"Straws in the Wind"
A long novelette by

W. C. TUTTLE

Short Stories

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BIGGEST AND BEST—ACTION

Short

TWICE A MONTH

CONTENTS

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JULY 10th, 1938

COVER—William F. Soare

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"SOME Sinners Is Powerful Righteous." Well, it is our guess that they are; also that that is a good title for a story. It is the name of the Caddo Cameron novelette in our next issue, and in it Mr. Cameron has introduced a preacher. The author feels that the preacher of the Old West had a great share in making it what it was. "He rode up and down our frontiers," writes Caddo Cameron, "in company with farmers, freighters, hunters, cowmen, outlaws, peace officers and all the others; and if the truth were known, he was just about the most picturesque of the lot." The preacher in the new Cameron story is as picturesque as they come, and the story also introduces a new character to SHORT STORIES in the person of Skyline Jackson, enterprising young deputy sheriff of Bandero, Texas —whose methods are his own, and good. One of the best novelettes we've read for some time. It and Tuttle's immense "Straws in the Wind" in this issue are in the same class, we feel.

* * * * *

Not long ago we read in a newspaper a dispatch from Sydney, Australia, describing the crew of a trading ship that had reached that port from the Solomons. The whole tale sounded so much like one of Captain Moore's ship's companies that we give it here, just to show that the South Seas is—or should it be are?—the South Seas. The captain of this real, but fictional, ship was a New Zealander, the mate an Englishman, the supercargo a South African, the chief engineer a Scot (quite according to fictional tradition), the second engineer a Dane, and the eighteen members of the crew Polynesians and Melanesians. It wasn't apparently Quarter Moon Island from which this motley crew came—but it might just as well have been.

* * * * *

It seems that in the Bob Carse Foreign Legion story in our next issue there were two Yanks; rather an unusual state of affairs, but there it was. And one was determined that the other should learn French in order to make good at his profession; but the younger man, quite properly, objected to this "this is the cap of my uncle" sort of French that they put in text books. Was *that* language for a fightin' man, he thought. Well, that's the title of the story—"The Cap of My Uncle"—and as things turn out, it was fighting language after all. A good Carse story, and one not to be missed.

Coming up in the next issue

STRAWS IN THE WIND

By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "Gunsmoke and the Golden Eagles," "In Sheep's Clothing," etc.

JACK DEAN drew rein at the top of the grade and looked back, far into the blue haze of the distant valley. The old dirt road, like broken bits of dirty-yellow ribbon, stretched over the hills, losing itself in the hazy distance.

Ahead of him the road ran through a natural cut in the hills, before sloping down into Council Valley. He could see the rooftops of Hutch McFee's place, the keeper of the gate. Near the house would be a huge, double-locked gate, barring the entrance to the valley. Jack remembered Old Hutch McFee, hard-faced, grizzled, suspicious. And there was Len McFee, Hutch's strapping son, ignorant, uncouth, but strong as a buffalo bull.

Jack Dean was six feet tall, twenty-two years of age, with the physique of a middle-weight fighter. His eyes were the peculiar greenish-blue of ice, and usually about as cold. Wolf Dean had the same eyes, the same determined mouth. Perhaps that was how he had ruled Council Valley for over twenty-five years.

But Wolf Dean was dead now, and Jack Dean, erstwhile "Wolf Pup" was

The Wolf Cub Comes Home to Council Valley

back at the valley, after an absence of twelve years. He was the last of the Deans of Council Valley, sent for by the men who ruled the valley; asked to come back and take Wolf Dean's place on their council.

Jack Dean turned from looking at the valley, spurred his horse along through the cut and drew up before the huge gate. Old Hutch, white-haired now, hobbled out, his gnarled right hand clutching a Winchester rifle. He shaded his eyes and looked closely at the rider.

"Jack Dean, eh?" he cackled. "The Wolf Pup's back ag'in. Well, they said they sent for yuh. But I didn't think you'd come back. Nossir, I didn't," insisted the old man, shaking his head. "I told 'em that eddication wouldn't let yuh come back. I said that if ary a girl or boy was allowed to leave the valley, they'd never come back. Well, mebbe I didn't know what kinda stuff you was made out of, Jack Dean."

"I don't know why I came back, Mr. McFee," replied Jack. "I remember Council Valley. I wasn't too young to remember. But I was born here, and I—I came back."

"Yo're the only pup the old wolf ever had, Jack. He shore ruled the valley with claw and fang. Mebbe you can take up where he left off—I dunno. You've likely got newfangled ideas, which won't go here. We git along—like we are."

"A change might be good," suggested Jack mildly, as the old man fumbled with the heavy padlocks.

"Change? What kinda change? Yore father didn't want no change."

"My father," said Jack gently, "was not educated. He did the best he could."

THE old man shook his head ominously. "I wouldn't talk change, until you've learned how the land lies, Jack Dean. There's many a load of buckshot north of Lost Horse; and they've han-

kered to use it, since the Wolf died."

"How did my father die?' queried Jack. "The message didn't say."

"A shotgun bar'l, poked through a bedroom window. The Wolf was asleep—and he never knowed what hit him. Nobody found him, until next day. It was a big funeral, Jack Dean. I ain't seen that many rifles in church in many a day."

"So they murdered him, eh?" said Jack. "Blasted him in his sleep."

"He never knowed what hit him."

The gate creaked open and Jack Dean rode through, with never a backward glance at the old white-haired man, standing there, dangling chains and padlocks in his hands. He shook his head sadly and put the locks back into place. As he turned from the gate, Len McFee came from the house, wiping the back of a hairy hand across his lips.

"Whyn't yuh come out and say hello to the Wolf Pup?" asked the old man.

"Him and his pretty clothes," sneered Len. "Betcha he thinks he's goin' t' rise hell and shove a chunk under it. Smart's a whip, eh?"

"No, Len, he didn't try actin' smart t' me. Seemed kinda mild."

"Wolf Dean was mild-actin', too. Well, I'll betcha Jack Dean don't last long; him and his eddication. Council Valley will soon set him to rights, and I'm bettin' that the council asks an election, instead of app'intin' him to take Wolf Dean's place. Fools if they don't."

"Did you hear talk of that, Len?" queried the old man.

"Shore. Jist 'cause he's Wolf Dean's son, that don't give him no right to boss us. He's a damned foreigner, Old Man. Been gone twelve years. Outlawed himself, I'd say. Sol Feeney talked 'fore the council couple nights ago, arguin' for a election. They want a man from north of Lost Horse. Mebbe they're right, too. Ain't never been nary a man from up there to set in judgment."

"You quit puttin' in for them fellers, Len. Yo're part of Wolf Dean's gang, and don't forgit it. You let the Feeneys, Harrises and the Weirs fight their own battles, not to mention them gun-packin' Orths. They're all bad medicine, Len. Corn whiskey and ignorance."

"They ain't so bad, Old Man."

"They ain't! Why, Len, you—" Old Hutch McFee leaned in close to his hulking son, studying him closely. Then he asked:

"Are you hangin' around Weir's place, Len?"

"No, I ain't hangin' around. I was up there yesterday, thasall."

"Uh-huh. I seen her the other day, down at the general store. Dan Fallon said she was Donna Weir. He said she growed up here, but nobody noticed her —growin' up. Purty as hell," mused the old man, but snapped angrily, "She's rattlesnake breed. I wouldn't trust Mose Weir as far as I could spit quicksilver."

"We won't argue about her," remarked Len mildly. "She wouldn't even look at me."

"See that she don't, Len."

JACK DEAN rode down the narrow, winding highway into the valley. Fat cattle were everywhere, it seemed. He passed the ranch of Bart Shivers. Jack remembered him as being a huge, bearded man, slightly lame, who talked in a high-pitched voice. Next was the ranch of Ed Miles. Jack did not remember him so well, but he did remember Granny Miles, whom people said was an oracle. She must be a hundred years old now, mused Jack.

Then he came to his father's ranch—his ranch now, it seemed, with its huge, arched gateway and a great grove of ancient sycamores, which shaded and almost concealed the rambling old house. Nothing seemed changed. Even the two barking dogs might have been replicas of his own two dogs, twelve years ago. They answered to the same names, Nick and Rooney.

Two men met him on the old porch, looking him over narrowly, until he came close to them. They were Johnny Miles and Harry Fallon, appointed by the council to take care of the place until Jack Dean came home. They were two or three years younger than Jack, and he did not remember them. They were typical of the Valley, and Jack could see contempt for his clothes in their eyes.

They talked awkwardly with him, as he looked the house over, and said they'd be going, if he didn't need them. Jack didn't. He wanted to be alone to look over his old home, to plan what he would do in Council Valley—if anything. The house was unchanged, inside or out. Crude but comfortable.

He wondered if his father had run the place alone, or if the help had left, following his death. He cooked himself a meal, and sat on the porch, smoking, wondering what it was all about. His father had sent him away to school, to college; asking him to study law. Jack had stayed with his father's sister, until he finished high-school, when the old lady died.

College was a different proposition. Jack's temper, wild spirit and love of personal freedom had spelled defeat for him as far as college was concerned; so he got a job. After that he got many jobs, but with the same results—fired. He had been just out of a job, when the message from the Council finally caught up with him. But he had never let his father know but that he was still in college.

His father had taught him to shoot, when he was very small. It had been an obsession with Wolf Dean. And his last words to Jack, when he took him to the railroad at Redrock, forty miles away from Council Valley, was "Kid, above all things, keep on learnin' to shoot a six-gun. When you come home, you'll need that knowledge."

And Jack Dean did keep on learning to shoot. That was one phase of learning of which he never tired, and his most treasured possession was a black-handled .45 Colt. Now he had his father's two Bisley Model Colts, .45s, with hand carved bone handles, on which were snarling wolf heads. To Jack they were priceless.

HE FOUND that he could wear his father's clothes, even his high-heel boots and big, Stetson sombrero. They made him feel more like a part of the valley. He was sitting on the steps, watching the moon come up over the jagged hills, when a rider came through the gate, and drew up beside the porch. He called to Jack, who came out to him. It was Harry Fallon. He said:

"Dad sent me to tell yuh to come to the council tonight. They'll be lookin' fer yuh."

"I'll be there," replied Jack Dean. Afterwards he thought it was queer that he didn't ask what time they expected him. But that was like Council Valley, where definite time meant nothing.

He found horses in the stable, saddles hanging on pegs. Fallon had stabled the horse Jack had rented in Redrock that morning. He threw the saddle on a black gelding, and rode to Buckhorn, the only town in the valley. It was just the same, as Jack remembered it, except one or two more buildings had been added. There was the general store and post office, big saloon, a small restaurant, and the big council hall. Twelve years had made little difference in Buckhorn.

Jack tied his horse in front of the general store. There were quite a lot of folks

in town, and they looked sharply at this chap-clad young man, expecting to see a man in city clothes. But Jack paid no attention to them, as he strode straight for the council hall. There were several men outside the place, talking together. Jack heard one of them say:

"There he is now. And he's a-wearin' the Old Wolf's hat!"

"Fine feathers won't make no wolf out of a coyote," replied one of the men, and they all laughed.

Jack closed the door behind him and stopped to look around. Four men sat around a small table in that big room, where only one lamp was lighted. They all got to their feet, looking at Jack. They were all big men, roughly dressed, bearded.

"Jack Dean?" queried a high-pitched voice, which Jack recognized.

"That's right, Mr. Shivers," he replied.

"Remembered me, eh?" laughed the big man. "Heard yuh was in the valley; so we didn't waste no time. Don't yuh remember Ed Miles, Tom Creevy and Dan Fallon?"

JACK shook hands with them, as they looked him over curiously.

"My letter must have been late gittin' to yuh, Jack," said Miles. "Yore father was buried two weeks ago."

"I came as soon as I got it," replied Jack.

"Set down here, Jack," said Shivers, pointing at his own vacated chair. Then he stepped behind the other vacant chair, placing a hand on its back.

"Yuh see, we won't let no man set in this chair, until he's qualified to set there," he explained. "It was yore father's chair for twenty-five years—and no other man ever sat in it."

"I see," nodded Jack.

"And," continued Shivers, "we promised yore father that if anythin' happened to him, we'd give you first chance to take over the place he held in the council. It's caused lots of argument. Many of the people resent it. They want an election. The community north of Lost Horse want an election. They've allus wanted one of their own on the council. That's why we want this settled—before they git to raisin' too much hell over things."

"What would prevent me from qualifying?" asked Jack curiously.

"Several things," replied Shivers. "You've been out in the world and got a college eddication."

Jack winced a little, but motioned Shivers to proceed.

"You might have ideas that don't fit things here, Jack. We've run our own affairs all these years. There ain't never been a sheriff nor a lawyer through that big gate. We take care of our own. Yo're the only lawyer ever to come in here."

"We do our own lawin'," stated Tom Creevy. "We has our own ideas of right and wrong—and they're pretty good, too."

"We've made a lot of money, too," said Shivers quietly. "The mine that belongs to the council has piled up a lot of gold. We pay all the taxes for everybody at the county seat, and it gives us a place to make offenders work out their sentences to the profit of everybody. With modern machinery we could take out lots more, but we're satisfied.

"I reckon mebbe you remember a few things. You was about ten year old, when you was sent outside, wasn't yuh? That's one trouble in takin' yuh in here. Some of 'em claim yo're a foreigner. They say you'll want to change things; that eddication has ruined yuh."

"Well," replied Jack dryly, "I may say that I never got an overdose of education."

"That's good!" exclaimed Dan Fallon.

"Would you," propounded Shivers, "agree to listen to us and do as we ask yuh to do, knowin' what yore father would do, when anythin' comes up, instead of tryin' somethin' new?"

Jack smiled thinly. "I could either do that—or quit, couldn't I?"

"That's what I meant. You'd take it thataway, Jack?"

"Why not let things go for a few days, Mr. Shivers? Give me a chance to see how things are done around here; get used to the valley. I've been away a long time."

"There's a heap of sense in that," declared Fallon. "We can tell folks that—well, we're waitin' for Jack to make up his mind."

THE other three men agreed, and they all shook hands with Jack.

"Say nothin' of anythin' that is ever said in here, Jack," cautioned Shivers. "Council meetin's are always secret. Come out to the ranch and see us; yo're allus welcome."

Jack walked along down to the general store, where quite a number of people were buying or loafing. A little, hawk-faced man, with as evil a pair of eyes as Jack had ever seen, chuckled in his face and held out a skinny hand to him.

"Well, well! Don'tcha remember Sol Feeney?" he cackled. "Why, yo're the spittin' image of yore father. Great friend of mine—yore father."

"I believe he was, Mr. Feeney; how are yuh?" replied Jack, shaking hands with the man whom his father always mistrusted.

"A fine, upstandin' young man," declared Feeney. "You're a credit to the valley. Did they elect yuh to the council tonight?"

"Don't you think they'd be a little hasty—takin' me on sight?"

"Heh, heh, heh, heh!" cackled Feeney. "Modest young man. Donna! Donna! Come here and meet Jack Dean."

Feeney had called to someone behind him, and Jack turned to see Donna Weir, a half-smile on her face, looking up at him. Jack Dean had seen many pretty girls, but they all faded into insignificance when he saw Donna Weir. She was about an inch over five feet, slender, a figure which not even her home-made clothes could conceal, and an olive-tinted face, as delicate as a master's cameo. Her brown wavy hair threw off a golden glint in the lamplight.

"I am very glad to meet Mr. Jack Dean," she said simply.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Jack quietly. "Why, I—you are Moses Weir's daughter."

"Old Mose Weir's brat," she said.

"I—I'd hate to hear anybody call you that," he said.

"Would you? You should have been here, before I wore long dresses and stockings. I growed up in one single day—and they lopped off the brat. I—I suppose I washed my face—that day."

Jack realized that all conversation had ceased, and everyone was listening.

"At any rate," said Jack, "you are now Miss Weir."

"I suppose so — but they all call me Donna. And I am pleased to have met you, sir."

SHE turned and walked proudly from the store. In fact, she strutted just a trifle. Jack's lips twisted in a queer smile, as he looked after her. Sol Feeney cackled, and Jack looked sharply at him.

"Purty, ain't she?" chuckled Feeney. "Boys all crazy over her. Too bad she lives north of Lost Horse."

"What the devil has that got to do with her?" asked Jack.

"You *ain't* been back long, have yuh?" laughed Feeney.

"You live north of Lost Horse, don't yuh?" queried Jack.

"Course, I do; and I'm damned proud of it. Yore father never had no use for us folks. Called us revolutionists, feudists. Mebbe yo're like him—we dunno. But we do know that we don't want you on that council. It's our chance to put one of our own in there. An election will

show our stren'th—and we demand one. You jist take this warnin' from an old rawhider, Dean—don't go on that council. There's more'n one way to cause a vacancy. And next time there won't be no son to inherit the chair. Chaw that one over a while."

"I see," replied Jack, his eyes narrowing. "Shotgun vacancy. You didn't think I'd come back, did you?"

"I've done said my say," replied Sol Feeney, "and she goes as she lays. You make yore own bed—and you'll lay on it."

Sol Feeney went toward the door, and several men followed him. They were all from north of Lost Horse Creek. Jack turned calmly to the counter and purchased some tobacco, before going back to his horse.

"I believe I'm going to like Council Valley," he told the horse, as he rode toward home. "It has the right elements—a beautiful girl and trouble."

The next morning Jack found some of his father's clumsily-kept records, and went over them. They were mostly cattle deals. Judging from the information, the cattlemen of Council Valley bunched their cattle once a year and drove them all to Redrock, where the buyers met them.

Jack remembered that one of the valley laws prevented anyone from selling land to anyone, except residents of the valley. He had thought of selling out, but he realized that none of the residents could afford to pay even a fair price. Because of the fact that there was but one entrance and exit from the valley, no one employed extra riders for their cattle, not even during a roundup.

SOL FEENEY'S warning caused Jack to buckle on his gun that morning. He was at the stable, changing the stirrup length of a saddle, when he saw a rider enter the main gate. The man dismounted just inside the fence and came walking toward the front of the house. Jack saw him shift his holster carefully, as he stopped short of the porch. The man was of medium height, slender, his face shaded by the brim of a big sombrero.

Jack stepped from the stable doorway and walked toward the man, who seemed so intent on looking at the house that he did not see Jack. Fifty feet away Jack said:

"Good-morning."

The man jerked around quickly, his right hand lifted belt-high, his fingers spread.

"Stop where yuh are, Wolf Pup," he snarled.

"What's wrong?" queried Jack. The man stared at him for a space of ten seconds, or more. Then he said hoarsely:

"When yore father sent me to the mine, I swore I'd come back and kill him. But somebody else got him. Yo're the only one of the breed that's left; so I'm goin' to make it a clean sweep, damn yuh!"

The man's hand flashed down to the butt of his holstered gun, his body swaying to the left, as he drew. His gun came shoulder-high, all in a flash, but his body was still twisting from the impact of Jack Dean's first shot. The man's jerking finger fired the gun almost into the center of the front door, nearly at right-angles from the direction of Jack Dean. Then he seemed to trip over his own twisting legs, and he went sprawling on his face, his feet pointing toward young Dean.

Slowly Jack went toward him, grimacing back a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. He knew the man was dead, as he stood over him. Slowly he turned him over and looked down into the bearded face he did not recognize. The stained lips were still drawn back from the tobacco-stained teeth in a snarl.

Jack turned away from him and walked over to the steps, where he sat down, his gun hanging limply from his fingers. It was all so unreal—like a nightmare. For the moment he could not remember what the man had said. It was somthing about

making a clean sweep. A sound caused Jack to lift his head.

Only a few feet away from the dead man stood Donna Weir. She was bareheaded, clad in overalls, a colorless shirt and riding boots. Her eyes were wide as she looked at Jack.

"Terrible, isn't it," said Jack. "And I don't even know him."

"It's Park Orth," she told him.

"I remember there were Orths," said Jack. "He came to kill me."

"Your father and the council sent him to the mine for a year," said Donna. "He was turned loose last night. He—he beat his wife."

Jack nodded slowly. "I suppose he would. I'm sorry it happened. But why did you come here, Miss Weir?"

"I was in Buckhorn, and I—I saw him ride through. I thought—"

"You came here to warn me?"

"To warn you? To warn a foreigner? Park Orth was one of us, Jack Dean. And since when did one of us pack a warnin' to one of the lords of creation?"

"Then," said Jack, a thin smile on his lips, "perhaps you came to *help* him."

"Maybe I did!" she flared. "I certainly didn't come to warn you. If you don't mind, I'll be going."

"Don't mind it in the least. Miss Weir. But would you be so kind as to notify the good people of Buckhorn just what happened. It will save me the trouble of saddling a horse. I suppose you folks want to bury your own—north of Lost Horse."

"The folks north of Lost Horse will take care of *everything,*" she said. "You won't need to bother about anything."

"Thank you very much, *dulce amiga.*"

She had turned to walk to the gate, but turned quickly, her eyes flashing angrily.

"Gracias, lobata," she retorted, and walked on.

Jack chuckled grimly. He had called her sweetheart, and she had called him "young wolf," the equivalent of "wolf pup."

But in spite of her defiance he believed that she had seen Park Orth ride through Buckhorn, and had come to warn him.

IT WAS less than an hour when several men came with a wagon. Bart Shivers listened to Jack's story, after examining the body. The others listened and nodded gravely. One of them said:

"Park swore to kill Wolf Dean."

"It'll make a worse feelin' north of Lost Horse," said another.

"Sorry," said Jack. "I wasn't quite ready to die, yuh know."

"You were lucky to beat him, Jack," said Shivers. "He was a fast man on the draw."

"He talked too much," said Jack. "His mistake was in takin' time to tell me just why he was goin' to kill me."

"Well," grinned one of the men, "you bein' a stranger, he wanted yuh to know what it was all about."

"Kind of him," remarked Jack. "But what did Miss Weir report?"

Shivers smiled faintly. "Oh, she just said that Park Orth was dead in your front yard. She said she supposed you killed him."

"She didn't say how she happened to be at my place, did she?"

Shivers scratched his head thoughtfully, one eye closed a she looked quizzically at Jack Dean.

"By doggies, she didn't, Jack. Never thought to ask her either."

"It doesn't matter. Passing, and heard

the shot, I suppose. By the way, do they speak Spanish here in the valley?"

"Spanish? No, I don't reckon they do, Jack. The only Spanish person I know in the valley is old Granny Rodriguez, Donna's grandmother. She speaks it, I suppose."

"Yeah, I suppose. Maybe I better ride to town with yuh, Mr. Shivers."

"Well, maybe yuh better, Jack. I don't think that there'll be any trouble over this. Jist plain self-defense."

Jack saddled a horse and rode to Buckhorn with them. Several of Orth's friends arrived shortly, and took the body away. No one spoke about the possibility of any trial or hearing. They seemed to take it for granted that the case was closed.

"Keep yore eyes open, Jack," said Bart Shivers. "Things have been on edge for weeks, and this won't help things any. The council meets tomorrow night. Be there and be prepared to answer our questions. Either you qualify, or we will have to call an election. Yore father wouldn't ever allow any elections."

"And if I decide to not stay in the valley?" queried Jack.

"I reckon that's yore business," replied Shivers. "If yuh do, we'll have to take over yore ranch. It'll belong to the valley—along with everythin' on it."

"That's a queer law," said Jack.

"Mebbe. Yore father framed it. He made most of our laws—and he enforced 'em, too. There was a *man.*"

"Suppose that the Lost Horse folks revolt against me bein' on the council?"

"They can't do anythin'—after you've qualified."

"Except shoot me in my sleep," added Jack.

"Yes," nodded Shivers soberly, "there's always that chance."

THE ranchhouse of Moses Weir was a little better than the usual tumbledown dwelling of the folks north of Lost Horse. Perhaps the women were a little better bred, and cared more for their personal surroundings. Mose Weir was a huge, white bearded patriarch, looking very much like the pictured conception of his namesake. His nose was arched, high cheek-bones, and dark eyes, deep-set under beetling brows.

Just now the main room of the ranchhouse was crowded with men, most of them bearded, hard-eyed. Moses Weir sat in the center of the group, his eyes fixed upon Donna Weir, who was standing a few feet away, a haughty, defiant expression on her beautiful face.

"You went to warn him," said Moses Weir, his voice harsh.

"I went to see the shooting," replied Donna coldly. Someone laughed.

Donna's eyes swept the room, trying to locate the man who had dared scoff at her statement.

"You lie—you young hussy," declared Moses Weir. "You met this young foreigner and bandied words with him in the store. Lost Horse folks ain't good enough for you, eh? Now that you've took to long skirts and stockin's, you act like they're dirt under yore feet. Well, you'll marry among yore own people, young lady—and you'll keep away from the Wolf's pup."

Donna turned from looking at her father and her gaze swept over the faces of the Lost Horse men. Then she threw back her head and laughed.

"You're afraid of him," she taunted. "You're afraid he will be on the council, and because he's educated, you're afraid. You were all glad when Park Orth went down there to kill him. And because I was curious to see what happened, you set in judgment on me. Coyotes! No wonder you're afraid of the Wolf's pup."

"Yo're goin' too far, Donna," warned her father.

"You're as bad as the rest, father," said Donna. "You've always feared Wolf Dean; and now you're afraid of his son. You talk, and talk big—up here. You tell

what must be done. But you don't go down to Buckhorn and tell the council what must be done. For years you have gathered here to drink whiskey and talk against the council. Why don't you go down there and talk? You say that we're strong enough now to force them to give us justice—a voice in the council. But that's all wasted talk, because it's north of Lost Horse."

THERE was a long silence, after Donna had finished. They knew she had voiced a truth, and they had no answer. Then she turned and walked from the room. Her father made no effort to stop her. Finally he turned and looked around the room, and the men looked at him. Sol Feeney cackled huskily.

"She's done hit the nail on the head, gents. Damme, if she ain't! I'm willin' to believe she went there to see Park Orth kill that damn Dean."

"You allus was more or less of a fool, Sol," said Moses Weir.

"Mebbe that's true, Mose. But you'll have to admit that the gal done licked yuh. She flung the truth into yore face. She's got more dad-burned brains than the whole kaboodle of us put together."

"Well, what's to be done?" demanded Moses Weir warmly. "Are we goin' to set here and argue over a woman, or are we goin' to plan out somethin' to do?"

"Why not call the gal back?" chuckled Sol Feeney. "She could likely tell us something we *could* do."

"Shut up, Old Turkey Neck!" snapped Sam Orth. "Allus cacklin' and shakin' yore head. Nobody'll ever shoot you for yore wisdom."

"You ain't packin' any bullet marks, are yuh, Sam?" asked Sol.

"Stop it!" roared Moses Weir. "Do yuh want this meetin' to end in a battle?"

"That's the trouble with us," laughed Dave Harris. "We cain't get along with each other long enough to plan out anythin'. That's been our big trouble all along. Hatin' each other, bein' suspicious. Each one afraid that the other will git the best of somethin'. If they did have an election, who'd we put up for the vote?"

"Well, we'd have to select somebody," replied Moses Weir.

"Who?"

No one had any suggestion. After a long silence, Sol Feeney said:

"We might put up the gal—and save a feud."

Moses Weir got slowly to his feet and looked around the room.

"I reckon yuh better go home and think it over," he said wearily. "Talk it over among yourselves. Select the best man yuh can think of."

"And by that time," said Sol Feeney, "they'll have the Wolf Pup all qualified and settin' in Wolf Dean's chair."

"Mebbe *you'd* like to have it, Sol Feeney," said one of the men.

"All right—mebbe I would."

"You'd git four votes, Sol; yours, yore two brothers' and yore son's."

"That's right," nodded Sol soberly. "And at that, I'll bet I'd git more votes than any other man in the room. Good night, Moses."

The men left the house and rode away. Moses Weir put out the light and went heavily up the stairs to his room, where Mrs. Weir, a little, white-haired lady was sewing. He stopped in front of her, and she looked up at him.

"I'm sorry, Moses," she said slowly. "I —I was at the top of the stairs, and I heard what Donna said. I trembled for her. In all my life I have never heard a girl talk like that to her father—and before the meeting. But she always was headstrong."

Moses Weir nodded slowly, his deep-set eyes hard in the lamplight. He shoved his big hands deep in his pockets, frowning at the light. Mrs. Weir looked apprehensively at him. She knew his temper.

"You are—are going to punish Donna?" she whispered.

"No," replied Moses Weir quietly, "I am not goin' to punish her."

"What has come over you, Moses?" asked Mrs. Weir fearfully.

"The knowledge that Donna has all the courage and brains north of Lost Horse," replied the big man. "If she was a man—we'd have a man who could get more than his own vote. Good night."

MARK STEELE, tall, lean and cadaverous, rode out to see Jack Dean next morning. Mark was the legal light for the Valley, a self-made lawyer, forty years of age, with a lean fox-like face, keen little eyes, very little chin, and a neck like a turkey-buzzard. He wore a rusty-black suit, wrinkled and thread-bare, cowhide boots and no hat.

Jack met him at the door, where Mark Steele introduced himself.

"Yuh see," he explained to Jack, "I do the lawin' for the Valley."

"Where did you study?" queried Jack, after they were seated in the main room.

"At home," replied Mark. "I got me all the books."

"That must have been quite a large job," smiled Jack.

"Oh, no-o-o, I learn things awful fast. I pick up law very quick. It wasn't much of a chore."

"Nice of yuh to bother to come out here," said Jack.

"Wasn't any bother. Yuh see, I talked with Bart Shivers about yuh, and he said you'd likely need advice, bein' strange to things. For instance, yuh prob'ly don't know that the treasury is right here in this house."

"Treasury?"

"Uh-huh. Down in yore cellar. There must be two hundred and fifty pounds of gold in that safe."

"No, I didn't know it," said Jack Dean weakly. "Two hundred and fifty pounds? Let me see-e-e. That must be close to sixty thousand dollars in real money."

"Yeah, that's about what it is."

"But isn't it dangerous to have that much gold—here?"

"Shucks, no! There's five padlocks on the cellar door. All five of the council has to be here, or yuh can't open it. Each one has a key. Pretty slick, eh?"

"Five padlocks on a cellar door—guarding sixty thousand dollars."

"Sure. They've done that for years. Your father wanted that gold right where he could guard it."

"And they shot him through the window," remarked Jack. "They could have smashed the padlocks with a hammer and taken the gold at the same time, couldn't they?"

"We don't raise thieves here in Council Valley, Mr. Dean," replied Mark Steele stiffly. "We leave that to the outside world."

"The applause was deafening," murmured Jack.

"What'd yuh say?"

"Oh, I was merely thinking out loud," smiled Jack.

"Uh-huh. I do that sometimes, when I'm alone. Have yuh made up yore mind about qualifyin' for the council?"

"Not entirely. Who owns all that gold, and what is it used for?"

"It's supposed to belong to the whole valley, but is controlled by the council. Once a year all the taxes of the valley are paid, all in a lump. That's quite a little money. Once a year the cattle are bunched together and taken to market, but each feller gits paid for his own cattle. We don't farm more'n we can use right here."

"What about the claims of those north of Lost Horse?" asked Jack. "They warned me to not accept a seat on the council, because they want an election."

"If you refused to set with the council, and a Lost Horse citizen was elected, yore father would turn over in his grave."

"That," replied Jack gravely, "is something we never could be certain about."

"Well, I'll bet his spirit wouldn't never rest."

"Do you believe in spirits, Mr. Steele?"

"That ain't got anythin' to do with it. 'Course, you'll have to do as yuh please about qualifyin'. Lost Horse don't like yuh. They didn't like yore father. Well, you had one experience."

"Lost Horse had more of an experience than I did," replied Jack dryly. "They lost a voter."

"And that makes 'em hate yuh worse than ever. They had a meetin' at Moses Weir's ranch last night, and you was discussed."

"Was I?" smiled Jack. "In what way?"

"MOSES publicly chided his daughter fer talkin' with you in the general store."

"Well, what was wrong about that?"

"They don't like yuh, that's what was wrong."

"Of all the narrow-minded views I have ever known! Why, I merely talked in public with her. Steele, I'm afraid that Council Valley is pretty narrow in the head. Why don't they all get together, and be one big family? This situation is ridiculous."

"It's an established custom," stated Steele stiffly. "You nor nobody else can change it."

"I see. If it was good enough for my father, it should be good enough for me."

"That's right. It suited yore father."

"I see. But hasn't the Lost Horse population grown considerably in twenty-five years? I have heard rumors that they control more votes than Buckhorn."

"That's right. But they're so damned ignorant."

"That is what makes 'em dangerous—ignorance. Suppose they decided to take over the valley—by force."

"That's no good theory. They'd be afraid."

"Afraid of what? No outside law has ever been in here. Suppose they revolted, threw over the council and put their own men in to run the Valley. What would they be afraid of, Steele?"

"I don't know," admitted Steele.

"What would prevent them from taking the sixty thousand dollars worth of gold

for their own use, from confiscatin' all the cattle?"

"Well, we never figgered on anythin' like that. Yuh see, they was mostly moonshiners, when they came here. The law wanted some of 'em; so yore father let 'em take land north of Lost Horse, but never did allow 'em any hand in the gover'mint. The Feeneys and the Weirs and the Harrises was all feudists. They've feuded a little here, but not very heavy. Sol Feeney brags that he killed nine men."

"I wonder which one of 'em killed my father, Steele."

"That'd be hard to prove."

Jack stretched his long legs and proceeded to roll a smoke.

"Just what would be yore advice to me, Steele?" he queried.

MARK STEELE studied the young man for several moments, a heavy frown creasing his narrow brow.

"I'd go back where I came from," he said.

"Desert the ship, eh?"

"Yeah, that's my advice. You won't never fit conditions here. You've been livin' in a different world. You'll jist about try to fix some things in the Valley,

and—there's still a lot of buckshot that ain't never found its mark, Dean."

"Is that a threat?" queried Jack curiously.

"I'm jist a-tellin' yuh," replied Steele coldly. "The council, itself, won't stand for anythin' new. Once they elect yuh to the council — they can't throw yuh off. Nothin' but death will ever remove yuh from the council."

"Nothin' but death, eh?" mused Jack aloud. "Sounds sinister."

"We've only had three vacancies in twenty years," said Steele.

"Natural causes, except my father?"

"All alike—buckshot poisonin', Dean."

"Attempted reforms?" queried Jack.

Steele shrugged his thin shoulders. "Who knows? The meetings of the council are always secret."

Mark Steele's visit gave Jack Dean plenty of food for thought. It seemed that Council Valley had a nice way of removing an undesirable—and no questions asked. After all, why should he join the council, he wondered? Why not just be a citizen, living at ease on his ranch? It was a beautiful country, where life did not seem complicated. Prisoners, sentenced for breaking the Valley laws, dug out the gold to pay the taxes. Once a year the saleable cattle were all taken to market. Council Valley was a little world of its own, with no interference from the outside.

And there was Donna Weir. Jack had thought about her quite a lot since that night at the store. Now that she had been publicly chided about him, as Mark Steele had said, he was more curious than ever. He wondered what she had replied. He liked the name—Donna. He laughed at the thought that her living north of Lost Horse would make any difference. He had called her sweetheart, and she had called him Wolf Pup. That was all right.

With no thought in mind of seeing her in Buckhorn, he saddled his horse and rode to town. It was very quiet. Saddle horses nodded in the shade along the hitch-racks, a few men sprawled in the shade of the porches. Several mongrel dogs came to investigate him, decided that he was all right, and went back to their separate siestas.

AS JACK crossed the street to the general store, Donna and her father came into town, driving an old sway-backed white horse, hitched to an ancient buckboard, which seemed insecure on its wheels. They drew up in front of the store. Donna sprang out quickly to tie the team, but Jack was already there. Moses Weir, his white beard fairly bristling, stared at Jack. Donna halted and watched Jack tie a horse to a porch post.

Then the old patriarch got slowly from his seat and went into the store, following Donna, who had given no sign that she had ever seen Jack Dean before in her life. Jack smiled to himself and followed them into the store. Donna halted at a show-case and he stepped in beside her.

"Miss Weir," he said quietly, "if you will introduce me to your father, I'll apologize to him for talking with you in here the other day. I didn't know it was considered wrong."

"What made you think it was wrong?" she asked.

"I understand that your father spoke publicly about it last night."

"Who told you that, Jack Dean?"

"I believe my informant got his information from a man who was present."

Donna turned quickly and walked to her father, who had paid no attention to Donna and Jack. She spoke swiftly to him. After a moment's indecision Moses Weir came to Jack.

"Young Wolf," he said, "my daughter says that you have been told what was said and done at my place last night. Is that true?"

Jack nodded slowly. "I was told that

you verbally punished your daughter for talking with me here in this store."

"What else was you told, sir?"

"Well," smiled Jack, "I was informed that there is a lot of buckshot north of Lost Horse that hasn't found its mark yet."

"Both accounts are true, sir," nodded the big, bearded man.

Meanin' that if I talk with your daughter I'm liable to get a load of buckshot, eh?"

"If you want to understand it that way, sir."

Jack looked at Donna, a half-smile on his face.

"As much as I'd hate to be hit with a load of buckshot, it would be worth it, Mr. Weir," he declared.

"You are a bigger fool than yore father was, Young Wolf."

"But a lot more cautious," smiled Jack. "He slept near an uncovered window—I don't."

MOSES WEIR grunted and went back to his shopping. Donna looked at Jack, a queer expression on her pretty face, but went with her father. Jack walked outside and started to cross the street, when he saw Bart Shivers. They talked for a few moments, before Shivers asked him if he had thought over the situation.

"I have thought it over some," admitted Jack, "and I wonder if I want to be on the council. I wonder if I wouldn't be happier just to run my ranch and keep out of politics."

"Lost Horse hates you for who you are," said Shivers quietly. "If you turn down the council, Buckhorn will hate yuh, especially if one of the Lost Horse men are elected. You wouldn't be happy here."

"But," argued Jack, "suppose a Lost Horse man is elected. You'll still be four to one, in case of a vote."

"That is true, Dean. But if they can elect one man, they can elect more. And don't forget that buckshot is cheap."

Jack whistled softly. "I forgot about the law that only death can make a vacancy in the council. Four loads of buckshot, four elections and—four gentlemen from Lost Horse."

"That's true."

"But you have had elections before, Mr. Shivers."

Bart Shivers smiled behind his bushy beard.

"Yore father was head of the council, Jack. There were twenty voters working at the mine—and a prisnoer can't vote."

Jack looked curiously at him for several moments.

"A sudden wave of crime, eh?" he said.

"Yore father was no fool, Jack Dean."

"And he sent *me* out into the world to get an education," said Jack. "He was too smart for Lost Horse, until they remembered that buckshot is no respecter of brains."

"You will have your answer for us tomorrow night, Jack."

"If somebody don't shoot me before that time, Mr. Shivers."

"And be here before midnight," warned Shivers. "That is the deadline. After that we are obliged to leave it to a vote."

"I'll be here early," promised Jack.

Donna and her father came from the store as Jack rode out of town. He waved at her, but she paid no attention.

"I reckon I'm seventeen kinds of fool," mused Jack, "but I don't feel that Donna hates me. Some day I hope to talk with her, where there are no graybeards to listen."

Jack cooked his own supper. He examined the five padlocks to the cellar and smiled at how easy it would be for anyone to smash all five of them. Council Valley were certainly trusting souls. He felt uneasy over having all that money in the cellar. Sixty thousand dollars in raw gold. But it seemed that they had been

storing it in that same spot all these years; so it must be a safe place.

The nights grow chill in Council Valley; so Jack kindled a fire in the big fireplace, sprawling in front of it to smoke and plan what might be done. He had covered all windows carefully, loath to take a chance on the untried buckshot of the valley.

Someone was knocking gently on the front door. Jack got to his feet, slid his gun from its holster and went close to the barred door.

"Who is it?" he asked, and the answer came, "Donna."

He unbarred the door, opening it cautiously. Donna had moved off the porch, but he could see her in the dim light.

"Won't you come in?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid," she said cautiously. "I—I don't know who might come. But I must speak with you."

Jack stepped outside and closed the door behind him. He could see the white oval of her face in the starlight, and went down to her.

"I—I had to tell you something," she whispered. "Let's get back nearer the trees."

JACK followed her to the heavy shadows of the sycamores, where she stopped.

"Why did you come, Donna?" he asked quietly. "I beg your pardon, I meant to say Miss Weir, but the—the name slipped from my tongue."

"I am Donna," she said. "You are the only one to ever call me Miss Weir."

A gust of wind creaked the big trees, and the leaves rattled. There were scudding clouds.

"Of course, I'm glad you came, Donna," he said. "I've thought about you so much. But you might get into trouble—comin' here."

"I had to come, Jack Dean. I was afraid not to come. The Orths are coming here tonight. They have sworn to kill you, because you killed Park Orth — and to force an election."

Jack laughed shortly. "Playful folks, those Orths. So they're coming to murder me. Two of them, aren't there, Donna?"

"Yes—Sam and Dug. They are bad men—drunk most of the time. They have sworn to kill you."

"I don't know how to thank you for this warning, Donna. I think you are the sweetest girl I have ever known—and the bravest. You take your life in your hand to come here—and I don't mean anythin' to you. Isn't that true?"

"I never said—I must go now, Jack Dean. Leave the Valley. They will wait their time to kill you. We are nothing to you; so why not go away and let us alone."

"Go away?" Jack Dean laughed at her. "Leave you here? Donna, when you will go with me—I'll leave Council Valley. All the bad men on earth can't run me out—alone. That is your answer, Donna."

A heavy gust of wind swayed the sycamores, and the leaves eddied around them. Jack turned to glance toward the house, and at the same moment he heard the snapping of a dry twig, the heavy thud of a step, and a short scream from Donna.

He whirled swiftly and a blow partly stunned him. Groping for the gun in his holster, the whole world spinning, another blow knocked him into complete unconsciousness. But in the short interim between the first sound and the complete knockout, it had flashed across his mind that Donna had betrayed him—had decoyed him from the house out to the trees, where someone had been waiting to kill or capture him.

IT MUST have taken Jack Dean hours to regain consciousness, because sunlight glinted through a crack in the wall directly in line with his eyes. But Jack wasn't interested; he was too miserable. He tried to move his arms and legs, but

gave it up as a bad idea, because his head ached too badly. However, a little later, he discovered that his arms and legs were roped.

Then he decided that it was only a nightmare, and went back to sleep. Later he awoke, a trifle more clear as to his situation, although he could not remember what caused it. He was a prisoner, roped to a rough bunk in a room, where the cracks in the wall afforded the only illumination. Gradually he began to remember, his dulled mind piecing together some of the bitter facts.

His head felt as though it was swollen to ridiculous proportions, and his body was so numb that he wasn't exactly sure he had a body. Then he heard someone stirring about the room. They came over near the bed and he felt that they were leaning over him. But the footsteps receded and he heard the creak of a chair, a weary sigh.

His mind registered the fact that this man was his guard. But why should anyone guard him, he wondered? Then, like a flash, everything came back to him. Donna Weir had lured him out to the trees, where someone had been concealed, and they had knocked him down. Now he was a prisoner—waiting for what? He blinked at the gleam of dusty sunlight, trying to reason things out. He must have moved his head, because the chair-legs thumped on the floor, and the guard came over to him again. But Jack kept his eyes shut.

"How'r yuh comin', Wolf Pup?" asked the man huskily. But Jack did not answer nor open his eyes. The man grunted, spat viciously, and went right back to his chair.

Jack Dean must have slept again, because it was dark in the room, when he awoke again. But his mind was clear now, and his head did not ache much. The guard was apparently asleep, because Jack could hear his raucous snoring from across the room. He tested his bonds, but was too weak to make any impression on the tightly knotted ropes.

A FEW minutes later he heard the thudding of hoofs, as a rider came up to the front of the place. The guard awoke and was on his feet, when someone knocked on the door.

"Who's there?" queried the guard.

"Dave."

The door was unbarred, and the man named Dave came in. Jack made a guess that it would be Dave Harris.

"Has he woke up yit?" asked Dave.

"Hell—no! I'll betcha they hit him too hard. Been a-layin' thar since last night, and he ain't hardly moved."

"Uh-huh. Well, it ain't no skin off'n my nose. We had our meetin' a while ago. The Orths stuck to their guns, too. So we voted to let 'em have him right after midnight."

"That's the deadline, eh?"

"Shore. If he ain't there before midnight they'll have to allow an election—and he won't be there."

"I hope to tell yuh, he won't."

They both laughed heartily, and Jack heard them uncork a jug. After a deep drink, the guard continued.

"What's the Orths' plans about the Wolf Pup?"

"Lord knows. But they'll know what to do with him. They've honed for years for a chance to git even with a Dean. Yuh cain't blame 'em."

"They'll kill him, won't they?"

"After they're done with him—shore.

But they won't kill him quick. They'll be jist drunk enough to have their fun. How's he look?"

"C'mon over and take a look at him."

They both came over to the bed, but Jack never moved nor opened his eyes.

"Still dead t' the world, eh? Be a joke on 'em if he died 'thout rememberin' anythin'. Might, at that. It's their own fault for hittin' him so hard."

"What's bein' done about Donna Weir, Dave?"

"Cain't do nothin', till they find her. They said she ducked away in the dark and they ain't seen her since. Moses Weir told us at the meetin' that he ain't seen her."

"I don't like that part of it, Dave. She might go before the council and swear to what she seen. They might even arrest the Orths for murderin' him. That council would believe her, too—declarin' agin her own people."

"She couldn't swear to seein' anythin' in the dark. Don't worry about her."

"Well, I'll be glad when I'm finished here. Where you goin'?"

"Goin' to Buckhorn. Bunch of us goin' down there to wait for midnight. We ain't takin' no chances on the council not actin' on proclaimin' an election. How about another shot from the jug?"

They uncorked the jug again, and both walked outside. Jack Dean had no idea what time it might be, but he did know that he was to be turned over to the Orths at midnight. What special torture they had devised for him, he had no idea, but he could rest assured that those drunken, ignorant ruffians would have something planned.

But he knew now that Donna had not betrayed him. She did not know those men were behind the trees. And she was also a fugitive from the wrath of Lost Horse.

They believed she had warned Jack Dean, which was true. Jack tested the ropes, only to find that Lost Horse men knew how to knot a lariat. There was no chance of escape.

JACK heard the man named Dave ride away from the house. The guard came back into the house, muttering to himself aloud:

"Blowin' up a hell of a storm, looks t' me. Better have 'nother drink of that cawn juice, I reckon. Hey, Wolf Pup! How 'bout a little drink? Be damned dry whereat yo're goin'. No? Well, I'll have a little all by m'self."

Jack heard a roll of thunder, and a flash of lightning licked through the cracks of the wall. The guard had not bothered to replace the bars across the door. A gust of wind whined past the house, and another rumble of thunder rattled the roof.

He heard the door bang open and thought it was from the wind, but the half-drunk guard's voice bellowed above the whine of the wind:

"He-ey! What the hell are you—keep that gun down! Don'tcha know that they're—"

Jack heard a dull thud, which was the guard's body striking the floor. Jack was able to twist enough to see the open doorway, with the rain drifting in, lighted by the heavy flashes. It blinded him for a moment. Someone was pulling at his body, slipping a cold blade between his tied wrists.

It was Donna Weir, slashing at the ropes, panting heavily. His hands free, he managed to sit up and help her.

"Donna!" he exclaimed huskily. "You—here!"

"Can you get up?" she asked. Returning circulation made it painful, but he managed to get to his shaky feet.

"It's only thirty minutes until midnight," she told him. "They'll be coming from Buckhorn to get you. There's a horse outside. Ride fast. Go wide of Buckhorn and head straight out of the Valley. They can't catch you, Jack. My horse is the fastest in the Valley. You can

get past them in the storm. Here's a gun and a belt."

She shoved them into his hands and he mechanically buckled the holstered gun around his waist.

"Go fast," she urged. "Get out of the Valley—quick. You can be in Redrock by morning."

"And leave you here to face them, Donna?" he asked huskily. "They know you came to warn me. They'll know you hit that guard. He recognized you."

"That don't make any difference. Get out of the Valley before it's too late, Jack. I can take care of myself. Hurry."

She started for the doorway. He tried to stop her, but he was so lame he could hardly move. When he reached the doorway she was gone. He called her name several times, begging her to come back, but his only answer was the whine of the wind and the crack of thunder.

He managed to get into the saddle, but the return of circulation nearly made him scream with the pain. He did not know the road to Buckhorn, but he spurred the horse into a gallop, trusting that he had headed the right way.

In the lightning flashes he could see the muddy road through the pouring rain, which beat down upon his uncovered head and soaked through his flimsy shirt. But he felt no discomfort. The cold rain had driven the pain from his head, but the cut was open and he could taste the salt on his lips, as the blood ran down across his face.

DONNA had begged him to ride out of the Valley — to avoid the Lost Horse men at Buckhorn, who might kill him on sight. Jack threw back his head and laughed harshly. Run away and leave Donna to the mercy of those ignorant hill men?

Lights flashed in front of him through the rain. It was Buckhorn. Men were crowded under the wooden awning in front of the council chamber. Jack Dean spurred his horse straight for the front of the building, and in the parlance of the range, spiked its tail at the edge of the porch, throwing gravel and mud into the crowd.

Then he was out of his saddle and up the steps, a six-shooter swinging in his right hand. A single, guttering lantern, swung from a porch-beam, illuminating the bearded faces, all turned in his direction.

"The Wolf Pup!" exclaimed a man.

Jack Dean, mud-streaked, soaking from the rain, his face crimson with his own blood, laughed at them.

"Back up, you coyotes!" he snapped. "The Wolf Pup got loose and he's cuttin' his own trail! Tuck in yore tails, you scavengers!"

They fell back, giving him a lane to the door. Gripping the gun at his waist he strode slowly ahead, his head twisting from side to side, looking them in the eye. His groping left hand found the latch and opened the door. As he stepped inside a gun blazed behind him, throwing a shower of splinters from the edge of the door. He kicked the door shut, just as another bullet thudded into the oak planking behind him, and faced the four councilmen.

They were all standing, staring at him, as he came slowly forward, the water from his wet boots making little, dark-colored puddles on the floor. Their faces seemed a little blurred now. He heard Bart Shivers saying:

"And only four minutes to spare!"

"Thank God!" blurted Dan Fallon piously.

"Give Donna some of the credit," said Jack Dean, and fell sprawling on the floor.

The four men picked him up. Bart Shivers whipped off his neckerchief and wiped Jack's face. They looked at his slashed scalp and at his swollen wrists and hands.

"They had him prisoner," said Shivers. "It was a plot to hold him until after

midnight—and then kill him, I suppose."

"He needs a doctor," said Creevey. "That cut on his head is bad."

Bart Shivers' face twisted in thought, as he looked toward the door. Then he motioned to the three men to put Jack in a chair. He was so limp that they had to hold him. Shivers secured a rope, fastening Jack's shoulders against the back of the big chair. He put Jack's hands on the table and placed a sheet of paper between his fingers. At a short distance and in that light he seemed to be looking at the paper.

Then Bart Shivers walked over to the door and flung it open. The men crowded in close, staring in at the table and the men seated around it.

"Gentlemen," said Bart Shivers, "I have the honor to report that Jack Dean has qualified. You may as well go home. Good night."

Then he slowly closed the door and came back to the table.

SOL FEENEY and Moses Weir sat on the latter's ranchhouse porch next morning. The sky was still cloudy, although the rain had long since ceased. Sol Feeney's lean jaws worked violently, as he chewed his tobacco. Moses Weir stroked his white beard, his deep-set eyes very thoughtful.

Finally Sol Feeney spat viciously and looked at Weir.

"I know—it'll mean war," he said. "But I figger we can capture the council, and when we're in control we can send 'em all to the mine. Hell, we can figger out a charge. They've figgered out enough charges agin us. Then we'll take Dean's place and git all that gold. It'll be easy to take the gate. There's a good market for our whiskey in Redrock.

"Wolf Dean wouldn't never let us sell it outside the Valley. We can confiscate all their cattle and divide 'em among us. There ain't nothin' we can't do—once we git control. We'll live like kings."

"That would mean a bloody war in the Valley," said Weir slowly. "There wouldn't be many left to live like kings, Sol."

"Be more for them that was left," said Sol. "'Course you knowed that we had decided to have you elected to the council, didn't yuh?"

"No, I didn't know that," replied the patriarch. "The storm kept me from goin' to Buckhorn last night."

"Well, we had it all figgered. You was the only one we could all agree on. It was yore big chance, Moses — the big chance for Lost Horse—but it's gone now. They qualified the Wolf Pup. Damn him, he was staggerin' like a drunken man, his face all bloody—but he forced the men to give him room to git to the door. He was set to kill anybody that got in front of him."

"Not any weaklin', Sol."

"They'll need strong men—when Lost Horse cuts loose."

"If he hadn't got away—I might be on that council, Sol," said Moses Weir slowly. "I've dreamed of it. Now—I'd like to git my two hands on the throat of the man who knocked out Bob Murch and let the Wolf Pup loose."

"Yea-a-ah," agreed Sol Feeney quietly. "Some of the boys was sayin' that a woman might have done it. Dave Harris was there only a few minutes before Dean must have got loose. He said that Murch was all right, and that Dean was unconscious. Dave wasn't in Buckhorn more'n a few minutes, before Dean rode in. Damn funny, seems t' me."

"A woman might have done it, eh?" muttered Moses Weir. "That means that they're pointin' at Donna—accusin' her of betrayin' her people."

"They didn't mention no names, Moses. Lotsa women in the Valley."

"They're sayin' that she went to warn Jack Dean."

"I know. Yuh see, Moses, the horse Jack Dean rode to Buckhorn was Donna's

horse. We examined it, after he went into the council room."

Moses Weir shook his head wearily. "I dunno what's to be done."

"They're sayin' shes stuck on this foreigner, Moses. She's turnin' down her own folks for love of him. You can't let her do that. She's got to git married."

"Married? Who'd marry her, with all this hangin' over her head?"

"Len McFee."

"Len McFee? He don't belong to Lost Horse."

"Yuh furgit that we may need an ally at the gate, Moses. Len's been shinin' around Donna. He'd marry her in a minute. It'll stop all this tongue-waggin', Moses. Len's all right. He ain't so danged smart, but he's big and strong. She could do worse."

MOSES WEIR nodded slowly, his eyes somber. "As you say, it'll stop the waggin' tongues, Sol. Pass the word to Len McFee that I'd like to see him. We'll make it soon, and I'll make it a night that Lost Horse will remember for many a year. Mebbe that'll take their minds off'n war for a while, too."

As he got slowly to his feet a rider came galloping up the road. It was Sam Orth, hawk-faced, narrow eyes and with a cruel, thin-lipped mouth. He looked from Sol Feeney to Moses Weir, before getting out of his saddle and coming over to the porch.

"Bob Murch's able to talk," he told them grimly, "and he said it was Donna Weir, who hit him with the gun-bar'l last night."

"That ain't news," said Sol Feeney, cackling a little. "Murch ought to be ashamed to let a little thing like her hit him."

"To hell with that part of it!" snarled Orth. "What are yuh goin' to do about it, Moses Weir?"

"What's yore idea, Sam?" queried the patriarch stiffly.

"She ought to be tarred and feathered —and run out of the Valley."

Weir winced slightly, but his big hands tightened around his belt.

"We'll forgit yore opinion, Sam," he said.

"It's the opinion of Lost Horse," declared Sam Orth hotly.

"If yuh don't mind, I'll run my own family affairs, Sam," said the big man quietly. "When Lost Horse meets and voices an opinion, I'll accept it. I've been here twenty-five years, tryin' to live at peace with everybody. Nothin' like this has ever happened to me before. It has put a shame upon me. You and yore brother got Lost Horse to agree to let you have Jack Dean—after midnight.

"You and yore brother were goin' to torture him—kill him. Donna knew this. She's different than the rest of Lost Horse. She's allus been different. But if you or anybody else in Lost Horse lifts one hand agin her, I'll shoot the heart out of 'em. That's a warnin', Sam Orth—and yuh better heed it."

"I'll pack that word back to the men," replied Sam Orth. He mounted quickly, swung his horse around and then galloped away.

"I ain't no oracle," cackled Sol Feeney, "but I smell trouble."

"Pass the word to Len McFee," said the old man.

NO ONE seemed to know the exact age of Granny Miles. She was a tiny, antiquated morsel of humanity, her little face etched with a million hair-like lines,

but her eyes were clear and very blue. She carried a gnarled stick in lieu of a cane, and she thumped her way around with alacrity seldom in a woman of her age.

Her oblong, steel-rimmed glasses were always on the end of her nose, the bows caught in her whispy, white hair, and she talked in a shrill voice. Just now she sat in an old rocker on the porch of the Miles ranch and looked over her glasses at Jack Dean, his head bandaged, loafing in a home-made chair. They had brought him there from the council hall and had Granny Miles patch him up.

"Well, Granny, you ought to know," Jack was saying. "You've always been known as an oracle."

"Oracle?" she shot back at him. "Anybody with common, horse-sense is liable to become an oracle. Straws show which way the wind blows. Council Valley is jist about as stable as a straw in the wind —and you've upset 'em a heap."

"I'm sorry I ever came back here," stated Jack bitterly.

"That's sensible — but of no value, young man. Yo're here. You've saved us from havin' Lost Horse dominate the Valley. You've felt the wrath of Lost Horse. They're bad. They even tried to kill yuh at the door of the council hall. But yo're still alive—and in the saddle."

"But won't they try again?" queried Jack.

"Of course, they will. Lost Horse don't discourage easy."

"So I'm supposed to *try* and keep on livin'—or get out."

The old lady dug up a corncob pipe and proceeded to shave some tobacco off a very hard plug. Jack watched her curiously, until she had lighted it. Smacking her lips over the smoke, she grinned at Jack.

"I didn't used to smoke," she explained. "But I lived with my old man for over sixty years, and he smoked all the time. After he was gone I kinda pined around, until I found out that I had the pipe-habit from breathin' his smoke. Then I took it up for myself. Git a lot of satisfaction out of it, too."

"That's fine," said Jack absently. "But, Granny, what'll happen to Donna Weir? She was recognized by the man that she knocked out. When he recovers, he'll tell them she turned me loose."

"I feel sorry for her, Jack Dean," said the old lady. "Some of them folks are mean enough to do anythin' to her. Moses Weir is as bad as any of 'em, too. I ain't seen her in years—not since she was a leetle tike, not even knee-high to a dwarf. Purty young'n, she was."

"Granny, she's the prettiest girl I have ever seen—and the bravest."

Granny Miles peered at him over her glasses, a twinkle in her eyes.

"More straws in the wind," she said dryly.

Jack laughed shortly. "Nothin' like that, Granny. She didn't want me on that council. Mebbe she saw a chance to help Lost Horse, thinkin' I'd grasp at the chance to get out of the Valley. Mebbe she didn't want Lost Horse to have my blood on their hands."

"That's jist yore voice talkin', Jack Dean," said the old lady. "Them words never came from yore heart."

"I reckon you are sort of an oracle," he said quietly. "But all the time I'm settin' here—what are they doin' to her?"

"Well, I wouldn't advise yuh to go to Lost Horse to find out. That is, unless yo're honin' for a bullet in yore heart. They shoot straight up there—and sudden."

Jack got slowly to his feet. He was stiff and sore all over. He held out his hand to the old lady.

"Granny, I'm goin' home now, and I want to thank you for what you have done for me. I appreciate it a lot."

"Shucks, we're all in the same kittle," she laughed. "If we didn't help each other, we wouldn't last long here. Come often and stay late."

JACK saddled his horse and rode slowly home. Ed Miles had sent one of the boys over to Jack's ranch for his horse and saddle, because the horse Jack had ridden from Lost Horse had been taken back by some of the Lost Horse men.

He was riding through his own gate, when Sol Feeney came along, on his way to the gate to talk with Len McFee. Jack waited for the man to reach the gateway. Feeney looked him over suspiciously, not knowing what temper Jack might be in today.

"How are yuh, Jack Dean?" he queried.

"I'm all right, Feeney," replied Jack soberly. "What's news?"

"I don't know any news, except that you've qualified to the council."

"And no thanks to Lost Horse."

Feeney cackled dryly. He was thinking up a reasonable lie to tell Jack.

"No thanks to Lost Horse, eh?" he said. "Well, mebbe not. We shore had yuh plenty scared, though. Donna Weir is a shrewd one, but you done fooled her. Yessir, you shore fooled her—plenty."

"Fooled her?" queried Jack, puzzled at Feeney's statement.

"Well, yuh see," lied Feeney, "she 'lowed that you was chicken-hearted and 'thout any gumption; so she said that after you was scared enough, you'd leave the Valley, hard as hell would let yuh, if yuh had a chance. We let her have her way about it; so she made out to bash Bob Murch on the head, and let you loose, givin' yuh her own hoss. But," Sol spat dryly, "you went right down to Buckhorn and fooled her by gittin' on the council. Was she ravin' mad! Whooee-e-e! Everybody on Lost Horse is laughin' at Donna Weir's scheme."

"You mean that it was all planned—to get me out of the Valley?"

"You don't think that she'd turn her own flesh-and-blood down for a total stranger, do yuh? She fooled you, Jack Dean.

She's smart. The scheme was all right, but—but it didn't work out the way she had an idee it'd work."

Jack laughed shortly. "Sorry I made a woman look foolish."

"Oh, it's all right. Yuh know, she's goin' to git married soon."

"Donna Weir goin' to get married?"

"Shore. Her and Len McFee are gittin' married pretty soon. They've been engaged quite a while. Moses Weir is plannin' a weddin' party, the likes of which ain't never been seen in Council Valley. It'll shore be a wild night on the crick."

"I see," nodded Jack grimly. "Len McFee, eh? Well, that's—fine."

"Uh-huh. Well, I've got to be goin' along. See yuh later."

Jack rode to his stable and unsaddled his horse.

"Tricked by a woman," he muttered grimly. "Me worryin' about the wrath of Lost Horse on her head, and she's laughin' about her scheme, which didn't work out right. Afraid they'd kill me. Beggin' me to ride out of the Valley as fast as possible. Hell, I can see it now. Well, I reckon I needed a punch like that to knock me back on my feet."

THE following day Bart Shivers took Jack out to the mine, which was located about three miles from Buckhorn. For about twenty years it had been used as a jail for offenders, who were obliged to work out their sentences. It consisted of about two acres, surrounded by a twelve-foot stockade, with a three-foot overhang of barb-wire.

Built in against the foot of a mountain it extended some distance above the actual tunnels. The buildings were all of log construction. Buck Creevey, brother of Tom Creevey, was in charge, assisted by two hard-faced guards. There were only six prisoners working now, and they were all from Lost Horse.

Shivers explained that they were doing exploration work now, because the princi-

pal gold vein was narrowing. The prisoners, bearded and unkempt, eyed Jack Dean suspiciously. They knew what had happened. Each man wore a leg-iron, which was locked to his bunk at night.

"We don't use no jury," explained Shivers. "The council decides on the penalty, after listenin' to the witnesses."

"Presumin'," smiled Jack, "that all witnesses are honest."

"Jist as honest as the prisoners," nodded Shivers. "After they git a taste of the mine, they're usually good for a while. We don't baby 'em up here. Them guards are efficient."

"How often do yuh change guards?" asked Jack.

"We don't, except if one dies or gits killed. They wouldn't last a week—outside. Lost Horse don't forgit easy."

"I meant to ask about that gold," said Jack, as they rode away.

"Yuh mean—the treasury?" queried Shivers.

"In my cellar. Those five padlocks on the door, and all that."

"There's five keys," said Shivers. "One for each of the council. When there's money to be put in or taken out, we set a time and all meet at yore ranch. You'll learn about it at such a time."

"It's a wonder that somebody hasn't stolen that gold, Shivers."

"We've never worried about that, Jack."

They rode past the old cemetery, where Wolf Dean was buried. It was the first time Jack had seen his father's grave. No attempt had ever been made to beautify the place, and the graves were only marked with plain, wooden markers.

"Lookin' at Council Valley from yore point of view—what do yuh think of it, Jack?" queried Shivers, as they rode on.

"I'll tell yuh seriously," replied Jack, "that I still think it's a crazy dream, and that I'll wake up pretty soon and try to remember what it's all about."

FOR the next few days Jack stayed around the ranch, repairing fences and getting acquainted with the place. He realized that he might be shot from ambush at any time, as there was plenty brush to serve as cover for a rifleman. He knew that he was welcome at any of the ranches south of Lost Horse, but was not in the mood for conversation.

He tried to tell himself that he was not interested in Donna Weir's marriage to Len McFee, that she did not mean anything to him, but with very little success. He often found himself lounging in his saddle, looking at the misty hills beyond Lost Horse. Sol Feeney had repeated his lies in Buckhorn about Donna Weir turning Jack Dean loose, expecting him to leave the Valley.

There was plenty of talk about the coming marriage of Donna Weir and Len McFee. Len McFee seemed to be spending quite a lot of his time north of Lost Horse, but it was rumored that he was not spending his time with Donna. Rather he was drinking moonshine liquor with convivial friends up there.

It was rumored that Moses Weir was going to make this the biggest wedding ever held in the Valley, and had extended an invitation to all the council, except Jack Dean. Shortage of staple groceries caused Jack to ride to Buckhorn. He listened to the gossip in the general store, finally going to the Buckhorn Saloon.

Only a few men were there, but Jack was obliged to hear more about the wedding. One man said:

"Moses Weir had the store send out for a lot of them Chinese lanterns t' hang in the trees. Everythin' is shore goin' to be pretty. He's killin' a couple fat cows for the barbecue, and there'll be slathers of whiskey for everybody."

"Prob'ly be a funeral or two, before it's finished," opined a pessimistic soul. "That usually happens."

"The council has been invited," offered another, "but I don't expect any of 'em

to go. That'd be like runnin' yore head into a b'ar trap."

"Was you invited, Mr. Dean?" queried the bartender.

"I'm afraid not," replied Jack calmly.

"Here comes Len and some of the boys now!"

Several men were dismounting outside the doorway, and in a few moments they came in, with big Len McFee in the lead. With the exception of Len, they were all from north of Lost Horse.

"Shove out yore best liquor!" yelped Len. "We're all drinkin'."

As he swaggered up to the bar he recognized Jack Dean. He stopped short, looked Jack over closely, spat explosively and looked at the rest of his crowd.

"Here's the Wolf Pup, who got fooled by a woman," he laughed. "I ain't seen yuh since yuh came here, Wolf Pup Dean. How are yuh?"

"I'm all right," replied Jack quietly. He nodded to the rest of the men and started for the doorway.

In two strides Len McFee caught Jack by the shoulder and whirled him around roughly.

They stood face to face for a moment.

"What'r yuh crawlin' out fer?" demanded Len.

"Take yore hand off me," replied Jack coldly.

"Well, if that ain't funny!" exploded Len. "Who the hell are you to tell me what to do, Wolf Pup? F'r a nickel I'd tie you plumb into a hard knot."

Jack reached slowly into a pocket, brought out the nickel and handed it to Len, who looked at it dumbly. Jack watched the hands of the big man closely. Jack had been with one college long enough to win the middleweight boxing championship for them—and he had been taught to watch a man's hands.

"He's payin' yuh yore own price to tie him in a knot, Len," chuckled one of the men.

THE nickel fell from Len's palm, and with a bellow of rage he closed both huge fists. Jack swayed back, his left fist making a swift feint at Len's big face. Both of Len's hands jerked up to protect his face, and at that instant Jack Dean stepped in, driving his right fist, with every ounce of his strength and weight, square into the arch of Len McFee's ribs. It was the well-known solar-plexus punch, a sickening, paralyzing blow.

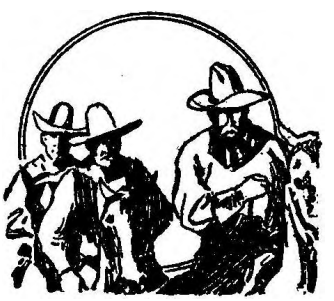
Len McFee's mouth flew open, his arms fell weakly at his sides, and a moment later he crashed down on his face. Jack Dean had danced aside, drawn his gun and was standing there, paying no attention to the man he had knocked out, but to the gawping crowd.

"Gee-e-eminee-e-e Gawd!" bleated one of Len's gang. "He only hit Len oncet—in the belly!"

Len's breath was whistling in his throat, as he fought for air, his features twisted with pain.

"I b'lieve he's dyin'," said one of the men.

"He won't die," said Jack quietly, "but he also won't eat nor drink for a few hours. By the way, would any of you gentlemen like to try and stop me from leavin' this place?"



After a few moments in which no one spoke, the bartender said:

"I don't believe anybody cares to stop yuh, Mr. Dean."

"Thank yuh kindly," nodded Jack, and walked outside, going straight to his horse, where he mounted and rode out of town.

Len McFee finally managed to get to his feet and sank into a chair, where he

panted audibly, perspiration beading his big face. Gradually he recovered, but he was weak, his stomach upset. He did not seem to understand what had happened. It was absurd to tell him that Jack Dean, much smaller in every way physically, had knocked him out with a single punch to the body.

"I didn't see it," wheezed Len. "I—I thought a horse kicked me."

"He couldn't begin to whip yuh—in a fair fight, Len," assured one of the men. "You'd eat him alive."

"He hit yuh, when yuh wasn't lookin', Len," said another.

"That's right," wheezed Len. "I wasn't lookin' for it. He didn't have no right to hit me thataway. I'll git him f'r that, you see if I don't. Nobody can hit me when I ain't lookin'."

"Let's have a drink, Len."

"I don't want no drink. I don't want nothin'—except to git even with Wolf Pup Dean."

"Wait a minute," warned the bartender. "You kinda forgit that Dean is one of the council, don'tcha? And yo're kinda forgettin' that the council can pile a lot of hell on yore shoulders, Len. I'd advise that you forgit that punch in the belly. Yo're lucky he didn't jump on yore face with his boots, when you was down. Danged if I don't believe he's either chicken-hearted—or a gentleman."

"I ain't sayin' what I'm goin' to do," grunted Len. "I reckon I'll be goin' home, boys. See yuh soon again."

"Keep alive for the weddin'," called one of the men. Len grunted sourly and went out to his horse. It was the first time he had ever been worsted in a fight, and it did not please him a bit. But he knew he must be careful.

Anything he might do to Jack Dean would have to be done in such a way that no blame could be attached to him. Self-defense might be all right, until he remembered what happened to Park Orth. And Park was rated a fast man with a gun. He ruminated over the idea of a fight with Jack Dean, where all might see it. But he also remembered what one of Jack Dean's punches had done to him—and discarded the idea as not having sufficient merit. Fortunately the punch had been to the body, instead of marking his head; so he would not have to explain to his father about the fight. And his father was not quite sold on the idea of Len marrying a Weir. Old Hutch McFee had his own ideas of the folks north of Lost Horse.

IN THE meantime things were not going so pleasantly at the Weir ranch, where Moses Weir was going ahead with his plans for the wedding. Donna Weir had been forbidden to leave the ranch, being a virtual prisoner. She had sworn never to marry Len McFee, sworn it straight into Moses Weir's big beard, and in no uncertain terms.

"Sol Feeney lied, when he said that I turned Jack Dean loose, scheming to get him out of the Valley," declared the hot-headed girl.

"He was tryin' to cover yore shame," replied Moses Weir.

"I'm not ashamed," she declared. "Don't anybody have to lie for me. I'm tired of lies. You're planning to uprise and take over the Valley. I'm not deaf. You don't care how many you kill. I heard Sol say that they'd put the torch to Buckhorn, and build their own town."

"You keep yore mouth shut," warned Moses Weir. "You'll marry Len McFee, if we have to hog-tie yuh."

"Why didn't you pick out a decent-looking hog, while you were at it?" queried Donna. "I hate the sight of that big, ignorant McFee."

"I s'pose you'd rather marry Jack Dean."

"What woman wouldn't?" she retorted. "At least, he looks like a *man*."

"You'll be satisfied with Len. And the less fuss yuh make, the better. I've made up my mind and given my word."

"Then I don't count."

"Not a damn bit," replied her father. "I'll be glad to git yuh off my hands. Len can take care of yuh."

Donna looked at him steadily for several moments.

"I gave you my word I wouldn't run away," she said slowly. "I'm taking back my word now."

"You'd rather be locked up, eh?"

"Yes. At least, deep down in my heart I'd know that I did everything possible to keep from marrying Len McFee.

"You wouldn't dare run away," he told her.

"I've taken back my word," she replied.

"Then you go under lock and key until the night of the weddin'. I'm justified in doin' that. I can't take a chance of you bringin' any more shame to the name of Weir."

"What more shame do you want?" she asked. "Locking your daughter up, until you can marry her to a man she hates. My God, what are your ideas of honor, anyway?"

"I've listened to yore back-talk as long as I'm goin' to," he declared. "Into the house with yuh. I'm master of this place."

He followed her into the house, where they found Mrs. Weir and Donna's Spanish grandmother, Mrs. Rodriguez, many years removed from her native soil. She was very old, with a hawk-like face, bright eyes and snow-white hair. They looked inquiringly at Donna and her father.

"Lock her up," ordered Moses Weir. "She took back her word."

Mrs. Weir bowed in submission, but the grandmother laughed at him.

"Is this funny to you?" asked Moses Weir warmly.

"To me," replied the old lady in precise English, "it is most ridiculous, Moses Weir."

"You two women will be responsible for her," he declared. "I shall hold you accountable for her being at the wedding."

"There may not be any wedding."

"There's less than a week left."

"Kings have lost their throne in less time."

"Stop babbling, Old Woman. Put this girl under lock and key."

"If you insist," nodded the old lady. Motioning to Donna, they went up the stairs together.

"Your father is a funny man, Donna," she said gently. "He gives only half an order."

"What do you mean, Grandma?" asked the girl.

"He says to lock you in a room, but," the old lady laughed quietly as she unlocked the door, "he does not say to not let you have the key. I must use my own discretion. But there is plenty of time, Donna. Many things might happen. I have seen Len McFee. Faugh!"

"What on earth would I do without you, Grandmother."

"Marry Len McFee, I believe. *Buenas tardes, querida, mia.*"

JACK DEAN was not elated over his fight with Len McFee. After all, Len, for all his size, knew nothing of the art of self-defense. He had been an easy target. Jack felt more sorrow for him than anger against him. And in knocking Len down he had only added another enemy to the forces already against him in the Valley.

But Jack could not reconcile himself to the fact that Donna had fooled him that night, and that she was going to marry Len McFee. Finally the urge to learn the truth became so strong that he rode one afternoon into the Lost Horse hills. He knew where the Weir ranch was located, and after some careful maneuvering he managed to get in fairly close to the ranchhouse without being detected.

He saw Moses Weir hitch up a team to a wagon and ride away, and he saw two women on the front porch, talking with Moses Weir, before the big, white-bearded man drove away. After the vehicle had

creaked out of sight down the road, Jack Dean rode down behind the house and around to the stable and corrals. He saw a tall, thin woman, wearing a faded calico dress and a sunbonnet, going down toward the stable, and waited for her.

She was Mrs. Rodriguez, Donna's grandmother. Jack had ridden in close to the fence, and she came close before seeing him.

"Buenas tardes, Señora," smiled Jack.

The old lady looked keenly at him for several moments. They were concealed from the house.

"Who have we here, speaking in my native tongue?" she asked.

"Jack Dean," he replied.

"The—lobata?"

"Yeah—the Wolf Pup," laughed Jack.

She came close to the fence, staring through at him.

"Yes, you favor the Wolf," she said. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, yuh see, I—" faltered Jack. "I'd like to thank Donna Weir for turnin' me loose the other night."

"I shall deliver your message."

"I'd rather deliver it myself, Señora."

"That is not possible," she told him firmly. "Donna will see no one. In a very few days she marries Len McFee."

"Happily, I suppose?"

"Quien sabe, Señor?"

"Why do yuh say, 'Who knows'?"

"Who can tell?"

"I mean—is she happy to marry him?"

"That is for Donna to say, Señor; I am only her grandmother."

"I should like to ask her," smiled Jack. "No harm in that."

"What difference could that make to you, Señor?"

"I wouldn't want her to be unhappy," replied Jack.

The woman looked closely at him for several moments, as though trying to read his thoughts. "So that's the way the wind blows, eh?"

"I am not ashamed," replied Jack.

GRANDMA RODRIGUEZ turned her head and looked toward the road.

"Do you realize that if a Lost Horse man saw you here, you'd never go back alive?" she asked quietly.

"I know," nodded Jack. "I'll take that chance."

"Rash young blood," muttered the old lady. "I have seen a lot of it in my time. But it would be a big price to pay—with no chance of gain. You will not be able to see Donna Weir; so you may as well save your life by riding south at once, Señor. Believe me, I am telling you the truth. I swear it on my beads."

"No need of swearing," said Jack Dean quickly. "But tell me this," Jack leaned against the top-pole of the fence, looking down into her eyes. "Is Donna Weir a prisoner?"

The old lady's eyes avoided Jack's face for the moment.

"Why do you ask that?"

"She has not been to Buckhorn since the night she released me."

"Perhaps there is naught to cause her to go to Buckhorn."

"You didn't answer my question, Señora."

The old lady half-turned, as though going away, and did not look at Jack as she said slowly:

"Your father had a strange ability to read minds. He asked questions, but did not require an answer. I wonder if you inherited that ability. *Buenas tardes, Lobata."*

"Gracias, Señora—and *adios."*

Jack rode back to Buckhorn, where he found Bart Shivers and Tom Creevey. They had heard about his fight with Len McFee, and someone had told them that Jack had boasted that he could whip any man in the Valley.

Jack told them the truth of what happened, and Creevey said:

"Len had it comin'. He's runnin' with that pack of coyotes most of the time."

"He'll prob'ly be a permanent resident,

as soon as he marries that Weir girl," said Shivers.

"I just discovered that Donna Weir is a prisoner in her own home," said Jack.

"That so?" replied Shivers. "What's the idea?"

"They're forcin' her to marry Len McFee."

Both Shivers and Creevey laughed. It meant nothing to them. Shivers said, "That sounds like Moses Weir."

"But isn't there anythin' that can be done about it?" asked Jack.

"Not a thing," replied Creevey. "There is no law here that don't allow a man to do as he pleases in his own home. If Weir has picked out Len for a son-in-law, there ain't anythin' we can do."

"Couldn't the council—" began Jack, but Shivers interrupted.

"The council doesn't touch matters like that, Jack."

"I see. It's a mighty tough deal for that girl."

"Yeah, mebbe it is. But she's got to marry somebody; and Len's as good as anybody she could pick out among her own people."

Jack was boiling inwardly as he rode home from Buckhorn. He felt that Sol Feeney had lied about Donna. They were forcing her to marry Len McFee, because they believed she liked the Wolf Pup too well. If the council could not help him—who would? The Buckhorn folks were not interested in what went on north of Lost Horse.

"I reckon I'm a lone wolf in this deal," he told himself. "If I'm goin' to do any good—but what can I do? My only hope is the grandmother—and she's a mighty weak straw to grasp at. Another straw in the wind," he finished bitterly.

JACK rode back to Buckhorn that night, risking a chance of a shot in the dark, because he was lonesome. But the town was almost deserted. Jack's was the only horse at the hitch-racks. Two or three of the townspeople were in the Buckhorn Saloon, a few more around the general store; but not a soul from Lost Horse.

Jack purchased some tobacco and a box of cartridges. He was using one of his father's guns now. Men had looked curiously at those handcarved, bone handles, sticking up above his holster. They knew those guns very well. The men who had knocked him out that night had taken his gun, and the one Donna had given him was only a cheap imitation of a good hand-gun.

Jack was leaning against a counter in the store, listening to the desultory gossip, when he happened to see a face outside one of the dusty windows. It was a blurred impression of a bearded face, with bright eyes, looking in against the lamplight. Jack tensed for a moment, but realized that the man was probably doing nothing more than looking into the place.

After a little while he sauntered to the door and stepped outside. There was one more horse at the hitch-rack. A man was crossing the street from the Buckhorn, and as he walked past Jack recognized him as Ase Feeney, a brother of Sol Feeney. But Ase was smooth-faced. Jack walked over to the Buckhorn, but did not find the bearded man, who looked into the store.

"Gettin' spooky," he told himself. "Might as well go home."

He mounted and galloped out of town. But as he drew nearer home, some instinct warned him to be careful. The warning was so strong that he drew his horse to a stop a good half-mile from his gate.

"That's funny," he muttered aloud. "I wonder if I have the same gift my father

had? It was just like a sign, 'Danger Ahead'."

He rode slowly along toward the ranch. There was no moon, but his eyes were accustomed to the starlight. He turned off the road and went slowly through the trees to a cross fence, where he dismounted and tied his horse. Working carefully he reached the rear of his ranchhouse.

There was not a sound, except the soft rustle of a breeze in the sycamores. But Jack remained quiet, his ears tuned for any suspicious sound. Then it came —a queer, choking gasp. After a moment or two a husky voice half-whispered:

"Gawd, that stuff's strong!"

The voice came from in front of the house, or near the corner. Jack drew back, considered the situation for a moment, and then drew off his boots. Crossing his back porch, noiselessly, he quietly opened a window, and crawled into his own main room. With no more noise than a marauding Apache, he came to the front window, which was raised an inch or so. Crouching in close he listened. The husky voice said:

"Naw, I'm not losin' my nerve. I'll blast him."

"That's the stuff, Len," applauded a voice quietly. "Center that old gun on him, when he rides past, and pull both triggers. Blow him plumb off his horse." Another voice said:

"Are yuh dead shore yore old man don't know yuh come down here?"

"He don't know nothin'. I gave him that gallon of corn, and he won't know anythin' for a week. He won't know I ever left the gate."

"That's fine."

"How 'bout 'nother drink?"

"Listen, feller—you've got shootin' to do. We don't want any mistakes made. This is the night the Wolf Pup dies."

"Yeah, that's right. Tell me some more 'bout what you fellers are goin' to do. After yuh blast everybody in Buckhorn and burn the buildin's, what'r yuh goin' to do next?"

"Build our own town. We'll take over the mine and turn all the prisoners loose. Then we'll git all the gold that the damn council has been a-hoardin', sell the cattle and split the money."

"No use tellin' everythin' yuh know, Dug," protested a voice.

"Aw, Sam, he's with us."

"Yeah, I know he is. But stop blabbin'. He'll be here most any minute. He never stays late. Let's all keep quiet."

JACK sagged back on the floor, trying to figure everything out. Judging from the conversation and the names, these three men were Len McFee, Dug and Sam Orth.

The Orth brothers had furnished McFee with a shotgun, whiskey and a desire for revenge, and they were waiting for him to come from town.

But this plot to take over Council Valley! Was it only the wild vaporings of those two ignorant ruffians, or was there such an idea in the minds of Lost Horse men? Would they go so far as to try and do these things, Jack wondered? Lost Horse was always threatening, so Shivers had told him. Anyway, it would be worth repeating.

He eased himself to a comfortable position, waiting for them to start talking again. He could hear an occasional whisper. Jack began wondering what to do. He could not see them. Any action on his part might bring a blast from the double-barrel shotgun, loaded with buckshot. As far as he knew, they might all be armed with shotguns—and a shotgun is an effective weapon in the dark.

Several more minutes passed. Then a sibilant whisper, so clear that it seemed directed straight into Jack's ear:

"I hear a horse comin'!"

"That must be him."

Two sharp clicks indicated the shotgun was cocked. Jack twisted his head, his

face against the pane, trying to see toward the gate.

Then he heard the whisper again:

"He's stopped inside the gate. Mebbe he—"

"I c'n git him from here."

"He's turnin'—"

A sheet of flame seemed to lick out halfway to the gate, and the smashing report of the heavy double barrel shook the windows of the house.

"By Gawd, yuh got him!" gasped a husky voice. "Good shootin'!"

Jack heard the sound of running footsteps, as the three men ran out toward the gateway. He could see the faint illumination of a match, as they grouped together. The horse came in close to the house and stopped near the porch. Jack got up and opened the door a few inches, just in time to hear as vicious a stream of profanity as he had ever heard before. A choking voice said:

"You thought it was him, too-o-o-!"

Jack could not hear any more, until one of the men ordered another to go and get the horse. The man came back to the porch, caught the animal and led him back.

Finally they all went away. Jack went out to the gate. The men were across the road in the trees, getting their horses, and finally the four horses and three erect riders went back toward Buckhorn.

Jack Dean laughed quietly to himself, as he went back to get his boots.

"Somebody is goin' to be missin' in the mornin'," he told himself, "and it won't be me. I better go and get my horse. Poor Len. That Lost Horse gang are tryin' to make a bad boy out of him, but I'll bet he's a sick child this evenin'."

THERE was an unusual crowd around the general store, when Jack rode into Buckhorn next morning. Ed Miles came to Jack at the hitch-rack and said:

"Somebody murdered Ase Feeney last night. Sam Orth found the body beside the road when he drove in this mornin'. Ase was here last night, and they got him on his way home. Riddled with buckshot."

Jack smiled to himself. It was plain now that Ase knew about the attempt to kill him (Jack) at the ranch, and had ridden in, after giving them plenty of time to have killed him. Curiosity had been the undoing of Ase Feeney.

They walked over to the store, where Sam Orth and several of the Lost Horse men were talking. Orth looked bleakly at Jack, but did not speak. His was the bearded face which Jack had seen at the store window last night.

"Th' thing t' do," suggested one of the men, "is t' find out who wanted to kill Ase."

"We've never dug a murderer out of Lost Horse yet," said Miles.

"Mebbe the killin' was justified," chuckled another. Orth scowled at Jack Dean and said:

"What'r yuh lookin' at me fer, Wolf Pup?"

"I just wanted to get yore scent," smiled Jack. The men all looked curiously at Jack, puzzled at his remark.

"Wasn't you and yore brother out at my place last night?" asked Jack.

"No!" snapped Sam Orth quickly. "We never been out there."

"That's funny," remarked Jack, sniffing audibly. "I thought I smelled you two, when I came home last night."

"I dunno what yo're talkin' about. Smelled us?"

"Yuh see," explained Jack quietly, "everybody has their own peculiar scent. That's how yore dog recognizes yuh. My nose is pretty good."

"Well," flared Sam Orth, "if you think you smelled me and Dug at yore place last night, you better git yore damn nose fixed."

"It might have been two other skunks," said Jack soberly.

But the insult failed to register with

Sam Orth, even though one of the men laughed aloud. Sam said:

"I dunno what it was, but it wasn't me and Dug, 'cause we was home."

"There was another scent," said Jack seriously. "I've smelled it before, but I just can't identify it. Unless I'm mistaken it's from a man who lives *south* of Lost Horse."

The scowl deepened on Sam Orth's face, and there was a flicker of fear, or apprehension, in his eyes.

"Yo're doin' quite a lot of smellin', it seems to me, Wolf Pup," he said, and walked into the store. The men drifted away, leaving Jack and Miles together.

"Was you funnin' with Sam, or did yuh mean it?" asked Miles.

"I believe I meant it," smiled Jack. "Miles, did it ever occur to you that Lost Horse might pull off a revolution?"

"Revolution? Yuh mean—a uprisin'?"

"Yeah."

Miles laughed and shook his head.

"Son," he said, "they've talked about it for twenty years. Used to worry yore father, until he got used to it. It's whiskey-talk."

"Did they talk about burnin' Buckhorn, takin' all the gold, takin' over the mine—and all that?"

"Oh, shore. They've even talked of scalpin' us. They brag that they've got more men than we have, more guns."

"Haven't they?"

"Yeah, I reckon they have. But what of it? They hate each other too much to ever work under one leader. They all want to be boss. That's why we laugh at their threats. If there was a vacancy in the council, I don't believe they could ever decide on any one man to vote for. If there was one strong man in that outfit, we might worry. But you forget the threats and rumors from Lost Horse, son."

But Jack was not satisfied. Possibly because he was a newcomer to the Valley he could see the danger of the situation. Council Valley had heard "Wolf!" cried so often that they ignored it. If trouble did occur, they would be totally unprepared.

Jack rode over to Bart Shivers' ranch and talked the matter over with him—and with the same result. Shivers laughed at him, and told him the same things that Miles had said. He told Shivers about the murder of Ase Feeney, but not what he knew about it. Shivers said:

"Not many folks die of old age on Lost Horse, Jack. They flare up once in a while and throw buckshot. But if yuh tried one of 'em for murder, their bitterest enemy would prove they never done it. After yo're here a while, you'll see 'em just like we do."

Jack shrugged his shoulders and rode back toward his ranch. If the council was satisfied—— He reached the main road and came in beside a four-horse freight-wagon, going toward Buckhorn. Len McFee was on the seat with the driver, who was from Buckhorn. McFee did not speak to Jack.

"Bringin' in a lot of stuff for the weddin'," informed the driver. "Moses Weir shore bought a lot of stuff."

Jack glanced at the load and nodded. Then he said:

"Somebody murdered Ase Feeney last night."

"Th' hell they did!" exclaimed the driver. Len spat dryly, but made no comment, staring down at the horses.

"Loaded him with buckshot," said Jack. "They say that Feeney was on his way home from Buckhorn. Sam Orth found him this mornin'."

"As I allus said, 'Here t'day, gone t'morrow'," said the driver.

"A queer thing happened at my place last night," remarked Jack, and he saw Len McFee wince. "I was in bed, when all to once it sounded like both barrels of a shotgun were fired just outside my window. Two, three men out there. Pretty dark last night. This mornin' I found

blood on the dirt by my gate. I reckon somebody lost their jack-knife, too."

Len's hand went instinctively to his pocket, but he dropped it quickly, realizing what he had done.

"I hope I can find the owner," added Jack.

"Mostly allus yuh can find the owner of a knife," said the driver. Jack nodded and reined in at his own gate, where he sat in his saddle and watched the freight wagon disappear.

"I reckon I'm a pretty good liar," Jack told himself. "Len's sure worried about that knife; and Sam Orth is worried about my nose. And when Sam and Len talk it over, they're goin' to worry about me bein' in my house last night—with them talkin' over things."

MOSES WEIR'S old wagon lumbered along the road to Buckhorn. On the seat beside the patriarch sat Grandma Rodriguez, clad in rusty black. On a sharp turn in the brush, two armed men stepped into the road, stopped the team and looked sharply at Moses Weir. Without a word they stepped aside, and the vehicle went on.

"Road guards?" queried the old lady.

Moses Weir nodded. "I want to know who goes out and who comes in."

"*You* want to know? Getting important, aren't you, Moses?"

"Some day, I'm goin' to boss this Valley, Old Woman."

"So that is the meaning of all these meetings."

"Keep yore tongue to yourself," he advised her.

"Wedding gew-gaws," she mused aloud. "Mighty heavy, it seems to me. Load 'em with buckshot, don't you?"

"Hold yore tongue, woman!"

Grandma Rodriguez laughed at him. "Going to rule the Valley."

"I'm the only man strong enough to do the job," he told her.

"I wonder."

"What you wonderin' about?"

"How long you'll stay alive, with Lost Horse behind yuh. You'll never unite them, Moses Weir. Put the law of the Valley into the hands of Lost Horse men! Outlawry, feuds, murder. You nor no other man can stop 'em."

"I'll run this Valley," declared the big, white-bearded man. "I'll show 'em."

"You can neither read nor write."

"That don't count. We don't need it. Look at Donna. You insisted on her goin' to school in Buckhorn. There's education for yuh! Have to lock her up to make her do my biddin'."

"If you were educated you'd understand why, Moses Weir."

"Faugh! I'll make laws that yuh don't need education to understand. I'll open the road out of this Valley. There's a big market for whiskey on the outside. We've got the finest stills on earth—and have to drink all our own whiskey. That mine will make us all rich. Damn it, I'll buy yuh a new silk dress, Old Woman."

"Thank you. I'll need it—for funerals."

MOSES WEIR tied his team in front of the general store, letting the old lady attend to her own dismounting. But he did open the door of the store for her. There was no one in sight, except the proprietor. Moses Weir said to her:

"Do yore shoppin' and I'll be back in a minute. And remember—no gossip."

He stepped outside and hurried over to the Buckhorn Saloon. Jack Dean, sitting behind the end of a counter, trying on a pair of new boots, got to his feet, as the old lady came down the aisle. Had Moses

Weir known Jack was in there, he never would have gone across the street.

"Better get me a size smaller," said Jack, and the proprietor went to the rear of the store. Jack stepped closer to the old lady.

"How is Donna?" he whispered. Without a word Grandma Rodriguez drew a folded piece of paper from inside her dress and handed it to him.

"Not here," she whispered. "Wait and read it later."

Then she brushed past him and went toward the rear of the store. Jack shoved the note deep in his pocket and went back to the proprietor, who had secured the proper size. They were talking about the boots, when Moses Weir came back. He scowled heavily when he saw Jack Dean, who did not pay any attention to him. Grandma Rodriguez was some distance away from them, examining some calico on a shelf.

Jack paid for his boots, tucked them under his arm, and turned to see Moses Weir. Jack smiled and nodded.

"How do you do, Mr. Weir," he said pleasantly.

"I'm all right," replied the big man very coldly. "I have issued invites to the council to attend the weddin' at my place t'morrow night. Yo're welcome to come."

"Well, thank yuh a lot, Mr. Weir. Mighty nice of yuh — but don't expect me."

"Yo're welcome," said Weir stiffly, as Jack walked past and left the store. Grandma Rodriguez stepped over to him.

"Is that young Dean?" she asked.

"That's him."

"Looks like his father. Gun-fighter, fist-fighter, and he's got honest eyes. The breed didn't die with Wolf Dean."

"Bridle yore tongue," he told her. "Do yore buyin', so we can git back home."

JACK rode a mile out of town, before he unfolded the note. It was written on cheap paper, and was entirely in Spanish. Jack could speak a little Spanish, but had never read it. However, he was able to make a literal translation.

It said:

> "I am prisoner in home. Bad danger in Valley so be ready to go away. Come night of my wedding before nine. Grandma will help what she can. Beware the road is guarded. I pray for you.
>
> *"Dulce Amiga."*

"Dulce Amiga," said Jack. "I called her that, and so she signs it instead of her name. Bless her heart, she wrote in Spanish so no one could read it, in case it was intercepted. Come to her wedding before nine o'clock, and the road is guarded. The Lord only knows what it is all about—but I'll be there, if I have to shoot my way through."

Back on Lost Horse Creek at the Orth ranch, Sam and Dug Orth sprawled in the shade with Len McFee, an uncorked jug beside them.

"I don't hold no belief on that smellin' idea," declared Len. "The Wolf Pup's a liar. But he does know somethin'. Say, which one of you fellers lost a jack-knife on his place last night?"

Neither of them had. Len grinned and reached for the jug.

"Then he lied about it. But he said he was in the house, when I fired that shotgun."

"He's still lyin'," declared Dug. "He was in Buckhorn, when we rode through there. He never came home."

"Here's somethin' else to figger on," added Sam. "He wasn't on the road from Buckhorn, and he wasn't in Buckhorn, when we came back. Put that in yore pipe and smoke it."

"They say he's like the Old Wolf," said Len uneasily. "They say he knows when there's danger. Nobody ever got the Old Wolf—awake."

"Well, don't worry," laughed Sam, wip-

ing his lips after a big pull at the jug. "He'll never do anythin' to us."

"What do yuh mean?" queried Len.

"Never mind what I mean. You do the marryin'—we'll take care of him—and the rest of 'em."

"I shore been a-laughin' at Sol Feeney," chuckled Dug. "He's been trompin' up and down the crick, tellin' folks that he's goin' to find the feller who buckshotted Ase, and flay him alive. Shore a good joke on Sol—thinkin' that Ase was murdered."

"That's a good'n," laughed Sam. "Gimme that jug, Len. You better taper off a little, feller; yo're gettin' married t'morrow night."

"What'sa matter with you, Len?" asked Dug. "You don't look like no happy bridegroom t' me. Too much corn liquor."

"I dunno," grunted Len. "Aw, I'm all right. What does it mean—flayin' a man alive?"

"Takin' th' skin off'n him, while he's still alive."

"Hu-u-h? Gimme that jug—quick!"

"Yo're shore funny, Len," laughed Sam.

"Yeah, I feel—funny."

MOSES WEIR had spared no expense in making Donna's wedding the biggest thing of its kind ever held on Lost Horse. It was also the first time that Buckhorn had ever married into Lost Horse. Long before dark there was a steady stream of wagons, buggies and horseback riders, heading for the Weir ranch.

The wedding was not to be solemnized until nine o'clock, but Lost Horse believed in coming early and staying late. The trees around the house had been strung with gaudy Chinese lanterns, and the house blazed with lamplight. By dark the fences around the house were one solid mass of horses and vehicles.

Huge barbecue pits smoked, sending up savory odors. Great cans of coffee simmered on the coals. Kegs of liquor were ready to be broached. It seemed as though everybody brought their numberless dogs, which were under everybody's feet, and causing innumerable dog fights.

Contrary to the usual custom, every man wore a gun or guns, and on every saddle along the fences were rifles and ammunition belts. By eight o'clock the celebration was in full swing, except that the men were not drinking as heavily as usual.

They puffed on Weir's cheap cigars and talked in subdued tones.

Moses Weir sat in the bunkhouse, conferring with the men, who were coming and going all the time. Not a man from Buckhorn was there. It was strictly Lost Horse. The women were all in the house, sitting on anything handy, doing little talking. The Reverend Knowles, aged, half-blind, wholly-deaf, had not yet arrived.

Len McFee came alone, clad in an ill-fitting, once-black suit. His face was razor-nicked, and he looked as though any unusual sound would send him bolting into the woods. No one had anything to say to him, and they ceased their conversation, as long as he was near.

He wandered from group to group, but with no success. Finally he said to one of the men:

"This here seems more like a funeral than a weddin'."

The man merely shrugged his shoulders and walked away; so Len went to one of the kegs and drank alone. He said to another man:

"I'm jist wonderin' if I ain't mixed up on the night."

"This is *the* night," the man assured him.

"I reckon I'm all right then," grinned Len. He saw men going toward the bunkhouse; so he sauntered over there. Several men came out, carefully carrying a wooden box. Len saw the box plainly in the lamplight, and shoved his way inside the bunkhouse.

"What are they doin' with the dynamite?" he asked Moses Weir.

Moses Weir looked at one of the big men near Len. Len didn't see it, but the big man smashed him square on the point of the chin, and Len collapsed, knocked out—cold.

"Hell of a thing to do to the bridegroom," said the big man, blowing on his skinned knuckles.

"He's still from Buckhorn," said Moses Weir meaningly, "and we can't take no chances—not now."

UPSTAIRS in Donna's room sat Donna and Mrs. Rodriguez. Donna was dressed in a simple white dress, not exactly a wedding gown. But she looked beautiful, in spite of the worry. She got to her feet and paced the small room, the windows of which had been boarded up from the outside.

"Oh, I hope he understood," she said wearily. "I couldn't explain it in Spanish. Maybe he couldn't read Spanish at all. If he can only understand enough to warn them."

"After all, these are your people, *querida mia,*" reminded the old lady.

"Oh, I know it. But they will kill innocent people tonight. If Jack understood that warning, it may be war—not a massacre. After all, war is better than murder."

"Better, I suppose," nodded the old lady. "After that—what? Your father would kill you if he knew about that note."

"Perhaps," nodded Donna. Suddenly she turned to the old lady.

"We can stop it!" she almost shouted. "We can send for my father and tell him that Buckhorn has been warned — that they are ready to fight."

"Excellent, my dear," nodded the old lady dryly. "And then the only ones to die would be you and me."

Donna's eyes clouded, and she nodded slowly.

"Yes, that is true, Grandmother. What time is it?"

"Half-past eight."

"Not much time left," she sighed. "If he only could do something."

"It is time for me to go downstairs," said the old lady. "I must be watching. He may have read that note."

She kissed Donna fondly and went to the door.

"Do not cry," she said, looking back at Donna. "An empire may be won or lost in half an hour."

It was after dark, when Jack Dean rode away from his ranch, going straight into the trackless hills. He had told Shivers about the warning note, and this time the big man did not scoff. He listened gravely, his eyes thoughtful.

"It might be," suggested Jack, "that the wedding would bring them together in force. And Buckhorn wouldn't expect a revolution and a weddin' on the same night."

And Bart Shivers had said:

"You are like yore father, Jack—he saw things ahead of time."

It was difficult traveling in the hills, but Jack knew that he would never be able to reach the Weir ranch, if he traveled the road. But he had plenty of time to make the trip and to try and plan what to do, when he got there. This time he wore both of his father's guns, and in a scabbard under his left knee was a rifle.

Jack saw the twinkling of colored lights through the trees, long before he reached the Weir ranch. Picking his way carefully through the brush he reached a trail, only to swing his horse into the brush again, as he heard sounds of someone on the trail. Jack dismounted and covered the nostrils of his horse to prevent the animal from nickering.

In the darkness he saw what looked like several men on horseback, winding through the brush. Wondering where they were going, he rode back to the trail and went down toward the ranchhouse. There

did not seem to be any good reason for men leaving the festivities.

Jack tied his horse near the rear fence and stood there in the darkness for several minutes, trying to remember details of the ranchhouse and its surroundings. The ranchhouse faced the north. It was sort of an L-shaped structure, with the kitchen at the west side. Between the kitchen and the fence was the bunkhouse, with the door on the east end. Off to the south of the house were the barbecue pits.

JACK could see that nearly all the illumination was around the front of the place and along the east side. There were no horses tied at the rear fence, but the other fences were tied solidly. He could hear the sound of music and the babble of voices. He could see men going in and out of the bunkhouse, but the light was not bright around there.

His watch showed that only fifteen minutes remained before the time for the wedding, as he walked boldly across the back yard to the house. He stopped at the shaded back porch, where the darkness was heavy. A partly uncovered window gave him a scant view of the interior of the kitchen, and he saw Grandma Rodriguez. The door between the kitchen and the main room was nearly closed.

Jack took a coin from his pocket and tapped gently on the window pane. The old lady looked up quickly, glanced toward the main room, but came directly to the back door, which she opened and looked out.

"Jack Dean," whispered Jack. Grandma Rodriguez stepped outside and put out a hand, trying to locate Jack in the dark.

"Sh-h-h-h!" she warned. "Listen—and do not talk."

Swiftly she whispered her instructions to Jack, who gasped at the audacity of her suggestions; but she was back inside the house, before he could question her. For fully a minute he stood there, thinking swiftly. Then he went boldly back to his horse, saw that the animal was tied loosely, and then began cautiously to circle the fence, looking for another likely looking steed.

"The preacher is here, Moses," informed one of the men, coming into the bunkhouse.

"Let him wait a few minutes," replied the patriarch. "One of you fellers find out how Len McFee is feelin'. Soon's he's fit, we'll have Old Knowles tie the knot. Then we're ready for action."

"Len's all right," assured one of the men. "But he's boilin' 'bout somebody sluggin' him. I done tol' him it was a mistake, and he said that the feller who slugged him would soon find out how much of a mistake it was."

"Never mind him," growled Moses Weir. "I'll be in the house in a minute. Everybody have a big drink—you've done mighty well tonight."

The main room of the ranchhouse was about fifty feet long, by thirty feet wide. On the east side was an open stairway to the second story, the bottom of it nearly opposite the doorway to the kitchen. The crowd was at least three-deep around the room, awaiting the appearance of the bride. Near the fireplace at the south side of the room stood the Reverend Knowles, looking very much like a little, old owl, peering around, smiling vacuously, clutching his prayer-book.

NEAREST the kitchen doorway stood Grandma Rodriguez, very alert. She did not allow any of them to go into the

kitchen. The crowd shifted, as Moses Weir came in, walking slowly up near the preacher, where he took his place.

An accordion player, accompanied by a guitar and a banjo, began softly playing his version of the wedding march, including variations. Two men came in with Len McFee. Len had a skinned chin, a twisted tie and a rather soiled shirt. Taken as a whole, Len McFee did not look the happy bridgegroom. His eyes held a sullen, puzzled expression, as though wondering what it was all about, and his big fists were clenched.

Some one whispered, "Here she comes!" and all eyes turned to the stairs.

Donna Weir, followed by her mother, came slowly down the stairs, and the tempo of the music became almost ragtime. All eyes were on Donna. She turned at the short landing and came down the last five steps into the room. Her eyes shifted toward the preacher, her father and her husband-to-be. Then she walked to the center of the room, and before anyone could realize what she was doing, she darted for the kitchen doorway and disappeared.

It was all so sudden that the crowd was stunned. In her haste to get into the kitchen, Grandma Rodriguez swung the door, and the surging crowd managed to slam it shut. Moses Weir pawed his way to them, flinging them aside with his huge hands.

"Out the front!" he yelled.

But it seemed as though everybody wanted to go through the kitchen, except a few near the front door. From somewhere outside the house came the popping reports of a six-shooter. Moses Weir was cursing viciously, as he tore away from the crowd and ran heavily out on the front porch. A man was stumbling up the steps, clutching a smashed shoulder.

"The Wolf Pup!" he groaned. "Had horses—ready. They're gettin' away."

By that time the crowd was out, running hither and yon, confusing anyone who had presence of mind enough to do anything constructive. Women's shrill voices, crying children, and the barking of dogs added to the din. Only Len McFee and the preacher were left in the house. The preacher, one hand cupped around his ear, was yelling questions at Len, who stood there dumbly, looking at him. Finally Len reached out, placed a thumb against the preacher's nose and shoved him over backward.

Moses Weir had managed to gather some of his men around him.

"To hell with the weddin'!" he blazed. "Pass the word—we're ridin' down the Valley."

FAR back in the hills Donna and Jack drew rein, their horses close together in the brush, sides heaving from the swift run. Jack nearly swept her off her horse, as he leaned out to embrace her.

"Donna, we did it!" he choked triumphantly. "They'll never get you again. You're mine, Donna!"

"Dulce amiga," she panted. "I love you, Jack, and I'll never go back to Lost Horse. But we must go fast—get to the gate ahead of them. They'll block the road. Already they are riding to Buckhorn. Don't you understand, Jack, Lost Horse is on the war-path!"

"You mean they're revolting tonight, Donna?"

"Yes, yes! I was afraid to write it in the note. But I told you the road was closed. I—I thought you'd understand."

"I did, sweetheart. But listen—that sounded like dynamite! And rifle shots."

"The mine, Jack! They are dynamiting the stockade. They'll kill the guards and arm the prisoners."

Jack swung the horses around and they headed for the Valley.

"Do you think we can make it, Jack?" asked Donna anxiously.

"Make it? Sweetheart, with you behind me, all Council Valley couldn't stop me."

"They will have at least a hundred men, Jack."

"A mere handful—the way I feel."

LOST HORSE came to Buckhorn that night and they came with a rush of galloping horses. Straight into the main street they came, almost concealed in a fog of dust from milling horses. There was not a light in town, and it looked like a complete surprise.

Then Moses Weir's voice barked an order. As if in answer to it, every window in Buckhorn blazed with gunpowder, and a hail of buckshot tore into the men from Lost Horse. Caught on two sides, hammered and slashed, Lost Horse became demoralized. Horses and men went down. No one paid any attention to Moses Weir's bellowed orders for a retreat.

The men sprawled in the street, firing back at the death which spat at them from every side. Someone managed to fire the store and council hall, both match-dry old structures; but the defenders went out the back way and reformed to move in close again, sending a withering fire into the Lost Horse horde.

Buckhorn was suffering, too. There was no long-range shooting. It was buckshot range, where the report of a gun meant death or injury—suicide, if you wish. No one knew how long the war lasted, but it proved too long for Lost Horse. Fire was only spasmodic from the Buckhorn men—they were nearly all gone.

The Lost Horse survivors were crawling away, meeting outside the illumination of the burning town. Not over a dozen or fifteen in all, few of them uninjured. Sol Feeney, savage as a wounded old grizzly; Buck Feeney, his right arm smashed; Dave Harris, Sam Orth, all battle-scarred.

"Damn 'em, they was ready!" screamed Sol. "There must have been a traitor in our crowd. Lost Horse is wiped out, but Buckhorn ain't much better. I'm all that's left of the Feeneys. Dave, they got Bill. I seen Dug Orth ridin' t' hell on a handfull of buckshot!

"We've got to git out of the Valley—all of us—but we'll go out rich. Git horses! We'll smash the treasury of Council Valley, out at Dean's ranch, and we'll all be rich. Git them horses—quick!"

The battle was over when Donna and Jack reached Buckhorn. There were only a few survivors—all Buckhorn men.

"My father?" queried Donna.

"He's back there, in the middle of the street," replied a man. "The council hall's gone and the laws went with it. They're all gone, Shivers, Creevey, Fallon and Miles. We smashed Lost Horse, but some of 'em got away."

Jack slowly turned their horses and they rode toward the ranch.

"It's terrible!" cried Donna. "We are just like two people in a dead world. Everybody has killed everybody else."

"Don't Donna. For us the world is just comin' alive."

They were close to the ranch, when a man stepped out from behind a tree, pointing a rifle at Jack, halting them abruptly.

"What are you guardin' the road for?" queried Jack.

"Waitin' for the boys to git rich, damn yuh. Then they'll decide yore fate."

"Waitin' for 'em to get rich?"

"Shore, you fool! They're lootin' the treasury of Council Valley. Buckhorn may lick us with buckshot, but we'll be damn well paid."

"You mean—they'll take the gold?"

"Every dime. Right now they're smashin' into the safe. Must be more'n a million in gold, and when we git outside—"

For an instant the old ranchhouse seemed to bloom like a huge, fiery rose. The sycamores blew apart like matchsticks, and the concussion of the explosion nearly unseated the two riders. The guard dropped his rifle and went sprawling to his hands and knees.

Luckily the horses were not knocked

down. Donna's scream of fright was drowned out by the clatter and smash of falling debris. Jack reacted very quickly. He dived off his horse, square into the sprawling guard, flung his rifle away and jerked the man to his feet. The heavy scent of dynamite smoke billowed out to them.

The guard was panting, gasping, frightened to death. Jack flung him aside and mounted his horse.

"How many men were in that lootin' gang?" Jack yelled at the guard.

"All—there was—left," replied the man dazedly.

As if by mutual consent Jack and Donna rode on. Even the big arched gate had been swung around by the explosion. Jack did not look toward the location of his home, but kept straight ahead.

"I never knew the secret of the treasury," he told her. "There were five padlocks on the cellar door. They told me that each of the council had a key, and all must be there in order to open it. Some of the five must have known the secret—but Lost Horse didn't. The council was not as trusting as I supposed."

THEY reached the massive gate, and Jack jerked the signal bell. They heard Old Hutch McFee coming down from his house, his lantern twinkling against the cliff. He held his lantern shoulder high, peering between the oak timbers.

"The Wolf Pup!" he exclaimed, his breath redolent of moonshine.

"Open up, Hutch—we're comin' through," ordered Jack.

"Huh? Where-at is yore order from the council?"

"Here!" barked Jack, almost shoving the muzzle of his gun against the old man's long nose. "Drop yore gun and unlock the gate."

Old Hutch dropped the gun, and the big key rattled nervously against the huge lock.

Then he slowly opened the gate, looking owl-eyed at them. He didn't recognize Donna.

"The council are all dead, Hutch!" explained Jack. "Most all of Council Valley are dead, too. You won't need to lock the gate again."

Then they rode on, leaving Old Hutch against the gate, fumbling with his lantern.

"All dead?" he gasped to himself. "The council—the people? Well, I'll be jiggered. I—I wonder if he done—hu-u-uh! Well, I allus said that the whelp of the old wolf might be hell on wheels."

Where the road turned from the cut and gave a long view of the misty distance, silvered under the moonlight, the two riders drew rein. Jack put his arm around Donna and pointed far down across the hills. Neither of them spoke. He kissed her, and they went slowly down the old road.

Dugan Was Rich for Him; But the Money Was South American Money, Hard and Heavy—Especially When It Was All on His Back

ROBBERS' ROOST

By ARTHUR O. FRIEL

Author of "A River to Cross," "Closed Country," etc.

MONEY is like women. Sometimes it's mighty useful to a man; sometimes it can be a damned nuisance.

Down here in Venezuela, now, where nobody wants paper banknotes, twenty dollars' worth of silver *bolivares* is a load. And if you're trying to carry, say, a thousand of them, you need a burro. Also, in some places, a gun or two, and maybe a steel vest.

There was a fellow named Dugan who found that out. North American, Irish descent, big, dark; about my own size and set-up. And—

Oh, no. My name's Hart. Get that straight. Hart. If you came down here looking for anybody named Dugan you

can keep on looking. You didn't? All right, then.

Now this lad Dugan was a peaceable fellow; but somehow he kept running into accidents. His fists were big, and sometimes they'd bump somebody and bust things. And once or twice some hard eggs down here got in front of a gun he was holding, and the thing went off. And so between one thing and another he had to keep drifting.

But now and then he got a lucky break, too. And this time, down on the *llanos* south of here, he had drifted into a tough jam sick and broke, and out again well and rich. Rich for him, I mean. For weeks he hadn't seen a dollar. Now he had about $200, North American.

But it was all South American money, hard and heavy. And he was afoot; tramping it, across those flat plains where the sun sizzles the thin grass and starves trees to spindly dwarfs or kills them when they're born—except in places where their roots can find water even in the dry season. And with that sun broiling him too, those thousand *bolivares* seemed to wear a hole in his back.

In his back. That's right. Try carrying that weight in your pants and you'll find out why. All he was wearing was pants and shirt and Venezuelan sandals and a straw sombrero. Also a long-barreled but small-bored revolver at his belt. That was all the hardware he wanted dragging at his waist-line. The money rode in a bag wrapped in his hammock-pack. And, no matter how he stowed it, it worked down and rubbed hard.

So hard that sometimes, hanging his hammock between trees at a waterhole and chewing up the dry cassava and cheese he lived on, he scowled at the money-bag and said:

"To hell with you! Tomorrow you can stay here and rot. I'm going somewhere!"

And there you have Dugan. To him money was only something to help him get along, not something to break his back for. He was always going somewhere—or nowhere; anyway, he kept going. There are a lot of fellows like him.

BUT of course he never tossed away that bag of silver. Every morning he cussed it again, and then packed it a different way and plugged along.

After awhile he found a path. A sort of hoof-track, worn on the hard ground by heavy animals, leading across the everlasting flats toward a low grove of dark trees. Some cattle were grazing near those trees; wiry beasts, scattered around, with no watchers that he could see. Just a half-wild herd, he thought. But when he reached the grove he found a house.

Not much of a house. A mud-walled *casita* with a low brown palm-thatch roof, dull and gloomy in the shade of the stubby trees.

After one look at it he decided to pass it up. But then he stopped short.

Dogs rushed him. Dark dogs that sprang from nowhere, making no sound but savage growls. Dugan took one look at their eyes and went for his gun. Those eyes were bad. But then a voice yelled:

"Perros! Abajo! Down, dogs!"

And those brutes stopped dead, bracing back so hard that they skidded. Then the whole bunch turned tail to Dugan and, facing the house, whined for mercy.

In the doorway stood a stocky man with a black beard, holding a club, threatening the dogs, sizing up Dugan. For a second he scowled, as if he had been expecting somebody else. But then he said:

"Hullo traveler! What are you selling?"

"Nada," said Dugan. "Nothing. This pack on my back is my own bed and board. But if you could give away a drink of water I could use it."

"Why not?" said the other fellow. "Come in."

So Dugan did. The dogs had sneaked away. Their master, still holding his club, jerked a thumb toward a clay jar of

water on a table and stood looking Dugan over.

Dugan drank heavy. The water was warm and not too clean, but he was dried out. Setting down the jar, he remarked in North American:

"Man, is that a relief!"

THE other fellow's brown eyes stared. Then he said:

"Well, I'll be damned!"

And that was North American too. And he grinned, showing some broken teeth, and asked:

"Where you from, big boy?"

Dugan stared back at him, and didn't like his looks. Between the high black beard and the low black hair was a flat nose, and the eyes were too close together. And the thick neck and heavy body looked bloated and unclean. So he said:

"Oh, here and there. And you?"

"Same place," said the other fellow. "My name's Ruff."

"Oh, yes? Mine's Tuff," said Dugan. "Glad to have met you. So long."

He started out. But Ruff objected:

"What's the rush? Stick around and cool off, can't you?"

"How?" asked Dugan. The place was hot as an oven; one small window at the back, the doorway at the front, and practically no breeze outside.

"I'll show you," said Ruff. And he opened a closet and pulled out a demijohn of raw white rum; with a kick like a mule.

Dugan had tackled that stuff before, and knew what it could do. So he shook his head. But then, looking around the lonesome hole again, and growing curious, he said:

"Oh, all right. After you!"

Ruff grinned and let it gurgle. That fiery stuff went down his gullet like water. When he handed over the jug Dugan took one short drag, grabbed the water jar, and swallowed a big chaser.

"Can't take it?" Ruff sneered.

"Nope," said Dugan. "My liver's out of order. Too much high living. And besides, I'm traveling. How far is it to the next place?"

"A long haul," said Ruff. "Hell, man, what's your hurry? Somebody after you?"

His eyes glinted. And Dugan, playing up, said:

"Not that I know of. When I stop 'em they stay stopped."

Ruff laughed loud, glancing at Dugan's holster.

"Well, then take it easy," he said. "If you're just tramping around, maybe I could find you a job."

DUGAN looked around again, sizing up the poor place. Dirt floor, mud walls, small closet; hammock, narrow table, square stool, water jar, a few greasy dishes, and a couple of dirty kerosene lanterns. That was all, except a short loft on the pole rafters, holding some dingy odds and ends. Job? Doing what?

Dugan didn't care. Why should he, with a thousand *bolívares* on his back? But he asked the questions anyway. Ruff came back with another:

"Can you ride?"

"I'm no cowboy, if that's what you mean," said Dugan. "And even if I was, what of it?"

Ruff grinned again, and looked again at the long gun on Dugan's belt. He didn't know it was only a .22; in the holster it bulked like a .45. And he said:

"If you can stick on a horse or a mule there's money to be picked up around here."

He teetered back and forth, feeling very

good with that big slug of rum in him. And his look and grin told Dugan more than his words. These *llanos* were cattle country. They were all free range, like the old Western plains up in the States. Beefs wandered wherever they might, and many of them were killed by *tigres*. And the *llaneros* (cowboys to you) took things pretty easy. So if quite a few head disappeared, what of it?

Unless, of course, you were caught making those beefs disappear. In that case you had to be a tough fighter to get away with it. And Dugan looked as if he might be that. So—

"I see," said Dugan. "But I'm a lazy cuss, and I'd rather walk than work. Much obliged for the drinks."

AND he swung and walked out.

The doorway was narrow, and he was wide, and he turned a little sidewise. So he bumped into one more of his accidents. His pack hit the jamb. And his money-bag inside said, *clink!*

Just a short sound, but a dead give-away. But Dugan didn't care. He started off north. Then, getting curious again, he swung left and took a walk around the place, finding a small cook-house out back, and, farther on, a fair-sized corral hidden among the trees. That pole pen was empty. And, so far as he could see, there was no horse, mule, or burro.

A queer layout. A lone rustler's roost, but nothing to rustle with. A beaten track leading south to the Rio Apure—a river which ran straight east to the big river Orinoco, which in turn ran on east to the Atlantic Ocean, with a few meat-eating towns along the way. A back-door outlet, that, for cattle swiped from the plains up north and out west. But here, only one pot-bellied rum-hound with a few dogs, and some cattle grazing as if they belonged to the place, and nothing else; not even a *cocihembra*. And so—

What? Oh. A new word to you? Well, a *cocihembra* is a low-down housekeeper. The nearest you can get to it in our language is "a female animal that can cook." No brains. Just a body that knows enough to get a man and keep him alive to keep her alive. The world's full of them. And down in the Orinoco country it's a very poor or peculiar man who hasn't at least one.

And this fellow Ruff, who talked big about sly jobs after guzzling rum, had nothing in sight. Dugan chuckled. He had seen that type more than once in South America, and in North America too. So he about-faced and started north again. And that sudden move just saved him.

Something hit his pack like a sledge-hammer. Something that caught him with one foot off the ground and knocked him sprawling. As he went down he heard a loud gunshot.

For what seemed a long time he lay there, using his eyes and ears but not moving a muscle. He heard silver money clinking out had felt his money-bag growing lighter. The hidden shooter had shot low; and that was sensible. At short range most guns lift. But instead of blowing out Dugan's bowels he had ripped the bag behind.

When the money stopped running every-

thing was quiet. Then, soft as a tiger sneaking up, came footsteps from behind. They crept closer and closer; and Dugan felt cold sweat washing out all over him. But he still played dead.

The steps stopped. Somebody, sizing up the spilled silver, said: *"Haaah!"* Then somebody stooped and pulled Dugan's face up for a last sure look. And then Dugan struck.

Heaving himself up, he threw a wicked punch straight under the jaw. The other fellow went up in the air and flopped down on his back. And Dugan smashed him.

Smashed. That's right. One thing Dugan couldn't stand was a rat that bit in the dark. Now he saw red and let himself go. When his eyes cleared and he sat back with his fists numb, he was sorry.

Sorry, because the thing under him was Ruff. Or had been. It wasn't much now. And Dugan, getting up, said to himself:

"Oh, hell, can't you ever learn where to stop? If you'd kept him alive you might have learned something."

But there wasn't any answer to that. So he scraped up the spilled money and loaded it into his clothes and started out once more. But after a few steps he slowed down and swung back to the house. His legs were weak.

Why? Well, if you've never smashed a man to hell with your bare hands, you wouldn't know. After it's over you're all burned out. And how would I know?" Never mind. I'm just telling you.

Dugan went into the house and sat in the hammock and felt pretty low. And then came something that made him feel better. A queer thing too, in a way.

The dogs came to him. They had stayed away somewhere while he was polishing off their master. Now they slowly approached, tails down, legs ready to jump away from a kick or a club. And the biggest one, the leader, drew back his lips in a sort of grin. His long teeth looked vicious, but his brown eyes said he would like to be friendly.

Somehow it touched Dugan, who usually liked dogs. And he grinned back and said:

"Well, hullo, fellow! Have you been treated rough around here?"

At that the big one stood up, pawing the air, and gave a low bark. And all the drooping tails came up and wagged a little.

"All right, boys," said Dugan. "You're a pretty good gang, at that. And you sure look as if you'd been kicked around, and starved too."

They did. Their ribs stuck out. Their short-haired skins showed scars. One of them had a crooked leg, broken and grown together any old way. Another had only one eye. Mongrels, ugly to look at—but decent dogs, if given half a chance.

"M-m. I guess maybe I did a good job at that," said Dugan. "You boys seem to think so, and you ought to know. Well, now, how about some eats?"

Tails wagged again and eyes brightened up, but looked rather dumb too, as if they got the idea but didn't know what to do about it. And Dugan, looking into the closet, found nothing eatable but some dry cassava and a small piece of cooked meat covered with small bugs. He tossed that piece to the dogs, and the leader got it with one jump and gulp. The other stuff in that closet was mostly empty bottles and a few demijohns.

On the top shelf was a small leather bag. Opening this, Dugan found a fistful of .44 cartridges. And the closet, he now noticed, stood a little away from a corner wall; just about far enough to let a hand go into the narrow space and grab a hidden rifle. That rifle was outside now, where Ruff had dropped it. And now Dugan, thinking about eats, went and got it.

First, though, he dumped his money on the table; he saw no sense in lugging it around just then. With that weight

gone, he walked out with the dogs prancing around him. When he reached Ruff's body, though, they growled and hung back. So, not liking it much himself, he hauled it off to one side and left it behind some bushes. Then he examined the rifle —an old repeater—and, finding the top cartridge good, he started for the herd of cattle south of the grove.

BUT the dogs had other ideas. The leader, trotting ahead, tried to turn him somewhere else; he seemed to think there was something the new man ought to know about, or something else that was usually done with a gun around there, or— Well, something. So Dugan took the hint and followed the pack. And they led him past the empty corral to a big tree.

It was an oil-tree, with smooth yellow bark. But on one side that bark was not so smooth as it should be. It had black

pock-marks, and dark gashes, and faint brownish stains. They reached about as high as a man. Above there, no marks. And below there, scattered around on the ground, several narrow mounds. Graves.

Shallow graves of men—or maybe a woman or two. Bullet holes, machete slashes, on the tree. Dogs looking up at Dugan as if they expected him to tie up somebody and then—

"Good God!" said Dugan. And he gave the dogs a hard look. But then he saw that they were just showing him the sights of their place, and he said:

"Let's go!"

They came along. And he found the herd, and shot a young bull, and cut off some big steaks for himself, and told the dogs:

"Go to it, boys!"

They went to it like wolves. Leaving them feeding, he walked back, found some wood, broiled his tough beef in the cook-house, and ate like a wolf himself. For some time past he had gone without fresh meat, and now the taste of it made him ravenous.

Stuffed, he grew sluggish and sleepy. He had walked far that day, and now he felt too heavy to move. The dogs, coming in with bellies almost dragging, acted the same way. But they kept moving to some place beyond the house, and he followed them, crossing the path, into the grove over there. And there they showed him a spring of water, small but fairly cool. So he drank, and so did they, and then they all rested together.

Here the grove was clean and thick and dark, and the dirty house was out of sight and smell, and everything peaceful. Dugan sat back against a tree to take a short siesta. Sleep got him. When he woke up it was sunset.

"Hell's bells!" he said, starting up. "Do I have to stay in this dump tonight?"

Then he stared at the dogs. They were up, bunched close, facing toward the house. And the leader was growling.

LISTENING, he heard a dull beat of hoofs. They stopped. The dogs growled louder. Dugan snapped at them:

"Shut up!"

They looked at him, and then skulked away into the darker brush behind him. And then everything else turned dark. The sun was gone; and, while he still listened, it was night.

Voices sounded. Rough voices saying things Dugan could not catch. Then came a harsh yell:

"Hi! Rooff! Devil take you, where are you?"

Ruff, taken by the devil some time ago, kept quiet. More mutters. Then the same harsh voice ordered:

"Get down, you! Lucio, take him in! Paco, water the beasts! Tobal, make a light in there! *Cra*, where is that drunken dog of a Rooff?"

Somebody said something in a thin, high voice, and loud laughs followed. Then something trampled toward Dugan, and he came out of his trance. Four men, at least, were over there; tough guys, if voices told anything. And all Dugan's money was in that house. And Ruff's rifle was out back, on the ground beside the clay cook-stove, where Dugan had left it when he followed the dogs to the spring.

Horses broke through the brush toward the waterhole. Dugan ducked. A man, dim in the dark, followed the animals. When they had passed, Dugan pussy-footed toward the house. He wasn't worried yet. He wanted to see what was going on. And he had a gun—

Then he stopped dead. He had no gun. Feeling for it, he found the holster empty. While he slept he had slipped down, and somehow the revolver had slipped out. Now, in the dark, he had no chance of even finding the tree where he had rested.

What he called himself in the next few seconds was plenty. Then he moved on again, faster. Ruff's rifle—

But he was too slow. Before he could make his way through the trees the house was lit up, and somebody yelled:

"Válgame Dios! Mira! Look! Money!"

There was a silence. Then somebody thought fast and said:

"Something is wrong here. Rooff would never leave a *bolivar* in sight if he lived. Look around outside, *prontamente!*"

Men hustled out with a dirty lantern. Swinging it wide, they walked around the house. In a minute one shouted:

"Here's his gun!"

Dugan silently cursed. The leader, standing black in the doorway, said:

"Nothing else?"

"Not yet."

"Bring the gun here," the boss ordered, "and look farther."

"We will do the looking first," said the man outside.

"Maldito, bring that gun here!" the boss yelled.

HIS black right arm jerked toward his belt, and he took a step out. Then, looking at something in the lamplit house behind him, he stopped and waited. A man came slouching around the corner; handed over the rifle, and went away again with the lantern. The light faded out behind the house, and the boss went back inside, shoving the door half shut.

Dugan, behind a tree, stood thinking. That boss—a thick-set fellow built like a bull—did not trust his men with a gun. But they probably had knives; maybe machetes. Those long scars on the tree out back, where somebody had been chopped apart— Oh, yes. And right now, in that house, was somebody the boss wasn't leaving alone. Somebody who might soon be up against that same scarred tree.

But that was the other fellow's hard luck. Dugan had to think about Dugan. While he was still thinking he heard something behind him. He faced around, saw nothing. The grove now was pitch black. But he guessed that the horse-guard, hearing the yells, was coming back to see what it was all about. He guessed right.

A man blundered past and dimly showed in the open path, where a little starlight faintly shone. Dugan jumped him.

The man heard him coming and jerked half around. That was as far as he got. Dugan slugged him down; straddled him, soaked him one more between the eyes. Then, feeling around, he found a dropped knife, not very long but very sharp.

"Well, that's something," he said, sliding the steel under his belt. Then he

pulled it out again and cut the fellow's pants into long wide strips; tied his hands and feet, and gagged him; hauled the senseless body back into the bush, and left it there.

"One down and three to go," he laughed in the dark. With one enemy licked, nothing seemed too tough to tackle next. We Irish are like that. But by the time he found the path again things had thickened up.

The lantern was coming back. It came around a corner and went into the house, with dark shapes following. But one of them stopped in the doorway and stood facing out, watching. So Dugan stopped where he was.

Voices mumbled. Dugan, listening hard, heard the word *nada*. So the hunters had missed Ruff, behind the bush; and they had missed Dugan's pack, under the tree were Ruff had shot him down. In that darkness, with only a faint oil-light, nobody could see much anyway.

BUT everybody was suspicious. And soon men came out again, and the rickety door creaked and banged, and the dull lamplight inside was gone. And Dugan knew guards must be crouching with backs to walls and knives out, listening, ready to strike like snakes.

How many? He was not quite sure. The weak lights had shown only a moving bulk that might be two men or more —but seemed to be more. He wished now that he had counted the horses going past him.

But wishing got nothing, and neither did waiting. So he moved again.

Feeling his way, he worked back toward the spring. There the horses, no longer thirsty, were contentedly feeding off green leaves. Following his nose and ears, he found one animal, caught its dragging reins, led it toward the house. The others followed.

Keeping on the off side, he walked across the open path. When the first horse broke out of the brush he heard a sharp hiss at his left. For a few seconds the air felt tight. Then, as the other horses tramped along, a voice grumbled:

Where the hell have you been all this time, Paco?"

Dugan gave a sour grunt and walked on toward the corral. The same voice said:

"Step lively and get back here quick! There is news."

Dugan kept mum. The horse found the corral for him. He let it go, and let the others follow through, and noisily put up the bars. Then he yelled:

"Dios! What's this? *Yeeee—ugh!"*

That last screech and groan were like those of a dying man stabbed in the back. He had heard that noise before—and seen the job done—in more than one place since he left the States. When you hear it and don't see it it's twice as hard on your nerves.

Dead silence followed. Dead, scared silence. Even the leaves flapping in the night wind stopped. Then the breeze blew again, and the little night sounds of chirping beetles and other bugs went on. And Dugan worked softly off among the trees, swinging back toward the house. Then the paralyzed men at that house came to life.

The door rasped open, and the boss' voice demanded:

"Have you got him?"

"Diablo, no! Something has got Paco!" said one. And another blatted, "At the corral, it was! Paco passed only just now with the horses, and spoke as he passed, and then the bars rattled, and then he screamed—*Cra!* Like a horse being killed by a *tigre,* it was! And—"

"Shut up! I heard it," said the boss. "Why in hell didn't you get over there? Get going!"

"Without a gun? No, *por Dios!"* came another voice—the high one. "Give us the rifle. Or come yourself."

"Si. That's right," the others agreed. And Dugan knew his guess had been

good; there were more than two men besides the master.

"Four to go," he corrected the odds. "But maybe—"

THERE he listened again. The boss swore and threatened, but the others still refused to take a chance without a gun. In the end the boss said:

"*Pues,* you water-gutted worms, I go! Come here, you! Take a lantern! And, by the bleeding Judas Priest—" (or something like that) "—I'll find out what's going on around here! But you will walk in front of me, you lousy rats, and if one of you tries to run away—"

And so on, while they all went inside. And Dugan, grinning, made a quick sneak to the one back window of the house. This was what he wanted—the whole gang going to the corral in a hurry, giving him time to grab up his money and duck out again into the dark.

Looking through that small window, he really saw the men for the first time. The boss, dark up to now, was still dark;

a heavy-built thug with face and hands almost black, and a flat nose and brutal underslung jaw; more than half nigger, and the rest mostly Indian, with a little low-down Spanish mixed in. And if you can find a worse mixture than that, tell me about it sometime.

The other three gangsters were yellow or almost white. The yellows were hard-faced, stocky *mestizos.* The almost white one was lanky and snake-eyed, with a little black smudge of a Hitler mustache over his thin fish-mouth; and Dugan guessed he was the one who spoke in that high voice. A gutter rat, that one, from devil-knows-where; and cruel and treacherous as any other rat.

But in that dirty room was one decent man—if faces show anything. A medium-sized man, sitting stiff on Ruff's stool, with his arms tied behind him. He was another almost-white, but much different from the gutter rat. Back straight, chin up, eyes set on a blank wall, he sat without a quiver anywhere in him. A high-class Spaniard, with a touch of high-class Indian; the kind that will go through hell and high water, and burn at a stake at the end, without a yelp.

Dugan got all this in one quick study. Then he scowled. His plan was not working out.

Instead of rushing out with Ruff's rifle, the black boss pulled his belt tight and packed Dugan's money inside his shirt, shoving it around to the back. When it was all in he buttoned up tight, worked his shoulders to settle the load, and eyed the prisoner with a nasty grin.

"Much as I dislike to disturb your rest, Señor Monteverde," he said, "you must take a walk. Tobal, untie his feet!"

One of the *mestizos* knelt, worked on ropes, stood up again. Monteverde stood up too; worked his feet a little, as if they were numb; then was still as a statue. The black boss gave him a rough shove and rasped at his men:

"*Vamos!* Outside!"

SO THEY went out, with a lantern first and the master last, and Monteverde marching ahead of the gunman like a military officer on parade. And Dugan slid around the darkest corner and stood quiet, while they all filed past on the other side of the house and on toward the corral.

Then he trailed along.

At the corral the gang found nothing. They stared at the bars. They peered at the horses. They searched around the

gate. Two went inside, looked the ground all over, came out fast, croaking, *"Nada!* Paco is gone!"

"Cra!" said somebody, with a shake in his voice. "What is that damned thing that snatches men away to nowhere? First Ruff—now Paco. It must be a devil!"

The boss laughed loud.

"Si, it is the big devil himself, perhaps!" he jeered. "And if he will leave me money on the table for each one of you he takes, he can have you all, cheap! Yah-hah-ha!"

But, for all his noise, he stayed close to his gang and kept his gun up. And after looking all around he said:

"We might as well get our business done now."

"Si!" said the gang. "The sooner the better."

So then the boss said:

"Señor Monteverde, I intended to entertain you for some time—a day or two, at least—with some amusements these boys of mine are clever at performing. But the chief entertainer, a man who lived here and had some special tricks of his own, seems to have departed. And the rest of us are getting tired of it all. So now walk ahead of me again, dear friend!"

His teeth gleamed in the lantern light, and his grin was deathly as a black skull. Monteverde looked him square in the eyes, then walked along. Bunched close, they all made their way past the corral. And Dugan, back in the dark, took a circuit.

Working out into the open *llanos,* he swung along fast in the starlight, turned in again, and crept toward the big yellow *palo aceite,* guiding himself by the lantern. A few feet back from that death-tree he crouched and watched.

"This," said the boss, grinning again, "is our little theater, where we have our little plays. Look well at this tree, señor, and the little marks on it. Every little mark has a meaning. Men have stood there and made the most funny noises. And some of them are still here. Tobal, move the light around and show the gentleman what I mean."

THE light moved, showing the scattered graves.

"Unfortunately," the boss went on, "these people were unwilling to pay for their entertainment. It may be that one or two really could not pay. But mistakes do happen in any business. We have made no mistake this time. You are very well able to pay a good price. Now will you or won't you?"

His sneering politeness turned hard and ugly on those last words. Monteverde coldly asked:

"What is your price? You have been a long time coming to it."

"Oh, have I?" The boss sneered again. "Well then fifty thousand *bolivares* in money. And your sworn promise that you will not again interfere with our little sales of cattle down the river. You have been much too busy in that way for your own good. What did it matter to you if a few animals went away somewhere? You, with your thousands! *Cra!"*

His eyes glowed hot in the lantern light. But then he swallowed and turned pleasant, saying:

"But never mind that now. With fifty thousand *bolivares* in hand we shall never bother you again. There you have it. So now what?"

His voice turned tough again. Monteverde calmly asked:

"How am I to pay? By check?"

Again the boss laughed loud.

"Oh, no, señor!" he said. "Hard money!"

"And how can I do that?" asked Monteverde. "Fifty thousand hard *bolivares* weigh something."

Dugan, back in the dark, grinned at that and said to himself: "Man, you said something there!" And the black man, hitching up his shoulders again under the weight of Dugan's one thousand *bolivares* inside his shirt, seemed stopped for a minute. He looked toward Ruff's house, as if he wanted to be told what to do next.

But soon he got a thought and chuckled. And he said:

"You will write a letter. To your daughter Mariana. *Si! Bueno!* Mariana, the little dove— Ah!" His eyes gleamed now like a cat's. "You will tell her to bring the money on burros to a place I will think of—with a man or two to handle the animals, but no weapons. And then—"

"And then," Monteverde broke in, "you will shoot the poor peons, seize the money and my daughter, shoot me, and have her for your own rotten purposes! Oh, no!"

THE prisoner wasn't cold now. He was suddenly hot as hell.

"You stupid, stinking son of black slime," he yelled, "you'll never put your filthy paws on my girl, or my money either! Do your dirty worst to me, you scum! I've lived my life, and I'll spit on you as I die! You—"

There he stopped, glaring at the gang. And for a minute the gang gave back. It was like the explosion of a gun you thought wasn't loaded; it knocks you back on your heels. But soon the boss caught himself and snarled:

"Tie him up, *muchachos!*"

The others slammed their victim against the tree and tied him. They set the lantern near him, squatted off at one side, and watched. The pale thin one rolled a *cigarrillo* and lighted it. The broad yellow ones rested without a move. The black one stood back, looked down at Ruff's rifle, dropped it, and drew his belt-gun, a heavy old-fashioned revolver. He thumbed back its hammer and took aim. Then he held everything.

"From the feet up, hombre," he said. He wasn't saying señor any more. "Inch by inch. And when I get tired of shooting my boys will start carving. Think it over."

Monteverde, stiff and cold again, said nothing. Dugan, in the near bush, felt sick. He had forgotten about his money, but he wanted to do something quick and didn't know how. The shallow-brained gang had forgotten Ruff and Paco, too, for the time; but they probably would hear anything creeping up at their backs. And what could Dugan, with one short knife, do against three knife-men and one gunman—with two guns, at that?

And then he almost gave himself away. Something cold touched his left hand; something cold as the nose of a snake, out on its night hunt, coiled ready to strike. He nearly jumped and ran. But, freezing steady, he looked sidewise and saw eyes bigger than a snake's. Dog eyes. Eyes of the big dog of Ruff's pack.

Behind that dog were the others, all watching Dugan. Where they had been since they left him at the spring, Dugan didn't know or care. Maybe they had been following him all the time since he told them to shut up, and waiting for some new order from the new man who treated them right. Anyway, he suddenly got a new idea.

He stroked the big dog's head, then pointed to the black boss out yonder. The

dog stiffened up and growled. He didn't like that nigger-Indian. Then Dugan softly hissed:

"Sssic 'em!"

And without another sound the big dog obeyed. His pack followed. Before the gangsters outside realized that anything was coming the dogs were all over them.

THE dark mongrels rushed out of the black woods like wolves and attacked at full speed. The leader went for the black boss, jumped for his throat, and knocked him down. The black fellow got off one wild shot with his gun as he lost balance. The other dogs swarmed on the squatting knife-men, who started up but didn't get far. And Dugan, sprinting out from cover, grabbed control.

He snatched for the rifle on the ground and got it. He started a swing of the butt for the boss' head, but checked it; the big dog was in the way—on top of the black man, and doing business. The revolver was loose on the dirt, so Dugan grabbed that too; then turned on the knife-men. But they didn't give him any work.

Badly bitten, those three gangsters were fighting wildly with their knives but making a poor showing. The dogs knew their stuff in a gang-fight, and they were blood-mad and fast workers. The men, down on hands and knees or rolling around and stabbing and kicking, were trying to protect their throats and stomachs, and yelling blue murder. Between their howls and the savage snarls of the dogs, the noise was hellish. And Dugan added a note of his own.

"Ssssic 'em!" he commanded. "Sssssic 'em!"

Then the white gutter rat, somehow catching sight of Dugan and realizing he was the new boss around there, screeched:

"Por amor de Dios, stop it! They're killing me!"

"So what?" said Dugan. But then, looking around, he decided to call a halt. So he yelled at the dogs, and when they paid no attention he fired a rifle-shot over them, and they came to their senses. Glaring and bristling and bloody-mouthed, they looked at him and waited. And to the men he said:

"Come here, you! And leave your knives behind. Stay on your knees, too. Down low, crawl!"

They crawled. All but the boss. He was through. Killed by money, you might say. That heavy load of Dugan's silver packed inside his shirt had made him clumsy when he was down—and the big dog hadn't been clumsy. After one look at what had been a black throat, Dugan turned away and walked over to Monteverde.

"Buenas noches, señor!" he said, sliding Paco's knife through the ropes. "This concludes this evening's entertainment. Hey! Hold up!"

But Monteverde couldn't. He was quite old, and now that he saw he was safe his knees gave out, and he just slid down to a squat and rested. But his head stayed up, and his eyes shone, and his grin was good to see. And soon he said:

"Gracias, amigo! The entertainment has been most interesting. Are you the chief entertainer the black one spoke of? If so, you have managed the play most cleverly."

"Oh, no," said Dugan. "He went away and he won't be back. I'm only the collector. And that reminds me— Just hold this gun for me, will you?"

And he passed the rifle down and walked over to the corpse and collected his own money, to the last *bolivare.*

When he came back he was a little disappointed in Monteverde. He had more than half expected the Spaniard to shoot the licked gangsters and clean up the situation. But the old fellow had other ideas, which Dugan learned about when they all were back in the house.

All but one, that is. The pale gutter rat collapsed on the way, sniveling like a baby; and when they looked him over they found two arteries cut by dog teeth and no blood left in him. They left him where he lay. But Dugan went with the lantern across the path and found Paco, still tied tightly by his own pants, and dragged him in. So they still had three prisoners; one whole, the other two full of tooth-holes but still tough. And then Monteverde smiled and said:

"If you have no use for these criminals, Señor Stranger, I can make them quite useful."

"How?" asked Dugan.

"Hang them," Monteverde explained. "In public. After the police have obtained full confessions of all their crimes. Our prairie police are too few and too slow to do much until criminals are caught by somebody else, but they are very good at getting all the facts afterwards. And when the news goes out and the people gather and see these *guapos* strangle on a rope, there will be a good effect. Many men and women will sleep better and, perhaps, live longer."

"M-hm," said Dugan. "Well, that's all right with me, if you think you can handle the job alone. I happen to be traveling my own way. And I'm not interested in helping your slow police."

They looked each other in the eye, and the old man grinned.

"I see," he said. "And I can handle it very well—tomorrow."

And tomorrow he did. That night he slept in a hammock, worn out, dead to the world, trusting everything to Dugan. And Dugan, who had slept all the afternoon, sat against the shut door and watched the prisoners, with the rifle across his thighs and the big dog at his feet, wide awake.

ALONG toward morning the yellow men began to weaken and whisper all kinds of promises to the watchman. But Dugan was deaf and dumb. And day came, and Monteverde woke up full of new strength, and after a while a parade went south.

The gangsters walked, with hands tied behind them and neck-ropes connecting them. Monteverde, following on one of their own horses, held the end of that neck-rope, ready to garrote the whole gang of them at any false move. And under his belt he carried the black boss' heavy revolver, and along with him walked the best of the dogs. The lame one and the half-blind one and a couple of others had been put out of the way; and those still living were the pick of the pack.

"Treat these dogs right, will you?" Dugan asked at the last. "They're good fellows. I'd keep them, but I probably couldn't feed them, and probably you can."

"I treat everything right that treats me right," said Monteverde. "And if you ever come this way again, stranger, you will find that true. My name is Monteverde, if you hadn't heard. Speak it anywhere in this State of Guárico, and you can easily find me. And could I, in parting, ask who you are?"

"You could, but you wouldn't get any answer," Dugan grinned. "I'm just one of those things that pass in the night. Good luck to you, old-timer—and keep your eyes open!"

"Trust me to do that. Well, then, *vaya con Dios!*"

He reached down a hand. Dugan took it. They gripped hard, and then Monteverde rode away. Soon he and his captives and dogs were gone down the shady path, and Dugan was alone. And, somehow, lonesome.

But that didn't last. Soon he went hunting for his own lost revolver, and found it. And he picked the best horse and saddle at the corral and turned the other animals loose to run free on the *llanos.* And he slung his pack behind his saddle and mounted to ride. But then, all set to go, he looked at the dreary old house and swung off again.

"Just one more look, fellow," he told the horse, tying him to a tree. And he went inside. When he came out he had the key to a puzzle.

UP IN that overhead cubbyhole he had found a scarred old suitcase. Old, but tough; good leather, that had cost plenty when new. It held old suits and shirts and so on; old, but expensive sometime. And tucked away in the shirt compartment was a North American police notice:

WANTED FOR MURDER
$1,000 REWARD
For information leading to the arrest of
Harrison L. Ruff, alias—

And so on, with plenty of aliases and a couple of pictures and a good description, and mention of a nasty kidnapping ending in murder. The poster was about three years old.

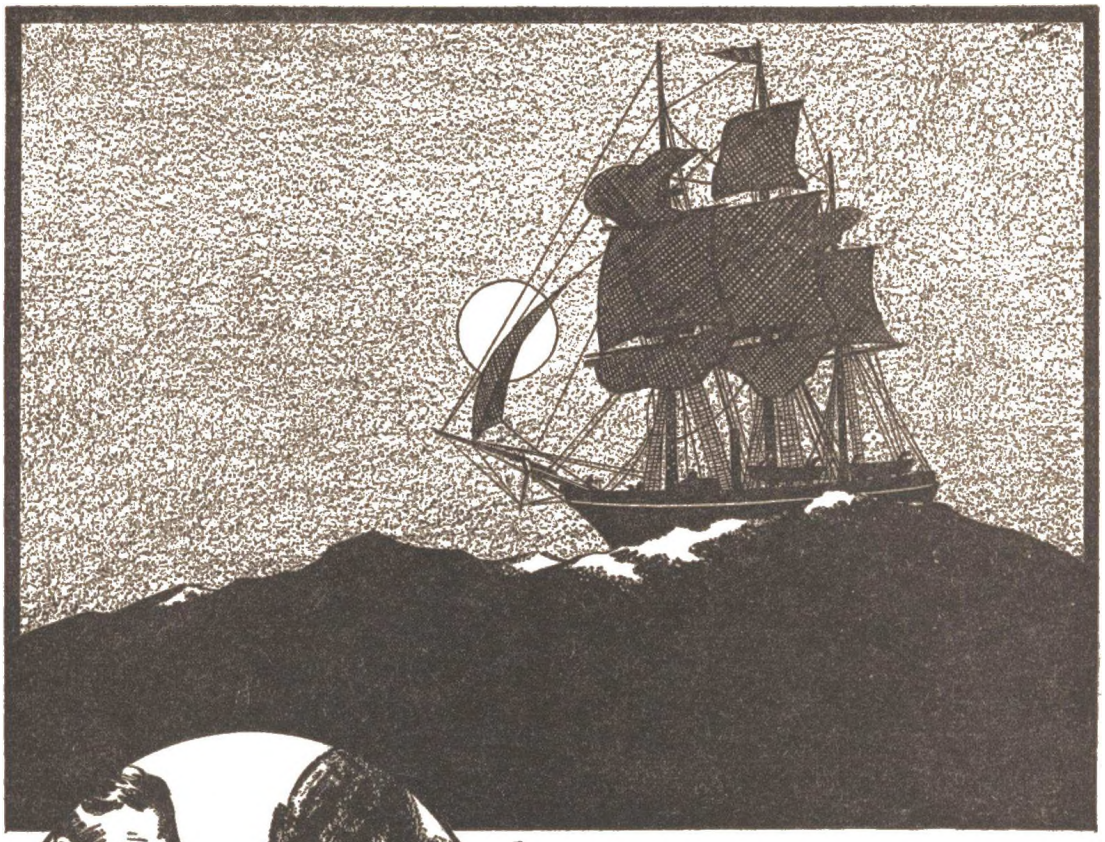
That explained a lot—except why Ruff used his real name down here and had kept that evidence against himself. A dirty snatcher and cowardly killer like that must be screwy anyway. However that maybe he had managed a getaway from the States and somehow drifted to that lonesome hideaway on the empty *llanos;* joined up with a few cheap cattle thieves, and tried to work the snatch racket some more. But the raw rum got him first, and another North American drifter got him last, and he just worked out his own finish. And if you've got any G-man friends up North who are still holding the book open on Ruff, tell them to put it in the dead file.

So now Dugan got back aboard the four legs that were going to carry him and his pack awhile. And he looked down at that pack, now hanging heavy on the horse's backbone instead of on his own, and he said:

"Come on, money! You're more damned trouble than you're worth, but you're going some place where you can do me some good, whether you like it or not."

And, sitting pretty, he rode out north into the sun.

A Bantam Weight Learns the Difference Between Taking a Whaling and Taking to Whaling



TOMMY THE TERRIBLE

By FRANK J. LEAHY

Author of "The Ghost of Jock Robbin," "Nothing Ever Happens," etc.

THE fight was over. It had been a brief affair. A few feints, a clinch or two, several wild body swings, a bell, an uproar, another bell, one steaming uppercut well aimed, and "Terrible" Tommy Mahone was down—and out. The title was no longer his. Jeers would now take the place of cheers; criticism the place of "'At a boy, Tommy!" Too old, that said it all. His battle-scars had been warning the public for a long time. Couldn't fool the fans when a guy was wobbly, losing his punch, giving ground under a hammering. He was just no longer Tommy the Terrible.

There was no one to console him as he left the ring. The arena was deserted when he finished dressing and slipped out the rear exit into the uncertain fog of a San Francisco night. Even his manager was gone, his trainer, his seconds, all those

old stand-bys who had cheered his victories in bygone fights. Tommy knew he was out of the game now—a has-been. He, like the others, had seen it coming, and—he would prepare to retire, after he had eliminated just a few more contenders for his crown. There was Battling Aguinaldo and Flash Jones and Young Perini. With slapping the wind out of their sails he was through. That had been his promise to the gentlemen of the press. Aguinaldo and Jones, it was true, he did lay out for the count, but Young Perini had taken him for the belt tonight.

TOMMY found a bench in a little park, and there he brooded for a long time. Just before daylight he set an aimless course, which brought him finally down to the Embarcadero, where dark ships were moored.

At that time, through the dawn-fog, Captain "Big Bill" Chance, skipper of the sailing ship, *Ladybird*, came by and, noticing the disconsolate figure standing gazing into the ominous water, paused to ask, "Thinkin' o' settin' sail, young fella?"

Tommy only half turned his head to reply:

"Speakin' t' me, are you? I'm an old man."

He slouched again over the wharf-rail to ponder gloomily the disturbed tide below. Captain Chance stood wide-legged behind him.

"I reckon you don't belong down here, son," he said. "You ain't a sailorman, and it looks bad, your mopin' on the front this way. Had some hard luck, have you?"

"Hard luck?" sneered Tommy, facing about. "It ain't hard luck when a guy takes the count in the second round. There's somethin' else wrong when that happens. It ain't hard luck when a guy gets too old, is it? It's bound to come some time. That Wop don't know as much about boxin' as I've forgot about pink teas. But he's a kid, see? I'm an old duck. I can't fight no more. Nine years I wore the spangles, but it got so's they didn't match my wrinkled brow Then the mugs—my pals!—turned me cold. I been afraid o' that all my life. They'll send me my share, but I'm not goin' after it. I'm too proud, see? Old'n proud—nuts!"

"It's a good way to be, son." Captain Chance eyed Tommy narrowly, then slouched over the rail, himself, companionably. "See that old sailin' ship o' mine, there? She slid from the builder's ways over fifty years ago. She's the only sailer of her kind afloat and in service. Over in the Oakland estuary you'll find a few of her sisters; not too old to sail, but simply retired. The *Ladybird's* served her time, too, but she's still in the running. And why? Because she was built right and handled right. Sturdy as any new steel freighter. Slower, yes, but she gets there. She's been gettin' me there for the twenty years I've owned her, and I wouldn't trade her for the best o' the new ones. I'm whalin' in her, son—for the sport of it, and just as they used to back in the fifties. And she's payin' me fair dividends.

"Maybe she don't interest you none," he wound up, "but the point is, and don't you ever forget it—you're never too old to keep your chin up; never."

"Yeah," replied Tommy sullenly. "Well, say! You may still be fishin' whales in an old tub, same as I could go down in the third-rater class, fightin' preliminaries, but I ain't like that. I gotta be *it*, see? An' 'cause I can't be *it* no more, I'm gonna be *nothin'*. I know when I'm washed. The Wop opened up t'night, jus' after the second bell, an' I got in a left hook to his jaw, but he never even batted a lid. I put everything I had in that sock, but what happened? He knocked me for a row o' counts, that's what. An' so what? I'm sayin' good-bye to the old spotlight, without any love an' kisses."

"I thought fighters had guts," said the

captain, watching the little ex-champ speculatively. "What you need is a cure for a soured disposition, I'm thinkin'. Your tail's between your legs. That's no way. Ain't it occurred to you you might slip out o' sight somewhere and train hard and make a come-back?"

"Ha!" scoffed Tommy. "You got grand idees, mister, but they don't sound to me. Thanks for your trouble, but you jus' run along, an' I'll get by."

A TUG was slipping alongside the *Ladybird*. Captain Big Bill Chance watched it momentarily, then, suddenly, he gripped Tommy's arm, hard.

"Take another look at that old windjammer o' mine, young fella," he said. "She's shovin' off this mornin' for a favorite whalin' ground I know, down off New Zealand, and so are you."

Tommy tried desperately to free himself, but the steely fingers only fastened tighter.

"Say!" he snarled. "Cut it out now! Lemme go, before I—"

"It'll make a new man out of you," said Big Bill, "and a younger one—for a comeback."

"I tell ya, you're crazy," protested Tommy, threshing in the captain's grasp like an irate puppy-dog.

"What difference does that make?" replied Big Bill. "The idea's still good."

The tug drew the *Ladybird* out across San Francisco Bay, past Alcatraz, and through the Golden Gate; to drop astern as sail after snowy sail billowed and spread from the sailor's yards and stays in the first fog-lifting sunlight. The land breeze became suddenly fresh, and soon, with tops'ls mastheaded to a lusty song, the *Ladybird* was loping easily into the open sea.

Captain Chance, on bringing him aboard, had sent Tommy into the fo'c's'le under escort, and there the ex-champion was left alone to his weariness from a sleepless night and to the bewilderment of this new "go" which the big man had called a whaling cruise. Had this thing happened at any other time of his life than in the immediate wake of his ring defeat, his submission to it would have been no less than it had ever been in the most enraged moments of Tommy the Terrible. As it was, he felt, without recognizing it, a cer-

tain peace creeping into his soul. The ring, the jeers, his false friends, though yet all too vivid in his memory, seemed drifting into a sort of other-worldness. He felt as though he were awakening from a bad dream. And yet, slumped there in loneliness on a bunk in the disordered fo'c's'le, rebellion slowly rose in his naturally mutinous mind. This captain of the ship, who, perhaps, had never even seen him fight, was pretending to befriend him—why? "Jus' watch your step, Tommy," he warned himself, "an' see what the big guy's lay is. Don't do nothin' he says, an' he'll soon find out you ain't the bozo he took you for. You didn't ast for this; you don't have to take it."

It was about at that moment that a messenger appeared from aft.

"C'mon," tersely. "Skipper wants you."

"Looky here, sailor," said Tommy. "Jus' what's up? What d'you people think I am?"

"You're shanghaied," was the reply. "And me, I can't tell what you are. C'mon."

On the poop Tommy confronted Captain Big Bill Chance with an attitude of righteous anger.

"So," he snarled, "I'm shanghaied, am I? I've heard o' that. An' I don't like it. You put me back ashore, or—or—"

The captain stood, legs wide apart, his blue eyes silencing Tommy, holding him his distance.

"Listen, young fella," he said quietly, "just a little advice to you before you go any further. You're on shipboard, and we're on the high seas. That means no lip; no loud, large words, understand? If you want to call yourself shanghaied, that's only a word for it. I brought you along for your health. You were up against it mentally, and the next thing you'd done would be jump in the bay. I'm givin' you a chance to pull yourself together. Take it gracefully and save yourself some trouble."

"But what'll the mob think?" argued Tommy sullenly. "When they find me missin' they'll say I took a powder. How'll they know I got kidnapped?"

Big Bill's eyes were cold upon him.

"They won't," he said quietly. Then sternly, "Report to the mate for a watch. And shut up!" he roared.

TOMMY was lying on his bunk, cursing talentedly the whole rotten scheme of things which had placed him in his present inglorious position, when Captain Chance strolled forward the following evening.

The crew had been ignoring the ex-champ altogether. He was too insignificant to be considered a worthy fo'mast hand, and surely would prove no useable hand in a whaleboat crew. The only thing that had registered with them at all was that he was an unmitigated liar and braggart. The captain called the bosun aside and spoke to him briefly about Tommy.

"He's the worst I ever see," reported Boats. "He won't work. Of course, I could put the pressure on him, but I know you don't want that—bein' kinda soft on him."

"M-m," said Big Bill. And, "No, I didn't aim to put any pressure on him when I brought him aboard, but I see now it's best. They've been applaudin' his punches too long; now, I'm thinkin', it's time he learned he's only a bantamweight, after all."

He descended into the fo'c's'le and towered over Tommy.

"Young fella," he began, "I don't believe you quite understand—"

"Argh-h!" Tommy cut in, playing up to his audience. "Go 'way, heavyweight. Go away!"

The fo'c's'le hatch was open. Big Bill snatched Tommy out of the bunk, shook him momentarily into quietude, then, as though he were handling a sack of flour, pitched the ex-champion of the bantam ring skyward through the hole.

"I didn't want to do that," he apologized to the fo'c's'le's people. "He asked for it."

Then he went topside and met Tommy, half-dazed and sullen, picking himself up.

"Now get aloft and give that man a hand to seize that fore-tops'l brace," he said. "You've got to learn sometime about a lot o' things."

Tommy did learn how to seize a tops'l brace, but when he descended he at once profaned the sacred precinct of poop deck and fastened upon the ship-master the glare with which he had cowed many a ring opponent.

"Now," he said bitterly.

A single word, but a mutinous one; and suddenly his left shot outward and upward to catch the captain full on the point of the chin. He had to spring a little to connect with that lofty position, but he knew he hadn't held back an ounce by the pain that immediately numbed his hand.

The blow staggered Big Bill for an instant. He worked his jaw a time or two to test of it, slowly smiled, and suddenly went into action.

The people of the *Ladybird* peered astounded from aloft and alow. They saw almost without believing what they saw; watched ring science matched against brute strength. Big Bill was awkward; every well-aimed blow of Tommy's struck him fair. But these were body blows, and on the massive wall of bone and sinew they had little more than a jarring effect. The skipper reached out gropingly, swung

wildly, dodged ineffectually, and made himself comparatively ridiculous by his inability to even touch the diminutive ex-champion; until, at last, his bronzed fist closed upon the arm that, at the moment, was steaming upward to plant a seasoned package of knuckles in his Adam's apple.

That arm-grip slowed the fight down to a walk. It was, in a sense, Big Bill's only chance, and he made the best of it. He clamped his other hand tightly on Tommy's other wrist, and, after a moment's futile wriggling, the Terrible One stood defeated. Then the captain personally escorted him forward and desposited him in the bos'n's locker.

FOR ten days Tommy Mahone was kept out of sunlight and circulation, on a diet of hardtack and water. When he was released he was turned over to the mate for whatever detestable jobs that bucko individual could conjure up.

Thereafter, every man Jack did all they could to help Captain Big Bill straighten out the little leather-pusher. But day by day they admitted more sincerely that Tommy was an incorrigible. He counterbalanced the stern lessons they tried to impress upon him with an outburst of wholesale blustering, never failing to name himself as superior to one and all of them in intellect and fistic prowess. He continually quarreled and spoke in terms of mutiny. He sulked through his enforced duties, blundered intentionally in tasks which imperiled others; in fact, did nothing well but live in loud and profane memory of the squared circle. In a word, he was a lubber. He was utterly indifferent to everything pertaining to the sea, and scornful of everyone who went down to it.

"It ain't my fault I'm here," he unceasingly complained. "It's as crude a piece o' snatch work as was ever perforated."

The boundless Pacific, daily heaving under skies that became clearer and bluer as the ship loped over the equator; the spell of a steady fair wind crooning a lullaby in the sails; the peace of lying out on deck evenings and watching the mast-heads sway among the stars, while a man sang softly and thrummed a mandolin, seemed never to appeal to him. A salty yarn aroused in him no more interest than would an account of a pink tea printed by mistake in a daily sport sheet. Terrible Tommy Mahone was fight-depraved beyond reform.

Then, by the time Malden, Starbuck and Tongareva—ant-hills in the vast pool of ever-changing colors—were lifted out of the East, the tropics had become a drug to deliver him into a sort of blue heaven of apathy.

He suddenly feigned illness. Exempted from shipboard duties, he would lie in his bunk for hours at a time, complaining and demanding attention. Then, when the stuffiness of the fo's'c'le became insufferable, he would dwell in the coolest shadows topside, literally chuckling up his sleeve at the others toiling about him in the scorching sun.

"I can't figure it out," worried Captain Chance, not unduly concerned about shipboard sickness in the tropics.

He kept close watch over the little pug, and practiced the best he knew how the physician's formula. But, finally, when Tommy grew no better nor worse, the truth dawned on him that he was being victimized.

"Chuck 'im back in the bosun's locker," suggested the mate.

"No," said Big Bill, a smile weltering across his face. "I think I have another plan."

THE mate passed the plan on down, and so a change came over the people of the *Ladybird*. They became actually civil to Tommy the Terrible. At first the "fever-stricken" little tough was nonplussed. Then he became morose. Where, before, his shipmates had colored that certain patience they felt was due a sick man

with a growl, a curse, an insult, they now practiced a brand of politeness upon him, and it gnawed at the whole grain of his up-bringing. They avoided being rude to him. They commiserated with him. And then when they became, in fact, courteous to him, he did nearly contract a fever—of fighting rage. They spoke of him and to him in soft voices of compassion. They agreed that he should never have been taken to sea, that he was not of the metal of the sailorman. Furthermore, and they particularly stressed this, he was getting pretty old. Of course, they granted, in his prime— But now—well, they were sorry they'd been so inconsiderate of his shortcomings.

"I'll bet," said one, in Tommy's hearing, "that Young Perini, who took him for his belt, feels proud—like a guy would takin' candy from a baby."

"Yeah," was the reply, "it's tough. Tommy'd be better off dead, now; he can't do nothin'."

"Oh, he'll die, all right."

"When they give up, like he has. Sure."

Thus did they pay out their sympathy and complaisance, and it was carried so far that, when at anchor for water and stores in Papeete, Captain Chance put the well-known bug in the ear of the quarantine doctor who came out to the ship.

"Look him over close, Doc," added Big Bill, when they stood over Tommy. "I'm worried. He's been delirious. Thinks he's been shanghaied and all that sort—"

"I was shanghaied!" stormed Tommy. "Kidnapped—"

"See?" the captain cut in.

The doctor nodded gravely and went to work on Tommy with his stethoscope and clinical thermometer, and wound up by giving him a stiff cathartic.

"I'm afraid you plucked a sort of frail petal from the bush of life," he finally announced. "But even so, he's got to be kept active. Something light. I suggest making him your cabin boy."

THEREAFTER, with the *Ladybird* in the wind again, Tommy indeed became sour in spirit—making the captain's bed and shining his boots and waiting on his table; he, the ex-champion bantamweight of the world!

There appeared, however, just the remotest prospect of comfort for the dethroned little man on the day the last outreefs of the Austral Group had dwindled into the horizon and a sleeping school of whales was sighted off the starboard bow. "She blows!" had no sooner been sung down by the lookout than Tommy confronted the skipper, appealing, almost demanding, to be allowed to take part in the hunt.

This whaling business, whatever the requirements might be, offered now the one opportunity to prove to his politely scoffing shipmates that he was not too old to fight and kill anything under the sun, Young Perini, themselves and all the whales in the southern ocean included.

"I tell you I'm not sick," he reiterated, and thumped his chest and flexed his muscles. "I'm as good as the best o' you, an' better. You gotta gimme a chanct. You gotta!" He had screwed his face into a fierce scowl; he was leading with his chin. "I've took a lot o' your dirt; now gimme a break."

In the rigging sailors were shortening sail.

"Well," said Big Bill, chuckling inside of him at such real and intended challenge, "I don't know."

And then suddenly the Chinese greasy doctor called up to Tommy from the galley door:

"Come along, you, ol' fella. Peel-um plenty onions, don't folget."

"You go to hell!" yelped Tommy, to the tune of laughter from all quarters of the ship. "I'll peel-um your hide, you slant-eyed heathen, ya!"

"Mr. Seversen, there!" laughingly called Big Bill to the mate. "Here's a hand for you. Take him in your boat and give him

an ash blade—if he's strong enough to row."

And Tommy the Terrible was off forward.

Two boats were put off, and the first one to get away was stroked by Tommy and steered by the mate. Tommy had rowed boats before, in his training days, and because he was proving himself at least an oarsman now, those who remained on the *Ladybird* lined the lee bulwark and perched on the foreyard like a flock of crows, howling lustily as the boat lost itself amid the waves.

And though there was something of resentment in the hearts of the seasoned whalers at the sight of Tommy—Terrible Tommy, the palooka, the braggadocio, the shirker—setting the stroke for them; though they did their best to splash that stroke and confuse the rhythm, Tommy was not in the mood to stand for any such play upon his dignity.

"Watch the stroke, there, you farmers!" he cried, keeping a motion as regular as an engine-driver.

BUT soon a sail was rigged, and, with the aid of the oars, the boat was quickly brought close upon the sleeping school. Ancient were these whaling tactics, but at the taffrail of the *Ladybird*, long glass in hand, was Captain Chance, deriving the same keen delight from the hunt as it was done a century ago as he derived from galloping the old windjammer down the sea in this day of swift and efficient steamers. This was a sport for him, and he missed no part of it. He knew exactly when the sail in Seversen's boat was hauled flat; he missed no motion of the boat as it shot up into the wind and alongside an enormous mass of sperm whale. He knew when the whale sounded; he saw the mate go forward and the harpooner aft to take up the steering oar after striking the whale. His blood raced on seeing the great mammal lanced, and his blood froze as the maddened creature charged and came within a whisper of capsizing the frail craft. Later, he saw the monster come within another hair's breadth of knocking the boat to pieces with an angry flip of its huge tail. All through the hunt, in fact, as he maneuvered the old *Ladybird* along in pursuit of Seversen's boat as the cockleshell was towed into the horizon by the wounded and frenzied prey, did he thrill to the adventure. And not until he picked up that boat, with its game in tow, picked up also the second boat, which returned unsuccessful, was the exquisite sensation of the kill lost to the most strenuous labor of all. For then the cutting in began.

And Terrible Tommy's words, as he set foot on deck, a new light in his eye, a fighting scowl on his face, were merely, "A frail petal from a bush, am I?"

DAYS thereafter were made up of a routine of continuous whaling as the *Ladybird* cruised about the feeding grounds. And many were the adventures as the weeks lengthened into months. Once the boat in which Tommy pulled an oar was carried far out of sight of the mothering sailer by an infuriated whale, and it drifted aimlessly for days before being picked up. At another time Tommy's boat was capsized, and it was only after a long, hard swim that the hunters were rescued.

Captain Chance through it all remained outwardly impassive toward the Terrible One, shunning him almost entirely. However, he was well aware that the little has-been bragged no more about his distinguished past. Tommy seemed to have summoned up from some chink in his punch-drunk mind a serious purpose, and that—to refute the current theory that he was too old to do more than the work of a ship's chambermaid. He never missed a trip in the boats, and never did he shirk the disagreeable toil of cutting up the whale when the dead monster was made fast alonsigde. He was always there with

the rest with his keen-edged cutting-spade; he was in at the hoisting of the huge slabs of blubber to the deck; was a party to the trying out, when the blubber was rendered to extract the oil in the big brick kiln abaft the foremast, later to be barreled and stored in the hold. However, the supreme moment had not seemed to have arrived in his whaling career till the day when his boat returned to the ship with a whale in tow and the mate confronted Big Bill with, "Tommy Mahone struck and lanced this one, Cap'n. Done it as good as any boat steerer I ever see."

Big Bill nodded. "I saw him," he said. "It was a knockout in the first round."

This strenuous labor, day after day, taxed, indeed, the staying qualities of the hardiest. Only Tommy seemed never to tire, in his new mysterious rejuvenation. When the day was done, while others made the most of an hour or so of relaxation on their watches below, he went off by himself on the fo'c'c'le head and engaged in a little shadow-boxing and footwork, by moonlight. And though Big Bill knew, and all others knew, of these private work-outs, no caustic insinuations were passed, as of old; and, perhaps, well they were not, for Tommy was fairly itching to prove he was no longer too old to fight, as well as whale.

So went the seven-month voyage of the *Ladybird;* seven months, that is, until she stood in to Honolulu with a small fortune in sperm oil and whalebone stowed below decks.

It was after midnight when she dropped anchor, and only Captain Chance went on shore. Nor did he return till the following noon, and at once he sought out Tommy the Terrible.

"Young fella," he said, "I've news for you." He pressed a sports section into Tommy's hand. "Read that! Your old friend. Claims he can lick his weight in black panthers. Stakin' half the gate, guaranteeing $5,000 to the man who can put him to sleep in ten rounds."

Tommy's eyes suddenly glittered.

"Who is this tough guy?" he inquired.

"Well," said Big Bill, turning away, "if it don't scare you to hear it, his name's Young Perini."

THE gong sounded at 9 P. M. sharp, three days later. Tommy Mahone had accepted Young Perini's open challenge, and had been accepted. The bantamweight champ had defeated all challengers in the States, and was now off to exhibit himself internationally. The people of the *Ladybird* were at ringside almost to a man, and in Tommy's corner were Captain Chance and the bos'n.

It was music to Tommy's ears, that curt, summoning tap of the first bell; what sweet relief for that old deadly nausea was the ring smell—the smoke, the sweat, the resin, the glove-leather—to his nostrils. Clear-headed, fighting-mad, he was the Terrible Tommy of his hey-day—slim, sinewy, sun-browned. Yet, concentrating upon his olive-skinned adversary, his mind photographed no single anxious emotion. His eye was searching, his scowl ferocious, his tongue as sharp as a cutting spade as he whaled into the cocksure champ with hardened fists.

In the first round they entertained the customers with a slam-bang interchange of rights and lefts. In the second Tommy caught one below the line and went down for a count of five. In retaliation for which he closed one of Perini's eyes in the third, causing the champ to start giving ground. And in the fourth heat Tommy experienced the exquisite satisfaction of feeling his opponent weakening.

"Dirty li'l piece o' shark-bait!" he snarled, and brought into savage play every sea-toughened sinew. "I'm gonna —eat you up!"

Time and again he staggered the champ, and each time he measured him for a knockout. In the fifth round he had him against the ropes, and the people of the *Ladybird* went wild. The whole polyglot

audience sang its praise to the Hawaiian heavens, but Tommy heard only the tattoo of his gloves against the champion's olive torso. And then at last he found his opening. He rocked Perini with a sizzling left, followed with a right uppercut, and the champ crumpled.

A second later the bell sounded.

But when it sounded again, for the sixth, Young Perini was still out cold, to the tune of the crowd in uproar.

"It was beautiful, young fella!" said Big Bill, warding off the surging throng.

"He's jus' a push-over," snorted Tommy. "I oughta have his title."

"It's what whalin' did for you," said the captain. "Remember what I told you, long ago, about the *Ladybird*—old, but still goin' strong; built right and handled right; sturdy as any new steel freighter. That's you."

Tommy smiled, but it was a grave smile.

"Where'll we go now?" asked Big Bill, when they had quit the arena.

"I'm goin' back to the ship," insisted Tommy. "With you—if you'll do me a favor."

They found the *Ladybird* peopled only by Mr. Seversen and the Chinese greasy-doctor. The moment Tommy stepped on board from a shore boat he stripped off his cap and coat.

"We're gonna mix it ourselves, Cap'n Chance," was his startling announcement. "You licked me once; maybe it was a whole bunch of times; now I'm gonna see if I can't stage a comeback on you. That's if you're a sport," he added.

The captain chuckled, then frowned terribly.

"Why, you ungrateful little half-pint," he growled, "that's mutiny."

"Yeh, but look what this is!" said Tommy, and he suddenly sprang from his toes, as from a trap, his left outstretched like a javelin of destruction, aimed at Big Bill's jaw. There was a crackling sound of impact, a thump of body against bulwark, a grunt, a groan, and the master of the Ladybird went down for the count, even as Young Perini had gone down.

But, in going, he toppled forward, and the huge bulk of him caught Tommy off balance, so down went the bantam too, to lessen the fall of the heavyweight. There was another crackling sound, but this time it was Tommy's hard little head banging the edge of a loose sheet-block; and they both were out.

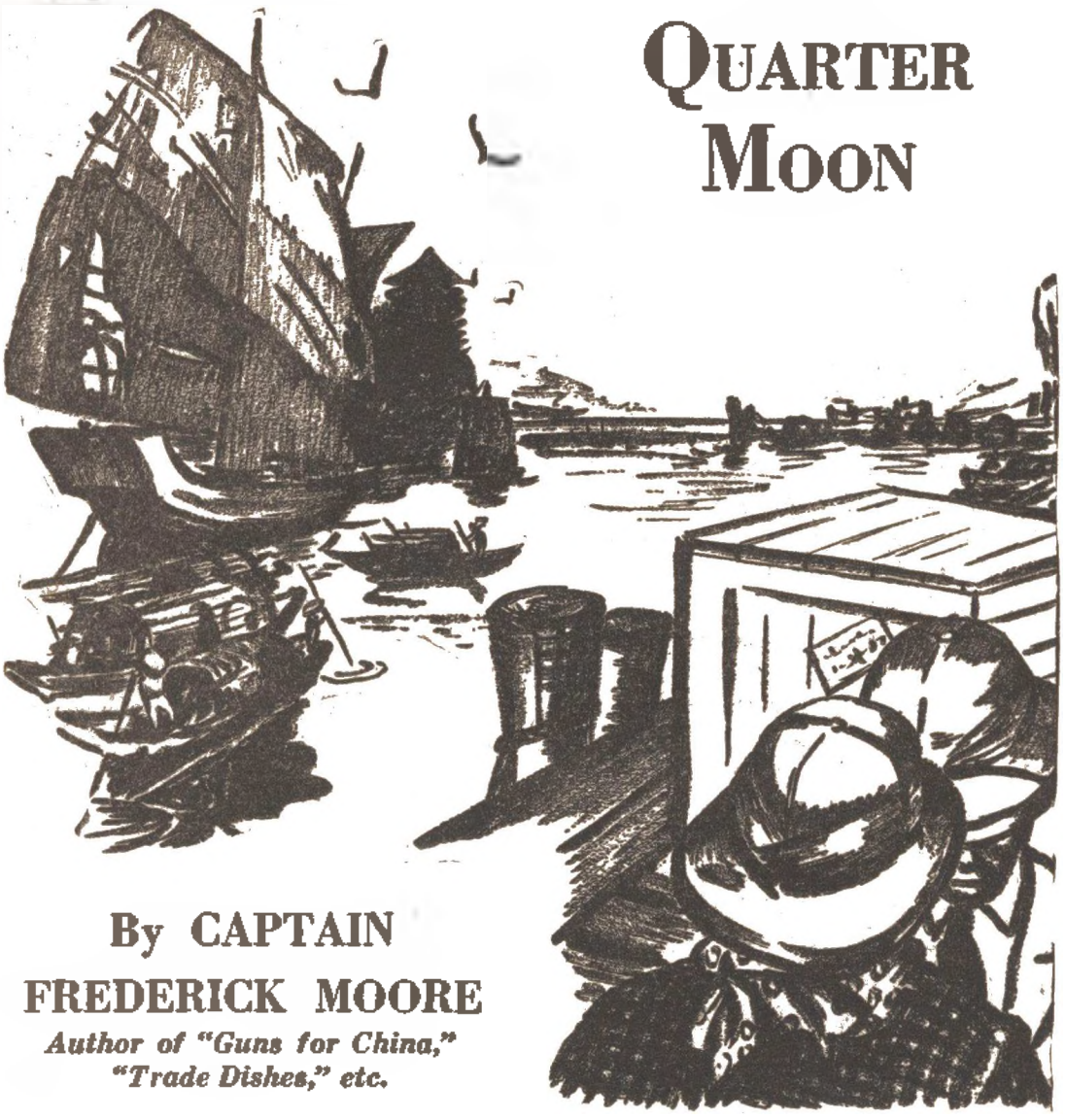
When they came to they were still tangled up as they had fallen, and the mate and the Chinese were sitting side by side on a hatch, the enduring ripples of the mate's laughter accompanying the excited jabbering of the yellow man.

"Rouse out of it, there, you ancient warriors," Seversen boomed at them. "It's a draw. You're both too old to fight; what's eatin' you? Better you stick to whalin'."

"Suits me," sighed Big Bill.

"An' me," groaned Tommy the Terrible.

Pearls At Quarter Moon



By CAPTAIN FREDERICK MOORE

Author of "Guns for China," "Trade Dishes," etc.

PART I

I

"PEARLS is looney business," said Van Klinken. "This schooner *Alantra* comes, this yacht *Sout' Vind* she comes, and old An Lu is trying to sell pearls to the yachtish millionaire and his wife. Ladies and pearls is for me always trouble."

The big Dutchman ran his fingers through his yellow hair. His blue eyes were tired. He turned them to the alarm clock on his desk and squinted at the Dutch girl who clicked her wooden shoes on the dial of the clock every second of the day. Then he put some Sumatran tobacco in his pipe and leaned back in his chair.

It was nearly nine in the morning. The shell-paned windows of Van Klinken's office on the second floor of the ancient Chinese building were partly open, giving a view of the river, which was crowded

A Millionaire Yachtsman Enters the Pearling Trade—But He Doesn't Fully Realize the Sort of Competition He'll Meet from the South Seas Professionals

with tugs, lorchas, sampans, slipper boats, tramp steamers, cruise liners, pearling luggers, fishing boats. Only a Chinese port can have such a river and such a bedlam of puffing, clanging, tooting and jabbering. And anchored off the Bund's landing steps in front of Van Klinken's office was the beautiful white yacht, *South Wind*, recently in from San Francisco.

Captain Sunderland, all in white, his big helmet on the desk near him, listened to Van Klinken and cleaned an automatic pistol.

Clara Fitch banged out some letters for Van Klinken, but she listened carefully to what the big Dutchman was saying. She was new to China—a griffin of less than six months, typing her way around the world. Being from Gloucester, Massachusetts, she had sea-going feet and couldn't be kept away from ships.

"This Captain Barron's going to be a bad actor," said Captain Sunderland. The young man's tanned jaws were set in hard lines that morning. He let his gray eyes stray to the window, where they picked up the battered old schooner *Alantra*, with her pumps going, not five hundred yards

from where the amber masts of the *South Wind* cut the blue of the sky.

"Always he was bad," agreed Van Klinken. "You vatch him. Now we have the mystery. What is the case? This Captain Barron comes leaking in from Vladivostok full of scrap iron to Singapore. The Japs wants that scrap. First to Tsuraga, Chapan, the *Alantra* was going. No. She not go there. Singapore now Captain Barron goes. But he stops here with the ocean his ship in to be pumped out. And he goes looking here for Rolf, the pearler. Pearls mit scrap iron and ladies! Pearls is bad enough, but scrap iron and ladies I cannot be thinking about all mixed up. Three nights I am not sleeping and I think, but what do I know? Nodding! Not one damn nodding—excuse me, Miss Fitch. Pearls is looney business."

"Barron and Rolf were partners once with pearling luggers down south," said Captain Sunderland as he snicked a clip of cartridges into the automatic. "And a lot of their men died—accidentally in the fleet."

"Sure! You will accidents see if you vatch Rolf and Barron long enough. Knives in your back, maybe, they catches you vatching 'em. Not healt'y. But what I am asking you is for an answer. Rolf goes to this millionaire yachter the Mr. Ellison from the *Sout' Vind*, to sell him seven pearls—seven valuable pearls. But the Mr. Ellison does not buy. What is the case? They keeps talking. In the yacht they talks, in the hotel they talks, but the Mr. Ellison does not take pearls. All he do is listen at Rolf. What is Rolf saying? This I must know. Miss Fitch must stop typewriter running and vatch the Mrs. Ellison and see what she says, and you, Captain, must vatch Rolf, the Barron scoundrel, and the Mr. Ellison. When you are finding out what is the case that the Mr. Ellison looks at pearls but does not buy and keeps talking, then to me, as you Americans are always saying, you will be bringing home the pig bacon."

"Are you going to send Miss Fitch out on this dangerous job?" asked Sunderland. He turned toward the young woman with questioning eyes, though the question had been directed to the Dutchman.

CLARA FITCH stopped her machine. "Why shouldn't I go?" she demanded tartly. The freckles across her nose crinkled; her blue eyes turned a trifle cold as she regarded Captain Sunderland.

"Sure I send her," said Van Klinken. "For a typewriter runner around the world, she is a smartish girl. She likes pearls to talk about. I pay her goot extra when she goes spying for me. If she did not like the job, she could do her own sneezing at it—not yet has she sneezed." He grinned at both of them, his eyes owlish with pretended solemnity.

"Where did Rolf get the seven pearls that he showed to Mr. Ellison?" asked Sunderland of Miss Fitch.

"From old An Lu, who has a pearl shop in Bazaar Street, and you knew that before you asked me."

"The answer is that besides Rolf and Barron, both dangerous men, this job is really a Chinese job, with pearls in it, which means danger for young ladies who run typewriters—a lot more danger than you ought to get tangled up in."

"Only the Mrs. Ellison she vatches," said Van Klinken. "Always, she makes a goot spy and if she keeps sharpened eyes on this millionaire lady, maybe she finds out something for us. At the hotels and when eating nobody shoots people, so—"

Van Klinken stopped short as he saw Sunderland get on his feet swiftly and stoop to peer out the window.

"Barron coming ashore!" he said. "Two Russians rowing him." He thrust the pistol under his left arm into the holster.

"You vatch him!" said Van Klinken. "To An Lu's place he goes on pearl business, I bet you. Before him you must be at the Blue Heron Bridge—and Miss

Fitch with you, to go along to the hotel and see what is happening to the Mrs. Ellison. Go it, you two!"

Captain Sunderland hurried down the stone stairs. Out on the Bund he held up a hand for a rickshaw. There was a straggle of men outside Van Klinken's ground floor office, and inside, behind the sign which said, "Employment Office. Crews for ships, cooks and stewards. Also office help. Apply here," men in white coats played cards at tiny tables. It was under this business that Van Klinken masked his secret operations in the port.

MISS FITCH came hurrying down the stairs, brushing at her brown pongee coat and skirt, and wearing the brown felt hat with the Chinese ideogram in silver which meant Long Life. She arrived in time to step into the rickshaw as it pulled up. Then she and Sunderland went rattling up the Bund just as Captain Barron's boat reached the landing steps before Van Klinken's office.

"A leather faced man in a rumpled duck suit and a straw hat. I think he has a cane, your Captain Barron. He doesn't look very dangerous to me," said Miss Fitch.

"You keep 'vatching' him, as Van Klinken says, and you'll likely see something dangerous. But I'm going to send you along to the hotel to watch Mrs. Ellison, when we get to the Blue Heron Bridge. There's too much raw steel in this game of the boss' for a girl like you."

Clara smiled at him. "Why don't you quit yourself? It's no job for you, either. You came to Van Klinken looking for a skipper's berth in a steamer, and let him hire you for a pearl spy when there was no ship's bridge open for you."

"Listen, gal!" said Sunderland. "The tramp I skippered was sold from under my feet for scrap to the Japs. I can take a chance of getting knifed while I'm waiting for a ship, but you'd better go back to New York's subway, where it's safe."

"Forgot that I'm a Glo'ster girl? You, that's fished the Grand Banks, ought to know that we Glo'ster folks don't quit a job because it's dangerous."

"I don't like it, just the same. And I'm going to quit myself just as soon as I can, this spy business."

"Going back home—to fish?"

"No. I'm staying this side when I get enough money to buy a schooner—that's a cheap one."

"From jobs I've held in shipping offices, I know that there's no money in schooners. You know it yourself. What's your game? Piracy, Sundy?"

Sunderland grinned. "I was thinking of pearls."

"Caught the pearl fever from Van Klinken?"

"Sure! He's told me a lot. And he knows the selling end. As the head of the Amsterdam pearl syndicate's spy department out here, he knows plenty. Van has promised to back me when this job we're on now is done. Of course, I could get Chinks to back me with a lugger, but I'm not much of a man to work for Chinks."

"So you're going pearling, eh? Then I'll stick to my job here and not start toward home Suez way and Gib. You might not need a typist, but I'm a fairly good sea cook."

"That's a deal if I get out of this job alive."

"You're trying to scare me."

"I'm not. You're going on to the hotel when I get out at the Bridge of the Blue Heron."

"I am not. I want a good look at this Captain Barron as he walks past you and you follow him. So I'll just get out when you do."

THEY moved slowly through the crowded traffic of rickshaws, motors and swarming Chinese. But when they reached the canal which cut into the city from the river, they turned to the left up the narrow embankment and saw ahead the arc and arches of the Bridge of the Blue Heron. It was an ancient stone structure over the canal. And boats crowded the canal itself—lorchas being poled along and mat-topped barges with housekeeping families cooking their rice over charcoal stoves.

At the bridge they slowed down to enter the maze of bearers of burdens on shoulder poles and the hawkers of various wares. In the middle of the bridge Captain Sunderland had the rickshaw runner pull in to the side path, drop the shafts, and Clara Fitch got down, and Sunderland paid the bill.

It was then that they saw the white figure of Rolf coming down Bazaar Street on the far side of the bridge—a tall man in ducks with a great mushroom helmet, smoke exploding at intervals from under the helmet as he puffed a cigar and strode into the tiny square before the bridge. They saw him move to the Golden Lantern Restaurant on the canal embankment. He disappeared under the awnings, going in the direction of the verandah tables that were sheltered by screens.

"That is where he meets Captain Barron," said Sunderland. "And Barron will be along presently." He paused at the stone railing of the bridge and Miss Fitch drew in beside him.

From the end of Bazaar Street came a shrill voice above the tumult of the swarming Chinese. A rickshaw which had been behind Rolf was stopped, and sitting in it was a figure in white coat and cap, berating the Chinese runner, who was listening patiently to his passenger's tirade.

"Wot the blinkin' 'ell you goin' acrost the bridge for? Come on, now! Back up and be smart about it! Think I'm a tripper wot's lookin' for brass temple bells and the like of that. Stop 'ere! Didn't I tell you that in Chinese? Don't you know your own crimson language?"

The runner backed the rickshaw and turned to the far side of the little square.

"That's Parkins, the steward out of the *South Wind*," said Sunderland. "And it looks to me as if he's following Rolf from the hotel. Did Ellison send the steward to keep track of Rolf—or is Parkins playing a game with Rolf to swindle Ellison? That steward's under foot every time I get on the track of Rolf."

"I've heard Van Klinken speak about Parkins," said Clara. "The boss is suspicious of him. Thinks that Parkins took cash from Rolf to help Rolf get aboard the yacht by representing him as an old friend in the days when Parkins was in steamers in China side."

BUT Sunderland was not listening very attentively. He was looking toward the Bund end of the bridge, skin crinkled about his eyes and the skin of his lean jaws taut. Captain Barron was coming from the Bund, walking swiftly, thrusting his way between the yellow men, and swinging a yellow cane. He was puffing as he mounted the sharp grade of the bridge which arched over the canal.

"I'll bet that Captain Barron is headed for the Golden Lantern Restaurant," said Sunderland. "He'll meet Rolf—and we've got the pair of 'em tied together in whatever game it is that is being played with pearls to swindle Ellison."

"Are millionaires swindled as easily as all that?" asked Clara.

"A millionaire might lose his yacht if Rolf and Barron got it into their heads that they need a yacht for smuggling—use it once and then sink it, just as cars

are stolen at home and then ditched after being used in a crime."

"Ah, yes," she said. "Captain Barron with his schooner—and a crew of Chinese. I see now what Van Klinken means when he says that Rolf's talking pearls to Ellison is just a blind for something else. Ellison hasn't bought any pearls so far. What Rolf wants is probably information about which way the *South Wind* will go to Singapore from here."

"And the *Alantra,* Barron's schooner, bound for S'pore in the first place, but puts in here leaking. Another blind. Barron and Rolf needed an excuse to get together—with An Lu having a bite in the pie."

"But why does Van Klinken care about any danger to Ellison?" asked Clara.

"He doesn't. But it's his job to know who's smuggling pearls, if any. A peck of pearls taken from the southern waters and smuggled in here to An Lu might have an effect on the pearl markets of Amsterdam, London and New York. The syndicate that pays Van for his operations out here expects him to know about such things—which gives us a job."

"Hooray for the job!" whispered Clara.

"Wait until you've seen some hot lead or cold steel. Then you'll be homesick for Glo'cester, Miss Clara Fitch, typewriter runner."

"Trying to scare me, smarty?"

SUNDERLAND did not answer. Captain Barron was now almost abreast of them on the footpath at the opposite side of the bridge. He was not able to walk very fast. The path was crowded with Chinese, all moving slowly, most of them with unwieldy burdens.

A man hurrying behind Barron drew Sunderland's attention. It was the white-topped Russian style cap which made him so noticeable—that and the fact that he was in such a hurry that he thrust Chinese out of his way and their complaints were angry. This man, Sunderland remembered, had been in that boat that came to the Bund from the *Alantra* with Barron. And the man was trying to overtake Barron.

Almost within reach of his man, the Russian thrust out a hand to touch the skipper's shoulder. A pole coolie pushed in ahead of the Russian and checked him. Then Sunderland and Miss Fitch saw a blue sleeve shoot upward from the press of people behind the Russian.

A naked blade flashed in the sunlight. It curved downward and struck the Russian in the back. The white-topped cap and the Russian's head dropped out of sight abruptly into the wall of people and bundles all about.

Chinese sprang aside with yelps of fear. Some leaped into the roadway of the bridge. Rickshaws were forced to stop or swerve. A clamor rose as traffic was stopped, many of the complainers unaware of what had happened on the foot path. A ring opened where the Russian had fallen.

A Sikh policeman with a braided black beard came pushing through the crowd. He blew a whistle for help.

A figure in a blue blouse, his head wrapped turban-wise with a dark bandage that reached almost to his eyes, came whirling out of the press of people about the prostrate Russian. The blue of the blouse was the same blue that had marked the arm which had been lifted with the knife.

Sunderland had but a couple of fleeting glimpses of the man. He was short, yellow skinned, and ran with his head down, going with the speed of a rabbit escaping into a thicket. He shot out of sight into a crowded alley at the Bund end of the bridge.

CAPTAIN BARRON did not stop. Seemingly unaware of what had happened behind him, he slipped under the awnings of the Golden Lantern Restaurant and moved toward the verandah

tables where Rolf had gone, and was lost to view.

"We'd better get out of here," said Sunderland, drawing Clara along after him. "We don't want to be picked up as witnesses."

He saw Sikh police drawing in at both ends of the bridge, the first policeman at the scene of the stabbing still blowing his whistle in frantic blasts.

"It all happened so swiftly!" gasped Clara, clinging to Sunderlands' arm as he hurried toward Bazaar Street.

"Cold steel always appears unexpectedly," he said. "That's the first you've seen in this business—and I hope it's the last."

They heard a thin piping voice up toward Bazaar Street. Parkins was coming toward the bridge in his rickshaw and he was singing an old music hall ditty. They caught the last line of a chorus, *"Oh, w'y is the world so g'y tod'y, w'y is the world so g'y?"*

"We tiffin at the Golden Lantern," said Sunderland. "I want to make sure that Barron and Rolf actually meet there, and you'd better telephone Van about what has happened and where we are. Then you can go to the hotel and keep watch on the Ellisons. Tell Van that the man who did the stabbing looked like a Jap, though I can't be sure of it. Might be one of An Lu's Chinese assassins. That Russian came ashore with Barron—don't forget to tell Van that—and for all we know, Captain Barron knew that An Lu had laid a plan to kill that Russian at the bridge. *Alantra's* from Vladivostok, you know, was really bound for Japan with scrap steel the last we heard—there's a tie-up somewhere on that but we'll let Van think it out himself."

"And that steward Parkins happened to be around, too," she whispered as they got off the bridge and headed across the tiny square toward the Golden Lantern.

"Parkins is always around when anything happens—and I've a hunch that we'll see plenty of him before this job's finished."

They stepped under the vermilion and gold sign of the restaurant and went to the canal verandah. At the far end of the long room formed by a wall of the building and bamboo blinds that enclosed the verandah they saw Barron and Rolf at a table. Sunderland was guided to a table by a Chinese waiter and sat where he could observe the two men behind him. It was not yet tiffin time, but most of the tables were occupied.

While Sunderland ordered, Clara furtively studied the two men down the verandah. They were talking quietly, a bottle between them. Barron was a stocky man, his shoulders bulging at the seams of his duck coat. A man of middle age, he looked sea battered and browned. His crinkled eyes had a keen stare in them though he was peering now into Rolf's face as the pearler talked in low tones. Barron suggested amiable benevolence, but his soft voice when he spoke belied the hard line of his face.

ROLF looked like a prosperous business man. With his helmet off, the upper part of his face was strangely white in comparison with the brown of his jaws, burned by tropical seas. A mesh of wrinkles about his eyes betrayed the fact that he was no stranger to the pearling latitudes. His white clothes were smartly tailored. He wore a white silk skirt and a pale blue tie of that same faded hue which marks the coolie blouse of China.

Clara Fitch went to the telephone booth and talked to Van Klinken. She was gone several minutes. When she returned to Sunderland and they began their lunch, it was not long before they heard a shrill voice at the distant bar of the restaurant.

"Sure, I seen it, but I'm not tellin' the bobbies. I don't want nothing to do with murders 'erabouts. I don't want to be no witness. I seen 'im 'ook a knife into the bloke's back like you'd push the glass out

of a pub door of a Saturday night. Sort of a Jappy done it. Jolly fat chance to catch a Jappy in this port, when the place fairly crawls with 'em. Gin and bitters is mine."

Clara turned to Sunderland, but said nothing. Sunderland had already craned his neck to look into the bar. He saw the *South Wind's* steward standing with a short man in a man-of-war's blue uniform —from a British gunboat in the river.

It was five minutes later when Parkins appeared on the verandah. He looked about, saw Rolf and Barron, and walked over to them. Touching his cap in a gesture that suggested a salute, the steward said to Rolf, "Beg your pardon, sir. Mr. Ellison would like to see you at your convenience at the hotel. Matter of importance, sir."

"All right, Parkins. I'll be there in a few minutes," said Rolf. And as the steward walked away, Rolf grinned and winked at Captain Barron.

"And you'll be there, too, Miss Fitch," said Sunderland. "If you can, learn what they talk about. And you'd better get out of here before Rolf makes a note of your appearance." He paid the bill and walked out to the little square near the Bridge of the Blue Heron.

II

WHILE a powdery snow had turned the hills of Vladivostok white, Captain Barron had sat in the main cabin of the *Alantra* and written a letter to Rolf, down in China.

The schooner lay at a dock close to the railroad yards while her holds were being filled with scrap iron. The cargo nets were being whipped aboard by yelling Chinese while Barron's pen scratched over the paper. The three Russians who were sailing with him, two as mates and one as supercargo, would be back aboard presently and Barron hurried to get the letter finished. The gimbal lamp over the chart table, being used as a desk, burned with a dull yellow, for the gray light at the portholes was dimming fast. Night was near.

"These damned Russians are playing me for a fool," Barron wrote. "I'll find out what it is before long but they got me bluffed so far. I don't care. They paid five times the usual terms for a three months' charter to take scrap steel to Japan. The low-down is that we're going to Singapore. I'm coming in to have a talk with you on my way to S'pore. I'll open a seacock, flood the holds, and swear it is a bad leak. This scrap cargo is a blind. The three Russkys sailing with me are big bugs. All been in the Czar's navy—officers. I think one of them, Komroff was an admiral. He's mate. The other two are damned polite to him. I been in a stew about this for a week but I can't find out nothing. They are smooth. Nights take me uptown, one of 'em at a time, and buy wine, to keep me out of the way. That's when the funny business goes on—and most of the loading is nights. Few Chinks on the jobs in daylight. We sail in the morning. Looks as if their game is to kill me at sea and sink the schooner. I've got my old Chink crew and if I don't miss my guess these Russkys will have a job on their hands to kill me and take the ship. Be ready to come along with me to S'pore if I get where you are."

From the gangway there came Russian voices. Barron stopped writing and hid the sheets of his letter in a drawer full

of charts. Komroff had returned. It was time to dismiss the cargo handlers who had worked through the day. The night gang would be aboard presently, working under flood lights at hatches and the mountain of scrap metal near the railway sidings.

BARRON turned a little in his chair to listen. But Komroff had finished what he had to say to the Chinese loaders —he had used Russian in speaking to them—and his feet came tramping up the steps at the break of the deck. Presently he came through the after companionway into the main cabin. He shook snow from a faded raincoat, took it off, and stood revealed in wrinkled and shabby clothes, his feet in boots and the tops of his trousers tucked under the tops of the boots.

"Ah, Captain!" he said. "We shall be finished tonight from what I see in open hatches.

"In the morning we are at sea. This is good, what?" He took a long cigarette from a packet, struck a match and puffed. His face was lean and sallow, his nose long by the emaciation of his cheeks and his gray eyes looked weary. But his poor clothes could not conceal, as he stood before Barron blinking at the gimbal lamp and inhaling smoke, that this man Komroff was a man accustomed to command.

"I'll be glad to get out of here," said Barron. "Don't like cold weather."

Komroff laughed quietly. "We shall soon be where it is warm. But tonight we shall warm ourselves with wine. A little celebration, my friend, before we sail." He tosssed a roll of banknotes to the table. "If when you are up in the city this evening, pay for as much champagne as this will buy. We are all friends together but once at sea you are the master. Officially, we clear for Tsuraga, Japan, but I have arranged that we get clearance for Singapore. I have friends in Vladivostok who are glad to grant me, the simple mate of a cargo schooner, favors."

"I understand that," said Barron. "It's a help."

Komroff took from a pocket a silver flask, reached for small glasses in the rack over the chart table, gave a glass to Barron and tendered the flask. The skipper poured himself brandy, nodded as Komroff bowed, and they drank.

Barron rose and pocketed the roll of banknotes. "I'll go up to the Svetlanskaya and order that champagne."

"Good!" said Komroff. He went abruptly to his little cabin off the messroom, and called back to Barron, "I shall have the lights on and cargo coming aboard in a few minutes. We must work fast tonight to be sure we are loaded for the morning tide."

"You attend to that as it suits you, mister," said Barron. He opened the drawer and sneaked out the sheets of his letter to Rolf, pocketed them, and went out on deck with a heavy coat pulled over his shoulders as a cape. He wore a felt hat with a wide brim that could be pulled down over his eyes.

Barron knew that he was being sent to the city for a purpose. Komroff had just come from the main street of Vladivostok. He could have ordered wine delivered to the *Alantra*. The game was to get the schooner's skipper out of the way immediately and when he returned to the vessel keep him drunk most of the night.

Barron had been for years engaged in breaking the laws of a dozen countries, from pearl smuggling to gun running, with some modified piracy when it promised a high profit, he got out of his vessel because he had planned a game of his own for his last night in port.

IT WAS a hard job to get across the freight yards. There were many sidings and every one had strings of cars on them. It was necessary to weave up and down between the tracks looking for open-

ings between the cars. And as groups of cars were being moved about it was not safe to crawl under them to cross a track. Barron managed to get clear before darkness fell. He hailed a battered old droshky with a rawboned horse and a giant of a driver bundled in several old coats.

At a dingy little restaurant on the Svetlanskaya he addressed his letter to Rolf and gave it to a man who was a mate in a steamer bound for China. There the letter would be mailed. Barron took no chances with Russian mail in Siberia when he informed his old partner in crime that he suspected the Russians who were sailing with him of being in a game—with Singapore the real destination for the *Alantra.*

He paid for a dozen cases of champagne to be delivered to his vessel and kept for his own pocket what cash was left over. He lingered for an hour, pretending to be drunk by the time he left, but he had secretly disposed of the vodka served to him. He felt sure that he was being observed by spies in the service of Komroff. He made sure to be sober for the job he had on hand that night.

Taking a droshky, Barron remained in it until he was out of the city's business district, then paid off the driver, and staggered down hill toward the docks. It had stopped snowing but the ground was white. He was able to make sure that he was not followed from the city.

From the high ground above the bay he could see over the tops of the freight cars in the great yard between him and the docks. The flood lights at the hatch of the *Alantra* forward revealed Chinese working the scrap metal into the vessel. The mountain of scrap near the tracks was now white, except for a black cavern in the side made by the Chinese loading the slings. Besides, men were carrying loads on their backs over gangways. Komroff had a tremendous gang at work for the night shift, as usual, but by daylight he had kept only a few men loading. This fact had been the first actual sign to Barron that there was something crooked about the cargo of scrap. The change from a Japanese port to Singapore for destination had confirmed his opinion that he was engaged in a business far more dangerous than appeared on the surface of the charter.

He went down to the railroad yards and made his way with caution toward the docks. He intended to hide among the cars and watch. The tumult at the vessel and the shunting of cars, with all the yelling that is necessary for Russians and Chinese at work, made it easy for him to move about without being detected. Besides, it was dark among the cars, and if he were seen he would be taken for a worker going about his tasks.

HE CAME out from between freight cars to the dock and stepped into the shadow of a small building used by cargo checkers. It was closed for the night.

Not far away there was a droshky. The driver was huddled in his seat, apparently waiting for somebody. It might be Komroff who intended to go up town, Barron thought, so he decided to remain where he was and see if anything happened which would be a clue to what mystified him.

Komroff's voice lifted above the clamor and the clumping of cargo. He was on the dock. He emerged presently from the mass of toiling Chinese at the scrap pile and passed them. Behind him came the other two Russians—the second mate and the supercargo. Barron could not be in doubt about their identity. He saw the trio sharply outlined against the brilliance of the flood lights high on the main mast of the *Alantra.*

"They are coming to take the droshky uptown," Barron told himself.

He watched them advance slowly toward a white pile of stuff that had been thrown from an open freight car. With its thin covering of dry snow the pile looked like

brick or Chinese tile during the day and left over night to be taken away the next morning. Near the irregular pile there were small cases scattered on the ground —long, narrow cases that looked like pieces of cut stone to Barron.

Komroff paused when a dozen feet from the pile of brick. The others stopped and looked about the yard. Suddenly there was a covert manner among them all—as if they feared being observed and must move forward with caution. It was not until Barron had noticed this furtiveness among the three men that he realized that from where they stood they could not see the waiting droshky only ten yards from them but masked from their view by a small box car at the end of a siding shorter than the other tracks.

Komroff moved forward again. At the pile of brick he stopped, stooped, picked up bricks and slipped them into the heavy pockets of his outer coat. The others joined him. They pocketed bricks, lifted their heads to look about them, and then walked back toward the *Alantra* and up the gangway, talking together as they walked. Barron noted that the sides of their heavy coats sagged straight down as they walked.

"What the hell are they picking up ballast for when we're deep in the water with scrap iron?" Barron breathed in astonishment. "I always said that Russkys were lunatics, and now I know—"

His eye caught a dark figure moving swiftly from under the box car which served to conceal the waiting droshky from anybody approaching or standing at the pile of brick where Komroff and the others had filled their big coat pockets.

A SECOND figure emerged from under the box car. Both men ran swiftly to the pile of brick, loaded their pockets hastily, and with a brick in each hand, ran as fast as they could toward the droshky. There they unloaded their loot under the rear seat of the ancient vehicle and darted back to their concealment under the box car.

Komroff was coming back again. This time he moved slower than when he had approached the brick pile before. He had something under his great coat which compelled him to walk with shorter strides. He held this unseen object against his side under the coat by pressing his left elbow close in to the coat, and with the right hand across his chest he steadied something. The left side of the skirt of his long coat stuck out stiffly in a vertical line. At the brick pile he freed himself of this mysterious burden. As his back was to Barron it was impossible for the skipper to see what it was that Komroff had brought secretly on his return trip to the railway yard.

The second mate came, followed by the supercargo. They, also, carried something hidden under the coats which impeded their walk. They joined Komroff at the brick pile but did not load their pockets. Instead, they stood talking quietly, moving about slowly and stamping their feet against the cold.

Half a dozen men appeared from among the cars down past the brick pile. Barron's first thought was that these men had been hidden in the yards and he wondered if they knew where he was in concealment at the dark side of the little building. But as Komroff hailed them, Barron soon understood that these six Russians had been on the night shift of cargo loaders. They had worked with sacks among the Chinese, searching for ingots of copper which were to be found in the mountain of scrap. Komroff had explained the presence of the six Russians to Barron and showed him a sack with copper bars in it. The sack had not been emptied through a hatch, but had been later dumped into the lazarette. Komroff's story was that by accident some loads of copper bars had been dumped with the scrap steel. Railroad men, Komroff said, had stolen a carload of copper ingots, had dumped the

copper in the scrap pile, and later loads of scrap iron had been dumped on the stolen copper. It was now coming to the surface as the scrap was being loaded aboard the *Alantra*—and Komroff was gathering it on his own account.

Barron sucked in his breath sharply. He knew that Komroff had lied, now that he had seen what appeared to be bricks taken from a pile near an open box car. It was plain enough—Komroff was loading by night mostly stolen copper, and the copper ingots were being dumped in the yards. They were not gathered from the scrap pile. And the two men hiding under the box car were stealing copper ingots and stowing them into the droshky.

BARRON attempted a little mental arithmetic. If six men working all night for six nights had been loading copper ingots into the *Alantra,* to be mixed with the scrap, how much copper had they put aboard the vessel? He could not be sure. But he saw the six men go to work filling sacks from the pile. There were not many ingots in each sack, but as the men moved away to the vessel's side and climbed the gangway, it was plain enough that they carried heavy loads on their backs.

As Barron thought the matter over he felt that he had the solution of the mystery. As a high naval officer before the revolution Komroff would know where the Czar's navy had a big supply of copper at Vladivostok. The other two Russians sailing with him for Singapore in the *Alantra* were also former naval officers. The three of them were escaping from Siberia with what was virtually a cargo of copper. The metal would bring a high price so soon after the war. If there was enough copper to be sold at Singapore the three men would have in their hands a small fortune. That was why they had bought scrap iron—to conceal the real cargo, which was copper. Also, Barron knew now why the loading crews were light by day and heavy after dark. The copper was mixed with the scrap after daylight. Freight cars brought the copper into the yards during the nights.

Men who knew the copper was being stolen were getting as much of it as they could into the droshky, thieving on their own account when they could grab a few ingots. Barron could understand that well enough, for everybody in Siberia was getting what they could out of the vast war supplies that were dumped all over the hills back of Vladivostok. And Barron reasoned that he could use a load of copper himself if he could deliver it somewhere between Vladivostok and Singapore. He would have time to think that over when he was at sea. And Rolf could make certain arrangements. Barron decided that he must get away another letter and that meant he would have to return to the city to find the steamer officer who would mail the second communication in China. Captain Barron felt that it would not be a difficult job to get rid of three Russians on board his own vessel. Accidents were always happening at sea. His Chinese crew were aware of that fact.

SOME men came back with empty sacks. They resumed work. Barron lost track of Komroff in the movement of men from ship to freight yard, for the Russians all looked alike in the indistinct light.

It was half an hour before anyone was at the pile of copper ingots. Barron's feet were cold and his teeth were beginning to rattle together. He decided that he would stumble out across the open dock as if he had just arrived. He knew all that he needed to know.

As he thrust a foot forward to move away, the two men came running from under the box car. They scudded for the pile of ingots, heads down. They gathered a few ingots into their pockets, took one in each hand, and turned to run for the droshky. Barron waited until they

got clear of the space he had to cross in getting to the schooner.

But Barron did not step forward as he intended. Three figures emerged from behind box cars near the ingot pile. These men had rifles, and on each rifle there was a bayonet. Two of the men had their rifles clubbed. The last man ran with the bayonet thrust before him—and Barron saw that the last of the three was Komroff as he ran past the little building.

Before they were aware that they were pursued, the two fleeing ingot thieves were clubbed over their heads. As they fell, Komroff pinned one to the ground with his bayonet. The supercargo reversed his rifle and bayonetted the second man.

The droshky driver suddenly came to life. He whipped his horse in a sudden fury. But the vehicle must have been too heavily laden to be moved swiftly. It was barely under way when the supercargo leaped on the back seat, bayonetted the driver in the back and let him fall to the ground. Seizing the reins, the man then brought the horses to a stop. Komroff ran up, paused to use his bayonet on the prostrate figure of the driver, then hurried on to the droshky. The three men who were to sail with Barron in the morning raided the ingots from the droshky after securing the horses to a box car.

Barron shivered, though not from cold now. He had a pair of automatic pistols handy under his coat. He was not sure that the weapons would do him any good if Komroff and the others caught him hiding behind the little building. He had done some killing himself in his time, but he began to wonder if he was any good at the game of murder in comparison with the three Russians who had settled a job with steel without firing a shot.

He had to get out of there. Chinese were coming back from the schooner with empty sacks. He could move to the dock without being seen if he took a short cut of about five yards to the nearest box car. In his path was the first man bayonetted. He lay still in the snow with a great black patch growing around him in the white powder that had fallen earlier in the evening.

KOMROFF and the others were unloading the droshky. He could not see them now but Barron could hear them speaking to the horses to quiet them. Barron stepped out from his concealment. As he passed the dead man there was a thin bar near a hand thrust forward into the snow, the fingers bent as if clutching for the ingot which had gone out of reach.

Barron picked up the ingot and moved on. He emerged from the yards on a spot close to the dock where he was hidden from the workmen returning with sacks and the laboring Chinese by the mound of scrap metal. He did not go to the *Alantra* but went in among some box cars. In the darkness he sneaked far up the yard and came out to a narrow street of poor houses. He climbed the hill and walked back into the business section of Vladivostok.

He went to a shabby little hotel and found a room. He ordered brandy and food and writing paper and pen and ink. He had to get away another letter to Rolf about that cargo of copper hidden in scrap.

It puzzled Barron a little to find that what he had witnessed had left him shaken. He did not mind seeing men killed. But he disliked the idea that this Komroff, who was such an aristocrat for all his raggy clothes, was so effective with the other two in disposing of the copper thieves. It was going to be a job of work to get rid of those three Russians sailing in the *Alantra* next morning. They had too many damned brains to suit Barron. It was one thing to shoot native divers who tried to steal pearls, but men who had been officers in a navy could give anybody cards and spades at killing.

Barron also felt a queer sense of satisfaction. There must be tons of copper

mixed with the scrap in his holds. Three men had been killed for stealing a few ingots of copper. Barron considered that as he sat in the room thinking, his leathern face grave, but his eyes glowing with greed as he stared at the lamp. The electric fixtures had been ripped from the walls and ceiling, the plaster was gone in great triangles and there were black stains on the old carpet which told of murder.

THE waiter came with the tray of food and a few scraps of paper with scanty ink in a bottle. He was a young man, pale and thin, with haggard cheeks and eyes that looked dead. He spoke perfect English which startled Barron, until the captain realized that the waiter was another aristocrat who had been through terror.

Barron had brandy first. There was no heat in the room and his bones were still chilled. He got the slab of copper from the pocket of his big coat when he took it off. Even in the dim illumination from the smoked lamp chimney the copper was of lighter color than the ingots which Komroff had shown on board the *Alantra* —copper from a sack that was being used by the Russian loaders at night.

It was a thinner slab, too, than the copper shown by Komroff. Yet it was heavier. An inch thick, about six inches long and four inches wide. Barron held it close to the lamp. There was something stamped on the metal, some sort of trademark struck into it with a figure in reverse on the face of the marking hammer.

It was some sort of a bird that was depicted on the metal. Barron stared at it. He saw the outline of a bird with two heads, each head looking a different way. The sort of nonsense, Barron reflected, that could be expected from the dumb Russkys. Yes, that was it—an eagle with two heads. Naturally! Copper that belonged to the navy would be marked with the insignia of the Imperial Russian government. Double-headed eagle.

Barron's eyes opened wider. His lower jaw sagged. He held his breath for an instant, then gave a long silent whistle which ended in a gasp. The hand which held the metal moved up and down like the balance of a scale testing the weight of the copper. Then the slab dropped to the table and Barron collapsed into the chair. His body shook in sudden chill. He slapped his hands up and down on his knees. He felt queerly faint and helpless. He reached for the brandy and drank heavily from the bottle.

"Damn me!" whispered Barron to the lamp. The hair hanging down on his forehead was suddenly damp. He brushed a shaking hand over his head. He recalled to his mind his mental picture of the pile of ingots under the powdery snow near the small box car. There were square cases, too. Of course, they would break the cases and get the ingots out before dumping them into the holds of the *Alantra* with the other scrap. Ingots such as those on the table being dumped from box cars for a week or more and dumped into the schooner every night—and by six big Russians. Even Komroff and the second mate and the supercargo had helped carry ingots to the schooner. No wonder the men stealing ingots and loading them into a battered droshky had been killed with bayonets—and the driver, too. Those men knew the secret.

BARRON laughed harshly. He wondered why his wits had been so thick as to believe that three men could be bayonetted because they were stealing a few slabs of copper. And how well Komroff had put over his slab of copper from a sack to account for the men working nights—and only nights—to pick copper from the scrap pile. Such tricks might be expected from Chinese. But the damned Russkys were slicker than Chinks.

Slick, hey? Barron's teeth showed in a twisted grin. Those Russians would find out who was slick before he was finished

with 'em—he and Rolf and An Lu, the Chinese dealer in pearls.

Barron wrote with the greenish ink on a scrap of paper. It was a matter that needed caution. Rolf wouldn't believe, anyhow, if he had the truth. Nobody would believe it. Barron found it hard to believe it himself, yet he knew it was true. Men were not killed with bayonets by Russian aristocrats for a matter of a few slabs of copper dumped from a box car.

"I know now," wrote Barron. "Remember, I'll come in with a leak. From there I meet you at Quarter Moon Island. You need a small, fast vessel, but not a lugger. Don't charter, don't buy a vessel, but spot one that can be sent to Quarter Moon with some sort of bluff, and you go with it. I'll burn or sink there. I'm going to have trouble with Russians. I'll need Suki, that Jap of An Lu's, and you know what for. There are no pearls at Quarter Moon. But we look for some there. Millions of 'em. We can find 'em. I know where they are. But we got to get away with 'em. Get your eye on a vessel that nobody will suspect and be ready to talk turkey when I come in with my bilges full of water and my pumps going. We got to go to London or New York and we got to go fast. I guess I don't need to tell you everything. I sail in the morning, like I told you in the other letter."

He did not sign the letter, but sealed it in an envelope lined with a pattern that resembled a spider's web. He put the ingot in his coat pocket, then took the metal out, and with a knife scraped off the indentations of the marking hammer which had stamped the double eagle on the metal.

HE examined the scrapings and nodded his head. He wrapped them in a handkerchief, making sure that not a particle of the yellow metal was left on the marble of the table's top. He left the bowl of soup and the disk of bread, pocketed the brandy bottle, and having paid for his room and the food, he walked out of the hotel and down to the docks, looking for the steamer which was to sail next day for China. His friend was on board. Both letters for Rolf would be mailed in Shanghai.

When Barron got back to the *Alantra's* dock up in the toe of the bay, he staggered drunkenly. He never was more sober in his life. As he stumbled past the spot where the ingots had been, they had disappeared. So had the unopened cases. Also, the dead men had disappeared. The stained snow was trampled. But Komroff and the second mate was lurking in the yards, supervising the Russians working with sacks. The sacks were being loaded at box cars. So there were still more ingots going aboard the *Alantra!*

"Ah, so you have come!" exclaimed Komroff. "It is nearly midnight. The wine has come. But already you are drunk! We have been looking for you, Captain Barron."

"Sure!" said Barron. He swayed on his feet. "Well, I'm here, ain't I? To hell with the wine. I got to have some sleep." He observed that there was a rifle leaning against a car. The men with sacks on their shoulders grunted when they got to the ground from the open car.

"Yes, get some sleep, Captain," said Komroff. "You must be sober at daylight so we can sail with the tide."

"Sure, I'll be sober," said Barron thickly. "You call me when it is daylight." He staggered away to the gangplank, and as he passed the forehatch, one of the Russians dumped a sack into the hold just in time to get clear for a cargo sling to let go a load of scrap into the hatch.

At daylight Vladivostok had marched past the *Alantra* as a big tug took the schooner to sea.

III

ROLF knew that it was wise not to be eager about the business with Mr. Ellison. The seven beautiful pearls borrowed from An Lu had been shown to the financier, appraised by Van Zee, the Dutch expert on pearls, and were back in An Lu's stock. So far, so good, was Rolf's attitude. Ellison must make his own decision.

The two men sat in a room on the second floor of the International Hotel, overlooking the river. There was no one on the outer verandah—at least no one who mattered. A young woman in a pongee dress, or skirt and jacket, with a Chinese silver decoration on her hat. She had fallen asleep on a rattan sofa while reading a book behind a screen. A passenger ashore out of a cruise steamer, Rolf decided, when passing to Ellison's room.

"If you decide to scout that reef off Quarter Moon with the *South Wind*, Mr. Ellison, let me know before tomorrow morning. If I go with you, I will want to take a Jap diver who has worked for me before—a man named Suki. Good skin diver. He is the only man who knows that I found pearls there." Rolf leaned back in the grass chair and blew smoke toward the ceiling.

Ellison's gray eyes were on his yacht. Her teak deck had been washed down and glistened with moisture, as the sun slanted past her amber spars. The brown sail covers were off and the canvas was being run up for an airing. The flood tide gave her a taut hawse.

A man of millions, Ellison's thin face and pugnacious jaw were familiar to newspaper readers the world over. His mustache was the color of ivory, his hair whitening, and though he was clad in smart flannels and buckskin shoes and his hands looked soft, Rolf felt that the yacht owner would be a difficult man to deal with in certain circumstances; for instance, if he learned that he had been walked into a trap. Well, the business would be finished before Ellison knew what happened, was Rolf's reasoning.

Ellison knocked ashes from his cigar. "If this reef you found has as many pearls on it as you believe there are, it would be a simple matter to organize a company."

"Put in from ten to twenty luggers for a quick clean-up," said Rolf. "The shell alone would pay. I don't want to appear in it myself—as a professional pearler my luggers would be watched and every Jap boat, or white for that matter, would be down on that reef and skim it. But if we stop in there with your yacht—and it's known that you're bound for S'pore, who's to suspect that you're on a pearl scout? Costs you nothing—unless you want to go into the game for a quick clean up after you've seen yourself how many pearls can be found on a certain number of dives."

"Are you sure we can find the reef?"

"Certainly. I took bearings and crossed 'em. That reef runs for a mile or more along the curve of the island's shore. The yacht can lay in a fine bay that's a sheltered anchorage. There hasn't been a pearler around there for years. I located that reef by accident. Had the sun aft and caught sight of shell in the shoals as I went over. Four of those pearls, as I've told you, that Van Zee appraised in an afternoon, and three the next day. Only a pearler knows what a high percentage that is—and even Suki doesn't know how many I got. Seven! In two days, or less, with a skin diver. You heard Van Zee average them at about $3,000 each. That Dutchman would have a fit if he knew that I'd found a bank with such pearls,

so thick. He's the best appraiser in the country. He didn't know they were my pearls. If he did, I'd be dogged day and night by the Jap spies—pearl spies, I mean."

"If you sail in the *South Wind* with me, won't you be followed—especially, if this Jap diver you mention goes along with us?"

"We can outsail 'em," said Rolf. "Besides, I'll pass the word that I'm going along to S'pore with you. Nobody will suspect that we've slipped in at Quarter Moon Island. There's an abandoned plantation on the bay we'll anchor in. Friend of mine who's bought the place and owns a schooner may drop in while we're there —name of Barron. He could bring me back here—or to S'pore—if necessary. And it might not be wise for me to show up in S'pore with the *South Wind* after we've been to Quarter Moon. We could then arrange for a fleet of luggers through dummies, and join the fleet again with your yacht. That's the way it works out, but you'd know best what you wanted to do, Mr. Ellison, if you were convinced that we can find plenty of pearls in a week on my secret reef. If Suki can't find shell with pearls, then you're not out a dime. If you organize a company, or we operate together, I own half the take."

"I'll let you know by six o'clock this evening," said Ellison. "Come aboard the *South Wind* and you'll have my answer."

ROLF reached for his helmet and got to his feet. "Good enough, Mr. Ellison." They shook hands, Rolf lingered for another drink, and then went out to the verandah to the stairway at the end of the hotel. The tripper girl who had been asleep behind a screen was no longer there. She could have heard nothing, anyhow, and if she had heard a word or two, the conversation would have meant nothing to her. Somehow, she seemed vaguely familiar to Rolf but he knew that trippers roamed the city for days, and that Bazaar Street was a favorite haunt for the women trippers. That was the street of the gem merchants.

But Clara Fitch had not left the hotel. When she knew that Rolf was departing she had slipped down the stairway, gone to the rickshaw park at the far side of the hotel, engaged a runner, and was holding him in check until she could see which way Rolf would go.

She had heard enough of the conversation to grasp its meaning. The *South Wind* was going to Quarter Moon Island to hunt for pearls—where there were no pearls by Van Klinken's account. Captain Barron was expected to appear at the island—where he owned no plantation unless Van Klinken had skipped some important information. Mr. Ellison had seen seven pearls which he believed were the property of Rolf, but Van Klinken already knew from Van Zee that the seven pearls were the property of An Lu, the Chinese pearl merchant, who was as crooked as the Chinese alphabet or whatever it was that the Chinese used for writing letters and making sign boards.

Sitting in the rickshaw, and using a Chinese parasol to help conceal herself, Clara saw Rolf stride away from the hotel. He was headed for the upper end of Bazaar Street. And on that street, near the end of the Bridge of the Blue Heron, was the shop of An Lu.

She had picked up from hotel chatter the fact that the man who had been stabbed to death was really a Russian. He was out of some ship in the river. The name seemed to be Komroff. There were rumors that a Japanese had stabbed the man. Captain Sunderland, also, she remembered, thought that the assassin was a Japanese. And that blatty steward from Ellison's yacht—Parkins—had remarked at the bar of the Golden Lantern Restaurant that he had seen the murder and that the killer was a "Jappy." That was a fine big gathering of facts for Van Klinken. He would be interested to know that Elli-

son was going looking for pearls where there were no pearls. He would tear at his blond hair and snap his eyes at the Dutch dancing girl on the dial of his alarm clock, and mutter, "Pearls is looney business!"

IT WAS all decidedly looney to Clara Fitch. But the *South Wind* would be sailing away soon with Rolf and a Japanese diver and it would not matter to Van Klinken, for he only was interested in pearls, and Clara had to remind herself again that the Dutchman swore that there were no pearls at Quarter Moon. So he should not be interested. Anyway, he could not learn any more about the game that Rolf was playing with pearls borrowed from An Lu, turned back to An Lu, and Rolf going off on a wild goose chase with an American millionaire in a yacht.

Clara told her runner to take her down Bazaar Street, and "not make go fast-fast." It would not be wise to get ahead of Rolf. He might remember, if he saw a young woman in a rickshaw, that she was the same young woman who had been napping over a book on the verandah at the hotel.

As the rickshaw moved out slowly, Clara caught sight of Parkins coming up from Bazaar Street toward the hotel. He carried a swagger stick and a thin parcel that looked like a bundle of mail for Mr. Ellison. He was whistling softly a gay little tune. His eyes smiled up at her, brazenly bold, as the rickshaw passed. What was it that made the Cockney grin like that? He knew something—too much entirely! Had he spoken to Rolf as the men passed close in the crowded street? There was a chance that Parkins was in the game with Rolf against Ellison. And what if Parkins knew that Clara Fitch was watching Rolf? After the murder of Komroff, here was another red thread in the fabric of danger. Sunderland was always talking of danger in this spying game for Van Klinken. She should, she knew then, have watched Rolf with greater care so that she could be sure—or even suspect—that Parkins had passed some warning word to Rolf when they passed just at the upper end of Bazzar Street.

The white figure of Rolf, with his big helmet, was in sight far down Bazaar Street. He had slowed his pace as the street throngs increased. But Clara's rickshaw was also slowed by increasing traffic and Chinese swarming in the middle of the road.

Her eyes strayed for an instant to a juggler in a cross street. He was keeping five brass swords in the air, with one balanced on his chin. His apprentice played a flute and held out a cup for cash. When Clara looked for Rolf he could not be seen.

For a moment she was in panic. What would Van Klinken think if she had to report that Rolf had disappeared in the street while she gawped, as they would say back home, at a Chinese juggler.

She hurried the runner along. Then she gasped with sudden understanding of where Rolf had gone. Under a high vertical signboard with gilt Chinese characters on a vermilion background she saw English lettering on an ivory signboard near an awning over a narrow doorway. The black letters read, *An Lu. Pearls.*

As the rickshaw moved slowly past the doorway Clara glanced in from under her parasol. There was the white figure of Rolf before the tiny counter of the pearl merchant. And the black-capped head with a button on top told her that An Lu was behind his counter. The rickshaw went on.

Van Klinken, as usual, was right. He was always swearing that he was not able to think out puzzles, yet he always foretold where Rolf would arrive—at An Lu's. And Rolf invariably turned up just as Van Klinken predicted.

The rickshaw went on to the Blue Heron Bridge. Sunderland would be waiting there for her. He followed the rick-

shaw until she dismissed it and then Clara joined him at the Golden Lantern Restaurant.

"I saw Parkins again," said the captain. "And I think that he made a note of the fact that I watched Barron go back to his schooner."

"And Parkins just passed me on his way to the hotel," she told him. "And he had a grin on his face. He and Rolf passed in Bazaar Street and I was dumb enough to be looking somewhere else so I can't be sure if they spoke as they passed. That Cockney knows something—about *us*." Clara was worried.

THEN she related, swiftly and guardedly, what she knew about Rolf's talk with Ellison. Sunderland whistled into his tea.

"And he mentioned Barron—something about owning a plantation at Quarter Moon—I didn't catch all of it. Sneaked as close to their room as I dared, but there was a screen that creaked when I tried to get nearer to the window where they talked."

Sunderland shook his head. "I don't like to see you playing in such a dangerous game. Van Klinken ought to notify the police. This is not a pearling cruise that Rolf's taking the Ellison's on, but looks to me like a kidnaping. The Ellisons are to be taken to some island and held for ransom; it will look Chinese. Probably is, with An Lu the boss, but Rolf and Barron will handle the business for that crooked old Chink."

Clara rose. "I've got to get to Van with my report."

"Hurry along. I've got to pick Barron up when he comes ashore again. That Russian we saw killed has been identified as a naval officer—name Komroff. But nobody seems to know where he came from, or that he wanted to stop Barron on the bridge. But I know he came ashore with Barron from the *Alantra*—which probably means that Komroff was with Barron but under a false name. Van Klinken says we must keep our mouths shut because the important thing is to find out what Barron's game is with Rolf, and the police would only gum things up if they held Barron now. Besides, he'd swear he knew nothing about it or why Komroff was stabbed, and might be telling the truth. But Van Klinken declares that An Lu supplied the assassin. Van's most likely right."

Sunderland went out with Clara, but let her go on across the Blue Heron Bridge alone. Barron would come across the bridge when he came up from the Bund.

A boy went past with an English newspaper. Sunderland bought a copy, for his eye had caught the word "Russian" in a headline. But the news turned out to be not more information about Komroff, as Sunderland had hoped. He read the brief account hastily of an incident which was of no importance to Van Klinken.

"This morning," the first paragraph stated, "the body of a Russian, in poor clothing, was fished out of the river by sampan men at the jetty near the lighthouse at the mouth of the river. There were no marks of identification. The man had probably been drowned some time during the night for he had not long been in the water."

SUNDERLAND idled along the bridge. "A tough day for Russians," he told himself. He walked over to the canal embankment to get into shade, taking a position where he could watch the bridge for Barron or pick up Rolf if the pearler appeared from An Lu's shop. He felt certain that the two men would meet again in that neighborhood, which was a main traffic line to the Bund or to the shops of Bazaar Street on the way to the big hotels. Even Ellison would cross the bridge if he decided to return to his yacht during the day. Mrs. Ellison was known to be visiting some ancient temples and pagodas at the upper end of the city, being one of a

party sent on a sight-seeing tour by the International Hotel.

For half an hour Sunderland kept watch. The canal was filled with its usual clamorous water traffic, coming and going out of the river. But as the heat of the day increased there was a slackening in the chatter of the boat families. They drew under the matting roofs and panted, leaving the almost naked men with poles to push their craft along and supply their own gossip as they sweated at their jobs.

He was about to leave the place, and as he stepped forward Sunderland caught sight of something near the river which made him look with sudden interest—there was a white boat coming in with four Chinese rowers. And in the stern sheets of the boat Sunderland saw the white shoulders and the straw hat of Captain Barron. He had been rowed up the river from his *Alantra* and was intending to land, Sunderland felt sure, at stone steps not far from the bridge.

The boat backed in. Captain Barron stepped from the stern sheets and took pains to get good footing on the wet stone, where men had been drawing water in buckets to wash down the blazing yards of nearby godowns. Barron had to be careful, for he carried a black leather bag, and Sunderland noted that from the way the skipper's shoulder sagged, the bag's contents were heavy.

Sunderland moved down toward the river. He wanted to pass Barron and then follow him. The four big Chinese in the boat were to wait for Barron, for they smoked at once and made fast the painter to a ring in the stone embankment.

After Barron had gone by him, Sunderland was about to turn. His attention was attracted to a man who leaped from a sampan that had barely turned in from the river—a white man in faded blue trousers and a jacket which was really a blouse. He wore a dirty white hat. As he ran past Sunderland the man from the sampan was breathing hard. He carried something in a hand pressed close to his thigh that looked like a short pistol. It was this glimpse of the weapon which made Sunderland pause to look after the runner.

CAPTAIN BARRON was on his way to the Bund end of the bridge. One of the Chinese in the boat tied up at the steps cried out sharply, just why, Sunderland did not know. Captain Barron turned to look back, for it was one of the crew and he knew the voice or understood that the alarmed yelp was a warning.

The running man was then within a few feet of Barron, who saw him, and leaped aside to get out of the way. The man from the sampan struck at Barron, hit him, and rocked him back on his heels. Barron dropped the bag, regained his balance, and reached to a back pocket. But he was too slow in drawing his revolver.

The man grabbed the bag and started to run back toward Sunderland but the weight of the bag was greater than he realized. He could not run with it freely for it hammered on his leg with every step and pulled him down to the right, so that instead of going straight down the embankment toward the river, he was pulled off his course by his burden.

Before he had come abreast of Sunderland, the man fell. The bag was hurled forward and went rolling down the steps to Barron's boat. The crew were in clamor, but as Sunderland turned to look after the bag, he noted that only three were left. Two of them ran up the steps to secure Barron's bag. It had burst open

from the violent impact on the stones and from it had fallen several flat objects wrapped separately in red handkerchiefs —objects that looked, from the redness of the fabric about them, like thin bricks.

The man who had fallen did not rise. Nor did he move. There was a splash of red near him on the blazing stone embankment which led Sunderland to believe for an instant that one of the red-wrapped objects from the bag had fallen nearby before the bag left his hand.

A Sikh policeman came running down from the end of the bridge, blowing his shrill whistle, and seeing that Captain Barron was pocketing a revolver, paused to ask what had happened.

"That man tried to steal my bag," said Barron, and abruptly ran to help his Chinese pick up the wrapped objects and stow them back in the bag. The Sikh looked down at the body of the man from the sampan, then stooped, and drew from his back a knife. It had a heavy lead handle. It had been thrown by a man skilled at putting a knife into a target—a trick of certain Chinese bandits and river pirates.

"I don't know who the hell he is," Barron said testily to the Sikh. "I tell you that he grabbed my bag and I don't know who threw that knife. What's more I don't care and for all of me you can blow your whistle at the moon tonight and good luck to you. Yes, you can talk to me after I've been to the bank. I'm a stranger here. If you police didn't jabber so much maybe a man could walk along in the middle of the day around here and not have folks making fast to other people's property."

Sunderland kept out of it. He felt certain that the knife had been thrown by one of Barron's boat crew. Besides, Barron's Chinese had recognized the man running after the skipper, and had their own reasons for yelling an alarm—and putting a lead-handled knife into the man's back. Moving slowly toward the bridge, so as to keep Barron in sight, Sunderland heard a voice in the throng behind him where the dead man lay sprawled.

"If you ask me, I'd say that the blighter looks like a Roosian Finn."

"Can anything happen around here," Sunderland asked himself without looking back, "that that Parkins isn't somehow handy to poke his nose into the pie that happens to be spilled?"

He hurried on after Barron across the Blue Heron Bridge.

IV

VAN KLINKEN grinned as he looked out into the Bund. He saw a thin little man, in a white jacket with silver buttons and a white topped cap with a silver band over the visor, studying the lettering on the sign which proclaimed Van Klinken's business to be an employment agency specializing in seamen, stewards, masters, mates and divers for pearling luggers.

Parkins had just come from the *South Wind*. Van Klinken had sent a Chinese messenger to inform the steward of the Ellison yacht that something could be learned which would be to the interest of Parkins if he called promptly at the employment agency.

So the door to Van Klinken's private office was wide open when Parkins walked up the stone stairway to the second floor —and top—of the building where the Dutchman conducted his business.

"You vill come in, yess?" asked Van Klinken, as Parkins paused at the open door and looked in. He was suspicious that things were not as they should be, not for any particular reason, except that he distrusted all foreigners, especially Dutchmen. Van Klinken spoke with alluring sweetness, his words sticky with honey—the honey suggested by the color of his yellow hair.

"Was it you that sent for me, sir?"

"Yess. You are the Mr. Parkins. Maybe you look for a job. This is the

place for finding alvays jobs in ships. You vill please sit in the big chair." Van Klinken's Netherlands accent always thickened when he was dealing with a victim. He knew the value of pretended stupidity.

Parkins walked into the net. He did not take off his cap but sat in the grass chair before Van Klinken's desk. The steward's thin face glowed with sunburn. His eyes were damp—gray, nervous eyes that roved over the whitewashed walls and studied the furniture of the room as if he believed that about the place there were concealed secret listeners.

"Wot should I be lookin' for a berth for? And look 'ere, Dutchy, wot's the game?"

Van Klinken swung his chair so that he could reach the ice chest behind him. He took out two bottles of beer, opened them, shoved a glass toward Parkins, with the bottle, and filled a glass for himself. "Your Captain Holter, has quit his job as skipper the *Sout' Vind* in."

Parkins opened his eyes and his mouth wide. A hand, reaching for the beer, stopped halfway to its object and hung suspended.

"So he's beached 'isself, eh? You never know wot these American Norwegians will do next, Dutch. I ain't surprised, in a way of speakin'—I've seen it comin' these last days. But 'ow'd you know that Dutchy?" Parkins went on with the beer business and had his nose in the glass by the time Van Klinken, taking his time, answered.

"He comes here and tells me. I get him a job this morning so he can go to San Francisco in a steamer as mate—goot pay, too. His vife is in San Francisco so he likes to go home. But he tells me not for why he qvits. This, of course, is none of my business. No questions I ask people. Jobs—them is what I gits."

Parkins licked the foam from his lips. "I knows wot the skipper skipped for. Somebody's been puttin' insects in 'is ears, as the Americans says. Ashore the skipper gits it—and the insect wot he gets, bites 'im, that's wot—bites 'im so bad he chucks the job and goes lookin' to you for one."

"What is it the insect that bites him?" asked Van Klinken in his blandest voice.

"I don't rightly know, Dutchy. I wouldn't let nobody scare me out of my job. Of course, the skipper ain't been with us long. Mr. Ellison didn't like 'im too good—nor the missus. Ain't got no manners. Sucks 'is fingers when 'e eats. Me, I been with Mr. Ellison a long time. That's because I know 'ow to keep my mouth buttoned. But I don't rightly like wot's goin' on these days. It ain't for me to say."

"Something is wrongish?" purred Van Klinken.

Parkins finished his beer and gazed at the ice chest door with reflective eyes. The day was hot. Van Klinken brought out more beer.

"My owner's got in with a man since we comes to this port that the skipper don't like—before he jumped for the beach—and no more do I."

"Name, please?"

"Rolf, that's the blighter's name. Did you ever 'ear of 'im, you bein' stuck in this yellow 'ole of a China?"

Van Klinken considered, his eyes on the clock's dancing girl while he searched through his memory for a name that seemed to elude him. "Rolf. H'm. Maybe I hear about him—if he works in a bank."

"Bank me eye!" said Parkins just as he got the top from the beer bottle. "Naw, not a bank, Dutchy. Something to do with pearls. Not that I listens, mind. My owner knows that I keeps my lip buttoned like an old maid's shillin' pocket."

VAN KLINKEN lifted his yellow eyebrows. "Pearls! For a yachter millionaire? That would be looney business. You is wrong, mine friend. Maybe the Mr. Ellison buys pearls. But not the pearl

business. Plenty money he has. But does he buy pearls from the Mr. Rolf?"

"Buy pearls? Naw! The missus has pearls a-plenty back in 'Frisco. But Mr. Ellison 'as 'ad a look at pearls. It wasn't a matter o' buyin', but just to see 'ow good they was. I know that. And the lookin' at charts! You'd think that we was goin' on a polar cruise. Land o' the midnight sun—or is it moon—sort of thing."

"Charts? You means Charts of the oceans?"

"Wot else? But the skipper didn't know what charts they was. It was kept dark from 'im, the business. That's why 'e 'ooked it for the beach. Mysterious, like. Didn't like it. China gives 'im the creeps, any'ow."

"But what is the mysterious part of it? Charts is not mysterious. They are needed to know where to go."

"This bloke Rolf 'as gone and found 'isself a lot of pearls in an ocean, I'd say. My owner maybe sets up a company to find the pearls. That's Mr. Ellison's game. Starts companies and pushes the shares. Made no end of money that way. Me, I'm studying the business. I'll be pushin' shares myself one of these days if I listens to my owner long enough." Parkins finished the last of the beer.

"But where did this Mr. Rolf be finding pearls?"

"Oh, some silly sort of place. I don't rightly remember."

"Quarter Moon Bay—or maybe island, yes?"

Parkins squinted an eye. "'Ow'd you know, Dutchy?"

"I didn't know. That's where lots of pearls could be find if you looked hard enough."

"That's the place. Anyhow, the skipper got scared. Somebody shore side told him that pearling is dangerous. People gets slitted with knives and the like of that who goes pearling. For Jappies, it's a good game. They don't mind bein' slitted, from all I 'ears. You and me, now! No pearls for us, wot?"

"Pearls for you if you goes in the *Sout' Vind* to look for 'em, ain't it?"

"Ow, that's just my owner's way of restin' 'isself from share-pushin'. But wot was it you wanted to see me for? We ain't got to that yet."

"No," said Van Klinken. "It is the case that we gossip a little. No harm. The day is hottish. What I want to talk about is business. I might make a few dollars if you help." He reached into a drawer, took out a gold piece and slid it along the top of the desk toward Parkins. "When a man helps me to make two dollars I gives him one. This is the case—a man is wanting a job for skipper a long time. A goot man. You mention him to the Mr. Ellison, say I can give goot papers. The name—Captain Sunderland. And if you just puts an insect in the ear—you understand?"

PARKINS regarded the gold piece. It was twenty dollars. He shut one eye and squinted with the other to the open shutter that gave a view of the river, with the *South Wind* anchored off the Bund. "A tall bloke in a blinkin' 'elmet wot's always knocking about the Blue 'Eron Bridge—is that this Captain Sunderland?"

"Ah! Maybe you been seein' Sunderland?"

"I don't rightly know, sir, but I can generally tell the orfficer blokes a mile away." Parkins was turning respectful at the sight of gold coin. "Thank you kindly, sir." He turned for the doorway. "I'll be bringin' this Sunderland to my owner's mind, sir. He'll need a skipper—and need him prompt now that the old one 'as 'ooked out. Paid 'im orf last night—and never did like him, as I said. So long, sir."

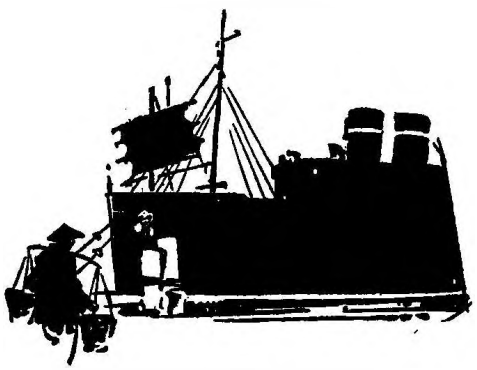
"So long, Mr. Parkins—until back you comes, eh?"

"That won't be long, sir," and Parkins slipped through the doorway and down

the stone stairs. Van Klinken watched the steward join a bluejacket out of the British gunboat in the river.

"Fine and goot!" exclaimed Van Klinken. "No, I am wrong. Like the Americans are always saying, fine and dandyish."

But all the time the big Dutchman mistrusted Parkins. The steward knew more than he admitted, and he knew Sunderland by sight. If that meant that Rolf knew he was being spied upon, it was quite likely that Parkins was spying for Rolf. But Van Klinken was not concerned about such details. They were the chances that had to be taken in his business, and the Amsterdam jewel syndicate paid well for knowing all about any pearling venture, straight or crooked—and Rolf's games were always crooked, with An Lu behind him.



Van Klinken made a couple of entries in his expense book. One item that he recorded read: "For having Captain Holter leave his job in the *South Wind* and expense to San Francisco, $1,500."

By the time Clara Fitch appeared, Van Klinken had worked out a plan for her. She came in all smiles with her tripper's parasol and a string of glass diamonds that she had purchased in Bazaar Street as an excuse to dally in the vicinity of Mrs. Ellison. The millionaire's wife was buying jade monkeys to be sent home for presents—the sort of monkeys that are used in place of jewelry and were trifles carved during the T'ang Dynasty and worth about a hundred dollars if of opal jade shot through with particles of rose and green.

"She's gone back aboard the yacht—and of course I can't very well follow her there, much as I'd like to. So what do I do next, Mr. Van Klinken?

THE Netherland put the tips of his fingers together along his pale red cummerbund in front, leaned back in his swivel chair and smiled. "You go aboard the yacht, Miss Fitch, Clara, mine dear—and bring me home the pig-bacon."

"The yacht! How can I go aboard the yacht?" She believed that he was joking.

"Mit feet—and with your hands take hold of the ladder. Sure, that is the vay to go aboard yachts! You are a lovely lady and you will be looking nice in a yacht. I vish I could go mineself."

"But I can't go calling on Mrs. Ellison without an invitation!"

Van Klinken opened a drawer in his desk and took out papers which were neatly tied with red tape. "Here you haff papers. From banks and so forth that say you are good typewriter runner—and lawyers and steamship owners who have offices—New York, Honolulu, Manila, Shanghai and here, too, and one from me saying you are a big help. Also you want is go to New York, Singapore, Malta, Gibraltar and the Atlantic Ocean upper side or lower side. So! You ask the Mrs. Ellison can you go so far in her yacht as Singapore for nothing but what you eat and sleep—companion lady to write letters, read books, sew buttons, turn on the radio and maybe sing a little. If she say yes, then you go in the *Sout' Vind* to Singapore, which will be nice and you'll learn a lot about pearls at Quarter Moon Island. Maybe not so much as I t'ink, but that will be plenty. The Captain Sunderland will be lonesome, I be lonesome—but you not be lonesome. Tell the Mrs. Ellison that you are boatish and never sick and maybe she is sometimes

sick and this idea gets you a job. Sure! You can do it, Miss Fitch, Clara, mine dear."

"Singapore! In that beautiful yacht! Mr. Van Klinken, I'd like nothing better —except that I'd hate to give up this job with you." Clara did a few steps of a jig, hornpipe style, to show her delight at the possibility of such a trip.

"Vell, I shall be lonesome. Also, Captain Sunderland."

"I should worry about Captain Sunderland. He's nice, of course, but he's always nagging at me that I ought to quit this job. I don't think it's any of his business."

"He won't tell you to quit no more—if you go in the yacht."

"That'll be something!"

"Sure! And he won't be lonesome. I know it."

"Oh, do you! And how long has Captain Sunderland been telling you that he wouldn't be lonesome if I quit and went on to New York through Suez?"

"Not longish, Miss Fitch. Never he say it—but I know it."

"How do you know it, boss?" Clara was suddenly most curious.

VAN KLINKEN rocked himself a little in the swivel chair and winked at the dancing girl on the dial of the clock before he answered.

"When the *Sout' Vind* goes out in the ocean away from here, what is the case? Clara Fitch has a job got in the yacht—and the skipper of the yacht is Captain Sunderland. How could he be lonesome." Then Van Klinken broke out in laughter that threatened to dislocate his shoulders. He slapped his desk with a fat pink hand and waved the other wildly at Clara Fitch.

"Sunderland! Skipper of the *South Wind!* How long has he been in that job?"

"Not yet. I fix it. I fix everything but broken hearts. You go aboard the yacht and get the job before I send another lady typewriter runner to do it and keep you working here with me."

She held out an eager hand. "Give me my references, please! When that yacht sails, I sail in her—or no typewriter runner does, lady or otherwise. This is the job I've looked for since I left my home to look at the world."

Van Klinken handed over the documents. "Maybe, Miss Clara, you find it dangerous to go."

"I'll take that chance, and thank you for it, Mr. Van Klinken. Everything that's interesting, is dangerous, isn't it?" She smiled at him, made sure of the tilt to her hat in the little mirror on the wall, and snapped shut her handbag on the papers.

"Sure! And you won't be lonesome while Captain Sunderland is along as the skipper."

"Yes, I will! Lonesome for you." She threw a kiss to the girl on the alarm clock, moved to the door, waved a hand, and called as she started down the stone stairway, "I'll let you know all about my new job before we sail."

"Bring back the pig-bacon," he called after her. Then he leaned back in his swivel chair and laughed till his shoulders shook.

V

ELLISON left the International Hotel with another week to run on the rooms he had there. He took precautions against letting any one know that he was sailing with his yacht before daylight. He spoke to the desk casually about dropping down the river to a lower anchorage, but all arrangements were completed for being out of the port and on the way to Quarter Moon Island while the hotel people and his bankers and the cable office were all informed that he did not intend to sail for a couple of weeks.

The Bund was a great rainbow of lights as the taxi took him to the landing steps opposite Van Klinken's office. Nels,

launchman of the *South Wind*, was waiting with the power dinghy. Parkins had been left at the cable office for a message which should come from the United States.

The new skipper was at the gangway as Ellison went over the side. "Hold the launch alongside to bring Parkins off—and there'll be a Japanese named Suki to come with him."

"Yes, sir," said Sunderland, as he snapped off the blue owner-absent light on the starboard fore spreader.

Ellison paused to look forward into the gloom under one section of what was left of the awning. "Mrs. Ellison on deck?"

"No, sir. That's Miss Fitch, the secretary just shipped. Mrs. Ellison's below."

"I'll join her. Well, Cap'n, how do you like the ship?"

"Never had anything finer under my feet, sir."

"Glad you feel that way. She can do her stuff—and as a veteran of the Grand Banks fleets, I think you'll handle her well. She's a Banker's hull, you know." Ellison paused to look up the river at the oases of brilliance which marked the big hotels, and went on, "Be ready to get the anchor up any minute." He lowered his voice.

"A man named Rolf coming along as far as Singapore with us. I'll let you know about that a little later. I've a special reason for wanting you to size this man up as well as you can. Not that you're wanted for any underhand business but my sailing master in this case can be of a little help."

"Very good, sir."

"Ever hear of this man named Rolf?"

"I think I have, sir—he's been a pearler, if it's the same man."

"That's the man, yes. Don't know him, by any chance?"

"No, sir. Know him by sight."

"And probably by reputation, but I'm not going to ask you about that now. I'm taking on a ticklish game—just as sort of a hobby. I might add that there's a stand of rifles and automatics below—and you'll have a key, and so will I."

"Expect trouble with Rolf, sir?"

Ellison chuckled. "Not with you aboard. That last skipper I had was a good man, but he wouldn't have fitted into the job that's ahead of us as you will. Not that I know much about it. But we'll keep an eye peeled. That Jap coming, is one of Rolf's men, but he'll bear a hand with the crew when needed. Keep him in your watch as extra hand."

"Yes, sir."

Ellison moved aft for the companionway. Once he stopped, as if to turn back, reconsidered and went on to disappear below.

SUNDERLAND moved forward to where Miss Fitch was on a bench at the midship companionway. Nels was sent back to the landing steps to pick up Parkins.

Sunderland sat beside Clara. The distant blare of music ashore reached them, with the clatter of rickshaws over cobbles at the upper Bund and the horns of motors and all the hum of life in the warrens of the vast Chinese city beyond the quiet river.

"Aren't we lucky?" asked Clara softly.

"I'm not sure of that. I'm glad to be back to sea, yes, but we'll know our luck better when we're back here—if we get back."

"Great gobs of gloom!"

"No. Caution. Ellison isn't sure himself of what he's in for. Sounds as if he'll take me into his confidence later, but I doubt it. He's not the type of rich man that talks too much. Just said enough to tip me that he doesn't trust Rolf—nor Suki. That's the name of the Jap coming along with Parkins. Arms below—and

I'm to have a key to the chest. That'll help."

"Van Klinken tell you about Rolf getting pearls from An Lu—more pearls, I mean, than the original seven?"

"Yes," said Sunderland. "Ten pearls, of average value, according to Van's inside tip from his special Chinese spies. Van can't make that out at all." He looked ashore.

The shell-paned shutters of Van Klinken's office were glowing whitely from the lights behind them. They knew that the fat Dutchman was at a dark but open window keeping watch of the river and the yacht.

"Where do you suppose that Captain Barron got the gold filings that he sold in the Chinese bullion market?"

"That's a question, young lady. Russian gold, Van says—and the *Alantra* from Vladivostok, of course. Some of those gold filings were used to pay An Lu for the ten pearls that Rolf got. And we're supposed to be on a pearling scout to Quarter Moon Island. Well, we'll find pearls, of course, seeing that we're bringing a supply with us."

"Anyway, Skipper, we haven't got to be bothered by that Captain Barron. I was glad to see his old schooner get out yesterday morning."

"We'll be seeing him, I'll bet. He didn't pay Russian gold for pearls to make our Mr. Rolf a present."

"Probably not. But that'll be another day. I'm going to enjoy this cruise as long as I can, and with you along, I feel fairly safe. And I'll give you a bet if you want one."

"What'll it be?"

"We bring home Van Klinken's pigbacon."

"We can do it, I guess."

"Okay, New England. Let it ride that way." She laughed at him, a gay little laugh, for she was as happy as Sunderland at the idea of having blue water under them in the next few hours.

THEN they heard a voice raised in song, above the rattle of rickshaw wheels, and they both laughed, for they knew the singer.

"Norty, norty, norty!" chanted Parkins. *"Wot norty things you say! You really are so norty that you'd better go aw'y!"* The music hall ballad came to an end as the rickshaw stopped near the landing steps.

"One slick Cockney," said Sunderland. "He'll bear watching, as well as the other gentlemen mentioned to me just now by the boss."

"Lost your way four times gittin' 'ere!" roared Parkins to his runner. "And this your 'ome town! More than once I've dropped a penny in the plate back in my own 'ome for the 'eathen—and that was you! No 'ope for the likes of you. Roll away now, and no back talk or I'll bash you one." There was a rattle of wheels and they saw Parkins moving down the steps from the lights of the Bund.

"Don't make so much noise, steward," said Nels from the dinghy in a low growl.

"You keep your ruddy lip out of my affairs, Nels."

"Get in here and shut up," retorted Nels."

"Seen anything of a Jappy that was to be 'ere?"

"No. He'll come later, or—"

A figure appeared at the top of the landing steps. He hurried down. Sunderland and Clara heard a few words spoken but could not make out their meaning.

Then Parkins gave the clue to who the man was.

"Ow, so Suki's your name! Good name for a Jappy! Don't keep things slowed down, climb in! We're off to sea m' lad! Shove off, Nels, and I'll see that you get a cup of coffee."

Sunderland was at the side ladder to meet them. Suki was sent forward with Nels, then the launchman went back to wait for Rolf.

"I've a cable for the owner, sir," said Parkins.

"Take it below. And mind this, Parkins—you don't need to tell the whole port every time you open your mouth that

we're bound for sea. We're just dropping down river."

"Very good, sir," said Parkins. "I was just alludin' to the fact that the Jap's outward bound when we do sail."

"Then that's settled and no more need be said about it. We'll get along fine. And when you're done with the owner, fetch some of that hot coffee of yours to Miss Fitch and the skipper on deck here."

"Very good, sir," said Parkins as he moved aft. There was a sly snicker in the reply, as if Parkins knew of something most amusing which Captain Sunderland had missed in his general summing up of the situation aboard the *South Wind*.

"That steward is going to give us trouble," whispered Clara, as Sunderland went back to the seat.

"I don't think so," said Sunderland. "He's more friendly than he seems on the surface. I know his kind fairly well—slyly insolent but pretty dependable in a tough spot."

"Van Klinken believes Parkins is hand in glove with Rolf."

"Maybe Van's right. It's possible that Rolf got the steward to scare the old skipper out of this berth."

"Why do you think that Rolf wanted to change skippers here?"

SUNDERLAND thought for a minute. "I'm not sure. But I know that if I wanted to pull some shenanigan on this vessel I'd want a new skipper aboard because the old skipper would naturally have the confidence—to call it confidence—of the owner. A strange skipper in a yacht has not learned the curves of the owner, and the owner is uncertain of a new skipper."

"The man who got out may have picked up some gossip about Rolf."

"Yes, that's true. Some Norwegian skipper around this port may have tipped the man who quit that Rolf is crooked—or has a bad reputation. It would be simpler to quit than argue with a man like Ellison, who is accustomed to run things his own way, and on his own judgment. I must consider that, too. Rich men become arbitrary and are not inclined to let their servants take charge—and yacht skippers are considered to be servants. Sea-going chauffeurs from the standpoint of many owners. I'll have to feel my way with this berth, and I'm not inclined to step up to Ellison and give him advice. After all, I'm not here primarily to put this yacht where he wants it but to find out what this game is with pearls."

"I feel the same way," said Clara. "And it would be a mean job if I felt that I was only a spy planted in the yacht. Our job is to protect the Ellisons, in a way, from being caught in whatever the trap is that Rolf and that Captain Barron has set."

"Exactly!" said Sunderland. "We are not here to turn against our salt. If this cruise means that there'll be a fight, we'll be fighting on the side of the Ellisons. We're not going on this trip to swindle, or let anybody else swindle, the owner."

"The absurdity of a man of millions going to hunt for pearls," said Clara. "Why, he could buy a hat full of pearls and not think twice about it."

"He doesn't care whether he finds any pearls or not," said Sunderland. "Just an

excuse to knock about with the yacht on his way to S'pore. He's tired of high finance, as I see it, and simply wants to play at picking up more money on a vacation, just as some men pay five hundred dollars to catch a basket full of trout that could be bought for a dollar."

"Yes, I see that," Clara admitted. "It's Rolf who's the fool if he thinks that he can swindle a man who must be as shrewd as Mr. Ellison, who has made fortunes at the trickiest game in the world—money manipulation through the stock market."

"Anybody can be fooled in a new game. And for all we know, our Mr. Ellison may be willing to drop a few thousand to be fooled."

"But why should he do that?"

SUNDERLAND laughed, then went on in the same soft monotone that was barely a whisper. "Women don't get that particular viewpoint. I've heard of men who let themselves be swindled in order to pick up a new trick—and then use the new trick in their own business, with modifications. I don't say that Ellison wants to learn swindling methods, but he might be amused by finding out what Rolf's game is and be willing to pay for the amusement. Ellison's no fool. You just heard him tell me to take Rolf's measure—and mention the key to the arms on board. No, the owner has his guard up for this cruise, a fact which makes me feel a whole lot better about the business ahead of us."

"I'm not a bit worried, either. Wouldn't go unless you did, Skipper." Clara waved a hand to the girdle of lights that looped along the bend of the river above them. "And this certainly beats hammering a machine in an office!"

"You hate civilization!"

"No, I don't—this yacht is civilization. And these foreign ports can be as stupid, after a time, as the business district of any American city. And I don't hate American cities, either—they produce something worth more than all the picturesque squalor of the tropics. And there are more slick games going on right in this city than anywhere at home. The only difference is that most of the crookedness and graft here is on a nickel basis. At home we do things on a bigger scale. If I'm going to pick a place to be poor I'll pick my own country because poverty there is heaven compared to the hell of poverty in the glamor of the Orient. I don't see much glamor in wondering where the next handful of rice is coming from."

"Good gosh!" said Sunderland. "What a lot of heavy thinking from a typewriter runner!"

"I used to be a schoolma'am before I left Glo'ster—and on the side I taught navigation. I cut my teeth on a bone quadrant, smarty!"

Sunderland laughed. "Latitude, fish—longitude, fish."

Clara laughed with him. "Yes—and fortunes out of fish! Don't sneeze at fish. They've produced as much money as pearl hunting. I haven't forgotten that you promised me a job when you start pearling."

"Caught the fever, eh? Well, we New Englanders always look around to see where a dollar can be picked up."

"Certainly we do! But we're not really looking for money so much as we are seeking a way to finance romance."

"A lot of fun—at a profit. That what you mean?"

"Yes. The old whalers and clipper skippers made money, but what they really wanted to do was get away from farms, get a long boat ride and see foreign parts. My grandfather admitted that to me, and he ought to know, as the blood in our family is really salt water. Generations of us pickled in brine and stuck together with tar. But we saw the world and that's something."

"Same here," said Sunderland. "I'd always climb aboard anything that would float and carry a shirt on a stick—and

some didn't float or keep their sticks—but I enjoyed—"

SUNDERLAND'S low tone trailed off into silence. He straightened up from the seat, and turned with intense alertness to the side of the vessel away from the Bund.. A sampan was approaching from the native city across the river. A white figure became visible as bars of brilliance from moving lights on the water struck across the moving boat.

"Hello, *South Wind!*" came a voice. "All right to go around your stern and come up to the starboard ladder? I'm expected on board you."

It was Rolf's voice. He spoke no louder than was necessary.

"All right, sir," said Sunderland. "We're waiting for you." He touched Clara's arm and moved to the starboard gangway.

"Is Mr. Ellison aboard?" asked Rolf as his figure came under the light Sunderland turned on at the gangway to make visible the short side ladder and the grab ropes hanging from the temporary gangway stanchions.

"Yes, sir. And the dinghy is at the landing steps waiting for you—if you're Mr. Rolf."

"That's who I am. I hear there's a new skipper aboard."

"Yes, sir. I'm aboard as sailing master —name, Sunderland."

"I found it simpler to come over from the other side, Cap'n Sunderland." Rolf reached for the grab ropes and came up the ladder with a skill which revealed his familiarity with the trick of getting out of a quick boat to a more stable craft. As his soft soles slapped the deck, he went on, "I've three bags in that—"

"I'll attend to your luggage, sir." Parkins was on the job, in white coat and cap and his oily deference. "Take it to your room and Mr. Ellison's waiting for you below in the main cabin. Just come along aft with me, sir."

It was Sunderland who took the luggage from the Chinese sampan man. By the time Parkins was up again, Sunderland had whistled for the dinghy and Nels was nearly alongside.

"Just in time," said Parkins. "I go ashore with a cable, and orders are, Cap'n, to get the anchor when I'm back aboard. Then it's coffee for the deck, with a jigger of rum in it to wash the blarsted dust of this Chinkie port out of our throats." He went over the side, ballasted with an envelope and his own importance.

Anderson, the mate-engineer was called, and the crew came on deck to strip down the last of the awning and make all gear secure for sea. In fifteen minutes Parkins was back, the dinghy lashed on deck, and the engines were turning over. Then the cable began clinking home.

"Anchor aboard, sir," was Anderson's last report from forward.

Sunderland had the wheel, with Clara beside him. He already had the propeller turning by using the deck throttle. "Half ahead, mister," Sunderland called. "I'm just holding her against the tide."

Presently the engines struck a new note and the *South Wind* began to move against the flood. The Bund lights began marching past, faster and faster, like a long and twisted passenger express gaining speed.

NELS came aft and took the wheel. The men forward were lashing the anchor and securing for sea.

Sunderland moved to the starboard main shrouds to peer ahead at the marks which would take him to the outer sea buoy. Clara went with him but she turned to look toward Van Klinken's lighted windows. The fat Dutchman would be watching from a dark window the range lights at the two mastheads and the green at the starboard fore shrouds and know that his two spies were on their way to bring home the pig-bacon.

The voices of Ellison and Rolf came up

through the main cabin skylight. Parkins was in the galley making a few remarks about China to Chin, the cook.

Sunderland asked for a little starboard wheel, then steadied, and picked up his next light.

He knew the ranges of that river like the palm of his own hand.

"Decks under our feet again, skipper," said Clara softly.

"And a lot under the decks, eh, gal?"

"Just enough pepper in the soup. Shall I put in just a little spice—and what kind do you like?"

"Okay, Cleopatra! Drop in a couple of pearls. I've always wanted to try pearls for flavoring."

"They might be dangerous." She was giving him the laugh on his sermons to her about danger.

"All the better, gal! And you obey orders without arguing. I'm the skipper, you know."

"Aye, aye, sir! You run your old boat yourself, smarty. I'm going below to see if Mrs. Ellison needs me—for singing, perhaps, as Van Klinken mentioned. I'll be back when the smell of tide's out of the air." Clara dropped down the after companionway.

(*Part II in the Next* SHORT STORIES)

LONG RED

By ROBERT H. ROHDE

Author of "Port In a Fog," "Prison Pen," etc.

A GIRL named Marna Trask came up to Meldum County on the Tuesday after the long Fourth of July week-end, and although she was sound as a dollar physically she came for quite as definite a reason of health as ever brought out invalid to rebuild in the clean, pine-broomed air of the Meldum hills. It was a different and peculiar reason, the fact of her case being that her life wouldn't have been worth a plugged nickel in New York that summer—not unless Uncle Sam, who certainly owed her no such hard-boiled handling—had chosen to snap a lock on her and left her to swelter through the dog days in an oven-sized detention cell.

The quiet, alert-eyed young fellow who conducted her on her New England journey very confidentially explained all that to red-haired Corporal Bradley, the Down East trooper who covered all Meldum and most of the next county for a budget-pinched state police department. He was a G-Man, the escort, and he looked up Bradley and introduced himself before he started back to the big town.

"Not that she's likely to come to any harm around here," he said, "but the Bureau will appreciate it if you'll keep an eye on Miss Trask. She's Number One witness in our top prosecution of the year —and the kind of witness we don't manage to get enough of. The come-clean kind. She knew she was putting herself on a spot when she opened up to us, but there's not a particle of fear in her. As sure as she goes on the stand next fall, Joe Lazzo sits hot. And when Lazzo volts out, the curtain's down on one of the goriest rackets running. You read about the case, maybe. The Carson thing—you know?"

Bradley nodded. He had seen the newspapers, heard the newscasts. Hugh Carson had been a trucking contractor in New

"One Thing You Can Count On— Crooks Are Careful Drivers."

York, one of many under the thumb of gouging racketeers. Their extortions threatening ruin, he had stopped paying and when the mobsters waylaid and destroyed a truck with an interstate load, had made an appointment with the Federal District Attorney.

It was an appointment never to be kept. Carson, starting from his own office to the D. A.'s, had been clipped down by gang bullets—murdered before the horrified gaze of his secretary, standing at a window not a dozen yards from that death-spitting gun. She knew Joe Lazzo by sight, knew it was the racket boss himself who had "taken care" of Carson, and had had the pluck to tell what she knew. So now Lazzo was a Federal prisoner, charged with homicide, headed for the Chair. And Marna Trask was the girl with haunted brown eyes whom Bradley had seen alighting from the train that afternoon, come to summer in Meldum out on lonely Storm Ridge.

"She'll be with relatives," Druce, the F. B. I. agent, said. "Boston people who've bought an old farmhouse and remodeled it into something as easy to look at as Marna herself is. We could, of course, have jugged her as a material murder witness. But why play her dirty when she's been so utterly on the up and up? We know we can bank on her. And as for safety, we figure she could hardly be safer anywhere than in an out-of-the-way spot like the Ridge."

THAT seemed like something else to bank on, too. It did look so then. Even Bradley, knowing what he knew of urban types, dubious as he was about more than a few of the jowly city men who in the last couple of years had been buying up one after another of Meldum's played-out hard-scrabble farms, had no thought otherwise at the moment.

But when a couple of weeks later he saw Marna Trask in Hillville, shopping there and alone, he had a sudden, sharp jitter. He didn't like that. Too many of those new summerites, the heavy-jawed, flint-eyed, zipper-lipped sort, were in and out of the village at all hours. It simply wasn't healthy for the girl to show herself in Hillville. Her picture had been in the papers, a quick snap but an amazingly good likeness none the less, and as well as any city cop Trooper Corporal Bradley knew the underworld to be a world of flash recognitions and swift communication.

He gave her a chance to get out on the open road and there, where the publicity was less but still too much, he zoomed his motorcycle alongside her small coupe and spoke—spoke bluntly, pointing what he said with a nod toward a glitter of chromium that had swept past as she pulled over.

"Right there—that's one of them, Miss Trask! They're everywhere nowadays, cars bought with blood money, vultures free-wheeling around on plush when they belong behind bars on bare boards. If they get a line on you—well, they mustn't. The safe side's the best side. So you just keep out of Hillville. Keep out of Barlows too. Stay on the Ridge. Please!"

She looked aghast at Bradley and then, as her eyes swung to follow the speeding shiny car, a shiver twitched her slim shoulder.

"People like that—up here? I never thought of it. Never!"

The warning appeared to have taken. Bradley chugged along beside her as far as the dirt road that climbed Storm Ridge, and as they parted she soberly assured him, "I'll be careful. You needn't worry about me. I won't go into the villages again, ever."

And to Bradley's best knowledge she kept her promise. He saw her no more on village streets or traveled roads. But regardless, the cat somehow was out of the bag. July blazed into August and on the night of the third—a night of torrential rain squalls and screaming wind,

winding up the hot spell—he had a long distance call from Druce.

IT WAS a late call. Midnight had struck almost a half hour before it rang in and Bradley, ready for bed in his crossroads billet midway between Barlows and Hillville, had slung off his Sam Browne belt and begun to undress. In a drowse when he lifted the receiver, he heard half a dozen words that snapped him awake. Each of them, coming through from faraway New York, had the hard ping of a Davis Cup service.

"Bradley? For God's sake get to Marna Trask! *Fast!*"

Druce, steamed up, spoke choppily. He had tried, first, to get a connection to Storm Ridge, but no go. The wires were down.

"It may be a false alarm," he said. "Stool pigeons aren't always a hundred percent accurate, and I'm praying that this one isn't. But the tip is that the Lazzo mob knows where our star witness is hidden out. True or not, it means that Miss Trask must be closely guarded from this minute on. Until we can get there, it's up to you. It's got to be. How long before you can be on Storm Ridge?"

"Fifteen minutes," Bradley said.

But he made it in twelve. At quarter of one he stood, slickered and streaming, on a veranda high on the Ridge with light from an overhead dome splashing down on him and Marna Trask staring at him from an open door, her face white and strained.

Her voice was shaky, husky with scare. "An—an accident? Was it bad? Joan and Bill, they're not—not—?"

Joan and Bill, Bradley knew, must be the Waylands, her sister and her brother-in-law. He said quickly, "No accident. Where are they?"

Her color was better then, her voice puzzled but easier.

"Bill had to run in to Boston. Joan went with him. They left early this morning, planning to be back tonight. And when I saw you—"

"It's nothing about them. Not that kind of news. But you—you're here alone?

"Why not?"

Pithily Bradley told her why not. He concluded:

"And if I'd known you were all by yourself, I'd have had heart failure on the way. Or else have doubled speed and maybe broken my neck."

She smiled. "I'm glad you didn't know. As it is, I'm all right, whether Bill's here or whether he isn't. Perfectly well able to take care of myself, regardless. I'd made sure that the doors and windows were all locked, and there's a gun here that Terry Druce lent me. And besides, I've got the telephone."

"You think you've got it," Bradley said. "If Druce couldn't get you on it, *you* can't get anybody. That's that, so right here I stick. It's all I can do. There'd be a room for you down where I'm staying, but with the Waylands away in the car that's out. It's no night for tandem riding on a motorcycle, now is it?"

SHE smiled again and shook her head. "Hardly. And Bill and Joan should be home any minute. If you feel you must wait for them, come in and have something to drink and smoke. Bill has some grand Scotch, and there's a log going a mile a minute in the fireplace."

Bradley could hear the log crackling. He started to shed the slicker and then he heard something else.

"Listen! Isn't that a car coming now?"

Her ears were as good as his.

"Yes. On the Ridge. They're home!"

Bradley chucked the wet waterproof down the verandah and stepped in.

"I'll still have the Scotch," he said, "if the invitation isn't canceled. And I can use a little fire on the outside. I'm colder than if I'd been riding at ten below."

Powerful headlights danced white on the easterly windows, and the hum of the engine was louder. His chin jerked up.

"Hi!" he ejaculated. *"That's* never the coupe that you were driving. It's a big car. Brute of a motor!"

Marna Trask was at a window. She brushed back a curtain, raised a shade.

"No; it's not Bill. They're not coming here. They've stopped below."

Bradley peered over her shoulder. A quarter of a mile away the headlights blazed through the rain, no longer jouncing. Another light, not so strong, briefly flared beside them.

"Strangers, whoever they are," he said. "Might be coming here, at that. They just stopped to put a flash on that next R. F. D. box. Yes—and the name isn't the one they're looking for. The car's moving along, this way."

His lips were flattened, his shoulders up, his eyes sparking.

"Now, look!" he snapped. "First, switch off the porchlight. If that car turns in—if anybody from it comes on the verandah—hit the switch again. But don't, no matter what, open the door. Not unless I give you the okay. Right?"

He slid out at her nod, vaulted a porch rail and rolled his motorcycle behind a drenched clump of shrubbery where it could not be seen from the drive. Behind him the door closed and the bolt clicked, and with the dome-light off the only illumination outside the house was what filtered through drawn shades.

HE HAD moved fast, but he was hardly under cover before the machine with the throaty power thrum had reached Wayland's. It halted by the gate, a hundred feet from where he crouched in the hammering downpour. Once more the flashlight played on a mail-box; then the car turned in.

It was a touring car, a big and costly one, with rain-blackened side curtains up and twin wiper-blades sweeping its rakishly slanted windshield. The kind of car the quick-and-easy money man went for, but at least there was nothing furtive about its approach. Halfway along the drive its musical horn gave a dulcet too-toot-a-too, and under the verandah it sounded again.

Two men got out. They scooted up the steps, and when one of them banged the Wayland knocker and the dome sprang alight Bradley perceived the reason for the scooting. Traveling in that thumping storm, neither wore a raincoat. One was thin, one stocky, each around thirty, and Bradley had never seen them before. Nor their car, either. He saw that it carried New York plates and that only the two had been in it, and having made certain there were two and no more to deal with he moved softly around the machine.

The girl was at the door, but hadn't drawn the bolt. She wasn't flustered. Her voice was steady and clear.

"Who's there?"

The thin man answered. "We're looking for a Miss Trask. This is the place, isn't it?"

"Yes; you're talking to her." There was a small square of glass in the door, and she was looking through it. "Who are *you?*"

"Federal agents, Miss Trask," the thickset man said. "Something else has come up—another big case we figure you could help us on. We're from the Boston office. Want to talk to you."

Bradley was at the foot of the steps behind them, his hand at his holster.

"How about talking to me?" he said.

They pivoted and stared. Both for a moment stood speechless. One—the thin

one—had snaked a hand under his coat. It dropped back to his side, empty, when his companion laughed.

"I'll be damned! A cop! Where did you pop from, Trooper?"

"I'm a guest here, sort of," Bradley said. "And you're Government men, are you?"

"That's it. Special agents, D. of J."

"From Boston?"

"I guess you heard."

"I did. And it didn't sound exactly reasonable."

The thin man's eyes flutterd.

"Don't get thick with him, Mac," he said. "He's all right. Just a wise guy—sees all, knows all. He means the New York license on the bus. That's what's got him goggled up. He probably don't understand the way we swap plates around from state to state."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" The beefy man grinned. "How would it be with him, I wonder, if we showed our tins?"

HE PICKED a shield out of his pocket and held it up under the light.

"Good enough?" he demanded. "Then fade out. This is Federal business. Strictly private business."

Bradley looked hard at the badge. It was exactly like the little gold shield that Druce carried, leather-cased, in his fob pocket; so far as his eyes told him, was the real thing. He stepped up out of the rain, took swift thought and called:

"All right, Miss Trask! You can open up now."

But the shield hadn't actually satisfied him. He didn't like the cut of the touring car's passengers, didn't like their manner or the way their eyes slitted when the door swung in. He'd met several G-Men, but none of the stamp of these. He couldn't imagine Druce, for example, tricking himself out as they were tricked. Druce, law-educated, dressed like a Y.M.C.A. secretary, not like a Broadway tailor's dummy.

Bradley kept his hand close to his gun.

"There's Miss Trask," he said. "You can talk to her all you want. But first, how about talking to Boston?"

He nodded toward the telephone stand just inside the door, and didn't miss the swift, thin glance they exchanged.

The heavyweight glowered at him.

"What's the idea?" He snorted. "Boston! *We* should call Boston? Why?"

Bradley shrugged a wet shoulder.

"You can call it New England caution. I'm all for cooperating with the government in every possible way. But I don't know you fellows. I just want a better identification. Anybody could have a badge—even a Federal badge."

There was a moment's silence. The eyes of the two in the multi-pleated, sharp-lapelled coats clicked together and veered back to Bradley.

"In other words," the thin man said softly, "you think we're phonies? Is that it?"

"No. I simply want to be sure you're G-Men. All you've got to do is pick up that telephone and call your office. Two minutes will get you a line through to Boston."

"And suppose we don't feel like wasting two minutes? Then what?"

THAT was the narrow-chested one again rasping. His friend shut him off with a quick shake of his head.

"Don't be like that!" he snapped. Then he smiled at Bradley and said smoothly, "How you come into the picture, trooper, is past me. You're all right, though. I give you credit, you're only doing what you think you ought to. But look at the time! How'd we get the office on the wire this hour of the night? Hell, there's nobody there; won't be until—"

He stopped short, staring into the muzble of the revolver that had zipped suddenly up out of the state-police holster. The trooper's blue eyes had a steely glint behind it. He said, "Get 'em up, both of you!" and said that so dynamically that

the arms of the two in front of the leveled gun were lifting before they were capable of protest. But when he spoke again, he had relapsed into his earlier twangy drawl.

"That's one way of making a dead phone work! These people are fake G-Men, Miss Trask. They've given themselves away—don't even know there isn't an F.B.I. office in the country that doesn't have some one on tap to catch incoming calls twenty-four hours out of the twenty-four!"

They were Lazzo mobsters, masquerading. Bradley knew it as well then as he did a few minutes later, when he had disarmed and searched them. Each had carried, in a shoulder holster, an automatic pistol, and the guns were of a different make and type than Druce and the other authentic Federal men packed. Also, each yielded a memorandum book whose contents gave clinching proof of racket association.

While they watched him with smouldering eyes, handcuffed together, tight-lipped, Bradley thumbed swiftly through the note-books.

"Yes—crooks, and big timers, Miss Trask," he said, pocketing the books and swinging up his wrist watch. "They've probably been in better jails than we've got in Meldum County, but they'll have to put up with what we have. Now, to get them to Hillville. Do you suppose you could drive that car of theirs? Will you?"

Druce had made no mistake as to her courage.

She had been as cool through it all as if she hadn't come within an ace that night of being one more vanished racket witness, and her nod answering Bradley was prompt and calm.

She could drive the car, she said, surely could and surely would drive, and when she was sitting at the wheel with the thwarted snatchers manacled and glum in the tonneau behind her she still gave no smallest outward sign of nerve frazzle. She got under way without a fumble, her touch of the starter brisk and competent, her hand steady on the shift lever.

Black mud under wheel, blacker sky above, motorcycle and mob car slithered down off the Ridge and onto the hard road below. Bradley, turning toward the hill-hemmed little county seat, shot ahead there. He hit an even fifty and held it, saw with a backward glance that the touring car was coming right along.

FOR one mile and then another it kept pace with him as exactly as if he had had it on a tow rope. A hundred feet astern, never more, never a discernible inch less, it buzzed on after him. He looked back less often then. With Druce himself driving at his back he couldn't have been more confident of getting his prisoners safe into Hillville, and his mind eased and drifted. He wondered what sort of criminal records the fingerprints of those snappy dressers would show up for them in the F.B.I. files at Washington, wondered if after this close shave the Bureau wouldn't be snapping Marna Trask home to New York and barred detention.

Very earnestly he hoped they wouldn't; and if they didn't, he promised himself he'd certainly make it a point to get up on the Ridge again soon and frequently.

Then, with something less than five miles covered of the twenty between the Ridge and Hillville's tight little brick jail, trouble all at once cropped up to the rear. Bradley sensed it when the strong, steady beam of the following headlights suddenly wavered on the glistening concrete in front of him, sweeping to one ditch and across to the other. Knew it, too late, when that musical horn gave a ragged and not too euphonious blurt that was unmistakably a warning.

Too late by only a fraction of a second, but a vital, fateful fraction. The big touring car, wide open, was rushing up on him then. Leaping. He gave his motorcycle the gun, made a desperate swerve that

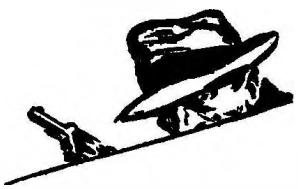
took him over the shoulder of the road and to the edge of the ditch. But he hadn't, even there, got clear. The lurching machine whipped over after him. Its bumper, or a fender, swiped his rear wheel and as the motorcycle plummeted into the ditch he went sailing—sailing to a brambly crash and a blackout.

HE KNEW, when he next knew anything, that he had been out cold, but how long he had lain stunned in the brush he had no way of telling. His watch, its crystal smashed, had stopped. The only time it gave him was the time of his crash. Five minutes to one, the frozen hands said. And now what time was it?

The sky revealed no more than the watch; rain still came pelting, without let up, out of blackness unrelieved by the faintest glimmer.

He strained his eyes toward Hillville, but the touring car's headlights were nowhere visible. Obviously the machine had raced along after spilling him. His gun remained in its holster, and Lazzo's men would certainly have lifted it if they'd stopped to see what the spill had done to him.

They'd be doing seventy, eighty, ninety, if they had stayed on the Pike, which meant that if he'd been out for anything like as much as an hour it was already a clean getaway. Freedom for them—and for Marna Trask, God knew what.



Himself, he was miraculously all in one piece. The brambles had ripped his face, shredded his slicker, but they had made a life-saving cushion where he landed. He had broken no bones. He ached and smarted and the cold was in his marrow, but his groan was for the girl who'd have lived to fry Joe Lazzo and flatten his mob if a too-cocksure back-hills state trooper had been actually possessed of even one-half that New England caution he had boasted.

Marna, as likely as not, was finished already. Bradley, pushing to the ditch with his bull's-eye in a torn and bleeding hand, had a shuddering vision of her lying in a rain-beaten huddle, done for, dumped like a sack at the roadside. *Horrible!*

His light found the motorcycle, half submerged in ditch-water, but at a glance no more seriously damaged than he. His heart lifted at sight of it; again rose when he had managed to wrestle it back onto the concrete and the engine kicked off with a splutter and roar.

He could be in Hillville and at a telephone, he knew, within a quarter of an hour. And then as he went streaking over the skiddy concrete, the hoot of a distant whistle came echoing through the hills to him and by the whistle he knew the time—knew that only minutes had passed, and precious few of them too, since his flight over the handle-bar.

It was a train whistling at the crossing above the county seat; the night train, due in Hillville at 1:04 and still a good long two miles from the village station.

Only seconds after he heard the whistle he had come to the end of the concrete. He stopped there, shot the shaft of the bull's-eye over the mud of forking soft roads, briefly stared down at tire-tracks in the fork bearing west.

They were fresh tracks, all but certainly the tracks of the fugitive New York car. And that was normally the better road, the high road, the car had taken. But Bradley, speeding on, might have snatched his cue from that beloved old Scottish song the summer's swing bands were slaughtering in dance tempo. Zooming east, *he* took the low road.

EVEN the strongest nerves have a snapping point, and Marna Trask's had come to theirs when the hurtling bulk of

the heavy touring car, wrested out of her control almost before she could flash hand to the horn button, made its murderous swoop for the police motorcycle.

Her eyes, closing to blot out sight of the inevitable hit, stayed closed and the car had clicked off nearly a dozen pell-mell miles before they opened. She was still in the front seat, but not behind the wheel. The table-turners were at her left now, not nearly so badly hampered by the handcuffs as they might have been, the husky one driving, the other gripping her wrist with thin but steely fingers. They were off the cement, bouncing at much reduced speed over ruts that meant easy going or broken springs, and by the clock on the dash it was twelve minutes past one.

The scrawny man craned at her when she stirred, then spoke out of the side of his mouth. His banter had a grimness underneath.

"You picked a swell time to faint, sister! It's a wonder we didn't go up the pole with the cop."

She gasped, "You mean he—was *killed?*"

The new driver gave a hard laugh.

"It'd be nice if he was. We wish we knew ourselves."

"And," the nearer neighbor chipped in, low-voiced, "it might be somebody else's good luck that we don't know. You, baby—you get a longer ride than you might be getting otherwise. Think it over now. See if you can figure that one out."

She could figure it, and it was chilly figuring. All that was keeping her alive was their uncertainty in regard to Bradley. They might, coming to Storm Ridge, have meant to put her out of the way—to rub her out, in what would probably have been their own casual phrase for it. But now she was safe; safe, she supposed, until they could assure themselves that the red-haired trooper would never point them out as her murderers.

Herself, she had no fear of death. What happened to Marna Trask, what happened to Joe Lazzo, didn't matter then. Her silent prayer for Bradley was a prayer for him alone, and while she desperately prayed the touring car slowed. It stopped and the driver swung the spotlight in the windshield to a road sign. He grunted.

"Detour! 'Bridge under repair.' *Hell!*"

THEY swung left and that new road, for perhaps a mile, was ruttier than the one they had been detoured from. Then by degrees, it improved until the tires were swishing on good macadam, and the speedometer was steadily climbing. It showed "78" when those talon fingers bit suddenly deeper into the captive's arm.

Leaning forward, eyes close to the dripping glass, the thin man barked, "Get off the gas! There's a light ahead—red!"

It was a swinging red, evidently an electric blinker at some back-hills railroad crossing, and when the car shot under interlacing boughs and the pound of the rain lightened, the wind brought down the strident clang of the crossing bell.

The stocky man had let up on the accelerator.

"Damn that wiper! I'd never have seen a thing before we tangled with the choo-choos!"

His foot was on the brake. He depressed the pedal lightly, a skilled driver mindful of the "55" in front of him and the wet surface underneath.

The thin mobster, tensed, was braking too. He swore wheezily.

"Hold it! Hold it! Don't you try to beat any train. Not with *me* along!"

He drew a snarl from the wheel. "Can the back-seating, Roxy. What d'you want me to do—turn us over?"

The flashing red light, Marna Trask thought, couldn't have been more than a hundred yards away then. But their speed had been cut below forty and the car was in control. Short by its own length of the track beyond the crossing light, it came to a sliding stop.

The beat of the gong, clamoring just over the bumper, did things to those good nerves that had finally frayed out. Her pulse quickened. She felt the throb, faster and faster, and it seemed that her strength was pumping out through her wrists. Her head reeled.

SHE wanted to scream; and then, when the curtain beside her suddenly ripped away, she did scream. It was a gory hand that had torn back the curtain, a nightmare figure that had materialized at her elbow; a scarecrow all blood and mud and tatters, bathed in an unholy crimson from the crossing light above.

The scarecrow had a gun; also a voice.

"Hello, everybody!" it said. "Hello again!"

And that cheerful voice was certainly the voice of Trooper Corporal Bradley.

"You're all right, Miss Trask?" he asked. "Fine!"

Then he had the tonneau door open and was in the back seat, pressing the muzzle of the gun to the nape of a thick neck.

"Step on it, snatcher!" he drilled. "You can beat the train, easy. *Jail*, James!"

There was pressure both in the command and behind that cold revolver. They went over the tracks, the train not yet in sight, and a turn beyond put them on a smooth road that was a straightaway into Courthouse Square in Hillville.

Five minutes took them there, another five saw the New York tourists in out of the rain with a good roof over them and stout brick walls around.

"Impersonating Federal officers is one part of the charge and kidnapping's another," the wreck of Trooper Bradley told the Meldum sheriff. "Maybe the G-Men will think of some others when they get here tomorrow. But anyway, these birds are pretty well washed up."

He went back to see the cell doors close, and when he returned to the sheriff's office he was washed up too. The blood was gone, and most of the mud, and neat white criss-crosses of court plaster covered the deepest of his scratches.

"Those fellows are funny," he remarked to Marna Trask with a quirky smile. "Up on the Ridge they seemed to have a pretty good grasp of the English language, but darned if they understand a single word now. They just no spikka—not without advice of counsel, anyhow—and I'm not taking the time to work on 'em. Now about *you*, now? Want to spend the rest of the night at the hotel here?"

THERE were a lot of things Miss Trask wished to say to Trooper Bradley. Her heart was full of them; but it didn't seem to be the moment to let them out. She shook her head.

"Better hadn't," she said. "Think of the shock for Jean and Bill, finding those guns in the living room—pistols all over the place, and *me* gone!"

"But they probably won't be home tonight."

"I'm sure they will be."

Bradley glanced at the grizzled sheriff.

"Then," he said, "how about lending me Exhibit A, Clem, and putting some county gas in it? Think it could be arranged if I brought it back bright and early?"

It could, and so at two o'clock the snatch car was rolling again, Corporal Bradley at the wheel, Marna Trask at his side, the tonneau empty.

"Once," Marna said softly, "I worked in an insurance office. I heard plenty about 'acts of God' there. Now I've seen one. What else could you call it—that train coming through the hills just when it did and our car stopping instead of racing it for the crossing?"

Bradley dragged at his cigarette.

"Well," he drawled, "I don't know. The stopping could sort of be counted on. Take a crook, he's a careful driver all the time. Living in constant danger, he's the last person to risk an unnecessary chance.

Yes, I figured on the stopping. Naturally."

"And knew about the train?"

Bradley nodded.

"There isn't much I don't know about that railroad. My brother's division superintendent." He smiled. "No, Miss Trask. If there was an act of God anywhere, it was in their choice at the fork. With the detour, they had to come in to the crossing; and picking the road they did they were just throwing away milage. Traveling the other road I knew I could beat them to the rails, with a lot to spare. But of course something had to slow them, something more than a motorcycle. Maybe I could have shot a hole in a tire. But at high speed that would've meant a wreck—and there *you* were."

They had turned off the smooth straightaway then, and around a woody bend the crossing hove in view, visible and audible both. For that section, an amazingly busy crossing. Again the bell banged its warning tattoo and the red light winked.

A car was standing there, its tail light a smaller and stationary gleam of red. A coupe, at close hand alike familiar to Trooper Bradley and Marna Trask; the same little machine that Marna had been in the day Bradley shooed her away from Hillville.

She gasped, "Bill and Joan!" as the touring car pulled up to its left.

The two nice-looking young people in the coupe were staring at her.

"Marna!"

That came through the window, a startled duet. Then the glass was down.

"For heaven's sake, Marna!" cried the coupe's driver. "Who the deuce are you with and what are you doing?"

Miss Trask, at her calmest, told him, "Oh, it's a long, long story, Bill. I'd better save it all until we're home."

Wayland leaned out in the rain, squinted up at the blinker.

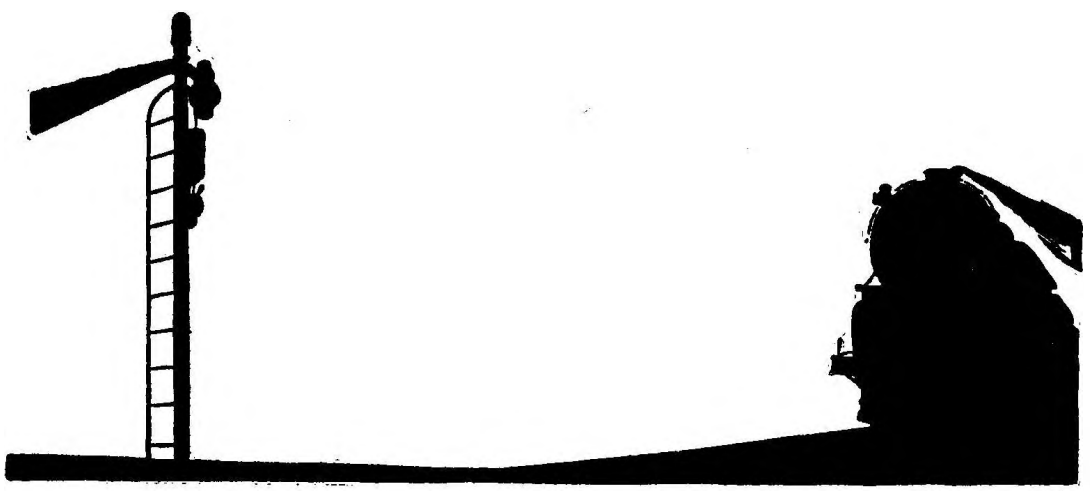
"Home!" he said. "Good Lord, we should've been there by now. We've been standing and standing, waiting for the train, to get by. Can you see it yet Marna?"

She saw that Trooper Bradley was grinning.

"No," he answered for her, "Miss Trask can't see it. Blamed good reason too, because the next train through here isn't due until afternoon. It's just the light and the bell acting up. They're out of order, kind of. You see, somebody monkeyed with the light-trip an hour or so ago and it's been a long red ever since."

Then he was out of the car, grinning more widely.

"You just keep on holding everything," he said to Bill Wayland. "I can fix it in a jiffy. Oh, sure—*I* know how!"



10

Crooks Sometimes Overlook Red-headed Kids and Queer Signatures

THE SUSPICIONS OF RATTLER RED

By GENE VAN

Author of "Red's Wandering Mule," "A Good Quail Gun," etc.

"GEE!" exclaimed Red Harris, a broad grin on his freckled face as he took over the reins from the big husky driver. "I've always wanted to drive four horses."

"Yuh might as well learn now, Red," said the stage driver.

"Oh, boy," said Red. "What do yuh think of me, Little Pardner?"

"Red driver, now," said the little tot, who was sitting between Red and the driver on the top seat of the stage.

"Yore dog-gone right I'm a driver," said Red. "Just wait until the sheriff sees me."

"Yuh don't think he'll get sore at me for lettin' yuh drive, do yuh, Red?" asked the driver.

"Gosh, no," replied Red. "He's a swell guy, Buck."

"Well," drawled Buck Ryan slowly. "I just don't want him to get sore at me, that's all."

"He won't," promised Red.

The three of them, Red Harris, Little Pardner, and Buck Ryan made a fine scene on top of the stage as it swung down through the canyon. The sun was down and darkness was creeping over the country.

Red Harris was nearly sixteen, but looked much younger because of his slight build. He was dressed in a dark blue

suit, white shirt with the collar open at the neck, and a pair of black shoes. His thin freckled face beamed as he looked at Little Pardner, his bright red hair waving in the breeze.

Little Pardner was dressed up, too. He had on a new pair of bib overalls, a blue shirt, and a pair of white shoes. On his lap he held his straw hat. His big blue eyes were watching every move that Red made. His blonde hair was mussed up by the breeze. Little Pardner was four years old, short and stubby of build.

Together these two boys lived in Ocotillo City with Little Pardner's father, Sheriff Spike Haslam. After his living with them for over a year, Haslam had adopted Red when he had saved the baby's life. With Haslam busy as sheriff, Red took over the job of looking after Little Pardner, which was quite a task.

"Can't we go any faster, Buck?" asked Red.

"We can, but don't try it, Red."

Just then they hit a bump that nearly threw them off the seat.

"Gosh," grunted Red. "I—I never saw that one."

"That's all right, Red," said Buck. "I hit 'em once in a while myself."

"I hope it didn't hurt yore passenger," said Red.

"I guess not, Red. She never said anythin'."

"Mebbe she got hurt," suggested Red.

"I don't think so," said Buck, a big grin on his round tanned face. Buck was a big fellow just past twenty. He had taken over the stage driving job after the last driver had been shot in a holdup. Buck was the son of the express agent in Ocotillo City.

"I wonder who that lady can be?" said Red.

"I dunno, Red," replied Buck. "Mebbe she's the new school marm."

"Mighty pretty," said Red.

"Well, I—I didn't get such a good look at her."

"Well, I did," grinned Red.

"Kin I drive?" asked Little Pardner, tugging at Red's sleeve.

"Can yuh beat that, Red?" said Buck.

"You can't drive this stage, Little Pardner," said Red. "Yo're not big enough."

"Kin try," replied the little fellow.

"That kid's smart," remarked Buck.

"Yo're tellin' me," snorted Red.

"See daddy soon?" asked the youngster.

"Yuh betcha," grunted Red.

"Been away a little over a week, ain't you?" asked Buck.

"Uh-huh," nodded Red. "Been visitin' the sheriff's sister in Copperville."

"Thatso, eh? Have a good time?"

"Yeah," said Red dryly. "We was havin' a swell time until she decided to dress us up."

"Well, Red," said Buck. "Women will do that."

"Just look at me, will yuh?" said Red. "I look like some darn dude."

"Ha-ha-ha," roared Buck.

"Go ahead and laugh, but it ain't exactly funny to me."

"Hey!" shouted Buck, grabbing the reins from Red. "Whoa!"

DIRECTLY in front of them as they rounded a curve were several large boulders in the middle of the road. Buck stopped the stage almost against them.

"Whee," grunted Buck. "That was mighty close, Red."

"How did they get there?" asked Red.

"I reckon they slipped down the hill."

Buck climbed down his side of the stage and looked the boulders over.

"I might need a little help, Red," he said and then he moved in close to the door of the stage and said. "We'll be goin' in a minute, lady."

Red and Buck found out that it took more than a minute before they had the road open. The boulders were heavy and it took all of their combined strength to remove them. More boulders had fallen into the road beyond the curve; so they

all went around there and cleared the way, before going back to the stage. It was at least fifteen minutes before they climbed back on the seat. By now everything was dark.

"I wonder if our passenger was asleep," said Red. "She didn't seem interested."

"Mebbe so, Red," said Buck. "Better let me drive. We're a little late, and I know this road pretty good in the dark."

"All right, Buck," said Red. He put his arm around Little Pardner. Soon they swung out of the hills and onto the open desert. Far ahead they could see the lights of Ocotillo City.

"Be home pretty soon, Little Pardner," said Red.

"Good. See daddy."

"Yes, sir," smiled Red. "I wonder if Glub and Fitt will be there?"

"Glub and Fitt miss us?" asked the baby.

"I bet they missed you," laughed Red. "At least they had a little rest."

"I like 'em."

"Uh-huh," nodded Red. "I can see our house."

"I'll stop there first and let yuh off," said Buck.

"Gee, that'll be swell, Buck," said Red.

"See daddy!" exclaimed Little Pardner, pointing at the shadows of two men on the front porch.

"That's the sheriff and Geography, all right," said Red.

THE stage drew to a stop at the house. Spike Haslam and his deputy, Geography Jones, were on the walk to meet them. Haslam took Little Pardner in his arms and kissed the baby. Red handed Geography their old battered suitcase, and then climbed down. The stage swung away from the walk and headed uptown.

Up the walk and into the house they went, Haslam carrying Little Pardner in his right arm, his left arm about Red's shoulder. Geography followed along behind with the suitcase.

Haslam was a big heavy set man of about forty, dressed in typical range garb. Geography was dressed the same, but he was tall and lean and walked with a little limp, due to an old bullet wound. His face was lean and tan with a long mustache.

"Good old home," said Red, grinning happily.

"Are yuh glad to get back?" asked Haslam.

"Yes, sir."

"How about you, Little Pardner?" asked Haslam as he sat down with the youngster on his lap.

"Uh-huh," nodded the little fellow.

"Say, Red," said Geography, tugging at his mustache, "where didja get all that new riggin'?"

"Oh," said the sheriff, a broad grin on his features. "I see where Molly did a little shoppin'."

"Yeah," grunted Red dryly.

"Me dressed up, too," said Little Pardner.

"Two dang dudes," laughed Geography.

"Well," said Red. "I don't have to wear this alla time. Wait until I get into my old clothes."

"Outside the shoppin'," said Haslam, "how was everythin' else?"

"Fine," said Red. "We had a dandy time."

"Just sit down and tell us all about it," suggested the sheriff.

They all sat down around the fireplace and listened to Red tell of their visit with Aunt Molly. When he finished, he noticed that Little Pardner had gone to sleep on the sheriff's lap.

"Guess he didn't care for my story," laughed Red.

"I reckon as how he's pretty tired," said the sheriff. "I'll put him to bed."

RED and Geography were sitting in the front room while Haslam was busy with Little Pardner when there was a knock at the front door. Red jumped to his feet and opened the door. On the porch stood Buck Ryan and several other men.

"Is the sheriff in?" asked Buck.

"Just a minute, Buck."

Haslam came to the door, having heard his name.

"What's the matter, Buck?" he asked.

"There's a lady missin', Sheriff."

"What lady?"

"She—she was on the stage with us," explained Buck, "and when we got to town, she wasn't there."

Gone?" queried Red. "Why—why she never got off."

"That's what I been tryin' to tell 'em, Red," wailed Buck. "But they won't believe me."

"He's right, Sheriff," said Red. "I saw her get on and she never got off not that I know of."

"M-m-m-m," said Haslam, scratching his head. "That's mighty funny."

"We'd better do somethin', Sheriff," suggested one of the men.

"Get our horses, Geography," said the sheriff.

"Can I go?" asked Red.

"Not this time, Red. You stay here with Little Pardner."

Haslam picked up his hat and followed the men uptown. Red watched them for a while, then closed the door. He went to see if Little Pardner had awakened, but the youngster had slept through it all. Red partly closed the door and then sat down in a big chair by the fire. His mind was busy working. What had happened to the lady, he wondered.

"Gosh," he grunted aloud. "Somethin's mighty queer somewhere." But soon he fell asleep in the chair.

It was several hours later when he was awakened by the sound of voices and the opening of the front door. Red turned to see who it was.

"Hello, Sheriff," he said. "Didja find her?"

"We found her, Red," replied Haslam, closing the door.

"Where?"

"She was walkin' toward town."

"Walkin'?" queried Red.

"Uh-huh," nodded the sheriff. "Says she got off the stage when it stopped in the canyon, and that you pulled out and left her."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Red, a puzzled frown on his face. "I never saw her get off."

"I reckon you and Buck were too busy movin' the boulders."

"Mebbe so," admitted Red. "But dog-gone it—I dunno."

IT WAS morning and up the street came Red and Little Pardner. They stopped and talked with several persons, but finally reached the sheriff's office. Inside they found Geography, stretched out on a cot.

"Well, well," he greeted them. "What brings you two travelers here?"

"Just out walkin'," replied Red, "and we thought we'd drop in and see what's new."

"Nothin' new 'round here, Red," said Geography. "See yuh got yore old clothes on."

"Yo're dang right, Geography," grinned Red.

"Daddy gone?" asked Little Pardner.

"Yeah. He's gone out to buy some tobacco."

"Howdy, strangers," said the sheriff, smiling at them. He picked Little Pardner up and placed him on top of the desk, then sat down alongside him.

"Here he comes now," said Red.

"Red and me are out walkin'," said the youngster.

"So I see," grinned Haslam. "What are you two up to now?"

"Nothin'," said Red, "but I couldn't help wonderin' about that lady."

"Well, Red, yuh can forget about her," said the sheriff. "I just found out she's Jim Benson's niece. Came here to take over the Golden Goose mine."

"She the one that wrote us, Spike?" asked Geography.

"Yeah, that's the one. She's the only living relative."

"Gosh," grunted Red. "Imagine a girl runnin' a mine."

Just then there was a slight noise at the doorway. They turned to see a tall thin man dressed in a black suit that was several sizes too large for him, his lean face topped with a tall black Stetson. His hard gray eyes blinked nervously, as he looked around the room before entering the office.

"GOOD morning, Sheriff," he said in a gruf voice.

"Howdy, Blinn," replied Haslam. "What can I do for the law profession today?"

"I just dropped by to see you," said Edwin Blinn. "I'm here to take my client, Miss Benson, to the Golden Goose mine."

"Oh, said the sheriff. "Yo're handlin' her case, eh?"

"Yes. Have you met her?"

"Last night when she got lost from her stage," replied Haslam.

"Ah, yes," nodded Blinn. "A wonderful girl."

"Is she goin' to stay here?" asked Geography.

"Well, I'm not so sure, gentlemen," Blinn cleared his throat. "She mentioned something about selling the mine and getting back to the city."

"Uh-huh," said the sheriff. "I got a letter from her a while back saying that she was comin' out here, but I didn't know that it was her last night."

"She wrote you?" asked Blinn, a slight frown between his eyes.

"Yeah," replied Haslam. "She writes a mighty pretty hand, Blinn."

"Say, Spike," said Geography, "is she the one that has that funny signature?"

"She's the one, Geography."

"Funny signature?" queried Blinn.

"Yeah," nodded the sheriff. "Some folks have funny signatures."

"Yes, I—I believe so," said Blinn. "Well, I guess I'll be going, Sheriff."

"Drop in any time, Blinn."

"I may want you, if she decides to sell."

"I'll be here," assured Haslam.

"Funny man," said Little Pardner after Blinn had left.

"A funny man is right, Little Pardner," agreed the sheriff.

"What sort of a lawyer is he?" asked Red.

"I dunno," replied Haslam. "Good as any, I reckon."

"Does he do much business?" asked Red.

"Mebbe so. His office is in Copperville and he doesn't get over here often," explained the sheriff.

"Let's go for a walk," said Little Pardner.

"Let Red take yuh, Little Pardner. I'm too busy," said Haslam.

"Come on, Little Pardner," said Red as he picked the little boy off the desk.

"A great pair, Spike," said Geography when they were gone.

"Yes, sir," grinned the sheriff.

"When are yuh goin' to see yore sister?"

"In a day or two, Geography."

"I guess she's all right now."

"Red says she's feelin' dandy since that operation."

"I wonder who planted that gold at her house, Spike?"

"I wish I knew, Geography. He's the only one of the Benson gang that's alive."

"Mebbe we'll find out sooner or later," said Geography.

"I dunno," grunted the sheriff. "Mebbe he's left the country by now."

Several months before, Big Jim Benson had tried to run things in Ocotillo City. He had been sending out gold shipments by stage to Copperville, robbing the stage and stealing his own gold. Then he collected insurance on it. He had had a messenger take some of the gold to Haslam's sister in Copperville. It had been well known that Haslam had tried in every way to raise money to enable his sister to have a delicate and very expensive operation performed. The gang had planned to kill Haslam and hide the body, following the robbery, but Red had accidentally overheard enough of the plot to save Haslam's life and exterminate Benson and his gang, except the unknown man, who had delivered the gold in Copperville that night. He had never been apprehended.

DOWN the narrow dirt road came Red Harris and Little Pardner on the back of their old mule. Red was sitting in front with the youngster holding onto Red's rope belt. He had to hold on tight to keep from sliding off the rump of the mule as it stumbled along the road.

"Look!" exclaimed the little boy, pointing to a small chipmunk that was sitting on a log by the side of the road.

"That's a chipmunk, Little Pardner," said Red.

"I like 'em," said the youngster and promptly let go of Red's belt and slid to the ground. He scampered toward the chipmunk, which just as promptly turned and faded into the brush.

"Come back here," laughed Red, leaping off the mule. "Let that chipmunk alone."

"I want 'im, Red."

"He's gone now," said Red as he took the boy's hand. "Come on."

They went ahead on foot with the mule following behind, Red holding it's rope in his hand.

Suddenly Little Pardner stopped short and the mule nearly walked into him. Red stopped and turned to see the youngster picking up something from the road.

"Whatcha got now?" asked Red.

"Look!" exclaimed Little Pardner, holding out his hand. In the small palm was an injured horned-toad.

"Better put it down, Little Pardner."

"Toad hurt."

Red took the horned-toad, looked it over and then tossed it off into the brush.

"Where'd he go?" asked the child.

"I guess he's all right," said Red. "You pick up the darndest things."

Up through a narrow canyon they walked and finally they came out on a large clearing with several large houses and a couple of cabins. There were several men stirring around the place as Red and Little Pardner approached it. A large sign by the road read: "Golden Goose Mine."

"Lotta men here, Red," said the youngster.

"Yeah," grunted Red. "I guess they're busy again now that they've a new owner."

"Funny man," said Little Pardner, pointing toward a man coming down the steps of one of the houses.

Red could see Blinn, the lawyer, at the foot of the steps talking to a young lady. Then Blinn climbed into a buggy and drove past the boys, showering them with dust.

"Let's go up and see the lady, Little Pardner," suggested Red.

"Uh-huh."

RED tied the mule to a post near the road and they went ahead. When they were nearly up to the house, the lady turned and hurried into the house. Just as they reached the steps, a big ugly-looking man came out of the door.

"What do you brats want around here?" he demanded in a deep voice.

"We just came up here to see Miss Benson," said Red. "We met her in Copperville and we wondered how she got lost last night."

"Oh, yeah!" snorted the man. "She's sick and can't see anyone. Scram!"

"But I—"

"Get goin'!" snapped the man as he started down the steps.

"All right," said Red. "Yuh don't have to get tough."

"I'm runnin' this place, Redhead, and I don't want to see yore mug around here again, understand?"

"Uh-huh," nodded Red as he took Little Pardner's hand and hurried back to their mule. Here they stopped and looked back.

"A tough guy, huh?" grunted Red. "Lady sick, huh?"

"Whatsa matter, Red?" asked the little boy, not understanding a rebuff of that nature.

"I dunno, but somethin's fishy here," replied the puzzled Red.

He untied the mule and they started down the road toward town.

"Goin' fishin'?" asked Little Pardner.

"Huh? Goin' fishin'? Oh, yeah—fishy," grinned Red. "Well, I dunno, Little Pardner; I might at that. Probably catch me some skunks."

"Skunk fish, Red?"

"No, just plain skunk!"

IT WAS late afternoon when they finally reached Ocotillo City. Red took Little Pardner up to the house. He put the mule in the small corral in the backyard. Little Pardner went out in search of his two pets, Glub and Fitt, a mongrel pup and a long rangy cat. He found them asleep on the front porch in the afternoon sun. At his yelp of delight, they jumped up quickly and raced for the rear of the house.

"I see yuh found 'em," said Red as Little Pardner passed him, hurrying after the fleeing pets.

Red laughed and went into the house. He went straightening up things in the front room when he heard a commotion in the backyard. Out he went to find out what Little Pardner was up to. He found the child sitting on the ground, one leg over Fitt, holding her to the ground while he shook Glub with both hands.

"Hey," shouted Red. "What's goin' on?"

"Glub won't talk," replied the baby.

"He can't talk, yuh know that."

"I want him to speak," said Little Pardner firmly.

"What didja ask him?"

"I want to know if he was lonesome."

"Oh, grinned Red. "I guess he missed you all right. Better let him and Fitt go."

"All right," grunted Little Pardner.

"You be a good boy and stay around here," said Red. "I'm goin' up town for a while."

"Uh-huh," nodded the baby. "Me good boy. Stay here, Red."

"Fine."

RED went up to the sheriff's office. Spike Haslam was seated behind the desk writing while Geography was sitting on the cot reading some old reward notices.

"Howdy, Red," said the sheriff. "How was yore trip?"

"We got along fine, Sheriff," said Red.

"Where didja go, Red?" asked Geography.

"We went out to the Golden Goose mine."

"What'd yuh go out there fore?" asked Haslam.

"Just thought we'd go out and see that lady," said Red.

"Oh," said Geography, and he winked at the sheriff. "Startin' kinda young, ain't he, Spike?"

"I think he is," smiled Haslam, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Yuh got it all wrong," said Red seriously. "I didn't go out there on 'counta that lady."

"Well," said Geography. "That's what yuh just told us."

"Well, I—I," stammered Red. "I kinda wanted to see her."

"I reckon yuh did, son," said the sheriff. "Just what did yuh want to say to her?"

"Oh, heck!" groaned Red.

"I reckon yuh just went out with Little Pardner," smiled Haslam, "and accidentally found the mine."

"Uh-huh."

"Well, didja see her?" asked Geography.

"Well, I saw her from a distance," said Red.

"Not 'fraid to go up to see her, was yuh?" asked Haslam.

"Gosh, no!" exclaimed Red. "We saw her there, but she went in the house."

"Musta seen yuh comin'," laughed Geography.

"I dunno," said Red. "A tough lookin' guy came out and said for us to beat it. He said the lady was sick."

"Sick, eh?" grunted Haslam.

"Well, that's what he said anyway," replied Red.

"Is that all he told yuh?"

"No, sir! snapped Red. "He told us to get off the place and to never come back."

"I reckon as how they didn't want you boys around," said Geography dryly.

"Mebbe so," said Red, "but he didn't have to act so darn tough. I hope he steps on a rattler."

"Why, Red," said the sheriff. "That's not any way to talk."

"Mebbe not, Sheriff, but I don't like him."

"What did he look like?" asked Haslam.

"A big ugly lookin' man with a deep voice."

"I bet that was Mike Robbins," grunted Geography, tugging at his mustache.

"Mebbe so," grunted Red.

"Robbins has been foreman up there since they opened," said the sheriff. "He worked for Benson."

"Well," said Red dryly, "that don't change my opinion of him."

HE GOT up and left the office. Slowly he sauntered across the dusty street and sat down on the board walk, leaning back against one of the hitch-rack posts.

"Looks like the lad has somethin' on his mind," said Geography.

"Must have," grunted the sheriff. "He don't usually get sore at anyone. Queer kid. What do yuh reckon he went to the mine for?"

"I'd like to know," replied the deputy.

"So would I," grinned Haslam. "But it wouldn't do any good to ask Red; he wouldn't tell yuh."

"That lad can sure keep still about things until they pop," said Geography. "Mebbe somethin's wrong around here and we don't know it. I figure our best bet is to keep an eye on the lad."

"I don't doubt it, Geography," said Haslam. "When Red sits like that, thinkin', somethin's bound to happen."

"Red tell me a story?" asked Little Pardner as they got up from the table.

"Mebbe in a little while, Little Pardner," said Red. "I gotta get the dishes washed first."

"All right," grinned the youngster as he walked into the front room, where Haslam and Geography had just gone. They were talking and Red could hear them as he cleared the table and washed the dishes. After he finished, he joined them.

They were sitting by the fire while Little Pardner was on the floor looking at pictures in a book.

"All finished, Red?" asked the sheriff.

"Uh-huh," nodded Red as he sat down.

"Me and the sheriff were just talkin'

about things, Red," said Geography. "Mebbe it'd be best if yuh stayed clear of the Golden Goose."

"Mebbe it would," sighed Red. "The foreman don't like me."

"Good," said Haslam. "Well, Geography, what about a stroll uptown?"

"Suits me, Sheriff."

"You look after Little Pardner," said Haslam.

"Yeah," replied Red. "I'll put him to bed."

"I'm not tired, Red," said Little Pardner, as the men left.

"It's near yore bed time."

"Red tired, too?"

"Not tonight, Little Pardner."

"Red goin' fishin' for skunks?"

"Mebbe so."

"Take me along, Red?" asked Little Pardner.

"Yo're too young, Little Pardner. Mebbe you'll be able to go with me when yuh get bigger," explained Red.

"Little Pardner closed his book and looked at Red.

"Do yuh want to hear a story?" asked Red.

"No!" snapped the baby.

"Why, what's the matter with you?"

"I wanta go fishin'."

"But, gosh, yuh can't go with me," said Red.

"I wanta go!" said Little Pardner, getting to his feet.

"Don't be that way," pleaded Red. "Be a good boy."

"Boy good," said Little Pardner. "Good boy go fishin'?"

"Yeah, sure," grunted Red. "I'll take yuh fishin' tomorrow."

"Red go fishin' skunks tomorrow?"

"We'll see—mebbe tomorrow," said Red.

"All right," grunted the youngster.

"Mebbe you'd better get to bed now," said Red.

"Not tired, Red?"

"Mebbe not, but you'd better get to bed if yuh want to go fishin' with me tomorrow," said Red.

"Red go to bed?"

"Pretty soon," replied Red, getting to his feet.

Red turned down Little Pardner's bed and quickly prepared the little fellow for it, then turned out the light.

"Good night, Little Pardner," said Red from the doorway.

"Good night, Red."

RED partly shut the door. Quickly he went into his small room and lighted the oil lamp. From his top dresser drawer he took out an old Colt .45 which Haslam had given him. He shoved it down inside his waistband, blew out the light, and left the house. Out on the sidewalk he stopped and looked around. There were many people on the street in town.

Red sauntered up the street, keeping clear of the sheriff's office. He did not stop to talk with anyone, but slowly made his way up the street and out of town. With the lights of Ocotillo City fading behind him, he walked rapidly up the dusty road. Across a short patch of desert and then the narrow road began to wind through the hills. On went Red, halting once in a while, listening to see if anyone was coming up the road. A few clouds in the sky blotted out the moon and made it very dark. Several times Red stumbled and nearly fell.

Finally he came near the buildings of the Golden Goose, one of which had a light burning. Red stopped at the entrance to the outfit and looked around. After making sure that there was no one guarding the place, he continued toward the house with the light. The shade was down, but every once in a while he could see the shadow of a man against the shade.

Red stopped short as he heard voices from inside. They were a little muffled, but Red could distinguish what was being said.

"But how can I help it?" wailed a voice. "I didn't know a thing about it until today."

"This is a hell of a time for any slip-ups," grunted a deep voice angrily.

"We gotta do somethin'," said the first voice.

"It's all up to you," said the deep voice. "Yo're the one that planned it all out—all but this one angle."

"All right, all right," wailed the first voice. "I'll do all I can."

"You'd better—or we'll all be sunk."

"Don't be so damn jumpy," wailed the first voice. "Give me some time to think."

"Well, hurry up," said the deep voice. "We can't stay here forever while yo're tryin' to plan out somethin'."

"Listen," said the first voice. "If it wasn't for me, you'd still be—"

"Yeah," interrupted the deep voice. "And if yuh don't do somethin' soon, I'll have somethin' else to thank yuh for—somethin' none of us want."

"Aw," wailed the first voice. "No one knows a thing about it. It all went off grand."

"I dunno," said the deep voice doubtfully. "I was wonderin' about that today."

"Uh-huh," grunted the first voice. "I—I, well," he paused for a second, then went on; "I was doin' a little thinkin' about it, but we can clear that up easy, too."

"Sure," said a woman's voice, speaking for the first time. "What will a couple more murders mean to us?"

RED gritted his teeth as he listened. He couldn't make out who the speakers were. Murders! Red swallowed thickly. What if they found him out here. He pulled out his Colt and held it in both hands.

"Don't say that, Ann," said the first voice.

"Well, it's the truth."

Red scratched his head, still puzzled. Who was this woman called Ann? He didn't know anyone around here by that name, and Red was sure he knew everyone in and around Ocotillo City.

"Just let me get at her," begged the deep voice. "I'll clear all this up."

"Yuh might, and yuh might not."

"She'll do anythin', when I get through with her."

Red could hear one of the men roar with laughter.

"Supposin' she refuses?" wailed the first voice. "That'd put us in a hell of a spot. Women are funny."

"I don't think she'd do that," said the woman.

"I don't know."

"That's all right," snapped the deep voice. "You've done enough knowin' for a while. I'm goin' to take charge from now on."

"Yes, but—"

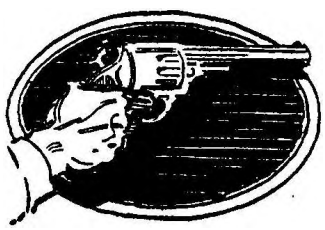
"Shut up!"

"Certainly, but—"

"You keep still and do a little listenin' from now on."

"All right."

"I'm goin' over to her cabin and get her



to sign this paper," said the deep voice. *"And it better be a funny signature."*

"You'll have to be rough with her," laughed the woman.

"Don't worry none, Ann," said the deep voice. "I'll be tough on her—unless she shows some sense."

Red straightened up and slipped to the corner of the house, still gripping his gun. He saw the man come out of the house and bang the door behind him. In long strides, he went across the yard and up between a row of cabins. At the last one

he stopped. Red followed at a safe range. He saw the man unlock the door, and shove it open. Red waited until the man was inside before he went forward.

A LIGHT appeared in the cabin as Red slid in beside the wall. As he kneeled down beneath a partly open window, he heard the man laugh, but without mirth.

"Howdy, sister," he said. "I got a little business for you."

"I'll not do it, if it's the signing of those papers," came the reply in a girl's voice.

"Oh, yes, you will," snapped the man. "Just wait until you see what I've got in store for you."

"This is an outrage," said the girl. "I'll tell the police."

"That don't worry me none, sister," said the man. "I don't think the officers will ever see you."

"You mean—mean that you're going to—"

"That's right, sister. Yo're mighty smart—about some things."

"I won't sign!"

"Mebbe a little burning of those pretty feet of yours will change yore mind," remarked the man.

Red shook with excitement. Burning a girl's feet made him shudder. Without thinking, the boy straightened up and bumped his head on the partly open window, rattling the frame.

"What was that?" snapped the man.

Red, gripping his gun, stepped around the cabin and flung open the door. Just in front of him was the big man, coming toward him, a gun in his hand. Red stuck out his own weapon and as the man reached the door, pulled the trigger. *Wham!* The small room shook with the concussion. Red staggered back, nearly fell over, but managed to keep his feet. Powder smoke blew back in his face, as he gasped in a full breath. He had shot a man!

The man fell forward, his gun slipping to the floor. Red slowly stepped into the room and looked at the marauder, who had fallen on his face. Then he went quickly to the girl, who he discovered was tied in a chair against the side wall. Her face was white in the lamplight as she looked wide eyed at the red-headed boy.

"Don't be afraid, Miss," said Red as he put down his gun and drew out his old pocket knife to begin cutting the ropes.

"Who—who are you?" she asked.

"Me?" grinned Red. "I'm the boy that was on the stage with you last night, Miss Benson."

"You know me then?"

"Yeah."

"What's goin' on here?" demanded a voice in the doorway.

Red turned to stare into the muzzle of a gun held by Edwin Blinn, the lawyer. Blinn's face was pale and his gray eyes were twitching nervously.

"Why—Mister Blinn," stammered Red. "I forgot—you."

"Can that stuff, red-head," he snapped. "Get over by the wall."

Blinn moved into the room a little more and glanced down at the body on the floor. With his foot, he turned it over. Slowly he shook his head.

"He really did run into something, didn't he?" Blinn smiled a little. "You're a pretty good shot, red-head. Too bad you'll never grow up."

"I—I didn't—"

"Don't let it bother you none," cut in Blinn. "After I'm finished with you two, no one will know who did it."

HE MOVED to the front of the room, turning so as to cover Red and also watch the girl.

"Maybe you'd better sign now," he said to her, pointing to the papers on the table.

"Sign what?" asked Red.

"Shut up!" snapped Blinn. "You signed your death warrant, when you came her tonight."

"They want me to sign over my mine," explained Miss Benson.

"Oh, so that was their little scheme," grinned Red weakly. "Well, I knew somethin' was wrong, when they ran me away from here."

"I've had enough of you," snarled Blinn, lifting his gun to cover Red. "I better put you out of this right now. Maybe the lady will understand that I mean business."

Blinn was a lawyer, not a gunman. As frightened as he was, Red could see the muzzle of that revolver going around in circles, as Blinn's finger tightened on the trigger. The thought flashed through the boy's mind that Blinn was using a double-action gun, and that in pulling that stiff trigger he would be off his target most of the time.

Red's thoughts and actions were perfectly synchronized. With a diving leap he went across the room, tackling low. He heard the thunder-clap of the revolver shot, as the astonished Blinn managed to fire. The bullet thudded into the wall high above the charging Red, who hit Blinn just at the knees, knocking his feet from under him.

The impact knocked the wind out of Red, who sat there, owl-eyed and watched the black-clad figure of the lawyer, crawling around on the floor, gasping for breath and pawing for his gun, which had slid under a chair. He got the revolver all right, but Red also got his breath, and the next moment was astride Blinn's back, both hands twisted in the lawyer's hair, yanking his head back.

"Ho-o-old fast!" yelped a voice at the doorway, and Red twisted to see Spike Haslam and Geography Jones, guns in hand, standing in the doorway, watching the spectacle of a red-headed kid, riding a prominent lawyer from Copperville, who was trying to buck over the top of a very dead man on the floor, while a white-faced girl looked on.

Quickly Haslam slipped a pair of handcuffs on Blinn. Red went over to the girl and finished cutting the ropes.

"Kinda messy around here, Miss Benson," said the boy, panting wearily.

"Miss Benson?" queried the puzzled sheriff, as he straightened up.

"Yeah," grinned Red. "That's who she is."

"Why—"

"I know," laughed Red. "The other girl was a fake."

"Golly Moses!" grunted Geography. "I guess yuh got yore wish, Red. He shore stepped on a rattler."

"I had to do it," said Red as they all looked down at the body of Mike Robbins.

"I know yuh did, son," said the sheriff.

"Say," said Red. "How'd yuh get here?"

"We follered you, Red?" grinned Geography.

"We knew yuh had somethin' on yore mind," added the sheriff.

"Didja hear what Blinn said?" asked Red.

THE sheriff shook his head. "What'd he say, Red?"

"Well, they wanted Miss Benson to sign some papers," replied Red. "This other girl couldn't do it, on account of the signature. They wanted to steal the Golden Goose mine, and after Miss Benson signed the papers, they was goin' to kill her, I guess."

"Wasn't that a beautiful thought?" gasped the sheriff. "They took Miss Benson off the stage—and mebbe they didn't have time to put the other girl in her place. That's why she walked to town. How about it?" he asked, turning to Blinn. "You might as well talk."

Blinn shut his lips tightly, scowling at Red.

"Things were all right for 'em, until you told him about that funny signature Miss Benson put on her letter," offered Red

Spike Haslam's mouth opened wide, formed a perfect O, but no sound came. Then he looked at Geography, who was grinning. Just then they heard the clatter of hoofs.

"I reckon the other girl is leavin'," said Red.

"Let her go," replied Haslam. He turned to Blinn. "Who is she?"

"Names don't matter—she was only a tool," replied Blinn.

"What did Robbins have to do with it, Blinn?"

"Robbins framed the deal. He was the only one left of Benson's gang. He was the one who took that gold to your sister that night, and he wanted revenge; so he came to me for help in stealing the mine. If it hadn't been for that red-head, we'd have pulled the job, too."

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Haslam. He turned to Red. "When did you get yore first whiff of this deal, Red?"

"When we came up here—me and Little Pardner," grinned Red. "We seen her in Copperville and she gave Little Pardner and me some candy. She acted like she—well she kinda liked us—but when we came up here, she ran in the house and sent that big bully to run us off the place."

"Crooks always overlook somethin'," declared Geography.

"Red-heads and funny signatures," said Blinn.

"So that signature had yuh stopped, did it?" queried Haslam.

"Certainly. We didn't know you had it on a letter."

"I guess it was a *funny* signature," remarked the sheriff dryly. "I don't just remember it, do you, Geography?"

"I don't remember what it looked like, if that's what yuh mean."

Blinn's eyes snapped wide. "You—you haven't that letter?"

Haslam shook his head. "No-o-o," he drawled. "It was burned up a month ago, Blinn."

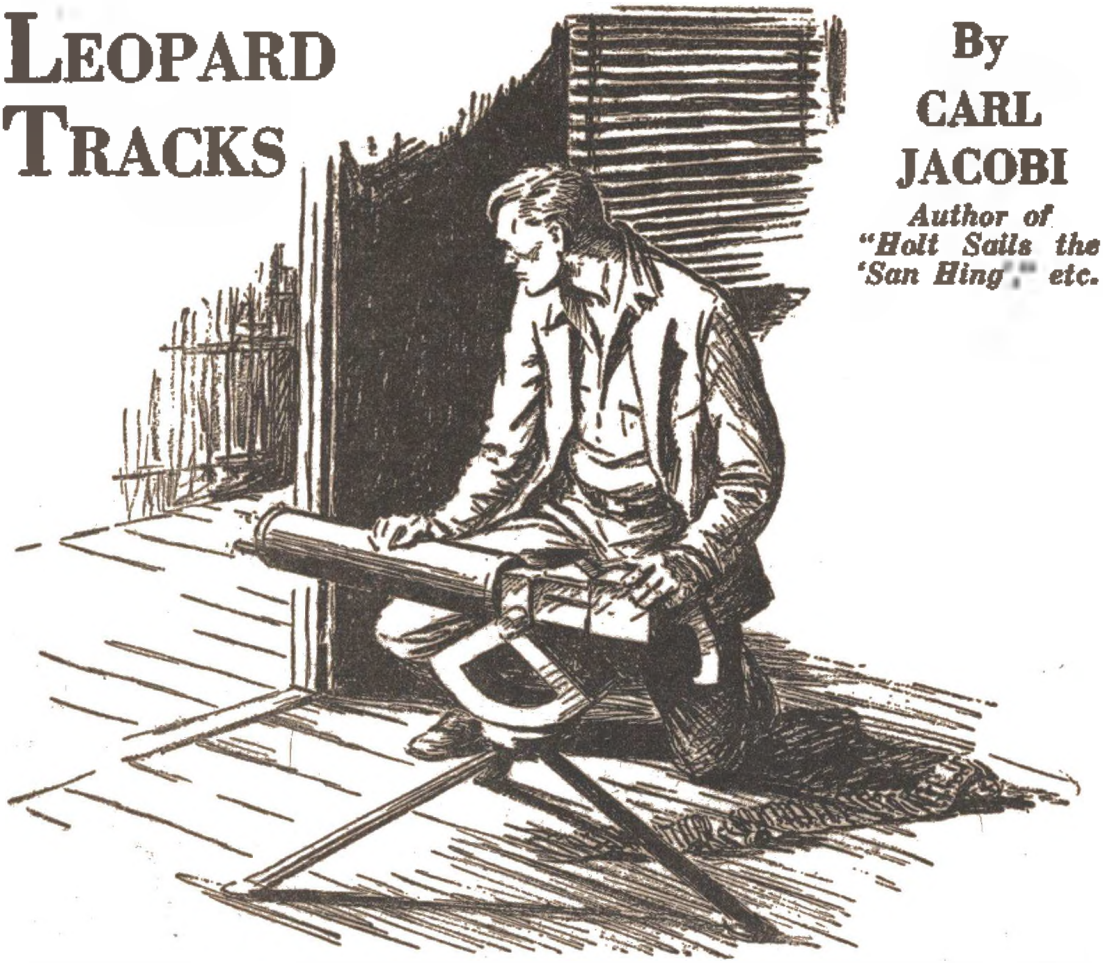
Blinn drew a deep breath, shook his head wearily and looked at the handcuffs on his wrists."

"It—it don't matter," he said painfully. "There was still that blamed red-head."

LEOPARD TRACKS

By CARL JACOBI

Author of "Holt Sails the 'San Hing'," etc.



A Really Good Engineer Doesn't Fancy Himself as Crocodile Bait—Not At All, in Fact

STOCKTON was halfway between sleep and consciousness when the train ground to a sudden stop. The wheezy locomotive screamed a protesting whistle blast, and the groans and creakings of the wooden coach gave way to the thick silence of the jungle.

Stockton opened his eyes slowly. Dim light from the car's hanging lamps made a drooling glare of the rain-washed windows. But outside the blackness was unbroken.

There could be no legitimate reason for the train's stopping here. Long Hatap, the last intermediate station lay forty miles behind. Between Long Hatap and Sepitang, his destination, was only jungle.

Up ahead a confusion of yells sounded as Malay trainmen ran forward to inspect the trouble. The door to Stockton's coach opened, and the native conductor hurried down the aisle.

"Something is wrong, Tuan," he said. "Someone has placed a tree across the tracks."

Stockton nodded. Without reply he got to his feet, paced through the entrance and swung down the steps. Rain and wind, the forerunners of the southwest monsoon, smote his face as he advanced quickly to the front of the train.

A moment later he came to a halt in the glare of the engine's headlight. Fifty feet ahead, squarely across the narrow-gauge track, a heavy Seraya tree barred all passage. The native engineer and fireman stood in silence, gazing at the obstruction stupidly.

"Tuan." Kelea, Stockton's Number-One boy, materialized out of the gloom and seized his master's arm. "Tuan, you had best go back in the train. It is the Muruts. They will attack any moment."

A gleam snapped into Stockton's gray eyes as the familiar sight of Kelea's moon-face and the sting of the rain combined to bring back his old alertness. He was a tall, rangy man with an incisive face and a firm jaw. He squared his shoulders now, snapped:

"Run back to coach three and hustle out that gang of Dyaks. Post guards at the end and either side of the train. Move!"

The Malady nodded and vanished in the darkness. Stockton turned to the fallen tree.

HE HAD been warned something like this would happen. Trouble with the Muruts was to be expected, of course. But all the way from Sandakan Stockton had wondered by what miracle this railroad managed to operate. The native trainmen were lax and incompetent. The coaches, dry of oil, developed hot-boxes with maddening regularity. Trestles creaked and trembled. And overshadowing it all was the officials' suave and shrugging indifference. "It cannot be helped."

Stockton's job was to see that it was helped. Employed by the company's London stockholders, he had come here to British North Borneo for a double purpose; to improve the present two hundred miles of trackage and to continue the road forty-five miles farther into rubber-rich Sepitang jungle.

From the beginning, since he had arrived on location, he had been advised repeatedly both were impossible. More than that, on the night before he had boarded the train for the interior the warnings had come to a sinister head. A pistol shot had missed him by inches as he strode along a waterfront street.

Stockton was puzzled. He knew some dark motive lay beneath it all. But up until now he had only vague innuendos to support his suspicions.

Running footsteps sounded behind him, and ten or the thirty Coast Dyaks he had hired for construction-labor shambled forward.

"Move the tree!" Stockton ordered. But even as he spoke, it happened.

Back in the jungle a drum began to boom. Simultaneously from the underbrush close at hand a sharp *thwack* sounded, and a feathered shadow whipped across the open space. With a gurgling scream one of the Dyaks pulled the poisoned dart from his throat and plunged headlong.

It was open hell then, without preamble. Muruts—North Borneo's savage head-hunters—rushed onto the right-of-way. With fiendish yells they went at the Coast Dyaks with parangs.

Stockton's revolver was spitting fire. Deliberately he stood, back to the little teakettle engine, making each shot count. But they couldn't stay here. They would be wiped out.

In Malay he shouted an order to the Coast Dyaks to retreat to the coaches. Then, pistol empty, he directed his attention to the leader of the attack, a squat, naked Murut crouching half in the undergrass. At intervals the native raised a *Sumpit* blow pipe and sent a dart streaking into the struggling mass.

LIPS a grim line, Stockton circled out of the path of the headlight, threw himself forward in a flying tackle. He struck the native low, sent his fists pounding outward. The Murut gave a yell of surprise.

Then they were rolling over and over, clawing for each other's throat.

A breath-taking blow caught Stockton hard in the midsection. Twice he felt gouging fingers rake across his face, tear at his eyes. Struggling frantically, the native utilized every savage trick he knew to overcome his white man opponent. They

rolled over and over in the tall grass, pounding each other mercilessly.

Suddenly the native whipped his hand to his bark loincloth, brought it up with a glint of steel. It was a kris, and the blade bit deep into Stockton's arm. He recoiled, let his hold slip. Like an eel the native jerked free.

And then abruptly as it had begun the attack ended. The raiding Muruts turned and with hoarse cries of defiance sped into the jungle.

Weakly Stockton got to his feet, staggered back to the locomotive. Four of the ten Coast Dyaks lay dead on the right-of-way. The remaining six huddled in a close group, gazing at the dark foliage where their assailants had disappeared.

"Kelea!" Stockton yelled. "Get that tree off the track. There's nothing to fear now. They've gone."

"Tuan hurt bad?" The Malay eyed Stockton's bleeding arm anxiously.

Stockton shook his head. "Not bad, Kelea. See that the train is moving in ten minutes."

After that the American engineer made his way slowly back to his coach. He opened his canvas luggage bag, drew forth a small but compact medicine kit. The kris had not touched the bone, he knew. But the wound was deep, and he was taking no chances of blood poisoning.

II

THREE hours later the train reached Sepitang, the rail-head. Here, as if to demonstrate the futility of jungle construction work, a single shack on piles served the triple purpose of freight shed, station and residence for Winston Traynor, Sepitang's District Officer.

Left arm well bandaged, Stockton leaped across the pool of mud and water to the *nibong* platform. A smoking carbide lamp threw down a circle of light, and in its glare, hand outstretched in welcome, stood Traynor.

"So you're Stockton," the District Officer said after a house-boy had taken the engineer's bag. "Welcome to the world's jumping-off spot. Come inside, and we'll have a drink."

Stockton slid a bulldog pipe between his teeth and glanced back at the motionless train. "I've got thirty Dyak laborers here," he said, "or did have when I started. They'll have to be put up for the night."

A perceptible frown crossed Traynor's face. "Thirty, eh?" he repeated. "Well, there's an abandoned *kampong* a quarter mile through the bush. They can stay there. Who's this?"

"Kelea, my Number One boy. He bunks with me."

Five minutes later, after he had seen the last of his Coast Dyaks move down the trail, Stockton took the proferred chair in the main room of the District Officer's shack and came to the point abruptly.

"Just how many men," he said, toying with his glass, "had this job before me?"

Traynor took a moment before replying. He was a big man with a large, round face and a tooth-brush mustache. His eyes were clear and friendly. Yet behind his constant smile there lurked an air of caution, as though he were weighing each word he spoke.

"Three," he answered. "Didn't they tell you in Sandakan?"

"They didn't tell me much of anything in Sandakan, except to predict I'd be back in a month."

Traynor laughed nervously. "You *will* too," he said, "or follow your predecessors. Hawley died of fever. Irving was

killed by Muruts, and Granson gave it up as a bad job."

FOR a moment Stockton sat in silence, palms pressed hard against the wicker arm-rests of the fan-back chair.

"As I understand it," he said, "a single track is to be laid from here to Laudang, a distance of forty-five miles. The survey maps show the country to be heavy jungle, but all comparatively high ground, with the exception of a half mile strip of swamp. I don't quite see——"

"You don't see why it would be such a difficult job, eh?" Traynor interrupted. "Well, it doesn't happen to be a case of physical trouble. It's something a little harder to understand. The leopard tabu."

The District Officer got to his feet and crossed to a large map mounted on the wall. With his pencil he drew a small circle in the center of it.

"Three miles west of here," he went on, "is the beginning of leopard country, a district supposedly overrun with cats, both spotted and black. The Muruts believe an invisible magic boundary surrounds the tract, and that as long as man does not attempt to cross it, the leopards will remain there, and the *kampongs* will be safe from their attacks.

The magic boundary was brought into creation by a powerful witch doctor. A year ago maulings and killings by leopards was a regular occurrence. Since then, strangely enough, there has been practically no trouble."

Stockton's brow furrowed. "Magic," he repeated slowly. "You mean the Muruts will try to prevent construction work through that section?"

"They'll fight tooth and nail to stop it," Traynor replied. "And beside that, there's Lorgan and Mace."

"Lorgan! Not Britt Lorgan, the rubber man who used to be in Sumatra?"

"The same." Traynor's eyes shifted slightly. "He and Mace have a big plantation surrounding the tabu grounds. Imported Brazilian trees. Mace says no damned railroad is going to cut through his property."

The two men drank another gin pahit, and then Stockton, with an abrupt yawn, rose to his feet.

"I'm done up," he said. "Think I'll catch a little shut-eye, if you don't mind."

Followed by Kelea, he went to his assigned room. Inside he carefully bolted the door, saw that the bamboo shutters on the window were secured. Undressed, he slid his revolver under his pillow and lay back on the bed heavily. From his cot on the other side of the room, Kelea waited his master's order to extinguish the lamp.

But Stockton had no intention of sleeping for the moment. He wanted to think, to prepare a plan of action. It was no wonder, he mused, that the men before him had failed in their attempt to place the railroad on a paying basis. No wonder the stockholders back in England were complaining.

YET from where he stood he could see only a mixture of troubles to confront him. Beneath those troubles and linking them together lay some sinister activity, the nature of which he could only guess at.

Nor was Traynor as friendly as he appeared. The District Officer had told Stockton only what he wanted to tell. It was obvious the man was concealing something.

"But he seems all right at the core," Stockton told himself. "I'd bet my arm there's something hanging over his head."

It had been interesting to watch the District Officer's reaction when informed of the attack on the train by Muruts. Traynor had gone white for a moment, then laughed hollowly. He was very sorry, he had said, but such things were to be expected. After all, Sepitang was pretty much jungle.

The engineer turned to Kelea.

"Kelea," he said slowly, "you know of a

Tuan-besar who calls himself Lorgan—Britt Lorgan?"

The Malay boy's eyes narrowed. "Yes, Tuan," he said. "An evil man."

"How long has he been here?"

"A year, Tuan. He joined the man called Mace, and together they are becoming very rich. But they are cruel to their natives."

Stockton nodded. He signaled the light to be extinguished and closed his eyes to sleep. In the morning he would take the river trail to Lorgan's plantation.

III

UNDER ordinary circumstances Stockton would have called himself a light sleeper. The years he had spent back of beyond in New Guinea and Upper Burma, and more recently in the unexplored interior of the Celebes had taught him to awake at the slightest intimation of danger.

Tonight, however, wearied by the jolting train ride and by the sudden change from the comparative coolness of the coast to the humid heat of the interior, he fell into a deep slumber.

He awoke with a start. The room was in blackness, and there was no sound save the steady breathing of Kelea.

Stockton strained his ears. All at once it struck him that Kelea's breathing did not sound normal. It was less regular than a man in natural sleep. Even as he listened, it became fainter. Simultaneously there swept into the engineer's nostrils the unmistakable odor of chloroform.

He inched his hand under the pillow, drew out his revolver.

His eyes were accustoming themselves to the gloom now. Abruptly two shadows formed before him. One was creeping toward his bed. Deliberately Stockton shifted his position until the springs creaked.

"Hold it," he said quietly. "One move, and I fire."

There was a startled intake of breath, and the nearest figure hurled itself forward. Stockton fired point-blank. Then massive hands clawed for his throat, and a heavy weight landed upon him.

An instant later it was two against one as the second assailant closed in from the opposite side of the bed. Heavy blows rained upon the American's face. A cloth soaked with chloroform was clamped over his nostrils. He tore it away, wrenched his revolver hand free.

He pumped two shots in quick succession, leaped from the bed and delivered a bone-cracking blow on the jaw of the nearest figure. There was a howl of pain and a frantic attempt of the attackers to regain the advantage they had lost.

Back somewhere in another part of the house a door slammed, and a rush of feet sounded. The two figures turned, ran for the window. One last shot Stockton fired as they ripped the shutters open and vaulted into the night. A scream of pain told him he had scored a hit. Then heavy blows sounded on the door, and Traynor's voice could be heard yelling, "Stockton, are you all right? Open up."

Stockton paced across to the door. But before he slid back the bolt, his fingers moved swiftly across the locking device. A dry exclamation came to his lips as he touched a slender steel band that had been forced between the door and the frame. So the assailants had entered from the main room of the shack, had they? That was interesting.

A moment later, the lamp lit and Traynor firing questions in a steady stream, Stockton bent over the supine figure of Kelea. Cold water applied to the Number One boy's wrists and forehead brought him around slowly. But a long five minutes passed before Stockton elected to talk.

He swung around then, faced the District Officer with hard eyes.

"I thought Sepitang was pretty much a controlled district," he said icily. "Do you

make a habit of inviting night visitors to the guest room?"

Traynor's lips quivered. "It must have been Muruts from Kinabatangan country, deep inland," he said. "None of the tribes near here would dare——"

"Muruts from deep inland," replied Stockton, "don't arm themselves with cloths soaked in chloroform. And they aren't exactly experts at opening a locked door."

A moment later Stockton took up a flashlight and went outside. But the window of his room opened on a wooden walk, and he could find no footprints. He walked around to the front of the shack. Here he could see the twin rails of the narrow-gauge track stretching into the jungle gloom. The train had departed hours ago for the coast.

"Pleasant job I've taken over," Stockton muttered to himself. "I haven't even started work yet, and the attempts to get rid of me are coming fast."

MORNING, and he found his plans abruptly changed. He had intended to go downriver by *prahu* to Lorgan and Mace's plantation. But when he emerged from his room into the main chamber, he found the two rubber men waiting for him.

Lorgan was a huge man, bearded, with deep-set eyes and an ugly knife scar across the left side of his face. He wore dirty duck trousers, a singlet, and a solar topee, the puggaree cloth of which was torn and yellowed. Mace was smaller, with a swarthy complexion. Neither of the two men rose from their chairs to greet him.

"We heard you were here," Lorgan spoke up, swiveling a whitish cheroot to the other side of his mouth. "So we came over to give you a little information. I suppose you figure on running trackage up toward Laudang. Well, Mr. Stockton, you're out of luck. It can't be done."

Stockton helped himself to the coffee on the table. "A lot of other people seem to have the same idea," he said. "Just what are your objections?"

"My objections are plenty. First of all, I'm not takin' any chances of losin' native labor by arousin' fear and suspicion of the leopard tabu. Second, if you run that trackage forty-five miles farther, you'll pave the way for every fly by-night planter in British North comin' up here and cuttin' in on our business. We're

doin' all right now without that damned railroad. We ship our stuff by the river, and it gets to the coast in plenty of time."

Stockton eyed him quietly. "I'm afraid all that won't make any difference," he said. "The Company—the Government, that is—has granted me complete power to lay tracks from her to Laudang. We start today."

For a moment tense silence filled the room. Then, with a snarl, Lorgan lurched erect. "Oh, you do, hey?" he snarled. "Well, you trespass on my property, and there'll be trouble. The same kind of trouble the last guy found that came up here with big ideas."

HE swung on his heel and with Mace trailing puppy-like behind him, stalked out the door.

Traynor, the District Officer, who had watched the drama in silence, shook his head. "I'm afraid you're biting off more than you can chew," he said. "Those men are powerful in the district."

His breakfast eaten, Stockton dispatched Kelea to the abandoned *kampong* to round up his crew of Dyak laborers. Then, armed with a Winchester 50-110, he

walked down the tracks and headed into the jungle.

The tracks ended within a few yards at a bumper switch. Protected there by a canvas covering was a small gasoline-motored hand-car. The hand-car was oiled and fueled and apparently kept there by Traynor for a quick exit in the event native conditions became out of control.

A rough right-of-way had been surveyed a quarter-mile past this point, Stockton knew. Beyond, he would have the triple job of surveying as he advanced, planning road-bed and overseeing construction. As he strode along now, avoiding vines and creepers, he made a mental note, with satisfaction, that at least there would be no difficulty in obtaining ties. The Taphang, Palapak and Seraya trees which would have to be felled would take care of that with lumber to spare.

A mile Stockton trekked through the dense bush. He was approaching the outer boundary of Lorgan and Mace's plantation, but an indefinable urge kept him going. Suddenly he halted, gazing at a large sign nailed to a tree:

PRIVATE GROUNDS
TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT!
BRITT LORGAN.

Stockton smiled grimly. What lay beneath all this? Fear that the district's rubber market would be spoiled? But no. Continuation of the railroad's trackage and running trains on regular schedule would enhance rather than depreciate Sepitang's wealth.

He pushed past the sign, continued marching due east. The jungle about him was unbroken as yet with no sign of planted rubber trees. A hornbill screeched in the tesselation of growth above.

And then the foliage thinned to an open spot. Snaking its way across the center of it was a muddy stream.

Like a slowly-drawn piece of wire the engineer went rigid in every nerve and muscle. Across the stream, on the opposite shore, a bamboo pole angled upward from the water's edge. Fastened to its top end was—a human head.

It was not the type of head Stockton had so often seen dangling from the ridge poles of Dyak long-houses. It was shriveled, it was dried and cured, yes—but—it was the head of a white man!

IV

FOR a long time he stood there, staring at it. Then, lips tight, he waded into the stream and crossed to the other side. It was not difficult to understand the presence of that head—and yet it was. Traynor had said Irving, one of the three men who had undertaken this job before him, had been killed by Muruts. The thing then constituted one more threat in the many hands-off warnings that blocked his way.

But who had put it here? Lorgan? If so, how had the man obtained it from the natives? And why had Irving been murdered at all?

Back at the Sepitang station Stockton found his Dyak laborers waiting impatiently to begin work. The iron rails had been piled alongside the track, and competent Kelea had already distributed picks and shovels.

"Okay," Stockton said. "Let's go. Kelea, I'll want ten men for tree cutting."

A loud sing-song chant went up as the Coast Dyaks leaped to their tasks. Sweat streaming from under his helmet, the engineer strode ahead, marking each tree that would have to be felled.

By nightfall the work was well under way, and the vague fears which had loomed before Stockton faded somewhat. He made his way back to the District Officer's shack.

The evening meal over, he sauntered over to the wall map, studied it a long time.

"Traynor," he said, "you say these leop-

ard tabu grounds are three miles west of here. Can they be reached by river?"

The District Officer nodded. "They can," he said, "but you'll be on Lorgan and Mace's property. You see the forbidden district begins in the western side of Lorgan's plantation and extends a short distance beyond."

"Has Lorgan done any planting in the tabu district?" Stockton asked casually.

"No," Traynor fumbled to light a cigarette. "The leopard spots act as a wedge across the western side of his plantation. "But——" The officer's eyes widened as Stockton picked up his helmet and began to strap his revolver belt around his waist. "You're not going out there now?"

"Just a little look-see," Stockton replied. "I want to give the place the once-over."

He passed out the door and headed across the clearing in the direction of the river. Once the *lallang* grass had closed about him, he stopped short and turned, watching. As he had expected, the door of the shack opened again, and Traynor's native house-boy emerged. In long fast strides he ran down the overland trail toward Lorgan's plantation.

Smiling grimly, Stockton continued to the river shore. He found a one-man dugout, took up the paddle and pushed onto the black stream.

For an hour he guided the clumsy craft up the inky waterway. Lights filtering through the leaves told him at length that he was abreast of the Lorgan house. He continued silently past the log-landing, moored the canoe in a clump of tall reeds.

On shore long, symmetric rows of rubber trees loomed before him. Stockton got a flashlight out of his pocket and advanced to examine the nearest tree.

A LOW whistle came to his lips as his eyes took in the smooth, unbroken trunk. If Lorgan and Mace were operating a rubber farm, they had a funny way of doing it. The trees showed no signs of recent tappings.

Tree after tree he inspected. All were the same. With the flash casting a white beam ahead of him, the engineer moved deeper into the forbidden plantation.

Abruptly the regular corridors came to an end. Rising up before him, a solid, unthinned wall, was jungle again.

The leopard grounds!

Silently Stockton slid his revolver from his holster and pushed into the wall of growth. Twenty feet forward, he switched off the flash. On and on he forced his way, advancing with the greatest caution.

But no danger presented itself. Even the insects seemed to have stopped their monotonous drone, and he felt as if he were walking blindfold through a great void. He drew up at length, scowling in the blackness. His hunch had been wrong. There was nothing here.

And then as he turned to go back, he suddenly stiffened. Voices had drifted to his ears. Low voices and the muffled popping of what seemed to be a gasoline motor. Stockton darted forward. He dropped to hands and knees, wormed past a last fringe of bush—and stared.

A circular man-made clearing opened before him. Suspended from wires stretched between bamboo poles were four gasoline lanterns. The place was ablaze with a whitish glare.

A line of recently built nipa-thatch huts dotted the far side of the clearing. Before them, like some elongated water spider, a corrugated iron runway reared its bulk upward.

And in the center of the illuminated space stood three men, Lorgan, Mace, and a naked native. Lorgan was talking:

"This time we've got to do the job and do it right. In two days Stockton and that damned railroad of his will have reached the outer boundary of our plantation. In two more the tracks will be pushing here into tabu grounds. He's got to be stopped and stopped cold."

Mace nodded. "Do you think he suspects?"

"It don't make any difference whether he suspects or not. We'll finish him before he has a chance to make a report. LaGahi, how many Muruts can you gather by the morning's sun?"

THE naked brown man considered. "As many as the bees over a cone of honey, Tuan."

Lorgan spat. "Stockton keeps his Coast Dyaks in the abandoned *kampong* near the Sepitang station. You and your Muruts will steal upon the village at dawn and kill them. You will then go to the railroad tracks, seize the iron rails and throw them into the quicksand of the *klubi* swamp. Do you understand, La Gahi?"

The brown man licked his lips. "It will be done, Tuan."

A cold wave darted up Stockton's spine as he heard these words. Cautiously he inched his way closer.

"What about Traynor?" Mace demanded. "He hasn't talked so far, but I don't trust him, and—"

"Traynor is my job," Lorgan replied. "I'll take care of him in my own way."

The two rubber men turned abruptly as a fourth figure darted into the clearing. Like a flash Stockton recognized Traynor's house-boy. The native would bring information of his presence!

Revolver in hand, Stockton acted. He strode into the clearing.

"Don't move," he said quietly. "Lorgan, pull your gun and drop it before you."

There was an instant of motionless tableau. Feet braced wide, Lorgan stared with open eyes.

"Your gun!" Stockton repeated. "Drop it!"

Slowly the weapon appeared from the man's belt, fell to the ground. Mace lifted his arms skyward.

"Now," Stockton permitted a grim smile to touch his lips, "now, Mr. Lorgan, I think your plans are going to be somewhat changed. You're going to the Sepitang station, but you're going there to make a confession. After that, unless I'm mistaken, you'll be escorted to Sandakan for trial."

Lorgan's first start of surprise had passed on. He gazed back defiantly. And suddenly he laughed.

With that laugh came the American's first intimation of trickery. He gave a heaving lunge, threw himself sideward. Too late—powerful hands closed about his throat from behind. Even as he felt his windpipe jam closed, the two rubber men leaped forward.

Something hard and heavy came down on the engineer's head. The world before him shut off in a curtain of darkness.

V

HOURS seemed to have passed before he opened his eyes. His skull ached, and there was a clot of dried blood on his forehead. He moved his lashed wrists to touch a wall of nipa-thatch, and he saw, as he had expected, that he was a prisoner.

A prisoner in one of the huts facing the corrugated iron runway. He understood the significance of that runway only too well now, and he knew he must free himself and get back to the Sepitang station before dawn.

The words sounded mockingly in his brain. Try as he would, he could not separate his hands. His ankles too were securely bound.

The radium dial of his wrist watch showed him it was five minutes after midnight. In a few hours blood-thirsty savages would swarm down on his unsuspecting Coast Dyaks, massacre them. And Traynor——!

Even though evidence was piling up to condemn the District Officer, there was something about the man that touched a chord of friendship far back in Stockton's brain. Deliberately he fell to work on his fastenings. At the end of twenty minutes

he lay back exhausted. And then his keen ears detected a sound outside the hut.

He lay rigid, listening. Stealthy footsteps came nearer. A voice whispered:

"Tuan Stockton. Are you there?"

The American gave a gasp of relief.

"Kelea," he answered. "In this hut, quick."

A moment later the Malay Number One boy skillfully finished untying the knot, and Stockton stumbled unsteadily to his feet.

"When you did not return, Tuan," Kelea said, "I knew something was wrong. I followed you to the Lorgan landing, and I trailed your tracks inland."

Stockton nodded. It was not yet one a. m. There was still time. He strode out of the hut, and with the Malay at his heels, headed at a fast pace for the river.

THE Sepitang station was in darkness when he reached it. On the platform Stockton hesitated, swung about to face the faithful Malay.

"Hurry to the *kampong*," he ordered. "Round up the Coast Dyaks. Bring them here. But don't take the regular trail; cut through the bush!"

Then he went inside to the door of Winston Traynor's room and rapped loudly. No answer. Scowling, Stockton twisted the latch, pushed across the sill.

A wave of dismay swept over him. By the lighted lamp he saw that the room was empty. An overturned chair and twisted bed clothes bore mute evidence of a struggle.

For a moment he stood there, unmoving, face a grim mask. Then his eyes fastened on the opposite wall. There was a map there, a map similar to the one in the main room, showing the Sepitang district drawn to scale. But at the bottom a small section had been torn out, leaving a triangular opening. Stockton stepped closer. And then he saw something else that galvanized him to attention. There was a smear of blood on the map next to the torn section.

In one quick moment he had the whole picture. The point of that tear ended at the marking of a river junction a short distance downstream. Traynor, unobserved, must have left this trail-mark before being dragged from his room.

But why there? There was nothing at the river fork save an impenetrable reed-choked swamp and— He rocked backward as a thought struck him with full significance.

Securing a fresh revolver from his luggage, Stockton turned, ran out. Caution to the winds, he raced back to the river shore, leaped into the dugout and began to paddle madly downstream. As his powerful arms moved back and forth, digging the blade deep, his eyes studied the black shores. But he saw nothing.

The river turned, and in the darkness he sensed its widening. Swamp grass rustled against the keel.

On he raced, keeping midstream. There was something uncanny about it all. The water purled and sighed beneath him. Back somewhere in the flanking wall of gloom a leopard coughed as it made its kill.

And then all at once he became a ramrod in the dugout. On the southern shore a light flashed behind a network of intervening trees. Stockton backwatered, twisted the canoe and headed toward it.

Five minutes later he was fighting his way toward higher ground. The light was a short distance ahead of him. Emerging on a well-worn trail, he darted forward silently.

Abruptly he caught sight of his quarry.

There were four natives, faces hideous with war-paint, and a white man. The white man was Winston Traynor. Half carried, half dragged, the District Officer moved between them, still pajama-clad.

Britt Lorgan's cold-blooded plans struck Stockton like a whip-lash. He had delivered Traynor over to these Muruts with instructions to feed him to the crocs. There was a swamp pool at the river junction where the saurians fed. Once the District Officer was out of the way Lorgan would have full rein to pursue his plans as he wished. It would be a long time before Government red-tape would send another magistrate to the section.

Stockton whipped out his revolver and fired. Two shots in quick succession sent two natives writhing to the ground. The remaining two hesitated an instant, then plunged off the trail into the dense bush.

"Kelea!" Stockton yelled in Malay to no one, "after them! Cut them off before they reach the river!"

The ruse worked. Crashing footsteps pounded a frantic diminuendo. Stockton rushed to Traynor's side. The District Officer leaned against a tree, face white, blood trickling down his cheek from a knife slash on his temple.

"Are you all right, old man?" Stockton demanded.

Traynor nodded. "I'm all right," he said slowly. "The blighters pummeled me a bit, but——"

"Then put your arm around my shoulder. We've got to get back to the station —pronto."

ON the platform of the District Officer's shack twenty-four Coast Dyaks worked in frantic haste. A breastwork, waist high, of green bamboo and the sawed sections of heavy Taphang trees, was being erected. Kelea stood in the center of the confusion, shouting orders. In the doorway Stockton labored at top speed to mount on its tripod a forty pound short-range Maxim machine gun.

Slumped back in a Singapore chair, the District Officer watched the preparations in silence. The first streaks of dawn were climbing in the eastern sky.

At length Stockton rose, crossed to Traynor's side.

"Unless I'm wrong," he said, "Lorgan and Mace will be here in a few minutes. They'll have regimented a tribe of Muruts from Kinabatangan country, and they'll have guns. When they discover my Coast Dyaks are no longer at the abandoned *kampong*, they'll direct their attack here. It's going to be war!"

"War, yes," Traynor stroked his jaw slowly. "And we've got only a few rounds of ammunition. Stockton, you don't know——"

"I know more than you think," the engineer replied. "I know this isn't a jealousy fight by a couple of rubber men or a rebellion incited because of violation of the leopard tabu. It goes a long way farther than that."

Traynor's eyes widened. "Then——" His voice faltered.

"For more than a year Lorgan and Mace have had interests other than rubber," Stockton continued. "As for the leopards in the tabu district, that was just a story they cooked up to keep away curious natives.

"Blue grounds, Traynor! Silty clay hiding one of the richest mineral deposits in the world. The tabu sector in the Lorgan and Mace plantation is the hiding place of a diamond mine!"

Traynor put a cigarette between his lips, chewed it nervously.

"It was quite a scheme," Stockton went on. "Mace must have discovered the deposit and sent for Lorgan to help him mine it. They started on a big scale, enlisted the operators of the railroad to help them. Lorgan knew that mining was strictly a government monopoly, controlled by the British North Borneo Company. But as long as that railroad was kept in its present miserable condition there would

be few visitors to this section. As long as it was prevented from penetrating the plantation, the secret would not be discovered."

The engineer paused, shot a glance across the clearing. Heat waves shimmered before him. The air was tense, pregnant with menace.

"The uncut diamonds were shipped to the coast in disguised rubber drums and slipped by the customs. Lorgan killed Irving, one of my predecessors, because he feared interference with his plans. He planned to do away with me in a like manner.

"But what I want to know—" Stockton's eyes hardened—"is where you fit into the picture. Why——?"

THE question was never finished. From the wall of underbrush on the other side of the clearing a rifle roared suddenly. A Coast Dyak at Traynor's side clutched at his throat and crashed to the platform floor.

An instant later the attack began. Into the open space a swarm of naked savages poured, mouthing wild yells. Bullets and blow pipe darts thudded into the newly-built barricade. Muruts — headhunters from the deep interior, they were. And most of them were armed with modern rifles.

Stockton swiveled the machine gun. His teeth were clamped about the stem of an unlighted pipe, and his face was grim as a ripping staccato roar vibrated into the morning air. Back and forth he swung the Maxim. Muruts fell like pushed dominoes.

And the hail of death had its effect. The attack broke. Turning, the natives beat a retreat to the jungle.

"The devils are up to something," Stockton said to Traynor. "If they can't smoke us out by gunfire, they'll try trickery."

Even as he spoke a flaming streak lifted out of the undergrass, whipped through the air and slammed into the front wall of the station shack. Quickly Traynor jerked the fire-spear out of the wood and ground it out under his heel.

Stockton retaliated with a burst of shots from the Maxim. He could see his fusilade lance its way through the foliage. He could hear intermittent screams as the steel-jacketed bullets found their mark. But no native showed himself.

The sun was mounting higher. Sweat began to pour down Stockton's face. He began to fire more slowly as the attacking shots lessened. Three more cartridge belts lay beside him. When those were gone—for the moment he preferred not to think about that.

And then, as suddenly as the first, a second attack began. They came from three sides this time, closed in on the station in a half-circle of thunderous gun-fire. A bullet tore along Stockton's cheek, left a hot trickle of blood.

Suddenly the engineer motioned Traynor to his side.

"We can't hold 'em," he yelled. "Take the gun. I'll try and get out the back way."

The District Officer shook his head. "You can't do it. There isn't another white man within——"

"Take the gun!"

An instant later Stockton was inside the shack, striding to the rear entrance. Two Coast Dyak guards stood there, armed with *parangs*. He pushed past them, peered out into the open space.

No living thing showed itself in the undulating stretch of *lallang* grass. Were they out there, too, waiting for him? Stockton knew he must chance it.

He gripped his revolver, bent low and leaped down the steps. Ten feet forward he dropped flat and began to crawl. An eternity of nerve-grinding caution, and then at length he had reached the jungle. In a wide circle now he moved past the station toward the far side of the clearing.

The rattle of the machine gun, the yells

and the intermittent shots seemed hollow and distant as he fought his way through the undergrowth. At last instinct told him he was behind the raiding natives, approaching them from the rear.

Abruptly every nerve of his body jerked taut. He listened. A footstep sounded close at hand.

And then roaring close at hand came the crash of a revolver. The bullet screamed past Stockton's ear. Two more slugs in quick succession slammed into the trees at his side.

The American dropped. Ahead through the intervening foliage he caught a momentary glimpse of a familiar figure. Britt Lorgan! The renegade darted behind a tree, firing as he moved.

A second figure, that of Mace, appeared for a split instant. Stockton snapped the trigger of his own gun, but the slug went wild.

As the shots continued to hammer around him he realized grimly that he was cut off. It was only a question of time before Lorgan or Mace would pick him off.

And then a flash of hope streaked into his brain. A heavy *nageva* vine hung before him, dangling from the branches above.

Lips tight, Stockton wormed his way toward it, as a new fusilade of lead lanced the undergrowth around him.

In Indo-China five years before he had seen a vine of that type used for a bizarre and bloody kind of duel. There had been two vines then, with a man suspended from each. Swinging, the two combatants had slashed at each other with knives.

Now the American acted. He grasped the vine, crawled backward until it was stretched taut at a forty-five degree angle. With a heaving lunge he threw his weight upon it, shot into the air, a human pendulum.

Two shots from two guns thundered forth. A hot slug ground into the American's shoulder. Then he was swinging abreast of the two renegades; releasing his hold, he dropped.

He dropped hard upon the crouching figure of Mace. The renegade reared like a cornered animal. Stockton brought the butt of his revolver down on the man's skull in a smashing blow.

And as Mace relaxed and went limp, Stockton leaped erect to meet the attack from behind. Ten feet away Britt Lorgan lunged from behind the tree, pistol flaming. Again Stockton felt a slug hit, this time penetrating deep into the calf of his leg.

Then he threw himself forward. The two men clinched, went down, exchanged blow for blow.

A cruel kick caught the engineer hard in the groin, sent a wave of nausea surging through him. He hammered back grimly, drove his fist hard over his opponent's heart.

And then, at last, an opening presented itself. Lorgan spat blood, twisted free and poised for a final thrust. Like an enraged tiger he lunged, clawing for Stockton's throat.

Stockton pivoted at the precise instant. He brought his right fist catapulting upward against the renegade's jaw. With a gasp Lorgan dropped and lay still.

But even as the engineer stood there with the two prone men before him, a chorus of yells farther back in the bush and a renewed burst of shots told him his work was but half completed. The Muruts were massing for a last attack. With his ammunition almost gone District Officer Traynor would be helpless.

Stockton's lips squeezed in determination. He stifled the moan of pain, bent down and lifted the inert figure of Britt Lorgan to his shoulder.

And then, staggering under the weight of his burden he began to fight his way through the jungle. In a wide circle he moved, keeping well to the rear of the rifle shots.

Penetrating the last fringe of bush he

emerged abruptly on the railroad tracks. Here, still covered by its sheet of canvas, was the gasoline handcar. Stockton whipped off the covering, dropped the unconscious Lorgan upon the seat.

"You're going to take a ride, my friend," he said huskily. "Not a long ride, but if my guess is right it'll bring results."

Red spots were swimming before his eyes as he gave the motor a last look. He switched on the ignition, twisted the crank. There was no response, and his strength was fast ebbing.

Again he spun it, fought the dizziness that was overwhelming him. The motor caught with a roar. Stockton flung the gear into forward.

And then as the handcar with its motionless passenger began to move down the rails toward the Sepitang station, he felt his legs slowly buckle beneath him.

IT WAS noon of the next day before Stockton opened his eyes. He sat up in bed, found himself back in his room in the Sepitang station, gazing at Winston Traynor, who stood at his side, smiling.

"How do you feel?" the District Officer asked.

Stockton felt his bandaged shoulder, swallowed hard. As in a haze memory returned to him.

"Lorgan and Mace"—he began. "The Muruts—did they——?"

"Lorgan and Mace are on their way downriver under guard to Sandakan," Traynor replied. "They'll stand trial, and unless I'm wrong they'll be locked up for a long time. But I wouldnt' be here at all if it hadn't been for that handcar stunt of yours."

"It was a neat job," he continued. "The natives, full strength, were advancing into the clearing. And then, like a bolt out of the blue, came that handcar with Lorgan sprawled unconscious across the seat. The Muruts took one look and ran. They knew that with their white leader gone, they were lost."

Stockton nodded. But his face still wore a puzzled frown.

"You want to know why I didn't tell everything in the first place," Traynor said slowly. "Well—that isn't so easy to explain.

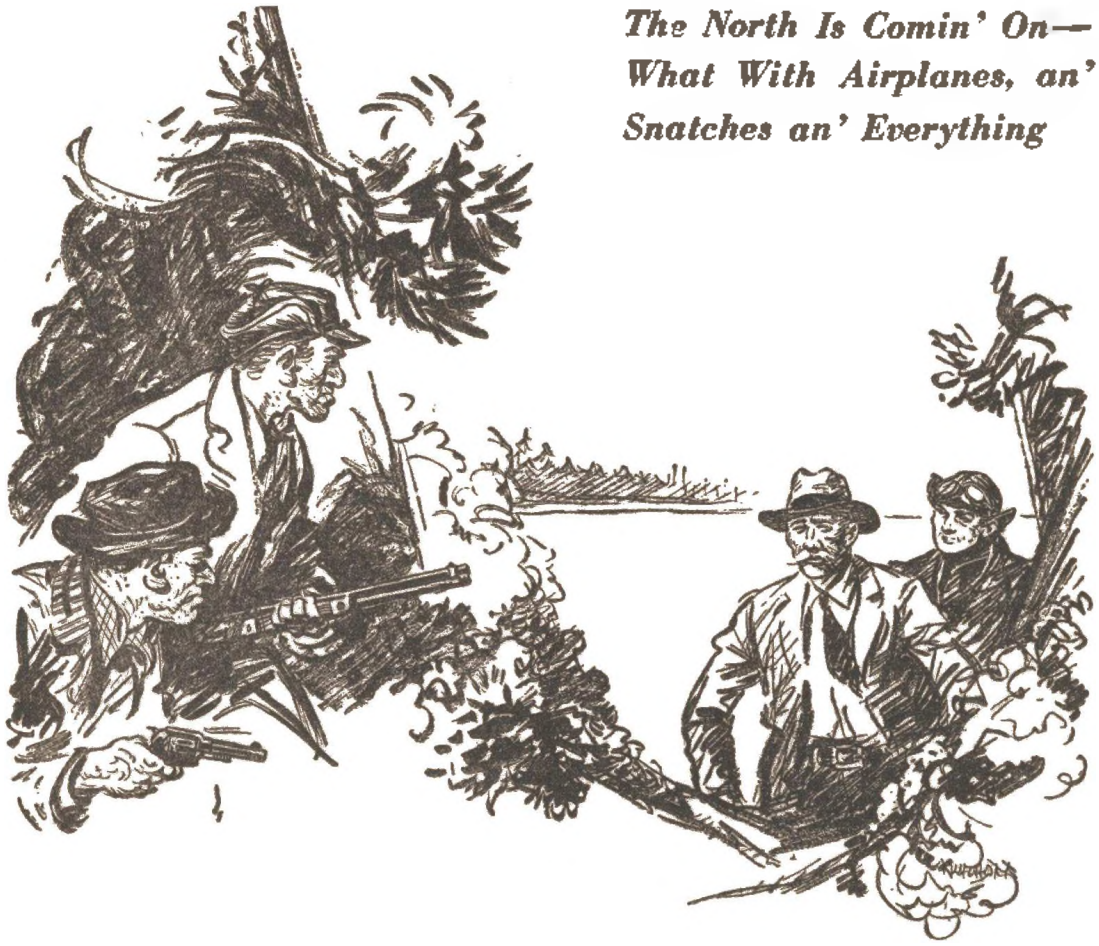
"You see my son who is in Government service also served as District Officer here at Sepitang when I was in Sandakan, recovering from fever. That was when Irving, one of your predecessors, was here in the interests of the railroad. As you know, Irving was murdered, probably by Lorgan, but Lorgan, by trickery and cunning, falsified evidence so as to place the guilt of the crime on my son.

"Lorgan held that evidence over my head, forced me to shield him and Mace. I should have refused, of course, but—my son——"

Stockton leaned forward, gripped the District Officer's hand.

"I would have done the same thing, Traynor," he said quietly.

The North Is Comin' On—What With Airplanes, an' Snatches an' Everything



MIDNIGHT RENDEZVOUS

By H. S. M. KEMP

Author of "Pay-off," "Cold-Deck Detectives," etc.

WHEN Cockeye McDonald and Bill Nelson first struck north of the Churchill and into the Cariboo Lake country, they came the hard way. That was the canoe way—paddle, pole and track-line; brawn and sweat and fatigue. Both were well past the prime of life, and they took longer on the trail than younger men might have done. But slowness paid; leisurely travel gave them the opportunity to check over stuff that otherwise they might have passed by. On the south shore of Cariboo Lake they struck it rich, and in due time sold out to the Consolidated for a sweet hundred and twenty thousand. Bill Nelson took his share and turned south; Cockeye stayed on—to throw out his chest and brag to the mob who followed the strike.

Canoe travel had done that; but since then things had changed. Now muti-motored airplanes came and went; and the men at the mine and the hangers-on at Cariboo Camp paid the thunder-birds little heed.

One came roaring in now, rattling the dishes in Windy Jessup's Eating Place and shaking the earth with the vibration of its four-hundred-horse engine; and all old Cockeye McDonald did was to grunt, turn on his stool and remark to Fat Morris that

Ken Borden 'd be tearin' the chimney down next.

So much then, for the familiarity that breeds contempt; but when the door of the eating-house opened and a heavily-built, grizzled man in city garb stepped in, Cockeye stared in amazement.

"I'll be a dirty name," he gasped, "if it ain't Bill Nelson!"

Grizzled Bill Nelson came across, almost slammed Cockeye from his perch on the stool, grabbed his hand and pumped it.

"Cockeye McDonald—scrawnier an' homelier than ever!" He grinned fondly at his one-time partner and pumped his hand again. "How th' devil are yuh?"

Before Cockeye could reply, two more people—a man and a girl—stepped in. Bill Nelson turned. "C'mere, Kay!" he ordered. "Meet an ol' sidekick of mine. You've heard me tell of Cockeye McDonald."

Bill Nelson failed to say just who the girl might be; but there was no need of it. She had Bill Nelson's black wealth of hair, his contrasting blue eyes; and the frankness of her smile and the set of her chin could only have been inherited from Bill himself.

Cockeye shook her hand, was introduced to Fred Connors; and Fat Morris was made acquainted with everyone else.

"Fat," explained Cockeye, "ain't a partner of mine, but he's dang well ornery enough to be. We hive up together in the winter here in camp, and just now he's down on a visit. But you'll like him, if you don't get to know him too well."

Fat stammered, scowled and blushed; and Cockeye turned an appraising glance on the girl's escort, Fred Connors.

Judged by his looks, Connors didn't seem to be the kind of a feller that Bill Nelson would drag around. He was too arrogant, too handsome, although Cockeye decided that the wave in his hair had come from a beauty-shop. But perhaps he was something to the girl; and a glimpse Cockeye had of a diamond on her third finger seemed to support his suspicion.

COCKEYE turned back to Bill Nelson. "Sorta nice seein' all you folks," he remarked. "But you never come all this way just to visit me."

"We didn't," confessed Bill Nelson with a grin. "Fact is, some feller's got a mineral-showin' up north that I want to take a look at. It might pay."

"Still grubbin' for gold," grunted Cockeye.

"Oh, sure. My little stake would all be gone by now, if I didn't keep an eye open for some gilt-edged investments."

"You oughta try the simple life, like me. But you will go charterin' planes and tearin' around the country——"

"I ain't charterin' no plane—except from here on," pointed out Bill Nelson. "We got what you might call a lift in Ken Borden's mail-plane. He's swingin' west from here, of course, and over to Bear Lake. Joe Casey's the feller I got hired."

"Thasso? Ever see that plane of Joe's?"

"Why, no. What's the matter with it?"

"Nothing's the matter with it, except it's a two-place Moth. One of you can go along as passenger, but you sure won't squeeze the bunch of you in."

Bill Nelson frowned. "I thought he had a big cabin job?"

"So he has. But that's off on some charter proposition, and won't be back for a week or ten days."

Bill Nelson looked at his daughter and Fred Connors. "Hear that? Seems like this is a freeze-out as far's you are concerned. Figure you can kill time if I went off alone?"

Connors shot a proprietary glance at Kay Nelson and a faint smile broke over his handsome features. "What say, Kay? Think you could stand my company?"

The girl shrugged. "It's a case of Hobson's choice."

Watching this, Cockeye wondered if he had doped things out correctly. The girl

did not seem very enamored of Freddy Connors. And if she wasn't, whose was the ring she was wearing?

HE FOUND out soon. Bill Nelson and the others ordered up one of Windy Jessup's man-size meals. Cockeye, who had a letter to send up on the mail-plane to Bear Lake, wandered down to the wharf in quest of Ken Borden.

Ken Borden, youngest of the Airways all-ace pilots, was tinkering at his motor in preparation for a start. In gray-flannel pants, silk shirt and windbreaker, he looked more like a bank-clerk out on vacation than the master of a thirty-thousand-dollar plane. But as Cockeye showed up alongside, he pitched a pair of pliers into the cabin, dropped to a pontoon and smiled up at him.

"Hi, Chief! How's every little thing with you?"

"Not too bad for an old-timer," answered Cockeye. He pulled out his letter and handed it across. "Give this to Jerry Zigman up at Cameron Bay, Ken; and here's two-bits for the postage."

"Never mind the two-bits," grinned Ken. "Have this one on the Government." He shoved the letter into a pocket of his shirt and hopped up alongside Cockeye. "Met an old pal, eh?"

"Bill Nelson? Yeah. But tell me, Ken, before I die wonderin'—who's the bull-flapper he's got in tow? Friend of his?"

Ken Borden's face suddenly darkened. "No friend of his, but a friend of Kay's."

"Thasso? And somethin' tells me," grinned Cockeye, "that he ain't no particular friend of yours."

"I hate his guts!"

Cockeye digested this sudden outburst. At length he smiled cannily. "Up here in this Garden of Eden we hear things. Some of em's just rumors; some of 'em ain't. And seems to me I heard tell that Miss Kay Nelson was steppin' out with a young feller that flew an airyplane. But mebbe you wouldn't know."

Ken Borden laughed thinly. "She was, once upon a time."

"And who quit—she or him?"

"Him. He knew when he'd worn out the 'Welcome' on the mat."

Cockeye lugged a battered pipe from his pocket and chipped tobacco from a plug with a horny thumb-nail. "Are you sure he wore it out?"

"Sure. Fred Connors had a hot line and winning ways. The feller we're talking about had neither."

Cockeye sniffed. "This other feller couldn't have wanted her very bad."

"What d'you mean?" flared Ken. "I wanted her more than I've ever wanted anything!"

"*You* wanted her?" Cockeye's blue eyes went wide with innocence. "Then you was the feller I heard of? Well now! And you let her run out on you without puttin' up a scrap?"

Ken gritted his teeth. "Are you crazy? I didn't consider myself. If Kay was going to be happier with Connors, I wasn't going to be the stumbling-block!"

"Happier with a punk like him!" jeered Cockeye. "Connors said 'Boo!' at you; and you put yer tail between yer legs and run! And if Kay's anything like her old man, I understand her. She'd fight for a pal; and she expected a pal to fight for her. And when you wouldn't, well, she figured you didn't think she was worth it." Cockeye paused. "I don't know so much about wimmen; but they ain't so different from men. They admire guts!"

Ken Borden went white with anger. "They're hard words, Cockeye!"

"And you need 'em. I've only seen Kay and that Connors guy for five minutes, but I can read 'em both. He's struck on her, all right, but she ain't in no trance over him.

"If I was you, I'd smear that louse out of the way and take what the Lord had sent me." He paused to light his pipe; then gave a short nod preparatory to walking off. "Now don't get sore, Ken. Them's

pearls of wisdom I handed you. Figure it out for yourself."

BY THE time he worked his way back to Windy Jessups, Cockeye found that Joe Casey had joined the gang. Ex-barnstormer and stunt-flier, folks claimed that Casey kept his two planes going and himself in money by the chances he took. Lean, hard, reckless, he now lounged against the counter, concluding his arrangements with Bill Nelson.

"Six in the morning will suit me fine. And how long you figure we'll be gone?"

Bill Nelson could not definitely say. "Like I wrote you, it's a matter of guesswork. I don't want to waste no time, but I don't want to be in too much of a hurry and pass up a bet. Still, we'd oughta be back some time day after to-morrow."

"Fair enough," agreed Joe Casey. "I'll see you at six o'clock sharp."

After Casey had gone, Cockeye slid onto the stool beside Bill Nelson.

"Where's this stuff you're goin' to see, Bill?"

"Up on Blueberry River. Feller named Schneider staked it."

Cockeye nodded. "Fritz Schneider. Darn good rock-man. If Fritz thinks she's worth while, chances are she is. Seems to me, though, that Fritz pulled on for Yallerknife six weeks ago. Anyways, that's what I heard."

"You heard wrong," Bill Nelson told him. "I got a letter from him only a week before I come away. He was in Edmonton then; but said he'd meet me up at High Hill Portage on the seventeenth. That's to-morrow, ain't it?"

"Yuh." Cockeye's gaze strayed to the girl and Fred Connors who had finished their meal and were now waiting near the door. "And these folks—what happens to them while you're gone?"

"Dunno," answered Bill Nelson. "I was sorta figurin' on you tellin' me. Fer campin' arrangements, that is."

Cockeye combed his stringy beard. "Connors, of course, can crawl in here with us. And Kay, she can stay with the Curly Frasers."

"The Curly Frasers?" repeated Bill Nelson. "Some new breed of dog?"

"Mrs. Curly Fraser," Cockeye told him, "was the step-daughter of old Jud Ambridge—him that Joe Parrot murdered over a gold-claim. She come in here to stay with Jud, and when she couldn't get back ended up by marryin' young Curly Fraser."

"And you, prob'ly," suggested Bill Nelson, "had a hand in the affair?"

"The weddin', or the rest of it?" grinned Cockeye. "Well, we gen'ly look after the downtrodden. And as this is our camp, Bill—the camp that you'n me started—I always figured it was up to me she runs straight. Anyhow, till the Police come along and handle things. But let's go see them Curly Frasers."

Arrangements concluded for the stay of Kay Nelson, Cockeye came back and inaugurated a poker-party to celebrate Bill's return. The party broke up as the owls went to bed; which gave Bill Nelson just time to get ready for his trip.

Right on the dot of six o'clock, Joe Casey's plane took off; and Cockeye, feeling that he should do something to entertain the visitors, arranged with Fat Morris a fishing-party to Pickerel Point, ten miles up the lake.

Had the handsome Fred Connors elected to stay in camp Cockeye could have enjoyed himself. Fat ran the engine; and there were some points that Cockeye

wished to discuss with the girl. But with Connors around, enjoyment was banished. By the time they arrived home in the evening, Cockeye's feelings towards the man were those of plain disgust.

But he had to provide him with a night's lodging. He mentioned the matter to Fat, while Connors was outside cleaning his twenty-dollar shoes. "I take it," he suggested, "you'll hit the boards to-night in favor of our distinguished guest?"

Fat's jaw dropped. "Me?" he managed to croak. "Sleep on the boards—*fer him?* If that hummin'-bird come crawlin' to my place on hands and knees, freezin' to death in the winter, I wouldn't cut boughs so's he could bed himself down under a jack-pine!

And mebbe I didn't get a bellyful of him to-day! He wiped his feet on the gal and squinted down his nose at me like I was a Dogrib Injun. Th' devil with him! If the floor ain't good enough, let him go hang himself on a nail!"

Cockeye felt the same way, but as host he had to do something about it. So he borrowed a folding-cot from Windy Jessup and fixed Connors as comfortably as possible in a corner of the room.

THEY awaited the arrival of Joe Casey's plane through the following day, but it failed to show up. Cockeye soothed the girl's fears by saying a feller couldn't check over no gold-proposition in five minutes. He got away with the suggestion, until sundown. Then he himself began to feel a trifle uneasy. As a pilot, Joe was as good as they came. True, he took long chances; but the weather was fine and clear, and Cockeye could not see where any chances existed. He talked the matter over with Fat.

"Me, I never did hold with them danged airyplanes," he told him. "If the Lord intended a feller to fly He'd have rigged him with wings and feathers in his tail. And that kite that Joe runs around in ain't nothin' but haywire and canvas. If they don't show up to-morrow, feller, we're goin' to hunt 'em."

Cockeye did not sleep well that night. Nor, apparently, did Fred Connors. Cockeye heard him muttering and twisting; and towards dawn Connors put on his shoes, lit a cigarette and went outside. But almost at once he came galloping in, to shake Cockeye roughly by the arm.

Cockeye, trying to sleep, asked what in blazes was the trouble. Connors still shook him. "Get up! Look what I found—held down by a rock on the porch!"

Cockeye pulled himself to an elbow. "Rock? Porch? What's the matter with you?"

"This paper, man! They've got old Bill!"

Through his hangover from lack of sleep, Cockeye managed to make out some sort of paper being shoved under his nose. Grumblingly he reached down his steel-rimmed glasses, twisted the paper so that the early morning light fell full on it and spelled the thing out.

> "If you want Nelson back alive, money talks. Don't do anything yet, but your orders will come soon. Wait for them."

Cockeye read the note twice, and a scowl of mixed perplexity and unbelief sat on his face.

"What the devil's all this?" he demanded. "Someone pullin' a gag?"

"I don't know!" averred Connors. "All I can tell you is I found it outside."

Cockeye sat up, let out a yell at Fat Morris in the opposite bunk and shoved the note across to him. "Here; you got no brains. Tell me what this means!"

It took some moments for Fat Morris' slow-moving faculties to adjust themselves; then he grabbed the paper and gave it his attention. He read, scowled, and looked blank-faced at Cockeye.

"My gosh! Somebody's got Bill and Joe! Yeah; 's what it is. A snatch!"

Cockeye snorted. "Them detective sto-

ries you bin readin'— Still, let's have a look at her ag'in."

Fat Morris heaved himself out of the bunk, kindled a fire and set on the coffee-pot. Connors began to get dressed. Finally, "I dunno what to make of her," grunted Cockeye. "She looks genuine enough. Where did you say you found her?" he asked Connors.

"Right on the porch. A rock was holding it down, in case the wind blew it away."

"And you never saw nobody?"

"Not a soul." Connors seemed to hesitate. "Should we go up and wake Miss Nelson?"

"Should we show a little sense?" snarled Cockeye. "Why wake her? She can't help. And if this note is the real McCoy, there ain't a thing to be done till them 'orders' turn up.

NOTHING more was said until Fat's coffee brewed; then after a drink all around, Cockeye got up, dressed, and began his campaign.

"To begin with," he said to Connors, "and s'posin' Bill and Joe has bin kidnapped, just who knew Bill was comin' north?"

"Everybody. At least, it was common knowledge. Bill had all kinds of friends in the city, and he kept it no secret from them."

"And how long ago did he make up his mind to take this trip?"

"Two or three weeks."

"And in two or three weeks," grunted Cockeye, "a lot of fellers have come north. Any of the dozen that calls themselves prospectors and pulled into here could be responsible."

"And where did the snatch take place?" asked Fat Morris.

"Where d'you think?" retorted Cockeye. "Up in the clouds? On High Hill Portage, of course—where Joe was headin' for and where they come down. Fifty-five miles north of here."

"Mebbe you're right," admitted Fat. "Whoever done it could have pulled the job, then struck south yesterday. The boys is prob'ly held up-country some place, and one of the bunch come in to see to the reward. Seems like I heard a canoe-and-kicker pull in last night soon after dark."

"I heard it, too," agreed Cockeye.

With the coffee out of the way, Fat set a skillet on the stove and cut hunks of bacon. He took a wash, indicated basin and towel to Connors, and combed his rambling hair. He and Cockeye wolfed the meal, but Connors balked at the solidness of it. Connors said, "All I ever eat for breakfast is grapefruit and toast. Anyway, since this affair has turned up, I don't feel a bit hungry.

Cockeye, spearing another piece of bacon, grunted in sarcasm. "Feller's got to keep up his stren'th in spite of it all. Make toast outa bannock. And you'll find the grapefruit in the prune-bowl."

Connors bit off a retort, and helped himself to a second cup of coffee.

"And now," decided Cockeye when the meal was finished, "we're goin' to work. Fat, you 'n me for High Hill Portage to hunt sign. Connors, you stick around till the time wimmen-folks gets outa bed. When's that—noon? Then you'd best spill the beans to Kay Nelson. Treat 'er easy. Tell her we'll have old Bill back 'fore she's begun to miss him. And above all, don't let the news of this happenin' get around."

"But how can I tell her without Mrs. Fraser knowing?" asked Connors.

"Mrs. Curly's all right. So's Curly. What I mean is, don't go runnin' up to Windy Jessups and tellin' that bunch about it. The fewer that knows, the better."

BY THE time that the rest of the camp and the day-shift over at the Mine were thinking of rolling-out, Cockeye and Fat Morris, in Fat's engine-powered canoe, were well out on Cariboo Lake. They crossed the fifteen-mile stretch, turned up

the Blueberry River, and at three in the afternoon had arrived at their destination.

High Hill was a well-known landmark. A little beyond it a portage left the Blueberry River and struck off into the tangle of birch and balsams. Cockeye had never traveled the full length of the portage, but he understood it led into a succession of lakes. But before they actually reached the portage they caught sight of Joe Casey's biplane, grounded on shore at the portage foot.

Alongside at last, Fat Morris shut off the outboard motor. "Anyways," he remarked cheerfully, "they never swiped the plane."

They got out, and almost at once Cockeye pointed to a groove in the pebbly shore at water-line. He said nothing, for there was nothing to say. The groove indicated the spot where a canoe had beached.

Other tracks were here, but in the pebbly rubble they were too indistinct to be of much assistance. Cockeye, with Fat at his heels, turned up the bank.

On the grassy sward at the edge of the bush they found a well-used boiling place. There were the dead embers, the stick to hang the kettle on, empty bean-cans and an equally empty tobacco sack. Beyond the fireplace was the portage. Cockeye gave a grunt. "There ain't so much here, feller. Let's go ahead."

Up the narrow trail the ground was softer and held the imprint of booted feet; but the prints of men going away were overlapped by others coming in Cockeye's direction. Cockeye frowned, but he walked on with Fat Morris till he came to a spot that gave signs of an evident struggle. Small saplings were broken; the grass was crushed and bruised. And lying off to one side was a bloodstained club.

Fat Morris circled the spot, his eyes missing nothing. He dropped to a knee, parted the grass; stood up again.

"Well?" asked Cockeye at length. "What d'you make of it?"

"Can't tell much," grunted Fat. "Seems like they started off up this portage, then got into a scrap with some other guys. I figure by the look of that club that they got beat up pretty bad, and that these other guys had to carry 'em back to the fire. The tracks goin' back are punched a lot deeper than them comin' up."

Cockeye grunted in admiration for Fat's astuteness. "Anything else?"

"Not that I can see; except it must have been some fight. Bill ain't young no more, but Joe ain't no pushover."

"Prob'ly them guys snuck up on 'em. Might have sandbagged 'em before they knew anything about it."

At the boiling-place again, Fat made another careful survey. Inch by inch, on hands and knees, he went over the ground. He combed the ashes, sniffed at the bean-cans, pocketed the tobacco-sack; and at last came across a couple of cigarette butts. These he studied for a long minute, then handed them to Cockeye.

"Hand-rolled," he observed. "And from wheat-straw papers. I ain't seen a wheat-straw paper since I come north five years ago. You'd better keep 'em," he advised Cockeye. "May come in useful."

But there seemed little more to be gained at the present. "All we know," said Cockeye, "is that some fellers landed here in a canoe, sandbagged Bill and Joe Casey, then prob'ly slung 'em in the canoe and hauled 'em away some place." He looked around him for a moment. "Might's well take a look over to Fritzie's and see what's there."

FRITZ SCHNEIDER'S camp was a quarter-mile distant along the river-front; and they found it deserted. The door was padlocked, and there was no indication that Schneider had been around for weeks. Cockeye looked through the window, and the interior seemed to be as desolate as the outside.

"All hooey," said Cockeye, "about him havin' a date with old Bill. Schneider hit off for Yallerknife six weeks ago—just

like I said he did." And then deliberately. "If you can't tell me which way that canoe went, we might as well hit for home ag'in."

But at the portage Cockeye spared time to clamber up and take a look into the cockpit of the Moth. He found Casey's flying-helmet hanging by a strap from the instrument-board. On the seat was an opened package of cigarettes. With the cigarettes was an air-map folded back to show the line of flight that Casey had been on. All these things seemed to indicate that Joe Casey had had no intention of leaving his ship for more than a few minutes at the most; and now he had been absent for more than twenty-four hours.

As Cockeye dropped to the ground, his leathery face was drawn into lines of anxiety.

Fat, ready for the start, had to call to him twice before he was heard. Then Cockeye turned, slowly.

"Don't be in a rush, feller," he told him. "Mebbe I got a new angle on this case."

Fat waited. "Well?" he asked at length.

"Somethin' tells me we needn't waste no time huntin' for Joe Casey."

"Why not?"

"Joe's gone where the good fliers go. Look at things this way," suggested Cockeye. "There's money in kidnappin' Bill Nelson, but only a load of grief in kidnappin' Joe. Joe's bad medicine in a scrap; he wouldn't be took prisoner without puttin' up a holler. And to clinch all, that there kidnap-note never made no mention of him."

"Mebbe," suggested Fat, "they overlooked him."

"You don't overlook Joe Casey," was Cockeye's pointed rejoinder. "If these kidnappers we're dealin' with are the rats that all other kidnappers appear to be, they prob'ly knocked Joe out and dumped him in the river to make things safer for themselves."

"I hope you're wrong," said Fat, and shook his head.

"I hope I am," agreed Cockeye. "But knowin' Joe as I do, and thinkin' of that bloodstained club and the look of his plane, I don't like things a bit."

IT WAS dark when the two men reached Cariboo Lake again, and they found Connors and the girl waiting for them in Cockeye's shack. Kay Nelson sprang up as they walked in, but as Fat kicked the door shut behind him, the hope that had glowed in the girl's eyes went out.

"No good news," announced Cockeye. "But no bad news, neither. We found Joe's plane, and the marks of where a gang had bin waitin'. By what we saw, your dad was loaded into a canoe and took off to some hideout. And you folks —anythin' doin' here?"

Kay Nelson picked up a piece of paper from the table and handed it over.

"Our 'orders'," she said laconically. "Read them."

Cockeye's tufted brows lifted. "Read 'em to me."

Walking over to the table and spreading the paper beneath the lamp, the girl obliged.

> "Take twenty thousand in used bills," she read, "and parcel them together. Put them on the big limestone rock on the edge of bush about 300 yards northwest of camp. Don't try any funny stuff. The mail-plane is going south tomorrow. Fly out on her, and have the money in the spot mentioned by midnight of the 21st. Don't try to double-cross us, or we'll kill Nelson before we kill you."

Fat Morris broke in with a short-clipped oath. "Before they kill us!" he snarled. "Let 'em come out in the open and talk killin'! Where," he asked the girl, "did this come from?"

"I don't know," she replied frankly. "Fred and I went over to Mrs. Fraser's tonight, and when we came back it was on the table here."

"And, of course, you never saw nobody?"

"Only the ordinary men around the camp."

Cockeye broke in. "Same old stuff, and nothin' to work on." He took off his hat and chucked it on a bunk. "Twenty thousand," he murmured. "That's a lot of money. Dad got it?" he asked the girl.

"I would imagine so."

"And can we get it?"

"If we have to."

Cockeye gave a deprecating shrug. "Any time a man's life is stacked ag'in twenty thousand simoleons, it's good policy to play into the dealer's hand. In this case, the fellers that have kidnapped your dad hold all the trumps. It might not pay to try to double-cross 'em. Kidnappers play a tough game the tough way."

Connors gave a sneering laugh. "Just like that! Hand 'em over twenty thousand the first time they ask for it!"

COCKEYE'S jaw stiffened, but before he could speak Kay Nelson cut in. Pin-points of anger were blazing in her eyes. Anger flushed her face.

"You're insulting, Fred," she told Connors. "Mr. McDonald is only trying to help."

"It's the viewpoint," observed Cockeye, dryly. "I'm thinkin' of your dad's safety; he's thinkin' of his coin."

"And what does that mean?" said Connors, angrily.

But Kay, catching a glimpse of Fat Morris' bunched fists, spoke quickly.

"Don't let's quarrel. We were talking about the money this gang demands. I can get it, but how?"

"Fat and me was figgerin' to have a talk with Tad Evans," said Cockeye. "Tad is Joe's mechanic and has a pilot's license. If he agrees, we'll run him up to High Hill Portage and have him bring Joe's plane home. He should be back fairly early; then you can fly out with him instead of waitin' for Ken Borden."

"And will I have time?"

"Oh, sure. The twenty-first is two days away." He turned to Fat Morris. "We'll do that—go down and see Tad."

But on the way there, Cockeye dropped into Windy Jessup's. Windy's place was momentarily deserted. Stepping inside, Cockeye cast a glance over the stock of candy and tobacco that occupied a couple of shelves behind the lunch counter. Not finding what he wanted, he and Fat pushed on into the rear.

Windy Jessup, fat, red-faced over the cookstove, turned a glaring eye on the two intruders. Ex-lumber camp chef, Windy retained strict notions regarding the sanctity of his kitchen.

"Outa here, you bums!" he began to yell. "Feller can't work—"

"All right; all right!" soothed Cockeye. "We won't keep you long. All I want is some cigarette-papers."

Windy scowled. "You? Cigarette-papers?" He stared at Cockeye in open suspicion. "Yer last teeth gone so's you can't hold a pipe no more?"

"That's right," agreed Cockeye. "I figger on rollin' me own."

Windy waddled around the counter, wiping his hands on an apron as he came. "Any special kind?"

"Yuh. Wheat-straw."

"Wheat-straw?" Windy shook his head. "Ain't got such a thing in the place."

"Ain't, eh?"

"And ain't had since I bin here. They went outa fashion with tommyhawks and flintlock guns. But at that," allowed

Windy, "it seems like they're comin' in ag'in."

"Yeah?"

"Feller named Mead—Sam Mead—told me to order him a whole carton. Said he was about out of 'em and the white ones was bad fer his azmer. Got a weakness in the throat, y'unndestand."

But Cockeye was little concerned with the ailments of Sam Mead. What he was concerned with was the man's whereabouts. "And who's Sam Mead?" he asked Windy.

"Prospector. Got a claim he's workin' up on Trout Narrers." Then Windy Jessup suddenly frowned. "But you don't want wheat-straw papers no more 'n I want the seven-years' itch. What's in the air, Cockeye?"

Cockeye grinned as he sniffed delicately. "Skunk, ain't it? Or mebbe it's somethin' you're cookin' up fer breakfast? But that's all right, Windy. I'll see you ag'in."

Outside, Fat Morris chuckled. "You'll never make no detective. You're too poor a liar. But your attempt at it showed us a lead. Trout Narrers ain't no more 'n ten miles from High Hill Portage. I'd like to call on this cigareet-rollin' pelican; this Sam Mead."

"Me, I'm hankerin' for the privilege myself," Cockeye assured him. "But our first callin' is on Tad Evans."

Tad Evans, red-headed and bulldog-jawed, was loafing in a chair in Joe Casey's shack, reading a technical magazine.

"Yes, siree!" greeted Cockeye, barging in unannounced. "How 'bout goin' places this fine night?"

Evans lowered the magazine sufficiently to scowl over the top of it. "Do what?"

"I was askin' how'd you like to take a li'l trip up to High Hill and bring Joe's ship home. Joe," explained Cockeye, "wouldn't appear to be in no position fer to bring her home himself."

Evans scowl deepened. "I never was no good at riddles, me. So what?"

"Joe's got himself kidnapped or killed. That's what. Him and the feller he flew up north." In a dozen or so sentences, Cockeye apprised Tad Evans of past events. He swore him to secrecy about them, then made his suggestion. "Me 'n Fat has just come back from High Hill. To a feller that don't know nothin' more about airyplanes than he does of Cain's wife, yer ship looks okay. But she sure needs someone to fly 'er home. Furthermore, we was wonderin' how you'd like to take Miss Nelson out to town and bring back the money that's needed?"

Evans debated the point. "I guess so. Sure," he agreed. "When you want to start?"

"Right now!"

SO, FOR the second time in sixteen hours, Cockeye and Fat Morris struck north.

The chill of early dawn had given place to a steaming sunrise when they reached the stranded plane. Tad Evans checked gas and oil, swung into the open river and went roaring away for Cariboo Lake. Cockeye and Fat Morris had other fish to fry.

For five minutes or so after Tad Evans had left, Cockeye stood on the river shore laying plans and stating his fears.

"We don't want to go crashin' into this like no bull in a china-shop. Like I told the gal, kidnappers is tough. They didn't hesitate about usin' a club on Bill and Joe; so when I say we gotta go sorta delicate, I ain't scarin' you with no bogey-man."

"You ain't scarin' me nohow," averred Fat Morris stoutly. "All I want is to connect with the guys that talked of killin' me. And if they're up at Sam Mead's—"

"*If* they're up at Sam Mead's," emphasized Cockeye.

"I said, if."

"And that's the point. We ain't got no guarantee we'll find Bill Nelson at Mister Mead's at all—"

"But we're sure willin' to take the chance!"

"Very well, Fightin' Man," sighed Cockeye. "The sooner we start, the better."

They made another six miles, and came to the mouth of a small stream flowing down from the northeast. Now, according to Fat's calculation, they would be about four miles from Trout Narrows. A down-river wind blew into their faces, but both knew that it would only be safe to use the engine for another mile. Came the time when Fat disconnected it, and both had to resort to paddle-work.

They hugged the shore of willows and drooping birches. A day-dreaming owl, scared by the canoe's approach, went flapping away over Cockeye's head. Cockeye stiffened; Fat Morris laughed. On—until the willows gave way to dense spruce and tamarack, and the flat-lying country behind them turned suddenly to bedrock and grey-granite hills.

They came to a lake. Fat reported this to be the first of the Trout Lakes, a short half-mile across. Ahead was the Narrows, through which the second Trout Lake began.

And somewhere near those Narrows, Sam Mead had his habitation. Fat decided this was a good time to go ashore for a preliminary survey.

Ten minutes he and Cockeye lay on their bellies in the bush. Inch by inch they studied the shoreline of the lake. A flock of ducks squawked on the water and a couple of loons went whistling overhead. But these were the only signs of life they could distinguish. Fat decided that nothing was to be gained by further loitering; and he was crawling to his feet when two shots rang out. Promptly he dropped back, frowning at Cockeye.

"Shotgun," muttered Cockeye. "Lookit them ducks!"

The ducks, a flock of canvasbacks, went wheeling into the air. Another shot came; and two of the birds plunged down. The next moment, from a grassy bay near at hand, a canoe took out in pursuit.

FAT and Cockeye crouched lower. The canoe held one man alone, who retrieved the ducks and headed for shore. Five minutes went by, and Fat turned to his companion. "Now our turn!"

They padded quickly, cutting diagonally across, to land fifty yards from where the man in the canoe had last been seen.

Here the bush was thick and tangled; so much so that, leading the way, Fat Morris almost blundered onto the cabin before he knew one was there.

The cabin was of equally recent and clumsy construction. Its corners had not been trimmed, flour-sacks served as windows, and a stove-pipe projected at a crazy angle from the flat, mud roof. But both men were more interested in what the shack contained than they were in its outside appearance. They heard a voice; a jarring laugh; then a moment later a man in torn and patched overalls came out carrying a water-pail and headed down the hill towards the lake.

Fat Morris let him go, then spun on Cockeye.

"You stay here. I'm goin' in."

"So'm I!" declared Cockeye. "How d'you get that way?"

As the overalled-man dipped his bucket, both made a run for the shack. Fat Morris was taking no chances. There might be one or half-a-dozen men on hand to greet him. So he sprang through the door with fists bunched, trusting that the suddenness of his charge would carry him through.

But there was no need for an attack of any sort. The lone occupant of the place was Bill Nelson.

He was sitting on the spruce-boughs with which the floor was littered. About his bloodstained head was an equally bloodstained bandage. A padlocked dog-chain hung around his neck, the chain itself attached to a staple driven into the

wall. Then he looked up, and his mouth sagged.

"Cockeye!" he managed to blurt. "You found me!"

Cockeye was on the point of answering, but Fat Morris whirled him behind the open door. "Shut up!" cautioned Fat. "He's here!"

Footsteps began to sound; they drew closer. In time they scraped in front of the door. The overalled man tramped in and set down his water-pail. But as he straightened, something exploded beneath his ear and dropped him dead in his tracks.

Cockeye gave a gasp. "You like to tear his head off!"

"I'll tear his head off and his heart out!" snarled Fat. "This beaut is one of the guys that was goin' to kill me!" Fat grabbed him by the shoulders. "Let's take a look at him, now we got the chance."

ROLLED to his back, the senseless man proved to be sandy of complexion, mean of visage, and badly in need of a shave. "Never saw the bloke before in my life," grunted Fat. "Who is he, Bill?"

"Ferget the questions," snapped Cockeye. "Find the padlock-key."

"In his pocket," offered Bill Nelson. "Frisk him."

Fat found the key, then turned Bill Nelson loose. Save for a ragged scalp-wound, Bill Nelson appeared to be little the worse for his experience. His first question was regarding Joe Casey.

Cockeye shrugged eloquently. "We can only guess at that, Bill."

"Just what I figured. It was this way," went on Bill Nelson. "We landed, and were met by that bird on the floor. I thought, of course, it was Fritz Schneider, but I find his name is Sam. Anyway, he started to lead us up the portage, then hell broke loose. Something cracked down on us, and Joe let a holler. I never had a chance; neither did Joe. Next thing, there come a biff over the bean ag'in, and I'm finished. When I come around, I'm sitting right there where you found me."

Fat was glaring at the inert figure of Sam Mead. While he looked, he caught a flutter of the man's eyes. A moment or so later, woozy-looking, Sam Mead crawled to a sitting position; and Fat Morris lit into him.

"You Sam Mead?" he demanded. "Then by th' horns o' Satan, Sam Mead's gonna talk! Where," he bellowed at him, "is Joe Casey?"

Sam Mead blinked, looked from Fat to the other men, and a sullen, stubborn expression came into his eyes.

"Won't talk, eh?" roared Fat. "Won't tell th' gen'man what he wants to know?" Big man that Sam Mead was, Fat grabbed him and slammed him on the bunk. "I'll give you just one minute," promised Fat. "Then you'll howl for the chance to tell!"

Cockeye gave a thin cackle. "My, but you're tough! Y'know," he confided to Bill Nelson, "what I like about this feller Morris is the delicate way he handles things. Nothin' hasty; nothin' too crude!" And then, with a quick change of face and voice he swung on Fat himself. "Skip it, Silly! Sam Mead ain't the talkin' kind, even if we had the time for talkin'. But there's a len'th of line over the stove. If you want to be useful, tie his hands behind him; then we'll hit out. Our chore ain't finished yet."

Fat's face darkened. "And there's a lot of questions that ain't answered yet. Gimme three minutes with him—"

"The line that I was alludin' to," insisted Cockeye, "is over by the stove. That's it; hand her across!"

WHILE in profane silence Fat Morris obeyed orders and bound his prisoner, Cockeye gave Bill Nelson the gist of what had happened in the past twenty-four hours.

"So it looks as though, Bill, you're valuable property. Right now I'm hopin'

that Kay's hittin' for Mattawap in Casey's plane for that twenty thousand."

"Twenty thousand," remarked Bill. "Do these rats think they can get away with a stunt of that sort?"

"They thought so, anyway. But it looks like they lose."

"And who's in this gang?"

Cockeye's grin was cryptic. "I ain't positive. And where the libel laws is so danged strong, it pays a feller to be more than sure before he opens his mouth."

"You got an idea?" asked Bill Nelson, incredulously.

"Several. But like Sam Mead, I ain't tellin' all I know."

They started south again, and night, velvety and star-studded, had long since settled before they reached Cariboo Lake. But this was what Cockeye McDonald most desired. For unseen, and herding their prisoner between them, they moved up to Cockeye's shack.

Connors was there alone, dozing in a chair. As the party entered, he started up. He stared, blinked rapidly, and stared again.

"Mr. Nelson! Why—good lord!" he blurted at Cockeye and Fat. "You found him!"

"Sure we found him," agreed Cockeye. "Didn't I say we would."

"And where's Kay?" asked Bill Nelson.

"Kay? Why, she flew out with Ken Borden early this afternoon."

"With Ken Borden?" repeated Cockeye. "Thought she was goin' with Tad Evans?"

"But Ken got here first."

Cockeye began to grin. "So she went with Ken, did she? Funny you didn't go along!"

"I was going to," scowled Connors. "But that heel, Borden, was going to charge me full flying-rates. Seventy-five bucks."

"Ain't it a corker!" chuckled Cockeye. "But that's the way things go. When we was youngsters back home, Bill," he told Bill Nelson, "the feller with the snappiest horse-and-buggy got the inside track. Then come the automobile; and the gals loved the smell of gasoline. But nowadays it's planes! Tell you, kid," he advised the glowering Connors. "if you ain't got a thirty-thousand-dollar kite like Ken Borden, you ain't in the swim at all!"

Fat Morris threw on a fire, and after a meal was cooked and eaten, he and Cockeye escorted their prisoner to a stout, log-walled cache in the rear of the cabin.

"I built her strong," said Cockeye, "to keep out carcajous, skunks and sech-like vermin. And what'll keep 'em out, will sure keep 'em in. That's right, Fat," he told his companion; "the lesson he taught you about the dog-chain seems to have fallen on fruitful ground. But make it a bit tighter around his neck. We don't want him pullin' out. And now to nail her solid to the wall—" But as he walked out, he had one last word of counsel for his prisoner. "The boys hereabouts, Sam, don't go regular to church—us havin' no church; but they got sure-'nuff strict ideas about what's right. If you get noisy and let 'em know I got a real kidnapper under lock-and-key, any pertection Fat and I could give you would be plumb abortive."

BUT back in the house, he and Fat and Bill Nelson went into a committee of ways-and-means. Connors, still in a sulk over Cockeye's joshing, resumed his chair, listened, but took no part in the conversation.

"This gang," said Cockeye, "are certain kidnappers and possible murderers. And we got to nail 'em. Sam Mead ain't what you'd call the garrulous type, so it's no good foolin' with him. He won't tell us who they are; so we must find out for ourselves."

"And how?" sneered Fat. "Teacup-readin', crystal-ball, or just goin' out and studyin' the stars?"

"I'll set a trap for 'em," averred Cockeye. "It's like this: unless Tad Evans talked—and I told him not to—there ain't nobody but us bunch and him that knows anythin' about the happenin'. Anyways, only us knows that Bill's bin turned loose. My idea is to go ahead with the plot, set out the money at the place indicated, then nail the contact-man when he turns up."

Fat grunted. Bill Nelson wriggled uneasily. "Only thing wrong with the picture," observed Bill, "is that this contact-guy may walk off with my money. To tell you the truth, fellers, Kay may have some little chore rustlin' that amount. Oh, I ain't broke," Bill hastened to add; "but I got irons in the fire. In the next few weeks—usin' what money I got in the bank—I figger to be worth a hundred thousand. But if anything happened to that twenty thousand, I'd be where I was five years ago."

"With a pick and a shovel and the cramps in yer shoulders. Yeah," agreed Cockeye, grinningly. "You'll be all right, however. I'll guarantee that."

They talked on until Cockeye began to nod. "Was a time," he pointed out, "when I could travel day and night and never turn a hair. But that ain't now. Me," he announced, "I'm off to bed."

He could have slept the clock around, but noon of the following day brought the return of Kay Nelson. She came in Ken Borden's plane; and Cockeye, hastily dressing himself, watched the greeting between father and daughter down on the wharf. He was just finishing a cup of cold coffee as they came into the shack.

The girl was laughing. "So we don't need the money after all!"

"Mebbe we do," replied Cockeye.

"Why should we?" she asked, with a slight frown.

"Yer dad'll explain." Cockeye picked up his hat, put it on and went down to have a talk with Ken Borden.

Ken was checking the oil in his motor. Cockeye grinned up at him.

"Pleasant trip?"

"Could have been more so," grunted Ken. "The circumstances weren't favorable."

"Yeah; guess that's right," agreed Cockeye. "But I hear you got the money."

"Finally. The bank officials were nice enough, but it took Superintendent Howe to swing things."

Cockeye grunted. "The police, eh? Too bad. If they start messin' about—"

"They won't. Not till I tell them to. Kay explained that police interference might mean her dad's life; but with Howe's agreement, the bank came across."

"And Bill had enough on hand?"

"Kay arranged for the balance."

COCKEYE loaded his pipe. "While we ain't sayin' nothin', we got a chance to find out who's back of this snatch." He explained the scheme for outwitting and capturing the contact-man, and suggested that if Ken were staying over he might like to sit in on the fun.

"I shouldn't stay," frowned Ken. "Got a freighting-job to handle as soon as I get back. Heavy machinery, going north of Flin Flon. But on the other hand," he smiled, "you're awful tempting."

"Then set in!" urged Cockeye. He became suddenly confidential. "Just between you and me, boy, I know who's back of this racket right now. All the play tonight will produce is the actual proof and the culprit."

"You *know* who is?"

"Oh, sure!" smirked Cockeye. "Your pal Connors."

"Connors?" Ken Borden looked at Cockeye as though he thought the old man was bereft of his senses. "Connors, you say? It can't be him! Why—"

"Why, nothin'!" snorted Cockeye. "Who else? He waited a moment; went on. "Connors knows old Bill's fairly well heeled. He knew weeks ago he was comin' up here. All he had to do was to hire the mugs to do the strong-arm work, and he'd collect the coin."

Ken continued to stare at Cockeye, but a look of half-doubt crossed his face.

"I can't believe it—" he began.

"Course you can't. But I ain't wrong. And I wouldn't miss the show tonight for anything. But there's this," he told Ken Borden. "Somebody's got to keep close tabs on Connors. I want him caught with the money."

"And suppose he does get away with it?"

"Won't do him no good. I told Bill, Fat and him that we'd put this money on the rock as per orders, but I ain't that foolish. We'll put a dummy parcel there. The real dough'll stay right in the shack."

THEY went up to the cabin to find a smiling Kay Nelson preparing dinner. After dinner, shared in solitude by Sam Mead, Cockeye dug out poker-chips and cards. Kay went to visit Mrs. Fraser, and the others began a four-handed game.

But time dragged till evening; then Cockeye became suddenly active.

"Now here's the idea," he explained. "The money's got to be on the rock by midnight, but whoever's goin' to nail this contact-gink has got to be there first."

"Leave that part of the job to me," growled Fat Morris. "No jughead threatens to smoke me up or keep me outa bed all night and gets away with it. I'll nail yer contact-gink!"

"You may include me," stated Ken Borden.

"And," said Connors, "me."

Cockeye was smiling as Ken volunteered his services, but at Connors' offer his smile suddenly vanished. He frowned, and tried not to; and all the time he was asking himself what had gone wrong with his deductions. Connors he had picked for the contact-man, in fact for the brains of the whole scheme. And yet here was Connors volunteering his assistance. But somehow he summoned a smile.

"Seems like y'all want the job, and I ain't envyin' you none. The m'skeeters 'll be poison, you won't be able to smoke, and all you'll have fer comp'ny is the hoot-owls and the bats. But if you are goin', you'd best get ready. Three men scattered around that rock should have her pretty well covered. I'll show up with the coin at about quarter to twelve."

So, shortly afterwards, Fat Morris, Connors and Ken Borden pulled out. Cockeye waited until eleven-thirty, when Kay Nelson returned.

"Who's got the money" he asked.

"I have," said Bill Nelson. "When Kay gave it to me I shoved it in the cupboard and kept my eye on it ever since."

"Good!" said Cockeye.

He grabbed a bunch of newspapers from the table-top, folded them and tied a string around them. Bill Nelson looked on.

"What's the big idea?" he asked.

Cockeye grinned. "You never thought I'd take chances with your dough, did you? I ain't that crazy. In the dark, this bundle of papers 'll pass for anything. It's good enough bait fer the rats we're after."

"Then why the devil didn't you say so before?" demanded Bill Nelson. "You ain't got no regards for a feller's nerves."

Cockeye completed his preparations and reached for his hat, only to notice Bill Nelson doing likewise. He frowned, said to Bill, "You ain't in on this!"

"No? Then who's kidnappin' is it, anyway?"

"That ain't the arg'ment. There's Kay

to be thought of. And if you like the idea of her bein' left here alone, I don't."

Bill Nelson seemed to waver. "Somethin' in that," he admitted, grudgingly. "Maybe I'd better stay."

"Maybe you'd better," agreed Cockeye; and he pushed on out.

The night was dark and clear, but in the high altitude a streak of faint coloring still remained in the northwest. Cockeye turned into the bush directly behind the cabin, and from there worked his way to parallel the lake.

Twice he stopped in his tracks to listen. All he heard was the screeching of a pair of little owls and the thundering of a distant rapid. He went on, and when he judged himself to be near the limestone rock indicated in the kidnap-note, he quit the bush to come out on the shore. His eyes were growing more accustomed to the darkness. He could see the lattice of the spruce against the sky; and at last he made out the bulk of the rock.

HIS nerves tingled a bit. Whoever the contact-man might be—and it certainly could not now be Connors—he would be a man who played safe. He might be at the rock ahead of him. He might also be a bird who played very safe, the sort who subscribed to the theory that dead men told no tales. Cockeye thought of the disappearance of Joe Casey; and his nerves tingled more than ever. But in a moment or two he reached the rock, placed his parcel on it, and turned hurriedly back along shore.

A hundred yards away he had the feeling that eyes were spying on him. It was an uncanny feeling; something that made him quicken his steps. Cockeye wanted no knife between the shoulder-blades; but at the end of his second hundred yards the feeling had disappeared and cold logic took command.

Certainly, he argued, the contact-man would be watching him. The guy would be on the lookout for a bum play. He would want to be sure the coast was clear before he made a move towards lifting the parcel from the rock. And feeling himself safe, Cockeye suddenly quit the shore and began to retrace his steps through the bush.

He wanted to be in at the kill; even though he had backed the wrong horse in picturing Connors as the cuplrit, there would be some satisfaction in nailing the real guy. He moved hastily for the first few yards, slowed down for the next, and made the remaining distance as soundlessly as a bush-Indian. Suddenly, nearing the rock, his heart almost quit. Something grabbed him by an ankle, yanked him earthward and slammed a big hand over his mouth. A voice breathed in his ear; and he almost fainted from relief when he recognized the voice as that of Fat Morris.

Fat was speaking from a one-inch range. "Freeze, chump! Feller comin' up th' shore!"

Turning his head as much as Fat's hand would allow him, Cockeye caught the vague outline of something twenty yards away at water's edge. Ordinarily he would have missed it; but the figure was silhouetted against the faint streak in the sky.

He crouched down, and Fat gave him his freedom.

The figure advanced. It hesitated; looked around. Cockeye thought of a wary old fox approaching a trap. There was a sudden sprint, and the figure passed not five feet away.

Fat leaped to the kill. Bellowing hoarsely, his arms went out. Cockeye heard the crash of bodies thudding to the ground. Connors lunged in. Beyond the rock came the beam of Ken Borden's searchlight. Ken's voice, "This parcel any good? Or shall I chuck it away?"

"Chuck it away!" ordered Cockeye. "She's a dummy, anyhow."

Fat was cursing and grunting through his teeth. His big fist was pumping. At

each downward drive, Cockeye caught a sodden, squashy sound.

More thudding, more crackling of underbrush; then Ken Borden's light snapped on again.

The light showed Fat Morris struggling up; Connors, bending over something that failed to move; and Cockeye, demanding a look at the gink.

"You, Fat!" ordered Cockeye. "Who the devil is he?" Then, as Fat dragged the unmoving figure into the open—*"Joe Casey!"*

THEY were back in the cabin again. Casey lay sprawled on a bunk, still unconscious, unlovely, his hands tied to the side-poles. Mystification sat on the faces of Bill Nelson and Kay; Cockeye seemed puzzled by it all.

"Who'd have figured on Joe Casey?" he muttered to any who might answer him. "Who'd have figured on Joe?"

Connors gave a thin laugh. It was taunting, spiteful. "Something wrong with your reckoning?"

Cockeye acknowledged it. "Yeah."

Fat's thoughts, however, were running on a different plane. He said to Cockeye, "What was this about a dummy package? Wasn't it real dough down there?"

"No," Bill Nelson answered. "That's locked up in the cupboard. The dummy coin was Cockeye's scheme. And seem's like it worked!"

Connors' laugh came again. "Quite a scheme, too. But you only know the half of it. Stick around," he advised, "till I come back. I'll show you the rest of it then." He walked out, leaving four very puzzled people behind him.

Fat frowned; looked at Bill Nelson. "What's he mean by that?"

Bill had no answer; and Cockeye ventured none. For in reality, Cockeye was beginning to feel vague pains of unrest. It looked as though he had not only misjudged but underestimated this young Mister Connors. Connors' grin, as the man walked out, had been self-satisfied; the grin, decided Cockeye, of the cat who swallowed the canary. What did Connors know that Cockeye didn't know himself?

Then he heard Bill Nelson speaking.

"Simple enough, when you see how it was done. This sidewinder in the meat-cache, this Sam Mead, went ahead of me on the portage and Casey trailed along in the rear. It was Casey that took the first crack at me, and Casey that finally laid me out. There wasn't more'n two of 'em in the play—Sam Mead, and Casey himself."

"And Joe Casey," cut in Fat Morris, "was the feller we heard pullin' in that night with the canoe and kicker. Remember me tellin' you I heard one pull in?"

"Yeah," nodded Cockeye. "I heard it, too."

"Then Joe hung around the camp some place, and slipped us them kidnap notes."

"But didn't you tell me," mentioned Bill Nelson, "that you figured you had the kidnappers all lined up?"

Cockeye combed his scraggy beard. "Yeah," he confessed. He looked around to the closed door, then back again to

Bill Nelson. "Right now," he admitted, "I'm treadin' the valley of humiliation. But if I made a mistake, I'm game to stand the gaff. I picked Fred Connors."

Kay Nelson gave an involuntary little cry. "Fred Connors? How on earth could you think of him?"

Cockeye shrugged, more miserable than ever. "Dunno; but he seemed the logical party. Like I told Ken, he knew yer dad was comin' up here. It woulda bin simple for him with all the dope to work on."

"By gosh, I get it now!" Ken Borden's

voice interrupted the conversation. "Joe didn't handle this thing alone. Tad Evans is in on it, too. They had it all arranged—the kidnap, the getting of the money, and a quick fadeout in the Moth. Joe's hard up; both his ships are mortgaged from nose to tail. Give him twenty thousand dollars and he'd be hard to find!"

"And that's what Fred meant by the 'half' of it!" broke in Kay Nelson. "He saw through the scheme, and he's gone to catch Tad Evans!"

"Golly, yes!" blurted Cockeye. "C'mon; let's go lend him a hand!"

But there was no need for them to go anywhere. Connors came to them. And he came through the door with a gun in his fist and murder in his eyes.

"Right, folks!" he ordered. "Back up on the other side of the table!"

His face was pale, set. A curl of his marcelled hair hung over his forehead. And the gun, a bluish, ugly-looking automatic, seemed to cover each of the group.

"Back up, and make it fast!"

With low mutterings, with Kay Nelson dead-white of face, the group obeyed Connors' commands.

"The other half of the scheme!" Connors laughed thinly. "The best half. And that gummy-fingered rat"—indicating Joe Casey—"is left holding the bag!"

The group beyond the table hung on the man's words; they watched his every movement.

With a malicious grin at Cockeye, Connors boasted, "Sure I'm the brains of this thing! Casey was going to collect the money, we'd split, and I fly out with Tad Evans. Now Tad and I'll fly out alone!"

As though in affirmation of his statement, came the roar of Joe Casey's Moth. As they listened, the roar died to a steady thrum.

The plane was being held in check, ready for a quick getaway.

"The money in the cupboard?"

No one answered. Connors' lips tightened. He strode to the cupboard, snatched at the currency-parcel, hefted it.

"Thanks, folks!" he grinned.

COCKEYE felt sick. The money was Bill Nelson's; his last cent. All that stood between Bill and the pick and shovel again. Never before had Cockeye felt so miserable, nor so helpless. Something must be done; and there was nothing to do.

The lamp, hanging to the wall, lit up the scene with vivid clarity. It shone on the smile on Connors' lips; on the desperate look in Bill Nelson's eyes. And then Kay was speaking.

"You wouldn't do that, Fred." Her voice was low, intimate. "That money is every cent that dad has. Give it back, please, and we'll forget everything."

Connors' smile became crooked. "I'd do anything for you, my love—but hardly that!"

Cockeye caught Ken Borden's sharp intake of breath. He almost felt the man stiffen beside him. Then the long chance was born in Cockeye's mind.

It was a trick, an old on. How it occurred to him, Cockeye didn't know. But it had fooled better men than Connors in the past; and it might fool Connors here, tonight.

Cockeye was standing beside the table, Connors across it. Cockeye looked past Connors' shoulder, towards the open doorway.

"Now!" he barked. *"Jump him!"*

And Connors fell.

The man spun, gun tightly clenched in his fingers. Cockeye upset the table; drove it, crashing, against Connors' legs. As the man reeled backwards, he sprang at him.

The gun roared into the roof. A wave of humanity swept over Cockeye as Fat, Ken Borden and Bill Nelson charged in Again that night came thuds and blows. He heard oaths from Connors, dreadful

oaths for a lady's ears; then a sudden, significant calm.

Ken Borden was the first man up. "He's finished. C'mon, Fat! You and me for Tad Evans!"

They surged through the door, leaving Cockeye and Bill Nelson the task of roping the sodden Connors.

"Three prisoners already," grunted Cockeye. "And another comin' up!"

HE GLANCED at Kay Nelson, standing beside the overturned table. The girl was trembling. From the lake-front, came a sudden silence as the throbbing of the plane suddenly ceased. A few minutes later the door burst open; and Ken Borden and Fat Morris, holding the struggling Tad Evans between them, came crashing into the room.

Evans' face was blood-stained, but at sight of Connors he made a lunge. He cursed the man savagely, until Fat Morris clamped a hand over his mouth. Cockeye produced another length of rope, but it took the efforts of all before the man was subdued.

Then Cockeye stood up, shoved wispy hair from his forehead and glanced around him.

"Seems to me the shack's gettin' a bit crowded. And crowded with the wrong sort. We've one malefactor outside and three more here. When we laid out this camp, Bill, we oughta built us a jail."

Ken Borden looked at his strap-watch. "One-thirty," he announced. "And coming daylight." He seemed to ponder some point before he spoke again. "I could shove these eggs aboard and fly 'em to town."

"Yeah," agreed Cockeye. "And they *could* get loose and hammer yer brains out."

"But they can't stay here!"

"There's the Police," observed Cockeye. "And the Police have handcuffs and legirons and all that sort of riggin.' Fetch the police in here, and let them clean up their own dirty mess."

Ken crossed to the table and picked up his gloves. "If some of you boys could come along and get me swung around—" he suggested.

"Sure," agreed Cockeye. "I'm man enough for that."

They started, but at the open door Kay Nelson's voice halted them.

"You'll be coming back again?"

Ken turned. "Me?"

"Yes. You'll be coming back, won't you?"

The words were ordinary enough, but to Cockeye they held a certain significance. He glanced at Ken Borden; and it seemed that Ken was caught with the same idea. He hesitated, like a man on thin ice—afraid to take the step ahead, afraid not to. And Cockeye watched with growing impatience.

The old man fidgetted, shuffled his feet.

"Say it, y' scissorbill!" he whispered hoarsely. "Y'know what she means. Say it, if you've got the guts!"

Ken turned on him. He tried to appear indignant, insulted. But at the look on Cockeye's face he had to smile.

He turned to Kay Nelson. Strangely enough, the girl was smiling too. Ken hesitated no longer.

"Certainly," he told her, "I'll be back. All I need is the invitation!"

To Catch A Thief

By ALFRED BATSON

Author of
"Maiden Voyage," "Notorious Gentlemen," etc.

CHARLESTON Charley Prowell hastened over Garden Bridge, his handsome face wreathed in a smile at the thought that here he was again in fabulous Shanghai, though bent on a mission as innocent as the blue sky overhead.

"By jove," he ruminated, "being innocent is blawsted dull. I almost wish I'd meet George Gilbert, the C.I.D. chief, and bother the warrant he has for me. But I'll be a hundred miles away this time tomorrow."

He lighted a fresh gold-tip, squared back his shoulders and looked not without pity at the crowds of homeless, wandering Chinese who had taken refuge within the Settlement on the appearance of the Japanese army, and were now roaming the Bund in droves.

Meanwhile, he had crossed Nanking Road and found the number he wanted.

On the front of the building in Chinese characters, he read:

Kei Da Fei Wong Tzu—*"Insurance Company of Exalted Happiness in Crossing the Great River."*

This made him smile, but the smile faded as his attention was claimed by a throng of men and women who stood in the doorway, moaning and whimpering. They were farmers, rickshaw coolies and small peddlers—he knew from snatches of their conversation. Something stirred within him at their abject despair, and he was constrained to ask what the trouble was. One answered:

"Long time I have pay grave money. Now my son die and company no pay back."

"Was your son a soldier?"

"No soldier. Him die by catchee sickee."

Charley passed over a handful of coppers and pushed through the heavy doors to a long counter that ran the length of the richly furnished interior. A clerk was busy at the far end and he had to wait. In that moment he glanced idly into an inner sanctum where sat a heavy jawed, button-eyed foreigner reading a letter. He was Mr. Leviton DeMarias, one of the rich taipans of the Settlement and head of

Charleston Charley Sees A Strange Angle to the Insurance Business in Seething Shanghai

the Kei Da Fei Wong Tzu, Charley knew without being told.

IT WAS a typical scene to be found in any Shanghai hong, but something in the picture brought a veritable catch to the throat of the smoothest confidence man in the Far East. He looked and saw why—an enormous ruby in the tycoon's broad expanse of shirtfront. Charley knew that ruby, there could be none other of its size.

"Know it," his mind repeated, "jolly well do I know it. And it tells me something no one would suggest about——"

The clerk came along then and cut in on his thoughts.

"I want to insure myself," Charley said with a wide smile.

The clerk smiled back. "Ver' sorry, sir, this com'any do not insure foreigners. It for Chinese on'y. Ver' sorry."

Charley frowned. "I've never heard of an insurance company refusing foreigners."

The clerk's eyebrows arched. "Ver' sorry, sir. This com'any for Chinese on'y." With that he walked away.

Charley shrugged, started out and met the crowd of lamenting coolies again. Passing a Mex to an emaciated old crone, he said, "Your son have die too?"

"No son, I have lose hus'and," the old woman sniffed. "Yap soldier burn all food so my hus'and he starve." She looked past Charley to the ornate spaciousness inside. "Since five moons old my hus'and have pay grave money but now no can catch money back."

"Why you no go court?"

The woman wrung her hands. "Court no goodie. No can win."

Charleston Charley Prowell cursed inwardly. He was moved more than he cared to show at the plight of the unfortunate people around him and he decided abruptly to have a look into the business ethics of Mr. Leviton DeMarias. A suspicion was growing in his mind that this visit to Shanghai might not turn out the uneventful stop-over he had originally planned it to be.

NEXT door to the insurance company was the official newspaper of the Settlement. Charley went in and asked for the court records. Running through them for the past year he found DeMarias' name more frequent than any other in civil actions. One case was just like another.

The beneficiaries had sued to collect after the insured died, and DeMarias' defense had never varied: "There was no person by this name insured by my company. Here are my records."

"That's odd," Charley thought. "These Chinese are not so dumb as to sue for no reason. It doesn't make sense.

He started back toward Hongkew, the phrase beating a tattoo on his mind: "No person by this name—here are my records."

"The Chinese must have had some grounds," he persisted to himself. "Yet those records—? And why was he always so anxious for the court to see them?"

Suddenly he paused midway between the Jap sentry boxes on Garden Bridge. The whole thing had become crystal clear in a blinding flash! It was an insurance racket that could be worked in no other country but China and it explained why DeMarias' would not insure foreigners. Foreigners might sue and were likely to win. But a native—!

Charley knew that when a Chinese child was born it was given its "si" name in keeping with folklore centuries old. That name, for example, might be Wong Lo Ping—Beautiful Baby with Strong Voice. When the child was seven it got its "to" name, Bing Yang Ki—Youth Who Is Growing Like a Reed. At fourteen came the "gi" name, also indicative of its nature, Fu Tsi Pao—Boy Who Will Revere His Elders; and at twenty-one came the name it would carry for the rest of its life.

Thus if a child was insured at six under

its "si" name and died years later when known by its "gi" name, DeMarias would not technically be in error in saying he had no such name on his books.

But actually he was as crooked as the thief who stole coppers from a blind man.

"Why the cheap swindler," Charley exploded. "It's one thing to take over rich people and grafters the way I do—they can afford to lose—but to prey on ignorant and trusting coolies, by jove that isn't cricket."

FROM a brilliant blue, his eyes became pin pricks of flint and his jaw set in a rigid line.

"Regardless of the fact that if Gilbert spots me in the Settlement he can arrest me, I'm going to take this rotten DeMarias over the hurdles more thoroughly than he's ever taken a coolie. Why, that bland-faced soul of hypocrisy."

To Charley's credit, it may be stated that it was after this that he suddenly realized that DeMarias had a connection with the underworld—but at that, he breathed easier. It would be an opening wedge. The proof of this connection was in that large ruby that decorated his chest.

A week before it had come into the possession of Charleston Charley Prowell through the genius of his nimble fingers. He had filched it from one of the most beautiful Chinese women ever to grace the dance floor of Shanghai's Cathay. Charley had felt no remorse in the act, for the lady was the concubine of a general of troops who was also a renowned master of "squeeze." Many generals were of the same category. They would accept money from the government for their men, pocket the larger part of it and pay off with wordy exhortations on how soldiers should make every sacrifice to fight the common enemy, Japan.

Meanwhile the generals waxed rich. It was an old Chinese custom.

So Charley had turned Robin Hood by making the snatch, and remitting the money to the Fund for China's Wounded. He hadn't sold the ruby in the regular way because the reputable stores would ask how he came by it. Instead he'd placed it with a native fence who in turn must have disposed of it to DeMarias.

Charley began to wish now there was some way he could get that ruby back.

"By jove," he thought, "it would be blawsted humorous to sell it over again for the wounded. Oh, ra-ther."

But getting it back wouldn't be simple. Nor would it be simple to take over DeMarias. The insurance tycoon was no fool—else his racket would have been discovered long before.

CHARLEY'S mind set avidly to work as he returned to his hotel. But his plans were interrupted when underneath his door he found a large square of paper covered with Chinese characters. Calling the hallboy, he said:

"Talkee me what this piece have say."

The Chinese squinted and read. Finally, he closed the door and turned the lock.

"Him talkee Yap man all same Chinaman's f'len'; Yap man do anyt'in' for show Chinaman all same b'lothers. Him talkee Yap man do anyt'in'—"

The sentence trailed off as the boy hurled the paper in the basket and spat after it.

But Charley caught the gist of the circular. It was more Japanese propaganda to assure the natives of captured Hongkew that they no longer were under the laws of the International Settlement, but

that Japan henceforth was their sole protector.

"Any man today catch trouble this side?" he asked.

The Chinese smiled broadly. "Today British p'liceman come wantchee arres' foreign master. He make big fuss but manager say 'no can.' Then manager call Yap soldier—they t'row p'liceman out."

It was Charley's turn to smile at that. He'd figured his hideaway right as he usually figured things right. That was why he remained top man in his dangerous profession.

Here he was in a hotel within a short twenty feet of Garden Bridge and the Settlement, yet where the Settlement police would not dare come out for fear of precipitating a Japanese "incident."

The Japs thrived on incidents and every foreigner in Shanghai knew that if a good one came along they might use it as an excuse to take over the whole foreign quarter, in addition to Hongkew which they had already grabbed.

Realizing this, and also that he was a foreigner under the jurisdiction of the International police *when he was in the Settlement,* Charley left his hotel for a brief visit inside a nearby building over which flew the rising sun banner. There he used one of his numerous passports and became Herr Karl Froelich of Munich, Germany.

FIFTEEN minutes later he emerged, patting his breast pocket, smiling outwardly, but inwardly thinking again of that ruby in the shirtfront of the rich taipan, Mr. Leviton DeMarias.

He returned to his suite, gave his hallboy a handful of Mex dollars and whispered that he was in Shanghai on a piece of very secretive business. But should anything happen not on the program, he would find a way to get a message to the hallboy.

He in turn was to take it to a certain gentleman in a certain nearby building. The name and address he wrote on a chit.

The hallboy nodded vigorously and took the paper. He found great "face" in being a party to an intrigue, and he'd carry out his instructions to the letter.

Charley thought of and discarded a dozen plans before he hit upon one that seemed flawless. Then he got busy on the telephone and shortly after ten the following morning, was sitting opposite the insurance tycoon in that worthy's richly furnished office.

Greed was written in DeMarias' every gesture, in the tight skin over his bony face and in his beaklike nose between narrow, distrustful eyes. He toyed with a pencil and studied Herr Karl Froelich who sat across from him.

Herr Froelich had come on the recommendation of a close friend, the agent, more truthfully, from whom he had bought the ruby which now graced his broad expense of chest. Thus Herr Froelich was one of the inner circle and should have been above suspicion. But to Leviton DeMarias nobody was above suspicion.

"The deal is this," Herr Froelich was saying with a trace of German accent, "if I bring this machine oil in under my own name it might raise questions. I'm not in business here. Nobody knows me. But if it's consigned to you——"

"And the stuff is hidden in the barrels?" DeMarias cut him off.

Herr Froelich nodded, his voice dropped to a whisper. "Well hidden. Five pounds of pure Arabian gum opium in every barrel. Once it's here we can have it cut for the local market. Not an ounce of Arabian has come into Shanghai since the war started. The demand should be terrific——"

DeMarias could well picture the prospects. But what was uppermost in his mind was something else again. "The proposition?" he interrupted.

"Fifty-fifty. A two way split."

"I lend my name, get the stuff through the customs without a search—for fifty percent?" DeMarias' mind ran. But aloud he said, "It sounds all right. Go ahead."

"I knew you were a man to see a good piece of business," Herr Froelich put in. He got to his feet, thrust out a well manicured hand and took his departure.

Passing through the same miserable coolies as on his previous visit, Charleston Charley paused and glanced up and down the crowded Bund.

SUDDENLY an automobile filled with Jap soldiers came by. A Chinese in the wandering crowd of refugees whipped out a pistol and fired, once, twice, three times. The thousands around him began screaming, panic-stricken.

Charley didn't wait to see if any Japs were hit. He turned down Nanking Road, fighting his way a block west. Then he turned north and went along behind the British Consulate to a row of small offices.

"By George," he thought as he went up the steps, "the foreigners have their hands full. They can't search every Chinese in the Settlement; and lots of the Chinese have pistols. That means incidents like the one I just saw—and any incident may mean——"

But it was all grist to his mill.

He left the sentence unfinished when he came to a glass door marked "To Tung Importing Co." Once inside he was shown immediately to a private room where sat a fat, beady-eyed Chinese who smiled when he saw his visitor. No introduction was necessary, nor were any words wasted.

"I want twenty barrels of American machine oil brought in from Japan on the first boat," Charley said, low voiced. "Have them in the name of Leviton DeMarias. And in each barrel have a small compartment about a foot long and a foot deep."

He gestured with his hands and the Chinese nodded. He'd done jobs for this foreigner before and he knew what to expect. Something was being smuggled. And that DeMarias, the big taipan, was involved was no concern of his.

"After that," Charley cut him off, "I want about a hundred—" He bent forward and whispered a single word. "Can you get them?"

"It am hard these days, it cost plenty. But can do."

"Good. Put them in the compartments when the barrels are on the dock. You can arrange that. Then let me know at my hotel."

The native nodded again. A little cumsha on a dock would work wonders. He figured up the charges, and when Charleston Charley Prowell paid in advance the major part of his roll had vanished. When the deal was pulled off he'd be broke again, but it was being broke in a good cause. And when this job was done, another would turn up. One was always turning up—that was what made life the constant thrill he found it.

At the precise moment he was leaving the "Ta Tung Importing Company," Mr. Leviton DeMarias was leaving his office.

He'd caught a suggestion in Herr Froelich's breezy manner that perhaps everything wasn't on the up and up. So to have an ace in the hole in case anything should go wrong, he wanted something on Herr Froelich. He might find it at police headquarters where he was now bound.

But, oh no! Not to tell the coppers his suspicions, merely to look over the photographs in the Identification Division. For Leviton DeMarais had an idea that Herr Karl Froelich might be somebody other than he represented himself to be.

A WEEK later a brief note from the "Ta Tung Importing Company" informed Charley that his "goods" had arrived. He beckoned a closed rickshaw and went across Garden Bridge to the office of the "Insurance Company of Exalted Happiness in Crossing the Great River." Now was to come the play wherein he put

the knife in the swindler Mr. Leviton DeMarias. Shortly after he would twist it and laugh as the tycoon squirmed.

Mr. Leviton DeMarias received him with a wide smile, closed the door carefully and moved his chair a little closer.

"It's here," Charley exulted honestly. "I'll have it off the dock tonight and cut. Then we cash in."

Mr. Leviton DeMarias' grin widened. "Excellent. You handle the details. We'll split whenever you're ready."

Charley nodded, though his eyes were fixed on that ruby.

"By George," he thought, "I hate to see a beautiful gem like that on such a low crook. It more properly belongs to me."

He took DeMarias' hand in a firm grip and reached for his hat, congratulating himself inwardly that the whole thing had gone off without a hitch. Then he left the office and went down in the elevator. The big play was just around the corner.

It was as the car touched the bottom level that DeMarias returned to his desk, opened a drawer and brought out a glossy photograph. On the back, under the stamp of the Shanghai Municipal Police, was written: "Charleston Charles Prowell, most dangerous and astute confidence man ever to operate on the China Coast. Apprehend on sight." There was a lot more in a folder which accompanied the picture.

"Damn you, you're clever," DeMarias admitted grudgingly to the face that smiled up at him with a trace of defiance. "But you're not so clever you can hook me. And now I'm coming by twenty barrels of machine oil—or whatever you got in them. I had them investigated and they *are* twenty barrels, bought and paid for and in my name. It may be sea water, but in any event, the joke's on you. And you've got a surprise waiting."

The surprise wasn't waiting. It had transpired. And it had come when Charley left the elevator. He had gone through the cluster of people, looked up and down the Bund carefully, then stepped out.

In that split second a figure appeared from somewhere in the crowd, as though by a miracle. A pistol glinted. But what made Charley's blood freeze was the lobster-jawed face above the pistol.

It was that of George Gilbert, Shanghai's chief of C.I.D.!

"Greetings," Gilbert said grimly. "I've been looking for you for a long time and —I have the warrant right here. Now come along quietly. We've got a lot to talk over."

He started a fresh frisk, but Charley remonstrated.

"I say, Gilbert—searching me like a common criminal isn't sporting. I've never had a pistol on me in my life. You know that, raw-ther."

Gilbert shook his head and was forced to smile.

CHARLEY took that as a good omen. "There's just one thing, old topper, I'd like to call my hotel."

Gilbert couldn't see anything wrong in letting Charley call his hotel. "I suppose you want to order caviar and champagne, eh? Get a lot, lad; you'll be away a long time."

They went around the corner to the Palace bar from where Charley made his call, Gilbert looking in through the booth door as a good detective should. His hand was in his pocket, wrapped around his pistol butt, and his mind was probing for tricks. But Charley wasn't up to tricks —at least, not to the casual eye.

The message was that he'd been detained suddenly on business and would be at Police Headquarters. Would the hotel manager kindly give the message to Charley's hallboy? The manager said he'd be delighted to and Charley hung up.

Gilbert scratched his head when he came out.

"You know, Charley, if you'd put the energy you use in your sort of deals to a better account, you'd be a rich man."

They got in Gilbert's car then and went down Nanking Road. But Charley had no interest in the crowd of people along the way, nor in the groups of Jap soldiers off duty who lounged around, watching and seemingly waiting, watching and waiting.

Charley's mind was in a turmoil of confusion. The meeting with Gilbert was the coincidence he'd long feared. But when he examined it more closely, a sixth sense suggested that it might not be a coincidence. By the time headquarters was reached he'd begun to suspect the fine hand of Mr. Leviton DeMarias.

"Blast him," Charley ruminated, "he's double-crossed me."

HE NEVER remembered the details of what happened in the charge room, beyond that he faced a camera again. Nor was he greatly interested in the specific case for which they were holding him. There were a dozen they could bring up if they'd discovered them—so what matter this?

But when he heard a whispered conversation between George Gilbert and an assistant commissioner, he perked up.

"This fellow's so slippery," Gilbert said, "we'd better not take any chances. All he needs is a loophole you could pass a pin through."

"Take him to court right away in that case," the a. c. said. "Have him indicted and arraigned. Charge him with everything in the book, get a date set for trial and then we'll work the case up."

Gilbert smiled, turned to Charley. "Looks like you're in for it, lad."

It was an hour later that Charley was standing in the dock in H. M.'s Court for China. A black robed, bewigged judge sat high to his right behind a mahogany bench while to his left was a packed courtroom, packed largely by Japanese soldiers. But the first few pews were filled by Jap officers, all very interested in the proceedings about to commence.

Charley's eyes ranged over them until he made out a diminutive little man in civilians, sitting quietly on the edge of the first pew and delicately holding a handkerchief over his mouth.

Gilbert was inside the railing, flanked by a half dozen police officials and attachés from the prosecutor's office. It was easily the biggest show H. M.'s court had seen in months.

Finally the judge snorted and sat back. An assistant prosecutor arose and read off a charge. The judge heard it out, nodded and turned to Charley.

"Have you anything to say?"

"Simply," Charley said with a wry smile, "that I deny the jurisdiction of this court." His accent was a broad Mayfair that could have been cut with a knife.

The judge bent forward as though propelled by springs. Gilbert's jaws dropped open and he was suddenly breathless.

"I beg pardon," the judge said. "Did I understand correctly? Will you kindly repeat—?"

"I deny the jurisdiction of this court."

"Pray on what grounds?"

The room was deathly still.

"On the grounds that I am not a British subject."

His Honor snorted again, ran a hand up the side of his face. His eyes were fastened on Gilbert. Gilbert's attention was riveted on the man in the dock.

"Indeed," His Honor said frigidly. "Of what nation are you a subject?"

"Japan."

Gilbert relaxed then and permitted himself a broad grin. The a.p. so forgot court dignity as to laugh outright. His Honour rapped with a pencil and grunted for silence.

"I am afraid," he said icily, "that I shall require more substantiation than a mere statement. It is apparent from your accent, dress and appearance that——"

Charley was unable to hear the rest. He beckoned to the diminutive civilian on the end of the first pew. The man came forward, bowed very low to the

bench, to the British flag, to everyone inside the railing and finally to Charleston Charley Prowell. Meanwhile he had fumbled in his pocket and produced a paper.

The paper was passed to the bench and again the little man bowed.

"I have honors to be vice consul for Imperial Japanese governments. This papers prove Mr. Prowells becomes subject of my country several days before. I respectfullys submit same."

His Honor read the paper, noted the big seal at the bottom and called an interpreter. The interpreter said the seal was genuine.

"Such being the case," came down from on high, "I have no jurisdiction over the gentleman before me."

Charley could guess what was going on in the judge's mind. With the city full of Japanese troops, a Jap fleet in the river and relations between Great Britain and Tokyo none too cordial, to hold a man in a British court when he was a subject of the Mikado might be the auspicious "incident" for which the Japs were waiting. His Honor was holding a stick of dynamite with the fuse lighted and he knew it.

"There is no case," His Honor went on succinctly. Then he bowed to Charley. "I deeply regret the discomfort to which you have been subjected. And I shall ask Chief Inspector Gilbert to apologize."

"That will not be necessary," Charley said magnanimously.

He didn't wait for what was to follow, though he could well imagine the few words that would pass between Gilbert and His Honor in the latter's office. Rather, he left the dock, paused to dust his hands with a silk handkerchief and strode from the room, followed by the diminutive little civilian and a score of Japanese officers. At the same time he was thanking his stars for the sixth sense that had made him go into the building under the rising sun banner across the street from his hotel a few days previously.

CHARLEY was crossing Garden Bridge when the gleaming Rolls Royce of Mr. Leviton DeMarias approached. He was thankful that he could lose himself in the crowd of natives waiting to be permitted through the lines, as he watched the car go on into Hongkew.

"And me walking," Charley thought ruefully.

He was congratulating himself that he'd switched his allegiance not a moment too soon, when the thought came that he didn't know DeMarias' nationality for a certainty. Suppose he'd also pulled a switch at the last moment?

Heretofore he'd taken it for granted that DeMarias was an American, or, if he wasn't American, he was British. In the latter case, so much the better. The British were great sticklers for peace in the Settlement—as he'd just seen demonstrated.

But the tighter to draw the trap he was setting for the insurance tycoon, he phoned the "Ta Tung Importing Company" and a half dozen men were assigned to locate DeMarias' bank. The reply came back after an hour and a generous spreading of cumsha that there was no account under his name at the British National.

"He's such a crook he's probably got it hidden in a Yankee bank," Charley concluded. "He wouldn't be such a fool as to tie it up in real estate; and with the war on he wouldn't chance a Chinese bank——"

A few minutes later a message came that DeMarias wasn't a depositor in Shanghai's sole American bank. Nor did either of the institutions in the *Concession Française* know him.

That meant that he'd beaten Charley to the snapper on the end of his punch. And Charley knew further that once the story of his own escapade got in the Shanghai papers, DeMarias might cover his tracks beyond finding.

So he had to pull the plug on the instant and trust to good joss. Suiting the action

to the word, he telephoned George Gilbert.

"You did me a great favor this morning, dear chappie," he began. "I want to return it."

GILBERT'S profanity is beyond recording. But when he had cooled down, Charley heard, "I'll find a way to chase you out of Shanghai if it's the last thing I do. What's your trick now?"

"Come, come, Mr. Gilbert. I'm no trickster. But if you go to the Settlement Merchant's wharf you'll find twenty barrels of machine oil consigned to Mr. Leviton DeMarias—"

"No interest," Gilbert cut him off. "I'm not settling any of your grudges. And I'm not being fooled a second time. DeMarias was a year ahead of you. He's a *registered Jap!*"

Charley slammed up the receiver and bolted for the office of the Japanese vice consul. That gentleman listened to what he had to say, then took him on the double to the general commanding all Imperial troops in the Shanghai area.

Instantly a score of Jap secret service men got busy, and soon a very much disturbed Mr. Leviton DeMarias was stopped as he sought to reënter the Settlement over Garden Bridge.

He was taken to the office of the Jap high command where he found Charleston Charley Prowell facing him across the general's desk.

"As a Japanese subject," the general's voice grated, "how to explain can you twen'y barrels of machine oil on Settlement Merchant's wharf. Yes?"

DeMarias laughed. "It was bought by this person here, one of the biggest——"

"It are in your name," the general cut him off.

"I'll admit, but I'll wager the barrels are filled with river water—"

"You make foolish of me? Does this look like river water?"

The general snapped his fingers and a couple of aides stepped forward with a bulky blanket. When it was opened Leviton DeMarias found himself staring down at a hundred shiny new pistols. Instantly his face blanched, a hand shot to his throat as he mumbled incoherently.

"I know your game." The Jap's voice

was crisp. "You smuggle these in machine oil for kill Yapan officers. You excite Chinese refugees——"

"This is preposterous," DeMarias argued heatedly. "I'm a loyal Japanese. Why, the proof is that every cent I have is on deposit with the Tokyo Specie Bank!"

"You admits you are Yapanese," the general went on. "My country is at war and I am in charge in Shanghai and before usual court of laws. So I have disposal of cases. For smuggling against Yapanese government I sentence you for military prison for ten years."

DeMarias would have fainted had his eyes not come to rest on the smiling face of Charleston Charley Prowell.

"You cheap informer," he shouted. "You—"

"Me," Charley cut him off blandly. "I haven't said a word. I haven't——"

DeMarias turned to the general. "This man is the biggest swindler—!"

"What's swindler?"

"He's a crook. He can do anything with figures."

"He's bookkeeper?"

"Hell, no," DeMarias roared. "He's, well, if he thinks you got anything, he'll get it away—"

The general beamed. "He's magical? I like this for entertain, no?"

DeMarias was livid with rage.

"No, you thick-skulled soldier," he bellowed.

"This sentence fifteen years," the Japanese put in casually. "You keep on talk maybe you catch life."

DeMarias saw he couldn't make the general understand so he gave up.

But Charleston Charley Prowell was not giving up. He had an ace in his sleeve and he'd seen his chance to play it.

"Isn't it the policy of the Japanese government to do everything to help the Chinese?" he interrupted.

"Ver' much," the general said, while his aides nodded vigorously.

"Good," Charley went on. "This man before you has been defrauding coolies for years. Now you have the power to show your good feelings toward the Chinese by making amends."

"What are you talking about?" came from DeMarias.

"Explain please," the general put in.

"Haven't you an insurance company?" Charley sought of DeMarias.

"Yes. What of it?"

"Do you insure foreigners?"

"No. There are plenty of foreign insurance firms."

"That's not the answer. You wouldn't dare cheat a foreigner the way you do the Chinese. They'd sue you and win."

"What's all these about?" the general asked, rising and pounding the table.

Charley explained briefly how DeMarias had taken advantage of the ancient Chinese custom of name changing to work his rackets. The general heard him out.

"Chinese can go to courts."

"They go, but they can't win," Charley put in. "In every case DeMarias shows his records and proves he has nobody by the name the Chinese dies under."

The general began to catch on.

"So he keep money they have pay for years."

Charley nodded.

"And because he belong my country this is great harm against friendly relations with Chinese."

Charley nodded again.

The general pondered a moment. "So question now is how to give money back to people who belong for it. This easy because all money in Yapanese bank. But to find man to do is hard."

Then suddenly his face lighted. He turned to Charley. "I give you yob."

"Dammit no," DeMarias said in a choking whisper. "He's a swindler."

The general interrupted with a broad grin.

"I know this swindle. You tell me. 'If he think you got money he gets him away,' you say. That's why I gives him yob. He gets your money and gives back to poor people. This make Chinese like my country for honesty."

DeMarias broke into a flood of tears.

THE general ran a finger behind his starched collar and sat down. These foreigners were a crazy lot. Give him an Oriental any time. One could understand them and their brains worked in a straight line, but white men— Then suddenly he leaped up and raised a hand.

"Nothing in army regulation gives me money for pay you for this yob," he said to Charley. "Good swindler should be paid, so I think only fair you pay yourself from this man's check book." He paused abruptly and studied the ceiling.

Suppose this DeMarias had crooked his books and didn't have a cent of cash. And suppose it took Prowell a couple of months to find it out?

"I fix," he said suddenly with a broad smile. "You take something now for pay you for yob. You take——" He glanced at DeMarias and his eyes riveted on the ruby. Thrusting out a hand, he grabbed it, passed it to Charley.

"Case closed! No appeals!"

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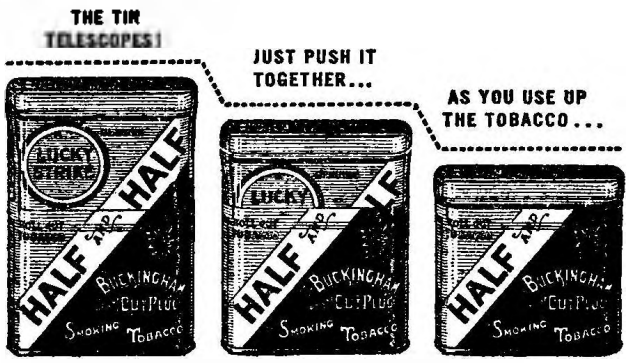

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FOR PIPE OR CIGARETTE

Almost Cremated

I HAD ridden the rods from the Atlantic to the Pacific in search of work, but nothing doing anywhere. So back I would go over the same old route with the same results. About this time the depression had reached its peak. However, I kept on riding back and forth, and you could hang your hat on my shoulder blades and my ribs were protruding so that you could count them at a casual glance. Then I got my break. It was at a Shingle Mill on the Pacific Coast. My job was to load the manufactured product, heavy bales of green shingles, into cars and boats. It was hard work, especially for one in my condition—half starved. However, I could take it, though at night I was too tired to sleep. But somehow I managed to stay with the job. When I was not loading shingles I had other jobs to do around the mill. One of those jobs was to look after the conveyor.

This was an endless belt or chain something not unlike the non-skidding chain used on trucks, only a little wider. The functions of the chain was to carry the waste products of slabs and chips up an incline trestle about three hundred feet long and dump it in a crematory three hundred feet from shore. The crematory resembled a big gas tank minus the top covering. This fire never went out as the mill was running twenty-four hours a day. One day something fouled the belt about halfway up and the slabs and chips were falling into the water in showers. That meant a heavy fine for the mill owners, for the Harbor Police were always on the prowl to enforce the Port laws against any one dumping material which would be a menace to navigation. I decided to do what I could about it and by working fast for a few minutes I freed the jam, then to my horror when I tried to walk back down I found that my foot was caught in the belt. Pull and drag as I would, I couldn't release it. There was I getting dragged closer and closer to that roaring inferno. I hollered until I was hoarse, but the noise of the saws kept anybody from hearing me. Words cannot describe my feelings. I was soon only about twenty feet from the fire and it was getting hot even at that distance. Looking back I saw my dog running around on top of a pile of shingles, making a terrible racket as though he knew I was in danger. Then suddenly he jumped up trying to come up to me, but there were two high-power tension lines just below him and he landed square on top of them.

I saw the sparks fly and then the power was off. I was saved—only five feet from

the fire by now. My dog had made a short circuit. Then to my horror I saw the engineer running toward the Power House. I figured that he was about to replace the fuse that must have blown out, then would start up again, and I would be burnt to a cinder in two seconds. I was just waiting for the end which I knew would come soon then, when I saw the engineer come out again as if to look things over. Evidently he couldn't start up the machinery. I tried to attract his attention by shouting but the fog and smoke were all around me and he couldn't see me though he must have heard me as the saws were now stopped. The minutes seemed like hours to me, waiting for my doom.

The boss and all the men were now in the yard trying to start the machinery again, when bang went another fuse. One of the men who happened to be looking up saw blue streaks coming from the wires where the dog was still stuck fast. He gave the alarm to the others, and they lifted the dog down, but he was dead. Now, thought I, is my time, for they were nearer to me than before. I shouted once more and then they saw me. Just in time too, for that engineer was not wasting any time—he was just about to start up again when the boss who had heard the racket outside grabbed him. They released me with the aid of a jimmy bar, but I couldn't walk, for my ankle had been broken. The dog that had saved my life is now stuffed and occupies a conspicuous place in my home.

John Francis Cullen.

My First Crackup

I WAS stationed at France Field, a United States Army flying field situated on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal, when the incident which I am about to relate happened.

On this particular evening I was scheduled for a night mission which was similar to hundreds of others that I had previously made. Perhaps if I had known in advance as to what was going to happen on this particular one I never would have gone along, but as fate always keeps her secrets well, I went along as co-pilot on the plane and Lieutenant Diehl was the pilot.

At exactly seven o'clock that evening four planes took off, with me flying in plane numbered 155. We immediately circled the field and climbed to an altitude of about two thousand feet. The planes then fell into formation and headed for Albrook Field, another Army flying field on the Pacific side of the canal.

As I have previously stated, I had flown at night many times, but still I get a thrill every time I fly in the dark. There are always some small incidents that happen to break the monotony and one always feels the stinging thrill of flying through the air at such tremendous speed with nothing but blackness on all sides and of gazing down upon the many thousands of twinkling lights below.

To our right were the towns of Colon and Cristobal which seemed to be floating like some magic carpet. I smiled to myself as I recalled the many pleasant memories of bygone days which I had enjoyed in these two little towns. Then on our front I sighted the Gatun Locks of the big ditch, a feat of engineering which is listed as one of the great wonders of the world, an achievement that had cost the French and American governments millions of dollars and thousands of lives before it was finally completed. One should see it at night from a plane flying at about this altitude to really enjoy its beauty, because the entire canal can be seen and it is a sight that will long be remembered. Its gigantic locks are lighted with thousands of lights, and Gatun Lake itself is the largest man-made lake in the world and supplies the water for the operation of the locks. Then only does one begin to comprehend the struggle and strife it took to construct this great masterpiece, linking the two largest oceans in the world by only eight hours. By plane the flight across only takes about an average of twenty minutes.

We arrived over Albrook Field, circled, and the plane I was in took the lead and headed back toward France Field, by a different route. The trip back was uneventful as we flew over the deep jungles where not even a light could be seen. Upon reaching the field we received orders by radio to land by parachute flares which are carried by all planes flying at night. The landing lights on the field are all put out and then the plane flies over the field, drops the flare and then comes in to land, using the light from the flare. The trick is for the pilot to make the landing before the flare goes out. If he fails he must drop another flare and try again, because the field is too dark to attempt a landing without light.

One by one the planes dropped out of formation and passed over the field to determine the wind direction so they could drop the flares and have them drift over the field. It is always a nerve racking sight to watch the other planes make their landings, and to make matters worse it had begun to rain, making the field very slippery and dangerous for landing. When our time arrived, orders came by radio that the field was okay for landing and we were to land immediately. I then awaited orders from Lieutenant Diehl to release the flare, which I did successfully from an altitude of about one thousand feet. He immediately brought the plane around to the northerly approach for landing, and that was when I started to pray that he would make the landing before the flare burned out. They only burn for approximately three minutes. The flare failed us. Due to the rain it went out before we could land, so we had to drop another in order to make the landing. We circled the field and dropped the second flare and again Lieutenant Diehl proceeded as if to land from the north. This time I knew we would land in time and I also had a premonition that something was going to happen.

As the flare came down slowly giving off a very glaring light, it was swaying and throwing shadows across the field, sometimes leaving a large part of the area in total darkness, thereby tending to create an optical illusion for the pilot. An optical illusion it was, because Lieutenant Diehl said that everything looked okay to him when suddenly the left wing tip hit the ground. From that moment on, my respect for the lieutenant has known no bounds, for he did just the opposite from

what an ordinary pilot would have done. Instead of closing the throttles and cutting his switches, he gave her the gun while it was still on its wing tip, making a complete circle, thus bringing the plane to a stop with only slight damage to the left wing. That sudden alertness and cool thinking on the part of Lieutenant Diehl was the only thing that prevented a very serious accident, for we were traveling at a speed of over sixty miles per hour when the wing tip hit the ground. No sooner had the plane rolled to a stop when I got out and touched my two hands to good old mother earth and gave a sigh of relief. Was I scared! But when I saw the lieutenant was in the same state I laughed, but I can assure you it was a shaky sort of laugh.

N. M. Gamarello.

$15 For True Adventures

***UNDER** the heading* Adventurers All, *the editors of SHORT STORIES will print a new true adventure in every issue of the magazine. Some of them will be written by well known authors, and others by authors for the first time. Any reader of the magazine, any where, may submit one of these true adventures, and for every one accepted the author will be paid $15. It must be written in the first person, must be true, and must be exciting. Do not write more than 1000 words; be sure to type your manuscript on one side of the page only; and address it to: "Adventurers All," Care of Editors of SHORT STORIES, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N.Y. Manuscripts which are not accepted will not be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for that purpose.*

The Yen for Something Different

"THE old whalers and clipper skippers made money," said the girl in Captain Moore's "Pearls at Quarter Moon" in this issue, "but what they really wanted was to get away from the farm. They wanted a long boat ride and to see foreign parts. The blood in their veins was really salt water; the generations were pickled in brine and stuck together with tar." She herself was "typewriting her way around the world" till she fell in with a Dutch trader in China whose business was pearls, and who declared it was a looney one.

"Pearls at Quarter Moon" is a remarkable yarn, in that the pearls actually play a very small part in the story—and they were planted ones, at that! But in order to get a millionaire to play at the pearling game a great many elements entered into the picture, and a couple of New Englanders had ample opportunity to prove that stuff about their being pickled in brine.

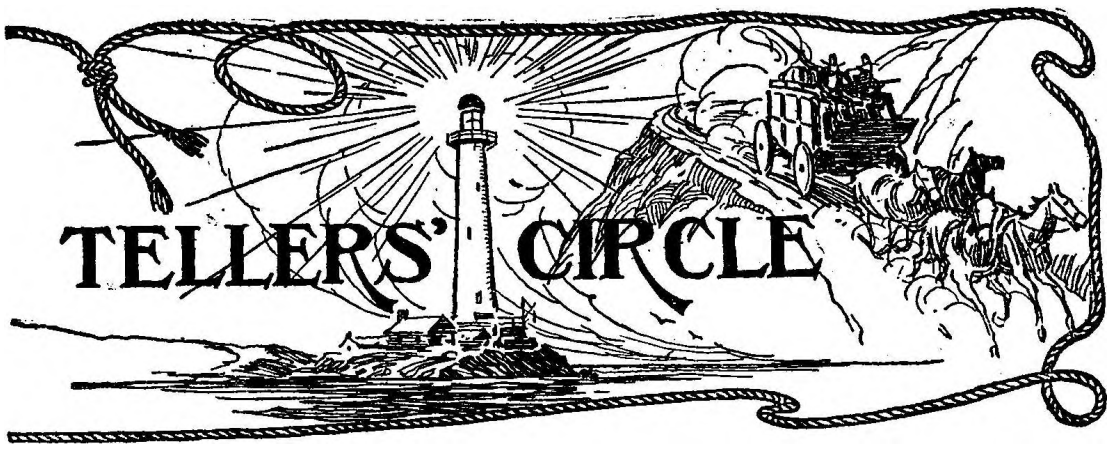
Ornery, Tough and Lovable

THAT was Cockeye MacDonald of H. S. M. Kemp's recent stories of the North, of which "Midnight Rendezvous" in this issue is the latest. Mr. Kemp writes:

"Cockeye MacDonald, the wizened rock-rat with a nose for murder and a flair for crime, is no one person, but a composite of a score of old-timers I knew down North. You may run into Cockeye anywhere—on trap-lines, in fish-camps, or poking around with a prospector's hammer. He's sixty years young, suffers from stomach-trouble due to a lifetime spent eating his own cooking, has a disposition like a hacksaw, and a heart of gold. His faded blue eyes have seen the passing of many seasons; age has brought wisdom, and with wisdom, a tolerance for youth and its hot-headed deeds.

"But age has not, apparently, dulled his faculties; nor, to any appreciable extent, has it hardened his arteries. He still runs his hundred traps, lives 'way north of the Churchill; and, when I was up there and traveling with him, loved to shove his dogs to the limit just to see whether that punk of a trader could keep up with him.

"Ornery, tough and lovable; whangleather, and the obstinacy of a mule. And when the time comes for him to cash in his chips, he'll do it in the perverse way he has lived all his life. He'll go out on his trapline and fail to return; his paddle will snap in some roaring rapid and they'll find his capsized canoe; or, perhaps, some fine morning an Indian from the south-end of the lake will barge into the shack to see why no smoke has been coming out of the chimney for the past few weeks. In this latter case there'll be a funeral. A shirt-sleeved Mounted Policeman, the Indian, a trapper and a prospector will dig the grave. To cover their feelings, they'll curse Cockeye for giving them so much work, they'll joke about the fit of his feet and head, and when they're done they'll



set up a cross. Years later, some other trapper or prospector or lone Indian moose-hunter will pass the place where the cabin used to stand. There'll be the crumbling, lichened walls, the stones of the fireplace, and off to one side under the whispering pines a mound and the cross. The name on the cross—Cockeye MacDonald—will have been worn off by the elements; but the memory of the old son-of-a-gun will remain.

"H. S. M. Kemp."

Measuring the Aurora

IN many of our Northern stories mention is made of the elusive Aurora which fills our northern skies with its swaying, colored curtains of light. It is an interesting fact that the Aurora has been photographed and measured by science. Not only was it possible to measure the size of the Auroral displays but also their distance above the surface of the earth. Measuring such rapidly changing forms would seem difficult, but the trick was done by capturing the more prominent forms in simultaneous pictures taken by cameras at widely separated stations. Thus the Canadian scientists who studied the Aurora near James Bay in 1931 had their two stations twenty-five miles apart. Then with telephone communication it is quite easy to have both cameras set toward some certain point in the sky, usually a star, and snap them at the same moment. Each picture shows the same Auroral form but it appears in a different position against the stars behind it. This change of position makes it possible to compute its height above the earth by means of triangulation.

The Canadian observations revealed that most of the Auroral displays in that district were between fifty and seventy-five miles up with a few of them extending as high as 155 miles. The Norwegian scientist Sturmer, who made such simultaneous photos of hundreds of Auroral displays in his country, reported that the average height was about seventy miles. The bottoms were usually beween 56 and 62 miles with the upper portions extending from 185 to 300 miles. The lowest he reported was fifty miles and one display seen near Oslo, Norway, reached an extreme height of 620 miles.

These reports would indicate that the Northern Lights are usually a good many miles up though some residents of the north have reported that on rare occasions they have seen Auroral streamers come down to the ground or very near it. Some of these reports have come from quite reliable observers who said that the light was visible against some object in the background such as a tree, building or a cliff. Scientists do not deny that such displays may occur but so far none of the scientific observers have ever been around when the Aurora came so near the earth and have never had the chance to study it at such close range with their instruments.

In the Next Issue **Short Stories** For JULY 25th

North

Corporal Downey of the Mounted finds some good assistance—from the accused!

"Not a Chance in the World"

A long novelette by

JAMES B. HENDRYX

West

How to extract evidence as a fine art!

"Some Sinners Is Powerful Righteous"

A novelette by

CADDO CAMERON

ROBERT CARSE

"The Cap of My Uncle"

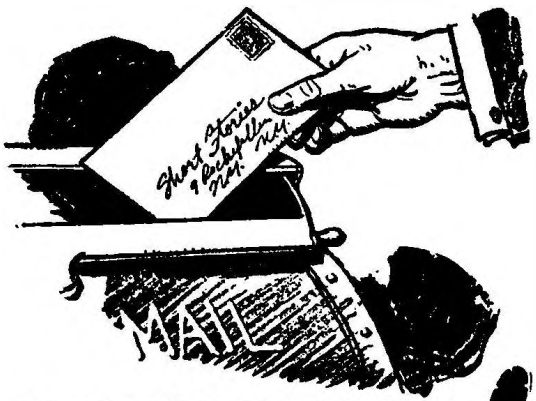
A story of the Foreign Legion

FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

"Thumber"

A story of Old Lady Riley

FRANK MOORE'S big serial, etc.



SEZ YOU!

EDITOR, SHORT STORIES:

Let me congratulate you and Baynard H. Kendrick for the story "Pillared Headings" in a recent number. I know less about coal mines than I do about metal mines, but as a mining geologist I spend a good part of every year underground. So I know what it means to be lost in a mine, in blackness unimaginable to ordinary mortals. If Kendrick has failed to get this meaning across to the average readers it is their fault, not his.

Aside from the story itself, the most appealing thing about "Pillared Headings" is its accuracy of fact and of expression. Miners and geologists—and there are a lot of them among your readers—talk a slightly different language. All too often I run across allusions to mines or geology that are just impossible to one who knows the game. When I do, I can't help but wonder. If the local color of this story, about which I know something, is inaccurate, how about the others—timber, construction, South Seas, about which I know less? Are they, too, inaccurate? Maybe I shouldn't criticize a story for local color if the story itself is good, but it would help a lot if I felt the color was good too.

Very truly yours,

Edwin B. Eckel

U. S. Geological Survey,
Washington, D. C.

We do strive for accuracy in local color, which makes Mr. Eckel's letter all the more welcome. And we are sure Mr. Kendrick, also, appreciates praise from that quarter.

EDITOR, SHORT STORIES:

I have been a reader of your interesting magazine for more years than I can remember. What I do like about SHORT STORIES is that in one copy I can visit all the truly romantic countries on the globe. Through its pages I have conjured up pictures of Texas, South Seas, China, Yukon, etc., etc., until I felt that I knew as much about those places as the oldest inhabitant. Then I read a paragraph in the magazine about the wild dogs of Australia and my faith tottered. When I read the above mentioned bit I felt like using an American expression, namely "Nerts." I don't know what that means but it expresses my feelings. Your informant knows nothing about wild dogs, and very little of the history of Australia. Wild dogs do not hunt in packs. In the mating season you might find one dog and two bitches running together but more often than not, only one of each.

While the pups are young the bitch attends to their education and dad goes off after pastures new. But these pups could never be likened to a pack. I know because I have hunted dogs for years in the far north. I remember one paddock where a dog and bitch at mating time killed five hundred lambs in three or four days. Just killed for the sport. If any part of the lamb was eaten it was the tongue.

By the way—all the animals, native or Australian are marsupial with the exception of the wild dog or dingo. This puts the wild dog in the more recently introduced category. Probably brought over as tame dogs by some long forgotten discoverer of Australia, some Egyptian or Asiatic navigator of years ago.

S. C. Good

South Australia.

The item Mr. Good objects to was a filler we used some time ago, and we hasten to print his interesting letter in refutation. By the way, it is always of interest to find different names for things in Australia. What they describe as a paddock, for instance, would be called a pasture in the United States.

EDITOR, SHORT STORIES:

First I want to thank you and the authors for the many years of pleasure, relaxation and true enjoyment that have come to me since I first met "Black John, Cush, George Cornwallis," etc.; also "Sad Sontag and Swede," and last but certainly not least "The Major and Jim," a perfect team. Long may they prosper as I expect to live another thirty years—I am only forty-five.

Have you ever considered gathering the stories of these various characters in sets of books? An edition not too expensive, but nice. If you ever do, put me down for set number 1 of each. Perhaps for suggesting this the authors would autograph my set.

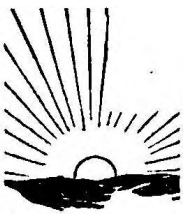
Put it up to the readers.

With love to the characters and sincerity to you and the authors, I am,

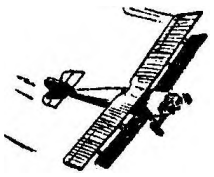
Morgan T. Nugent

Elsinore, California.

As we wrote Mr. Nugent, some of the Black John Smith stories have appeared in book form, as well as many of the Tuttle yarns. The Major and Jim have come out in books in England—as well as making radio appearances—but not in the United States, so far as we know.



OUTLANDS AND AIRWAYS



Strange facts about far places and perilous air trails. Send in yours.

Bottles Cross Pacific

To assist in checking the circulation of ocean currents, two bottles were thrown into the Pacific Ocean from the liner *Monterey* at widely separated points in July, 1936.

Early in 1938, both were found on the New South Wales coast within a few days and within a few miles of each other. They were forwarded, according to instructions found in the message inside, to the hydrographic office of the Washington Navy Department.

Towers Subject to Heat

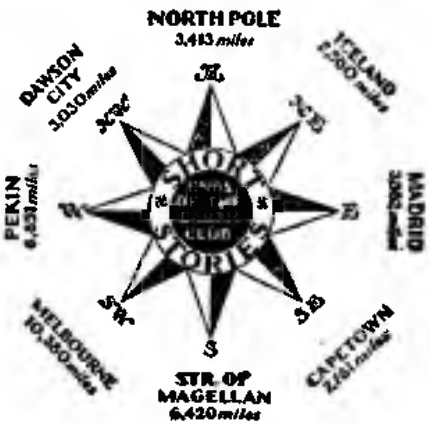
The Washington Monument cannot resist the heat of the sun of a midsummer day without a slight bending of the shaft a few hundredths of an inch toward the north; while the Eiffel Tower in Paris, is eight inches shorter in winter than in summer.

Seaplane Distance Mark

Catapulted from a ship anchored of Southern England, Capt. Hans Werner von Engle, German commercial aviator, flew 5,278 miles over the South Atlantic and landed at Caravellas, Brazil, on March 29 of this year. His time was 42 hours, thereby breaking the long-distance record for seaplanes made last year by Capt. Mario Stoppani of Italy, who flew 4,362 miles from Cadiz, Spain, to Cara-

vellas on December 28-29. Captain von Engle made the flight in a Dornier Do-18, equipped with two Junkers heavy-oil engines. The plane carried a crew of four and no cargo. The longest non-stop flight on record is the one made last July when three Soviet flyers landed at San Jacinto, Calif., after flying from Moscow over the North Pole—a distance of 6,295 miles—in 62 hours, 2 minutes.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

A soldier on foreign duty who will exchange letters, cards, or just about anything.

Dear Secretary:

I would like to join the Ends of the Earth Club. I am a corporal in the U. S. Army, stationed in Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

I have been reading SHORT STORIES for a long time and I enjoy them very much. I would be glad to exchange letters, cards, or pictures with anyone wishing to swap.

Sincerely,

Capt. Russell D. Schaffer

Company L, 21st Infantry,
Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, T. H.

He can tell you about bacteriology or Death Valley.

Dear Secretary:

Please enroll me in the Ends of the Earth Club. I have been an ardent reader of SHORT STORIES for a long time, in fact, the whole family enjoys reading the magazine.

My hobbies are collecting stamps and snapshots but am also very much interested in bacteriology.

I would like to receive a shower of letters from all over the world and faithfully promise to answer every one who writes.

If any one would like to know something about Hollywood, I can tell them

James Hanover,
SHORT STORIES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City, N. Y.

I enclose these four coupons from SHORT STORIES.

Please send me a list of Ends of the Earth Club members interested in stamp collecting.

Name _____

Address _____

about our movie studios; tar pits, where many pre-historic animals have been found; our observatories and museums.

In my travels over California I have visited many other places of interest such as: Death Valley, the lowest depression in the Western Hemisphere; the giant Redwoods of Northern California, various resorts in our Rocky Mountains and many other places too numerous to mention here.

Sincerely yours,

George Maier

1270 N. St. Andrews Place,
Hollywood, Calif.

From a lonesome boy in a small town comes a plea for pen pals.

Dear Secretary:

I have been a steady reader of SHORT STORIES and every issue has been very interesting reading. I would like to join the Ends of the Earth Club and hope that I will be accepted as a member. I will also be very grateful if I may have a few lines printed in your very popular magazine asking for pen pals.

I have done quite a bit of traveling and am sure some of the readers of the magazine would be interested in hearing about some of the various places I have been. I also have a large photo collection of many countries and of their scenic beauty. I am also a musician, play in both band and orchestras. I am sure that I could write very interesting letters to all who wish to correspond with me. So get your pen and pencils and drop a few lines to a lonesome boy in a small town, who has left his travels to settle down, and a few cheer letters will be more than welcome.

Hoping to hear from all who read this letter of appeal, I remain

Yours for a pal,

Mark M. O'Hara

C. B. B. O. Trpt.,
3210 Wilson Ave.,
Campbell, Ohio.

JOHN procrastinated Here is what happened to MARY

JOHN, his good wife Mary and two lovely children, owned a $7,000.00 house with only a $2,000.00 mortgage, and had about $3,000.00 in the bank. He caught a cold; it developed into double pneumonia and within a week he was dead.

There was no will. An executor had to be appointed by the court, a bond paid and a lawyer appointed. He had two brothers with whom he was on bad terms. Each applied for one-third of the estate. The executor got 5% and had one year to settle.

The mortgage was foreclosed, Mary was dispossessed. Today this man's family are on relief, destitute. If our Will booklet at a total cost of one dollar had been used, all this trouble would have been saved. Things like that are happening every day.

OUR booklet giving samples of Standard Last Wills and Testaments, with many separate clauses, enables one to make just the kind of Will desired by simply copying the wording and filling in your names.

With our booklet comes a Will blank with full instructions how to sign and have it legally witnessed so as to make in SECRET, without other legal advice, a perfectly legal will.

Mail One Dollar for booklet and legal form Will blank.

Make Your Own Last Will and Testament

THE FOLEY COMPANY.
Room 810, 15 W. 48th St., New York, N. Y.

I enclose herewith one dollar for which send me, postpaid, your booklet "How to Make Your Last Will & Testament" and blank legal Will form.

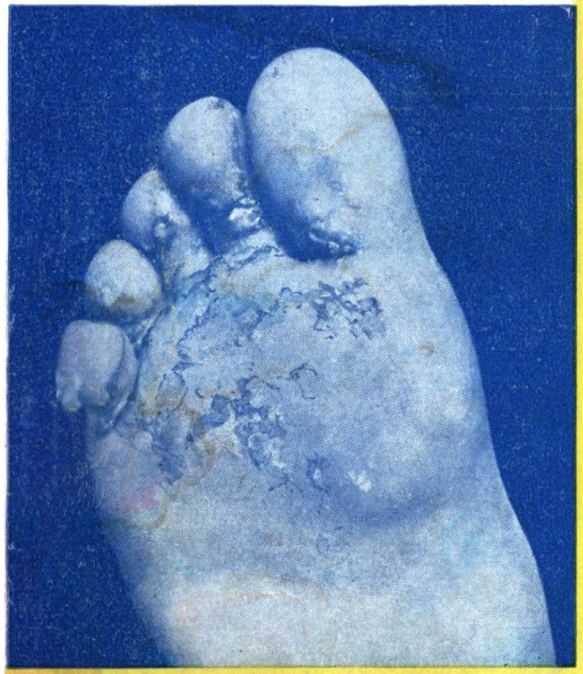
Name.....

Address.....

City.....

State.....

Satisfaction or Money Back



FOOT ITCH

ATHLETE'S FOOT

Send Coupon
Don't Pay Until Relieved

According to the Government Health Bulletin No. E-28, at least 50% of the adult population of the United States are being attacked by the disease known as Athlete's Foot.

Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

BEWARE OF IT SPREADING

Often the disease travels all over the bottom of the feet. The soles of your feet become red and swollen. The skin also cracks and peels, and the itching becomes worse and worse.

Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

Most people who have Athlete's Foot have tried all kinds of remedies to cure it without success. Ordinary germicides, antiseptics, salve or ointments seldom do any good.

HERE'S HOW TO TREAT IT

The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 15 minutes of boiling to kill the germ; so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

H. F. was developed solely for the purpose of treating Athlete's Foot. It is a liquid that penetrates and dries quickly. You just paint the affected parts. It peels off the tissues of the skin where the germ breeds.

ITCHING STOPS IMMEDIATELY

As soon as you apply H. F. you will find that the itching is immediately relieved. You should paint the infected parts with H. F. night and morning until your feet are well. Usually this takes from three to ten days, although in severe cases it may take longer or in mild cases less time.

H. F. will leave the skin soft and smooth. You will marvel at the quick way it brings you relief; especially if you are one of those who have tried for years to get rid of Athlete's Foot without success.

H. F. SENT ON FREE TRIAL

Sign and mail the coupon, and a bottle of H. F. will be mailed you immediately. Don't send any money and don't pay the postman any money; don't pay anything any time unless H. F. is helping you. If it does help you, we know you will be glad to send us $1 for the treatment at the end of ten days. That's how much faith we have in H. F. Read, sign and mail the coupon today.

GORE PRODUCTS, INC. N. F.
845 Perdido St., New Orleans, La.

Please send me immediately a complete treatment for foot trouble as described above. I agree to use it according to directions. If at the end of 10 days my feet are getting better, I will send you $1. If I am not entirely satisfied, I will return the unused portion of the bottle to you within 15 days from the time I receive it.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....