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ANC

Short Stories

February 10th

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"Send Down the Guns"

ROBERT DALY

A captain in America's young Navy begins to envy the pirates!

"Slight Misunderstanding on Halfaday"

JAMES B. HENDRYX

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Short Stories

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

SCATTER SHOTS FROM THE MAIL BAG

7.65-mm. Browning = .32 A.C.P.

QUESTION: I have a German-make pistol, I believe, and would like to find out if there is an American-made bullet that can be used in it with safety?

The markings are as follows: Cal. 7.65 WAFFENFABRIK MAUSER A.-G. OBERNDORF A. N. MAUSER'S PATENT

Any information on this will be greatly appreciated.

L. C. P., Texas

ANSWER: Your little Mauser pistol is chambered for the .32 Automatic Colt Pistol cartridge (as manufactured in the United States) known in Europe as the 7.65-mm. Browning.

This Mauser Pocket 1910 is one of the best-finished pistols ever manufactured. I have owned one for quite some years and have found it very accurate for a pocket automatic.

SHORT STORIES in England

QUESTION: I have just seen your copy of SHORT STORIES for September 1942, and an article called "The Shooter's Corner" caught my eye.

The magazine was well-thumbed and all I could read was your address and something about a "Book on Small Bore Rifle Shooting" by Colonel T. Whelen, published by the Sporting Arms & Ammunition Manufacturer's Inst.

I know I have one chance in a million of you answering this, after so long a time but I wonder if it would be possible for me to still obtain this book. I have heard of American magazines doing many wonderful things but if I even get an answer to this I'll take my hat off to all of them. Thank you.

M. W. E., London, England

ANSWER: Under separate cover I am sending you my personal copy of the "Book on Small Bore Shooting" as I believe you can use it to good advantage. Hope you enjoy it—and Good Shooting!

Single-Action Colt Trouble

QUESTION: I have just been reading your "Shooter's Corner" in the September issue of SHORT STORIES magazine, wherein you deal at some length with the Colt S. A. "Frontier Model" revolver, and it has occurred to me that you may be able to give me some further information on the same subject.

I recently came into possession of one of these guns, badly rusted. However, I cleaned it up, and reblued it completely, and it is now in perfect working order, with the bore in pretty good shape. I would like to fire it, but I am in a quandary on two points.

First, the gun carries nothing to indicate what caliber it is, .45 or .44. It had a 7½" barrel, with the thin foresight mentioned in your article, and carries the figures "1898" and the last patent date shown on the frame is Jan. 19th—75. It chambers a .45 shell properly, but the bullet seems a very tight fit in the barrel. I might mention that I have fired about a dozen .45 shells in it, both from a rest, and by hand, but I desisted when the barrel seemed to heat excessively.

Second, in your article above mentioned, you state that these guns, carrying serial numbers prior to 165,000 should not be fired except with black powder ammo. The ammo. I have been using is modern .45 Govt. put out by the Peters Co. Although nothing untoward has happened yet, if this practice is dangerous, I won't continue it.

Any assistance you can give toward answering these two questions will be very much appreciated, since I have not access here to any qualified gunsmith, and I have no previous experience with this particular

type of gun. I might also mention that with the .45 ammo I have been using, the gun shoots 4" high at 25 yards.

H. J., Canada

ANSWER: The first thing to do is push or drive a tight fitting lead plug through the barrel (being very careful not to injure the steel) and measure it to find out what the groove diameter may be. Early .44-40 caliber "Frontier" Model Single Action Army Colts had groove diameters of .424 inch, while later ones were .427. Incidentally, the word "Frontier" was originally used to indicate the .44-40 caliber. The .45 caliber Colt known as the "Peacemaker" had a groove diameter of .452.

It would take quite a bit of rusting to enlarge the chambers of a .44-40 cylinder to take the .45 Colt cartridge, but I suppose it would be possible.

Another thought, you are not by any chance using the Peters .45 Rim Auto. cartridges with lead or metal jacketed bullets, are you? In order to successfully shoot these cartridges there would have to be a lot of fore and aft cylinder play due to the great thickness of the rim of this cartridge.

A rough barrel will heat up faster than one in perfect condition!

When smokeless powder came into general use in revolvers, the Colt people strengthened the whole arm to give a wider margin of safety.

I have never heard of one of the older guns (in good condition) blowing up but it is better to be safe than sorry!

Foreign Ammo

QUESTION: Would you please tell me if I can get any Mauser .25 caliber Jap ammunition, or are there any make of American ammunition that will fit such a gun. Thanking you for any information on this .25 rifle.

J. C., California

ANSWER: Jap, as well as German and all wildcat ammunition may be obtained from J. W. McPhillips, 285 Mastick, San Bruno, California.

Steel Cartridge Cases

QUESTION: I have a .45 caliber automatic cartridge which looks different from any I have ever seen. The bullet seems to have a copper jacket as generally seen on this type of service ammunition, but the case is a little mottled in color and looks somewhat like steel.

I have heard that during the war cartridge cases were made of steel. Is this so?

Any information you can give me will be appreciated as I am starting a cartridge collection and want to know just exactly what I have.

T. M., Utah

ANSWER: During World War I, the Germans were very short of copper, so were compelled to find a way of making cartridge cases and bullet jackets from any available substitute. They got along fairly well by using soft steel.

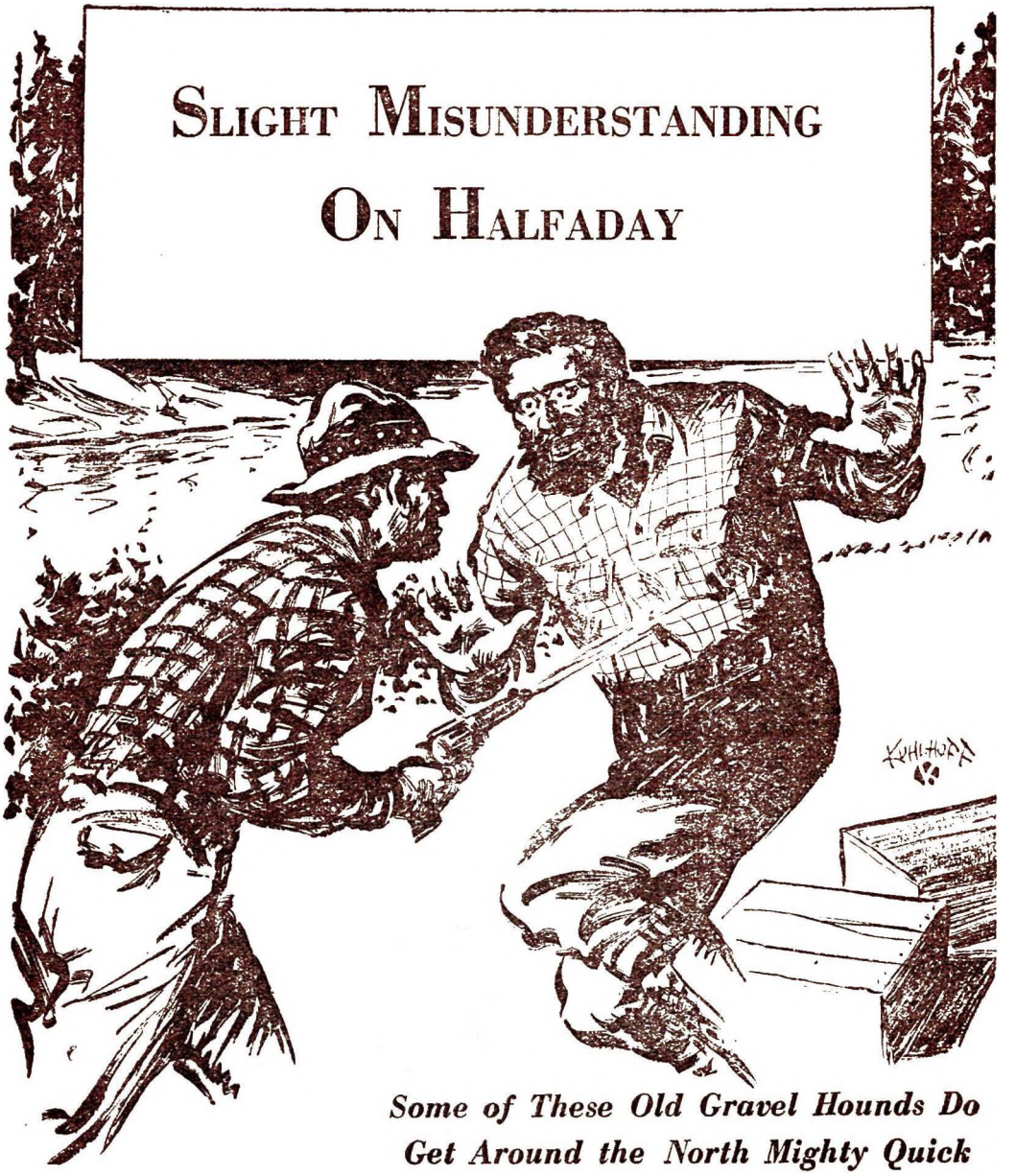
At that time the boys at Frankfort Arsenal did quite a bit of experimenting along these lines, and also had fair success using mild steel as a substitute for brass. In order to draw the steel it first was plated with tin which acted as a lubricant.

No acute shortage of copper developed for us during that war but it was a different story during the last one.

A method supposedly was perfected and a large number of cartridge cases as well as bullets were produced from steel. The bullets had a coating of copper.

Brass has several distinct advantages over any other readily available metal for use in making cartridge cases. Good corrosion resistance, ease of working in blanking, cupping and drawing, and good "springback" characteristics. It is my opinion that all of these advantages have not been equalled by the use of steel for making cartridge cases.

Slight Misunderstanding On Halfaday



Some of These Old Gravel Hounds Do Get Around the North Mighty Quick

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

I

THE spare, shifty-eyed man with the sharp rat-like face raised his glass halfway to his lips and returned it to the bar untouched as his glance shifted from the open doorway of the Klondike Palace to the face of Cuter Malone, the burly proprietor of the combined saloon and dance hall, who faced him across the bar, the inevitable black cigar protruding at an angle from a corner of his mouth. "Well, I'll be damned!" he muttered. "Look who's comin' in the door!"

Malone frowned as his muddy eyes rested for a moment upon the figure of the huge black-bearded man who had just stepped into the barroom, a limp packsack dangling from his shoulder. "Black John Smith," he

grunted. "What's so funny about that? He stops in here now an' then, when he's in Dawson—damn him!"

"But—he ain't s'posed to be in Dawson."

"What do you mean—s'posed to be? There's sure one hombre that wherever he's at, that's where he's s'posed to be! There ain't no one tellin' *him* where to go—not even Downey."

"What I mean—how the hell did he git here?"

"How the hell would he? In a canoe, or a boat—er mebbe he walked. How does anyone git around the country?"

The big man had stepped to the bar, well toward the front of the long room, allowing the limp packsack to slip to the floor at his feet, as a bartender set out a bottle and glass. As he poured his drink, the rat-faced one eyed him with a puzzled frown.

"Listen here," he said, again glancing into Malone's face, "I an' the Swede kin git around the country as quick as anyone when we want to—an' this time, I'm tellin' you, we wanted to! It's like this—you rec'lect, it's damn near a month ago, a couple of cheechakos which claimed their names was Freeman an' Evans was in here throwin' their dust around an' braggin' about makin' a strike on some crick way to hell an' gone up the Stewart. Big Rosy, she froze onto this here Freeman an' hung to him till she

got him soused an' frisked him fer 'leven ounces in one of the dance hall booths—"

"Hold on!" Cuter interrupted, and turning, reached for a notebook that lay on top of the huge iron safe behind him. Thumbing the pages, he paused and scowled at an entry. "Here it is, June the thirteenth—'leven ounces, did you say? I git a fifty-fifty cut on whatever the girls pulls in, an' here Rosy only turns in my cut on eight ounces—that's what she claimed she got. The girl's crooked as a dog's hind leg. Wait till she shows up tonight, an' I'll tell her where to head in at! It's gittin' so an honest man can't make a livin' no more, the way he gits gypped."

"Hold on, now, Cuter—it might of be'n eight ounces Rosy told me she got. I most likely fergot—"

"Fergot—hell! You ain't no better than any of the rest of the damn crooks. You'd try to cover up fer her. Seems like a man can't trust no one in this damn country!"

"Well, anyhow, Rosy, she tips off me an' the Swede, that these two guys claims they've got better'n two hundred ounces in their cache, so when they pulls out we follers 'em.

"Gee—talk about a trip! Way to hell an' gone up the Stewart, an' then up a crick—an' the water higher'n hell, an' havin' to lay around in the bresh fer four days after we got there gittin' damn near eat up with the black flies an' mosquitoes waitin' fer them guys to go to their cache so's we could locate it. We grabbed off a hundred an' eighty ounces—all there was in it—not two hundred like Rosy claimed. We promised her a twenty-five percent cut, so we told her we only got eighty ounces, an' give her twenty. All she done was tip us off—so what the hell!

"Well, anyways, whilst we was waitin' there in the bresh—it was the last day before we found their cache—Black John an' a Siwash come by there. An' they was headed the other way—up the Stewart! That evenin' them fellas went to their cache to put in some more dust, an' when they'd went back to their shack me an' the Swede grabs off the dust an' hit hell-bent fer Dawson. We got here this mornin'. Now, what I mean, how in hell could Black John of got here damn near as quick as we did when he'd went on up the Stewart? 'Cause, believe me, brother, we hightailed here all the way!"

Cuter rolled the cigar to the opposite corner of his mouth and regarded the man critically. "Did Black John see you an' the Swede hidin' out there in the bresh when he went by?"

"Hell, no! We didn't let no one see us—him most of all. He'd of know'd damn well what we was hangin' around there fer, an' it's claimed he won't stand fer no cache-robbin', not on Halfaday Crick, nor nowheres else. Not even if the guys that gits robbed is cheechakos, he won't. Cripes, like as not if he'd of saw us he'd let us clean out that cache, an' then throw'd a gun on us an' took the dust away from us, an' either kep' it, er give it back to them guys, an' hung us. I've heard how him an' that Halfaday Crick bunch has hung guys before now fer somethin' they done."

MALONE nodded. "Yeah, they've hung guys up there—plenty of 'em. An' I've know'd Black John to give guys back dust an' money, too, that they've be'n robbed of. An' him the damndest crook in the hull Yukon! Trouble is, a man can't never figger out what Black John will do. He don't never rob no pore guy, an' like I said, if someone else robs one, like as not Black John robs him, an' gives the dust back to the guy that lost it. Then the damn cuss'll turn around an' rob, er swindle a guy like me fer all he kin git. He's took me fer plenty, off an' on. An' if someone robs some big outfit, like the Consolidated, like as not Black John will lay fer him, an' rob him. But he don't never give them big outfits back their dust, by a damn sight! No sir—he grabs it off'n the thief an' keeps every damn ounce of it. He hates the big outfits—claims they're ruinin' the country fer the pore man. He's right, at that—but he's smart enough never to rob no one but a thief, an' slick enough to do it so the police can't git onto it. So the law ain't never ketched up with him. I'm tellin' you that if him an' I could make a deal—sort of throw in together—with me down here slippin' him the word, like on gold shipments, or guys that had struck it lucky, an' him an' his gang pullin' off the jobs, there wouldn't be no limit to our take. But somehow him an' me, can't seem to git together on nothin'.

"You claim he didn't see you an' the Swede when he passed by where you was at, up the Stewart. That's what you think. But

you might be wrong. He might of saw you an' never let on, an' then follered you on down here. Anyways, that's the way it looks from here. Er else why would he be here so quick—an' him headed the other way? If I was you I'd lay low till he gits outa town. There ain't no one in Rene LaBlanc's shack. You an' the Swede better hole up in there, an' I'll slip you the word when he's gone."

The shifty-eyed one cast a furtive glance in the direction of the bearded man, who was refilling his glass from the bottle, and slipped hurriedly from the room by way of the back door.

WHEN he had gone, the bartender who had served the bearded man stepped the length of the bar and addressed Malone in an undertone. "The big guy there, he wants a word with you when you've got time. He's been waitin' around till you got through talkin' with Lefty. Claims he's got some connections down in the States that passed him the word that you're okay, an' to hunt you up when he got here."

Malone eyed the man with a frown. "What the hell you talkin' about? You mean Black John, there?"

"Black John! Hell, that ain't Black John!"

"What!" Malone's eyes suddenly widened, and he stared at the bearded one at the other end of the long bar. "By God, if that ain't Black John I'll eat him!"

The bartender grinned. "Better start eatin', then. An' believe me, if he's as hard as he claims he is, yer goin' to chaw some damn tough steak. Shore looks like Black John, though. I thought he was him when he come in the door."

"Tell him to come over here," Malone grunted, a note of skepticism in his voice. "I'll know damn quick whether he's Black John er not."

The man moved along the bar and faced the burly proprietor. "You Cuter Malone?" he asked abruptly.

His eyes on the man's face, the other nodded. "That's me," he replied. "Who the hell are you?"

The stranger grinned, showing a double row of uneven yellow teeth behind the black beard. "It would depend on what part of the country you seen me in. I've got several different monikers. Spokane Blackie'll do as well as any of 'em. So, bein' as we're acquainted, I'm tellin' you you got recommended to me."

"Yeah?" Cuter replied, a wary note in his voice, "an' I'm askin' you who done the recommendin'?"

The other grinned. "Ever hear of a guy named Slim Akers? An' another one name of Jim Quantum? An' Stanton? An' a dame name of Frisco Nell?"

Malone nodded. "Yeah, I know all them folks. Every one of 'em's left the country—gone outside."

"That's right. On account of who?"

"On account of Black John Smith."

"Right agin. An' that's where I come in."

"You?"

"Yeah—me. Accordin' to them folks I'm a dead ringer fer this here Black John. Fact is, Jim Quantum damn near swallered his cud when I stepped into a saloon in Frisco where him an' Akers was havin' 'em a drink, an' Akers, he turned sort of green like around the gills. When they found out I wasn't Black John, they rung in Stanton, an' all of 'em agreed I'd pass fer Black John anywheres. Jest to make shore they figgered out a joke on Frisco Nell, her bein' a dame they claimed hated Black John's guts on account of him shovin' off a batch of queer bills on her an' gittin' her picked up when she tried to pass 'em down in Frisco. She done time on account of 'em an' had jest got turned loose. They claimed that if I'd fool Frisco Nell, I'd fool anyone—even you an' some guy in the Mounted, name of Corporal Downey.

"So they rigged up a date with this here Frisco Nell in the back room of a dump an' was in there chawin' the fat with her over a couple of bottles, when I walks in on 'em. It was a hell of a joke, if you ask me. The minute I steps in the door, this here dame grabs up a bottle by the neck an' heaves it at me, an' then she reaches fer a long wicked blade she's got strapped to her leg, an' she's halfways acrost the table with it, 'fore Quantum an' Akers grabs her an' holds her whilst Stanton pries the knife out of her hand. Cripes, another minute an' I'd of be'n sliced like a side of bacon!

"Well, she quiets down when she finds out I ain't him, an' then the four of 'em figgers out that if I was to come up here, an' git in touch with you the minute I got here,

an' before I'd showed up to anyone else, betwixt the two of us we might rig up some damn good plays—an' Black John would git blamed fer 'em. They all hate this here Black John's guts, an' would be glad to see him knocked off, er put away by the Mounted. Then they could come back here. They figger you could dope out some jobs, an' I could pull 'em off—mebbe in cahoots with some kind of a gang you could git together—like I was the leader of the mob—an' if anyone got sight of me, they'd swear it was Black John an' some of his Halfway Crick gang done it."

"It's Halfaday Crick—not Halfway," Cuter corrected, an avaricious gleam flashing in his muddy eyes. Turning abruptly he picked up a bottle and two glasses from the back bar. "Foller me," he said, in a low terse tone, "before anyone sees you. We kin talk things over in the back room."

II

JUST on the edge of darkness, about a little fire above which a kettle of moose stew was bubbling, four men sat before a tent pitched well within a grove of spruce that grew on a tiny plateau at the bend of a creek that flowed into the Yukon, some fifteen miles below Dawson. They were an evil crew, hand-picked by Cuter Malone from among the thugs and sinister characters who frequented his notorious Klondike Palace in Dawson. The man known as Lefty took a long pull at a bottle, and passed it to the Ape, a person of unbelievably long arms and eyebrows so shaggy as to almost conceal the wicked gleam of a pair of beady green eyes. "The hell this here ain't the place!" he replied to a doubt expressed by the other. "This here's the first crick that comes in on the right hand side below them red rocks, ain't it? An' we're a couple of miles up it, ain't we—jest like Cuter said?"

The Ape grunted, pulled at the bottle, and passed it on to Slim Carew, a hard-eyed, tight-lipped individual, who glanced across the fire at the speaker. "If it's the right place, why ain't nothin' happened?" he demanded, drank from the bottle and passed it to Big Mike, a huge hulk of a man who was said to have packed his eleven-hundred-pound outfit over the Chilkoot in three trips. It was also hinted among the Klondike underworld that he had obtained this outfit by the simple process of strangling its owner and "tromping" his body into the quagmire on the outskirts of Sheepcamp. Mike held the gurgling bottle to his lips until it was empty, tossed it into the bush, and wiped his lips with the back of a hairy hand.

"Yeah, why ain't they?" he seconded Slim's question. "What the hell we here fer, anyhow?"

"You know damn well why we're here—'cause Cuter told us to be—that's why!"

"I don't notice Cuter hittin' out on no crick an' hangin' around fer two days gittin' et up by the dam' skeeters an' black flies," the Ape said. "No sir—he stands there back of his bar smokin' them big seegars, an' h'istin' a drink whenever he wants, with that big yellar diamon' flashin' in his necktie, watchin' the money roll in."

"Cuter's smart," Slim ventured. "He wasn't made in a minute. He knows his way around, all right. I'm willin' to go along with him. He never sent us here fer nothin'."

"Yer damn right he didn't," Lefty agreed heartily.

"I'll say he didn't!" Big Mike sneered. "Whatever he sent us down here fer, he gits a fifty-fifty cut! Whatever there is to do, we do it—an' he sets back doin' nothin' an' grabs off the half of what we git."

"He doped out the play—whatever it is," Lefty defended. "Hell, a man's got to git paid fer his brains, ain't he?"

"It don't take no hell of a lot of brains to send four guys out in the bresh to git eat up by skeeters, does it?" the Ape queried.

"Not if that's what he sent us out here fer, it don't," Slim agreed. "But if you know'd Cuter like I do, you'd know he don't never do nothin', that don't show a profit. You fellers kin do as you damn please. Me, I'm stickin' here till somethin' happens. What it's goin' to be, I don't know. But when it comes, there'll be somethin' doin'—an' whatever it is, we'll be in on the play, an' there'll be plenty of dough in it. Cuter, he don't fool around with no small-time stuff."

"An' I'm stickin' along with you," Lefty said, lifting the lid of the pot, and prodding the meat with a pointed stick.

The Ape shrugged. "We all got to stick,

I guess," he said. "If we don't, Cuter, he'd be sore at us, an' we wouldn't have no place to hang out."

"That's right," assented Big Mike, and glanced at Lefty. "Ain't that stew about done? I'm hungrier'n hell."

"Git yer plates an' fly at her," Lefty replied, as he swung the pot from the fire.

FIVE minutes later, as the four were engrossed in gorging themselves on the savory stew, a man stepped into the circle of the firelight. So noiseless had been his approach that no hint of his presence reached the four, until he appeared at their side.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said. "Go right ahead. Don't let me interrupt yer meal."

The four sat as though petrified staring up into the face of the huge man, whose snaggy yellowed teeth showed behind a black beard that concealed his features.

"My God," Lefty gulped. "Black John Smith!"

The big man nodded. "That's right, Lefty. The last time I seen you was in the Klondike Palace a few days ago standin' there at the bar chawin' the fat with Cuter Malone. That was only a few days after I seen you an' the Swede up a crick that runs into the Stewart. You was layin' in the bresh waitin' to spot a cache belongin' to a couple of cheechakos. I was headin' into the back country with a Siwash, an' I seen how you seen us go by, so I kep' on goin' fer a ways. Then I left the Siwash to make camp an' I slipped back that evenin' an' watched you two lift a couple hundred ounces outa the cache, an' hit out downriver."

"It—it wasn't only a hundred an' eighty ounces," Lefty managed to say, his eyes on the big man's face.

The other grinned. "Oh, well, what's twenty ounces amongst friends?"

"Friends? Did you say friends?" Lefty exclaimed, a hopeful note in his voice.

"That's what I said—an' meant it, too."

"You et?" Lefty asked.

"Not sence noon. Me an' Cuter had dinner together in Dawson."

As the big man seated himself Lefty produced a plate, heaped it with stew and passed it to him. The meal proceeded in silence. When it was finished the bearded one began. "You see, it's like this: I've be'n playin' a kind of a big-time game up there on Halfaday—not botherin' to pull no jobs except there was big money in 'em. That's all right except it's gittin' harder an' harder to find out where the big money's at—an' me located way up there on Halfaday. I never bothered with no small-time stuff, like robbin' cheechakos, an' the like—never figgered it was worthwhile. Hell, I've even robbed fellas that's robbed cheechakos, an' then give the cheechakos back their dust—jest fer the hell of it—kind of a joke, like.

"But like I said, them big jobs is gittin' further an' further between, so couple weeks ago when a Siwash come along an' told me about a crick he'd found way up the Stewart, where the gold laid thick in the gravel, I hit out with him, figgerin' that if it was as good as he claimed, mebbe I'd turn to prospectin' fer a change. We was headin' up there when I seen you an' the Swede, so, like I said, I sent the Siwash on to make camp an' I snuck back an' laid in the bresh watchin' you boys, an' then, when I seen you lift them pokes from that cache, it set me to thinkin'. 'Cripes,' I says to myself, 'there's a couple hundred ounces them boys lifted in a couple of minutes! No matter how rich a strike is, it ain't that rich! An' I got to thinkin' about all the hard work there is in shovelin', an' pannin', an' sluicin', an' choppin' wood, an' burnin' in, an' crankin' a windlass, an how a mans way to hell an' gone up there with no one but a damn Siwash to talk to, an' nowheres to buy a drink, an' no one to play a game of cards with. An' layin' there in the bresh slappin' the mosquitoes I got to thinkin' how many cheechakos there is in the country, an' how many of them small caches there is, an' how easy it was fer you boys to pull that job, an' how a man was overlookin' a hell of a lot of bets by passin' 'em up. 'John,' I says to myself, 'yer a damn fool.'

"So I hits back to where the Siwash had made camp, an' I tells him to go on up to his crick an' start pannin', an' I takes the canoe an' hits out fer Dawson. I done some more thinkin' on the way down, an' I figgers that along with them little jobs, a man hadn't ort to pass up the big ones, neither. 'If I could hook up with someone,' I says to myself, 'that could git wise to stuff like gold shipments, an' which cheechakos had made

big strikes, an' tip me off to 'em, then I an' a few other guys could pull 'em off.'

"It was then I happened to think of Cuter Malone. 'He's the guy kin do it, if anyone kin,' I says, an' then I got to thinkin' that mebbe Cuter wouldn't throw in with me on account of a couple of deals I'd pulled off where Cuter hadn't come out so good. 'Mebbe he's so damn sore he won't have nothin' to do with me,' I says. But then I got to thinkin' that Cuter he's first an' last, a business man which don't never overlook a chanct to turn a dollar—honest er dishonest. 'He'd be a damn fool to turn down a hook-up like that,' I says, 'an' Cuter ain't no damn fool. Anyhow,' I says, 'it won't do no harm to try.'

"So when I git to Dawson, I hits fer the Klondike Palace, an' it was then I seen you an' Cuter standin' there at the back end of the bar talkin'. So I waited till you'd went, an' then I goes back where Cuter's standin' an' him an' I goes in the back room an' has a powwow. First off, he's kinda sore about them deals I'd pulled on him, but when I p'ints out that by-gones is by-gones an' how a man can't never git nowheres lookin' backwards, an' how a hook-up betwixt us would be onbeatable, an' might be good fer a million, he seen the light, an' we dickered. 'I'll hit fer Halfaday,' I says, 'an' pick out about four of my boys, an' come back down, an' we'll git to work.'

"But Cuter, he balks at that. 'Not by a damn sight!' he says. 'Not you an' yer Halfaday Crick bunch! By God,' he says, 'if I go into this here thing you'll be boss of the gang, all right—but it'll be my gang. I trust you like a brother, John,' he says, 'but I know damn well if you worked with yer own boys, I'd never git a damn ounce of the take. If we go into this, I handpick the four guys that you work with. I want to be shore I'm gittin' my cut.'

"I done some objectin', but Cuter he stood pat, so finally I agrees, an' we works out the deal. It's simple. Cuter he tips me off to where the dust is at—an' we git it. Then we split fifty-fifty with Cuter. Seems fair an' reasonable, on the face of it. What do you boys say?"

THE Ape tamped tobacco into his pipe bowl, lighted it with a brand from the fire, and scowled. "I ain't kickin' on you bossin' the mob," he said. "'Cause I've heer'd how yer good. But damn if I see how it's fair an' reasonable if we pull off the jobs an Cuter sets back an' grabs off a fifty-fifty cut, fer just fingerin' 'em."

Big Mike agreed. "Yeah, I figger we'd ort to git the big end of the cut—us doin' all the work."

"'Special," Slim Carew added, "when there's five of us to divide our half of the cut. That there leaves us only ten percent apiece, an' we take all the resk."

"A fifty-fifty cut looks like a hell of a lot fer Cuter to take, even if he does figger out the jobs," Lefty opined.

The bearded one grinned. "Glad to know jest how you boys feel about it," he said. "Bein' how you was Cuter's own hand-picked men, I didn't know but what you'd be hell-bent to see that he got all that was comin' to him. He will, at that—but you boys is overlookin' one angle—it's us that does the jobs, an' takes the resk, as you boys pinted out—an' likewise, it's us that does the dividin', after we git the dust. How the hell will Cuter know how much we take? He won't—till we tell him. Somehow, I figger the deal will be even more fair an' reasonable than appears on the face of it—fer us."

Slim Carew offered his hand. "Put her there, John," he said. "By heck, you're all right! How about it, boys?"

The others agreed wholeheartedly, and the bearded one eyed them. "I seen a little of Lefty's work when him an' the Swede lifted that there cache up on the Stewart. Him an' the Swede had the patience to wait around till they locate that cache, which is recommendable. I asks Cuter if you two would be in the gang, an' he says how Lefty would, but not the Swede, him bein' ontrustworthy."

Lefty nodded. "Yeah, he's all right, some ways, the Swede is—but he's a crook, at that."

The big man turned to the others. "You boys is total strangers to me," he said, "an' bein' as how we've got to sort of depend on one another in a pinch, I'd kind of like to sort of git a line on you."

"My grift is strong-arm work—stick-ups. Frisco, Chi, an' points between. I'm figgered handy with a gat."

The Ape grinned. "Sort of all-around

yegg, I guess you could call me. I've worked up an' down an' acrost—pretty much all over—peterman, gum-shoe worker, hister, eight-wheeler—all down the line."

Big Mike growled surlily. "I could swing fer plenty of mine," he said. "I ain't talkin'. But I'll be there when the fun starts."

THE bearded one nodded. "Guess you boys will do, all right. Now about me—any of you got any doubts about me bein' able to run this gang? Any questions you'd like to ask? Might's well know where we stand before we start."

Lefty grinned. "I ain't never, what you might say, know'd you, John. But I've saw you quite a few times in Dawson. An' I seen you an' that Siwash when you passed me an' the Swede, up there on the Stewart—an' believe me, you shore was slick enough not to let on you seen us. But I've heard tell enough about you an' that there Halfaday Crick gang, an' the jobs you've pulled off, so even if the half of it was true, you'd be good enough fer me to throw in with, any day in the week."

The Ape shrugged. "I'm like Lefty," he said. "I've heer'd enough about you so's I'm satisfied."

Slim Carew nodded. "That goes fer me, too."

Big Mike knocked the dottle from his pipe. "I'm takin' Cuter's word fer it. If you've got the guts an' the savvy he claims you've got, yer all jake by me."

The bearded one smiled. "Okay. An' seein' we're all satisfied, I'll fetch up my bed from the canoe. It's down around the bend. In the mornin' we'll have some target practice. I'd like to see how good you boys be—in case we'd have to shoot it out with some of our clients, er mebbe the cops."

III

IN THE Tivoli saloon in Dawson a little group of sourdoughs had forgathered toward the rear end of the bar early one evening when they were joined by Burr MacShane, himself one of the elect. Old Bettles, dean of the sourdoughs, greeted him vociferously:

"Fill up, Burr. We've been waitin' for some old gravel hound to show up so we can get a game of stud goin'. Where the hell you be'n for the last month, er so?"

MacShane filled the glass the bartender slid across the bar. "I've be'n down Forty-mile way," he said, "lookin' over a proposition on a crick I heard about."

Swiftwater Bill laughed. "The proposition didn't turn out so good, eh? Yer face is longer'n the moral law."

"What the hell's the moral law?" asked Moosehide Charlie.

Bettles grinned. "I ain't got time to go into details, right now. But the gist of it is, if you mind yer morals the law won't bother you. Ain't that about right, Burr?"

MacShane failed to join in the laugh that followed. His brow puckered in a frown. "Fact is," he said, "it's the law that's botherin' me—an' not that there proposition on that crick."

"What the hell you be'n up to git the law on yer tail?" Camillo Bill asked.

"It ain't me. It's Black John."

"Black John!" Bettles roared with laughter. "Shorely you don't mean to hint that Black John would break the law!"

The others joined in the guffaw. "Why, that old sin-blister has broke it in so many pieces they never will git it put together agin," Swiftwater Bill exclaimed.

"Guess you don't need to worry about the law ketchin' up with Black John," Moosehide chuckled.

"That's the hell of it," MacShane replied. "It's already caught up with him."

The laughter was stilled and the faces of the sourdoughs became suddenly grave. "What do you mean—caught up?" Bettles asked. "Hell, Downey was in here not over an hour ago, an' he didn't say nothin' about it. Claimed he was hittin' to hell an' gone up the Klondike to investigate a corpse some guy found up there. Stopped in here for a drink before he started. Cripes, if Black John had got mixed up with the law, Downey'd have said somethin' about it, shore as hell."

"Downey don't know about it yet," MacShane replied. "An' I'm damn sorry to hear he's pulled out. If ever he was needed right here it looks like it's now."

"Who does know, if Downey don't?" Swiftwater Bill asked.

"A rooky constable name of Rollo Buck."

"Oh—him!" Camillo Bill sniffed. "Keeps

his shoes shined nice, an' his pants is always pressed. Don't tell me he's arrested Black John!"

"If he tried it," Bettles opined, "Black John would turn him over his knee an' paddle his hind end."

"He ain't arrested him yet, but he claims he's goin' to," MacShane replied. "Fact is, there's a couple of guys with Buck that claim they was robbed of better'n three hundred ounces. I an' Sam Crombly was paddlin' upriver an' we run acrost Buck an' these two guys. They'd stopped to cook dinner on a point. We landed there fer a few minutes an' they told us about it. Both them guys claimed there was five men in the gang that robbed 'em an' both of 'em claim Black John was bossin' the job. They both claim they know him by sight, an' they swear they ain't mistaken. We'll be hearin' more about it before the evenin's over. They'd ort to be pullin' in before long."

Camillo Bill frowned. "Anyone saw Black John lately?" he asked.

Bettles shot him a glance. "Why?" he demanded.

Camillo shrugged. "Oh—nothin' much. Couple days ago I was over to police headquarters chawin' the fat with Downey, an' a cheechako comes in an' claimed he'd be'n held up an' robbed of eighty-two ounces down-river, an' that there was five men in the mob, an' the leader of 'em was a big guy with a black beard."

"Black John was in here, couple weeks back," Swiftwater Bill said. Him an' a Siwash. He bought quite a bill of grub from Al Scougale. Claimed he hittin' way to hell an' gone out in the hills to look over a crick the Siwash claimed he'd found. Accordin' to John the Siwash showed him a poke of coarse gold."

Bettles refilled his glass and for several moments he stood staring at the little beads that rimmed the liquor. "Five, six days ago," he said thoughtfully, "me an' Downey was in here havin' us a little snort, an' a couple of cheechakos come in an' claimed they'd be'n robbed down river a piece. They claimed they were fetchin' in a hundred ounces to deposit in the bank, when five men took out in two canoes an' forced 'em ashore an' robbed 'em. One of the guys claimed that the leader of the gang was Black John. He claimed he know'd Black John by sight, havin' seen him here in Dawson a time er two. Downey told the guy he was crazy if he thought Black John would pull a stunt like that. An' I told him the same thing. But the guy insisted he wasn't mistaken, an' Downey detailed Constable Peters to investigate the complaint. 'Whatever faults John's got,' Downey says, 'they ain't little ones like robbin' cheechakos,' an' we had a good laugh over it."

MacShane nodded. "That's the way I'd look at it, too. But when you come to think about it, Bettles, there ain't so damn many men in the country John's size that's wearin' a heavy black beard."

A STUD game was started and along toward midnight Constable Buck stepped into the saloon accompanied by two cheechakos. The officer glanced about the room and, leaving the men at the bar, stepped over and paused beside the stud table. The sourdoughs glanced up as Swiftwater Bill riffled the cards.

"Any of you men seen Black John Smith?" Buck demanded, frowning into the upturned faces.

Bettles nodded gravely. "Yeah, I've seen him," he replied.

"Where is he?"

"Damn' if I know."

"Where did you see him?"

"W-e-e-l-l, a year ago come Dominion Day, he was here in the Tivoli, an' last Christmas—"

Constable Buck flushed angrily. Cut out the nonsense!" he snapped. "You're talking to the law. Any of you men seen Black John lately—within the last ten days? There's been a robbery committed, and Black John's at the bottom of it."

"Did you git to the bottom of it an' see him there?" asked Camillo Bill, guilelessly.

The officer pointed toward the bar. "Those two men were robbed downriver a couple of days ago, and they both swear that Black John was the leader of the five-man gang that robbed them. Both of them know him by sight. And that's not all—I just reported at headquarters, and Constable Nevers said there had been two other robberies, and that one of the victims said the man who robbed him was a big man with a black beard, and the other one said

that the five-man gang that robbed him was led by Black John. Corporal Downey detailed Constable Peters to investigate one of these complaints, and put Constable Cox on the other one."

"Looks like robbery's gittin' to be quite a pastime along the river, don't it?" observed Moosehide.

Burr MacShane grinned. "If it's Black John that's pullin' off all them robberies it looks like he's workin' up quite a business."

"What does Downey think about it?" Swiftwater Bill asked.

Constable Buck scowled. "Corporal Downey is not at headquarters. He is very conveniently investigating a corpse someone reported finding somewheres up the Klondike. There's no one at headquarters except Constable Jones. I'm hitting out for Halfaday Crick."

Swiftwater Bill gave the cards an audible riffle. "That's about as safe a place as you could be—if Black John's workin' along the Yukon," he opined.

Constable Buck flushed. "Halfaday Crick is Black John's reputed headquarters," he replied hotly, "and I'm going up there and get him. I'll bring him back here and let these men identify him."

Bettles grinned. "Looks like you've ondertook quite a chore, sonny," he said. "Did Downey leave orders for you to go up there an' fetch Black John down?"

"No. I'm not taking orders from Corporal Downey. I'm working out of Fortymile, under Inspector Steele. I ran onto this robbery complaint while making a routine patrol along the river inspecting fish nets."

Bettles' grin widened as he allowed his eyes to travel from the constable's well-shined shoes to his face. "Oh, yes. I knew I'd seen you before. You're the lad that Black John found camped upriver chawin' loon meat that you thought was duck, after missin' a few shots at some moose. Downey was tellin' me about you ballin' up a trap-stealin 'case, an' Black John clearin' it up, an' about how you'd be'n passed on from one detachment to another clean from Saskatchewan. He inherited you from Whitehorse, an' then wished you off on Sam Steele down to Fortymile. Sam, he can't pass you on without shovin' you clean over into Alaska. At that, you'd ort to make a swell U. S. marshal, after you'd got a little more age an' fat onto you, an' got acquainted with a few politicians. Better stick to yer net inspectin', Rollo, an' let someone else go up after Black John."

Under the studied needling of the sourdoughs Constable Buck blew up. "Damn you oldtimers! You're all alike—every damn one of you! You think just because you've been in the country since God knows when, you know it all—and no one else knows anything! And Corporal Downey's just like you! I told him long ago that when I got the chance I'd clean up on that Halfaday Crick gang—and I told Black John that, too—right to his face! I'm not afraid of 'em—even if Downey is. Believe me, I'm heading for Halfaday after a live man—and a damn bad one, at that—not up the Klondike to investigate a corpse."

"Looks from here," Moosehide Charlie observed, "that Downey's goin' to have two corpses to investigate."

Burr MacShane nodded. "Better let Downey handle Black John," he advised. "Believe me, it ain't no job fer a rooky to tackle."

Constable Buck scowled. "It's Downey this, and Downey that! To hear you men talk you'd think there was no other policeman in the country besides Downey. Downey's had plenty of time to arrest Black John if he wanted to. If you men think it's good policing to allow a notorious criminal to go about his work without any interference by the police—I don't. It's high time Black John's career was brought to a close—and if Downey won't do it, I will!"

Camillo Bill grinned. "Yer guts is more commendable than yer brains, Rollo," he said. "But go ahead. It's your funeral—not ourn."

THE words had scarcely left his lips when a wild-eyed cheechako dashed into the saloon, paused in mid-floor for a moment, and spotting Buck's uniform, hurried up to him. "I went to the police station to report a robbery and murder, and the cop on duty there says you're the one to talk to, on account of all the other cops is out on detail, an' he's got to stick there at the desk."

"A robbery, you say? And a murder?"

"You're damn right it's robbery an' mur-

der! Me an' my pardner was camped on a point about ten miles up the river, when all of a sudden five men busts out of the woods and pulled guns on us, an' told us to throw up our hands. I put mine up, but Bill, he's my pardner, he made a dive for his rifle and the leader of the gang—a big man with a heavy black beard—the one that ordered us to throw up our hands—shot poor Bill dead. Then they dumped our packsacks upside down, and took our dust—two hundred and ninety-five ounces, and they took what grub we had, and smashed our canoe, and threw our rifles in the river, and then, while one of 'em waited there keeping me covered with his revolver, the others shoved two canoes into the water, and the other one joined them, and they headed upriver, leaving me to find my way here afoot."

"When did this happen?" Buck asked.

"Last evening. It took me all day today to get here clawing my way over rocks and through the brush."

"How about your partner—the man you say was shot?"

"How about him! Hell—he's dead! The big man fired two bullets into his head. Poor Bill never had a chance."

Constable Buck glanced into the faces of the sourdoughs. "There you are!" he exclaimed. "I knew it would be only a question of time till Black John added murder to his long list of robberies. But that spells his finish! This robbery and murder were pulled off upriver from here. The others were below—between here and Fortymile. That shows that Black John and his gang are headed back to Halfaday Crick, leaving a trail of crime behind them that a blind man could follow. And believe me, they'll find me right on their tail when they get there! This is my chance—the big chance I've been waiting for. The chance to show Inspector Steele who's the best man—Downey, or me. I'll bet he'll never detail me to inspect another fish net!"

"That's right, Rollo," Bettles agreed somberly. "He won't. An' BUCK ain't no long name to carve on a slab, neither."

IV

OLD CUSH, proprietor of Cushing's Fort, the combined trading post and saloon that served the little community of wanted men that had sprung up on Halfaday Creek, close against the Yukon-Alaska border, laid aside the month-old newspaper he had been reading and peered over the top of his steel-rimmed spectacles as Red John Smith burst into the room.

"What the hell's your hurry?" he asked, as he set a bottle and two glasses onto the bar. "When did you git back from Dawson?"

"I jest got here, right now!" the other replied, grasping the bottle, filling his glass, and downing the fiery liquor at a gulp. "Where's Black John?"

"He ain't got back yet from that prospectin' trip him an' that Siwash hit out on 'bout a week 'fore you hit out fer Dawson. Why? What do you want of him?"

"I wanted to tell him to git to hell over acrost the line as quick as his legs will let him! Downey's comin' up here!"

Cush eyed the man sharply as he refilled his glass. "What the hell's ailin' you? You drunk? S'pose Downey is comin' up here? What's that got to do with John?"

"It's got plenty to do with him! Fact is, Cush, John ain't off on no prospectin' trip with no Siwash. He's be'n down along the river pullin' off a bunch of robberies—him an' four other guys. I hung around couple of days an' heard 'em talkin' about it—Peters, he's investigatin' one of them robberies, an' Cox another one—an' God knows how many more there'll be by now. Downey, he let on he was hittin' up the Klondike to look over some corpse he claimed some cheechako had found, but I mistrusted he'd hit fer here, so I follered him, an' las' night I slipped around him when he was camped on the White a little ways below the mouth of Halfaday. He'll be gittin' here sometime today."

"What kind of robberies was these here John's s'posed to be pulling off?" Cush asked.

"Reg'lar common robberies," the other replied. "Them five is stickin' up cheechakos an' robbin' 'em of their dust."

Cush scowled. "Yer crazy as hell if you think Black John's got anything to do with piddlin' little jobs like them. Howcome you figger it's John? An' howcome Downey does?"

"We figger it was Black John 'cause every guy that got robbed claims it was him—

that's why. These guys have all saw Black John in Dawson, now an' then—an' they all claim it's him that's bossin' them jobs."

"They're a bunch of damn fools, then," Cush replied. "Jest like all cheechakos is."

Shore they're damn fools," Red John agreed. But even a damn fool might know what he seen." The man paused and glanced uneasily toward the door. "I'm gittin' to hell outa here till after Downey goes back," he said. "He seen me there in Dawson, an' if he was to see me up here ahead of him, he'd figger I come up to tip off Black John."

"Don't go shootin' off yer head about what you heard," Cush cautioned. "You never kin tell how the boys might take it. Someone might figger it would be doin' John a good turn to knock Downey off, an' some of 'em might figger that if John had let go all holts an' was startin' on a round of cheap robberies, they could do likewise—an' hell would be poppin' all around. What we got to do is keep our mouth shet till Downey gits here, an' I'll find out what he's got to say."

RED JOHN disappeared, and a few hours later, Corporal Downey stepped into the saloon, to be greeted by Cush with well-feigned surprise. "Well, damn if it ain't Downey, hisself!" He set out a bottle, and slid a glass across the bar. "Up here fer somethin' special?" he asked, "'er jest takin' a walk?"

"Where's Black John?" the officer asked, filling his glass from the bottle, and shoving it toward the other.

"Him an' a Siwash is off on a prospectin' trip way to hell an' gone up the Stewart. This here Siwash, John done him a good turn one time, an' so when he runs onto some crick which he claims is lousy with coarse gold, he lets John in on it. He had the gold, too. I seen it. Nuggets an' dust, too. He had nineteen an' a half ounces which he claimed he scooped outa a rapids behind some rocks in one day—an' that's good money on any man's crick."

"I'll say it is," Downey agreed. "How long has he be'n gone?"

"It's better'n three weeks—yeah, it'll be four weeks tomorrow. Did you want to see him special?"

The officer nodded. "Yeah. The fact is, Cush, there's be'n a series of robberies down along the river, an' every one of the victims claim they was robbed by a five-man gang, an' that Black John was bossin' it."

"They're a bunch of damn fools then," Cush replied. "You know damn well, Downey, that John wouldn't fool around robbin' no cheechakos outa their dust! Hell's fire! You know as well as I do, that time an' agin' John has robbed guys that's robbed cheechakos, an' then give the cheechakos back their dust!"

Downey nodded. "That's right," he agreed. "I don't believe John is mixed up in these robberies any more than you do. But these men believe it was John, and they've reported to us it was John. What I'd like to do is to get John to go back down with me an' confront these guys. I'm bettin' they'll find out they're mistaken."

"Shore they will!" Cush agreed heartily. "You know there ain't an honester man in the Yukon than John is, when it comes to robbin' a cheechako, er any other pore man. Cripes, Downey, I'd trust John with every damn cent I've got in the world."

"So would I," Downey agreed, "an' never give it a second thought. But," he asked with a twinkle in his eye, "how far would you trust him with say a hundred thousand dollars' worth of the Consolidated dust? Or how far would you trust him if you were a crook?"

"That ain't neither here, nor there." Cush affirmed. "Nor neither I wouldn't trust him if I was shakin' dice with him fer the drinks. But these cheechakos ain' the Consolidated nor no other big outfit—nor neither they wasn't shakin' him fer the drinks. An' the chances is they ain't crooks—jest damn fools."

"You got any idea how long John figured to be gone on this prospectin' trip?" the officer asked.

"No. He didn't say. A prospectin' trip is one of them things a man can't never tell how long he's goin' to be gone on it. I'd say, though, that he's liable to show up any day, now. It looks like a man should orta git clean up to the head of the Stewart an' back in a month."

"Guess I'll jest throw my stuff in John's cabin an' hang around a few days. I'd shore like to get this mess cleaned up. I've got a

couple of men workin' on it, down on the river."

V

AS THE survivor of the two victims of the latest robbery had reported to Constable Buck, the five bandits had headed upriver after committing the crime. But after rounding the first point, they pulled ashore and later, under cover of darkness, slid the canoes into the water and slipped silently downriver, camping before daylight in a thicket of spruce well back from the water's edge almost directly across the river from Dawson.

The bearded leader explained the move as they cooked breakfast over a smokeless fire of dry twigs. "That guy'll hit Dawson sometime this evenin' an' squawk his head off, tellin' the police we hit on upriver, an' tomorrow mornin' the police will hit out after us, figurin' we're headin' fer Halfaday Crick. 'Long towards evenin' Lefty, here, he'll slip acrost the river an' git in touch with Cuter. He might have somethin' good doped out by this time.

"I don't know how much them cheechakos is goin' to claim they got robbed of—but it'll be plenty—an' Cuter's goin' to put up a squawk when you turn him over his cut. You kin p'int out to him that guys allus lies about how much they lost, an' swear that them four pokes holds his half of the take—an' that we're givin' him a square deal. At that, he's gittin' a little better'n twenty-five percent—which is a-plenty, seein' how we done all the work."

"I'll say it's a-plenty!" the Ape growled. "Not only we pulled the jobs, but we run onto them cheechakos without no help from Cuter. What I claim, if he don't tip us off to somethin' good today he don't git a damn ounce outa the next jobs we pull off."

The others agreed, and later in the day, Lefty crossed the river.

The cheechako victims of the various robberies had squawked loudly of their losses at the Dawson bars, damning off the police, and cussing the country, in general. On the night after the reported robbery and murder, standing in his accustomed place behind the bar of his notorious Klondike Palace, Cuter Malone bought the survivor of the last outrage a drink and listened sympathetically to his story. As the man turned from the bar, Cuter took a notebook from the top of the big iron safe behind him and added the figure two-ninety-five to the three other entries. "Eight hundred an' three ounces fer the four jobs," he muttered, totaling the figures. "An' my take is four hundred an' one an' a half ounces. That figgers six thousan' an' twenty-four dollars. Not bad fer the time they've be'n at it. It's too damn bad we can't keep the grift a-goin'. But it won't be long now till Black John'll be gittin' back from that prospectin' trip up the Stewart. Lefty an' the Swede seein' him go past 'em, up there, checks with what Red John said when he was in here the other day—about John hittin' out up the Stewart to find some crick a Siwash told him about. If things would break right, an' the police should knock Black John off on sight, everything would be jake. But the hell of it is, when Black John's mixed up in it, things don't never break right—fer me. If the police would arrest him an' charge him with these jobs, the chances is he'd wiggle out of it, somehow er other. They might not take the Siwash's word on where he was at, but God knows how many white men he might of run acrost that could alibi him out of it. I can't afford to take a chanct. I'll slip the boys the word on this Excelsior Development shipment, an' when they pull that one off, we'll close the book. Cripes, if them boys would git picked up, an' find out the guy they think is Black John is a phony, they'd every damn one of 'em spill their guts—an' then where would I be? The best way to work it would be to have 'em knock this here Spokane Blackie off an' then git to hell outa the country."

THE mumbled soliloquy was cut short at sight of Lefty, who had entered inconspicuously by way of the back door, and was beckoning with a crooked finger.

Pocketing the notebook, and picking a bottle and two glasses from the back bar, Cuter slipped from behind the bar, led the way to the little back room, and locked the door behind them. Cuter set the bottle on the table, and both filled their glasses.

"Here's lookin' at you," Lefty said, downed the liquor, and refilled his glass.

"How!" Cuter grunted, his pig-like eyes on the other's face. "An' now come acrost

with my cut." His glance shifted to the notebook that he had tossed onto the table. "Accordin' to my figgers, it'll be four hundred an' one an' a half ounces."

Lefty laughed. "What the hell you doin' —kiddin' me?"

"What do you mean—kiddin'! I've got it right here, black on white, what you boys lifted off'n these guys—eight hundred an' three ounces."

"That's what they claim," Lefty said. "But you know damn well, Cuter, when a guy gits robbed he allus claims he lost two, three times what he did."

Malone scowled, and pointed to the notebook. "Take that first job—three hundred an' twenty-six ounces is what they claimed you boys took 'em fer."

For answer, Lefty drew a little moosehide poke from his pocket and tossed it onto the table. "There's your half of that take—weigh her up."

Taking a set of scales from a shelf, Malone weighed the dust. "Ninety-two ounces," he roared, "an' it ort to be a hundred an' sixty-three!"

"I wisht it was, Cuter, 'cause we'd of got that much, too. We made a balance scale outa two tin cans an' some string, an' we weighed up the dust even every time we pulled a job, an' put your half in the poke. Here's the four pokes fer the four jobs we pulled."

Malone weighed the dust in the other pokes and totaled the figures. "Two hundred an' twenty-two an' a half ounces," he bellowed, "an' you guys got the rest!"

"That's right," Lefty agreed. "An' the rest is jest exactly like you got."

"Yer a damn liar! An' the hull five of you is a bunch of crooks! If a man could only git honest men to work with! But there ain't a guy a man kin trust in the hull damn country." Malone pocketed the dust and eyed the other with a baleful glare. "Well, here's one job you'll come clean on —'cause I know to the last ounce what the take will be! The Excelsior Development Company is shippin' nine thousan' ounces outside day after tomorrow on the *Hannah*. It'll be packed in three wooden boxes—three thousan' ounces to the box. An' when the split comes, I git forty-five hundred ounces—an 'not a damn ounce less! An' what's more, we've got to slip the guy that tipped me off to this shipment ten percent of the take—that's nine hundred ounces—an' the half of it comes outa you boys' cut. We don't dast to shave his cut none 'cause he knows how much is in them boxes. He's a clerk in the Excelsior office."

Lefty nodded. "Okay, Cuter. You'll git every damn ounce that's comin' to you—you kin depend on that. You got us boys wrong. Why the hell would we gyp you when we're dependin' on you to finger all our big plays? It don't make sense. You got the half of every damn ounce we took—honest, you have."

Somewhat mollified by the earnestness of the other's tone, Malone shrugged. "Keep on turnin' me in my half then," he growled. "An' remember, on this here job, I know what it'll be. How's Black John workin' out?"

"He's okay. He knows his stuff, all right. Gee, he's hard. He let that guy have it, last evenin' an' never batted an eye."

"He's hard, all right," Cuter agreed. "Mebbe too damn hard."

"What do you mean?"

"It's like this. I got the word, the other day, that Black John's fixin' to doublecross you boys—an' me, too. A guy from up on Halfaday, name of Red John, got drunk in here an' shot off his mouth. Accordin' to him, our Black John figgers on pullin' jest one big job with you boys, an' then hittin' fer Halfaday Crick. If you kick on goin' up there he'll prob'ly tell you he's hittin' fer the outside by way of the Dalton Trail. But Halfaday Crick is where you'll wind up at—an' it's where you'll stay, too."

"Why would he go to Halfaday Crick? Hell, we're doin' all right down here!"

A MALEVOLENT grin twisted the corners of Malone's thick lips. "You'll do all right, up there, too. That is, the four of you'll lay low fer a long time—in under slabs in the little graveyard out behind Cushing's Fort. Black John's game is simple, an' it's safe—onct he gits you boys on Halfaday. All he'll do is call a miners' meetin' an' hang the four of you."

"Hang us! What would he hang us fer?"

Cuter shrugged. "Figger it out fer yerself. Who'd have all the dust you boys has took, if you an' the Ape, an' Big Mike, an' Slim Carew was out of the way?"

Lefty's eyes widened, and he turned a shade paler. "Why—Black John would."

"Yer damn right he would. That is, onlest you boys beat him to it."

"How do you mean—beat him to it?"

"I mean, knock him off before he gits the chanct to knock you off. It's like this here. You boys lay fer the *Hannah* at the mouth of the White River. Halfaday Crick is up the White. When you've got the boxes of dust, you step behind Black John an' let him have it. An' be shore you git him the first shot. Then you boys come back down here with all the dust. You kin divide his cut up betwixt you—I'll be satisfied with my fifty percent. None of you boys has be'n identified by these cheechakos you've took. Every one of 'em spotted Black John, him bein' sort of conspicuous, like you might say—an' none of 'em paid no attention to the rest of you. You four kin lay low here in Dawson till the stink dies down, an' then slip outside with yer dust."

Lefty's eyes lighted with avarice. "By God, Cuter—I believe yer right. I'm tired of the damn country anyhow!"

"You've got to git Black John first."

"We'll git him—you don't need to worry about that. Why the dirty, doublecrosser! Gittin' us guys up there on Halfaday an' hangin' us! Yer damn right we'll git him!"

Cuter nodded. "Okay. Better git goin', now—an' don't knock him off till you git that Excelsior dust. We need him on that job."

VI

LEFTY returned to the bandit camp just on the edge of the darkness.

"Did Cuter put the finger on a job fer us?" the Ape asked.

"I'll say he did! An' believe me, it's a honey! First off, he squawked like hell about us short-changin' him on his cut. He'd set down what them cheechakos claimed they lost, an' it figgered up to eight hundred an' three ounces, so when he weighed up them four pokes, he let out a yell. But I told him, like Black John said, how guys allus lies about what they lost, an' Cuter he sort of quieted down. Then he slipped me the word about this here gold shipment. He got the tip from a clerk in the Excelsior Development office—nine thousan' ounces, in three wooden boxes is bein' shipped outside day after tomorrow on the *Hannah*."

"How much does nine thousan' ounces figger in money?" Big Mike asked.

The bearded leader produced a pencil and figured on a scrap of paper. "Gold figgers sixteen dollars to the ounce, up here," he said, "an' nine thousan' ounces would be a hundred and forty-four thousan' dollars."

"The hell of it is," Lefty said, "we ain't got no chanct to short-change Cuter on this deal. He knows what the take is. An' besides that we've got to kick in ten percent of our share fer the clerk that tipped Cuter off to the shipment."

"How much does that figger apiece, fer us guys?" the Ape asked.

Again the leader did some figuring. "It figgers jest thirteen thousan' apiece, after we kick in our ten percent fer the clerk."

"An' how much does Cuter git?"

"He'd git seventy-two thousan' minus the seventy-two hundred he slips the clerk."

"Cuter figgers the best place to pull this here steamboat job would be at the mouth of the White River. Halfaday Crick is up the White, accordin' to Cuter, an' the police would figger we hit fer there, instead of which, we drop back down the Yukon."

The bearded one nodded. "His reasonin' seems sound," he agreed.

"Every damn one of them cheechakos claimed Black John was leadin' the gang that robbed 'em. An' a police constable hit out fer Halfaday Crick, today, accordin' to what I heard in Dawson," Lefty said. "Figgerin' that's where we hit fer, after pullin' that last job. An' other constables is downriver workin' on them other jobs, too."

The leader nodded. "This constable will be already headed up the White, then, by the time the *Hannah* gits to the mouth of it.

"Here's the way we'll work it. Lefty, an' the Ape, an' Slim will slip acrost the river an' buy tickets fer Whitehorse, an' board the *Hannah*. I don't dast to show there, 'cause like Lefty said, all them cheechakos seen me an' I'd be knocked off in a minute if I showed up in Dawson. Me an' Mike, we'll hit out tonight fer the mouth of the White, an' be waitin' there when the *Hannah* comes along. Jest before she gits there, one of you boys slip into the pilothouse, an' shoves a gun in the captain's ribs an' tells him to nose the boat up agin' the bank. Another one of

you pulls a gun on the passengers an' herds 'em into the cabin, an' the other one goes onto the lower deck an' covers the crew. Then when she hits the bank, me an' Mike steps outa the bresh an' carries the boxes ashore. Then we'll slip into the bresh till the *Hannah* pulls away."

"Won't them boxes be heavy as hell?" Big Mike asked.

"They'll go damn near two hundred pounds apiece," the leader said. "They make 'em heavy a-purpose, so guys can't slip off with 'em handy. That's why me an' you's got to handle 'em. These other boys couldn't lift two hundred pound."

" 'Tain't right," the Ape growled, "Cuter gittin' better'n sixty thousan', an' us only a lousy thirteen thousan'."

The leader grinned. "If you don't like the arrangement, mebbe you better jump in the river an' swim acrost an' try to talk Cuter outa part of his share."

"Fat chanct!" the Ape grunted. "An' besides, I can't swim a lick."

The grin widened behind the bearded lips. "You won't have to do no swimmin'. Fact is, boys, Cuter's cut on this here job is goin' to be jest exactly nothin'. Them there nine thousan' ounces splits five ways—an' we're the five. It's like this—after we pull off this here job, instead of slippin' back downriver an' dividin' with Cuter, we shove on up the White, an' hit fer the outside on the Dalton Trail."

"What's the Dalton Trail?" Slim asked.

"It's a trail that runs along up the White then cuts acrost through the Chilkat an' comes out at Haines. There's only one police post on it an' we kin duck around that. We're settin' pretty. Nine thousan' ounces cut five ways makes eighteen hundred ounces apiece, an' that figgers twenty-eight thousan', eight hundred dollars. That, on top of what we've got will make better'n thirty thousan' apiece—an' that ain't chicken feed in no man's language, fer the time we've put in. I ain't be'n outside in quite a while, an' with better'n thirty thousan' on me, I could have a damn good time!" He paused and glanced into the faces of the others. "How does that strike you?" he asked.

THE scheme met with universal approval, and the bearded one turned to Lefty. "Okay, then, you boys know what you got to do. You're bossin' the job on the steamboat—an' see that you work it jest like I said. Me an' Mike's hittin' out fer upriver, right now. So 'long. We'll be seein' you boys at the mouth of the White."

When the two had departed the Ape grinned at the others. "Cuter shore played hell when he picked Black John to run this mob," he said. "He gits short-changed on the jobs we already pulled, an' he don't git a damn cent outa this big job."

"That's right," Slim Carew agreed. "Black John's smart."

Lefty regarded the other two with a cynical leer. "He's smart, all right. But he ain't as smart as he thinks he is—by a damn sight."

"Meanin' like what?" the Ape asked.

"Meanin' his 'rithmatic's a little bit off when it comes to splittin' the take. He claimed she'd split five ways, when the fact is, she only splits four."

"How do you figger that out?" Slim regarded the speaker narrowly.

"Git an earful of this," Lefty said. "Black John never figgered on the dust splittin' five ways. He figgered on keepin' every damn ounce of it hisself."

"Baloney!" scoffed Slim. "How the hell could he do that? There'd be the four of us agin' him."

"Yeah," Lefty sneered, "an' where would us four be when we got on Halfaday Crick amongst that gang of his, up there?"

"We ain't goin' to Halfaday Crick," the Ape reminded him. "We're hittin' fer the outside on the Dalton Trail."

"That's what you think. But I know different. Listen, you guys—Cuter ain't so damn dumb when it comes to figgerin', hisself. A guy from up there on Halfaday Crick gits a load on the other day, there in the Klondike Palace, an' shot off his mouth, fer fair. He brags how Black John's runnin' a gang of punks down here on the river, robbin' cheechakos an' the like of that, an' waitin' fer the chanct to pull a big job. An' when he pulls it, he aims to steer his punks up to Halfaday, prob'ly tellin' us he's headin' up the Dalton Trail, an' then call a miners' meetin' an' hang the four of us, an' keep every damn ounce fer hisself, barrin' mebbe ten ounces apiece er so he'd pass out amongst his gang, up there, fer votin' to hang us."

The Ape's eyes widened in horror. "By God," he cried, I've heered how they hang guys, up there!"

"Shore they do," Lefty said. "Cuter, he's got it doped out like this here—we pull the *Hannah* job at the mouth of the White, jest like Black John said. Then, when him an' Big Mike gits them heavy boxes packed ashore, an' the *Hannah* goes on, we knock Black John off, load the dust in the canoes, an' hit back downriver. Then we slip Cuter his cut, an' we divide the rest of the dust up betwixt the four of us. Then we lay low fer a while, watch fer the chanct to hit outside with our dust. That's the way he figgers it. But tellin' you about me—I don't see no sense in us hittin' back downriver an' slippin' Cuter his cut on this here *Hannah* job. We kin find the Dalton Trail, all right. I've heard tell how Jack Dalton drives cattle in over it, so it's bound to be easy to foller. We'll hit fer the outside with them nine thousan' ounces, an' only have to cut it four ways, instead of five.

The Ape smote his palm with a hairy fist. "Black John figgerin' to hang us an' keepin' all the dust fer hisself! The dirty, double-crosser—yer damn right we'll knock him off! An' me, I be'n figgerin' him fer a square guy. It's gittin' so's a man can't trust no one."

Slim Carew's eyes narrowed. "That's what us guys git fer throwin' in with him. He'll, we know'd he was an outlaw—everyone knows it. It would serve us right if he had of hung us—fer bein' a bunch of saps. But I figgered he was one outlaw we could trust. Damn a man that will go back on a pal! We'll knock him off, all right, an' while we're about it, why not knock off Big Mike, too? That'll only leave the three of us to split that nine thousan' ounces—three thousan' apiece, besides them two's cut on the other jobs."

Lefty agreed enthusiastically, but the Ape frowned. "How long is this here Dalton Trail?" he asked. "There's three of them there wooden gold boxes, an' Black John figgered they'd go damn near two hundred pound apiece. I can't pack no two hundred pound over no trail, an' neither kin you. An' there's our grub besides. Why not save Mike to help with the packin' till we git to the end of the trail?"

"We'll git the dust over the trail, all right, onct we git it," Lefty said. "We'll kill us a moose, an' make pokes outa his hide, an' knock them boxes apart an' stick the dust in the pokes, an' then we kin double back on the trail."

"I agree with Lefty," Slim said. "I don't trust Mike. He's crooked as hell. He might lay fer a chanct to knock us off an' keep all the dust fer hisself. We better git him when we git Black John, jest as quick as the *Hannah* gits out of sight."

"Okay," Lefty said, "she's all settled, then. An' jest so there won't be no mistake—like all of us jumpin' the same guy—I an' the Ape will both take Black John, an' Slim will 'tend to Mike. We'll slip around behind 'em an' let 'em have it."

VII

CONSTABLE BUCK reached the Ogilvie trading post as darkness settled over the Yukon. The trader recognizing him as the rookie that had manhandled the old Indian Blackbird, greeted him with a none-too-cordial nod as he announced his intention of spending the night:

"I'm on my way up to Halfaday Crick to arrest Black John Smith," Buck announced importantly.

"Goin' to git even with him fer showin' you up, that time you balled up that trap-stealin' job, eh? I thought Downey sent you on down to Fortymile to answer charges of misusin' a prisoner. Same Steele must be out of his head—sendin' you up after Black John. I'll bet Downey'd never done it."

Buck flushed hotly. "Corporal Downey is not sending me anywhere," he snapped. "I'm not taking orders from Downey. I'm working out of Fortymile under Inspector Steele. But I'm making this trip on my own. I found out that Black John and four of his gang have been robbing cheechakos along the river, and have hit for Halfaday Crick. So I'm going up there and get him. I'll show Corporal Downey that if he won't bust up the Halfaday Crick gang, I will! Can I get something to eat?"

The trader regarded him gravely. "Supper's over, sonny," he said, "but I'll see what I can do. What would you like—a sugar tit?"

"There ought to be a law against insulting policemen," Buck replied, "and never mind

about the grub. I'll cook my own supper down by the river."

The trader grinned. "Downey, he's shore goin' to be glad of your help, up there on Halfaday Crick," he said.

"Downey's not on Halfaday. He's gone off up the Klondike to investigate a corpse some fellow found. It's a damn sight easier to investigate a corpse than it is to handle Black John Smith."

"Guess yer right, at that. But if Downey's gone up the Klondike he shore took a hell of a roundabout way to git there."

"What do you mean?"

"Meanin' that he went through here a few days back. Stopped in fer some terbacker, an' shoved on upriver. He said he was headin' fer Halfaday."

"Why would he go up to Halfaday when he knew Black John was operating along the river?" Buck demanded.

The trader shrugged. "He didn't tell me, an' I shore as hell didn't ask him. Mebbe he didn't know Black John was operatin' along the river. If he did, mebbe he figgered the best way to git him would be to slip up to Halfaday an' wait for him to go back there. Or mebbe he jest went up there to pick some flowers. You can't never tell about Downey."

BUCK scowled, a gleam of suspicion in his eyes. "I don't believe Corporal Downey hit for Halfaday Crick. And I'm not so sure you're not just telling me that to head me off. I noticed that time I arrested Blackbird and brought him in here, you seemed mighty friendly with Black John—and so did Corporal Downey. It may well be that I've stepped right into the middle of a damn dirty mess—a mess that will involve you and Downey and God knows how many more—a mess that may explain why such a notorious outlaw as Black John has never been arrested and brought to book."

The trader nodded gravely. "That's right, bub—mebbe you have. If I ever stepped in a mess like that I'd shore track it around some."

"If Downey's gone to Halfaday he'll find me right on his heels, and if I can get to the bottom of this conspiracy there's no telling where I'll go. It's the big chance I've been waiting for."

The trader chuckled. "Well, you've got it. An' there shore ain't no tellin' where you'll go. 'Cause when you explain this here conspiracy to Sam Steele, he's goin' to blow a gaskit."

Owing to certain misadventures anent the handling of his canoe on the upriver journey, two days passed before Buck camped late in the afternoon on the west bank of the Yukon, a mile below the mouth of the White River. Dog-tired from bucking the current, he sat with his back against a rock and filled his pipe. A steamboat hove in sight downriver, and he eyed her with a frown. "Gosh, if I'd known the *Hannah* was due upriver, I could have had her put me off at the White River and saved myself a hell of a lot of work," he muttered. Then his brow cleared. "But I'm glad I didn't. If I had I'd never tumbled onto that conspiracy. That trader's going to find he talked too much for his own good. If Downey really is on Halfaday, and I can slip up and get the evidence that he's playing in with Black John, I'll get my corporal's stripes right away. Inspector Steele might even put me in command of the Dawson detachment!"

The frown again returned to his brow as the *Hannah* suddenly altered her course and headed for the bank a mile or so above. "Going to land some prospector," he muttered. "Maybe that's the mouth of the White River. It sure can't be much farther along. I've been expecting to hit it all day."

The steamboat backed away and continued on upstream. Then suddenly the sound of a shot, and another, and another reached his ears from the spot where the steamboat had landed. "What the devil!" he exclaimed. Then, suddenly his muscles tensed. "Maybe that's Black John and his gang! Maybe they found some prospector was going to land there, and laid for him! If I can slip up and get the drop on Black John, he'll have to order his men to throw away their guns to keep from getting plugged. Cripes, if I can round up that gang single-handed it will sure show Downey up! Even if they do start shooting I'll have the advantage. I'll be under cover, and they'll most likely be in the open. I'll show 'em I didn't get my target medal, and my rapid fire medal down at Regina for nothing!"

Be it said to Constable Buck's credit, that his courage was far and away ahead of his

judgment. Drawing the service revolver from its holster, he checked the loaded cylinder, then returning it, he proceeded cautiously on foot though the bush. It was slow going, clambering over rocks, and inching his way through the thick scrub, being careful to make no slightest noise.

An hour later, he crept behind an upstanding sliver of rock and peered around it to see three men seated beside a small fire.

Beyond them two bodies lay face downward upon the sand above which hung a tea pail. With tight-pressed lips, he drew the revolver from its holster and leveled at the three beside the fire.

VIII

ONE by one, Lefty, the Ape, and Slim Carew slipped aboard the *Hannah* at the Dawson wharf and mingled with the passengers. As the boat approached the mouth of the White River, Lefty edged toward the pilothouse. On the upper deck the Ape took his place in the bow, while Slim Carew slipped below where the deckhands lolled about on the boxes of freight. As they approached the mouth of the White, the Ape suddenly drew a revolver from beneath his shirt, leveled it, and bawled an order for the passengers who were seated in chairs or strung along the rail, to bunch in front of the cabin—or else. At the same moment, Lefty slipped into the pilothouse, and shoved the muzzle of his gun into the captain's ribs. "Head fer shore!" he commanded, in a low, hard voice. "Run her in there at the mouth of the White. An' do it quick." On the lower deck Slim covered the crew.

As the boat nosed against the bank, two big men leaped aboard, and without a word, each picked up a small heavy wooden box, from a spot indicated by Slim, and carried them ashore. Then the heavily bearded one returned, and picked up the last of the three boxes and stepped ashore with it. From the deck the passengers watched the procedure, wide-eyed. "Black John!" someone gasped, and the Ape grinned.

"You guessed it. That's him, all right. So 'long, folks. Glad I didn't have to knock none of you off. We don't hurt no one that don't hurt us."

A moment later, he was joined by Lefty, and as the two big men on the shore covered the passengers with drawn revolvers, the three bandits leaped ashore, and the *Hannah* backed out into the stream and headed upriver.

As the boat reached midstream, the bearded one regarded the others with a grin. "Everything come off jest like clockwork," he said. "An' here's nine thousan' ounces that Cuter don't git no part of. We'll pack the stuff couple hundred yards up the White, where that sand patch is. The diggin's easy there, an' we'll cache it till mornin'—jest in case. Then we'll split her up, an' start packin' it up the trail." Reaching down, he picked up one of the boxes. Big Mike picked up another and followed him toward the sand strip. The Ape glanced at Lefty and reached under his shirt. Lefty shook his head and stepped closer. "Not yet," he whispered out of the corner of his mouth. "Wait till they git the stuff over on the sand. No use in us liftin' our guts out when we got them to do it. One of 'em'll come back fer the other box, then we'll foller 'em over to the sand, an' when he stoops to let it down, we'll blast the two of 'em to hell. Remember—me an' you takes Black John, an' Slim 'tends to Mike.

Big Mike returned for the third box, and as he lifted it and headed for the sand strip where the bearded one waited, the three fell in behind him. As he stooped to lower the box to the sand three shots rang out almost simultaneously. Big Mike pitched forward atop the box, and the bearded one jerked spasmodically as two heavy-caliber bullets tore through his chest, spun half around, and crashed face downward upon the sand.

For a moment the three conspirators stood with drawn guns eyeing the prostrate forms. "They're finished, all right," Lefty said, slipping his gun beneath his shirt. "An' now, like Black John said, we better bury these boxes in the sand till we git organized to begin packin' it out. Gee, think of it—three thousan' ounces apiece, besides what we git when we frisk Black John an' Mike."

The three set to work and soon had scooped out a shallow hole into which they rolled the three heavy boxes. Covering them with sand, they dragged a blanket over it a few times to smooth the surface, then tracked around over the spot till it presented the same surface as the rest of the strip.

"Hadn't we ort to bury them guys?" the

Ape asked as they removed the pokes from the dead men's pockets.

"It's too much work," Lefty replied. "Besides, I'm hungrier'n hell. Let's cook supper, an' after we've et, we kin drag 'em over an 'throw 'em in the river—it's easier."

THE others agreed, and collecting firewood, they soon had a fire going, and the tea pail set aboil. Squatting about the fire at the edge of the bush, the three were suddenly startled by a sharp barked command. "Hand up!"

Three pairs of eyes focused upon the figure that had stepped from behind a rock, not thirty feet distant—a figure in the uniform of the Northwest Mounted Police.

Lefty's hand shot beneath his shirt, and came out with his revolver. There was a loud report, and he slumped forward across the fire. The Ape reached the bush in a single leap and disappeared from sight. Slim Carew elevated his hands above his head and eyed the officer, who had him covered.

"Unbutton your shirt," Buck commanded, "and let your gun fall out, then back away from it."

The man complied, and as the constable picked up the gun he could hear the brush crashing with rapidly diminishing sounds as the Ape placed distance between himself and the arm of the law. Keeping Slim covered, Buck stepped over and glanced down at the dead man. "Good God," he cried, "that's Black John Smith!"

Slim favored him with a twisted grin. "That's right," he admitted. "The king of the outlaws of Halfaday Crick. He don't look much like no king, now—the dirty doublecrosser!"

"What do you mean—doublecrosser?" Buck asked, and listened as Slim unfolded a sordid tale of plot and counter plot, being careful, however to make no mention of the three heavy boxes of dust that lay buried directly beneath Buck's feat.

"Nice bunch of guys," he grinned, when the other had finished. "We'll camp here. It's too dark to go back to my camp. We'll eat first, and then you can get busy and bury those three."

"Why not throw 'em in the river? That's what we was goin' to do."

"No. The manual says to bury all bodies where other disposition is impractical. It don't say how deep to bury 'em, so we won't waste much time."

Supper over, Buck watched while the other scooped three shallow graves in the sand, rolled the bodies in, and covered them. Then he handcuffed his prisoner. "Why," he asked, "were you all on the *Hannah?*"

"We wasn't. Only me an' the Ape, an' Lefty. Black John an' Big Mike was waitin' fer us here. We got the tip that a guy was goin' outside on the *Hannah* with a lot of dust, an' we was goin' to pinch him off here, an' then hit outside on the Dalton Trail. But the guy worn't on the boat, so we made the captain land anyhow. Then we know'd Black John an' Mike would be mad, an' mebbe knock us off fer bunglin' the job—so we beat 'em to it."

Buck nodded. "The main thing is that Black John is out of the way for good. I was headed for Halfaday to get him. According to the trader at Ogilvie, Corporal Downey's up there now, so in the morning, we'll go back to my camp a little way down the river and pick up my canoe, and shove on up to Halfaday. I'll bet Downey'll be sore when he finds out he slipped up on the job, and I stuck on you fellow's trail till the gang was wiped out." Slim nodded. "Yeah, most likely he will. But it was me knocked off Black John—not you. I'd ort to git some credick fer that, when my trial comes up."

"That will be up to the Crown prosecutor and the jury," Buck said.

"Why not hit back down to Dawson?" Slim asked. "By God, if them guys up on Halfaday figger I knocked Black John off, they're liable to knock the both of us off to git even."

"They won't dare to bother me," Buck replied. "They won't bother anyone any more, now Black John's gone. He was the brains of that gang."

"Okay, if yer bound to go up there," Slim said. "But we don't have to go back to yer camp in the mornin'. We got more'n enough grub fer the trip right here, an' the canoe Black John an' Mike come up in, is hid here in the bresh."

IX

WITH the shot that killed Lefty ringing in his ears, the Ape ran crashing through the brush until, completely winded,

he paused for breath in a spruce thicket. Hearing no sound of pursuit, his courage returned. "The cop got Lefty," he muttered, "an' that leaves only me an' Slim to split them nine thousan' ounces. If I kin sneak back an' knock the cop off, we kin git away with it."

Slowly and noiselessly he worked his way back until he lay behind the very rock from which Buck had shot Lefty, reaching it after the bodies had been buried and Buck and his manacled prisoner sat talking beside the fire. Slipping the revolver from beneath his shirt, he leveled it at the constable's back. As he was about to press the trigger a thought occurred to him, and he lowered the weapon as a slow grin twisted his lips. "Gee," he muttered to himself, "I come damn near pullin' a boner! If Slim ain't spilt his guts about them boxes, the cop'll take him away, an' I git the whole nine thousan' ounces, myself. If he has told him, an' he starts diggin' 'em up, I'll plug him, an' Slim, too. Slim's got it comin', at that, 'cause chances is, if there was jest him an' me alone, he'd lay fer a chanct to knock me off. He's that crooked."

HE LAY there listening to the two talk until finally they rolled in their blankets. Then he slipped noiselessly away, and spent an uncomfortably chilly night in the spruce thicket. In the early morning, he watched from a point of vantage on the hillside as the two breakfasted, made up a pack of supplies, slipped the cached canoe into the water, and headed up the White. As they disappeared around a bend he rose to his feet and headed for the sand spit where the three boxes of gold lay in the shallow cache.

To his vast relief he found that there was food left in the packs of the two big men, and lighting a fire, he fried thick slices of salt pork, boiled a pot of tea and ate ravenously. Then he proceeded downriver afoot. "The cop said his camp is only a little ways down. I'll git his canoe, an' load the dust in it an' git to hell outa here. No tellin' what Slim will do—the crook might tell the cop where the dust is cached, if he could make some kind of a deal."

Returning with the canoe an hour later, he beached it on the sandspit, dropped to his knees, and scooping the sand away with his hands, uncovered the three wooden boxes. Rising to his feet, he stood eyeing the treasure gloatingly. "Nine thousan' ounces—all mine! How much did Black John say that figgers? A hundred an' forty-four thousan' dollars. Gee—I'm rich!"

X

FAR up a little feeder of a tributary of the Stewart River, Black John Smith eyed the Indian who faced him across the little fire. "It shore looks like we've got somethin' here, Amos," he said. "We'll set our stakes, an' I'll slip down to Dawson an' record the claim. We've be'n away for quite a while, so I'll slip up to Halfaday first an' see how things is goin'. There's no hurry about the recordin'. Way up here there ain't no one goin' to crowd in on us. If this here proposition holds up clean down to bedrock, you're goin' to be richer even than Carmack. I'm shore obliged to you fer lettin' me in on it."

The Indian shrugged. "Huh. You good mans. Me—I'm ain' fergit dat tam you giv' me poke of dus' w'en me an' my woman los' de boat an' all de nets in de ice. Seexty-t'ree ounce, she was een dat poke. I'm say I'm pay you back som'tam—an' I do it."

The big man grinned. "I'll say you done it—with interest. That poke I tossed you that day turned out to be the best sixty-three ounces I ever invested." He rose, tossed his pack into the waiting canoe, and shoved off. "So long, Amos! Be seein' you before long."

He ran the Stewart without incident, and several days later slanted the canoe across the Yukon opposite the mouth of the White. As he approached the west bank he caught sight of a canoe beached on a sandspit a short distance up the smaller river, caught, also, a fleeting glimpse of a man down on his knees, apparently burrowing into the sand with his hands. Then the brush along the bank hid the man from view, and he beached his canoe a short distance below, and proceeding noiselessly through the bush, brought up behind the upstanding rock only a few feet distant, just as the man rose to his feet and stood staring down at the flat tops of three wooden boxes. "Nine thousan' ounces—all mine!" the man exclaimed aloud. "How much did Black John say that

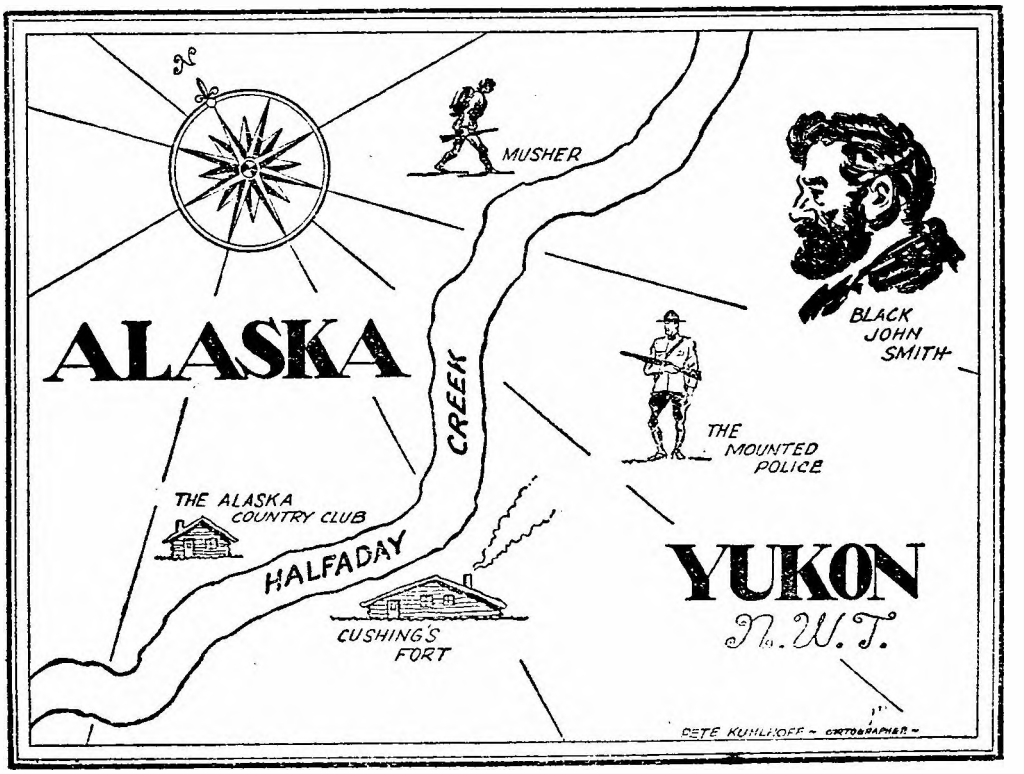
figgers? A hundred an' forty-four thousan' dollars! Gee—I'm rich!"

Stepping into the open within a few feet of the man, Black John spoke: "Comparatively so—for a cheechako—if the ounces are there. But—why take my name in vain?"

The man whirled at the words, and stood for a moment as though paralyzed, his huge hands dangling limply almost to his knees. His eyes widened in horror, his mouth gaped open, and his whole frame shuddered. The barrel chest heaved convulsively, and with a choking, gurgling scream, he turned and plunged headlong into the canoe which shot out into the river, whirled around in an eddy, and promptly overturned. For a moment or two the long, ape-like arms thrashed the water, then shot straight upward as the misshapen body disappeared beneath the surface, and the empty canoe drifted out into the Yukon.

So sudden and unexpected was the man's behavior that Black John stood speechless for several moments after his disappearance. Then, a slow grin widened the lips beneath the heavy black beard. "Well, I'll be damned," he muttered. "Some miscreant, no doubt." Then, as his eyes came to rest on the three wooden boxes, the grin widened. "The amount he mentioned is worth contemplatin'," he muttered. But the way he acted I shore must be a terrorizin' lookin' object. He mentioned my name. How the hell did he figger I'm mixed up in it?"

Droppin' to his knees, he lifted the boxes from the sand and regarded them with a puzzled frown. "Accordin' to their heft they're full of dust, all right. An' both the Excelsior Development Company an' the Consolidated ships their dust outside in boxes like these. Either one of them big outfits losin' the dust don't give me no pain in the neck. They're ruinin' the country for a poor man with their damn dredges. But how the hell could one man have got 'em here? This ain't a one-man job, by a damn sight. Either this guy knocked off his pals, or he's doublecrossin' 'em by removin' the dust while they're away for some reason 'er other. Any way you look at it, the thing savors of onderhandedness. The ways of these damn crooks is shore sad to contemplate. An' it's my plain duty to see that they don't profit by no sech carryin's on." So saying, he carried the boxes, one by one, to a point some



three hundred yards upstream, and deposited them in a recess beneath an undercut bank below the surface of the water.

"It ain't been sech a bad month," he mused, as he brushed out his tracks, stepped into his canoe and headed up the White, "what with that strike up the Stewart, an' this here little windfall I stumbled onto. An' when I hit out with that Siwash, Cush claimed I was wastin' my time!"

XI

AFTER waiting on Halfaday three days for Black John's return Corporal Downey stepped into the saloon one morning and faced Cush across the bar. "I can't hang around here any longer," he said. "What with these robberies goin' on down along the river, there's no tellin' what'll happen, an' I've got to be there. When John shows up you tell him I want to see him down to headquarters."

Cush poured himself a drink, and shoved the bottle and a glass across the bar. "Drink up," he said. Then, after a moment's pause, "Fact is, Downey, I'm sorta worried about John, myself. Red John was down to Dawson—got back jest ahead of you—an' he told me about John headin' a gang of four robbers down there. I told him he was a damn fool—that John wouldn't mess around in no sech doin's. But where the hell is he? He's had time to go up the Stewart an' git back before this. Tell you what I'm a-goin' to do—I'm a-goin' down to Dawson with you. One-Armed John's out back helpin' the klooch smoke some meat. I'll let him tend bar whilst I'm gone. Bein' only one-handed he can't steal only half of what one of the other boys could. Wait till I tell him, an' throw my pack together, an' we'll hit out."

And so it was that at the foot of the Fish Rapids the two met Constable Buck and his manacled prisoner. The constable eyed Downey wtih just a suspicion of truculence. "Did you arrest Black John?" he asked.

Downey shook his head. "No, he wasn't on Halfaday."

The constable smiled. "You remember that quite a while ago I said that if I ever got the chance I'd clean up on Black John and his gang of outlaws—and I've done it!"

Downey seemed unimpressed. "Have, eh? Was it quite a chore?" he asked quietly.

"I'll say it was!"

"Sam Steele detail you to do it?"

"Inspector Steele had nothing to do with it. In fact, he gave me a very insignificant tail—inspecting fish nets. While on this detail, I heard these reports of the robberies along the river, and realizing that my chance had come at last to show that I can handle a really big situation, I disregarded my orders and hit out after the robbers."

Downey grinned. "That'll prob'ly tickle Sam. Nothin' he likes better'n to have some rookie disregard an order."

Constable Buck flushed. "He'll be glad I disregarded this one," he replied. "I sure cleaned up on the Black John gang. Black John, and two of the others are dead, and I took this prisoner. Only one of 'em got away."

"Black John dead!" cried both Cush and Corporal Downey in the same breath. "Who killed him?"

"I did," the prisoner cut in. "The damned skunk was figurin' on doublecrossin' us—an' I knocked him off. Him an' Big Mike, too."

"And I got there just after it happened," Buck said, "and shot one of the others, and arrested this one."

For an hour or more Corporal Downey and Cush listened as Slim Carew gave a detailed account of the devious machinations of the gang. At its conclusion Cush shook his head, sadly:

"I shore can't believe it. An' what's more I ain't believin' it till I see Black John's body. He wouldn't of mixed up in no sech doin's if he was sober—nor yet if he was drunk. If it is true, he musta gone crazy. Anyways, if he's dead, us boys'll fetch his body up to the Fort an' bury it decent. Then I'll be pullin' out. Halfaday ain't never goin' to be the same no more, if John's gone."

"If John's gone my work's goin' to be a damn sight harder," Downey added. "He shore kept the men on Halfaday in line."

Slim Carew eyed the officer craftily. "How about me an' you makin' a deal, Sergeant?" he asked.

"Corporal's the word. What kind of a deal?"

"Well, s'pose I'd tell you where nine thousan' ounces of dust is cached in three wooden boxes—dust that was shipped out

on the *Hannah* couple of days ago. There's bound to be a big stink about it—an' you'd git the credick for findin' it."

"Nine thousand ounces of dust?" Constable Buck cried. "You never mentioned any nine thousand ounces of dust!"

"A guy don't have to sing his hull song to onct. An' you bein' jest a common cop, couldn't do no dickerin', if you wanted to."

"The credit belongs to me!" Buck cried. "I was the one who rounded up the gang!"

Downey ignored him. "You mean you men got nine thousan' ounces off the *Hannah?*" he asked, turning to Slim.

"We sure did. An' we've got it cached where you'll never find it if you don't dicker."

Corporal Downey eyed Buck. "How long was it after the landin' of the *Hannah* before you jumped these men?" he asked.

"I'd say about an hour."

"Okay. We'll be pullin' out, now."

SLIM CAREW scowled at the officer. "How about that deal?" he asked.

"I never make no deals with a crook," Downey replied. "Even if I did, I wouldn't have to bother with you. If there was nine thousan' ounces in three boxes, they would weigh right around two hundred pounds apiece, an' there ain't no three men like that could cache them boxes in an hour's time where I can't find 'em in half a day's search. If you'd have left Black John alive to cache 'em, it might be different."

As they were about to step into the canoes, another canoe rounded the bend and beached at the foot of the portage. All four stared at the huge black-bearded man who stepped ashore and regarded them with a grin. Then the grin faded from his lips and he stared in return. "What the hell's the matter with you guys?" he demanded. "You look like yer starin' at a ghost!"

Slim Carew broke the momentary silence with a shrill scream: "It's—it's Black John!" Whirling about, he headed for the bush, but Downey promptly tripped him, and turned to the big man with a grunt. 'This man did think you was a ghost," he replied, "an' the rest of us weren't so sure. 'Specially after Constable Buck, here, reported that he saw you dead and buried." He turned to Buck, who was still staring speechless into the big man's face. "After this, Constable," he said, sarcastically, "when you bury a man John's size, you'd better lay a rock on his grave to keep him from gettin' up."

"But—but—I did see him buried! I—I'd swear to it!"

Black John grinned. "You might swear to it, Rollo," he said. "But damned if *I'll* believe you."

Slim Carew, white and shaking, eyed the speaker narrowly. "You ain't Black John!" he cried suddenly. "I seen it when you grinned. Black John's teeth is yaller, an' kinda snaggy like—an' yourn's white, an' even!" He turned to the others. "This guy ain't Black John. He's a phony."

Cush grasped the big man's hand and wrung it warmly. "By God, John," he said, "when them guys told me you was dead, it seemed like the end of the world."

"There seems to be some slight misonderstandin' here somewheres," Black John said. "S'pose we onearth this here corpse that's s'posed to be me—that is, if he's buried anywheres clost."

"He's buried shallow in the sand at the mouth of the river," Buck said.

"Let's go," Black John replied. "I'll shore be interested in inspectin' him."

Arriving at the sandpit some time later, Buck led the way to the spot where the three bodies lay in their shallow graves. Uncovering them was the work of a few minutes, and all stared down at the body of the huge black-bearded cheechako. "Pretty good replica, at that," Black John opined, "barrin', mebbe, a few moral defects the deceased ondoubtless acquired previous to his demise."

Slim Carew was staring at a hole that had recently been scooped in the sand at a point not far distant. "The dust!" he cried, his voice trembing with rage. "The dust's gone—all three boxes. The Ape musta snuck back an 'got it. He's got away with the hull damn works! Nine thousan' ounces of dust! I allus know'd he was crooked!"

Black John regarded the speaker as he shook his head gravely. "Tch, tch, tch—ain't that hell? But—let that be a lesson to you, my good man—shun evil companions, because crime don't pay."

The Surface of the Sea Might Look Empty—but There Were a Lot of Good Ships on the Bottom

LAST MAN UP—LIVES!

By WILLIAM L. ROHDE

"HEY YOU!"

I rolled on my side and received a frying sensation from the deck planks, heated like a grill by the flaming tropic sun. I went back on my stomach and twisted my head towards the dock instead. A big man who looked like a bucko mate in a better-than-mate's white linen suit stood staring down at me and the *Battledore II*. His broad, bronzed face had a truculent, demanding expression.

"Hey you," the tone was harder then before, "where's Al Hammers?"

I don't like bucko mates or bucko people. I rocked to my heels and splashed suntan oil liberally on my smarting side, rubbing it in carefully. I didn't look at bucko again until his heels sounded at the dock end of the *Battledore II's* short wooden gangway. Then I stood up.

"Stay off," I said.

The big man stopped and looked at me carefully. Then he switched the threatening look which had gathered around his eyes and mouth for one of bland greeting. I didn't like him any better.

"Say," he said smoothly, "if you've got black hair under that sun hat I'll bet you're Al Hammers."

"Might be a good bet," I answered, "who told you to make it?"

"Man named Grant in Boston. I've got a letter from him."

"Come aboard and let's see it."

We went into the little pilot house and

I stuffed my carved briar while I glanced at the letter, a few lines on bond as pure as white plastic. It was a short note—executive memo style—from Emory Grant introducing Mr. Nicholas Becker.

Grant was a solid Boston tycoon—solid enough to have given me a cut from a little business I transacted for him in Newfoundland with which I bought the *Battledore II.* That is, I bought half of her.

The other slice of her was owned by Sandy Parker, who put up her piece of Newfoundland payoff. I liked the *Battledore II* a lot. Maybe I liked Sandy's polished blondeness even more. So far I hadn't been able to tell myself—but with Sandy looking after her piece of the ship by taking this tropical vacation with me, maybe I'd find out.

Becker had been studying the ship while I read the note and rolled my thoughts around in my head.

"This is an ex-patrol boat," he said, "I thought you had a six-bitter?"

"That was the first *Battledore,*" I admitted. "She was one of the forty-tonners built in 1924. This baby is one of the later class, from War Assets."

Becker took out a handkerchief and dabbed at his collar. He probably expected me to offer him a drink. I didn't.

Finally he pulled out a cigar and bit the end of it off. He started to spit it on the deck, looked at me, and went out and aimed it overside instead.

"You're Hammers, then?" he asked.

"All right," I said, "I'm Al Hammers. What can I do for you."

Nicholas Becker was no pussy-footer. "Help me pick up half a million dollars."

"Delighted. Where is it? In your room at the Queen's Park Hotel?"

"Nope, but you know the territory as well as you do the Port of Spain. It's up on the Murman Coast."

THAT bounced me into silence. I watched a British launch put out from the customs dock, manned by husky blacks in clean white shorts. Beyond them I could almost pick out the houses on the low hills of Trinidad. The sun was a keen blade along the blue of the harbor.

Murman Coast! I remembered empty seas and desolation, and ice, and above all the cold. Cold that wraps you up in a chilled steel blanket, and you can't get away from it because there's nowhere to go.

"Too far," I said, "and too nice here."

Becker shrugged. "O. K., but a third of a half million is a lot of money. Don't you want to hear the details?"

Of course I wanted to hear the story. Sandy and I had nothing to do in particular, and the *Battledore II* could make the run. She was in the best shape she'd seen since she was built. Some fifteen thousand dollars had gone into her at Norfolk in the shape of auxiliary tanks, a new direction finder and general overhaul. I could use some dough.

Still it wasn't the money, maybe . . . but I couldn't help thinking. Half a million dollars! Lying up there on the cold Murman Coast. Then I snorted. Where would that kind of dough come from up there? The land of fish and not many of those.

Becker was watching me. "You're wondering," he said, "and I don't blame you. Like to hear about it?"

I put flame to the top of the briar. "Shoot."

"Remember the *Driscoll?*" he asked.

"Yea, and the *Baker* and the *Scott* and the *Grey.* I was with them when they got it."

"That's right. I was mate on the *Driscoll* when they got us coming out of the White Sea in 1942. There was five of us in a boat that got ashore near Cape Cherry and Vaisinski, with a gold and silver cargo that came out of the invaded countries through Archangel. The stuff's still there."

I puffed a blue cloud in front of my face as a think-shield. There had been a lot of wild tales about some of the treasure that had flowed out of Europe during the war via the North Russian route. Rumors of piracy—and worse—that are still being worried by the Coast Guard Merchant Marine hearing units.

I figured in my head. "That's about half a ton of gold."

"No, about five hundred pounds. The rest is jewelry and stuff from Hungary and Rumania and God knows where. Here—"

He handed me a tissue package. I spread the paper and saw a brooch of rather awkward design, but flashing all the fires of the rainbow. Rubies and diamonds, clustered

on metal like colored candies on a birthday cake.

"There's a piece of it," he continued, "and the rest is up there in the frozen ground. Waiting for us."

I handed the packet back to him. "A guy wrote a book a few years ago," I said more or less to the breeze, "and he told about all the treasure he'd found and where there was a lot more. I knew the guy. He never found a thing, but he sold a lot of books."

Becker had patience. "I put this stuff down myself," he said, "and here's how much I think it's worth to go back."

He pulled a second package from the breast pocket of his white linen coat. "There's four grand. It's yours, win, lose, or draw, if you'll try the trip."

I riffled the corners of the thick wad of bills. There was forty C-notes or close to it. I still didn't like Nicholas Becker, and I didn't want to leave the tropic sun and go back above the Arctic Circle.

The big man kept talking. "You can't lose. If I don't get the stuff we just come back and you're in at least a few hundred. If the Russkies catch us we're naturalist or adventurers and they'll just chase us off. Of course, if you're afraid of 'em, or of the trip—still, you know what you can do with this boat by now. I know you had her bow strengthened and put extra tanks in her."

"You can stop talking," I said, "we'll get under way for the States in the morning. You just spent four grand."

Sandy came aboard about five o'clock from her shopping expedition in Port of Spain. I talked to her in her cabin about the Becker deal, while she ran a new comb through those disturbing blond curls.

"You're the skipper, Al," she said when I stopped talking.

"We can leave you in Miami for awhile—"

The wide blue eyes whipped into me like twin rockets. "You're not leaving me anywhere. I'm going with you. I'm not—"

She caught herself and anchored her arguments to the ship instead of me. "I'm half-owner. I want to keep an eye on my property, or no deal."

I grinned. "O. K. Fireball. Maybe you'll freeze your tootsies."

The comb worked out a neat part. Only one blue eye peeked at me as she said, "I don't freeze easily."

She had me there. I went back to the ward-room to entertain Becker.

SANDY turned out a solid dinner for us. Steaks from the new freezer and a big salad.

I watched Becker sneak wolf looks at Sandy when he thought I wasn't watching him. I couldn't blame him for that. In blue shorts and halter, with her skin glowing from a fresh tan just three shades darker than her gold-toned hair—but I still didn't like Nicholas Becker.

Barnes, my Scotch engineer, and young Kirk and his buddy, Joe Fiske, my pair of mates and ordinary seamen and all the ratings in between, came aboard about ten. We were playing gin rummy in the cabin when they stopped in to pick up a cold can of orange juice. Trinidad liquor is hard on the pipes.

After they had gone Becker asked, "Is that all the crew you carry?"

"Right now, yes. They double in the engine room or on deck." I spoke a bit too quickly.

"We'll need another man," he said, "I've got a friend in New York who'll do. Good sailor and close mouthed."

I didn't want any friends of Becker sailing with us; yet I couldn't say just why. Then I told myself to stop being so damn suspicious of everyone. Didn't Becker put up four grand? I couldn't refuse to take a good man without seeming foolish.

"O. K.," I said, "cable him to meet us in New York, and tell him to go down to Canal Street and pick up eight sets of winter gear. Will he know what to get?"

"Sure," Becker nodded, "he's been in the north country."

SIX days later we entered Biscayne Bay, and had refueled by dusk and were churning up the inland waterway at a smooth thirteen knots. The Coast Guard weather reports promised fair skies, so I took the *Battledore II* outside and cut across the open sea to Bogue Inlet, through the inland channel again and out at Norfolk.

During the day watches I put all hands to work splashing black paint on the ship, desecrating the fresh gray and white dress

that the shipyard had given her. Becker protested when I kept him hard at it.

"What the devil?" he objected. "Let's have this stuff done in a boatyard."

"You said you're in a hurry," I told him off the New Jersey coast when he wanted to quit painting. "Get this ship covered with rough black and I'll have you out of New York for Newfoundland in two days."

He scowled, nodded, and went back to work.

Becker's friend came aboard in Brooklyn. He was a lean, wiry six-footer with eyes that hugged each other and a habit of trying to watch everything at once. He made me a little nervous, although he wasn't the nervous type—just cagy like a rat in an experimental pen.

He had discharges as third mate on several ships in 1944 and '45. "What'd you do before that? I asked him.

"I sailed AB during the war." The tight green eyes flicked and dodged. "Lost my other discharges at sea."

"Got an NMU book?"

"Naw."

That made me like him even less. The name on the discharges was Alex Purtville, and they were undoubtedly genuine.

He had brought four big packages with him in the cab. We broke them open.

The crew picked out what winter gear they wanted, swapping sizes and taking sheepskins or parkas according to preference.

Purtville had done all right—as right as a man who must have been above the Arctic before. He had bought felt boots and oversize rubber boots with felt liners, and two dozen used fur and sheepskin hats for one dollar apiece. He had four dozen surplus all wool union suits and fifty pairs of Navy hip-length wool stockings.

There were even black and khaki face masks in his bundles, and leather mitts with woolen inserts. He handed me a receipted bill for $225.

"Say," I exclaimed as I pulled bills from my wallet and added a twenty for expenses, "I think I'll let you buy all our stores. Did you have any trouble getting this stuff so cheap?"

Another man might have been pleased at the compliment, but Purtville just squirmed and looked. "Nah," he muttered, "the bottom's out of the surplus market on Canal Street."

WE DID clear from New York in two days, with a fat, dummy funnel newly planted just aft of the pilot house. The *Battledore II* was beginning to look more and more like one of the nondescript coastal utility boats that worked out of Scotland or Norway or—Archangel. The dummy stack cost me eight hundred dollars, including the double-time for the night crews who installed it.

We refueled at St. Johns, where I stayed cheerfully aboard in deference to the way I had last left the island. The British trained police have long memories. I didn't even mind that I had to spend six days hidden on the ship while we waited for favorable weather reports. I wanted no part of a raging north Atlantic in the patrol boat, even if she had been rebuilt for real sea-going. I'd been turned back by the sea in a nine-thousand ton tanker in 1941; the mountains of water that did the job were still out there.

The trip to Reykjavik was a pleasure cruise, thanks to my careful weather checks, but again we tied up for a week awaiting a lull. Sandy and I rambled around the barren countryside . . . from here on in, there would be little relaxation.

On a cold Sunday morning we left Iceland and then spent eleven days battling heavy seas and trying to conserve fuel. We raised the Lofoden Islands and reached Tromso on the very last of the six extra tanks that had been built into the ship. I ceased to regret spending all that money on the old girl for fitted, almost too-heavy extra tanks and the double auxiliary fuel pumps.

I topped the Diesel stores again at Hammerfest, and then—with fair weather reports coming in faintly from the BBC, took the *Battledore II* and its party of "naturalists" north again, ostensibly for Spitsbergen.

We had an east-nor'-east course between Bear Island and North Cape, through cold, blue-green water hardly touched by a sun that peeped briefly at us from the southern horizon and then left us to gray, cheerless days. Sandy talked about it when she kept me company on the morning watch.

"It's so empty," she said, "like a sep-

arate world of its own. Just water and cold."

"The bottom is not so empty," I said soberly. "There's a lot of ships and men down there. Right about here they wiped out nearly half of our convoy in 1943. Just boom-boom-boom and not much luck hitting back at 'em."

She shuddered. "What a senseless business, to blow up ships and kill men you don't even know."

I did a little too much thinking that night, when I was alone in the dark cold with the rumble of the Diesels and the pound of the water to hypnotize me. I glanced up from my crystal ball—the hooded binnacle light—and saw a flickering glow off the starboard bow. I made a 45-degree turn to port and went away from the lights. I didn't want to swap questions and answers with a Soviet patrol or coaster.

I changed course abruptly twice that night and twice the next day, to dodge approaching lights or objects seen through the glasses on the horizon. I took the *Battledore II* well out along the coast before cutting down to raise the Rybachi Peninsula.

The landfall was right on the button, but before I throw too many roses for my navigation I'd better add that the strong Russian direction-finder station was transmitting, although I could not read the exact signals. The letters were not listed in my last Radio Aids to Navigation.

We crept along just beyond view of the Murman Coast, until Becker, following my careful pencil dots on the chart exclaimed. "We're on it! Take her in."

"We aren't very near Vaisinski," I pointed out. "You mean your spot is this far out?"

"Yeah, that's it. That little cove right there." He touched an indentation on the chart. "You can just hide her in there before it gets full light."

"O. K.," I said, "wake up Kirk and put Purtville in the engine room for awhile, and tell him to call Barnes if he needs an assist. We want everything under control on this move."

I'd been standing watch twelve hours a day myself, but Barnes had been down below almost continuously. One of the twin Diesels had been running hot, even though cut way down on revs. I wanted to let him sleep. Purtville was proving to be a handy man for the engine room watch, and it kept him out of the way. If he crippled the ship—he was in the same boat.

We would have to get in and out of sight fast, or get away in a hurry if this deal blew up. I wanted Barnes and Joe Fiske for fresh reserves.

"There," Becker clutched my shoulder as the ugly, ice smeared landfall showed more clearly in our glasses, "five points off the port bow."

I followed the twin lenses over until I could see a faint opening in the shoreline. Then I gave Becker the wheel and began a canvass of the horizon, spinning the binoculars and my neck around like a P-51 pilot on a strike. We were still alone on an empty sea.

"The chart shows some sort of building a couple of miles west," I said.

"Yea," Becker's voice was hoarse, almost feverish with excitement, "but all abandoned. Used once in awhile by bird-hunters."

AT A GOOD sixteen knots the *Battledore II* moved towards the headland quickly, as it seemed to spread out to both sides of us, empty, barren, and desolate. I stamped my feet, cold even through felt boots and three layers of socks. We were almost at the jaws of the inlet when I signaled Purtville for dead-slow and saw the stumps of two masts protruding from the sea near the mush and snow of the shore.

"What's that?" I pointed.

"The remains of a two-masted schooner," Becker grunted, "she was there when we came in."

The wreck didn't look as if it had weathered four Arctic winters. Yet there was nothing I could fasten my suspicions on. Nothing to give me cause to get the devil out of there—which was really what I wanted to do. I felt like a mouse walking into one of those one-way cage-traps, and the worst part about it was that I felt ashamed of my fears. But they kept riding on my shoulder.

The break in the coastline was small, a half-moon shaped inlet unworthy of the name harbor. I eased the *Battledore II* into the inmost nook of the anchorage with the

power plant idling, until she gently grounded. The open sea was still visible through a narrow slice of the entrance. We were about forty feet from shore.

"Let go the hook," I called to Kirk, and when it bit I reversed the wheels a few revolutions until it dragged snugly.

"O. K.," I blew out my breath with a puff, "all hands get those canvases up and then put the tender over."

An hour later the *Battledore II* was covered with white, very dirty white, old sails which I had brought along as camouflage. They did a good job of hiding the ship, for when I made a brief run seaward in the four-cylinder tender, the ex-patrol boat appeared as just another shapeless mass from half a mile out.

"Well," I asked Becker over coffee and muffins, "where do we go from here?"

"About three miles inland," he answered, "we can start after it as soon as you're ready."

"Right now," I dug out a Perfecto and lit it, "the quicker we're out of here the better. We'll take Kirk and Purtville. Think we can carry the stuff in two trips?"

"Sure." He seemed pleased at my choice of the shore party.

I WENT to my cabin and put on two more sweaters, lengthening the single piece of rawhide which looped around my arm to hold my shoulder-holster. A simple little rig I'd made myself by cutting down a standard holster until it was just a skeleton of leather holding a short-barreled .38 Police Positive.

Then I strapped on a web belt with an old .45 and two clips in the little canvas pouch. It probably wouldn't even fire in the below zero cold, but I never rely on automatics anyway.

I had a brief talk with Barnes before we left, carrying four seabags for the loot.

The Murman Coast has a narrow headland which forms a small barrier between the sea and the wasted plain behind it. We clambered over the rough ice and snow, following Becker who seemed to know his way very well. Once we crossed a faint trail, and I pointed to the marks of horses' hooves.

"No telling how long ago those were made," I said, "but keep a sharp lookout. If we meet any Russians, get close and jump 'em but don't kill them."

Becker nodded impatiently. "Yea, come on."

I didn't like the way he'd assumed an air of leadership. Still, I didn't give a damn if he knew what he was doing.

We were moving now in a really trackless waste, broken only by ugly folds in the landscape, and it was into one of these that Becker finally turned. It led downward, and we were upon the dugout almost before I saw it.

Hugging an elbow in the fissure, an earth and driftwood hut had evidently been built during the warm season and with an eye to concealment. There was a faint thread of smoke from the back.

"Say," I called softly to Becker, "who's in that thing?"

"Friendly Russians," he replied, "didn't tell you about 'em because I was afraid you'd refuse to come."

"You don't know me very well," I said, "let's go in."

"Wait here a minute," he said, "if they see a stranger they might get hasty."

He pulled open the heavy, narrow door of the hut and disappeared. I took the opportunity to unbutton my parka, and whispered to Kirk when Purtville was looking at the dugout. "Watch it now."

The youngster dropped an eyelid and patted the pocket of his sheepskin. He evidently had the .38 Detective Special that I'd issued him.

BECKER came out of the hut and waved his hand. We went in. I felt like a hunter stepping into a tiger's den.

Nothing happened! Three bearded, dirty men huddled silently around a table in the small room merely looked at us and grunted. Becker was loading the seabags from a hole in the floor.

I wondered how many hours it had taken to dig that cache. Ten minutes later we were on our way back to the ship, staggering under heavy loads in the seabags. I was puzzled, but Becker seemed to be delivering the goods, so I played along.

We reached the *Battledore II,* and were scrambling aft along the deck with our burdens when Becker fell with a crash on the planks and cursed.

"My ankle!" he moaned, "damn that ringbolt!"

He got up and limped to the hatchway, dragging his bag behind him.

"Want me to look at it?" I asked.

"Naw," he shrugged, "it'll be all right. Just wrenched."

He pulled one of the little boxes out of the bag and handed it to me with a grin. I nearly dropped it, surprised by the weight.

"That's one of the babies," he said, "worth thirty-five dollars an ounce, and there's a lot of ounces in one."

I tossed it aside. "Let's get the rest of it and get out of here."

"Sure." He got up, then winced and sat down again on his sack. "My ankle's no good."

I nodded. "All right. I'll go back for the last load. I watched the route pretty carefully."

"Good," he nodded, "I'll hold the fort for you."

I figured he would. Kirk, Purtville, and I had some coffee and went ashore again. We retraced the trail to the hut, and made it in good time without a pause.

I was watching for the dugout, and stopped a few hundred feet from the concealed position, my hand on Kirk's arm.

"Go ahead, Purtville," I said, "you seem to know this layout."

The flickering gray eyes sought mine, then strayed away to look at the sky and the snow and then back at me.

"Huh?" he said.

"Go into the hut," I said, watching him squirm.

There was no sign of life from the windowless structure, but the thread of smoke still rose into the colorless sky.

Purtville hung back. "What's the matter?" I said. "You were in there before?"

The eyes strayed and rambled. That decided it. I slipped the .38 out of the slit in my parka before the tall man could move. He had been watching my belt gun too well.

"Frisk our friend, Johnny," I said to Kirk.

The sailor, with a rather amazed expression, relieved Purtville of a Mauser 7.65-MM automatic and a sheath knife.

"Now, Purtville," I said coldly, "you sure you don't want to go in that door?"

He stood fast, glowering.

"All right, Johnny," I said, "put your belt around his feet and wrap this web job around his arms. Behind him."

I took the .45 and the clips off the belt and tossed it to Kirk. Purtville glared at both of us, but his eyes always came back to the .38 that stayed on his gut. He let himself be bound.

"I'm gonna open that door for you," I said, "Johnny, see if the indicator pin is sticking out on that Mauser."

He found the protruding piece of metal. "Yeah."

I went up beside him and pushed the button below the thumb piece. "She's ready to spit," I said, "if what I think happens when I open that door, feed it into the opening. Then get set with your own rod."

The younger man nodded. He was excited, but it was an eager, zestful emotion. That's good.

I went alongside of the hut and hooked a long piece of driftwood in the rope handle and pulled. The gang seemed to cut loose with a cannon. There came a roar from the interior of the shack that sounded like the finale of a state fair fireworks display. Chips flew from the doorframe, and a pattern of ice showered up many yards in front of the opening.

Off to one side came the evenly spaced shots of Johnny Kirk's Mauser. A steady roaring until he had put every one of his eight slugs through the doorway, belly high.

It was now or never. If the men inside had a chance to get set they could hold that earthen structure for a month. I shut my eyes tightly to get accustomed to blackness, and jumped through the door with my .38 in my right hand.

I opened my eyes as I passed the opening, and pumped two pills towards a dark shape near the right hand wall. No answering fire hammered at me. I stopped and looked around, and as my eyes contracted in the gloom I suddenly felt very sick. The little room was empty.

"Where are they?" Johnny burst through the door, waving the Detective Special from side to side.

"Gone!" I spat it out. "That was a shotgun deadfall. See it fastened to the table? Come on."

I ran outside, just in time to grab Purt-

ville as he twisted partly out of the web belt that fastened his arms. "Awright you punk," I snarled, "start talking."

I gave him an open-handed slap beside the head that laid him on the ground so hard he bounced. He rolled onto his back and glared at us.

"I'll tell you some of it," I roared at him in my anger and sudden sense of impotence, "those guys in that shack were not Russians, they're your pals from the *Driscoll!* You all came back here in that two-masted schooner but you wrecked it. So you and Becker got back outside somehow and mousetrapped me into this."

Purtville had struggled to a sitting position and I shoved the Colt at his nose. He shrank back. "Easy, Al," he whined a little, "this was Becker's racket."

"Yea," I snapped, "you just came up here to see me blasted at the door while you got Johnny from the back with that Mauser."

Johnny, who had been standing with his mouth open came to life. "Why those bums," he said, "I'll give you—"

I grabbed him by the shoulder as he moved towards Purtville. "Hold it Johnny. Just unfasten him. The dumb jerk didn't even figure that Becker and the boys would probably leave him here once they all got on board."

THE shifty-eyed sailor staggered to his feet, rubbing moist snow from his face and hands. "Becker's angle gag was a phony, wasn't it?" I waved the .38 at Purtville. He nodded.

"Now tell me straight," I bit the words off in my fury, "is there an engineer or a guy that knows engines in your crowd? I mean among those three mugs from the hut who've gone aboard with the rest of the gold?"

"Nah," he shook his head.

"Awright. Back to the inlet. You lead the way."

Following Purtville's boots up and down the rough terrain I had plenty of chance to kick myself, as the three of us headed for the beach in single file. Becker had probably taken over the ship by now, tying up Barnes because he'd need him for the trip home, and killing or capturing Joe Fiske. I swore feelingly as I remembered the man's hot looks at Sandy, and scowled as I remembered the other three men who were on board by now—men who had not seen a white woman, or any woman, for many months.

Beind me Johnny Kirk called out. "Hey Purtville, you got any more slugs for the Mauser?"

The man kept munching through the rough ice and said nothing.

"Answer him," I snarled, "or we'll strip you right here."

Purtville dug a hand into his sheepskin pocket and I drew the .38 with one motion, but he merely tossed a tobacco pouch past me to Johnny.

"Eight more slugs," Johnny crowed, "we're back in business with the Mauser."

Behind me came the snick of metal as the youngster removed the magazine and punched shells into it with cold hands.

"Don't point that thing at me," I said without turning.

"Right, Skipper."

I wished I had his confidence, but I knew how black the odds were. Two men with two handguns each going up against four guys in a solid ship. I knew Becker would leave Purtville anyway at the first sign of trouble, if he hadn't tried to get away already. Purtville was cagy, but plenty thick.

There were two Springfield .03's in my cabin, and Becker could pot us quite comfortably with those. My one hope was Barnes. I'd told him to cripple the engines at any sign of trouble, and if Becker hadn't secured him first, the approach of the three mugs from the cabin should have been enough notice for Barnes. I wondered how long he'd hold out against torture when they found the engines fouled up and told him to get them going. I muttered again and kicked Purtville in the seat of his long sheepskin.

We reached the sheltered dip behind the headland that separated the shore from the plain, the channel through which a trail could be seen in the warm season, and where we had seen the frozen hoof marks on our first trip. I looked carefully as we crossed the low spot and saw several more marks of passing horses, and then I heard the horses themselves!

From our left came short yelps, and along the dip in the landscape came two bulky

figures on small Mongolian ponies. They looked like fat dolls on toy horses, but the rifles they waved weren't toys.

"Don't shoot, Johnny," I yelled, sensing that the lad would have his pistols out. "Put your guns away and stand still."

The riders pulled up in front of us. Two Laplanders or men of some north country tribe who were now citizens of a Soviet Republic. I gave them my biggest smile.

"Good day," I said in my poorly remembered Russian, *"Amerikanski journaleeskaya."*

One of the men swung off his horse like a pudding sliding off a saucer, and came up to me. He wore a padded coat that reached to the tops of his sand-colored felt boots, and a fur cap with the flaps tied up and a red star on the front of it. He had one of the pan-fed, all-purpose tommy guns strapped to his back, and carried the rifle in his hands. He had an olive skin and slanting black eyes that snapped.

"American journalists?" he said in perfect, Oxonian English! "Without any portable typewriters."

The trace of a grin passed his lips as I turned on my biggest smile. I pulled cigarettes from inside my coat and passed them around. We all lit up.

"Now please," the stocky man with the British tones said, "who are you and where are you going?"

"I'm an American journalist," I said, "and I was doing an article on the Arctic. We came ashore near here because of engine trouble and ran into some pirates. This is one of 'em."

"I'm not a pirate," Purtville squawked, "I'm a sailor."

Johnny hit him with a backhanded smash. "Shut up."

The Russian looked on without emotion. "I am Lieutenant Karapetyan," he said. "I think you had better come with us and tell your story to Captain Tutarinov, if you please."

I figured he had added the English rank to his own name to clarify the situation, but Tutarinov—!

"Captain Tutarinov," I exclaimed, "was he once commander of the ice-breaker *Josef Stalin?*"

Karapetyan nodded, seeming a bit puzzled but pleased that I knew of Tutarinov. "Captain Tutarinov had a great war command in this area," he said in his precise tones, "now he is acting port captain for Molotovsk as well as master of the new ice-breaker *Nikolai Gastello.*"

"Well," I tried to sound out the "Leftenant," "I'd like to get back to my ship and see what I can do."

The voice was quiet, but firm. "I think we had better see Captain Tutarinov."

He spoke quietly over his shoulder to the bulky figure of the man on the other horse. Just a few words in Russian that I could not follow. The little horse was wheeled around and cantered away down the ill-defined trail to the west.

"Let us go," said Karapetyan, gesturing after his comrade who was already shrinking in the distance.

We went.

Two hours and about three miles later I was well-tired, as we clambered up another icy incline that slipped boots back a half-step for every one taken. Karapetyan had not remounted, but led his horse as he brought up the rear. The rifle tactfully slung on his saddle. I could have drawn and killed him at almost any time, but I think he knew I wouldn't or he would have searched and disarmed us . . . when he had the early drop.

AT THE top of the small hillock we looked down into a little harbor, slightly better than the one in which the *Battledore II* had found shelter. There was one small building and a wooden pier, leading out to a ship moored in the inlet.

"The *Nikolai Gastello,*" Karapetyan said.

Johnny Kirk whistled. "Look at all those guns," he exclaimed.

He was looking at the 20-MM and 40-MM anti-aircraft batteries which stud north country Soviet ice-breakers like the needles on a porcupine. They'd been a surprise to the German and Norwegian Nazis a few years ago, too.

The scramble down the trail was easy, and before we reached the level area near the building several men were walking out to meet us. Karapetyan's partner had turned in his report.

The men who met us merely stared and let us pass. They were an assortment of

Russian coast-patrol crews and sailors from the ice-breaker.

"Say!" Johnny exclaimed as he passed one group, "aren't those—?"

"Sure," I grinned, "women sailors. Some of 'em are darned pretty when you get some of that padding off."

He whistled. "That's what we need on the *Battledore.*"

Karapetyan led us into the small building near the pier, a heavy structure of thick logs and unfinished planks. Undoubtedly landed here from the lower Siberian forests.

A man sitting at a rough desk looked up, then stood up. "Captain Hammers," he said in tones as Oxonian as Karapetyan, "it's been a long time."

Captain Tutarinov stood six feet five in his white leather boots, a sharp faced man with black hair and a black mustache. I'd done a lot of business with him during the war, going in and out of the White Sea. I sure hoped he remembered all those good dinners on my Liberty ship and the many cartons of cigarettes.

"It sure has," I smiled and shook hands. "It's good to see you again."

He spoke in Russian to an orderly, who began setting teacups on one side of the desk.

"Now," he turned to me, "the tea will be ready in a moment. If you please—*propoosk?*"

He was asking me for papers in the politest way possible, which was nice because I didn't have any.

"*Papyroosa,*" I said in bad Russian and handed him an American cigarette. He grinned, took it, and handed me one of his own brand with a long cardboard stem. "I know you use these," he said.

"Now, if you will explain how you happen to be on the Murman Peninsula, and at what port you entered the Soviet Union . . ."

I SAT down on a bench and lit the cigarette. "I came up to do some articles on the Arctic," I said, "you know I was always interested in this country. I had some engine trouble and had to beach my ship east of here. Then I was taken over by some pirates or thieves."

Tutarinov nodded noncommittal acknowledgment. "I see. It is true we have had suspicions that some strangers were on this coast, but we haven't been able to find them."

"If you'll backtrack our trail," I said, "you'll find their hut about three miles inland."

"Ah," he muttered, "interesting."

Then he looked at me again, quite politely. "And how did you happen to be there?"

"After these three strangers got aboard my ship while I was ashore, I went inland to look for help."

"Hm . . . mm." Tutarinov can be an exasperating man when he looks at the tip of a cigarette and says that. He was doing some thinking, and he had always been a man who could do that well. The orderly poured out the tea and we drank it. I needed it.

Our host stood up. "Well," he said, "we must go down the coast and see these pirates. It should be interesting."

"How?" I asked. "Take the ice-breaker out and pin them from the sea?"

"It would seem best," he nodded reflectively, "and the patrol will also move on them from the shore side. The trap must be complete."

"Yeah," I said, looking gloomily at the floor, "there's only one thing—there'll be a fight."

Tutarinov smiled, his black mustache curling for a moment over white teeth. "We Russians do not mind one," he said, "and if I remember the Intourist Hotel in Molotovsk one evening—you do not mind one either."

I looked a little more pleasant, and then frowned again. "But," I murmured, "my wife is on that ship."

I knew Sandy wouldn't mind the promotion, and I didn't want her in the way of the streams of cigar-size slugs the Oerlikons on the *Gastello* could spread if Becker and Company started shooting. And they would.

"Ah—" It was the one approach that could touch the duty-proud Russian. Money, sympathy, or death could not have swerved him, but 'ah'—Love! Russians rarely surrender, but they are suckers to their emotions.

"I want a chance to tackle my ship first," I talked rapidly, "with a few men in a small boat. If they get me you can still blow her out of the water, but I might be able to keep my wife from getting hurt. If those

Niemyetskis"—I fumbled the half-forgotten word but it took—"haven't hurt her already."

Tutarinov's eyes flashed. "It can be done," he said, "and forgive me if I remember that you three will replace three Soviet citizens who might be killed. Not that I disbelieve you, *tovarich,* for I remember you fought the Fascits, but—"

I tried to look like a noble crusader. "Thank you. And this man," I gestured at Purtville, "will not go with us. I think he is a traitor from my own crew. We can deal with him later when we question the other bandits."

Tutarinov nodded and spoke in Russian. Purtville flew out the door at the hands of a burly Red Navy man. He was shouting and arguing until we could hear him no longer.

AN HOUR later we were pop-pop'ing out onto a gently rolling sea. Johnny, two Russian coast patrol sailors armed to the teeth, and myself. The horsemen, a squad of six, had gone down the coast already to picket the *Battledore II* from the inside, and Tutarinov was coming in with the ice-breaker in two hours, come ice or high-water. The shore patrol carried a radio, so I knew I had to move fast.

One of the Russians with us was our pal Karapeteyan, and he probably had orders to watch us as well as the gang we were going up against. I felt like the ham in the sandwich in a strong man's fist.

The deep gray of the Arctic night was on us as we entered the inlet where the *Battledore II* should be anchored if my faith had been well-placed in Colin Barnes.

"Comrades," I spoke to Karapeteyan and his buddy, "will you get under cover in the forepeak. I think I can arrange to approach my ship. When I start something, come out with those chatterguns going."

Karapeteyan spoke to his mate, whose English was not as fluent as his own. Then he turned to me. "Very well, Captain Hammers. And please—do not let anything go wrong."

It was a nice, polite way of saying that those pan-fed, durable tommyguns could spray both ways.

The two Russians were hidden under a tarpaulin in the little decked forepeak of the launch as we moved into the quieter waters of the anchorage. For a moment panic clutched at my heart as more and more of the tiny harbor became visible, but no *Battledore II.* I was ready to start roaring when at last I saw her, drifting bow first onto the outer ledges of the inlet. Becker had slipped the hook, or hauled it in by hand, but he hadn't been able to make Barnes repair the engines. There were lights on board, which meant that the gasoline generator was supplying power and some heat.

I pushed the clumsy wooden tiller away from me and we headed for the ship's side. Almost at once a rifle barrel poked out from her after rail and I began shouting and waving.

"Hold it, Becker! Hold it! You can't get away without my help."

There was a mutter from the forepeak. "A trick," I hissed at Karapeteyan, "I'm trying to get in close."

The rifle evidently was not held by Becker, for shouts came from the deck, and in a moment he bobbed out of a hatchway.

"Becker!" I shouted. "Let's make a deal. I can fix those engines."

There came no shots from the patrol boat, so I steered alongside her. "When I start it," I muttered at the forepeak, "get the guys in the stern."

A second later I wanted to whisper, "Get the *men* in the stern," in case Karapeteyan's slang was weak. It was too late. We were alongside.

As we came in, Becker sent one man forward and one aft with the Springfields, and now they covered us. My chest felt itchy. I've shot those cannons and seen 'em hit.

"Get Becker when we go," I muttered just loud enough for Johnny Kirk, standing beside me, to hear.

"All right, Al," Becker waved a .45 as he stood on the ship's deck, high above the launch. "Come on board with your hands up. Both of you."

"Say," he added, "where'd you get that boat?"

"Stole it!" I shouted wildly, "from the Russian Navy! They're right behind us! Look!"

I flung my left hand towards the open sea and didn't look. Becker did, and I think I shouted loud enough to make the rifle

holders glance seaward, for they missed me as I dove for the outside gunnel of the little boat. I drew without a fumble and pumped lead from the .38 past the forepeak, as a ripping barrage of slugs hosed past me from the Russians.

I shot four times at the man with the Springfield, and was pretty sure he wouldn't be working the bolt again, but I couldn't wait to find out right then. Kirk's .38 Special had boomed twice, but the roar of Becker's .45 over my head was thunder close-in. He made the mistake of putting lead into Johnny long after the game young lad was dead. It gave me a chance to feed Becker the last two pills from the Police Positive —right in his broad chest.

"Come on!" I shouted at Karapeteyan. "One to go."

I sprawled over the patrol-boat's side, on my face on the splintery deck. Karapeteyan landed almost on top of me, spatter-gun and all, as his partner held the launch and the ship together.

I hauled the .45 out of the holster and hoped the big piece of hardware would fire. No time to reload Old Reliable. I ran forward to the pilot house, and around it.

Inside the little room a man swung about to cover the port door. "Drop it," I shouted, "drop it! There's a tommygun on you!"

The third bearded man had seen enough of the Russian's work—and maybe mine, too. He stuck up his mitts.

I had him on his face on the deck in a second, securing his arms and legs with signal-flag lanyards. Karapeteyan stood calmly watching. I stuffed the R flag in the bound sailor's mouth.

"Great!" I pounded the Russian on the shoulder with such enthusiasm that he had to grin. "We got this bunch." I hurried out on deck towards the launch and he followed.

"Get to that radio and tell Captain Tutarinov to move down fast with the *Gastello*. Then tell the shore-patrol to watch out for three more pirates on shore!"

I WAS urging Karapeteyan into the launch. He was following orders in the pressure of the moment, but he hesitated as he stumbled over Johnny Kirk's body. Becker had fallen into the water.

"Hurry," I shouted, "I'll see if my wife is O. K. Get back here before they attack from the sea!"

At the word "attack" Karapeteyan's face lit up and he shouted in Russian to his mate, who threw in the clutch of the launch and they headed for the group clustered on shore.

"Hang on," he shouted, "I'll bring the whole force out, Captain Hammers. We'll get the rest of them swine."

It was the first mistake he had made in his English. It cheered me up. I ran for the main cabin.

On the table of the saloon Barnes lay moaning, his shoes and socks off and his feet a charred mess. Sandy was tied to the inner door jamb.

"Are you all right?" I said as I cut her loose with a knife snatched from the galley.

"Yes," she moaned, and collapsed. I had to let her lie.

I grabbed a full pound of lard from the refrigerator and smeared it on Barnes' feet. He groaned as I rubbed it in.

"Oh God," he said hoarsely, "I didn't tell 'em nothing, Al."

"I know that," I said, "but you've got a job to do now, Barnes. A little five-thousand dollar job for me. That's what I'm paying you for the next half-hour's work."

"Oh—oh," he groaned again.

I jumped into my cabin and grabbed my last half-bottle of Johnny Walker Black. "Here," I pressed it against his mouth, "get it down, man. Your favorite fruit. Come on!"

A lot of it went around his neck and then he swallowed.

"Come on," I rasped, "you gotta get those engines going in five minutes. Full reverse. Full reverse!"

I pulled him upright and he screamed as his feet hit the deck, but gasped, "Maybe more for power."

"Get down there," I helped him up the ladder and out onto the deck. "This is *it*. Give me full reverse."

The rugged Scot staggered to the engine-room hatch and I went below to find Joe Fiske trussed up like a Christmas package in a companionway. I slashed his thongs and told him to lay low. His jaw was nearly broken by the gag.

Climbing to the pilot house I switched

on the searchlight with its keying attachment and trained it on the beach, where Karapeteyan was huddled around the radio with the shore patrol. I began to blink.

It took a minute for one of the Russians to spot me, and then there came an answering flicker from a hand light.

"C-a-n-y-o-u-r-e-a-d-t-h-i-s?" I winked.

There was a short conference and then the light blinked uncertainly, but it spelled "y-e-s." Then they kept sending question marks, which was just dandy. I wanted to keep them occupied, and away from their launch and a return trip to the ship until Barnes got the Diesels going.

We were still playing fireflies, when there came a rumble from below decks, followed a few seconds later by another. The rumble rose to a minor roar and then the *Battledore II* pulled her nose slowly off the underwater sludge on which it rested and we began to crawl seaward, stern first.

For a moment the Russians on the beach were not quite sure of the score. Karapeteyan and several others jumped into the launch, but the *Battledore II* had her bustle raised for the open sea and was shoving it along. I needled the wheel and blessed the ship's designers as I felt a bit of steerage way. We edged into the opening of the inlet crabwise, but straightened with the rudder or the current.

The launch was following us, and I could see the small figure of Karapeteyan standing up in the bow. I'd have given more than a penny for his thoughts. They were perhaps three hundred yards away. The *Battledore II* reached the more open water and I shouted into the voice tube.

"Barnes," I roared, "can you give me full ahead?"

"Aye."

A few seconds later the roar of the *Battledore's* engines changed pitch. We had been drifting our stern to starboard, so I swung the wheel full to port and held it there.

We had to make a tight circle, closer to the launch and close enough to the beach to ground if our luck was bad. I kicked open the port door of the pilot house and got down on the deck. I could still see the world well enough through the open door to tell me when to straighten her out. I'm glad I hit the deck.

It was probably Karapeteyan who made the decision and opened up first. I'd seen a sample of his shooting. The glass flew out of the pilot house windows and cut my face in three places. The big searchlight shattered and smashed.

The fusillade paused for a moment, perhaps as Karapeteyan picked up a loaded tommy, and then three or four of them cut loose. By now we had turned enough so that they were shooting from our starboard quarter. There was hell and sudden death along the length of the ship, and then I straightened the wheel by spinning it with one hand from below and we showed them a pair of heels.

I HELD the *Battledore II* to an east-nor'-east course at full speed for three hours before turning north into an even colder and more empty world. I was willing to run along the edge of the ice-cap towards Spitsbergen, rather than chance a meeting with the *Gastello* and a Captain Tutarinov who by now classed me with the enemies of the Soviet Union and a double-crosser to boot.

"Still," I told Sandy as we turned west again the next day, "he has his pirates, or one of 'em and the pieces of the others. Purtville will talk his way home in five years."

She sighed as she held the wheel and followed the compass card. "What a life, and all for money."

"Yeah," I agreed, "but did you see that loot? We're in the chips!"

I watched the cold blue water for awhile, the grin wiped away. "I'm only sorry about Johnny," I said slowly. "Tutarinov will give him a soldier's burial, anyway. He was a game boy."

Sandy sighed and tried to lean her blonde head on my shoulder as I lounged against the radio receiver. "Al—let's buy an orange grove and relax."

"Watch the wheel, cox'n," I said. "We'll see."

I bought the services and silence of our prisoner cheap enough, but a Danish fishing ship off Spitsbergen charged us so much for Diesel oil that it ran the expenses way up.

Then I thought of Becker and shrugged. It's nice to be the last man up.

Pete Laird Was Naturally Lazy, but When He Contemplated Murder, He Didn't Propose to Overlook a Single Bet

THE NICKED EDGE

By
FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

PETE LAIRD was a lazy man. Sometimes it was too much trouble to feed his dogs and he skipped a day. It was much easier to put an empty can under the leaky spot in the roof, than to climb up and make the repair. Thus he had three cans on the cabin floor, and as they were of different size, different sounds resulted when rainwater fell into them. One went "Pink-pink-pink" all night long; another went "plop" at long intervals—the leak being small and it taking some time for sufficient water to form a big drop. The third was a lazy "plunking" sound.

The lower hinge on the cabin door was broken. He had another hinge on a piece from a broken door, but he never got around to taking out the screws and transferring the hinge to the cabin door where it would do some good.

When Pete Laird was a shiftless kid, his father used to say, "Pete, your carelessness will be the death of you yet." He must have said it a thousand times. It was one of the few things he could remember about his father, who worked from dawn to darkness on the farm and never quite got rested up.

Now at the age of twenty-seven Pete Laird was taking his father's advice. He was going to commit murder and make a careful job of it. He had thought everything through to the end. He had considered every detail, such as disposal of the body, and turning suspicion toward another man. He was going to kill Old Man Endicott; plant evidence that would convict Endicott's young partner, Mike Dutton of the crime; then take over the Mink River trapping area.

Old Man Endicott had packed over the Chilkoot Pass in Ninety-eight, whip-sawed lumber and built a boat at Lake Lindeman, then followed the ice down the Yukon with thousands of others. The ground he staked turned out to be hungry ground, so he went to work for a man who took a million dollars from ground five hundred yards from his worthless claim. He was Young Endicott in those days.

After that, Endicott trapped and prospected until he became Old Man Endicott. He decided it was high time he got into something that would support him and he had an idea fur could be treated as a crop, from which a man could reap the annual harvest, as in corn, wheat or anything else.

No one wanted the Mink River country because it was over-trapped. Old Man Endicott moved in and his first job was to trap the predators—wolverines, wolves and coyotes. In the meantime he had lived off the land, refusing to trap mink, or the

beaver increasing at two big dams they had built. Those were pretty lean years, and Old Man Endicott got mighty sick of eating salmon fresh, salmon salted down in kegs and salmon dried.

One day he realized he was in the money —that he would always be in the money as long as he kept the predators out and never over-trapped. In time he realized he wasn't going to live forever and that it might be a good idea if he brought in a partner—some young fellow who would feel about Mink River fur as Old Man Endicott did.

The region, the old man decided, with its annual crop of fur would be a sort of monument to his memory. It was better than a marble shaft stuck up in some cemetery for birds to sit on and the weather to tarnish.

It took him three years to find exactly the right man, but when Mike Dutton came along, with his Irish grin, his quick temper and equally quick way of apologizing when he was in the wrong, Old Man Endicott said, "You're just the ticket. And you can do what I'm too old to do—branch out, and treat fur as a crop on a large scale. It takes time for a young squirt to learn to be a carpenter—unless he wants to be a wood butcher—a bricklayer, and so on. Same way with fur."

MIKE hadn't believed it, until a wolverine made a sucker out of him, *ran* his trap line and refused to be caught in Mike's traps. In time Old Man Endicott's stomach hurt him a lot. He had to take baking soda after every meal, and folks at Cold Deck, the nearest trading post, said he should have the local doctor look at him and maybe operate, or else go Outside to a specialist. But the old trapper hadn't been sick a day in his life, except for colds and hangovers after a spree. He firmly believed hospitals were a place you went to only when you were ready to die.

But whenever his stomach "acted up" as he termed it, he wasn't fit to live with. He would fly off the handle and cuss out Mike. When Mike wouldn't fight back, Old Man Endicott would ride him until he finally hit the ceiling, then they had it hot and heavy. It usually ended up by Mike tramping the forty miles to Cold Deck and getting tight on moonshine. At such times, Mike loved everyone until Old Man Endicott's unreasonableness was mentioned, then he would growl, "I'll murder that old cuss, much as I love him, some of these days. He keeps at me until I see red. And when the jury hears the story it'll come in with a justifiable homicide verdict." Everyone knew Mike Dutton was just talking, but Pete Laird had an idea that if Old Man Endicott were murdered, a lot of people would remember what his partner had said.

Only one thing bothered Pete Laird after he had worked out details, and that was Jeff Conway, the deputy United States marshal at Cold Deck. Everyone knew that he was hell on wheels when it came to solving frontier crimes. But Conway, like Endicott, was getting on in years. His brain was as active as ever, but his legs would no longer carry him to the scene of the crime. When young Dan Murdock relieved Conway of his duties at Cold Deck, Pete Laird was confident his circle of good luck was complete.

Dan was young and ambitious to make good. He would break his neck to clear up his first murder case. Pete reasoned that Dan would be quick to jump at conclusions and would arrest and hold Mike Dutton in short order, then gather the evidence. Well, Pete Laird grinned to himself as he sat in his cabin working out minor details. He expected to give Dan Murdock all the evidence he needed to convict Mike Dutton of murder.

They would bring Mike in for trial, then they would take him down to the McNeil Island prison and hang him. Pete decided that there was no hurry. Trapping season was ahead, and he wanted the tough customers to decide on their trapping grounds, and to have them pack in their traps and supplies before Old Man Endicott and Mike Dutton were out of the Mink River country picture. Otherwise some of them might decide to move in and give him trouble. Just before the freeze up, when the streams were low, was about the right time.

HE ARRIVED at Cold Deck early one morning for a few drinks, and to stock up with sugar, coffee, flour and bacon. He was a bearded, dirty brute whose clothing smelled of stale moose tallow, campfire smoke and dried salmon. He tossed several

wolf pelts on the trader's counter and called off his needs. Then he went over to the marshal's office and asked Dan Murdock if there had been any new trapping regulations issued. "A man can't afford to take chances," he explained. "Sometimes he's so far in the back country he don't hear about the new rules. Friend of mine come in with thirty beaver skins one spring. Then he learned his part of the country had been closed to all trappin'."

"Where are you trapping?" Murdock asked. He was a blondish fellow, with a friendly smile and very blue eyes. Very keen eyes, too, but Laird failed to notice that. His idea of a marshal or sheriff was a man who was surly and scowling and whose right hand was never far from a gun butt.

"I trap south of the Mink River country," he said. "Old Man Endicott and Mike Dutton have got that country sewed up. They're always fightin' and folks expect 'em to bust up, but they never do."

"I've met them both," Murdock said. "Fine fellows. The old man hasn't long for this world, and he's in pain much of the time, and rather trying, I imagine, but Mike Dutton is very fond of him. Their quarrels are passing squalls—always followed by long calms. As to your question—there are no new regulations."

"Thanks. Glad to've metcha," Laird said, leaving.

The marshal opened the window with a relieved, "Whew! What that fellow needs is a bath—clothes and all. And he didn't call to find out trapping regulations. He wanted to size up the new marshal. Well, a natural impulse, particularly if a man has something up his sleeve, like cache robbing or trapping in a closed area."

Mike Dutton came in a few minutes later with a cheerful, "Trying to toughen yourself up, Dan? Why the open window on a raw day?"

"Pete Laird just left."

"Oh! Pete! That explains it," Dan said. "What's on his mind?"

"Wanted to know about trapping regulations."

"Did eh? He must have gotten religion or something," Mike commented, adding generously, "Pete's all right in his way, I suppose. Lazy and careless. He has a log running across a creek near his home. I'm about Pete's weight, but I'll wade the icy stream rather than cross on his rotten log. Why, when he crosses, sometimes hunks of rotten wood drop off on the under side—and all he'd have to do is drop another tree. Just thought I'd tell you so if you're up that way, you'll wade the stream instead of risking a broken leg. It's a wonder his shiftlessness hasn't been the death of him."

"Some of these days he'll break a leg and we'll have to go out and pack him in," the marshall said. "How're you and the old man making out?"

"Oh he built a fire under me yesterday afternoon," Mike answered. "I pulled my freight before I lost my temper. He needed baking soda any way, so here I am. He'll have cooled off by the time I show up."

Mike Dutton visited awhile, made plans for a trout fishing trip with the marshal, then said, "Well, so long. And don't postpone the fishing trip. If we got an early freeze up, you'd be out of luck. It's a good stream, but you can slip on glazed boulders and break your neck without half trying."

At the trader's, Mike told the trader the story of the blow-up, picked up the mail, shoved the baking soda into his pack, and headed for the Mink River country. Pete Laird followed half an hour later.

LAIRD'S cabin was on Mink River, but in the open country, seven miles downstream from the Endicott cabin, which was at the southerly end of his trapping area.

Pete began his preparations by sharpening his axe. He was going to need a very sharp axe, because he expected to work fast. When the job was done he began looking for nails. He searched the cabin awhile but was unable to remember where he had put the tin can filled with various size nails the last time he had used them.

His old food cache, which had fallen when the supports had rotted away, was full of nails. He couldn't find his claw hammer so he began chopping out a section of timber studded with large nails. "Wish I knew where that damned hammer was," he muttered. "Have to chop mighty close to a spike. Oh hell—I'll prob'ly miss it."

Three strokes later the axe was slightly deflected by a segment of wood, and the

blade cut the spike neatly in half. Pete Laird swore, then looked at the blade. A deep nick broke the axe's keen edge. "Aw well—" he grumbled. He finished the job, carried the wood to his cabin and burned it. He panned the ashes and reclaimed the nails. They weren't quite as strong as originally, but they would serve his purpose.

He didn't propose to leave tracks on his side of the river for some snoopy posse to follow to the Endicott cabin, so he crossed the stream in his leaky skiff, poling it up a sluggish creek until it was concealed by tules. He put on moose hide moccasins, fearing his boots might leave a nail pattern somewhere to betray him. There was a slight hole in one moccasin near the heel, but he hadn't gotten around to patching it.

The ground was frozen in spots, and this was rough on his feet but the stake, he reasoned, was worth the discomfort. A man had to endure some things, he reflected. He was well pleased with himself for he had planned carefully, leaving nothing to chance. His father, he decided, would have conceded his thoroughness.

He was tired when he arrived at a point opposite the Endicott cabin. He was wet from the knees down, but his body from the knees up was dry. He removed his wet pants, underwear, socks and moccasins and hung them up to dry, then got into his sleeping bag. He would liked to have built a fire, but smoke would have brought Mike Dutton across the river in a hurry.

Pete Laird put in a miserable night, sleeping, then waking suddenly for no reason other than his nervous tension. A small creek fed Mink River and he followed this early the next morning for a half mile. He located several dead, dry trees and cut them, confident the distance and the steady roar of Mink River would muffle the ringing of his axe.

He floated the logs downstream to a sandbar, arranged them in the shape of a light raft and nailed them together. It supported his weight nicely when he tested it. He was ready. "Ain't missed a bet," he mused. "Now for them to get into a fight."

He spent two days in a thicket opposite the cabin, waiting for an explosion. It came at breakfast time on the morning of the third day. The door opened and an angry Mike Dutton emerged, ducking. He looked back in time to stop a heavy frying pan which the old man had hurled. It struck Mike above the eye, bounced, leaving a smear of sourdough flapjack batter on his cheek.

Pete Laird couldn't distinguish what Mike was saying, but it wasn't hard to guess. Mike stood there a moment, then in a towering rage, caught up a club and advanced on the old man framed in the doorway. Then he shrugged his shoulders, threw the club away, and brushed past Endicott.

He came out a few minutes later, carrying a heavy pack. Without a word he started upriver. His purpose was obvious to a trapper—he was taking advantage of the occasion to supply the shelter cabins along the trap line.

LAIRD crossed the river half an hour later. He gave Mike Dutton ample time to get beyond calling distance should something go wrong and Old Man Endicott started yelling for help. The raft cleared the fast water without overturning, and lodged against two boulders ten feet from shore. He waded to the bank in hip-deep water, then approached the clearing. He hesitated once, thinking, "Mebbe I should have tied the raft. Still—it couldn't work loose from them rocks."

He made his way to a thicket a hundred feet from the cabin and studied the situation. A light tap with the heavy part of the axe would be enough to drop Old Man Endicott in his tracks. Then he noticed the frying pan. It hadn't been touched since it had bounced off of Mike Dutton's skull. That would fit in perfectly with his purpose to turn suspicion on Dutton. An hour elapsed before Endicott came out of the cabin with the water bucket in his hand. He glowered at the frying pan and muttered something Laird didn't catch, then he went on to a small creek emptying into the river. It carried no glacier silt and was much better for drinking purposes than the river water. When Endicott bent down to fill the bucket, Laird stepped from the thicket and caught up the frying pan. He crouched behind the wood pile, and when Endicott was passing, leaped up and struck.

The old man dropped, and the water bucket overturned. Laird watched him for several seconds. "One blow *was* enough," he said. He dropped the frying pan and picked up the bucket. He carried it into the cabin and put it on a wooden shelf where ring marks showed that it usually stood. He found a pair of Mike Dutton's boots and put them on.

He reasoned that a man of Mike Dutton's type would be instantly filled with remorse. This would be followed by fear, and he would then take desperate measures to conceal the body. Laird stood near the body and looked quickly about for a logical hiding place. The thicket immediately came into his range of vision. He wanted to leave a faint trail—something for the marshal to follow. The trail must look as if the killer had tried, but failed to conceal his tracks. He dragged Old Man Endicott a few yards, then carried him, then dragged him.

He left the body near the thicket, hurried to a shed and brought back a shovel. He cut the sod and rolled back a piece seven feet long and four feet wide. It was thick sod, and by working the shovel under it carefully it could be rolled like a carpet. Then he started digging. A few inches below the surface, he struck a tangle of roots. He was glad his axe was sharp because the roots were moist and tough.

Laird chopped through them and lifted them out, then he went down three feet. He was going to roll the body into the grave when he remembered a man filled with remorse would likely wrap the remains in a blanket. He ran to the cabin and pulled a four-point, red wool blanket from a bunk.

Laird wrapped Old Man Endicott's body in the blanket, and rolled it into the grave. He shoveled in the dirt, put the roots in, then covered them. He carried the excess dirt to the river and dumped it, then replaced the sod. "Job's done," he muttered, satisfied. He left the boots in the cabin, put his moccasins back on and returned to the raft.

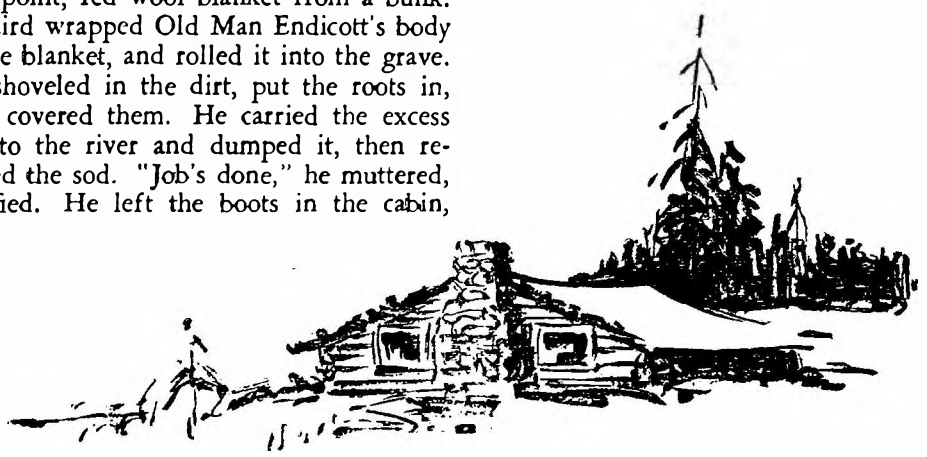
THROUGHOUT his commission of murder, Pete Laird had either walked in the water or upon grass. He had carefully avoided anything that would hold a moccasin print. While wearing Mike Dutton's boots, he had made it a point to leave something of a trail to follow.

The raft was stuck and Pete tried to wedge it free with the axe handle. When it was on the point of snapping, he waded ashore, cut a small tree and used it as a pry. The raft floated free and Pete clambered aboard. He secured the tree to the raft, as it might attract attention, and floated past the cabin.

He looked at it with greedy eyes, wondering how long it would be before he moved in. Near his own cabin Laird cut the tree loose and began working his way to the bank. He stranded the raft, knocked it apart, cut it into fuel lengths and carried the wood to his cabin. He poured a stiff drink of white mule—a potent alcoholic beverage he had made—then sat down. He felt weak and nervous, then the alcohol took hold and a sense of elation gripped him. "Now all I have to do is watch things happen," he said.

Things happened two days later when Mike Dutton came into his clearing, shouting, "Have you seen anything of Endicott? He's gone."

One of Mike's eyes, and the flesh on the skull was black and blue. His face was covered with several days' growth of whiskers. The black stubble, and his soiled



clothing, lent him a tough appearance. It was obvious he had come in from the trap line cabins, discovered Endicott was missing, and had immediately headed for Cold Deck.

Pete Laird had planned for some such incident, knowing that it would transpire and likely be the first of several. "Maybe he wandered off," he said, "he was gettin' old."

"He isn't the wandering kind," Mike answered. "If you haven't seen him, something's wrong. He'd've passed this way if he went to Cold Deck. Hang around, search parties may be needed. We'll want every man who knows this part of the country."

"I'll be right here when I'm needed," Laird promised.

The marshal and a fair-sized posse came up-river the following morning, and Pete Laird was ready to join them. "It looks bad for Mike Dutton," a miner said. "Anybody can see he's all bunged up from a fight with Endicott and now the old man's disappeared. Nobody's seen hide nor hair of him."

Two men left the posse near the Endicott cabin, and searched a log jam and river-bar where the bodies of animals drowned in the river often stranded. They reported nothing. "Now let's get this straight," the marshal said. "You, Dutton, came back after one of your rows with the old man. You found the frying pan in the yard where it had landed after hitting you?"

"That's right," Mike answered.

"Then you went into the cabin and found the stove cold—"

"The stove cold and the dishes we had eaten off of that morning hadn't been washed," Mike said. "To me that proves he disappeared before another meal time. He liked his meals on time. I called, looked around for tracks, then went into the cabin again to see if his rifle, sleeping bag or pack sack were missing. Nothing missing except the old man."

"You fellows stay here, all of you," the marshal ordered, "and let me examine the ground."

While the men sat down and smoked, the marshal walked slowly around the cabin, eyes noting details, many of which were unimportant. "Hmmmm!" he said at last. "Someone dragged something here. Almost missed it, but there it is. Now a man carrying a heavy object makes a bee line for his destination—"

Pete Laird's heart began to pound. He hadn't thought of that, but now realized he had gone in a straight line. The thicket was straight ahead. The showdown was coming sooner than he expected. The marshal didn't hurry, but looked for clues as he slowly approached the thicket.

He motioned the others to join him, then pointed to several boot prints in the muck. "My guess is, we've found Endicott's grave, boys," he said. "You can see an effort was made to do a good job—cutting and replacing the sod. But time, and the elements haven't yet destroyed the evidence." His eyes wandered over their feet. "Mike, that's about your size, isn't it?" He pointed to the footprint. "Step alongside of it."

Mike Dutton made a print beside the old one. "The size is the same, but the nail pattern is different," he said.

"A man could change his boots after a crime," Dan Murdock said. "Laird, go to the cabin and bring back every pair of boots you can find."

Pete Laird felt like cheering. He returned quickly with the pair he had used in the crime. "These was in plain sight," he said, "and kinda messed up with clay."

The marshal took one and pressed it in the muck. "Your boot print, Mike," he said. "Get shovels, boys, and we'll dig. Mike you're under arrest. Two of you boys keep an eye on him."

"Hell!" Mike exploded, "You don't think—"

"That's exactly what I try to do, Dutton," the marshal cut in, quickly—"think."

THEY dug slowly, carefully, uncovered the roots and threw them aside. Then they came to the four point wool blanket, now smeared and dirty with muck. "Here's Old Man Endicott at the end of his trail," Dan Murdock said quietly. He helped the others lift the body from the grave, then carefully unwrapped the blanket. "You said, didn't you Dutton, that when he hit you with the frying pan there was a flapjack in it?"

"Yes, a big one, that had just started cooking on one side. It wasn't ready to be

turned yet. Some of the dough smeared my hair."

"Some of the dough smeared Endicott's hair, too," the marshal said. "He was hit by the same frying pan and same dough."

The others grew wrathy and scowled at the nervous Mike Dutton. "I didn't hit the old man," Mike protested. "I wouldn't, but it sure looks bad for me."

"You ought to be strung up," a man growled.

"As undoubtedly he will be if guilty," the marshal said, "but let me remind you, he is innocent until proved guilty. Never forget that for a minute. Take him to Cold Deck, boys, and lock him up. I'll be along after I've looked around. I may have missed important evidence."

As Pete Laird followed the posse as far as his cabin, he kept asking himself, "I wonder how long it'll take to try and hang Dutton? I wonder how long before I can move in?"

He had the coffee pot on and holes punched in a tinned milk can when the marshal came along. He had even washed his hands and face. "Coffee?" he asked.

"Thanks," the marshal answered. "And while I'm drinking it tell me what you know of the quarrels between Endicott and Dutton."

"I don't know much, except the old man was ridin' him hard a lot of the time. Dutton just lost his temper I guess. Don't think anybody blames him much, but still —murder is murder."

"That's right," the marshal agreed. "Thanks for the coffee. I'll be up again as soon as I talk things over with Dutton. If I need you I can call on you?"

"Sure, any time. Glad to testify," Laird answered.

Several days later he awakened to find his cabin surrounded by a posse, and Dan Murdock was saying, "Well, Laird, time's come. I need you."

Pete Laird hesitated, then he came out. "What's the charge?" he asked.

"First degree murder—the premeditated killing of Old Man Endicott," the marshal answered.

"Hell! I don't know nothin' about his killin'. I figgered it was Dutton. Why—"

"Anything you say may be used against you," the marshal reminded him.

Pete Laird grew silent. Now he noticed a posse member had his axe and was looking at the nick. "That's funny," he thought, "I didn't use a axe on the old coot, I used the fryin' pan."

When they arrived at Cold Deck he noticed Mike Dutton was waiting in front of the marshal's office. "You see, Laird," the marshal explained, "I was fairly sure from the first that Mike Dutton wouldn't kill Endicott. He can get fighting mad, but he isn't the killer type. He has an Irish temper right enough, but he controls it. As for you? Well, Mink River trapping grounds looked mighty sweet to you, and there I had my motive. Then you helped me along."

"How?"

"Various ways. You were a little careless a couple of times. Remember when I sent you for Mike's boots. You didn't bring 'em all, you brought the pair that fitted the prints. You *knew*. But the real evidence that connected you with the killing—" He stopped and thought it over. "You might as well know it, because you have no defense against it. You nicked your axe! Remember?"

"Yeah, it struck a nail," Laird answered. He might as well admit it because anyone could see the nick in the blade edge.

"Well, when you dug Old Man Endicott's grave and cut the roots with the axe, the nick left a mark on every root," the marshal answered. "I checked on the Endicott axe. There wasn't a groove in the blade. And then—I checked on yours."

There was guilt in Pete Laird's sudden collapse. He managed to stand with an effort, and his legs when he walked were like rubber. He could hear the judge saying, "—hanged by the neck until dead! Dead! Dead! And may God have mercy on your soul."

And he could hear his father's tired voice warning, "Pete, your carelessness will be the death of you yet."

Send Down the Guns . . . and Proceed With Your Piracy!

SEND DOWN THE GUNS

By R. W. DALY

"THERE certainly are women aboard her!" Jeremy said and snapped his glass shut. He was angry. With an ineptitude usually found in higher places, the British captain had managed to run his ship aground on a Bahama shoal, which, in itself, was bad enough. The Briton was the first enemy that the *Resolution* had encountered since leaving Charleston, and with her back broken was of little value either to Jeremy or to the State of South Carolina which had commissioned him.

If he had been a pirate instead of a duly authorized naval officer, he might well have continued on his way, but as the younger son of an honored family, he was compelled to stand in for the stricken ship. Even Gardner, his first lieutenant, could see for himself there was no other choice, and Gardner's father had originally come south from

Massachusetts: it did not require a gentleman to realize that every exertion had to be made to save women imperiled by the sea.

"Larboard your helm," Jeremy said, and passed the word to furl all canvas save the topsails. Shelving onto the shoal, the waves accelerated, heaped higher, and broke into twisting rollers that shoved the miserable Briton further into the key off the Great Abaco Island.

Gardner came aft from examining the sounding leads. "Still sand, Jerry," he said. "God knows when the coral begins."

"Have you ever been ashore in these parts?" Jeremy asked.

"No," Gardner grinned. "Why would I want to?"

Jeremy stared at the helpless ship, about a mile away. He had no appetite for the day's work ahead and regretted his decision to cruise along the Bahama Bank in hopes of plucking a rich merchantman or two who might try to slip out of the Indies by an untraveled route. Of average height, athletic, heavily muscled in shoulders and torso, he showed his aristocratic blood only in the proud carriage of his head. "Why would anyone want to," he replied, "except a Briton? Sling out the boats."

"Aye, aye, sir," Gardner said slowly, with a hint of doubt in his voice.

Thoughtfully, Jeremy gazed after Gardner, as that tall, assured officer bawled for the boatswain. From the first day they had sailed together, Gardner, in a superior Yankee manner, had managed to imply that Southern gentlemen knew nothing about seamanship. Being junior in rank, he had never openly scoffed at Jeremy's ability, but he had criticized enough of Jeremy's

fellow captains for Jeremy to be sure of his opinion. This, Jeremy did not altogether like, and proposed one day to change Gardner's mind.

A stiff wind on her quarter, working under topsails as though going into battle, the *Resolution* groped cautiously for the edge of the shoal. Jeremy had no intention of piling up his sixteen-gun command, particularly with Gardner aboard, nor with the sea running high and swift did he want to expose his men to a longer passage than was necessary. They would have good reason to curse as it was.

He beckoned to a boy. "Tell Mr. Israel to bring down that damned flag," he said. Moments later, the officer in the bow ably placed a six-pound shot within a hundred yards of the Briton's immobile stern. Before the spray from the splash had whipped back again into the sea, the reversed colors were struck. Jeremy was less than gratified. The Briton's surrender was purely formal, and he had insisted upon it only to safeguard his men against possible resistance to the carrying out of their merciful errand. On the open sea, the sight of striking British colors would have elated him. Here, he was only annoyed.

"Boats slung out, sir," Gardner reported. "Suppose it would be too much to expect him to come to us?"

JEREMY'S eyes were on his prize. Not a figure had moved among those on the poop since the British flag had been hauled down. "They're intelligent," he said wryly. "If his stupidity ran them aground, why should they trust him in the boats?" He cocked an ear to the soundings. "Three fathoms is all we dare risk. We'll drop you and then put about."

Gardner stood half a head taller than his captain. "When the State gives me a ship of my own," he remarked lightly, "I'll take better care of my men."

"Don't bother with his papers," Jeremy said, ignoring the gibe, as Gardner put on his oilskins. "Get the people off. No gear. Just people. You can't afford to overload."

"Aye, aye, sir," Gardner replied, in a brisk military manner that was too military. "I hope they're pretty."

Jeremy furled sail, manned falls, and dropped his boats into the sea. He was pleased by the snap with which he managed the business, but Gardner only looked bored. With the dexterity of experience, coxwains fended off, dropped astern of the *Resolution,* and made for their objective. Jeremy used the last of his way to swing bows into the wind, and as Gardner went by, bellowed through his trumpet.

"If her captain wants to go down with his ship, don't argue!"

Casually, Gardner waved a hand in reply, and Jeremy felt foolish.

Using sail just to keep off the shoal, Jeremy idled at the three-fathom line, while his pair of boats fought their way towards the stricken Briton. He had no illusions about the difficulties which Gardner faced. Only constant alertness and drain on nerves and strength would keep the boats from broaching in the breakers. Only seamanship of the highest order would bring the boats back to the *Resolution.* Everyone knew that Gardner had the skill.

Aware there was no real need to worry, Jeremy nonetheless went into the rigging to watch.

"The galley fires are lighted, sir," Israel reported.

"Good," Jeremy grunted, without glancing down. "Make 'em a hot toddy."

Israel hesitated. "What about the ladies, sir?" he finally asked.

"What about them!" Jeremy growled, looking down.

Second Lieutenant Israel was nonplussed. He didn't mind seeing to the customary duties of securing the ship from quarters, for the *Resolution's* crew was well drilled. Women, however, were not usually fitted into the economy of a man-of-war, and Israel was puzzled as to the steps to take for their accommodation. "Why, sir," he explained himself, "Where will we put 'em?"

At the moment, with his boats and a score of prime seamen jeopardized by the requirements of chivalry, Jeremy was as gallant as an unhorsed cavalryman. "That can wait. See to the toddy."

Israel touched his hat and went below.

Jeremy frowned. The boats were more than halfway to the wreck, and he saw no signs of preparation to receive them. Israel's question burned hotly in his mind. What, indeed, was he going to do with his feminine prisoners? The *Resolution* was small,

and his were the only fully adequate quarters. His code demanded that he move in with Gardner, but Jeremy was beginning to be more than a little annoyed with his code. Women had no business at sea in wartime. He envied pirates who had a simple solution to the matter.

Wearily, he called his messenger. "Have Mr. Israel move my gear into Mr. Gardner's stateroom," he said. "Clean sheets to the cabin bed."

Having disposed of the women in a manner which would gratify his second lieutenant, Jeremy was free to concentrate on the boats. They hovered by the Briton's side, waiting for a favorable instant to slip under his stem. Jeremy's pulse quickened when Gardner darted towards the ship. A yard's miscalculation, and the irresistible water would crumple the boats against the ship's hull and sweep their men away before a hand could be held out to help them.

Being a Yankee, Gardner gained the relatively smooth water on the ship's lee bow and disappeared from Jeremy's view. Since no debris suddenly spurted beyond the ship, Jeremy knew that his first lieutenant was safe, even though the British were torpidly slow in doing anything about entering the boats. Jeremy could sympathize with them. The trip in would prove easy compared with the return to the *Resolution,* and the British had watched the sturdy little boats come towards them through the wavy hills.

Jeremy impatiently kept his eyes on the Briton's forecastle, fuming at the inactivity. Even with his glass, he could not observe any disposition on the part of the British to be rescued. Then he saw Gardner's lithe body vault over the rail. Shortly thereafter the British began to quit their doomed vessel. Carefully, Jeremy counted until he had watched more than twenty souls go over the side. He closed his glass. The boats would be seriously over-weighted.

He jumped down onto his quarterdeck. "Stand by the starboard anchor, Mr. Rakes," he said to the officer on watch.

The *Resolution's* third lieutenant was as amazed as an aimless stroller who unexpectedly flushes a quail, but the habit of obedience had him underway before he realized that he had not been formally relieved. Suppressing his own thoughts about the propriety of anchoring off a shoal, Rakes got the cable of the starboard anchor on the bitts, bent on, cleared the way, and stood by for the command to let go. His diligence was rewarded by instructions to prepare the larboard anchor as well.

TURNING into the wind, Jeremy dropped his best bower. While the cable fitfully surged out of the hawse, he took soundings off his stern. With two cables spliced together onto the best bower, he could let the sea carry the *Resolution* perhaps four hundred yards towards the Briton, and that could mean the difference between survival and death for Gardner if his men were exhausted. Should the hemp part, the *Resolution* might well join the Briton, so Jeremy prudently did not place his trust in a single anchor.

"I want to know the instant that the splice leaves the cable locker," he said to his messenger. "Make no mistake."

"Aye, aye, sir!" cried the youngster, running below.

Jeremy glanced at the Briton. Gardner had cast off and was heading into the waves. Belaying the cable to make certain that the starboard anchor was holding and not coming home, Jeremy loosed his mizzen topsail and backed the *Resolution* as far as she would go to one side. When he let go his second anchor, he did not want to risk fouling the cable of the first. Furling sail, he again let the sea and wind carry his ship towards the wreck, and gave some attention to his first lieutenant.

With unfaltering skill, Gardner met each wave as a separate problem, thwarted its power by a twist of the steering sweep, and through his steadfast confidence encouraged his men to swing their blades in a rhythm which promised to drive the boats to the *Resolution* before their stamina evaporated. He saw his skipper easing onto the shoal and smiled ironically. Jeremy would not expect men to pull more than an hour against a running sea. Gardner shook his head pityingly. A Yankee captain would have had more faith in his men.

Unaware of Gardner's interpretation of his maneuver, Jeremy concentrated upon the water under his rudder and the scope of cable to his anchor. Charts were useless, for the crests and troughs could pitch the

Resolution onto the shoal and break her keel at a point where the charts might indicate sufficient water for a ship-of-the-line. When a cable's length had gone to the starboard anchor, Jeremy let go the port. With the pair of hooks down, the *Resolution* was fairly secure for the time it would take to take up the boats. Jeremy felt better as the two cables surged through hawseholes.

He felt even better when Gardner's men had struggled close enough to pick up a line floated down in a cask. While the sailors thankfully rested on their oars, the crew on the *Resolution* steadily dragged the boats to her stern. Jeremy bitted cables, grappled his helm, and made a slight lee.

"Put over the ladder and a boatswain's chair," he said, and leaned on the rail. Gardner looked up at him from the bobbing boat and gave him a nonchalant salute. Jeremy frowned down at the chests crowding the boat's bottom. The prisoners were lucky to have escaped with their lives, without transporting their gear. Gardner caught the frown, shrugged, and pointed to the women. One was young and one was middle-aged, and neither, soaked and huddled, was exciting. Jeremy was somewhat disappointed.

Gardner sent up the male prisoners first. Jeremy ignored them all, despite their expostulations, and the lieutenant of marines hurried them below. Then Gardner lashed the older woman onto the boatswain's chair, and Jeremy stepped back from the rail. She carried a considerable amount of weight beneath the dress that whipped indiscreetly about her, and annoyed the seamen who were hauling her aboard.

"Faith!" exclaimed the boatswain, as the men struggled with the line. "Did Mr. Gardner bring back a cannon, sir?"

"Handsomely does it," Jeremy replied, and went back to the rail. The woman used the ladder only to keep herself from swinging about and stared up at Jeremy with the look of a landlady soliciting long overdue rent. "'Vast heaving!" he called, when she was up to the rail, and swung her himself onto the deck. She was caught for a moment by the colors and thrust them from her with a stifled oath.

Jeremy unlashed her. The instant she was steady on her feet, she snatched his hands away from her person, and said, "Mind your manners, you bloody rebel! I'm Mrs. Colonel Donaldson!"

More amused than shocked by the forthright language usually heard among troopers, Jeremy smiled, placatingly, and introduced himself. "If you will be so kind as to follow this lad, Madam," he added, "he will escort you below to my cabin."

When Jeremy was born, Mrs. Donaldson had doubtless offered physical attractions to the young officers of the British Army. There were hints of a once well-built body in the proportions of her hips and shoulders, but Mrs. Donaldson had carelessly built too well upon her foundations, and now hung nearly twice as much weight on the frame that had persuaded Mr. Donaldson to abandon bachelorhood. "None of your cabin!" she shrilled, with a knowing lift of her chins. "I will wait for my daughter. We are under the protection of Captain Clerk."

Jeremy did not make comment, because Dorcas Donaldson was peering at him over the rail. Before he could move to her assistance, she supplely dropped down onto the deck. No one had to unlash her from a boatswain's chair, for she had boarded like a man.

With a toss of the head, Dorcas flung her rainhood onto her back, and let blond hair blow freely. Blue eyes nearly on a level with his, she had a wide mouth which could have been generous, but her high forehead hid a quick mind which was busy with ingratitude.

Spreading her strong legs against the pitch of the ship, she studied the captain of the *Resolution* with leisurely insolence. She bore a brace of pistols in the blue sash about her waist and Jeremy did not care to question her ability to use them. Dorcas Donaldson was a capable girl, strong in her beauty and body, and unintimidated by the unfortunate circumstance of being a captive of an American warship.

"Proceed with your piracy," she said challengingly, the long, slim fingers of her right hand resting on her hip, conveniently near the butt of a pistol.

Jeremy did not recover all at once from his nonplussed admiration. "Not yet, ma'm," he drawled unthinkingly. "Your powder's wet. It would not be fair."

"Really?" she said mockingly, and with a swift movement of her hand snatched out

a pistol and aimed at his head. "My father was a soldier and taught me the use of weapons."

"And a scandal it was, too," Mrs. Donaldson interrupted disapprovingly, as she matter-of-factly leaned on a gun and inspected her clothing in the thrifty hopes of finding that the salt water had not irretrievably ruined them.

Jeremy had looked into the muzzle of a pistol before. He had not liked the experience then; he did not like it now. Mrs. Donaldson's remark did not divert her daughter. Jeremy automatically tightened. This strange, mad girl had absolutely nothing to gain by shooting him. He knew this, and she knew it. A pistol shot or two could not change the nationality of the *Resolution*.

He said nothing for he had nothing to say. She was three steps from him and five from the nearest seaman. She was unnaturally cool, and her hand did not shake from the weight of the pistol.

"A bit of oiled silk is all that is needed," she said, and her right eye narrowed even as Jeremy realized that she was going to squeeze the trigger.

Before his body could act upon the information from his brain, the pistol flamed, powder stung his face, and smoke blinded his eyes, while his ears cringed from the sharp report of the explosion. He lunged for her. He felt no pain. Then, suddenly his hands were upon her shoulders, but he could not grasp her right arm, and a heavy pistol barrel landed on his skull to bludgeon him into unconsciousness.

II

HE opened his eyes and looked at the open sky. Through the throbbing of his head, he heard the working of wood and hemp and the thrumming of wind through the rigging. Gardner stood by the helm, tautly staring toward the ship's bows.

Jeremy found himself on a cot, painfully sat upright, and put his feet on the deck. A quartermaster touched Gardner's arm. "We've almost cleared, Captain," Gardner called. "Shall I set the course?"

"The same," Jeremy replied, and got up. He was dizzy for a moment, then the throbbing subsided, and he was himself again save for a cracked skull. He felt the outlines of the bump on his head, and walked over to the binnacle. Glancing aft, he saw the grounded Briton far off on the starboard quarter. "Put her in chains and hang her at dawn," he rasped to Gardner. "Why didn't you disarm her?"

Gardner grinned, and turned over the watch to Israel. Tactfully leading Jeremy to the stern out of the crew's earshot, he indicated a row of chests. "I was thinking about these," he said. "I'm sorry, but I didn't search the women, though frankly I'm glad I didn't."

"You should be," Jeremy grunted. "What's in the chests?"

For answer, Gardner stooped and lifted a lid. Gold shone brightly in the daylight. "Part of the loot from Grenada," he explained, with a certain satisfaction. "Captain Clerk got out as the French invaded. It's all properly invoiced to His Majesty's Ministers. I didn't think you'd object too much if I squeezed a little room in the boats for it."

Jeremy gazed at the hard specie which was so desperately needed in the fight for independence. "How did you find it?" he asked, momentarily overlooking the fact that the money represented a direct violation of his orders.

"That wasn't difficult," Gardner shrugged. "Nobody wanted to leave. Clerk even tried to tell me that he'd fight if I tried to take him off, because it was his duty to go down with his ship. He doesn't look like the type who'd be sentimental, so I just scouted below and found the stuff in his locked cabin."

"And then—?"

"And then I urged him to come out to us," Gardner said cheerfully. "He thought the weather was going to moderate by dawn and he'd have a chance to use his boats to reach the island. As it was, he didn't want to risk them in a heavy surf."

Jeremy sat down. "I presume you also brought his papers," he remarked acidulously.

"It just so happens that I did," Gardner admitted artlessly. "They were in the cabin, so I brought 'em along."

"We'll take up the matter of disobedience some other time," Jeremy said. "Where are the papers?" Gardner produced them with alacrity, and so, as the sun went down,

Jeremy busied himself with the details of the *Swiftsure's* cruise, Captain Gideon Clerk, Master.

Until she had touched at Grenada, the *Swiftsure's* career had few differences with that of the hundreds of British merchantmen who plied the Indies, but at Grenada, Captain Gideon Clerk had stumbled into history, as the Count d'Estaing seized the island to make amends for rebuff at St. Lucia.

IN a moment of crisis, defeated commanders seize any means to transport last messages to their governments, and Sir George Macartney, beleagured governor of Grenada, was not an exception. With his only sloop-of-war snapped up by the French vultures, the harassed knight turned to the merchantmen who might possibly escape. Thus the *Swiftsure* had been given a dignity and worth beyond her humble traffic. Already charged with the task of transporting to England the widow and orphan of an officer who had unwisely combined liquor and climate, Captain Clerk received both the honor of Sir George's dispatches and chests of money from businessmen who had reason to believe their liquid assets were safer with their government than with the French.

Jeremy thoughtfully looked up from the *Swiftsure's* papers. Like any American, he was gratified by news of a British defeat, even though he was pricked by the energy with which d'Estaing pursued the objectives of France and dawdled over those of the Continental Congress. At any rate, the presence of the money was sufficiently explained to make an Admirality court prompt in deciding the legality of its seizure. Gardner's foresight would net them all some handsome prize money.

He hesitated about opening Macartney's dispatch, justified his curiosity by the happy thought that he might find therein some information which would oblige him to return to Charleston at once, and gently worked open the seals. The messenger respectfully interrupted his reading.

"Your hat, sir," the youngster said.

Jeremy started as though surprised in a burglary. The messenger stood before him, young-faced, burdened with sorrow.

"Thank you," Jeremy murmured, then noticed the hangdog expression. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't sign on to be a maid, sir!" the youngster blurted.

"Who said you did?" Jeremy asked.

"Mr. Gardner, sir. With your permission, I am to serve the ladies. I told Mr. Gardner I would discuss the matter with you."

"Well, now," Jeremy commented gravely, "it strikes me as an excellent idea. We need someone who can keep his wits about him, not some silly fellow who would romantically help them to blow up the ship. I agree with Mr. Gardner that you're the right man."

The messenger did not brighten. Despite his youth, his experience at sea had aged his perceptions. The captain was backing up his second in command. No matter what words he used, the decision was plain.

"Yes, sir," the messenger said disgustedly.

"I want to see Mr. Gardner," Jeremy remarked, taken aback by the failure of his reconciliation.

"Aye, aye, sir," the messenger responded with a dejected tug at his forelock.

Jeremy let the lad go without reproof. The hat in his hand had a hole through the crown which aroused an unpleasant memory. Gardner came back from the helm. "What the devil did you do with 'em?" Jeremy demanded.

"They're in your cabin," Gardner answered, with his infernal grin. "Unarmed."

"Oh?" Jeremy muttered, with a forbidding glance at his junior's lean face.

Gardner broke off the grin. "The boatswain took care of her. They say it was a good show for a minute or two, but he had the weight and won."

"I'm glad to know it's safe to see her," Jeremy said sourly. "Have you spoken to them?"

"After getting the boats aboard, I was busy with the ground tackle," Gardner replied, sardonically hinting that it had been time foolishly spent. "Yours is the pleasure of broaching the cask, Captain."

Jeremy gazed up at Gardner's too respectful expression. Evidently Yankees didn't move ships onto shoals just to help oarsmen. "Well," he said, carefully putting the *Swiftsure's* papers to one side, getting to his feet and putting on his punctured hat. "Go to

quarters if I haven't returned within the hour."

TO SHOW Gardner that he knew his business, Jeremy checked the ship's course and the set of the sails before going down the after-hatchway. Entering the maindeck companionway, he observed a marine sentry outside the cabin door, learned that the ladies had refrained from setting the ship afire, knocked to announce himself, and waited more than a minute for a summons to enter. He was not invited, and under the very serious eyes of the sentry, pushed open the door.

Mrs. Donaldson was prostrate on the bed, but Dorcas stood by the table, ready for war or peace. The reflected sun melted her hair so that each thread glowed like the metal in the chests above. Her face was composed and serene, as though she had spent a day with flowers and gentle music, rather than pistols and violence.

Even without a weapon in her sash, Dorcas was formidable in her womanhood and strength. "How now, Mr. Pirate," she said casually. "Have you come to claim your spoils?"

Once again Jeremy wished that the *Resolution* were sailing under the skull and crossbones. Dorcas would have made freebooting a pleasant occupation. "Madam," he said coldly, "you owe me a pound and four."

Dorcas raised a skeptical eyebrow, while Jeremy threw his ruined hat on the table. She studied him for a moment, like a tigress stalks a bullock, respecting the bulky muscles of her prey, yet disdainfully confident of her feline superiority. Jeremy, in a shirt, showed to his best advantage, and he was accustomed to appreciative glances, though he found this candid appraisal unsettling.

"You live by my mercy," Dorcas retorted boldly, after a glance at the hat. "Or do you believe that I could miss your thick head at three paces?"

"A pound and four," Jeremy repeated stubbornly. "There was no need to shoot."

"I thought otherwise, Mr. Pirate."

"You incurred unnecessary dishonor," Jeremy said stiffly.

Dorcas shrugged a broad shoulder. "Our belongings are now yours," she replied carelessly. "Why ask for money? Help yourself. We will make shift with the clothes on our backs."

"You mistake my character, Madam!"

"Do I?" she asked sarcastically. "I would not have fired at a gentleman. Your bulk, Mr. Pirate, is against your pretensions."

Jeremy dropped the subject, dimly seeing her motive in scaring him half to death. If nothing else, the shot had impressed upon him the fact that Dorcas was not to be taken lightly. Her strong spirit could exact recognition of what she deemed her rights. By the gesture of pushing the *Resolution's* captain to the brink of death for a frightening glimpse of the eternal abyss, she had demonstrated a contempt for life which would make men think twice before attempting to humiliate her.

He felt a surge of sudden attraction as she stood defiantly before him, although he was certain that she was capable of concealing a poniard beneath her skirts. Whether she did or not was unimportant, for Dorcas would use whatever came to hand, having the coolness to exploit the gifts of fortune.

Wondering if she did indeed have a blade strapped to her thigh, Jeremy took advantage of the glare from the windows to look, but the muslin was tantalizingly secretive. His eyes were traitor to his thoughts. Dorcas moved to the only comfortable chair in the masculine cabin, sat down and crossed her legs. Then, with a mocking smile, she raised the hem of her skirt to her knees, and revealed a slender scabbard bound to her right calf.

"Dorcas!" exclaimed Mrs. Donaldson, hoisting herself on an elbow and glaring at her hoyden daughter. "Put down your skirt!"

The girl obeyed with an unexpected docility. "I was showing our pirate that we Scotch have some worthwhile customs, Mother," she explained tranquilly.

"Your daughter is an armory, Madam," Jeremy said.

"My daughter is a baggage!" replied Mrs. Donaldson in resigned scandal. "Pistols and daggers, forsooth!" Her face was furious. "There was none of that in *my* family, praise the Lord!"

"That will do," Dorcas interrupted icily.

Mrs. Donaldson gasped, shrank back from the rage in her daughter's manner, shook her head in invocation of the virtuous

feminine ghosts of her clan, and sank helplessly back on the bed.

Jeremy did not have much difficulty comprehending that Dorcas would endure personal humiliation from her mother yet flare like a rocket at a hint of affront to her father or his memory. He wished that Mrs. Donaldson had never boarded the *Swiftsure,* because he suspected that Dorcas could yield to malicious temptations to irritate her mother's genteel morality, and there were plenty of men aboard who would play her game. He did not want that kind of trouble.

In the silence with which the one woman nursed her grievance and the other challenged repetition, Jeremy was uncomfortable. He was as welcome as a tax collector. Instead of being the master of his own ship in his own cabin, he was an intruder. After making certain that Mrs. Donaldson was shocked or frightened into temporary silence, Dorcas turned blazing eyes upon him.

Jeremy did not quite know what to do. The women of his family had ruled their men by quiet voices and courteous reminders. The intently scornful expression of a beautiful Scotch-English girl was beyond his management. He was confused by contrary urges, both to punish her physically for her arrogance, and to close her passionately in his arms. The first was forbidden by his breeding, and the second by his misspending of leisure with hunting or riding or books. Gardner could have interpreted the situation and improvised a tactful strategy, but Gardner was securing the ship for sea. Besides, Gardner would formulate a strategy to suit his own interests, and Jeremy did not care for that.

At length Jeremy chose to believe he had been given a smoldering invitation to speak and get out. He rose, picked up his hat, and turned toward the bed. Dorcas relaxed in her chair.

"I have been informed of your private misfortune, Madam," he said to Mrs. Donaldson. "I assure you that you are as safe aboard the *Resolution* as you would be under the British flag. You will be landed at our earliest opportunity to place you in a position to continue your homeward voyage."

"Now, that's a fair speech for a rebel!" Mrs. Donaldson exclaimed, shifting her head on the pillow for a better look at him. She had recovered remarkably from the verbal bout with her daughter, and glowed with almost matronly approval.

Jeremy accepted the conciliation in her tone, but did not care at all for the amusement which made the features of Dorcas seem less than angelic. "Should you want for anything which is in our power to supply," he added uneasily, "ask either Mr. Gardner or myself. We are your servants, Madam."

"If so, land us at Jamaica," Dorcas interrupted. "Mother is known there."

"Jamaica?" Jeremy echoed, facing the daughter of Colonel Donaldson. "You ask the impossible. Your countrymen have a frigate base on the island."

Dorcas sighed in false disappointment. "I had heard that pirates were not always afraid of Port Royal," she said. "Did not the pirate Henry Morgan sail from there and become a knight?"

"For the last time, my dear lady," Jeremy retorted with a touch of roused temper, "we are not outlaws. This ship is commissioned by the sovereign State of South Carolina. My officers are gentlemen, my crew are honest men. Chance has delivered you into our care, and you will not be abused."

"How dull!" Dorcas murmured, with enough realistic regret to jolt Jeremy's sensibilities. He regarded the girl with renewed interest, and she frankly met his eyes.

"Dorcas!" moaned Mrs. Donaldson, when the innuendoes of the comment had insinuated their way through her preoccupation with the postponement of her return to England and the establishment of a discreetly comfortable life on a widow's pension. *"Dorcas!"*

"Oh, Mother, be still!" Dorcas snapped. "For all his fine speech, he's a pirate, in principle if not in deed."

Jeremy was accustomed to flat acceptance of his word. The obduracy of the girl almost tempted him to remark that his ancestry included an array of barons and baronets who gave him more quarterings on his arms than the late colonel had commanded corporals, but he retained sufficient British blood to be reticent about his breeding. "Please explain your opinion," he said bluntly.

"Why did your mate seize the *Swiftsure's* treasure?" Dorcas asked with the semblance

of reasonability whereby women confound males.

Jeremy laughed at such naivete. "Lieutenant Gardner is aware that money is legitimate prize."

"Certainly," Dorcas agreed demurely. "Aren't women legitimate booty, too?"

With a triumph of self-discipline, Jeremy controlled his temper and made a leg to Mrs. Donaldson. "By your leave, Madam," he muttered, and stiffly left the cabin.

The lump on his head began to throb again.

III

ALTHOUGH locked in a cabin, the women dominated the ship. With a flash of her dagger, Dorcas restricted the right of access to Jeremy, Gardner and the boy who morosely brought them their meals and tended their wants. As the captain had few legitimate reasons for disturbing their involuntary guests, and the remainder of the men aboard might have had illegitimate intentions, the ladies MacDonald were largely left to their own entertainment. They demanded nothing, were silent, and therefore, stimulated conversation throughout the *Resolution*.

Quarterdeck watches were carried out with meticulous injunctions against running or shouting. The ship was managed in the quiet always demanded by regulations and rarely obeyed in practise. It was the spontaneously unanimous desire of the crew to refrain from distressing the ladies, by which, of course, they meant the fair Dorcas. Only the *Resolution* herself remained aloof from the conspiracy, grinding her timbers and creaking her masts and groaning her slings in contrarily feminine jealousy.

Jeremy observed the phenomenon with suspicion; Gardner was amused. The *Resolution* had orders to cruise north of the Windward Passage, intercepting those vessels which left the Indies by way of the strait between Cape Maysi of Cuba and St. Nicholas Mole of Hispaniola. Jeremy was far from sure that his ship was still a man-of-war.

"I don't like it," he remarked to Gardner, one noon when the latter was working out a sun sight.

"Wot?" Gardner murmured disinterestedly, flashing through the mathematics which ever confound the aristocrat.

"Israel has the voice of a cannon. Now he's using a messenger, if you please, to carry out his orders."

"So Israel has read the Articles," Gardner mumbled pleasantly. "What's wrong about that?"

Jeremy gazed down at the chart of the waters north of the Windward Passage. "This isn't a transport," he said. "They must adjust themselves to our needs, not we to theirs."

"Still bothered by that rap on the noggin, Jerry?" Gardner asked solicitously.

"Finish that sight!" Jeremy growled. "Evidently you find conditions acceptable."

Frowning thoughtfully at the latitude his calculations had given the *Resolution*, Gardner put down his pen and turned toward his captain. "Mademoiselle Dorcas is a handsome bit of baggage," he said quietly. "I find nothing extraordinary in the desire of all hands to please her. If I met her ashore, I wouldn't be so damned backward myself. As it is, I defer to your seniority."

"Don't," Jeremy said caustically. "I'm fighting a war."

"Why carry patriotism that far?"

"Do you want me to convince her I'm a pirate?"

Gardner swore softly. "What difference does it make if she does think so? If her mind is set that way, the explosion of the magazines wouldn't change it. Seize the main chance, man. The devil with her nationality—you're more British than she is, anyway."

"Mr. Gardner," Jeremy said slowly, "don't attempt to establish social relations."

"That's rather selfish," Gardner grinned. "Just because you can't get—"

"—Don't flash your charm on her," Jeremy interrupted. "I'll have your hide."

Serious all at once, Gardner looked down at him. "Don't ever try taking my scalp, Captain," he advised quietly.

For a moment, Jeremy stared belligerently back. "You've been warned," he said decisively. "No social relations." He then left the stateroom to go topside. Such casual immorality obliged him to recast his opinion of Gardner, and he wanted the hot, strong winds about his head. Smiling tightly, Gardner returned to his deskwork.

THE *Resolution* was on the station to which she had been assigned for three weeks, and could anticipate profitable activity. The majority of British trade gathered at Jamaica to take protection from such vessels of the Jamaica establishment as might be en route to England. Jeremy had strict orders to refrain from attacking convoyed ships, for South Carolina could not afford the loss of a cruiser, but some reckless skippers preferred to run the risks of Yankee privateers and French corvettes and sailed independently. These were his prey.

Lieutenant Rakes was reaching easily for the windward side of the Passage route, to enable the *Resolution* to sail free towards any stranger who made an appearance. Jeremy peered through a glass at the looming mountains of Hispaniola, thought contentedly of the nearness of the strong, friendly harbor of Cap Français in event of a disaster, and then strolled about the deck carefully inspecting his battery.

Resting under the open sky on the *Resolution's* flush deck, the cannon were Jeremy's ultimate reason for being at sea. Bred in the British tradition, the Colonies were determined to carry the war to their enemies so long as their ships could leave ports. Even a decade could not suffice to permit the Continental Congress to match the equipment of England, developed since the days of the Stuart Kings. Fleet actions had to be left to French Allies, whose magnificent ships-of-the-line actualized an expenditure of money and manufactures and materials that the colonies would be unable to duplicate for three generations. The great ships could determine the course of the war by a sharp day's work, but there was no guarantee they would come to grips.

Thus, from the first weeks of insurrection, while shrewd American diplomats strove to enlist the aid of any European power in their cause, gallant little vessels struck at British merchantmen, the corpuscles in the blood of British life. They sailed under the flag of the Congress, or of a state, and fought as men-of-war, or they sailed with letters-of-marque and made a thrifty business of privateering.

No matter how an American went to sea, the aggregate effort of the little ships sent insurance rates spiralling at Lloyds. Jeremy looked upon commerce-raiding as the true civil war. The English Army was small in numbers and prestige, and the skirmishes of lobsterbacks and rebels went against the Americans largely because of inferior equipment. In ships, the small ships, matters were equal, and seamanship was paramount. The skill of commanders and the will to conquer determined the outcome of engagements.

Jeremy knew he was little better than average in his mastery of seamanship. He had learned more by observation than direct experience. Thanks to an uncle in Charleston who had tarnished the family name by entering trade and acquiring a modest fleet of brigs and schooners, Jeremy had found no obstacles in the way of making pleasant voyages to the Indies as a passenger during the youthful years when he needed an outlet for his lust for adventure. From this, it had been easy for him to decide to be a ship's officer while waiting for his father to saddle him with the family estate. After a few voyages, his uncle gave him command of a schooner. So, between infrequent trips to the West Indies and leisure at home, Jeremy had marked time until Sam Adams and a handful of patriots cut away the web holding the pattern of his life together.

Nearly four years ago, on a sunny autumn day, Jeremy had applied to the State of South Carolina for a commission. As a lieutenant, he had gone through the lean years before the French alliance, and few begrudged him the dignity of his own command when seniority conferred it upon him. He had learned his profession, in the opinion of the gentlemen who marshalled the resources that South Carolina officially put into the struggle for liberty.

Only the few like Gardner thought that there were more competent men, and this was galling to Jeremy's spirit, especially when his honesty compelled him to admit that he had picked up a good deal of information from watching Gardner handle the ship. The admission was bitter, for the self-assured Gardner was not above gratuitously explaining some particular operation which he was certain was strange to his captain. At these times, Gardner looked at him as though demanding proof of Jeremy's right to command.

Jeremy had not taken too long to decide that he would prove his right to command before the end of the cruise. Though no

words were spoken, Gardner understood, and stood by, with that eternal grin which Jeremy had begun to despise.

WALKING slowly along the row of blackened cannon, Jeremy stopped at one which had a rusted vent, sent for the gun-captain, and forthwith fined the man a month's pay. A rusted vent could prevent firing, and the *Resolution* needed every pound of metal that could be flung from her broadside.

"A second offense and you go in irons. Is that clear?" he said harshly, his strong features fiercely wrathful.

"Yes, sir," the gunner replied uncomfortably.

"Rouse out Mr. Israel," Jeremy directed, and went to the next piece. There he was annoyed by the shot which, due to the air and the occasional sweep of salt water across the deck, had become slightly corroded. He waited until his gunnery officer made an appearance.

"Look at those racks," he commanded. "They are casting cannonballs imperfectly enough these days without making 'em deteriorate. Clean 'em. Clean 'em all!"

Israel was a forthright youngster whose physique made the members of his division loyally wager that he could take the captain in a fair fight. He was not totally unaware of this sentiment, and on occasion let it influence him. "Certainly they are rusty, sir," he answered boldly. "You wouldn't permit me to paint 'em."

"I gave you an order, Mr. Israel, not an argument. If you will be so kind as to accompany me, we will doubtless discover more unfitness for battle."

"Yes, sir," Israel said, tightening his lips.

Jeremy's searching eye only discovered a tuft in the breeching of another gun, but this sufficed to push him into a sulphurous, quiet lecture on the requirements of a good gunnery officer. He did so in the bows, out of range of curious ears, and Israel made no attempt to justify himself, accepting the criticism with Christian patience. At the end, Israel could look forward to the ruin of his future off-duty pleasures.

Satisfied that he had impressed his gunnery officer and crew with the need to be more thorough, Jeremy went aft to the helm, and obliterated the complacency of Mr. Rakes. The yards were trimmed a fraction less than the angle needed to make the sails draw full efficiency, someone had sloppily coiled a brace on a spike, the helmsman used too much rudder. Mr. Rakes was left to wonder if he had been taught the first thing about going to sea, and was too stunned to defend himself.

Having shaken up the watch, Jeremy repaired below to the wardroom for a draught of wine. In his absence, the men who had witnessed the exhibition shook their heads over him. Ordinarily, he had been an amiable gentleman, war-hardened to a disregard of the trivialities whereby peacetime ships were kept out of mischief. He had been primarily concerned with carrying out the *Resolution's* function of harassing British commerce, and discipline had taken care of itself, after his actions had proved his capabilities. With the masculine reluctance to reject a matured judgment, the crew attributed his outburst of irascibility to a rebuff from the girl in the cabin.

To a certain extent, their simple conclusion was valid. In Jeremy's scheme of things, women had a clearly established status in life. They were wives or mothers. At suitable times men made them the first,

and then Nature according to a random bounty saw to the second. At all times, they were modest, tender and lovable. Dorcas could only claim the latter quality, and this, even in a disproportionate amount, did not

offset her lack of the maidenly virtues. Jeremy had at times almost brought up the matter with the sophisticated Gardner.

As a matter of fact, the temptation to speak to his first lieutenant had become so impelling that he had been obliged to evict Gardner from the stateroom, and put Israel in with Rakes, on the pretense that a captain's solitude was a military necessity. Gardner, of course, went with a leer on his cynical face which indicated that he understood the reasons for the move, and thereby gave Jeremy a twinge of conscience.

In truth, Jeremy was troubled. Nearing his thirties, insulated by the time-killing habits which had seen him safely into physical maturity, Dorcas had kindled in him appetites he had never before urgently wanted to feed. He did not know how to proceed, and was reluctant to admit it to Gardner, to whom the news would not have been surprising.

He stretched out on his bed, closed his eyes and instantly saw Dorcas, not as she had aimed the pistol at his head, but as she had stood before the windows and sat in the chair of the cabin. He did not struggle to expel the vision, endeavoring to complete in his memory the details of her face, and hearing the husky voice with which she spoke. When she was fixed in his mind, he transferred her with ease to the South Carolina countryside, and put her boldly on a horse which she sat like a gentlewoman and controlled with a firm, strong hand. He took her hunting with him, and she strode along in the garb of a man, and enjoyed the crisp air and did not mind when the game did not rise because the country was beautiful and she was with him.

She sat at his table and charmed their guests, shepherding the ladies into a drawing room for the patter about personalities and children which befitted the conversation of the gentle sex. She would smile her sardonic smile, but the women would smile back uncertainly, wondering what foolishness had produced the merriment. They could later say whatever they wished, and it would not matter, because all the men who came to the Hall would defend her against detraction and insinuation.

He swore, sat up, swung his feet to the deck, put on his boots, and went to the door of his stateroom. Perhaps another look at her would clarify his mind. More through instinct than reason, he entered the companionway and started aft. The sentry snapped to attention. Jeremy said, "Everything in order?" and before the marine could answer, a messenger darted through the quarterdeck hatch, thudded down the ladder, and shouted, "Captain! A sail!"

Jeremy swung around, back into his character as a commanding officer of an undersized sloop-of-war. "Where away?" he asked.

"Starboard beam, sir," the youngster replied. There was a trace of malicious gratification on his face as Jeremy pushed him aside and ran for the ladder, without pausing to don hat or sword.

HE burst onto the sun-splashed quarterdeck. Gardner had preceded him and busily shaking out sail, while the *Resolution* came about. Taking a quartermaster's glass, Jeremy did not interfere with the maneuver which would bring their sixteen guns towards the stranger. He peered at the southern horizon a few points to the west of Hispaniola's mountains, where a three-masted ship was beating up through the Passage.

The boatswain breathlessly ran onto the quarterdeck, his face florid with sweat and excitement, and anxious for the command that would set him and his mates piping all hands to quarters. Lowering his glass, Jeremy nodded. Instantly, the boatswain shrilled a call to battle stations and the sleepy *Resolution* abruptly came to life. Hatches spewed men who raced to guns, cast off lashings, leveled pieces and raised ports. At a quiet word from the quarterdeck, crews ran out their guns. The ship was ready before Jeremy's fifty-dollar bull's-eye watch could tick three minutes.

He looked approvingly at the half-naked gun-crews. "Well done, Mr. Israel," he said to his gunnery officer. "Take your station, sir."

Overlooking the earlier criticism in the few words of praise, Israel went into the bows. Rakes stood by the mainmast, and Gardner commanded the quarterdeck. If nothing else, the *Resolution's* smallness gave the great majority of her complement an opportunity to see what happened under the sun. For himself, Jeremy was pleased that he did not have to deal with a gundeck be-

low, which would have required troublesome clearing of partitions before battle.

Satisfied that the *Resolution* was prepared, Jeremy devoted his mind to less urgent matters. Beckoning to the messenger, he instructed the lad to take the ladies personally into the hold with the prisoners and to remain with them until they should be sent for. Disgruntled by the assignment which would have been welcomed by almost anyone in the crew, the youngster dispiritedly went below.

Gardner laughed and stooped to take a bearing on the chase, while Jeremy surveyed the weather. The wind blew hot and steady from the east and there were no signs that it might change before sunset. The *Resolution* had some five hours in which to close, and the stranger was helpless to avoid challenge, as she bore down on him.

Conscious of Gardner's appraising eyes, Jeremy used his glass in an admirable attempt to discover the stranger's armament. The distance was too great, however and the chase was still hull down. Without insulting the critical Gardner by giving an unnecessary order, Jeremy left the quarterdeck and made the rounds of his gun-crews. Most were veterans, and could endure the hour's strain that separated them from action, but a few had just come into the *Resolution* and needed the encouragement which Jeremy gave by judicious praise.

Although he had only eight muzzles to a broadside, he deliberately took his time. He was more apprehensive than the greenest landsman groaning under the strain of passing ammunition. This was the first combat he had ever experienced as a captain, and he wanted to do a fast, clean, workmanlike job. Absently, he glanced occasionally at the stranger to make certain that she was not one of the frigates out of Jamaica who haphazardly blockaded the Passage. Besides, her battery would in some measure determine his tactics. He thirsted for this information, yet refrained from seeking the aid of Gardner's sharper eye. Regardless of her strength, so long as she was not a British cruiser, he was committed to attack, and knowing the odds an hour in advance would not really make him any more comfortable.

Thus, he was near the bow on his way aft, when he observed that the gun-crews were not expending their curiosity upon the Briton. He followed their eyes to the quarterdeck and saw Dorcas, calmly talking to Gardner, who showed great pleasure in maintaining his part of the conversation. Without another word to Israel, Jeremy stalked aft as rapidly as his dignity and the pitching ship would allow.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded of Gardner. "I gave orders that the ladies were to be taken below."

"Mother is in your foul bilges screaming at Captain Clerk," Dorcas answered for the first lieutenant. "Won't that satisfy your requirements?" The wind used her hair as a hundred men would have liked to have done. She was poised and insulting.

"You will kindly join her," Jeremy said crisply, mastering the effect she produced upon him. "This quarterdeck may soon be too hot for gentleness."

"I have no desire to talk to Captain Clerk," she replied impudently. "Your mate is far more stimulating."

"No doubt," Jeremy grunted, flashing a wrathful look at his casual assistant. "I do not send you below merely to converse, Madam."

'I'm not going," she said stoutly. "When you are sunk, I want to be able to swim to the victor."

Jeremy glared at Gardner. Gardner shrugged indifferently. The sight of a battle at sea might have a salutatory influence upon the willful lass. Poses and pretensions have a habit of vanishing when metal whistles through the air, and a bulwark offers no protection, but instead becomes a potential source of deadly splinters.

"I remonstrated with her, Captain," Gardner said drily. "She refuses to go."

HAVING doggedly refused to be intimidated by the tiny *Resolution*, the Briton was less than two miles distant. Jeremy did not have time to take her forcibly below by himself, nor did he want to gamble on the hotness of her temper. Dorcas was capable of using her knife, and he could not risk it. He toyed with the idea of ordering Gardner to take her below, and promptly dismissed the thought. In the dark byways leading to the hold, Gardner and Dorcas might have kindled a mutual flame.

"As you wish," he said, with the en-

thusiasm of a boy returning to school after summer vacation, "Your mother will doubtless understand should any hurt come to you."

"She wouldn't weep too long," Dorcas agreed matter-af-factly. "Pray do not let me impede you, gentlemen." A model of composure, she perched herself on a small arms chest.

Jeremy turned away and used a glass on the stranger. Dorcas could afford to be impertinent. The stranger was half again as big as the *Resolution* and carried a dozen guns to a side. Jeremy put down his glass. The Briton was taking in sail, clearly intending to fight, rather than attempting to run away. The gesture was disconcerting, and not at all to be expected of the usual merchantman.

"Privateer?" he said aloud.

Gardner caught the remark, folded his arms across his chest and looked thoughtful. "Well," he remarked, "I wouldn't board until he had been cut down to our size."

Sharply, Jeremy looked at the source of the unsolicited advice. A boarding affray could too easily get out of hand, and he did not care to enter into one, even if Gardner indicated that it was the proper thing to do. "Take in sail," he said curtly. "Match his."

"Aye, aye, sir," Gardner responded and raised his trumpet.

Unconcerned, comfortable with her back to a bulwark, Dorcas smiled maddeningly when Jeremy glanced her way, drawn by the magnetism of her confident charm. He wished then he had swept her off her feet and carried her below as she gave him a look of warm challenge that sent him back to the enemy.

Sure of his physical and moral superiority, the big Briton fired a challenging gun before the ships had closed within a mile, and lowered and rehoisted his colors to emphasize his nationality. In reply, Jeremy directed Israel to fire a gun on the bow, and broke the Grand Union flag from the *Resolution's* main truck. The banner of South Carolina might not have been recognized by an English merchantman, but the impudent Grand Union was only too well known by the patrons of Lloyds insurance agents.

Carrying just enough sail to bring the *Resolution* into range, Jeremy kept his men from releasing their battle anxieties. He tried to appear cool as he endeavored to get an estimate of the Briton's crew, but few heads showed above the bulwarks. He was unable to admit his nervousness, especially with Dorcas on his quarterdeck. He was not afraid of an enemy privateer, and had the courage to attack a ship-of-of-the-line should his superiors deem it wise for him to do so, yet he had the vital duty of preserving his ship and could not afford rashness.

Covertly, he glanced again at Dorcas to see if she had been ruffled by the exchange of courtesies. She showed excitement only in the sparkle of her blue eyes. He told himself angrily that women did not have a place in war, particularly at sea, where fresh blood showed scarlet on the whiteness of scrubbed decks.

"For the last time," he said with the asperity of a mother correcting her children at the end of a long day, "For your own sake, go below."

Gently, she shook her head. "I am impatient for you to come within hail of your fate, Mister Pirate."

Silenced, Jeremy thrust her into a pocket of his mind, and returned his attention to the Briton, who was imperturbably plowing along on a steady course. The agreeability with which the fellow disdained evasive tactics was both puzzling and worrisome. Jeremy knew that some captains preferred to build close quarters on their weatherdecks and permit themselves to be boarded, annihilating enemy crews from the security of barricades. Jeremy did not propose to be lured to destruction.

"He doesn't have boarding nets up," Gardner remarked cheerfully. "Perhaps we have a sloop-of-war in disguise."

It was not difficult for Gardner to banter; he was not responsible for the *Resolution*. Jeremy did not have the stomach for levity. Fortunately, the Briton took the initiative. A few hundred yards under a mile, the stranger loosed a staggering broadside from the twelve guns of his battery. The cold barrels threw the shot short of the *Resolution*.

"He isn't a sloop-of-war," Jeremy observed quietly, and lost a degree or two of his tension.

Gardner nodded agreement. British naval captains prided themselves upon saving

broadsides for point-blank range. Their quarry did not sail under commission from the Admiralty.

"I would like to examine his papers," said Jeremy, attempting to be jocular in order to persuade Gardner that he was entirely calm. "Set sail."

With a spread of canvas drawing well, Jeremy put down his helm and increased the range rate to more than five knots, which would bring the *Resolution* within pistol shot in slightly more than a quarter of an hour.

His judgment was further confirmed by the Briton's feeble show of gunnery. A sloop-of-war could easily have delivered a half-dozen salvos as he bore down on her, but only three or four guns attempted to hit him, and these in a spasmodic fashion.

In such circumstances, the *Resolution* arrived at two hundred yards and sustained only one hit. Jeremy backed his main, shortened sail, and let his larboard gunners have a chance at the Briton who slowly filled their ports when the *Resolution's* bows again swung north. The shock of great guns shattered the suspenseful quiet. Jeremy felt a twinge of ecstasy, as he saw the results when the smoke had blown over the Briton. Several shots had ruthlessly punched holes into the stranger's side, and flame crackled on the open deck.

Israel's gunners followed up their advantage, pumped two more broadsides into the hull and upper works, silenced opposition, and brought down the haughty Cross of St. George and Andrew.

JEREMY was startled by the abruptness with which the encounter ended, and suspiciously refused to come aboard when the Briton obediently hove to. Backing sail, he killed the *Resolution's* way, and turned to talk to Gardner, and found Dorcas incredulously staring at the surrendered vessel, while men frantically rushed about to extinguish the flames on her deck.

With satisfaction spiced by malice, Jeremy said, "Think you it's a trap? He quit rather soon for a Briton."

"Stab me!" Gardner said softly. "I'm amazed. I don't know what to think, Captain."

"Well," Jeremy remarked, smiling at Dorcas, "perhaps he hoped to scare us away by his resolution and the first broadside. Suppose you take a boat and find out?"

"Aye, aye, sir," Gardner said, and called for his crew.

Thus, Jeremy was left alone with Dorcas, who had lost more than trifle of her composure.

A SHORT distance away, the merchantman looked large enough to stow the *Resolution* tidily in her hold, yet for all her size she had made a terrible opponent. The dignity of the British nation had not been gloriously sustained.

While Gardner's boat was being hoisted out, Dorcas studied the ruined merchantman. Her face was white, drawn with expectancy, as though she hoped for a miracle to redress the disaster. Slowly, she looked about the horizon. Only the distant, massive mountain peaks of Hispaniola met her searching eyes.

Jeremy could not yet use a woman with ungentlemanly harshness. "The day's work is done, Miss Donaldson," he said almost comfortingly. "Hadn't you best go below to reassure your mother?"

He was astounded when she rose to her feet without a word or movement of defiance. He was moody and not jubilant when Gardner languidly reported that their prize was four hundred tons, twenty-six men and a crestfallen captain. She was loaded with sugar that the citizens of the revolting colonies could use in their fight for freedom.

Aware of the odds which the Briton had faced, Gardner was no longer impressed by the victory. Once the Briton's bluff had been called, the outcome was axiomatically inevitable.

"Have Rakes sail her to Charleston with our prisoners," Jeremy said crisply, seeing by Gardner's expression that he had still to prove himself.

"Send the gold, too."

"And the ladies?" Gardner asked significantly.

"Not the ladies," Jeremy unhesitantly replied. "When relieved, we'll put into Cap Français and see if there isn't some way to get them over to Jamaica."

"Yes, sir," Gardner said blandly.

Jeremy wished that his first lieutenant would learn to control his suggestive leers.

IV

ALTHOUGH, like other hopeful commerce-raiders of the time, the *Resolution* carried a handful of gentlemen qualified as prize-masters, whose sole duty was to conduct captures to an American port, Jeremy had not thoughtlessly sent a lieutenant with the full-rigged *Bristol Maid*. His decision has been partly spontaneous, partly premeditated, and partly instinctive.

The prize-masters had their own snug quarters and did nothing to help with the ship's ordinary routine. Employed by the state, they gamed, slept, ate and enjoyed themselves until called upon to exercise their office. In an emergency, a captain could use them to stand watches. Unlike most ships-of-war, the small *Resolution* only carried three lieutenants, so that Gardner, although first, had to take his share of watches. Thus Jeremy could have pressed a prize-master into service.

This, he did not do, because, by substituting himself for Rakes, he had the responsibility of eight hours on deck, legitimately escaping from crowded conditions below.

Although most of the crew put him a notch higher in their esteem for his unselfishness in sharing the burden of deck-watches with Gardner and Israel, some remarked that the captain became more and more like his former cheerful self, instead of progressively degenerating under the strain of four-on-and-eight-off. Among these few was Gardner, and Gardner realized that the hours on watch left little room in Jeremy's mind for thoughts of Dorcas. When he did hit the sack, he was able to uncoil the springs of his alertness and almost at once to drop into a heavy sleep. Gardner was more acute than the captain who quickly forgot that he had deliberately affronted the prize-masters by his decision. They could do him harm, for they owed their positions to influence of one sort or another.

He was unworried. For him, in writing his dispatch, it was sufficient to have pointed out to the Commissioners that the Grenada gold had to be borne to Charleston by an officer of the South Carolina Navy. Not that prize-masters were untrustworthy, but because the *Swiftsure's* letter-cases were full of matter considered to be of a confidential, military nature, and prize-masters were, after all, civilians.

He knew his argument was specious, and did not care. His body grew weary and denied much activity to his brain and the return to prosaic duties made him more charitable towards his prisoners. When Gardner suggested that they be permitted the liberty of the deck to escape the heat of the cabin under the July sun, he quickly assented. When it was brought to his attention that salt pork might be less than appetizing to women, he gave his Negro servant free run of the hencoop, so that the ladies could refresh their palates. He permitted the ship's carpenter to rig a clothes line outside the stern windows, in order that they might have clean linen without exposing their private garments to public gaze.

With his outward adjustment to the phenomenon of having women aboard, most of the crew became content with their lot. It was clear to all hands that the captain had no intention of usurping a pleasure to himself which no one else could hope for. Deprived of a fruitful source of discontent, the seamen returned to complaints about food, berthing and responsibilities which are together the mark of a happy ship. A few of the older hands superstitiously murmured about the bad luck that females reputedly carry in their train, but these were overborne by those who enjoyed the sight of Dorcas strolling about the weatherdeck.

FROM the moment she had seen the *Bristol Maid* lower her colors, Dorcas had changed. She lost none of her proud bearing, but no longer did she contemptuously hold her head high and ignore the admiration which all hands were willing to shower upon her. While taking the air, she often spent the morning or afternoon talking to any member of the complement, officer or enlisted man, who had the time to spare and the invitation to tarry. Jeremy did not break into this quickly established custom, for, although ship's work sometimes suffered a little, morale soared high to compensate. Despite his forbearance, Dorcas did not admit him to the circle of friends she made, and, if anything, showed delight in speaking familiarly with Gardner when Jeremy was in a position to notice.

In this manner, Jeremy's newly-won peace of mind was subtly unsettled, and he began to sleep less comfortably.

Fiercely, he dedicated himself the more to his duty, and by the end of the first week of patroling, the *Resolution* had spoken a score of Yankee or French merchantmen and had taken a total of three Britons. While not the richest bag for a week's cruising, three prizes represented considerable success. Upon signing the log closing the month of July, Jeremy was rendered sufficiently mellow to be receptive to Gardner's suggestion that the ladies be invited to join the officers at Sunday evening mess.

"Certainly," Jeremy agreed, glancing at the log. "An excellent idea. They must be wearied of each other's company."

" 'Twill be a precaution as well as a kindness," Gardner remarked. "Otherwise, only one might leave this ship alive."

"And just what does that mean?" Jeremy demanded.

Gardner chose to be noncommittal. "I cannot imagine what they manage to do with themselves in the evenings," he replied. "If they play cards, the old lady would be bound to cheat, and we know the gal has a hot temper."

Jeremy frowned. He had not given too much thought to the manner in which the ladies amused themselves. Perhaps he had been wantonly unkind. Perhaps he ought to give them the run of the wardroom.

"Oh, no," Gardner objected quickly. "Once a week will break the monotony for them. Oftener would break us."

"I see what you mean," Jeremy said, visualizing the talkative Mrs. Donaldson as a constant dinner partner. "Let it stand."

BEFORE the hour could come around on Sunday evening, however, Jeremy had long regretted his acquiescence. He went to bed early on Saturday night, and instead of falling into an exhausted sleep, he tossed about fitfully, finally so alert, he imagined he saw the girl slip quietly past his door. He even started to get out of bed, until reason told him that there was a marine sentry in the corridor whom Dorcas could not elude, even to see Gardner.

He was unable to sleep then because his mind was flooded with Dorcas, and she would never permit him to have the peace of restful oblivion. He nearly snarled when a boatswain's mate respectfully summoned him for his watch.

Somewhat ashamed, and completely weary, Jeremy struggled up to the quarterdeck and relieved Israel. Nothing excited the night or the sea, and after a few polite words, Israel went thankfully below to his rest. Ordinarily, Jeremy enjoyed the four hours of a night watch. Only a few men were on deck, and of these, the majority catnapped with his approval by their ready guns. The *Resolution* endured a minimum of interference with the composition of her symphony of working sounds. The sky was usually friendly with stars and the moon, and the air was cool. Under topsails, the ship moved slowly, and the men would not have to be roused more than once to handle lines.

Early this Sunday morning, however, Jeremy had no pleasure in his surroundings. He was disgruntled by the total loss of his week's peace. Once Dorcas had reasserted herself in his imagination, she persisted in remaining. Jeremy did not blame his constant watchfulness of Gardner, but rather his own weakness which was unable to deny or circumvent her attraction. He felt that he could have been resolute enough to control his thoughts.

The men on watch were quick to sense his mood and did not disturb him with trivialities. The boatswain's mate tended to the lookouts, and the quartermaster used the peaks of Hispaniola to plot the *Resolution's* track. The men on the wheel took care to remain on course. With a gentle, steady wind, Jeremy had nothing to do save slowly pace the deck and think. He was dimly troubled by the solicitude whereby the crew respected his perturbation. It was not right for a captain to be conspicuously upset.

He envied Gardner's experience if he distrusted the fellow's morals. The big first lieutenant had taken Dorcas in stride, and as captain would have proved no less nonchalant. Jeremy began to believe that Gardner, and not himself, was the person who knew the proper way to spend time ashore.

He was trying to picture Gardner in the captain's boots, when the cause of his uneasy condition startled him.

Dorcas stood on the quarterdeck. "Good morning," she said pleasantly.

Her appearance took him back. "What the devil are you doing topside?" he snapped.

She laughed and thereby animated the slumbering watch. "Every time you talk to me," she complained quietly, "you want me to go below." Angelically pale in the soft light of the moon, she flowed towards him until they were face to face. "Why?"

Jeremy took her arm and silently led her aft. His fingers were sensitive to the unexpected pliancy of her flesh; she should have been as cold and unyielding as marble. Out of earshot of the curious quarterdeck gang, he released her. "What are you doing on deck?" he asked again. Then he was stung by the quick suspicion that she could easily have been in the passageway earlier in the evening. "How did you leave the cabin?"

"Why, sir," she said mockingly, "I walked. Think you I'd permit myself to be carried?"

"When?" he demanded.

Dorcas shrugged lazily. "I do not watch the time, Mr. Pirate."

He stared at her, drifting away from the responsibilities of command and the covetous eyes of the watch. "Why are you on deck? It is all very well during the day, but I do not sanction night-prowling."

"How pretty," she murmured, and leaned slightly towards him. "Perhaps I came to see you."

Electrified by the impossible possibility that she responded to the same stimulus hammering in his skull, Jeremy raised his hands to touch her.

Dorcas laughed at the gesture and leaned back against the rail. "I really came to see the sky," she said matter-of-factly.

Jeremy awkwardly dropped his hands and looked intently at her unfathomable face. He salvaged the fact that this was the first time that he had ever spoken to her with any degree of privacy, and carefully tried to see if he might lay the ghost of his attraction by finding her commonplace or flamboyant. The dim light was as kind to her as it was to him. Her features and figure were softened to share the beauty of the night.

Jeremy jettisoned propriety, caution and good sense. There was only one way to have peace. "Do you hate me, Dorcas?" he blurted.

"Could I love a rebel?" she responded readily, thrusting aside his familiar use of her name.

The riposte wounded him. "Rebel!" he flashed bitterly. "What do you know of our cause?"

"Rebellion is mutiny," she countered. "How do you like mutiny?"

Jeremy stared at her, silent. The exchange had shifted the conversation to a political level, and he had intended to speak only of a personal relationship. However, if she had been adroit in deflecting him, she had not by a flat answer brought him up short.

"I may as well confess," he said slowly, after a time and due reflection, "in different circumstances, I would be driven to seek your hand in marriage."

Dorcas rewarded him with an ironic laugh. "You have my sympathy, Captain. Some men did not have to be driven."

The poor light prevented her from observing the hot flush he felt in his cheeks.

"I do not have the gift of language," he said. "I did not intend to insult you."

"In short," she said calmly, "you think you love me?"

Her boldness did not make him shudder as he would have done in June. The bluntness with which she spoke of love did not surprise him. He had few illusions about Dorcas Donaldson. She was not a girl who would perish on the vine.

"In short," he agreed, "that's it."

She looked at him gravely, no longer belligerent or bold, and for once, thoughtful. She did not smile and she did not speak. She looked at him, and then she walked away.

WATCHING her athletic figure slip down the afterhatch, Jeremy was incredulous. He felt as exhilarated as he felt cheated. He had never intended to speak to her in such fashion and was amazed at himself for having done so. His declaration had been unrehearsed, yet he was not sorry he had spoken. If nothing else, his conscious mind was thereby reconciled with his less inhibited subconscious, and he enjoyed a sensation of relief.

And then the devils gleefully assailed him. What had she offered in return for his forthrightness? Nothing. He knew little

more about the girl than he had before going on watch.

For the remainder of the time he spent on deck, the devils slyly gave him another question to chew on: how much of the emotion he suffered was for the real Dorcas and how much for the image which had come to live with him? The more he thought about it, the more ridiculous he considered his blurted admission.

He was thoroughly uneasy when Gardner approached towards seven bells, and was very irritated by his first lieutenant's unseasonal cheerfulness. Most individuals growled upon relieving the midwatch. Jeremy almost barked his instructions for the day, and started to stomp off to his quarters for an hour or two before dawn.

"By the way, Captain," Gardner stayed him, "Miss Donaldson sent to me for permission to come topside. Did she disturb you?"

JEREMY was brought up short by the innocent question. Wheeling, he looked up into Gardner's inscrutable face. This, then, explained how she had passed the sentry. Did it explain anything else? He longed to ask at what time she had left the cabin, but feared the answer. "Yes, she did," he replied carefully. "Let's not make a habit of it."

"Very well, sir," Gardner replied with pseudo-submissiveness. "I'll see that she doesn't bother your watch again."

"Or *your* watch, Mr. Gardner!" Jeremy growled involuntarily, and stomped off, a tired, bewildered man.

In the wardroom of the *Resolution* at dinnertime, Dorcas Donaldson bloomed for the gentlemen of South Carolina, sharing her wit and attention equally, so none could be jealous of his neighbor. All that Jeremy discovered was the fact that Miss Dorcas could comport herself like a lady when she was so inclined, and she did not indicate in any manner that the pregnant encounter of the early watch had made a significant impression upon her.

Jeremy did learn, however, that the husband of Dorcas would acquire a mother-in-law who, after several rounds of the bottle, could open up a Pandora's box of Rabelaisian stories, but this did not influence him one way or the other.

V

JEREMY soberly looked about the littered deck of the *Resolution* and grimly waited for a complete report from his subordinates. To leeward, Gardner was boarding one of the most determined British privateers who had ever sailed in the West Indies. Jeremy was in no mood for compliments, even though the British captain had earned hearty praise from its owners for the stout manner in which she had defended his vessel. That defense had cost the *Resolution* a score of men killed or wounded.

Weakened as Jeremy had been by the requirements of sending away prize crews, he could now scarcely muster forty able-bodied men. With nearly half of his patrol to complete, he had cause for worry.

When Gardner signaled from the prize that she was secured, Jeremy gave the deck to Israel, and went below to see for himself what damage had been done to the *Resolution's* hull. He found the carpenter and his mates ruefully clustered about a gaping hole in the berth deck side. Jeremy understood at once why the carpenter had been tardy in reporting.

"Sheet lead and plugs won't take care of that," he said, accepting the inevitable. "Stuff in your bedding. We'll run into Cap Français."

"Aye, aye, sir," the carpenter murmured glumly, calculating the difficulty of making an adequate repair. "We'll have to refit those two frames and back 'em with strap iron. She'll be weak at best."

"It can't he helped," Jeremy said wearily. His carpenter, before the war, had been a builder of fine furniture, and had a craftsman's distaste for juryrigging. "Get down the bedding."

His eyes sadly on the hole which had destroyed the *Resolution's* soundness, the carpenter nodded. One of his assistants was idly kicking a heavy crowbar about the splinter-strewn deck. "Why can't they use solid shot like civilized folk?" he complained.

Jeremy turned away. "Plug up that hole!" he snapped. "There's a sea running."

The carpenter looked aggrieved. "I've sent for the bedding, Cap'n."

"All right," Jeremy replied. "Let me know when we can maneuver." He glanced

around the berth deck and saw perhaps ten plugs already hammered like corks into shotholes. If nothing else, he could be grateful that the crowbar hadn't hit the *Resolution* near or below the waterline. The whole thing was mainly his own fault. He had come too close to the Briton in an eagerness to end the fellow's resistance and gain Gardner's good opinion. As it turned out, he dreaded to hear Gardner's quiet comments on the affair.

He started aft and met the boatswain, who informed him that they hadn't made any water. Jeremy thought for a moment about putting a sail over the gaping wound, and decided that his men had earned their right to rest. "Have a few hands stand by the pumps," he ordered. "We might ship some water."

Having just detailed some of his mates to the duty of sewing the dead into hammocks, the boatswain was sombre. "There were eight killed outright, Cap'n. Four more will probably go soon."

Jeremy felt his stomach knot. Later he would know the names of those who had died, and would write eulogies to their families. At the moment, he was not anxious to discuss the manner in which Death had snatched at the members of his ship's complement. Few captains can casually shrug off the results of battle; most have troubled consciences, and Jeremy was not an exception. He wondered if the boatswain also thought that the *Resolution* had come too close to the Briton before the fellow had been thoroughly defanged.

"We'll be going into Cap Français," he said. "They'll have the best medical care available."

The boatswain had spent his life at sea and had the sailor's distrust for the capacities of landsmen. "They'll be better off aboard, sir," he dourly suggested. "Cap Français is rotten with fever."

"We'll soon see," Jeremy replied. "Rig a tarpaulin amidships and leave them on deck." He went through the after berth deck door and entered the officers' country. Foot on the ladder, he was checked by the sound of Dorcas' voice.

She stood in the passageway, arms akimbo, and imperiously demanded to know what had happened.

Jeremy was far from the amiability wherein he would submit to insolence even from a woman to whom he had declared his love. "Nothing that concerns you," he growled. "Get in the cabin and pack your gear. We are going into Cap Français."

"Hurt that badly?" she asked solicitously. "It was such a little ship, too."

"It was a good little ship," he said. "Pack your gear."

She did not move. "Why don't you resign?" she asked slowly. "Turn over your vessel to Mr. Gardner. I am sure he is a capable officer."

"Your concern for this ship is deeply touching!" he flashed, angrily sarcastic.

Dorcas laughed. "I am concerned for myself," she said contemptuously. "You'll drown us yet."

"Good riddance!" Jeremy snarled. He did not especially enjoy being informed by her that Gardner was superior to him as a commander, and he automatically lashed back with the words that first came to his outraged mind.

Dorcas disdained retort, and after an awkward moment of withstanding her blazing eyes, Jeremy went up the ladder. He had been happy that she had chosen to go below after the first engagement, instead of persisting in the whim of seeing battles from the quarterdeck. Now he realized that rumor spread as fast as shot. Somewhere she had heard of his error in judgment, and had mercilessly stabbed him in the vitals of pride. He did not have much to hope for, not if she failed to even respect him as a captain.

Topside, he perceived that Israel had made progress in clearing the deck, and consulted his charts to estimate the time it would take to bring the *Resolution* to a place of safety. If Gardner completed his work aboard the prize within the hour, he could enter the Paris of the West Indies before sunset. Forcing himself to be patient, he looked across at the mettlesome Briton. He took a few grains of satisfaction from the condition to which his guns had reduced her hull and rigging. The Briton's obstinacy had been bloody, and the prize appeared to be past salvaging.

He did not avert his eyes from his dead when the boatswain asked for approval of the manner in which they had been prepared for burial. He walked along the row of

bulky bundles and directed the boatswain to have his detail ready when the *Resolution* got under way. Then he went to see the wounded.

None of the men lying on the deck abaft the mainmast greeted him with three cheers of affection. In that day of medical ignorance, wounds were often as not mortal. A man facing death from rotting flesh is rarely cheerful. Some of them, propped against guncarriages, looked enviously and silently down the deck towards their mates who had been sewn into hammocks.

Jeremy spoke a few words of thanks to each of them, in the guilty hush of a girl gossiping in church. One or two answered with a vestige of the respect they had shown for his authority when they had been physically capable of enduring twelve cuts of the cat for disrespect. The others ignored him, either tense with pain or secure in their badges of courage. Jeremy returned to the helm.

"Mr. Gardner is coming, Cap'n," the quartermaster said.

Gratefully, Jeremy looked over the side. Gardner was more than halfway back to the *Resolution*. "Stand by to take him aboard," he directed, and sent the messenger below to find how far the carpenter had progressed with mending the hole.

Gardner wore a long face. "She's a shambles," he said. "All hands killed or wounded. She carried a privateer's commission from Jamaica. I'd like to try and get her into Cap Français."

"That bad, eh?" Jeremy murmured thoughtfully, staring at the man whom Dorcas apparently considered to be his superior. "Why not sink her and be done with it?"

"Matter of policy," Gardner suggested, in the bored, patient manner of a schoolmaster teaching the multiplication tables. "The French might appreciate us more if they see her."

Contrite because of the disaster, Jeremy managed to accept the lesson without flaring. "How about her captain?" he asked.

"Dead."

"Can you make port?"

Gardner shrugged noncommittally. "We'll be all right if you remain in sight."

"Do you know the channel?"

"Certainly."

"Then go ahead," Jeremy assented tiredly. Gardner was right, of course. The prestige of South Carolina and of all the American colonies would be enhanced if the French saw what a small cruiser had done to a British privateer. Thus far in the war, the French had fought little enough for the Americans. Since he could not send the prize to Charleston, Jeremy guessed that he would be forgiven if he presented the wreck to the Governor of Cap Français. "Transfer their wounded and God be with you."

Gardner grinned. "The wounded are on their way over now," he said, and went to his boat before Jeremy could comment on the high-handed assumption of authority. He wondered if Gardner had possibly at one time or another discussed his competence with Dorcas Donaldson. Such disloyalty, he was obliged to concede, would not be beyond that suave, ruthless sophisticate.

Despite apprehension, the trip into the French stronghold was easily accomplished. The *Resolution* followed her prize at a distance which, while not reflecting on Gardner's judgment, nevertheless would have enabled Jeremy to come alongside within a few minutes. Threading the channel past the batteries protecting France's northernmost bastion in the West Indies, the two ships anchored to the buoys assigned them by the harbor master, who shook a wise old head in admiration of men who dared to sail such beaten vessels.

VI

JEREMY tried to persuade himself that he was happy as he looked at himself in the stateroom mirror and gingerly cut at the soaped bristles on his chin. As far as the *Resolution* was concerned, everything was going well. The carpenter had neatly trimmed away the injured frames and strakes and promised to have the job complete and shipshape within two days. None of the wounded men had died, and the burial of the dead had been forgotten in the excitement of permission to send liberty parties ashore. The French had thankfully accepted the offer of the *Resolution's* doughty prize.

He had these reasons to believe himself fortunate. On the other hand, he had an appointment with the senior naval officer on the station to discuss the matter of prison-

ers. He could forsee no obstacle in the way of landing the ladies Donaldson. The French were charming. They did not make war on women, or even, in that century of moderation, on the bulk of enemy men. Only professionals bearing arms were involved in hostilities, and Dorcas would be considered irregularly armed.

Jeremy slashed himself, for the image of Dorcas came between his face and its reflection and he knew himself for a fatuous fool. If she were gone, he could not be happy. Even if she despised him, he had to have her near. Angrily, he daubed at the gash on his chin until the flow of blood stopped. He finished shaving and put on his shirt. He had scarcely pulled it down over his head, when Dorcas stepped into the stateroom.

Softly swearing, he was brought up short by her amused chuckle, and whirled to face her. Before he could speak, she walked up to him, put a hand behind his head, and kissed him, pressing herself to him with a fervor and strength he had never known was possible in a woman. His longing was tripped by her lips and his arms went about her.

After a time, she gently pulled back her head, and her blue eyes had the liquid depths of the sea. Jeremy kissed her again, abandoning himself to emotion, not asking why she was actualizing some of his dreams.

Then he felt her hands on his, as gently she bade him to release her. Reluctantly, he complied, though passion ridiculed him for an idiot. With a finger on his lips, she would not let him speak.

"I might not see you alone," she said quietly, "before you put us ashore. This is my thanks for your gallantry." She smiled. "You are a gentleman and I am not insensible to the fact. If I were a lady, our association might have ended differently. Goodbye, Mister Pirate."

Jeremy would have stopped her, but an instinct sounder than his brain or body warned him that she would never forgive him if he did not let her go as she had planned. Her farewell did not have the flavor of spontaneity, and no actress can forgive the bungler who destroys her great moment.

So Jeremy stupidly stared at the door until his ears told him that Dorcas was speaking to the sentry outside the cabin. Then, deliberately because his mind had suspended operation rather than compete with tense nerves, he completed dressing. A quarter of an hour later he was on deck talking to Gardner before entering the boat to go over to the seventy-four gun ship-of-the-line *Zodiaque*.

"I imagine you'll be delighted to have the cabin again," Gardner remarked.

For a wild instant, Jeremy thought that his First Lieutenant had possibly observed the scene in the stateroom. He flushed before he realized that Gardner had been tramping about the weatherdeck supervising the unloading of fresh provisions. "Yes," he replied in a voice he hoped was cryptically steady. "If it is agreeable with Israel, why don't we have a supper for them tonight?"

"It's agreeable with Israel," Gardner said. "I've bought the best that this pesthole has to offer."

"Oh," Jeremy murmured, still too warmed by his memories to make objection to the presumption with which his nominal subordinate invariably anticipated him. "You might send them a fruit mash now." He frowned for a moment as though checking over unfinished ship's business, while his coaxwain waited.

"I have," Gardner said.

Too blissful to be irritated, Jeremy moved to the entryway, Gardner walking slowly alongside him.

"Y'know," Gardner remarked conversationally, "she's quite a piece. Came into the wardroom this morning and kissed me goodbye. Just like Helen of Troy."

"Really?" Jeremy murmured absently, still wrapped in his cloud. He was in the boat before he understood what his first lieutenant had said. At once, his cloud dissolved and he plunged into the Styx. Dorcas had to go.

He was in the *Zodiaque's* great cabin and chatting with her captain before he fully grasped the enormity of the fact that he had in sorrow come to discuss a means of removing Dorcas Donaldson from his life. With detached amazement at the ease with which a man can throttle his happiness, he heard himself telling a debonair leanly aristocratic Frenchman about the *Resolution's* adventures, blindly delaying the finality of

the transfer as long as he decently could.

The Frenchman was interested in the account of a successful cruise, because he was interested in learning anything which might later be of use to himself in battle. Besides, the stay at Cap Français was dull while one waited for Admiral le Comte d'Estaing to cease wandering through the Indies to prepare his expedition for the relief of the North American colonists.

So the hours passed and the wine flowed and the sun was well in the west before Jeremy signed some papers. By then he did not exactly comprehend the Frenchman's courtly innuendoes, and departed for the *Resolution* in an artificial glow which only began to dissipate when he fumbled at the ladder on his ship's side. Gardner met him at the entryport, but Jeremy remembered nothing of their conversation, and went below to his stateroom to lie down on his sack and meditate until time to dine.

He fell asleep and dreamed of no one, for the wine had been excellent. He awoke when Gardner shook him, grumblingly dragged his wits about him, and greeted his subordinate with a smile and a staggering slap on the back. "Supper ready?" he demanded cheerfully. "Good! Be with you in a minute."

Gardner knit his brows while his captain dashed water on his face and scrubbed himself dry. "Ye'd best control that exuberance," he warned. "She still has that dagger, y'know."

Jeremy laughed. "Sorry to see 'em go, eh?"

"Someone should be," Gardner parried.

"Come," Jeremy said, slipping on his coat, "you can make 'em a farewell speech."

Somewhat bewildered by such uncharacteristic levity, Gardner followed Jeremy to the wardroom, where Israel sat chatting to the ladies Donaldson. Dorcas was dressed in the simple muslin wherein she had boarded the *Resolution,* and with a ribbon over the top of her head and tied at the nape of her neck, showed the flow of her golden shoulders to the turn of her ears. She was beautiful in the style of the Greeks who had listened to Homer, and she entreasured the wardroom with a warmth even the sternness of her mother could not vitiate.

Jeremy bowed, looked at each person in the room, and ended with his eyes on Dorcas. "I could permit these next hours to be melancholy for some of us," he announced, "and needlessly fill others with false hopes. I will do neither. We designed this entertainment to commemorate the last evening we were to have our guests. I must inform you that the intention was more honest than fate." He watched the full bosom of Dorcas strain in breathless suspense. "The senior naval officer present has refused to assume responsibility for transporting you ladies to Jamaica. Therefore, you will remain aboard until we can find another means of repatriating you. Shall we sit to table?"

Gardner studied him with a gleam of respect on his saturnine face, but it was Mrs. Donaldson who broke the hush which followed his polite question. "Young man," she said, "I demand that you set us ashore! I will see the Governor of this place!"

Jeremy nodded pleasantly. "Certainly," he said amiably. "Mr. Gardner will escort you anywhere you wish to go tomorrow. I would not have you believe that I was abducting you."

His prompt assent shook the suspicious aggressiveness of Colonel Donaldson's widow. "I never heard of such a thing!" she declared. "Refuse to assume responsibility for us!"

"It is an unhealthy season, Madam. Your countrymen have not been too helpful in exchanges. The French await the fleet of M. d'Estaing. In such circumstances, I was informed you would fare better in our care."

"We've had enough. Put us ashore, you scoundrel! Do we understand each other?"

"Madam," Jeremy replied calmly, "for your own good, you are not welcome in Cap Français. Do not blame the French or us. You were best off in Grenada. If you chose in troubled times to put yourself at the mercy of the sea, you have only yourself to blame. Now, sit you down and enjoy Mr. Gardner's menu. He went to great lengths to please your palate."

Mrs. Donaldson gaped, Dorcas hid a faint smile, Gardner looked at Israel, and the junior officer adroitly held a chair behind the widow so that she was discreetly persuaded to do as she was told. During the silence wherein the mess attendant opened bottles of wine, Jeremy said to Dorcas, "I will do my best to get you started on your way to England."

"I insist upon going ashore!" Mrs. Donaldson blurted, shoving back her chair.

"Oh, do be still, Mother!" Dorcas said firmly. "I'm the one who should worry, not you." She inclined her head towards Jeremy. "We accept your hospitality, Mister Pirate. At least you speak our tongue."

"Thank you," Jeremy said, and raised his glass. "Your health, ladies."

HAVING made her demonstration in the interests of virtue and decency, Mrs. Donaldson capitulated. In truth, the money secreted in her trunks would not have gone too far during an enforced stay on the island, and she was enough of a gambler to take her chances on reaching a place where her rank as a colonel's lady would be worth something. "I would rather have ale," she said righteously.

Gardner obliged, and the gathering proceded to become pleasant. Only Jeremy refused to be gay, and the others were too amused by themselves to notice. He was occupied by two things. Firstly, the success of the deliberate lie whereby he had impugned the character of the French captain who had been only too chivalrously eager to take charge of the ladies. Gardner had seen through that, though he obviously had reasons for concealing the truth. Jeremy was concerned lest Mrs. Donaldson somehow discover the deception before the *Resolution* could clear port.

Secondly, and almost as nerve-wracking, he wrestled with the implications of his foolish, half-drunken promise to Dorcas. How could he possibly ensure her passage to England? He had promised, yet had no idea of how he could fulfill it, and still be faithful to the oath he had sworn to South Carolina. And again, he lacked enthusiasm for honoring his pledge.

He could not sleep on this problem, remaining awake during the night. There was only one practicable course to get the Donaldson's to England, but he would be disgraced, for the method involved taking a prize and then releasing it with the women on board. His superiors would be unable to countenance such a free-handed use of his trust, and at best he would be asked to resign.

If he should do this, he did not have to ask himself if Dorcas was worth the subsequent disgrace. He was certain that she was, and would be willing to bear the consequences, if, he concluded, the patrol's end would prove that she eternally scorned him.

Having hit upon a means of taking Dorcas out of Gardner's hands, should he be unable to win her for himself, Jeremy at last dropped off to sleep, quite satisfied with his Machiavellian departure from a life of unfruitful rectitude.

VII

UNDERMANNED, the refitted *Resolution* sailed from Cap Français as a private ship-of-war. Only her captain was aware of this subtle change in her character, which was just as well, because to a man the crew felt that her duty had been done, and grumbled when the cruise was resumed. The discontent was natural, for the *Resolution* was minus half of her normal complement, and in condition to be overpowered by a handy privateer.

"At least," the carpenter said bravely to the boatswain, "we'll pounce cautiously now."

"You've had too much of that dark rum," the boatswain replied dejectedly. "The cap'n thinks this is a fightin' ship."

The carpenter refused to believe the boatswain and thereby lost a month's pay which he rashly wagered on the accuracy of his judgment. The dawn of the first morning that the *Resolution* had regained her station, a sail glimmered in the Windward Passage, and the boatswain took avaricious delight in shaking the carpenter awake.

Jeremy headed for the stranger as valiantly as though the *Resolution* had just cleared from her home port. By eliminating his ammunition chain and similar special duties, and concentrating every man on deck, he was strong enough to fight sharply for perhaps a half-hour against a vessel of equal strength. With an arrogance that would probably have later repercussions, he ordered the prize-masters to stand by as topmen, thus stripping them of their pride and reducing them to the humiliating status of sailors. Only his handful of marines showed spirit in quitting the main fighting top for a pair of guns, and their alacrity was prompted by gratitude for escaping the hazards of their usually exposed battle post.

Gardner preserved his sangfroid, and saw fit as second-in-command to suggest tactfully that it would be unwise to close the range too rapidly. Busy in the feeble light with his telescope, Jeremy did not cringe from the remainder of his previous recklessness. The stranger was more than ten thousand yards distant, and Jeremy strove to approximate her strength. Her hazy outlines only told him that she was larger than the *Resolution.*

Closing his glass, Jeremy shaped an intercepting course and looked at Gardner. Speculating on how much the first lieutenant had surmised of his intentions in keeping the Donaldsons aboard, he asked, "Are the ladies comfortable?"

"Dorcas is quite used to the rats by now," Gardner replied. "She offered to help fight a gun."

"Maybe we'll need her," Jeremy said.

Gardner looked embarrassed. "Jerry," he began uncomfortably, "you aren't thinking of anything stupid, are you? Like running down to Jamaica with a flag of truce?"

"Certainly not!" Jeremy scoffed, delighted by the simplicity of Gardner's suspicions. "That would be suicide!"

Gardner brightened. "I thought you might be thinking of laying in a stock of good rum," he said casually. "I wanted to be sure."

Jeremy looked at the growing stranger and added up his advantages. He had the wind. The *Resolution,* well-handled, could win. He decided to gamble on his luck. A soldier's daughter, Dorcas could appreciate a hard won victory, and she could appreciate it better if she witnessed it with her own eyes. He beckoned to a messenger. "My compliments to Miss Donaldson," he said. "Tell her she may come topside if she wishes."

"What?" Gardner exclaimed. "Isn't that a bit flamboyant, Jerry?"

"Afraid she might see I'm not altogether the dunce someone has been telling her about?" Jeremy asked significantly. "Afraid I might break into someone's territory?"

Gardner's tanned face whitened. He stepped forward, fists knotted.

Jeremy was content to have it out with his first lieutenant. The scene had to arise sooner or later, and one spark for the quarrel would serve as well as another. "I've been wanting to tell you something," he said, taking Gardner's measure. "You—"

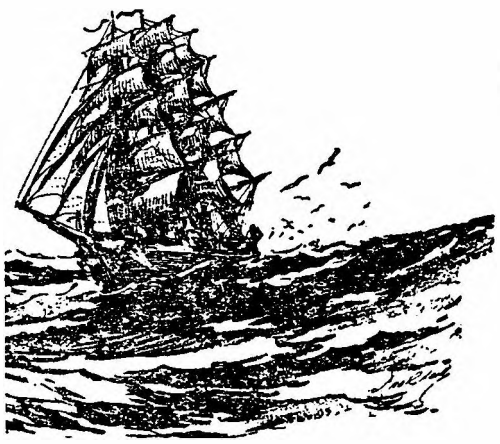
And then the quartermaster apologetically but feverishly interrupted. "Cap'n! She looks like a frigate!"

Both officers whirled to study the stranger. The rising sun showed her lines more clearly. Even as he clawed his glass open, the dryness of his throat told Jeremy that the quartermaster was right. Less than four miles away, His Britannic Majesty's thirty-eight gun frigate *Artemis* was flinging open her ports so that her battery could be easily counted. There could be no mistaking her for a merchantman, not with her thousand tons. Jeremy changed his plans of attack to flee for the refuge he had just left.

Curious about the summons sent to her, Dorcas Donaldson came on deck, and paused beside the hatchway when she understood the cause of the excitement animating the *Resolution.* Silent, she did not intrude upon the sudden drama.

Gardner darted a look towards her and advanced upon Jeremy, who was preoccupied with the frigate. "What were you going to say?" Gardner asked grimly.

Jeremy closed his glass. "Nothing of importance," he replied. "We can continue our discussion later. Right now, we must run."



"Right," Gardner said succinctly, unknotted his fists, and smiled at Dorcas.

And so Jeremy noticed her. He wished he had not been so cocky as to invite her to witness him in what had turned out to be a rout, but he had to put personal wishes behind his duty. He glanced at the sea and

the weather, while the *Resolution* turned towards Cap Français. If the wind rose, the heavier frigate would have the heels of him, being better able to drive her hull against the power of the waves. Jeremy breathed a heartfelt prayer and shook out sail. Now on his starboard bow, the frigate duplicated his actions. Gardner took bearings as the *Resolution* accelerated to a steady velocity, and reported sadly that the frigate had a better hull.

Working on a chart, Jeremy estimated that the *Resolution* was more than seven hours away from the safety of Fort Picolet, and steeled himself for a gruelling race. His determination was unnecessary, for his eyes fell upon another set of sail hanging off the port bow, as the land mist burned away. He knew even before Gardner dashed up into the mainmast shrouds that the newcomer was another British man-of-war and promptly put about.

The path to Cap Français was blocked, and he faced the friendless, open sea. Taut with fear, he gazed at the British frigate which inexorably had duplicated his maneuver. He cursed the full day ahead, which gave the British leisure in which to grapple and overpower him. He shunned the whitened faces turned despairingly towards him, for in them he would only see a reflection of his own. He cringed away from the thought of the eighteen-pound shot which would rip through the *Resolution's* hull as much as he cringed before the complacent sparkle in his beloved's eyes.

"Shoot once and haul down the flag before he can reply," Gardner patronizingly advised, after reporting that the vessel to the south was undoubtedly another frigate. "At least our guests will get safely to their home." He bowed towards Dorcas.

Gardner's practical voice and gesture bit deeply into Jeremy brain. He was face to face with his duty. He was damned if he would tamely surrender, but he could not fight. No one of his superiors would madly insist that a tiny ship should pit her puny metal against twelve times her power. They all, however, would expect him to do what he could to save the *Resolution*, and to save the *Resolution* he had to lose Dorcas. There was no other way out.

He chose promptly. "Send down the guns," he said quietly.

"What?" Gardner exclaimed incredulously.

"Send down the guns," Jeremy repeated. "We'll outrun 'em."

Gardner stared at him. The few additional tons below the center of gravity would only add a trifling bit to the *Resolution's* sailing ability, and would leave her totally defenseless. "You can't outrun a frigate," he objected.

"Very well, then," Jeremy said calmly. "We'll outsail her."

"Really?" Gardner sneered.

Jeremy managed to smile as he ripped his pride to shreds. "Don't you believe you can do it?" he asked resignedly.

"I?" Gardner roared.

"You. You've maintained that Yankees are the best seamen in the world," Jeremy said bitterly. "You're a Yankee. Here's a chance to prove yourself."

Gardner recovered his composure and before Dorcas, asserted his self-confidence. "Well," he murmured reflectively, "we could ease the sticks and close-haul to the northeast." He grinned. "We may carry away, but then we can always persuade Mrs. Donaldson to take us under her protection as prisoners on parole."

"We won't carry away," Jeremy said soberly, nettled by Gardner's jocularity. "Yankees are too good. Besides, Mrs. Donaldson is a fate I'd die to avoid."

"What about Dorcas?" Gardner asked.

"She and the ship are yours," Jeremy replied tightly. "I'll see to the guns."

AND that was how, in a mortal emergency, Jeremy openly admitted that there was a better man than himself aboard the *Resolution*. The admission was gall in his mouth. He refused to look at Dorcas, brushing aside to go down the ladder. All hands soon would know he had stepped down from command. He noted the astonishment on the boatswain's face when he walked up to a small party of men wrestling a gun along the berth deck, and without explanation put his own powerful muscles into the job.

When the gun was secured along the keel, he stopped by the orlop to call into Mrs. Donaldson that she could repair to the cabin if she so desired. "You may be among friends by nightfall," he said, and

did not stay to answer the questions bubbling on her garrulous lips.

Too sickened to loiter on the weather-deck where Gardner was proving to Dorcas that a Yankee could master the Royal Navy, Jeremy tried to absorb himself in the business of taking the guns into the hold, but the boatswain had them all below within the hour, so that he was obliged to return to the quarterdeck or stay with Mrs. Donaldson in the cabin. He went topside.

Stimulated by Dorcas, Gardner was cheerful. The *Resolution* responded to his sure touch like a purebred mare, edging tightly into the wind towards the east. She crept and covered little distance, so that Jeremy was able almost to pinpoint her position. She had not moved far in an hour's time. Neither had the *Artemis*. If anything, the *Artemis* had moved even less.

"God willing," Gardner said, "he won't be within gunshot by nightfall. Then I can shake him."

Recoiling from the personal pronoun, loudly spoken for the benefit of all who could hear, Jeremy hopefully remarked, "He doesn't seem to be overhauling us."

Gardner silently picked up his quadrant, sighted on the truck of the frigate's mainmast, called off his reading to a quartermaster when he had precisely found the angle which the maintruck made between his eye and the frigate's waterline, and a few moments later announced confidently, "He gained two hundred and thirty yards in the last hour. Presupposing constant conditions, that'll bring him to three thousand yards before sunset. I'll shake him during the night."

"Far better than I could manage," Jeremy said.

Gardner looked down at him. "Would you mind taking the sights?" he asked quietly, an odd expression on his face. "Then I could concentrate entirely on the wind."

Jeremy silently picked up the quadrant. He did not shrink from the faces of the quarterdeck gang and did not try to read their minds. The British were not gentle with naval prisoners. Everyone knew the horrors of British prison hulks. A man's skill separated the *Resolution's* crew from starvation and filth, and Jeremy was not the man to whom everyone looked for salvation.

Jeremy felt that he was less capable than Captain Clerk who had run the *Swiftsure* aground. His usefulness as a Captain was over. The preservation of his ship was foremost, and he willingly subordinated his reputation to that end, even if he could not willingly bear the contempt he would find in Miss Donaldson's eyes.

AND then he suddenly saw that he had more than fear in the race which dragged out under the brilliant August sun. If the *Resolution* lost, he might still win. Gardner would have lost credit for being merely boastful, Jeremy would be in England, and no one could tell what might happen there, when he was freed of the responsibilities of command. His interest in himself tried to sabotage his will to do his utmost for his native land. His pride complained about the deadly wound it had suffered when he had publicly confessed that Gardner was the better sailor, and begged him to resume his place, subtly hinting that his less dextrous ship-handling would allow the *Artemis* to bring her eighteen-pounders into range before the night protectively closed about them.

Jeremy battened down the hatches on pride and passion, forcing himself to stand idly by while Gardner coaxed every possible advantage out of the hull, sails and wind. The hours seemed as endless as the sea. The *Artemis* seemed to have an eternity in which to put her broadside into position. The British captain, aided by a clean, copper-sheathed bottom, tried every device known to his experience, and Gardner deftly checkmated them all. When the *Artemis* fell away from the wind to try to get at the *Resolution* by a series of long swift tacks to the north and south, Gardner coolly gained a few yards in the opposite direction. When the *Artemis* doused her square sails and used her fore and aft rig like a schooner, coming nearer to the wind, Gardner did the same.

No matter how the British captain attempted to exploit his superiority, Gardner matched him with superior seamanship, and in the end, the *Artemis* doggedly settled down to the original close-hauled chase, where she gained consistently, if slowly. If Jeremy hoped that the difficulty would dissuade the frigate from straying too far from her station, he was as mistaken as the British

captain was in presuming that the *Resolution* would haul down her flag.

When the sun plunged below the western horizon, the *Artemis* was only a few yards short of the three thousand feet that Gardner had predicted. In the gathering dimness of night, showing no light, Gardner let the *Artemis* see him straighten out on a northerly course as though shaping for the Crooked Island Passage. After he was unable to make out more than the bulk of the frigate looming on the sea, he boldly put about and ran south, directly towards the loitering second British ship which had long since abandoned the chase to cover the Windward Passage in conformity with orders issued by the Admiral of the Jamaica Station.

Before the moon collected its sheen from the sun and climbed high enough to give the *Artemis* enough illumination to be certain of what was taking place, Gardner had displaced the frigate from her favorable chase position and was sailing free into the west. Israel took over the watch, as Gardner triumphantly proposed a celebration in the wardroom, with the ladies present at a late supper.

Jeremy glanced at Dorcas, who had stoically withstood the heat of the day and the strain of the hunt, and declined on the grounds that he should take the watch and see the *Resolution* fully out of danger and into the Old Bahama Channel where the *Artemis* probably would not care to follow. Gardner did not protest, and taking Dorcas with them, the two officers went below.

ALONE with the quarterdeck watch, Jeremy dismissed all except the men he absolutely needed, so that as many as possible might recuperate from the exhaustion of tension. They went willingly to their hammocks. Jeremy sent for the boatswain.

"Before you turn in," he said, "make certain the rigging is set up."

"Aye, aye, sir," the boatswain replied cheerfully and ventured to say, "We sure were lucky, Cap'n."

Jeremy wondered if the old sailor was mocking him in the use of his title, but the fellow was looking at him with genuine respect. Furtively, he glanced about and found the same expression on the faces of the quartermaster and the men at the helm. Puzzled, he was too weary to seek an explanation. He would take the *Resolution* home, for she could not resume her patrol with a pair of British frigates in the way, and he would be in time to intercept and warn his relief. He would resign his commission and privately answer any questions his superiors might raise. For the rest, he was happy and sad. He did not understand why, but he was flooded with a feeling of achievement as well as the bite of loss.

When he came up to relieve, Gardner furnished a partial explanation of the crew's attitude. Out of the hearing of the men, he said with unwonted affection and sincerity, "I want to apologize, Jerry. I've been unfairly resentful. Perhaps I'm a little handier than you at sea, but it took something I don't have for you to have turned over the ship to me. Are we friends, now?"

The generous words meant little to Jeremy by then, for strain abruptly overtook him, and he wanted to sleep. He shook hands, and Gardner took him by the arm to the hatchway. As he stepped on the ladder, Gardner remarked, "We had a good time in the wardroom. Your friend Mrs. Donaldson complained that her baggage of a daughter had never started to pack her gear to get off at Cap Français. What can you make of that?"

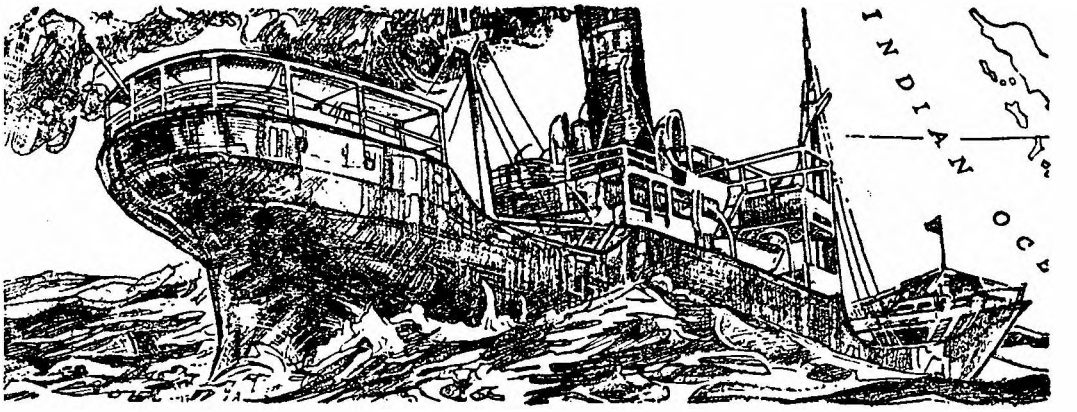
Very quickly, Jeremy sluffed off his tiredness, and dashed below to his stateroom, where he knew in his bones he would find her. She waited quietly, and when he burst into the tiny room, merely opened her arms to him. He soaked himself in her vitality, and yielded to the compulsion of her magnetism.

Later, in the morning, satisfied she was forever his, he ventured to explain his fears of Gardner, and the agony of his humiliation. Dorcas hushed him tenderly, and remarked, "I used him to make you certain. I don't care if he's a better sailor. Father said his sergeants knew more about soldiering than he did, but it took character to be an officer and a gentleman. You have character, darling."

Jeremy glowed and blessed the late Colonel Donaldson, while the *Resolution* rolled through the shallows of the Old Bahama Channel.

MEN who wouldn't DIE!

by George C. Appell



The Long Haul

S. S. *THERESA* was a tiny British tramp that cleared Aden one day in 1923 on her way from Mediterranean ports to the Orient. She rode away across the Indian Ocean and nobody ever saw her again.

Listed at Lloyd's as missing, rung from the world by a solemn note of the Lutine bell, she nevertheless gave back her crew to the land of the living. Hot, weary weeks later, a small boat drifted up to Dirk Hartog Island off the northwest coast of Australia —2,300 miles from where the *Theresa* sank! The boat contained the gasping remains of twenty of the crew who had gotten away in the terrific typhoon that had struck the rusty freighter and batted her to the bottom. And these men not only had ridden out the twister in a cockleshell but also had stayed alive for almost three months on two beakers of stale water, maggoty biscuit and masticated shoe leather. The vast wetness of that bulge of the world contained no ship, no bird, no island for a haven; frying under the fierce sun, swollen from thirst, limp with scurvy, they nonetheless kept a course southeast, knowing that Australia must appear some day. That, or death.

They might have gone north to Diego Garcia; northwest to the Cocos or south to Amsterdam Island; but the chance of missing such small dots was too great. They had to head for Australia.

At night they sang hymns; and soon night and day were one, and in their slow delirium they came to Dirk Hartog, still singing in hoarse, bubbly tones.

No mutiny romanticized these men nor their feat, yet one brushed aside official incredulity with a remark which might well have been spoken by a man from the *Bounty* "Englishmen can sail anyplace there's water."

Each Country May Have Its Own Type of Bandit, You Know.

THE SENOR'S CANE

By B. E. COOK

FOR once Harden Bayle saw fit to forego those preliminaries which always gave him so much satisfaction and irritated me beyond endurance.

"I want Senor Porfirio and so-forth and so-on Guerrero's cane," he declared. That was all.

"And who is this Senor Porfirio Guerrero?"

He lashed out then with characteristic nastiness. "If you were really as downright moronic as you often appear to be, I could overlook it. But when I remember that you rated slightly above me at the university, I wonder how you can have sunk so low."

Always he was throwing my past in my face and I hated it. However often he might do it, I never could grow calloused; every time I flinched at the lashing. Me sunk so low! Who but Harden Bayle should know how far I'd fallen from the promise of a brilliant future to this business of fetch-and-carry for his unlawful desires, his museum on the Barrens!

As usual, he read my thoughts and said, "I refer not to your state of morals but to your intelligence, to the fact that you never —apparently—read the daily papers."

So Senor Guerrero was news? He could have said so in half a dozen words. That, however, wasn't Bayle's way. Oh, no; he must first put me in my place. Very well, if the man was in the papers I needn't stay here to learn about him, not on the receiving end of Bayle's dirt with the information.

"Very good," I said. "You'll get it."

Had he been anybody but Bayle, I'd have sworn the eyes flashed momentary approval, even admiration, but I well knew that all his throughts centered on his greed, his loot. Some fine day, I promised myself, I'd get some sort of human response from him; it might be anger, maybe regret or sorrow, but I'd get it. I couldn't be too confident about it in view of the fact that his hard exterior had never shown the slightest sign of cracking.

Outside on the Barrens it was a grand day. It gave my spirits a great lift as I rode downriver to the big city. I felt more alive than I had in weeks. No denying it, these

missions for Bayle furnished the spice of life for me. Much as I craved the sea and the long, slow trips in the old *Edgemont*, my existence would have been drab indeed without these quests.

In a measure, Bayle had been right. I hadn't read newspapers or even listened to news. We had just come through a nasty storm and in a ship like the *Edgemont* rough weather allows no time for pink teas or quiet reading.

I got a paper at a newsstand and had no trouble at all locating this Senor Guerrero. He was front page. I studied his picture—and not because I think I'm able to read any man's character in his face. Ah, no. I've seen hellions who looked like honesty personified and many a mug ugly enough to scare the kids belongs to a dependable, friendly fellow. I recall an eminent PhD. at the university who looked like a nitwit—and there was Bayle himself, apparently the model of a stalwart citizen? 'Nough said.

No, Senor Guerrero's picture wasn't likely to determine for me whether Bayle craved his cane because of personal or public retribution, or whether the cane rated importance because of some Guerrero characteristic. All I sought was the where and how and helpful information thereunto.

Guerrero was small and trim, as many Latins are. He was frankly posing for newspaper photographers on the steps of some large building, its fluted columns behind him, his smile wide enough to display nice teeth, and leaning a bit on a cane. So-o-o, this would be Guerrero and this was his cane.

True to habit, I made for a library to dig out my dope. One good thing about the big city is the many branch libraries; that is, I needn't revisit any one of them to hunt for stuff. You understand? I didn't want to be recognized, I aimed to be inconspicuous. One can never tell.

Not much to be found on Guerrero but it was right at hand because all came within a week or ten days. He was a Central American, well educated and heeled, of illustrious lineage and a successful businessman. While he evidently didn't dabble much in politics, he was all out for good relations between his country and ours.

All in all, he sounded most too good to be true. The only off note was a physical disability; he was quite lame, relying on that cane. Even this added to his glamor because he had been maimed in warfare against a band of guerrillas while serving as an officer in his country's army. He was older than I would have judged from his pictures, but you never can tell about these Latins. He was about my own age and he looked like a young sprig.

The interpretations of the purpose of his present visit varied, each according to the slant of the paper publishing them. That's one of the peculiarities of our press, I suppose; there must be a story, and a sensation, if possible. Some dailies featured his social importance with spreads of his family and home. Some hinted at a political mission, some at a business deal. Conservative sheets wrote ponderously of international goodwill and Pan-American solidarity. One nondescript yelper went so far as to hint that the man was a Communist agent.

Well, there it was. I could take my choice —no, I didn't have to. It mattered not a tinker's damn to me why he'd come. What I wanted of him was the cane and the most likely way to get it.

But my mind doesn't work that one-track way. I couldn't help speculating on his purpose here. Superficially, it looked like the usual social whirl you know. A week-end at Mrs. So-and-so's at Hampton, luncheons spread by big-business combinations where one money-bag after another would be spouting generalities to which the Senor would render appropriate responses, more

dinners at some exclusive clubs, a theatre party. Anyway, thus it had been going. Me, I doubted the goodwill engendered between peoples of two nations by pampering a socialite this way. What a farce the whole thing was! Hokum.

Or was I sour, disillusioned and crabbed

because I had to play outside the glamor fence? If my life had gone as it had started, I might easily have been one among those stiff-shirts, making the speeches. Heaven forbid. Let them have it.

Even as I sat reading, one of these affairs was in progress, but who was I to realize it? Nobody sent me invitations to such things or put me on the entertainment committees. That, by the way, was for fellows like Harden Bayle; aye, week after week, the same thing over and over.

I HAD left the library. Getting a latest issue from a newsboy, the news gave me a jolt. Something had happened at that latest dinner for Guerrero, something which just wasn't done in the best of circles. Perhaps the guest of honor got tight; he gave his hosts merry hell.

What confounded me then was the fact that the affair had been given by a big-time manufacturers' association. As a token of their esteem, they had presented Senor Porfirio Benito Guerrero with an expensive, custommade cane and, figuratively speaking, he had thrown it in their faces!

On second thought, this put me up against it. Now there were two canes. Which one did Bayle want?

I scrutinized other papers for some clue. The smooth sheets glossed over the entire affair, hinting at free-flowing champagne and wagging tongues. One hinted baldly that the Central American visitor had made an ass of himself and had shown poor appreciation of the splendid treatment accorded him. Another went so far as to say that he had insulted our country and who did he think he was?

Not one of them had quoted what he had said, so I judged it wasn't printable or it had been incoherent. Either way, Senor Guerrero seemed to be washed up with us and we with him. No doubt he'd put for home pronto, taking his cane along. Which cane? Had he actually refused the gift cane or was the story of its refusal merely a story of wild words? In either case, which of those canes did Bayle covet?

One thing I vowed: I'd not go to Bayle for the answer. I'd work it out myself, even risking failure—my first failure.

Presumably Bayle wanted the new one; as presumably he had known it would be presented. But even he couldn't have foreseen Guerrero's actions. Then could a rejected cane have any value to him now? Of what importance had it been to him before the presentation? Of what importance now?

If matters had gone as planned, the affair would have been a friendly gesture by our big business and Guerrero's acceptance would, in turn, have been another Pan-American nicety. In which case, how would it have struck the Senor to have had the thing stolen from him? Any change in his attitude? Any repercussions from his country? Between the American nations there is a delicate balance and our reputation as a good neighbor easily becomes a moot question. Was Bayle, therefore, deliberately aiming to add salt to a scratch already sore? I should know how little honest patriotism is in his makeup; long ago he'd been party to sheltering a dangerous Jap because he'd coveted a scared scroll. Was his desire for the cane, then, in utter disregard of international relations or in an attempt to make trouble?

All for a cane which, it seemed, nobody wanted; another trivial item doomed eventually to some "white elephant table."

On the other hand, what about the cane I'd seen in the news photo? Had it any special significance? Fortunately I have ways of learning quickly what I have to know for a commission; this way I found out that Senor Guerrero's cane he'd brought from home was the one Bayle wanted. Its intrinsic value to its owner was considerable and he never appeared in public without it. It had been given to him by his wife, had been blessed by the church and he had vowed never to part with the thing. So Bayle demanded it!

By now I realized my time was short; the Senor would make for the airline at once. He might even be on his way.

Only such extremity could have induced me to do what I did. After all, the very simplicity of the move might spell its success. I went to his hotel. At the desk I inquired for the number of his room, got it, and turned away; the first round was mine, the Senor was still registered. In fact, he hadn't left his room that day.

I WENT back to the clerk to say that I would run up and see the man. Yesterday the ruse wouldn't have stood a chance,

but today the clerk was openly contemptuous. His entire attitude proclaimed: "Go see him. I'll not announce you. He's no longer the concern of gentlemen, you look just about fit for his kind."

Like most of his breed, he sized up my rough hands, my cheap suit, my weathered features. Usually I don't go in for being noticed that way; as in the matter of using public libraries, I do not want to be mentally catalogued by anybody. But this was an emergency and no time for careful maneuvers. Mine was a bold plan; viz., if the Senor was alone, I could take his cane. He couldn't prevent it. If, however, he wasn't alone, I could say I'd made a mistake in reading the number of his room, bide my time and somehow develop an opening more promising. Nothing subtle, understand, but there's a time for brains and a time for brawn, as they say.

To a limited extent, luck was with me again. I mean, he was alone, but my coming did not surprise him. In fact, he was expecting me. Contrary to my expectations, the clerk had phoned him I was on my way up. This, I suspect, was a hotel rule, more to check on a caller than to accommodate Senor Guerrero.

He answered my knock with a cool, calm "Come in."

He stood directly in the light of a bay window, facing the door and leaning on his cane. It forced me to size him up against the only light there, but I managed. He looked all in, probably a hangover. He stood there a moment taking my measure, then moved toward me, and I noted that he leaned heavily on that cane.

Rare for me was my feeling of shame. Here stood a smaller, weaker man and crippled to boot. If Bayle could only see me wrestling the cane from him, how it would please him, how he would gloat! He never forgets that I invite danger on occasion, but he also realizes that even I have some compunctions.

Nevertheless, I had to get that cane.

I must have been staring at it for the Senor, in good English slurred with the softness of the Latin tongue, said, "My cane fascinates you. Would you like to examine it more closely? Wait until I get to a chair and sit down."

His movements were quick, not ungraceful even with the cane; so his disability was not repulsive. Seated, he passed me the thing.

Now I actually held it in my hands! Nothing could prevent my bolting to the door and believe me I'm no slouch at the getaway. Nor could he summon help in time to check my escape because his telephone was on the far side of the room and he'd be a long time reaching it. And I knew he'd never stoop to shouting for help like an old maid whose orchard is raided.

Yet there I stood, in the midst of a quickly made plan, examining the cane to cover up my indecision. It was a stout stick, but beautifully satin smooth, carved-out of a dark wood. On the handle a sort of heraldic shield was very delicately carved in great detail.

"The coat of arms," he advised, "is from Spain. It has been ours in a long lineage. Yes, it is a beautiful instrument. Aside from usefulness to me personally, it is a rare thing, a collector's item. Is that why you want it?"

How I jumped—inside. I could hardly believe what I'd heard. So he saw through me and my call? The faster I got out of here the better. What was I waiting for?

Now, as though thinking aloud, he gave me a dry, mirthless laugh. "Yes," he mused, "I recognize that hungry expression in your eyes, the collector's look. I also collect, nor am I always ethical about it either. But I have never burst into a man's room to steal." Abruptly his voice lost its softness in the sharpness of a military command: "It is not for you. Pass me the cane. Lift your hands over your head and get out. Quickly. No fooling!"

Fooling? The glint in his black eyes meant business; so did the neat little revolver in his fist. "Stra-ange country," he rumbled deeply. "They insult my seriousness with silly parties. Their press makes of me a glamor figure one day and brands me a boorish ingrate the next. Now comes a total stranger into my room to walk away with my most personal, valued possession."

I lost no time in handing him the cane. I hoisted my long arms. But I didn't leave as commanded. There was one thing I wanted to ask.

"Well?" he urged.

"Will you tell me one thing?" Under his

icy stare I hastened on: "Just what did you say at that dinner yesterday afternoon?"

ONE emotion after another chased across his mobile face, then he laughed and the laugh was genuine. "This is incredible! You come to steal my cane. You stand where I can shoot you like a dog and ask me what I said at a dinner. Go read your stupid newspapers, they say I was intoxicated, they make of me a joke. And you with your hands high like a dolt ask what I said."

The bitterness was sincere. He had me puzzled. What lay behind all this sourness anyway? Could I bluff or drag it out of the man? It was worth the try because what he had revealed of his opinions of the papers gave me a notion.

"Senor Guerrero," I said as disarmingly as I could, "I really want to know. I represent a newspaper, a small one but it prints the truth. I was not admitted to that dinner yesterday and we suspect the big fellows have put something over on us—maybe on you also."

The effect of that speech on him gave me the nerve to drop my hands and throw myself carelessly into a chair, even letting my eyes roam his luxurious room and adding, "This is actually what brought me here. The matter of your cane was merely a ruse to get your attention. What I want to know directly from your own lips—" My eyes came to rest on him and he hadn't budged an inch. That gun still nosed in my direction.

"You lie," he sneered in seething rage. "You want the cane, I know it." In lighter tone he went on: "But also I can see that you wish the other. Why, I cannot guess. Of what use? I came here to confer on a matter that is vital to my country—and to yours. Those who should have listened carefully made light of it, diverting the issue in receptions. *Muy bien*, why go over it all again?"

A matter vital to our countries? An old sensation stirred inside me, what Bayle calls my "good-deed complex." What had this dapper little man to say of such importance and why had he been given the run-around? Ah, I've seen these important birds below the Rio Grande before, always hot in their politics, but it hadn't been to politicians that this fellow had gone. Instead, to business top-notchers; and it happened that at the moment I was at loggerheads with businessmen as exemplified by such as Harden Bayle.

"Senor, suppose you drop that little gadget and give me your story. At least I'll listen sincerely and I'll not give you the run-around."

" 'Gadget'? Oh, this gun. I prefer to keep it ready. As for my story, of what use now? It will not accomplish more than to salve my feelings in the telling."

Nevertheless, his facial expressions gave me something to go further on. He wanted an audience, any audience at all. But the way that clerk downstairs had looked me up and down to rate me low still stung. After all, I am an old grad of a famous university and my family rates old as families go in these parts. At times the snob in me overrides my seamy record and the wasted years.

I got to my feet and headed for the door.

That got him; he couldn't forgo an audience. "Wait," he said. "It will do no harm. Make yourself comfortable. I—er, shall retain my gadget, if you will not—er, not mind."

Both the man and his story proved a surprise. As he droned along, I knew that the item in the papers a week ago had not overplayed him. He was all wool and a yard wide, as my Yankee forebears said about genuine articles.

IT SEEMS that his country is struggling to grow up, be adult, and get on its own feet economically. With raw materials in abundance and plenty of raw labor, it aims to manufacture for home consumption. Up here, we make—we boast—the best machinery in the world. Certainly the most. Naturally, they would buy this from us. New machinery for export, of course, is definitely out; we absorb it because our stock of manufactured goods is low and our companies are reconverting with wartime profits to peacetime production and improvements.

Well, according to Guerrero, his countrymen were willing to buy the old mill equipment. They wanted it from cotton and woolen mills, from machine shops, they would buy whole plants if possible. And they expected to pay high, even for the discarded equipment. They got crates of it, carloads, shiploads. I myself could vouch for that statement because the old *Edgemont*

herself had gone south to them with two cargoes of it.

The Senor's country had paid much more than the stuff was worth, expecting to, in a sellers' market and realizing they were an outlet for antiquated machines. All they asked was that those of us who sold them should play square with them.

Those smart guys play square? I thought of Bayle and his ilk and laughed.

The Senor hastened to assure me that not all American businessmen were "what you call horse traders. No, no; your paper can say for me that some have been fair. But more have snided, collecting big sums for old junk and lying to us regarding its workable condition." He went on to specify that "guaranteed" parts had fallen apart under a few weeks' operation. Then, worn out parts could not be replaced despite promises.

"Being new in the field, we have been misled and deceived," he claimed earnestly. "Many of our mills are already in bad shape, getting worse every day, and there are serious business failures. They are blaming all of it, justly or not, on Americans. My people are resentful; they know they have been swindled and it makes for bad blood between the Americas.

"I came to reason with your businessmen, to plead if necessary. Don't they realize how it looks to a struggling people like ours? To the world? How greedy they look and what hatred they pile up? Can they not be satisfied with reasonable profits and give us honest reports of the condition of their machines? They must think in terms of thousands, not millions. *Por Dios*, is money so important and goodwill so negligible?"

By this time my Senor was so intense that he used both hands in gesturing and the little gun lay slack in his lap. I swear I could have sprung at him, grabbed the weapon, got the cane and away. But he'd struck in me a responsive chord and I had to shoot off my mouth. "What was that last?" I asked. "Oh, yes. Now what did you say to them at the dinner?"

"Say? Exactly what I am telling you, the truth. I told them that I could not accept their gift, that it was not so much a gift as an attempt to keep me quiet. But so much confusion rose! I couldn't be heard. At first, I did not comprehend, your ways are strange. Then I knew they never would hear me." His deep voice dropped low in a sigh of futility to add, "I saw that they would not change."

Said I, "So you expected understanding from that gang of vultures?"

"But where else could I go? They are the men concerned and some have been honest with us and forthright."

"As individuals, yes; I can name you a dozen more like that," I said and proceeded to do so. "The word of these is above question, Senor."

His eyes gleamed. "Wonderful!" he cried. "Take me to them. I shall deal with them as individuals; they might influence the others."

Ah, yes, I'd known these men; many of them had known me. But I could not myself introduce Senor Guerrero. Not I. And I knew many more of the other kind, no better than myself but reckoned among the wealthy and powerful. Too cussed often, I mused, these sit on the boards and determine policies of their companies because they rate as "successful." They would indeed seize upon the Senor and give him a whirl that left him no time for serious business. And now that he'd called the turn, he was being passed out as a public joke. In due time there'd come a buyers' market period. Another day for those Latin customers, too, but what cared these fellows so long as they got theirs at the moment?

"This proposition of yours takes some thinking," I said. "Give me a few hours."

"But I have passage on a plane. Two o'clock."

"Cancel it."

He studied me for a long minute. "It will do no harm, I suppose."

SO IT was in this plainly doubtful half-confidence of his that I headed for the old ship to thrash the problem out. Away from him, there were times when I considered letting the whole affair slide and concentrating on the cane. Except for one detail: I secured a list of those who had attended the final dinner and there was Harden Bayle's name. More than that, he was chairman of the dinner committee.

That clinched it for me. I was all out for Senor Guerrero and his cause.

I sat aboard ship, selecting plans, rejecting ideas, discarding others. That way sooner or

later matters clear up. Nobody can appreciate what it meant to me, working for a decent cause. Bayle, of course, would have sneered at it. More than the cause, I'd met and talked with a man of Guerrero's caliber; I'd made him respect me; he was treating me like an equal. Only those who have been social outcasts can grasp what this means and I thought for the nth time: some fine day I'll shake off Bayle's yoke and go down to Senor Porfirio Benito and so on Guerrero's country myself; with his gratitude and friendship I might start all over again. That is, if the plan I'm contemplating works.

All the while, however, was this fact! I had to get the cane for Bayle.

Slowly from concentration the plan took shape. I fancied the consternation on Bayle's face— Hold on; I myself would not be present to see his face; somebody else must manage things under my absentee direction. Not for me big dinners and the company of big-time businessmen.

While details were still hot, I phoned the Senor the layout. At first he didn't cotton much to the plan because he preferred the gentleman's way, but I convinced him that fire must be fought with fire and he fell in with it. Then I gave him certain careful instructions, warning that he'd not hear from me till the following day since I'd be out of town.

Next a toll call to Boston, then a seat in a plane leaving in an hour. Mindful of Boston's weather, I got warmer clothing aboard —and the officers' mess swooped in with a telegram in the hands of a messenger.

From Bayle. You could have floored me with what it said: "I understand Senor has canceled his reservation stop congratulations." Ten words and right on the beam. What did he know? How much of it would be guesswork?

Forewarned by the message, I left the ship with extreme care, knowing he had me under surveillance. I rowed the tender to another ship and went aboard. Certainly nobody in the *Edgemont* could have seen me leave that one and go up the street to an elevated stop two blocks in the opposite direction from where she lay. I moved fast.

The trip to Boston was over before I'd lined up details of my next move, then I was on the streets of old Cambridge and that did things to me.

"Old Diggery" waited for me at home and up his walk I noticed how the bare boughs of wisteria made a pattern on the wall. I recalled those wisteria in full bloom; Cambridge was sprinkled with their beauty.

He didn't offer his hand, but I understood. Not that he gave a damn about my private life; he simply couldn't forgive me for letting my Alma Mater down. A strange world he lives in, far removed from life's harsh realities. Doubtless, he'd have welcomed Harden Bayle with open arms and almost I regretted coming. What could I, a social outcast and a spoiler, hope to accomplish through this dried up, secluded old man?

Then the essential quality which had drawn me here came to the fore—he called me by name and invited me inside. Aye, Old Diggery knew more about both grads and undergrads than any other living person and like the proverbial elephant, he never forgets.

Excluding, of course, my quest for the cane, I went directly to the point with the whole story, making it look the best possible. He listened, his sunken old eyes fixed on something out a window so firmly that I wondered whether he really heard the details, whether the man was in his dotage.

After I'd finished, the wrinkled face broke into a smile. "You still retain all the powers of eloquence," he said. "The picture you paint makes me sad. Many of our most prominent and promising men who should have become public spirited and honest are today merely money grubbers without vision for the future of themselves or their country. I could name a dozen from your own class in the category; they have failed fully as much as you have, Dick, yet the world calls them successful."

Calling me Dick stirred memories; he'd used to call us "Tom, Dick and Harry," us being Harden Bayle, myself and a third who had since died.

"Now, just what do you want from me?" he asked in a way that made me wonder why I'd presumed he was senile.

"A young man to manage the Senor's affairs because he says our ways are strange and he cannot understand us. This must be a grad with his future to carve out. It might prove a great opportunity for him. He must be smart and fearless because he's staking up

against a hard-boiled gang. Honest, of course, and incorruptible and socially in the know."

The old man chuckled. "Anything else?"

"Yes. He must know Spanish. I've the plan all worked out and I'd give my bottom dollar to be in a position to carry it out myself—"

He nodded understandingly. "It's like the building of the temple; David couldn't do it because his hands were stained with blood. That was for his son Solomon to accomplish. I think I know precisely the person for you. He is all you require—but he hasn't money at present."

I could have laughed outright; always I have considerable money to use, Bayle's money, by the way, which was a laugh indeed.

INSTEAD of returning to New York by plane, I knew it would save time to wait until the young man could join me and we'd go together by train. That proved to be one of my most fortunate decisions.

Justin Davis was just the sort I'd hoped for and I took to him at once. We got directly down to brass tacks upon boarding the train and by the time we'd cleared Connecticut we had things nicely in hand. While I myself intended to manage this affair behind the scenes, I had him review every step before he left me at the uptown station with his letter of introduction to the Senor. Why I put him off up there I'll never quite know; perhaps it indicated that I'd formed a habit of furtiveness.

By that time it was late at night. Habitually, my wits are about me if I go down to the docks so late. That night, however, my head was so packed full of my scheme that I must have become careless. I had no warning. A crash on the head, then oblivion.

I awoke with an aching skull—and Harden Bayle. I shut my eyes, surely this was only a nightmare. But the pain persisted and so did Bayle. I looked around and recognized things; this was his museum away upriver on the Barrens. Ah, well, I'd been a prisoner here before and escaped.

But this time was different. My feet were secured in some kind of a contraption I'd never met up with; so Bayle had decided I'd never make this a second escape from here?

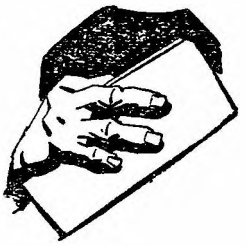
He saw that I had revived but he made no talk and neither would I. How far the silence would have gone round the clock I don't know; I surely was uncomfortable and my patience was short. Despite my determined silence I blurted out, "So what? And why?"

"You should know. Where's that cane? I ordered it, didn't I? You visited that Latin visitor in his hotel. What happened? He canceled his reservation. Why? And where in hell have you been since yesterday noon?"

Aha, thought I, I'm going to really enjoy this! I had Bayle guessing. And damned worried to boot. Now what could be the worry? Not the cane, else why did he have me cooped up? He was one of the gang which had baited the Senor; was he afraid of what the Latin might say? Was this why he had the man under surveillance, and me at the same time? He'd connected my being there with the cancellation. So what? He'd had me shadowed—there was a point: I'd given him the slip and he didn't know about my jaunt to Boston. But he smelled a miscue somewhere and was sure I had something to do with it.

Well, I could do a bit of baiting myself. "So you belong to a conference of manufacturers. What the hell do you manufacture?" I demanded scornfully.

"I have my interests," he replied loftily.



"Much of my money is invested in production plants."

"Invested in them, all right," I rejoined. "Invested in old junk you've been palming off on your friends down South. How would this read in the newspapers?"

Though he didn't flinch outwardly, I knew I'd put my finger on the tender spot. Bayle the upright, the civic-minded, the model of social behavior—a cheap dealer in cheap goods! That was what worried him, his precious reputation. That was why he wouldn't feel at ease until Senor Porfirio Benito Guerrero was out of the country. He

suspected that something revealing and explosive was in the air and he suspected my hand in the plot.

Sure a grand stew had been in preparation, but it appeared to me that it would come to nothing with myself imprisoned up here. Davis couldn't go it on his own from what I had told him and as for the Senor, he wouldn't stand a flea's chance with them by himself. My plan was blowing to pieces.

"What are you tagging me for?" I asked. "Of course, I visited the hotel to get my bearings. You want that cane, or don't you? Then why do you butt in? I get my plans laid, ready to grab it, and what do you do? Put me in pickle, miles up the Hudson with the blueberries and rattlesnakes!"

"I want to know why he cancelled his reservation—after you went there. What's up?"

"Why do you presume anything's up?"

He looked down at me as though he could murder me, then snatched a letter from his pocket and scaled it toward me on the floor. It was like Bayle to do just this because with my legs beautifully fettered it would be extremely hard for me to get to the letter just beyond my reach.

I certainly would not ask him; I got to it myself. I had schooled myself against one of his nasty surprises, but it was all I could do to hold in when I read the thing. My plan was actually in operation. The Senor had taken the first step!

It was a courteous note addressed to Bayle, chairman of the hospitality committee. In it the Senor apologized for his behavior at the dinner, saying that he feared he had been too convivial. He begged the group to overlook his bad manners and urged them to be his guests at another dinner on one of two specified dates. He further said that he would be glad to accept their beautiful gift of a cane in the same spirit in which it had been offered.

"That gentleman shows good breeding," I commented. "Of course, you will accept such an invitation."

Bayle's eyes narrowed; I was too enthusiastic in spite of myself. Said he, "He leaves us no alternative and it sounds to me as though you've had something to do with it. It smacks of your style of tricks. We can't refuse. In the separate note to me personally, he apologizes some more and suggests he has done all possible to make amends. He has given it to newspapers that he has sent apologies the rounds and has invited the organization to a dinner as his guests."

"Hell, what more could you ask?" I demanded facetiously.

"Look at the spot we're in!" he snapped back. "Can't turn him down with all that publicity. But mark my words, I shall keep you up here until that dinner has come and gone."

"And lose the cane," I needled.

"Even if I do, I've got to keep this situation in hand, somehow, and get that clever Latin packed off home!" he almost shouted.

SOMETHING new stirred within me, for never had I failed on one of Bayle's missions. Right or wrong, I had promised to deliver and here was he, blocking me from doing it. Was it sheer folly to stack up against him? What if my plan involving the Senor and Justin Davis should collapse? Up here I was helpless; those two must see things through or it would be just too bad for the mate of the *Edgemont*. For, of course, Bayle had a certain hold over me; would I, by defying him and also failing to get the loot, end my usefulness to him? What then?

Whenever there's no way backward and none on either side, the only direction to take is straight ahead, of course. I took it in a bold move. "Will you get me a sheet of paper and an envelope?" I asked him.

His astonishment was funny to see. "Why?"

"I want to write a letter to the Senor. I'll ask you to mail it."

"Are you mad? What the devil do you suppose I've got you tied up for?"

I assumed a dreamy air. "I'm about to do a little crystal gazing. I can see a dinner table, big one. You're there in your best soup-and-fish; so are lots of your friends—and a dark man, the Senor, I'd say. With him is a strange young man as his business adviser." I paused to let him squirm.

"Cut that foolishness and come out with it. I knew right well you were in on this scheme!"

"Will you get me the paper? No paper, no crystal gazing."

For once, by cripes, it was I reading *his* mind. He was saying to himself I might write anything I wanted to but he didn't

have to mail it. But my story had got him going.

"The rest of the story will be continued in our next—"

Bayle flung from the room with an unaccustomed oath, taking care to lock the door even when he knew I couldn't have crossed the floor inside half an hour. He returned with paper and enough food to let me understand that I really was here for some time to come.

I wrote with irritating leisure, the unsealed envelope in hand and Bayle's beady eyes on me. I stopped at length, to continue the talking: "When the chow is downed, speeches. Reporters with long ears and sharp pencils will be present, remember, and—the Senor is the host this time. Can't shout him down. The show won't get rough; he's too much the gentleman. He will say he knows you are his friends and his country's friends and you all will want goodwill throughout all Pan-America. He knows you all are on the level but regrets that all Americans he's dealt with aren't of your high caliber. He knows you'll want to use your influence and example in all business transactions between the two countries and asks your pledge to that effect. He'll bring out a paper for you to sign, too, and he knows you'll gladly do so, being men of integrity—just a statement that the undersigned will, in future, take only a reasonable profit and that their guarantees will be dependable.

"Since you are all honest men with nothing to conceal, he will ask you to permit a notary to witness your signatures.

"He knows that newspapers will be glad to report fully this gesture of international goodwill; he fears that it would be an imposition to ask them to devote any more of their valuable space to print certain *other* memos he has here at hand."

Bayle's deep red flush, was it rage or partly embarrassment?

"Bayle," said I, "those memos are the nigger in the woodpile. They're a sworn record of every shady deal you and your friends have put over on them in four years of machinery shipments. Cheap swindling. How the reading public would lick it up! Remember, if you all knuckle down and sign the first paper offered, the second goes into the wastebasket, forgotten. Don't make a mistake. Senor Guerrero is not fooling."

Between sentences I'd managed to write. "Now," said I, "want to read this letter? I didn't seal it; I didn't want you to mess up the envelope opening it.

What Bayle read was:

Dear Senor Guerrero:

Regret very much I cannot attend dinner but trust that Mr. Davis's assistance will assure its success. In doing what I have for you, I have placed myself in great danger. The bandits have seized me and demand ransom. Only ransom acceptable is your cane which you will not need after the dinner. Please do not misunderstand, this is a very serious matter for me. Besides, I believe you owe me something not too sacrificial for my help.

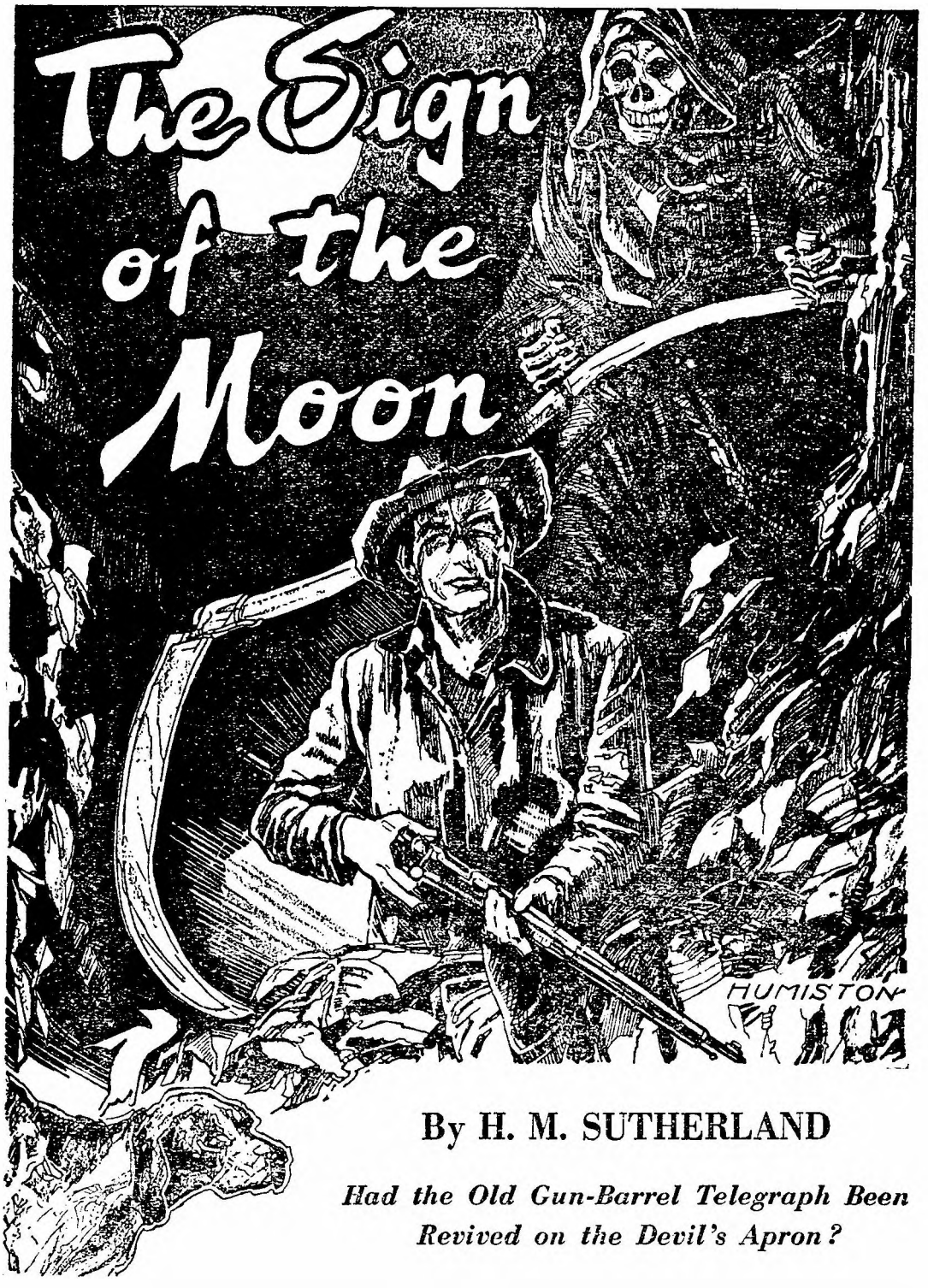
Signed:

The Man Who Called Wed. A.M.

P.S.: I understand Mr. Harden Bayle will present you their cane. He is well known to me. At that time, will you hand him your other cane for me? He will understand and see that it is delivered to the right place. This is all the thanks I ask.

Bayle snorted, "He fool enough to believe this story? And surrender his cane? He should know this is a civilized country; we don't have bandits as they do in his infernal land!"

"I'm quite sure he'll pass you the cane, Bayle. He is a gentleman and a gentleman pays his debts. As for bandits here—well, the Senor frankly has said we are a strange people and he doesn't understand our ways."



By H. M. SUTHERLAND

Had the Old Gun-Barrel Telegraph Been Revived on the Devil's Apron?

HOMECOMING was not as Lon Caswell had so often dreamed in the crawling, green jungles of New Guinea and the South Pacific isles. There were none to greet him as he stepped out of the bus, and only a few people glanced at him as they passed by intent upon their own affairs. Apparently returning soldiers from the far-flung places was an old story in Montvale.

But he had not expected any reception, or even anyone to meet him. He knew few people at the county-seat, and he had not written that he had received his discharge and was returning home. But somehow there was a hint of disappointment in his reactions as he stepped down to the walk and turned to follow the bus-driver to the rear of the vehicle for his bags.

Irresistibly he glanced up at the looming Cumberlands that formed the serrated skyline in the west a half-dozen miles distant, and to him there was something deeply sinister in the purpling shadows that mantled the slopes. He could see the fan-shaped spread of the "Devil's Apron" basin where No-Business Creek reached out its greedy fingers, and his heart beat a little faster. Deep in those purpled silences lurked a stalking menace, a threat of death that struck and left no trail.

For an instant he stood motionless, staring, and trying to remember the details of the letter from Rutherford. Then he shrugged and stooped to pick up a bag, and the lump of the gun under his armpit was comforting. Determined to get at the heart of things at the earliest possible moment he strode straight to the courthouse.

Sheriff Rutherford was awaiting him in his office door.

"I seen ye comin' boy," greeted the grizzled old lawman heartily, extending a gnarled hand that carried the grip of a vise. "I've kinda been a-lookin' fer ye fer some months now."

"Glad to get back, Sheriff," replied Lon, drawing a deep breath, and relaxing deeply into an old sheepskin chair. "I came as soon as I could because there are some things—that I've got to do."

"I know, son!" Rutherford's drawling voice was a caress. "I know, but I reckon hit ain't quite time fer to try to do anything jest yit. I still ain't got a single smidgin uv evidence that'll hold in cou't."

"Tell me about it," demanded Lon, leaning forward in his chair.

Rutherford arose slowly and with studied unconcern strolled over and closed the door silently. Then he resumed his seat and with painfully slow movements filled his old pipe and lighted it. When it was going well he tossed his feet up to the top of his desk, and stared thoughtfully out through the open window toward the Devil's Apron. Lon with an effort choked his impatience.

"Wall, as ye know, yore pa an' Silent Steve Cantrell allus wuz at odds with each other," began the sheriff, bringing his gaze back to Lon's face and remaining there unwaveringly. "They never got along though they never did git into a open fracas. But soon atter ye went into the army, they had 'em a lawsuit over the bound'ry betwixt their land an' yore pa won the case.

"Le's see—yes, that wuz in September two year ago. Then, right atter that, on the eighteenth day uv October, yore pa wuz found dead on a woods' trail up thar on the Devil's Apern, 'bout half a mile from his home. One uv the Jackson young'uns found his body, an' they sent fer me.

"Hit 'peared like he'd been up thar huntin' up some uv his cattle that had been runnin' loose in them woods endurin' the summer, an' he wuz waylaid from the bushes. He'd been shot through an' through with a rifle-gun—I figgered 'twuz a thu'tty-thu'-tty, though hit might abeen bigger—but we never did find the bullet. I made a close search through them woods in rifle range, but I didn't locate no tracks ner nothin' I could connect with the shootin'.

"That's jest about all that I wuz ever able to l'arn about hit, son," he concluded with a slight shrug. "I've tried mighty hard, but whoever done hit shore did cover up."

Lon was silent for a long minute, his eyes closed, and his thoughts going back to the day he had last seen his father, standing by the gate watching until Lon had turned the curve in the road on his way to the induction center. Bart Caswell had always been a man of a few words, and all that he had said on that morning that Lon left was, "Take keer uv yoreself, Lon." There had been no visible expression of the emotions that had gripped them.

"It was Silent Steve—I know that," burst out Lon at last. "He's a sneakin' killer and always has been. When I was a little shaver, my ma used to scare me by threatening to call Silent Steve, and I was always afraid of him. The way he'd slip through the woods wearin' his moccasins with the heels in front, and carryin' that old long, brass spy-glass was enough to scare the daylights out of us kids."

"He ain't hardly human, that's a fact," admitted Rutherford grimly. "I reckon that's why I never could find no evidence."

"He's been tryin' for years to get that north cove of pa's up there," recalled Lon with a frown. "I've often wondered why, and I've looked up there for signs of coal or some kind of mineral that he might have discovered, but there was nothing, unless—unless it was the fact that there is good water there and it would be fine for moonshining."

"No man knows what's in Silent Steve's mind," observed Rutherford succintly. "Best thing to do with him is to let him plum alone." The sheriff sat up straight in his chair, and gazed questioningly at Lon. "Ye ain't figgerin' on goin' up thar, air ye—I mean to live?"

"Yes—today," replied Lon. "I'm goin' to find out who killed pa an' why. There's bound to be some way of findin' out the truth."

"I don't ad-vise hit, Lon," warned Rutherford, shaking his head. "Silent Steve ain't goin' to let ye stay up thar. He'll drive ye out one way er t'other bekaze he's done made up his mind that he's goin' to git yore land—force the sale fer taxes er somethin' atter he's druv ye out. No, son, I don't believe I'd tackle that job all by my lone self."

LON was silent while Rutherford fumbled in the drawer of his deck, and brought to light a bundle of papers.

"When yore pa got killed," explained Rutherford, placing the papers on the desk before Lon, "ye didn't have no near kin to look atter things fer ye, son, so I had the Jedge uv the Cou't to app'int me as yore gyardeen, er legal agent, 'til ye got back home." He paused and the hint of a grin appeared at the corners of his mouth. "I've still got that ol' blue-ticked houn' dawg uv yores—holdin' him fer ye. Drum's his name, ain't hit?"

"You have?" ejaculated Lon in surprise. "How is he? I was goin' to ask you what had become of him."

"He's out thar at the jail, an' he's plum fat an' frisky fer a dawg uv his age. An' he's still able to stay on a fox's trail with the best uv 'em." Rutherford turned to the pile of papers.

"We'll go look at ol' Drum in a minnit, soon's I've explained about what I've done with yore prope'ty. I sold off all the livestock an' what grain an' feed yore pa had at the time uv his death. Hit all come to a leetle better'n fou'teen hunnerd dollars, an' the de-posit slip is among these papers. Me an' a couple uv my deppities locked up ever'thing else, an' we've been sorta keepin' a eye on hit from time to time. I don't think nothin's been de-stroyed."

"I'll not forget what you've done, Sheriff," said Lon feelingly. "And I reckon old Drum and I will get along all right up in the Apron. We'll settle all these legal things," he promised, pointing to the papers. "the first time I come back to town. I've got plenty of money for what I need now."

Old Drum was asleep in the backyard of the jail building when Rutherford and Lon approached, and the old dog opened his eyes and looked up at them lazily. At first he lay perfectly motionless, and then slowly and with increasing vigor, his tail began to thump the ground. With an eager whine he came to his feet, and his joyous capers and welcoming whimpers made up for all that had been missing in Lon's homecoming.

It was late in the afternoon when the truck that Lon had hired deposited him and his supplies before the weathered cabin on the headwaters of No-Business Creek. When they had unloaded the boxes and bags on the porch, Lon stood leaning against a post, and watched the truck depart, and as the blanket of silence gathered in about him, he suddenly realized that he was clinching his fists so tightly that his knuckles were showing white through the skin.

With a shrug he dismissed his forebodings, and went through the house, opening all windows and doors. Everything seemed intact although dust had covered the furniture and floors. Little had been changed since he had gone away, and there was even some firewood behind the kitchen stove. His twenty-two calibered repeating rifle was just where he had left it, hanging suspended on a pair of deer antlers over the fireplace in his room.

After a frugal supper he stood on the porch, watching the evening shadows lengthen and deepen into the velvety moonless darkness. At his feet lay old Drum, motionless save when at irregular intervals he raised his head and stared into the gath-

ering night, listening to the familiar sounds of the forest. Once Lon half-arose to go into the house and light a lamp, but with a shrug he dropped back into his chair. There wasn't any particular reason why he should make a target of himself against the light.

Out of the encroaching silences suddenly came a weird, penetrating wail, a cry so unreal and unearthy that all nature seemed to become hushed with bated breath. Even the chirping crickets were silent, and a cooing night-thrush in the lilac bushes in the corner of the yard muted its song. Old Drum arose to his feet, a low growl gathering in his throat, and then he stood stiff against Lon's tensed legs.

For a moment Lon was bewildered, frozen with expectancy, and then he relaxed with the realization that the sound had been that of someone blowing through the barrel of a shotgun to call in his dogs from the chase. The strange, lonely wail brought a rush of memories to Lon, and the dog must have recognized the sound because he dropped to his belly on the floor. But Lon also knew that the hillfolk also blew messages of warning through the barrels of their guns, or sent out signals that were pregnant with meaning known only to the clan.

The sounds seemed to be coming from high up along the dividing ridge between No-Business and Whispering Creeks, a full half a mile distant, and much closer than that to the home of Silent Steve and his two stalwart, moonshining sons. It was probably one of these sons—Crit or Dave—who was calling his dog in home. Or it could be Silent Steve signalling to his boys, and when the wailing had ceased the silence that followed seemed even more ominous.

Once again that eerie wail resounded—one long and two short notes, and then another long—and the echoes rolled the length of the towering dividing ridge. After that came another palpitant silence, and despite his every effort Lon unable to rid himself of the idea that the old "gun-barrel telegraph" had been revived because of his coming back to the Devil's Apron. Yet he was unable to think of any reason why the signalling would be necessary.

Still puzzled, and not a little worried, he at last arose and went into his room. Without a light he undressed and crawled under a blanket, for the heat of the summer day had been chilled by the fogs that drifted up from the serpentine river below. His last waking memory was that of old Drum as the dog dropped heavily to the floor just outside his room door.

AN uneventful night passed, and the sun was streaming through his open window when Lon awoke. He swung out of bed, and the moment that his feet touched the old bear-skin rug, he heard the thump of Drum's tail on the floor outside. The bright sunlight, the cheerful call of the bob-white out near the barn, and the pervading peace and quietude of the place combined to lift Lon's spirits, and he was whistling as he strode back to the kitchen.

The kitchen was a lean-to with a floor several inches below that of the remainder of the house, and, Lon opened the door and started to step down, a warning whirr brought a leap and a startled gasp from him. There was no mistaking that sound. It was the deadly warning of a coiled rattlesnake. He turned and ran for his rifle, and then, opening the door wide, he peered into the dimly lighted kitchen. Just inside the door, between the kitchen table and the stove was the five-foot snake, coiled, and his flat head resting on top of that glistening spiral.

Even in the half-light it was no difficult shot to drill the head of the venomous threat. And before sweeping the still wriggling body outside, he made a careful search for a possible mate lurking in the dark corners or under the chairs. He removed the string of rattles from the snake's tail and then threw the reptile over the yard fence.

Returning to the kitchen, he came to a sudden halt just inside the door. That snake had been planted for him! The thought chilled him, and his glance shot instinctively to the window which he had opened the previous evening to air out the room, and had not closed again. Slowly he walked over and thrust his head through the opening, measuring the distance to the ground beneath.

It was more than four feet of sheer wall, and a physical impossibility for any snake to have gained entrance in that manner. The kitchen door had been bolted on the inside, and the front door locked. There were no other doors in the house, and all other windows, save that in his own room,

had been closed. The walls and floors of the kitchen had always been rat-proof.

These facts considered, there was no longer any doubt in his mind but that the rattler had been stealthily brought to the kitchen window during the night and dumped inside. It would have been a typical Silent Steve act, and Lon knew instinctively that, somewhere high up on the slopes of the hills above, that old brass-bound spy-glass had been trained on the house when the windows had been opened the previous late afternoon.

Thoughtfully Lon prepared his breakfast of buckwheat cakes, and gave old Drum a liberal helping. He had planned to make an investigation of the farm the first thing in order to see what repairs were necessary, particularly in regard to fencing. With his G.I. loan he hoped to stock the place again, and plant an orchard, for he had always believed that the Devil's Apron would be ideal for producing apples on a paying scale.

By the time he had finished his coffee, he discarded this plan. There were other and more pressing things ahead, and apparently these things were forced upon him, regardless of whether he wanted to give his attention to them or not. Not for a moment did he doubt that the attempt to drive him out of the Devil's Apron was already under way, and was grimly and inexorably being carried to him. That rattlesnake was in itself a sinister message.

His first task was that of cleaning up his father's old Winchester rifle, a .302 that had seen its best days, but was still usable if it had not rusted too much in the last three years. He discovered that the inside of the barrel was still spotless due to a carefully placed muzzle-plug, and after considerable oiling and manipulating, the found the mechanism to be in excellent working order.

He oiled his revolver, too, and then spent an hour at target practice in the yard with the three guns, not so much for his own satisfaction, but for the benefit of the watchful eyes that he knew were upon him from the distant fastnesses of the hills. He gave particular attention to his little twenty-two rifle, polishing it until it shone and refurbishing the bead.

A large red-tailed squirrel hawk was circling slowly overhead, apparently watching for quail, and with the small rifle he took a careful aim. At the crack of the gun the hawk came tumbling down, with a few scattered feathers floating earthward more slowly.

"That ought to hold 'em for a while," he chuckled to himself, as he carried the guns back into the house.

That afternoon he was surprised by an unexpected visit from Sheriff Rutherford who hitched his horse to the picket-fence, and dropped heavily into a chair on the porch. Lon, who had been tinkering with some farm machinery in a shed beside the barn, quit his work and joined his visitor.

"Thought I'd sorta drap over an' see how ye wuz a-gettin' a-long," explain Rutherford, lighting one of his inevitable stogies.

"All to the merry—so far," replied Lon with a shrug.

The sheriff's eyes narrowed and he peered steadily at Lon.

"Meanin' that ye've done had some trouble?" he demanded softly.

"Nothin' much," laughed Lon, "only I found a fine big rattlesnake coiled up on the kitchen floor when I got up this mornin'. Eleven rattles and a button. He was my first visitor."

"Ye figger the snake was put thar?" queried Rutherford, blowing a cloud of smoke upward and watching it dissipate.

"Back in her lifetime," said Lon gently, "my maw simply couldn't stand rats in the house, so our kitchen was rat-proof. The door was latched on the inside, an' it's four feet from the ground to the sill of the window that I left opened last night. You can figger it out for yourself."

"Shore has the ear-marks uv Silent Steve," mused Rutherford. "I reckon that's his fu'st move in tryin' to drive ye outta the Apern."

Lon nodded. "I'll be ready for him next time," he promised grimly. "How about spendin' the night here with me, Sheriff?" he suggested after a pause. "There are a number of things I want to talk over with you."

"I wuz aimin' to do that. Been kinda worried about ye, son, since ye left town yeste'day afternoon."

Together they unsaddled the sheriff's horse, and watered him. Then Lon, with a reap-hook, cut sufficient grass for the night's feeding, and they stabled the animal. Through it all Rutherford helped, but ap-

parently his mind was on other things. And from time to time his glance wandered irresistibly out toward the ridge-line that marked the boundaries between Lon's farm and the holdings of Silent Steve Cantrell.

A little later they sat smoking on the shadowed porch, and Lon brought up the subject that concerned him deepest.

"Where was it they—got my dad?" he demanded harshly.

"Up thar on that trail that leads up to yore cove field, straight acrost frum that high knob ye see stickin' up thar." Rutherford pointed toward an elevation that Lon knew was a corner on the survey between the Caswell and Cantrell farms, the very land that had been in dispute in the lawsuit.

"You told me that you thought it was a thirty-thirty bullet that killed him, but that you never saw it," said Lon slowly. "I take it that the bullet went on through him."

"That's ke-reckt, an' ef'n I knowed the exact spot frum which that bullet wuz fired, I might could find hit. Hit wuz a kind uv a level place whar we found yore pa, an' that bullet's bound to be thar some'rs clost—mebbe a few yards distant, de-pendin' on the elevation."

"But the hole that the bullet left," persisted Lon, "was it small, like a thirty-thirty makes, or was it big enough to have been fired by a forty-one-calibered Swiss Army rifle? Bullet-holes almost always close up to some extent."

Again Rutherford watched a swirl of smoke as it slowly arose toward the ceiling.

"I know what ye's thinkin', son," he murmured, "an' hit could be ye're right. Hit's hard to tell the caliber uv a bullet from the hole hit makes in a man. An' Silent Steve is the only man in these parts that has a ol' Swiss rifle like that. Still an' all, we'd have to git our hands on that bullet."

"Judgin' by where you found the body, where do you think that the killer was hiding when he fired?"

Rutherford removed his cigar and with it pointed to the high knob on the dividing ridge.

"I'd say 'twuz right about thar—whar ye can see that dead chesnut tree a-shinin'. Yore pa wuz a-layin' at the aidge uv the creek up thar, a couple uv steps beyanst the water. He wuz goin' up the holler, an' he wuz shot squar through the back—deep in the left breast. The bullet, so Doc Stanley said, nicked the heart. Jedgin' by that, I'd say that the bullet come frum the top uv that p'int."

"You searched there, of course."

"Shore, but hit had rained en-durin' the night, an' thar wuz no sign uv tracks er anything that I could see. Thar wan't no spent shell thar. I reckon I told ye that whoever killed yore pa picked a time when a big rainstorm was brewin', an' hit washed out any sign that mought have been left."

FOR a moment they were silent, and then, as if in answer to their inmost thoughts, there came that low wailing signal, quivering through the evening shadows, and, listening to it, Lon, found himself clenching his hands so tightly that his nails were biting into his palms. Rutherford grew suddenly taut in his chair, and sat staring into the purpling distances as if he were carved of granite.

For five endless minutes those wailing signals echoed and re-echoed along the hill, and Lon, trying to translate them in Morse code, failed completely. Came a short interruption, and then they continued steadily as if the sender expected no reply. Finally utter silence settled down, smotheringly like a blanket, and Lon and Rutherford both relaxed.

"That gun-bar'l telegraph," murmured the latter softly. "Fu'st time I've heerd hit in years."

"I heard it last night," said Lon with a shrug. "What do you think they're cookin' up, Sheriff?"

"Wall, hit's jest like I told ye afore ye started up hyeh yeste'day. Hit's Silent Steve's play to skeer ye out." Rutherford eyed Lon speculatively. "Hit mought be I could sell this place fer ye, Lon, ef'n ye wanted to go some'rs else fer a spell. Be kinda lonesome fer ye all by yoreself up hyeh."

"I'll stay," said Lon quietly, and Rutherford looked grim.

"Wall, ye're old 'nough to know yore own mind," he concluded, tossing away the butt of his cigar and arising.

Little was said during the frugal supper that Lon cooked and served, and afterward Rutherford took a stroll about the place while Lon washed and put the dishes away. They went out to the porch again, and for a

short time sat talking in a desultory fashion, but the mosquitoes soon drove them inside. When Lon lighted the oil-lamp in the living room, Rutherford carefully closed all the shades, and then sat down for a final smoke. He lighted his cigar and eyed it critically until it was burning to suit him.

"Ef'n I wuz in yore place," he said in a guarded tone, "I'd cut down that big buckeye tree jest back uv the house hyeh. The butt's nigh about rotted through, an' hit's liable to fall at any time—'specially ef'n hit had jest a leetle cuttin' er sawin' done on hit. An' when ye do cut hit, ye'll have to be plum keerful how ye throw hit, er hit will smash the house right plum in the middle."

"I'll see about that in the next day or so," replied Lon vaguely, and a few hours later he was to recall with a shudder his careless dismissal of that warning.

It was shortly before two o'clock in the morning when Lon found himself sitting bolt upright in bed, straining his ears, and trying desperately to regain his sleep-drugged senses. There had been a terrific explosion or crash that had awakened him. That much he knew instinctively, and his first thought was that a gun had been fired in the room. Then he remembered that Rutherford was sleeping in the next room, and he fumbled for matches to light the lamp.

"Don't show a light," came Rutherford's warning whisper. "They might take a pot-shot through the winder."

"What was it?" demanded Lon, feeling for his clothes.

"That buckeye tree, I reckon. Sounded like hit anyhow. Git yore clothes on an' we'll slip out an' see."

A waning, watery moon was hanging over the black rim of the western hills when they cautiously crossed the porch and dropped into the deep shadows of the house on the east side. Lon was in front, cat-footing toward the rear of the yard, and a glance at the skyline told him that the towering old buckeye tree had fallen. A few minutes later he halted against the sprawled breast-high trunk.

Rutherford passed on above him, climbing swiftly and soundlessly up the sharp slope, and a few seconds later his flashlight glowed on the stump.

"Come hyeh, son!" he called, and Lon joined him, peering at the jagged splinters where the trunk had broken off. Then he saw something that brought a startled exclamation to his lips. The trunk had been deeply sawed on the lower side.

"Yeah," drawled Rutherford, voicing Lon's thought, "they shore sawed her right to throw her right spang on the house. But the pull uv the tree wuz a leetle to the left. That's all that saved us."

"Seems to me like we'd have heard 'em," said Lon after a pregnant silence. "Or the dog," he added as an afterthought.

"Buckeye wood's plum soft an' spongey, an' the saw wouldn't make much noise," explained Rutherford, picking up some of the sawdust and rubbing it between his finger and thumb. "Then, too, ye mought have noticed—ol' Drum is gittin' a mite deef. He can nose out a cold trail with the best uv 'em, but his hearin' ain't what hit onct wuz."

AS THEY walked back to the house old Drum came to them, and followed at Lon's heels. Once or twice he stopped and sniffed the air suspiciously, and then he trotted ahead and vanished in the deeper shadows. When the two men entered the house, and Lon had lighted the lamp, Rutherford's tones and demeanor were normal again.

"They lit out soon's that tree started to fall," he surmised drawlingly. "O' cou'se, 'twould be moughty hard to prove, but thar ain't no question about who 'twuz. I looked all 'round that stump up thar, an' they left no tracks. Bound to have been two uv 'em to pull the saw. Hit looks like they wropped rug-sacks er somethin' around' their feet, an' mebbe poured turpentine on 'em so's no dawg could foller 'em. Yeah," he concluded with a shrug, "'tuz Silent Steve—the murderin' ol' devil."

Despite Rutherford's confident belief that the Cantrells were through for the night, there was no further sleep for Lon. He tossed and turned in his bed, and grew tense and listening to any untoward sound that caught his ears. It was somewhere near four o'clock when he heard old Drum open up with his deep bay somewhere out in the direction of the ridge-line facing the Cantrell place, and Lon knew instantly that the dog was on the trail of a raccoon.

After some fifteen minutes of trailing,

Drum's tones changed, telling all and sundry that he had treed his quarry, and then at regular intervals the dawn resounded with his deep, belling voice. With the breaking of day, Lon dressed quietly, and taking his rifle, he slipped out of the house, without waking the sheriff, and made a thorough examination of the ground around the stump of that buckeye.

It was as Rutherford had said. There were no marks from which anything definite could be determined, and, stooping to the ground, he was able to detect the penetrating odor of turpentine. Lifting his head, he stared intently at the woodlands, mist-shrouded and pearly, that marked the boundary of Silent Steve's land, half-expecting to see the orange flare of an exploding gun muzzle, or even the stooped, sinister form of the strange old hillman whose warped mind was brewing such a devil's stew of hatred and secrecy.

Idly Lon listened for old Drum's bark, but apparently the dog had quit the tree and probably had returned home. Retracing his steps, Lon awakened Rutherford, and then went into the kitchen to prepare breakfast. The sheriff's normal joviality was slightly forced as he ate, and there seemed to be something on his mind that echoed in a sharp metallic ring to his ordinary drawling tones. When he was ready to leave, he placed a hand on Lon's arm.

"I reckon yore mind's done made up, an' I ain't a-goin' to try to change hit," he said earnestly. "Ol' Steve's got murder in his heart, an' hit's yore job to see that he don't do what he's aimin' to do. Ye can't take no chances, son, an' ef'n I wuz in yore place I reckon I'd sleep out in the open fer a night er so."

He paused to light one of his inevitable stogies, and when Lon failed to make any reply, he continued:

"I'm a-goin' on Whisperin' Creek to serve some papers today, an', on second thought, I'm a-goin' to send over one uv my deppities to spend the night hyeh tonight."

"Don't bother," expostulated Lon. "I'll get along alright."

"No." The sheriff was adamant. "I don't aim to see murder done in my county ef'n I can help hit. Stay onder cover today, Lon, an' be on yore gyard." Without another word he wheeled his horse and rode slowly out of the clearing.

For several moments Lon stood motionless, watching the dwindling figures of horse and man until they vanished around a bend in the trail. With a shrug he dismissed the vague feeling of uncertainty that had gripped him and turned to his morning chores. Twice he called old Drum, and he received no reply save the reverberating echoes of his own voice from the cliffs above and beyond the clearing.

Nonplussed by the continued absence of the dog, he finally determined to see if he could locate him and the quarry that had been treed at daybreak. He filled the magazine of his little repeating rifle, hoping to kill a couple of squirrels for his dinner, and, skirting the lower field, he slipped into the forest in almost the opposite direction from his real destination, for he knew that his every movement was watched.

By a circuitous route and by taking advantage of the cover afforded by the thick undergrowth, he soundlessly approached the sharply pointed knoll on which stood the gleaming dead chestnut tree—the point from which Rutherford believed that the shot that had killed Bart Caswell had been fired. It was somewhere in that vicinity that old Drum had treed his 'coon.

In the rhododendron beds at the foot of this sharp slope, Drum came out of a clump of huckleberry bushes to meet Lon, and the dog's actions and furtive attitude put Lon instantly on guard. The dog's tail was tucked low between his legs, and his slinking stride and fearful backward glances were inexplicable. Lon's first thought was that someone had driven the dog away from his quarry by throwing rocks at him, but when he saw the hackles standing on the dog's neck, he knew that there was a more deadly danger threatening.

The old hound came directly to Lon, and when the latter halted beside a thick clump of rhododendron, the dog dropped on his belly and gave expression to a low growl.

"What is it, boy?" whispered Lon, easing the safety off his gun, and holding it at a ready position.

The dog was peering steadily through the tops of the shrubbery, apparently centering his gaze on the top of the knoll where the spectral bole of the dead chestnut loomed indistinctly through the foliage. For a long moment Lon stood motionless, breathing

through his mouth for silence and straining every sense for some sound or movement that would tell him what he faced. Only the lazy chirping of insects and the occasional cry of a bird disturbed the breathless quietude.

Slowly and soundlessly, and taking extreme care not to step upon a dried leaf or twig that would crackle underfoot, Lon pushed through the rhododendron thicket, and when he broke into the more open woods, he halted and half-crouched behind a fallen moss-covered log. Again he gave his every attention to the knoll above him, but as far as he could determine there was no moving or living thing on it. Drum followed close behind him, never once offering to take the lead.

At last convinced that whatever danger that had been lurking up there was gone, Lon warily climbed up through the huckleberry clumps and scrub oak toward that glistening dead chestnut. Twice Drum growled a warning note, and each time Lon halted and stood motionless for several seconds before advancing. When he had reached a point some thirty feet distant from the foot of the chestnut, he caught a glimpse of an object that brought him to a halt.

Almost atop the bared roots of the looming dead tree lay a brown, shapeless body, and at first Lon thought that it was a mound of dead moss, but a closer look told him that the color was not right. Then instinctively he knew that it was the lifeless body of a man, for he had seen too many of those shapeless lumps of clothing in the jungles of New Guinea and the Philippines.

A few more steps brought him close enough to identify that partly covered face. It was Silent Steve Cantrell! Even death could not smooth or erase the sinister, ruthless features. For an instant Lon's thoughts milled, and then he realized that Sheriff Rutherford must be told immediately.

There was a short-cut through Blowing Rock Gap across from the headwaters of No-Business Creek to the Whispering Creek Basin, and Lon knew that it would be possible to intercept the sheriff over there while he was delivering his legal papers. Instantly, and with the instinct of a born woodsman, Lon struck off in a southerly direction, taking the most direct route regardless of the terrain.

Two hours later he was sitting beside the trail along which Rutherford must ride on his way back to the county seat. The road was not heavily traveled and for the most part was grass-grown, and he did not hear Rutherford's approach until the latter was within fifty yards. Lon tossed away his cigarette and stepped into the middle of the road. Rutherford reined in.

"What's happened, Lon?" he demanded, slipping from the saddle with surprising agility.

"Somebody's shot Silent Steve," said Lon succinctly. "He's lyin' up there at the foot of that big chestnut on the knoll."

"Ye don't say!" ejaculated the sheriff, pursing his mouth and giving vent to a low whistle of surprise. "How'd—who done hit, do ye reckon?"

"I didn't," replied Lon with a shrug. "All I know is that he's lyin' there. I didn't go close enough to make any examination—came straight on over here to tell you about it."

"An' ye done right, Lon," agreed Rutherford as he turned to lead his horse back into a clump of paw-paw bushes that flanked the road. He hitched his mount securely, and then came back to Lon. "My hoss'll have to wait hyeh fer me. I'm takin' hit that ye come through Blowin' Rock Gap to head me off, an' a feller can't ride through thar."

Lon nodded in affirmation, and followed the sheriff who had turned and without any further discussion was moving at a gait surprisingly swift for a man of his age. They headed back up through the thick timber toward the looming notch in the ridgeline above them. It was with difficulty that Lon maintained the pace that Rutherford set, and they made even better time back to the death-scene than Lon had made earlier.

The forested knoll was still deserted when Rutherford and Lon drew near the towering dead chestnut. Out in the bushes a few feet away from that scene old Drum quietly put in his appearance. He had kept a solitary vigil during Lon's absence. The latter halted beside the dog and watched Rutherford stride straight to the crumpled body. For a long minute he stood motionless, staring down at the almost shapeless heap, and then Lon drew slowly near.

The sheriff glanced quickly over the scene, and then let his roving eyes search out every detail about him. Apparently there were no tracks, or signs of any struggle, at least as far as Lon could ascertain, but he could see that Silent Steve's butternut shirt-front was stained and soggy with blood. A floppy old black hat lay a few inches from the long, grizzled, unkempt hair.

"Shore looks like murder," said Rutherford, drawing a deep breath. "Ef'n he'd killed hisself—either by accident er de-sign—thar'd be a gun some'rs."

The sheriff bent over and ran his hands over the clothing of the slain man, and then he straightened and looked at Lon.

"He's been dead fer hours," he murmured softly. "An' hit shore looks like plum center shot. Help me turn him ove' an' le's see."

AS LON stepped in beside Rutherford an untoward sound down the slope a few yards brought him around and he saw the two stalwart, lanky sons of Silent Steve—Crit and Dave—come into view through the undergrowth. Crit was carrying a double-bitted axe, and Dave a heavy, large-calibered rifle. Soundlessly, grimly, they came on up the hill, their eyes fixed on the prone form at the sheriff's feet.

The two hillmen halted a step or two away, and Dave's glance left the body of his father and went searchingly to the sheriff's face.

"Who done hit?" he demanded, his voice a distinct threat.

"That's what we're tryin' to find out." Rutherford straightened, and turned so that he could face both of the newcomers. "Seems as how he's been dead fer some time, but thar's no sign uv a gun, er fight, er nothin'."

"Somebody done hit," said Dave tonelessly, and his eyes whipped to Lon accusingly. The latter shook his head in silent negation.

"When did he leave the house?" queried the sheriff of Dave.

"Last night er early this mornin'," replied the latter. "All me as' Crit knows is that he went to bed early last night, an' wuz gone when we got up this mornin'."

"Air ye shore ye went to bed early last night?" demanded Rutherford sharply. "Can ye prove that ye two an' Silent Steve warn't over at Lon's place last night a-cuttin' a big buckeye tree?"

"Don't know what ye're drivin' at," denied Dave furtively. "Me an' Crit an' paw wuz at home last night."

"What the hell has that got to do with this business?" rasped Crit, pointing toward the body. "I'm figgerin' Lon Caswell thar done hit."

"Hold yore hosses, son," warned Rutherford sharply. "Help me turn him over, Lon."

Together they straightened the body of Silent Steve, and then rolled him over on his back. Rutherford unbuttoned the old hickory shirt, exposing a small bullet-hole just over the heart. The aperture was almost closed, and the old hillman had not bled much.

"A twenty-two, by Gawd!" growled Dave, and his accusing eyes went swiftly to the rifle that Lon was carrying in the crook of his arm.

Crit stepped in close to Lon, his axe held menacingly, and Sheriff Rutherford dropped his hand to the handle of his forty-five Colt that swung in a hip-holster.

"None uv that, boys!" he ordered sharply. "Lon didn't do hit. Silent Steve wuz killed sometime endurin' the night. I spent the night with Lon. Ye can tell that Steve's been dead fer mebbe ten-twelve hours. Hit's shore puzzlin'—"

"Mebbe 'twuz done this mornin'," interrupted Dave, "atter you left Lon's place. We seen ye leave, an' we seen Lon come this way." Dave's eyes were slitted, and his thin lips drawn down in a snarl. The barrel of his Winchester was pivoting slowly in Lon's direction.

"Stop hit—right thar, Dave!" The sheriff's tones were metallic, and Dave grew motionless. "I know that Steve was killed endurin' the night. Ye can con-vince yoreself ef'n ye'll jest take a clost look." He pointed toward the ground where the body had been lying before it was turned over. "Ye see them moon-flowers thar, don't ye?" he queried. "Ye know that they blossom out atter night, an' that they fold up as soon as the risin' sun touches 'em. Ye can see fer yoreself that them flowers onder Steve—what's left uv 'em—air all blossomed full out."

LON leaned forward, staring at the small bell-shaped purple flowers, some of which had been crushed and flattened by the weight of the body, and then he looked at the folded blooms nearby. There could be no doubt but that the man had been killed before seven-thirty that morning when the sun had arisen. And Rutherford had not left the cabin until well after eight.

"Now, put up yore guns, boys," suggested Rutherford a couple of minutes later, "an' le's set down an' see ef'n we can figger out what r'ally happened. Hit looks to me like Steve wuz shot 'long about daylight, er mebbe sooner, with a twenty-two-calibered gun uv some kind. Now, like I said, I spent the night at Lon's place, an' I didn't leave 'til long atter sun-up. He found the body 'long about ten o'clock this mornin', an' then he headed me off over on Whisperin' Creek. We come on over hyeh, an' ye two fellers showed up. That's all we know fer shore."

Dave and Crit obeyed Rutherford's suggestion and leaned the axe and rifle against a convenient tree. Then they sat down on a log so near that the weapons were in ready reach, and it was obvious that there still lurked some suspicion of Lon's innocence. From time to time during the next few minutes their gaze left the stark figure on the ground and moved relentlessly to the motionless Lon who stood leaning against the bole of the dead chestnut.

For a long minute Rutherford sat squatted on his heels, peering at the dead man, and puffing steadily at his stogie. At last he turned to Dave.

"This mornin' about four o'clock," he said softly, "ol' Drum thar treed him a 'coon up hyeh in this di-rection some'rs—mebbe in this dead chestnut." He peered upward and studied the tree which had partially rotted and there were a number of large apertures—homes for the wildlife of the forests. "Hit shore looks like a den-tree to me, an' I reckon this wuz whar he treed that 'coon.

"Now, I also know that Steve hyeh wuz jest about the best 'coon-hunter in this section, an' I reckon thar wuz nothin' he loved better. I figger that he heerd ol' Drum an' knowed 'twuz a 'coon, so he come up hyeh to see."

Dave nodded somberly. "Hit could a-happened," he admitted.

"What kind uv a gun did yore pa use in shootin' out treed 'coons?" queried Rutherford.

"A twenty-two long-bar'led target pistol —with extra long ca'tridges in hit," volunteered Crit.

"But whar at is the gun now?" demanded Dave truculently.

"That's what's got me plum stumped," replied Rutherford with a frown. "I'll be satisfied that he shot hisself accidentally ef'n we could find that gun."

ONCE again his glance went over every inch of the surface about the body, but there was no place in which the gun could be hid or covered. Then the four of them joined in a minute examination of the ground over the entire knoll for a distance of twenty yards from the tree, but found nothing.

"Wall, le's fix us a stretcher," suggested Rutherford with a sigh of resignation, and he picked up the axe and cut and trimmed two long poles. Thrusting these poles through the arms of the coats that the four men were wearing, they made a crude litter and lifted the still form of Silent Steve upon it. Rutherford picked up the fallen man's hat and placed it over his face.

As they stooped to pick up the litter, old Drum ventured a few steps closer, and then went over to the base of the dead chestnut. He smelled of the bole and whined uncertainly. Rutherford straightened suddenly.

"Wait a minnit, boys!" he ejaculated softly. "Thar's a 'coon in that tree. Whar's the axe?"

Lon eyed the sheriff in surprise. It was hardly the time to hunt 'coons, and, judging from the expression on the faces of Crit and Dave, it was plain that they were of the same thought. Nevertheless, without hesitation Rutherford caught up the razor-sharp double-bitt and attacked the chestnut on the down-slope.

The tree was hollow all the way down to the roots, and it required only a few strokes until an ominous crack gave warning, and Rutherford quickly stepped to one side. Old Drum was whining eagerly as he watched the swaying top of that tree. Then he crouched as the great trunk swept down and crashed heavily, throwing up a cloud of leaves and dirt.

The bole of the chestnut broke into half a dozen segments when it struck the uneven ground, and from one of these segments leaped an usually large raccoon. In a flash old Drum was on it, and, wise in such matters, it was a matter of seconds until he had secured a death-hold. The battle was over.

The sheriff paid scant attention to the raccoon. With heavy, accurate strokes he split the segment of the trunk in which the 'coon had been hiding, and when the halves fell apart, exposing the bed of leaves and mould the animal had built, he stooped and peered downward with a hint of a smile playing about the corners of his mouth.

"Come hyeh, boys!" he requested softly, and when they gathered close about him, he leaned over and picked out of the 'coon-bed a pearl-handled, silver-plated twenty-two pistol.

"This the gun yore pa carried?" he asked, and both Crit and Dave nodded affirmatively.

"I kinda figgered we'd find hit hyeh," he exulted. "I've allus noticed that 'coons wuz worse than children to pick up an' store away bright, shiny things. That 'coon come out at daybreak this mornin', an' found that gun alayin' thar beside Steve, an' he hid hit in his den." He examined the gun closely, intently. "Look! The hammer's fresh scarred whar hit struck a rock in fallin' from Steve's pocket, makin' hit ex-plode. An' thar's one empty shell in the gun. I reckon that tells the story, boys."

Lon felt a wave of relief as the plain explanation was unfolded, and both Dave and Crit were mute, but apparently convinced. Rutherford thrust the gun into his capacious pocket, and then began to search among the dead leaves in the raccoon's bed. After a few seconds he straightened with a grunt of satisfaction, and in his hand he was holding a long copper-colored object. One glance told Lon that it was the empty cartridge case of a forty-one-caliber Swiss army rifle, such as Silent Steve had usually carried.

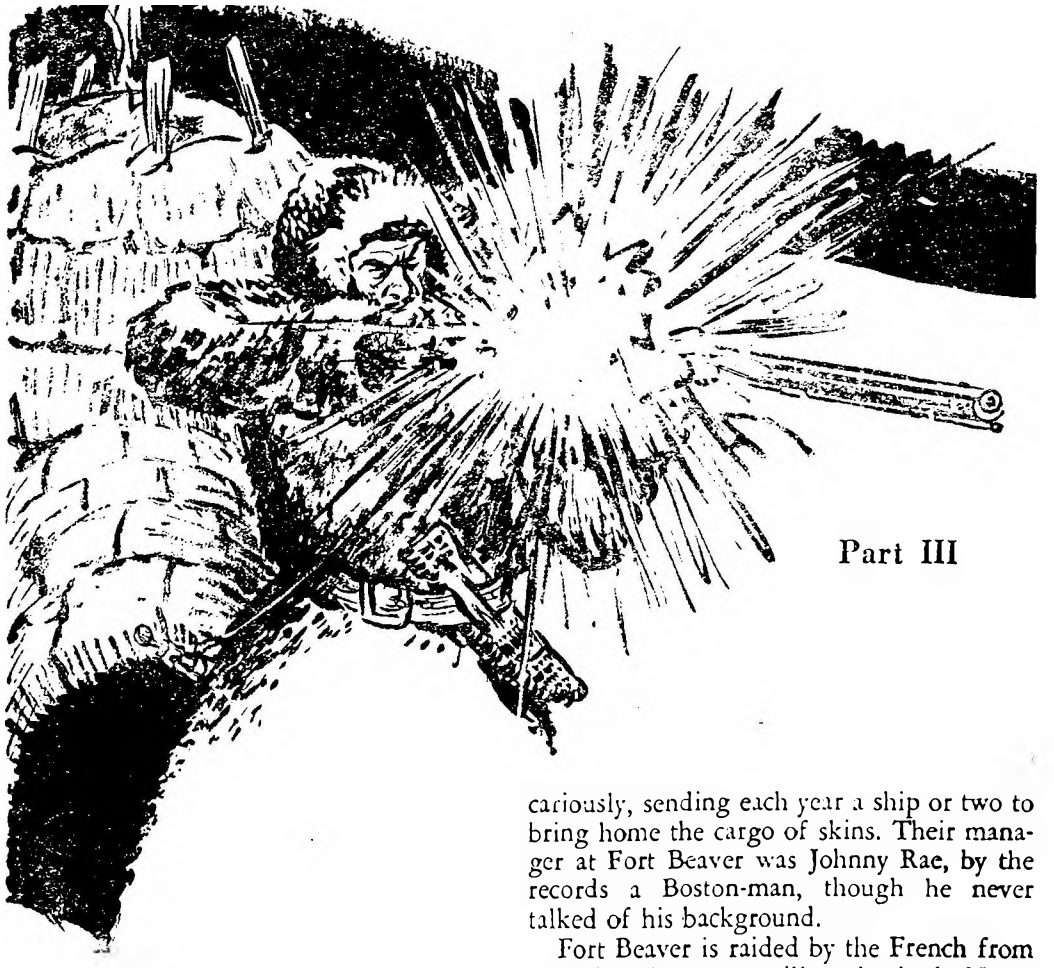
"That's the ca'tridge that killed Bart Caswell," declared the sheriff harshly. "An' as fer as my office is con-cerned this closes the book. If thar's any doubt in anybody's mind we'll locate the bullet up thar whar Bart died, but the case is closed onless'n somebody demands hit. What's done is done an' thar's leetle we can do about hit now. But thar's one thing I want to see done right now. I want ye three boys should shake hands to show that this hyeh feud is finished an' done."

In pregnant silence Lon grasped the hands of Crit and Dave, and he sensed the sincerity of their clasps. Then the two hill youths stooped to raise their grim and somber burden, and an instant later vanished like shadows into the undergrowth.

Being a Gentleman Is No Recommendation When One Deals in Treachery

DEAD MEN DANCING

By H. BEDFORD-JONES



Part III

THE STORY SO FAR

THERE was a time when only the dancing men—tremendous, fluttering natural phenomena—were realities of the vast inland sea, unknown, uncharted, which later was to become Hudson Bay. Ownership was uncertain; just now the English company of gentlemen adventurers held the forts precariously, sending each year a ship or two to bring home the cargo of skins. Their manager at Fort Beaver was Johnny Rae, by the records a Boston-man, though he never talked of his background.

Fort Beaver is raided by the French from Canada who were sailing the bark *Nonesuch*, which they had captured from its captain. This Captain Laurens' daughter, Laurie, had escaped and accomplished the well nigh impossible feat of wintering in the North—aided by the Indian, Black Cloud, a Cree. When Johnny Rae is accused of complicity in the fur-pirates' raid and ordered to Fort York for questioning he escapes and joins the girl and Black Cloud.

Their mad scheme is to recapture the *Nonesuch* from the Sieur de Troyes, his Mohawk helper and another French renegade, Savary. They would thus regain the girl's patrimony and save the Company property, for the French planned to winter in one of the Bay's hidden coves and raid Fort York at will.

The impossible plan succeeded; Savary was away from the *Nonesuch* on a raid, and Johnny, the Cree, and the girl take the ship. They find aboard her all the furs that Laurie's father had accumulated and plan to keep them. Then the Sieur de Troyes returns and from him Johnny learns of the French plan to take over the country from the English and oust the Company. Though he no longer owes the Company allegiance, Johnny feels the men at Fort Beaver must be warned. He and Black Cloud make their way there to pass on news of the French plans of conquest. When they return to the *Nonesuch* they find that the ship has been raided; a band of drunken Eskimo have carried off Laurie to their village of stone huts in the interior, where Savary is.

Forgetting all thought of de Troyes, Rae and the Cree follow the Eskimo trail. They find and rescue Laurie, chase the Eskimo and Savary away from the village and dig in there.

Then a wounded caribou is seen by Black Cloud, and they realize it has been shot. Only one person could have done it—a white man. In this barren desolation? Then

enemies were at hand; the impossible had happened.

IX

BLACK CLOUD had been aware of the truth and of its implications long before Rae divined it. The Cree had calmly uncased his musket and was now loading it. With a gesture he moved toward the brush. Rae started to follow, then halted.

No one was in sight. And firewood was vitally important to them. Also, Laurie should be warned. He spoke quietly.

"I'll take in the wood and get the muskets loaded. You scout; be careful!"

The Cree assented, beady eyes glinting with excitement. Rae went to the trees, bundled his wood, made fast the long thong and started for the stone houses. He kept looking back until Black Cloud disappeared. The wood dragged easily. He sighted the stone houses with a sharp breath of relief; nothing had happened here. Laurie was outside, filling a pot with snow to melt for water. Seeing his approach, she came to aid him.

"Where's Black Cloud?" She gave him a sharp look. "What is it—something wrong?"

"Yes. He's scouting; we'll hear from him." The wood was added to the pile behind their house, and he told her of the caribou. "Whites—you see? That's all we know. No time to waste. We must get the muskets loaded and ready."

"Whites!" Her gaze swept the unbroken expanse of the Bay and darted up the coast. "That means Savary—"

"Not likely. Perhaps a party from Fort York or Beaver—Company men. Look." Rae pointed to the smoke ascending from the stone house. "That blasted smoke would draw them, too; must be visible from everywhere. We'll, keep a lookout; I'll see to the muskets."

He flew at the work, uncased and loaded the muskets, cased them again, added his own to the pile, set her pot of snow on the embers to melt, and joined her outside.

"Nothing in sight, John. So this means danger, eh?"

Rae relaxed, got his pipe alight and nodded.

"Nothing else; may be a good thing," he rejoined. "Now we'll not leave here so soon. This shows what folly the trip would be. I'll not risk harm coming to you, for such scant gain, my dear!" He smiled into her eyes, then squinted again at the snowy expanse; but she regarded him oddly.

"I like you, in such moments of crisis as this," she said. "You're a different person, John; it's as though you put off a mask, to reveal a truer inner sense, another self."

"Aye," he said whimsically. "That of Jack Powers, eh?"

She frowned. "Jack Powers?"

"Precisely. There was a man named Powers in Bristol, a man of much probity and honor. He went to Boston in the Massachusetts colony as a royal official; while there, a son was born to him. He was a wonderful man, so upright that he leaned backward, so righteous that he'd tolerate no sin in his own family. He made life a hell for all around him."

Rae's voice became bitter, angry, caustic.

"Later, Powers returned to England—I think he's in London now. He alienated his son, who was guilty of a few youthful indiscretions. Powers magnified 'em into sins, said his son was bound to the devil, kicked him out. Jack went gladly, but didn't quite go to the devil—came near it, though."

"You knew him?" Laurie asked, as he paused. His lips twisted.

"Oh, well enough. He changed his name and called himself an American, because he was born there. Like the French in Canada, who call themselves Canadians, you know. His father is a judge in London, now—a magistrate, more holy than ever. The old man had seen plenty of seamen and Hudson's Bay men in Bristol and Gravesend; he hated 'em like poison, said they were all rogues and hellions. So Jack, for the devil of it, got into the Hudson's Bay Company—under his new name, of course."

He broke off to squint at the empty horizon again. No one was in sight.

"It's very strange," she said. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"You broke into it." He laughed curtly. "Your instinct surprised the truth, my dear. Another man, says you, and truly. I've never breathed it to a soul, but I'm glad to be telling you. I'd have no secrets from you, ever."

"Wait!" Her voice startled, she stood up. "Do you mean that you, John Rae—"

"Am really Jack Powers, yes," he said. "A rogue of ill repute, a wastrel and a ne'er-dowell—a *vaurien,* as the French call it, a worthless fellow—"

"Nonsense," she said curtly. "Is the name of Jack Powers blackened?"

"Devil a bit! I merely chucked it for that of Rae. My godly pater handles certain legal affairs for some of my lords of the Company, so I got rid of his name. The old buzzard has made money and owns shares in the Company, too. I did think to work up to a good command as John Rae, then go back to London and give him a real shock or two—well, none o' that now. I'm out of the Company."

"But you're not," she contradicted. He laughed again.

"Little you know; give a dog a bad name and he's hung. These captains and governors of the forts are bitter hard, stern men, my dear. My lords in London are a loose lot, so their servants on the Bay atone for it by harsh, pitiless living. They'd like naught better than to get me in chains and send me to London—the more credit to them for catching a fur-pirate, an accomplice of your precious Savary! And we stand here babbling of green leaves, while the fates descend upon us—"

At his gesture she started, turned, and caught sight of two black dots leaving the distant trees and starting across the open for the stone houses. The respite was ended.

Rae knocked out his pipe and spoke quietly. "Favor me, if you please—keep secret the name I mentioned."

"You have my promise," she returned. "Why frowning now?"

"It's odd that Black Cloud let them beat him here. His scouting can't be at fault—ha! Look at that figure in the lead! Damme, but I think it's the Cree! He's picked up someone who was on the trail o' that caribou and is leading him here!"

Amazing but, as it proved, true. The two shapes swung forward at a good pace, and the one in the lead was the Cree, as his furs testified on closer approach.

Then Laurie began to laugh—a sudden-breaking cackle, not of mirth but almost of hysteria, revealing how deep had been her tension. She caught at Rae's arm, lifted a hand and began to wave.

"It is, it is!" she cried. "Look, John—don't you know him? Sieur de Troyes, of course. No enemy after all! And—and—"

Her voice failed, as a third figure appeared, far behind the other two—bent far over, dragging something along through the snow. Now that he had a clue, Rae knew that black-furred shape.

"The Woodpecker," he said. "Le Pivert—the Mohawk, of course. Hm! I'm not so sure, my dear, that this is an unmixed blessing. Let's be slow to talk, until we learn what this visit means. A pleasant afternoon call over a hundred mile or so of snow and ice isn't made merely to pass the time o' day. No enemy? Think again. If Troyes isn't the most dangerous rascal in these regions—"

"John! He's a French gentleman!" she exclaimed.

"Being a gentleman is no recommendation when one deals in treachery," said Rae. "And you've changed your tune about this fellow, since we first met. Well, that's your affair; I'll mind my own business. This monsieur didn't afford you much help when the Eskimo—"

Laurie faced him with hot anger.

"For shame! We were all poisoned then, could barely lift a hand!"

Rae shrugged. "Aye, right you are. But if death's door was opening upon me, I think I'd block it long enough to save you from danger. A fine boast, if ye like to call it so; you're more important to me than I am, but there's naught so important to yonder gentleman as his own neck, his own schemes. And if he'd spend fifty thousand pounds to bribe me, I'd warrant he has the King o' France behind him, with larger stakes on the table than he's mentioned so far. Or else it was but a vain false promise o' gold."

HE FELL silent, seeing that his words served only to anger her. Black Cloud and Troyes were drawing near, and a gay cry of greeting came from the Frenchman. Laurie waved and started to meet him; Rae fell in behind her. Sieur de Troyes was himself again, strong and eager, volatile, radiant with health and laughter. He came to Laurie, caught her hand and lifted it to his lips, and his gaze went to Rae.

"Ha, good companion, greetings! A pleasanter meeting than our last, eh? I rejoice to find you so well and hearty. Yonder comes

Le Pivert, bringing the better part of the caribou that so happily led us to you. *Peste!* This is luck, indeed. I was not at all sure of finding you, though Savary gave full directions."

They stood in talk until the Woodpecker arrived with his burden. He gave them a mere nod of greeting. Rae scrutinized him and was aware of a very different type of man from the Cree—stalwart, deep-chested, ruthless, with eyes of greater shrewdness and sagacity; yet Rae found the slighter Cree far more to his liking.

Leaving the redskins to cut up the meat, the other three went into Laurie's house and got a fire going for warmth. Presently furs were shed and pipes were lighted; Troyes had an abundance of tobacco, and filled Rae's pouch while he talked.

"I was helpless for days after you left," said he. "Savary came back with five of his men left; with Davy, that makes six for him. They brought three Eskimo women. Most of the men were wounded, but they're doing well enough. Savary was aware that you had been with him in the fight, but was sure you'd been killed. I hoped otherwise, and came along to prove it. Neither he nor his men would come; they had a bellyful of this place, you may be sure. Besides, we disagreed—well, of that later on."

He checked himself and they fell to discussing the fight with the Eskimo, in detail. Rae, speaking little, decided against any immediate break with the Frenchman; time enough later to assert himself. Troyes was able to clear the calendar for them; to his astonishment, Ray learned that Christmas was past and gone—this apparently eternal winter had only about four more months to run.

Troyes had brought a small pack of trade goods, expecting to run into Eskimo, and at once turned these over to them. Tobacco, a flask of rum, and the sewing supplies that Laurie needed. They made a hot drink of the rum, and it was grateful. As they sipped it, Rae bluntly asked the question worrying him. The Frenchman smiled.

"Why did I come? Faith, man, to see you both were alive or dead! I shall have use for you—more so now than ever, as it proves; and my interest in this charming Titian angel," his eyes twinkled at Laurie, "permitted me no rest until I have found her safe. I've much to tell you; things have happened, but let that wait." He looked at Rae. "Did you discover anything about the English forces at the Company forts?"

"Aye. I promised you the information, and I keep my engagements, Monsieur." Rae detailed the scantily small garrisons of the posts, their slight ability for defense against any enemy, and made no secret of the increased force expected to arrive with summer. At this, Troyes snapped his fingers. He was delight.

"Magnificent! They protect a treasure with a corporal's guard! Look you, my friends; they cannot realize that this is one of the world's greatest treasure houses, that over a period of years it will pour into the hands of its holders uncounted fortunes, more than the loot of the Indies! These dull, phlegmatic English—but your pardon. You too are English. Well, with a bare handful of men Pizarro won all the gold of Peru, and I shall do the same thing here, only more, more!"

COURTEOUS, exultant, charming, he was in truth a great gentleman, planning to play upon a tiny stage amid desolation a deed of arms that would resound through the world. Rae eyed him grimly, in a way admiring him, in a way hating him, and silently awaited his time to speak bluntly. It would not come yet for a while.

"And you!" Troyes turned to him abruptly. "The reward I promised you is too small. I shall increase it. What is the secret of holding this region—gripping a few forts around this Bay? No, not at all. These few forts will fall to the first enemy who seeks to take them. Why? Because they are weak, futile, made for trade only."

He winked, gestured, sped rapidly on, and laid bare a point so admirable, so apt and true, that Rae marveled no one had ever glimpsed it until now.

"Half a dozen posts, mere trading centers, almost unarmed! We'll change that; make one of these posts—just one—a real fortress! Who does that, holds the entire region. Just one strong fortress, and a thousand trading posts if you like! Eh, my friend?"

An exclamation broke from Rae, as he perceived the value of this idea.

"Excellent! Troyes, you've hit it. One

fort that can't be taken—yes, no more is needed. Turn one of these Bay posts into such a fort, and the trick is done. Why, back in the war years, that's exactly what happened! The English held one fort, and the French all the rest of the Bay except the one post that could not be taken—and the English still hold the entire region! Until now, that's been forgotten."

Troyes broke into a wild laugh. "Aye. And you shall be given command of one fort, any one you please. How long you'll hold it, how long before new governors are appointed, I can't say—a year at least, perhaps many more. In that time you can become supreme, make your fort inviolable! I conquer the Bay, and place it in your hands for the keeping. You see?"

A glorious dream, and practical also; the strategy was beyond caption. They talked of it, of its implications, until the Woodpecker and Black Cloud came in, bringing strips of meat to be cooked; then Laurie fell to work, everyone pitched in bringing wood and supplies, and they made ready for a feast.

Rather, a gorge. Troyes had brought a small portion of salt with him—a delicacy long unknown to his hosts. No more was needed to make the feast a rich and rare occasion. They ate and ate until the daylight departed and the dead men were dancing their streaming colors across the skies. The two redskins ate on until they were bulging, and then departed to sleep it off in Black Cloud's house.

TROYES and Rae got pipes alight, stretched out upon the piles of furs, and so Sieur de Troyes got down to his actual news—and his reason for coming here. He was not blunt about it; he came to the point via a queer inversion all his own, after Rae inquired whether he had arranged matters with Savary as planned.

"No," said Troyes. "He and I disagreed. He is thinking of today's penny, I'm thinking of tomorrow's gold—and more. Of this country as it will be tomorrow, when the beaver has vanished, when the Indian has disappeared, as in eastern Canada and the English colonies. More than wealth alone—shall I say spiritual growth?"

Astonished, Rae said nothing; he saw an odd look in Laurie's face.

"As man gathers knowledge, he seeks to improve his gods," went on the Frenchman slowly. "He sees a land made by unknown gods; he thinks them his own God. The Indian passes; his Manitou becomes, in the mind of white men, their own God. That is my hope for this country, this land of ice. It is for tomorrow and tomorrow's people—my own people."

"You may be right, but I think you have things terribly awry and twisted," Laurie said suddenly. "Doesn't the Englishman think as you do?"

"Oh, he's a materialist purely." Troyes gestured gracefully. "Like Savary, he can see only the hard shilling. Well, we disagreed. Neither he nor his men now want to follow my vision. He's agreed to sell me six of his cannon, at a price; instead of using him, I mean to use Monsieur Rae, here.

"The Woodpecker, you see, came with news. He has interviewed many Indians west of here, has passed belts with them, has smoked with them, and made full arrangements. Before the spring breakup of ice, a hundred or more—probably many more, indeed—warriors will arrive here at the bark, to get the guns. With them will come certain other men, Mohawks, Hurons, perhaps a few whites. They will transport the cannon south across the ice and will take each Company post in turn—Beaver, York and the others. That will be before the ice breaks up. I shall, of course, lead them; it is my work. If anything happens to me, there are others to take my place."

"Savary, then, won't help you?" quried Rae.

"Yes, but I can't trust him or his men. I prefer to get 'em out of the Bay with their ship as soon as the ice goes. That suits them, too; they fear Indians. Those two men frozen at the rail created a frightful commotion!" Troyes chuckled as he spoke.

"I trust you told them I did it," said Rae.

"No; I left it unexplained. Well, having changed plans and with all arrangements made, I came with the Woodpecker to find you; I need you, and rather thought you would be wintering here. The gods help those who help themselves."

Laurie intervened rather sharply.

"You seem overflowing with religion today. Don't you know it is not considered good form to be continually talking about God? It's not done."

Troyes eyed her mockingly, a wicked gleam in his look.

"I am not one of your stodgy Englishmen, my dear."

"No matter. You're wrong. You've deluded yourself with too much religious theory; it's affected your brain."

HE LAUGHED gaily. "I'll risk that. However, I have no desire to quarrel with you, sweet lady, so I'll cry *"mea culpa"* and stick to mundane affairs—"

"You don't wish to quarrel? Then by what right do you presume to confirm Savary and his thieving rascals in the possession of my bark and the furs aboard her?" she demanded heatedly.

Rae Chuckled to himself; things were going entirely to his liking.

"Eh?" Troyes stared at her, surprised. "But they have possession!"

"Not by my consent," she flashed. "I mean to have vessel and furs alike; I don't intend that they shall go to a parcel of mutineers."

Troyes gestured with his agile hands. "In that case, very well; it is news to me but I yield gracefully. In fact, I'll lend you help in regaining the vessel and her contents. Very easily done, when my redskins arrive."

"I don't need your help," she replied, though less stiffly. "The offer is a kindly one, Monsieur, and I appreciate it. I thought you had resolved to hinder me—"

"God forbid!" exclaimed Troyes; Rae thought him quite sincere. "Whatever you may desire, is my pleasure, I assure you. From this moment count the ship your own —provided that you confirm the arrangement of leaving me half a dozen cannon and powder. Eh?"

"Oh, of course," she rejoined uncertainly. "But how do you propose to get possession of the ship?"

"*Peste*! By killing Savary and his rogues, of course. My Indians will—"

"But you can't do that!" she cried out. "I don't want them killed. They'll have to work the bark for me."

Troyes stroked his mustache. "Then will you kindly inform me how you yourself think to get hold of the bark without killing those now aboard her?" he demanded smoothly. At her utterly flabbergasted expression he broke into a ringing peal of laughter. Laurie flushed. Rae chose the moment to intervene with quiet words.

"It's a waste of time to dispute the skin of the wolf before he's dead, my friends. Let us leave this argument to be settled on the spur of the moment. Whenever Miss Laurie wants the bark, I'll obtain it for her."

Troyes gave him a look. "You? And how?"

"I don't know yet; that, too, will come at the moment. Much may happen before then to change the complexion of things. Why bother about details now?"

"I like to have everything arranged beforehand," said Troyes.

"Very well; if that pleases you, do so. It doesn't please me. I prefer to act upon existing facts. Your Indians may never come, for example. You may be dead—we may all be dead—when they do come. A score of things may happen to alter the circumstances. So wait until the time comes, and then act as seems best."

Sieur de Troyes regarded him steadily for a moment.

"You're an opportunist, are you?"

"No, a realist."

"And where did you learn your French? It contains some very odd phrases and words. I could almost swear it was the dialect of Marseilles, which is very distinctive."

"I learned it there, while in prison for a year," Rae said calmly.

Troyes made no further reference to the subject.

X

WITH the startling arrival of the two visitors, a change in the living conditions was effected. Another of the stone houses was cleared out and Rae shared it with Troyes, leaving Laurie by herself. The two redskins likewise lived in company.

Troyes remained here nearly a week. During this time the Woodpecker scarcely said two words, as far as Rae knew; indeed, his brand of French was readily understood only by Troyes. He was a bronze image, utterly efficient, entirely lacking sympathy or interest in the whites, devoted only to hunting and to gorging himself. The abundant game here kept him occupied.

In view of the definite plans now afoot, Rae was forced to the conclusion that he

must take direct action well before the ice broke up or the bark was able to leave her inlet. If he missed the moment, he would miss all.

Further, he discovered that even now the entire Bay was not frozen over, as he had presumed was the case. Troyes was armed with a world of information on such matters gained from French sources, which had been carefully preserved and were far more accurate than the Company's knowledge. According to him the west coast of the Bay was solidly frozen but only to a few miles offshore; the many creeks and rivers effected a lowering of the salinity.

James Bay, to the south, might be entirely frozen, but in general the amount of ice decreased as one went northward. Also, the Bay currents were so forceful that when the final breakup did come, the ice would disappear almost overnight. The French had kept records of all such things, and Rae thought the Company might very well imitate them.

Sieur de Troyes made no secret of his immediate plans. He was now returning to the *Nonesuch* to make sure his promised cannon got set ashore, together with powder and ball. This underway, Le Pivert would retrace his lonely journey westward to contact the redskins of the war party with definite word about the cannon. He would bring these warriors to the bark sometime in March.

"And you had better meet me there then," pursued Troyes. "I shall not remain with those rascals—I may go in search of some Indian village to occupy my time. But if I am to get rid of Savary and his rogues as I now intend, and seize the ship for our redheaded angel, I must be back aboard her by March."

RAE did not argue who was to seize the bark for Laurie. Within himself he debated whether this might not be the right time to throw off the mask and declare himself bluntly to the Frenchman. He decided against it. Time enough—there's luck in leisure—so let that await the occasion.

"I shall probably be there, then," he replied, and Troyes was content.

He and the Mohawk got off of a fine morning, taking such furs as they desired and laden with fresh meat; plenty remained in camp, fresh and frozen. They started across the ice, going by compass. When they were out of sight, John Rae beckoned Laurie.

"There's a fire in the hovel; come in and warm. I want to talk to you."

She followed him inside and sat on the furs, pulling a bearskin over her feet. Rae got his pipe alight and relaxed.

"Things we must settle," he said. "I brought a small compass from Fort Beaver, but it's never been much use to me. Now it is. From Troyes I got bearings to reach the inlet and bark from here; also bearings to reach Fort Beaver. Now I'm going to Beaver as planned, to see Larson. He should be back there by now."

He paused, and met her intent gaze.

"Before going, I must know what's in your mind, Laurie. I'm quite willing to meet you halfway; no secrets. I must know what you intend regarding the bark and the furs aboard her, stolen from the Company."

"Right," she said. "First, what about yourself? What do you plan?"

He frowned. "Frankly, I intend to get away in the bark—to get her for you. Those furs represent a fortune. I meant to get them away for us both. Now I'm not at all sure about it. I'm inclined to play straight and hand 'em back to the Company perhaps."

"You can do that for all o' me," she said to his astonishment. "Oh, I know! I've changed too, my dear. I'll not see those damned mutineers profit by the loot, but I don't know that I want to profit by it either. Not the ethics of it; but we could only sell them in New England or in France. A hard job, really! The vessel belongs to me. She's sound and good and worth a bit o' money. I'll be content with her."

Rae nodded. His face cleared.

"Excellent; apparently we're at one. To be honest about it, I want to stay in the clear. I'm minded to put a spoke in Troyes' wheel—just how, I don't know yet, but I think it can be done and that I can do it. We'll take that up in due time; everything in its turn. Apparently you're no longer content to be a party to the grand schemes of the Frenchman."

"I never was," she said quickly. "I like him—yes, in a way. But things have happened, words have been said, you don't know about. I'm of two minds about him. He's a great gentleman at times, and at other times I fancy he's a scoundrel—oh, it's

just little things, looks, gestures! I may be quite wrong. But I'm not for him."

Rae smiled. "Better and better; I was afraid you were. Shall the Bay go French, then? That's his aim, of course. Behind all his fine words and plausible talk, he's a French agent; his intent is to drive out the English—and by heavens, he can do it! If his plan goes through, there won't be a British ensign on the Bay next summer! He's cursed clever, too. That idea of his about one strong fort and numerous trading stations is a prime notion to remember."

"Were you," she asked abruptly, "really in prison in Marseilles?"

Rae looked at her. "Yes. Not I, but Jack Powers, a heady young fellow who got into trouble here and there before he learned his way around. Does it matter?"

She shrugged. "No. I'm interested in John Rae, not in Jack Powers."

"Good girl." Rae put out his hand and clasped her warm fingers. "Tell me, how do you think Black Cloud stands with our late visitor? I've not talked with him."

"I haven't either, but I've watched him. He acts very friendly to their faces; I imagine Troyes has won him to the scheme, on the surface. But I think he's afraid of that Mohawk—I certainly am, too. And I think he has just promised Troyes to be on the safe side, and really will do whatever you tell him."

"That's my notion, too," Rae concurred, "therefore, I'll go on that presumption. Laurie, this whole country is at stake; not just the Bay posts, but the vast inland empire. That's what I'm thinking of—tomorrow, as Troyes so glibly says, is worth the thought. I'm thinking of my own tomorrow, also. I'm resigning from the Company and want to get the resignation in; Hector Larson will see to that. But more, I want to get in a memorial that'll go direct to Sir Bibye Lake, Governor of the Company in London—plans, changes, projects."

"But why, if you're resigning?"

"Building for tomorrow, my dear. Comparatively speaking, the chiefs or governors of the posts here on the Bay are minor servants; the Committee in London give the actual orders for everything, and rule like despots. Captain John Merry, the Deputy Governor, has an active brain and knows his business. I'll guarantee that when my little memorial reaches these men next summer, the pot will bubble like mad! And out of it, I'll get something good."

"As Jack Powers?" she asked slyly.

"No; he's dead and forgotten. As John Rae, my dear! Now, to set all this to moving, I must get to Fort Beaver and consult with Hector Larson. He's going back to London himself next summer, a rich man. D'ye know how he made his start?"

LAUGHING, Rae told her the story; he was one of the few who knew it. Larson had acted as agent for one of my lords who owned Company stock, at a sale of beaver pelts; it was known that many dealers had come from the Continent for the auction at Garraway's Coffee House, and Larson was ordered to bid up the pelts to a high price. But Larson, taken suddenly ill that day, appeared not; his enraged master drove him out of business.

Young Larson, however, had learned a thing or two. He engaged certain agents of his own, shipped out to the Bay as a Company servant, and prospered. Each year when the beaver were sold in London, certain packets bore secret marks; only Larson's agents knew these, and buying in the marked packages, secured the finest furs of the shipment. Profits were high, and Larson built up a small fortune for himself.

Here, too, John Rae had some ideas. The packaging of the furs was a subject of high dispute; furs were stolen, too, en route; he had his own notions about the proper method of packaging, and of what furs should be sought. Beaver had formerly been the only pelt desired, but that was folly; the beaver would give out, and others furs could be had in enormous quantity. Rae's own experience enabled him to go into detail here, also upon a proposed new scale of trading prices and goods—in short, he envisaged formation of new and improved orders covering the whole business of the Company here on the Bay, and the more he thought about it, the bigger bulked the idea. Hector Larson was his one sure chance of reaching the London Committee direct, too.

He discussed the whole thing with Laurie freely. She was definitely in favor of it, but she was not in the least blind to the chance of its failure

Don't build too great hopes on this as a chance for the future," she said gravely. "I approve, yes; but it looks too vastly important. The odds are against you. We don't know how we'll get out of here, or when. We don't know what will happen to us. The future, so far as we two poor lost souls are concerned, is just as nebulous as those dead men dancing across the sky. Remember that. All this scheme of yours handing back the stolen furs to the Company—if we regain them—and your memorial, are no more than desperate chances."

"Right, of course," admitted Rae. "Yet without such hope, how can a man exist? Without ambition, without a dream, what good is life? I have a further dream, too, more personal, more inspiring, more sacred—but the time hasn't come to speak of it yet. First overcome the things close at hand and pressing upon us both. I'll give myself to that, and cast forth my desperate hopes. Once away from here, once safe—"

She smiled, her gaze searching him with odd intentness.

"I believe you'll do it. Do you know, John, you've changed greatly since I first knew you? Developed may be the word. You've brought new things from within yourself, you've grown."

"Force of the pressure of circumstances," he said lightly. "If I can spoil the plans of Troyes, it'll be a great thing. I have a general idea how it may be done, but I strongly doubt whether I can do it."

"Count on this red-headed witch," she said. "I'm with you; we're together in all of this. I'll do anything I can to help. When do you think you'll go to Beaver?"

"Soon as possible. First, I want to talk with Black Cloud and feel him out. With his help things may not be so hard to manage."

"Don't spare talk," she warned. "He's more intelligent than you think. He's made me explain what a map is, and comprehends perfectly now. I think he'll respond to frankness also."

Rae had strong doubts of this, but resolved to put her belief to the venture.

OPPORTUNITY came soon. He was hunting with the Cree, preparing a store of meat against their departure. They got several fat beaver from a lodge, and while making ready pelts and tails, Rae broached what was on his mind, using French, English and Cree. He was brutally frank. Troyes was no friend but an enemy, said he, and told of the coming party of warriors, which was apparently no news to Black Cloud. The Bay would become French or English; he meant to make it stay English, if possible.

"I may fail," he concluded. "It means a fight. You must choose now; stick with me, take your chances, or else help Troyes and the French."

He had a long argument, simply because he was trying to make everything clear in three languages; had he stuck to English or French alone, the redskin might have comprehended more easily. Black Cloud grunted, questioned him, made him draw a crude map in the snow to show the position of the various Bay posts, and finally cleaned his knife and sheathed it.

"Me English," he said curtly. "Now we go, eat beaver tail."

It was settled like that, in two words, and confirmed over a gorgeous feast of succulent tails. The start for Fort Beaver was set for the third day thereafter.

The weather was fine and clear when they said goodby to Laurie and headed southward across the ice. Rae knew what he was in for—a grueling march with only the dubious compass guide to follow. None the less, he was in high spirits. This marked the beginning of a new future, provided he could carve it out. Gradually things had assumed shape; a pattern was coming into visibility, a pattern to follow, and the old haphazard life was ended. Everything would depend upon what happened, upon how he was able to shape events. He might well go under, but survival meant a victory of breathtaking proportions, and he was savagely determined upon survival.

This purpose carried him through the bitter march; they were five days out before sighting a smoke, and running it down to find Fort Beaver. Here was Hector Larson, grizzled and caustic as ever, with three new men as garrison—old hands sent up from Fort Albany to help maintain the outpost.

Hector's greeting was hearty, cheerful, leonine.

"Back? O' course I'm back!" he roared. "Came back right after Christmas, and

everything's moving along in fine style. Gosh, man, it's grand to see you again! In with you and the Cree, and we'll celebrate your coming the night!"

When they were alone together, Rae ventured the question in his mind.

"Did you get in the warning I gave you? What news?"

Larson rubbed his spiky chin. "Oh! Aye —news enough. Not that it'll make your heart leap for joy, I fear. Well, I saw James Isham himsel' and delivered your warning—and the daft man laughed."

"Laughed?" repeated Rae, incredulous.

"Aye, so. Laughed. A peddler's pack o' nonsense, says he. Injun uprising? All moonshine. And he meant it."

Rae recovered from the shock. "All right. After we eat, I'll have some details of the moonshine for your private ear."

"Good. I'll welcome them, lad."

"What about arresting me?"

"Naught was said about it; but the order still stands. I'll pay no heed, of course. While in charge here, I'm not arresting you."

"Thanks, old friend." Rae pressed his hand warmly. "I'll stay for a day, perhaps longer. Tell you everything tonight."

Rest was a wonderful thing, embittered as it was. Laughed! Isham had laughed! Enough to infuriate anyone, by the lord Harry! There'd be laughter of a different sort ere the winter was over!

Dinner was a glorious thing, with English tongues chattering around the board and good old Company fare once more; the three men looked in some awe of John Rae, but were civil enough. When all was done and pipes were lighted, Rae and Hector retired to the chief's room, and over a drink Rae pitched into his story, holding back nothing.

Hector listened with amazement, with many a perplexed shake of the head and hot exclamation, and threw out his hands when he heard of Troyes' plans.

"Oh lord, and the daft fool laughed! Why, Johnny Rae, that Frenchman is a genius, no less! Come spring, he'll have the Bay, all of it—he can't fail! With just one cannon, he can take every single post, and we helpless!"

"Cheer up. He'll not do it, Hector. Never mind, I can't detail future happenings now, but I've a notion or two that may work. Anyhow, I'll do my level best to stop him. So you're going back to London this summer? Sure?"

"Aye, if I'm left alive; I'm no' sure I will be."

"Then I want to write a memorial, and I want you to get it to Captain Merry or Governor Lake for me—a secret message and plans. And I'll give you my resignation and a letter for Governor Isham, promising him to restore the furs that were taken from here. It may soften the old boy a bit to know I'm honest. Anyhow, I'll tell him where the bark lies now, and when I get away with her I'll see that the fur-packs are handed over to the Company's account."

"If I was you, I'd snaffle them for my own account," grunted Hector.

Rae laughed. "I've thought of that, too, never fear! But I'm playing a straight game and shall count heavily upon that memorial getting to the Committee in London."

"I'll answer for that, my word of honor," growled Hector, stifling oaths. "I'm putting in a letter to the Committee myself, telling the honest truth of how the Company is going to hell here on the Bay. Ruination, that's what it is! But Isham's a good man, none better; he needs the proper orders, that's all. He's no initiative of his own."

"I'd like to discuss that memorial with you," said Rae. "I've made a number of plans, and I'd be glad to have you approve or reject 'em before I go to work. . . ."

HECTOR LARSON was pleased by this appeal. The two of them sat up until a late hour conning Rae's various ideas. Hector added a few of his own to the list; he was level-headed, knew the Bay as few others did, and had small respect for the present orders from London that ran the Company's trade. It was he who suggested that a supply of stout sleds be sent out for use at each post, thereby assuring communication in winter and a way of handling supplies and furs. They could be hauled by hand and should be of great use.

After a good sleep, Hector provided ink and parchment and quills, and John Rae fell to work. He had not written for a long time and it came hard, but by the time his letter to Governor Isham was sealed, he was in form again.

Now he attacked the memorial, drawing

this up in a florid style calculated to flatter my lords of the Committee, and addressing it to the Governor in due form. The preamble done, he attacked the details of his proposals in more succinct style, adopting as his own the idea of Troyes regarding one impregnable fort on the Bay. He covered indeed, most details of the Company trade and management here, pointing out the folly of some present rules, and the best way in which to advantage them. Only the lack of parchment, not plentiful here, prevented him from going further; as it was, the task took him all day, and it was with a sigh of vast relief that he signed and sealed the packet. He gave the products of his labor to Hector that evening.

"Here y'are, old friend. I forgot one or two minor points, but everything of importance is down. If they read it, the thing may accomplish something."

"I promise you they'll read it," replied Larson. "I'm to go back wi' the Company ship, and I'll see to its reading, granted I reach London alive. You'll spend the night. Your redskin is sleeping off a mighty gorge."

Rae laughed. "I'll do the same, thanks. I feel better now."

"Ye say that rogue Savary is aboard the bark. How in God's name d'ye expect to get her into your hands?"

"I'm no prophet; I'll think about that when the time comes, Hector. Just as well not to ask what happens up in that inlet; before the ice goes out, I fancy there'll be grim work yonder."

HECTOR nodded. "Aye. You'd be surprised to know what some o' these inlets have seen, in this deserted land where nothing happens. Hundreds of years ago the Eskimo staged a war of extermination against the Norse colonists in western Greenland, and won. Only yesterday there was Cap'n Jens Munck's abandoned ship up on the Danish river, full o' dead men, and the Eskimo came aboard in crowds and started a fire in the magazine. You can still see the guns in the mud up there, I hear tell. Queer stories everywhere. And what become o' Cap'n Hudson himself, set adrift in an open boat? A tough morsel for the savages to eat, he was. Want a razor to be rid o' that beard?"

"No, thanks, I'll keep the whiskers. But I'd like a pair of shears for Mistress Laurens."

"Shalt have them with pleasure."

That night the dinner was another celebration, at which everyone gloried and drank deep, and Black Cloud glowed all over his brown pockmarked features as he rapidly became drunk. The outpost was well stocked with rum; rules in respect to liquor were very slack—another thing Rae had covered in his memorial—and the agents of the Company were far from considering themselves guardians of the redskins; a conception that was to arise only with later generations.

This drinking delayed departure next morning, for the Cree was evil-minded with his hangover and could scarcely be stirred into action. Rae was making up packs to take along, with two of the men in the store, when he heard a scrap of talk passing between them.

"Aye, sent my brother to the gallows, he did, for prigging of a barley loaf. A bitter hard man he be, that Justice Powers, and hand in glove wi' my lords of the Company, too."

"Powers!" spoke up Rae, surprised. "Is that the man whose son went to the bad?"

"Aye, disappeared years ago, they say. Old Powers, he hates all seamen and is the best-hated magistrate in London town himself, but he stands high."

Stands high! Rae laughed to himself, grimly. In earlier days he had looked forward to foully disgracing this high-standing name, as the best vengeance he could take upon his righteous parent; that had passed with age and discretion. Indeed, he was not so sure that he hated his father at all, now. He had cut adrift entirely, even in his own thoughts, and was interested only in upbuilding the name of John Rae, for whom he could envisage a mighty future in this northland—provided he stayed alive.

Black Cloud was stirred at last, loaded up, and they started out. Rae waved farewell to doughty Hector and faced northwards across the ice. He quite forgot one thing, which did not seem at all important, except as a means toward establishing his own good intentions—that in his letter of resignation he had given Governor Isham the location, so far as he could describe it, of the fur-laden bark.

A mere trifling detail, he thought at the moment, but one that might have a mighty though unguessed import, in the future.

XI

THAT trip back to the stone houses took a good week, for Rae trusted to the compass but it proved wildly off. Only the insistence of Black Cloud brought the two men back to the correct route. Their packs provided food, but they suffered bitterly from cold, and the final days were unending horror. Rae knew he could never have survived such a journey the previous year; now he was so hardened and inured that it was not even a grave affair. They sighted the cape or island at last, and found Laurie safe and well.

Almost ludicrously, they pitched into a grimly desperate struggle for firewood. As though to make up for lost time, blizzard upon blizzard descended, beginning the same day they returned. It was a fortnight of downpouring snow in which all three huddled in their stone hovels. Life became a frantic effort for mere survival; the twin needs of fuel and food topped everything else and there was no fun in it. The stone houses were completely buried in snow; merely keeping open an exit required supreme exertion.

Misfortunes never come singly. Blubber for lamps was needed, and Black Cloud secured a small seal from a blow-hole in the ice; Laurie went to help him cut it up. While doing this she slipped in a nasty tumble, wrenching her left leg, spraining the ankle, and driving the knife almost haft-deep into the flesh above the knee. Although the injury was not serious, this was little short of disaster.

Rae managed to serve as doctor, nurse and cook while Laurie lay helpless on the pile of bearskins. He had to keep the hurts dressed and fetch wood and snow for water, the Cree meantime keeping up a supply of meat. The ankle came around, the wound healed, forced intimacy drew them together with a deeper awareness of each other, and time passed; the days, carefully marked down, became weeks, and the weeks fled with hard work to speed their going.

When Laurie was able to get around once more, the world outside was a different place. The heavy snow had wiped everything from sight, landmarks were buried, and it seemed rankly impossible that spring would ever come to a thaw.

Although Rae was conscious of the passing weeks, the buoyant confidence with which he had left Fort Beaver was sapped most sadly into uncertainty. Now that the time for action approached, his idea of regaining the bark single-handed and of facing Sieur de Troyes seemed rank madness. He never wanted to see the *Nonesuch* again; he had undertaken an impossibility. While he did not voice this, Laurie sensed his feeling and brought it to light.

Rae had been drawing the loads of the spare muskets, untouched since the arrival of Troyes and the Woodpecker. Laurie was watching him, and finally came to sit beside him with an earnest word.

"Such a savage scowl! You're downhearted, eh? I know the symptoms, John, and I've a remedy to propose. You've laid out work ahead that is too much for anyone, so drop it."

He gave her a harsh look. "And what? Cut a hole in the ice and jump in?"

"No. I talked with Troyes. Before I ever came ashore, I talked with Savary and others. I know what we can do, and it's the most sensible thing. Go down to James Bay, and from there we can ascend the rivers to Canada. That was the old French overland route to the Bay. We can manage it. Never mind if we do abandon the bark! At least we'll be safe and sound."

Rae pushed the powder aside and held a brand to his pipe.

"If I hadn't glimpsed a big thing, it wouldn't have drawn me. There's no temptation in accomplishing little things, running away, playing safe, doing the sensible canny thing and taking no risk. That's not living. Risk, dangers, obstructions are given us so that we can overcome them."

"But I'm afraid," she said.

"So am I," he concurred. "Scared stiff thinking about what's to be done, scared for you. I plan to use your help; it's damned dangerous. Doesn't pay to think about things beforehand. If I'd been told last summer that I'd winter here in an empty Eskimo village, it would have frightened me to death. But we're doing all right."

She smiled faintly, her blue eyes gazing at

the fire. Rae watched her hungrily. Her knotted red braids, her angular features—strength here, no faltering!

"You've had a hard time taking care of me," she began.

"Bah! You're an angel," he broke in. "Hard times are a joy—whatever one overcomes, is a joy to look back upon. Look at the bark—Savary to be handled, the men to be cowed into accepting you as captain. Rogues who've been free, on the loose, a long time. Black Cloud will be small help. You'll be more. Yes, it's a tough job to anticipate, but lord, girl! An easy job would be small sop to one's pride. Overcoming is the way to build character. There's Troyes to consider, too. I must get straight with him before leaving here. Can't go away letting him think I'm a dirty turncoat, ready to take his money to betray my friends and comrades. It'll be a nasty job, I fear."

"It will," she said slowly. "So you really won't consider my suggestion?"

"No. My mind's settled. If you like, I'll prevail on Black Cloud to guide you, and you go along overland to Canada."

"Silly!" she cut in. "We stick together. I owe you a lot. I'm thankful you're with me now, not Troyes. He's a handsome gentleman—"

Rae laughed, took her hand, and kissed it.

"And Johnny Rae isn't handsome, he's no gentleman, but he thinks the world and all of you, red-headed witch that you are, Laurie Laurens! By the way, remember telling me, at early acquaintance, what a fiery disposition you had—how you could fight and curse with any gallant? Well, I've heard you do little cursing this long winter. Have ye lost the art?"

"I've had no need," she said. "If the need arises, I'll hold my own with you or anyone."

"Pray it rises not, then. There's strength in these fingers of yours—"

"Chafed, rough, knobby, as they are?"

He kissed her hand again, then loosed it and rose.

"You tempt me; therefore I flee you," he said, and went out, laughing.

Daily, almost hourly, during those long intimate weeks, he found her temptation personified; yet he turned his back. He refused to think about it. He had greater things afoot than mere philandering. He wanted her, but not for a little moment—for all tomorrow, if that tomorrow ever came. As for the present, he was not blind to her trust and comradeliness; if not content with this, he made it do.

So the weeks sped along; time was drawing toward action, and yet he delayed. He could not wait for the spring breakup; those redskins from the west and south, with their leaven of Canadians or French, would be coming to secure the cannon and move them across the Bay ice to the attack. Troyes meant to catch the posts isolated by ice and snow, surprise them one by one—a clever man, no doubt backed by all the knowledge and money and strategy that France or Canada could supply. For, carefully as Troyes was working and covering his actual backers, Rae knew that France was behind his schemes. France would benefit; and if war resulted, France was prepared and ready for it. England was not. And if France won this toss for the Bay, then the remainder of the American continent was in her hand.

Rae, therefore, must move a step ahead of Troyes—a thing hard to figure, difficult to time precisely, but certainly before the ice went out. As soon as it went, the bark must go, too, in order to be through the straits and gone, back into the world of men. Savary now had no more than six men with him—enough of a crew to work the bark in a pinch.

Everything was uncertain, hazardous, dependent upon factors clear beyond any present reckoning. To make definite plans into the future was impossible.

And here Rae came down with a slight cold. It worsened, hit his lungs, and went into a fever. For days he lay tossing, unconscious; he lost all track of time, his careful checking of days went by the board, and when he came to himself, it was long ere he recollected the deficiency and then only realize that to make it up was impossible. March had come in—how far, he could only guess. This meant that he should be on the move. The ice might go out anytime between now and May.

"D'ye see? I'll have to be going. Can't let Troyes and his Injuns get ahead of me—possession of those cannon mean everything!" he cried. Laurie leaned over and held strong meat broth to his lips.

"Never mind that. Here, you must eat in order to regain strength. Black Cloud has

brought in some beaver tail, too. Now that you're yourself, everything's all right."

Far from that, but Rae set himself to it grimly. Strength came back rapidly, with Laurie's careful nursing; to his astonishment she took his place very fully, even helping Black Cloud kill two bears which had smelled out their store of frozen meat. The Cree did not appreciate this. A woman who used a musket was, to his notion, a calamity; especially when she used it better than he could. However, his devotion to Rae was so absolute that he made the best of a bad business, though he had a name for Laurie in his own tongue which scarcely stood translation and was quite uncomplimentary. In his mind she was Rae's squaw and therefore to be accepted as a necessity, grudgingly.

So stood matters when poor hapless Davy came blundering along.

THE slight illness seemed to have done Rae good. Strength flooded back, and with it steadiness of mind, surety of himself, resolution. Sometime in March, Troyes had said, would come those warriors to get the cannon. Sometime in March—it was that now!

He was speaking of this to Laurie, late one day, as she helped pile up the wood he had just brought in.

"I'm entirely fit now," he was saying. "Doubts? Bosh! I'm myself again; now I'll go forward and—and—"

His words trailed away. He straightened up, shielded his eyes against the snow-glare, and stood at stare. Laurie turned, followed his gaze, caught sight of a dark figure stumbling along the shoreline.

"That's not Black Cloud!" she exclaimed.

"Correct, my dear. Our smoke is apparently a magnet that draws every wandering traveler to us as lodestone draws iron—hm! Looks familiar, though. Do you remember—no, it was Black Cloud who was with me when we sighted Davy coming across the ice."

"Davy!" she repeated. "That yonder—it isn't Davy?"

"Seems impossible. Ignorant, bumbling, inefficient Davy, of all people! Yet you sent him before, and he found us. And this looks like him again. Here! I'll go out and meet him. Black Cloud's not around? All right. You build up the fire. Anyhow, this caller is obviously alone and carries no musket—there's no danger."

It was an amazing thing, he reflected, as he went forth to meet that uncertain figure, evidently drawn hither by the fire-smoke. Davy, of all men—slow-witted, innocent of the northland, certainly no paladin of valor—getting through on errands that would have daunted a redskin! Yet Davy it was, as he soon made certain; Davy, so glad to see him that tears of joy came forth and froze in dirty runlets while he clutched at Rae.

"Gawd bli'my, Mr. Rae, I thought certain I was done for this time! Easy to find, they says. Straight compass course and you can't miss the smoke—but what wi' the false suns and the queer lights by night, I been mixed and all confused like—"

There he went to pieces. He was haggard, exhausted, reeling. For two nights he had not slept but had kept going—largely from fright. The ice was making sounds, crackling sounds, he babbled. Five days he had been on the way, but he had evidently made very poor going of it.

Rae helped him on to the stone houses above the beach. His babblings became incoherent mutterings; he was worn out. But those first words had given Rae a bad start—cracklings in the ice! Once it began to break up, with currents and tides to help, it would go fast; evidently the first warnings were being given. The reason for this desperate and incredible journey must wait until the man regained power of coherent speech.

Davy could not even greet Laurie; he was finished. She had built up a fire in Black Cloud's house, so Rae got him to bed, piled furs above him, and left him asleep as he dropped. Emerging, he met the questing eyes of Laurie with a shake of the head.

He can't talk; utterly exhausted. Give him a couple of hours and a good feed, and he'll come around all right."

"Is he the only one? No Indians?"

"None else in sight. Apparently someone sent him; he has a small, worthless compass in his pocket. Wait and see."

Black Cloud returned toward sunset, unsurprised to find a visitor. He had read the sign in the snow.

Davy had a full three hours of heavy slumber, then impatience could wait no longer and Rae roused him. A bountiful re-

past was ready. Shaggy-bearded and unkempt, Davy was famished. After washing, he lit into the hot food with a will, gorging like a redskin and making no attempt to talk. At last, with a sigh of repletion, he accepted tobacco, stuffed it into a stubby clay pipe and blinked around.

"Who sent you?" began Rae.

"The men. Lemme see—there's Wat and Jem York, brothers they be, and Humphrey Fallows; then Ben Tinker and Bose—that's Henry Horn, the bos'un. Five all told, and me. There's no more left of the crew, for a many got killed here by their account."

Rae nodded. "Well, get at the story. Tell it your own way, Davy."

"It wasn't none o' my wanting to come, strike me if it was!" protested Davy earnestly. "But they said it was easy to find and it was my job—they wanted me to find you and get you there, to the bark."

"Where's Savary?"

"Asleep."

"What? Asleep now?"

"No, no—lumme, I mean he was asleep. That's how I got away," cried Davy. "I'm a-trying to tell you all Bristol fashion, but I got mixed about it. The Frenchman was stopping with us or had been."

"You mean Sieur de Troyes?"

"Aye, that's him—a fine braw man, but a Frenchman. He told me about you being here. Savary knew it already. He had seen you, time o' the fight. Well, him and Cap'n Savary had a quarrel. What about, I dunno. Only he had told us about an army of red Injuns a-coming to kill all the Englishmen on the Bay and take all the forts. A lot the cap'n cared, but we was frighted. There's no money out o' them furs we got stowed aboard, and no way to get any, and no place to go in this cursed land, and now there's only five of us left and the Injuns will scalp and burn us all when they come—"

Davy paused for breath, then gulped.

"It's you as we want, sir," he cried. "You and Mistress Laurens here—the ship belongs to her, it does. We don't want to go to Execution Dock for pirates; all we want is to get out o' this horrible country alive, so help me! We'll give up the bark and them looted furs. We was honest Englishmen once and can be again if we get home—

Well, there it was; an amazing story, which Rae shrewdly judged to be partly lies and another part ignorant fear. Terror of the red Indians was upon those six luckless seamen; those of the crew who were not English had been slain, and the remainder were howling for home again and no more piracy.

Rae's questions elicited the story more clearly. Troyes was wildly distrusted by the men, if not by Savary, and they were in abject fear of their lives. Learning that Laurie and Rae were here, alive and well, they had sent Davy to carry their plea for help. Savary knew nothing of it. He and Troyes had quarreled and the Frenchman had left the bark, nor did Davy know where he was.

THAT the frantic men had secretly turned against their leader was evident. Rae gathered that Savary had yielded to a spasmodic brutality verging upon ferocity; the men were now afraid of him, afraid of everything around them in this land of snow and frost. Two guns had been hauled out and lugged ashore before the break came with Troyes.

"When the Frenchman went, hell broke loose," stammered Davy. "It was the savage women took back from here. Everyone was drunk, and I can't abear to think about it—gashly bad it was! Three o' them fat squaws! The hands took 'em by turns, but one of 'em got a knife—"

He broke off and shuddered.

"Enough to make anyone sick, it was," he went on brokenly. "Savary got the one wi' the knife—he killed her. She was fat and blubbery. There was a mad scrimmage and the others, they got killed likewise—"

It was not difficult to imagine that wild, drunken orgy aboard the bark, with lust and blood dominating all involved. Rae shrank from the picture, and when stupid Davy had been milked dry of information, Rae sent him off to finish his sleep. He was already nodding again.

"Well, what d'you think of it?" Laurie demanded.

Rae chuckled. "Seems like a perfect sample of the old rhyme: 'When the Devil grew ill, the Devil a monk would be.' Don't forget the other half of it, though: 'But the Devil got well, and Devil a monk was he.' That's what worries me. Those mutinous men of yours are sick of the glamorous piracy; how deep the feeling goes, is a ques-

tion. This whole affair might be a trap, simple and natural as it sounds."

"But," she questioned, "do you feel like investigating it?"

Rae nodded. "Oh, of course. I'm getting off with daylight."

XII

PROTESTS, questions, arguments—the palaver lasted a long while, until Rae put an end to it impatiently.

"I'm leaving at daylight, and I'm leaving alone. You and Davy and Black Cloud come along later—say, next day. Black Cloud can guide you, if Davy can't; you'll be safe enough. I don't need you; I want no help; this is no war-party but a scout. I want to find how much of this wild yarn is true; should it be true, it's damned important. And since I can scout much better by myself, let's have no more argument. The time has come to act, and I intend to act, so that settles it."

Accordingly, Rae got up and off before the sun, taking only a small pack of smoked meat and Davy's compass, leaving the other for Laurie's use. He did not see Davy again, but heard him snoring lustily. Laurie saw him off into the dimming west; he held her close for a moment, looked into her eyes, and smiled.

"Good friend, good companion—you've had a hard time here!" he said. "I do hope the end's in sight, and the sky will clea ahead."

"You're a fine man, John Rae," she murmured. "It hurts me to see you go alone."

He kissed her, quickly. "Content with so little—or so much? Good-bye, my dear. When we've the open sea ahead, and the world we know, it'll be another story."

"I'll remember that. God keep you!"

Simple words, hiding so much, yet they remained with him as he faded into the cold miles.

He traveled hard. Five days to the mainland inlet and the bark, Davy had said, but he was not Davy, and he laughed at the thought. He was astonished by his own endurance; he kept up a killing pace, thankful that there was snow on the ice, for he could heap it over himself and sleep.

Yet it was a tough journey, despite his furs and extra moccasins. The ice crackled ominously at times; he imagined that he felt it moving under him, and the fear spurred him to new effort.

That Davy's story might well be true, he knew; and if so, this daring gamble was well justified. It was a wonder those mutineers had not gone mad, what with the strain of the winter alone; that bloody affair with the Eskimo must have taken the heart out of the boldest, too. They might well be ready to pitch their stolen fortune overboard and run for dear life; but, once safe, would they be of the same kidney? Not likely. That, however, could abide the event.

Brain raced feet; a thousand wild fantasies came into his head, half-glimpsed plans crowded his mind and were replaced by others. He fought them all back, stubbornly. Until he learned the situation he could do nothing; he must wait and see what turned up. To try and plan, was sheer folly. With this conclusion he flung himself on, closing his brain against useless thought.

A day passed, another, a third. Oddly enough, lack of water was his greatest trouble, since here he could not stop and make a fire to melt snow. He had to melt it in his mouth in order to wash down the pemmican—another score for the memorial and Hector's idea about using sleds! A sled, pulled behind him, could have carried water and all else. A glow warmed him at memory of that memorial—what far-reaching changes it would cause, did the Committee read and act upon it!

The fourth day came, bringing the same hopeless horizon in the west; but ere the sunlight passed, the horizon was broken, and broken again. An uneven line, slightly northward—no doubt the cliffs of the inlet, since smoke rose there. But, dead ahead, another smoke, thinner, paler, scantier, the smoke of a campfire. Here, then, would be two or three of the crew out upon a hunting foray, and Rae made for this smoke. From his position afoot the horizon was limited to some six miles, and before the daylight was gone he sighted a clump of trees bulking darkly. He was on the mainland, the low flat shore, before he knew it, since the shore here was invisible under snow and ice.

That was a disheartening prowl through the gloom of night, for no fire was visible. Yet the wind was toward him, and after vain searchings he smelled meat cooking;

this heartened him, since he was bitterly hungered. He could even smell smoke, yet could find no indication of its provenance. No lights lit the sky—the dead men were not dancing tonight—and he dared not shout. He was dog-weary, too.

And then, suddenly, unexpectedly, a voice spoke in French.

"Very well, my brother. You must get off at once and bring them here without further delay; already we have waited too long, the ice will soon be gone. No doubt you will meet them on the way. If so, hurry them."

"I shall leave in an hour," came the reply.

"Better shut that flap; it's getting cold in here."

Silence ensued; but Rae stood stiffly as though frozen. Understanding rushed upon him. The man who had spoken was Troyes; the response had come from Le Pivert. They were both here, close by among the trees, almost within touch!

Rae stood motionless until the cold struck into him, then moved carefully. If he waited, the Woodpecker would depart and Troyes would remain alone; but he could not wait. Cold, weariness and hunger, not to mention lack of sleep, were overpowering. He must act at all costs. Here was Troyes, who had to be settled with. The smaller smoke that had guided him here must have come from a fire immediately close at hand, a fire still alight.

He investigated cautiously; the odor of tobacco-smoke came to him now, and the stars were out, helping his vision. After a little time the thing fairly leaped at him. amazingly near; a lodge, probably of skins around a framework of poles, Indian fashion, banked with snow to the very top; his nose, rather than his eyes, verified it. For an instant he hesitated, then took decision and lifted his voice.

"Troyes! Are you there? This is John Rae, alone."

The startled tension of the silence could almost be felt. Then came reply.

"Rae? 'Allo! All right. Le Pivert will bring you in."

Something moved, uprose, became black against the snow. There was a tunnel through the banked snow; the Mohawk had come out. He spoke.

"Where is my brother?"

"Here."

Rae moved toward him. The Woodpecker saw him, turned, stooped.

"Come," he said. Rae followed.

The interior of the lodge was warm, commodious, a trifle smoky, though most of the smoke from the little fire went out the top aperture. Pelts, meat cooking, water melted in a pot, and Sieur de Troyes, energetic and radiant as ever, who caught Rae's hand with a cry of delight.

"Welcome! By what miracle did you find us?"

"No miracle; smoke. I'm rather done up," said Rae. "Give me water, a bite of food, a little sleep, and then I can talk coherently. I must have a word with you."

"My dear fellow, here, drop on the furs—get those wet moccasins off—make yourself comfortable!" exclaimed Troyes. Rae obeyed, feeling compunction at accepting hospitality; yet it was necessary. The Mohawk sat in bronze silence, his gaze examining Rae minutely, except when he was eating.

They talked by fits and starts, or rather Rae did, as they attacked the food. Troyes asked after Laurie, after the Cree, and apparently thought this visitor had come to see him alone. Rae let him think so, and said nothing of Davy. Troyes spoke of Savary, said that no dispute remained with Rae and Laurie, made no mention of trouble. His talk was smooth, specious, unreliable; Rae felt that he was being handled like a child, but cared not. He was too weary to think or spar mentally.

"We'll have a good visit," said the Frenchman. "Le Pivert is leaving at once to meet my band of warriors; it is time they were at work. Stretch out on the robes, sleep, be at home! We have much to discuss, when you are refreshed."

Nothing loath, Rae complied, and was asleep almost on the instant.

HE WAKENED to daylight and solitude; he lay looking around until remembrance came to him. The fire was out. The interior of the wigwam was cold, but furs were over him. No one else was here. His moccasins had been rubbed with grease and lay near him; he sat up, donned them, rose and pulling aside the fur from the face of the tunnel, went out into the open air. His toilet was brief; he rubbed his face briskly with snow and ducked back into the open-

ing. Daylight, sure enough; it was now sunlit morning. The voice of Troyes pursued him, and a moment later the Frenchman appeared, bearing a load of firewood.

"Well! You slept soundly. So did I," said Troyes. "Now for a fire and a bite to eat, eh?"

He fell busily to work; soon a blaze was going up, and the lodge warmed so that both men could remove their outer furs. Troyes had some fairly palatable bread, and they ate, washed it down, and brought forth pipes. All this took time; when at length his pipe was filled and ready for the ember, Rae felt entirely himself again. He was ready for what must be said, and the sooner said the better.

"Did your Mohawk get away?" he asked, as he puffed. Troyes nodded.

"Yes, and took our supply of frozen meat with him. Now I'll have to do some hunting, with two mouths to feed."

"One," corrected Rae. The piercing gaze bit into him.

"Eh? What mean you? Are you not remaining here?"

"No," Rae replied. "You have taken much for granted, Monsieur. You made an offer which I never accepted, if you recall. I am not your man."

The thin, lean-lined face broke into astonishment. Troyes laughed shortly.

"Oh, you jest, eh? You make fun, like an Englishman. Me, I do not greatly like such jests. We are friends; you shall accept a high position here on the Bay and begin a great future. I have asked about you; that man Savary knew you well, he says, and commends you—eh? *Peste!* Your eyes glower like those of a wolf! Can it be that there was some earnest behind your jest?"

Rae shook his head.

"No jest whatever, Monsieur. You thought that I was content to become a traitor to my own people; I am not. You thought that a great sum in gold would blind me to ethics and honor; it does not. Look—put yourself in my place. Would you sell your allegiance and come over to the side of the Company and work against France? I think you would not."

The countenance of Troyes was a study in flitting emotions. Incredulity was succeeded by a dawning realization; it was difficult for him to comprehend that Rae spoke in deliberate earnest. He had been so sure, so certain of his man, that awakening came hard. Anger stirred in his keen gaze.

"Then you have tricked me!" he declared. "You let me think that you were a friend, an ally! You deceived me!"

"That was your mistake. I'm not justifying myself; I'm merely telling you the facts." Rae was imperturbable, cold, precise. "You work for France, to win all this great land; I cannot share in that aim, Monsieur."

The long hands of Troyes clenched and unclenched as he stared at Rae; his features tightened; his thin lips became a firm line. He set his pipe down.

"Then if you are no friend, you are an enemy," he said.

"Regrettably true; from this time forward, at least, we are on opposing sides," assented Rae easily. "I have had to tell you this before going farther. I have plans for myself, as well as for Miss Laurens—"

"Ah!" broke out the Frenchman, in a hoarse gasp. A change swept into his face. "I have plans for her also, very definite plans. I have arranged everything. She is nothing to you. She has become a part of my own affairs—"

He broke off; the anger in his eyes had become fury.

So there it was, on the surface at last; the repressed emotions had burst forth. Plans, ambitions, love of country—these were borne aside and flung away, before the wave of deeper and more turbulent feeling. With an effort Rae kept his control.

"You have arranged!" he said, and smiled thinly, mirthlessly. "You go too far, Monsieur. You are not in France now. You like to arrange everything far in advance; that is unfortunate for you, perhaps. I have seen to it that your schemes are now known to the Company officers—although you were already known as an enemy."

Troyes paled to the lips. A crackle leaped in his voice.

"Enough! You pass all bounds, you despicable rascal! Now you have sealed your own fate. You know too much. You have betrayed my trust, you have betrayed me—"

"Betrayed France! I, betrayed you—"

Rae broke into a peal of ironic laughter, as the grim humor of it struck him. But his laughter was a veritable lash to the other man. Troyes flushed deeply, an oath broke

from him, and his passion burst all restraint. He lunged to his feet, inarticulate with rage at what he took to be mockery, and his hand went to the knife at his belt.

"Don't be a fool. I've no wish to harm you, unless you force me to it." Rae, unhurried, rose and put out a hand to his fur-cased musket. He looked at Troyes, who was panting, glaring at him, venting a torrent of French oaths with every breath, and a certain contempt came into his gaze.

"Someone else can kill you, as easily as I could did I so desire," he said. "That's not my purpose. I came here to tell you the truth, and have told it, Monsieur. Save your rage for those whom it may impress. You may as well have the rest of it: Those cannon from the bark do not go to your men, your plans are ruined, the Bay remains in the power of the Company, if I can make it so. This secret, underhand game of yours will not avail either you or your masters in France. Farewell, Monsieur."

He turned, pulled aside the skin covering the entrance to the tunnel, and stooping as low as possible, wormed his way out to the open air.

A long breath escaped him as he straightened up. It was done; he felt clear of it all at last. Now he could go forward, locate the *Nonesuch,* and see what the situation there was. Laurie might be along any time, and he must meet her as she came with Davy and the Cree.

He took a few steps, heard a hoarse cry, and looked around to see the figure of Troyes emerge from the tunnel and rise erect. The Frenchman carried an uncased, naked gun, probably his rifle.

"Wait!" he called to Rae. "Wait! This is not finished."

Rae turned. "I have nothing more to say, Monsieur."

"But I have!" cried Troyes. "Death of my life! You scoundrel, do you think you can threaten me, Sieur de Troyes, and not pay for it? Do you think I shall let you go to tell the world of my doings?"

"I told you once not to be a fool," Rae rejoined. He could not figure the Frenchman as dangerous, although his burning rage was obvious enough. "You've had your warning, and I've made my position clear to you."

"Only too clear," Troyes declared. "It is you who are the fool, and it is you who must pay for your folly, you mad Englishman. Your mouth shall be shut, at least; as for her, she'll do no talking."

With this, he lifted the gun to his shoulder. Rae could not realize that he was in earnest, until he saw the muzzle covering him. At this short distance, there could be no miss—

The weapon exploded in a gush of powder-smoke.

For an instant Rae could not comprehend it. He stood there, cased musket under arm; nothing happened. Then, as the smoke thinned, he saw that Troyes was prostrate in the snow, motionless; blood was pouring from his head and freezing as it pooled. The gun lay beside him, in pieces. Whether overloaded, or too long exposed to the bitter frost, it had burst.

RAE hurried to the side of the man. There was nothing to be done; Troyes was dead. Slivers of steel had penetrated his eyes to the brain; his own vaunted rifle had finished him in the act of murder.

Shocked, amazed, facing readjustment of everything, John Rae gazed down at the body in somber thought. It was difficult to realize that this vital, jaunty, dangerous man was really gone; yet, though the planner was departed, his plans remained. Others would take his place. French or Canadians would be in that band of redskins coming to the bark. Troyes himself had boasted that, should anything happen to him, the scheme would still reach fruition.

"The peril exists; his death won't change things, yet it will make my own task easier," thought Rae. "And, except for this accident of a burst gun, I'd be lying dead here—unpleasant certainty! Lost his head completely: he would have shot me down like a wolf. Well, it's done. He must have had some token, some authority, perhaps letters—I'd better take a look. Might be important as evidence."

He knelt, whipped off a mitten, and examined the already stiffened body. He found nothing, and rose. In the lodge, perhaps.

At the entrance, he stooped and passed through the tunnel. Inside, the fire was down to embers, the air was fast chilling. He began a careful search of garments, of every likely depositary, and discovered no indication of what he sought.

Determined, he went through everything, tossed furs aside, came upon a sealed pouch containing blank paper of French watermark, and nothing else. Time passed. Powder-horn, firebag, bullet pouch, yielded nothing; the pursuit was evidently vain, and at length Rae gave it up in disgust. No use; Troyes was ended and could be discounted completely. Best let it go at that, he reflected, and get up the coast to the waiting *Nonesuch*. There was still Savary to deal with, and Laurie must be met, too—

He delayed to load his musket, carefully, then cased it anew and stooped to the tunnel. Only one thing had rewarded his trouble: a very plain but superb hunting-knife of fine chased steel, far better than his own. He thrust it inside his shirt at the throat, thinking that he could fasten it to his belt later on.

Sunlight at last. He emerged from the tunnel and straightened up, blinking. For the instant, the dazzling whiteness blinded him—

"Down wi' that musket, Johnny Ray!" brayed a heavy voice. "Your arms up, and be smart about it, else we'll blast a hole through you!"

The dazzle passed. There stood a tall, furred figure—Savary himself, by the lord Harry! Savary, exultant and dominant, and behind him three of his men with muskets ready.

Caught, disconcerted, helpless to move, Rae obeyed the harsh command and let fall his musket, lifting his arms. Savary came to him with a jaunty swagger and laughed as he felt beneath Rae's furs.

"No pistol, eh? But I'll take this knife, my fine lad, to keep temptation out of your reach. And you killed the Frenchman, did you? Well, so much the better for us all. Now, then—"

Rae saw that Savary was between him and those threatening muskets. He moved like a flash, and his fist launched out to take Savary on the angle of the jaw. His foot slipped in the movement and his force was lost. The man merely staggered, then came at him with grappling arms, orders storming from him.

"Here, lads! Smart about it, damn you—use your butt while I hold 'un—"

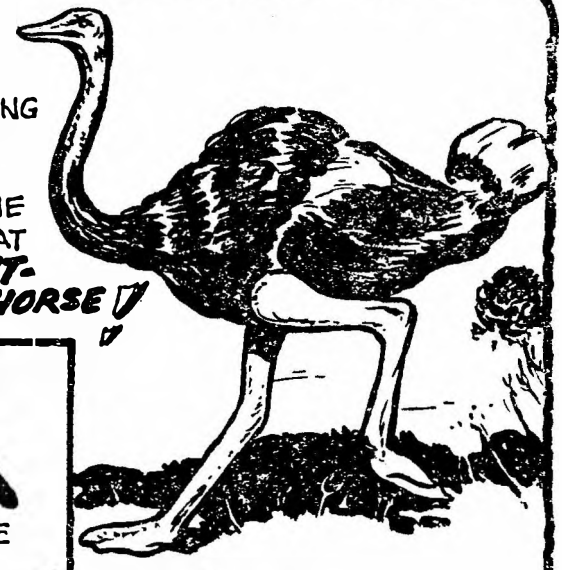
The three men came cursing, and Rae found himself gripped by those long arms. A musket swung, and the butt drove home behind his ear. Savary let him fall limply to the snow, and grinned.

"No need to kill 'un," said he. "Tie up the rascal; he may be vallyble to us yet. Then back to the ship and clap 'un in chains. First we'll have a look at this Injun house afore we go."

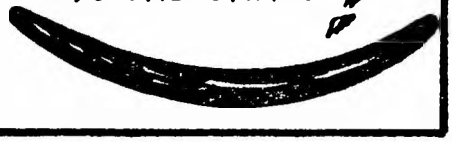
(*To be concluded in the next* SHORT STORIES)

Curioddities By Weill

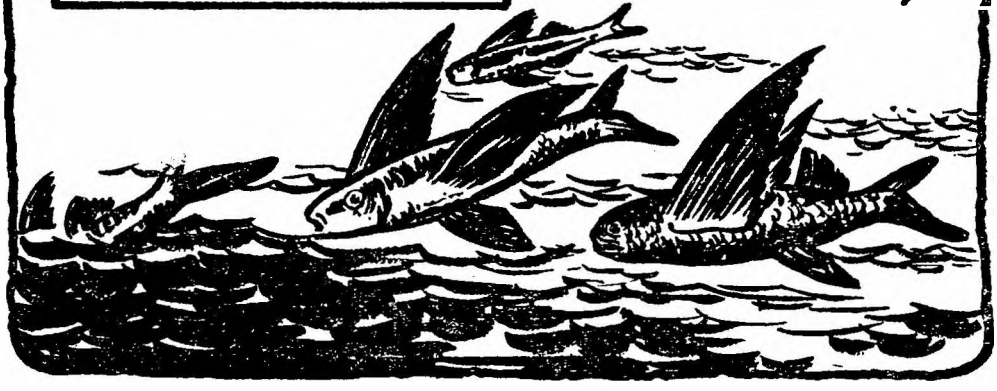
AN OSTRICH WILL FIGHT FURIOUSLY IF CORNERED, ADMINISTERING VERY POWERFUL KICKS *WITH HIS KNEE*, BUT HIS CHIEF DEFENSE IS THE ABILITY TO ATTAIN GREAT SPEED. *AND HE CAN* **OUT-STRIP THE FASTEST HORSE!**



AUSTRALIAN NATIVES RARELY USE SHARPLY CURVED RE-TURNING BOOMERANGS! FOR HUNTING OR FIGHTING THEY PREFER THE MODERATELY CURVED TYPE, *WHICH DOES* **NOT** *RETURN TO THE OWNER!*



FLYING FISH CAN REACH A SPEED OF **THIRTY-FIVE MILES PER HOUR** BEFORE TAKING OFF! SUPPORTED BY ITS ENORMOUS BREAST-FINS IT IS CAPABLE OF A GLIDING FLIGHT LASTING ***HALF A MINUTE!***



A Feller Can't Sit Still in Midstream; Either He Shoves Himself Ahead or He Drifts Back

INTEREST IN PORCUPINE LAKE

By H. S. M. KEMP

THERE were fourteen passengers on the big twin-engined plane heading north to Caribou lake. These were mostly Consolidated employees, but as well there were a man with his wife and children, and Big Jack Henderson and Cockeye McDonald. The family group had chairs well forward, but Cockeye and Big Jack occupied two nearer the tail.

"So you're goin' after more business," observed Cockeye McDonald. "Never was such a man as you, Jack, for branchin' out."

Big Jack Henderson, fifty, heavy-featured and sun-wrinkled, gave a grunt. "Well, you know how it is, Cockeye—a feller can't set still in midstream. Either he shoves himself ahead, or he drifts back. And the way fur's apt to be next winter, I might's well branch out as you call it before some other guy gets ahead of me."

Cockeye's silence seemed to indicate

agreement. "And where might this branchin'-out begin?"

"At Canoe River and Porcupine Lake," Big Jack told him. "There ain't no one tradin' at Canoe River, and so far's Porcupine Lake's concerned, the feller that's in there now don't count."

Cockeye squinted sideways at Big Jack. "Whaddya mean—don't count?"

"Just that. He don't worry me at all. He ain't the Hudson's Bay Company or North-West Traders. He's just a little guy, pluggin' along on a shoestring. I'll move in on him this summer, build and get settled. If he acts reasonable, everything'll be fine and dandy. But if he starts actin' funny, cuts his goods or boosts fur-prices, I'll just squash him and that's all there's to it."

Cockeye gave a grunt. "Just like that, eh? Squash him—the way you'd squash a beetle." He sighed, shrugged. "And they wonder why I stick to the minin' game!"

Now Big Jack was frowning. "What's the minin' game to do with it?"

"Nothin'—thank the Lord!" said Cockeye fervently. "And that's why I like it. In the minin' game, or the prospectin' game, it's every man for himself. You take your hammer or your gold-pan and you poke around. If you don't make good, you ain't out much anyway; but if you do, if you make a strike, you're all set. You run your lines or blaze your trees; and once you record her, she's yours. You don't get 'squashed.' No land-grabber or timber-hog or some guy clawin' for more'n his belly'll hold can take her off you. She's yours, to do what you like with; for better or for worse."

A grim little smile caught the corners of Big Jack's lips. "Well, that's tellin' me," he remarked. "I'm a land-grabber. A fur-hog, mebbe."

"And no different to a whole lot more of 'em," agreed Cockeye. "I ain't got no quarrel with your Canoe River proposition. Mebbe there ought to be a trader in there; mebbe the traffic could stand it. But this Porcupine Lake stuff don't set good with me at all. A guy's in there already, has bin for a couple of years. When he moved in, he took a chance; didn't know whether he'd make a go of it or not. But now that he is makin' a go of it and is really gettin' somewhere, you figure to horn in on him and crowd him out. And for a feller that's got a string of posts up in the Mackenzie River country and don't need to mess with this territory at all—well, Jack, you pick it up from there."

Big Jack's grin still held. "Y'know, Cockeye," he said, "what I like about you is the delicate way you put things. Nothin' rough, nothin' to hurt anyone's feelin's. You should of been a diplomat. Or a preacher."

Cockeye's stringy beard bristled. "If I was a preacher, I'd give 'em hell-fire without no syrup on it. And a lot of you guys need it bad. And this stuff about the other guy actin' 'reasonable'! What you mean," he told Big Jack, "is that when you pull in there, you figure on bein' the old he-frog and the only frog in the pool. Oh, I know you, Jack," Cockeye stubbornly averred. "You got a name—you're tough, cold-blooded. Even the Hudson's Bay people leave you alone."

Big Jack accepted the compliment. His smile softened a bit. "I'm not so tough," he demurred. "Outside of business, I'd give anyone the shirt off my back. But *in* business, well, that's different. It's fight or get licked; jump on the other guy before he jumps on you."

Cockeye gave a thin little laugh. "Before he jumps on you! I can't imagine Curly Andrews jumpin' on anyone."

"Curly Andrews?" Big Jack frowned again. "Curly Andrews? I should know that name. Heard it some place before."

"You could of done, if you're interested in dog-racin'. Curly took in all the big races before the war. Won The Pas Derby two years in succession."

"Know him now." Big Jack nodded. "Quite the goin' concern, wasn't he? But how come he got mixed up in the tradin' game."

"Account of a gal," Cockeye said tersely. "A gal who turned him down to marry somebody else."

AT Big Jack's insistence, Cockeye gave out with the yarn. In fact, Cockeye figured Big Jack should know it. It would give him an insight into the makeup of the man he was going to tangle with at Porcupine Lake.

"The gal," stated Cockeye, "was old Pete Malley's daughter from Cumberland House. She was a school-teacher down there; and

though I ain't no great judge of feminine beauty, I figured her just as cute and pretty as a litter of silver-fox pups. She was medium-sized, with the jet-black hair and high colorin' that goes with a dash of Cree blood; and she had all the guys for miles around chasin' right after her. They camped on old Pete's verandah, took her to the dances, and one or two of 'em even went so far as escortin' her to church. But it was easy to see which one of 'em had the edge. It was Curly Andrews.

"Mind you, Jack, Curly wasn't nothin' special to write home about. He was only average good-lookin', and he was a bashful sort of guy. But he was easy-goin' and easy to get along with; and then ag'in, he didn't drink or tear around. Summers, he worked for the Hudson's Bay, but in the winter, all he knew was dogs, and how to race 'em.

"And he knew that, all right. Didn't matter where there was any sort of a race, Curly'd be right out in front. And he made money at it, too. We figured any day he and Jean'd be gettin' hitched—only just about that time Buck Stillman happened along.

"Now this Buck Stillman, Jack, was a horse of a different color. He was a Government Fire Ranger who had bin transferred from the Deer River country to Cumberland House. He was a big, rangy brute, with white teeth and a little black mustache and a flow of words that'd done credit to an oil-salesman. Right away quick he begins to make a play for Miss Jean Malley. He hires old Pete as a sort of deputy, so's to get in strong with the old man, and he lets it be known that he's in line for the District Supervisor's job.

Well, after that, it seemed Curly Andrews never had a chance. I guess he couldn't make up pretty speeches like Buck could; and alongside the swashbucklin', cock-a-whoop Mister Stillman, he looked drab. And any chance he did have he ruined by climbin' his rival one day and tryin' to beat his head off.

"It was outside the Hudson's Bay store," Cockeye explained. "The way I heard it, Stillman made some remark about Jean that didn't sound just right to Curly. Somep'n about high-steppin' fillies and the way to handle 'em. So Curly up and asked him what livery-barn he was born in; and they tore into it.

"Of course, Curly never had a chance. Buck cleaned his clock in jig-time and mopped the ground with him. And when the news of it got around to Jean, she took it all out on Curly. Mebbeso she never got the right of the happenin'—it's a cinch Curly himself wouldn't tell her—but she told him that a man with a jealous temper like that certainly wasn't the one for her and she was glad she'd found him out in time. And just two weeks after that, she became Mrs. Buck Stillman."

COCKEYE had to break off then, for the big transport landed at White Deer Lake to pick up two more passengers. He and Big Jack got out to stretch their legs. But once they had taken off again, Big Jack wanted to know the sequel to the story.

"I guess I can figure it out," he told Cockeye. "This Curly Andrews drowned his sorrows in booze; and when he come to and wanted to get away from it all, he opened up his post at Porcupine Lake."

"Well, he didn't," said Cockeye. "And it wasn't Curly Andrews who took to drink, but Buck Stillman. Buck prob'ly liked his licker before he was married," Cockeye hazarded, "only he kept the knowledge of it to himself. But once the honeymoon was over and the double-harness began to gall, he blossomed out as an accomplished drinkin' man. We were mildly surprised," admitted Cockeye. "Not so much surprised that he liked a drink, but the little time it took him to get around to makin' a hog of himself with it. We figured that with a bride like Jean, he'd sort of soak up the delights of a home of his own. But not him. He was out most every night, drinkin' or poker-playin' or raisin' his own particular brand of Cain. If Curly Andrews had bin around he coulda told Jean, 'I told you so'! But Curly wasn't around any more. He joined up and went overseas; and when he come back wounded, he took a job runnin' a post for old Heeby Farquarson up on the Churchill.

"Anyways, this wild stuff of Buck's went on for two-three years; then just about the time Jean had her first baby, Mister Stillman loses his job. Buck's supervisor came

up on one of the river boats and found him soused to the gills when he shoulda bin fightin' a big fire over on Sturgeon Lake, and Buck's out on his ear.

"After that, it was pretty much what you'd expect. Buck tried to straighten up and look for another job, but no one wanted him. Finally, when Fall came around, he figured he'd take a crack at trapping.

"Well, he did. He'd spent most of his life in the bush and he figured this trappin' game was a pushover. But he found out different. Most of the winter they lived off bannock and rabbits, but he made a fair-to-middlin' clean-up in the spring in the muskrat hunt.

"We were plumb sorry for Jean," Cockeye averred, "but there was nothin' we could do about it. None of us men-folks offered her any advice, but one or two of the white women in the settlement did. After another summer with Buck sloppin' around the place, pickin' up odd jobs and spendin' half his wages on likker, they told her to clear out and leave him. But," observed Cockeye, "women are funny. They ain't like men. If you'r me, Jack, had a partner that didn't pull his weight, we'd put the skids under the four-flusher and let 'im go. But not women; not Jean, anyway. She said Buck was 'her man', and it was her 'duty' to stay with him. Duty!" sneered Cockeye. "Her duty was to crown him with an ice-chisel and plead justifiable homicide! Anyways, she stuck with him, had another kid, and finally ended up, two years later, in the Fox Country—the finest hunk o' desolation y'ever saw. Or," he suddenly asked Big Jack, "didja ever see it?"

Big Jack said he'd never even heard of the Fox Country and reminded Cockeye that the Mackenzie River was his particular stamping-grounds.

COCKEYE nodded. "Yeah, the Fox Country. *Makasees Uskee,* as the Crees call it. She lies west of Reindeer Lake and just south of the Barrens. I prospected in there one year and I was good'n glad to get out of her. She ain't clean and open like the Barrens nor yet heavy-timbered like the rest of the country. She's flat, and scraggy, with pimply little hills—Cripes!" Cockeye almost shivered, "I was that glad to get outa there it was like gettin' outa jail. And that's the sort of thing Jean had to put up with.

"Why she didn't go goofy I never knew," stated Cockeye. "I talked one day with an A. & J. pilot who stayed at their camp overnight. He said Buck wasn't makin' no hunt to speak of, but they'd progressed from bannock-and-rabbits to bannock-and-cariboo —it bein' a meat-country. He said Buck looked like a Nitchie only worse, account the Nitchies can't grow beards and Buck had a set of whiskers like an owl's nest, and he figured that Buck didn't wash no oftener than he needed and only went on the trapline when the flour-sack and the tobacco-can run dry. But Jean, she was different. She looked thinner and there was somep'n in her eyes that wasn't right, but she was clean as could be and the two kids woulda bin a credit to anyone. But that's all that was ever seen of 'em till just after Christmas, when Buck pulls into Curly Andrews' tradin' post on the Churchill.

"Now Curly told me he was considerable surprised. Surprised on three different counts—that the guy behind the owl's nest was Buck Stillman, that Buck could looked that tough, and that the Stillmans were anywhere around that country at all.

"But Buck was the same old windjammer. He slaps two-three foxes and a few mink on the counter and tells Curly he's settin' on the top of the world.

" 'Lots more where they come from, only I'm holdin' 'em for prices to go up.'

"Curly nods and don't bother tellin' him he knows he's a liar, but asks Buck what fetches him in.

" 'Grub', says Buck. 'I built a new camp last fall a couple days west from where we used to be and I guess none of the boys know about it. Leastways, no traders called on me; so the grubpile's runnin' low'.

"You can figure," suggested Cockeye, "how that'd sound to Curly. Curly knew how Buck lived, and he could picture for himself all Jean'd be goin' through. Then to hear that Buck's sort of grubpile was runnin' low musta hit him pretty hard. For he still loved Jean. Must of done. For when guys like Curly get hit, they get hit hard.

"Then Buck said he wasn't headin' home at once. His dogs needed a rest, so he'd lay over a day. Lay over a day, would you!" emphasized Cockeye. "A five-day trip in and

a five-day trip goin' back; and him goin' to lay over for another day still! With the gal and her two kids shanghaied up alone in the most god-forsaken country y'ever slung an eye over!

"Well, Buck goes out. He's goin' to find some place to camp, and Curly don't see him ag'in till night. And when he does see him, Mister Stillman's lit up like a Christmas tree. Some breed had pulled in there with a string o' dogs and a crock 'r two of firewater, and him and Buck go out to kill 'em. Buck's like a wild man. He wants to sing or fight or get a dance organized and he don't care what he does first. Curly steers clear of the guy, figurin' that the shape Buck's in there might be trouble between 'em; and along about midnight some scared squaw's bangin' on Curly's door to tell him that Buck's hopped the twig for the Happy Huntin' Grounds. Which huntin' grounds," added Cockeye grimly, "had no connection with the *Makasees Uskee*.

"It seems like," he went on conversationally, "that Mister Buck Stillman had a weak heart. At least, that was what the coroner's inquest reported when a week 'r so later the police came in to take charge of things. And with a heart too weak and firewater too strong, somep'n had to give way.

"CURLY told me," went on Cockeye, after a pause, "that when he found Buck Stillman he felt a little bit sick. He compared the cock-a-whoop Buck Stillman of a few years before with the dirty, slack-mouthed scarecrow lying on the floor of that ill-lit Injun shack. Buck had come a long way, and a long way down. Then Curly's thoughts switched to Buck's wife, to Jean, so well rid of the bum.

"Now, figured Curly, she could get out of that godforsaken hole and go back to her own folks. Her 'duty' as she called it was ended, and from here on she had only her kids to think about. She was broke, worse than broke, but she had her teacher's certificates and they represented a decent living. Mind you," and Cockeye gave a faint smile, "Curly never mentioned anything about himself in all this; never said nothin' about a chance to pick up the broken pieces and start all over ag'in. But the guy was human, and bein' human, he couldn't of thought of much else. He did tell me, though, that the next second somep'n seemed to bunch up tight inside him. It come of thinkin' of what Buck had said a few hours before; somep'n about havin' built a new camp and none of the boys knowin' just where it was.

"Curly said he thought fast. The Fox Country, the *Makasees Uskee*, was a good five days north of the Churchill. Up till that year, quite a few of the Nitchies had wintered in there. It was a good country for foxes, and for lynx. But lately, the trappin' hadn't been so good. Leastways, not enough to warrant pitchin'-off such a long ways from home. Buck had tried it, though; and if things were what they seemed to be, he had the whole country to himself. And at a camp nobody knew about.

"You got to understand," Cockeye told Big Jack Henderson, "that the Fox Country is quite a hunk of landscape and that she runs clear up to the Barrens. A feller could wander around in there for weeks and never run across another human track. And somewhere up in that goshawful desolation was Jean—with only two little kids and the timber-wolves for company. No wonder his guts bunched up tight!

"Curly says his first thought was to get a plane sent in. That meant either a three-day trip to Island Lake and a radio-message out to town, or a two-day trip to Pelican Rapids and await for another day till the mail plane came in on its reg'lar flight. Add to all this was the time that would be lost while the plane flew up to the *Makasees Uskee* then cruised around tryin' to locate Buck's camp. Curly knew what Buck's camp'd look like—a two-by-four shack with a snow-covered roof, set in a grove of timber, and it might never be spotted from the air. And you remember too, Jack, what I said about that desolate country. Miles of it, hundreds of square miles that'd take a whole fleet of planes to comb over.

"Curly didn't like the set-up at all, but there was only one out. That was for a man and a string of dogs to hit north at once, pick up Buck's trail and follow it. There'd bin no snow since Buck came down, and the trail would strike south by Burntwood Lake. So all a feller had to do was to get to Burntwood and have one of the Nitchies there show him where Buck's trail swung in.

"Curly's dogs were in good shape. He still had five of 'em; for in about a week's

time he was figurin' on turnin' over his post to the halfbreed feller that helped him run it and lightin' out for Dorando and the big race there he'd entered a month before. First money was seven-hundred-and-fifty dollars; but Curly brushed the money out of his mind when he thought of Jean. There'd be other years for dog-racin', but if he didn't get to Jean before her grub ran out, there'd be only starvation for her.

"So he talked it over with his halfbreed sidekick. He said he wouldn't take no big load of stuff with him because he'd be fetchin' Jean and the kids right back. But he emphasized that he'd have to get there before it snowed.

"The halfbreed savvied that all right, but Curly says the guy gave a bit of a shrug. He said he'd bin sizin' up the sky that night and it didn't look good to him. In fact, he looked for snow within twenty-four hours.

"That was all Curly needed. He slung a jag of grub and dog-feed together and hooked his dogs to a big, high-headed toboggan. Then just as he was ready to start, the halfbreed had an idea. S'pose it did snow?

"S'pose Curly got within a day of the camp and snow washed out the trail completely? Well, he'd be sunk! So why not take Buck Stillman's leader along? Once Curly got past Burntwood the dog oughta have brains enough to know he was headin' home; and if the trail didn't show, the dog'd still want to make a beeline for camp.

"That sounded good to Curly, except for one thing. That was that this leader of Buck's couldn't run in the same class as Curly's dogs and he'd cut down the speed of the whole outfit. 'Let 'im run along behind, then', said the breed. 'Load him, if you have to. For if the time ever comes that you do need him, you'll sure need him bad'.

"Curly located Buck's dogs, and a Nitchie told him which one was the leader. Raised by a white man and prob-ly petted by Jean, the dog wasn't mean to handle. Moreover, he was a leggy hound; and when Curly tried hookin' him in with the rest of the string, he found he could keep up with 'em.

COCKEYE paused in his story. He stretched, settled his battered felt hat on his head and turned to Big Jack Henderson.

"Now here was a race—a bigger race than Curly had ever bin in before."

"And the stakes were bigger," agreed Big Jack.

"Yeah; the stakes bein' the lives of a gal he loved and her two kids. Curly says he wanted to drive them dogs like the devil was after 'em; to rush 'em, to beat the snow and get there quick. But he was a dog-man, this Curly Andrews. He let 'em pick their own gait, knowin' they had four or five days steady goin' ahead of 'em. So he run for a while, then crawled under his robe in the toboggan. Trouble was he was off to a bad start. He'd bin workin' hard in the store all day, and the weather was twenty-five below. Take a guy that's tired, Jack, and you know he gets cold quick. So when midnight come, Curly was glad to stop for a cup of hot tea and a snack out of the grub-box.

"But he made time. He got into Otter Narrers and laid up there for an hour, then struck off ag'in and didn't make another stop till he boiled up at three in the afternoon. He travelled all that night, but the next day, for the dogs' sake, he rested for three hours.

"Meanwhile, the wind had turned east. It warmed up some, but this didn't look good to Curly. Warmin' weather and an east wind meant snow; and it was all he could do take an hour or so off in the afternoon for another breather for the dogs.

"He said he was tired enough himself, but he figured, travellin' day and night, he couldn't be much more then than a day and a half from the Fox Country. The dogs had slowed up considerable, but by feedin' 'em half a fish now and then, he had kept 'em goin'. He was still short of Burntwood Lake and he didn't like the way them fingers of snow was startin' to spread out across the trail.

"But he got to Burntwood without no trouble, though he wouldn't lay up when he got there. He grabbed a cup of tea an Injun woman made him and et a couple of smoked fish, but all the time he was talkin' to the man of the house about what lay ahead. The Injun told him that he should take the trail that ran to the fishin'-hole out on the lake, and from then on, the track that ran north from there, the only track, was Buck Stillman's. The Nitchie added that

Buck hadn't come down the reg'lar trail from the Fox Country but had come in more from the west.

"Curly could figure that. Buck had come down direct from his new camp. So when the Injun offered to go along with him, Curly said no. The location of Buck's new camp was as much a mystery to the Injun as it was to Curly himself; and by the looks of the dogs Curly saw when he pulled in, he figured he'd make better time travellin' alone.

"So he struck off agin. He never had much to go by, but accordin' to Buck's own statement, the new camp was two days west of the old one; and as the Injun said the old camp wasn't much more'n half a day due north, Curly figured that on a diagonal he had about a day and a half still to go. A day and a half, that was, by Injun travel and with ordinary dogs; which'd make it still one day for Curly's steppers.

"He never had much trouble that night, except he was gettin' dizzy from tiredness himself. He'd snatched the odd ten-fifteen minutes of sleep in the toboggan at the start of the trip and when the dogs were fresh, but now he was tryin' to spare 'em all he could. Then he says his fingers got numb too easy, and though he kep' poundin' along behind the toboggan, he didn't seem to get his blood to circ'latin' like it should. And when he wheeled the dogs into a stand of scrubby jackpine at dawn the next mornin', his biggest worry caught up with him. The trail was driftin' in fast.

"All night the wind had bin moanin' through the evergreens and willers, and while he hadn't been able to see much then, the comin' of dawn showed him what he was up ag'inst. The snow that his sidekick had predicted was on the way.

"Curly says he was good'n glad then that he'd fetched that leader of Buck's along. By the scrawny look of the timber and the flattenin' of the country, he figured he was gettin' within strikin' distance of the *Maka-sees Uskee;* and even if the trail did wash out, this hound-dog of Buck's oughta be able to sniff out his way home from there.

"So feelin' just about as tired and groggy as when he'd stopped, he got the dogs up ag'in. He says they acted mean about it and one of 'em grabbed at him. But he got 'em goin', at a shufflin' sort of run.

"It was broad daylight now, and Curly was able to take stock of things. The sky was a dirty-gray without a cloud or a break to it anywhere, and the snow came siftin' across the trail. You know what it's like, Jack," Cockeye suddenly said. "Dawn, and you're chilled and you're hungry, and the wind moans around you like it was blowin' off a graveyard. And if you're kinda lost, and you're alone, and you ain't just sure how far it is—"

"I know," said Big Jack, grimly. "You don't need to paint no word-pictures for me."

"Well, Curly felt all that. And on top of it he had the fret and the worry over Jean and the two kids. Was she outa grub already? Was the storm ragin' up there right now, with her scared to death? Curly says he shoved on till noon, when he came out onto the end of a great big muskeg.

"He says somep'n came up in his throat fit to strangle him. For out across the muskeg, the snow was driftin' like a white curtain. He didn't know how far across the muskeg was, because he couldn't see; but he knew there wouldn't be no trail in a drift like that. And he couldn't see good for another reason, because the wind was waterin' his eyes and as fast as he wiped it away they'd flood up ag'in. So what between his eyelashes freezin' to his cheeks and his cheeks freezin' to the fur of his parka-hood, he knew he might's well bull into it as stand there shiverin' over it all.

"WELL, Jack, a hundred yards from timber the trail petered out. Curly figured he'd try Buck's dog, but that meant changin' harness with fingers that were pretty now much all thumbs. So he'd try somep'n else first. And you know what that meant—gettin' out ahead, shufflin' around and locatin' the trail with your feet. Well, he did that. He found it and he missed it, but bangin' his hands to keep the circulation goin', he shoved on with the dogs crowdin' at his heels.

"We can picture the sort of a time he had. In the timber, the trail still showed some, but on every little muskeg or open spot or pot-hole of a lake he had the devil's own time. On one little lake he lost the trail completely. This was around noon, only there wasn't no sun to tell him so. He was

on the point of tryin' Buck's dog ag'in, when he figured that as the lake wasn't very big he might save time by tryin' something else first. That was runnin' around the shore and locatin' where the trail entered the green timber. Like I say, the lake wasn't big, and a quarter-mile away, sure enough he found it. Then he struck back to where he'd left the dogs.

"But halfway there he knew he'd make a mistake. The dogs were roarin' and fightin' and yelpin' like a pack of wolves.

"It was this new dog, this dog of Buck's. As long as Curly was with 'em, his own behaved 'emselves; but once they were alone, they ganged up on the stranger. When Curly reached 'em, the dog was dead with his throat tore out.

"That was the payoff. Curly says he pretty near howled. The dog had bin his ace-in-the-hole and now his ace was gone. More than that, two of his own dogs were crippled and had to be turned loose to foller, and he lost a good half-hour straightenin' out and fixin' the harness. He figured it was between one and two when he finally got goin' ag'in.

"After that it was the old routine—stick to the trail where it showed, shuffle around out ahead when you lost it. Curly tells me he was beyond feelin' much of anything any more. He was too weak to be just hungry, nearer played out than tired, and his fingers were just so dead they coulda bin whittled outa jackpine. He was in a kind of stupor, I guess, else he wouldn't have gone through the ice like he did.

"He says it was gettin' dusk and he was crossin' a bit of a crick. There wasn't no trail left on the ice, but he could see a sort of a shadder where it went up into the bush on the other side. He was leadin' his dogs up off the ice, when he went through —*plunk!*—up to his knees in water.

"That scared him. He come awake, scrambled out, and made a run for a snowbank. You know the old stuff, Jack—get snow on your legs, quick, to sop up the water before it seeps through. Well, he thought he'd done it, and he goes on ag'in, walkin' ahead of his dogs like a drunk up this shadowy trail. Only pretty soon he couldn't walk very good. The wet snow froze to his legs till it was like he had 'em shoved in a pair of stovepipes. But he still didn't feel cold, didn't feel anything, he says. And he don't know how he followed this bit of a trail. Unless—and you'll snicker at this, Jack; sounds sorta haywire—unless it was somep'n he couldn't explain. He says it was like mind-readin', telepathy, or like somebody *talkin'* him in there. Like they used to *talk* the bombers home in the war."

BIG JACK HENDERSON gave a grunt. "I don't snicker at anything. I've bin around the raw edge of things too long."

"Anyways," went on Cockeye, "that's what Curly claimed. It got too dark to see any trail if there'd bin any trail to see; yet he climbed one hill, stumbled down another, bumped into this tree and that but held a straight course. That is, till he tripped over a snowbank and went down on his face.

"He says he musta slept, for the next thing he knew he heard sleighbells—the bells on his dogs as they stood up to shake 'emselves. And when he realized he'd bin sleepin', he tried to get up. He couldn't lay there. He had to shove on!

"He got to his knees, and as he turned he felt the snow drivin' thick ag'inst his face. The wind was roarin' now through the scrub and the force of it almost shoved him over backwards. But he managed to get up; and when he did so he had the goofiest feelin'. The lower part of his legs had bin cut off and he was *standin'* on his knees!

"Then the truth hits him. His legs are frozen from the knees down!

"Curly says he got terrified then. He stumped around to the sleigh, grabbed at the headline and yelled at the dogs. He had to tear a limb from a dead tree and heave it at 'em before they made a move. And when they did make a move it was to break into a shamblin' sort of trot.

"They were climbin' a little hill, and when they broke into this trot, Curly tried to keep up with 'em. He pegged along on his frozen legs, eyelids frozen tight, clingin' to the headline. But the dogs were too fast for him. He tripped, and stumbled, and went down ag'in.

"When he worked the ice from his eyelids and tore them open, he couldn't see nothin' but the outline of the trees wavin' ag'inst the sky. And he couldn't hear nothin', either. And when he yelled at the dogs and made a grab for the sleigh, his

hands touched nothin'. Then from 'way down the hill the wind brought him the sound of a bark, and he knew the dogs had took off and marooned him.

"'Right then,' says Curly, 'I died. I handed in my chips. For after tryin' two-three times to get up and endin' flat on my face in the snow, I knew I was finished. I just huddled up with my nose between my knees and hoped the count wouldn't be too long a-comin'.

"But Curly got fooled," concluded Cockeye. "The count never did come. He thought he heard more barkin', so he raised his head a second time and scrubbed more ice from his lashes. And you know what he saw? What he wouldn't believe? A light, a square of yaller light, from a window down there in the valley."

COCKEYE paused again. This time the pause was longer. He could have been Curly Andrews himself, lost in memories.

But Big Jack Henderson roused him. "Well, go on, y'old jughead. What happened next? I know the feller didn't die, or he wouldn't be tradin' up at Porcupine Lake."

Cockeye stirred, blinked. "No," he agreed; "he didn't die. And only because a gal named Jean had lots of guts and lots of savvy. When the dogs turned up at the shack without a driver, she took a long chance. She got into her parka and mitts, took a flashlight and swung the dogs back into their trail. She couldn't've recognized the dogs, but she figured out what had happened. And if goin' back a few miles through that howlin' storm meant straightenin' out an accident or savin' a life, she was game to tackle it.

"That's how she found Curly, though she don't know how she managed to get him into the toboggan, dead-weight and unconscious like he was.

"Of course, when the search-plane did locate 'em a week later Curly wasn't so good. He'd gone through hell with his frozen legs, and by the time they got him out gangrene or somep'n had set in. They had to take 'em both off just short of the knees, but apart from that he's as good as ever."

Big Jack nodded, thoughtfully, silently. After a long, long moment, he said, "And that's the guy that's tradin' at Porcupine Lake."

Cockeye answered, "Yeah."

In the meantime the big plane had cleared the last of the timber and was heading out over the crystal-green water of Cariboo Lake. Buildings showed, the smoke of a smelter; then the ship banked, touched down and swung into a wharf.

The mining crew were the first ashore. Cockeye and Big Jack got up to follow. So did the family group. But Cockeye waited to give way to them.

First there were the two kids, a boy and a girl of four and five, then a woman, young, dark-haired, with the sweetness of face that comes from suffering. The man was around thirty, snub-nosed, cheerful, greeting Cockeye with a smile. But he walked stiffly, awkwardly, as though the legs he used were not his own.

Cockeye checked him.

"Hey, Curly. Shake hands with a friend of mine, Jack Henderson from the Mackenzie country." And as the girl turned, "And you, too, Jean." To Big Jack Henderson he said, "The Andrews family, Jack—mighty good friends of mine, too."

There was a shaking of hands all around, but, with it, a frown on the face of Curly Andrews. And when finally Cockeye and Big Jack swung down to the wharf, Curly seemed to be waiting for them.

Big Jack smiled, bit off the end of a cigar and shoved it between his powerful jaws.

"Nice trip," he told Andrews. "Great country you got up here."

Curly Andrews nodded. He wanted to say something, but he seemed to have trouble getting it out. He turned, looked into the troubled eyes of his wife, then faced Big Jack.

"Nice country," he agreed. "And they say—they tell me, Mr. Henderson, that you're interested in Porcupine Lake." His manner was nervous, hesitant, and Cockeye saw him swallow hard. "That so?"

"Me? Interested in Porcupine Lake?" Big Jack laughed aloud. He rolled the cigar around his lips and stared quizzically at Curly Andrews. "Someone's bin kiddin' you, boy. If there is such a place as Porcupine Lake, she don't concern me at all."

Announcements of Intended Robbery Weren't Usually as Raw as This!

LAST FLING AT RIVER BEND

By RAY PALMER TRACY

BRICK LOWE was serious about quitting his drifting around. His chief reason for a decision so drastic was that he had reached the advanced age of twenty-four. It was time to settle down.

Since Brick had been sixteen, he had ridden the range, high, wide and fancy free as a topband. He had looked the country over carefully and had picked out a couple of likely spots to establish a spread. If this new place toward which he was headed, River Bend, didn't measure up, he knew right where he was going.

Unlike a lot of roving cowpokes, Brick had gathered and saved his moss. He had a well-filled money-belt that should be sufficient to give him a proper launching in a small way.

He refused to admit, even to himself, that this visit to River Bend was really one last fling at adventure in a world open in all directions. Yet his big, six-foot frame was filled with an eagerness which was reflected in the expression on his freckled, rugged face and in the penetrating gray of his eyes, as he rode across the Arizona desert and up the barren mountain slope into Apache Pass.

When he was through the rims and pulled up on the other side, he forgot his empty canteen and the thickness of his dry tongue. Below him was a great valley that seemed to have dropped from another world.

A sparkling stream split the green grasslands for three-quarters of their length. The stream then made a right angle turn and vanished in a deep mountain canyon that lay close to the border. In the angle of the stream were the scattered houses of the cow town of River Bend.

Brick followed the switch-backed highway to the valley floor and then into town. In the hot afternoon sun, the one dusty business street with its sun-blistered buildings and drowsing horses at the hitchrails, seemed asleep. Brick was not lulled to security thereby. Some of the most violent and unchristian characters he had ever met had exploded right out of a Sabbath-like peace.

He took his tired horse to the livery stable. After seeing to its care, he threw his trail roll over his shoulder and went up to the hotel. Cutting across a vacant lot, he didn't go around to the front steps leading to the hotel porch. Cowboylike, he took the

shortest course. As he came to the end of the porch, he placed his hands on the waist-high floor to leap up, when voices came to him and he paused.

A line of trees at the side of the hotel had concealed his approach across the vacant lot. As he glanced around, he saw there was a screened window close to him and the sash inside it was raised. Evidently the hotel parlor was in there and it was from the parlor the voices were issuing.

"You listen to me, Nell," said a voice, while not exactly harsh, held tones that grated on Brick's nerves. "We can't run the Box-B like your old man run it forty years ago. We've got to bring it up to date or quit."

"You think the way to bring it up to date is to fire all the boys who've worked on the Box-B for years, and put a lot of tough gunmen in their places?" came an angry inquiry in a young, deep contralto with a timbre that made little shivers run up Brick's spine. "That don't make sense to me, Mr. Lapine."

"We have to get rid of the deadwood," argued Lapine. "And don't call me *Mister* Lapine. Call me Jim."

"I own two-thirds of the Box-B, *Mister* Lapine," said Nell. "My father built it up from nothing with the boys you are trying to fire."

"Have fired," corrected Lapine with maddening complacency.

"When you included Jenny and George Shelton, my cook and her husband, who've been on the Box-B since I can remember, you went too far."

"I'm foreman of the Box-B as well as a one-third owner," reminded Lapine. "I just didn't like skinny George's nosey ways."

"You were foreman," Nell did some correcting of her own. "You're fired!"

Lapine laughed with vast amusement.

"You're going to hire a foreman to rod my bunch of hand-picked boys?" he inquired.

"You think I'm going to stand around and do nothing while you shove me to one side and run the Box-B to suit yourself?"

"It's out of your hands already," said Lapine with an assurance that carried conviction.

Brick couldn't have moved to save him. This was about the rawest announcement of an intended robbery he had ever heard. Lapine must be pretty sure of himself to talk this way.

"There's no sense in us wasting time arguing," Lapine went on. "Why don't we get married? That would settle everything."

"I wouldn't marry you to save my own life," said Nell with deliberate scorn. The depth of it made Brick want to pat her on the back. "More than that, I'm taking Jenny and George back to the ranch."

"Go ahead and try," invited Lapine. "I doubt if they'd go back for double wages and a bonus."

"You're threatened them!" accused Nell.

"No, indeed. I just promised them certain things would happen if they were fools enough to come back. And, by the way, I had a new man come in on the stage today. I let him have your horse to ride out to the Box-B. You can ride back with me in the buckboard."

"You're not very bright, *Mister* Lapine!" The contralto was trembling with fury. "You're just contemptible. I'm going to have sheriff Ben Cross go after my horse. I wouldn't be seen riding down the street in your company."

"Maybe I'm brighter than I look," suggested Lapine. His tone hinted that Nell had pierced his armor of conceit. "You see I planned it this way. Ben Cross is fixed up with an errand that will keep him out of town all day, although I don't think he'd have the guts to interfere anyway. We'll be starting home in an hour. You be ready then and save yourself trouble." It was an unmistakable order from a man who was riding high. Brick heard him walk across the floor and open a door which probably led into the hotel lobby.

THE big cowboy hadn't intended to eavesdrop. He hardly realized he was doing so until it was over. Although it was none of his business, he had an urge to smash a man who had so little regard for the rights of others.

The deeply imbedded American trait in the cowboy, to help the weak fight off aggressors, urged him to do something. Anyhow he didn't want to be caught listening.

Instead of leaping up on the end of the porch, he quietly hurried around front and was leisurely mounting the porch steps when

a man who must be Lapine came out of the front door.

Lapine was not as tall as Brick, but he was wider and fully as heavy. He was ten years older and looked more than that. His face was long and his jaw narrow. A pair of pale, chalk-like eyes under sandy brows looked Brick over with no expression whatever. If he was interested in a stranger in River Bend, he gave no indication of it. He went across the street and pushed in the swinging doors of the Crystal Palace Saloon.

Quick interest knifed through Brick. He took care not to appear to be watching the man, but he was sure that somewhere in his travels he had bumped into Lapine. There was something familiar about him. Yet a hurried check of possibilities, left Brick without a clue. Maybe he just resembled someone he knew. Slowly the cowboy went into the hotel.

Naturally he was curious about the other voice. As he stepped into the lobby, he glanced toward the parlor and saw that Lapine had left the door open. A girl was standing just inside the parlor and facing him.

Brick came to an abrupt halt. He wasn't expecting to see anything so lovely. Rich toned, coppery hair clung in natural waves to a proud head. Her wide white hat she held by the strings in her right hand. She was gripping the strings so tightly, the knuckles showed white. A light gun was belted about her slender waist.

Her tailored shirt and riding breeches set off glamorous curves, and the arched little boots gave a dainty, finishing touch. She appeared to be staring straight at Brick out of long-lashed eyes of smoky blue, but was contemplating some inner vision that had turned her soft red lips bitter.

As they stood facing each other, the cowboy lost in admiration and the girl sunk in tragic thoughts, she suddenly became aware that she was not alone. Warm color swam into her smooth cheeks.

"Oh!" she gasped. "I'm sorry. I really didn't see you." That was true, but sounded so inane, even to her own ears, that another warm wave of color deepened the tones of the first.

Brick swept off his hat and a disarming grin quirked the corners of his wide mouth.

"I know you warn't seeing me," he acknowledged. "And I know it must have been a terrible shock when you discovered what was obstructin' the view. On the other hand, it give me an excuse to stare back at you; and am I pleased with what I see."

Nell tried to recover her dignity and put him in his place. In spite of her, the bitterness faded from the sweetness of her mouth and a white gleam showed in a shy smile.

"I must have looked silly standing there staring into space," she said.

"I wouldn't alter a thing," said Brick with so much enthusiasm, she hastily changed the subject.

"You're a stranger here," she stated, slowly coming out into the lobby as though drawn by something out of her power.

"Not any more, I ain't. I've met you. My name is Brick Lowe. Brick because of my high color and freckles and not because of my dun-colored hair. I've come to River Bend to look for a job and a location."

"I'm Nell Travers, of the Box-B," Nell introduced herself. Reminded, her smile faded and the bitter expression came back to her lips.

HIS mind on Lapine and the things he had overheard, common sense urged Brick to keep away from this girl and a mess of trouble. But something deep within him rose up and fought common sense back into the shadows and celebrated the victory by loudly announcing that this was the one girl for Brick Lowe.

"You're in trouble, Miss Travers," he said, firmly planting his feet on a trail from which there would be no turning back.

"What makes you say that?"

Brick was not a good liar. Anyhow, he never intended to deceive this girl about anything. So he told her the simple truth about his eavesdropping. "I like to help you," he ended.

The mixture of humiliation and rage that blazed up in the smoky eyes faded as she looked up at the big cowboy and read his sober earnestness.

"There's nothing you can do," she said. "Even the law can't or won't help me. I'll tell you the rest of the story and you'll see I'm right." She led the way back into the parlor and they sat on the horsehair sofa.

"My father, William Travers, built up the Box-B," Nell began. "It's one of the

biggest outfits in the valley. After my mother died my father married a widow with one son, Don Wright. We all got along very well. Don was a little wild and used to take trips and be gone several months sometimes. Finally he settled down and become foreman.

"My father passed on last year and my stepmother was only a month behind him. Don inherited his mother's widow's third of the property and I inherited the rest of it. Everything went on about as before until three months ago. Then Don got a letter that seemed to frighten him. He said he had to take a trip to Mexico, and left.

"Three weeks later I got a letter from Don saying he wasn't coming back. He had sold his interest in the Box-B to a James Lapine who was coming to take possession. That was the man you heard in here with me. He had all the papers properly signed and moved out to the ranch. He fired all the old hands and replaced them with gunmen of his own choosing. You heard the rest."

Mention of Mexico had set something in motion in Brick's memory. He was now positive of where he had seen James Lapine, if that was his name. It was one night on the border, when he was with the border patrol. The patrol was making a raid on an attempt to run wet cattle across the line. Brick hadn't got a real good look, but he did see light fall on the face of one of the outlaws. The narrow build of it and the shape of the man all pointed to Lapine. That, connected with the absence of the deputy sheriff, gave Brick the germ of an idea.

"This don't look hopeless to me," he encouraged Nell. "I heard you fire Lapine from his job as foreman. As the majority owner you were within your rights. There must be some way to make it stick and replace him with a man of your own."

"Who would go into that nest of gunmen Lapine has imported?" asked Nell. "No man of River Bend would do it."

"How about one of the men Lapine fired? What became of them anyhow?"

"They're all here in town at Mrs. McCarty's boarding house. They're waiting to see what is going to happen. However, there isn't one among them that could take the lead in a thing like this."

"How would I do as foreman?" questioned Brick. "You don't know me, but I know my trade."

"You!" Nell's exclamation was one of astonishment.

"I said I wanted a job, didn't I?"

"But why this job?"

"You want the truth?"

"I never want anything else."

"Until a few minutes ago I had only one reason for wanting to settle here. I liked the country. Now I have another reason. I fell in love with you at first sight. Nothing could drive me out of here until we're married."

Again fire glowed in Nell's eyes. She took a backward step and seemed to grow taller than her slender height. For a moment, Brick thought she was going to slap him.

"You are going to far and too fast," she said coldly. "Besides, you don't know me at all, nor I you."

"Our hearts know all about each other," he said seriously. "Mine has known you always. It told me that the second I laid eyes on you. Just listen to what your heart says about me."

Nell's heart had picked up a beat and it disturbed her. Her anger refused to hold its edge. This cowboy couldn't be right. Things like this didn't happen outside of stories—at least not to her.

"This is ridiculous," she frowned, trying to be calm.

"Yes'm, it sure is, looking at it like a problem in arithmetic. Looking at it from my angle, it's plumb wonderful! And if that suspicious light I see flickering up in them beautiful eyes means what I think it does, forget it. Don't confuse me with Lapine. I probably ain't as well heeled as two-thirds of the Box-B, but I ain't broke either, and I didn't steal it."

No one likes to have their secret thoughts plucked like waiting flowers, no matter how intriguing and attractive the pickee.

"You don't know what I was thinking at all!" Nell said, but couldn't meet his eye.

"I'm sure I hope not," grinned Brick. "Now about that job. We can forget the personal angle till our other troubles are camped and bedded down. Judging by the looks and talk of that jasper, Lapine, ro-

mance must be at least two looks and a a couple of hollers in the future."

"It's more distant that that," said Nell, fighting back the warm glow that was stealing over her. She knew she ought to send this big cowboy away for his affrontery. But there was strength in him and honesty; and how she did need both.

While she hesitated, someone came in the lobby and then a square built, cowpoke with gray in his dark hair, stuck an anxious and inquiring face in the door. The whole ensemble lighted as his gaze fell on Nell.

"So here you are," he said. "We was up to the boarding house and saw you ride into town a spell back. A little while ago, Si Fagan swore he saw what looked like one of Lapine's owlhoot hands riding your Nibs' horseback toward the Box-B. We figgered he must be mistaken, but thought we'd better find out."

"Yes, it was Nibs, Si saw," admitted Nell. "Lapine, without even asking me, let his new man have my horse to ride to the ranch. I fired Lapine as foreman, and he refused to be fired."

"Doggone him! Why did Don let a crook like that have his share of the ranch?" growled the cowpoke helplessly.

"Mr. Lowe, this is Tom Rex, one of the boys Lapine fired from the Box-B," introduced Nell. "Mr. Lowe has offered to take on the job of our foreman."

Tom studied Brick with intense interest and then nodded.

"I wouldn't wonder if you could take Lapine's measure and have plenty left over," he approved in a tone that made the pulse in Nell's throat prominent with its beating. "But how about the others?"

"How many of the old Box-B hands can we count on?" asked Brick.

"All five of us," replied Tom solidly. "We're right back of Nell."

"I suppose Lapine has plenty gunhawks," suggested Brick.

"Seven, counting the man who rode Nibs out," answered Tom. "Lapine makes eight. There's only four out at the ranch now. Squint Miller, Scar Dixie and Shorty Fuller followed the buckboard into town. They're all across the street in the Crystal Palace Saloon."

"So that's why Lapine was so sure I'd ride out to the ranch with him in the buckboard. He had strength enough to force me," Nell said.

"The thing to do is to act now while we've got the gang split in half," said Brick.

"The Box-B boys are not gunmen," worried Nell.

"Neither am I, even if it would be hard to convince certain parties who got numerous right in my face," said Brick with a modesty that robbed his words of any hint of boasting, but did have the effect of assuring Nell and Tom that he had no fear of Lapine or any of his ilk. "What we've got to do is use strategy."

Both Nell and Tom waited expectantly.

"Where's the sheriff's office?" asked Brick.

"Ben Cross is no good. Anyway, he's out of town. Don't you remember?" reminded Nell.

"I don't want the deputy, I want to burglarize his office," said Brick.

"How's that again?" inquired Tom, suspicion in his eyes.

"I've got more than a hunch that Lapine under other names is a wanted man," explained Brick. "That being so, there will be other wanted men associated with him. I figger to use that idea to get rid of the whole pack. Here's my plan. He dropped his voice till no one could possibly overhear and outlined what he had in mind.

"It might work," agreed Tom doubtfully.

"Sure it will work," said Nell. "The only part I don't like is it leaves me twirling my thumbs."

"Don't let that worry you," grinned Brick. "If Lapine and his crew come out on top, you'll be right out of the frying pan into the fire. Now, Tom, you come with me to the sheriff's office. I need a lookout. Then you can go round up your boys and drill what they're to do into 'em till they can't miss."

"Leave it to me," said Tom. "Come on." He led Brick out the back door of the hotel.

LEFT alone, Nell went to the front window and cautiously peered across the street to the Crystal Palace Saloon. Her face grew stiff with anger. Squint Miller was out front watching the hotel. Lapine had put a shadow on her trail to see that she didn't slip one over on him. She had an urge to leave the hotel to see what

would happen, only it would jeopardize Brick's plan.

After an agonizing wait, Tom came in through the back of the hotel. He was worried.

"We're all set up to a certain point," he said. "Trouble is, that damn Squint Miller is out front of the Crystal Palace watching the hotel. Someway we've got to get rid of him, and quick."

"Why, of course," Nell said. "Lapine must have seen you come in here and is waiting to see what we're going to do. We'll both go out on the porch and I'll tell you loud enough so Squint can hear that you boys can't help me."

They went out on the porch together and put on the act. Nell turned back into the hotel with bowed head while Tom walked away. Quick as she was back in the lobby she rushed to the parlor window. Squint was just going into the saloon and he didn't come back. It had worked.

In a few minutes she saw Tom and the other Box-B boys wandering down the street. Then, suddenly, not a one of them was in sight. A moment later she saw Brick Lowe coming leisurely from the other direction. Once Nell's heart told her that his eyes were trying to penetrate the drapes of the parlor hotel window. Otherwise, no one would have suspected the tall cowboy had a thing on his mind.

Brick came in front of the Crystal Palace Saloon and stopped. He seemed to debate with himself about going in and finally did so. As the doors flapped behind him, Nell found she was biting her lips. If anything happened to him! That was a silly way to feel! He was just a strange cowboy! But she knew she was kidding herself, even if she refused to admit it.

When Brick entered the Crystal Palace, aside from the fat bartender with his little eyes almost out of sight behind puffy lids, there were five men in the saloon. Lapine was one of them. Three of the others were easily identified by the descriptions Nell and Tom had furnished during the planning.

The fifth man was of a different breed. He was small, skinny and elderly with iron gray hair. Backed against the bar by the man Brick identified as Squint Miller, the old fellow was gazing up at him unafraid.

They all paused in what they were doing long enough to give Brick a hard stare as he went to the bar and ordered a beer. Noting that he didn't seem interested in what they were doing, they all turned back to the old man. Squint shoved him hard against the bar.

"So you was hittin' out of the country to tell some nosey ranger a bunch of lies about what was going on at the Box-B? Eh, George?" inquired Squint harshly.

"I warn't goin' to tell no lies," denied George.

"Jest what was you aimin' to tell, George?" asked Squint, his bleak eyes shining with cruel hardness. He struck the old man across the mouth, cutting his lip until it bled.

"Jest the truth," said George steadily.

The answer infuriated Squint. He smashed his fist into the old man's face, knocking him sagging against the bar.

"You was fixin' to lie us into trouble!" he snarled.

"All I was goin' to say," said the old man, "was that a bunch of thugs took me and my wife off the Box-B by force so they could git Nell Travers out there alone and helpless."

"You see?" Squint turned and looked at Lapine. "Good thing we sighted him sneaking up the road on a livery hoss."

"We'll take him back to the ranch," said Lapine. "By treating him kindly, maybe he'll learn to tell the truth by the time he leaves again."

"I ain't goin' out to the ranch!" refused the old man. "You want to git me out there and murder me!"

"Teched in the head," Squint said sorrowfully and glanced toward the bartender and Brick to see how it was going over. "Well," he ended, "le's go."

BRICK couldn't afford to have Lapine or any of his crew leave the Crystal Palace. And he was pretty sure that Tom hadn't had time to get the Box-B boys set. Always something arose to make life difficult.

"If this man you call George is teched in the head, he needs treatment he can't get at a ranch. He ought to be taken to a hospital," Brick sparred for time.

Lapine whirled around. Squint fell back a step.

"Just what business is it of yours?" purred Lapine with a note of deadly warning.

"None. I'm just curious," said Brick. "I was wondering who figgered out the way to treat a case of teched head was to bust the patient in the teeth and accuse him of lyin'." He shifted his position slightly so his hand was only inches away from the polished butt of his gun.

"Keep your long nose out of this, or I'll knock it out!" blared Lapine arrogantly. He stood on widely planted feet, his hands ready to dart for his weapons. There was a sureness about him that labeled him as one with top rating in his profession.

Brick saw his time had run out. Stalling was past. An ironic smile lifted the corners of his mouth. Just as he had found a real reason for living he was going to lose his life. He was good with a gun, but the odds were too great.

"It's my business if that man is George Shelton," he accepted the challenge, and hoping to upset them with a surprise. "I'm the new foreman of the Box-B, and I'm hiring George and his wife to go back there to work. The rest of you are fired!"

Brick raised his voice to a shout on the last word. It was the signal for the Box-B boys to come in front and back. Nothing of the sort happened, but all of the Lapine crew went for their guns. Squint, his reflexes fast, had seen this coming quick enough to get a two seconds lead over everyone, including Lapine and Brick.

Feeling this was the end, Brick ignored the man who was going to cut him down. All he prayed for was the strength to cling to his feet long enough to finish Lapine. Then the forgotten man went into action.

George Shelton catapulted himself at Squint's knees. He swept the gunman's feet from under him just as his gun was coming in line. The bullet went into the bar and Squint hit the floor in a fighting tangle with the old man.

Feet pounded outside and Tom's welcome voice yelled: "Hold it! You're all covered!"

Lapine's pale eyes filmed over and his gunhand slowly dropped to his side. The others followed his lead, including Squint who now scrambled to his feet. Brick

wiped sudden sweat from his forehead. He had been saved by a split second.

Tom and two others were already through the swinging doors. Two more were coming in the back way. Each man wore a deputy star Brick had dug out of the deputy sheriff's office.

Lapine and his gang eyed the stars with wary apprehension and astonishment. The effect was not lost on Brick.

Lapine's pale eyes came back to the man waiting at the bar.

"So you're the new foreman of the Box-B!" he sneered. "Think I can't spot a sneaking lawman far as I can see him? Suppose you cut the clowning and tell us what the hell you think you're doing!"

Brick flipped up one corner of his shirt collar. Underneath was pinned a gold shield he had rifled from the deputy sheriff's effects. It was a convention badge of some kind. At a distance of ten feet it looked plenty legal and important.

"My department," said Brick, "got word of peculiar doings in River Bend. I'm here to have a look. Practically the first glimpse showed me a wet cattle contractor. It give me an idea there might be some nice reward money close around. This is just a little checkup along with other business. Tom, unload the boys and remove temptation."

Tom gathered the guns from the stunned Lapine gang.

"You ain't got a thing on us, you damn, sneaking lawman!" grated Lapine.

"No? I've got what happened just now and Miss Travers has already added plenty more. However, as I said, this here is a private checkup of my own." He reached into his shirt front and pulled out a flat pack of *wanted men* reward posters he had taken from the deputy sheriff's desk. He laid the pack flat on the bar and studied the top poster, glancing at the Lapine gang, critically, from time to time.

Sweat started out on Squint and Shorty. Lapine and Scar carried it off better, but showed a distinct unease.

Just the way they acted was a give-away that they had things to hide. Brick went ahead with his act with increasing confidence. Wetting his thumb he lifted the top poster, turned it face down on the bar and consulted the next one.

This time he turned and smiled thinly at Shorty Fuller.

"Listen to this one, Shorty," he invited. "About six-feet-five, weight around 180 pounds, prominent nose slightly canted to the left, big ears and sandy hair, thin on top. Known as Shorty or Slim. Suspected of murder and wanted for handling wet cattle." He stopped and raised his brows. "Well, well," he went on, "it looks like this little trip will pay expenses."

"It ain't me!" roared Shorty.

"Keep your shirt on," advised Brick coolly. "All you've got to do is prove it ain't you, and you're free." He folded the poster and put it in his pocket. Then he went on to the next.

"Have you got one on Jim Lapine?" inquired Tom.

"Not under that name, but I've got one I figger fits him farther down in the pile. Here's a description of one of these bad boys. See if you can tell which one as I read it off." He glanced at Squint.

"Description of Squint?" asked Tom.

"Listen and see what you make of it. Funny how a few little things like a squint eye, yellow teeth and a jaw setting at an off angle like it had been kicked that way by a disgusted hoss, can mark a man so he can't take no comfort committin' murder a-tall."

"I ain't on no poster!" denied Squint furiously. "I ain't the only *hombre* with a squint eye!"

"Maybe this ain't you, after all, Squint," admitted Brick. "As I read on, I find something that don't fit you. It says here that this bird is popular with the ladies." Brick had noticed the man's vanity and the way he dressed. "Now I ask you, what woman in her right senses would take a second look at such?"

Squint reddened with outrage.

"I can get any woman I—" he started.

"Shut up!" broke in Lapine, more to draw attention than to interrupt Squint's outburst.

At last he had become cool enough to notice something Brick had planned for him to notice and was already wondering if he was going to have to point it out to him.

The Box-B boys were so interested in the poster business they seemed to have forgotten they were guarding dangerous prisoners.

They had even drawn together in a knot, leaving a clear way to the swinging doors only a few paces from the Lapine gang. Lapine's eyes made a flick that informed and alerted his men.

"Lawman, that's all rot!" Lapine shouted. Then he leaped for the door with his gang right behind him.

"After 'em!" yelled Brick.

The Box-B boys hit the doorway together and hung awkwardly, giving the escaping outlaws time to reach their horses and head for the pass.

Brick had told Nell to be sure and stay in the hotel parlor where she would be safe. But when Squint's gun roared in the saloon and she could see the Box-B boys were late, it was too much for her to stand. She ran out on the porch, her gun in her hand. She stood there hesitating, almost ready to defy all precedents and rush into the saloon.

There was nothing but ominous silence from across the way. It seemed to her that she just had to know what had happened. She acknowledged to herself that she loved Brick Lowe and had from the minute he had said such shocking things to her.

Plenty of noise came from the saloon now. A rush of feet and the doors flapped open. Out rushed Lapine and his men. The men flung themselves on their horses at the hitchrail and spurred down the street toward the river bridge and Apache Pass.

Lapine had come to town in the buckboard. However, there were several horses at the hotel hitchrail. The outlaw made for the best one. Then he saw Nell on the porch with a gun dangling in her hand.

Moving with amazing speed for a man his size, he bounded to the porch and had his hands on Nell before she realized what he was about to do. He snatched at her gun. Armed, he could down the lawman. Without a leader, he didn't fear the others. All was not lost, and the stakes were high.

"Soon's I kill that damned law sneak, I'm going to take you to Mexico where that fool stepbrother of yours is," he boasted. "He thought he killed a man I shot and bribed me to keep quiet with a third of the Box-B. I'll marry you and we can sell the Box-B and live below the border like a king and queen. Gimme that gun!"

Nell was fighting him with all her lithe, young strength. He couldn't get his hands on the weapon she held and the dangerous seconds were fleeing. He crushed her against the wall of the building, caught her hand and twisted the gun away just as Brick hit the porch steps.

Lapine whirled like a great cat. The gun flashed around in a swift arc. Brick had the advantage, but lost it when he was forced to bound to one side to get Nell out of his line of fire. Both guns flamed at once.

Brick thought he had been hit on the head with a hammer. The next thing he knew he was stretched out and his head was pillowed in a soft lap. His eyes opened and he looked up into the lovely, frightened face of Nell Travers. He managed a grin.

"Did I let that mangy coyote take a bite of me?" he asked. "And did he get away?"

"Lapine's bullet cut a groove right into the bone of your skull. For a minute I thought you were dead." Nell was weak with relief. "You got Lapine right through the heart. The boys just carried him across the street."

There was a tingling sensation in the region of Brick's mouth. He had a growing conviction that as he was coming out from under the effects of the blow, that warm lips had been pressed on his.

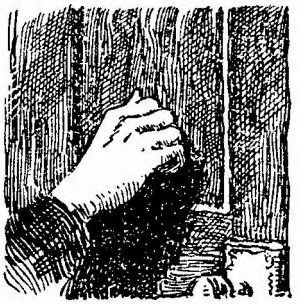
"Does your kissing me just now mean that you agree to marry me?" he asked.

"You were playing possum and peeked!" Nell accused.

"Before I get bandaged up and us Box-B boys ride out to the ranch and finish the cleanup, I want to peek again," he said and reached up his arms.

"Go ahead and peek," smiled Nell and once again pressed her soft lips against his.

The Story Tellers' Circle



Collecting Items

EVER since Berton Cook conceived the idea of a miserly collector with his private museum packed with hard-to-get items collected by a not altogether willing field scout, he has had inquiries about the gloating Harden Bayle, and the young adventurous mate of the ship *Edgemont*. This kind of thing happens according to Mr. Cook:

"We met at a cigar counter, total strangers. Said he, 'Howdy—and who is this Harden Bayle in real life? Come now, you writers don't pick characters right out of the air.'

"Sometime afterward a different young man asked, 'I've just read another of your Harden Bayle stories and still you don't give away the name of the mate of the *Edgemont*. Well . . . ?'

"Well, Mr. Cook sez us, how about Harden Bayle and the mate of the *Edgemont*. We want to know, too!"

So, without benefit of thumbscrews, the author of "The Senor's Cane" replies:

"On June a Po'keepsie doctor ordered me to camp on The Barrens beyond Kerhonkson for the summer—and my sinuses. Lysle and I joined the berry pickers to meet expenses. We roamed great hills and heard stories of huge fenced game preserves, of large houses of New Yorkers and vacation-time luxurious living therein. During periods of vacancy, natives broke into the establishments, so they boasted. In fact, they told one story of reducing a grand piano to kindling with axes.

"Then another summer, I forested on an estate some miles distant for a New York banker who was building a hotel in the wilds with direct phone connections with Wall Street in every room. Now put together the berrypicking and the foresting experiences and out of them comes Harden Bayle. He is that banker. Long ago both he and I have forgotten each other's name.

"Out of Beacon Hill society have occasionally emerged characters who kicked over the traces of circumscribed and predetermined living. Harvard, close by, featuring individuality, can easily provide impetus to the rebellious tendency. Sometimes the combined influences produce genius, but occasionally a strikeback to the early days when only one-fourth of Boston's Puritans could have attended church if they'd wanted to. Since rebellion in a man plays on the fringe of lawlessness, it may cross the line in places. The mate of the old *Edgemont* crossed, and so far he's never got all the way back." BERTON E. COOK.

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