Loose Lip Lock meets the "adam bomb" in a novelette by . . . . ANDREW A. CAFFREY

Short Stories

February 10th

Twice A Month

25c

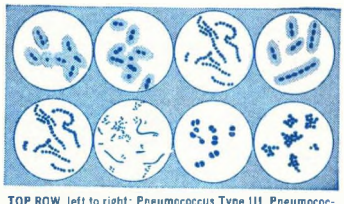
"DUSKY"
Jim Kjelgaard

"CHAPARREL BOMB"
G. A. Shaftel

Germs Reduced up to 96.7% in Tests

Fifteen minutes after a Listerine Antiseptic gargle, tests showed bacterial reductions on mouth and throat surfaces ranging up to 96.7%, and up to 80% one hour after a Listerine Antiseptic gargle.

"SECONDARY INVADERS"



TOP ROW, left to right: Pneumococcus Type III, Pneumococcus Type IV, Streptococcus Viridans, Friedlander's Bacillus. BOTTOM ROW, left to right: Streptococcus Hemolyticus, Bacillus Influenzae, Micrococcus Catarrhalis, Staphylococcus Aureus.

How Listerine Antiseptic can help to head off a Cold or lessen its severity

WHEN you feel a cold coming on, it's likely to be a sign that a virus has infected you and that millions of germs called the "secondary invaders" are threatening a mass invasion of your tissues through throat membranes.

That's the time to "baby" yourself a bit and get started at once with the Listerine Antiseptic gargle regularly. Here's why:

Kills "Secondary Invaders"

Listerine Antiseptic reaches way back on throat surfaces to kill millions of the "secondary invaders". . . the ugly germs, according to some authorities, that cause so much of the misery you know so well.

Often this prompt, delightful precaution may halt the mass invasion of these germs and nip a cold in the bud, so to speak.

Fewer Colds in Tests

If your cold has already started, the Listerine gargle, taken early and often, may help reduce the severity of the infection.

Bear in mind Listerine's impressive record made in tests over twelve years: Those who gargled with Listerine Antiseptic twice a day had fewer colds and usually milder colds than those who did not gargle . . . and fewer sore throats.

So, when you feel a cold coming on, eat sparingly, keep warm, get plenty of rest, and gargle with Listerine Antiseptic. It may spare you a lot of trouble.

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Short Stories

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EDITOR
D. McILWRAITH

ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

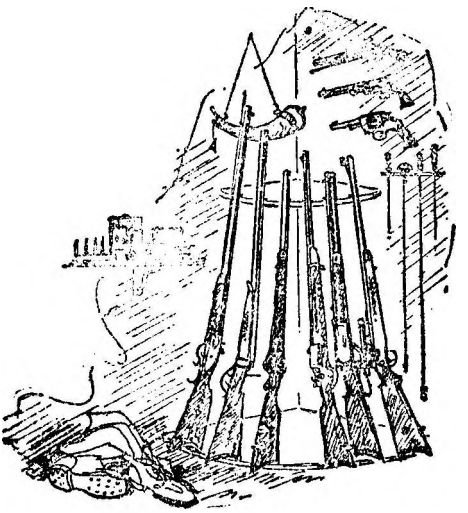
February 10th, 1946

CONTENTS

Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

EVERY AUTHOR'S FINEST AND LATEST STORIES NO REPRINTS

WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.* M. DELANEY, *Secretary.*



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by
PETE KUHLHOFF

More Gun Terms—
Do You Know 'Em?

VARIOUS definitions, abbreviations and other bits of gun terminology were discussed in the last spasm of Shooter's Corner.

Let's continue!

There are a couple of additional points that should be mentioned regarding cartridge nomenclature.

The .38 caliber pistol bullet is, in most cases, really .35 caliber. The 3.57 S.&W. Magnum bullet measures the same as the .38 Special bullet and is named for the groove diameter of the barrel. In fact the .38 Special cartridge can be used with good success in the .357 Magnum revolver.

American bore diameters are usually given in hundredths of an inch, while the English use thousands. Thus the .30 caliber is the .300 caliber in England.

On the European continent the metric system of measurement is used. In Germany, our service cartridge, the .30-'06, is known as the 7.6 U. S. A.

The cartridge case length is tacked on which makes the European cartridge nomenclature even more confusing to the American shooter. For example, the cartridge which we know as the 7-mm (the "Spanish" Mauser) is known as the 7 x 57—the 7 is the caliber in millimeters and the 57 is the length of the cartridge case also in millimeters.

For use in single shot rifles having drop block actions, double rifles and combination guns, the European arms companies generally produce a rimmed version of the rimless cartridge. It is marked with an R—i. e., the 7-mm would be stamped 7 x 57R.

The farther one goes into this cartridge nomenclature business, the more confusing matters get. So the fellow who goes all out for cartridge collecting as a hobby has a lifetime job on his hands, even if he limits himself to those of American manufacture.

NOW let's take a look at a modern bolt-action rifle. It is composed of three major units; the barrel and receiver, the bolt (breech-bolt) and the stock.

The receiver is the part in which the bolt slides and into which the barrel is screwed.

The bolt is the part which supports the base of the cartridge case when the cartridge is in the chamber. The cartridge extractor and the firing-pin is a part of the bolt.

The breech-action consists of the receiver containing the bolt which locks closed to sustain the gas pressure, and opens to permit loading.

The stock is the wooden part of the rifle. It is designed so that the gun can be properly handled for firing. The portion of the stock that is under the barrel back to the trigger guard is known as the forearm or forend. The remainder of the stock is generally referred to as the butt stock.

The civilian is concerned with only two types of gun actions: the manually operated and the semi-automatic breech actions.

The manually operated group includes

(*Continued on page* 8)

YES SIR! YOU TOO CAN BE YOUR OWN BOSS!

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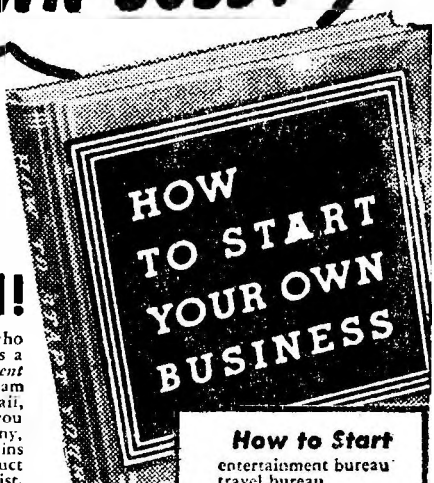

SPARE TIME OR FULL TIME

Many of the businesses suggested can be started in your spare time or by some member of your family until you are ready to take over. Many of the ventures require no capital or very little. Many of the businesses require no inventory of merchandise. Some of the suggestions are for outdoor work and some are for those who work at a desk. A special chapter tells Service Men how to get the most help from the Government, including provisions of the "GI Bill of Rights."

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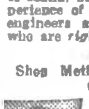

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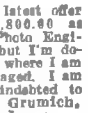

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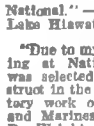

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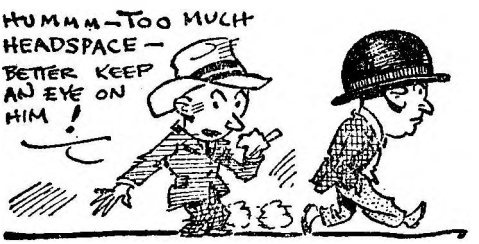
The Shooter's Corner

(*Continued from page 4*)

the various single shots and the following repeaters: the lever action, the pump or slide action, and the bolt action, in fact any gun where the action of loading the cartridge from the magazine into the chamber and extracting of the fired cartridge case is motivated by hand.

The semi-automatic is really a self-loader. The trigger is pulled for each shot. The power developed by the exploding powder is utilized to operate the action in extracting and reloading.



The U. S. service pistol is generally called an "automatic." Strictly speaking this is not true. It is really semi-automatic, or self-loading as the trigger has to be pulled for each shot.

The "fit" of a cartridge in the chamber of a gun is very important. The cartridge must be under-size enough to permit easy extraction after firing—and yet must not be too small, for serious complications may set in, which would wreck the gun, to say nothing of the shooter!

The most important measurement on a cartridge (they're all important) is the one from the head of the case where it is supported by the bolt or breech-block to the forward stopping point of contact with the chamber proper. This measurement is from the head of the case to the shoulder. With the rimmed case it is the measurement of the thickness of the rim. On the belted case such as the .300 Magnum, headpiece is measured from the front edge of the belt to the rear of the case.

This measurement is most important for two reasons. First, it is obvious that the cartridge must be supported against the face of the bolt or breech-block so that the firing pin can strike the primer with sufficient force to explode it. And secondly, there must be no looseness between the head of the cartridge case and the bolt face because when fired the head of such a case would act as a piston exerting as much as 50,000 or more pounds per square inch against the bolt face, thus stretching the case to such an extent that it could rupture and fuse, allowing hot gas under this terrific pressure to escape to the rear with disastrous results to the breech action and the person doing the shooting.

At least two headspace gages are used for measuring the headspace in a chamber —a "go" and a "no go" gage.

The "go" or minimum gage for the government .30-'06 rifles measures 1.940 inches. Every government rifle in .30-'06 caliber must accept this gage and the bolt must close easily and completely.

The "no go" or maximum gage used at the arsenal measures 1.946 and no rifles are allowed to go into service that will accept this gage.

A maximum gage is used in the field—it measures 1.950. All rifles that will accept this gage are withdrawn from service and returned to the arsenal for repair or salvage.

New .30-'06 caliber rifles should have a headspace measurement of between 1.940 and 1.943.

Well, here we are at the end of my rope. There's a lot more of this gun dope. Perhaps we can get into it again later on. Keep your readin' eye in good condition 'til next issue!

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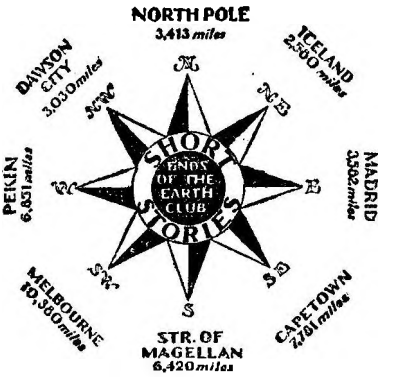

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Dear Secretary:

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Ronnie Keirstead

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Yours truly,

Howard Risk

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Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me as a member of your club and please send me a list of your members, who are stamp collectors.

Sincerely yours,

Paul Randolph

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All the Way from Holland

Dear Sir:

As a regular reader of your famous SHORT STORIES, I would ask you if it is possible to become a member of your "Ends of the Earth Club." SHORT STORIES is the best magazine I ever read and I recommend it to all my friends.

Yours truly,

H. T. Fyt

60 Essenburgsingel,

Rotterdam 1 W. T., Holland.

Flight Sergeant

Dear Sir:

Please send me a membership card for the "Ends of the Earth Club." I am a flight sergeant in the air force.

Thanking you very much, I am,

H. Smart

803 Main Street,

Dauphin, Manitoba, Canada.

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Dear Sir:

Previous to my transfer to the A.A.F. a short time ago. I was a contract pilot for the Chinese National Airways based at Hostel No. 1, Kunming and I feel quite safe in saying I'm qualified as a member of your club. I hope you will agree.

Correspondence in the service is always a welcome thing, so if you have some way of getting me some, I would certainly appreciate it.

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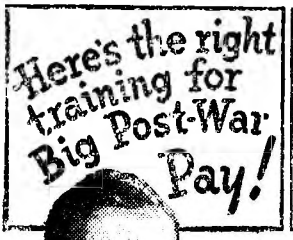

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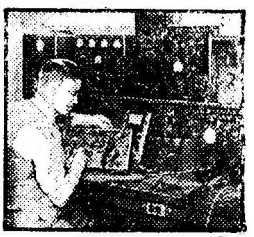

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FRICTION ON FEDERAL

By ANDREW A. CAFFREY

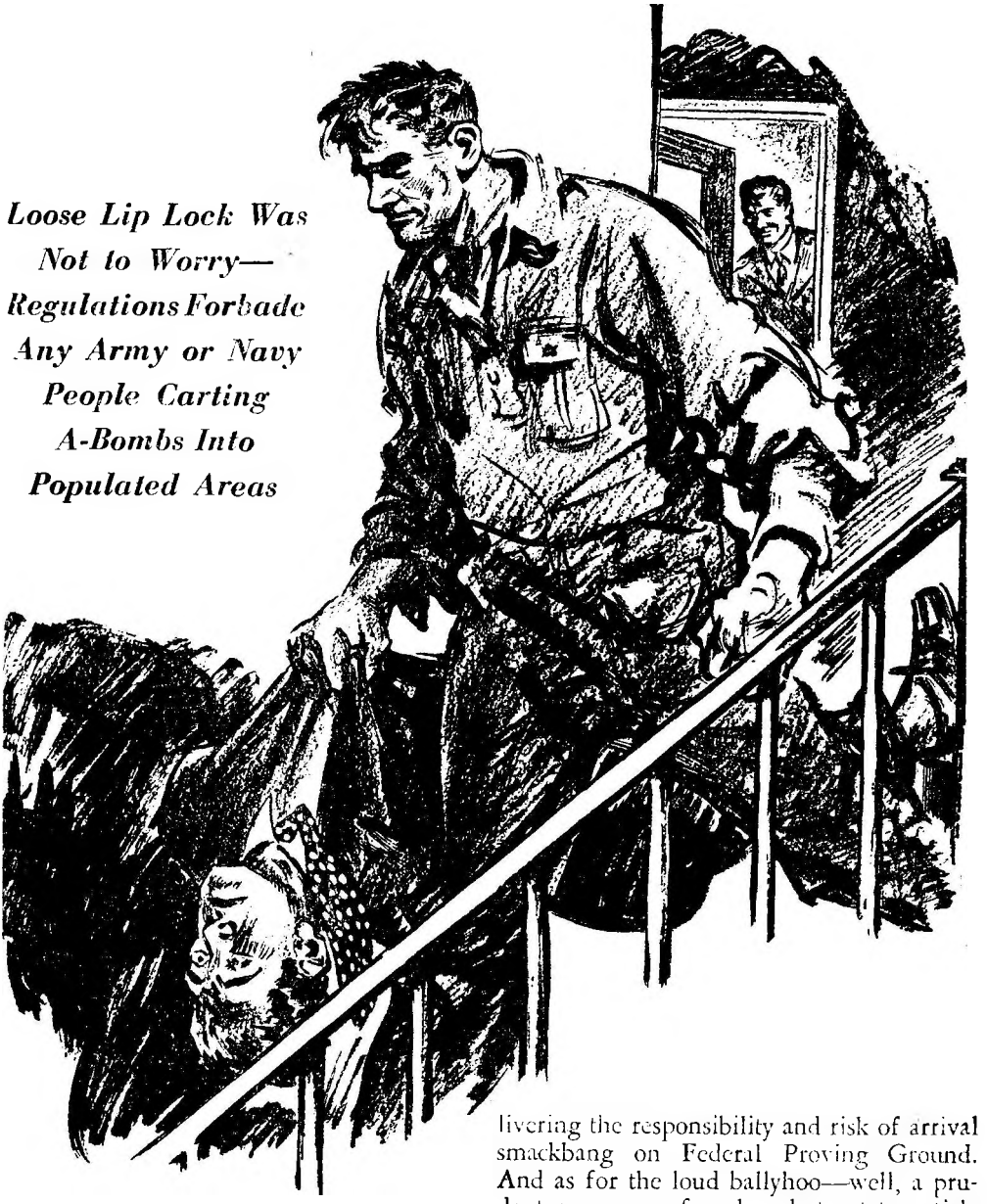
Author of "Then You'll Fly Them Home," etc.

I

MR. LOOSE LIP LOCK, Federal Proving Ground's ace aircraft mac, said he'd be a dirty name if the aircraft guys didn't name their jet jobs right. "Shootin' Star, Airocomet, Fireball," he repeated for the benefit of the noon-hour loungers atop the long workbench in the rear of Aviation Section's mighty main test hangar, "an' now we get this Madden Meteor. All them things wind up by crossin' the sky in a hurry an' burnin' themselves into the ground. . . . Gee, ya don't think the factory guys've gone into the true confession business, do ya?"

It would seem so, for the jet propelled products had been running into very bad luck. There was even talk going the semi-official rounds to the effect that Uncle Sam's air departments were all set to go thumbs down on anything that tried to backfire its way through space. But now, as noted by Loose Lip's habitual running off at the mouth, the Madden factory had managed to get this last-word Madden Meteor under the wire, and in for test and hoped-for acceptance by Army Air Forces. What's more, the Madden people had sent its latest product east with a publicity buildup reminiscent of the late war days wherein Uncle Sam paid for all such grandiose ballyhoo under cost-plus agreement—cost plus everything that could be loaded onto a plane short of flattening it into the ground. On the heels of the buildup—the Mercuric winged heels thereof—the Madden folks had shot their new Meteor planes coast to coast for delivery. Planes, plural, for Proving Ground had re-

Loose Lip Lock Was Not to Worry— Regulations Forbade Any Army or Navy People Carting A-Bombs Into Populated Areas



turned strictly to prewar test requirements. One of each model submitted must be broken down—or smashed up—in Stress Lab, while new model No. 2 was to be test hopped. Said test flying, of course, being contingent upon the Stress Lab's satisfaction with the breakdown of its first victim.

Anyway, both the coast-to-coast hops and the publicity bellow were out of the usual. As a rule, a manufacturer is satisfied to send his pair of submissions in crates—thus delivering the responsibility and risk of arrival smackbang on Federal Proving Ground. And as for the loud ballyhoo—well, a prudent purveyor of such a hot-potato article like a jet job usually held up his cheering until he was certain he had something to cheer about. But Madden Aircraft, war-born on the very edge of Hollywood, was neither prudent nor self-submerging. Perhaps Madden was putting Air Forces and Proving Ground on a spot. Perhaps they were saying, *Here, we build 'em. Now let's see you fly 'em, and don't tell us that you're afraid to go along with aviation advancement. A jet job's all right. The jet job's safe. We know. We*

build 'em and sell 'em. So don't stand there, soldier!

THE Madden people, in turning out this Meteor job, had done themselves proud in some things. For instance, they had tossed aside the craving for aeronautical lightness, adding hundreds of pounds in an honest effort toward securing fire-proofed safety for both craft and crew. And all that ship weight saved because of a jets' lack of heavy propeller, heavy radiator, heavy oil-cooling system, supercharger and other controls, had been put back into this new model in an asbestos-fiberglass housing which, in turn, covered the regular super-hot jet-engine housing. Of course, that rough-looking asbestos-fiberglass housing was itself sheathed from view by the ship's slick, greased-lightning duralumin skin. And now, as Loose Lip Lock and workbench-sitting mates studied the model waiting for Test Hangar okay, the long asbestos-fiberglass housing was in full view, the easily removed outer skin having been taken off for closer inspection and study.

"Damned if it don't look like them ads you see in the magazines—*this pipe was under London for 150 years,*" Loose Lip said.

Streeter, the long-time top man in Parachute Shop, said, "Lock, you loud wahoo, you're just sore because these new-fangled jet things're gonna put you old-style motor macs outa work. Within five years, Lip, there won't be a reciprocating engine left in this man's air corps."

"You read the same magazines that I look at the picters in, Street'," Loose Lip said. "These dang things is just a flash in the fan, here today an' call the crash wagon tomorrow."

"They're hot, and no mistake," old Streeter agreed. "But if it wasn't for that ball-of-fire complex, you'd have the world by the tail. Look at that layout—one moving part, just that center shaft, and nothing else."

"Yeah, except for what the pilot can stop movin' by eatin' lotsa cheese," Loose Lip agreed, or disagreed. "An' you'd move somethin' too, Street' old silk worm, if you had to ride these hot-shot rockets like us air guys do."

"Us air guys!" old Streeter repeated. "Why, you loud wahoo you, I was with the Wrights when everybody else said they were wrong. I was with Glen Curtiss before he first met Jenny, back when pilots argued that no plane could ever fly a right turn. And I was a flyin' mac with Farnham Fish when good guys like him were willing to bet a right arm that you'd never catch them flying higher than three hundred feet above ground. I've seen it come up, Lip; and all the way. So when I tell you greaseballs that the old hot-pot engine is on the way out, you can take it from a guy that knows."

"That's right—flare up at that low boilin' point of yours!" Loose Lip snapped. "You've been around, Street', an' you're all right in your place. But your place is up amongst the cobwebs in your chute loft. So get back to your dusty rafters an' let a big-shot airplane guy like me tell these open-mouth yakles what they should know about wings. Now like I was sayin', students—these jet jobs is all named right. Shootin' Star. Fireball. Fallin' Torch. Spent Roman Candle. Madden Meteor. Devil's Own an' Hell's Special."

Fats McCully, Motor Shop's questionable contact out in Test Hangar, perhaps fearing the loss of a job in the event Streeter was right, said, "Loose Lip's got the dope. These jet-job sky squirts don't worry us reciprocating engine guys a-tall."

"Where do you get that stuff, Fats!" Loose Lip demanded. "You—a recip, rec—you a infernal combustion guy! Say, you couldn't figure out the firin' order of a one-lung kicker. Man, oh man, you should be all for these jet engines. Just a compressor, a turbine, one shaft an' a ring o' fool-proof combustion chambers. Nothin' that a guy with ten thumbs an' no brain can mess up. Yes, sir, Fats, these things are your dish. Another thing—don't ever let me hear you sayin' I'm right, 'cause if you say so, Fats, I know surer'n hell I must be wrong. An' I'd hate to think that Air Forces' best civilian mac could be even half wrong—even if Street' here was in right with the wrong Wright brother."

II

COL. CALL, chief of test, came down from his loft office just after the crews had returned to the after-lunch tasks; and

he located his chief mechanic, Slim Rand, and Star Mac Loose Lip Lock right where he knew he'd find them—buzzing around that Madden Meteor. Of course, Col. Call realized that both Rand and Loose Lip hated the very guts of any jet job—about as much as a three-year-old kid hates a new red toy.

COL. CALL said, "Slim, I guess you can start getting this Madden Madcap ready to do it. Stress Lab tells me they're going to okay their end of the deal."

"Well, we knew that," Chief Mac Rand said. "Any dam'fool builder can turn out a structural job that will pass Stress Lab. Sure they can. And why not? They don't have to fly 'em.

"But what the hell! She's yours, Lock," Slim Rand then added, meaning that he had placed the new job under Loose Lip's service care. "I suppose you want it?"

"Sure. I took that for granite," Loose Lip enthused. "It's like I was tellin' ol' Street' durin' noon rest. I sez these new high-class jet jobs're the goods, an' they rate the best danged mac on the reservation, an' if my ol' gent was here, he'd tell you that I'm talkin' about me. Modest as I am.

"Okay, Slim. I'll put my crew on it right away, an' we'll rebuild it from the ground up. Damned if we won't make it look like somethin' that's been under Washington, D. C. hell'n'gone longer than any of them other pipes've been under London.

"Hey, Mac—Johnnie-boy—Shanks"—all this to the three handiest of his crewmen—"come over here and take over on this new short-fuse Madden time-bomb. First thing off the bat, grab Fats McCully by the heels an' yank him outa that escape nozzle. Go ahead, yank him out! That's a order, gang! Yank!

"Look, Fats. You keep outa this job. What are you tryin' to do—sab'tage the danged job before I have a chanct to get it through test? Anyway, they's nothin' inside that engine, from the intake mouth to the escape nozzle that you can understand."

Fats McCully, thus summarily drawn heels-first from the barrel-round rear nozzle via breech delivery, regained his feet and voice only to find himself facing a grinning Col. Call, plus a few others who happened to stop long enough to witness the Lock-inspired horseplay. Fats told Loose Lip a few things, but the telling was more or less subdued.

"Fats," Loose Lip told Call and the others, "is just a kid at heart. When he sees a big sewer pipe like that, that's been under the city for a hundred-fifty years, he can't help crawlin' through it. Wouldn't it be a hell of a note, gents, if a pilot got this ship up in the air an' heard a noise like a plug bein' pulled outa a bathtub, then looked back only to see old Fats bein' blowed outa that exhaust nozzle? Motor Shop loses more snoops that way!"

The Madden Meteor, having just the one jet-propulsion unit, had that power plant in the aft section of its large, long fuselage, with the oversize round exhaust nozzle directly below the high rudder. The ship, generally speaking, was outsized in just about everything. To begin with, the dope stencilled on its side cowling told you that it had a gross weight of 20,000 pounds, a wingspan of 95 feet, a length of 69 feet, and a height of 19 feet. That's a big ship, big as the average conventional two-engined job. But the Madden Meteor was designed for a big purpose: it was to be Uncle Sam's first A-bomb carrier. And Air Forces' stipulated requirements for such a ship demanded that the craft be able to carry said atomic cargo high, far and fast. The dope on the side cowling didn't give the fuel capacity; but the fact that the bottom fuselage and both wing butts—and thick wings they were—had nothing but tanks for packing, told the casual observer that the job should be able to hop from here to there. With "here" being any east or west coast airdrome, and "there" being any other place, such as Berlin, Madrid, Tokyo or Moscow. As for gun positions, she had them too, but not in the usual profusion. Evidently, this ship's purpose wasn't to fight its way out, but to dart its way in.

Because there was so much weight of propulsion unit over and aft of the main wing bay, the Madden Meteor had been fitted out with an extra long cabin nose. In that nose were the pilots' seats, the operations rooms—navigator, radio and radar men—plus tight sleeping quarters for a half dozen. The whole works, including the engine room aft, was pressurized for altitude work. And the Madden ballyhoo said she could look down on all those other wartime jobs which

had called 45,000 feet high. Neither Army Air Forces nor Madden gave the actual top ceiling. Nor did they make public the speed, though their nationwide publicity did sniff a bit at the reputed "more than 550 miles per hour" claimed for the P-80 Shooting Star.

The Meteor's bomb bay was long but not large; and the greater part of that space was, as Streeter told the gang, reserved for his department. That is, on either side of the long narrow bomb bay there were racks, not the usual bomb racks but a setup of simple Streeter-made frames devised to contain—and in turn free—the two super parachutes that are used to float an A-bomb down to its predetermined just-so-high-above-target explosion point.

"It's a dirty shame," old Streeter had often said—"this thing of destroying all that swell silk yardage just to knock out a few million buckteeth. That's what I told Procurement long before Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I wrote MacArthur a personal letter an' told him to bill the Bank of Japan for those four chutes. I'm still waiting to hear from the general."

III

DURING the next few days, old Streeter continued to wait to hear from the general. At the same time, Loose Lip and his crew made all the necessary moves required to put an okay-for-flight sign on the Madden Meteor. And the regular test activities of the big hangar flowed right along. Then, as expected, Stress Lab figured up its score sheet and gave the new jet product a clean bill of health, thus passing the patient along, officially, to Test Section.

Now when those two Madden jobs came eastward via the airways route, a full dozen Madden factory gentlemen had ridden the ferry. There were engineers, mechanics, publicity department and public-relations men. Up till now, this Madden group had spent most of its time between Stress Lab, Headquarters and the best bars over in Proving Ground's semi-official town of Liberty. Rumor said that the Madden men had worked wonders in all three ports of call. But with the project out of Stress Lab hands, and nudged along into Test Section, the Madden boys moved over. Right away, they began to bother hell out of Col. Call and his hard-working staff of flying gents—pilots, observers and flying macs. And as a rule, that loft crew is pretty hard-boiled. They think that any guy without motor-ring in his ears is a foreigner; and as for dressed-up guys with no gasoline smell to 'em—well, what the hell are they doin' up here in the rafters?

It would perhaps be unfair to say that the Madden group suggested an application of moneyed pressure, but it's not to be denied that the publicity and public-relations gents—bearing the trademark "Madden"—were not slow to parade the fact that plenty of that old cost-plus stuff had collected where it could still do a lot of good for the right airmen. Perhaps for FPG test pilots.

Well, that mazuma bait wasn't new in Aviation Section on Federal Proving Ground; because anybody there could tell you—and Col. Call still remembered—that one of our biggest factories had sold a model even after said new model had killed the section's best test pilot. And that was the thing the loftmen were fighting in their own way, so the Madden group came a cropper even before they got well started. That is to say: one wave of their money and Col. Call & Co. saw red and began to bristle. There was friction from the moment the Madden men moved from Stress to Test.

PERHAPS the most offensive red flag in the Madden bad-weather-warning chest was Chief Test Pilot "Major" Piney Kellet. That is, Piney Kellet was chief test pilot for the Madden factory. Being chief test pilot, he was vice-president in charge of sales. That, for some reason still bewildering to the rank and file of airmen, being the usual manufacturer's arrangement. Three years before Uncle Sam went to war, this same "Major" Piney Kellet had been a buck lieutenant flying test right there on Federal. He hadn't been too popular. There was some talk about him getting a thumb in an acceptance pie. He had flown the test runs on the ship in that particular pie. The ship, a fighter job, turned out to be not so good. Somehow or other, Lieutenant Piney Kellet's request for separation from Air Corps was accepted with alacrity; and the loft hadn't missed him at all. But the war rush had built him big.

But now, having ferried one of the Mad-

den Meteors east to the old stamping ground, Piney Kellet was back, sitting very pretty, jovial as all-get-out, willing to forget and forgive, and happy to meet the few old hands still to be found there in test.

Piney, knowing the ropes in the old establishment, began swinging his weight just as soon as the word went up to Call's office to get that Madden jet job into work. What's more, the old publicity ballyhoo went into high again, and needless to say all the doings, past and present, of Major Piney Kellet, chief test pilot for Madden Aircraft Co., were finding their way onto the front pages of every worthwhile newspaper.

"Maybe," Loose Lip said to Col. Call, "our old friend Piney'll fly the test runs for you."

"Would that he could, and he'd be damned welcome," said Call, "for verily, Lockie, anything even remotely connected to our erstwhile associate stinketh to high heaven. I don't like the man, Lockie my friend. While he's running loose here in the hangar, I wish I was home in bed and that my brother was here. There's going to be some unpleasantness before we reach a yes or no on this assignment. I feel it in my bones."

"Me too," Loose Lip said. "But with me I thought it was just a ordinary headache. But when ol' Joe Faber begins cussin' in his beard—look out below."

"I saw the signs in Joe right away," Col. Call said. "And every time Piney Kellet's voice sounds off down below, Joe shuts the door to their room hard enough to knock it loose from its hinges. Joe had lots of trouble with Kellet."

JOE FABER, senior test-flight observer at Federal, like old Streeter, traces his thousands of air hours clear back to the dawn of aviation. Joe's hard man. Of course, there's only about five foot four of him, but the good Lord put it all in one chunk; and little Joe has always been willing to give odds-on that a good little man is just as good as a fair big man—just so long as the good little man knows enough to start whatever is due for a starting.

Way back when Buck Lieutenant Piney Kellet pulled that fast one, getting his thumb in the pie, Joe Faber had been senior test-flight observer. But Joe was sick when the final test runs were flown. Fact is, he was so sick that they had him out cold, down in the post hospital—for three days. And Joe always claimed that the only reason he was sick was because he made the mistake of having two or three drinks with Piney Kellet and two guys from the factory which turned out the ship that was in the pie where Piney got his big thumb. The ship had been okayed while Joe was incapacitated.

"Loose Lip," Joe Faber had told the loud star mac, on the day when the Madden Meteor first came into test hangar, "here's one first-class dam'fool who won't touch a drop of anything stronger than ninety-proof gasoline until this Madden job gets through all its runs. They tell me that the Kellet hee' flew this one in."

"That's right," Loose Lip said. "He was astin' for you, Joe. Yes, sir, Piney sez 'Where's that little rascal that used to hang around up in the observers' loft—is he still with you?'

" 'I guess you mean Peewee Faber,' Fats McCully tells him. 'Faber's the test-flight observers' mascot. Yeah, he's still here. The Boy Scouts tried to get him in their last draft, but they didn't have no luck. His ma wouldn't let him go.' "

"Loose Lip, you're a liar by the clock," Joe Faber said. "That fat tub of lard knows enough not to rag anybody higher than just you, an' I do mean you. Be seein' ya. And remind me to shoot Kellet on sight."

IV

OLD Parachute Shop Streeter and his crew were putting two outsized chute packs into the Madden Meteor's bomb bay—trying them just for size, as Streeter said—and attached to the chutes, and shackled in the regular bomb rack, was a mockup of something that didn't look at all like a conventional bomb. But, of course, there's really no reason why something that's to be slow-delivered by chute should have regular bomb contours. Anyway, the mockup was getting plenty of attention.

"So that's what the damned adam bomb looks like, eh?" Loose Lip remarked.

"I didn't say so," old Streeter answered. "If this here mockup had long silver handles, and was painted grave gray, I'd suspect that you was dead, Lip. But I see you're

still standing, and still gassing, so I guess you ain't."

"How heavy's that mockup?" Loose Lip asked, caring more for his snooping than for Streeter's ribbing.

"Who wants to know?" Streeter shot back. "You think you can worm military secrets outa me, Lip? Scram, bum."

That A-bomb mockup, for parachuting data, would be of the same actual weight as the atomic bomb of a like size; but, anyway, Loose Lip had been foiled. However, the onlookers were surprised to learn that the atomic bomb was neither small nor light. The long, casket-like object—with no long silver handles—must have had plenty of weight, for the chute packs bespoke a large spread of silk.

"You gonna have them chutes dropped, Street'?" Loose Lip asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" was the best he could get from old Streeter. "Why don't you get outa the way of men at work and crawl down under the pavement with the rest of those pipes that've been buried for 150 years?"

"We're all set to put the outside skin back on that old dug-up sewer pipe," Loose Lip made known, "an' if you chute guys know what's good for ya, ya'll have this inside work all washed up. Like ol' Piney Kellet was sayin' to me, onny this a.m.—'Mr. Lock,' he sez, 'me an' the boys from Madden Aircraft 're countin' on you to push this job through test. An' if ya cut a few corners—jus' cheat a little in the huddles—I'll make it worth your while for a few thousand smackers.'

"But all kiddin' aside, Street'," the big gabby mac then said, beginning to back down out of the cramped bomb bay, "we're ready to go when you are. The Madden people're beginnin' to put the whip on us. They're in a hurry."

"They should be," old Streeter said. "There's a pair of new Midland Aircraft jobs down on the receiving siding right now; and one of the brains in Final Assembly was telling me that those six Midland crates contain two jet jobs that'll shade this Madden Meteor forty ways from the center. Same type ship, too. And the Midland guys are shooting for the same contract."

"I know all about that—all about it," Loose Lip said. "I get around. I got spies in Final Assembly, an' in Headquarters. I'll tell ya somethin' else. The Consolidated people are due to ferry in two o' their own vision any day now. Damn tootin'—ol' Piney Kellet an' his Madden gang should be in a hurry. But ya know somethin', Street'?"

"Shoot," old Streeter said.

"Joe Faber's gonna drag his feet like hell on these runs, just wait an' see. Keep ya eye on that little guy. He's gonna go so slow that he'll print all his writin', dot all his i's and crost all his t's. They's gonna be some fur fryin' on this ol' provin' ground or my name ain't Mr. Chief Ace Star U. S. Air Mechanic Lock, First Class."

"First Class my eye!" said Streeter to the broad back of the departing Loose Lip. "You couldn't figure out the firing order of a lawn sprinkler, you supercharged wahoo you."

JOE FABER began to move his test instruments into the Madden Meteor just as Streeter and his crew were winding up their bomb bay tasks. Being senior test-flight observer, it was up to little Joe to make all assignments for his instrument-reading, flight-data-grabbing associates. And when test runs came along fraught with TNT potentialities—such as jet jobs—Joe Faber never failed to assign one Joe Faber to the task. It wasn't that Joe was an air hog. Good Lord, he'd been in the game too long for that; and didn't he have a wife and four kids over in West Liberty?

Hal Vane, the loft's next ranking observer, was helping Joe decorate the tree. That is, they were putting instruments here and there, inside and out, from snout to rudder, and from wingtip to wingtip. For the most part, Joe and Hal taped those instruments in place here and there—air-speed recording venturi tubes at the intakes, along the ship in the slipstream, out on the wings in the "normal flight" flow, and even back at the exhaust nozzle. And there were recording thermometers just about everywhere Joe and Hal Vane could find a spot to hang such an ornament. Most of all, Test wanted to know how much heat was geing generated by that kerosene-burning devil. How much heat in the combustion chambers themselves, how much in the compressor, how much outside the first shell, and, most of all, how much heat was getting beyond that hard-

looking pipe that had spent so many years under the streets of London.

Hal Vane, being next to Joe in seniority, must know where each instrument was placed, this in the event of Joe Faber being unable to fly any assigned test run. In such an event, of course, Hal Vane would take over.

It all took time. And Loose Lip lit up most of the Faber-installed Christmas ornaments when Joe asked him to remove that outer dural skin so that more thermo tubes could be poked in along the hard-looking asbestos-fiberglass casing.

"Gee, Joe," Loose Lip finally said, "I don't mind doin' things for you loft lice, but the minute I uncover any part of this crock, Fats McCully crawls in an' gets hisself lost. Here he comes now—see the fat son o' Satan comin' the minute I get set to pull off this housing!"

"Fats' the best dam' motor mac on the reservation," Joe Faber said. "You're just sore because you can't shake all over when you walk. Another thing—Fats is tops with the Kellet heel.

"How about that, Fats? Didn't I see you going into the chief engineer's office with Kellet?"

"Yeah, you did," Fats McCully admitted. "So what?"

"Nothing," Joe said, beginning to work a long thermo tube in along the asbestos-fiberglass shell. "But you'll never get to first with the chief, or get any place here on Federal, as long as the Lip here is putting knives in your broad back—the upper part of your broad back."

"That's what you think, but, by hell, you hit pay dirt that time, Faber. Me and Major Kellet was in the chief's registering a kick. Lock and the rest of these hangar greaseballs're all done giving us Motor Shop contact men the brush. Major Kellet knows the score, and he's with me all the way. We're going to get some action on this job. That's what Major Kellet was sore about most—the way Test is walking the dog. Call's office'll hear from the chief."

"Whew, you hear that, Loose Lip?" Joe asked. "Fats is going to take over where you should've started but stopped."

"Never mind that line," Fats said, "but, by hell, Kellet says that I'm going to go right along, step by step, on everything where this power unit figures in—now what's them tubes for, Faber?"

"Sh-h-h, Fats!" Joe shushed. "We're piping in hard liquor for the gremlins that live in these jet housings and blow the dam' things skyhigh. If we can get the little devils drunk enough, they might forget their dirty work, fall down and fail to blow the flight crew into the next world."

"And that's another thing," Fats McCully chimed in. "Lock, Major Kellet and the chief agree that I should ride some of the test runs on this job."

"Fat chance! Fat chance, Fats!" Loose Lip said. "Us test hangar guys'll handle all the air work. You just stick to your mittflopping. So Kellet wants more action, eh?

"Come on, Faber. You too, Hal. You're holdin' up one first-class heel. An' ol' tub o' lard here wants a ride!"

V

WHILE Joe Faber took his own good time about installing his many recording devices, the big test hangar clanked and hummed in its usual way. Jobs came and jobs went, and they were, as a general thing, just run-o'-field ships. Not so however when a tow truck came up the wide apron dragging a ship which was very well known—and may be long remembered—to Test, and especially by Col. Call and Loose Lip Lock. It was the British-made "Stingray," that all-wood, two-unit jet job in which Call and Loose Lip had made a firy test hop hardly three months before. Loose Lip, fighting fire aft in the bomb bay while Call flew the torch to a good landing, had been pretty badly burned, winning himself a stay in the post hospital. And now, after weeks in Rebuild and Conversion Shop, the ship was being returned to Test. Loose Lip and Col. Call were at the foot of the loft stairs when the tow-truck driver nosed his briefed bus in close and politely yelled, "Where t'hell do you guys want this cull spotted?"

"Well I'll be a dirty name! It's the ol' Stingaree!" Loose Lip exclaimed. "What say for a hop, Cap? Let's get hot."

"Don't be too hard on the old Stingray," Col. (the erstwhile "Cap") Call said. "She's a good ship, as jet jobs go. It wasn't her fault that we came down in the red. And now, with those fuel tanks moved out of her

mid-section cabin, as per suggestion of Mr. Lock, she should be a very good job. We'll give her another try as soon as I get time, maybe later this week."

CHIEF MAC SLIM RAND walked out on the apron and, in turn, politely yelled, "Pull ahead onto that ready apron, Chief Big Wind. Come on ahead. Not too fast. Jake! Unhook an' get t'hell back to your cage."

While the tow-truck driver was lifting his padded hooks off the Stingray's landing-wheel fittings, a party of six well-dressed gentlemen, led by a field guide, strolled up the apron and came to a stand under and around the Stingray. The lecturing guide began to explain a jet job to the well-dressed group.

Col. Espy, officer in charge of Photographic Lab, came down the line from the general direction of Visiting Ships hangar. He spotted somebody in the sightseeing group and stopped to shake hands. Then he seemed to spot a second person known to him, so he pumped a second hand. Watching, Col. Call and Loose Lip guessed that Col. Espy had discovered former acquaintances, perhaps in his own line of work.

"Must be more Hollywood gents," Loose Lip surmised. "Sure they are. Look at the way them babies're dolled up. Beautiful! If I ever have to live it over again, Cap, it's Hollywood for me. Look at them duds! Tell you what, them's glam-mer guys, an' no dam' foolin'."

When Col. Espy said his good-byes to the touring group, he caught sight of Col. Call, gave him a wave, then decided to come into the hangar and loaf a bit. Espy, one of Hollywood's camera aces, had been borrowed from Moviedom by Air Forces early in the war. And now, as he told all and sundry, he was just waiting for his extradition papers to come through so's he could kiss the East good-bye and return to heaven.

"Them some of your Hollywood sidekicks, Colonel?" Loose Lip asked.

"Why yes. How did you know?" the naive camera colonel asked.

"How did I know!" the bluff Loose Lip exclaimed. "Do guys develop that beautiful any place else but Hollywood? They gonna shoot a picter here on Federal?"

"No, nothing like that," Col. Espy answered. "They're not that kind of Hollywood men, Lock. They're top-bracket men, high pressure, too. Executives. Managerial whizzes."

"No! Not mystery men?" Loose Lip asked.

"You're not far wrong," Col. Espy said, in a low voice.

"Come on, you're neck-deep in friends, Colonel," Loose Lip guaranteed. "Let's have it. If they don't make picters what do we want with 'em here on Federal?"

"Maybe plenty," Espy stated. "You men have heard this talk about the Crosby Research Foundation's work on the atom bomb, and in particular the defense against the A-bomb?"

"Sure. All hog-wash," Loose Lip exploded. "Just dear old Hollywood tryin' to horn in on some cheap publicity."

"Hush yore mouf, Lockie. Let's hear Col. Espy," Col. Call suggested. "Go ahead, Col. Espy. I'm all ears."

"Well, these men are here representing the Foundation. I understand that they're going to give a practical demonstration of their claims," Espy said.

"Ya mean to say they're here to explode some of them dam' adam bombs by remote control — here on Federal?" Loose Lip yelped.

"No, not exactly," Col. Espy said. "You see, Lock, the Crosby people claim that they can activate the detonator, via long-range impulse, and explode the atom bomb. So the demonstration to be put on here at Federal Proving Grounds will just consist of proving that the detonator can be put in operation. You know, there is no explosive element in the atomic bomb's detonator itself."

"I don't know, much as I hate to admit that they's anything I don't savvy," Loose Lip admitted, and apologized, "but here's hoping you're right. I'd hate to have this ol' stampin' ground blowed hell'n'gone off the map."

"Good Lord, you don't need to worry, Lock," Col. Espy promised Loose Lip. "I have a great many contacts with the men in Chemical Warfare, and they tell me that strict regulations provide that no atom bomb shall ever leave the desert areas—out in Arizona and eastern Washington—except in the case of war. You'll never find any of

our army or navy people carting A-bombs into populated areas such as this eastern seaboard."

"Good. Then I can go back to my workbench and sleep in peace," Loose Lip said. "You took a big weight off me shoulders."

"Glad to unload you—eh, I mean glad to be of any service toward restful enlightenment," the colonel said. "But don't worry, you'll never even see an A-bomb on this post."

"What do ya mean, never even see one!" Loose Lip said. "Just step over here an' do a maidenly stoop an' squat under this Madden Meteor's open bomb bay doors. Here, come way under. Is that a A-bomb or is it a A-bomb?"

Stooping, sitting on his heels under the open bomb bay doors, Col. Espy studied the long something just above his head. He laughed appreciatively and said, "A test mockup, eh? Man, you could fool me. That's a nice piece of workmanship. You know, some of our best Hollywood set builders are doing mockup work all over the country for Army and Navy. Look at the detail on this piece of work!"

"Detail is right," said a new voice, that of old Streeter. He was back in the hangar on some piece of business or other; and he'd stopped to stoop, squint and gab. "That isn't regular Federal Proving Ground mockup work, Colonel. We got this one by express, shipped east from one of them desert arsenals where they store this atom hell. Yes, sir, it cost your old Uncle Sam a small fortune to put all that exact detail on a mockup that might get itself bounced to pieces when these chutes hit the ground."

AGAIN, Col. Espy said, "Yes, it could fool me. And I should be hard to fool, for I've seen the real thing. That's right. I was flown west to photograph the first A-bomb produced, for the official Air Forces archives. Needless to say, I wasn't told what I was photographing; but I got a rough idea when that first one fell on Japan. Well, Lock, you can tell the boys in the back room that you've seen an A-bomb, or a reasonable facsimile thereof; and if anybody calls you a liar, well just tear off his top and refer him to me. Say, I'm going to get away from here—this damned mockup is real enough to go off. See you men later!"

VI

COL. CALL, like the head test pilot for an aircraft firm, had acquired a high-falutin' title when he first took over in the loft office. No, he wasn't dubbed "Vice-President in Charge of Sales," or anything like that. But he became, as per official Air Forces procedure, Chief Test Pilot Call. Holding that high office and title, a man could either dog it or fly it. Call chose to go right on flying 'em. Like Joe Faber, Chief Call usually made the first hops on any new type plane which—on paper or to the eye—seemed to offer signs of flying danger; and this despite the fact that he was a now-graying product of World War I.

So Call was holding down the pilot's seat when the Madden Meteor blew itself free of the main runway on its first test hop. Young Major Silver, one of those 8th Air Corps boys with a chestful of hard-won decorations, was in the co-pilot's spot. Loose Lip was aboard either through force of habit or because Call didn't mind the added weight of a flight engineer. Joe Faber was the little guy with a pocketful of pencil stubs guaranteed to write when high in the sky, and absolutely no danger of 'em leaking lead. Fats McCully had made his bid for a place in the crew, but Call brushed him off by saying that this was just a shake-down hop, and the fewer men, the better.

The job got off that runway like a goat with a can tied to its tail getting away from something it can't understand; and Col. Call turned to Loose Lip and Joe with, "What did you men say about Major Kellet's offering? Why, gentlemen, this ship's something! Wow. Now where were we? Where's that airstrip we just left? Oh, my gosh, you men better get set to eat crow."

"Give it time to warm up," Joe sang out. "Give it time to reach the fusing point. And it won't be long now. These thermos are beginning to show their red blushes already. My guess is that she's just one more jet problem. And by hell, I hope so."

Well, that first test run, as Call had intended, was just a shake-down cruise. Nothing much was proven, either for or against the Madden product. Call and Major Silver agreed that the craft handled nicely, with the comfort and maneuverability pe-

culiar to jet jobs. Loose Lip had to admit that the job smelled all right to him, for a flying mac assumes that everything's jake just so long as he can't smell too-hot oil, over-hot metal and other warning signs that arrive via nose. As for Joe Faber, he didn't have anything to say, perhaps being disappointed because the job had failed to blow up in his face.

When Col. Call set it down and came back to a stop on the apron afront Test, Major Kellet and half a dozen of his Madden men were waiting. Col. Call unloaded first, then Major Silver.

"Well, Call," Major Kellet asked, "what do you say—is it a good job?"

"I wouldn't know, Major," the chief of test said. "She took off. She flew. She landed. She'll do all three, again and again, during the next several days."

"Hell, man. Not too many days, we hope," Kellet said.

Joe Faber, overwhelmingly encumbered by his observation impedimenta, was backing down the steep ship ladder; and Kellet had the bad judgment to ask a question of Joe at such a time.

He asked, "How about it, Faber—what do you think?"

"I think it's on my shoe," Joe said, lifting one foot at a time and taking a look. "No it ain't. It's the ship. Kellet, she stinks." And having said that, little Joe brushed right past Kellet and headed for his loft office.

FIRST thing next morning, Col. Call and the same test crew were ready to give the Madden Meteor another hop. Major Kellet was on hand bright and early.

"Mind if I ride along, Colonel?" he asked Call.

Call, just ready to climb aboard, said, "Well, er, Major Kellet, I make it a point never to hop civilians on official test flights."

"There's no regulation against it, is there?" Kellet asked.

"No, but it isn't usual. But I'm going to put her nose down a few times on this hop, just to see how she'll take the dive, so I'd prefer not to have the responsibility of a civilian aboard."

"But the risk'll be mine," Kellet pressed. "I see no good reason why my request isn't in order."

"I do," Col. Call said. "I think it would look bad for the factory representative of a ship to be aboard while that ship is making its bid for acceptance. It isn't being done. Why, do you know, Major, that some of the better aircraft producers lean far backward in their efforts to keep their personnel away from Federal while any of their offerings are in work here?"

"That's *some of the better producers?*" Kellet repeated. "Meaning, I take it, that some manufacturers are better than others, as seen by you gentlemen here in Test? Sort of a preferred list."

"That's it," Col. Call agreed. "They're preferred to hold themselves apart while the ship's in this hangar, thus avoiding any hint, rumor or danger or undue unethical pressure leading to the acceptance of the craft in question. I think you understand our position, Major."

"I think I do," Kellet agreed. "By the way—how far do you intend diving this job?"

"Not too far, Major. Not too far."

"You and I know that a test crew can dive the wings off any job—even off the product of one of the 'better' producers," Major Kellet said, "and that, of course, would terminate the bright future of any ship."

"And in a tight hermetically sealed cabin such as this, it would terminate the dull future of the crew too," Call reminded Kellet.

"A case of: If the stop don't get you, the claustrophobia must. The whole thing sort of cramps a man's style, Major."

"That's right, Colonel. If a man will stand for the cramping. I've got to look into it and see what the cure is for claustrophobia. There must be a cure, even here on Federal Proving Ground. But thanks, anyway, for the courtesy hop I didn't get."

"Don't mention it," Call said, stepping through the oval hatch. "Close 'er up, Lockie.

"All set, Joe? You too, Major Silver? Let's go—before the major blows a fuse."

"You told him off, Cap," Loose Lip enthused. "But that dam' Kellet snake won't be dead till long after sunset. That guy's gonna do lotsa wigglin', an' most of it'll be close to Headquarters. Money talks, ya know."

VII

FOR a full day, the Madden men could be listed among the things hard to find on Federal. For some reason or other, Major Piney Kellet and his affluent playmates seemed to have lost all interest in test-hangar doings. But not for long. They had just moved into town—gone into print. That is, into even more print than they had hitherto inspired. What's more, the new publicity was inspired stuff, fraught with dire warnings lest the procurement methods of Uncle Sam's aviation agencies suffer a dramatic, dangerous letdown. And, according to the printed matter, it seemed as though the great test department on the great Federal Proving Ground wasn't as great as Mr. John Taxpayer had a right to suppose it was.

That's the stuff that crowds its way right into any Headquarters and sits down hard in the commanding officer's lap. Neither Army nor Navy can take it. Past record warns them that there's never been a case wherein the military won out over a money-backed publicity campaign. And when Mr. Money begins shouting that the military is wrong, all the big boys in Washington read what is writ and act according to form. The form being Mr. Money's.

Three or four days of routine test runs went by, and old Streeter was the guy causing all the trouble now. He wanted to know when—for Pete's sake—they were going to drop that A-bomb mockup.

He went up into Call's loft office for the umpteen time to ask *when?*

"Keep your shirt on, Old Timer," the chief of test begged. "As I told you yesterday—and the day before—I've got to hold it up until those Chemical Warfare observers arrive from New Mexico. They're some of the brains who worked on the development; and they want to see how she chutes to earth. Anyway, I'm saving you and your crew a lot of work."

"How come?" Streeter asked.

"You can figure that one out," Call said. "You'd have to install the whole works again for our 'military load' runs."

"I'd lead-bag 'er to that weight," Streeter said.

"Yeah," Col. Call agreed. "But it's just as easy to leave the chutes and the mockup where they are till we make the 'military load' runs. Then we'll drop it for you. Danged if you're not like a kid at the county fair, Street'—always wanting to see the parachutes open."

"They better open," old Streeter said, "'cause that's when I get hell, when they don't open. Just like you're catchin' your share of holy hell now from the wise guys in the papers. How come, Cap?"

"Don't you know? We're up against the Madden money. We have Major Kellet on our tail."

"That lug!" old Streeter mumbled. "Say, come to think of it, I just saw that phony, the chief engineer and two-three other guys going into the commanding officer's office. And this Motor Shop mistake—this Fats McCully that's always in the Lip's hair—he was waddling along behind. Where does that ton o' shale cut in on the Kellet deal?"

"McCully doesn't count," Call said, reaching for a new stack of the flight reports that had piled up on his desk. "The big boy's just taken a fancy to Kellet, or to the evidences of great wealth. I suppose he thinks he can do some good for himself, in some way or other. Maybe he's just raising a lump on his chin, who knows?"

"Some day," Streeter mused, "old Loose Lip is gonna raise a lump on that lump that'll be bigger than the lump himself. He sure gets under the Lip's skin. I get me a big boot outa both of 'em."

"But you laugh *with,* not *at* our old friend Lock," Call was quick to remind Streeter.

On the morning that the Madden Meteor was due to start its "military load" runs, with all required arms and instruments in place, Loose Lip called the fuel truck early; and he had the ship waiting on the ready apron long before the test crew showed any signs of coming down from the loft. Other crews — pilots and test-flight observers — emerged from those high offices, clammered down the steep stairs, cussed all work in general, then went out to man their waiting assignments. After a long wait, Loose Lip guessed that Joe Faber, Cap. Call and Major Silver must be the only guys left up there among the rafters. So he thought he'd go up and see what was holding them there.

Loose Lip went into Col. Call's office, said, "Hy' ya, sweet stuff?" to one of the girls on duty there, then said, "She's all set to hop, Cap," to the chief of test.

Hardly had Call's door closed behind Loose Lip before Major Kellet and four of his Madden men arrived in the hangar. The major went up the steep stairs. He pushed open the door giving on the rear office—the observers' own private domain—and went in, slamming the door behind him.

About five minutes later, Loose Lip stopped chatting with Col. Call, half-turned to gaze at the wall between the two offices, and asked, "What's bust loose here—one of them dam' adam bombs!"

There was a devil of a racket coming through that wall—and clattering throughout the loft—seemingly emanating in the test-flight observers' stronghold. Then a door opened, something hit the floor, and the door slammed.

Call said, "Open the door, Lockie. Let's take a look."

Loose Lip did as ordered, then he stepped back, a wide grin on his face, and allowed Call a better view of the findings. The findings was the very quiet form of Major Kellet, supine on the between-doors landing platform, his eyes glazed and his face bloody.

"Well, I'll be— Oh, Joe!" Col. Call sang out. "Joe!"

Joe Faber jerked his door wide open, stepped out, biting down hard on his lower lip, stepped on Major Kellet, then came into Call's office rubbing the bleeding knuckles of his right mitt.

Down below, there were signs of confusion as Kellet's friends started for the stairs. Loose Lip stepped over to the top of the steep flight, held out the flat of his right hand, and said, "Right where you be, Madden men. We'll handle this end of the party. All right, step down. Down."

"What about it, Joe?" Loose Lip heard Call ask.

"The lousy heel came into my room with a proposition. I was alone in there," Joe Faber said.

"A proposition?" Col. Call asked.

"There was money mentioned, Cap," Joe said.

"The hell you tell! Oh, Lockie. Take it away," Call ordered.

Loose Lip reached down and grabbed the still out-cold Kellet by the slack of his clothes as gathered together across his chest by the great spread of the big mac's mighty right hand; and then Loose Lip started down those steep stairs—with Kellet's heels counting out the bare steps as they went. Slim Rand was at the foot of the stairs, sort of standing off the four surprised-looking Madden men. Slim stepped aside as Loose Lip reached the foot, gave his burden a final twisting hurl, and sent Kellet flopping and tumbling across the slick blue concrete toward his waiting mates. "Take it away on a shovel," Loose Lip said. "He ran into somethin', gents." Then Loose Lip swung on his heel and went back up the steep stairs three steps at a stride. He mustn't miss anything that might be in the making up there, not Mr. Loose Lip Lock!

VIII

SOME days, somehow or other, everything seems to pop at once. Col. Call had just cooled Joe Faber down, then persuaded him to take the bleeding right knuckles down to the post hospital, when the crash sirens began sounding off; and the tower phoned the loft that a test job had just gone down—seven or eight miles north of the reservation —trailing a streamer of black smoke.

Hardly had Call and Loose Lip started to wonder what job that might be when an outside call came through, via Aviation Section's own main switchboard, saying that somebody wanted to speak with Col. Call from Crescent Beach, sixty-odd miles south of Federal. Call said, "Put him on. . . . Hello. Yes, this is Test, Call speaking. . . . You what? . . . You did? . . . It is? Entirely out of sight, you say? . . . But what were you doing down there? Oh, you were? Just trying a low-altitude, full-power, straight-away run? . . . Well, hold everything and stand by till a salvage crew shows up. Goodbye."

"Another one in the drink, eh?" Loose Lip guessed. "Who?"

"Lieutenant Pierce," Call said. "He put that P-38 into the surf, about five miles below Crescent. The kid says it just happened. We've heard that one before. Well, Lockie me boy, it seems that you and I won't get in any air work this morning, and I don't need to tell you that delay will irk Major Kellet."

"Irk the jerk," Loose Lip said, strolling over toward the field-view windows of the

loft office. "Hey, somethin' else is bust loose. Everybody's runnin'. And there goes the meat-wagon and the fire truck. Yeah, there goes the crash siren again."

"Oh, by hell. Let's give up and go fishing," Call said.

The crash siren was still wailing when the phone rang again. Col. Call was wanted in the commanding officer's holy of holies.

"The carpet," Call said. "This could be it, and but quick, eh? Or do you think the major might be still asleep?"

"The guy won't stay copped," Loose Lip said. "You say that was the C. O.? Then I'll say good-bye to you, Old Timer. You was a swell boss while ya lasted. An' maybe you an' ol' Joe Faber can go out an' find work together. Somethin' congenial, like knockin' guys teeth down their throat. Won't you guys ever learn to keep your snout clean?"

Moving toward the door, Call said, "It's a mess, and I'm not kidding me, so you don't need to try. However, it's been one of the finest mornings in a devil of a long time. That was beautiful, Lockie. Kellet out cold. And little old Joe Faber stepping on him as he came into this office in response to my call. And you, my fine friend! The artistic manner in which you took him, so daintily, using just one hand, and *carried* him down those stairs, simply because I said 'Oh, Lockie. Take it away.'"

"Aw shucks, Cap," Loose Lip half-objected, "it was nothin'. I'd do that any time, for anybody. It was a pleasure. I'll bet that snake'll spend the next few days fangin' the splinters outa his butt. What I mean, he went over them rough splintery edges fast, but don't you go down to the C. O.'s office sayin' that I had any part in this drunken party. I got a certain high standin' to defend; an' everybody on Federal, from C. O. down to the lowest broom in Maintenance, looks to me for a good sample."

NATURALLY, there was a great hullabaloo in Aviation Section during the following few hours. The build up ballooned the affair far beyond its real size and importance. And in the big cafeteria, during the noon rush, they said that Col. Call had taken a poke at Major Kellet; that Kellet had tried to hang one on Col. Call, only to have Loose Lip Lock cold-cop him; that Loose Lip and Joe Faber had ganged Kellet; and, anyway, there'd be hell to pay.

Loose Lip, of course, shoved out his chest, said it was nothing, refused to give out any definite statement, but continued to hold himself available for anybody desiring to talk about the matter. He was evasive, reluctant to reach for the halo, but any keen onlooker could detect that he was the real hero of whatever had happened up there in the loft.

"You guys know how she shapes up," he said, over and over again, "a gent in my spot can't afford to shoot the breeze while the ol' official lid is on. 'Dumb's' the word. This thing, ya know, is likely to have reconcussions all the way to Washington. Sure I drug Kellet down them stairs, ankles over teakettle, but I don't want you guys sayin that I bopped the heel, unless, of course, you know what you're talkin' about. Oh, sure, sure, dam' right I've had reason enough to slug the guy. Yeah, that's right; Cap. Call looks to me to keep Test straight, an' Kellet's been gettin' in me hair ever sinst this Madden Meteor comes on the field. Okay, an' that's all, but don't tell everybody that I washed him out."

So noon came and went; then the afternoon session of test work made an honest effort to get back into the old groove, just as though nothing untoward had ever occurred to upset the usual clock-work routine of the big hangar.

At one-thirty, Miss Lane, one of the loft's records clerks, came to the rail at the head of the stairs and asked Loose Lip to come topside and help put her straight on some engine records that were in his handwriting.

"Them records got my X at the bottom?" he yelled up.

"Yes, Mr. Lock," Miss Lane answered, "and your official fingerprints too. Most of the figures are buried under the fingerprints. Don't you ever listen to those Wonderful-Ivory-Snow or Rinso-White songs on the radio?"

Loose Lip was still in the loft, taking his own good time about explaining engine records to the good-looking Miss Lane, when Col. Call returned to his desk. It was a grim, long-faced Call. He just glanced at Loose Lip and the girl, then sat chewing his lower lip and gazing at the blotter. Loose Lip gave Miss Lane the nudge and sent her

into the inner office, in behind the glass wall.

"No 'military load' runs today, eh Cap?" Loose Lip asked.

After a long pause, Call answered, "No, not today. And not for us—when they are made."

"No?" Loose Lip questioned. "You mean they went over your head, Cap?"

"Way over," Col. Call made known. "Hell'n gone over. I've been told off, politely, but told; and it hurt like hell. You can't beat money, Lockie. The C. O. and the top men in Engineering are all right, but they're all on loan either from Detroit or from the plane factories. Presently, within the next few months, they'll go back there. So they string along together. They scratch each other's backs—every time."

"Well, how bad is it?" Loose Lip asked.

"For the casual onlooker, not bad at all," Col. Call said. "But for you, Joe, the rest of the loft and myself, it's a beating. The C. O. politely suggested that I place the Madden Meteor in the hands of another test crew. Just to wash the slate clean, and get everything sweet and pure, the new crew is to start from scratch. Our past work goes out the window. See if Joe Faber's in the back office. Give him a call."

"He's gonna yell like hell," Loose Lip warned.

"Yes, he is," Call agreed. "Look. You and I might ease it to him by pretending that we're glad to be rid of the Madden job— Just a shake. What's this?"

For the next few minutes, while Loose Lip stood with his broad back to the door, Call read a memo that had been placed on his spike during his absence from the office.

"Say, this came just at the right time," Call enthused. "This should take Joe's mind off his troubles. See if he's there."

Joe Faber came in. He said, "I'm still sitting around waiting to get a call from Headquarters. Isn't it about time that Kellet heel got some action?"

"He's way ahead of you, Joe. He's had it," Call said.

"What did it get him?"

"Plenty. He got you and me out of the Madden ship, and I have orders to assign the runs to another crew," the chief said.

"So a lousy outsider can dictate here?" Joe asked. "All right, I'm through. I'll write it out and hand it in. Anyway, I've been here too long, and—"

"—and you'll stay a little longer," Call stated.

"The hell I will!" Joe Faber barked. "When I say I'm through, Chief, I mean I'm through. I always promised myself it would be that way. I've seen hundreds of good guys get the dirty end of the stick, here on Federal, and take it sitting down. Guess most of the poor workin' stiffs had to take it. But not me. I've saved my stuff, so has the woman, and we can tell 'em all where to get off. At least, for a little while. Goodbye, Cap. Take care of yourself, Lock, you loud son—"

FIRY Joe Faber had turned toward the door leading out, outward from a long, honorable, dangerous career. But Loose Lip's long and honorable—also dangerous—right arm had come up, and the hand thereof closed on the slack of the chest of Joe's flying jacket.

"Small stuff," the big mac said, "you're a good little man as good little men go, and ya can knock the teeth outa any fair big heel. But ya'll never be as good as a good big man like Old Man Lock's fine son. an' I'll slap ya ears down if ya don't hold everything an' listen to reason.

"Cap, tell him about that Operations memo—whatever it is."

"Now listen, Joe," Call argued; "are you going to let this Kellet send you down the road talking to yourself? He, and what he represents, has outsmarted us. The ship's out of our hands. But it isn't as though they were hanging a doubtful product on this test hangar. You yourself must admit that it is a better-than-usual job. So what? Well, as I see it, the whole thing is just a matter of bad blood between Kellet and the loft. We don't like the man."

"He stinks in seven different languages," Loose Lip said. "But the Cap's right, Joe. Sit down. Give a listen. Go ahead, Cap."

"A few days more, then Kellet and his gang will be gone," Call reminded Joe Faber.

"Till the next time," Joe said. "He'll be in here with more models. And another thing—if the ship is a good job, why did the ape try to reach me with money?"

"That's the big-shot complex," Call said.

"A man like Kellet would rather win a point via the dirt road than reach his object on the broad, clean highway. You see how it is. If he can go back to the Madden factory, tell them that he passed out a bit of wise money, and at the same time say that he got the ship past acceptance, well that will show that he knows all the ropes here at Federal. It will prove to Madden that their vice-president in charge of sales is on the job, worth his salary, and just the man to take care of future transactions. As I get it, this Madden is a heel too."

"No, she don't add up," Joe said, starting to his feet again. But Loose Lip made a move too. "We've lost everything if the hijackers can come up those stairs and tell us where we get off. And especially if the brass down in Headquarters backs 'em up—or do the dirty work for 'em."

"Ah, but there's the point," Call said. "There'll be a complete change of brass before long. They're changing every day. Six months from now, Joe, we'll be back to normal; and when that day returns, well gentlemen like Kellet will be in line for some mighty rude awakenings. So stick around, and maybe the day will soon come when you can take a poke at the major with impunity."

"Well," Joe Faber said, smiling for the first time, "I'll admit that it was a pleasure. I suppose a guy should be willing to make some little sacrifice for that—though they tell me that the loud wahoo here took all the credit down at the cafeteria at noon. But what's the biz on the Operations memo?"

"The patient," Col. Call kidded, "showed signs of growing interest. You may remove your foot from his chest, Lockie."

IX

"THIS Operations memo is a two-way joyride," Chief of Test Call said. "Some fun. First, Operations urges that we take all steps toward winding up the test runs on the old Stingray, the runs so suddenly terminated by the fireball ride that Lockie and I took last summer. Next, Operations suggest that we cooperate with the scientific gentlemen of the Crosby Research Foundation, and hold the Stingray ready for their anti-A-bomb experiments. I take it that it means the remote-control knocking out of the A-bomb detonator."

"Where's the fun in this?" Joe Faber asked.

"Why, Joe, you surprise me," Call said. "It is not only fun, but a high honor, to be thus identified with a world-shaking experiment early in the atomic age. Where's your romance?"

"Guess you're right," Joe agreed. "It is something, if we don't wind up detonated."

"No danger," Call assured Joe. "Lockie here, and myself, have had this explained to us. The A-bomb detonator, apart from the main element, has no explosive in it. Just a matter of electronic tubes, or some such damned juke box, and that's the part we'll carry aboard the Stingray. This Operations memo suggests the Stingray because being a jet-propelled job, the electro-activity influence will be reduced to a minimum. That is, there shouldn't be any possibility of the ship's own electrical gadgets influencing the activation of the detonator."

"And no fair tilting the ship, either," Loose Lip told the chief. "If the Crosby guys can't light 'er up, damned if we'll cheat an' help 'em hit the jackpot. When do we jump on this job, Cap?"

"Right now," Call said. "Joe, you turn over the Madden job to Hal. Tell him to do his job, avoid talking shop with the Madden men, and tend his own knitting. Then get your setup aboard the Stingray. We'll push that job through the rest of her runs. Meantime, I'll get in touch with Chemical Warfare and tell them that we're ready for the Crosby boys, say first thing in the morning.

"And as for you, Mr. Lock—say, do you ever do any work around here?"

"Me—no. I'm just here to pick up an' drag out what you guys set up an' knock down. I take it that I should go down an' make a check on the Stingray?"

"You do that," Call agreed. "And if you say the ship is ready to go, I'll know that it's ready to go, 'cause Old Man Lock's bright son—"

"—even though he ain't got much eddication," Loose Lip supplied, "—is the best—"

"—best so-an'-so engine-and-airplane mac on Federal Proving Ground."

"After Mr. Fats McCully," Joe supplied, moving through the door. "There's the boy

for my money. I'll bet Kellet has him sitting in the Lip's seat when the Meteor hops off next time."

CHIEF CALL assigned two hot young pilots just back from the Pacific to the Madden Meteor. Captain Handy in the left seat, and Lieutenant Gilroy as the co-pilot. The ship was still under Loose Lip for service and maintenance, so he told Bud Shanks to take his place as flight engineer. So when the next day's test work got under way, Loose Lip had the Madden Meteor all set out on the ready strip, just as though nothing had happened. Also, he had the Stingray right alongside, and likewise ready to go.

The Meteor's crew came out first; and Hal Vane, looking as sore as the very devil, was plainly carrying either a torch or a chip on his shoulder in behalf of Joe Faber. "I hope she blows her bloody brains out through the exhaust nozzle," he told Loose Lip as he clambered aboard. The two Pacific pilots, knowing little of Federal politics, were all hopped up over the prospects of putting a big jet job through its paces, so they went up into the cabin with plenty of youthful bounce.

Just as Captain Handy was giving Flight Engineer Bud Shanks the word to batten her down, Major Kellet—with a nose under wraps—came hurrying up the apron. He was waving a slip of paper.

"Just a moment, pilot!" he sang out. "I'm coming aboard with you."

"Just a minute yourself!" Loose Lip cut in. "Who sez you ride this job?"

"The chief of Operations, Colonel Martin, says so," the Madden Co. major told Loose Lip. "Take a look at this official flight permit—I assume you can read?"

"I'll make a try," Loose Lip answered, trying bravely to keep himself under control. He glanced at the flight permit. It was in order. Under his breath, he said, "You're in, Kellet. Say, on you them bandages look swell. You lousy lug."

Fats McCully then lumbered down from a Motor Shop jeep that had just stripped to a stop near the Meteor. "Oh, Major Kellet," he chirped. "I'll ride this hop with you if it's all right."

"All right with me, big feller," Kellet agreed.

"Oh, no, you don't. Not by a dam' sight, Fats. This ain't no Sunday-afternoon dollar-a-ride racket," Loose Lip objected. "You keep to hell outa my ship. Close 'er up, Bud!"

"But McCully is a test-hangar attaché," Kellet yelled. "He has a right to——"

"Wrong again, *Major* Kellet," Loose Lip emphasized. "This man mountain o' jello isn't even a guest in Test. An' by hell, no flight slipee, no ridee, an' he ain't got one. Hey, Cap Handy, you've got the Tower, you've got the green, get goin'. You're holdin' up the parade."

KELLET cussed, even above the first loud hum and whirr of the jet engine. Fats McCully cussed too. But the Madden Meteor was on its way out to the west end of the east-west runway. Loose Lip said, "You oversize screwball you, you're askin' for a nice sweet slap in the snoot. Don't you know guys get hurt when they start runnin' round with cheap-john crooks? How'd you like to have me spread ya beezer from ear to ear like I give Kellet?"

"That ain't the way I heard it, Loud Mouth," Fats McCully said. "But you've horned in once too often. I was supposed to ride that hop, and you'll be told, wise guy. You'll be told."

"Fat lot o' good that'll do anybody, Fats. Me, I'm to thick to savvy anything but what's on playin' blocks or in the funnies. Five minutes from now an' my moron brain will 've forgot that I set you down, an' you better forget too.

"Hey, pipe down, Fats. Who're these tourists? Oh, yeah, I know. It's the Hollywood gents. Yes, sir, this is something; an' here's where Ol' Man Lock's smart son goes out for fame."

THERE was a personnel bus rolling to its stop near the Stingray; and, at the same time, Col. Call and Joe Faber were coming out on the apron, along with Chief Mac Slim Rand. Col. Call made a few fast strides to meet and shake the hand of the first man to unload from the bus. Loose Lip's eyes popped when he spotted that man. It was Special Agent Ryder, the F.B.I. man who, somehow or other, always seemed to be somewhere on Federal when big doings popped. However, he hadn't been seen near

Test during several months. Stepping down directly behind Ryder, two other strangers, with F.B.I. written all over them, strolled apart a few paces on the wide apron and began studying everybody and everything.

"Glad to see you, Col. Call," Ryder said. "Still here, eh?"

"Just barely," Call answered. "Long time no see you. I take it you've been busy with high science?"

"I'm all but atomized," Ryder admitted; and then, lest he be pressed for further personal history, he turned to the matter of brief introductions. Two of the better-dressed gentlemen were introduced as representing the Crosby Foundation. Two others, older men and lacking the Hollywood brand, were presented to Call and Joe Faber as Professors Keen and Sparling. The latter, a little old gent with a moth-eaten goatee, merely nodded and grinned, for he was carrying a green cloth-covered boxlike burden very close to his chest. It was, without doubt, the A-bomb detonator.

Loose Lip chested his way into the group to say hello to Ryder. "Long time, Chief," he said, "since me an' you bust a case here on Federal. Hey, is this the fuse the Hollywood guy's gonna bust by remote control!"

"Nothing's going to be busted, my friend," Prof. Sparling laughed. "But this is the element which you fellows are to carry aloft."

"Don't you ride along, Pop?" Loose Lip asked.

"Not necessary," the professor said. "I guess we can trust you Federal Proving Ground fellows. Now, Col. Call, who will act as official observer?"

"The official Federal observer—Mr. Faber," Call kidded. "That's his job, Professor Sparling. Joe'll squint at anything and get the right answer. He can tell time. He can read a glass and tell you to get in out of the rain. He can read the red column and tell you to get in out of the sun. He can read a sports page and tell you to stop betting on them bums."

"Remarkable," said Professor Sparling. "Well, Mr. Faber, I'll turn this over to you. There isn't much to observe, as you can see. Our only concern is to have the observation stamped as fair, unbiased and official. You merely keep your eye on this sight slot and wait for the interior to glow. If you get a glow, you'll know that the element has been activated."

"Like if we fly over the power plant," Loose Lip said, hooking a thumb toward the high stack east of the field, "or get too close to a radio tower."

"No. Not at all, big fellow," the professor said. "Up to date, our research has discovered no electrical impulse that can activate this device. That, my friend, was where a tidy piece of the famous two billion went —into making this detonator safe for our own handlers, and for our own country. After all, it must be transmitted by auto, rail and water, and, at times, attached to the atom bomb itself."

"An' how are ya bettin' that the Crosby gents can't light 'er up?" Loose Lip asked.

"I wouldn't bet," the professor said. "There are wonder men in Hollywood, young fellow. Miracle men. They'll take you to the bottom of the sea, or into the stratosphere. They'll give you a cyclone, or furnish a snowstorm. They'll wash you away in a flood, or shake the world if you desire. Now if they've nullified our atomic labors of years, I won't be surprised. And I don't think I'll be unduly sorry either."

Mr. Lindbrook had a flight scheduled which he asked Col. Call to follow. He glanced at his wrist-watch and said, "It's fifteen minutes of ten now, Colonel Call. We worked out this plan of test with the idea of making our first send at ten. Can you be in the air by then?"

"Certainly. We're ready to go," Call said.

"Fine," Mr. Lindbrook said. "Now it makes little difference where you are at that send—maybe five or six miles away from this field. After that, every five minutes for a half hour, we'll try another send. You'll change your distance, also your altitude, until you are, perhaps a hundred miles away and pretty well up toward your ceiling. Mr. Faber will help us a lot if he finds time to record the activations: time, approximate distance from Federal Proving, and altitude. I think that covers it, Colonel Call."

"Hey, just one more question, Pop," Loose Lip thought to ask—"or maybe you can tell me this better, Mr. Lindbrook. Do you Crosby people beam this gadget of yourn right at the ship carryin' the A-bomb. I mean, that is, within the usual spread of a radio beam."

"It isn't a radio beam," Lindbrook said. "And we claim that our gadget, as you call it, isn't limited to a beam's spread. It's all-inclusive, Mr. Lock. We hold that it will reach all neutronic detonators, within the range of our present send, at one and the same time."

"Quod erat demonstrandum," whispered Prof. Keen.

"Well, gents, that's jake," Loose Lip said, "'cause I'd hate to think anybody was aimin' things right at us. If ya just get us by accident, well that's another horse with a new collar.

"Okay back here, Cap. Will I close 'er up? Take it away when you're set."

X

WHEN the rocketing Stingray began to grow small, out over the Atlantic, Slim Rand suggested that the scientific group step into his hangar-rear office and have a smoke while they waited. So the group strolled inward with that in mind. But they were hardly inside the big hangar before Miss Lane was calling down from the loft platform.

"Oh, Chief Rand, is there a Mr. Ryder in your party?"

"Right here," Ryder answered, glancing upward with a bit of surprise.

"You're wanted on the phone, sir. Long distance."

"Will it be all right if I take it on this phone?" Ryder asked, pointing toward Slim Rand's office.

"No, sir," Miss Lane answered. "You'll have to go down to Communications Office, in Headquarters. The clerk told me to say that this call is on Intelligence's private trunk."

It took minutes for Special Agent Ryder to reach that extra-special, very-secret, well-guarded Intelligence trunk line phone. And reaching it, Ryder took one good listen, turned ashen gray, said, "I think we're too late, Chief. I'll do what I can. Good-bye, good-bye, and by hell it might be just that—*good-bye.*"

Then Special Agent Ryder bowled guys and gals over as he rushed down the corridor into Operations.

Then Col. Martin, officer in charge of Operations, with Ryder following close, rushed out of Headquarters and over to radio room.

To the chief radioman in that room, Martin yelled, "Get in contact with the pilot of the Madden Meteor. She's in flight. Hell, man, don't sit there! Let's have action!"

"Chances are, sir, she has no radioman aboard. You know how it is, sir, they don't bother with anything but their intercom on test runs, that is, unless the tests call for radio work."

"Damn it to hell!" Col. Martin yelled. "What other ship is in the air?"

"Let's see," said Slim Rand. "There's a basic trainer, a Republic fighter job, Parachute Shop's dummy-drop ship, an old DC running fuel tests, and—"

"Can any of them be reached by radio?"

"Not a one," said Slim. "Their jobs don't call for radio contact."

"Anybody else aloft?"

"Yeah, Col. Call in the Stingray," said Slim.

"He'd have radio," said Martin, with new hope in his voice.

"Nu-huh," Slim grunted. "She just got back to this hangar an' we've had no radio installation work-order on her."

"Oh, by hell! What a mess. We've got to reach the Madden job or——"

Special Agent Ryder said, "Too late, Colonel. Look at that clock. Five of ten."

"The clock's wrong, mister," the radioman said. "She's slow by two-three minutes."

THE Stingray, though she boasted two jet engines, was only a two-man job. That is, she was a single pilot and rear-gunner ship. However, she had a good sized bomb bay. She was of British all-wood construction. So Call was up front in the pilot's seat, while Loose Lip and Joe Faber squatted aft in the empty bomb bay with the green cloth-covered something resting on the floorboards between them. Gazing into the sight slot, at about five minutes of ten, when the Stingray was about ten miles offshore, Loose Lip began telling Joe Faber's fortune, but took time out to ask, "Hey, Cap—see anything of the Madden job out front?"

"I haven't been looking for it," Col. Call sang out. "What time you got, Joe?"

"Four of ten. It won't be long now," Joe answered.

"That's what the guy said when they strapped him down in the chair an' got ready to activate the high voltage—it won't be long now," said Loose Lip.

Loose Lip got up and slid himself into the empty gunner's seat, just behind Call. He leaned forward and studied the clear sky out ahead. "There's your Madden job," he sang out, pointing off to the east. "See her? I'd say she's 'bout twenty miles offshore."

"You've got good eyes for an old gentleman," Col. Call said. "That's her. Say, let's go over and see whether or not we can blow past. I bet we're faster than her."

So saying, Col. Call turned the nose of his Stingray to the right, heading out toward the fast-traveling Meteor.

"How are ya for time, Joe?" Loose Lip sang out. "The instrument-board says two of ten. Same on my wrist."

"Same here," said Joe Faber. "Well, push open that door, Fate, for we're on the threshold of the future. One minute to go."

"We're overhauling that squirt," Loose Lip said to Call. The Madden job was perhaps six or seven miles out front, and both craft had the same altitude, seven thousand feet above the sea.

"Let me get a squint at that too," Loose Lip Lock sang out to Joe Faber, quitting the seat and barging back into the bomb bay. "I might get a chanct on "I Was There."

"Thirty seconds to go!" Joe Faber yelled, loud enough for Call to hear. "Twenty! Ten! And, by hell, she glows!"

That was all. The world shook. The sky was filled by a flash of light beyond all previous conception of light. Call raised his throttle hand to his eyes and exclaimed, "Good God! I'm blind."

Loose Lip put both hands to his eyes and pressed hard. Joe Faber cupped both mitts to his face and was afraid even to try his eyes. Then the sound reached them. All the sound of all the world throughout all the ages, rolled into one mighty crack of doom. Then the world shook again and again. And the all-wood Stingray had no direction then. Its jet engines had choked to an airless stop. It might have been rightside up or upside down; but nobody aboard had the faculties to figure that out, nor the mind or willpower to give it a thought. The ship was like a rat in a terrier's jaws—shaking, breaking, falling, hopeless and helpless.

And the three men were numb, deadened to all conscious reaction, stupefied beyond even an effort toward self-preservation. Through that coma shell of semiconsciousness, again and again, came those blasts within blasts, and the Stingray writhed, twisted, rolled, spun and fell. Now and again, when the aimless, turning fall gave the slowly clearing eyes a view in the direction of that hell in the east, the sense of demonic color flash—like hell's own boiling brimstone—came to blind them anew.

But they were airmen, and they did fight back. On hands and knees, Loose Lip and Joe Faber crawled forward, pulled themselves up behind Call's seat, and said, "Give 'er hell, Cap. Fly 'er, pilot. 'At's a stuff, kick 'er off her back. Wait till we crawl our way out front there. Get that nose down, Cap. . . . 'At's the stuff. Get 'er divin'. . . . Ah, ya've got 'er in the groove. Make 'er say 'uncle.' . . . Yes, sir, there's enough of her left in one piece for you to fly. Fly 'er down, pilot. Fly 'er down."

XI

COL. CALL, telling about it later, claimed that he'd never have been able to set that Stingray down were it not for the fact that the soft, feathered crest of a mile-high wave reached up just at the right time and then pulled the ship down with it—like a shortstop taking the burn out of a drive by drawing the mitt back on a swing. Anyway the all-wood Stingray hit the sea just hard enough to smash it into kindling wood—without smashing the men therein, but spilling them into the deep drink. After a while, while those towering waves were still running house-high, Loose Lip fought his way to the surface. In his right hand he had Cap Call, and in Call's hands was Joe Faber. Joe Faber was unconscious.

They came up through and under what was left of the Stingray. The wreckage still had a bit of flotation left, for her power nacelles had gone directly to the bottom of the Atlantic. Loose Lip and Call boosted Joe Faber atop the biggest section of wing. Then they tried to keep their heads above the foaming wash and take a breather.

"What was it?" Loose Lip finally asked.

"Don't know," Call said. "I had my eye on the Madden job when I heard Joe yell

'she glows,' and that's when the world ended. I think it was the Meteor, all right. Good Lord, man, can that be the way these other jet jobs have exploded? Is there something in these kerosene burners that we haven't even guessed?"

"Could be," Loose Lip said. "Ya know, 'cordin' to the reports, they haven't been findin' any too much of these jet jobs after they explode an' crash. Gee, what a bang! Say, you an' me better open up a chute an' make a float sack outa it. We might be out here all night."

It was midafternoon when Navy sent out some patrol boats to see what might be learned about that offshore explosion which had blasted and blinded all hands along Federal Proving Ground's long beach frontage—and sent a tidal wave in through and over Navy's extensive shore installations. Navy was bewildered. They guessed that an ammunition ship had blown up, but they had no shipping reports showing that any ammunition ships were on the Atlantic at that time. When they phoned cross-country and tried to ask Army about it, they found that Army wasn't answering the phone. Army, and especially Aviation Section, seemed to have gone out of business.

Anyway, along toward three-thirty, a patrol boat picked up three men adrift, one sitting on a section of wing, two holding to an air-filled parachute-silk float. The three men didn't have much to say, so Navy put them ashore, then rushed them cross-country to Aviation Section.

Everybody in hangars, shops and officers had been sent home. The off-shift guards had been summoned, and they alone seemed to populate the ramps, aprons and streets.

Special Agent Ryder and some of his men, along with the C.O. and Col. Martin, several of the Madden group and the entire Crosby Foundation contingent, were present in the assembly hall when Call, Loose Lip and Joe Faber walked in.

ESCHEWING all preliminaries, the C.O. asked, "Were you close to it, Colonel Call? Close to the Madden ship?"

"Fairly close, sir. Perhaps four or five miles away. I was just getting ready to overhaul and pass it," Call said. "I think it exploded, sir."

"You think? You don't know what happened? Maybe you'd better tell them, Mr. Ryder. After all, they have a right to know," the C.O. said.

Ryder said, "You men went to the edge of Eternity. We tried to reach and warn you. That is, we tried to reach you by radio when I got word from Washington. But it was too late. You had no radio aboard.

"Gentlemen, six weeks ago, out at the desert base in New Mexico, Chemical Warfare commissioned the building of half a dozen mockups of the atomic bomb. The mockup builders were expert set makers from Hollywood.

"The idea was to ship two or three of these mockups out to the Coast, to the studios, for educational films. A few of them were to be sent to Washington. One was scheduled to come here for test purposes —aboard the Madden Meteor.

"Well, as I say, these mockup mechanics were Hollywood's best. I was there. I saw them work. Their detail was beautiful. When they were finished you couldn't tell the imitations from the real A-bomb. For a fact, they'd fool the most expert, and they did.

"Somebody made a mistake, in the packing or shipping. The mistake wasn't discovered till this morning. Washington got it too late. I got it too late."

"But the Crosby Foundation," Call inserted, "was on time. And to the second. It worked. It works. I've lost two young pilots and a fine test-flight observer."

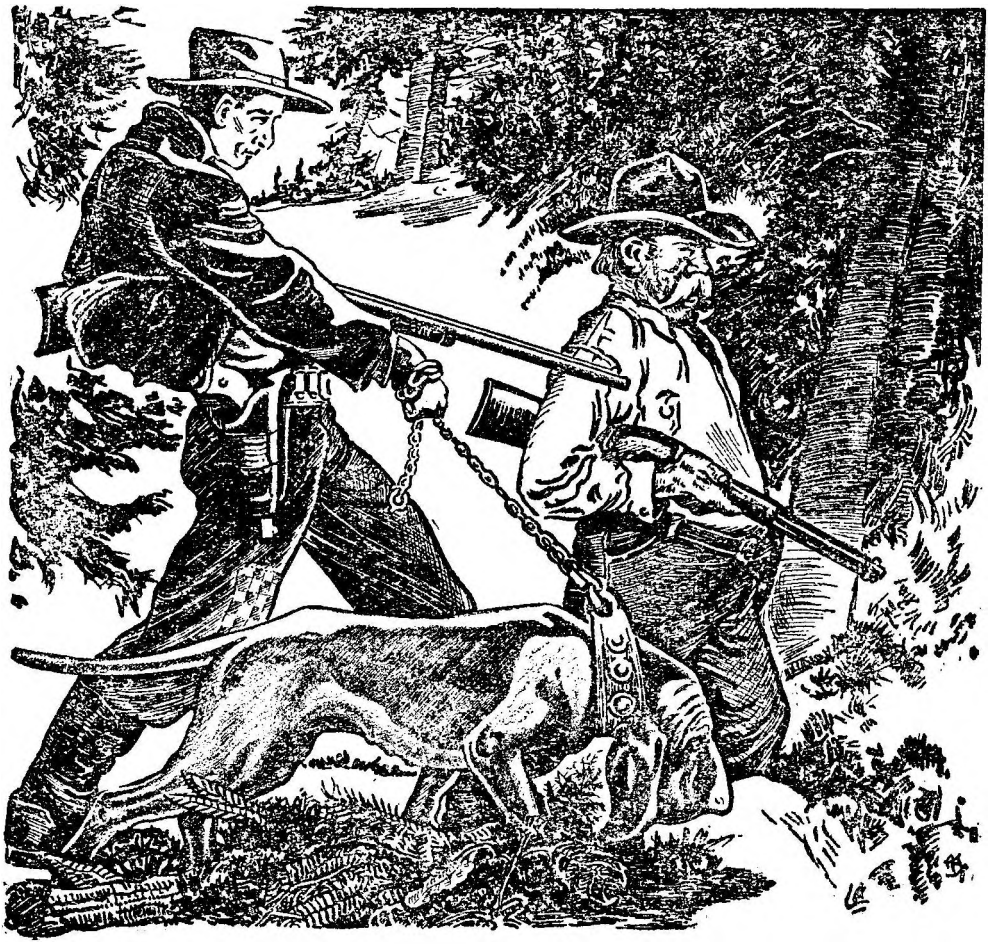
"And Major Kellet was aboard, don't forget," one of the Madden men added.

"The total loss is just three men, nevertheless," Joe Faber stated.

"An' as usual, I'm the star sample of a moron without a brain. Know what I went an' done—grounded that lump o' lard, ol' Fats McCully, jus' when he was gonna climb aboard with Kellet. Yes, sir, I go to work an' save that guy's life. That's what I call bottoms," Loose Lip bewailed. "Joe here, loses a swell friend, an' I save meself a bad enemy.

"Hey, just a second, Ryder! What you hintin' at? You mean to say they had the real adam bomb aboard the Meteor? Oh, by hell! Oh, by hell! Give me air, gents. Let me outa here."

Dusky Does Impressed the Sheriff—But Then That Was What He Had Been Trained For



DUSKY

By JIM KJELGAARD

NO SOUND came out of the green forest that surrounded the field where the cabin stood. But the huge black and tan bloodhound that had been asleep on the porch raised his head suddenly, and got to his haunches. For a moment he sat perfectly still. Then he rose, and his toenails clicked as he walked across the rough boards. The noise brought Tom Marfree to the cabin door.

He said, "Who's comin', Dusky?"

The big hound stood beside the rail post at the head of the steps, his head stretched and slightly lowered as he strove to read in full the slight trace of story brought to him by the breeze. Tom looked at the wind-ruffled trees, and at the mouth of the trail that emerged from the forested mountain. The source of the faint scent Dusky had caught was still beyond the Elephant Rock, and therefore more than fifteen hundred feet

away. As soon as whoever was coming passed the rock, Dusky would have him identified positively.

Tom brushed his right hand through his curly brown hair, and looked steadily at the dog. The deep lines that anxiety and worry had etched in what should have been an unmarred, clean, eighteen-year-old face, deepened a little more. Pop had acted queerly when he left the cabin with his rifle yesterday morning, and all during the previous night he had tossed on his bed muttering about the work he had to do. If that work included—

Tom thrust the thought from his mind. Pop had promised him faithfully that he wouldn't go outside the law again. He had served his two years in the penitentiary, come home to Tom and Dusky, and— And he hadn't smiled since. Pop, in his own home, was a lost man. It wasn't just the fact that nobody would give a job to, or have much of anything to do with, a man who admittedly had run the hills with Lobo Harsher. What people did not know was that, two years ago, down at Jonas' store, Lobo had hit Pop over the head with a gun barrel and left him lying for the officers to find when they came.

Pop had never told anybody except Tom that Lobo and Jack Kivlin had been with him that night. He'd said nothing, but just let the officers guess that, somehow, old Al Jonas had knocked him out. Al had been too bewildered to know whether he had or not. But which was better? Pop had discharged his debt, and was a free man. Lobo and Kivlin had not been seen in the Big Dog Mountains for nearly two years. If ever they came back, there was a standing price of five hundred dollars on each of their heads.

Tom's right hand stole forth to rest on the folds of skin that rippled across Dusky's shoulders. A fierce, hopeful little voice beat within him. He'd tried to tell Pop that everything was going to be all right. They could make out wonderfully here, trapping, hunting, selling wild honey, digging roots, and fishing. And there was always Dusky. Five years ago, when Pop had carried the little, squirming, ridiculously big-footed pup up the mountain trail from Lincoln, he had pinned high hopes on Dusky. The dog was going to be a man-hunter, Pop said, and he had trained him as such. Only, before anyone had come to use Dusky, Lobo Harsher had stopped at the cabin and— Pop always had wanted to make a lot of money fast. But there would be use for Dusky, some time, if only Pop would be patient. People didn't condemn a man forever.

THE great hound tensed his body, and bent his head a little lower as he strained to catch fully the elusive odor that had come to him. Then he relaxed and wagged his tail. Tom sighed. It was not Sheriff Reuben Cowles or any of his deputies coming; Dusky never wagged his tail for anyone but Pop. And, since Pop was coming up the trail in broad daylight, everything was all right. If Pop had done anything wrong, and been detected at it, he'd be a long way back in the mountains by now.

Tom pulled the big hound a little closer and hugged him tightly. The summer sun suddenly had warmth and cheer, the day was bright. There was never anything to worry about as long as Pop was with him. It was only when he sat in a corner of the cabin, staring at nothing in particular and thinking the thoughts that tormented him, that there was reason to worry. Pop would sometimes sit that way for hours. Then, as though drawn by something he couldn't resist, he would go away with his rifle.

Five minutes later a tall, lean man wearing blue denim trousers and a khaki shirt broke out of the forest. A fringe of black beard adorned his face. But even at that distance there seemed to be something that set him apart, something bitter and lonesome. It was, Tom thought wistfully, as though a lone wolf that the pack had driven out had come in sight.

Tom leaped from the porch, and with Dusky pacing at his side ran forward. Pop shifted the carbine he carried from his left hand to his right.

"Hi," Tom called. "Where you been?"

"Oh, just walking. How'd it go?"

"Swell! Dusky and I, we missed you though. I've been thinking of a new trapline we could lay out this fall. How about up through Horse-Shoe Gulley and around on Stanner Mountain? Why, with the way you know how to set traps, we'll take a thousand dollars in coyote pelts alone."

Pop said, "That's a wonderful idea."

"Sure. You bet. And we'll get a lot more

good ideas too. Why, we'll make a lot more money than we could workin' for wages. Do you know what, Pop? I've got another idea. You trained Dusky to hunt men, and he's probably the best man-hunter there is. But look, why don't we get a bitch too? Thoroughbred bloodhound pups are worth seventy-five dollars and—"

Pop murmured, "You needn't do that, Tom."

"Do what?"

Very gently Pop said, "Torture your brain about me. I promised you I wouldn't hit the outlaw trail again."

"You mean that, don't you?"

"I mean it."

"Well, that's all right, Pop."

"Sure, kid. What you got to eat?"

"I caught some trout this morning."

They entered the cabin and Tom fried trout while Pop sat moodily at the table. Tom turned his eyes away. Pop had come back in body only. His mind was far away, fastened on some of the bitter and hopeless things that Pop couldn't help seeing. His eyes were red with weariness, he must have been up all night. He'd forgotten to take off the wrinkled old checkered cap that he always wore. In somber silence he ate the trout Tom fried, and rose.

"Guess I'll catch me a little shut-eye."

"Sure. Go ahead."

Pop lay down on his cot, and with Dusky at his heels Tom went outside to hoe the weeds from their vegetable garden. When he went in, two hours later, Pop was sitting in a corner staring absently at the fireplace.

"You didn't sleep long, Pop," said Tom hesitantly.

"Oh," Pop said, and resumed staring at the fireplace. Finally, "Tom, life gives us a raw deal sometimes. But we have to play our cards as best we can, and only fools complain. However, it's true that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children."

Tom said desperately, "Don't talk that way!"

"There's a lot of things that you'll understand later," Pop said. "And there's some that I hope you'll never understand. I'm going for another walk, Tom. I don't know when I'll be back."

Tom said dully, "All right, Pop."

Pop took his gun and disappeared down the trail. Tom sat numbly in the cabin, staring at nothing. Dusky came to lay his head on the boys knee, and Tom's hand strayed down to scratch the big hound's ears. Night came, and while Dusky lay on the floor beside him, Tom crawled into bed. After the darkness enfolded him, he breathed a heartsent prayer:

"Please! Please, wherever he goes, watch over Pop and let him believe in something besides what he does."

It was a long time before he fell asleep.

HE DID not know exactly what time it was. But he came out of sleep instantly, fully awake and alert, and slipped out of bed to walk across the floor and take his own rifle from its rack. Dusky squatted near the door, head bent and straining, trying to catch positively whatever vestige of scent had drifted out of the forest through the closed door. Tom loaded his rifle, and watched the big hound. Dusky's pendulous lips lifted, a low growl bubbled deep in his chest, and a cold chill began at the back of Tom's neck to travel up and down his spine. It was not Pop who was coming this time. Tom stole a glance at the wan, mournful, early morning light stealing through the windows, and waited. But another five minutes elapsed before someone pounded at the door and a voice said:

"Hi there! Wake up! Wake up, in there!"

Rifle in his right hand, Tom approached the door and flung it open. He stepped back, ready to meet whoever might have come so unreasonably and so early in the morning. But he lowered his rifle. A small, stocky man, with steel-gray eyes and a handle-bar mustache on his upper lip, stood before him. It was Sheriff Reuben Cowles.

Tom gulped, but, "where's your father?" Reuben Cowles asked.

"He—he went over to Fosterville last night."

"Dammit!" the sheriff ejaculated.

"Wh— What's the matter?"

"I wanted to use that hound of his."

"Oh."

Tom felt suddenly weak and lifeless, as though a hand of terror had hovered for a moment over his head and passed on without striking. The sheriff was on somebody else's trail, not Pop's. And, with that realization, came a vast, surging ecstasy. At last, after five years, there was a demand for

Dusky. Though he was absent, Pop's dreams of long ago were coming true.

"I can put him on a trail for you," said Tom.

The sheriff looked keenly at him. "You can?"

"Yes. What happened?"

"Al Jonas was killed in his store last night," Reuben Cowles said bluntly. "Whoever killed him robbed both the money till and the safe. I can't find a clue. Can your dog do it?"

Tom said firmly, "Dusky can find whoever's been in that store."

"Then bring him along."

"Just a minute."

TOM put his rifle down, buckled Dusky's harness on, and snapped a leash to it. A ripple of excitement palpitated through him, and the great happiness remained. Al Jonas owned the Lincoln store, where Lobo Harsher had left Pop such a long time ago. Now another outlaw had come to see Al Jonas in the night, and had killed him. That was a bad thing because Al Jonas was a nice old man.

But if Dusky could find his murderer, and he must, Pop's debt should be fully paid in the minds of people who still looked upon him as an outlaw.

"I'm ready," said Tom as he picked up his rifle.

"Come along."

Together, with Dusky trotting easily beside Tom, they walked down the mountain trail to where the little town of Lincoln nestled in a valley so green and calm that it seemed no man with evil in his mind could ever walk there. At the outskirts, the sheriff halted and slid behind a tree while two men with lunch buckets in their hands walked towards their daily toil at the Lincoln saw mill. After they had passed, Reuben Cowles looked Tom squarely in the face.

"How do you want to go about it?"

"Who knows anything about the—the murder?"

"Me, so far. I couldn't sleep last night, and went over there about half-past three to get some tobacco—Jonas sleeps in the back of the store. When he didn't answer my knock, I tried the door and found it open. Jonas was dead."

"We'll keep it that way," Tom said quietly. "The fewer tracks Dusky has to bother with, the sooner he'll pick up the one we want."

"You're sure he can find the trail?"

"I know it."

They strode through the nearly deserted streets, and unseen came to Jonas' store. They entered, Dusky crowding close against Tom's legs as the sheriff closed the door behind them. The musky smells of the store, that stocked everything from bread to harness, rose about them, but Tom was looking at Al Jonas. He lay in the center of the floor, in death pitifully old and shapeless. His hands were cast upward, as though to shield his gray head from blows that might have rained upon it. The upper half of his old-fashioned nightgown was stained with bright blood, and blood had dripped in a black puddle on the floor. A knife had spilled that blood.

Reuben Cowles said sharply, "Well?"

"Just a minute."

It should be simple to pick up this trail. Tom fought back the nausea that rose within his stomach, led the big hound to the fallen body of old Al Jonas, and pressed his head towards it. After Dusky had snuffled about, Tom took him to the safe. The big hound cast about there for a moment, dropped his nose to the floor, and headed straight for the door.

"He's got it," said Tom.

"How do you know? There were probably fifty people in here yesterday."

"They didn't all handle the safe," Tom said. "Only Al Jonas did that. Dusky knows he's here, he's smelled around the safe to find who was here, and he'll find whoever had their hands on it. Pop trained him that way."

"Suppose two or three people handled the safe?"

"If there's more than one trail out of here, Dusky will take them one at a time. He'll find the killer."

"Hold him a second."

The sheriff stepped to the telephone, gave three short rings, and waited. There was the click of the receiver on the other end, and the sheriff spoke.

"Hello, George? Rube speaking. Hustle over to Jonas' store, will you? Yeah, he was robbed and murdered last night. No, but I think we'll have him soon. I've got Bob

Marfree's bloodhound on the trail. Don't let anyone in."

He hung up, and Tom's eyes roved again to the rifled safe. Then he stood stock still, staring in horror, while inch by inch within him his soul seemed to die.

Reuben Cowles said, "Let's get going."

"Y—Yes."

"What's the matter with you?"

"N—Nothing."

"Then let's move."

He opened the door and Dusky followed the trail through it into the street. Tom stayed dazedly beside the dog, for the moment able to think only of one thing. That was the object he had seen pushed under the safe.

Pop's old checkered cap.

TOM HELD the leash loosely in his hand, following along beside Dusky as the big hound went down Lincoln's dusty street. A couple of other mill hands, on their way to work, stopped to stare curiously.

"You goin' rabbit huntin', Rube?" asked one.

Reuben Cowles said brusquely, "Leave us alone and don't mess up the trail."

"What you huntin'?" the curious mill hand persisted.

"Stay out of the way!" Reuben Cowles snapped.

The mill hand said in an injured tone, "Well, I was only askin'."

Reuben Cowles moved up to walk beside Tom, the carbine in his hand dangling loosely. But the apparent carelessness was only a sham, Tom thought dully. Reuben Cowles was whipcord and steel. He could whip his gun up, and shoot, before whoever he might be trailing could even think of shooting back. And when they came upon Pop, somewhere back in the everlasting hills——

They would come upon him. No man, not even Pop, could run from Dusky. Like all bloodhounds, Dusky had only one thought when he was set upon a trail. Every tiny sense within him was consecrated to reaching its end.

Even if Tom took him from it now, jerked him around and flatly told Reuben Cowles that there had been a mistake, that Dusky had struck the wrong trail, the big hound would run away and return to it. And you could not blame Dusky for so doing because that was what a bloodhound lived for and what he must do.

"I never thought a hound was much good. But I do believe he's really got it!" said Reuben Cowles excitedly.

"I—I don't know," Tom said.

They passed out of the town into the forest. And here, where there were no other scents to conflict with the one he followed, Dusky travelled faster. Tom broke into a little trot, pacing the dog as he went through the green grass and weeds that flanked a sparkling little mountain stream. And, he thought hopelessly, Pop would choose such a way to run when he ran. In extremity he would always turn to the mountains because they were what he knew and loved best. But, though he could lay a long trail into them, he still could not lay a long enough one. No man on earth could do that when Dusky was trailing him.

WITHOUT hesitation Dusky splashed across the little creek, and picked up the trail on the other side. Tom glanced helplessly at Reuben Cowles, and the little sheriff said delightedly, "I can see for myself that he's going right. If this one pans out I'll have a lot more work for that hound of yours, Tom."

Tom said, "He might be runnin' a deer that came this way."

"Right out of Al Jonas' store?" Reuben Cowles jibed. "Nope, since the dog put us right, I can see for myself that he's on a man. How old a trail can he follow?"

"I've seen him take a track sixty hours old, and follow through on it."

Reuben Cowles murmured, "That's a right old trail for any dog." There was a small silence, and Reuben Cowles said bluntly, "Tom, five years before you were born your dad and I spent two winters in the same trapping cabin. I found out then that he had a lone and wild streak, and I wasn't surprised when he started running with Lobo Harsher. Do you know the whole story?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"It's Pop's story."

"Let it go then," Reuben Cowles murmured. "Your dad has a wide streak of good in him, too. And Al Jonas was pretty popular around these parts. It's going to be a

big feather in the cap of whoever can help catch his murderer. Did you ever know that they wanted to get you out of that cabin into a home while your dad was in—in jail."

"I wouldn't have come."

"I knew that," Reuben Cowles said. "That's part of the reason why I made them leave you there. The other part is that I liked Bob, and wanted him to feel that he had something to come home to. Now tell me the truth. Where is he?"

"He's been running the mountains for six months. Don't talk any more."

Reuben Cowles said, "Jail never did that to him. He's running the mountains for a purpose. Now I'll shut up."

Dusky left the little stream and struck a slanting course up the side of a mountain. Tom panted, and stayed beside the big hound. They climbed to the summit, entering the big pines that clothed it and following Dusky through them. Beyond, for more miles than any man had ever travelled, there was only wilderness. But a man, or men, were about to go through it. Reuben Cowles could no more leave a trail than could Dusky. He would follow to the end, and then——?

Tom swallowed hard, and looked at a small boulder projecting above the scuffed needles about fifty feet ahead. He knew now what he must do; if there was no Dusky on his trail Pop still had a chance of escaping. Tom's right thumb slipped surreptitiously down the breech of his gun and pulled the hammer back. When he came to that boulder he would stumble on it, and his rifle would be pointing at Dusky when he stumbled.

But, when he came to the boulder, he stepped over it. His index finger sought the trigger of his rifle, and his thumb eased the hammer back down to safe. Sweat broke on his forehead, oozed down his face. It had been an awfully long two years while Pop was in jail. Dusky was all he'd had then, except the certainty that Pop would come home to them.

He looked desperately back at Reuben Cowles, and said, "Let's rest a minute."

"Why—sure. Tom, you look sick."

"I'm all right."

He peered ahead, through the trees, and with his eyes followed the scuffed pine needles as far as he could see. He had another chance. About thirty yards farther on the trail crossed a projecting root. He glanced down at Dusky, and away again. You couldn't shoot a thing for doing the job both God and man had intended it to do! But—!

"Let's get going," Reuben Cowles said.

"Sure. I—"

The snap of a rifle seemed to punctuate his remark, and it was answered by the blast of a heavier, throatier gun. Dusky threw his head up and whined. His tail wagged furiously, he strained forward into the wind. Reuben Cowles held his hand up to caution silence, and his rifle ready. Now he stalked ahead, through the trees towards where the rifles' voices had betrayed them. Tom followed. They came to a grove of small evergreens whose feathered branches rustled as they brushed each other, and Reuben Cowles dropped to his hands and knees. They crawled forward. Dusky whined again, and wrenched the leash out of Tom's hand to bound forward. He disappeared, and a second later Tom heard Pop's voice.

"Dusky!"

The pit of Tom's stomach was very cold and heavy now, and because he did not know what else to do he followed Reuben Cowles through the little evergreens. The stocky sheriff stopped to raise his rifle, and Tom glided forward to strike the gun down.

"Don't shoot!" he said.

Tom looked around the low-hanging branches of a small tree to see Pop stretched on his stomach behind a moss-grown log. Blood stained the back of his shirt, and the wet cloth sagged. But Pop's rifle was levelled across the log.

"Come on out. Don't be afraid," he called over his shoulder.

It was curiously unlike Pop's voice, or at least the Pop Tom had known for the past six months. Now his tone had a strangely gay and light-hearted lilt, as though Pop had been relieved of a burden too heavy for him to carry. The little sheriff and Tom walked up, and Tom saw the two dirty, dishevelled, shifty-eyed men standing beside a boulder forty feet away.

Still without turning his head Pop said, "There they are, Lobo Harsher and Jack Kivlin. They killed Jonas. I could have killed both of them. But I didn't."

Reuben Cowles said respectfully, "You wouldn't, Bob. I'll take over from here."

He walked towards the two who had not dared flee from Pop's rifle. Dusky reared with his paws on the log, watching.

"Where'd they get you, Pop?" asked Tom.

"Through the shoulder—don't worry about it. I always thought they'd come back here, and I picked up their trail in Gulcher Hollow last night. I was a little bit late to do Al Jonas any good, but I thought they'd come this way. They always did when I was with them. I've been huntin' 'em six months, Tom. I sort of figured I still owed people that much. And—and I owed something to you. People aren't going to think of you only as an outlaw's and jail bird's son."

"I see, Pop." He strove to turn the conversation. "Dusky," he said with feigned unconcern, "picked up your trail at Jonas' safe."

"Yeah. I swung the door open and looked in to see what they'd taken."

Reuben Cowles, shepherding the two ahead of him, came softly back and grinned down at Pop. He said:

"It looks like you've earned yourself a heap of different things, Bob. What do you want to do now?"

"Go home," Pop was smiling. "Tom and me and Dusky, we'd all like to go home."

How it feels to have a long-geared saddle slicker yank one back from the grave twice in a row. . . . . .

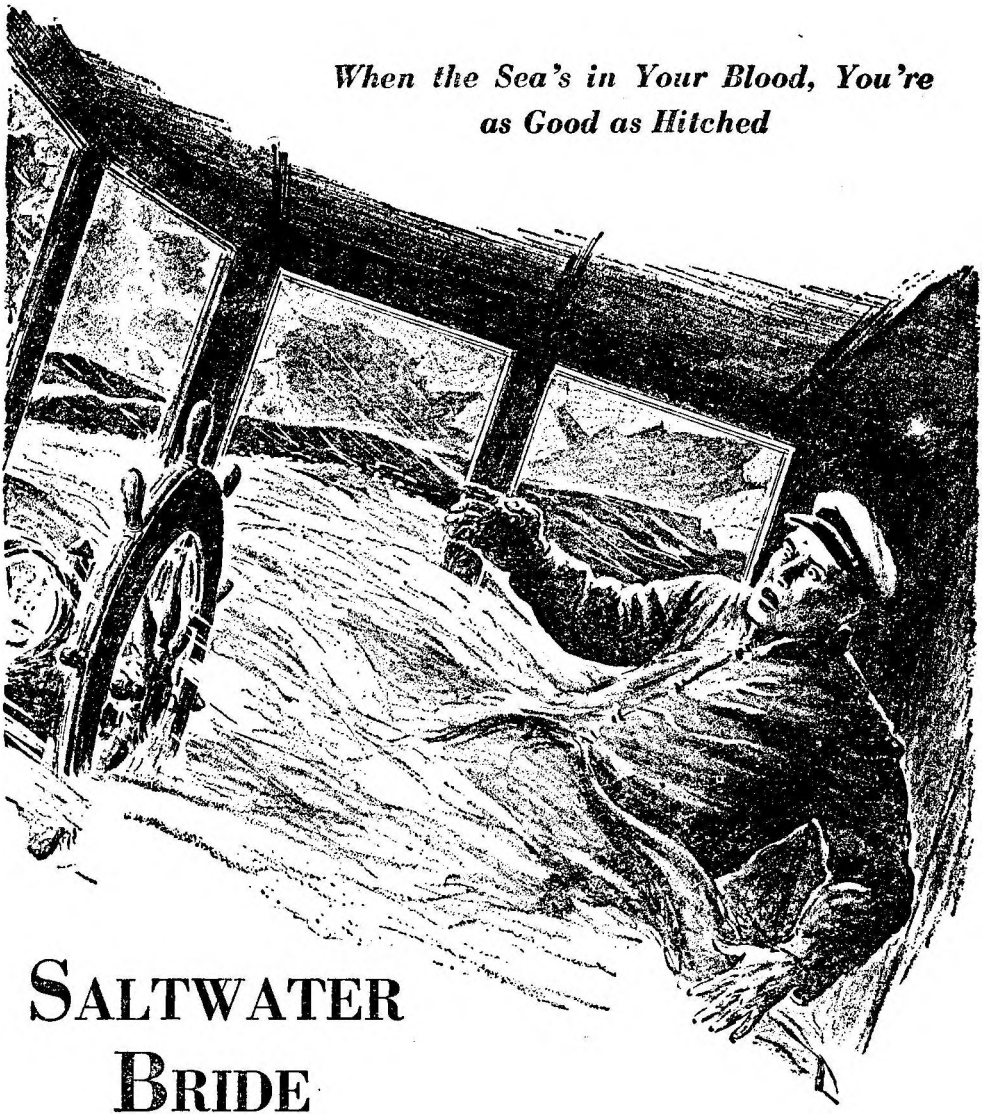
"Crazy Moon Gold"

A Hashknife Novelette in Our Next Issue

by

W. C. TUTTLE

When the Sea's in Your Blood, You're as Good as Hitched



SALTWATER BRIDE

By JOHN SCOTT DOUGLAS

LEANING on the wheelhouse window frame and with peaked cap pushed back on his blue-black hair, Captain Joe Williams studied the approaching boat through his binoculars. The diamond dazzle of the seas made her hard to identify, for her wartime gray almost blended with Baja California's coastal range.

Excitement quickened in Joe at the heavy way she sat in the glassy seas, at her slow recovery. A 250-ton tuna-boat like the *Rosa*, she appeared to be, with the same large square bait-tank at the stern.

Forgetting the foot that had stopped a Jap bullet at Tarawa, Joe started a dance step but was forced to grip the grab-rail. Pain made him sick at his stomach, but a moment later his heavy features and dark brows were relieved by a flashing smile as he turned toward the man at the wheel. Louie Randini, though he had no papers,

was known informally aboard as "the mate."

"You got no feeling for a boat, Joe," Louie admonished him. "You kick the old *Rosa* and she make your foot hurt."

"I feel good," Joe said. "Good as that night I won the amateur boxing bout and later a cup for dancing. Good as when the judge changes my name from Guillermo to what it means in American. Good as the day I joined the Marines."

"You talk crazy," Louie said.

"You think so?" Joe's dark eyes gleamed. "That boat's the *Bianca,* I bet you!" With a rising note in his voice, he yelled at the lookout in the crow's nest. "What boat, Frankie?"

"Looks like the *Bianca,*" Frankie Giannos called back.

"See," Joe cried. "She sailed from San Diego before the *Rosa,* a whole week earlier. She must have turned north off La Purisima, or not farther south than Magdalena Bay. And she sits like a gravel scow. What does that tell you?"

"Maybe she's been in a blow," Louie suggested. "Maybe she's damaged."

"We've had no weather! . . . Louie, she found a good school of tuna. She's carrying 200 tons, I bet you. One more good catch will fill our fish tanks. Well, we'll have it if we find that school the *Bianca* found. We'll have a short run, use little oil, make the profits, eh, Louie?"

"Six to eight hundred a man, maybe," Louie said, "*if* we find the school. . . . But look what we're heading into, Joe. Suppose that's why the *Bianca* turned north?"

Louie pointed to an indistinct smudge of clouds over the Mexican mountains.

"That storm's over the Gulf of California," Joe said.

"It's moving westward. I wish our operator would fix our radio so we could get weather reports. It feels like a *chubasco.*"

"Always you got to worry, Louie! You ask the *Bianca* if she got any weather reports. My signalling is rusty."

JOE removed two flags from the bulkhead rack, handed them to the mate, and took the wheel.

Louis strode past the three fishermen taking sun baths on the forward deck. The mate was a head shorter than Joe, a stocky, swarthy man whose round face was solemn to the point of sadness.

Two of the fishermen sat up to watch Louie wig-wag, Nick Bonetti rubbing the livid scar a fishhook had left on his lean, craggy countenance, while little Mario Costa tenderly stroked the long mustache almost spanning his moon face. But Tony Patino, who lay stretched out near the rail, with a shapeless, greasy hat nearly hiding his bearded face, continued snoring. His hairy, barrel chest rose and fell rhythmically. Tony had once owned his own boat and since the men trusted his judgment, Joe called to him:

"Hey, Tony, what you think? How does she look?"

Tony snored on until Mario prodded him. And then, pushing his hat back, his gray beard parted to disclose a red cavern when he yawned.

"How she look, eh, Tony?" Mario asked.

Tony rolled his head a little, and stared eastward with drowsy eyes. Pulling his hat over his eyes again, he settled back.

"*Chubasco,*" he grunted.

Louie's face was strained as he mentally translated the flag code coming from the *Bianca's* signalman.

"The *Bianca* says the radio reported a storm moving westward," the mate said, turning. "We'd better try to run around it, Joe."

"Maybe they got it from a Mexican weather station," Joe said. "They make mistakes, sometimes. I'm going to find that school of tuna."

The three fishermen didn't question this decision, even from a 26-year-old skipper, for Joe was believed to have the "Guillermo luck."

But the mate's eyes were troubled when he returned to the wheelhouse.

"Joe, we better try to run around this storm or put in at a Mexican port. No school of tuna is worth the chances you take in a *chubasco.*"

"It's worth it to me," Joe said, his wide mouth tightening slightly. "It will buy my freedom."

Louie stepped onto the duckboard to take the wheel and for several minutes

there was no sound in the wheelhouse but its ticking.

"Sometimes," Louie said, "I don't get you, Joe. What do you mean—buy your freedom? You got no wife."

Making a sweeping gesture, Joe started to speak. Then, instead, he limped across the wheelhouse, dragging his right foot a little.

"All this," Joe said impatiently. "Fish and boats, boats and fish—that's all I heard since I was a kid. If we make a big catch this time, mama will get half of it as owner of the boat. And with the money I've put away for her and my three kid sisters in annuities, that will keep them even if anything should happen to the *Rosa*."

Louie's eyes were puzzled. "What you going to do, Joe? Buy your own boat?"

"No! No boats, no fishing for me! Rosetti can buy a good little machine-shop cheap, and with my fisherman's share on this trip, I can match him. We'll land a sub-contract from one of the aircraft factories, and we'll have our shop all clear when the war ends."

"Are you crazy, Joe? Your people been fishermen since your great-grandfather, maybe longer!"

"That's long enough," Joe said curtly.

LOUIE stared unbelievingly at him and when Joe walked to the window to stare broodingly at the glittering sea, the mate spoke softly.

"I know she's been breaking tough, Joe. When you go off with the Marines to Guadalcanal, you Guillermos have three boats. Then your father and Vincente are lost when the largest boat disappears near the Galapagos; and a dumb agent makes it a total loss, because he forgot to send in the insurance money. And right after that the second boat goes down off the Tehuantepec Peninsula, with your other two brothers. And the insurance barely covers her bank loan. So when you get your medical discharge, there's only the *Rosa* and no money in the bank. But you been making out pretty good since then, Joe. You're a better navigator than your father or your brothers. And you're as lucky at finding tuna."

"That's only part of it," Joe said, his eyes stinging as he thought about it. "All the time I was fighting Japs in stinking foxholes and across the white beaches of South Pacific islands, I keep promising myself that if I ever get back home I'll stay there. Get a little business, maybe, and buy a home and marry and have some kids. It's what all the Marines want, and the seamen and soldiers, too, if you ask them."

"You can have that and be a tuna fisherman, too," Louie said.

Joe made a disparaging sound. "A machine-shop doesn't sink!"

Louie shrugged. "That's the chance you take to make good money. And you couldn't leave the sea, Joe."

"Why not?" he asked brusquely.

"Because the *Rosa* keep calling you back. All seafaring men know that ships are like women. There are good women and bad. And that is also true of tuna-boats. The *Rosa* is like a good woman; you can trust her and she will never deceive you. But, in return, you must be loyal."

Joe laughed. "That's Old World talk, Louie. It's the way my father and brothers talked. It didn't do you any good to be born Californian. You might as well be Italian."

"This is not a matter of where one is born," said Louie. "Every fisherman knows that his first mistress is his boat, and the woman who marries him learns this thing to her sorrow. Remember when your father had the serious brain operation? After he was released from the hospital, he did not first go home. No; he came aboard the *Rosa* and with tears in his eyes, he knelt and kissed her deck."

Joe had been serving on the *Rosa* at the time and it embarrassed him even now recalling his father's action.

Momentarily the mate's eyes strayed to the glassy, glittering seas and the clouds above the Mexican coast, now taking on a bright metallic sheen. Then his thoughts returned to Joe.

"A man wasn't meant to spend his life between four walls tinkering with machinery, Joe. You think about the *Rosa* when she's rolling along nice like this, when the sun comes out of a crimson sea, or the sky is all bright with the sunset. You think about these things and you come to your senses, eh, Joe?"

"I thought about them, Louie, and I'll still take the machine-shop."

Louie's eyes rolled toward the overhead. "This comes from having no feeling for your boat," he cried with exasperation.

"It's just a means of transportation to me," Joe said bluntly. "Like a car or a train or a plane."

"That is bad talk," Louie said. "And it is because your boat has no place in your heart that the men feel uneasy about you, Joe, though you're a good skipper. They know that the *Rosa* may become resentful, as would a neglected woman."

FOR two days the *Rosa* sailed southward and the storm gods withheld their fury. Their Olympian palaces rose among the architectural clouds to the eastward; by dawn they were tinted with splendor when the coastal mountains were tipped with fire. The sea shimmered like hammered silver under the molten sun and the stifling air was charged with waiting forces.

Louie Randini interpreted what these signs might mean to a 250-ton tuna-boat and concern deepened in his eyes. Repeatedly he begged Joe to run around the storm or to go into port. But with his glimpse of freedom if the *Rosa* made a good catch, Joe refused.

The men were in the galley abaft the wheelhouse at breakfast the third day when there came the lookout's cry of *"Tuna!"* They jostled each other crowding through the doors, and dashed forward. Young Frankie Giannos was yelling as he climbed down the rigging.

"Tuna! tuna! tuna! millions of them!"

Beyond the *Rosa's* bow the sea boiled like water pounding over a reef. Silver glimmered from thousands of leaping bodies, and then part of their flashing brilliance was gone as a pall of shadow moved westward from the coast. Glancing skyward, Joe saw that the overcast was spreading. Sunlight backlighted the clouds briefly, before fading to a pale glow. A wind sighed, riffling the seas. Came a sharper breath, a low piping that set the flag flapping astern.

The mate was beside Joe now, gripping his arm and pointing eastward. The light had gone out of the clouds. Black thunder heads marched across the darkening sky and draped beneath them were gray rain curtains.

"Joe, we'd be smart to run for it."

Joe laughed. "You tell the men that, now that they've seen tuna!"

Already the crew were aft. For a moment Joe watched the silver and purple and gold bodies breaking water as the boat drifted into the school. They appeared to be one-pole tuna, lighter fish of less than 35 pounds. Then a larger fish broke water, a fish that Joe estimated must weigh nearly 150 pounds. He felt uneasy, and hoped there were not many such four-pole tuna. Usually you found only fish of the same size in a school, but on rare occasions there were three- and four-pole tuna in a school of smaller fish, and that's when you had trouble.

Now, hurrying aft, Joe found Tony Patino and five other fishermen lowering the iron racks from the port side. When suspended from their chains, their grilled bottoms were bare inches above water. Each rack had a low rail on the seaward side, against which the men could brace their knees when landing fish.

A "chummer" was already at the bait-tank, ladling sardines and anchovies from the tank with his long-handled dip-net, and casting handfuls beyond the rack. These bait-fish, or chums, swam toward the *Rosa* for shelter, drawing tuna toward the boat.

Louie ran up with an armload of poles and Joe helped check the feathered lures attached to the hooks. In the water, the lures bore a passing resemblance to a squid, a tuna's favorite food.

The mate glanced up uneasily as a forked tongue of lightning cleft the sky. The crackling that followed was almost lost beneath the wind's shrill piping.

"Music to work by," Joe shouted

boisterously. "Pretty good, eh, Louie?" But the mate didn't smile.

Joe took a pole and lowered himself to the rack. A captain was only another fisherman when fishing began. He cast his squid lure as Tony, Mario and Louie climbed over the rail and dropped to the rack. There was a silver blaze like the thrust of a rapier. Joe yelled. A tuna, breaking water, fought at the end of his line. Skillfully employing the force of its strike to help him, he sent the wriggling fish flying over his head. It fell from the barbless hook and flopped on the deck above and behind him. Joe whipped his lure back into the solidly massed school of fish.

ALMOST immediately Tony and Mario and Louie hooked tuna and sent them sailing over the rail. From farther along the rack came the cries of fishermen landing their first fish.

Then talking ceased, the men becoming absorbed by the fish fighting for chums and lures. Behind them Frankie Giannos worked knee-deep in flopping fish. He tried to keep them moving forward before the catch grew too deep around his rubber boots. He freed embedded hooks for the fishermen to save them time, and occasionally uttered a startled oath when he failed to duck a hook and lost pieces of skin and clothing.

"A thousand curses!" Mario Costa wailed.

Joe stopped on a forward swing to look. The little fisherman leaned all his weight against a curved pole. His knees were braced against the rack railing; his long mustache quivered with indignation.

Joe realized that Mario would struggle until pulled overboard rather than endure the joshing due a fisherman who lost his pole. Then Joe saw the large fish—a three- or four-pole tuna that didn't belong in this school. He lowered his hook and jerked upward, not really expecting that he'd be lucky enough to snag the hook in the gills of Mario's fish. When he did and was forced to exert all his strength, pain darted through Joe's bad foot. Their poles creaked as the fish broke water and then tried to sound.

Tony turned and saw they were in trouble. He tried to snag his hook in the big fish's gills, but it was not until his fourth attempt that he succeeded. Then the tuna thrashed so wildly that the rack shook with their weight. The three poles were curved like scimitars; they were on the verge of being pulled over when the mate saw their plight.

"Wait—I help you!" Louie shouted. "Frankie, throw me the gaff!"

For several moments they struggled, until Frankie appeared with the gaff. He threw it accurately to Louie, and the mate, leaning far over the rail, slipped the point beneath the gills and with the help of the other three fishermen, brought the fish aboard.

"What for a little guy like you always got to catch the biggest fish?" Tony demanded angrily. "Why don't you stick to fish your size?"

Mario sputtered as he waited for Frankie to free his hook.

The surges rolled in around their rubber boots as the seas rose, splintering into salty spray that drenched them to the skins. Presently a backwash threw Mario Costa off-balance just as another large fish struck. He was pulled over the low rail. Joe jumped over the rail, descending feet first into the mass of silver bodies. He grasped Mario's belt as the fish sounded and snatched the heavy pole from Mario's hand.

"Always the big ones, you got to catch!" Tony said as he caught the little man's arm. And he spat over the rail in disgust.

Big barracuda had severed the tails of several tuna they were lifting from the water. With that recollection sending chills down his spine, Joe didn't wait for help. Grasping the rail, he quickly clambered onto the rack.

At first the fishing was sport, then work, but as the hours passed it became a test of endurance.

Joe wondered dully how many scores of times he had put his weight behind his pole to send tuna flying over the rail. His aching arms became dead things that he could move only by force of will. When he or the other men hooked a three- or four-pole tuna, his companions on the rack cursed their luck in finding a mixed school. But

Joe now helped them land the big fish in weary silence.

AS the wind strengthened, the seas curling away from the ship became harder to brace against, for Joe's right foot ached so steadily that he was leaning most of his weight on the other side. Sometimes, stumbling like a punch-drunk fighter, he grasped the rail to keep from going overboard. But there was no time to rest, nor even time to snatch a bite of food while the *Rosa* was in the school. Hunger ceased bothering him when the boat began pitching and rolling heavily; food then would only have nauseated him.

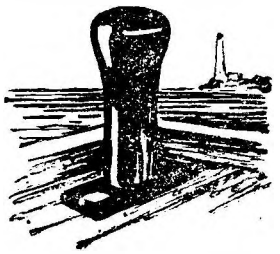
"Joe," Frankie called down, "I can't keep up no longer, and the fish will wash overboard if the seas get any heavier."

"Come on, men," Joe said. "We got to give Frankie a hand."

Daylight was precious. The fishermen swore at Frankie, and two men helping him, for not packing fish forward to the fish well while conditions were favorable. Now fish were slid forward and dropped down into the refrigerator tank. The chummer kept casting bait as they worked, so that the boat was still in the school when the men returned to the racks.

Hour after hour fishing held good, though it seemed to Joe that they were taking more of the heavier fish that had intermingled with the school as the day wore to a close. He was nearly exhausted when darkness ended the long ordeal.

They washed and crowded into the galley for a cup of coffee and a sandwich



before returning to work. There was no time for a real meal with the seas growing increasingly heavy, for their catch must be stowed below.

The *Rosa* had not yet been reconverted with salt-brine tanks, and it was necessary to pack the fish in crushed ice. Joe was grateful that this was not part of a captain's work. He had "iced down" tons of tuna in the past, but now he was glad to escape the hours of standing in cracked ice and stacking fish. His foot wouldn't have stood much more cold.

More than that, he was anxious to get under way. The wind, which had been rising for hours, buffeted the *Rosa* with hard, pounding gusts as she turned northward. The feathered seas were building up. And the little tuna-boat, designed to ride and not plough through them, rose on the surging hills of water and fell in swift, heart-chilling descents. The rigging was an instrument upon which the wind played its long, shrill notes. The whistling died to a low, mournful fluting when the foaming hillocks slid from beneath her, so that he heard clearly the sustained seething, rushing sounds of churning waters, the clapping of breaking seas, the tortured creaking and wrenching of strained cross-braces and timbers.

Clinging to the jerking wheel and trying to ignore the throbs of pain resulting from bracing both feet squarely on the duckboard, Joe was sustained by the thought that Louie would relieve him when the fish were iced down. After sufficient time elapsed for the hatches to be battened down, Joe decided that the mate was eating before reporting. Then, as if a wintery wind were blowing down his spine, it came to Joe that Louie could never reach the wheelhouse—for the past hour that had been impossible—and he must fight alone.

Only hope of relief had prevented him from realizing that before. Past experience in other gales acquainted Joe with probable conditions aboard. The men in all likelihood were unable even to reach their cabins, let alone the wheelhouse, and must be trapped in the galley.

It was one thing to endure pain and hunger and weariness for an endurable span of time. But now Joe's stomach constricted when he peered through the windows. The seas were flecked with phosphorescent fire that showed only too vividly the walls of water beyond the bow, to port and starboard. The seas smothered the *Rosa* in foam, crashed and boomed in

frothing cascades over the bow, beat down in sheets upon the wheelhouse and hissed along the decks.

HE was shaken by the sense of his aloneness and the impossibility of any relief. Not even from the hearts of his men could he draw any strength. Joe knew now that Louie was right: the men respected his seamanship, but they felt that the sea was not in his blood. They had no blind faith in him such as they had once had in his father and brothers. He was a competent skipper; that was all.

My stubbornness got us into this, Joe thought. *Now I've got to save this boat if it can be done.*

Most of all he feared mechanical failure such as a broken shaft or a clogged fuel line, for to Joe the *Rosa* was only a machine upon which you rode the seas, not a personality as different from other tuna-boats as one woman from another. Before long a clammy chill settled over him as he wondered whether this craft of timbers and engines might capsize; be mauled until she could no longer withstand the destructive stresses.

With the smaller catches made earlier on the southward passage, Joe guessed there must be 180 tons of tuna aboard. But no longer did he believe these catches worth the chances he had taken. It was no longer a gale. This was a *chubasco,* the thing most feared by tuna-men.

The wind rose, wrathful and shrill, and the seas tumbled in climbing and falling hills about the *Rosa.* Joe speculated on what would happen if the little boat took the full brunt of those tons of maddened waters. It would be the end, he felt sure. And he tried by spinning the wheel first port, then starboard, to prevent that disaster. There was a chill in his blood, in his very bones. But always the tuna-boat climbed after each plunge, her bulkheads creaking and rasping, the whole boat shuddering in sudden frenzies when her propeller was lifted from the seas.

Joe himself was dead tired. The hours of standing on his crippled foot and heaving fish aboard had left him with too little strength for this long ordeal at the wheel. Several times only the heeling or plunging of the ship awakened his dulled senses. And then at length, like a fighter groggy from too much pounding, Joe's grip relaxed on the wheel. Before his fatigue-drugged mind could respond, a beam sea caught the *Rosa,* and Joe was flung as if by a catapult against a bulkhead.

Too nearly unconscious to grasp clearly what happened next, he was dimly aware of the *Rosa* wallowing in the turbulent seas. Walls of water seethed over the wheelhouse, then pounded and shook the tuna-boat as she lay on her beam ends. Above the crashing thunder of the seas, Joe heard the thump of loosened gear somewhere below and the clatter of breaking china in the galley. The *Rosa* recovered, sluggishly.

And almost instantly she heeled over again. Glass splintered with a ringing clatter under the impact of water and it flowed like a flume across the wheelhouse deck. Joe was driven against the bulkhead with paralyzing force. He thought for a moment that his sight was gone when the lights went out and the wheelhouse was plunged into darkness. The boat trembled and shook under the seas' hammering, every timber screeching and creaking with strained protest.

She's breaking up! Joe thought, too numb from the last blow to move a muscle. *This is how my father died. This is the way my brothers Leonardo and Vincente and Francisco left this world. This is how men are lost at sea!*

There was nothing Joe could do to save the *Rosa* as he lay there waiting for the rending timbers to plunge him into the sea. But no timbers parted. He sensed that the little boat was miraculously rising and it was as if he were drawing air again into his lungs.

I have done nothing, Joe thought. *Yet we are saved!*

Staggering erect as the boat righted itself, he groped across the house and once more felt the reassuring wheel spokes in his palms. The icy sensation of disaster went out of Joe with a rush.

"We'll do it, old girl!" he cried, and laughed again.

THERE were other bad moments when the boat was clawed by the *chubasco,* moments when shudders passed through

her staunch frame and the water dashed cold through the broken wheelhouse windows. But never again was Joe doubtful of the outcome. His boat was built to ride the seas like a cork, not to knife through them like a transoceanic greyhound. She had taken the worst the seas could give and she was still afloat.

By dawn the wind had died to a faint whisper and though the seas were a gray wilderness of restless waters, Joe knew the *chubasco* was over. Nick Bonetti came to relieve him.

Joe staggered along the deck like a man in a dream, but there was a warming sense of gratitude and deliverance in his heart. He stepped into the galley and saw that all his crew were safe, though Louie's arm was in a sling. Suddenly Joe's eyes smarted and without knowing why he did it, he turned and kissed the bulkhead.

"You're a great old lady," he said, his voice choked with emotion.

The impulse came deep from Joe's heart, but his cheeks burned when he turned to face the men. He expected taunts and laughter. There was no laughter. Mario abruptly rubbed his eyes, and the faces of several of the other men were working. Joe's eyes widened a little at seeing the remaining fishermen smiling. Never before had they smiled at Joe in quite that way.

Then, leaping up, Tony slipped his arm around Joe's shoulders.

"We got a skipper, eh, boys?"

There was a roar of agreement.

"What the hell," Tony shouted at the cook. "You give Joe a cup of coffee! Some breakfast quick, see! . . . Here, Joe, you take my seat. You get some chow, you don't look so white, eh?"

"Okay," Joe said, dropping limply to the seat.

Tony kept patting him on the shoulder. "Your old man, he often say, 'A man's first mistress is his ship.' You know what he mean now, Joe?"

"Sure," Joe said.

"It don't make sense," Louie said. "A skipper who can take a boat through a *chubasco* like that one working in a machine-shop."

"Who's working in a machine-shop?" Joe asked, and his voice bristled. "Don't talk crazy, Louie!"

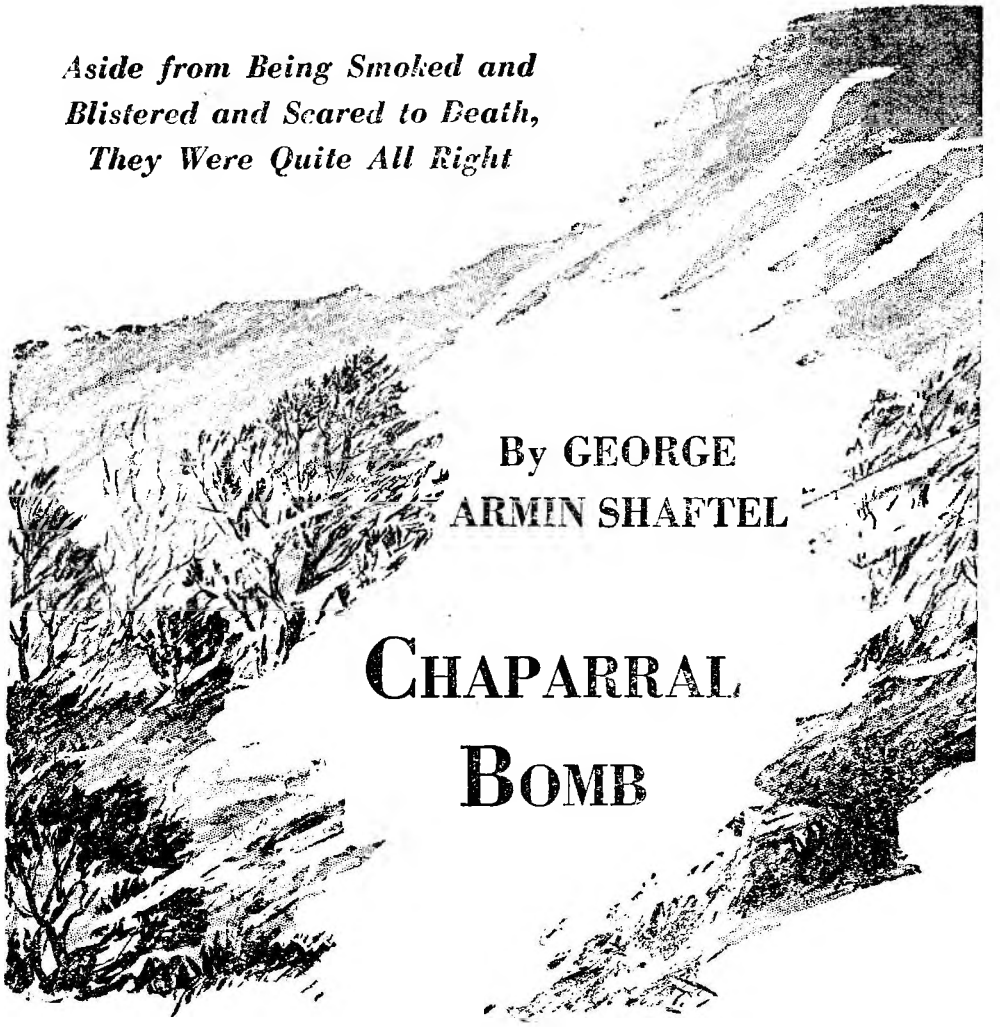
Tearing Down

By FRANK BONE

ROAMING Caterpillar tractors, closing night;
Heavy wagons leaving crowded midway bright.
One more hour of gaiety and time to dine
Left along the State Fair's flashing banner line.

Then will loaded show trains whistle and depart;
Sleeping time of those of wand'ring gypsy heart.
Tented city, rides and sideshows, games of skill,
Long a mem'ry to the hosts it gave a thrill.

Aside from Being Smoked and Blistered and Scared to Death, They Were Quite All Right



By GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

CHAPARRAL BOMB

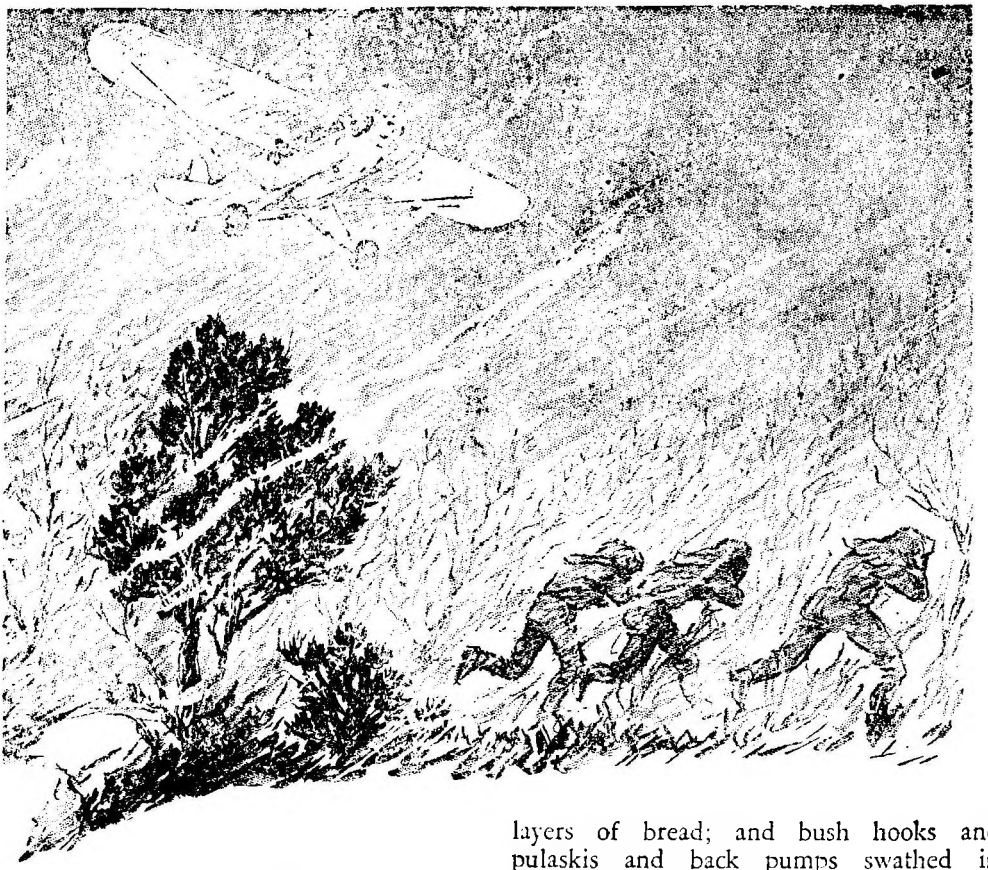
I

THE Forestry Service plane rocked in the turbulent air over the fire, and smoke obscured Steve Haynes' vision of the ground. He gestured for the pilot beside him to nose downward. Joe Cagle cocked an eyebrow and compressed his lips ruefully, but pushed the control wheel forward and the ship dived into the uprush of smoke.

Steve Haynes felt his nerves crawl. He knew fires. He knew them intimately from fighting them on the ground. Now, as an assistant fire-control engineer, he had to study them from the air, and he didn't like it. He had seen birds drawn helplessly into the vortex of suction and upblast about a blaze.

The plane bored out into clear air, and the shape and momentum of the fire was sharply outlined below. It had burned a huge black shield across Cholla Basin. Its western edge was a crescent of flames; and the black desolation behind it was stippled with gray banners whipping from smouldering debris. The slant of those smoke streamers put a pucker of dismay between Steve Haynes' gray eyes. For it meant wind. Lots of wind. A "santa ana" was blowing up out of Mexico. When you're fighting fire, he told himself angrily, you can always count on the worst happening.

He saw the men on the ground, then,



and he bit his lip in helpless vexation. They seemed so thin and puny a line of defense. It wasn't his fault, he reminded himself. All suppression crews were green and undermanned just now. *Trouble with you is that you've got an ingrown sense of responsibility. Take it easy! Pete Haskell is a competent fire boss. He's got those men humping, and they've almost finished their fire line.*

He picked up the radio microphone, and droned Pete Haskell's name until the fire boss answered.

"Pete, we've brought tools and grub for you."

"We can sure use 'em, Steve. Let 'em drop."

The plane came over the fire-fighters below, and Steve signaled with his arm. In the cabin behind him, two men waited beside the trap door in the plane floor. Swiftly they pushed out the "food bombs" —bundles of eggs and butter and spam carefully wrapped and cushioned between layers of bread; and bush hooks and pulaskis and back pumps swathed in sleeping bags and tent canvas.

Dropping, the parachutes of wool sacking bulged wide, and the supplies moved earthward on a long, swift slant. Steve swore softly. That wind! It could explode a merely bad fire into a very fancy conflagration.

The bundles reached earth, and the men waved grateful acknowledgment. Joe Cagle waggled the wings in answer. All cargo unloaded now, he turned the Travelair homeward.

Words rasped in the radiophones. It was the fire boss.

"Steve, I sent Bill Bransom and four men to mop up spot fires along the ridge to the northwest. He was to keep in contact by radio. I've been calling and calling but he doesn't answer."

Steve Haynes' pulse skipped a beat. He was a stockily built young fellow, possessed of a calm steadiness unusual in a man still under thirty. There was quiet strength in the set of his friendly lips, quiet self-assurance in the level glance of

his gray eyes. He emphatically did not believe in borrowing trouble; but always during a fire he expected disastrous moments. He fought against it. He told himself it was a morbid and neurotic streak in him. But he couldn't suppress it.

Now had come one of those moments. But he kept his voice casual and reassuring as he answered Haskell.

"Likely his radio is out. We'll look for him, Pete."

The pilot nosed the plane low along the fringe of the burn.

Steve studied the terrain. Even as he looked for that missing crew, his trained eye noted details. The low swells were not covered with tall timber, like northern California, but with the jungle-thick chaparral of the hot country behind San Diego. Now the burned-over area was dotted with smouldering points that would glow like a myriad fireflies at night. The mop-up job was going to be slow and tough. Every ember of sumac and toyon must be smothered with dirt. Every punk-like heart of yucca must be torn apart. Every burning fragment of sage and creosote bush must be doused with water. Otherwise that rising wind would blow sparks into the unburned areas beyond and start new fires that might run utterly out of control.

The pilot tapped his arm and pointed.

"Steve, there they are!"

He saw the crew, then, and caught a sharp breath of dismay and grabbed up the microphone.

"Bransom! *Bransom*!" he spoke urgently. "Haynes calling Bransom!" he repeated over and over. But got no answer.

BILL BRANSOM'S crew had worked into a small box-canyon to cut a line around a spot fire that had started in dense brush. But already, with that whooping wind behind it, the blaze was jumping their line, and getting away from them. But what was even worse, it was spreading across the mouth of the cove, making a trap of it.

"Go down and cut your motor!" Steve ordered his pilot.

Joe Cagle nodded and gunned his motor into a shrieking *bra-a-a-a-u-h* to catch attention, and glided toward the canyon. The grimy faces of the smoke-eaters were turned up as the plane came low over them. Steve stuck his arm out his opened window and gestured violently and shouted.

"Get out! She's cutting you off!"

His words probably were not heard, but his wild gesture had meaning for Bill Bransom. As the plane rose and banked in a turn, Steve saw the five men throw down their tools and start running, Bransom leading them. But as they neared the mouth of the box-canyon, they had to stop. For already the fire had burned across the entrance, and they were cut off. They were trapped. Climbing the sheer walls was out of the question; it would be a slow job, and the fire would catch them.

STEVE saw them pull off their jackets and pull them over their heads. Inwardly Steve applauded Bransom's good sense. There was but one possibility of escape, and shrewd old Bill was going to attempt it —to race through the thinnest front of the fire itself. But it was so damned risky! *And we can't help 'em. We can't do a single thing but sit here and watch!*

They were running into the edge of fire now. Steve winced and his skin crawled. He knew how smoke scorched into your lungs. He knew how skin writhed and split and peeled under the gusts of heat. Heads down, the men were lunging through the smoke.

One man sprawled flat. Bill Bransom turned and ran back and hoisted the fallen man onto his big shoulder and started on again. But he couldn't run, now; and he hesitated, as if uncertain. Smoke whipped in a gray mist over him. The flames were pale in the sunlight; dark-green brush curled and blackened with appalling swiftness. *Bill, keep going! This way, man! This way!* Steve pleaded. And his heart leaped when Bransom started on again.

But Bransom took only a few steps, and collapsed once more. Smoke rolled over him. And there was nothing that Steve could do but strain to see, all unaware that he was shouting, that he was hammering his clenched fist against his thigh in helpless, raging grief.

Momentarily the smoke cleared. Bransom and the other man still lay where they

had fallen, unmoving; and their faded blue denims now were black.

"Joe! Land somewhere! Get me down there!"

But Joe Cagle sharply swerved the plane homeward.

Steve caught a long shuddery breath, and slumped back in his seat. Presently he lifted the microphone to his lips. He started to speak, but his throat was locked, and he had to wait a moment.

He called his base and made a brief report.

"Joe," he said, a bit later, as the plane neared the Forestry Service field at Picacho, "I yelled at you, back there. Guess I was a little bit crazy."

Joe Cagle pressed Steve's arm.

"You take things too hard, guy. Look, when we get in, I'll phone Mrs. Bransom."

"Thanks, Joe, but—that's my job."

Joe nodded. Steve sat in silence, stonily figuring the cost of the fire, so far. Already it had denuded 20,000 acres of watershed cover that would take twenty years to replace. And it had taken two lives. Two honest, hard-working lives. Two men who had families who needed them, and friends who would miss them.

Why? Maybe it was because somebody threw a burning cigarette out of a car. Maybe it was a spark from a quail hunter's coffee fire. Maybe it was a match stolen out of a cabin by a pack rat, and gnawed alight. Maybe it was an old beer bottle lying in the dirt, that had focused the sun's rays onto grass as dry and inflammable as celluloid. Some such accident.

And maybe it wasn't an accident at all.

He was going to find out, Steve told himself savagely. He was going to find out what, or *who,* had started this fire.

TWO big transport planes were on the field, unloading men, when Steve and Joe landed. The District Ranger had wisely telegraphed to Oregon for experienced fire-fighters.

"How does she look, Steve?" Ranger Prentiss asked.

"She's under control, except for one break-through over the ridge. But while this wind blows, she's going to keep on jumping the fire line."

He sketched the progress of the burn on a map, and they made quick plans. Trucks roared off with the reinforcements. More supplies and cans of water and mono-ammonium phosphate were loaded onto the Forestry plane. And the Ranger went aboard, to observe the fire from aloft.

Steve walked into the office and gave further orders. The bodies of the two dead men were to be brought out as soon as they could be reached. Then Steve sat down at the telephone and put a call through to San Diego. And as he waited for Mrs. Bransom to answer, he sat there taut and heartsick. How could you tell a woman that her man was dead? How could you take the shock and pain out of the news? You couldn't gloss over the facts for Mrs. Bransom. She knew. She knew fires, and what they could do to a man. She—

"Here's your party," said the operator.

Hanging up the phone when he finished, Steve sighed deeply, and just sat there, rubbing his stubbled chin. Mary Kyle, the dispatcher, eyed him solicitously.

"I must look like a Bill Mauldin doughfoot with a hangover," he said.

"Why don't you get some sleep, Mr. Haynes?"

"I'd keep fighting fire, Mary. Besides, I've got a job."

He bent over a map on the big desk. The first smoke of this fire had been sighted from two lookout towers. Each had phoned in a reading on the blaze. He studied the intersecting lines on the map that marked the exact spot of the first upcurling wreath of smoke. It was on the Martin McEnnis ranch, in a wide saddle between low hills. Steve sketched a map.

Mary Kyle came to the table and set a glass of water and two aspirin tablets in front of him. He grinned at her, his tired face suddenly warm and boyish, and thanked her.

"Relax, Steve. You can't carry everybody's troubles."

"I guess I am a dope, at that."

He swallowed the aspirin, then nodded so-long and hurried from the office.

He had a small panel truck in the garage, assigned to his own use. He climbed in, and started down the highway south toward the

fire, driving rapidly. It was mid-afternoon, and he wanted all the daylight that was left.

It took him an hour to reach the first burned-over area. He left the highway, then, and turned west onto a ranch road that cut through black, ash-strewn hills. Though it was two days since the fire burned here, spots of smoldering debris still sent up wraiths of smoke that stubbornly bowed flat when the wind gusts hit them.

He was on the McEnnis Ranch, now; and coming through the line of hills, he reached the wide saddle where the fire had first sprung into disastrous life.

He stopped his car, and left it beside the road. The road served as a firebreak, since the wind was blowing away from it, and the fire had not crossed. Methodically, he started pacing the burned-over ground below the roadway, pausing at every clump of burned brush to peer within, studying the ash-strewn soil for possible footprints.

The lowering sun was still hot, and he was bone-tired; and irritably he began to wonder if he wasn't being a fool. Even more irritably he reminded himself that this was routine, and that he had a job to do. An empty hour passed; and his alertness began to blunt, and he began to think of Bill Bransom and rebellious anger was a pressure rising beyond tolerance within him.

Then he saw it. Abruptly he stopped short, staring.

The edge of a footprint was outlined in the soil by a slim crescent of ash. It was pointed toward a charred heap of brush.

Heart thumping, he peered into the burned clump.

And a low-voiced "I'll be damned!" came from his lips; and for a long moment he just stared with the mild shock of a person who actually finds what he expected, yet dared not hope, to find.

He was looking at a little tripod of sticks to which had been wired a small magnifying glass like the lens of a flashlight. Beneath it was a clump of little sticks, match sticks, bound together; some fifty or sixty of them. All were charred black now, burned through. A touch would crumple them into ashes.

"That flashlight lens was set to focus the noon sun on those match heads. Likely there was dry grass and twigs piled around, too." He bent, and carefully sniffed of the ashes. "I bet a rhodokrit test would show that kerosene was sloshed onto the stuff. Simple stunt, but sure-fire."

He took a half-dozen matches from his pocket, and held them in a tight clump under the lens in such a way that the sunlight was focused on them. Within a surprisingly brief five seconds his test matches flared alight. Yes, it was sure-fire, all right!

He stood there, staring unseeingly at the lens and tripod, his mouth hardening and a profound and bitter anger swelling within him. The range fire had been deliberately set. And all the expense of fighting it, the damage it had caused and the two men it had killed, were the result of somebody's calculating and malicious intention.

"I'm going to give this story to the newspapers and get them to play it up big. 'Firebug commits double murder by remote control.' I'll have 'em print what damage this fire has done to the range, too. This land'll be ruined in a few years, now. When the rains hit this denuded ground, the runoff will gouge out gulleys and cut-banks and wash away the top soil. Might be a good idea to print pictures of this valley every spring, to show how the range is eroding to hell and gone. And if I catch the man who set this thing off, I'm going to make an object lesson of him."

He got a camera from his truck and made a careful series of pictures of the incendiary device in place.

Then, with a shovel, he scooped the whole thing up and carried it into the truck, to take back to the Ranger station.

"Wonder if there's any fingerprints on the lens?"

He took white lead powder from his kit, and with a fine camel's-hair brush applied it to the top of the flashlight lens. Part of his job, since the war made fires set by saboteurs something to expect, was to teach Forestry Service employees the rudiments of arson detection.

He held a magnifying glass over the incendiary lens—and blurted an excited "Ah!" A broad thumbprint was visible.

Thinking hard, he decided that the fire was probably set by a local man. Perhaps somebody right here on this ranch.

Steve did not delay. He stowed things away and slid under the steering wheel, and started driving to the McEnnis Ranch. The road lifted over the ridge, and dropped into

another basin, and angled sharply southward.

GUSTS of wind made the light truck stray to the far side of the roadway. He fought it back; and glanced at the sky and frowned. The eastern horizon was blanked out by the dirty yellow haze typical of a prolonged "santa ana." And he saw that smoke obscured the ridge to his left. The fire lay east of that ridge. If it jumped the ridge, this wind would drive it in a resistless rush across the whole basin, down onto McEnnis' ranch buildings.

It was almost suppertime when he pulled into the ranchyard, and the ranch crew were coming in from work. A truck unloaded a dozen Mexican nationals. In Spanish Steve asked for Martin McEnnis, and was told that McEnnis was busy in his office but would come out soon.

A Ford sedan drove into the yard, then. A girl stepped out of it, carrying a leather case like a doctor's instrument bag. The men all seemed to know her, and like her, for they greeted her with a lively chorus of *"Buenas tardes, Señorita!"* and she answered in fluent Spanish.

Steve's pulse skipped a beat. She was a lithe, shapely girl with a brisk manner and a quick, warm smile. Her hair was light brown, her skin very fair and her eyes a vivid blue. She saw Steve then, and nodded and said hello with an easy informality that at once erased the edge of shyness Steve was apt to feel when first meeting a pretty woman.

She noticed that he wore the Forestry Service uniform and badge, and she saw the lines of strain and fatigue on his face.

"Are you looking for Martin McEnnis?" she asked. He nodded, and she said, "You can be sure he'll show up for supper. Come along. I bet you haven't had a decent meal since that brush fire started."

He walked into the mess hall with her, a little stir of excitement in his tired nerves. The girl had a graceful walk that was nice to see, and her voice was low and pleasant. He pulled out a chair for her, and sat down beside her. She told him that her name was Ruth Mercer, and that she was a nurse from the Health Services Branch of the War Food Administration.

"It's my job to take care of the Mexican nationals brought in to do farm work around here," she explained.

An elderly Mexican cook with a young assistant then served food; good food, too—*chili rellano*, red beans, hash-brown potatoes, noodles, milk and coffee and coffee cakes as big as a shingle. As Steve ate, he studied the *braceros* at the other tables.

"Husky-looking bunch of men," he remarked.

"They're a picked bunch," Ruth Mercer said soberly. "We send a Public Health team down into Mexico to screen out applicants for work here who aren't competent or who carry disease. Not only that, but every man of them had to be passed by both Immigration and Department of Justice authorities."

MARTIN McENNIS strode in. He was a tall, good-looking man of thirty-five who could wear smart riding breeches and a suede jacket and look natural in them. His hair was blond, but his eyes were brown and deep-set in crow's feet that made his smile expansive.

He grinned at Ruth, putting his hand on her shoulder a moment, and nodded as she introduced Steve.

"Sorry I'm late for chow, but I was talking long-distance to my bank."

"Money troubles?"

"Yeah, in reverse," he said, with good-humored irony. "Used to be, I was always fighting to get my mortgage renewed. Now I'm hunting for mortgages to buy. The way beef is selling, the dough comes in faster than I can invest it."

"Maybe you need an extravagant wife."

He cocked an eye at her.

"It isn't leap year, but I'll accept your application."

She laughed delightedly, though color did warm her cheeks.

"Why, Martin! In front of a witness, too. You'd better be careful."

But she does like him, Steve reflected. And why not? The guy had looks and an easy, smiling way about him and pots of money. Steve sighed. Damn it, why did he always meet a fine girl after she was involved with somebody else?

"Martin," Ruth Mercer remarked, "a couple of your men I don't recognize. Were they transferred from Warner's?"

"Huh-uh, and they've got no passports, either."

"Oh, you're not using 'wets,' are you!"

"Why not?" McEnnis shrugged. "I need men to cut alfalfa and build fence. Be practical, honey."

Ruth Mercer looked troubled.

Steve said, "These men don't look like ordinary Mexicans."

"What should they look like?" Ruth retorted. "Most people's idea of a Mexican is a dark, squat little man with a pock-marked face. It makes me furious! Look at that man at the end of the first table. He's small, he's dark, he's had smallpox. What part of Mexico do you think he's from?—he's from Joplin, Missouri, and his name is Sam Jones!"

"My foreman," McEnnis said. "He's a Methodist and works at it."

"Now look at that boy dishing out food in the kitchen. His skin is lighter than yours, Mr. Haynes, and his eyes are blue. He's just an ordinary good-looking kid like the boy who delivers your morning paper, but he can't speak a word of English and he comes from Xochimilco! Now look at that man at the middle of the second table. He's got a thin, beaked nose and big slant eyes—he looks like an Aztec prince, but his skin is light, and he's six-feet-three, and he'll use the money he makes working here to finish his last year of medical school in Mexico City! There isn't a man in the whole crew who's a stereotyped Mexican!"

Steve grinned at her.

"Okay, I deserved that, but I'm convinced now."

She laughed then, and said in apology, "They're such good, willing boys, so polite, and so darn grateful for anything you do for them! I like them a lot."

She liked them; and being the forthright, generous person she was, she stuck up for them, Steve reflected.

"Haynes," McEnnis said soberly, "I offered to put my men to work fighting fire, but the District Ranger refused them. Said if any foreign nationals got killed he'd have the State Department on his neck. Did you come about that?"

"No. I came to find out what started the fire."

"What was it? Spontaneous combustion?"

"Spontaneous as a booby trap!"

"What d'you mean?"

"This fire was deliberately set."

Ruth Mercer caught her breath. McEnnis frowned.

"You're sure of that?"

Briefly Steve described the flashlight lens set on a tripod to focus the sunlight onto a bunch of matches.

"I'll be damned," McEnnis murmured. "Look, you got any way of discovering just who this firebug is?"

"He left his signature," Steve said grimly. "A thumbprint on the flashlight lens."

"Good! You know, my workers are all fingerprinted. All we need to do is compare their passports with your thumbprint. If one of my men is guilty, we'll ferret him out in a couple of minutes."

Ruth Mercer stood up.

"Martin, I've got to open my clinic. A case of smallpox was found in Escondido and I'm ordered to re-vaccinate every foreign national on my list. Right away. I've got to finish here by eight o'clock so I can go on to Byler's Ranch and do the same for his men tonight."

"Sure, honey, you get busy. I'll line the boys up for you. I'll use this smallpox thing as an excuse to ask for their passports. I'll say it's a check-off."

RUTH walked into a small storeroom, and took her equipment out of her medical case, and made ready. McEnnis talked to his crew, and gathered up their passports and brought them to Steve; and Steve took them out to his truck.

The eastern horizon was dense with smoke that burned a somber gold with the late sun upon it. He stared a moment, then climbed into his car and switched on his two-way radio, and caught a tag end of talk on the Forestry Service wave-length.

"—damn it, Cagle, we need some of that mono-ammonium over here!" and Joe Cagle's answering, *"Look, Chief, this crate's no B-29. I've got to go back to the field for another load."*

Steve grinned. Joe Cagle's salty disrespect was a form of affection; if he disliked you he was very formal. Steve switched on a strong light inside the truck, set the flashlight lens on a shelf and went to work. The *braceros'* passports were just cards, postcard size, with data, a small photograph of the

worker on one side, and his thumbprint in the opposite corner.

Through a magnifying glass, Steve compared the incriminating print on the lens used to set the fire with the thumbprint on each passport. One after another he examined. Disappointment began to grow in him as his pile of suspects dwindled.

And then he found it. The 9th card he examined. The thumbprint on Pablo Ramirez's card was the print on the incendiary lens. Identical! No shadow of doubt about it! *"Pablo Ramirez. Age: twenty-one. Home: Irapuato, state of Guanajuato."*

Steve sat back, a hard, challenging glint in his gray eyes.

"Mr. Pablo Ramirez, you're going to have your day in court, and may God have mercy on your soul."

THE radio had been humming peacefully; but as Steve pushed back the seat and stood up, urgent words rasped from the loudspeaker. *"Prentiss, calling Donaldson! She's jumping our line up here! Sweeping over the ridge. Bring your crew north at once! I need every man you've got! You hear me? Come in, Donaldson!"*

Donaldson verified the order, and the radio became quiet. Steve thoughtfully switched it off, and jumped to the ground. He glanced again at the eastern sky. The smoke was boiling up heavy, no doubt of it. It was closer, too.

He walked into the mess hall. McEnnis' men were lined up now, waiting their turn in the clinic. Steve walked into the storeroom, and sat down on a bench beside Martin McEnnis.

"Well?" the rancher demanded, whispering. "Any luck?"

"That thumbprint is Pablo Ramirez's."

"*That guy!* I'd never've suspected. I'll get him!"

"No. We'll wait."

"Damn it, if that lousy *pelado*—"

"No." Steve's gray eyes hardened with command, and McEnnis looked away, and shrugged. "We'll wait," Steve repeated.

Ruth Mercer was scratching a *bracero's* arm with a needle, and administering the vaccine. The man had a head cold; and she gave him nose drops when she finished the vaccination.

Done, she said, *"Es todos, Señor,"* and the man murmured a *mil gracias* and went out; and the next in line entered.

"You look gloomy, Juan," she said in Spanish, after greeting him. "Doesn't Lola write to you?"

Lola did write, the worker confided. She wrote that if he did not come home, she would marry Jaime. And Juan couldn't go home. Not until he had finished paying for the farm which his big United States dollars were buying for his family. That would take another year of work here.

"But you *can* go home, Juan," she told him. "Just for a month's furlough!" It could be arranged. Of course, the trip would be at his own expense. But Lola was worth it, wasn't she? But yes, a thousand times yes! said Juan. Only, what then? He couldn't bring her back into the United States with him. "Give her a baby, Juan! That'll keep her busy and keep her wanting you back," Ruth advised; and they laughed together.

Other patients followed. She innoculated them; she taped up one man's chest, to ease a muscular ache under the shoulder; she dressed an infected thumb for the next man. She was in a hurry; but not a hint of it marred her cordial talk with each *bracero*. Steve realized that he was staring, that he was watching every move of her deft fingers, watching the graceful way she walked, and smiling in response to her easy, vital laughter.

He could like Ruth Mercer, he realized; he could like her an awful lot.

The next patient was hesitant, afraid. Diffidently in Spanish he asked Ruth if she would give him treatment. She asked why not, and he answered that he was a "wet."

"You're a human, aren't you?" she retorted, and smiled.

She vaccinated him; and then he told her that he was *enfermo no puedo dormir*—that he was ill, and could not sleep. At night he choked up so that he strangled, and his chest was full of pain. She took his pulse, she listened to his heart and to his breathing. And she turned away from him. Steve saw that the sparkle had died in her eyes.

"I'm afraid that this man has cardiac asthma," she told him and McEnnis in a low tone. "He'll have to be repatriated."

"I'll hand him over to the Immigration people," McEnnis said.

"No, Martin. It'll take time and red tape

before they'd finally send him home. He's got to go soon. I'll buy his ticket."

"You will not. With me rolling in dough! I'll do it."

"Since you insist," she said lightly. Steve caught the faint irony; but Martin McEnnis missed it. Ruth explained to the sick man that he was too ill to work. He took it stoically. But when she said that he would be given a ticket home, tears came into his eyes and he kissed her hand.

The next patient was Pablo Ramirez.

He was a stocky, well-built youngster with light skin and clean-cut handsome features. Ruth greeted him warmly and asked him if he felt better than he felt last time she saw him; and as she worked over him, he told her that he felt no better—that he was still troubled with persistent headaches, and weakness that kept him lying in his bunk all the time.

"Where nobody can watch him," McEnnis whispered to Steve.

RUTH took his pulse and temperature and blood pressure. She turned to Steve and McEnnis and said in English, "He's been complaining of illness for weeks, but I can find nothing wrong with him. I'll refer him to a doctor in Escondido, but I suspect what's wrong with him is psychoneurosis—a jag of acute homesickness. He'll have to be repatriated."

"After he's done a long stretch in prison," McEnnis snapped.

Steve said, "Ruth, ask him if he owns a flashlight."

Ruth's lips formed a startled "Oh!" of understanding. So Ramirez was the guilty man! She asked him the question.

He *had* owned a flashlight, he answered. But he had not been able to find it for over a week.

"You don't believe that!" McEnnis demanded of Steve.

"No. But I don't disbelieve it, either."

"Meaning what?" McEnnis snorted.

"Meaning I'm not sure that he's not telling the truth."

"What *are* you sure of?"

"That his flashlight lens was used to set the fire—which means that the firebug is very likely somebody from this ranch! McEnnis, the fire was sighted about twelve noon, on Wednesday. I want to know the whereabouts, late Wednesday morning, of every man on this ranch."

"Fair enough. All day Wednesday my foreman had a dozen men building a line fence to keep my cattle out of locoweed in Pima Canyon. Of the rest of my men, all but one worked with the kitchen crew, painting this bunkhouse. They will corroborate each other. One man, though, pretended to be sick, and lay in his bunk all day, and nobody watched him. That was Ramirez."

"A psychoneurosis isn't pretense," Steve said curtly.

"So you're still not satisfied. Maybe you'd like to know where *I* was Wednesday noon?" McEnnis said derisively.

"If you don't mind—" Steve said, with crisp control.

"I *don't* mind. I was in San Diego on Wednesday morning. Ruth will confirm it."

Ruth had finished the vaccinations, and was packing her medical bag. She nodded yes to McEnnis' words.

"I've been having headaches from eyestrain and I need glasses," he explained. "But I'll be damned if I'll wear specs. Who the hell ever heard of cowman hazing cattle out of the brush while wearing glasses astraddle his nose! So Ruth insisted that I see a Dr. Lewin Crager, who makes those new contact lenses. You know, the kind that fits over the eyeball. Blamed things cost a hundred and fifty bucks, but you don't look like a foxy grandpa when you're wearing them.

"Well, Dr. Crager examined my eyes Wednesday morning. Then I caught the eleven-thirty bus home—I don't have gas for trips to San Diego. At two-thirty I got off the bus at Junction, where Sam Jones was waiting with my car, as he'll confirm."

"That's so, Mr. Haynes," Ruth said. "I made the appointment with Dr. Crager for Martin over a month ago."

"Satisfied?" McEnnis demanded.

Frowning, Steve asked, "Tell me, have you ever heard of an Army magazine called *'Outfit'?"*

"No. Why?"

"It goes to soldiers in hospitals. I've been getting it ever since I got my medical discharge from the Army."

"So what?"

"So," Steve said sharply, "I'm still not sure that Ramirez set the fire."

McEnnis threw up this hands. "I give up!"

Steve sighed with weariness, and for a moment bent his head and rubbed his red-rimmed eyes. Then he sat up straight.

"Look, McEnnis. The firebug set an incendiary device of a lens and matches. If Ramirez sneaked out of the bunkhouse, Wednesday noon, and set that fire, why didn't he simply strike a match and touch off the dry grass brush? He could have got back to the bunkhouse unnoticed. So why should *he* have used a time device?"

"Ask him!"

"*A time device,*" Steve repeated sharply. "It makes sense in only one way—it was worked out to give the firebug a chance to have an alibi in case he needed one!"

"I still don't see why you're harping on me."

"That time device," Steve said, with slow emphasis, "could have been set up any time during Tuesday night. Where," he demanded bluntly, "were you Tuesday night, McEnnis?"

McEnnis jumped to his feet in rage.

"Damn it, why're you picking on me!"

"Because you're the only man with an obvious motive—"

"There's dozens of motives! Somebody with a grudge. Some psychopath with an insane compulsion to set fires!"

"—and because you've given me an alibi that's an out-and-out lie. Why should you do that if you're not covering up?"

"You're crazy! Man, you've gone completely haywire!"

"Martin, please," Ruth Mercer begged. "Sit down, and *calm* down. Mr. Haynes, why should Martin have set fire to his own grass?"

"Not to his grass, Miss Mercer. Oh, no! But to a wide basin that's covered with chaparral that too many ranchers mistakenly consider useless. Every year we have dozens of such cases. You watch the newspapers. Every year there are ranchers who look at land covered with sage and sumac and greasewood and creosote bush that cattle won't graze on, and wish to God that they could get rid of the damned stuff. You got thousands upon thousands of acres of chaparral, McEnnis. So you decided to burn it off, because next year it would all come up with grass that cattle could live on. You'd be able to feed maybe four hundred more head of beef, and at the price it's fetching now—"

"So help me, I didn't set that fire!"

"Then why are you covering up with a lie?"

"Damn you, *what* lie?"

"Martin!" Ruth gasped.

"You claim," Steve retorted, controlling his own inner lunge of anger, "that you were in San Diego on Wednesday morning, having your eyes examined by Dr. Lewin Crager.

"Last week I read in *Outfit* magazine that Dr. Crager had just been called to the big Army hospital at Pasadena. He's busy making contact lenses for servicemen. So he didn't give you an eye examination in San Diego on Wednesday."

"So you say, but I claim that he *was* in San Diego, and he *did* work on my eyes!"

And he stood pat on that, glaring at Steve. Ruth Mercer, her serious face pale, looked at McEnnis with deep and troubled intentness.

QUIETLY Steve insisted, "The fire was started with an incendiary device so that the firebug would have an alibi if necessary. He didn't expect that lens on a tripod to be found. Nor," Steve said bitterly, "did he expect a 'santa ana' to blow up on Wednesday evening. And he didn't expect that two men would lose their lives fighting the blaze today—"

"Oh, no!" Ruth cried out.

"Oh, yes. I saw it," Steve said, his voice suddenly harsh, "and one of those men was my friend. McEnnis, that incendiary device was set up Tuesday night. Can you account for your time on Tuesday night?"

"I certainly can! And Ruth will confirm it. Won't you, Ruth?" he asked her directly. "Tuesday nights, Ruth goes into San Diego. And last Tuesday afternoon, coming from a clinic at Carson's Ranch, she stopped by here and I went on into town with her. We had a late dinner together at Bernadetti's, and went to a late movie. Then we drove out to the beach and just talked a while. Ruth's mother had gone east, and I slept in her apartment, while Ruth went on to stay with a cousin. And early next morning Ruth had to start on her rounds, and left town. At nine o'clock I was in Dr. Crager's office.

That's how it was, and Ruth will corroborate it! Ask her!"

Steve looked at her. It seemed to him that for a moment of startled indecision Ruth Mercer could not answer.

Then she breathed, "Yes." And repeated it, more loudly than necessary, "Yes! Martin was with me until past two o'clock Tuesday night."

"Now you convinced?" McEnnis demanded. "I didn't have time to get back here Tuesday night to set that incendiary device, even if I'd *wanted* to!"

STEVE slumped back on the bench. He felt utterly spent from strain, and heartsick with frustration. McEnnis was lying. Steve was positive of that. But Ruth Mercer was corroborating the man's alibi. *So she's lying! She's lying, too!* And somehow that hurt, that hurt profoundly.

"And I'm helpless," Steve realized, utterly appalled. For as long as Ruth confirmed McEnnis' lie, his alibi would hold. Her lie would clear him. Would save him. "And there's nothing I can do about it! McEnnis will get off scot-free!"

McEnnis was watching him, warily trying to keep a grin of triumph from his handsome face. *He knows he's safe now!*

Angrily Steve came to his feet, saying, "Look, McEnnis—"

There was an interruption. McEnnis' foreman, stocky Sam Jones, came hurrying into the clinic, his pockmarked face working with excitement.

"Boss! The District Ranger just telephoned!"

"What about?" McEnnis demanded irritably.

"We g-got to evacuate! The fire's broke through the lines and is sweepin' over the basin!"

"Evacuate, hell!"

"We *got to!*" Sam Jones repeated wildly. "The Ranger said the fire's running away and can't be stopped—and either we get out of here in a hell of a hurry, or every damned one of us will burn."

Steve ran out of the room. The others followed him out of doors. They had to lean against the wind that poured out of the southeast. In stunned dismay they started across the valley. The horizon was blanked out by a towering wall of smoke; and beneath it, in a streaming race before that whooping wind, a line of fire was sweeping across the basin.

II

FOR Steve, that oncoming wall of smoke and fire was far more alarming a sight that for the others. From sore experience he knew what it could do. He knew how swiftly it was moving; he knew its explosive heat, its rocketing tongues of flame. He knew that nothing human now could curb its ruinous momentum.

He caught a sharp breath, and jarred out of his first shock, and took command.

"Jones!" he snapped. "Pile your Mexican workers onto a truck and head north as fast as you can travel!"

"No!" McEnnis protested. "We'll cut a wide break with the gangplows—"

"That won't work," Steve cut in. "Not in this wind!"

And Sam Jones added, "The Ranger said we got to get out of the basin before the fire cuts off the road and traps us in here!"

"But I just can't go off and let my buildings burn!"

"You can't save 'em by burning with them, McEnnis," Steve retorted. "Jones, get that truck!"

"But I c-can't! After supper I took the head off the engine, to grind the valves, and now there ain't time—"

"McEnnis, you've got a car?" Steve demanded; and when the rancher nodded dazedly, Steve said, "Take it, Jones."

"Use my Ford, too," Ruth added.

"Yes, sir! Boss, you coming with us?"

"No," Steve said harshly. "McEnnis, you're riding with me. You're under arrest!"

Martin McEnnis swung violently toward Ruth.

"They'll put me in jail!" His voice shook. "Ruth, you come with me. You've g-got to! I couldn't have set that fire, and you're the only one who can prove it!"

"Of course, Martin. I'll come with you," she reassured him.

Somberly Steve thought about Ruth as hurried preparations were made to leave. He could understand *why* she lied to help McEnnis; but knowing why was no comfort.

Ruth Mercer was a fine, decent person, both plagued and blessed with a

lot of idealism and a lot of stubborn loyalty. It wasn't easy for her to back up McEnnis' lie with another of her own. It went against the grain; her cheeks were flushed, and she had averted her face, for inwardly she was burning with guilt. But McEnnis was in serious trouble, and needed her help. He had come right out and asked her to back him up; and being the sort of person she was, she couldn't refuse. Steve could understand that. You can believe sincerely in the sanctity of the law, in the abstract; but if a close friend, to whom you're bound by a thousand ties, comes to you in desperation and begs for aid, to refuse seems heartless betrayal. She just could not betray him.

Steve went out to his truck and switched on his radio and called the District Ranger. Prentiss finally came in.

"Is the road out of McEnnis' basin still open?" Steve asked.

"Yes, Steve! Joe Cagle reports it's still open. I'll keep him in the air to observe how things go. But you get moving fast, boy! It's going to be a close thing."

Sam Jones crowded eight men into McEnnis' club coupé and another eight men into Ruth's small sedan. The two cars roared on up the road. Steve then followed. Ruth sat beside him, and McEnnis on the other side of her.

And as Steve peered through the twilight at the fire off to the right of them, he grew doubtful. Prentiss was right. It was going to be awfully close. For the road angled to the east, across the front of the blaze, which was coming on *so* fast! He pushed the throttle to the floor.

The light truck rocked and swayed to the left across the road from the force of the wind that hit it. The savage gusts were hot and acrid with smoke. McEnnis rolled up the window on his side. Glare of the fire laid a sheen of flickering crimson on the glass. And as the car curved nearer to the oncoming fire, its roar grew increasingly audible, a swift sputtering and crackling that seemed to pervade all the air and impinge upon all the senses.

"We can't make it!" McEnnis blurted. "The fire'll reach the road before we get past."

"It's still open," Steve said curtly.

"But there's a side road ahead that goes west over a mesa—"

"And then curves south into Mexico," Steve retorted. "No. We're going straight to Headquarters."

"I won't try to escape. I swear!"

"You've already told me one lie. Why should I believe you now? Besides, you'll likely be charged with murder. You're not eligible for bail or parole or anything else."

"Damn it, you've got no case against me!"

"You've got no alibi against my charges," Steve snapped back. "I've been thinking, McEnnis. I've been thinking how you're going to look, in court, when Dr. Crager testifies that he had to go north to do Army work, and left in such a hurry that he didn't have time to cancel all his appointments. He probably dictated some letters that were slow getting mailed. How're you going to look when he testifies that he never examined your eyes, neither last Wednesday nor any other time?"

"But he *did!*"

And with that alibi tossed out the window we're going to say that from two a.m. Tuesday night, until you met your foreman at two-thirty Wednesday afternoon, you had time to hire a car and get out to the ranch to start this fire, and return to San Diego. Plenty of time!"

"You're crazy! I *did* see Dr. Crager Wednesday morning. He got back for his appointment with me. He got back for a lot of his appointments."

If he did, you're safe, Steve reflected; but aloud he said, "You're whistling in the dark, McEnnis. You sound shaky as hell."

"You *go* to hell!"

Ruth Mercer caught a long, shaky breath.

"M-Martin," she stammered, "my medical bag's under your feet. I don't want you stepping on it. Put it on your lap, will you?"

He nodded, and lifted the bag onto his lap.

"Thanks," she said. "Martin, remember that birthday present you gave me, because you didn't like my driving alone at night? It's in the bag. Get it out for me."

Steve was peering at the two cars ahead. They were making good time, fortunately; they were faster than his light truck.

McEnnis had opened Ruth's bag, and was lifting something out of it. Something he pointed across at Steve as Ruth shrank back in the seat. It took Steve a moment to realize that McEnnis held a small automatic pistol.

"There's that little side road just ahead. Turn!" McEnnis ordered. "Make the turn!"

"Good God, man! Resisting arrest will only make trouble—"

"Make this turn!"

Steve braked down his speed, and made a swaying turn into the rough side road.

"Now stop the car!" McEnnis commanded. "Quick! *Stop it."*

Steve brought the little truck to a halt.

"Now get out," McEnnis said.

"Martin!" Ruth protested. "You can't leave Mr. Haynes here afoot. The way that fire's coming, he won't have a chance."

"I'm not worried about his chances, I'm worried about mine! I'm going to cross into Mexico, and I don't want him to see where I cross. Get out, Haynes!"

"But, Martin, it's—like doing murder—"

"He's had practice at that," Steve said; and he was thinking, *With me dead, there'll be nobody to testify against McEnnis. That's what he's really got in mind.*

"I said get out of this car!" McEnnis repeated. He lifted the gun a bit, and Steve delayed no longer.

He opened the door on his side, and slid from under the wheel, stepping out onto the ground.

"Martin, you can't do it. I won't let you go off and leave him."

"You'll do as I say," McEnnis retorted.

But Ruth slid along the seat, and got out of the car herself.

"Martin, if you make him stay, I'll stay here, too!"

"Don't be a crazy damn fool!"

"I mean it," she answered. "If you leave him here, you're leaving me, too! I've tried to help you. But this is something I'll not take part in. This is as far as I go."

"All right, damn it, you can stay, too."

She didn't break down, then; she didn't say, Oh, all right, I'll go; she didn't start to plead. She just stood there, her lovely face taut and still, as he slid along the seat and under the steering wheel.

Steve, watching, suddenly held his breath and tensed.

"Don't try hopping onto the car!" McEnnis warned jerkily. He was holding the automatic with his right hand; and now, awkwardly, he reached across his chest with his left and turned the ignition key in the dash. But he couldn't reach the gear shift lever with his left hand. So he transferred the gun from his right to his left hand, to have his left hand free—

And as he shifted the gun, Steve jumped for him, caught his arm with both hands, twisted sharply and bore down. The gun exploded, but the bullet plowed harmlessly into the dirt, for Steve was wrenching McEnnis' wrist sideways, and bending his arm down over the window frame with all his strength. McEnnis gasped in agony, convulsively starting up from his seat. Strength drained from his fingers, and the gun dropped to the ground.

Steve let go of the rancher's arm and stooped swiftly to grab up the automatic. McEnnis, with his other hand, snatched the ignition key from the dashboard.

And as Steve straightened up with the gun, McEnnis wildly flung the ignition key out of the car, flung it into the thick brush as far as he could, shouting wildly, "You're not throwing me into any jail!"

RUTH ran into the brush where the key had fallen, and groped frantically under the greasewood and sumac. Steve started to join her, but realized how useless it was, and stopped. In the car, racing down the narrow road at fifty miles an hour, they probably could have passed the front of fire; but now their narrow margin for escape was lost, even if they could start the car. So if was useless to hunt for the key in the dead leaves under the brush, it would take time they didn't have.

Instead, Steve searched the sky, and listened for the hum of an airplane motor. But smoke obscured the sky, and the spiteful conflagration of the fire was now so close that it drowned out other sounds. Steve looked at the fire then, and for a second his heart stopped beating and panic was like an involuntary, swelling shout in his throat. The blaze was so close, and coming so fast! He checked his panicky feelings. Turning to the car, he whipped open the door.

"Get over!" he snapped at McEnnis. "Stay in the car."

McEnnis slid over the seat, and Steve reached in and snatched up the radio and flipped the switch.

"Steve Haynes, calling Joe Cagle. Joe Cagle! Come in, Joe!"

"Okay, Steve! Where are you, guy?"

"Joe, my car's stalled halfway across the McEnnis basin. I'm right in the way of the fire."

"Good God! Any spot for a plane to land?"

"No, none at all. It's all brush and rocky washes. Look, you got any cans aboard?"

"Yeah, Steve! Got a full load, this time. I'll come right over."

"I'll turn my spotlight straight up so you can locate me."

"Okay, Steve! Here I come!"

"Come fast, boy," Steve said, not aloud. He turned, and called to Ruth.

"Never mind that key. Come back here!" He shouted, but his voice was barely audible over the uproar of the fire.

"You going to stay here?" McEnnis demanded. His face was livid and sweating and he was shaking. "Don't you think we ought to f-find a cutbank and dig into it?"

"So you think of that now, huh? Yes, we stay here."

Abruptly McEnnis lurched into a run down the road.

Steve swore, and sprang after him and caught him.

"Look at that f-fire! We can't stay here!"

Steve hit him, then; he swung the automatic and struck the rancher at the temple, and he collapsed. Steve dragged him back to the little truck, and pulled him beneath it.

Ruth had come back to the car; and Steve ordered her, "You crawl under, too. Quick! It's coming fast!"

She obeyed. Steve switched on his spotlight and turned the beam straight up into the air. Then he reached into the truck and pulled out a blanket and a heavy raincoat. He had a big canteen of water, and he swiftly emptied its contents over the blanket.

With the blanket and raincoat, he crawled under the truck.

"Edge over against McEnnis, Ruth."

He pulled the wet blanket over them, and the raincoat on top of it. Then he burrowed under the blanket himself, tight against Ruth, and pulled the coverings over their heads.

He thought of the gasoline in the car tank. What if it exploded? But the tank was very low, fortunately. Of course, the truck might burn over them. He couldn't do anything about that. He couldn't do anything about anything in the few seconds they had left now. Except hope, and maybe pray, and look for Joe Cagle—

THE roar of the fire was mounting. It was like the furious sputtering of grease in a skillet amplified a million times. Lifting the edge of the blanket to peer out, Steve winced from the heat in the wind, and narrowed his eyes against the glare.

Then he saw the plane, flying dangerously low, and from his lips came an involuntary, "Oh, my God, he's going past, he can't see us in the dusk and smoke!" But then the Travelair banked in a turn, and he realized that Cagle was lining up for a difficult cross-wind run. And risking his neck! Even at 500 feet it was begging for trouble to fly over a blaze like this.

Steve looked at the forefront of fire again. It seemed to be ballooning in size as it came. Chaparral burned so *damned* hot! Creosote bush went up with a snarling whoosh of flame. Laurel and toyon and sage blackened and snapped and burst alight; and junipers were like gas-jel bombs—full of resin and inflammable oils.

Ruth's lips were against his ear.

"Steve," she said, "if there's anything you can do to save yourself, go ahead. Never mind us. We got you into this."

"Hush!" he retorted. "Keep under the blanket. Fold your arms over your head!"

Watching, Steve saw the plane come over. The trapdoor in the bottom of the ship was open, like a bomb bay.

Objects fell from it. Objects that glistened in the red glow of the fire. They fell in a line between the truck and the oncoming flames. They struck in the brush, landing in a line parallel to the road and smashing against the ground with a dull cushioned thudding. The plane banked steeply, and came back in a return run; and again, the shining objects came hurtling down into the brush to smash with a muffled, splashing thump. No explosion, just a solid, watery b-u-ump that was almost inaudible through the crackling uproar.

The Travelair banked and turned to cut squarely across its former course; and again it dropped its "bombs" in a line to north of the truck. Then once more it circled, and this time it dropped "bombs" south of the truck. And then Pete Cagle was done. He

waggled his wings, banked and waved from a side panel; then he gunned his motor, and the Travelair headed for its home base.

STEVE looked at the fire. A matter of seconds now. To north of them, the blaze had already reached the road and streamed over it. Presently it would reach the road here. Steve pulled back under the blanket. He put his arm above Ruth's shoulders and hunched to protect her with his body. Even under the blanket he could smell paint on the truck blistering from heat. In a moment, maybe, the whole car would burst into flame—

The fire came on. It reached a line some fifty feet from the car, and stopped. The wall of flame divided. It roared on to north of the truck, it swept on to south of the truck. It poured across the road on both sides of the truck—and then closed in again. The vehicle stood in the midst of an untouched island, in the center of a square surrounded by fire. On every side the blaze leaped high, but within this square of immunity a wall of brush kept back the fire. Flame did not feed upon this brush; flame did not roar through it in blighting destruction.

For Pete Cagle had bombed the chaparral within this square with five-gallon cans of mono-ammonium phosphate, and the solution had made the brush non-inflammable.

Steve peered out from under the blanket again. Around their little square of immunity the fire was raging, and he gasped as heat struck his skin; it was as if his hair was being pulled out by the roots, as if skin was being sliced from his face. The bombing had worked, he realized; but he felt no relief and no security. For he was thinking how a vortex of tremendous heat will tunnel the fire upward, sucking air from all sides but allowing none to reach the center. If that should happen here, though they would not be burned, they would suffocate. The heat was more than he could stand. He drew back under the blanket; he flattened his body low, clawing into the sandy road, as he had done when German planes came strafing over the American lines. His arm tightened about Ruth's shoulder.

Dusk deepened into night. The glare of fire moved on against the sky to the northwest. Around the truck, the flames ate themselves out, and dwindled, and died. Smoke lifted densely from charred brush; and here and there a bole of sumac or manzanita glowed red and gave off a banner of sparks when the wind blew loudest. Acrid odors of burnt brush bit into Steve's nostrils.

Ruth stirred, and Steve moved aside, drawing the blanket back.

"We're all right," he said—and grinned lopsidedly. "I mean, aside from being smoked and blistered and scared to death."

"What happened?" Ruth asked, in confusion. "I mean, why did the fire miss us? It seems so odd—"

"When the plane came over," Steve explained, "Joe Cagle dropped cans of mono-ammonium phosphate solution around us. We've discovered that a 5-gallon can of the stuff will make a hundred square feet of brush resistant to fire. We've practiced a lot with the material. When a fire has just started, and hasn't run wild over square miles of territory like this one had, we can fence it in from the air. We can surround it with a wall of brush that won't burn, and that way keep the fire within small limits." He chuckled. "What Joe Cagle did here for us was to *fence the fire out,* by surrounding us with a wall of brush that wouldn't burn. Smart, us Forestry boys, no?"

"Not no—*yes!*" she said, with an unsteady laugh.

"You all right, McEnnis?" Steve asked.

The rancher mumbled something, and climbed out from under the car and rose unsteadily to his feet. He peered around.

"Yeah, look around," Steve said curtly. "It isn't very pretty, is it?"

McEnnis' face worked, but he did not answer.

"Maybe you still figure to claim you're innocent," Steve went on. "But realize this—your alibi is going to sound damn phoney when I get up in court and tell how you tried to escape into Mexico, and how Ruth even tried to help you to escape. That really licks you, McEnnis. That spells guilt in big letters. And if, on top of that, Dr. Lewin Crager testifies that he did *not* examine your eyes last Wednesday, as I know he will testify—" Steve shook his head. "McEnnis, you'd be smart to plead guilty and take whatever leniency the court can give you."

The rancher eased a long, shuddery breath

through his lips, rubbed the side of his face with a tremulous hand, and nodded.

"I guess so," he said. "I guess so—"

With a flashlight, Steve searched the brush into which McEnnis had flung the car key. Ruth helped, and finally they found it. They got into the little truck, and Steve stepped on the starter. It worked; and soberly they rode on down the road to town.

The local newspapers played it up big. In a community very conscious of the fire hazard, the story was important; and its ironic angle made it interesting. The headlines screamed, FIREBUG BURNS OUT OWN RANCH and INCENDIARY CAUGHT IN OWN FIRE.

McEnnis' own lawyer urged him to plead guilty. Steve and Ruth were in court when the judge passed sentence.

"—and so you figured upon getting new grass, next year. You did not figure upon the price that might be paid.

"I am advised by the Forestry Service that you have destroyed a covering of chaparral which will take twenty years to replace. You have very seriously damaged the capacity of the watershed to hold back rain. Water will run off swiftly, instead of soaking into the soil. Water will run off so swiftly that erosion will be disastrously increased. Rains will gouge out gullies that will erode into canyons, washing away topsoil and cutting hillsides into badlands. Before the chaparral can grow back to its former water-holding capacity, the range will be forever damaged.

"What is more, as a result of your crime two men lost their lives. You did not intend to kill them; but they are just as dead as if you had waited in ambush and shot them.

"I wish that I had language strong enough to express my feelings about you. To put it coldly—you have destroyed a small portion of the long-time heritage of our whole people. You have committed a form of treason. For the crime of arson, the law provides a sentence of two to twenty years. Exactly how long you will remain in prison will depend upon the Prison Board. I can only say that, to my mind, for you the very maximum would be insufficient!"

Martin McEnnis did not lift his head.

STEVE walked out of the courtroom with Ruth Mercer.

"I'm satisfied," he said. "I'm awf'ly satisfied. Especially with the judge's speech. It'll be in all the papers, and I think it'll do a lot of good. Every season we get a number of fires that were set to clear range. This case will scare would-be firebugs back to their senses. In the long run, maybe, Martin McEnnis will have done us a lot of good."

"Steve," she asked quietly, "why didn't you arrest me as an accessory?"

"Well—you did try to help McEnnis escape, but motives count with me. I can't imagine you doing anything except out of the goodness of your heart."

Her lovely face warmed with color. She did not answer.

"Are you in love with McEnnis?" he asked her then.

She sighed softly. "Let's say that I was —drifting into love with him. He was lots of fun. He—seemed to think a lot of me. But he finished it, once and for all."

"I think a lot of you myself," he said.

She smiled at him.

"You're a nice guy, Steve."

"You know, you and I have started off backwards."

"What do you mean?"

"You know how two people usually begin. They make a lot of light talk, and joke, and go dancing, and have a lot of fun, and begin to like each other without really discovering each other. We got it all backwards.

"I know the serious side of you. I know that you've got ideals that aren't just so much language. I know that you're a loyal person. Too loyal for your own good, maybe. I know that you can take a lot of grief without cracking up." He caught a long breath. "So—"

"So what?"

"So I'd like to see the other side of you. I'd like to see what kind of movies make you laugh. I'd like to go dancing with you. I'd like to work hard at convincing you that I'm a nice guy to have around. And I—I'd like to begin by taking you to dinner tonight. Do you suspect that you could work up a good appetite by seven o'clock?"

"I suspect," she said, and her eyes were laughing "that by seven o'clock I could work up a perfectly scandalous appetite!"

He stood there looking at her.

"I think it's going to be good," he said.

DRY-LAND PIRATE

By RYERSON JOHNSON

Author of "Barb Wire," etc.

Part III

THE STORY SO FAR

IN THE 1830's and thereabouts, the Ohio was a great highway for traders up and down its treacherous waters. Two of these—"Kaintocks"—were poling their loaded barge toward market when they are boarded by a man calling himself Dan Blue and an acknowledged gambler who wants to go along as passenger. "All the way from the head of the lakes to New Orleans," he declaims, "civilization, as she's quaintly called, pushing in the valleys of the Mississippi, carving out a new world for itself. The big frontier! Room for everybody! Sure, for all the merchants, bankers, lawyers, politicians. All the gamblers, road-agents, prostitutes, townsite boomers and counterfeiters. Speculators, all of 'em, buncos and grifters! All feeding on each other—and the honest farmer."

That's Dan's picture of the country, but there's more behind it all. And what is there is no less than a grand scheme for piracy—dryland piracy—by one John A. Murrell, who has organized a band of outlaws, headquarters in the "Garden of Eden," who plan to loot the whole district. Murrell was an actual character in America's early days, but Dan Blue—ex-lawman of the United States

Plans Were Forming for a Mighty Empire of Evil That No Power at Washington Could Check

Government, now on his own to outwit Murrell's whole outfit—is Ryerson Johnson's own. Dan's river days are combined with those of a river woman, Crystal Flame—whom he proposes to take away from Claw Cotten, Murrell's "right bower"—and later he forms an alliance with one of Murrell's henchmen, René St. Cyr, who "works the wilderness trails from Natchez to Nashville."

Dan soon finds that St. Cyr knows that he's a lawman who wants to gain entry to the Garden of Eden to get evidence to break up the Murrell Empire of Evil, but St. Cyr says he will side with him nonetheless. Especially after Dan is commissioned to kill St. Cyr and warns him instead. From him Dan learns of Murrell's grandiose plans for "The Day" which he will announce soon: "They raid the cities simultaneously on The Day—Natchez, Nashville, Memphis, Tuscaloosa, and all the stick-and-mud county-seat towns in between that are worth raiding. They cut communications, put up trail and river blocks and hold the towns while they sack the banks and mercantile establishments. It's to be the biggest peacetime plundering operation ever pulled off, probably to the tune of the bloodiest reign of terror. Murrell himself looked forward to leading the raid on New Orleans —and smashing all that were not of his own girth."

So René and Dan plan to make their way to the Garden of Eden and Dan announces he can get them passage down-river with the two "Kaintocks" he first encountered.

CHAPTER XVIII

KILLER-DILLER ON A DOLLAR

STORMY days and rising water gave them some trouble. Once they ran into a sawyer and were forty-eight hours extricating the flatboat from the octopus grip of sodden tree arms. But on the 27th of January, late of a rainy afternoon, the Kaintocks put them ashore at a place down-river specified by René St. Cyr. The way the muddy current ripped and filled, breaking through the bayous to flood the swampy bottom land on the Arkansas side, the Kaintocks refused to risk a landing there. The passengers had to be content with stepping out on the Tennessee shore.

"It's all right," René confided to Dan. "The Clan keeps a private ferry on this side. We'll sleep tonight at an inn I know, a ways back from the river, and cross over tomorrow."

They plodded on through Mississippi mud. Rain in a cold drizzle alternated with sleet. Swamp willows raked them in the face, and the snake-like roots of osage orange trees, pulled loose by the flood water, lay everywhere waiting to trip them.

Plastered with mud, and wet to the skin, it was midnight before they hove to in front of Johnathon Champion's Owl Hoot Inn on high ground. The inn, built tightly of logs and lumber, was dark. René banged the brass knocker. He kept banging it and after a while a light showed inside. A man from an upstairs window asked guardedly:

"Who aire ye?"

"Hello, Champ, you old rascal . . . Frenchy."

"What the all-fired hades you doin' these parts this time of night?"

"Come on down and open up."

Grumbling, the innkeeper moved back from the window, there was a thumping presently behind the oak-slabbed door as he removed the four-by-four timber that barred it. He stood in a cotton nightshirt and night cap, holding a tallow candle, bidding them enter.

The studdings of the common-room were low over their heads. Hand-hewn tables and benches bulked in the wan candlelight. Through the years the big room had been smoke cured with burning wood, meat fat, and Kentucky hill tobacco. The odors hit the nostrils with a stale pungency after the wet freshness of out-of-doors. The flames in the huge open fireplace had long since slunk up the chimney, leaving only a red eye of coals to glow balefully.

"You got any lodgers?" René wanted to know.

"Two," the innkeeper told him. "Come in earlier tonight."

"What they like?"

"One of 'em's sich a dandy you wouldn't think to see his likes outside a Chartres Street tailor shop in New Orleans. He rides a big sorrel horse. The other'n rides a chestnut. Young fellow well cut out. They didn't say, but I figger the one for a down-river slave dealer mebbe, and the other'n his apprentice."

The eyes in René's bearded face commenced to glow with very nearly the intensity of those coals in the fireplace.

"We'll go up now," he said. "We'll leave our clothes outside our door. Have 'em cleaned up a bit and dried. We'll have to have 'em in the morning. Lost all our gear in the river crossing."

Up in their bare room under the rafters, furnished sparsely with a bowl and pitcher on a crude pine washstand, with a hook-rug underfoot, they undressed and went to bed. Their pistols, powder-horns, shot pouches, knives, wallets and change purses crowded them some, but the practice in these outland taverns was as unthinkingly natural as that of children who take their rag dolls and fur bunny rabbits to bed with them. The corn husks made a rasping with every turn and move of their bodies. Outside the wind wailed, and sleet scraped with gritty fingers at the greased parchment stretched tight for a window pane.

When René volunteered no information, Dan muttered, "This innkeeper—he one of the Mystic Brotherhood?"

"Old Champ? No, no. I've known him for some years is all. He thinks I'm a fencing master. I account for my goings and comings by telling him I run a school in New Orleans and another in St. Louis."

"You seem tensioned up about something."

"Hell-and-a-half; give your imagination a rest."

THEY slept the night. In the gray of morning their clothes were awaiting them, wrinkled and grubby looking, but at least dry and the gobbed mud scraped off. When they went downstairs the other two lodgers-for-the-night were there before them. The youngest of the pair, blond, blue-eyed and tousel-haired, sat silently on a three-legged stool before the fireplace. He had his feet on the fenders, warming his shins.

He had, Dan Blue observed, a downcast countenance, for all the strength of his cheek line and the bulldog thrust of his jaw. He looked as though he carried on his broad shoulders all the woes of the world, but when he caught Dan's glance on him, he brightened up, putting on a good face, though Dan surmised it was forced. In his big capable looking hand he held a pair of worn suede gloves. He held them by the fingers and kept whacking them in a nervous gesture against his knees.

In his salt-and-pepper business suit buttoned tight and high to the thin roll of his lapels, and with his neck sticking out of the starched collar, he looked, as the innkeeper had said, like a young apprentice. A very model young apprentice—if you overlooked the bulge under his coat made by the pistol thrust inside his waistband, and the bulge on the other side which to Dan Blue's professional eye indicated a belt knife. Of course, this was black country; even a young apprentice might prudently go armed. He might also conceivably be nervous. But still—

Dan Blue passed behind him and with deliberation dropped a silver dollar on the floor. It struck smartly and rolled on the puncheons—and the young man toasting his shins jumped about a yard. Yes, a very very troubled and edgy apprentice. And René St. Cyr was edgy—last night and this morning. There could be something smouldering here.

"Sorry I startled you," Dan said, and reached down to retrieve his dollar.

He only reached for it, that was all. From the tail of his eye he caught an impression of a man stepping from the near chimney corner. The man's foot, with a smack of hard finality, clamped down on the dollar. It was a foot in a burnished eastern boot. Under the instep a mauve pantaloon was strapped. Dan's eyes ranged upwards. At the lean waist the pantaloons were secured by a belt of Spanish hand-tooled leather having a silver buckle as big as a man's palm. Two pearl-handled pistols, handsomely mounted, were clearly visible under the unbuttoned coat. The coat, of English broadcloth, was a rich plum color. All in all, the man's attire with its silver buttons, ribbon fastenings of black watered silk, and ruffled shirt of the finest French handiwork, would have marked him merely for a New Orleans fop who had strayed beyond his guilded parish.

That's if a man looked no farther than the clothes. The face was another thing. So was the man's general bearing. It was hard to define. Even in repose it was arrogant, subtly threatening. But it was more than that. A sense of evil wrapped him, so that, curiously, chillingly, it seemed to seep from his very pores. It was evil charged with a frightening energy and it gave the impression of being held only barely in leash. The mouth, composed, was still in a strange way, tense. It could become, chances were, hard as a mussel shell. And the eyes, curiously like wet velvet under a fire glow, insolent, conscienceless, weren't they devoid of all except personal feeling, without imagination as to how another could feel—weren't they the cold, flat eyes of a killer?

Dan made his guess that they were.

Unemotionally he said, "That's my dollar you're stepping on."

The man bowed with exaggerated politeness. "You are, I perceive, sir, a rash man. Now as a stranger from a far country wouldn't it be the better part of discretion for you to have said, 'I believe, sir, that you are stepping on my dollar.' "

"When I know what I know," Dan told him, "I don't beat around the bush. I dropped the dollar—"

"Ah, now we come to the crux of the thing. You dropped the dollar. Now I will say that I have no intention of contesting your ownership of the dollar. You dropped the dollar. I saw you drop the dollar. Why did you drop the dollar?"

Matching the other's veiled sarcasm, Dan said, "I wanted to see if it would bounce."

The flat eyes stared unblinkingly and a film seemed to dull their velvet brightness so that now in the gloomy tavern room they seemed more the lackluster tone of dry slate than anything else. Although he moved not

a muscle, decision seemed to animate him, and a warning tremor set up in Dan, a warning that said almost as plain as words, *This man will kill! He cannot stand to be opposed in the slightest degree. This dandified yahoo will kill for nothing!*

Then to Dan's disbelieving ears René St. Cyr's voice came sharply, "Take it easy, everybody. *I'll* tell you why he dropped the dollar."

It wasn't a fight ruse, because René moved in from the doorway walking lightly, his hands held loosely away from his sides to prove his peaceful intent. He stopped close up, said to the Chartres Street wild man, "I want to apologize for my friend, sir. He is a stubborn, mule-headed oaf. He hails from Pittsburgh and points beyond, being unacquainted with our ways and manners in the Big Valley. This I offer not in excuse, but merely in extenuation. He is, as I said, a stubborn, ill-mannered oaf."

THUNDERSTRUCK at René's supine crawfighting, Dan looked at him closely. He could detect no slightest levity of manner. René seemed more deadly serious than Dan had ever known him. The diller with his foot on the dollar stood staring, waiting.

René St. Cyr continued. "Now I will tell you why he dropped it. It is a silly practice of ours. Each morning one of us drops a dollar. If it rolls East or West, he pays the tavern bill; North or South, I pay it. That's all." He thumbed Dan. "He was too bullheaded to tell you."

The diller nodded and stepped back, graciously removing his foot from the dollar. Dan made no move to retrieve it, and the innkeeper who had been watching in wordless apprehension, sidled in and picked it up.

The diller, with those cold hypnotic eyes turned on René St. Cyr, said, "I accept your apology and your explanation, sir. You are, I perceive, a gentleman of the old school. But why you should concern yourself with the likes of this one—" his white hand waved diffidently at Dan— "surpasses my comprehension."

René murmured, "He has, sir, believe me, hidden talents."

"Then I must say he keeps them damned well hidden."

"I am working to bring them out." René stroked his beard, turned on his infectious smile. "By so short a time as tonight you will see how he has improved."

The diller bowed. "I trust you are right."

Dan, still tensely watching, saw René return the courtly bow, continue the inane drivel. "I trust you will not take it amiss, sir, if I hazard a guess about your profession. I take you to be a cotton merchant."

"You are a shrewd observer."

René smiled. "And how is the cotton market in Arkansas?"

The diller's eyes, still dry as slate, stared flatly. His voice from between the musselshell lips came flatly too. "The cotton market, my dear young man, is today in a dangerous technical position." He turned his baleful stare to include Dan Blue. "Nothing for amateurs to monkey with. But I will know more about it tomorrow or the day after. Ask me then."

Dan's pulse stepped up a notch as he told himself that this was, after all, more than senseless drivel. Something was passing between these two men that did not show on the surface. He looked quickly to the man whom the dilly had addressed as Hues to see if he might be in on it too. He looked just in time to see that young worthy drop one of his gloves behind the stool. It wasn't an accident. It was about as obvious a thing as could well be—that is, if a man was watching. Hues seemed to be unaware that anyone had seen. With that worried look still festering through the scrubbed morning-shine of his youthful face, he moved over to the staghorn rack, reached to take his coat down.

Dan's glance followed in hard appraisal. "Looks like it's catching," he brooded. "I drop a dollar and he drops a glove. Why?"

The diller, it seemed, was also ready to depart. He did it in the grand manner. "Landlord," he directed, "my coat and beaver."

With a bored look that could have been interpreted, "In my business you get all kinds," the innkeeper moved to hand down the coat, a luxury garment and no mistake—a wide-skirted Boliver which in New Orleans would have been in exquisite taste. After the Boliver coat came the plushy silk hat, high as a length of stovepipe, and with a rim no wider than a man's thumbnail.

The dilly wore it at a rakish slant so that it looked as though any minute it might fall off. On most men it would have appeared

ridiculous. On the dilly it didn't. His insolent self-assurance was so great that he could probably have worn an actual stovepipe and gotten away with it. The implacable chill that lurked behind the slate-bed grayness of his eyes would have further blighted any tendency to laugh.

Dan's glance kept shuttling to young Hues to see if he would pick up his glove. He didn't. He glanced back once, that was all, with a mechanical swiveling of his neck in the stiff collar, as though he had to be sure the glove was still there. Then he tramped to the door behind the great one with that tortured look on his face as though he were determined to slay a dragon or conquer the world, but more than half expected a pistol ball between his shoulder blades in the process.

CHAPTER XIX

IT PASSES BELIEF!

AS THOUGH his guests, departing, had left a chill over the place, the landlord hurried to stir up the flames in the great stone fireplace.

Dan turned to René St. Cyr. "Feed it down, partner. What is this oaf you called me?"

René grinned slyly. "I dunno. It just came to mind."

"Like the cock-and-bull about why I dropped the dollar?"

"Why *did* you drop the dollar?"

"Something working on the jackanapes, that's why. I wanted to see if he was as worried as he looked." Dan stared somberly at René, distrust swelling again within him, suspicion gnawing, like rat teeth chiseling tallow. "I never thought you'd crawfish."

A flash of temper appeared on René's bearded face. His words came fast and mockingly. "I thought you were the Galahad with a mission in life. I thought you stood alone between the Mystic Conspiracy and rapine, loot, and carnage over ten States. Then was this the time and place to risk your precious life? Just to prove to a couple of strangers that you are a fearless fellow? Isn't it enough that you—and your friends—know you are not afraid? What are you, a Creole puff who must practice rapier thrusts six days a week that he may go abroad on the seventh inviting insults in order that he may have the opportunity of defending his precious honor? Was this the time and place—"

"You win," Dan said, chagrined, his hand reaching out to grasp René's arm in reassuring friendliness. "A man is a fool to let himself be pushed into a fight that is not of his own making. I kept telling myself that; I knew it was a prime stupidity. And yet—It sounds zaney. I don't expect you to understand.

"But I seemed to be pulled along by a force outside myself. The eyes maybe, I don't know—but something, anyhow, about that clothes-horse diller, some deep-set malignancy, seemed almost to hypnotize—"

René sighed. "He does that to a man."

"Then you *do* know him?"

"Yes, I know him," René said quietly.

Bluntly, Dan asked, "Who is he?"

That light of sardonic amusement flashed in René's eyes. "You didn't recognize him?"

"Certainly not—"

"I don't think he recognized you either. At the camp meeting we were standing pretty well back, and I was careful to make sure we weren't too near one of the light-wood torches—"

"Not Murrell!" Dan gasped.

René nodded. "Murrell."

The innkeeper poked his bald head in from the kitchen to announce that breakfast was ready and getting cold. Dan didn't hear. René had to nudge him to start him toward the table. Dan moved, but still unseeingly. So the diller was Murrell! And the Reverend Cob had been Murrell! How many more times had he come face to face with the so-called great western land pirate, and never known it? But next time he would know it. *By so short a time as tonight.* René had made an appointment for him right over his head. An appointment at the Garden of Eden.

Dan shook himself as he reached his place at the table, turned and went back to the stool where the young desperado, Hues, had been sitting. He bent and picked up the glove.

René, watching, said appreciatively, "You caught that play too? What do you make of it?"

"Don't know," Dan admitted. His hands were busy, turning the glove inside-out, examining it minutely. "I thought it just pos-

sible the jackanapes might have left a note in one of the fingers. He didn't."

Dan came and sat down at the massive breakfast table where enough dishes steamed to have fed a keelboat crew.

"The chip one of the elect?"

René shook his head. "I never saw him before."

"Murrell's intended victim, maybe?"

"No. He had a chance to rob him and sound him last night if he'd been of a mind to. He must be taking him over the river. A new member I'd guess."

"He was way-out worried about something."

René shrugged. "Some of them are like that—coming up for the oath of the Grand Council. . . . Let's eat."

He started reaching for his share of the venison steak, cold roast 'coon, fried potatoes, fried eggs, salt pork, journey cake, and beans. Dan followed suit. There was sorghum molasses for sweetening, and tea as black as tar to wash it all down with.

Dan leaned close. "That about the cotton merchant—you were sounding out Murrell about Claw Cotten?"

"Sure. Murrell claimed he's due in at the Garden tomorrow or next day. Means we've got to get in there and out—fast. Claw's dangerous, he said; nothing to monkey with. Claw or somebody, then, has told him about our shooting match in the woodpile. My judgment on it, from the way Murrell reacted, is like I thought at first. Murrell didn't order the killing; it was Claw's own idea."

"Can you be sure of that?"

"With Murrell you can't be sure of anything—except that he'll serve his own self-interest."

"What I'd like to know is, why all the mumbo-jumbo between you two in your talk? Like schoolboy conspirators. Why didn't you take him aside and ask him what you wanted to know?"

"It was for him to take me aside if he'd been so minded. That's orders from the horse's mouth—never by so much as a word to recognize him, meeting him in public. That's not an affectation; it's common sense, considering all the water he's carrying on how many shoulders. So I took my cue from him and played along. I figure he felt a little hamstrung by the youngster he had in tow. Could be he hadn't revealed himself completely. Incidentally, he wasn't as displeased with you as he sounded. He likes them brash—just so they don't forget who's king-pin."

"You knew we were going to meet him here?"

"I knew it was at least possible. The time was right, the direction was right, and now and again he stops over here."

DAN ate mechanically, continued his feverish brooding. So the diller was Murrell and the parson was Murrell. Twice at least he had met the dry-land pirate, the devil-man of many faces and many places. He would meet him at least once more—

From outside, wafted on the winter wind, came the sound of a horse hard ridden. The hoofbeats ended with a thudding scurry in the tavern compound; the door was flung open. The man who stalked across the floor was young Hues. A cold wind blew with him from the door, and it seemed to be a cold engendered by more than river-damp and a lowering temperature, a cold that crept into the marrow, unaccountable defying wool and fur and fireglow alike.

If Hues had shown signs of tension and unease before, now he was beside himself. His blue eyes were wild and piercing. The wind should have nipped his cheeks, made them red. But they weren't red. His face was a ghastly white from which his eyes burned through. His glance shuttled erratically.

"My glove—" the words pushed through his lips with a strained hoarseness.

Dan Blue took the glove from his pocket. The young man bounded close, snatched the glove from Dan's outreaching hand. He didn't look at it, just crammed it in his pocket. It was maybe then not so much the glove, Dan made the shrewd surmise, as *time,* which was working on this hysterical youngster. He wanted the glove, yes, but he wanted it in a hurry. His next move bore out this estimate.

He looked for a tortured moment into the faces of both Dan Blue and René St. Cyr, and if ever fear and horror were written on a man's face, and with it the necessity of confiding in someone, it was written in the twisted features of young Hues.

He made his decision and turned away. "Landlord!" the word came imperatively as

he stumbled to the kitchen where the innkeeper's frightened face showed through the door crack.

YOUNG Hues then tumbled words into the landlord's ear. He kept looking back to the outside door as though in desperate fear of being interrupted. And all the time he poured out words. They sounded in a muddled burr to Dan and René, but to the landlord, judging from the utter shock which grew on his face, the words made horrible sense.

Hues turned finally, and with a last admonishing gesture—finger against lips—stumbled in frantic haste to the door. The unnatural chill breathed in across the room again as he went out. They heard his horse's hoofs drumming away into distance.

Dan and René swapped incredulous glances.

"Well, by the tarnal!" René said. "As your Kaintock friends would put it, by the tarnal!"

They got up and approached the landlord, who stood trembling, his saddle-leather face more nearly the color of peeled willow bark now.

He looked oddly like a man with a hot coal who couldn't make up his mind where to drop it.

"What was eating on him—that young man?" Dan threw out.

The landlord shook his head, or more exactly, the head just seemed to shake for him. "I cain't tell you—cain't tell— Promised I wouldn't. Not until, I mean onless—" He stopped, gulped. "You wouldn't believe it noways."

"Do you believe it?"

"Yes—no—I donno—" He pulled back as though they might have been shaking him. "Leave me be."

"Champ," René tried, his voice warmly confidential, "you know me. I've been coming here for years. You can trust me—"

"I cain't tell nobody," Johnathon Champion sputtered, his voice raising on the dagger-point of hysteria. "It—passes belief! It's—too awful! But take warnin' from me. Git away from here. Git far away. I am. I'm agoin' to close up and go live in Cincinnati to my sister's—"

"On the word of that salt-an'-pepper jackanapes?" René taunted. "Tell me just this, Champ. The glove—what'd he say about the glove?"

"Said nothing—nothing—"

Nor would all their questioning get Johnathon Champion to say anything more. Dan and René withdrew to themselves.

"My guess about the glove," Dan muttered, "is that he left it to have an excuse to come back and tell whatever he told to the innkeeper. It was his only chance to get away from Murrell, to say something without Murrell knowing."

"It could be that," René agreed. His eyes narrowed in crafty consideration. "Or it could have been he wanted it to appear like that."

"What you driving at?"

"The whole thing could have been an act—and for my money it was. Some trick of Murrell's. Something to impress us. God knows what for. The chief thrives on mystery—"

"You think Murrell *sent* him back?"

"I do. And it's plain to be seen that Murrell's got him an aide-de-camp at last who is as good an actor as Murrell himself."

"Murrell doesn't do things without reason, does he?"

"There's reason behind it. You can bank on that. We'll have to keep a weather eye out, that's all."

CHAPTER XX

THE GARDEN OF EDEN

ON FOOT it took them half the morning to make the trip from Champion's Owl Hoot Inn to the river. The sun at times was a faint opalescent glaze in the sky, but mostly it was throttled and buried in the overall lowering grayness. The wind whined through the sere winter growth, carrying a cold spume that was nearly, but not quite, rain.

Chill and damp, they came out on the Mississippi landwash and René poked around in a drogue of swamp willows that overhung a muddy slough. He cursed and floundered in the icy ooze, with mud plastering about all of him but his eyeballs.

"There's anyhow half a dozen of 'em spotted around here at all times," he growled, "but night or day I never yet put my hands on one right off."

It took him a good half hour this time before he uncovered a big flat-bottomed rowboat. He dug the oars out of the mud alongside. Dan helped him shove off. They took turns at the oars, neither of them being what any man in his right mind would call expert. The swollen river had a rip and swing to it; the current boiled and the boat wallowed like a cottonwood log, butting out a trail as crooked as any path left by an eel. "Enough mud in the boat alone to sink her," Dan muttered.

"For the elite," René informed, "there's a horse ferry. Next time we'll come riding."

They kept rowing and they made it across, sloshing ashore near the mouth of the Old River in the Chickasaw Bend. They hauled the boat up and left it in plain sight.

"We're home," René said. "Murrell-land." His mouth gave that sardonic twist. "Don't have to hide anything here—except our intentions."

It was a swampy shore and to Dan's eager eyes seemed to present nothing but a dismal reach of canebrake. The wind still blew cold and wet, rattling the cane, making it creak and pop. René, without a backward look, plunged into it and Dan followed. René moved with precision, so Dan presumed there must be landmarks of a sort within the mud-caked desolation. The cane was so thick that in the river mist a man at arm's length was almost out of sight. Dan held close and they came out into some water maples after a while and some cypress that seemed to grow out of the drag end of a bayou or lake. René skirted the cypress sink to higher ground and Dan, following, could see unobstructed water.

"Lake Murrell," René grunted, and laughed unpleasantly.

They sighted a log hut presently, a large one, almost buried in a tangle of leafless vines and thick-growing Cherokee rose bushes that made an almost impenetrable barrier higher than a man's head.

"Wait here," René said, and he moved out alone, holding to cover.

He was back in a short time. "It's all right," he said. "I just wanted to make sure it wasn't Claw's men holding down the hut. I talked with them. Claw isn't here yet—so they claimed. Come on."

At the cabin René made Dan known to five men playing cards on a warped and wobbly table. The five ran pretty much to type: hard eyes, tight mouths, with a callousness of manner, an animal furtiveness that stamped them for seasoned bush pirates.

One man as spare as an Arkansas razorback, with teeth as prominent, sparse whiskers almost as bristly, got up from the card table and went stumping down to the ramshackle pole wharf. Dan and René went with him. They all got in a boat and the razorback rowed.

The water lay about them, still and black and stagnant. It was dyed so deeply by tree roots and leaves, it looked almost solid; it was a mild surprise that oars could make the surface ripple. More cypress trees reared upward near the opposite side. With their octopus roots humping high and brown from the black water, they gave the final touch of stygian unreality to the place. In between the grotesque trees the boat pointed, under the drooping branches, into the mists that shrouded the shore. They touched at a place where the spongy land had been cribbed and corduroyed with young poplars grown up in the path left by a tornado sweeping through here in past years.

Dan and René stepped ashore, where they pushed on through more canebrake and willows. And mud. This time of year, always the mud. They came out of it finally into low-growing paw-paw, persimmon, and Kentucky coffee-bean trees. Ahead Dan could see still higher growths and towering above all, a cottonwood that might have taken three men at its base to span it.

"That's her," René said.

"What? Where?"

"Keep moving. You'll see. In the summer our headquarters is smack under the shade of that cottonwood."

Dan Blue's pulse leaped up from his wrists to his throat.

IT WAS the biggest log structure Dan Blue had ever seen; squat and low-roofed, but big, and so new that the sap was still in some of the logs. Outside were the horse racks and pole corrals, makeshift huts that passed for grain and blacksmith sheds, a pile of firewood higher than the cabin, with here and there a brush lean-to for sheltering the horses in bad weather.

There seemed to be horses everywhere,

and smoke poured from the big cabin chimney. René kicked open a huge slab door and they went inside. No special reception awaited them. Men were always coming and going, Dan was quick to observe. The place was busy as campaign headquarters for an army—a very true comparison, he wasn't long in discovering. The first sweep of his eyes told him that there were maybe two-score men in the place. Life centered about the fireplace built of blocky native sandstone, where a man-sized log burned and a whole hog, spitted, hung roasting over the flames.

They approached the group at the fireplace, pushing through the fetid air that was thicker in here if possible than the foggy river air outside. The reek that made them want to hold their breath at first was compounded of hill tobacco smoke, stale liquor breath, steaming wet clothes, unwashed sweaty bodies, and the horsey smell of the saddles hanging on wooden pegs about the room. The floor was a black froth of ground-in mud and sawdust.

And this was the Garden of Eden! This human pigsty. The heart of the Mystic Conspiracy! From here the poison pulse-beat went out over the whole Big Valley. It was absurd. One of René's sardonic jokes. Precious time had been wasted—

René at his elbow chuckled. Always so quick to sense another's moods, he stopped in his tracks and said, "Don't let a little mud obscure your vision. I assure you it doesn't obscure Murrell's. Sure, he'd rather have a marble courthouse for his headquarters, with pigeons roosting on it instead of crows and buzzards. Well, if he has his way, he'll have his courthouse. He'll rule from Natchez, where the land and river trails cross. You know about the acorn. It started in mud. It got to be a big oak, remember?"

He laughed, slapped Dan on the back as though he might be concluding a lusty story —this for the benefit of some of the brothers who were beginning to watch. In a louder voice he said, "Now come over and meet the boys."

They moved on to the fireplace.

"Meet Dan Hawkins," René made casual introduction. "New man from the East."

They had talked it over and decided to use Dan's real name here. One Piney and Claw most certainly must have given the assumed one unfavorable publicity among the brothers. The real one had commanded attention in the papers too. There was a good chance, they thought, that they could cash in with Murrell on that.

Some of the men at the fire grunted an acknowledgment of the introduction, but most stared in silent hostility. The reaction wasn't necessarily personal, Dan realized. It could merely reflect the ingrown wariness, the smash-and-kill-before-you-get-killed attitude of men defying the law. Some of them wore city-tailored clothes and represented, Dan guessed, that class of Murrell-men "prominent in business and standing fair in society." For them he had greater hatred and disgust, if possible, than for those callous killers openly defying the law, taking their risks where they found them.

While he made casual talk here, Dan kept covertly looking around the big room for his first glance of the King in his palace. And young Hues. He had a burning curiosity about that one. All along the sides of the barnlike room, alcoves opened off. Some were fitted with built-in benches and slab tables. Men sat hunched close in the alcoves, drinking. The glow of their cigars shone through the reeking dimness. The babble of their talk sounded out. Now and then a drunken shout was raised above the rest. And lacing it all together were the shriller voices and laughter of the houris imported to the Garden of Eden from Natchez-Under-the-Hill, or from the red-light districts in the towns still farther south, all the way to New Orleans, from the flatboat anchorage off Tchoupitoulas Street there, to the Swamp and Girod Street and the fancy houses springing up beyond Canal.

Dan didn't locate the Garden overlord. Not then. But a gray-bearded oldster with the evil of a hard-lived life pocked deeply into his face, saw him looking and he staggered up from one of the alcoves, waving a rum bottle and roaring something indistinguishable through his beard. He walked with his feet wide spread in the manner of a man far drunk. But when he got close it was René St. Cyr that he reeled against, throwing one buckskin-fringed arm around him for support.

"You're here jus'n time, Frenchy, m'lad. Girls goin' dance the *clodoche*. You know

the *clodoche,* har? Like the can-can, only more better." The oldster's weight bore René back a few steps from those others lounging at the fire. He hung on and tried to put his bottle to René's lips. "Have lil drinksh, ol' timer." His mouth was close to René's ear, and he hung on there, gabbling, until René made a pass finally at taking a drink from the bottle, and then in disgust pushed him away.

He staggered back to his alcove, and Réne, as soon as it was seemly, went and squatted down in front of the fire, indicating for Dan to join him. René's hand moved, apparently in illustration of what he was explaining to Dan about the ingenuousness of the device rigged up here for roasting a whole hog. But what René was saying for Dan's ear alone was:

"He gave me a tip-off. Old Mush-mouth. A time or two I've been able to help him out of a tight, and he's come through now. My number's up with the Clan. That's straight from Murrell. I told you sooner or later it would be. Well, it's sooner, now that Murrell's ready to pronounce The Day. Claw's the executioner. He has Murrell's promise on that. The way it shakes down, we'll do all right till Claw gets here, but he's due—not tomorrow or next day, as Murrell told me at the tavern, but today. You're my friend, so you'll be included."

HIS hands moved, feeling at his clothes. He took a small pipe from his pocket. In the most natural manner in the world he started tapping the yellow-stone bowl against a piece of wood in the fireplace. While he tapped he talked.

"So how you reading the tickets, gambler? We could step outside the door now, with a good chance of getting away—or do you want to try to finish what you started?"

Dan said slowly, "I'm working for something; I've got a dream behind me. But you're in this only for the excitement. I couldn't rightly ask you to risk—"

"It's however you want it," René put in stubbornly.

"Well," Dan said, "I'm hell-in-a-steamboat-boiler for finishing what I start."

"Right!" René stood up. "Let's go look for Murrell. The more we can speed this up and get what we came after—and get out—the better."

THEY started on a casual appearing round of the long room, stopping here and there for a bantering word. In the middle of the floor there was a long table held up by two wooden horses. The cooks were cutting exploratory slices of the roasting hog, now, and forking it down on the bare table top. Grease ran between the boards, dripped into the black sawdust underneath. Men were laughing, shouting, drawing up chairs and three-legged stools, bringing out Bowies, gimlet daggers, and long-bladed skinning knives—all the cutlery they were going to need.

René and Dan moved on past the alcoves, nodding and speaking to the men inside playing cards or just close-talking. Some of the alcoves were swaddled with the personal belongings of the men inside. Saddle bags, shot pouches and powder horns—gun-belts, overcoats, bridles and saddles hung from wooden pegs or sagged from stag-horn racks. Some of the alcoves were fitted up with cornhusk ticks in double or triple-tiered bunks. They passed one such, before which a sleazy curtain was drawn. A wave of warmth crept out, body warmth synthesized with store perfume and scented powder.

Maybe the store stuff was cheap. Maybe the girl—or girls—inside were cheaper than cheap. But that perfumed breath, contrasting with the man and animal smells in the rank room for just an instant were heady as rare brandy.

CHAPTER XXI

NEW MAN FROM THE EAST

THEY came upon Murrell in one of the big double alcoves at the end of the room. He was neither the shouting parson nor the dilly of the morning, though he was considerably closer to the dilly. Dressed for comfort, his shirt, open at the neck, was of fine linen. He wore an amber colored smoking jacket unusual enough to have been of his own design: wide flaring sleeves, low wide pockets, with a double bank of pearl buttons. He wore the same mauve pantaloons, holstered the same pair of North and Cheney pistols silver mounted on brass frames.

René introduced Dan. He told their

agreed-upon story in brief clipped words. It held close enough to the truth to have a solid ring: how Dan had been actually working out of the United States Marshal's office, how he had been tossed out in disgrace for teaming up secretly with the eastern criminal band he had been sworn to track down —how, now, he was determined to buck the law openly and without reserve. He wanted to line up with Murrell. He regarded Murrell, from what news had come filtering through about him—and echoes of his exploits had permeated the East, never doubt that—as the outstanding organizational genius of his time, perhaps of all time. He thought there was no limit to where Murrell might go. He wanted to go along with him. He was a good man himself, Dan Hawkins, having invaluable connections in high places, no conscience, no scruples. He would never, never, for instance, rob on the Trace and let his victim live.

René got a hard and meaning smile from them on that. Oh, he did a magnificently calculated job of building up Dan Hawkins. At the end he stood waiting. Dan, beside him, felt like a prisoner awaiting the life or death utterance of a judge—and with good reason!

MURRELL'S white fingers drummed on the tabletop, and Dan caught a blurred glimpse of the H. T. brand on the ball of the thumb. Murrell's slate-gray eyes bored into Dan, but none of his intentions were foreshadowed on his face—his too handsome face from which, however, the malignance of his nature showed through. Maybe the cigar smoke and the sullen glow that reached over from the fireplace had something to do with it, but it seemed again to Dan that an aura of evil seeped from this man's very pores.

Murrell smiled at last. At least his lips bent upward and his face muscles creased, though his eyes remained the same. "Why now," he said, "I followed your case very closely in the papers at the time. I have been wondering how soon it would be before you came to me." His hand reached out. "Shake, brother-chip."

Dan put his hand in the boss outlaw's grasp and it was like spanking the belly of a toad—it was that dank and yielding. But the fingers, Dan found, had surprising strength. Dan felt them form themselves against his palm in the sign of the Grand Council. Dan gave the return sign.

Murrell laughed in what seemed to be hearty good humor. "Frenchy has coached you well. You understand, of course, that until you are formally initiated you stand on probation. You come here and die—or you go out from here a member in good standing of the Mystic Conspiracy."

"I am ready to meet the test," Dan said.

"Spoken like one of the true girt," Murrell declared. "Now meet these brothers: Jesse Rainsford, and don't be deceived by his polite churchman's appearance. Jesse owns a string of private banks that stretch from Saint Louie to Mobile."

Rainsford, who was sitting next to Murrell on the bench, had a round face and mutton-chop whiskers. He smiled as though it hurt him.

Murrell laughed heartily. "That's a true banker's smile for you. Could be because they discount his notes at about a dime on the dollar against Philadelphia. But that's only for today. R. T. Bicknell's Bank Note Detector lists his banks today as wildcats. But Jesse can afford to hold his smiles. He'll have the last laugh. He's scheduled to be my minister of finance."

Murrell indicated the man on his other side. "Micajah Goodloe. Goody was born a rogue and a cut-throat, and he will die one. No speculation too tough for Goody. He goes in a straight line and gets things done. Make a good general in an army, Goody would."

He roughed the hair of Micajah Goodloe and the man's ape-like jaw stuck out a mile as he grinned. He had eyes deep-sunk under bushy brows; there was cruelty in them, and cunning, and his whole squat body as he slumped there, seemed charged with animal vigor. One of Murrell's bodyguards, Dan made his own surmise.

Murrell's hand waved out to the four men on the bench opposite. "Burnt-lip Pequin. Used to be with Lafitte, buccaneering in the Gulf. Scuttled more vessels, put more men off the plank and more women in his bed than little old Dominique You. And you know who Dominique You was? Lafitte's number-one man at Grand Terre. He used to be with Napoleon. Burnt-lip sided him. But sea pirating ain't what it used to be. So he got smart and came up the river to me."

Burnt-lip Pequin, so called because of a hot-iron brand that had in some distant day disfigured his lower lip so that it lay back, pendulous, washboarded and raw, like a cauliflowered ear, gave them his horrible caricature of a grin, and Murrell turned to the man beside him.

"Osmun Foss," he announced. "He's in the banking business too. Only he don't ask Andy Jackson's kind permission. He can print up better counterfeit than lots of the state banks—and he knows how to put 'em in circulation. King of the Queersmen, they call him."

Osmun Foss took his bow. A gray little man with a bulging forehead, no one would have looked at him twice—which was part of his stock in trade.

"Bunk Yeaple," Murrell indicated. "Used to operate out of Cave-in-Rock. Had the biggest river gang on the Frontier — till I showed him river pirating was going out as fast as sea pirating, and he came along with me to work the land trails."

Bunk had a big and formless body, like he might have been stuffed with straw. His face was rather formless, too. He grinned vacantly, and looked up out of milky eyes, heavy lidded. He appeared to be perpetually sleepy or foolish. Dan knew that he was neither. His name had been mouthed for years with fear and apprehension by rivermen as far East as Pittsburgh.

"Last and newest, we have Adam Hues." Murrell leaned forward, fawning at young Hues. "He's from the Yala Busha country. A man who goes where the opportunities are ripest for the picking. He was setting himself up as a merchant in the territory just opened by the government in the Choctaw Purchase. Hues is a merchant—with a keen eye for speculation. And plump Arkansas women, eh, Hues?"

Murrell was working himself into a beautifully expansive mood. He extracted a cigar from a silver pocket case, bit off the end. "Hues and I met up on the trail a few days back. We hit it off from the start. He was looking for a horse he'd had stolen. He doesn't know it yet, not fully—but looking for a horse, he's found an empire. He's a bright young man. Great possibilities. I plan to make him my personal aide."

Hues gave both Dan and René a polite nod, taking his cue from Murrell and giving no sign of having previously seen them. Dan thought that the worry was etched as deeply in the young man's face as ever. In fact, the presence here of René and himself, if Dan judged correctly, had added a new and blighting worry to Adam Hues' old list. He seemed so tightly drawn that he looked ready to burst. He did not trust himself to speak; he only nodded.

Murrell appeared not to notice, or if he did, to ascribe it to the young man's natural nervousness at finding himself in the presence of so many outlaw notables. Murrell looked at René and said:

"We're most of us here that matters—except Claw. He lit out for Natchez, hunting that hell-cat woman of his." Murrell rolled the unlighted cigar between his lips. "Understand you boys had a little fracas at New Madrid. Wish you two'd bury the hatchet. Makes a distracting note in the organization." He tilted the cigar at an angle in the corner of his mouth, spoke around it. "One Piney floated in with the queer the day afterwards. Claimed Crystal Flame was dead. Claw choked it out of him that he was lying. Seems she went off with a river gambler somewhere — One Piney thought maybe Natchez. You wouldn't have heard anything about it, would you?"

René shook his head no. Dan Blue was weak for a moment with a double unease, one for Crystal in Natchez, the other for the way things were shaping up here. This crafty land-pirate was too affable, wasn't he? He had accepted a new man too readily, hadn't he? He was just building them up for the kill, wasn't he? Indulging his ruthless whims, playing cat and mouse—

Murrell said, "Tell you what. Let's all go in my quarters and have a little pre-convention meeting. I'll acquaint you with the set-up all around. You can act as a kind of steering committee to help me put it over to the brothers in Council tomorrow. Some of 'em will need some persuading. It's dynamite I've got." He stopped suddenly, stood up. "Round up Blackbird Fentres and Tate Micklejohn. Tell 'em to show in at my quarters." He stopped again, worried the cigar around. "Put Frog at the door. Tell him if Claw Cotten comes, to send him in, too."

In the push of the men moving for the private quarters, Dan caught René's eye.

They were in it now, the full rip and boil of it, for better or worse to the end.

René's lips twitched at the corners. "Stick close," he said.

THE private quarters of the Great Western Land Pirate knocked Dan's eyes out. Coming from the muddy squalor of the big room—it was like coming from a stable, or even more so, an animal den, into a palace room. Palace room was a pretty apt description. Dan couldn't quit his wide-eyed gaping. Neither, he noticed, could young Hues.

The quarters had been built-in behind the great chimney of the barracks-like room they had just vacated, a smaller fireplace in here utilizing the same chimney. A mantel of iridescent Ozark mountain stones framed the fireplace. It was a thing to consummate beauty, constructed by a master hand. Dan's feet sank in the oriental rug as in thick woods moss, as he moved with the others who were self-consciously distributing themselves around on the red-plush-and-gold chairs and sofas. Tapestries and oil paintings in rococco gilt frames crowded the walls, and overhead a round ceiling mirror hung with crystal pendants reflected the palace luxury. Bric-a-brac, French Palissy plates, and Chinese porcelains were everywhere, with embroidered doilies and silken runners keeping company with marble-topped tables, sideboards and "whatnots" of mahogany and rosewood carved in intricate design.

Murrell noted the awed confusion the room created among the brethren, and he expanded more and more. Here the King was at home in his palace—or his antique shop. He sat behind a gilded table that had certainly made its bow in the French court; he relaxed behind the table, the unlighted cigar still clamped in his mussel-shell lips.

He clapped his hands—clapped once in a bored affected manner.

And then Dan and all of them became aware of the source of the exquisite perfume that spread itself over the room. It was distinctly a relative of the perfume which had wafted from behind the sleazy curtain in the alcove outside. But a very very distant relative, a high-nosed one from up on top the hill in the mustn't-touch-me-with-anything-but-a-bankbook neighborhood.

When the King clapped his hands from behind a Chinese teakwood screen, richly ornamented with jade and mother-of-pearl, came sounds of silken stirrings. Most of the men had been here before. They knew what to expect. You couldn't have told it by their actions though. They sat as frozen as the new ones.

It wasn't real. Not here in this Arkansas backwash. Not in this world of mud and blood. It couldn't happen. But it did.

She was tall, with hair as black as the Mississippi at midnight. Caught up beneath a bright bandeau, her hair flowed down behind her. Her long gown flowed too as she came gliding. She had a face that was one with her body. Eyes that burned. Long lashes—no matter if they were glued on. Creamy complexion; red, red, scarlet red lips. A cheek and chin line as exquisite as the Dresden china figurine on the Ozark mantel, and all one with the soft neck curve.

Gold bracelets on her wrists made a jangle as she reached for a pair of jeweled tongs on the mantel—the tiniest jangle that crashed on the eardrums like a symbol's clamor. Her fingers were soft on the metal; her red-enameled nails could have been gem stones. Her toenails red-glistened, too, through the openwork gold of high-heeled sandals as her gown fell away a little space when she bent to pick up a live coal with the tongs.

That was about all there was to it. She moved swayingly from the fireplace to Murrell's side. She held the coal for him in the jeweled tongs while he lighted his cigar. Then with one velvet hand she patted his cheek, and moved to a teakwood sideboard. She made several trips, bringing brandy glasses on a lustre plate, a box of cigars, and several bottles of aged Bordeau cognac. You could tell it was aged. At Murrell's directions, Dan guessed, the dust of the years and the cobwebs had been left on the bottles.

She carried them close against her breasts because it was the easiest way to carry so many. The bottles dented her breasts, of course, in a manner that no one missed. It almost looked as if it might have been Murrell's intention to distract them this way to save money on his liquor bill. Certainly Dan's throat at the moment was too dry to swallow, and so, he guessed, was about everyone's.

The bottles, when she put them down, left dust marks on the soft stuff of her dress, and

that they noticed too, every tiniest smudge. She dusted her hands together delicately, looked at Murrell. He nodded. She bent, kissed him on the cheek and moved—glided, flowed, undulated—back behind the screen. There were the same silken rustlings as at the beginning, and then silence.

"The corks have been loosened, brothers," the King invited casually. "Pour your measure. And light up. They're prime leaf Havana; I had 'em brought in myself on a lugger from Cuba. Cost you a wagon-wheel apiece in New Orleans."

NO ONE reached for anything. Not right at first. They were still under the anesthetic of that dream, every man's dream. *It had been a dream, hadn't it?* She hadn't spoken—not a word. But there was the faint red smudge on John A. Murrell's cheek where her lips had touched. There was her warm perfume still flaring their nostrils. Maybe it was better that she hadn't talked. Maybe she had a voice like a jay. There had to be some imperfection if it wasn't a dream.

Bunk Yeaple, the shapeless one, with the body like stuffed straw, was the first to get words out; Bunk, who had lived out his whole violent life in the wilderness, operating from places like Cave-in-Rock and Wolf Island. Bunk sat on the edge of his chair where maybe once a King of France had sat. His face was a sheen of sweat, his gross body knotted tight as a wet hawser.

"Hell, Chief," he said in a hoarse bleat, "you shouldn't of did it. Why'd you do it?"

He was asking for all of them, even the big-town banker, Jesse Rainsford. Of them all, perhaps Burnt-lip Pequin was the most composed, Pequin who had sailed with Lafitte and Dominique You, who had scuttled more ships and had more black-haired Spanish women for the taking than he could rightly remember. He sat relaxed now, a reminiscent glow in his sea-hawk eyes, his flinty fingers caressing the Harper's Ferry pistols—those pretty officer's guns which poked their ornamental handles from his sash of red wool.

For Dan Blue the vision had been something very different. After the first heart-hammering jolt when he had sat as numb as any of them, bleakness had settled over him like a shroud as René's words came back. *He'd like her for his harem at the Garden.* This, then, was what Murrell had in mind for Crystal, always holding over her the threat that he could throw her to the dogs outside if she displeased.

"Why'd I do it?" Murrell was leaning forward, eyes smouldering with a kind of gray fire, his whole face charged with that magnetic tension. "Did you ever know me to do anything without reason? Any of you; did you? All right, here's the reason. You liked it, didn't you? You like all of it—the woman, the brandy, the dollar cigars. I've got it—you want it. All right, you can have it—and more! I just took this way to get you started thinking big. First I had to make you want it. Now I'm going to show you how to get it. Not just for one day. Get it and keep it all of your hell-fired lives!"

He turned to Hues. His hand waved out. "Bring my portmanteau."

Young Hues got up, his lips held so tight they were white as china. He went for the portmanteau where it leaned against the richly carved bookcase. He brought it to Murrell who opened it and took out a heavy sheaf of papers. He spread them across the table top. There were maps, hand-drawn to scale, and clipped papers covered with figures and close writing.

Murrell explained, his hands reaching out now and again to thump the papers: "As you know, we've all been working for The Day. Our plans are far enough along now to set it. That's what you're here for, that's what you've come all to hell from over ten states for—to hear me name The Day. *That's what you think!* But I've been holding out on you. I've got a walloping surprise. It's going to rock you back on your ears. Some of you are going to get shaky in the knees when you hear it. That's because you don't dream big enough. That's why I had hot-stuff come swishing out from behind her screen, to keep you dreaming big. Now take a drink everybody. Take two drinks; light up a Cuba and get set."

CHAPTER XXII

GLORY AND GOLD WITHOUT MEASURE

THEY were reaching now. Everybody. The tension, one of crackling expectation, was growing. They were Murrell's

creatures. Swamp-road cut-throat and urban banker, he had them in his hands almost as completely as he had held the gospel hungry seeking grace at New Madrid. Even Dan Blue could feel the pressure. This man had something, this anti-Christ devil out of hell, he had something; he sure did.

He let them laugh and talk for a minute and feel the glow of the cognac, let them bathe their throats with the mellow effluvium of the weed smuggled in from Havana.

"Now then," he said, "down to cases. This stuff—" his hands spanked on the papers— "outlines our campaign, every bloody gold-weighted detail of it—and I use the words advisedly. You and every man gathered in convention tomorrow will be coached in the details of his work. Here are charted the locations of our powder and ammunition caches, here are listed our members —there'll be five thousand Strykers alone by the time The Day comes! You know the general plan of attack. I myself will lead the assault on New Orleans. Burnt-lip Pequin with his army will smash at Nashville. Claw Cotten will seize and hold Natchez. Local groups will fall upon county seats and communication centers in between. I'll sweep up from the South. Pequin will come down from the North. We'll leave garrisons along the way. As you know, we have men in key points everywhere working inside the law to

smooth our course. We'll join forces with Claw Cotten at Natchez. We start from the outside, roll up to the hub, you see; rule from there. We'll have our chance at looting every bank and mercantile establishment from Nashville to the Gulf."

He stopped, leaned forward, knuckles showing white against the table top. "You thought that was the whole idea, didn't you? It's not. That's only what might be called our minimum objective. We have a maximum one."

His hand waved out to indicate the two men he had rounded up from the big room at the last minute before entering his quarters: Tate Micklejohn and Blackbird Fentres.

"Blackbird Fentres, as most of you know, operates a slave auction at Natchez. A powerful man, with connections in slave trading quarters all over the South. Tate Micklejohn is overseer for one of Mississippi's largest plantations. I've been going over a certain feature of our campaign with these brothers." He paused, lashed out. "We don't just stage an outlaw rebellion; we stage a slave rebellion at the same time. You know how the blacks outnumber the whites throughout the South in places ten to one. You know the fear that walks with the white man down here, the fear of the black man organized and run amok. You know the panic and confusion resulting in a community when only one 'incident' occurs. Well, can you imagine what will happen when the slaves from Nashville to the Gulf rise up and start butchering their masters and their families in their beds?"

MURRELL pounded the table until it shook and the veins stood out on his forehead like cotton-bale cordage.

"With the slaves falling upon the plantations, with our own brothers of the true girt sacking the cities, with the law-enforcement machinery sold out to us, what chance have the people got? In one bold bloody coup we will seize power so solidly that the United States government itself will despair of doing anything about it. That's where I've been holding out on you, brethren of the Mystic Conspiracy. We don't just stage an outlaw rebellion. *We establish an outright outlaw empire.*"

He let that soak in, gloating at the effect of his announcement as mirrored by their stunned expressions. He banged the table, screamed at them, "What's to stop us? Just because it's never been done before? I tell you it's practically a fact accomplished! The groundwork for the slave rebellion is well

along. We have key slaves and slave masters everywhere working for us—and Northern abolitionists financing us in the mistaken belief that they are helping the slaves to freedom through a bloodless coup. Once we are established who is going to drive us out? Not the locals. We will have killed all who stand in our way. The rest will be our slaves as completely as the blacks. Who then to oppose us? The Federals? Think on it. Think deeply. This is a raw new country of relatively few people and overwhelmingly many miles. There are no roads. Only trails and rivers. We will have control of all strategic points. Andy Jackson is president. Won't he remember that he himself with his handful of ragtags at New Orleans slaughtered the flower of England's armies? Won't he think twice before he puts his own head in such a noose? We will have men to present our side in Congress. We have paid newspapers in the North. The argument will run: 'Yes, we could do it; we could throw the rascals out. But at what cost of time and money and the lives of our brave young men! It is a wilderness stretch at best of no great economic or strategic value. Swamps and trees. Let the beggars have it. It is not worth our while to take it back.' "

He came around the table in a bull-like rush. He sputtered in their very faces, walking up and down, "So then, brothers of the true girt, what do you say? Are you men of destiny? Do you want to rule an empire with me from our new capitol building at Natchez?" His hands swept around. "This hut we're in, this mudsty, it shall become our national shrine! This our humble beginning—pilgrims from all the world will come here to reflect and marvel. Think on it!"

They thought on it, and they liked what they thought. Their talk buzzed in a high hysterical key. Smoke funneled from their mouths as their cigar ends glowed redly in the advancing night dimness. Their hands reached and kept reaching for the exquisite liquor. They swallowed it in gulps and it was no more than water in their throats.

MURRELL, the consummate master, needled them further in their dreams of grandeur. "Who is to say that we shall stop on the Mississippi. Spain's hold is light to the West of us. As we grow stronger we keep reaching out. Who is to say where we stop? Could be we will control two continents!"

Some of them demurred on that. It was all right with Murrell. He had expected them to. It let him settle more solidly for a lesser—his intended—objective.

"All right, we hold only to our present speculation. We will be realistic. We will even admit the possibility of the federal government in some other administration effecting a campaign to throw us out. Maybe they throw us out. In ten years. Even in five. I ask you brothers, what can we not accomplish in five years? Any time the pressure grows too great we go with our loot to Mexico.

"We could buy the whole of Mexico with half what we will have. So there gentlemen, you have our maximum and our minimum goals. Not merely to stage our rebellion. At the least to found an outlaw empire and hold it for a period of years. At the most to hold it forever. In any case, glory and gold beyond measure for all of the true girt."

They talked again, their words jamming and clashing against each other. Drunk on liquor, dreams and expectations, they talked, while the master-dreamer of them all went back to his chair and sat and glowed and puffed his Cuban cigar.

Then one introspective brother raised a troubled objection. It was Osmun Foss, the gray little man who was in the banking business, too—without Andy Jackson's blessing. In the money business anyhow, by way of his own printing presses and distribution channels.

"It's wonderful," he said. "Wonderful. But it's so big. Before we're ready for The Day we'll have to trust so many people with the secret. So many, many people. I've found in my own tight organization even, a man sells out once in a while. Or plain gets drunk and shoots off his mouth. All these Strykers. All the Grand Council even. How are we going to keep our plans from leaking out somewhere?"

"That's all that's troubling you?" Murrell barked.

"That's all. If we can keep our plans to ourselves I know we can put it through—"

"Then rest easy, brother. I'm glad you put the question. Here's the answer. It's big, you say. Big. You're damned almighty

right it's big. It's so big that—let somebody talk—*who in hell would believe 'em?*"

A stir went around. Heads nodded. The fireglow in the darkening room put their faces in sharp planes of light and shadow as they nodded in ecstatic delight, savoring more and more the diabolical genius of this Devil Murrell. Clamped like a mussel shell again on his cigar, Murrell's mouth relaxed then and writhed at the corners in his death's-head grin.

He took the cigar from his mouth. "You see what I'm meaning? Things so big that people's little minds can't hold 'em. Raids and looting, sure. But who would believe that this handful of men in the mud in Arkansas would brace the United States government in a way that even England couldn't get away with? Our strength lies in our very boldness. In striking hard and striking fast. And anybody spills the plans beforehand, why, he'd be laughed off the earth. He'd be locked up in an asylum. It's too, too preposterous for anybody to believe. It's crazy, see? That's why it can succeed." His face chilled; his eyes grew baleful, lost their wet velvet luster, became that dry slate color as the tiny ridged muscles at the corners pulled the lids half down. "There is another reason why no one is liable to talk out of turn. We'll come to that in a minute."

THEY did not seem to notice the change that was coming over him. But Dan noticed and he threw a quick sidelong glance at René St. Cyr, sitting so close beside him on a lion-claw taboret. René's hand lifted to the cigar between his teeth and under cover of the hand, murmured:

"Side me close now."

Murrell leaned back in his chair, clapped his hands twice sharply; and from behind the massive Chinese screen the swaying vision appeared again. The girl moved silently, lighting a taper at the fireplace, then putting the yellow flame to all ten candles in a silver candelabrum. She carried the heavy thing and set it carefully on Murrell's table. Her perfume and the diaphanous gown trailed after her, and shadows scuttled to the corners. The lighted candles were caught up and reflected in the ceiling mirror overhead, and the crystal pendants hanging like a fringe around the edge of the mirror—or like stalactites in an Ozark sandstone cave—glittered like diamonds. The effect was impressive; no mistake about that.

Once in the process of adjusting the candelabrum on Murrell's table Dan Blue saw the girl frown very slightly and almost imperceptibly shake her head. In the direction of the Chinese screen, he thought. She was looking almost at him and he wondered—But then he realized that it was René St. Cyr who had held her fleeting attention. Dan looked sharply, but no expression showed on René's bearded face. And yet Dan was mortally certain that something had passed between these two.

René raised his hand to his cigar again, leaning a little toward Dan. "The mirror," was what his hidden lips said.

Dan stole a glance upwards at the circular mirror, but it revealed nothing in the room that didn't show otherwise. It was somewhat blinding to the eyes, anyway, with the candlelight reflected in it. He bore down hard in his mind to try and get René's meaning. Things took a turn then that made him forget mirror, girl, and about everything.

It started innocently enough. Tate Micklejohn put a question. Tate was sandy-haired and skinny, with high cheekbones and hollows where his cheeks sucked in over teeth he had lost. His eyes were a washed-out blue with sun-squint wrinkles at the corners, and his skin had been leathered by sun exposure. Even under the broad brim of a plantation overseer's hat you get a lot of reflected sun in the long run. Tate's hands had stubby fingers and they were knob-knuckled. They kept rubbing against his thumbs, constantly rubbing, the fingertips rolling back and forth over the balls of the thumbs. It was as if they felt restless, empty. They needed something to hold. Something like a shotgun, or a cat-o'-nine-tails whip, or a hammer and leg-iron—something like that. Tate was a good overseer. He made a plantation pay.

He asked the question that all of them sooner or later would have asked. "What about The Day?" he asked. "You've give us a right nice blueprint, Chief, on what's goin' to happen. But *when's* it goin' to happen? How long've we got to make ready?"

Murrell leaned over the desk. He talked quietly, but he hit them with another bombshell. "I was coming to that," he said. "I

can't tell you the date. Not now. Not till we remove the two traitors from our presence."

THE North and Cheney pistols that had sprung to his hands left no slightest doubt about whom he meant. They were pointed dead on René St. Cyr. And those of Micajah Goodloe, Murrell's number-one bodyguard, the man who went in a straight line and got things done, were out and holding hard on Dan Blue. Oh, they weren't taking any chances. They knew St. Cyr from away back, and they were coming to know Dan Blue now.

Goodloe, watching Murrell, had taken his cue from the master, who drew even while he was talking. Micajah Goodloe's guns were up almost at the same instant. He knew so well who to level on that this must have been a put-up job between the watchdog and the master, Dan realized starkly. The old man in the big room outside, the one they called Mush-mouth, who had pretended to be so drunk in order to tip René—he had known the Indian sign was on them. How many more had known? Young Hues, from how he had acted in the alcove. No matter—the thing now was: how were they going to get out from under this? It was something they couldn't well have guarded against. Anything like this, if it came, they had thought would be touched off by the arrival of Claw Cotten.

Funny how a man tried to alibi himself even before his brain got to working on setting things to rights.

"Hues," Murrell bit out the words, "you're handy. Step in behind the late Mr. Blue and take his guns. Don't overlook a derringer he might have, and any knives. Bunk, do the same by Frenchy."

Dan looked at René, and they both knew they were in for it. They let themselves be disarmed.

"Take the stuff over on the far side of the room. Drop it on the sideboard," Murrell directed. While they were complying he turned to the brothers of the Clan, assembled.

"Now," he ripped out, "you're going to see why a man's not liable to sell-out the Mystic Conspiracy. There isn't enough money in the world to make it worth his while. I'll show you what I mean."

He reholstered his guns with a flourish. "Bunk, you can put yours up too. What we've got scheduled for this pair is something that'll be a better object lesson than anything a gun can do." His white hand moved out, pushing the candelabrum a little back on the table. The moving light made diamond-like flickers in the crystals overhead and across the face of the ceiling mirror. Dan knotted his brains in another struggle about that mirror. It still didn't reveal anything in the room that couldn't be seen directly, but in a flash of revelation he thought maybe he knew what René had meant now. "Side me close," René had said. Sure—sure.

Murrell's hands were spanked down upon the table again, on the scattered papers there that spelled it all out in black and white so that the veriest scoffer could not doubt—that was if a man could get hold of those papers and get them out of here; that was if a man could get out of here!

Murrell was talking again, leaning far over the table, his mussel-shell mouth emitting words in hard bursts. "You all know what brother Cotten can do with that iron claw of his. All right, you're going to see him work out. Close up. You're going to see that hooked mitten of his wipe off a couple of faces. You're going to see two men staggering around without any faces. The blood streaming down from where their faces were. You're going to see them scream and stagger till they drop. Without any faces! Right here in this room. On my oriental rug. *Right now.*"

He looked toward the screen behind which the lady had betaken herself. But it wasn't the lady who this time came out. Claw Cotten, and he didn't sway any. Squat, he stood, his little possum eyes biting out from his hairless, bladder-like face. The candlelight accentuated the perpetual malarial yellow of his face . . . but it was the devil's claw that drew the glances of every man in the room, glued and nailed the glances while the heartbeat made a thudding against the ribs.

Claw Cotten didn't say anything. He just came forward on his stumpy legs, ready to gouge with that prodigious hand, armor-clad with the hooked mitt—ready to wipe a man's face off. He advanced on René who was sitting closest.

CHAPTER XXIII

DAGGERS FROM THE SKY

IT WAS a matter of hair-shade timing and René waited until Claw had moved alarmingly close in, waited until just before the eyes in the room were bound to switch from the claw to the target: René's face.

It was a simple thing he did. He was sitting on the plush and gold taboret, a kind of upholstered stool—no back to it and no arms. His hands were in front of him, gripping the under edge. He simply put his weight on his feet outstretched to each side, raised up enough to take his body weight from the taboret, and lifted upward in a violent surge. Upward and outward as he put the taboret in a short swing toward the candelabrum on the table. The heavy silver candle holder whacked over on the table. Some of the ten candles winked out. But some of them remained lighted to gutter against the papers, those blueprints of outlaw empire.

Murrell leaped instinctively to protect his precious papers, and René, holding to the taboret, let it follow out its swing, then brought it smashing back as he took a long step toward Claw Cotten. Caught off guard, Claw felt the weight of the taboret thump his face. More of the upholstering than the naked metal made the contact, so it wasn't by any means a finishing blow. But it did set him, grunting, back on his heels and gave René a chance to follow up in a movement which put him closer to the Chinese screen. Yells and curses crammed the room by this time, and general pandemonium as men moved in uncalculated bursts of energy.

Part of the uproar was the direct result of Dan Blue's actions. Tensioned like a watch spring, attuned almost to René's pulse beat, he had "sided him close," and the candle flames from the overturned candelabrum were no more than taking their first yellow licks at the papers on the desk, than Dan had jerked himself sideways off his gilded chair and heaved it upwards with all his force. He didn't hold on to it as René had with the taboret. He let it go and it smashed into the ceiling mirror with a crash that was sweet sweet music to himself and René, but brought appalling confusion to everyone else. Glass came showering down, jangling, clashing, like daggers spilled from the sky.

Murrell and Bunk Yeaple took the brunt of it. Through all the nightmarish disorder one detail came through for Dan, sharp-etched as lightning: the sliver of glass impaling Murrell's white hand and the blood trickling out, red on the white papers—those outlines of empire—and the yellow flames beginning to feed as he beat at them with his other hand.

Then the flames were out and Dan was reeling back, with gun blast loud in his ears as Bunk Yeaple fired a pistol ball. But Bunk was heeling backwards, too, under the drive of mirrored daggers from above, so the pistol ball didn't slow anybody. Somebody else put a shot in the room, and Murrell's cursing voice tailed in on the echoes of it, Murrell shouting:

"No gunning, you damn fools! In this dark, this crowd—you'll kill the wrong ones. Take it easy, damn you; get to the door there."

But it wasn't to the door that René was lunging. It was in the other direction, toward the Chinese screen. Dan, still siding him close, leaped after him. Claw Cotten bore down with the devil's claw and Dan's hands, directed by no conscious thought, yanked an oil painting from the wall and swung it, edgewise. The heavy gilt frame raked along Claw Cotten's arm and struck the hooked mitt on the inside, putting on pressure in such a way as to skin the devil's claw from his hand. Dan could have tried for that a hundred times and never worked it. And here it was without an effort. Not as good as breaking the wrist with the heavy frame, but still—

Murrell had flung himself around the table and was clopping down with the pistol barrel, aiming the blow for Dan's head. Sickness struck him like a physical blow as he realized he was going to be too slow to duck it. He tried, God knows he tried. Bones and fibers in his body wrenched like tornado-twisted lumber as he tried to jerk himself back. But he was too slow and he knew it.

Then one of those crazy things again that shape men's lives and make a chaos of their planning—blind chance. Or was it? He had a fleeting half-awareness— Then Murrell with a chair tangled between his legs was going to the floor in a crash, the pistol bar-

rel swishing past Dan's head, short of its mark a good six inches.

René's urgent voice exploded in Dan's brain, and he turned, stumbling, but landing behind the screen on the silken softness of a bed. In the perfumed darkness here he felt René's hands pulling. He flopped over, his knees digging deeply into feather pillows. If there was a door it was closed—he made for the gray patch of window. He didn't have to butt out the glass. The window was open.

Guns were blasting now behind them, and pistol balls pludding, but they made it through the window. René chanced the gun lead for long enough to wait and smash out the glass and yank the window down. In Dan's book it was damn-fool delay until the reason flashed. It was to give the girl a break. She must have opened the window for them. This would cover for her.

FOR the remainder of the night the thing that both Dan and René fumed about the most was food. "We never did get any of that roast hog," they kept morosely reminding themselves. That they stayed wet and cold was beside the point. A man, after a fashion, gets used to that. He never gets used to being hungry.

With the first couple of horses they could put their hands on in the Headquarters yard they had shaken off their initial pursuit in the quagmire trails winding through the canebrake. They'd head back to Champ's Owl Hoot Inn, they decided. It was the closest place around to get anything to eat, and it wasn't too bad a bet in any case. The brothers of the true girt, the chances were, wouldn't be looking for them to retrace their steps.

They abandoned the horses and crossed the river higher up this time in another of the Clan's hide-out boats that René, by dint of much mud-grubbing and swearing, managed to locate. It was broad daylight by the time they put in at the Owl Hoot.

Johnathon Champion greeted them with hostility and suspicion. René scraped mud from his lips, glared at the tavern keeper through red-rimmed eyes, and waved him aside. "Food. Put it on the table, Champ. Sudden. We're only staying long enough for a warm and a feed."

"And sell us your guns," Dan ordered.

The landlord did himself handsome. He brought plenty out fast. All the while he mumbled to himself. "—not likin' this. Crazy comings and goings. Not likin' it. Goin' to sell out and go to my sisters in Cincinnati."

Dan and René talked too, while they ate, holding terse post-mortem.

"It's Claw Cotten's throat I want to dig my fingers in," Dan brooded. "Murrell, in spite of everything, remains kind of impersonalized to me. It's hard to explain exactly. But he seems not quite real—as though in the end he will be something for the fates to settle."

"I know what you're meaning. He effects people that way. He's a colossal evil genius —not to be judged by ordinary standards."

"But Claw Cotten—he's real as slimy creek mud, real as gouging cat-fish fins. Murrell's tumble I can leave to due process. His own vanity could bring him down. It could be a very little thing. But Claw I've got to finish with my own hands—"

"We finish him," René cut in, "or he'll never rest till he finishes us."

A different fear sharpened Dan's voice. "You think he had been to Natchez, like Murrell said?"

"I doubt it. He had work to do, holding

him at New Madrid. The suspicion about Crystal is out though, you could tell from Murrell's talk. I think Claw will head for Natchez now, as soon as he decides the trail has gone cold on us."

"Behind that Chinese screen all the time!

He took the long way around the lake I reckon? And went in by way of Murrell's private door? Even that old crony of yours, Mush-mouth, apparently didn't know he was there."

René nodded.

"The girl tipped you? There when she was lighting the candelabrum?"

"Yes." Rene's eyes glowed somberly. "Janie Elwive came through. She did all right. I introduced her to Murrell in the first place. I found her in a dance house in the Memphis Pinch Gut. He took her out of there, set her up as his number-one mistress. It was quite a step up for Janie. She was grateful. Yes—she came through all right. Gave me time to plan the candelabrum-mirror play—"

"Murrell," Dan jabbed, "must have been tipped about how we served the horse-boat—the fierce way he clamped down on us, not giving us a chance to say anything."

"I think so," René agreed. "In the wheelhouse, there—the pilot or the steersman—maybe some mirror reflection from one of the windows against the night. I could have been recognized before we took that pair out—"

"Bad habit of yours, I've heard, Mr. St. Cyr." Dan gave him a wolfish grin. "Letting them live, I mean."

FROM outside, distantly growing, came the fast clop of hoofs. While the landlord wrung his hands in the kitchen doorway, Dan and René pushed back from the table, grabbed the weapons that had been furnished them, an old Lancaster flintlock and a cannon-mouth derringer with a brass frame and engraved silver plates, a discouragingly ornamental-looking thing that had probably never been fired since it left the gunshop and looked as though it might fly into a thousand pieces the first time the spark was put to the powder.

They wedged themselves, one on each side of the wide front door. It was Adam Hues who came riding. He pulled his horse to a rearing stop in the compound, threw himself from saddle and made for the inn.

"Now could be where I break my bad habit," René said tensely.

"Wait," Dan rapped out. "Hold back a minute. I've got an idea about this one."

Hues came on and burst through the door—and under the guns of Dan Blue and René St. Cyr. He stood owlishly blinking, and breathing hard. At the last his hand went out in a placating gesture. Words tumbled in frothing eagerness from his mouth.

"I'm not blamin' you, what you're thinkin'. But hear me out first. It ain't noways how it looks. The landlord'll bear me out—What I said to him yesterday morning in here. When I came back after my glove. I only left it so's I'd have a chance to get away from Murrell and come back and tell the landlord. You saw me tellin' him. You've got to believe me—"

"Quit alibiing," René snapped, "and talk."

The landlord was clumping forward now, his feet scuffing the puncheons in his hurry. "He's all right, this lad! All right—"

René turned the cannon-mouth derringer full on the landlord's stomach. "Go ahead," he invited. "*You* tell it."

Johnathon Champion looked agonizedly at Adam Hues, and Hues nodded his head half off. "Yes, yes; tell, 'em! They'll believe it a barrel's-weight sooner from you than what they will from me. They're all right. I didn't know it yesterday, but I do now. Tell 'em."

The innkeeper told them.

"His name ain't rightly Adam Hues. It's Virgil A. Stewart. He's from over Jackson way. A Parson Henning there, he had three field hands stolen, and Mr. Stewart, he set out to git them slaves back from Mr. Henning. Worth three thousand dollars if they're worth a farthing, and three thousand to a preacher is a lot of money, more money in fact than I ever knowed a parson to—"

"Keep to the story," René chopped in. "It's beginning to look like we're all three in a hurry."

The way it shook down, young Hues—or Virgil A. Stewart—suspected Murrell of stealing the slaves, Murrell having recently bought a plantation in the neighborhood; and although he worked hard at trying to set himself up as a solid citizen, he seemed to make a great deal of money without tending much to his farming, and there were mysterious goings-on at his place—men forever coming to visit him after dark and riding away before the light of morning. Virgil A. Stewart had intercepted Murrell on the trail according to the way he had planned it. They

struck up an acquaintance and for three days and nights they traveled together, Stewart leading the talk toward speculation, making out to be quite a lawless character himself in order to get Murrell to talk about the stolen slaves.

The upshot was that Murrell, his vanity puffed by the young man's ardent interest, way out blew his top. It all came out: the whole fantastic story of the Mystic Conspiracy and the plans for outlaw empire. Murrell prided himself on being able to size a man up quickly. Stewart, he opined, was one of the true girt. He invited him to cross the river with him to the Garden of Eden. He would initiate him into the Clan and make him his aide-de-camp in the coming campaign.

As he had the opportunity Stewart scratched names and dates with his scarf pin on the sides of his boots and on his saddle skirt. It was this welter of incredible information that he had imparted to Johnathon Champion yesterday morning when he made the excuse to come back for his glove. He felt that in crossing the river with Murrell he might be going to his death. He did not want news of the conspiracy to die with him. So to the innkeeper he had gushed out the highlights of it, with instructions to take the word to the authorities if he, Virgil A. Stewart, did not live to return from the Garden of Eden.

DAN BLUE looked at young Hues, so energetically nodding to confirm everything the innkeeper was saying. "It was you," Dan tendered recognition, "who kicked the chair in Murrell's way—back at Headquarters when he was coming at me slugging with his pistol barrel. I thought then—but I couldn't be sure. You made it possible for me to get away."

The young man kept nodding, wordless in his delirious appreciation of the way things were trending.

"How'd *you* get away?" René bought in.

"Why—no trouble," the youngster sputtered. "He—he trusts me. Murrell does. I don't know why, but he does—"

René swore softly. "That mad vanity of his! He couldn't imagine that he could ever size up a man wrong—"

"I just told him I didn't like any of his girls, that I had a girl of my own on this side of the river I wanted to see. He laughed and said get the hell across then and see her—"

"You happen to be among the elect to whom he confided the date for his rebellion?"

"Oh yes. The Day. It's Christmas, next year."

René blinked, swapped glances with Dan who was also blinking.

"Just like that!" Dan said softly. "The great man spills his guts to blue-eyed younker he meets up with on the trail!"

"That vanity! I knew it would finish him off some day. Christmas, Eighteen thirty-five. That gives him plenty of time—"

"And *us* plenty of time."

"Christmas! He would do it on Christmas. Everybody all over the land lulled with peace and good-will—and too much dinner turkey. Then the slaves butchering, Murrell's hellions shooting and looting, and those honorable ones standing high in business and fair in society and politics, selling out from the inside. He couldn't miss—only puffed up by his own conceit he brags to a marveling boy. And there goes your Mystic Conspiracy—out like a candle in the wind!"

It was sweet savoring after the mud-and-blood grubbing they had been through. "But we've still got to supply the wind for that candle," Dan reminded.

"A wind to blow the whole valley clean," René said, his dark eyes glowing. "Once it would have been enough to stop Murrell. Not any more. Five thousand little Murrells now to be mopped up. That's a job we'll have to get some help on. We'll need long-range planning—many men in many places—"

"Sounds, Mr. St. Cyr," Dan gibed gently, "like you might be getting steamed up about the welfare of the people."

René frowned—and made a speech. "Could be I've been too hasty all my life, letting my emotions boss my brain. This intolerance I see everywhere, this blind rutting along the little paths in which a man is born—I hate it with a ground-in deep-scarred hatred. But I am coming to see that my kind of protest hasn't don't anything to alleviate it. I have no reason to love the people, that's true. Still, I have no wish to see them served as Murrell will serve them. I've been thinking—here on this continent we have a chance

at something new in the world. Here are many races and many classes. Here in America we can show the world how men can live together. But first, I reckon, we have to understand each other. I have been too impatient before—and not knowing where to start. But now I'm thinking that if I help beat down Murrell and his Clan, I can undo some of the harm I have done in helping them grow in the first place. With the Mystic Conspiracy licked, there'll be just that much less—well, brutal cynicism to clog the air of human understanding." He smiled, almost shyly. "How's that for a speech?"

Dan gripped his arm. "I told you you'd make a good parson—though I doubt there is a church big enough for you."

Young Hues was watching, wide-eyed. "I told Murrell," he volunteered, "that I was headin' for the Yalo Busha. He said he'd join me and he wrote me out the names of more than a hundred men I might be meetin' on the way. Key names in the Clan, men for the most part leadin' law-abidin' lives in the eyes of their neighbors."

"Good," René said. "We'll check those against the ones I know." He looked soberly at the young man. "Mr. Stewart, you have become a man of destiny. I hope you realize that. Now listen carefully. Go about your affairs just as you have planned with Murrell. We will arrange to keep in touch with you. Say nothing of this to anybody." He turned to the landlord. "And you say nothing."

There was an odd uncertain look on Johnathon Champion's face.

"You understand?" René asked severely.

"Yes, yes," the innkeeper said quickly.

"When the time is right," Dan expanded, "we'll let you know. This will take planning and timing. It won't be enough to bring charges and cause a few arrests. We have to have proofs, or, like Murrell says, we'll be laughed into a booby hatch with our 'wild stories'."

René looked at Dan. "We'd better get going."

Young Stewart, eager to please as a young hound, said, "You've got more time than you think. You fooled them proper in your getaway. They think you rode toward the Sabine and the Spanish countries, so they're looking for you mostly on the other side of the river. Claw Cotten and them have even given up the chase. Murrell excused them from Council same as he did me, and they've hit for Natchez on a speculation of their own. Something about a woman of Claw's. So you see, you've got plenty of time."

"You see?" Dan said bleakly to René. "Nothing to worry about. We've got plenty of time."

They got going.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DEVIL'S PUNCH BOWL

AT NATCHEZ Dan and René trooped ashore with a straggling keelboat crew. Riding the river had taken more days than they liked to think about. Part of the way they had paddled a *pirogue*, a clumsy excuse for a boat hollowed from a log. For another part of the journey they had managed a steamboat passage. But the steamboat was on a private charter for Baton Rouge. The captain would on no account put in at Natchez. Dan and René had got off at a woodyard and finished their trip as keelboat passengers. And now they were here.

Late morning under a bright sun and far enough South now that there was warmth to the sun even in winter. There was greenery too. High on the bluff in among the leafless trees was the green of palmetto and cabbage palms, and live oaks weighted down with the gray-green of Spanish moss and the bright sheen of mistletoe. But it wasn't Natchez-on-the-Bluff that they came through first. It was Natchez-under-the-Hill, and here there was no greenery.

They made their way to the Landing by climbing over the tops of flatboats hawsered to posts sunk deep in river mud. Waterfront shacks reached out from shore, many of them on spider leg pilings that would go but with the next high-river. No matter. Plenty of lumber from old flatboats for the building of new ones.

The froggy river smells gave way to the stench of unpaved alleys, fish heads and offal in the riverfront bilge, as they neared solid ground. Store-boats, floating cobblers, tinsmiths were jammed in here tight against one another. Grog-boats too and red-curtained girl-boats.

Dan and René clambered through it all and anchored their boots in the wet clay of the shore. They looked around. Here it was, the hell-hole of the Big Valley. Natchez-under-the-Hill, a strip of oozing clay between the river and the bluff, an unsurveyed criss-cross of mouldering alleys. Unpainted shacks, some with low-gabled roofs, leaning against each other to keep from falling, and hardly a respectable enterprise in the lot: pot-houses, groggeries, low dance halls, dram-shops, bordellos, red-light hotels and door-curtained cribs.

The place was only beginning to stir from its past night's debauchery. Swampers were rough-sweeping the refuse from puncheon floors. A wagoneer and a boatman stood in front of Mother Jenkins' House, loudly and obscenely berating each other. Probably nothing personal in it. Just an expression of the unreasoning never-dying hostility existing between men of different trades and environments. Two early birds, professional gamblers if their fancy vests were an indication, watched idly from a second story gallery. A slave with jingling earrings trotted past; he leaped a drunk in the alleyway mud with no break in the rhythm of his moving legs. The drunk's pockets had been turned inside out.

"Won't you come in, gentlemen?"

The voice was throaty and seductive, and so close that Dan started in surprise. They both looked back. Close enough that they could have reached out and touched her, a girl leaned on crossed arms, looking from an opened window. Her mouth was red from quickly smooched-on lipstick, but her eyes were dull from interrupted sleep; her face had an unwashed glaze. She smiled, and her white hands lifted to poke at her hair, a brassy tousle still from the night's pillow. She yawned and put one hand to her mouth.

In spite of her general frowsiness, her extreme youth saved her. She was perhaps no more than fourteen. She was pretty—or could have been. She was appealing—and pathetic.

She was smiling again. "I know it's early." She moved from the window to the door, pulled back the curtain. "Won't you come in anyway?" She stood there in her loose calico dress. It was rumpled. Could be she had slept in it. Could be she had whisked it up from its heap at the foot of her bed and just put it on. "I'll make tea for you—all at the same price."

René smiled in that way of his that could be so warmly human, moved on. Dan shook his head, moved on with René. But he couldn't help it, he had to look back once. To René this was all old stuff, but Natchez-under-the-Hill was new to Dan. New and it sickened him a little. He couldn't keep from identifying it with Crystal. Here she had lived. "It is born of river scum," she had said. And it was. River scum and deep-woods rubble that reeked of lusts and murder. But it had been Crystal's home. This frontier cesspool was as familiar to her as to René.

René said, interrupting a thin whistling sound he had been making through his teeth, "If you're thinking of Crystal—don't."

Dan turned to him, startled. It was uncanny the way René could call the turn when a man got to worrying about Crystal.

René said further, in a voice curiously tight, "It hasn't touched her. She's like those India mystics you read about who can sit down on hot coals and not get burned. Believe me; about Crystal it's true."

"I believe you," Dan said. "I believed her and I believe you."

They kept moving, sped by the same urgency, because Dan during the days on the river had come to know that René, in his way, was as concerned over Crystal's safety as he himself was.

"There is a Professor Morse in Massachusetts somewhere," René volunteered, "working on something he calls the magnetic telegraph. He ever gets it like he wants it, you're supposed to be able to send a message quick as thought over a wire. And get an answer right back."

"We sure could use one of those," Dan muttered, "hooked up to Colonel Doddridge's plantation."

René nodded. "What I was thinking."

The town came more alive as they got back from the river. But still the hell-holes crowded each other on the sour-smelling alleys; the dives, saloons and brothels, with here and there a grubby orange bar now, a fly-speckled notions store, a tannery, horse lot, livery stable, a grain and tobacco warehouse. They came up to one particularly noisome dive with the sun-bleached cypress siding falling off, a rickety stairway going up

to a side gallery, and the whole structure sagging so it was like to fall any minute. Faded by sun and rain the letters on a signboard in front proclaimed: HOUSE OF REST FOR WEARY BOATMEN.

A barrelhouse occupied the ground floor of this one, a tavern not even high enough in the scale of riverfront respectability to afford a regulation bar. A couple of warped planks laid over the tops of two up-ended kegs sufficed. Red curtains, grimy and stained, hung dispiritedly at the windows of the starkly bare room, with a red boat's lantern over the door to reassure anyone naive enough not to know that more than liquor was sold here.

A faro banker had rolled an empty barrel out onto the slab sidewalk and was trying to drum up a game. A few deep-woods bullies stood around, vacantly staring at the cards on the barrelhead. They wore linsey-woolsey shirts of yellow and blue, not red like the river roarers. At least they had been yellow or blue in the beginning, before the dye had faded, before the wagon dust had become sweat-caked between the weaving. As further marks of their trade they wore broad-brimmed hats. They wouldn't have been caught dead in a coonskin. One of them carried a long rawhide whip. He kept flicking it at road debris. The cheek of every last one of them bulged with a tobacco chew. The ground about them and the slab sidewalk was bright with brown expectoration. They turned their bored morning-after stares on Dan and René as the pair drew near.

"You think you'll pass muster, Mr. Blue?" René joked under his breath. "With your cookie duster shaved off and your sideburns clipped you look naked as a jay bird in the snow."

"*I* look naked? With your black mattress stuffing gone you look bare as a boiled egg —a peeled one."

THE WORD, they knew, must certainly have gone out about them on the Clan's grapevine, and being open game for any mystic brother in the whole Big Valley, they had thought it the part of foresight to do something about obscuring their identity. They had changed clothes too. They wore boughten clothes, but nothing superfine enough to draw particular attention.

They got opposite the door to the barrelhouse and René turned his head away, lifting his hand in a swift movement to point at something in the other direction, at the same time spouting a garble of words. He walked a little faster too, and Dan kept pace.

"What's that play for?" Dan wanted to know when they got by. "I didn't see anything."

"I'm hoping that one inside the door didn't either," René said. "The one with his face half buried in the tankard of ale, his eyes under the coonskin squinting out at us?"

"I saw him, but—"

"I know him. He's a Clansman and a riverman. What's a riverman doing in a place that rightly ought to read: HOUSE OF REST FOR WEARY WAGONEERS? If Murrell is putting the squash to the feud between river and wagon men, then he's really getting this Valley tied up. Here's the logical center of it, like he said, here where the land and river trails cross. The Spanish Road comes up from New Orleans and the Trace goes out to Nashville. It'll be a bloody whirlwind from the Ohio to the Gulf, and centering here."

"You mean it *would* have been. We're going to stop it. Remember?"

"Sure," René said. "Sure." But something was gnawing at him, Dan could tell.

They kept moving, not even slackening for the climb where the road looped up two hundred feet to the top of the gray bluff.

Natchez-under-the-Hill blanked out behind them like a bad dream as they turned their stride East along a road that broadened and became cobbled pretty soon. And then they were in Natchez-on-the-Bluff—and the difference a man would have to see with his own eyes to believe. It was maybe a little like ascending from hell to heaven, as near to either anyway as could be found on the Mississippi frontier.

The cool and spacious buildings lay about, with deep piazzas, iron grille work, tile roofs, arcades and columns in the Spanish manner. Here was indolence and ease and every evidence of gracious living. The fancy shops and bazaars openly displayed their wares; china, silks, and silver. Coffee houses and genteel taverns elbowed so so politely the offices of the commission merchants, those gentlemen who dealt without soiling their

hands in cotton, coffee, wood, spices, hides, salt, sugar, horses and fish. There were the lawyers' chambers, the public buildings, a stately theater with vaulted corridors of yellowing brick, a bank under the Grecian portico of which the gentlemen lolled, flicking the ash from their Cuban cigars and talking of their profits—or of the gorgeous creature who was their latest mistress.

And here everywhere bordering the streets were those famous Pride of China trees. Only the planters and their ladies weren't walking under them, they were riding under them. The clop of hoofs sounded sharply from the cobbles, and the aristocratic grind of carriage wheels iron-shod with rims scarcely wider than m'lady's finger, made a pleasant grating against the ears.

Dan kept hoping against hope that he might sight Crystal Flame—or Helen Doddridge—in one of the stately carriages. He didn't, and they kept moving along. They passed a tentlike building—little more than a roof held off the ground by wooden posts, and open on all four sides—within which a slave auction was going on.

DAN'S FACE hardened. This was little different from a horse auction. The slaves, men, women and children, were pinched and pawed, their mouths pried open for examination of their teeth, their eyes rolled back, and in varying stages of undress they were paraded around and put through

their paces for the edification of the gentlemen who came to buy, or perchance, merely to look. Leg-irons, manacles, and bull whips, kept easy at hand, were visual evidence of the brutality that partnered the depravity of the slave trade.

Dan's nails were digging at his palms. If these misused blacks ever came to feel the power of their numbers, as Murrell planned that they should—

Dan felt René's hand clamp in silent warning over his wrist. Dan didn't need the warning. He had seen the same thing which René had. The thought had flashed that under the surface maybe it wasn't so different after all—on the bluff or under the hill. Human life and welfare in either case were given scant heed. For the planters and merchants up here it was a good life, yes. But good only at the expense of the great bulk of underlings, black and white. Nine men labored and died that one might live. So it was under the hill. The top-dogs of crime and vice down there lived in luxury too, and with their paid bodyguards, their sops thrown out to the law, could count themselves as secure as anyone.

That was what Dan was thinking. But in one split-wink he focused down in time and place to one man in the urgent present. The man was down in front at the platform in consultation with the auctioneer. He was a fat and oily little man who dyed his hair black and let it grow long and lopped it across his bald head in the vain belief that he covered it. What he lost on top of his head he more than made up in his eyebrows. They were bushy and black and met above his nose in a straight line across his forehead. This gave him a slightly owlish look—a disgruntled owl who had not this day had his fill of mice. But it was a different bird that he took his nickname from. It was his profession gave him his nickname. He operated the slave auction here. "Blackbird" Fentres, they called him. He was known pretty largely all over the South. The first and last time Dan had seen him was at Murrell's Garden of Eden in company with the plantation boss, Tate Micklejohn.

"You think he saw us?" Dan asked tensely, when they were walking away.

"I don't believe he did," René said. "But it's not good. That boatman we saw in the wagoneer's bar, now Fentres. Bound to be others."

"Among them Claw?"

"Especially Claw. Murrell is putting the pressure on around here."

They rented horses at a livery stable and cantered north from town. They passed heavy freight wagons, oxen drawn, and loaded high with cotton bales, corn, tobacco.

The wagoneers gave them lusty wide-out waves. They passed a canvas-topped Conestoga, red on her sides and with a blue belly, weathered badly though from a thousand miles of dirt grinding.

A short piece out from town the road dipped into a swamp. Good fill and corduroy. They clopped along. The swamp got deeper. Black water glimmered around the cypress butts. But rocky ledges reared here and there; it was not all water and muck.

"The Devil's Punch Bowl, they call this," René spoke. "Dry rock inside if you know the way. Makes a big amphitheater; a fort, kind of, a natural fort. Indians used to use it, I've heard 'em say. You could put a thousand men in there and hide 'em snug—"

He broke off as his eyes sighted two men seated on a rock a little way back from the road in the cypress gloom. They were eating their lunch, one sucking an orange, the other whacking at a piece of jerky with his knife.

By no word or action did either Dan or René show surprise. They looked to the road, that was all, and held to the same pace they had been following when, for a second there, the world stopped.

They got clear of the swamp, and the sun was warm on their shoulders again, and bright on the land where in season Indian corn grew, and grass as high as a man's head, and long-staple cotton that you couldn't find its equal anywhere in America. Dan and René breathed again and leaned close in saddle.

"You saw?" René questioned tightly.

"I saw."

"Reckon they saw us?"

"They were looking. They saw. Whether they recognized us is something else again."

"If they did we won't be long in learning. Claw Cotten ain't one to leave grass grow under him. Neither is Tate Micklejohn."

"Tate—he's the plantation overseer, the one with Blackbird Fentres at the Garden?"

"Right. But I never knew him personally. I don't know what plantation in Mississippi. Oh, I know what's gnawing on you. I'm hoping you're wide and far wrong, that's all, on account the same thing's working on me. Your Doddridge place can't be far from here."

CHAPTER XXV

THE FIVE HUNDRED AND THE FIVE THOUSAND

"I DIDN'T kill him and he didn't kill me. You see? We're friends."

That was what he would say. It kept dinning in Dan's ears like a firebell in the night as he rode along beside René. *I didn't kill him and he didn't kill me.* That's the first thing he would say to Crystal when she came running across the lawn to meet them. *If* she came running. Claw Cotten had got to Natchez first. If he had also got to Crystal first—

They turned into a long plantation road. A trimmed bay hedge ran beside them on either hand. Great liveoak branches, hung deep with Spanish moss, reached over the hedge to arch above them as they rode. They came to the house at the end of the road. Tall glass doors and windows, rainbowed in the sun. White stately columns. Iron-grilled galleries. Broad, sloping roof. The whole set down amid magnolias and formal gardens, with a lawn in front as big as a meadow. A proud and proper mansion, exuding hospitality—for those with other proud and proper mansions.

But the old Colonel, for all that he was a slave owner with a mind set deep in the ruts of the feudal past, was another man to ride the river with. As man to man he was all right—one of the real ones. He came by his Colonel title honestly, having earned it under fire in 1812. He could as justly have claimed the title of Congressman. Honest to the core, a good vote-getter, he could have been returned indefinitely to office. But he had preferred to leave Washington for his sunny acres. Seeing the place for the first time, feeling its mellow charm, Dan could well understand why.

His glance was ranging everywhere as they drew near on the winding lane, and then he was seeing the Colonel and his lady. Sunning themselves on a side piazza. Though how they expected to get any sun, Dan didn't know—she in her choker-necked, long-skirted gown, he in his white blanket coat and the broad-brimmed hat so favored by the planters down here for keeping the sun off.

Then it wasn't only the Colonel and his lady that Dan was seeing, but Crystal!

Crystal Flame and Helen Doddridge both. Crystal gave a wild little cry, and came running, her dress of flower-print cotton whipping in abandon about her knees, her high heels taking tiny bites from the lawn. Helen Doddridge came too, but more sedately.

Dan was off his horse and Crystal was in his arms. She was crying and he felt like it himself, and what he was saying he didn't know. But after a bit he was holding her out to look at her. In the simple morning frock, low in the neck and puffed on the shoulders, and with the high waist, she looked wholesome and sweet as a child. The sun was in her cherry-blonde hair, the way it had been when Dan first glimpsed her on the cliff at Cave-in-Rock.

Dan found his hand going out to René, found himself saying what he had told himself he would: "I didn't kill him and he didn't kill me. You see, Crystal? We're friends."

OVER CRYSTAL'S shoulder he could see Helen Doddridge's eyes grow wide and startled at this glib talk of killing. He had been aware of Helen standing there, of course. No use to tell himself he hadn't. He was honest enough to hope that none of his emotionalism was for Helen's benefit.

Crystal's hands gripped hard on his arms, but she included René, too, in her glance when she said, "I'm glad. You two—Oh, I'm glad!"

Things propered off a bit then and Dan bowed and held Helen's hand lightly and they exchanged cool, awkward greetings; and he introduced her to René.

She was much more cordial to René, more than the occasion required, Dan thought. So maybe *she* was putting on just a little of an act too—though he still hoped that *he* wasn't.

Colonel and Mrs. Doddridge had come across the grass now. Dan bowed and presented René, and then he was pumping the hand of the old Colonel, striking an attitude and saying:

"Webster and Clay—turn those rascals out! I hold with John C. Calhoun, suh, on the doctrine of nullification and the principle of state sovereignty. I do indeed."

The Colonel laughed and poked him in the ribs and turned him to the house. "This, I believe, calls for a ceremonial drink, suh. Very possible two or three. If we lose count after that, who is to blame us?" He walked with a spring in his step, the Colonel, a wiry man with a long white mustache and a longer beard. It was not a goatee. It fit in no conventional pattern, was peculiarly his own.

Crystal took Dan by the arm and held close while they walked, shamelessly adoring him. Helen and her mother came on politely with René. It was a gala homecoming until Crystal, trying to pile her happiness even higher, said, "They've been so wonderful to me, Dan—they're precious, just like you said they were." That part of it was all right, but she went on: "Everything's wonderful. You being here, and Frenchy—René," she caught herself. "And Murrell—isn't it the most wonderful news about Murrell?"

Dan braced himself instinctively. "Murrell?"

"Don't tell me you haven't heard! Don't you read the papers?"

"We—haven't been much where papers are," Dan said carefully.

"Well, its just that—Murrell's in jail. Now don't tell me—"

"Murrell's what?" It was René sounding off. He left the Doddridge women, came close.

"In jail," Crystal repeated, but more doubtfully now. "I—I don't know much more about it than that. I thought you boys would know. Somebody, a Virgil A. Stewart, had him arrested back at Murrell's own plantation in Madison County. It seems an innkeeper, someone named Johnathon Champion, wrote a letter to his sister in Cincinatti—"

RENE MADE a noise closer to a groan than anything else, and Dan seconded him, saying "I thought that landlord of yours looked a little funny when we were telling him to keep mum on everything. He'd probably already posted the letter, and there was nothing he could do about it then—"

"But he let the jackanapes know, after we'd left. And that young wild man, figuring the fat was in the fire, took matters into his own hands—"

They had all stopped on the lawn and were watching him curiously. He was aware of Helen's dark eyes, gently probing now,

and mirroring, it seemed, some secret hurt of her own. The things a man could read in a woman's eyes! *He* was the one who had been so grievously hurt.

He shook his head, frowning. "They'll all be on their guard now, the Grand Council and the Strykers—the five hundred and the five thousand. There'll be hell to pay!"

"But I don't understand, son," the Colonel interposed. "With Murrell lost to them, his organization will peter out—"

"No! The Clan is bigger than one man now. He has organized so well, it can go on without him. But they'll set The Day up. They're bound to—"

"The Day!" Crystal exclaimed. "You know it?"

"We did," René said somberly. "But with Murrell in jail, that'll all come out in the trial. It'll be public information. That won't stop the Conspiracy. They'll change The Day on us, that's all. Their signs, their meeting places—everything. For us it'll be all to do over again."

Dan's shoulders drooped and he shook his head tiredly. "We had it in our hands. All tied up in our hands. Now it's almost like I was starting out cold again from Washington."

"Oh dear," the Colonel's lady said, "oh dear," without knowing much of what it was all about. "This *day* you all speak of so tragically. What exactly is it?"

She pulled on the strings of her bonnet and looked pertily at René, and he said.

"It's when the slaves rise up, madam, and butcher their master and their mistress in their beds."

It was brutal and he knew he shouldn't have said it, but he said it and was not sorry. Dan, giving him a startled look, could almost read what he was thinking by the expression on his set defiant face. *They hurt me and they weren't sorry—all the nice people. Now let 'em sweat a little bit. It's true anyway. They might as well know it now as later.*

The Colonel cleared his throat and twisted at his mustache. "I'm sure it's not as bad as—"

"Your overseer," René interrupted in a savage burst, "would his name by any chance be Micklejohn?"

"Why yes. Tate Micklejohn. But I don't see—"

"He is a very good man if I may say so," Mrs. Doddridge put in a little tartly. "His discipline is strict but not severe. The slaves respect him. They love the Colonel, but they respect Mr. Micklejohn. Others about here have lost slaves lately, but we have had not a single runaway."

"You won't have," René said tightly, "not until The Day. Micklejohn will see to that."

"Why, what do you mean, suh?" The Colonel was a little frightened now.

RENÉ'S lithe shoulders lifted. "Maybe you'd better be the one to say it, Dan. And apologize, will you, for my bad manners."

Dan said, "Tate Micklejohn counciled with us, sir, in Arkansas territory. At Murrell's headquarters. I have to tell you that your overseer is one of Murrell's inner circle."

"Oh, come come, Dan—" the Colonel started. But he only started.

"In it bloody hands and fists. Why, we passed him within the hour at the Devil's Punch Bowl in close talk with Murrell's number-one man of the whole Clan, the man who's in Murrell's shoes already if Murrell is in jail. A man they call Claw Cotten. Blackbird Fentres, in Natchez, is another—"

"I can well believe it about Fentres. But my own overseer!"

"That's just where the danger lies, Colonel. You can hardly believe it. A million other people will be loath to believe it about a lot of people they know. Murrell has his men literally everywhere. No place too high or too low." Dan turned to Crystal. "Was a list made public in the paper, a list of Clansmen?"

"I saw no list, Dan—"

"Stewart's saving that for his ace card at the trial, I reckon." He went on, thinking out loud. "Now every scurvy one of them, inside the law and outside, who are on that list, will be champing to settle young Stewart's hash—to keep the list from coming to light."

"You mean," Mrs. Doddridge gasped, white faced, "they'll kill—"

"Killing is as casual with them as it is for you to break your morning egg at breakfast, madam," René enlightened.

"Oh dear—I—I think, if you'll please excuse me, I'll go in the house for my shawl." She turned away, almost as though escaping from something tangible. The pleasant peaceful grounds, her disturbed glance said, steamed with menace now, with every shrub and hedgerow of bay and privet an ambuscade for murderers.

"Wait, Mother," Helen called, "I'll get it for you."

"No, no, dear. You stay and talk if you like. I can manage." She looked back, gave them a fleeting smile of reassurance, and walked faster to the house, to the security of it's familiar walls.

René said, frowning, "It was more than happenstance that we saw Claw and Tate in the Devil's Punch Bowl. They must have been there for a purpose, and I'm wondering—"

"But over and beyond that," Dan said, driving his words, "We've got a close-up problem. Believe me everybody, I'm not being alarmist when I say something could happen now—well, any minute. René, talk this out with me. Suppose they recognize us. Suppose they did. You know them. Claw anyway. What would he do?"

René nodded briefly. "I've been mulling on that. . . . Missing us at the swamp, they'd know where we were headed. They'd come on as fast as they could. By a back road likely. Two against two, face to face on an open road—that wouldn't be to their savoring. They'd come on by a back road, looking to ambush us here." René paused, considering.

"Time would be goading them, wouldn't it," Dan prompted. "Every minute they could save would be to their advantage. They'd figure to sound us before we could talk too much—"

"Sound?" Helen's small wan voice inquired.

"Kill," René interpreted.

"They'd work together, wouldn't they?" Dan went on, thinking out loud again. "For their own protection. But after they'd put us away, Tate Micklejohn would do a rescue act maybe."

"That'd be logical," René agreed. "About the way they'd figure it, yes. To make it look good in front of the Colonel here, to undo anything we might have said, Tate would apprehend Claw, even roughing him up a little. Oh, he'd make it look good. He'd have to. His whole long-range plan would depend on keeping the Colonel's confidence."

CRYSTAL was nodding, her eyes bright and hard. "But he'd let Claw go, you mean. Before he could be jailed. Stage a break for him—"

"That's it," Dan whipped. "He'd get away—taking you with him, Crystal. It would be reported in the news as an isolated incident. And Virgil A. Stewart's violent death would be another isolated incident. And so, then, would Murrell's trial, if that slippery gent stays in jail long enough for there to be a trial. If he does, we can be sure he'll get a good lawyer. The trial will dribble along and maybe he'll get a few years for slave stealing. The conspiracy part of it, the plans for outlaw empire—who'll believe it? If it's introduced in the testimony it'll be laughed into the ground. And underground the conspiracy will flourish—to flame in the open on a new day that they will set. Without Murrell's guiding genius I doubt they can manage their outlaw empire. But they can certainly have their Day of fire and blood and plunder."

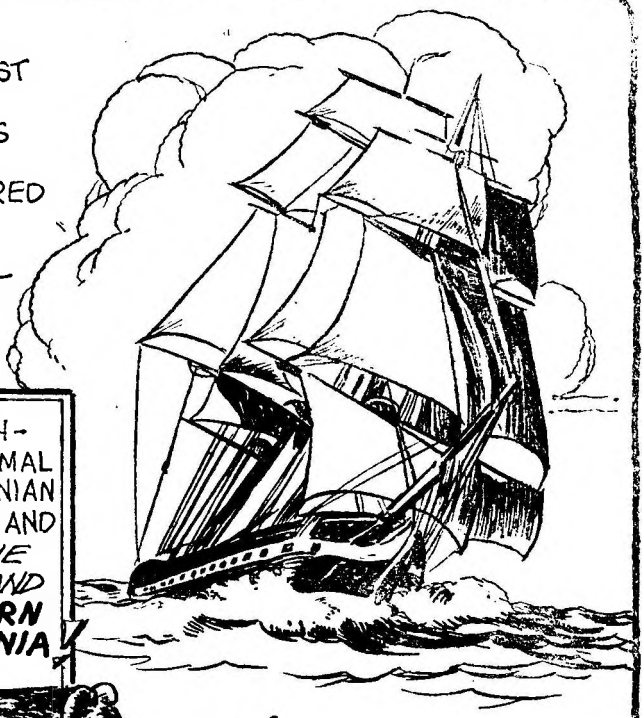
They all went into the house. It was the Colonel's own suggestion. Aroused now to the close-up peril, his thoughts were all of protection for his own. He was going to have a gun in his hand, and the women folks would have to be moved immediately to the safety of the upstairs.

Perhaps some of the timorous fear of the Colonel's lady was translated to all of them. The apprehension anyway. The sun shone still. But there was no longer any friendly warmth in it. The hedgerows of the formal gardens, the trees and shrubs, were all bristling thickets now, hostile and foreign as the gloomy woods and canebrakes that housed the killers on the Natchez Trace.

(*To be concluded in the next* SHORT STORIES)

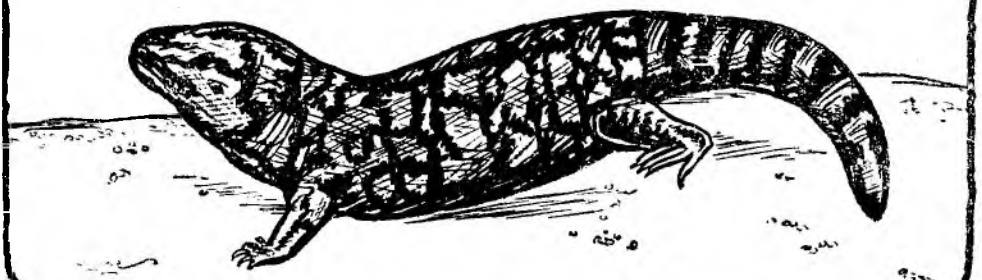
Curioddities By Weill

THE ORIGINAL COST OF BUILDING THE CONSTITUTION WAS $300,000. SHE WAS LATER RESTORED AFTER MANY YEARS AT A COST OF ABOUT **$900,000!**



THE **LARGEST** FLESH-EATING POUCHED ANIMAL KNOWN, THE TASMANIAN WOLF, IS VERY RARE AND INHABITS **ONLY** THE DENSE FORESTS AND SCRUBS OF **WESTERN TASMANIA!**

THE GILA MONSTER CAN GO MONTHS **WITHOUT FOOD** BECAUSE IT STORES UP A LARGE QUANTITY OF **FAT** IN ITS **TAIL!**



If a Man Can't Take the Word of a Sourdough, Whose Word Can He Take?

TWO MEN ON A RAFT

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

I

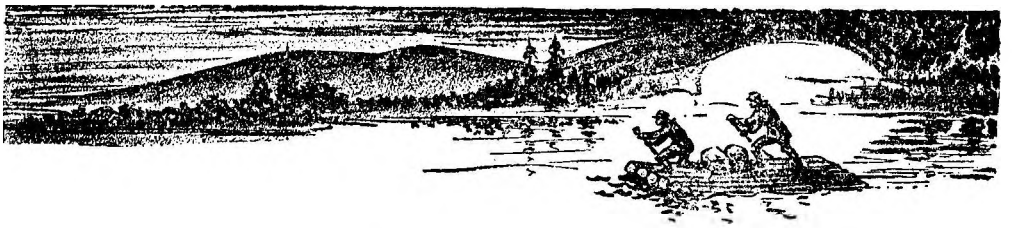
BLACK JOHN SMITH stepped through the doorway of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little community of outlawed men that had foregathered on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, crossed to the bar, and elevated a foot to the battered brass rail. Old Cush, the proprietor of the inn, eyed him sourly. "It looks like, what with all the damn cusses that shows up along the crick, one of 'em could be a dentist."

The big man grinned. "You've got to remember, Cush, that most of the boys that drifts in on us is crooks, of one sort or another."

"Well, why the hell couldn't a dentist be a crook if he wanted to?"

"Offhand, I can't think of no good reason. So if you'll shove out the dice box an' quit wastin' time in idle speculation, we'll get the day started right."

"You wouldn't call it no idle speculation if you'd laid awake all night with a tooth-



ache," Cush growled, as he set out a bottle and two glasses. "An' the way I feel I wouldn't give a damn if you beat me out of a dozen drinks, so there ain't no p'int in shakin' dice. I've had four a'ready this mornin', besides three, four I drunk durin' the night, but it don't seem to do no good."

"Which tooth is it that's bothetin' you?"

"It's one of them back ones in my top jaw —an' the way it hurts, it might be two, three of 'em. I got a couple of holler ones, back there."

"If you can't be more specific than that I'm afraid I can't do you no good."

"You! What good could you do anyone with a toothache—even if you know'd which one was achin'?"

"Listen, Cush," Black John said, downing his liquor and refilling his glass. "The way I look at it, dentistin' is jest the same as anything else—common sense, that's all. If a man's got a holler tooth that's achin', that tooth ort to come out—an' the same reasonin' applies if it's one tooth, er a dozen. Even if a holler tooth ain't achin' at the moment, it's bound to ache sometime. So, to relieve yer present discomfort, an' insure you agin further annoyance, I'll jest go ahead an' knock out all them holler ones, an' be done with it."

"Knock 'em out!" Cush exclaimed, his eyes widening. "What d'you mean—knock?"

"There's two schools of thought in dentistin', one holdin' out fer pullin', an' the other favorin' knockin'. Personally, I hold with the knockers. Of course, a reg'lar dentist, like in some town, where he's got an office, an' a hell of an assortment of forceps an' a good barber chair fer a man to r'are back in, would ondoubtless favor the pullin' method. But take it out here, removed as we be from all them comforts, an' nothin' but a common chair to set the patient in, an' only a pair of common pliers to work with, the knockin' method has got pullin' beat all to hell. The pliers would either slip off'n the tooth when a man yanked back on 'em, er else the holler tooth would cave in an' you couldn't get the roots.

"But with the knockin' method, all you need is a hammer an' a spike, an' a couple of good stout men to hold the patient in the chair. You work the p'int of the spike into the gum at the bottom of the tooth, an' hit her a clip with the hammer, an' the tooth will fly halfways acrost the room. I'll slip down an' git Pot Gutted John an' Red John to hold you, an' I'll have them achin' teeth knocked out of yer jaw in no time. Might's well knock out all the holler ones while we're about it, an'——"

"Not by a damn sight!" Cush cried. "You ain't goin' to knock none of my teeth out! Nor yet, you ain't goin' to pull none! What the hell do you know about dentistin'?"

"Not much. But I'm willin' to take a chanct. A man can't never tell what he can do till he tries. The operation I outlined seems simple enough, don't it? It ain't goin' to cost you nothin', except mebbe three, four drinks apiece fer me an' Red John, an' Pot Gut. I'm willin' to contribute my time, an' what nail-drivin' experience I've had, gratis. An' I'm shore the other boys'll do sim'lar. Hell, Cush, look at it sensible—you've got everything to win, an' nothin' to lose. You get shet of the toothache, an' at the same time insure agin any future ones."

"Yeah, an' s'pose yer damn spike would slip an' go through my tongue? Er you'd hit too hard an' drive it clean on out through my cheek? Where the hell would I be, then?"

"Well, of course, those are chances you'd have to take. To me they seem remote, an' trivial."

"Yeah? Well, whatever them words means, the chances don't seem like that to me! Cripes—jest thinkin' about it has set all my other teeth achin'! I'm goin' to hit fer Dawson an' go to a reg'lar dentist! Few

more nights like last night an' I'd go plumb crazy."

"In sech case, I s'pose you want me to run the saloon?"

"Not by a damn sight! I figgered it all out last night, layin' there in the dark. I ain't worth a damn in a canoe, even when my teeth ain't givin' me hell. An' besides that, what with the clean-up goin' full tilt, the safe's fillin' up with dust. You'd have to make a trip to Dawson with it anyhow, so we kin kill two birds with one stone. You go 'long an' we'll take the dust with us."

"Who'll run the saloon?"

"I'll have to git One Armed John an' Pot Gut to run it whilst I'm gone. I kin trust them two to steal less than any of the other boys might—One Arm havin' only one hand, an' Pot Gut not bein' overly smart. Here comes One Arm, now. I'll send him down to fetch Pot Gut."

"When do you figure to start?"

"Jest as quick as them two git back here! It was bad enough last night when that tooth was achin' stidy—but sence you begun talkin' about knockin' 'em out with a hammer, every damn one of 'em's jumpin'—an' achin' like hell when they light."

II

ALONG toward dark, five days later, the canoe bearing Cush and Black John shot out of the mouth of White River into the mighty Yukon.

"We'll camp here," Black John said, heading the light craft toward shore. "It's goin' to be dark as hell tonight. If we was travelin' light we could take a chanct, but with all this dust aboard, if we'd hit a driftin' log er a snag of some kind, it would go to the bottom like a shot."

Cush, whose offending molar had been intermittently, aching, assented. "Yeah, an' if we git an early start in the mornin' we might fetch Dawson tomorrow night."

They landed, and a short time later, as the flame of their little fire shot a friendly beam out over the darkening river, a canoe beached and a young woman stepped out and approached the fire.

"Why—it's—it's Uncle John Smith!" she cried, her eyes on the big man's face.

The bearded lips parted in a smile, as the shrewd gray eyes returned her glance. "You've got the name right, Miss. But us Smiths, bein' a prolific race, I don't seem able to figure out jest which one of my nieces you might be."

"Don't you remember me—Mary McCadden—down at Forty Mile?"

"What! You — little Mary McCadden! Gosh, how you've grow'd! Remember the time you an' two, three other kids was playin' around on the floatin' ice cakes, an' one got out of the eddy an' went floatin' off downriver with you on it? Cripes, I'll never fergit how yer ma yelled when she seen you go out of sight around the bend!"

"Sure, I remember it," the young woman smiled. "And I remember that you and Swiftwater Bill rescued us in a canoe, and how Scotty Lowry slipped off the cake and was nearly drowned. And I remember the tanning I got when I got home, because I'd been told to keep off the floating ice."

"I guess you had it comin'. Floatin' ice in the Yukon ain't no place fer kids to be playin'. But howcome yer headin' downriver all alone?"

The smile died on the girl's lips. "I'm heading for Dawson to find Corporal Downey. We're in terrible trouble, and I want to see if he can't help us."

"Downey's a good man. He can prob'ly help you, if anyone can. But—who's 'we'? An' what kind of trouble is it you've got into?"

"Scotty and I—Scotty Lowry. We were married a couple of years ago, and drifted around—located on Jack Wade Crick when the stampede was on, and drew a blank when the claims all around us were doing better than a dollar to the pan. We prospected a lot of cricks, but didn't find anything. When we'd go broke, Scotty would work for wages till we had enough for a grubstake, then we'd hit out again. Finally we located on the McQuesten, and for the first time, were doing pretty well—taking out better than wages, and not yet down to bed-rock.

"The Yukon Development has a location a few miles above us, and the other day they were robbed, or claimed they were—of fifty thousand in dust that they had sacked up in eighty-ounce sacks for shipment to Dawson. Their watchman claims two men were in on it, and he got a good look at one of 'em. He described him as medium sized and slender,

with sandy hair, and a sort of turned-up nose. A constable came up from Stewart, and after hearing the description, he arrested Scotty. When he took him up to the Development outfit, the watchman positively identified him. Scotty answers the description, all right—but he had nothing to do with the robbery. He couldn't have had, because he hadn't set foot off our location for weeks. I was there every minute—and I know. Besides, anyone who knew Scotty would know he'd never commit a robbery. They took him to Dawson, and I heard the Inspector was up at Whitehorse, so I went up there to see him. But he said there was nothing he could do about it, under the circumstances. He said he'd given orders for every boat and canoe between Stewart and Whitehorse to be searched, also those going downriver from Stewart to Dawson. Also all the passengers on the steamboats who got on below Whitehorse, and above Dawson are being searched.

"But in the meantime they've got Scotty locked up, and I'm going down to Dawson to see Corporal Downey. He knows Scotty—has known him ever since he was a kid—and he knows he'd never rob anyone. There must be something someone can do about it!" the girl cried. "Surely they can't convict an innocent man on the say-so of a watchman who only saw him for a second, and at night when there was only a half-moon!"

"The law can do some funny things," Black John opined.

"I—I've heard that—that you run things up on Halfaday Crick and that nearly every outlaw in the country hits for there. I—I wonder if those robbers could have hit for Halfaday?"

"Not yet, they ain't," Black John said. "That is, no strangers have showed up fer quite a while, an' we didn't meet none, comin' down. Me an' Cush is hittin' fer Dawson to see a dentist, an' then we're goin' back. I can promise you that if them robbers shows up on Halfaday, with that there Yukon Development gold, I'll see to it that Scotty's turned loose, pronto. Set down an' have a bite with us, an' then I'll pack yer blankets ashore an' fix you up a bed."

"I'll eat supper with you, but I'm hitting on for Dawson. I want to see Corporal Downey as soon as I can. I'm not afraid of the dark, and I can't bear to think of Scotty lying there in a cell—for something he never did."

SUPPER over, the girl departed in her canoe, and Black John eyed Cush across the dying embers of the little fire. "How much dust did we fetch along out of the safe?" he asked.

"Forty sacks—they'll run right around eighty ounces apiece. Fifty thousan' dollars er so."

The big man grinned. "Well, we ain't takin' it to Dawson. Not this trip, we ain't."

"What do you mean—we ain't takin' it to Dawson?"

For answer Black John got to his feet and reaching down raised the heavy packsack from the ground. "We're packin' this dust back in the bush an' cachin' it—right now, before some rookie constable comes along an' catches us with it."

"Ketches us with it!" Cush exclaimed. "What if he did ketch us with it? It's ourn, ain't it? That is, it belongs to the boys on the crick. They know we're packin' it down to Dawson fer 'em, don't they?"

"Yeah, they know. But the rookie wouldn't. Accordin' to what Mary McCadden told us, that's jest about the amount that was lifted off'n the Yukon Development Company. Not only that, she claimed the police is searchin' all boats an' canoes goin' downriver. An' on top of that, you might fit the description of the robber that watchman seen."

"Like hell I do! She claimed this here robber he seen was sandy headed!"

"These searchin' jobs is mostly delegated to rookies, most of whom ain't dry behind the ears yet, an' whose mental equipment is totally inadequate to comprehend the contradistinction between sandy hair an' that shade of sun-bleached yeller that you're adorned with."

"Now you've got all them big words out of yer system, mebbe you'll go ahead an' tell me what they mean in English—an' what the hell they've got to do with us takin' this here dust to Dawson? An' besides that, that there young woman claimed this here watchman seen that there Scotty, an' claimed it was him that done the robbin'."

"I fergot," grinned Black John, "that you're a stickler fer pure, unadulterated English. Sech bein' the case, I'll explain that

unless we get shet of this dust, we're liable to find ourselves in a hell of a jam. Allowin' fer the fact that the watchman only got a fleetin' glance at the robber—an' that by the light of a half-moon, there's nothin' in the book that says he can't change his identification the minute he claps eyes on you. Addin' to this contingency the fact that I've heard it rumored here an' there, that I'm an outlaw, an' that you ain't a damn bit better, our reputations wouldn't be no comfort to us in case we was caught with the goods."

"But hellfire, John—Downey would know you'd never pull off no robbery—that is, not none here in the Yukon! An' besides that, all the boys on Halfaday could swear this here dust is theirn."

"Listen, Cush—that Yukon Development Company is shy fifty thousan' in dust. They want it back. S'pose they was to identify that dust, sacks an' all—an' I wouldn't put it past 'em to—where the hell would we be? You know as well as I do that most of the boys on Halfaday has reputations that's shady, at best. Their word wouldn't hold up in court agin the word of the Yukon Development men. An' as fer Downey—he don't believe I'd pull off no job like that here in the Yukon, as you said. But that would only be a matter of opinion, an' wouldn't be worth a damn in case we was picked up with the fifty thousan' in dust. Come on, let's get shet of this incriminatin' evidence as quick as God'll let us, before some damn rookie sees the light of this fire an' comes breezin' in on us."

Toward evening, next day, as the canoe bearing Cush and Black John rounded a point, some twenty-five miles above Dawson, they were waved ashore by a man in a uniform of the Mounted Police. He was a young man, and as Cush, who was paddling the bow, stepped ashore, the officer eyed him sharply. "What's your name?" he asked abruptly.

"Lyme Cushing."

"Where'd you come from?"

"Who—me? I come from Cincinnati, Ohio."

"I mean, where did you come from just now?"

"Halfaday Crick."

"Halfaday Crick! You mean the place all them outlaws hang out?"

"I couldn't say."

"You couldn't say, eh? Well, you'll say, all right, when the time comes. Stand over there, and don't try to pull a fast one, or you'll never get a chance to say it."

Black John stepped from the canoe with a grin. "What's on yer mind, bud? What's it all about?"

"I'm askin' the questions, here—not you," the rookie replied. "What's in that packsack?"

"Well, there's a black an' red checked shirt, with one button gone off'n the front, an' a tore place in the sleeve jest below the elbow, where I snagged it on some brush. An' a white-handled toothbrush with a hole drilled through the end so's a man could hang it up on a nail, if he wanted to, but I——"

The rookie scowled. "What the hell do I care about your shirts an' toothbrush! Lift that pack out here so I can get a look at it!"

"It's all right where it's at, fer as I can see," the big man replied. "Lift it out yerself, if you want to look at it. Better go easy, though. It's heavy."

"Heavy!" the officer exclaimed, his eyes narrowing. "About two hundred pounds of dust in it, eh?"

"We-e-l-l, somewheres around there, mebbe. Me an' Cush, here, we panned out couple hundred pounds last evenin' on a sand bar. Seems to me we fetched it along—er mebbe not. I forget."

The officer stepped to the canoe, leaned over and grasping the sack heaved up on it, and promptly sat down upon the rocks, the sack weighing possibly twenty pounds, grasped firmly in his hands. He regained his feet, with a scowl. "Wise guy, eh?" he snapped. "What's your name?"

"John Smith."

"And where do you come from?"

"Oh, I've come from a lot of places, take it first an' last. Right now, I come from Halfaday Crick, along with Cush, here."

"John Smith—Halfaday Crick? Are you the Black John Smith, I've been hearing about, that's king of that bunch of outlaws that hang out, up there?"

"That's right, bud. I'm old King Smith, himself. An' I don't mind tellin' you that it's extremely annoyin' to be held up this way by a common policeman. Cush, here, has got a hell of a toothache, an' we're headin' down to Dawson to see a dentist. 'Course,

if there's anything I can do fer you—like changin' yer didies, er heatin' yer bottle of milk, I'll be glad to accommodate you, an' then we'll be on our way."

"You'll be on your way, all right!" exclaimed the rookie angrily. "You're under arrest for robbing the Yukon Development Company, on the McQuesten, of fifty thousand in dust. Cushing, here fits the description of one of the robbers. And it's my duty to warn you that anything you say may be used against you. Stick out your hands till I slip these cuffs on."

BLACK JOHN extended his hands as the rookie fumbled with a pair of handcuffs, he drew from his pocket. "Take it easy, sonny," he said. "You've got the key in wrong. Them ratchet cuffs opens easy, onct you get the hang of 'em. There—you'll get the hang of it with a little practice. Now slip 'em on an' bring 'em up nice an' snug. That's the way."

His face red with rage, the rookie snapped on the cuffs, and turned to Cush. "Throw that packsack in the canoe, and get in there in front. I won't put cuffs on you so you can help paddle." He turned to Black John. "You get there in the middle, and I'll paddle behind."

"Downey'll paddle yer behind, when you get to Dawson," the big man grinned. "He don't really expect rookies to have no sense. But it shore peeves him when they come up to expectations."

"You won't be so cocky when Corporal Downey gets to working on you!" retorted the officer. "He'll make you tell where you've got that dust cached—and don't you forget it! It's about time someone busted up that outlaw gang on Halfaday Crick, if you ask me. And don't try any monkey work. I want to make Dawson before dark."

HOURS later, Corporal Downey looked up from his desk as the door of his office swung open, and Black John and Cush stepped into the room, closely followed by the rookie. The veteran officer glanced at the cuffs on Black John's hands and roared out laughing. "Well, well! What you be'n up to, now, John? Spit on the sidewalk down on Front Street?"

The rookie stepped forward. "These men are under arrest for that Yukon Development robbery," he announced importantly. "I picked them up early this evening on the river."

"Got 'em with the goods, I s'pose?" Downey asked.

"Well, no. They've cached the gold someplace. But this man, Cushing, answers to the description of the man the watchman saw. And the other, there, admitted that he's no other than Black John Smith, the notorious outlaw up on Halfaday Crick. They refused to give any good account of themselves, so I brought them in."

"Good work!" Downey grinned. "An' now, after you unlock them handcuffs an' lay 'em here on the desk, you can go tell Constable Peters I want to see him." The rookie complied, returning a few moments later accompanied by Peters. Downey glanced at the older constable. "You better slip upriver a ways an' take over that boat-searchin' job. Conway'll tell you where he left his camp outfit, an' then he'll slip into his work clothes an' start in cleanin' these spittoons. The floor needs scrubbin', too." He glanced up at Black John. "Runnin' a detachment is a hell of a job," he said. "It takes quite a while to find out where yer men fit in best."

"So you've got a robbery on yer hands, eh?" the big man remarked. "Mary McCadden stopped an' et supper with Cush an' me, last night. She said you've got Scotty Lowry locked up on the say-so of the night watchman."

"Yeah," Downey said wearily. "An' he's jest about as guilty as I am. Some constable from Whitehorse fetched him down here. If they'd quit sendin' these damn' rookies up here to do a man's job, mebbe we'd get someplace. I know damn' well Scotty wasn't mixed up in that robbery. But in the face of a positive identification, I can't turn him loose. An' the hell of it is, unless we can turn up the ones that done it, Scotty's liable to get convicted. It's jest like that damn fool, Conway, arrestin' you an' Cush—if you'd happened to had a big bunch of dust along, an' the company men had claimed it was theirs, you'd be'n in a hell of a fix. I'd have known you wouldn't pull a job like that—but I couldn't have done a damn thing about it—an' mebbe a jury would have convicted you."

"That's right," Black John admitted,

"mebbe it would. The law's shore got its drawbacks, ain't it, Downey? A man could be innocent of a crime, an' everyone with any sense could know he was innocent—but if some damn fool jury said he was guilty, he'd do time."

"That's right," Downey admitted. "I'd shore like to pick up those robbers for Mary McCadden's sake, an' Scotty's. They're damn good kids—sourdoughs, both of 'em. They've had tough luck sence they was married, an' now, jest when things begins breakin' for 'em, this has to happen. What you doin' in Dawson? When you goin' back to Halfaday?"

"We come down so Cush could see a dentist. He's had a hell of a toothache. I offered to knock the achin' tooth out, an' all his other holler ones along with it, but the damn fool wouldn't let me. I could have—"

"With a hammer an' a spike he wanted to do it!" Cush interrupted. "What kind of a way is that to pull teeth! By God, jest thinkin' about it sets every damn tooth I've got to achin'!"

Downey grinned. "Sounds like a kind of rough an' ready treatment, at that. Might work, though."

"Shore it might," Black John agreed. "Hell, I told Cush I was willin' to take a chanct."

"He was willin', but by God, I wasn't!" Cush exclaimed. "Where would I be'n if he'd hit too hard, er the spike would slip, er somethin'! An' where's this here dentist at? I'm a-goin' to see him right now. My tooth's startin' in agin jest thinkin' about that damn spike."

"There's two, three of 'em in town," Downey said, "but you'll prob'ly have to wait till mornin'. They don't keep open nights."

"We'll step over to the Tivoli," Black John said. "If a few of the sourdoughs is in town we can prob'ly get up a stud game that'll take yer mind off yer teeth till the dentist opens up."

"You fellows hittin' back to Halfaday when the dentist finishes up with Cush?" he asked.

"Yer damn right we be!" Cush exclaimed. "What with One Armed John an' Pot Gut runnin' things up to the Fort, the quicker I git back the better."

"Jest keep yer eyes open for them two birds that robbed the Yukon Development. They might hole up somewheres back off the river till things cools off. An' they might hit for Halfaday, if they haven't got there already. Accordin' to the watchman, one of 'em's sort of light built an' sandy haired. He didn't see the other, but the tracks where they got into their canoe showed there was two of 'em. Whitehorse has be'n searchin' all upriver travel, an' we've be'n searchin' the downriver—an we ain't turned up nothin'. They're s'posed to have got away with better'n fifty-thousan' in dust—forty eighty-ounce sacks, to be exact."

"The amount is worth contemplatin'," Black John commented.

"I'd shore like to recover that dust," Downey said, "but it's the robbers, along with the evidence that'll convict 'em, I'm worried about. I'd hate like hell to see Scotty Lowry convicted of a crime he never committed."

"If them birds hits Halfaday, we'll spot 'em," Black John replied. "An' if they fetch in that fifty thousan' with 'em, I'll get holt of it—don't worry."

"Yeah," Downey replied dryly. "But jest remember, John, we can't convict 'em without the evidence."

III

THE stud game in the Tivoli broke up at breakfast time, and Black John registered at the hotel and went to bed. Toward mid-morning he was awakened by a pounding at his door, and Cush stepped into the room and crossed to the bed. The big man eyed him sleepily. "What the hell's ailin' you—wakin' a man up, this time of day? Go on to bed an' ketch you some sleep."

"It's this here dentist," Cush said. "I went there an' he set me in a barber chair, an' r'ared me back an' shoved a little lookin' glass on the end of a stick in my mouth an' prodded around amongst my teeth with a knittin' needle fer a while, an' then he says am I bothered with pains in my muscles an' j'ints—like the rheumatiz?"

" 'What's that any of your business?' I asks him. 'I come here to git a tooth pulled,' I says, 'an' not about no rheumatiz.'

"An' then he says what I need is to git all my teeth pulled out, on account they're p'izenin' my system. I seen what his game

was—instead of gittin' paid fer pullin' one tooth, er mebbe two, the damn hog wanted to pull 'em all, an' then charge me fer makin' some false ones. I up an' told him he was a damn crook, an' got to hell outa there, an' went on acrost the street to another dentist, an' he done jest like the other one done—an' told me the same thing."

"Well—why don't you let 'em go ahead an' do it, then? Why bother me about it?"

"You be'n around more'n what I have, an' yer smarter'n what I be, an' what I want to know, is them dentists on the up-an'-up about them teeth, er be they a gang of damn crooks? How the hell could a rotten tooth in a man's jaw give him the rheumatiz in his shoulder?"

"Listen, Cush, I'm no doctor, nor dentist, neither one."

"I'll say you ain't—wantin' to knock out teeth with a spike!"

"But it's ondoubtless possible than an infection can travel from one part of a man's body to another. Go see Doc Southerland an' ask him. You can bank on what Doc says, every time. If he tells you to have all yer teeth out—you better do it—an' anyway, git out of here an' let me sleep!"

WHEN Black John awoke, late in the afternoon, he found Cush seated glumly in his room, a huge cuspidor at his side, into which he spat blood at frequent intervals. The big man grinned. "Got fixed up, I see. When do you want to start for Halfaday?"

"Listen," Cush mumbled painfully. "The way I feel I don't give a damn if I never git to Halfaday. I ain't got a tooth left, an' the dentist claims I'll have to hang around for a week er more—mebbe two weeks, before he kin make them false teeth, on account my gooms will be sore that long. An' in the meantime, by God, I gotta git along on soup—an' sech like!"

"But hell, Cush, if you get rid of the toothache, an' the rheumatism, to boot, it'll be worth it."

"I'll be shet of the toothache, all right. If a man ain't got no teeth, they can't ache him. But about the rheumatiz, Doc Southerland ain't shore. He says them dentists is good square shooters, an' he advises me to have my teeth out on their say-so. An' he says it might well be that it might clear up the rheumatiz, too. An' then again, it might not Them doctors, they don't crawl out on no limb."

DURING the next few days, Black John mingled with the sourdoughs, playing stud at night, and sleeping well into the day. Cush stayed pretty much to himself in his room. And it was there that Black John found him early one afternoon, laboriously perusing a newspaper. "Get on yer hat, an' let's take a little trip," he invited.

"Where to?" Cush asked, shoving his square-framed, steel-rimmed spectacles from nose to forehead.

"Upriver a piece. That lead dog of mine, old Wolf, is gettin' along in years, an' I ain't got a dog in my team that'll take his place. Camillo Bill was tellin' me about a damn good lead dog I might buy off'n old Joe Timmock. Joe's quit prospectin', an' took a watchman's job on Bonanza, startin' next month, an' he won't have no use fer his team. He lives in a shack about fifteen miles upriver where a crick comes in. We'll go up an' have a look at that lead dog. You be'n mopin' around here long enough. It'll do you good to move around a little."

"I'd kinda like to go, at that," Cush said. "I'm shore as hell tired of settin' in this here room all day. The only trouble is, I look like hell—like my face had sort of caved in."

Black John grinned. "Hell, don't let that worry you none. Old Joe Timmock ain't no chrome, himself. Besides, jest think how you'll look with all them new false teeth. Cripes, with them new teeth, an' a haircut, an' a checked shirt, an' mebbe a new pair of pants, you'll blossom out till half the women in Dawson'll be runnin' after you! I wouldn't be surprised if there'd be three of us hittin' back fer Halfaday."

"Three of us?"

"Shore—me, an' you, an' yer new wife. What with all the women there is in this camp, you'll shore as hell be marryin' one of 'em."

"Not by a damn sight!" Cush exclaimed. "Not me. Not no more. By God, I'd ruther left them old teeth in an' got p'izened! I tried it four times, a'ready. 'Course, two of them times—the two middle ones—I ain't rightly to blame fer—bein' too drunk to know if it was me that was gittin' married, er someone else. But I damn soon found out." He stood and lifted his hat from a nail

behind the door. "Guess I'll go 'long with you. It'll feel good to git some of this town stink blow'd off'n me."

"What the hell's that?" Black John asked, as Cush took a bottle from the dresser and pocketed it.

"That there's some kind of stuff the dentist give me. Laudanum he calls it. These here gooms of mine is sore yet in spots where little slivers of bone keeps workin' through. An' sometimes one of them teeth starts achin' agin where it got pulled out of. So then I take a little swig of this here laudanum, an' it quits hurtin'. It's good stuff. I'd ort to lay in a keg of it fer the boys. It's got pain-killer beat all to hell."

"Yeah," Black John grinned, "a keg of laudanum to peddle out amongst the boys would fix Halfaday up fine."

IV

STOPPING in at the Tivoli Black John purchased three quarts of whiskey, and the two proceeded to the river.

"Shore as hell looks like you fetched licker enough along," Cush opined, as they stepped into the canoe. "Looks like a couple quarts would be'n plenty, fer jest the three of us if we're comin' back tonight."

"I don't never like to stint on supplies," the big man replied. "A man never can tell what might happen—like someone else bein' there at Timmock's. Or s'pose somethin' come up so we'd have to stay all night? We'd be in a hell of a fix with only two quarts."

They reached Timmock's as the old man was preparing supper. Black John uncorked a bottle, and drinks were had as Timmock cut a couple of extra steaks from the moose haunch and tossed them into the pan.

"Camillo Bill told me you'd quit prospectin' an' took a job night-watchin' fer some outfit on Bonanza," Black John said, as they seated themselves at the rude table.

"Yeah," the old man replied regretfully. "What with chechakos runnin' hog-wild on all the cricks, it's got so a man can't go nowheres without runnin' into some of 'em. It ain't like the old days no more, John. The camps is full of gamblers, an' preachers, an' sech like—an' the cricks is full of chechakos. If a man made a strike nowadays he'd find hisself in the middle of a town in a week—the way them damn chechakos would crowd in on him."

"Guess that's right," Black John admitted. "You've made three, four good strikes in yer day, Joe. You'd ort to have enough laid by to take it easy."

"Yeah, I'd ort to—but I ain't. You know how it is—easy come, easy go. After I made that strike on Birch Crick, I went outside an' tried to out-guess them Seattle gamblers. In a month's time I had jest enough left to git back on. Then when I hit it lucky on Forty Mile, I went outside agin an' married up with some good-lookin' woman down in Frisco. I banked sixty-eight thousan' in what they call a j'int checkin' account. Well, she unj'inted the checkin' account, all right—an' I had to borry enough to git back on.

"That strike I made on Hunker looked better'n any of 'em, an' I was spendin' it about as fast as I took it out, figgerin' there'd be plenty of time to salt some by, later. Then I hit bed-rock at fourteen foot—an' that was that. If the damned chechakos had stayed out of the country, so's a man could move around a little without stumblin' over 'em, I'd try agin. But the Eureka manager, he offered me a good thing, so I tuk it. I'm goin' on seventy, an' I figger a good easy job won't hurt me none."

"That's right, Joe," the big man agreed. "Camillo was tellin' me you might be willin' to sell that lead dog of yours. Mine's gettin' along in years, an' I'd like to pick up a good leader."

"Shore I'll sell him! I'll sell him to a sourdough, like you. But I wouldn't sell him to any damn' chechako. I'd shoot him first! He's four year old, an' one of the best leaders I ever had. By God, it won't take Tige long to show a team who's boss."

"What do you hold him at?"

"Cripes, you ain't saw him yet! I ain't got him here. A Siwash is summerin' him, about five mile up the crick. I kin git him down here in a couple hours."

"I don't need to see him, Joe. Camillo Bill said he's a top dog, an' so do you. That's good enough for me. Hell, if a man can't take the word of a couple of sourdoughs, whose word could he take? What do you hold him at?"

"Well, take it this time of year, dogs is down, on account they got to be summered. If I helt him till fall I could git two hundred

fer him. But—oh, give me one-twenty-five, an' he's yourn."

Black John shook his head. "Nope."

"Give me a hundred, then. He's a bargain at that price."

"Nope."

"By God," Timmock exclaimed, a frown of annoyance on his face, "a dog like Tige is dirt-cheap at a hundred! If you wait till fall you'll pay a damn sight more fer a worst dog."

"That's jest it," Black John grinned. "That's why I want him. I'm goin' to make you an offer—an' you can take it, or leave it—two hundred an' fifty."

"Two-fifty! Hell, I told you you could have him fer one-twenty-five!"

Black John's grin widened. "I've got a good team, Joe—too damn good a team to be led by a cheap dog. It's two-fifty, er nothin'."

The old man shot him a sidewise glance. "Give me one-twenty-five. I ain't got to where I've got to take charity—not yet, I ain't."

"Listen, Joe—I ain't got no more charity in my soul than a rock."

"That ain't the way I've heer'd it."

"But I ain't no petty thief, neither," Black John continued, ignoring the interruption. "I happen to know what you prob'ly don't—that with all the chechakos crowdin' into the country, dogs is goin' to be worth what a man will pay for 'em, come fall. If you was a chechako, I'd take the dog at a hundred. But I wouldn't beat a sourdough, no more'n you'd take charity. Here's yer two-fifty—an' you have the dog here so Cush an' I can pick him up on our way upriver. We'll be pullin' out, now. Them damn coots down to the Tivoli took me fer three thousan', last night—an' I've got to get it back."

"I ain't heer'd about dogs goin' up," Cush said, as the two made their way to the river. "Fact is, the talk goes that they're goin' to be cheap, this fall, on account the damn chechakos fetched so many in with 'em."

"Horse traders has the reputation of lyin' like hell—why can't a dog trader? Old Joe needs that extry one-twenty-five a damn sight worse than I do." Black John retorted.

AS THEY were about to step into the canoe he straightened up and fixed his eyes on a raft that was drifting down with the current. It was well out in the river, and as the men plied their rude paddles the raft slanted in toward shore. Black John continued to stare at the craft as Cush shoved the canoe into the water. "Come on, git in!" Cush exclaimed impatiently. "What's so funny about a couple of damn chechakos driftin' down the river on a raft?"

"Interestin', rather than humorous, I'd say," the big man replied, his eyes still on the raft. "Your choice of words at times leaves much to be desired. Methinks the gents are headed for yon p'int, a couple of miles below. They'll ondoubtless camp there for the night. We'll stop in an' pay 'em a call."

"What the hell do you want to stop an' chaw the fat with a couple of damn chechakos fer?" Cush asked querulously. "If yer so hell-bent on mixin' with chechakos, wait till you git to Dawson. The Klondike Palace is full of 'em."

"I have a hunch we may learn somethin' of interest from these wayfarers."

"What I would learn off'n a damn chechako I wouldn't want to know it," Cush growled.

Reaching into the canoe, Black John picked up a bottle of whiskey, drew the cork, and handed it to Cush. "Have a drink," he grinned. "It'll put you in a more sociable frame of mind." Cush drank, and handed back the bottle, at which Black John took a prodigious pull, slopping a liberal portion on the ground, as he returned the cork to the bottle.

"Couple more like that an' you'll shore as hell be feelin' in a sociable frame of mind," Cush opined, "an' besides that, you spilt enough fer a couple good drinks."

"Think nothin' of it," Black John replied, a bit tipsily. "Soon we will be in Dawson where whiskey floweth like water, an' we can drink our fill. An' in the meantime, 'tis befittin' we should whet our appetite." Reaching into the canoe, he picked up the other bottle, drew the cork, and tendered it to Cush. "Sample this one," he said. " 'Twill ondoubtless do you good."

"What the hell's ailin' you? This here's the same as that other bottle—an' you got that open." He took a drink, and handed it back, and again Black John took a hearty swig. "Looks like this here's a hell of a time to be startin' a drunk," Cush growled, "an' us got fifteen mile to make in a canoe."

"Drunk, er sober, it's all the same to me! By God, I'm a canoeman! I'll bet I could go over Niagara Falls in a canoe, if I was drunk —an' I wouldn't even try it, if I was sober." He paused and pointed toward the raft, close in, now, and nearing the point. "I was right. Them two's headin' fer that p'int. Get in, Cush, an' we'll shove off."

A few moments later, Black John laid down his paddle and clapped a hand to his jaw. "Ow—Cripes, but that hurts!" he exclaimed.

"What hurts?" Cush asked, craning his neck to glance at the big man in the stern.

"My tooth! A back one. It's achin' like hell. Never had a toothache before. By God, if that's the way it feels, I don't blame you fer headin' fer Dawson. What's the name of that dentist?"

"Name's Jones," Cush grunted dryly. "But if yer tooth's achin' so bad, mebbe we better pull ashore, an' if I kin find a spike, I'll knock it out—if I kin find a rock fer a hammer."

"A toothache like this ain't no joke. Fer Cripes sake, Cush, hand me that there laudanum the dentist give you! Mebbe it'll ease it up a little."

Reaching into his pocket, Cush withdrew the bottle and passed it back. As Black John took it, he said, "Keep yer eyes on the river, Cush, an' hold her straight. There's cross-currents in these eddies, an' we might flop over. I'll paddle agin when this damn toothache eases up."

Behind Cush's back, Black John drew the cork from the six-ounce bottle of laudanum, poured its contents into the half-emptied bottle of whiskey, shook it well, and slipped the bottle inside his shirt. Smacking his lips, he corked the laudanum bottle and returned it to Cush, who reached for it, without looking around.

"Hell!" he cried, a moment later, as he stared in horror at the empty bottle. "You didn't drink it all, did you?"

"Why, shore. My tooth's achin' like hell —an' the quicker I can cure it, the better."

"You grab yer paddle an' we'll hit fer shore as quick as God'll let us! You'll be asleep in five minutes—an' in ten you'll be dead—onlest you kin puke that out of you! That there dentist says only to take a little bit of a swig—like a teaspoonful to onct. An' not too often, at that. He claims it don't take no hell of a lot to knock a man out—an' damn little more to will him. An' you've drunk enough to kill half a dozen men!"

"Oh, mebbe chechakos, an' folks like them—but not a sourdough. That laudanum ain't a bad drink—if you take a shot of liquor fer a chaser. It's beginnin' to take holt, too. My toothache's better already. An' ease off, there! Quit paddlin' like the devil was after you. I'll begin paddlin' agin now. My toothache's about gone. Mebbe you better lay in a couple of kegs of it when we get to Dawson. Like you said, it's got pain-killer skinned a mile."

BLACK JOHN picked up his paddle and the canoe swerved out into the current. In the bow, Cush paddled grimly, glancing over his shoulder every few moments and muttering to himself.

As they reached the point, Black John swerved the canoe shoreward and beached it beside the raft. Two men looked up from the little fire they had kindled. One was a large, lantern-jawed man with a shock of black hair that hung low above his eyes. The other was slightly built, with reddish, sandy hair. Black John stepped ashore a bit unsteadily. " 'Lo, men," he greeted. "Sheen yer—hic—fire. Is one of you a—hic—dentist?"

"Dentist!" the larger man exclaimed. "Hell, no! We're prospectors."

"Too bad. Y'ort to be dentist. Got hell of a tooshache. Goin' down to Dawshon git

her pull'. Where'n hell's Dawshon, anyhow?"

"It can't be very fer," the large man replied. "We're headed fer there, too. Be'n prospectin' up above. We're campin' here fer the night."

"I ain't goin' camp. Goin' on till I hit Dawshon. Gotta git toosh pull—givin' me hell."

The other grinned. "Looks like you've took on plenty of medicine. Cripes, if I had a load like that, I wouldn't give a damn whether my tooth ached er not."

Black John regarded him owlishly. "Like a drink?" he asked. "I got shome lef'."

"Would I ever! I ain't had a drink in a month!"

"Me, neither," the smaller man said. "Brother, if you've got a couple drinks to spare, you'll save our life!"

"Shore got couple drinks," Black John said. "Got whole damn half a bottle lef'." Fumbling at the buttons of his shirt, he reached in and withdrew a bottle slightly more than half full, and tendered it to the large man. "Drink hearty, boysh," he said. "Drinks ish—hic—on me."

The man took a good long pull at the bottle and passed it to the smaller man, who also took a deep drink, and handed the bottle back to Black John, who corked it and replaced it inside his shirt. "Gotta keep it hid," he explained, with a glance upriver. "Damn police stopped ush back a waysh, an' looked all through our packs. Claimed shomeone robbed shomeone, er—hic—shomething, shomewheresh. Never foun' my licker. I hid it. Police search you, too?"

The large man frowned. "Yeah, they stopped us back a ways, an' run through our outfit. Hell of a lot of good it done 'em! Claimed some outfit up on the McQuesten got robbed of fifty thousan' in dust. Hell, that's a couple hundred pounds. No one but a damn fool would be fetchin' two hundred pounds of stolen dust down the river!"

"Thash what I claim!" Black John agreed. "No one but couple of damn foolsh. Police is damn foolsh, too. Ort to be huntin'—hic—damn robbersh where they ish—not where they ain't. How 'bout nother li'l snort? Jes' 'bout two damn good drinks lef' in my bottle—an' you boysh ish—hic—welcome to em."

"Another damn good drink would go good, all right," the large man replied. "Mebbe it'll wake me up a bit. I'm gittin' sleepy as hell."

"Me, too," the other added, dully. "Another drink wouldn't hurt. But how about you, an' yer toothache?"

"I've had 'nough. Licker don't set good on my—hic—stomach." He withdrew the bottle and handed it over. "Kill 'er, boysh. I don' dast drink no more. Might git headache."

The large man held the bottle to the light, marked the halfway point of the remaining contents with his thumb, drank his portion, and passed it to the other, who finished it off, and tossed the bottle into the bush.

"You claimed it ain' sho far to Dawshon," Black John said, turning to the two seated beside the fire, "why'n't you come on 'long wish us, an' when I git my toosh—hic—pull', we'll whoop her up fer couple daysh. By God, I'll be sho glad to git my toosh out, I'll git drunk fer a week!"

"Huh?" asked the larger man sleepily.

"Ain't goin' to Dawson tonight," the smaller one said dully. "I'm goin' to sleep."

"Yeah, shut up, an' quit talkin'," the other said. "I'm goin' to sleep, too."

Both men had stretched out on the ground beside the fire, and a few minutes later, both were breathing heavily.

Cush eyed Black John. "Well, what do you know about that! Damn if I ever seen a couple of fellas git sleepy so quick. Cripes, they didn't look sleepy when we landed here. You're the one that ort to be sleepy—what with all that there laudanum you drunk. There's one thing shore—on top of that whiskey you throw'd into you, it made you drunker'n hell. Yer about the drunkest I ever seen you."

Black John grinned. "Think so? Well, let me tell you, Cush, it takes a damn sight more'n a few drinks of liquor and a bottle of laudanum to make me drunk. These poor fellows prob'ly got sleepy because they've had a hard day. Runnin' a raft is a damn sight harder on a man paddlin' a canoe." He paused and glanced down at the two heavily breathing men. "Guess they'll stay dead to the world fer a while," he said, "so we'll go ahead an' load that dust into the canoe."

"Dust! What dust you talkin' about?"

"Why, the dust them two coots lifted off'n the Yukon Development Company, up

there on the McQuesten. The dust they've got Scotty Lowry pinched fer stealin'."

"But hell, John — didn't they jest git through tellin' us that the police searched 'em an' didn't find no dust!" Reaching down, he lifted each of the two packs the men had unloaded from the raft. "Yer even drunker'n what I think you be if you figger there's any dust in them packs. Don't neither one of 'em weigh over thirty, forty pound."

For answer, Black John picked up the light ax that lay beside one of the packs, and waded waist-deep into the water. Using the bit of the ax as a pry, he loosened a wooden plug that had been carefully fitted into an end of a hollow log—one of the side logs of the raft, and began removing little moose-hide sacks of dust, which he transferred to the canoe. Then he filled the space with small stones and sand, and replaced the plug, fitting it in exactly as it had been, while Cush looked on, wide-eyed and speechless. "Come on," the big man said, "let's get goin'."

CUSH eyed the little sacks piled amidship in the canoe. "Hey, John!" he exclaimed. "Downey claimed how they was forty sacks stole up there—an' you ain't only got thirty here!"

"That's right, Cush. We hadn't ort to be hoggish about a deal of this kind. Them thirty sacks will net us some slight profit from the venture, an' the ten sacks I left in the log will furnish evidence enough fer Downey to convict them two damn crooks on, so he can turn Scotty Lowry loose. Then he can turn them ten sacks over to the Yukon Development Company. Seems like they're entitled to a twenty-five percent cut on the deal, seein' they're furnishin' the evidence."

"But Downey'll wonder what in hell become of them other thirty sacks."

The big man grinned. "Wonderin' won't hurt Downey none. He's done a lot of it, from time to time. He'll think them crooks cached it somewheres upriver. An' that reminds me, we'd better stop off before we hit Dawson an' ease them sacks under a rock somewheres where we can pick it up later—jest in case."

A few miles downriver the two landed and cached the thirty sacks of dust. As they were about to step into the canoe, Cush eyed Black John narrowly. "They's a hell of a lot about this here deal that I don't savvy," he said. "How and the hell did you know them two damn cusses floatin' down the river on that raft, was the ones that done that robbin'?"

"Why, cripes, Cush—Downey told us that one of them robbers was light-built an' sandy-haired, didn't he? An' besides that, if they didn't have nothin' to conceal, why would they had that plug drove into the end of that log? I jest sort of put two an' two together."

"Yeah? Well, what I mean—that there raft was clean out in the middle of the river when you seen it. Not only you couldn't see that there plug that fer, it bein' under water, but you couldn't even tell if them fellas was little er big, er what color their hair was!"

Black John laughed. "Hell, Cush—if you'd throw them damn storm windows of yours in the crick an' get you a decent pair of glasses mebbe you could see somethin', too."

"Listen—them specs of mine ain't only fer readin'. I didn't have 'em on when I was lookin' at that raft—an' I kin see good enough to draw a bead on a moose jest as fer as you kin any day! An' besides that, how about you gittin' a hell of a toothache all to onct, an' drinkin' all my laudanum, an' it not even makin' you sleepy? An' how about you bein' drunker'n a fiddler one minute, an' stone cold sober the next? An' what made them two cusses both go to sleep whilst we was standin' there talkin' to 'em?"

"Come on—get in the canoe. I don't want to lose out on that stud game. If you'd be'n workin' as hard as them two fellas on that raft, you'd be sleepy, too. An' as for the rest of it—I like a good snifter of laudanum, now an' then—specially when I've got a toothache, an' I like to get drunk as occasion demands, an' I like to get sober agin. Charge it up to eccentricities—an' let's get goin'."

"Yer the only man I ever seen," Cush grumbled, as he stepped into the canoe, "that kin keep on makin' a damn fool of hisself—an' allus come out on top!"

V

WHEN the stud game broke up, next morning, Black John strolled to the hotel, stepped into the dining room, and seated himself at a table. As a waitress

paused beside his chair he glanced up into her face.

"Well, dog my cats, if it ain't little Mary McCadden, herself! What you doin' here?"

"I've been here in Dawson ever since I saw you up there at the mouth of White River, a few nights ago. I've talked with Corporal Downey—but it didn't do any good. He says he don't believe Scotty is guilty, any more than I do—but there's nothing he can do about it in the face of that watchman's identification. I want to stay here to be near Scotty, and I didn't feel like lying around doing nothing, so yesterday I took a job here at the hotel."

"Like the work?"

"No, I hate it! I want to be back on the claim with Scotty. It's the first time we ever had the chance to make good—and this had to happen! Oh, Uncle John—isn't there something you can do about it? If you only knew——"

The girl's voice faltered, and she broke off abruptly.

"Now, now—don't start cryin'. Cryin' won't get you nothin'. Let's see, what was it you was tellin' me, up there by the river? Oh, yeah—about some robbery, an' how Scotty Lowry got pinched for it. Cripes—anyone with any sense ort to know Scotty wouldn't rob no one. You trot along an' fetch my breakfast, an' when I've et, I'll go over to Headquarters an' tell Downey to turn Scotty loose."

"But—but—he can't turn him loose! He told me so, himself."

"Hell, sis—Downey's jest like anyone else—he don't know what he can do, till he tries.

"You quit worryin'. Tell you what I'll do—I'll bet you a poke of dust agin' an extry pile of pancakes that you an' Scotty'll be headin' upriver before sundown this evenin'."

BREAKFAST over, Black John sauntered over to Police Headquarters to meet Corporal Downey coming out the door. "Hello, John," the officer greeted. "What's on yer mind!"

"Nothin', jest thought I'd drop around an' pick up some of the latest gossip about the sinful. Where you headin'?"

"The *Sarah's* due in this mornin' from downriver. The inspector's goin' through from Forty Mile to White Horse, an' I've got some matters to talk over with him. Come on along. We can set around an' chew the fat, till the boat gets in."

Proceeding to the river, the two seated themselves on a pile of lumber, and talked of this and that, their eyes on the mighty sweep of the Yukon. A half hour passed, and Black John pointed to an object far out on the water. "There's a raft," he said. "Looks like two fellas an' a couple of packsacks on it. Jest some more chechakos fer you to worry about."

"Yeah," Downey growled, "they come on rafts, an' in canoes, an' boats—some of the boats they've got, a man wonders how the hell they held together till they got here."

"Looks like they're headin' in shore."

"Yeah—they all come pilin' in on us. The damn fools can't seem to get it through their skulls that not one in a hundred of 'em'll ever make wages."

Black John was staring intently at the raft. "Chechakos don't know nothin'," he opined. "But then, they ain't s'posed to. Look at that outfit. See anything queer about it?"

Downey eyed the approaching craft. "Can't say as I see anything queer about a couple of chechakos floatin' downriver on a raft. What do you mean—queer?"

"Looks to me kind of queer that both of 'em, an' their packsacks would be on one side of the raft. It ain't a very big raft, an' they're both of 'em way over to one side—an' yet the raft floats level."

Downey stared at the outfit. "Yeah. So what?"

"So there must be some reason fer it holdin' level, with all that weight on one side."

"They prob'ly got a water-logged timber on the other side, an' that's the way they keep her balanced."

"Yeah—water-logged, er dust-logged, one of the two."

"What do you mean—dust-logged?"

THE raft was drawing nearer to shore. "One of them guys is light-built—like Scotty Lowry, like the robber that watchman up on the McQuesten seen—an' look, he's got kind of sandy-colored hair, too. Say, Downey," the big man said suddenly, "if you had a bunch of stolen dust, an' knew the

police were searchin' everyone that went downriver, what would you do with it?"

"I'd cache it, of course."

"But—if you didn't want to cache it? If you wanted to take it along with you? How would you do it?"

Downey eyed the speaker shrewdly. "Damned if I know. How would you do it?"

"I'd build me a raft with one holler log in it—an' I'd stuff the dust in the log, an' then plug it. Only I'd put the holler log in the middle of the raft, instead of off on the side, so I wouldn't have to keep my weight on the other side to balance it."

Downey was staring wide-eyed now as the raft rapidly approached shore. Suddenly he got to his feet, and started for the river. Black John rose, and turned back toward Front Street. "So long, Downey, an' good luck! I played stud all night—got to ketch me some sleep."

Late in the afternoon he awoke to find Cush seated in the hotel office. "That there dentist, he made me bite down on a hull damn mouthful of hot beeswax. An' he claims I kin git my false teeth in a couple of days. By God, it's about time! I want to git back to Halfaday an' see if I've got a saloon left.

"An' what's more, when I told him about you drinkin' that hull bottle of laudanum down at one swig, without even feazin' you, he jest the same as called me a liar. I know damn well it couldn't of be'n as strong as what he claims it is. The damn crook—I'll bet he gits it by the keg, an' cuts it!"

BLACK JOHN grinned. "Figure he prob'ly run a saloon sometime, eh?"

"Listen—you know damn well I don't cut no licker I sell to sourdoughs! I keep them bottles of cut stuff fer chechakos—an' they ain't s'posed to drink strong licker, nohow. It's bad fer their guts."

"Okay—come on over to the Tivoli, an' let's sample a few horns of Curley's licker. It won't hurt our guts none."

As the two were drinking, Corporal Downey strolled in and joined them at the bar. Black John called for another glass, and shoved the bottle toward him. "Fill her up, Downey. I'm buyin' one."

Downey filled his glass and returned the bottle to the bar.

"Here's how," he said. "That shore was a good hunch you had—about them two damn cusses on that raft."

"Oh—you mean, this mornin'! So they was the ones, eh? An' you got 'em? An' the dust, too?"

"Well, I got part of the dust—ten sacks of it. They prob'ly cached the other thirty sacks upriver somewheres. They're good actors, though. They looked surprised as hell when I pried that plug out an' begun clawin' sand an' rocks out of that log before I come to the dust. When the manager of the Yukon Development positively identified them ten sacks, they saw the game was up, an' admitted pullin' the robbery. Then they told a cock-an' bull story about a couple of fellas landin' at their camp, last night, an' druggin' 'em, an' how it must have be'n them that robbed 'em of them thirty sacks. But I didn't fall fer no sech crap as that. They've got the stuff cached, all right."

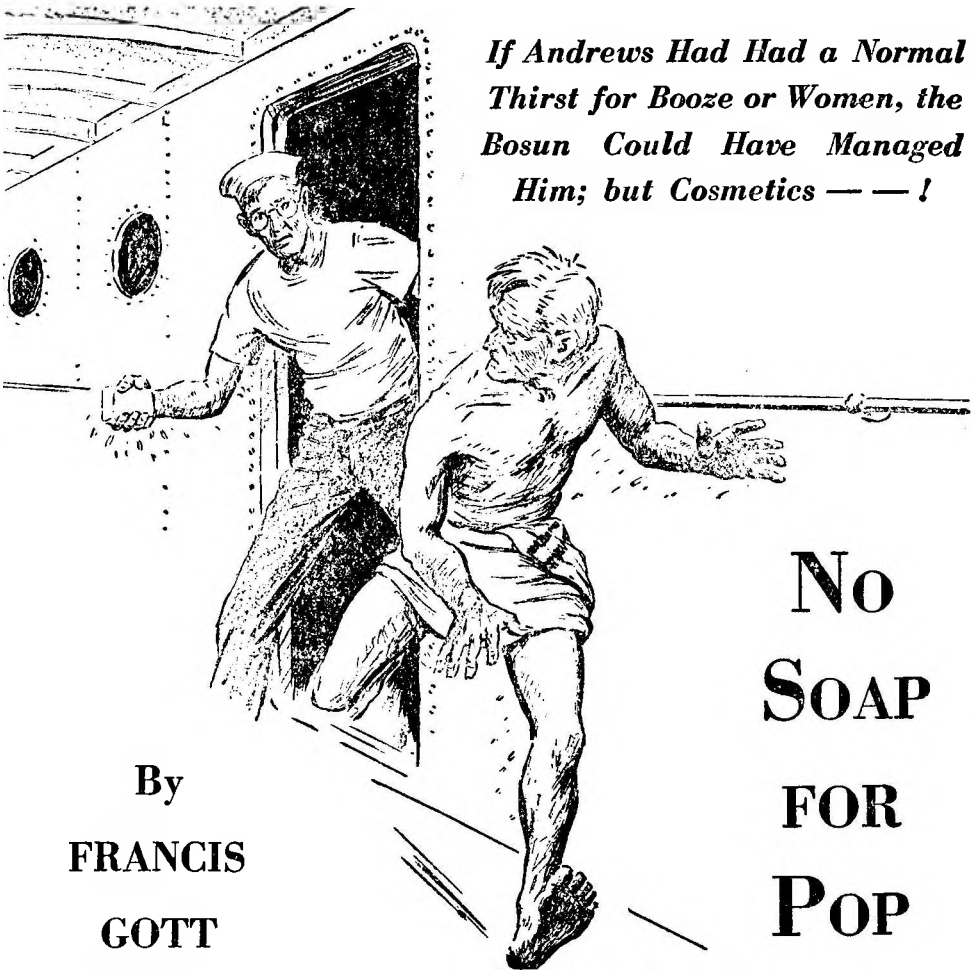
"Yeah, it's a safe bet it's cached upriver, somewheres," Black John agreed. "Don't it beat hell the deception them damn crooks practices?"

"Anyhow, I'm shore glad I picked 'em up. I turned Scotty Lowry loose as soon as they confessed. Him an' Mary jest pulled out fer upriver a couple of hours ago. She told me to say good-bye to you. Said she didn't want to wake you up. Told me to tell you to stop in on 'em sometime up on their claim. Said you had a pile of pancakes comin'. Well—so long. I've got to go down to Forty Mile."

"So long, Downey. Me an' Cush'll be pullin' out in a couple of days. Stop in an' see us, sometime. Always glad to help you out when I can."

"I wish to God we had a few men like you in the Service," Downey said. "Why the hell don't you join on?"

"N-o-o, Downey. It ain't that I wouldn't like the work. An' mebbe, with my pay comin' along reg'lar, I might feel a certain sense of security, that I ain't got now. But take it on the whole, I guess I'll jest struggle along like I am, prospectin' around, pickin' up a little here an' a little there. So long, Downey. I'll be seein' you."



If Andrews Had Had a Normal Thirst for Booze or Women, the Bosun Could Have Managed Him; but Cosmetics — — !

No Soap for Pop

By FRANCIS GOTT

FOR thirty-one-odd years I was a self-respecting A. B. until this war come on and they made me a bos'n. Now I ain't got nothin' against bos'ns although if my patriotism hadn't been appealed to I'd still be a plain A. B. and happy. Bos'ns has to think too much. On top of this they are caught in a cross fire; they get hell from the crew and hell from the mates and a special sort of hell from the skipper. A bos'n never has a friend.

All of which never bothered me much until Jacky Andrews was signed on. Now this war has forced a lot of queer fish to sea, but I've managed to make something of a sailor out of all of them. This Andrews, though, was of different fiber. He figured he'd rather drown than be shot at; all of which is a matter of opinion and all right, but without wishing the army any undue hard luck I wish they had got him.

All Andrews could think about was soap. When I first discovered this queer streak in him I had a pretty bad five minutes. Even then, knowing of this awful vice, I could have put up with him if he had not started to try his soap out on Pop Jarf. Now if there ever was a man I thought a lot of, it was Jarf, him and me having been shipmates ever since I was a young squirt.

Well, we was three days out of New York, working down towards the Azores and warmer weather, when I began to get worried about this guy Andrews. It was the winter before the Japs made their deep obeisance toward the atomic bomb and A. B.'s were so scarce we only had one to a ship. By a little conniving with the skipper and the commissioner I got Jarf signed on,

and we was both happy about it—that is, until this guy Andrews began to show his character.

Outside of Jarf, I had all green hands, but they were willing and taking hold good. Even Andrews didn't do so bad them first three days although it was plain his mind wasn't on his work. I thought maybe he was in love; well, he was, with soap.

On the third day, as I said, we was rolling along over an oily swell when I climbed to the cap'n's bridge to see how Andrews was making out on a soogee job. He wasn't there. By the square foot or so of paint work washed clean of soot he hadn't been there for a long time.

Now the old *Hobart Rand* is a ten-thousand tonner with deep well decks and long promenade decks amidships. For one bos'n with a crew of green hands it meant a lot of climbing. I was pretty mad.

I went down into the crew's quarters back aft, into the messroom and washroom and then hoofed it up forward to the storeroom. No Andrews. I found Jarf in the paint locker mixing paint.

"Where's Andrews?" I asked.

Jarf's little face webbed like a walnut as he grimaced hopefully, "Perhaps he's fell overboard."

"What ye got against Andrews?" I asked, surprised.

Jarf watched paint drip from his paddle. Finally he twisted his wiry body toward me, blue eyes winking uneasily.

"He's a screwball."

"Eh! What makes ye think, so, Pop? I got to admit he's a mite peculiar, but he seems to be honest and I wouldn't go so far as to say he was off the beam."

"Well, Bill," Jarf conceded, "dunno as I'd say his brain 'ad slipped its gimbels; it's level enough — but it ain't p'intin' true no'th."

Turning an empty bucket over, I sat down beside Jarf. Jarf looked toward the door, nervous like. He sure was on edge, which was a puzzler; for, as a rule, ain't ever been much as could upset him. I looked toward the door, too, but all I could see was a section of well deck, a secured cargo boom and the blue sea and sky beyond.

"He keeps lookin' at me," Jarf whispered.

I snorted. "That's nothin'. All the green hands look at ye. Ye're an old-timer, Pop, and they respect ye. They've never seen the likes of ye before."

"Yeah," Jarf said, straightening his knotted body. "Andrews' look is different, though; he's up to something. He studies me out'n them thick ported eyeglasses o' his. Gives me the creeps, he does."

"H'mn! Has he said anything?"

"He told me I'd make a good specimen."

"What kind of a specimen?" I asked, puzzled.

Jarf bit off a hunk of tobacco and chewed miserably. "I dunno."

"He'd better not try any fast ones," I said, real ugly.

NOW I got a heap of affection for old Pop Jarf. If any guy was going to lay for him— Well, I knotted my fist, and I ain't no little guy, weighing one ninety, and going five foot ten.

Getting up, I laid my hand on Jarf's gray head. "I'll tend to that feller," I promised.

"Oh, he ain't done nothin'—yet," Jarf hesitated. "He may be a good feller."

Leaving Jarf to his paint mixing, I started aft again. As I passed the galley amidships I happened to look in through the open port. I stopped, right there. I saw Andrews in that galley where no sailor ain't got a right to be. He had a white apron over his dungarees, and his lank body was bent over a kettle, real interested. He was stirring, making a contented sort of slithering noise with his lips and had a gleam in the corner of his eye I didn't like.

"Andrews," I asked, entering. "How come ye're in here cooking soup when your job is up on the cap'n's bridge soogeeing paint work?"

"It's not soup," Andrews corrected. "It's soap."

"Soap!" I bent over the kettle and seen that it was full of a greasy mess. "That don't look like soap to me."

"I got a lot to do to it yet, Pelican," Andrews explained, looking down at me. "Should I explain the procedure, I doubt if you could follow me. However, I shall hand you a cake of the finished product."

"First," I says, trying to squint through them thick lenses of his, "the name ain't Pelican; it's Pelkey. And second, your soap making is goin' to end right here."

"Oh, no, it isn't" he says, face flushed.

"Oh, yes, it is."

"You cannot stop me from working on my own time," he hints, hopefully.

I rub my chin, dubious like. "No, I don't believe I got ambition enough to stand over you when I needs me sleep. Howsomever, I doubts if the cook will stand for you messing up his pans."

"I have fixed it up with the cook," he says. "I have promised him a perfumed cake to take ashore to his girl in Genoa."

Now I come to the reluctant conclusion that this Andrews ain't as dumb as he looks. I been trying, futilely, for three trips now to get on the good side of that cook.

"H'mn! How come, Jacky, me b'y ye took to soap instead of to drink or women like a normal man?"

"Soap," he says, "is my business. I was raised in soap from a swaddling babe, for my father owns a soap factory. Always, we have striven for a newer and better cake to delight the nostrils and cleanse the skin of man, woman and child. I am now thirty-seven years old and it is too late to change."

I was shook all of a heap. I had never give thought before that a grown man could give his life to soap.

"Ye should never have come to sea, Jacky, me b'y," I advises. "A hard life, it is, and no place for a man who likes to smell soap."

Andrews sighed wistfully and a sad smile passed over his long face. "The choice was not mine. The army sniffed at my heels, forcing me to the conclusion that I did not want such a life. I am not lacking in patriotism, however. So I decided to give my life through the merchant marine if need be."

"A most noble conclusion," I agreed.

Now I've had to put up with a lot as bos'n. If Andrews had had a normal thirst for booze or women I could have handled him. But soap!

A WEEK later I was taking it easy in my room, which I share with the deck engineer, when in walks Jarf. He is bare except for a company towel knotted about his loins. The poor old feller is trembling and rubbing his knuckled hands together. The mahogany tan of his forearms and hands make quite a contrast against the white skin of his wrinkled belly.

"Sit down, Pop," I invites, real pleased yet uneasy that he is getting so old that he is taking to running around in a diaper. "Let's play a game o' cribbage. By the looks of ye, ye needs a drink, too."

"No, Bill, 'tain't a drink I'm needin'," he swallows, big Adam's apple working "But I'll sit for a spell and calm meself. I just had a frightful experience."

The deck engineer, Moe Sweency, shoves his baboon face over the edge of the top bunk, thin fleshed ears prickling. Like me and Jarf he is an old hand.

"Yup," Jarf says, bow legs wobbling under him. "I was in the washroom dousing the sweat off'n me with a bucket o' sea water, when in walks Andrews. He has a big cake o' pink soap in his hand.

" 'Mr. Jarf,' he says, an awful gleam shootin' out'n his eye. 'I'm goin' to do you the honor of givin' you a bath with Andrews & Son's, Incorporated, latest creation—Sea Foam's Rippling Perfection.'

" 'Oh, no, yer ain't, sonny,' I says, thinking I ain't heard aright.

" 'Oh, yes, I am,' he says, his brown glims gleamin' somethin' wicked through his thick eyeglasses.

" 'Yer lays a hand on me, sonny,' I warns, 'and I'll bash yer clean into the scuppers.'

"He steps nearer, pawin' that hunk o' soap. Smells like a female woman, it do, all perfumery and nice, and I am ashamed for him.

" 'It's a wonderful creation,' he says, 'and I am going to give you the bath of your life, even if I have to take you down and sit on you, Mr. Jarf.' "

Moe Sweeney is so interested, he is hanging half out of his bunk.

"I never did like that guy," he whistles through buck teeth. "He is a landlubber of which they ain't none whicher. He will never be reformed."

"And what did ye do, Pop?" I asks. "Such a swab! Did ye mop the deck up with him?"

Old Jarf sunk weakly onto a bench locker and hung his head. "I am scared of him. How can I hit a man with such thick glasses on that he can't see good to hit back? Even now he is after me."

"It is time this is nipped in the bud," I says. "I respect your chivalry Pop. I shall attend to him meself, bos'ns havin' broad shoulders."

"Bill," Jarf's voice breaks. "Yer be a true friend—even if yer be a bos'n."

I pat Jarf on the shoulder. "We will stick together like rope yarns in a try pot full o' tar."

I STEP out into the square where the steering engine is clanking like all get-out because a green man is at the wheel. I move down to the next door and enter the deck gang's fo'c'sle. Sweaty and smokey smelling, it contains nine men, all green hands who act tougher'n regular A. B.'s. Sure enough, Andrews is there. He has a big hunk o' pink soap on a sheet of paper on his bunk and is mooning over it.

"Andrews," I says, standing beside him and looking down at the soap. "I ain't a man to be digging into a man's private life, but ye are upsetting the morale of this ship. I warn ye, it has got to stop. On this ship every man takes his own bath, which is an old custom at sea."

The rapt look leaves Andrews' face. His lean jaw hardens.

"Mr. Pelican," he coughs, "you are too dumb even to be an Irishman. However, I shall forgive you. It is an honor that I am striving to do the *Hobart Rand* through the person of Pop Jarf. When we return to the states I shall have my dad put Pop Jarf's picture in an advertisement which through the medium of the better-class magazines shall go to every corner of the world. Pop Jarf will be made happy seeing himself recommending that new creation—a shining new cake of Andrews & Son's, Incorporated, Sea Foam Rippling Perfection."

Nigh speechless, I take Andrews by a bony shoulder and shake him. "Why, such a lousy trick would ruin the old man. He would be laughed at from South Street to every corner of the seven seas."

Andrews coughs, calmly, "I shudder every time I watch Mr. Jarf taking a bath with deck sand and ship's soap. That yellow soap is not fit even for a horse."

"Ye ain't goin' to do no such awful thing to old Pop," I warn, ominously. "Pop has used deck sand and yellow soap for to scrub his hide with ever since he went to sea and it is too late to teach an old sea dog new tricks. Why should he use perfumed soap? Why, it would break his spirit; he would never be the same after."

"But, Bos'n" Andrews insists in a loving voice, "just feast your eyes upon that wondrous cake of soap. I admit, it is still a bit soft, for my makeshift dryer is not altogether satisfactory. However, feel its smooth texture. Take a pinch of it. Smell it. Rub it between your fingers and listen to it gurgle."

I takes a pinch and sniffs of it.

"Smells like seaweed," I grunt. "Kind o' nice, though."

"Yes!" He glows all over. "That's it, Bos'n Pelican—seaweed. Fresh, growing seaweed, bathed by the purest of sea water. A triumph! I have captured the essence."

"Yeah," I says. "I don't doubt it—but lay off'n old Pop. Me, I could maybe use a cake of that soap and keep me head—but as for old Pop—it'ud wreck him. He would never be the same after. Promise ye'll keep away from old Pop."

Andrews crosses his lanky arms on his breast. "I make no promises."

"Then, Mister," I growl, "watch your step. From now on there is war between us."

I turn abruptly and leave him. I climb up through the shaft well to the messroom and turn the steam on the percolater. Then I proceed to drink black coffee. On the twelfth cup I feel my brain beginning to spin like well-oiled machinery. Pop Jarf is my friend; I will even walk the mainstay for him.

Now I must pace the poop deck until I get an idea. So, stepping outside, I begin pacing. I notice that the half moon, a weird green is climbing the night sky, dragging veils of cloud after her. Beneath my feet the deck is vibrating to the churning of shaft and screw. I spit into the silvery wake and curse that I am a bos'n. When me and Pop was both A. B.'s together, I was happy.

"Purty night, ain't ut, Bose."

I turn to see Sweeney's buck teeth gleaming in the moonlight.

"Moe," I growl, "Be pleased to keep your hatch battened. I am about to do some thinking."

"Ha!" Sweeney chortles cryptically. "I am glad I ain't a bos'n."

"Would ye mind, Moe," I request, "leaving me alone so that I can work me brain in peace. It is hard work even under the best of conditions."

"Sure," Sweeney says. "I am about to

proceed into the messroom to shove my face into a sandwich. First, however, I want to warn ye that that mooncalf Andrews has give all hands a sample o' that batch of pink soap he has concocted; and they are bumping lard bellies even now, lathering bubbles like sick whales."

I moan. "How about Pop?"

Sweeney whispers in me ear, "He is peeking at them from around a corner. Whether he be intrigued or just plain scared at bein' give a proper bath, I can't tell."

After Sweeney leaves me to my loneliness, an idea comes to me out of the night, full blossomed like a calla lily. Immediately, I go below, happy that I am rewarded for such hard work.

I shall make Andrews into a sailor!

Yes! Then he shall have no more desire to corrupt old Pop. However, I shudder. It will be a stiff race; for I am up against a man with a cold intellect. He must not suspect; otherwise he will think circles around me.

I do not feel happy, but I brighten when I realize that I have the edge. I know what he is trying to do to old Pop, but he does not know what I shall do to him.

AS SWEENEY has warned me, I find Andrews in the washroom with the crew. I am disgusted; I think with longing of the old days when a sailor was a sailor. Yes, all hands are on a regular binge, lathering the place full of soap bubbles. The perfumery nigh chokes me. I have feared the worst, and by it I am confronted, but I have a stout heart. I rest easier, though, to see old Pop is not there.

"Andrews," I rasps, watching him rub his fingers against Shorty Mahan's back, testing the consistency of the lather, "I warn ye, between you and me there is war. Ye had better desist from this horrible debauchery or I shall have your hide."

He gives me a pitying look, "Bos'n, even for an Irishman of American descent you have not got brains enough. I shall always be two steps ahead of you."

"All right, Andrews," I growl. I watch him for a full minute in fascination, he is so covered with soap; even to his glasses he gleams like a horrible nightmare. "I feel sorry for you; you have asked for it. I have got a brain made powerful by long periods of rest. Against it a tired brain has not got a chance."

The men all glare at me. I see that they do not like bos'ns, which is natural. I feel for them, however, for once I was an A. B. I know that for them the first year will be the hardest. They do not yet realize that I am a father to them and have their interests at heart.

Gagging from the smell of that pink soap I leave them.

The next day I start in to make a sailor out of Andrew's. First I have him slush down the foreshrouds with fish oil, which I consider a good antidote for perfume. When he comes down he looks like he has crawled through a dirty fuel pipe. I view him with pride, for he smells like a whaler two miles to wind'ard. Next, I have him soogee the foremast from the truck down, a real job; for the old *Rand* is rolling something wicked to the glassy swells and the sun is like a blow torch touching the neck.

At three o'clock Andrews wiggles out of his bos'n's chair and groggily comes down the mast ladder.

"Water," he croaks.

I wonder if maybe he is going to pass out on me, but I know he is a tough boy and I harden my heart. So I slam it into him.

"Can't take it, eh!" I sneer. "Better ye should have let the army draft ye where the life is easy. Ye will never make a sailor."

He sways there on the blistering deck, white foam dried to his lips, and glares at me. His face hardens. He is a big-boned skeleton tied together with sinew; he has the makings of a tough man.

"Bos'n," he croaks in a husky whisper, lips moving slowly from exhaustion, "You have such an unintelligent face that even an ape would not consider you his social equal. Your mother must have driven you from the family doorstep at an early age, her disappointment must've been so great."

He wipes the sweat, fish oil and dried soogee from his glasses, turns and climbs the mast again.

I see that I have an opponent worthy of a Pelkey. I am both glad and concerned—glad that he is falling for my bait, and concerned that he is so tough that he can take it. I fear that come night he will be making soap again.

So at one bell before night chow, I am

standing there when he finishes the mast.

"Now, Andrews," I say with a friendly leer, "we have a half hour before supper. While ye are restin', we will proceed to back anchor chain out of the hawse pipes and flake it on deck so that tomorrow ye can chip, red lead and paint ut."

Anchor chain will break a green man's heart. Often have I cursed it. So I help him just enough to keep him from utter discouragement. He is game, although bleary eyed from weariness.

"Ye are an awful slow worker, Andrews," I say, shaking my head dubiously. "Looks to me ye will be owing the company for your salt."

"You are trying to ride me," he croaks; his voice is so husky I can hardly hear it, but I can read the contempt in his eyes.

"Ride ye!" I snort. "I'm only askin' for a fair day's work. Ho! Ho! Perhaps we had better call it quits, provided," I add, slyly, watchin' him close, "ye keep your soap makin' enticements away from old Pop Jarf."

"Ye can go to hell," he chokes.

I chuckle. It is a good sign, it being the first time I have heard him swear.

As I am about to go aft to get outside of my much-needed supper, Chief Mate Svenson shoves his square face over the weather stripping of the bridge and yells, "Bos'n, Cap'n Britchell vants to see you. Step lively up now."

So, cussing my fate at being a bos'n and thereby the catspaw of the whole ship, I climb wearily to the bridge.

"Bos'n," Cap'n Britchell rasps, spearing me with blue shafts of suspicion from his little eyes, "the mates tell me that the men, especially Andrews, are spending half their time in the galley making perfumed soap. You should be aware that these men are aboard this vessel to work—and not to play!"

I mop my tired head. "Cap'n, somebody has exaggerated. All hands have been hard at word all day, especially Andrews."

Exasperation rides between Cap'n Britchell's puffy lids. "It has not been obvious."

"I wish Andrews could hear ye, Cap'n," I declare fervently. I add to myself that the skipper cannot see anything because he sleeps all day.

Cap'n Britchell pats his capacious belly, nicely ballasted with supper. "Bos'n, in future you will attend more strictly to your duties. Ahem!"

By this time I am mad. However, he is skipper and I am just bos'n. So I just spit.

"Yes, sir," I say, and leave the bridge.

By this time I am late for supper, but fate is never kind to a bos'n. On the well deck aft I am stopped by Shorty Mahan and Slim Nevens.

"Bos'n," stutters Mahan, "we are de-de-delegated to complain of a just grievance."

"Oh, yeah," I snarl, for by this time I am worked up, see.

"Yes," agrees Nevens stoutly, solemn eyed as a sea guppy. "You are driving us too hard. This is becoming a hell ship. Shipmate Andrews is so tired tonight that he does not feel like givin' us a lesson in soap makin'."

What I did to Mahan and Nevens is not for the record.

LIFE is cruel to a bos'n. For the next three weeks I hardly sleep; for at night I must think up new ways to harden Andrews. I drive him until each night he is groggy. In order that none may suspect I must drive the rest, too; yet Cap'n Britchell is not satisfied. He complains continuous that I am too easy on the men and will never make a real bos'n. Perhaps he was once a bos'n and has not forgot.

However, I have a stout heart and even though all hands from the skipper down now hate me, I will do even more for my friend Pop Jarf.

Five, six times has Andrews tried his wiles on Jarf, but Jarf has not weakened.

That evening as the *Rand* glides past a British flattop and into the inner harbor of Alexandria, my body is at low ebb and my mind full of brooding thoughts. So I decide to go ashore to taste life in the native quarter.

On entering the washroom I am shocked to a full stop at what I see even though I have worked for it.

"Andrews," I ask, aghast, "what are ye doin'?"

"You got eyes," he snarls.

Yes, he is scrubbing his hide with a deck brush and a hunk of ship's soap of which there is none harsher.

"Bos'n," a cold smile rides his mobile lips, "you thought that you would make life so miserable aboard this ship that I would

leave her. Well, I have fooled you—I have become a sailor."

I begin to glow all over. It is so nice to see before me what I have worked for.

Andrews spits a broad stream of tobacco juice into the scuppers. "I am through with the land forever. Sparks has cabled my dad that I have found my true calling. Captain Britchell is a fine man. He has loaned me his Bowditch and his Cugles so that I can study to be a sea captain. Bos'n, I hate your guts. I do not want to look at you on my own time."

"Oh, my gosh!" I yelp. My grin is so broad it staggers him. "Good! Atta boy!"

It is a much-puzzled and astonished Andrews whom I leave in the washroom. I must tell the good news to Jarf. Good old Pop Jarf! Never again will he be bothered by landlubbers waving cakes of pink soap.

I find Jarf on the well deck beside the sweet water tap. He is belly deep in a big tub and I can hardly see him for bubbles. He is singing and in one hand clutches a cake of pink soap. I have never seen a man so happy, chortling so to himself.

"Pop," I moan, "the sight of you makes me very sad; never again will ye smell the same, salty and tarry and hempy like."

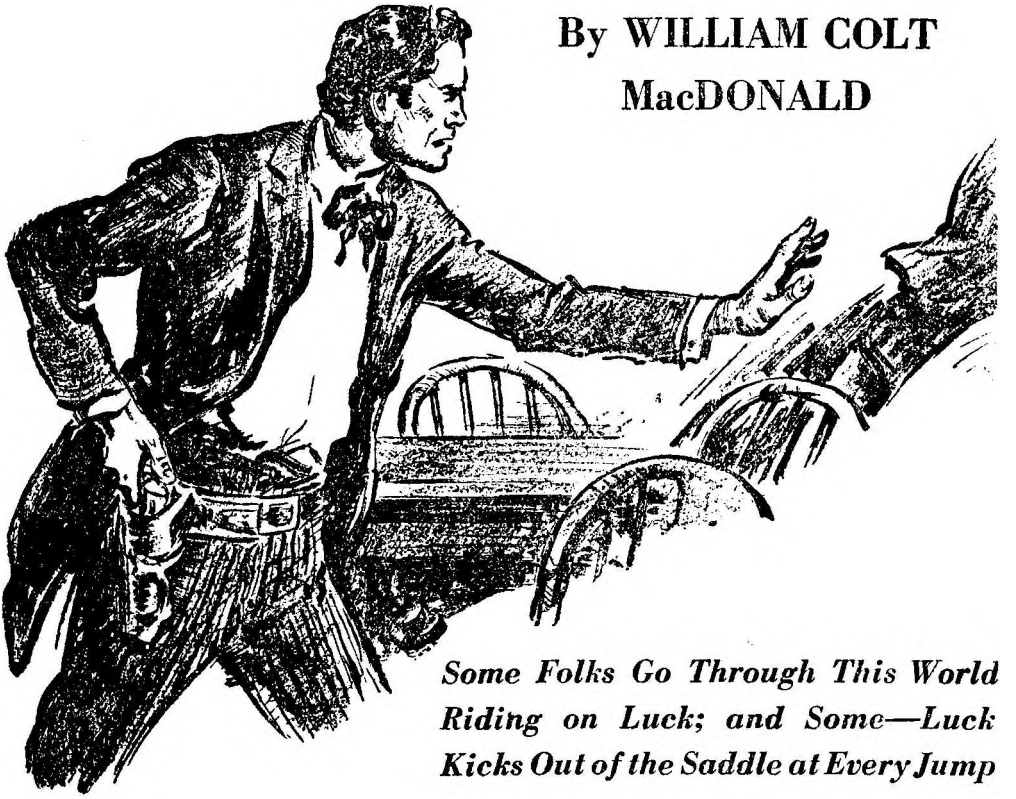
"Bill," he grins, thin fleshed ears dripping bubbles, "that Jacky Andrews is a fine lad. He has a pa who is goin'ter make me famous just sittin' in a tub, scrubbin' like I be now, for to have me picture took."

Sadly I shake my head.

"Yup, Bill, yer has sure misjudged so fine a lad, but I guess it be because yer be a bos'n. Bos'ns be so dumb. Bill, yer be behind the times. Yer should take a bath with this soap; it is wunnerful. For years I missed a lot."

No Shining Armor

By WILLIAM COLT MacDONALD



Some Folks Go Through This World Riding on Luck; and Some—Luck Kicks Out of the Saddle at Every Jump

TEXAS was still raw in those days when Lee Crockett operated the Birdcage Bar, in San Pablo, and dealt an honest game of faro across his layout of green cloth with its painted designs. Men still toted six-shooters during their waking hours, though cowhands from nearby ranches no longer felt free to shoot up the town when they came riding in to quench a payday thirst. San Pablo had an ordinance prohibiting such activity, as it had an ordinance relative to the proper closing hour for saloons: midnight. Crockett's Birdcage, alone, heeded the closing ordinance. As the town marshal admitted, "San Pablo's too young yet, to take its laws serious, like it should."

But San Pablo had ambitions—along with a church and schoolhouse—of one day becoming the county seat, and while it hadn't attained any remarkable degree of polish, the town was, at least, acquiring a definite smoothing of its rougher edges. Itinerant travelers spoke of San Pablo as "a decent little town," and in the elevating of the settlement to such distinction, Lee Crockett had played more than an equable part. Crockett was courteous, friendly and square as the proverbial die; he possessed many friends. In those early days it was not unusual for gamblers and saloonkeepers to maintain prominent positions in cow country social life.

The particular night doesn't matter—it was sometime in June. Lee Crockett was drawing the oil-cloth cover across his faro table, his bartender having departed fifteen minutes previously, after urging the last reluctant customer on his way. Night silence enveloped San Pablo. Farther along Main Street, two saloons remained open, but the town lay peaceful under a full moon.

With the faro table clothed in its protective case, Crockett made his way about the big, empty barroom, extinguishing the oil

lamps burning in brackets. A lean, bronzed man of thirty years was Lee Crockett, with good features, steady eyes and dark hair that curled slightly where it touched the collar at the back of his neck. A black, square-cut coat, with wide lapels, reached almost to his highly polished knee-boots into which were tucked gray trouser legs. Across what was known in those days as a fancy vest was stretched a gold watchchain. His white linen was immaculate; the black string tie knotted with precision; his manners were impeccable. Beneath the coat, slung to a wide cartridge belt, was a holstered, forty-four caliber six-shooter.

CROCKETT'S footsteps echoed softly in the now darkened room and carried him through the chest-high swinging doors at the entrance. Outside, on the saloon porch, he closed a heavy oaken door against the swinging partitions, secured it with a padlock and paused a moment at the edge of the porch to roll a cigarette. A scattering of lights along San Pablo's main street competed palely with the huge round moon floating serenely above the Sangre de Santos peaks east of town. Here and there, at hitch-racks, a few cowponies slumped patiently on three legs. A wagon and team waited before the General Store which had closed hours before. Along either side of Main Street were squat adobe buildings and high false-fronted wooden structures.

From deep shadow, two yards to the left of Crockett, came the sound of a cough. Crockett's head turned easily. It was too dark to distinguish features, beneath the wide wooden awning, but Crockett recognized the cough as one he'd been hearing for the past week. He said quietly, "Still in town, eh, Bandera?"

Bandera straightened painfully from the beer keg on which he'd been seated and walked to Crockett's side, a wizened boy-like figure with a hollow chest and features pre-

maturely lined. He wore cowman's overalls, a slouch brim sombrero and a six-shooter. Behind him was a long record of a none-too-savory odor, but as yet San Pablo's town marshal wasn't aware of the fact. Since his arrival, the man had vouchsafed no information about himself, beyond the fact that he'd told someone his home was in Bandera. No one particularly cared where he was from, or whether or not he stated truth, but the name had clung to him.

"Yes, I'm still here," Bandera said harshly. "It's my damn' lungs. I had to rest one more day."

Crockett said evenly, "Maybe you'll wait one day too long."

"What do you know about it?" The words came in a half snarl.

"Nothing for certain; I reckon I made a good guess though."

"Regarding what?"

Crockett hesitated a moment before stating a blunt fact in an even tone: "The law's on your trail, Bandera."

Bandera commenced a scornful laugh that ended in a curse. "How do you know?"

"Something about your eyes told me that, the first day you arrived." Crockett's voice was easy, drawling.

Bandera coughed again, a long frame-wrenching cough, breathed painfully, before he said, "If you knew so damn' much, how come you didn't turn me over to the marshal?"

The explanation came hard for Crockett. "It's like this, Bandera—you hadn't harmed me, nor anybody in San Pablo, so far as I could see. I don't figure I'm big enough to sit in judgment on any man. There's too much intolerance in life as it is. You were sick when you hit San Pablo—you're still sick.

"You came into my place and minded your own business. You lost your last dollar across my faro table, but without whining. I could see the desperate need of money in the very way you played—"

"Is that why you insisted on loaning me twice the amount I lost? Leastwise, you called it a loan." Bandera's voice was scornful. "The more fool you; you knew damn' well you'd never get it back. Well, I'll tell you something—I figure that loan saved my life. I was getting right hungry, and you—"

"Bosh! Forget it."

"I won't forget it! There's some things a man can't forget. Why'd you do it?"

Crockett shrugged careless shoulders. "I don't just know," he said slowly. "You looked to be in right bad shape—like you'd been that way most of your life. You know, Bandera, some folks go through this world riding on Luck. And some—Luck kicks out of the saddle at every jump. I figured you'd been kicked plenty."

"Mostly in the lungs," Bandera said bitterly. "I came out to this country thinking to get cured, but I came too late. I've had to live any way I could—and I ain't enjoyed any of the ways. That mean anything to you?"

"I don't reckon it's any of my business."

"Look, Lee, I'll pay you back some day."

Crockett smiled grimly in the gloom. "Why, Bandera, you won't—" Abruptly, he checked the words.

BANDERA laughed harshly. "Go ahead, finish it—tell me I won't live long enough to repay you—"

"Shucks!" Crockett said heartily. "You got a long life ahead of you."

"That's a damn' lie and you know it," Bandera snarled. "Why in hell do you keep saying things like that when you know better?"

"I'm sorry, boy. Didn't mean to rile you—"

"Listen, Lee—" Bandera's voice softened "—so far, you've been guessing. Here's the straight of it. Three weeks back I killed a man in El Paso."

"That's your business," Crockett said imperturbably. "Maybe he had it coming. I don't want any details."

"He forced me to draw. I didn't want a fight."

Crockett nodded. "I think I heard something about that, though I didn't know you were involved. You'd better ride, Bandera. Your trail's still hot."

"Can't—yet," the other said doggedly. "I've got to rest another day." A violent spasm of coughing seized the frail form.

"You'd better get along to your bed, leastwise."

"These days"—meaningly—"I never aim to get horizonal until it's necessary."

"You know what you want to do, I guess. Well, it's time I was moving toward my

boarding house. Somebody has to do the sleeping."

Abruptly, Bandera changed the subject, "Lee, did you know that Brant Madison's back in town?"

Crockett said dryly, "I got word of that last night."

"What did you hear?"

"I don't reckon to go into that now." The voice was quiet, but the lines hardened along Crockett's jaw.

ACROSS the street, the boots of some homeward-bound pedestrian clumped hollowly along the plank sidewalk. The sounds died away after a time, to be replaced by other sounds at a hitch-rack a block away. Horses' hoofs drummed, faded out to silence. Bandera asked, "You seen Brant Madison today?"

Crockett shook his head. "He never comes into the Birdcage."

"You heard anything?" Bandera persisted.

Crockett scrutinized the pinched face through the gloom. "No, I've heard nothing. Just what are you hinting at?"

"Lee, you're going to have to kill Brant Madison."

"That's foolish talk," Crockett laughed softly. "What's on your mind?"

"Madison needs killing."

"That's not for me to say—nor you, either." Crockett said again, "What's on your mind?"

"Madison's been doing a heap of drinking all day. He's ugly. He had a lot to say concerning your church-going the past two months."

Crockett chuckled. "I helped pay for that church. A man can't be criticized for profiting on his investment—"

"Damn it, Lee, when are you going to wake up?" Bandera demanded fiercely. "Don't you know that Madison is telling it all over town that you're attending church on account of his wife?"

Crockett stiffened; certain hot words welled to his lips before he got himself in check. "Anything else?" he asked quietly.

"Plenty. Madison says you're in love with his wife. With you and the Madisons living at the same boarding house—well, maybe you can guess how he talked. He was out of town five days, you know, and—"

Crockett cut in coldly, "Madison's a damned liar and every decent man and woman in San Pablo knows he's a damned liar. Why, I've never said an out-of-the-way word to Mrs. Madison."

"I believe that, but there's a heap of folks won't. Madison's piling up trouble for himself. You'll have to kill him, Lee, to shut his lying mouth."

Crockett's hard gaze was fixed on the long stretch of moon-bathed, dusty roadway, but he wasn't seeing it. Finally, he said slowly, "I couldn't do it, Bandera, even if I was so inclined."

"Why not? Listen"—Bandera's tones were earnest—"there's no use you denying you care a lot for Mrs. Madison. Hell! There's people in town that notice things. I hear folks talk."

"About Linda Madison and me?" Crockett demanded incredulously. Momentarily, the news stunned him, preventing further comment.

Bandera coughed and nodded. "I'm telling you—it's all over San Pablo—"

"You're telling me what?" Crockett was suddenly, savagely, angry. "Bandera, you—"

"Don't you get touchy with me, Lee. I'm just telling you what folks are saying. You've been seen sitting on the porch with Mrs. Madison. She rides your saddle horse—"

Crockett swore in a low, furious monotone, concluding, "There's nothing wrong in loaning a friend a horse. Mrs. Madison wanted to ride. Madison didn't take care of it. I offered my pony, figuring Madison didn't have the money for a horse."

"He's got money now. He's had money, on and off, ever since they came to San Pablo, I understand, and put up at your boarding house—'bout three months back, wasn't it, they arrived? Brant Madison's a first-rate skunk."

"You're sort of hard on skunks in general, aren't you? Say, are people saying anything else about us—that is, Mrs. Madison and me?"

BANDERA eyed Crockett a trifle nervously. "We-ell, the way you watch her when she's singing in the church choir has told folks a lot of things *you* wouldn't put into words. And—oh, hell, Lee, I'm telling you, again, you're going to have to kill Brant Madison."

Crockett demanded harshly, "And have

everyone say I killed him so I could marry his wife? Don't talk like a fool. Killing Madison is something I don't dare do now, though—" He left the statement unfinished.

"You'll kill him, or Madison will run you out of town. He's making threats."

Crockett's eyes narrowed; his lips were a thin line across his jaw. After a time he reached a decision. "I reckon I'll just have to be run out, then."

"Hell's-bells!" Bandera said bitterly. "You're too easy-going. What if you did kill him and take up with her? Folks would soon forget—"

"That's enough of that talk," Crockett told him in sharp tones. "My mind's made up."

Bandera said hopelessly, "All right, you're the boss. Say, do you want to know where Madison gets his money?"

"That's none of my business," Crockett told him coldly.

Bandera couldn't be stopped. "Look, Lee, you remember that stage hold-up, four days back. There was better than ten thousand in the strong-box. The driver was killed and the guard—"

"What about it? The sheriff is riding trail now, looking for the Larrabee gang. They're the ones that did it. The guard mentioned them before he died."

Bandera agreed. "Yeah, the three Larrabees were in it, but there was a fourth bandit —masked. The guard didn't know him, but he'd recognized the Larrabees, right off."

"Are you hinting that Madison was the fourth man?" Crockett said slowly.

"I'm stating a fact."

Crockett shook his head. "You're wrong. Madison hasn't the nerve for anything like that."

Bandera laughed scornfully. "If you were living down in the Mex quarter, the way I am, you'd hear things. Down there, the finger points at Brant Madison." A minute passed with no reply from Crockett. Bandera continued, "How you figuring to handle Madison, Lee?"

"I'm not figuring. If Madison wants to run me out, he can—"

"Moses on the Mountain!" Bandera snarled. "You let Madison get the idea he can run you out and he'll go farther. He'll try to kill you instead. God! Won't you ever wake up?"

"I'm awake now, plenty awake," Crockett said grimly. "Anyway you look at it, it's a problem. I won't kill Madison. At the same time—" Crockett paused, glancing swiftly at the small figure at his side. "Look here, Bandera, did you think Madison might be gunning for me tonight? Is that why you were waiting here for me to close up?"

"Madison made a heap of war talk, today," Bandera muttered, "shaming your name and hers. I just thought he might try to— Cripes! Lee, you know what I mean. I thought maybe I could prevent him—damn it!" He was suddenly furious. "What difference does it make, anyway? Can't I sit here a spell without you—?"

Crockett cut in quietly, "All right, I understand. Thanks, son." Bandera was breathing heavily, though he didn't say anything. Crockett went on, "I'm going to slope along to my bed. Good night."

He had already stepped to the sidewalk when Bandera said, "Wait a minute, Lee. Why don't you let me kill Madison?"

Crockett turned swiftly. "Not that," he said earnestly. "Remember, that's the last thing you must do—"

"I don't see it that way. After all, you've been decent to me."

"There's one reason right there," Crockett said. "Folks know you and I have been friendly. They'd say I hired you to get Madison out of my way. There are moral reasons, too. After all, there's a law against murder." He put out one hand, caught the other's shoulder and pressed it hard. "You're a pretty white hombre, Bandera. I'm not overlooking that—"

"Aw, shucks, forget that guff," Bandera snapped.

Crockett said abruptly, "Good night," and walked away. Bandera stared after him until he was lost to view, then turned slowly in the opposite direction.

AT THE first corner, Crockett crossed over and pursued a straight course along the plank sidewalk, his eyes momentarily glancing toward the lighted windows of the Oasis Saloon, where Brant Madison usually did his drinking. Loud voices and raucous laughter floated on the night air, from the open doorway of the Oasis. Crockett's mind was a swirl of emotion that wasn't reflected in his somber face.

"Damn Madison," he mused, "and damn the gossips in this town. Like a fool, I've been thinking nobody knew how I felt about her. I reckon I'll have to leave San Pablo. It'd be tough if there was trouble over her. She's got things tough enough now. Lord! If I just had the right to stay and make Madison behave. . . ."

A man passed, spoke to Crockett. Crockett said, "Evening, Ethan," and walked on. A rider loped along the street, the pony's hoofs thudding dully in the dust, the forms of man and beast etched sharply in the brilliant moon glare.

At the next corner, Crockett turned into Second Street where twin rows of cottonwood trees filtered moonlight falling on the residences at either side. The street was quiet, the houses dark. But one light shone from that double line of buildings, and that was from a lower window of Crockett's boarding house, a frame structure, painted white, with picket fence to match, and a huge live oak spreading its ponderous limbs above the front yard.

Crockett turned in at the opening in the fence, closed the gate behind him and progressed toward the steps mounting to a low, roofed gallery across the front of the house. Morning glory vines grew in profusion along the gallery, dimming the lamplight from the front room. Crockett crossed the gallery, reaching for his doorkey, then noticed the front door standing wide open. At the same moment a slight movement to the right caught his attention.

"Good evening, Mr. Crockett."

"Oh! . . . Mrs. Madison. I didn't see you sitting there."

MOONLIGHT through the climbing vines traced a lacy pattern over the girl's slight form where she occupied a rocker just beyond the rectangle of yellow lamplight shining from the window. Reason told Lee Crockett to pass on, into the house. Instinct involuntarily turned his steps toward the seated girl. He said quietly, "Up rather late, aren't you, Mrs. Madison?" while his mind revolved with the thought: I stand here voicing flat, conventional subjects. It's all wrong. Why can't I tell her? Why can't we go away together? Maybe she doesn't care enough to do that. But why doesn't she? Caring the way I do, she'd simply have to care for me. It must be so. But no, I stand here, and we'll talk politely about the weather, or the night, or the town, or perhaps business of some sort. But never the things we want to say. We don't mention her husband. Not a pleasant subject for either of us. Husband! That's a mockery, too, like that ring on her finger. I'd like to teach her what husband means—to take care of her for ever and ever and ever.

"Won't you sit down, Mr. Crockett? The moon's right pretty tonight, isn't it. I couldn't sleep, so I came downstairs."

Her words fell dully on Lee Crockett's abstractions; the moon's right pretty. And so are you, Linda Madison, waiting up for your husband's return, I suppose. Or perhaps he's already returned and you fear to go upstairs. After last night. Why in God's name do such things have to be?

Linda Madison rose a trifle nervously to move her chair as Crockett sought out a seat. For a brief moment she was framed against the lighted window, a slim figure of a girl in a tight-fitting bodice and voluminous skirt of some soft gray material. A brooch held a bit of lace at her white throat, and there were further touches of lace at her wrists. The lamplight behind her slim form threw an aura of pale gold about Linda Madison's tightly clustered curls. Then she was reseating herself as Crockett settled to a rocking chair a yard away, filigreed moonlight tracing patterns over the occupants of the two chairs. Neither spoke for several minutes. It was peaceful along the street, silent, save for a myriad tiny insect sounds. Beyond the gallery, in a patch of shadow, dancing fireflies flashed luminescent signals to each other. A million thoughts—most of them of the same tenor—swirled through Lee Crockett's mind, but he didn't dare put them into words. The girl was first to break the silence.

"My hus—Mr. Madison—returned yesterday."

Crockett said, level-voiced, "That so? Hope he had a successful trip. Selling barbwire to these Texas cowmen is a mighty tough proposition. Cow folks don't take to fences."

"Oh, he's given that up. I'm not sure, exactly, what his business is now. He's not told me much—" She paused abruptly, her voice changed, "Mr. Crockett, didn't you know he was back?"

Lee Crockett thought, Good God! Didn't I know he was back? With all of San Pablo buzzing with gossip and him making threats. And last night! Lord above! She must think this house is peopled with deaf folks. Crockett said carelessly, "Seems I did hear something to that effect."

Linda Madison's breath caught sharply. "You didn't hear us—last night? That is—I think Brant was talking louder than usual. Those upstairs walls are none too thick. I feared he'd waken the house."

Crockett's eyes closed with pain at the recollection. Talking louder than usual. Drunken cursing. Worse. He forced a soft laugh. "Didn't hear a thing. Me, I sleep like a log," he said, and tried to change the subject:

"Did you go riding today?"

"I haven't been out all day. I—I don't think I'll be able to use your pony again, Mr. Crockett. Mr. Madison objects to my borrowing other people's property. I see his viewpoint, of course. He's promised me a horse of my own. It's been very good of you to—"

"Not at all, not at all," Crockett said quickly. "I'm sorry if Mr. Madison feels that way. Of course, we all think differently on things. If I see him, I'll try to make him understand it's all right—really doing me a favor. The pony needs exercise. I wonder I didn't see Mr. Madison around town, tonight."

"He—he returned home early, and has gone to bed."

Crockett frowned, musing: Madison's drunk again. He's turned in to sleep off a drunken stupor. Linda's afraid to go upstairs. Madison had money again. What was it Bandera had mentioned about Madison and the Larrabee gang? It might be true. If that became known—? Crockett speculated on the advisability of warning Madison. If Madison could be induced to leave the state, trouble might be prevented. Anything to save Linda Madison further pain. But no, Madison wasn't the sort to listen to reason. If he'd only go away and leave Linda in San Pablo. Lee Crockett instantly despised himself for that thought. He commented aloud, "I suppose Mr. Madison was right wearied after his trip. I can't blame him for going to bed early."

The girl didn't have any answer for that.

SOMEWHERE, high in the leafy branches of the big live oak, a mockingbird had suddenly gone insane, but the sounds fell on deaf ears so far as the man and Linda Madison were concerned. Crockett reached for brown papers and tobacco and asked for permission to smoke. Linda murmured something that had to do with an affirmative. Deftly, Crockett's long fingers fashioned a cigarette. His match scratched loudly along the silent, shadowed gallery. Holding flame to the tobacco, Lee Crockett inhaled deeply, then raised his eyes to Linda Madison's face.

There was a quick intake of breath as Crockett removed the cigarette from his lips. The match flame wavered in the darkness, burning down, unnoticed, to Crockett's fingers, while for what seemed an eternity, the man and girl probed each other's thoughts. Then Linda Madison's blue eyes dropped before Crockett's burning gaze. His face had gone hard; tiny white bulges formed at the corners of his mouth. The cigarette dropped from Crockett's clenched fingers, twisted, crumpled, to the floor of the gallery. Crockett's lips formed two words: "Merciful God!"

Abruptly, all pretense vanished as Lee Crockett lurched up from his chair, placed his hands on Linda Madison's slight shoulders and swept the girl to her feet. Neither spoke for a moment, and Crockett commenced to breathe more regularly. He removed his hands from her shoulders and lighted a second match, holding the flare to reflect on Linda's white features. A greenish-purple bruise was visible on the girl's left cheekbone. The match burned down, flickered to extinction. Crockett didn't say anything, but Linda could sense the terrible immensity of force, hatred, welling in the man's entire being.

"You—you mustn't," she gasped at last, wide-eyed in the vine-screened moonlight. "It's all, all right. He didn't realize. He—he, you see, he'd been drinking. I must have said something that angered him. Oh, I don't see how you could have helped hearing, last night." Her voice broke a little. "You must have heard him, didn't you?"

Crockett said doggedly, "Me, I sleep like a log. Maybe I've been sleeping too sound. It's time I come awake."

Linda felt his arm tremble under the touch of her light fingers. "You—you

mustn't do anything," she whispered, "say anything to arouse his anger. No saying what he might try to do. I'm hoping to persuade him to leave San Pablo. There's been some talk—" Her face paled and one slim hand went suddenly to her lips as though to dam further speech. Moonlight picked out the dull gleam of gold on one finger and the sight spurred Lee Crockett's cold fury. For a minute, only the breathing of the man and girl broke the silence. Linda was facing him, now, erect, trying to interpret the thoughts passing across the grim features, lips silenced by her involuntary revelation.

Crockett's voice was toneless, flat, when he finally spoke: "I reckon Bandera was right." The girl's question wasn't audible, but he caught her meaning and explained, "Madison needs killing."

"Lee! You mustn't talk that way." It was the first time she'd used his Christian name. "Lee, listen to me—"

Crockett laughed harshly. "I've done too much listening, already, without doing—"

"But, can't you see—" the girl was pleading anxiously, "that would only make matters worse? I'm asking you, Lee, please don't. Won't you do that much for me?"

Something in the girl's manner, the way she employed his given name, broke Crockett's resolve. When they finally came, his words weren't quite steady, "Linda, there isn't a thing in God's good world I wouldn't do for you. Is that clear? I never intended saying that much, even, but it's out. I can't recall the words, don't want to recall them, now. The damage, if any, is done. I'd intended to go away. I can't go away and leave you here. I know better than to ask you to go with me. You're not that kind. And"—his voice blurred—"and I don't dare do what's needful. Linda, what in God's name *is* a man to do?"

"Lee, there's nothing *you* can do. Nothing I can do, for that matter. Perhaps things will work themselves out. We'll have to be patient—"

"Patient, Linda! Do you think there's no limit to my patience?" He was about to go on, but paused suddenly, moving quickly back from the girl.

A man had stepped out of the open front doorway and stood glaring near the entrance, a hulking brute of a man with a hairy chest showing above the nightshirt tucked into trousers. Linda uttered one low word, "Brant." Brant Madison's bare feet pursued a wavering course across the floor of the gallery, the boards creaking under his bulk. His hair was tousled; his small eyes showed red-rimmed in the light of the moon.

"So that's how it is, eh?" Madison sneered. "You two cooing doves carrying on behind my back—"

"Brant! Hush! Go back to bed. You're in no condition to talk—"

"I'm in condition to listen, though, Linda, my girl. Pulling the wool over my eyes isn't as easy as you think. Bah! You two make me sick with your lallygaggin' around and your Linda-this and Lee-that. It's sickening!"

The girl fell silent. Every fibre in Crockett's body was vibrating with suppressed fury. Madison continued, "It's got to stop, do you hear? Crockett, you ashamed to speak up? Y'know"—he laughed coarsely—"a man's legal wife for a saddle horse isn't a fair trade. I should get something to boot—"

Crockett broke in sternly, "Don't be a fool, Madison. Go back to bed. People in the house will hear you. We'll talk this over tomorrow, when—"

"We'll talk it over here and now," Madison rasped. "Don't want people in the house to hear us, eh? I shouldn't think you would, neither one of you two—" The word he spat at Crockett had the effect of jerking Crockett's right hand toward the walnut butt of his six-shooter. Then, slowly, reluctantly, Crockett's hand moved away, as the girl's anguished protests penetrated his turbulent mind. Madison blustered, "Had the idea, right then, to shoot me, didn't you? Why don't you go on with it—"

Crockett's reply was low, tense, terrible with hot, futile rage: "Madison, you deserve killing, if a man ever did. Out here, a decent man doesn't even strike an animal in anger. If you had a gun—"

"If I had a gun! Hah!" Madison laughed raucously.

Linda said, "Brant, won't you please go upstairs. I'll come right up."

"No, I won't go upstairs." Madison mimicked the girl's tones. His voice changed. "Want to get rid of me, eh? Crockett would like to shoot me, but he don't dast do it. Want to know why, Linda? He knows damn' well that all San Pablo would claim

he killed me so he could get you. And for the same reason, he don't dast hire it done. I'm no man's fool. I know a thing or two. Crockett, you don't dast harm me. Isn't that correct?"

Crockett fought to hold his words steady. "Madison, you're drunk or you wouldn't talk that way. We'll settle this tomorrow."

"You're damn' well right we will!" Madison lashed out. "I'm giving you until midnight, tomorrow, Crockett. Either you get out of San Pablo, or I'm going to kill you. No man can steal my wife and live to boast about it. Not that she's worth stealing, as you should know by this time—"

The words ended in a confused gurgling sound, as Crockett's muscular fingers closed on Madison's throat. Madison struggled to get free, thrashing his big frame about, arms working like flails, but in the end he was forced to capitulate to the terrible contracting fingers activated by Crockett's sudden, insensate fury. Crockett felt the girl's alarmed grasp on his arm, caught broken fragments of fear-stricken speech. Only then did he arrive at a certain realization of what he had nearly accomplished. Reluctantly, he loosened his fingers, dropped one hand to Madison's left shoulder, the nails sinking deeply into flesh. Madison clawed feebly at his bruised throat, while Crockett spoke, the low words vibrant with chilling virulence:

"You've had your say, Madison. You've said too much. Maybe I'll leave town; maybe I won't. I've got to think this out. But if you so much as mention my name with Linda's, tomorrow, I'll hear about it—and I'll kill you. Do you understand? I'll kill you. After you've sobered up, you'll realize I'm not making idle talk. And I'm not leaving San Pablo before midnight, tomorrow. Some arrangement must be made, if I leave; things here have got to be different. Is that clear?"

Madison sputtered certain unintelligible words, nodded his head. Crockett said sternly, "Then shut your foul mouth, keep it shut and go to bed." With fingers still clutching Madison's shoulder, he whirled the man around and pushed him toward the open doorway. Madison staggered inside. A moment later they heard his heavy form treading slowly the creaking stairway. Then, silence for several minutes. Linda had dropped into a chair, back in the shadows. A faint, subdued sobbing reached Crockett's ears. He said softly, "Linda, you can't go up now. Not to his room. Will you take mine?"

"There's a sofa in the parlor, Lee. I'll stay there for the night."

"That's probably best. Linda, I'm regretful it had to happen this way. Maybe I said more than I should have said. But it's too late, now, to do anything about that." He was standing near the doorway, his voice gentle, trying to pierce the shadows, see her face. Linda didn't reply. Crockett went on, "I reckon I'd better go up to my room. If I stayed longer—" He broke abruptly off, then added, "Good night, Linda."

He was still listening for the girl's reply as he moved slowly up the stairway to the second floor.

THE following day brought no solution to the problem torturing Lee Crockett's mind. He opened the Birdcage, as usual, spoke the regular words to the regular customers, dealt the same imperturbable faro to winners and losers alike, his face an implacable, granite-like mask. The day drifted slowly past. A little after noontime, Bandera put in an appearance and found Crockett standing before the long mahogany bar. There weren't any customers in the Birdcage at this hour. Crockett's bartender, Steve, was at the far end, polishing glasses.

Bandera held his voice low. "Remember what I said, last night, about Madison taking part with the Larrabees in that hold-up? Well, it's true, Lee. I've been talking to an old fellow down in the Mex quarter. He overheard the Larrabees and Madison planning the job. I'm aiming to get some more information, then you can act."

Crockett said quietly, "Act in what way?"

Bandera coughed and asked hopelessly, "Don't you ever wake up? It's your best bet. As an honest citizen, it's your duty. You can force Madison to leave San Pablo—or go to the pen."

Crockett eyed Bandera steadily. "And then what?"

"That will leave you a clear field."

"For what?"

Bandera threw both arms in the air in a gesture of helpless surrender. "All right. If you don't know, neither do I."

Crockett's lips curved wistfully. "You

know, Bandera. So do I. But it can't be done that way. Would you have me turn a man over to the law, just so I could—never mind! I won't do it, that's all."

Bandera said slowly, "I guess I know how you feel. All right, you just leave things to me. I'll drop a hint to Marshal Griggs—"

"Nothing doing in that direction, either, Bandera."

"Damn it!"—stubbornly. "You're too easy-going. The way Madison's talked, he's got to be stopped, one way or another—"

"Talked?" Crockett said swiftly. "Has he been talking today?"

"Hell! What's up? You act like you'd been jolted—"

"Has he been making that same talk today?" Crockett demanded fiercely. "Don't stall me, Bandera. I want the truth."

Bandera shook his head. "I haven't even seen him today. I was in the Oasis Saloon a spell back. Somebody remarked that Madison must be sleeping off the load he gathered last evening."

Crockett breathed easier. Bandera said, "Have *you* heard anything more?"

"Nothing I want to talk about."

"Lee, you've got something on your mind," Bandera accused.

Crockett smiled with dry humor. "A mighty good Stet hat, son. It set me back better than thirty dollars."

Bandera snarled angrily, "All right, be funny—" A fit of coughing interrupted the words. He finally concluded, "Why don't you just say it's none of my business? I can take a hint. I'll get out, and you can sit here and wait for your knight in shining armor until hell freezes over and we'll see—"

"Bandera, what in the devil are you talking about? What do you mean—knight in shining armor?"

A rather sheepish look replaced the one of anger on Bandera's face. "Aw, nothing much," he muttered. A sudden grin broke through the features that should have still been boyish. Awkwardly, he tried to explain, "You see, when I was just a little tike, my maw used to read me stories about knights. It seemed like folks were always getting into a jam that looked hopeless. About that time, a knight in shining armor would come riding up and kill the dragon or the bad king or whatever it was that caused the trouble, then everybody lived happy for ever after. And since I first heard those stories, I've always kept thinking how good it would be if some knight could clear up my troubles for me. But I reckon the days of knights in shining armor are gone."

Crockett eyed him quietly a moment and nodded. "The shining armor seems to be gone, anyway," he said gently. The two talked a minute or two later, but Bandera again becoming angry at Crockett's refusal to take action along the lines indicated, flung himself furiously from the Birdcage Bar, and Crockett again gave his mind over to the problem knotting his brain.

TO LEAVE town meant leaving Linda to such ugly ideas as might form in Madison's head. Remaining to be shot, would result in a similar situation. To kill Madison, or expose him to the law—no, that was out of the question. And if Bandera took it upon himself to kill Madison, gossiping tongues would maintain Crockett had hired the job done. A long sigh welled up from Crockett's throat. He mused:

"I'm like a bronc that has to be hobbled when he's turned out for the night. The bronc knows where he wants to go, what he wants to do—and can't do it. He can move only within circumscribed limits. Hobbled! That's the only word for it. My moves are pretty well limited. I'm powerless."

Abner Griggs, San Pablo's town marshal, a portly man with a sweeping mustache and the badge of office on his open vest, entered the Birdcage, bought a drink and endeavored to engage Crockett in casual conversation. Crockett replied only in monosyllables; the marshal departed in something of a huff, feeling his importance was going unnoticed. The bartender left for dinner; when he returned Crockett still stood at the bar. Eventually, he wandered across to his faro table. Customers drifted in and out all afternoon. Crockett spoke only when necessary.

The afternoon waned, the sun swinging far to the west and painting the serrated peaks of the Sangre de Santos mountains a vivid crimson. There were a few brief moments of twilight, then night descended abruptly, even while Steve, the barkeep, was lighting the kerosene lamps. A cooler breeze entered from the street. Customers of the Birdcage departed in quest of supper. Crockett remained seated at his faro layout, his

long sensitive fingers moving idly about the dealing box, sliding cards through the opening to the table, reshuffling and repeating the operation.

"Suppertime, Boss," Steve announced.

Crockett didn't raise his head. "Go and eat, Steve. I'll be here if anyone comes in." He didn't hear the bartender's retreating footsteps. Over and over and over, the cards rippled through his fingers. "What is a man to do?" Crockett mused. "The cards refuse to tell me. An Ace of Spades to stay—and be killed. An Ace of Clubs to leave San Pablo. But neither card shows up when it should. Maybe I should designate a card for killing Madison. No, I won't do that. I'm all wrong about the cards," he finally told himself impatiently. "I've got to decide this for myself."

After a time the bartender returned and took up his duties when thirsty patrons arrived. Crockett dealt faro automatically that night and won steadily, but he was scarcely aware of the fact. His mind was blurred with ideas relative to a slim, blue-eyed girl and a man who had threatened to either kill, or run him out of San Pablo.

The evening passed swiftly. Before Crockett realized it, midnight was at hand and Steve was announcing the closing hour. Customers finished their drinks and filed quietly outside, calling their good nights to Steve and Crockett. Crockett replied mechanically and remained seated behind the faro table, gazing with unseeing eyes on the green cloth layout. A few minutes later, Steve departed with his usual, "Adios, Lee."

Dimly, Crockett heard the man's fading footsteps on the sidewalk. With a start he raised his head and suddenly realized the barroom was empty. The town was quiet now. Once, men's voices sounded from across the street. Silence again descended. Crockett's thoughts returned to the present. "It's midnight—and after," he said aloud, his voice echoing through the room. Five minutes passed and blended into ten, fifteen. Crockett hadn't moved from his chair.

Finally, he rose stiffly. "I reckon Madison lost his nerve," he speculated. "Even that puts me, us, no farther ahead. It's all the same. Nothing has changed. I might as well put out the lights and vamoose for bed." A deep sigh parted his lips as he rounded the corner of the faro table. The holstered gun at his right hip felt unusually heavy, awkward, beneath the long black coat. An old clock on one side wall ticked monotonously, loudly, in the silence of the barroom. Crockett crossed the floor, reached both hands to the kerosene lamp in its bracket above the bar, started to lift it down. At the entrance, the swinging doors moved noiselessly.

"Never mind that lamp, Crockett!"

Brant Madison! Crockett stiffened, didn't move a muscle. His arms were still raised toward the lamp. He heard three quick steps. The swinging doors moved again. Brant Madison laughed confidently. Nothing decent about the sound, though. He said, "Keep 'em high that way, Crockett. Turn easy. Don't try to reach for your gun."

Crockett turned slowly, deliberately, arms still in air. He saw Madison take several more short jerky steps toward him. The man gripped a six-shooter in his right hand. He staggered a little, halted, swaying uncertainly. His eyes were red-rimmed, ugly. He didn't wear a collar; a soiled handkerchief was knotted about his throat. He spoke again, "Back up to that bar. Move easy. Keep your hands high."

Crockett complied, folded hands now resting atop his head, his eyes boring into Brant Madison's murderous glare. Again those short jerky sounds of booted feet as Madison penetrated farther into the room. He was standing opposite the faro layout now, his gun barrel bearing on Crockett's middle.

"Hold it that way, Crockett. Want to say your prayers first?"

"You wouldn't know what I mean, Madison," Crockett replied quietly, "when I tell you I've been praying all day."

"Yaah!"—disgustedly. "You and your church-going. Damn you, Crockett, I'm going to kill you." The gun in Madison's hand tilted slightly.

Crockett said calmly, "I'd think twice was I you, Madison."

"I've already thought twice. More than twice. You had your chance to leave San Pablo. You didn't take it. I'll have to help you on your way, you—"

The swinging doors moved again. Madison jerked his head toward the entrance. His face went ashen and he lowered his gun. Three men filed silently into the room—rough, sinewy-jawed individuals with soiled

clothing and unshaven faces. All gripped six-shooters. Brant Madison said weakly, "Hello, pards. I was just killing me a coyote—"

"Shut your lying mouth, Madison," one of the men snapped. "We got the same intentions."

None of the three spoke to Crockett, though one man watched him warily. Crockett recognized the trio: the Larrabee brothers —Gus, Tom and George. Tough, hardened characters, all three. Crockett lowered his hands and asked, "What you boys got in mind?" His tones were calm, deliberate, drawling.

Gus Larrabee, leader of the three, turned his head slightly as though seeing Crockett for the first time, and replied, "Crockett, you keep out of this. We don't want trouble with you. It ain't any of your business. Keep out of this and you won't get hurt."

Brant Madison had retreated a half-dozen paces, his fascinated, wide-eyed gaze glued to the weapons in the hands of the three Larrabees. All color was drained from his face. He still held his six-shooter, but lacked the requisite courage to attempt to save his life. Stark, unmitigated fear had paralyzed every muscle of his cowardly frame.

TOM LARRABEE took up his brother's conversation, saying coolly to Crockett, "We held up the Bascom stage a few nights back. Madison planned the job, playing us for suckers. We were to draw off the sheriff's posse, while Madison returned to San Pablo with the money. Two nights ago, Madison was to have met us outside town and split the money four ways. Madison didn't show up. He figured we'd be afraid to come in after him—"

"Listen, boys," Madison cried frantically, "you've got it all wrong. I was all set to come, but I couldn't make it—"

"Shut up!" George Larrabee snarled. "Gus—Tom—we're wasting time. It's risky. Let's get this job done and slope *pronto*—"

"George is right," Gus growled. "Madison, stand up and take your medicine like a man—if you know how."

Madison had already backed away, gasping, pleading for mercy. The three Larrabees followed him relentlessly down the room, each waiting, hoping, for Madison to summon sufficient courage to raise the gun he held and, at least, offer some defense of his craven life. But that sort of thing wasn't in the cards. When Madison's back touched the rear wall he almost collapsed. His form shook, while he choked and begged, slobbering gibberish that went unheeded by the three closing in on him.

Crockett's lips curled with disgust. He said, "Leave be, boys. There's not going to be any killing here."

George Larrabee threw a glance at him, sneering, "That's your opinion. We figure different. This double-crossing scum of creation can keep the money, but it won't—"

Crockett's cold voice repeated, "There's not going to be any killing here. Not if I can prevent it. There never has been a killing in the Birdcage—"

"Wait a minute," Tom Larrabee interposed. "Maybe Crockett's got the right of it. He's square. No use making trouble in his place. What say we take Madison away and do the job outside of town?"

"Well, let's get started then, for Gawd's sake," Gus Larrabee growled. "We wasted too much time a'ready."

A wild idea surged through Crockett's brain.

Here was the solution to the problem that had tortured him for twenty-four hours. Let them take Madison away. That would settle things, once and for all. Nobody could blame Lee Crockett then. Gossiping tongues would be set at rest. Already, in his mind's eye, Crockett visualized the scene that would follow the discovery of Madison's body; he could see himself explaining how the Larrabees had taken him away—ah! there was the rub.

Madison was slumped, in a half-faint, against the rear wall; there'd be small difficulty taking him out. Then Crockett spoke aloud, before he realized what he was saying. "And then," he said quietly, "folks will ask me what I did to stop it."

Tom Larrabee's mouth dropped open. "Huh? What did you say, Crockett?"

Crockett replied, even-voiced, "You're not taking Madison away from here, either."

Gus Larrabee cursed. George Larrabee said, "Look here, Crockett, don't be a fool. You can't stop us. You keep out of this. We don't want to hurt you, Crockett. This is none of your business. Why should you care—?"

Crockett insisted firmly, "You're not taking Madison out of here."

Gus Larrabee ceased cursing and said wearily, "Hell, we might as well let both of 'em have it. Time's slippin' away. Crockett, being mule-stubborn, will have to go first."

Lee Crockett saw Gus Larrabee's arm swinging toward him. In one smooth motion Crockett swept back his coat, drew and fired his .44. The two guns crashed almost simultaneously, Larrabee's slug splintering the bar-panel behind Crockett. Gus Larrabee swayed a moment, mouth gaping in stunned surprise, then his legs bent and let him slowly to the floor, his gun slipping from nerveless fingers.

There was one terrible moment of silence, dread suspense, while the very smoke-filled air appeared to vibrate with the unbearable intensity of violence and sudden death. Then, as though by prearranged signal, Tom and George Larrabee lifted their weapons toward Crockett. In that moment, no one noticed Bandera push through the swinging doors.

THAT which followed was all a blur of roaring guns and smoke-clouded fury. Flying lead shattered the mirror back of the bar. George Larrabee plunged to his knees, sobbing out curses, his features twisted with agony. Crockett whirled toward Tom Larrabee and felt a bullet from Larrabee's gun jerk his coat-sleeve as it winged a vicious path through the cloth.

Crockett fired again, missed. Tom Larrabee was moving fast across the floor, long-barrelled .45 lifted for another attempt. Brant Madison was still slumped against the wall, eyes tightly closed, voicing feeble prayers to the Almighty. His fingers were clenched about his gun, but he lacked the nerve to take an active part in the fight.

Bandera had taken in the situation at a glance and leaped into the room, his right foot striking something on the floor. Looking down, he saw the six-shooter that had fallen from Gus Larrabee's hand. Seizing the idea that flashed through his mind, he stooped swiftly, snatched up the gun and fired one swift shot.

Dust spurted from Brant Madison's vest, over the heart. Shocked into activity, Madison opened his eyes and realized Bandera had shot him. Bandera laughed harshly, bent down and replaced Gus Larrabee's gun near its dead owner's outstretched fingers.

A groan of baffled rage, pain, resentment, parted Madison's lips. With a final effort he raised his gun, triggered two bullets from the black muzzle, concentrating his aim on Bandera. Then Madison slid, lifeless, to the floor.

Bandera, just rising from Gus Larrabee's side, spun half around, crashing into the moving legs of Tom Larrabee, nearly upsetting the man and causing both Larrabee and Crockett to miss shots. Larrabee swore savagely, jerked away from Bandera's falling body and swung his gun hand toward Crockett.

Lee Crockett felt the .44 jerk in his hand. Through a maze of weaving gunsmoke he saw Tom Larrabee pause in midstride, then crash headlong to the floor and lay without movement.

Silence again, save for the ticking of the clock on the wall. Gray smoke was lifting in thin layers halfway to the ceiling. Abruptly, a man's booted toes drummed spasmodically on the floor. That, too, ceased, after a few seconds. An acrid odor of burnt powder stung eyes and throat and nostrils. Five men were sprawled in various attitudes around the barroom floor. Grimly, Lee Crockett spoke six words, "Looks like all hobbles were off," as he shoved his gun back into holster.

Walking swiftly to Bandera, he lifted the frail form to a chair near one sidewall. Bandera coughed, placed one hand to his lips and laughed strangely at the color on his palm when he took it away. Crockett said gently, "You hit hard, Bandera?"

"My lungs sure catch hell," Bandera said whimsically. "Twice, I—"

"I'll get you fixed up in a jiffy," Crockett said. He started to remove Bandera's shirt.

Bandera shook his head. "What I got—can't be fixed up." His tones were none too strong. "Lee, I said I'd—repay you—some day—"

Shouts sounded along the street and there came the noise of running feet. Marshal Griggs barged through the swinging doors, followed by several excited citizens of San Pablo. Griggs took one look about the room, reholstered his gun, and demanded, "What in hell brought this on?"

Crockett said tersely, "The Larrabees,

They had some sort of trouble with Brant Madison, figured to take him away. I was forced to register certain objections."

Griggs glanced sharply at Crockett. "Lee," he said, "you always did have a rep for being a fast gun. Now, I know it's true."

"I figure," Crockett said easily, "a reputation of that sort generally keeps a man out of trouble."

Griggs snorted, moved about the room examining the sprawled forms. He returned to Crockett, saying, "Maybe two of 'em will live. Madison and Gus Larrabee are goners. Look here, Lee, who killed Madison? I want the truth about that."

Bandera laughed weakly, a thin trickle of crimson staining his chin. "Any fool, Griggs," he said, "could see—one of the Larrabees did it." He braced himself on the chair, laughed again.

Griggs frowned. "I want the right of this. Lee,"—Griggs spoke awkwardly—"did you—? You see, there's been talk around town—"

Crockett interrupted coldly, "That talk won't be repeated here, Griggs." He glanced around at the men who were commencing to crowd into the barroom. "I tried to stop the Larrabees—"

Bandera interposed, saying again, "Any fool would realize it was one of the Larrabees." He tried to rise from the chair, failed, slumped back. "Probe out that slug—in Madison's carcass. You'll find it's a forty-five. Lee carries a forty-four—"

Griggs swung swiftly toward Bandera, spoke with brutal, accusing frankness. "You tote a forty-five, Bandera. I've wondered about you—wondered, maybe, if you hadn't been hired to come here and—"

"Don't you say it, Griggs," Crockett warned swiftly.

"Let him rave, Lee," Bandera said scornfully. With an effort he drew his six-shooter, held it toward the suspicious marshal. "Here, take a look. I walked into my finish before—even had time—to see what was going on. My gun—hasn't been fired—"

"You've had time to reload." Griggs looked skeptical.

"But not to clean my barrel," Bandera insisted painfully. He was breathing with difficulty. "Look for yourself."

Gingerly, the marshal sniffed at the black muzzle of the gun, then thrust the tip of one finger into the opening. The finger emerged oily. No powder grime there. Griggs grunted, lifted his head toward Bandera and held out the gun. "You're correct," he admitted.

Bandera didn't offer to accept the gun. He sat as before, eyes wide open, glassy. Griggs grunted again and thrust the weapon into Bandera's holster. Glancing up, he met Crockett's gaze across Bandera's still form. Crockett's eyes looked moist and he muttered, half to himself, "—no shining armor—"

Griggs looked puzzled. "What's that?"

"It doesn't matter," Crockett said quietly. "Look, Marshal Griggs, I've got something to do. I'll be right back."

Griggs said, "There ain't any hurry—now."

CROCKETT nodded, pushed through the men jammed about the entrance, and stepped out to the street. He walked swiftly along the sidewalk, ignoring the excited questions of men who hurried in the direction of the Birdcage, and continued straight toward Second Street.

The moon showed through the cottonwood branches as it had the previous night. The houses were dark. Ahead, in the leafy shadows, Crockett saw the outlines of the white picket fence and a slim form waiting in the gateway. He didn't change pace, not even when he saw Linda Madison's arms lifting toward him.

For a moment he held her away, his eyes steady on her white, uplifted face. "Linda," he said quietly, "there's something I must tell you."

"Lee, I know—know it all. A man came running with the news. I've waited for you. It seems I've always been waiting for you. Oh, Lee Crockett, thank God you weren't the one to—"

"Hush, Linda. We mustn't talk about that now." He could hold out no longer. Somewhere, high in the branches of the big live oak, a mockingbird had turned insane with happiness, but the sounds fell on deaf ears, so far as Linda and Lee Crockett were concerned.

Hiji's Post Was in the Outposts, and He Proposed to Use His Own Judgment in the Matter of Justice

BLACK, WHITE AND IVORY

By SEABURY QUINN

CALA CALA—which by interpretation from the Bomongo means long ago—the Lords of High Decision who shape the policies of His Majesty's Colonies decided that the less harmful and more glamorous of the fauna of British West Central Africa was being depleted with wholly unnecessary rapidity, and accordingly decreed a shooting license fee of fifty pounds for those desiring to hunt the rhinoceros, the hippopotamus or the elephant and limited the hunters' bag to two or at most three of the particular variety of pachyderm he had elected to destroy.

To the logical, tough-minded French whose lands abutted on the British holdings this rule seemed simply silly. The ivory is a valuable article of trade. From it one makes billiard balls, piano keys, knife handles and an infinite variety of beautiful and useful things. And since the elephant is the sole source of *l'ivoire,* and since the stubborn beast will not stand still to be detusked as cattle stand to be dehorned it is imperative that he be killed in order

that the ivory be obtained. It is regrettable, of course, especially from the elephant's point of view, but what would you? Should trade and commerce cease on that account? But no. Emphatically.

The upshot of this reasoning was that even the African elephant (*Elephus africanus*), who is admittedly far less intelligent than his Asiatic cousin (*Elephus indicus*), eventually discovered he was safer on the British side of the border than in French territory and accordingly took up residence under the protection of the Union Jack, to the extreme dissatisfaction of the natives whose mealie patches and plantain trees he seemed to think had been set out for his especial benefit, and the even greater resentment of certain white men who had long been accustomed to shoot him in large numbers and leave his carcass rotting in the jungle while they dispatched his tusks to the ivory markets of London and Antwerp.

So much aggrieved were these gentlemen that they proceeded to do what their kind has done from time immemorial—what Al Capone and Heimie Weiss and Frankie Yale did when the Volstead Act became law. And precisely as the price of liquor skyrocketed while its quality declined during prohibition, so now the price and quality of ivory ascended and descended in inverse ratio. *Scrivelloes*, small, semi-hollow tusks from which a billiard ball could not be turned, became expensive as the solid sixty-pound tusk-tips had been, and as for prime ivory, it became almost priceless. So the hunters profited mightily and began to regard the solemn gentlemen of the Colonial Office with something like the negative affection American gangsters had for officers of the Anti-Saloon League.

There was but one fly in the ointment, but he was a most substantial fly. In fact, not to speak entomologically, he was a veritable dragon-fly—the sort of fly that you could not intimidate with threats or swerve by argument, who if you undertook to shoot it out shot faster and straighter and who, if you offered to share profits with him, would knock you down, and wait for you to rise upon unsteady feet, then floor you with another uppercut. He was the resident commissioner of the Luabala District—a territory only slightly smaller than the State of New Jersey—and although his name was carried on the Army List as Captain Sir Haddingway Ingraham Jameson Ingraham he was less formally known to friend and enemy alike as Hiji.

HIJI stared thoughtfully at N'siki, son of Chiliki, son of M'gala, who had come paddling in hot haste that morning from the upper waters of the Mendi-Mendi, his six rowers in a state of near exhaustion and himself in such a dither that he found his words with difficulty. "O man," said Hiji as he brushed a wisp of black mustache with the knuckle of a bent forefinger, "this is bad palaver."

N'siki, squatting in the shade of the trees bordering the parade ground like an overfed and slightly nervous bullfrog, rubbed both hands in the dust and shook his head from side to side in token of both solemnity and agreement. "Yea, Hiji, it is very bad palaver, but thou art our father and our mother and will know what to do to help thy children."

It was, indeed, a bad palaver. Very bad. The ivory poachers, not content with killing off the bulls with heavy rifles, had gone from retail to a wholesale scale of slaughter, digging pitfalls in the jungle roads stamped out by the elephants, hanging heavy pointed weights like anvils where they would drop on the heads of the herds as they went down the narrow trails, and setting up deadfalls of great logs to fall upon the pachyderms as they made their way to the river. A party of ten huntsmen, hurrying home with a good take of game, had fallen unaware into one of the pitfall traps and four of them had died horribly, impaled on the sharp stakes at its bottom, while the others had been more or less severely injured, and all had had to spend the night in misery and fear before their cries were heard by village women and help could be sent to them. A woman of N'siki's village had been permanently crippled by a deadfall that crashed on her, another had been crushed as one might crush a beetle underfoot, and when the villagers had asked redress for their injuries they had been lashed with *kibokos*—whips of hippopota-

mus hide—and driven from the poachers' camp with threats of worse to come if they dared repeat the annoyance of their call.

"We are mindful of thy laws that we should not take justice into our own hands and kill these wicked white lords, Hiji," sobbed N'siki, "and besides, they have guns and would probably kill us before we could reach them with our spears, but"—his sobs became almost asthmatic in intensity—"Sabao was my youngest wife whom I had bought from K'iani the son of K'iniki for six goats and eight cooking-dogs and a bar of salt.

"She was young and very beautiful and when she spoke the little monkeys in the trees ceased shattering and honey dripped from her lips—"

"How many of these white men are there?" Hiji interrupted the perfervid epitaph.

THERE were no names for numbers in the native vocabulary, but after a brief moment's pause N'siki held up one hand, fingers spread out fanwise, and the thumb of the other. "Six?" Hiji whistled softly. That was coming it a bit strong. "And what do they look like?"

"Lord, they are very ugly. Not beautiful like you. They have hair the color of dried grass and eyes that look like cold

blue stones. Also one of them wears an eye in his eye, and it is very evil, for when he looked at I'sifi the woodcarver he was stricken with great sores as if he had been pricked with poison thorns."

Hiji pondered this a moment. "Wears an eye in his eye?" he ruminated. Then, "By Jove, d'ye mean like this?" From his tunic pocket he extracted a half crown and screwed it into his eye like a monocle.

N'siki shook his head vigorously in token of assent. "Lord, who shall say how thou shouldst know this? Truly, thou art Hiji who knows all."

"Humphf. Six sportin' johnnies poachin' on our side o' the border, and one of 'em wears an eyeglass," Hiji murmured to himself. "Quite a ruddy toff." Aloud he ordered, "Go to my soldiers' house, O man, and bid the cookman give thee bread with treacle on it. In the morning when thou art rested go back to thy place and send a delegation to these white lords—"

"*Ow-a*?" interrupted N'siki. He had felt the sting of the *kiboko* at the poachers' camp.

"Do as I say, O countenance of great misfortune. Tell them you bring tidings of great joy. Say that your hunters have discovered a great meeting place of elephants and that for suitable reward you will lead them to it. Then guide them through the jungle, taking time about it, pausing as if you had lost your way, and going round and round in ever-widening circles. Have trackers waiting where the river turns upon itself like a snake wounded by a spear that when I come with my soldiers they may lead me to these men who seek the-elephants'-meeting-place-that-is-not. You understand?"

N'siki's rather leaden eyes gleamed suddenly as if their lead were scratched to brightness. "I understand, O Hiji, and it shall surely be as thou hast said. Hiji the mighty, Hiji the wise, Hiji who comes when no man thinks him near—"

"Cut out the compliments, you pie-faced old heathen. Go get your bread and treacle. You've got a job of work to do. Get fed and rested for it."

THE stratagem he had outlined would be simple and effective—if it worked. Ivory poachers generally kept close to the international border across which they could scurry to safety at the first sign of the approach of the police, but he was gambling on their cupidity being greater than their caution. For reasons no zoölogist has been able to explain, the elephants

occasionally met in conclave, herds coming to the rendezvous from far and near, sometimes crossing five hundred miles of jungle to attend the convention. These meeting places were generally natural depressions, small walled-in valleys forming natural amphitheatres, and into them the pachyderms would crowd by hundreds, calves, cows, long-tusked old bulls and adolescent youngsters whose ivory was just commencing to protrude between their lips. The natives declared that the "great ones" danced at these assemblies, certainly the earth was hard as concrete when they left the meeting, but as the full-grown tusker weighs five tons or more and leaves a track as big as the bottom of a half-bushel measure each time he puts his foot down, this was scarcely to be wondered at. At any rate it was the dream of every ivory hunter to come upon a convocation of elephants where he could lie in ambush in the circling hills and fire pointblank until the herd stampeded. To stalk a single bull sometimes required days, and shooting him was dangerous business. If the hunter could come on a meeting place he would find ten, or twenty, perhaps fifty tuskers within easy range, and nothing but bad aim or lack of ammunition could prevent his garnering a fortune.

N'siki would lead the poachers well back from the border in search of the mythical elephants' dance hall. Steaming up the Luabala under forced draft and hurrying through the brush at forced march, Hiji would catch up with them before they had a chance to cross into the French lands, and then—the gentlemen of the Colonial Office were keen on preserving their elephants, the commissioner who nabbed an ivory poacher red-handed acquired more merit than he who stopped an intertribal war or put down an uprising. Here were six of 'em, just waitin' to be popped into his bag. "Thy task awaits thee, O man," he repeated. "Eat well and sleep the sleep of rest until the cock has trumpeted his salutation to the sun, and if I take these evil ones through thy help I shall give thee beautiful and lovely gifts."

N'siki's broad face creased in an anticipatory grin. "The white water that burns, O Hiji?" Gin was as highly thought of by the natives as catnip is esteemed by cats.

"Perhaps."

"Or even a small kindly devil who says *tick-tick* in a shiny box?" Telling time is not a common accomplishment of the native, but the cheerful ticking of an American cheap watch is music to his ear, and he who wears a nickel timepiece swung about his neck is rated as a man of much importance by his neighbors.

"Get out, you usurer. You'll have me givin' away the whole store before you're done!"

"*Ahee*, O Hiji," N'siki's shining black face split in a grin of startling whiteness, "it shall be even as thou sayest, or my women shall stamp the death dance for me."

A FIRE of twigs was burning behind a mud rampart, its orange glow scarce staining the surrounding darkness, when Hiji and twelve Houssa troopers debarked from his steamboat the *Wilhelmina*. "I see you, Hosaka, son of N'siki," he greeted as a tall young man rose and came toward him. "Did all go well according to the plan which I explained to thy father?"

"O Hiji, thou art my father and my mother," Hosaka responded conventionally, "but the plan thou gavest to my sire miscarried—"

"Eh? The devil—"

"I think that thou has spoken with a straight tongue, Hiji."

"What d'ye mean?"

"As many days ago as a man has fingers on one hand my father went to the white lords as thou commanded, saying, 'Behold, I am N'siki, son of Chiliki, son of M'gala, and a man of much importance in the country. It has come to me, O white lords who seek elephants, that in the hills that lie behind the Wood of Dreams there is a place where the great "great ones" meet to dance, and my hunters have met many on their way to join the council. Now for as many bottles of the white water that burns as a man has fingers on his hands and feet I will lead thee to the place of congregation of the "great ones."'"

"Good enough. And they fell for it?"

"Alas, O Hiji, they fell upon my father with their whips saying, 'Lead us to this place of which thou speakest, man, or we shall beat you till you die, and if we find

that thou hast lied to us it were far better for thee if thy ancestors had died ere they saw light.' Then they put a collar on my father's neck and tied a rope to it that he might not escape, and one of their bearers took the rope in one hand and a *kiboko* in the other, and the white lord with an eye in his eye said, 'Lead us to the dance-place of the tusked ones, man, or surely you shall die in torment.'"

"Bloody swine!" Hiji's teeth snapped on the epithet. "You have trackers here? Good. Let us be on the spoor of these bad ones."

They hurried through the thousand-fold dim noises of the night led by the lean, intent trackers whose instinct, sharpened by long practice, seemed almost able to smell out the course a laden bee had taken in its

flight or point unerringly to the trail where little agile monkeys had swung from branch to branch of the great bronze-boled trees. The Houssas marched in route-step, walking warily as Indians on the warpath, and Hiji who had changed his boots for tennis sneaks made less noise than a panther on its prowl as he kept pace with Sergeant Bendigo, his second in command and chief of staff.

THE night was tiring rapidly and there was a faint glimmer of gray light as one of the trackers held up his hand in a warning gesture. "We near their place, O Hiji," he whispered. "Can you not smell the smoke of their fire?"

Hiji threw his head back, sniffing like a hound that tests the air, but could detect no taint of wood smoke. He shook his head and motioned the man forward. "Go on, M'unoki, thou hound in human form, and scent out their position. We wait thee here and—"

Once again the tracker raised his hand in admonition, and like a company of ghosts who hear the crowing of the cock and seek their daytime graves the party melted into the bush by the trail. "One comes!" M'unoki hissed.

He was a big man, very black and powerfully muscled, and in the crook of his left elbow was a double-barrelled rifle such as hunters of big game employ. For all his wrestlers' bulk he stepped with an amazing lightness and as Hiji looked at him he saw the cicatrices of knife-scores upon his cheeks and breast and forehead. This man was not one of his forest people, but a native of the French possessions, probably an Ouaké.

"*Halte la!*" Hiji stepped into the trail and raised his hand. "Who art thou, and whence comest thou—"

The fellow started with surprise, but only momentarily. There was a click of metal as he cocked his rifle, and its double muzzle swung toward Hiji.

"Man, this was written from the beginning." Bendigo stepped silently from his concealment and drove his bayonet into the giant's back just underneath the left shoulder blade.

"Nice work. Very nice indeed, O Sergeant-Man," Hiji commended. "It would have been unfortunate if he had roused 'em with a shot. Eh?"

The tracker who had slipped down the path came back, running noiselessly as a cat. "They are encamped six spear-throws down the trail, my lord," he reported, "and—"

The wail rose like the screaming of a panther, but it was not a panther's cry. It was the anguished scream of one who feels his spirit riven from his shuddering

flesh, a quavering, bubbling screech of awful agony.

"Good Lord, what's that?" exclaimed Hiji, and the tracker's face was drawn into a grin as horribly mirthless as the grimace of a skull as he answered:

"N'siki."

"N'siki?"

"Yea, Lord, they are tormenting him."

IT WAS a very well arranged camp. Two large tents had been pitched at its center and the brushwood shelters of the porters were arranged in prim, neat rows like barracks. Before the larger of the tents sat a big blond man in a camp armchair, and on each side of him, like members of a court-martial, were ranged two more. A sixth white man in khaki shirt and shorts was superintending something which two Ouaké bearers did. Exactly, they were raising an X-shaped contrivance made of crossed logs so that it hung above a pyramid of glowing charcoal, and to the cross beams had been lashed a man who screamed and struggled futilely as he swung head-downward in a short arc above the incandescent cone.

The big white man in the armchair drew a silk handkerchief from his left cuff, polished a monocle with it, and set the glass in his right eye. "Who was it sent thee to lead us on this wild goose chase, and for what purpose, O countenance of extreme ugliness?" he asked in excellent Bomongo. "You say you made the story of the elephants' dance-place up in hope of cheating us of a reward? You lie. We know you had not wit enough to think up such a story. Who sent thee to mislead us? This is the last time I shall ask thee. Answer and speak truly and I shall have you shot at once. Keep stubborn silence and you hang head-down above the fire until you die. There is no power on earth can save you—"

"You wouldn't care to make a bet on that, would you?" asked Hiji as he stepped out of the shadow of the copal trees that ringed the camp. "I'm layin' odds of six to one—"

The big man with the eyeglass leaped from his chair as if he had been stung by a wasp. *"Gott im Himmel!"* he exploded. *"Polizi!"*

"Not precisely," Hiji corrected. "His Majesty's Royal Frontier Houssa Police is the more accurate term, and—" his eyes hardened as he tapped the earth with the ferrule of his swagger stick— "unbuckle your belts and toss 'em right here." As the belts, each with a Mauser automatic strapped to it, hit the earth at his feet with soft thuds, "Take down that poor one from his cross and see to his hurts," he called across his shoulder, "then round these swine up. Let's have a look at 'em."

The captives were lined up before him, six white men, blond, well-fed, immaculately clean and well groomed, and the two Ouaké hunters who had swung N'siki over the fire, great sullen-faced black men with chests and faces scarred by ceremonial knife-wounds. Behind them huddled some fifty porters, obviously drafted from the neighborhood, and obviously happy at the turn events had taken, for lash-wales showed on most of their bare backs, and several nursed the half-healed scars of recent vicious wounds.

Hiji pointed to the Ouakés with his stick. "Take that carrion to the confines of the camp and prepare a meal for the hyenas," he ordered, and as Bendigo saluted with a "Hearing and obeying, Hija," he turned once more to the white men. "What have you to say for yourselves?" he demanded.

THE big man with the eyeglass bowed, hinging forward stiffly from the hips, hands close to his sides. "I am Doktor Karl Manasse von Richter und Flechheim," he announced gutturally, "and these are my assistants, Doktor Hans Mohnen, Doktor Wolf Gontram, and Professors Raspe, von Brinken and Geroldingen. We are collecting specimens in French West Central Africa—here are my credentials—I am—"

"You're a liar out of blazin' hell," cut in Hiji. "In the first place, you're not in the French lands, nor have you been these last two months. In the second you're no scientist in search of specimens; you're a bloody ivory poacher. In the third place you've killed several of our people with your devilish elephant traps, and I caught you red-handed torturin' one of His Majesty's subjects, and threatenin' to kill him.

"Hear that?" A volley rang out from

the bush as eight Houssas under Bendigo's command sent as many Enfield bullets through the Ouaké hunters. "Can you give me one good reason why I shouldn't serve you the same way?"

"A dozen if you wish, Herr Captain."

"All right; name 'em, and speak fast."

The big blond man smiled, a smile of conscious superiority. "We are white men," he replied sonorously. "In a country such as this the white man's prestige must be maintained at all costs. You would not dare kill us as you did our bearers, for the news of it would travel through the bush like wildfire, and instantly the natives would think they might mete out summary vengeance for every real and fancied wrong they've suffered from the whites. Then no white man would be safe in the jungle. *Na, na, mein Hauptmann,* you dare not do it. You have the white man's prestige to maintain—"

"You're wrong there, Herr Doktor," Hiji contradicted. "It's not the white man's prestige, but the prestige of the law I'm sworn to maintain. That poor bloke we caught you torturin' has as good a right to sue you in the British courts for assault and battery as if he'd been a white man whom you'd bashed on the nose in Piccadilly Circus or New Bond Street—"

THE big man interrupted. "I'm glad to hear you say so, Herr Captain. You represent the law. Therefore it is your duty to convey us to the coast where we may stand trial before a duly constituted court."

Hiji nodded thoughtfully. "And I s'pose you'll have your consul cable to the Wilhelmstrasse and make an international incident of it?"

"*Natürlich.* We are citizens of the Third Reich. Our Fuehrer will protect us." A light not far from that of madness blazed in the prisoners' eyes as each of them raised his right hand in a stiff-armed salute and bellowed, "*Heil Hitler!*"

Hiji shook his head more in sadness than in deprecation. "It won't do, Manasse, old thing. The folks at home would never understand it. Your bloomin' fuehrer's got our boys in Downing Street and Whitehall bluffed enough already. They'd probably knuckle under, cashier me and send him a hand-tooled letter of apology. No, old

cock, it won't do. Here you come, poachin' ivory in a Crown Protectorate, beatin' and killin' inoffensive natives and finally torturin' one of 'em almost to death. You came into my district across the French border, and that's the way you're goin' out. No fuss, no scandal, no monkey-business."

The big blond German looked at him in amazement. "You mean that you will take us to the border and release us?" he demanded, and the cold politeness of his manner froze into an icy Prussian arrogance. "*Ist gut.* You will escort us to the French border—"

"Right to the banks of the Bongo-Kafung, Herr Doktor."

THE river separating French from British territory slipped silently between its low banks, its greenish-muddy water smooth as oil. "Here's where we part company, Herr Doktor," Hiji announced as he raised his hand to signal a halt. "How you managed to get through the French lines into our country is no affair of mine, though I'd bet my last shillin' someone over there is richer than he was when you came through.

"I'm confiscatin' all your gear, and the ivory, of course, is contraband. But I'll wager you've a well-filled wallet and can buy as much as you'll need where you're goin'. You'd better shove off now. There's very little daylight left, and—"

Herr Doktor Manasse eyed him coldly. "Where are the boats?" he demanded.

Hiji's face was blank as a fresh sheet of note paper. "Boats?" he echoed.

"Yes, boats, imbecile. Are we to wade or swim this *verdammt* river—"

"That's a rough outline of the plot, Herr Doktor. Take it or leave it. I said I'd bring you to the river, but I didn't promise you a ferry." His eyes went hard as he stared into the big German's face. "We march in just five minutes, and we're takin' your guns with us. It might not be too healthy for you to stay here. The natives might have some old scores to settle. You're not exactly popular around here, and it's amazin' how deaf I can be when I set myself to it. Which'll it be, wet feet or—" he waved his hand at the jungle which crouched dark, menacing and silent at their

backs, like some gigantic beast that waited only for the coming night to pounce.

Doktor Manasse swore. "When I get back to civilization you shall be reported for this outrage—" he began.

"Oh, quite," assented Hiji. "I'm sure you'll make a full report, complete with hot and cold runnin' statistics and everything, Herr Doktor. Meanwhile, you'd best be goin'. Daylight's wastin'."

THE muddy-green water swirled round the Nazis' legs in little playful ripples as they waded into the shallows. There was hardly any current and the bottom shelved so gradually that they were almost a full hundred yards from shore before they had to strike out with their arms.

"The blokes swim well," commented Hiji as he watched the powerful breast strokes of the departing prisoners. "I shouldn't wonder if they made the center of the stream—"

"Wah!" Sergeant Bendigo exclaimed softly at his elbow. "The *alemani* swim most skillfully, as thou hast said, O Hiji, but there are those who swim better. *Al hamdu lillah!*—Unto Allah be the glory!"

Some hundred feet above the swimmers rose two bulbous knobs, and over them there was a patch of greenish river-slime. The knobs moved nearer, and now the watchers could discern a three-foot length of tapering snout that marked the apex of a triangle, a long, triangular-shaped ripple that spread for twenty feet each side. *"Yah Allah!"* whispered Bendigo, his small teeth chattering with excitement. "Look well, O man," he grasped N'siki by the shoulder and pointed to the river. "See those who beat and burned thee; see them who would have killed thee with torment had it not been for Hiji!"

"Ahee!" exclaimed N'siki. *"Ahee!* Behold, they come to evening meat, the "long ones"—the fish that walk!"

Now two oblongs like the upper halves of floating logs appeared beside the first, and from each spread a long V-shaped ripple.

Upstream and downstream, and from the still muddy waters separating the swimmers from the watchers on the shore came other bone-domed, long heads, more swiftly-cleft long V-shaped ripples in the

quiet water. Something sounded like a rifle shot as a great tail slapped the river surface.

Doktor Manasse heard, and turned a puzzled frown toward the source of the sound. *"Herr Gott!"* he shouted as his long arms flailed the water like the paddles of a racing steamboat. "Crocodiles!" He rose waist-high from the sluggish current, almost seemed to stand upon the water for a moment, then, as if he had been on a gallows and the trap had sprung, he dropped from sight in a mad, boiling patch of foam. His legs shot up from the surface, kicked frantically, scissored once, then disappeared.

The water seethed and boiled and red stains showed against the froth-like foam churned by the giant lizards' threshing tails. Then everything was quiet. The river slipped between its banks of spongy mud with a sleek oiliness on which there showed not so much as a ripple. A homing bird screamed raucously and in the woods behind them little monkeys chattered. Then the sun dropped down behind the trees like a spent arrow and it was dark.

"Will you have whiskey-water, Lord?" asked Corporal Alibu at his elbow.

"Eh?" Hiji started from his silent contemplation of the river. "No, corporal-man, just whiskey. I don't feel like dilutin' my liquor this evenin'."

As Alibu went for the drink he grinned suddenly. "Wonder if a crock can digest glass?" he muttered to himself. "I'm sure Manasse was wearin' his blinker when they got him."

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