

L. PATRICK GREENE—A "Major" Novelette

Short Stories

Twice A Month

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February 10th

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THIRST

It struck the Foreign Legion on the Western Front

by

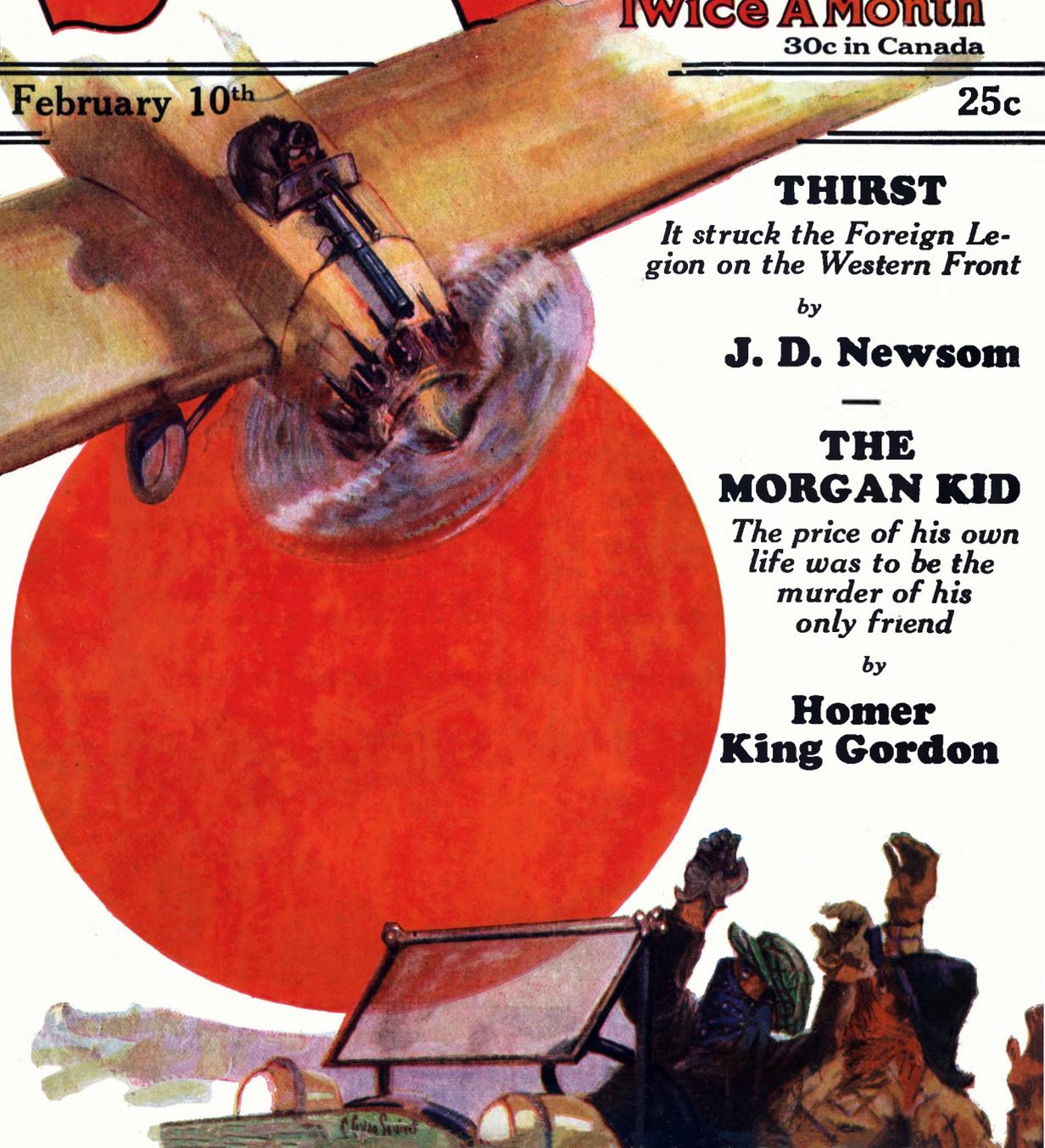
J. D. Newsom

THE MORGAN KID

The price of his own life was to be the murder of his only friend

by

Homer King Gordon





The sunny side of seven

When 7 o'clock seems to you like a dim and drowsy dawn, there's a quick, jolly way to scatter the night mists from heavy eyes—

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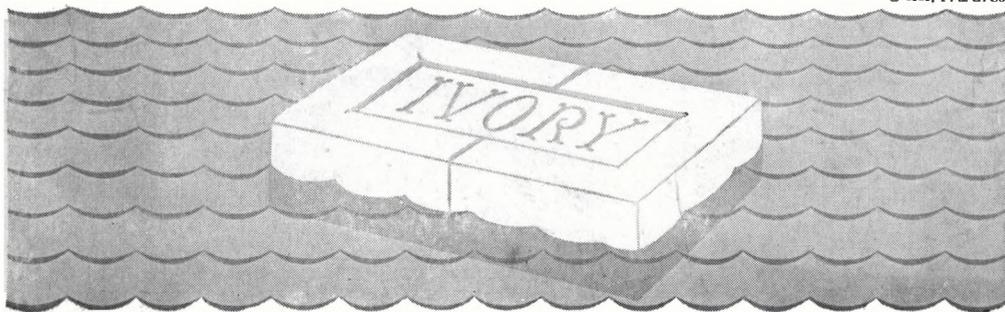
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Short Stories



Vol. CXXVI, No. 3

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ASSOCIATE EDITOR

FEBRUARY 10th, 1929

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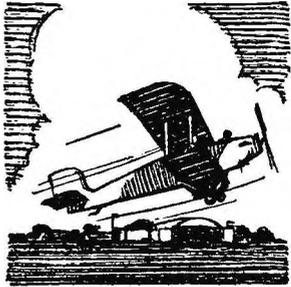
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Circus stunts, the
Border Patrol,
a tough oil town,
crooked politics,
Slim Evans in
action



GRANDSTAND STUFF

A novel length and fighting strength story

by

Thomson Burtis

TENNESSEE

A mountaineer is drafted
into the wartime navy.
An exciting short story

by

Robert Carse



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SHACKLES**

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OF TIME**

Some off-hours
among the gangsters

by

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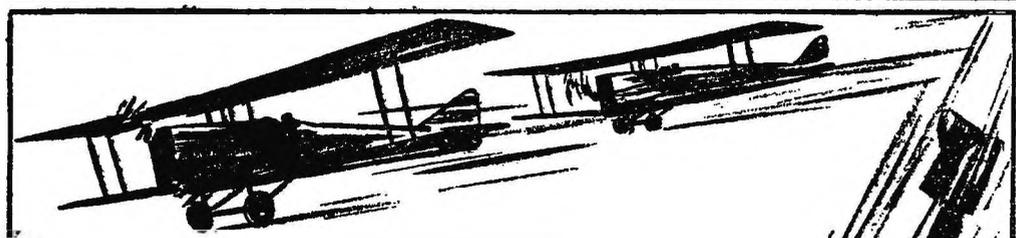
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PLANE CRASHER

YOU all remember the young movie stunt flyer who appeared as one of the leading characters in Thomson Burtis's novel, "The Sky-Jackers" an issue or two ago? He was just the reckless, devil-may-care sort we expect a stunt flyer to be. Which was quite as it should be, for Burtis has been one himself, knows many others, and beside that he was the type required in the story. However, with all that fresh in mind it was an interesting experience the other day to have lunch with Captain Dick Grace the ace of Hollywood plane-crashers and to hear him tell of his experiences in providing breath-taking thrills for the motion picture audience. This young man's form is familiar to millions who, without knowing anything about him or his squadron of death-defiers, have seen him crash in several of the biggest and most popular of the flying pictures. In one of his intentional crashes he broke his neck. Of course the spinal cord was not injured or he would never have recovered. But in repairing the broken vertebrae the surgeons hung him by the neck well off the ground, in which position he remained for thirteen hours! That was one instance. He has pulled off many crashes without sustaining a single

injury. His total of completely destroyed planes is thirty-one.

Now you would suppose such a man to be the reckless type, wouldn't you? On the contrary

he is slight of build, quiet, soft spoken, and modest to the extreme. Yet there is that about him which at once stamps him as the air-man. But

unless you knew who he was you would never learn a word of his profession as plane-crasher. Nor is there anything reckless or devil-may-care in the way he goes about his job. Indeed he prepares for and executes his crashes with even more care than a flyer who is safeguarding himself and his passengers against accident.

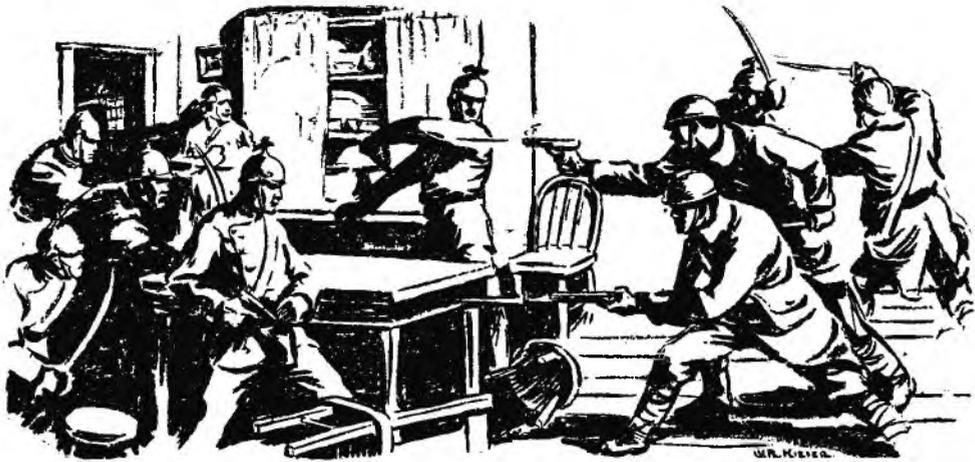
In the first place he keeps himself in perfect physical training, and the squadron of stunt flyers working under him are all required to go through the most rigid tests. Each day they practice in formation acrobatics which are usually considered safe only for a plane with the whole sky to itself. Each crash is planned out with the most elaborate care.

About the man himself. Is he afraid or nervous? His simple and unassuming answer to that is that his job requires so much of the science of flying that he cannot think about himself—once he is in the air.

Which all goes to show that even if a man's job is crashing aeroplanes—on first look the easiest thing in the world—he has got to work at it with care, precision, thoughtfulness and all the other qualities which we ordinarily attribute to the plodder, and would never ascribe to the stunt flyer.

THE EDITOR.





THIRST

By J. D. NEWSOM

Author of "Rifles of the Legion," "The Home of His Fathers," etc.

WAR AS IT WAS WAGED ON THE WESTERN FRONT; AN ENERGETIC OLD FRENCH LADY WHO COULDN'T TELL THE FRENCH FOREIGN LEGION FROM THE GERMAN ARMY; DIPLOMACY AS PRACTISED BY AN AMERICAN LEGIONNAIRE—AND YOU HAVE ONE OF NEWSOM'S BEST

SOLDIER of the Second Class Albert Withers of the French Foreign Legion crawled out of the cellar window and peered cautiously up and down the village street. Nothing stirred. The houses bordering the way were closed and shuttered. At the far end of the street, where the open country began, a sentry paced forth and back with a slow, heavy tread. A pale new moon riding above the housetops threw a dim light.

For a long moment Withers crouched low, cocking his head first on one side then on the other the better to hear the sounds coming from the brick house. At last he turned back to the cellar window and whispered hoarsely:

"Orlright, matey, 'oist away!"

There followed an indistinct gargling sound accompanied by unmistakable and blistering oaths. This noise gradually died away and was superseded by a prolonged creaking and a clinking which made Withers exclaim in an impassioned undertone:

"Steady on there! You'll 'ave the whole blarsted battalion awyke in a minute."

From the depths of the cellar a voice answered him:

"What the hell do you think you're at up there? Waiting for Christmas? Grab hold of the basket. It's as heavy as lead—and the damn' place is lousy with spiders."

"Nah then," urged Withers, "don't get all excited over nothink. Tyke yer time; the coast's clear."

HE GROPED about in the darkness until his fingers closed around the handle of a wicker market basket. A broad and happy smile appeared on his grimy countenance as he drew the basket over the windowsill for it contained fifteen dust encrusted bottles of fine old red wine.

"Got 'em?" inquired the cavernous voice. "Work fast, Bert! There's too many bugs down here."

Withers braced himself against the wall and thrust his arm inside the hole.

"All set," he announced. "Up she comes!"

And up she came. A second basket laden with many bottles; some cognac hoary with age, half a dozen of Cordon Blanc, and another half dozen of champagne, not to mention pot-bellied Grand-Mariner liqueur.

Withers gave a low chuckle. He was a short, narrow-shouldered cockney, with a



pinched, thin face. He had not shaved for several days, and his cheeks were covered with a reddish stubble which did not enhance his appearance. His scarlet trousers and blue *capote* were so caked in dirt and coal dust that they had taken on an earthy hue.

The voice from the cellar broke in abruptly upon his reverie.

"You wall-eyed mutt," it demanded, "how long are you going to keep me waiting down here? Lend a hand and make it snappy!"

Withers succeeded in catching hold of a calloused paw, which jerked him forward and threatened to drag him into the hole.

A moment later Soldier of the Second Class Michael Curialo came wriggling out of the cellar window.

"Cobwebs!" he growled, wiping the back of his hand across his face. "Great hairy spiders crawling up my back!" He clenched his fist and shook it within a fraction of an inch of Withers's snub nose. "I'd like to wring your neck—leaving me down there in the dark, and me without a match to my name."

He was a large, raw-boned man with a trick of twisting his mouth sideways in an extremely hard-boiled manner whenever he had anything to say.

WITHERS, however, was quite unperturbed by this outburst.

"Never mind abaht that now," he urged. "Yer never gets anythink in this blooming world wivout a bit of 'ardship, as they say, and Gor'blimey, just look at what we got!" He jerked his thumb at the baskets.

Curialo's hard face relaxed and he suggested that they adjourn to an empty cow-

barn he had spotted not far from the church to take advantage of their find.

"That ought ter do fine," agreed Withers, "and if, come morning, there's any left we can 'and it over to the boys ter put in their canteens. Thirsty! Lor' lumme, I been dreaming such a thing would 'appen. I been 'oping against 'ope, as the saying is. I wasn't as dry as this, not even in Africa. It's a crime the way they been treating us!"

HE SHOOK his head sadly. Their battalion had been rushed across to France at the outbreak of war. They hadn't been given a chance to accept the hospitality of the citizens of Marseilles, nor to wash the brine off their lips. As soon as they landed they were bundled into cattle trucks and dispatched toward the front. But in those early days of the war nobody knew where the front happened to be. The battalion was shunted all over the map, side-tracked and shunted again. Sometimes the Legionnaires were fed, sometimes not, and the train had a devilish habit of stopping in the middle of the open country, five miles or more from the nearest water.

They were old soldiers, most of them, used to campaigning in Africa, but they were forced to admit—and they admitted it with blasphemous oaths—that sunny France in September was drier, hotter and far more uncomfortable than Algeria had ever been. Cramped, bone-weary and utterly disgusted they were trundled aimlessly about until the train stopped in the middle of the night at a wayside station and, at last, they were told to pile out.

What they wanted was food and water and sleep, but there was no time for any of these things. They were needed up front,

badly needed, so said the battalion leader, Commandant Perache. The line had cracked and the Germans were marching toward



Paris. The battalion was going to go into action at once, it was to help hold off the enemy long enough to allow the battered armies to reorganize and

counterattack.

The Legionnaires marched away. They marched and they went on marching. They fought their way past streams of refugees, push carts, dogs, and woebegone soldiers who had lost everything except their sense of direction. The villages had been picked bare. The supply services were nowhere in sight. The Legionnaires tightened their belts and marched. They met cuirassiers and chasseurs and infantry of the line, gunners without guns and dragoons without horses, but they did not meet a single German.

Occasionally they traveled as part of a brigade, but mostly they journeyed alone, groping about blindly for an enemy to fight, a staff to obey and a commissariat which would provide food.

AFTER three days of this game of hide-and-go-seek, when the battalion reached the village of Brocourt-le-Bas, most of the men had dropped in their tracks when the order to halt had been given. The Germans were reported dead ahead, but the Legionnaires didn't give a damn for the Germans; what they wanted was sleep. In line of companies they sprawled in the main street of Brocourt-le-Bas and snored out of wide open mouths.

Curialo and Withers, however, had found sleep impossible, exhausted though they were. Thirst and hunger tormented them and drove them to desperate lengths. The battalion's rolling kitchens had disappeared in some traffic jam far down the road, and one gulp of the green water in the horse pond had been too much for them.

Until dark they wandered about with one watchful eye on what Withers called

"the main chance." But they were out of luck. Wherever they went they were pursued by a fat and acrimonious peasant by the name of Gaucher, who told everybody he met that he was a municipal councillor and that, sacred name of a thousand thunders, he wasn't going to allow a band of criminally minded foreigners to loot the houses of the poor people of Brocourt-le-Bas who had been compelled to flee before the invader. For, so he said, he knew all about the Legion, in whose ranks there were more bandits than in all the prisons of France.

Had he any spare food, or barrels of wine he would care to sell? He had *not*. Most certainly not. Life was hard and precarious. He needed all he had for himself. Not even Commandant Perache could subdue him. When two of his cows were commandeered and slaughtered he flew into a violent fit of rage and denounced the IVth Battalion of the Legion in terms which no municipal councillor ought even to think, let alone use.

Then, after having driven Curialo and Withers away from an empty house, which belonged, he asserted, to his third cousin on his mothers' side, he retired and slammed his door upon the war, the Legion and the world in general. He was a wise man, for it was growing dark, and he might, quite possibly have run into the sharp point of a bayonet had he stayed out too long.

Half an hour later Withers and Curialo lowered themselves down into Monsieur Gaucher's cellar.

"Maybe 'e's not got anything," Withers admitted, "but least ways we can make sure. 'E's too mean to be poor."

What they had found filled two baskets to overflowing.

ONE last look up the street to make sure that the sentry was attending to his own business; one last look at the brick house across the way, then they picked up the baskets and stole away.

But they did not go far. A window above their heads flew open with a resounding bang. Framed in the aperture appeared the red, contorted face of the municipal councillor. His grating voice shattered the stillness.

"I have caught you, species of thieves that you are! In my cellar. I heard you. *Au secours!* Help! Am I to be robbed by these mercenaries? Is there no one to arrest these pigs?"

Rooted to the ground the two Legionnaires stared up helplessly at their traducer while he yelled and howled and bellowed. Both ends of the street were blocked by wide-awake sentries. Several officers appeared on the threshold of the red brick house. Commandant Perache came striding across the roadway. He was a tall, thin man, with immensely long legs and slightly stooping shoulders. There was a mildly sarcastic smile about the corners of his mouth.

Withers caught sight of the smile, and his forehead became suddenly damp. The penalty for looting, as he knew all too well, was death, and the commandant did not have the reputation of being any too lenient.

"Gor'blimey," muttered Withers. "We're in for it now!" His knees quivered, but he was careful not to let the basket crash to the ground.

THE commandant, followed by a group of officers, a sergeant or so and a brace of signallers, was halfway across the street. Overhead the voice of the councillor brayed mightily.

"Leave it to me," Curialo said between his teeth. "We'll fix his feet." And he added, "Perhaps," as an afterthought.

"There! See for yourself what sort of men they are, these brigands," stormed Monsieur Gaucher. "two fine cows sacrificed to feed such men! And nothing but a bit of dirty paper to show for the deal. Look at them, those two thieves. They broke into my cellar, yes. But I waited, for I had no desire to have my throat cut. It is well known——"

"Will you be good enough to shut up?" ordered Commandant Perache. "You will? I thank you." He fixed the Legionnaires with a cold and fishy stare. "Where did you get that wine? It is wine, I presume?"

Curialo cleared his throat, which was drier than ever.



"It's Nuits-St. Georges-1910, *mon commandant*," he explained. "And a little Ayala champagne." He paused long enough to let this sink in, then he added, "And—oh, I was forgetting, there's some cognac and a bottle of liqueur."

The officers gathered about the commandant eyed the baskets with heightened interest. Some one said, "Ah, ha! We have connoisseurs in the Fourth! 1910 was the best year since——"

"My property!" bellowed M. Gaucher, thumping the window ledge with his fist. "Stolen out of my cellar! Looted. I demand justice!"

"Be still!" ordered the commandant, who did not appear to have much affection for the loud-mouthed peasant. "And where," he went on addressing the troopers, "where did you find these—ah—precious vintages?"

"In that coco's wine cellar," Curialo confessed. "Behind a stack of kindling wood. There's a million spiders down there."

"I heard 'em at it," trumpeted M. Gaucher. "I caught 'em red-handed. And they're the kind of men we have to depend upon for protection. No wonder the Germans are almost upon us. It's a disgrace to my country—at the mercy of such foreign mercenaries!"

Perache's voice cut like a whip lash:

"If you call my men mercenaries, or thieves, or brigands just once more, do you know what is going to happen to you? I'll send in a picket and have you propped against a barn door and shot. Shut your mouth and speak when you're spoken to, and not before."

THIS unexpected retort took the wind out of M. Gaucher's sails. To show his independence he kept up an incessant mumble, but he took care to make his words unintelligible.

"Now then," Perache went on, "you found this wine in the wine cellar. Why did you break into this man's house?"

Curialo waited a long, long moment before making an answer and Withers's heart rose up and choked him. He saw himself facing a firing squad and the vision was not at all soothing.

"Well," snapped the commandant, "I am waiting!"

Curialo took a deep breath and plunged in.

"It's this way, *mon commandant*. We heard you say you would like a good bottle of wine instead of so much well water, and Soldier Withers and myself thought to oblige you. We looked around——"

"*Mon dieu!*" Perache exclaimed softly. "How thoughtful of you!"

An immense weight lifted off Withers's shoulders, for he thought he detected an undercurrent of good humor behind the commandant's words.

"Exactly," he blurted out. "And not only did we find this stuff, which we both agreed was just the thing for the officers' mess—and as God is my witness we haven't touched a drop of it—but we found two casks of ordinary wine in the cellar. There's enough for the whole battalion."

"And he's the man who didn't have a drop in his house," Curialo added scornfully.

COMMANDANT PERACHE tugged thoughtfully at his moustache. His staff took even less pains to disguise its sentiments. Their moonlit faces were wreathed in smiles. Even the adjutant forgot to glare at the culprits.

"I see," murmured Perache. "If I understand you rightly, you had every intention of handing over your loo——" he checked himself hastily—"I mean the fruits of your investigation to the supply officer, who would then have given M. Gaucher a requisition order. Very irregular proceeding, of course. Might be misconstrued by any one who didn't know the moral worth of my men. Am I right?"

Curialo looked his chief full in the eye. "Yessir! Absolutely right."

A subdued growl came from the window, but one glance from the commandant was enough to keep the councillor in check.

"You showed commendable initiative," Perache declared. "The bold individualism I expect of Legionnaires—although I confess I should have preferred you to adopt more orthodox methods. You say you found two wine casks in the cellar?"

"Both of them full," asserted Withers. "Casks of the most enormous, *mon commandant*. In the second cellar close to the steps."

"And we haven't had a drink of wine for weeks," added the virtuous Curialo, "but we didn't so much as turn the tap. It was a visit of inspection we were making. We heard from other villagers that the citizen Gaucher had said he was sure the price of wine would be going up because of the war, and that's why he wouldn't let us have any—at any price."

PERACHE looked up at the would-be profiteer.

"So you lied to me," he said. "You were willing to let my men go thirsty for the sake of a few francs."

"It's my property," retorted Gaucher. "Those two men broke into my house——"

"Since you will not sell I shall have to commandeer what I need," barked the commandant. "The supply officer will give you a receipt when he takes delivery in the morning. If you offer any opposition I shall have you sent to prison."

"This is an outrage," began Gaucher.

"Close your shutters, shut your windows, shut your mouth and go to bed," ordered Perache, and there was a distinctly ominous ring to his voice. "Tomorrow night you may be entertaining German soldiers. I doubt whether they will treat you as civilly as we have done." The windows closed violently.

Two minutes later Curialo and Withers stood in the sitting room of the red brick house which had been transformed into battalion headquarters. Beside them, livid with rage, stood their platoon sergeant, a leathery-faced veteran with a bushy gray moustache and billious eyes.

He had been awakened just as he was dozing off and dragged into the sitting-room where he had found two of his men in custody. That they should have got themselves into trouble was bad enough, but that

because of them he had lost his night's sleep was a crime so heinous that he could think of no adequate punishment.



Commandant Perache, his hands in his pockets, leaned lazily against the mantel shelf. Beside him stood the culprit's company commander, a youngish man with a toothbrush mustache and a very subdued twinkle in his eyes.

IT OCCURRED to Withers that the captain had winked at him, but the idea was so preposterous that he looked away hastily, and focused his gaze on a cheap alarm clock which registered exactly half-past two.

"You understand," the commandant said suddenly, "that you ought to be shot. You're a pair of the greatest rascals in the battalion. You know that, don't you, without being told? Very well, then, I'm not going to have you shot. For two reasons, one of them is that our friend Gaucher is a greater scoundrel than the two of you rolled in one. The other reason is that I saw you go into action at Beni-Mellal, and I know there's some good in you for all your in-subordinate ways."

"*Mon commandant,*" chorused the Legionnaires, "I—we—"

"Oh, don't thank me," he said with biting sarcasm. "I'm not through with you yet."

"These men," he went on, speaking to Sergeant Verbeuken, "don't seem to need sleep. You, I trust, have been able to snatch a few hours' rest?"

Verbeuken knew what was expected of him. He clicked his heels together and tried to look rested and refreshed.

"Splendid!" drawled Perache. "The battalion it so happens is incapable of another step for several hours to come. It must let 'em rest whether I like it or not. And I don't like it. Both our flanks are up in the air, you know that as well as I do. The only definite piece of information I have is that the Germans are directly in front of us. They occupied Montsoutl some hours ago—that's twenty kilometers away. Tomorrow morning we'll probably be going into action. Our right flank is pretty well taken care of. The rest of the brigade is coming up by forced marches. But I can't find out what happened on the left.

"The 16th Dragoons ought to be there, but I can't find them. All our patrols have

drawn a blank. Now you're going to go and have a look. At the end of the village you'll find a path bearing away to the left. Follow that until you come to a farm flanked by three poplar trees. Beyond the farm there's a wooded hill. The dragoons ought to be there. All clear to you so far?"

"Perfectly clear," assented Verbeuken.

"If you find the dragoons at the farm come straight back. If not stay there until daybreak and reconnoiter the neighborhood."

"And if we find no one?" hazarded the sergeant.

"But you will find somebody," said Perache, and his acid tone convinced the Legionnaires that there was yet worse to come. "In fact you won't come back until you have found somebody. If you see any Germans find out what regiment they belong to and where they're headed for. That's all."

IT WAS more than enough. Verbeuken, who took his business seriously, was stunned by the magnitude of the task.

"Excuse me, *mon commandant,*" he stammered, "did you say I was to go out on patrol with my whole section—or just these two men?"

"Three of you. No more, no less. You, Sergeant, should have known better than to allow two hungry, thirsty rascals out of your sight. And as for you," he transfixed the troopers with a glassy stare, "I think you realize how lucky you are, but you're not getting off as easily as you think you are—and you don't have to grin at me confound you! It's ten kilometers to the farm, ten there and ten back. You'll miss the wine issue, and you'll have to fight tomorrow with bellies as empty as drums. You've got your orders, Sergeant. March away!"

"Party!" ordered Verbeuken, "right turn—quick march!"

Outside in the street he said, "Blame me, would you, for your foul ways? Wait till I'm through with you, you'll be spitting blood!"

At that moment, however, nothing could dampen the Legionnaires' good humor. They beamed upon the sergeant.

"A fine fellow, the commandant," ex-

claimed Withers. "The sort of officer who knows how to handle his men. In English we have a proverb to the effect that God in his mercy augments the temperature of the air blowing upon the recently clipped lambs, and I, for one——"

"It is I who will increase your temperature," agreed Verbeuken, speaking between clenched teeth. Stepping back a pace he swung the toe of his boot against the seat of Withers' pants. "I'll give you mercy. I'll show you kindness. Get your packs and your rifles, lice that you are, and with great speed!"

As they headed down the street they heard the unmistakable sound which accompanies the opening of a bottle of champagne.

"Twenty kilometers to go," grunted Curialo. "We ought to have camped in the old coot's cellar."

"Move!" urged the sergeant. "And speak in French when you are in my presence, species of a herring-face, instead of that barbarous English of yours!"

WHEN the patrol reached the Bleu-zet farm Madame Rouland was already up and about though it was still dark night. All her life she had been getting up an hour before dawn, and she saw no reason why she should change her habits simply because the world had gone to war.

She was alone in the house, for her daughter and her son-in-law had become panic stricken when they heard that the Germans had occupied Montsoul, the near-by market town. They had bundled their belongings into the hay cart and had joined the line of refugees headed toward Paris.

But Madame Rouland had refused to budge. She had even boxed her son-in-law's ears when he had tried to force her to climb onto the cart.

"You mind your own business and I'll mind mine," she told him. "I was born

here, I've lived here sixty-eight years and I'll die here, Germans or no Germans. Let 'em come! I'll tell 'em a thing or two. I promise you."

"They'll shoot you if you talk to them the way you talk to me," grumbled her son-in-law. "You don't know what they can do, these Germans."

"Oh, don't I! They're big soft fools, like all men. I saw 'em in 1870. Fat Bavarians, sitting there in the court yard, hunting for lice in the seams of their shirts, men who ought to have been at home tending their crops. Off you go, if you mean to go. I'll not change my mind. And," she concluded, betraying her secret at last, "what would little Julot say if he came back and found the house empty?"

Julot was her grandson and her god. He had rejoined his regiment the day of the general mobilization and had not been heard of since.

Nothing any one said could shake the old lady's determination. She meant to stay right there and wait for her little Julot. It didn't matter to her whether she had to wait a week or a year. She was quite sure the boy would come home sooner or later. For all they knew about it, she declared in her high, cracked voice, he might drag himself up to the doorstep, wounded and sick and thirsty, and die on his own threshold because there was nobody to take him in and nurse him.

"If he's wounded," protested Julot's mother, a matter-of-fact peasant who loved her son in a matter-of-fact way, "they'll take him to hospital, where he belongs. You'd better come along with us."

But they had to leave without her.

SINCE then she had milked the cows, fed the chickens, washed the kitchen floor and kept the farm running without a hitch. Once or twice she heard the far-off rumble of gunfire, but she had no time to bother about any such nonsense.

In between chores and last thing at night she looked out of doors to see if Julot weren't anywhere in sight. She had the whole broad countryside to herself, for the farm was away off the main lines of communication, and after the last refugees from Montsoul had gone by—and she gave



them a piece of her mind—she saw no one.

She was putting her wash to soak when the knock came at the door. For a moment she was almost afraid. It wasn't natural for anybody to call at that hour of the morning, and it flashed through her mind that her visitor might well be some tramp bent on the worst kind of devilry.

Then, abruptly she remembered the war.

Just to be on the safe side she armed herself with a heavy meat chopper before she went to the door. To be even safer she looked out through a small, heavily barred slot.

"Open that door," ordered Sergeant Verbeuken, jamming the muzzle of his rifle against the grating. "Open quick or I'll shoot!"

"And is that so?" snapped Madame Rouland. "*Eh b'en*, you're a nice one, I must say. Where are your manners, young man. Just you try to shoot and see what'll happen to you."

This virulent outburst somewhat reassured Verbeuken, but he was in no mood to be badgered by a sacred species of a skirted civilian.

"Any Germans in there?" he demanded.

SHE laughed long and loud.

"Germans! You're scared of your own shadow. Hee-hee! I knew you were scared from the way you spoke. You men can't fool the old woman. I've bred 'em and nursed 'em and spanked 'em. Of course there aren't any Germans in here. I'd like to see 'em scuffling their dirty boots over my floors!"

"Seen any hereabouts?"

"Not since 1870. They stole my father's white marble clock. When you get to Berlin——"

"Listen," said Verbeuken, and his voice shook with wrath, "will you open that door or do I have to blow out the lock?"

"Blow out the lock and I'll have the law on you," she snapped. "You come close and let me see your face. I'm not letting every stray loafer who comes down the road into my kitchen."

Shielding the candle with her hand, she threw its light onto Verbeuken's angry, bearded, sweaty face. She was less interested in his face, however, than in his uni-

form—his *kepi* and the collar of his blue coat. That was what she wanted to see—the French uniform. No mistake about it. Just like her Julot's fine uniform, but ever so dirty.

"You don't happen to belong to the 110th, do you?" she inquired.

"We do not. Open that door, I tell you."

"Haven't seen it, have you? My grandson belongs to the 110th. I'm expecting him home. His name's Julot Perrat."

"Neither it nor him," began Verbeuken, but he was cut short by Withers' voice speaking out of the darkness at his back.

"Ah, tell her we have not slept for three nights. Tell her all we want is a drink of water. Tell her we won't pinch the family spoons."

HE SPOKE funny French, it seemed to Madame Rouland, but he sounded so utterly weary that she forgot all her fear—forgot everything save the fact that outside her door three soldiers of France were begging for a drink of water. Her heart went out to them. If she couldn't mother Julot, these his comrades, would do almost as well.

She drove back the bolts and turned the key in the lock.

"*Entrez, mes petits!*" she cried. "I'm so very glad to see you, so very glad!"

There were tears in her eyes as she watched them clump up the steps and shuffle past her into the kitchen.

"Sit down," she ordered. "Take off those knapsacks and make yourselves comfortable. I'm all alone, I'll have something ready for you to eat in five minutes. If it isn't a pity for grown men to be cavorting about like this in the dark!"

"We can't stop," grunted Verbeuken,

leaning heavily on his rifle. "You haven't seen any cuirassiers hereabouts by any chance?"

"Seen nobody," she retorted.

"Not for days. What's your hurry? Sit down,

I tell you, and have a bit of something to



eat. The fire's laid. I'll have an omelet ready in——"

"No," Verbeuken said firmly. "I must find those cuirassiers or the Germans—can't stop. I'll take a glass of wine while I'm here and be much obliged for it, but that's all."

The old lady stamped her foot. Her beady black eyes flashed.

"Speak for yourself," she shrilled. "You aren't alone. What about these two poor fellows? Look at 'em, worn out, they are. Can hardly stand up. *Mon Dieu!* Never have I seen such filth and such dust!"

"All we want——" croaked Withers.

"Close that trap of yours!" Verbeuken shouted. "Not so much as a drop of water do you get on this patrol."

"See 'em?" he went on addressing Madame Rouland. "Look 'em over. A fine pair! Don't waste your time pitying them. They've only themselves to blame for their troubles."

"You're a nice one, I must say," exclaimed Mme. Rouland. "And who are you to begrudge two thirsty men a drink of water? Discipline, I suppose you call it, and I say you're acting like a spoiled baby with its stomach out of order."

VERBEUKEN tried to argue, but he was no match for the old lady. Once her tongue began to wag no power on earth could make her stop.

"You've said quite enough, my good man," she summed up. "You do as you're told. Sit down and I'll have an omelet on the table before you've had time to loosen your belt. And some fresh baked bread."

"I tell you we can't stay," Verbeuken protested feebly, "but I'll do this, if you'll let us have a bottle of wine and some bread we'll swallow a mouthful and be on our way."

"Now that's the way to talk," she approved. "There's some Pouilly in the cellar. You sit down quiet for a second and I'll fetch it up."

She whisked out of the room and they heard her sabots go clattering down a flight of stone steps.

"All right, you two," grunted Verbeuken. "You can slip off your packs for a minute."

They let their packs slide to the ground and propped their rifles in the corner by the grandfather clock.

Curialo yawned, stretching his long arms above his head.

"Maybe she'll blow us to a bottle apiece," he sighed. "By golly, Bert, remember the days when we could drink for a cent an hour. I'll swear I was never as dry as this in Africa—never!"

"The good old days!" commented Withers. "Two square meals a day, we'ad, and ——"

"Talk French," barked Verbeuken. "Insolent swine—saying things about me in that lingo of yours. I won't have it!"

"No harm meant, *mon sergent,*" Withers started to say, but he was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Madame Rouland.

ALL kindness had gone out of her face. She stood in the doorway, glaring at the Legionnaires.

"Yes, 'speak French'," she sneered. "I thought there was something queer about you. I couldn't make it out. But I heard. Speak French indeed!" Her voice rose shrill and high. "You're Germans—spies! I'll teach you to come begging at four o'clock in the morning. Trying to frighten an old woman to death!"

Smash! A bottle sailed through the air, missed Curialo's head by a fraction of an inch, and burst like a bomb against the wall.

"Gor'struth! We ain't never going to get a drop to drink!" wailed Withers, ducking behind the broad back of Sergeant Verbeuken as the old lady hurled another bottle at them.

"We're Legionnaires!" protested Verbeuken. "Wait a minute. Wasting good wine like that. Legionnaires, I'm telling you—the Foreign Legion. Not Germans at all—whoa!"

Crash! The second bottle bounced off his upraised arm, struck the sideboard and exploded in a rain of wine, fragments of glass and broken dishes.

A pungent odor of grapes filled the room. So did Madame Rouland's voice:

"Legion of pigs! Legion of bandits! You good-for-nothing Germans masquerading in

my Julot's uniform. *Sapristi!* If my Julot were here he'd spit you on the end of his bayonet!"

Having no more bottles to throw, she caught up the meat carvers and shook it at Verbeuken.

"I knew you weren't French from the way you were treating your men. You wouldn't find a French sergeant denying his soldiers a drink of wine, let alone water. And there's your wine," she cackled, "on the floor. Lap it up!"

"We're Legionnaires," sputtered Verbeuken, nursing his bruised forearm. "I'm a Belgian, the small one there is an Englishman, and that grinning ape over yonder comes from America."

"You're a liar!" she retorted. "Think I'm crazy? You're Germans. Don't you think I can tell a German's ugly snout when I see one?"

WHATEVER she had intended to say next died away on her lips. Instead, raising herself on the tips of her toes, she flourished the meat carver at some one standing in the doorway directly behind the Legionnaires.

"More of you!" she snorted. "Yes, you may laugh, you specimens of the most imbecile. Laugh, you devils. I'm not afraid of any of you!"

The Legionnaires's first impression was that the old lady had suddenly lost control of her wits, but this impression was short lived. Her eyes were quite clear, and it became all too evident that she was addressing, not a ghost, but some live person or persons who had noiselessly appeared on the threshold of the kitchen.

Slowly the Legionnaires faced about, shuffling their feet on the red-tiled floor.

They found themselves staring at the muzzles of several carbines which were pointed at their chests. Behind the carbines stood an equal number of Uhlans with broad grins on their faces.

The humor of the situation, if any, was quite wasted upon the Legionnaires. For one long moment they stood rooted to the ground, gaping foolishly at the intruders.

A young *feldwebel*, very smart in his field gray uniform and flat-topped helmet, stood just inside the doorway, leaning against

the wall with his feet nonchalantly crossed. He had a tooth-brush mustache, a sarcastic smile, and a large blue automatic in his right hand.

"Messieurs," he said amiably, "I bid you good morning. It is to be trusted that you will surrender without putting us to the necessity of wasting expensive ammunition."

His French was quite as fluent as that of the Legionnaires, although his accent was abominable. Even so they understood every word he uttered.

"You are prisoners of war," he went on, needlessly laboring the point. "I am sorry I have spoiled your party with madame." He waved his automatic apologetically, "What will you? It is the war!"

Madame Rouland was the first to recover her powers of speech.

"Do you mean to tell me," she demanded indignantly, "that these soldiers don't belong to *your* army?"

"That is an impossibility, Madame," said the dapper little German. "The age of miracles has passed us by long since."

"They're spies in French uniforms," she persisted, trying to convince herself even though conviction was no longer possible.

The German laughed outright.

"We are guilty of no such clumsy tricks," he assured her. "We exhibit a finesse, Madame, an efficiency in such matters of which these men are, as you must perceive, wholly incapable."

HE HAD learned his French at Janson-de-Sailly, one of the leading colleges of Paris, and he was glad of the opportunity to air his knowledge in the presence of this poor old peasant.

Kultur was a very fine thing, *nicht wahr?*

Kultur, however, was what the Legionnaires most conspicuously lacked. They belonged to the international brotherhood of roughnecks. Pretty speeches meant nothing to them.

They had recovered from their astonishment, and it occurred to them all simultaneously that the little Heinie was so busy gabbling to the old dame that he had forgotten their existence. Moreover, the Uhlans in the doorway seemed to be less alert.

"Krauts!" suddenly yelled Curialo. "Sock 'em!"

The next few moments were extremely noisy and agitated. Verbeuken snatched up his rifle—it had been resting against the table—and fired from the hip. The bullet knocked off the *feldwebel's* helmet, but that young man was much more wideawake than he appeared to be. Shot answered shot. Verbeuken crumpled up.

Meanwhile Curialo and Withers, who had made a dash toward their weapons, found themselves fighting a losing battle against half a dozen German cavalymen. Withers drove his fist into a *Got mit uns* buckle—which bruised his knuckles—but that was the beginning and the end of his share in the performance. A gun-butt collided against the nape of his neck. He saw many bright stars, then the floor rose up and bounced off his forehead. Before he had an opportunity to appreciate the novelty of these phenomena the toe of a hobnailed boot struck his right ear a terrific blow which almost tore his head off his shoulders. He lost all further interest in the allied cause.

Curialo fared no better, although he did succeed in clouting one Uhlan between the eyes before he was knocked out. Three hefty cavalymen pinned him against the wall and pounded him scientifically until he crumpled up, very much the worse for wear.

He was dimly conscious of being dragged, heels foremost, across the floor and dumped in a corner by the wall. He lay very still, wondering rather disgustedly how long it would take him to die of internal injuries. All his insides felt as though they had been jarred loose from their moorings. He was sore—much too sore to move hand or foot. Or so he thought.

Gradually the stunned feeling wore off and he realized that he was abominably thirsty. His mouth and throat and nose were full of blood, and the salty taste made matters a thousand times worse.

He had not had a decent drink since he left Africa, five weeks ago, and now, by heck, he was going to die of internal injuries without so much as a glass of red wine to cheer him on his way.

All his other aches and pains vanished before this all-consuming thirst. Clumsily he raised himself off the ground and sat up. The effort exhausted him. He sat propped up against the wall with his legs

sticking straight out before him, as limp as a chewed string.

THERE was a great deal of noise in the kitchen. The Uhlans were talking and laughing at the top of their voices. One of them had put on a Legionaire's *kepi* and was prancing about like a maniac while the others stamped their feet and clapped their hands.

Curialo looked about for some trace of his companions. Withers lay close beside him—a queer, glassy-eyed creature out of the corner of whose mouth dribbled a thread of blood. Beyond, flat on his face, lay Verbeuken. The blue cloth of his capote, between his shoulders, was stained dark red.

"Bert," croaked Curialo, "can you hear me? Bert?"

Withers's eyelids closed wearily, then opened again.

"Wa—er," he muttered. "Drink wa—er."

"I'll say! I could drink gallons!"

"Been trying to make 'em 'ear me for the pawst hour," groaned Withers. "Gone mad, they 'ave, them Fritzes." He coughed heart-rendingly, spattering drops of blood on the wall papers. "Kicked me in the teef," he explained. "Jarred the blooming lot loose. Gor' blimey, matey, I got ta 'ave a drink!"

"Same here," grunted Curialo. He raised his voice and tried to shout, "Hey, you Heinies, how about a drop of water?" but his voice did not rise above a whisper, and the Uhlans were too busy celebrating their triumph to bother about their prisoners.

Their conversation seemed to consist almost exclusively of the word "Hoch!" Each time one of them cried "Hoch!" they all drank out of tin mugs which, afterward, they rattled on the table. On the table also there were several empty bottles.

"It's 'er," Withers spat out. "'Er what wouldn't give us a drink. Putting good wine afore them swine."

INDIGNATION overcame Curialo. I Again he tried to shout, but no one heard him, with the exception of Madame Rouland, who was standing on the opposite side of the room, arms akimbo, watching the Uhlans' antics much as an elderly schoolmarm might supervise the capers of a room-

ful of unruly brats. There was no trace of fear in her eyes, nor for that matter was there any trace of affection.

Curialo's strangled cry reached her above the "Hochs!" of her unwelcome guests. Instantly her whole bearing changed. She nodded her head very quickly several times and scuttled out of the room. Seconds later she reappeared with a pitcher in one hand and a glass in the other.

Water!

The two Legionaires sat bolt upright, straining toward her, their hands outstretched.



But the young *feldwebel* barred her way as she came around the end of the table.

"A thousand pardons, *chère Madame*," he said politely, "but may one inquire as to the destination of this choice beverage?"

"*Pour eux*," snapped the old lady. "For them—for my boys."

The German laughed heartily.

"But that is bad logic," he exclaimed.

"When we entered the house I heard you calling them foreigners and pigs and rascals—and I may add that that is the reputation of the Foreign Legion the world over."

Madame Rouland's wrinkled mouth closed as tight as a rat trap, and a gray tinge crept into her cheeks.

"You do not want them to have a drink?" she inquired.

"Not now," declared the *feldwebel*. "I am humane; I do not wish to see or to cause needless suffering, but this case is different. I asked these men to surrender. It was not honorable of them to fight us. War is war, Madame, and I would have killed them for their treachery if my chiefs did not desire me to bring back live prisoners in a fit state to answer a few simple questions. My chiefs will be glad to find out about the movements of the French Colonial Corps. Its presence on this front was unsuspected. These men will be very useful."

"Like hell they will," snarled Curialo, trying to struggle to his feet. "What's the idea of keeping us from having a drink?"

THE Uhlan's smile vanished like a flash. He jammed his automatic against Curialo's ear.

"Down!" he ordered. "Stay down, or once more I shall have you punished. Not a sound do I wish to hear from you. Enough!"

Curialo subsided. He was still too weak to stand up, otherwise the *feldwebel* would have been winging his way heavenward within the next few seconds, for he handled his automatic like a novice, flourishing it here and there and everywhere, except in the right direction.

Well satisfied with himself the Uhlan turned again to Madame Rouland, took the pitcher out of her hands, and carried it to his nose. He smelt it and made a wry face. Then he dipped one finger into the liquid and sucked it.

"*Wasser!*" he said in a shocked voice. "*Wie schädlich!*"

And everybody roared with laughter.

"You see why I refuse them a drink," he went on. "It makes the prisoners amenable to reason. They are so thirsty they can think of nothing else and cannot give trouble. I am a merciful man, I do not wish to hurt them unnecessarily."

He went to the door and spilled the water over the step.

"I hope Madame sees my point of view," he pleaded, handing her the pitcher. "Madame perceives that I act through no feeling of revenge."

The old lady gave her shoulders a shrug.

"It's not clever what you're doing," she snapped. "Look at 'em with their tongues sticking out! You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"But I'm not," he assured her. "They may be thirsty—even so they have not lost the use of their vocal organs. Listen to their language. They know no shame!"

The language the Legionaires were using was coarse and vulgar. Between spasms of choking they called the *feldwebel* every foul name they could think of, and their vocabulary was extensive. They cursed him in French and English and Arabic, and when their stock began to run low they called him pet German names they had learnt from their fellow Legionaires.

The Uhlan lost his pleasant smile. He

walked over to Withers's side and cracked him smartly over the top of the head with the butt end of his automatic. Withers said, "Gor!" then his nose began to bleed, which rendered further speech impossible.

The *feldwebel* beamed upon Madame Rouland.

"That is how one teaches them proper respect," he explained. "They are no good these foreigners, these blood-thirsty mercenaries."

THE lines about the corners of the old lady's mouth grew deeper.

"How about the other one?" she inquired, pointing to the sergeant. "Nothing to be done for him either?"

"There is little one can do, and at least he gives no trouble. I have examined him, it is a scalp wound he has across the back of the head. He will survive, have no fear, and be of great use to our headquarters—unless of course his skull is cracked."

Madame Rouland wiped her apron across her eyes.

"Smoke!" she exclaimed angrily. "It always does make me cry, smoke does."

"Do not weep over the fate of such men," urged the Uhlans. "War is war, and——"

"Think I'd weep for them or anybody else?" sniffed the old lady. "Don't you worry my lad. Cry my eyes out for a crew of foreigners? Not likely. Fact is, I been thinking; you at least are doing your duty by your country."

The *feldwebel* clicked his heels together and saluted.

"But these rapsCALLIONS," she went on, "they're brigands. Came in here, they did, and yelled 'wine!' at me. Tried to frighten me to death——"

"I will rid you of their presence in one minute," promised the German. "The dawn comes almost into the sky. We must go quickly."

"Now just wait a minute," protested the old lady. She leered toothlessly at the *feldwebel*. "You been honest and decent—didn't try to break into my cellar as those brutes did. You wait, I'll bring you up another bottle."

SHE didn't seem to hear the choice, unprintable epithet Curialo spat at her.

"You saw how I had to fight 'em off,"

she went on, "and I suppose you're quite right about not giving them a drink. But your men deserve one. There's a bottle down in the cellar—a good bottle of white. It'll warm you up at this hour of the morning."

"Madame is too kind," murmured the *feldwebel* without attempting to disguise his contempt. "Madame will find that her attitude will be much appreciated by the German troops of occupation."

"That's it," she agreed, fawning on him.



"Might as well face facts, eh? I always said the Germans are all right, and now you're here you're welcome. And what's more," she

pawed at the Uhlans's shoulder, "you remind me of a boy of mine. You're just like my little Julot. Such a good boy, he is! You wait a minute——"

She came back with an armful of bottles.

"With speed!" ordered the *feldwebel*. "We must go!" He raised his mug and toasted Madame Rouland. "I drink to our good understanding, Madame, and to your broadmindedness. Hoch!"

"Hoch!" repeated the Uhlans, downing the wine at one gulp.

"Now we must go," declared the *feldwebel*. "Soon it will be daylight."

"Don't be in such a hurry," pleaded Madame Rouland. "There's some more of that wine down below, and I'd rather see you drink it up than have my house cluttered up with people I mightn't like so well. You wait."

They waited. She brought up several more bottles of wine—an innocuous, tricky little wine which slid like water down a man's throat—and exploded in the pit of his stomach. Two mugs brimful of that treacherous beverage made the Uhlans boisterously happy.

ONCE or twice the *feldwebel* looked at his wristwatch, but Madame Rouland would not let him go. She called him her "little rabbit," and made him talk about his

mother in far away Wurzburg. He grew sentimental and blear-eyed, and so did his men. They sang sad, slow songs about blond Gretchens, village church spires and the glories of the fatherland. When she was not busy replenishing the mugs Madame Rouland applauded vigorously.

The two Legionaires were too astounded to say anything coherent. Sick with disgust they watched the old woman wait upon the Uhlans, and slobber over the Uhlans, and ransack her cellar for the Uhlans, who were rapidly growing cockeyed.

At last the *feldwebel* tottered to his feet and groped about for his helmet. His face was purple, and his gummy lips were set in a foolish smile.

"Must go," he repeated for the twentieth time. "The dawn comes."

"My little cabbage," gurgled Madame Rouland. "Not yet, my grand soldier boy! I have one last surprise for you. Be seated. You have nothing to fear; it is still quite dark."

She forced him back onto the bench and patted his shoulder affectionately.

"I know what you need," she laughed. "A small drop of *calvados*, it'll keep out the morning cold when you ride away."

SHE produced two bottles of *calvados*, a lethal brew guaranteed to play havoc with the toughest brain. The Uhlans were too far gone to care what they drank, and she filled their mugs almost brimful.

"I'd like to kill 'er," groaned Withers. "And us perishing for a drink."

"Killing's too good for that witch," answered Curialo.

Madame Rouland was standing behind the *feldwebel*, resting her hands on his shoulders, and laughing at some maudlin remark he had just made.

"If I had my way," Curialo went on. "I'd take a horse whip and tan her hide until——"

Whatever he meant to say went unsaid, for he was aware all at once that something queer was happening, something which at first he could not understand.

Madame Rouland was behaving in an unaccountable fashion. Her back was turned to the Legionaires, but Curialo noticed with surprise that she appeared to have grown

suddenly stiff and rigid, as though she were straining every muscle and sinew in her body to breaking point. Her elbows stood out sharply from her sides, and her boney shoulders were haunched up about her ears so that she looked more than ever like an evil bird of prey.

Slowly she began to rock from side to side, struggling with some object Curialo could not catch sight of. A rattling, gasping sound became audible. Two of the Uhlans facing the old woman reeled drunkenly to their feet. One of them gave a loud shout and, having kicked away the bench, started to lumber around the end of the table toward her.

THEN she half turned toward the Legionaires, and they saw that her fingers were closed around the *feldwebel's* neck. He was clawing at her wrists and bouncing up and down like a jumping-jack as he tried to shake off her strangle hold. His face was livid and his mouth hung open.

She yelled at the Legionaires:

"What in the name of the *bon Dieu* are you waiting for? Up, you weak-kneed, good-for-nothing rascals! Must I do it all myself—with my own hands? On your feet—fight!"

Her shrill, screaming voice had a dynamic effect upon the two Legionaires. Quite suddenly they recovered the full use of their numb limbs. They were halfway across the room before they knew what had happened to them.

Curialo stopped the Uhlan who was endeavoring to rescue the *feldwebel*—stopped him with a trip-hammer blow which sent him crashing over backward against the edge of the sink.

Withers, armed with a carbine which he tore out of a German's hands, drove the steel shod gun-butt into the rightful owner's face. He followed up this initial success by a swift victory over the *feldwebel*; the latter had succeeded in tearing Madame Rouland's hands away from his throat and was reeling about, gasping for air, while he tried to draw his automatic from its holster. Withers had not spent four hours a day for many years at rifle drill without acquiring a certain proficiency. He swung the gun

high and wide and brought down the butt very accurately on the *feldwebel's* right elbow.

IT WASN'T much of a fight, for the combination of wine and *calvados* had completely destroyed the Uhlans' morale. They were too dazed and soggy to resist the onslaught of their former prisoners and after four of them had been put out of action the remaining three feebly waggled their hands above their heads and hiccupped "Kamarad."

The first thing Curialo said as soon as the commotion died down was:

"Hey, *la patronne*, have we earned a drink or not?"

"You have," agreed Mme. Rouland, "but _____"

"But nothing," croaked Withers. "For the love of the *bon Dieu* bring us a bottle of something wet and don't argue."

"But," she cried, "the cellar is empty, my poor infants. I poured the last bottle down the gullets of these Boches—to save you!"

And at that precise moment Sergeant Verbeuken came back to life. He sat, staring about him with a puzzled frown making a groove between his eyes. He carried one hand to the wound on his head and muttered something unintelligible. Then grunting he stood up and walked unsteadily to the door.

Dawn was close at hand. The sky to the east was luminous and a cold gray light was seeping over the fields. Abruptly he wheeled around and barked, "Get those prisoners out of here quick! Can't you understand a plain order? You aren't paralyzed, are you? It'll be broad daylight in another minute. Hustle those—out of here!"

"You haven't given any orders," protested Curialo. "You've been unconscious half the night."

"Me—unconscious!" shouted Verbeuken. "You confounded liar, you poor fool—what's got into you?"

"It's no more than the truth," put in

Mme. Rouland. "If it hadn't been for me _____"

"Not another word out of you," ordered Verbeuken. "If it hadn't been for you we'd have had a drink. But it's too late now. We're starting back at once."

NOTHING any one said could make him believe that he had been knocked out for more than thirty seconds, and he was in too much of a hurry to take in any of the details which might have made him alter his point of view.

"I wouldn't touch a drop of water in your house," he told the old lady, "not if you brought it to me on your bended knees. Spies, are we? Germans in disguise? Legionaires, that's what we are!"

"I made a mistake," she admitted, "but if you'll let me fetch you—"

He waved her away.

"Kick those prisoners to their feet," he ordered. "At once!"

A minute later the Legionaires and their prisoners filed out of the house. Being an infantryman Verbeuken refused to have anything to do with the Uhlans's horses which were tethered to a fence behind the cowbarn.

Madame Rouland watched the party go limping down the road.

"Leave my house?" she said in answer to Curialo's parting question. "I should say not! Who'd tidy up the mess you've made, eh? And who'd be here to wait for Julot when he comes back? Good luck to you, and tell your officers that your sergeant's crazy."

Tight-lipped and scornful she stood on the top step until they were well out of sight.

"I been thinking," muttered Withers, after they had gone about a kilometer. "It's this, if we get back quick maybe the old man'll let us 'ave our wine ration, seeing as 'ow we bagged seven Heinies. Gor 'blimey, it's no more'n we deserve, even if I do say so!"

A gleam of hope appeared in Curialo's eyes.

"By golly, that's true too," he admitted. "I'd clean forgotten about them two casks."

THE pace grew faster, much to the Uhlans' dismay. They were badly bruised and shaken; they were suffering



from an acute hang-over, and before long they were sweating freely.

The pace grew even faster when a muffled rumble of gunfire came rolling over the plain. Far away several puffs of black smoke appeared against the clear morning sky.

It is doubtful whether Curialo or Withers heard the noise or saw the smoke. They were thinking of one thing only—the wine issue—and the nearer they drew to Brocourt-le-Bas the longer grew their stride.

Around a bend in the road they caught sight of the village. Almost simultaneously a burst of rifle fire crackled viciously somewhere quite close at hand. A bullet went by with a long-drawn whine. Several more followed in quick succession.

They saw a group of men run stoop-shouldered in among the wheat stooks in a nearby field.

“Double march!” ordered Verbeuken. “Pick your feet up! First man slows down runs up against the point of this bayonet of mine!”

As they lumbered into Brocourt-le-Bas the rattle of musketry settled down to a steady roar. The tiles on the roofs along the main street were cascading down into the roadway as though torn off the rafters by a high wind.

They found Commandant Perache standing at the foot of a ladder propped against the wall of a barn.

“Brought back seven prisoners,” panted Verbeuken. “At the farm—no trace of the cuirassiers, *mon commandant*.”

Perache had forgotten all about the patrol. He was far too busy organizing the defence of the village, which was threatened by a heavy column marching down the Montsoul road.

He gave the Uhlans one swift look.

“Hand them over to the battalion orderly officer,” he snapped, “and rejoin your company as quick as you can.”

A machine gun added its methodical clatter to the uproar, and he had to shout to make himself heard.

“Your company is up the road beyond the church.”

Then he dismissed them and scrambled up the ladder.

“’Ere’s the war, right enough!” commented Withers. “A nice way this is of sending us into action.”

“*En route!*” ordered Verbeuken. “You can talk it over some other day. March!”

THEY rid themselves of their prisoners, and trotted slowly up the main street toward the church. Gusts of bullets drummed into the walls above their heads.

Suddenly, when they came close to the church, Curialo paused and grabbed at Withers’s arm.

“See anything?” he yelled

“See what?” protested Withers. “You ain’t gone mad too, ’ave you?”

“There!” cried Curialo. “See it!”

“It” was a horse pond full of scummy water, scumming as only a battle field area pond can be.

In three strides, before Verbeuken could stop them, they were across the road. They fell flat on their stomachs in the mud and buried their faces in the foul water.

For a second or so Verbeuken hesitated, then he flopped down beside them and drank until he could drink no more.

A hail of bullets drummed into the low coping built around the pond.

The sergeant propped himself up on one elbow, smiling not unkindly as he watched the two troopers sucking and guzzling and wallowing in the water.

“*Allons, mes gars,*” he said at last. “You’ve had enough—can’t stay here all day. All set?”

Withers wiped his sleeve across his dripping face.

“Gor struth!” he sighed. “You may talk about your wine and your beer and your perishing champagne, but——”

“There’s nothing comes up to water,” agreed Curialo, “there’s ab-so-lutely nothing like water.”

Then, alert and contented for the first time since they had set foot on French soil, they jogged along through a storm of lead toward the sound of the guns.



BOYS WILL BE BOYS

By MEIGS O. FROST

Author of "A Double-Cross for Charity," "The Challenge of the Snake," etc.

CASE OIL FOR CHINA—THE VERY DEUCE OF A CARGO TO GET THROUGH THE TYPHOON SEASON IN THE CHINA SEAS. YET FOR KNOWING OLD AS WELL AS NEW TRICKS OF THE TREACHEROUS SEAS YOU CAN'T BEAT A BUNCH OF OLD SHELLBACKS

UNDER the shed of the Boston wharf lay the cargo that had come from Durban. With empty holds the full-rigged ship lay at her mooring. On her stern, partly obscured by sun and salt, could be discerned her prosaic name. The *Mary J. Kilbourne*.

In his cabin, aft, sat Captain Erik Olaf Malleeson, her master. He had been reading a book, trying to forget his troubles. Now he was thinking. The book lay, open, beside him. It gave minute instructions on the care of poultry.

On the cabin wall two official documents, framed, behind glass, informed the world that Captain Malleeson had qualified as master of any tonnage on any ocean in steam and sail, to the satisfaction of the properly constituted maritime authorities of the United States of America. One look at his weathered face, his blue eyes, his bony, rangy frame and big, competent hands, showed he had been exercising those qualifications for years.

Too many years. That was the trouble. That slick, grease-haired Boston agent of the owner had tipped him as much. Too many young American third mates with master's papers.

"In steam, maybe. Not in sail," he had argued.

"Owners should worry. Sail's a joke," the agent had dismissed the matter.

Well, maybe he was right. Maybe that trip from Durban was the last. What then? You couldn't drive it out of your mind by trying to decide between White Leghorns and Barred Plymouth Rocks. He'd have had that chicken farm by now and have been independent as a hog on ice, after the Durban voyage, if it hadn't been for his wife's operation and nearly a year in the hospital. If— That was just it. Could he make it, possibly, on what he had?

Save for the watchman he was alone on the ship. Mates and crew, paid off, were seeking such solace as Boston afforded seamen in the month of April. But a master couldn't seek stimulation or forgetfulness that way. Rank was rank.

Captain Malleeson slammed shut the book on poultry. He went to his private locker and drew out a bottle from a stock that had come aboard in Africa. Its level lowered markedly as he poured. He drank.

With pencil and paper he began to figure. He knew just the place he wanted for that chicken farm. He knew the terms. The figures didn't lie. He shook his head

disappointedly. You couldn't twist them into an answer, to save you.

HE LOOKED around as steps came down the companionway. It was that grease-haired Boston agent. Captain Malleson got out another glass.

"Well, you've got a job on your hands," grinned the agent, and drank deep. From an inner pocket he drew a telegram in code, and the typed decoding of it.

"You got me to thank for it, too," he added. "You'll notice the owners put it up to me whether to get a younger man."

Captain Malleson reached for the decoded copy and read it carefully.

"Case oil for China," he mused aloud. "Shanghai. Charter calls for a dollar fifty a case. Must start to load inside ten days. Failure to get alongside wharf ready to load by the tenth day reduced rate to seventy cents a case and the owner of the oil can refuse to load. The difference in the two rates is seventy thousand dollars.

"That's a war time charter," he remarked, looking up at the agent. "From the date, the owners had it while I was in Africa. And I've been here fourteen days in Boston and this the first word."

"Owners are like that," said the agent, flippantly. "Can you make it? Or do I have to get a youngster who can?"

Something flamed up inside Captain Malleson.

"I'll make it," he said. "Do I have full charge of outfitting and route?"

"Route? You'll use the Panama Canal of course," said the agent.

"I will not," said Captain Malleson. "Figure your canal fees. Figure the calm belt on the Pacific side. Figure what chance there is to catch a tow out of it, and what it costs if I do. We go around the Horn."

"Maybe you're right," admitted the agent. This particular owner was only a small factor in his young life. "Go ahead and fix it up yourself. You're in charge."

He poured down another drink and went ashore.

CAPTAIN MALLESON was left with his authority and his thoughts. They were plenty.

Case oil. Nasty cargo. The bottom tiers

are likely to leak. The packing case wood softens; the tin cans rust and corrode. The bottom ones first. The bilge is pumped every four hours, and if the bottom tiers are leaking, you have empty cases at the bottom and heavy cases on top. That means a top-heavy ship. Many such ships and cargoes have vanished completely. They are often reported overdue. And by God, the China typhoon season was due in ninety days!

The *Mary J. Kilbourne* had a foul bottom, too. Half an inch of barnacles and fifteen feet of green whiskers growing out of them after their Durban voyage. All there was to do was clean the hold, get her in drydock, clean and paint her bottom, take in three hundred tons of rock ballast, water, provisions, a suit of storm sails, ropes—

Yes, he knew a trick that might be worked at Punta Arenas! It would take old heads for that. Old heads! Old men! By God, he'd show them.

He rose to his feet and went up the companionway, amazingly light for his bulk. Overside on the wharf, he must see stevedores, ballast men, drydock men. Lucky there was plenty of his private stock from Durban left. What a case of it would do to expedite his clearance!

He must interview a boarding master, too. There was one who could round up the old shell-backs for this voyage. There was more than one reason for a crew of old men; they didn't kick like young ones. That consul at Shanghai was a devil about the rights of sailors. The crew was always right, the officers always wrong, with him. Well, Erik Olaf Malleson knew what would keep a bunch of shell-backs' mouths shut. To hell with these young sea-lawyers.

THAT night there was a party aboard the *Mary J. Kilbourne*. It lasted until dawn. Bottles from Africa fulfilled their destiny in Boston. It was a method on which efficiency experts frown—but with the dawn things began to hum.

Aboard the ship came sails, rope, provisions and water for one year. Three hundred tons of rock ballast.

And a crew of fourteen men.

"I had to clean out the Old Men's Home to get what you ordered, but I got it," boasted the boarding master, the taste of the

Durban liquor still in his mouth. "You says, 'Grab me every able-bodied bar-sinister over fifty years old in sight,' and I done it. Here they are."

They wore dented derbies and tattered soft felts. Some were patched with ship's canvas. Some had underclothes. But they were real shell-backs, economical of motion, not a prance in the lot. Yet every one



was a man who did his job as he breathed; without thinking about it.

Everyone of them was over fifty. First mate, second mate, sail-maker and cook were past sixty. The cabin boy was seventy-one.

Captain Malleson looked at them and grinned. He'd show those owners something.

Only one of his preparations for the voyage proved impossible. The drydock was jammed with priority orders. The *Mary J. Kilbourne* must trail her barnacles and green whiskers to Shanghai.

But the chicken farm loomed so close the captain could touch it.

For case oil for China cannot be loaded like coal. The five-gallon tins, packed two to a wooden case, must be set on temporary, rough wooden flooring. It may be stepped. It must not slant. The cases must not touch the skin of the ship. Bilge and sweat must not defile them.

That meant that he must get lumber. Ordinarily, rough lumber thrown out and sold for less than nothing at the voyage's end was used for the flooring for the cases. But a British sea captain in Durban had told Captain Malleson of the Chinese famine in planed lumber.

And on the Boston wharf were two great stacks of lumber, which could be bought, one rough and splintery, one smooth and planed.

The wharf superintendent came aboard by special invitation. After probing the private stock from Durban he decided three hundred dollars cash would about be the difference in cost between lumber rough

and planed. Captain Malleson paid it down on the table, and the planed lumber was put aboard. At Shanghai the company would get what it would have got for the rough lumber. He would get the difference. Fair enough.

TO THE grease-haired agent, aboard one day, he said, "There's some space in the lazaret. Can you scramble up any more Shanghai cargo?"

"Not a chance," said the agent.

"Mind if I use it?"

"Help yourself, so long's the owners are taken care of."

Seven hundred extra cases of case oil for which Captain Malleson paid cash went into that lazaret. If it was good business for the owners, it would be better for him, freight free. It was that or more rock ballast, anyway. She had to be down by the stern a bit more for better steerage way.

At last the cargo was stowed. Hatches were fastened. Sailing day dawned.

That crew from the Old Men's Home one at a time, had listened to Captain Malleson. His words had been no panegyric in praise of youth. The shell-backs went forth from the interview with the look of cats whose whiskers are thick with cream.

A GALE was blowing, as the *Mary J. Kilbourne* slid out of Boston harbor. It rose almost to hurricane force. She made the Equator in eighteen days.

"Clipper ship time, and then some, Mister," said Captain Malleson to his first mate.

"Shave them green whiskers off her, and she'll race a liner, sir," the sixty-one-year-old veteran grinned.

Down past the Equator she trailed that ten-acre crop on her bottom; down the east coast of South America.

They reached Punta Arenas at last. There she put in for fresh vegetables, officially. She got them. But she got, too, supplies you'll find on no vegetarian menu. Rum in kegs.

The shell-back grinned as they saw it come aboard. The captain kept his word.

And meanwhile in the Masters' Room of a Punta Arenas ship chandler's, Captain Malleson was talking long and earnestly

with the skipper of a British tramp freighter. Talking over drinks that the Britisher never had to pay for.

Seven hundred dollars, cash, changed hands, though the tramp freighter's log reveals no such transaction to this day. Her skipper's wife back in Bootle, long had wanted one of those handy American flivver sedans.

Be that as it may, when the British freighter steamed out of Punta Arenas for the Straits of Magellan, she had a tow. The *Mary J. Kilbourne* was at the other end of the hawser. Her shell-back crew lolled back with the languid grace of liner passengers and a repartee all their own.

On the sailing ship's monkey-poop was lashed a keg of that Punta Arenas rum. The seventy-one-year-old cabin boy had appointed himself Rum Issue Officer, with no other duties.

Food and liquor. Jest and song. Heavy seas racing past. Forecastle jests.

"No need to scrape the old girl's bottom. This speed and these seas'll take them green whiskers off her."

"Will you 'ave a muffin with yer bally awfternoon tea, Lord Reginald?"

"Har—har—har!"

THREE days' towing saw them through the Straits of Magellan. The towing hawser was cast free. The British tramp's skipper wished he could pick up seven hundred dollars every week as easy as that.

Across the long Pacific swells the *Mary J. Kilbourne* snored. She straddled the Equator again; again left it astern. Six hundred miles north of it, ninety days out, steering due west, the aged first mate grinned at Captain Malleson again.

"These damned old shell-backs say you're chasing a typhoon to pick us up and carry us into Shanghai."

"I am. Get set to throw a tow rope to the first one you see. If I don't hit Shanghai ahead of time, that devil of a consul there's going to have me hanged for treating the crew so badly they mutined on the high seas and delayed us."

Which, duly relayed by way of the boat-swain, rocked the forecastle with laughter.

They were a thousand miles off shore. A good breeze was carrying them along at

seven knots. It would have been eleven knots had her bottom been clean.

The sky began to cloud up. Rain squalls broke. From the poop, Captain Malleson scanned the heavens, and he noticed the clouds were not racing. They seemed a solid ceiling.

Then a dead calm fell. He looked at the barometer. It stood at twenty-six. Great, smooth, heavy swells began to roll.



"Take in everything but storm sails, Mister," he ordered his first mate. Storm sails it was, the ancient shell-backs going to their task unhurriedly, steadily, automatically.

A little later the barometer went down to twenty-six point seven.

"Double reef your storm sails, Mister," came Captain Malleson's order.

As unhurriedly, as steadily, as they had been reefed, they were double reefed. The cook served a special hot meal. The seventy-one-year-old cabin boy served a rum ration. Everybody knew what was coming.

TWENTY-FOUR hours the *Mary J. Kilbourne*, in the midst of the floating garden trailing from her foul bottom, rocked on those steady, heavy seas in that dead calm. She was like a rocking horse on a nursery floor, beneath a cloud ceiling of solid, motionless gray.

They were a hundred and ten days out of Boston.

Every thing aboard her was lashed and double-lashed. Two heavy tarpaulins, folded up, were placed by the mizzen rigging to starboard and port.

Then all hell exploded full in her face.

The typhoon struck. Inside an hour it was raging at the peak of its powers. Men crouched beneath the lashing of thick rain that struck like the blow of a fist; beneath the beating of a maniac wind that was as though fifty giant hands had taken hold of them and were shaking them with insane rage all ways at once.

From hand-hold to hand-hold they inched

along the deck. The tarpaulin to leeward was forced outside the mizzen rigging with titanic efforts, and unfolded, fold by fold. It stood against the rigging, rigid as a steel wall. It would steady the ship if the storm sails blew away. In its shelter alone on all the deck could a word shouted in an ear be heard.

Through the sky, solid, immovable, blackish gray, rode a million invisible devils with steam sirens for voices. All howled at the top of their lungs.

Under the keel terrific waves chased lashing after one another, in a mad race.

Through the typhoon the *Mary J. Kilbourne*, green whiskers and all, sped like a startled jack rabbit.

It was noon when the storm had struck. It was toward night of the next day when the typhoon showed that up to now it had been only playing. The double-reefed foresail blew to threads with a report like a cannon.

Lightning was lancing through the thick heavens. Lightning about a ship loaded with tin cans of gasoline and kerosene!

Out of the sky flashed a great shaft of it that licked down and struck the mizzen sail. As though a million knives had been plunged into the heavy canvas at a single thrust, it shredded and vanished. By some miracle the bolt seemed content with that.

Wind that had been a solid wall, became a solid wall of charging locomotives.

Above the storm roar rose a groaning, a splintering, a crashing. As an athlete with an ax would smash, one by one, the pickets on a fence, the masts of the ship, one by one, went by the board. Jagged stumps alone thrust above the deck. Crashing spars splintered the captain's gig, slung in the stern; made matchsticks of the ship's boat, lashed keel up, amidships.

NO ORDERS sounded. None could sound in that hellish uproar. But that crew of ancient seamen needed no orders. Clawing, scrambling, gripping at every hand-hold, they fought their way to the carpenter's quarters. They emerged with axes and crowbars gripped in hard old hands.

To leeward they fought. With slashing blades and prying bars they attacked that

leeward rigging like a wrecking crew of demons in hell. Held by that rigging when the windward rigging gave, those floating masts, with every lurch, were doing their best to smash through the side of the ship.

Around them through the blackness the lightning played. They didn't need its glare. They fought by feel. In the midst of a melee of wind and water and splintered wood and tangled hemp some instinct born of decades at sea told them where to strike; where to pry. And before their attack the tangle of splintered masts tore adrift.

Stripped clean as a river scow, the ship rode the typhoon like a duck. Rode it five days and five nights and came out on the other side. It was raw rum and cold sea biscuit at the last.

BENEATH a sun that looked strange, they manned the pumps. When through the scuppers gushed nothing but salt bilge with never a trace of oil they grinned at one another with cracked faces and cursed like pirates with relief. The case oil cargo was unbroken.

Nothing to do but eat and sleep and drink water for chasers to the daily issues of Punta Arenas rum! Food and water and rum for a year. They should worry. More days, more dollars. Day after day they gathered on deck and told stories of the Seven Seas and the ports thereof.

They were in the grip of a current carrying them westward about two miles an hour, floating garden and all. Islands and reefs were ahead—the long string of islands of which Formosa is the greatest, that stretches south some seven hundred miles from the southernmost point of Japan.

"Nothing to worry about," Captain Malleson told his first mate. "Even if our case oil does start to leak, we can't get top-heavy. Nothing to get top-heavy with. If we hit a reef and punch a hole in her big enough to let her ballast run out, that's only trivial. As long as the hatches hold she'll float on her



cargo. The only thing can hurt us is to get hung on a reef and have it blow hard enough to pound us to pieces. Not much chance of that."

"I haven't heard anyone kicking, sir," said the mate.

It was thirty days before they sighted land. Up out of the Pacific off the starboard bow rose a small green island. The day was clear. The sea was smooth. They had steerage-way enough to get closer for a looksee.

"Send for the cabin boy," ordered Captain Malleson. "I think it would be a good idea to put him ashore there and leave him some sheep on our way home. He might save something against when he gets old."

"Have him in a moment, sir," said the second mate. "He got a little too much of that Punta Arenas rum and tried to kill the carpenter."

THE second mate went forward and laid the captain's proposal before the seventy-one-year-old prisoner. Discipline in non-essentials was slackening on the *Mary J. Kilbourne*.

"Tell him to hell with him and wait till I get older," was the message of the cabin boy in whom traces of Punta Arenas rum yet lingered.

Then trouble loomed ahead as the little island sank astern.

Before them twisted forty miles of tortuous channel between islands and reefs. Through it was racing a current born of the gigantic body of water displaced by the typhoon. They were out of the steamer path. This was serious. Hung up there without wireless, Lord alone knew how long they would stay.

Captain Malleson thought fast. He called Chips to him. He gave minute instructions.

"The current is swiftest where the channel is deepest," he explained at the end.

Presently at starboard and port on the poop rose little frames jutting out beyond the ship's sides. At the end of each frame there rose a slender piece of wood about a foot high.

At the tip of each little upright was fastened the end of a fishing line about a hundred feet long. From the other end dangled small wooden floats. Carefully the floats were swung outward and forward into clear

water beyond the green whiskers of the foul bottom.—

"The current is swiftest where the channel is deepest."

"Wonder how many of these bright young men would figure that out?" mused Captain Malleson.

Groups of ancient shell-backs to starboard and port watched those tiny uprights. Suddenly one sang out.

"Starboard stick bending forward, sir!"

"Starboard your helm!" shouted Captain Malleson.

The shellback at the wheel spun the spokes. The ship swerved to starboard. Another yell sent her to port.

Curve by curve she chased the deepest part of the channel on its twisting way, its secrets revealed by those little sticks that bent to the tug of the current on the floats.

With never a scrape on rock or reef she came out the other side. Leisurely she resumed her steady drift to the west. Nearly fifty days of it in all.

THEY were a little more than two hundred miles from Shanghai when a Japanese passenger steamer sighted them. The captain came alongside.

"Do we tow you into Yokohama or do we take you off and sink that derelict as a menace to navigation?" was his ultimatum.

"You try either one and you got a fight on your hands," was Captain Malleson's. Then he waxed insulting. "Outside a bunch of pretty Jap girls, we got all any white man has coming to him out here!" he roared. "You wireless the towboat company at Shanghai to come out and get us—or you go chase yourself in circles!"

The Japanese captain took another look at the crew of ancient shell-backs who were hurling over the rail their messages of hoarse and unprintable disdain. He had passengers and mails. He sent the wireless to the towboat company at Shanghai.

One hundred and eighty miles outside Shanghai the searching towboat hove in sight. The bargain was struck. It was plenty, but it wasn't salvage.

THIRTY-NINE hours later the *Mary J. Kilbourne* nosed up into the Yangtze River, one hundred and forty-nine days out

of Boston, her cargo safe and sound and delivered within charter specifications.

The consignee's agent had come out with the tug. He had roared at the sight of the crew from the Old Man's Home; had roared again as he overheard them tell what was shortly to hit Shanghai—and how.

And below in the captain's cabin, he had told Captain Malleeson over the Punta Arenas rum enough about the case oil and planed lumber market in Shanghai to make it plain that the chicken farm had come into port with the *Mary J. Kilbourne*.

At the river mouth the quarantine boat met them. The doctor came aboard.

"You line up your crew and let me give them a thorough going over," he ordered. "After an experience like that, some of those ancients must need attention."

"That's all you know about shell-backs," Captain Malleeson flared. "Plenty of salt horse and plenty of good booze pickle the insides and make them immune to anything."

It looked as though Captain Malleeson was right, after the examination ended.

"Fat and sassy," was the quarantine doctor's verdict.

"Come below and have a drink," Captain Malleeson invited.

He and the doctor sat in the cabin over glasses of Punta Arenas rum. The doctor was listening to a lecture on poultry. A noise arose on deck. Splashes followed it. Shouts in the voice of the sixty-one-year-old first mate.



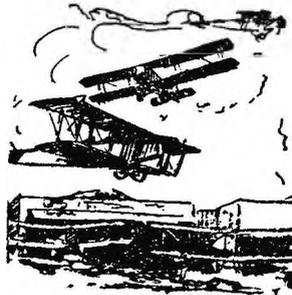
"Hey, there, you terriers! Be-lay that!"

"You'll have to square it with the port authorities, sir," he was explaining to Captain Malleeson a moment later. "Those Chinese soldiers came aboard with rifles and got rough. The cabin boy yelled to the crew to throw them into the river for swimming lessons, and they did."

"Boys will be boys," chuckled the quarantine doctor, who was standing behind Captain Malleeson.

THE NEXT ISSUE

**A stirring action novel of flying,
oil fields, Border intrigue
and circus adventure**



GRAND STAND STUFF

by

Thomson Burtis



THE MORGAN KID

By HOMER KING GORDON

Author of "Kid Brother of Men," "What Price Treasure," etc.

THE MORGAN KID COMES WEST FROM KENTUCKY AND ENTERS THE ONE-MAN TOWN OF DEAD ROCK WHERE MEN COME AT THEIR OWN RISK. THEY STAY SUBJECT TO THE PLEASURE OF BLACK DIAMOND, A RULER SURROUNDED BY HIRED KILLERS. AND THE FIRST THING THE KID FINDS IS THAT, AS THE PRICE OF HIS OWN LIFE, HE HAS TO MURDER THE ONE MAN WHO HAS BEFRIENDED HIM IN ALL THAT HELL-HOLE

LIFE in Dead Rock began at sundown. It continued until dawn. With the coming of the morning sun, the little cow-town on the banks of Big River closed its doors, buried its dead, and slept through the scorching heat of another southwestern Texas day.

Men came to Dead Rock to drink and gamble. Black Diamond, a swarthy-skinned, soft-voiced dandy, owned the town, which was centered around his headquarters and office, the Cannon Ball Saloon. The front part of the saloon was built of adobe, but a rectangular wooden dance hall extended across the back of the adobe barroom and a balcony extended around it.

The piano was on a raised platform at one end of the dance floor. Two large rose-tinted phonograph horns, attached to wooden boxes, were set up on the dance floor just in front of the musician's platform. These were to catch donations thrown by the dancers who wanted more music.

A short, narrow street lined with small square adobe buildings was behind the dance hall. These were the living quarters of the dancing girls. Some of the girls were Mexicans, others were white.

The large adobe houses across the street from the entrance to the Cannon Ball housed the bartender, gamblers, musicians, and other attendants. Black Diamond himself lived in a thick-walled house between the town and the river. A cluster of smaller huts around his house were used by his personal friends and guards.

Dead Rock was strictly a one-man town. Black Diamond's word was the only law it knew. Men came there at their own risk. They stayed as long as their money lasted or their conduct pleased Black Diamond. He was surrounded by gunmen hired to kill, and who killed to keep their jobs.

THE Morgan Kid arrived in Dead Rock about midnight. He was only a gaunt, gangling boy, with a fuzz of unshaved hair on his upper lip. His gray homespun pants were tucked into knee-high cowhide boots. His short coat was several sizes too small for him and his big-boned wrists and hands stuck out from his coat sleeves. His black hat was small and straight-brimmed. A roll of blankets and a rifle were strapped to his old army saddle.

The horse he rode was the only thing he owned which did not give the men of

Dead Rock a hearty laugh. It was a big chestnut gelding that carried him with the swift sure-footed grace of a thoroughbred. But he left his horse among the cow ponies tied to the hitchrack in front of the Cannon Ball and the animal was not with him to check the boisterous laugh which went up from the men at the bar when he opened the door and came solemnly into the saloon.

An old-fashioned heavy pistol hung from a broad belt at his waist and was strapped down to his right leg so low that the gun-barrel was almost in his boot-top. He flushed at the laugh and walked stiffly across the room to a table in the corner.

A drunken cowboy staggered across the room and, with his hands on his hips, bent over and stared long and searchingly at the boy.

The puncher's big sombrero was set on the back of his head. His black bearskin chaps rippled in the lamp light as he steadied himself against the table to keep from falling. The boy tried to look away and drummed nervously on the table with his knuckles.

"Gents," the cowboy announced gravely, "as shore as I'm standing here cold sober, it's alive. I saw it wiggle its eyes and swaller its Adam's apple."

A CIRCLE of men closed in around the cowpuncher and his victim. The boy looked around at his tormentors with a silent appeal for sympathy, but he found nothing but mirth.

"I'm alive, but I'm danged near all petered out," his voice broke to a sharp staccato. "I've rid all day since sunup and that's a powerful lot of riding for anybody in this country where you don't see a tree nor a crick for miles around."

The cowboy staggered around the table and put his arm across the boy's shoulders.

"You-all must be plumb tuckered out," he declared with heavily counterfeited sympathy. "How 'bout me and you-all having a little drink while you tell me all about the old folks back there in them there mountains?"

The Morgan Kid looked helplessly at the grinning men around him.

"I ain't extra partial to strong liquor," he remarked faintly.

"Aw, come on," the cowboy insisted, playfully tightening his arm around the Kid's neck. "You ain't gonna make me mad, are you?"

"Well, if you've got a gourd of corn liquor around here, I'll jine up with you for a sip," the boy promised, "but I'm powerful near tuckered out and I'd rather be eatin' than drinkin'. I ain't et none all day."



WITH a drunken wave of his hand, the cowboy tried to quiet the roar of mirth that went up from the onlookers.

"Don't pay a bit of attention to them yaps," he winked broadly at his audience, "Me and you are so extry intelligent that we're as much alone here as if everybody else wasn't even present."

The Morgan Kid tried to free himself but the cowboy hung on tenaciously.

"What's your name, Kid?" he demanded in a confidential whisper which was intended to be heard by everyone present.

"Ben Morgan."

"No!" the cowboy exclaimed, as though stricken with awe—"Not one of the Morgans!"

"That's it. Ben Morgan from Old Kentuck', and I'm right lonesome for them hills, too," the boy declared wistfully.

The drunken cowboy stood up and steadied himself with one hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Gents," he exclaimed, waving solemnly for attention, "meet up with the Morgan Kid from old Kentuck'. He's rid here all the way by hisself and he's lonesome. Let's have him give us a little dance and fergit all about his ma and pa back there in Old Kentuck'."

The cowboy's proposal met with a yell of approval.

"Kid, get right up here on this table and shake your hoofs," the cowboy ordered. "Make your ma and pa proud of their little boy that's lonesome and wishes he was back home."

"Ma's been dead these last five years," the boy said soberly, "I reckon you ain't got no cause bringing' her into this."

HIS face flushed with anger and his mouth set into firm lines of determination. The men around him were suddenly silent as though ashamed of themselves and brought to their senses by his simple statement. Even his cowboy tormentor hesitated and looked at his victim with admiration and a new respect.

"Aw, come on, Kid," he urged, "give us a dance. It's all in fun."

A girl pushed through the men around the table, and, shoving the drunken man out of the way, sprawled an arm around the Morgan Kid's shoulder.

She wore a short, low-cut black dancing dress covered with beads and spangles. Her high-heeled dancing slippers were red and were matched by red stockings.

A thick coating of powder gave her dark skin a pale lavender tint. Her lips were smeared with rouge and her eyelashes were blackened and beaded.

"Hello, Keed."

She lowered her face and smiled impudently at the boy. Then she turned on the men surrounding him. "If he dance, he dance wiz me," she shrilled.

"Aw, come on, Rosie," the cowboy pleaded sullenly, "he's just a kid. Lay off of him."

In a burst of anger the girl stamped her heels and snapped her finger under the cowboy's nose. "Who in hell are you to tell me what I do?" Her eyes were as hard and metallic as her voice. "I do as I damn please."

SHE turned on her heels and flounced the back of her short dress into the cowboy's face. Loud guffaws of appreciation encouraged her to further efforts.

The Morgan Kid was more afraid of her than he had been of the drunken cowboy. She was older than he had first thought and what he had first mistaken for sympathy now appeared to be merely jealousy that someone else had taken the center of the stage and robbed her of her position which she thought was rightfully hers.

"Come on, Keed," she ordered, "You dance wiz me, not for heem."

She repeated the flouncing of her dress toward the spot where the cowboy had been, but he had skulked back through the crowd toward the bar.

"I ain't no fit dancin' pardner for a lady," the Kid protested. "Anyway, I've been ridin' all day and I'm stiff."

"You come wiz me."

She caught him by the coat collar, and with surprising strength jerked him out of his chair. Half led, half pulled through the crowd, he was forced out onto the dance floor.

Putting her arms around his neck, Rosie half closed her eyes and leaned heavily against his chest.

"Come on, Keed. Dance," she said sharply, signalling for the man at the piano to commence playing.

THE boy tried to push her away from him, but her embrace tightened and her eyes opened wide enough to glare savagely into his.

"You no like to dance wiz me?" she asked. Although her voice was a soft purr, it made the Morgan Kid tremble with fear.

"I ain't never learned to dance these kind of dances," he tried to explain.

"Then I teach you," she said between clenched teeth. "Put your arm around me and dance, damn you."

They were alone on the dance floor. The other dancers were standing along the edge of the floor watching them.

Sickened by the pungent perfume with which her dress and hair reeked, the Morgan Kid turned his face away, and as the music started, took a few short, jerky steps in an effort to please her and get rid of her as quickly as possible. They were half way across the floor when a man lurched out toward them from the bar entrance.

He was drunk. The lower half of his face was covered with a stubble of black



beard. His shirt was opened at the neck. Hair straggled down in his eyes, although he wore a wide-brimmed sombrero pulled over his ears.

Rosie saw him coming and pushed the Morgan Kid away, although she kept one hand clutched to the Kid's coat sleeve. She faced the interruption brazenly, as though flattered to be singled out for such attention.

"What you want?" she asked coquet-tishly.

THE drunken man put his hand in her face and pushed her roughly to one side and addressed his remarks to the Morgan Kid.

"You let loose that gal, see?" he said thickly. "Get to hell out of here; she's mine."

The Morgan Kid flushed and started to stammer out an answer when Rosie threw an arm around his neck and pouted up into his face.

"You keep heem away from me; he's drunk," she said. "I like you best, Señor."

"Get out, I say!"

The drunken cowboy caught her by the shoulders and threw her back, ripping a shoulder strap off her flimsy dress.

"You'd better apologize for treating the lady that way," the Morgan Kid said hotly. "That ain't no way to treat a woman nowhere."

The man turned for a moment to face Rosie, who came at him with a knife in her hand. It was a long, thin-bladed dagger, and she sprang at the cowboy with animal-like fury.

He whipped a gun from his holster and struck her across the face with the gun-barrel. Then he grabbed her wrist and twisted the knife from her hand. She sank to the floor, whimpering with pain and rage.

THE Morgan Kid looked on, his face blank with amazement. Noise in the dance hall had suddenly ceased. The men and women around them seemed to be waiting in silence and tense expectation.

"Now, you spawn of that damned horse thief Morgan, I'm ready for you," the drunken man shouted. "I never knowed

anybody by that name that wasn't a horse thief. I reckon that's why you left home. You was run away. Well, you'll never do any thievin' down here."

"I don't crave no bloodshed," the Morgan Kid said dully, "I left home because I didn't have no stomach for shootin' and killin' over nothin', but no man ever called me a horse thief or called my kin that when I could hear them."

"Well, I'm calling you one now," the cowboy snarled.

Rosie screamed a curse and tried to struggle to her feet, but he aimed a boot heel at her face and kicked her over backward.

"You stay there," he said with an oath.

A bruised red welt showed under the powder where the boot heel had left its mark.

The Morgan Kid looked at the girl and at the man who had now turned to the floor, and all his patience and timidity seemed to leave him with a flash.

He crouched down, his legs far apart and his right hand hanging down below his boot top. With a wild, shrill war cry, he thrust his head forward and began to sway lightly on the balls of his feet.

"I ain't afeerd of no man," he half yelled and half sobbed. "Git your gun out and commence shootin'."

The drunken cowboy tried a snap shot, flicking his gun up from below his waist and firing as he went for his second gun. His bullet ricocheted across the dance floor and thudded into the piano platform.

THE Morgan Kid snaked his long, heavy gun from its holster, and its report seemed to shake the building. The cowboy staggered and the Morgan Kid raised his long right arm and shot again.

A cloud of heavy smoke rose to the ceiling as the drunken man fell face forward on the floor with his arms outstretched and his guns flung from his limp fingers.

The Morgan Kid turned to the men and women under the balcony and gave his wild war-whoop again, sweeping the muzzle of his gun in a wide circle around the room. His eyes were blazing. The blood had gone from his face and his teeth were bared in a frenzied challenge to any one

who dared interfere with him.

A bullet from some one in the balcony tore up one of the floor boards at his feet. He swung around and fired at the door from where it had come and then, realizing his exposed position in the center of the floor, began a quick retreat toward the bar and the Cannon Ball's entrance.

"Get out of my way!" he screamed. "I'll show you if I'm scared."

The crowd under the balcony fell back as he approached and made a path, but across the barroom and near the door were three or four men flat against the wall and waiting with hands on their guns. One of them gave a quick order and all of the lights over the bar were suddenly extinguished, leaving the Morgan Kid outlined in the entrance to the dance hall against a background of lights.

INSTINCTIVELY, he dived for the nearest shadows as a bullet whined past the spot where he had just been standing. A hand closed over his collar and he felt himself jerked backward into the stairway which led up into the corridor around the balcony booths.

"There is a window at the far end of the corridor upstairs. Get out that, Kid, and get your horse."

The man who had given the order was lean and sunburned. He might have been any age from thirty to fifty. Although he wore the boots of a cowman and carried two guns strapped to his waist, his clothes were well tailored and of expensive make.

His voice was as steady as though he had just directed the Morgan Kid to the next town, but he spoke with the quiet confidence and authority of one who expects to be obeyed without question.

"Get going, Kid," he urged, but not impatiently, "I'll cover the stairs until you get out."

The Morgan Kid nodded his understanding.

"I am powerful obliged to you, Mister."

His ally smiled and turned to face the crowd that was surging toward the stairway from the gloom of the barroom. The Morgan Kid went up the stairs three steps at a time and found an open window at the end of the corridor.

IT WAS only a short drop to the ground. Men had come out of the main entrance of the saloon and were milling around in front of the building when the Morgan Kid dodged through the cow ponies at the hitchracks and swung up into his saddle. They set up a yell when they saw him wheel his horse into the street and start out of town. A few shots were fired over his head but, keeping close to the buildings and taking advantage of the shadows thrown by them, he got away without being hit.

The Morgan Kid was in country which was new to him. He had found his way to Dead Rock by asking directions as he rode along. The only trail he knew was the one over which he had traveled to get there. Now, confused by the darkness and the excitement of his escape from the Cannon Ball dance hall, he lost this trail in his mad rush to get away, and when his mind had become settled enough to think of the matter at all, he found he was riding due west instead of northeast.

A low ridge of mountains lay ahead of him. The range was cut up into dry washes, which made concealment easy but his progress slow. He crossed one well defined trail which led off southwest toward the border, but he decided it was wiser to keep off traveled trails and trust to luck to find some safe hiding place where he could rest.

He was weak from hunger and fatigue and his horse was leg-weary from the all-day ride into Dead Rock. Turning into one of the larger canyons, he let his horse follow the rocky bed at a slow pace while he rode along, hunched up in his saddle, trying to figure out what had happened to him and how he could have prevented the dance hall shooting.



THE thought of Rosie, the dance hall girl, filled him with disgust. She had meant nothing to him. A cheap, human vulture, her advances to him had been merely a vain attempt to make herself the center of attraction. She could have prevented the shooting, but instead it seemed to the Morgan Kid that she had done everything she could to make bloodshed inevitable. Drunk and mad with jealousy, the man he had killed had given him no course but gun play.

The Morgan Kid understood the good-natured baiting by the tipsy cowboy in the barroom. That was something which might have happened to a stranger wandering into a wide open saloon back in Kentucky. It was nothing for a man to lose his temper about. The Morgan Kid had not resented that. He knew it was because his clothes were strange and his talk different than the talk of the cattle range.

SEVERAL hours after leaving Dead Rock, he came to the head of the canyon he had let his horse follow. It ended in a small, oval-shaped meadow covered with a thick carpet of grass. Soft mud and the trickle of water indicated a spring somewhere near. High ground around him offered some concealment. At least it was a place where he could let his horse drink and graze while he rolled up in his blankets and got some badly needed sleep. It was too dark to see whether or not he was near a trail or ranch buildings, although he was too tired to care much how close he might be to danger.

Taking the saddle from his horse, he put a picket rope around its neck and staked it out where it could nuzzle in the puddles of water and graze in the thickest and greenest of the grass. There were some scraps of bread and some pieces of cold meat in his saddle pack but his stomach was too upset to try to eat. Making a pillow of his saddle, he took off his boots, reloaded his gun and laid it down by his head, rolled himself in his blankets, and, pulling his hat down over his face, slept.

A kick in the ribs woke him up. His hat fell away from his face and the glare of the morning sun blinded him for a mo-

ment as he groped around for his gun. It was gone.

When his eyes became accustomed to daylight, he found himself looking into the muzzle of a rifle held in the hands of a thickset, heavy-jowled cowboy, who appeared to be only too willing to pull the trigger upon the slightest excuse. In a circle surrounding him were seven or eight men, all mounted, although the cowboy who had wakened him was on foot.

"Get up, Kid, get your boots on," his captor ordered gruffly. "And don't try any fancy business unless you want a bullet in your ribs."

The Morgan Kid recognized some of his captors as men he had seen in the Cannon Ball Saloon on the previous night. Somewhat apart from the other men, a slender, richly dressed man sat mounted on the best horse he had seen since he had left Kentucky and in a saddle that was studded with silver and gold mountings.

THE Morgan Kid had heard of Black Diamond, and although he had never seen him before or heard him described in detail, he recognized him at once.

"I couldn't help what happened last night," he protested, instinctively speaking to Black Diamond instead of the cowboy who had him covered. "Honest, Mister, it wasn't my fault."

Black Diamond's dull, agate-colored eyes showed nothing but indifference. He answered the Morgan Kid's remark with a slight frown of annoyance but did not sepaik. Nor was there any mercy in any of the other faces around him. Realizing the hopelessness of any plea for fair play, the Morgan Kid gulped back the appeal he was about to make, and slowly commenced to put on his boots.

One of the men had his rifle; another had the gun he had laid away down by his head. There seemed to be no chance to escape. They were all mounted and armed, and even if he could get on his horse and get away, they could bring him down with a bullet before he had a chance to get out of range. The cowboy who held the gun on him seemed to read his thoughts.

"One jump and it's your last," he said

grimly. "Stand up and cross your arms behind your back."

While his arms were being tied, the Morgan Kid noticed Black Diamond admiring his horse, which was standing quietly by its picket stake watching the proceedings with pointed ears.



"Saddle it up, Bill," Black Diamond ordered, "and let the Kid ride it."

"Where are you taking me, Mister?" the Morgan Kid asked, trying to keep his voice steady.

BLACK DIAMOND looked at him for a moment with cool insolence.

"To the nearest tree that has a limb thick enough to throw a rope over it," he answered.

The Morgan Kid was lifted on his horse and, led by Black Diamond, the party started across the range. The Morgan Kid made no attempt to talk with his captors. He watched for a chance to escape but that seemed almost impossible. His arms were tied securely behind his back. His horse was led at the end of the cow rope. One of the men carried his bridle, and even if he could break loose, he had no means to guide his horse and get away.

After a ride of about an hour they entered another canyon and came to a grove of cottonwood trees beside a small stream. Here Black Diamond halted the lynching party.

"Well, Kid," he said coldly. "here's where it happens."

Obedying Black Diamond's orders, one of the men threw a cow rope over an overhanging limb. The Morgan Kid's horse was led under the limb, a noose was tied in the end of the rope and placed around the boy's neck.

"You got any objections?" Black Diamond asked.

THE Morgan Kid threw back his head and looked squarely at the leader of the lynching party.

"You can hang me if you want to," he said clearly. "I won't give you the satisfaction of breaking down and begging you for mercy. I killed that man after he had his gun out and shot at me once. I ain't sorry for what I done and I'd do it again if I had to."

Black Diamond eyed him steadily for several seconds. Then, without any change of expression, he turned to his companions.

"Leave him there for a few minutes and come over here," he ordered curtly.

The men obeyed him promptly. Dismounting and leaving their horses with dangling reins standing around the Morgan Kid's horse, they withdrew a few yards and grouped around their leader.

The Morgan Kid thought of making a dash for liberty and take a chance that he would not hang himself by doing so. The noose remained around his neck although the other end of the rope did not appear to be tied securely. He almost decided it was worth trying, but Black Diamond suddenly left the other men and came over to the Morgan Kid's side.

"What's your name?" he asked brusquely.

"Ben Morgan."

"What are you doing down here in Texas?"

"I've got some kin here—a cousin, Tod Morgan. He owns the Link Circle Ranch. He writ up and said that maybe if I'd come down here he could use me. He said to come to Dead Rock and anybody there could tell me where his ranch was. That's how I happened to be there. I didn't go there looking for no trouble. But no man can call me and my kin horse thieves and not expect to have to fight. It ain't no name to be ashamed of."

"What relation are you to Tod Morgan?" Black Diamond asked.

"He's my father's cousin," the Morgan Kid answered.

"Ever seen him?" Black Diamond demanded.

"No," the Morgan Kid admitted. "He

left Kentucky about the time I was born. But that don't make no difference between us Morgans."

BLACK DIAMOND seemed to bristle with anger.

"Are you trying to hint that if I go ahead and hang you your cousin will make trouble with me for doing it?" he said. "Why, I own more range that I haven't ever seen than was covered by the whole Link Circle Ranch. I've got a thousand men back of me to his one."

"Anyway, he'd never forget you hung me," the Morgan Kid declared stubbornly.

"I reckon he wouldn't," Black Diamond sneered. "He'd probably catch the first horse he saw and get out of this state as quick as he could. If you don't think so, what do you say if I send some men over and get him and I'll hang the both of you here together on the same limb?"

"There's no cause to harm him for what I done," the Morgan Kid said soberly. "I ain't begging you for mercy."

"No, but you'd like to live."

The Morgan Kid could not keep his lips from trembling.

"I ain't done nothing to be hung for," he muttered. "All I ask is a fair chance."

"These are friends of the man you killed," Black Diamond reminded him. "They never saw you before and you don't mean anything to them. You killed their friend and they're out to even up the score by hanging you. It's a life for a life down here. That's the only law we know."

"I didn't hanker for no killing," the Morgan Kid said passionately. "I come down here from Kentucky because I was downright tired of shooting at men and being shot at on all occasions jist because our family's been fighting with another family for years on. There weren't any sense in it as far as I could see, and I was sick and tired of it. I thought I could



come down here and live without that sheddin' of blood."

"You're pretty fast with that old cannon of yours," Black Diamond said with just a trace of admiration in his voice. "I was up there in the balcony watching you."

"I growed up knowin' I had to learn how to handle a gun if I wanted to keep from gettin' killed," the Morgan Kid explained. "But I'm downright sick of havin' to carry one."

"Know who it was you killed last night?" Black Diamond demanded.

"I never set eyes on him before."

"It was Ike Kane," Black Diamond commented.

"I hope he didn't leave no family," the Morgan Kid said earnestly.

"He didn't," Black Diamond declared, "but he left a lot of healthy friends, me being one of them and these men being others. How do you think you can square yourself with us for killing an old friend?"

"I don't reckon I can," the Morgan Kid answered.

"And what if you could?" Black Diamond asked softly.

"How?"

BLACK DIAMOND looked at his companions and then off across the range. He seemed certain of what he wanted to say but not just decided on how he wanted to say it.

"A life for a life is our motto down here," he finally commented. "Ike Kane is dead. Somebody else has got to die to pay for his killing. It's either going to be you at the end of a rope or some one else."

"There ain't likely to be nobody that'd want to die in my place if I would let them," the Morgan Kid said hopelessly.

"Do you know why Ike Kane was in the Cannon Ball Saloon last night?" Black Diamond asked.

"I reckon he came to get drunk like he was when he came shootin' at me," the Morgan Kid answered.

"He came there to kill a man," Black Diamond declared. "You shot him before he had a chance to carry out his intentions. He was all lickered up so he wouldn't lose his nerve when he got his chance."

"Well, whoever it was he was intending

to kill I don't reckon that man would be anxious to put himself in my place," the Morgan Kid protested, "even if I did happen to save his life accidentally."

Black Diamond smiled slightly.

"I reckon not," he admitted, "Anyway, that wasn't what I had in mind."

"Then what was?" the Morgan Kid asked.

Black Diamond jerked his thumb toward his companions who were watching them just out of ear shot.

"Ike intended to kill a man by the name of Scott," he said slowly. "I reckon we all wouldn't have been surprised or upset much if Ike had collected a couple of bullets or so while he was killing this man Scott."

He paused.

"I don't get what you're driving at."

"Just this," Black Diamond said sharply.

"If you want to go out and take your chances on killing Scott, I reckon me and my friends can forget that you killed Ike Kane."

"I might as well be hung for killing one man as for killing another," the Morgan Kid objected dully. "Scott's friends would hang me for willing him, or else the law would."

"I'm the only law there is in this part of Texas," Black Diamond snapped. "And Scott hasn't any friends that I know of."

"But I never saw him nor heard of him that I know of," the Morgan Kid protested. "Why should I promise to kill a man I never saw?"

"To save your own neck," Black Diamond answered. "You asked for a chance and I'm giving you one. If you want to die, just say so and we'll get this affair over with in a hurry."

"Then I reckon you might as well go ahead," the Morgan Kid said miserably.

"You're a fool!" Black Diamond exclaimed. "You've killed one man. What does one more matter? Why, I've got a hundred men who would jump at the chance to make a friend of me by killing Scott. He'll die whether you kill him or some one else does. You idiot, can't you see? It's the only way I can keep these men from hanging you. I'm doing this for the sake of Tod Morgan, your cousin. I know him and like him. And let me tell you some-

thing else. This man Scott is the worst enemy Tod Morgan has in the world."

THERE was a ring of sincerity in Black Diamond's statement. Although the Morgan Kid could not understand why the offer had been made, he could not help but believe that Black Diamond was telling the truth. Whatever the reasons were that had prompted the offer, Black Diamond was not lying.

"If I could only see my cousin Tod first," the Morgan Kid proposed.

"There's reasons why you can't," Black Diamond retorted. "I know where Scott is hiding, and if your cousin Tod Morgan knew where Scott could be found he'd go out and kill him himself. He wouldn't let you do it. And if he did it you wouldn't be earning your right to live. That's just one reason. There's others which I can't go into. You can either take it or leave it."

"Haven't I any time to think it over?" the Morgan Kid asked.

"I'll make this proposition," Black Diamond conceded. "If you'll promise me that you'll either kill Scott within twenty-four hours or else you'll come back to the Cannon Ball Saloon and give yourself up to me to be hung, I'll turn you loose right now and give you your guns and tell you where you can find Scott."

"That's fair enough," the Morgan Kid said eagerly.

"But understand, under no circumstances must you go near your cousin, Tod Morgan, or try to see him," Black Diamond warned. "That's part of your promise."

The Morgan Kid drew a deep breath.

"All right," he promised. "If you turn me loose and give me my guns and tell me where I can find this man Scott I give you my word I'll either kill him within twenty-four hours or will come to the Cannon Ball Saloon and surrender to you."

Black Diamond slapped him on the leg and smiled.

"That's the way to talk, Kid," he said admiringly. "Me and you are going to get along fine together. I knew you would and that's why I made you the offer. It was the only way I could think of to satisfy my men and save your neck. That's a fine horse you're ridin'."

"I raised it from a colt myself," the Morgan Kid said proudly. "Us Morgans have always bred fine horses."

"Well, when you get through with Scott come on down and see me anyway," Black Diamond invited. "I'll take you out to Tod's place and if he can't use you I think I can. Some day we'll have to try these horses of ours out in a little friendly race. Yours is the first horse I've seen in Texas that would have a chance against mine."

"I reckon it would be a race at that," the Morgan Kid admitted, although he was secretly of the opinion that his horse would best Black Diamond's in anything but short sprint and possibly in that, too.

BLACK DIAMOND went over to his companions and said a few words to them in a low tone which the Morgan Kid could not hear.

Their threatening demeanor changed so quickly that the Morgan Kid was puzzled. They acted as though their fierceness had only been a part which they had been instructed to play and that they were glad it was all over.

The man who had bound his arms now freed them. Another one flicked the rope loose from around his neck.

"Had anything to eat, Kid?" one of them asked solicitously.



The Morgan Kid shook his head.

"But my appetite ain't very hearty," he explained.

They all laughed and even Black Diamond joined in the merriment. The man who had asked about his eating brought a small package from his saddle roll and offered it to the Kid.

"It's only some boiled beef and bread," he apologized, "but in case you get hungry before you get around to more solid food it might come in handy."

"I'm sure much obliged," the Morgan Kid said gratefully. "Now that you mention it, I am beginning to feel a little hollow."

"You men start on back," Black Diamond ordered abruptly. "I'll catch up with you in a few minutes. I want to give the Kid here some directions."

"Well, good luck, Kid," one of them said. The others waved and headed back toward Dead Rock, obeying Black Diamond's orders unquestioningly.

BLACK DIAMOND rolled a cigarette and waited until they were almost out of sight before he turned to the Morgan Kid.

"They're all good-hearted," he declared; "I told them you'd promise to kill Scott if they'd forget about your shooting match with Ike, and at my suggestion they all agreed that was the square thing to do. You rub them the right way and they'll be your friends for life."

"I feel a lot different toward them than I did," the Morgan Kid said. "I surely thought I was a goner when that rope was put around my neck."

"You kill Scott and you're out of danger," Black Diamond said grimly. "But don't forget that promise to be back within twenty-four hours if you don't, and if you come back without killing him you're a fool if you think the men that just left here won't hang you."

"How do you know that I would come back?" the Morgan Kid asked.

"Because I know a man when I see one and because the word of a Morgan has always been good in Texas," Black Diamond declared. "Isn't your word good?"

The Morgan Kid nodded.

"Yes," he said quietly, "if I don't kill him I'll come back."

"You won't have any trouble finding his place," Black Diamond stated. "See that range off to the west?"

He pointed to a low range of hills a few miles to the westward.

"Follow this canyon to where it comes to the foothills," he directed. "Then ride south until you hit a trail which goes up over the ridge. When you hit the backbone of the ridge you'll find an old trail which goes north. Follow it until you come to a cup-shaped meadow surrounded by a fringe of scrub timber. At the left end of the meadow there's a spring and a cabin. Scott

is staying there in the cabin. He'll be there alone. There is no chance of making any mistake. You can do the shooting any way you want to, but I advise you to take your rifle, and when you get a bead on him, keep shooting until you know he's dead. Watch out if he's wearing a gun, for he's dangerous. You may think you know how to handle a six-shot, but compared to him you're a two-year-old baby with a cap pistol."

"I never killed a man in cold blood yet," the Morgan Kid remarked gravely.

"Well, if you figure on giving Scott an even draw, you never will," Black Diamond warned him grimly. "And remember he's your cousin, Tod Morgan's worst enemy. Your cousin will be the first man to admit that after you kill him."

"What does this Scott look like?" the Morgan Kid asked.

"He's a human gun hawk," Black Diamond replied, "and he's not afraid of the devil himself. He's a bad egg, and if you give him a chance he'll kill you before you make a move."

"If I don't come back you'll know he has," the Morgan Kid said simply, "I give you my word."

"Well, good luck and take care of yourself."

Black Diamond put the spurs into the flanks of his horse and galloped away after his companions.

THE freedom which he had found so welcome a few moments before became less and less desirable as Black Diamond galloped away out of sight. The Morgan Kid felt suddenly tired and discouraged. Either he had to kill a man with whom he had no quarrel or face a rope again. With twenty-four hours' start, he might ride north and escape. But he had given his word, and although the Kid could

not help the thought entering into his mind, he put it resolutely aside.

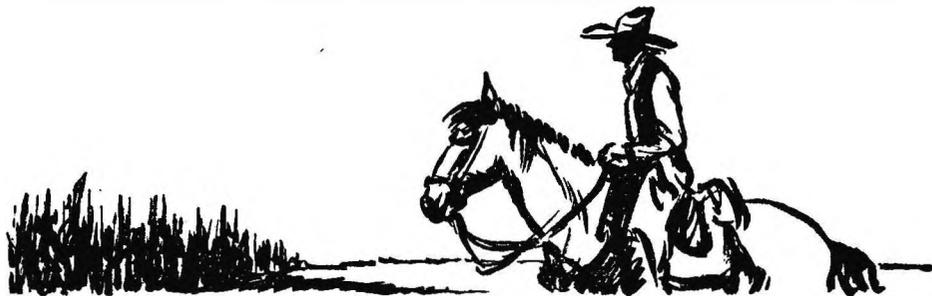
He believed Black Diamond that Scott was an enemy of his cousin Tod Morgan, but he could not understand why he should not be allowed to see his cousin before setting out to kill Scott. Nor could he understand the attitude of Black Diamond's companions. They did not act like men who were out to avenge the death of a friend and companion. They acted more like men who had been told to play a bluff, and who had played it exactly as they were told to do. But why Black Diamond should want to bluff him into killing Scott was more than the Morgan Kid could comprehend.

He did not believe that Black Diamond was sincere when he claimed a desire to be his friend and save his life. With so many friends and so much power, Black Diamond had no need for his friendship, the Morgan Kid reasoned, and any move the Boss of Dead Rock made was apt to be for his own good and for selfish motives.

BEFORE starting westward toward the mountains, the Morgan Kid made up his mind that he was not going to kill Scott from ambush. He resolved to meet Scott face to face and give him a fair chance even if he lost his own life by doing it. If it was necessary, he would rather die a quick death by a bullet from Scott's gun than live with the knowledge of a cowardly crime to torment his conscience.

When this decision was made he turned his horse up the canyon and started over the trail Black Diamond had described to him.

He had no trouble following it. That afternoon came to the little meadow upon the mountain top. From the high ground where he stopped his horse he could look over the scrub timber down into the flat.



The grass covered meadow itself was egg-shaped. It was a quarter of a mile wide at its widest point and about half a mile long.

From the trail he could see no signs of a cabin, but the grass at the narrow western point seemed a greener tint than anywhere else, indicating a spring nearby. The cabin, he concluded, must be hidden among the trees.

There were two ways to approach the spot where Black Diamond had said the cabin was located. One was to ride openly across the meadow. The other was to keep among the trees and approach under cover. Any one trying to sneak up to the house would certainly be in danger if discovered. If Scott was expecting trouble he would be looking for it among the trees. The Morgan Kid decided to ride openly through the meadow and to avoid a rifle bullet by seemingly inviting one.

THE cabin was where Black Diamond said it would be. It was built of logs, with a slant roof which projected back over a lean-to or stable. The cabin door was open. Acting as though a bullet was the last thing in the world which he expected, the Morgan Kid rode up to the doorstep and dismounted. As he stepped up to the open door, a man came around the corner of the cabin carrying a rifle.

The Morgan Kid turned, and for a few moments he and the man with the rifle stared at each other with mutual astonishment. It was the lean, sun-tanned man who had told him how to get out of the Cannon Ball Saloon and who had blocked the stairs while he had made his escape. He was the first to speak.

"Howdy, Kid," he grinned amiably. "I don't know how you ever came to find this cabin, but it's sure the right place. Make yourself right at home."

"I—I—I surely wasn't expecting to see you here," the Morgan Kid said truthfully.

"I go by the name of Scott around here." The sunburned man leaned his rifle against the cabin wall and waved his hand toward the door. "Just before I caught a glimpse of you coming across the meadow, I was all prepared to eat a little snack. Come in and join me first and we can talk afterward.

You missed a little excitement by leaving the Cannon Ball so suddenly last night, but I reckon you must have had some getting away from Black Diamond. I heard he headed the pursuit after you himself, and it's sure a compliment to a man to have that happen."

The Morgan Kid wavered an instant before Scott's friendly gaze. Then he unbuckled his gun belt and tossed his gun down by Scott's rifle.

"I reckon I am a little hungry," he admitted, "and if you don't mind me settin' in with you I'll be glad to."

THE cabin was built of logs chinked with mud. A split log bunk filled with pine needles was attached to one wall. An iron kettle hung over a smouldering fire in the stone fireplace at the other end of the room. A makeshift table, made of boards taken off packing cases nailed on a framework of sawed saplings stood in front of the fireplace. The chairs were upended logs sawed to convenient lengths and stripped of bark.

"It's not much for looks but I don't pay any rent," Scott said humorously. "Drag one of these chairs over and I'll dish up the food."

He put tin cups and plates on the table and gave the Morgan Kid a big helping of stewed beef and potatoes and a cup of black coffee.

"When you left last night there was considerable excitement for a while," he remarked. "Black Diamond ordered his men to close all the doors. I expected some of them to try and rush the stairs to the balcony, but either Black Diamond didn't know you'd gone out or else he was playing some other kind of a game, for no one tried to get by me."

"I didn't lose any time getting away," the Morgan Kid declared.

"I'm surprised you were able to shake clear of them," Scott said. "Black Diamond sent a half dozen of his men out to trail you and he's got some human bloodhounds on his payroll."

"I didn't," the Morgan Kid explained; "I was woke up this morning by having a gun poked in my ribs and there was Black Diamond and some of his men sitting right

on top of me on their horses."

"Where are they now?" Scott asked quickly.

"They've gone back to Dead Rock," the Morgan Kid answered.

Scott's face became grave. He ate for a few moments in silence, staring thoughtfully at his visitor.

"Then your being here is not quite an accident," he said slowly.

"No," the Morgan Kid admitted, "Black Diamond told me where your cabin was and sent me here."

"Why?"

"He give me my choice of being hung or earning my freedom by killing you," the Morgan Kid said frankly. "I promised him I'd either kill you or go back to Dead Rock inside of twenty-four hours and surrender myself to him."

"Why did he want to hang you?" Scott asked.

"For killing Ike Kane," the Morgan Kid explained. "He said his rule was a life for a life and either mine or yours had to pay for the killing of Ike Kane."

The Morgan Kid told everything that had happened to him after he left the Cannon Ball Saloon until the time Scott had walked around the cabin and discovered him. He repeated, as well as he was able, everything that Black Diamond had said, including the statement that Scott was Tod Morgan's worst enemy. Scott listened without interruption until the Morgan Kid had finished. He appeared to be thoughtful but not surprised or alarmed.

"Did you ever see Tod Morgan?" he asked.

"I guess I did, but I was too young to remember it," the Morgan Kid explained. "He left Kentucky when I was just a little tyke."

"Then how do you happen to be out here?" Scott asked curiously. "Did he send for you, or what?"

"He writ my pap a letter."

"How long ago was that?" Scott demanded.

"I guess it was about six months ago," the Morgan Kid explained.

"You sure got yourself in a fine mess out here," Scott declared. "I heard your name last night but I didn't connect you with Tod Morgan, but I reckon Black Diamond did, and that explains a lot of things. Maybe he knew you were coming and was expecting you."

"How would he know that?" the Morgan Kid protested.

"Diamond keeps himself pretty well posted," Scott replied, "and Tod Morgan might have told him. But the question right now is, what are we going to do about you?"

"I reckon I can go back."

"And get yourself hung?" Scott said.

THE Morgan Kid nodded without answering.

"Why didn't you take a shot at me?" Scott inquired. "Or did you figure Black Diamond was bluffing?"

"No, he wasn't bluffing any," the Morgan Kid answered, "but it ain't likely that I would try to kill the only man that befriended me since I left Kentucky."

Scott grinned and relaxed.

"You're a damned fool plumb after my own heart," he declared. "Being frank and honest is the best way to make a friend that I know of. From the way you handled that old cannon of yours last night I'm a lot relieved that you're not going to try potting me."

"If I'd a knowed who you were, I'd a never have started up here in the first place," the Morgan Kid said honestly. "Black Diamond didn't describe you none and the name Scott didn't mean nothing to me."

"Here's something that's been puzzling me some and it might interest you, too," Scott commented. "According to what I heard last night, Black Diamond was in a booth waiting to get a shot at Ike Kane himself. The girl that had her arms around you and was out there making you dance is a favorite of Diamond's, and Ike Kane has been buzzing around her too long. You simply saved Black Diamond the trouble of shooting Kane."

"But he said Ike Kane was one of his



men," the Morgan Kid objected.

"Ike used to be Tod Morgan's foreman," Scott declared. "Diamond and Tod are pretty thick, as I said. Ike boasted he was going to shoot Tod, and then clean up Black Diamond's joint. Diamond had Ike all prepared for the undertaker when you arrived."

"It looks like I'm sure pitched head first into something I don't understand," the Morgan Kid acknowledged. "But I'm positive Black Diamond wasn't bluffing none about hangin' me if I didn't kill you."

"Diamond would like to see me killed all right," Scott admitted. "I'm surprised that he knows about this cabin, and that, knowing about it, he hasn't sent some of his hired gunmen up here before."

"He said if I didn't do it some one else would."

"Maybe so," Scott said lightly, without any apparent worry. "I've been mixed up in so much cussedness that I reckon my passing wouldn't be a great loss to the world."

"I think Black Diamond is a little afraid of you," the Morgan Kid volunteered.

"Then he shows good judgment."

SCOTT was smiling but this statement was not made jokingly. The Morgan Kid remembered Black Diamond's description of Scott as a gun hawk who was not afraid of anything.

"Let me give you some advice, Kid," Scott said suddenly.

"I need some," the Morgan Kid confessed.

"Then get out of this country quick," Scott advised. "There's going to be big trouble, and if you stay you're likely to entertain a bullet when you least expect it."

"I give Diamond my word that I'd come back, and I'll go," the Morgan Kid declared dully. "I ain't never broke my word yet."

"But his making you promise that was just a trick," Scott argued impatiently. "I tell you that Diamond was all set to kill Kane himself. That talk of hanging you to avenge Ike Kane's death was all bunk. I think I'm beginning to understand why it was done, but you can take my word for it that it was a trick."

"I promised," the Morgan Kid insisted.

"It's nothing to me whether you get yourself killed or not," Scott said, "but you're playing right into Diamond's hands. It's a trap to get you and Tod Morgan in up to your ears, and if you've got any sense you'll get out while you can."

"I'd like to, but I can't," the Morgan Kid declared earnestly. "If I hadn't given my word it would be different, but I have and I'm going to live up to it."

SCOTT got up from his low stool and strode impatiently about the room. His genial expression was changed to a scowl, and as he walked about he snapped his fingers angrily. His demeanor was so strange that the Morgan Kid watched him in silence and amazement.

"How old are you, Kid?" Scott asked shortly.

"Coming on eighteen next month."

"Ever hear of Ruth Morgan?" Scott demanded.

The Morgan Kid shook his head.

"Is she some kin of Cousin Tod's?" he asked. "He wasn't married when he left Kentucky and he didn't say anything in his letters about ever getting married since then."



"Well, he did," Scott snapped. His expression was so savage that the Morgan Kid did not dare ask any questions about this Ruth Morgan.

From Scott's attitude he surmised that she was either Tod Morgan's wife or daughter.

"I guess if you don't mind, I'll be starting back," he offered, when Scott's savage mood seemed to increase rather than grow less.

"I've a good mind to put a rope on you and keep you here until Diamond comes after you," Scott growled. "If I thought he'd come, I would."

"That wouldn't do either of us much good," the Morgan Kid said. "Anyway, there's no cause for you to get in trouble for me."

"He probably wouldn't come," Scott said glumly.

"I reckon he'd either think I killed you or else had broke my word and run," the Morgan Kid admitted.

SCOTT stopped walking around the room and whirled around.

"That's the answer," he declared. "I've been trying to figure out what Diamond wanted. You've given me the answer. He tried to throw a scare into you by arranging a fake lynching party. He figured he could scare you so bad that you'd either come up here and get your head shot off or else you'd hit the first trail that headed north and never show your face in Texas again. Listen, Kid. He knows me too well to expect I would let you kill me. Of course there is a possibility that you would get the drop on me and do just that. If you did, so much the better for Diamond. If I killed you, it would put you out of his way. Or if you broke your word and run, the same thing happens. You happened into Dead Rock at the wrong minute. Diamond's got enough on his mind without bothering about you. That's the trick. I knew he was figuring on something but I couldn't make out what it was."

"Well, if I go back, he can still put me out of the way," the Morgan Kid said. "If what you say it right."

Scott chuckled softly.

"Not so easy as he first imagined," he declared, and his good humor had returned. "We'll give him the surprise of his life."

"How?"

"By walking in on him and inviting him to commence shooting," Scott proposed. "I reckon that's the last thing in the world that Black Diamond expects."

"But there ain't no cause for you——" the Morgan Kid protested.

"Say, Kid," Scott declared, "you butted into my game and you've got to play the game the way I say from now on. I'm not keen about helping one of Tod Morgan's kin, and maybe the next time we see each other it will be with guns out trying to get in the first shot. Tod Morgan's got good reason to hate me, and maybe you'll have too before this thing's over. But right now we're playing together against Diamond.

Stuff your belly full of food and get ready to ride. We're starting into Dead Rock immediately."

"Well, if you insist on coming along ——" the Morgan Kid protested, "I'll sure be much obliged for your company. But it don't seem reasonable to me."

"When you get good and acquainted with me you'll find out that I specialize on doin' unreasonable and unexpected things," Scott chuckled. "The thing I'm trying to do now is figure out how we can get into the Cannon Ball Saloon without Diamond knowin' that we're comin' in together."

IT HAD been dark for several hours when the Morgan Kid and Scott rode into Dead Rock.

"I always believe in doing the unexpected," Scott explained. "If Diamond has any lookout watching, he'll have them put where we'd be apt to sneak in."

So instead of sneaking into town, they rode along the edge of Big River and climbed their horses out of the river canyon just back of Diamond's house. From there they rode directly to the Cannon Ball Saloon.

The hitchrack in front of the Cannon Ball was crowded with cow ponies. A blare of music came from the dance hall. Scott turned off the main trail just before he reached the saloon and motioned for the Morgan Kid to follow him. They rode up alongside the dance hall and stopped under the window through which the Morgan Kid had escaped.

The window was shut. Although Scott stood up in his stirrups he could not reach the window ledge.

"Diamond hangs out in a balcony booth up at this end," he explained, "we wouldn't have a chance going in there through the front door. Diamond's gun slingers would plug up the exit as soon as we got in, and I've an idea that you're about the only person that will ever escape by this window again. It's probably nailed down. I figured that maybe it would be open and we could get inside this way and take Diamond by surprise."

"Ain't there some kind of a back door?" the Morgan Kid asked.

"There's a couple," Scott answered. "We

could get in by them all right, but to get up into the balcony booth where Diamond is we'd have to cross right across the dance floor under his eyes. I reckon we'll have to try something else."

"I could go in alone," the Morgan Kid offered.

Scott shook his head impatiently.

"I'm runnin' this show," he reminded him.

"I'll do anything you want," the Morgan Kid promised hastily. "Only I was figuring if I drew their attention you might be able to sneak in."

"All right, Kid; keep your shirt on," Scott answered, "we'll just keep on doing the unexpected. If we can't get in to Black Diamond, why, the next best thing is to make Black Diamond come to us."

THE Morgan Kid could not see how such a thing could be managed so he wisely kept still.

"Keep in the shadows," Scott ordered, "and if we pass anybody, act a little bit drunk. Make them figure that we're leaving early with a full load."

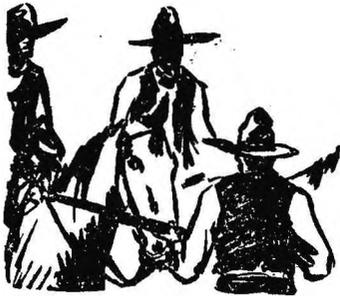
He turned his horse back toward Black Diamond's house and pulled his hat down over his eyes. The Morgan Kid rode along at his side.

"You've got your gun ready to use if it has to be?" Scott muttered.

"Yes," the Morgan Kid answered.

"Well, keep it handy," Scott advised him, "but don't start any gun play until I give the word."

"Where are we going?" the Morgan Kid asked, as they continued to ride directly toward Black Diamond's house.



"We're going right into that courtyard and bluff any one that stops us into thinking that Diamond sent us down here to wait for him," Scott said tersely. "If they won't

bluff, I'll try to shut them up with my gun barrel. You keep back and let me do the talking."

As they rode through the courtyard gate, a swarthy-faced half breed stepped out from the shadows and stood directly in front of their horses. He carried a cocked rifle under his arm.

"What you want here?" he demanded insolently.

"Who the hell wants to know?" Scott retorted. "Who are you to stop a couple of Diamond's friends?"

The guard hesitated and peered at them as though trying to recognize their faces.

"You no come here before," he accused finally, but with a touch of respect in his voice.

"And we wouldn't be here now if Diamond hadn't sent us," Scott declared.

"He no say nothing to me," the guard objected.

"Why the hell should he?" Scott asked. "Does he ask your advice whenever he has visitors here, or does he tell you where he puts his money?"

"What you want?" the guard asked uneasily, bluffed by Scott's cocksure confidence.

"Diamond said you'd show us where to put our horses and show us into the house where we could wait until he got a chance to leave the Cannon Ball and come down here and palaver with us," Scott informed the guard. "I reckon if you want to save your ears, you'd better begin doing just that and not stand there jawing. You get me much madder and I'll bore you for new earrings or else I'll tell Diamond and I know damn sure he will."

"I only do what he tell me to do," the guard declared sullenly. "Why didn't you say so first he sent you?"

HE LED the way around the main ranch house to a long, low open stable which was divided into stalls by bars dropped down from the manger.

"You leave your horses here," he explained.

Scott dismounted promptly and motioned for the Morgan Kid to do the same.

"Diamond got any liquor in the house?" Scott asked anxiously of the guard. "I rode

all the way from the border and I'm thirsty."

"Mebbe so," the guard answered.

"Is there any one in there that knows for sure?" Scott demanded angrily.

"Everybody gone to bed," the guard replied.

"Well, let 'em alone," Scott exclaimed. "I reckon we can hold out without a drink if we have to, until Diamond gets here."

The front door of the ranch-house was unlocked. The guard pushed it open and stepped aside to let them enter. He seemed unwilling to come into the house himself, although he did not object to their doing so.

"How about that liquor now?" Scott asked again.

THE door opened into a large living room furnished with stuffed leather chairs and a polished mahogany poker table. Oil paintings hung on the wall. Heavy velvet curtains screened the two windows in the room. Several decanters of liquor stood on a buffet which was pushed against one of the inside walls.

"Come, have a drink on us," Scott invited the guard, who had followed them into the room and was standing by the open door.

"No," the guard refused, but he continued to stand there and eyed the filled decanters thirstily.

"Oh, come on," Scott urged him impatiently. "What's the matter? Won't Diamond let you take a drink?"

"He no like," the guard admitted, his eyes gleaming with desire.

"Well, we won't tell him you drank with us," Scott promised, and went across to the buffet where he set out three glasses and filled them with the red liquor.

"Come on; I'm thirsty."

The guard closed the door and came quickly across the room. Head back, he gulped the liquor down noisily.

"Better have another," Scott urged him. As the guard raised a second glass to his lips, he was half turned away from Scott and the Morgan Kid. This opening was evidently what Scott was waiting for. Using one of his six guns as a club, he struck the half breed guard just above and behind the right ear. The guard slipped forward on

his face without an outcry.

"Couldn't take any chances with him," Scott explained his unnecessarily savage blow. "I know his breed. If he got out of here he would have gone over and waked some one up and sent them to tell Diamond we were here. I figure from the way he acts he's a new man. He certainly never was in here before."

"What will we do with him?" the Morgan Kid asked. "Is he dead?"

"No, he'll wake up quick enough," Scott declared. "Get one of those curtain ropes and we'll tie him up."

SCOTT removed the guard's jacket and serape and his heavy cartridge belt before they tied his hands and feet.

"Now, work fast, Kid," he directed when these were removed. "Get his hands and feet tied and then gag him."

They did this by stuffing a heavy napkin in the guard's mouth. Then they rolled him into an adjoining room and closed the doors.

"It's about time for Diamond to be coming back," Scott said hurriedly. "How's your nerve, Kid?"

"It's all right," the Morgan Kid declared, although his teeth were chattering.

"Are you afraid to draw a gun on Diamond?" Scott asked.

"Not if need be," the Kid assured him. "I ain't hankerin' for no more shootin' than I have to, but I can still shoot if I'm pushed to it."

"Well, from now on I'm going mostly by guess work,"



Scott said, "but here's how I figure the land lays. When Diamond comes in from the Cannon Ball there's got to be some one at the gate to meet him. He'll be expect-

ing this half breed guard. If some one doesn't show up, Diamond will get suspicious and never come inside the house. He's lived along the border too long to take chances."

"Is that what you took his things off

for?" the Morgan Kid asked.

"Right," Scott answered, "I thought first I'd let you put this outfit on and let me wait here for Diamond. But I reckon we'd better reverse things. I don't suppose you know any Mexican, do you?"

The Morgan Kid shook his head.

"I ain't even ever heard any," he confessed.

"Well, Diamond might say something to this fellow in Spanish and expect an answer," Scott explained.

"I can try if you say so," the Morgan Kid offered.

"No," Scott said decidedly, "I don't think Diamond will say anything to the guard. He'll probably get off his horse and throw the reins to the guard and walk into the house. If that is what happens it will be simple. You simply sit here at this table with your gun out, and when Diamond walks into the room, cover him and keep him covered until I get in."

"I can do that all right," the Morgan Kid promised.

"But here's something else that may happen," Scott warned. "Diamond may bring some of his companions with him. You be on the lookout and if he comes in with one or two more men, better get into that room where we threw the guard and wait there until you hear something start to happen."

"What do you mean—happen?" the Morgan Kid asked anxiously.

"Well, I'll try to get in and get them covered and call for you," Scott explained.

"What if they recognize you at the gate?" the Morgan Kid demanded.

"In that case, there's liable to be some shooting done," Scott said drily, "and if that happens, you can use your own judgment. I'd advise you to get out through the back of the house and get onto your horse and get away from here as fast as you can. If there's more than four or five shots you can rest assured that you'll never have to report to Black Diamond again. The first gunpowder I'll burn will be for his benefit and I won't miss him more than twice."

THE Morgan Kid did not commit himself to any course of action, if shooting should start at the courtyard gate. Secretly

he resolved to stand by Scott through whatever happened. But there was nothing to be gained by telling Scott that and getting into an argument about it.

"You've got things all straight now?" Scott demanded.

"I think so," the Morgan Kid asserted; "I'll do just what you told me to do."

Scott took off his hat and vest and put on the jacket and serape and hat that had been taken from the half breed guard. He was so many pounds lighter than the guard that the Morgan Kid could not see how the deception would work.

"Never mind, Kid," Scott chuckled. "It's dark out there and as long as I keep my head down and shuffle around like this half breed did, Diamond won't likely notice those few pounds of shrinkage. You'd be surprised how careless a careful man like that can get occasionally. Taking things for granted is the best thing people do."

He wrapped the serape around his shoulders so that his chin and the lower part of his face could hardly be seen. Then he lowered his head and shuffled out of the room as the half breed guard had entered it.

THE Morgan Kid sat down at the poker table facing the door and examined his gun to see that it was loaded and ready for action. The room was lighted by a heavy oil lamp swinging down from the center of the ceiling. It threw strong light down on the Morgan Kid, but it also lighted the door. The Kid laid his gun on the table and leaned back in the chair to wait. He was surprised to discover that he was not nervous, not even when he heard the galloping hoofbeats of a horse approach the house and heard a voice which he recognized as Black Diamond's at the courtyard gate giving orders to Scott masquerading there as the guard.

The Morgan Kid cocked his pistol and pointed it at the door. After a short interval of silence he heard the grate of boots cross the sandy yard and up the front porch steps.

Black Diamond was not alone. When he stepped up to the door he made some remark and was answered by a companion. Fortunately for the Morgan Kid, Diamond was still talking to his companion as he

entered the room and was half turned away from the poker table where the Morgan Kid sat waiting.

"Put up your hands, both of you!" the Morgan Kid ordered.

Diamond's companion, a big, slovenly, dark-faced puncher, caught sight of the Morgan Kid over Diamond's shoulder, and, after a moment's hesitation, slowly raised his hands shoulder high. Black Diamond's hands were on his guns as he turned and faced the poker table, but he made no move to draw them.

For a few seconds he stared at the Morgan Kid and then he laughed.

"God, Kid, that muzzle looks big."



"Put up your hands, I said," the Morgan Kid repeated. His voice had unconsciously risen to a shrill hysterical pitch—"I ain't scared of the both of ye."

Black Diamond shrugged his shoulders and slowly elevated his hands about breast high. His puzzled expression changed to one of swift understanding and seriousness. Without asking the Morgan Kid's permission, he stepped over and closed the door.

"Kid," he said earnestly, "I get the game now. Is that Scott out there at the gate?"

He read the truth in the Morgan Kid's eyes and did not wait for him to answer.

"Listen," he said hurriedly, "I'll forget that hanging threat and give you five hundred dollars cash and a job at two hundred dollars a month with me if you'll put that gun down and let me handle Scott when he comes in here."

The Morgan Kid's gun did not waver. The gambler's offer merely caused the tremble to leave his knees and help clear his brain.

"I ain't askin' you for no favors," he said. "I reckon I know my friends."

"You fool!" Diamond exclaimed. "Scott will ruin your cousin Tod Morgan if you let him."

"I'll chance it," the Morgan Kid declared.

DIAMOND glanced at his companion and back again to the gun which the Morgan Kid held across the table. Then he shrugged his shoulders with a gesture of resignation.

"No use, Pete," he advised; "I've seen him handle that gun before. He's just scared enough to be deadly. We'll have to take our chances with Scott. I thought there was something funny about that guard, but the fools are always getting drunk and I didn't pay much attention."

"Turn your faces to the wall and with your left hands unbuckle your belts," the Morgan Kid ordered. He got up from the table and went over to where they were standing, so close that he could have leaned over and touched them with his gun. They obeyed him slowly, but without any offer of resistance. He let their guns and belts drop to the floor.

"Now get over there against the other wall," he directed, "and stand there facing the wall with your hands up."

"But you've got our guns," Diamond protested.

"I reckon you're carryin' one under your arm," the Morgan Kid commented. "I ain't takin' any chances on your usin' it nor I ain't goin' to be takin' any chances of takin' it away from you."

At this moment Scott came hurriedly into the front door and rewarded the Morgan Kid with a grin of admiration.

"I was afraid you might have trouble with the two of them," he explained. "But there wasn't any way of warnin' you."

"I think he's wearin' a gun under his arm," the Morgan Kid pointed at Diamond.

"Then we'll take it away from him," Scott declared.

Diamond was wearing a shoulder gun, but he surrendered it without any argument and with a show of careless indifference.

"I reckon we surprised you some," Scott chuckled. "Me and you have been dealing with worthless men so long it's a plumb miracle to run into a man whose word means something."

DIAMOND nodded.

"Have a drink," he invited. "You've won the first pot. What comes next?"

"Well, we'll have to decide that," Scott said. "I advised the Kid to forget his promise and get out like you wanted him to, but he was hell bent on coming back and reporting that he didn't care to carry out your shooting instructions. He figured he was running into certain death by doing it and I sort of agreed with him, so I decided that the best thing to be done under the circumstances was to come down here with him."

"How much does he know?" Black Diamond asked curtly.

He did not appear to relish the situation, but neither did he seem to be afraid of Scott or fearful of his safety. He was annoyed but not alarmed.

"Not a thing," Scott answered slowly, "and if you tell him anything it's apt to be your last peep."

"I've already passed up several chances and there's not much likelihood that I'll change my mind," Diamond retorted. "He's free to get out of here if he wants to."

"How about it, Kid?" Scott asked. "Diamond's plumb forgiven you for shooting Ike and is willing to let you ride away free. It will save you a lot of trouble."

"I come down here to help my cousin Tod, and I reckon I'll stay," the Morgan Kid declared. "I don't know what you all are talking about but I reckon I can learn."

"It looks like you've got yourself another enemy," Diamond said sarcastically to Scott. "I was trying to do you a favor by getting him out."

"Well, you never can tell," Scott drawled. "If he gets on the other side of the fence, at least I'll know there's one white man in the other camp that won't shoot me in the dark behind my back."

"All right," Diamond said impatiently. "What's the next move? I'm tired of this horse play."

"We're all going out to Tod Morgan's," Scott stated. "The Kid and I could do without your company but I reckon we'll be a little safer if you and your pal come along with us. And monkeyshines, and your friends will find your carcass out on the range tomorrow morning. Does that sound agreeable to you?"

"You've got your nerve," Diamond declared, "but I've got just as much. I'm ready

to start whenever you are."

"Then we're right now ready to go," Scott said. "Come on, let's get started."

THEY rode out of the courtyard without attracting any attention. For several hours they rode southeast following Big River. A cold wind came up as dawn approached. It blew up from the river bed



and chilled the Morgan Kid until his arms and hands were so numb that he could not have used the gun had it been necessary. However, Black Diamond and his companions seemed willing enough to keep peace.

The sun was just coming up when they reached the Link Circle Ranch. It lay in a big bend of the river. The ranch buildings were down behind the river bluff, sheltered from the wind, and surrounded by willow trees. The ranch-house was set apart from the other buildings, some seven or eight in number, consisting of feed sheds, machinery barns, bunkhouses for the ranch riders and a cookhouse.

The main ranch-house was a long, low building built of adobe, with timbered beams sticking out several inches from the adobe walls and the corners. Smoke was coming out of the kitchen chimney, and as they rode into the ranch yard, a young girl came out on the kitchen porch and stared at them curiously.

She was about the Morgan Kid's age.

Black Diamond touched the brim of his hat respectfully. "Howdy, Miss Morgan. Is your father inside?"

She looked at them for a moment and then nodded. Her hands were covered with flour, but her checked blue gingham dress was fresh and clean.

"Yes," she answered, "I'll call him."

SHE turned and went back into the kitchen and in a few moments a tall, broad shouldered man about fifty years old

came out on the kitchen porch. His resemblance to the Kentucky Morgans was so marked that the Morgan Kid sighed with relief. Worn out with weariness and fatigue, he felt suddenly secure and back home again among his kinspeople. Tod Morgan looked inquiringly at Black Diamond and then at Scott. He seemed half afraid to speak.

"What is it you want, men?" he asked at last. In contrast to the other men he had met in Texas, the Morgan Kid noticed that Tod Morgan did not carry a gun.

"It's Scott's party." Diamond jerked his hand back toward Scott.

Tod Morgan inclined his head as though he had guessed as much.

"Get down and come in," he invited. "I was just about to have some coffee, and I guess there's enough to go around for all of us."

The Morgan Kid slid off his horse and advanced rapidly to the rancher's side.

"I'm Ben Morgan from Kentucky," he introduced himself; "the one you writ to Pap to have come down."

The bearded rancher appraised him briefly and then offered his hand.

"Howdy, son," he said, "I reckon I'd 'a' knowed you anywhere. All of us Morgans carry the same slant of chin and set of eyes. I'm downright glad to have you here."

Ignoring the other men, he put his arms around the Morgan Kid's shoulder and led him into the kitchen.

"Ruth," he said gently, "this is Ben Morgan from Kentucky, the boy we've been expecting. I reckon he's pretty tired and hungry."

RUTH MORGAN smiled at him timidly and shyly offered her hand, after she had wiped the flour from it with a dish towel.

"We've been expecting you for weeks," she volunteered. "You're just in time for breakfast."

"I'm powerful tuckered out, but I reckon I'm not too near dead to set up and eat a right hearty meal," he said gallantly, "especially if it's one you cooked."

"It won't take me but a few moments," but it clouded again as Scott and Diamond

came into the kitchen.

"Can you fix enough for all of us, Ruth?" he asked. "I guess we'll have some talking to do before we're ready to eat, anyway."

"It won't take me but a few moments," she promised.

"Come on here in the sitting room," Tod Morgan invited. He moved slowly as though expecting a calamity which nothing could forestall but with an unflinching courage and gentlemanly courtliness which even an impending tragedy could not overcome. Instinctively the Morgan Kid went to the rancher's side.

Black Diamond noticed the move and smiled meaningly at Scott.

"I've been expecting you, Scott," Tod Morgan declared.

"Wait a minute," Diamond said hurriedly. "Pete, you go on out to the cook shack and eat with the men."

His companion left the room reluctantly as though he wanted to stay but did not dare disobey his leader.

"He's dumb and useless," Diamond explained, "and what he don't know he can't talk about."

"Tell your story, Kid," Scott directed the Morgan Kid, "Start when you went into the Cannon Ball and bring it up to now."

BLACK DIAMOND lit a cigarette and smoked indifferently as the Morgan Kid told of his experience in the dance hall, of the lynching party, of his meeting with Scott in the mountain cabin, and of their ride down into Dead Rock. The door into the kitchen was open, and when the Morgan Kid began his story, Ruth came to the door and stayed there until he had finished it. Tod Morgan may not have been aware of her presence as his back was toward the kitchen door and he was listening intently to the story which the Morgan Kid was telling.

"Of course the hanging threat was a bluff," Diamond confessed. "Knowing the situation, I was trying to get him away from here."

"What if I had killed him?" Scott objected.

"I didn't think he'd go after you," Diamond claimed. "If I'd have been in his shoes, I'd have taken the first trail north

and that's what I was thinking he would do."

"You don't know the Morgan breed," Tod Morgan remarked.

"I know you pretty well," Diamond snapped.

"I've always lived up to my word," Tod Morgan said dispassionately. "Even Scott knows that."

Scott had been watching Ruth in the doorway. His eyes were wistful and there was an expression of bitterness in his face. When he spoke his voice trembled with suppressed emotion.

 "You've got a lot to be proud of, Tod," he said evenly, "and maybe you've got a lot of regret. But the day of reckoning hasn't come yet. That isn't what I came out here for."

"Then why did you come?" Tod Morgan asked.

"I wanted to see the Kid delivered here safely," Scott declared. "Diamond's got enough crimes hanging over him without letting him kill this kid."

"I'm much obliged to you," the rancher said simply.

"But I figure it might as well come to a show down now as later," Scott continued. "You knew I was here and Diamond knew my hideout."

"How much does Ben know?" Tod Morgan asked.

"Nothing," Scott said shortly. "You and I and Diamond are the only ones that know. I've told Diamond that I'd fill him full of lead if he opened his mouth and I reckon you aren't likely to talk much."

Tod Morgan sighed and shook his head.

"No," he confessed, "but I ain't thought of nothing else for years, ever since I knew."

A dull red flush spread over Scott's face and he had to fight to control himself. Involuntarily the Morgan Kid's hands dropped to his guns and he moved over to his cousin's side in a protecting attitude. Scott noticed this and smiled wryly.

"Blood tells," he commented.

"It's more to his credit," Tod Morgan

rebuked Scott gently. "You'd think less of him if it didn't."

"I'm tired," Diamond said impatiently. "Go on and deal your hand, Scott."

"It's just this," Scott said crisply. "I know your game, Diamond, and I'm ahead of you in every move you try to make. That's why I'm here now. You keep your hands off the Link Circle ranch. Understand me?"

"Why should I want it?" Black Diamond sneered. "I've got plenty of land and cattle."

"Two reasons," Scott said gently. "One is that you want anything you can lay your hands on that you think you can get."

"And the other one?" Diamond challenged.

"I'm here to protect the other one," Scott retorted.

"What do you want to do?" Tod Morgan asked slowly. "Diamond is right, Scott. You might as well not waste any more time."

"I'm not just sure what I intend to do finally," Scott said. "But for the time being, Tod, I understand that you have never hired anyone to take Ike Kane's place as foreman of the Link Circle and I reckon there's a lot worse men that you can get than me. If you've got any objections to me being your foreman from now on for a while, say so."

"Is that all?" Tod Morgan asked incredulously.

"For the time being," Scott answered. "I know that you fired Ike Kane because you found out that he and Diamond were scheming together to slowly rob the Link Circle. That won't happen when I'm foreman here."

"You'd have a hard time proving that," Diamond commented.

"And you'll have a hard time running any more cattle on this ranch while I'm here," Scott retorted.

"I'll be glad to have you take the job, Scott," Tod Morgan said quietly. "I reckon you know that as well as any one."

"None of that," Scott said sharply. "You've got a right to name any one foreman you want. If you don't want me, just say so, and we'll work something else up."

"Well, that suits me," Tod Morgan assured him hurriedly. "I reckon you'll want to live here in the house."

"I'll live where any other ranch foreman ought to live—right out in the bunkhouse with the men," Scott said gruffly and again his face flushed, "and we might as well commence that arrangement right now."

THE rancher turned and discovered Ruth standing in the doorway.

"I think Ruth has breakfast ready for us," he remarked rather feebly.

"I'll eat with the men," Scott declared. "And you, too," he said, turning to Diamond. "What's good enough for me is good enough for you."

"Have it your own way," Diamond agreed.

"Then come on," Scott ordered. He paused just before he left the room and looked first at Tod Morgan and then at Diamond.

"You two understand this thing now," he said. "You talk, Diamond, and you die. I'll do all the talking when it's necessary."

"I don't see what it is that I can't be told," the Morgan Kid protested. "I'm not a baby."

"You'll find out soon enough," Tod Morgan sighed. "Don't cross Scott. He knows what is best."

"But I have breakfast all ready for them," Ruth said, as Scott and Black Diamond left the living room and walked out through the kitchen, "aren't they going to stay for breakfast, Dad?"

"No, Honey," he told her tenderly, "Scott is taking Kane's place as foreman and he thinks it wiser to eat in the bunkhouse with the rest of the men."

HE PICKED up his hat and started to follow them out of the kitchen.

"But you'll be back, won't you?" she asked.

"Yes, I'll be back in a few minutes, but don't wait breakfast on me," he replied. "You and Ben go right ahead and eat. I'm not very hungry anyway."

"Maybe you need me along," the Morgan Kid suggested.

Tod Morgan shook his head.

"No, son," he answered. "You sit down and eat. There isn't anything you can do now."

He looked after Scott and Diamond, who were on their way across the ranch yard toward the cook shack.

"I can wait," the Morgan Kid offered.

"Scott expects you to stay here," the rancher told him kindly. "But, son, I expect you'd have saved us all a lot of trouble if you had killed him up there in the mountains when you had the chance."

He turned and walked heavily out of the kitchen. His head was bowed and his shoulders drooped. In the short time that they had been in the house, he seemed to have aged years.



The Morgan Kid waited awkwardly until Ruth motioned him to take one of the chairs at the table. She appeared to be worried and troubled and had difficulty in keeping the tears from her eyes.

"I reckon you wish I hadn't come," he said miserably. "But he writ Pap that he wanted me to come."

"I don't think it's your fault," she confided. "Dad has been worried for weeks. Several times I've heard him up in the middle of the night walking around his room."

"I wish I knew what it was," the Morgan Kid said wistfully. "Maybe I could help."

"I think we can help him most by doing as he wants us to," she declared. "I love him more than anyone in the world, and I know whatever he does will be right."

"I guess I should have shot Scott like Diamond told me to," the Morgan Kid exclaimed, "but he was a friend to me and I liked him too well to shoot him, even if I could have done it."

"I like him too and I'm glad you didn't," she said determinedly, "and I hate that Black Diamond."

BLACK DIAMOND and Pete, his companion, left before Tod Morgan came back to the house. Ruth and the Morgan Kid had finished eating but were still sit-

ting at the table when he entered. It had been a strange meal. The Morgan Kid was awkward and shy in the presence of the girl and she was silent and preoccupied.

"I reckon it didn't take you young people long to get acquainted with each other," the rancher remarked, trying to make light of his own uneasiness and worry.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Ruth said, "but I was so afraid something might happen to you that I didn't feel like talking."

Tod Morgan came around the table and patted her on the shoulder.

"Don't you worry about me," he advised. "And, anyway, you have lots of time to get acquainted. Right now I reckon our young kinsman would like a chance to catch a few winks of sleep."

"If you need me for anything, I can wait till later to sleep," the Morgan Kid offered.

"Go ahead and get some rest," the rancher ordered. "Ruth will show you the room you can use while you are living here and we'll wait until you rest up before we talk over the folks back in Kentucky."

The Morgan Kid did not argue. He realized that the rancher had many other things on his mind and was in no mood to either listen or talk about relatives he had not seen for years.

IT WAS late afternoon when he woke up. Ruth gave him a friendly smile as he went through the kitchen and asked him if he wanted anything to eat.

"I reckon I can wait till supper time," he declared. "Is your dad around anywhere?"

"He may be out by the feed barns or the corrals, but I think he rode off somewhere."

"I'll go out and take a look."

He did not find Tod Morgan, but he saw Scott, who had just ridden in from the cattle range. Scott's face was streaked with dust and perspiration and his eyes were red from lack of sleep. As he slid out of his saddle, he swayed with weariness and had to cling to his horse for support.

"Let me unsaddle him and take care of your horse for you," the Kid offered. "I've had a good sleep all day."

"All right, Kid; I'm sure about all in." Scott accepted the offer gladly. "Put my horse in that back corral and hang my sad-

dle there on that hook under the shed."

He spoke as though he had already made himself familiar with every detail of the ranch and knew just where every animal and piece of leather belonged.

When the Kid came back to the bunkhouse after taking care of the horse, as directed, he found Scott with his shirt off, sluicing his face and neck with water from a big tin basin on the bunkhouse wash rack.

"I was looking for Cousin Tod," the Morgan Kid explained.

Although Tod Morgan was only a distant cousin, the Kid had decided this was the proper way to speak of him.

"He rode out to the herd, but he ought to be back in a few minutes," Scott answered. "What do you think of him?"

"I like him," the Kid declared quietly.

Scott made no comment.

While the Kid hung around the bunkhouse waiting for the rancher to return, two cowboys rode in. Instead of unsaddling their horses, they left them standing by the bunkhouse door, while they went sullenly inside and began to pack their blanket rolls. Scott did not appear to notice them, but the Morgan Kid saw him put his back against the bunkhouse wall and keep his hands conveniently near his guns. In a few minutes they came out, strapped their rolls to their saddles, mounted, and rode off.

"Are they quitting?"

Scott nodded grimly.

"They're a couple of bad eggs."

SCOTT'S attitude discouraged any questions and the Morgan Kid was wise enough not to try and force him into any explanations.

These came later when Tod Morgan rode into the ranch yard. Still in his shirt sleeves, Scott strolled out to meet him.

"I fired Joe and Blackie," he said shortly. "They are on Black Diamond's payroll and I figure if he wants to pay 'em he can use 'em."

The rancher appeared to be a little dazed by the sudden action, but he did not question Scott's authority or rebuke him for what he had done. In fact, he immediately changed the subject away from the two men.

"How do things look?" he asked, and

the Kid thought he was sincerely anxious to have Scott's opinion.

"It's a fine ranch and a fine herd of cattle."

Tod Morgan threw his head up proudly and smiled.

"I've worked hard and not made any bad mistakes," he said quietly, "and luck has been with me right from the start."

"Until I showed up," Scott reminded him.

Tod Morgan flushed and for a moment



the Kid thought the two men were going to quarrel. However, the rancher's face quickly lost its resentment and bowed his head without replying.

"I'm damned tired," Scott apologized, "and this Joe and Blackie business got up my temper."

"Better come over to the house and have supper with us there," the rancher invited. "There's plenty of room."

"I'll eat here where I belong," Scott declined the invitation and turning abruptly, walked away.

AFTER supper was over, the rancher took the Morgan Kid over to the bunkhouse and introduced him to the men. There were twelve or fifteen riders on the Link Circle payroll and the Kid found them a likeable lot. He was younger than any of them but they did not appear to resent his coming to the ranch.

"I reckon you'll find me green," he told them frankly, "but I ain't aimin' to get fresh and if I should without knowin' it, I'll be much obliged if you'll just smack me down and set me in my place."

"That's the way to talk, son," Tod Morgan said approvingly. "You and the boys will hit it off all right together."

For hours after the Morgan Kid went back to the ranch-house and went to bed, Tod Morgan and Scott sat on a bench out by the fence and talked. Snatches of their conversation came in through the open win-

dow, but they were so far away that he could not make any sense of the occasional words he heard. Both men talked angrily at times. Then they would quit quarreling and seemed to reach some sort of an understanding, and then break out into heated arguments again.

Scott finally went over to the bunkhouse and Tod Morgan came in to his room. It was separated from the Morgan Kid's by a thin wooden partition. Although he tried to go to sleep and not listen, the Kid could hear the rancher shuffling papers and muttering to himself until nearly daylight.

When the Morgan Kid finally went to sleep, beams of light were still coming through chinks in the partition wall from the lighted lamp in the rancher's room.

THE Morgan Kid's first week at the Link Circle ranch was a busy one. He discovered that his clothes would not do for work on the cattle range. Chaps were needed to protect his legs from the continual scratching of brush against them. A wide-brimmed sombrero was needed to keep his face and neck from being blistered by the sun, and the ornamental handkerchiefs that hung around the riders' necks were hung there to be handy against dust kicked up by a moving herd. He found out that high heels kept his feet from slipping too far through the stirrups.

Tod Morgan took the Kid around the boundaries of the Link Circle Ranch. From the ranch-house it extended up and down Big River for several miles on both sides of the river. In the spring the herd was run on the upper side of the river on the high ground, but as the hot weather burned up the grass, the cattle were moved down across the river to the lower half of the ranch where several waterholes and valley ground kept the grass green until the fall rains began.

THE Kid had no special duties until the beginning of the second week of his stay at the ranch, when Scott called him aside one morning.

"Everybody works around here, Kid," he said. "What do you think you can do best?"

Tod Morgan was present and did not

seem to object to Scott's ordering the Kid to work. It might have been the rancher's own idea, the Kid realized. At any rate, he had not come to Texas to loaf, and he was glad enough to be assigned to a regular job.

"I reckon I know more about horses than anything else," he stated.

"Well, now's the time we've got to get started breaking the broncs for the fall roundup," Scott said, and his face was serious. "Do you think you can qualify for a job like that?"

"I'll try," the Kid promised uneasily. "They kain't more than pitch me off."

This was just after breakfast. The other Link Circle riders had scattered off to their various jobs about the ranch.

"How, about making a try right now?" Scott proposed.

"Suits me all right," the Kid agreed.

Scott led the way to the horse corral, where a dozen or more broncs were warming themselves in the morning sunshine.

"Cut out Baldy," Scott ordered.

One of the riders picked up a rope and walked through the corral gate toward a bald-faced, pot-bellied bronc that watched him approach with jaded, indifferent eyes. The bronc looked to the Kid to be about seven or eight years old and the tamest of the bunch.

With a dexterous flick of his wrist, the puncher put a loop of the cow rope over the bronc's head. Jerking his head up and giving his captor a look of reproach, the bronc started to resist, but surrendered meekly at the first tug of the rope around his neck. Scott went into the corral and threw his saddle across Baldy's back, and buckled the cinch into place.

BALDY humped himself and groaned, but stood still while a hackamore was pulled over his head. The other riders of the Link Circle ran to places of advantage on the corral fence and settled down to watch. The Kid was surprised to discover Ruth standing by Tod Morgan's side at the corral gate, also prepared to watch him ride. Some one had either run over to the ranch-house and told her what was about to happen, or else she had known about it in advance. From the grinning faces around

him, the Kid thought he was the victim of a joke.

All he could figure was that they were trying to scare him, and, after getting him set for a wild ride, were putting him up on an old bronc that a nest of hornets wouldn't make buck. He hinted as much to Scott.

"I'll buy you the best saddle you can find around here if you can stay on Baldy for five minutes," Scott assured him.

"All ready?" the man holding the bronc's head asked.

Scott stepped back, and the Kid walked over to Baldy's side and laid his hand on the saddle horn.

"Turn him loose," he ordered.

"You'd better get up first," the puncher warned.

The Kid put his foot in the stirrup and swung up into the saddle. Quickly the puncher at Baldy's head jumped aside.

For a moment nothing happened. Then the bronc arched his back a little higher and made a gentle rocking chair buck. It hardly made the Kid sway. He glanced around at the corral gate and saw Ruth watching him with drawn breath, and to reassure her he grinned and waved.

The wave of his arm seemed to attract Baldy's attention. Slowly he turned his head to the right and looked back at the Kid until his nose almost touched the right stirrup. The Kid shifted his weight and started to push his right foot against the bronc's nose.

With the uncoiling motion of a suddenly released spring, the bronc raised his rump into the air, and, pivoting on his fore feet, kicked backward and whirled until, without moving his head apparently, he had reversed ends.

The Kid found himself sitting spraddle-legged on the ground, staring into the bronc's sorrowful brown eyes. He was not hurt; in fact, he did not remember ever hitting the ground, the transition from the saddle to his present position had been so swift and unexpected.



The bronc drooped his ears, lowered his head, and sighed heavily. A roar went up from the punchers on the corral fence as the Kid got up and dusted himself. Although he only gave her the briefest of glances, the Kid saw that Ruth Morgan was laughing just as heartily as the rest of them. He knew that his ears were red as he went around to the bronc's side and started to mount again. This time he treated the pot-bellied old bronc with a glance of respect.

GRABBING the reins, he swung up into the saddle again and tried to get a grip on the bronc's sides with his knees. He did not repeat the mistake of loosening his grip when Baldy again looked back at him, but he was expecting the same whirling trick which had unseated him the first time, and thus was underrating the bronc's crafty intelligence.

Instead of whirling on his forefeet, Baldy went up into the air and came down hump backed on all four feet with a jolt that made the Morgan Kid's jaws click, but he kept his seat in the saddle.

The bronc hesitated a moment and then seemed to stretch himself and really get into action. Going up into the air again, he sunfished and came down stifflegged again, but this time one foot at a time, giving the Kid four separate jolts.

The Kid forgot his private resolutions and made a grab for the saddle horn. He missed it and brought up a handful of Baldy's mane. Baldy squawled and began to do cartwheels in the air. With his hind legs doubled up under him like a dog scratching fleas off his ears, the bronc seemed to literally kick the Kid out of the saddle and propel him headlong over his head.

This time the Kid lay where he fell until he was picked up. He came to with his head in Ruth's lap and he thought for a moment she was bathing his face with water. It turned out to be blood she was wiping off and the blood was coming from his own bloody nose. Ruth was not laughing. Instead, she was indignant.

"You knew perfectly well that no one on this ranch could ride Baldy," she stormed at Scott. "I don't think it's much of a joke to order Ben on a horse you can't ride yourself."

"Who can't?" Scott retorted.

"You can't," she said right back at him.

SCOTT'S lips met in a hard line. "Drag the Kid back out of the way and I'll show you," he said quietly.

"Don't try it, Scott," the Kid warned. "He'll kill you sure."

He staggered to his feet and tried to get hold of Scott's sleeve, but Ruth held him back, and Scott himself shoved him aside.

"Let him try it if he thinks he can," she said scornfully. "He thought it was fun watching you try it."

The Kid let himself be led back outside of the corral gate. Scott tightened the saddle cinch, pulled his hat down firmly on his head, and taking the reins in his left hand, vaulted into the saddle. Holding his right hand up above his shoulder, he did not wait for Baldy to commence the battle, but dug his spurs into the bronc's flanks.

Baldy wasted no time in professional flourishes. He went up into the air so far that it looked as though he was going to fall over backward, but he came back down on his feet, shaking as a dog shakes when coming out of water. But Scott stuck to the saddle and his right hand did not come down below his shoulder. Weaving, clawing, pawing the air, the old outlaw tried every trick he knew to dislodge his rider.

Scott's riding was a feat of horsemanship which brought gasps of astonishment and admiration from all who watched. Even Ruth Morgan forgot the Kid's bloody nose long enough to stare at Scott with growing admiration and enthusiasm, as the wily old bronc finally stopped from sheer exhaustion and then, at Scott's urging, trotted meekly around the corral as though the bucking had been merely an exhibition which he and his rider had arranged and rehearsed beforehand.

SCOTT flung himself out of the saddle in front of Ruth and walked stiffly up to her.

"I've never yet told a man who worked for me to do something which I couldn't do myself," he declared. And then, turning his back on her before she had a chance to answer, he walked away.

"Get out on your jobs, you hombres," he ordered.

The Link Circle riders slid down from the fence and scattered in all directions as though his demonstration had convinced them of his right to expect his commands to be obeyed.

"You'd better come over to the kitchen and wash your nose with cold water," Ruth advised the Kid. "It's still bleeding a little."

Scott had ridden away from the ranch-house when the Kid's nosebleed stopped. At supper time Scott had not returned nor did he come back that night.

After breakfast the next morning, the men came over to Tod Morgan for instructions. They were all worried and uneasy.

"I don't know where he's gone," Tod



Morgan said slowly. "He may have ridden into Dead Rock or somewhere, but I don't think we have any cause to worry about him. Go right

on about your work as though he were here."

A murmur of surprise ran around among the riders. They had expected to be sent in search of Scott, and so had the Morgan Kid. It was not like Scott to ride off the ranch without telling some one where he was going and when he would be back.

"Let me go look for him anyway," the Morgan Kid requested.

"You've got your work to do," Tod Morgan said stubbornly.

The Morgan Kid looked at Ruth and saw that she was also puzzled and uneasy. She followed him out to the corral gate.

"I think dad didn't want the men to know how worried he was," she explained in a whisper. "He's going into Dead Rock himself and see if he can find any trace of Scott."

"If Scott is in Dead Rock, Cousin Tod will never find any trace of him," the Morgan Kid declared. "Diamond would kill him on sight if he could and throw his body

in the deepest mud hole he could find."

"It's not that so much," she hesitated for a moment. "I think dad's afraid that Scott has gone in there and got drunk. He said he wasn't dependable."

The Morgan Kid started to contradict this with his own opinion, but after a second's hesitation he thought it better judgment to keep still.

"What if he doesn't find him there?" he asked.

"Then I think he'll send out a search for him," she predicted.

THE search was organized that evening after supper, for Tod Morgan rode back from Dead Rock and reluctantly agreed with the men of the Link Circle that something serious must have happened to Scott. None of the men had noticed Scott leaving the ranch, and none of them had anything but guesses as to which way he had gone.

Tod Morgan seemed to be torn between two fears. One that he would find Scott dead, and the other that he would find him alive. He made no secret of the fact that he hoped Scott had voluntarily disappeared, although he offered no reason as to why Scott would want to do this. However, he gave orders for a thorough search, sending the Link Circle riders off to ride circle on every gulch and dry wash within miles of the ranch.

The riders went in pairs. The rancher instructed them not to leave the Link Circle boundaries unless they were following some well-defined trail.

"If Scott isn't hurt, you'll find him somewhere on the ranch," he explained. "Comb every foot of it and don't come back in until you're sure he's not on the circle you're riding."

The Morgan Kid was not allowed to join the searching party, although he pleaded with his cousin Tod to allow him to do so.

"You stay here with Ruth," the rancher ordered. "I don't want her left here alone, and besides, you don't know the range well enough to be of any use. I'm going out and try and keep in touch with as many of the searching parties as I can, but if they bring Scott in, and you think I should be found immediately, you can come get me."

THE Morgan Kid protested, but his cousin Tod overruled all of his objections. When the search had started, he and Ruth sat out on the porch steps for several hours, waiting anxiously for news, and shyly exchanging facts about their childhood. He learned that Ruth's mother had died several years back and that since that time Ruth had taken full charge of the ranch-house and had done all the cooking for her father.

"Did you ever see Scott before?" he asked curiously.

"I never heard of him," she declared positively. "And I know his name was never mentioned."

"I don't think that's his real name," the Morgan Kid confided. "Black Diamond hinted that he had another name."

"I'm sorry I dared him to ride Baldy," she said, "and I hope he's found alive."

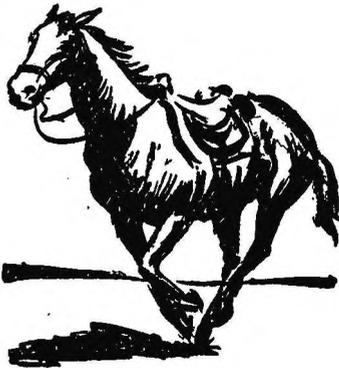
"If he's alive, he's bad hurt or else he'd have come in," the Morgan Kid declared.

"I wish we could do something," she said wistfully.

"I guess the best thing we could do would be to get a fire going and some water hot and bandages ready," the Morgan Kid proposed.

SCOTT was brought back to the ranch just before daylight. He was unconscious and white from loss of blood. A bullet had drilled a hole through his right leg just above the knee. He was alive but breathing very faintly.

Tod Morgan was among the party that brought him in.



Although he had been unconscious when they found him, the two riders who had discovered Scott had been able to recon-

struct something of what had happened. They found his dead horse first. It had been killed by the bullet which had passed through his leg. Following a trail of blood left by the horse, they came upon Scott about a hundred yards away.

The wounded horse had evidently thrown him as soon as it was hit. He had torn off his shirt and made a crude bandage which he tied above the bullet hole in his leg, and then, unable to walk, had crawled along after his horse until the pain and loss of blood had overcome him. His knees and his hands were torn and bruised from crawling over the sand and rocks. It had happened down in the far southeastern corner of the ranch in a section not frequented often by the Link Circle riders because it was rough and barren and few cattle ever strayed there.

The doctor, who came as soon as they could get him to the ranch, dressed the wound and declared that Scott had better than an even chance to live. A few small arteries had been cut, but the bandage Scott had tied above the bullet hole had helped form a blood clot and stopped the bleeding before he bled to death. The bone in his leg had been bruised but not broken. He was suffering from shock and exposure as much as from the bullet and loss of blood.

Had the search been delayed a few hours longer he would certainly have been dead before they found him. Tod Morgan must have known this, but he expressed no regret over not starting the search sooner. He did, however, do everything in his power to help Scott recover. He kept the doctor at the ranch for two days, moved Scott into his own bed in the ranch-house, and took turns with Ruth and the Morgan Kid sitting at the wounded man's bedside.

IN A couple of days Scott recovered enough to tell them what had happened.

"It seemed to me that we've been losing cattle down in that section of the range, and while I was riding around down there looking for some explanation, I crossed the trail of a quite good-sized herd that had gone down that way, and I took up the trail to see if I could find out where they went to," he explained. "It was late in the afternoon and I was in a hurry to get back to the ranch,

so I wasn't as careful as I might have been. As I came up out of the dry wash and started to go down into another one, I saw a puff of smoke across the river, and then the bullet hit me. When my horse fell, I threw myself off to get out from under him, and rolled down into the dry wash. The horse got up and staggered off, but I lay there waiting for whoever had shot me to come over and finish me. Fortunately, I had my guns. No one came, and I began to get weak from the loss of blood, so I stripped off my shirt and tried to make a bandage to stop the bleeding. It got dark and still I hadn't seen any one, so I started to crawl after my horse. I didn't know how badly it had been hit. They told me I didn't have my guns when they found me. I had them when I started, so I guess I must have got out of my head and thrown them away before I keeled over."

"It's funny whoever shot you didn't come over to see what kind of a job he had done," Tod Morgan commented.

"Either he figured I was dead or very much alive," Scott said.

"Or else he was in a hurry and didn't want to be recognized," the rancher remarked.

THE doctor was not definite about how long Scott would be in bed. If the wound healed without infection and there were no other complications, it might be two or three weeks or it might be two or three months, he informed them. It all depended upon Scott's vitality.

Scott had been in bed for about a week when Black Diamond rode up to the ranch one morning. The Morgan Kid saw him coming and met him at the gate.

"I reckon you all had better turn around and go back where you come from," he advised him.

"That's a kind of dangerous order to give me, Kid," Diamond retorted. "Hadn't you better think it over for a little while first?"

"I had it all thought out," the Kid declared.

Tod Morgan came out of the ranch-house, and, seeing the Kid talking to Black Diamond, came hurriedly across to the gate.

"I've just been ordered off," Diamond said amiably. "Ain't you got any rights left

at all on your own property, or does somebody else do all of your talking for you now?"

"Go on in the house, son," Tod Morgan told the Kid kindly. "I've been wanting to see Diamond and he just saved me the trouble of riding into Dead Rock."

"When are we going to have that race, Kid?" Diamond asked.

"Sooner than you expect, maybe," the Kid hinted darkly. "You're going to start running and I'm going to start coming after you."

"That'll sure surprise a lot of people, including myself," Diamond said. "Now run on in the house before I lose my temper and spank you."

"Go on, son," Tod Morgan urged him, "and don't tell Scott that Diamond's here. There's no use getting him excited."

FOR an hour or more Tod Morgan stood at the corral gate and talked to Diamond while the Kid watched from one of the ranch-house windows. When Diamond left, the rancher did not come back to the house but walked up slowly to one of the feed barns. The Morgan Kid followed him. His cousin Tod had gone into the barn and closed the door. The Kid hesitated a few minutes wondering if he wanted to be disturbed.

Looking through a chink between the door planks, he saw the rancher sitting on a pile of grain sacks in the barn runway. He was leaning over with his bowed head supported by his hands and there was such an expression of hopeless misery and discouragement on his face the Kid walked softly away from the door and left him alone.

Going back to the ranch-house, the Kid waited until Ruth left Scott alone for a few minutes and he had a chance to talk to Scott without any one present to hear what they said. Then he went in and told him of Diamond's visit and of Tod Morgan sitting out there in the feed barn.

"What I want to know is what's all this about," he demanded. "One of us is bringing trouble to the ranch and it ain't fair to Ruth and Cousin Tod."

"Trouble is something all of us have got to learn now to meet," Scott stated. "There

is nothing you can do about it except cause us as little trouble yourself as you can."

He declined to answer any of the Kid's questions and finally ordered him out of the room, claiming that he was tired and sleepy. But when Ruth went back into the sick room, Scott seemed to be wide awake and anxious to have her stay with him.

It hurt the Kid to see the attachment which had sprung up between Ruth and her patient. That day in the horse corral when she had wiped the blood away from his nose the Kid had been supremely happy. He hadn't stopped to figure out why until he saw her showering the same care and attention upon Scott.

He had no right to be jealous, but he was, and when he heard them laughing together and exchanging whispered confidences, it made him wish he had never left Kentucky. He had a notion to go out and tell Tod Morgan what was happening in the hope that his cousin Tod would get Scott moved back to the bunkhouse and away from Ruth.

The Kid was beginning to suspect that



Scott's wound was not half so painful and slow healing as he pretended it was, and that he was only using his wound as an excuse to stay near Ruth.

About a week later the Kid's growing resentment of the growing intimacy between Ruth and Scott could not be held in leash any longer.

"I reckon Scott could get up and walk if he felt like it," he said gruffly to his cousin Tod one morning.

"What makes you think that?" the rancher asked.

"Well, he doesn't act very sick when Ruth's around him," the Kid explained. "He was holding her hand in there this morning and talking to her like he was as well as ever."

The rancher looked at him with slow understanding.

"So that's it?"

"I thought you ought to be told," the Kid explained lamely.

"So you've been hanging around the house too long?" the rancher continued, ignoring the Kid's interruption. "Well, we can soon change that. After this, you ride herd with the rest of the boys. You can keep your room here at the ranch-house, but I don't want to see you hanging around here in the daytime. Ruth's just a kid and so are you and I don't want any mooning around here. You'd better get your horse right now and ride out and get acquainted with what you've got to learn."

THE Kid walked away in a daze. Instead of being grateful for the information given him about Ruth and Scott, Tod Morgan had actually jumped him. The Kid was lonesome and homesick and the hot tears dripped from his eyes as he saddled his horse and got ready to obey his cousin Tod's instructions.

A few miles in the saddle helped him to get himself under control a little but he still could not understand his cousin Tod's actions. The rancher had seemed utterly indifferent to any designs Scott might have had upon Ruth. The Kid spent most of the day perfecting wild schemes whereby he could save Ruth from Scott, defying the whole world and Ruth herself if need be. They were all impractical, but the Kid felt somewhat comforted by thinking them out any way.

That night at the supper table Ruth gave him a withering glance of pity, which made him think that maybe after all his cousin Tod had said something to her about being so friendly to Scott. Although the subject was not mentioned at the table, if his cousin Tod had said anything it certainly had not done any good for Ruth seemed to be particularly tender and solicitous when she took Scott his supper later.

The Kid put himself to sleep bitterly condemning the inconsistencies of all women.

There was no real work for him to do on the range. After reporting to the herd the next day, he was good-naturedly ordered to get out of the way and go chase butterflies. He had been warned by his cousin Tod to stay away from the place where Scott was ambushed, but the herd was working down in the southeastern part of the ranch and he took this opportunity of visit-

ing the place where it had happened.

Circling vultures guided him to Scott's dead horse. He found the spot where Scott had rolled down into the dry wash and had lain waiting for his assailant to come and finish him. The stones around the place were still rusty with dried blood. From back of the ridgeway where Scott had fallen from his horse, he looked across the river and located a clump of willows from which he thought the shot had been fired, according to Scott's story.

THE river was shallow and easily forded. He went over and examined the ground around the willows. There were hoof marks in the sand, showing that a horse had been standing there for some little time. Evidently whoever had shot Scott had seen him coming and had just hidden behind the willows and watched him some time before the shot was fired.

Dismounting and searching the ground carefully, the Kid found a fired rifle cartridge. It was unquestionably the one that had been ejected from Scott's assailant's gun after the shot was fired.

The Kid slipped the empty cartridge into his pocket and mounted his horse. A plain trail of hoof marks was left in the sand leading away from the willows and down the river. Curious to know how far he could follow the trail, the Kid turned his horse down the river and rode along parallel to the hoof marks in the sand. He lost them occasionally but each time found them again, until they crossed the river.

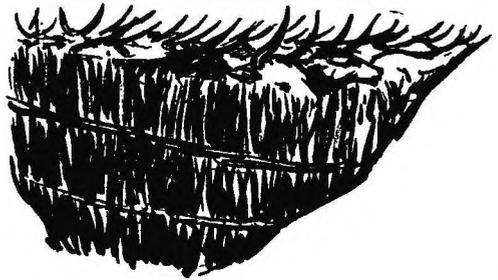
Although he looked carefully, he could not see where the horse had come out of the river bed on the other side. Hoping to pick up the trail further on, he rode ahead anyway until he had gone several miles from the clump of willows from which Scott had shot. However, he found no more trace of tracks he could identify as those he had been following.

AFTER leaving the Link Circle Ranch, the river had made a big bend to the north. Instead of following the river back, the Kid started to take the short cut back to the Link Circle herd. To do this, he had to ride across a mile or more of broken ground where the river during flood times

had cut several old channels.

Crossing these bad lands, the Morgan Kid was startled to hear the bellow of a steer, followed by the answering bawl of several more. Quickly riding down into a dry wash to conceal himself, he waited until the steer bawled again and he could locate the direction from which the sound had come. It seemed to come from one of the old channels down toward the river.

The Morgan Kid remembered what had happened to Scott and decided to be cautious. Dismounting, he tied his horse to a mesquite root, and, taking advantage of every bit of cover the broken ground offered, he crept up to investigate.



It wasn't likely that any cattle would stray to such a section of the range that was bare of grass and had no water or shade to attract strays. However, he was not prepared for what he discovered.

A brush fence had been built across one of the blind canyons, converting it into a corral. It was filled with Link Circle steers. Guarding the canyon fence were two cowboys the Kid recognized as Joe and Blackie, the two punchers whom Scott had fired from the Link Circle payroll.

On his back in the shade of the canyon wall just outside the fence was Pete, Black Diamond's body guard and companion. He seemed to be asleep, for his head was covered by his hat and his sombrero tilted down over his eyes, but the Kid was certain of his identity, for he was within less than a hundred yards of him.

Although they were milling around so that he could not make an accurate count, the Kid estimated that there was about a hundred Link Circle steers in the corral. They were restless from thirst and hunger, and Joe and Blackie had to keep riding back and forth along the corral fence to keep them from breaking away.

THE Kid backed away from the ridge from where he had made his discovery and hurried back to his horse. Mounting, he dug his spurs into the horse's flanks and streaked it across the range for the Link Circle ranch-house. He had seen enough to know what was going on. The steers had probably been cut away from the main herd in small bunches and driven up to the corral where they were kept during the day. At night they were probably driven down to the river and watered, and then driven back to the corral. When a sufficient herd was collected, they would be driven off down the river to some spot where the Link Circle brand would be altered and they could be grazed awhile and then sold.

Scott had been right when he had thought the size of the herd was dwindling.

The Morgan Kid galloped through the ranch yard gate and slipped out of the saddle by the kitchen door. Ruth was stirring cake batter when he ran panting into the kitchen.

"Where's cousin Tod?" he asked.

"He just went out to the bunkhouse," she answered quickly. "What's happened?"

"I'll tell you later; I ain't got time now," he shouted as he raced out to the bunkhouse.

Tod Morgan was standing in the doorway looking apprehensively at the Kid's lather covered horse when he saw the Kid coming toward him.

"What is it, son?" he asked, coming out to meet the Kid halfway. "Is someone hurt?"

"It's rustlers," the Kid gasped. "Black Diamond's got a hundred head of our steers penned up in a blind canyon waiting for a dark night to run them down the river. I stumbled on the corral by accident."

"Wait a moment," the rancher said slowly. "Take your time and think twice before you accuse a man of cattle stealing. Did you see Diamond? How do you know it is Diamond doing the stealing? Tell me exactly what you found and not what you think you found."

"I know it's Diamond," the Kid protested indignantly. "Joe and Blackie and Pete are guarding the brush fence that's thrown up across the canyon and you know they're on Diamond's pay roll. Didn't Scott tell you they were?"

"Then you didn't see Diamond?"

"Well, I saw Joe and Blackie and Pete and I saw a hundred head of Link Circle steers."

"How many?"

"Well, I couldn't count them exactly because they were milling around thirsty and nearly half starved. But there's about a hundred there anyway. That's how Scott got shot. He was trailing a bunch that had been driven off down there toward this corral, and one of Diamond's men caught him looking at the trail the herd made and put a bullet in him. Here, I even found the cartridge."

THE Kid took the empty cartridge from his pocket and put it into the rancher's hand.

"Stick to facts, son," Tod Morgan admonished him. "You don't know this shell was fired at Scott, and you don't know who fired it, or why they did it."

"But I tell you I saw the tracks and followed them down the river. That's how I happened to find this rustlers' corral."

"Did you see any Link Circle brands being altered?" Tod Morgan asked quietly.

"Why else would they be holding them there penned up?" the Morgan Kid appealed. "If you hurry, we can get back there before dark and get some of the men and catch them redhanded before they have a chance to get away. They are not expecting anything because I crawled right up on top of them and they didn't see me."

Tod Morgan appeared to be undecided. He frowned and seemed to be groping for words.

"Let me go ride for the men," the Kid begged. "Joe and Blackie and Pete are all armed and they'll shoot to kill."

Tod Morgan slowly shook his head.

"No, son," he said regretfully. "I realize how you feel but there's a lot of things you don't understand that you'll have to take my word for. Have you told anyone else about this?"

"Why, no; I came to you as fast as I could."

"Then don't," the rancher ordered. "Clean the lather off your horse and give him a good rub, and just forget what you saw."

"You don't mean that you're going to let them get away with them cattle, do you?" the Kid asked incredulously.

"I'll handle the matter in my own way," the rancher answered.

"But—but——" The Kid hesitated and involuntarily looked back toward the ranch-house.

Tod Morgan guessed his intentions.

"Don't tell Scott anything about this," he said sharply.

THE Kid's shoulders sagged and he slowly turned away. He could not believe that his cousin Tod would deliberately let cattle rustlers run off with a hundred head of cattle without making a move to prevent the theft. He groomed his horse as he had been ordered to do, but he could not obey the rest of the rancher's instructions and forget what he had seen. The more he thought of it, the more he considered it his duty to let Scott know what was going on, even though his cousin had forbidden him to do so.

Watching for an opportunity, he crept back to the ranch house and entered his room through the bedroom window. The rancher had not come back to the house. After a while, the Kid heard Ruth take her cake pans from the oven and then leave the kitchen. She started over toward the bunkhouse, and, watching her from the window, the Morgan Kid could see that she was worried and anxious to know what news he had brought in so excitedly.

Scott was reading when the Kid entered the room.

"Let me do all of the talking," the Kid said hurriedly. "Cousin Tod told me not to tell you, but I think it's something that you ought to know."

Speaking as fast as he could, he told Scott of his discovery and how it had happened. Scott listened without interrupting.

"What ought I do?" the Kid asked when he had finished.

Scott leaned his head back and looked

thoughtfully at the ceiling. He was propped up in bed half dressed with only his bandaged leg under the covers. The Kid waited for him to speak, which he did at last.

"For one thing, you'd better get out of here and not let Tod know that you've been in to see me," he advised soberly. "Let me think things over for a while."

Scott's attitude added further mystery to the affair. The Kid left the house by the way he had entered it and got away without being seen by either his cousin Tod or Ruth, who were talking just outside the bunkhouse. Going over to one of the feed barns, he stretched out on the hay and vainly wracked his mind for a solution to the strange things that were going on around him. He wished that he could talk to Ruth. His cousin Tod had not forbidden him to do this, but he was too proud to go to a girl for advice, although he longed for some one in whom he could confide.

HIS cousin Tod went back to the ranch-house with Ruth and remained there for the balance of the afternoon. The Kid did not go to the house until supper time. The evening meal was eaten in silence. Tod Morgan's face was haggard and he was morose and gloomy. Ruth seemed to be trying to get along with the Kid, but the rancher kept a watchful eye on her and managed to prevent them from exchanging more than commonplace remarks. The Kid was wondering how he was going to manage to get in to see Scott when Scott himself solved the problem.

"Oh, Kid," he called from his room. "Come in here a minute, I want to see you."

The rancher looked at him but made no objection when the Kid left the dining room and went into the sick room.

"About that bronco busting business we were talking about the other day," Scott said carelessly. "I've been thinking it over and I'd rather you didn't do anything about it at all until I get back up on my feet again and am ready to oversee the job."

"All right," the Kid said dully. "I reckon you know best."

During the time that Scott had been occupying his room, Tod Morgan had been sleeping in the living room in a folding bed. That night the rancher asked the Kid



if he minded changing beds with him for one night, giving as a reason that he figured on working on his books for a while, and he reckoned a light in the living room would keep everyone awake. The Kid agreed gladly, although he wondered why the rancher would make the request at this time, especially since he had been working over his books late in the living room several nights, and had not even bothered to ask if the light interfered with anyone's sleep.

THE rancher did work several hours after the Kid had gone to bed, but after the light had been put out, the Kid thought he could hear someone moving softly about the room. Then he heard the unmistakable grating noise of the window being opened and he realized why his cousin Tod had wanted the room that night. Using the window he could get out of the house without anyone knowing, just as the Kid had got in and out that afternoon.

After debating with himself for a while as to what he ought to do, the Kid slipped out of his bed and pulled on his clothes, and, carrying his boots in his hands, slipped out of the house through the kitchen. He had no business following his cousin Tod, and if he was discovered, he would certainly be rebuked, if not ordered to leave the ranch immediately.

But if there was no one to tell him anything, the Kid thought that the time had come when he should try to learn something for himself. Keeping in the shadows, he slipped out past the bunkhouse and saw Tod Morgan saddle a horse, mount it, and ride away in the direction of the rustlers' canyon corral. Without stopping to consider what consequences might follow such a move, the Kid saddled his own horse and set out on the rancher's trail. In a few minutes he began to get an occasional glimpse of the rancher silhouetted against the clear sky.

Tod Morgan rode in a straight line to the rustlers' camp, proving to the Kid that he knew where it was located, or at least recognized it from the description given him. As far as the Kid was able to determine, his cousin Tod had no suspicion that he was being followed. He rode slowly, but was apparently not concerned with the

thought of a possible ambush and seemed to be taking no precautions against being seen or heard.

When they neared the canyon corral the Kid swung off to the north and hid his horse where he had picketed it when he first discovered the guarded Link Circle cattle.

RETRACING the trail he had used on his previous trip to the corral, the Morgan Kid looked down on a strange scene. Just below him, Tod Morgan and Black Diamond were in a whispered conference. Twenty or thirty yards away, Joe and Blackie and Pete, mounted and suspicious, were watching the rancher and their leader.

The Morgan Kid could not hear what was said, but he saw his cousin Tod nod repeatedly while Black Diamond vigorously rejected all of the proposals the rancher made, waving them aside with his hands impatiently, and countering with proposals of his own.

The two men talked until Diamond's companions became impatient and edged closer to the conference. Diamond rode over to them and gave some rapid, low-voiced



orders. Pete threw down the gate bars of the corral, and urging his horse into the canyon, drove the steers out of the corral ahead of him. Joe and Blackie turned the herd

toward the east, away from the Link Circle Ranch. Waving a contemptuous farewell to the rancher, Black Diamond spurred his horse along after the herd.

For a few moments Tod Morgan sat on his horse watching the cattle disappear. Then he shook his head sorrowfully and started back toward the Link Circle ranch-house. When he had gotten out of sight the Morgan Kid walked back to his horse. Just as he swung up into the saddle, a rifle shot rang out down in the canyon.

Tod Morgan had not been armed. The Kid had looked closely to see if the rancher had been carrying a gun, and had admired

the nerve he had shown, riding into the rustlers' camp without one. The Kid was undecided what to do. If he went to investigate he would probably be discovered, but on the other hand, if he did not, something might have happened to his cousin Tod, who might be needing help.

Making sure that his gun was ready for action, the Kid headed his horse down the canyon toward the direction from which the shot had come. There was no one around the canyon corral when he arrived there. Following the trail his uncle had taken when he had ridden out of sight, the Kid rode along watching the shadows and listening for any suspicious sound.

He had not ridden very far when he discovered a horse moving restlessly along one of the canyon beds. It was his cousin Tod's horse. The bridle reins were dragging and the saddle was empty.

"Is that you, son?"

A voice hailed him weakly from the top of the nearby ridge. It was Tod Morgan's.

The Kid found him sitting with his back up against a boulder. His face was white and strained, and he looked helpless and weak.

"I've got a bullet through my back," he said quietly. "It don't hurt much and I don't think it's bad, but I can't seem to move my legs. I reckon, son, you'd better leave your gun here with me, and ride for help."

THE Morgan Kid was scared. His knees were so weak that he could hardly stand, but his fear was mixed with anger and indignation.

"You ought to have knowed better than to consort with them thieves," he cried hysterically. "Which one of the scoundrels done it? I'll settle with him first before I give my gun up to you. I sat there watching you talk to Black Diamond and saw them greasers eyeing you with their fingers just itching at their gun triggers."

"Where were you?" Tod Morgan asked slowly.

"I was laying right up there on that ridge looking down on you," the Morgan Kid declared. "I heard you raise up the window and get out of the house and I followed you. I don't care if you do send me away from the ranch. I knowed you was running

right into trouble. I should have shot them down when I had a chance."

"Diamond bought those steers," the rancher said, but his assertion lacked conviction, and the Morgan Kid knew that he was lying.

"I reckon if he did he shot you so that he knew you'd never collect," the Kid exclaimed. "Which way did he go? I'll settle with him!"

"Diamond didn't shoot me," Tod Morgan insisted. "Neither did any of the men he had with him."

"Then who did?" the Kid demanded.

"Just after I was shot I saw Scott sneaking along the canyon," Tod Morgan declared. "He was carrying a rifle and riding bent over in the saddle, but I recognized him by his bandaged leg and by his horse."

The Kid looked at his cousin Tod with open-mouthed amazement. He could not believe that Scott would be guilty of such a trick, and yet he realized that the rancher was not lying.

"You must be mistaken," he protested feebly.

"I saw him," Tod Morgan repeated stubbornly.

"But Scott was home in bed," the Kid argued. "He couldn't be up riding around with that leg of his."

"Scott boasts that he always does the unexpected.

THE rancher tried to change his position, and groaned as he moved. A spasm of pain twisted his face. The Kid was suddenly ashamed of himself for standing there arguing when his cousin Tod might be dying from his wound, although he had protested that it did not amount to much.

"I reckon I can get you in by myself," he said gruffly. "If I can't catch your horse I can put you up on mine."

"I don't think I can move my legs," the rancher warned. "They feel numb and dead."

The Kid struck a match and examined the wound in his cousin Tod's back. The bullet had plowed along under the skin just above the rancher's hips. The wound was bleeding very little.

"It must have creased my backbone," Tod Morgan explained. "The upper half

of me's all right, but I just feel numb in my legs."

The rancher was a big man, too heavy for the Kid to lift, and he was unable to stand upright without the Kid's support. Half dragging and half carrying him over to the edge of a shallow ravine, the Kid had him lie down along the edge. The ravine had a straight bank that was almost as high as a horse's back.

Without trying to catch the other horse, the Kid led his own horse down into the ravine and made it stand over near the spot where his cousin Tod was lying.

Lifting himself on his hands, the rancher threw himself across the saddle. He tried to drag himself over until he could sit in the saddle, but was unable to do so.

"I reckon I'd better just lay across it this way," he said weakly. "And I reckon you'd better try to tie me on this way, too."

With the rancher's head and hands hanging down on one side of the horse, and his legs and feet on the other, they started back to the ranch. The Kid walked ahead and led the horse, trying to choose a level trail. He stopped every few minutes to see if the wounded man was still in place and to give him a chance to rest for a few seconds.

Tod Morgan remained conscious throughout the entire slow trip. It took them hours. The sun was up when they arrived at the Link Circle ranch.

Ruth and the Link Circle riders saw them coming and ran out to meet them.

"Don't worry none, Honey," Tod Morgan assured her. "I ain't hurt bad; I'll be all right in a day or so."

While Tod Morgan was being carried into the house, the Morgan Kid went over



to the horse corral and looked at Scott's horse. An attempt had been made to clean it off. But when the Kid ran his hands over its withers and neck, he found lines of dried sweat

which indicated that it had been ridden hard during the night.

Scott's rifle was there, standing in a corner of the kitchen. When he entered the house, the Kid picked it up and smelled of the barrel. It was foul with freshly burned powder. There was a cartridge in the barrel and the magazine was full, but the Kid knew it had been fired during the night and reloaded, perhaps, but not cleaned.

Scott was asleep. His face was flushed and he was breathing heavily, and even the noise of bringing Tod Morgan into the house had not awakened him.

"Was Scott out of the house last night?" he asked Ruth at his first opportunity.

"What makes you think that?" she asked evasively, and the Kid knew that she was trying to shield Scott.

"Because he was the one that shot your father," the Kid declared. "Your father saw him sneaking down the canyon after the shot was fired."

She threw her head back defiantly and looked squarely at the Kid.

"I know him too well to think he would ever do a thing like that," she said proudly, "and you would never dare tell him to his face that he did."

Before any one had had time to start after him, the doctor arrived. He had been riding past the ranch and stopped in to take a look at Scott's leg.

Tod Morgan's wound made him shake his head uneasily.

"It didn't do much damage; did it, Doc?" Tod Morgan asked anxiously. "It didn't seem to bleed much at all, and it don't hurt none."

"I don't know," the doctor said frankly. "It creased the backbone, and what damage it caused doing that I can't say right now. We'll have to wait and find out. Maybe you'll be all right by morning, and maybe you'll never walk again."

"I reckon it won't be that bad." The rancher tried to laugh.

"I hope it won't," the doctor admitted, "but I'm not making you any promises."

The wound in Scott's leg had reopened and was badly swollen. Scott frowned with annoyance at the Kid's accusing stare, but he waited until after the doctor had left the ranch before he called him into his room.

"Ruth says that you are spreading the

story that I shot Tod Morgan," he said gruffly.

"I am," the Morgan Kid retorted. "Tod Morgan said he saw you right after the shot was fired. I looked at your horse when we got back, and your horse was rid last night. And your gun was fired last night, too, because I smelled of the barrel."

"I reckon it's a good thing that I'm flat on my back," Scott said grimly.

"It gives you more time to make up with Ruth," the Morgan Kid exclaimed. "I reckon I ain't blind if the rest of them are."

Scott clutched at the bed covers and tried to control the sudden burst of temper which forced the blood from his face and shook him so violently that the bedstead rattled against the wall.

"Listen, Kid," he said finally, "get on your horse and ride down to the southeast line of the ranch. When you get down there, you'll find out what I was doing last night. And when you've found out, don't come near me for two or three days. Now get out and do as I told you."

THE Kid rode down to the section of the Link Circle ranch where Scott had told him to go. About a hundred head of gaunt Link Circle steers were grazing there. The Kid recognized them as the cattle which he had seen penned up in the canyon corral. It was the bunch which Tod Morgan declared Black Diamond had bought and started to drive away.

Hanging to the low branch of a willow tree down near the river was the body of a man.

The Morgan Kid rode closer and discovered it to be Pete, Black Diamond's companion and the man who had let down the canyon corral bars and started the stolen Link Circle cattle eastward just before Tod Morgan had been shot. A rifle lay on the ground under Pete's swinging body. The Kid ejected all the shells from the rifle magazine, and found that it was of the same caliber as the empty shell he had found among the clump of willows from which Scott had been shot. It was the same caliber as the bullet which had crippled Tod Morgan. The rope around the dead man's neck belonged to Scott. It was a two-colored

braided horsehair rope which the Kid recognized at once.

In some way or another Scott had recovered the stolen cattle and had made Pete help him drive them back to the Link Circle range. Then he had strung Pete up to the willow tree.

THE Kid had no idea what had happened to Joe and Blackie and Diamond. He now understood why Scott had ridden away from the ranch, and Scott's presence in the canyon after Tod Morgan had been shot was explained later when he rode back to the ranch-house with news of what he had found.

He did not talk to Scott, but Tod Morgan himself absolved Scott from any blame in the shooting.

"I've been talking to Scott," he explained, "and I did see him down there just after I was shot. He had ridden down there to drive the Link Circle steers back to our range. When he heard the rifle shot, he naturally figured it was aimed at him, and got under cover as best he could. He didn't know that the bullet was meant for me and didn't even know that I was down there."

"Did he kill Joe and Blackie and Diamond?" the Kid asked.

Tod Morgan shook his head.

"You'll have to ask him," he said. "He told me Pete was hanging down there from that willow tree, and that there had been a battle. You must have riled him up considerable, son, for he wasn't in any mood to talk."

Ruth turned her head and refused to look at him as he left Tod Morgan's bedside.

For four or five hours the Morgan Kid



sat out on the corral fence trying to make up his mind as to what he should do. He realized that he had made a fool of himself. Ruth's attitude filled him with a dull ache and

an utter disregard of what happened to him in the future.

At noon he ate with the men in the bunk-house, and heard them predicting that Tod Morgan would never be able to use his legs again.

Late in the afternoon he walked into the ranch-house, and, disregarding Scott's orders to stay away, pushed open the door into Scott's room and walked in. Scott saw him but did not order him out. The Kid closed the door carefully and then came over to Scott's bedside.

"I'm sorry I said what I did," he said manfully. "I was wrong and I want to apologize. But I don't take it back about you pretending you are sicker than you are and laying in here to make up with Ruth."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" Scott demanded.

"I'm going to leave here tonight," the Kid declared. "You're a better man than I am, and you deserve her more than I do, I reckon. She cares for you more than she does for me, so I'm goin' to leave. I reckon that's the easiest way out of this for all of us."

"You're what?" Scott demanded sharply.

"I'm going to ride west into Arizona," the Kid declared. "While you're here I reckon Cousin Tod don't need me none, and you and Ruth would rather see me get out of the way."

"Why?"

"Well, I reckon there's no use trying to fool you about the way I feel about Ruth," the Kid said slowly. "But the best man won, and I'll go away without any hard feelings. I wish you both happiness."

"Come here, you damned young fool," Scott ordered roughly, as the Kid turned and started to stumble out of the room.

SCOTT turned his face away and waited a few minutes before he continued. When he spoke again his voice was hoarse and his eyes were unnaturally bright and damp.

"Listen, Kid," he said gently. "I didn't realize what was happening."

"Anyway, we're cousins—sort of," the Kid said, "and I reckon that would always stand between us."

"Pull your chair up close, Kid," Scott directed. "You've forced me into declaring myself. I reckon it had to come sooner

or later, and since Tod was hurt this morning I've about decided to do it anyway. But I don't want anyone else to hear what I've got to say. It's just between you and me, and you must give me your word that it will never be repeated."

"I'd rather you didn't tell me anything," the Kid protested. "It was hard for me to make up my mind to leave, but it's all made up, and I'll go without any fuss."

"Well, after you hear what I've got to say, you can still go if you want to," Scott offered. "But I think you will decide you'll be needed here more than ever."

"Well, if you think it best——" the Kid said, pulling his chair up to the sick man's bed.

"I talked to the doctor after he looked at Tod," Scott explained, "and the doctor is afraid that a bone in Tod's spinal column has been crushed, and is pressing against his nerves in some way so that he'll never walk again until an operation is performed, and the operation is so delicate that it's liable to be fatal if it's ever attempted."

"Who shot him?" the Kid asked. "Was it Diamond?"

"No, I reckon it was Pete," Scott said. "Pete was the only one that had a rifle. I left Joe and Blackie where they fell. Diamond wasn't with the bunch when I caught up with them. I guess he'd left them and rode on back to Dead Rock. But what I'm getting at is this, Kid. Ruth and Tod Morgan will need someone here to protect them now."

"Well, you'll be all right in a few days," the Kid commented.

"Yes, in a few days I'll be riding on," Scott said sadly.

"You stay and let me go," the Kid begged bravely. "Ruth likes you better than she does me."

"I hope so," Scott declared wistfully, "Kid, I'm Ruth's father."

The Kid looked at him with open-mouthed astonishment and unbelief.

"It's true," Scott said quietly. "Here is the story. I'm older than I look. Ruth's mother and I were married when we were both young and I came here and started the Link Circle ranch. About the time Ruth was born Tod Morgan came down from Kentucky. He was a fine looking young

fellow, just a few years older than I was, and a thorough gentleman. I hired him to help me with the ranch.

"Kid, it's easy for a man to make a fool of himself. I was young and wild and hot-headed and didn't give a damn about nothing or nobody. Tod Morgan was just my opposite. I'd go out and stay out all night, gambling and raising hell, and he'd stay here taking care of Ruth's mother and Ruth and the ranch.

"I don't blame anybody for what happened. It doesn't matter how I discovered it, but I found out that Ruth's mother was in love with Tod Morgan, and had lost her love for me."

"Does Ruth know you're her father?" the Kid asked.

"I'm telling the story," Scott said impatiently. "You just listen to me.

"When I discovered what was happening, I first thought I'd kill Morgan, but I loved Ruth's mother too much to do that. I thought the matter over for a few days, and saw she was right. I didn't deserve a woman's love and respect.

"When I decided that, there was only one thing to do. I simply disappeared. I just rode off one night and never came back."

"So you really own the Link Circle ranch?" the Kid said.

"I started it, but Tod Morgan increased the herd to ten times its original size and the ranch itself to many times what it was when I started it," Scott explained.

"When I'd been gone about six months, I hired a man to come back here and tell



Ruth's mother that I was dead. I hired him to say that I'd been killed down in Mexico and that he himself had buried me. To make the proof positive, I sent back my watch with a picture of her in the back of it, and a ring, and a belt buckle that she had given me.

"A year or so later I heard that she and Tod Morgan had been married. Ruth never knew any father except Tod Morgan. This

was a big country then, and a wild one.

"I didn't expect anyone to recognize me when I came back, but Black Diamond did. He's the only one that knows me. He came out here and told Tod Morgan that I was still alive."

"Doesn't Ruth know who you are?" the Morgan Kid repeated.

"No," Scott said, "and I think it's better if she never does. I talked to Tod. They've never told her about me. If I told her I was her father it would ruin her respect for me, it would tarnish the memory of her mother, and it might change her love for Tod Morgan, the only father she has ever known and a better man than I will ever be.

"She's a wonderful girl, Kid, and I'm glad I came back to get acquainted with her. But I don't want to spoil her life and Tod Morgan's life and make her hate me by telling her the story.

"When Tod Morgan dies, the ranch will go to her. Black Diamond used his knowledge of my identity to try to rob the ranch. He threatened to tell Ruth the whole story unless Tod would shut his eyes to what was going on. That's why Tod was willing to let him get away with those few steers last night. A hundred head of cattle didn't mean anything compared to the unhappiness Diamond could cause Ruth."

"How do you know he hasn't told anyone?" the Morgan Kid asked.

"I know Diamond," Scott replied. "He could blackmail Tod Morgan just as long as he and nobody else knew the secret. He isn't the kind that would ever give anything away."

"But if you leave here what will he do?" the Kid protested.

"When I leave here Diamond's talking days will be finished," Scott said grimly. "I think it's fair that you know. Tod Morgan and I talked about that and we both intended to tell you some day. I thought I'd stay for a while. But I guess I might as well be going along. If Tod Morgan ever wants to tell Ruth about me, why, he can. If he doesn't, I'll never show up here as long as he lives. I have plenty of money, and I'm too restless to be tied down long to one place, anyway. I was born a wanderer, and I reckon I'll die one.

"But I want your promise, Kid, that you'll never tell Ruth. For the sake of the memory of her mother, I hope she's never told."

"I'll give you my word if you want me to," the Kid promised.

"All right, Kid. Now get out and leave me alone for a while. I'm tired, and I want to do some planning."

THE Kid ate supper with the men in the bunkhouse and crawled into an empty bunk there for the night. But he had hardly turned in when one of the men who had volunteered to sit at Tod Morgan's bedside for the night ran into the bunkhouse and told the Morgan Kid that the rancher wanted to see him in a hurry.

The Kid dressed as quickly as he could and went over to the ranch-house. As he went in he noticed that Scott's door was open and that his bed was unoccupied.

Tod Morgan was propped up in bed. Ruth was at his side, holding his hand.

"Scott's gone," he said weakly to the Kid. "I reckon you're about the only one that can get him back. He said he was going in to settle with Diamond. Catch him if you can and try to persuade him to come back here. Tell him I know how seriously I'm hurt and that he's got to come. Tell him that I'm going to tell Ruth everything, and that there's no reason why he should fight Diamond. He's told you; hasn't he?"

The Kid nodded.

"Then don't waste any time," the rancher pleaded. "I think he's gone in there to kill Diamond and then let himself be killed. I'd rather die myself than see that happen."

"Can I take the men with me?" the Morgan Kid asked.

"Take them all if you want them."

"I reckon they'll all be needed," the Kid declared, "and I'll do my best to bring him back. And, Cousin Tod, I reckon it takes a man to tell Ruth what you're going to tell her."

Every man on the Link Circle ranch went with the Morgan Kid. He simply told them that Scott had gone in to fight it out with Black Diamond, and that he needed help. They all volunteered.

He wanted to ride on ahead, but they persuaded him to go with them. They ar-

gued that Scott would have to ride slow, and pointed out the number of gunmen with which Black Diamond was surrounded, and told him it would be foolish if he rode ahead into trouble. He acknowledged the wisdom of this and reined his horse down to the gait of the slower cow ponies.

IT WAS late when they arrived in Dead Rock. Only a few scattering ponies stood around the hitchrack in front of the Cannon Ball Saloon. The Kid did not recognize Scott's horse among them.

He ran into the Cannon Ball a little ahead of the rest of the Link Circle men, and, remembering what Scott had said about Diamond spending his evenings in one of the booths above the dance floor, he ran up the balcony stairs and opened each booth door as he passed it.

Diamond was alone in one at the end of the dance-hall. He looked into the muzzle of the Morgan Kid's gun and arched his eyebrows in surprise.

"Where's Scott?" the Morgan Kid demanded, "and don't try no tricks."

"How should I know?" Diamond answered. "I thought he'd be plumb satisfied with the murdering he done last night and be out at the ranch. Why did you expect him here?"

"Don't stall for time," the Morgan Kid said savagely. "It won't do you no good. Tod Morgan has told Ruth the truth by this time, and I've got the whole Link Circle outfit with me. They've got all your hired men covered downstairs. You ain't got no help. Cousin Tod said Scott had come in here to shoot it out with you. Where is he?"

DIAMOND seemed to reflect for a few seconds.

"Pete said he had killed the old gent," he remarked.

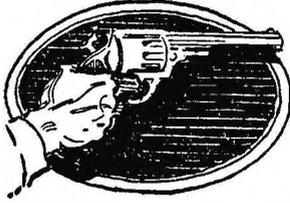
"Evidently Pete was lyin' as usual; he's all right," the Kid said. "I'm askin' you again where's Scott? If you don't answer, I'm going to drill you."

"So you've got everybody in here with you?" Diamond mused.

The Kid saw him move his feet over toward the booth wall and step on a button. Almost immediately all the lights in the building were extinguished. He fired at the

spot where Diamond had been sitting, but his bullet crashed through the partition wall and he heard Diamond's mocking laugh at the door.

"Come on, Kid," Diamond challenged. "I said you and I would have a horse race.



If you've left the Link Circle ranch with only Ruth and that old man out there, I guess it's a good time

for me to pay a visit to the place. I've got something to settle with Tod, and then I guess Ruth and I can take a little visit down south."

The Morgan Kid fired again, but again he missed. Guns began to blaze down in the darkness below him. He thought he heard Diamond drop down to the dance hall floor, but he was not sure. Men and women were screaming and trying to get out of the back exit.

The Kid ran down the stairs and bumped into one of the Link Circle riders.

"I couldn't find Scott," he shouted. "If he comes, tell him that Diamond's gone out to the Link Circle ranch, and that I'm going after him. Tell him to hurry."

He ran out to the hitchrack and jumped on his horse.

There was only one trail that led from Dead Rock to the Link Circle ranch. It was wide and well-defined. As he left Dead Rock, the Kid saw a horse and rider ahead of him. He recognized the horse as that of Diamond's.

Speaking a word of encouragement to his own horse, he shook the bridle reins free and started in pursuit.

DIAMOND'S horse was fresh. For the first mile or so he drew steadily away from the Morgan Kid, but the thoroughbred blood in his fine Kentucky mount soon began to tell.

Inch by inch he came nearer until he could feel the dirt in his face from the hoofs of Diamond's running horse.

He made no move to use his gun, nor did Diamond make any attempt to use his.

As the Kid came nearer, Diamond began to beat his horse and frantically urged it to

greater speed. All he accomplished was to throw his horse off its stride and give the Morgan Kid an opportunity to close up.

He drew alongside, and with a yell that went back to his boyhood days in the mountains of Kentucky, he stretched out his arms and threw himself at Diamond's neck. His hands reached their mark, and the force of his flying leap pulled Diamond backward out of his saddle.

THEY were both stunned for a moment; then they grappled and commenced to fight.

The Morgan Kid had lost his guns when he fell. Black Diamond had lost the one which he wore at his waist, but the Kid could feel another shoulder gun as he wrapped his arms around the gambler's body.

The Morgan Kid had no idea how long they fought. Rolling around in the sand, fighting, scratching, gouging, hammering at each other's faces, it was an even fight until the Morgan Kid suddenly felt a hand tighten about his collar.

It was Scott.

"I reckon I can take care of this thing from now on, Kid," he said coolly.

A red glow appeared in the sky in the direction of Dead Rock.

"You don't have to fight him, Scott," the Kid yelled. "Cousin Tod has told Ruth everything. He kain't blackmail you no more. There's no use getting yourself killed. Cousin Tod wants you to come back to the ranch."

SCOTT'S grim expression did not change.

"Get up," he ordered Diamond. "I was just riding into Dead Rock to settle things with you when I happened in on this scrap. I couldn't believe my eyes at first, but I reckon the Lord has played you a dirty trick."

"I'm not armed," Diamond protested.

"He is too," the Kid declared.

Scott walked over to where the gambler lay and tried to yank him to his feet. Diamond groaned and rolled over onto his face. Scott stooped down and shook him. He moved with difficulty, as he could hardly touch his wounded leg to the ground.

"Get up, you skunk, and fight," he said contemptuously.

WITH the sudden movement of a snake that uncoils itself to strike, Diamond rolled over and staggered to his feet with a gun in his right hand.

"Look out!" the Kid yelled.

Scott laughed harshly. As he brought his hands up from his side they were both spitting fire.

Black Diamond's fingers clutched his gun convulsively and he fired into the ground as he pitched forward on his face.

Scott rolled him over on his back, and after looking at him for a moment, put his guns back in his holster.

"That's all of that, Kid," he said wearily. "I reckon Ruth or none of you would have been safe with that skunk living."

"But I started to tell you that Cousin Tod had told Ruth everything," the Kid declared.

NOW that the fight was over he saw that he was shivering and shaking from fright and nervous exhaustion.

"I thought he would, Kid," Scott declared. "Tod Morgan is a man among men. But I made up my mind, and I guess there's no use changing it now."

The Kid suddenly noticed that Scott's bedding roll and blankets were tied on behind his saddle.

"I reckon it's best for us all that I leave," Scott said. "Some day I may come back. If you ever need me, I'll be here. Don't try

to find out how I'll keep track of what's going on at the Link Circle, and I think that after you consider the matter a while, you will agree with me that it's best that I leave. As long as Tod Morgan lives I'll keep out of the way. Tod raised Ruth and he has a right to her love and care. I'm a wanderer and I wouldn't be satisfied doing anything else."

The red glow over Dead Rock increased and forks of flames appeared over the range.

"Diamond's got lots of friends," Scott continued, "I reckon that after what's happened tonight that if I did go back to the ranch I'd only cause trouble.

"I'm going down below the border where I've got a ranch or two, and I guess it's up to you, Kid, to take care of Ruth and the Link Circle until I get back."

"I wish you wouldn't go," the Kid pleaded.

"I made one mistake in life and there's no use making another," Scott said calmly. "Ruth thinks a lot of you, Kid. You go back and tell her that her dad thinks just as much. And some day, when I get old and feeble and need some home cooking again, I may come back and settle down with you. But be good to her, Kid. Good-by."

He went over to his horse, mounted it, and headed it southward toward the border.

The Morgan Kid was too filled with emotion to speak. He was not ashamed of the tears which streamed down his cheeks and blurred his eyes so that Scott was soon lost from sight.

Ruth was waiting for him when he got back to the Link Circle ranch. She was standing at the corral gate watching the red glow over Dead Rock.

He told her what had happened and she sobbed for a while on his shoulder. Then, hand in hand, they walked into the ranch-house and sat down on the edge of Tod Morgan's bed.

"Scott said as long as you live the Link Circle ranch and Ruth are yours," the Kid told him, and then related what had happened.

"Then, son, we'll have to take care of them, so that if Scott ever changes his mind and comes back, he can see that we haven't betrayed his trust.

"From what Ruth tells me, I guess the boys have wiped Dead Rock off the map. It's a hell hole that deserved to be burned long before now," continued Tod Morgan. "I reckon, son, that you'll help me take care of Ruth for Scott."

"If she'll let me," the Morgan Kid promised. "And even if she won't, I'll stay around and do my best for I promised him that I would."





FEAR

By ROBERT CARSE

Author of "The Purple Shirt," etc.

HIS REGIMENT WAS ORDERED UP TO THE FRONT, BUT THE COLONEL WAS ORDERED BACK TO BLOIS—THE SINK-HOLE OF THE A. E. F., FOR INCOMPETENTS. PERHAPS THE COLONEL'S TROUBLE WAS NOT KNOWING HOW TO DO WHAT HE WAS TOLD. ANYWAY, HE CONTINUED NOT TO—WITH ASTOUNDING RESULTS

THE Colonel sat with his head in his hands at a small, bare table in regimental headquarters. When at last he straightened vaguely up he caught sight of himself in a mirror across the room, and that sight frightened him.

He came slowly to his feet and crossed the big, deserted room toward the mirror, eyes on his own eyes in the glass. Directly before it he stopped. The man he saw therein was white faced, terrifically haggard. The fleshy face was deeply lined, the eyes dull and feverish, the mouth slack, still stupid with wonder and astonishment.

The Colonel felt of his collar ornaments, the crossed rifles and numerals of his regiment, then the eagles of his rank upon his shoulder straps, then the smooth, thick and heavy leather of his Sam Browne belt. A small moan issued from his lips.

Those clean, bright crossed rifles, those neat white eagles on his shoulder straps were no longer his. Perhaps not even the smoothly shining Sam Browne belt. For he had been busted, broken, benzined just now. He said these words aloud, and the sound of them made him shudder.

He cursed, then, cursed like a wilful, frightened child. Cursed this Army, cursed the Regular Army mahogany-faced old Brigadier General Inspector who had just benzined him—the man who in the last hour had sent his whole world reeling and swaying about him as he told him he was without doubt the poorest colonel, the most slovenly commanding officer and peace-time militia officer that it had been his pleasure to benzine, bust and send to Blois—the sink-hole of the A. E. F., the bugaboo and end of any officer!

A shudder shook the Colonel again as he thought of the old Brigadier's growled words. Dirty camp—unpoliced streets, unpoliced barracks—corporal of the guard drunk—sentries walking post with rifles greasy with cosmoline, no cartridge belts and no bayonets—

There were other charges, too, many of them. But the Colonel did not recall them now. Instead his mind was occupied with bitter, blurred wonder of what his wife Minna and the kids, the people on the block and everyone else at home would think when the news—the news—

He sobbed through his teeth. The sound

startled and enraged him, gave him some perspective on himself and his new and terrible position. Swiftly, clearly, he considered what he should do. The Colonel was not a stupid man, nor an overly bright one. But now he thought with fear-inspired clarity. He must get out of here and away before one of his staff came in and saw him as he was. That would be unbearable.

What had happened to old Joe Smith, his lifelong friend and the Adjutant of the regiment, he did not know. Probably old Joe had caught it in the neck, too. Undoubtedly, thought the Colonel, thinking briefly of old Joe's hapless, amiable way of conducting his paper work and the work of the headquarters company! But Joe—the hell with Joe!

IT MUST be himself now, and himself alone. He was—had been, he corrected himself savagely—the Colonel of this outfit, and on his head must fall the blame, the amassed wrath and horror of the county and town at home.

The taste of his sudden tears was bitter in his mouth. Through his mind had just passed a vision of the regiment some four months before, parading down the main street of Springdale from the familiar old red brick armory. Flags, flags, bunting on the post office, the banks, the stores, the churches, even. The reviewing box before the county courthouse had been packed with the mayor, the city council and their families, but Minna was there in the front row, with the four kiddies beside her—for that handsome, stiff-striding figure out there was the Colonel, her husband!

A hot feeling of pain clamped the Colonel's throat. In one swift and terrible gesture he rent the piece of paper he held in his shaking hands into bits. It had been his order of relief and transfer to Blois, signed and issued by the Brigadier Inspector from Chaumont. The Colonel looked down at the fluttering bits and laughed, a little insanely. To hell with it!

If this man's Army did not want him, he did not want the Army! But, he knew, he must get out of here, and hurriedly. All of them would not get broken, get sent to Blois, and some one of those who did not get busted might come banging in here now,

discover him, and write home to Springdale and tell them there how he had looked and acted when this had happened. No, not one of them must know about that; let them imagine and lie as they would, but he could always ever afterward discount that as lying and imagination.

He moved rapidly to one of the windows and looked furtively out. It was still dark without, the French rain drumming down on the tar-paper roof and from the eaves in violent, slanting lines. In the middle of the rain-pooled, soggy company street stood a huge brown Cadillac limousine, its headlights burning dimly, a discreet red glow coming from time to time through the side-curtains in front as the Brigadier Inspector's driver inhaled on his cigarette, cupped in the palm of his hand. The old unnamable and his assistants in torture and ruin were still in the regiment, still in the camp, then? What new and terrible havoc was the white-mustached old son of a swine raising?

Suddenly the Colonel knew that he did not care, that, indeed, it was no longer any of his business. He himself had received his bitter share. That was all that counted—now. Except that he must get out of here, and at once. What if the skinny old son of a son came back, and found him still here, the scraps of his neatly signed order of relief and transfer to Blois strewn whitely across the floor? The Colonel shuddered; he could not face that man's cold, terrific rage and knowledge again! No, and again no!

HE PACED swiftly over to one of his private foot lockers in the corner. From it he ripped his new French trench-coat, purchased for many, many francs the week they had landed at Le Havre. He slipped it on. Into an inner pocket of it he placed a rubberized thin and flat money belt, also a new possession, which held his total capital of some four hundred francs. Hanging from a hook in the rear of the up-ended foot locker was the Colonel's personal Colt .45 automatic, encased in its shiny leather holster. For a moment the Colonel studied it, and a new thought seared through his brain, making cold sweat come to his forehead, making his white, flabby hands shake and quiver.

Clammy fingers found the flap of the holster, opened it, pushed it back. In his hand was the flat, cool steel of the thing. The Colonel straightened back his shoulders stiffly, raised the thing, throwing off the safety catch. But no; he was a coward; he could not. No—no!

Instead he slipped the thing into one of the capacious side pockets of the trench coat. He slammed to and locked the door of the foot locker, turned about. Once again he took in the bare and deserted room. This had been the final setting of his last glory, and of his bitter, swift disgrace. He would, he knew, never see it again. Not that he ever wished to, he told himself viciously.

Then a new and craftily clever thought came to him, and he moved over to the desk of old Joe Smith, his life long friend, and the adjutant of the regiment. From Joe's top drawer he took an already signed railroad pass, the rest of it left blank in Joe's broadminded manner. The rest of that order the Colonel filled in, not at all attempting to copy old Joe's handwriting. The Colonel was not a particularly intelligent man, but again, he was not a stupid one. Right now his brain was functioning with feverish, abnormal luminosity, and he was very aware that upon his shoulders, upon the side of his cocky new overseas cap were still the small, neat eagles which told all of the military world from Bordeaux to the Front that he was a Colonel of infantry, a man to be saluted, and "sirred" and left very much alone.

There was even, in fact, a small and boyish smile of hopeful wonder about his lips as he swung around and stamped across the shaky wooden floor toward a small and little-used door at the end of the room. Buttoning the cross-flap of his trench coat as he stepped out into the darkness and the mud and rain, the Colonel spoke softly aloud: "Minna, if they're going to have my hide, they're going to have all of it, but no 'Blooley Blois' for me!"

THE sentries walked post with new and rapid smartness, the corporal of the guard was either sober or had been changed, the Colonel found. Did these boys know? the Colonel wondered as he splashed by them, head down. Almost all of them he knew by name, for they had soldiered with him in the good old easy peace days at home. Some of them had worked in the store at home; others had danced with his oldest daughter, Vera, at the regimental and company dances in the armory. Two of them, he recognized, had been his personal orderlies at summer camp the happy year before. And now—

He was out of the gate; the barbwire and the strings of lights were behind him. Ahead, dim, white and straight, stretched the French military road that led to Imry. He followed it, walking rapidly, head back, for it was dryer under the poplars at the side of the road and the insistent rain no longer beat hard at his eyeballs.

Three times automobiles roared by him, headlights like golden wings ahead. The first time he kept to his position in the side of the road, and was almost run down by the hurtling machine. When he heard the second one pounding behind him he took the edge of the ditch, back turned to it, so that the mud and water splashed up might not strike his face. But when the sound of the third was loud in his ears he flattened out in the muddy, stiff grass of the ditch, hands over his face. He was, he had just realized, no longer a Colonel of infantry. He was, in short, a fugitive. A. W. O. L.

It took him two hours of stiff walking to get into Imry. The town was all but asleep. In the square before the mayor's office a poncho-covered sergeant of military police stood, his red-and-blue arm band well in evidence. The Colonel could clearly see it when a hundred paces away. Then he stopped, and drew into the shadows of a doorway and thought things over. Where he was going he did not know or care—except that he was not going to Blois or to the States, unless taken in handcuffs. But, he realized, Colonels of infantry, or any other arm of the service, did not walk on foot and alone and at night or any other time. The sergeant of military police probably also entertained the same belief.



There was no doubt he could outface the man, and would undoubtedly have to outface many others just like him, if not worse. But, this was Imry, and the provost-marshal in the town was known to him, and in all likelihood, the majority of the non-commissioned men of his staff knew him by sight. Soldiers were talkative, remembered the Colonel. Especially military police!

THERE was an alley just past the house where he stood. He took it. In time, and after some stumbling around in the darkness and over piles of refuse and old manure, he came out again into the principal square, to find himself on the other side of the mayor's office, and the sergeant of military police gone from sight.

The Colonel crossed the cobbles of the square, walking fast. Turning a corner by a small *epicerie*, he saw before him the red and green glimmer of switch lights, the dim yellow blur of the station itself, partially hidden by the black shadows of box cars on a siding. There was small sign of life there, but the Colonel knew there would in all probability be one if not more of the ubiquitous military policemen somewhere about. He would not go there—yet.

Instead he crossed the ties and rails toward a small and poorly lit place that bore without a battered sign which read *Vins, Tabacs*. The door was shut, seemingly locked. Upon it the Colonel hammered persistently with the heel of his hand.

At last it was opened to him and a thin man with a fat black mustache in the Marshal Joffre manner blinked out at him. He frowned and cursed at sight of the khaki, then broke into an unctuous, "Good evening, my Colonel!" when he took in the quality of the trench coat, the cordovan puttees beneath, the small silver eagle on the Colonel's rain-black cap. The Colonel entered rapidly.

"Close and lock that door," he ordered in his bad French. "You know when the next train leaves?"

"But yes, my Colonel. Within the next hour and one half—if they are not late nine hours, as the last one."

"You know where it goes—what kind of train it is?"

"But yes, my Colonel; the husband of

my aunt is the *chef de gare*. The hungry pig has just gone out now. The train is a 'rapid,' and goes to Bordeaux. It——"

"That is enough," cut in the Colonel, very military. "Now how about some cognac of the Martel Brothers, an omelette and some black coffee—not chicory."

"All of the greatest excellence and speed, my Colonel! The *cognac*?"

"Now. In the bottle."

"Ah!" said the man with the fat mustache, and ducked away.

THE Bordeaux "rapid" did not arrive for five hours. In that time the Colonel consumed three omelettes, six cups of scorching hot coffee, and well over a pint of the brandy of the Martel Brothers.

The Colonel was not by nature or habit a drinking man. He had believed, though, that liquor would be good for what ailed him. This he had found emphatically to

be so. He had never assaulted himself with three star *cognac* before and the effect was tremendous and exhilarating. The world glowed and spun prismatically around him. He had forced a number of drinks upon the nephew-in-law of the *chef de gare*. And that gentleman, who had not drunk brandy since July, 1914, became beautifully luminous, singing songs in French and what he claimed to be "English." But the Colonel retained enough control of himself to realize that too much noise would destroy him utterly and he silenced the man, who finally slept, shaggy chin propped on the table edge, eyes open and round, like black shoe buttons.

When the "rapid" finally thundered into the station at a full twelve miles an hour the Colonel reeled erect, buttoned his trench coat, slipped two ten-franc notes between the man's rough chin and the table and let himself softly out.

The cool force of the rain against his face was grateful and sobering, but he was still riding on a high, glorious wave when he reached the tiny station platform. A knot



of three M. P.'s stood there beside the *chef de gare*, who held in his white-gloved hand a long tin horn. The M. P.'s looked staringly up as the Colonel banged down the platform. This, the Colonel knew, must be his moment.

"The Bordeaux express?" he snapped, scowling as he had never scowled at any man before.

The M. P.'s hands were by their sides, their heads were up, their heels together; they stood at stiff attention.

"Yes, sir," answered the tallest of the three quickly, a man who wore upon his sleeve a corporal's chevrons. "The Colonel wishes a compartment?"

"Yes," growled the Colonel, still scowling.

"The Colonel has luggage?"

"No. I'm only going down the line. Show me that compartment!"

THE corporal of military police saluted, did a smart right face, stepped off. Swiftly, the Colonel followed. Near the head of the train the corporal stopped, opened the door of a first-class compartment, peered inside. He then used a one syllable word emphatically.

"Outta here, yuh bums!" he barked. He whacked at unseen feet with his club. Groans, shouts and curses came from within. "Outa here!" rasped the corporal again, busy with his club. His two companions approached on the run. "Dump them hombres outa there an' fling 'em in the back cars!" ordered the corporal. The hombres, forcibly persuaded, came forth, dragging packs and musette bags, rifles and blankets, beneath which they attempted to hide bottles of wine. "All ready for you, sir!" said the corporal briskly, coming smartly to the hand salute.

"Very good, Corporal," granted the Colonel, and returned the salute.

He got in. The corporal shut the door softly. The *chef de gare* elicited a long, snorting howl from his thin horn. The engineer replied with bell and whistles. The train jerked on. The short cars bumped and swayed over the uneven roadbed; in the Colonel's compartment there was no light and he sat in complete darkness. The after effects of the brandy made him sleepy

now and despite his many bitter thoughts he at last slipped into a deep if uncomfortable slumber.

He was awakened by the rays of a flashlight against his eyelids. He sat up bad naturedly.

"What the hell is it?" he grunted.

"Sorry, sir," said the young M. P. who held the flashlight, "but this is Bordeaux and these cars are leaving the station for the yards at once."

"Huh!" snapped the Colonel. "Thanks!"

He got stiffly up and scrambled out of the carriage, the young M. P. stepping back respectfully.

"That way, sir," said the M. P., pointing.

THE Colonel nodded without word, and went the opposite way as soon as the M. P. had turned his back. He stumbled over siding switches, over chunks of coal, to come eventually up against a high board fence. This he surveyed grimly. No, he told himself, he was too old, too fat and too tired to negotiate that. He must go back and brave the gate indicated by the M. P. who had aroused him.

Curse his own stupidity anyhow! What the hell was he doing here in Bordeaux, what the hell was he——

There was no answer, he realized. He was just stupidly and blindly trying to flee from himself, and would probably end up in Leavenworth, doing a deserter's share on the rock pile with a hammer!

The gate was right in front of him, now, and about it a half dozen men wearing the now sickeningly familiar red-and-blue arm bands of the military police. The Colonel straightened back his shoulders and stepped forward at an increased pace. A man wearing the hatcord of an officer and a web-holstered Colt slung from his trench coat belt, stepped forward, halted, saluted. The Colonel returned the salute snappily.

"The Colonel has his pass?" asked the round-faced lieutenant of military police.

Without word the Colonel produced old Joe Smith's railroad pass that he himself had filled in at the training camp behind the front. The lieutenant surveyed it thoughtfully, and a small, quick frown gathered on his smooth forehead. He looked up, taking in the Colonel's heavy, lined face, the gray

hair beneath the edge of the overseas cap, the little silver eagle on that cap.

"This is a railroad pass, sir," he said slowly.

"Exactly!" said the Colonel, and held out his hand for it.

Reluctantly, the young lieutenant handed it to him.

"The Colonel's regiment left for Messanie-la Ture last night, didn't it, sir?"

The Colonel laughed merrily.

"That's another of those service of Supply rumors, young fellow! You wouldn't find me here if it had."

Then he stepped on through the gate, returning the enlisted men's salutes briskly, but quite aware that they were staring very curiously after him once his back was to them. Cold little beads of perspiration broke out on his forehead; that had all been much closer and harder than he had expected! The Colonel lit a cigarette, and his hand shook as he did so.

THERE was one great flaw in all this business, he told himself as he stumbled on through the dawn-gray street. He was to all eyes a Colonel of infantry, and even the lowliest rear rank buck knew that a doughboy colonel would not plunge around alone for long, without any orderly or the



smallest piece of luggage. No. A lieutenant, a captain, a major, even, might bang around in the manner he now was, but his rank was too high, aroused too much curiosity. Colonels just didn't do it. There were no casual colonels, no men bearing eagles upon their shoulder straps and caps who wandered around France away from their commands.

He stopped against the wall of a warehouse to think things over. That young M. P. lieutenant at the station had all but held him for further investigation; a more hard-boiled and cynical youth assuredly would have. But, what to do? What if he stripped himself of his marks of rank, took off collar, cap and shoulder insignia, flung away

his Sam Browne belt? He would still ostensibly be an officer; his trench coat, his cap, his puttees and the quality and cut of his beautiful whipcord uniform would at once show him to the observant eye as an officer.

But, there must be some way out! And he must find it hurriedly or it would all be over for him. Bitterly, he cursed himself for responding to this mad impulse of fright and for not obeying his order of detachment, transfer, and disgrace, to Blois.

The sun was up now, and Bordeaux was coming to life. American and French trucks banged through the streets. There were soldiers everywhere. The Colonel was busy returning salutes. He crossed the main boulevard through an eddy of trucks, Fords, motorcycles and big brown staff cars, only to halt hesitantly on the far side. A tomato-faced, fat lieutenant-colonel of the Quartermaster Corps glared at him curiously from the rear seat of an Army Dodge and the Colonel glared back, only to realize that the collar of his trench coat had slipped down from the collar of his tunic and his crossed rifles and the numerals of his regiment were visible. What the hell was it the young M. P. lieutenant had said about his outfit pulling out for Messanie-la Ture? That was the Front, or right behind the Front. He had doubted it before, and made the young lieutenant doubt it. But, it was manifestly so, for he had never seen the fat lieutenant-colonel of the Q. M. Corps before, and the man's only curiosity in him had been the numerals of his regiment.

Out of here, said the Colonel to himself, and in a hurry! He ducked down a little side street, too narrow for automobile traffic, where the rough-beamed houses leaned crazily out over the cobbles, their upper stories touching against one another in places. There were no soldiers in the place, just a few old French civilians, talking with the shrill volubility of age. They looked up at him as he passed, but without curiosity; in the last three months they had seen many, many American soldiers.

AROUND a sharp corner the street widened out a bit, and the dwelling houses gave way to small shops, a tobacconist's, a dressmaker's, a barren-looking butcher

shop, a photographer's. Directly in front of the photographer's unwashed show window stood a broad and burly sergeant of the railroad troops, his big ham hands pushed deep into the rumpled O. D. of his blouse pockets, his peaked overseas cap on the very back of his head, a hand-made Bull Durham cigarette pendant from his lips. Looking up at the Colonel, he startledly began the quite complicated maneuver of taking the cigarette from his lips, jerking down his blouse-coat, bringing his body to the posture of attention and saluting. Before he was halfway through it the Colonel had looked swiftly around and seen that they were alone.

"Forget it!" snapped the Colonel, now in full possession of his great idea.

"Huh?" gawped the big sergeant. Then, remembering himself, "Sir?"

"I said forget it!" repeated the Colonel. "Come over here; I want to talk with you."

Stupid and silent with wonder the big sergeant of railway engineers followed the Colonel to a shadowy and deserted doorway across the road.

"You wanted to have your picture taken?" asked the Colonel briskly, with a nod of his head toward the photographer's window before which the sergeant had been lingering.

"Yessir!" replied the sergeant, crumpling a bit in his posture of strict attention.

"What was holding you back, then, when I came along?"

"A cupla things," muttered the sergeant, now talking man to man, soldier to soldier. "Them here damn' pants and jacket fer one thing! Ever since I been in this man's Army me girl in Wilkes-Barre has been frettin' me for a picture of me in uniform. An' this damn' thing's been shrinkin' more 'n more every time it's rained, an' mister, it sure rains bokkoo in this town! I won me some two hundred franc' down to the barracks last night an' grabbed me off some leave so's I could come up an' get mugged. But I usta be a fireman on the Pennsy in the old days, an' make good jack, an' dress han'some. I sent her a picture o' me in this here tailor's mistake, and she'll forget all about me bein' a sergeant an' prob'ly marry one o' them Home Guards!"

"Quite right!" agreed the Colonel. "Quite right!" He paused. Then: "How would you

like to exchange uniforms with me? This outfit cost me over a hundred dollars in Jacob Reed's in Philadelphia; your girl in Wilkes-Barre will appreciate that. Call it an even swap—yours for mine—and no questions asked."

"Say-ay!" said the sergeant of railway engineers. "Say-ay-ay!" He stepped back a pace or two hurriedly from the other man. "What youse tryin' to pull on me, huh? Youse think I'm dumb? They'd throw me in the mill so fast—" He paused, studying the Colonel shrewdly with hard, inquisitive eyes. "You ain't no Bosh spy, are yuh?"

"Lord, no!" barked the Colonel. "Now stop sounding off, and wait a while and listen to me. I'm A. W. O. L. Get that? I'm on the loop, and the M. P.'s are looking for me. Surely! Commissions don't mean a damn to those boys; you're enough of an oldtimer around here to know that yourself. Why am I? That's a long story, sergeant, and one I haven't got time to answer. What? Wait a minute until we get off the street and into the Frog photographer's there."

MASTERFULLY he laid a hand upon the sergeant's elbow and led that wondering, gaping man into the photographer's shop. To the proprietor he said a few words in his bad but intelligible French, then turned again to the sergeant.

"You'll knock your girl's eye out with this uniform," he told him rapidly. "You got a knife on you? Get to work, then, and strip the cords off the cap, those pieces of junk off the collar and shoulder straps, the officer's stripes off the sleeves. You can wear those puttees of mine back to camp, with the trench coat over them, and then sell them to one of your looey's. Don't take less than a hundred francs flat for the two of them. Fits fine, doesn't it? Wait a minute; give me those ornaments. Cut off your chevrons and pin them on the other blouse. Surely. Then when the Frog is through taking your picture I'll have him sew them back on your old blouse again for me. You can buy new ones at the Q. M., you've got your warrant, haven't you? Now go comb your hair at that mirror there. Sergeant, you're a married man already!"

The sergeant thought so himself as he

inflated his massive chest and smoothed down the beautiful whipcord of the Colonel's tunic over it. About his waist was the gleaming lower half of the Colonel's Sam Browne belt; on his head was the Colonel's cocky overseas cap, minus the silver eagle and blue infantry cord that had formerly brightly adorned the edges. His powerful



legs were encased within the brightness of the Colonel's cordovan puttees. Withal, he was a fine and imposing figure of a man and soldier.

Chevron-clad arm thrust prominently forward, great chest inflated, head back and up, hands clasped, he postured magnificently for the little monkey-like French photographer. Meanwhile, the Colonel clambered into the wrinkled olive drab and placed his insignia ornaments in a pocket of his rubberized money-belt, which he strapped about his waist beneath the sergeant's khaki flannel shirt.

While he struggled inexpertly with the sergeant's wrap puttees, the photographer pressed the small black bulb of his camera again and again, and the last pose of the sergeant was taken. The Colonel straightened up, to let the Frenchman sew the chevrons on his sleeve below the shoulder and above the elbow. The big sergeant still strutted magnificently, now garbed in the trench coat.

"Well, you're all set now, aren't you?" demanded the Colonel.

The sergeant nodded, a bit gravely.

"But say, guy," he asked, "ain't the gang gonna ask me some questions about 'how come' when I hit back in this business?"

"Huh!" said the Colonel, reaching down to loosen a fold of the right puttee. "Aren't you a big enough man to pipe down a little kidding? Can't you tell 'em you bought it with their crap money, and you'd like to see the man who could take it off you?"

"Say," granted the sergeant, "you're a pretty slick jasper!"

"I am right now," murmured the Colonel. He held out his hand. "Well, so long, and thanks!"

"Good luck, buddy!" barked the sergeant. "I think yer a little nuts, but that's your business. Where you bound now?"

"God alone knows," said the Colonel gently. "I don't!"

The sergeant was muttering curiously as the other went out the door.

THE Colonel walked back to the center of town with a strangely light heart. He saluted right and left, taking great joy in it. He had left his tailor-made cigarettes in a pocket of the trench coat and now, coming upon some of the sergeant's Bull Durham and papers, experimented with his first hand-rolled cigarette. He was just lighting it when he looked up and saw across from him the young lieutenant of military police he had encountered at the station. He started, then controlled himself, realizing his change in position, but still fearful enough to turn his head. When he swung around again the young lieutenant had gone from sight. He had, he realized, better get off the street until he further figured out his future plans.

He turned off the main boulevard up which he had been walking and took his way down a winding side street where there were no M. P.'s in sight, but plenty of women and American and French soldiers. Where a sign on a window read *Debit des Vins*, he turned and went in. It was a big, dark place, packed with American soldiers, the air heavy with smoke and the smell of wine, the men sitting for the most part with their blouses open, singing, eating and talking, if not drinking. He found a vacant corner and sat down.

"Got the makin's, sarge?" asked a vacuous faced youth at a table next to him.

"Yeah," he drawled, falling into his new role. He produced the Bull Durham sack and papers, passed them over.

"Thanks," said the youth, accepting them. "How about a l'il drink o' vino?"

"Don't think I'll say 'no'!"

"Attababy! Best thing fer yer troubles. Push hover there, Frank, an' let the sarge sit down. Bad-mannered bum, ain't he, sarge?"

"What outfit, sargint?" asked the man called Frank.

"Railroad. You guys all doughboys, huh?"

"Yeah. An' we won't be in this M. P.'s paradise long."

"Why not?"

At that they almost all laughed, good naturedly.

"Hot tip come through this morning at chow-time that we was bound up tonight. We been here sittin' on our butt-plates goin' on a month now. 'Bout time. These here S. O. S. guys kin have this dirty burg. We're gonna——"

"What you jawbonin' about, yuh gold-brick doughboy?" broke in a rasping, wine-thick voice from the next table.

The infantryman who had been speaking stopped abruptly, half rose up from his chair, then sank back into it again, laughing hilariously. He jerked a thumb over his shoulder toward the next table.

"Yuh hear that? One o' them yelluh-backed Q. M. belly-robbers soundin' off. He——"

There was a heavy, flat sound. A low moaning sigh came from the speaker. He fell face-down on the table. The rest was swift and incoherent. Bottles flew, chairs crashed, feet, fists, elbows and knees jabbed and swung. The Colonel had not been in a rough-and-tumble fight before in all his life; he participated in his first bitter lesson right there and then.

Some unseen man tore at him, pinned him against an upturned table edge. The Colonel hammered his face and body with weak hands, only getting one good head blow home. The man retaliated by capturing the Colonel's right thumb, biting it severely. Hot, mad rage caught the Colonel's brain. He belted the man's head with his clenched left hand, and when this did no good, came swiftly up with his knee. The man went backward, yowling. Then the Colonel half-ducked the bright arc of a swinging bottle. The thing glanced off his skull. He fell slowly sidewise just as the M. P.'s crashed in the door, yelling.

WHEN the Colonel woke up there were the smells and sounds of many men around him. The lurching of his body told him that he was again in a railroad carriage.

"Where the hell is this?" he asked hoarsely, sitting up.

Low laughter came from around him.

"This here is Black Jack Pershing's swell private box car. Yer bound fer the front, buddy, and I-ain't kiddin' one bit!"

There was something familiar about the drawling, high voice, and the Colonel pulled himself more erect and looked about him. At that moment one man struck a match and the Colonel saw next to him the vacuous faced youth of the wine-shop, and the



man named Frank and half a dozen more slightly reminiscent faces. All of them seemed quite battered with unmistakable signs of fist-

tic fray, and in a sudden rush memory of the brawl in the Bordeaux wine joint returned to the Colonel.

"Who brought me here?" he asked vaguely.

"We did," answered the man named Frank, while the car laughed again. "One o' them heavy artillerymen socked you fer a home run with a bottle and you went out like a light. Then them sons o' sons who call theirselves M. P.'s come bustin' in an' we drug you out hell fer leather, 'cause you was the handiest, I guess. Drug a couple o' other wrong guys, too; couple o' them Q. M. guys. An' what a ride they're gonna get by the time this outfit does its stuff up there! But, you're a good guy, sarge, an' a friend o' ours—a buddy. You done your act in there noble, an' we're sorry we brung youse by mistake, but we was still pretty drunk an' in a awful rush an' they was pilin' intuh the cars at camp when we got back. So when it came to 'Company, Count Off!' we propped youse up in the file closers an' shouted out fer yuh when they read the name o' one o' our real guys who was still missin'. Then they just heaved combat packs, tin hats an' masks at us, an' t'run us in these here palaces, an' there y' are."

"Well, I'm A. W. O. L. for fair now!" said the Colonel gravely.

"That's right," agreed the man named

Frank. "But don't take it too much to heart. What the hell! We get up in the lines a few days and youse kin sneak alongside the top kick with a coupla us who he knows real well an' sing yer song, see? He's a real guy, fer a wonder, the top is, an' he'll prob'ly put a buzz in the old man's ear an' fix things up fer yuh. Most jaspers when they go over the hill don't beat it fer the lines with a combat outfit, an' ain't that so! Yuh lost yer cap in that ruckus in the wine joint, an' we took them stripes an' collar ornaments offen you; ain't no sense in some snoopy staff bird banging down on you parked among a flock o' doughboys. We put them ornaments an' chevrons in yer pockets, time bein'. One thing more; yer down on the rolls as Jan Lewaski; get it? Jan, the dum Polack, he got flattened out in that riot, an' the M. P.'s has probably got him yet. His pack an' rifle is right beside you; read the number on it when yuh get a chancet, so's you'll know which is yours in a hurry. Now, yuh got the makin's, sarge?"

"Yes," said the Colonel weakly, "I have."

HE ROLLED himself a clumsy cigarette in the dark when the others returned to him his papers and Bull Durham, then some of them handed over to him corn willie, dry French bread and weak, watered wine, and he ate and drank ravenously. It was hot in that car, the air thick with tobacco smoke and the smells of many sweaty men placed close together. The effect on the Colonel was to make him very sleepy and he arranged his sore head on Jan Lewaski's pack and was soon snoring heavily.

Men were shouting and stamping about him when he awoke. The doors of the car were open and through them came gray light.

"C'mon, buddy," said one of the men beside him, "here's where we begin poundin' the pike! Fall in beside me, an' shout when the sarge yells 'Lewaski,' savvy?"

"Right!" grunted the Colonel, and fumbled down for his new pack and Springfield-Enfield.

One after another they jumped down from the car to the cinders of the siding bank, jerking their packs into place.

"Put on them tin derbies!" bawled a tall

man who wore the chevrons of a top sergeant. "Get the lead outa yer pants; snap it up!"

They obeyed and stumbled into line at the command, "Fall in." Down the siding in the dim dawn light the Colonel could make out other companies formed as themselves and could hear the sergeants' shouts of "All Present or Accounted for sir!" He himself was Number Three man in the rear rank of a nondescript squad, for which he was glad. They dressed right and came to attention while the top kick read off. Then the bow-legged little captain, followed by his lieutenants and the top sergeant, came down the aisle between the silent, sleepy men. The captain neither looked to right or left and seemed in a great hurry, the others of the inspection party following his example. An order barked out and they swung off into column right, to be given the order of route step.

THEY walked along easily, bumping one against the other, pushing back the strange shrapnel helmets from their foreheads and adjusting the straps of packs and rifles. A mist lay low against the ground and the Colonel could barely make out the bodies of the men three ranks ahead of him. Looking to the right and left of him, he saw that his neighbors wore white, strained faces and kept constantly staring up and ahead.

"What's the matter?" he asked of the Number Four man, the one who had told him his place in the squad formation.

"Listenin' to see if that was the Front, up ahead, there. Can't hear no shootin'. Mebbe they took us back to Bordeaux again, huh?"

"Don't be a sap all yer life!" snarled the man on the Colonel's right. "Smell that?"

It was impossible not to.

"Yeah," granted the Number Four man, "but that's nothin' but a dead horse over in that ditch. Horse kin die anywheres, can't he?"

"Yep!" agreed the other quickly. "But most anywheres they'd detail a coupla guys with a coupla shovels to clean it up! An' ain't I right!"

After that they were silent, content to onserve their breath and keep their thoughts

to themselves, for the Route Step order had been changed and they were swinging along to the old familiar, "*Hun, Tuh, T'ree, Foh,*" rifles at the stiff Right Shoulder, and the Colonel had the idea that somewhere off the road there in the fog were unseen but sharp-eyed staff officers watching them. This seemed to be the explanation, for a mile or so further on they were returned to the Route Step again and breathed more easily.

The Colonel was tired; more tired, he thought, than he had ever been before in his life. But still he marched mechanically, head down, pack and rifle galling at his shoulders, illy wrapped puttees cutting at his ankles. The surface of the road was hard, white, and in a kind of sleepy dream the Colonel watched the men's legs flash over it. Looking up from time to time, he saw that there were silver, straight rows of poplars on each side of the road, and between them and over the road was stretched long, weblike strips which must, he knew, be camouflage. This was the Front, then, or very near to it.

A WARM feeling of elation gripped his stomach, his entire body at the thought of it. Here was his chance to redeem himself; here was his great stroke of good luck come true. Then the feeling changed to one of deep depression and sadness, for he had just thought that his own regiment, the old outfit which had been a great part of his life ever since the Spanish-American War, was up here now—without him, with some



new Colonel, and with the full knowledge that their old Colonel, the man they had trusted and loved for so long, had been proved incompetent, and had been busted, benined, thrown out on his ear and sent to Blois in disgrace. The Colonel bit his lips until the blood came. He'd show 'em! He'd show 'em yet who was a soldier and a man! His luck was with him now, and in his money belt about his waist were—

"Down, down in the ditch!" screamed a voice.

Head over heels they tumbled in, lay holding their heads and ears. But there was no scream of descending steel, no roar of expected high explosive.

"What the hell?" asked one man nervously.

"Heinie plane," explained a nearby sergeant. "Frog anti-aircraft in the next field's gettin' ready to take a lick at it!"

Then they were all silent, twitching, waiting. The Colonel heard a snarling, high whine, unlike anything he had ever heard or imagined before. It was followed, interrupted by a swift *taka-taka-taka*. Bullets drummed the surface of that white road; bullets thrummed and sang in that field; bullets caught prone men in the back and legs as they lay in that ditch, hands over their faces, bodies cold with fear.

The motor of the low-sweeping Fokker roared as the Hun pilot gave it the plane's maximum throttle and put the neat little ship into a desperate zoom over the poplar tops. Then the French anti-aircraft battery in the next field cut loose. The world seemed to shiver, snap, explode with the roar of the explosions. The American doughboys leapt wildly to their feet, calling curses, exhortations to the gunners, peering up with mad eyes where the German plane, now a black speck among white, flower-like bursts of smoke and red flame, whipped off toward the Front and escape.

"On your feet!" barked a sudden voice from ahead. "Take care of those wounded! Fall in! Fall in!"

Simply, they obeyed, and before the Colonel quite realized it, they were marching on again. He himself moved vaguely, stupidly, doing nothing more than bump into the men ahead of him, walking with his head down, eyes half shut, a feeling of nausea and great physical sickness which he did not yet realize as fear at the base of his stomach.

THEY marched all that day with only brief halts. The Colonel reeled on his feet, sometimes fell into the ditches or over the rims of shell holes, dead horses or debris. For where they walked now was the backwash of the Front, and there had re-

cently been terrific fighting here. Smashed water carts, artillery caissons, machine gun wagons, trucks and ambulances had been pulled aside and dumped in weird lines alongside the roads. The roads themselves were pulverized beyond belief and the long lines of men walked only with great difficulty. Night came and with it the dull hope that they might soon be given the order to halt, to fall out, sleep, then eat. But it did not come until almost midnight.

When it did, they fell headlong and where they were, not even taking the packs from their backs. The Colonel awoke to find a big sergeant kicking him heavily in the side. The Colonel cursed him bitterly and the non-com did nothing but curse back and move off. The pain in his side fully awakened him and he sprang up, feeling very weak, very hungry, and very much afraid. Silent groups of men were eating about him.

"Where's the chow?" he asked feebly.

"In yer pack, soldier!" laughed a hard-faced man beside him. "This heah outfit don't know what a rollin' kitchen looks like!"

The Colonel fumbled with the straps of his pack.

"If I take this thing off," he said, "I'll never get it back on again in God's world!"

"Aw, hell!" grunted the hard-faced man. "Finish this!"

Gratefully the Colonel did. He was just gulping down the last bit of goldfish when a low order snapped out from ahead. Non-coms and officers with carefully guarded flashlights appeared, rousing them up, tugging them into line, seeing that all had combat packs, gas masks, bayonets, rifles.

"Le's go! Le's go!" shrilled the hard-faced man who had given the Colonel part of his rations. "Wheah is this war?"

"Ah, button yer lip, cornhusker!" barked the man named Frank. "Save yer wind fer a little later on; you'll need it!"

A harsh order for silence snarled from the blackness ahead and they obeyed sullenly, wishing greatly that they could talk and thus dissipate some of the fear they all now felt. Obviously they were walking through what had once been a large woods. Now it was a tortured shambles of broken stumps, up-ended rocks, roots and torn limbs. Men tore uniforms and flesh, cursed

and were silenced, cursed and were silenced again.

THEN, wholly without warning, the shelling began. Men separated from man widely, and pulled on gas mask and tin helmet securely, then came together with his fellows again, feeling fear and terrible loneliness. Officers came among them, kicking and pushing, driving them out into a wide, irregular sort of skirmish line again. Mysteriously, they were at the edge of the wood and the shelling had stopped.

They dropped to their hands and knees and wiped the cold sweat from their faces, still trembling all over. A lot of their buddies were killed, wounded, back in there in the darkness of that shattered wood, they knew. The louder mouthed of them cursed the Germans, made wild promises of vengeance.

"Fix bayonets!"

Men pawed for canvas scabbards, for Springfield muzzles.

"Down on your bellies!" said a low voice.

Down they went.

"The Jerries are right over this rise. We're waiting now for the Frogs to throw up a surprise barrage for us. When I blow this whistle, jump! And not backward, or you'll get hot and quick lead up your tails. [There'll be non-coms behind you, and M. P.'s behind them, waiting for the yellow-bellies. Keep on—straight ahead—and don't stop until ordered, and don't take care of the wounded until ordered; they've got pill-rollers to take care of that. You—"

But French shells were making a moaning stridance overhead and a man could no longer hear himself speak. The barrage lifted and went on, lifted and went on again. A rocket snapped



up somewhere to the right and a whistle bleated faintly. The men looked at one another, at the dull-gleaming points of their bayonets, with which, in a minute now, they were going to kill other men. Then, slowly at first, they walked forward, hands taut

about the smalls of guns and straps, heads low. Their pace increased; there was no counter barrage, not even machine gun or rifle fire, and ahead they could see the wild red surf of the French seventy-fives sweeping up and down, up and down. The men lifted their heads, smiling grimly, breathing more easily. They'd show the dirty Heinies what—

The first German 155 shell landed within three yards of the Colonel. Dirt and small stones cut and stung his face; he was knocked end-wise and almost unconscious. For a while he thought he was, until he heard the screams of the wounded beside him. He rose up. Fell, slipping in a pool of blood. A dead man lay beside him, and his hands were on that man. The Colonel's fingers fluttered, stopped. That man's head was off at the shoulders. The Colonel turned, ran, screaming, beating his body with his arms madly as he ran.

"Halt!"

THE Colonel ducked, swerved, ran on in the dim gray dawn light. A bullet wheed over his shoulder; another.

"Halt, yuh hound!"

The Colonel obeyed, turned slowly about. He had been running along the bank of a small, sunken cart-path. Here it was intersected by a wide main road, and on the bank at the intersection stood a tall man wearing the arm band of the military police, a Colt automatic in his hand, a hard smile on his square, clean-shaven face.

"C'me 'ere!" snarled the M. P. "Where's yer dog tag; let's see it!"

Around the Colonel's neck was a light gold identification disc bearing his name, serial number and rank of Colonel, with the name of his former command stamped on it also. Slowly, he fumbled for it, still standing a little way from the other, knowing that now he at last was caught, branded as a deserter and a coward, a man who had run from his first action. In his hand he still stupidly held his rifle. This he propped against his knee as he reached fumblingly for the dog tag. The M. P. was still advancing toward him, automatic muzzle trained on the Colonel's stomach.

It was the Colonel who heard the German 77 first. He flung himself down and back-

ward. The M. P. was still on his feet when it hit—

SHELL shock; multiple contusions; no identification," said a voice.

The Colonel blinked open his eyes. He groaned through dry, stiff lips and the nurse and Medical Corps captain who stood beside his bed looked curiously down at him.

"What's your name, soldier?" asked the gray haired Army nurse.

The Colonel considered that question for the period of perhaps five minutes, in full retention of all his faculties now.

"Jan Lewaski," he ventured, in a strange, croaking voice.

"What outfit?" asked the Medical Corps captain at once, and the Colonel issued a little inaudible sigh of relief. He gave the name of the regiment and division he had gone up to the lines with. "Didn't you find my tag?" he asked weakly, an odd power of cunning possessing his brain.

"No," snapped the Medical Corps captain. "You had nothing but a pair of boots on when they brought you in from the dressing station. Remember your serial number?"

"No, I don't," murmured the Colonel. "I ain't—ain't thinkin' very good yet."

"That's no wonder," admitted the nurse. She half turned from him. "Doesn't the captain think he had better leave him alone now? Perhaps after he is fed and has had another sleep—"

The man wearing the captain's bars moved off down the long ward without further word.

"I'll see that you get some hot soup in a minute, soldier," promised the nurse. "You just lie still. If you're good I'll see that you get cigarettes."

The Colonel nodded, trying to smile. But when the nurse had gone down the ward the Colonel turned slowly over on his aching side and looked about him. The place he was in was clean, spacious, almost beautiful, manifestly the former *salon* of some old French chateau.

"Where the hell is this at, soldier?" he asked softly of the man in the bed to his right.

"Riau-court," said the other. "Back o' Paris. Where'd you get yours?"

"God, I don't know. They marched us

until we was cock-eyed. Where'd you get yours?"

"Chateau Thierry. I'm outa the Second Division. Been here a month an' over now. I'd like to get back to the outfit, but this jawbone pill-roller says 'no.'"

"You still look kinda sick, buddy."

"Mebbe I am. But a guy gets fed up lyin' on his back an' listenin' to you hombres jabber and sound-off all night."

"What do you mean?"

"This here's the shell-shock ward; you was fit to be tied yourself when they brung you in."

"What was I saying?" asked the Colonel carefully.

"Hell, everything—singin', mostly, an' bum at that, believe me!"

THE Colonel began to speak again, then checked himself. The gray haired nurse was coming down the ward toward him, bearing a tray on which was a bowl of steaming broth. She propped up his head with pillows and fed him.

"Feel better?" she asked, rearranging the pillows.

"Yeah. Thanks, nurse. How long I been here?"

"Almost a week. I'm surprised you're so lucid now. Here's your cigarettes and matches. Be a good hombre and keep quiet and you'll get more. So long!"

She lit his cigarette and moved softly away. The Colonel inhaled the dry American cigarette and, in slow procession, memories of that night, of all his past life came back to him. Out of that blurred kaleidoscope one vision predominated: the faces of his wife and children the morning he had said final farewell to them in Springdale before he had marched off at the head of his regiment his

new boots bright and squeaking, his head up—

A low moan broke through his lips.

"Take it easy, guy," advised the Second Division man to his right.

He nodded, unable to speak. He dropped the dead cigarette butt, covered his eyes with his aching hands. Broken, he whispered to himself silently. Transferred to Blois for gross incompetency. Undoubtedly listed now as a deserter. Due to be found and convicted sooner or later. Then? Then Leavenworth— Would they, he wondered, have enough compassion to spare his wife and children the truth? He had not written them in weeks, over a month; could not now—could not risk discovery.

Why did he still live? What was there left to him? Why hadn't that shell which had killed the M. P. who had cornered him killed him also and let him go out that way? Against himself once more he piled up the harsh-sounding words: Blois, incompetence, drunkenness, lies, bribery, desertion, cowardice under fire, theft of a respectable man's name. But the train of thought was too harrowing, too tremendous for him to pursue for long and he slipped swiftly into a thick black coma, his mind eclipsed by weariness.

During the next two weeks his body healed but his mind remained in a lethargic state, for which, vaguely, he was glad. He ate only because he was ordered, aided to. He had lost his taste for tobacco after that first cigarette and lay for hours at a time lying flat on his back, staring at the ceiling, listening half-consciously to the talk of patients, orderlies and nurses about him. Broken phrases, incomplete sentences he took into his brain and dully considered. Home—the States—all permanent cases—was he a permanent case? he wondered. It seemed that way from what the doctors said when they came by his bed every morning and evening with the nurse on duty. Home—that would be good. Perhaps in the States he'd have a chance to jump it, get back to Springdale somehow. But, that was madness, too. More madness. He had fled enough. No!

HE MUST get better—right now, right here, and get out of this place. For, if he were returned to the States, the impulse to break out and get back to them in Springdale would be too great. No, he must get out now, here, in France. The thought stayed with him constantly during the next



week or so, and his condition bettered swiftly. He sat up in bed, played cards with the Second Division man, even walked up and down the ward a little, sat for hours out on the terrace of the magnificent old chateau, looking out over the emerald smoothness of lawns at blue summer skies and distant, peaceful fields which stretched toward Paris.

Then one morning after inspection and breakfast as he sat with his feet on the side of the bed talking to the Second Division man he saw the nurses and orderlies in the doorway at the end of the ward stiffen into attention and he knew that an impromptu inspection party of visitors was being conducted through by the Medical Corps Colonel Commandant.

He broke off his desultory conversation with the Second Division man and got swiftly back into bed; otherwise he would have to stand at attention at the foot of his steel hospital cot. He pulled the stiff, disinfectant-smelling sheets high about his chin. Looking over them with cautious eyes he peered down the ward. In the party were three fat women, Americans, a thin little man in an unmistakable brown American derby. All of them were talking at once, and to them the pompous Medical Corps colonel was listening very gravely, very eagerly.

A start of fear made the Colonel's knees jerk underneath the blue hospital sheets. He recognized all four of that civilian group; he had known them almost his entire life! The little man was Senator Lew Graffner, from Springdale; the women his wife, his daughter and sister!

The Colonel ducked his head down beneath the sheets and lay absolutely still. A cold feeling of terrific fear caught at the pit of his stomach. Graffner was a big man in the Senate; probably the member of some stupid Senatorial investigation committee, come to France to make life more stupid for the A. E. F. The women folk were all big bugs in the Red Cross, through Graffner's political connections. All of them lived on the same street as himself in Springdale; he and the little man belonged to the same lodge—were both members of the Springdale Chamber of Commerce.

If they discovered him now, found him out! "Jan Lewaski!" All of polite and im-

polite Springdale would know about it tomorrow morning by cable! Pray God that his old regiment was in the lines, and that Graffner had not been able to visit it, seek out "my very good friend, the Colonel—see the home boys in their role of heroes!" The party had stopped at the next bed, were firing questions at the Second Division man, refighting the battle of Chateau Thierry. The Colonel lay as if dead, hands over his face even underneath the bed clothes. At last they moved on.

ALL that day the Colonel lay there in his bed in a sort of trembling lethargy. His mental processes were not coherent; his brain was slowly cracking under the tremendous and insistent strain he put upon it. Supper came. He did not eat, lying perfectly still now. "Lights out" came and he still rested stiff and motionless. He did not sleep; he could not.

So it was he who started up first when there came the high storming wail of the sirens through the calm, moon-splashed night. Low lights flickered on and the orderlies and nurses came running through the wards.

"What is it, guy?" barked the Second Division man at a busy orderly.

"Boche Zepp' raid. Two of them headed out from Paris this way now. Outa yer bunks, you guys that kin walk! Out an' in them dugouts across the lawn!"

The weak and badly wounded were picked up, laid on stretchers, carried out. Those that were able stood up and walked slowly and without assistance out of the place. The Colonel was one of the first of these; then he reconsidered. He ducked back across the dark smoothness of the lawn, where now not a light showed and ran into his ward. He knew the place well, had learned its every corner during the weeks he had been here. What he wanted was in that closet behind the ward nurses's night desk.

Pawing in the darkness, he found an orderly's issue overcoat, an overseas cap, several pairs of shoes and wrap puttees. There was no one else in the place and the Colonel took his time in fitting himself with the best pair of shoes, wrapping the puttees securely about the legs of his hospital blues and jam-

ming the cap down over his head. Then for a moment he risked discovery and turned on the shielded little light over the nurses's desk, found pen, paper and ink.

Swiftly, he wrote his real name, rank and former outfit, described in terribly terse language the evolution of his military career since arriving in France. Before he turned out the light he found and slipped into a pocket of the overcoat with the statement he had just signed a bottle of powerful opiate. If he drank enough of that stuff, the Colonel knew, he would kill himself. And he would, if cornered by the M. P.'s.



But, he was not going to die that way; he was very much aware of that now. If he died at all it would be at the Front, facing the Boche, a rifle in his hands — as a man, a soldier —

dier —

Then he turned and ran from the place rapidly, but laughing softly, as a boy escaping on some prank from school might. He cut across the black, deserted lawns, ducked through shrubbery, came to a gravel drive, to a high iron-grilled gate left slightly ajar. The sentry stationed there had been called to help move the wounded to the underground dugouts and bomb shelters and was not on post.

Only for a moment did the Colonel pause and look up. Searchlight rays jabbed the black roof of the sky like long gold lances. One glanced against a long, pointed silver ship. Instantly guns coughed, and that black sky-roof was cracked by the wild red fire of the bursting anti-aircraft shrapnel.

THE Colonel did not hesitate to see more. He stepped out onto the road and hastened north, toward Paris, toward the Front. He had gone perhaps a thousand yards when he heard wild cursing in French from a ditch and saw a French military bicycle sprawled in the stiff grass there. Beside it he made out the dim figure of a fat French soldier crouched there.

"What's the matter?" asked the Colonel in his bad French.

He was answered by a string of curses and the statement that just two minutes before this stretch of road had been flailed by swiftly descending fragments of the French anti-aircraft barrage. Then the Frenchman fell to cursing the Zeppelins and the more the stupid French gunners again. The Colonel said nothing. He just grasped up the bicycle, mounted and pedaled madly off. Behind him the Frenchman screamed and attempted pursuit, but the Colonel was to be stopped by very few men that night.

After he had negotiated two or three curves he slowed down, even laughed a bit. He put himself to a steady pace then and kept on, his course the dim, straight whiteness of the road. Perhaps five miles from the hospital he came to broad fields where men and horses moved and he could hear the muttering bang of cold truck motors opening up. Men cursed in A. E. F. English and it was only then that the Colonel knew he was in the heart of a big artillery park.

He dismounted from the uncomfortable seat of the bicycle, walking beside it, pushing it by the handle-bars. He came so to where one big heavily laden Army truck was attempting to lurch free from the soft earth of the field onto the hard surface of the road. Officers and drivers cursed here and flashlights cut yellowly through the night.

The Colonel drew back a bit and kicked the French bicycle into the ditch. Then, awaiting his chance, he dove for the rear of the truck, grasped the tailpiece and climbed up and in, pushing up the stiff tarpaulins that covered the load. The truck was loaded with heavy wooden boxes whose contents the Colonel could not discover in the darkness. But he had found a comparatively comfortable resting place up against the rear side of the cab when the driver finally mounted his seat, threw the thing into gear again, swayed up onto the safety of the road and headed north.

Other trucks fell into line behind with a roar of straining cylinders. The Colonel smiled to himself happily in the darkness. This long line of trucks, this train, could have just one destination, some artillery dump close to, or even at the Front!

PERHAPS he slept, perhaps his weakened body was jarred into unconsciousness by the motion of the truck. That he did not know or care about when he awoke. He was very hungry, very weak and thirsty. The truck train still rumbled on, but very slowly now, rolling from side to side, moaning through mud and shell-holes in low gear. They were near, very near the Front. It was about time he got out of here before they caught him.

He painfully made his way over the boxes of seventy-five shells to the rear of the truck, lifted up the heavy tarpaulins and looked out. It was about a half an hour before dawn, judging by the dim mauve light in the sky. What little he could see of the surrounding landscape was nothing but a desolate black, treeless waste.

The Front! They must be inside the reserve lines now, headed probably for the echelon or field base of some field artillery regiment. Well, he could do the rest on foot. Would much rather! His own truck slammed into a partially filled and wholly unavoidable shell-hole, bounced through it. The truck behind whanged its front wheels into it, taking all the driver's attention and skill.

At that moment the Colonel jumped, swerved aside and into the field beside the road. One after another the trucks bumped by and were gone. He smiled after them thoughtfully.

What now, he asked himself. Better follow them on foot to wherever they were going, for there, without a doubt, would be food—food, which was the one thing he sorely needed now! He walked for what seemed to be about five kilometers along the muddy road, following the tread of their tires, seeing no one, hearing the dim pounding of the guns ahead now. A shattered woods lining the top of a long slope arose ahead, and he knew that there was the end of his journey, that over that slope was the Front.

He entered the woods warily, following the path of the ammunition train. The smell of wood smoke came to his nostrils, to his ears the sounds of horses on picket lines, the grunts and cries of sleepy men working at unloading the shell boxes. Suddenly he

came upon the outskirts of the echelon and stopped.

Beside a chow gun a cook was cursing his K. P. detail sleepily, a dead cigarette dropping from his unshaven lips. The K.P.'s cursed as venomously back, and moved off slowly to fetch the thing the cook had cursed them about—more firewood. This, too, was his moment, the Colonel realized. He silently approached the cook.

That round-bellied gentleman looked up with cynical eyes.

"How about a little chow, cook?" asked the Colonel softly.

THE cook set himself for a new and more violent flow of curse words, then espied the packet of tailor-made American cigarettes this gaunt-faced man extended toward him.

"Snap it up," muttered the cook, taking the cigarettes, "before them work-dodgin' sons git back!"

The Colonel obeyed with alacrity, gulping down the piping hot slum and coffee after he had seated himself on an empty G. I. can. The cook watched him with professional interest. Then his eyes widened and a new curse broke from his lips. The Colonel, in seating himself on the G. I. can, had let the protecting folds of his issue overcoat fall back, thus exposing to the cook's view the legs of the hospital blues.

"You're A. W. O. L., buddy!" said the cook harshly.

"You're no liar," admitted the Colonel, skimming up the last of the slum with a crust of bread.

"Damn right I ain't!" said the cook venomously. "Now jerk yer freight outa here before the Old Man hands me a 'blind' for puttin' out to yuh!"

"One question," demanded the Colonel good naturedly.

"What outfit is this?"

"Eighty-eighth Field," growled the cook.

"What division?"

"Ninth."

A warm glow of joy encompassed the Colonel; the last



troop movement reports he had heard had placed his old regiment with the Ninth Division!

"Soldier," said the fat cook gravely, picking up a heavy billet of wood, "I said jerk outa here!"

The Colonel smilingly and swiftly obeyed just missing the grouchy K. P. detail as it emerged with its load of firewood. A number of foot paths ran off through the woods from the chow gun and one of these the Colonel took at hazard, walking blindly along it. Heavy fighting had gone on about here the day before, he realized, for the ground and blackened stumps were newly wrent and the place stunk of old gas and high explosive fumes. Several times he saw the khaki-clad forms of dead men sprawled almost out of sight in the brush, missed by the hurried stretcher-bearers on the night before.

A clammy ague was upon the Colonel and his teeth were deeply fixed into his nether lip when he went off into the brush and took what he wanted from one of those strangely sprawled forms. He grasped gas mask, rifle, belt, helmet and pack, then fled, low, moaning cries issuing from his lips. That man's face he had just seen at the last moment. It was one of the boys from his own outfit. Jimmy Gray, who had been a soda clerk in the Barry drugstore at home!

THE monotony of movement, just the physical fact of going on, quieted his nerves and restored him to some degree of confidence once more. His old outfit was in here, he kept telling himself. His old outfit! From time to time he met and passed telephone repair details stringing fresh stretches of varicolored wire through the woods. These men, worn with weariness and lack of sleep, paid him only the slightest attention. Further on he came to a machine gun section, the men still sleeping heavily under shelter halves stretched over shallow dugouts. Here a red-eyed sentry looked curiously up at him, and he waved his unencumbered hand, muttering, "Howdy!"

Abruptly the woods stopped, and before him was what had once been a wheat field. Here great shell holes gouged the ground, and dead men, American, French Colonials

and Germans, lay everywhere. This obviously was the scene of yesterday's fighting. A bloody business it had been, too. No living man seemed to exist there and he started across the place toward the other slope.

Bullets in a crackling hail snarled about him. He fell flat. A low curse came from his right. He turned and crawled that way. Just visible above the edge of a shell hole was the top of a tin helmet which moved ever so slightly at the sounds of his dragging approach. Hunching forward on his hands and knees, he slithered over the brim and down into the hell hole. A thin, nervous little man lay there, bare automatic shaking in his mud-caked hand. His eyes blinked up at the Colonel like those of a startled rabbit.

"Cheese!" said the man with the automatic. "Them square-head gunners almost took yuh that time!"

"Huh!" said the Colonel through white, tight lips. "What are you doing here, Parsons?"

"Lookin' fer the artillery, sir. You—you come back to the outfit, sir?"

"Yes," said the Colonel evenly, eyes on the fear-bright eyes of the little headquarters runner, "I have; am— Where's the regimental P. C.?"

"Over to the foot of that next slope," said Parsons hoarsely. "Captain o' A comp'ny's actin' colonel now, though."

"What!"

"Yessir. We sure got tangled up yestiddy an' last night."

"How?"

"Went past the objective an' plumb intuh the Frenchy barrage," A shudder shook the little man. "Me an' Mountenow was with the colonel an' the adjutant when that damn minnie hit—*whack!*"

"And you are going back to the battery in the woods?"

"Yessir. Them Heinie machine guns up the slope has been givin' us hell all night. Couple o' others started back, but I reckon they got shot up. This mornin' the captain sent me. I got this far when I seen yuh plowin' along; then I ducked. We ain't got no phones no more an' I gotta get through. The place is lousey with wounded up there."

"Ah," said the Colonel softly. "Parsons, you'll find the .75 battery through the woods

to your right. Watch out; there are telephone details and machine-gunners in there and I think they're kind of jumpy. Where'd you say the P. C. was?"

The little man carefully pointed it out to him again.

"All right," said the Colonel. "I'll go out of here first; let those jugheads shoot at me. You've got to get back. And, when you do, tell the skipper of that .75 battery I want a barrage as fast as he can hand it on that other slope—he's got fresh shells, I know it. Tell him so for me."

"Yessir!" said Parsons.

Then the Colonel was gone.

IT TOOK him over an hour and all the new-found courage he possessed to cross that half mile of shattered field. German machine gun and rifle bullets whinnied about him all the way. Then, just as he was almost there, the muttering thunder of a new and terrible German barrage rolled down upon that place. It raked that torn field with steel fingers of death, and raked it again and again. Lifted and poured its venomous, deadly fury upon the woods behind, where the American .75 battery had just gone into action.

For a time the Colonel lay flat in a shell hole, almost stunned out of consciousness. Then, like a man in a nightmare, he rose calmly up to his feet and walked, erect and slowly, to what was left of the regimental P. C. Perhaps the German machine gunners, wearied by their all night vigil, were too tired to smash him to a red pulp; perhaps they sensed some power of deathlessness that was now with that stalking, crazy-eyed man. Anyhow, the Colonel dropped at last into the enlarged shell hole where lay the mangled bodies of half a dozen men, among them the young captain of A Company, who had been acting cplonel.

Only one man, a platoon sergeant of B Company, was alive in that shambles. He sat to one side, head down, mud-caked left hand clutched tightly over the raw stump of his right arm, shot off just below the elbow.

Him the Colonel shook softly by the shoulder. The man looked up at him with faraway eyes.

"Hello, Colonel," he said softly. "Glad

to see you back, sir. We're—we're in a damn bad way."

"Here," said the Colonel in a strange, distant voice of near-madness, "close your eyes and let me bandage that. If you can, tell me about it. I think there's a Boche counter attack brewing up there now."

"I—I will," said the sergeant through trembling lips.



"Our own barrage chewed us up late yesterday afternoon. Both our flanks are way up in the air now. The Colonel — new Colonel—and his staff got it all in one lump just before dark. Majors, company commanders and almost all the looies and sergeants got theirs during the night. I—I——"

The man put back his head. He was dead, a blank, boyish smile of wonder and amazement on his lips. The Colonel did not cry out; did not curse. He just sat silently for a moment or so with his head in his hands. Then he came upward to his hands and knees and, Springfield still in his hand, crawled from shell hole to shell hole, calling to those who were left by name.

Some of them cried hysterically when they saw him. Others cursed him, their nerves and respect for everything gone from them during the night. These last the Colonel cursed back, his face a white mask of fury, his eyes bits of dark, mad fire, his bayonet point out eagerly toward their chests.

"I am," he told them in his metallic, expressionless voice, "the rankingest guy in this outfit. You will obey me; savvy?"

THEN he jerked the bayonet point eagerly, and those that stared into his eyes understood the fear that possessed this man, this fear of his which was greater than his fear of death—his fear that he might not die as a man, might have to go home to his friends, to his wife and family, branded as a coward, a failure as an officer, a deserter, a ——

The Colonel smiled, nodding to himself just a bit insanely. These men of his under-

stood him now, and those that didn't trust him feared him—and would obey him. He jerked the flat bayonet point toward the grim hill above them.

"They're coming out of there now; see 'em? We're going to stay here; give them all we've got with sho-shos, rifles and grenades. Then, on your feet and through them! *Through them!* I have given my orders all up and down the line— Now!"

Like a great gray wave, the first line of the German attackers was swarming down the slope above with grim confidence, believing that that terrible barrage which had just passed over had wiped out what fragmentary resistance remained from the night before.

This they thought until they were perhaps forty yards away from the zigzag of shell holes which was the American line. Then automatic rifles, Springfields, Colts and Mills bombs thrust forth a singing wave of steel against which that human gray wave reeled and went back—surged forward again—to be met by another sleet of steely death. Then khaki figures were among them and men grunted, squirmed, screamed in the agony of death.

Right through that now ragged and weak gray wave little knots of khaki figures slipped, bayonet points red and warm. Up the slope, shooting, heaving grenades, bayoneting the scampering Brandenburger gunners, who were afraid to fire down slope and into the masses of their own men.

The Colonel captured a light Spandau gun first—spitted the cowering gunner through the throat. He jerked the thing about and screamed aloud as its lead hail whipped and tore through the groups of gray, running men below. Other men followed his example frantically. Mysteriously, suddenly, a strange silence settled on that little shell torn plain. The silence of death, the silence—

"Look!" cried a white-faced boy beside the Colonel in the machine-gun pit. "Look, sir!"

An American plane drummed low right above, the pilot hanging half out over the

side of his cockpit, goggles whipped off so that he might see better. The Colonel leapt to his feet, waved toward the woods where were the German lines, then toward the battered woods across the little plain where the German barrage had blotted out the American artillery. The pilot waved his hand, slid back into his cockpit again; zoomed his ship over the trees and back toward the American lines.

TEN minutes later a holocaust of American shells winged overhead, to crump and crash in a steel wall between the German second wave and that little group of spent, bloody men in khaki. The Colonel was hunting for cigarette crumbs in the pockets of his torn overcoat when the first skirmishers of the American relief wave broke through the blackened woods to their rear. The Colonel sighed very softly, placed his aching back against the warm barrel of the little Spandau and slept.

"Colonel! Colonel Smith!"

The Colonel opened his sore eyes, looked blankly up. The tiny machine gun pit was full of officers, men who wore small white stars upon the shoulders of their overcoats, thick curls of braid upon their overcoat sleeves. The man with the most stars leaned down and helped the Colonel to his feet, grasping for the Colonel's hand excitedly.

"Magnificent, sir! Magnificent!" said the man with the most stars. "With half a company you have—"

"With my regiment," corrected the Colonel, his lips thick and dry to his hot tongue. "This is—was, my regiment, sir."

"Is," verified the Major General. "I'll have to see that you get decorated highly for this, Colonel; I shall sign the citation request myself."

The Colonel nodded feverishly.

"Yes," he answered, "I'm afraid you will—now."

He ran heavy hands over his eyes, settled back again against the captured Spandau. "If you gentlemen don't really mind, I think I'll sleep—"

He slept, while they stood staring at him, mouths open.



THE KEEPER OF RED HORSE PASS

The Tale of a Cattle War—and Cultus Collins

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "Three On and Everybody Down," "Hank Potts—Peace Promoter," etc.

PART II

CHAPTER XI

THE GUN ON THE WINDOW SILL

AS FAR as the stolen gray horse was concerned, Cultus was decidedly at a loss to know where to find the thief. It was evident that somebody had tried to throw the guilt on the Circle M, in case the owner of the horse ever discovered it.

After leaving the Circle M, the road wound along the side of a hill, turned sharply to the left and went over the top of the mesa. On an air line, the top of the mesa at that point would not be over two hundred yards from the ranch-house. It was rather a stiff climb, and at the top Cultus drew rein for a breathing spell.

Here the yellow dust was rather deep in the road, which was masked from the ranch-house by a clump of mesquite. As Cultus sat there he noticed a number of horse tracks in the dust. It appeared as though two horses had milled around there considerable, and among the horse tracks was the boot print of a man.

Cultus studied them rather impersonally for a while, but finally swung out of his saddle and examined them more closely.

The man had dismounted and taken three steps toward the mesquite clump. At the edge of the road Cultus discovered another track. Finally he walked over to the mesquite to a point where he could look through at the ranch-house below the mesa, and here he found the butts of a number of cigarettes, evidently only recently smoked. The ground was also scored from bootheels, where two men had sat.

It was clear as print that someone had been watching the Circle M ranch-house, and, judging from the number of cigarette butts, they had been there quite a while. He went back along the road and found where they had ridden back toward Medicine Tree.

Whether they were spying on him or on someone else at the Circle M was a question, but Cultus had the feeling that they were watching him. He rode slowly back to the forks, where he lost the tracks. They either went toward the Bar Anchor or headed across country, he was not able to determine which, as the road to the Bar Anchor was too hard to show a track, and he did not feel that it was worth his time to follow it to softer ground. He rode back to Medicine Tree and stabled his horse.

It was about thirty minutes after Cultus

left the Circle M, when Mac Rawls rode in from the Triangle X. Rawls was a lean, bony faced cowboy, with a shifty eye and a mop of roan colored hair, which hung low over his eyes. In any country he would be labeled a dangerous person, from his appearance alone.

Blaze had never seen Rawls, but he was sure Rawls was from the Triangle X. Blaze went out to him when Rawls drew up in front of the ranch-house.

"Marsh wants yuh to come to the Triangle X tonight," said Rawls. "Said it was important."

"Wants me to come, eh?"

"Yo're Blaze Nolan, ain'tcha?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I've told yuh what to do. And Marsh says we ain't to come together; sabe?"

"I guess so. You tell him I'll be there."

Rawls nodded, turned his horse and rode away, while Blaze went down to the stable. Jules found him saddling his horse, but did not ask where he was going.

"Which one of Marsh's gang was that, Jules?" asked Blaze.

"Rawls. Pretty damn' bad hombre, Blaze."

"Marsh seems to specialize in that kind. I'll probably be late in gettin' back, Jules."

"Sure."

In the meantime Jane and Harry Kelton came to Medicine Tree, and Cultus met Jane in a store. She nodded and smiled at him, and he stopped to talk with her.

"Did you find your horse?" she asked.

"Well, I ain't exactly found him yet, but I've still got hopes. How's yore father?"

"Not very well. Dad is having a lot of

THE KEEPER OF RED HORSE PASS

W. C. TUTTLE

What has happened before

HAVING been imprisoned on the charge of killing Ben Kelton in a quarrel over the dance-hall girl, Della, the cowpuncher "Blaze" Nolan of Painted Valley is paroled through the influence of the big sheepman, Kendall Marsh, who demands that Blaze rustle the cattle of Painted Valley cattlemen and drive the stolen herds out of the country over the Lost Trail, the location of which only Blaze knows. In particular, Marsh wishes thus to break old Jim Kelton and force him to give up his ranch in Red Horse Pass to satisfy the mortgage which Marsh holds on Jim Kelton's J. K. ranch, and then Marsh can pour sheep into Painted Valley through Red Horse Pass, which Kelton still jealously guards.

Before Blaze agrees to the deal, Marsh is shot down by somebody behind a portiere. In the next room Blaze finds Jane, daughter of Jim Kelton, the girl to whom he had been engaged before the dance-hall girl episode. Blaze helps Jane to escape and flies himself without learning that Marsh had merely been stunned by the bullet that brought him down.

Two weeks later, Blaze appears in Painted Valley where he stays at the Circle M ranch of Jules Mendoza. In the valley town of Medicine Tree, Blaze refuses to shake hands with young Alden Marsh who had testified that Blaze had killed Ben Kelton. Young Marsh is now a member of the Triangle X outfit—the ranch recently purchased by his father, Kendall Marsh. Old Jim Kelton knows through his daughter, Jane, of Blaze's interview with Kendall Marsh and is convinced that Blaze is going to steal his cattle and help Marsh flood the valley with sheep. Jane is not so sure.

Cultus Collins now appears in the valley, searching for his stolen gray horse, and Jim Kelton and his son, Harry, wonder if Cultus is secretly tied up with Marsh, though Cultus of course has no least sympathy with sheepman. Later, in the War Dance Saloon in Medicine Tree, Cultus is forced to chastise young Alden Marsh for drunken impudence, and the Triangle X foreman, "Butch" Van Deen, prudently takes young Alden away.

In a talk with his father Harry Kelton confesses that it was he who shot Kendall Marsh by mistake while attempting to shoot Blaze Nolan and put out of the way the only man who knew where the Lost Trail was.

While on his way to get news of a meeting of cattlemen to be held at Kelton's J. K. ranch Blaze Nolan follows a girl out to the ranch and finds her to be the dance-hall girl, Della, who had left the country to avoid testifying at his murder trial. He takes her away to prevent her spying on the cattlemen's meeting. Meanwhile the cattlemen decide to keep an eye on Blaze.

Cultus sees Blaze riding his stolen gray horse in town with a Circle M brand on it. He visits Mendoza and Blaze at the Circle M ranch, tells them the horse is his, and learns that Mendoza didn't know he had such a horse in his corral. They decide to leave the horse there as bait to trap the stealer of it. Meanwhile Cultus has run across two of the Triangle X outfit punchers, Hank North and Terry Ione, the latter of whom Cultus had met before, further south.

Incidentally Cultus learns that Blaze never had known the dance-hall girl, Della, and that there had been an unknown third man mixed up in the shooting of Ben Kelton.

trouble with rheumatism, and he don't get around very well. He worries an awful lot."

"About the sheep?"

"Oh, I suppose; and other things."

"Uh-huh. I was out at the Circle M today, Miss Kelton."

Her eyes clouded quickly and she turned back to the counter.

"I had a long talk with Blaze Nolan," he continued, "and I'm of the opinion that he's been handed a tough deal in Painted Valley."

Jane turned quickly.

"Did Blaze Nolan ask you to say this to me?"

"No, *ma'am!* Blaze Nolan ain't that kind. He don't ask odds of anybody; it was merely my opinion."

"Then I guess your opinion is all wrong, Mr. Collins; and we won't discuss it any further."

A CLERK came to take her order and she ignored Cultus, who went outside. He sat down on a bench and rolled a cigarette. The two horses from the JK ranch were tied in front of the store, but Cultus surmised that Harry was across the street at the War Dance Saloon.

The streets of Medicine Tree were not lighted, except what little illumination they received from lighted windows. A few minutes later Jane came out. She did not see Cultus, as she halted at the edge of the sidewalk, as though waiting for Harry to join her.

Finally she stepped out to her horse and tied her few packages to the saddle. Cultus saw a rider pass the lights of a window farther down the street, and as this rider came within the illumination from the War Dance Saloon Cultus saw that it was Blaze Nolan. Jane had seen him too. Blaze rode on past them, into the lights of the hotel, where he turned sharply to the right, taking the road which led to the Triangle X. There could be no mistake about his destination, as that road did not lead to any other place.

For several moments after his disappearance Jane still stood there beside her horse. Then she quickly untied the animal, swung into the saddle and followed Blaze Nolan. Cultus got quickly to his feet. He had never

been to the Triangle X, but he had seen the men who worked there, and he did not think it a safe place for any lady at night. After a moment of indecision he hurried across the street and down to the livery stable, where he quickly saddled his horse and took the road to the Triangle X.

IT WAS less than two miles from Medicine Tree to the Triangle X ranch. Blaze did not hurry. He had no idea that anyone was following him, nor did he have any fear of trouble with Marsh or his men. He knew that Kendall Marsh was cold-blooded in all his dealings, but he did not fear Marsh. But Blaze didn't know what to do; so he decided to let things go according to fate.

Butch Van Deen met him at the doorway of the ranch-house. It was their first meeting since Blaze had refused to shake hands with Alden Marsh.

"Lookin' for yuh," said Butch shortly, and stepped aside to let Blaze walk in.

Kendall Marsh was seated on an old couch, smoking a cigar, while near the fireplace sat Della, the dancehall girl from the War Dance Saloon. Blaze looked sharply at both of them as Marsh motioned him to a chair midway between them. Butch stopped near the door, while Mac Rawls squatted on his heels beside the door which led to the dining-room.

"Well, I'm glad to see you again, Nolan," said Kendall Marsh.

"I wonder how much truth is in that statement?" smiled Blaze.

"We won't argue about that. I had to come out here to find where you were. I guess the sheriff didn't think it was worth while to answer my telegram."

"It wasn't his fault, Marsh; I offered to notify yuh. But I didn't."

"You left my house rather suddenly that night, Nolan."

"Yeah, I shore did. Why not? I thought mebber you was dead, and I'd have stood a lot of chance with the police."

"That's how I guessed it," smiled Marsh. "No, I don't blame you, not for that. But you know who fired that shot, and you're going to tell me who it was."

Blaze shut his jaw tightly.

"Oh, yes, you are," said Marsh slowly. "You'll tell me who shot me, or I'll send you

back to the penitentiary."

"You'll send me back?"

"I'll swear that you shot me, Nolan."

"Oh, I see. Well, I've always heard that



you was crooked, Marsh; but I never knew you'd stoop to bein' a cheap liar. You know damn' well I didn't shoot you."

"Well, I know damn' well you know who shot me."

Blaze shook his head slowly.

"No, yo're bluffin', Marsh; you don't know. I got out of there as quick as I could, and I didn't stop to try and find out who did shoot yuh. In fact, I wasn't a lot interested in the shootin'."

"Glad I got shot, eh?"

"Not glad, Marsh; just indifferent."

MARSH smiled grimly. He was not used to dealing with a man who spoke honestly. "You knew it was someone from Painted Valley," he stated.

"No, I didn't know that either. I felt that you had made enemies in other places. I don't know who shot yuh, Marsh; and if I did, I wouldn't tell yuh."

"Still backing up Painted Valley, eh? And after the deal they've handed you! Blaze Nolan, you're a fool."

"Yeah, I suppose I am."

"Harry Kelton or his sister shot me."

Blaze started slightly, and Marsh laughed.

"I'm no fool," said Marsh easily. "I have ways of finding out things. And you'll find that out pretty damn' quick, if you try to double-cross me. Either Harry Kelton or his sister heard what we discussed that night at my home, and you know it, because you was the one who told them you were out of the penitentiary and had a meeting with me. Nolan, you had them hide in my house and listen to my plans."

Blaze laughed at Kendall Marsh, and Marsh's eyes blazed with anger.

"Don't deny it," warned Marsh. "You delayed meeting me until you were sure they had plenty of time to reach Los Angeles. Harry and Jane Kelton left here mysteriously a week or more before you came to

my place, and they got back here a few days afterward. Under that balcony the police found three sets of tracks—two men's and a woman's, and one set was yours, Nolan. Oh, there's plenty of evidence."

"Why didn't yuh have 'em arrested?" smiled Blaze.

"Lack of legal evidence at the time."

"Don't bluff, Marsh. You built that all up after yuh came here."

Blaze turned and looked at Della.

"So yo're one of Marsh's spies, are yuh? That's how yuh happened to be at the meetin' at the JK. I wondered what you was doin' there."

"Yes, and you stopped her from gettin' important information for me," rasped Kendall Marsh angrily.

"Kinda low down ain't it, hirin' women to do yore dirty work? I suppose you was the one who paid her to get out of town ahead of my trial, and you've probably paid her a salary ever since."

Kendall Marsh got to his feet, his fists clenched. Blaze saw Butch Van Deen shift his feet a little and his right hand dropped near his holstered revolver. The woman merely laughed harshly.

"I'm giving you one chance, Nolan," said Marsh coldly. "You'll tell us where to find that Lost Trail, and you'll tell us right now, or you'll never leave this room alive. I'm tired of you. I saved you from a stretch in the penitentiary, and I gave you a chance to make some easy money, but you've double-crossed me in every way. Now, you'll talk; and, damn you, you'll talk fast."

BLAZE knew that Marsh meant every word. One more killing would not bother him. But Blaze was not afraid. From where he sat he could see Butch Van Deen and Mac Rawls. He did not think that either of them could draw quicker than he. Marsh might have a gun, of course.

"So yuh aim to put me out of the way, eh?" drawled Blaze. "If I don't tell yuh where that Lost Trail is, you'll kill me; and if I do tell yuh, I'll never get out alive. I can see yore game, Marsh. Three to one, and not countin' the lady. All right; you say the word. Yuh may get me, but some of yuh go along with Blaze Nolan!"

Marsh laughed hollowly.

"You are not considering the two loads of buckshot just behind you."

Blaze did not turn quickly. But it came to him in a flash that they would not kill him until they were sure he would not tell them where to find the Lost Trail. Then he turned his head. Just behind him was an open window, and over the sill protruded the two barrels of a shotgun, pointed square at him.

CHAPTER XII

CULTUS SWINGS A MEAN GUN

CULTUS approached the Triangle X cautiously. He could see the light through one window, but he did not know the lay of the land; so he dismounted and came on toward the house, circling away from the open window.

He went around the house, searching for a window where he might overhear what was going on in there. He moved in close to the house, sidling along in the dark, and almost ran into Jane Kelton, who was leaning against the wall near another half-open window. There was enough illumination for Cultus to recognize her clothes.

He backed slowly away to the kitchen door, which was barred. Then he went back around the house to the window where he had first seen the light. It was very dark out there, and always a danger of making a noise in that unfamiliar terrain. But he went cautiously to the corner of an angle in the wall.

Ten feet beyond him and around the corner was the window, and as Cultus leaned out for a glimpse, he saw the dark bulk of a man, leaning in fairly close to the window, with the lamplight shining on the breech of a double-barrel shotgun, which the man had slid across the window sill.

He could hear Marsh talking to Blaze about the Lost Trail, but he could only hear an occasional word. Cultus slid his gun loose slowly. He had an instinctive hatred for any man with a sawed-off shotgun. The man's back was turned toward Cultus, and he seemed intent on what was going on in the house.

Then he heard Blaze's drawling voice: "Three to one, and not countin' the lady. All right; you say the word. Yuh may get

me, but some of yuh go along with Blaze Nolan!"

CULTUS took two cautious steps forward, as Marsh's voice rang triumphantly: "You are not considering the two loads of buckshot just behind you."

And then Cultus Collins took another step toward the window.

"You didn't think we were fools enough to make it anywhere near an even break, did you?" asked Marsh. "I've had a man out there on the job ever since you came here to the house. It's all in a day's work with him. Now, you go ahead and talk! If you want a pencil and paper to draw a map, we'll get 'em.

"I want full directions for finding that Lost Trail, Nolan. Your life don't mean anything to me. When Kendall Marsh wants anything, he gets it. Think fast. I'll give you thirty seconds to talk. And thirty seconds isn't much. Ten of 'em are gone now; ten more are on their way. Ready to talk?"



Blaze's face was white in the yellow lamplight, his muscles tensed;

"Twenty seconds gone."

The woman covered her face with her hands, and Butch Van Deen laughed harshly.

"Five seconds more."

Blunk! It was a queer sound. The two barrels of the shotgun jerked upward, came a terrific concussion—darkness.

Both barrels of the heavy shotgun had sent their loads of shot into the big lamp, which illuminated the room, and the whole house shook from the concussion.

Blaze threw himself full length out of the chair, landing on his hands and knees. The woman screamed and fell over Blaze. Someone else stumbled into him, and he struck them with the barrel of his gun. A revolver lashed out a streak of fire, but it was not pointed in his direction.

The door flew open, and Blaze went out, like a quarterback going through a hole in the line for a touchdown.

Bullets were flying promiscuously, but Blaze headed for his horse. He saw Della swing onto her saddle, but the horse whirled

wildly and flung her to the ground. Blaze didn't know why he ran to her. She was one of Marsh's gang, and in no danger, except for an accidental shot, but he ran to her in the dark, swung her up in his arms and ran to his horse.

He swung her up to the saddle, mounted quickly, twisting her around in his arms, and rode wildly away down the road toward Medicine Tree. He was half a mile from the ranch before he slackened speed.

"I dunno why I picked *you* up," he told her. "I reckon it was because you're a woman. Now yuh can see how I stand with Kendall Marsh. He'd have murdered me, if somethin' hadn't happened to ruin his scheme. I reckon it's war now; and if you're wise, you'll keep out of it. You've done me all the dirt yuh can, anyway; so yuh may as well let up.

"I reckon I hit it when I told Marsh that his money sent yuh out of town ahead of my trial, and it was his money that kept yuh away from here. I never thought about that. But you won't be any good to Kendall Marsh from now on; and you better watch yore own skin. God knows, I've no cause to worry about you—you paid liar; but you're a woman. I'll drop yuh just outside Medicine Tree and you can walk in. And you can tell Marsh what I said."

THE woman did not say a word, and Blaze wondered if she had been hurt when the horse flung her in the dust. Anyway, it was no concern of his, he decided. Two hundred yards away from the end of the main street, he let her slide to the ground, and without another word he rode swiftly down the main street of the town, and out the way that led to the Circle M.

Harry Kelton saw him ride through, and recognized him. But Harry wasn't interested in Blaze—he wanted to find Jane. He was sure she had not started for home alone, but he mentally kicked himself for staying so long at the War Dance. He had searched all over the town for her, and was about to leave for the ranch, when he saw Blaze Nolan ride through.

He stood on the edge of the sidewalk for several moments, debating what to do, when he saw a woman coming down the sidewalk toward him. She was limping a little and

walking slowly, and as she came into the lights from the store window, he saw it was Jane. She was dusty, and one sleeve was almost torn from her dress.

"For God's sake, what happened to you, and where have you been?" he demanded. "Jane, you're a mess! Look at yore clothes. And where's yore horse. Talk, can'tcha?"

"Give me a chance," she said weakly. "I don't know where my horse is, but he's probably still out at the Triangle X. He threw me off out there, and Blaze Nolan mistook me for another woman. He brought me back to town on his horse, without knowing the difference, Harry."

"Blaze Nolan—the Triangle X? What do yuh mean, Jane? Are yuh crazy?"

"Maybe I am, a little."

"But what on earth were you doin' out there? I've hunted all over for you."

"Can't we both ride your horse? I can't go back after mine. There was a lot of shooting out there at the Triangle X, and I—I want to talk with Dad. Who is this coming?"

It was Cultus Collins. He rode up to the front of the store and dismounted, whistling softly. He saw Jane and smiled at her as he removed his big hat, and they saw a smear of blood across the back of his left hand.

"Still shoppin'?" he asked pleasantly, and then he saw the dusty and torn condition of her clothes.

"It shore is dusty in this country," he smiled. "I picked up a brown mare, wearin' a saddle. I think she's got a JK brand. I wasn't sure who she belonged to; so I tied her at a hitchrack at the far end of town. I didn't want to get arrested for stealin' horses, yuh know."

"Where did yuh find her?" demanded Harry quickly.

"Oh, jist around somewhere. Good night."

He went out to his horse and led it down the street to the stable.

"Was Collins out there?" Harry asked his sister.

"I don't know."

"I'll bet he was; he's one of Marsh's spies."

"I guess we better go home," said Jane wearily.

"I guess so. But what were you doin' out

at the Triangle X, and what was the shoot-in' about? Is it a secret? And what woman did Blaze Nolan mistake you for?"

"For that woman he was supposed to have fought Ben over."

"Oh, she was out there, eh? More mystery!"

"I suppose so. My, I skinned my arm when I got thrown!"

"Are yuh sure Blaze didn't recognize yuh?"

"No. Let's go home, Harry."

"Don't feel very good, eh?"

"I feel great. If I didn't still have sand in my throat, I'd sing."

AND while they rode back to the JK, things were not so pleasant at the Triangle X. Terry Ione was laid out on the couch, with a cold water compress on his head along with a lump the size of a goose-egg, where Cultus Collins's six-shooter barrel had landed with sufficient force to cause Terry to lose all interest in things.

Mac Rawls had a red streak across one cheek, where a bullet had narrowly missed ruining his face, and Kendall Marsh had a bullet scrape across his right elbow, which caused him considerable pain.

Della was still there, unhurt, but willing to go back to Medicine Tree as soon as possible. The room smelled strongly of kerosene from the smashed lamp, and bits of glass were scattered around the floor.

"This was a hell of a failure," stated Kendall Marsh glumly. It was about the tenth time he made such a statement.

"Yeah, that's a cinch," agreed Van Deen.

"We had him all ready to talk, too. Now, it's too late—he'll never talk. But who hit Terry?"

Terry didn't know. He saw a lot of stars, and that was all the information he could offer. He didn't even hear the shotgun go off, but he had a skinned chin, probably caused by the kick of the weapon when his fingers convulsively jerked at the two triggers.

"Could it have been that damn' Injun?" wondered Marsh.

"Jules Mendoza?" asked Van Deen.

"That's about who it was."

"I hope it was. If it was any other Painted Valleyite, they probably heard more than

I'd care to have 'em hear. One of you better escort this woman back to town. She's been scared out of ten years' growth."

"I'm all right," said Della. "I fell over somebody in the dark."

"So did I," complained Mac Rawls. "I reckon it was Nolan, because whoever it was



they almost busted my right shin with somethin'."

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Marsh. "What can be done?"

"You've lost yore chance to twist any information out of Nolan," declared Van Deen. "He'll be wild as a hawk now. Probably throw in with Painted Valley."

"They don't trust him, Butch. He's in a tough spot himself. The best thing he can do is to leave the Valley."

"The same to you and many of 'em," said Mac Rawls painfully. "You're settin' on dynamite yourself, Marsh. If I was in yore place—"

"That's about all out of you, Rawls; I'm runnin' my business."

"Runnin' is jist the right word—runnin' it to hell and gone."

VAN DEEN stepped in quickly and told Rawls to drop the subject. He left the room, and Marsh snorted with disgust and anger.

"Don't blame Mac," said Van Deen. "He's lookin' out for himself. The men are willin' to take orders from you, but they won't run their necks into a rope for what you're payin' 'em. This shore is a ticklish business right now, and if Painted Valley ever breaks loose, we'll all go over the hill.

"You was foolish to try and put somethin' over with Nolan. He's no fool; and right now he's dangerous. If it was the Injun who hit Terry over the head, there's nothin' to worry about, because that Injun ain't very well liked around here; but if it was somebody else, and they heard what was said—"

"This is a fine time to accuse me of foolishness," complained Marsh. "You thought the idea was a good one."

"After you was so damn' sure that Nolan would cave in and tell what he knew."

"Most anybody would, with a shotgun against their back. It wasn't my fault that somebody hit Terry over the head. Nolan would have told."

They argued a while longer, and Marsh decided to go to bed.

"Well, I'm going back to town," said Della.

"Want me to go with yuh?" asked Van Deen.

"Just get my horse for me, Butch."

"I guess you better leave the country," said Marsh angrily.

"Yes?" Della lifted her penciled eyebrows. "And where will I go, and who pays the freight?"

"I'm about through paying the freight."

"You are, eh?" Della laughed shortly. "That's fine. But just remember that you haven't started yet, Marsh. I don't know where the Lost Trail is located, but I know other things."

And Marsh swore viciously as Della and Van Deen went out to their horses.

"If you see Alden in town, bring him back with you, Butch," he called, but Butch did not answer. He muttered something about dry-nursing a wolf pup, and Della laughed.

"I didn't know you were going to ride with me, Butch."

"I'd rather ride to town than to set there and quarrel with him," he replied.

"Well, I won't quarrel with him," she said coldly. "If he thinks I'm a fool, he's crazy."

BLAZE NOLAN rode through Medicine Tree, intending to go back to the Circle M ranch, but when he was halfway there, he swung his horse around and rode back. The more he thought over how close they came to murdering him, the more angry he became. He wanted to meet some of them on even terms, and he had a feeling that some of them would come to Medicine Tree that night. Just now Blaze Nolan was a potential killer.

He tied his horse to the War Dance hitch-rack and went into the saloon. Alden Marsh was in a poker game, half drunk as usual and Hank North was bucking a roulette

wheel. There was no sign of Della, and Blaze decided that she would not appear that evening. He went over to the roulette wheel, and Hank moved aside to give him room.

Hank merely glanced sideways at Blaze and went on playing. Blaze felt sure that Hank did not know what had happened at the Triangle X that night, or he wouldn't appear so unconcerned about it. After losing a few dollars, Blaze went over to the bar, and a few minutes later Cultus came in and joined him.

"Well, what do yuh know?" asked Cultus pleasantly.

"Not much," seriously. "How are you, Collins?"

"Pretty good. In fact, if I was any better, I'd have to be tied."

They talked for a few minutes, and Blaze had about decided to go on to the ranch, when Della and Butch Van Deen entered the saloon from the rear door. Blaze stared at Della, but she paid no attention to him. Her clothes were clean and there was nothing about her to indicate that she had been thrown in the dirt.

Butch did not look toward Blaze and Cultus. He talked with Della for a few minutes before she went upstairs, and then went to the roulette game where he spoke to Hank North. Hank shrugged his shoulders, glanced toward the poker table, where Alden Marsh was playing, and turned back to Butch.

It was evident that Hank was telling Butch how small the chances were to get Alden out of the poker game, and Butch evidently agreed with him. Without looking toward Blaze, Butch turned and walked from the rear of the saloon.

Blaze frowned thoughtfully, told Cultus good night and walked from the saloon. He crossed the street and hurried down to a point across from the livery stable, where he stood and watched Butch ride in, leading a saddle horse, which he turned over to the keeper, and then rode back toward the Triangle X.

"I guess I'm gettin' kinda loco myself," mused Blaze, as he went up to his horse. "I bring her to town on my horse, and a few minutes later she rides her own horse in, and nothin' to show she ever got dumped in

the dirt. And I distinctly felt a big tear in one of her sleeves. This kinda hocus-pocus shore makes me paw my head."

He climbed on his horse and headed for the Circle M.

CHAPTER XIII

TIGHTENING ROPES

FOR quite a number of years John Freeman had been cashier of the Medicine Tree Bank. Painted Valley had seen his hair turn from brown to gray during the years he had served them, and they knew him for an honest man. He lived simply and alone, never having been married. From one end of the valley to the other, he was known as "Uncle John," as much a fixture of the bank as the faded gold-leaf letters on the window.

Just now John Freeman sat at his old desk, facing Jim Kelton, one of his oldest friends. It had been difficult for Jim Kelton to come to Medicine Tree, but he knew the cause was urgent.

"I know what you want, Jim," said Freeman. He seemed to have aged greatly in a few months, and the blue-veined hands, which toyed with a pencil, were not steady.

"You know what I want, John?" queried Kelton.

"Yes, I know; you want to renew your mortgage."

"Well?"

Freeman shook his head sadly, his fine old eyes turned away from his friend's face.

"I can't do it, Jim. I've had my orders. The bank has decided that Painted Valley ranch property is too big a risk; so we are not to renew any mortgages. I'm sorry. It isn't like the old Medicine Bank to do a thing like that. We've always carried the folks along, taking the lean with the fat. But it's different now."

"Since Kendall Marsh got control, eh?"

Freeman sighed deeply, but did not deny it.

"If I only had the money, Jim; but I haven't. The bank never did pay me a very big salary. It isn't big enough to pay much.

But it has been my job and my pleasure—until now. Now it's just a job."

"I've got about thirty days," said Kelton slowly.

"Just about. Don't you suppose you could place it with the bank in Broad Arrow?"

"No, John; not a chance. I owe this bank twenty thousand dollars, which I might pay, if I sold every head of stock I own. But I'd be flat broke and nothin' to start on. Beef ain't worth anythin' now."

"Sam Hawker was in yesterday."

"Tryin' to renew?"

"Yes. I had to tell him the same thing. Jim, it's like slapping an old friend in the face; but what can I do? I'd give any of you the last shirt I owned. But shirts won't save ranches."

JIM KELTON hobbled out of the place, downhearted, although he knew what would happen. He had had plenty of warning. Jane met him down at the post office. She still limped a little and the back of her right hand was scratched. It was the second day after the trouble at the Triangle X, but she still felt the effects of that fall.

Her father shook his head at her, indicating that he had failed.

"I'm goin' into the post office," he told her.

"All right, dad. I've got a few things more to buy, and I'll meet you at the buckboard."

"Sure; that's fine."

Jane walked down to the general merchandise store and started to go in, when she met Blaze Nolan face to face. They both stopped short, looking at each other. Then Blaze stepped aside to allow her to enter the store, but she did not go in.

"So you really came back to Painted Valley, did you?" she said softly.

"Kinda foolish of me, Jane, wasn't it? The last time I seen you, I wasn't sure where I would go."

"The last time?" She was looking closely in his face.

"Yeah; that last time. Wasn't that the last time? I saw you in that street car, and I wondered if I'd ever see you again."

"That wasn't the last time, Blaze."

"It wasn't? I don't remember any other time since."

"The last time you saw me, you called me



a paid liar and said I had done you all the dirt I could."

Then she turned and walked into the store, leaving Blaze, his jaw sagging, looking after her. He leaned against the doorway, a perplexed expression in his eyes.

"Called her a paid liar," he muttered. "Who's crazy around here, anyway? Said she had done me— My God!" His eyes snapped open wide and he stared into space. That was what he had told Della. And Della had come back with Butch Van Deen that night.

Jane had been at the Triangle X that night. He had mistaken her for the lady from the War Dance Saloon. He had held her in his arms all the way back from the Triangle X, and had called her a paid liar. He tried to laugh, but it was only a grimace, as he reviewed the things he had told her on the ride.

But what was she doing out there, he wondered? Was she looking for another chance to take a shot at Kendall Marsh? Was it Jane who had hit Terry Ione over the head? He wanted to ask her all these questions, but was afraid to go back to the store; so he sat down on the sidewalk and watched her join her father and ride out of town on the buckboard.

After they had left town he sauntered up past the bank, where he found John Freeman standing in the doorway. The old man looked at him curiously.

"Hello, Uncle John," said Blaze.

"Hello, Blaze."

THERE was an awkward pause; awkward for both of them, because they had been friends. Then, "I heard you were back, Blaze."

"Yeah, I've been back quite a while, Uncle John. How is everythin'?"

"Just going along."

"Yeah? But not so well. I saw Jim Kelton come from here today."

"Oh, yes; he comes in to see me once in a while."

"But you didn't renew his mortgage."

The old cashier stared at Blaze wonderingly.

"What do you know of these things?" he asked.

"I know that Kendall Marsh owns con-

trol of this bank, and that Painted Valley mortgages are not to be renewed."

The old man nodded sadly.

"I guess your information is correct, Blaze; but I didn't know it was public knowledge, yet. You seem to know considerable about the private affairs of Kendall Marsh."

Blaze grinned knowingly.

"Yeah, that's right. Me and Marsh are very familiar. In fact, we take shots at each other once in a while. It's my turn next."

He sauntered on up the street, leaving Freeman to stare after him and wonder what Blaze meant.

"Well, bless my soul!" exploded Freeman. "Taking shots at each other? This is rather a peculiar state of affairs, it seems to me."

Cultus Collins was seated near the front of a restaurant, when Blaze came in, and Blaze sat down across the little table from him. Blaze was in rather a jovial mood, and Cultus wondered what had happened to him.

"Feelin' pretty good today, eh?" he remarked.

"Better than I have for quite a while, Collins."

"Shotgun medicine, eh?"

Blaze looked at him quizzically, wondering what Cultus meant.

"I don't quite understand," he said slowly.

"There ain't two Blaze Nolans in this valley, is there?"

"No-o-o," drawled Blaze. "One is plenty."

"And if that last five seconds had ever been ticked off, there wouldn't even be one."

Blaze jerked forward, studying the homely face of Cultus Collins, who was smiling lazily back at him.

"Where were you?" whispered Blaze.

"I was behind the man who was behind the gun."

"It was you, Collins? You hit him?"

"He had to be hit."

BLAZE took a deep breath and settled back in his chair, but his eyes still searched Cultus's face.

"Collins," he said slowly, "I don't understand why or how you happened to be there, but God knows I'm grateful. You saved my

life. In another second or two, that shotgun would have made mince-meat out of me. For once in his life, Kendall Marsh wasn't bluffin'."

"That shotgun didn't sound like a bluff. Gosh, I shore was scared that it had killed somebody, but the light was out and I had a hunch that the loads had gone into the ceiling."



Blaze gave his order to the waiter, who shuffled away.

"How did you happen to be there, Collins?" he asked.

"I saw you go through town, and I saw a lady follow yuh; so I followed her."

"That lady was Jane Kelton?"

"Oh, you knew she was there, eh?"

"I found it out a few minutes ago, Collins."

Cultus laughed softly and leaned across the table.

"I seen you pick her up, Nolan. I was close to yuh. I thought you knew who she was; so I brought her horse to town."

"I thought she was that woman from the War Dance."

"That shore was funny. Did she tell yuh what she was doin' out there?"

"No; but I imagine she wanted to know just how damn' low I had sunk."

"Women *are* funny thataway."

CHAPTER XIV

BAD NEWS GETS UP SPEED

AND Jim Kelton was thinking the same thing as he sat on the shady veranda at the JK that day and mulled over what Jane had told him. His daughter had heard much which had been said to Blaze Nolan at the Triangle X, and he felt his hatred of Blaze oozing away to a certain extent. Either Blaze was still loyal to the cattlemen of Painted Valley, or he didn't know where the Lost Trail was located.

Harry came up to see him, still dusty from a long ride.

"I saw Tommy Simpson today, Dad. Sam Hawker went out to the Triangle X to have a talk with Kendall Marsh, but Marsh has left the valley. The bank refused to re-

new Sam's mortgage, and I guess Sam went out there to argue it out with Marsh. Tommy said that the gang out there acted kinda meek and mild, and Terry Ione is goin' around with his head all bandaged up."

"What do you think of Jane's story?" asked his father.

"It looks as though Blaze Nolan wasn't so strong with Marsh. Jane was a little fool to go out there, and I feel like kickin' myself for givin' her the chance; but you know Jane. Dad, I think she's fightin' for a chance to help Blaze Nolan."

"Women are queer critters, son. But I can't believe that Nolan carried her all the way from the Triangle X to Medicine Tree, without knowin' who she was. And if this other woman has lied about him and done all them things against him, why did he pick her up and take her to town?"

"Jane spoke about that. He said Nolan told her it was because she was a woman."

The old man nodded slowly.

"Some men are queer critters, too."

"Tommy says Hawker is goin' to round up his stock and see if he can't save a little out of the wreck. It'll break old Sam, and he knows it, but he swears that Kendall Marsh will never get the O Bar B ranch as long as he lives. Marsh owns the bank, the War Dance Saloon and the Triangle X, and he's got the rest of us under his thumb."

"And he's pulled out of the valley, eh?"

"That's what Tommy says. But that don't mean anythin', as far as our condition is concerned. Marsh can work from one place as well as another."

"We'll just have to wait and see what happens. If Blaze Nolan won't tell Kendall Marsh where the Lost Trail is located, we're safe, as far as rustlin' our stock is concerned, and if it comes to a showdown, I'll go broke before I'll give up keepin' cases on the Pass."

THAT night Bad News Buker got drunk. Inaction palled upon him, and he looked upon the flowing bowl for inspiration. A bad example as an officer of the law, it is true; but Bad News was human, in spite of his job.

Then came Tommy Simpson from the O Bar B, and "Ole" Olsen, from the Bar Anchor. Ole was a huge, blond, open-faced

sort of a person, while Tommy was of medium height, with copper colored hair and a wide mouth. Ole's laugh was thunderous in its capacity, and after a few drinks he was as gentle as a grizzly bear.

Bad News welcomed them to his one-ring circus, which made it a three-ring attraction, and they started out to put on a regular show.

"Thish is the time fer all good men to come to the aid of their party," declared Bad News, after they had become sufficiently organized to appreciate their own worth.

"Motion made an' carried," stated Tommy. "We shall now proceeed to shave the country. Ole, will you lead us in our openin' shong?"

"Hold everythin'," begged Oscar, the barkeep. "Don't let Ole sing. My gosh, he shakes all the glasses loose from the back bar."

"Ole," said Bad News seriously, "has what I conshider a good voice."

"It's durable," agreed Oscar, "but not musical."

"That's all accordin' to yore ears," said Tommy owlshly. "Fer my part, I don't want it too damn' musical. And who has a better right to shing, I'd crave to know? Wasn't it one of Ole's anchestors who discovered this wonnerful land?"

"What's the joke?" asked Oscar.

"Tha's a fact," agreed Ole. "He shore discovered America."

"Hey!" snorted Oscar. "You ain't no Eyetalian, Ole. Columbus was an Eyetalian, you big Swede."

"Shore was; but he never discovered thish country. It was my grandfather, I tell yuh; old man Erickson."

"Yore grandfather?"

"Sure as hell. My mother's name was Erickson, and she married a Olsen."

"Which makes you a Swedish cow-puncher in spite of anythin'," said Tommy seriously. "But how about a shong?"

"With all that behind me, I could have been anythin' I wanted to be," declared Ole, his chest swelling visibly.

Tommy, as he reached for the bottle and helped himself to a drink, sang in a quavering tenor:

*"Oh, man wants little here belo-o-ow,
But he never gets that much."*

"If Columbus didn't discover this country, what did he discover?" asked Oscar, making a mental note that Tommy owed the house two-bits.

"He discovered how to make an egg stand on end," said Tommy seriously. "It was a great boon to humanity."

"Stand an egg on end?" Oscar was interested.

"Shore. Didn't yuh ever see it done?"

"Aw, yuh can't stand no egg on end."

"All of which shows that you came from Yuma, Oscar. All it takes is practice."

OSCAR took a couple of eggs from beneath the bar and proceeded to try and stand one on end on the back-bar. Needless to say, he was unsuccessful. Alden Marsh came in and stopped between the bar and a poker table, possibly wondering what Oscar was trying to do with the egg.

Alden was wearing a pair of robin's-egg blue trousers, which were palpably new, as the creases were still sharply visible, although a trifle tight in spots. The newness of the trousers did not correspond with the rest of his raiment, which was far from new.

"Aw, there can't nobody stand an egg on end," declared Oscar, turning back to the bar.

"Can if yuh know how," said Tommy.

"Gimme the aig."



Oscar passed one of them to Tommy, who drew up his sleeves in imitation of a magician. He placed the egg on end, holding it with the forefinger of his left hand.

"Now, you've gotta watch it close, Oscar. This is just a trick of balancin', and it don't stay on end very long."

The fact of the matter was, Tommy was almost too drunk to even keep his own balance. Oscar hunched down behind the bar in close proximity to the egg, his eyes intent on the egg itself. And with a swift motion of his right palm, Tommy came down upon the egg with crushing force, and the contents of the egg just squirted out into the face of the interested Oscar.

He staggered against the back bar, one hand clawing at the mess on his face. It wasn't an overly fresh egg. Then he drew

back his right hand and flung the other egg at Tommy's head, but his aim was poor, possibly due to his eyes being full of egg at the time, and the egg hit Alden Marsh square in the belt-buckle and sagged down in a yellowish mass over his robin's-egg blue pants.

For several moments Alden Marsh looked down at his pants, a queer expression in his eyes. Then he sniffed audibly. The egg was probably older than the one Oscar was digging out of his eyes. Alden Marsh was just a little drunk, but not drunk enough to brook any such an insult. He reached for his gun, but too late; Tommy Simpson had jerked him sideways, throwing him off his balance, taken the gun and headed for the front door, while behind him went Bad News and Ole Olsen, whose grandfather had discovered America.

Alden Marsh was mad. In fact; he was so mad that he stood in the middle of the saloon and told the wide world all about Tommy Simpson, not considering that Oscar, the barkeep, had thrown the egg. Possibly he blamed Tommy for not getting hit with the ancient bit of hen-fruit. While the cursing didn't hurt Tommy, who had faded from the scene, it served as sort of a blow-off for Alden. He bought himself a drink and considered the future.

The pants didn't belong to him; they belonged to Terry Ione, and Terry wasn't there when Alden took them. A nail in the corral fence had ruined Alden's overalls, and there wasn't another pair around the ranch; so he took Terry's new pants. Robin's-egg blue didn't look well with that glazing of egg-yolk; it looked like a weak sunset in a midday sky. Alden sighed and decided to kill Tommy Simpson.

HE TRIED to borrow a gun from the bartender, who didn't own one, and then decided to try and find Tommy and get his own gun back. He thought Tommy might be a trusting soul. And while Alden went in search of Tommy Simpson, Terry Ione rode in to Medicine Tree. He wore the coat and vest of that robin's-egg blue suit.

Alden went to two other small saloons, looking for Tommy, and in each saloon he drank deeply; too deeply, perhaps. But he managed to forget the eggs so entirely that

less than an hour later, when he met Terry in front of the War Dance Saloon, he had forgotten the incident entirely.

"H'lo, par'ner," he greeted Terry jovially. "Whash on yore mind?"

Terry looked him over gravely. They were a queer looking pair. One with a robin's-egg blue coat and vest, with overalls; the other with robin's-egg blue trousers, slightly soiled, and an old, stringy vest and no coat.

"I've got a secret," said Terry seriously. "C'mon where nobody can hear it, and I'll let yuh in on it."

"Tha's great," said Alden owlshly. "I hope it's good."

"If it ain't, it's my fault, feller."

Alden traveled across the street like a boat in a heavy gale, but he reached the sidewalk in front of the Medicine Tree Bank. Terry led the way down an alley past the bank, while to his ears came the sound of doubtful harmony, rendered by Tommy Simpson, Bad News Buker and Ole Olsen, who were singing in Bad News's little office just down the street:

*"Old Man Lute was a gol darned brute,
And he couldn't git his cattle up the gol
darned chute;*

With a hi and a yi and a hi-yi laddy o-aye."

"I can hear shingin'," declared Alden.

"Yea-a-ah; and that ain't a marker to what yo're goin' to see, feller."

Bam! And Alden Marsh thought somebody had thrown a lighted match in a carload of fireworks. Terry could pistol-whip a man nicely, when he put his mind to it.

CHAPTER XV

LOOTING AND DEATH

THAT same evening Blaze Nolan had made up his mind to ride out to the JK and tell Kelton the whole story of his alleged connection with Kendall Marsh. He intended explaining everything; but lost his nerve before he reached the ranch, and turned back to town. He heard the three men singing in Bad News's little office, and guessed rightly that they were full of the cup that cheers.

He tied his horse in front of the post office and had just stepped up on the sidewalk, when there came a thudding jar which seemed to shake the buildings. It was not unlike a small earthquake. His horse swung nervously around, jerking back on the tie-rope.

The jar must have been considerable, because the singers had stopped in the midst of a cowtown song which had fifty verses and twice as many choruses. Wondering what had happened, Blaze went slowly up the street, starting past the front of the bank, when his bootheels crushed down on broken glass.

He thought he heard a muffled voice in the alley, and stepped back. It was pitch dark in that alley, but Blaze was so sure he had heard a voice that he started down there blindly. It was not a wide alley and was not over sixty feet long to where it opened out at the rear of the Medicine Tree Bank.

It was lighter there, and Blaze saw a man. At least it looked like a man, wearing white pants, and staggering around. Blaze went toward him, and was just opposite the rear door of the bank, when another man seemed to hurtle through the doorway, crashed into Blaze, who went to his knees, grasping blindly at the other. Came a thudding blow on the head, and Blaze went sprawling on his face, his two hands clutching some object, which he fastened onto in the crash.

THE heavy jar had knocked the chimney off the lamp in Bad News's little office, and had shaken them enough so that they realized something was wrong.

"Earthquake," declared Bad News. "I've felt 'em lotsa times."

"Nothin' like it," objected Ole. "That was dinnymite, I tell yuh."

They went outside and looked around. Several men were out on the sidewalk in front of the War Dance, talking loudly over what it might have been. A man left the post office and started up the street, but stopped in front of the bank. After a few moments he came back down the street to where the three men were grouped in front of Bad News's office. He was the blacksmith.

"One of the bank winders is busted," he said. "Glass all over the sidewalk up there."

He spoke loud enough for the men in front of the War Dance to hear it, and they strung out across the street, heading for the bank. This information seemed to sober Bad News immediately.

"C'mon!" he snapped, and started running up the street.

Cultus Collins had felt the jar in the hotel, and he came down to the street in time to join the crowd at the front of the bank. Speculations were rife, when he reached the crowd. Bad News tested the front door and found it locked.



"Let's try the back door," suggested someone, and the crowd filed through the dark alley.

The rear door of the bank was open, and a few feet away from it they found Blaze Nolan, lying flat on his face. He had been hit over the head, but was regaining consciousness. Clutched in his hands was an old gunnysack, which Bad News took away from him, by the light of matches, and they found it heavy with a mixture of gold, silver and currency.

No one made any comments. Dangling the bag of money in one hand, Bad News led the way into the dark bank. Someone found a lamp and lighted it. The vault of the Medicine Tree Bank was merely a big safe, and now its formidable front door hung drunkenly open from a heavy charge of explosive.

"Don't touch anythin'," advised Cultus. "Send somebody for the bank officials."

"That's right," agreed Bad News. "Somebody go after John Freeman."

A man ran out through the rear. "F'r Gawd's sake, look what we've got here!" exploded Tommy Simpson.

It was Alden Marsh, a smear of blood down one side of his face, sitting limply in a chair. He was minus his pants and one boot. His eyes stared blankly at the lamp, which was held in front of him.

"Can yuh beat that?" wondered Ole. "The robber wasn't satisfied with a gunnysack of money, so he took Marsh's pants and one boot."

"What were you doin' in here?" asked Bad News.

Alden mumbled something unintelligible and licked his lips.

"Where's yore pants?" asked Tommy.

"It was a secret," whispered Alden foolishly.

"He's been popped over the head," said one of the men. "Look at the knot on his cranium."

BAD NEWS went outside again, where Blaze was sitting up, and helped him to his feet. Blaze seemed a little hazy and paid no attention to Bad News's questions. He staggered a little as he came in with Bad News, and sat down in a chair beside Alden Marsh.

John Freeman came a few minutes later and surveyed the wreck. The safe had been looted completely; not even a scrap of paper remained. He got up from his examination and looked around the room.

"Here's the sack of money, John," said Bad News.

"I guess we better count it right now," said the old man.

Someone held the lamp, while he dumped the contents out on a table and made the count. Much of it was packages of currency, and, with the rolls of coin, it did not require long to check it all over.

The total was a few dollars over sixteen thousand. They dumped it back in the gunnysack.

"I think that is about what was in the safe," said the old man.

"Then he didn't get away with anythin', eh?" grunted Bad News.

"Nothin'—except the stocks, bonds, mortgages and all the rest of the papers in the safe."

The men looked curiously at each other, but nothing was said.

"What do you know about this, Blaze?" asked Freeman.

"I know I got hit," said Blaze painfully. "I felt the shock of the explosion, and I walked on glass in front of the bank. Then I thought I heard somebody down the alley; so I went down to see who it was. I saw a man with white pants, and about that time I got hit."

"Did the man with the white pants hit yuh?" asked Bad News.

"I don't think so."

"Then where in hell did you git the gunnysack with all that money?"

Blaze stared foolishly at him.

"You had a gunnysack, which contained sixteen thousand, Blaze."

"I did? Where did I get it?"

"How did I get here?" asked Alden Marsh.

"I suppose somebody swatted you, too, eh?" said Tommy Simpson.

Alden looked down at himself curiously.

"I've lost m' pants!" he grunted.

"At least yo're sober, for once in yore life," said Bad News.

"You better send to Broad Arrow for the sheriff," Freeman advised Bad News.

"Yeah, that's true. I guess I better go after him myself. Will you take charge of the money, John?"

"Yes."

JUDGING from appearances, the door of the bank had been opened with the delicate aid of an ax and a crowbar. The lock and one panel of the door had been ruined.

"No use trying to repair it tonight," said Freeman. "There's nothing in the bank to attract another robber."

No one suggested holding Blaze or Alden Marsh. Bad News was only too glad to head for Broad Arrow and notify the sheriff. Cultus went with Blaze to the hitchrack, but neither of them discussed what had just happened.

"Come out and see us, will yuh?" asked Blaze.

"Sure thing, Nolan; so long."

Cultus went across the street to the War Dance Saloon, where everybody was trying to decide on just who had robbed the bank. Alden Marsh had gone home, minus his pants, and still a little hazy over it all. But he was sober now.

Cultus tried to find out how Marsh lost his pants, but no one seemed to know. But Cultus did find out that the impression was becoming general that Blaze Nolan had robbed the bank. Not that he had done it alone, because of the missing papers, but that he had either been injured in the explosion and

had fallen unconscious outside the door, or that his accomplice had knocked him down and failed to take the sack of money.

"Blaze will be in jail inside of an hour after Buck Gillis gits here," declared a cowboy. "Unless Blaze is wise enough to hit for the tall hills."

"And him out on probation," said another cowboy. "The way they'll soak him will be plenty."

Cultus went back to his room, inclined to believe that the cowboy had been right. But Cultus couldn't shake the feeling that Alden Marsh was mixed up in the deal in some way; either Marsh or the man who had taken Marsh's pants. And Cultus felt sure that Blaze would not be mixed up in any deal with Alden Marsh. And while Cultus debated the thing in his own mind, Terry Ione, clad in a full suit of robin's-egg blue, bought drinks for a girl in the War Dance Saloon, and wondered what he could use to take egg stain off his pants.

INSTEAD of going after the sheriff, Bad News availed himself of the telegraph, and within less than an hour after the robbery Buck Gillis received a wire, telling him some of the details and urging him to come at once.

Buck Gillis knew that Kendall Marsh was at the hotel; so he immediately told Kendall Marsh that his Medicine Tree Bank had been robbed.



Together they caught a freight train out of there at midnight, and when they got to Medicine Tree they talked with Bad News, after which Marsh swore out a war-

rant for Blaze Nolan, hired a rig at the livery stable and drove out to the Triangle X.

Bad News was able to recite a fairly good running story of what had happened. He told them of finding Alden Marsh, minus his pants, in the bank, and how they had found Blaze Nolan and the sack of money just outside the door.

"Looks like Blaze had made another mistake, eh?" observed Marsh.

"I'd hate to think so," replied Buck. "Mebbe he can explain."

"Let him explain in jail," said Marsh. "I'll send him back to the pen so quick it would make your hair curl. Have him here tomorrow morning at ten o'clock, Gillis."

"You ain't runnin' my office, Marsh. If I think the evidence is strong enough, I'll bring him in. If it ain't, I won't. If you swear out a warrant, I'll have to serve it, of course. And while yo're talkin' out loud about it, you better ask yore kid where he lost his pants."

"You don't think he'd rob his father, do you, Gillis?"

"I'm not sayin' what I think. But I'm goin' out and talk with Blaze in the mornin'."

"Yes, and you bring him in, if I can get a warrant tonight."

He managed to arouse a justice of the peace, who grumblingly wrote out a warrant for Blaze Nolan, gave it to the sheriff, and went back to bed. Buck cursed witheringly, berated Bad News, for want of somebody else to berate, and slept the rest of the night on a single cot with Bad News.

Cultus saw the sheriff leave town the next morning, but did not know his mission until he met Bad News, who told him about the coming of Kendall Marsh and the writing of the warrant.

"Do you think Blaze had anythin' to do with that robbery?" asked Bad News. "It shore looks all twisted up to me. I can't see head nor tail to it."

Neither could Cultus. A little later on he talked with Oscar, the bartender, and Oscar told him about the eggs.

"What kind of pants did young Marsh have on?" asked Cultus.

"Kinda pale blue, I reckon. What do yuh reckon he done with 'em?"

Cultus didn't know, but he wished he did.

"Sa-a-ay!" blurted Oscar. "I seen Terry Ione wearin' the identical color suit. By golly, he shore was. Pale blue."

"Did Marsh's coat and vest match his pants?"

"He didn't have no coat. No, by golly, he didn't have anythin' on to match them pants. They was brand new. I 'member them creases down the front. Ain't it funny how yuh remember things like that? Huh? That egg shore made a mess of 'em. You say

there's a warrant out for Blaze Nolan? Kendall Marsh, eh? Hope they don't git him."

THE bank was closed, as far as business was concerned, of course, but John Freeman entertained the curious who went in to look at the smashed safe. Cultus went in and looked it over. It was not the work of a professional safe blower, although the job had been thoroughly done.

Cultus walked around the rear of the bank and through the alley, but if there had been any evidence, the crowd had obliterated it thoroughly. Freeman had made a fairly close check of the books, and stated that little, if any money, had been taken, and that the papers were only valuable to the bank itself.

The forenoon passed without any sign of the sheriff or Blaze Nolan, and Bad News opined that Blaze had taken to the hills, with the sheriff after him. It was a little after the noon hour, when Ole Olsen rode in from the Bar Anchor, and found Cultus and Bad News eating dinner at the Chinese restaurant.

Ole was almost incoherent. He gulped down a glass of water and rested his two big hands on the table in front of Bad News.

"I—I found Buck Gillis down the road," he panted. "He's dead as a monkey-wrench—shot!"

"You ain't drunk, are yuh, Ole?" asked Bad News.

"No; you danged fool! I tell yuh, I found him—got a handcuff on one wrist. I tell yuh he's dead, Bad News! I didn't touch him."

"Are yuh shore it's Buck?"

"Got Buck's clothes on and his star, and it looks like Buck. I didn't ask him if he was Buck, you damn' fool!"

"Must be old Buck," said Bad News shakily. "I'll get the doctor." He started to walk, but broke into a run, while Ole sat down and reached for another glass of water.

"I never found a dead man before," he said foolishly.

"Where was he shot?" asked Cultus.

"Down the road about a mile and a half."

"I mean, where did the bullet hit him?"

"I didn't look. Good gosh, I got off my

horse and yelled at him, but he didn't move. I seen the handcuff on his left hand——"

"Where's his horse?" interrupted Cultus.

"Along the road between here and town. I didn't bother with it."

Cultus left his unfinished meal and hurried down to the livery stable, where he quickly saddled his horse. Ole carried the news to the War Dance, and there was quite a parade down the road to where they found Buck Gillis.

The doctor's examination was brief. Buck had been shot twice, and either bullet would have killed him. The doctor was rather annoyed when Cultus insisted on helping him with the examination. On the sheriff's left wrist dangled the handcuff, the other cuff being open and still containing the key. Cultus examined the wounds closely, but said nothing.

After they loaded the body in the doctor's buggy, Bad News asked Cultus to ride with him to the Circle M ranch.

"Blaze got him cold," said Bad News drearily, "and he's prob'ly headin' a long ways from here, but we'll see what that danged halfbreed has to say about it."

THEY found Jules Mendoza and his two men at the ranch, but they either didn't know anything about it or didn't want to know. Jules said he didn't know the sheriff arrested Blaze.

"Me and Tony Gibbs and Mex Skinner go 'way this mornin'," he said. "Blaze stay here. We come back, Blaze gone. What happen?"

"The sheriff came here to arrest Blaze for robbin' the Medicine Tree Bank last night, and Blaze killed him on the way to town."

Jules thought it over for several moments. Then: "Too damn' bad, eh?"

"And they'll hang Blaze for this."

Bad News turned imploringly to Cultus.

"Can yuh imagine that, Collins? I guess we might as well go back to town. Mendoza don't know anythin'. Wait here while I talk to his two hired centipedes."

Bad News went down to the corral, where he questioned Tony and Mexico. Jules shoved his hands inside his waistband, squinted thoughtfully at Cultus and said:

"You friend of Blaze Nolan?"

"No," replied Cultus, "I didn't know him well enough for that. You have to know a man a long time to find out if you are his friend, Jules."



"I know Blaze long time. He's my friend. You think Blaze rob

bank?"

"*Quien sabe?*"

"He get much money?"

Cultus explained about Blaze being knocked unconscious, with the money in his hands, and by that time Bad News came back.

"Tony and Mexico don't know anythin'," he grunted. "I reckon they're not lyin'; they wasn't here. Let's go back."

As Cultus and Bad News mounted their horses Jules said to Cultus, "Come see me sometime, *compadre*."

"Shore," smiled Cultus. "We'll *habla Español*, eh?"

"*Bueno esta. Adios.*"

"*Hasta luego.*"

CHAPTER XVI

BULLETS AND BLAZES

BAD NEWS was in a bitter frame of mind, as they rode back to town. He had been very fond of Buck Gillis. They had ridden the range together long before Buck had been elected sheriff.

"Yo're the sheriff now," Cultus told him.

"Yeah, I know it; but I'd rather have Buck. He was a square shooter, Buck was; and if I ever notch a sight on Blaze Nolan——"

Bad News didn't need to finish his statement. They rode back to town, past the place where they had found Buck, but Bad News didn't look at it. The town seemed greatly aroused over the murder, and Bad News was being advised on every hand just what to do; and he did just what everybody knew he should do—take a posse and do a lot of foolish riding over the hills.

He took Ole Olsen, Butch Van Deen, Hank North and Archie Lee. They rode back to where Buck had been killed and tried to pick up some kind of a trail, but without avail; so they trusted to luck and

went east. Cultus would have advised going west, because of the fact that Blaze would probably head for the Lost Trail, in order to get safely out of the valley, and the Lost Trail must lay to the westward. But Cultus had not been considered in the matter.

Cultus loafed around the town that day. The blacksmith, by way of explaining ancient history, showed him where the killing for which Blaze had been sent to the penitentiary had happened—the place where Ben Kelton had been shot in an alley beside the War Dance Saloon. And Cultus figured out the area across the street where a bullet fired from the alley could possibly strike the side of a building.

IT REQUIRED considerable search before he found the bullet hole. It was in the front of a store, the bullet barely buried out of sight in the weathered pine, and he removed it with the point of a heavy knife. Strangely enough the bullet was not badly battered, and to his experienced eye the caliber was evident. He put the bullet in his pocket and went to the general merchandise store, where he leaned on the counter and considered their stock of revolver ammunition.

"Do yuh have much call for .41 caliber stuff?" he asked the clerk, who was also the proprietor. The man looked over the shelf of cartridges and shook his head.

"Ain't had no call for 'em for a long time," he said, "and I don't see any shells on the shelf. Yuh might git some down at Henderson's place. He carries shells."

"It ain't a very popular gun," admitted Cultus.

"Not around here." He scratched his nose thoughtfully. "I don't jist remember who had one of them .41's; it's been so long ago that I sold any."

Cultus went down to Henderson's store and inquired about them.

"Ain't had none for months," he was told by the clerk. "Didja try the Medicine Tree Mercantile?"

"They sent me down here."

"Uh-huh," thoughtfully. "Well, we ain't got none. If I remember rightly, somebody out at the Circle M had a .41. Mebbe it was Mex Skinner. Anyway, it was one of 'em, and I'm sure it wasn't Mendoza, 'cause he

always buys .45's. Yuh might borry some shells out there, or I could order yuh some from Broad Arrow. They'd probably have some."

"No, don't bother, and thank yuh very much."

"Yo're welcome. Come in again."

Cultus pondered deeply over this information. There did not seem to be any way in the world to connect Mendoza or either of his two men with the killing of Ben Kelton. The bullet was unmistakably a .41. Cultus had owned several of them, and the ammunition was familiar.

He went down and talked with the doctor, who was also the coroner, about the murder of Ben Kelton. The doctor was busy with the remains of Buck Gillis, but he stopped long enough to inform Cultus that Ben Kelton had been killed by two bullets, which had gone entirely through him, and that there was no way to determine the caliber.

"Yes, I remember seeing Kelton's gun and also the one the sheriff took from Nolan," he told Cultus. "Both of them were .45's."

Cultus thanked him and went away, no wiser than he had been before. Blaze Nolan had told him that he was sure he had heard one of the bullets strike the building across the street, and Cultus had been able to find only one bullet hole in the wall—made by a .41. One thing seemed pretty probable. Three .45 shots had been fired during the Kelton killing, therefore were not the other three shots fired all .41's?

THE posse came in about eight o'clock that night. Cultus went down to Bad News's office, but the deputy was in bad humor.

"Rode the hoofs off our broncs for nothin'," he said savagely.

"Didn't yuh ever stop to think that if Blaze knows where that Lost Trail is located that he'd head for there. It would take him out of the valley."

Bad News rubbed his dusty nose angrily.

"That's right! Well, why didn't yuh mention it before, Collins?"

"Well," smiled Cultus, "I didn't think a sheriff needed any advice from me."

"Yuh didn't? Well, yo're all wrong. But it's too late now, dang the luck!"

"Will they perform an autopsy on Buck Gillis?"

"A what?"

"An autopsy. Find out what killed him."

"I don't reckon there's any doubt what killed him. You didn't think he passed away from old age, didja?"

"I'd like to see them bullets, Bad News."

"O-o-oh, yea-a-ah! Shore; I'll have the Doc cut 'em out for yuh. Well, I'm goin' to eat. Yuh ain't et yet, have yuh? Yeah? Well, I'll see yuh later, Collins. Goin' to have the inquest t'morrow mornin'. Hell of a lotta good it'll do. See yuh later."

Cultus was in the War Dance Saloon, watching a stiff poker game at midnight. None of the posse were there; they were tired enough to go to bed early. A freight brakeman came in to get a glass of beer, and Cultus heard him talking with the night bartender.

"They shore had one big fire in Broad Arrow this evenin'," the brakeman said. "Burned down one side of a street for three blocks, but they managed to control it. Courthouse, couple saloons, feed store and some vacant buildings. Pretty hot, while it lasted."

"Burned the old courthouse, eh?" asked the bartender.

"Nothin' left of it. Nobody hurt."

"What started it, do you suppose?"

"Nobody seems to know. Them old buildings get pretty dry."

Cultus smiled thinly. With the papers stolen from the Medicine Tree Bank, and the county courthouse a mass of ruins, there was left no evidences of any cow-ranch mortgages in Painted Valley!

NEARLY everyone in Painted Valley came to the inquest. Buck Gillis had been known by everybody in the county, and they wanted his murderer punished. Jim Kelton brought Jane to town. He didn't realize what the burning of the courthouse meant, until he talked with Joe Brown and Sam Harker, who were in the same fix as Kelton. Harker had talked with a lawyer, who assured him that there was not a scrap of paper left to show that the Medicine Tree Bank had ever held a mortgage on the O Bar B.

Jim Kelton didn't know whether to be

glad or not. He was too honest to take advantage of the situation, and talked with John Freeman about it. Freeman was un-



able to tell him what to do, except that the bank could not hold him for anything, unless the stolen mortgages were recovered.

K e n d a l l

Marsh came to Medicine Tree that morning, boiling mad. He knew what it would mean to him, and he fairly stomped the bank floor while he argued with John Freeman over who had done this.

"Don't try to tell me that the cattlemen didn't do it," he raved. "It wouldn't benefit anybody else, would it? Steal the mortgages from the bank and then burn the records! I tell you, Freeman, the cattlemen of Painted Valley did it. The guilt lies between three men. Perhaps all three of them had a hand in it. One man helped Blaze Nolan rob this bank. Perhaps the same man set fire to the courthouse.

"By God, I'll have all of them in jail before I get through with them. I'll start a court action that will make this valley sit up and know who I am. I'll sue every one of them. Somebody will go to the penitentiary for this."

"It's a very regrettable thing," said Freeman mildly.

"Oh, it is, eh?" sarcastically. "It don't seem to worry you any. I guess you're through with this bank, Freeman. You've been among these cow-lovers so long that you're as bad as they are. Draw what you've got coming and I'll lock up the place. No use keeping open, even if the safe wasn't smashed. These folks wouldn't do business with my bank, anyway. All I wanted it for was to control those mortgages."

John Freeman sighed, but did not raise his voice in objections. He felt that it was coming.

"I wouldn't advise you to stay in town, Mr. Marsh," he said quietly. "There is quite a feeling about you, and it wouldn't—"

"I go when I please, Freeman," coldly. "I could buy this damn' town and still have

plenty of money to build a dozen more."

"To build a dozen more—perhaps. But the price of this one might be rather steep."

"I'll own it before I get through."

Marsh locked the bank, climbed in his buggy and drove back toward the Triangle X. He didn't need to consult an attorney to know that he could never collect on those mortgages, unless the ranchers were honest enough to pay, regardless of the mortgages. And Kendall Marsh was wise enough to realize that he had never done anything to cause these three ranchers to stretch their honesty to the breaking point.

CULTUS listened to the inquest and heard the jury bring in a verdict charging Blaze Nolan with murdering an officer while in the discharge of his duty. The evidence was purely circumstantial, but who would ask for more? The sheriff served a warrant on Nolan for robbery; the sheriff is found dead beside the road, the warrant in his pocket, and the prisoner flown. The doctor testified as to the nature of the wounds, Ole Olsen testified to finding the body; the justice who made out the warrant for Kendall Marsh, charging Nolan with robbery, testified to his part in the matter. It was all very simple.

When the inquest was over, all the male spectators and principals adjourned to the War Dance for refreshments, while the women and children went shopping or piled into their respective rigs to await the pleasure of their lords and masters.

Jane didn't go to the inquest, and Cultus found her sitting in the JK buckboard, waiting for her father. She seemed very downcast; so he stopped to talk with her. Her eyes clouded when she heard the verdict of the coroner's jury, and Cultus had the feeling that she still cared for Blaze Nolan more than anyone thought.

"Do you believe he did these things, Mr. Collins?" she asked.

Cultus smiled grimly.

"He sure left plenty evidence, ma'am."

Jane shook her head, her lips compressed tightly. Then: "He came here to work for Kendall Marsh. His interests were with Kendall Marsh; so why would he rob his employer? Not to benefit the cattlemen, surely. He would have no cause to do that."

"It don't look quite right, that's a fact," admitted Cultus. "I've got pretty well acquainted with Nolan, and he don't strike me as a bad sort of a person. I've never heard him say a word against anybody around here—and I don't think he cared much for Kendall Marsh, if what we heard that night out there was true, and I reckon it was."

"Then you *were* out there?" quickly.

"I was the one who popped the shotgun man over the head."

"Oh, I thought you were, but I wasn't sure. But how did you know I was there?"

"I followed yuh, ma'am."

Jane took a deep breath.

"Oh, I'm glad you did, Mr. Collins!"

"It worked out pretty good. And then Blaze Nolan brought you to town."

"But he didn't know it," said Jane, coloring quickly.

"He does know it now. At that time he thought you was that woman they call Della."

"I know it. She is the woman that Blaze fought my brother over."

"The woman *they say* caused the killin', ma'am."

"Don't you believe it?"

"Do you?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Ma'am," Cultus leaned on the wheel and looked at her closely, "what would you give to have Blaze Nolan exonerated of all these charges?"

She stared at him wonderingly.

"Exonerated? Oh, that would be impossible. But I'd give—" she stared blankly at Cultus—"I'd give 'most anything. But there's too many things against him—too many things to explain away."

"There's quite a lot," he admitted slowly.

"And he ran away, you know."

"Yeah—he's gone."

JIM KELTON was coming down the sidewalk, hobbling along with the aid of his cane. He smiled at Cultus, who offered to untie the team for him.

"You were there when they found Blaze Nolan at the back of the bank, weren't you, Collins?" asked Kelton.

"Yeah, I was there," smiled Cultus.

"What was yore impression of it? Do yuh suppose somebody knew that Blaze was

goin' to rob the bank, laid for him, knocked him down, but missed findin' the money, when Blaze fell across it?"

"That's a plumb new theory," smiled Cultus. "Got the papers, but missed the money, eh? Worth thinkin' about."

"And what about Marsh's son bein' in the bank, minus his pants?"

Cultus laughed softly, but shook his head.

"I'd like to know, myself. But here's another little theory. Suppose Blaze Nolan knew that somebody else was goin' to rob



the bank, tries to stop it, but gets knocked out, after he took the money away from him?"

Jim Kelton shook his head quickly.

"If Blaze Nolan wasn't guilty, why did he shoot Buck Gillis?"

"Button, button, who's got the button?" smiled Cultus. "Theories are of no value, Mr. Kelton. Friends will always find one to fit their particular views, while enemies will always find one to fit their views."

"Are you Blaze Nolan's friend?"

"Not yet; I haven't known him long enough."

"Huh!" snorted Jim Kelton, gathering up his lines. Jane shot Cultus a grateful glance, as they drove away, leaving him with a smile on his lean face. Finally he turned and walked down to Bad News's office, where he found the lanky, sad-faced deputy seated at a table, making meaningless marks on a sheet of paper with a stubby pencil.

"I wish I knowed where Blaze Nolan is," he said mournfully. "I've sent telegrams to every darned sheriff in the world, I reckon. Somebody ort to pick him up. I hope he resists. It's a hangin' job, and I don't want no chore like that. The county is goin' to offer a thousand dollars reward for him, dead or alive. The bank is closed and Freeman has been fired. Kendall Marsh was here a while ago, and I reckon he was awful mad. I reckon his plans have kinda gone haywire lately."

"I guess they have," smiled Cultus. "In

more ways than one. What will be yore first move in locating Blaze Nolan?"

"Gosh, I dunno! None, I reckon. What *can* I do? This is a hell of a big country to look for one man in. Nossir, I'm jist goin' to set here and wait until somebody else sees him. I may be a fool, but I'm not goin' to be a tired fool, I'll tell yuh that. Some folks seem to think that the burnin' of the courthouse at Broad Arrow had some connection with the bank robbery here."

"They're not blamin' that on Nolan, are they?"

"I s'pose. Why, they'd blame him for a change in the weather. And," sighed Bad News, "he'd prob'ly be to blame. The part that hurts the worst is the fact that before Blaze had any trouble around here, him and Buck Gillis was the best of friends. And then for Blaze to up and kill Buck! Well, yuh never can tell which way a dill pickle will squirt. I suppose he was willin' to do anythin' to keep from goin' back to the pen again. Buck didn't want to serve that warrant. He was mad about it. But he couldn't help doin' it, after Marsh swore it out. Gosh, I'm sorry I didn't go with Buck. I wanted to, but Buck said he didn't need me. And I didn't think he did. Well, that's the way it goes, Collins."

"Didja ask the coroner to find them two bullets that killed Buck?"

"Shore. He said he would."

"Who shoots a .41 sixgun around here, Bad News?"

"Nobody that I know about. Why?"

"I was just wonderin'."

"Uh-huh," thoughtfully. "Didja think Buck was shot with one?"

"No, I didn't suppose he was, but I was a little curious."

"Let's go down and see the doctor; he might have 'em by now."

THEY walked down to the office, and the doctor produced both bullets from an old china cup he had on a shelf. Bad News handled them gingerly. One was rather badly battered, but the other was almost perfect in shape.

"Forty-five," said Bad News.

Cultus didn't deny it, but asked the doctor if he had a pair of pliers, which were quickly produced. After considerable dif-

ficulty, Cultus managed to draw a bullet from one of his own cartridges, while the other two men watched him curiously. Then he inserted the bullet which had been removed from the body. It fit loosely.

"By golly, that's a .44!" exclaimed Bad News. "I thought Blaze wore a .45."

"I guess he shot a .44 this time," said Cultus, as he handed the bullets to Bad News. "Lock these up, will yuh? We might need 'em."

"What is your theory?" asked the doctor curiously.

"Of no value at all," replied Cultus softly. "Yuh see, I liked him."

"That's the worst of bein' a sheriff," complained Bad News. "Yuh always find folks who are friendly to the criminal."

"I thought you liked Blaze Nolan," said Cultus.

"I do. That's the hell of it."

Later on that afternoon Cultus found Jules Mendoza and Tony Gibbs in Henderson's store, but neither of them had much to say. They were purchasing a small bill of goods, and Cultus noted that Mendoza bought several boxes of .44 revolver cartridges. He wanted to ask Mendoza if any of his outfit used a .41, but decided not to, as there were several other men in the store.

It was about ten o'clock when Cultus decided to go to bed, and as he came in the little lobby of the hotel the proprietor handed him a sealed envelope, which was grimy from handling. On it was penciled the name Collins.

"I dunno where it came from," explained the man. "The first I seen of it, it was here on my desk. There ain't no other Collins in this town; so it must be for you."

Cultus thanked him and took it to his room. The enclosed sheet of paper was rather interesting. It read:

Collins:

Come to the mouth of Padre Canyon tomorrow. Can't trust anybody else. Can tell you something you might like to know. Destroy this note at once, and come alone.

Nolan.

Cultus lighted a cigarette over the chim-

ney of his lamp and studied the penciled note, wondering what it was all about. The writing was cleancut, no words misspelled.

"If that note is from Blaze Nolan, it shore ruins some of my pet theories," he told himself. "It could have been left on the desk by Jules or Tony. And where is Padre Canyon, I wonder? I reckon I'll find out if that's Blaze Nolan's handwritin', before I poke my nose into any traps."

He folded the note, shoved it deep in his pocket, kicked off his boots and blew out the lamp before he opened the window. Across the street was the War Dance Saloon, going at full blast, the strains of a fiddle and a jangling piano playing a rag-time; two cowboys trying to harmonize "Sweet Adeline" on the sidewalk below his window; blue moonlight and the deep shadows where a group of horses dozed at a hitchrack, and far to the west, where the stars seemed to be tumbling down, was Red Horse Pass, etched clearly against the sky.

"The moonlight does knock off the rough edges," muttered Cultus. "Sometimes I wonder why folks live in a place like this."

And, as though in answer, came the voices of the two cowboys singing an old Southwest refrain:

*"Just dust and heat,
One crooked street;
The houses ain't very tall.
It's grim and hard,
But I tell yuh, pard;
It's home, sweet home, thasall."*

"I reckon that's the answer," said Cultus softly to himself.

CHAPTER XVII

THE CANYON OF DEATH

IT WAS noontime at the JK ranch when Cultus rode into the patio. Harry Kelton was drawing water at the well, and Jane was sitting in the shade of the porch, listlessly perusing an old magazine. Harry greeted Cultus cordially.

"Get down and rest your feet," he invited. "Dinner must be almost ready. What's the news from town?"

Cultus dismounted and let his horse drink at the trough.

"No news," he replied.

"No trace of Nolan, eh?"

"I guess not. I saw Bad News sittin' on the sidewalk in front of his office, whittlin'," smiled Cultus.



"Might as well be, as far as any good he could do. I'll stable yore horse for yuh."

Cultus handed him the reins and walked over to Jane, who had put aside the magazine and smiled at him. He removed his sombrero and leaned against the porch, speaking softly.

"Miss Kelton, have you got a sample of Nolan's writin'?"

She shook her head slowly, thoughtfully.

"No, I haven't. Why did you want a sample of his writing?"

"I can't tell yuh right now. Would yuh recognize it, if yuh saw it?"

"I don't believe I would."

"Uh-huh. Hot, ain't it?"

He drew a huge colored handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his lean face. And with the handkerchief came a folded bit of paper, which dropped beside the porch, unseen by Cultus. Harry Kelton was coming across the patio and happened to see the piece of paper. Jane turned toward the doorway, and Cultus stepped over to a washbench. Harry leaned against the porch, until Cultus finished, and then took his place at the washbench.

And as soon as Cultus went in through the doorway to the dining-room, Harry stepped off the porch and picked up the folded paper. It only required a moment for him to read it. His eyes narrowed as he put the paper in his pocket and followed Cultus in to the dining-room.

JIM KELTON welcomed Cultus warmly and asked for news of Nolan, but Cultus was unable to furnish him with any new information. They talked of cattle and of the Painted Valley. Harry was curious

to know if Cultus had any trace of his stolen horse, but Cultus evaded the question. Cultus steered the conversation away from Blaze Nolan as much as possible, because he felt that Jane did not care to discuss him.

Cultus had found out the exact location of Padre Canyon before he left Medicine Tree. It was situated about two miles north of Red Horse Pass, but his information regarding its length and breadth was rather meager. His informant, the hotel keeper, said there were quite a number of old cliff dwellings in Padre Canyon, especially on the south side, but that they were inaccessible and had never been investigated.

He rode away from the JK ranch shortly after dinner, and, as soon as he reached the first turn in the road, he swung sharply to the north, heading for the mouth of Padre Canyon.

And Cultus was barely out of sight when Harry Kelton handed his father the note which Cultus had lost. It was the note from Blaze Nolan. Jane didn't see the note, but she heard her father read it aloud.

"Well, what's to be done?" asked Harry. "It looks like a chance to catch Blaze Nolan, dad?"

"But you can't do it alone. Collins is evidently a trusted friend of Nolan. You better ride to town as quick as yuh can, show this to the sheriff and let him take a posse. If Blaze is in Padre Canyon, they'll need several men to get him."

"All right. I'll get down there as quick as I can, don't worry about that."

Harry ran out to the stable, threw a saddle on his fastest horse, and went racing down the dusty road toward Medicine Tree. Jane went out on the rear porch, where she watched Harry ride away. Ever since the day before she had wondered over Cultus Collins's question: "What would you give to have Blaze Nolan exonerated of all these charges?"

Why would he ask her such a question unless there was a possibility of such a thing, she wondered? Did Cultus Collins have information which might exonerate Blaze? Were they working together on this information? Did Blaze have some information for Collins?

All these questions raced through her mind now. And if the posse caught Blaze now—

SHE turned back to her room, where she quickly donned a pair of overalls, boots, flannel shirt and a wide hat. There was no one to question her coming or going. Her father was on the upper veranda, watching the road to Medicine Tree.

She ran out to the stable, saddled Glory, the little brown mare, and headed due north. At a short distance she looked like a slim young cowboy riding a very swift little horse and going somewhere in a great hurry.

But Cultus didn't hurry. He was taking plenty of time, because he was still a bit dubious about that note being genuine, and because he was going into an unfamiliar country. The traveling was very uneven, and at places the mesquite forced him to detour widely, but he finally reached the mouth of Padre Canyon, with its steep walls of colored sandstone. The mouth of the canyon was about two hundred yards wide, with towering spires on either side.

The canyon was quite brushy, but nothing grew on those grim walls, which broke back like the turrets on a queer jumble of castles. Cultus halted at the entrance long enough to smoke a cigarette. The note had asked him to come to the mouth of the canyon, and here he was.

But the only sign of life was a circling buzzard whose shadow passed and repassed over those broken walls. There was no chance for Cultus to have been mistaken in the canyon. He rode in farther and halted again. From here he could look up at the south wall, where overhanging cliffs threw shadows over what Cultus decided were the old cliff dwellings.

But still there was nothing except the circling buzzard; not even the call of a bird to break the silence. Then he heard a sound behind him. He swung his horse around quickly. It was Jane Kelton on her brown mare, following the tracks of Cultus's mount.

He waited for her to come up to him, not knowing who she was until she was only a short distance away.

"You haven't seen him?" she asked quickly. Cultus shook his head, wondering

how she knew where he was and what he was looking for.

"You lost that letter and Harry found it," she explained. "He's gone to town to get the sheriff and a posse."

Cultus felt in his pocket for the letter, but it was missing.

"I—I didn't want the sheriff to find you," she said wearily.

"Well, that was shore thoughtful of yuh," he said, "but I ain't found him—Nolan. You know what the note said?"

"I heard dad read it. Was that why you wanted a sample of Blaze's writing?"

He nodded slowly, scanning the cliffs.

"Yeah; I wasn't sure that he wrote it."

"Who else would write it?"

And as if in answer to her question, came the thud of a blow, and Cultus's horse buckled at the knees and went headlong, throwing Cultus to his hands and knees, where he sprawled foolishly, while the canyon walls echoed back the *spang* of a high powered rifle.

JANE'S mare whirled wildly, almost unseating her, when a second bullet whined off a rock near her front feet and went *skec-e-ing* across the canyon. She swung the horse back, spurring viciously. Jane knew they were in a trap, but she was game. Cultus was on his feet now.

"Get on behind me!" she yelled. "Glory will take us out."



Cultus came running, but before he could get up behind her the brown mare's left hind leg buckled under her and she went to her haunches, pawing wildly. Jane threw herself free as the mare went over backward, but the fall dazed her for a few minutes.

She heard the crash of Cultus's revolver. He was on his knees beside her, the smoking gun in his hand, his lips a trifle white.

"I had to do it," he said tensely. "Her leg was busted."

"Glory?" whispered Jane.

"Yeah. They got my horse cold. Don't

move. That last shot came from the east. We're under cover now, but there's two men, at least, and they've got us trapped."

Another bullet smashed through the mesquite, showering them with splinters of wood and leaves. Cultus shook his head dubiously.

"That's too close. I'm a fool not to have packed a rifle. Might have known it was a trap."

"Who is it?" asked Jane nervously.

"I dunno. Golly, I don't see why you didn't stay home. Wasn't any use of you gettin' hurt."

"But I had to come, don't you see. If Blaze was here——"

"You wanted to warn him of the sheriff?"

"Yes. You spoke about something that might exonerate him, and I knew he'd never have a chance if the sheriff caught him."

He looked at her curiously.

"You still think quite a lot of him, don't-cha?"

She nodded slowly and winced when another bullet whined over their heads.

"We've got to git out of here," said Cultus. "They're crossfirin' this bunch of brush, and sooner or later they'll kill both of us. If yuh ain't afraid of a few stickers, we'll do a little crawlin'."

"I'm not afraid," she said simply.

"Sneak in on my left side and keep down low. Mebbe we can fool 'em for a little while. Nose in the dirt, sister. Don't try to look up, and crawl on yore elbows. Drag yore legs. That's the stuff. C'mon."

It was a slow process and painful. There were plenty of small cactus, and Jane discovered that nearly everything she crawled over had a sticker of some kind. Foot by foot they slid away through the sand. No bullets searched through the mesquite now.

"They know we've moved," Cultus told her, "and they're movin' to a place where they can see us again."

They made a hundred feet and flattened out behind some low bushes, while Cultus lifted his head in a vain endeavor to see the shooters.

He didn't see them, but his effort was rewarded with a bullet, which threw sand in their ears.

"I reckon we better move on," he grunted. "Keep lower than a snake."

TWO more bullets from the east, which scattered sand where they had been, assured Cultus that at least one of their assailants was not yet aware of their change of position. They were nearing the sheer sandstone side of the canyon now, and Cultus was looking for a place where they might make a permanent stand.

A hundred feet ahead was a break in the wall. It didn't look exactly promising, but it might be better than out in the open. A shallow, angling washout gave them a little advantage, but one shooter had located them again. His first shot was three feet high, and bored a hole in the sandstone wall above them.

"Long range stuff," panted Cultus. "If this washout continues, we might have a chance."

They dragged their way along to the mouth of the fissure, where a little patch of brush gave them a few minutes of security.

"Gee, I never felt so big in my life," panted Jane, as she stretched out flat on her back, rubbing her elbows, where the sand had cut the tender skin.

Another bullet struck near them and she ceased rubbing. Cultus had been studying the fissure, which seemed to run back for quite a ways, but seemingly without any angles behind which they might hide. As near as he could see, it was open to the top of the cliffs.

A bullet from the east settled the question.

"We'll try that fissure," he told her. "It might be a death trap for us, but we've got to take that chance. Anyway, they've got to face us, and there'll be no crossfire. When we start for the openin', we've got to crawl real fast for a few feet. There's some broken sandstone in there, but not enough to stop many bullets. C'mon."

They went across that open bit of country like a couple of lizards, and into that fissure, while a bullet showered them with sand from a projection above their heads. Cultus saw where the bullet had scored the sandstone. He patted Jane on the shoulder.

"We're all set until they get located again. That bullet came from the north, and it

came on an angle that proves he's got to change his position in order to shoot straight into this fissure. But if he ever does get the right position on them opposite cliffs, he can rake us at his own sweet will. And if they both get up there—good mornin', Saint Peter."

CULTUS got boldly to his feet now and began moving back through the narrow fissure, which was barely wide enough for him to pass through. Jane came close behind him to a wider spot, where he drew her past him. The fissure extended about seventy feet to where it narrowed to not over twelve inches across.

Jane squeezed through for about six feet, where an unseen fissure broke in from the west. It was not over six feet in length. Her shout of gladness caused Cultus to twist his way through, thankful that he was thin enough to make it.

"By golly, this is great!" he exclaimed. "We're safe for a while."

"For all the while, you mean."

Cultus shook his head slowly.

"We're bottled up, thasall."

"But the sheriff and his posse will find us."

"Not a chance. We won't know when they come, and they don't know we are here. Them two bushwhackers will take it easy until after the posse has gone, and then they'll cork our bottle."

"Maybe we can get out after dark," hopefully.

"Mebbe. Lotta mebbes about this deal. We don't dare go back. Them fellers has got their seats for the big show right now, and we'd shore get punctured quick if we went back to the main fissure. It's a case of—"

Cultus's eyes had been exploring the fissure above them, and now he craned his neck for a better view. He squinted up that narrow fissure, looking up at the tiny streak of blue sky above them.

"Jane Kelton," he said seriously. "there's a way out of here, if you've got the nerve to tackle it. See them old niches in the wall? They're on both sides. This fissure was the old cave dweller's getaway. Are yuh game to go up the old timer's stairway?"

Jane studied the precarious ladder, where

a misstep would be certain death. High above was the jagged streak of blue, which marked the exit. It seemed a mile away, and the fissure no wider than her hand.

"It's a chance," he told her.

She was trembling a little and her face was white.

"I—I don't believe I could make it," she faltered.

"I'd be right under yuh," he said. "You can lean forward against the end of the fissure. We can take off our boots, and it's just a case of takin' it easy and bracin' against the walls. Them niches ain't far apart. It's our best bet, and I'd rather chance it than bullets. If you say so, we'll stick right here and fight it out; but I'd shore like to have a chance to help Blaze Nolan."

That settled it. Jane leaned against the wall and began taking off her boots, while Cultus whistled unmusically between his teeth and rolled a cigarette.



CHAPTER XVIII

JUST "BAD NEWS" HENNERY BUKER

YUH say Cultus Collins lost this here note at yore ranch?"

Bad News Buker studied it thoughtfully, while Harry Kelton sat on his horse against the edge of the sidewalk in front of Bad News's office.

"Padre Canyon, eh?" mused Bad News. "Blaze has information for him, eh? Wonder what in hell Blaze wants to tell him?"

Bad News lifted his eyes from the note and looked at Harry. "Might be a chance to grab Blaze, eh?"

"That's what I thought, when I brought it to yuh."

"Oh, yeah."

"And Collins will be away from there before you ever get a chance to catch Blaze, if yuh don't hurry."

"That's right. Wait'll I get my horse, and you can go with me."

"Why not swear in a posse?"

"Nope. If I can't get him alone, I'll never get him. All a damn' posse is good for is to offer advice and kick about things."

Harry was willing to ride with him, and

they left town as soon as Bad News could saddle his horse.

"Collins must be in cahoots with Blaze," offered Harry as they pounded along the road.

"I ain't offerin' any thoughts on the matter, Harry. Mostly always I'm wrong. I don't sabe Collins no more than you do. Said he was here to find a stolen horse, but he ain't looked for no horse; not that I've seen. I figure he's just a lazy buckaroo with some money, and he'll stick here as long as his money lasts. But don't never git yore mind in such a condition that yuh might think for a minute that he ain't forked. Pass all such thoughts, pardner, because that lean, hungry-lookin' waddy is much man."

"I ain't choosin' him for trouble," grinned Harry. "What he done to Alden Marsh and Butch Van Deen was plenty warnin' to me. I reckon they've laid off him since then. Seems to me that Alden Marsh is kinda layin' off the booze lately."

"Well, he ain't such a familiar sight as he was for a while. Mebbe the old man has kinda blocked his parade. We better turn off here and head north, I reckon. Better travelin' than it is farther on this way."

"All right," and they swung off the road. Then, "Who do yuh think helped Blaze rob the bank that night?"

"Pardner," grimly, "if thinkin' got me anywhere, I'd be right where I started from. I reckon Buck Gillis hired me for a deputy because he felt sorry for the cows around here; and now I've got hoodled into the sheriff's boots, which fit me jist like a sixteen collar would fit a rattler. I can crawl right through my job and never touch sides, bottom or top. Some of these damn' fools around here seem to think that all you've got to do is pin a star on yore vest, and yuh immediate becomes wise as hell. Yeah, I'm wise, y'betcha; wise to the fact that I don't know anythin' about my job."

"If yuh catch Blaze Nolan, you'll have a reputation, Bad News."

"Sure, I will. Then they'll hang Blaze, won't they? Uh-huh. And all my life I'll think about it—think how damn' easy I could have kept from catchin' him. Legal murder."

"That's queer talk from a sheriff."

"Yo're just like the rest of 'em, Harry."

I may wear a star and have folks call me sheriff; but I'm jist Bad News Hennery Buker, the same as I was."

"Then what are yuh goin' out here for?"

"Keepin' up appearances, I s'pose."

"Meanin' that yuh wouldn't arrest Blaze Nolan?"

"You take that out and bury it, will yuh? Of course I'll arrest him—if I catch him."

"Buck Gillis wouldn't hesitate to arrest him."

"So I noticed. There's Padre Canyon ahead. That note said for Collins to meet him at the mouth of the canyon, eh? Mebbe we better go kinda easy from now on."

THEY angled their way silently along for the last quarter of a mile to the entrance of the canyon. Very little stock ever ranged in Padre Canyon, and it just happened that they struck the spot where both Cultus and Jane had ridden in. Bad News pointed at the marks in the sand.

"Tracks of two horses," he said. "Look kinda fresh, too; and they're both headin' the same way. You keep an eye on the tracks, while I keep my chin up, 'cause this ain't no place to get caught."

They trailed in slowly, following the tracks. There was not a sign of life, not even the circling buzzards. The sun had passed the head of the canyon now, and the pinnacles threw their long, purple shadows across the depths.

"This damn' place is like a tomb," growled Bad News. "It always makes me feel how small I am. I'd like to take some of the big men I've heard about and set 'em down in the middle of this place. I reckon God A'mighty made places like these jist to show yuh how danged insignificant yuh really are."

"Whoa!" snorted Harry.

He was out of his saddle quickly, and Bad News was not far behind him. Almost blocking their trail was the body of Jane's brown mare, and fifty feet away, piled on its head, was Cultus Collins's horse.

Harry dropped on his knees beside the brown mare, while Bad News hunched down on his heels, scanning the surroundings.

"This is Jane's horse and saddle," said Harry in a hoarse whisper. "Been shot twice, Bad News. Broken hind leg and a bullet through its head. My God, what happened around here, anyway?"

"That's Collins's horse," replied Bad News, pointing a lean finger at the animal beyond. "Neck busted square off. I reckon we got here too late for the party."

"But what would Jane be doing here? She was at the ranch when I left there."

Bad News wiped a sleeve across his sweaty face.

"Did she read that note?" he asked.

"No. Dad read it aloud, and she might have heard it. But what difference would that make?"

"Not bein' a woman, and never havin' been engaged, I'd hate to try for an answer on that one."

"Do you think she came to see Blaze Nolan?"

"You know what I think about my own thinkin', Harry. Let's see what we can find around here."

BUT the signs were not plain to either of them, because the ground was too hard to retain a footprint. They circled the horses, trying to pick up tracks, but the ground told them nothing; so they came back to their horses, where they stood and scanned the cliffs on both sides.

"Shore beats me," said Bad News wearily. "I reckon we better hightail back to yore ranch and see if yore father knows anythin' about it. If he don't, we'll get a gang of men and search the canyon. There's somethin' queer about this. Blaze Nolan ain't the kind to invite a man to see him, and then bushwhack him."

Harry took one last circle of the place, but was unable to pick up any tracks; so he came back to his horse and they rode out of the canyon. Bad News looked at his watch and back at the portals of the canyon, as he said, "We're shore stuck for time. By the time I can get back to Medicine Tree and organize a searchin' party and get back here, it'll be dark. We'd look well, searchin' Padre Canyon with a lantern."

"We'll see what dad knows, before we make it look too bad. C'mon!"

(To be concluded in the next issue)



IF YOU'RE lookin' for excitement, when you get to Solomon,
Lose no time at all in bein' introduced to Flapjack Dunn.
An' when conversation's started on a free an' easy jaunt,
Just say, "EGGS," an' you'll be gettin' all the ructions that you want,
An' the reason Flapjack rages like a huskie with a fit
Is herewith elucidated so's to wise you up a bit.

He was snowed up in his diggin's, while the Yukon blizzards blew,
With his gold dust an' his huskies an' with nothin' much to do
But play cards, till once, while cookin', he just took a casual glance
At the egg that he was breakin', an' he caught the one word, "Nance,"
Scribbled faintly on the eggshell, an' then cockin' his bald head,
"Nance O'Toole, Eleven Green Street, Paradise, Pa.," he read.

Flapjack found that winter draggin'; it just wouldn't seem to pass,
For the love-bug had him dreamin' day an' night of the far lass,
An' the spring had him departin' in a hurry to the south
With his pockets jammed with dollars, as these words boomed from his mouth:
"Gents, I'm nothin' much to look at but I'm harkenin' romance,
An' I'm trailin' back here wedded to a dame whose name is Nance."

Laughin' loudly at our joshin', Flapjack started on his way,
An' he reached his destination down in Paradise, Pa.,
An' he walked the gravel pathway that was leadin' to the door,
Where his knuckles on the panels seemed to cause a mighty roar,
Till the door swung inward slowly an' a woman, old an' white,
Blinked at Flapjack, who was thinkin', "Holy Moses, what a fright!"

Flapjack got right down to business an' he smiled a silly smile,
As he gulped, "I'm short of language an' I'm mighty shy on style,
But I've come down from Alaska to be weddin' Nance O'Toole,
Whose address upon an eggshell—" Then the old dame sneered, "You fool,
That there foolishness was written forty years or more ago;
I'm the Nance an'—a gran'ma, as I'm wantin' you to know."

Flapjack gasped an' gulped an' spluttered an' then lifted up his feet,
An', before he realized it, he was beatin' a retreat
Back to Solomon an' ravin', while his cronies made his life
Worse than wretched by their questions appertainin' to his wife.
Which is ample explanation as to why nobody begs
To be gettin' Flapjack's nanny by the mentionin' of eggs.





CODE

By FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Author of "The Last Stampede," "Sweet Water," etc.

A REVERED TRADITION OF THE SEA MAY BE CONFUSED WITH A SKUTLE-BUTT RUMOR—WHEN STORMS BLOW UP OFF THE PACIFIC COAST AND TWO CAPTAINS OF THE OLD SCHOOL COME FACE TO FACE. ONE ON THE BRIDGE OF A COAST GUARD CUTTER AND THE OTHER IN COMMAND OF A RUM RUNNER

A MONTH had passed since the *Crayton* had first appeared off shore seeking a chance to land her cargo unobserved. It was an interesting and valuable cargo, but there really was no secret regarding the identity—real stuff, bottled in Scotland. Each bottle bore a label which read:

Supplied on all the Liners of the P. & O. Coy. continuously since 1874, numerous other Shipping Companies, H. M. Transports, and to many Clubs and Officers' Messes at home and abroad.

But this cargo was not destined for either P. & O. Liners, His Majesty's transports or Officers' Messes—not if Captain McNulty could elude the Coast Guard ships strung along the invisible line designated the twelve mile limit.

The glass was dropping and McNulty scowled and cursed his luck as the *Chinook* one of Uncle Sam's newest cutters steamed past. Old Wold, her skipper, was on the bridge and he knew all about the *Crayton* and McNulty. In addition he was familiar

with all of the tricks in the book and could neither be deceived nor bought. It was his belief that a pitcher could and would come to the well once too often.

From the *Crayton's* crow's-nest came the lookout's monotonous voice, "*Chinook* two points off the starboard bow, sir!"

McNulty growled a retort and glanced at Pritt who owned the cargo and ship. "The *Chinook* is ready to take us as usual, Mr. Pritt."

Pritt swore with feeling. Then he swore again as the radio operator appeared with a weather report predicting a bad blow within a few hours. McNulty put to sea. This was no coast to be caught in a blow. Pritt ventured a suggestion. "The cutter is riding light and we are loaded. We can stand rougher weather than the *Chinook* why not try to run in after she's hunted shelter?"

"Not off this coast, sir," McNulty replied. He sniffed the air, believing his sense more reliable than a weather report. "A man needs room in bad weather. If we crashed on a reef——"

"Ship and cargo are insured against perils of the sea," Pritt interrupted.

McNulty scowled fiercely. Pritt flushed. McNulty clipped his words. "Let me remind you, sir, I am a sailor first. There are certain codes a real sailor never forgets. There's saving human lives; and there's sailing your ship whether she's a great liner with hundreds of passengers or a fishing schooner. Never forget that, Mr. Pritt."

PRITT watched the coast line slip over the horizon. Ahead everything was black and the men were making things secure. Queer people, these sailors, he reflected. He had met many of the old school. They were all the same, respecting codes time had handed down. Yes, and stubborn. Old Wold was stubborn in his determination to prevent the *Crayton* from landing her cargo. McNulty, though he was none too keen about the job, was determined to see it through now that he had agreed to Pritt's proposition.

An hour later the storm was upon them. Great seas crashed over the deck; the woodwork creaked and groaned as the vessel labored. McNulty paced a spray-drenched bridge. He was dressed in oilskins and the face peering from beneath the sou'wester was ruddy and glowing with the joy of battle. The blue eyes peered into the darkness and saw many things denied the landsmen. The flesh about the eyes was lined and seamed from many years, squinting, for phantom ships leap unexpectedly from the fog; phantom reefs bare their fangs on stormy nights and the sailor's only guess must be the right guess.

With this man on the bridge a sense of security stole over Pritt. He retired to his bunk, snuggled in the warmth of the blankets and listened to the roar of the storm and the break of the seas against the riveted walls. The pulsations of the engine lulled him to sleep.

IT WAS the change in the engine room rhythm that awakened him. Sensing the unusual, Pritt dressed hastily. The *Crayton* was wallowing in a troubled sea. Sounds that the engine usually stilled became audible; spray hissed; waves broke and rushed into an inky night. "What's the trouble, Captain. Coast Guard?"

The Coast Guard vessels were a night-

mare to Pritt. The storm might have driven them within the twelve mile limit.

"Vessel in distress. See her? Dead ahead, sir!" The skipper pointed a stubby finger. Pritt could see nothing, but presently a flare outlined the masts and shrouds of a small schooner. She was barely making headway. "Full speed ahead, Mr. Hansen! We'll speak her!"

The mate executed the order, first repeating it.

When she was alongside the battered craft McNulty's voice boomed a "On deck there?"

"Hello!" The answer came from a figure clinging to the schooner's wheel. The wind carried half the man's words away. Pritt caught, "—engineer—foot—in—'chinery—crushed—aid?"

"Engineer crushed his foot in the machinery," McNulty explained. "Needs aid!" He turned to the mate. "Mr. Hansen we'll take him aboard."

McNulty did not say they would attempt to take him aboard the *Crayton*. He said they would take him. It was evident the schooner's small crew had prepared for this. They carried a limp figure to a contrivance of wood and canvas secured to a 'midships deckhouse and lashed it. With few words being passed the two crews worked in unison.

Pritt gripped the bridge rail and held his breath as one of the *Crayton's* cargo booms swung over the schooner's deck. The steel block swung dangerously, caught and tore free some light gear on the smaller craft, then came banging against the steamer's side. With infinite patience they maneuvered the restless craft and bided their time—knowing that in the end it would come.

DEFT hands finally caught the block and hooked it into a network of lines as the schooner was on the crest of a wave. The next instant she had dropped beneath the improvised stretcher and the injured man swung into space. The sea leaped up furiously, as if denied its prey, then dropped sullenly away. The *Crayton's* hoists whined, then slackened away on the falls as the stretcher came clear of the side. A dozen men rushed forward to stop the swinging burden. It knocked them down and crashed against

steel walls of the deck houses. Pritt could feel his own flesh wince as the injured man's bones snapped from the impact. The falls slacked away suddenly and their burden stopped suddenly in the water surging on the deck. Brief as was the pause it was sufficient for eager hands to snatch the man from the stretcher and carry him into a cabin. Drenched and battered, the men withdrew. The captain and the steward examined the victim.

The skipper's thick fingers explored his ribs which had taken much of the impact. "Some broken," he announced. "Arm broken, too! He's unconscious, but coming 'round. Now for the foot!" The swollen, pulpy mass might have been a foot at one time, but now—— Pritt shuddered. It looked as if it had been fed into a rock crusher.

The skipper scribbled a brief message:

*Captain Wold,
U. S. C. G. Chinook. Have taken badly injured man from Schooner, Vivian Gill. Leg amputation necessary. Radio position.
McNulty, Crayton.*

Pritt read the message and licked his lips, suddenly grown dry. "Are you taking him inside the twelve mile limit, Captain?" he inquired.

"Certainly, sir! God was with us in getting him aboard. We could never transfer him again—and be lucky."

"We might!" Pritt's voice was hoarse. "If we're caught inside the twelve mile limit—— God, Captain, and you're going right into the cove where the *Chinook's* anchored. It means—ship and cargo."

"He can't be transferred again at sea," McNulty answered grimly.

"Try it!"

"We can't trifle with a dying man."

"If the cutter would meet us he'd get attention that much sooner. Try it——"

"No!"

"I order you to do it, sir!" The words came thickly. Pritt's face was ashen. A jury might take into consideration the circumstance and free them, but it would never return ship and cargo—it could not. "I order you to at least attempt it, sir!"

"You order?" McNulty's eyes glittered.

"Yes!"

"You've forgotten the law of the sea, sir. I am the only man who gives orders on this ship. I am responsible."

"When we touch port, sir——"

"Yes, when we do," McNulty rasped anticipating his words. "My chest is always packed!" he added.

PRESENTLY the steward returned from the radio shack. The *Chinook* was lying in Salmon Cove.

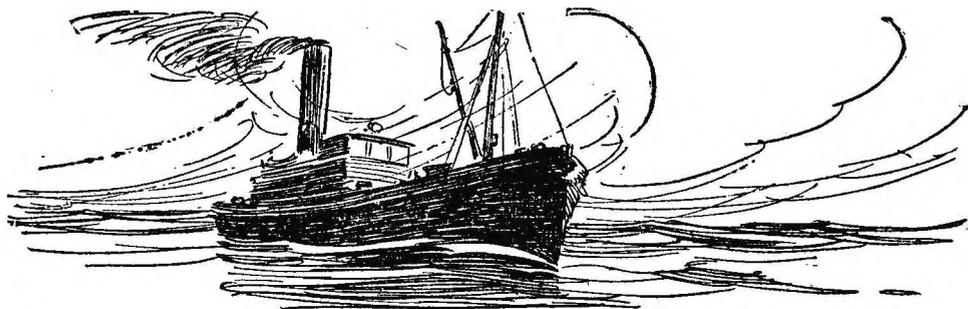
Salmon Cove!

What queer tricks fate played at times. This was the point selected to land their cargo.

With the storm blowing her shoreward and the engines turning over at full speed the *Crayton* was breaking her best previous record. McNulty was grim as he crossed the twelve mile limit. In time the grim walls of the coast loomed ahead. Even in the darkness the line of surf stood out sharply and white. Somewhere there was a break. They felt the ground swell now—the lift and fall was different.

"Peril of the sea!" muttered Pritt. "I hope we strike. The Coast Guarder is there to rescue us. I hope we strike!"

A white finger of light suddenly pointed skyward, giving the location of the cove. The *Crayton* slackened speed, then Mc-



Nulty growled, "Hard over!"

"Hard over, sir!"

The steamer seemed to slip into the trough of the sea then slide behind white water. The tossing ceased!

As they came slowly alongside the cutter, her rails were lined with alert seamen. The cutter's surgeon leaped aboard and disappeared below, followed by a hospital steward.

WOLD paced his own bridge, pausing frequently to take in the details of the *Crayton*. She rode very low in the water. "Nasty outside, Captain?" he observed.

"Very, Captain," McNulty answered. "The man's bad hurt, I should say. The *Vivian Gill* has a gas engine to keep her moving, like so many fishing schooners. He got his foot into the machinery some way. Then in getting him aboard we smashed him some more, sir!"

"It don't seem possible you could have taken him aboard, Captain, in that blow!" What a cargo the *Crayton* must have to make her ride so low. Only machinery or bottled goods could make a steamer ride like that. So this was the *Crayton*, the rum runner a thorn in the Coast Guard's side? Wold looked at McNulty's stubby hands, resting on the bridge rail. The rain was whipping the flesh into a ruddy glow. Short, thick hands—the hands of a man who had learned his ground work in sail. They were hands similar to Wold's. Scars from rope burns; scars from fistfights. The present generation of sailors was good enough, but it was the old sailing vessels that taught men the sea and its codes. Such codes were made by time; not by men who wrote them on paper and called them laws. Men got around laws through technicalities, but seamen followed the spirit of the code.

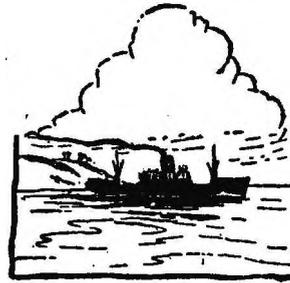
They were bringing a stretcher from the *Crayton*. A blanketed figure lay silent, but the chest rose and fell—like the sea beyond the reef. Sometimes it was quick, again it was slow, doubtful, as if the blow was almost over. The blanket blew back, disclosing a white face coated with the grease of the engine room.

The surgeon looked up briefly. "He'll live, I think, but that foot will have to come off. Yes, he'll live. The sea breeds men."

TWO of the *Crayton's* crew leaped back to the deck of their own vessel as seamen took their places at the stretcher. The grim Coast Guard skipper cleared his throat. "Cast off the *Crayton's* lines for'd and aft," he shouted. He looked sharply at McNulty. "I suppose you'll be proceeding, sir, the storm has about blown out."

"I'll be proceeding, Captain Wold," McNulty answered.

As the *Crayton* swung about and steamed slowly seaward a sailor who had been aboard the steamer hurried up to the skipper. He was a young man and did not understand all of the traditions of the sea and the unwritten codes between masters. "When I



was aboard, sir, I could smell whisky—Scotch whisky, sir. Some of her cargo must have broken in the storm."

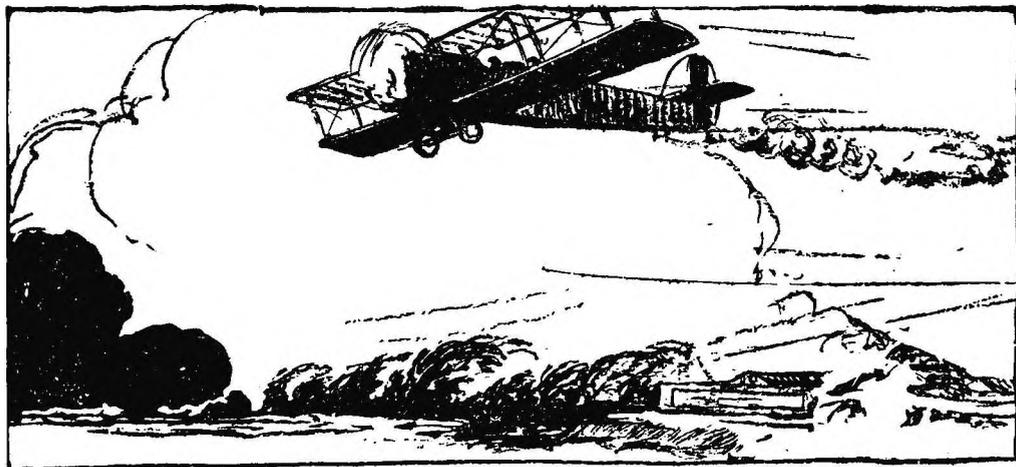
Captain Wold looked the youth squarely in the eye. "Youthful imagine, lad, youthful imagination," he said as though giving an order. "There's a skuttle-butt rumor that she's a rum-runner, but I sniffed and didn't smell a damned thing."

TWENTIETH CENTURY RANCHING

FOY PARKS, West Texas cowman whose ranch lies near Midland, Texas, is responsible for a new innovation in ranch tactics. When a natural gas pipeline recently was laid across his ranch to carry the fuel from a big gas field to Midland, Parks had his ranch tapped in.

Now the cook uses gas and the cowhands manipulate gas heated branding irons in applying Parks's brand to his cattle.

F. H.



PAYLOAD

By RAOUL WHITFIELD

Author of "Wild Water," "Border Brand," etc.

WITH A TRANS-CONTINENTAL FLIGHT AND A NON-STOP RECORD AT STAKE—WITH ALL IT MEANT TO HIM—KEENE FOUND HIMSELF MYSTERIOUSLY LACKING AN ASSISTANT. THEN VON ELTZ FILLED THE BREACH—AND BATTLING THROUGH A RAGING TEMPEST OF THE SKIES, KEENE'S PLANE BECAME THE STAGE FOR A MORE TERRIBLE BATTLE OF OLD WAR-BORN HATRED AND BITTER MISUNDERSTANDING

WEB KEENE stood at the door of the tiny field hospital, a frown on his lean, browned face. Out on the field surface, at one end of the runway, was the Standard New-type, "Airman." It was almost dusk, but Keene's eyes could distinguish the figure of Allister, standing a little apart from the group of pressmen and ground crew members. Webster Keene moved his rather thin lips slightly.

"Rotten break!" he muttered. "No man I'd rather have in the air——"

MacCall, the doctor, came to the door. He shook his head slowly; the white face of Bert Ranner appeared back of one of the doctor's shoulders. There was a bitter look in Bert's dark eyes.

"He shouldn't go, Web." There was a note of finality in the doctor's voice. "He's running a fever—there's a little congestion in that big chest of his. It'll be a tough hop——"

The medical man stopped speaking. Bert Ranner started to speak, but coughed harshly. But he went on.

"I've had colds before, Web. I've run a fever before——"

Web Keene shook his head slowly. There was a faint smile on his face.

"It's no go, Bert. You've done your share. You got the crate set for the hop. It was that damn cold hangar, the rain——"

A figure was at Web's side. A voice interrupted.

"Associated Press, Mr. Keene. Are you taking off—or is this another delay? I'd like to buzz the office on——"

Anger struck at the lean faced pilot. But he controlled himself. *Another* delay! Well, the *Associated Press* man was right. There had been plenty of delays. It would be "another." If——

He turned his eyes away from Bert Ranner. He forced a level tone.

"No delay," he said slowly. "We're getting off—in thirty minutes."

Bert Ranner swore grimly. Web Keene turned, moved to his friend's side. He smiled faintly.

"It's all right, Bert. The way things are going, you're out of a mess. Oh, I know

you'd want to be in on it! But the record's not likely——" he lowered his voice a little — "to be smashed *this* trip. Everything's gone wrong. I suppose I'll get Wellington in your place."

Bert Ranner turned away, trying to hide his disappointment. For weeks he had been working on the radial engine, cabin plane. For weeks he had been planning. A nine-cylinder, radial engine—four hundred pounds of payload—and a trans-continental flight. The accomplishment of such a flight—a non-stop flight with a record to be broken—that took planning. And now, at the last minute, he was out of things.

Bert Ranner straightened. He faced Web Keene again. He felt rotten; his body was hot and cold alternately, his whole chest ached. He spoke in a steady tone.

"She's right, Web. She'll take you through. But it'll be man power, pumping power that'll count. If Wellington gets that straight, understands——"

Web nodded. "I'll *see* that he understands," he stated. "You'd better stay off the field, Bert. See you in a week or so."

Bert Ranner held out his hand. There was a peculiar expression in his dark eyes.

"Luck, Web!" he muttered. "Get Wellington to understand. He's got to be more than—payload!"

Web Keene released his grip on Bert's hot hand. He nodded his head, turned away. MacCall led Bert over to a cot. From somewhere in the darkening sky came the drone of a plane, winging high. Bert Ranner groaned.

"Wellington!" he muttered bitterly. "He's never *been* anything more than payload! It's a crime to let him ride this record try——"

He broke off. A siren wailed out on the field. A gust of wind rattled the windows of the tiny field hospital. The doctor moved toward his cabinet. Outside, the voice of a newspaper man sounded, calling to another—a photographer.

"Get out to the ship, Burke. Ranner's out of the flight—Keene's got a new relief pilot. Better shoot him."

Bert Ranner swore grimly. He looked toward the half-opened hospital door. His voice was a harsh whisper.

"Damn him!" he muttered. "I'd *like* to shoot him!"

ALLISTER met Web Keene near the white-winged ship. His eyes held a worried expression. Web spoke slowly.

"MacCall says Ranner can't sky ride. He looks sick. Who do I get, Allister?"

The head of the manufacturing company hesitated. Web looked at him in faint surprise. Allister had held out for Wellington. He had wanted the engine design man to ride with his star pilot, from the beginning. And yet now he was not naming him immediately.

"Rawlings is on the field," the head of the plane outfit said slowly. "Bill Drake's here. Both know enough——"

Web shook his head. "Rawlings is too temperamental," he stated. "Bill's got a sick kid at home. Of course, there's——"

Allister interrupted him, speaking in a quiet tone.

"Wellington just had a talk with me. He doesn't want to ride along, Web." The eyes of the organization head avoided the pilot's suddenly narrowed ones. "I hate like the devil to postpone again. There's been a lot of publicity——"

Allister broke off. Web Keene stared at the older man's profiled face. Wellington not wanting to ride along! That was funny. He had been very anxious to go, up until now. And Allister had wanted him to go. Web spoke grimly.

"Changed his mind in a hurry, didn't he? Why?"

The organization head shrugged his shoulders. His eyes met Web's. He spoke in a puzzled tone.

"It beats me, Web. Things have been going wrong, ever since we planned this record break attempt. I went to Wellington a half-hour ago, when Doc MacCall told me he didn't think Bert should ride. Knew you didn't want him, but it looked as though you'd have to take him. And when I told him—he turned me down."



Web Keene smiled grimly. "This hop means big money, Chief," he stated. "We've got the ship to take the record away from the National people. They've cleaned up since they've held it. Maybe they don't want us to start."

Allister straightened. His face was serious. He shook his head slowly.

"It's damn certain they don't want us to take the record, Web," he stated. "But they're not playing rotten with us. And they couldn't reach Wellington, anyway. You don't think——"

HE BROKE off, staring at the lean faced pilot. Web Keene was smiling with his lips pressed tightly together. His eyes were looking beyond the head of the organization, toward the white winged ship and the group about her. He spoke in a low voice.

"I don't think you've got a crook in the outfit, Chief," he said slowly and with faint mockery. "But I *do* think damned funny things have been happening. After all, I made the first trans-continental non-stop hop, Chief. I didn't *have* a relief pilot. And I'll make this one with a——"

His voice died suddenly. He stiffened a bit; his eyes narrowed to little slits.

"There's Von Eltz," he said very slowly. "He'll do, Chief."

Allister's eyes met those of his star pilot. Allister had been a major in France. He had run a reconnaissance squadron. Webster Keene had been his ranking flying officer. When Allister had gone out of the automotive industry and into the air, Web had come in with him. They knew each other. They knew each other's past. Old things.

There was a little silence. Then Allister spoke in a quiet voice.

"You know about Von Eltz, Web. He *doesn't* know about you. I got him here because he can handle tri-motor ships. He hasn't met you—only once or twice. He's pretty quiet."

"Von Eltz!" Web Keene's face was twisted. There was a peculiar quality in his tone. "Just the man. Chief! Do I get him?"

Allister was frowning. He looked toward the figure that was coming toward them

now. It was growing very dark. Field men were rolling out the flood lights. The duralumin prop of the white winged ship was idling; the exhaust rumble came down on the wind to the two men.

Von Eltz reached them. He was tall, heavily built. He had blond hair and blue eyes. Over his left eye was a thin-traced goggle scar. He smiled faintly, looking at Webster Keene.

"I hear Ranner's ill," he said in his rather husky voice. "Wellington says he doesn't feel up to the hop. I'd like the chance, Keene, to ride along. I'm acquainted with——"

"The job's yours," Web cut in sharply. "That is, so far as I'm concerned."

He turned his gray eyes toward Allister. The organization head was looking into the blue eyes of Von Eltz. He seemed to be searching for something. Suddenly he turned toward Web Keene.

"You want him. He wants to go." He shrugged his shoulders. "Another delay will hurt us. The trade's ready to laugh now. The ship's right. Last weather report was as good as we can expect at this time of the year. And, after all, Von Eltz will be mostly cargo—gas pumping. He's got good arms. Shifting weight—he can do that. But the job's mostly——"

Allister stopped. He faced Von Eltz, his eyes narrowed. The blond headed one was looking into the gray eyes of Web Keene. He was smiling.

"——mostly payload," Von Eltz finished in a quiet tone. "I'm ready, Keene."

THE flood lights were on the runway. Someone handed in a copy of the latest New York street edition. Flashlights boomed. Back of the single controls sat Web Keene. In the fuselage compartment, sprawled among the fuel cans, was Von Eltz. Allister stuck a hand inside.

"Loose storms around Pennsylvania!" he shouted above the exhaust rumble. "Wire me when you hit dirt at Mines Field. And smash that record, Web!"

Web grinned back. A voice called out hoarsely.

"California—here we come!"

More flashlights boomed. They were hardly needed, in the reflected light from

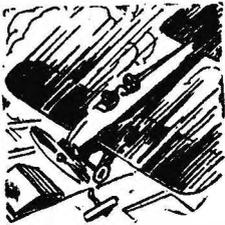
the long runway. But the newspaper men were taking no chances. Records weren't broken every day, and when Allister sent out a ship piloted by a war ace, that was news!

The official timer of the Aero Club stood beside the man with the checkered flag. Web Keene slid the cabin glass closed. The wheel blocks had already been taken away. The pilot jerked his head slightly, called back toward the fuselage compartment.

"Fairly comfortable, Von Eltz?"

The man stretched out behind replied in his husky voice. "Very good. *Excellenz!*"

Web Keene stiffened in the cockpit. It



was the intonation of that last word that counted. Von Eltz had not forgotten—he was not reverting to war usage. Allister had been wrong. Web Keene knew about Von Eltz—and Von Eltz knew about *him*.

With his left hand fingers on the throttle, Web hesitated. The man with the checkered flag was staring toward the trans-continental plane. The motor rumbled steadily through the exhausts. Slowly Web Keene smiled. He smiled with his gray eyes, with his thin lips pressed tightly together. His head was to the front, his eyes on the lighted runway. But he could see, very clearly, the face of the man lying back of him. He could see that goggle-glass scar.

He glanced at his wrist watch. 6:10, it said.

Four hundred pounds payload, he was carrying. The gas load would lighten with consumption. He wasn't worrying about getting the plane off. But the payload—that would remain. Eric Von Eltz—he was one hundred and eighty-five pounds of it.

Web Keene shoved the throttle forward. The radial engine roared, the plane started to roll. He could see men waving. She picked up speed slowly. Moving the stick forward, he got her tail up. A word came to him, stayed with him. "*Excellenz.*" He glanced at the air speed indicator. It was registering ground speed now. Thirty-eight. Not enough. But she was picking. New York to Los Angeles. A record to break. It meant a lot, to break it. It meant

sales. It meant that Web Keene knew engines, knew engine alteration. A record to break, to make. He pulled back a little on the stick. The flood lights were dimmer. They were nearing the end of the concrete runway. Slowly the *Airman's* nose came up—she lifted from the ground.

"Very good." Web Keene mocked grimly. "Very good, *Excellenz!*"

JAKE CONNELLY got on the 'phone at one end of the Garden City hangar. He could still hear the drone of the departing trans-continental plane. He spoke in a toneless voice.

"Eddy? Say, get this—last minute switch on the *Airman* cross-country flight. Bert Ranner's out. Congested lung—got the dose from his hard work on the plane. Might play that up. But here's the big kick. Wellington refused to fly with Web Keene. Don't know why—not yet. And Heinrich Von Eltz climbed aboard to pump gas and make up the payload weight. Got that—Von Eltz—"

Jake frowned at a question that broke in on him over the wire. He swore softly.

"You're getting old, Mike!" he told the rewrite man at the other end. "Von Eltz was in the war. So was Web Keene. Keene was an ace—suppose you remember *that?* Well, so was Von Eltz. Only for the *other* side, see? It's good stuff, Mike—ten years after stuff. Keene and Von Eltz, war enemies—comrades now. Out to smash a record, together. Riding through the black skies! Get it? Right! I'll stick to find out why Wellington refused to go. S'long."

Jake Connelly hung up. He lighted a cigarette, moved out from the hangar. High in the western sky he could see the thin exhaust trail of the *Airman*. Keene and Von Eltz, riding the night together. Jake shook his head slowly. He was an old-timer; he'd been in France with the Twenty-seventh Division. He'd seen things. He watched the exhaust trail of the western winging plane with slightly narrowed eyes.

"Comrades *now?*" he muttered grimly. "Damned if I'm so sure about *that!*"

FOR fifteen minutes Web Keene, strapped into the cushioned seat of the narrow cockpit compartment, had been

trying to get altitude, to lift the fuel weighed plane over the bank of black clouds that was rushing toward them in the dawn tinged sky. And he knew now that it was a losing race. They'd have to turn back, or go through the stuff. They'd never get over it.

Web smiled grimly. It had been a rotten night. They had dodged electrical storms, flown high and low, winged off their course. The wings had been soaked with water most of the time. The chances of breaking the record were about gone. But the *Airman* was proving one thing—she was a sturdy craft.

The cloud bank moving toward them, towering high above them, was an ugly one. Lightning stabbed through it. There was high wind inside. But it was an extensive bank. There was just one thing to do—bank to the south, away from the center of it—and climb again. They had nine thousand feet. The *Airman* had a ceiling, with the fuel weight remaining, of around fifteen thousand. There was a chance that they could break through.

Web banked to the left, his eyes on the bank indicator, lighted on the dial board. A roar of thunder brought sustained sound and vibration within the tiny cabin. He twisted his head as he leveled the ship out of the bank, called back to Von Eltz.

"Better pump gas into the Number Two tank. And watch anything that's loose back there, Von Eltz. The ridin'll be rough."

His voice was hoarse; he could scarcely hear it. There was no reply from the man behind. Only once during the long night had his passenger spoken. And then it had been to tell Web that the hand pump used to get gas from the cans to the tanks was functioning properly. And once again Von Eltz had used that word, "*Excellent.*"

The ship climbed steadily. Her radial was roaring without a false note. Jagged, black cloud edges were outlined by the brilliant flashes of lightning. The storm covered a wide area. They might fly for miles trying to get around. It was go through—or turn back.

WEB KEENE fought a bump with both hands on the stick. He got the ship on even keel again. She was heavy

for this sort of thing. The air was getting very bad. Rain beat suddenly back against the windshield glass. The whirling prop sent it back with a sharp fury. Almost immediately the glass started to leak. Web held the ship in a steady climb. He watched



the instrument board closely. In a few seconds the chances were that they would be flying blind, dependent entirely upon these instruments before him.

Air-speed eighty-two miles an hour. That was all right, under the circumstances. They were climbing mildly, at a fifteen degree angle. The bank indicator showed the left wing a bit low. The stick was centered. It might be balanced weight—back of him. He thought of speaking to Von Eltz, shouting back at him. But he didn't. A slight wing droop made little difference, just now.

Ten thousand, five hundred feet—with the R.P.M all right for the climb angle. He played safe, advanced the throttle two notches, increasing the whirl speed of the duralumin prop. The fury of the rain increased. The ship was pitching badly.

Lightning flashed with a blinding color, very close to the ship. She dropped off on her left wing. Web fought her out of the slip, got her on even keel again. He opened the throttle wide. All chance of smashing the record was going. They were feeding her power plant precious gas—too much of it. But she had to have air speed, air control. The storm was a bad one.

Thirteen thousand. She wasn't climbing much. He leveled her off. The storm area might run high. There was heavy pressure. A down beat of wind and rain. Cross currents of gale force. And always the danger of being truck by lightning. Web was gripping the stick with both hands. His feet were pressed firmly on the rudder pedals. He glanced toward the Number One tank indicator. She was getting low in gas. He'd have to cut in Number Two pretty quick.

The ship slipped off on her right wing. He gave her left stick, left rudder. She came back sluggishly. His legs and feet were soaked from the water dripping in through the windshield. There was no vis-

ibility—flight was dependent on the dial-board instruments, on Web Keene's alert senses.

LIGHTNING cracked in a blinding flash, very close. The air seemed charged with electricity. The single-engined plane dropped sickeningly, then slipped off on her left wing. Web Keene got her back on level flight again, glanced at the altimeter. They were down to twelve thousand feet. He thought, flashingly, of nosing her down, trying to get beneath the storm. But that would be as bad a chance as the one they were taking now. The country below was mountainous—the storm clouds might be racing low. There would be severe downcurrents, worse rain, perhaps.

The plane roared on. There was a constant vibration inside the cockpit, not alone from the engine beat. The thunder was roaring constantly. Instrument needles were showing the effect of the charged atmosphere. And Web Keene, already under the strain of the night's flight, was tiring. His wrists ached.

He felt a touch on his right shoulder. Twisting his head he saw the head and shoulders of Von Eltz, in the opening from the fuselage compartment to the cockpit. Von Eltz was lying on his stomach, and he held out something white. Web got his left hand from the stick, gripped a small piece of paper. Words were scrawled on the paper. He held the slip on even keel with an effort, stared down at the words scrawled on the slip of paper. His lips repeated them slowly.

"Remember—Weirhofen?"

Web Keene stiffened in the cockpit. He let the slip of paper drop to the wet flooring of the cockpit. He twisted his head around, his lips moved grimly.

"Get back—in the fuselage—Watch that loose stuff!"

And then he heard Von Eltz laugh. And the laugh told him many things he had only half guessed. He *knew* that Von Eltz knew. The ex-German ace knew that Lieutenant Webster Keene had shot down Captain Weirhofen, had shot him down in flames, more than ten years ago. Von Eltz had not forgotten.

WEIRHOFEN, the pride of his squadron. Weirhofen, the German ace who had downed more than twelve Allied pilots. Web had shot him out of the skies, had battered his plane down in a loose winged spin.

"Very good, *Excellens!*"

The words of Von Eltz, mocking, came to him above the beat of the radial engine, the roar of the storm. Both hands on the stick, Web Keene stared at the instruments, flying blind. Lightning flashed off to the right. The plane was winging with her nose down a little—with her left wing drooping again.

Von Eltz—shoving him that note! Why? What did he intend to do?

Web Keene fought down sudden panic striking at him. Things had gone wrong for weeks. Wellington had refused to fly with him. Perhaps he had heard what Web thought of him. Perhaps Von Eltz had made sure that Wellington had heard! Certainly he had planted himself aboard the ship—as a passenger. As payload. As a fuel pumper who—

That was it! Web twisted his head to the left. He stared up at the indicator of Tank Number Two. The tank was *empty!* Von Eltz failed to hand-pump the fuel into the tank that would have to be cut in within a few minutes!

Rage struck at Web Keene. And then suddenly he was very calm. He could not



defeat the elements and a man who hated him, who had hated him for ten years, at the same time. He got his left hand from the stick, slipped it into the fuselage opening back of him. He fumbled with his tired fingers. They touched nothing but the fuselage flooring.

And then Von Eltz laughed again. Even as Web got his fingers back on the stick, tried to hold the storm-rocked plane on even keel, the laughter reached him. It came hoarsely, mockingly.

The Irving pack parachute that Web had slipped back of him after climbing into the plane was gone! It was out of his reach.

Once again rage struck at the pilot of the

transcontinental plane. There was a sliding door at the left side of the fuselage, near the tail assembly. Von Eltz had his own parachute. And he had the 'chute of the man he hated. He had never forgotten.

AND yet there was something that Web failed to understand. Many men had fought in the war. Many men had met—afterward. They had fought on opposite sides. They had forgotten. It had been almost a duty to forget. But Von Eltz had not forgotten. Why?

Eight thousand feet! Web Keene pulled up a little on the stick. The nose of the ship came up with an effort. She was rain soaked, wind battered. The lightning was less severe. It seemed to Web that the rain was easing up a bit. They might be coming through.

He stared at the indicator of Number One tank. The tank was almost empty. Unless Von Eltz were to pump immediately—

Web jerked his head. He shouted back fiercely.

"Don't be a fool, Von Eltz! Get gas up there!"

The head and shoulders of Von Eltz were close to his seated body now. The passenger gripped Web's right shoulder. It hurt, that grip! He was a strong man, a big man. He shouted at the pilot. And, in spite of the storm sound and the partial deafness caused by the exhaust roar through the night, Web Keene got his words.

"You sent Weirhofen down—*after* he was out! You followed him when he was going down—his body riddled—!"

"You lie!"

Web snapped the words at Von Eltz. But his eyes were on the instrument board. He was still fighting the wind-twisted ship. He had heard the accusation before—that he had downed Weirhofen after the pilot had been shot in a dog fight. It had been one of the foolish rumors of the front.

Von Eltz reached up, jerked Web's head down toward his mouth. His eyes met the gray ones of the pilot. He was half crouched on the flooring, his head and shoulders jammed into the cockpit compartment.

"He was dying—you poured lead at his ship! I've waited these years—"

Web spoke hoarsely. "That's—a lie! If you don't pump—"

VON ELTZ laughed wildly. His blue eyes were narrowed to little slits. The ship slipped off badly as Web tried to straighten his body.

"You're getting—yours." Von Eltz shouted at him. "I've got your 'chute. I'm going out—the fuselage way! I wasn't important, eh? I didn't count! I was payload!"

He released his grip on Web Keene. The plane was getting into the first turn of a spin. Web got the controls in neutral. He pulled back the stick. For a brief second he thought the nose would fail to come up. Power pulled it up. But there would be power only a few minutes longer.

Web Keene groaned. He thought of leaving the stick, trying to get back in the fuselage, trying to get the 'chute. But that was no good. In ten seconds the plane, weighted as she was, would be in such a spin that she could never be pulled out. And he'd fail to get the 'chute, anyway. Von Eltz was strong. Years of bitterness had kept hatred fresh in his soul.

Web Keene twisted his head. "You're a flyer, Von Eltz!" he shouted. "Pump gas—get us through! *After* we land—"

There was no answer. Web Keene got the left wing up from a bad sag. The rain was letting up, lightning flashes were more distant. But the air was still terribly bad. They were still flying blind.

The mockery of it was that Von Eltz might get down safely in the harness of a 'chute. Even the wind and rain might not destroy the silk. And he could claim that he had jumped when the *Airman* was crashing, and that the pilot had not jumped. The mockery of it was that Web Keene had downed Weirhofen in a fair sky fight. Because his comrades had not believed it possible for their ace to be downed in such a manner, they had started the other, ugly rumor.

The radial engine roared steadily. But it was almost over now. The indicator of Number Two tank showed no gas pumped up. Number One was almost empty. They were flying at eight thousand feet. The

plane was still taking a terrific air battering.

Without power there was not a chance in a thousand of making any kind of a landing except a crash landing. And a terrific crash landing, at that. There would be little light when the ship plunged down through the rain clouds.

A VIVID flash of lightning blinded Web Keene. He got his left hand from the stick, rubbed his eyes. The ship was falling off on a right wing. He tried to pull her back, and this time he failed. It seemed to him that the engine had ceased to roar. Perhaps the plane had been hit. He tried to fight off a sudden dizziness. He got the nose up a little—the engine *was* roaring. Then she was off on a wing again. The air seemed worse. His eyes could only see a blur where the altimeter had been.

The nose of the ship was down, she was plunging again, went into the first turn of a spin. A slow spin, but she would whirl into a fast one swiftly enough. He could barely center the stick. Things were tumbling up front, battering up from the fuselage. A fuel can struck the back of the seat. He swayed as the ship whirled. Something struck him heavily in the back of the head. He had one flashing thought—Von Eltz had got clear! This was the finish! Blackness swept before his eyes, a greater blackness than the storm had brought. There was a roar in his ears, a different roar than that of the engine. Pains stabbed through his head.

He tried to stay erect. But he could feel the pull of safety belt around his waist. He was slumping forward in the cockpit. The beat of the rain died as the wind shrilled up through the rigging of the transcontinental plane.

And then suddenly Web Keene felt weight against his body. A different weight. He was being shoved roughly to one side. He was out of the seat now, half sprawled

on the cockpit flooring. Everything in the ship seemed to be tearing loose. Everything was whirling.

Web Keene tried to fight off unconsciousness. This was the end—he wanted to take it with his eyes open. He wanted to see the plane rush down through the black clouds, see the blur of the battering earth rise up. He struggled to sit up. The dizziness was leaving him. He stared up at a head, a blond head! The head of Von Eltz!

THE plane was no longer spinning. Her nose was coming up. The slant of the flooring was less. The rush of the wind was decreasing. Web Keene could see Von Eltz now. In the light from the instruments he could see him. The man's feet were on the rudder pedals, he was gripping the stick with both hands. Red streaked his face. A rush of gray light suddenly swept the cockpit. They were out of the clouds.

"She's—dead!"

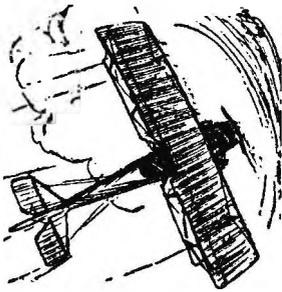
Web Keene muttered the two words. There was no engine roar now. They were out of the clouds—out of the spin. But they were sweeping down with a dead stick.

And now it was Von Eltz who was fighting. Red streaking his face, both hands gripping the stick, he banked her vertically, then leveled her off. Web Keene had not been able to see the wall of yellow and green—the mountainside that had flashed below the nose of the plane. Now she was losing speed again—but Von Eltz was stretching the glide. His eyes had picked out a rain soaked level valley. It was the one chance.

Down and down the plane dropped. Fuel cans rolled badly in the fuselage compartment. The cockpit was soaked with water. The prop whirled only through the wind pressure of the glide. Slowly Von Eltz pulled back on the stick. She lost flying speed. The blond pilot shouted down at Web.

"Hang on—we're stalling!"

They struck. There was little forward speed left. The ship dropped more than twenty-five feet, like an elevator. The landing gear crumpled like paper. The fuselage fabric crackled. Floor boards came up and struck pain from Web Keene's aching head. Unconsciousness prevented him from



seeing Von Eltz throw his arms before his face, double in the cockpit. And he was still out of things when the German ex-ace, his body cut and bruised, slowly dragged him from the wreckage of the trans-continental plane.

A GROUP of miners from Redville came down the valley toward them, an hour later. They had heard the crash roar of the plane. Several of them had seen the shape diving out of the clouds toward the mountainside. Von Eltz saw the figures coming out of the rain.

Propped up against the wreckage of the ship, he turned his head toward Web Keene. They had talked only at intervals during the hour they had waited.

"I damn near went crazy—when I had you up there alone, Keene," he muttered. "Weirhofen was my pal. Everywhere I went I heard that story. How you didn't give him a chance—"

He stopped, smiled grimly. "But I couldn't go through—with it. I couldn't leave you—even though I'd planned, for months. I told Wellington you hadn't confidence in him. He backed out, at the last minute. I was pretty rotten about it—"

There was a little silence. The rescuers were getting up close; Web Keene turned his head toward Von Eltz. The blond headed one spoke again.

"I wrecked that ship. I'll take the consequence, Keene. I knew—when you said I'd lied that it was a rotten mistake. But I loved the man you shot down. We were closer than brothers."

Web Keene waved his right hand toward the nearest of the rescuers. His left arm was useless. Then he smiled faintly at Von Eltz.

"We might not have got through, anyway," he said slowly. "You had a better chance—going over the side. You stuck. We're alive, Von Eltz, and you got us down. I've always felt there was something between us. I had a hunch this trip would show what it was." He smiled faintly, grimly. "It did. But the *storm* licked us, Von Eltz, we'll both stick to that!"

Von Eltz stared into Web's gray eyes. He spoke slowly.

"You mean you're forgetting that I—"

"Just that!" Web Keene muttered faintly, turning his eyes toward the approaching rescuers. "We'll try it with a sister ship, Von Eltz. We'll smash that record yet. All it needs it a little different packing of the —" he closed his eyes, but his lips were curved in a faint smile as he finished—"payload."



THE MYSTERY LAKE OF PERU

LAKE TITICACA, in Peru, is one of the world's strangest bodies of water, and associated with it is a mystery that man has never been able to solve. This lake, which is about half the size of Lake Ontario, is situated amid the glacial snows on top of the lofty Andes, and its waters are among the highest in the world. Its surface is twice as high in the air as Mount Washington, and on all sides tower the silvery peaks of the Soratas.

But here on the roof of the world, huge steamships ply the waters daily; fields of potatoes, barley and quinoa are cultivated and progressive towns nestle in the harbors.

The lake is fed the year 'round by nine rivers that pour their icy waters continually down from the snow-clogged Andean peaks. The water from these incoming streams would overflow Lake Ontario within a week, but this South American lake remains at practically the same level the entire year. Where does this tremendous amount of water go? That is a mystery that wise men the world over have been unable to solve. The lake has no visible outlet to the sea. A tiny part of its waters flow through the river Desaguadero and into the small lake Poopo. Lake Poopo has no outlet.

No man knows where the water goes, though the explanation has been offered that there are huge holes in the bottom of the lake, through which the water is drawn into underground rivers that flow underneath the Andes and away to the plains and deserts below.

B. W. G.



ALIAS THE WHIPPOOR-WILL

By RUSSELL HAYS

SOMETHING MYSTERIOUS ABOUT A LONG STRING OF FREIGHTS AT NIGHT. SOMETHING SINISTER WHEN VAGUE FORMS MOVE IN THE SHADOWS OF THE CARS AND WHISPERS SOUND IN THE GLOOM. AND THAT WAS JUST THE TIME THAT THE WHIPPOOR-WILL WOULD CHOOSE TO GET IN HIS EVIL WORK.

THE freight was ballin'-the-jack straight into the sunset, hung up red as fire over ten thousand square miles of western Texas.

Already the chill of evening was creeping to the marrow of the half dozen 'boes crouched in the gondola near the middle of the train. They buttoned up their coats, moved stiffly, furtively around. They'd be glad when they got to El Paso. This was a bad road to ride, a bad division.

"Shack comin'," grunted the humped, scabby-faced man with his back to the end of the car.

The others turned to gaze sullenly up at the squat bull-necked figure which had suddenly materialized atop the swaying box-car ahead. He stood there, outlined against the flaming sky, staring down at them through slitted green eyes. A silent, ominous figure, a short club clutched in his right hand. Then he was swinging down the ladder, had jumped over on the sheet iron piled in the front of the gondola.

A full minute he glowered at them. Then, "Thought they was some o' yuh lousy bums hidin' out back here! What the hell yuh guys think this is? Bum Special? Well, yuh're

gettin' off, and stayin' off, the next stop!" He beat on the edge of the car with his brakie club. Growled deep in his throat like an angry bulldog.

None of the 'boes ventured an answer. Just stared at him.

Negro boy, a Shreveport Negro, nimble boned and glassy eyed, cringed as the shack's green eyes fastened on him. "Well, Nigger, what yuh ridin' on?" spat out the brakie.

The Negro swallowed hard. "Ah ain't got no money, boss. Ah'm jest a pore boy tryin' to——"

"Aw, can that stuff! Come on. Whatcha got? Think yuh can ride on this train for nothin'?"

The Negro showed enough whites of his eyes to make a top sail. "Honest, boss——" Then with a despairing grimace, he fished around in his pocket, held out a silver half dollar in a grimy claw. "All ah got, boss. Ain'tcha goin' leave me a dime fer a coffee Ann?"

The shack snorted scornfully. "What the hell—why, yuh black devil!" He turned on the next man, a pale youth with an abnormally long, twisted nose. Infinitely sad he

looked. "What yuh got?"

The boy handed him a quarter without argument. The shack hopped off the sheet iron to face the two men, apparently partners, who squatted against the north side of the car. One of them was the scabby-faced man. Both were blanket stiffs, itinerant workers, riding the rattler to save money. Little doubt but what they had enough cash on them to see them through to their destination. The scabby-faced individual kicked through with twenty cents, the other with fifteen.

THE shack turned scowling to his two remaining passengers. Clutched his club more firmly. He wasn't sure about these men. He tackled the big one first. A huge man, clearly a lumberjack, to judge by his high cut shoes and the corduroy pants that peeped from under his greasy coveralls. His broad, sloping shoulders bore out this impression. His face was big and red and set with curiously bright blue eyes the color of turquoise.

"Well, what are yuh ridin' on?"

The blue eyes gleamed coldly. "A red card," he said quietly.

"The hell yuh are—a damn wobbly! Them things ain't good no more!"

"Ain't they?"

The big man's hand was thrust carelessly inside his sheepskin coat, might have been clutching the square butt of an automatic. The brakie couldn't be sure. He growled angrily. "No they ain't! Yuh're gettin' off the next water-tank!" He turned to the last man. Teetered on his toes, sizing him up.

He wasn't a large man, slender, sinewy, hawk faced. His dirty gray suit fitted him snugly, was of fine grade, tailored material. Not the usual run of 'bo at all. He might have been a prosperous man, down on his luck. He might have been a yegg. He eyed the shack imperturbably from pin-point gray eyes.

"Well——" said the shack.

"Well!" mimicked the 'bo. A cruel, mocking smile pulled down the corners of his slit of a mouth. "Well, well, well!"

"Think yuh're hard, don'tcha?" the shack said.

"I damn well know I am," the 'bo sneered softly.

The shack let it go at that. But if ever there were murder in a man's eyes it showed for an instant in his narrowed green ones as he turned to step back on the piled sheet iron. He stood there scowling at the man, his thick lips tensed in a snarl that showed his blackened teeth. "A yegg, eh? Well, the bulls'll get yuh. Or mebbe the Whippoor-will!" He smiled faintly, ironically—as though at some subtle joke.

The 'boes looked after him silently as he whirled abruptly and climbed back up on the boxcar, stared down a second, then with a shrug disappeared back the way he had come. The freight roared on into the sunset, dust swirling up about the gliding wheels. The greasy, smoke laden wind sucked around the end of the car ahead. The sheet iron shook with a heavy, thumping sound. The man who might have been a lumberjack was the first to speak.

"The Whippoor-will, what was he talkin' about?"

THE scabby-faced 'bo shot a suspicious glance around the car. Seemed to be weighing the men about him as though dubious to whom he spoke. "Hi-jacker!" he said tersely. "Bull back to Sanderson told me they'd been twelve men killed on this run—last few months."

"Twelve 'boes?" gasped the pale faced boy.

"Yeh, twelve killed—lot more been crippled."

"For land's sake!"

"How's he work?" asked the hawk-faced man emotionlessly.

The men moved closer to hear above the beating of the sheet iron. "He's a dirty murderer!" said the scabby-faced man. He shot a searching glance at his questioner. "This here's his favorite division. Pops up after dark, a little ways outside a town. Wears a mask. Goes through a gang o' 'boes then makes 'em jump. The bull tells me they's a railroad dick on his trail—don't know, though. Somebody oughta kill the devil!"

"You reckon he's ridin' dis train, boss?" quavered the Shreveport Negro.

A strained silence settled on the little group. The scabby-faced man didn't answer. No one said anything. They moved

back to their old places, all suspicious, all watching one another furtively.

The hawk-faced man leaned his elbows on the edge of the car and gazed out across the lonely miles of greasewood, blurring into the fading horizon. He knew what they were thinking. His thin lips drooped in a sardonic smile. Him, Gurney, a yegg—it was to laugh! And all because he had bluffed that brakie out at his own game. He'd have to watch his step though. Neither one of those blanket stiffs would hesitate to rap him over the head, just on general principles.

He turned around so that he could watch them from the corner of his eye. He saw the lumberjack staring at him fixedly from bland, turquoise eyes. Could feel them boring into him. The fellow looked the other way, guiltily. Gurney started involuntarily. He wondered—

This dude was going to bear watching! That lumberjack make-up of his was well worked out; those high cut shoes, even the sheepskin and mackinaw cap. Still, there was something about the red face that didn't quite fit in. Watchful—too watchful—that was it. What the hell was a lumberjack doing out in this God-forsaken country, anyhow?

THE wind cut through Gurney's thin coat and he snuggled down against the splintery side of the gondola. Filthy business, this riding freights! Dirt, grime, smoke—and that everlasting jar that took the heart out of a man. The long nosed kid had moved over and was talking to Scabby-face.

"One thing, he won't get nothin' offa me," said the boy hollowly. "Mebbe a buck or two." He meant it, too. Gurney could see that. The kid looked half starved.

Scabby-face shook his head sorrowfully. "Me neither. Believe me, I had the price I wouldn't be ridin' this rattler. Man'd be a damn fool!" He grew confidential, leaned forward. "Had me a stake last week, been workin' on a bridge outta San Antone. Went into town to have a little fun. I'm a son-of-a-gun if some scum didn't rap me over the dome—first night. Come to, I was layin' in an alley. Even took my Ingersol!"

Gurney could scarce hold in a smile.

Been rolled had he—that story was too old. Didn't have the right ring! Old Scabby-face was a crazy fool giving himself away with a story like that. He might as well step right up and holler, "I'm a sugar plum!" Gurney wondered just how much the stiff really did have concealed about his body. He wouldn't be carrying it in his pack. Packs are liable to get left behind when somebody starts shooting and you have to go



over the side in a hurry.

Gurney looked over at the red-faced man. Found that he was being watched again. It made him uneasy. Twelve men bumped off!

Cripes that was bad!

Up ahead, the engine let out a long, mournful shriek. Coupling blocks banged as the freight slowed down. Far on up the track, Gurney could see a huddle of lights like tiny stars set in the flat vastness of the greasewood. The long nosed boy, who had been studying a frayed time-table, leaned over the side and caught the number on the next mile post. "Lay over for the east bound Sunset Limited. Goin' on a sidin'," he said.

The train whistled again, slowed down more and more, was barely crawling along. Gurney saw the front brakie run out and throw a switch. They crept forward again, smoothly. The 'boes ducked down as the gondola came opposite the switch. No use inviting trouble. The whitewashed posts of a stockyard slid by, a coal bin. The brakes went on and a rattling bang ran down the train as they took hold.

"Here's where I grab off some grub," said Scabby-face, throwing his pack over the end. His partner followed him. They dropped down to the cinders and went scuttling across the ditch along the right of way.

"Me too," said the skinny boy; going over the side.

The lumberjack got unconcernedly to his feet, also moved toward the end of the car. Gurney looked back along the train, saw a

lantern bobbing toward him from the ca-boose. Gussed it was the conductor spotting hot boxes. The Negro boy still sat humped up on the edge of the sheet iron. Miserable, he seemed, and cold.

"What's wrong, Snowball? Ain't you goin' to eat?" asked Gurney, not unkindly.

"Ah ain't got no money, no more," said the Negro.

Gurney felt in his pocket. "That's all right—come on with me. I can stand it this time."

The red-faced man, one leg over the side, turned to gaze back at him queerly, grunted under his breath, then slid out of sight.

The Negro got hastily to his feet. "That shuah's mighty kind a you, boss," he quavered.

"Aw, shut up an' come on!" growled Gurney.

THEY went straggling over to a false fronted, dingy little building fronting the dusty wagon road that paralleled the tracks. Several of the train crew were already lined up on the stools running the length of a mahogany counter, once, plainly, the proud bar of a saloon. They glanced at the 'boes a bit quizzically, somewhat as a hen that has hatched goslings. Gurney ordered beef stew, scheduled at \$.35.

The men bolted down their food, the blanket stiffs finishing off their steaks with a piece of banana pie. Red-face ate slowly, methodically, seeming to think with every bite. The Negro finished off his stew and started in on the cracker bowl before the gangly, peroxide blonde waitress took it away from him. She threw a coy, persuasive glance at the hawk-faced Gurney who seemed not to notice it. Already the train crew were draining their coffee cups. He finished hastily and stepped over to the cigar counter to settle up.

He frowned as he pulled the change out of his pocket and found that it counted up to sixty cents. He reached in his shirt and pulled out a ten dollar bill.

"Nothin' smaller?"

Gurney felt the eyes of the 'boes and the train crew on him. Saw Red-face staring at him from the corner of his eyes. Saw an avaricious light glow in the brakie's green eyes.

"'Fraid not," he said with a shrug. He didn't go on to explain that it was all the money he had. What was the use?

He pushed out the screen door, the Negro at his heels. They walked down the lonely main street of the little town. Night had settled on the greasewood, velvety blue and black. A group of men in high hats and high heeled boots squatted around the door of a pool hall. Made some comment about, "Nigger and a white man—bums!" as the two passed. Over on the siding the freight engine panted softly like some great iron beast resting in the traces.

From out of the west a brilliant spear of light suddenly pierced the gloom. A sharp, distance-dimmed whistle broke the lulling quiet of the little town. The light grew stronger and stronger. Bore down on them. Presently they could hear the roar of the Limited's wheels, the churning of her drivers. Like a mighty square bolt, shot along the sides with portholes of light, it raced toward them. Let out a shrieking whistle. Then rushed away into the night.

"Guess we'll go a little farther—pretty quick now," said Gurney.

"Uh-huh, ah reckon." The Shreveport Negro's black face wrinkled in a frown, he licked his lips. "Shuah a good supper, boss," he said at last, hesitated again. "Wonder did you-all notice that theah shack lookin' right hard at us. Seen that money you got, boss."

"Yeh, I seen 'im. Liable to make trouble! Listen, boy, you better stay away from me. Won't nobody bother you. Better go now." Gurney's tone was crisp, brooked no denial.

The darky looked up at him uncertainly. Swallowed hard. "Jest as you say, boss." He moved reluctantly across the street.

GURNEY presently turned back to the pool hall and bought himself a pack of cigarettes. When he came out, the engine crew was walking back toward the train. Snowball had disappeared. Three figures that he guessed were the blanket stiffs and the stringy boy, loitered in the shadows of the dinky little depot. The engine gave a single long, deep whistle, high-balled.

The hawk-faced man moved slowly up the street again, sat down in the black door-

way of a store, his lean face momentarily outlined in the red glow of his cigarette. He wondered where the lumberjack had gone. Wondered if he were the Whippoor-will.

The brakes clicked off down the freight with a hissing sound. The wheels of the engine churned, slacked up, then shot forward with a jerk that loosed the cars one by one. It blew off steam, puffed and blew, crept slowly forward. Gurney got to his feet and strode leisurely over to the right of way. He caught an empty stock car up close to the tender. Still puffing on his cigarette, he sat in the doorway, watching through the starlight in an effort to see where the other 'boes loaded.

He saw the three by the depot suddenly rush out and nail the gondola they had ridden that afternoon. Several minutes passed. The freight was picking up speed rapidly. Still gazing down its broken length, Gurney saw a dark lump appear on the step of the gondola, saw it drop off. Then another. The faint light from the station silhouetted the packs on their backs.

"Smart dudes," he grunted. "Givin' me the slip." He chuckled grimly, knowing that the blanket stiffs had thought him the Whippoor-will. "For a penny I'd wait and catch the next train, myself."

HE MOVED quickly then, over to the other side of the car. Threw away his cigarette. For a second he poised on the sill, then leaped out and down. Hitting the cinders like a cat, he ran a few steps and dropped down on his stomach. The cars slid swiftly by. A head set on a long stringy neck was thrust up out of the gondola, outlined against the sky. Then came a string of boxcars. Gurney half rose on his toes like a sprinter.

The empty box car he had marked earlier in the evening came rushing up. He raced a dozen steps along side it, swung up in the open door. Here, he was at least comparatively safe from Red-face, providing he were the Whippoor-will. No one could get into the car except through the doors, and while any boarder was doing that, Gurney figured he could be leaving by the same way. If he'd had a gat, of course, it might be different. Well—he wasn't hunting trouble.

He sat just back of the lighter space between the two doors for an hour or more, gazing out at the black blur of the earth gliding past on either side. It wouldn't be so long now, he was thinking, until they pulled into El Paso. A bad town for 'boes, he'd heard. He shrugged. Occasionally, a yellow spot of light that he knew was a ranch-house bobbed up out of the darkness, grew larger, then receded again.

Once he heard footsteps on the runway up on top and saw a glow of light shining out over the doors. The brakie probably. A murderous looking brute if he had ever seen one. Too bad the Whippoor-will couldn't



get him. Gurney hugged his arms across his chest and settled down again as the footsteps passed.

Another half hour went by. Gurney got to his feet and strode back and forth the length of the car, slapped his arms against his sides to get up circulation. Funny how cold it got at nights out here in this wilderness. Bad as the mountains. He thought he heard a sound up on top, and froze, listening.

"Sure'n hell!" he whispered to himself.

Whoever it was had left the runway and was crawling over toward the edge of the car. A head suddenly dropped down into the dim square of the door. A curiously black head. Eyes searched the car, sought him out.

"Is that you, boss?"

"Huh? For cripes sake! What you mean followin' me?"

The Negro gave a relieved gasp, came crawling crab fashion down the side of the door. "Ah—ah didn't aim to foller you, boss. Please boss—I ain't hurtin' nothin'."

Gurney could see the rolling whites of the boy's eyes, could hear his teeth rattle as he shivered. The Shreveport Negro was full of fear, no doubt about that, ready to jump from his own shadow. Gurney reached out and patted him on a skinny shoulder. "That's all right, Snowball. Curse you, you damn near had me jumpin', sneakin' up that way!"

"Ah—ah shuah didn't aim to." A lengthy silence followed. Then, "Say, boss—who is you?"

GURNEY laughed, for the first time in days. "Don't worry—I'm not the Whippoor-will! Nope, Snowball, not that! Just a busted stiff headed west."

"O-o-o-oh!" There was long drawn out relief in the word. The Negro cleared his throat. "Ah tell you—all why I'se so scared. You seen that big wobbly back in the gondola—that man is gotta gun! I seen it. Yes, sir, a big un!"

"The hell you did!"

"Shuah did. Coupla gondolas got lumber in 'em to'ard the front. Me, Ah was hidin' in the back one when this heah fellah clum on back to that town. Seen 'im kinda squat down in the end of the front un. Ah didn't say nothin'—didn't like his looks so much.

"Directly, he starts peepin' aroun' up and down the train, shuah funny like. But ah don't say nothin'. 'Bout this time he pulls a gun outta his coat an' sets theah lookin' at it. Right then was when Ah gits scared, most a-feared he's goin' hear my teeth knockin' aroun'. By-an'-by he put it back in his pocket an' went sneakin' down to'ard the engine. Right den boss was when Ah up an' tore out! Yes, sir, since then Ah been lookin' fer you."

"Might a been a good thing you did," said Gurney musingly. His thin mouth was clamped in a straight harsh line. His hawk eyes narrowed to slits. So the lumber-jack was carrying a gun, was he? Pretty good that make-up he had on, a hi-jacker!

He'd been a fool to flash that ten back in the Quick and Dirty. As big a fool as old Scabby-face with his story about being rolled. A bigger fool, come to think about it! Gurney glanced apprehensively at the open doors of the car. Hi-jacker or no hi-jacker, he'd give him a run for that coin. He started as he heard the roof creak. No light either—so it wasn't the brakie. He whirled on the Negro.

"Lay down, back in the end," he ordered.

THE Negro cringed back into the deeper shadows, lay belly down on the quivering floor. Gurney moved over to the north door. Saw the upper part of a man's head,

a cap and a pair of eyes, come slowly, cautiously down at the top of the south door. He knew the tactics. Knew that he had been spotted. Knew, at the same time, that he was no more than a vague shadow in the darkness of the car. No danger of the fellow trying to cover him, he would be too indistinct for that.

The head drew back as slowly as it had appeared. There was a creaking sound that might have been a heavy body moving across the roof. It was hard to tell above the roar of the train. Gurney knew what to expect. The fellow, if he were coming down at all, would swing suddenly in through the door. It took guts, that did!

"All right, come on—damn you!" he muttered through taut lips.

His lean body was tense as bent steel. He didn't feel the cold now. A glowing light burnt in his pin-point eyes. No need to repeat the invitation! There was a slight fumbling sound. The next instant a man's heavy body had swung down off the roof, kicked into the car, was grabbing in a pocket for a gun.

Even in that fleeting instant Gurney had seen that he was masked, thick-set, built like an ape. Already Gurney had leaped toward the north door, was scrambling up the side of it.

"Stick 'em up, yuh!" the Whippoor-will snarled.

Gurney was drawing himself up to the swaying roof. A gun roared under him. He saw an orange dash of flame. Felt a board sliver close to his leg. Then he was up on top, running like a fool down the top of the train. Two cars down, he glanced back. Saw the Whippoor-will drawing himself up on top, leaping toward the runway.

Gurney half expected to hear a shot, not that there was much danger of getting hit. Still, the hi-jacker wouldn't advertise his presence by shooting up on top, he reasoned. The conductor in the tower of the caboose would see it sure. Damn lucky for him! The runway seemed to race to meet him. The tops of the cars seemed like a great chain of rocking floats anchored in the black river of the night rushing swiftly by on either side.

The tops of the cars were irregular. Some high, some low. A black maw lay between

them. Tough if he should stumble and fall down into one! They'd have to pick him up in a bucket. It was dangerous business, too, to glance back. If one made a misstep? He chanced it nevertheless. Thought, couldn't be sure, that the hi-jacker was gaining on him.

He quickened his stride.

"The devil's hot on the trigger!" he panted agitatedly.

He came to a car load of coal, jumped wildly toward the peak of it, stumbled as he landed and fell forward cutting his shin. He was up in the same movement, thankful that he hadn't sprained an ankle. He floundered to the end of the next car, grabbed the ladder and swarmed up it. Behind him he saw the Whippoor-will leap to the coal and raise his gun. A bullet sang over his head.

For the next two cars Gurney imagined he gained a trifle. He had to. He had just remembered that the gondola was up ahead. Too long a jump to take from the top of the boxcar behind it. Chances of breaking a leg. He grabbed for the roof rung of the car, swung half way down the ladder and leaped over into the gondola. He wondered as he raced across it what had become of the long snooted youth. No time to look around now! He caught the ladder of the next car. Gained the top of it—and grunted in startled amazement.

The Whippoor-will had taken the jump from the top of the train to the sheet iron in the gondola! Had landed half crouched, and hadn't bothered to try a shot. As he raced forward, Gurney gave a gasp of desperation. The fellow wasn't human!

IT MUST be twenty cars yet up to the engine, Gurney was thinking. No doubt about seeking shelter in the cab now. None at all. If he'd had a gun—but he hadn't. Half a dozen cars passed under his flying feet. Then he saw the gondolas loaded with lumber that the Negro had talked about. He remembered them then. Wondered if he'd ever be able to make it across them. Well, as a last resort, he could chance the cinders. It wouldn't be nearly the jump from the lumber that it would be from the top of a box car. He might even be able to drop from a step.

He glanced back. The Whippoor-will was

a scant car back of him. How could the devil move so fast? He looked down at the gondolas and saw that the lumber had worked forward in the cars. He couldn't jump to it the space it had left. He'd bust up sure. He dropped down the ladder, leaped over the edge of the car and went scrambling up the irregular slope of the beam ends like a squirrel climbing a roof. The hi-jacker was leaping from the ladder, made a grab at his foot. Missed!

Gurney decided to jump. It would likely mean a broken leg. Perhaps a broken neck. He raced the length of the lumber laden car. No—not yet! He still had a chance. He jumped for the next car, though he bumped his knee cruelly.

He thought, glancing down, that he had seen a figure crouching in the open space at the end of the car, that the starlight shone on something metallic. He couldn't be sure. It was all shadowy. He supposed that it was the long nosed boy, but didn't have



time to cry out a warning. The Whippoor-will had come to the end of the other car. Gurney had a glimpse of the masked face, the broad shoulders, as he made the top

of the beams and straddled a brace. He wondered why the fellow didn't shoot. Then realized that he must have pocketed his gun to climb faster.

Then, behind him, the hi-jacker gave a sudden, hoarse fearful cry!

Gurney whirled. He saw a pair of hands reach up and grab the Whippoor-will by the legs, jerk him back down.

"Who the hell!" gasped Gurney.

He heard an angry, hissing curse. A shot! Then another. He turned back, not knowing why, and saw struggling shadows in the pit at the lumber car's end. He heard strangled oaths and panting cries. Then a gun spat out again. One of the figures pulled away, seemed momentarily stunned. Gurney crept up to the edge of the beams and crouched there. He saw the Whippoor-will pointing his gun. It must have been empty

for he raised it for a club. Was about to bring it down on his victim's head.

Gurney couldn't be sure in the doubtful light, but it looked as if the other man were the brakie. Anyhow, the fellow had come to his rescue. That was the point. Gurney would do a lot for a man like that. He leaped, lithe as a cat, for the upraised arm.

The Whippoor-will gave a surprised hiss, spat out a hoarse curse, then Gurney's weight carried him back and flung him against the end of the car. He bounced back like a rubber ball. His great shoulders seemed to heave up under his smaller assailant. Gurney felt himself being thrown back and up. He grabbed desperately at the gun, wrenched it loose somehow or other. Dropped it. Then he fell against the piled beams. The hi-jacker rushed him.

"Come on, damn you!" howled Gurney, backing up on to the uneven top of the beams. Up here he knew he had a chance.

The Whippoor-will didn't hesitate, didn't even bother trying to find his gun. He gave an infuriated grunt and came lunging up the beam ends. As he straightened up Gurney met him with a left to the jaw that carried him back and tore off the handkerchief. The hawk-faced man's blazing eyes opened incredulously. The Whippoor-will was the brakie!

THE thick face fixed in a snarling grimace seemed somehow pale in the faint light. Madness was in the glistening green eyes! Gurney stepped in close and beat a tattoo to the chest with his left. Dancing back, he saw the brakie fumbling in his pocket, and guessed that he was going for a knife. He couldn't let him do that.

"So you're the Whippoor-will?" Gurney spat out at him.

"Yuh'll never live to tell it," the brakie muttered in his ear. Gurney sank both fists in the man's stomach. Low—well, what of it? The hand came out of the pocket. The brakie wilted, half dropped. He clawed desperately for the slighter man. He got an arm around his shoulder, hugged him to him. Something akin to terror clutched the hawk-faced man. He never knew just how he tore himself away.

Gurney jumped clear. The Whippoor-will leaped for him wildly, stumbled, fell to

one knee. Gurney stepped in. His foot flashed out, caught the killer on the upturned point of his wide, tilted jaw. He collapsed, a dead weight across the brace nailed on top the beams.

"Dirty swine!" panted Gurney.

He grabbed hold of the still figure, and started to heave it off the train. He paused. It would serve the devil right. Still, he stepped back and looked down into the hole at the end of the car. The lumberjack, he could see now that it was he who had been crouching there, was coming around.

"How you feel, buddy?" questioned Gurney.

THE other shook his head groggily, slapped a hand to his shoulder. "Pretty sick," he said shakenly. He searched around in the bottom of the car and picked up a gun. "Where'd he go?"

"Aw, I got the back-stabbin' devil up here! Got a notion to chuck him off."

"No, don't do that. Here——" Red-face tossed up something that glimmered faintly. Handcuffs! "Put these on 'im."

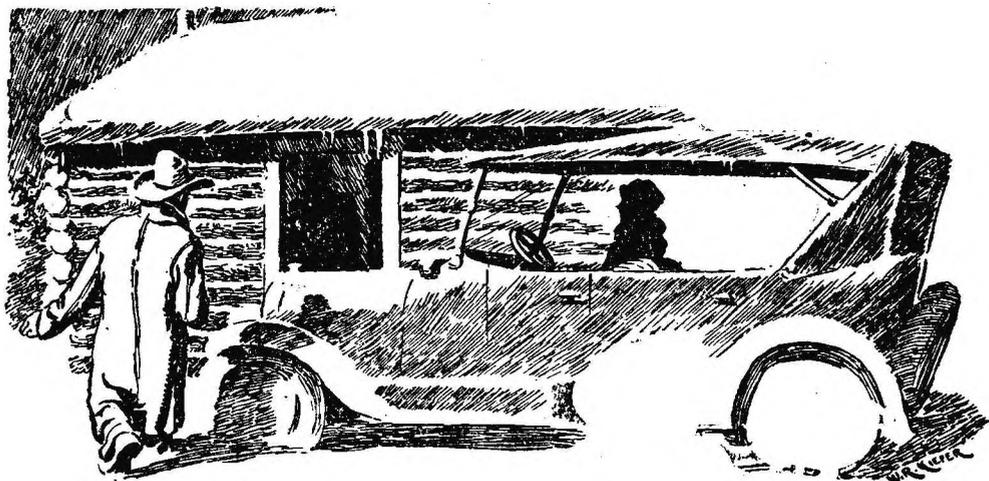
Gurney blinked "The hell!" He caught them and went back to the still slumbering brakie. He clamped the irons around the hairy wrists, pressed them in tight enough to hurt. The fellow was coming to. Well, let him! It looked as if he was going to get his now.

Gurney came back to the lumberjack who was endeavoring to climb up out of the hole. Gurney lent him a hand and pulled him on up. He felt his shoulder, wordlessly, and found that although bleeding badly, it was not serious. He cleared his throat. "Say, who the hell—you a dick?" he asked at last. "Sure had me guessin'!"

Red-face chuckled dryly. "Well, I did a little guessin' myself," he admitted wryly. "Who the heck are you?"

"Oh, I'm just another dick. Out of a job, down on my luck. Was figurin' on tryin' to get in on something here in El Paso. Don't know of any openings?"

Red-face looked at him keenly for a second. Chuckled again. "I guess I don't look much like Chief Inspector," he said. "Had to have somebody catch this devil here. But damn, you're hired, buddy—started work today noon."



TOPSIDE TUNES IN

By ROBERT H. ROHDE

Author of "Close Herded," "Sonny Gets the Sack," etc.

THE GHOST TOWN OF TOPSIDE WAS TO SEE SOME STRANGE GUESTS ONE NIGHT WHEN SNOW PILED HIGH IN THE PASSES—AND THE FOREMAN OF THE BAR B Q WAS TO LEARN THAT IT TOOK MORE THAN MAIL ORDER CITY CLOTHES TO DEAL WITH A COUPLE OF CITY CROOKS

IT WOULD have been a plumb fool trick for even a man alone to try to make it over to Bender, with the sky all pasty-looking up there in the north and the wind beginning to hone itself to a knife-edge along that vast gray whetstone of mountain. In the case of a man with a girl to look after, it was—as nearly as Cal Orcutt could figure it out—just about forty times worse.

But it wasn't until long after he had put Dos Bravos canyon behind, unhappily wasn't until the first lazy flakes were nesting on the wind-shield, that young Mr. Orcutt began his conscience-stricken computation. And by then, as he calculated further and very hastily, the measure-up on procedure came to a dismal six of one against an exact half dozen of the other.

He braked to a crawl, and with fingers gone blue from chill pushed back his Stetson to clear his brow for thought.

"I dunno," he murmured, his eyes irresolute under the flopping wide brim as they looked down upon the girl snuggled close to his side on the little roadster's seat. "I dunno, Liddy, but what I've run us jam into a meaner mess than stayin' another day

and night back to Waltonville woulda made."

The girl—just now she was no more than a tip of nose and a pair of cheerful gray eyes peeping between the turned-up collar of a mackinaw and the pulled-down blue wool of a knitted tam—had for a time past been taking stock of the situation herself.

"If you're thinking about turning back," she said, ready with suggestion, "I vote 'No.' Don't let's stop and argue, Cal. If you'll only step on it, we'll make the pass in a couple of hours. I do want to get home tonight. And don't you reckon that the Bar BQ would appreciate having the foreman on the job Monday morning, to start the week off right?"

The driver cast a quick and anxious glance back over his shoulder.

"I dunno," he repeated. "If it's going to be Waltonville for a second night's stand, we hadn't ought to waste a lot of time makin' up our minds. It looks pretty well bleared up behind us—and you know how fast the drifts pile up in Dos Bravos. It's as bad as the pass, Liddy, when there's an air to push the snow. And racin' the storm to the pass—no, I swear I dunno about that. It'd

be somehow in the same parcel with racin' a train to a crossing. We're out o' luck if we don't beat. I tell you, sweet, an open car ain't nothin' to be blocked up in these here mountains with!"

"But we're not blocked—yet. And my vote stands, Cal. Let's take a chance on the pass. If we can't get through—well, it'll be time then to decide what's next best."

Orcutt stared at her, then laughed shortly.

"It's all right with me, honeydew," he said, jamming down in the same instant on the Stetson and on the gas. "It'll only be a month when you're G. H. Q. for the Orcutt family, and I reckon I might just as well start practice on takin' orders now. Was it the pass you ordered, Miss Collins, ma'am? Very good, ma'am! We're on our way, ma'am! But I'm bettin' the hot chocolates, ma'am, that you'll wish you hadn't went!"

THE car had picked up speed then and Cal Orcutt, clipping short the further comment that her laugh invited, settled grimly to the business of covering ground. At best, it was never good going along this makeshift mountain trail; and now, with the snow falling thicker, gluing anew to the glass as fast as the windshield-wiper swept it away, blanketing the road ahead, it held perils that the driver realized far more acutely than did his passenger. Making any kind of time over it called for a man's undivided attention—that, and a horse-shoe.

Once or twice the girl spoke. But Orcutt's replies were choppy monosyllables and she gave up the attempt at conversation with, "All right, be cross! See who cares!"

Orcutt passed that with a fleeting grin and a shake of his head. His eyes were steady on the road, all but lost under the deepening white cloth—and he was praying for that horse-shoe. A slide into one of those vicious holes that the snow masked might mean a bent axle or a broken spring; and then wouldn't it be pretty?

He found efficacy in prayer. For a while, he did—and for another while. He didn't quite make a boulevard out of the rocky trail, but at least he did manage to hold the speedometer needle at a consistent thirty and keep out of the worst bumps. He was

already in sight of the pass, close enough to see that the drifts were not to be surmounted—that he'd lost his race—when the luck ran out.

Suddenly the wheel was twisting out of his numbed hands. As he fought for control, his foot heavy on the brake, the machine lurched into a deep hole.

Out of that, with a leap and a crash, the hood bucking convulsively before him, he slid directly into another and deeper hole; and when the skid ended at the side of the road, the grinding and clanking ahead had already told him the story.

His horse-shoe had certainly been snatched back. Not one spring had gone, but two—both the front ones.

Orcutt threw off the ignition and folded his hands on the wheel.

"The hot chocolates," he solemnly announced, nodding toward the snow-choked pass, "are sure on Miss Liddy Collins, this treat. And gosh! don't I wish I had 'em!"

DELIBERATELY—it made time for harder thinking, and his icy fingers weren't up to skilled performance, anyhow—Orcutt twisted him a straw-paper cigarette before he climbed out to inspect the damage.

"Better let this be an object lesson, Liddy," he said, dragging a match along a



leg of the highly-civilized pants he had mailed out of Kansas City especially for the occasion of that plus ultra dance at

Waltonville. "Don't go shootin' reckless at grade-crossings, any style. A hundred wins won't make up for the time you're licked—and a game where the percentage runs that-a-way ain't any game for human people to stack up against. If we'd swung back when I said, and took it easy—well, we'd be a heap closer to your cousin Edna's stove right now!"

The girl came further out of the mackinaw as she straightened.

"Nothing," she faltered, "—nothing's broken?"

From beyond the front bumper Cal Orcutt briefly gave her the news.

"Only a couple springs."

"You mean—we're stuck?"

Orcutt offered what reassurance he could.

"Not as bad as that. We're all cut up, but I reckon we're still in the ring. Only thing, we got to go on a crutch—wherever we're goin'. The thirty-mile-an-hour stuff is all off. We'll be doing all right to get by with three." He looked back along their wheel tracks, even now half obliterated by the driving snow. "And that puts Dos Bravos canyon ten hours away from us."

SHE had vanquished her panic, and the gray eyes were clear again. She smiled at Orcutt as he climbed back beside her.

"I reckon, Cal," she said, "that I can stand it if you can—and we've got the gas. And maybe—" her voice was softer, contrite—"maybe I've had a lesson about something else besides racing trains and racing snow." Then her eyes, dropping, were suddenly severe. "Your poor hands, child! And you wouldn't wear your gloves! Why, Cal, I'll expect to see your fingers dropping off before we've made Waltonville!"

Orcutt, reminded of the poor hands, rubbed them together and blew lustily upon them.

"Maybe a lot of things will be happenin'," said he, "before we make Waltonville—or Bender, either. My part, I ain't got a mind, Liddy, to trek all the way back to the canyon just to find out there ain't any more chance of gettin' through there than gettin' through the pass. I want to know the canyon's clear before I start—or else I want to hole up where there's a roof and fire and grub. We ain't more than six or seven miles from Topside; and whatever the orders is, Topside's the next stop. I got the bit solid in my teeth this once, peach pie, so no use sawin'."

"Topside!" the girl exclaimed. "That—graveyard!"

"That's where," affirmed Orcutt cheerfully. "There'll be shelter for us in Topside—and we'll sure be welcome to it."

She was staring at him.

"I don't think I'd like that sort of wel-

come, Cal. Or to be gusted by ghosts." She shuddered in the warm depths of the mack-inaw. "No; I'd sooner stick with the car—even if we had to sit the storm out in it."

Cal Orcutt chuckled.

"We don't need to, Liddy. There ain't anything in Topside to be scared of—nowadays, anyhow. The camp is comin' back. In the spring there's a big Boston company going to put a lot of fancy up-to-date machinery in, and see can't they pay themself pretty gleanin' gold that the old-timers let lay."

But still she was rebellious against the proposal.

"Topside always gives me the creeps, Cal—those old wooden crosses leaning together at the head of the street. Don't let's go. If there's going to be live people there next spring, all right; let's wait and go then."

BUT Orcutt had stepped on the starter and was turning off the trail at a sharp angle.

"Listen, noblest work of nature!" he enjoined. "Papa knows where he's going and what he's doing. If you had only of gave me a chance you mighta found out something. I was goin' on to say that this Boston outfit put up a nice new bungalow for the engineers they had pokin' around Topside all summer long. They got all Grand Rapids furniture in it, and everything; and when the engineer persons went away, they—"

"They left it as spooky as ever."

Orcutt, sure now that he had swung into the proper trail for the ghost-camp, trusted his left hand to drive solo long enough for his right arm to bring the girl to him in a quick and impulsive hug.

"They sure are one of our strangest and most impressive genders—women," he grinned. "I know you ain't afraid of the churchyard down to Bender, Liddy—nor anything on the hoof in this or neighborin' counties. What would make you think that the sperrits of a few gents that happened to die with their boots on ain't just as amiable as them of various cantankerous old parties that have went barefoot at the job o' kickin' the bucket? It just beats me."

She was silent; and though it was a rawer wind now that lashed her cheeks, the color

in them was not so high. Orcutt, making that discovery with a side glance, hugged her again.

"Never mind, julep," he told her. "We won't talk any more about that section of Topside—or think about it, either. We'll find real live company at the camp; and shelter and heat and beans, just like I said. What the engineers done when they went away last month was to send up old Bill Ketchum to look after the bungalow over the winter, and stand guard over some items of trick machinery they had already moved in. He's livin' high, old Bill. Why, I heard down to Waltonville that he's even got a radio set bringin' in cabaret music and cookin' recipes, and fashion hints and other world news whenever he pushes the button. That's the new Topside for you! Feel better about visitin' there now, wonder girl?"

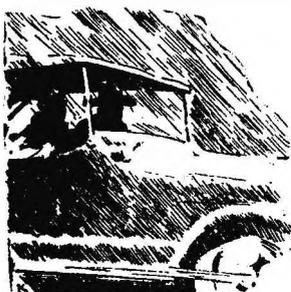
VERY obviously she did.

"Bill Ketchum there!" she cried. "Why, Cal—why—why didn't you tell me right off? That's different! Of course it is!"

"It's different a couple ways," Orcutt said. "First place, being with old Bill ain't only goin' to make us comfortable in body, but in mind, too. I mean, if we're snowed up it's a whole lot better to have a good, standard, respectable third party snowed up with us. Even though we're engaged, and our day's been set, the situation sorta calls for it. Then again, it might just be that at Topside we could find out whether we was really snowed up or not—and find out without limpin' all the way back to the canyon."

She looked at him wonderingly.

"No," he said. "Topside's high up, and commands a grand view, but I ain't expectin' to see Dos Bravos from there, even with the best o' glasses. What I'm thinking about, Liddy, is that radio box up to Ketchum's—



and the new broadcast station over to Amatura City. Amatura's on the air every evenin'. We've had 'em a dozen times on our set at the Bar BQ; and it seems like they make a habit, when they get around to

the weather report, of throwin' in a little low-down on road conditions for good measure.

"Chances are, o' course, they won't know as much about the pass as what we do. But for the sake of anybody that might be thinkin' of coming over the mountains from Bender, I'll bet a hat that Amatura'll have something to say about the canyon. Yes, ma'am, Miss Collins! It ain't so long since people got trapped up here, with both ends of the road plugged, that Station KBL won't be figurin' this snow and letting the neighbors know whether it's fell heavy enough at Dos Bravos to wall back traffic."

The crippled machine was climbing then, in first gear, up a steep incline. At the crest above, the girl's eyes were first to glimpse the distant smoke ribbon visible through a momentary rift in the curtain of the storm.

"See, Cal!" she cried. "Topside's over there—and Bill is home, waiting to take us in!"

TOWARD the top of the slope the roadster had wallowed hub deep in snow, but the crest had been swept clean. Beyond, a big rocky basin opened up, and Orcutt gave his corroboration in a nod. He had been over this trail twice before, and it had to be so; that beckoning, briefly-seen twist of smoke over against the far wall of the basin must mark Topside.

With no more than a couple of miles to go, and the trail not yet drifted, they couldn't help but make it. And old Topside of half a hundred years ago, going full blast, couldn't have offered them better than Bill Ketchum surely would have to give—nor, coming down to it, as much.

To spare his fuel against the chance that Ketchum might not be overstocked himself, Orcutt cut off his engine and coasted the first mile. He could see the smoke himself before he had slipped into gear again—a hospitable blue streamer whipping over what was probably the only sound roof in Topside.

The new house, iron-sided and four-square, stood at the back end of the camp's single street; back, beyond the barns of dance halls filled now with ghostly echoes of fiddle music and thumping boots and crashing guns, by the fenced-in lot where

Topside the unregenerate had fled away its sudden dead.

"Bill will be hearin' the motor by now—coming out to see what the parade's about," promised Orcutt, pointing ahead through the windshield. "Just you keep your eye on the door yonder, Liddy, and watch him dance when I give him the horn."

Already his hand had gone to the horn-button, for the door was opening before the last words were past his lips. It was a short, querulous, ejaculatory toot he gave, though.

"Who's that?" he demanded. "If it's Bill Ketchum—well, I'm an alligator! Bill wasn't more than half that size last time I saw him, and I sort of reckoned he musta got his full growth early in the Seventies. Either this here place must of changed hands quite recent, sunburst, or else other snowbound company has seen Mr. Ketchum ahead of us."

FIRST filling the door of the iron-walled "bungalow," then looming outside it, a large and unfamiliar figure had come into view. Orcutt, schooled from earliest boyhood to swift and shrewd appraisal of strangers, had taken note of the gun-belt and the big hand hovering by the holster before his eyes lifted to scrutinize the fever-pitted and frowning face.

The stranger stood with his massive legs planted wide apart in the snow banked at Ketchum's threshold, his thumbs hooked into the sagging belt, as if disposed to block the way. Orcutt, after a closer look at him, was suddenly and painfully conscious of the disadvantage that went with the sporting of polite party-clothes. When a man went to a dance as high-toned as that Waltonville swaree, where he was expected to show up in low-cuts instead of boots, and a big time pants vest-coat combination and a hard collar, his gun didn't have any more place on him than his spurs. Packing a pistol to Liddy's cousin Edna's birthday party, Orcutt had decided, would be just about as bad a social error as forgetting himself with his table-knife. So, coming away, he had left his own gun-belt hanging in the office shack at the Bar BQ—and now, presciently, he was sorry.

But no signal of that was in his eyes, nor

any concession of handicap in his placid voice, when he stopped the car with the radiator all but parked against the dubious stranger's waist-line.

"Nice day, mister," he said pleasantly. "Where's Bill?"

The pock-marked man's face was blank.

"Wrong address, bud!" he grunted. "There ain't no Bill here."

Cal Orcutt shrugged and grinned, but his mind behind the grin was busy with anxious conjecture.

"I reckon," he said, "that you must be kind of a newcomer to Topside. Bill Ketchum, according to pretty reliable report, is the mayor of this burg—an' chief o' police an' dog-catcher, too. Also, according to description, this here iron mansion is his headquarters."

ORCUTT'S eyes had shifted to the shadows back of the half-drawn door. Detecting movement there, he burst into laughter and called out, "Well, doggone! Puttin' one over on a poor young man, are you? Come on into the air, Bill, and tell a old friend 'Howdy!'"

But the man who came forward—to Orcutt he looked to be little more than a boy—was another stranger. He was slim, beardless, and like his companion he wore a gun-belt; rather, was buckling one on as he appeared. Collectively, his features gave an impression of recklessness, but something expressed in his eyes brought Orcutt to a quick conclusion regarding him. Back of the native recklessness just now, close behind it, was something very near to terror.

The older man's lips drew down in a surly, short-bitten smile.

"If this is yore pal Ketchum," he said, "he ain't told the truth to me."

Orcutt's grimace was a disclaimer. This second stranger, the boy, didn't appear to be a bad sort, but his side-kick was unprepossessing enough for two—unprepossessing enough to worry a man coming upon him in as awkward a situation as this, and as remote a place.

"Nope," said he, "he ain't old Bill—nor unless he's been swimmin' in Poncy Delaney's bath-tub. The man I come to Topside hopin' to find could be his grandpop. Funny hopin' to find could be his grandpop. Funny he ain't here!" Orcutt glanced up at a snow-

covered wire running from a wooden pole secured to the corrugated roof to another roof up the street, over a sign faded beyond deciphering. "That seems to be an aerial, so this ought to be the right shack—unless the camp's gettin' as full of radios as people."

It was the younger man who spoke up—nervously, Cal thought, and obliquely.

"Mebbe you ain't made such a big mistake," he conceded. "It could as well be Bill Ketchum's house or Robinson Crusoe's for all we know. We're just transients, like. We come by a while ago, and found the latch-string out and nobody home; so we just got in out o' the snow. As for what's happened to the landlord, you can search me. We ain't got him—or seen him." The sagging front end of the car had caught his eye, and he squatted and inspected the spring nearer him. "Bust, hey?" he sang out, popping up. "Helluva spot for an accident, ain't it?"



"Worst that could be found," agreed Orcutt. He hesitated, considering the steady down-sift and the bleak sky, and diffidently addressed himself to the man with the pitted face, "Fact is, old-timer, the lady and me was calculatin' to put ourself onto Bill Ketchum for the night. The weather bein' what it is, and the car cracked up, and the pass so full o' snow it's like to choke, it appeared to be good sense."

Both of Ketchum's self-admittedly unbidden guests were peering interestedly now through the snow-veneered windshield. "Dam' if it ain't a woman he's got with him!" exclaimed the big man. He burst out into boisterous laughter, as if that fact constituted in itself an excellent and exclusive bit of humor. "Well, I'll be swaggered if it ain't so!"

His friend caught the lifting of Orcutt's shoulders and the narrowing of his eyes, and spoke hastily.

"Please to excuse the gent's French, missis. He ain't had many advantages, so it ain't all his fault." He dug an elbow into

the pock-marked one's ribs. "Why don't you have some manners, Sidden? If it ain't enough for you that these here people know the owner, and sure have as good a right as us to the roof and the fire—well, then, how about one of 'em bein' a lady? I don't get the idea of keepin' her in the cold."

Another and looser smile had come to Sidden's lips.

"You bet she's invited!" he concurred, still staring through the windshield. "She couldn't be more welcome if the joint was urn! Climb out, lady, and come in an' get warm."

CAL ORCUTT, sitting tight in the roadster, tugged at the sleeve of the mackinaw.

"I don't like the layout!" he whispered out of the corner of his mouth. "Let's hold off a little until I get a better idea what's what. It's kinda peculiar, Bill Ketchum not bein' on tap."

Sidden, done with his lingering inspection of the passenger, had retreated to the doorway and was stamping the snow off his boots. He still wore his grin. Reassured by it, the girl shook her head.

"What's the harm?" she demanded, her voice held low, but nevertheless insistent. "Sometimes I think you're a little peculiar yourself, Cal—whenever it comes to dealing with people you don't know. If you weren't used to men toting guns, maybe it wouldn't seem so funny. Come on. We can thaw out, anyhow, and maybe have a bite. And then—there's the wireless. You don't need Bill to work it, sure?"

"Reckon not," said Cal, and bargained, "Well, we needn't stay more'n a few minutes if the entertainment ain't good. But if I'm goin' in at all, Liddy, you got to be ready to haul freight when I say the word. A go? Kayo, then!"

From his early sourness, the pock-marked Sidden had veered to a state of high good humor. His grin was even wider as he elaborately bowed his company into a great room long enough to house a set of bowling alleys. Comfortable bunks were built along the walls, with gasoline lanterns swung above them; and at the near end, back of the door, wide cushioned benches flanked a roaring open fire. By one of these benches,

on a small table, stood a box with a row of knobs and dials on its paneled front.

"Right homelike, ain't it? Radio and all!" With an extravagant sweep of his arm, Sidden invited the late arrivals to be at ease in his borrowed castle. "Been ridin' far?"

"Considerable far," said Cal Orcutt.

HE WAS for letting it go at that, as his briefness implied, but Sidden went on.

"From where?"

"Waltonville," supplied Orcutt.

Even that wasn't enough for the big man. He scratched his nose.

"Waltonville? Le'see. Yeh; I savvy where that is. Back o' the cork-screwing canyon, ain't it—first town? What time you leave?"

"About seven."

Sidden had been inspecting Cal's holiday rig.

"Feller," he announced, "you got me stumped! You sound like you belonged in these parts, but dam' if you look it. What's the answer to you? What's your racket?"

The new tack, suddenly swung into, was no less galling to Orcutt than the other had been. He roped back a direct and undiplomatic comment.

"Cows and such like," he vouchsafed. "I'm foreman of the Bar BQ outfit, over back o' Bender. Week days, I generally dress a little different from this, but when I go out in society I don't set any limit."

Sidden glanced at Liddy Collins. With her mackinaw thrown open, she had slipped past Orcutt and was gratefully hugging the fire.

"I reckon," he observed, "that the movies is responsible for a lot of queer things we see." His protruding black eyes went back to Cal. "I've saw a heap of ranch bosses, brother, but never one got up like you. Maybe this Bar BQ is some kind of a dairy farm? No? Well, my mistake."

Orcutt's face had reddened, and he had raised himself with doubled fists boring into the bench-cushion. Again Sidden's younger companion moved into the breach.

"I've heard tell of the Bar BQ, mister," he said quickly. "There ain't a ranch in this state that's got a better reputation in—where I come from. No, sir, from all accounts, there's no better in all the country

for a good workin' hand to lay down his bed-roll at. Maybe if—if we'd met some other way than this, you'd of saw me——"

SIDDEN interrupted ironically. "Well, you sure get over a big disgust, Johnson, quicker'n any lad I ever met up with! Maybe you'd like for me to give you a recommend to the gent—tell him what a lot of use you been to me?"

The boy flushed painfully.

"At the Bar BQ," said Cal, speaking directly to him over Sidden's shoulder, "we don't look for a cowhand to bring recommends like a store clerk. We just sort of look him over. Sometimes we do that on the premises, and sometimes where we happen onto him—as for instance, here. All I got to say, Mr. Johnson, you might look me up if you ever get to feelin' like it. Just ride into Bender, and say you're looking for Cal Orcutt, and you'll pretty quick hear how to find me. I ain't promisin' nothing, understand. But you size up like material—and there's times when we're needin' hands just as well as times when we ain't."

Sidden, a moment ago, had lighted a cigarette. He tossed it, half smoked, into the fire.

"All right, kid," he sneered. "There's a line on a swell job for you—a job which might last, and might not, dependin'. And now, Mr. Olcott, let's get back. You say you started out of Waltonville about seven o'clock this a.m.

You was going to Bender, but the snow headed you off. Meet anybody on the way, did you?"

Orcutt took a moment for thought before replying. Certainly no mere casual curiosity would dictate a methodical inquisition like this. There must be a reason behind Sidden's persistence—a reason that would perhaps account for that half-scared look in the youngster's eyes.

"No, we didn't meet any one," he said slowly. "Why?"

Sidden ignored the counter question.



"Well, if you come straight from Waltonville to the canyon," he said, with an air of pleased discovery, "you sure didn't hit no other towns on the way. Is the lady Mrs. Olcott? No? Then the storm pulled a fast one on the both of you, didn't it? How long did you expect to hole up with your pal Ketchum? Shame on you, Chauncey, for settin' a nice gal in such a way to get herself talked about!"

Liddy Collins turned from the fire.

"It's kind of you to think about me, Mr. Sidden," she said quietly; "and just to ease your mind, I'll tell you that I'm not worrying. People around Bender, and Waltonville too, know me and they know Cal—and they know we're engaged to be married. When they know the mountain storms as well, what's there to talk about?" She looked over at the radio and then at Cal. "Would Amatura City be on the air as early as this? It's getting dark out, so it must be around half past five."

Young Johnson, standing by the paneled cabinet, began twisting the knobs.

"I've been tryin' to get the darn thing to work 'most all day," he said. "It seems like it's out o' whack. Know anything about 'em, Mr. Orcutt?"

"Some," averred Cal. He crossed to the radio, for a moment twirled the dials, and then lifted the hinged lid. "Tubes don't light up," he announced at once. "Maybe that means a busted connection somewheres. Just gimme a minute, and I'll trace the wires out."

BUT he didn't need a minute, or half of one, to discover where the trouble lay. Alongside the table on which the cabinet stood two loose wires dangled, their bared ends touching the floor. Orcutt held them up.

"Here's the answer—no juice. Bill's shy a battery. That's all that's the matter. Otherwise they left him a perfectly good radio set that he could have got programs on clear from the Coast."

A cry of dismay escaped the girl.

"Then—we can't work it?"

Orcutt, debating, rubbed his chin.

"Dunno for sure," he said. "If every-thing else is all right, we can try. What way are you boys travelin', Sidden? I mean, did

you come up here in a car?"

"No," the big man said, after an instant of hesitation and a swift exchange of glances with Johnson. "No; we're old-fashioned and come up on leather. What's that got to do with the music box? Why're you so set on startin' it up, anyhow? Me, I can get along without listenin' to a lot of noise out of it."

Orcutt smiled.

"I'm kinda wild about radio music myself," he said, "but it ain't music I'm aimin' to get out o' this here box. If I can get her buzzin' and tune in the Amatura City broadcast station, I might save myself a lot of time—and just possibly a lot o' trouble. As for bein' curious about you all's means of locomotion, I thought that maybe if you had an automobile I could borrow the battery out of it. My battery's pretty well run down, but we'll take a whirl with it, anyway."

Going out, he left the door ajar so that while he pried up the floor-hatch in the roadster and loosened the battery connections he could have Liddy Collins under his eye. It seemed to him that the storm was abating. The snowfall was noticeably less heavy; and the sky, although night was now not far away, was clearer. That was cheering.

When he pulled the battery out he had decided to take a gambling chance and push on back to Dos Bravos, lacking positive information from KBL at Amatura that drifts had made the canyon impassable. The Sidden person, he was surer than ever, was bad medicine, and it didn't give young Johnson any too good a character to be pulling up with him. For his own part, he certainly would think twice before spending a night up here in Topside with the two of them, alone and unarmed. With Liddy along, staying under the same roof was out of the question.

BUT his face, when he re-entered the iron bungalow, betrayed nothing of this resolve nor of his heightened misgivings in regard to Ketchum.

"Now the trick is," he said, when he had hooked in the battery, "to bring in any old station, just to prove to ourself that the set works. Then, when it's six o'clock—if

anybody's got the right time on him—we'll fiddle around until we find out where KBL comes in at." He threw the switch, and again lifted the lid. "So far, kayo! The tubes show up like White City!"

As he turned the dials an encouraging succession of clicks and squeals sounded in the loud speaker. Then a voice flowed out of the horn, hazy for a moment, but mellifluous nevertheless.

"—playing at the Rice Hotel," it announced, clearing. "The next number is a fox-trot with a foxy title. You guessed it! Next offering of the orchestra, ladies and gentlemen of the radio audience—'Winnie Never Walks Home.'"

"Some reception!" jubilated Cal Orcutt, against the bleating of the faraway saxophones. "What we strayed into ain't anything else but Houston, State o' Texas!"

Again he moved the dials, conjuring a new voice out of the loud speaker.

"—firm at the close, following the sharp advance of Steel," this voice advised; but, though the information meant less than nothing to him, Orcutt kept the station tuned in until its call letters had been broadcast.

"Chicago!" he announced, identifying them. "People, this here is a set!" He consulted the big silver watch moored to the chain festooned across his unaccustomed waistcoat. "Ten to six, mine says. But I could be considerable out, either way, because mostly I go on straight sun time and this machine needs dustin' and greasin'."

JOHNSON had a watch, too.

"You're fifteen minutes slow, Mr. Orcutt," he said. "It's past six o'clock now—five past. If there was somethin' special that you wanted——"

Abruptly, Orcutt blanked out the voice from Chicago.

"I'll say there is! If I've lost out on that weather-and-road report from Amatura, Liddy, I'm goin' to ask you to step out in the snow long enough for me to indulge in the good old American right o' free speech!"

Then, squatted before the cabinet, he went intently back at his fishing. The loud speaker, under his manipulation of the dials, went crazy. Threads of speech, shreds of classical music, tatters of jazz, twankings

of ethereal ukeleles, the thunder of a distant organ—all these were woven together, with whistles and squawks and rat-tats of code, into a mad-house medley.

His head cocked, Orcutt listened eagerly as the stations clicked in and out.

"There!" he cried, after a little. "If that ain't the spieeler at Amatura City, I'll let my ears go for storage! Li'l Honey-in-the-



Comb, we call him at the Bar BQ."

He sharpened the tuning, but the Amatura announcer was occupied at that moment with a topic apart from the weather. Orcutt leaned closer to the horn as he caught the first few words. They were enough to give him the drift:

"Two masked men——train between Axman and Bender!"

Glancing swiftly over his shoulder, Orcutt saw that Liddy Collins had heard, too. Sidden, his arms folded, was staring at the loud-speaker, and she was staring at Sidden.

Sedately, smoothly, the honey-voice glided on:

"Sheriff Dunn believes the pair boarded the train at Axman and concealed themselves in a washroom in the first car, climbing forward over the coal later and forcing the engineer to stop ten miles south, where they probably had an automobile or horses waiting."

Young Johnson, his eyes round, jaw sagging down, had come up straight on the settee. Beads of perspiration were starting from his forehead, and his voice was shaky.

"Is—is that sure Amatura City?"

Orcutt, his attention riveted elsewhere, acutely sorry now that he had succeeded in picking up KBL, but fascinated by Honey-in-the-Comb's recital beyond power to tune it out, answered with a short nod. Sidden's eyes were boring into his back. He could feel them.

"Miller, the express messenger, noted locally as a bronco-buster until a bad accident set him permanently on the ground two years ago, sacrificed himself to duty. Taken by surprise, with his own gun out of reach, he gamely refused to open the safe at the bandits' command. They shot him dead, but they fled empty-handed."

Down in the new broadcast studio at Amatura City, there was a brief stage wait. KBL's imported Eastern announcer wasn't quite as pleased as usual with the sound of his voice.

"I'm afraid, folks," he interpolated in that coily clubby way of his, "that I've picked up a little cold." And sounds immediately thereafter agitating the diaphragm of the horn suggested that he had occupied the pause in search for a handkerchief. "Now there's one more paragraph," he resumed, completing the voice-clearing operation with a discreet cough, "in this dispatch from Bender."

He coughed again, and Orcutt, venturing a veiled back-glance at Sidden, saw that the big man stood rooted in the same position, arms folded, eyes unwinking. Then Honey-in-the-Comb:

"Descriptions of the younger robber vary, and Sheriff Dunn holds them of little value, since the man was masked. But the other bandit will be easier to identify. His face was not completely covered by the handkerchief tied over it, and members of the train crew agree that it was deeply pock-marked, as if from fever. The sheriff requests that he be notified at once by any one seeing a man of this description, traveling either alone or with a younger companion."

HEAVERY heels struck the floor behind Orcutt. He wheeled to find Sidden only a pace from him, his right hand gripping the butt of his revolver, his left fingering a pitted tell-tale cheek.

"Had to do it, didn't you?" the big man snarled. "And now I reckon you think you know somethin'!"

Orcutt met his glare boldly, although his heart was pounding. Why hadn't he had the good sense to shut the radio off, cut over

to waves carrying innocuous honky-tonky, when he sensed the march of Amatura's tidings toward this inevitable crisis?

"I haven't heard yet," he said, "what I was listenin' for. All that I'm bothering about, neighbor, is what KBL has to say about prospects of the snow lettin' up, and the condition of the road in Dos Bravos canyon. You can bet I ain't anxious to be puttin' up in Topside if there's any chance of getting back to Waltonville."

The heavy black brows had drawn close together.

"Just how much chance, Mister High Collar," mocked Sidden, "do you calculate there is?"

But the question wasn't left for Orcutt's answering. The dulcet voice of Amatura City on the air—inwardly and savagely, and now doubly, he cursed it—was piling on the agony:

"—tonight and tomorrow. Roads still open in other directions, but Triangle Z manager reports Dos Bravos canyon snowed up at four o'clock this afternoon, and probably Curran Pass as well from all signs. Snowfall at the north end of the state—"

Sidden's thick lips sagged into the lines of the sardonic smile that was more than half sneer.

"I reckon," he said, "I maybe won't have to press you so hard to stay—after that. Sure you'll put up with us, Olcott. There ain't only this one good house in Topside, and there ain't only the one Topside on this man's mountain. We'll all have music and what-not, an' a good time together. Come on, Chauncey, have off your ulster. You know, you gotta think o' the lady!"

IN HIS own way of putting it, Cal Orcutt hadn't been thinking for some minutes of anything else but. There had been a demon in Sidden's eyes from their first covetous inspection of Liddy Collins through the snow-covered windshield. Already the odor of whisky hung heavy about him; and Orcutt had no doubt but what those two brown-tinted bottles on the table back of the fireplace held more whisky.

Sidden sober, even before that blood-chilling broadcast had rippled the ether,

branding him bandit and wanton killer, had represented problem enough. Drunk, and backed by the companion of his crime, he'd certainly have no compunction in shooting away any obstacle between him and his desire of the moment, even though the obstacle were a man unarmed and all but defenseless.

But for now, the big man of the fateful pock-marks was disposed to a cumbersome and expectant amiability.

"Take off your things, sister," he urged. "Don't be strange. We all got to make the best of it; and, believe me, the best ain't going to be so bad." He grinned as she hesitated. "Oh, I know what's fussin' you. It's the earful you just got off of that sweet thing down to Amatura. From the look on your boy friend's face, I could see he had me tried and convicted and just about strung up when the description of the gun person come over. Ain't it the truth, Chauncey?"

"Tryin' and convictin' people," Orcutt answered indirectly, "ain't any business of mine. And if it was, I reckon I'd want better evidence than chit-chat out of a radio box." Then, snatching at a means of escape from the ominous subject as it suggested itself, he nodded to the girl. "Go ahead, Liddy; get out o' the mackinaw. I reckon we'll plant here a while."

Sidden stared at him for a little in silence.

"Well," he said then, "we all might just as well settle down, now we've got sorta onto terms of understandin'.

If I've sowed a little seed in your head, Olcott, all the better. You 'tend to your affairs, and let me 'tend to mine, and everything'll be pleasanter. *Sabc?*"

Young Johnson, through all this, had said not a word. Orcutt had found it impossible to catch his eyes; although, seeing possibilities in the boy as a buffer, he had striven most anxiously to.

Now, advancing out of the shadows where he had taken refuge, Johnson addressed himself to Sidden.

"The way you been actin' up, *amigo*," he said coolly, "I wouldn't blame these folks for anything they was to think about us. You sure could spend a lot of time with the etiquette book, and not be wastin' any. Because we just fed ourself, it don't say that they mightn't be hungry. What say if you rustle up some human grub out o' the absent host's cupboard, while I go out to the shed and raid the feed-box for the hosses and bed 'em down comfortable?"

HE LIGHTED two of the gasoline lanterns before he went off; and darkness having already fallen, carried one with him. Sidden, under the brilliant light of the other, stirred himself to throw together a meal centered upon bacon and beans, with soda crackers and boiled coffee and sliced peaches out of a can as adjuncts.

Somehow, a queer feeling developed at the pit of Orcutt's stomach as, sitting by the fire, he watched the preparation of the meal through a fog of cigarette smoke. In the Panhandle country, before coming to the Bar BQ, he had worked with an outfit whose cook was popularly reputed to have got his man—in fact, who could easily be encouraged to admit that he had.

But no one ever had harbored any scruples against eating old Doc Fay's grub, or even had given a thought to the possibility of it having been contaminated in any way through the associations of his gory past. He had killed his enemy—and legend corroborated his say-so—in fair and square, stand up fight. Universally, therefore, he was accounted a good man, and passing harmless.

This was different, though. By all odds, Sidden was a redhanded, ice-blooded murderer. Not only the radio description argued that, but his hiding away here in desolate Topside, his surly and overtly suspicious reception of the passengers in the snow-trapped roadster, his reaction to the report of the train hold-up from KBL. True, there could be two men in Caraway County who had come through a fever—could be a dozen. But, adding everything up while his eyes enthusiastically followed Sidden, Orcutt felt his appetite ebbing away. And Liddy Collins, he deduced from her ex-



pression, must be feeling pretty much the same way.

ALTHOUGH she had come to his side after hanging up the wet mackinaw, he didn't speak to her until the clatter of dishes as Sidden set the table gave him the favorable opportunity for which he had been waiting. Then, close to her ear, he whispered:

"I reckon that radio stuff musta gave you quite a start, sugar plum. But shucks, these people are just plain drifters—next door to hobos. The big feller's an ornery sort, and no denyin'. However, he's had a drink or two, and that's all that——"

The girl's hand closed tight on his arm.

"Cal," she interrupted, "you aren't telling me the truth of what you think. You're sure, just as I'm sure, that these are the men the alarm is out for—the men who killed poor Carl Miller. And if you're thinking what I'm thinking, you're wondering if Bill Ketchum hasn't—hasn't gone the same way."

"No such thing, Liddy," Orcutt earnestly lied. "Old Bill's down to Waltonville, sure. Must of been shootin' down the Topside short-cut while we were heading through for the pass. I heard tell he commutes back and forth right often."

"But——"

"Listen, sweet," Cal cut in urgently. "Whatever the case is, we can't walk out. Just by itself, the snow's enough to hold us. I reckon I could handle Sidden all right if he got obnoxious, but I got a better idea. His eyes keep travelin' over to them bottles, and I don't like that.

"Now, right after you eat, s'pose you say that you ain't feelin' well. Work up a chill after the drive—anything. Go and lay down on one of them bunks 'way in the back. If you can get to sleep, so much the better. And I'll set up and be company for Sidden until he guzzles himself under the table. No, he won't miss you any. The pleasure of your presence was just a passin' thought with him. His fun's in the bottles. See! Watch him trottin' over there now!"

AND it seemed, a half hour later, that Orcutt had cannily sized up his man. Sidden had primed himself with two more

he-man drinks by then, each a half tumblerful, and he made only perfunctory protest when, in womanlike fashion adding a headache for good measure, Liddy put forward the excuse of her convenient chill.

"All right then," he said. "Rest up. A real evenin' don't start until twelve a. m., midnight, anyhow, and I like everybody lively 'round me when I'm partyin'. And don't fret, neither. I'll see to it personal that you get your call."

Subsequently, Orcutt entertained a hope he'd forget that; forget even the presence of the girl under the same roof. Most assiduously, the pock-marked man proceeded to apply himself to his liquor. Cal, under royal command, reconsidered a refusal and downed a drink of it. He found it potent stuff, and vile—quite the worst, he thought, that he had ever run against.

Shuddering after it, he said to himself, "Mister, you better be careful about forcin' your T N T on your unwillin' guest. A couple more hookers like that, and I'm plumb apt to be removin' the guns off both of you, and kickin' you out in the snow!"

Later on—but so much later that he could scarcely credit that generous and noxious noggin as the cause—Orcutt began to feel uncomfortably warm. The fire was no higher, and he wondered if some sudden change in the weather might not be accountable for the growing stuffiness in the house.

That possibility built a new hope. The drifts in the pass certainly hadn't had a chance yet to settle and pack; a thaw would therefore make short work of them. If Sidden would only keep tipping the bottle, obligingly drink himself into a stupor, even the broken-sprunged roadster would have staggered beyond his reach before he came to. And probably before it got there, Curran Pass would be open; full of slush, and bad going—but open!

ORCUTT sat a little longer nursing the hope, from a shadow contemplating the hosts who by every inference were also his jailers.

They sat facing each other across the littered supper table, talking in tones so low as the bottle passed between them that the vociferous radio, tuned in now on one of the big network broadcast stations, drowned

all but tag-ends of their speech.

Once, Sidden's fist pounded hard on the table and set the tin dishes to dancing. His voice was louder then, an angry bull roar.

"It's too late to crawl out, you yeller pup! You gotta stick!"

Young Johnson, whose face had been growing paler as Sidden's grew redder, half rose. Then he dropped back heavily into his chair, as if he had found his legs uncertain beneath him, and his reply was so low-pitched that Orcutt could catch no word of



it. It was then that Orcutt, grasping his chance while the two were engrossed with their private quarrel, yawned and got up and

unostentatiously gravitated toward the door. He had opened it—found the air soft as spring on his cheeks—when Sidden's thickened voice boomed across to him.

"If you're goin' for a walk, Chauncey, tra-la. No objections here—as long as you aim to go by yourself."

Orcutt shut the door carefully, and returned to the fire.

"Not for me," he said, engineering a convincing shiver. "Too cold."

As he seated himself at his shadowy end of the fireplace bench, a wisp of familiar doggerel floating out of the loud speaker challenged his ear:

—on the radio—

We're going to go.

Good night—everybody!

Then another voice, one of those rapturous announcing voices succeeded the singer's:

"It is now exactly one minute after twelve o'clock, folks, and we are signing off until six o'clock tomorrow morning. Sweet dreams!"

SIDDEN started up, his bleared eyes indignantly blinking.

"What the hell kind o' time-keeper are

you, Johnson?" he demanded. "Didn't I tell you to tip me off when it got around toward midnight, so I could start organizin' the ladies' aid?"

The boy eyed him steadily, his hands folded on the table.

"I kinda thought," said he, "that you'd licker yourself clean out o' the idea. And I didn't think, ol'-timer, that it would be so bad if you did. That's shootin' straight."

Sidden leaned belligerently over him, scowling.

"Well, I'm swiggered! Ain't you the pretty one to be teachin' Sunday school? How you get that way, kid?"

Johnson's hands came apart, and his fingers drummed the table.

"I been used to thinkin', Sidden," he said, "that I was part ways a gen'leman. Not that I ever set up to be a saint. But I was taught early that the Lord made two kinds o' women—and that a man could be decent with both kinds without doin' himself any harm. You got eyes in your head, friend, and you oughta be able to see which kind the lady back there is."

Sidden grinned malignantly.

"What I was taught was different. Women! If they don't come educated, I'm the one to educate 'em. They'll always thank you for it in the end. Snap up, kid! Tinker with that organ-box and extract somethin' lively out o' it, while the sweetest dancer in Topside goes to collect his partner. Twelve o'clock, people! The limit's off at the tables, and high jinks go on the floor!"

He took three long strides from the hearth, and found his path blocked. Cal Orcutt, springing up, disputed the way.

"Take it easy, Sidden," he advised, putting up a fending hand. "Miss Collins told you she wasn't feeling well. Better let her alone. If you're set on makin' a night of it—well, you ain't exactly by yourself, are you?"

The big man laughed—drunkenly and gratingly.

"My habit," he said, "is to pick my company, and I'm pickin' it now. That gal back there is my choice for the evenin'. She'll get well, quick enough. No, an' you don't need to rouse her up for me, neither. Didn't you hear me promise her that I'd attend to the

chose myself? Now, back up, Chauncey! You hear? Fade away!"

Cal Orcutt, standing firm, appealed desperately to Johnson.

"Will you stand for—this?"

The dark youth shrugged wearily.

"I've done spoke my speech. You seen how much good it did."

Sidden grinned approval.

"That's sense, kid! When I make up my mind to a thing—it happens. Use your legs, Orcutt. Get out o' my way before I blow you out! I'm the bird to do it, and I don't mean maybe!"

HIS hand dropped to the holster, pointing his threat. As he gripped the gun he took a step backward—put himself beyond reach of a rush. It was a mechanical movement, practiced.

Looking beyond the big man, Orcutt saw that Johnson was on his feet. He made a last appeal:

"If you're any kind of a man, young feller"—with the image of death so close before him and obsessed by the greater terror of what might come after, his voice was tight and breathless—"if you're any kind at all, see that I get a sportin' chance.

"Here's your pal, promisin' to pull a gun on me. Pull it an' use it. I got nothin' but my hands—but I don't misdoubt he would.

"Right now, in front of you, I'll tell him to his face. I figure him as just that type of animal. Him make any bones about shootin' down an unarmed man? Hell! He'd—sooner! I'll prove it to you, here and now, Johnson. Just you let me take that gun o' yours. Lend it to me long enough to go outside with Mister Siddeh. Let me invite him to take me on, man to man. See if he—"

It had been a bold play of Orcutt's, this—and he had lost. He broke off abruptly. Sidden's revolver, which had been almost imperceptibly lifting in the holster during this last pregnant half minute, was now drawn and leveled from the hip.

The little round black hole in the muzzle held Orcutt's eyes fixed. The last thing he was likely to see in this world would be a dart of flame—there. And then, God help Liddy! The prayer which sprang to his lips was not for himself, but for her.

A savage joy was on Sidden's dappled

face. A maudlin inspiration came to him. He raised his voice, mimicking that one on the radio:

*"You're goin' to go,
Mister So-and-So,
Now, here you go!
Good——"*

IN HIS preoccupation with that tiny round deadly hole, Cal Orcutt had quite forgotten Johnson. Now the boy's voice, sharp and hard, sliced in:

"Don't touch that trigger, Sidden! If your gun goes off, mine's bound to—an' you're sure right in the road!"

Suddenly, Orcutt no longer had the hole to contemplate. The muzzle of Sidden's revolver had gone down as he wheeled and stared.

"What's into you?" he stammered.

Johnson, his gun in his hand, came around the table.

"It seems to me," he said icily, "that I heard this here gen'leman make a gen'lemanly proposition. I'm aimin' to see that it gets proper consideration, Sidden. A while ago you called me yeller. Now he calls you yeller, an' offers to show you up. I just sorta didn't like the way you was goin' to answer him, that's all. So I'm askin' you to put down your iron on the table, ol'-timer. That means what it says. Unless you want to take a chance of usin' it on me—lay it!"

Slowly, as he stared, Sidden's right hand went out to the table; more slowly still, his fingers released the gun.

"You're actin' crazy, kid!" he protested; and then he added venomously, "Mighty crazy, considerin' that your neck is in the same noose as mine!"

Young Johnson winced, but his voice was steady.

"I reckon, Sidden, that I am crazy. If I wasn't—would I be here? Blow the works



if you want to—if the radio ain't blowed 'em already. Fair enough. I'll blow 'em, too. I've saw you shoot down one man in cold blood, ol'-timer, and I ain't got the kind of stomach that'll stand another. If that's yeller, I'm a sunflower! What about Orcutt's proposition? Not afraid of it, are you?"

"It's crazy, I tell you! When a man goes wanderin' among strangers without a gun, and tries to rule 'em, whatever trouble he gets into he brings on himself. That's the way I travel, kid—and you bet I travel heeled. You mean you'd hand him over your gun to blaze at me with? Hell, followin' that out, I ought to give him mine, too, and stand still in the light for him to plug at!"

Johnson corroborated him with a cool nod.

"Mister Orcutt," he said, "if you'll agree to the way I lay out the rules of this up-and-comin' dispute, you're sure welcome to the loan of my six-gun. You can stake your life—which like as not ain't necessary mention—that the rules'll be fair and make 'em."

Sobered by the defection of Johnson, Sidden loosed an outraged bellow.

"Fair! Get your brain clear. See where the line is. See where you stand. See who's here. Take this hard-collared citizen that you're puttin' up for. If you and me ever was to go up the rope, kid, there'd be a crowd of people just like him standin' around and cheerin'. That kind o' people is our natural enemies. It's them keeps us runnin' so that we never have a chance to set comfortable and enjoy what we earn. In your own case, wasn't it them that—?"

Johnson's pale cheeks were aqua.

"No use talkin' about a line, Sidden, and which side of it I choose. I reckon I must be a natural straddler. If you're game to shoot it out, my gun——"

"Then you're worse than yeller!" Sidden cried, his eyes flaming. "You're a rat against your pal. You hear that? A rat! That's the plain word for it. If we went ahead, and this bird was to have the luck to pump me, wouldn't it be just the same as if you done it yourself? Who else gave him the chance? Where'd the lead come out of? Answer me that, if your tongue ain't glued by now to the top o' your mouth! No, kid! When men kill together, they stick together!"

BEFORE that onslaught, young Johnson was wavering. Orcutt could see it in his eyes—the rising indecision.

"Nobody's got to shoot anybody," he offered, bolstering him. "We're 'way off the issue. Miss Collins is sick. You don't want to see her disturbed yourself. That's right nice of you. If we let her sleep"—even as he spoke, he could see the girl's white and terror-filled face lifted from her pillow—"if we let her sleep, it's a lot better."

But Sidden, too, had seen the effect of his biting peroration on Johnson. Pressing his advantage, he snarled, "You're lucky to be alive, Olcott! Dam' lucky! But alive or dead, you ain't goin' to stand in the way of what I've got my mind set on! Clear the track, now, before I break you in two and throw the pieces out of it!"

With his greater height and weight and reach, and his boiling rage, Sidden looked quite able to carry out that program—but Orcutt didn't wait for him to start. Reassured by a hasty glance in Johnson's direction that the younger man was disposed to hold himself neutral in any battle with fists, at least, he sent a crashing right to Sidden's bumpy chin.

It straightened the big man, and rocked him, but didn't down him. He returned a wild swing; and Orcutt, ducking under it, found his jaw again. Sidden staggered back and went sprawling, the table and dishes on top of him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Orcutt saw that Liddy Collins was up now—running toward him. He half turned to her. And suddenly, as she ran, her face froze with horror.

"Cal!" she cried. "Cal! He's got——!"

A spiteful crack behind him completed her warning. Past his ears a bullet whizzed, to end its droning flight with a startling clangor against one of the iron walls.

AS ORCUTT swung around, something else was flying toward him; something, this, that he could see. Before it had sailed by, he saw it. Automatically, he thrust out a hand and intercepted its flight. In the same instant he heard young Johnson's voice.

"With my compliments!"

Orcutt had caught the flying gun by the

barrel with his left hand. As Sidden's second shot from the floor plucked at the shoulder of his shirt, his right hand had closed around the grip. His bullet met the big man rising, toppled him back. On his gray-shirted chest a splotch of red appeared. Orcutt walked quickly to him.

"Can you hear, Sidden?" he asked softly. "I'm glad it was me. *Sabe?* That Miller, the express messenger on the train, was an old time Bar BQ man. One o' the best friends I ever had. That clear? Yes? I just wanted you to know!"

It had been a clean hit to the heart. The big man's eyes were already glazing in the livid, spotted face as Orcutt straightened. Johnson was beside him, white as death.

"I'm a rat—a rat!" he stuttered. "But I ain't sorry, Orcutt. I reckon I wasn't cut for rolickin'." He stared at his gun as it was offered to him; shook his head over it. "No, you keep it. I'm surrenderin' to you. I was in on that train job with Sidden, like you pretty well know already. I didn't do any shootin', and that's God's truth. I say it knowin' that it don't make any difference to the law. I swing, anyhow.

"But I didn't think it was goin' to end in a killin'. Sidden—I had met him in a 'speak' upstate—promised it would all go as smooth as syrup. He was an old hand, he said. I was on the rove, and he told me I was foolish to be goin' hungry just because I couldn't hook onto a job. After he had talked a while, I got to feelin' I had somethin' comin' from the world, and ought to start collectin'. He was buyin' one drink after another, and before he stopped I had joined out with him.

"Yesterday—that was our first job. Sidden had it framed when he run across me. All I had left was my bed-roll. But he had hosses and had figured out where to hide 'em. The way he seemed to look at it, the express company and insurance companies could stand to lose anything we got.

"When we had got the train stopped, and hi-jacked the messenger, and found the safe closed, I was for quittin' there. But Sidden was all lathered up. 'I'm going to count three,' he says, 'an' if you ain't openin' up by then, you're cooked.'

"I thought he was bluffin'. That's God's truth, too, though nobody'll ever know it

but myself. And then, right on top of Sidden—'Three!' the gun whammed—and I was a murderer with him.

"I thought he had me for life then, I reckon. But a couple hours ago, right there at that table, I told him different. Told him I was through; goin' to hunt me a job if I went without eatin' for a month on the trail of it; when I got it, goin' to stick with the bossies the rest o' my nat'ral life. I meant it



so hard, Mr. Orcutt, that I never lifted a finger when he called me yeller. But I expect that if you hadn't dropped him, it'd been a case o' one of us droppin' the other before I ever coulda got away from him."

Orcutt had righted the table. He dropped the boy's gun into his pocket, and thoughtfully twisted a cigarette.

"I don't know," he said slowly, "but what it'd be better for us all to be gettin' out of this. As company, Sidden ain't a whole lot improved—this way. I sorta feel about the present surroundin's, Liddy, like you do about Topside's center of population back yonder. S'pose you climb into your mackinaw? And you, Johnson, I reckon you'd better come with us!"

The other had sunk weakly on one of the wooden benches after the curtain had fallen on Sidden's promised high-jinks—stared at him.

"But—the snow——" she faltered.

Orcutt went to the door again and threw it open.

"Snow!" he cried with a wave toward the star-tipped sky. "Way it's just the same as May!"

He bundled them into the car, but paused in the cabin himself to make some adjustments before he joined them, and the roadster, now carrying three instead of two got under way.

LIGHTS were at play in the pass when the little car trundled gingerly down off the Topside trail after a couple of hours of cautious down-hill snailing.

Orcutt saw them one moment; the next they were gone.

"That's funny!" he said to the g side. "I'd 'a' swore there was an comin' toward us through the pas you see it, apple dumplin'?"

"I thought I saw lights—over near this end. Maybe they turned back."

"No need to. This thaw has sure opened the road. Slush don't drift, star of the evenin', and slush is all there's left. Well, maybe we both need our eyes examined."

But they stood in no need of an oculist's attention. A mile further up, a sudden glare blinded them—the beam of a powerful searchlight from the side of the road. It was mounted on the running board of a big open car which pulled across the trail to block them. The roadster's less intense lights glimmered on the barrels of a half dozen rifles sprouting from the tonneau.

"Hullo!" some one shouted. "'Lo, Cal! 'Lo, Liddy! Nice time you people to be haulin' home! You next door to got shot. Where you been?"

Orcutt knew the voice. It was Luke Corey, the marshal at Bender, who had hailed them.

"Topside," he answered. "We busted a few springs, an' thought we'd hole up with Bill Ketchum."

"Topside!" the marshal ejaculated. "You been there, Cal? And to Ketchum's? That's where we're headin' for. Just had a round-about call from Waltonville, while ago. Seems Ketchum rode in there last night, and told about seein' a couple strangers ridin' up toward the camp just before the snow started. He was totin' some kind o' battery down to get it recharged, an' didn't bother to go back. You and Liddy didn't see no strangers around Topside, did you?"

"I hope to tell you!" said Orcutt promptly. "We sure did!"

Eagerness sharpened Corey's voice.

"Not a big hefty man, with his face all pock-marked up?"

"That's him!"

THE marshal turned to wave his rifle-men in the tonneau.

"You hear, boys? Wasn't it a hunch?" He cleared his throat and impressively flung his grenade. "Well, Cal, you been hob-nobbing with a sure 'nough train-robber. And a killer, too. You knew Carl Miller? Hell, 'course you did—well! But there ain't time to be givin' you news you'll hear below, anyhow, with half o' Bender awake. How about this pock-marked daisy. Was he alone?"

"Very much so," said Orcutt soberly.

"You think he's still there?"

"I know he is. And he'll stay a while. Maybe it was a pal done it—personally, I wouldn't want to say. It's somethin' you all can figure out for yourself. What I was goin' to tell you, this here pock-marked person is occupyin' the middle o' the door in Bill Ketchum's cabin—plugged clean through the heart. There's a couple of horses in a shack in back o' the bungalow—but I dunno. Maybe one's a spare mount, left behind for light goin'. That's somethin' for you to dope, too, Luke."

The marshal was rubbing his chin.

"Two hosses. H'm! That could mean Pocky's kid pal is still lurkin' somewheres around Topside."

The big car had started to swing out of the roadster's way at a word from Corey to the driver beside him. But suddenly, as the spotlight's beam shifted, the marshal stiffened.

"Hold on!" he shouted. "Stop right here! Who's that you're ridin' in your back seat, Cal? Not somebody you just picked up?"

Orcutt laughed mightily.

"You might say so, Luke. It's somebody I picked up—for the Bar BQ. A new hand, and a good hand, and a lad I owe a lot to. Satisfactory, Mr. Corey? Then—*adios!*"

He had stopped his engine with the abruptness of his braking when the big car pulled in front of him, and the tail-light of the posse's machine was a faint red pinprick up the trail before he had coaxed his rundown battery to turn the starter.

As the engine roared, Cal Orcutt leaned back to the rumble.

"Youngster," he said, "that was official!"



THE FOOL, THE VILLAIN, THE HERO

By L. PATRICK GREENE

Author of "An Ill Wind," "Graded," etc.

THREE MEN MET IN THE AFRICAN DESERT; THREE MEN WERE CAUGHT IN A BLINDING SANDSTORM. OF THE THREE ONE WAS THE MAJOR—THAT MYSTERY OF THE DIAMOND FIELDS; AND OF THE THREE ONE WAS A FOOL, ONE A VILLAIN AND ONE A HERO

THE lure of diamonds brought two of them to the Kalahari Desert; joy of adventure the third. A stinking water hole in the heart of South Africa's Great Thirst Land was the magnet which drew them together. Three white men, outwardly as definitely cast as three masked characters in an old time Morality Play.

The first came from the north. His colossal strength was sapped by the furnace heat, the shifting, powdery sand and the burden he carried in his arms. At his heels, their ears pricked up at the scent of water, two heavily laden pack donkeys ambled.

Coming to the water hole, the big man lowered his burden in the shade of a gigantic sand dune, bent over it anxiously and then, frowning slightly, climbed carefully down the slime-covered sides and filled his water-bag.

He tasted the water, his fatigue-lined face expressing disgust at its flavor, and returned to the top. As he did so the bundle he had placed in the shade moved fitfully, disclosing itself to be a man—a bushman; naked, dirty, his coarse hair matted with

grease, his bones threatening to burst through his yellow skin.

The white man ran to him, knelt beside him, carefully raised him to a sitting position and held the water-bag to his lips.

The bushman's eyes flickered open for a moment as he swallowed greedily, then he returned to the death-like coma from which the smell of water had roused him.

Whistling softly the white man took the packs off the donkeys and turned them loose to feed on the *t'samma*, the melon-like desert plant, which grew in a measure of profusion near-by.

That done he made camp—lighted a fire, filled his billy-can with water which he put on to boil—and sitting down with a weary sigh, smoked a well-seasoned pipe. He looked occasionally toward the bushman as if meditating what course to pursue in order to revive life in the man he had carried for so many weary, waterless miles.

Presently his eyes closed, his pipe dropped from his mouth and, for a time, he found easement from his bodily aches in sleep; so sound a sleep that he did not observe the approach of the second man.

THIS one came from the south. He was a wizened, rat-faced little man; his upper teeth were abnormally long and protruded unpleasantly.

In a holster strapped to his thigh was a revolver—his right hand rested on its butt—and in his left hand he carried a sjambok with which he menaced the pock-marked bushman who, walking between two boney pack mules, led the way. The bushman was almost at the point of exhaustion, and when the mules, scenting water, quickened their pace to a jaded trot, they dragged him off his feet for his wrists were firmly bound to their packs.

The little man laughed as he hurried after his mules and prisoner. Catching up with them he brought the animals to a halt and scouted ahead—first giving the bushman harsh instructions to keep himself and the animals hidden behind a near-by dune.

He came almost immediately in sight of the first man's camp beside the water-hole. Dropping to the ground, he wormed his way cautiously forward. His revolver was now in his hand, his eyes glistened.

Right at the very edge of the water hole he crept, his presence unsuspected by the sleeper. He helped himself to some water from the first man's canvas bag—evaporation had cooled it but had not destroyed its stench!—and swallowed greedily.

Then he fired a shot into the air.

THE first man awoke with a start; his hand dropped to his revolver holster.

"None of that," said the second man.

The first one laughed; he saw that the little man had him covered.

"Of course not," he said. "There's no need for anything like that, is there? Only you startled me. Why did you fire?"

"That was a signal for my nigger to come up with the mules," the other replied.

"I see!" the big man looked meditatively at the other. "But I don't understand your exaggerated caution. Put away your revolver and let's be friendly; there's enough water for us all and plenty of *t'samma* for our animals.

"You're the first white man I've seen since I came into the desert—and that's three months ago. My name's Handley, Richard Handley; Dick to my friends."

"And mine's Snape—generally known as Rat Snape. And I ain't putting away my gun, mister. I'm keeping you covered—see? Just now, water an' a good meal means a damned sight more to me than a bushel of diamonds—an' I ain't taking any chances."

HANDLEY shrugged his shoulders. "Just as you like. I was going to suggest, though, that we pool our resources. Maybe we can concoct a good meal——"

"What I want of yours, mister," Rat snapped, "I'm going to take—and don't you forget it."

"Why take when I'm ready to give you," Handley said gently. "However——"

He broke off and looked keenly at Rat's mules which now came lumbering up to the water hole, dragging the bushman between them.

"That's no way to treat a nigger!" he exclaimed. "You've been thrashing him with a sjambok. The poor devil's back is——"

"It is and I have," Rat said grimly, "and it's no business of yours, mister, how I treat



a nigger. An' let me tell you, that one 'ud be dead if he had what he deserved.

"An' say," Rat continued, looking keenly at Handley, "since you're so bloomin' kind hearted, suppose you untie that nigger of mine, take the packs off the mules an' let 'em out to graze? Go on! Hop to it!"

Handley hesitated and then answering the threat of Rat Snape's revolver, obeyed. But he obeyed in such a way that it was evident that he had no intention of continuing to accept this invidious situation.

Snape, realizing this, scowled uneasily.

"Don't you try any tricks, mister," he warned. "I'm watching you all the time, an' there's no call for you to be so blamed interested in them packs of mine. There's nothing in them, nothing for you to see."

His face reddened angrily as Handley straightened himself with a contemptuous shrug of his shoulders.

"An' furthermore," Snape ranted as Handley bent over the bushman and spoke to him in a low voice, "you leave that nigger of mine alone. He's my pilot—that's what he is. He's going to lead me to——"

He stopped short. "Anyway, ne added gruffly, "you leave him alone. See?"

"I was only asking him if he wanted a drink," Handley said smoothly. "Don't you understand the vernacular?"

"No, I don't. Why in hell should I? I ain't no bloomin' dog ape—an' that's the language he talks, blast him. But he understands the sort of English I talk to him, an' that's good enough for me."

FOR a little while there was silence. The sun, although near its setting, blazed with undiminished fierceness; the mules, too tired it seemed to eat, huddled together in what scanty shade they could find. And the two white men—their common lot should have formed a bond of friendship or, at least, of companionship—glared at each other suspiciously.

Snape's bushman crawled to the shelter of the sand dune and sat beside his prostrate fellow tribesman; silent, hate-filled.

Snape looked toward them and cursed. For the first time, it seemed, he was conscious of the other bushman's presence.

He strode over to them and looked at the man Handley had carried to the water hole.

"Your own nigger don't look any too healthy, mister," he said with a leer.

"No, poor devil. I found him back there in the desert, starving and half dead. I carried him here——"

"Quite a hero, ain't you?" Snape jeered. "But let's eat; what you got?"

"Flour, a tin of bacon. What have you?"

"Nothing. At least nothing I'm going to use. Hell, no! I'm an invited guest; you're going to be hospitable and feed me. See? So get busy an' cook grub."

AGAIN Handley hesitated and seemed on the verge of a violent refusal to act as slave to the rat-faced little man; again the menace of the revolver calmed him.

"But look here," he said protestingly. "Why do you act like this, old fellow? Here we are, two white men, met by chance in the desert, miles from civilization, and you act as if I was your deadly enemy."

"And how do I know you ain't?" Snape countered. "See here—I'll put my cards on the table. I'm on the track of diamonds—

maybe you are, too. You must be, or you wouldn't be in this damned hell on earth. Right then. I've seen men murdered for diamonds. I've seen 'em murdered by men they thought their best friends, in a *dorp*, where there wasn't one chance in a hundred of the murderer getting away. Well, if men'll murder there, it's a sure thing they would here where there ain't one chance in a thousand of their being found out."

"A sane man," said Handley, "wouldn't take one chance in a million of being hung for murder."

"Men ain't sane when they're on the track of diamonds, mister," Snape retorted. "So me, I ain't taking any chances. If so be one of us is going to commit murder—that one'll be me. I certainly ain't going to be the one murdered. So put that in your pipe an' smoke it. I'm looking out for number one, me, Rat Snape, all the time."

"You're next door to a villain," Handley said shortly and then, without further comment, busied himself preparing a meal—coffee, *veld-briks* and grilled bacon.

He was conscious that Snape was watching his slightest move, and presently Snape moved closer to him.

"I've heard," Snape said craftily, "of blokes being poisoned. Don't you try any monkey business like that with me, mister."

Handley laughed shortly, but made no reply. He was searching amongst his pack for condiments to add to the flour.

"Yes," Snape continued, as if proud of his forethought, "it's easy to poison a man in this country an' a damn sight safer than shooting. Say, I've heard of blokes being killed through eating powdered glass. They die damned painful, so I've heard. An' then there's a lot of poisons the niggers know about. But I'm too damned smart to be caught that way. I've heard——"

"Have you heard this one?" Handley asked swiftly as he blew a cloud of pepper into Snape's eyes.

The little man screamed, his revolver exploded harmlessly—Handley had thrown himself to one side—and the next moment his feet were knocked from under him. He rolled over and over, panting, clawing and cursing.

Handley rose to his feet, a triumphant, self-complacent smile on his face.

He drew his revolver and stood over Snape.

"We'll change places for a bit," he said suavely. "I don't know what sort of a crook you are—but I'll be watching you closely. You won't have a chance to poison me!" He laughed at that, "I'll be watching you all the time—but not too close!"



Snape sat up and frantically rubbed his red, inflamed eyes with his dirty hands; tears streamed down his cheeks.

He groped blindly for his revolver which he had dropped after the first panic-inspired shot, and swore viciously as one of Handley's nailed boots came down heavily on his hand.

"Blimme!" he exclaimed in a whining voice. "No call to act like that. We're white men—alone in the bloomin' desert. An' white men ought to stick together. That's what I always say. Ow! My bloomin' eyes burn like hell!"

"I say! I hope I'm not intruding!"

AT THE sound of the slow, cultured drawl, Handley turned with a start to face the third white man to arrive at the water-hole. He had come up unobserved during the struggle.

And then Handley laughed—loudly, derisively. Snape blinked and peered suspiciously before him. What he saw in the way of outfit was sufficient to make him forget his anger toward Handley and the smarting pain of his eyes. And he too laughed—laughed until the tears flowed again, bringing further easement to his eyes, washing out the black grains of powder.

The newcomer looked at him, looked at Handley, mouth agape, a bewildered expression on his clean-shaven face.

"I say!" he stammered. "Have you Johnnies gone mad or what? Maybe the sun has affected your—er—brains, the way you are laughing."

Snape was about to make a boisterous retort when Handley interposed.

"You must excuse us," he said smoothly. "Perhaps as you suggest, the sun has affected us. On the other hand, you must admit your appearance is a trifle incongruous in the heart of the desert," and he once more examined the newcomer from head to foot. The man, who was mounted astride a donkey, wore a white silk shirt, open at the neck, white drill riding breeches and highly-polished polo-boots. A white helmet disguised the shape of his head and cast a shadow over his eyes. A monocle gleamed in his right eye. It twinkled when it reflected the rays of the setting sun.

"Don't you think," drawled the newcomer, "that introductions are in order? My name—sorry I have no card—is Aubrey St. John Major. I'd be charmed if you'd call me Major—the Major, you know!"

He smiled.

"Pleasure's all mine!" Snape said with an elaborate bow.

"My name's Handley," said the big man. "And this is Rat Snape."

"Ah—you are partners, I presume?"

"No, far from it," Handley replied.

"You bet your life we're not," Snape echoed.

"Really?"

"Yes—really!" Snape mimicked. "We just met by chance, not an hour ago. Tomorrow we goes our own ways again—an' nobody is going to go *my* way. See?"

THERE was a threat in Snape's voice. "Poor lad," the Major said feelingly, "so you're all alone in the world. And that's why you were crying. Never mind. I'll come with you."

"By God, you won't," Snape shouted, then grinned self-consciously. What was the use of losing his temper with a fool dude? Muttering under his breath he turned away and attended to the *veld-briks* just in time to save them from being hopelessly burned. He raked them out of the red embers and dusted the ashes from them.

Handley frowned. The Major puzzled him. The man looked like an utter fool! "Take out your monocle, Major?" he said abruptly.

The Major obeyed wonderingly and Handley, coming closer, stared keenly into his face.

"My word!" the Major murmured, "I do hope you're quite all right. Or is it that you think—er—you saw some green in my eye?" he laughed self-consciously.

Handley shook his head.

"I wonder," he said, "if you *are* such a fool as you look?"

"Pon my word—!" the Major began indignantly, but Handley, ignoring him, continued as if talking to himself.

"It hardly seems possible; and yet his eyes—even without the monocle—are an



innocent baby blue. And his jaw seems slack; he holds himself as if his muscles were flabby and he looks as if he's got a tub of a belly. I wonder? At that he's taller than I am

—at least he would be if he held himself erect."

Handley's black eyes were now focussed thoughtfully on the revolver the Major carried in a holster at his waist.

"What do you want?" he demanded, his tone suddenly changing. "How did you come here? Where's the rest of your outfit?"

"It's a long story, mate," the Major began in a mock tragic voice, "but—" and he pointed to the west—"here comes my partner; he can tell you better than I."

HANDLEY and Snape both turned and looking in the direction the Major indicated saw a white tented-top wagon, drawn by eight mules, slowly approaching the water hole.

A Hottentot walked beside the leaders, his squat muscular body gleaming like burnished copper.

"Hi!" Snape yipped excitedly. "There ain't enough *t'samma* for all them animals. An' it's a damned sure thing there ain't enough water. So you can move on Mister Monocled Major. You ain't going to camp here tonight."

"But really!" the Major expostulated.

"Snape's right," Handley agreed reluctantly. "First come, first served. There's

another water hole thirty miles or so on, they say."

"But where, where?"

Handley shrugged his shoulders.

"That's for you to find out," Snape said.

"All I know is, you ain't going to camp here an' drink my water."

"I didn't know it was your water, old chap."

"Well I say it is—so what are you going to do about it?"

The Major appealed to Handley. "At least you'll let me fill my water kegs?"

"What can I do?" that man asked in mock mournful tones. "Snape was here first—that gives him control over the water. The best I can do, if he permits it, is give you a bagful out of my supply. And I'm willing to do that."

"Kind of you, dear lad. Kind of you—very. But I am distressed. It is impossible for us to go on—really! We shall die of thirst in the desert. Oh, I say! Don't do that."

Snape, retrieving his revolver, had fired a shot in the direction of the oncoming wagon. A little cloud of sand spurted up just ahead of the foremost mules, showed where the heavy bullet had hit.

The mules were halted.

"That's just a warning shot, Mister Major," Snape said. "Now you tell your nigger to keep away from here or I'll let daylight into him and your mules."

"But where are we to go?" the Major asked helplessly. "It will be dark very soon and—"

"You can go to hell for all of me," Snape said. "But you don't camp here."

"Better go, Major," Handley said softly. "He's within his rights. Anybody who knows the desert'll tell you that."

"I'm not likely to go to law about it, old horse," the Major replied. "If you think I'd better go—"

HE CUPPED his hands to his mouth. "O-he, Jim!" he shouted. "Wait a bit."

"Yah, Baas," the Hottentot replied.

The Major turned to Handley.

"That's all the vernacular I know," he said with a self-conscious grin. "I'll have to tell him the rest by signs."

He gestured wildly, his arms swinging like windmills.

Snape and Handley looked at him, laughing contemptuously at his antics.

And then, suddenly, they no longer grinned. Handley reeled back, staggered by a blow on the jaw; and at almost the same moment Snape's revolver dropped to the ground, his arm almost paralyzed by a chopping blow, delivered by the edge of the Major's palm, on his wrist.

Before either man could recover, the Major was standing close to the water hole. In his right hand was a revolver with which he covered Snape and Handley.

"What the hell!" Snape demanded.

And Handley, nodding sagely, "I thought you weren't such a fool as you looked, Major. But there was no need of this. You ought to have known we were only having a game with you. As if we'd turn a white man away from the only water hole for miles!"

"Of course we wouldn't," Snape added swiftly. "We was only having a lark."

The Major laughed affectedly.

"A rippin' joke, rather. I'm glad you laddies have a sense of humor. Perhaps you will better appreciate my little joke. I'm going to teach you a new desert rule. And that is—possession is nine points of the law. In other words, for the present, the water hole—and all that it contains—is mine. In the meantime—permit me."



He stooped and picking up Snape's revolver handed it to its owner. Then he returned his own

revolver to its holster and turned to watch the approach of the wagon.

Snape and Handley exchanged meaning glances. It was evident that they considered the Major a colossal fool. Having gained his objective he had immediately thrown it away; had, by returning Snape's revolver to him and turning his back, put himself in the power of the two men.

Snape's eyes glistened, and his grip tightened about the revolver. There was no

questioning his intentions. But Handley frowned and shook his head imperatively; his lips framed the words:

"No. Too risky. His nigger would get away and tell the police. Wait."

And at the same moment the Major—he had been polishing his eyeglass—turned sharply on his heels and said playfully, flourishing his monocle, "You have no idea what a lot it's possible to see in this. It's, as it were, quite a third eye. Helps me to see what is going on at my back if I hold it just so. Oh well, don't be so downcast, dear old Snapy. A better opportunity will doubtless present itself. I'm such an utter fool, you know."

What else he would have said was interrupted by the arrival of his wagon, the mules expertly handled by a squat, muscular Hottentot who evidently considered that his Baas was supreme and walked with the gods.

SWIFTLY, ignoring the scowls of Snape and Handley's running fire of good humored conversation, the Major and Jim the Hottentot outspanned. In an incredibly short time the mules were hobbled and turned out to graze; a white bell tent was erected; and in it were placed a collection of camping luxuries—cot bed, with linen sheets; mosquito netting, water filter, uniform cases, a chair, a table and a hanging lamp.

Snape's eyes bulged greedily at the sight of them, and Handley was frankly envious.

They were both completely astounded when the Major presently appeared in full dress clothes—looking as if he were prepared for an evening at the opera. And they could be excused for gaping openly. The Major's appearance was decidedly incongruous in that bizarre setting; the yellow shifting sands, the weirdly shaped dunes which were melting now into the falling curtain of darkness; the flickering fire flames—and the other two white men, unkempt, unshaven, their clothes shapeless and ragged.

But the Major moved with a complete assurance which made the incongruous congruous. So much so indeed that Handley openly apologized for his appearance and requested the loan of the Major's razor, while Snape endeavored to comb his tangled

hair into a semblance of order with his grimy fingers.

"I hope," said the Major, and there was a touch of formality in his tone, "I hope you two gentlemen will dine with me. You will find Jim, I think, an exceedingly good cook."

"The pleasure's all mine, guv'nor," Snape said with a smirk.

"Delighted," exclaimed Handley.

"Then that's that," said the Major. "Please make free of whatever you need in the way of toilet articles."

He bowed them into the tent then went over to where the two bushmen were lying and, squatting on his haunches—native fashion—talked with them in the harsh, spitting dialect of their tribe.

His face was stern when he returned to the table which Jim had set just outside the tent.

II

THE evening meal was over. The three men were leaning back in their camp chairs, sipping their coffee and smoking contentedly.

"That," vowed Snape, "was a meal as was a meal!"

"Your nigger is a wonderful cook," said Handley. "He can give a west end chef points."

The Major waved his hands deprecatingly. Then, his face was stern, he leaned forward.

"I don't like to talk of unpleasant things—but haven't you gentlemen been treating your bushmen a little harshly?"

"That's a good 'un," Snape chortled. "How'd you expect a white man to treat a nigger? Kiss him? Say, mister, listen; I found that nigger way back in the desert. He was bad with fever an' just about fit to die. Well, I nursed him well an' because he told me he knew where there was diamonds, brought him along with me. It seemed he wanted to come, else he could have gone to find his people for all of me.

"Well, what do you think the ungrateful devil did this morning? He tried to stick me with a knife—an' so I thrashed him. Do you blame me? He tried to do a bunk then but I made him come along. An' now the

blighter says he don't know where there are diamonds. He's a liar—they all are—but I know a way of dealing with lying niggers. He'll take me to this Bushman's Treasure afore I'm done with him."

"Ah!" the Major said softly. "You don't speak the dialect do you?"

"No, I ain't no bloomin' ape. But that nigger I brought along speaks a bit of Zulu—an' I know that."

"An' he talked about Bushman's Treasure, did he? Well, somehow, I'm not too



sure you'll like it when—and if—you find it."

"Not like diamonds, mister?" Snape exclaimed incredulously. "Say, it ain't possible for me to

lay hands on too many of them. Diamonds, hell! Diamonds mean heaven, London, home for a chap like me."

"Then," the Major said tentatively, "Bushman's Treasure may be even more precious to the Bushman than to you."

Both the men laughed derisively, Snape adding, "You don't know much, do you, mister? What good, I ask you, is diamonds to a bushman? They don't mean no more, if as much, to him as a handful of colored beads."

"Maybe you're right, dear lad," the Major drawled. "But about this other matter—of ill-treating the bushman I mean. I dislike—oh most profoundly—anything which even remotely approaches brutal treatment of natives by white men. I—er—set my face resolutely against sjamboking an' all that sort of thing. But in this case, if one is to believe your story, the sjamboking was deserved. Oh, quite!"

"Thanks for nothing, mister," Snape said sarcastically. "Didn't know you was a sky pilot; but you can preach all you want after feeding me like you done."

The Major turned to Handley.

"Your bushman seems to be in even worse plight than Snape's," he said quietly.

Handley laughed softly.

"You don't expect me to say anything, do you? You've been talking with the bush-

man. You know his story. There's nothing for me to say."

The Major nodded thoughtfully.

"Just the same—I'd like to hear your story. It is so rare that one hears of such heroic self-denial as you have shown."

HANDLEY looked at him sharply, frowned, then in the self-conscious voice of one who attempts to decry his own good deeds, he said:

"Oh—I only did what any real white man would do. It's not worth talking about."

"Perhaps not," the Major agreed, "but there are few white men, I think, who'd quarrel with his partner over—a—nigger."

"Tom used to go mad almost," Handley murmured. "He'd beat the nigger till he couldn't stand. I stood it as long as I could. I warned Tom plenty of times what would happen if he didn't change his manner of treating our nigger. But it was no use. Yesterday morning he lost his temper again—the nigger spilt some coffee on him. I wasn't in camp at the time. When I arrived he'd got the nigger on the ground and—well, we had a fight, Tom and me did. After it was over, we divided up our goods, tossed to see which direction we'd go—and parted company. Knowing about this water hole, I headed for it, hoping to fall in with some of the nigger's tribe."

"And you carried him——?"

"Well, I couldn't leave him alone to die, could I?"

"Some men would," the Major observed.

"An' so he would have," Snape growled, "only, I'm gambling, he wants to get something out of the nigger."

HANDLEY shrugged his shoulders. "That, Snape," said the Major reprovingly, "is the classic attitude of the villain toward the hero."

"He's no bloomin' hero," Snape said fiercely, "and I'm no—hell, what's the good of talking to a fool like you!"

"Oh, finish it!" the Major's lips smiled, but not his eyes. "You were goin' to say you were no villain. Is that it?"

"Something like," Snape replied sulkily.

"But you must be," the Major laughed. "You look exactly like one." He turned to

Handley again. "And you're after diamonds, too?"

Handley shook his head.

"No; I've had enough. I'm on my way out of the desert—and nothing will bring me back again. How about you? You've asked us questions enough. Why are you here? What's your game?"

"I'm hiding from the police, dear lad. They want me for murder."

"Murder!" Handley echoed.

"Murder!" Snape exclaimed. "Do you mean to say I've been skoffing with a bloody murderer?"

"You're joking," Handley protested, his hand to his eyes, veiling the hard light which came into them.

"No—it's a fact. Read for yourself if you have any doubts." And the Major passed over a fragment of a police circular. On it was a portrait of himself and a full description of the man and the crime for which he was wanted.

"I don't think it flatters me, do you?" he drawled. "The portrait, I mean. And as for the description—still, I'd like to have it back. It's an interesting—er—souvenir."

"So you're *that* Major, are you?" Handley said slowly as he returned the circular to the Major. "You're the I. D. B.; the man who pretends to be a fool; the man——"

"And you," said Snape indignantly as he rose to his feet, "have the bloomin' cheek to try an' call me down for sjamboking a nigger! Hell! And you're after the bushman's treasure, ain't you? You're after diamonds, too."

"Diamonds—my word, yes. Look."

From his pocket he took a handful of uncut, unpolished stones and tossed them carelessly on the table.

The other men pounced on them excitedly, examining them with the shrewd appraisal of experts. As if by some secret agreement they divided the stones into two equal piles and pocketed them.

The Major laughed. "I'd like them back, please."



Snape tried to look innocent.

"Have 'em back," he echoed. "Why, mister, you gave 'em to us. They're our reward for not givin' you away to the police. An' what's more," he added excitedly, "it's my belief you've found the place of the Bushman's Treasure my nigger talked about. Well—you're goin' to take me to it."

"I'll be delighted—really—but you won't be. And in the meantime—" he held out his left hand—"I want my stones back."

The others made no move.

"If you please," the Major insisted quietly, and his right hand moved with a lightning rapidity.

Handley and Snape jerked into action, answering the threat of the revolver in the Major's right hand.

"After all," Handley sighed regretfully as he returned the diamonds he had taken, "I don't suppose we have any right to them even if you are a murderer."

"*Wanted* for murder," the Major drawlingly amended. "There's a world of difference. But I'm glad you realize you have no right to the stones. I find a revolver a powerful advocate. Thanks. Thank you, too, Snapey."

"Oh go to hell," Snape growled. "I'm returning these stones because they don't amount to a damn. What do I want with five or six—"

"You shouldn't forget the old proverb, Snape," the Major interrupted. "A bird in the hand—and all that."

"Five or six stones," Snape continued doggedly, "don't mean nothing to me. You're goin' to take me to where I can pick 'em up by handfuls. You promised—an' I'm goin' to see you keep it. It ain't murder when you kill a murderer."

"Oh—I'll keep my promise," the Major said hastily. "I'll take you to the place of the Bushman's Treasure. But you'll be disappointed—really. And now, after I've had a few words with Jim, I'm going to turn in. Bally tired, don't you know. Oh, by the way, I think we're goin' to have the deuce an' all of a blow tonight—at least so say the two bushmen. And they *know*. So you'd better make all things fast. I'm having Jim

inspan my mules—it's safer. Good night!"

III

FOR a time Snape and Handley did not move. They saw Jim the Hottentot enter the tent; they heard, but failed to understand, the conversation he had with his *Baas*. They saw him emerge again, heard him inspan the mules.

The light in the tent was extinguished. The candles on the table—hitherto they had burned steadily—flickered and danced unsteadily before a sudden upspringing breeze. A stronger gust extinguished them. Sparks from the fire whirled upward and were lost in the black dome of night. The sticks were scattered, the fire ceased to be. The darkness was intense.

"He's a fool," muttered Snape. "What did he want to give himself away like that for?"

"Yes—he's a fool," Handley agreed and rose to his feet.

"Where you going?" Snape asked, sensing the other's movements and stretching out for him with a groping hand.

"To see to my kit." Handley's voice sounded from some little distance. "The Major was right. It's going to blow hard."

Cursing, Snape shuffled forward, fighting his way against a wall of darkness. He stumbled and fell heavily to the ground.

He called to Handley, to the bushman, to the Hottentot and, finally, to the Major.

There was no reply. The wind drove the words back into his throat.

The darkness became even more material; the air was filled with grains of needle sharp sand which stung the flesh. Snape could not face it. He crouched low. The wind's fury increased. The desert was filled with the sound of shrieking wind devils. No stars were visible.

Mules neighed in terror. There was a rattle of wheels, the thunder of hoofs, the rifle like reports of a driving whip wielded by an expert—then silence.

Snape grinned. That would make things easier; easier to handle the Major now that his nigger had gone into the night with the stampeding mules.

He moved slightly, experimentally, then

desperately; alarmed by the weight of sand which shrouded him. With an effort he wriggled free and rose to his feet, bending to the wind's force, turning his back to the driving sand.

HE CONCENTRATED his faculties in an endeavor to orient himself—a difficult task in this hell's darkness. Succeeding, he dropped on hands and knees and crept slowly toward the tent. He smiled grimly. He was acting on a suddenly conceived plan. A bird in the hand, the Major had quoted. And now Snape was on his way to make sure of the diamonds the Major had on him. If he resisted—Snape grinned. There was no need to be squeamish when dealing with a murderer. Besides, no one would ever know. This blasted sand would take care of that.

He came at last to the tent fly and, locating the lacing which closed it, cut through it with his knife. A moment later he was inside the tent enjoying its shelter from the wind's hard buffeting.

For a few minutes he sat motionless, endeavoring to quieten his breathing; nerving himself for the next move.

He listened intently, detected the sound of a sleeper's measured breathing and crawled stealthily in that direction. He halted at a low chuckle.

"It's bally dark," the Major's voice said, "but I believe I have you spotted. Oh, rather. 'Specially as I've been expecting



you. Now I'm goin' to count three an' if you're still here at the conclusion of my count I shall fire. One—very amusing this, isn't it? Blind man's 'bluff' with a vengeance. Two——"

There sounded a dull thud, a gasp, the noise of a falling body.

"Hey! What the hell? Major!" Snape shouted. He jumped to his feet and lurched forward.

Something had descended on his head with stunning force and, slumping to the

ground, he wandered for a time in a darkness which far transcended that of night.

SNAPE awoke to the brightness of another day's sunrise. His head ached and, sitting gingerly erect, he tenderly fingered a big bump on the back of his head and wondered vaguely what had happened.

He stared about him and groaned. Apparently he was alone in the heart of a desolate and unknown waste. The water hole had vanished—so too had the queer shaped dune which had been his landmark. The Major's tent, the bushmen, the mules, Handley—all had vanished. There was not one thing visible to indicate that at this place, only last night, three white men had outspanned.

Weakly, Snape staggered to his feet and looked around despairingly. He understood now. Last night's sand storm was responsible for everything. It had filled ravines and shifted hills. The water hole was buried, beyond recovery, most like. The familiar landmarks had all been blotted out. Overnight the face of the desert had been changed.

Overhead the sun blazed with a fierce intensity in a cloudless sky; the heat, although the morning was young, was oppressive, thirst creating.

Snape licked his dry lips. A worried light came into his eyes. He knew the desert well enough to appreciate the peril of his situation—without food or water; alone.

Then, remembrances suddenly flooded him, and he commenced to dig frantically in the sand with his hands, hoping to uncover the body of the Major. He hesitated presently, greatly puzzled.

"It's funny," he muttered. "Why wasn't I buried in the sand, me lying there unconscious all through the night? An' I wonder who it was knocked me out. Wasn't the fool dude Major, that's sure. I'm betting he was knocked out first. Might have been the bushmen or—Handley. Yeh! Reckon it must have been Handley. It's a fact he's nobody's bloomin' hero.

"Oh hell! This thinking don't get me anywhere. I got to do something—get somewhere. But what? Where?"

He rose to his feet and stared moodily about him, rocking uncertainly.

THEN he stiffened, and stared unbelievably at a black shadow on the yellow sand—the shadow of a man. He looked to its source and saw the Major, carelessly debonair—clad in pajamas and sun-helmet, come from behind a sand dune.

Snape gasped with relief.

"My God," he exclaimed, "I thought you was buried down under about thirty foot!"

The Major smiled. "And you were worried——"

"Of course," Snape said shortly. "But never mind that. I want to know what it's all about."

"Natural enough, so do I. I'm afraid I'm very much of a fool. You see I was expecting a visit from one of you last night and had no intention of being caught napping. I greeted you quite warmly, didn't I? But I wasn't expecting Handley too. I rather misjudged him. I thought he was too clever for straightforward robbery with violence. And so he won the game. He knocked us both out and—er—decamped with the takings."

"Do you mean to tell me he's got your diamonds, Major?"

"Exactly. Is that what you were digging in the sand for?"

"Hell no! I thought you was buried under there. Killing by way of business is one thing but I'm damned if I can stand by and see a man buried alive. So I started to dig."

"It would have been a long task," the Major commented. "What made you stop?"

"I used my brain. It stood to reason that if you was buried I ought to be buried too. An' I ain't."

"No," the Major agreed softly. "You—er—ain't. An' you can thank me for that. You see Handley was a little too cocksure last night. He didn't make a thorough job of things and I recovered quicker than he expected. Even so, it was almost too late. That was a deuce an' all of a sand storm which blew last night. I was nearly buried——" He shrugged his shoulders.

SNAPE stared at him.

"So I got you to thank, have I?" he said. "If it wasn't for you I'd be buried

down there somewhere. Life's funny. Here I was ready to knock you out last night and——"

"But you didn't," the Major interrupted lightly. "And this morning you started to



dig for me in the sand with your naked hands. That, I imagine, a bout squares things."

They were both silent for a little while. Then said Snape, "Hell, but I'm

dry. What do we do next?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Why, drink until I bust. But small hope of that! We're in a hell of a hole, Major. As far as I can see—our bones'll be bleaching here afore long."

"Nasty imagination you have—very!"

"It's no good shutting your eyes to the truth. We ain't got a dog's chance of getting water—we don't know where water is. It's the end for us but afore I go, I'd like first to have a quiet talk with that Handley."

"Maybe he's gone to get help," the Major suggested.

"Don't be a fool!" Snape said biting.

AGAIN there was a silence, broken this time by the Major, who said briskly, "Well—come on, old lad. Let's trek."

"Trek where?" Snape asked dully. "What's the good of trekking? We've got to die, so might as well die here."

"But that's silly. Why die; at least we might find Handley, you know."

"I'll trek till I drop in hopes of that," Snape said fiercely.

"Good. That's the spirit. Now follow me an' don't talk—talking makes one dry. I have an idea that Handley made for the place of the Bushman's Treasure. We'll go there. An' so I shall keep my promise to you."

"To hell with the Bushman's Treasure," Snape said. "I'd trade all the diamonds in the world for a drink. However—lead on. If I can have a word with Handley afore I peg out I'll die happy."

IV

IT WAS high noon. The heat of the desert had increased beyond the limit, it would seem, of human endurance. Yet over the blinding white sand the Major walked with easy, effortless stride, despite the burden which he carried on his back. A burden which cried and cursed; now begging to be put down and left to die; now urging his human steed to quicken his speed. The desert had utterly defeated Snape. Added to the blow he had received over night, it had reduced him to the verge of insanity.

But the Major was deaf alike to his tears and curses. Not once since the time he had by force restrained Snape from eating the briny crust of a salt pan—Snape's fevered mind insisted that it was snow and he had fought viciously to escape from the Major and indulge in it to his heart's content, and death—had he eaten. He was conserving his strength, his eyes fixed on a queer shaped kopje which danced fantastically ahead of him.

TIME passed. Snape relaxed, his head lolled forward and he forgot his misery in sleep. And there was no sound save the measured crunch of the Major's feet on the shifting sand.

And so he came presently directly under the lee of the queer shaped kopje, encircled its base and passed on amidst a welter of rocks. There he halted, lowered Snape to the ground and gently shook him into consciousness.

Snape sat up with a start.

"Blimme!" he croaked. "Where are we?" His lips were cracked, bleeding. "I thought—Do you mean to say you carried me?"

"Quiet," the Major silenced him. "We're at the place of the Bushman's Treasure—and Handley's here. Listen."

As he spoke the man Handley came into view. He was almost naked—the few clothes he wore hung in shreds about him and at them he tore with nervous, plucking fingers.

Snape jumped to his feet with a savage curse. "Let me get at him," he gasped, then collapsed under the Major's restraining hold.

"He's been punished enough," the Major

said. "He's lost—and he's thirsty. Leave him to me."

He stepped forward.

"Handley!" he shouted. "Handley."

The man peered suspiciously about him.

"More voices," he muttered. "They mean nothing—nothing." Then he saw the Major and Snape. He dropped to the ground, hiding his face between his hands, rocking back and forth.

THE Major walked over to him and touched him on the shoulder.

Handley shivered, yellow with fear, then clutching hold of the Major's legs pinched them and finding them real gave way to a frenzy of relief—jumping to his feet and capering about excitedly.

The mood passed and he looked sullenly from the Major to Snape, then back to the Major again.

"You're real—you're alive!" he said.

The Major nodded.

"Small thanks to you," Snape said bitterly.

Handley laughed insanely.

"What's it matter? Soon we'll all be dead. But I don't care much now. I didn't want to die alone. It's been hell. There were voices that——"

"Of the man you had killed?" the Major asked.

Handley nodded.

"Yes. Of my partner—I killed him back there as soon as I'd found out where the Bushman's Treasure was. He died easily.

He didn't know what thirst was. And I heard your voice—and the voice of that little rat."

He pointed at Snape.

"But you're not dead," he resumed, a puzzled light in his eyes.

"No, we're not dead," the Major said calmly.

"Then the voices— Hell! Was I mad? No, of course I heard them—and you're dead. I killed you both last night and the sand storm buried you. I came here with the bushmen. All through the storm I trekked.



They led me to this place, holding my hands. But in the morning I was alone—all alone. And the water in my flask was turned to brine. And I've been searching for years—looking for diamonds."

"There are no diamonds here," the Major said sternly; and there was that quality in his voice which sobered Handley, destroyed his thirst-created delusions.

"No diamonds here!" he echoed. "But they told me this was the place of the Bushman's Treasure. They——"

"Come!" the Major said. "I will show you the Treasure. We all need it."

He led the way forward amidst the chaos of rocks, climbed the lower slopes of a kopje and halted presently before a triangular shaped cleft.

"Come!" he said again and passed into the cleft, passing along a narrow tunnel-like passage which opened out presently into a large cavern. And the floor of that cavern was a pool of crystal pure water fed by a subterranean spring.

"This," he said, "is the Bushman's Treasure."

The two men heard no more. They had flung themselves into the life giving fluid—drinking it through their thirsty pores.

Complete sanity quickly returned to them.

"We can search now," said Handley, "for the diamonds. We'll forget our little differences. What do you say?"

"There are no diamonds," repeated the Major.

"I don't want any," said Snape. "I only hope I'll never be that thirsty again. An', as for you, Handley, I ain't forgetting what you did last night or what you said a bit ago."

"What——?" Handley began viciously.

"Let us go outside," the Major said smoothly. "We can talk better in the sunlight. And there is something else I want to show you."

THEY followed him meekly enough outside and there halted, gaping in amazement.

For there was the tented-topped wagon, and the Hottentot—grinning contentedly—and the mules, and the two bushmen; and seated comfortably on a camel, a policeman.

"Hands up, Handley," he said. "I arrest you for murder of your partner."

"How do you get that way!" Handley exclaimed. "He died of fever. He—say, if you want a murderer, there's one." He pointed at the Major.

Before he could say more Snape felled him with a shrewd blow to the point and, wheeling, the little man drew his revolver and aimed at the policeman.

"Put up your hands," he yelled. "And you, Major, get on your way, quick. I'll hold him here till you've got a good start."

The Major looked at the policeman who nodded.

"Thanks, Snape, old top," the Major drawled and climbed onto the driver's seat of the wagon. "The bushman's got the diamonds Handley pinched from me. They're yours. A hero's reward, you know. So long."

The Hottentot flourished the long driving whip, the mules broke into a canter and, in a few minutes the wagon had passed from sight.

HALF an hour passed. Snape lowered his revolver.

"I reckon you won't catch him now," he said.

"No," agreed the policeman. He was bending over Handley, handcuffing him securely. "Thanks to you."

"I had to do it," Snape said. "He saved my life. He's a bloomin' hero, if you ask me."

"Don't have to. I've met the Major before. He's a white man."

Snape looked puzzled.

"I don't understand. If you know he was the Major why didn't you arrest him for murder?"

The policeman laughed.

"That circular was an old one. We thought once he'd committed a murder but it was afterward discovered that he purposely made it look as if he were guilty to shield a woman. No; the Major doesn't commit murder. Say, don't you understand what it's all about yet?"

"I was trekking with him across the desert when we run across the body of a white man. He'd been shot, no doubt about that, but it 'ud have been a hard thing to prove he was murdered. It 'ud have been impossible

for me to have proved it on the murderer working in the ordinary police way. So the Major takes the trail and catches up with you and Handley. He guesses one of you's the murderer, but don't know which for sure. First he suspects you, then he suspects Handley. Then you again. Then after a talk with Handley's bushman, he's sure it's Handley. But that ain't proof. So he shows you the diamonds he's got—he *does* know where there's more; not that getting rich interests him—and fixes up with the bush-



men to lead you to this place. It's a long story—you'll have to figure it out for yourself."

"You mean," said Snape slowly, "he deliberately offered himself and the

stones for bait?"

"Yes. He reckoned that a man mean enough to murder his partner wouldn't boggle at another murder or two—'specially with a sand storm in the offing to cover up his crimes. 'Specially when there was a couple of bushmen ready to lead him to a good hide-up and—as he supposed—more diamonds. And Handley took the bait."

"So did I—nearly," Snape confessed. "What a fool I was. An' it's a good job

for me Handley was a bigger one. An' you' an' the Major's nigger Jim was waiting here all the time, eh?"

The policeman nodded.

"We were here when Handley came with the bushmen—they hid from him right away—and, believe me, as soon as he discovered he was all alone, an' without water, an' lost, he talked a lot to himself. He's a dirty villain if there ever was one."

"It's a fact he ain't no hero. But look here—why did that bushman of mine play a double game with me? First he told me he knew where this place was, then he said he didn't."

The policeman laughed.

"He said he knew where the Bushman's Treasure was. You thought he meant diamonds. And when he said he couldn't take you to diamonds—you lost your temper and thrashed him. He got sulky after that."

Snape grinned. "I reckon I'm a blamed fool."

"And a bit of a villain; a bit of a hero, too, by all accounts."

"A damn' small bit," Snape spat in self-contempt. "I thought I was doing a big thing by giving the Major a chance to get away. He must be laughing at me."

"Not he," the policeman said decisively. "That's not his way. And now, if you'll give me a hand, we'll see if we can't bring a bit of life into the real fool and villain. It's funny, isn't it, for he looks like a bloomin' hero!"

Willard K. Smith

is a newcomer to **Short Stories**.

He writes thrilling crook stories.

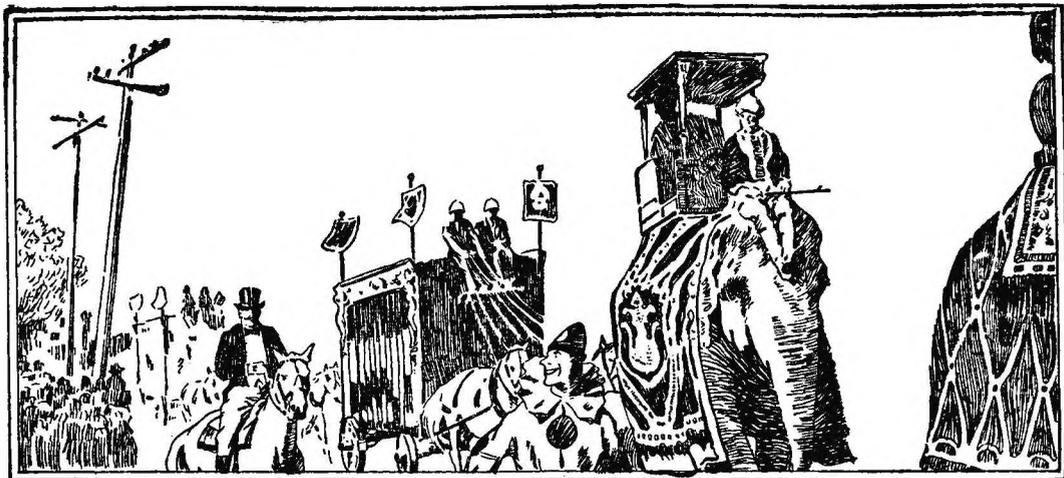
In the next issue he will have a story,

"The Tooth of Time"

Following that will be a serial by him, one of the most exciting we have ever had—



BOWERY MURDER!



The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

Grandstand Stuff

WHEN Thomson Burtis was fifteen he joined the old Johnstone minstrels Road Show as freak singer. He was at the age when a boy's voice breaks but he got over his embarrassment at the fact as soon as he discovered that he could sing both boy-soprano and bass. He had been a choir singer once and now he collected on the fact. In blackface he did vocal gymnastics that astounded audiences from Evanston, Illinois through Columbus, Ohio, to Springfield, Mass.; and he did an "Off to Buffalo," the tap-dancers' ancient exit routine, on the side. For this he collected twenty a week and found, until within a year the soprano faded from his voice, he became a natural baritone, and lost his job. So, at the age of sixteen, he joined up with Robert Mantell's well-remembered company of Shakespearian actors, and a more exalted Burtis trouped back from Springfield, Mass., through Columbus, O., to Evanston, Ill. Besides playing cup bearer to the King and "Alarums and excursions, Courier heard dismounting without" his job was to collect four throne-carriers and the Duke of Lancaster's army from among the bums in each town's public square.

At the end of the run he decided that the life of an actor wasn't so hot and stopped being one. He worked and wandered around the country making his living in various ways, coal-heaving, dishwashing, riding the rails, and of course, flying.

After he had resigned from the army, however, he returned to the boards and once again acted around the country—but now as a part-time clown in the Sells-Floto Circus! He says, in part, of the circus:

"There were troupes of trained lionesses, eleven magnificent lions, a dozen polar bears and nine leopards. To allow the lionesses to enter the ring the polar bears had been squeezed into a couple of cages, then the leopards driven down into a couple more and the lions drawn from their customary habitation in the center of the lion cages. That allowed the lionesses to be driven into the lions' cage, and thus over the runway to the ring. There were a couple of outlaws like Kaiser who fought every step of the way, usually being moved in the end by firing off a blank cartridge underneath his jaw.

"Trouping with a circus seems to strike everybody the same way. Just exactly what the weird fascination of the thing is, I can't tell myself. Perhaps because it's such a busy life—a new town every day, new crowds, and constant taut excitement due to the holiday spirit which circus day always seems to generate in any town up to fifty thousand people."

All of which throws a sidelight on Burtis's full length novel "Grandstand Stuff," which comes in the next issue.

It's all about the troupers—the circus folks; but Slim Evans and Tex McDowell those efficient and ready Army airmen who

have held you spellbound in so many adventures, are there too. For George Groody, formerly of the Border Patrol, owns an air-circus in connection with the big circus and the boys of the McMullen Flight come over for a visit in their planes.

And what a visit! The fighting starts on page one. A while border oil town goes to war against the circus. Ground warfare and aerial warfare. The Border Patrol dog-fighting with a crack outfit of crooks. Crashed planes, parachute jumps, machine-guns, aerial acrobatics. And below the elephants bellowing and the roustabouts shouting, "Hey, Rube!" And in the distance the spouting gushers.

Want to read "Grandstand Stuff" by Thomson Burtis? Good. You've only one issue to wait.

Shellback Boys

MEIGS O. FROST says that his amusing yarn in this issue "Boys Will Be Boys" is straight fact, and adds another piece of fact even more fantastic. Well, all the better:

"'Boys Will Be Boys' is perfectly good fact," he says. "That voyage actually was sailed and that typhoon conquered. I got the story from the sea captain who was master of the ship. It came out at a session of the True Believers' Club, a highly informal institution down by the New Orleans waterfront.

"About a technical question in 'Boys Will Be Boys.' What is perfectly clear to a sailor might be confusing to others. To begin, case oil is gasoline and kerosene in tin cans which are in light wooden packing cases. It is dangerous cargo. The bottom tiers may leak. Any sea water coming down inside the hull through the deck, or normal seepage through the sides of the hull, naturally collects in the bilge at the bottom. The packing case wood may soften; the tin cans may rust and leak. On a ship with this cargo the bilge is pumped every watch. As it is pumped, the bilge water is always tasted. If it tastes or smells of gasoline or kerosene, there is a leak. Bilge water is never allowed to collect in such a cargo from the damage it can do sloshing around against the bottom tiers. So with a clear-pumped bilge every four hours, if the bottom tiers

are leaking, you have empty cases at the bottom and heavy cases on top. Many such ships have vanished. Old sailors always believe bottom-tier leakage and a top-heavy ship made these missing ships turn turtle and go down with all hands, especially in a storm. So great is this danger that when gasoline or kerosene is tasted in the bilge, the captain will take advantage of the first fine weather to break out his cargo of case oil on deck and stow it again with the empty cases thrown overboard and full cases at the bottom. The oil that has leaked has no chance to act as ballast because of the constant pumping of the bilges.

"On her way back to the United States, this particular ship ran into a second typhoon and is the only sailing ship of which I ever heard that came through the center of a typhoon unscathed. I left that episode out of the fiction version. It was too much for fiction. Real life frequently is!

Meigs O. Frost."

Railroad Killers

THE hi-jacker and the killer brakeman are the twin devils of the railroads," says Russell Hays whose story "Alias The Whippoor-will" appears in this issue. This is Mr. Hays's first yarn in *SHORT STORIES*, and there are more coming along. We know that you'll enjoy his authentic railroad and hobo atmosphere as well as the thrilling story. Hays goes on to say:

"There is no more savage figure on the road than the killer brakeman. Personally, I have come in close contact with only two of these gentlemen. Two are a plenty as far as I am concerned. Both were positively known to have killed several men on their runs.

"I recall talking with one of them. He was a lean, sinewy man with chilled steel eyes. Not at all the-kind of person you would like to be out alone with on a dark night. He had few friends, least of all among the train crews. I asked him if he wasn't afraid of getting bumped off. He shrugged. Several boes, it seemed, had taken rides on his run for the sole purpose of ending his career. It seemed to fill him with grim amusement.

"At this time he was a railroad bull. He had been promoted, perhaps, for his good work. His brother, I learned, had also been

a brakeman. A bo got him. Whether he had also been a killer I do not know. As we talked on, the man grew more confidential. He was plainly lonely. He tried to justify the killing of an old man who had been picking up coal along the right-of-way. He claimed the old fellow had thrown it off a passing car. A nice excuse for killing a man?

"Another time he had kicked a man off a fast freight, breaking his legs. Six months later, the bo, then a cripple had laid for him with a bottle of nitro-glycerine. When the killer got the drop on him, he was afraid to throw it. At last, my 'friend' admitted ruefully: 'Yeh, they'll get me some day. I don't expect to last more'n a couple more years.' He meant it. I wonder if he is still alive?

"The characters in 'Alias The Whippoorwill' are all very real people. The hi-jacker is the other devil of the professional tie-counter. I'm glad to be able to say that I missed a pair of them cleaning up the jungles near Pocatello, Idaho, by about five minutes.

"Labor strikes during 1922 produced more turmoil on the roads, I imagine, than there had ever been before, or since. Judging from the methods used in some jungles to enroll members into the I.W.W. I suspect that these brethren were the original racketeers. Most railway workers were armed and had orders to watch out for union workers tampering with the trains. Killings were common, and knock down and drag out fights were the accepted thing, especially around division points in coal mining towns."

And Then Some

WILLARD K. SMITH can write as thrilling a crook story and as baffling a mystery yarn as you'd want to read anywhere. *SHORT STORIES* has not published any of Smith's work yet, but we're giving you some in the next issue. It's called "The Tooth of Time" and it's the story of a watch which runs a little wrong. That watch passes from crook to crook, and in each case it affects his life in a strange way. With the watch as a thread, Smith makes a fascinating yarn of New York's underworld. When you've read it you won't be able to wait for the issue after that when Smith's big crime

serial "The Bowery Murder," begins. We'll let you know more about that next time. We're going to administer the drug gently—first dose a short story, second dose, part one of a serial. After that you'll have the habit. There'll be no stopping you.

Walt Coburn, one of the finest Western writers going, as you know, has a story, "Snow Shackles" in the next issue, and Davis Jones has another of his great war stories, "May the Best Man Win."

We're giving you another Russell Hays railroad hobo yarn "Gunmen, F.O.B.," and a gripping E. S. Pladwell "The Rawhide Reformers," with a laugh at the end.

And Bob Carse has a story of the navy in war time and what a yarn it is. It's called "Tennessee" because that's the name of the big dumb hillman who captures a submarine single handed in the middle of the Atlantic. Don't miss it.



THE MAIL BAG

An Old-Timer Speaks

THE reason we like *SHORT STORIES* is because there is nothing impossible in it. The spring of 1879 while living in Leavenworth, Kansas, I had a severe attack of what we called Leadville Fever, and the 15th day of July, 1879 my buddie and I arrived in Denver. The first hotel we stopped at was the old Denver House; just a short distance away was the old Elephant Corral, run at that time by Wall & Witter of stage line fame. After supper we wandered up on Blake St. and went to the Palace Theatre, run by Ed Chase, with the Eureka Hall adjoining with more Gold and Silver piled on the tables than I ever saw or expect to see again. Do you wonder why I like *SHORT STORIES*?

Men Stay Men

HERE in the Southwest the old order is passing; that is the old conditions are passing, but I strongly suspect that men are still men. We value dead bank

robbers at considerable sums. We are still looking for lost gold mines where no gold mines ought to be. There is always some one punching a hole in Mother Earth seeking oil and finding it, as well as a few other things such as gas, potash, salt water, sulphur, and who knows what else; and all of this within sight of the most traveled transcontinental highway in the U. S.

HERVEY S. HUTCHINS, JR.,
Fort Worth,
Texas.

SHORT STORIES in the brig

WHEN I was a Marine I got into an argument with a brand new officer. It was very one sided up to a certain point. He got abusive and personal and I bested him as to Rules and Regulations and guard routine. He called me names that even a marine would not stand for, so I pasted him one on the bezer. To hit an officer in the Navy means about five years making little ones out of big ones on board a "Stone Frigate" or in other words 84 Mare Island, California, would be where your mail would be sent for the next five years. When the excitement had died down somewhat and I was in a nice safe Ship's Brig, I asked the jimmylegs if I could have my magazines

out of my locker, and the jimmy, even if he was a gob was human enough to let me have them. There was two others in cells on each side of me, and I leaned out of the porthole and passed magazines to them. They were on solitary confinement and not supposed to have anything to read, but the Marine sentry was blind, his sympathies were with them, and he did not see anything wrong, in fact he used to borrow them so he could read, after the jimmy had stowed away in his hammock. I could hear the solitarysnickers in their cells, "Honest to Gawd" said one of them to me one day, "I'll be sorry when my time is out, I never had so much fun since the pigs eat up my little brother." It takes some time for a court martial to convene, and several months elapsed before my trial come off, and the verdict was published. A lieutenant whom I had lent SHORT STORIES to in the past, acted as Counsel and he made a good one and scored a direct hit. I had witnesses that the other officer called me names, and I pleaded "Guilty under provocation" and got away with it, was restored to duty and rank with all back pay and allowances.

W. W. HILL,
Newark,
Ohio.



OUTLANDS



OUTLANDS will give you news of the distant and dangerous places of the earth. It will collect facts from the lands of adventure, near or far, and present them briefly in each issue. If you know of any interesting facts or have had any adventures of your own, OUTLANDS will be glad to print them.

Tropics

THERE are certain ruins at Zimbabwe, in Rhodesia, that Miss Caton-Thompson of Oxford University is going to ex-

plore. In 1905 Dr. Randall McIver ascertained that they were not of later date than the Fourteenth Century A.D. The things that have been found in the ruins largely resemble the handicraft of the mod-

ern Kaffir. But the great question is how the people who had that kind of a civilization could construct buildings such as these ruins were, which the modern Kaffir is certainly not able to construct. The modern Kaffir lives in primitive Kraals.

LIEUTENANT E. A. COOKE, of the Australian Air Force, and Mr. R. A. Monson, an Australian journalist, reached Johannesburg, South Africa, after walking from Capetown. The former then completed 1,000 miles in 33 days, beating his own previous world's record. They intend walking to Cairo, which they hope to reach on April 11.

THE demarcation of the boundary between South-West Africa and Angola has now been completed.

LARGE numbers of cattle are dying of starvation in the Transvaal bushveld, through the failure of the rains.

FROM Africa comes a letter concerning the King of Beasts and his amazing gentility.

"First of all, to clear away a misconception, the poor maligned 'King of Beasts' is seldom a scourge of humans and does not attack unless under exceptional circumstances, as when wounded, provoked or suddenly disturbed; when a female has cubs to protect or in the extremely rare case of a man-eater. The man-eater is invariably an aged beast that has lost its power to make a kill of its fleet-footed victims, the zebra and kongoni, and has thus developed a daintier taste. The records of the Uganda Railway will, I think, establish this clearly, as the trainmen have to get their 'line clear' at all hours of the night, in remote lion-infested stations, with water tanks; and their only means of protection is a lamp.

"In regard to the native mental measurement of the 'great cat,' one tribe in Kenya, the Masai (a fighting warrior tribe related to the Zulus), stages a lion-drive every year. Armed only with the native spear, they converge in circular formation and kill off all such pests in that region. They thus cut down the future mortality of their

cattle and gain their warrior status, if they have not killed a lion before."

P. H. JENNINGS,
Uganda.

Sea

WHEN the Surveyors' Searching Squad were looking for contraband on the freighter *Glendola*, a member of the squad found ten Chinese stowaways.

Going below in No. 3 Hatch, he was surprised to find various articles of clothing spread around. On further investigation, he located ten Chinese, naked, hidden behind bags of sugar. Calling the other members of the squad, he brought the stowaways on deck, when one of them fell back into his arms, dead. Exhaustion and malnutrition caused death.

The intense heat had caused the Chinese to strip and alcohol fumes given off by the raw sugar had prevented the dead man eating, although hard boiled eggs, crackers and a pitcher of water were found in their hiding place.

North

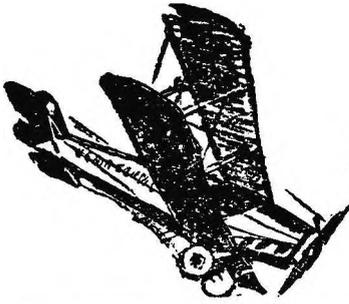
AMOUNTAIN northeast of Cordova is being literally toppled over by pressure of a glacier at its base, Henry Wolkins, pioneer Alaskan, said on returning from a survey of the district.

Wolkins made an inspection following reports that a volcano was in eruption. He said the dust cloud arising from tons of rock sliding from the mountain peak had been mistaken for smoke.

On the mountainside farthest from the glacier masses of rock of from 500 to 2,000 tons intermittently crash down to a valley below with a deafening roar. The glacier has buckled and cracked.

THE salmon run during the past season in British Columbia has been one of the largest in history with the exception of the sockeye variety, Major J. A. Motherwell, Dominion Fisheries Inspector of British Columbia, reports.

Major Motherwell has returned from an inspection of the north coast where he said the fish have been making their way up stream in countless numbers.



AIRWAYS



AIRWAYS is a new department and a new idea. **SHORT STORIES** has already taken cognizance of the great interest in flying with its fiction. It is now instituting a department which will contain flying news. Facts about what is happening in the air today. **AIRWAYS** will be glad to publish letters from readers containing accounts of true adventures in the sky.

Aviation in the Southern Seas

AUSTRALIAN Air Marshal Sir John Salmond recommends the Australian Federal Government to spend £1,139,000 over nine years on drastic improvements in its air service. The replacement of obsolete machines has already been ordered.

In New Zealand the Te Awamutu Chamber of Commerce has decided to invite the Auckland Aero Club to inspect several suitable sites for a landing place.

The New Zealanders believe that the push given to aviation by the recent successful flight across the Tasman Sea will result in flights becoming almost of daily occurrence between the principal towns.

Trade in Airplanes

EXPORT of airplane engines, parts and accessories for the first three months of 1928 were valued at \$815,490, according to a report just completed and issued from Washington by the Department of Commerce. This is an increase of 250 per cent over the same period last year.

Forty-nine complete aircraft, valued at \$509,419, against five aircraft with a value of \$84,000, were exported this year during the first three months.

Air Fight

AFIGHT in the clouds over Wyoming between two commercial airmen preceded the crash of their plane in which one of them was killed, the other severely injured. An army officer witnessed the struggle from the ground.

"The plane was not more than 250 feet above the ground and I could see the two men struggling," said the officer. "One of them raised from his seat behind to lean forward and grab hold of the other who seemed to be fighting back. As I watched, the plane, evidently uncontrolled, stopped its level flight and dived sharply down."

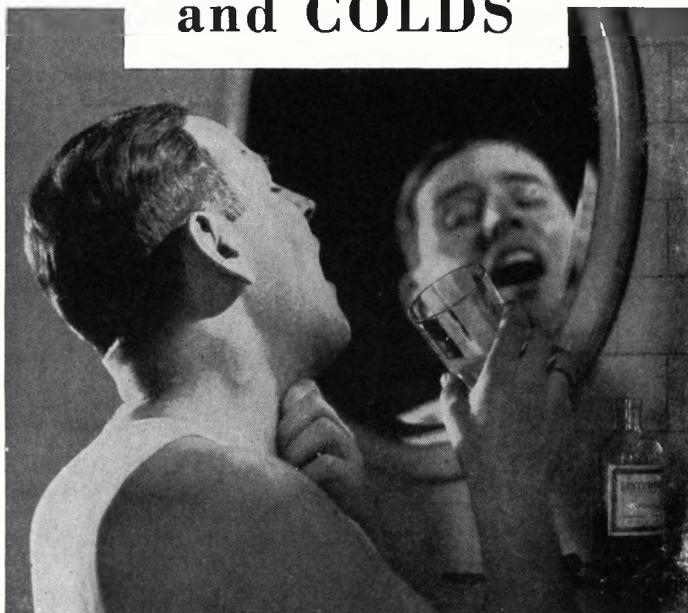
For the Movies

ALVIN KNECHTEL, cameraman, in order to shoot the fighting planes from all angles, had the floor of the cockpit of his plane removed when photographing a recent picture. The leader of the squadron had been instructed to find a spot in the heavens where there were light, fluffy clouds that would form a background. He started cruising in search of them; his companions followed him, and so did the camera plane.

After several minutes Knechtel noticed his pilot struggling with his parachute, which had become partly unfastened. "Help me with this thing before it opens and yanks me out," shouted the pilot. The floor of the plane was gone. If Knechtel moved from his seat he was due for a long drop.

The pilot let go the stick and reached for the chute while the plane careened and tumbled madly. A few hundred feet from the water, the pilot got his parachute in hand and straightened the plane out. Knechtel got his breath and they ascended in search of the mere combat planes. They found them—still searching for a background of light, fluffy clouds.

How to avoid SORE THROAT... and COLDS



Tests show amazing power against bacteria

Kills typhoid germs in 15 seconds

More than fifty diseases, some slight, some dangerous, have their beginning in the nose or throat.

Therefore, an irritated throat demands immediate attention. It may be the symptom of a cold—or worse. The germs causing the irritation must be killed before they get the upper hand.

Listerine, used full strength as a gargle, is a powerful aid in killing germs. Repeated tests by laboratories of national repute prove it. For example, Listerine, full strength, in 15 seconds destroyed even the virulent *M. Aureus* (pus) and *B. Typhosus* (typhoid) germs.



Yet Listerine is so gentle and safe it may be used undiluted in any cavity of the body.

Now you can understand why millions rely on Listerine to avoid ordinary sore throat and colds entirely, and to check them should they gain a throat hold. You'll be amazed to find how quickly Listerine brings relief.

If, however, a feeling of soreness persists, call your physician. It is no longer a matter with which an antiseptic can deal.

Keep a bottle of Listerine handy at home and in the office, and at the first sign of throat irritation gargle repeatedly with it full strength. Lambert Pharmaceutical Company, St. Louis, Mo., U. S. A.

Prevent a cold this way? *Certainly!*

Countless colds start when germs are carried to the mouth on food. By using Listerine on the hands before every meal, you attack such germs and lessen the risk of cold. Remember this, mothers, when handling baby's food.

LISTERINE
The safe antiseptic

nobody loves a cougher!



LUDEN'S
Menthol Action
has made coughing
unnecessary. The
instant you slip a
Luden's in your
mouth — and take
a deep breath —
quick relief.

*In the triple-sealed
yellow package
—not touched by hand*

