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MARCH 10th, 1941

COVER—Arthur Mitchell

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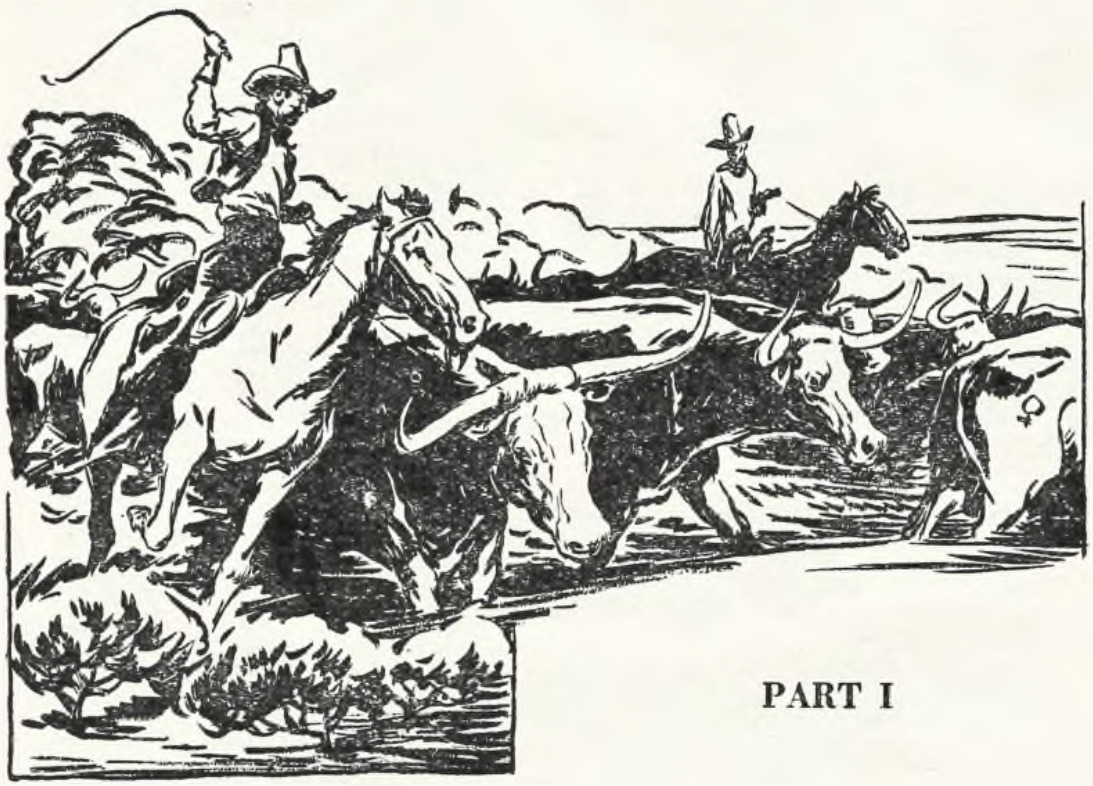
Red Clark Takes Charge

By GORDON YOUNG

Author of Many Stories of Young Red Clark of Tulluco

"You Say All Killers Are Yellow? I Wonder if You Really Think That, Red!"



PART I

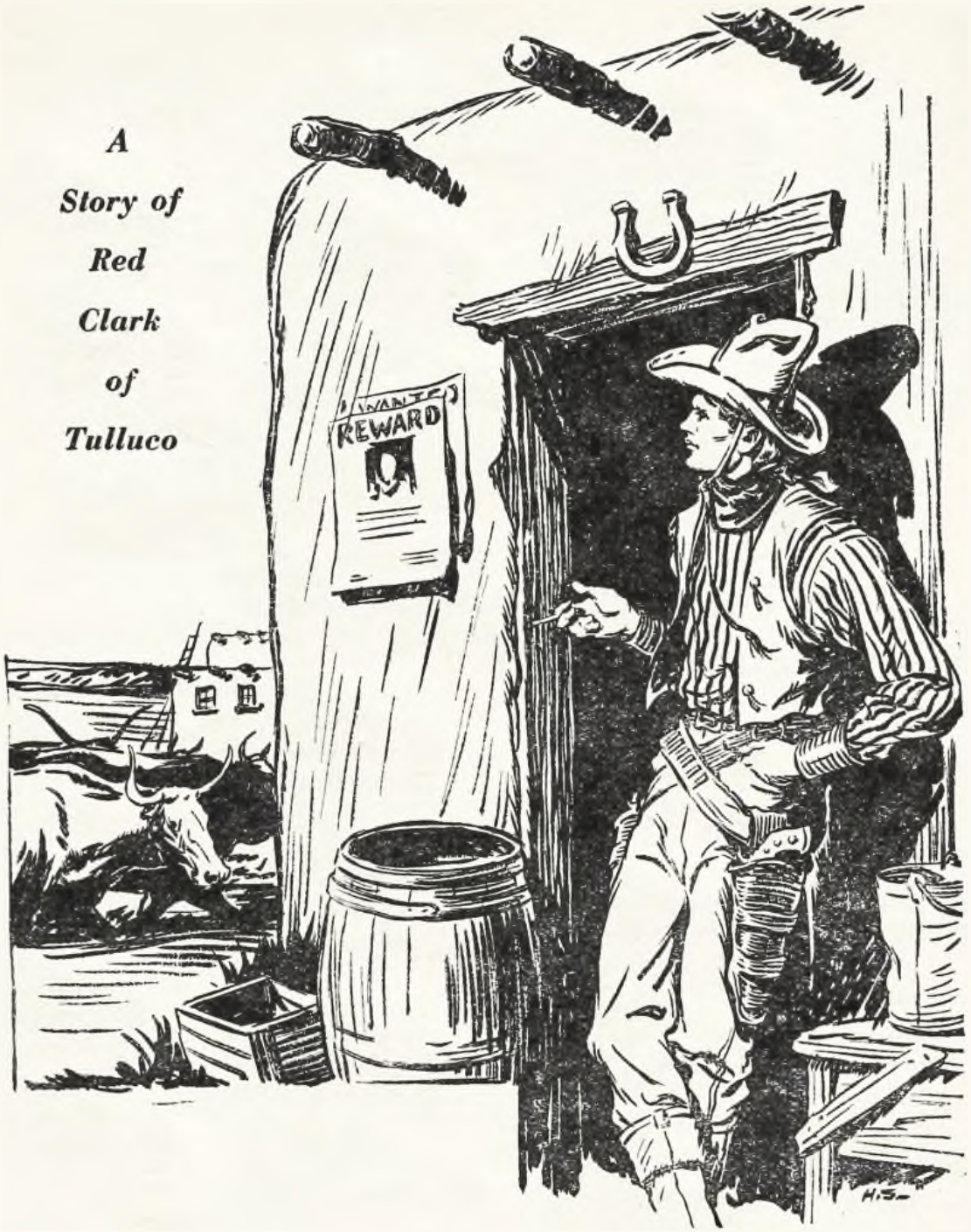
I

TWO men stood in the shadows behind a dust-grimed window of the lonely roadhouse known as Mack's Place and gazed at Red Clark who was squatting in the shade while he instructed a four-year-old toddler in the art of catching a suspicious chicken.

The tow-headed toddler wore nothing but diapers and his body was as brown as an Indian baby's. He stood between Red's knees and gazed up, trustfully and pleased, at the cowboy's lean biscuit-brown face.

"Now me, I'm learnin' you a lesson," Red explained, tossing a few grains of corn, "from how this chicken acts. He thinks you and me are feedin' him out of goodness of heart, the which ain't ever so when strangers grin friendly-like and offer you free drinks. 'Specially it ain't so when girls do it to you! You wanta remember that when you grow up. Save you from

A Story of Red Clark of Tulluco



feelin' silly, like this chicken is going to feel."

Red tossed more corn, bringing the hen nearer. She cautiously hesitated with quizzical tilt of speckled head but corn seldom fell her way, so she clucked reassuringly to herself and stepped closer to the loop of string spread on the ground.

A lean slant-eyed man with a crooked mouth gazed at Red through the dusty window. "Hell, Colonel, he is packin' two guns but he looks to me more like a fool kid than a bad enough man to keep you from enjoyin' your likker!"

Col. Kilcoy mopped around his black-bearded face. He held the handkerchief in his right hand and his right hand did not have a thumb; it was said to have been

taken off by a Yankee sabre during the war.

"He's no fool kid, Sam. No, sir! He worked for Old Terry a couple of years ago when I first come into the country."

Sam Bowman listened with slit-eyed watchfulness. The colonel was quite somebody in the country, or thought he was, being tall, wide-shouldered, black-eyed, and he wore a broad black hat and a long square-cut black coat even on the hottest days.

"But they's more than that about him, more than that about him, Sam." The colonel stuffed the large blue handkerchief into the tail of his coat, took off his hat, ran the thumbless hand up through his hair.

"Yeah, just what?" said Bowman.

The colonel nervously fished the handkerchief from out the coattail and wiped about his forehead. "Red Clark of Tulluco. I've heard about him, heard a lot about him. Tulluco? Were you ever up there, Sam?"

"No; was you?"

"Never. Never was. But I've known men from there. He's the son of the man that used to be sheriff up there." Col. Kilcoy wiped around his neck, gouging down in under the collar. "Hot today. Whew!"

"No hotter'n yesterday, is it?" Bowman's shrewd cold eyes studied the colonel. 'What about the sheriff?"

"Big bully and bluff!" Col. Kilcoy was as emphatic as if opposing people who spoke otherwise. "Did you ever hear of Tiger Burns?"

"Can't say as I recall, Colonel."

The colonel cleared his throat. "Umuhmm. Burns was really a killer."

"Yeah?" Bowman listened with a sidelong slit-eyed stare, and there was a slight skeptical lift to an eyebrow that gave his wrinkled face a very ugly look; and the colonel added quickly, "But not up to your mark, Sam. You're in a class all by yourself!"

What was more, the colonel believed that and sometimes he was a little uneasy. Sam Bowman's manners were mild enough to wait on ladies in a general store, but the colonel knew that he was as cold-blooded as a snake and sometimes he talked in a quiet way with an ugly smile that sent little shivers up and down the colonel's back on pin-pointed feet.

"Well, what about your Tiger Burns, Colonel?"

"Quick as the devil and tricky. He killed old Sheriff Clark, and—"

"Oh, so? You just said the sheriff was a big bluff." Bowman reflected, or pretended to reflect. "Oh yes, yes." A smile squirmed along his twisted mouth. "I think I have heard that this Sheriff Clark was shot in the back, wasn't he?"

Col. Kilcoy cleared his throat, blew his nose, flapped at his face with the wide brim hat.

"Safer that way," Bowman added. "And honest now, Colonel, do you think it's any meaner to shoot a man in the back than in the front when you know you can draw so much faster'n he can? Hm?"

It was the cold low sneer in Bowman's voice that got under the colonel's hide. There were lots of things that the colonel would never admit to himself; and one of them was that he was afraid of Sam Bowman. Bowman seemed to know that, and to know about other things the colonel was more willing to do and have done than to talk about; and it amused the cynical old killer to make the colonel fidget and protest.

"Well, anyhow, Sam, we're talking of this Clark boy out there—'kid,' you call him! He's trying to rope a chicken for a baby! Well, at fourteen he was riding with fighting men in a range war, drawing a man's wages, too!"

"You 'pear to know a heap about him, Colonel? Hm?"

"I told you he was down in this country a couple of years ago. He was talked about a lot then." The colonel had put on his hat, and now he removed it and rubbed the handkerchief along the sweatband.

"Did you happen to have a run-in with him them days?"

"No, no—*no!* I never saw him before. What I'm getting at is that this 'fool kid,' you call him, out there playing with a baby, wasn't sixteen when he tracked down Tiger Burns and killed him. Face to face!"

BOWMAN looked as if about to laugh. His laugh was always nearly noiseless, and the quiet voice and sleepy, slanting, low-lidded eyes fooled a lot of people. "Um-hm. Sorta comes back to me now that I heard about that once. Yes. Didn't it come out afterwards that somebody had hired this Burns to shoot that sheriff?"

Col. Kilcoy leaned closer to the dirty window and peered steadily and did not seem to hear.

"Did it ever come out who hired this Tiger Burns?" Bowman repeated.

"I don't know. How would I know?" said the colonel shortly. Then he turned, "What are you laughing at?"

"Me? Oh, I'm a little tickled to see a gunman, like you say that kid out there is, have such an easy conscience that he'll squat with his back to a window like this. I'm careful about where I put my back. Ain't you? And I wouldn't want anybody staring at my back like you're staring at his, now."

The colonel turned quickly and frowned at Bowman. "Just what do you mean, Sam?"

"Me? Why, Colonel, just what I said," Bowman replied in as mild a voice as if talking to a pretty girl. "I most usually do mean what I say."

"Do you think I've got anything personal against this Red Clark?"

"I think you don't much like him."

"I'll tell you just what it is, Sam. Now look here." He put out his thumbless hand to Bowman's arm. "You know what plans we have for that Terry ranch and—"

"Sure, sure. We're going to steal it from that old shypoke."

The blunt word "steal" was harsh on the colonel's ears, and he gestured silencingly, but Bowman went on, speaking with twisted lips.

"Sure! As the saying is, he hasn't kith or kin—you've said that—and he's too damn old to run his ranch anyhow. We've found out—or rather you did, because you're a smart man, Colonel—that after the little courthouse burned some years back over there at Manzitos he never recorded any of his deeds, so—"

"Yes, yes, yes, I know. Now listen, Sam," the colonel kept saying, interruptedly, but Bowman was having his kind of enjoyment, and he kept right on:

"—so if we can get hold of the damn deeds, burn 'em up, get some of our own recorded—"

"But I'm trying to tell you about this Red Clark and what—"

"—and you, Colonel, being smart, you'll know how to fix it, so if we have to go to law." Then Bowman did laugh, nearly noiselessly, and he made fun of the colonel in a gentle voice, with, "You, being such an honest man, you've explained to me that if there was any heir—kith or kin, you call it, Colonel—why, you wouldn't think of such a thing! But since they ain't, why, we might as well quit stealin' old Tom Terry's cows and take the whole damn ranch." And Bowman laughed again, noiselessly.

THE colonel was wiping sweat down deep in under his collar, and, having failed to stop Bowman's jeering, he simply pretended not to listen, then pointed at the window, "And I'm telling you that fool kid, as you call him, can raise more hell with us than any half dozen men on Terry's ranch."

"You don't even know he's going down to work for Terry."

"I know Old Terry didn't want him to quit!" Then Col. Kilcoy smiled, and he dropped his voice to a confidential gentleness. "You see, I've just been warning you that this Red Clark is dangerous. Don't

have any trouble with him, Sam. I wouldn't want *you* to get hurt!"

Bowman lifted his hand, "Now now, Colonel. I can see through that one. I've shot men in the belly, and I've shot 'em in the back—for you. But I never make a notch for them I drop when they ain't lookin'. That wouldn't seem quite honest, and I've got my pride, you know. So maybe you'd better up and tell me the truth, Colonel!"

"Truth? Truth? What the devil do you mean, Sam?"

"Does this Red Clark suspicion that you had anything to do with havin' his dad killed?"

The colonel drew himself up with a burst of profanity. "Now damn that tongue of yours, Sam! You just like to rile me, damn you! I never was in Tulluco in my life! I don't think the Clark boy ever heard my name or—"

"Then you wasn't stealin' cows from the Terry ranch when he was down here before?"

"No, I only started that after you come along and—well, hell!" Col. Kilcoy forced a laugh. "You like to rile me. And you sure can. I'm going in where it's cooler and take a nap. But I'll tell you again, Sam, that Clark boy is dangerous. Don't have any trouble with him."

The colonel walked away, a fine figure of a man, tall and erect. He was handsome, too, with distinguished beard and bearing.

Sam Bowman pushed back his hat, lit a cigarette, watched through the window. "Dangerous, huh?" A strange smile wiggled along the thin crooked lips. "Smart man, the colonel. I got a feelin' that some day he's liable to be a little bit too smart for me if I'm not careful.

"And I wonder just why he wants me to kill that boy?"

THE chicken stepped into the loop of string; Red gave the string a flip and a jerk, and the hen jumped. A small stick, for a hand-hold, was tied to the end of the string and Red gave the stick into the eager baby's fingers.

"There you are, son. Now you got yourself a wild bronco. Hold 'im, cowboy! In this old world you got to hang onto things or they get away from you!"

The chicken fluttered, jerked, tried to fly and the toddler squealed happily as he trundled out from between the shelter of Red's knees.

The baby tugged one way, the chicken jerked the other; and the chicken squawked bloody-murder, lunging with flutter of wings and kick of leg against the string, and the baby fell forward and skinned its nose on the gravel and began to howl. The chicken ran off with waddling sway of body, trying to get away from the stick that came dangling after.

Red jumped to pick up the child but a woman was already out of the house.

She was a skinny haggard bedraggled woman with the kitchen's grease and grime on her dress and hands. She caught up the baby, squeezed it against her breast and lit into Red.

She told him shrilly what she thought of a grown man that would pick on a baby —and a hen. She told him what she thought of a country that would produce such a man. That, she said, was the only chicken on the place that laid any eggs, and the baby needed eggs! She yelled that she didn't want her baby to grow up in a country like this where men wore guns and killed one another.

"They's been three men shot in this house since I come here two year ago! By men like you that hang around waitin'—you big no good drunken horse-thief, you!"

She went on and on, screaming at Red, and the things she said, especially about that being the only chicken that laid any eggs, made him feel bad.

He took off his hat and tried to apologize but the woman wouldn't listen. She had her pent-up grievances, long nursed over the hot stove when she was so worn out

that she could have dropped in her tracks and slept where she fell.

"Why don't you pick on men?" she yelled. "Men like you that carry guns and can fight back—not just a pore little baby!"

She rubbed the baby's skinned nose with the underside of the dirty skirt's hem, and the baby kicked and yelled because she hurt.

Red followed her to the kitchen door, hat in hand, still trying to explain, but she told him to shut up.

Mack shuffled out of the dimness and into the kitchen. "What's all the tarnation racket here anyhow?" Mack was slope-shouldered, shiftless, easy-going.

"He's been mistreatin' our baby!" she screamed. "Pushed him down an' skinned his pore little nose! Just you look at it! If you was a man you'd do somethin'!"

Mack waggled a thumb under his suspender, set it higher on a sloping shoulder, peered under fuzzy eyebrows at Red. Red looked awkwardly apologetic and was holding out two dollars.

He explained, "I want to pay for the eggs that chicken won't lay!"

Mack's Place was a dinky 'dobe roadhouse where the stage stopped, and travelers who headed south by way of Manzitos for the boom town of Centavos City; and Mack had seen enough roughs and toughs to know that they didn't stand hat in hand, offering money to help apologize.

Mack said, "You come along outside here with me and we'll talk things over."

When they were around to the side of the building, Mack took the two dollars, dropped them into his pocket. "She's all upset. She don't like it out here. She's naggin' at me all the time to go back East." He pointed a lank arm at the top of the 'dobe. It was flat and covered with dirt. "Makes her mad to live where the floors are dirt, the walls mud, and you have to shingle your house with a shovel—after ever' rain!"

"Now you lissen to me," said Red sternly. "We got to catch that chicken and get the string off her. She may get tangled in a cactus with it. We got to fix it so she can lay her eggs. You help and I reckon we can run her down."

SAM BOWMAN stepped quietly into the nearly bare room where Col. Kilcoy, in privacy, had taken off his long coat, removed his black tie, and opened his collar. There was a bowie knife on one side of the colonel's belt and a derringer on the other. He sat on a sagging bunk and smoked a cigar, now and then wiping down inside of his collar with the blue silk handkerchief. Some flies buzzed at the dirty window.

Bowman had a cat-footed way of moving and there was something cat-like in his narrow slanting eyes. He was a hard one to figure, having a wrinkled face that was good at poker and a smooth quiet voice that didn't give away what he felt or thought.

The colonel asked, "Well?"

Bowman pushed up his hat, sat on a stool, opened a pocket knife and gouged under a fingernail, watched his nails as he cleaned them. "To sorta get back to what we were talking about, Colonel—you never been in Tulluco, hm?"

"No, never. Never! Why do you think I might've been?"

"Me? I ain't thinkin . Just sorta hoping, maybe. Another man from there is down in this country that maybe we ought to know somethin' about. He's over on the Terry ranch, too!"

"Who is he?"

"Fellow named Jack Harbin, Colonel."

Col Kilcoy jumped just about as if he had heard a rattler's whir alongside the bunk. "What's that? Who? Harbin? Did you say, *Jack Harbin?*"

" 'Pears like you know about him, hm?"

The colonel looked a little out of breath. "Did the Clark boy tell you?"

"No-o. I ain't spoke to him—yet."

"See here, Sam. What's got into you? Where'd you hear that name?"

"I never heard it," said Bowman, making a point of accuracy, and eyeing the colonel with about the same look that a horse-trader has when considering a deal.

"You must have heard it! What do you mean, saying you never heard it?"

"W'y, I never heard it. I just read a letter."

"What letter? Whose letter?"

"That Clark boy's. His coat is tied to his saddle, and his saddle is hangin' up down there at the stable. Just on a chance I looked through his coat and—"

Col. Kilcoy reached down beside the bunk and picked up a flat bottle, drew the cork. "Where is he now?" The colonel looked as if whether or not he took a drink depended on what he heard.

"Who? The Clark boy?"

"No, Harbin? Where is he?"

Bowman laughed softly and looked amused.

"Well, that Clark boy is out there in the brush chasin' a chicken. Him and the long-legged Mack. Mack has a time of it keepin' his suspenders up on them slope shoulders."

"But what about that letter?"

"And you know, Colonel, I reckon you're right about that kid bein' a hell-fire-cat. Yes, sir—"

"But *Harbin?*" The colonel had not yet taken his drink.

"That skinny wife of Mack's give him a dressin' down that'd blister a mule's hide, and he took it polite an' humble-like. Been my experience, Colonel, that when a fellow —'specially a young fellow—is polite to somebody he's not afraid of, you can get yourself a lot of trouble by tryin' to make him afraid of you." And Bowman grinned as he nodded, "Thanks for tellin' me he was dangerous."

The colonel stood before Bowman and bent forward. "What about that letter? What did it say? Where is it? Let me see it! Now what the hell are you grinning about?"

"Me? I was just thinkin' what if Mack loses his britches out there in the brush—cactus and all!"

The colonel uncoiled a string of cuss words for he knew that Bowman was tantalizing him, having fun in his way, then he took a long swallow and corked the bottle, slipped it into his hip pocket. Again he asked, "Now what about this letter, Sam?"

"Well, sir, Colonel, 'pears like it's not goin' to be as simple as we thought. We'd sorta planned, you know, to put a little hole

right through the middle of Old Tom Terry's forehead, an' him not having that kith or kin, as you call it, why then—"

"Damn your soul, Sam, stop that! What about this Jack Harbin?"

"Oh, yes; Harbin. He used to have a pretty good-sized ranch up in Tulluco, didn't he?"

"Why, yes—how the hell do I know? What are you driving at?"

"I'm just sorta cur'ous about who this Harbin is. 'Pears like he sold out up in Tulluco and is down this way, and is thinkin' some of buyin' into Old Tom Terry's outfit."

The colonel glared angrily, demanded, "Are you making all that up? Just stringing me?"

"The hell I am!" Bowman held out his hand. "How about lettin' me have a nip?" He took the bottle, drew the cork, rubbed the bottle's mouth with his palm.

"Why didn't you bring me that letter, Sam?"

BOWMAN tipped the bottle to his mouth. "One thing, you do carry good whiskey, Colonel. What's the use of stealin' a man's letter after you've read

it? 'Pears like this Harbin has known the Clark kid from the time he was a little shaver. Do you know anything 'special about Harbin?"

The colonel thrust his fingers into his thick beard and glowered at the window where the bluebottles were buzzing up and down the dirty pane.

Bowman sat still, the bottle in his hand, his hand on a knee, inscrutably eyeing the colonel. "Do you?"

The colonel spoke without looking around. "I've heard of him. That's all. Just heard the name."

"Um-m. Must be pretty well fixed to be buying into the T T. Tom Terry is a funny old galoot, Colonel. Harbin's letter made special mention of the fact that Old Tom don't want anybody to know he is takin' a pardner. Which gives some idee as to how much they trust this Clark boy. And kinda messes up our little plan, too."

Col. Kilcoy put a match to his half-smoked cigar, shook out the match, turned to Bowman and saw the twisted mouth parted in an ugly smile. "What the hell do you think is so funny!"

"Me? Oh, I'm thinkin' about that red-headed kid out there, scootin' around in the brush to catch a chicken and make it lay some eggs for a skinned-nose baby. And I never seen you so jumpy, Colonel. Don't you feel good?"

"I feel all right!" the colonel snapped.

He turned to the window. The flies buzzed in a tumbling flight against the pane and the whine of their wings got on the colonel's nerves. He struck at them with his four-fingered hand, crowded one into a corner of the window, crushed it savagely.

MACK'S wife had worked herself into such a state that instead of getting supper she suddenly flung skillets of meat and potatoes to the floor, then took the skinned-nose baby and shut herself up in a room.

She shrieked through the door that she wished she and the baby were dead, and she wouldn't ever again, as long as she lived, cook another bite in this place.

Mack looked down his long nose, ran a thumb up under his suspender and told Red, "Danged if I understand women! I thought my first wife was bad. She'd whale whatever was handy at my head! But she allus done her cookin'. Now here it is, dark a'ready, and I got to clean up that mess an' git supper. Col. Kilcoy'll have a fit. They say he just about owns the Ace of Hearts over at Centavos, which I hear tell is a mighty high-toned place. An' he's quite some cowman, too, they say. Owns the Diamond D. Wonder how it'd feel to have plenty of money?"

Mack lit a couple of dirty lamps in the kitchen and asked Red to set one on the bar out in the dining room.

The dining room, with its one long table, was not large but, nevertheless, also served as the barroom and store.

The bar ran before a few nearly empty shelves that had some bottles, and cans, mostly of tomatoes and peaches, and it was also the store's counter.

Red fiddled with the smokey lamp to make it burn evenly but he didn't succeed very well. He left it on the end of the bar and went to the table where supper would be placed bye-and-bye, or so he hoped.

He was entertaining himself trying to flip a tin spoon over a ketchup bottle by tapping it just right when Col. Kilcoy and Sam Bowman came into the room.

Bowman walked with a slouchy litheness, lazy-smooth and quiet, but the colonel carried his head high and strode with the air of being somebody important.

Mack put his head through the kitchen door, gestured loosely. "He'p yourself, Colonel, you an' Mr. Bowman, there at the bar. Just pay whatever it comes to after supper. I'll hustle the best I can. Biscuits are purt-near done."

Bowman said, "You do the bartendin,' Colonel. Your taste in likker suits me fine.

When it comes to hosses, women an' likker —you know what I like!"

Red stopped making his spoon jump and listened, and in listening he thought he heard something outside the house. He got up to peer out of a window, but the panes were dirty and it was dark outside. He tried to push the window open but found it nailed. Mack had nailed the windows because the wind banged and broke panes, and glass was worth more than fresh air.

The colonel went behind the bar and held one bottle after another to the lamp as he studied the label.

Bowman called toward Red, "You care to join me an' the colonel here in a little drink of bad likker?"

"I think somebody rode up out there," said Red, still listening. "Maybe you'll have lots of customers, Colonel."

Red came to the bar with long-shank spurs jangling to the soft thump of dime-pointed heels on the earthern floor.

The colonel stood listening for a moment, and Bowman cocked his head; then, "I didn't hear nobody. This," he went on, pointing, "is Col. Kilcoy of Centavos City an' surroundin' country. An' my name's Bowman. I work for a livin', but the colonel here, he just has him a good time!"

"Howdy," said Red. "Me, I'm Red Clark of Tulluco."

THE colonel gave him a quick straight look and put some dignity into his, "Glad to meet you, sir"; then he became busy with a corkscrew.

Red stood close to the lamp and Bowman sagged lazily against the wall at the other end of the bar.

"Tulluco?" Bowman repeated, then, as politely as a request for the time of day, "Just why, 'of Tulluco?' Does that mean somethin' sorta special-like?"

"I allus say it thataway. I'm kinda proud of being from there. My dad was sheriff, and sure a good un almost from the time they had a sheriff till he was killed."

"Killed?" Bowman inquired, soft and sympathetic.

The colonel broke in with, "Sam, this damn corkscrew turns in its handle." He looked at Red, "You mind asking Mack for one out of the kitchen?"

"I'll ask 'em," said Red. As he stepped out of sight into the kitchen the colonel leaned across the bar.

"Sam, don't bring that up!"

"W'y, Colonel, I'm just cur'ous, a little. You've never been in Tulluco. I wanta hear the kid tell about things. Don't worry, Colonel!"

The colonel pretended to be glad to have the corkscrew that Red brought and made a sociable remark about the weather.

RED answered, "Sure is hot. You bet." Then he told Bowman, "A bad man called Tig Burns killed him—from behind."

The colonel had the bottle down almost between his knees and was grinding in the corkscrew, and Red fell quiet and began to drum softly on the bar and looked at his fingers as if watching to see that they drummed right.

Bowman waited a while. "Yeah; then what?"

"Like all killers," said Red moodily, "Burns was yaller."

"Hm-m. So?" Bowman inquired, lifting one eyebrow.

"He done it for money. There was a letter found in his pocket after he was killed. Man offered 'im three hundred dollars to kill my dad!"

"What you say the man's name was?"

The colonel spoke up, "Sam, get your cup ready!"

"All ready, Colonel." Bowman touched the cup, moving it an inch or two.

"Gambler my dad had run out of the country."

"And who was it killed this Burns?" Bowman asked gently.

"Oh a fellow."

"But then," Bowman went on, soft and

vaguely mocking, "you say this Burns was yaller, so it wasn't much to the fellow's credit, was it? You say all killers are yaller, hm? I wonder, do you really think that?"

Red looked directly up into Sam Bowman's mask-mild face and told him, "Killers and such, they're fast and tricky and all that, plumb dangerous, sure enough; but they've got something inside of 'em that makes them afraid, downright scairt, when they're up against a man that is honest and mad and can shoot quick, too! That's what I mean."

Col. Kilcoy stopped working on the corkscrew and looked expectantly across the bar as Sam Bowman inquired, "Just how many bad men have you tried that on?"

"I'm tellin' you how my dad said it!"

"But you're wearin' two guns!"

"My dad's!"

"Come to think," said Bowman, " 't ain't been so long ago that I heard a fellow speak about your dad. This man—" Bowman's narrow eyes slanted toward the colonel—"he said that your dad was—"

The cork was jerked from the bottle so hard that it had a resounding plop and the colonel spoke loud. "Get your cups ready. Get your cup ready, Sam!" But the colonel poured first into his own cup.

Then he set the bottle near Bowman, and Bowman pushed it toward Red, and he smiled in a queer ugly way as if waiting. The colonel was already taking a big swallow.

Red took up the bottle of gut-twister and Sam Bowman's hand slipped to his gun. Then Red half-turned and looked into the darkness at the far end of the room with his head tilted, listening. The sound might have been that of a stealthy tip-toeing. His keen eyes saw shadow-vague forms in the doorway and the wink-like shimmer of something metallic; and a voice spoke from the doorway opposite the kitchen:

"Now you skunks——"

Red did not look aside but slammed the bottle into the lamp, knocking it far off the end of the bar and darkness came like the swoop of a wet blanket over a candle, for the chimney went off and the flame went out before the lamp hit the floor. And with the darkness came lance-shaped spurts of fire, and the Bang! Bang! Bang! of guns from the doorway.

Red had swirled aside with a lithe jerk of body and before the falling lamp struck the earth-floor a cocked gun was in his hand and he fired back; but, quick as he was, he knew from the report at the other end of the short bar that the half slouching mild-voiced Sam Bowman had beaten him by the length of a split second's tail in shooting at the men in the doorway.

So, all of a sudden, the room was laced with fire-flashes, and the reverberant roar of the guns burst echoes that shook the room's walls, and powder smoke filled the darkened room, and there was the plunk and splatter of lead into adobe, the splatter of 'dobe earth from the walls as if flung by the handsful, and yelled oaths from the voices there in the doorway.

One yell, half way out of a man's throat, turned into a hoarse grunt as when a chunk of lead strikes close to a man's bellybutton.

Another voice howled, "Ow God! Damn!" and no more shots came from the doorway, but there was the sound of running feet going away, and a moment later the flurry-clatter of a hard-ridden horse making off.

Just as suddenly as there had been noise there was silence, and the silence was like a weight.

Red's ears had a stunned feeling so that Sam Bowman's voice, not ten feet away, seemed oddly far off. "Maybe next time," Bowman was saying, as cool and quiet as if talking of potting rabbits, "they'll try it in daylight—when they can see better! Anybody hurt?"

"I got some danged dirt down the back of my neck," said Red.

"Colonel? Colonel, how'd you make out?"

The colonel began to swear in a shaken voice. Bowman said, "Don't do much good to duck in the dark!"

Red didn't know then just what Bowman meant, but he understood after a while when he saw the dust all up and down the front of the colonel's long black coat, as if he had scrouged flat on the dirt floor.

Mack had his head out of the kitchen and was yelling, "What the dinged tarnation was all that about?"

"Just a pack of rustlers wantin' to have a talk with the colonel!" said Bowman, as if in a mild way he had had a good time.

Mack told them, "I bumped my head purt-near plumb off tryin' to crawl under that dinged stove—and it was hot!"

"Bring out your lamp," Bowman told him.

"Bring hell!" Mack yelled. "I'm shakin'—dropped my biscuits face down! Bumped my head—that stove's hot! Damn such a tarnation goin's on!"

When Red went into the kitchen for the lamp he found a pan of biscuits upside-down on the floor before the stove. Mack had been taking out his biscuits when the shooting began.

Two men were dead and a third had gone. Spurs were found on the saddle horns of the dead men's horses, good horses, too.

These men had known that the colonel and Bowman were here and had tried to sneak in on tiptoe.

"Rustlers," said Bowman, pointing to an unshaven fellow that lay on his back with his mouth open. "The colonel's had trouble with 'em."

Red was holding the lamp and Bowman leaned close, looked steadily into his face, "Where," he asked quietly, with commendation, "did you learn to shoot?"

"Me? My dad brought me up to know how to shoot and do it quick. And if you don't do it acc'rate, he said, you better hadn't do it a-tall."

"I'll go a long way to say you do it quick!" Bowman replied, and the glitter in his narrow cat-like eyes conveyed admiration.

"Hell," Red told him, "you beat me, though! My first shot just made a big echo out of yourn!"

"Um? Think so?" Then Bowman turned and peered aside at the colonel, who was looking at the two dead rustlers. "Colonel, you heard what the kid here said? His dad taught him to shoot. I reckon that sheriff-dad of his must've scared a lot of bad men out his neck of the woods. That right, kid?"

"It was my dad's notion that nothin' tamed a killer so quick as knowin' that an honest man would fight it out with 'im, anywhere, any time—right now, or some sooner!"

Sam Bowman twisted up a corner of his crooked mouth and smilingly appeared to weigh the matter. "Maybe that's right. Maybe it is. Honest men are so scarce it's hard to tell how bad men do feel about havin' to shoot it out with 'em. Right, Colonel?"

A COUPLE of hours later Red was riding on his way with a painful memory of the lank wild-eyed woman gazing at the corpses and mumbling to herself as if out of her mind, while the clumsy Mack stroked her shoulder and tried to get her to go to bed.

The colonel and Bowman sat up talking with a bottle of bad whiskey between them.

"They must've been laying for us down the road, Sam. When we didn't come, they come up here."

"We got no complaint," said Bowman. "Only, do you still want me to kill that Clark boy?"

"I never said anything about killing him! Never!"

Bowman grinned in an ugly amused way.

"You sure are a funny one! Why, damn your black-bearded soul, Colonel, you went around the bush about it, but you sure as hell said, 'Kill 'im, Sam'!"

"You were, too, right on the edge of a quarrel when—"

"Right, Colonel. I was just about to tell him I'd heard his father called a big bully and bluff. He'd've jumped back at me like a bobcat and—"

The colonel laughed. "He didn't know who he was talking to!"

"If you ask me, I don't think he'd've much cared, Colonel. He didn't even brag enough to say that 'twas him that killed your friend up in—"

"What friend?"

"—Tulluco. Burns."

The colonel let go with a string of oaths. "I never said he was any friend of mine! Damn you, Sam, you are always trying to rile me!" He forced a laugh. "You're a smart man, but you do get off on the wrong side of lots of horses! I never was in Tulluco, I told you!"

The colonel poured a drink, held it as he said, "Now see here, Sam. Don't you think we ought to play a little bit squarer with these boys? I'd've paid them off, like I promised, but you wouldn't let me and look what happened tonight!"

"All right," said Bowman with a pleased grin, "look! Damned outlaws. They run a bunch of cows across the Border for us. And when they come for their pay, I told 'em to go to hell. Two of 'em went, and the other'n is on his way to the tall timber. Listen, Colonel. Me, I respect a man that'll make you keep your promises. Now if that Clark kid turned rustler and worked for us—I'd make damn sure he got paid!"

"Getting modest, eh?" The colonel laughed. "You beat him on the draw. He said you shot first."

Bowman scratched behind his head, tipped his hat forward, lifted his head to peer up under the lowered brim. "I do a lot of things I ought'nt—maybe. One thing, Colonel, you do that I don't. I don't lie to myself. Yeah, he said I beat him on the draw. And me, I'm smart enough to remember that he didn't say, 'Mister Bowman, I threw a bottle, knocked over that lamp, jumped to one side, *then* drew and just about beat you on the draw'!" Bowman grinned, eyed the colonel, added, "And what he didn't know was that I had my hand on the gun—just about to plug him!"

"God A'mighty, Sam, you're not afraid of him?"

"No," said Bowman reflectively, "I don't think I am. But I've never seen anybody that could beat 'im for being quick." Then Bowman's cold slanting eyes fastened on the colonel's face, and he said coldly, "I don't like some of the words you use, Colonel. 'Afraid,' for instance. That's not becomin' to a man that ain't got all the dirt brushed off the front of his belly—yet!"

"Now, Sam. Now—"

"Oh, I know, you can't cock a gun with your right hand, but you could have at least stood up and helped us make some noise!"

"Damn it, my foot slipped and I—"

"Shut up, Colonel. You tell yourself any kind of a lie, and believe it." He watched the colonel with tantalizing directness and a poker-blank face, then:

"Maybe I am afraid of him. Maybe there is something inside of a fellow that gets scairt, as the kid calls it, when you run up against an honest man that can shoot—just about as quick as a bobcat can strike. Anyhow, I know now why your friend Burns shot his father in the back!"

The colonel's profanity filled the room with blasphemous protest, and Bowman noiselessly laughed at him; and the colonel could not tell whether Bowman really believed he had anything to do with Sheriff Clark's death, or just pretended to believe and so get the colonel excited.

II

IT WAS about ten o'clock in the morning when Red rode into Manzitos, put his horse up at the livery stable on the corner and crossed the street to the store that was also the post office.

A letter that he expected was there; it said for him to come on out as fast as he

could to the T T Ranch, and it was signed Jack Harbin.

Red went next door into a saloon, laid down a ten-dollar gold piece and told the barkeep:

"I just got in and I want to eat. A little whiskey, first. Where's a good place, 'cause from how I feel right now a good-sized wolf would get all chewed up if he tried to argy with me about a beef steak!"

The barkeep was short, fat, sociable, and had manners enough not to stare at the two guns in long grease-black holsters that were worn low and tied down. There was nothing show-offy about Red. His bibless overalls were stuffed into high boots. He wasn't wearing a coat and his blue shirt had sweat stains. A tobacco sack's tab dangled from

a pocket of the old brown vest. So, except for the two guns, he looked just like any cowhand that had come in for the ranch mail.

"There's the Green Front down the street. It's run by a red-headed grass-widder woman. Her husband went down to Centavos with a girl from the Best Chance a couple months ago. But he'll be back. A place to eat and sleep'll bring him back. He's that kind."

Red went down the street to the Green Front. It was a two-by-four place with a few tables and no other customer. He hung his hat on the back of one chair, sat in another, and made a polite noise with the knife and fork to let whoever was in the kitchen know that he was waiting.

A small woman came toward him in a faded dress that was not clean and the apron about her waist was torn, and her face had a tired hopelessness as if she did not care, did not care much about anything. Deep worry-lines ran from each side of her nose to the corners of her drooping mouth, but her head was covered with rope-thick coils of red hair, not brick red but the shining red of a copper pot after it has been scoured.

He looked hard at her but she scarcely noticed him, or perhaps she did notice his stare and for that reason seemed as indifferent as she knew how.

He asked for hash, steak, two fried eggs, coffee and pie, and all the while she looked away as if thinking of something more important.

His eyes followed the coiled mass of bright hair as she went wearily into the kitchen. He pulled at an ear, rubbed his nose, shut his eyes, and tried to figure out what it was that he almost, but not quite, remembered.

When she came with the heaped-up platter of hash, steak, and eggs, he grinned:

"It's your hair! Mine, bein' what it is, when I was a kid I used to look at yours and think it was the color of molasses in sunshine and—"

The woman had reached over to place the platter before him and did not seem to hear, or else she had so often heard men speak of her hair that she paid no attention; but when she realized that he was talking of the past she stiffened, drawing back the platter just about as if to refuse to serve him, and she stared frozenly at his face.

"—and I sorta expected it to spill down, kinda like it had melted. I'd have known you anywhere!"

The platter dropped from her hands and shattered by her feet on the floor. She gasped, "Who are you?" and seemed just as dazed as if he had hit her in the face. "Who are *you?*"

Then all of a sudden Red felt queer and a little confused and wished that he had kept his mouth shut, but he mumbled hastily, "I'm sorry. I sorta forgot—it's been so long!"

Her eyes had a fear-stunned brightness

and she put her hands on the table to steady herself. "Who are *you?*"

"Why me, I'm Red Clark—of Tulluco!"

The woman said, "Oh!" in a choked kind of a way and a hand went up to her throat.

"My dad was sheriff when—well," he went on uncomfortably, "when you done what you done that time."

THE woman looked as if he had struck and hurt her unfairly; and it gave him a queer feeling of embarrassment to think that he had a couple of letters in his pocket from the husband she had run away from a long time ago.

Then, suddenly, Red remembered something else, something that he did want to ask her about, but she stood there in such a hurt dazed way that he hesitated. Nevertheless, he wet his lips and began:

"Miz Harbin, do you happen to know—"

"Don't call me that! Don't call me *that!* I'm Mrs. Dannell. Just Mrs. Dannell and don't—please don't! Don't ask me anything! Please, please don't!"

A pleading brightness glistened in her eyes as if she were about to cry, and she breathed hard with a hand up to her throat.

"I told you," said Red solemnly, "Sheriff Clark was my dad—so do you happen to know where that fellow Carrick is now?"

"He's dead. Years ago he died." She spoke quickly in a flurried voice. "He was killed in Kansas City. In a card game. Oh, why did you have to recognize me!"

Red cleared his throat but he couldn't think of anything to say, so he fingered a fork, moved his feet and the spurs rattled on the pine floor.

At that moment two other early dinner-time customers came in with heavy steps and sang out familiarly, "Howdy, Miz Dannell?"—"We're in a hurry."—"Don't b'lieve 'im, Miz Dannell. We come early so you would wait on us your ownself!"

They laughed and sat down with scrape of chairs, scrape of feet, and rattled the knives and forks in pushing them aside to make room for their elbows.

Mrs. Dannell leaned forward and said, "Please, you won't let anybody know that you have seen me? Know where I am? You won't, will you?"

"Miz Dannell, I'm sorry I spoke, but maybe you don't know I got reasons for wantin' to know about that man Carrick."

"He's dead; that's all I know. I don't know anything more. But you must promise not to tell you know who I am—come to see me tonight. Come to the kitchen. I work late every night. You can come through the alley. Will you come?"

"I won't be in town."

Her voice dropped lower and she bent forward with desperate pleading:

"But I must talk—beg you— Oh, I wish I had never been born! Won't you—" Her voice died away as if she were choked into silence.

She looked so small and hopeless and worn out that Red, even if he knew that she wasn't entitled to sympathy, felt sympathy anyhow; and he told her, "When I come back to town, why then we'll have a talk. But you won't need be afraid of me, Miz Dannell."

Mrs. Dannell kneeled and gathered up the broken platter and mess of food as well as she could and hurried into the kitchen.

When she came back, Red had gone but there was a dollar lying on the table.

TWO weeks later Red walked his tired slim-legged horse down the dark alley and when he was behind the kitchen of the Green Front he swung off, dropping the reins. The glow of a coal oil lamp showed dimly through the burlap curtains.

He hitched up his belt, pushed back his hat and told himself, "I'd rather take a lickin'." Then he knocked on the back door.

Mrs. Dannell had a pan of boiled potatoes on the stool beside her. She rubbed the moist loose skins, poked out knotty eyes with the knife's point and sliced the pota-

toes over the basin in her lap. Tomorrow's onions were already sliced in the granite tureen on the shelf-table and filled the kitchen with their smell.

She was alone and working late as she did every night for, unless she filled men's bellies, they would go to the Cattleman's Hotel, or even to the Chinaman's. Sometimes Mrs. Dannell would have liked to cram all men into a gunny sack and drown them.

The knock startled her. "Who is it?" she called sharply, as if no matter who might answer he was unwelcome.

"Me, Miz Dannell. Red Clark. I come for that talk."

She said, "Oh!" in a nervous voice and called, "Just a—a minute!"

The clock ticked noisily, pointing to 9:40. As she lifted the basin of sliced potatoes from her lap she realized that she was very tired—and afraid. It was only by working half the night and all the day that she kept the Green Front going and so laid by a few dollars, a very few, from time to time.

She wiped her sticky hands on the flour sack dish-cloth and gazed at herself in the small square mirror that was set at an angle to catch reflections from the dining room and helped her keep an eye on what went on out there.

Mrs. Dannell studied her face with a troubled look. "Old, tired—and wicked!" she thought. "And have been punished enough!"

Wrinkles were cut deep into her cheeks. She put her work-scarred fingers to the heavy coils of red hair. Her face had the weary haggardness of a tired old woman and, though there was not a gray hair on her head, she felt agedly worn-out, with memories that tormented her.

When Red Clark was a motherless cow-town kid that his father, the sheriff, thrashed from time to time, she had been a beautiful woman and proud of this hair that was now so troublesome with its need of being washed, combed, put up.

Long ago she had thought of cutting it; but short-haired women had a bad name and she was trying to hide her name. She knew that she was now called the "red-headed grass-widder woman;" and men annoyed her by smirking and acting sweet. She wished bitterly for the gunny sack and deep river, but she couldn't let them see how she felt for there was the hotel and the Chinaman's awaiting such customers as left her.

Her hand shook as she unlocked the door, and her voice was low and strained.

"Come in, Mr. Clark."

He came awkwardly, hat in hand, showing the touseled brick-colored cowlick. His long spurs raked the floor and she watched his lean face, as dark as old saddle leather.

Mrs. Dannell did not remember him; she merely remembered that Sheriff Clark had a motherless son who rode bareback like an Indian and was often into some kind of reckless mischief.

She lifted the pan of boiled potatoes from the stool and said, "Set down, Mr. Clark."

He moved slowly and sat with knees spread and his hat brim motionless between his fingers as he looked up at her, waiting to listen.

"Mr. Clark?"

"Yes, mom."

"Look at me."

He was looking at her, steadily, but he said, "Yes, mom."

"Do you know where Harbin is?" Red did not reply. "Do you?"

"Yes, mom."

"Are you going to send word? Tell him? My God, don't, please don't! Don't! He might kill me!"

Red looked down at his hat, twiddled the brim through his fingers, then he looked up. "You know better'n that."

"Oh.' She sat down wearily.

"It just sorta happens, Miz Dannell, that Mr. Harbin is somethin' a little better'n a mighty good friend of mine."

She caught her breath and her fingers

squirmed into the apron, twisting and untwisting. "W-where is he—now?"

"Closer'n you figger, I guess."

"Where?"

"Down in this country."

"But where? *Where?*"

Red cleared his throat and looked right at her. "Over to the hotel."

Mrs. Dannell jumped from the chair, then she sat down, let her head fall back and closed her eyes. She said, "Oh God, dear God!" as if beginning a prayer. She opened her eyes fearfully, "He'll kill me!"

"He ain't that kind of man and you know it."

"How long has he been here?"

Red twiddled the hat brim and felt bogged down. He had figured out just how to talk to Mrs. Harbin, who had been a Mrs. Carrick, and was now Mrs. Dannell, but somehow he couldn't get braced to bring up what he had in mind; so he said:

" 'Bout twenty minutes. I took his horse to the corral and come on here. I figgered you oughta know he was in town."

"You haven't told him?"

"That I seen you? No, mom."

"What's he doing here? How'd you come to meet him?" With out-flung hand, accusingly, "You brought him!"

Red laid his hat on the floor, drew tobacco and papers. As he rolled the cigarette he lifted his eyes to hers. "I was on my way to meet him the other day when I run across you."

"You brought him back here on purpose!"

"No, I never. But I have sorta talked to 'im about things. Brung 'em up, you know. Me and him both have got reasons to remember that Frank Carrick who—"

"He was killed in a card game in Kansas City, oh, long ago! And I was glad to hear it!"

"I reckon," Red agreed. "Mr. Harbin he asked me did I remember Jimmy, and I said, 'Not much.' He was some older'n me, and you wouldn't let him play with us kids. I don't blame you a-tall. We done things that kept our dads busy larrupin' the seat of our britches."

Mrs. Dannell was wringing her hands and her eyes were shut, and she seemed about to break down and bawl. "Oh, God, Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy! I don't know where he is! I don't know where my boy is! I don't, I don't, I don't! You believe me—don't you believe me?"

Red held the cigarette near his lips, the lighted match in the other hand and he told her, "No, mom."

"Oh! But I don't, before God, I don't!"

"The other day Mr. Harbin said, 'More'n anything in the world, I still want my boy.' When he says somethin' he means it. So I figgered that Mr. Harbin has got some rights and I want to see 'im get 'em."

Her voice was almost a scream. "I don't know where Jimmy *is*!"

"You'd say that anyhow. You sure raised hell with Jack Harbin, you did. He went broke 'cause you carried off some five or six thousand dollars that he had in the house to pay for some cows. You carried off his boy and—"

MRS. DANNELL began to cry pitiously. "Don't throw things up to me. I've suffered enough. Nobody knows how I have—have suffered!"

She dabbled at her eyes with her knuckles then turned back the hem of her dress and wiped her eyes.

"He suffered some too. But he is a hard man to—"

She dropped her hands and looked fiercely at Red. "He was always a hard man! I was afraid of him! Afraid, I tell you! That's why I did what I did—I was afraid!"

"That," said Red, "just ain't so. He is a hard man in the right kind of way. He didn't go to pieces, like some. Folks respected him a heap for how he acted. My dad made 'im deputy sheriff for a time and he was sure a good un."

Red dropped the cigarette, rubbed it out with a boot toe, took a deep breath and told

her, "Maybe you know, maybe you don't, but Carrick left Tulluco that time 'cause my dad told him to *git!* He took you and the boy along. And Mr. Harbin's money.

"Well now, if that Carrick's dead—I don't think Mr. Harbin wants to see you any more'n you want to see him. But he wants his boy. So I've laid awake, figgerin'. And I've decided Mr. Harbin has a right to know about his boy. But if you won't tell me where we can get track of him, then I reckon I'll have to tell Mr. Harbin where you are so he can come and talk to you his ownself."

With that Red stooped for his hat, got up, but Mrs. Dannell jumped off her chair and faced him with her back to the door as she thrust out her hands, pleadingly. Her face was smeared with tear stains and her eyes were frightened.

"Don't tell him! Don't! I'd rather die than have him see me again—see me like this!"

Red remembered how proud and well-dressed and stuck-uppish she was; and he knew that she wasn't afraid that Jack Harbin would hurt her, except maybe by the way he looked from his honest eyes, and he thought that most of her fear was just plain shame. A fancy gambler had turned her head, and here she was, unnerved, haggard, with beauty gone, but the great mass of bright hair remained nearly unchanged.

"Then you tell me where the boy is, Miz Dannell."

"I don't know! I don't know where Jimmy is! Oh, God, how I have worried and suffered!"

"How'd you come to lose track of him?"

"I was afraid of that man so—"

"Which un?"

"Carrick. Jimmy loved him more than his own father and—"

Red said, "Ugh."

"—and he loved the boy, or seemed to. But I grew frightened at the way Carrick talked about things—gambling tricks and all that!—he was going to teach Jimmy; and when I found out the kind of man Carrick was—oh, he beat me! He did things to me! Look, look here!"

She leaned forward with a finger to her soiled cheek and traced a slight scar. "With his fist! I had to stay with him for I had no money and no friends and my family—they were church people—but I did get some money from a man and I sent Jimmy to my sister in the East, and she wrote me that Jimmy had run away—he was about fifteen then—and I wrote frantically but I never found out— Oh, how I have suffered! I don't know where my boy is! You don't know what I have gone through! And look at me now, working here night and day, trying to get a little money so that I—"

"Why don't you sell out?"

"Sell out? Sell out? What have I to sell? As hard as I work I don't put by more than ten or fifteen dollars a month! Who would buy a business like that?

"And you must believe me. I am telling the truth. Before God, I am, Mr. Clark. And you won't tell Harbin, will you? Promise me! Please, please promise me!"

A great anguish of pleading was in her face, expectantly; but Red told her, "I ain't makin' no such promise. Maybe you are lyin'. I don't know. But Mr. Harbin is goin' to be terrible mad at me if he finds out I knew where you were and didn't tell him. So I think maybe I better had. Leastwise, I ain't promisin' not to!"

She moved aside from before the door and stood against the wall with her head back and her eyes closed, and Red opened the door and passed out into the darkness of the alley.

Mrs. Dannell stood motionless for a long time and gazed with a far off look as if watching things beyond the kitchen's pine walls. A somewhat wild and determined look came on her face and she suddenly began yanking the pins from her hair and scattering them on the floor.

"I'm going away!" she said fiercely. "And nobody will ever know me again!"

The rope-like coils came quivering down and reached far below her waist, covering her shoulders like a heavy curtain of copper-colored threads. She shook her head, throwing the hair back; then she went to the chopping block and took up a long butcher knife and tried the edge on her thumb.

She struck the knife with savage thrusts from side to side on the steel, then she gathered the hair with her left hand and with a kind of frantic hurrying began to saw up close to the scalp. "Nobody will ever know me again!"

The hair came off raggedly, handful after handful that slithered to the floor, and, when it was all cut, she threw the knife from her and hurriedly took up shavings and kindling that had been laid by the woodbox for tomorrow's breakfast fire. Live coals were still buried in the stove's white ash and she stirred them into flame, then she gathered up the slippery strands of hair and dropped them through a pot hole.

The flames hissed up with a prolonged sound of singeing and a crackling whir. The burning hair had much the foul smell of burning feathers.

When she looked into the mirror she jerked back as if face to face with an ugly stranger. The hair that remained stuck up and out jaggedly at all lengths.

Mrs. Dannell gave a muffled cry of horror and clapped her hands to her face, then she dropped to the floor with her arms on the seat of the chair and her face on her arms, and she sobbed.

THE next morning amid the clatter of dishes there was rough chaffing in the Cattlemen's dining room. Mr. Harbin paid no attention but Red stuck out his ears as he ate hash, fried eggs, sausages absentmindedly, for he was listening to the way a drawling townsman was laying it into a sheepish fellow:

"Here Pete has been sayin' it was a kind of Christian duty for a man to eat outa the hand of the pore grass-widder woman, and look at 'im now this mornin' swallerin' our oatmeal!"

Pete grinned helplessly. "I told you galoots her place is closed up and she left town. A man has got to eat, ain't he?"

"Even if his heart is broke, heh? And look how he is a-gulpin' down the coffee! Only yest'dy he said nobody could make coffee like a red-headed woman. In a sort of way he is betrayin' that pore woman, drinkin' coffee that other hands has made!"

Pete finished his coffee, asked for more. "She took the 5 o'clock stage for Centavos."

"Goin' after that no-count husband of hers, hm?"

"There at the stable they say she set half the night waitin' for the stage to start. She was cryin' and wore a shawl over her head."

Red chewed and swallowed thoughtfully. He told himself, "I reckon I overplayed my hand," and wondered what Mr. Harbin would say if he knew.

AFTER breakfast Red sat in a rocking chair on the front porch and watched Mr. Harbin go down the steps and along up the street toward the bank.

He was a tall thin-lipped, lean-waisted man; and, though his shoulders were square, he walked with the short slightly pigeon-toed teetering steps as some horsemen do after they have put in the best part of thirty years in a saddle.

He was on his way to make final arrangements about buying into the T T Ranch. His wife's robbery had caused a bank to foreclose on him, but Mr. Harbin had worked himself back up and was

now a little more than pretty well fixed.

Red himself did not think it was very smart of Mr. Harbin to go pardners with Tom Terry; but Mr. Harbin had sent him wages to ride down and wait around, and he hadn't asked Red's opinion on the deal.

Red liked Old Tom Terry but he didn't like the lay of the land, and he did not like working for Mr. Terry who would blow up and sweat and cuss and raise hell over a little of nothing, then be sorry and apologize, but maybe do it again tomorrow. Red liked to work for men who meant what they said and stuck to it till the people in hell began to want overcoats.

Mr. Terry was a pint-sized, hard-drinking, hard-fighting old-timer—old, talkative as a magpie, and sort of childish. He had been a great one in his day, and had started in the cow business as a Texas brush-jumper with a long rope, a saddle iron and a six-shooter that really worked.

You couldn't help liking him for all his senseless bad temper. Now he was excited over a granddaughter who was coming in on the stage in a day or two, and he carried her picture around and showed it to people.

He hadn't even known until recently that he had a granddaughter, and being a lonesome old man, with nobody but an old Negro for a companion—a mighty fine companion, too, Red thought—Mr. Terry was planning big things. He had run the granddaughter's mother out of the house some twenty-odd years before in one of his wild tantrums and never heard from her afterwards.

That was just the sort of fellow he was, good hearted but bad tempered, and there was no knowing which way he would jump.

Once with Old Mr. Terry fuming and cussing about what all he was going to do to a damn thievish nester family, he and Red rode back up in the hills and found a scared sickly man trying to skin a T T yearling. There was a scared sickly woman trying to help, and two tow-headed thin-faced big-eyed babies toddled at their mother's skirt.

Red had hooked a leg over the saddle horn, rolled a cigarette, and grinned as he watched Old Tom Terry show them how to skin his own cow. More than that, he gave the man some money to buy flour and stuff for the half-starved woman and babies.

They rode back to the ranch with Old Tom Terry telling what all he would do if he ever found any other nesters skinning one of his cows; and also he told Red into how many pieces he would break his neck if Red told anybody how he had helped cow-thieves skin his own cow.

Red knew that Mr. Terry was agreeing to leave the management of the ranch to Mr. Harbin, who had told Red some of the things he meant to do, right off. Red had kept his mouth shut but he was pretty sure Mr. Harbin and Mr. Terry would soon have a falling out, especially when the foreman was fired. Mr. Terry had found Baldy Winslow a tip-top cowman, and he couldn't get it into his head that Baldy wasn't still tip-top, not even though rustlers were getting away with a lot of cows.

THE veranda ran along three sides of the old hotel and as the day grew warmer, Red picked up his rocking chair and moved to the north. He had the whole length of the porch to himself, so he rocked back, cocked his feet on the railing and let his thoughts drift. They settled around Mrs. Dannell and the regret of, "I sure didn't play my cards right!"

Red turned his head and saw a woman watching him, so he brought his feet from the rail, stood up with clatter of spurs and pulled off his hat. His heart gave a kind of queasy flutter, for right away he knew that she wasn't the sort of woman that a careful man ought to like, but she was pretty.

He was young and knew a lot more about cows than he did about women, so

he did not think that she was a bit overripe; he merely thought that she was plump and sweet looking, not hard and worn like some that he had seen here and there.

She wore a white waist with ruffles and a long blue skirt, but she did not have on a hat and her head was covered with yellow curls. He knew, or at least had been told, that this particular color was artificial, but it was pretty. Large blue eyes gazed at him with what seemed to be a kind of staring innocence, but he guessed that the innocence part was put-on.

Her voice had a slight huskiness but was pleasant when she asked, "Who are you?" and her smile let him know that she wanted to be friendly.

"Me, I'm Red Clark of Tulluco, Mom."

She sat down in a rocker near his, then smoothed her skirt and laid a little cloth draw-bag in her lap. There were rings on her fingers but no plain gold band. "I am Bess Howard," she told him. Her mouth was large, the lips full and red, perhaps reddened.

She smiled with mischievous crinkling of eyes for she could tell that Red was awkward, interested and uncomfortable. "Set down and talk to me. I get lonesome."

He sat on the edge of the rocking chair with his hat on his knees, and just as he was thinking that he would bet she was full of the devil, a shadow seemed to fall on her soft round face. For a long moment she stared off at nothing and looked tired and not happy. Then she smiled at him again.

"Why do you men in this country always wear guns? And you are wearing two?"

"Oh, sorta habit maybe. Fellow owns a nice gun he don't like to leave it layin' around. Might get lost. So he sorta ties it to 'im."

"But two?"

"Me, bein' skinny, I'd get lopsided-like unless I had the same weight on both sides. Helps, too, when you are in the saddle. Keeps you from bouncin' around and maybe fall off."

Her eyes crinkled and her voice was soft even if a little husky. "I think I like you."

Red guessed that she was just teasing, for lots of girls did that to him; but he grinned and told her, "I'm just a cow hand." He added, "And sure a good un, too. If you've got any cows you want took care of maybe we could make a dicker."

"I haven't any cows just at present, thank you. I get bored in my room, so I come out on this side of the porch each day. I've been here over a week and it's hot and lonesome and—" She shrugged a shoulder, then she took tobacco and papers from the draw-bag and rolled a cigarette, brushed the crumbs from her lap. "Have you been in this country long?"

"Not this time but I was down here once before for awhile."

She held the cigarette ready to be lit but touched her hair in a few places to make sure about the curls. "Do you know a rancher named Tom Terry?"

"Sure. Most ever'body knows Mr. Terry."

"So I have heard." She put a match to the cigarette, inhaled. "What is he really like?"

"Fine fellow. You bet!"

She looked directly at Red, "How well do you know him?"

"Sometimes he says a little more'n 'Howdy.' Why you ask?"

Miss Howard shrugged a shoulder. "We have to talk of something, don't we, to make conversation?" Her voice dropped tonelessly and the unhappy shadow darkened her face. "I've been here ten days —alone. Waiting. Waiting for what?" Then, "Damned if I know!" She smiled again, gave the cigarette a flip that sent it over the veranda.

He watched it fall and almost told her that she oughtn't throw away live cigarettes, then there was a clatter of sharp heels, a loud shout of:

"Red? Red? Where the hell are you?"

A little old man rounded the corner and shut up his cussing as he caught sight of Bess Howard, but he took off his hat and came on. His half bald, gray-fuzzed head glistened with sweat.

"Hello," Red said; then, "Miss, this is Tom Terry."

"Howdy," said Old Mr. Terry, bobbing his head and putting out a hand. He never cared much about his appearance, wore old clothes, cussed a blue streak, but was always polite to ladies.

Bess Howard had a queer look, almost as if a powerful hand had tightened her corset strings with a jerk, as she took the tough calloused old hand, and she smiled. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Terry?"

"Sure, sure." He made a swipe at his nearly bald head which had formerly been about the color of red hot coals, then he reached for a straight backed chair, telling Red, "Keep'r seat, keep'r seat, boy."

Mr. Terry was seventy or more and his small face was seamed with wrinkles that had the look of deep knife scars, but his eyes, though caught in a net of wrinkles, were as clear as any youngster's. He took a cigar from his vest pocket, snipped the end on a cutter that dangled from the watch chain across his vest, but he chewed the cigar instead of lighting it.

"Where you from, Miss?" he asked sociably.

"Kansas City."

"My gran'dater is from Chicago. She'll be here today or tomorrow. Can't hardly wait. Show you her picture. Here 'tis."

From his inside vest pocket he removed a picture that was carefully wrapped in butcher paper, and his eyes followed the picture as he gave it to Miss Howard, and she stared at the old man's earth-dark face instead of at the picture as he talked:

"Ain't never seen 'er yet. Her maw run off with a fellow, fellow named Ward. I didn't have much sense them days. I said I'd take his hide off an' nail it to the front door 'f I ever—would'ye, too! But that was a long time back. He's dead now. So's Nettie.

"Had four children onct. Nettie—that was her maw—" he tapped the picture—"was the purtiest. Nell, the baby, she took her death of cold ridin' home from a dance. Was to've stayed all night but quarreled with her feller and lit out for home. My two boys—gone—dead— I'm all that's left. Me and little Nettie here who's comin' on the stage. Ain't she purty?"

Again he put out a finger and touched the picture. "Can hardly wait. I fixed the old ranchhouse up some. Got in an organ from Centavos 'cause little Nettie wrote me she plays and sings. That'll be nice. Set by the fire and have 'er play and sing.

"Told Old Sligo—he's the colored man been with me for years—thinks he owns the ranch half the time—and you orta hear him play the banjo! I told Sligo to get in a woman cook 'cause Little Nettie won't like the grub we're used to. Anyhow, orta be another woman 'round the house."

He turned on his chair, beckoned. "Looky here, Red, at this picture."

Red had looked at the picture a dozen times, each time saying, "Yes, sir, she is sure purty!"

"If you wasn't so dinged red-headed I maybe wouldn't mind Little Nettie fallin' in love with you!" Mr. Terry ran a hand over his once fiery fuzz and laughed. "This boy, Miss—" he jabbed a thumb at Red—"is so dern mild lookin' and full o' fun folks don't know that he most near to like a sore-tailed bobcat if he gets mad. But I do hope him and Little Nettie hits it off because Red here is a good boy—a *good* boy!"

Red leaned across Mr. Terry's shoulder to peer again at the picture of Little Nettie. It was a pretty picture. Her hair lay in soft curls over her forehead, and she seemed a mere child of sixteen or seventeen with a half smile on her closed mouth and a wistful trustfulness in her eyes.

"Sure is purty," Red mumbled.

Bess Howard took the picture and gazed at it for a long time, then she gave it back, drew a handkerchief from her bag and quickly blew her nose. The handkerchief scattered a pungent scent.

Red noticed that there were tears in Bess Howard's eyes, and she dried them with quick furtive dabs, then gave Red a kind of angry look when she glanced up and saw that he was watching her.

She arose, ignoring Red. "I'm so glad to have met you, Mr. Terry. I must go now. Your Nettie is—is—there just aren't words. Good-by, Mr. Terry."

Bess Howard walked quickly to the side door of the veranda and it closed behind her with a startling slam.

Mr. Terry folded the photograph back in its butcher paper, returned it to his pocket.

"Who is she, Red?"

"Don't know more'n she said. I was settin' out here and she come."

Mr. Terry faced Red paternally. "Look out for her, Red. Look out for her kind. I b'lieve in treatin' anybody that wears skirts like a lady, but you're young. And the biggest damn fool in ten counties sometimes, but an all right feller, otherways! Maybe you an' Little Nettie'll hit it off. Where's Harbin?"

III

WHILE Mr. Terry and the banker went over private matters preliminary to drawing up the partnership, Mr. Harbin and Red sat outside and tipped their chairs against the 'dobe wall, idly looking at whatever was to be seen along the dusty street.

Red whittled on a yellow pine stick as thoughtfully as if doing something important; and, at last, he spoke what was on his mind:

"Since you put me on your payroll awhile back, your business, in a way of speakin', is some of mine. So I'm going to say, ain't you buyin' yourself quite a whack of trouble—goin' pardners with Mr. Terry?"

Mr. Harbin took off his hat, poked out the crown, divided it again, put it back on his head. He was quiet mannered, and if you knew him well enough you knew that he was good-natured and sometimes joked a little. He smiled as he asked, "How do you mean?"

Red took off a thin shaving that curled. He dangled the spiral for Mr. Harbin's inspection. "Looks like some purty girl lost a lock of hair, don't it?" He was thinking of Bess Howard's curls. The shaving dropped. "You know as well as me!"

"I'm still listening." Mr. Harbin was still smiling, too.

"For one thing, he wants you to run the ranch, but he don't want people to know he's got a pardner."

"So?"

"Well, he flies off the handle purty easy." Red threw away the stick, closed the knife. "What I had in mind is that you're already purty well fixed. You could've stayed that way. You had tame cows under a fence up in Tulluco and money in the bank. Now you're gettin' into a big gamble and maybe hard fight. Why?"

Mr. Harbin pulled forward the brim of his hat a little and his mouth had an amused quirk as he studied Red's face. "But *you* wouldn't work for me. Why?"

Red grunted, stuck out a leg, fitted the rowel into a crack of the board sidewalk; then, "*Me*, ride in a pasture!"

Mr. Harbin's smile widened. "I seem to recall that once a big cowman made you a foreman before you were out of your teens.

He had range enough that you could ride a week without hitting a fence. He liked you. You were well fixed. Yet you quit. Why?"

"Why?" Red sounded as if he thought Mr. Harbin's a foolish question. "Why, 'cause after we chased out the rustlers, what the hell was there to do but ride

around in the spring and count calves, ride around in the fall and count steers? I never was good at figgers! A job like that makes you feel there's somethin' inside of you that's not being used like it wants to be.

"I'll tell you what it's like—like that pasture-ridin' you offered me, too. All my life I heard how fine feather beds was. Then once in a hotel I had one. I couldn't sleep. I kep' scrouging around to get to something hard I could lay on. So I piled out on the floor and I was all right. I'd rather roll up in a blanket anytime out on the ground, where maybe a rattler would cuddle up to keep warm, than crawl into another feather bed. Some jobs are too much like havin' to sleep in a feather bed."

Mr. Harbin stood up. "Here comes the stage. I don't like feather beds either, Red. Old Tom expects his girl. Let's see if she is on it."

THE four horse stage came rocking at a gallop through the smoke-like roll of dust and jangled into a halt before the livery stable where the station agent, who was also the livery stable owner, had a box that was called the office.

Old Tom Terry caught up with Red and Mr. Harbin and tried to hurry them into a jog trot to where a little group had gathered. Lashings were being thrown off the top baggage and the burly driver exchanged greetings and banter with friends as the boys unhitched the team and brought out fresh horses.

"There she is! That's Nettie, I bet!" Mr. Terry shouted, pointing ahead toward a young woman who appeared to be looking expectantly over the group.

He rushed up to her with, "I'm Tom Terry and are you my N-Nettie?"

His voice faltered into a protesting quaver before he had finished the name for, having got a better look at the lady, he knew that she could not be his Nettie.

The lady was slender, dark, young, pretty — prettier than Bess Howard, but something like her in a way. She smiled at the roughly dressed little old man.

"No, sank you, but I am not your Nattie!"

Mr. Terry backed away, then he called to the driver, asking about passengers, and the burly driver thoughtfully shook his head. "No name like that on the list, Tom. Not this trip, Tom."

Mr. Terry scratched his cheek with a far-off dejected stare clouding his old child-blue eyes.

A young man who was running with a light cane in his hand bumped with jostling shove against Red, threw out his arms and shouted, "Elaine!" The pretty girl cried, "Ooo-oo-la!" and her black-gloved arms fell about the young man's neck.

He had the gambler's pallor, the flashy gambler's dress, the lucky gambler's air of self-satisfaction. He gave the lady his arm, glanced about and men fell back, making way. Something about his arrogant handsome face seemed to assume that they gave way for him.

Red also stepped well aside, but Mr. Harbin remained in his tracks at the edge of the sidewalk. There was room enough between him and the wall for the couple to pass abreast, easily, but not enough to suit the gambler's pride. He lifted his chin and spoke coldly, "With your permission, sir!"

Red knew Mr. Harbin's dislike of gamblers, especially of fancy-dressed good

looking gamblers. Mr. Harbin did not move and the gambler impulsively turned his light cane as if about to lift it and strike.

Still Mr. Harbin did not move, not so much as an eyelash, as he gazed at the pale

young man, not smiling, not frowning, but somehow giving the sort of warning that any man with a lick of sense would take. After a long moment's hesitation the gambler took it, and he and his lady went on. His face became as darkly pink as if he had been slapped, and the dark lady's face turned over her shoulder with an expression that had some wonderment but no anger.

Mr. Terry mopped his head with a bandanna. "The jolt it give me when I got a good look at 'er! 'You my Nettie?' I said. To think maybe she had been my Nettie! Couldn't be, o' course—a woman like that; but—whew! Let's have a drink and go back to the bank to sign up."

AFTER the papers were signed at the bank they went to the hotel and stopped at the bar.

Mr. Terry bought a box of cigars and a bottle of whiskey.

"Now we'll go up to my room and talk some things over before supper. Here, Red, you bring the bottle. Don't you drop it." Mr. Terry waved to the barkeep. "We'll be back, Charley. I want to get my boots off."

In the hall an old Mexican who was a man-of-all-work around the hotel furtively touched Red's arm then pressed a piece of paper into his hand.

Red thrust it into his pocket, gave the bottle to Mr. Harbin, explaining, "You'd better take this. I'm goin' to the washroom."

Red unfolded the note by the washroom window. It was written in a large rounded hand that was easy to read.

> "Dear Red, I just have to talk to you alone about something nobody but God in heaven knows. My room is No. 8 at the back upstairs. Please come as soon after supper as you can. Please come, Red. I just haven't a friend in the world I can talk to. So please, please come. Bess Howard."

Red folded the note back into his pocket and in a slow sober way took off his hat, hung it up, tucked down his shirt collar, rolled up his sleeves. He filled a pan with water, soaped his face, scrubbed it into a lather, gouged at his ears, and rinsed by scooping the water against his face. With eyes tightly shut against the soapy water he groped for the roller towel.

"What's come over women that so danged many of 'em want me to come for a private talk!"

As he stared into the wavy looking glass and combed his wet hair, he told the image:

"It ain't you she's after. Your looks never made any woman silly like that. She is after somethin', though. I sure am not going to her room. There is the porch and all outdoors for to talk in if she wants."

Still that "something nobody but God in heaven knows," had a solemn sound, like sincerity; and it stirred curiosity, too. She was pink-faced, sweet, soft-looking, and had curly yellow hair; there was even at times a look of innocence in the wide blue eyes. He didn't believe in the innocence, but he tried to think that there was nothing mean and hard about her—like some.

OLD TOM TERRY was in his undershirt and sitting on the bed with his boots off. He held a glass of whiskey in one hand, an unlighted cigar in the other and wiggled his toes as he talked.

He interrupted himself to say, "Pour a drink, Red, and set down. Have a cigar? Better for you than them snake-tails you smoke. An' remember now, Red, you ain't ever to say anything about the deal between me and Jack here."

Red had promised that until there was a kink in his neck from nodding, but he nodded again and said placidly, "I sure won't, Mr. Terry."

"I know how 'tis between pardners," Mr. Terry went on, jabbing the cigar in and out of his mouth between phrases.

"Like the banker says—" the gray old banker had a long nose and tight mouth and Red did not like his looks—"it just busts an outfit wide open—wide open—I've seen it happen—when one dies and t'other has to sell with beef down to settle an estate for fool heirs as have got no sense an' want their money right now!

"I know you'll take care of little Nettie all right. An' Old Sligo. They're all I care about. She'll be here tomorrow. Ever'thing of mine is to be hers, 'ceptin', of course, Sligo is to have a good home and some money.

"You'll most likely out-live me. Natural thing you should. I'm gettin' old, damn it! Worst thing that can happen to any man. You lose your teeth, you lose your hair, and if you eat too much you get the bellyache. I'd give ever'thing I got in the world to be Red's age again—you lucky pup, you!

"But anything can happen, Jack. Horse fall—cold settle on your lungs—a shot go wild, or maybe don't! So if you do go first, you've made it kinda hard for me about that boy of yourn. You want him found if possible, and—ain't you got no idee a-tall where he is?"

Red held his glass of whiskey between his fingers with his elbows on his knees and looked down, listening all right but politely pretending not to be curious.

Mr. Harbin picked a cigar from the box, studied it, laid it back. "I've told you, no idea. In a way, I've always meant, when I had some time, to see what I could do. Now it looks like I'll be busy for a long while. Matter-of-fact," he went on quietly, and just as if speaking to the cigars in the box, "I guess as a man grows older his feelings grow stronger for—for a boy that he has lost.

"I told you I sent some money to a man in Chicago to try to find out about Jimmy. I knew where his mother's family was located and the fellow got in touch with them. He wrote me that Jimmy had stayed with an aunt for a while, then went away and the aunt died, or maybe the aunt died before he went away. That's all I know. It eased me that he was away from his mother and that man she went off with.

"I'd give anything to have him by me. That is, if he has turned out to be the kind of boy I'd want him to be. But I'd rather not know if—well, his mother always cried and took on if he needed a thrashing. She'd even lie for him to help him not get it."

They were silent for a time. Mr. Terry chewed on his cigar. Red looked down into his whiskey glass as if watching things. Mr. Harbin drew a long breath and stared out of the window.

It was growing dark. Through the open window the steps and voices of men could be heard as they gathered for a few drinks, then supper. Shadows dimmed the room. Red thought about putting a match to the lamp but he sat still.

Presently Mr. Harbin's thoughts turned into words, and he went on:

"So if a horse rolls on me or something, you just do whatever you can about Jimmy. If he's alive, he can be found by detectives putting advertisements in papers. His mother's family will help if they know there is some money coming. They're that kind."

AFTER supper Red had to stand around in the hotel bar because Mr. Terry wanted to talk of his Little Nettie who would be here tomorrow, sure.

". . . I want her an' Red to hit it off. Red's got to stay up to the Big House with me an' her. Red, you are going to teach Nettie to ride and . . .

Red pressed his lips to keep from grinning and sneaked an imploring look toward Mr. Harbin who was amused.

"Looks like another feather bed," Mr. Harbin murmured.

"What's that, Jack. What's that? Feather bed? Wouldn't have one of the damn things in the house! Not on the ranch. But if Nettie and Red——"

Old Tom Terry, getting off in a ro-

mantic vein, was planning to coop Red up at the home ranch as a riding instructor for Little Nettie. Red grinned and squirmed, knowing that it would only rile Mr. Terry to protest, knowing also that he was not going to be cooped up, not even if Little Nettie was prettier than her picture.

"Come along, Tom," said Mr. Harbin. "Let's take a walk uptown, see the sights. Coming, Red?"

"Me, I'll moscy along afterawhile."

After they had gone Red went down the dim hall with as much uneasiness as a thief and tapped lightly at No. 8.

Bess Howard opened the door at once and said, "Come in," hurriedly.

She closed the door behind him and he stood with his hat before him, the fingers of both hands holding to the brim, and he felt helplessly out of place as he looked at her and wondered what on earth was the matter.

She had been crying and still trembled from sob-like sighs. Her face was swollen, her eyes red and she didn't have any dark stuff on her eyebrows and lashes so that it looked as if she didn't have any eyebrows or lashes. Her yellow hair was still curly but mussed.

He said, "What all is the matter?"

Bess gathered the long blue dressing gown about her and pointed toward a chair with a hand that held a wet handkerchief. "Set down, Red. I'm all to pieces." Her voice was huskier now.

HE turned to the chair and felt ill at ease because her corset had been thrown across the back. She picked up the corset, gave it a fling and said, "Set down, Red."

He sat down and she leaned toward the mirror above the washstand, pushed at her hair. She said, "I sure look a fright!" but as if she did not much care. Then she faced about and tried to smile, "Red?"

"Yes, mom?"

"Why didn't you tell me that Mr. Terry was such a good friend of yours?"

"I don't know. Didn't know it mattered, I guess."

"It does matter! Where's my tobacco?"

Bess took up a half empty sack with brown papers and sat on the edge of the bed, dabbed at her red nose and, putting the soggy wad of a handkerchief in her lap, rolled a cigarette. Now and then her body shook with sighs.

"I've just about bawled my eyes out. Does no good. Got a match?"

He struck a match for her. She said, "Thanks," and reached to the stand for a saucer that was littered with stubs and placed it on the bed by her. She pulled the dressing gown across her knees and told him, "I feel so bad I don't care how I look. Are you working for Mr. Terry?"

Red balanced his hat on his knee with the air of trying to do a trick and watched the hat as he told her, "In a way, I reckon so. Not right this minute maybe, but—" He looked up. "Mr. Harbin is to be super'tendent, sort of, and is takin' me along. Why?"

"Mr. Terry likes you a lot, don't he?"

"I reckon. Why you think so?"

"The way he talked about you and his Nettie hitting it off."

"Oh, he's just—I like him fine, but how he talks sometimes don't mean anything."

"It means a lot!" She put out a hand toward him and the hand trembled. "Will you promise something?"

"Depends."

"Depends on what?" Bess jabbed the cigarette down among the saucer's stubs and blew her nose.

"Depends on whose business it is."

"It's mine! Red, I don't know a soul in this country and I don't know what to do, and I— Oh, Red! I am Nettie Ward!"

She choked up and her face got pain-twisted. For a moment she tried to control herself, then she turned and lay across the bed with her face in the bend of her elbow and began sobbing.

Red sat perfectly quiet as if listening to the words repeat themselves inside of his

ears as he gazed at her with frowning intentness; then his own mouth tightened in a hurt twisted way. Something inside of him began to feel a suffocating ache because he saw how bad things were for her. There was such a lot of difference between this Nettie Ward and the Nettie Ward that Old Tom Terry was expecting.

He asked softly, "Was that your picture?"

Her head moved in jerky nods against her arm.

Red's hat fell to the floor and he did not notice. He put the palm of a hand on each knee and sat still because there was nothing to say, nothing to do. He felt a little like the time when he had to stand and watch a baby Mexican girl die of the croup. The child looked as though somebody had hold of her throat and was strangling her. He knew that this was worse for Bess Howard than if somebody was beating her with a whip, and there wasn't anything that he could do about it.

After a long time Bess sat up, looked disconsolately at the soggy handkerchief, then went to the wash bowl. She poured water and dabbled at her face. "I've used every handkerchief I have, bawling! I'll have to start tearing up my clothes for rags if I don't stop!" When she had wiped her face on the towel she returned to the edge of the bed.

"Roll me a cigarette, will you, Red? I'm shaking."

"Sure. And here is a handkerchief. New one, too." He drew a brand new bandanna from his pocket, offering it.

"Thanks. My, but my nose is sore." She sighed convulsively and rubbed her nose. "I just can't cry any more. It does no good. Nothing does any good. He's such a dear old man and I—I—what am I going to do?"

"I don't know. Here." He offered the cigarette, then struck a match. He broke the match, tossed it to the saucer. "How did you come to do it like you done?"

"Do what, Red?"

"I don't know. But you are here, been here week-ten days you said. And he expects you tomorrow, sure. And that picture. You've done something all out of kilter."

Bess puffed moodily on the cigarette. "I haven't any sense. I really haven't. I wasn't playing a trick. I don't know what I thought I was doing. Would you like a drink?"

"No, mom. But you take one if you want."

"I don't drink, but I keep a pint just in case." She put the cigarette in the saucer. "Doesn't taste good. I keep wanting them but they don't taste right. I thought I would die when he showed me that picture!"

Red nodded, understandingly.

"He knows I'm twenty-six—I look forty! Yet he expects me to look like sixteen!" She added bitterly, "And be like I was at sixteen! Oh, I've made a mess, haven't I?"

"I don't know yet what you've done."

"Nothing very intelligent. Mother has been dead for years, but a while back I got the idea of writing Grandfather Terry as if she had just died—and I sent the picture.

"Just to see what would happen. I don't think I really expected to hear from him. He had never forgiven mother. At least she never knew if he did.

"And he wrote right back for me to come to him. His letters are over there in the valise. In a way I didn't want to come. I knew he wouldn't like me. I've been through too much. But I kept thinking, 'Why not? Why not go and see what happens?' And here I am!

"All the while I was coming across the country I knew that I couldn't let him think that this tired old worn out blowsy *me* was his Nettie. I don't know just why I did it, but I wrote that I would arrive on the twenty-first or twenty-second. Then I came on. I wasn't trying to play a trick. I don't know what I was doing. Oh, I had

good reasons in a way, but I wish to God I had never written that I was coming.

"So I've been here, waiting. Waiting for him to come to town—come to meet his Little Nettie. And I have asked people about him. I suppose I have hoped that it would all work out somehow. But it hasn't—and won't! That picture today—he would hate me, wouldn't he? Wouldn't he hate me?"

Red evasively mumbled, "I don't know."

"You do know. And I know. I know what I look like. What a girl would have to look like when she's been through what I have. Roll me another cigarette?"

"Yes, mom."

"I'm going to tell you something else. You may as well know it all. But don't misjudge me! I'm not hoping, honest, Red, I'm not hoping—you will believe me, won't you?"

"Maybe." He gave her the cigarette and a light, then rolled one for himself.

"Red, he said—it's in a letter over there. You can read it if you want—he said there was nobody else in the world that he cared about, so he was leaving everything to me. But I am not hoping that he'll die. I don't want him to die!"

Red scratched a cheek and wondered.

"But if he does, why then—well, don't you see?"

Red eyed the tip of his cigarette; watched the film of smoke rise, waver, vanish; then, non-commitally, "Sure, I see."

"I'd feel like a murderer just to have the least little bit of a wish that he would—would pass away."

Red gazed solemnly at her tear-swollen face. He didn't know whether or not to believe her.

"I don't want to go back East, and I have to do something. I can play and sing a little. I wrote him that I could—and he got an organ! And a woman cook. Oh, God, Red! And that picture, wrapped up like something precious! It's hell, isn't it. Red?"

"Yes, mom."

"What kind of a place is Centavos City?"

"Noisy and tough."

"Do you think I could get work over there?"

"I reckon, but I don't know. I used to blow my wages over there. It's changed. Bigger now. Wilder and worse."

"Well, Red, I'm leaving on the stage in the morning—5 A.M.!— for Centavos. I'll find something—I can dance—play—sing a little."

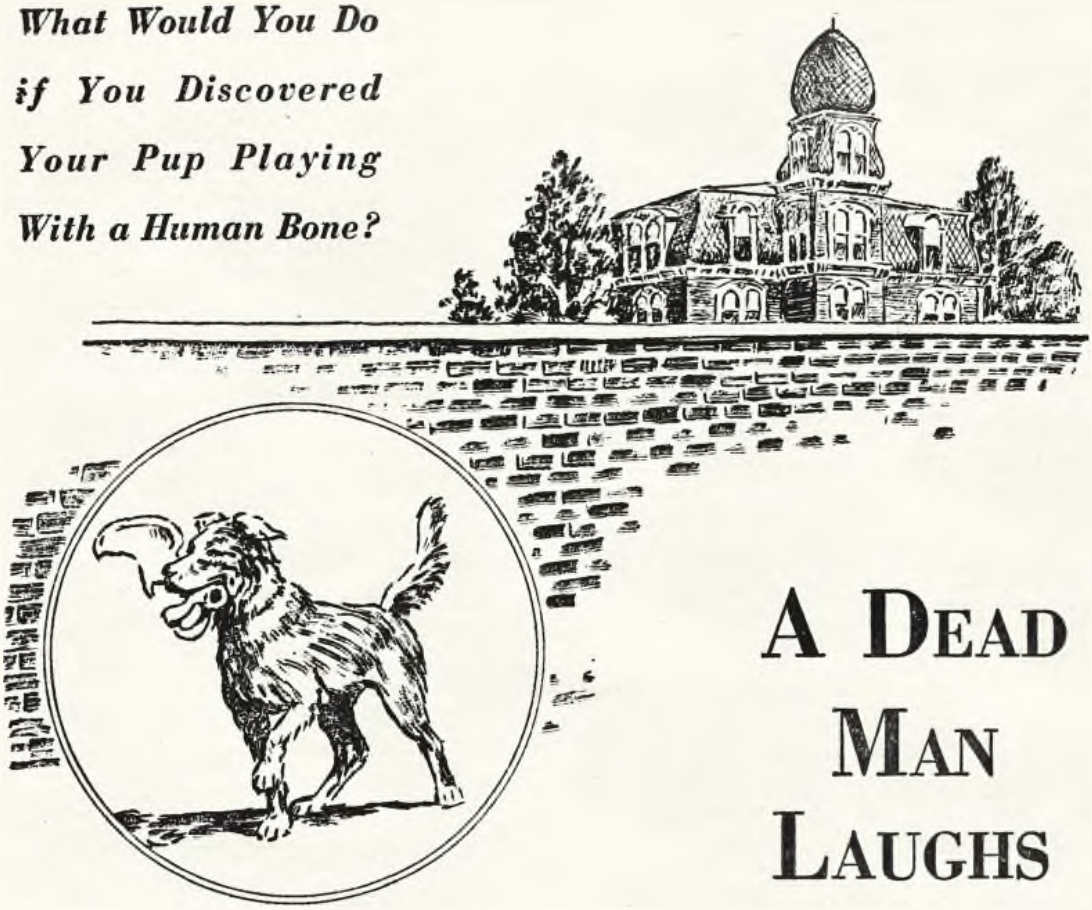
"Why'd you up and tell me all this about yourself?"

"I had to tell somebody. And he likes you so much. I haven't a friend—and you are his friend—and he is just heart-hungry and aching for—for his little Nettie!"

She put Red's new handkerchief to her eyes and bawled.

(*So it was up to Red to think of something to do—Part II in the next issue*)

What Would You Do if You Discovered Your Pup Playing With a Human Bone?



A Dead Man Laughs

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

YOU would have said that on such a morning nothing could happen. Carse as a matter of fact did say so.

"Nothing could happen on a morning like this."

He was having a quiet cup of coffee with his crony, Fletcher Steele, who had dropped in for no apparent reason. This was on the front porch, which was enormous, all front porches thereabouts being enormous.

Nothing ever happens in a place like this anyway. Out here in West Park, I mean."

"Oh, I don't know—"

It was summer—definitely, for no chill of spring clung to the air—but not yet ferociously. It could have been late June, it could have been early July. Nobody on such a day would care.

Carse's dog, a shaggy absurd pup, was clowning with a bone too big for him. He would drop it at the foot of his master, then pick it up again and run around the lawn, growling in mock rage.

The dog was almost the only thing that took the trouble to move here in the sedate somewhat gone-to-seed West Park section. Even Carse's garden, while it looked presentable, was not alert, not at its best. It couldn't be bothered, perhaps. The daffodils and vehemently yellow forsythia had long since gone, and the tulips should have done so, being bedraggled and generally disgraceful. The iris was in bloom, moving back and forth half-heartedly in a half-hearted drowse of breeze. Sunlight was smeared impartially, and even the shade was gay. Bees buzzed. Birds, when they got around to it, twittered.

"You live in an atmosphere of excite-

ment down at Headquarters. Murders and robberies and so forth. But imagine anything exciting happening out this way!"

Fletcher said again, "Oh, I don't know." He reached down and grabbed the puppy. "For instance, look what your dog's playing with. A bone. Where did he get it?"

"Why, I suppose—"

"Because," added Fletcher, *"it happens to be a human sacrum!"*

STANDING across the street from the Wyckoff house they could only see, over the wall, the third story, upon which had been slapped sideways a roof consisting of pieces of slate of many different colors and shapes, and the fourth story, a square old "tower" enclosed in glass that was dirty. On top of the tower, amid more slate, there was an utterly senseless filial of no particular color, shaped rather like a stupendous darning egg. Of all the houses in West Park this was the most West Parky. It was also the largest. In fact it was even called, from time to time, Wyckoff's Folly. Which was only to be expected.

"That's the place."

"How do you know?"

"The bone," answered Fletcher, who was holding it, "is utterly dry. Every bit of smell must have passed out of it long ago. But still your pup found it interesting—which means it must have been against something or in something that had an odor he liked. He wouldn't have picked it up just because of its pretty shape. And he must have got it somewhere very near here, because he didn't have it when I came to call on you half an hour ago and he hasn't been out of our sight for more than five minutes since then. So it came from this neighborhood. Well, we've been looking around. There are a lot of garbage barrels and garbage cans out in this neighborhood this morning, but that one over there's the only uncovered one. It's so low that the pup could have pushed the lid off with his nose and done a little snooping inside. Let us go and do likewise."

"Using *your* nose?"

"I'm a cop. I've got a nose that's used to poking into funny places."

Fletcher asked, as they crossed the street, who lived in the Wyckoff mansion these days.

"Augustus Leemer Wyckoff II. Only one of the family left. A grand nephew of Gus and the two old dames. You've heard about them, haven't you?"

"Uh-huh. The kid doesn't live in that barracks alone, does he?"

"Well, yes. You see, he's been in Europe since he was a child. South of France. I don't know whether it was the War drove him back, or lack of money. Probably both. He's only living in the mansion to save hotel bills, I understand. He's anxious to sell the place and clear out. I guess he doesn't think much of the home town."

Fletcher Steele nodded. He was not impatient, disagreeable, as he would have been in the company of a fellow policeman. Indeed he seemed even cheerful. With a forefinger he poked thoughtfully.

"Ah, yes, here we are! A human sphenoid. Part of the skull. Will you chase back to the house, Jack, and fetch me an umbrella?"

"An um— An umb—"

"Umbrella, yes."

IN ANY other part of Sayres City they would have been observed, but here in Harrison Avenue near Wyckoff Avenue they might have been in a lonely country road. They heard a delivery truck wheel over pavement somewhere near at hand, but no vehicle or pedestrian was in sight. There was not even a playing child. Perhaps children in West Park—if there were any left, if the gaunt square houses were not peopled solely by old men and women—did not play, or at least not right out where they might be seen.

"It's a very interesting bunch of stuff in that can," Fletcher explained. "I'd like

to examine it at my leisure, in the laboratory."

Twenty minutes later when he walked into Police Headquarters lugging a large, awkward and seemingly very fat umbrella, there was the usual snicker. The boys, who didn't understand him, and for the most part were afraid of him, never lost an opportunity of shoving somewhat elephantine wisecracks at the head of the Identification Bureau. There was no denying that Fletcher Steele could do some wonderful things sometimes; but neither could it be denied that he often looked damned silly, and was peculiarly vulnerable to the catcalls of the commonality.

"Heck, Fletcher, you *stink!*"

"He always stinks," somebody else said.

They got no rise from him. Paying them not the slightest attention, he went to the door of his laboratory, unlocked it, popped in, umbrella and all, and slammed the door, after which they heard the key turn again in the lock.

"No, I *meant* that," the first cop said, his blond eyebrows pushing up furrows where they tried to meet. "He really *did* stink!"

AT Headquarters they thought of Fletcher as a cosmopolite, as indeed he had until recently been. Like Augustus Leemer Wyckoff II, he had spent most of his life in Europe, with the difference that Fletcher had studied. He was not young and not old, Fletcher Steele. He must have been, the boys supposed, always the same irascible screeching worker of miracles and repository of strangely related information. It was difficult to remember that he had actually been born in Sayres City. Not from any love of the place, however, had he returned. He had awakened one morning to find himself poor. Being in Sayres City at the time—he had come back in order to learn why his usual checks weren't appearing—he had shrugged skinny shoulders, asked a few questions, and taken the first job that offered itself, a job as head of the Identification Bureau of the local police department. He had got this job partly because of his elaborate and expensive education, which included the study of many subjects related to criminology if not to crime itself; partly because, being desperate, he came cheap; but chiefly on account of pull.

He never used that pull again. Anyway it no longer amounted to much—a few old-timers like Jacob T. Carse, who had known him as a kid.

Fletcher himself had been born in that same old West Park section, then the fashionable part of town. He, too, had come from one of those great square ugly turreted mansions, so many of which had since been converted into boarding houses or else torn down and replaced by apartment buildings. For even the shabby gentility of West Park was doomed. A section far out when the Wyckoffs, the Carses, the Wests built there, it had become, what with the growth of the city, close in; so that the constructions of apartment houses were taking an interest in it.

Fletcher therefore knew about the Wyckoffs.

As far as Sayres City was concerned, originally there had been four of them, two brothers, two sisters. They were supposed to be very rich. They stayed behind their walls, never mixing with neighbors, seldom even taking a trip to Chicago or St. Louis, and as a consequence they were much talked about. One of the brothers married, somewhat late in life, and (his wife died soon afterward) triumphantly produced a son. Then this brother himself died. The son was sent away to school, later to college. He returned from time to time to visit his aunts and his uncle, but really the house belonged to Gus Wyckoff, as the townspeople called him behind his back, and to Miss Mary and Miss Elizabeth, impeccably dressed ladies who carried parasols when they rode out.

Gus, now, was different. Nobody in Sayres City had ever seen him do anything

wrong; nobody had ever heard anything specific against him; but it was generally assumed that he was a scamp. He had attended some big Eastern university, a feat not then as common as it was to become, and when he rode forth in a swanking four-in-hand he not infrequently wore a turtle-neck sweater and smoked a very large curved-stem pipe. He had also been seen smoking a cigarette. It was said that he drank; and certainly he had a very red face.

In due time Miss Mary died, Miss Elizabeth died, and Gus himself died, and on each occasion the nephew reappeared from whatever Eastern city it was he lived in—New York was the popular guess—to attend the funeral, sign some papers, and vanish again. He was accompanied then, by a son of his own, Augustus Leemer Wyckoff II.

Those three, Miss Mary, Miss Elizabeth, and Gus, had occupied Wyckoff's Folly for more than thirty years. The nephew never returned after Gus died. Recently the nephew himself had died, presumably in that vague Eastern city, and Augstus Leemer Wyckoff II inherited the house.

Fletcher visited Augustus two days after the finding of the sacrum and the sphenoid.

The front gate, the main carriage gate, was decisively locked. He went around to

the Harrison Avenue entrance. He was wondering, as he went, whether the occupant attached any importance to stories that the house was haunted. Probably not. There would naturally be such stories; but nobody had ever taken the trouble to describe the Wyckoff ghost or give any reason for it; nobody spoke smugly of it, as an Englishman might do. And it was not likely that any except a few old Negro servants of the neighborhood feared to pass Wyckoff's Folly after dark.

Naturally, too, there was a treasure. Its outlines, foggy enough, at least were clearer than those of the ghost. The Wyckoff wealth was not local; the family owned no land other than that upon which the house stood, and no Sayres City utilities or factories had contributed toward the upkeep of those carriages. Yet there were many alive still who swore that more than once they'd caught the glint of true gemmery when Miss Mary and Miss Elizabeth rode forth. Those dames were bedecked, in the talk of the town, until they came to be like twin Czarinas of Russia. And what had happened to all these gauds? Ah-*hah!*

FLETCHER pushed the gate open and walked into the garden. It was weeds. Nor were they brash, newly arrived weeds, noisy in their triumph, gloating; but they had conquered all grass and flowers so long ago that they'd forgotten, and now they stood sleepy and stale. Insects drone among them.

A row of stones marked the path to the kitchen, and once upon a time they'd been whitewashed. Fletcher saw too the upper portion of a fountain: a little iron boy, naked and chubby, rather frantically gripped a chubby iron fish from the mouth of which no water had gushed these many years. Further away, peering in amazement over the pollen-dusty weeds he would never get used to, was, inevitably, a stone deer.

The house itself, from here, seemed enormous, an architectural hodge-podge warty with bay windows, false towers, balconies and ginger-bread. Its windows however kept it from looking a typical neglected mansion. For the windows were intact. Dirty they were, to be sure, but their very numbers gave their authority, and they glared with glazed malevolence, unblink-

ing, some deliberately expressionless, none of them sleepy as was all the rest of the world. That many eyes, they studied Fletcher. They'd been spared the missiles of boys, he knew, partly because of the high garden wall, chiefly because of a cantankerous and very alert caretaker who had recently been discharged.

The kitchen door was opened. A chunky young man stood there, a young man with plump cheeks, hurt blue eyes, lips habitually twisted in a pout. Petulence of course is known everywhere; but the high-waisted slacks he wore, the sport shirt, the espadrilles, were things unfamiliar to Sayres City. He looked as if he might even, without warning, don a beret. You suspected that he kept his handkerchief in his sleeve.

"There's a sign outside that says 'No Tradesmen'."

"I saw it," said Fletcher, "but not being a tradesman, I came in."

"Oh. I don't want to buy any—"

"I don't want to sell you anything. It just happens that I used to live in this vicinity, back in the days when your great uncle was cutting his capers."

The young man said, "Ah?," in a tone, less frigid, but he didn't move out of the doorway.

"And I thought of moving back some day, maybe. Somebody told me you had this property on the market? Maybe if the price—"

"No, this property is not on the market." As Fletcher showed astonishment. "It *was,* but now I've decided not to sell. Not just yet, anyway. I'm beginning to like the place."

He grinned sheepishly, as though a bit ashamed of this.

Fletcher asked, "You really live here all alone?"

"Oh, yes. Just in a few rooms. There's enough furniture left to carry me on. Monstrous old pieces, of course."

"What do you do with yourself?"

"Search the house. That takes time. You see," he hurried on, "there's supposed to be a treasure hidden here. I didn't take that seriously until I came back and saw the place and lived in it for a while. There really could be a treasure in a house like this. Why not? I seem to remember my father saying that my great aunts had a lot of diamond brooches and bangles and so-forth, but this certainly wasn't left to my father when they died, and there's no record of its being sold. So maybe it still *is* here. Stranger things have happened.

"Not that I need the money. But what else have I got to do? Can't go back to France. Besides, it's rather a lark, treasure hunting."

"I see," said Fletcher.

Augustus Leemer Wyckoff II had been tolerably sociable for a few moments. Now the pained expression returned to his face.

"At any rate, the house is not for sale. I wish you'd make that clear to any friends or business associates who might be interested. I've definitely withdrawn it from the market. Good day."

"Good day," said Fletcher, and all down the path to the sidewalk gate he had the feeling that those blank dull malevolent windows were glowering at his back.

Once through the gate, he stepped aside and waited. A minute later he heard the scrape of a hasp, the clack of a padlock. Soon afterward he tried the gate again, and learned that he could not now open it. He grinned.

A garbage pail stood by the curb. It was not a very big pail. The garbage in this neighborhood, as Fletcher had already learned, was collected Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday mornings.

Yes, the pail was small. The umbrella Fletcher carried was very large. He had no difficulty getting the contents of the one into the other.

IKE ANDREWS came calling two weeks later. Acting Commissioner of Parks and Public Structures Andrews was a large pink jovial man who did a lot of work, especially around election time. Not

often was he summoned to Sayres City police headquarters on a matter pertaining to the building itself. They had paid Fletcher Steele the compliment of calling in the highest authority.

Nobody ever knew what to do about Fletcher. He was a hard guy to get along with. Yet to get along without him, as even the stupidest among them knew, might be even more difficult.

The Acting Commissioner had to knock for some time before the laboratory door was opened. Fletcher never liked to be interrupted.

"Hello, Sergeant. Interesting place you got here. Always did mean to drop in on you."

"What do you want?"

"Got all kind of chemicals and things like that in there, eh?" Ike Andrews endorsed a wonderful payroll but his knowledge of science was not great. "Things like that always interest me, you know."

"I'm busy. What do you want?"

"Well, you see it's this way, Sergeant. Some of the boys—uh—I mean naturally your fellow members of the department, Sayres City's finest, you know? Some of them, they didn't like to speak to you personally because they know you're usually wrapped up in scientific things like those chemicals and all. But at the same time—"

"What in hell are you trying to say, anyway?"

"Well, you see it's this way. The boys sort of thought that whatever—uh—whatever experiments or like that—scientific experiments I suppose they are—the boys thought that after a while they kind of smelt odd. These experiments, I mean. They kind of had—"

"You mean they stank. Isn't that what you mean? Listen, Andrews, this whole building stinks, but not half as bad as the guys who run it. Good-bye."

And he slammed the door.

Two hours later there was a knocking that persisted. Fletcher slid off his stool, furious. He swung the door open.

"Listen! Haven't I told you I don't care how much this—"

"Lord Iumme, Fletcher! What's the trouble?"

The head of the Identification Bureau quieted, even half grinned in apology.

"Hello, Jake. Excuse me. I thought it was another one of those missing links looking for trouble. Come in. They've been complaining about the smell."

"I should think they would! What've you got here anyway?"

"Some more waste matter from the Wyckoff kitchen."

JACOB T. CARSE stood in the middle of the laboratory—he had never been there before; few men had—and looked around, nodding. He saw the big box of cotton into which Fletcher used to fire guns when he wished to examine their bullets. He saw the microscopes, the ultra-violet lamp, the X-ray apparatus, the green steel businesslike fingerprint files, the racks of test tubes, the pipettes, crucibles, flasks, retorts. He saw the bulging blowsy couch upon which Fletcher not seldom slept. He saw five or six cats which entered and left and walked around as they wished; for this laboratory was a cat sanctuary; alley cats—they literally entered from an alley, by way of a window—had the liberty of a place the Mayor himself couldn't have crashed. Carse saw the precision instruments, the color filters, the enlargement cameras, the scales, the micrometers, the Bunsen burners and bottles and burettes and books and beakers.

He also saw the bones. He swallowed.

"That's what I came to find out about. You get me all worked up—and then leave me flat. I haven't laid eyes on you since the week before last."

"I'd give you back your umbrella right now, Jake, except that some of the ribs got bent out and the whole thing isn't exactly perfumed. I'll see if I can't get the city to buy you a new one."

"It's not the umbrella I'm worried about.

You know that. But tell me how the good work's going."

FLETCHER shrugged. Even with old acquaintances like Carse he did not like to talk about his work—not, at least, until it was all cleaned up, the report written, the matter finished. Still he was fond of Carse. And if it hadn't been for Carse's pup—

"Well, I've been carting off the Wyckoff garbage every other morning since that time, and besides doing that I went out to the city dumps and poked around the place where the stuff from West Park would be deposited. And in that way—Well, you can see for yourself what I got. Thirty-four bones out of a total of 200-and-something. But the ones I've got are mostly important ones."

"It really is human then? Or was?"

"Absolutely. I've got a good part of the skull, one humerus, one femur, most of the pelvic arch bones."

"Was it a man or a woman? Can you tell that?"

"A woman. See the width of the pubic arch here, when I hold it together? And see its rounded apex? See the square shape of the body of the pubic bone itself and how it looks sort of pinched where it joins the ramus? See that sacrum? That's what your mutt brought. See how short it is, and wide? And notice how wide open the great sciatic notches are, and how small the acetabula are—they only measure 46 millemeters in diameter; you'd never find a man's like that.

"By Pearson's formula I figured that she stood about 5 feet 3½. She had a small cranium, probably not more than 1,200 cubic centimeters. Her gnathic index was only 94.2, so she wasn't a Negress.

"I haven't any teeth, but judging by the ossification, which is the best way anyway, I'd say she was about 22 or 23 at the time of death. That was quite awhile ago—I can't tell how long—wouldn't be able to tell even if I knew in what kind of place the bones had been kept, and at what temperature and so-forth — but it must have been ten years at the very latest.

"Most of the epiphyses seem to have united with their shafts, so that would make her 20-odd anyway. But see along the margin of the hip bones here, where the epiphysis along the crest of the ilium forms the main part of the bone? Well, that crest usually unites with the rest of the ilium at 22 or 23. And then this secondary center along the margin of the pubic ramus is still separate, and *its* union is usually at about 24. So I'd say she was either 22 or 23."

Carse cried, "Good Lord! You mean to say you can tell all that from a few old dried-out bones?"

"I can tell a lot more than that." Fletcher stroked a cat with one hand. "I haven't been playing games with those things. I've been working over them.

"For instance, I can guarantee that this woman, whoever she was—I can't give you her telephone number—"

"You're slipping, Fletcher."

"—but I can guarantee that she never really suffered from arthritis, rickets, osteomyelitis, tuberculosis, syphilis, bad tumors, diseases of the ductless glands, or paralysis. She might have had dandruff, for all I know, but she didn't have chronic lung or heart trouble. Now look at those great sciatic notches—"

"Which ones are they?"

"Here. This one is wider than that one. The ischial tuberosity here is heavier than on that side, too. The acetabulum, the cavity for the head of the thigh bone

here, has got a greater capacity and depth than the one on the left. For that matter, the right hip bone itself *weighs* slightly more. And there's a difference in the measurements of the areas forming a joint with the sacrum on the right and left sides. And a slight asymmetry of the sacrum itself.

"Well, she might have had halitosis and b.o. and I couldn't detect it, and unless I had a lot more of her bones than I've got here I wouldn't be able to tell you whether she had a club foot, or a claw foot, or a hammer toe, or any extra fingers or toes or maybe missing ones, or a cervical rib, or a spina bifida, or congenital angulation of the tibis, or wry-neck. But I can tell you this much, from what I've already pointed out—that either all her life or most of it she was lame in her left leg.

"Another thing. The left eye socket here is smaller than the right in both diameters. The opening for the optic nerve on that side is tiny, while the one on the right is normal. See here—I've taken gelatine-zinc casts that'll show it clearer. And look at the small size of the left lachrymal cavity. What's the answer? Why, she was blind in her left eye."

Carse shook an aging head. He had heard that his friend was clever; he had never expected all this.

"It's the damnedest thing I've ever listened to! Why, you ought to be able to identify a woman like that, with all those facts about her, even if she *has* been dead for a long while!"

"As a matter of fact," Fletcher answered, stroking the cat, "I have. You see, I found out even more from those bones than I've mentioned."

"Who was she? How did she ever—"

"Come, come, Jake. Is this any way for a retired hardware dealer to act?" He walked to the door, unlocked and opened it. "I'll tell you the rest this afternoon. I'll drop in for some beer."

"What time?"

"Oh, about four. I've got another call to make in that neighborhood first, but it shouldn't take long."

Carse paused in the doorway. He looked sideways at Fletcher.

"Who else are you calling on in West Park?"

"Augustus Leemer Wyckoff II, if you must know. By-bye, Jake."

THE young man, looking more than hurt, looking downright sore now, at last unlocked the tradesmen's gate, though he opened it only three inches. Scowling through the aperture, "What do you want to keep hammering like that for? I told you the other day that—"

"I didn't come here to talk about property," said Fletcher Steele. "I came to talk about bones."

The young man tried to keep on looking sore, even to bluster, but in spite of himself his worriment showed.

"Dry bones," Fletcher supplemented. "They came from this house. You see, I've been collecting your garbage every other day for the past two weeks." He did not try to force his way into the garden, but he did lean closer to Wyckoff as he said, "You're not going to enjoy this little chat, but we'd better have it just the same. Not here. In the house."

"Come—uh—" Have you ever seen lips without any blood in them? and eyes that swam over with the very tears of fear? "Come in."

Their words boomed and banged about in the huge dining-room, and slithered like ribbons through long empty dust-clogged hallways. Their words cunningly but quickly took over the house, each word refusing to sag and fade but poking its way into this chamber and that chamber, unbaffled by walls, sheering off the floor as off the high ceiling, encountering alert echoes of itself, and echoes of echoes of echoes; so that soon the whole of Wyckoff's Folly hummed with syllables remote detached, blurred, fuzzy at the edge, syllables sometimes whispered, sometimes

murmured, now traveling in swarms like mosquitos, again lonewolfing it through stretches of air only momentarily uncrowded by sound. It gave you the creeps. For the house had been built to contain things of velvet and horsehair and lace, silk, damask, heavy carpet, portieres with plush balls dangling from their edges, and curtains and rugs and throw-overs—stuffs against which sound would not clang off. An empty mansion is not a good place; but a mansion crammed with sly word-ends tumbling about like smoke fills any heart with fright.

Nevertheless, though his eyes were busy and even brighter than usual, and he wondered how young Wyckoff could bear to live here, Fletcher told his story. In a voice equally dry he told about the bones.

The only articles of furniture were two cheap kitchen chairs and a massive old mahogany dining table upon which were scattered some magazines, a teapot and teacup, an ashtray filled with cigarette butts, a portable typewriter, two newspapers, some notepaper. Nothing hung on the walls, nothing covered the floor.

Wyckoff sat motionless, listening. He was pale as death. Fear sloshed back and forth in his sad blue eyes like water in a bucket that's jogged. When Fletcher had finished, the young man wetted his lips; he did this as though it burned.

"There was plaster on some of those bones," Fletcher added, as though absentmindedly. "The skeleton was in a wall, eh?"

"Yes. There's no sense denying it! You seem to know everything! Yes, I found it in a wall. On the third floor. I'd been measuring the walls, thinking it just barely possible I might find hidden treasure—or if not a real treasure, at least something that would be worth something. After all, you're likely to find almost anything in a house like this."

A cloud of echoes hummed around him. He shook his head as though to shoo off insects. His lips trembled.

"I—I found a place where one small wall was much thicker than it had any business to be. I thought it sounded hollow, when I tapped it. That might have been my imagination. Anyway I figured it couldn't do any harm, so I took an axe and smashed that wall in. And I found —well, what you've seen."

"That," pronounced Fletcher, "is why you took the property off the market in such a hurry."

"Exactly. What else could I do? It wasn't that I was afraid *I'd* be accused of murder! After all, I must have been in France at the time it happened, if I was even alive then. But there's such a thing as family pride. That might seem silly, coming from a man like me, in this day and age—especially considering that I only saw Uncle Gus a couple of times while I was a child—but just the same, that's the way it was."

"If you sold the house, the skeleton would be found."

"Of course! Because whoever bought it would only buy it to tear it down and build an apartment house here."

He stared at the windows. Two were open, showing a stretch of weeds in the midst of which the stone deer raised a startled head, and beyond that the high garden wall. Nothing moved there.

"I thought of burying them, but what good would that do? When they excavated for the new building they'd sure as hell dig them up."

"Vous avez raison," said Fletcher.

"On the other hand, I couldn't picture myself carrying them out in my pockets and chucking them into the river or somewhere. I—I'm not used to such things. Murders and things. I've lived a quiet life. It would scare the wits out of me to try to do anything like that.

"So I decided to put them into the garbage pail, one or two or three at a time. I never supposed they'd be noticed, or if they were I thought they'd be taken for meat bones. It meant staying on in this

miserable city longer than I'd meant to do, because I couldn't do anything about selling the house, or even showing it, until they were disposed of. But it seemed best."

Fletcher drew a long slow breath, then jerked his head around and stared at the empty shadows of the hall.

Wyckoff asked, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. This place gives me the heebie-jeebies, that's all."

"It did me at first too, but I've got used to it. Listen"—the watery eyes were on Fletcher—"if you've found out so much about this woman, her age, her height, the fact that she was physically deformed, why couldn't you perhaps identify her?"

It was the same question Jacob Carse had asked that morning, and Fletcher, as he had done then, smiled.

"As a matter of fact," he answered, "I have."

"You—you might as well tell me. Was she—did Uncle Gus—?"

"Nobody who remembered the old household here could recall any servant who answered that description. And I couldn't picture your great uncle keeping a mistress who was blind in one eye and lame in one leg. So that ruled that out. But I think I've managed to identify her. I've got every reason to believe that the woman whose bones we're talking about was Miss Margaret Mason, nee Mosnicka, a Czech immigrant who died in the charity ward of Gouveneur Hospital, New York, August 17, 1892. She died of pneumonia."

Young Wyckoff sprang to his feet.

"Why, if she died of pneumonia—"

"I never said she was murdered, did I? I never mentioned murder. No, Margaret Mason died a perfectly natural death. There were certain other little things about those bones I haven't described. It had me buffaloed for awhile. You see, the humerus and the tibia had holes drilled clear through them, the length of them. And the skull and pelvic bones all had tiny holes in them, one or two in each, not deep, they could have been screw holes. Get it? There was no wire, but they'd been wired together at one time, and in the case of the skull and pelvic bones screwed to plates.

"Don't you get it yet? Maybe it'll help if I tell you that the reason I was able to identify Margaret Mason is because she left her body to science. Which means that it went to some medical school and was dissected, and later the bones were sold or given to some student. Maybe he was the one who assembled them and wired them, or maybe he sold them to somebody else who did it. A box of bones was worth something in those days. But a complete skeleton, standing upright, was worth even more—as much as a hundred dollars when I was studying medicine.

"Well, can't you guess the rest? Your Uncle Gus was East then. There's a famous medical college in the university he attended. He had money. He was a rah-rah boy, and probably hung pennants on his walls and had a burnt wood pipe rack and drank beer from a fancy stein. Back in the days when football players used to wear handlebar mustaches it was considered hot stuff to have a skeleton in your dormitory, even if you weren't a medical student yourself. Your uncle bought it. He got tired of it after awhile, when it more or less fell apart, but he kept it for years, for no particular reason, just sort of sentiment maybe."

"Good God! But why should he plaster it up in a wall?"

"Your Uncle Gus, from all I can gather, was a funny guy. It's reasonable to suppose that one time just before he died he got looking over his souvenirs and the sight of them sort of filled him again with the old hell-raising spirit. He hit upon one last mad prank. They'd been talking about him for years, here in Sayres City. Well, he'd give 'em something *real* to talk about! You see, it was his idea of a joke. First, of course, he removed the wires and the plates."

The pudgy spoiled face of Augustus Leemer Wyckoff II pinkened in impotent rage. He was so angry that he almost wept.

"The miserable old faker!"

"There's never any accounting for people's senses of humor."

"And to think *he's* the one that— To think I suffered all that agony meaning to protect *his* name!"

Fletcher rose.

"Well, I just thought I'd tell you. It was a lot of work, what with one thing and another, but I didn't mind."

"It was very *wonderful* work, Sergeant! Forgive me for not thanking you sooner. I can't tell you how much you've relieved my mind. Must you go? I wish I could do something for you."

"You can."

"What is it, Sergeant?"

Fletcher leaned close to him, both fists on the table.

"You can tell me this," he answered. "You can tell me why you've been pretending that you're living here alone when all the time *you've had at least two other men here with you!*"

Wyckoff gawped, thunderstruck.

"I—I don't understand! Do you mean to say you don't believe me? I can take you upstairs right now and show you—"

"I believe every word you've told me," Fletcher answered evenly. "What I want now is the rest of the story. The part that has nothing to do with the bones. The part about the treasure."

"The treasure? I haven't found—"

"You see, that garbage pail of yours held a lot of interesting things. Am I to believe that you smoke three different kinds of cigarettes, for instance? And that you eat at least a loaf of bread and two cans of beans and eight eggs every day? And if the grounds and leaves are anything to go by, that you drink at least a quart of coffee a day besides a good bit of tea? You're hard-up as hell, Wyckoff. I've been investigating you, and I know. You're broke. Practically all you were left by your father, outside of a lot of worthless stocks, is this property, which is mortgaged up to the hilt anyway. If you do sell it, you won't get much out of the deal. Tell me, why have you been dealing at three different grocery stores? You don't want snoopy neighbors to get talking about your guests, that's why."

He glanced toward the shadowed hall.

"Why don't you ask them to step out and introduce themselves? I've got an idea who they are anyway, but I'd like to know if I'm right."

There was no sound from the hallway, no movement there. Fletcher sighed. He turned to Wyckoff, and as he did so he took a small metal object out of his pocket.

"I made one very lucky find. It required a lot of searching but it fitted in beautifully with your talk about thinking that you might find the treasure after all. Now this little article that's shaped like a tulip has got solder inside it, and not long ago there was something imbedded in that solder. Even if I hadn't seen the shape of what had been imbedded there, I think I'd have figured that this is what the lapidaries call a 'dop,' broken off from the stem that holds it. It's what's used to keep a diamond firm when it's being polished on the skeep—or maybe repolished. I've seen them in Amsterdam. Maybe you have too. You shouldn't have let your friend throw this away after it snapped off."

He looked again at the hall.

"Still out there? Why don't you come and join the party?"

Wyckoff stood very straight, almost leaning backward, and his eyes were wide open, his mouth was open too. He was badly frightened. Fletcher Steele had his

chin almost on his shoulder, and when the man appeared in the wide hall doorway he did not stir.

The man was as small as Fletcher, but young, sleek, truculent. He was sore, and kept looking at Fletcher. His hands were in the pockets of his coat.

"You're a cop!"

"That's right." Fletcher grinned a little. "Joey Marrs, eh? That's what I'd guessed when I saw that diamond impression. A modern American brilliant cut. And I suppose you're 'antique-ing' them? Smart boy, Joey. Talented. Steals 'em and cuts 'em both. It isn't every crook can do that. Too bad you weren't just smart enough to lift those Anderson jewels last month without bumping off Mrs. Anderson's maid."

The young man shook his head, glowering.

"You're not going to hang that job on me."

"I am when we find the Anderson jewels here in this house. You couldn't have recut and remounted them all. That takes time."

"You're not going to find them here. Because you're not going to walk out of here."

He glanced at Wyckoff.

"You and your damn bones! Why didn't you tell us?"

Fletcher seemed in good spirits.

"Now who's the fence who had this bright idea? Tell me that, huh? No, wait! Let me give you my guess. Ev Lindeman."

Marrs said nothing.

"*You,* naturally, I recognized from your pictures. I've got your front-and-side in my own files. But Lindeman I could recognize personally—which is probably why he's so coy about stepping out and taking a bow.

"Another thing. Stop me if I'm wrong. Ev Lindeman is the only fence big enough to handle such rocks who comes from around here and would be likely to have heard about young Wyckoff and his troubles—and the Wyckoff treasure. So naturally he's the only one who'd think of such a scheme in the first place. And it wasn't so dumb, at that." He raised his voice. "Don't be bashful, Ev, if it's you out there! I'm just saying it was a pretty clever stunt. Joey here goes to you with the hottest rocks in the country—he being plenty damn hot himself, for that matter.

"You'd love to handle them but you can't think of any way to do it. They're being watched for everywhere. So then you happen to hear about young Wyckoff coming back and living here alone, and you get this bright idea. You come here and proposition him, and being broke and desperate he takes you up. What's more, you've got an ideal spot to work in. Joey does the resetting, you stick around to make sure that nothing goes wrong, and Wyckoff fetches supplies and holds off visitors.

"Reversing the usual procedure. Instead of taking diamonds of an old-fashioned cut and modernizing them, you take these Anderson stones, which were modern American brilliant cut, the most fashionable there is, and you deliberately refacet them so that they become something else—I suppose Old Mine cut, or maybe English round cut. Something that was popular fifty-sixty years ago. It would decrease their value, naturally, but what's the value of any diamond if the man found with it in his possession is likely to go to the chair? Yes, that was a smart notion. Nobody would ever suspect such a thing. And then you'd mount 'em in old-fashioned mountings, and our little south-of-France sweetheart here would 'discover' the Wyckoff treasure. Oh, smart. But naturally it was a long hard job, and naturally too you weren't expected to know that young Wyckoff had just run across a wallful of bones and didn't know how to get rid of them."

"You talk too much," the little man said. "I'm going to bump you."

HE SCOWLED at Wyckoff, who was near to fainting.

"We got to, understand? We *got* to! I don't care what you think about it, it's the only thing to do. Here and now."

He drew from his pocket a small shiny revolver.

Fletcher said sharply, "Put that thing away before it goes off and hurts somebody! Do you think I'm so dumb that I came here alone?"

It was then that Ev Lindeman came forth. Large, dark, lean, middle-aged, with steel-rimmed glasses and a forward-jutting head, he looked like a disagreeable pawn broker. He was badly frightened. He stabbed a finger at Fletcher, and his voice was high.

"He's a liar! He always works alone! Everybody knows that!"

"So it *was* you, after all, Ev? My, I'm glad!"

Lindeman was not accustomed to being in the midst of a crime of violence. He didn't himself handle weapons or burglar's tools.

Rather, ordinarily, he was a receiver, a backer, a promoter, a fixer. Every cop in that part of the country knew that Lindeman was crooked, but he'd never been arrested.

"You're trying a bluff, that's all! You've done it before. You're trying to scare us into thinking you've got somebody behind you."

"But I have, Ev. I really have, this time." He waved toward the windows. "It's full of cops, out there. You can't see them yet, but you will just as soon as there's any fuss in here."

"Baloney! You're much too smart to bring out a whole squad unless you had a search warrant."

"But I did get a search warrant."

"On what? On a little dingus like that, that only a guy who'd happened to visit the diamond places in Amsterdam would know what it was?"

"Oh, no. On the bones, you sap. Those bones were very handy. I testified that they looked fresh, but that little lie doesn't make the warrant any the less legal."

He dropped his mocking tone. He was becoming the old impatient Fletcher Steele again.

"Listen. What do you think I've been doing all this talking for? To hear the sound of my own voice? No, it's because I figured I had to put on a show to keep you guys interested. Otherwise one of you would be likely to watch the wall out there and see the cops climb over. And that might mean a little thoughtless bang-bang, which I wouldn't like to see happen. *This* way everythings fine. You're surrounded."

The garden was drowsy in sunshine. No bees hummed there, for there were no flowers, but a cloud of tiny white butterflies tumbled low over the weeds, and the little iron boy still squeezed the fat dry iron fish, while the deer, inanely staring at nothing, went right on looking startled.

JOEY MARRS alone, Fletcher noticed, did not look through the windows. Marrs looked at Fletcher. He was the only one, Fletcher reflected, who had any guts. The others were scared stiff.

But then, Joey Marrs would go to the electric chair if he was arrested. He had certainly killed that maid servant at the Anderson house, not in Sayres City, but in the same state. Caught with the diamonds, he would be as good as convicted before he went on trial.

"Well, he's either lying or he's telling the truth," Marrs said. There's only one way to find out."

He pocketed the pistol and walked toward an open window.

"Watch the guy," he said without turning. "If he makes a break, slug him."

He put a leg over the sill, then the other leg. Hands in pockets, the right one on the revolver, he dropped to the ground.

They watched him. They saw him slish through knee-length weeds toward the

tradesmen's entrance. He was walking slowly, his shoulders hunched high.

He was half-way to the gate when somebody near him, somebody hidden, cried, *"Hold it!"* He spun, screaming a little, sobbing, and drew the pistol. All the air

jumped, all the earth too, as though at one terrific explosion of dynamite. Individual shots came pit-pit-pitting fussily through this roar which was the sum of all their parts, and they came from Marrs' right, his left, from before him and behind. One man with an automatic rifle rose from the weeds not ten feet from where Marrs stood, and the rifle was chattering. Nobody waited to learn whether Marrs really meant to fire that revolver or whether he was only bluffing. It wouldn't have been good sense to wait.

Fletcher saw Joey Marrs spin around and around, jerking and jumping grotesquely, like a stuffed doll batted about by children. The revolver flew from his hand. He was probably dead even before he fell, at last, full-length.

Fletcher did not witness this fall. He had suddenly become aware of bits of glass flying past his face, and he realized, through the roar of guns, that the windows were being shot out. That cop with the automatic rifle was letting the muzzle ride up on him. Fletcher yelled, "Hey, you lousy stiff!" and dropped flat. The others had already dropped. The far wall was speckled with holes.

Silence thudded down upon the world. And after a long while a voice came through it, taut as wire stretched too hard.

"How many of you are in there?"

"Ain't nobody here but us chickens, Boss!" Fletched Steele snarled. "And for Pete's sake, keep those cannons quiet! You couldn't find enough fight in these two guinea pigs here to dent a sofa cushion."

AFTERNOON shadows, in no hurry, thrust tentative javelins across the lawn. Fletched finished his beer. He and Jake Carse never used to talk much. They used to just sit there on the porch, when Fletcher had time.

Down the street cops were searching the grounds of Wyckoff's Folly for that small shiny revolver which had fallen from Marrs' hand when he went spinning around and around. It had been lost in the weeds somewhere. There was no question that Marrs had *had* it—a dozen men including Fletcher himself could testify to this—but it would make for a better report if the thing were found.

"Have some more beer?"

Fletcher shook his head.

"I really ought to get down there and help the boys—" He stooped suddenly, yelling, *"Hey!"* Carse's shaggy foolish pup had galumphed up on the porch and stood before them, tossing his head, worrying something he held in his mouth. "No wonder they couldn't find it!"

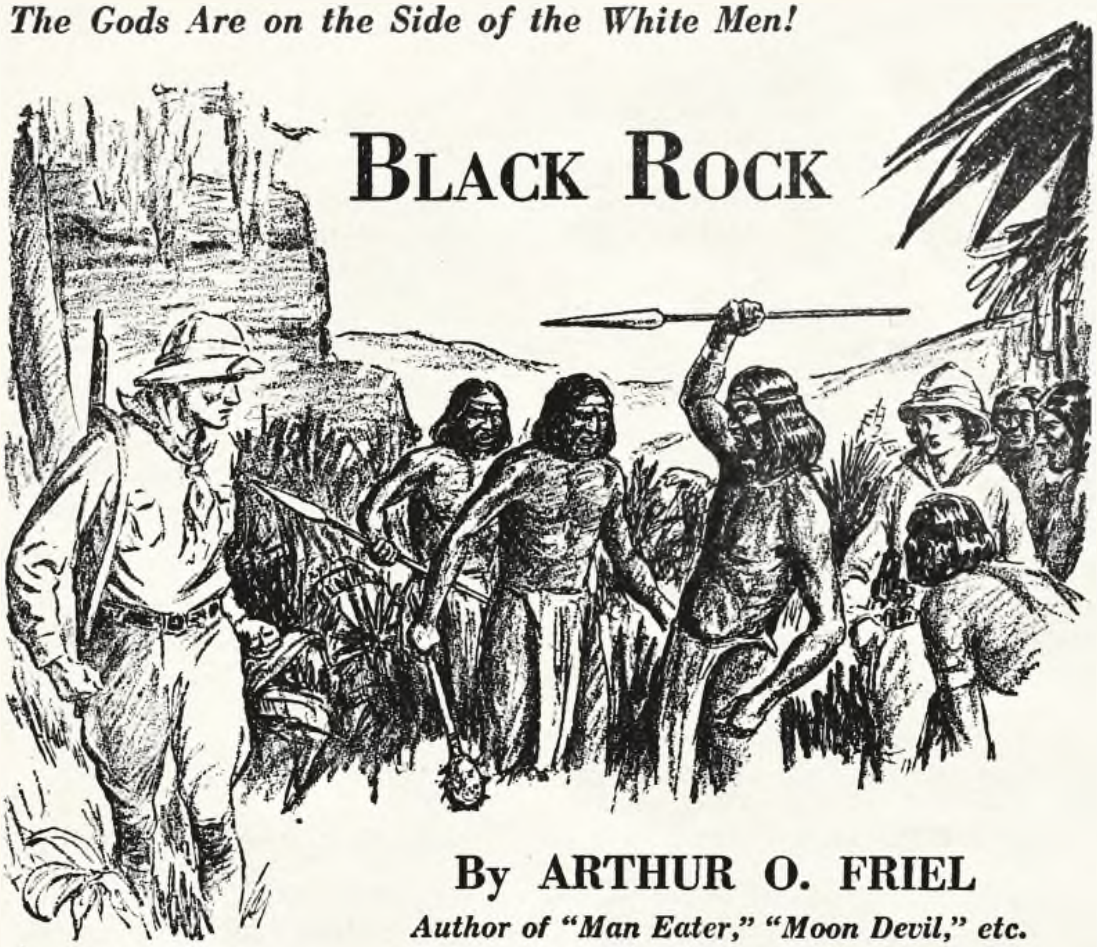
He grasped the dog by the scruff of the neck and very carefully removed the pistol —very, *very* carefully, for the pup thought this was a game and resisted playfully, and the gun after all was cocked. It was a cheap old-fashioned Spanish pistol. It might easily have gone off.

Uncocking it, Fletcher exhaled at length. He wiped his face. He rose.

"Lovely quiet neighborhood you have here. A guy doesn't have to go looking for trouble here. It's brought right to him. No, thanks, I won't have any more beer. I'd better get back to headquarters where I can relax. Drop in on me sometime, if the pace gets too much for you out here in West Park. But don't bring any of your pets along!"

The Gods Are on the Side of the White Men!

BLACK ROCK



By ARTHUR O. FRIEL

Author of "Man Eater," "Moon Devil," etc.

I

HIGH on a jungly mountainside a white man peered afar through strong binoculars.

Before him spread a barren brown prairie, streaked by a crooked green belt of trees. Beyond, bluish in tropical heat haze, rose more mountains.

Behind him stood two brown men and a white woman: a slender woman with short dark hair, masculine clothing, and a holstered pistol. The brown men, wearing only breech clouts, were Piaroa Indians, untamed dwellers in this rugged region east of the crooked Rio Orinoco. And down below, in the thick forest which ended at the plains, waited other Piaroas—armed for combat.

Now these four gazed at the same spot. Far out on the sunburned *sabana,* and some distance from the wandering green *cano,* loomed a strange black rock. Isolated, precipitous, it was visible to any eye. Through the magnifying lenses it seemed a crude fortress, roughly built, topped by lumpy watch-towers.

To the white man, an experienced explorer, it was a phenomenon eroded by ages of water and wind; a work of nature, yet a freak even in this freakish land of Venezuelan Guayana, one of the oldest parts of the South American continent. To the primitive natives it was a sinister thing to be eyed askance. To the young Northern woman it was a curiosity in which she felt only mild interest. Yet to it, with different motives, all now were bound.

Lowering the glasses, the tall observer asked:

"Have a look, Lee?"

"Anything new?" the girl inquired.

"No."

"Then I'll save my eyes, Corwin. We've studied it before now from here. And let's be going."

She turned toward the steep slope up which they had climbed to this bare outcrop. Then one of the brown men, with small eyes fixed on the binoculars, voiced gruff gutturals. The other spoke in crude Spanish:

"Chief say he want see through your sight-gun."

Corwin glanced shrewdly at the heavy-faced chief, gauging his greedy gaze.

"Bien," he acquiesced. "But first, Hokko, tell him this—the sight-gun gives magic sight only to men favored by the gods."

As the warrior translated, the chief's lips quirked in a half sneer. Then he voiced a curt demand which unmistakably meant:

"Gimme!"

Corwin passed the glasses. Clumsily the brown boss held them up, squinting with a deep scowl. Soon he shoved them back at the owner.

"Did you see well?" probed the American.

"Chief say yes," replied Hokko. "See much magic."

"Did he see the great *tigre* carved high on the black rock?"

The chief grunted an aggressive affirmative. His gaze met Corwin's with hard defiance. Over the Northerner's tanned face passed a faint smile. The chief's mouth tightened. Abruptly he swung off the stony ledge and strode downward among the trees.

Corwin chuckled.

"That's one on him," he said. "I turned the thumbscrew and put the lenses away out of focus. He saw only a blur. But he claimed to make out a carving that doesn't exist."

"The old bluffer!" Lee laughed. Then, thoughtfully, "But maybe your joke's not so good. You made rather a monkey of him, and I think he's sore."

"He is," nodded Corwin. "Sore because I've caught him lying—and maybe for other reasons. I haven't liked his attitude lately, and— Well, wait a minute. Hokko! *Aquí, amigo!*"

THE warrior, about to follow his leader down the declivity, returned.

"We need speech, you and I," declared the white man, "to make clear some things now foggy. And I know you will speak truth."

"Sí." Hokko looked pleased.

"You remember, Hokko, that I once saved you at the Rio Orinoco, where you had been captured by cruel slavers."

"Sí."

"And so you led me to your tribe-house in these hills. And you remember that I have fought for your tribe; that I have killed devils who were preying on your people; and that this man-woman here, who is my assistant, has always been ready with her own gun to fight for us all."

"Sí."

"And you Piaroas know that we whites from far away are favored by your gods. Not once since we came here have the thunder gods roared at you, nor any sickness come upon you. Is it not so?"

"Sí."

"Very well. So you and all your tribe owe us great friendship. Yet your chief has never acted friendly toward us. Why?"

The brawny fellow looked troubled. He glanced down the shaggy mountainside where his ruler had vanished, then looked again at the lean outlander and the slender woman. While he inwardly debated, Corwin added:

"Hokko, your chief spoke falsely just now. No *tigre* is carved on that black rock. He claimed magic sight which the gods did not give him. No good luck comes to those who follow a liar. Especially when that liar claims the favor of the great gods.

"Even in the world of white men, Hokko, there have been big chiefs who did

that. They deceived their people. The gods heard. And when gods are angered—Do you know what they do?"

"Si," muttered the aborigine. "They destroy—"

His head turned toward the huge god-mountain Sipapo, bulking leagues away at the south.

"Right," solemnly agreed Corwin. "The gods destroyed those lying white chiefs—and those who followed them. Destroyed them with the thunder of many great guns and the lightning of many flames and the rain of many bullets. So may they do now to you and your people, unless—"

There he paused. Hokko's cheek muscles bulged. Then he announced:

"Chief jealous. You big man here. Bigger than chief. He hate any man bigger."

"Uh-huh. I thought that might be it. Well, now, what is the truth about that little rock out yonder? Why do you men fear it?"

"We no fear!" came gruff denial. "We no like."

"Why?"

"Men go there no come back."

"So? And why is that?"

"*Quien sabe?* Bad place—we stay away. Our own land good; we leave bad place alone."

"Very sensible. Then that place is not Piaroa land?"

"No. Our land stop here, where mountains go down. We—"

A HARSH yell halted him. Down below, the chief was ordering him into line—and, by inference, his white companions. The imperious tone brought to all three faces a frown of resentment. And Hokko, although obeying, moved downward with a touch of belligerence.

Following, Corwin said:

"Lie Number Two."

"Meaning?" probed the girl, who had not understood Hokko's mongrel Spanish.

"Meaning the chief again. He gave me to understand that the rock out there was in Piaroa territory. It's not. I smell something fishy."

"Meaning?" she repeated.

His only reply was a hitch of one shoulder, from which was slung a short rifle. Loose gaited, outwardly nonchalant, he ambled on down through the forest to a narrow trail where waited the rest of the party. There the chief suspiciously eyed Hokko, who, retaliated with an antagonistic stare. The commander's heavy brows lowered; but he voiced no rebuke. Mouth tight, he moved off in the lead. Smoothly the Indian file flowed after him. The Americans fell in at their usual place—last.

THE path, usually a mere animal track, showed recent improvement and use. Chopped brush lay in confusion at each side. Trees were barked, near the ground, by the scraping passage of heavy dugout canoes hauled overland. Now, as the Piaroas marched, Corwin noted a slight sluggishness in their steps. None deliberately delayed; yet none progressed with the confident swing of a warrior voluntarily seeking adventure. Rather the gait was that of conscripts, advancing because they must.

Out of the shady defile they trod into the blaze of the torrid barrens. A few rods away flowed the green-fringed creek; and on its slow water floated two canoes. Into these thick shells the natives stepped promptly, yet with the same cheerless lack of resilience; and as they dipped their paddles their movements were mechanical.

Brown bodies swaying in automatic rhythm, the crowded vessels glided down the meandering waterway. Amidships of

the first dugout rode the chief, hunched up like a watchful toad. In the second canoe the North Americans squatted with hands locked over knees; and aft, trailing the broad steering paddle, Hokko sat on the overhang, vigilant captain of his boat crew. His bronze visage now was stolidly expressionless.

Miles crawled away behind. Along the banks small life sometimes showed amid the rank verdure—a huge-billed toucan on a bough, a slinking agouti on the ground, a coiled snake on a projecting root. Otherwise there was only the tangled waterside growth, broken by occasional gaps through which the brooding mountains looked in at the stealthy voyagers.

Lord of all those heights, the colossal Cerro Sipapo towered ever against the high sky; a stupendous, sheer-sided block, father of terrific storms. To that great bulk Corwin's pensive gaze reverted at every opening in the bush. Never ascended, fiercely defended by savages who seldom permitted outsiders even to enter their rough territory, the holy mountain seemed forever inaccessible to scientists.

Yet Corwin, deserted by his Orinoco boatmen while en route to explore the back bush along the Venezuelan-Brazilian frontier, and soon adopting as assistant a lone white girl whose own exploring party had been killed by Colombian savages, had also adopted a new intention—to conquer that unconquered fastness, gaze abroad at something never before seen by human eyes, pass on his observations to later followers.

Meanwhile, by taking advantage of the varying aspects of that mountain—plus some fierce fighting of his own against hideous things menacing the Piaroas—he had convinced the superstitious brown folk that he was in league with its pagan deities. And, by some inherent reversion to the primitive, he had involuntarily acquired a half-conscious deference to its moods. But now, neither amicably clear nor angrily cloudy, it gave him no counsel. As he again contemplated the squatty Piaroa chief ahead he sighed.

"Too bad," he murmured.

The silent man-woman asked, "What?"

"Oh, several things. Among others, I've kept dreaming that I could eventually persuade these chaps to help me climb old Sipapo. But that's a lost hope."

"Why?"

"The chief's dead set against me. I'd hoped to work through his hard shell and make him my friend. Instead, by making myself popular with his people I've made him my jealous enemy. Which means that he'll do all he can to obstruct me. I've seen his type before. Once they start to undermine a man they never let up; and every failure makes them more vicious."

"I can't see that he's obstructing us now. He's very uncouth, but he's been doing everything possible to help us reach that black rock you want to examine."

"Yes. In fact, he's been just too willing. I've learned that it's an unhealthy place to visit. When we get there, watch your step."

After a straight look into his face she was silent. Studying the morose Indian commander anew, her blue eyes grew steely; and her right hand shifted her belt gun farther forward.

At length the motionless tribal ruler straightened from his slouch and stood erect, scanning the left shore. At once every paddle halted. The dugouts slowed, drifting on the quiet current. The waterside growth here was thin; and through its scattered green showed a hard dark shape.

The chief grunted. The paddles swashed, driving the canoes to land. Seizing weapons, the Piaroas leaped out; scrambled up the steep bank, and confronted—nothing.

Nothing but empty plain, grilling heat, and the ominous black rock amid the barrens. Nothing moved; nothing but a few dry palm-fronds wearily swaying in a faint breath of hot wind.

From that grim rock ran a scraggly line

of greenery hinting at existence of a tiny brook. Trees clustered at the base of the cliff. Elsewhere the ground was bare. After a moment of intent peering through the sun-glare the invaders moved forward.

Corwin led. Helmet tilted against the sun, rifle still slung at his back, long legs swinging easily, he proceeded with neither haste nor hesitance. Hokko, in response to a lazy glance, moved up beside him, carrying a heavy war-club. The chief plodded along at the American's left, grasping a brazilwood stabbing-spear, short handled, long bladed. Bunched behind these three, the tribesmen walked with weapons ready; bows, double-edged wooden war-axes, long *tigre* lances.

Last of all came Lee Burton, temporarily forgotten by the natives but by no means forgetful of them. At the right rear of the troop she marched, watching the chief and all his men.

Steadily the advancing feet, bare or booted, swished through the thin dry grass. Nearer came the stone, and larger grew the green growth masking its foot. As Corwin approached his brows drew down. Interspersed among tough hardwoods and smooth-stemmed palms were masses of thorn-bush, forming a barrier apparently impenetrable—not quite natural.

"Looks queer," he muttered.

Swerving, he walked to the sunken brooklet, a mere thread at the bottom of a narrow slit. Stepping across, he began a wide circuit. Soon he paused, peering aloft.

HALFWAY up the eastern side of the precipice was a spot of deeper darkness, a cavity, roughly oval. Drawing his binoculars, he trained them on the orifice. The sun, glaring into the lenses, baffled the effort to penetrate the inner gloom and hurt his optic nerves. Yet, just as he lowered the glass, his strained sight seemed to detect some small movement up there; a vague, shadowy shift of something at one side.

Peering once more, he discerned nothing. Dead without and within, the stone seemed but a petrified Cyclops staring eternally with its one empty eye-socket at lifeless distance.

He walked on. No other cavities were visible. So, ending his tour, he came again to the brooklet. There the waiting Piaroas muttered. And their chief, seizing opportunity to assert himself, put their wonderment into a gruff demand.

"What," translated Hokko, "you see up there?"

Probing the headman's narrow gaze, Corwin's gray eyes grew bleak. The rough voice and aggressive attitude of the churlish commander were those ordinarily used toward a subordinate. Coldly the Northerner replied:

"Things I choose not to tell you."

Wherewith he turned away. The double snub stung the chief into open hostility.

Snarling, he jerked up his javelin. At the menacing noise Corwin sidestepped and wheeled. But the weapon was not thrown. A hiss of indrawn breath by the disapproving brown men, an angry growl by Hokko, a sharp voice from the right rear, all halted the poised spear. Sliding a look around, the enraged boss found his warriors scowling, the mutinous Hokko lifting his club, and the mannish white girl standing with pistol drawn.

The spear sank. The chief glared at his subjects, then assumed a wooden expression. Corwin looked long at his enemy; then again turned away. This time he walked along the brushy brook toward the rock.

Lee put away her gun. Hokko, still glowering, lowered his club. The others eyed their chief in misgiving bordering on distrust; and one or two glanced uneasily at the mighty Cerro Sipapo, as if dreading some rumble of wrath from the watchful thunder gods. Nobody spoke. As silent moments passed all eyes centered again on Corwin.

He now was at the point where the tiny

stream issued from the mass of greenery. For a moment he stood very still. Then, rifle ready, he moved into the tangle. He had nearly faded from sight when Lee Burton spoke.

"Vamos!" she bade, gesturing toward the palms.

Response was tardy. Hokko alone advanced at once. The chief stood balky; his henchmen wavered, uncertainly awaiting his leadership. On the girl's face grew a contemptuous sneer, more cutting than words.

With a sour mutter the recalcitrant leader moved forward, followed by all his men.

Meanwhile Corwin had discovered a way through the matted growth. Beside the thread of water ran a faint path, invisible outside the grove, yet plain enough when fairly under foot. Snaking inward toward the stone, it revealed no tracks of men or animals, yet was well trodden; and the thorny bush close beside it was, strangely, devoid of spikes up to a height of about five feet. The American, a foot taller, stooped to evade the wooden bayonets menacing his face; and at every step he scanned earth, trunks, and upper reaches, seeking sign of any trap. The ground, though littered with dead fronds, concealed no covered pit. The trees showed no taut vine, no jutting stick, no other evidence of snare or spring-bow. Deeper he worked into the barbed maze—then halted. Five yards away was a cave.

Dark, raggedly semicircular, perhaps ten feet in diameter, the opening yawned silent and empty. Into it vanished the path; and out of it flowed the soundless brooklet. Heavily shaded, the entrance was dim; and the interior was dead black.

For minutes the discoverer stood motionless, watching, listening. Then, backing away, he retraced the path to the open, where the Piaroas, grouped in close huddle, eyed him intently. To Lee's questioning look he answered:

"Something's living here—or has been. I should have brought my flashlight. But—Hokko! Can torches be made?"

Hokko, surveying the many fallen palm fronds on the ground, readily replied:

"Si. Pronto."

"Bueno. Let it be done. But first say this to your comrades:

"I have found the den of the destroyer of men. It is very dark. What brave warrior will go with me to carry light?"

Instead of complying, Hokko asserted, "Me! I go!"

"Bueno," approved Corwin. "But repeat what I said—and do not say you are going."

Puzzled, the loyal fellow complied. Silence ensued. The men looked dubiously at the thicket, glanced at one another, stood mute. Into the eyes of their chief came a sly gleam. Corwin's mouth hardened.

"Your chief, bravest of all, will go," he announced. "Say it!"

Mechanically Hokko translated. The chief, taken aback, scowled at the outlander, then rasped a contradiction.

"Chief no go, no let any other Piaroa go," reported Hokko. "He say if you brave you go alone."

"I need both hands for my gun," reminded Corwin.

The chief's retort dripped malice.

"He say if gods lead you, you no need light."

"Oh yes?" Corwin's face hardened still more. "Then say this:

"First, that you go with me. Second, that I say your chief is a coward. He dares not go where you, one of his men, is going. He is not fit to lead men. He belongs at home with the old women. And when he sneers at me and at his gods he is loco. Those gods watch and listen now—up there!"

Dramatically he extended an arm toward the Cerro Sipapo.

"And from this day he will be despised by gods and men, unless he proves himself not afraid to face the killer of Piaroas!"

His concluding tone was solemnly prophetic. Hokko, repeating the denunciation with keen relish, ended on the same foreboding note. For a long minute there was a breathless hush.

Astounded, infuriated, yet muddled by the sudden broadside, the chief first made an abortive upward movement of his spear, then let it sink as he eyed his men cornerwise. Their searching gaze told him that unless he accepted the white man's challenge he was in truth disgraced. Gritting his teeth, glaring at Hokko, he nevertheless capitulated. With jerky strides he walked to the edge of the trees and halted, waiting.

"That's better," dryly remarked Corwin, in English. "Our dear old friend's going in with me, Lee, where I can watch him. You stay here and guard this path outlet—and shoot anything you don't like. I'll have the boys surround the rock; they'd be worse than useless in there. Now, Hokko—"

Orders followed. Men readily responded, some constructing crude torches from dry palm leaves corded into cylinders with green vines, the rest trotting away to take positions around the stone. Before they scattered, Corwin added.

"The chief shall lead, as chiefs should. Hokko will walk at my back."

A venomous glance from the chief, a tight grin from Hokko, and glimmers in all other brown eyes proved that his dis-

trust of the one and faith in the other were fully comprehended. Thereupon the three filed into the thicket.

At the cave entrance Corwin struck a match, ignited the sullen leader's torch, and nudged him onward with his gun muzzle. Thereafter no prodding was necessary. Hopeless of retreat or treachery, the light-bearer fixed all his attention ahead.

Flaring, crackling, the makeshift light dispelled the dark, yet revealed nothing monstrous. The walls, smoothed by ancient action of water when all the outer land had been higher than this remnant of stone, varied in width and slope. The passage wormed about, climbed short grades. The gloomy ceiling slowly dripped. Then, from a small hole at the right, silently flowed the little spring, sole vestige of a once powerful subterranean stream. Thereafter the footing was dry.

Stooping forward, with torch extended and spear gripped tight, the chief crept ahead like a stalking jaguar. Corwin walked erect, ready to aim and shoot over the chief's bowed head. Hokko stole along behind with club on shoulder, his free hand holding unlighted torches.

The burning fagot sputtered down, dropping red smoulders and black ash underfoot, growing weaker as it shortened. Then the adventurers met steep climbing. Up a twisty chute they ascended until the chief grunted for a fresh torch. With this ablaze, they worked on, going faster now, impatient with the continued lifelessness of the place. Up, up, up—until the chief stopped short.

He had entered a small cavern, dark, yet not completely black; for from one side seeped weak twilight, the wan ghost of outer day.

As Corwin pushed in, the chief straightened from his hunting crouch, holding his smoky torch high overhead. At once he gave a startled grunt. His body jerked back as if struck.

For a second the Piaroa looked dumbly down at himself. In that second Corwin, behind him, felt a tiny impact against his helmet. Then from the chief burst a hoarse yell; a yell of rage, vindictiveness, despair, all in one. Hurling aside his torch, he sprang forward with spear up. And over

near the faint dayshine Corwin saw something move.

A mere shadowy phantom, it was fading into nothing. With quick aim he fired.

The crash of the shot was deafening. The specter seemed to twitch. Twice more he shot, feeling thunderous blows on his eardrums at each flash of powder. The phantom, huddling over, sank to the floor.

Poised for further action, he glanced swiftly around. The torch, unwound by its fall, flared wide in brief bonfire, revealing no new enemy. The chief, his spear thrown, now sank and squirmed, strangely sluggish. Hokko, behind the rifleman, stood petrified.

Wheeling, Corwin snatched another torch from Hokko and thrust it into the flame on the floor. In the new blaze he strode to the fallen phantom.

Bullet torn, it was dead; a dull, short, lank old Indian. Beside it lay a small cylindrical basket and a short pole. But the basket was a quiver, whence jutted thin blackish shafts tipped with white tree-cotton. And the pole, with bell-shaped mouthpiece, was a half-length blowgun.

Beyond, dimly visible, was a crooked corridor leading toward the outer light. It was empty. So Corwin turned back to the stricken chief, over whom Hokko now was bending. Dull-eyed, the erstwhile ruler was quiet in the rapid paralysis preceding death from *curare* poison. But somehow he recognized the white man who had forced him here to destruction. Over his lax lips flickered a grimace of hate. Then his jaw dropped and his body lay limp.

Jutting from his bare stomach, driven deep into his flesh, was the envenomed dart which had killed. It was black from end to end with wet, fresh *curare*. Straightening, Corwin handed the torch to Hokko and doffed his helmet. There, stuck in the outer cloth, was a similar missile; the one which had flown unseen, hardly felt, above the chief's head to slay the next invader.

Tossing the deadly thing away, he then walked into the hole whence came the feeble dayshine. It twisted into another natural room. Here was full daylight, flooding in through a large opening at the far side. And here he stopped.

Stopped, and backed. Nothing alive was here. But much that was dead.

ON NICHES in the rock wall were skulls. On the rock floor were others. Grinning up at the newcomer, they mutely greeted:

"Hullo, stranger! One more who wouldn't stay home! Welcome to our jolly company!"

After one startled look, Corwin grimly smiled. Skulls and bones were nothing new to him. Ethnology, study of peoples, scientific measurements of heads and brain power, deductions of the pasts and futures of the human race, were his business here. But his smile died as his gaze met something else.

Flat on the stone floor lay a short skeleton. Its bony legs were curiously bowed. Its arms, some of its ribs, showed old fractures; breaks which had been reset and reknit in life, but now, denuded of flesh, were obvious. Beside it lay a dull brown bag.

A startled grunt behind the Northerner made him turn. Hokko stood there agape, distinctly scared. Corwin recovered his own poise.

"You are safe, *amigo*, with me," he assured. "Come in."

But the awed native would not advance farther. As his eyes roved around, however, he nodded toward something beside the entrance — a crude couch of palm leaves. Beside this were dingy clay pots, a water jar, and a bottle-shaped gourd smeared with viscid blackish fluid. Here in this sepulcher had lived the solitary, snaky Indian who slew by poison.

Corwin's wonderment grew. But, suspending conjecture, he moved to the outer opening. Down below on the brown *sabana* stood several of the scattered Piaroas surrounding the tower. He waved his

helmet. The eagerly waiting figures threw up responsive arms and ran toward the brook. At that he frowned.

"Hokko, go down," he bade. "Let the men make more torches and carry out their chief. But let nobody enter this room until I give permission. Nobody but my man-woman. *Vaya!*"

Left alone, he again eyed the skeleton. It was rather old; powdered with fine dust which, even at this height, had floated in during past dry seasons. But the man himself had not been old before his death. The skull was toothless in front, but the molars were all there and firm. And one was capped by a shell of tarnished gold.

"A white man!" murmured Corwin. "How come?"

Squatting, he critically surveyed the whole shape, his expert gaze noting all osseous oddities.

"Man, did you take a beating!" he said. "Front teeth knocked out. Arms broken. Ribs kicked in. Collarbone busted too. And—let's see—yes, a fractured skull besides. That transverse suture's unnatural. And your legs—"

He frowned in puzzlement. The bowed legs were unbroken. As he studied them his eyes narrowed and a hand rubbed his long jaw. Some half-born memory stirred, then died. Shaking his head, he turned to the bag.

OLD canvas, stained, oddly seamed, inexpertly but strongly sewn with tough yellowish palm-cord, it was evidently remade; a duffel bag, cut down to a floppy knapsack. Lank, thin, it held little. Knocking off dust, Corwin dumped it.

Out fell a queer assortment: a rusty automatic pistol, a postcard-size camera, a pocket aneroid, a broken watch, a discolored notebook, other small odds to which Corwin gave no attention. He seized the book.

Scattered notes, hastily jotted, crowded its pages. Early ones were quivery, as if some outer vibration had influenced the writer. Later they grew stronger, smoother, longer. Dates were infrequent, then missing. The last writings were weak and almost illegible.

Flipping leaves, grasping contents in rapid glances, Corwin soon voiced a startled grunt. Dropping the book, he again stared at the silent shape. His hands drew a pipe and tobacco pouch; loaded, lighted, gripped the stem while smoke sank deep into him and floated out.

"Man, oh man!" he said, contemplating the fleshless face. Then he selected several pages and intently studied them.

Down below, the usually taciturn Hokko was making an oration. With dramatic detail he led his mates along from the start of their unwilling pilgrimage to the death of their dictator. A bad chief had, as the white man predicted, been smitten down in the dark by—What? Not by the white man.

That white man had again smashed down some infernal killer with his gun, and now he awaited service by his loyal men.

Hearing Corwin's final order, those men rushed to make new torches. Lee Burton, understanding none of the Indian dialect but watching results, bit back impatience and relaxed as she met Hokko's glowing gaze at the end. The big brown fellow was not, after all, just a hunk of muscles with a thick mind. His flow of language, his statuesque poise, his control of his primitive audience proved him a natural leader.

When he beckoned her into the natural tunnel she went with no distrust. As the party climbed, the mutterings of Indian voices and the updrawn smoke of the new lights forewarned Corwin, who restored to the old bag everything but the notebook. This he stowed inside his shirt.

"What's this?" exclaimed Lee, halting at the threshold.

"An explorers' club."

"Don't joke!"

"No joke. Or only half one, anyway.

All these fellows are retired explorers. Permanently retired."

Staring at the scattered skulls, she drew back. "I know you're hard-boiled about such things, Corwin; but if this is supposed to be funny I'm not amused. Who were these men?"

"Indians, mostly. Or maybe some mestizos—or even white men. I could tell, perhaps, by measuring the skulls, facial angles, and so on. But why bother? In their way they were all explorers; they came into territory they didn't know to learn what was there. And that's exploration, whether the man's a big noise in the Northern newspapers or just an unknown bow-and-arrow brown boy.

"Some of these lads probably are the Piaroas who disappeared over here. But here's one hellbent adventurer from our own country."

HE NODDED down at the skeleton. Lee, now accustomed to the place, advanced.

"Who?"

"Craig Potter. Otherwise known as Crackpot. Ever hear of him?"

"No."

"I'd forgotten, too. He disappeared when you were a baby, and I was only a schoolboy. But you've heard of Wrong-Way Corrigan?"

"Oh, yes," she laughed. "Who hasn't?"

"Corrigan, the Irish lad who lately fooled the United States government by taking off for California in a crazy plane but flew the Atlantic to Ireland. He gave the world a big laugh and came back alive. Well, this little fellow right here beat Corrigan to the same idea by more than twenty years. Only he came south, and he didn't come back."

Soberly he regarded the misshapen wreck.

"Poor little devil!" he mused. "The mind of an eagle in the body of a sparrow. Why are people born that way?

"You see men built like Hercules, but with nothing inside. And you find ugly runts packed with power, but never given a chance to show it. Laughed at, sneered at, because they didn't grow up tall, dark and handsome—or with a barrel of hand-me-down money from rich relatives. There is something wrong in the government of this whole universe. Or is there?"

IN THE momentary silence the man-woman eyed him anew. Never had she seen him like this. Cynically scientific, handling dead or live men like mere museum specimens, shooting down human enemies as if they were only snakes in his path, often mysteriously silent, sometimes strangely exuberant, he had never shown any deep sentiment.

"Anyway," he continued, "Potter was a nut about flying. No money to speak of, no chance to be an army or commercial pilot; his funny little bow legs and general insignificant appearance were against him. But somehow he made crazy crates of his own—and then crashed them. Some of those broken bones you can see came that way, and his nickname too—Crack-Up Potter, or Crackpot. But he could take it. As soon as he was out of the hospital he'd start all over again. And finally he built a machine that would really fly.

"Then he hopped off for— Guess where. Manaos, Brazil, on the River Amazon! Why? Nobody knows—except that nobody'd ever done it then, so he was just cracked enough to try it. No instruments but a cheap compass and a second-hand aneroid. No food but chocolate. No dunnage but a few old clothes in a dilapidated sack. So he went. And so—Here he is."

"But how? What happened?"

"His last crash. Somewhere north of here. He lived, but fell into the hands of the Tapachanos, a small but tough Indian tribe who owned this section. They'd never seen a plane, and took him for some queer little god — or devil — who'd ridden through the sky on a giant thunderbird.

They let him live, but never let him go out.

"On the other hand, they let him ramble all over this section, within set limits. So those little bandy legs of his carried him

where no other white man's ever been. And he kept notes in his log-book. And now I've got it!"

He patted the flat record within his loose shirt.

"So, when and if I return to the States, science will be the richer. And Craig Potter will get the credit due him, while the handsomer lads who laughed at him twenty years ago will stay forgotten."

"Good!" she approved. "He'll be a hero at last. If he could only know!"

"He needn't. He was a sort of demigod here, and probably he enjoyed it. And after he died the Tapachanos made him a saint, or something similar. That's why he's stowed up here, with a death-guard of bodiless adventurers knocked off by the Tapachanos—and a snaky watchman who tried to add us to the collection.

"It seems that a pestilence practically wiped out the Tapachanos some years ago. Apparently it got Potter too. His last entries look sick. But there was at least one old die-hard who lived, and made this hole his hangout. I had to shoot him, and now I'm sorry it was necessary. But—Oh well, let's go!"

He strode toward the inner chamber, whence the Piaroas had now removed their dead chief. Down the long chute and out of the winding shaft they retreated, and away through the fanged bushes to the open land.

There the Indians, glumly regarding their recent commander, awaited whatever the dominant white man might say. Corwin acted at once.

"Hokko, say this, your chief today brought doom on himself by speaking falsely and acting treacherously in the sight of the Piaroa gods. Another man proved himself a true man, a brave man, a better man than this chief who now is dead. It is pleasing to Those Who Know—and to me—that this man now become your chief. The new chief is Hokko."

Hokko drew a long breath. Then, head high, he spoke without bombast, repeating the statement in measured tones, looking his fellows steadily in the face.

Into the gloomy visages came quick light. Tight grins, pleased looks, a low hum of approval welcomed accession of the erstwhile crew-boss to supreme responsibility. Whatever any relatives of the former chief might say, he was henceforth their respected dictator, able to rule without trickery.

With a glance at the westering sun Hokko spoke again. Men grasped the corpse and trudged away toward the canoes waiting at the south. All others followed.

The black rock receded behind them, already half forgotten. Corwin's gaze fastened on the Cerro Sipapo, around whose lofty crest drifted soft gray clouds. And, low toned, he said:

"I'll be seeing you."

Lee, overhearing, followed his eyes, glanced quickly back at him, and missed a step.

"What was that?" she suspiciously inquired.

"Oh, did I speak? Well, rookie, you should never question a brass hat. But, since you're my second in command—or third, now that Hokko's promoted—I'll let you in on something. There's a way up that tough mountain."

Step, step, step. Lips tight, the rookie repressed further question.

"And little old Crackpot found it. He couldn't use it. He hadn't the strength. And that's Piaroa territory, and there's al-

ways been a feud between Piaroas and Tapachanos. But the Tapachanos, knowing that was the Piaroa god-mountain, found the way up just for spite. They wanted to defile it in their own dirty way and make the Piaroas like it.

"They never made the grade. The Piaroas interfered. But the Tapachanos told Potter about it. And so now—"

He softly laughed. Walking on, Lee Burton added up fractions hitherto unorganized. For the first time she realized that Corwin's opportune appointment of Hokko as chief of local warriors was not merely an impromptu act of friendship, but a long step toward consummation of his daring dream of conquest.

And now, striding on, he broke into an improvised marching song:

"Hi-ho, adventurers,
Wherever you may be!
We're all a lot of crackpots,
As the world can plainly see.
But while we blunder all around,
High in the sky
Or down on the ground,
We—we—"

His vibrant voice died out. After several more steps he complained, "Damn it, I never can find the last line. Not until I've found the answer to what's ahead—and then I've forgotten the start. There's always something else coming up next. But—"

With an upward gesture toward Sipapo, he left the finish to the future. And in the sky-blue eyes of Lee Burton shone bright new light. Of barren brown-burned earth, of dark tombs, of venomous killers in this savage land she had seen more than enough.

But away up there, where the high gods waited to decide unforeseen fates.

Under her breath she hummed a little song of her own: an old poem about a woman who, over the known world's farthest rim, had found her man and followed him. And as they traveled, neither spoke again. Both minds dwelt in the clouds.

II

UP a huge stone block crept tiny human ants.

More than a mile high, the massive mountain rose sheer, dark, forbidding, its broad base spurning a jungly jumble of lesser highlands, its wide summit pushing into sunlit clouds. Everywhere its precipitous sides formed a mighty rampart suicidally unscalable—except at one spot.

There opened a wide crevasse, penetrating far inward, sloping far upward. And by this difficult but practicable route ascended the two-legged insects, tenaciously persistent. Yet, though working with inflexible purpose, only two of the busy creatures showed zest.

These, the leaders, were white. All others were brown; solid bodied, stolid faced natives of the torrid forest. On strong backs the brown ones bore bundles of sticks or rolls of wiry vine. At times when the clothed white ones paused at stony upshoots almost impassable, the bare burden-carriers swarmed together, constructed cunning ladders, scrambled somehow to higher ledges, affixed the crude stick-and-vine steps, and thus enabled the foreign climbers to resume progress. But even while laboring they maintained quietness bordering on stealth, speaking only in low murmurs, glancing uneasily upward, moving as if fearful of rousing some drowsy giant whose wrath meant destruction.

Nothing stirred overhead, however, except the clouds and the sun. The high vapors swirled in variant winds, thickened to threatening gray, thinned to tenuous white, dissolved into nothing. Thereafter the crawling sun stared hard into the deep gorge, beholding human activity unprecedented, virtually incredible. For this lordly mountain was the Cerro Sipapo, haunt of the thunder gods of the Piaroa Indians of

Venezuela. If ever a man had set foot on the sacred colossus his intrusion had been unknown to the savages dwelling in the rough hills round about it. But now a tribe of those dour Piaroas was not only permitting but actually aiding in its invasion. And the dread gods, instead of roaring with rage and blasting them into oblivion, did not even mutter.

Fearlessly the white pair mounted ever higher; a tall, lean man and a slim but capable girl in masculine khaki. Across the man's shoulder-blades rested a short knapsack, strapped tight. From the girl's belt hung a flat holster whence peeped the rectangular butt of a pistol. She alone was armed—and she only because of habit. Weapons here seemed not only useless but, to the Indians, almost impious.

Pausing at another obstruction, the man glanced at her flushed face and asked, "Tired, Lee?"

"Not a bit, Corwin!" she denied. "A little winded—but who isn't?"

He grinned, looking at the Piaroas. Even they, born hillmen, were breathing fast; and on their coppery skins sweat glistened.

"It's a long haul," he said, "but—"

He stopped, listening. From somewhere had come a strange sound. A brief bass rumble, or growl, or snore— What had it been?

No answer came from the empty winds which eddied in the cleft. Nothing moved. Even the breathing of the Piaroas had halted. Still as statues, they gaped upward, stricken by apprehension.

"That was queer," said Corwin. "Must have been the wind up yonder, humming around an outcrop. Well, let's go. Hokko, *vamos!*"

Hokko stood irresolute. Big, powerful, unafraid of any normal danger, doggedly loyal to the white explorer, he now was daunted by that mysterious noise. Over him and all his men had swept guilty fear of their pagan deities.

"*Maluc'!*" he muttered. "Bad!"

"Come on!" insisted the tall outlander. "You know the gods are my friends. Often they have shown favor to me and my man-woman here. Now they would not have let us climb so far if they were unwilling. That noise was only wind."

Hokko, dubiously listening, swayed his bushy head offside.

"No wind!" he disputed. "Wind no growl so."

The North American repressed further argument. His cool gray eyes slid across the scared faces of the other tribesmen, then again swung aloft. Whatever the noise might have been, a repetition would throw these superstitious jungle habitants into downward panic. Without them he was stopped.

Then his long face brightened. The high ravine had become shallow and, though rough, seemed passable after surmounting the jagged projection which now ended his upward way.

"Lift me!" he ordered.

Hokko grunted. Several brown hands grasped Corwin's belt and boots and raised him, stiff-legged, to higher viewpoint. A rapid survey convinced him that thenceforth he could proceed without balky laborers.

So, lowered to face them again, he told their foreman:

"You've done well, *amigo*, so far. But perhaps you'd better go no farther. Maybe the gods don't want you to enter their home. So now make one more ladder, and we'll go on up. You wait here for us —or, if you like, go back down to the ground and rest there."

HOKKO'S troubled brown eyes cleared. With a brief command to his followers he stood at ease. His men, sensing by his attitude that this was the end of their work, sprang into action. Swiftly twisting bush-cord, tying in the rungs, fastening wooden grapnels, they then boosted a man to haul the contraption up and hook it. With a climb and crawl the Northerners were again on solid footing. The man

looked eagerly ahead; the girl, soberly behind.

"Well, now we're on our own," announced Corwin. "And, except for a few tough places down below, we might have made it under our own power—if nobody interfered. And we've still got the moral support of the only fellows likely to interfere. Ready to meet the gods?"

She did not reflect his grin. Her deep blue gaze still dwelt on the bunched brown men below, then roved down the long defile.

"I wouldn't joke about gods, Corwin," she reproved. "Somehow I feel as if Hokko were right: that we'd better not go on up. I'm not superstitious, but— Well, I—"

"Skip it," he cut in. "Stay here and take it easy, if you feel that way. I'll come back before sundown."

He swung away. Over her face flowed hot red. Then, lips tight, she followed his receding back.

Hokko, thus left behind, stood looking after the two with mixed feelings—hopeful belief that those superior beings would be well received by the omnipotent thunder-gods, anxiety lest they might not, and shame that he lacked their resolute daring. Never before had he lagged in their service. For a moment he seemed about to climb that final ladder. But then, looking back at his tribesmen, he grunted and walked away downgrade.

Silently his men filed after him, to eat, rest, and wait at a camp just outside the jungly mouth of the gorge. As they went, the inexplicable voice which had scared them held its peace.

Meanwhile the Northerners had clambered steadily onward. Over misshapen hunks of fixed stone they drew themselves, and between loose blocks they wormed, and across zigzag fissures they sprang. Everywhere was bare rock, unsoftened by trees or shrubs; rock swept clean by roaring torrents which, after sudden cloudbursts deluged the summit, always sluiced down this natural chute. Now the footing was bone dry; but so steep were many of the slants that only careful balancing outmaneuvered bone-breaking falls.

At length, with a difficult crawl up a short cliff, Corwin squirmed to a stand on the summit; swept one comprehensive look around, then turned to see whether he was followed. Not once had he looked back. Now, seeing the flushed face of the girl close behind, he stooped, grasped her shirt-collar, and heaved her up. She collided with him, clutching for support, struggling for balance, laughing excitedly. And he, eyes shining, laughed with her—not his usual short chuckle, but a boyish laugh of exuberant triumph. The inaccessible, insurmountable Cerro Sipapo was conquered; the chimerical dream of a Northern scientist had come true.

For long weeks Corwin had yearned to scale this forbidden height, explore its broad top, change its status from virtual non-existence to definite position in the gradually improving cartography of Spanish America. Now, with all obstacles overcome, he stood in the land of the thunder gods—who received him with benign tranquility.

The clouds, dispersed or sunken to lower levels, were gone. The wind, capable of hurricane force at this altitude, flowed gently from the northeast, cool, dry, invigorating. The sun, radiant, yet tempered by the breeze, revealed every detail of the table-land; strangely eroded humps, juts, waves, smoothly rounded or sharply ragged. Nowhere in sight was anything potentially dangerous—or anything conceivably responsible for that bygone, almost forgotten growl in the upper air.

Out beyond the great precipices stretched bluish immensity; the thin heat haze, imperceptibly thickening with distance, held other mountains, some bulking bold, more of them veiled, others mere shadowy shapes afar. A world without men, it seemed; a sleepy, dreaming world yet to be peopled with turbulent, truculent humanity warring for land, for money, for political power. Viewing that serenity, the two beholders unconsciously drew long breaths. Then the man became practical.

Moving over to a roughly rectangular projection, he sat on it, opened his pack, and produced a frugal lunch of roasted meat, cassava bread, a plugged gourd of water. Without words the two ate. Thereafter he drew forth compact scientific tools, solar chronometer, aneroid, compass, pedometer, notebook, pencils. With these he proceeded to work at measuring, figuring, recording. As he moved about, the girl quietly followed, observant of each new detail, yet pausing often to gaze again abroad at the vast vista never before seen by any woman.

So through untimed hours they traversed the lofty stone, from side to side and end to end. Near the northern end was the roughest surface and the highest point; toward the southern extremity the top became level and smooth as a floor. From the eastern edge was visible the chaotic mass of mountains comprising Venezuelan Guayana; from the western, the far-reaching Rio Orinoco and, beyond, the flat *llanos,* the plains, of Colombia. Once, momentarily contemplating that long river, Corwin's eyes sharpened as if a sudden odd thought had flitted through his brain, and his gaze swept along its misty length as if seeking something. Then, with a headshake, he turned again to his self-appointed task.

AT LAST, with a contented smile, he repacked his shoulder-bag. Although his meager equipment might not be minutely accurate, it had given him all essential facts. If ever a strong expedition with bulky instruments should penetrate here it might correct unimportant errors in his calculations; but the big achievement of first ascent and exploration was his alone.

"A good job done, partner!" he exulted. "And, thanks to the gods, done in record time! I know some fellows who once spent more than three months at a job no bigger than this. Wind, rain, clouds balked them at every move. And a stiff wind up here, or even a thick cloud bank, could have hampered us badly; in fact, nullified the whole climb. We're in luck. And, by the way, where's that awful overhanging danger of yours? I've been too busy to notice it."

She laughed, glancing toward the ravine.

"Those gloomy Indians infected me, I guess. They were so— What's that!"

Both tensed. From the gorge had risen a long call:

"Ho-o-o! Aho-o-o!"

Powerful, yet dolorous, the bass notes rolled into the upper silence like lingering strokes of a funeral bell, chilling the hearers with a formless dread. Corwin's mouth tightened. Swiftly shouldering his bag, he loped toward the rocky cleft.

"Ho-o-o! Aho-o-o-o-o! *Seño-o-or!*"

"That's Hokko!" exclaimed the girl "And there's trouble!"

Reaching the edge, Corwin strode along it, looking down. All the length of the rough descent now lay in shadow, and at first no life was discernible among the dark angularities. Then, down where the Piaroas had hung the last ladder, something moved: a pair of brown arms gesturing in signal. Above them was an upturned face —Hokko's. He was alone.

Waving an arm in reply, Corwin waited. The gesturing below became imperative signs to come down. Then the Indian turned to gaze toward the distant mouth of the gorge. Listening hard, the white man thought he heard a dull mumble somewhere far below.

"Yes, there's trouble," conceded Cor-

win. "Just what, remains to be learned. Until I know, you'd better stay up here."

"Meaning that you're going to Hokko? Why not make him come to you?"

"He won't. Moreover, I don't want any Piaroa up here. A look at this bare top would destroy all their visions and explode our claim to intimacy with their gods."

"Oh. Yes, of course. Well, then I'm going with you. We have to go down anyway, and—"

"No more argument!" he bruskly interrupted. "Obey orders!"

She flushed, but took the command like a soldier. As he returned to the top of the chute she remained at the rim, watching downward.

SLIDING down the first drop, Corwin picked his way rapidly over the rubble. Sure-footed, agile, he sprang from rock to rock with unerring judgment and increasing speed, yet with constant control of momentum. In the confined space between the close walls his grating steps sounded loud, yet went unheard by any ears but his own; for up the long gully now rose a continuous growling noise which grew in volume as he neared the waiting Indian.

At the ladder head he halted, looking down into Hokko's perturbed face, reading there a mixture of anger, chagrin, worry, uncertainty, and partial relief at the arrival of the hitherto unconquerable white man. Outwardly calm, Corwin asked:

"Well, *amigo*, what's wrong?"

"Much," croaked the chief, in his bush Spanish. "Unless you and gods save us we all die."

"Why? How?"

"We do evil here, walking up Sipapo. Many men mad, come to kill. *Oiga!* Listen!"

The menacing growl swelled, became a furious clamor, lasting for long seconds. Then it sank to a medley of rasping yells, inarticulate but ferocious. Hokko swung as if to start downward, but checked himself. Corwin, scowling, vainly peered along the crooked canyon. The disturbance was evidently down at the base of the mountain, but out of sight.

"Who are they?" he snapped.

"Piaroas. *Bravos*. No reasonable."

"No friends of yours."

"No. Long time we no mix with them. Rough, wild, no savvy."

The explorer nodded. Like many other jungle tribes, these Piaroas were all of one clan, yet divided into small scattered communities, each self-sufficient. Between them might exist great differences of mentality. Also there might be rivalries, jealousies, old family grudges fostering mutual animosity, leading sometimes to murderous fights. Now Hokko, supreme in his own settlement, was in the territory of cruder clansmen who not only refused recognition of his authority but perhaps were his bitter personal enemies.

"You do something?" Hokko now asked. "They very bad."

"Where are your men? Inside this canyon?"

"*Si.*"

"And the bad ones are outside?"

"*Si.*"

"Then there is time to consider the matter. Tell me the whole story."

Sitting down, he let his long legs dangle beside the ladder and waited with apparent ease. Heartened somewhat by his composure, the glum chief explained the situation.

A wandering hunter, coming upon the temporary camp after the invaders of the mountain began their ascent, had questioned the one man left there as guard of the weapons and supplies. Then he had gone, ostensibly to continue his hunt. Now it was evident that he had sped to arouse the warriors of his own settlement, and perhaps of others.

So, while the sacrilegious whites and the impious henchmen of Hokko were laboring up the ravine, and while the tired workers were slowly returning to their rest-camp, a horde of enraged savages

rushed through jungle shadows to wreak vengeance on any desecrators who might escape the wrath of the gods. They reached the camp just as Hokko's band was about to emerge from the gorge; caught the lone guard, but lost him as he fought free and bolted to join his mates. Now they blocked all escape from the ravine. Moreover, they possessed all the weapons of Hokko's men —captured in the camp—and the white man's rifle.

Corwin inwardly writhed. True, his gun was useless to the attackers. Habitually wary, he had withdrawn its military bolt and dropped it into his packsack before starting his climb. But now the loss of the powerful rifle which had been his mainstay seemed a staggering blow.

Yet, even if he had it, what good would it do? He could not hope to annihilate an army of stealthy savages with one gun.

He listened again to Hokko. Droning out his death-story, the brown man revealed that the leaders of the combined force were long-time enemies of the lately deceased chief of his own tribe. Now, hostile as bloodthirsty *tigres,* they would kill him at sight, giving him no chance to explain recent change of management. Thus far they had not quite dared to enter the sacred approach to the upper gods, or to shoot more than a few poisoned arrows at the weaponless prisoners hidden behind projecting rock. But later—

THERE Hokko paused, pleading brown eyes dwelling on the white man's unreadable gray gaze. From below sounded a renewed uproar of harsh voices—voices clamoring for the white man, the white man-woman, all their loyal brown followers—in fragments.

"I see," said Corwin. "It is bad. But be of good heart, Hokko. Go now to your men and bring them here. Pull up all ladders as you come. I go again above to take counsel."

Hope flared in the somber brown face. Wheeling away, Hokko went fast down. As he went, Corwin drew a long sigh. Then, standing, he pulled up with him the last ladder.

The action was automatic. As he once more ascended, the impromptu contrivance of stick and vine trailed behind, snagged itself on juts, tried to drag him back; then tore free as he yanked. Meanwhile his mind beat at invisible walls as hard as the snagging stone, seeking some way out, but finding none.

Nearing the end of his climb, he recalled himself; scowled down at the useless drag, and flung it away. Up over the last pitch he hauled himself, and there he met the questioning gaze of Lee Burton.

"Sorry, partner," he crisply announced. "But this is where we get off."

Her blue eyes widened, but held steady.

"As bad as that?" she asked.

He nodded.

"The gods have been kind, but men are otherwise. It's this way!"

Tersely he told her, adding, "I've ordered the boys to retreat up the canyon. That'll put them out of sight and take the edge off the present provocation to rush in and butcher them. But that's all the good it will do. We're cooked. No food, no water— Oh well, size it up for yourself."

He walked away. Soberly she looked along the naked top, where all depres-

sions which might have retained water were dried out by sun and wind. Out beyond, all drifting clouds were high and white, promising no providential shower; and the hazy air was light, devoid of the sultry pressure foreboding thunderstorm. Even the gentle breeze which had eddied around now was still, sleeping in the tor-

rid calm of late afternoon. All at once the dreamy home of hospitable pagan divinities was a trap whose merciless jaws had snapped shut.

Swinging back, he added, "And for once I can't bluff the heathen or talk them off. They're not only outright savages but fanatics, without reason or sense, as Hokko says. Any attempt to face them is worse than useless. And they'll never quit until they know we're through. I've met the type before now, and I've no illusions about it. So here we are—to stay."

She nodded slowly, but her hand strayed to her pistol.

"Perhaps tonight—" she suggested.

"No chance," he differed. "They'll be on watch, and they'll leave no gaps in their line. We can neither sneak through nor shoot through. They're too many for us. And if they caught us alive— It's really more sensible and much less painful to use that gun on yourself."

"Do they—"

"Usually South American Indians don't. They kill you first and take you apart afterwards, if at all. But this is a special occasion. I've seen what was left of a couple of white men after one such occasion, a few years back. It wasn't nice."

Her lips contracted, and the hand at her holster tightened. Then, with a lift of the chin, she said:

"I see. Well, then that's that."

Her tone was as matter-of-fact as his had been. Now, with a short nod, he again moved away. Left alone, she sank on the stone where they had so happily eaten lunch, and, hand over knees, stared soberly into the misty distance. She knew that when Corwin, hitherto always able to contrive a way out of every difficulty, saw no hope they had truly reached the end of everything.

HE, REACHING the corner where the ravine broke the eastern wall, lay down and, head over edge, peered toward the besiegers below. Vision intercepted by stony bulges on the precipice and by the heavy forest on the ground, he discerned nothing. A continued uproar of voices rising along the wall, however, proved the vindictive horde to be both large and implacable. Rising, he walked back along the canyon rim, abandoning any thought of dropping stones which might be brought up the gorge. Any such missiles would bounce off the outcrops and miss the enemy by many yards.

Stopping once, he looked down to locate Hokko and his band, who, beyond reach and sight of their foes, were methodically working their way up the ascent and, as he had bidden, removing the ladders behind them. Somberly he watched them a moment, his face heavy with regret. Poor devils! Trusting him, believing in him, overcoming hereditary inhibitions to help him, they had come to dire calamity through him; yet, even now, they retained stubborn faith in his ability to extricate them. How long that faith might endure, and whether they might eventually manage to worm their way through the beleaguering force to freedom, he could not judge.

At any rate, they must shift for themselves. Drawing back, he resumed his walk, noticing meanwhile that the hostile vociferation was subsiding. Apparently the enemy was settling down to quiet but ruthless vigilance.

Lee Burton glanced up at him, then away again, her position unaltered. He sat down beside her, and for a long time neither spoke. At length she said:

"I've a strange feeling, Corwin, that we ought just to walk over the edge of this place and out into the air; that the gods—or something—would take us from there and carry us away, unhurt. It's nonsense—but I keep feeling so."

"Well," he slowly responded, "there's something in it. Only it's a long drop, and it may hurt for a second when we crash. After that the gods—or something—will have us, all right. Anyway, it's all

in our own hands when the time comes. And if we hop off the west edge the brutes down on the east side will never have the satisfaction of knowing where we went."

"That's not just what I mean. But—Never mind."

Another long pause. Then, a bit awkwardly, he said:

"I—er—just want to tell you—you've been a prince of a pal, Lee. And still are."

"Thanks. That goes double," she replied, with a slight smile. "And it's all been very interesting. I wish we could go on, but— Well, I ought to have been killed weeks ago, when my father and brother and the others were massacred. So I've been living on borrowed time, and now I'm only getting what was coming to me."

He made no rejoinder; there was none to make.

In silent comradeship they sat looking out and away. Looking northward. Homeward.

Down in the canyon, Hokko and his men waited, wondered, worried as time passed without return of their white man; but they made no move. Up above, the sun slipped more rapidly toward the hazy horizon, blazing hot in its last hour of day. On the humpy top of Sipapo all was still.

Suddenly Lee's head turned westward. Corwin, too, straightened up. Into the soundless air had come a faint hum—a far, low note from the sunset.

"A plane!" screamed Lee, leaping erect. "Over there! It's—it's— O-o-oh!"

Her last cry was almost a moan. Despondency had killed her thrilling excitement. And Corwin, with jaw tight, paled as if sick.

There was a plane, yes; a tantalizing aircraft going its way, unconscious of their existence, unfeeling as a jaunty yacht passing an island whereon castaways starved.

Far away it was. Away out near the Orinoco. A lazy dragon-fly buzzing along northward, following the river with languid indolence. Too far off for it to discern the two tiny ants on the mountain top, even if it cared to look eastward. So far that only the breathless hush made it audible. Gradually it would recede into nothingness, unless—

"By God, girl, maybe your hunch was right!" suddenly swore Corwin.

WITH that he sprang away toward the gorge. Leaping down, bounding recklessly from rock to rock, he reached the discarded bush ladder. Seizing it, he pounded back up the slope. As he heaved himself again over the edge he panted:

"Get my—notebook! Packsack! Hurry!"

With frenzied strength he wrenched the ladder apart, yanking out rungs, snapping tough vines. Lee dived at his knapsack, unstrapped its flap, grasped the loose-leaf notebook within.

Knife out, he was hastily slicing shavings from the half-dry sticks. Now he snatched the fat notebook and tore out blank leaves from the back; crumpled them and struck a match. On the rock a tiny fire blazed, bit at the shavings; slowed, sputtered, sank to a sulky smoulder.

The plane cruised steadily on.

More paper strengthened the feeble flame. More shavings curled, crisped, began to burn. Whittling, blowing, nursing the infant beacon, Corwin worked madly, yet cannily. And now, larger and hotter, the fire steadied and grew. On it he built up sticks and loose wads of the damp vines. From it into the upper air climbed a wavering column of black smoke.

Still the drowsy dragonfly floated onward.

Red-faced, red-eyed, wet-cheeked from sweat and smoke, Corwin glowered at the heedless sky-ship and muttered:

"Damn you!"

But still he added fuel. The smudge grew taller, spread wider. Lee stood white-faced, wordless, watching the far flier pass into the blinding ball of the low sun.

Then, as it emerged to northward, she gasped:

"Oh—it's turning! Or else— Yes! It is!"

It was. The tapering body shortened, tucked its tail out of sight, became a stout creature approaching head-on. The sleepy buzz turned to a businesslike drone of accelerated speed.

Rapidly it grew into a deep note which suddenly touched a chord in the memory of both eager listeners.

"That's what we heard this morning!" declared Corwin. "It must have flown near here!"

SHE nodded, flashing a quick smile. That morning noise, deadened by intervening stone, opposed by contrary wind, had been only momentary to the ears down in the gorge; but it was the same. For a second Corwin grinned, visioning the alarm with which Hokko's men would hear it again. Then he forgot them for matters more immediate.

The rumble now was a thunderous roar. The flier was a big monoplane, swinging broadside on, leveling itself with the mountaintop, holding prudent distance while its pilot or observer scanned the two marooned people. Helmet off, Corwin yelled, gesticulated, pointed southward. The craft sliced past and drew away —but not far.

Rising, it circled above, studying the upturned face of Sipapo. Again it drew away, southward. At the far end it cruised slowly, veering, balancing, considering. Corwin seized notebook and pack.

"Come on!" he urged.

They ran. While they dashed over the lumpy surface the plane continued its wary reconnaissance. At length, as the runners neared the long level at the south, hesitance turned to decision; the hovering ship rose again, turned, and slid down easily on the natural landing platform. From it descended a tall figure which marched to meet the panting refugees.

"Quien es?" he crisply demanded. "Who are you?"

Corwin, thus challenged, withheld answer a moment as he recovered breath. The airman, military from cap to boots, was swankily uniformed; his face was hawk-like, black-mustached, keen-eyed. He was scanning the disheveled Northerners with scant cordiality.

"Norte Americano," then replied the explorer. "Name of Corwin. Man, you're an angel!"

"Hmph! What do you here?"

"A little exploring—which has turned a bit sour."

"Eh? Exploring?" The black brows drew together thoughtfully. "Corwin? Oh—ah—*sí,* to be sure! I recall the name. Well met, *Senor!* Who is this man with you?"

Corwin grinned and waited. As the Venezuelan's eyes fixed on the winded girl now running up they widened. For an astonished moment he regarded her contradictory khaki breeches, mannish shirt, feminine face and loose dark hair. Then, as she stopped, flushed and breathless, he stared into her blue eyes with amazed disbelief.

"Dios! Is it possible? Are you the *Senorita* Leona Burton, of the Burton expedition which disappeared two months ago after entering this country on the Rio Negro from Brazil?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"How? Caramba, three countries have been seeking you, *Senorita!* Our Venezuela —that Brazil—your own States of the North.

"Your relatives up there have been burning the ears of ministers and consuls for proof of your—ah—for news of your safety."

"Proof of my death, you mean." Her tone now was frosty. "My relatives up there would be like that."

"There is a matter of property settlement, it is true," admitted the officer. "But let us get on. Night approaches, and I can-

not remain here. What is your difficulty, *Señor* Corwin? Speak fast."

The explorer explained. Into the Southerner's hawk face came a joyous grin, not at first comprehensible to the watchers.

"So," concluded Corwin, "if you'll roar over the heads of those savages down there, they'll either die from fright or run a mile or two before stopping for breath. Then we can get out with our own men."

"They will die or run, in truth," chuckled the other. "Hombre, what luck! I have yonder a load of bombs to dispose of! What sport!

"See, I am here because there has been a bandit outbreak in the back regions. Not serious, but an annoyance. So, though this is not a bombing ship, I was sent down to drop explosives enough to blow them across the border. But they had gone when I arrived, so it was necessary to freight all that iron back north, with no amusement. Now— Ah, now! You shall see!"

Corwin frowned. Although he himself had shot down more than one jungle enemy before now, mass destruction of primitive people did not appeal to him. He was about to object when the officer rushed on:

"SO LET us be going! We shall have a heavy take-off with you two aboard. but the load is not too great. My tanks are half empty, and the altitude will assist, and when the bombs are dumped we shall—"

"Not so fast!" broke in Corwin. "Who said we were going with you? I only asked you to—"

"I say, *Señor,* that the *señorita,* at least, must go with me! Am I to report that I found her in the wilderness, surrounded by savages, and that I left her there? No, *por Dios!* She must report herself to the North American minister at Caracas!"

The Venezuelan's jaw had hardened, and his sinewy right hand hung not far from his sidearm.

"Quite right," conceded Corwin. "She should do so. As for myself, I prefer to remain."

"That is your privilege, *Señor.* My government permits you to risk your own life as you please. But not the life of this young lady."

"This young lady," retorted Lee herself, "has the same privilege, if she chooses to take it. But— Give me a moment to think."

"Very well." The flier glanced impatiently at the low sun.

FOR a moment the girl stood looking at the machine, then at Corwin, whose set face was unreadable. Then she said:

"I know I ought to go. But so ought you. Your work here is done, and—"

"No, it's not," he contradicted. "There's more—"

"Small stuff!" she scoffed. "You've already done the biggest thing possible here. Leave the small hills for other men. Otherwise you'll certainly be killed."

"On the contrary, I'll stand higher than ever because I made this thunderbird come from nowhere to scatter my enemies. Besides which, all my earlier records are at Hokko's tribe-house. I don't intend to lose them."

His tone was antagonistic, his gaze set on blank emptiness beyond her. Studying him, she sensed his inner conflict. A lone man, fighting his lone way along his own chosen course, he had chanced to find her —and, now that the gods had come to take her away, he was shoving her off. But, when she was gone, he would be far more lonely than ever before. And she would not have it so.

Subtly changing front, she stepped closer and murmured:

"I need you, man, to stand by while I'm getting back to civilization. How do I know this officer is all right? And there's another man in the plane. It'll be much better, all around, if you'll come along. Your things at Hokko's will keep."

Her low voice and appealing eyes

touched the right chord. Narrowly he regarded the bloodthirsty army man, scanned the heavy face of a pilot still in the ship, and shortly nodded.

"Something in that," he admitted. "*Capitan,* I go with you, if you will wait till I return. Lee, watch yourself."

Wheeling, he ran back to the gorge. The officer muttered something, then rattled an order to his subordinate to readjust the load of explosives during the wait.

At the lip of the canyon Corwin peered down. Huddled in the deepening shadow, Hokko's men were motionless as crouching statues. Throughout the depths reigned the tense silence of strained listening. Although the maneuvering plane had neither crossed the ravine nor flown out eastward, its roaring voice had stricken both the penned Piaroas and their murderous kinsmen into speechless awe. When Corwin called, the group below started as if struck.

"Hokko!"

"*Si?*" questioned the chief.

"I go," solemnly announced the white man. "Some day I will come back to you. Until then, guard my belongings in your tribe-house. Do you hear?"

"*Si!*" All the brown men were up now.

"Soon you shall go home," predicted that voice. "Wait here till darkness. Then go forth without fear. And hereafter, see to it that all men know what befell those who dared to attack you for serving me. *Adios!*"

Silence. Turning away, Corwin ran back across the summit. As the sun touched the horizon he reached the plane, which, in his absence, had been moved and turned at the inner end of the lofty level.

"If at last we may go, *Senor*—" sarcastically prompted the officer.

"Well, why delay?" gibed the Northerner. "Up with you, Lee!"

They climbed, squeezed into close quarters, settled themselves. The craft quivered, bumped forward, roared off the edge. Staggering in an upcurrent of air, it swooped sickeningly, then fought its way to steady balance. In a long swing it thundered out over the eastern jungle, climbing higher, then circling back to the mouth of the canyon. Grinning like a mustached *tigre,* the officer worked off his boredom with hand-thrown death.

HELL exploded below; a hell of crashing concussions, smashing trees, screeching terror. Through long seconds the wrathful thunderbird hurled its devastation on the shuddering green forest and the madly fleeing little brown men who had arrogated to themselves the godly decision of vengeance.

Soon, its fury expended, the high monster slid away northward. Its contemptuous backward roar dwindled to a drone, a hum, and nothing. On Sipapo and its cordon of lesser mountains rested stunned silence.

Sunset faded out. Stars and a half-moon sprang alight in luminous sky. Across the god-mountain swept sudden wind, hurling into nowhere the charred remnants of a burned bush-ladder. Then out from the gloomy gorge filed a string of two-legged brown ants, walking in dazed wonderment, yet with fearless confidence and huge pride.

Henceforth, they knew, they would be the overlords of all Piaroa land; the respected, feared allies of superhuman white strangers who could not only climb to the home of the gods but make an appalling creature blast all their foes into mangled fragments.

So, though those strangers had flown away—and though, unknown to them, the man-woman dreamed of keeping her man forever away—Hokko and his men trudged homeward through the night with heads high, trusting in their white man's parting promise.

Their dumb faith was not mistaken. White or brown, male or female, soon or late, jungle rovers disgusted by another look at the outer world always come back to the wild lands.

"Sweetness and Light" Was To Be the Watchword in the Tough Camp Called Hell

Power Of A Name

By GEORGE BRUCE MARQUIS

Author of "Stranger Than Truth" and Other Stories of Bat Jennison.

HELL was a tough camp. Hell's Engate Hotel was tougher still and Mose Lamb, the proprietor, was tougher than his hotel by a good two notches. Hell's Engate was a hotel by courtesy only. A glorified private rooming house, it was the casual residence of strolling highwaymen and stage robbers in from one red job while planning the next. The choicest thugs and cutthroats of Hell hived there in more or less permanence. Second rate roughs gave the street wide berth.

So far as the physical went, Mose Lamb chorded perfectly with his inoffensive name. Smooth, ruddy cheeks, amazingly blue limpid eyes, mouth that turned up winsomely, dimpled chin, all totted up a sizeable sum in guileless good nature. But behind that disarming exterior, all was very different. With gun or knife, Lamb was deadly dangerous. And now as watchful shepherd of a hard flock, he catechised the interloper. A mild-mannered, brown-bearded man he was, small, gray-eyed and soft spoken. Yet there were certain signs that suggested to the astute hotel man that there was more here than surface assaying indicated. For the intruder wore two pistols, he had chosen the extreme inner end

of the bar, he was unobtrusively observing the foreshortened barroom and its quota of one through the efficient aid of the bar mirror.

"You're a stranger here," Lamb had smiled the implied question.

"At that, I ain't no pilgrim." This between sips of the whiskey straight.

The dimple deepened in Lamb's chin, proof ample to those who knew him that the chief's pressure tank was approaching the danger point. Yet his reply was peaceful.

"I observe the signs," he stated idly. "Did I get your name?"

"You didn't, but you will," the other told him crisply. "It's Jim Hood."

"Don't seem to have heard it before," and Lamb lingered on the thought. The antics of one Bud Plum, the sole spectator, had in fact diverted his mind for the moment. Plum, a gambler off duty, had been a grinning gallery of one as Lamb probed for information. But now as the stranger divulged his name, Plum's smile faded, likewise some of his color and sliding down in his chair, he tilted his hat forward to shield his face. Lamb wondered, made a swift surmise, then returned to the request of his would-be guest.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hood," he declared, "but I'm full up. You see the Governor of the Territory and his staff have engaged rooms here. They come in on the evening stage. It don't leave *me* a place even. No doubt you can get accommodations at the Alta House. Next time maybe you'll have better luck here."

"Who's the governor?" Hood queried. "Didn't know we had one, in fact."

"George Brownell," Lamb told him, "from Lewiston, the capital."

"Never heard of him," Hood okayed his ignorance without apparent shame. "Well, in the case as you've set it out, I reckon I'll hafta hoof it along. Give that said governor my best regards." And lifting his dunnage from its corner, he left the hotel.

Bud Plum hoisted the brim of his hat cautiously and watched him depart. Now he got up and tiptoed to the bar. Leaning over he whispered hoarsely, "Know who that was, Mose?"

"You looked like a plucked goose," Lamb said disgustedly, "stretching your neck out that way. Sure I know who he is. That's Jim Hood."

"Like hell it ain't," Plum disputed. "That's *Bat Jennison!*"

"No!" The denial was incisive, yet with a backwash of speculation and some dismay.

"You bet that's Bat Jennison," Plum insisted with a mingling of pride in his fearsome discovery. Now he inventoried his stock and presented an itemized statement.

"Look at it this way, Mose. Short brown beard, gray eyes, lots of chin, mebbe five feet four and a hundred-thirty pounds. And," he trod heavily now, *"two guns,* both *Colt's Forty-fives* with the tie strings dangling. That latterly fact tells me and you, too, that he shoots from the hip through his open ended holsters. That sets up that damned Jennison man prezactly. Besides," and he muted his tones, "he travels under the name of Jim Hood about half the time."

Stubborn to receive an unpalatable fact, yet Lamb was bending slowly.

"Well," he temporized, "of course it's possible, but he didn't sound or look dangerous. There's probably a dozen Jim Hoods west of the Rockies."

"He never seems dangerous," and Plum resumed the in-thrust and out-thrust of his long limber neck. "Remember I was in Boulder after he cleaned out Dude Musick. That's what everybody said. And Governor Brownell's the very larky who sent him in there."

"And this man said he'd never heard the name," Lamb remembered.

"Which is the way Bat Jennison would act," Plum amplified. "You betcha that Jim Hood is Jennison. What I wonder is what's he here for."

"Maybe he's not after anything." Which was certainly wishful thinking on Lamb's part, for he was one of the towering crooks of Hell, and Jennison's methods were to deal sternly with the leaders and leniently with the small fry.

"Of course he may just be passing through," Plum caught eagerly at the unlikely thought, "or even on a visit. Which makes me think that I owe Jigs Dawson a visit over to Lone Pine. Kinda think I'll wander over and see him this afternoon."

"If I remember right," Lamb said caustically, "the last time you saw Jigs was when he was whittling at your runaway shirt-tail and with an uncommonly able-bodied dirk, at that."

"Just Jigs' way of playing a joke," Plum explained bravely. "He'll be tickled to see me."

"He's likely got a longer knife by now." Lamb observed dryly. "Yes, he'll probably be glad to see you."

Now Lamb communed with himself, weighed certain known facts and out of his solo symposium arrived at a novel decision. To the skeptical Plum he now announced it.

"Jennison won't cause trouble," he decreed in lordly fashion, "if he's treated right. How do men in our line of business act when he drops into a camp?"

His oration well under way, he had paused dramatically but without thought of interruptive question or observation. However he got it.

"If they're smart, they drop out when he drops in," Plum contributed. "As for me—"

"You'll stay here," Lamb told his shirking lieutenant flatly. "And I'll tell you how men like us act. Instead of banking the fire under their hell cart, they fire up and tie down the throttle. Naturally Jennison hears the noise and being what he is, goes about pulling the fires."

"Or else they try to outsmart him," Plum added his quota, "which is a mistake, or try to outshoot him which is a bigger mistake yet. What do you figger to do, Mose?"

"We'll make this camp stink with holiness," Lamb declaimed. "Sweetness and light will be our motto as long as he hangs around here. There'll be no shootings, holdups nor crooked work of any kind. I want you to amble round and carry my orders to who you know need them. Remember, sweetness and light's to be the watchword."

"Okay, Chief," Plum nodded. "Still it's going to be a tough order to some of the boys."

"Well, they'd better heed it," Lamb said ominously.

Plum started away, then halted at the beck of a straying thought.

"How about the three boys who are to ride the stage out tonight and hold it up?" he queried. "Want me to tell 'em to sit tight?"

Lamb considered, then made a judicial pronouncement.

"That job is to be pulled well out of town. Tell them to go ahead. But tell them too, that Bat Jennison is in town and for them to keep their eyes peeled. That damned runt's got eyes in the back of his head, top too, I reckon. Gallop along."

MEANWHILE, the man under painful discussion at Hell's Engate, had arrived at the Alta House. The phlegmatic proprietor, Gib Dundee, admitted to an empty room and Jim Hood paid the designated price. Now Dundee arose and moved toward the hallway. But his prospective guest stayed his elephantine progress with a remark of apparently casual nature.

"I just happened to stop in first at that hotel up the street. Hell's Engate, seemed to me. The ramrod didn't have a room seein' as how the governor, Brownell, had done engaged all his spare space. Comes in tonight on the stage so the ramrod told me. I reckon he told me the truth. Wouldn't be no reason for lyin'?"

"Well," Dundee provisoed dryly, "bar-

ring the fact that Brownell ain't been governor for over six months he likely did."

"Then he did lie to me!" Hood snorted. "I kinda had a suspicion he did. I've half a notion to go back there and pull that button he thinks is a nose. Yes and slap them rosy cheeks."

Gib Dundee gave the belligerent man a careless glance.

"I ain't in the general habit of giving advice," he stated, "but since you're a total stranger in Hell, I'll break over once. *Don't do it.* In fact don't do anything."

"Why not?" his guest insisted. "He lied to me, didn't he?"

But Dundee had ventured farther than his wont. Disregarding the demand, he began to move down the narrow hallway.

"Come on," he said. "I'll show you where you're to bed down."

ZACK HADAD, proprietor of the Bliss Saloon, looked with distaste on the spiritless crowd. Yet the command had gone forth from Mose Lamb and Hadad and his henchmen were not the men to disobey. Since Hell had drawn its first lusty breath, no calm like this had marred its hitherto uproarious career. The forced geniality was tepid, the conversation desultory, in which the half-hearted oaths were elements of weakness rather than strength. Even the games of chance snailed to a late start. Sam Mang, stud dealer par excellence, had at long last collected a laggard three and was at the bar collecting chips and cards when his potential gamesters were increased by one. A man had slouched into the vacant chair opposite the dealer's. Zack Hadad noted the reinforcements and laid a hand on Mang's arm.

"That's him, Sam," he whispered tensely. "See he's straddling the chair right now."

"You mean?"

"Bat Jennison. Calls himself Jim Hood, but he's Bat Jennison, all right."

Mang studied the man for a lingering moment.

"He may be Jennison," he observed, "but he's drunk."

"Like a fox," Hadad warned. "An old trick of his. Don't be took in by it. Smarter men than you have fell for it to their sorrow. He's a devil for luck, too. May suit him to play out a hand without looking at his hole card. Humor him, Sam. And above all, don't try no tricks with him. Don't deal from the bottom of the deck, for instance. He'll see it with his eyes shut and his back turned. That is," he stipulated, "unless you want to stop a Forty-five slug with your belly button. Remember, he's the fastest man in the West with a gun and his aim matches his speed."

"I know you won't call me a coward, Zack," Mang stated, "when I tell you I ain't particularly anxious to have that pelican setting in my game."

"You bet I know how you feel," Hadad said sympathetically, "but there he is anyway. Remember to humor him and deal on the dead level square. He's square himself and you'll have no trouble if you do square by him. If he wins, he wins, that's all."

Mang seated himself at the table, his case of chips before him. At his left were two miners, almost before him, the redoubtable Jim Hood, between Hood and the dealer, a man named Jim Ball. Ball was a come-on or capper. To him or substitute cappers were dealt the winning hands, the gains divided later with the house.

But tonight no special favors would fall Ball's way, a thing that would grieve and surprise. One of the inconsequentials, he had not been made privy to the great secret.

Chips were high as quoted by the dealer. Whites, one dollar; reds, five dollars; blues, ten dollars. The men bought according to fancy. Hood made purchase of five hundred dollars worth as he mouthed a half question.

"No gold chips, I notice."

"We don't use them," Mang explained

politely. "But side bets are allowed, with no limits."

"That's all right," Hood gave grave assent. "Just didn't want to git in a slow game. I want action when I play."

Stud poker has its variations as to betting. Sometimes an ante is set before the game, sometimes the dealer declares it with each deal. In the latter case, if the players meet the ante, two cards are dealt before a bet is made. This was the method used by Mang. As an initial ante, he declared a white chip. When four chips skidded into the center of the table, he dealt to each a card, face down, the hole card and covered each in turn with one card, face up. The miner immediately on the dealer's left, one Joe Brown, displayed a king of hearts, his neighbor, Al Nemic, had a ten of diamonds, Jim Hood showed a seven of clubs, the sometime stooge, Jim Ball, exhibited the jack of hearts. Brown knew his hole card to be the queen of clubs, Nemic had the nine of spades. Ball was gratified with the ace of hearts. Hood had not looked at his hole card! Zack Hadad, watching with avid intentness, nodded with uneasy satisfaction. To him the evidence was all in, the case was closed. This method of playing the hole card blind, was Jennison's own. Almost worthy of copyright. To Hadad, Jim Hood was Bat Jennison. It was a bedrock conclusion that made him shiver, yet not with ecstacy. As for Jim Hood, he sat as if he held a cupped hand to his mental ear, listening for a message none but he could hear. And to all appearances he was not acting. The dealer scanned the four displayed cards.

"King bets," he decreed.

Brown, with a comfortable start toward a good hand tossed out a red chip. Nemic "saw" it. Hood, as if in a trance, added a second red. Ball met Hood's bet, Brown and Nemic contributed one more red each and Mang proceeded to deal the third card. Brown drew the king of diamonds, Nemic the six of clubs, Hood the four of spades, Ball the jack of spades.

"Kings bet," the dealer intoned.

Brown hoisted his sights, but not unduly. It was not his wish to force Ball at least from the game. Nemic had already folded up his cards and Hood with but a seven and a four no doubt would follow suit. So Brown reasoned as he tossed in a blue chip. And failed to reckon on intangibles. Hood met the blue and added another. Ball met the raise and Brown contributed a second. Again the cards fell and Brown felt an elation he by no means revealed when he noted the queen of diamonds. Two big pairs and difficult to beat. Hood garnered the six of spades, Ball the ace of diamonds. He, too, held two pairs and he topped Brown by a spot.

"Kings bet."

BROWN considered. No aces had appeared other than the one now displayed by Ball. His hole card might well be an ace, or even a third jack. Yet the probabilities were against either supposition. Accordingly Brown tossed in two blue chips. He had given no thought to Hood with a seven, a four and a six. Of course, if he had either an eight or a five as a hole card, he might draw a straight. But Hood did not know his hole card, if he relied on ocular means. Yet he was drunk and a drunken man might do anything. And while Brown reflected on this idly, Hood fumbled out two blue chips. Ball met it without haste and the dealer spun out the final cards.

For his fourth card, Brown had drawn a seven, Hood likewise had drawn a seven, Ball had drawn a queen. Mang surveyed the three hands displayed and made announcement.

"Kings bet."

Two pairs, kings up, still loomed high to Brown and accordingly he bet three blues, then looked at Jim Hood. Still without peeking at his hole card, Hood was ricking up chips in a leaning tower of Pisa style, while he mumbled:

"My hunch says, play your sevens. I hears and I obeys." And to Brown's three blues he had added four. Seventy dollars risked on a pair of sevens and an announced hunch!

Ball, with aces and jacks, scanned the other hands. Of course Hood might possess a third seven, but that inebriated man couldn't know it. Or could he? Had he glimpsed his hole card as dealt? Then Ball noted again that Brown's final card had been a seven and took courage. Hood was drunk, that was all.

"I'll tip the scales a bit," Ball said jauntily as he tossed in ten blue chips. "Going to meet it, Mr. Brown?"

"Damned right," Brown retorted, suiting action to words. "What are you doing, Mr. Hood?"

"I'll maybe just call," Hood nodded as if in heavy consultation. "Yep, I'll so do." And three blue chips joined the plethoric pile.

Ball without a thought for Jim Hood, flipped over his hole card and reached for the chips.

"I figgered you for two pair, Mr. Brown," he grinned, "and I see I top you."

"Don't burn your fingers, feller," Jim Hood snorted, "till you see my hand. My hunch has said all along that I had the top hand. I wouldn't have bet otherwise for I figger it's foolish to do so. Just like

throwing your money out to the birds. Well here she is, a seven like I knowed. I guess even *you* won't pretend *two* pair beats threes!"

Ball stared at the three sevens, then at the mumbling Hood. It was an uneasy stare, for superstition was the topmost layer in his notably shallow mind.

"How," he queried finally, "did you know your hole card was a seven?"

"I was told," Hood answered gravely.

"How was you told?" and Ball inched back unconsciously. "I was setting here and I didn't hear it."

"Things like that," Hood declared solemnly, "ain't heard with mortal ears."

"Cut the argument," Brown said testily. "I set in for a game, not a visit."

In the course of the next hour, they noted that Jim Hood seemed to play a ragged system that checked neither with logic nor common sense. Yet it was a system. His rather steadfast adherence proved that. For one thing, he appeared distrustful of big cards. His system was apparently founded on his faith in the lowly cards. He seemed even to disdain those ranking above a seven spot. But for this evening, at least, it was a winning system. Likewise his bluffs seemed without rhyme or reason, but like his system, for this night, they displayed a deadly certainty.

AT THE end of the hour the bulk of the chips were owned by Hood and Brown. Now Hood yawned prodigiously, thumbed open the lid of his heavy hunting-cased silver watch, squinted at the face, closed the lid and laid it down once more at his finger tips. Now he made announcement.

"I'm playin' just one more hand," he stated owlishly. "Got 'portant things to do yet tonight. Yep, just one more hand, then I'm cashin' in."

Brown looked enviously at Hood's potential wealth.

"Dare you to play your hunch once more," he taunted.

"I maybe will," Hood made guarded acquiesence.

Now he sat trance-like till two cards were dealt, then he nodded. Apparently his unseen genius had given instructions.

He did not glance at his hole card. Brown displayed the ten of hearts, Nemic the eight of diamonds, Hood the deuce of hearts, Ball the three of clubs. Nemic glanced at his hole card to find it the four of clubs and folded up before the bet. Ball, finding his hole card to be the seven of hearts followed Nemic into temporary oblivion. Brown, with the king of hearts as hole card was already fingering a blue chip when Mang droned:

"Ten bets."

Hood met the bet, paused as if irresolute, then added one white. If he had motive, his vacuous face failed to register. Brown, who hoped for a later killing, solemnly met the trifling raise and Mang flipped out two more cards. Brown drew the ten of spades, Hood the two of diamonds. Two pairs displayed with Brown's tens vastly topping. Drawing confidence from Hood's methods, Brown decided to push up his bet and accordingly tossed in two blues. Hood's pudgy finger went out to explore his pair of twos.

"Two and two is four," he announced profoundly as he slid out four blue chips. Brown met the raise and the deal proceeded. Brown to his secret joy, received the king of diamonds, Hood the seven of clubs.

"Tens bet."

Brown considered. With two pairs he felt supremely confident, yet he did not wish to drive Hood from the game just yet. So he made a furrowed browed show of perplexity to end with a modest bet of one blue which Hood with equal gravity met. Again the cards fell, delivering the ten of diamonds to Brown, the two of clubs to Hood. It was a rather unusual pair of hands to be displayed, both showing threes. Besides, Brown held a pair of kings, a powerful hand, unbeatable, *unless* Hood had a two spot in the hole. But if Hood had a two spot, Brown felt that it was unknown. For he was a confirmed sceptic of things occult and Hood had not looked. Yet if he made his initial bet too steep, Hood might not meet it. Finesse suggested a medium wager, commensurate with the displayed tens. So might he trap Hood into successive follies. Mental consultations ended, he tossed in five blue chips.

Through misty eyes, Hood considered the bet while he parleyed aloud.

"Jim," he instructed himself, "he bets fifty dollars on three tens. I suggests that you raise it. How much? Say thirty dollars." And he tugged out eighty dollars in assorted chips.

The corners of Brown's harsh lips drew up ever so slightly. Hood was limping drunkenly into his trap. So he met the raise of thirty dollars and added a hundred.

"How much did you up it?" Hood inquired as if his turbid mind could not both count and retain the tidy sum.

"A hundred more, he says, Jim," his tongue fumbled. "It ain't tall enough yet."

And while men watched avidly, he met the raise of one hundred dollars and pawed out a hundred dollar raise. The quirk at the corners of Brown's hard lips deepened as he met Hood's raise and came back with an added two hundred. Again Hood memorized the bet.

"It's goin' up," he mouthed as he painstakingly counted out two hundred to meet Brown's raise, "but it ain't yet steep enough."

He paused as if to listen to his unseen mentor while men remarked the monument of chips now involved. Exactly one thousand eighty-six dollars disported there. While men speculated, Hood spoke to Brown, and Zack Hadad, now standing behind the dealer, observed that his speech had cleared amazingly.

"How much you got there, Mr. Brown?" he had asked.

Brown's hands fairly fluttered to his remaining chips, then paused.

"What difference does it make?" he challenged.

"Because, I'm goin' to tap you," Hood told him as he stacked in chips to keep the bet open. For a long moment Brown weakened. Already that bloated pot held five hundred and forty-two dollars he had contributed. And he had remaining by actual count only three hundred twenty-seven dollars worth of chips. Could it be possible that Hood had that potentially devastating fourth deuce as his hole card and that he knew it? And while he debated, Hood had counted out three hundred and twenty-seven dollars and tilted them into the pot. Now his eyes grew vacant as he mumbled.

"There she is, Mr. Brown. Take it or leave it. Who wins, gets a tidy pot."

"Display your cards," Mang suggested as Brown covered Hood's final bet.

Brown flipped over his king with confident hand. Then his gloating smile moulted swiftly into a scowling, incredulous stare. Hood had nonchalantly displayed his "hole" card, the deuce of spades!

"I only got two little pairs," he said apologetically, "but they match."

Now he pushed the miscellany of chips toward Mang and got up.

"Count 'em," he bade the dealer, "I'm getting a drink. Don't know what's there exactly, but I'll take your count as correct."

"And count correct," Hadad growled superflous command into the dealer's ear. "He knows what's there to the last white chip."

"I'm counting straight," Mang nodded. "And I'll count twice for good measure."

Brown's anger had sprouted a seed of dark suspicion in his surcharged mind. Still skeptical of supernatural aids, he had reached the hazy certainty that Hood had in some way crooked him. Thirst for gore inflamed his eye and threaded incoherency through his tones.

"That damned little sand toad!" he snarled. "Crook me, will he? Well, I'm—"

Zack Hadad gripped him roughly by the shoulder, spun him around and chilled his truculence with an eye as cold as that of a thrice frozen fish.

"Listen you double concentrated flap-eared damn fool," he hissed. "That gent would make your belly look like a colander before you'd even get started for your gun. He could take on a dozen like *you* at the same time and live to bury you all. Do you know who that is?"

"Sure," Brown blinked dazedly, "that's—"

"Bat Jennison," Hadad supplied. "*Now* what do you figger on doing?"

"I figger," Brown answered numbly, "that I'll toddle home to bed. So long."

HOOD downed a drink and following a pensive pause added another to an already considerable cargo. Jettisoning a few inconsequential remarks to the attentive bartender, he returned to the card table, collected his original investment and bloated earnings and stumbled streetward. Now a stranger who from an obscure corner had held Hood under keen-eyed vigilance for the past hour arose and in an unobtrusive way followed him out into the night.

Across the street and a block away was the stage stand and toward it Hood angled a zigzagging course. In front of the stand stood the midnight stage with the driver already on the box, the armed treasure guard behind him. In two minutes they would be off with forty thousand dollars in the treasure box and as yet no passengers. However, three passengers were in the immediate making, the predesignated road agents who were to relieve the guard of the treasure. Even now as the driver waited, they emerged from a blind alley not ten feet away and paused to survey the immediate territory. The driver, one of the thug brotherhood, raised his hand in a comforting signal, then held it so, frozen by a voice and figure, a shade less welcome than the devil's. Jim Hood stood there, a foot on the hub of the near front wheel,

his hand gripping the edge of the driver's seat.

"I'm riding with *you*," he puffed as he clambered upward. "If you ain't got no objections," he added as he wriggled himself to comfort and moved a sagging pistol to the top of his thigh. The driver had been well advised by Lamb and his answer was crammed well with counterfeit affability.

"Old-timer," he gurgled, as he waved frantic dismissal to the three, "I'm histed to have you. How far are you traveling?"

"To hell," Hood asserted thickly.

"Why, you're in Hell right now," the driver hastened to inform him. "Just climb down—"

"It ain't in the hell I'm aiming for," Hood said darkly. "Let's get going."

"Well, that's smart," the flustered driver cackled inanely. "Yep, as you say, we ought to be moving. And we're goin' to do it."

The three preordained robbers watched the stage disappear down the street, then slunk back into their alley. A prudent action not imitated by the keen-eyed watchdog over the destinies of Jim Hood. From the shadows across the street, he watched the stage whirl round a corner, then he untied his saddle pony from a nearby hitchrack and followed discreetly. Just beyond the skirts of the camp he met Hood shambling townward. Apparently unnoted by the plodder, the horseman let him pass, then furnished a modest rear guard for Hood's wobbly return. Just beyond the limits of the camp, Hood had halted the stage and climbed down. From the dusty road he had delivered an ultimatum.

"Drive on like hell and don't turn back," he had ordered sternly. "I've got some things to do back in Hell and don't need you."

The treasure guard, a hard bitten taciturn man had maintained his normal silence throughout all the strange antics of Jim Hood and the sycophantic groveling of the driver. Now he spoke to the driver.

"What the hell's chewing on the old-timer, Bud? Did he figger himself as an extry guard, or what?"

His random arrow so nearly nipped the bull's eye, that the driver fumbled for an answer.

"If he did," he answered the grim-eyed guard evasively, "he was off a hundred miles, no less. Ga lang!"

MOSE LAMB hunched over his foreshortened bar and cursed Bat Jennison and all his works. If he had ever doubted the identity of Jim Hood with Bat Jennison, it was some feet and rods farther back along the trail. To him his faithful satellites had brought reports of Hood's acts, in brief relays. His intoxication set down by Lamb as simulated, his performance at the card table, his dramatic appearance at the stage, his night ride, all dovetailed with a perfect pattern. And that pattern was Bat Jennison. For the first time in his career of crime, Mose Lamb felt fear that was akin to panic. For if Jennison had known of the planned stage robbery, he knew the architect of the plan. And that architect was Mose Lamb. Tales of Jennison and his unbending ways with the lawless arose to plague him here in his night solitude. The form of Jennison seemed to dilate and grow great in his disordered thinking. He would leave the camp temporarily to this nemesis of wrong doing. A hasty step toward its swift accomplishment and his retreat was halted. A man had reeled through the doorway and halted to shift a pistol into comfortable reaching distance. Jim Hood had arrived. Still playing drunk, ran the wild fantasy through Lamb's mind and so doubly dangerous. Teetering there, he addressed the quaking man behind the bar.

"I've made up my mind," he announced ominously. "You lied to me about that said Governor Brownell. He ain't now governor and don't try to tell me it was a joke. She'd be just another lie." He paused as if to let the full significance of

Lamb's unforgivable crime plummet to its utmost depths before adding:

"Still and but, I'm giving you just one chance. This town ain't wide enough to hold us two and I'm stayin'."

It was a deliriously happy solution for Lamb that all but made him whoop with joy. Hood was offering escape at the very moment he, Lamb, had believed it barred. Yet he made a slight protective pretense, even as he moved toward the door.

"It was just a joke," he asserted with a sickly grin, "I'll explain to you tomorrow."

"Not to me," Hood disputed flatly, "nor tomorrow. Be moving."

When Lamb had gone, Hood sat down heavily in a corner chair and inched it to reclining position against the wall. If indications were worth the recording, his journeys for the night were ended. As Lamb faded through the door, a man slid round the corner of the saloon and halted him. The newcomer was one of the trio thwarted by Hood at the stage stand. In chattering, clipped sentences Lamb explained his ouster which a covert peek verified. Yet the position of the oustee gave rise to a plan for repossession propounded by the other. Drawing Lamb round the building, he pointed upward to a dimly lighted window, a two-paned affair, set just off the end of the bar.

"I'll climb up on this box," he explained in guarded tones as he dragged the packing case against the wall, "and pot him while he sleeps."

"Don't try that," Lamb expostulated hoarsely, "Bat Jennison sleeps like a weasel with one eye open. He ain't drunk, nor asleep, either. He's just baiting a trap. All right, you damned fool, have it your own way. But don't say I didn't warn you."

The box creaked beneath the would-be sniper's weight, then he straightened up, gun in hand. But his target checking glance was not prolonged. Instantly from the barroom below roared two shots, twin holes were bored through the glass to fence in tightly each bulbous ear, in split second fashion came a third, snuffing the single lamp and plunging the barroom into darkness. The man hit the ground with his shoulders, completed an unintentional back flip and came up running. Inside the dark room there sounded some fitful scrapings, as if a chair back were being rooted more firmly against the wall, followed presently by soft blubbery sounds that had both rhythm and comfort in their dulcet tones. Unless there was purposeful deception afloat, Jim Hood slumbered.

GRAY dawn filtered in through the murky windows when Hood awoke. He gaped hugely, then to ease a cramped muscle, slanted his head toward the open door. Now his red-rimmed eyes focused slowly on the figure of a man seated in the corner of the room. The next moment he was staring, wide awake and cold sober. For his replica sat there, very much at ease and also very much awake.

"You're Bat Jennison," Hood blurted through flabby lips.

"Sometimes Jim Hood," the other nodded, "but now Bat Jennison."

Hood's front chair posts came down flat onto the floor and he passed a hand across his brow as if to clear away mental cobwebs. For he, too, had heard of Jennison, and he, Jim Hood, had masqueraded shamelessly as Bat Jennison. Under his own name, it was true, yet it was a planned mimic, notwithstanding. While he wondered, Jennison arose, crossed the barroom and sat down beside him.

"What was the big idee behind the charade?" he asked. "I looked you up in Tamarack and knew you fur a hard workin' miner who hardly knowed one end of a gun from the other. That's why I follered you over here. The game you've been playin' is hard, believe me."

"And too fast for me, Mr. Jennison," Hood admitted. "I played in more luck than I'm entitled to, I know. One day's a-plenty. When did you come?"

"I arriv' jest as you was straddlin' into the stud game," Jennison told him. And, brother, let me tell you. That trick of spottin' your hole card in your watch case is old as Methusalah. Wonder is somebody didn't plug you for bein' funny. You see, you might see somebody else's beside yourn.

"After the game, I followed you when you climbed the stage coach. Remember?"

"Just about," Hood nodded, "but the details are hazy. Guess I was pretty drunk by then."

"Too damned drunk," Jennison said without reserve. "Playin' drunk is one thing, but gittin' entire spiflicated gits no excuses from me. Then when you ran Lamb outen this room and settled down, I was watchin' from around the corner. Kinda lucky for you I so did." He pointed at the drilled window. "See them holes?" he directed. "Well I planted 'em by the ears of a gent who had snuck thar from the outside whose intentions wasn't honorable."

"I think I kinda remember three shots," Hood hazarded a bit doubtfully. "Did he shoot at me?"

"Nope," Jennison grinned, "his intentions was noble, but he kinda failed to function after he drapped from sight. After that I shot out the chandelier so as it wouldn't shine in your eyes and muss up your sleep. Me too, fur that matter. You and me has been here side by each ever since."

"You put yourself out to keep my damned fool drunk head from being shot off," Hood castigated himself bitterly. "Well, I'm through playing Mr. Jennison."

"A thing I'm believin' easy," Jennison told him. "Still, you ain't yit told me how you come to start out on this shindy."

"Well," Hood grinned sheepishly, "it was a fool notion I can see now, but I'll tell you about it anyway. You see, Mr. Jennison, I've known about you for a long time. I've known, too, that you traveled under the name of Jim Hood sometimes. But when I found out that for size and general looks we were pretty close to being twins, the notion come to me that it 'ud be fun to act your part for a day or so. Men that knowed you, told me about how you wore your guns, talked, played stud and so forth. Well, that's the way it was. But one time's a plenty. I'm finished up."

"Mr. Hood," Jennison said gravely, "playin' that game is dangerous. Where's your hoss?"

"He's down at the feed barn," Hood answered as he got up. "And I see the point. You won't feel no happier than I will to put this camp behind my back. I'll pick up my dunnage at the Alta House on our way to the feed barn."

Fifteen minutes later, Hood climbed up into the saddle. Now he leaned down over the horn and stretched out his hand.

"Mr. Jennison," he grinned happily, "you've learned me a lesson and I'm almighty grateful. Besides, I ain't forgetting you saved my life."

"Don't mention it," Jennison disclaimed hastily. "Remember I owe you somethin' fur the frequent stealin' of your name. She's jest even Stephen, I figger. So long."

"The Answer to a Blitzkrieg Is a Dive-Bomb, I Reckon!"

ESCAPE AND RESCUE

By CLAY PERRY

Author of "A Tale of the Tipes," "The Battle of Rawhide and Steel," etc.

JACK GIRARDIN pounded a red-tipped stake into the riverbed, near the high, rocky shore topped with tall timber, as his young wife, Cora, held the sturdy logger's bateau headed into the dashing current with an oar thrust down behind the squared stern.

"After you've planted that one," she said, rather sharply, "how about making a landing and boiling up? I'm starving. Do you realize it's almost two o'clock?"

"Gosh, no, I didn't, but now you men-

tion grub, my stomach strikes the lunch hour, all right. I wanted to set enough markers to keep the land cruising crew busy for two or three days. How is our gas?"

Cora inspected the gauge on the tank of the powerful, sixteen-horse-power outboard. She reported not much over a gallon of gas left.

"Going to be hard finding a good landing place," said Jack. "Have to look for some sort of a beach. This up-stream work has eaten more gas than I realized. That five-gallon tin under the seat will just about get us back to camp. I'll take over while you rustle some grub."

He took the stick while Cora ducked into the hooped canvas deckhouse which gave the boat somewhat the look of a prairie schooner, afloat, and began to unwrap parcels from a huge hamper.

"Oh, say!" she exclaimed as she undid a bundle tied in a newspaper. "Here's some of mother's fresh bread and—"

Her voice rose higher in a squeak of excitement as she began to read, at first to herself, then loudly, against the thundering noise of the motor and the roar of the river that slapped and pounded the plank bottom and bow of the bateau.

> "Two German prisoners at the Nipigon internment camp made their escape, last Saturday, and are believed to have headed for the wilds of the north shore of Lake Superior, perhaps to attempt a crossing. It is believed they are trying to get to the so-called neutral strip of Nine Mile Portage on the Pigeon River. This piece was established by the Messrs. Webster and Warburton, boundary commissioners, as the only absolutely neutral bit of territory in the world. It doesn't belong to anybody, never can belong to anybody and the escaped prisoners, if they made it, could camp out there the rest of their lives and be perfectly safe. The winters, though, might be a little rough."

"Yeah, I'll say so!" exclaimed Jack with a grin on his lean, alert face. "And a crow couldn't exist there in summer, either."

"You know that strip of country?"

"I was up in there cruising timber three years ago for Dad, before he died. Ran across the markers and didn't know what to do, as we thought we were getting into Canada. It's only a few miles north of here. This river runs from the same watershed as the Pigeon. Want to go up and hunt for the Germans?" he chuckled.

"Well, first let's eat," she chuckled back. "I see something ahead that looks likely. It's an island, I think."

"Yep. I'll head for the downstream end, where the current won't be so strong. Say, do you realize that Nipigon is clear across a wide stretch of Superior? Nobody would be able to swim that pond."

"They could steal a boat or stow away on a freighter and sneak off at Grand Marais," Cora insisted, her dark eyes glowing with the excitement of her suppositions. "Hey, what was that we hit?" she cried, as the bateau banged something.

Jack jumped up and looked back.

"A dead-head. Probably some old snag, loosened by the current. Lucky we sideswiped her. Huh, that's some desert island we've picked out! Not a tree on it bigger'n a pike-pole handle, except those dead pine stubs. The Cedar River goes on some terrible tears in breakup time and ice-cakes have shaved the timber almost all off the island. Anyhow, we'll find dead wood for a fire."

HE CUT the motor as they got into the backwater about the sandy tip of the island. In the center of its low-lying bush was a jumble of rocks partly covered by a spindly growth of brush and vines. Three large dead pine stubs alone remained of the once densely wooded area, relics of the spring floods. To Jack Girardin, logger, operating his own outfit and Cora, who served as his camp clerk, the barren little island held no interest save as a place

to land and boil up water for tea, and fry bacon. They were cruising far up the Cedar into the woods, in search of good timber. Timber for ships of war. The tremendous demands of the national defense program had sent many a timber-cruiser scurrying for the tall uncut, from Maine to California. Jack Girardin, already a veteran at logging out for the Navy's mosquito fleet lumber needs, was pushing far up the Northern Peninsula toward the Canadian border in search of straight, strong pine, spruce, hemlock and cedar. This was a preliminary cruise. A land crew was to follow, pick up the red-tipped stakes he set and make a detailed survey of the stumpage. Back at Lost Creek, ten miles as the crow flies, Jack had established his base camp, with Cora's brother, Tim Crane, in charge of a crew that was building tote-roads and paving the way for swamping out logs.

No sooner had the bow of the bateau plowed the sand, than Cora with characteristic eagerness to be first to explore fresh country, jumped out and ran toward the rock pile. She was dressed for roughing it, in khaki slacks, shoe-pacs and wool blouse.

Her rich, red-gold hair flew out like a flame as she ran, eyes wide, to see what there was to see, if anything, in the sole outstanding landmark on the island.

Jack was unscrewing the cap of the gas-tank to refill from the reserve tin before he forgot it, when he heard a muffled cry from the brush in mid-island.

"Jack! Come—help—"

Then it was chocked off.

Jack leaped ashore, running, digging his sharp calks into the sand. He had taken but a few strides when he was brought up, short, by a ragged, bearded man who stepped from behind one of the dead stubs, a leveled automatic in hand, and a hoarse command:

"Halt! Put up your hands! You have a boat. We need a boat and a pilot to get down this God-forsaken river."

The fellow's face was haggard, his eyes red, his expression desperate.

"What the devil—?" began Jack, "Who are you? What—?"

"Silence!" came the snarling order, and the automatic trembled in the grip of a grimy, bruised hand. "Never mind questions. We want that boat."

Through Jack's mind flashed the words that Cora had uttered but a few moments before, in what he had thought idle imagining of a very remote possibility.

"They could steal a boat."

The ragged gunman spoke perfect English—too perfect, because of the unquestionable German accent he had. Out of the corner of his eye, Jack, as he raised his hands, caught a glimpse of another bearded, bedraggled man, younger than this one, who bore himself with a stiff-backed attitude as of one drilled to soldierly carriage. He had on a wretched coverall suit of denim, mostly in tatters, and he was urging Cora ahead of him, toward where Jack faced the other, a gun in hand. His youthful face was pallid beneath several days' growth of beard but he bore himself as one accustomed to command. Jack thought he recognized the type, one of those arrogant officers of storm-troopers. He had seen pictures of them—and this one spoke to the other in German.

Jack caught the one word he recognized, *"fraulein,"* and with it came a gesture toward Cora and then toward the bateau. Jack was suddenly glad that Cora understood German. It might help. He saw her eyes flash and her lips set firmly, as she kept her arms folded in defiant refusal to hold her hands above her head.

There was another language that Jack and Cora had learned, a secret language they had invented as schoolmates and playmates, years ago, and had kept up for the fun of it. It was an adaptation of the universal "pig Latin" so popular with youngsters, but without the "iggery-piggery" affixes. They reversed words, using some

made-up ones when that proved difficult or impossible. And Cora spoke in that language to Jack now, but using his middle name, reversed.

"Ey tawn rou toab, Mot," she said. (They want our boat, Tom.)

"Wonk ti," he replied. (Know it) and then stung at the sight of Cora being prodded in the back by the gun, he demanded of the older man, "How did you get here without a boat?"

"With water-wings," sneered the older one sourly. "I shall ask the questions. You answer. Where are we? What is the name of this river? Where does it run to? Who are you and who is the woman in pants with you?"

Tom's lips set and he glared at his questioner, with a tightening of his muscles that caused Cora to cry a warning, for Jack was setting himself for a leap and a swinging kick with a steel-shod boot.

"Akeit teasy Mot! Ge dot su dolc. Ge ray mergams morf nackuckland. Ew nac loof um fi kat rou mite." (Take it easy, Tom. They've got us cold. They're Germans from Canuckland. We can fool them if we take our time.)

Jack answered her in kind, "Yes, they are desperate. They demand our boat and a pilot. Don't let on you savvy German. Pretend this is Indian talk. I'm going to try to trip 'em up."

"Be careful, and don't let—"

"What sort of language is this?" demanded the older fugitive, angrily.

"It is Choctaw, an Indian tongue that my wife learned from a squaw who cared for her as a girl. She taught it to me."

"You will speak English and make reply to my queries," ordered the gunman. "Who are you and who is she?" Your wife, you say? Hum!"

HE GAVE a significant glance at his companion who was sizing Cora up with an insolent stare. It brought a flush to her cheeks, but she stared him down, then turned her back on him.

"I am Jack Girardin," Jack replied, thinking it best to tell the truth. "This is the upper Cedar River and it runs into Lake Michigan. The lady is my wife, as I told you."

"How far from here to Detroit?" came the next query, as the older man rubbed his chin with his left hand, parting the whiskers to reveal for an instant a long, white scar.

Jack gave him a shake of the head.

"A long, long way," he said. "And you can't reach it by boat. Overland as the crow flies, over three hundred miles. You'd have been better to stick to Lake Superior."

"What? What do you know of — of where we came from?" raged Scarface, and he then rattled off a swift sentence or two in German to the other, addressing him as "lieutenant."

Cora quickly shot it to Jack in Choctaw.

"He said that you seem to know too much. Be careful, they are all on edge and very dangerous."

"Shut off that Choctaw!" warned Scarface, and the lieutenant prodded Cora with the gun so that she winced.

"I mean," Jack went on, trying to keep cool, "that if you follow this stream down you'll be heading away from Detroit. You could make it, better, by following the route out of Superior into Huron by way of St. Mary's River and the Soo Canal."

"But this one runs to Lake Michigan. We can as well go to Milwaukee, with the boat," declared Scarface, and again addressed the lieutenant.

Jack did not trouble to inform him that Milwaukee was twice as far as Detroit and that no boat could navigate the stream clear down to Lake Michigan.

The lieutenant grumbled something gutturally, and Scarface demanded of Jack:

"You have food with you?"

"Yes," replied Jack, with a quiver of his stomach.

The pair immediately marched Jack and Cora toward the bateau, Scarface mopping

his mouth with a trembling hand, his eyes like those of a wolf.

"No tricks, now!" he warned. "Stand apart. You over there—you there," and he waved them to places several feet apart, with his gun.

The lieutenant, licking parched lips stood guard while Scarface went to the boat and rummaged about in the deck-house, returning with an armload of tins, the loaf of bread, still in the newspaper that contained the item about escaped German prisoners.

Cora remembered, now, that the paper was two weeks old. That meant that if these were the ones mentioned, they had been in flight from Nipigon for almost three weeks, wandering about in a thinly populated country, much of it dense wilderness. They must have somehow crossed from the Canadian shore into the Northern Peninsula, plunging into this almost trackless wilderness to land on the barren little island.

From beneath his hat-brim Jack studied them as they fairly choked down food, tore the newspaper from the bread and gobbled it. Their torn, frayed clothing, split shoes, heavy beards and grimed, blistered hands and faces told of hardships suffered in traversing some of the roughest country in mid-America. Only their guns were new, and of standard British army pattern, stolen, no doubt. The denim garb of the lieutenant suggested the prison camp. The other had on civilian clothing, including a sweater and cloth cap. Jack judged him to be a civilian, not a soldier, and evidently the leader of the pair. The lieutenant apparently did not know a word of English.

Jack was thinking, as he hungrily watched them eat most of the generous provender which he and Cora had been about to sample, that if they had appealed to him, decently, for rescue from the island in middle of the roaring river, he would have been tempted to help them and to let them go. But the ruthless manner of the holdup and especially the treatment of Cora hardened his heart and steeled his muscles. He was racking his brains for some trick to outwit them before they made off with the boat, or compelled him to take them in it.

Scarface rose, stretched himself, and started for the water's edge with an empty can, leaving his automatic where he had laid it on a drift-wood log he had been seated on. Jack hunkered down on his heels, as if tired of standing, his arms across his knees, and he gathered himself in a springy knot, for action, murmuring to Cora, in their Choctaw: "I'm going to tackle your man. Get the other gun."

He sprang upward and outward, launching himself like a football tackler, at the lieutenant, who sat flat-legged in the sand, with tins between his knees. Jack's diving attack caught the fellow on the right shoulder and sent him sprawling. Cora made a quick leap and grabbed the gun Scarface had left—but Scarface had seemed to sense danger, and had whirled suddenly back from the river's edge. As Cora got his automatic in her hand, he was upon her, his foot coming down on her wrist. He kept it there, pinning her to the ground, forcing her fingers open and snatched the gun. With an oath, he pointed it at Jack, who was struggling with the lieutenant in a despertae flurry of feet, knees, sand and brush.

"Let him up! Let him go, or I'll shoot!" Scarface threatened.

He kept his foot on Cora's wrist while she clawed at his leg, and only the softness of the sand kept her from suffering crushed bones. She continued to fight, but Scarface knelt on her arm and she had to quit, for fear of a broken elbow.

Jack, seeing her plight and having failed to get the lieutenant's gun from him, scrambled up and put his hands high.

"Let her go, I surrender," he cried. "You had better not shoot. There's a river patrol coming up soon."

For a moment Jack felt that he faced

death. Scarface was shaking with savage anger, but the warning of the "river patrol" worked. He took his knee from Cora's twisted arm, pushing her roughly away, and said to Jack:

"I'll spare you, this time, but for this attempted trick you shall remain here on this island and this one—if she is your wife—will pilot us in the boat, and safely. Understand!"

"But my wife cannot operate—" Jack began.

"You lie!" shouted Scarface. "We saw her bring the boat up before you took tiller. She can and she shall operate it for us. Otherwise, she goes as a hostage, with hands and feet tied."

"Mot, tel em od ii!" jabbered Cora. (Tom, let me do it.)

And she went on, "I'll try to empty the reserve gas tin and hold them up until you can make a raft and follow. Cut across the bend to Lost Creek and get help from camp."

She was silenced, this time, by a brutal slap across the lips from Scarface. Jack ground his teeth, but the muzzle of the lieutenant's gun was now pressing against his spine and he dared make no further move.

"That's the last time you are to speak the Indian," raged Scarface. "And we are in a hurry. Come! Into the boat with you and start it," he ordered Cora.

"You stupid idiot!" cried Cora. "How can I operate or steer, with my arm crippled? It is useless."

"The other is not hurt," snarled Scarface. "Keep your tongue still."

With a significant glance at Jack, begging him to make no further resistance, Cora obeyed, and Jack, biting his lip until it bled, had to stand and watch her go.

THE ragged pair wasted no time in pulling up anchor and shoving off, one or the other keeping a gun on Jack all the time, and the craft was whirled into the current. Jack saw Cora, her right arm dangling limp at her side, pull at the starting cord with her left hand. The motor sputtered, thundered into life and the bateau shot downstream. Above its noise he heard Cora cry in their secret language!

"Get down! They might shoot. Hurry with a raft."

Tom dropped behind the half-buried drift-log, but no bullets came his way. Indeed, the Germans seemed to have no further interest in him, for they did not once look back.

Jack, shaken by anger and the agonizing fear of what might happen to Cora, rushed back into the brush and began searching, frantically, for wood for a raft. The drift-log was useless; it was water-soaked and rotten. There was not a stick of sound wood larger than a man's wrist to be found lying on the island and Jack had nothing to bind sticks together with, anyway, save some slender vines. He was cursing himself for his failure to outwit and overpower the fugitives, kicking at useless bits of decayed wood, or wet parts of ancient logs, when he came upon the wreck of a canvas canoe that had been dragged up behind the rock-pile. It had been used, evidently, as a crude shelter and fireplace, by the Germans. The canoe told its story. It had been battered and broken by being flung on rocks, and Jack guessed that this was what had brought the pair to the island, that they had been wrecked in the rapids above and managed to cling to the craft and get ashore. But the canoe was of no use. The Germans evidently had made futile efforts to repair it. The paddles were gone.

Another discovery was a hole in the sand on one side of the island where a large log had lain, and footprints about it told of an attempt to float it. Jack remembered the dead-head that his bateau had bumped.

It did not take long, but it seemed an age, before Jack realized that he was marooned. It would be suicide to try to swim to either mainland shore, and even if he made the west shore, by a miracle, he

would face a full day's journey through the woods to Lost Creek.

"I've got to find something that'll float, something I can ride," he told himself feverishly. "If she can stall that motor, dump that tin of gas, I might make the portage across the big bend, and beat them to camp."

Jack had only a jack-knife for a tool. The axe was under the rear seat of the bateau with the gas tin. He got out his knife and went desperately to work on one of the standing pine stubs. It was fifteen or sixteen inches in diameter and stood twenty feet high. Hacking at it with the knife was foolish, he decided. He tried rocking it to loosen the roots, but it stood too firmly for that. Then he remembered an Indian trick that a Chippewa lumberjack had shown him. He built a fire about the base of the stub with dry driftwood and brush. Then he bent over a stout sapling that still was supple, though dead, and severed its tough fibres by drawing the knife blade across them at the bend. It furnished him a pole ten feet long and almost two inches through. This he used as a pry under the roots of the stub and as the fire weakened them, he was able to rock the stub back and forth, by using all his strength on the lever. The top waved back and forth in widening arcs. Swearing from the heat and his exertions, blinded by smoke, he kept doggedly at it, and at last, after almost an hour of hard work, he sent the tall stub crashing down.

By good luck, it struck a boulder and broke, giving him a log about twelve feet long, dry and sound and buoyant.

Jack Girardin was no ordinary lumberman or riverman. He was an expert log-rider, a champion log-birler in the annual Roleo contests held at various old-time rivertowns in the Great Lakes region. He had stood on a "cork" pine log and run it down many a whitewater rapids, some swifter and rougher than this one, and with the pole, he did not hesitate to shove off on his tricky, turning, bobbing single-log raft for the run he intended to make.

It was the beginning of a ride as reckless and dangerous as that of a man on a wild horse, bareback, bridleless, hammering down steep mountain trails. A strange ride, a strange race, a seemingly hopeless one; unless, somehow, Cora could trick her passengers, either by putting the motor out of commission on a submerged rock or dumping the reserve gas.

There was less than half an hour's supply in the tank, Jack knew, but he was almost two hours behind them. The bateau could travel, downstream, at the rate of twenty miles an hour, if called on to do so. That would eat gas fast, and a halt must be made to refill the tank—if there was any gas left. How could she manage it?

Jack Girardin hot-footed his jagged log down the first rapids at a speed at least half as great as the motorized bateau could travel. The log was lively, long seasoned, standing, almost as rapid in its revolutions under his feet as a lathe-turned cork pine, especially prepared for tournament work in a roleo. Jack liked it. He was used to this sort of a log, preferring it to one that was crooked and heavy. For the greater part of the time he gripped it between his steel-calked feet, the toes spread far apart, dragging his pole as a combined rudder and balancing pole, sometimes thrusting it against bottom, in the shallows, or fending off from dangerous rocks. Timber floats free of submerged stones of its own accord, if not in a jam.

Jack had ten miles to run the river to reach the cut-across portage trail to Lost Creek, and then over two miles of foot-travel through the woods. The river curved about in a meandering course between the two ends of this trail, covering almost three times the crow-flight distance. The bateau, of course, could run it in an hour and a half, but if out of gas, it would lag and float slower than Jack's log. The bateau, called by lumberjacks, a logger's hack, was built of heavy planking, over-

lapping for strength to bump into log-jams and slide over rocks and be hauled across portages, sliding on its heavy-keeled bottom. There was but one oar in it, by the accident of its mate having been broken and the blade lost in the river, once when Cora was holding the bateau for a stake job, wedging the blade between rocks in a swift current.

As Jack got the feel of his log, he rode more easily, and was able to pole himself along faster, in some stretches. He was making a good ten miles an hour but he ground his teeth and prayed for greater speed, and ground them again as he thought of the treatment that the Germans had accorded Cora. He did not know how badly her arm was injured; she had refused to cry out. It might be broken or a joint dislocated or sprained. Jack's face burned as if he had been the one to suffer that slap across the mouth from Scarface. He boiled for revenge, and yet he knew that he must keep cool and be canny, if he wished to accomplish a rescue.

Scarface, Jack decided, was the more dangerous of the pair, perhaps he was a secret agent of the German government. Once in Milwaukee or Detroit or any city or town with the large German population in this part of the country, he might find sympathizers who would secrete him. Then doubtless he could throw himself into fifth column sabotage against the United States and its aid to Britain and self-defense program.

IT WAS late afternoon, but the light was still good, when Jack's log bumped shore at a blazed tree, marking the beginning of the trail to Lost Creek. He leaped on land, throwing his pole aside, and started at a rapid pace through the woods. But soon he halted and listened, with bated breath, for the sound of a motor; he heard nothing. He did nothing. He did not know whether to think that was of good portent or bad.

A scant half hour later Jack rushed into his camp—to find it entirely deserted. All the bateaux were gone from the wharf. He guessed that the crew had all gone into the woods, and that the cook and helper had chugged downriver for fresh supplies, ordered before Jack left at the little settlement twelve miles south. He found one minus mark that cheered him mightily.

There was no sign of a recent landing of a boat. He started for the tool-shed, when he caught sight of something far up the river, moving slowly down, and he ducked.

It was his bateau, with its hood of canvas, and the motor was silent.

Jack provided himself with the best weapon in camp, a long sharp-pointed, sharp-hooked pike-pole. Firearms were prohibited in the logging camps during the closed season on game.

A short distance above camp, at a point where the river narrowed to less than thirty feet, a gnarled old hemlock three feet in diameter leaned out and over, at a low angle, its topmost branches dragging in the water near the opposite shore. Jack went up the sloping trunk and into the thick fronds of its branches until he was perched right over mid-stream. By pushing boughs aside he could see up the river, clearly. His pike-pole would reach the water, below. Grimly he waited.

And as he waited he thought, "I shall have to pin them down or tip the bateau over and then rescue Cora. They left me to starve or to drown. They hurt Cora and kidnaped her. I shall not be too gentle with the skunks."

He could see Cora's red-gold hair now, as the low sun shot rays through the timber. He could get no glimpse of her passengers. Evidently they were under the canvas. He wanted to get a signal to Cora, somehow. He must manage it. He cut a small branch from the tree, twisted it about his pike hook and thrust it down, waving it back and forth, like a pendulum, then drew it out of sight.

He saw Cora start, lean forward, then

swing the bateau sharply outstream to make it pass directly beneath him. And she gave a quick gesture, pointing to the deck-house and laying her head on her hand.

JACK got it that the kidnapers were asleep but he was not taking chances on it.

"The answer to a blitzkrieg is a dive-bomb, I reckon," he told himself as the bateau floated beneath him.

He dropped, striking with his mailed feet on the middle bow of the canvas deck-house, stiff-legged. The springy, tough bow bent, cracked and collapsed and the heavy canvas was flattened into the boat, and Jack felt the sudden struggles of the pair beneath it as he thrust his pike under a thwart and held down hard on the end of the spruce handle, making a powerful lever of it that kept the canvas and bows pressing upon the flattened bodies of the Germans.

He expected a shot at any instant and he Choctawed to Cora, "Grab a branch and get up into the tree. I'm going to—"

Then he saw that her right arm was in a sling about her neck, but his entire attention was demanded in preventing his armed prisoners from squirming free. When he looked back, again, Cora was gone from the stern seat and the bateau was swinging crazily about, rocking dangerously from the struggles of the Germans. Muffled oaths came from beneath the tarp, and then one grimed hand was thrust out and held up, empty, and the voice of the lieutenant gasped, *"Kamerad!"*

But it was his left hand and Jack could not tell whether he was trying to pull a trick, or whether Scarface was in position to shoot.

It was like having a bear by the tail, unable to let go. He jumped onto the side of the bateau, glancing upward and catching a glimpse of Cora's form, crawling through the hemlock boughs, down the sloping tree trunk. He lifted his pike, thrust its point through the tarp until it touched human flesh and began to bear down as the lieutenant screamed, *"Kamerad"* again.

"Toss out your guns or I'll put a hole through you with this pike," Jack shouted. "Get 'em out under this end of the canvas, both of you."

The lieutenant was squirming from the pricking pain of the twisted-steel pike point. He appealed to the other in German and soon the two automatics were pushed out. Jack got them, then jerked the pike free and hooked the canvas up with the pike-hook.

The lieutenant was holding his right shoulder with his left hand, his face contorted, blood trickling through his fingers.

"Lie down, face down, flat on the bottom and do not move," Jack ordered.

They obeyed and Jack poled the bateau toward the shore. Cora slid down from the tree and Jack saw that she had got her right arm out of the sling. She caught the painter that Jack lifted from the bow with his long pike and towed the bateau slowly to the camp dock.

The faces of both the fugitives were full of fearsome astonishment when they were permitted to sit up, and saw who had trapped them.

"How—how did—did you get here?" gasped Scarface.

"You'll answer my questions, now," snapped Jack. "But still I'll tell you how I got here. You left me marooned—so you thought—to starve to death, but I rode a log down the river. It's a good old American lumberjack custom. Now, how did you two guys get here? Why did you cross into the States?"

"We did not know we were in the United States," replied Scarface sullenly, his eyes on the glittering steel pike-point. "We were seeking the neutral land, the Pigeon River strip that we knew of. But we were lost in that frightful wilderness, starving, and we then were wrecked on that miserable island."

"They didn't offer me a crumb of food, all the way down," put in Cora.

"I ought to pin you both to trees and let the timber wolves have a meal," growled Jack. "But I doubt they'd like the taste. You realize that you are subject to Federal laws regarding aliens who enter the country illegally," he went on. "And for carrying firearms and kidnaping and theft—and general cussedness. If you'd been halfway decent I might have looked the other way and let you go, but as it is, I'm going to turn you over to the F.B.I. Now get busy, Scarface, and take care of the lieutenant. He's losing blood. Cora, I see that you ran out of gas," he finished, turning to her.

"Yes," she answered. "And they wanted me to row—with one oar. With one arm."

"Nice fellows!" Jack remarked. "Who are you, anyway?"

Cora answered for them, as they went sullen.

"They are fugitives from the Nipigon prison-camp, as we suspected," she said. "They told me all about themselves on the way down, without knowing I understood German—as well as Choctaw. The scarfaced one is Herman Richter, an agent of the Nazi secret service. The lieutenant is off a German sub that was captured by the British, prowling the north Atlantic to sink shipping. Herman Richter fears he will be shot as a spy if he is returned to Canada. He engineered the escape from the prison camp by wounding a guard. He doesn't know—nor care—whether the guard died or not. They got across the lake on a tramp freighter, as stowaways, stole a canoe from a lone trapper near Grand Marais, leaving him stranded, and got to the upper Cedar and started down. They were wrecked in the rapids above the island. Richter intends—or he intended—to join some saboteur forces in Detroit or Milwaukee and see what he could do to ruin the American defense work. He was planning to smuggle the lieutenant to Mexico where there are German ships in cargo, ready to run the blockade. Jack, it's lucky you're a roleo rider," she finished. "But I'm going to cave in unless I eat, soon."

"How did you manage that gas tin?" asked Jack, through a mouthful of beans and johnny-bread, in the cook-shanty.

He had roped the two Germans securely back to back to the anvil in the smithy, and had phoned over the crackling logging line to the United States marshal at Cedar River.

CORA drew in a sharp breath.

"I pretended my right arm was completely useless," she replied. "I got it in a sling and kept it there, waiting for them to be off guard—and ready to jump overboard if I failed. They were sleepy, almost all in, and I guess your talk of the river patrol impressed them. Anyway, Herman kept a sharp watch ahead, leaving the lieutenant to watch me. I hated to face him. He said things in German—that—that made me want to kick him in the teeth. But he nodded off very soon and I edged the tin out, an inch at a time, under my knees, kept my jacket over them, and managed to lift the tin over the side and let it go about three miles from the island. We ran out of gas a few minutes later and drifted the whole way down."

"Say, you really are eating with your left hand!" cried Jack.

"I could eat with my foot if I had to," she said, and then her voice trailed off, her face went white and she slumped forward in a dead faint.

The marshal reached Lost Creek in the bateau with the camp cook and helper, bearing a circular that gave photos and detailed descriptions of the German fugitives. Richter, it was revealed, was a notorious spy and saboteur, with a record in Canada and South America for engineering murderously destructive fifth column work. The lieutenant was high in Nazi councils and badly wanted back in Germany as an expert submarine menace.

"The F.B.I. has been on the lookout for this pair," the marshal said. "And they're going to have the honor of being the first prisoners to be interned in the new international prison zone—that Pigeon River strip."

"So, they'll get there, after all!" chuckled Jack. "And a darned good place for 'em—for the winter."

"That kind of human beast deserves it," agreed the marshal. "How is Cora?"

"She's better. She's complaining of hunger," grinned Jack, and then sobered. "I found she had a dislocated shoulder. The damned Huns! If this pair is a fair sample of Hitler's forces, I don't want any part of them, alive. Rather be dead. But I got to hop to it and organize my cruising party for tomorrow. I reckon the Navy needs the stuff in a hurry. Sailors can't ride logs; they've got to have 'em built into boats."

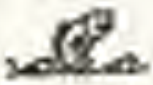
The Ship's Cat

By WILLIAM DE LISLE

THE smallest and least of the *Marie's* crew
He has shipped aboard with the cook;
He has half an ear and a touch of mange,
And a vigilant, fiery look.

No stranger he to the ways of the deep,
Nor the best of a sailor's junk,
And a pleasant dream on a Cape Horn night
In the warmth of the captain's bunk.

He has bit and clawed at many a hand,
He's spat at many a mate,
And drawn the blood of the harbor Toms
Ashore on the River Plate.



He has wooed and won where the Trade winds blow,
He has mused aloft on the Line,
Sung rollicking songs in the middle watch
When the great stars wheel and shine.

And he's off again, is the *Marie's* Mike,
His cares they are passing few,
While stiff as her sticks he carries his tail
As an old salt Tom should do.

God send where mariners find their rest,
In the ports beyond the sun,
That Davy's locker be snug and warm
For the least and the smallest one.

"Vengeance Is the Son of Anger; an Open Mouth Is Often the Vestibule to the Grave"

THE GOLDEN WITCH

By SEABURY QUINN

Author of "Hiji," etc.

HIJI — otherwise Captain Sir Haddingway Ingraham Jameson Ingraham of His Majesty's Frontier Police—frowned up from the dispatch the mail canoe had just brought in. It was from Pangborn who commanded down the river forty miles, and it brought bad news. Foul.

Dear Hiji [ran the missive]: Just a hasty line to warn you to look out for her; she's coming, and may be there ere you get this chit. Miss Louella Burnside of Chicago, U. S. A. and points west, if you please, or if you don't, for that matter. Sister of the Marchioness of Titherington, and, as it follows most inevitably, sister-in-law to his Nibs the Marquess. She has a stack of letters from the Home Office requesting—nay, my son, commanding!—that we show her every courtesy and put our facilities at her disposal while she gathers data for her book.

And there, my lad, you have it. The charming Louella's a Ph.D. from some blighted college in Sioux City or New Jersey, and an authority on choregrophy.

She's watched the Zunis and the Navajos practice hop-skip-jumping, seen the dervishes go dithering on their dizzy way, observed the corybantic convolutions of the Kanakas. In fine, what she doesn't know about folk dancing has been torn out of the book—with a single singular exception. We're it. She is desirous of witnessing first-hand the dances of the simple, unspoiled savages of Central Western Africa, and has come all the way from Kansas City or Oshkosh to observe our natives at their joyous, carefree play.

Having neither corn nor death nor marriage dances on tap for the beauteous Louella's inspection, I'm sending her to you by fastest boat, and wish you joy of her. Trot out a full programme for her, like a kind, sweet soul with nothing else to do, and, meantime, love and kisses.

Pip-pip, old pelican.

P.

"Bleedin' rotter!" Hiji muttered. "Backstabbin' Judas!"

The blighted marchioness' blooming sister could not have selected a worse time for her advent at the station. Things had been quiet in the district, too ominously quiet, for a full half year. Now merry hell was threatening to break loose. Mebili, witch doctor extraordinary and medicine man plenepotentiary, self-styled "The Mighty One," had come down from the Ichichi country on a grand triumphal tour, discovering more black-magic workers in the generally peaceful Luabala district than Matthew Hopkins had smelled out in Jacobean England, with deplorable results to the quiet of the countryside and even worse ones for the accused wizards, since it was not considered good form to permit a witch to survive, and the executions had been carried out in due and ancient form, often with elaborate circumstances of discomfort for the condemned.

Now it was strictly forbidden to "chop" witches in the Reserved Forest Area. The King Emperor's justice, as administered by Hiji, would attend to them, but under the evangelistic exhortations of Mebili, chiefs and village headmen took the law into their own hands with the result that a week earlier a canoeload of frightened people from the Luabala district came paddling with panic-stricken haste to Hiji's station.

"Lord," began their spokesman ceremonially, "thou art our father and our mother, our help in time of trouble and our protection from the wickedness of evil men."

"Thou hast said it, O man," Hiji answered. "What is it that you ask of me?"

It appeared there were many things the messengers desired, but most of all they wished to be freed from the presence of Mebili.

As many days before as a man's hands have fingers he had come into the territory of their chief, proclaiming that he led a great crusade against all witches and warlocks. His appearance was well-timed, for there had been a sickness in the flocks and many goats had died. The crocodiles had been especially active, too, and one of the chief's newest and youngest wives had been carried off by a great saurian as she stood ankle-deep in the river to fill a cooking calabash with water.

THESE untoward happenings were the work of evil men, declared Mebili. The goats had been bewitched, and as for the great crocodile, the one that carried off the chief's young wife, he was no crocodile at all, but a foul wizard who assumed that form to work his wickedness.

The chief had listened fascinated, for Mebili was a gifted orator, and his equipment was extraordinarily impressive, consisting of a head-dress of black and white vulture feathers, row on row of bracelets, necklaces and anklets of human toe- and finger-bones and teeth, wristlets and spats of monkey-fur, and a coat of cam-wood

pigment laid upon his black and glistening body in weird and fanciful designs.

For the consideration of a bag of salt Mebili would smell out the offending wizard that the chief might wreak his vengeance on him and restore the area to peace and quiet. At first the chief demurred. Salt was the highest grade of currency among the natives, taking precedence of goats and cloth and copper wire and iron rods; only the youngest and best-favored women had their worth computed in sacks of salt. But when Mebili craftily insinuated that the village found guilty of harboring a wizard could be fined at least five bags of salt for its collective crime the chief became enthusiastic, and Mebili found himself forthwith hired as witchfinder-general.

That he earned his stipend results testified. Up and down the forest he went, and every village where he stopped to make *ju-ju* had reason to regret the honor of his visit, since in every one at least one witch was found, a fine of salt laid on the community, and the offending culprit forthwith neatly "chopped."

The spokesman's aged father had been smelt out by Mebili, and upon his accusation had been beheaded. Not only that, though that was bad enough in all conscience. His goats and rods and cloth and wire had been confiscated by the chief, thus destroying any inheritance he might have passed on to his son, and the village had been fined ten bags of salt. Since only six could be produced, the deficit had been made up with goats and rods and wire and cloth, leaving the community in virtual bankruptcy.

Each man in the whole party had a similar tale to tell. Two, indeed, were actual fugitives from Mebili's wrath, having had occasion to offend him, and decamped before he had an opportunity to smell them out.

"This is bad palaver," Hij decided. "The King Emperor forbids chopping witches. Such as are denounced must be sent to me for final judgment. Moreover, it appears that as long as Mebili is paid a fee of a bag of salt for every wizard he denounces, no man's life is safe. Presently, when I go out upon my tour of inspection, I shall call upon your chief, and ask him, 'Where is such and such an one?' If he says they were chopped for being witches, I shall hang him to a tree, or to the ridgepole of his broken hut. The right of life and death lies not with him, but with the representative of the King Emperor. As to this Mebili, I shall send for him forthwith, and you shall bide here while my soldiers go to fetch him. Then you shall stand before his face and tell his crimes, and I shall hear his defense. If what you say proves so, he shall go down the stream in chains to work upon the roads, if that be according to the judgment in his case."

Then he sent a corporal with four Houssa policemen to bring Mebili to the station. The party had been gone four days; Mebili was due any moment now, and this blasted sister of a blighted marchioness was coming on a visit—studying the native dances, being entertained as if he ran a bally tea shop, and he with a peck of trouble on his hands, maybe with a punitive expedition to lead.

He knew these Yankee college dames, he'd seen 'em on vacation in England. Probably she'd have scraggly gray hair pulled so tightly back from her forehead that it made her eyeballs seem to pop, thick, shell-rimmed spectacles, buck teeth, a strident, nasal voice, and an inborn feeling of superiority to foreigners, meaning thereby all persons so unfortunate as to have been born outside the confines of the U. S. A. Blast Pangborn, anyhow! If he'd only had the decency to tell her that the natives were all Wesleyian converts and disapproved of dancing—

His ruminations were broken by the prolonged and wobbly screaming of a steamer's siren, and across the heat-waves of the diamond-brilliant river churned the

old stern-wheeler *Wilhelmina*, moving over the rough, choppy surface of the inlet with the grace of a stout dowager attempting the tango or carioca. "Oh, Lord," he groaned as he slipped into his white tunic and put on his sun helmet, "here she is! Steady on, feller. Chin up; carry on for King an' country, an' all that sort o' thing!"

NIGHT had fallen thick and hot, the brilliant stars had flung a spider-web of light across the sky, before long the moon would slide up behind the screen of copal-gum trees. The air was filled with scents of Africa, the smell of flowers and spice, and the dark, thick heat that rolled up from the river like a cloud of unseen vapor. In the bush the night-drums throbbed and pulsed and muttered. The *lokoli*—the jungle telegraph—was busy gossiping.

It was not given Hiji, or any white man, to read that stronge, mysterious code which an unlettered people used to transmit messages with a precision rivalling the accuracy of the teletype, but he could make a shrewd guess at the burden of the tidings which the drummers sent along the jungle trails. A woman had came to the station. Hiji—"He-Who-Comes-When-No-Man-Thinks-Him-Near" —had taken a mate; she would be his number one wife and direct his household. He must have paid a great price for her, for she was like the moon at evening, her walk was that of the gazelle, and from her lips dripped almond-honey—he glanced with a slight smile of amusement across the pointed yellow candle flames at his companion. "If you only knew what they are saying about us, my girl."

It had been a day of surprises. When the *Wilhelmina* threw her gangway out and Hiji marched between the guard of honor of ten Houssas drawn up at the landing he had expected to receive a spinsterish, school-teacherish sort of person who exhibited the less admirable features of a female wasp which had been lately crossed in love. That was the impression Pangborn's letter had conveyed. The blighter!

THE vision that burst on his startled eyes was positively dazzling. Tawny hair, worn in a long page-bob, that swept back from a widow's peak and a high, candid brow. Eyes colored like old amber, pale golden skin, wide shoulders, narrow hips, a lean, small waist. Her khaki jodhpurs and beige pongee mannish shirt, which she wore open at the throat, picked up and complemented her blond-golden coloring, and set off to perfection her youthful, almost boyish figure. He blinked his eyes like one who stares into the sun, clicked heels, saluted her as if she'd been a visiting Commissioner, then with a grin advanced with hand extended. "Dr. Burnside, I presume?" he queried.

The tall fair girl looked at him with a little frown of surprise between level brows. Then, playing up, she thrust her hand in his and gave him a clasp no man need have felt ashamed of. "Stanley—I mean Hiji—we are saved!" she exclaimed. And instant mutual liking and comraderie was born of their laughter as he helped her down the teetering gangway.

Her expression of bewilderment at meeting him was understandable. From Pangborn's carefully particularized descriptions she'd been led to expect someone with a toothy, vacuous smile, whose conversational limits went no farther than, "Haw —haw, I say!" and whose personal appearance was that of a Frankenstein's monster with adenoids, a monocle and a mustache.

When she saw a big young man with black hair lightly powdered by premature grayness, mahogany-tanned face and smiling eyes above a trim mustache advancing toward her she went almost rigid with astonished delight. So this was the moronic, woman-hating Hiji, the "savage chief of still more savage men," against whom Major Pangborn warned her when he at-

tempted to dissuade her from her trip up-country. The old fraud!

THEY had dined and dined well, for Wah Poy, the wizened Chinese who ruled Hiji's cook-house, was more than merely competent; he was an artist. The table had been laid on the well screened veranda, snowy lace on bright mahogany with sparkling crystal and bright silver under the soft light of tall candles. Hiji was almost reprehensibly good-looking in his white mess kit with the double row of little medals gleaming on his breast. "I don't wonder our girls fall for Englishmen!" thought Louella Burnside, Ph.D., with a little silent inward sigh as she poured coffee from a silver pot into egg-shell-thin Sevres cups.

She had swept in to dinner in a trailing white-crepe gown with narrow rhinestone shoulder straps that left most of her golden-tanned back exposed to his startled but entirely approving gaze. "If her sister's anything like her I'm not surprised the marquess went off the deep end for her!" thought Hiji as he eyed the girl with veiled appraisal.

They had listened to the broadcast that the wireless picked up from Rio, violins, guitars and castanets mourning over a tango, with the vocals rendered in sweet, throaty, pizzacato voices with that sobbing, tender quality none but the Latins can impart to song. She hadn't talked her specialty; had it not been for Pangborn's blasted letter he'd never have suspected she was a Ph.D. Everything was perfect, he thought with that portion of his brain reserved for personal use, but the section which was labeled "Official" had a problem to contend with. What was keeping Corporal Alibu and the Houssas? They should have come in with their prisoner before sunset. Mebili was a shrewd old duck, perhaps—

He heard the challenge at the compound gate and heard it answered. The beam of an electric torch stabbed through the darkness, there was the subdued rattle of accoutrements. "Excuse me," Hiji rose abruptly. "Here's a detail with a Johnny I've been waitin' for. Have to see him bedded down—"

"A prisoner?" she asked.

"Yes. Sort o' witch doctor who's been makin'—" He halted abruptly. Why was he so utterly an ass?

The girl had risen, eyes alight. "Oh, a witch doctor! I'd love to see him. Please, may I come with you? I've seen the medicine men of the Sioux and Apaches, but—" She had fallen into step with him. Her hand was on his arm, as lightly as a butterfly poised on a flower. That he might refuse permission to see the prisoner seemed never to have occurred to her.

Mebili strode across the parade ground more like a conqueror than captive. He did not wear the costume of his office, instead he had a red and much-soiled blanket draped about his shoulders in the manner of a Roman toga, on his head was an old battered felt hat several sizes too small, in his mouth he held the reed stem of a clay pipe which he puffed contemptuously. A tramplike, shabby figure, but one that walked with the assurance of a man whose power is unchallenged, and the sense of

undisputed power gave dignity and something like an air of stateliness to his carriage.

The corporal and his detail marched behind, as if they were a guard of honor rather than policemen with a prisoner, and there was something furtive, almost frightened, in their bearing.

"O man," asked Hiji as the detail halted at attention, "did I not order you to bring this one to me in chains? Where are the irons on his ankles?"

The corporal bent his head, which was strictly nonregulation for a soldier standing at attention. "Lord," he replied, and there was something sullen in his tone, "we lost them."

"Lost them?" Hiji's lips twitched slightly under his mustache, but he was not smiling. "Before or after you took this one into custody?"

"Before, O Hiji. As we marched through the forest—"

"Thou art a liar and the father of liars, and in the morning I shall look into your case," Hiji interrupted.

"Be it so, Lord," answered Corporal Alibu resignedly, "if I should live that long."

"Eh? What the devil? What d'ye mean—?"

"Lord," spoke a Houssa—and it was plain he labored under great emotion, for a trooper does not interrupt his captain's conversation with a noncommissioned officer for trivial reasons—"Lord, the mighty one declared that if we put the irons on him, or even if we walked beside him he would smite us with the sickness. We should die with the sickness *mongo*—the sickness itself. Ere we came in the gate the corporal made to put the irons on him, and—" His words stopped suddenly, as if the thread of speech had been snapped, and a dew of perspiration formed upon his brow. Mebili the witch doctor looked at him, not threateningly, scarcely with more interest than he might have bestowed on a beetle crawling in the dust, but—the man was silent as if stricken mute.

"Yes?" Hiji prompted impatiently.

The soldier swallowed twice convulsively, but no sound came from him.

"Speak up!"

There was no answer, though the man was obviously trying desperately to speak.

"Mebili," Hiji spoke so softly that his words were scarcely audible, "how would you like to hear the lash sing *swish-swish-swish,* not twenty or twice twenty times, but for a full hundred?"

"Lord," answered the witch doctor imperturbably, "who is the man who dares do that to me? Who dares to take the lash and lay it to my back?"

Hiji's eyes bore coldly down on him. "I will," he answered shortly. "With my own hand I'll beat you as a man might beat a dog, and after that I'll boot you round the parade ground—"

"Master," interrupted Mebili, and for the first time his assurance faded, "what is it you would have me do?"

Hiji's eyes flicked toward the silent trooper, and at the signal the witch doctor gave a grunt. With a choking sob the Houssa seemed to catch his breath, his taut throat muscles relaxed. *"Istugfur Ullah!* —God's mercy!" he gasped thickly.

IN THE morning Hiji found himself in a predicament. Mebili, it was true, was lodged in the guardhouse, and quite at his ease. He had eaten a hearty breakfast with great relish, but of witnesses for the prosecution there was no trace. Okari, spokesman for the Luabala tribesmen, accompanied by his entire party, had gone down to the river before morning colors, intent on getting necessary things from their canoe, they had explained to the sentry who passed them through the gate. They had not returned, and when a messenger was sent to bid them hasten to the trial he found that their canoe was gone, and they with it.

Hiji gnawed his lower lip in perplexity. Finally he sent an orderly for Bendigo, his sergeant and chief of staff. "O sergeant of the King Emperor, art thou afraid of witch doctors?" he asked when Bendigo, trim in blue tunic and red tarboosh, stood ramrod-straight before him.

The whites of Bendigo's eyes seemed suddenly to grow larger and his thin lips pursed with a twitch. Then, remember-

ing it was strictly against military etiquette to spit upon the O. C.'s floor while he was standing at attention, even when abominations of idolaters were mentioned, he swallowed hastily before replying. "I am a Moslem of the Moslems, O Hiji, and a *haj*, for I have made the Pilgrimage to Mecca. These evil worshippers of idols can do nothing to me save by God's permission. What shall be has been ordained from the beginning."

"All things are with Allah, truly," answered Hiji, who had a sound respect for Islam. "Therefore, O Sergeant Man, thou wilt take eight troopers and the little boat that goes *puck-puck* and follow swiftly on the trail of Okari, whose father was a dog and son of dogs, and bring him and his people back that they may testify against the evil doings of this witch doctor whose ancestors have verily been without morals since the day of Adam's creation."

Elation showed in Bendigo's dark face. His flaring nostrils and smooth coffee-colored skin bespoke his negroid heritage, the thin-lipped mouth, the straight, sleek hair, and the finely modeled hands and feet were pure Arab, while the gleaming, piercing eyes and quick, cruel smile were equally pure devil. Hiji loved him. But he knew his failings.

"The dead speak not in testimony, O Sergeant Man," he cautioned. "See thou to it they come back alive."

"If they resist, one may persuade them of the folly of their course, O Hiji?"

The ghost of a reluctant grin materialized beneath the corners of Hiji's close-cropped mustache. "I bade thee bring them back alive, O Sergeant of the King Emperor. If they came with sore skins—that may be as Allah ordereth."

"Hai-jah!" murmured Bendigo, and something more than intuition told Hiji that Okari and his company would bitterly regret their shirking of responsibility as witnesses against Mebili.

Personality, like beauty, is largely in the eye of the beholder. When Mebili came before him for preliminary hearing Hiji saw an evil-favored, bandy-legged old man with a great many wrinkles and an expression of positively reptilian malevolence in his rheumy eyes.

Dr. Burnside, seated by him with her pencil poised above her opened notebook, saw a mild old colored man whose stooping shoulders and thin arms and legs pled for her sympathy. His deeply-wrinkled face and almost white thick thatch of wool were badges of the honor of old age—he seemed a sort of native Uncle Tom. And Hiji—could it be that Major Pangborn had been serious after all? Was he a twentieth century edition of Simon Legree?

"He looks so sweet and cute and harmless," she almost cooed. "Surely, he can't be so very bad." Since she understood neither Akasava nor Coast Arabic the byplay of the night before had been completely lost on her, and Hiji had not troubled to elucidate.

"Man," said Hiji to Mebili, "why do you work these wickednesses? It comes to me that you have smelt out witches. That may be as it may be. Witch-smelling is a trade that has been followed by your people since the sun was kindled into brightness. But the laws of the King Emperor say no man suffers death until his fault is proved, yet at your urging witches have been chopped. That is bad palaver."

The old man gave him a look which had pure distillate of malice for its mildest ingredient. "Who say Mebili do these thing?" he asked in halting English.

"Oki!" Hiji sat forward in his chair. "So you speak English. Where'd you learn it? Mission school?"

Mebili returned to his technical defense. "Where feller say Mebili bad?" he demanded. "No man say so, you let um go."

Here was a poser. By the rules of evidence in even such a rough and ready court as this a man could not be tried without accusers. "They will be back," Hiji assured him. "I'm holding you till they return,

my man, and if they testify that men were chopped by your command—"

"You let um go," the prisoner interrupted. "No man say Mebili bad, you let um go—"

"Be quiet, babbler of monkey-talk," commanded Hiji sternly. "And in the future speak your own tongue. I understand it better than your pitiful attempts at white man's words."

This was a gratuitous insult, and so intended, for while Mebili's English was thick and guttural it was easily understandable, and Hiji had no more than a fair working knowledge of Akasava and Swahili. He planned deliberately to anger the witch doctor. Enraged sufficiently, the old villain might be goaded into admissions torture could not wring from him.

But though Mebili never went to college he understood psychology better than the average professor. Vengeance was the son of anger, but an open mouth was often the vestibule to the grave. He would bide his time in silence. Accordingly he sucked his lips against his almost toothless gums and stared at Hiji while the rage that smoldered in his sunken eyes was like a live thing coiling in their depths.

"Take this offspring of a cur and a hyena to the guardhouse," ordered Hiji as the silence lengthened. "See that no man speaks to him, or he with others."

"Oh, the poor old thing!" Dr. Burnside almost sobbed. "I'm sure that he's the victim of a conspiracy, otherwise why were all those natives afraid to accuse him openly."

"I have a rough idea," he answered in a noncommittal tone. "How about a little tennis before luncheon?"

MEBILI was held *incommunicado,* but things did not go to Hiji's liking. Sergeant Bendigo's best fighting cock, Abd-el-Kader—Son of an Able Father—was found dead beneath his perch one morning, though he had been strong and well at sunset and had crowed lustily at midnight. Several of the krooboy hangers-on at the station became unaccountably ill, a woman sat down to her skoff at night in perfect health; by midnight she was dead, and her passing was accompanied by particularly unpleasant symptoms.

Hiji fretted. Witch doctors had mysterious powers, he knew, and the natives were extremely suggestible. More than once he'd seen men die of the "cursing sickness"—fade away and give up life despite all efforts to revive them, all because some wizard put *ewa*—death—on them. They could work these spells while miles away, he knew, but it was necessary that the victim be apprised of his forthcoming end. How could Mebili work his spells from solitary confinement, he wondered. For that the old witch doctor was responsible he had no slightest doubt.

Then one morning as he walked across the compound he saw something. Dr. Burnside, notebook in hand, sat beneath a copal-gum tree, and a black boy on his round of morning duties passed within a dozen feet of her. As he came abreast of the seated girl he turned his head away, put his opened fingers crosswise to his lips and spat between them.

This was the native charm against the evil eye, roughly equivalent to "making the horns" with outstretched fore- and little-finger by the Latin races.

"Cheg'li!" he called to the boy, signifying in the native language "pull" or "pull over," much as a New York traffic officer directs an erring motorist to the curb. "O man," he demanded as the boy came to a shuffling halt before him, "why do you thus put shame upon the woman I delight to honor as my guest?"

"Master," the boy shuffled his bare feet in the dust embarrassedly, "it is because she is a very potent witch, and those on whom she looks, or on whom her shadow falls, shall surely suffer sickness or the death."

"Who hath told thee this great lie, O fool?"

"Lord," the boy's embarrassment was

great, but superstitious stubbornness was greater, "it is so. Did not she stroke and fondle Sergeant Bendigo's great fighting-cock, and was he not all cold in death next morning? Did not the woman of M'Lingo, who died of the sickness *mongo* a night and a night ago, stoop within her shadow to lace her boot the day before she perished in a bloody sweat? Did we not see her working *ju-ju* on the night the sergeant man went seeking Okari? Did we not see her dance the dance of death and hear her sing the death song—"

"My sainted Aunt Jerusha's Sunday bonnet!" Swift recollection came to Hiji. After dinner on the day Okari and his cohorts took French leave the girl had asked him about native dances. Did they have corn and rain dances, marriage dances, ghost dances—

"You mean dances of mourning for the dead?" he had asked.

"Not quite. All primitive peoples have those, but the ghost dance of our American Indians is unique, I think. It's the chief rite of the Ghost Dance or Messiah Religion, and was introduced in 1890 by the Piute Wovoka, the Indian Messiah, who taught the time was coming when the whole Indian race, the dead as well as the living, should reunite to live a life of millenial happiness upon a regenerated earth. The religion inculcates peace, righteousness and work, and teaches that in time the white man shall be driven from the land, not by war but by the will of the Great Spirit. Really, there's a certain similarity between the underlying principle of the Ghost Dance and the dances of the Druses, for it's looked upon as a sort of invocation the purpose of which is, through a trance or vision, to bring the dancer into contact with the unseen world and the spirits of departed friends. See, here's the way it starts—"

She had laid her cigarette in an ashtray and, rising, began stamping out a sort of chorea, bending forward from the hips until her body almost paralleled the deck of the veranda, muttering a chant, first low, but slowly rising till it seemed to sound like the wailing of shrill winds that whistled down the rock-walled canyons, striking her hands on each other in a sort of four-four time.

"There!" she had dropped back in her chair and picked her glowing cigarette up. "Have they anything like that you know of in the jungle?"

He had shaken his head. Judging by the sample he had seen, the dances of Shoshonean Indians were as different from the savage Africans' as their languages were far apart. But even as he had answered in the negative he had noted several black boys crouching in the garden, eyes almost big as saucers, teeth on edge with fear and dread. To a people who conceived the earth and air and water full of devils of a most malignant sort there was but one explanation of her weird dance. She had been making *ju-ju*, and while *ju-ju* might be either good or evil, no one but a fool would take a chance.

"O man," he told the cowering black boy, "go back to him who told thee this great folly and say the *ju-ju* which the woman from across the mighty waters worked was for myself alone. There are evil men who work their wickedness in the jungle, therefore Hiji, who is the right hand of the King Emperor, has imported this very notable witch to meet their magic with a stronger one. Say this, O one of very little understanding, then go to Wah Poy at my cook-house and say I bid him give you little sweet cakes, even as many as you have fingers on one hand."

The black boy's face shone with anticipatory delight. "Thy wish is the desire of my heart, O Hiji," he declared with fervor.

HIJI looked up suddenly, a small frown between his brows. He was working on a report for A.H.Q., Dr. Burnside sat in a deep wicker chair on the veranda, and she was humming softly to herself, petsis-

tently repeating the same tune, as if she sought to memorize it. It was her humming he'd been hearing, but he had heard without the consciousness of hearing, as one may be unmindful of the ticking of a clock. Now it suddenly dawned on him, and he did not like it. It was not a friendly chant. He'd heard it once or twice, and it meant trouble. It was the thing they sang while young men danced about the fires in a long circling rank and the women set up a great stake in the cleared space before the chief's hut.

"Where in heaven's name did you hear that abomination?" he asked as he stepped out upon the porch.

Dr. Burnside made a gesture of impatience, as one might warn off an officious child, hummed more determinedly a moment, then, "There, I think I've got it memorized," she smiled at him. "It has an oddly tricky rhythm—"

"Where did you hear it?" he repeated, this time not quite so politely.

She raised her tranquil eyes in bland assurance. "From Mebili. He told me—"

"Mebili?" Hiji echoed. "Didn't you understand no one was to see or talk with him?"

"Why, no," she interrupted. "I heard you order him to close confinement, but didn't dream that you included me. The sentry didn't challenge me when I went to the guardhouse, and the poor old fellow seemed so grateful for my visits. I have no interest in your jungle politics. My interest is entirely educational, and this old man is my first contact with the wild country. He has told me many interesting things, and says that when he is released he'll take me to the village of Chief Duengo where I can see some dances no white man has ever seen—"

"And lived to tell about it," Hiji broke in coldly. "Miss Burnside, I must ask that you refrain from seeing this old reprobate, or having any dealings with him. I've put him in confinement because he is a very dangerous person. Directly or indirectly he's responsible for at least a dozen murders, and his influence among the natives is distinctly bad—"

"I don't believe it—not a word of it!" the girl broke in. "Just because you're credulous enough to believe any wild cock-and-bull story self-seeking natives see fit to tell about him you've lodged a perfectly harmless, inoffensive old man in jail. And if Sergeant Bendigo comes back with the absconding witnesses they'll swear his life away. It's outrageous! When I go back to London I shall see the Secretary of State for the Colonies hears of the high-handed way his representatives deal with the natives here. Perhaps if new men were sent out—" she paused to let her threat sink in —"men not susceptible to native superstitions, and with a sense of abstract justice, there would be less need for the floggings and hangings which are indulged in so promiscuously by the present administration."

His voice was cold as icy spray as he replied. "You are at liberty to tell the Colonial Office anything you please, and his Excellency is at liberty to believe whom he will, but until I am relieved of this command I have the responsibility of keeping peace and order in this district, and my orders are neither debatable nor reviewable. It is my order, Dr. Burnside, that you neither see nor talk with, nor attempt to see or talk with the prisoner Mebili."

"Really, Captain Ingraham!" She fairly leaped from her chair and flounced past him to her room, chin in air. Since she

was wearing jodhpurs instead of skirts it was no simple matter to achieve the effect of flouncing; no one but a woman—and not many women—could have done it. But Louella Burnside, Ph.D., was a remarkably able person in many ways.

They did not see each other through the afternoon, and shortly before dinner she sent word by a houseboy that she was indisposed. Sergeant Bendigo returned with his detail and a much chastened Okari shortly before midnight. Hiji saw to their disposal in the guardhouse, drank a more than usually tall whiskey-soda, smoked a final pipe and turned in.

The luminous hands of his wristwatch pointed to exactly twenty minutes of three when he roused in response to Bendigo's thundrous knocking. "What the devil—" he began.

"O Hiji," in his excitement Sergeant Bendigo almost forgot to click his heels as he burst through the door, "the foul wizard whom they call the mighty one has broken from the prison. Okari welters in his blood upon the floor, the corporal Alibu who had the guardhouse duty stands like a man congealed to stone, and—forgive me for the evil tidings that I bring, my lord—the golden one has fled away with Mebili!"

"The golden one—"

"Yea, Lord. The woman who has eaten of thy bread and salt—"

"The devil!" Hiji was halfway across the room in one tremendous leap, thrusting feet through breeches, buttoning on his tunic, stopping only to belt on his Browning pistol. "Sound alarm and assembly; leave twenty men to garrison the station, and have the rest in marching order right away!"

"We take the trail, then, Hiji? In what direction?"

"To the Chief Duengo's village, by forced march. Snap into it!"

"Hearing and obeying, O valiant leader of the valiant!"

Bendigo was jubilant. A fight of any kind was meat and drink to him, and he had a special score to settle with Duengo. A raiding party from the chief's country had ambushed ten Houssas some years before, and the troopers' leader had been Mansur, oldest son of his father's sister, and his favorite cousin. When he and his detail finally crashed through to their relief they found ten corpses crucified on crude crosses of copal-wood, hanging head-downward over the remains of slow fires. Unmentionable things had been done to them, but not before they died. Duengo's father had been chief those days, and when Hiji hanged him in the sight of all his people the half-grown brat Duengo gibbered curses and spat at them. The cuffing Bendigo had given him had been part payment on the debt of vengeance he owed the chief and all his line, but a deadly hatred had been born that day, and hatred in the jungle leads to spilt blood soon or late.

"Hai!" Bendigo exulted as he raced across the parade ground. "There will be shooting before long; the spears will fly as thick as gnats around the carcass—*hai*, and bullets too! The little guns that stutter will be singing songs of death, the bayonets will go *pung* as we strike home to let the idolaters know our lord the Emperor King is master still and Hiji his right hand and I his left!"

ARMED men were boiling from the barracks like a swarm of angry hornets from a disturbed nest while the bugle shrieked its strident message of alarm. Hiji hurried to the guardhouse for a quick inspection. Bendigo had not misstated matters. Okari lay upon the floor of his cell with his knees drawn up and his arms out. He was not a pretty sight, for the gash that gaped across his throat from left jaw-point to right ear was like a yawning toothless mouth that laughed sardonically, and blood was all around him on the rough plank floor.

The cell in which Mebili was confined

was empty as a tenantless bird-cage. Its door swung open on lax hinges, and the key had been turned after opening, making it impossible to bolt the door again until a fresh lock were adjusted. In the two cells farther down the corridor crouched Okari's terrified companions, their faces gray with fright. "How came this wickedness to pass, O sons of great misfortune?" demanded Hiji. "Speak and speak quickly."

The superstitious fear that held the helpless prisoners by the throat was terrifying, but the fear of Hiji struck at the pits of their stomachs. "O Hiji, thou art our father and our mother," began one of the men, but Hiji waved away the compliment impatiently.

"Time wastes, O mumbler of inanities. Speak quickly if you would not feel fire against your skin."

"Hearing and obeying, Master. Some time ago the soldier man who holds the keys of the prison came down the way between the cells and stopped before the cell in which the mighty one was locked. Then he became as he had been a man of stone, and presently came the golden one, and took the keys away from him and opened wide the door that held the mighty one.

Thereafter she departed, but the mighty one men call Mebili came to the cell in which Okari was and entered thereinto and chopped him with the knife he took from the soldier. Us he spared, but we are very fearful, for behold, no prison has been made with strength enough to hold him, and he promised he would serve us even as he served Okari if we spoke evil of him."

"Fear not, O man," Hiji comforted. "The soldiers of the King Emperor stand round about to guard thee, and I shall deal with this Mebili."

"Lord, you said the same thing *cala-cala*—long ago—but Okari lies drowned in his blood, and the mighty one makes mock of all thy soldiers and thy prisons."

"The palaver is ended," announced Hiji as he turned away. It was, indeed. He had lost face before the natives. All the forces of the Crown were put to shame by one old bandy-legged, nearly naked witch doctor. This was the devil of a situation. "And when I catch that little Burnside baggage, I'll spank her as she ought to have been spanked when she was growing up!" he promised savagely.

Corporal Alibu stood at attention at the turning of the corridor. He stood so rigidly that he neglected to salute when Hiji stopped before him. "O man, what shame is this, that you neglect to tender me the proper military honors?" Hiji asked.

The corporal stood and stared at him with fixed, unseeing eyes. Hiji touched him lightly on the cheek, then passed his hands before his eyes. There was no reaction.

"Hypnotized, by the Great Horn Spoon!" he muttered. Alibu had been afraid of Mebili. That began it. To translate fear into compliance with hypnotic command was a relatively short step. "Ho, some of you," he called, "take this one up and lay him on his bed. Allah's hand hath touched him."

THEY hurried down the jungle trail. The narrow path lay through a silent forest, twisting like an endless snake between great towering trees massed and matted in an almost solid wall by parasitic creeping vines. Patches of swamp land lay here and there across the way, but these were bridged by felled tree trunks. The heat was almost stifling, the thick miasmic mist was round them like a cloud of steam; only the merest rays of moonlight reached the tangled depths through which they hastened. "*Fisa*'—faster!" Hiji urged. Duengo's village lay a full two days away, but if they hurried they could overtake the fugitives before they reached it. "*Fisa, fisa;* a pound of almond-honey to each man if we come on them before—yes, corporal man?" he

broke off as the leader of the advance guard came running back.

"The bridge is gone, O Hiji."

"The bridge—gone? Good Lord, it can't be!"

"As Allah liveth and shall one day judge the righteous and the sinful, it is gone, O Hiji."

And gone it was indeed, as he discovered when he reached the river bank. Three years before he'd laid the penalty of building a suspension bridge across the deep, mud-banked and crocodile-infested stream upon the people of a village who had rebelled at the hut-tax. It was a fine strong bridge with puncheon floor swung between great cables of knitted vines, strong enough to bear a mule train if it had to, and it cut the time between the station and Duengo's country by a full two days. There it trailed before them in the muddy rushing water, its cables chopped and frayed away at the far end. Without a working party of at least a hundred men it could not be repaired; even then the work would take more than a week. They'd have to hack and slash their way down river to the ford, and that would take a full twelve hours. After that there'd be a twenty-mile detour through swampy land.

"Mebili, my lad, you're goin' to wish your mother had died thirteen years before she met your father when I catch you," Hiji promised as he viewed the ruins of his once-proud bridge.

AT LEAST two hundred warriors were ranked in a great circle round the fire that threw its orange tentacles full fifty feet into the darkness of the moonless night. Behind them and between them crouched the women, while in a semicircle where the firelight put a burnished glow upon their faces sat Chief Duengo on his stool of state, with his wives, his counsellors and his sub-chiefs round him. All day the drums had growled and muttered, since darkness fell the young men had been dancing in a long, loose circling rank, now with the coming of the lightless hour before moonrise all were gathered by the council fire to see Mebili the Mighty One smell out a witch and free the district for all time from the black magic which afflicted it.

For the evening ceremony Mebili had fairly outdone himself in magnificence. Upon his thatch of graying wool was a crown of vulture feathers, a necklace fashioned from the toe- and finger-bones of men hung round his neck, while bracelets of the same kind rattled at his wrists and ankles. Every rib was outlined by a smear of cam-wood pigment. His face was painted dead white with spots of bright vermilion, the tip of his nose was stained brilliant purple. In one hand he held a forked stick of copal-wood, from a cord of plaited human hair a child's skull, polished till it gleamed like ivory, swung and bounced across his chest.

Louella Burnside fairly shivered with professional delight. Mebili had promised she should see a ceremony no white man had seen. How wise she'd been to make friends with the old man; he'd given her a privilege no amount of money could have bought. Despite the solemnity of the occasion she had trouble choking back a giggle. While that stuffy, self-righteous Hiji had been safe in bed she had stolen from the bungalow each night, gone to Mebili's cell and let him out to roam at will around the compound. Alibu was in the plot, too, she knew, for every night when she crept to the guardhouse he'd been standing in the corridor before Mebili's cell, as stiff as on parade, and pretended not to notice when she took the keys from his belt and released the prisoner. He'd been waiting, still pretending, when they returned just before the sun came up, and appeared to take no notice of her when she put the keys back.

Several times they'd run across the station's hangers-on while they were on their secret walks. Once a rooster ran across their path, and Mebili took it in his hands

and fondled it. No one who was kind to animals could be wholly bad, she knew. Again, there was that poor woman who died a little later. She was coming from the well when they met her, and fell forward on her face at sight of Mebili. He talked so gently to her! Told her she would be quite well in a few days, so he said. Of course, the poor thing died, but that was not his fault.

Three nights ago the old man told her that the time had come. The people of Duengo's village were to have a great powwow; there'd be dancing, feasting, merrymaking, and at the end he'd cast out devils from the tribe. But she must help him get away.

How easy it had been! While Alibu pretended not to notice, she had taken the keys from him, unlocked the cell, and gone out to wait for Mebili. The sentry at the gate had challenged them, but when Mebili spoke to him he'd been like Corporal Alibu, and pretended not to see them when they slipped out of the compound. And that conceited Hiji thought his men were loyal!

Then—again she had to suppress a laugh as she thought of it—they'd chopped the cables of the bridge and come along the trail free from pursuit. A company of the chief's men would go with her to the coast tomorrow morning, and when she got to London—wouldn't Captain Sir Haddingway Ingraham Jameson Ingraham be surprised when she told her story and he was relieved of his command! The horrid, brutal—

Crashing drums broke through her pleasant thoughts. A roar of voices sounded from the close-packed ranks of tribesmen as Mebili leaped out from behind the council fire and began circling round and round the climbing flames.

At first he moved with a slow, shuffling step, but gradually the cadence of his dance increased. Finally he was pirouetting like a ballet dancer, and as he reached the climax of his dance the whole company began to sing the chant he'd taught her—the one that Hiji disapproved of.

She sang with them, her clear contralto blending with the untrained, husky voices of the natives, her soft white hands slapping out the four-four rhythm in unison with them.

Mebili circled three times round the fire, and as he passed her she saw little flecks of foam upon his lips. There was a gripping, feverish tensity in the atmosphere. Something terrible seemed hovering over them. There was no saying what it was, but it was there, cold, terrifying, paralyzing. Some instinct, some inward sentinel of the senses, told her she was in deadly peril. The smile died on her lips and her eyes darkened. Fear was blurring them, fear that began at her stomach-pit and spread like a great wave of nausea through her.

Mebili whirled across the smoothly swept cleared patch of ground, he was halting in his dance—with a leap he landed right before her, bent his bandy legs in a frog-squat and thrust at her with his forked stick. She looked into his eyes. They were dim and foul as pools of water with slime-scum on them, but in their stagnant depths she read the deadly, deathless hatred he had for her race. She was the witch he had smelt out—she was——

Strong hands grasped her roughly by the arms, the shoulders, the neck. She was jerked up from her seat, rushed across the clean-swept earth to where a little pile of

sand was heaped before the fire, forced down to her knees. A great black warrior towered over her with a wide scythe-bladed sword of native iron in his hand. "Speak well of us to all the devils you meet in the land of ghosts," he intoned ceremoniously, and raised the beheading-sword.

"No—*no!*" Her voice rose to a shriek as she writhed futilely in the grasp of her captors. "Oh—*no*—"

She didn't understand for a moment. She felt the grips relaxing on her arms, and saw the headsman draw back with a choking gasp of surprised fear, saw Mebili crouch and seem to try to shrink in upon himself. Then she heard the drawling, unaccented greeting. "Dr. Burnside, I presume?"

"Hiji!" She was on her feet with a bound, scampering across the cleared space to the figure that stood outlined in the firelight. "O Hiji, Hiji, I've been *such* a fool!"

He was unshaved, his clothes were torn with jungle-thorns and smeared with jungle swamp-mud, but she threw both arms about his neck and fairly smothered him beneath an avalanche of kisses. Nor were they any mere perfunctory pecks of gratitude. Each one was an authentic kiss with none of the essentials missing. "Hiji darling—oh, you blessed lamb—O dear, *dear* Hiji!" she sobbed between kisses.

"Stand easy!" He put her gently aside and strode across the fire-lit ground until he stood before the chief.

"Duengo, mighty chief and ruler of the land between the big and little rivers, they tell me you strike mighty blows with the war club," he declared.

"Lord it is so," replied the chief with wonder in his voice. He had expected summary sentence and execution, at least insulting reproaches. Instead, the great He-Who-Comes-When-No-Man-Thinks-Him-Near saw fit to compliment him. Then he looked about him and found comfort.

There were but eighty travel-stained Houssas at Hiji's back, he was sitting in the midst of two hundred armed men. "It is even as you say, white man," he answered loftily. "Duengo is a mighty smiter. At his stroke the greatest stones are shattered into pebbles."

"That is well," commented Hiji thoughtfully, "for you shall go down river with me forthwith, and presently you shall stand before the Judge Man who, when he hears the story of tonight's doings, will set you to break stone upon the roads, and thus you shall toil, with chains upon your legs, so long as you shall live, both you and all those who dared lay hands upon the woman I had under my protection."

A warrior raised his killing-spear and rattled it against his shield. *Crack!* Firing from the hip, Bendigo shot the man through the head, and as another warrior stepped forward the soldier next to Bendigo let fly and drove a bullet through his heart.

Hiji looked around him, speaking slowly and distinctly. "Let any man among you raise his spear, and he dies as did those foolish ones. Moreover, if you have not thrown down your weapons on the ground before this little stick stops swaying I shall have my soldiers loose upon you the small guns that stutter, and all of you shall surely die." He held his swagger stick between his first and second fingers and gave it a gentle swing.

The spears and shields came clattering down. Before he could have counted twenty the whole village was disarmed.

"Lord," whispered Duengo as he looked at the cowed and conquered remnant of his army, "I think it would have been more better if you hanged me quickly, and got this business over with. It is not fitting that a chief should work upon the roads like common men—"

"Who said you were a chief, O countenance of extreme ugliness?" broke in Hiji as he snatched the leopard skin of office from Duengo's shoulders. "The King Em-

peror, whose representative I am, sets up chiefs in this land, and casts them down, as well."

"O Hiji, who shall sit in judgment for the people now?" a voice came from the women crouching by the council fire. "Duengo has no son or brother to take his place, and his uncle is known for a half-wit."

"Who spoke?" Hiji searched the ranks of warriors and women with a quick glance.

"Lord, I did." From the virgins kneeling by the fire a girl came forward, not impudently, yet with assurance in her walk. She looked him fearlessly in the eye. "I am the daughter of Infandu the wood-carver, who aforetime knew thee as a friend, O Hiji."

He looked at her a long moment. She was tall for a native, slim and beautifully proportioned, straight-backed, narrow-hipped and high-breasted, with a skin the color of rich chocolate, large, steady eyes and features so sharp-cut that he suspected she had Arab blood somewhere in her ancestry. Rather old she was for a virgin, seventeen or perhaps eighteen, intelligent, too, he guessed, noticing her high forehead and the great breadth between her eyes.

"Who shall sit in judgment?" he repeated, and laughed suddenly. "If judgment were in thy hands, maiden, how would you deal with that one?" he asked, nodding toward Mebili.

"He is to die, Lord?"

"Aye, that he must, for he has done murder."

"Then I would have him hanged from a tall tree, but first I'd have his beads and ornaments and all his magic-working medicines burned in the fire, lest another come on them and set himself up as a smeller-out of witches."

This was more and more astonishing. "You do not like witch doctors?" he asked.

"No, Lord. They are evil men. *Calacala*—long ago—when I was young I went to school at the God-man's and learned

that all their talk of magic and witchcraft is lies."

"H'm." He studied her with deeper interest, then, "It shall be even as you say, O maiden. How do they call thee?"

"Sakamora, Lord."

"Then I give thee a new name. Henceforth men shall call thee Artemisia, and"—he dropped the leopard skin which was the badge of chieftainship across her velvet-brown bare shoulders—"hail thee as the chieftainess of all these people."

He took her right hand and raised it. "O people of the Luabala land, behold your queen and ruler. Hear and obey her orders, for I have chosen her to govern you, and her commands are mine."

Now here was something like which no man living had heard of. Save as hewers of wood and drawers of water and for the fulfillment of the simplest biological functions women were of small account in the jungle, yet He-Who-Comes-When-No-Man-Thinks-Him-Near had raised a woman to rule over them. A murmur began in the ranks of warriors, but Hiji shouted it down.

"Silence, you unholy blighters! Too long you have been ruled by men, and foolish, witless men, at that. Duengo's father I hanged from the ridge-pole of his broken hut, because he was so great a fool as not to know the King Emperor's law cannot be flouted. Duengo I take to the Settlement to toil in chains upon the road until he dies, for he, too, was a fool and listened to the counsel of witch doctors. Is it from such as them you would have rulers? This maiden speaks the word of truth; I have listened to her judgments and delighted in them. Do you likewise, or by *ewa* you shall answer to me for it, and the answering will not be to your liking. Up hands and give the salute to your queen and ruler, Artemisia!"

"Artemisia!" came the chorus as the people's hands were raised in sign of fealty.

"Take thought before you render judgment, Artemisia, and do even-handed justice to all men," he advised the new queen.

"Lord, at the God-man's school I learned the law of government," she answered.

"Did you, now? And what is it?"

"Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye also unto them."

"Humph. Too bad some of our civilized rulers couldn't have been sent to that mission school when they were young," he murmured as he turned to give the order for the homeward march.

HIJI raised his hand in salute to the figure waving fondly to him from the *Wilhelmina's* stern. Lord, but he was glad to see the back of her!

Louella Burnside, Ph.D., disobeying orders and flouting his discipline, had been something of a stinker, but Louella Burnside, woman, reduced to almost tearful humility, spendin' her time apologizin' for her folly, tellin' a chap how utterly and incomparably wonderful he was, or just gazin' at him soulfully—that gave one the hump.

It positively did!

"Good-by, Hiji, my dear! Don't forget to call when you come back on furlough. I'll be watching for you!" came the sweet contralto from the little steamer's afterdeck.

"Good-by!" he called across the widening gap of sunlit water. "Send me an autographed copy of the book when it comes out!"

The *Wilhelmina* disappeared around a river-bend with a hoarse scream from her siren and he turned on his heel. Now for a nice long whiskey-soda. He broke into a snatch of song as he walked toward the quarters:

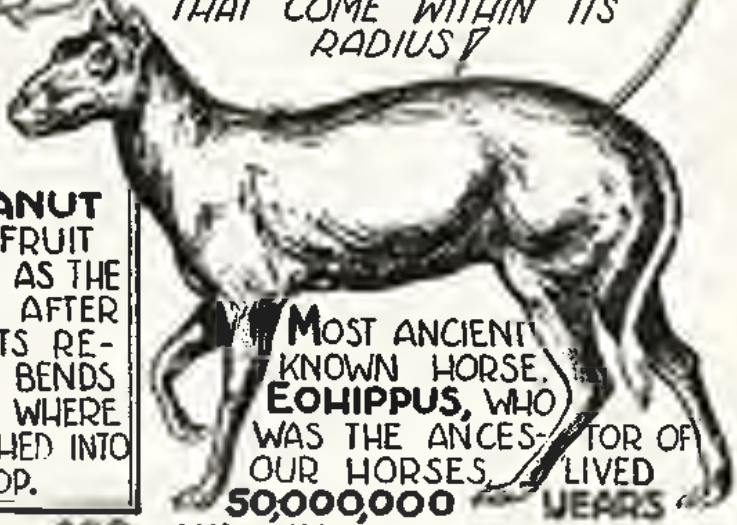
"Me aunt she died o' Saturday night
And left me all her riches:
A wooden leg and a feather bed
And a pair of calico britches. . . ."

Curioddities By Weill

THE **AMERICAN INDIAN** DOMESTICATED TURKEYS, NOT AS FOOD *BUT FOR THEIR* ***FEATHERS!*** FULL FEATHER HEADDRESS WAS NOT WORN BY THE INDIANS THAT **COLUMBUS** SAW BUT WAS THE EXCLUSIVE CULTURAL PROPERTY OF THE **SIOUX** AND **CROW** TRIBES OF THE WESTERN PLAINS —

CLADOMELA AKERMANI, THE SOUTH AFRICAN **SPIDER** SECURES FOOD *BY WHIRLING A SPUN THREAD ROUND AND ROUND, CAPTURING INSECTS THAT COME WITHIN ITS RADIUS!*

SELF PLANTING **PEANUT** PRODUCES ITS FRUIT UNDERGROUND. AS THE FLOWER FADES AFTER FERTILIZATION. ITS RECURVING STALK BENDS TOWARD THE EARTH WHERE SEED PODS PUSHED INTO THE SOIL DEVELOP.



MOST ANCIENT KNOWN HORSE, **EOHIPPUS,** WHO WAS THE ANCESTOR OF OUR HORSES, LIVED **50,000,000** YEARS AGO AND *WAS ONLY ABOUT THE SIZE OF A* ***FOX TERRIER!***

WHEN WERE PRECIOUS STONES U[illegible]S BULLETS? *See Curioddities next issue.*

. . . . Only There Was Some Sort of Dirty Snake in Paradise

CALIFORNIA GRINGO

By GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

THEY had come from Mexico City, the two travelers on the *Camino Real* which linked the missions of California. A long journey, a swift journey and a secret one it had been. And a secret, gloating satisfaction burned fever-hot in the thin, dark man who talked as the two of them rested in a tavern at San Gabriel.

"You will wait here for me. A week or ten days. No more, I promise you!"

He was dressed in a suit of dark broadcloth and a white frilled shirt and stovepipe hat, like a *gringo* business man; but his olive-hued face and arched nose were arrogant Castilian. The burly hombre to whom he whispered wore the garb of a *vaquero*—short jacket and tight, laced trousers and heavy spurs. But his pantaloons were trimmed at the knee with gold lace; his leggings were richly stamped and secured by gold and silver twists; and he carried himself with the brutish insolence of a hard-bitten army officer.

"Ten days, then. But you'll bring the stuff with you, without fail?"

"You will be satisfied, *amigo*. *Adios*. I dare wait no longer. I go now to the Rancho San Pascual."

Outside the tavern, the gaunt-faced man swung into saddle again and reined his fine horse northward. A man who rides alone does not guard his expression. Triumph and anticipation burned in the dark eyes; the savoring of rich satisfaction for a hatred that long had lain pent and smoldering.

Northward toward Rancho San Pascual he rode.

THE *señora* was very beautiful, and very much in a hurry.

She puzzled the customs authorities of the port of San Pedro.

"I wish to go to Rancho San Pascual. *Muy pronto!*"

A *gringa* she was, an American lady; yet she spoke passable Spanish. She had come so far. By sailing vessel from Boston, around Cape Horn, then up to California. She had come so far, and yet she was in such a hurry. Surely a few hours now could make no difference. But these *gringos! Loco.* But she was beautiful, this fine *senora.* Her yellow hair shone in the hot sun with a living, golden lustre; and her blue eyes were alight with expectancy, with an eagerness made tender by worry. They were gallant men, the *Californio* authorities; they knew that only love could put so beautiful a lady in so great a hurry. They bestirred themselves to arrange an escort to take her to Rancho San Pascual.

"Wait, I am not alone," she said.

THEY were tough hombres, the three *gringos* who squatted about a campfire in the chaparral of Santa Anita Canyon.

Towering men in buckskin hunting shirts black with wear, their faces were smooth-shaven in Indian fashion and their hair long. They had come from afar, these trappers. Overland. From Independence over the Trail to Santa Fe. Then up into Utah, and down across the Mojave into Cajon Pass and California. They had known Pawnee raid and Pah Ute ambush. They had starved on roots and gorged on venison. They had spit cotton with thirst, and writhed from alkali water. But nothing had dimmed the hot, truculent avarice which goaded them westward. Their Hawkens rifles were primed and loaded. Tufts of human scalps fringed their leggins. The dog-eat-dog hardihood of the wilderness was in the stern set of lean jaws and the cold burn of their eyes.

"Come on! No more waitin', damn it!"

"But he said—"

"Don't care a hang what he said. Let's go!"

Two of them jumped up, and the reluctant one followed. They pulled their mules out of the brush, onto the trail. Mounting, they rode westward.

A *paisano* horseman rounded a bend in the trail before them.

"Hombre, kin you show us which way to Rancho San Pascual?"

"Straight ahead, *Senores,*" the Californian said politely.

With a muttered *"Gracias,"* the trappers rode on.

But rounding that bend, they stopped.

"That greaser'll remember what we look like."

"Joe, you do it."

Joe turned and rode in pursuit of the Californian. Presently a rifle report lashed and re-echoed between the hills. Joe came back; and the three men rode on westward.

They reached a forking in the trail—and up the right hand fork a rider was coming at a fast trot. At sight of them he turned his mount, and waved for them to join him.

"Come on. They're expectin' us," he said briefly.

Toward Rancho San Pascual they rode. In them was no appreciation of the beauty of green hills studded with ancient live oaks, of cattle grazing on wind-rippled *lomas*. In them a hot, truculent avarice was fanned to blazing expectancy.

It was the 15th of September, and the year was 1843.

RANCHO SAN PASCUAL lay in a basin surrounded on three sides by mountains and opening out onto San Gabriel Valley. It was a gracious range, green with the grass of the first rains, shaded by giant oaks. And the *casa* was a gracious old adobe flanked by the huts of the *vaqueros* and by corrals.

A thousand head of cattle milled in the corrals now, and riders worked among them. By the corral gates, Buck Harmon and his friend Don Andreas Lugo were holding anxious conference.

"I do not know your customs well," Buck was saying. A tall, finely built man with a friendly mouth and keen gray eyes, he was tense and puzzled. "I sent invitations to our neighbors as you suggested, Andreas. But it looks like they're avoidin' me!"

Don Lugo said, "*Amigo,* I have bad news for you."

Buck looked sharply at his friend. The *Californio's* handsome face was drawn with regret.

They had been back in California just a week now—just a week since they had returned from Santa Fe over the grueling Gila River route. They had returned with some twenty thousand dollars in silver pesos and gold doubloons—money paid them for a huge herd of California horses and mules which they had sold to Missouri traders in Santa Fe. That herd of stock had been stolen out of California by Pegleg Smith and the Py Ute chief Walkara.

Buck and Don Lugo, pursuing the raiders, had managed to recover the big herd of horses and mules—to drive them to Santa Fe, and sell them.

Buck had bought the Rancho San Pascual just before that big horse raid. He loved California. He liked *Californios.* Back home, now, he wanted to make friends of his neighbors.

So, he had planned a big *matanza,* in the custom of the country. He had invited neighboring rancheros to come visit him today—to help him cut fat stock from his cattle herd and slaughter them, to get the hides and tallow. And in the evening, as was the custom, Buck had planned to hold a *fandango* and put on a theatrical. Then, to top it all off and make an unforgettable occasion of it, Buck had planned to reveal that he and Don Lugo had recovered the stock which had been stolen from all of them and had sold the horses and mules at a fat profit in Santa Fe—and to pay to each ranchero the money coming him!

To recover $10 for each $2 head of stock they had counted as lost—that ought to be a pleasant surprise, Buck had figured.

IT HAD been a good plan. Just one drawback to it.

Not a single one of Buck's invited guests had shown up.

"Do you know *why* they haven't come?" he asked Don Lugo.

The stalwart *Californio* nodded soberly. "They are afraid of you."

"Of me? But why, for Lord's sake?"

Don Lugo laid his hand on Buck's elbow in a friendly gesture of reassurance.

"It is not you, personally, they're afraid of. Listen to me, *amigo.* Last year, Commodore Atcapsby Jones of the United States Navy sailed his ship into Monterey harbor. He landed marines and seized the *presidio* and ran up the United States flag and announced that he was taking California for his country. You remember?"

"Sure. But Jones hauled the flag down in a day or two, and apologized, didn't he?"

"*Si,* and Alvarado gave him a champagne supper in Los Angeles to show there was no resentment," Don Lugo said. "But, my friend, since then Lieut. Fremont has come into California with Kit Carson and some fifty riflemen, and is wandering the mountains. They say he brought cannon. Why is he here? And Captain Sutter, up in the Sacramento, has gathered some three hundred *gringos* around him. Sailors who've deserted their ships, and trappers and settlers who've come over the *sierra.* Sutter feels himself so powerful that he can tell our governor to go to the devil. Why has he gathered such an army around him?"

"It's not an army. Just—settlers, that's all."

"So you think. But the people of California think of what such settlers have done in Texas! The Lone Star Republic was part of Mexico, don't forget. Moreover, the air is full of rumors of war. Between Mexico and the United States.* You see? *Californios* are afraid. England wants California. France wants California. But the United States will let neither take her. And the States already has armed forces abroad in our land. So the decent element wait in dread, *amigo,* for what is to come."

"But that's no reason for them to refuse to have anything to do with me. I'm their friend, Andreas!"

Don Lugo shrugged. "Fear breeds hate, *amigo.*" His low voice was sad.

Buck's powerful chest lifted to a long, shaky breath of consternation. For he had the keen foresight to see what this might mean for him. Here, among a gracious and kindly people for whom he had the profoundest admiration, he had planned to make a permanent home for himself and his family. Now his hopes were menaced. Among a people who hated *gringos,* he could not find a place. He would be the dreaded outlander, the suspected *e'tranjero* who must be watched and guarded against as if he were a spy of the raiding *Chagnanosos!* And if ever invasion of California actually started, against him and his would reprisals come.

"Don Harmon!" a *vaquero* shouted, pointing down the road.

Buck looked down the road toward San Gabriel. His lean hard face warmed with sudden pleasure.

"Andreas, look. Guests *are* coming. You're wrong! They're late, that's all."

Don Lugo turned to look. "Pray the good Lord that I am mistaken," he murmured.

But as he watched the oncoming riders Lugo's dark brows knitted and his handsome, olive-hued face grew puzzled.

IT WAS a small party of riders who approached. Two *soldados* from the port at San Pedro. One held a fair-haired boy of three years before him. The others were two women, blonde women. One was middle-aged, and held a baby in her arms. The other woman was young and lovely, and the sun shone on her golden hair as the hood of her cape fell back.

Abruptly Buck Harmon gazed in thunderstruck amazement.

"Good Lord, it can't be, j-just can't—"

And then he was running down the road as the party drew near, he was lifting the lovely young woman from the horse; and she was calling him by name, and then she was tight in his arms.

* This War with Mexico finally came, in '46.

Don Lugo walked forward, puzzled but smiling.

"My wife, Andreas!" Buck fairly shouted at him. "Just arrived — from Boston."

Don Lugo had never met Ellen. He bent over her hand in courtly fashion. She was a beautiful woman, he thought; and very much in love with her towering young husband.

Buck was lifting his young son from the soldier's saddle.

"Gosh, Timmy, you're big! You've grown like a tree."

Ellen Harmon turned, and from the nurse's arms she took a placid bundle with a button of a nose and two bright, curious eyes and tiny fingers that clutched impartially for anything within reach.

"Buck, I think it's time you met your new daughter."

"My new—I mean, good Lord, *y-yes!*" Buck stuttered.

He felt a little foolish as he took the bundle, took it as gingerly as though it might break or explode in his arms. The bundle reached out and got hold of his strong nose and gurgled. Buck grinned, and Andreas Lugo laughed.

"But she's a beautiful *chiquita!*" Lugo said.

Buck looked at Ellen, his gray eyes shining.

"You should've written you were coming, Ellen. I had no idea. Why, when I saw you, I couldn't believe my eyes."

"But I did write, Buck! Months ago. You should have got my letter in August. I sent it care of Mr. Workman in Los Angeles."

"That explains it. We've been gone. Don Lugo and I have been clear to Santa Fe and back. I haven't seen Workman yet."

"Nice surprise?"

He smiled, and how he felt was so plain on his face that Ellen impulsively hugged him. But even at that moment of profoundest happiness, dread gripped him, fear that was like a throttling hand at his throat. What a damnably ironic twist of fate! The one thing he wanted most in the world was to have Ellen and the children here with him. But being here was now so *dangerous* for them! He faced the reality of that with the clear-eyed honesty and courage which were bedrock in his character.

The *Californios* were a gracious and kindly people, yes. But now they were a people made suspicious and menacing by panic.

For the country, though rich was pitifully weak. In arms, in man power. Why, here at Los Angeles, which was the center of population of all California, there were but fifteen hundred people. Most of the country was cut into big cattle grants occupied by a few *vaqueros*. So California was appallingly vulnerable to an invader, and *Californios* knew it. They were brave; they would fight. But just the same, dread and resentment filled them with the desperation of a people at bay. *Gringos* living among them lived under the threat of that desperation. Buck didn't fool himself. It was but human nature to retaliate against wrongs. His family was right in the path of retaliations if Fremont or Sutter started cutting a wide swath in the north, or some other U. S. Commodore sailed into Monterey and raised a flag of conquest.

"Buck, you *are* glad we're here?" Ellen whispered. She sensed something of his worry and dismay.

Buck never got to answer that. His wife suddenly grasped his arm, and cried out. Don Lugo's horse, standing nearby, pitched to its knees. In the corrals, cattle suddenly flung in a crowded mass against the corral posts. There came an ominous rumble that was soundless and yet pervaded air and earth. Servants came running out of the *casa*. Somebody cried, *"Temblor!"* The *paisanos* dropped to their knees and crossed themselves in prayer. Buck put one arm about Ellen's shoulders

as he felt a sway and shock in the ground under his feet.

"It's nothing, Ellen!" he said reassuringly. "You'll feel light quakes out here every once in awhile."

Tiles fell from the *casa* roof and crashed on the ground—as if in ominous mockery of Buck's words. His throat tightened. The very earth shook under his feet, and just now the thought had anguished meaning for him.

Then he noticed that Don Lugo had picked up young Timmy. Laughing down at the frightened child, the stalwart *Californio* was so calm and self-possessed that his manner soothed Timmy and the nurse. Buck looked at his friend with a quick and profound gratitude.

DON LUGO did not stay for the evening meal. For all his towering sighs and pugnacious blaze of spirit, he was a sensitive and courtly gentleman. This evening, he felt, Buck and Ellen should have to talk alone. They had a lot to tell each other. So Don Lugo mounted his big roan and spurred away toward his own *hacienda* near the old San Fernando mission.

It was dark when he reached home. His *mayordomo,* taking his horse as Don Lugo dismounted, announced respectfully, "You have a guest, *Señor.*"

Something in the servant's tone made Don Lugo demand sharply. "Who is it?"

"One who is not welcome. He waits in the *sala,*" the *mayordomo* said with the frankness of an old servant who takes privileges.

Don Lugo's handsome face tightened. He uttered a low worried *"Valgame!"* and stalked on into the *casa.*

A man stood before the fireplace in the living room—a long, lank figure in somber black against the ruddy gleams of the fire, warming long, clawlike fingers.

"Don Lopez!" Lugo exclaimed, and in his tone was angry surprise.

The lean, gaunt-faced hombre bowed. For an instant a flash of mocking hatred was in his narrowed dark eyes.

"You seem very glad to see me."

With a bluntness unusual in any *Californio,* and especially in him, Don Lugo rapped, "You know better. It was agreed that you would never return here. Why are you back?"

Don Francisco Lopez was Lugo's cousin. Lugo, inheriting the family ranch, had given Lopez the job of managing it—until he discovered Lopez was selling horses to traders from Santa Fe and keeping the proceeds. Don Lugo, then, had given Lopez all the cash money he could raise and told him to get out of California and stay out. Whereupon Lopez had gone to the Pueblo of Los Angeles. By dint of an extraordinary concentration upon drinking and gambling, he had lost that cash money in five days' time. For some months he had slunk around the district like a *pelado* tramp. Abruptly he had come to Don Lugo again. Asked for horses and a little money, and swore that this time he would go for good. Lugo gave it, and Lopez had disappeared.

Instead of answering Don Lugo's question, Lopez asked with bland malice, "Aren't you going to ask after my health? And where I've been? And my plans?"

Don Lugo's lean, aristocratic face crimsoned under the reproof. His tone was

courteous as he asked, "Have you eaten? Your old room will be made ready for you."

"*Gracias!* I assure you, my dear cousin, that I am as anxious to get out of your sight as you are to have me do so. But I've had to come to you for a favor."

"You want money!"

"Only to *borrow* money. Enough to purchase Don Garfias' ranch."

Lugo started with surprise.

"But it's not for sale. Garfias sold it to Senor Harmon."

Lopez stiffened with surprise that was staggering shock. His hard, gaunt face twisted with dismay and frustration.

"Sold to a *gringo?*"

"Yes. A *gringo* who is my friend."

Lopez licked his thin lips. "Well, the *gringo* may be induced to sell. Only, it may take more money. Will you lend me this money?"

Don Lugo's answer was curt and abrupt. "No."

"But I will repay you in ten days time. I will repay you twice over!"

Don Lugo stared at him in amazement.

"*Nombre de Dios,* I can't believe that! How?"

"I swear it! You must take my word for it."

Forget it, Francisco. *Senor* Harmon will not sell."

"I will offer him such a good price he will be glad to sell. *Gringos,*" Don Lopez sneered, "will cut out their own hearts for a profit."

Words of furious anger crowded to Don Lugo's lips. But he checked his temper. For he realized, suddenly, that perhaps it would be best if Buck Harmon *did* sell out. All the doubts and worries of the past day pointed to that. There was trouble ahead for even such *hidalgo-Americanos* as *Senor* Harmon in California. Perhaps it would be best for him to take his family out of the country. Don Lugo sighed. Never had he found so fine a *compadre* as the tall quiet American who was so staunch, so honest and courageous in all his feelings.

"All right, Francisco," he said heavily, "I will lend you as much money as you'll need. But still I don't understand your purpose. You have no interest in raising cattle and horses!"

"True enough."

"In God's name, then, why do you want Rancho San Pascual?"

With a hot fury amazing in one of his bland, weazelish temperament, Don Lopez blazed at Lugo, "That is my concern. Rest content that I will return your money to you in ten days—and that I will repay you twice over!"

A RANCHERO was usually up and at work before dawn.

Before going out, Buck slipped into the children's room and for long minutes gazed at his young son and baby daughter.

Timmy already was big-boned and rangy for his scant years. He had Buck's own gray eyes and firm, sturdy chin. The baby had her mother's coloring—shining yellow hair and blue eyes. Buck pulled the cover close under her chin, whispered for Timmy, who had wakened, to go back to sleep, and tiptoed out.

Out at the corrals, then, Buck gave his riders orders for the day. Of the cattle in the corrals, those in prime condition were to be slaughtered, hides stripped and staked out for drying, and the tallow dried out and run into bags of bullock's hide and stored. These *botas* of tallow and piles of hides were the money of the country, the medium of exchange with which a ranchero bought his supplies for the year.

Hauled away in carts to San Pedro, they were traded to the merchant skippers of Boston ships for imported goods.

"*Senor* Harmon!"

Buck turned as one of his *vaqueros* addressed him.

"What is it, Amadeo?"

"*Señor,* my brother Raphael — the *mayordomo* sent him to the oil spring last night. Raphael did not return, so this morning I went to find him."

The oil spring was a flow of oil that exuded from the ground in a gulch in the hills to the north. For generations the fathers of San Fernando mission had filled rawhide sacks from the spring, refined the oil and used it in their lamps. Buck's *mayordomo* used the oil in the lamps of the *casa.*

"You found Raphael?" Buck demanded.

"*Si, Señor.* I found him lying senseless on the trail. Beaten, *Señor.* Like one beats an Indian who steals. The clothes stripped from him. Horse gone, and saddle gone. Even the few *centavos* from his pockets stolen!"

"Who did it, Amadeo? Indians?"

Amadeo's shrug was rueful even in its anger.

"*Quien sabe?* Raphael was struck down from behind. He did not see who it was."

"I'll think further of this matter, Amadeo," Buck said, and dismissed the rider. Outwardly, Buck was calm. But inwardly, a sudden appalling sense of living under an avalanche crashed upon Buck. Was this part of the trouble he feared, starting *already?* If it was, fighting back would only bring more grief back upon him, and his people.

Buck returned to the house for regular breakfast. He found Ellen and the children already in the kitchen, receiving clay bowls of roast beef and frijoles with tortillas from *Señora Ruiz.* It wasn't exactly Ellen's idea of a proper breakfast for small children; but young Timmy seemed wild for it. Later, Ellen told Buck, she'd add some Boston cooking to the menu.

After finishing with cups of beaten chocolate, Timmy, then Ellen, asked Buck to show them around their new home. So they started out, Timmy scampering ahead like a fox terrier, Ellen's lovely face radiant. They had so much zest and delight in everything Buck showed them that an edge of anguish sharpened his gloomy forebodings. They would love this rancho —which they might lose, so soon and so tragically.

The main house was a low, rambling structure, thick-walled, built of adobe brick and of timbers hauled from the Sierra Madre. The roof overhung on the inner sides to cover a corridor running the full length of the north and west sides, floored with brick and overhung with vines. Onto this corridor all the rooms opened—the main *sala,* the sleeping rooms, the storerooms, and at the end the shed which served as kitchen. Furniture was scarce in California. The kitchen stove was really a small furnace of adobe. Some of the beds were mere boxes the size of a bedstead with a hide stretched across.

The living room held benches of tables patterned after mission furniture—made of massive oak and polished to a rich, dark sheen. On the floor were strewn Indian rugs from Santa Fe, and a couple of huge grizzly hides. In a corner stood a little shrine with an ever-burning candle; and a few bright objects of lacquer and silk from China gave notes of color to the *sala.*

In the *patio* were benches of adobe and willow withes. What caught young Timmy's wondering eyes were stools of whale vertebrae. Beyond the main house were the quarters for the riders and house servants. Just rude huts of poles and mud —but such a profusion of flowers garlanded them and such strings of green and scarlet peppers hung from the eaves that they looked like twinkly-eyed squaws who might waltz around in a May dance any minute.

Not a door on the whole rancho had a lock on it!

It was that which summed up everything for Ellen, and made her hug Buck's arm and say, "We'll love it here, Buck. It's simply Paradise!"

Buck turned his face away for an instant, for fear that some of his keen dread

would show itself. *Paradise!* he thought. *Well, even Paradise had a dirty snake in it.*

"*Señor* Harmon!"

BUCK'S *mayordomo,* the stocky Ruiz, wanted a word with him. Buck left Ellen and the kids and walked to one side with Ruiz.

"Something very strange," Ruiz began in Spanish, his old face troubled. "Garcia brings me word that the waterholes in the canyon have dried up."

"Impossible!" Buck exclaimed. "The creek was running a good flow just day before yesterday."

Ruiz spread his hands in a mystified shrug.

"*Si*—but now the creek is dry, *Señor.* Like a bake oven!"

"Send a couple *vaqueros* up the canyon to investigate."

Ruiz nodded. "But there is something else, *patron.*" He pointed northwest. "We had a band of horses running near La Canada. But we can find none of them now. It is very strange," he repeated.

"Send two men to ride up the canyon and over into La Canada."

"At once, *Señor!*"

After the evening meal, that night, Buck sought out Ruiz. Asked him what his two riders had discovered about the stream that had dried up and the missing horses. Ruiz frowned in worried, baffled concern that had an edge of superstitious dread.

"*Señor* Harmon, I send Lupe Garcia and Nicanor Saez. But they have not come back at all!"

Dismay coiled sickening and cold within Buck.

Ruiz suggested, "I can put ten men in saddle at once, *Señor.* We can ride into the canyon, over into La Canada!"

Buck's first impulse was to say, *do it pronto and I'll go with you!* But sober second thought checked that furious impulse.

For maybe it was his ranchero neighbors who were responsible for these vandal acts against him, Buck realized. Maybe among his neighbors were resenting, *gringo*-fearing *Californios* who wanted to drive him off of Rancho San Pascual by petty persecutions—just as they wanted to drive all uninvited *gringos* out of California!

If he fought back against these vandal acts, he'd be fanning the flame; he'd bring undeclared war into the locality that would smolder for awhile and then explode into a showdown battle. *I don't want that,* Buck realized. There was, therefore, but one thing for him to do—sit tight. Make no acts of retaliation against his neighbors. Just grin and bear whatever was done against him, until his neighbors learned to like and trust him.

"Ruiz, do nothing tonight. Wait my orders."

But as Buck turned away, a grim question troubled him.

Just how much of punishment could a man take without striking back? And if he did strike back, what would be the end? A massacre of every *gringo* family—which would bring an invading American army to retaliate upon the country with fire and sword?

BUCK woke suddenly out of deep sleep, alarm shrilling like a wild bell in his mind. He sat up in bed, listening. Jumping out, he pulled on some clothes, grabbed his rifle and strode outside. A shadowy figure moved in the *patio.*

"It is I, *Señor,*" the *mayordomo* whispered.

"What's wrong? Why are you up?" Buck demanded sharply.

Ruiz sighed, and chuckled wryly. "It must be that I am getting old, *patron.* I think I hear men moving in the night—but look! All is peaceful as a good conscience."

But Buck walked the length of the *patio,* nerves taut, listening and peering. Something seemed wrong—

He almost stumbled over a body

slumped on the ground, the sprawled heap of Chico, Ruiz' mongrel dog. Bending over the dog, Buck's pulse missed a beat and an oath choked in his throat. The dog's skull had been cleaved almost in two by the blow of a small axe or tomahawk. Ruiz saw what had happened. Choking out anguished endearments, the *mayordomo* bent over the mongrel.

It was then that Buck noticed the door of the storeroom. It was standing open. Buck reached the doorway in a couple of swift strides.

He peered inside, rifle leveled. But the faint moonlight showed nobody within. No person—and practically no thing.

THE storeroom had been piled high with supplies. With flour, and meat, and a variety of the goods which every ranchero could get only by trading his hides and tallow to the Boston ships at San Pedro—groceries, wines and liquors, ready-made clothing and bolts of cloth, ropes, and iron for blacksmithing and other such staples. Most of the stuff was gone, now. Stolen.

Violently Buck turned and started for the corrals. But then he checked himself. It was useless to try catching the thieves in tonight's darkness. He couldn't find tracks till daybreak.

Besides, did he really *want* to find the looters? Was he ready for a showdown with his persecutors? All his misgivings crowded down upon him—and he turned back toward the house.

"Go back to sleep, Ruiz," he said.

Himself, Buck could not sleep. Staring at the dark ceiling over his bed, he pondered his problems.

AT DAYBREAK he got up and went to the kitchen for the *desayuno* of chocolate and bread. Ruiz was there, eating as if the food choked as it went down. His plump face was doleful and angry.

"*Senor,*" he revealed, "Amadeo tells me that the orchards have been looted. Pears and peaches stolen by those *maldito ladrones!*"

Buck said nothing. Forced himself to eat his food.

Ruiz suggested, "Perhaps we take ten men and look for those thieving *pelados?*"

Buck's answer was curt. "No! We have work in the corrals."

And until nearly noon Buck worked hard in the corrals. Then, as he was knocking off to return to the *casa* for dinner with Ellen and the kids, one of his *vaqueros* rode up.

"*Senor,* at the spring of Cabeza de Vache," the rider said, "I found some of our cattle. They had been butchered, *Senor.* Haunches taken, and the rest left for the coyotes."

Buck's lean face blazed with anger. Ruiz, the other cowhand at work nearby, quit and stood rigid, watching him. Almost did Buck's towering resentment stampede him. But he turned away. Without a word he turned away and strode toward the *casa.*

Old Ruiz flung a skinning knife at a corral post with a savage oath of fury.

Buck found a stranger waiting for him in the house.

"I'm Don Francisco Lopez," the man introduced himself.

Buck was in no mood to be polite to strangers; but with an effort he courteously asked the man to have dinner. With an insolence and disdain that brought spots of hot color to Buck's high cheekbones, the *Californio* refused.

"I'm too busy, *Senor.* I have come here to buy your ranch."

It took Buck a moment to absorb that. He drew a long, slow breath and studied this Don Lopez. It wasn't like a *Cali-*

fornio to show the manners of a hog at a trough. A long, lank man, this Lopez. Dressed like a Yankee merchant in dark trousers and long coat of broadcloth, with wing collar and flowing black tie. A swart, gaunt-faced hombre with a predatory beak of a nose and hot dark eyes, but thick twisting lips that could spill honeyed lies.

"My ranch," Buck said, "is not for sale."

"You need take no loss, I will pay you the exact sum you paid for it," Lopez said, as if Buck's answer wasn't worth heeding at all. In a lower, ominous tone Lopez added, "California is growing increasingly unhealthy for *gringos, Señor.*"

"Who sent you here?" Buck asked tautly.

"Why—I come from my cousin, Don Andreas Lugo." Lopez saw Buck ease up a trifle, hearing this. Lopez was shrewd enough to press an advantage. "He is concerned over your welfare."

"Just the same, I don't care to sell."

"Valgame! Do not try tricks of bargaining, *Señor!"* Lopez said angrily. "I will not raise the price I offer. Your ranch is of no real use to me."

"Then why in blazes you wantin' to buy?" Buck demanded.

Lopez ignored that. Backing water, in a placating tone he said, *"Amigo,* I will let you keep every head of stock on the place, to sell or drive elsewhere as you wish—and pay you $20,000 for the bare range. Isn't that a generous offer?"

"Yes," Buck replied so furiously that Don Lopez retreated a step, going pale. "It's so damn generous it's charity! Get out, *Señor.* Go on. Get out of here!"

"Señor, I will pay $30,000," Lopez offered frantically. *"Thirty—thousand—dollars!"*

"No. Don Andreas Lugo is my friend," Buck said heavily. "So I'll try to forget about this. You, *Señor,* are not my friend. You climb your horse and get off my ranch *pronto*—or I'll haul you off at the end of a *reata.*"

Don Lopez almost groveled then, wringing his hands.

"Señor, I must buy Rancho San Pascual. I must! I will pay whatever you ask. Any price!"

Buck caught him by the collar and hustled him out of the *casa,* to his waiting horse. Practically heaved him into the saddle.

"Ride, hombre!"

"Maldito gringo!" Lopez screeched, beside himself. "You'll come crawling to me, you Yankee fool! You'll come crawling to me to buy your ranch at any price," he shouted, but he was spurring his horse safely out of reach as he yelled. *"Maldito pelado!"*

Buck turned wearily back toward the house.

A prize polecat, this Lopez. Funny kind of fellow for Don Lugo to send. Though it was just like the handsome courtly Lugo to try to buy Rancho San Pascual, so that a friend could take his family out of a country that had become dangerous for *gringos.*

Then a doubt crept into Buck's thoughts. Maybe Don Lugo had not sent Lopez. But if not, what in the world made Lopez so hogwild to buy Rancho San Pascual?

YOUNG Timmy made a big event of the mid-day dinner. He had appetite and he had gusto, and he spooned up the thick soup *a la española* with a big-eyed, lip-smacking delight that made Ellen laugh even as she chided him about guzzling his soup up like a puppy. He looked up at her with his big gray eyes and his smile so much like Buck's that impulsively Ellen hugged him. Timmy then attacked the *el puchero,* meat and soup vegetables with hot sauces, with the same giant-killer's vim.

But it was good, this *el puchero.* So good that Ellen praised it, and pried the recipe out of blushing *Señora* Ruiz as she brought in fried beans and *tortillas.* After all that, Timmy still had room for a

dulce dessert. He patted his tummy and grinned at his father.

"Rascal!" Ellen said. "Buck, what are we going to do about school for Timmy and Mary a few years from now?"

"Well, the rancher send boys to Mexico City for an education. No schools here to speak of. Or we might do like some of Hugo Reid's neighbors in San Gabriel did —send the youngsters to a missionary school in Hawaii."

"Never! We'll simply have to start a school here," Ellen said, with such flashing-eyed firmness that Buck couldn't help but smile, even as her words brought swarming back upon him all his fears for their future.

Ellen had fixed her lovely hair in *Californio* style this morning, parting it in the middle and bringing it back to a lustrous, golden knot at the back. She had put on a *camisa* and short skirt, and on her bosom she wore a brooch of azure stones which matched the clear blue of her eyes. She looked so slim and young and radiant that it wrung Buck's heart to think of what she might have to face these next few months.

Impulsively he said, "Ellen, how'd you like to go into Los Angeles this afternoon? Have tea with some American women?"

"Oh, Buck, that would be heavenly! So many things I've still to learn about getting along out here."

But there was a delay to their departure. The *mayordomo* came into the *sala,* hat in hand, and *Señora* Ruiz with him, and behind them crowded *vaqueros* and women servants of the *hacienda.* The men were grinning embarrassedly and the women smiling with shy pleasure. Plump old Ruiz made a gracious little speech. They had brought gifts, he said. For the *Señora* and young Timmy, and the baby.

"Gifts of welcome, *Señora,* for that we are so happy that you have come to live among us," said Ruiz.

There was a *rebosa* for Ellen, of embroidered silk imported from China. A little skirt and jacket of nankeen for the baby. But the most wonderful gift was for Timmy: Buck realized that *Señora* Ruiz and her helpers must have sewn for long hours of the night to make it—a tiny ranchero's costume of linen shirt, a vest and short jacket of blue velvet, and pantaloons of blue velvet trimmed with silver lace at the knees and with strips of red cloth along the outer leg seam. Just like a grown-up's! With a tiny leather hat, leggings of stamped and embroidered leather, and calfskin shoes embroidered with white thread and fastened with silk cords. Even a black silk handkerchief to wear around the neck!

Ellen's eyes filled with tears as she thanked them all for the gifts. "You've made me so glad I've come to California!" she told them.

Buck and Ellen decided to leave the children at home under the watchful eye of Miss Beulah, the nurse. Then, Buck mounted on his fine *palomino,* Bontai, and Ellen riding side-saddle on a gentle gray, they rode to *la Ciudad* of Los Angeles.

ELLEN gazed curiously around as they entered the city. There wasn't a wooden building in the place—only low, one-storied adobes with flat roofs covered with bituminous pitch, mud-colored and ugly except for bright strings of *chile* that decorated the stores. Each of these *tiendas* had a solitary barred window, and one doorway in which the *tiendero* sat lounging as if to prevent customers from walking inside to buy. There was no paving on the streets, and no sidewalks; and the dust was as deep as a Boston snow. Nevertheless, the citizens walked down the middle of the street instead of along the side—to escape black drops of *brea* dripping off of tar roofs melting like icicles under the hot sun.

Buck stopped at Dr. Wolfenden's home, and took Ellen inside; and Mrs. Wolfenden, of French birth, cordially served *cha,* afternoon tea, and said that other neigh-

bors would be dropping in. Buck left, then, anxious for a talk with other ranch owners in town.

Buck went to the *tienda* of Don Abel Stearns; but the huge, ugly American was gone on a *pasear* south, Buck was told. And as Buck walked along the north side of the *plaza,* it suddenly occurred to him that he didn't see a single American abroad on the streets. Was it just accident? Or were the Americans deliberately keeping themselves safely out of sight? Accident, probably, since Mrs. Wolfenden hadn't mentioned any trouble—

It was then that Buck encountered Dona Verdugo and her big son-in-law, Don Raphael Analis. Dona Verdugo owned the Los Felis Rancho. She was a large woman with a large temper and a shrill tongue.

Amazingly she stopped squarely in front of Buck, her placid face darkening with rage. She shook a plump fist in his face, and her eyes blazed. *"Maldito ladron!"* she screamed. "Accursed thief! We welcome you among us, we give you trust and friendship. But you with your *Indios blancos* are a curse upon the land! You should have been driven out with the other *Chaguanosos!* You hypocrite!" she screeched at him. "You conscienceless marauder! You scum of the earth! You—"

Don Raphael Analis finally got her shamed into subsiding, by telling her that she was making a public spectacle of herself, that her language was unladylike and unChristian; and he turned her away, sobbing with pent anger.

But over his shoulder, Don Analis, his tone grimly quiet, warned Buck, "Our patience will reach its end, *Senor.* We drove out the red Indian. We can drive out the white ones, too."

"For God's sake!" Buck exploded. "Will you tell me what in the world this is all about?"

Flushing angrily, Don Analis snapped, "To injury you add insult, *Senor.* Our lances will answer for us!"

Flabbergasted, Buck stared after them.

He didn't meet any other American on the street, and after awhile he returned to the Wolfenden home and Ellen came out and they started back to the ranch. Ellen was glowing.

"I've had such a pleasant time, Buck! I'm going to love California. People are so kind and all—it's heavenly here."

Yeah. A paradise. Only there seemed to be some sort of dirty snake in Paradise that was going to run them out.

BUCK hadn't seen the last of Don Analis.

The very next evening, after supper, the *mayordomo* came to Buck in the *sala* with word that two men had come to see him. They wished to see him outside. So Buck walked out.

At first, in the dusk, he recognized only tall, handsome Andreas Lugo, who nodded silently and worriedly. With a start, then, Buck saw that stocky Don Analis was with Lugo.

"My house is yours, *amigos,*" Buck said, in Spanish.

"We will not come in," Don Analis snapped.

And Don Lugo began, "Buck, you believe me an honest friend of yours, I think?"

"My very best friend, Don Andreas."

"Then will you listen patiently to what I have to say?"

That disturbed Buck, but he said, "Of course I will!"

Don Lugo uttered a troubled sigh, then plunged ahead. *"Amigo,* the rancheros are saying that you have gathered together on your ranch a band of imported gunmen."

"What?" Buck gasped.

"And that your *Indios blancos* ride by night. To prey upon the countryside—"

"Attacking our *vaqueros* like Walkara's Py Utes! Looting our orchards and killing our cattle," Don Analis burst out.

"Wait, Don Ana'is," Lugo begged, shushing him.

But Buck, aroused beyond patience, retorted, "That's not so. There's not one other American on Rancho San Pascual!"

"Buck, your neighbors insist that you have gathered a band of *rifleros,* hunters from over the Sierra, like Fremont's army of gunmen—like Captain Sutter's rabble in the north! That you have brought them here for loot and plunder—"

"I haven't brought any gunmen here and I'm not plunderin' anybody," Buck cut in harshly. "Blamin' *me!* When I've been takin' so damn much grief from my neighbors these last few days! I've had my storerooms looted, and my cattle slaughtered—"

"So *you* say," Don Analis snapped. "My nephew was coming from the river with mules carrying kegs of water when the *gringos* attacked him. They left him for dead. Took the mules—and loaded them with jerked meat stolen from my *paisanos.*"

"And *Senor* Nacio Gallardo," Don Lugo added, "says that the Americanos came and drove out of the *hera* the mares with which he was threshing wheat. And Don Sylvestre Pino reports that his *vaqueros* were bringing loads of *brea* from the pits to repair roofs when they saw *gringos* stealing beans and melons and sacks of wheat from his *hacienda.* And there are other such accounts. *Amigo,*" Don Lugo summed up, "it is believed that you are building a force of men here. And when the signal is given, you will move with Fremont and Sutter to seize the country."

"That just naturally ain't so," Buck said, "I've got no *gringos* on this ranch, and I've got no intention of helpin' anybody seize the country."

He put it bluntly, harshly. And just as bluntly and harshly Don Analis said, "*Senor* Harmon, you lie."

Buck looked at him. Buck started for him—

It was a rapid drum of pounding hoofs which stopped Buck in his tracks. He turned, and Lugo and Analis turned. To look toward the north, at a rider who bulked dimly in the fading twilight as his horse came galloping. Behind that rider, in the distance Buck's keen eyes made out two other horsemen who reined up in the brush.

On toward the house that first rider came as fast as his horse could travel. He

was bent over saddle horn and was holding with both hands like a man who is sorely hurt and clings desperately to a support. And then Buck recognized the man, and Don Lugo too recognized him.

"Lopez!" Buck blurted. "Francisco Lopez!"

Cra-ack! A rifle lashed fire across the dusk. And a second rifle laid a streamer of flame through the twilight. Don Lopez straightened convulsively on his horse, and pitched headlong to the ground.

Recklessly Buck ran toward him. The two *Californios* sprinted after Buck. It was a rash thing to do; for none of them carried a weapon to use if more gunfire spurted from the brush.

Buck bent over the fallen man. There was no mistaking the lank, gaunt-faced Francisco Lopez. His back was blotched with blood. Don Lugo turned him over. In Lopez's dark eyes came no recognition. His breath rasped and choked in his throat. He muttered words, as if to himself:

"I came too late, I came too late—"

Ruiz and some of the *vaqueros* came running to the scene, summoned by the roar of shots. Buck swiftly gave them orders to search the brush there to north of the corrals.

And turning to Don Lugo, Buck said, "Let's carry Lopez into the house! We can—" Then Buck desisted. For, looking at Lopez, he saw that the man had slipped beyond any earthly aid.

Buck laid his hand sympathetically on Don Lugo's arm.

But Lon Lugo shook his arm off, and looked at him for just one instant, his dark eyes blazing. Bending, then, Lugo picked up Lopez, carried his dead cousin to his horse, swung him across the saddle and stalked away, leading the horse—without another word or look to Buck.

It was Don Analis who spoke, Don Analis who paused just long enough to say, "We'll come back, *Señor.* We'll come back with enough men to drive you *gringos* into the ocean!"

BUCK had to reassure Ellen, then. He didn't explain what had happened; but with an optimism he didn't feel at all, he told her it was a trifling quarrel that would blow over in a day. He sent her to put the children to sleep—then he took rifle and pistol and slipped out into the darkness.

His *mayordomo* reported that no prowlers seemed to be lurking around the *hacienda.* Buck told Ruiz to call the riders in. To sleep, now; but to be ready at daybreak to follow the tracks of the gunmen who had shot Lopez—to be ready for battle with the raiders they might find at the end of that trail!

Himself, Buck did not sleep. He moved through the chaparral beyond the corrals like a wary ghost, peering, listening, and watching for the approach of marauders. Repeatedly he circled the *casa;* and as the hours inched past, and he saw no one and heard nothing more alarming than the yap of coyote and the liquid mourning of 'poor-wills, he angled farther and farther northward toward the hills from which Lopez' killers had come.

But the long night passed with an ominous, waiting quiet that seemed undisturbed.

At daybreak Buck headed back toward the ranchhouse. Uneasiness gnawed in his thoughts.

He was on the low ridge northwest of the *casa* when he first heard it—a spattering of musket shots, and panicky yells.

"Good God! Did those raiders slip past me?"

He started running, his pulse kicking wildly with alarm.

Down the slope, through the chaparral and to the rear of the corrals he sprinted. Then he stopped for a look-see.

Riders surrounded his ranchhouse. There was no more shooting, no more yelling. For already they had seized the place! Twenty—fifty—at least a hundred armed men Buck estimated, hopeless consternation like a throttling hand around his throat.

But those men were *not* Americans, they were *not gringo* raiders. They were *Californios,* Buck realized. They were his own neighbors. They were neighboring ranchers and their riders. Armed with muskets and lances! Don Analis had not been bluffing when he'd said he'd come back with an army. For there he was, at the front door of the *casa.* And with him, too, was Andreas Lugo.

"I can shoot 'em both out of saddle," Buck raged in the first heat of his panicky concern. "Damn 'em, I can kill a dozen of 'em 'fore they run me down!"

But that would do nobody any good.

Rifle to shoulder, finger taut against trigger, he watched, his anguished thoughts racing. Had the rancheros killed anybody? What were they going to do? Burn the *casa?* Drive off every head of stock? Where were Ellen and the children?

Don Analis was giving orders—but Andreas Lugo was right at his side, putting in a word now and then. Buck saw the *vaqueros* haul *carretas,* the clumsy wooden-wheeled carts, to the front of the house and hitch oxen to them. Then out of the house the men started bringing furniture, chests, blankets and bedding, supplies and clothes — everything that was movable! Onto the *carretas* it all was piled.

Then he saw Ellen! She came out of the *casa,* holding young Timmy by the hand—and Ellen was dressed in her traveling suit. Behind her followed Miss

Beulah, the nurse, with the baby in her arms.

"*That's* what they're doing—moving us all down to San Pedro, by God!" Buck gasped. "To put us and all our belongings on a ship that'll take us back to Boston."

Driving him and his family out of California!

As if of its own volition his rifle lined onto Don Analis. But Buck drew a taut rein on his violent feelings.

What should he do Give himself up and meekly accept this banishment?

The sun was up now, streaming warmth in a golden flood over the vast rampart of the Sierra Madre. It was light.

It was light enough to trace hoofprints in the dust.

Buck's lean face hardened with resolve. Somebody was to blame for all that had happened. Damned if he'd quit without trying to catch up with that somebody!

Unnoticed, he caught a gentle horse from the corral farthest from the house. Took saddle from the corral bars and then hefted it onto the sorrel. Then Buck moved. Not toward the house. But toward that thicket from which the two gunmen had shot Don Francisco Lopez last night.

There Buck found tracks in the dirt. Faint tracks, but legible to a mountain man.

That trail Buck set out to follow.

ALONG the base of the bluff rimming the Arroyo Seco Buck traced the hoofprints. Up onto the ridge northwest of his home spread, and into the high valley of La Canada.

The men he tracked knew Indian cunning. He lost their sign in dense greasewood and laurel clumps. But his own woods savvy was plenty keen; and he worked till he cut the trail again. Across the high valley, and into one of a myriad of canyons that serpentined back into the Sierra Madre he followed the sign.

Within that winding gorge, Buck guessed, he'd find the camp of those raiders. He rode on up the well-defined trail at a cautious pace, peering ahead through the tall scrub oak and manzanita arching over the path.

And then, abruptly, the hot still quiet of the gorge was shattered to the lashing *cra-a-ack* of a rifle report.

Buck's mount pitched headlong, dead before it hit, catapulting Buck from the saddle. He landed on his side and rolled, and sprang erect. From a clump of dense *toyon* lining the slope ahead of him lifted a writhing phantom of powder smoke. Just one swift glance Buck took, then he whirled to grab up his fallen rifle.

Again a Hawkens rifle kicked up a thunder of flouncing echoes in the narrow gorge, and lead struck steel with a ringing clang—and Buck's rifle leaped from his hands even as his fingers closed on it. He clawed for the pistol holstered at his side—and half spun around as a third bullet tore his holstered pistol right off his belt. He knew, then, that those were Americans in ambush ahead of him, with fine *gringo* rifles and fine *gringo* marksmanship. They were playing a cat-and-mouse game with him, for they could have put that first slug through his own head as easily as they had put it through his horse's.

He flung himself into the shelter of a clump of black sage—but fast as he moved, a bullet creased his ribs like the slash of a hot knife.

And then a man shouted, "Git on back, Harmon! We don't aim to kill ye less'n we got to. But come any farther, and we'll shore do it."

Swearing under his breath, Buck took swift thought.

DELIBERATELY, then, he rose to his feet. Strode out into full view.

Down the narrow V of the canyon he looked, but all he saw was sun glistening on the varnished green of chaparral.

"Who are you men?" he shouted. "What you doin' on my ranch? You know

damn well that anything you asked me for, in reason, I'd give to you. Why you come into this country like murderin' hoss thieves?"

A rifle spoke again. Buck jerked to the hot tear of the slug against his ear lobe. Lifting his hand, he felt warm blood.

"Next shot," came the yell, "will catch you smack between the eyes. Turn around. *Git!*"

And then upon Buck crashed realization that he must be close to something damned important here in the canyon. For these men in the brush who were turning him back—obviously, *they were stationed here, waiting, as guards!* Farther back in the gorge must be a camp of the band of *gringos* which Don Analis had insisted were hiding on Rancho San Pascual. But if so, *why* were they here? And just what were they up to?

Buck turned, obeying that order. Stalked away.

On out of the narrow gorge he strode, and turned down the trail to his ranch.

But as soon as he judged that he was out of sight of those guards in the canyon, he dived into the brush beside the trail. In his mind was some intention of stealing back into that gorge—

But even as he jumped, rifles roared out behind him. The guards had followed. A slug creased his throat and another bullet tore through the fleshy part of his left forearm. He hit the ground hard, rolled under a clump of *romero* and lay still.

"Got 'im!"

"Maybe. Let's make sure."

Buck heard them coming then. Two men, coming with guns in their hands, and he had only the knife at his belt.

He waited, his pulse thudding hard. Cautiously the two men hunted through the chaparral for him. One of them was headed his way. Buck pulled his knife from belt, and waited—taut, hardly breathing. First move he made that they could see would bring bullets smashing into his body.

On that man came. Straight toward him. Buck slowly lifted his knife.

The man was a lean, lank tow-head with the scrawny neck of a Pike County Missourian. Rifle at ready, he peered before him into the brush. Abruptly he saw Buck. His rifle snapped to shoulder—but Buck's arm lashed forward. The knife was a blur of steel through the air. Squarely to the trapper's forehead the knife struck, with its blunt end, felling the man senseless in his tracks. Buck lunged for him, and seized the rifle and the .45 at his belt.

"Joe!" the other guard called. "You see Harmon?"

Buck raised right up into plain view, the rifle in his arms.

That other guard saw him. Both fired. But Buck's spoke a split-second quicker, and Buck's bullet smashed into the man's shoulder while the latter's slug hissed past Buck's head. Reeling back, the man fell; and instantly Buck was on top of him, pistol leveled, and the man yelled quits.

"Don't shoot, you got me!"

With the *reata* from his saddle Buck hogtied both men. He put a rough bandage on the hurt fellow's shoulder. Buck's own arm bled freely, and he bound it tightly with strips of his own shirt.

Armed with rifle and pistol, Buck then stepped out onto the trail. Not back to the ranch, but on up into the canyon he started. The two gunmen had been guarding something. Just what that something was, Buck intended to find out.

TWO THE very summit of the gorge Buck followed the trail—and found nothing. But the footpath switchbacked up out of the canyon, over a hump into the deep, winding gorge out of which flowed the creek that watered Rancho San Pascual—the stream which had dried up so mysteriously.

There on the ridge, Buck peered through a screen of sugar-bush into the canyon below. He could see nobody, but it seemed

to him that the sun-drenched quiet held a low murmur, a tremor of distant voices, of *many* voices. Nerves drawing taut, he started down the trail into the wooded gulch.

"Say, what in—? That looks like water below!"

Through the trees it seemed to him that he saw a *pool* on the bottom of the winding valley. A lake! Which was impossible, for the creek had dried up. Stopped running, at least.

"So help me, it *is* a lake!"

Nearing the valley floor, he saw that here was a deep, narrow body of water where formerly there had been only a tiny creek that leaped and shouted down stair-stepping boulders in bombs of spray. And as he came around the first bend of the winding gorge, he saw the reason why—*that creek had been damned up.*

"Now why in blazes should anybody have done that?"

Down through the chaparral he stole, to the dam. It was built of logs and earth and rock—newly-cut logs, newly-shoveled earth. Moreover, he found a flume. The impounded water was flowing out of the lake through a Vee-shaped runway of wood, built on stilts, that slanted on down the canyon.

And on down-canyon Buck followed that flume.

Striding along then, Buck heard voices. He heard many voices and he heard them plainly. He heard the sharp thud of axes biting into wood. He heard the metallic clink of tools against rock. He heard a shout of anger, a yell of derision, guffaws; and the rumble and beat of many men at work.

Ahead of Buck was a bend in the canyon, and beyond it the narrow gorge widened out somewhat, leaving a flat terrace where the creek had formed a wide, shallow pool.

And as Buck came around the bend, he saw men busy on the canyon floor. So many men that he froze in his tracks to stare, thunderstruck. Scores of men, forty—sixty—seventy-odd men here in the gorge! And every last one of them was an American like himself.

The nearer side of the canyon was lined with brush lean-tos, with crude wickiups of buffalo and elk hide, even with caves dug into the bank and covered by a blanket. And farther down-canyon mules were tethered out in the brush—a hundred of them, Buck guessed.

"But what in the world are those hombres workin' so damn hard at?" he wondered, flabbergasted.

He watched them, his astounded surprise deepening. So many men could have come into the district unnoticed only by the most careful secrecy. But why should they have been so secret about it? They had dammed the creek back, he realized as he watched, so that they could work in the very bed of the stream. Every man in camp was toiling in a feverish sweat, now, in the sand and rock which had been covered by the pool. They were shoveling the stuff into long wooden troughs. Into these troughs they led a flow of water from that flume. It was damned odd! They put sand and rock into the troughs—and the water washed that sand and rock right out. Were these men loco? Some of them shoveled dirt into boxes on rockers, then grabbed a long handle and rocked the box like a nurse crooning a colicky baby to sleep. Of all the queer shenanigans!

"Maybe if I got closer I could make sense of what they're doin'," he reflected. And maybe if he got closer he'd catch a dozen bullets into his skin!

THROUGH the brush he crawled, stomaching along with the shadowy stealth of a raiding Apache. Nearing the men, he recognized some of them. Moun-

tain men he'd met at the great fur rendezvous before beaver got scarce and beaver hats went out of style. There was lanky, pockfaced Nig Baynes, a trapper from Georgia. Andy Jarrow, a chunky Missourian who was pure hell in an Injun scrape. Toby Mahan, who could find *beaucoup* beaver where everybody else said none was left. Chip Basie, with Pawnee blood in his veins, who once had helped Buck escape from a war party of Cheyenne, in South Pass. A dozen others Buck recognized—mountain men, old he-coons who could make 'em come with the best! And here they were in a hidden canyon of the Sierra Madre, digging in a creek bed!"*

SUDDENLY a shout arose from men bent over one of the wooden troughs.

A sort of pandemonium seized the whole outfit. Men all over the diggings dropped their shovels and left their wooden troughs and came crowding around the men who'd let out that wild yawp. Buck crawled through the brush and got closer.

"Look at the riffles. Thick with dust!"

"Nuggets big as elk teeth, so help me!"

And then Buck understood.

It was gold which these men were digging from the creek bottom. *Gold.* And gold was the answer to all the hidden activity, the shooting and the raiding. Gold was the reason Don Francisco Lopez had been so loco-wild to buy Rancho San Pascual.

"Somehow, these men found out there was gold here," Buck reasoned. "They passed the word along to their friends, and by twos and threes they coyoted in here. Likely they realized the *Californio* authorities wouldn't allow foreigners to mine here. Not without payin' a big tax, at least. Besides, this land is private property. *My* land. They must've figured the owner would kick 'em off. That's why they've kept it all so secret. And that's why Lopez was so crazy to buy the ranch from me. *He knew about this gold!* So he rode in here yesterday, and rode smack into these hombres. He turned and high-tailed it, but they followed and killed 'im 'fore he could spill the secret."

Buck's deep chest lifted to a long, shaky breath.

Gold. On his own ranch.

"Sure," Buck murmured through clenched teeth, "I find gold on my ranch *—just when my neighbors are driving me off of it!"*

BUCK racked his brains. What should he do? Lone-handed, he couldn't drive these gold-thieving raiders off his ranch.

And then, excitement swooped into the canyon as a stocky American on a huge bay horse came pounding up into the gorge from below. His left arm was covered with blood. At his shout, men left their sluice boxes and rockers and came running toward him.

"Trouble, men!" he yelled. "The Spaniards are wise to us."

"What's up, Baylor?"

"What's happened to you? Where's Carney?"

"We rode smack into a big bunch of *vaqueros*. They caught us, and a snake-smart hombre name of Don Analis started askin' us questions. I shut up, but Carney—they used some Injun torture on 'im, and he broke down and told all about us!"

*In case it seems strange that Buck did not realize at once that these men were placer-mining for gold, it should be pointed out that this is the year 1843. So far only one gold strike has been made in the country—in Georgia, in 1839. The gold discovery which is generally thought of as the first finding of gold in the United States is usually that of Marshall's find at Sutter's Mill in 1848. Actually, Don Francisco Lopez found gold *first* in California—in March, 1842, in one of the canyons of the San Francisquito Rancho, some forty miles northwest of Los Angeles. Moreover, in the very next year, Lopez found gold again at San Feliciano. What's more, a third discovery of gold was made in 1843 (by Mariano Lopez, this time), near Santa Ines Mission in Santa Barbara County. From the first discovery spot (named Placerito) some Mexican *gambusinos* took 212 pounds avoirdupois of gold. A man named Salazar went to the San Feliciano mines in the latter part of 1843 and he himself took out $42,000 worth of nuggets. So Buck Harmon had never even heard of placer mining and knew nothing of its processes.

"He didn't tell we're in here diggin'—"

"He sure as hell did!"

"Then those Spaniards'll be comin' in here after us!"

"Will be comin'—hell," Baylor grunted, "they're on their way in here now! Nigh onto a hund'rd'n fifty of 'em. I got away while they was palaverin' on how to jump us. Ride down to the mouth of this gulch and you'll see the dust their hosses're kickin' up."

For a minute there was confusion and some panic among the miners. But older, shrewder men among them roared out commands and brought order out of incipient rout.

"Let the Spaniards come! We'll fix a trap for 'em!"

Quickly Nig Baynes and Andy Jarrow and Toby Mahan hatched their plans. Buck crawled through the sumac brush until he was almost above them, to overhear their talk. And as he listened, consternation knotted cold and sick within him. For the trap they were planning would be a deadly one.

Here, where the miners were washing gold out of the creek sands, the canyon widened in a bulge. But on below, the gorge narrowed and turned, like the thin down-curving neck of a fat goose. And down below in the gooseneck, the trap would be set. The *gringo* raiders had kegs of powder. They would set two charges. As the *Californios* came charging hellity-larrup up the narrow Notch below, one blast of powder would close the gorge *behind* them—then a second blast would avalanche the Notch shut in *front* of the Spaniards, who would thereby be locked into a narrow slot walled by cliffs.

"Like wasps caught in the neck of a gourd!" Mahan crowed.

"And meantime," Andy Jarrow said, "we'll be climbing up onto the rimrock above the canyon—"

"Hell, from there we can massacre them Spaniards with rocks!"

"Yeah, likely they'll be jammed together in the Notch and be cold meat for our rifles. We'll rub out every last one of 'em!"

"That'll serve notice on the whole damn country to leave us be! Come on. Nig Baynes, and you, Chip—you fix the blast at the lower end of the Notch. Me n Andy will blow the high end of the Notch closed. Rest of you head for the rimrock above!"

They took more time, then, to select a half dozen riders to go down-canyon. They were to let themselves be seen by the advancing *Californios*—and then flee away ahead of them and lure the Spaniards into the Notch below at a headlong run.

Buck, hearing all this, foresaw that the plan would work with the infallible certainty of a wolverine deadfall.

Among the brush lean-tos below Buck was a makeshift wickiup of buffalo robes. Nig Baynes and Chip Basie entered it and came out with a keg of gunpowder each. Chip handed his over to Toby Mahan. At a dogtrot they headed for the gooseneck Notch below the diggings.

THE other miners got ready for the battle ahead. Frantically they worked to clean up their sluice boxes of gold dust and nuggets caught behind the riffles, each man stowing his own gleanings of wealth into the safety of his own leather poke. As if, Buck reflected wryly, they knew too much about each other to leave any gold lying around. Those who finished, ran to the lean-tos to seize up rifles and drive home fresh charges.

"Don't just squat here like a rabbit mesmerized by a sidewinder!" Buck railed at himself. "Do something. You got to!"

Impulsively he started down the steep slope to the flat streambed of the diggings below.

Just what he could do, he had no idea; but something, *anything*, he must do to prevent a slaughter of the *Californios* who would come galloping up the gooseneck Notch below with the heed-

less, unsuspecting dash and foofaraw so characteristic of them.

The canyon wall got steeper the lower he went. The last fifteen feet of it was straight up and down; some places, in fact, had been undercut into caverns by the creek before it had been damned back. Buck had to drop the last five yards. He landed jarringly behind the clustered lean-tos.

And then he heard hoofbeats. Heard a drumming pound of hoofs that clattered in racing thunder.

Yells rose up.

"They're comin'!"

"Finish up here, quick!"

Through Buck's anguished mind flashed a vivid picture of what was happening. Up the gooseneck Notch below the diggings a half dozen of the raiders were fleeing ahead of the avenging *Californios!* Luring the *Californios* into a deadfall.

I got to do something—now! Buck realized. *In a matter of half-minutes it would be too late.*

And then Buck heard a man gasp out an oath, right behind him.

"Buck Harmon, or I'm a horny toad! Sa-a-y—"

Buck whirled, recognized the trapper. Tip Neely. Buck lunged at him, and then struck with his pistol barrel; but the wiry mountaineer dodged—and then something crashed to Buck's head, from behind, like the fall of a ton of rimrock, and Buck hit the ground face-down.

"Shall I hogtie 'im, Andy? It's Buck Harmon."

"Naw, let 'im lie, Tip. Just take his gun'n come on. Toby sent me for some more powder."

LASHING their horses right and left, the half-dozen miners came pounding up the gooseneck Notch below the diggings, their lathered horses flecking foam from their muzzles, manes whipping as they stretched out belly low to the ground. The miners rode like men panicked with fear—and behind them, stretched out in a long column in the narrow Gap, pursued the *Californios.*

They rode splendid horses, and they made a gaudy show in their velvet jackets and leathers *cueras,* their neckerchiefs and sashes, lances held aloft and pennants fluttering—they made a dashing, gallant picture in contrast to the buckskin-garbed *gringos* they chased. Some of the *vaqueros* fired their muskets at the fleeing men ahead, but their slugs went wide. The *Californios* didn't count much on bullets; it was the headlong charge with their lances leveled that they relied upon.

On up the gooseneck Notch the six trappers galloped—on into the wider canyon bulge of the diggings.

And then, in the Notch, behind the *Californios,* an explosion shattered the hot quiet of the afternoon. Earth, rocks, brush and shattered scrub oak and manzanita ballooned skyward with a roaring concussion that knocked the rearmost man from his saddle.

For a moment there was confusion in the ranks. *Vaqueros* reined up in panic. But Don Analis and Andreas Lugo and *Señor* Gallardo shouted commands, and the momentary rout was swiftly ironed out and the column spurred on again after the six miners who had vanished around the bend ahead of them into the wider gorge above.

Abruptly, in front of the *Californios,* a second explosion flung a black cloud of earth and rock skyward, rearing up a barrier of fire and smoke and bursting granite before the hard-riding *vaqueros.* The forefront of the column was struck by a rush of concussion like an invisible tidal wave that flattened men and horses to the ground. And down upon them rained debris—and there ahead of them the rimrock of the narrow gap avalanched in a grinding, dust-palled slide that blocked the way ahead like a steel gate clanging shut.

Confusion fell like a thunderclap on the *Californios.*

"Valgame Dios!" Don Analis swore. "It's a trap, Don Lugo. We can neither go forward nor back."

"Dismount! We'll climb over the rocks," Lugo shouted.

And onto the dust-smoking barricade of debris blocking the way to the diggings, Don Lugo led a charge.

But from the top of that rock fall, a dozen rifles blasted a volley. Trappers' rifles, fired with trappers' precision. Don Lugo reeled and fell. Beside him *Senor* Gallardo slumped to the ground. *Vaqueros* climbing the rock slide pitched headlong and rolled back off the high-heaped slant of debris. Under that volley of bullets the *Californios'* rush stopped in its tracks.

Don Analis, swearing in panic, yelled for his men to find cover. *"Nombre de Dios!* We are caught—trapped! Find shelter, men. *Pronto!"*

Again the rifles spoke from the rampart of fallen rock, and every bullet found its mark.

BUCK never saw the man who had struck him down from behind. Coming to his senses, he lurched groggily to his feet. Feeling for his pistol, he realized it was gone. He was unarmed.

It was then that he heard the first blast in the Notch below. The *Californios* were already in the trap. Something like utter, helpless panic gripped Buck.

In front of him was that robe wickiup. Impulsively Buck darted into it. Coming out then, he dodged into the brush lining the camp, and started up-canyon.

Looking back over his shoulder, he saw that the miners were starting to leave the diggings now, also starting up-canyon at a run. To climb to the rimrock above so's to shoot down at the *Californios* caught in the Notch!

Buck eased the burden he carried higher under his arm, and started sprinting his level best. He made no more effort to keep under cover, but ran alongside the wooden flume leading to the miners' dam up ahead. Around the bend, where the canyon narrowed again, Buck ran—and there before him loomed the dam of earth and rock and logs.

A path to the rim slanted up the face of the dam and zigzagged up the west slope. Up this path those following miners would swarm.

Buck flung himself up the pathway, but below the top of the dam he stopped. Bending, he tore and clawed at its face with his hands, scooping out rock and earth. He made a hole in the front of the dam, and into this hole he shoved that keg of gunpowder he had taken from the wickiup of buffalo robes. Swiftly he affixed a length of fuse to the keg.

"Hey! Look—up on the dam!"

"That's Buck Harmon! What in blazes—?"

"Get 'im! Drop 'im off'a there."

A rifle lashed out, and a slug thudded into the dirt, kicking dust into Buck's face.

Working swiftly, he split the powder fuse end, and with flint and steel showered sparks onto the split fuse. It caught, it hissed and sputtered into deadly life.

Then Buck lunged to the top of the dam, and ran for his life to the canyon wall and on up the path to the top. A rifle bullet hissed past his ear, and another slashed through his sleeve—as behind him a cannonading blast tore that dam apart, shattered its loose matrix of rock and dirt and logs and spewed them skyward in a thunderous eruption. Concussion knocked Buck sprawling into the brush.

Through the ragged V torn out of the dam, the long-pent water poured in an arching flood, behind it all the weight and pressure of a long, deep lake. By its resistless force it burst outward the rest of the dam, opening sections like gates torn off their hinges, and thereby freeing the full volume of water. Out it poured, in a towering wall of foaming destruction.

The miners running to climb out of the

canyon saw that water looming over onto them like a glacier turned suddenly liquid. They turned, fled back the way they had come.

But that wall of water engulfed them, and whirled them away down-canyon, shouting and helpless in its grip. A liquid avalanche, it roared around the bend onto the wide bulge of canyon holding the diggings—and over lean-tos and wickiups that foaming wall swept. Sluice boxes and tom-rockers it smashed into useless kindling. Over the entire placer diggings the water swirled, bringing up with a crash against that barrier of rock debris which blocked the upper end of the Notch.

And in that sudden maelstrom of heaving water, the placer miners struggled to keep afloat.

Of them all, only the dozen men on top of the rock fall blocking the Notch, who had been shooting at the *Californios,* were not caught by the flood. Some of the miners clung to wreckage of their sluice boxes. Some, who were strong swimmers, upheld others who were not. Some reached the canyon walls, and got hold of rock projections and bushes and clung, holding their heads out of water. The walls were so steep that only two or three were able to haul themselves out of the water.

They shouted for help.

The dozen miners on the rock pile who had been shooting at the *Californios,* climbed down to help their partners. The debris slid under their feet, and several of them plunged into the water. They had no ropes to work with. They were too few to do much good.

From the canyon rim, Buck shouted down to them, "Ain't a dozen of you fellows left to fight! Rest of you have lost your guns and your powder's wet and you're goin' to drown if you don't get help almighty soon. You willin' to call it quits?"

"Go to hell!" a miner shouted back.

"Don Lugo," Buck called to the *Californios* in the Notch. "Bring your *vaqueros* up over that rock pile. These *gringo* gold thieves are helpless."

"Hold on, Harmon," Nig Baynes cried. "Don't let them Spaniards massacre us!"

"They can rub out the lot of you just by throwin' rocks," Buck warned. "Or they can haul the lot of you out of that water with their *reatas.* It's up to you! What do you want?"

"Haul us out of here with them ropes," Mahan shouted.

"Sure!" Buck answered. "If you give up. Give me your word it's quits, and I'll tell my friends to haul you men out. Either you surrender, or we leave you weighted down with rocks at the bottom of this pond. What d'you say?"

"What in hell can we say?" Mahan shouted back. "We're licked. We give up!"

THE *Californios* outnumbered the miners two to one anyhow; so there wasn't much the miners could do if they had been of a mind to resist. With the aid of rawhide ropes they were hauled out of the water, a few at a time, and hog-tied. Some six or seven of the placer thieves had drowned.

Of the *Californios,* a dozen had been killed by bullets, and as many more were wounded. Don Lugo had a leg broken by a slug. *Senor* Gallardo was dead. Buck worked with Don Analis to put rough bandages on all, miner or *vaquero,* who were hurt.

And that evening, up on the rim of the canyon, a powwow was held around a huge campfire.

What was to be done with the gold-hungry raiders? That was the *Californios'* problem.

Don Emilio Vargas, a white-haired ex-army officer, was for shooting the whole crowd of *gringos* as a warning to others to stay out of California.

"But Americans like *Senor* Buck Harmon," Don Lugo put in quietly, "who come not to steal but to live among us in

peace—and who will fight to preserve that peace—such *hidalgo-Americanos* we want in California!"

So Don Analis proposed, "Let's put these thieves on a ship and send them to prison at San Blas."

"Let's put them on a ship, all right," Buck spoke up, "but send them back to Boston. To their own country."

That aroused a storm of protest.

But Don Lugo insisted, "We owe consideration to whatever Don Harmon proposes. It is *his* gold these thieves were stealing. Moreover, but for him, most of us would be dead men now."

"But, Don Harmon," Analis asked worriedly, "if we merely send these *ladrones* home, what's to prevent them from coming back into California? To steal your gold again, to steal our cattle and horses?"

Buck stood up, tall and severe in the firelight, his strong face resolved.

Gravely he asked, "*Amigos,* if I promise that I will arrange matters so that these men will not return to California, will you put them aboard a Boston ship in San Pedro harbor?"

There was some hesitancy. Then Don Lugo staunchly agreed, others chimed in, and presently the whole group assented.

"I'll need till morning to make my plans ready," Buck said then. "But I promise you, when I finish, these men'll have no reason to filter back into California."

During the night, Buck sent riders to his ranch, to San Gabriel, to Los Angeles. All night he worked.

And in the morning, again he faced the *Californios.*

"*Amigos,* you are afraid that if we send these miners on a ship to Boston, they'll come back here. But I say that even if we lined them all up and shoot them, that wouldn't save us from *other* raiders who'd slip into California when the rumor of gold hit them on the far side of the Sierra. It's gold which brought these poverty-poor trappers and ship-deserters into this country—and as long as there's hope of gold in California the wanderin men will come huntin' it as sure as a dead ox will lure a hundred buzzards into a sky that's seemed absolutely bare of wings.

"What I want to say is — gold ain't riches. Gold is just the means of gettin' riches. What does a man want money for? For security. For peace and quiet and meat and bread and a warm sun and clear air, and for livin' among men he likes who like him. It's to get all those things that hombres want money. Well, here in California, we've got such riches. Our worry is *how to keep 'em.*

"That's why, *amigos,* I'm goin' to fix it so that these gold-huntin' thieves won t want to come back to California.

"What I'm goin' to do may seem kind of drastic. But it's not, if it'll keep California a land where no man has to lock a door, a land where there's beef and frijoles enough for every hombre, a land of big distances and friendly ranches where every guest is welcome and finds a pile of coins on a bedroom mantelpiece from which to help himself, a land where there's no crowding and no rushing, and where nobody's big-rich and nobody ever lacks for a horse or a 'dobe house. That's the kind of a country California is now, and that's the kind of a country we're goin' to keep it! That's why I'm doing this—"

He raised his hand, and waved in signal. The camp was on the flat above the canyon, above the placer diggings.

AT BUCK'S signal, *vaqueros* lit powder fuses. The kegs of powder which Buck had sent for during the night, and had put in place in the canyon walls, exploded with a roar and shock that rocked the countryside like some disastrous *temblor.* The rimrock heaved and crumpled in an eruption of dust and smoke—and the walls of the canyon slumped, demolished in slides of decomposed granite that avalanched into the gorge, one after the other, filling the lake, covering the placer diggings, burying the gold deposits under

half a mountain of rock, locking them away under depths of debris forever impenetrable to mere pick and shovel.

And when the shaking had eased out of the ground under their feet, when the last lingering echo subsided and the dust cleared out of the sun-drenched air, Buck spoke again. Solemnly, his strong voice ringing with earnestness, he said, "There'll be no mucking and fighting and killing for gold in California!"

"Si mis afectos recibes
No me repondas que no.
Sere quanto tu quiseres,
*Porque me mueor si no."**

On Rancho San Pascual, a *fandango* was in progress.

Buck's *vaqueros* had built an arbor, with seats around the walls—seats that were crowded, this balmy evening, with rancheros and their *senoras* and their young ones. Violin and guitar players furnished gay music to which a couple were dancing a spirited *fandango* figure, the man singing out the *bomba*. Don Analis was here as master of ceremonies; and with him had come portly *Señora* Verdugo and her comely daughters. Various branches of the Gallardo clan were here, and of the Garfias and Pino and Alvarado families, and the Sanchez and the De la Guerra y Noriega groups.

Andreas Lugo, sitting with his mending leg propped up, whispered to Buck, who stood beside him, watching the dancing.

"This time, *amigo,* all the rancheros you invite—they come, no?"

Buck nodded, smiling. Tomorrow, he was thinking, he would send to each ranchero his share of the money coming him from the sale of those stolen horses and mules which Buck and Don Lugo had recovered from thieves and sold in Santa Fe, such long, eventful weeks ago.

"Buck," Don Lugo spoke on, "I have found out what brought my cousin, Don Francisco, back to my *hacienda*. It seems that he learned about the gold placers on Rancho San Pascual some years ago. In fact, he himself stole a large amount of gold from the canyon, and fled to Mexico City with it—that was when he promised me that he would never return. But he spent his money, and got into debt in Mexico City. In debt to an army officer. He brought the hombre back here. The reason he wished to buy your ranch, of course, was to get hold of the placers." Don Lugo shrugged moodily. "But he came, as he himself said, *too late.*"

"Yeah, and any other gold-hunters prowlin' into California will have come too late," Buck said tranquilly.

There was a stir among the dancers, a cry of alarm, and the music abruptly ceased. In the earth under his feet Buck felt a jar and tremor. But almost at once it was over, gone; just the hint of a *temblor*. The music quickly resumed, and the dancing went on with a gayety oblivious of any threat.

Buck walked around the arbor, to join Ellen near the muscians. She slipped her arm through his. Her lovely eyes shining, she whispered for him to come with her—over to a long table standing to one side.

On the table were arrayed gifts which the guests had brought for the family of Don Harmon. Many gifts, among them finely woven Indian blankets, rare glassware from Guadalajara, a great silver-mounted saddle and bridle, priceless old lace made by Indian women of the missions, a gorgeous *mantilla* for Ellen.

Impulsively Ellen hugged Buck's arm.

"I feel that we really belong now, Buck! They've taken us to their hearts."

Buck nodded soberly. "Uh-huh. Rancho San Pasqual is our home, and here we'll stay. This is one time," he said, suddenly smiling down at her, "when instead of the humans bein' driven out of Paradise, *they chased out the snake!*"

* One of the *bombas* spoken in the *fandango*:
"If you accept my homage,
Do not answer me with 'no.'
I will be whatever you wish,
For else I must die."

Doc Pain Might Be a Horse Doctor—But the Sheriff Thought a Powerful Lot of His Opinion

GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER

By HOMER KING GORDON

Author of "Trail Marks," "Shotgun Decision," etc.

WINDY GATES had just finished trimming what remained of Doc Pain's hair when Sheriff Rink drove up in his old automobile to the curb outside the barber shop.

"Oh boy, there's the sheriff! Hope he's not after me," Windy whispered. "Doc, you been up to anything."

"Nothing except minding my own business," Doc said shortly.

"I bet something's happened. I wonder what now," Windy speculated eagerly.

"It's nothing very important or else it's mighty recent or you'd know," Doc declared, giving Windy a quarter.

"Thanks Doc. Bet I would at that," Windy agreed cheerfully.

When Doc went out the sheriff motioned for him to get in the car. They were life long friends. On a couple occasions Doc had helped the sheriff solve

murder mysteries, but he had no desire to make hunting down murderers or criminals a habit.

"Somebody got a horse they want destroyed or something?" he asked.

FOR years Kelcy Cotton Pain had been Farmington's veterinarian, although on occasions through necessity, and because he had once studied medicine, he had treated the owners of his animal patients as well, even if in defiance of the law, and Doctor Findaly, the county coroner who had no use for Doc at all.

The sheriff started his car and drove away from the curb heading back to Doc's home and office and the old barn he had converted into an animal hospital.

"Sarah said I'd find you over at the barber shop," he remarked.

Sarah Weems was Doc's housekeeper, self appointed secretary and acid tongued spinister critic.

"She also said if there had been any more murders around Farmington to solve them myself and leave you alone," the sheriff chuckled.

"Well, I hope there hasn't been," Doc observed soberly.

"Doc, damned if I know," the sheriff exclaimed. "I got a hunch there has been and my hands are absolutely tied. You'll understand why when I explain."

He drove into the barnyard back of Doc' rambling old house, and both men went into Doc's barn office.

"Who's dead you think might have been killed?" Doc asked.

"Hump Mason."

Doc crammed a chew of fine cut in his mouth and stared at Sheriff Rink incredulously.

"Why, he's been dead and buried a week. I went to the funeral myself. I've known Hump and Tressie as long as I can remember. He wasn't worth his weight in manure and I wouldn't blame anyone much for killing him, but I didn't think there was any question about how he died. Wasn't Findaly, his doctor, there when he died?"

The sheriff nodded.

"He treated him for two days before he died and signed the death certificate cerebral hemorrhage, and he sticks to that."

"While I haven't any more use for that old fuss budget than he has for me, he ought to know cerebral hemorrhage when he sees it," Doc declared. "What makes you think otherwise?"

"Byron Bradson was the undertaker who had the funeral. A couple days ago he had quite a talk with me. It seems when he was preparing the body he found a little hole in the back of Hump's head right at the base of the brain. Said it was mighty small, but what made him notice it particularly was that it was sort of waxed."

Doc grunted skeptically.

"Why didn't he tell Findaly immediately?"

"He did," the sheriff replied. "Findaly looked at the hole. Said it was insignificant. Hump threshed around in bed a lot before he died and Findaly said he might of hit his head on something then. Anyway Findaly as much as told Bradson to mind his business and he would continue to be perfectly capable to write death certificates for his patients."

"If that's all I'd say Bradson was letting his imagination run away with him, too," Doc commented.

"It was evidently pretty much on his mind when he talked to me," the sheriff said. "I spoke to Findaly and he suggested I take something for my liver."

"So you got mad and being as stubborn as a Jeffersonian democrat you commenced to poke around. What'd you find out?"

"First, that a couple days or so before Hump had this stroke, he bought a railroad ticket for California but he went over to Panis to buy it."

"He went over there often enough to get drunk. Musta been lucky in a crap

game over there to have enough money for that though," Doc observed.

"Also when he was over there he flashed a roll so big he could hardly get it in his pocket and he boasted there was plenty more where that came from," the sheriff continued.

"I thought the bank had already served a foreclosure notice on the Mason farm," Doc said thoughtfully.

"The bank has, but furthermore, I found out Hump had quietly started to make arrangements to send Tressie to the poor farm."

Doc emptied his jowls in a sawdust-filled box beside his desk.

"When old man Mason died he left the farm and all he had to Hump and Tressie between them, share and share alike. Tressie stayed home, never married but took care of Hump, and then watched him drink up and gamble away all they were left. Then mortgage the farm and run through with that money. If you're trying to hint that Tressie might have killed him, I'd say she was perfectly justified but shoulda done it a long time ago," Doc said grimly.

"I ain't saying that or anything," the sheriff retorted. "I'm asking where did he get a lot of money all of a sudden, where did it go when he died, why this California business, and just how did he die anyway? They've got a hired man out there that hates him, I've heard. I ain't accusing anyone. I haven't enough information to order the body exhumed and an autopsy, and I'd be scared to death to dare do a thing like that even if I had the authority. Can't you see with Findaly taking the stand he has, my hands are completely tied?"

"In other words, you've got too much sense to stick your neck out and risk having your head cut off, and you think I haven't," Doc commented.

"I think it's my duty to have the thing investigated, anyway I can get it done," the sheriff said stubbornly. "I'm not counting on too much help from you."

"Why don't you talk to Tressie?" Doc suggested.

"Talk," the sheriff snorted. "I yelled myself hoarse. She had that grafaphone horn or whatever it is she carries around stuck in her ear but even when I stuck my head down that and yelled I couldn't make her understand much of anything."

"Did you talk to the hired hand?"

"Yes. His name's Henry Fink or Henry something or another. All the information I got was from him. That wasn't much."

"You might as well tell me," Doc grunted. "I reckon I'm hooked."

"He's been working for Hump for about a year. Sleeps out in that old cabin behind the house but of course he eats in the house. According to Henry, Hump got home about midnight. Said he figured Hump was drunk because he scraped a fender when he drove into the garage. Henry didn't get up but he heard Hump go into the house."

"Hump slept downstairs, didn't he?" Doc asked. "I've been out there and in the house dozens of times."

"And Tressie slept upstairs," the sheriff agreed. "I did manage to get her to tell me she didn't hear Hump come home and didn't know when he got home."

"Who found him?"

"When the hired hand came in to build a fire in the kitchen range just about daylight, he heard Hump groaning. He went in and found Hump bleeding at the nose and mouth and ears, and then pounded on the floor to get Tressie downstairs. She had him call Findaly. Two days later Hump died. He was never conscious."

"I'll go out and talk to Tressie," Doc promised. "I never had much trouble making her hear and if she knows anything I think she'll tell me."

"In the meantime Doc——"

"Sure. Don't say anything that would involve you," Doc scoffed.

"I want to see justice done," the sheriff protested. "But you can see my position."

"Sure. You want some one else to do

the dirty work for you," Doc accused. "Well, get to hell out of here now. I'm busy and sore and if I find out anything I'll know where to find you."

"At the jail," the sheriff grinned.

"That's where you ought to be. In it," Doc growled.

IT WAS late in the afternoon and Doc had no calls to make so he puttered around the barn and office, thinking over what Sheriff Rink had told him until Sarah came out on the back porch and bagged the metal triangle hanging there to call him to supper.

Sarah was in her later days, a thin waspish woman who used her tongue to offset any display of sympathetic human kindness.

"What did Sheriff Rink want?" she demanded after Doc had washed up at the kitchen sink and had settled down at the table and commenced eating.

"We talked about a quarantine the state has been talking about putting on feeding steers," Doc said vaguely.

Sarah sniffed suspiciously.

"He acted like it was more important than that."

"Rink likes to act important," Doc said calmly. "What's this I hear about Tressie Mason going to the poor farm?"

"That poor sick old soul. Whoever told you that, Kelcy Pain?" Sarah demanded.

"Well, I hear the bank has foreclosed," Doc remarked.

"Why, she wouldn't live a year in that place," Sarah said indignantly.

"I didn't know she was in such poor health," Doc said. "Is she really sick?"

"Is she sick," Sarah compressed her thin lips. "If you only knew how sick she is."

Doc filled his plate.

"What's the matter with her?"

Talking about Tressie to Sarah had been more or less a shot in the dark but he knew they were both Methodists, and about the same age and he had long ceased to marvel at the quantity and sources of information Sarah had stored up when he could betray her into talking.

Sarah pressed her lips more firmly together.

"Why don't you ask Doctor Findaly? He's her doctor. And besides, what business is it of yours, anyway?"

"None I guess," Doc admitted.

He realized that Sarah had finished giving out information about Tressie Mason and was wise enough not to excite her curiosity by appearing at all interested. The situation was delicate enough without enlisting the attention of Sarah's sewing club members.

However he was interested and much as he disliked Doctor Findaly, he thought his interest was important enough to visit Findaly's office later that night.

Findaly was alone when Doc walked into the reception room.

"Well," he said, "this is a surprise. Are you sick?"

Findaly, small, foppish and precise in dress and manner was the direct opposite in appearance to Doc Pain who wore an old vest medaled with composite stains and had no concern about where his stomach had slipped as long as it remained full.

"Never felt better in my life," Doc declared. "But this call is business, not social."

"Good," Findaly snapped. "What business and whose business?"

"What's wrong with Tressie Mason?" Doc asked bluntly.

Findaly glared at him.

"I thought you claimed to have enough background of medicine to realize that no reputable physician would be unethical enough to answer such a question," he said frigidly.

"Baloney," Doc growled. "We might say this is one doctor to another even if I am a horse doctor. The bank is foreclosing on the Mason farm and I've heard she's going to be sent to the poor farm. If she's as sick as I've heard she was, I'm

unethical enough to see that some other arrangements are made. To hell with ethics when its a question of humanity."

Doctor Findaly flushed and chewed at his lips.

"You might have explained that in the first place," he said stiffly.

"Well, I haven't wasted much time," Doc observed. "What's the answer?"

Findaly went into an inner office and brought back a card which he studied pompously. That he was dramatizing his concession to answer the question amused Doc considerably; however, he kept his face straight.

"I consider her condition definitely incurable," Findaly announced. "If operative, it would be extremely dangerous and probably not constructive."

"How long?" Doc asked.

"A year at the most. Probably six months," Findaly declared. "That, of course, I have not expressed before either to her or anyone else."

"Well, I'm not broadcasting it either. Don't worry," Doc said. "But much obliged for the information."

THE following day was Sunday. Doc knew enough about Tressie Mason's habits to time his visit out to the old Mason farm at the exact hour which suited his purposes.

It was about ten o'clock when he drove up in front of the weatherbeaten old farm house and parked his car. When he knocked on the front door no one answered, so he went around to the kitchen door, and knocked there. When no one answered he went out into the barnyard and looked into the garage. The car was gone.

Tressie always went to Sunday school and church. Since Hump was not there to take her, evidently the hired man had driven the car over to the country church which she attended.

Just to be sure, Doc knocked on the kitchen door again, but he did not wait long before pushing it open and walking in.

The house, as Doc had expected, was deserted, although a fire was burning in the kitchen range and there were pots of food cooking slowly.

Back by the warming closet were a couple tin cups. One was filled with sealing wax and the other with parafine. Glass jars and caps and rubbers were on top of the warming closet. Tressie was famous for her preserves and canned fruits and meats.

An old-fashioned icebox was over by the pantry door. One of Tressie's old bonnets was hanging on a peg over the icebox. Doc walked idly through the dining room and through the living room and into the bedroom which Hump had occupied. He touched nothing, nor did he see anything unusual or to excite his curiosity. Everything was clean and neat.

Feeling a little self-conscious he went upstairs. One of the bedrooms was evidently for company and had not been used for some time. The other was the room Tressie used.

A couple of empty suitcases were by the bureau in Tressie's room. Her bed was made and ornamented by a small square pillow cased in fancy cretonne. Doc stared about the room a few seconds and then went back downstairs.

A trap door was open leading down into the cellar. There was a flashlight lying on the ledge at the head of the cellar steps. Doc flicked it on and walked down the steps. The cellar was lined with shelves

and the shelves were loaded with glass jars and sealed tin cans.

Doc looked them over idly. In one corner of the cellar was a box filled with tin cans that had been opened. Doc picked one of them up. It was an old can, marked with an S made from sealing was with which the can had been sealed. All the cans in the box were labeled with an S.

Sausage, he supposed, but inside, the cans were dull and tarnished. He looked in several and in one he found a tiny piece of green paper. Doc rubbed it between his fingers thoughtfully, examined it through a little pocket magnifying glass that he always carried in his vest pocket, and then carefully put the small bit of paper into the back of his old-fashioned watch where he knew it would be safe.

A CAR came rattling into the barnyard. Doc went back upstairs into the kitchen and was standing, warming himself by the kitchen stove when a young man burst into the room.

He was about twenty-five, dressed in work clothes and wearing an old cap. There was an old flannel rag wrapped around his throat.

"I'm Doc Pain. Where's Tressie?" Doc asked. "I drove out to see about vaccinating that litter of pigs. Hump said he wanted it done a week or two ago. I guess you must be Henry."

"Tressie's over at church," the young man growled, still eyeing Doc suspiciously. His voice was very hoarse.

"I mighta known that if I'd used my head," Doc grumbled. "How's she getting along since Hump died?"

"Better. So'll a lot of other people," Henry said grimly.

"I guess he musta been a pretty hard man to work for," Doc agreed. "Don't see hardly how you managed to stick on here for as long as you did."

"I stayed for her sake," the hired man told him.

"I heard you and Hump had some pretty stiff battles," Doc remarked.

"What if we did?" Henry demanded. "I didn't like him and he knowed it and so did everyone else. What's it any of your business for, anyway? I know about you and the sheriff bein' mighty thick. What're you snooping around here lookin' for?"

"Hump's money," Doc said grimly.

He was watching Henry closely and the young man could not conceal the shock the blunt statement had given him.

"Or was it Tressie's money? Had it hid in them old tin cans down in the cellar, didn't she?"

"I don't know anything about any money," Henry mumbled uneasily.

"Well, what do you know about what happened the night Hump had his stroke or accident or whatever it was?" Doc asked.

"He got home drunk about midnight. I heard him scrape the car fender against the garage door and got up and went to the door out there where I sleep. He staggered up the walk and into the house. I went back to bed. Next morning when I went in to build a fire he was moaning and groaning in his bed. I got Tressie downstairs an' then called the doctor."

Henry made his statement in a monotone as though it was a story he had repeated until he knew it by heart.

"Don't know anything else?"

"No," Henry mumbled hoarsely.

"What's wrong with your throat?"

"I got bronchitis."

"Better let me see if you're running a fever," Doc suggested. "Might have some medicine with me that'd clear up your throat."

Henry backed away, snarling.

"I don't need no horse doctor. You'd better leave me alone," he warned.

"Suit yourself," Doc said mildly. "Reckon I'd better not wait. Tell Tressie I'll be out the first of the week."

He ambled outside and down the walk

toward the barnyard, although his car was parked out in the road in front of the house. Looking back as he opened the yard gate he caught a glimpse of Henry watching him from the pantry window.

UNHURRIEDLY, he examined the fenders on Hump's old car. None of them showed any indication of having been scraped against a garage door. Nor did the garage doors show any signs of being recently scarred. Satisfied of that, Doc went out to his own car and drove back to town.

That night he saw Sheriff Rink.

"I went out to see Tressie today but she'd gone to church. I did have a talk with that hired man," he remarked.

"What'd you find out?" the sheriff asked.

"I don't exactly know," Doc said slowly. "But I do know I've got him scared. I caught him in some lies, and he's worried. If I'm anyways near right, I think he'll try to skip out, and right away."

"Want me to go out there tonight and pick him up?" the sheriff inquired.

Doc shook his head.

"I think it'd be wiser to let him get started. He'll probably try to catch a train or bus here in Farmington or at least come through here, and I think if I was you, I'd do it as quiet as possible. He'll talk, if we go after him right, but as for picking him up on any specific charge—"

"I suppose I might as well not ask you what you're driving at," the sheriff complained. "Maybe I can pick him up that way. Maybe it's just giving him a chance to get away."

Doc chuckled.

"And maybe I don't care much, or maybe it won't make a lot of difference if he does," he commented.

"When you get in one of these moods I'd just as soon set around with an empty bottle," the sheriff grumbled. "All right. He'll be picked up, and you'll be notified. I'll see that he doesn't get away."

It was late, two nights later when the sheriff called Doc.

"I've got him," he explained. "Picked him up after he'd bought a ticket to St. Louis. Want to talk to him now or in the morning."

"Might as well make it now," Doc answered, "I'll be right up to the jail."

When he got there he found the sheriff and his prisoner in the jail office. Henry glared at him sullenly when he came in. The hired man's throat was still wrapped with a flannel rag.

"Somebody's gonna pay for this," he growled defiantly.

"Somebody usually pays for murder," Doc agreed quietly. "Gone through his pockets yet, Sheriff?"

"Thought I'd wait till you got here," the sheriff explained. "Turn everything you've got out here on the table, son. I want all your pockets emptied and turned wrong side out."

Reluctantly the hired man stood up beside the desk and emptied his pockets. His pocketbook came out last. It was bulging with money, and many of the bills were old and ragged and of the old-fashioned large size.

In all, he had about two hundred and fifty dollars.

His pockets emptied, Henry stepped back, glowering at Doc.

"Take that rag from around your neck now," Doc said firmly. "And then open up your shirt. Don't think I don't know bronchitis when I see it."

"Hurry up, son," the sheriff advised

DEFIANTLY Henry ripped the rag from around his throat and tore his shirt open. His neck was purple with finger marks and scratches that looked as though they had been made by horny fingernails.

"Suppose you tell us the truth now," Doc suggested.

"I got to think first," Henry mumbled, sitting down in the chair by the desk.

"Doesn't take much thinking to tell the truth," Doc protested mildly.

"I'm not thinking about myself. I'm thinking about her. She's old and she's sick. Tomorrow she's leavin' to visit some relatives. I don't want her mixed up and worried an' badgered. She's been the only friend I've ever had, long as I can remember. You promise me you won't mix her up in it and that you'll let her go on her trip without knowin' you've caught me, and I'll tell you exactly what happened, and I'll take my medicine."

"You tell us the truth, and there's no reason why Tressie has to be bothered," Doc said quickly, before the sheriff had a chance to answer.

"That's a promise, from both of you?" Henry demanded.

"It's a bargain. You tell the truth. We'll do our part," Doc declared.

"That's a hell of a spot to put me in, but go ahead," the sheriff agreed.

"Well this is what happened," Henry said hurriedly. "Hump found out Tressie had some money hid away in tin cans down in the cellar. She'd saved it dollar by dollar from her egg and poultry and stuff she'd grown and canned and stuff like that."

"How'd you find out about that?" Doc asked.

"He told me when he was drunk. Bragged about it," Henry replied.

"Told Tressie too, did he?" Doc asked.

Henry shifted uneasily.

"—I suppose so, but I don't know," he answered. "Anyway, it don't matter. He owed me money an' I told him I wanted what was comin' to me. He wouldn't give me a cent. I found out he was plannin' to skip out an' let the bank take the farm an' let Tressie go to the poorhouse, so that night I waited for him."

"How much of this did Tressie know?" Doc demanded.

"How would I know?" Henry demanded. "And besides, it don't make any difference. When he got home that night, I demanded my money and he swung at me with a stick of stove wood. I made a lunge at him and then he got me by the throat. We rolled around the wood pile, all the time he had me by the throat an' everything went black. I thought I was dead, but after a little while I woke up and there he was, layin' on his back."

"What had happened to him?" the sheriff asked.

"While were rollin' around, I guess he'd hit his head on a nail stickin' through a piece of old box. Anyway the nail was in his head, clear up to the piece of board. I pulled it out an' carried him into the house and got him in bed and undressed.

"How about the money?" Doc asked.

"I took it out of his pocket, just what he owed me," Henry confessed sullenly. "All the rest I told you was the truth."

"Where was Tressie while all this was happening?" Doc demanded.

"Upstairs asleep I suppose," Henry said promptly. "She's as deaf as a post. We coulda fought all over the downstairs and she'd never 'a heard anything."

"What do you think, Doc?" the sheriff commented.

Doc filled his mouth with fine cut and stared reflectively at the ceiling.

"I'd say Henry that you're not a very convincing liar," he remarked. "In the first place, Tressie's not deaf as a post. She might be a little hard of hearing, but sev-

eral years ago, I was out there and saw an old gander run up behind her and hiss while she was out in the chicken yard feeding her poultry. She nearly jumped out of her shoes, and she wasn't wearing that ear trumpet either. So she certainly

would have heard you bring Hump in the house and put him to bed, even if she didn't hear the fight."

Henry kept his mouth shut tightly.

"Second place," Doc went on, "Tressie must have had quite a considerable amount hid down there in the cellar, from the number of cans I saw. You've accounted for just a little, and I don't believe for a minute Hump would ever have told you or anyone else where he got the money."

Henry continued silent.

"I guess the only thing to do, Sheriff, is go out and get Tressie," Doc sighed.

Henry jumped to his feet.

"You leave her out of this," he shouted. "You promised you would."

"We made a bargain," Doc reminded him. "We'll know the truth when we hear it."

"What do you want to know?" Henry asked sullenly.

"First, how you knew he had the money," Doc suggested.

"I saw a light out in the barn late one night and when I went out to see what it was, I saw Hump in the oat bin, opening tin cans and stuffing the money he took out of them in an old suitcase," Henry admitted.

"What did you do then?"

"Nothin' till the next day, then I told Tressie. She told me not to tell anyone else. It was money she had been saving for years to pay off the mortgage."

"Well what did happen that night?" Doc questioned.

"While he was gone we found the money hid in his closet. Tressie sewed it up in a little pillow. It wasn't quite enough for the mortgage for he'd spent a lot, but she thought it'd be enough to get the mortgage renewed if she could get it in to the bank the next morning." Henry was talking frankly and there was no doubt but that he was telling the truth.

"What did you do?" Doc asked.

"I waited up. I hoped he'd come home so drunk he wouldn't miss the money. We put the suitcase back stuffed with paper. When he got home, he was plenty drunk. He went in the house. I didn't go to bed, but I thought he had when all of a sudden, I heard screams in the house. It was Tressie screaming for help."

Henry took his handkerchief off the table and wiped his face.

"They were upstairs. She'd gone to bed. When I got up there he had her legs under his arm an' he was jabbin' the soles of her feet with the lighted end of his cigar, tryin' to make her tell what she'd done with the money."

"So that's where the fight took place," Doc observed.

"No it wasn't," Henry said hotly. "I was so mad I was crazy. What I meant to do to him, I didn't want her to see. I got him by the collar and dragged him downstairs an' out in the barnyard. The fight took place right where I said it did."

"Just like you said," Doc asked.

"Yes," Henry said, hesitating a moment. "Except when he grabbed up that piece of wood he hit me an' stunned me long enough so he got me by the throat."

"Where was Tressie?" Doc insisted quietly.

Henry glared at him.

"She had hobbled out there after us. When it was over, she helped me get him in the house and into bed. We worked over him, thinking he'd be all right until he started to bleed."

"One thing I'm curious about Henry," Doc remarked. "When Findaly got there, did Tressie tell him about the fight."

"Yes, she did," Henry declared. "He looked at the hole in his head and said it didn't amount to anything. Said he'd just had a hemorrhage because his brain was burnt out with liquor."

"Why wasn't anyone else ever told about this fight?" the sheriff demanded.

"Tressie asked us not to say anything," Henry said simply. "She didn't want any of her neighbors to know what a lowdown bum Hump had been. I guess that's why

she faked that ear trumpet business, so he couldn't nag her so much an' so people wouldn't be always tryin' to sympathize with her over Hump."

"Why's she going away now?" Doc asked.

"She knows you and the sheriff have been snoopin' around. How would she explain the money now to pay off the mortgage, without telling it all? Don't she deserve a little peace, after all she's gone through?" Henry demanded indignantly.

"Son," Doc said gravely, "while that fight was going on and Hump had you choked, are you sure Tressie didn't pick up an old piece of board, not knowing there was a nail sticking out of it, and crack Hump over the back of the head."

"Of course she didn't," Henry declared quickly. "I pulled that piece of board with the nail in it away from his head myself, and it wasn't much bigger than my fist."

"And wasn't it a piece that might have been broken off the end of a larger piece?" Doc said.

"It wasn't either," Henry said stoutly. "You leave her out of this. I've told you the truth."

"Sounds like a pretty straightforward story to me," Doc observed. "No reason why we shouldn't let Henry go ahead to St. Louis is there, Sheriff?"

"Not that I can see," the sheriff agreed slowly. "Go ahead, son."

"And you won't tell her or anybody what I've told you?" Henry asked eagerly.

"That was our bargain," Doc declared. "And after you've had a vacation, if you don't find some work down there, come back here. I'll have a job you can have if you want it."

"I sure appreciate that," Henry said gratefully. "I guess I didn't mean some of the things I said about you two."

"Forget it, son," the sheriff declared. "Fill up your pockets and go on with your trip."

THE following noon Doc Pain made it a point to be down at the station when the train pulled through, headed west. Tressie Mason, a little frail old lady in old-fashioned black silk was waiting nervously on the platform. Doc went up and took her black gloved hand in his and shook it vigorously.

"Just heard you were going on a trip, Tressie," he declared, raising his voice and speaking into the old-fashioned ear trumpet she had put to her ear. "Wanted to tell you I'm buying in your old farm when the bank puts it up for sale. When you get tired of wading around in the Pacific, come on back home. Everything will be there just like you've left it and I'd like to have you live there and look after things, just as you always have."

She tried to answer but tears were streaming down her face, and anyway Doc had waited until just before the train roared in, making much conversation impossible. When he had helped her on the train and it had pulled away, Doc found Sheriff Rink waiting at the curb back behind the baggage office.

"Well?" the sheriff commented.

"Tressie's off on her big adventure. Findaly says it was cerebral hemorrhage. I say it was. What do you say it was now?" Doc demanded.

"As far as I'm concerned, it might have been measles," the sheriff exclaimed. "I'm so damned glad this case is closed, I need something stronger than your conversation to celebrate with. Come on and get in. I know where we can get it."

"Where?"

"Just to close the books forever, we'll make Findaly buy," the sheriff grinned. "It'll teach him to have a little more respect for us next time."

"What I Claim, There Can't Nothin' Happen. Outside of Earthquakes and High Water, That You Can't Do Somethin' About If You Go at It Right"

FATHER JOHN

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of Many Stories of the Outlaws of Halfaday Creek

I

BLACK JOHN SMITH swung the canoe from his shoulders and returned down the mile-long portage trail around the Fish Rapids of the upper White River for his packsack. Half an hour later he deposited the pack beside the canoe, split a handful of kindlings from a dry spruce stump, lighted a fire, hung his tea pail above the flame, and proceeded to slice a liberal portion of bacon into a frying pan.

A light canoe rounded a bend upriver and rapidly approached the head of the rapid. It beached at the portage landing and a man stepped out and dragged the canoe clear of the water. He was a small

man whose frail build suggested undernourishment. Black eyes peered with burning intensity from a face of waxy pallor. From beneath the brim of a flattish black hat silvery hair cascaded almost to the shoulders of a long black robe caught up at the belt by a thick wollen cord from which dangled an ivory cross.

Black John rose to his feet, his bearded lips parting in a smile as his eyes rested momentarily upon the thin, well-formed nose, and the delicately chiseled lips that stood out in sharp contrast to the rugged outline of the country, with its towering mountains, and its rock-ribbed canyon into which the waters of the river plunged with a low roar in a welter of foaming whitewater. For he knew this little priest as a man mighty in spirit as he was frail in body.

"Hello, Father! Jest in time to help me git rid of a bang-up fryin' of bacon an' beefsteak. I'm shore glad you happened along. It's kind of lonesome for a man to be eatin' supper all by himself."

THE thin lips smiled. "Beefsteak, did you say, John? You mean moosesteak?"

"Not by a damn sight! I've be'n down to Dawson an' I laid in enough honest-to-God beefsteak to last me clean to Half-aday. What I claim, if a man's got to chaw moosemeat most of the year he's entitled to fill up on beefsteak whenever he kin git it. I'll bet it's quite a while sence you've et any beefsteak."

"Not so long as one might think. Last fall in Montreal and in Ottawa I had beefsteak, and also many other good things which one is denied in the outlands."

"That's so. Me an' Cush heard you'd gone outside last fall. Figgered you'd quit. Convertin' them Stick Siwashes must be a hell of a job, at best."

"You knew I had not quit," the little man replied, and again he smiled as his intense black eyes met the twinkling eyes of blue.

"Shore, we know'd you hadn't quit, Father. I was only kiddin'. But I never even got a raise out of that one, did I? How's things on Feather Crick?"

"Not good. The forces of evil are at work among my people."

"The devil kind of got the jump on you while you was gone, eh? Tell you what you do, Father—chase him over onto Half-aday an' we'll call a miners' meetin' an' convict the son-of-a-gun of some kind of skullduggery an' hang him."

"I wish I could do just that. Only this time there are two devils."

"Chase 'em both over. Hell—two, er a dozen—it's all the same to us! Did someone move in on Feather Crick while you was away?"

'No. When I returned, late in the fall, my people were as I had left them. It is a long story. A condition has fallen upon them for which I fear I myself am to blame."

"I'll bet you're the only one that would figger it that way. But let's fergit the damn Siwashes till after supper." Fumbling in his packsack, the big man drew out a black bottle and a tin cup into which he poured a liberal potion. "Throw this into you while I fry up the steak. After we've et we'll fill up our pipes an' you kin tell me all about it. You know damn well, Father, that if me er Cush kin do anything fer you, all you've got to do is to holler."

Stepping to the river the priest diluted the liquor with water and returned to the fire to sip it slowly as the beefsteak sizzled in the pan. Billows of savory smoke surged into the big man's face as he held the frying pan over the coals. He turned his head away, coughing, and, reaching for the bottle, took a deep long pull at it, rasping the dregs from his throat. "Never seen a damn campfire yet that the smoke didn't git in yer eyes, no matter which way the wind blow'd!"

The little priest smiled. "Do you know, John, you've never grown up. You are just a little boy."

"Huh?" The big man peered across the fire in startled surprise.

The smile widened. "Yes—just a wayward little boy who blusters and swaggers and says 'hell' and 'damn' where he thinks it will shock people. But it does not shock me in the least. Deeds rather than words mark the true measure of a man. And those of us who know you best realize that, despite much that is to be deprecated in your make-up, in your heart there is more of good than of evil."

"Well—I'll be damned!"

"Possibly. That is not for me to say. Nor is it for me to either countenance nor condone your loose code of ethics."

The big man laughed. "Dig yer dishes out of yer pack, Father. I ain't got but the one set with me. We want to git at this steak while it's hot. No wonder yer so damn little an' skinny—launchin' into abstract theological problems instead of beefsteak! Hold yer plate, now, while I fork this slab of meat onto it."

The meal over, Black John tossed the other his tobacco pouch, and producing a porcelain pipe bowl from his pack, the little priest fitted a long wooden stem into it, filled the bowl, lighted it with a coal from the fire, and puffed contentedly while the big man washed the dishes.

Lighting his own pipe, Black John glanced across at the priest: "What's this here two-devil business that's botherin' you? Mebbe it ain't as bad as you think. Anyways, it won't hurt to git it off yer chest. What I claim, there can't nothin' happen, outside of earthquakes an' high water, that you can't do somethin' about if you go at it right."

The priest slowly shook his head. "There is nothing you or I can do, John. This is a matter for the police."

"Yeah? Well, listen—there's be'n several times when things has popped up on Halfaday an' vicinity that a person would say, offhand, was matters for the police—but which, in fact, was adjudicated an' disposed of in a highly satisfactory manner without no police interference whatever. S'pose you jest start in at the beginnin' an' spill me an earful."

"Well—as you know, for upwards of twenty years I have labored among the Stick Indians, and by dint of hard work and vast patience, have succeeded in gathering into a little community on Feather Creek, some ninety souls. I have encouraged them to trap, and to fish, and to hunt in the proper seasons. And to lay by food for the winter instead of living the hand-to-mouth existence of the scattered Indians of the mountains. I have also induced them to plant small gardens. And in about one year in three we harvest enough of potatoes and other vegetables to last us far into the winter. One year we ripened some barley. We have built log houses and a church. But we are very poor, and existence is hard, even in the good years. However, we are better off than many others. And I have continued to look after the welfare of my people, both temporal and spiritual. Some men of the police, notably Inspector Jarvis and Corporal Downey, know of my work among these people and approve it."

"Shore they do, Father. So do me an' Cush. You're one missionary that had sense enough to look after the temporal part before you tackled the spiritual."

"Last fall," continued the priest, ignoring the interruption, "I traveled to Dawson and spoke to these men, asking them if it would not be possible to secure treaty money for my Indians, and they suggested that I go to Ottawa and take the matter up with those in authority there. They both provided me with letters commending my work, and recommending that any aid possible be accorded me.

"I therefore journeyed to Ottawa and to Montreal where I held many conferences with those high in authority of both the Church and the State. I shall not burden you with the details—suffice it to say that in the face of what appeared at first to be insurmountable difficulties and objections

I finally succeeded in convincing the proper persons of the crying need of my people, and of the justice of bringing them within the treaty bounty.

"The result was that early this spring a treaty party arrived on Feather Creek and paid the bounty which, with certain back payments that I had convinced them had accrued, amounted to one hundred and seventeen dollars for each of the ninety members of my community.

"Now, one hundred and seventeen dollars is not wealth. But, as I pointed out to my people, if they should continue to hunt, and to fish, and to trap, and to plant their gardens as they have done in the past, this money, if frugally and judiciously expended, would go a long way toward alleviating their suffering for many years to come.

"They are, for the most part, a docile folk. And I had hoped that they would see eye to eye with me in this matter. In order to conserve their competence I suggested that they turn their money over to me to hold in trust for them. In other words, I would act as their bank, doling out the money to them as seemed expedient for their welfare.

"BUT, owing mainly to the subversive advice of four men among them—men who speak English, and who have worked on the fishing boats of the coast, and the steamboats of the Yukon, they refused to turn over their money to me. A few allowed me to keep part of their competence—but pitifully few. I am holding only four hundred and twelve dollars out of the ten thousand five hundred and thirty dollars that they received.

"Word of the payment had evidently become noised about, for two weeks ago I noticed that many of my people were drinking liquor. Most of the men, many of the women, and even some of the children were becoming drunk nearly every night. I had seen no white men about, nor could I find any, though I searched diligently. Questioning proved of no avail as the men would not talk, and those of the women who might have told me of the source of this liquor feared to do so.

"Finally one woman, the wife of one of the four who speak English and the worst drunkard of them all, came to me and told me that two white men were selling the liquor, and that their camp was at the mouth of a small feeder, some three miles below the village.

"I visited the place immediately, but the men had evidently just departed from there. I believe that inasmuch as these men knew of the treaty payment they must also know the amount of money paid. I believe that they risked only a small stock of liquor on this first tentative venture, and obtained only a relatively small part of the treaty money. And I believe that they will return. Having found out that the Indians will buy their liquor they have hastened to Dawson or to Whitehorse for a new supply. The woman told me that they charged two dollars a quart for the liquor, and that it was three parts water."

Black John, who had listened to the recital without interruption or comment, removed the pipe from his lips and spat into the fire. "You done wrong in not havin' the treaty money paid over to you in the first place, instead of to the Siwashes," he opined.

"Ah, but I tried to do that! I foresaw what might happen if these people came suddenly into possession of this money. And I tried to impress upon those in authority the importance of allowing me to handle the fund as the trustee of my people. But they said it could not be done. Each Indian must receive his allotment personally, and receipt for it personally, with his or her mark. And so it was done."

"Uh-huh. Jest another evidence of the damn fool way Governments do things. Some ten-dollar-a-week clerk back there in Ottawa—an' it might jest as well have be'n in Washington, er Paris, er Berlin,

accordin' to what country was involved—sets there an' figgers an easy way of doin' a thing so it'll work out nice with his filin' system—an' that's the way it's got to be done—come hell er high water! There ain't no sech thing as takin' into account the special requirements of an individual case, er of listenin' to advice from someone that knows somethin' about what's got to be done—hell no! The formula's be'n worked out—an' the system'll be followed, no matter if it wipes out a band of Siwashes, er sinks a battleship! Because if it ain't done that way the ten-dollar-a-week clerk back there in Ottawa might ball up his file. An' that's Government efficiency!"

"I fear there is much truth in what you say, John. But nothing can be accomplished by sitting here and recounting the shortcomings of the Government. It seems that once a certain routine has been established it becomes as unchangeable as the law of the Medes and the Persians."

"Yeah," agreed the big man dryly. "An' you kin take notice that there ain't a Mede left—an' damn few Persians! Mebbe if their laws had be'n more flexible they'd have survived. Governments could learn a lot by studyin' hist'ry, if they wasn't so damn dumb. What do you figger to do about it?"

"Why, I am hastening to Dawson to impress the police with the importance of taking immediate action in the matter. They must prevent these men from returning to Feather Creek with a further supply of liquor."

BLACK JOHN frowned. "You'd be all right, Father, if you could git in touch with Corporal Downey er Inspector Jarvis. But I doubt that you kin reach either one of 'em quick enough to do any good. I jest come from Dawson, an' I know that Jarvis has gone down to Eagle, an' Downey's somewheres upriver. We come up together till I branched off at the mouth of the White. He was goin' on up to investigate a murder somewheres up the Pelly. There's half a dozen rookies in Dawson under Constable Blake. But I'm doubtin' that Blake would detail a man to go back with you on account of bein' left shoft-handed in case someone would spit

on the sidewalk, er discharge a firearm on Sunday."

"But he *must* send someone! This is a matter of life and death to a great many natives. My labor of twenty years may be rendered useless within the course of a few days if those men are allowed to return to Feather Creek with liquor. It is a matter of the utmost importance. Surely this Constable Blake will realize that!"

"Yeah? Well—try it an' see. On yer way back you might stop in to Cush's an' tell me what luck you had."

"But he must be made to realize the importance and the urgency of this matter! What else can I do? What would you advise?"

Black John gazed into the fire for several moments in silence. "Was one of these damn hooch runners tall an' the other one short?" he asked abruptly. "An' was the tall one carryin' his left shoulder a little higher'n his right, an' stickin' his head kinda forward, like he was lookin' over a fence?"

"I do not know what they looked like. I did not see them, and the woman did not describe them to me."

"Did they see you?"

"That I cannot say. I do not believe that they have seen me, as the woman told me they did not venture onto Feather

Creek beyond the mouth of the feeder. The Indians went to them for their liquor."

"W-e-e-l-l," drawled the big man, after refilling his pipe, "mebbe it would be jest as well fer you to go on down to Dawson. Like I said, I don't believe you kin git it through Blake's skull that yer predicament is anything more than an interestin' incident. But yer luck might be that either Downey er Jarvis'll git back to Dawson within the next few days. I don't believe yer hooch runners are on their way to Dawson er Whitehorse, either one. I've be'n four days on the White, an' if they'd be'n comin' down, I sure would of met 'em."

"But where else could they obtain the liquor?"

"They might buy it from Cush. His place is the clostest to Feather Crick, an' it would save 'em a lot of time an' hard work."

"But Cushing would not sell them liquor to trade to the Indians. I'm sure of that."

"Not if he know'd what they was goin' to do with it, he wouldn't," Black John agreed.

"But they might have some story cooked up about what they wanted it fer. I happen to know that Cush has got a lot of surplus liquor on his hands owin' to a deal he put over when Jake Cavanaugh went broke in Whitehorse. Mebbe he'd jump at the chanct to git red of a couple of bar'ls at a profit. After all, he ain't so wide between the ears. A good smart lie might fool him. While you're down to Dawson I'll jest sort of poke around upriver an' see what I kin do."

"But, John—what can you do? You are not of the police. You know you have no authority."

"No? Well—mebbe yer right. But we've got laws on Halfaday that's workable because they're more er less flexible. We ain't like them Medes an' Persians. We aim to survive."

II

THE two breakfasted early the following morning and in the first gray of dawn Black John helped the little priest portage his outfit around the rapid, and pushed on upriver. Ascending Halfaday Creek he reached Cushing's Fort, the log trading post and saloon that catered to the wants of the little community of outlawed men that had sprung up close against the Yukon-Alaska border, shortly after dark.

Avoiding the front door he entered by way of the kitchen, passed through into the storeroom, and glued his eye to a slit in the wall by means of which one might see and hear whatever was going on in the barroom where at the moment a stud game was in progress and three or four men stood drinking at the bar.

After a few moments of scrutiny he reentered the kitchen and passed on into the proprietor's private apartment where he removed his coat and pacs, lay down on the bunk, and was soon fast asleep.

Hours later he was awakened by the opening of the door as Cush entered, lighted the glass bracket lamp, and turned to stare in open-mouthed surprise. "What the hell you doin' here?" he demanded. "You drunk, er somethin'?"

Black John sat up, swung his feet to the floor, and reached for a pac. "Nope. Jest ketchin' me a little sleep. I've had a hard day. Come clean on up from the Fish Rapids."

"What time did you git here?"

"Little after dark. What time is it now?"

Cush consulted a thick silver watch. "It's halfpast two. I jest closed up. Some of the boys was playin' stud. But why the hell didn't you come in the saloon when you got here?"

"I was tired an' in no mood fer revelry."

"Huh—first time I ever seen you too tired fer deviltry! But if you was so damn tired, why didn't you go to yer own cabin instead of crawlin' into my bed?"

The big man laced his pacs and put on his coat. "I wanted to speak with you in private," he grinned. "When I got here I stopped an' took a squint through the peekhole an' seen that a couple of strange faces was in our midst. Fetch the lamp an' we'll go out an' have a snort. It's customary fer the house to set 'em up when a newcomer arrives, ain't it?"

"Yeah, but you ain't no newcomer on Halfaday—an' never was." Picking up the lamp, Cush led the way to the bar, set out a bottle and two glasses, and made an entry in his well-thumbed day book.

"Hey!" Black John cried. "If you ain't buyin' the drinks, we'll shake fer 'em! What the hell you chargin' 'em up agin' me fer?"

"Bed rent," grunted Cush, as he filled his glass. "An' it's about time you was gittin' back, what with them two strangers showin' up on the crick an' pesterin' me to sell 'em three hundred gallon of licker."

"Got quite a thirst, ain't they?"

"Huh—you know damn well they ain't no two men is goin' to drink no three hundred gallon of licker."

"Time an' diligence would accomplish it."

"They claim they's a new stampede on somewheres they call Loon Crick an' they aim to sell the licker to a feller that's goin' to start a saloon there. But I ain't never heer'd of no Loon Crick, nor neither I ain't heer'd of no new stampedes. What I figger, they aim to peddle it to some Siwashes, somewheres. So I be'n stallin' 'em off till you got back. I know'd you'd be along pretty quick."

"I assume that these men have demonstrated their ability to pay fer this liquor?"

"If you mean have they got the money, they have. They banked—"

"Twenty thousan' dollars in used mixed bills," Black John interrupted.

"Twenty thousan' nine hundred an' sixty," Cush corrected.

"H-u-u-m, so their Feather Crick venture netted 'em nine sixty, eh?"

"What do you know about 'em? An' what do you mean about Feather Crick?"

"Downey happened to mention a certain bankin' irregularity in which a cashier was killed an' twenty thousan' dollars changed hands without benefit of a check book somewheres down in Alberta. The Feather Crick incident was what you might say, a sequel."

"Does that mean they cleaned up that nine sixty sellin' hooch to them Siwashes on Feather Crick?"

"That's Father Cassatt's story—an' I believe him."

"I mistrusted them damn coots was up to somethin' like that! An' here they want to buy three hundred gallon more!"

"Well—why don't you sell it to 'em? You've got a lot of that Cavanaugh liquor on hand that you could git rid of at a profit. It don't stand you no more'n five dollars a gallon delivered right here. You as good as stole it."

"What—an' have 'em peddle it out to them Siwashes? Not by a damn sight! I don't need no profits that bad. Father Cassatt's worked like hell up there amongst them Siwashes, an' I wouldn't do nothin' to hinder him. I like the little cuss. What we'd ort to do is hang them two, instead of sellin' 'em any licker!"

Black John shook his head. "It wouldn't be ethical, Cush. You see, Feather Crick, by no stretch of the imagination, could be included within our jurisdiction. An occasional hangin' here on Halfaday has a salutory effect on the remainin' citizens, an' thus tends to uphold the morality of the crick. But if we was to indulge in an orgy of promiscuous hangin's over a wide spread area it might arouse onfavorable comment in certain sources. This Feather Crick venture has no Halfaday angle whatever. The only way the case could properly be brought within our jurisdiction would be to tie it in somehow with Halfaday—like, for instance, if these men should purchase liquor here, an' pack it to Feather Crick, an' sell it to the

Siwashes. In sech case I'd feel jestified in sort of talkin' a hand in the game, an' seein' what could be done about it."

"If you'd quit talkin' like some damn preacher, er lawyer, er somebody, an' come right out an' say what you mean, mebbe someone would know what yer talkin' about," growled Cush. "What yer tryin' to git at, I s'pose—if I was to sell 'em this licker, an' they was to pack it over to Feather Crick an' sell it to them Siwashes, then we could go ahead an' hang 'em?"

"That's the thought."

"But how would we git holt of 'em? S'pose they cleaned up over there an' kep' right on a-goin'?"

"Where would they go to? They'll come back, all right. They think Halfaday is a place where a criminal is safe, er they wouldn't be here."

"That's right," Cush agreed. "They be'n askin' about you. Claim they want to hook up with you. That's how I be'n stallin' 'em along. Told 'em you was liable to show up any minute. But they're hell bent to get back to Feather Crick an' clean up on them Siwashes. They claim their hurry is 'cause this here fella that was aimin' to start that there saloon on this here Loon Crick might buy his licker in Dawson er Whitehorse if they didn't git it there pretty quick."

"They'll come back, all right," Black John said. "How much did they offer you fer the licker?"

"Eight dollars a gallon."

"Hum—le's figger a little. Them Feather Crick Siwashes got ten thousand' five hundred an' thirty dollars in treaty money, an' these fellas evidently got nine hundred an' sixty of it. That would leave ninety-five hundred an' seventy still on Feather Crick. Three hundred gallon, after it's cut, would give 'em twelve hundred gallon of trade liquor, which at eight dollars a gallon would come to ninety-six hundred dollars. They've got it figgered down pretty clost, all right. Why don't you go ahead an' sell it to 'em? Of course, you could make a lot more sellin' the stuff over the bar by the drink, but this way you'll make a quick turn-over an' nine hundred dollars profit on the deal—an' it'll give us a chanct to teach these boys a lesson."

"Why can't I claim I can't only spare thirty, forty gallon—er mebbe fifty? That would hook 'em up with Halfaday jest the same as if they got the hull three hundred."

"Nope. I want 'em to git every damn nickel of that treaty money away from them Siwashes. I've got my reasons."

"Huh," grunted Cush. "If I didn't know damn well you don't favor sellin' hooch to Siwashes no more'n what I do, I wouldn't have nothin' to do with it. But if you've got some reasons fer gittin' all that money, I'll play along with you, even if the difference in sellin' that there three hundred gallon by the bulk instead of over the bar will cost me a sight of money.

"It'll be worth whatever it costs to git the chanct to hang them damn cusses. But I shore hope nothin' goes wrong. It would be hell if they was to git away with that Siwash treaty money."

"They ain't apt to," Black John replied. "I'm hittin' out at daylight fer Feather Crick. It's only about forty mile, straight acrost. The way these fellas'll go, down Halfaday an' up the White, it's a lot further. Father Cassatt's gone on down to Dawson to try to git the police on the job. He promised to stop in here an' let me know what luck he had. If I ain't back by the time he gits here, you hold him till I do come. Don't tell him where I've gone. Tell him I'm out moose huntin'. In the meanwhile, there'll be a new priest lookin' after the welfare of them Feather Crick Siwashes."

"What priest is that?" Cush asked.

"His name is Father John."

"You mean—you? Cripes—you'd make a hell of a priest! An' besides Father Cassatt ain't half as big as what you be. If you tried to git into one of them black

dresses of hisn, you'd look like you was runnin' around in a shimmy!"

"You fergit," replied Black John, "that I still possess that robe that was stole off'n a priest on Tagish some time back. You rec'lect we rigged Pot Gutted John out in it onct. If it fit him, it'll shore as hell fit me."

"Huh, you've got the damndest way of goin' at things—but it gen'ly works," Cush admitted grudgingly. "What'll I tell them

damn cusses about you not showin' up? They're plumb anxious to meet up with you."

"They'll meet up with me, all right," replied the big man, grimly. "Tell 'em I sent word by a Siwash that I was stayin' down to Dawson fer another week er ten days. That'll give 'em a chanct to clean up that Feather Crick job an' git back here about the time I do."

"They've heer'd how you hang folks, up here—an' they're anxious to git on the good side of you. They call you the King of the Outlaws—the man that held up an army. Someone's shore be'n feedin' 'em a lot of crap!"

III

IT WAS late in the evening of the second day thereafter when Black John reached Feather Creek. Under cover of darkness he slipped into Father Cassatt's cabin, close beside the little log church surmounted by its wooden cross. He went to bed without making a light, and in the morning donned a long black robe which he drew from his packsack, and stepped out to stand before the church.

A young Indian woman who was passing stopped and stared at him in wide-eyed surprise. Raising a hand, Black John beckoned to her and when she stood before him he said solemnly: *"Ora pro nobis,* sister," not to mention other matters. The young woman continued to stare at him uncomprehendingly. "Do you savvy English?" he asked. But still she stood dumbly staring at him. He tried to jargon. *"Mika kumtux Boston wawa?"*

She continued to stare for a moment, then turned abruptly and hastened toward a small group of cabins that were visible down the creek. She entered one of the cabins from which two men presently emerged and walked toward him. When they halted before him Black John spoke.

"There's a couple of men here that savvy English," he said. "Father Cassatt told me there was four of you—men that have worked on the river, an' along the coast. I'm here to sort of look after things till Father Cassatt comes back. Go git them other two an' fetch 'em here. I've got some things to tell you fer yer own good."

One of the men turned away, halted, and pointed in the direction of the cabins where two other men were approaching. "Dem com'," he said. "Natla tell um new pries' wan' see um."

When the two had joined the others Black John led the way into Father Cassatt's house. "Now about this here hooch business," he began abruptly, and noted the sullen look that crept into their faces. "Regardin' the drinkin' of hooch there's two schools of thought—one holdin' it to be wrong; an' the other can't see no harm in it. Father Cassatt's a good man. He's your friend—don't never think he ain't. An' he's a friend of mine, too. He thinks you men hadn't ort to drink hooch—an' mebbe he's right. He's gone down to Dawson to git the police to come up here an' arrest the two men that's be'n sellin' hooch to you.

"But me—I don't see no harm in a man's takin' a drink now an' then when he needs one. So bein' as I'm in charge

of this here parish while he's gone, I'm slippin' you boys the word that them two men are on the way up here with a fresh batch of hooch. They're got three hundred gallon—a big batch, this time." He paused for a moment, noting that the faces of the four had brightened perceptibly. "Now, you boys know that by the time you git this liquor it's be'n cut by addin' three quarts of water to a quart of whiskey fer a gallon. When it's cut there'll be twelve hundred gallon, an' they'll git two dollars a quart fer it, which is eight dollars a gallon. But they won't have time to git rid of much of it before the police comes. The police'll arrest 'em an' pour out all the hooch on the ground—so you won't git none of it.

"Now, if I was you boys an' wanted that hooch, I'd git to these men when they first hit the crick, an' I'd buy the three hundred gallon before the police gits here. You'll have to pay thirty-two dollars a gallon fer it—but that's the same price you've be'n payin'—when you come to figger that three quarts out of every four in a gallon is water. If you buy it straight you kin cut it yerselves, er drink it straight, whichever you like. About half whiskey an' half water makes a good drink fer wimmin an' kids—an' is favored by some men. Anyways, you could cut it to suit yerselves—them likin' it strong could put in less water.

"But like I said, you'll have to work fast to git it at all. So if I was you I'd hustle around an' git hold of every dollar you kin git yer hands on, an' buy up them three hundred gallon, an' cache 'em somewheres before Father Cassatt gits back here with the police."

When the big man had concluded, the four held a whispered conversation. One of them asked, "W'en de mans com' wit' de hooch?"

"They'd ort to be here tomorrow er next day. They might even make it tonight. They'll take it to the same place they took the other batch. So if you'll show me where the place is I'll sort of hang around there an' let you know when they git here. In the meanwhile, you kin be gittin' that money together. An' remember, you better git every dollar you kin. This is yer last chanct. You won't git another break like this agin—if you live to be a hundred."

There was no trace of sullenness on the smiling faces of the four, as one of them said, "You good pries'! You no say we no kin drink de hooch!"

"Well, like I said, it's the way a man looks at it. Come on—one of you show me where this place is, an' the other three kin git busy collectin' that money."

Black John accompanied one of the Indians to a campsite in a thick growth of young spruce near the mouth of a feeder that ran into Feather Creek about a mile above its confluence with the White River. The Indian returned hastily to join the others in the collection of the money, and Black John took a more leisurely pace back to the priest's house.

Toward noon the next day the big man lay in the spruce thicket and watched two sweating white men and six natives remove thirty ten-gallon kegs from four canoes and pack them to the campsite where they set up a small tent. When the natives had disappeared in the direction of the village, he stepped abruptly into the tiny clearing where the kegs were piled before the tent.

The two men stared in angry surprise as the taller of them—the one with the outthrust head and the high left shoulder—jerked a nickel-plated revolver from his pocket and leveled it. "What the hell d'you want around here?" he demanded. "Beat it, before I put a bullet through you!"

The big man held up his right hand, palm foremost. "Put up your pistol, my son," he uttered, in a deep soothing voice. "I come to you in peace—not in war."

Seeing that he was unarmed, the man lowered the pistol. "What do you want?" he growled.

"Merely a few words with you—words that may prove of profit to you and to me."

"What d'you mean—profit to you?"

"It is thus. I know that you have come here to sell liquor to my people. I know that you have been here before. I know that you charged them two dollars a quart, which is eight dollars a gallon, for liquor that was three-fourths water. And I know that you took from them a matter of nine hundred and sixty dollars. That made me very angry and I dispatched a young woman whose husband was drinking heavily to notify the police who should arrive here within a day or two to arrest you and to destroy your liquor.

"But now that you have arrived before them, it seems there is nothing I can do to prevent you from selling your unholy wares. Such being the case I can see no reason why I, also, should not make some slight profit on the venture. I have great influence among my people, though I have not yet succeeded in persuading them not to drink liquor. But they follow my advice in many things. I see you have here thirty kegs of ten gallons' capacity each. Now it will be impossible for you to dilute and sell, piecemeal, any considerable portion of this liquor before the police arrive and arrest you and destroy the remaining liquor. But if you could sell it all, just as it is, in one quick transaction, you would save all the labor of diluting it, yet you would make the same profit. You could also leave here and be well away before the police arrive. My people still have more than nine thousand dollars of their treaty money. Now if I should advise them to bring this money here and buy this liquor, how much would you be willing to pay me for my part of the affair?"

"You mean, you'll tell 'em to buy it in a lump, an' let us git out of here? It'll cost 'em thirty-two dollars a gallon."

"Yes, I understand that. That is my proposition."

"How much do you want?"

"It strikes me that a thousand dollars would be none too much to ask, in view of the fact that it eliminates any chance of your arrest, besides doing away with a great deal of labor and delay."

"Hell—let's pay it to him!" exclaimed the short, stocky man. "We sure as hell can't afford to be picked up by the Mounted! We'd still make plenty on the deal."

"Okay," the other agreed. "When kin you pull it off?"

"At noon, tomorrow. I will bring the Indians here with the money."

"How many of 'em?" asked the tall man suspiciously.

"There are only four men among them who speak English. I shall bring those four."

"Okay—but they ain't to come heeled."

"Heeled? I do not believe I understand you, my son."

"They ain't to fetch no guns along, nor neither no revolvers. We ain't takin' no chances."

"Very well. It shall be as you say. I shall personally vouch for your safety until you are well away from Feather Creek."

"Okay—be seein' you tomorrow noon."

JUST before noon on the following day Black John, clad in his long black robe, and accompanied by the four English-speaking Indians, stepped into the little clearing. The tent had been struck and loaded into the canoe. Only the thirty kegs remained in the clearing. Each Indian produced a huge roll of money which the two men took and eagerly counted before slipping them into an open packsack.

"You've only got nine thousan' an' ninety-one dollars here," announced the tall man, as he figured with the stub of a lead pencil. "An' that only pays fer two hundred an' eighty-four gallon—we'll call it two hundred an' ninety, fer good measure. We won't bust a keg. We're takin' one keg back with us, at that."

Black John stepped close to the tall man as he was about to fasten the straps of the

packsack containing the money. "Have you forgotten my thousand dollars?" he asked in an undertone.

The tall man thrust his face even farther forward as he fixed the black-robed one with glittering narrowed eyes. "No, we ain't fergot that thousan'—by a damn sight. But you kin fergit it. Yer a hell of a priest—sellin' yer Siwashes out fer a thousan' dollars! The only differences between you an' this here Judas Ishcariot it tells about in yer Bible is that he got his thirty pieces of silver—but you ain't got yer thousan'—by a damn sight!" Pulling the revolver from his pocket he covered the five, calling to his partner over his shoulder, "Grab up the pack, Shorty, an' hit fer the canoe. Then take yer rifle an' stand these birds off till I git in!"

The man called Shorty pushed the canoe into the water, deposited the packsack amidships, and took his seat in the stern while the other backed down the slope, pistol in hand. Stepping into the light craft, the tall man shoved off, and a moment later the outfit disappeared around a bend, borne by the swift current.

The instant they passed from sight Black John leaped high into the air with an unearthly bellow and came down swinging an ax which he had concealed beneath his long black robe. Swinging the ax about his head, he whirled to confront the four astounded Indians, eyes glittering, and white teeth gleaming behind his black beard as his lips drew back in a hideous grin.

"Priest! Priest!" he screamed in a high falsetto. "Ha, ha, ha! They think I'm a priest! I'm a crazy man! I'm a devil! I cut men up an' eat their hearts. Y-e-e-o-w!" He leaped toward the astounded Indians swinging his ax aloft. "I'll eat your hearts an' drink the warm blood. W-a-a-h-o-o!"

The four stood not upon the order of their going. They fled down the slope toward the village, and as they went crashing through the underbrush Black John stood emitting a series of wild weird yells that echoed from the hills like the screech of a banshee. Then he deliberately smashed in the heads of the twenty-nine kegs, and grinned as the liquor gushed out and soaked into the ground. When the last drop disappeared he removed the long robe, rolled it up and placed it in his packsack and struck out for Halfaday Creek.

IV

STEPPING into Cush's saloon just on the edge of darkness the following evening, he was greeted by Father Cassatt who had arrived only an hour before.

"Hello, John! Cush tells me you have been moose hunting. Were you successful?"

"Never even seen a moose. But I didn't expect to see you here. Thought you was hittin' fer Dawson to tell the police about some hooch runners polutin' yer Siwashes."

"I was fortunate in running onto Corporal Downey at the mouth of the White. He was going down to Dawson with a prisoner. You remember you told me he had gone up the Pelly to investigate a murder. He got his man, and was taking him to Dawson. He promised to hasten to Feather Creek as soon as he got his man behind bars in Dawson. So I returned, stopping here as I promised to let you know what luck I had with the police, and also to procure some much-needed supplies."

"You was lucky to run onto Downey," Black John said. "You prob'ly wouldn't of got no action out of Blake till 'long about groundhog day."

"Yes, I was lucky. But even so, should those men return to Feather Creek before Downey could get there they would do much harm. And I greatly fear they may be there even now. Cushing tells me he sold three hundred gallons of whiskey to two men only the other day. He said they told him they intended to resell it to a man who contemplated opening a saloon at a place they called Loon Creek. I have never heard of a Loon Creek, nor have I heard

of any new stampede. I fear that this liquor is even now being sold to my people, and that they will have little, if any, of the treaty money left by the time Corporal Downey gets there."

"Yeah, but if Downey gits holt of the money, he'll turn it back to the Siwashes."

"True. But these men may be able to obtain the money and be gone with it before he gets there. Is there not something you can do, John? You remember you promised me you would look around and see what you could do. Can you not accompany me to Feather Creek tomorrow?"

Black John shook his head slowly. "No, Father, I don't believe I could do you no good by goin' over there. You see, some of them Siwashes of yourn might recognize me, an' whatever influence I might have over 'em would be impaired by my reputation. It might even affect your hold on 'em—consortin' with an outlaw, that-a-way. They might think that I ain't no companion fer a priest to cultivate."

"I do not believe that any of my people have ever seen you—much less would they know of your reputation."

"I don't know about that. You claimed that four of 'em could talk English, an' had worked along the river. Them four might of seen me somewheres. An' a reputation is like news—the worse it is, the faster it travels. If I thought I could do you any good over there, Father, I'd go in a minute—but I don't. You better stop overnight with me, an' we'll sort of talk things over. If we kin figger out some way to handle this case before Downey gits here, we'll go to work on it. It's too late to start out tonight, anyhow. A night's sleep in a bunk'll do you good."

IT WAS nearly noon the following day before the supplies the priest ordered were put up, and a man engaged to help him take them by canoe to Feather Creek.

As they were about to start, two men entered the saloon, and Black John stepped swiftly into the storeroom, unnoticed by the newcomers, who swaggered to the bar and loudly demanded a round of drinks. As Cush set out bottle and glasses, the taller of the two reached into a packsack and withdrew several rolls of bills which he tossed onto the bar.

"Nine thousan' an' ninety-one dollars," he announced. "Count her up, Cush, an' stick her in the safe along with the rest of our dough!"

Cush counted the money, handed the man a receipt, and introduced Father Cassatt as a priest who was in charge of a band of Siwashes over on Feather Creek.

The men stared at the priest in open-mouthed astonishment, grunted an acknowledgement, glancing inquiringly at each other as they turned to the bar and poured their drinks. After downing them the tall man cleared his throat.

"Ain't Black John Smith got back yet?" he demanded. "I want to meet up with him. I've got a hunch him an' us kin do business."

Cush nodded somberly. "Oh, shore. John's back. He's out in the storeroom."

"He is, eh? We're lucky."

"Yeah?"

"Sure. Figgered we might have to wait around here fer a week 'fore we seen him. Holler fer him, will you?"

Raising his voice, Cush called, "Hey, John! Couple of fellas wants to see you!"

The next instant a huge form stood framed in the storeroom doorway, paused there for a moment, and advanced slowly into the barroom.

"My God, the priest!" cried the tall man.

"Ah, yes. So you're the brethren that was inquirin' fer Father John? I trust that sight of me will be a balm to yer souls, if any. What wouldst thou?"

Every bit of color had drained from the faces of the two as the hand of the tall man flew to his pocket and came up grasping the nickel-plated revolver which he leveled at the advancing figure. There was a lightning-like movement, a loud re-

port, and the tall man pitched forward onto his face as his pistol clattered upon the floor.

The short one jerked his hands upward and held them high above his head. "Don't shoot!" he whined. "I'll fork over the thousan'. Toss it out, Cush. I'll make it two thousan'. Fer God's sake, don't shoot! It was Slim's idee—holdin' out on you. I wanted to pay. I'll show you I'm a good fella. I want to do what's right!"

BLACK JOHN'S pistol disappeared from sight as the torrent of words poured from the man's lips. "Why, shore, my son, I sort of figger you'll do what's right. I don't hardly ever make a mistake in sizin' up a man's character—do I, Cush? An' like he said, you kin toss out the money—every cent of it that them two had in the safe. Slim's dead, an' Shorty, here, he won't be needin' his half much longer. He claims he wants to do what's right, an' he prob'ly would—if he lived long enough to. But in his case the sands of life is dribblin' pretty damn fast into the oblivion of eternity, as a poet would say." Reaching for the rolls of bills which Cush placed upon the bar, Black John tossed them onto the card table beside which stood Father Cassatt, who stared uncomprehendingly from the men to the money, as the short man suddenly shrilled:

"Hey, that's my money! What the hell?" He leaped toward the little priest just as Black John stepped forward, placed a huge hand against his face and sent him crashing backward against the bar.

"Listen, you!" the big man roared. "If you want to lay claim to them funds you'll be given the chanct to do so immejitly after the verdick of the miners' meetin', which will be immejitly precedin' the hangin'."

"Miners' meetin'! Hangin'!" gasped the man. "What do you mean?"

"Meanin' that sellin' hooch to Siwashes constitutes the sin of skullduggery of Halfaday, an' as sech is hangable to a remarkable degree. Of course, an astute attorney fer the defense might claim that the offense wasn't committed on Halfaday. But the chances is the argument wouldn't prevail, the act havin' be'n instigated right here in this room, when the goods was bought, an' the profits figgered. Thus, *ab initio,* accordin' to our code, the essence of the crime was committed within our jurisdiction. The whereabouts of its mere consummation, accordin' to the doctrine of *pro bono publico,* is therefore a matter of no moment."

"But," faltered the man, "you can't hang me fer jest sellin' hooch to Siwashes!"

"The hell we can't! We kin try damn hard. An' up to now we ain't had no failures. Even if we didn't hang you, the law would. Corporal Downey's hot on yer trail fer a murder down in Alberta. But bein' as it's hot weather, an' what with the boys all busy on their claims, an' takin' into consideration yer avowed intention of right doin', an' all, I'm constrained to give you a break—sech break consistin' of a packsack full of grub, an' a bit of advice. Cush'll furnish the grub, an' I'll contribute the advice, which is that you shoulder the pack an' head up that gulch, yonder straight fer the Alasky line. Pick 'em up an' lay 'em down, lively an' long. It's a rough country, an' no trail. But it's better than hangin' from a tree, 'cause you might git through. Others has tried it, an mebbe some of 'em reached the Tanana. We don't know; none of 'em ever come back. If they did git through they know'd damn well they'd be'n somewheres by the time they got there. You've got sixty seconds to make up yer mind, at the expiration of which, Cush'll cut a len'th of rope an' I'll start tyin' the knot."

"I'll go! I'll go! I've heard tell how you hang folks, up here. Gimme the packsack. I'll go!"

After the man had departed, Black John turned to the priest. "Count it,

Father," he said, indicating the money that lay on the table, "an' then stick it in yer pack."

The little priest counted the bills. Then turned a puzzled face toward the big man. "I—do not understand. This money—where did it come from?"

"Oh, that's the money them damn scoundrels got off'n yer Siwashes fer the hooch they sold 'em."

"But—here is twenty-seven thousand six hundred and fifty-one dollars!"

Black John grinned. "Well—ain't you satisfied? Listen, Father—if the Government was damn fool enough not to let you handle the Siwashes' money fer 'em, I ain't. Take it, an' use it fer their good."

"But—I do not understand," repeated the bewildered little priest. "Here is seventeen thousand one hundred and twenty-one dollars more than the Indians received from the Government in the first place!"

"Why shore! That's accrued interest, plus the profit on the deal. Hooch runners makes a big profit."

"But—where did it come from? No matter how great their profit, they could not have obtained more money than the Indians had!"

"Listen, Father, I ain't got no time to enter into no intricate an' abstruse financial discussion, nor neither to bother my head tryin' to figger out the ramifications of a hooch runner's profits. I ain't no fiscal wizard, an' never will be. I'll p'int out to you, though, that the ways of sech rowdies is devious an' onderhanded to a disgustin' extent—so much so that even if they'd of kep' a set of books it would require the services of a good auditor to figger 'em out. You've got the money—an' money talks. It's there—no matter whether you kin figger it out er not. In your hands that money kin do a lot of good fer them Siwashes of yourn. So take it, an' spend it as you see fit. I promised you I'd sort of look around an' do what I could—an' I done so to the best of my ability."

The little priest smiled as he deposited the money in his packsack. "It seems, John, that you are a very able man. As you say, in my hands this money will do a vast amount of good for my people. But, John, there is a thing I do not understand." He paused and pointed to the corpse. "When you appeared suddenly in the doorway, why did that man cry out, 'My God! The priest!'? What did he mean by that?"

Black John grinned. "Why—damn if I know, Father. Onlest it was jest a sort of natural mistake owin' to the similarity in the way we talk, er our general appearance, er somethin'."

The priest smiled. "You flatter me as to appearance—but not, I hope, as to language. I've often wished I were a large man. I have always been frail of body."

"But ye're mighty in spirit, Father—er you'd never had the guts to stick it out up there amongst them Siwashes!"

The little man made a deprecatory motion with his hand. "It is the Lord's work. I am proud to be doing it. One more thing, John—what did the other one mean by his reference to paying you a thousand dollars? Have you had dealings with these men before?"

"Well, no—not what you'd say, personal dealin's. I onct acted as their agent in a small matter, an' they wasn't exactly punctilious in the matter of remuneration. In fact, they wrongfully withheld an agreed stipend. An' by the way, Father—you rec'lect that place you was tellin' me about where them damn hooch runners was sellin' that licker at the mouth of that feeder on Feather Crick? Well, if you was to look around good when you git back, you might find a matter of twenty-nine ten-gallon kegs. The heads is stove in, but the staves is all good. Yer Siwashes might think they come pretty high, fer the shape they're in—but they'll come handy to salt down fish in, if you rence 'em out good. So long, Father; an' jest remember—us sourdoughs always sticks together!"

Adventurers All

Unsung Hero

IT WAS one of those days when a smart sailor wouldn't go to sea. There was a cold, grayish look about the great surface of Lake Superior, and anyone knowing the raging storms this inland sea could kick up would have stuck close to dry land.

There were only two of us—my kid brother, Wayne, and I—and nowhere as far as the eye could see could we spot a dipping sail or curl of smoke. The breeze was from the southeast, off shore. We tacked our 20-foot sailboat out of the Portage Canal harbor along a choppy, merry course off the sandstone cliffs of Redridge.

About noon we were ten or twelve miles out, nearing the ordinarily busy Duluth-Buffalo shipping lane.

"Looks like we got it all to ourselves this time," I said, trying to be gay despite an odd feeling of loneliness that came over me. "Ought to make a good haul."

Those were the days of the hectic northwest lumber boom. Steamers and sailing ships, their decks loaded with timber, plied the oftentimes perilous lanes outside the Keweenaw Peninsula, and many a cargo was washed into the sea during the fall storms that swept the lake.

After that it was finders keepers, and the little sailboats and dories would dash out to pick up the drifting timber. Farmers and landlubbers that we were, we had salvaged many a lost cargo, but each time, until today, it had been a wild race with scores of "competitors."

We were finishing our lunch, our decks loaded, when I first noticed the swelling sea. The wind had kicked up abruptly, and snarling whitecaps and icy spray were soon whipping us mercilessly. Wayne, who had been sitting atop the timber, climbed down, and I saw him hug the mast with both arms.

I headed for the barely visible tower of the Portage beacon, but before long the sky became overcast and in a few minutes a drenching mist obscured our vision.

The sea piled up rapidly. I yelled to Wayne to help me with the tiller bar, but even with our combined weight the little boat tossed farther out to sea. Wayne felt it, too, but kept his silence.

By six o'clock we had lost ground. Our cargo was back in the churning sea. From the crest of each huge wave we would plunge madly into a deep valley and a solid wall of water. Then came the colossus—a mountain of foaming water that swallowed us whole.

I came up near the overturned boat. Wayne, gasping for breath, was wallowing nearby.

With one quick lunge I grabbed the gunwhale with one hand and Wayne with the other. Then, waiting for a chance, I helped him climb aboard and followed him up myself.

Wayne looked a little scared. But there was reason to be scared. I tried hard to look calm. Numb with cold, we clung to the boat for dear life through a wet dusk and into the night—for five and a half hours of terror and lost hope, never knowing when a huge wave would wash us into the icy water, more often never caring.

Through the dark, stormy hours that seemed like eternity only one faint hope flickered in my mind. We were in the shipping lane, but while most skippers would not venture out on a night like this, I knew of one ship, at least, that would dare to try to hold her schedule. She was the *S. S. Diana,* Captain Jim Hanley's famous excursion boat. Bound for Duluth, she was due to pass through tonight; I had seen her many times and knew her schedule and the will of old Captain Hanley.

But Wayne could not be comforted. He kept silent, and in the dark I imagined him wagging his head hopelessly over the prospect of any ship going out tonight.

The hours lagged on, but at 11:30, when my fingers were so numb I wanted to scream and let go, lights—warm, blinking steamer lights—appeared from the southeast. Softly I muttered a prayer.

Wayne spoke, bitterly. "They'll never find us—or even hear us—out here in the dark!"

The thought had not occurred to me. Now it struck me like a bombshell. All my pent-up hopes crashed. We sat silently watching the approaching lights. From her position, I estimated she would pass us within 200 yards, but upwind.

We began to shout, hoarsely, frantically, against the roaring wind. We knew we couldn't be heard. There were a few people hurrying about on deck. In my desperation I let go my hold and jerked a small metal match box from my pocket. With trembling fingers I struck three flickering lights before another wave soaked everything and almost washed me into the sea. No answering flare came.

The *Diana,* looking warm and snug and defiant, steamed steadily westward. Gradually our cries died down, and we sat silently watching our only hope of rescue fade into the night—little dreaming of the miracle that was about to occur.

ABOARD the *Diana,* as she plowed westward, the chief engineer stopped short on deck, peering into the night. For a moment, it seemed to him, a faint light had flickered in the storm. He wiped his eyes and strained them against the darkness. But no light appeared. Then, with a short laugh, he wagged his head and went about his duties. For what light could burn in a storm like this?

On the bridge above, weathered old Captain Hanley stopped too, leaning over the rail, listening. To him it seemed there had come a faint, frantic call. He listened for many minutes, but heard only the wailing wind and splashing waves. And he, too, wagged his head and went on.

A few minutes later Captain Hanley was in his cabin, ready for bed. His bed was made and his pajamas laid out, but Captain Hanley stood fully-dressed in the middle of the room. He was scratching his neck. Something was wrong; some strange, unseen power was holding him back. For some inexplicable reason he could not retire.

Then, listening to the whine of the wind outside, his eyes suddenly lighted up.

"The cry in the night!" he muttered. In a flash he was back on deck.

Sleepy passengers still on deck were astonished to feel the ship slow up and turn slowly about in a complete circle. They were surprised, too, when the *Diana* swung about not once, but twice, three

times, bucking high winds and mountainous waves.

But no cries came in over the storm. On the third wide circle, Captain Hanley wagged his head and the *Diana* steamed on. But as she gained speed, there came a shout from below. A sailor pointed to a dark blob in the surging waters, only 100 yards off to starboard.

The *Diana* snorted and went into reverse.

Through the blinding spray Wayne and I—two scared youths snatched from the brink of a watery death—could see a lifeboat being lowered. In a few minutes we were being helped aboard by a crew of grinning sailors.

A hundred passengers, hurriedly dressed, cheered when they raised us to the deck. There were tears in my eyes. There were tears in the captain's eyes, too.

For the balance of the cruise to Duluth, and back home again, Wayne and I were honored guests of Captain Hanley, the unsung hero. Our rescue, we learned later, had brought to twenty-five the number this veteran lake skipper had rescued that year. Our thanks were unnecessary. Publicity was subdued to a minimum. But that fall I shot a fine buck and presented it to the captain as a token of our appreciation.

It wasn't much, but a man like old Cap Hanley doesn't expect much. He'd rather give. *Arthur K. Johns.*

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THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by

PETE KUHLHOFF

The Krag Rifle

WELL, sir, you could have knocked me over with a feather when I learned that there were young riflemen coming along who had never heard of the good ole Krag. I have shot and butchered (remodeled to you) so many of these guns I just took it for granted that everyone knew about 'em.

Shortly after the January 10, 1941, issue of SHORT STORIES was published, the mail started coming in (I mentioned that the Krag was a good all-around rifle for me) —a lot of questions—so maybe we'd better go into this little lady's past.

Sometime in the early 1890's Uncle Sam decided to keep in step with other first-class powers and equip his army with a repeating rifle. The single shot Springfield .45-70 was the official arm at that time.

So after looking the situation over he decided to adopt a foreign rifle, the Krag-Jorgensen. Manufacture was commenced at the Springfield Armory in 1892.

The gun has a box magazine, the gate of which is located on the right hand side, holding five cartridges. The safety is on the rear end of the bolt. She is equipped with a cut-off, so the rifle can be fired as a single shot with the magazine fully loaded.

In 1898 a number of minor improvements were made and the Krag-Jorgensen —known as Krag among riflemen—was officially called the United States magazine rifle, Model 1898.

The infantry rifle was manufactured with a 30-inch barrel, while the cavalry was equipped with the Model 1899 carbine, having a 22-inch barrel.

The cartridge was loaded with about 40 grains of smokeless powder to push a 220-grain bullet measuring .308 inch in diameter. The bullet had a lead core jacketed with cupro-nickel, and when fired traveled at about 2,000 feet per second at muzzle from the 30-inch barrel.

With this early ammunition the boys had a lot of trouble with metal fouling.

In 1905 the Krag was superseded by the Springfield Model 1903, due, not to any fault of the arm but to the fact that its mechanism was such that the cartridges

One gun for all round use—Krag .30-40

had to be loaded one at a time into the magazine and it could not be altered for clip loading which modern war conditions require.

To close out its enormous stock and to aid civilian marksmanship, the War Department disposed of the Krag through the Director of Civilian Marksmanship to members of the National Rifle Association.

I have one of these guns which is known as an Arsenal Conversion. This means that the 30-inch barrel was cut to 24 inches, the handguard taken off, and the stock fore-end cut off above the sling barrel band.

By taking off the barrel sight and adding a receiver peep-sight, she made a good sporting rifle.

Modern ammunition is loaded to drive the 180-grain bullet at around 2,500 feet a second, which is good to use on any American game, including moose and bear, sez me, sticking my long neck way out!

Anyone interested in reloading for this (the all-around gun) or for any other cartridge, should get the new Ideal Hand Book on Reloading Ammunition which is Number 34.

I just received it in the morning mail and haven't had time to check it for "what's new."

It is published by the Lyman Gun Sight Corporation of Middlefield, Conn., at 50 cents per copy.

This and That

Arms for England

The other day I went down to visit Major Anthony Fiala, who is technical adviser of the American Committee for Defense of British Homes. The organization headquarters is at 10 Warren Street, New York City.

As of January 9, 1941, the committee has received over 1,500 guns, about the same number of revolvers, 783 binoculars, almost 200,000 rounds of ammunition and 1,476 steel helmets. All of this equipment goes to the British home guard units.

To get some idea of the value of this equipment, I asked the Major what the binoculars were worth. He said, "$29,040"—which is a heap of folding money in any man's talk.

It seems that the most needed article is the steel helmet, and every one sent to England will be put to immediate use in protecting civilian life.

The committee has received a sizeable contribution of arms confiscated by the police of various communities where the law permits disposal of such arms at the discretion of officials.

Major Fiala says, "Anything that goes off with a bang we can use. They all make holes."

Complete instructions in the principles on which good marksmanship is based is contained in the "Handbook on Small Bore Rifle Shooting," by Colonel Townsend Whelen, published by the Sporting Arms & Ammunition Manufacturers, Inst. We have made arrangements to send this handbook to all SHORT STORIES readers interested in shooting. Just enclose ten cents, in coin or stamps, to cover cost of handling and postage, and send to The Shooter's Corner, SHORT STORIES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York City, New York.

Everyone interested in shooting should join the National Rifle Association of America. I will be glad to furnish particulars.

The Story Tellers' Circle

History As Is

AN INTERESTING test of international law might come up, according to an item in the Minneapolis *Star-Journal* of September 30th, 1940. It seems that there's an internment camp in the region of the Nipigon where the British government keeps some of its German prisoners. Assume, says the paper, that one of these German prisoners escaped and made his way to the Nine-mile Portage, a stretch along the Pigeon River nine miles long and about a rod broad. This piece was established by the Messrs. Webster and Ashburton as the only absolutely neutral bit of territory in the world. It doesn't belong to anybody, never can belong to

anybody and the escaped prisoner could camp out there the rest of his life and be perfectly safe. The winters, though, might be a little rough the paper adds.

This intriguing supposition caught the eye of *Clay Perry*, who likes to write of happenings in the deep woods, and from it developed the story *Escape and Rescue* in this SHORT STORIES. Inasmuch as several historical points are raised by and in the story, we asked *Mr. Perry* about this neutral strip. His letter follows:

In 1841 Daniel Webster, acting as a commissioner for the United States, entered into negotiations with the states of Maine, Massachusetts and others in respect to the proposed establishment of a new boundary line, particularly between the northeastern states and Canada, and in 1842 Congress passed and President Tyler signed the so-called "Washington Treaty." This is sometimes called the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, and by it Maine lost some 893 square miles of territory to Canada and was to be paid $300,000 by Britain. The new line ran clear out to Lake of the Woods, in Minnesota and Ontario, cutting across the Great Lakes, Huron and Superior, and, as described in the "Dictionary of American History" by John Truslow Adams, the boundary was "also rectified at the head of the Connecticut River (then Massachusetts), at the north end of Lake Champlain, in the Detroit River and at the head of Lake Superior. It also included "a useful extradition article and another providing for free navigation of the St. John's River, as well as an article settling once and for all the question of the 'right of seizure and search' on the high seas."

The territory thus readjusted between the U. S. and Canada included some points then so remote and unknown that in one instance a lake called "Long Lake" could never be found. It is supposed, however, that it was a sheet of water at the mouth of the Pigeon River, and "the treaty adopts

that estuary and river and pursues the usual course across the height of land to Rainy Lake and to its termination at Lake of the Woods." It took in four million acres of valuable mineral lands in Michigan especially—for the United States.

Just what happened to create the so-called "neutral" strip of territory known as Nine-mile Portage along the Pigeon River is more or less of a mystery; doubtless the same conditions which "lost" Long Lake. At any rate, there it is—and even now so wild and unexplored that one might easily get lost in the region.

There exists a considerable library of published books, documents and comment on the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, for it was a matter of vital importance to the friendship of the United States and Great Britain, and it led to a new treaty between the U. S. and France, respecting the "right of search." This was being exercised, despite the War of 1812 which was supposed to have abolished it, largely because of the "blackbirders"—Yankee skippers running slaves.

Prior to the execution of the treaty which was signed by President John Tyler, August 9, 1842, there had been armed threats between the U. S. and Canada, called the "Aroostook War." The difficulty was to establish a line which corresponded with that established by the French when they owned Canada, and the search for maps was one of the features of the negotiations. Not until 1932 was the so-called "Red Line Map" which would have saved a lot of trouble, discovered in Paris.

Coming back to the neutral strip, it is evident that this was not deliberately established, for no official mention is made of it in the treaty; but it was later discovered as an error which could not be rectified easily, probably not short of an entirely new treaty, and being rather a worthless strip, anyway, it was doubtless left, under the jurisdiction of the International Boundary Commission which is now in existence.

Clay Perry.

Another point in Mr. Perry's story struck us as interesting, since very often in an adventure story, the hero can shoot himself out of a given situation when it becomes too hot. That local conditions can modify this possibility is brought out in the Perry story by the succinct statement that "firearms were prohibited in the logging camps during the closed season on game."

This Hiji Character

SINCE the Major, and the Edgar Wallace stories of Commissioner Sanders, we have had no such intriguing African character in SHORT STORIES as *Mr. Seabury Quinn's* Hiji. About Hiji *Mr. Quinn* writes:

Hiji and his comrades—white, mixed-breed and black — of the West Central Africa Administration have always seemed to me the unsung heroes of a great saga something like our infantry who, withou the romance of the air corps or a rousing song like that of the field artillery, are allowed to do war's dirty work and drudgery without popular applause.

They are just a handful, and have in their keeping a white population of some 5,000 men, women and children, the supervision of about a million and a half natives, most of whom are savages, and the administration of a territory covering 27,000 square miles. Beside the tasks assigned them, the exploits of the Indian Administration or the famed Northwest Mounted Police are merest child's play.

Nor is their task merely the relatively simple one of overawing primitively-armed natives with rifles and machine-guns. "Face"—the prestige of the government—has to be maintained at all times, but amiable relations with the natives must also be considered. When governmental orders run contrary to the age-old customs and beliefs of the savages this is no easy work. Broadly speaking, only two things are forbidden, murder and slave-trading; but since

native kings and chiefs and even village headmen have always asserted their inalienable right to dispose of those they dislike in various unpleasant ways, and the sale of slaves has long been a lucrative industry, enforcement of these ordinances has been far from easy. Also, witchcraft was as real to the natives as it was to Father Sprenger in the fifteenth century or the Rev. Samuel Parish of Salem Village Church in the seventeenth. Even those who had not had the benefit of missionaries' teachings believed wholeheartedly in the good fundamentalist doctrine that it's a sin to let a witch live. "Chopping" witches —proved or suspected—seemed quite the natural thing to do. The government called it murder and discouraged it, as a consequence of which unreasonable attitude the witch doctors' highly remunerative practices were threatened with extinction, and forthwith conflict between the church, as represented by the witch doctors, and "state," as represented by Hiji and the officers of administration, became as bitter and bloody as it was in medieval Europe of, say, Frederick Barbarossa's day.

Courage and tact are the two main requisites for men in such commands; the ability to administer even-handed justice in a way which will be understood and respected by a people with no such things as an abstract sense of justice, and to deal fairly and not too harshly with full-grown men with all men's strength and passions, but with a mental equipment and lack of self-restraint equal to that of the average six-year-old child in civilized lands.

Finally, they are charged with the safekeeping of an almost minute white population against the savagery of a horde of natives equally as cruel and warlike and even more numerous than the North American Indian of frontier days. It is a large order they have given them, but one which they have filled with full measure, pressed down and running over.

Seabury Quinn

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The very day you put on a BROOKS Patented Air-Cushion, you feel that you

Because the cling of the Air-Cushion makes it hold as nothing else can . . . because the wearer speedily comes to realize that there can be no slipping to let the rupture down . . . that while the BROOKS protects, the dreaded specter of strangulation is banished . . . because the wearer can indulge in every normal activity . . . because physical tasks can be resumed . . . because common sense says that everything humanly possible is being accomplished to improve the rupture condition.

And here is another "because," a tremendous one to those who have suffered and suffered with the miseries of a hard, gouging, burning, galling pad that never lets up, never is forgotten. Your BROOKS will have no springs, no metal girdle, no agonizing pressure devices. Instead there is the utterly comfortable Air-Cushion and a velvet soft body band. It is so absolutely comfortable that you'll hardly know the truss is there at all. To thousands upon thousands, such relief alone is a paradise.

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This is a new one on us

Dear Secretary:

I think I am the one and only bird of my breed to ask for enrollment in your Ends of the Earth Club.

I style myself, "Bank Protection Engineer." Have you ever heard of anything of the kind?

There are a lot of things from which a bank needs protection. Yet I believe the matter which comes to the mind of the average man is hold-up.

Burglary is well taken care of. If any banker reader wants to know "how come?" let him write me and I'll tell him, without charge. A lot of them still don't know.

What they don't realize is that every bank is different from practically every other bank; and that only a man who has *studied* bank hold-up—hundreds of cases, right on the ground—knows what can be done for *that* bank.

When they wake up to that fact, I'll have competition—after some fellows have really studied the problem instead of reading newspaper reports.

Why do I ask to enroll in the Ends of the Earth Club? If anyone has some ideas along this line I'd like to hear from him, just for fun. In my experience most everyone thinks he has an answer, right

off-hand. If you don't object to one member having some fun with another member, enroll me.

Yours truly,

H. F. Luers

Late Capt., Inf., U. S. Army,
Warrington, Fla.

Wants to hear from those interested in theatre, music, books and travel

Dear Secretary:

Your Ends of the Earth Club appeals to me greatly and I'm hoping you'll aid me in finding correspondents all over the world. I am interested in hearing from men and boys who like to write letters and who live exciting and thrilling lives. Will welcome letters from anyone who cares to write.

Am a young man of twenty-seven, deeply interested in the theatre, music, books, hiking and traveling. Have been in New England, Florida, and Mexico, but live in the quaint city of Brotherly Love.

Sincerely,

317 South 10th Street, *Tom Silton*
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

A Philippine Stamp Collector

Dear Secretary:

I have been a reader of the SHORT STORIES magazine for a long time and since letter-writing is one of my hobbies I decided to enroll myself as a member of your End of the Earth Club. I am sure that by doing this I can add more to the number of pals I have at present.

I am a young student of seventeen who is expecting myself to graduate this year. I am interested in stamp collecting and have plenty of time to answer letters. There is no question as to the ages and homes of my friends to be. I guarantee all of them prompt replies.

Yours truly,

Segundo C. Feliciano

294 Calamba Street,
Guadalupe, Cebu, Philippines.

WEBB City Forms a Chapter All Its Own

We welcome the Webb City, Missouri, Ends of the Earth Club.

Following is a list of members, all from Webb City, Missouri, who have just recently joined our club. They have formed a club of their own which they call the Webb City Ends of the Earth Club, and which is under the able direction of Miss May Aldridge of 505 N. Roane St., Webb City. We have listed their hobbies so that you who have like hobbies can exchange views and wares.

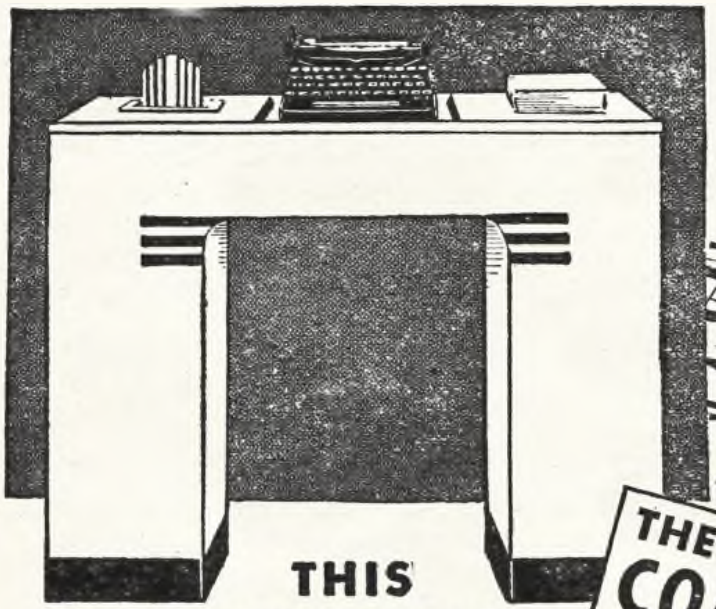
Inez Blankenship, 415 W. First St.—Postcards
A. S. Bunce, 16 S. Penn Ave.—Aviation and baton twirling
Marie Caln, 705 S. Oronogo St.—Stamps and postcards
Jo Anne Carsten, 311 S. Webb St.—Roller skating
Margaret Cox, 1215 Broadway—Stamps, books and music
Shirley Ann Durham, 706 12th St.
Marthann Elliott, 1501 Nelson St.
Mildred Elliott, 328 S. Roane St.
Martha Ford, 1321 W. 5th St.—Music, art
Christine Gandy, 819 W. Daugherty St.
Vida Ruth Hatcher, 415 Wood St., West—Sports
Emma Mae Hattery, 420 E. Austin St.—Matchbook covers,

Kathleen Head, 202 E. Broadway—Foreign countries
Helen Hensley, 317 S. Hall St.—Matchbook covers
Betty Hensley, 210 E. Broadway
Lavada Howe, General Delivery—Bric-a-brac
Betty Lou Hudson, 605 N. Roane St.
Ethel I. Hunt, 410 S. Elliott St.—Music
Pauline Lamb, 830 Campbell St.
Jean Lowe, 422 S. Devon St.
Erma Patterson, 1203 W. Aylor St.—Pictures of great people
Betty Jean Stines, 828 S. Hall St.—Snapshots
Betty Terpening, 1205 W. Daugherty—Pictures of Dionne

Jane Van Hoose, 809 S. Madison St.—Baton twirling
Shirley Williams, 701 W. Daugherty St.—Music and aviation
Helen Worthy, 424 N. Hall St.—China dogs and match

Ellsworth Barrett, 610 S. Hall St.—Stamps
Clifford Bridges, 420 N. Tom St.—Hunting and fishing
Don Hardestry, 1218 W. 7th St.—Airplanes
Bob Hargis, 325 S. Roane St.—Stamps, model airplane building
Jim Hickam, 1011 S. Madison—Golf
Charles Horne, 334 S. Liberty St.—Stamps, model airplanes
Gene Mayfield, 210 N. Oronogo St.
Kelly McKnight, 309 N. Roan St.—Hunting and fishing
Donald Metheny, 907 W. 1st St.—Woodworking and matchbook covers
Leon Moore, 1009 W. 1st St.—Matchbook covers
Mark Oliver Mottet, 920 W. 1st St.—Animal pictures
J. C. Palmer, 923 West 1st St.—Aviation
John Patterson, 1203 W. Aylor St.
Victor White, 501 S. Oakland St.—Camping and fishing
Bob Trimble, 1131 W. Austin—Baritone horn
Robert Woodard, 1013 W. 1st St.—Airplane models

This is a good idea. How about other towns following suit, asks James Hanover.



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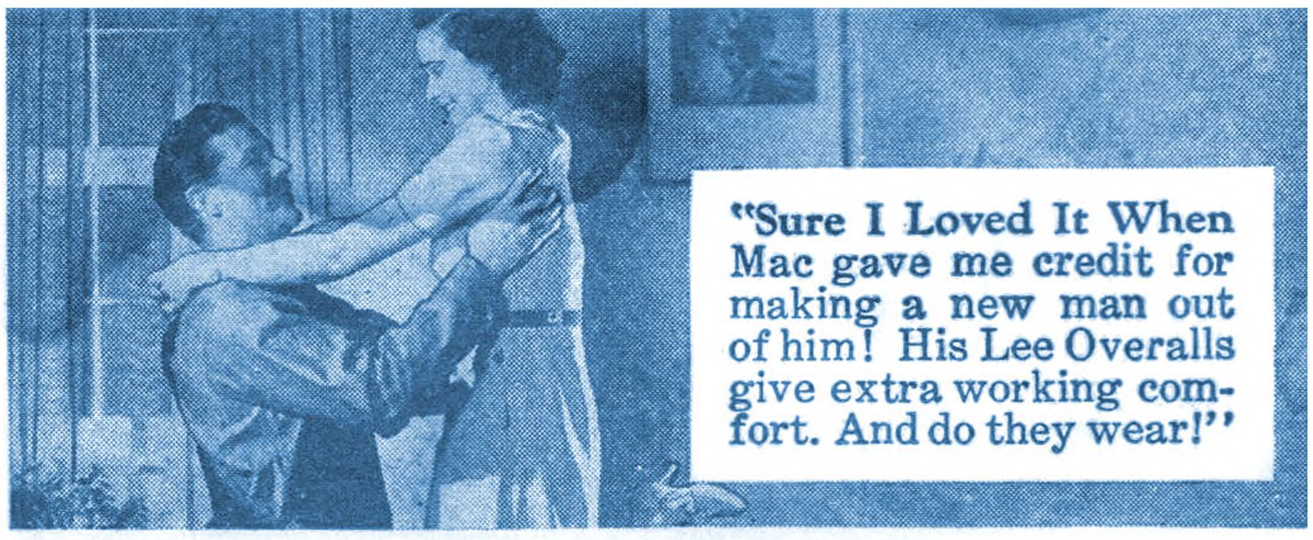

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