**A**N HOUR later the Rangers were in the saddle. In the estimation of men of their tough breed, nothing short of total disability was an honest excuse for failure to stay on the job. They might, and usually did, groan and grunt and cuss and swear by all their personal gods that they couldn't or wouldn't budge an inch, but, when the cook's call rang out at the crack of dawn they'd consider it a disgrace to stay in their blankets if they had the strength to lift their heads.

And when there happened to be no cook, roundup boss, trail boss, or cow foreman to sound the call to duty, their own devotion to the job drove them harder than any of these.

Badger and Blizzard rode the main east-and-west trail that traversed the desolate and untenanted region between Oxbow and Fort Stockton or "Camp Stockton" as this military outpost was sometimes called; but they didn't by any means stick to the high-way.

The sergeant insisted upon scouting the country as they went along, even back-tracking a distance of six or eight miles over that portion of the trail which they had traveled the night before.

In answer to Badger's complaint about a waste of time, he said, "I'll betcha a stack of blues that som'eres within fifty mile of Oxbow they's wagon tracks a-forkin' off from this here trail to'rds the no'theast."

"No'theast? Why in hell would anybody wanta go that way when they got so much country south and west of 'em?"

"Dead Hoss Canyon."

"Oh!" exclaimed Badger, greatly enlightened. "Then let's us keep on a-circlin' until we find them damned wagon tracks."

The Rangers were to a certain extent aided in their search by the fact that this was the rainy season, which, however, didn't mean a great deal in a country that averaged to receive only fifteen inches annually; but the ground was softer than it would have been earlier in the summer or in the middle of winter, and there was al-

ways the possibility that they might discover where wagons had passed when it was wet.

So they rode for hours with the sun boiling down upon them, breathing alkali dust kicked up by their horses and often whipped into their faces by a fitful wind, thirsty, stiff, saddle leather mighty hard to the touch, open wounds irritated by the caustic dust and the salty perspiration that found its way into them, while Blizzard tenaciously clung to the theory that the wagon tracks did exist and Badger swore, "Let's find 'em!"

Finally, while riding parallel to the trail three hundred yards north of it at a point which the sergeant estimated to be thirty miles west of Oxbow, he suddenly muttered an oath and pointed ahead. There, where the ground was free of catclaw and the scrubby grass was thin, ran the tracks of a single wide-tired wagon drawn by mules. A light shower had fallen since the tracks were made, so he was unable to do more than roughly estimate their age at not greater than a month or six weeks—perhaps much less; but that was of no particular importance. He had found his wagon tracks, the wagon was loaded, and the mules were pointed northeast across the open country.

He turned to Badger, a faintly triumphant light in his bloodshot eye. "There she is. Jest a waste of time to ride her out 'cause she'll lead us to some leetle waterhole and on to another'n until she gits to the canyon. From the first waterin' on, I calc'late she'll have company—plenty company, maybe a wide-open trail and maybe not. If it's easy goin' from there on, more'n likely they scatter; and if it ain't, they prob'ly got 'em a reg'lar trail. Betcha he turned outa the main trail over yander where it was rocky and he didn't leave much sign. A leetle farther on we're due to find more tracks, jest mark my words."

Since he made it a point never to give his partner any credit to his face, Bad-

ger grunted, "Maybeso, we're a heap more likely to find Comanche tracks. My medicine tells me we're in bad country and my brains tell me my hair is loose."

Gazing down at the wagon tracks, Blizzard nodded carelessly. "Yes, hah, we're mighty nigh smack in the middle of the Comanche range and it's light of the moon to boot."

"Then why don't we git to hell outa here?"

"We're on a hunt for more tracks and we gotta find a fust-rate place to stick up a wagon train."

The big Ranger shifted his weight to one stirrup, one swollen hand on the horn of his saddle—the other on its cantle, and glared at his lanky partner.

"Stick up what?" he exploded.

"A wagon train," drawled Blizzard, "jest a leetle one."

Badger slowly but emphatically shook his head. "Me—I done fit vigilantes until I ain't nothin' but a walkin' talkin' corpse and I'll fight Injuns if I cain't outrun 'em, but damned if I'll monkey with ary wagon train while the Good Lawd gives me the strength to say 'No!' and back it up."

"Why not?"

"'Cause it's resky as hell and they's no money in it."

That part of Blizzard's face which the bandage left visible was very solemn. "Mmmm-huh, reckon you're right 'bout that, so we'll jest see can we find a fust-rate place for somebody else to hold up a wagon train."

After one long, vicious look at his partner, Badger rode on cussing to himself.

As the sergeant had prophesied, they found six more sets of wagon tracks which angled off from the main trail and meandered across the plain in a northeasterly direction. He carefully examined the tracks and determined that they were of uniform age, which of course indicated that they were made by wagons of the same train.

After going ahead until satisfied that there were no more tracks to be found,

Blizzard reined Solomon to a halt. He twisted in the saddle and gazed off toward the northeast, his jaw set, his face unusually stern.

He said, "Dead men's wagons made them tracks."

"What makes you think that?"

"They was seven of 'em," answered the sergeant, speaking slowly, "and they was seven wagons in the Lohman and Woertz train that disappeared som'eres this side of Fort Stockton less'n a month ago. These here wagons was prairie schooners and so was the L and W outfit. Leetle barefooted mules was a-pullin' 'em—ten to the wagon, two to the tongue and two sets of fours, and that was the L and W hook-up. No two ways 'bout it, that there outfit went to Dead Hoss Canyon and we done found where they started."

"Might be," conceded Badger skeptically, "but I'd come a heap closer to believin' it if I was to see 'em in Dead Hoss."

"You never will," retorted Blizzard, "'cause they went in there painted blue with black runnin'-gear, and they come out steel gray and red. I still got the board I found up there, the one where the Tar Baby boy had been mixin' his colors. Calc'late it's due to come in handy one of these days."

Badger grinned as best he could. "Shore hope you don't git yo' long nose to my trail next time I make off with a wagon train. What's our next move?"

"We're a-headin' west and a-hopin' we git there," was Blizzard's cryptic answer. "Come on."

**T**HE Rangers returned to the main trail and continued onward at a leisurely but steady gait until they reached the next water—Linchpin Springs—shortly after sundown. When Badger saw the place—a twenty-foot perpendicular bank crowned by thick brush with the pool at its base from which the branch made its way through a meadow four or five acres in extent into a draw with rugged banks of-

fering excellent cover, he declared that this would be a first-rate place to rob a wagon train. Blizzard, who had been over this trail before and knew the country, stated that this was the point he had in mind; and he went on to say that, in all probability, here was where the L and W outfit met disaster.

They lost no time in giving their horses a feed of grain and in disposing of their own meager supper. Afterward, Blizzard stood guard in the brush on top of the bluff while Badger grazed their animals on the flat below. Some time later but before the moon came up, they rode west on the trail for a mile or so and circled back to



the draw three hundred yards south of it. There they hobbled and staked their horses, spread their blankets and slept until day-break.

Upon their return to the spring, Badger was amused and inclined to ridicule when Blizzard spent all of ten minutes examining the grass around the remains of their campfire and the banks of the pool and spring-branch; but his amusement changed to a tingle of excitement when the sergeant calmly assured him that a band of eight or ten Indians had visited the place less than three hours before.

"Hoss thieves, more'n likely," concluded Blizzard, "'cause they was a-carryin' loose

hosses and some of 'em was shod. Prob'ly been a-raidin' down Uvalde way and if we was to camp here a day or so, I betcha we'd see old Bigfoot Wallace come bustin' along on their trail."

From the springs to Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos the Rangers traveled unhurriedly, looking the country over for points favorable to the ambushing of a wagon train; but they covered the remaining thirty-odd miles to Fort Stockton at a lively gait so as to make up some of the lost time on the trail.

**I**T WAS early in the afternoon of the day upon which the Parker and Bosch train was due when they walked their horses onto the mesa where the fort was situated, fifty feet above Comanche Creek. One of the first things that caught Blizzard's eye was the P&B train of eight wagons corraled on the creek a short distance south of the fort, great blue and black wagons with PARKER & BOSCH and a number painted upon each side of their tarpaulin covers.

He called Badger's attention to the train, remarking, "Got in early. Must've camped at Leon Springs nine mile west last night. Now here's where our troubles commence."

"What the hell?" rumbled the big Ranger. "If our troubles ain't even commenced yet, Lawd help us!"

"That's it exactly," drawled Blizzard. "I don't know that there wagonboss but chances is he's plenty tough, 'cause they gotta be. We dassn't let on that we're Rangers, but somehow or other we're bound to persuade the cuss to do what we want him to do. Wouldn't be at all surprised if we have to make out to be jest a leetle tougher'n he is. Cain't tell."

Badger eyed his lanky partner for a moment, grinning. "All I gotta say is—don't make no difference how tough he is, soon as ever he gits a squint at you he'll hit for the tall timbers in a mile-high cloud of dust. Damned if it don't skeer me to

look at you with them shaved spots on yo' head—(Blizzard had long since thrown away his bandage)—and yo' face covered by larrupin' stand of red cactus, lookin' like it'd been kicked dead center by a mule."

Blizzard allowed the uncomplimentary remark to pass unchallenged. His gaze was fixed upon three Mexicans who were leaning against the front of a ramshackle adobe shack a short distance away on his left.

"When we ride past that there dobe," he said quietly, "jest take a good look at the Mex in the middle. Come on."

Whereupon the Rangers walked their horses down the road that led to the stage station and corral, passing within a few yards of the shack. The tall Mexican to whom Blizzard referred eyed them sharply from beneath the wide brim of his sombrero, but the officers glanced at him and his companions with no more than casual interest.

When they were out of hearing, Badger exclaimed, "Hell's fire! I'll swear I done seen that there scamp in Oxbow."

"That's what I calc'lated you'd say," drawled the sergeant. "Last time I seen him he was a-loadin' cawn meal and truck into a hunter's wagon in front of Aherne's store. Chances is he rid over here jest to git hisself some exercise, but I'm a-thinkin'."

"Me too," growled Badger, "and what I mean, I got a itch right square between my shoulder blades sorta like a sharp knife a-gougin'."

"Don't scratch it 'cause it might spread," cautioned Blizzard absently. "And them other two fellas—they looked like drivers and I'm sorta wonderin' whether they belong to the P&B outfit."

"It won't take long to find out."

"Nope," agreed the sergeant grimly, "and likewise we gotta find out whether that there Oxbow caballero heads east or west when he leaves here, if he leaves befo' we do and I calc'late he will."

HAVING put their horses up at the corral and themselves eaten at the little restaurant which served transients and the limited civilian population, the Rangers set out to take a little walk and look the place over. Badger did a lot of growling about the quality of the food they got and the cost of it.

He wound up by saying, "I been robbed by some powerful bad bandits in my day, but the boss of that there chuck wagon back yander tops 'em all."

"You cain't blame the pore cuss," declared Blizzard. "Didn't you hear him a-tellin' me that milk is twenty cents a quart and butter a dollar a pound and eggs seventy-five cents a dozen and chickens is a dollar to a dollar and a half on the hoof. Likewise he allows the only vegetables raised 'round here is growed at the fort garden fo' mile out yander, so he has to pull watercess on the crick and use it for fodder 'cause us gringoes won't eat roasted Turk's Head cactus like the Mex's do. Hush up and try to l'arn somethin' 'bout this old fort. She's got a heap of history behind her."

Calling upon the fine memory for details with which many unlettered men of the frontier were gifted, he gave to his young partner facts that he had gathered upon previous trips through the country; how "a old Spaniard by the name of Mendoza" swore he killed three buffalo there away back in 1683, which was the only record of buffalo drifting west of the Pecos; how the forty-niners on their way to California by the southern route often camped there at Comanche Springs and at one time called the place Saint Gall; and he described a number of Indian fights that had taken place there before the fort was established and while it was abandoned during the Civil War, this having been a favorite camp ground for Indians—especially war parties returning with stolen horses after raids into Mexico. He pointed out the long Arkansas-Chihuahua Train which touched there, continuing through Fort Davis in the

lofty Davis Mountains seventy-four miles southwest and on to a crossing of the Rio Grande at Presidio del Norte one hundred forty-seven miles away through unpopulated country—the route most frequently taken by freighters trafficking with the Mexican cities of Chihuahua and Parral.

Badger occasionally punctuated Blizzard's monologue with a flippant remark, but he nevertheless listened with interest for men of his type who were denied scholastic advantages derived much of their education in this fashion.

The sergeant ambled over to where they could get a good view of Comanche Creek and pointed out where it rose half a mile south of the fort. He went on to say that it flowed about four miles north and east into a sandy swamp; that it was fed by six springs and a government engineer once told him that these springs put out an average of thirty million gallons daily—enough water for every human in Texas; and he declared that a fella could catch mighty nice perch and catfish in the creek, and if he went swimming in it during the mosquito season he could more'n likely catch himself a dose of malaria.\*

THEY drifted over to the fort proper, at that time garrisoned by Negro soldiers — "buff'ler sojers" the plainsmen called them. Blizzard called Badger's attention to the guardhouse, a one-story structure of limestone blocks about fifty by eighteen feet.

"Make shore to stay outa there," the sergeant warned him. "I recollect the time we dropped a Baker and Cummin's herd at Horsehead to rest up, Johnny Hawks rid over here and got tight and they slapped him into that there army calaboose. When we finally pry Johnny loose, he jest stands out here on the edge of the peerade ground and looks up at the sky with his mouth

\* Badger and Blizzard were at Comanche Springs in the early 70's. At that time the springs had been flowing for no telling how long, and they're flowing today—minimum twenty-six and one-half million gallons, maximum forty-two million seven hundred thousand, converting thousands of acres of desert into fine farms.—C. C.

wide open, a-draggin' in big swallers of air like a pony with the heavens."

Badger looked skeptical. He said, "Air? I know for a fact that the army don't pay nothin' much and off and on a sojer's grub is powerful skimpy, but damned if I believe Uncle Sam's ever been too tight to give his men all the air they need."

Blizzard continued to stare at the guard-house. "Cain't help what you think, 'cause I know what Johnny said. The back end of that there calaboose has got two cells and the fella that built her figgered out jest how much air one man oughta have, so he gives them cells one winder apiece and it's jest eighteen by fo' inches. The whole trouble is, he figgered on one man to the cell and they most generally got from a dozen to twenty. Pore Johnny allowed they was fifteen of 'em in there with him, some of 'em a heap drunker'n others."

They ambled on, Badger convinced and mighty thoughtful for the simple reason that he was feeling frisky again and didn't know what might happen in Fort Stockton that night.

Blizzard pointed out the officers' quarters on the west side of the parade ground, one-story adobe houses with stone foundations and shingle roofs, and said something about how tough it must be on women from back East who had never before lived in such places. But Badger wasn't inclined to be sympathetic. He thought of the pioneer women who would consider such a home a mansion, living as they were in dug-outs—holes in the side of a bank, one-room log cabins with mud chinking and dirt or clay floors and no window glass, sod houses with sod roofs that leaked and harbored snakes and poisonous insects; women denied the companionship of their sex or servants to do their work, living in isolation and danger with no army to protect them; and living happily.

**T**HE Rangers rounded the north end of the parade ground and turned back along its east side, passing in front of the

barracks—three adobe buildings eighty by twenty-four feet with thatched roofs. Badger laughed outright and Blizzard grinned at the horseplay of a group of Negro soldiers — cheerful fellows, many of them former slaves—who were unloading mesquite roots from a wagon, their fuel for cooking in summer and heating in winter. Near at hand two of them were doing a hoe-down on one of the adobe platforms upon which they did their cooking, while a third sat cross-legged on the ground and hummed and swayed his body and clapped his hands.

Blizzard pointed out the stables, adobe buildings with stone foundations and shingle roofs, situated between the barracks and Comanche Creek.

Badger chuckled. "'Pears like Uncle Sam thinks more of his ponies than he does of his sojers 'cause the stables has got shingles and the barracks has to git along with grass roofs. Or mebbe he figgers the men are tougher'n the hosses."

Blizzard kept silent, gazing intently toward the stage station. A moment later he stopped in his tracks and pushed Badger aside until they had an army wagon between them and the corral.

"What the hell?" growled the big Ranger.

"That there Oxbow Mex," snapped the sergeant. "He jest forked his bronc down to the stage station and here he comes. Didn't want him to know we seen him. Wonder which way he goes—east or west."

A few moments passed while the Rangers kept an eye on the Mexican by watching around the corner of the wagonbed.

"It's east," said Badger.

"Uh-huh, east," muttered Blizzard, "with news for them that sent him here—the damned spy!"

"Let's us light out after the cuss."

The sergeant shook his head. His voice was hard, "Let him go. We'll meet up with him again at Linchpin Springs more'n likely."

"What next?"

Blizzard leaned against a wagon wheel and rolled a cigarette. "We're a-settin' out to find that there wagonboss and when we find him we'll see can we git acquainted with him sorta accidental-like."

And they found the wagon-master—Lafe Tucker six feet two inches of him, topped by iron gray hair that reached to his square shoulders with eyebrows and beard to match, cheeks the color and texture of old leather, and a voice fit to carry against a prairie gale or to make itself heard above the cracking of whips and the creak and groan of wagons, or the rattle of gunfire. They found him in a little adobe saloon where his hat almost brushed the poles supporting the roof and the size of him seemed to fill the place.

Ten minutes later the Rangers were drinking with him and his caporal—Carlos Perez, a short powerful man with a round face that looked honest and frequently broke into a smile displaying a mouthful of white teeth beneath an imposing mustache. A strong man himself but fifty pounds lighter than Badger, the caporal was almost childishly frank in his admiration of the big Ranger's fine physique.

Before long Badger had everybody laughing while he did a grand job of lying about how he and his partner happened to be so badly marked up.

**B**LIZZARD listened respectfully until the story ended, then he drawled, "He's a liar, gents. We been in a hell of a fight with a band of vigilantes in Ox-bow."

Tucker's laughter boomed out. Carlos smiled admiringly at Badger whose artistic fiction appealed to his Latin taste.

"Leastwise one of you tells the truth," declared Lafe, "and where Texas men is consarned, one outa two is a damned good average. But I ain't noways surprised to hear that you-all been in a fight."

Blizzard looked sharply at the big freighter. "How come?"

Tucker answered frankly, "'Cause

traipsin' back'ards and forth 'cross the country like I do, I been a-listenin' to stories 'bout Badger Coe and Blizzard Wilson for years."

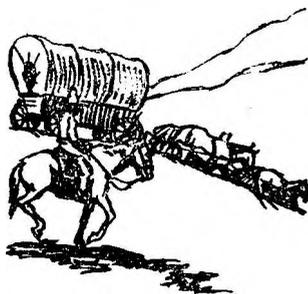
Neither of the Rangers showed his surprise. The sergeant was elated, but he hid that too.

"Good or bad or jest middlin'?" he drawled.

Lafe had a perfectly straight face. He replied, "Sorta fifty-fifty you might say, or mebbe a particle more one way or t'other, mostly t'other I reckon."

Badger blinked his eyes in confusion.

Blizzard grinned dryly, emptied his glass, and made signs to the bartender. When the bottle came he watched the others pour their drinks, afterwards filling



his glass slowly as if measuring it with care. Badger knew something was coming and wondered what it would be.

"Mmmm-huh," said the sergeant after tasting his liquor. "Kinda thin and puny. Must be the altytude. Betcha you heard some of them stories from that there Ox-bow fella that rid outa here a leetle while back."

Lafe Tucker's open countenance plainly showed that he hadn't met the spy. "What Ox-bow fella?"

"Oh-h, he's a long-gear'd Mexican boy a-packin' a stunted mustache with p'int's a mite sharper'n cactus," lazily answered Blizzard, "and he wa'n't a-wearin' no gunnysack over his head *today*."

"Damned keerless of him, I'd say," declared the wagon-master, obviously trying to hide his curiosity. "So he's done left the fort, huh?"

THE sergeant nodded slowly. "Uh-huh, after he got through talkin' confidential-like to a pair of Mexican fellas in front of that there leetle cantina 'cross the road from here. Somehow or other I figgered they was mulateros, but I ain't no ways sartin."

Lafe and Carlos exchanged quick, expressive glances.

The freighter asked sharply, "D'you recollect what that there pair looked like?"

"Didn't pay 'em much attention," drawled Blizzard, "but one of 'em is a hammered-down runt a-packin' the slash brand on his right jaw, left crop and right over-slope, which makes me think that mebbe he's had a argyment with a sharp knife at some time or other."

Tucker looked down at his caporal. "Arturo," he said.

Carlos lifted his shoulders.

"And the other'n," continued Blizzard, "is a grass-bellied, bald-faced scrub with a busted snout and—"

Lafe raised a large hand. "That's Tomas, shore as hell."

Again Carlos lifted his shoulders.

"Now I wonder," continued the wagon-master, thoughtfully stroking his beard, "what in thunderation that there Oxbow vigilante had to say to two of my best drivers."

Carlos narrowed his eyes and lifted his shoulders.

"Jest passin' the time of day with yo' boys, more'n likely," suggested Blizzard carelessly, "but you cain't never tell."

"Nope you cain't," rumbled the big freighter, hitching up his homespun breeches, "but I can come damned close to findin' out."

Carlos bobbed his head.

The sergeant sent a quick glance about the room. There were no other patrons and the bartender was opening a box or barrel outside in the rear of the place, so they had the saloon to themselves.

Blizzard moved close to Lafe as they both leaned against the bar. "Course it

might be," he began quietly, "you onderstand that I'm jest sorta guessin'—but it might be that the Oxbow vigilante buys 'em a leetle bottle of wine and they make talk sociable-like for a spell. Purty soon he sees me and Badger and befo' long he allows he's gotta hit for home 'cause he's got him a wife and six chillun to take keer of, and when he leaves here he knows damned well that you aim to split yo' train at Horsehead and the fo' wagons that stick to the Spanish Trail are a-carryin' nigh onto two hundred thousand dollars Mexican silver in kags underneath their loads. Naturally he already knowed 'bout you havin' the silver."

The sergeant paused briefly. He looked neither at the wagon-master nor the caporal. Instead he stared at a spot on the clay floor, tenderly running his fingers down the peeled bridge of his nose.

He concluded, "When I was a leetle shaver my old pappy allus swore that I'd live to git hung for guessin'. Wouldn't be at all surprised if he was dead right."

Tucker and Carlos responded to the Ranger's startling statement in widely different fashions. Lafe gazed incredulously at the tall redhead, his bristling eyebrows slightly elevated, his big mouth ajar, and one hand mechanically stroking his beard. Carlos, however, seemed to draw his head down between his bulky shoulders, his round face became a bronze mask in which his eyes shone like the black onyx of his native land. This off-hand discussion of his master's secrets by a mysterious and reputedly dangerous stranger had aroused in him all the fierce resentment and loyalty of his breed, and he'd fight at the drop of a hat. Blizzard noted these symptoms, saw Carlos' hand crawl inside his shirt beneath its bottom button, and he promptly thought more of the man.

During this brief interlude when no one spoke, Blizzard could almost read Lafe Tucker's thoughts. He knew that the big fellow was desperately searching his memory for things he had heard about these two

frontier characters; recalling, perhaps, that they were fighting men whose guns were said to be for hire; that they were reported to have little respect for the law and none whatever for a crooked lawman; that they were known to have robbed crooks, but never had been charged with the robbery of an honest man; and that they were wanted in more than one place for deprecations upon persons who, it was rumored, probably deserved what they got although the punishment was said to have been illegally administered. And, when he got his breath, the big wagon-master wondered what in hell he'd better do or say about it.

Presently he shoved his old hat to the back of his head and stood squarely on his flat-heeled cowhide boots. He frowned truculently at the sergeant, and demanded, "How come you to know so damned much?"

Again Carlos bobbed his head. He slid a little closer to the lanky Ranger. His hand remained inside his shirt.

Blizzard grinned dryly at both of them, and with his eyes signalled Badger to behave himself. The young Ranger was all set and hoping for trouble and the sergeant could see it.

"Lafe, fact of the matter is," drawled Blizzard lazily, "we're a brace of powerful ign'rant fellas and don't know nothin' much but we're the guessin'est fools you ever laid eyes on. What time you aim to stretch 'em out in the mawnin'?"

"We're makin' a short drive tomorrer twelve, thirteen mile to Antelope Springs," answered the wagon-master, "so I calc'late we won't start befo' ten. Why?"

"Ten? By dogies!" declared the sergeant, "that's when we been figgerin' on hittin' the trail. Mind if we ride with you a piece?"

**L**A FE TUCKER glanced at Carlos.

Carlos lifted his shoulders.

"Mighty glad to have you," rumbled the freighter, "'cause we need company. Ain't

got but sixteen men and every last one of 'em a-packin' a fifty caliber needle gun for fightin' pu'poses and a fo'ty-five six-shooter jest to play with. Come along and we'll persect you."

He paused suddenly, squinting suspiciously from beneath his bushy eyebrows. "But how come you're a-headin' back to'rds Oxbow after all the vigilante trouble you been havin'?"

Badger intervened. He chuckled and said, "We're a-honin' to make shore that we didn't miss none of them vigilantes."

Tucker laughed in spite of his suspicions.

Carlos smiled broadly. He took his hand from his shirt.

**T**HE bartender came in. Lafe waved a big paw and the bottle promptly made its appearance. Frequently during the ensuing hour, the little adobe trembled to the booming laughter of Badger and the rollicking wagon-master. Each being a story teller of parts, a liar of eminent attainment, they forthwith inaugurated one of those impromptu contests which afforded so much amusement to the robust and pleasure-hungry frontiersmen whose entertainments were of necessity simple in character and limited in number.

This was exactly the situation which Blizzard had hoped would come to pass. Having given Lafe something to think over, he now wanted to win the big fellow's friendship insofar as possible under the circumstances; and when Badger set out to make friends, he knew the young scamp to be mighty hard to resist.

When at last they parted company the wagon-master gave Badger a mighty slap on the back, and boomed heartily, "Now don't you forgit—we're a-rollin' our wheels at ten."

As the Rangers walked off toward the corral where they intended to sleep, Blizzard mused aloud, "Yes sah, and if we cain't make him listen to sense he'll be a-rollin' them wheels to'rds hell."

## CHAPTER IX

## A SMATTERIN' OF TROUBLE

WHEN Badger left the restaurant the following morning, he leaned back against its adobe wall, heaved a big sigh, let his belt out a notch, and declared, "That there thoroughbred chicken and them solid gold aigs shore is rough on a fella's pocket-book and easy on his stummick."

With a quill toothpick protruding from one side of his mouth, Blizzard looked sadly down his long nose at the young Ranger. "Don't bother yo' head 'bout what it cost you 'cause it may be yo' last breakfast. Cain't tell."

"Hush yo' moanin' mouth!" snarled Badger.

But, later, he thought of what the sergeant had said. They were standing with Lafe Tucker near one entrance to the wagon corral, watching the teamsters industriously inspecting and cleaning their weapons in compliance with the wagon-master's command, when it occurred to him that these men were preparing for trouble.

"Damned if you ain't got you a leetle army," he said to Tucker. "Are they good fighters?"

"They're plumb willin'," answered Lafe with a touch of pride, "and them needle guns will kill at better'n a mile, but they ain't one Mex in a hundred that can hit anything beyond two hundred yards or so."

"How come you carry Mex drivers?"

"'Cause they're far and away the best," declared the wagon-master. "In the fust place they got mule blood in 'em so they cuss a mule in his own language and he likes it, and in the second place the pore fellas is peons that ain't never been able to call they souls their own so they don't know no better'n to mind the boss and if he treats 'em human they'll go to hell for him any time they git a chance to do it. Me—I like 'em even if I do have to spank 'em off and on same as if they was chil-lun."

Blizzard gave Tucker a sly glance, and drawled, "Did you spank Arturo and Tomas, if you don't mind sayin'?"

The big freighter scowled terribly for an instant, then his wide shoulders shook with laughter. "Damned if I don't suspicion that you was a-hidin' som'eres and heard every word that there Oxbow vigilante said to my boys. Wa'n't you for a fact?"

The lanky sergeant slowly twisted the trailing ends of his mustache. "No sah, we're guessin' fools—that's all."

"Or lyin' pilgrims, one or t'other," rumbled Lafe. "Anyhow, you done hit the nail on the head all right. My boys didn't know no better so I ain't spanked 'em none, but God help that there Oxbow coyote if they ever lay hands on him."

Blizzard dropped the subject. He ambled around the corral examining the wagons and asking an occasional question about them, which Tucker answered with alacrity. He was proud of this outfit and swore it was the best ever to roll its wheels across the Rio Grande.

These were strongly constructed wagons especially designed for service on the difficult trails of west Texas and Mexico, unsuited to the less mountainous trails on the northern plains because of their weight—approximately four thousand pounds. The big freighter boasted that he could take these wagons to the top of the tower of Babel and down again without busting a wheel or axle or killing a mule, and to substantiate the statement he pointed out some of their salient features: axles of solid iron having spindles three inches in diameter; hind wheels five feet ten inches in height, front wheels a foot lower, tires six inches wide and an inch thick; a brake on each wagon with a beam of selected hickory seven feet long, six by eight inches square, manipulated by a lever with which a man on the seat could lock the rear wheels; a wagonbed of heavy lumber, twenty-four feet long, four and one-half feet wide with sides five and one-half feet high; and over the bows were stretched

heavy tarpaulins that extended well down on the beds, waterproof but not bullet or arrowproof admitted the wagon-master.

"Jest you gimme a load of seven thousand pounds or thereabouts," boasted Lafe, "and ten to fo'teen of these here sprightly leetle mules with Arturo and Tomas to skin 'em, and mistah—come hell and high water, I'll git there."



Presently Carlos and two assistants came up the creek with the remuda of close to a hundred mules. Since the animals were practically uniform in color and size, they all looked alike to Badger and he remarked upon the ease with which the caporal and his men rode into the band and cut out those that were not to go into harness today.

"Huh!" grunted Lafe. "That ain't nothin'. Ary one of these here drivers can go into the ramoother on the blackest night you ever seen and pick out his team. Nobody but a Mex can do it and I ain't never been able to find out how they go 'bout it. Smell 'em, I reckon."

A short time later eighty wiry little mules, the hide on their paunches stretched tightly over water and good grass, were driven into the corral. A number of the older ones at once walked purposefully through openings between the different wagons and halted in the exact positions they would occupy when harnessed and hooked up. The remainder waited sedately in the corral until Carlos cracked his whip and yelled at them, and then there was a scramble as they, too, sought out their respective places.

With a side glance at Blizzard, Badger

chuckled, "Got a sight more brains than some slabsided redheaded humans I know."

THE big wagon-master laughed deep in his chest. "They's times when a mule is too damned smart. If he's got a misery and knows he hadn't oughta work, by the Eternal—he won't work! But regardless, you git to lovin' the cuss 'cause he is so smart. He l'arns quick and he don't never forgit. These here mules was broke in a wagon corral, spent all they lives in one after that and don't know nothin' else, but they shore as hell knows a corral. Why I'll tell you for a fact—Old Flopear over yander, the nigh wheel mule on Number Fo' wagon, knows enough 'bout a train to boss one of 'em from Santone to Californy."

In what seemed to Badger a remarkably shore time—it was, in fact, from twenty to thirty minutes—the drivers began to mount their wheel mules, jerkline in hand, and their assistants or "slashers" as some called them were perched on the wagon-seat. Under each driver's left leg rode his needle gun in a saddle scabbard, and about his waist was a full cartridge belt supporting a holstered six-shooter. Their assistants were similarly armed, rifles carried on the seat behind them as a rule.

A squat little Mexican with bowed legs and a sombrero large enough to smother him should it ever get him down, came to the wagon-master leading a beautiful sorrel mule wearing a fine, silver-mounted Mexican saddle. He bobbed his head, smiled, and handed the bridle reins to his boss.

"Your horse, señor," he said in Spanish.

Afterwards he smiled and bowed to his chief's two friends and returned to his wagon.

Badger looked skeptically from the mule to the big freighter. He pushed his hat over one eye, and inquired, "How come him to call that there brute a hoss? It's a mule if I ever seen one of the things."

Lafe slapped his thigh with the end of his reins and grinned a bit sheepishly.

"Well sah, you see it's like this. That there boy Feliz is a mite teched in the haid and he sorta worships me, as a fella says. He's got a idee that I'd oughta ride nothin' less'n one of them fine 'Rabian stallions and his heart's nigh busted 'cause I ain't got one, so he allus calls Sally Ann here a hoss."

"Well, why in hell don't you git you a 'Rabian stud?"

Lafe elevated his chin and scratched a spot in his beard beneath it. "Calc'late I will befo' long. Feliz come to me a while back and allowed he knowed where he could steal a beauty, but up to now we been too busy for me to spare the boy."

With these words the wagon-master swung into the saddle. The Rangers mounted Solomon and Belial who were standing nearby, and moved aside to watch the wagon train take the trail.

Lafe Tucker ran an eye over his outfit from team to team, wagon to wagon, and man to man obviously neglecting no detail.

A moment later he bellowed, "All set?"

A chorus in English answered him, "All set! All set!"

He swept off his hat. The wind split his beard in half and tossed his iron-gray mane behind his head. He swung the hat in a wide gesture toward the trail.

"Stretch out!" he thundered. "Stretch out!"

There followed the cracking of whips and a confusion of Mexican voices increasing in number and volume as, one by one, the great wagons began to move. Wagon No. 1 with Arturo on the wheel mule rolled out first, followed by Wagons Nos. 2, 3, and 4 comprising the first section of which the scarred-up little driver was the captain. A short distance in the rear came the second section, Wagons Nos. 5, 6, 7, and 8 captained by Tomas. The marching order of the sections would be reversed tomorrow and each day thereafter so as to distribute equally the hardship of traveling in the rear of the train.

Lafe Tucker joined the Rangers and they remained where they were until the

last wagon moved off. From time to time he bellowed something at one of the teamsters, often a jocular remark in Spanish—occasionally a command or criticism punctuated by scolding profanity in both Spanish and English; and he even spoke to some of the mules, calling them by name and addressing them as if they were human.

Everything seemed to move with almost military precision, drivers and teams behaving as if they knew exactly what to do and did it willingly because it was part of their daily lives. Badger marvelled at the snap with which the little mules hit their collars and somehow seemed to get the jump on their loads, contrasted to the slow, steady pull of oxen or heavier mules; and studying them, he soon came to understand why many of the best wagon-masters chose these small, active mules for rough trails.

Carlos, the caporal, drifted the remuda along easily a hundred yards or so to the right of the trail. Although second in command of the train, a position he held because of his ability and honesty, his principal responsibility was the care of the outfit's animals which involved an almost endless search for grass and water. Whether in camp or on the trail, he commanded the post of danger since Indians invariably struck first at the remuda.

When the train rolled slowly down the slope from the mesa, Tucker and the Rangers trotted their mounts past it and took the lead. They rode in this position most of the time, occasionally making side trips to high points from which they could view the surrounding country and the trail ahead, often separating for this purpose. In such instances the wagon-master showed no sign of suspicion, even though the Rangers went off by themselves. On the contrary, as the train moved farther and farther from the protection of the fort, he seemed to appreciate their scouting activities. More than once Badger caught him eyeing with respect the lean, hawk-faced sergeant who now rode with his rifle

across the pommel of his saddle, had little to say, and apparently saw everything that moved within the limits of the horizon.

After they had traveled about six miles, Blizzard sprang a surprise by remarking that he believed he'd better go on ahead and scout the country around Antelope Springs before the train got there. During the space of five seconds Lafe Tucker gazed hard at the sergeant's bony face, evidently making no effort to hide his suspicions; but he must have seen something to reassure him in the Ranger's steady eyes.

He said with unquestionable sincerity, "Go ahead if you're a-mind to and I'll take it kindly if you do, but this is damned dangerous country for a man to ride all by hisself." He glanced quickly at Badger and back to the sergeant. "Take yo' pardner along even if he ain't much good in a fight, which I suspicion he ain't."

Before the big Ranger could frame a suitable defense or counter-offensive, Blizzard spoke up, "I'd a heap ruther go it alone than to have to wet nuss him through Injun country. Keep a eye on the cuss if trouble starts 'cause he's shore to spook and mebber stampede yo' loose stock, So 'long."

AND Badger was still thinking of all the things he should have said to his ornery partner when the train rolled down to the springs shortly after four o'clock. Soon after they got there Blizzard came up out of a draw below the pool, rifle in the crook of his arm, the creases in his face and neck filled with alkali dust. Evidently he had been riding some, for the tough Solomon was in a lather. Nothing was said about where he had been or what he had seen until after supper, when he picked up his rifle and dryly invited Lafe and Badger to accompany him to the crest of a nearby knoll from which they could get a fine view of the sunset.

"I'd shore like to see the old sun roll into his blankets jest once if I could," drawled the wagon-master, "'cause in all

my bawn days I ain't never seen a sunset."

From his four inches advantage in height over the tall freighter, Blizzard gazed dolefully down at him as they ambled up the slope. "And if you don't take keer, I wouldn't be noways surprised if this is yo' last chance to see one of 'em."

Lafe looked at Badger, his bristling eyebrows standing out like bunch grass on a still day. Badger slowly shook his head. They trudged on in silence. Upon arriving at the crest of the knoll they hunkered down not far apart, Tucker facing the Rangers. Although he did his best to hide the fact, Badger was very much on edge, for he realized that Blizzard was about to undertake one of the stiffest jobs they ever tackled—converting this tough, cold-jawed wagon-master to their way of thinking; and the outlook wasn't made any brighter by the knowledge that Tucker had seventeen men who would wade through hell at a nod from him. Those men might not be the best fighters in the world, but, as the freighter himself had said, they were "willin'."

Blizzard opened the dance in typical Blizzard fashion. His long keen eyes fastened upon Tucker's face in a gaze that was fierce, perhaps slightly domineering, and extremely confident.

"Mistah," he said quietly, "you're in one hell of a jackpot."

Evidently Lafe had prepared himself for something like this. He sat down and crossed his legs Indian fashion, and went to filling a very black cob pipe. "Go ahead!" he growled. "I'm a-listenin'."

"Glad to hear it," drawled Blizzard. "I was a-skeerd you wa'n't."

He, too, sat cross-legged with his rifle in his lap, continuing, "Fust off, we'll take that there Oxbow vigilante. When he rid outa the fort I jest happened to see that his pony is a mite splay-footed."

Badger experienced a slight twinge of conscience. He saw that buckskin walking, trotting, and loping but he didn't notice that it turned its toes out a little.

"So it wa'n't no trouble," Blizzard was saying, "to pick up his tracks on the trail and foller 'em to Antelope Springs. When he gits here he meets two other fellas that has been waitin' for him down yander in the draw, mebbe fo' five hours from the looks of the sign. I calc'late that whoever sent the cuss to the fort, sent these other two jaspers to fetch him back so's to see that nothin' happened to him befo' he got there with the news 'bout you and yo' silver."

Blizzard paused to light a cigarette.

"Who in hell sent him?" rumbled the wagon-master. And from where and why, and what the devil are you comin' to?"

"We're a-comin' to it all right," drawled the sergeant. "Jest don't you git in no lather. Old Splay-foot and his boss and a lot more like 'em will be waitin' for you som'eres between Hosshead and Linchpin Springs, and chances is they heads will be done up in gunnysacks—cain't never tell."

**L**AFE puffed hard on his pipe for a moment. "How come you to know so damned much?" he grunted. "Huh?"

The pink rays from the sagging sun seemed to deepen the hollows and sharpen the bones in the sergeant's long face, to make his thin lips thinner, his cold eyes colder. But the tough old wagon-master met his unwavering gaze without faltering.

"Don't know much," drawled Blizzard, "but I done picked up a few things while we been skytootin' here and yander a-dodgin' crooked sheriffs and sech, like for instance—"

And from there he drifted into a detailed description of the load—general merchandise and some mining machinery—which the Parker and Bosch wagons had freighted on this trip from San Antonio to Chihuahua in Old Mexico, giving the exact amount of the charges the wagon-master was supposed to collect from the consignees, all of which data Blizzard had secured from one of the owners at San

Antonio early in the course of his investigation.

The longer he talked the more completely flabbergasted Lafe Tucker became, but the lanky sergeant rambled on, "And after you'd unloaded the bulk of yo' freight at Chihuahua you drifted on down to Parral with some machinery and swapped it for bar silver. Then you come on back to Chihuahua and lazy 'round a spell while a fella by the name of Muller coins that there silver into Mex money at his mint, and now you got the money down yander in them fo' wagons that make up the no'th side of yo' corral. You're a-figgerin' to haul it to Luling and put it on the keers for Galveston, but she shore won't never git there if them boys in gunnysacks has their way—and I ain't talkin'."

This speech knocked the breath from Lafe. He worked his pipe so hard a cloud of smoke hid his face as if his whiskers were on fire. Presently he demanded, "Who told you that passel of lies 'bout my business?"

Blizzard stared steadily at him. He looked away.

"You know durned well," declared the sergeant firmly, "that I been tellin' you the gospel truth, but I don't mind sayin' that I got it from a fella down to Santone."

"What fella?" barked Tucker.

"He'll heft 'bout two hundredweight all in one chunk," continued Blizzard, "and he's got a round face like a apple with leetle blue eyes planted deep in it and a wallopin' big yaller mustache glued onto it.

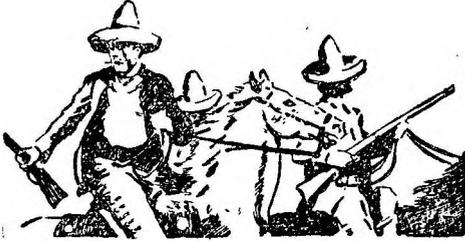
"Likewise he's got him a brewery and I done heard tell that he swizzles mighty nigh all the beer it can make. He's got a Yankee pardner, too, by the name of Parker and his name is Hugo Bosch, Parker and Bosch. Ever heard of 'em?"

Obviously Lafe could think of nothing to say, so he said, "Grumph!"

Blizzard went sedately on, "Parker and Bosch has got 'em a larrupin' fine wagon train and a hard-headed wagonboss by the

name of Lafe Tucker. And that's 'bout all I know."

The redheaded Ranger took off his hat and thoughtfully ran his fingers over a couple of the rapidly healing gashes which



were surrounded by shaven spots. He drawled, "My old haid shore feels like I was a-molting'."

As for Lafe, all set to explode as he was, Blizzard's last flippant remark was especially irritating; but, being a man of sound judgment and strong will, he controlled his temper with a tight rein for the time being. Badger afterwards swore that he saw the big freighter's thoughts milling around like mustangs in a trap.

**F**OR fully half a minute he sat hunched over like a sullen bear, gazing morosely down the slope at his corral. Then he growled, "How come that old Dutchman to git pussonal with the likes of you and tell you all them things, if he did—which I doubt like hell?"

Blizzard nodded once as if he considered the question a proper one. "You see it's like this," he began. "Them big freightin' outfits, several of 'em, is gittin' sick and tired of havin' they trains robbed and the crews murdered, so me and Badger is drawin' down damned good money to put a stop to that there monkey business. That's how come Mistah Bosch to make talk with me sorta confidential-like."

Lafe shot him a shrewd glance from the side of his eye. "Then why didn't Hugo let me know that he'd done hired you?"

"'Cause you was 'way down in Old Mexico when they made up their minds to do somethin' 'bout it, that's why."

The wagon-master continued to regard him with heavy suspicion. "Huh!" he snorted. "Bosch ain't noways a fool, so why would he pick a pair of more or less badmen with bounties on their hair when Texas has got some damned good Rangers that git paid to take keer of sech things?"

The sergeant answered promptly and unperturbably, "Plain as the burrs in yo' whiskers, Lafe. The law is so daggoned hide-bound it hobbles and sidelines its men and hogties jestic. But me and Badger don't never let it hinder us none to speak of and somehow or other them Santone fellas found that out. They figger that arrests and acquittals or pens and pardons ain't noways a shore and sartin cure for their miseries, but they do know that a good buryin' is a damned fine remedy for mighty nigh anything. So they sent for us."

Said Lafe with biting sarcasm, "Who plants yo' dead men?"

Blizzard's long hand hid the lower half of his face, but there was a faint twinkle in his eye. "Been too damned busy to find out," he drawled, "but whoever 'tis, they're due to have a hell of a job on they hands befo' we finish up this business and pocket the good money we're out to earn."

The big wagon-master stroked his beard and eyed the lean sergeant critically for a moment, afterwards observing, "Betcha you'd do purty nigh anything to earn them wages."

"Off hand I cain't think of anything we wouldn't do."

"Mmmm-huh," mused Lafe, "but why in thunderation have you made this big talk to me? I'm plumb tuckered out a-listenin' to you."

Blizzard put on his old hat and pulled it well down, almost to his thin sandy eyebrows. For ten seconds thereafter he sat perfectly still, except for the hand that slowly stroked the stock of his rifle while he gazed somberly out across the stunted chaparral and starved grass that clothed, as if in rags, the dejected land around him.

"'Cause I been hopin'," he said seriously, "that I'd be able to sorta persuade you to do some things that I calc'lated you wouldn't want to do, but would damned well have to do."

The old freighter bristled ever so little, but still held onto his temper. "What things?"

There wasn't the slightest vestige of uncertainty in the sergeant's voice. On the contrary, he spoke with the supreme confidence of a man sure of his ground and prepared ruthlessly to enforce his will upon all who offered resistance.

"If you got the brains I figger you got," he began slowly, appearing to weigh each word, "you'll see the sense of these here things and won't make no argyment. To commence with, you'll set off five six men to comb the bresh and draws for half a mile 'round camps befo' dark jest to make sartin that they ain't no spies a-hidin' out close by.

"I already done it once, but they could've snuck up sence then. And likewise, you'll leave them guards stay out for quite a spell."

**T**HE wagon-master nodded his massive head. "Sounds reasonable, all right. Go on."

"Next thing," continued Blizzard, "soon as ever it gits good and dark and befo' the moon comes up, you switch yo' wagon covers from the fust to the second section and vicy vercy so that when you git through, wagons one, two, three, and fo' ain't a-carryin' the silver like they are now."

The sergeant stopped for fully half a minute while Lafe Tucker pondered the matter. "Hell of a lot of trouble," muttered the big freighter, "but it's a idee that has got its good p'int. I'm a-listenin'."

"That's what I allowed," said Blizzard. "Then when you split yo' train at the Pecos, the silver wagons hit the Devil's River trail and the others stick to the Spanish Trail with they loads of hides and beans

and truck that ain't wuth nothin' much except for smugglers to hide things in."

Lafe jerked his head around as if the Ranger had yanked his whiskers. "What in hell d'you know 'bout smugglers?"

"Considerable," drawled Blizzard, "and I'm a-l'arnin' more every day we're out on this daggoned scout."

Badger picked up *his* ears, for this was the first time he had heard his close-mouthed partner seriously mention smugglers in connection with this case.

Tucker looked thoughtful for a moment, then asked, "Is that all you figger I'd oughta do?"

There seemed to be a little more snap in the sergeant's voice when he answered, "No sah, 'tain't. When yo' silver wagons roll south outa Hosshead on the Devil's River trail, you're under kivver in one of 'em and you stay there until you're clean gone.

"Meanwhile me and Badger go east on the Spanish Trail with yo' caporal and the wuthless wagons, and if ary spy happens to be on our tails he's shore to figger that we planted you durin' the night and are a-fixin' to git away with the silver our-ownelves. Savvy?"

"Shore I savvy," growled Lafe. "But what in hell becomes of them fo' wagons of mine on the Spanish Trail?"

Badger figured maybe it was imagination, but he sure thought he saw his partner getting all set for something.

Blizzard answered quickly, sharply, "They git stuck up and stole, 'cause they're bait!"

The big wagon-master sat perfectly still for a moment as if he found the significance of the statement hard to grasp. Suddenly his rage broke loose and he sprang to his feet, cursing mightily. One of his hands closed on his six-shooter, the other whipped off his hat as though to signal with it and he opened his huge mouth to yell for his men.

Neither of the Rangers moved.

"Be still!" rasped Blizzard. "Set!"

Tucker hesitated for an instant, glaring down at them.

"Take 'er sorta easy, Lafe," rumbled Badger, grinning. "Better not squall for yo' boys 'cause that there boa constrictor yander is the rifle-shootin' est sarpint in all Texas. He's shore to pick 'em all off befo' they git here. Me—I'll take keer of you. Set—down!"

"Go to hell—the pair of you!" thundered Lafe.

**B**UT he didn't call his men. A ruler in his own little itinerant kingdom, worshipped by his subjects, Lafe Tucker was neither accustomed to taking orders nor disposed to do it; and besides, he was a fearless man. Obviously these two strangers had made a favorable impression upon him and if the truth were known, he probably admired them because of the stories he had heard about them—tales which naturally would appeal to an undisciplined swashbuckler of his type. However, when Blizzard proposed to use four of his beloved wagons as bandit bait the big wagonboss showed fight and Badger could see that he wasn't bluffing. But Lafe Tucker was no fool. His face and bearing indicated that he knew these "more or less badmen" had him where his hair was short, and while he wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice his men in defense of his train, he'd never do it in defense of his own pride. He'd rear and faunch and storm around and save his face if he could, but, should the interests of his train demand it, he'd eat crow and like it.

Blizzard thought of all these things and more besides, during the half minute that Lafe stood there and cussed them up and down. Badger afterwards declared that he tied onto at least ten new and elegant cuss-words while the wagonboss was talking, and missed no telling how many more because they sizzled past so damned fast he couldn't snare 'em.

At length Tucker paused for breath.

Blizzard cut in, his voice cold and harsh

and utterly unruffled, "I'll admit that we're all them things and some more that's a heap wuss, but when we got a job to do Old Satan and all his fightin' hands cain't stop us. Now you shet up and set down and jest see can you listen to a leetle sense."

Lafe's closing remarks were fit to sear the hide from a mule or dehorn a bull, but he shut up and sat down.

"If you hadn't exploded and tore up the scenery so damned sudden," continued the sergeant, "I was fixin' to tell you that them wagons of your'n won't be hurt none and you'll git 'em back, loads, mules, skinnerns and everything."

Lafe viciously tamped niggerhead into his pipe.

**B**LIZZARD went on in a voice a shade more cordial. "We done found out where these here bandits cache the stuff they steal, so we'll know jest where to look for yo' outfit and thataway we're due to ketch 'em with the goods."

Lafe struck a sulphur match. He touched it to his pipe before it quit spluttering, got a load of its fumes, coughed, and lit in to cussing again. Badger and Blizzard sat back and listened—the former grinning delightedly, the latter as solemn and sympathetic as a goat.

From that point the argument continued for a long time, Blizzard doing most of the talking. He knew better than to try to wheedle this tough old-timer into anything, realizing that the language Lafe Tucker understood best and respected most was a strong language with force to back it up. Of course he explained his plans in detail because the wagonboss was entitled to know them, and he particularly emphasized the fact that every effort would be made to keep his men from getting hurt or killed.

"Course they'll be a fight—mebbe two fights," he said, "one of 'em when we raid the bandit hangout, but yo' men won't be there. And then we *may* have a smatterin' of trouble when the outlaws swarm

down on the wagons on the trail, but I'm a-hopin' we can dodge that'n somehow."

"You'll dodge it all right," growled the b'g freighter caustically. "You'll hunt kiver while my boys do all the fightin' and git killed off."

"Maybeso," drawled Blizzard lazily, "and if we'd let you go ahead like a blind ox the way you was, yo' whole damned train would've been wiped out and you with it. Naturally nobody wouldn't lose nothin' on account of you, but Mexican silver is good money."

And so it went until at length the sergeant saw that the wagonboss was convinced on every point, merely continuing the quarrel to salve his injured pride. Blizzard accordingly closed the argument by saying the right thing.

"Well sah, Lafe, that settles it," he remarked casually. "You jest let on to yo' boys that you taken a chance and hired us to do this that and t'other. Pass yo' word on it?"

"Shore!" rumbled Lafe, heaving himself to his feet, "and mind you—you better do it!"

**E**VERYTHING was done as Blizzard specified, but Lafe Tucker was the man who issued the orders and saw that they were carried out. Guards were stationed about the camp, Badger and Blizzard being among them, and the first and second section exchanged wagon-covers before the moon came up. Special care was taken to avoid discovery of the switch by even the keenest eyes, adjusting the bows so as to make the covers fit exactly as their predecessors had done and other precautions. And when the train rolled down the trail the next morning before daybreak, Arturo still captained the first section—Numbers One to Four—but Tomas had the silver.

Furthermore, Lafe Tucker crawled into Wagon Number Five sometime during the night while the train was corralled on the east bank of the Pecos at Horsehead Cross-

ing; and he didn't show his bearded face before the second section bade farewell to the first, taking the Devil's River route in a southerly direction by way of abandoned Forts Lancaster and Hudson, San Felipe Springs, Fort Clark, Castroville and on to San Antonio.

At Blizzard's direction the wagonboss assigned a skeleton crew to the first section—four drivers one of whom was Arturo, and Carlos the caporal. A remuda of six mules accompanied this section, no bellmare, each of the mules being a saddler.

Carlos had become very much attached to Badger and plainly showed his respect for Blizzard, and each of the drivers followed his lead without question. Before they had gone far, the sergeant overheard him telling Arturo to obey the orders of these señors as he would those of his chief and Blizzard surmised that the smiling caporal had given similar instructions to the other men.

With every mile that the little train rolled eastward, the tall sergeant became more serious and less talkative, more alert. He scouted incessantly, leaving Badger with the wagons while he rode far into that dangerous country alone in search of the gang which he was positive would lie in wait for them at some point on the trail. He cut his sleep to a minimum and spent the greater part of each night on guard or prowling—sometimes far from camp, afoot in moccasins, through chaparral, arroyos, canyons, any place where enemies might find cover from which to launch a raid. This responsibility for the lives and property of others weighed heavily upon him, and the manner in which he had acquired it made the burden all the greater. The strain gouged its marks in the surface of him. The skin stretched tighter over the bones of his face, its lines and hollows sank deeper.

His eyes crawled back in their sockets, but they lost none of their alertness and their fierceness intensified. His lean body seemed never to grow tired.

THE mettle and endurance of Solomon, his horse, equalled that of its master. Hollow-eyed, ribs showing and flanks gaunt, this long-legged, Roman-nosed, bony and ugly roan went through catclaw that hooked into his hide and tore itself loose, stunted mesquite and cactus that stabbed him with fiery needles; sat down and braced his feet and slid and scrambled down steep declivities over sharp rocks that brought blood from his hind legs, treacherous footing that threatened to cripple him, then lunged and struggled upward until his big heart pounded against his rider's legs and his lungs were ready to burst; plodded, trotted, or galloped mile after mile over alkali that set his nostrils and eyeballs afire, enduring thirst that paralyzed his throat and shot blood to his eyes, and no water to drink—just a little from his master's canteen to wash his mouth out: and rest periods that barely gave him time to eat.

But Solomon never failed to open his teeth for the bit when offered.

The train was camped at Lobo Water Hole. Badger stood guard with his rifle on the highest point he could find nearby, a hundred yards north of the wagons. The sun was crawling down behind a barren saw-toothed ridge that defaced the western horizon, wasting its inspiring colors upon an ugly land that defied its attempts to beautify. A feather of dust appeared in the east, on the trail. The sun picked it out, painting it in varying shades as it fluttered southward before the wind. That would be Blizzard, thought Badger; he'd been away since morning.

It was Blizzard, and Badger was there to meet him when he rode in. Solomon's gait was heavy and muscles twitched here and there in his legs, hips and shoulders when he came to a halt. His head hung, his ears pointed toward the pool, and he tongued the bit as if it were an effort to do so.

Blizzard's eyes were narrowed and red rimmed, his lips clamped as if glued to-

gether. His shoulder bones showed through his shirt and vest. He seemed to pry his body from the saddle, his knees sagged momentarily when his feet touched the ground. He stood for an instant, leaning against his horse. One hand held onto the saddle horn, the other hung at his side with his rifle.

He didn't return the greetings of Badger, Carlos, and three of the drivers who clustered about him. Instead he said thickly, "Water him out slow—rub him down good—feed him a-plenty. Slap my riggin' onto a fresh mule. Roust me out in two hours. Linchpin Springs is the place and——"

The rifle slipped from his hand. Blizzard was asleep on his feet!

They aroused him sufficiently to get him onto his bedding beneath a wagon and Badger pulled off his boots. He slept like a dead man for two hours and would have slept indefinitely had it been left to the Mexicans to awaken him, but Badger was insistent.

"It's shore mighty white of you to want to let the pore fella snooze a leetle longer," he told Carlos, "but when Blizzard Wilson says 'two hours' he means jest two hours and it's powerful onhealthy not to take him at his word. May have to drive slivers under his toenails and set 'em afire to wake him up, but I aim to do it regardless."

However, such drastic measures proved to be unnecessary. A good shaking, some slapping, and a reasonable amount of cussing awoke the sergeant and a huge quantity of scalding black coffee later influenced him to declare that he never wanted any more sleep. After inquiring about Solomon, he fell to eating like a starving wolf and talking like a man who had no energy to waste upon conversation.

BETWEEN mouthfuls he told Badger and Carlos, "They're in camps 'bout three miles no'th of Linchpin Springs, twenty, twenty-five of 'em. Had a lookout on a knob close to the trail with a spyglass.

The glass is in my saddlebags now. They'll figger Injuns done it 'cause I was in moc-casins."

He ate ravenously and in silence for a minute or more.

"I'm goin' back to keep a eye on 'em," he presently continued. "They might move. Gotta find out what they're a-cookin' up for us if I can. I'll gamble that they jump us at Linchpin, but they's other places between here and there. Cain't afford to take no chances."

Blizzard gulped another cup of coffee, afterwards speaking faster as if in a hurry to get away. "Recollect that me and Badger is a-makin' off with these here wagons, so act natural on the trail tomorrer jest in case they's a spy a-nosin' 'round. Make it a p'int not to git to the springs much befo' dusk. 'Bout two mile this side, they's a draw cuts in close to the trail. I'll be there—but if I ain't, you bust somethin' and wait a hour for me."

He got up stiffly, stretched and limbered some of his muscles, and from his great height grinned down at the stocky caporal. "This here Parker and Bosch outfit shore sets out mighty fine vittles. Much obliged."

Carlos bobbed his head twice. His white teeth glistened against his dark skin in the light of a sperm candle that fluttered lazily on top of a wagonwheel near by.

In precise, copybook English which some padre had taught him, he answered, "You make me very happy, señor. There is food in your saddlebags and water in your canteen."

"And I reckon," drawled Blizzard, "they's a flea-bitten jackass onderneath my saddle."

Carlos stared up at the sergeant as if wounded to the point of death. "Oh no, señor! Faquita is as swift as the antelope and wiser than the wolf. And, señor, Faquita will die for you with great pleasure."

Badger exploded into a big laugh.

Blizzard stroked his mustache, gazing solemnly down at the effusive caporal.

"Mmmm-huh. So her name's Fanny. Good name for a burro."

"A burro!" hissed Carlos, aghast at the thought.

The sergeant ambled off toward where Fanny was dozing placidly, saddled and bridled, having recently finished a generous helping of corn from a canvas trough fastened to the side of the wagon.

Carlos stood still for a moment, gazing sorrowfully at the Ranger's long back. Suddenly he burst into excited Spanish, "And señor, Faquita is most deadly in a fight. She has killed men—many very bad men!"

Blizzard looked the beautiful little animal over with a critical eye. He turned slowly, grinned dryly, and drawled, "Then I betcha she done it with her backbone—split 'em from crotch to topknot."

Carlos lifted and dropped his shoulders helplessly.

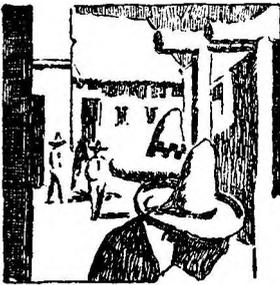
However, despite the things he had said about her, when Blizzard rode up out of the draw to meet the train shortly after sundown the following day, he seemed to be getting along right well with Fanny. She was a tired mule and he was a tired man, but a single glance told Badger that his partner was feeling mighty peart about something. He saw Blizzard note with approval the precautions Carlos and he had taken to make it appear that the train had been stolen; the drivers' saddle scabbards were empty and they wore no weapons in sight; and instead of grazing the remuda to right or left of the trail Carlos, with Badger beside him, had held it in the rear of the train regardless of the dust.

"Bully!" declared the sergeant. "I calc'late you ain't been spied on none today, but a fella cain't never be shore."

He dismounted, gave one of Fanny's ears a little tug to her great annoyance, and told the caporal with a dry grin, "Old Mexico breeds some wallopin' big liars and I betcha you're one of her biggest, but you done told the truth 'bout this here mule. She's a lady with brains, and I ain't talk-

in'. For a fact—while I was a-scoutin' that there bandit camp she follered me like a dog and made less noise than a cat, and two three times when I had to take kiver mighty sudden-like, damned if she don't flatten out behind a rock same as a panther. In all my bawn days, never seen the beat of it."

Carlos' round face beamed with pleasure for a moment, then grew serious and very, very innocent. He spoke in Spanish, humbly yet grandiloquently, "Faquita has always been a jewel, señor, and now that she has pleased you she is doubly precious. Also, señor—as one of my country's grand liars, my soul is tortured by envy to hear you describe Faquita's marvelous behavior so truthfully."



Bandits regardless, Badger threw back his head and laughed a booming laugh.

Blizzard grinned sheepishly. He glanced at Solomon who had spent an easy day at the end of a lead rope behind Number One wagon. "I'm powerful anxious to git some-thin' bigger'n a jackrabbit between my knees. Reckon I better do it now befo' the fun starts."

Badger and Carlos hung around while he switched his rigging to the horse, listening and asking occasional questions some of which he answered.

"I was damned lucky and ketched onto a thing or two," he said presently. "They aim to jump us while the mules is corralled. Reckon they figger thataway they won't have to roundup the remoother or mebbe lose it and have wagons on their hands with no mules to pull 'em. The skunks is holed up half a mile no'th with

a spy in the bresh at the springs and they won't make a move until he fetches 'em word that we're in camps."

**H**E THEN went on to outline his plans in detail. After each driver had been coached in the part he was to play, whips cracked, sharp Mexican voices cut through the twilight silence, the little mules dug their tiny hoofs deep into the alkali dust and the towering wagons rolled onward, groaning and protesting as if conscious of the fate in store for them.

Linchpin Springs, the pool which their flow created and the twenty-foot bank above it were situated fifty yards north of the trail. Extending eastward parallel to the trail were the flats through which the spring branch trickled into a draw where thirsty sand eventually swallowed it. This draw swung to the right and crossed the trail a half mile east, deepening into a fair-sized canyon as it made its way southward. Since this was a regular watering and camping place for freighters, grass on the flats and bordering the spring branch had been grazed down close and there was no brush to speak of, so that no one could approach the springs by way of the draw unnoticed. Any surprise attack would have to come from the north or the bank above, and the attackers would be forced to dismount because the semi-desert vegetation would not hide a man on a horse.

Badger and Carlos pushed on ahead with the remuda, the caporal apparently unarmed; but he had a six-shooter inside his shirt. They watered the mules and their mounts at the pool, leisurely, as if untroubled by thoughts of danger. But from time to time Badger stole a glance at the brush fringing the bank that seemed to be almost directly overhead and he frequently looked up the slope north of the springs, straining his eyes to pierce the failing light and discover the hidden watcher whom Blizzard had said was there to spy upon them. But the twilight shadows played tricks upon his eyesight, turning bushes

and clumps of cacti into men who vanished when he peered closely at them. Pretty soon he gave it up, cursing to himself. After all, if Blizzard with his cat's eyes said there was a spy a-hangin' 'round that settled it. And moreover, Badger Coe wouldn't have cared had he known there were twenty spies hiding in the brush because he'd been taking it easy long enough. He was spoiling for a fight.

When watered well, they took the remuda down the draw as if in search of grass and kept on going until reasonably certain that it was invisible to the spy at the springs. There they halted and Badger returned alone when he heard the wagons coming.

The train turned down into the flat a short distance below the pool. Number One swung to the left and Number Two followed in its tracks as customary when corralling a full-sized train. Numbers Three and Four swung to the right and when the four wagons came to a halt they were placed so that by stretching ropes or chains between them an irregular circle was completed—a makeshift corral, but the best they could do with four wagons.

Badger dismounted close to Blizzard, and inquired softly, "Is yo' spy still here?"

The sergeant nodded with grim satisfaction written on every line in his face. "Shore, and he'll stay until we git the mules corralled and settled down so he can tell his boss jest how we're sitated. You ride due no'th up the slope and keep a-goin' for 'bout two hundred yards, then stop like you was a-standin' guard. With you there he dassn't move, so we hold him here until we're ready for him to scoot back to his bunch. Make shore to keep a eye peeled 'cause they might've set out more spies sence I left 'em."

**B**ADGER rode away at once. Blizzard remained with the wagons until the teams were unhooked, watered and corralled, and the drivers had built a fire; then he mounted Solomon and went across

the trail onto the open ground south of the springs. Night had come and the moon was still a long way off. The stars were doing their level best, but beyond the range of the cooking fire and candles at the corral it was mighty dark. After walking his horse to a point where he figured he couldn't be seen by the spy north of camp, the sergeant stopped and looked back at the wagons.

He saw the four Mexicans scurrying about like frightened cats, into and out of wagons, grabbing up things here and there, saying nothing and making no noise to speak of. Within a very few moments he saw that each man had a canteen, a bridle or hackamore, a gunbelt about his waist and a rifle in hand. They slipped from the corral and ran across the flats toward the draw where Carlos was holding the remuda!

Blizzard let out a piercing yell. He fired his rifle three times. Four or five answering shots came from the fleeing drivers. Badger thundered down the slope on Belial, bellowing curses and cutting loose with his six-shooters. Guns flashed in the draw and their sharp reports stamped echoes near and far. Mules kicked and squealed and tore about in the corral, but they were tired and hungry and no strangers to gunfire, so none of them broke away.

The Rangers hit the flat at a gallop, heading for the draw. They fired several shots which were answered by a regular volley. After going far enough to be out of sight or hearing of the spy at the springs, they halted. Hoofbeats clattered down the draw. From time to time one or more rifles cracked, each burst of fire being farther away than the last.

Badger hung to his saddlehorn with both hands and laughed as hard as he could without making a noise. Even Blizzard snickered through his long nose.

Keeping his voice low, he said, "Damned if it ain't a load off'n my mind to see them fellas git gone without nary a scratch that-away."

Still chuckling and short of breath, Badger spoke in a husky whisper, "You're the deceivin'est devil in Texas, so help me. Lawdy! How them Mex's did run and throw lead at the stars! And that pore spy up yander. I seen him while I was a-ridin' the slope. He was Injuned down onderneath a mesquite and he was a-honin' to git clean away from there but he dassn't, so he's a-squirmin' wuss'n a cowhand with ants in his britches and a purty gal a-settin' his knee. What next, and why in hell don't we git it done?"

"I been thinkin'," said Blizzard slowly. "The man we want ain't with this here bunch, damn the luck! I done looked 'em over and I know. These jaspers is jest leetle polecats. We're out to trap the bull polecat that's a-bossin' 'em."

"How come you're so all-fired sartin he ain't here?"

"'Cause I know him and I seen every last one of 'em and he ain't—that's how."

"Who is he?"

"A pussonal friend of yourn," drawled Blizzard. "So I been thinkin' somethin' like this; them skunks would give a pritty to snare us, so they'll leave their hosses back yander a piece and Injun our camp. We'd be durned fools to make a fight, 'cause the shootin' light is mighty pore and they's twenty-one of 'em, and we want 'em to swaller the bait and git the wagons anyhow."

"Hell! No fight," growled Badger, "and me with both bar'ls loaded clean to the muzzles with buckshot and hoss-shoe nails."

**B**LIZZARD quietly cautioned him, "Don't you talk so loud or so damned much. As I was fixin' to say—soon's ever they git the wagons and don't git me'n' you, 'bout fifteen of 'em fork their broncs and light in to combin' the country for us. That don't bother us none, but the moon comes up befo' long and I'm thinkin' of them pore skimmers out yander on the trail a-straddle of leg-weary mules."

Badger muttered a profane affirmative.

"And so's to stop them coyotes from doin' that and for a heap better reason which I'm a-keepin' onderneath my hat," continued the sergeant, "while they're a-stealin' our wagons we'll be liftin' their ponies!"

"Huh?" grunted Badger, momentarily speechless. "But—but tweny-one of 'em!"

"Yep, that's right. I counted 'em."

The young Ranger chuckled joyously. "You damned old hossthief! Did you stop to think that they'll have men a-holdin' them ponies?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well?"

Blizzard listened for a moment, his face turned to the north where the top of the shaggy slope formed an irregular line against the sky over which saucy stars mischievously winked at him.

"Shuck them boots and leggin's and climb into yo' moccasins," was his answer. "That there spy had half a mile to go and I calc'late he's jest 'bout made it by now. Make 'aste!"

Having scouted it in daylight, Blizzard was thoroughly familiar with the lay of the land. He knew exactly how far down the spring branch to go in order to find a small valley which intersected it from the north, far enough east of the springs to make it a safe route for them to travel inasmuch as they'd be unlikely to meet the raiders or to be overheard by them. Although he knew that the bandits had moved their camp to within a half mile of the springs, he considered it highly improbable that they'd walk even that distance and expected to find their horses being held at least halfway to the wagons. Therefore the Rangers rode between four and five hundred yards up this little valley, slowly and as quietly as possible, and tied Belial and Solomon in some bushes.

Armed with knives and short guns, they made their way westward over comparatively level ground afoot. The vegetation grew in clumps, seldom as high as a man's head and with many open spaces between

them where the alkali soil looked white in the darkness. Badger often had the feeling that he was walking on snow-covered ground which made him a first-rate target. Before they had gone far Blizzard began to take advantage of every bit of available cover, bending low and darting swiftly across openings, and Badger imitated him as best he could. The sergeant frequently stopped to examine the dark line of the horizon from a point close to the ground so as to bring anything as tall as a man or a horse's head into relief against the starlit sky; and the young Ranger knew that his partner's keen ears were picking up sounds that didn't exist as far as the ordinary person was concerned.

After a particularly long pause beside a patch of catclaw, Blizzard gestured and Badger joined him. Without a word the sergeant pointed west, slightly south. Sitting on his heels and peering over the brush, Badger quickly made out a group of moving objects which he instantly marked as men walking toward the springs—men in sacks for their heads and misshapen shoulders.

Blizzard pointed northwest. "Listen," he whispered. "Hosses over yander in a leetle sag 'bout like a buff'ler waller I cemagine."

**B**ADGER strained his ears. He heard very faintly the tinkle of metal—bridle chains and bits, and occasionally the crackling of brush. His breath came quicker, his heart beat faster. Danger waited for him over yonder and he was impatient to meet it.

"Well," he growled, "let's go!"

"Keep yo' noggin' down and foller me."

And to follow this lean and sinewy scout, of whom other scouts had said, "He can out-Injun an Apache," was a man-sized job. The light was poor, the cover bad, and the pace he set was terrific—everything considered. It seemed that Blizzard could jack-knife at the middle and run a zig-zag course with bent knees as if that were the natural way for a man to

run. He could crawl on all-fours or squirm on his belly with surprising speed. Badger wondered why all the rush, until he happened to notice that they were circling so as to approach the horses from the north and that took time. The wind, of course. The guards would be on the windward side to avoid the dust.

At length—when Badger was ready to swear that he couldn't run, crawl, or squirm another rod, Blizzard stopped and waited for him.

The sergeant placed his lips close to Badger's ear, and whispered, "See them bushes with soapweeds in the edge of 'em? On the far side, two men a-squattin' facin' each other."

Badger quickly located the guards. He nodded.

Blizzard continued, "Take the nigh one. I'll nab the other'n. Mind you—no racket, a clean job."

The lean, hawk-faced sergeant drew his knife. He thumbed its razor edge unconsciously, it seemed, then returned it to its scabbard. Badger saw this. He clenched his jaws. "A clean job!" he thought with grim irony. *He* loosened a six-shooter in its holster.

The Rangers backed off a little and moved aside so as to get the bushes between them and the guards. As they went ahead, crawling with infinite care, Badger thanked his lucky stars for a breeze that made dry branches scrape and clack together and kept the leaves a-whisperin'. At last they crouched behind the bushes with their men six feet away—one sitting with his right, the other his left side toward them. They could get no closer undetected. The young Ranger glanced at Blizzard. The sergeant nodded.

**B**ADGER delayed for an instant so as to make certain that his partner struck first, before the men were alarmed. He saw Blizzard whip out his knife and swing around the bushes as silently as a shadow. Then he pulled a gun and went for his own

man, a burly bull-necked person. When he sprang from behind the brush a stirring scene flashed before him. He saw Blizzard's spidery arm dart about a man's throat, jerk its victim's head back and choke off his cry, and he saw Blizzard's blade flicker in a short arc and disappear.

His own man was in the act of rising, half turning and jerking at his six-shooter. The big Ranger slapped his gunbarrel across the fellow's temple with force



enough to knock out a steer. The bandit dropped in his tracks without making a sound.

Badger glanced over in time to see Blizzard release his hold and let his man crumple in a heap; and while holstering his

gun, he saw Blizzard carefully wipe his knife on the dead man's sleeve.

Working rapidly, the Rangers mounted two of the bandits' horses and shoved the balance into the valley. There they switched to Belial and Solomon and hazed the captured ponies due east until Blizzard estimated they were abreast of the point on the trail where he had told Carlos to wait for them. Turning south, they struck the trail not far from the appointed place and the caporal soon joined them with his drivers and his mules.

Carlos voiced his amazement in voluble Spanish, but Blizzard quickly cut him short in clipped English. "You fellas fork you a pony apiece. Make 'aste! We gotta ramble. Soon's ever they find out what happened, they'll straddle 'em some mules and take after us hell bent."

Carlos sprang from his saddle, barking orders at the drivers. Afterwards he looked up at the stern sergeant, grinning from ear to ear, and said in the most polite Spanish, "Fortunately for us, señor, the Faquita is here and there are none like her with the wagons or anywhere else in the world—to be truthful."

"Git a move on!"

*(To Be Concluded in the Next SHORT STORIES)*

W. C. TUTTLE will have a long story about no less a character than Flashknife Hattley in our next issue. He and Sleepy are dynamite-packed "Passengers for Painted Rock."

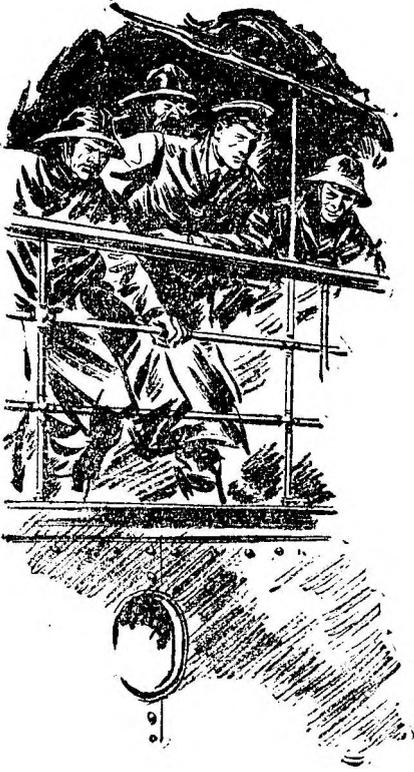
# SOUNDLESS SHIP

By PATRICK O'KEEFFE

Author of

"Brewer's Mule," "Island Occupied," etc.

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**C**APTAIN MYERS wakened with a start and raised himself on one elbow. He stared unseeingly into the intense darkness of his cabin, gripped by a

vague uneasiness. But he shook it off with the half-angry thought that it was only his state of mind. And Swale was the cause of it. He was developing a case of nerves over that man.

He knew instinctively what had wakened him—a long blast on the steam whistle. But not because of fog, in that sub-tropical latitude. Another rain squall. And a pretty heavy one, by the sound of it.

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*Evidence—That Was What  
Captain Myers Needed to  
Make His Story Believed*

He suddenly sprang from his bunk and reached up to the nearest of the two forward ports. He hurriedly let them down from their hooks and screwed them up tight. Then he switched on a shaded light. Another minute or two, he saw, and his desk would have been swamped. Even in the short time he'd taken to close the ports, his face and the front of his pajama jacket had been drenched.

He reached for a towel and began to wipe himself, a man in his early thirties with a ruddy weathered face, dark-haired and long-limbed. Rain gushed down the outside of the thick glass ports; the wind whistled in the mushroom ventilator above his head. No doubt about it being a heavy squall. He should have been called before this.



He glanced at the clock on the bulkhead, barely readable in the shadow. A quarter to five. The mate's watch. His lips tightened grimly. Swale, of course. That was probably the reason why he hadn't been called.

Captain Myers turned to his clothes, laid out on the settee. By the time he had quickly changed into them, another blast had sounded on the whistle. And still no call down his voice tube from the bridge. He took oilskins and seaboots from a locker and pulled them on. Dragging a sou'wester down over his head, he shoved open the door and went out into the deluge.

He groped his way blindly to the streaming bridge ladder. When he had reached the top his eyes were growing used to the darkness, and he could make out the squat oilskinned shape of the mate hunched beside the white cord. He made straight for his side.

"Why didn't you call me?" he demanded.

Swale turned up his big head. "When I was captain I didn't have to be called like some young cadet," he sneered. "The first blast on the steam whistle should be enough for any man."

"I don't want anything taken for granted," said the captain, angered. "I've given a standing order to be called whenever it comes on thick and I expect it to be carried out. Did you ring. 'Stand by'?"

"This isn't my first trip to sea," the mate snapped.

"I want a civil answer to—"

The captain's voice was drowned out by another roar of the whistle. He gritted his teeth. Swale had done it deliberately. And he was holding down on the cord longer than necessary, out of maddening insolence.

"Did you learn that on your first trip to sea?" the captain fumed when he could be heard again.

"I was taught never to be afraid to blow the whistle," mocked Swale.

The captain flung away from him in

anger. He set the engine-room telegraph to "Half Speed." He wondered how long he'd have to put up with Swale. He was getting more insolent. Perhaps Swale knew he was afraid of him and was playing on it.

UNTIL about a year ago Swale had been captain of a coastwise ship whose home port was New Orleans. And Captain Myers' father was marine superintendent of the line that owned her. When Swale put her ashore, Captain Myers' father had fired him, not only for gross negligence but also for having lied in a brazen attempt to place the blame on his second mate.

Openly vowing he would get even if ever he got a chance, Swale had gone north. And circumstances had put him in a position to make good his threat. He had interviewed Captain Knox, a shipmate of his early days who was also marine superintendent of the line operating the *Dartwood*. Swale had evidently made out a good case for himself; for Captain Knox had given him a berth, then open, as mate of the *Dartwood*.

Captain Myers had not at the time been in command of her. He came a few months later, promoted from senior mate when Captain Hunt of the *Dartwood* retired. He had not been pleased at finding Swale as mate, knowing through his father that he was unfrustrated. But he decided to give him a fair trial.

One voyage had been enough. On his return he requested that Swale be transferred to one of the other ships.

"He's insolent, surly, disregards orders. He still think he's captain and wants to do things as he thinks best. He's forever reminding me he was in command before I even got a third mate's license."

Captain Knox had set back his graying head in surprise. "That's odd, Myers. He didn't give Captain Hunt any trouble."

"He's giving me plenty. But I daresay it's because he owes my father a grudge."

"Pshaw, Myers! But send Swale in to see me. I'll hear what he has to say."

Swale had been equal to the occasion. When Captain Myers called in next morning, Captain Knox said:

"Swale was terribly put out because you reported him. Couldn't understand it. He admits that now and then he forgets he's no longer captain, but says he's trying to break himself of that. He's sorry you're a little touchy about it. He was indignant when I asked him if he bore you any ill will. He said he had nothing but respect for your father, though he feels he gave him a raw deal. In fact," concluded Captain Knox with a searching glance at Captain Myers, "he's afraid you're prejudiced against him on your father's account. I hope not, Myers. I want Swale to have a fair chance, and I wouldn't stand for anything like that."

Captain Myers flushed. "I'm not touchy, but I don't like to be flouted. And I'm not prejudiced against him. I'm judging him solely by his attitude toward me. Evidently you didn't write to my father for a reference, or you'd know that Swale didn't get a raw deal."

"Swale said your father was misled by others. However, perhaps you're a little hasty in your judgment of Swale. He's offered to do his utmost to try and please you. Suppose you give him a chance? Give him time to adapt himself to his lowered status. A middle-aged man set in his ways can't change them overnight. In any case I haven't another man available just now to relieve him."

Captain Myers had said no more. Swale's lying tongue had played on the sympathy of an old shipmate who had no idea of the man he now was, and words would not alter matters. But he knew Swale would not change; from what he'd gathered on board, Swale had been a different man under Captain Hunt. His antagonism was for him only. But he'd have to put up with Swale until he was able to convince Captain Knox of the fact.

Swale had lost no time in vaunting his triumph. During his watch on the first evening out he jeered, "So you tried to get rid of me, did you?"

"You won't be able to fool Captain Knox forever," retorted the captain. "He can be hard, even with an old shipmate."

"Maybe you'd better watch out yourself," muttered Swale darkly.

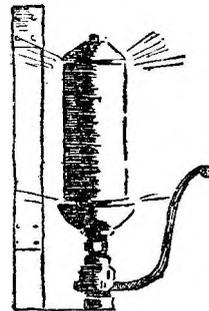
Captain Myers gave him a piercing glance. Swale's big greenish eyes were burning with malice.

"Is that a threat?"

"What do you think?" snarled Swale, suddenly flinging his paunchy form about and marching across the bridge.

**B**UT there was no doubt from his ugly manner that it was a veiled threat. And it filled Captain Myers with apprehension. He knew that as long as he continued to carry out all his duties as captain, Swale could not get anything on him; but Swale would have no scruples about resorting to trickery of some kind. He'd tried to frame his last second mate. And there was no telling what a man of his experience might be able to put over on a newly promoted captain like him.

This fear had troubled Captain Myers from that moment throughout the present voyage, and it was the reason he had been angry because Swale neglected to call him to the bridge this morning. If an accident



had occurred, Swale could easily have sworn he had tried to get him up and failed. A cunning liar like him was not to be trusted.

Swale blew the whistle again. Captain Myers stared into the hissing rain, his ears strained for answering signals. Ships were few and far between on that lonely course from West African ports to New York, but a mischievous fate often conjured up vessels from nowhere during thick weather.

But no other sound mingled with the howl of the squall. The wind had lashed the flat sea into a little fury, and the *Dartwood* was beginning to pitch. Captain Myers hoped the man on the fore-castle head was keeping a good look out and not crouched down behind something for shelter. It would only be human, though, for anyone to take chances on such a desolate stretch of ocean.

He'd never felt nervous like this before, and Swale was the cause of it. He'd have to try and get rid of him this time in. Not only for the sake of his own peace of mind, but because the longer Swale remained the more chances he'd have to injure him—

All at once the *Dartwood* struck another vessel. The impact jammed the captain against the fore part of the bridge. The sound of crunching and twisting of steel mixed with the wailing wind. He stared wild-eyed out over the starboard bow. But he could see nothing in that swishing darkness. He clutched the rail as the *Dartwood* sheered to port, heeling. There came another but lighter crash as her starboard quarter struck the unseen ship again. Then she seemed to bounce clear, and righted herself.

Captain Myers grabbed for the port engine-room telegraph and jerked the handle up to "Stop." He shouted to Swale:

"Hurry for'ard and see what the damage is. Get the carpenter out to take soundings."

Swale hastened into the wheelhouse for a flashlight and left the bridge. The telegraph jangled as the engine room acknowledged the order, and the ship began to lose way.

Captain Myers signaled several short blasts to the other vessel. But there was

no answer. He darted to the wheelhouse door, dragged it open, and hurried through into the chartroom. He rang the radio-room telephone. The operator had been wakened by the crash and was waiting for orders.

"Find out what ship we hit," the captain told him.

He went back into the downpour. Lights had gone on in the fore-castle, illuminating the endless slanting rain and the alarmed faces of the crew bunched inside the entrance.

The ship came to a stop, and the captain now blew two long blasts as the required signal. He listened intently, but failed to hear any answer.

ON THE fore-castle head a light played about as Swale investigated the extent of the damage. The oilskinned figure of the second mate suddenly took shape beside the captain, followed almost immediately by that of the third mate. The captain hurriedly told them what had happened.

"It's more than I can understand," he said anxiously. "We didn't hear a sound from her before we struck, and not a sound from her since. And she wasn't showing a glimmer anywhere—not a single running-light."

"Maybe she was broken down—dynamo stopped," suggested the second mate. "And we hit her before they could get the oil lamps going. Queer she didn't sound her whistle, though."

Captain Myers stared out into the raging squall. "She's probably showing lights by now, but we won't be able to see them until this hellish rain lets up."

Presently Swale returned to the bridge, and Captain Myers took him into the chartroom to hear his report. Their shiny black oilskins began to make two pools on the scrubbed planks.

"Her nose is knocked round," Swale said, wiping the rain off his face with his bare hand. "But there's no holes above

the waterline. But there's something below, because the forepeak's flooded. There's no water in the hold, though. And all she's got on the starboard quarter is a big dent. That's as much as I could make out leaning over the rail. The carpenter is taking more soundings."

Captain Myers was relieved. His ship was in no immediate danger as long as the collision bulkhead held. He spun to the telephone as the bell rang. The radio operator advised that he was unable to make contact with the other vessel.

"Keep on trying," the captain urged him. "The collision may have brought her antenna down and they're rigging it up again."

As he hung up he glanced anxiously at Swale. "I hope she's not sinking."

"You were on the bridge when it happened," sneered Swale. "That lets me out."

The captain's eyes blazed. But this was no time to allow himself to be provoked. "Get the hands up and clear the boats for lowering," he snapped. "We may need them to pick up survivors."

He merely wanted to be prepared for the worst. He doubted whether the other ship had been struck fatal blows. But from the savage look that Swale gave him as he turned away, it was plain that the mate felt he was sending him back into the deluge spitefully.

But the squall was coming to an end. Following Swale out, Captain Myers found that the wind was dropping. The rain slackened, and presently stopped. The darkness was now hushed but clear, and the captain's eyes ranged through it for a glimpse of light. But he might have been looking around an abandoned pit.

His bewilderment mounted. He couldn't believe that the unseen vessel had broken the law of the sea and scurried off like a hit and run driver ashore. And it was still harder to believe that she had sunk.

He hastened back to the radio-room telephone. But the operator reported he had

not yet been able to get any reply to his calls. Hardly knowing what to think, the captain put the *Dartwood* on slow speed ahead and began to cruise about the vicinity, with neither moon nor star in the black sky to aid his search.

But dawn was at hand. The sea had calmed with the passing of the squall. And as the gray light crept over its surface, many eyes followed it, for most of the *Dartwood's* crew had remained on deck in excitement over the mystery. And what he saw was not another ship but all that was left of her—wreckage.

Cries of dismay came from the men lining the bulwarks. On the bridge Captain Myers was too stunned for the moment to speak.

Then he gasped:

"Went down like a stone. Hadn't even time to get the boats out."

Even Swale was staring at the wreckage-strewn patch dumbfounded. "She must have been a death trap," he muttered.

"But all we gave her was a couple of glancing blows, and at slow speed."

SWALE looked at the captain's horror-stricken face, and his eyes seemed to gloat. "We're about twelve thousand tons deadweight," he said, "and she might have been some rusty old tub. Not that that will help you any at the inquiry," he added maliciously.

But Captain Myers was too agitated to be stung into replying to Swale's gibe. He whirled his back on him and called to the helmsman to alter course toward the wreckage. As the ship approached it, he saw that it consisted mostly of empty boxes and drums, clothing, stools and chairs, with here and there a life ring.

Every floating object capable of supporting a man was scrutinized. But the only sign of life was a thin bedraggled cat, clinging precariously to a half-capsized wooden box and mewing piteously at the ship. There was nothing human in sight, not even a body, as if the ill-fated vessel

had gathered all her dead into her own grave.

A boat was lowered to pick up the distressed cat and the life rings. Stencilled round each of the latter were two words, TORO—PANAMA. After searching his official publications, the radio operator reported that no ship of that name and registry was included as being equipped with radio. Looking her up in Lloyd's List, Captain Myers read that she was a small freighter, built almost twenty years ago.

A ship of her size would carry a crew of perhaps thirty at the most.

Thirty lives, and all snuffed out in a few minutes by his ship! Sick at heart, he set the *Dartwood* back on her course, but at reduced speed to lessen the strain on the collision bulkhead, under pressure from the flooded forepeak. Then he went aft to the radio room and wrote out a long message to the New York office giving particulars of the accident. That done, he returned to his cabin. But not to resume his sleep. Sleep was impossible in his present state of mind.

He was not only shocked over the collision but baffled by its mysteriousness. A ship failing to make sound signals both before and after the crash. And the absence of all lights. She might have been broken down with her oil lamps not yet in service, as the second mate had suggested, but she ought to have made plenty of noise with her whistle.

It was possible she had been deliberately running without lights. Still, ships only did that in a war zone, or if they happened to be gun-runners or some other kind of smugglers near the coast. This one had been far from any war zone, and almost in mid-ocean.

It was another mystery of the sea, with the secret locked up in a dumb animal. But he told himself that he was blameless. He'd taken all the necessary precautions—reduced speed, whistle, a good lookout. But it sickened him to think that it was his

ship that had sent the *Toro* down with all hands.

When breakfast time came he felt too distressed to go down and eat and asked for coffee. As the messboy brought it in and laid it on his desk, he remarked:

"That cat sure was hungry, sir. It wolfed a hunk o' meat an' a quart o' milk like it hadn't been fed for a week. They musta been on short rations aboard that ship, or sump'n."

"'Or something' is right," agreed the captain dismally. "Something that's more than I can figure out."

Later in the forenoon he wrote a full account of the collision in the official log and then sent for Swale. As the mate entered without troubling to knock or remove his dirty white-topped cap, the captain rose from the swivel chair before his desk and said:

"Please sit down there, Mr. Swale. I've written up the collision in the log. Read it over and sign it."

SWALE eased himself into the seat without a word. He read the entry, but instead of reaching for the pen, he glanced up sharply.

"I'm not going to sign that."

The captain stared. "Why not?"

"You wrote that no whistle was heard from the other ship. That's false. I reported hearing one right ahead just before we hit, but you ignored me. You didn't stop this ship as you're required to."

For a moment Captain Myers gazed at him as if he thought the accident had affected Swale's mind. But suddenly he grew rigid to a chilling suspicion.

"Does that mean you intend to try and frame me?" he demanded.

Swale came to his feet with an indignant expression on his blubbery face. "Just because I mean to tell the truth you accuse me of trying to frame you. You can call it what you like, but I'm not going to lie to save your skin."

The captain was speechless. It amazed

him that Swale should assume this incredible pretense before him who knew he was lying. And then he guessed the reason; Swale wasn't going to admit anything that could be quoted against him at the inquiry. He was cunning, all right. But there was one thing he'd apparently overlooked.

"What about the helmsman and the lookout?" the captain rejoined.

"I've already spoken to them, in case you tried to do any fixing. The helmsman said he didn't hear anything in the wheelhouse with both doors closed. As for the lookout, when I went forward to examine the damage, he wasn't on the fo'c'sle head. He came up afterward, saying he ran off scared when we hit. He's denying it, but I could tell by the way he spoke he'd sneaked down for shelter when the squall came on."

That neatly disposed of those two men as supporting witnesses—Swale had overlooked nothing. The captain clenched his hands.

He was tempted to plant his fist into Swale's lying mouth. But that wouldn't improve his case.

"Get out, you dirty lying swine!" he cried in sudden passion. "Before I throw you out."

Swale was evidently too thickskinned to be stung out of his pretense. "It won't get you anywhere calling me hard names," he replied in a resentful tone. "I mean to tell the truth no matter what you call me."

He went out with an air of righteous wrath. The captain sank back into his chair and gazed in dismay at the unsigned entry. It was now his word against Swale's. Before a board of inquiry gravely concerned over the loss of a ship with all hands, it would ordinarily have been no easy matter to clear himself; but with his chief mate testifying against him, his case would be a desperate one. He could charge that Swale was working off a grudge against his father, call his father to swear that Swale had vowed to get even. But would it balk a man like Swale, who

wouldn't hesitate to perjure his soul away?

If the finding went against him he'd be washed up for ever. His license would



be suspended, if not canceled altogether. And that wouldn't be the worst. He'd be prosecuted for criminal negligence.

Captain Myers was appalled. It wasn't enough to have all those lives on his mind. Now he faced the prospect of being held directly responsible. He burned with helpless rage against Swale, with bitterness toward Captain Knox. If only there'd been a single survivor to say the *Toro* hadn't blown her whistle, to clear up the mystery surrounding her! But all she'd given up was a cat.

Only a hungry cat that couldn't speak a word. What a mockery! What a—— The captain caught his breath as a startling thought flashed into his racked mind. That cat—why hadn't he thought of it before? If he were right, then—then Swale's lie would be exposed. And if he could make sure before——

HE JUMPED up and hastened along to the radio room. He grabbed for a blank and pencil and wrote out a radiogram to Captain Knox.

"Send that right away," he said breathlessly to the operator.

The operator read the message, and looked up in astonishment. "You figure that was the reason the *Toro* didn't answer our whistle?"

"I'm praying so," replied the captain fervently. "But don't say a word to a soul on board about that message. Or the reply if one comes."

The operator seemed puzzled by the order, but made no comment. And Captain Myers did not explain. This had to be handled with the utmost secrecy.

The operator brought him a reply that evening. "You were right, Cap'n," he observed, handing it to him.

Captain Myers read the message with joy. "Now send another back to Captain Knox requesting him to meet the ship on arrival at quarantine for something important. And remember what I said about keeping your mouth shut."

The captain concealed his joy thereafter. For the remaining five days of the voyage he went around with a cheerless expression. Almost everyone, he knew, would think he was merely brooding over the accident; but Swale would also feel that he was worried about him. And Swale must not be allowed to suspect that he wasn't. Swale hadn't pretended to the others he'd heard a whistle. He was clever enough not to commit himself openly to his lie until the last moment. If anything unexpected cropped up in the meantime, he could always deny that he had intended to lie. But unless there was a hitch somewhere, Swale was walking into a trap this time. The captain exulted. He wouldn't have Swale on his mind any more.

Down by the head because of her flooded forepeak, the *Dartwood* came to anchor off quarantine station one afternoon. When Swale returned amidships from his station on the forecastle head, Captain Myers intercepted him. The quarantine doctor's boat was approaching, and astern of it was the immigration cutter. Among these uniformed officials was a short figure in a derby hat and spring overcoat.

"That's Captain Knox over there on the cutter, Mr. Swale," said Captain Myers. "It looks as if he's in a hurry to inspect the damage and can't wait till we get to the dock. He'll be aboard in a few minutes. Are you still determined to lie about the whistle?"

He spoke anxiously, as if he were hop-

ing that Swale would change his mind at the last moment. But Swale answered stiffly.

"I said I was going to tell the truth, and I still stick to it."

"Very well," said the captain with a beaten look. "Come along to my cabin."

He led the way and showed Swale in. "Wait there. I'll bring Captain Knox in the minute he steps aboard. Then we'll see which of us he'll believe."

He then walked away grimly. But he was smiling when the doctor climbed aboard and shook hands.

"Sorry to read in the papers about your accident, Captain. Lucky you weren't sunk too," said the doctor.

"It could have been as bad as that," replied the captain.

He took the doctor down to the saloon, where the ship's papers were laid out. With a clean bill of health and no sickness on board, the doctor promptly cleared her. The immigration cutter came alongside. Captain Myers was waiting to greet the marine superintendent.

"What's the important business?" inquired Captain Knox, shaking hands.

Captain Myers took him to one side and told him of the false charge that Swale intended to bring against him. Captain Knox eyed him in amazement.

"But didn't you tell him that——"

"I kept your message a secret. He'd only deny everything. That's why I asked you to meet the ship—so you could hear him for yourself."

"Where is he?" said Captain Knox. "I can hardly believe——"

He's in my cabin. I got him out of the way, so none of the officials from shore could talk to him about the *Toro*."

THE cat, a gray tom, had strayed into the captain's cabin, and when they entered, Swale was seated beside it on the settee, stroking its back. Captain Myers smiled to himself at the irony of it. That cat was about to be Swale's downfall.

Swale rose and held out his hand. Captain Knox took it and began with abruptness.

"Captain Myers tells me you intend to lie against him about the collision. What have you to say?"

Swale threw an indignant look at Captain Myers. "I can see he's already got first word in. But I'm not lying. It's true, every word I'm going to say. Just before the collision I heard a whistle right ahead. I reported it to the captain and said we'd better stop. But he ignored me.

"That's been his way all along, as I've already told you," complained Swale. "He seems to think I'm telling him what to do. Anyway, he didn't stop the ship. I was half tempted to take matters into my own hands. But next thing I knew we'd hit. I was sick at my stomach afterwards when I saw what had happened. All those lives lost over one man's neglect. And now he's hoping to sneak out of it by trying to make a liar of me."

**CAPTAIN MYERS** marveled. But for the fact that he knew Swale was damning himself with every word, he would have been dismayed at having to refute such a plausible liar.

"You're sure you're not mistaken—sure you didn't imagine hearing a whistle?" ejaculated Captain Knox.

"Imagine it!" exclaimed Swale scornfully. "For the line's sake I'd like to say I might have. But I'm so sure that I'd be afraid to lie about it at the—"

"Swale," thundered the marine superintendent, "you're lying now and we can prove it."

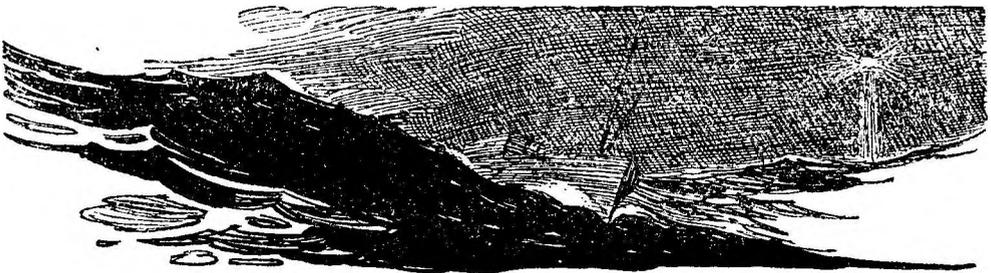
Swale looked startled. He darted a glance at Captain Myers, whose face was a grim mask. Then he stared down at the cat now licking itself on the settee, and he seemed to draw confidence from it, as if it reminded him that nothing short of a human survivor from the sunken *Toro* could prove he was lying.

"I don't know what lies Captain Myers has told you," he blustered, "but I'm ready to swear—"

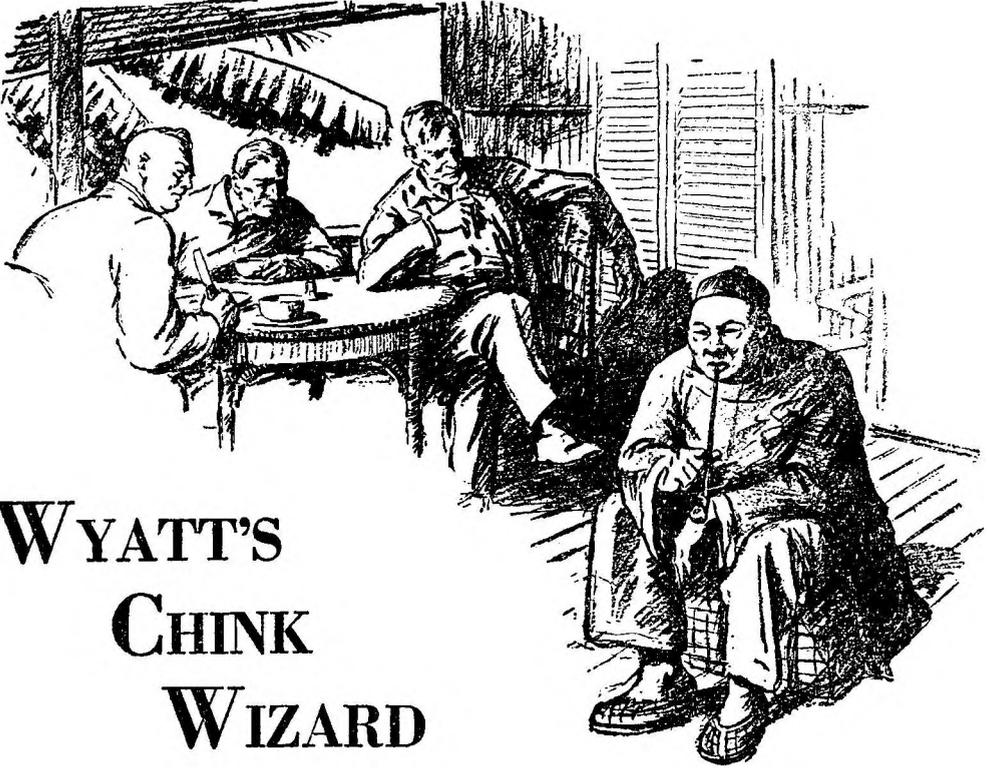
"That is enough," snapped Captain Knox. "You're not fooling me this time, Swale. You're through. You're not fit to be on the bridge of a ship. The *Toro* was abandoned as sinking during a storm four days before the collision. Her men were picked up forty-eight hours later while sailing the boats for land. The news came out in the papers on the afternoon of the day I received a radiogram from Captain Myers asking me to investigate whether she was an abandoned ship. So there wasn't a soul aboard to blow her whistle. She was nothing but a water-logged derelict, needing hardly more than a bump to send her plunging to the bottom."

Swale's blubbery face turned ashen. He looked around with dazed eyes at Captain Myers, who added mockingly:

"It was the cat which fooled us all at the time. It was something alive, and kept us from thinking of a deserted ship. But later I remembered that it was thin and hungry, and cats don't usually starve on a ship. Yet if one happened to be left behind on a derelict, forgotten in the excitement of abandoning her in a hurry—but perhaps it was a caterwaul you heard."



*“If a Man Has His Head in A Dragon’s Mouth, He Can Risk Riding Away on the Back of a Tiger”*



# WYATT'S CHINK WIZARD

By **CAPTAIN FREDERICK MOORE**

*Author of “Wyatt’s Hypnotizing Bird” and other  
Stories of Singing Sands Island*

“**W**HY in Tophet has Cap’n Jarvis got a Chink fol-lerin’ him around with a satchel?” demanded Wyatt as he came out on the veranda of his bamboo hotel at Singing Sands Island.

Sumpter Everdene Smith was at a table with me having breakfast. The schooner *Hussar* had just made fast to the head of the shaky pier before the hotel. Jarvis, all in white and topped by a wide straw hat, was waddling up through the palm grove with his swinging sea gait and spotting the

sunshine with explosive puffs from a native cigar.

“That suitcase the Chink’s packing along looks like the skipper intends to stop over for a gin bender,” said Snake Eye Smith. “If we could get him into a cutthroat stud game I might pick me up a piece of change.”

“You take it easy with that bird from the *Hussar*,” warned Wyatt. “If you start a game of stud poker and beat him at it, he’s just about liable to shoot you. That man’d skin a hoss and sell it for a giraffe, and if he intends to stay over, we’d better

lock up our cash because somebody stands to git skun."

Captain Jarvis mounted the bamboo veranda steps, took off his hat and fanned his red face. He was a short heavy man with protruding eyebrows and a ridge of white hair that stuck up on an otherwise bald head to give him the aspect of an inquisitive cockatoo.

"Goin' to stop a spell with us, Cap'n?" asked Wyatt.

The fat Chinese carrying the rattan suitcase sat on it, took a tobacco sack from the wide sleeve of a blouse, filled a cast iron pipe with a long stem, shut his eyes and took a long pull against the flame of a match.

Jarvis peered down the veranda to the table, saw Chang Su waiting on me and Snake Eye, and pointed with the big hat. "You break loose, Chang, and fetch me a pair of eggs with the eyes open. A cup of coffee that's half Java rum. Hop it along." He turned back to Wyatt. "No, I ain't stayin'. I'm in a hurry to git down to the southern islands with a freight of trade goods. I'm afraid that Cap'n Harrod of the *Starlight* wants to beat me there. You ain't seen nothin' of the four flushin' old shark have you?"

Wyatt shook his head. "Ain't seen him for a long piece of time—but if you ain't stayin', what's the Chink follerin' you around for?"

"I want to sell you that Chink for about three months, more or less."

"Sell him to me! Godfrey mighty, what'd I do with a boughten Chink? Don't you know that I could be took up by the law for buyin' me a Chink?"

"Just for three months," said Jarvis mildly. "He's a passanger—and he's broke. It'd be a favor to me, and I'll pick him up on my way back. You can make him pay while he's here with you."

Wyatt, his long thin Cape Cod face showing puzzlement, followed Jarvis down to our table. The skipper sat down, nodding to Snake Eye and me, wiped the knife

and fork on the corner of the table cloth and set himself for the expected eggs.

"How come you with a Chink passenger broke flatter'n a skate fish?" asked Wyatt. "It don't sound like your reg'lar way of doin' business."

"It's this way: he paid me as far as Gecko Island. But I didn't put in there, so I've got to feed him for three months for nothin'. Can't make him work in the ship, secin' that he's a passenger."

"Whyn't you put in at Gecko Island and git shut of him?"

"I got a note from Harrod of the *Starlight* that he wanted to meet me at Gecko and for me to wait him there. But you know what a soapy party Harrod is. That note was just a trick to make me lay at anchor at Gecko while he slipped past me with trade goods and sold his cargo in the southern islands. I didn't swaller that bait and just kept away from Gecko—and that leaves me with this spare Chink."

Wyatt's ears quivered. He saw a profit. "Wa'l, Cap'n, what's your idee of what's in it for me to take him off'n your hands?"

"Ten dollars ought to be fair and square —to an old friend and customer of yours."

Wyatt's face twisted in pain. "Ten dollars! Hell's bells! Don't you know that I'm runnin' a hotel here? Ten dollars wouldn't pay for his keep three months in a poor house that was run fair to middlin'."

Jarvis looked offended. He turned his bleak blue eyes on the Cape Codder. "Why, Wyatt, I give you more credit for a business head! You can feed that Chink on rice and fish—and make him catch the fish, with some over for your customers. He'd pay you if he spent his time off chasin' flies away from the table." Jarvis waved both arms to shoo away flies that were minding their own business.

"I wouldn't nake a cent," protested Wyatt. "I'd have to bed him down, and Chinks is particular."

"Sleep him in a barrel stave hammock down in the palm trees. He can stand it all right—there won't be but about a month

of rainy season before I'm back—and you know that it's natural for Chinks to shed water.

CHANG SU arrived with the coffee pot and measured into the skipper's cup the ration of Java rum.

"Ten dollars don't cover it," declared Wyatt. "He'd sneak into the cook house, and by the time he and my help got done jabberin' about the war in Chiney, there wouldn't be no sleep for my customers here in the hotel."

"Make him help your Chink cooks after he's got a mess of fish."

Wyatt considered, taking a glance at the smoking Chinese. "From the beef he's got under his pants he don't look like he's got much sprawl to him and the gist of the business'd be that I'd be all wore out watchin' him sit down."

The Chinese was puffing his pipe and regarding the scenery of the palm grove and bay with placid content. His feet were shod with battered old embroidered shoes. He had a wide moon face with a double chin.

His black eyes were reflectively shrewd. Over a dark blouse and spacious trousers he wore a faded blue gown and a round black cap topped his head, suggesting a stopper on some gigantic jug fashioned in Chinese form for a gargantuan tourist trade.

"He's a bargain at ten dollars for three months," insisted Jarvis.

"Make it fifteen bucks and we'll call it a dicker—and no rebate if the police come over from Lantu Vanna and pick him up. If there's any row about him bein' here, you hold the sack and go to jail alone. No liability—and this island has got head hunters onto it, if you've happened to forget, Jarvis."

The *Hussar's* skipper grabbed for a wallet and dredged it up from a back pocket. "Sold!" He backed the word by peeling three five-dollar notes from the wallet and slamming them down on the table. "He's

your Chink and it's your lookout that you make him pay."

Wyatt made a face. He knew that he had bid too low and suspected that there was something behind the business not yet brought into the open. But he pocketed the cash, giving me an eye that hinted at something covert taking form in his mind.

"Chang, take that new Chinkie down to the end table and stuff him with rice. Feed him cheap and watch the spoons."

Chang Su spoke in Chinese to the *Hussar's* passenger. He picked up his rattan suitcase and followed our waiter. Presently chopsticks were clicking and there was a subdued conversation at the end of the veranda.

"What's the name of him?" asked Wyatt.

Captain Jarvis halted his knife before his chin with an egg yolk. "His name's Chu Chow, or that's what I make of it." Wyatt winced. "With a name to him like that I can't say I got a bargain. And from the looks of the way that he works with them eatin' knittin' needles, you ain't far from bein' right. But what's his trade when he ain't passengerin' around with you on an empty pocketbook?"

"He peddles some kind of medicine—that suitcase is full of it."

SNAKE EYE SMITH crouched forward across the table toward Jarvis. "Did you say medicine? That's my line most of the time. I used to run a medicine show back in the States. Maybe I could figure out a way to use that Chink to pick up a little change if he's got a good stock of stuff with him."

"Naow, Snake Eye, don't start no one-Chink medicine show in my hotel!" warned Wyatt. "You'll likely p'isen some of my roomers—and I'll git sued."

"He's a smart Chink," said Jarvis. "He's a wizard in his spare time."

Wyatt's eyes opened wide. "Wizard! Say, what've I bought me? A Chink that's goin' to clean me out of rice—and a wiz-

ard! I won't have no wizard goin's on around here! You take your passenger to hell and gone out of here, Cap'n!" Wyatt clutched the banknotes from his pants pocket and threw them on the table before the skipper.

Snake Eye threw up a hand. "Hold your horses, Wyatt! We might make some money with the Chink if the pearling fleet comes in. Some good tricks and pass the hat. Nobody could sue you for entertaining folks—and with a show you'd sell more gin. Besides, with the pearlers out for a good time, they'd throw money around free—and you and me would split the take. Don't forget that I've been on the stage, with every kind of an act from hypnotizing to sawing a lady in half."

"He don't do nothin' that'd scare anybody," argued Captain Jarvis.

Wyatt hesitated—with the classical result. "What does he do?"

"He's got a knack for makin' things disappear. He puts 'em under a rug, and when he lifts the rug, they are gone. It's all hocus-pocus, of course, but he's had me and my Chink cook and my native crew bug-eyed all the way down here. I'm goin' to miss him."

Wyatt gathered up the money again. "Wal, mebbe Snake Eye's right. But things disappear around here fast enough 'thout me havin' a professional disappearer on my hands. The idee makes me nervous, but if Snake Eye can make it pay—and I don't lose anything—we might take a whirl at it if we got enough pearlers drunk some night."

"What kind of medicine has he got?" demanded Snake Eye.

"Little bottles of red stuff that you sniff to cure headaches."

Snake Eye turned his basilisk eyes on me. His long horseface was flushed with greed. I knew that he was short of cash. His inventive mind was working on an idea and I felt that it meant trouble for somebody.

"Naow, never you mind about the medi-

cine part, Snake Eye, but you heed up on what I said. I can see that you're gittin' sot to try more'n the wizardin' idee. I got enough damn foolishment around here as 'tis, and my blood pressure ain't nothin' to brag about. You start some shenanigan with that Chink of mine and my heart'll likely blow my hat off."

Captain Jarvis finished his eggs hastily, pushed his chair back, slapped on his hat and throwing a silver doliar on the table, started for the steps. "While I got a draft of air I better up-tail and git out."

"Hey, wait!" barked Wyatt. "I dunno that I want to keep that Chink."

Jarvis kept going. "If Cap'n Harrod comes in with his *Starlight*, tell him that I didn't git his note till after I'd passed Gecko Island. So long—and the best of luck with the Chinkie." He loped down through the palm grove, climbed aboard the *Hussar*, barked for the lines to be cast off, and sailed while Wyatt swore under his breath.

"Listen to me, Wyatt," began Snake Eye, rising and taking the Cape Codder by the arm. "Don't you go off the deep end. The Chink's got a stock of medicine, he's a wizard, and with me to produce the show we'll wow 'em from the back places in Australia to Malacca. That'll put me in the money. Come along with me and we'll see what he's got." He started for the end of the veranda where Chu Chow was finished with his rice and was smoking his cast iron pipe.

"I got to figger out a job of work for him," said Wyatt, as he went along with me in the wake of Snake Eye. "He can pick some chickens and when he's done he can wash up the dishes while he's restin'."

SNAKE EYE paused before Chu Chow and faced the bay. With a wave of his arm in the direction of the departing *Hussar*, the hypnotizer asked, "You like-ee stop this side more better be with boat schooner?"

Chu Chow put his hands into the sleeves

of his gown and shook hands with himself politely. Then he took his pipe out of his mouth, bobbed his head forward and said, "Mo' better stop this side."

"Business no good, hey?" pressed Snake Eye.

Chu Chow regarded us with complacent serenity. The three of us were barbarians who must be tolerated. "Business no good. Long time no money. Bad luck. Mebbe short time can do good luck."

"A little work'll change your luck around this place," said Wyatt.

"I been having a tough time myself," said Snake Eye. He put a hand over one ear, bent his head to one side, and made a face. "Me sick topside."

Chu Chow, suddenly alert at the prospect of a customer, grinned. One hand fumbled up a sleeve and brought out a vial half the size of a thimble. It held a red liquid. The Chinese drew the tiny cork and thrust the vial at Snake Eye. "Can do fix him quick good. You smell him two smell, no got one headache. You see. Velly good. Twenty-fi' cent."

Snake Eye sniffed at the vial. His face was stricken with a violent spasm. He sneezed several times with explosive vigor. Tears streamed from his eyes. He lost his balance and grabbed for a veranda stanchion. "Whuff! One smell is enough! That kicks like a mule."

"Naow, look here," said Wyatt. "You can't monkey around with my Chink on my time, Snake Eye. You just cut this sawbones business out. I got a doctor's book for anybody that gits sick."

Snake Eye advanced on Wyatt with the out-thrust vial. "You take a sniff of this and then tell me that the world's flat. Don't you waste this Chink's time picking chickens. He's got something. Smell it, tell me the answer, and then we'll both know."

Wyatt turned wary. The suggestion that he might lose money by not following Snake Eye's advice was something of a serious idea to the Cape Codder. So he sniffed at the vial, reeled away, and backed

up against the veranda rail. "Godfrey mighty! That ought to cure anything. It jarred loose the wax in my ears."

"You could stop a riot with it," said Snake Eye. "I can make a universal remedy out of it—anything from bad breath to the hives. Him and his headaches! That just shows you that Chinks've got their limitations. There's a fortune in it."

Chu Chow held out a hand. "Twenty-fi' cent," he said.

Snake Eye waved a disgusted hand. "Don't talk to me about twenty five cents when I'm going to make you rich—if you're a good wizard. You've got a bonanza but no brains. Fact that you're broke proves it. If I had ten dollars I'd be all set to start my company up."

"Mebbe you could make money with it on the road," admitted Wyatt. "But if you've got to buy the medicine from Chu Chow for a quarter a bottle—and them little bottles—how can you make a profit?"

"I'd need bigger bottles, a good label, and a snappy name." Snake Eye swung to Chu Chow. "How much you got bag side?" he demanded.

The Chinese put down his pipe and opened his rattan suitcase. We saw an upper tier of small cardboard boxes sealed with tape and marked with Chinese ideograms. Chu Chow took out a packet, broke the seal, and revealed a dozen tiny red vials. Then he waved both hands over the suitcase. "All same got full this pidgin. Plenty can do. You buy him?"

"What you call him?" evaded Snake Eye.

"Tige' blood—man tige' blood."

"Fumadiddle!" then exclaimed Wyatt. "Where would he git blood from a he tiger?"

"Boy, what a name!" yelled Snake Eye.

Wyatt snorted. "Who'n the hell ever heard tell of a Chink runnin' round catchin' up he tigers and drawin' their blood to cure headaches? A Chink meet up with a tiger and only one of two things could happen—either the tiger gits the Chink or

the Chink don't stop runnin' till he has to buy hisself a new pa'r of shoes."

"We don't care a damn who catches the tigers," declared Snake Eye. "He's got a grip full of the stuff, ain't he? That makes him the tiger department."

"But you ain't got no money to buy his stock."

"What's the matter with you lending me some and taking a flier in the game—or do you know a good thing when you see it, Wyatt?"

**T**HE Cape Codder scratched his ear. "I dunno as I want to put any money into a tiger blood company that gits the blood out of a satchel."

"Why bother to buy it at all?" asked Snake Eye.

"Wa'l, what else can you do?"

"This island has head hunters on it, ain't it? That's worth something, if they do their stuff. Accidents can happen, even here, and if the worst comes to the worst I can find a boat oar and conk the Chink if a schooner comes in. Before he wakes up I'll be started in business."

"You better go slow about conkin' anybody around these premises," said Wyatt. "Besides, he's a wizard, and you need him to sell the stuff. I might take a whirl if you work up some ideas that'd show a profit."

"All right. Give me time to get an angle on this medicine. I'll need a sales talk, a mandarin coat and a pigtail wig for myself. Then I can sell this remedy used by the Mongols for the past ten centuries and brought as a boon to the civilized races by a wizard from the Himalayas at the far end of Tibet. That means I'll need also a pair of camel skin pants with the hair on 'em and a prayer wheel."

"With camel hair pants you'll need you an A-rab boy as chief flea catcher. The hull darned thing don't sound dignified to me, Snake Eye."

With a pencil taken from his vest, and an old envelope, Snake Eye sat down to make notes. "I got to have something ro-

mantic. Tigers come from India, so I've got to find an oriental slant."

"Aw, hell! Don't go for to call the medicine oriental."

"Why not?"

"Because if I'm goin' to be in this company I don't want the customers thinkin' about belly dancers—and they will if you git oriental."

"All right," said Snake Eye. "But a good name for the tiger blood is what I need to start up my ideas."

"Bengal is in India," I said. "Why not call it Bengal Tiger Blood?"

"That's it!" said Snake Eye. He wrote the words on the envelope.

"You might have something to say about rajahs as long as you make it that kind of medicine—and tigers come from India, as you said."

"By snum!" said Wyatt. "You two sprout ideas faster'n a last year's potato in a damp cellar! But what's a rajah?"

"A king in India," I explained.

"Oh, them fellers. They're the jaspers that twist up a hoss blanket for a hat and ride around on elephants. They look fat and healthy, too, Snake Eye, from the pictures I've seen of 'em. They're great hands for gittin' married. If their wives argue with 'em, they sell the wives off and git a new lot. Them furrin kings ain't civilized but they sure as hell know how to git along with their women folks."

"What I need," said Snake Eye, "is to find a printer over in Australia that's got a picture of a tough baby tiger for the labels and our ads. He might even dig up a cut of a rag-headed rajah, if he's a good printer. With this medicine we got to give the customers the works."

"It'll be me that gits the works," said Wyatt. "seccin' that I'll have to pay the printer."

"You started to beef already?" demanded Snake Eye.

"I dunno as I'm beefin', but you take a Chink that belongs to me and start a medicine company on my money, when we don't

know if the medicine'll do anything but give the customers blind staggers if he smells of it."

"You've got to spend money to make money," said Snake Eye. "You've got to put out before you take in. Look at the telephone and the automobile and the flying machine. They started with nothing but ideas, while we've got a suitcase full of Royal Bengal Tiger Blood, ain't we?"

"It ain't paid fur yit," objected Wyatt.

"What's that got to do with it? Didn't I remind you that the place is full of head hunters that are short on heads? Hell, if we can't get rid of one Chink, we ain't got enough imagination to go into business at all."

"I got enough brains not to want to git hung, Snake Eye."

"You shut up about getting hung and fetch me a pitcher with two quarts of water."

Wyatt stared at the hypnotizer. "You ain't turned back to water fur drinkin' purposes, have you, Snake Eye?"

No. I want to see how much of a cut this stuff will stand. It's too concentrated, even if I get the tiger blood for nothing."

"You don't suppose it'd cure rheumatiz, do you?" asked Wyatt. "My right knee's a mite out of kilter, specially comin' down stairs."

"Get that water and we'll see what we've got."

Wyatt brought the pitcher of water. Snake Eye dumped in the contents of the vial. The resultant liquid was redder than what had been in the vial—and it looked more like blood.

"What a honey!" exulted Snake Eye. "Two quarts are sixty-four ounces, and a dollar for a two ounce bottle means thirty-two dollars out of a twenty-five-cent bottle of Chu's medicine."

"Fair enough profit," declared Wyatt.

"That's better than using Chu Chow to pick chickens," said Snake Eye. "You've got to put this Chink up in style—until we're ready to deal with him."

"I'll give him a room upstairs and let him run a bill. By the time you've got your labels and bottles, he'll owe me more'n his tiger blood's wuth. And he'll be up where you two can keep an eye on that satchel of his'n."

"We can't lose, Wyatt. We'll just let nature take its course on an island full of headhunters, and if Captain Jarvis comes back to pick up his Chink, we'll let him go—and your bill holds the tiger blood."

SO CHU CHOW and his suitcase were escorted upstairs by Wyatt and Chang Su was instructed to see that the new guest got anything he wanted. "And," I heard Wyatt tell Chang, "it all goes on the cuff. I'll leave it to you to keep it figgered up on that button board addin' machine of yours. If he likes gin, give him enough to keep him numb, but you stay sober yourself or I'll kick you outen your socks."

Then Snake Eye with the pitcher of tiger blood and a chicken feather painted Wyatt's right knee. The skin took on colors that suggested a rainbow at midnight during a volcanic eruption.

For three days, and part of the nights, Snake Eye walked about muttering to himself and writing various drafts of sales arguments and medical lectures. When I read it over I felt sure that if Snake Eye ever found himself in a community that required truth in advertising he would find himself in jail for the rest of his life.

"Put on your cheaters and have a glim at this," the hypnotist told me as he handed over a sheet of what he called his literature. I read:

"Royal Bengal Tiger Blood. The greatest boon ever discovered by Sumpter Everdene Smith for suffering humanity. Here we have the secret of how Genghis Khan and his Mongol hordes conquered China. Royal Bengal Tiger Blood kept his army in perfect health as he led his legions over the great wall of China and put himself on the Dragon Throne. Use this secret of the Mongols for all the ills that man is heir to.

Concentrated and refined by Sumpter Everdene Smith, noted authority on chemistry, by a special process. The blood is drawn from Royal Bengal Tigers captured in the private preserves of a rajah of India who lived to the startling age of ninety-six years and four months. The man-eating tigers are brought down by the lasso by Mongols riding on camels from the Gobi Desert. These warriors are noted for being the healthiest human beings in the world. A large two-ounce bottle for the small sum of only one dollar."

"Perfect!" I declared.

"It'll knock 'em cold," said Snake Eye. "It beats the stuff I got up about my Cherokee Indian Pain Killer, which I turned into Turkish Long Life Elixir when the newspapers discovered a Turk that lived to be a hundred and forty-two years old. I mopped up on that."

"All we'll need," said Wyatt, "is a fresh supply of tigers. When we run out of stock I'll go along with you and kick the ears off'n the tigers and then all you'll have to do is draw their blood."

"That Chink's got enough stuff, if it's cut right, to run me a couple of years. Don't you worry—I'll find plenty of tiger blood when I need it."

"**G**ODFREY mighty!" declared Wyatt one morning when I came down to breakfast. "That Snake Eye knows everything." He pulled up his pants leg and twisted his knee through a series of fancy gyrations. "Before he painted it with tiger blood I couldn't bend that j'int 'thout it'd crack like a lamb bone goin' through a meat grinder. Now it's as limber as a kittle of eels with the cover off."

"Maybe that medicine is better than we think," I said.

"Ayah. Chinks've got brains but they don't foller up a good thing when they've figgered it out. They started printin' but their books look like pictures of pretzels on a drunk. They started makin' gun powder but didn't amount to nothin' till the

Christians put it in guns. Like this Chu Chow of mine and the medicine—it'll take Snake Eye to make it pay a good profit."

Chu Chow lived in style, his meals being served in his room by Chang Su. In the cool of the evenings Chu always took a walk in the palm grove.

I was dressing in my room one morning when I heard Chang arrive at Chu's door with his breakfast tray. There was no answer to the knock on Chu's door. Chang pushed the door open and went in. I heard the dishes rattle as the tray was thrown on a table—then Chang yelled. The next I knew Chang was racing down the hallway screaming in terror for Wyatt.

**S**NAKE EYE, his face lathered for shaving, came into the hall to ask me, "What's the matter with the Chinkie?"

"Something wrong in Chu's room—we'd better take a look."

Wyatt was yelling below to Chang, trying to learn what bothered him.

Chang paused at times in his jabbering of wild Chinese to cry, "Him no got!"

"You cussed lunatic, him no got what?" demanded Wyatt.

Snake Eye and I walked into Chu Chow's room. The Chinese was not there. The sheets and pillows on the bed were undisturbed. The mosquito netting was draped up on the supporting wires.

"Gone!" exclaimed Snake Eye. "He was in the palm grove last night."

"Maybe the head hunters got him," I said.

Snake Eye brightened. "That would be a break, hey? We'd inherit the tiger blood."

Wyatt came running up the stairs after Chang Su. The Cape Codder stared into the room. "Hell's bells! He didn't go to bed last night."

"There ain't no place he could go but the jungle," said Snake Eye. "And that'd finish him off."

Wyatt looked around with scared eyes. "You don't suppose," he asked in awed

tones, "that this is some of his wizardin' business do y'?"

"What'd he want to put on an act for with nobody around and no change for him in it?" asked Snake Eye.

"Cap'n Jarvis said he was a disappearin' Chink—he's an expert at it."

"Oh, that! Jarvis said the Chink just made things disappear from under a rug."

"Ayah, but how do we know that he ain't made hisself disappear?"

"But what would he do it for?"

"What does a Chink do anything for? Why, just to boggle us up."

"But he's getting three meals a day and sleeping soft."

"I knew some damned thing'd go haywire with a wizard round the place."

"Head hunters got him, that's what," declared Snake Eye. "I hope to hell they did. For once them hellions would show us a profit."

"I can hold his satchel for his board," admitted Wyatt. "Where is it?" He marched across the room and looked into a closet. "There ain't nothin' in here but the usual crop of cobwebs."

"What?" yelled Snake Eye. "No suitcase?" He had a look himself and then turned to stare in horror at me. "Why, the double-crossing slant eyed crook! He took our tiger blood with him."

Wyatt scratched his head in bewilderment. "Wal, I can understand how a wizard can make hisself disappear, but a satchel of medicine, that's not in the meltin' away business. If it can, my Chink can give cards and spades to any wizarder that ever took a rabbit out of a hat or a deck of poker cards out of a deacon's vest."

Snake Eye got down on his hands and knees and looked under the bed. "Not even a mark on the dust," he reported.

Chang Su's teeth began to chatter. He grabbed the bowl of tea from the tray and drank, his hands shaking.

Wyatt said, "Now, Chang, you're all nourished up, and you might tell us when you seed Chu Chow last."

Chang waved a hand in the direction of the upper beach. "Night time him walk long time slow this side." He waved his other hand down the beach. "Him walk short time this side fast."

"But where'd he go?" pressed Wyatt.

"Him walk back. Him go lound in coco trees. Him stlike match. Him smoke pipe. Short time me no see him. Me go s'lip. Me s'lip this time, come this side, no got Chu Chow."

"Did he have that suitcase with our medicine?" asked Snake Eye.

"Very no can tell him got sluitcase, mebbe got, mebbe no got, him walk night time me no see."

Snake Eye shook his head in disgust. "Perfect solution of the mystery. X marks the spot. He run around the whole damned beach with a pipe that'd tell the head hunters where he was in the dark. That's clear as mud. But what's got me down is why he ran around after dark packing along with him the total stock of the Concentrated Tiger Blood Company."

"Ayah," said Wyatt. "He just disappeared hisself and the satchel with him. It don't sound human—and it ain't even Chink sense."

"I don't care if he lost his head, but I do care about that medicine," said Snake Eye. "The head hunters wouldn't want that."

Wyatt turned to Chang Su. "There's some shenanigan. You're a Chink and you ought to know more'n we do about it, Chang."

Chang's teeth chattered again. His eyes bulged. He shook all over, then blurted hastily, "Me no savvy this pidgin!" squealed and bolted through the doorway with the tray. Every time he hit the ground in the garden on his way to the cook house we heard the dishes jump.

Snake Eye turned to me. "You're the brains department—what do you think about the mystery?"

I told him, "This is not my morning for solving Chink mysteries."

Snake Eye snorted and blew shaving lather off his chin at me. "One damned Chink puts the whole tiger blood company on the rocks!"

We could hear Chang and his two helpers in the cook house engaged in a yelling match that suggested a Chinese grand opera in full swing.

Wyatt rubbed his right knee. "Damn it all! I threw my leg out runnin' upstairs. We'd better go down to the bar and take a little somethin' to dynamite our nerves. I'm as jumpy about this wizardin' business as an old maid at a raffle of weddin' rings."

So we went below and spiked our coffee with Java rum. Snake Eye dripped lather as he drank.

"Chinks've got the knack of givin' us fellas the run-around," said Wyatt. "You can't read a Chink's mind no more'n you can read one of their newspapers. They got sense but when they git excited their brains curdle. Civilization just don't take on 'em any more'n a mulc can git small pox."

**S**NAKE EYE got the feather and the pitcher of tiger blood and painted the Cape Codder's knee. "Where's that suitcase?" demanded Snake Eye.

"What's he want to disappear for? He was bearin' down hard on my most expensive gin. The thing don't make sense. We got to pole around on the beach and look for a pool of Chink blood."

"Damn his blood!" said Snake Eye. "Tiger blood is all that puts sugar in my tea."

We found nothing on the beach or in the palm grove to give us a clue to what had happened to Chu Chow.

Chang Su still had the jitters. He was scared when he brought our meals. He would look over his shoulder and shiver. After dark he refused to cross the vegetable garden between hotel and cook house. Our ears were tortured by Chinese debates in the kitchen. Snake Eye walked around and talked to himself.

In a week, the schooner *Starlight*, Captain Harrod arrived. She tied up at the pierhead. Harrod came rolling up through the palm grove—a fat, short little man with a friendly grin and a cap on one ear. He had a cargo of trade goods for the southern islands.

"You seen anything of Cap'n Jarvis of the *Hussar*?" he demanded.

"Ayah, I seen him, but I wish to hell I didn't have," said Wyatt.

Harrod tossed his cap on the table. "What'd he do to you?"

"He didn't do nothin', but I been bogged since he left."

"Cheat you out of somethin'?"

"He paid me fifteen dollars to keep a headache-curin' Chink for three months. I lost the Chink—and that give me a headache."

Harrod's eyes opened wide. "What kind of a Chink?"

"What the hell else could he be but just Chink? They're all alike, ain't they?"

"No, they ain't. Some are fat and some are thin."

"This was a fat one. He was a disappearer by trade—and he worked at it. He went straight up in the air like a gallon of rum in a jug with the stopple left out on a hot day."

"Where'd he disappear to?"

"I dunno. There wa'n't no damned place for him to go and take his satchel."

Captain Harrod put his feet up on the table, lit a long cigar, and shut his eyes against the smoke. "Satchel! You don't mean to tell me that he went with a satchel!"

"That's what I'm tellin'. And the head hunters got him. You heard what I said the first time. He was an expert wizard. I ain't worried about him personal, but I had a claim on that satchel for board."

Harrod opened his eyes and stared at Wyatt in disbelief. "What the hell kind of a song and dance you givin' me? Cap'n Jarvis didn't have no Chink that carried a satchel."

"Yes, he did. A passenger Chink—that'd run out of money. He was to be landed at Gecko Island. Jarvis said the Chink could make things disappear. Damned if I don't think now that Jarvis was scared of that Chink and paid me fifteen dollars to take him off'n his hands."

"You'll likely have the police over here from Lantu Vanna on your neck for losin' that Chink."

"Police!" said Wyatt. "What would the police come down on me for? I can't stop a wizard from disappearin', can I, satchel and all?"

"Why not? If there was somethin' in that satchel that the police wanted. How do you know what he had in it?"

"I seen what was in it—boxes of medicine."

**H**ARROD lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, medicine, hey! Sure of that?"

"Snake Eye here started up a corporation with it, so we ought to know—and we got wizarded out of it."

"Oh, that wizard guff!" said Harrod. "Just Cap'n Jarvis shootin' the breeze. But you're right about Jarvis bein' scared of somethin'."

"What was he scared of? The Chink?"

"I ain't sure. I sent him a note to wait for me at Gecko. Instead, he skips down here and unloads a Chink on you—and you lose the Chink. For all you know, Jarvis fixed things to pick up that Chink from the beach outside the bay. That's what the police might be interested in."

"Godfrey mighty!" said Wyatt. "Mebbe you're right!"

Snake Eye rose from his seat. "That's an idea! But what would Jarvis pay fifteen dollars to Wyatt for if the Chink was to be picked up again by Jarvis?"

"So Jarvis could claim that he'd left the Chink here if the police got to nosin' around about a Chink that might be wanted."

"You've hit it!" declared Snake Eye. "But maybe Jarvis just wanted the Chink

and his medicine back after he heard that I'd make money with it. It wouldn't be the first idea that's been swiped from me."

Captain Harrod sipped his gin reflectively. "There's always an answer with Chinks, but the catch is to find it. I had a case of a Chink passenger that carried a big trunk. He disappeared right aboard my vessel. I put his trunk ashore in the first port. Blast my blisters if the Chink didn't happen to be in the trunk. He was tryin' to outsmart the police. I got fined for tryin' to smuggle Chinks."

"Wa'l, my Chink couldn't put his fat hide into that satchel of ourn," said Wyatt.



"I'm interested up in this case," said Harrod. "I'm goin' to anchor here and see what happens. Cap'n Jarvis has put somethin' over, I'll bet a hat. He had some reason for not wantin' to wait for me at Gecko."

"We can use some heavy thinkin' around here," said Wyatt. "You stay and help us figger things out and the drinks'll be on the house."

"And I'll double that," said Snake Eye.

"If it ain't one damned thing with Chinks, it's another, but that's the last time I buy me fifteen dollars wuth of wizard," declared Wyatt.

The three Chinese at the cook house all wandered down to the pier to gossip with

the Chinese cook of the *Starlight* and the Malay crew. Chang Su, wearing his big conical bamboo hat spent the most of the day trotting up and down through the palm grove and jabbering on board the schooner.

Captain Harrod was comfortably drunk by midnight. He decided to go back aboard the *Starlight*. He made four attempts to get to the beach but each trip went hard aground on a coconut tree. We had to pry him loose every time and get him back to the hotel. We dug up Wyatt's front yard dragging the captain around while he swore at us with fluency. We finally decided that it would be simpler to put him to sleep in the hotel and save ourselves the trouble of burying him if he got drowned.

During the evening I saw Chang Su's conical hat moving through the palm grove. That lampshade head gear was plainly outlined against the background of the moonlight on the bay as he went to the pier.

In the morning Harrod was bright as a lark. He invited us all aboard the schooner for breakfast. He had plenty of trade beer—and ice.

**H**ARROD'S Chinese cook was slow about frying the eggs. The skipper stepped into the galley to investigate the delay. "You let the fire run down," we heard him complain. "You ain't got enough fire to give a man just back from hell the prickly heat." Then the cover of the big woodbox was slapped upward against the wall as Harrod went for firewood.

Harrod yelled—a yell of amazement. "What the hell's this?"

The *Starlight's* cook fled from the galley and went past the little messroom on his way to the deck like a shot out of a gun. From the galley came sounds of a prodigious disturbance that suggested a charging rhinoceros going through a plank wall.

The three of us dashed to the galley and peered in through the doorway. Harrod was mopping up the flooring with Chu Chow, who had just been dragged from the woodbox.

"Blast you!" screamed Harrod in fury, "I'll take your hide off and make two yellow rugs to send to my wife for Christmas! That'll be a lesson not to hold out money that's mine and skip away in the *Hussar* and turn yourself into a wizard that can disappear. I thought you'd wind up in my woodbox or in my bilges, and when you thought I was pickled drunk last night you stowed away on me. You may be a wizard but you ain't good enough to fool me!" He slammed Chu down to the floor and kicked him up against the bulkhead beyond the woodbox.

"Hey! Don't bust him all up!" yelled Wyatt. "That's my Chink!"

Harrod reached down, picked Chu Chow up, bent him double and thrust him down into a flour barrel that was lashed to a bulkhead, topped the barrel with Chang Su's conical bamboo hat as a lid. "Stay there for a spell and think up some new wizardin' tricks." Then Harrod turned to us, dusting his hands.

"Where's that suitcase with the tiger blood?" asked Snake Eye.

"You must've seed him before," said Wyatt, "To be so out of patience with him."

"I been tryin' to see him for some time," said Harrod. "Heard he was with Jarvis aboard the *Hussar* and wanted to git the Chink at Gecko Island, but Jarvis wouldn't stop there, so—" The skipper turned to see Snake Eye make for the woodbox.

"We got to git that satchel," said Wyatt. "I got a claim on it for board."

Snake Eye bent down, thrust his arms into the deep box, gave a bellow of triumph, and came up with the suitcase. "Got it!" he yelled. "We're back in business again!"

Captain Harrod ducked his head, leaped forward in a flying tackle, and Snake Eye hit the deck. The skipper wrung the suitcase from the hands of the prostrate hypnotist. Wyatt and I were thrust out of the way by Harrod as he made for the messroom. There he threw the suitcase on the

table. With a sheath knife he cut the straps and dumped out the cardboard boxes.

"I tell you that I got a claim on that tiger blood," insisted Wyatt.

"You got a claim on the gates of hell—and you'll burn your fingers to short stubs tryin' to collect!" roared Harrod as he knifed open a box. "I got a claim on this stuff that'll make your head swim around like a bar of red soap in a washin' machine."

Before our amazed eyes Harrod extracted from the cardboard boxes which we supposed to contain vials of medicine, fat packets of banknotes. He swore and licked his lips with a dry tongue. A pile of currency grew on the table as the boxes were ripped open. Snake Eye and Wyatt gazed at the performance, astounded at what they saw.

"What'n the hell did he do?" asked Wyatt. "Rob a couple of banks?"

"This is my money," said Harrod. "I run a hot cargo for a Swatow Chink. This bird of a Chu Chow was the pay-off man. He held out ten thousand bucks on me. I couldn't arrest him to git money on a charge that it was pay to me for smugglin', could I? I had to catch up to him—and it looked to me like Cap'n Jarvis was goin' to trim this Chink of my money and kick him ashore, but when you told me that the Chinkie'd done a disappearin' stunt, I felt that he must've had the cash with him or there wouldn't be no need to run out on you. I figgered he'd take a chance that my Chink cook'd hide him, so I played drunk to let the hellion come aboard me last night."

Captain Harrod pulled off his coat and threw it aside. We saw that he wore a pair of heavy automatic pistols in his back pockets.

"Godfrey mighty!" said Wyatt, as he looked at the pile of banknotes. "No wonder the Chink disappeared—after hearin' the way Snake Eye talked about conkin' him with an oar, and all. And that Chink

must've paid my Chang Su to hide him in the cook house."

"The most of that ten thousand bucks is here," said Harrod, collecting the cash.

Snake Eye wiped the sweat from his brow. "Looks like that Chink had run out of sense to come back aboard this schooner with money that belonged to the skipper. He'd been safer with us."

Chu Chow's shoulders and head rose from the flour barrel. "If a man has his head in a dragon's mouth," he said, "he can risk riding away on the back of a tiger. I am safer in this boat than in a hotel where I am to be slain for profit."

"If I could've kept my puss shut," Snake Eye said to me, "I'd be in ten thousand bucks."

"Knew every word that we said," remarked Wyatt sadly.

Chu Chow asked, "Is it an excessive demand, Captain Harrod, that I return with you to Swatow in your respectable schooner?"

"It ain't," said Harrod. "I want the respectable pleasure of kickin' you ashore in three places with your back broke if my ten thousand bucks ain't in this pile to the last dollar."

We walked down the gangplank to the pier. Harrod bawled to his crew to cast off the lines. "And," he called after us, "if you see that Cap'n Jarvis on his way back from the southern islands you can tell him that he ain't so damned slick as he thinks he is, and when I cross his bows I'll give him a poke in the snoot."

As we walked up through the palm grove Wyatt remarked, "We blabbed ourselves out of a fortune, with all that gab before the Chink wizard."

Snake Eye spat in disgust at a palm tree. "Blast them head hunters! They fell down on the job. If they'd got that Chink's head, we'd've been into that suitcase before Cap'n Harrod got here, bloodhounding after all that cash, and I'd've been on my feet again with a stake."

*Bob Makin Had Concluded That if He Had to Take on the  
Whole County a Few Mexicans and a Sheriff or so  
Didn't Make a Whole Lot of Difference*



## ONE CATTLEMAN'S CONSCIENCE

By RAYMOND A. BERRY

*Author of "Hell on the Hoof," "Two Jokers and One Laugh," etc.*

**B**OB MAKIN moved his game leg ever so carefully. He had splintered his shin bone several months before and it did not heal as it should. The threat of blood poison was with him. He was morosely contemplating how very unpleasant it would be to round up his stock before the winter storms while in such physical condition and without the help he should

have. And already there was snow on the higher peaks of the Frijole Range.

His gaze dropped lower to the white palisade of aspens at the far side of the meadows. A rider was just breaking from shelter and was riding furiously toward the cabin. Makin stiffened. There was no mistaking the unruly shock of sorrel hair which fluttered flame-wise in the wind.

It was Steve Westfall, half brother to

Judy Westfall, who owned the WW Ranch six miles to the south. Makin didn't like the hulking, loose-lipped, wise-cracking kid and wondered bitterly how such a lout could be even partially related to so fine a girl as Judy. The boy came on, riding wildly, and threw himself from the horse and stood in front of Makin, his customarily brassy face filled with a stark terror.

"Quick, Bob!" he begged. "Hide me before he gets here. You've got to, Bob!"

"Wait a minute, Kid, and quit champin' on the bit. Who's after you?"

"The sheriff," panted young Westfall. "Him and two deputies have been chasing me for the last three hours."

"I've always figured you'd meet up with some grief sooner or later, if you didn't change your ways," said Makin. "What form of devilty you been into this time?"

"Nothing wrong, Bob. I just mistook the sheriff for a deer. He looked like one in his brown pants and jacket."

The pipe almost fell from Makin's mouth.

"You mean that you took a shot at Smoot?"

"Yes. He was off his horse and stooped over. He looked like a deer."

"Sure you weren't sore because he caught you at some cussedness and tried to drill him?"

"No. I tell you it was an accident, but he hates me so he wouldn't listen. He'd kill me if he caught me!"

"He wouldn't do that, Kid. No officer does that sort of trick."

"Smoot would," chattered Steve. "He's a cruel devil. You know he is. For gosh sake, do something!"

THERE was enough truth in what the boy said to make the situation ugly. Sheriff Smoot did have a mean disposition and, in addition, he had already circulated his belief that young Westfall was connected with the cattle rustling that had put the Frijoles in a turmoil the past weeks.

The theory advanced by the sheriff was that the boy acted as lookout for more accomplished thieves, telling them when the coast was clear for their depredations. Plenty of people detested the boy and were glad to side with such views. If the sheriff took the boy into Hankville he might easily scare the boy into confessing things he had never done. Steve was pawing at Makin, his features twisting and a sweat of dread beading the downy, adolescent growth upon his upper lip.

"Hurry, Bob! I came here because Judy always said you were our friend. Don't let us down!"

MAKIN winced. He hated to have Judy's name coupled with this half wild kid but, years back, when Steve was only a baby and Judy a toddler of four or five he had stood at the deathbed of Tom Westfall and promised that he would look after the widow and children the best he could. He had done that—done it so well that the Westfalls had prospered while his own ranch had run down hill. No, with the memory of Tom's bullet-blasted body and haunting eyes still with him, he couldn't turn the boy over to a man like Smoot.

"All right, Kid," he said. "Go inside and sit down where he can't see you from the window. I'll strip the saddle off your cay-ue and turn it in with my ponies."

Hardly had he completed this task and limped back to the cabin doorstep, where he sat down, than another horseman emerged from the timber and loped his mount toward the ranch buildings.

"The sheriff's comin', Kid," called Makin. "Sit tight and don't make a noise."

"But the door ain't locked, Bob. He'll walk right in."

"I reckon I can prevent that."

Makin's unperturbed tones had a quieting effect upon Steve and the interior of the cabin became absolutely still. Closer and closer moved the sheriff's barrel-bodied sorrel. Now the muffled thud of hoofs on the springy turf was plainly audi-

ble. The sheriff's face changed from a white blur, partially eclipsed by the shadow of his broad-brimmed felt, into a rough triangle, definite of outline and unmistakably hard of detail. Nose, chin, ears, all held chiseled savagery. The eyes that regarded the rancher from beneath triangular lids were coldly inscrutable. When he jerked the sorrel to a sudden standstill Makin saw an agony of weariness in the equine eyes. Its flanks drew in and out, like the skin on a bellows. Bits of lather dropped from its belly and there was blood and hair on the wheels of the sheriff's spurs.

Makin pointed to the animal and asked in caustic tones, "Don't you ever give a horse a chance to get its wind?"

The gray chill of the sheriff's eyes was tinged with amusement.

"When I'm in a hurry, I don't. All a horse means to me is a way of gettin' places. Hell, there's always plenty more horses!"

The sheriff paused as though daring Makin to object, then went on, "That Westfall kid's been snoopin' around the camp of those two Mexican prospectors on Shingle Creek for a week. Today he got into their belongings and took a whole bunch of stuff. I happened to be in the neighborhood and took after him. The young devil got hostile and tired to dry-gulch me. Seen anything of him?"

Makin puffed at his pipe and countered, "What do you think?"

"That you have," Smoot answered in smooth tones. "Isn't that his nag there in the corral?"

"This is a ranch, Smoot. Not an information bureau."

"The hell it is. From the looks of you and the out-buildings it might be a museum. Do you put rocks in your pants to keep from blowin' away?"

That last was a sneer at the way Makin had thinned down since hurting his leg. With an effort he rose. Slowly he knocked the ashes from his pipe. The sheriff dropped from his horse and started for the door.

"Wait!" said Makin.

The officer appeared amused and asked, "Wait for what?"

"An invitation, if you think you're going inside!"

The sheriff reached into his pocket and pulled out a small sheaf of papers held together by a rubber band. Flicking through them with thumb and forefinger, he extracted one and held it out to the rancher.

"That's a search warrant. Read it over and see if I can't go into your shack."

So the sheriff was taking a high hand and carrying warrants entitling him to enter every home in the region. Such high-handedness did not sit well with Makin, and it wouldn't with a lot of others. He took the slip from Smoot's fingers, glanced at it casually, then handed it back. Smoot grinned triumphantly.

"Well, how about it?"

Makin nodded. "Correct, Sheriff. It gives you the right to enter, but it doesn't say a thing about your coming out."

THERE was a peculiar emphasis to the calm statement. It made the sheriff jump. His gaze roved over the speaker with new respect. At first glance the rancher was not an imposing figure, but he grew under examination. Was it just the jutting jaw and the determined mouth, combined with sage gray eyes that had remained compelling through months of suffering? No, it was something deeper than that. A thing which came from the spirit. To Smoot it seemed fantastic that this wraith of a man should really be threatening him, so he asked, "You really mean that?"

"What is your idea?"

"That you're a false front. I've heard you used to be pretty clever with six-guns, but not good enough to try that."

"Usually when I get a hunch, I act on it," Makin said politely. "Why don't you call my bluff?"

A red surge of fury mottled the sheriff's cheeks and jowls. His hand made a motion toward his holstered gun, then stopped un-

certainly. The gaunt man had him bluffed. He knew young Westfall was in the cabin, but he dared not make the search. And to say that later he would have Makin arrested would make him appear in a still worse light. He could never confess that he had been afraid to make a search when opposed only by a man who was ill from a wound in his leg. Struggling for mastery of his emotions he stalked back to the horse and, jabbing a foot into a stirrup, swung to the saddle. Makin could hear his choked breathing from ten feet away. At last the sheriff spoke, each word grinding from between his teeth.

"Makin, up till now you've been left alone as bein' harmless. If you hadn't been such a fool, you'd have kept on the right side of the law. Young Westfall is a criminal on several counts, includin' cattle rustlin'. Now you are one on at least one count. Maybe a lot more. If you know what's good for you, you'll get out of the country—quick!"

"And if I don't know what's good for me?"

"I'll either see you inside the penitentiary or in a wooden box!" snapped Smoot. "And I don't give a damn which." With that he whirled his mount and, roweling the tired beast unmercifully, he galloped down the sage-bordered trail leading to the Hankville road. After he had disappeared from sight Makin called to young Westfall, "Kid, I reckon it's safe to come out now."

Instantly the door opened and Steve stepped through. Gone now was his abject fright. Instead of trembling, he swaggered. With a brassy laugh he complimented his protector.

"Nice goin', Bob. Your actin' like a sure enough neighbor, sure saved me from hav-

in' to kill the sheriff. Judy's beau—Dave Haddock—has sort of got him cut out for his special meat and—"

The cold contempt in Makin's voice halted the boaster.

"Dry up, Kid. My stomach won't take it. Now tell me what you did with the stuff you stole."

"I didn't—"

"Yes, you did. You've been stealin' off and on for years and I'd let you bear the penalty if it wasn't for your sister. How in the world anyone as nice as Judy ever came to be afflicted with such a brother is past all understanding. Where did you cache the things you took?"

"Honest—"

**S**LOWLY Makin reached out and grasped a blacksnake hanging on the cabin wall.

"Kid, unless you come clean I'm going to flog your pants off. And if you try to run, I'll shoot the ends off your toes."

Something in the calm statement terrified the boy into making his confession.

"I wanted some ammunition, Bob. And the Mexicans had more than they needed. Anyhow I figured on paying them back. And I didn't shoot at the sheriff on purpose. The stuff is hid in a hollow log back in Burnt Fork."

Granite featured, Makin listened to the story, then pointed toward the corral.

"Get out there and saddle up your own horse and one for me. I'm going to see if you're telling the truth."

A drizzling rain was falling before they reached the point where the boy had hidden his booty. Makin had his slicker along but the wind lifted its skirts and blew up his trouser legs. He could wear neither chaps nor boots as the least pressure against the



festering wound was unbearable. Soon the moisture soaked through his pants and bandages. He began to chill and the misery from his hurt became a thing against which he set his teeth.

When they halted at the log he watched grimly while the boy fished three boxes of rifle cartridges, a hunting knife and a leather pouch containing twelve dollars from the hole.

"Is that all?" asked Makin.

"Every bit, Bob. So help me."

"All right. Hand them over and get back on your horse."

"What are you going to do now?"

"Take you home."

Horror blanked the boy's face.

"Bob, you won't tell Judy? Gosh, I'd rather you used the whip than have that happen. She thinks I'm great. It would kill her."

So the kid did have some human affection. Makin was glad to find it out and the boy was right about what his sister thought of him. Moreover, Judy was clean and proud. It would be a terrific blow for such a girl to discover that her only living relative was a sneak thief.

"Bob, please don't tell her," the boy begged again. When he lost his braggadocio he was almost likeable.

"If I don't, do you think the sheriff and those Mexicans will keep still? They'll spread it. It's sure to reach her."

"But she wouldn't believe them. Neither will Dave Haddock. They both think the sheriff's crooked. Bob, if you won't peep, I'll never steal a thing in my life. So help me."

Makin wavered, then said, "Maybe I won't tell about this, but I've got to talk with her anyhow."

"Why?"

"She's got to understand that it won't be safe for you to stick around here for a while. Now keep still."

They made the ride back to the Westfall Ranch in silence. Each mile Makin's physical and mental torment increased. From

the pain he knew that another lump was forming in his groin. He would be lucky if blood poisoning didn't set in. And his misgivings as to how Judy would react increased. Ever since Steve had been a small boy she had flown to his defense like a hen sparrow. The last two or three years Makin's efforts to set the boy right had made a growing coolness between them. Then, as Judy had grown up, younger men had sought her company and the man who had taught her to ride and shoot, and to know something of human nature, had been pushed aside for beaux who would take her to younger parties and dances. Makin had always wanted her to have a good time but now the eight years difference in their ages, coupled with his physical condition, had widened the chasm until all he could now do was look at her and eat out his heart with lonesome longing.

WHEN they trotted down a stack-bordered lane and into the yard about the house Makin did not try to dismount. He hated to go hitching up to Judy's door like a crippled cat. Besides he was not sure that, once out, he could get back into the saddle again.

"Ask your sister to step outside a minute if she doesn't mind," he directed. Then he settled down to count the seconds he waited by pumping pain into his swollen leg.

At last she came, something bright and woolly covering her thick brown hair against the splattering rain. There was questioning apprehension in her face, but it did not keep her from smiling. Makin would rather watch that spontaneous glow of friendship spill from her eyes and warm the coral of her lips than to see anything else in the world.

"Hello, Bob. What next? Here you haven't been to see me for weeks and now you won't get off your horse and come in. This is no way for a man to act."

There was a pleasant warmth to her chiding that hurt him as nothing else could have done.

"I'm sorry, Jury. But I haven't much time tonight. There's a lot of things to do at the ranch and I thought if you would come outside, we could maybe talk better alone."

"What is it, Bob? Steve looks scared stiff."

Makin removed his hat. He hoped to think more clearly with the rain cooling his head. If there were only some way of saying what he must say without hurting her!

"Bob, what makes you act so queer?"

"Did Steve tell you about his trouble with the sheriff?"

"What trouble?"

"He mistook Smoot for a deer and shot at him. Smoot was plenty sore and wanted to put him in jail. Judy, I think Steve ought to be got out of the country for a little while till this blows over."

Judy stared incredulously.

"You mean that he should run away just because of a mistake of that sort? Bob, you are out of your head."

Makin fumbled with his reins. It was harder than he had imagined.

"It's not just that alone, Judy. But you know Steve's a great hand to rove round in the hills. There's a lot of talk about rustling now and people are getting suspicious of everybody."

"You mean they're accusing my brother of stealing cattle?"

"No, no, Judy! Nobody but the sheriff so far. But such ideas spread. Be a lot better for him to get away for a while so there couldn't be any question about him. I'd see that he was taken to the train and sent to the World's Fair. Why not let him go right away? I'll pay his fare. Been wanting to do something for you for quite a while."

**N**OW Judy was really hurt. A confusion of injured pride and scorn pinked her cheeks.

"Bob," she choked, "I would never have believed that you'd say such things if I hadn't heard you with my own ears. No self-respecting person would run in the

face of false accusation. How can you suggest such a thing? You're always been our friend. What has happened to you. And you don't look like yourself at all. You're so thin and sick. You should see a doctor."

A deep chuckle sounded behind them. Makin and Judy whirled to find that Dave Haddock had come up, unnoticed. Twenty-four, strongly built, and in the very pink of condition, young Haddock emanated strength and self-sufficiency as he stood there, his broad mouth twisted by amusement.

"Bob's all right, Judy," he announced, "only he's lived alone over there so long that he's getting notional like an old maid. Ain't I right, Bob? Don't you look under your bed nights?"

There was more than just ugly banter in Haddock's words. They carried hate as well. Haddock, who had crowded the other men away from Judy Westfall was jealous of Makin as well. He hated the fact that for years Judy had called on Makin for emergency. Now was his chance to get even.

When the man he wanted to annoy did not answer, he continued, "By thunder, Bob, I never expected anyone who called themselves either a friend or a man to suggest anything as yellow as that. Steve's a fine kid. Good as they make 'em. And then talk about having him run away! He doesn't need to do that. There's plenty here that will stick up for him. If you've got so you're afraid of Smoot's shadow, at least don't come round here scarin' Judy."

Makin listened in amazement. He knew that privately Haddock considered Steve Westfall no good. In fact, not many months ago he had heard him belittle the boy publicly in a Hanksville saloon. Now, to curry favor with Judy, he was professing things which he did not believe. The tight control which Makin had kept upon himself through the nerve-fraying hours just past suddenly snapped. Swinging his horse close to Haddock he leaned out in his saddle and struck him across the mouth.

Judy's cry of protest was lost in Haddock's roar of rage. With an oath he reached for a gun, then stopped short as one of Makin's ancient, silver-mounted revolvers pointed straight at his chest.

"I gave you that whack, Dave, for being a dirty, unprincipled liar!" he snapped. "You know that I was telling the truth about Steve, and instead of backing me for the kid's good, you try to make me look foolish!"

The hot vehemence of Makin's words and the menace of his gun held Haddock speechless. But not Judy. Rushing between them, she looked angrily at Makin.

"Bob, you must be sick! No man in his right mind would come to me with such suggestions. Of course Steve isn't going to run away! And don't think this is the old, outlaw West and that you can draw guns on my friends in my own dooryard. Please leave at once, and don't come back till you're in your right mind. Come on, Dave. Let's go in out of the rain."

Suddenly Makin felt old. He was shivering. He slumped dejectedly in his saddle and watched them go. What would Tom Westfall say if he could see him now? Makin felt spent and utterly useless.

**T**HE ride home was a nightmare. His whole leg ached like an ulcerated tooth. When he reached the cabin the men who helped him had neither of them returned, although it was late in the evening. The wind was blowing hard and the rain slanted down with stinging force. Except for the fire that burned around his sore, he felt numb.

Fearful that the injured leg would refuse to function if he attempted to walk any

distance, he rode to the very door and, sliding to the step, balanced himself on one foot while slipping off the bridle and saddle. Turning the horse loose, he hobbled inside and managed to light a lamp. After that he made a fire in the cook stove and put water to heat. Until after midnight he soaked his wound in hot water and Epsom salts, then rolled into bed. Utter exhaustion caused a fitful sleep. By morning Lem Simmons, the elderly cowboy who was his best help, had returned. He brought hot water and Makin repeated the soaking process. He had intended riding back to the Mexican's camp to return the stolen property and see if he could placate them so they would not give the boy any trouble but the angry swelling in his leg, which took away all suggestion of an ankle, deterred him. His impatience at the forced delay would have been even greater if it had not been for the rain that continued to fall in torrents from clouds that hung low in the canyons. Knowing Smoot as he did, he felt certain the sheriff would not bother his head about anything in the line of duty until the storm abated.

The second day was like the first and through it Makin continued doctoring his wound, assisted by the faithful Lem. He made some progress toward reducing the swelling but when, on the following day he asked Lem to bring his horse the older man insisted that he was crazy. Such exposure would cost him either his leg or his life. But Makin would not listen. With the stolen money, cartridges and hunting knife stowed in his saddle bag, he took the trail for the Mexican's camp. When he started there was a cold drizzle but before traveling far the clouds began to lift and the sun



broke through. The warmth made riding a little easier.

He saw tracks of cattle. A lot of them, judging from the signs, had been traveling up this same morning, with several riders driving them. That seemed strange for ordinary stock worked down toward the valleys after a fall storm. At the forks he hesitated. The cattle had been driven south up a draw that would lead to the head of Panguitch Canyon. Makin would have liked to see who drove the herd but his destination lay two miles straight ahead and he did not want to put off his call on the Mexicans.

When he came in sight of the camp he found both prospectors standing in a little meadow between the old cabin they were using and the creek. At their feet lay a horse in a position that suggested it had gone to the limit of its endurance, then crumpled in a quivering heap. The roaring of the creek kept the pair from hearing Makin's approach until he was almost on top of them. The older of the partners, a squat individual with head of matching proportions, saw him first and gave a startled jump, followed by a scowling oath.

"Sacre damn, Señor! Why you not say you come?"

Makin smiled. "I reckon the creek kept you from hearing me. I didn't mean to slip up on you."

The two, regarding him closely, apparently decided there was nothing suspicious about the thin, tired man with a bandaged leg.

"Perhaps," the first speaker explained, trying to appear at ease, "it is because we are what you call anxious about the horse. Perceive, Señor, she is very seek. Do you think she has eaten the poison weed and got the beeg belly ache?"

Without dismounting Makin could see plainly the outline of a saddle pressed into the animal's steaming hair. Sweat still dripped from the lathered belly and in the foam along its flanks were splotches of crimson. Makin leaned closer and his eyelids narrowed. These were spur marks.

The animal had been ridden practically to death. The only horse he had ever seen anywhere near as harshly treated was the one Sheriff Smoot had galloped to his door.

"No one ought to use a horse like that!" he protested. "Who rode her here?"

The Mexicans regarded him with suave wonder and the older one asked, "You consider that she has been ridden harder than is good? That would be very wrong. But we and my partner have not observed anyone. The mare she come stagger up the canyon and lay down. Too bad. Too bad."

The expressions of the men were ingenuous but Makin felt an undercurrent of insincerity. They knew who had ridden the horse, but they did not wish to tell. Stranger yet, when he glanced about the meadow he could see several circular areas of trampled grass with wooden pins at the center. Horses had been picketed there the past night. He started to speak of them, then checked himself.

Instead he said, "Better cover her up so she won't cool off too fast. It's chilly by this creek. She may come out of it in time."

While they placed the canvas over the mare Makin studied the men more closely. The scuttling movements of the shorter man reminded him of a gila monster. His black hair had an oily, reptilian gloss and his eyes had an unblinking brilliance totally lacking in warmth. From the conversation he learned that this man was Jiminez Francisco. Pedro, the younger of the two, was an entirely different type. Slight built and spidery, he smiled continuously, but not convincingly. He smoked incessantly and his eyes, seen through the blue haze, were beadily repellent.

Without warning, when one of them was on either side of him, Jiminez asked sharply, "Why you come? A man with his leg beeg like that? You must be very interest in what we do up here."

So they did have something to conceal and were ready to protect their secret with guns. The moment was tense but Makin showed no sign of surprise or annoyance."

"I came to bring back something you fellows lost," he observed mildly.

"Something we have loose? Mc—I do not understand."

"The cartridges and the money that the boy took," explained Makin. "They are in my pocket."

Unflurried, he removed the articles and handed them over. The Mexicans watched, their eyes arched in surprise.

"How come you get them?" Jiminez inquired suspiciously. "Is the leetle devil your keed?"

Makin shook his head. "No. He's just a boy I've known ever since he was born. He isn't bad. But he's had no dad to teach him some things. When I found he had stolen this stuff, I made him turn it over. Is it all there?"

"Sure. Everything but the bullet. The keed he shoot some."

"I'll pay for what he used. Here's a dollar. Since he is just a kid I was hoping you wouldn't want to take the matter to court."

A spasm of black anger twisted Jiminez' face.

"Señor, we have no comprehension of the Americano court and magistrate. If the sheriff wish to lock heem up, that is very good. If the keed steal again, I cut off his ears."

**T**HERE was some more talk which neither placated the Mexicans nor provided Makin with any additional information. In the end he rode away, acutely aware of four hostile eyes boring into his back. When he reached the timber without being shot he was surprised as well as relieved. But his uneasiness persisted. Something highly irregular was on foot and the thought persisted in his mind that the exhausted horse lying in the yard was connected with the sheriff.

After riding at an easy jog for some little distance he noticed pinion jays overhead flying in the opposite direction. When he pulled up he could hear a flock of them squawking at something in his rear. There

was no telling about a pinion jay. They might screech at anything or keep a funeral silence according to their mood. Makin, for some inscrutable reason, had failed to arouse their ire, but they were making up in the maligning of whatever followed him.

Increasing his speed somewhat, Makin watched for a place where he could get off the trail without leaving any tracks. A spot where boulders were interspersed with brush just at the trail's edge offered him the needed exit. Turning out of the path he let the gray pick its way to a heavy growth of chokecherry that made an effective screen. Only two or three minutes elapsed before he saw the two Mexicans, now mounted, moving through the trees. Each carried a rifle across the saddle in front of him and both stared intently up the trail.

As he passed the younger man spoke impatiently. "We should never have let the gringo get away. That one is part fox."

His companion chuckled. "Restrain yourself, Pedro. The cabin was no place for completing our business with him. Too many ranchers come that way. Remember the sheriff warned us about that."

"But what if he becomes suspicious and gets away?"

"Use your wits. We are at one end of the canyon and two guards are at the other. And a man with his leg beeg like a post doesn't ride through the brush. He sticks to the trail."

The precious pair moved on and Makin drew a deep breath. He knew they intended to kill him, and from the number of horses picketed out their cabin the night before there must be a gang of them. Evidently they were bent on making a big haul. The hundreds of cattle being rounded up indicated that. But how would they dare unless they were receiving some sort of protection? And who could give it over the distance they were forced to travel except the sheriff himself?

He was not yet certain of this last point and it would be extremely risky to suggest such a thing to his neighbor ranchers un-

less he had something in way of proof. Smoot got along well enough with many of them and they would jeer at accusations unless backed by facts. Besides, Dave Haddock would make it his business to put Makin in the worst possible light. Being tired and pain-racked he was tempted to forget all about it—only a very small portion of the loss could be his in any case—but a habit of responsibility made such a decision impossible. In the end he rode over into the next canyon east to investigate.

There was a big flat near its head which had been fenced with poles years before and was still occasionally used while collecting stragglers after the regular roundup. Perhaps the rustlers were gathering their cattle there. Before he had ridden halfway to the summit the clouds settled in and it was storming again. Although still forenoon, visibility was soon restricted to a few rods. Traveling more by his familiarity with the ground than by sight, Makin several times heard limbs snapping and the bawling of cows as small bands moved through the brush. Once or twice he heard men shouting, but of riders he saw nothing.

Topping the ridge he angled downward, every slip or lurch made by his horse sending spurts of pain through his leg. Presently he cleared the trees and struck the worm fence. Inside he could count fifty head of cattle standing hunched, their backs to the wind. As only a small part of the five acre enclosure was visible, Makin judged there were several hundred head inside.

Traveling in the direction of the south gate he sniffed smoke and located a campfire built in the triangle formed by three pines. Moving closer he discovered several pots of food simmering over beds of coals, but of the cook there was no evidence. But a meal was prepared, ready to be served in the near future and to a sizable bunch of men. After which, no doubt, they would start moving the stolen herd south. If the

weather continued as it was, snow would soon cover their trail.

MAKIN was now so cold that he could hardly move his fingers. The doctor had said that sickness had made his blood thin. Fortunately, among other things that the rustlers' cook had left were two coffee pots steaming with a hot drink for chilly men. Makin did not wish to dismount, as getting back into the saddle was too difficult, but he broke off a maple limb with a side prong which formed a hook and slipped it through the handle of the smaller pot and pulled it upward. Some of the bubbling liquid spilled from the spout but he saved most of it and, after balancing it on the saddle horn long enough for the spout to cool, drank deep.

The heat stimulated him and, still holding the pot in one hand, he rode to the gate. Letting down the bars, he passed inside. Making his way to the far end he began shoving the cattle toward the opening. As the wind was from the north he had no trouble in drifting them through it. While so engaged he finished most of the coffee. He was just ready to leave the corral behind the last steer when two riders spurred out of the storm. Seeing him they shouted and opened fire. A bullet punctured the coffee pot which he still held and the hot liquid squirted on his mount's neck, making him jump. When the horse hit the ground again, Makin's gun was hammering. One of the rustlers lurched sidewise, then, throwing out his arms, fell as though diving. A slug from the second outlaw grazed Makin's shoulder. Before the fellow could further improve his aim, Makin knocked his horse from under him. The man lit on his feet, still full of fight. Running forward he sent three quick shots, one of which creased the rump of Makin's horse. The animal nearly bucked his rider off and plunged against the fence, raking the injured leg against a post. He cried aloud with pain and emptied his gun at the Mexican who went down in a kicking heap.

Sweating with agony Makin regained control of his horse and was preparing to see if he could identify either of the fallen rustlers when more of the thieves came in sight. Only the severity of the storm enabled him to escape this last bunch. When at last he dared pull the gray to a walk, his injured shin felt as though sticking in a fire. In desperation he slashed the trouser leg and packed the wound in snow scraped from the top of a boulder. If it had not been for the difficulty in remounting he would have crawled from his horse and stretched flat in one of the drifts that was beginning to form. As it was, he remained in the saddle, weaving with pain. To fight the fever which threatened his reason he stuffed handful after handful of snow into his mouth, but the limekiln dryness of his throat remained.

One thing kept him going. The ranchers must be notified that the wholesale steal was taking place, but the gray was tiring and made poor progress. What he needed was some fresher rider to whom he could turn over the responsibility. Swinging around a sharp curve in the trail he saw a horse's head come into view. The rider's head was bowed to the storm but as he came closer, Makin's gray whinnied and the approaching rider lifted his head.

**W**ITH a start Makin realized that it was Steve Westfall. At the same instant the boy recognized the cowman and reined up sharply.

"Kid," demanded Makin sternly, "what you doing up here? Don't you know anything?"

"Aw, dry up," flashed the youth. "Nobody appointed you my guardian. I'll hunt deer when and where I want to!"

Wheeling his mount Steve drove it into

the brush with raking spurs. Makin tried to follow, shouting for the boy to come back. It was useless. At the end of several minutes pursuit he lost all trace of Westfall and had nothing for his effort but added misery. Condemning himself for having bungled the one chance he had of getting someone to take word down for him, Makin rode on.

Thirty minutes later he encountered Dave Haddock and one of his men. Now at last there was a chance to put the situation up to a responsible party. Dismissing old hostilities from his mind he slowed up his horse and spoke to Haddock. The latter with a scowl continued on up the trail without speaking. Makin swung his horse sideways across the path ahead of him.

"Look here, you proud-headed idiot!" he blazed. "This is no time for personal feuds. There's a whole swarm of rustlers back east of here getting ready to run off something like a thousand head of cattle at one swoop!"

"Aw, hell!" snarled Haddock. "You're going crazy. Why don't you stay in bed instead of riding around like a lunatic? Nobody's stealing anything."

There was no reasoning with the man. Makin saw the implacable enmity in his face. That slap still rankled and Haddock was not man enough to forget a private grudge for the public good. Accordingly he turned to the rancher's companion.

"Newell, you used to work for me and you know that I'm not given to shooting off my mouth unless there's something to be said. Hell is popping in these hills. I know because I've had a brush with these outlaws myself and downed a couple of them. If Haddock hasn't got sense enough to turn back and spread the alarm, you have to do it."



"I'm paying Newell's wages," snapped Haddock, "and, if he makes a move without my consent, he's done."

"In which case I'll guarantee him another job. Newell, turn your nag around and get the ranchers up here pronto. This is serious. Haddock, if you make a move to stop him, I'll drill you!"

Makin's appearance and his air of utter determination had its effect on Newell. Besides he remembered the things for which Makin had always stood. Slowly he swung his horse around.

"All right, Bob, if you say so."

"One thing more," Makin called after him. "Stop at Westfalls and tell Judy her brother is running loose up here. The kid's in real danger."

After that Makin held Haddock where he was for several long minutes without saying a word. At last the younger man's impatience broke out in speech.

"Just what are you aimin' to do, Makin? Stay here till we both freeze to death?"

Makin shook his head.

"I'm merely giving Newell a good start and you a chance to cool off and use your head. You are sore and perhaps you have some reason to be, but the thing for you to do now is to get in and help me hunt up that kid before anything happens to him. I'm past doing any hard riding this trip, but you're not. Judy thinks everything of that boy. She wouldn't half appreciate anyone's sitting still and doing nothing when he was in a jam."

"Listen," snarled Haddock, "this is just between you and me and if you ever try to repeat it I'm going to say that you are a liar and folks will believe me. In the first place, nothing is going to happen to the young whelp but, even if I knew he was to be skinned alive, I wouldn't raise a finger to help him—not when it was you who asked me to do it. I hate the sight of you and I'm going to keep on feeling the same way. Does that answer you?"

Makin gave a weary nod. There was no use for further argument.

"How much longer are we staying here?" asked Haddock.

"Reckon you can go now."

WITH an exasperated oath Haddock started up canyon, riding into the storm. Makin debated his own next move. He wanted a chance to rest and doctor his leg, but the kid was on his mind. Perhaps he could still find him before the Mexicans did. He had barely run on to tracks belonging to what he thought might be Steve's horse when the report of a rifle reverberated sullenly from a point across the canyon and to his left. Turning in that direction he advanced cautiously. It was probably the kid shooting at a deer. If so he wanted to make sure that the boy did not give him the slip a second time.

A few rods farther on he heard voices. In a small clearing someone announced triumphantly, "Perceive, Pedro. Was that not a fine shot from so far away and with the snow so thick?"

"Certainly, Jiminez. You got that one monst well."

So it was the two bogus prospectors again. Without knowing why, Makin felt prickles along his scalp as he pressed forward to where he could obtain a view of the quarry under discussion. What he saw confirmed his worst fears. Lying in a patch of snow dyed crimson with his own blood was Steve Westfall his arms and legs twitching. The two Mexicans rode up beside him and now the older man dismounted and gave the boy a swift kick.

"Too bad, Pedro, that we did not get a chance to fix the man with the beeg leg the same way."

Filled with a cold fury Makin urged his horse into the open. At his snapped, "Hands up!" the Mexicans started to draw, then, seeing they were covered, reached for the sky. After the first instant of startled dismay both renegades recovered their aplomb.

Smiling, the squatty Jiminez purred, "Señor, we are mooch what you call deject

that the boy is been hurt. Me, I mistook heem for the deer. That is the common mistake, is it not? Only three days back this same keed thought the sheriff was a deer. Only hees aim was not so good."

"You're a liar!" clipped Makin. "You knew all the time where you were shooting!"

"No! No! That is not so, Señor. It was all the very bad accident. Now the keed is done snooping and stealing. Too bad. Too bad."

The unctious hypocrisy of the man was maddening. Makin felt an almost uncontrollable desire to shoot the fear of death into the two, yet he said, "Both you cutthroats get hold of the boy and carry him over under those trees. Be gentle with him. He may not be entirely unconscious."

Makin knew that the shifty pair were secretly more amused than frightened. Either they felt certain their confederates would come to the rescue or else they were confident they could catch him off guard.

As though reading his thoughts, Jiminez remarked, "You are one seek hombre for ride around in the hills arresting people for make the leetle mistake. Why don't you permit the sheriff to tend his own beezness?"

"Never mind the questions. Get the boy over to those trees and don't make the mistake of thinking I'm too sick to shoot straight!"

Without further talk they obeyed, staggering through the mullen and rabbit brush with their load. When they reached the pines a small cabin built tight against the wall of the canyon was visible some hundred yards farther north.

"Go on over to that building—and move fast!" Makin directed.

When they reached it Jiminez panted, "You wish us to carry the keed on in?"

"After while I do. Lay him down now and stand with your backs to me. That's right. Now take your guns out of their holsters and drop them in the snow. Don't try to whirl."

The guns fell soundless in the snow. Makin undid a short piece of rope and tossed it to Pedro.

"You tie your partner, and do a good job!"

After that, by a supreme effort, Makin dismounted and walked to the door without entirely giving away the extent of his weakness. From this vantage point he could keep both Mexicans covered while Pedro carried in the boy and laid him on the cabin's one wide bunk. His next move was to tie Pedro's hands behind him, after which he ordered the prisoners to sit down in opposite corners, with their backs to him.

THE cabin, which was occasionally used by hunters, boasted a rusty, partially broken down stove set up on a platform of rocks and earth. Its stovepipe had corroded until there were holes in it but Makin judged the remnant still capable of carrying smoke. Heat was the thing he needed most and, after a brief glance outside in hope of finding wood, he stepped back in and barred the door. There was only one small window, a little larger than a loophole. Stuffing this with rags he started breaking up a bench and two or three empty canned-goods cases. Within half an hour he had water heated and was soaking his leg in a battered bucket while his cocked revolver lay on the slap table near his fingers.

From time to time one or the other prisoners twisted his head and looked at the rancher. There was neither contrition nor fear in their hardened features, merely amazement that he was still able to sit up and retain command of the situation. Makin completed his soaking and drenched the wound from a bottle of antiseptic he carried with him. Bandaging the sore and throwing away the water, he came back to the bunk for a further examination of the boy. There seemed absolutely nothing he could do. The youngster was still breathing but he showed no sign of returning

consciousness. There was no way of guessing how serious the wound might be.

An hour passed, then two, with the building so soundless that the whiskings of a packrat seemed explosively loud. How many times the Mexicans turned to stare at him he did not count, but always his gray eyes were open and alert. Near midnight the older man could stand the suspense no longer and asked, "Señor, what are your plans concerning us? My partner and I do not understand."

"I am going to take you to Hankville and see that you stand trial for murder, or attempt to murder, whichever it turns out to be."

Jiminez smiled. "Señor, that is what you call stupid. Pedro and I will not confess, and there is not proof that it is not an accident like we have said. Your sheriff will have more sense. He will let us loose queek."

Unruffled, Makin lit his pipe and drew several puffs before answering, "You'll confess all right, and you'll be safe in the State Penitentiary before the sheriff ever gets his hands on you."

Jiminez grinned broadly.

"Perhaps, Señor, you are suspicious that the sheriff works with us?"

"Never mind what I think!"

"No? Well, that is just as good, for you will never get away from here alive. Our friends will soon come. After that they will shoot you full of holes, and finish the boy, also."

"And what will be happening to you while that is going on?"

"Nothing more serious than lying on the floor where the bullets cannot strike us. You would not shoot us because you are what they call a gentleman. Sometimes I think fool would be the better name."

"There is time for you to change your mind before morning."

"Yes? Then perhaps I should get the rest. I will lie down. Would you untie my wrists?"

"No!"

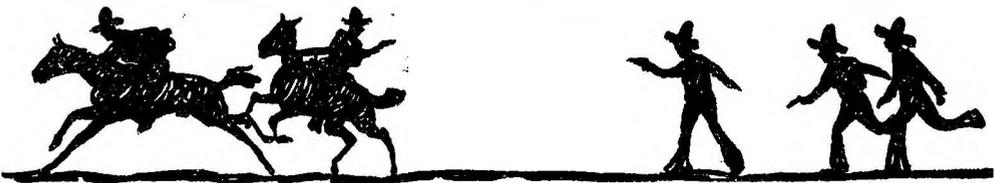
Jiminez yawned. Then I shall sleep as I am."

In a few minutes both his and Pedro's heads sagged forward and Makin decided they were dozing. Heat and exhaustion were working like sedatives on him, also. They had dulled the pain and he was in momentary danger of dropping off. If he should fall asleep in the presence of these two predatory humans it was unlikely that he would ever wake again. To occupy his mind he saw that both the revolvers he had taken from his prisoners were loaded and laid out ready for use beside his own.

AT two A.M. when the vigil had become most unendurable there was a loud knock, followed by a Spanish accented demand for admittance. Instantly both Jiminez and Pedro answered excitedly. So more Mexicans had arrived before the ranchers. Makin had hoped that it would be otherwise, still he showed neither disappointment nor weakening.

"You two shut up and stay in your corners. This is the last warning!"

There was an unflustered finality to his tones which the rustlers understood. Until the moment when this cowman was either dead or captured, their lives rested in the crook of his trigger finger. In sullen silence they watched while he cut the one fresh candle in two and, lighting the halves, placed them where there was the least likelihood of their being knocked over. With these arrangements completed he tipped the table on its side so the two inch planks



would give added protection. Hardly were his simple preparations for battle completed than a storm of lead chopped the cloth in the tiny window frame to shreds. Clay clinking fled from between the logs at twenty different places. Splinters, knocked from the inside of the plank door, thumbed viciously across the room. The stove pipe fell and the little fire remaining filled the room with fumes.

But through it all Makin remained crouched behind his table barricade, fighting a tough defense. Twice during the shot-gutted hours his bullets had brought cries of pain—once when a man looked in at the window, and again during an attempt to batter down the door. Jiminez huddled in his corner, hard-faced and confident, but the younger Mexican was beginning to crack. Not once during all that bedlam was there a time when he felt himself unobserved. This thin, pain-twisted American, with the swollen leg, now loomed in his mind as a Nemesis. Enough lead had splintered against the table to kill a dozen ordinary mortals, but this fighter had a charmed life. Nothing hit him or, if it did, he fought on, quick and accurate. He was a precision instrument of destruction.

**A**T sometime like four A.M. there was a lull in hostilities. Outside men were shouting and Makin turned to the younger Mexican.

"Pedro, what does that gibberish mean?" he demanded.

"Señor," panted Pedro, "my friends say they are very angry and in much hurry. They say they will set fire to the cabin and smoke you out. Señor, I beg you to let us go queek! Burning it is not a nice way to die."

Thoughtfully Makin stared at him through the drifting eddies of smoke. That he could remain unmoved only increased the younger Mexican's terror. At last the American said coolly, "Pedro, there is only one way you can leave this cabin."

"What is that?"

"Make a clean breast of everything. Tell why you tried to kill the boy, who's in on this cattle rustling, and how the sheriff figures in the set-up."

Pedro writhed. "Señor," he stuttered, "I will tell. It—"

"Shut up, you fool!" howled Jiminez. "It is a trick to get the information from us. Do you wish to have our comrades cut your throat?"

The warning set Pedro back in his corner, shaking. Makin limped over toward Jiminez.

"I told you not to talk out of turn," he said.

With a lightning swift movement he reversed his gun and brought the clubbed butt down on the skull of Jiminez who slumped in a heap. From the other corner Pedro watched with twisting features.

Makin turned to him. "Want to go on with that confession now?" he inquired.

Pedro shook his head.

The room became so quiet that Makin heard the sharp snapping of dry limbs together with the heavier blows of an axe. Later there was the sound of brush being heaped against the wall. Occasionally someone jumped upon the pile, forcing it into a more compact mass. In a general way Makin could tell the fellow's position by the scrape and crackle of boughs, but he was running too short on ammunition to risk uncertain shots. Soon a rosy glow beat in at the window. The light increased in brilliance and a hissing sound seeped through the walls.

Makin peered again at Pedro. The fellow was enduring a hell of tortured indecision.

"Well, your pals have started the fire, Pedro. If you want to get out of this alive, you'd better start confessing fast."

"Señor," whined Pedro, "I do not understand. Why are you so anxious that I tell? Either you will cook in here or you will be captured."

"In which case I'd be almost as bad off as you think. Well, maybe it's just a last minute curiosity. Do we fry?"

A superheated current of air blew past them. Its breath completed Pedro's demoralization.

"Señor," he gulped, "me—I tell everything. It was Jiminez who shot the keed. It was because he snooped. He would know about the cattle being stolen and we did not wish that. The sheriff would not see us if we would give heem some money. Plenty money. And now, for the love of heaven, let me out before it is too late!"

Crazed with terror he started for the door, but Makin barred the way with a gun pressed to his stomach.

"Not that way. You'd shrivel to a crisp. See those two short planks in the floor? Pry them up."

**B**Y dint of will power and threats with his gun, Makin convinced Pedro that their only hope of safety lay beneath their feet.

Once the idea registered, Pedro worked for his life. With a broken piece of pick he lifted the planks from their resting place, and revealed a black hole. Flames were licking into the room and Makin had to hold Pedro back from popping into the opening at once.

"I'm going first," he stated, "and you have to hand the kid and you partner down to me. Savvy?"

His eyes bulging with terror, Pedro nodded.

Getting down into the pit with his swollen leg was something of a trick but Makin managed it, stifling a groan of anguish as his ankle scraped the edge. Below he dropped to his knees in a cellar not over four feet deep and eased both the wounded Steve and the unconscious Jiminez to the earth beside him. The boy groaned as he was moved and Makin felt a momentary sense of relief for Judy's sake.

Pedro followed, tumbling down in his haste. Fear made him harmless. He was

willing to trust his life to the American.

"Quick!" said Makin. "Help me pull them back from the trap door!"

Hardly had they succeeded in doing this when the roof collapsed sending bushels of red hot ashes and burning wood into the cellar. Pedro screamed as one of the brands struck his leg.

"No time for yelling," admonished Makin. "There's an old tunnel opens off this cellar. We've got to drag these two in there. You take you pal. I'll handle the kid."

The fire furnished plenty of light, but the blasts of heat pouring down through the trap door threatened to sear their lungs. Twenty feet from the mouth of the tunnel the roof had caved in, so only a small hole something like a foot in diameter next to the ceiling remained. When Makin had crawled through the few feet of debris and into the unobstructed tunnel beyond, he helped pull the two unconscious charges through. Pedro followed, gasping for breath.

"Senor," he gulped, "the fire is burn out all the air. We shall choke."

"Not if you keep your head and help me fill up that hole so the smoke can't come in on us."

Coughing, spitting and reeling they worked by the stub of the candle which Makin had brought along. At last the aperture was blocked.

"That's better," approved Makin. "Now if we can get your partner and the boy back a little farther toward that pile of big boulders behind us, we'll be all right."

The Mexican stumbled and Makin helped him catch his balance, then pushed him forward toward the heap of rocks which blocked the passage.

"But I do not comprehend," gasped Pedro. "There is nowhere else to go."

"There doesn't need to be. Get your nose in among those big boulders and you'll breathe fresh air. That rock fall runs clear to the top. Here, fix your sidekick so he'll get some, too."

Soon Jiminez groaned and opened his eyes.

"All right, Pedro," announced Makin, "Stick your hands behind you. I'm going to tie you again."

**W**HEN that was done he looked hard at the two Mexicans and said, "I've got to blow out this candle so we'll have a little light when we begin to dig our way out again. One of you sit down on my right. The other on my left. Get away back from me. That will do. Now listen! Every little bit after I blow the candle out, I'm going to strike a match. If I find that either of you have moved, I'm going to shoot to kill. The same thing goes if you yell or try in any way to attract attention. That's all."

He extinguished the candle and leaned back against the tunnel wall. Hours ago he had felt almost done for and now the sensation returned stronger than ever. Only the jabbing pains that lanced through his leg kept him conscious. While he sat there weird fancies flashed through his feverish brain. Sometimes he caught himself almost believing that these sinister figures were real. Aware that his condition bordered on delirium, he shifted position frequently and felt the rocks, his gun—anything to hold his grip upon reality.

Three times he struck matches and found Jiminez and Pedro just where he had left them. When Pedro saw his gaunt features and bloodshot eyes he shivered. His companion licked dry lips and searched the cowman's face for some sign that he was giving out.

For several hours Makin held them there. When he felt he could endure the cramped position no longer he lit the bit of candle and undid Pedro's wrists, then ordered him to remove the plug in the tunnel. When this was done he looked out. The snow had stopped and the ruins of the cabin made a gray heap which nearly filled the cellar. One beam, however, that had not burned, made a bridge across it. There

was no sign of Mexicans. Makin had thought they would be gone. There was too much danger in remaining.

"Listen, Pedro and Jiminez," he said. "I'm going to crawl out of this hole backwards. You stay put till I call for you."

They watched him drop painfully to his knees and start the agony of shoving his crippled leg over the rough ground. A sweat of torture came from his pores and every bump of the injured shin caused an explosive response in his brain. He bit his lip till the blood oozed, and continued to crawl out of the hole. When he reached the log he sat straddle of it and inched backward up it, his eyes glued on the mouth of the tunnel. There was still a lot of heat coming from the ashes, enough to make his head swim. His heels dragged in the debris and he could smell the leather scorching. Back in the tunnel he knew the Mexicans were hoping that he would tumble off and be suffocated.

When finally he reached safety his mind was so confused with fumes and suffering that he hardly realized his success. Sliding from the timber he rested his weight upon his good leg and leaned panting against the end of the timber. For minutes he remained there while the coolness and fresh air brought a revival of strength. After a time he became interested in the fate of his horse. Looking around he saw a saddle sticking from the snow and made out the body of the gray. So the Mexicans had killed it.

**A** FEW minutes later two horsemen approached the cabin. When close enough to see its ruins they reined up sharply and stared at the gaunt figure braced against the blackened timber. Makin shaded his eyes against the glare of sun on snow and stared back. When he recognized them the haggard lines of his face took on an added bleakness. They were Haddock and the sheriff. The two came on until they were but a few paces away, then halted again.

"What's been coming off here?" the officer demanded

"Just a small rehearsal of hell," answered Makin. "Too bad you weren't in on it."

The sheriff's gaze took in the bullet-riddled body of the horse, the trampled snow and empty cartridges scattered about the ruins.

"Did you have a run-in with those rustlers you sent word in about?"

Makin nodded.

"And you saved yourself by holing up in that old tunnel the boys have been using for a storehouse winters?"

"That's right."

"They all got away, I suppose?"

"All except two that I've kept as hostages. They're still in the hole."

The sheriff's lids contracted.

"Yeah? Which ones were they?"

"Jiminez and Pedro, the fake prospectors that acted as lookouts"

"Get any information from them?" the sheriff asked uneasily.

"Plenty. The youngest one told how it was they shot at Steve Westfall and what help they were getting locally."

"Oh," said the sheriff, then, after a minute's hesitation, added, "Well, we'll take them off your hands now. Hey, you two in there come out!"

"Nothing happened and Makin said with false gentleness, I reckon they won't come till I call them, Smoot. They're sort of got used to my voice the last while."

An oath ripped from the sheriff. "Then call them out, you damned cripple! I'm in a hurry."

"You don't need to be. You're not going anywhere for a while."

"Say, are you crazy?"

"Maybe a little bit. But I just saw a bunch of ranchers top the ridge over south about a half mile. They're coming this way. I want to talk this business over with them and I want you and Haddock and the Mexicans all present."

Both men understood the implication and

each would gladly have murdered him, but the memory of Makin's gun covering him in the Westfall yard had a restraining effect on Haddock. Smoot harbored no such misgivings. Never again would this emaciated wreck with fever-polished eyes stand in his path. He would get him out of the way and arrange later with Haddock about unfriendly testimony, thankful that the rancher's hatred was a thing he could trust.

The sheriff's right arm blurred to the draw. Flame and thunder ripped from that area of lightning motion. Makin swayed like a tree caught in a blast of wind, then straightened. The sparks of sunlight on his revolver barrel merged with fire spurting from its muzzle. The sheriff stood up in his stirrups, his left hand making motions of futility, his right hanging limp at his side. Then he began to weave in his saddle.

"Catch him, Haddock!" snapped Makin, and Haddock pulled the officer from his plunging horse and eased him to the ground.

MAKIN was still on his feet and in command of the situation when the ranchers arrived. The landscape was beginning to spin until he caught sight of Judy Westfall who was riding at the head of the group and who came toward him, swinging from her horse almost before she brought it to a standstill. Her hands were outstretched toward him and in her face was genuine concern. She did not even look at Haddock.

"Bob, you are hurt!"

"Just another scratch on my game leg. Nothing serious."

The others were crowding around now, asking questions but Makin gave all his attention to Judy.

"Bob, do you know what became of Steve? Newell said that—that he was in danger."

"He was Judy. Jiminez, one of the fake prospectors shot him because he knew too much of their plans. I hope he'll get well

though. He's in the tunnel. Have some of the men bring him out."

Several of the ranchers were already on their way toward the hole. Someone asked about the sheriff's wounded hand and Makin explained, while the officer insisted that it was all a lie and Dave Had-dock stood by sullen and silent.

It was Newell and Judy Westfall who took affairs in charge. Newell reminded the men that things had happened just as Makin had predicted and that the wounded man, who had little at stake himself, had protected property for the entire neighborhood, had brought a faithless officer to justice and had saved the life of a boy. When Steve was brought out he verified the story and, as though improved by his hard experience, was unstinting of his praise of Makin.

He had been more nearly conscious than anyone suspected, as certain of his statements proved.

But it was Judy who lifted the greatest weight from Makin's mind.

"Listen, Bob, Steve and I can never thank you enough for all you have done for us. You are coming straight to the Westfall Ranch and going to stay there until you are well. You have never had the nursing you should have had. And—and after this—you are the one person to whom we'll go when we need some advice."

Her cheeks were rosy with thought of the words she could not say before so many people. And it was these unsaid statements that brought an answering glow to Makin's eyes. Already he looked years younger.

## In the next **SHORT STORIES**



*R. V. GERY'S Dutchman will team up with  
A. A. CAFFREY'S airmen of Federal Proving  
Ground, and CADDO CAMERON'S Texas  
Rangers and H. S. M. KEMP'S crotchety  
Cockeye give you an extra special number.*



# Adventurers All



## A Ghastly Experience

**I**T HAPPENED years ago. I was living in the foothills of Southern Alberta where bears and rattlesnakes were a constant menace to both man and beast. I had earned quite a reputation as a bear hunter, as often throughout the country my .30-30 had barked its death challenge to many a ferocious Cinnamon and Grizzly.

One morning I oiled my rifle and set out to nab a Cinnamon bear that recently had been doing great damage to livestock and poultry. I guessed that the animal's hide-out was probably in the Eagle's Nest, the name given to a short stretch of canyons and steep hills. When I reached the boulder-covered territory, I gradually ascended a tortuous trail until I was well over one hundred feet above the rocky canyon.

By this time I was walking along the very brink of the cliff, and I was beginning to notice huge tracks in the patches of sand. Suddenly I rounded a huge boulder.

*Arr-agh!*

With a bellow like that of a buffalo, the huge mountain of flesh and muscle towered above me. With another mighty roar he advanced, raising paws that could rip a bull to shreds.

Though experienced, I certainly was startled but I was calm enough as I drew a hasty bead on the wicked head. Blaam! I knew he was dead, but his mighty weight struck me, and the next moment I was sailing into space. A huge black blotch,

that I knew was the bear's body, shot past me. Down I dropped, on and on and on. And I realized that in a split second my body would be dashed to pieces on the rocks below.

Miracles do happen. If they didn't, I wouldn't be living now. As I shot through space, suddenly my body crashed against something that felt like padded springs. Making a desperate grab, I clutched thick pine branches and when I finally dared to think, I found my body resting on a ledge, my head leaning into space. Ten minutes of strained, cautious labor and I was resting entirely on the narrow ridge.

I now looked around me. The ledge itself scarcely extended thirty feet and was approximately a yard wide. A dozen pine trees, about three inches in diameter, clung to it; and lucky it was for me that their tough roots extended deep into the cliff-side. I was approximately fifty feet above the canyon.

How was I to get off the ledge? Nobody, as far as I knew, lived for miles around, so there was no earthly use in calling for help. And the ridge was so narrow that I was afraid to move.

Long, tedious hours passed, and the sun began to move westward. Once in a while a bird flew by, otherwise there was no sign of life.

"Well," I argued, "lying here won't help me. So whatever the result, I'll crawl southward."

Finally, with great sweat beads breaking

on my forehead and an empty feeling in the pit of my stomach, I reached the end of the narrow ridge. I peered over the edge, hoping to find a ledge lower down by which I could descend. All I saw was the black figure of the bear on the rocks below. Then—

Crr-unch!

The ledge was starting to slip! Desperately I tried to reach the pines, then I was again sailing through space. There was another sickening feeling beneath my ribs, and I closed my eyes, waiting for the last shock I would ever feel.

Another miracle happened. I crashed sideways on the carcass of the huge bear. There was a crack of bone and a searing furnace of flame ignited in my left thigh. At the same time, my left arm felt as if it were wrenched from its socket. Blinding red clouds kept passing like a mirage over my eyes, then a great black wave engulfed me.

**P**ROBABLY an hour later I recovered consciousness. Both my leg and arm were swollen till they were shapeless, but the pain was now only a dull ache. Every time I attempted to move, I almost lost consciousness, so at last I gave up trying. Then behind me I suddenly heard a sinister rattle. Snakes!

I turned my head and saw a huge reptile coiled in the shadow of a boulder about ten feet away, his beady eyes gleaming wickedly, his forked tongue darting in and out. No one can ever guess how I felt then, knowing that the beady eyes of those snakes were watching me, realizing that

soon I would be a lifeless hulk, that crows and magpies would be pecking me. I turned from these thoughts, determined to at least keep my sanity. I recalled, instead, pictures of the boys squatting around a flickering twilight campfire, the pipes lit, and everyone telling well-ripened yarns of old experiences.

The sinister rattle aroused me. Two huge rattlers were slowly slithering towards me, their beady eyes fixed on me with deadly intent. Then, like a flash, I remembered my revolver, extracted it with my uninjured hand, fired twice, and laughed harshly as the reptiles, minus their heads, flopped and wriggled on the splattered rocks.

I thought of saving one shot for myself, but quickly changed my mind. Instead, as the rattlers started to approach, I shot at them until the gun was empty. Then one huge snake began to slide towards me.

I waited, horribly fascinated, with a feeling in my breast that is useless to describe. Slowly the brute approached—then someone shouted.

I knew I was going crazy, so I didn't answer. But as the snake was within a yard of me, a rifle roared, and my face was spattered with slime and blood. Again I passed out.

I awoke in a prospector's cabin. He, having heard the revolver shots, had investigated—just in time! I soon recovered from my experience; but people who do not know my story, wonder why a strong, husky man should become so discomforted at the sight of even a gartersnake slithering through the grass. John Gillese

### *\$15 For True Adventures*

**U***NDER the heading Adventurers All, the editors of SHORT STORIES will print a new true adventure in every issue of the magazine. Some of them will be written by well known authors, and others by authors for the first time. Any reader of the magazine, any where, may submit one of these true adventures, and for every one accepted the author will be paid \$15. It must be written in the first person, must be true, and must be exciting. Do not write more than 1000 words; be sure to type your manuscript on one side of the page only; and address it to: "Adventurers All," Care of Editors of Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N.Y. Manuscripts which are not accepted will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for that purpose.*

# The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE



## *The Goodly Company of Old Timers*

“ANOTHER one of the old-timers has just headed for the big ranch in the sky,” writes H. S. Drago concerning his Drifting Kid story in this issue. “This time it’s Frank Button, so long the superintendent of Bliss Brothers’ Nevada outfits. Maybe this has nothing to do with the Drifting Kid; I’m not too sure. At least, knowing Frank so well makes it easy for me to understand why the Kid loved the high places, the smell of sagebrush; why the lonely grandeur of the mountain-desert was as vital as food and drink to him.

“My memories of Frank Button go back a long way. He was the foreman at the Bull’s Head when I wrote my first Nevada story. The ranch and Frank and all the rest of the crew figured in that yarn under pretty thin aliases. It was at the Bull’s Head that the Chink cook always had a piece of jerky drying on the line. Frank used to stop and whittle off a piece when he passed. That cook left awful sudden when Frank Button learned that the Chinaman had jerked a wildcat and he had been nibbling at it for three or four days.

“But of all my memories of Frank, none is sharper than of that early Sunday morning on the porch of the ramshackle hotel in Golconda.

“He drove up in a light wagon, an Indian with him. The Indian had his face bound up with a rag. Even so I could see it was badly swollen. Frank explained that the Piute had an ulcerated tooth.

“‘You must have driven all night to get here,’ I said. He still had twenty miles to go to reach Winnemucca and a dentist.

Frank nodded. I wondered why he had come this long way around when he could have taken the short cut through Paradise Valley. He said, ‘I had to stop at the Kelly Creek ranch. Wanted to see how the work was gettin’ along.’ I thought of the Indian and these extra hours of misery.

“Frank read my thought, and with his usual practicality said, ‘Hell, a toothache never killed no one.’ And then, ‘Hear you put me in another book?’

“I admitted as much.

“‘Well, there’s one thing about it,’ he said ruefully, ‘you can’t make me a bigger damn fool than I am.’

“I finally got him started on an explanation.

“‘You know cowboys ain’t more’n half human,’ he snorted. ‘I don’t figger no one with a lick of sense would stick with this Godforsaken country if he had two legs under him and could walk out.’

“‘Frank, you stuck it out,’ I told him. ‘Fifty years of it and you’re still here. You couldn’t be dragged away.’ I knew from Libby (his wife) how he acted whenever she had been able to get him down to California for a few days.

“‘I can’t understand it,’ he mused to himself. ‘It never did make sense to me. I been lucky, I know that. But where are the others that started with me? Livin’ on the county or bein’ taken care of by their friends. Forty a month and eats! It was just enough for a man to keep his drinkin’ on a cash basis. Freezing in winter, blistering in summer; sleepin’ under a tarp, rheumatiz eatin’ into you ten years before you begin to feel it!’

---

# STORIES THAT THRILL

**H**AVE you made the acquaintance of WEIRD TALES? It is a fascinatingly different magazine. Every month it brings you a feast of bizarre and strange stories. If you remember from your high school days the creepy thrill of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat*, the haunting beauty of his *Ligeia*, the stark terror of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the accelerating horror of *The Pit and the Pendulum*, then you will enjoy these present-day successors of Poe in the field of weird fiction.

**B**ETWEEN the covers of WEIRD TALES you will find worthy rivals of the most exciting tales of Poe, and weird science-fiction which in sheer imaginative power equals the best that has ever been published.

**I**T GIVES you intriguing tales of mystery and eery portent; bizarre fantasies almost unearthly in their beauty; creepy ghost stories that make your spine tingle; odd and curious *contes*; goose-flesh stories that should not be read after dark; tales of the supernatural, so plausibly written that they seem entirely real and possible.

**I**N ITS PAGES vampires creep from their graves; witches and warlocks disport themselves in their witches' *sabbats*; werewolves raven across the moors; strange monsters lumber through the twilight; metal mechanical men try to keep back the killing cold as the sun grows old and dies in the sky.

**W**EIRD TALES by its very difference is well worth reading, and when to this difference is added the high literary standard that has made the magazine foremost in its field, the pleasure derived from reading it is enhanced. If you read the magazine once, you will come back for more.

**Weird  
Tales**

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---

"He jerked a finger at the Indian in the wagon.

"Best hay stacker I ever had. Gets a bad tooth and he has to be lugged eighty miles to a dentist. It's always been the same, if you got a chunk of lead in you or cut off your finger. I tell you it never made sense. Work for an outfit, and you take up all its quarrels. You'd figure it was yours, the way you fight for it.' He shook his head soberly. 'Work in a store—some-thin' in town—anythin' would be better than this. I don't know why men stick with the range.'

"I think I know, and I suspect that old Frank knew too. I'm sure the Driftin' Kid knew.

"I can't help thinking what a fine outfit they're gathering up on the ranch of The Big Boss. Tom Brandon, Carl Haviland, Graham Lamb—old Frank will certainly have some good company up there. They'll get together. It ought to be something to be with them when the Big Boss sends out the wagon this spring."

### *Caporal Vs. Corporal*

THE use of the expression "caporal" in *Due for a Hangin'* worried us and we asked Caddo Cameron about it.

Mr. Cameron writes. "With respect to 'corporal' versus 'caporal'—the latter is correct as used in *Due for a Hangin'*. But your question is a natural one, and perhaps I should have inserted a bit of dialogue or an author's explanation to prevent our readers from stumbling over the word.

"It was used in Southwest Texas to designate a head man, ringleader, or chief, but it is not colloquial or idiomatic. It's a good Mexican word. In the old days when Texas ranches employed both American cowhands and Mexican cowboys (vaqueros), often the smartest and most dependable vaquero acted as sort of a strawboss over

the others of his race and was called the caporal—accent the last syllable, the *a* as in arm.

"With the old Texas-Mexico wagon trains, the caporal was in reality the chief herdsman although the scope of his duties was flexible, governed by his abilities and the wishes of the wagonmaster. However in case the train had an all-American crew (comparatively rare), the word 'caporal' would not be used.

"The earlier Santa Fe and Rocky Mountain caravans had, of course, men who performed the same duties; but I do not at the moment recall having seen the term 'caporal' employed by anyone who wrote from experience in those regions and times—Gregg, Majors, Catlin—the artist who traveled a lot while painting Indians—Ruxton, Inman, etc. I am therefore inclined to the belief that it belongs to Texas and vicinity.

"A Texas cowhand might occasionally refer to his old man—the owner—as 'the caporal,' but such usage was not a general one."

### *Hashknife Comes to SHORT STORIES*

FOR some time we have been corresponding with W. C. Tuttle on the subject of bringing his characters of Hashknife Hartley and Sleepy Stevens into SHORT STORIES. We have some very good friends, of course, in Sad Sontag and Cultus Collins, but numbers of fans were pleading the fact that old Hashknife had been out of circulation for some time. Well, he's coming back now with a bang and in the next SHORT STORIES there will be, complete in one issue, an extra long story of the activities of Hashknife and Sleepy.

It is called *Passengers for Painted Rock*, and is one of Tuttle's best.



OFTEN WE have received letters about material by W. C. Tuttle.

THESE LETTERS often mention by name one Hashknife Hartley, as well as his companion-piece, Sleepy Stevens, remarking that their writers would be interested in seeing stories about the activities of these gentlemen.

WE TOOK the matter up with Mr. Tuttle, who responded nobly with a Hashknife story called "Passengers for Painted Rock."

WE RESPECTED the nobility of the response, but the length of the story rather stumped us. However, we did some gymnastics with space, and in the next SHORT STORIES present with pride:

## **"Passengers for Painted Rock"**

*A long story of Hashknife Hartley by*

**W. C. TUTTLE**

Also in the next **SHORT STORIES**

## **R. V. GERY**

*The well known and very damned policeman of the Dutch East Indies meets a strange enemy*

**“The Dutchman Meets the Devil”**

## **MURRAY LEINSTER**

*A young travelling salesman drives up to meet an ominous shadow on his own front door*

**“Buck Comes Home”**

## **A. A. CAFFREY**

*A Federal Proving Ground story with the old meeting the new*

**“The General Laughed  
at Chutesmiths”**

## **H. S. M. KEMP**

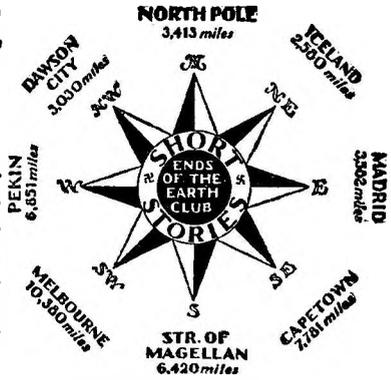
*Old Cockeye McLeod shows the North a thing or two about sleuthin’*

**“Cockeye Method”**

*and other favorites including the last thrilling chapters of Caddo Cameron’s serial.*

# 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, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.**



**A call from one of our deaf members for pen pals.**

Dear Secretary:

I am a steady reader of your SHORT STORIES magazine and think it is swell. I would like to get some pen pals. I am a deaf person and would especially like to receive letters from other deaf people. I live on a farm, am thirty years old.

Yours sincerely,  
Carl Teicrle

Box 17,  
Schuler, Alta.,  
Canada.

**A shut-in looking for pen pals in foreign countries.**

Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me in the Ends of the Earth Club. I would like to correspond with people outside of the U. S. Am five feet eleven inches tall, have blue eyes, brown hair and am twenty-five years old.

I am unable to travel due to injuries, but I would like to know things about different parts of the world and would appreciate hearing from people outside of the U. S.

Sincerely,  
David Vieau

324 Bellant St.,  
Cheboygan, Michigan.

**Here is another name to add to your stamp collectors list.**

Dear Secretary:

As an old member, may I ask that you add my name to your list of those wishing

to exchange stamps? May I also add a word for your magazine? In my opinion SHORT STORIES is the only one worth while on the market and I mean every word.

Wishing you every success, I remain  
Sincerely,  
J. Grimshaw

467 Inkster Blvd.,  
Winnipeg, Man., Canada.

**A call from a lonesome chap from the Canal Zone.**

Dear Secretary:

Please! If you can find the space in one of your issues print this appeal for pen pals.

I am twenty-two years of age and at times it seems terribly lonesome down here so would appreciate hearing from pen pals regardless of where they live. Will answer all letters and cards.

J. D. Gilbert

Box 1242  
Cristobal, Canal Zone.

**With such a wide range of hobbies, you should have loads of mail from the ends of the earth.**

Dear Secretary:

Would you please sign me up as a member of the Ends of the Earth Club?

I am in my teens and would like to correspond with someone in China, Africa, South America, New York and Texas.

My main hobby is collecting articles concerning aircraft and building airplane

models. I like to make and solve codes, collect insects, and experiment with chemistry.

Wishing all the members good luck, I remain

Yours truly,

*Raymond E. Chace*

Rock Point, Maryland.

**Any he-man anywhere, just drop this correspondent a line.**

Dear Secretary:

Would very much appreciate enrolment in your Ends of the Earth Club.

Though but twenty-four years of age, I have as a student traveled extensively in both Europe and the Orient.

Am now an invalid and would be very glad to hear from soldiers, sailors, cow-boys, planters; everyone, everywhere—he-men only!

Am interested in just about everything and promise long, interesting letters and postcard views of New York City in exchange for same.

Hoping to find room in your excellent publication for this plea, I am,

*Ellsworth B. Arnold*

Massapequa Park,  
Long Island, New York.

**From an outdoor enthusiast in Vermont.**

Dear Secretary:

Each month I look forward to receiving your interesting magazine—SHORT STORIES—because it keeps a faint spark of adventure alive in my soul. Since my trips to South America and distant parts of the United States, I still have the desire to travel to distant places some time in the future, which I hope will be soon.

The places I am most interested in hearing from are India and Russia, but no matter who writes, I will answer with an interesting letter and a snapshot of myself, from the top of Deer Mountain.

My hobbies are archery, mountain

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This may be the most important year in your life! Your whole future is apt to depend on how you take advantage of present business changes.

Returning prosperity is opening up new jobs, and creating unusual opportunities. But that does not insure prosperity for you. Only you can insure that.

For months—maybe years—employers will be able to pick and choose out of the millions new unemployed or dissatisfied with their work and pay. Naturally they will pick the men with most preparation and ability.

You should—you must—make yourself quickly more valuable—to protect what you have and to insure getting your share of the promotions and pay raises. It is being done by OTHERS—it can be done by YOU!

Ask us to send you full details about our new spare time training, and to explain how it prepares you to better meet today's demands and opportunities. If you really are in earnest, you should investigate *at once*. Check your field below, write your name and address, and mail.

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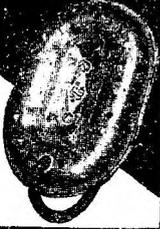
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climbing, swimming, and hiking. In the winter skiing is my favorite, so you can see the Great Outdoors have a tight hold upon one of America's youth and I love it.

Will you please send me my identification card? I promise to answer all letters.

Sincerely yours,

*Vincent D. Sullivan*

Marshfield, Vermont.

*Have you any duplicate stamps or covers to send this chap?*

Dear Secretary:

I have been a reader of **SHORT STORIES** for some time and would like to become a member of the Ends of the Earth Club.

I am a veteran of the World War and have been in the hospital for the last six years. Am interested in stamp and cover collecting.

Please enroll me in your club.

Sincerely,

*H. Ott*

Veterans Hospital,  
Castle Point, N. Y.

*One of our teen aged members looking for correspondents in South and Central America.*

Dear Secretary:

Would you be willing to accept one High School Senior in good condition for membership in the Ends of the Earth Club?

I am seventeen years old, and collect a little bit of everything, preferably stamps, and like to correspond with young fellows in South and Central America. Although these are my favorite parts of the Western Hemisphere, I will gladly correspond with anybody in the whole wide world.

I'll be watching the mails for my membership-identification card and letters from other lads.

Yours truly,

*Edgar E. Newman*

214 Munro Boulevard,  
Valley Stream, L. I., New York.

*Have we any other members who are students of engineering? Perhaps you want to compare notes.*

Dear Secretary:

I would like to join your Ends of the Earth Club. I study engineering in the University of Sao Paulo, and I'm a great admirer of the popular North American music. I will exchange pictures with anybody and will answer all letters.

Very sincerely yours,

*Antonio Jose Capote Valente*

Praca das Nacoes No. 3,  
Sao Paulo, Brazil, S. A.

*Stamps, travel literature, road maps, post marks or what have you?*

Dear Secretary:

I am a new reader of SHORT STORIES and wish to say that I think it is "tops."

I would like to join the Ends of the Earth Club and hear from every far-away country on the globe, especially Africa and Asia. So please get busy all of you club members and write me a letter. I promise to answer all that I get. I am interested in stamp collecting, post marks, and travel literature and road maps.

At present I am a member of a C C C Camp in New Hampshire and could tell about life in my camp.

Very truly yours,

*Raymond P. Carmier*

1147th Co. CCC  
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31x5.25-21	3.25	1.38					
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28x5.50-19	3.35	1.40					
28x5.50-20	3.35	1.40					
6.00-17	3.40	1.40					
30x5.00-18	3.40	1.40					
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30x6.25-20 3.95 12 10.95 4.65  
31x6.25-21 3.95 12 10.95 4.65  
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*Come on pen pals—help pack this chap's mailbox.*

Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me as a member of the Ends of the Earth Club. I like to read the stories about the South Seas, which are in most issues, and those of mysterious disappearances.

Am interested in stamp collecting and will gladly exchange with anyone anywhere. Hoping to have my letter box packed, I remain

Yours very truly,

*Norma Tunna*

310 Inglewood St.,  
St. James, Winnipeg, Canada.

*From an American Bluejacket in California.*

Dear Secretary:

I hope you can find an opening in the Ends of the Earth Club for an American Bluejacket. I am nineteen year old and would like very much to hear from anyone of about my age.

Sincerely,

*John Jos. Conforti,*

U. S. S. *Rigel*—7-E,  
Destroyer Base,  
San Diego, California.

*A National Guardsman wants to hear from others.*

Dear Secretary:

I would like very much to become a member of the Ends of the Earth Club.

I am a National Guardsman, and would like to communicate with other Guardsmen, in other states.

*Edward F. Seis*

1431 York Avenue,  
New York City.

**ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB MEMBERS**

*WITH hundreds of letters from new members coming in every day, it is obviously impossible to print all of them in the columns of the magazine. The editors do the best they can, but naturally most readers buy SHORT STORIES because of the fiction that it contains. Below are more names and addresses of Ends of the Earth Club members. Most of these members will be eager to hear from you, should you care to correspond with them, and will be glad to reply. Note these lists, if you are interested in writing to other members. Names and addresses will appear only once.*

- Oscar Thorin, 1705 E. 85th St., Cleveland, Ohio  
 Norman Tunna, 310 Ingleswood St., St. James, Winnipeg, Canada  
 A. Ulrich, 985 Tremont Ave., Bronx, New York  
 R. V. Utter, 1006 Pearl St., Alton, Illinois  
 George Van Zant, 1601 Robinson St., Jackson, Mississippi  
 Maurice James Walsh, 2731 W. Gladys Ave., Chicago, Illinois  
 J. L. Winters, 8013 Eustis-Lakeland Terrace, Dallas, Texas  
 A. D. Zimmerman, Pres. of Crossroads of World Club, Panama Signal Corps, Ft. De Lesseps, Panama  
 Solomon W. Akpan, c/o E. Essien, Ikot Akpan Abia, Ikot Ubo P. O., Ekot District, Nigeria  
 Antonio Varela de Almeida, Rua Monte Alegre 220, Sao Paulo, Brazil, S. America  
 Albert Amaral, 1928 Republican St., Honolulu, T. H.  
 Gunnar Anderson, 400 South Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.  
 Dell Andrews, 41 Ritta Ave., New Miami, Hamilton, O.  
 Alabi S. Ariyoh, 9 Crimogunye Lane, Lagos, Nigeria, W. Africa  
 Albert Artmann, 567 City Island Ave., Bronx, N. Y.  
 Victor Artress, 1042 Morrill St., Detroit, Mich.  
 Jerry Atwood, 377 "S" Road, Damon Tract, Honolulu, T. H.  
 C. E. Petrovich Baird, CCC D/G 61-CG, Pima, Arizona  
 William Balliet, CCC Co. 3350, D-G 69N, Fort Bliss, Texas  
 Charles L. Bean, 220 Claire Drive, S. E., Atlanta, Georgia  
 Raluh Beck, 4316 Hazel Ave., Chicago, Illinois  
 H. W. Bente, 724 Military Ave., Apt. 5, Detroit, Mich.  
 Daniel Berman, 5502-14th Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y.  
 Ernie Berriman, 119 Bonanza, Crown Mines, Johannesburg, South Africa  
 George Beyerl, 445 Water St., Bridgeport, Connecticut  
 Norman Birnbaum, 1056 Sherman Ave., Bronx, N. Y.  
 Charles Boldt, CCC Camp 4723, Valentine, Nebraska  
 Charlie Bowler, 10 King Edward Ave., Toronto, Ont., Canada  
 E. Y. Brackenridge, Glenside R. F. D., Montgomery Co., Pennsylvania  
 E. A. J. Broro, Medical Department, Degema, Nigeria, W. Africa  
 F. W. Brux, 31B, Vogack Road, Tientsin-3rd Sp. A., China  
 Daniel Buckley, Jr., Main St., Chatham, Massachusetts  
 Howard W. Buckley, 708 N. Walnut St., Seymour, Indiana  
 Arthur A. Bushnell, 20 Common St., Boston, Mass.  
 Milton Butler, CCC Co. 1510, Project F-104, Camp South Fort Rogus River, Butte Falls, Oregon  
 Mario Da Veiga Cabral, Rua Parco, 51, Rio de Janeiro, South America  
 Steve Campbell, 512 Fiske Street South, Spokane, Washington  
 Leonard Cantrall, Camp Mercer S-79, Manitowish, Wisconsin  
 Raymond P. Carmier, 1147th Co. CCC, Warner, New Hampshire  
 William Carne, 525 Westfield Ave., Bridgeport, Conn.  
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John Jos. Conforti, U.S.S.A. *Rigel*—7-E. Destroyer Base, San Diego, Calif.  
Sidney Cooper, 61 Barbosa Rodrigues, Cassacadura, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, S. America  
J. Paul Cowanough, 233 Cross St., Winchester, Mass.  
C. H. Darnell, CCC 3813 (V), Wynnewood, Oklahoma  
Bert Davis, 558 Adams Ave., El Centro, California  
Layiwiola Dende, 27 Daddy Alaja St., Lagos, Nigeria, W. Africa  
Willmer Des Marnis, 223 Second St. North, Stajles, Minnesota  
Michael DeVaney, 111 Dunsmuir St., Vancouver, B. C., Canada  
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George Dunlap, c/o J. H. Stephen, Leavenworth, Washington  
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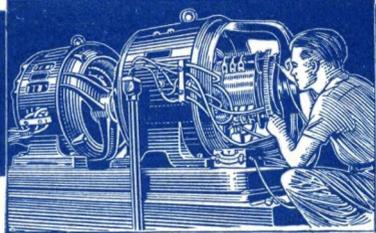


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