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FROZEN INLET POST

A Novel of the Land of the Strong Cold

by

James B. Hendryx

James Reynolds

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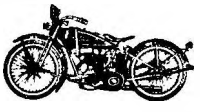

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Joan's soap, for instance, is just as fine, just as pure, just as gentle as Elsie's costly treasures. White, too, moreover—Joan prefers a white soap because she considers it daintier, and because it leaves no colored stains on her washstand.

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Short Stories

Vol. CXIX, No. 3 Whole No. 514

HARRY E. MAULE
EDITOR

D. McILWRAITH
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WHO OWNS YOUR LIFE?

HOW much of yourself do you really own? How much of your life is yours to do with as you like, and how much do you owe to your family, the state, your friends, your business? These questions, propounded in a story we were reading the other day set us to thinking on this question of loyalties, so frequently clashing in their interests and pulling us this way and that. Our thought was, can anyone lead his own life regardless of others, letting only his own desires and convenience dictate his actions? Granting that the end of life is happiness and contentment; that riches, fame, mental development, high position, etc. are only various ways for various people to gain this end in life; we still maintain that no man can reach this goal without being owned, to some extent, by others. There are plenty who have tried it and their selfishness and ruthlessness have turned even their so-called success to ashes in their mouths.

Yet the most Christ-like of men cannot allow himself to be owned entirely by the demands of others and still fulfill his mission of good in the world. Could a man whose life was dedicated entirely to the helping of others give all of himself to every demand? Obviously not, or he should be exhausted by petty affairs, and impostors, so that when the real call came for his energies, he would be unable to answer.

For the average man there is a middle course, to be determined only by conscious thought on his own part. We all owe some part of us to others. That is one of the immutable laws of nature born of the fact that man is a social animal. Just where the truest expression of leading our own lives comes each man must determine himself. Some iron, and some compassion, but most of all a clear head.

THE EDITOR.

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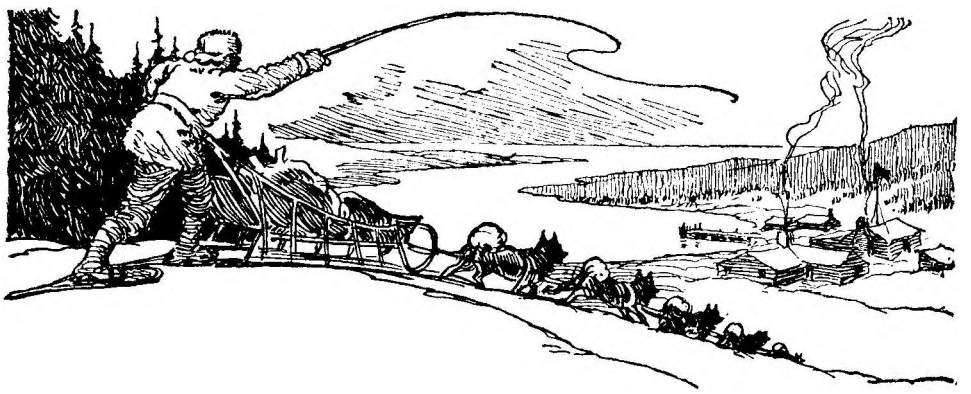
TWICE A MONTH

Short Stories

MAY 10th 1927



FROZEN INLET POST

High Adventure Along the Fur Trails of the Hudson's Bay Country

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Parole from the Mounted," "Oak and Iron," etc.

PART I

FROZEN INLET POST OF A GREAT FUR TRADING COMPANY WAS ON THE BLEAK NORTHERN REACHES OF HUDSON BAY—BACK OF BEYOND, NEXT DOOR TO THE PITILESS ARCTIC. AND THERE IT WAS THAT THERE WAS PLAYED OUT THIS DRAMA OF HUMAN COURAGE AND GREED; OF HOPE, DESPAIR AND TRIUMPH, AMONG THOSE WHOSE HOME WAS AMONG THE FROZEN WASTES, WHOSE LIVELIHOOD CAME FROM THEIR GOLDEN TRAILS, AND WHOSE HERITAGE WAS BENEATH THE FLAMING NORTHERN LIGHTS

CHAPTER I

FURNOT APPLIES FOR A JOB

"HAVEN'T they always come down the river in their canoes?" argued Giles Furnot, as he stood with his factor beside an upturned whaleboat on the beach at Frozen Inlet.

"Aye," conceded the older man, "an' time we had the country to ourselves, 'twas well enough they should. But with the scum o' the earth crowdin' in on us, we've got to meet competition."

During the previous summer two free traders had penetrated to a point some eighty miles inland from Frozen Inlet, and had succeeded in securing a considerable share of the fur that normally would have come to the post. These traders had built a small cabin upon a river that was a thoroughfare from the westward. One of them had wintered there, and at the time of the Christmas trading, had again succeeded in diverting a part of the Frozen Inlet fur. Therefore, in the mind of Duncan Alexander, factor at Frozen Inlet, these men were "the scum of the earth," and their cabin nearly a hundred miles distant was good and sufficient evidence of the overcrowding of the outlands.

Furnot smiled at the old Scot's words. "They won't be able to get much fur. Their tradin' goods won't hold out, an' they're not fixed to handle the fur, anyway."

"If they get one skin that should come to me, they've got too much!" retorted

the factor. "An', as for their tradin' goods—a small bit of liquor makes a short bargain. They've got liquor, even if Constable Barnes couldn't find it. It was told me by the natives, themselves. An' what's more, they can handle a deal of fur in small bulk—they only take the best of it, an' leave the heavier, rougher stuff for me. A man may beat me once, but not twice at the same game. When the trappers come in next month they'll find the whaleboat waitin' to carry their catch safe past the camp of the dirty land pirates."

"It's goin' to be quite a job to put the boat in shape an' get it up there," opined the clerk, foreseeing many days of labor ahead for himself and the Company Indians.

"Losh! A job! Man, ye should know what a job is! But job or no job—the whaleboat goes up the river! So look alive, now. Caulk her good an' tight, an' we'll run her up to the head of the Inlet on the ice, an' when the river's runnin' free you can take her on up."

Seeing that further argument was useless, Giles Furnot turned away to gather the tools necessary to the repair of the whaleboat that the Company Indians had only that morning broken out from under the drifted snow that had been its winter covering. And as he walked toward the buildings he was followed by the eyes of Alexander, whose thin lips tightened beneath the grizzled beard that masked the angular jaw, as though sensing the muttered curses with which the clerk reviled Frozen Inlet Post, the free traders, his factor, and himself for having sought transfer from Moose Factory to this far post on the bleak shore of the northern reach of Hudson Bay.

When he returned to the boat, Alexander was not in sight, and as he fell to work he forgot his bitterness in the thought that the Company boat would be bringing Anne Alexander home. "Home!" he muttered, contemptuously, as his glance swept the barren landscape where the ugly little buildings of the post with their sheet iron roofs furnished the only relief from the drab monotony of soggy snow. "Four walls an' a roof, an' somethin' to eat! Two months, now, or maybe three, an' she'll come. An' then—" The words trailed into silence, and as he plied his caulking iron, the clerk planned for the future.

Giles Furnot was not an outlander born, although the blood of generations of *voyageurs* flowed in his veins. His father had forsaken the land of the lakes and rivers, had married and settled himself as a cobbler in a small town in Quebec. But the town with its little wooden houses, its white painted church and schoolhouse, its stores, and the neighboring farmsteads of the little valley, held nothing of interest for Giles. Nor did the business of mending shoes appeal as a means of obtaining a livelihood. He was an apt pupil in the school, and the gentle Father Lacombie had thoughts of the boy for the priesthood. But Giles longed for adventure, and at seventeen he ran away and slipped aboard a vessel bound for far ports.

For three years he sailed the sea, then in New York, while looking for a berth, gangland claimed him. Eventually, under the sobriquet of the Sailor Kid, he became an object of interest to the police of three cities. By some curious quirk of fate a brace of his companions were convicted of a felony in Chicago, which fact brought sudden realization that adventure of a sort is bought with a price. Whereupon the little Quebec town knew Giles Furnot once again. But not for long. Through an old friend of his father he obtained recommendations that secured him a position with the great fur company whose outposts dot the wilderness to the shore of the frozen sea. Here he would find adventure, as his forebears had found it, among the lakes and rivers of the outlands, and the police of cities could forget the Sailor Kid.

From a two-year apprenticeship served at a post which the coming of the new railway quickly converted into a town, he was transferred to Moose Factory. It was there he met Anne Alexander, in the final year of her studies at the school.

The girl had spent the eighteen years of her life on the shores of Hudson Bay. Her mother had died at her birth in the far northern post, and Anne had been reared at the breast of a young Indian woman, under whose watchful care she weathered the perils of babyhood, sprawling and rolling about among the black flies and the mosquitoes together with numerous puppies and young Indians. Later she spent much time at the big house on the marsh, a hundred miles to the southward, where, with Hildegard Gaunt, she received her early education at the knees of the wife of David Gaunt, who was a fast friend of her father. Essentially a child of the North, Anne loved it, mastered it, and explored its untracked fastnesses with dog-sled, or pack-sack, and traversed its

waters in dory, York boat, or canoe. And yet, withal, she remained intensely feminine, a dreamer of dreams—wonderful day dreams in which her Prince Charming came riding to her over the snows.

A general favorite along the Bay, the girl viewed life seriously as is the wont of the wilderness dweller, yet with a vast and saving sense of humor that endeared her to everyone with whom she came into contact. This sense of humor was no heritage from Duncan Alexander, the dour old Scot, who, since before the birth of his daughter had presided over the destiny of Frozen Inlet Post. He was, in a way of speaking, a man of mystery. He had remained from choice for upwards of nineteen years at Frozen Inlet, one of the bleakest, and from the usual human viewpoint, one of the most undesirable, of the great fur company's outposts. And during those nineteen years he had not left the Bay, his absences from the post being rare visits to other posts, or to the great house on the marsh where his friend David Gaunt had established himself.

There were vague rumors that he possessed much gold, and other rumors that before his connection with the Company, he had dipped deep into the fleshpots of the world. But these were whispers. And if they ever reached the ears of Duncan Alexander, no man knew. Men did know that he was eminently fitted for his place. In furthering the Company's interests he was indefatigable, and he ruled his domain with the autocracy of a Czar, albeit with an "eye for an eye" sense of justice that commanded the respect of white man and native alike.

Down at Moose Factory, Giles Furnot had listened to the rumor—more especially had he listened to the rumor concerning the gold. Whereupon his interest centered upon Anne Alexander. There was scant opportunity, he found, of seeing the girl alone. Also, it took no discerning eye to see that he was not alone in his interest in Anne Alexander. There were other young blades among the employees of the two rival trading companies, and there were engineers and employees of the Hydrographic Department, and a young missionary from England. These, too, had listened to rumor. Insofar as he could see, there was none more favored than himself, except perhaps the missionary whose work seemed to be in some manner connected with the welfare of the school. Him, however, Furnot disregarded. The youthful cleric took himself so seriously as to leave scant room for serious consideration in the minds of others.

After which discerning survey young Furnot set about to win the girl's attention by making himself an outstanding figure in the little community. Contrary to the habit of the place, he held aloof from divine worship, ignoring alike the Catholic and the Protestant organizations, although affecting broad tolerance of both. Whereupon he became a brand to be plucked from the burning at the imminent risk of scorching godly fingers. Also he became an object of censure—the ungodly one, among the godly many. Thus having grimly planted his feet upon the road to local fame, he studiously sought by trick of speech, by trick of dress, and by trick of deed to keep them there. And he succeeded in that he awakened, first the notice, and later the interest of the girl. Studying her comings and goings, he contrived many chance meetings and always, by some adroit bit of conversation, he managed to whet the girl's curiosity so that, rather than seeking to avoid these meetings, she looked forward to them as bright spots in the monotonous routine of the days.

Thus it was he learned that she would finish at the school in the spring, and that she expected to go to Frozen Inlet with the supply boat when it headed northward in July.

The day before the *Nascopie* was to sail, chance threw in his way an opportunity he was quick to seize. David Gaunt's schooner appeared in the roadstead. A small boat put off from her, and three men stepped ashore, David Gaunt, Hilton, who was inspector of the Company's posts along the Bay, and a tall, spare man whose red rimmed, watery eyes of faded blue gleamed like points of flame above his grizzled beard—the factor of Frozen Inlet. Giles Furnot, busy among his account books, furtively studied these men, as he furtively listened to their talk with his factor.

The grizzled man was speaking: "—he does well enough as clark, but he's good for naught else. An' at Frozen Inlet 'tis more important a man should be able to handle a boat, or a canoe, or a team of dogs,

than to keep a neat set of books. What's to be done, must be done by the two of us or by the Injuns. 'Tis a job for a good man. The lad is well meanin', but no good for Frozen Inlet. In one of the larger posts he would be of value, for he knows figures, an' he knows fur."

"But," objected the inspector, "we can't get anyone up to you this year, Alexander. The *Nascopie* sails tomorrow, and there isn't an extra clerk anywhere on the Bay."

Inspiration seized Giles Furnot. Here was Duncan Alexander, himself, seeking a clerk. Frozen Inlet, visited but once a year, Alexander the only other white man —and Anne— Summoning his nerve, he noisily closed a book, and stepped forward.

"Wouldn't I fill the bill?" he asked, smiling.

For a moment all eyes were upon him, and Furnot was uncomfortably conscious that the keen eyes of the factor of Frozen Inlet seemed to bore him through. But his own gaze did not flinch, and presently the inspector spoke.

"What makes you think you would?" he asked gruffly.

"I couldn't help hearing your talk," answered Furnot, "an' I'd like to have a try at the job. I've handled boats and canoes all my life, an' I've had a little experience with dogs."

"The lad looks strong," appraised Alexander. "If he's willin', he might do."

"He's green," commented the inspector. "Never been north of here. Been with the Company a couple of years, but not on the Bay. Good enough stock, though. His father was a Company man—years back." He turned to the Moose Factory factor. "How's he been gettin' along?"

"I have no fault to find. He does his work well. It's rumored he's godless, but that is the concern of the clergy."

"All right. Take him along, Alexander. And, mind, if he don't pan out, it ain't my fault. Ordinarily I wouldn't shift a man to a post like Frozen Inlet till he's had a little more seasoning, We can get along here till you can send Brooks back with the *Nascopie*. I'll say you're lucky to get a man at short notice. Most of 'em fight shy of the outposts. He won't be so green a year from now."

Passing out the doorway with Gaunt, Alexander called over his shoulder, "Get your gear aboard the *Nascopie*. We sail at daylight."

As the two disappeared in the direction of the school, the factor turned kindly eyes upon the clerk. "'Twas so when I was young," he said. "I liked the outposts. But I doubt even then I'd have asked for Frozen Inlet."

"What's the matter with it?" asked Furnot, conscious of a slight uneasiness.

"Oh, nothin'—nothin', at all. Only it's bleak up there, an' lonesome. You'd better get your duffle aboard while there's daylight, an' tonight we'll go over the books."

When Furnot had gone and they were approaching the school, Alexander spoke his thoughts. "'Tis surprisin' these days to find a lad askin' transfer to an outpost. 'Tis generally the other way around. He's a likely lookin' lad, didn't ye think?"

"Aye," answered Gaunt, "he's big an' strappin'. But he's a man 'twill stand watchin'——"

"What do ye mean?"

"I mean," replied David Gaunt, "that he asked transfer for a reason. He looks a man too square in the eye when he talks."

Chapter II

At Frozen Inlet Post

HOUR after hour during that mild spring day Giles Furnot worked on the whaleboat with caulking tool and paint brush. It was a day to stir the heart of a man even at Frozen Inlet. The sun shone warm as though conscious of his waxing supremacy over the snows that were slowly and sullenly vanishing before his merciless attack. It was spring. Little rivers of water cut their way through the sodden snow and converted the icebound Inlet into a vast lake of gray slush. High overhead wild geese winged their noisy way, and now and then the sunlight gleamed with dazzling brilliance on long lines of wavies. Insect life with its myriads of stinging things had not yet awakened to fulfil its destiny of torment, and, stripped to his undershirt, the man worked in comfort. From time to time his glance rested upon the gaunt form of the factor who with the Company Indians labored in the construction of a stout sled, or cradle, upon which the whaleboat was to be hauled over the ice to the mouth of the river that discharged into the head of the Inlet.

Bitterly Furnot resented the grudging admiration that had grown up in his heart for the old Scot. "Close mouthed as a clam, damn him!" he muttered. "Ten months—just us two white men together, an' I don't know yet whether he's got a

dollar, or a million. He's got his pay, though. They say he ain't spent nothin' in eighteen, twenty years. He's saltin' it down for her. Ten months livin' alone with him! An' sometimes I think the old devil sees through my game. He's no man's fool. If I'd known she wasn't comin' up on the *Nascopie*— But how could I? She didn't know herself. He slipped one over on me there, but he didn't know. How could he? But she'll be in on the boat this year, sure. An' then— He's seventy if he's a day, an' his heart ain't so good."

He daubed a seam in silence. The factor was coming toward him. The old man paused at his side and inspected the work carefully. "Ye're doin' a good job, lad. One more day will finish. Ye can knock off now if ye like an' we'll see if we can get us some geese. I watched a big flock settle in beyond yonder rocks."

Furnot put on his shirt, stowed his tools, and a few minutes later was crawling through the saturated snow behind the factor to gain the coveted cover of the rocks. He glanced once at the loaded gun in his hand. Its muzzle was pointed directly toward the body of the other. What if it should go off? He grinned, and with a shrug he reversed the gun.

Close behind the rocks, Alexander motioned his clerk to his side. Before them, in a shallow surface water pool, fifty or sixty geese sported in the water scarcely twenty yards away. Furnot trained his ten gauge shotgun upon a closely grouped bunch, but the factor stayed his finger. He himself carried a repeating twenty-two caliber rifle. "I'll pick me out a bird, an' as they rise off the water you pour it into 'em. Ye'll get more when their wings are spread. Ye ready?"

The clerk nodded, and at the crack of the rifle he fired into what seemed to be a solid wall of necks and wings. He fired again, and noted that several geese were thrashing the water. Again he was conscious of the grudging admiration for the old man, who crouched beside him, working his little rifle. The geese were winging heavily into the wind, and with clocklike precision, the action of the rifle clashed, the cartridge popped, and a goose dropped. Ten times the old man shot, and eight geese hit the water, or the soggy snow beyond. With the shotgun Furnot himself had secured four.

"That's shootin'!" cried the younger man.

"Aye, not so bad for an old man. The twenty-two is far better than the shotgun, in weight, an' range, an' expense. Ye fired twenty cents worth of ammunition, an' carried nine pounds of gun to get four geese, while I burned eleven cents worth for nine geese, an' my gun was a mere handful."

The two returned to the post, dispatched an Indian to fetch in the geese, and sat down to supper. Frozen Inlet Post consisted of three buildings, the factor's house, the Indian headquarters, and a long, low building that was a combination trading room, storehouse, and fur repository. Furnot slept in the rear of the trading room but took his meals at the factor's table. These meals were silent affairs, for the most part, served in silence by an Indian woman, and eaten in silence by the two men. After supper, over a pipe, the affairs of the day, or the plans for the immediate future were discussed, after which Furnot would return to the trading room and read or play solitaire until far into the night.

Finishing his meal the factor drew his chair from the table to the stove, and tamped his pipe bowl. Reaching for an almanac he thumbed its pages. "'Twill be full o' the moon on the seventh," he said, "an', this is the fourth." The clerk joined him at the stove and filled his own pipe. The factor continued, "We should finish with the boat and sled tomorrow, an' then if it don't turn cold enough to give us ice in the daytime, we'll run her to the head of the inlet by moonlight. It's a matter of twenty miles or more to the head of the inlet, an' what with rough ice, an' all, an' the clumsy outfit, we can't figure better than ten or twelve miles in a night."

"The river won't be open yet," said the clerk.

"Aye, but we'll have the boat ready for launchin' when she does open. The first day the river's runnin' clear, ye an' the three Injuns start up. On spring flood ye should make ten or fifteen miles a day with trackline an' poles. There's only one short portage around a falls, an' ye can rig a Spanish windlass an' haul her around.

The river flows out of a lake about ninety miles from its mouth, an' accordin' to the Injuns, this free trader has built him a cabin in a patch of scrub on the north bank of the river about ten miles below the lake. Ye're to go on to the lake an' camp at the source of the river, so the natives comin' down to trade will have to pass yer camp before they come to his. Ye're to warn them against tradin' with him, an' offer to transport their catch to the post in the whaleboat."

"Suppose they won't listen to me?"

Alexander smote his knee with a hairy fist. "Make 'em listen to ye! This post is entitled to the inland trade, an' I'm goin' to get it! Tell 'em they've got their debt here to pay, an' tell 'em this trader's a fly-by-night, here today, an' gone tomorrow. Tell 'em his goods are shoddy, an' cheap, an' he cheats 'em, while the Company gives honest goods at honest prices. Tell 'em if they don't trade here they'll get no more debt at Frozen Inlet—an' what'll they do then? When this trader's gone back from where he come from, if the police don't get him first."

"If he's tradin' 'em hootch they ain't goin' to listen to no one," objected the clerk.

"Aye, lad, there's the rub, an' ye'll have yer hands full outwittin' him. Part of yer work will be to gather evidence that'll put him where he belongs."

"I ain't in the police," answered Furnot sullenly.

"That's true, but ye're a Company man, lad. An' the Company's got the welfare of the natives at heart. An' it's plain common sense we should have. It's the Injuns that brings in the fur, an' our own welfare depends absolutely on theirs. Time was the Company used to trade 'em liquor, too—till it learned better. Then as a matter of business it threw the liquor out of stock. The Company has small use for the fool sayin' ye sometimes hear that 'a good Injun's a dead Injun.' 'Tis only live Injuns that bring in the fur. I've watched ye now for the better part of a year. Ye're a smart lad, an' I'm not doubtin' ye'll be able to circumvent yon scum. If we can keep the spring tradin' out of his hands, the two of us can rest snug an' easy this winter, for he'll not be able to hold out another season."

Furnot slanted the older man a sidewise glance. Had he stressed those words "the two of us," or was it imagination? Why had he not said "the three of us?" Duncan Alexander puffed at his pipe, his eyes on the row of oblong openings that glowed at the draught of the stove. Silence had settled upon him. Furnot became keenly conscious of the little sounds within the room—the soft shuffling of moccasined feet, the click of cutlery, and the low rattle of porcelain as the Indian woman cleared the table, the incessant ticking of the clock, the drip, drip, of water from a leak in the roof, and the steady roar of the flames in the stove. These sounds all accentuated the silence that Furnot had come to hate.

Resentment against the brooding dumbness of his factor welled in the heart of the clerk. Did Alexander think he would spend another winter alone at Frozen Inlet with him? Could it be that Anne was not coming north? Had he been tricked again by this dour man of long silences? Ignoring completely the fact that he had volunteered for the position of clerk at Frozen Inlet, Furnot regarded himself as a martyr to Alexander's trickery. Anne herself had told him that she was finishing her last year at the school. Bitterly, in his mind, Furnot recalled the visit of Alexander to Moose Factory. It had seemed the chance of a lifetime—Frozen Inlet and the girl! How could he have known that Alexander had planned to send the girl southward with David Gaunt? Anne herself had not known. Only the day before, as they had stood for a moment together watching the loading of the *Nascopie,* she had told him that when the boat sailed it would carry her northward to Frozen Inlet.

Then Alexander had come, and after his acceptance as clerk, Furnot had purposely avoided any meeting with the girl during the few hours that remained before the sailing of the boat, for fear of arousing suspicion in the heart of the old Scot. It had been late that night when the Indian paddled him out to the *Nascopie,* after hours of checking over the Company books. And it had been late the following morning when he awoke and went on deck to find the boat plowing northward through the shallow waters of James Bay. Duncan Alexander stood alone, a weather seamed hand on the rail, his eyes on the distant shoreline. In vain Furnot sought the girl, and then he approached his new factor, that silent figure who stood at the rail, his eyes on the far horizon, the wind tugging at the grizzled beard—a Viking of a man, silent, unapproachable. Yet Furnot had approached.

"Fine day, sir," he had said. And the factor had answered "Aye." But the old

man did not turn his eyes from the line of the low, flat shore. Anger smoldered in the heart of the clerk as he recalled that scene. Vividly he remembered that he had tried again. "How's Miss Alexander this morning?"

"Well, doubtless. I cannot know." The eyes had remained fixed on the shoreline, and Furnot had turned away.

It was when the girl did not appear for the midday meal, that realization dawned that she was not on board the *Nascopie*. An hour later he again approached the factor. This time with a direct question which he strove to put lightly. "Isn't Miss Alexander on board?"

"No."

"Where is she?" Furnot had blurted the question, his brain in a turmoil.

"At this moment, doubtless upon the river about one-half day to the southward of Moose Factory."

This time the eyes of the factor had been upon him, and it was only by the exercising of the utmost self-control that Furnot had succeeded in concealing the mingled disappointment and rage that engulfed him. He recollected the surge of wild impulse to leap upon and to crush this imperturbable old man who had thwarted his aim—to demand that the *Nascopie* be turned back upon her course—to leap into the sea and swim to that low, flat shore—anything, anything, rather than a year of isolation with the man who stood calmly before him.

Recollection of the rumors of the old man's gold had flashed into his brain, and cooled the flaming rage. Gold. If he had it, it was doubtless at Frozen Inlet. They were bound for Frozen Inlet. It was a lonely post—Furnot would alter his plans, that was all. After all, the girl had figured merely as an easy means whereby he might accomplish his aim. The means had been withdrawn; the aim remained as before. The gold had not gone southward with the girl. When Furnot had spoken, it was with fine show of nonchalance.

"I'm sorry. We used to talk together, now and then, as we'd meet across the counter. But I suppose Frozen Inlet's no place for a woman."

"As good for a woman, as for her man," replied Alexander. "Did she tell ye it was not a good place for a woman?"

"No, she told me she loved it. That's why I thought she'd be goin' back. You see, I knew it was her last year in school."

"Aye, but there are things one cannot learn at Moose Factory. A year in the provinces will do her no harm. I sent her south to a school with David Gaunt."

All this Furnot recalled as he sat beside the factor and smoked. "A year in the provinces," he had said. Just that—and now the year was nearly up. In two months, or three, the *Nascopie* would again visit Frozen Inlet Post, deliver the mail and the supplies, take on the fur, and disappear for another year. Never once since that first day out had either ever spoken of the girl, nor had either mentioned gold. Was it possible that Alexander had again altered his plan—that Anne would not be on the *Nascopie?* Furnot realized that the girl again loomed large in his scheme of things. If the factor of Frozen Inlet had cached his gold, he had cached it well. And Furnot knew now, that not in one year, nor in ten, would he ever find it. There had been a Christmas mail from Churchill. Corporal Downey of the Mounted and a constable had left it on their way to Baker Lake. Had Anne herself elected to remain another year? Furnot must find out. If she were not coming north, he would go south. He would find her. Maybe his chances would be better away from the old man, anyhow.

Noisily he knocked the dottle from his pipe upon the corner of the woodbox, and reached for his tobacco.

"I hope they don't forget to ship that roofin' stuff on the *Nascopie,*" he announced, his eye on a discolored spot on the ceiling from which water dripped monotonously into a pan. "The freezin' an' thawin's raisin' the devil with the roof."

"Aye, 'twill doubtless be on the boat. I reported the roof bad."

"I suppose you'll be glad to have your daughter back home?"

"Aye."

"I guess it would be a big disappointment to you if the boat should come in without her."

"No."

"You mean, you don't expect her on the *Nascopie?*"

"Aye, she'll come on the *Nascopie*—but not this trip."

"She's not comin' this year?" Hate

flared in the short clipped words that rasped harsh.

Alexander ignored the tone, but answered without removing his glance from the ceiling. "No, she'll not be comin' this year. Next year, maybe. I hope so. I'd a letter at Christmas. She wants to visit some of her mates, here an' yon in the provinces. I gave her leave. A bit of travel hurts no one. It makes for better understandin'."

"You're a fool! Good God, man, do you think now she'll ever want to come back to *this?* You were a fool to ever let her go south of Moose Factory. What is there here for her—for any woman? Look at the damned place—a leaky shack, a tradin' room, Injuns, snow, an' ice, an' rocks, an' cold in the winter; an' in the summer, black flies, an' mosquitoes! No trees, no people, not a damn' thing! Do you suppose she'll ever come back to this?"

Himself surprised and not a little fearful at his impassioned outburst, Furnot was more surprised that the old man ignored it. The factor was an autocrat whose rod of iron was wont to descend heavily upon the back of an offender. His dignity as factor brooked no argument from a subordinate. He had just been called a fool. His judgment had been impugned. There was something ominous in the man's silence. Did it presage a furious outburst? Duncan Alexander was an old man, but Furnot knew that the gaunt frame was banded with muscles of iron. He hedged, mumbling a reluctant apology.

"I meant, I don't believe she'll be comin' back. What is there here for her?" he asked.

"Aye, she'll come back. Ye ask what is there here for her. I'll tell ye—the land she was born in, the only land she knows. That, an' a father's love——"

"Or his gold," sneered Furnot, emboldened by the older man's attitude.

"Aye, or his gold, if so be he has any. Ye are the fool, Furnot, an' 'tis time ye learnt it. 'Tis time we talked out plain—man an' man, not clerk an' factor. That, too, will make for better understandin'. I've studied ye, lad. I've watched ye, an' I've taken yer measure. There's summat of good in ye, as in everyone, an' more of bad than in most. From the moment ye volunteered for service at Frozen Inlet, ye became an object of interest to me. I cast about for a reason. 'Tis not in the common run of things that a man should prefer Frozen Inlet to Moose Factory. My first thought was of the girl. I questioned her, and found out she was more than a bit interested in ye. Well an' good. 'Tis natural a girl should find her man. That a man should volunteer for service at a post like Frozen Inlet for the sake of bein', as he thought, near to the woman he wanted was a point in his favor, or so it seemed to me. The girl is all I have. I wanted her to make no mistake in her choice. She has not known many men. I knew that two men may learn much of each other in a year's time, at a post like Frozen Inlet, so I sent her south, an' brought you here. On the boat yer questions about the girl strengthened my belief that it was for her ye had forsaken Moose Factory. The anger an' disappointment which ye strove to conceal upon learnin' she was not on the boat might well have been the emotion of an honest man. Ye rated high with me, lad, for I've no higher aim for my daughter than that she marry some good Company man, an' live her life in the land she loves. 'Twas not until ye began yer stealthy search for the gold ye believe I have, that I knew ye'd been listenin' to rumor an' that it was the gold ye wanted, an' not the girl. I was disappointed, lad, for ye do yer work well. But I have nothin' but contempt for a man that would stoop to use a girl as a means to a dishonest end."

"What do you mean, searchin' for your gold?" growled Furnot, sullenly. "I don't believe you've got any gold, an' if I thought you had, ain't I had plenty of chances to bump you off an' get it?"

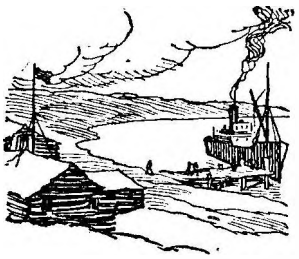
"If it's murder ye mean, yes, ye've had plenty of chances to kill me. But I'd no fear of that. 'Twould have done ye no good. 'Twould not have accomplished yer end. An' as for yer searchin'. Times I've been away—a few misplaced spider webs tell much, an' finger marks, an' the marks of a knife point upon the edges of the boards of the floor." The old man paused and refilled his pipe. "An' so, lad," he continued, "the girl will not be comin' back this summer. I hold no resentment against ye. Ye have broken no law, an' a man has the right to live as contemptible as his nature demands. Ye've another year yet at Frozen Inlet, an'——"

"Another year!" cried Furnot, stung to fury by the castigation of the factor's words. "Do you think I'd stay another year in this damned hole? I'm goin' back! To hell with you an' the girl! To hell with Frozen Inlet, an' Moose Factory, an' the Company, too! To hell with the

whole damned North! I tell you, I'm goin' back!"

"Aye, ye've told me that, but ye haven't told me how."

"How! I'll go back on the *Nascopie,* like I came—that's how!"



Alexander smiled a smile of pitying contempt. "D'ye think a Company boat would aid a man to violate a Company contract? Ye've made a decision without due thought to miles an' means. Ye're a fool, as I said. Consider, now, had ye been an honest lad with an honest love. Yer lass would have come to ye on the *Nascopie,* ye'd have married, an' in time what I have, be it much or little, would have come to ye both by right of inheritance—an' the time would not have been long. I'm an old man beset by mortal ailment. I'm thinkin' the snows of another winter will lie deep upon my grave. It is well, for I am tired."

"What's to prevent me from takin' what I want an' hittin' outside on my own? You can't stop me. I'm no prisoner!"

"No, no, lad, ye're no prisoner. I would not try to stop ye if I could. But ye'd not get far. The muskeg an' the swamps an' the lakes an' rivers, an' the black flies an' the mosquitoes of any inland route you took would stop any but a man of experience. An' if ye followed the coast, there's the police. The outfit ye'd take, the blankets, the food, a gun maybe, would be stolen goods. An Indian with report of the theft would pass ye, an' ye'd be picked up with ease."

"They wouldn't be stolen!" cried the younger man, leaping to his feet. "I've got nine months' wages due me——"

"Not if ye break yer contract," interrupted the other, "but even if ye had yer recourse lies in action at law for debt—not in seizin' Company goods without warrant." The old man interrupted an impassioned retort with a wave of the hand. "Ye realize, lad, I hold the upper hand. But I bear ye no malice. Ye're but following the dictates of a warped an' crooked mentality, an' ye'll continue to follow them until such time as ye reap yer reward. That is as may be, an' no concern of mine. My concern is for the welfare of my daughter, an' of this post. The spring tradin' is upon us, an' I have need of ye. When the tradin' is done, an' the fur is safe aboard the *Nascopie,* I can make out till the Company can send me a man to fill yer place. I'm offerin' ye a bargain that will work out to yer advantage. If ye'll agree to work for me until the boat comes, I'll agree to pay ye yer wages, regardless of contract, an' give ye free passage back to Moose Factory. Ye might have made a good man in the North, but my report on ye will, of course, prevent further employment by the Company. I would advise that ye make yer way southward an' seek the companionship of yer kind."

As Alexander finished, Furnot was conscious of the grudging admiration that, despite the contemptuous sting of the words, arose in his heart toward the older man. Despite the fact of his plotting, the factor was offering him a decent bargain. A wry smile twisted his lips.

"We'll call it a deal," he said, and pulling on his cap sought his own quarters in the rear of the trading room.

Chapter III

FURNOT TURNS FREE TRADER

IN A little pole and mud cabin situated in a grove of scrub spruce on a sharp bend of the river that empties into Frozen Inlet, Cleveland Bartholomew laid aside a small volume, and reaching for his binoculars, stepped to the door, and focussed them upon an object that appeared far down the river. The object was a whaleboat in which a man wielded a pole while three others labored along the bank on a trackline.

Bartholomew smiled as he studied the outfit. "The factor of Frozen Inlet coming to pay a neighborly call," he muttered aloud, and laying aside the glass, he threw a handful of tea into the pot, filled it with water from a pail, and set it on the stove. "At least he'll not find me lacking in hospitality. Even though His Lordship should refuse to drink with one foredamned, the red brothers will welcome a cup of hot tea." Once more he studied the slowly approaching boat, leaning against the door jamb to steady his glass. "Riding high and dry, as befits the superior race, while his serfs toil through the mud and the slush, and ford belly-deep through the icy waters of creeks. Well, why not? If I were in his place I'd share the ease and the discomfort exactly as he shares it. I'd figure it wouldn't make their bellies

any warmer to make mine cold. Philosophy, common sense, and custom—glad I wasn't born red."

Reaching a strip of gravel from which the snow had entirely disappeared, the progress of the trackliners became more rapid, and Bartholomew sauntered toward the beach. "Hello," he greeted, addressing the occupant of the boat. "Will you join me in a pot of tea? My name is Bartholomew—Grover Cleveland Bartholomew, to be explicit, and foreshortened by parting in the middle, G. Cleveland Bartholomew. By nature, an adventurer, and, at present, by profession, an independent trader." The boat beached and the other shook the proffered hand.

"I'm Giles Furnot, Company clerk at Frozen Inlet Post. Glad to meet you. Seems like I've heard that name before, somewheres. Maybe not, though—there's lots of names."

"I've noticed that. But not so many that resemble mine. It's not likely you've heard it. But, come, join me in a cup of tea. I'm none too warm myself, and those Indians of yours look frozen."

"Oh, they're used to it. Anyone's got to get used to it that lives in this damn' country."

The trader led the way to the cabin. "You don't like it, then? I supposed all Company men liked it."

"To hell with the Company! When the boat comes in, I'm goin' out on her. I've had enough of this to last me from now on."

The Indians followed, seeking shelter from the bitter wind on the sunny side of the cabin, where Bartholomew served them each a huge bowl-like cup of black tea. Then he rejoined Furnot, who had already entered the cabin.

"Had enough, eh? Well, I don't blame you. Had enough of it, myself. I'll be going out, too, this summer."

Furnot grinned. "The Company boat won't take you. It is for their own people."

"So I understand. But I guess I can go out as I came in—by canoe."

"Do you know the way?"

The free trader noted a certain eagerness in the tone, and answered, casually, "Why, I guess I can find it. All a man's got to do is to keep bearing southward."

"But you didn't come in alone."

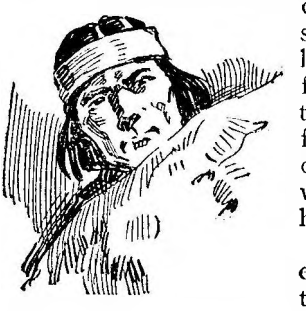
"No, I had a partner. We came in with five canoes and an Indian crew. The Indians refused to go farther north—said they were afraid of the Eskimos. So we located here, and last winter we disagreed. I bought him out, and he went south with a dog outfit."

"Kind of lonesome here all by yourself, ain't it?"

The man grinned. "What I have lost in gaiety I have gained in knowledge, I hope. Luckily I packed a few small books in my outfit, and these, with a deck of cards, some hunting, and memorizing of Indian words, has kept me fairly well occupied."

"Injun words? You got an Injun here?"

"No, I'm all alone. My partner was a man who has traded a good deal among Indians. I ran across him in a small mining town in Ontario, where I was sojourning for my health. He was outfitting for a trip north. The idea appealed to me so we threw in together. I knew nothing of trading, nor of Indians, so when he left I got him to make me out a vocabulary of such Indian words as I'd need in dealing with the natives. They haven't come in for any trading since the breakup. I only encountered one during the winter, and he must have been crazy. When I tried to talk to him in his own language he



couldn't understand me—laughed like a fool at first, then appeared frightened, and disappeared. I was glad when he went."

Furnot laughed. "Let's see the list of words your pardner made. Maybe he gypped you."

"What!" Surprised at the sharp exclamation, Furnot was aware that the other was regarding him intently.

"Sure," he answered, "suppose he gave you the wrong dope? Let's see your list. I savvy their lingo a little."

The other produced a tablet in which were penciled a list of English words with what purported to be their Indian equivalents. One glance at the list, and Furnot laughed. "That's what I thought," he said. "Your pardner double-crossed you. That's what scairt the Injun. He thought you'd gone fluey. You'd never do any tradin' on that list." Bartholomew made no answer and his continued scrutiny nettled Furnot. "You don't need to take my word for it," he growled. "There's In-

juns outside. Try it on them—or keep it an' try it on the ones that are headin' for the Post. It'll make my job all the easier."

"What is your job?"

"What do you suppose it would be—shovin' up this damn' river? The old man sent me up to head off the Injuns before they hit your camp, an' ship their catch down to the Post for 'em so you wouldn't get the fur. But if he'd known the Injun words you've learnt, he could have saved me the trip. I've got a damn' good notion to turn around an' go back. I didn't come up to Frozen Inlet to shove whaleboats up rivers, an' live in a tent."

Bartholomew crossed to the stove and lifted the pot. "Will you have more tea?" he asked.

Furnot nodded. "I'd like to have somethin' a little stronger, though, if you've got any on your hip."

Again the clerk was conscious of that intense scrutiny, as the other smiled. "Sorry I can't offer you a Bronx or a Tom Collins," he answered, "but unfortunately I lack the ingredients."

"Bronx—hell! A shot of moon would look awful good to me."

"You're from the States," announced Bartholomew abruptly.

"Well—partly. I lived there a while." Furnot paused a moment, and met the other's eyes, "Maybe I come north for my health, too."

A twitching at the corners of Bartholomew's lips broadened into a grin. "Let's lay some cards on the table," he suggested. "I'll take a chance, and maybe, if you're on the level, we can get together."

"Shoot."

"In the first place, I believe you're right about that Indian dope."

"You can easy find out."

"And I believe you're fed up on this country."

"Who wouldn't be?"

"And it might be profitable for both of us if we threw in together. I can't unlearn what I've learned in time to do any good with the trading, and your knowledge of the Indians and their language would be of value to me. Now we've got to search for a corresponding advantage to you. Am I right in supposing that there is certain money due you as wages, that would be forfeited in case you should —er, leave the employ of the Company without due notice?"

Furnot nodded, and the other continued. "In that case, I should pay you those wages. We will assume, then, that when you receive this money, we will be on an equal footing. I have certain trade goods here that are valueless to me because I cannot communicate with the Indians. You have a knowledge of the Indians and their language which is valueless to you, without my goods to trade. By pooling these assets of ours, we each have something of value. Have I stated the case plainly?"

"Sure. But how do we split?"

"Why fifty-fifty, of course. As I see it, neither can operate without the other, therefore each is of equal value to the other."

"Pay me the back wages, an' we'll call it a deal," replied Furnot quickly. "An' to hell with old Alexander an' Frozen Inlet Post!"

"How much?"

The clerk, after a few moments' reckoning, named a sum nearly double the amount actually due him, and Bartholomew counted out the money in American banknotes which he placed on the table before him. "As I understand the agreement," he said, "upon my making this payment to you, we become partners in a trading venture, I furnishing the goods, you the experience. The said partnership to go into effect immediately."

"That's right."

"Now in the matter of these Indians and the whaleboat. We might find good use for the boat——"

"Nix on that!" exclaimed Furnot. "It's too heavy to be any good to us, an' besides we don't want a cent's worth of Company stuff in our possession. Alexander's goin' to be sore anyway about me double-crossin' him, an' if we kept any of the stuff, he'd have the first policeman that hit the Post onto us in a minute. We'll send two of the Company Injuns back with the boat. The other one, Paul Tarsus, we'll offer him a job. I guess he'll stay with us—he don't like Alexander. But the other two, they'd go through hell an' high water for him."

"Suppose they don't go back? Suppose they go on up and establish the camp, and do just as you set out to do?"

"They won't. They're Company Injuns. They take their orders from me. I'll order 'em back, an' they'll go back."

"Suppose the factor, himself, should come up the river?"

"He can't. He's got to stay at the Post. The Injuns'll start comin' in pretty soon an' he's got to be there. More come in along the coast than come down the river.

He's alone except for the Injuns, an' they can't handle the tradin'."

Bartholomew smiled. "It looks, then, as though we were sitting pretty."

"We would be if you'd throw this damn' tea away an' fill this cup up with somethin' worth drinkin'. There ain't no use stallin' among pardners. I know you got it—even if Constable Barnes couldn't find it."

Bartholomew laughed and reaching upward, produced a flat flask from between the roof poles and the thatching of marsh grass and dirt that covered them. He poured two liberal portions, and as Furnot swallowed he rolled his eyes in appreciation. "Man, that ain't moon! It's the regular stuff!"

"Sure it is. And there are thirty gallons of it cached within a short distance of here. How much fur should we collect in return for those thirty gallons?"

"Thirty gallons! Like this?"

"The same."

"That's ninety gallons when we cut it. Say, we're rich!"

While Furnot removed his own personal effects from the whaleboat to the cabin, and dispatched the two Company Indians back down the river with the outfit, Bartholomew drew up a penciled agreement of partnership, and slipping into the bush, refilled the flask from a keg. When he returned Furnot was seated in the cabin, while Paul Tarsus was busy with some fish nets on the beach.

"Sign this memorandum," said Bartholomew, tossing the paper onto the table, "and then we'll take a little drink to bind the bargain."

Furnot carefully read the agreement and picked up the pencil. Bartholomew poured the liquor, returned the flask to its place of concealment, and turned to see Furnot staring in wide eyed astonishment at the signature affixed to the paper. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Anything wrong? If not, just put your name right there under mine."

Furnot's eyes shifted from the paper to the form that bulked large in the tiny cabin. "So you're Big Bart!" he cried.

"What?" The word crashed like a pistol shot, and one of the big man's hands dropped swiftly to his pistol. But the two hands of the other were on the table, and he did not draw the weapon.

Furnot found his tongue. "I told you a while back I'd heard that name somewheres. I was wrong. I never heard it, but I've seen it—a hundred times—on withdrawal permits down in Chi. So you're Big Bart! Who'd ever thought I'd be pardners with Big Bart? You bet I'll sign!" and suiting the action to the word, he picked up the pencil and affixed his own signature.

"Such is fame," sighed Bartholomew, as he sank into the chair opposite. "So you were one of the bunch in Chi! But how on earth did you get here?"

"Well, you're here, ain't you?"

"Yes, but merely by accident——"

"Mine was an accident, too. I beats it back home for my health after things get too hot in Chi, an' I gets a chance to go to work for the Company. I figures a year or two in the brush won't hurt my health none. Then at Moose Factory I heard about old Alexander, an' how he was supposed to have a barrel of jack. His daughter was in the school at Moose Factory, an' I played up to her, an' finally I gets a transfer to Frozen Inlet. But old Alexander, he out-guesses me, an' the frail don't come up with us. That was a jolt, for she was a knockout. I'd figured what more would a man want than her, an' the old man's jack. Anyhow, I sticks it out, puttin' in the time when I could, tryin' to locate Alexander's cache. But I don't get nowhere, an' then the old man spills it that she ain't comin' home this year! He's hep to my play, an' he tells me so. Then, he offers to keep me on the job till the boat comes in, an' ship me back to Moose Factory. There ain't nothin' I can do but take him up, so he sends me up the river to head off the trade from you. But to hell with him, an' his boat!"

"Has he really got the jack?" asked Bartholomew.

"If he has, he knows how to keep it," retorted Furnot shortly. "Nothin' doin' —what you're thinkin' about, take it from me."

"If the mountain won't come to Mohammed, then Mohammed must go to the mountain. Is that right? You're going back to find the girl."

"You're right I am! An' I'm playin' a lone hand, too—get me?"

Bartholomew shrugged. "Play your lone hand, kid—and welcome. Robbery's not in my line. But take it from me, make your play for the jack if you want to,

but leave the girl out. Women and business don't mix—your kind of business, and mine."

Chapter IV

THE SPRING TRADING

DUNCAN ALEXANDER listened in grave silence to the report of the two Indians that returned with the whaleboat. Righteous rage surged within him at the perfidy of the clerk to whom he had offered better terms than he had any right to expect. "He's a fool, as well as a knave—to throw in with that one!" he cried. "It was the other, the one who went south with the dog outfit, that knew the country. This one knows nothing. Well, 'tis their own funeral. Two fools, with a barrel of rum, an' no knowledge of either the country or the natives! Furnot knows enough of fur to be able to pick out the best of it, but what good will it do them? I know what they came in with. Their supplies won't last 'em the trip outside, wouldn't if they started now, an' they won't start for a month or two—not till after the tradin'. They're neither one of 'em trained to live off the country. They'll be comin' to me for supplies!" The keen, watery eyes twinkled triumphantly, "an' they'll pay! I'll get my rightful fur! The boat may return a short catch from Frozen Inlet this summer, but next year —! 'Tis only the natives will suffer, mayhap 'twill teach 'em a lesson." Having thus at length unburdened himself to the two Indians, he followed them to the beach and proceeded to meticulously check over the Company property returned with the whaleboat. "Too smart to give me complaint of theft," he muttered to himself, and returned to the trading room to prepare to do two men's work in handling the catch.

Spring had come on with a rush. Swollen rivers, bursting their icy bonds, poured their waters onto the rotting ice of the Inlet, making broad lanes of open water along the shoreline that widened or closed, as the sullen floes drifted hither and yon at the mercy of the shifting wind. Myriads of wild ducks and geese swarmed the open leads and the shallow ponds, and filled the air with the sound of rushing wings. Stately white swans fed in the shallows, and the shrill piping of shore birds was heard on every hand. Snow in dark, sodden patches, remnants of the deeper drifts, dotted the bleak landscape that alternated gaunt rocky ridges with vast levels of soggy muskeg. An unlovely scene at best, even with the warm wind of spring ruffling the deep blue water of the open leads into tiny wavelets upon which the slanting rays of the setting sun shimmered in glints of gold; unlovely, barren, horrible to one attuned to associate spring with the young green of waving forests, with bursting buds, and with the riot of blazing color of blossoming hillsides.

As the sun sank lower, Duncan Alexander left the trading room and turned his steps toward a rugged promontory that gave view of many miles of the low, flat shore of Hudson Bay. It was this promontory that marked the mouth of the Inlet. Above it floated proudly the flag of the great fur company—above it and its solitary grave marked by a rock cairn and a plain wooden cross. At the grave the man paused, his keen old eyes sweeping coast and open sea, the wind rippling gently the locks of silver hair that showed beneath the edges of his fur cap. His glance sought the legend that he himself had burned deep into the wood of the little cross:

ANNE MCARTHUR ALEXANDER

Died June 3d, 19—.

Aged 20 yr., 9 mo.

"Nineteen years," the man muttered. "Aye, nineteen years, today. 'Twas a bleak day, I recall—a drizzle, an' a fog from the sea. Ah well—ah well—I've never left ye alone, lass. By this time next year, I'm thinkin' there'll be the two of us, side by side. Ye died hatin' this drear land, lass, an' for nineteen year I've lived hatin' it. Men think I love it, for I've ne'er set foot off the Bay since—since ye left me. 'Twas not the will o' God, lass, that we should go back as we planned an' live in our Scottish valley, amid the forests an' the heather, an' the broom. But *she* could go back! Aye, rightful an' proud, she could tak' her place as mistress of Ian Kirk, for those that thwarted us be dead an' gone. 'Tis what ye would have loved, lass, an' 'tis a pity. But she'll not be goin' back. She would hate it, an' I'm glad. For there's been

many an Alexander an' a many a McArthur—an' from what we know, there's been few of either that's died happy."

A black dot appeared offshore to the northward. Alexander cupped his hands about his eyes. There it was, appearing and disappearing in the long swell of the shallow coastal waters. Another dot, and another, a long row of bobbing dark dots —Indian canoes. The first brigade of the trappers bringing in the semi-annual harvest of fur.

Slowly, steadily out of the north, they came, propelled by the paddles of the women and the children, with here and there a bit of cloth spread to the breeze by way of sail. The sun sank red behind the far horizon, and in the uncertain twilight Alexander lost the slowly approaching dots again and again, each time picking them up a little nearer to the promontory above which stood bravely the flagpole until, almost on the edge of the dark, the leading canoe rounded the promontory and headed into the inlet toward the beach in front of the buildings. From his elevation of a few feet, the man glanced downward into the canoe with its narrow margin of freeboard amidships, its conglomerate load of tepee poles, skins, blankets, utensils, dogs, babies, and household gods, upon and among which in some unaccountable manner, the paddlers managed to dispose themselves, while their lord and master, the chief of the little band, sat in the bow, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Although the canoe had passed within a few feet of the man standing by the flagpole on the low promontory, neither by word nor by look had either betrayed knowledge of the presence of the other.

As this first canoe passed Alexander turned and strode back to the post, his rubber boots pressing deep tracks into the muddy ground, soaked to saturation by the melting snows. Entering the trading room, he lighted the lamp, placed it in its bracket, and took up his position in the doorway as the canoe beached.

Solemnly, one might almost say majestically, the chief stepped from the canoe and proceeded toward the factor who stood framed in a yellow oblong of lamplight.

At the doorway formal words of greeting were exchanged in hoarse guttural, the chief followed Alexander into the trading room, where he gravely accepted the Company's present of tobacco and matches. Then, he passed out through the doorway and watched in solemn tolerance the activities of the squaws in their labor of unloading the canoe and setting up the tepee.

Other canoes were beached, other Indians greeted the factor and received their presents, fires flickered in the darkness—the spring trading at Frozen Inlet had formally opened.

During the days of alternating cold drizzle and warm sunshine, the wilderness people came—from the north, from the south, and from the west. The higher ground was thickly dotted with lodges among which prowled silent, beady eyed children and ravenous thieving dogs. Singly, or in family groups the natives did their trading, and in community groups about the fires, over many pipefuls of Company tobacco, they recounted the meager news of the outlands: deer were scarce this year around Kaminuriak Lake; there was a heavy run of fish in all the feeders of the Naguse, so many fish that nets broke with the weight of them and they could be scooped from the water with the hands; Eskimos had been seen in the vicinity of Ranken Inlet; foxes were plentiful along the coast, but hard to get inland; an old woman had died on Falling River, having wandered away in a snowstorm while hunting firewood; there was a sickness among the dogs, even some of the Police dogs at Baker Lake had had to be killed because they went crazy; there were two free traders up the river to the westward, who would trade rum for good skins, but would give no debt—it is bad to trade the good skins for the rum of the free trader who will not give debt; a man will feel fine and rich for a while, but when the rum is gone he is poorer than ever, for has not the free trader got his skins, while he has nothing but a sickness in the head. And so it went, the gossip among the men, while the smoke from the driftwood fires whipped hither and yon in the raw wind, and the squaws puttered among the pots, or labored in the mending of the canoes drawn high and dry upon the beach.

In the trading room day after day, Alexander worked from before daylight until far into the night. The bartering of fur at this far outpost is a momentous occasion in the lives of the trappers, and for the agent of the great fur company it is a time of vigilance and of hard work even with the assistance of a competent clerk. This year Alexander was doing the work of two men.

Consider for a moment, the factor's task. Awaiting his turn, John Big Bear enters the trading room followed by his wife, who gravely deposits a bundle of

fur before the factor. John Big Bear has had a good year, and the squaw slips out the door and returns with another bundle which she places beside the first. Four shy, half wild children follow her into the room and crowd together in a remote corner, their bright eyes darting inquisitive, fearsome glances about the room. A Company Indian closes the door which is a sign to the other Indians that the factor is busy. The squaw takes her place near her offspring, and John Big Bear advances to the counter where the factor breaks open one of the packs of fur. A large tin pan at his elbow is nearly filled with "skins," or "made beaver," the arbitrary unit of trade of the outposts. These made beaver may be anything from buckshot to brass checks, and in value may range from twenty-five cents to one dollar. At Frozen Inlet Post the made beaver was a brass check worth fifty cents.

Alexander shoves an empty pan in front of John Big Bear, and picking up a pelt from the top of the pack, examines it. "A good otter," he appraises, "worth twenty skins." Reaching into the large pan he picks up a handful of made beaver and slowly counts out twenty of the brass tokens which rattle bravely as they drop into John Big Bear's pan. The factor's keen eyes are on John Big Bear's face, and he notes with satisfaction that the dark features register approval of the price. Ordinarily it is the duty of the clerk to count out the made beaver, and to enter upon a memorandum for entry in the book, the price paid for each pelt. But there is no clerk, so Alexander makes penciled note of the transaction, and picks up the next fur. Pelt by pelt the two packs are disposed of, and the pan before John Big Bear is well heaped with brass tokens.

"A fine catch!" approves Alexander, and John Big Bear nods, his eyes on the pan of made beaver. Having no clerk, Alexander picks up the book, and thumbs its pages for the account of John Big Bear. He finds it, and spreads the page upon the counter. Gravely John Big Bear examines the penned figures. "Your debt," announces the factor, "is six hundred skins. Is that right?"

John Big Bear fumbles through his pockets and produces a folded bit of paper. He motions to his squaw, who advances to his side and owlishly scans the paper upon which appear six rows of X's, ten to the row. Each X stands for ten skins. Short guttural syllables pass between the two. John Big Bear picks up the pan, hefts it, shakes the brass checks about. The squaw reaches in and picking up a handful, contemplates them, and allows them to trickle back into the pan. Behind the counter Alexander waits patiently, for

John Big Bear is not in a hurry—never in his life has he been in any hurry, nor will he ever be. The squaw nods, and John Big Bear nods, and stepping close to the counter, lays his memorandum in the pan.

Alexander picks up the paper, examines it meticulously, and spreads it on the counter. Then, reaching into John Big Bear's pan he counts out ten made beaver and piles them upon the counter beside the memorandum and carefully draws a line through one of the X's. Very deliberately, under the lynx eyed scrutiny of John Big Bear and his wife, the process is repeated until sixty piles of ten tokens apiece are on the counter, and the last X is crossed off the memorandum.

The six hundred tokens are returned to the Company's pan. The debt is paid. And John Big Bear once more hefts his pan, lighter now, but still containing a goodly number of the rattling brass checks.

There are nearly as many made beaver left in John Big Bear's pan, as the factor counted out, which might mean to the uninitiated, that this year John Big Bear will be out of debt, that he will finance his hunt on a cash basis, that when John Big Bear comes in for the Christmas trading, there will be no debt charged up against his name, that his catch will be all velvet. But Duncan Alexander knows, and John Big Bear knows, and his squaw knows that this is not the meaning of those surplus brass checks.

First, there is the matter of a new twenty-two rifle. The twenty-two he bought two years ago is in good condition as to lock and stock, but the barrel, fouled from lack of cleaning, rusted from exposure to the damp of the salt water marshes, has a bullet stuck midway of its length. And the twenty-two, with the fish net and the rabbit snare, is the meat getter for the family. A new twenty-two is bought and paid for from the contents of the pan, then, after due conference between husband and wife a goodly yardage of squaw

cloth is measured and laid aside—this in the nature of finery. Vivid handkerchiefs are approved, accepted, and paid for. Candies for the four children, tobacco, a new pipe, some bells and pompoms for the dogs, a brilliant shirt for John Big Bear. The pan is nearly empty, but still there remain brass checks—for sugar, tea, and many cans of the white man's prepared food, but nothing for the trail or for maintenance nor clothing upon the trapline—only for palate-tickling food, and gaudy raiment to be vaunted during the encampment. John Big Bear will remain in the vicinity of Frozen Inlet Post, lazing the summer days away until the feel of the first frost drives him once more into the trading room to incur a new debt. His fat pork, flour, tea, blankets, salt, netting, twine, snare wire, ammunition, ax, files, fish hooks, warm clothing—all things necessary to the stern business of living—will be bought in the autumn on credit. And at the Christmas trading, the factor will once more extract a goodly share of brass checks from John Big Bear's pan.

But it is not every Indian who is granted a big credit. John Big Bear is known as a good trapper, and, moreover, as one who pays his debt. There will be Indians in from the westward—those who have left the pick of their furs on the river in exchange for the fire water of the free traders. For them there will be no surplus of brass checks to be dissipated upon finery, and the amount of debt allowed them will be meager in the extreme. When last year's debt remains partially unpaid without good and sufficient reason, next year's debt is hard to arrange for.

And so the trading goes on. Family by family the catch is disposed of, and fur by fur it is appraised and paid for.

Day after day Alexander approved, complimented; disapproved, reprimanded, and gathered in the fur. And the trading was not all. The fur must be sorted, baled in the fur press for transportation, and ready when the boat came in. The trading and the sorting could not be delegated; the actual manipulation of the press fell to the lot of the two Company Indians. When the day was done, Alexander closed and locked the door of the trading room, and toiled until far into the night on the books. In the grip of deadly disease, the strain of performing the clerk's duties as well as his own, was telling upon the man's vitality. His feet and ankles had swollen until he could no longer force them into his boots, and the heart attacks which, subsiding, left him weak and dizzy, were of increasing frequency. Nevertheless, uncomplaining, a trifle more grim perhaps than was his wont, he carried on.

The peak of the trading passed. Spring ripened into summer. The Indians dispersed to their summer fishing grounds, or idled away their time about the post. Mosquitoes and black flies swarmed in countless millions, dogs grew lean and increasingly savage and thievish. Ducks and geese and swans nested, moulted, and paddled about on every lake and pond and river. Deer horns were in the velvet.

Then one morning a black smudge appeared far on the southeastern horizon, and at noon the *Nascopie* dropped anchor offshore, and the work of lightering the year's supplies for Frozen Inlet Post began. Piece by piece, Alexander checked the cargo as it was carried into the warehouse. Noting the absence of the roofing paper, he added it to his requisition for the next year, together with caustic comment on its non-delivery. Also he demanded that a clerk be sent to him before the winter trading season.

Neither in conversation with the officers of the boat, nor in his report to the Company, did the factor mention his physical condition. But he knew, as he stood alone at the foot of the flagpole on the promontory, that he was watching the *Nascopie* with her cargo of fur steam southward for the last time.

Chapter V

In the Cabin

UP THE river from Frozen Inlet, in the cabin of the free traders, Giles Furnot faced his partner sullenly across the dirty table. Choice furs, unbaled, were heaped upon the floor where they had been dumped by the armful after having been carried from a canoe drawn up onto the beach.

"Well, what's the answer?" growled the ex-clerk. "You claimed you knew the way out. This is twice we've tried to make it, an' we're right back where we started from—an' damn' lucky to be here, if you ask me."

Bartholomew frowned. "You don't suppose we're back in this forsaken hole because I wanted to come back, do you? I thought I knew the way. It's not my fault that all these damned rivers look alike. I believe yet I can make it——"

"Make it! You can try it alone, then.

You don't get me paddlin' around in them mosquito sloughs no more, huntin' for channels that ain't there. I wouldn't put in another month like the one we've just had, for no money. I'm tellin' you we're lucky to have got back."

"Well what are we going to do? Sit down here for the rest of our lives? I'm fed up on this country. I was a fool to come up here in the first place. I ought to have taken my chances. Leavenworth or Atlanta would be better than this! If you'd listened to me and hired an Indian or two to guide us after the first attempt, we'd be well on our way by now."

"A hell of a lot you know about it. It's like I told you. There ain't an Injun you could trust to get us out—not with all that fur, there ain't. What they'd do is to get us somewheres where we couldn't go one way or another, an' then leave us shift for ourselves. You know how long we'd last. All they'd do is to wait till we got drowned, or starved, or the mosquitoes et us, an' then take the fur."

"We could take turns standin' guard, and blow their damned heads off if they deserted."

"Uh-huh, an' then where'd we be? If there was only one guide, we'd be bushed. If there was more than one, we'd get reported for murder, even if we got through."

"Well, what are we going to do?"

Furnot considered. "The only thing I see is to go out by the coast."

"The coast? You mean Hudson Bay?"

"What did you think I meant—the Gold Coast of Africa? Yes, Hudson Bay, an' it's a good thousand miles from Frozen Inlet to Moose Factory, an' a couple hundred miles up-river from there to the railroad."

"But can we handle the canoes——?"

"Canoes!" snorted Furnot contemptuously. "Who said anything about canoes?

It's a dog team trip—two teams with the fur we've got."

"Dog teams! You mean we've got to wait for snow?"

"About the only way I ever saw snow got, was to wait for it. Maybe you can figure out some way of dog teamin' without it."

"Don't try sarcasm, Furnot," Bartholomen answered. "You do it very clumsily, and it don't get you anything. We've got a situation here to face squarely. Our problem is to get back to civilization. The fact that we've made a couple of failures makes it all the more imperative that we succeed next time. A man that loses his temper is at a hell of a disadvantage, anyway you look at it. If we've got to stay here till snow comes, we'll stay. And in the meantime there are things to be done. There are dogs to be collected, sleds to be built, and supplies to be bought."

"A fat chance we've got of gettin' supplies from old man Alexander! He'll skin us out of our eye teeth! Believe me, I ain't goin' down there an' try to buy no supplies off him!"

"All right, you stay here and get out the stuff for the sleds, and I'll go down and beard the lion in his den. I'm not afraid of him. He's running a trading post, he can't refuse to sell to me if I tender payment."

Furnot sneered. "Oh, he can't, can't he? Suppose you tell me who's goin' to make him sell if he don't want to? An' even if he does sell, what's to hinder him from namin' his own price? We can't get to any other post, an' he knows it. He can take every damn' skin we've got for supplies enough to get us out of the country. He figures all that fur ought to have come to him. Whatever we've got, we've just the same as stole—that's the way he'll look at it."

"Suppose he does? He'll get the fur, won't he? I'll take a few good skins down with me, and he can buy them in just the same as though he had got them from the Indians—maybe a little cheaper. I expect to be gouged a little."

"You'll get gouged, all right, but it won't be a little."

"Oh, cut out the grousing, Furnot! You make me tired. I tell you he'll be glad enough to get this fur. What difference does it make to him whether he buys it from us, or from the Indians?"

Furnot shrugged. "You'll find out it'll make a hell of a lot of difference. He knows we traded hootch for fur that the Injuns needed to pay their debt with. He's had to cut down on this year's debt because last year's debt wasn't paid, an' he knows that every one of those Injuns are goin' to

winter hard on account of it. These Injuns are more to Alexander than just customers. He's got to kind of look out for 'em. He cusses 'em out, an' gives 'em hell when they need it, but he doctors 'em up when they're sick, an' he keeps 'em goin'. As long as they do like he says, they get along fine. When a couple of bozos like us start tradin' 'em hootch, they've got to suffer for it. You claimed a while back we might as well face facts square. These is facts, an' we might as well face 'em. It's a fact that the Company men have got the interests of the Injuns at heart—an' we ain't. It's like this, Bart: back there in Chi., you was the cat's pajamas—what with bein' one of the big guns in the bootleg ring. You wasn't in that game but damn' few years, but what show would old Alexander had, comin' down there an' tryin' to put a crimp in your game? The Company's been handlin' Injuns fer two hundred an' fifty years, Bart, an' believe me, they know their stuff! There's just one way Alexander could have beat your game in Chi., an' that would be to step in an' hijack a truckload an' get clean away with it. It might have worked that once, but next time he tried it, you'd have been set for him. An' the only way you could have beat his game, is to run in your batch of hootch, traded it, an' hit back out with the fur. When you fergot the way out, an' used up all the supplies, you put yourself in the same shape Alexander would be in if he forgot the streets back in Chi., an' drove the truckload up to you an' asked you how to get rid of it. Just remember that, when you go down to trade with old man Alexander."

Chapter VI

Alexander Drives a Bargain

DUNCAN ALEXANDER quitted the fire in the trading room and hobbled on swollen feet to the beach where the two Indians were putting down goose breasts in barrels for the winter. He turned up his collar against the bite of the nor'easter that roared in from the Bay, and scanned the low scudding clouds with weather wise eyes. "'Twill be the last," he said to old Luke, pointing upward where flock after flock of wild geese were winging their way noisily southward. "Tomorrow they'll be gone."

The Indian nodded. "De leetle lak' she mos' all froze. Tonight mebbeso de snow com'."

"Aye, Luke, lad, an' how would ye like to be headin' south wi' the geese?"

The Indian's eyes sought the man's face, and came to rest upon the swollen ankles encased in the thick felts, and then shifted to the stout stick upon which the factor leaned heavily. He shook his head, and pointed a brown finger toward the promontory where the little wooden cross stood outlined against the gray sky. "Me—A'm tell her A'm stay wit you. You go sout', me—A'm go sout', too. You stay Frozen Inlet, A'm stay, too. You t'ink Luke go sout' an' lef' you, you mus' git seek in de head, lak you git seek in de foot."

The bright, watery eyes of the old Scot softened as they rested upon the Indian almost with tenderness. "Aye, lad, ye promised. An' for nigh twenty years ye've kept that promise. But the book is almost closed, lad. Before spring ye'll be diggin' my grave. An' it's on account of that I'll be sendin' ye south—to fetch Anne back to Frozen Inlet, back home. I've a great longin' in my heart to see the lass, an' there is much I would say to her. If it be so that snow comes tonight, or tomorrow, I'm thinkin' ye could fetch her back by Christmas."

The old Indian nodded. "Eef A'm breeng Anne back on Chrees'mas tam', A'm start tomor'. Eef de snow com', A'm tak' de dogs. Eef de snow don' com', A'm travel light to David Gaunt, an' git outfit from heem."

The factor's eyes beamed approval. "Aye, Luke, ye've yet to fail me." He paused abruptly as a snow particle stung his cheek and pointed into the teeth of the oncoming storm. "I'm thinkin' ye'll get yer snow."

As the factor turned toward the trading

room, a tiny black dot caught his eye far to the westward, a canoe on the wind-tossed waters of the Inlet, rounding into the lee of a rocky point. He spoke sharply to the younger of the two Indians. "Peter, run fetch me the glass!"

As the man hurried on his errand, Alexander spoke to Luke, who was peering at the laboring craft, his eyes shaded by his

two hands. "I'm thinkin' yon is young Furnot. When the Injuns reported they two had started south, I didn't think they'd make it. I've been expectin' 'em here before this." The watery blue eyes gleamed with flinty hardness as the man took the glass from the hand of the Indian. "They'll winter on the river, an' they'll do their tradin' wi' me! But 'tis not Furnot —'tis the other. For shame or fear Furnot dared not face me. But they're birds of a feather."

Grover Cleveland Bartholomew beached his canoe, stepped out, and stretched his stiffened muscles, as his eyes turned from the buildings to the two Indians working over the pile of dead geese. "Hello, Rain-In-The-Face!" he greeted genially. "Where's the mayor of the city?"

Luke answered gravely, "De factor, he ees een de tradin' room." Reaching into the canoe, the visitor tucked a bundle of skins under his arm and strolled with an air of self-assurance toward the long low building. With a muttered word to Peter, old Luke followed.

Bartholomew regarded himself as a financier of parts. A few years previously he had resigned a thirty-five hundred dollar job as a hail-fellow-well-met drug salesman, to accept an eighteen hundred dollar job as a Government liquor enforcement officer, and with an eye on the main chance, lost no time in making underworld connections that had proved immensely profitable. Almost before he realized it he was included among the so-called "higher-ups" in one of Chicago's liquor rings. He was of the type who referred to the pistols of his hired assassins as rods, and a thousand dollars was a grand, or more intimately, a gee. He numbered many aldermen, judges, police officials, and politicians among his close friends, and became the ring's most valued fixer.

Then came a shake-up, something went wrong in the well oiled machine, arrests were made among the higher-ups, and Bartholomew, or Big Bart, as he was called, sought a small town in Ontario, where, more for a lark, than with any expectation of profit, he threw in with a free trader and ventured into the North. As his flabby muscles hardened he really enjoyed the life, and when his partner quarreled with him, he bought him out and sent him about his business. Coincidence had thrown Furnot his way—Furnot who, as the Sailor Kid, had been one of his own hirelings.

This was all right so long as he and Furnot were in accord, but since the last unsuccessful attempt to reach civilization, bickering that might easily ripen into hatred had crept in. In Bartholomew's philosophy, this was not so good. Furnot knew altogether too much, and Furnot was notoriously handy with a rod, a tool of the trade that Bartholomew, himself, had never touched. So as Bartholomew walked toward the trading room, he was heartily wishing himself out of the North.

Pushing open the door, he peered into the gloomy interior. "Hello, anyone home?" he called.

"Aye," answered a voice, and as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, he made out the form of the old Scot seated beside the stove toward the rear of the room.

The man advanced to the stove, and tossed the packet of skins onto the counter. "You're the factor, I take it—Mr. Alexander."

"Aye."

"Well, my name's Bartholomew. Been doing some trading, in a small way, up the river from here."

"Aye."

The monosyllabic answers revealed nothing of surprise, of welcome, of antagonism, nor of any other emotion. It was disconcerting. Bartholomew cleared his throat. "Sort of blustery outside—fire feels good. Had a sort of tough trip till I hit the lee shore."

"Aye."

"Yes, I thought I'd come down and do a little trading. Fact is, we're running a little short on supplies. Figured on going out by canoe long before this, but we've tried it a couple of times and don't seem to be able to make it. Guess we'll have to wait for snow and go out with a dog outfit. But we haven't got supplies enough to see us through. I brought down a little batch of fur. It's there on the counter. Would you like to look at it?"

"Aye."

Old Luke lighted a huge oil lamp, and Alexander picked up the packet, undid the thong, and examined the pelts one by one. When he had finished, a dozen fine fox skins lay on the floor beside him.

"What do you think of 'em?" asked Bartholomew.

"They are good skins. Have ye many more like 'em?"

"Well—some. Maybe not what you'd call many. I figure there ought to be enough here to pay for what supplies we need. I didn't come down here to haggle

over price. In fact, I'm willing to give you a good trade."

"Where's Furnot?" asked the factor.

Bartholomew laughed. "Oh, he stayed back in camp. He wouldn't come down. And right now, I want you to get me right. I didn't persuade him, one way or the other. He came along with the Injuns and said he was sick and tired of this post, and he was going to quit anyway when the boat came in, and wanted to throw in with me. Well, I was getting kind of lonesome and we made a deal. You can't blame me for that."

"No."

"All I want is to get out of this damned country—the quicker the better. Here's a list of what supplies we need. I figure those skins will be liberal payment."

Alexander took the list, and scanned its items. Then for several moments he sat, drawing the slip of paper slowly back and forth between his thumb and fingers.

"What do you say? Is it a trade?" asked Bartholomew at length.

The old factor spoke slowly, deliberately. "I've traded for twenty year on the Inlet. I know, almost to a skin, how much fur ye've got. An' I know how ye got it. An' I know what it cost—not what it cost ye, but what it cost the Injuns that traded the fur for liquor."

"But that's none of your business——"

"Aye," interrupted the factor, "it is my business. The welfare of the natives is the business of every Company man in the North. The fur ye've got would have paid the debt of many an Injun who must live hard this winter because his last year's debt is unpaid. Every skin ye have would have been traded in at this post in exchange for honest goods, for the things that he needs to eat an' to wear an' to use in his business of trappin'. An' as it would have been, so it should be. An' as it should be, it will be. Here is yer list an' yer skins."

"What! You mean you won't trade! Good God, man, you can't do that! We'll starve! We're up against it."

"Aye."

"Well, then, isn't there enough fur there to pay for the stuff?"

"About double the amount, were it come by honestly."

"What's the answer?"

Alexander lighted his pipe, and for several minutes puffed in silence while Bartholomew waited anxiously, his eyes on the imperturbable face. When the old man spoke it was in a tone coldly dispassionate.

"Ye told me ye wanted to get out of the North. That is as should be—the North will be the better for yer riddance. But ye'll go out clean of profit. The investment ye had in yer liquor, ye can charge to loss, or to experience, as ye see fit. I've two propositions to offer ye. Ye can take either one, or leave 'em, as ye wish. My Injun, Luke, is startin' south tomorrow. Ye can go out with him. I shall keep these skins in payment for the supplies that will take ye to the railroad."

"But what about Furnot——?"

"The other proposition will include Furnot. It is this—in return for all the skins ye have, I will outfit ye both for a trip to the railroad. In such case, ye will have no guide—Luke starts tomorrow."

"But it's robbery! It's a holdup! There's fur enough to pay for forty trips!"

"Ye refuse then? Very well, there is nothing more to talk about."

"Hold on! I—let me think a minute. I'll be damned if I'll starve! You say the Injun starts tomorrow. All right—I'll go! To hell with Furnot! To hell with the whole damned country! You've got me dead to rights. At that, though, I'll bet the Company'll never see the profits on the deal."

"The fur will be entered upon the books at a reasonable price," answered the factor, "an' certain credits will be made toward the debts of certain of the natives who were foolish enough to trade with ye."

"And what's more, I believe you'll do it," retorted Bartholomew, eyeing the older man with a look of mingled curiosity and respect. "But tell me, old-timer, what's it all gettin' you?"

"Peace o' mind," answered the other. "Ye'll sup wi' me tonight, for ye'll be startin' south by daylight."

Chapter VII

ANNE ALEXANDER

MISS FRANCES EASTON gazed through the window across the broad park that surrounded her school for girls in a suburb of Canada's

capital city. In the gray twilight bare branches lashed wildly as the great trees bowed and flung their naked arms to the gale. Snow fell in long slanting lines that obliterated distant outlines, and muffled the roar of the wind. A trolley car stopped, its row of yellow lights glowed dully for a moment, and moved on. A group of young women, collars upturned, hands thrust deep into pockets, heads bowed against the driving snow, hurried up the broad path, picking their way among the newly formed drifts. A slamming of the vestibule door, a stamping of feet, laughter, and tiny shrieks of relief at having gained shelter, and then footsteps upon the main stairway.

Miss Easton breathed a sigh and shuddered slightly at the moaning of the wind. "An early winter—how I hate it!" She was about to turn from the window when a figure appeared moving swiftly among the tree trunks. Head erect, arms swinging, the figure emerged into the broad meadow that stretched to the car line. Every line and movement of the lithe body spoke of health and endurance, and of the joy of living. No becoated and muffled figure this, shuffling with averted face before the wind. In woolen stockings, knickers, sweater and stocking cap, it paused in the full sweep of the gale and impulsively stretched out its arms into the teeth of the wind, the oncoming darkness, and the driving snow. Then, running, leaping, dancing it crossed the meadow and light footsteps sounded on the porch.

Little wrinkles of perplexity gathered between Miss Easton's eyes. How could anyone really love cold, and snow, and a howling wind upon the edge of darkness? Many of the girls enjoyed the winter sports, skating, tobogganing, skiing, all part of a well ordered curriculum, but this one loved storm and darkness and the physical discomfort of driving rain, and blinding snow. Anne Alexander Miss Easton had never been able to understand. Impulsive, lovable, sympathetic, she was a general favorite among her mates, albeit holding herself noticeably aloof. Miss Easton knew little of this girl of the far North—she was the daughter of a fur trader, motherless, and vouched for by David Gaunt, and was now entering upon her second year at the school.

Miss Easton's lips twitched at the memory of a day more than a year ago when the studied insult of a pupil, since dismissed, had been met with a fist to the jaw that scored as clean a knockout as was ever seen in the prize ring. The episode had caused surprise, consternation, and the unanimous approval of those girls who had witnessed the incident, and had established Anne Alexander in a very definite place in the cosmos of the school. The little pucker of wrinkles deepened between Miss Easton's eyes. For she knew that, despite her year of tutelage, Anne Alexander would today be as likely to resent an insult with a blow of the fist, as upon that other day when she had newly come out of the North.

As the girl entered the door the older woman turned to greet her with a smile, that flashed into a look of consternation. "My dear! Why, you're soaking wet to the waist! Where in the world have you been?"

The answer was preceded by a silvery laugh. "I fell in the creek. It was frozen over and I tried to cross, but the ice broke and I had to wade out. But I think by tomorrow it will hold up for skating."

"Go at once and remove that wet clothing! Even as you stand here you may be taking your death of cold!"

Again the silvery laugh. "Oh, I guess not. I've had time to get used to it. It was two hours ago I fell in. Oh, Miss Easton, don't you just *love* a day like this?"

The woman's reply was interrupted by the sound of the doorbell. An aproned maid turned quickly from the door with a half frightened cry, "Miss Easton! Come here, please!"

From the vestibule the older woman's voice sounded hardly less excited than the maid's. "What do you want? No! You can't come in!"

Anne Alexander had paused, her curiosity whetted by the excited voices. She caught the outline of a vague form in the dark vestibule and to her ears came a rumble of curious guttural, "—Meez Anne—A'm com' for git heem——"

Three swift steps and Anne Alexander bounded past between the two women and with her two hands seized the lapels of a blanket coat, and drew an old, leather faced Indian into the brilliantly lighted room. "Luke! Oh, Luke! You old

dear!" To the unspeakable consternation of the two bewildered women, the girl's arms were about the man's neck, and her lips were showering kisses upon the seamed face. Then suddenly the girl sprang back, and stared wide eyed into the Indian's face. "What are you doing here? Oh, tell me, Luke—has anything happened? My father? Where is he? Oh, tell me!"

"Frozen Inlet. You fader, she seek—on de leg, de foots she com' beeg." He indicated swelling with a motion of the palms. "She say me, A'm gon' git you. She lak to mak' talk wit' you—she t'ink she gon' to die. Dat better so you com' 'long. We mus' got to hur' lak hell we git back by Chrees'mas."

"But how did you get here?"

"Som'tam dogs to railroad. Den com' on cars. Den com' on leetle cars. Cop'l Downey, she on de cars com' to Ottawa. She fin' de leetle cars an' tell de man I gon' to de school."

"How soon does the train start? Where did you leave the dogs?"

"A'm lef' de dogs Cochrane. De train she go back 'bout hour."

"Wait, I'll be ready in a few minutes!"

As the girl turned toward the stairs, the voice of Miss Easton rose shrill. "Anne, what does this mean? Who is this person? Surely, you don't think I'd permit you to leave the school with——"

The girl paused on the first step. "He's old Luke! He took care of me when I was a baby! You heard what he said—my father is dying and wants to see me! We haven't a moment to lose——"

"I forbid you to leave this house!"

"Just try to stop me!" cried the girl, and flew up the stairs.

Miss Easton turned upon the Indian, and pointed a bony finger toward the open door. "Get out! Leave this house before I call the police!"

"Me, I ain' wan' you house. De p'lice don' wan' me. Meez Anne he say wait. A'm wait."

Furious, Miss Easton rushed to the telephone. "The police—quick!" she called.

"You want the Canadian Mounted Police, madam," informed a voice. "You have the city police. You are outside our limits."

"Hello—hello—hello— Is this the Canadian Mounted Police? Send an armed force down here at once—Miss Easton's school—an Indian is trying to kidnap one of my pupils. Hurry or you'll be too late! Have all trains watched—especially the one for Cochrane—they may be gone before you arrive!"

A desk sergeant at headquarters of the Mounted Police grinned broadly as the frenzied appeal burst upon his ear. With his palm pressed over the mouth of the transmitter, he said to the half dozen constables who lounged in the room, "Injuns on the warpath. Lady wants all trains watched and a big armed force right quick down to her school, about ten miles down the line. They're kidnappin' her pupils against the laws made an' provided. Here, Downey, you talk to her—you're a better hand with the ladies than the rest of us."

Corporal Downey, his eyes twinkling, took over the instrument. "Yes, madam. What is the complaint? Ah—yes. I understand. If I were you I'd— Don't want any suggestions? Yes, ma'am—this is Corporal Downey, of the Mounted Police. You don't want to talk to any corporal? The fact is, madam, we haven't a full regiment on duty here. No, the commissioner has just stepped out. You are talkin' to the rankin' officer. Yes, ma'am—now, if you will answer a few questions. How many Indians are attackin' your school? One—an' can you find out his name? Luke. Very good, an' the young lady he is tryin' to kidnap is? Ah, yes, Miss Alexander—Frozen Inlet Post, on Hudson Bay, I suppose. Daughter of my friend Duncan Alexander. Now, ma'am, I happen to know this Indian—he has been with the Alexanders since before the young lady was born. I know her, an' her father very well. I happen to know that it is all right an' proper that she should return with him. No, no, madam, you're mistaken. No, this is not a plot on the part of the police to connive in a kidnapping. Good-by, madam—what's that? Oh, yes, certainly—you'll appear before the commissioner in person? Yes, my name is Downey, Corporal Downey, an' I assume full responsibility—" Downey hung up the receiver, and returned the grins of his fellow constables. "Off comes my buttons tomorrow for connivin' in a kidnappin'—ain't that hell?"

Chapter VIII

Furnot Heads Southward

AFTER the departure of his partner, Giles Furnot dispatched the Indian Paul Tarsus on a trip to the northward after dogs, while he busied himself in the construction of a sled for transportation of the fur to the railway more than a thousand miles to the southward. Dur-

ing the daylight hours he labored, and when darkness gathered, retired indoors to sort the fur and make it up into packages.

The summer's trading had reduced the stock of unwatered liquor to less than five gallons, from which Furnot frequently refilled the flat flask. One day he succeeded in shooting a young bull and a cow caribou, and the balance of the daylight hours were spent in caching the meat.

A week passed. The sled was finished, but neither Bartholomew nor the Indian had showed up. Snow had fallen, the lake and the smoother stretches of the river had frozen, and the man spent the daylight hours in an unsuccessful hunt for caribou. It was on one of these expeditions on a river a few miles to the northward, that he came upon the wreck of a canoe at the foot of a rapid. Examination showed it to be the canoe in which Paul Tarsus had embarked in quest of dogs. Careful search of the banks of the stream disclosed what was evidently the Indian's last camp. Near the head of the rapids Furnot kicked the snow from a roll of blankets. The ax and some freshly cut firewood lay beside the ashes of a dead fire. Three of the four quarts of watered whisky with which the Indian was to have purchased dogs, lay with the blankets. Beside the fire was a bottle, carefully corked, yet with four-fifths of its contents missing. The shore was a bit marshy, and Furnot saw at a glance the manner of the Indian's undoing. After imbibing nearly a quart of the trading stock, he had stepped into the canoe and pushed out beyond the muck to fill his pot with water. Being very drunk, he overturned the canoe and together with the craft was carried down through the rapid.

Securing the liquor, the blankets, and the ax, the man returned to the cabin, where he drank himself into a drunken rage against the Indians, the North, Alexander, and Bartholomew.

Days passed and Bartholomew did not return—days in which he devoted himself more and more to the flat flask, and less and less to the business of hunting. The question of obtaining supplies became pressing. He had meat but no flour, the sugar had been used to the last grain, and only a few pinches of tea remained. When two weeks had passed with no sign of his partner, he decided on a trip to Frozen Inlet. "I s'pose he's gone an' croaked on me, too—damn him! I was a fool. He had jack on him, anyways a couple of grand. I'd ought to knocked him off before, instead of waitin'. Maybe old Alexander wouldn't trade with him, an' he didn't have grub enough to get back on. He better not try that with me," he muttered as he added the pistol to his pack. "With only him an' them two Injuns at the Post, an' no boat till next summer I can be to hell an' gone by summer—an' nothin' on me. Even if I stayed, what with the three of 'em weighted down an' a hundred foot deep on the bottom of the Inlet— But I don't want to do it that way. The old devil's got plenty jack if I could only find it. Everyone's got jack but me, but I'll get it! My best bet's the girl."

Three days later he pushed open the door of the trading room at Frozen Inlet, and advanced toward the stove where Duncan Alexander was working over his books by the light of the huge oil lamp.

"Hello," he greeted, with a half sheepish grin, "how's things at the post?"

"As well as might be expected," answered the factor, laying aside his book, and indicating an empty chair beside the stove.

Furnot removed his outer garments, spread them to dry, and seated himself. "Where's Bart?" he asked.

"Who?"

"Bart, my pardner. He started for here pretty near three weeks ago in a canoe to trade in some fur, an' he never came back."

"H's gone outside."

"Gone outside!" The tone was incredulous. "What do you mean—gone outside? He couldn't go nowheres alone! Couldn't even go outside the way he come in. We tried it."

"Luke went with him."

Furnot received the announcement in silence. Questions leaped into his brain. He covered the awkward interim by fumbling for his pipe, and whittling tobacco from a plug. Why had Bartholomew gone outside without returning for him? Why had Luke gone outside? At the first moment of meeting Furnot had noted the physical failing of the factor—the pallor of the cheek and brow, the swollen ankles encased in the shapeless felts over which no boots could possibly be drawn. The factor was sick—mortally sick, if appear-

ances counted. Had he sent old Luke for Anne? Deliberately he scratched a match and after the flickering sulphur had ignited the wood, held it to his pipe. Aloud he cursed his partner. "What did he go outside for—leavin' me up there alone! He come here for grub—damn him. He'd let me starve!"

"Aye," agreed Alexander, "but what would ye expect from a man who'd take profit from tradin' rum to the Injuns in exchange for fur they need to pay for food an' clothing for their women an' their children? Would ye look for loyalty in such a man? I would not. But ye're pardners, ye're birds of a feather. Ye'd have done the like by him, even as ye deserted me at a time when I most had need of ye."

"To hell with the Injuns. If they'd rather buy hootch with their fur than grub, that's their lookout. It's every man for himself. An' about me quittin' you, you ain't got no kick comin', I ain't even expectin' you to pay me my back wages. But, at that, I ain't no slave. I got a right to better myself if I can."

"Aye, if ye can."

"Yes, an' I done it, too. My share of the fur we've took in is three—four times as much as what my wages would have come to. An' with him skipped out, I've got it all! That's why I can't see what he pulled out for—not because I figured he give a damn about me. He loses that fur. I can't dope it out."

"Mayhap I can help ye. He came to me with some skins to trade—as ye have come to me now. I give him his choice of two offers. In exchange for all the fur ye've taken in, I agreed to furnish the two of ye just enough of an outfit to get ye back to the railway; or in exchange for the fur he had with him, I agreed to outfit him, and furnish him a guide. He chose the last. He seemed not o'er pleased with his bargain, but there was no profit in it either way, an' the chance of a guide decided him."

Furnot held his voice level. "An' you sent old Luke out with him, just to see him through?"

"Luke would have gone whether or no. I'm sore in need of a clerk for the winter's tradin'. I cannot handle the job alone, as I did this spring. As ye've no doubt noticed, I'm ailin'. I sent out for a clerk by the boat, but they've sent me none, an' the tradin' will soon be on us."

There was a nasty rasp in Furnot's voice as he replied, "You can chase him out of the North with that kind of a bargain—it was money in my pocket that you did—but you're dealin' with me now. I know what fur is worth." He paused and shoved the packet toward the factor with his foot. "Just look them over, an' make me a price."

Alexander broke open the packet, and one by one examined the skins. "A choice lot," he said, "a little better, maybe, than the ones he brought."

"What will you give for 'em—how many skins?"

Alexander answered deliberately, "For these, an' the fur up yonder in your cabin, just enough outfit to take you to the railway. 'Tis the same offer I made him, barrin' the guide, but you need no guide—just follow the coast."

Furnot laughed, shortly. "Don't be a fool, Alexander, an' don't play me for a fool. There's enough fur right there to outfit a dozen men for a whole winter at any post in Canada."

"Aye, maybe, but, not at Frozen Inlet. If ye intend to winter in the country ye'll have to find yer own supplies. There's none at Frozen Inlet for ye."

"You mean you refuse to trade with me?" There was a note of sneering truculence in the tone.

"Ye've heard my proposition. Take it, or leave it."

"You might run Bart out of the country, but you can't run me!" Reaching beneath his coat, Furnot withdrew an automatic pistol. "Talk sense, Alexander," he said, with a wicked narrowing of the eyes, as he tapped his crossed knee with the muzzle of the gun by way of emphasis. "Just remember this ain't a one-man show. For instance, what's to hinder me from knockin' you off—the Injuns, too, an' sinkin' you to the bottom of the Inlet, an' helpin' myself to whatever I want? Who'd ever say I done it? Who'd ever say any crime was committed? An' who could ever prove it, if they did say it? They'd find the whaleboat stove up somewheres on the beach, an' they'd write you off the books as an accidental drownin'. You want to get me out of the country. All right, I'll go. I'm sick an' tired of the damn' place, anyhow. But I'll take my fur with me—that is all but what I'll trade to you for supplies. I need dogs, an' harness, an' enough grub for three months. At that, you're gettin' a good bargain. Do I get it, or don't I?"

Apparently the factor had taken no notice of the pistol. "Ye get exactly two an'

a quarter pounds of grub for each of the fifty days it'll take ye to reach the railway, if ye travel fast. I have no dogs. There's a light hand-sled here, ye can load yer outfit on that."

"A thousan' miles of hand-sleddin'! You're crazy!" Furnot raised the gun in his hand. "If you ain't got the dogs here, just count me out a pocketful of brass checks, an' I'll buy me some dogs from the Injuns. I'll take the rest of it in grub. Come alive! I've knocked off better men than you before now." With a flourish, he thumbed back the safety lock of his pistol. "You're just one minute from hell, if you don't get a move on."

The old factor smiled, and to his astonishment Furnot noticed a twinkle in the watery blue eyes. "Speakin' o' hell, just look across the top o' yon pork barrel an' tell me what ye see."

Furnot whirled, and the next moment the pistol clattered to the floor, as his empty hands were elevated above his head. He was staring directly into the muzzle of the ten gauge goose gun. Its distance was about four feet, the hammer was at full cock and a brown finger was crooked upon the trigger, while peering along the barrel was a malevolent brown face. "For God's sake, don't shoot!" the words were a shrill shriek.

Stooping, Alexander picked the automatic from the floor. "Sit down," he commanded, and when Furnot complied he slipped out the clip, fired the bullet from the barrel into the floor, and opening the door of the stove, tossed the empty weapon into the fire. "'Tis not such a gun as a decent man would be havin' about," he said, and called to the Indian, "Ye can bring me the shotgun, Peter, an' then ye'll lay out fifty pound o' flour, an' the same o' salt pork, an' with it ye'll put ten pound o' sugar, an' a pound each o' tea and salt, an' a half pound o' tobacco, an' a couple o' blocks o' matches."

When the Indian had complied, Alexander spoke to Furnot, who had watched the proceeding with a scowl. "There's yer outfit. Ye can take it an' hit for the railway, or ye can take yer fur an' hit back where ye came from—'tis all one to me. But, mind ye, once ye leave this door, whatever road ye choose, ye'll ne'er be seen on Frozen Inlet again. Ye're a scourge to the country, an' moreover, ye've threatened my life with a gun. If ever ye show yer face within a mile o' this post, ye'll be shot on sight. An' I'm no man to be makin' idle threats."

"It's robbery, that's what it is!" whined Furnot. "Robbery, an' murder—turnin' a man out afoot on short ration!"

"Ye've a margin of safety if ye keep travelin'. Good men have made it in thirty days. Have ye made up yer mind? Ye've already overstayed yer welcome at Frozen Inlet."

"I'll go—I've got to go. I can't stay here an' starve. I'll go! But you wait! You ain't heard the last of me yet—by a damn' sight!"

Ten minutes later Alexander and the Indian, Peter, watched from the door of the trading post as a solitary figure, dragging a hand-sled, grew smaller and smaller on the white expanse of the Inlet, until finally it was swallowed up in the gloom to the southward.

"Heem bad man, dat Furnot," opined the Indian, as they turned from the doorway. "A'm t'ink dat better you let me shoot um to hell wit' de shotgun."

"Losh, lad, 'twould have been murder! 'Tis different, now—he's had his warnin'. But he'll na' be comin' back. We're well rid of the two of 'em."

"S'pose he meet Luke an' Meez Anne on de trail?"

Alexander shrugged. "Luke knows him for what he is—they've got both dogs an' a rifle. He could neither follow, nor fight 'em."

But the Indian, Peter, shook his head somberly as he carried the furs to the storehouse.

(To be continued in our next issue)

In the next issue

A THOUSAND-TO-ONE SHOT

by W. C. Tuttle

FRIED CHICKEN

By J. D. NEWSOM

Author of "The Noncombatant," "Three Days' Leave," etc.

RAIDS, COUNTER ATTACKS, SHELL FIRE AND SUDDEN DEATH; THEY WERE ALL IN THE ORDINARY BUSINESS OF THE DAY, AND TO BE ACCEPTED PHILOSOPHICALLY AS SUCH. BUT IT ALMOST DISRUPTED THE ALLIED ARMIES WHEN SOMEONE — MAYBE THE GERMANS — SPREAD THE NEWS THAT THE AMERICAN TROOPS WERE BEING FED ON FRIED CHICKEN

FOUR men crouched beneath the chicken wire covering the top of the listening post and cursed their luck.

Withers, who came from Bermondsey, swore in cockney English, because in times of stress his mother tongue was more effective than all the Franco-Arabic blasphemies he had picked up in the barrackrooms of the French Foreign Legion.

Curialo, a rawboned, gaunt and dirty man, spoke English also, but it was the English of New York's gas-house district, which he claimed as his *alma mater*.

Vankoor expressed his disgust in stolid Dutch, while Corporal Damois used the French of the Paris gutters.

Notwithstanding this strange confusion of tongues, the four men made no noise at all. They did all their cursing beneath their breath, for the German wire was less than thirty yards away, and a single round oath, loudly spoken, would have been hailed by a volley of hand grenades, which the chicken wire might or might not deflect. Probably not. They knew too much about the rate of mortality in that listening post to run any unnecessary risks.

Vankoor stood on the fire step, peering out through the moonlighted mist at the rank grass and the ragged lips of shell holes which dotted No Man's Land. The others sat on a mound of slimily wet sandbags which had burst under the combined effect of a sharp frost followed by thaw and rain. Their feet bathed in a pool of mud. They were cold and damp, and their breath steamed in white puffs through the mufflers wrapped across their mouths.

And they cursed. They should have been relieved that night at ten o'clock, but the relief was bogged miles away in the thigh deep slime which had blocked the trenches as soon as the thaw set in. It was then midnight, and the chances were good that they would have to stay in the line until the following evening.

Occasionally the muffled cough of a rifle shot echoed through the fog, otherwise an uncanny silence full of small creeping sounds and the everlasting drip of water brooded over the listening post. Out of the distance came the rumble of artillery fire, but the thick mist deadened it so that it was no more than a vague concussion, felt rather than heard.

Withers' teeth chattered dismally. Corporal Damois stood the racket as long as he could, then he leaned over and spoke softly in the cockney's ear.

"Species of a pig," said he, "do you wish to awake the entire German army? Control the trembling of your teeth, unless you wish us all to be extinguished before the relief arrives."

"It is not for my amusement that I make my teeth click," the cockney retorted indignantly. "And me, I do not mind telling you that the only sound that reaches me is the loud noise of your snuffling."

He didn't like the corporal, a young fellow who had joined up less than a year before, whereas he, Withers, was a veteran of the old Legion, with six years' service to his credit—or to his discredit, as he was frequently told when he appeared in the orderly room.

The corporal, however, was in no mood to listen to any back-chat from a common soldier of the second class.

"Very well, camel," he snapped. "When we are relieved you shall do four days' punishment drill to teach you better manners. Yes! And instead of telling I know not what lies to that fat Yvonne, you will be mending roads at Abancourt!"

He was huddled quite close to Withers for the sake of warmth, and he moved away a little to mark the severance of all friendly relations. But he moved away too bruskly and the mound of sandbags slowly gave way beneath him. They caved in and he slid down and down until he came to rest, waist deep in ooze. It climbed up inside his coat sleeves and soaked through to the small of his back.

"Withers," he ordered. "Camel! Aid me to arise. I command you to assist me!"

Withers came to his rescue, but both their hands were slippery and numb with cold, and they parted company at an awkward moment. Corporal Damois sat down again with a splash.

"Eight days' punishment drill!" he wheezed. "Eight days, thou hog! Deliberately you let go my hand. I will teach you to ridicule a superior officer!"

Then Curialo bent down and addressed the figure wallowing in the darkness.

"Listen, Corporal," he said out of the corner of his mouth, "you may want to die. That is your privilege. Personally, I desire to see once again the pretty girls of Abancourt. Now just keep still, and we'll hoist you up."

He took hold of Damois by one arm, Withers held the other. They tugged. The corporal came out of the mud with a sucking sound such as a cork makes as it comes out of a bottle. He was not in the least grateful.

"And you also, you shall do eight days," he snarled. "I will teach the pair of you to respect my rank. Disgraceful conduct!"

And he went and stood beside the stolid Vankoor, who was always respectful and never answered back, while great gobs of muck rolled off his coat and fell into the bottom of the hole.

"Little whippersnapper, that's what 'e is," Withers whispered to Curialo. "'E calls 'imself a corpril, but 'e don't ruddy well know what soldiering means, 'e don't. This perishing army! 'Ow I wisht I was out of it! It ain't what it used to be in the good old days when a man 'ad to see service afore 'e was promoted. Look at the likes of us!"

Curialo shrugged one shoulder. "Aw, forget it," he urged. "Belly-aching won't do you no good, Bert, so what's the use?"

"Silence!" hissed Damois, shaking his arm through the pearl-gray fog at the culprits.

"It's a dog's life, this 'ere Legion," complained Withers. "A perishing disgrace! 'Struth, it ain't fit for 'uman beings. Look at the food they gives us, and they works us to the bone—and then no relief. And us old soldiers what ought to be sergeants by rights, only them new officers don't understand nothink about men."

"Well, what're you going to do about it?" retorted Curialo.

"Do?" Withers' voice shook with emotion. "Desert, first chance comes my way, that's what. Or else surrender. I've 'ad enough. Upstart young corprils 'anding out eight days' punishment drill, as you might say, 'Will you 'ave a drop of beer?'"

The corporal stepped cautiously over and bent down until his face was thrust almost against Withers' snub nose.

"Do you wish even the Americans to hear you?" he demanded. "The *bon Dieu* knows, they are but a kilometer away, and they will surely be awakened by your sacred voice. I command you to be silent. When we get out of here, it is before the lieutenant that you shall appear for having disobeyed my order. And it is not eight days you will get, but *prison,* both of you!"

"I wish I was in the American army," retorted Withers, who knew by experience that Damois could be pacified with a bottle of *vin ordinaire.* "It is not five cents a day, but five francs we should be receiving. And good food, and not too much work. There is a people which understands the art of war! Is it not so, Curialo?"

"I guess they do," Curialo agreed without enthusiasm. He had tried to obtain his transfer to the American army months before, but permission had been refused, for he had joined the Legion before the

war broke out and belonged therefore to the regular army.

"They are fed on fried chicken and ice cream," Withers went on, quoting rumors he had picked up from untrustworthy sources. "They have pumps in their trenches. They are given permission to go to Paris each time they are relieved. What a people! It would be a pleasure to belong to their grand army."

"And you have talked enough," snarled Damois, who would have torn out his hair by the roots had it not been cropped short. "You, Withers, go take Vankoor's place and stand watch until we are relieved. That will shut your mouth for a while. And be not mistaken; it is courtmartial for the pair of you the minute we reach Abancourt."

With a grunt of disgust Withers heaved himself to his feet and climbed up on the fire step. Wraiths of woolly white mist trailed through the moonlight, and the darkness was full of ghostly shadows. But he did not care at the moment whether the darkness was full of Germans. Life was very sad indeed. He was hungry, cold, damp and tired. And as he stood with his head above the parapet, he thought enviously of the pleasant life led by the Yankees who had moved into the sector forty-eight hours earlier. He had not seen them, for they were separated from the Legion by a broad marsh and a stream where there were no trenches. But he had heard strange tales about the ways of these Americans: they were paid huge sums, their food was of the finest, their clothing was warm and dry; they stayed in the trenches for a day or so and rested in Paris for a month. Curialo scoffed at these rumors, but that was only because, being an American himself, he was sorry not to have obtained his transfer. Sour grapes.

The more Withers thought about the injustice of Fate, which had caused him to be born in Bermondsey and had driven him into the Legion instead of making him a citizen of New York—which was the one American city he knew of—the more his spirits sank. It did not seem right that some men should have all the luck, while he was being bullied by upstart young corporals.

"To hell with this 'ere Legion," he thought. "First chance I get, I'm going to hop it."

The cold made him yawn and tears blurred his eyes. He thought he saw something move out there in front of him in the dim half-light. He blinked and stared at the "something," and it became a whorl of gray mist. The night was quiet.

THEN, seconds later, he heard a faint, faint scraping sound, like cloth tearing on barbed wire. It made the hair on the back of his neck stand up and bristle. He peered at the tufts of rank grass and the dark hummocks which might conceal almost anything. Were they moving, or were they stationary? Was that round, black mass a man or a mound of earth? Had it been there a moment ago? Cautiously he moved his rifle and aimed it at the suspicious looking object. Nothing moved, save blades of grass stirred by the breeze.

"Corporal!" he whispered. "Corporal!"

Something *had* moved, over on the right. He steadied the butt of his rifle against his shoulder and fired. *Crash!* The report smashed the silence.

Before the sound of the shot died away, the wire above the outpost cried out rustily beneath the impact of a hand grenade. It rebounded and burst in midair. The concussion hurled Withers flat against the parapet. A hail of jagged splinters cut the wire and spattered in the mud—and in flesh and bone. Vankoor was hit. He went down, grunting like a stricken ox.

A shower of missiles fell in and around the outpost. Crash followed crash in quick succession. Dislodged by the explosions, sandbags fell into the listening post, bringing down the soft earth walls in a miniature landslide which paralyzed the Legionaires' legs.

It lasted seconds, while the air was alive with the hiss of flying fragments and the searing flash of explosions. The wire netting gave way, rolled up and sagged down into the hole. Trapped beneath it, Curialo and the corporal struggled like fish caught in a net.

Withers crouched behind the broken wall. He had lost his helmet and blood dribbled from a cut on his cheek. As soon as the din subsided he struggled to his feet. Dimly he saw dark figures loom out of the fog. He had time to fire twice, then a man leaned over the edge of the parapet and struck him on the side of the head with a nail-studded bludgeon. It was

a glancing blow, but it knocked all fight out of Withers for the time being. His hold on the rifle relaxed and he slumped down on the fire step.

Two Germans jumped down on top of him. Several more appeared along the fringe of sandbags. They were large, muddy, determined men and they worked with brutal efficiency. Those outside the listening post pumped lead at the Legionaires caught beneath the netting, while the pair who had dropped into the hole caught hold of Withers and bundled him out into the open.

For good measure, someone administered a second crack on Withers' spine with the butt end of an automatic before dragging him away. But he had not the least intention of trying to escape. Bright stars danced before his eyes, and his legs were of the consistency of cotton wool. He realized hazily that he was a prisoner, but he didn't much care if only he could reach the safety of the German trench before the inevitable retaliation started.

Two men caught him by the arms, while a third raider held the business end of a bayonet pressed close against the small of his back. They hauled him along with his feet dragging behind him, plowing their way through the muck and the shell holes.

Behind them, before they had covered ten yards, a machine gun opened fire. Then another and another gun added its harsh voice to the uproar. It swelled to a deafening chorus as it spread outward, up and down the line. A hail of bullets came whistling out of the pearly gray mist. Almost at once two of the Germans were hit. Withers saw them drop. His escort went to earth in a shell hole, and Withers went with them, up to his waist in ice-cold water.

The shock of immersion steadied his spinning brain. He gasped, and was rewarded by a clout over the ear. The Germans apparently intended to take him back alive, but they did not seem to care whether he arrived in a damaged or undamaged condition.

Over the rim of the crater bullets sizzled. The excitement showed no signs of abating; indeed, before long, a trench mortar battery came into action and distributed large bombs all over the strip of land between the two lines of trenches. One of these bombs came down with a long-drawn *wheee,* and plunked into the mud not six feet from the shell hole where Withers and his captors crouched down. It detonated with a rending crash, and a fountain of earth leaped up through the mist, obscuring the moon.

Then the column of dirt and smoke crumbled away, and showered the ground with debris. A long sliver of metal pinged against a coal-scuttle helmet, and its wearer slid a little farther down into the mire.

"Herman!" cried one of his companions. "Herman! *Was ist los?"*

Herman, however, was past caring what the matter might be. There were five inches of jagged steel in his cerebellum, and the back of his skull was cracked wide open. A grayish substance mingled with the blood which ran down the side of his face when they turned him over.

The Germans swore bitterly as if, instead of being soulless Huns, they had been men like any others, capable of grief and pain, friendship and affection. This surprised Withers. It occurred to him that it was very odd to see these two Boches crouching down in the mud beside their comrade, crying because he was dead.

Their sorrow affected him so much that he, too, began to snuffle. But they paid no attention to him whatsoever. They were going through the dead man's clothing, removing papers which they transferred to their own pockets.

"They'll be 'aving to write to the pore feller's widow, or his mother," thought Withers. "This 'ere is a terrible war."

Blong! Another trench mortar bomb split the air with its tremendous roar. By the white glare of the explosion Withers saw, quite close to his nose, the butt of an automatic sticking out of a holster at a round German hip.

Moved by an impulse he did not begin to understand, his fingers closed around the weapon. He jerked at it, and it came away with a rasp, which warned the German that it was high time he remembered the war and its often fatal consequences. He gave a sharp cry and tried to turn around, only to find himself looking down the muzzle of his own automatic. He was rash enough to make a wild sweep at it with his arm, and the gun went off. He went to join the long list of the Fatherland's death with a bullet between his eyes.

The sole survivor of the trio showed no fight. He put his hands up on a level with his ears—to put them any higher meant exposing them to the full blast of the machine gun fire—and shouted, *"Kamarad"* in a loud, imploring voice.

"Ain't it a crime!" cried Withers. "I

didn't mean to shoot your mate. 'E started it, 'e did."

"Kamarad!" repeated the German, who had learned English at Leipzig, and understood cockney English only imperfectly.

"Comrade is right," agreed Withers. "Fair sick of this war, I am. Fed up wiv it, if you should want to know. But don't you lower them dukes of yours," he went on less pleasantly as the German tried to put down his hands. "Just because I'm being chatty ain't no reason for you to try any dirty Hunnish tricks. Keep 'em up or, Gor'blimey, I'll blow your blinking brains out. Blow me if I don't!"

"You are not French?" quavered the German. "Is it the English which are in the line? We heard the *Chasseurs* had come before us."

"Fooled you, eh, what?" crowed Withers, although he was quite well aware that the *Chasseurs* would have been in the listening post if it had not been for the thaw. "Ain't so smart after all, are you?"

"May I put down my hands, please?" inquired the German. "It is so close to the top where they are now, and the bullets are breaking away the earth."

"Sit a bit lower, my lad," ordered Withers, running no unnecessary risks. "A bit of water won't 'urt you."

So, while angry machine guns hunted for them and a trench mortar battery plowed up the land, the Legionaire and the German sat waist deep in water and became more or less friendly. Rather more so than less. Withers apologized for having shot his prisoner's friend, and the prisoner apologized for having cracked Withers over the head. Which reminded the cockney that his head hurt abominably, and that he had lost his steel helmet.

"It's you what 'it me, is it?" he grunted, forgetting to be quite so amiable. "You better be careful how you behave, if you want to live. Fancy hitting me over the knob like that! Gor'struth, you almost cracked it open!" He became indignant.

"You blinking Hun! Here, just pass me that helmet of yours. I ain't going to expose myself to this here fiery blast while you sits there all armor-plated."

He felt much more comfortable once his ears were safely protected beneath the German's helmet, and he relented sufficiently to add, "You can put on your mate's hat if you like."

The German was more than willing. He snatched up the dented tin hat and crammed it down on his close cropped head.

The rattle of machine gun fire was decreasing, and the trench mortar gunners had gone back to sleep. Both sides were settling down once again to the long game of watchful waiting. The night became quiet once more.

"Gor'blimey," quoth Withers, sniffing the air where the smell of explosives lingered in the fog, "we ain't going to stay 'ere till the war's over. Here, my lad, hop out of here."

"Please," the prisoner said humbly.

"Ow, don't mention it," Withers snapped. He had been about to let the German go back to his own side of the line, but that deferential "Please," coming from a Boche, sounded entirely too submissive to be genuine.

"I'll give you 'please' wiv this 'ere gun, if you ain't careful. Hop out and crawl along ahead of me, and don't try to be nasty, my lad, or you'll get what-for where you won't much like it."

"Please," repeated the German. "Which way?"

"Now, that's a question," admitted Withers, rubbing the fore sight of the automatic against the side of his nose. "I'm blowed if I know, offhand. We come in facing this way—so. That's right ain't it? And then I shifted to 'ere——"

Then the German suddenly fell upon him and gripped him tightly in his arms. Neither of them dared make much noise, for the darkness was full of latent menace. The German was large and powerful. He could have broken Withers' back; in fact he would have done so had it not been for the fact that the muzzle of the automatic was squeezed up close against the underside of his jaw. He found the sensation so damnably unpleasant that he quickly relaxed his hold.

"Yes!" gasped Withers, his face contorted with rage. "'Please,' hey? You big, hulking brute, tricky, ain't you? But you can't fool a Legionaire! I'm up to your Hunnish ways."

"Ach, so!" exclaimed the German. "The Legion is still before us? They kill their prisoners, the Legion. Is it that you would kill me?"

"Killing's too good for you," Withers retorted. "Get out of this here hole quick. And don't forget I'm right behind you

wiv this gun in my hand."

They left the shell hole with the minimum of noise, and started on their journey toward the French wire. The German, who was well acquainted with the Legion's reputation, attended strictly to the business of crawling straight before him, but after fifteen minutes Withers had to confess that his sense of direction was slightly at fault. Instead of reaching the wire entanglements they came to the edge of a fog choked marsh, full of hummocks and pot holes and a litter of strange things that stank. Cat-tails raised stiff fingers in the light of the moon, and tufts of long grass, beaded with moisture, whispered and rustled. The eery stillness was broken once by the mournful cry of a moor-hen. Withers felt his blood run cold.

"Ease off to your right a bit," he ordered, tapping the gun muzzle on the German's hip.

They floundered deeper into the swamp until they came to a row of willow trees trailing feathery branches in the steamy waters of a black and oily stream.

"Lost!" panted Withers. "'Struth, if you hadn't butted in I'd been out of the trenches by now, on my way to rest billets. You blinking Hun!"

"It is war," apologized the German.

"That ain't nothing new. It's been the same war a matter of three years now."

"*Jahr*. Three years. And now Herman is dead and so is Adolph." He buried his face in his muddy hands and began to sob. "Always we have been together," he said brokenly. "The three of us."

"Yes, and you killed my mate back in the listening post, and what's more you tried to get me, too. Crocodile tears," jeered Withers. "If I was so much as to turn my head away you'd try again. Here you, have you got an Iron Cross by any chance?"

"To be sure," proudly answered the German, forgetting to be cautious.

"Well, then, hand it over, or them wolves what call themselves Legionaires'll be hooking it off you. And you ain't got a '*Gott mit uns*' belt, too, have you?"

The German was acquainted with the procedure, having no doubt practiced it himself. He handed over the booty without a murmur of protest.

"'Right," said Withers. "We'll try our luck again. Bear off a bit more to the right. 'Struth, if we keep going long enough we may crawl right into Paris."

They followed the row of willow trees for some distance, until abruptly the German paused on the fringe of a clump of tall grasses.

"Wire," he whispered. "I have stuck myself."

"Wire?" repeated Withers, coming up beside him to investigate. "Wire, my eye! We ain't nowhere near a trench."

He crawled up to the grass and groped about with his hand, hunting for the concealed obstacle.

"I don't feel nothing," he began.

Then he was knocked sideways, and went sprawling on his face with the German atop of him. The automatic slid from his fingers. He was at the mercy of his assailant. Fear made him struggle frantically. He squirmed and writhed beneath the German's weight and gnawed at a thumb which slipped into his mud filled mouth. The pain of the bite made the German swear.

The curse died away on his lips, for the clump of cat-tails and marsh grass suddenly erupted several men who fell upon him and started to hammer him with exceptional vigor. Their unexpected onslaught paralyzed him. He rolled aside, and yet more men proceeded to treat Withers in the same fashion.

It was short and brutal. In half a minute the commotion was over and the two prisoners were being hustled along, in and out of pools and through treacherous holes where captors and captives became drenched to the skin.

Soon they reached a deep belt of wire strung on knife-rests. They hurried through a gap and passed close to a sandbagged redoubt where cigarette butts glowed in the darkness.

"Couple of Heinies," said one of Withers' guards.

"Slick work," answered a voice out of the shadows. "Better make it snappy. There's quite some stuff dropping hereabouts tonight."

Strange, thought Withers, these men spoke English, very much after the fashion of Curialo. But he had not time for reflection, and his much battered ears were singing so that he could not be sure whether he heard this conversation or merely imagined it.

What he did hear, however, was a most unpleasant voice telling him to "get across that trestle and mind your step, or I'll plug you."

"I ain't a Hun," he protested feebly. "I come from——"

Smack! A boot coincided with the seat of his trousers and he decided to reserve his defense until a better occasion.

At his feet yawned the river, black, steamy, lit by streaks of silver from the uncanny moon. Across it a plank had been thrown. The far shore was lost in darkness.

"Snap out of it," ordered the same cantankerous voice. "If you fall in it's your funeral."

Out on the plank went the Legionaire, balancing himself with outstretched arms. But his boots were balls of mud and grass, and the plank was elastic as a springboard. He slipped and went on slipping. His arms flapped wildly, but his legs shot out from beneath him and he struck the surface of the water with a resounding splash. His heavy clothes would have dragged him under, but the stream was no more than breast deep and he waded ashore, where he was greeted by a row of grinning faces. Even the German was grinning, and Withers, feeling much the worse for wear, sputtered, "Gors'truth, this is a nice way to be treated by allies, even if I do say so. I ain't no Hun. I'm an Englishman, that's what I am: Blinking disgrace—" Speech became impossible, for his teeth began to rattle like castanets.

"Say, this bird speaks English," one man exclaimed. "Not bad English either, for a Kraut."

"I should worry," the unpleasant voice retorted. "Fetch him along pronto. If he balks, sock him! This is no place to linger."

Unmistakably, it was no place to linger. Before they had gone more than ten steps a thin whistling sound cut the still night air. It grew, it expanded until it became a prolonged howl, and a shell burst overhead in a fiery red halo. Shrapnel bullets lashed the ground. Another shell was on its way, but before it arrived the whole party was down in the American front line trench.

"I say," stammered Withers between shudders as he was dragged along, "A-are y-you the Ya-ya-yanks?"

"You said it," agreed his most recent captor. "We're the Ya-ya-yanks, and you're a p-p-prisoner. Feeling cold, Fritz?"

"M-my name's Albert Withers, and I buh-belong to the Frrrench army."

"Tell that to Sweeny," laughed the doughboy. "How come you're wearing a——"

Another covey of shells howled through the fog and spat lead into the earth. The night was not quite so quiet on this side of the swamp.

"Make 'em move," ordered a man close behind Withers. "Speed her up!"

"If y-you don't buh-believe me—" Withers began again.

"Aw, bottle it," urged the doughboy. "It'll keep."

They fought their way down the trench, climbing over mounds of wreckage.

"Been shelling this stretch right smart," one trooper remarked, and Withers was prompted to reply. "C-call this shelling, do you? 'Struth, wait till you really been shelled once. This ain't nothink."

"Maybe not," jeered his escort, "but you better keep right on hoping nothing worse happens tonight. You won't be going down till tomorrow morning. Say, where d'you pick up your English?"

"Pick it up?" Withers stuttered. "Gor'-blimey, ain't I always knowed it? Born in London, I was!"

"Thought you said you were in the French army? G'wan, what's the use of shooting that line of bull?"

"Get that man down the trench quick," barked the unpleasant voice.

"Sure," agreed the doughboy. "We're moving, Sergeant, fast's we can. But you ought to hear this bird speak English. It's a scream!"

They came at last to a dugout in a communication trench. The two prisoners were led down, preceded by the sergeant. Down in the dugout, which was stuffy and smelled of mouldy leather and tobacco smoke, sat two officers. One of them had two silver bars on his shoulder strap, the other one wore a bar of gold. The latter, moreover, also had a toothbrush mustache, tortoise-shell rimmed glasses and an abrupt manner.

Withers looked about in search of spring mattresses, fried chicken, ice-cream, and hot and cold running water—luxuries which he had been assured American troops carried with them everywhere. But he was disappointed. The dugout looked very much like any of a hundred holes in the ground in the French sector, with the same muddy floor and the same candles and the same moisture laden rafters.

He was not particularly interested in

the sergeant's discourse, because he felt quite sure he could establish his identity when the time came for him to speak. The truth was sure to amaze these solemn faced officers. He looked forward to their excuses with great pleasure, for officers always made him feel class-conscious and angrily bashful. Officers, whatever their rank or the army they belonged to, were toffs.

"There's a typical specimen for you," he heard the officer with the horn rimmed spectacles say to his companion. "He looks as if he had been through a mangle."

"He fell in the river," explained the sergeant. "And he speaks English, sir. They both do."

"Funny uniform for a German," the lieutenant commented. "Looks like a French *capote* to me. Hello! It *is* a *capote*. What d'you know about that?"

"Ghouls!" said the captain with intense disgust. "He looks just the type which would rob the dead. Personally, I much prefer the looks of the other fellow. Much more wholesome."

He turned to the sergeant and added, "Go through their pockets, will you? We'll make a bundle of their papers to send on to H. Q."

Then Withers found his tongue. "I beg leave to protest," he said with as much dignity as he could command. "You can't have me searched. No, sir, you can't. And what's more I been treated something shocking; kicked and punched all over the shop. And me a ally!"

"Good Lord!" breathed both officers, leaning forward and staring at Withers as if they were seeing ghosts. "Has it—does it—where did you collect this, er, man?" the captain wound up.

"Out in the swamp," grinned the sergeant. "He's a bit off his nut, I should say. The other one's easier to understand."

"But, Gor'blimey," cried Withers, with tears of wrath gathering in his protruding eyes, "ain't I telling you I'm a ally? I'm a Briton, I am. Fancy telling me I can't speak proper English!" He spluttered incoherently.

"An Englishman in the German army," exclaimed the captain. "If that's the case, you're just about ready for the firing squad. Be careful what you're saying."

"You don't give me a proper chance," Withers complained, wringing his hands. "I'm a private of the French Foreign Legion, that's what I am."

"An Englishman in the French army, wearing a German helmet," summed up the lieutenant.

"Took it orf a prisoner, I did," boasted Withers, "and, here: take a look at these!" He held out the iron cross and the German belt. "They all comes off the same blinking Boche. That's him standing there wiv a smurk on his soft face. My prisoner, Gor'blimey! I took him."

"Well," muttered the captain, making gestures of utter helplessness with his hands, "I have to admit that for once in a long and checkered career I am absolutely buffaloed."

He addressed the other prisoner with evident doubt. "Excuse me for asking, but are you, er, a German, or something else?"

"Cherman!" proudly answered the prisoner, drawing himself up.

"Thank God for that. I was beginning to wonder whether the patrol had wandered into some French trenches by mistake." Once more he turned to Withers. "Now," he pleaded, "in words of two syllables, will you please tell me what you are, who you are, and why you are found wandering about in a swamp at midnight in the company of a member of the enemy forces?"

"Maybe he's a spy," suggested the sergeant, who hated to see one of his prisoners slip through his fingers.

"Spy?" snarled Withers. "Gor'struth I——"

"Slowly," begged the officer, passing his hand across his tired eyes. "Let's get this thing straight from the start. We'll assume you're not a spy. Now then, shoot."

Withers' account of the night's events was moderately accurate. He produced his military booklet to establish his identity, and several letters bearing his address. And he wound up with the pathetic information that he was cold, hungry and very much the worse for wear.

Everybody concerned shook him by the hand and assured him that he was a fine fellow. Even the sergeant's hard face relaxed into a grin as he explained that "mistakes will happen."

"We'll fix you up so's you can get back to your regiment," said the captain. "Sooner, the better. There's no sense in

keeping you hanging around here till morning if your regiment's being relieved."

But Withers did not hanker to recross the swamp at that time of night, nor at any other time, for that matter.

"If it's all the same to you, sir," he begged, "could I stay here for the night. I been handled pretty rough tonight, and what's more," he added, his mind turning to thoughts of plentiful rations and a warm place to sleep in, "I'd like to see something of these here brave American boys what's come over here to fight the Huns. I been thinking many's the time as how I'd like to have a chat wiv 'em. But the Legion ain't what you might call sociable."

"All right, all right," promised the bewildered captain. "We'll fix you up. Sit down for a while, until we deal with this prisoner of yours."

AN HOUR later, in the second line of trenches some little distance behind the front line, Withers sat before a coke brazier in another dugout, which was crowded with men. His uniform hung drying on a string stretched in front of the glowing fire. It steamed, giving off an odor of wet wool and earth. Meanwhile he wore a tunic several sizes too large for him, a pair of trousers and a greatcoat lined with sheepskin of amazing warmth.

Iodine had been splashed on his cuts and bruises. It had been used so lavishly that it had run down his face in brown streaks, and he looked like an Indian brave all dressed up in his war paint.

Someone had provided him with a mess tin full of food, which he wolfed down before he realized what he was eating. The stuff had a strangely familiar taste, but at the moment he was too bemused to ask questions, although the word "beans" kept cropping up in his mind. Beans? Of course it was impossible that such wealthy warriors would be fed such common fare. He dismissed the word "beans" from his mind.

Then the sergeant appeared through the smoke and the steam, bearing a bottle beneath one arm. The bottle contained an intoxicating, amber colored fluid, sometimes called cognac. It slid without effort down Withers' throat, and the warm glow of the brazier crept inside of him and made him feel like a "blinking duke."

Shells were dropping in the immediate neighborhood of the dugout, but their ominous rumble did not disturb him. He was among friends, men who spoke almost the same language he used, and they seemed only too willing to sit at his feet while he discoursed upon war and love and the abominable life of the Legionaire.

"'Struth," said he, "it 'ud suit me to be in the American army! You blokes don't know what a war is like, if you ask me, and no offence meant, I'm sure. But it's a regiment like the Legion what gets all the hard knocks and no glory. *We* ain't never had a juicy bit of chicken, nor cognac, nor coats like this one here."

"Juicy chicken?" drawled a doughboy, who sat nursing his knees by the brazier. "How come, buddy? Don't you get broilers in your outfit?"

Withers put down the bottle and wiped the back of his hand across his lips. Decidedly he was feeling better and better. for some obscure reason he resented the luxury these Americans enjoyed while he, and the likes of him, went cold and hungry.

"Na-o!" he answered. "Nor do we have ice cream nor such fancy rations. You ain't real soldiers, if I may say so," he added condescendingly. "Not like us. You're just parade-ground soldiers, that's what."

No one tried to clout him over the ear. The whole squad was enjoying itself too well to break up the party. A three ring circus was mild amusement compared to Withers. Fried chicken and ice cream, indeed!

"That's right," sighed the sergeant. "I guess we're pretty soft. Turkish baths waiting for us in billets, and a special corps of gals frying doughnuts for us. Gosh, I tell you, it's a real pleasure to meet a he-man once in a while. Shake!"

He bent down and pumped Withers' hand with great solemnity, and every man within range proceeded to do likewise. But Withers' ruffled feelings were not improved by this demonstration.

"Gor'blimey," he hiccoughed, putting the empty bottle down between his feet, "it's a crying shame. You gets all the quiet sectors to hold and no work to do. Why, I'm told you have black men to—to——"

"To scrape the mud off our clothes," supplemented a soldier, bowing his head in shame. "One striker per man, and the sergeant gets two."

They gave him some weird information about the inner workings of the A. E. F., and he swallowed it, gagging with indignation—hook, line, sinker and rod.

He patronized them in a lofty manner, and yet he could not refrain from a touch

of bitterness, because he envied them all these barbaric delights. One man apologized because the dugout lacked electricity, but the central heating plant was out of order.

"It's the men of the Plumbing Corps," he explained. "They're out on strike. Their officers called it a meeting, but they shot 'em. They want three dollars a day, and I guess they'll get 'em."

Another inventive doughboy assured Withers that whenever an attack developed on the American front, Hawaiian regiments had to bear the brunt of the attack.

"Y'see," he explained, "we're insured, and the government at Washington can't afford to have us killed, see? It's bad enough when some of us get run over in Paris. I had three buddies run over by them wild taxicabs. Gosh, they must have cost a mint of money."

"Listen," pleaded Withers, turning toward the sergeant with salt tears of envy in his eyes. "Listen, Sawgent, I'm only a poor Legionaire, a black sheep what's gone astray as you might say. I'll never be missed in the Legion, they'll think I been killed. Couldn't I join this 'ere army? Couldn't I? Gor'blimey, listen here," the words came tumbling out of his mouth, "here's an iron cross what I took off a German. You can have it as a souvenir. And you see if you can't fix it so's I can stay wiv you. And what's more—look, here's a German belt. You can have that, too. See, it's got *'Gott mit uns'* writ on it."

He smiled a drunken, hopeful smile, and the sergeant, having pocketed the loot, wisely nodded his head.

"We'll see," he said. "I can't promise anything but wait till morning comes. I'll talk it over with the looie."

The shelling up above had increased to a steady thunder. The vibration was shaking lumps of dirt off the ceiling. Several of the troopers, including the sergeant, stared anxiously up at the black shaft of the stairway.

"Livening up," commented one of Withers' neighbors.

Withers blinked his eyes. He had been miles away in a blissful land where negroes brushed and pressed his uniform and blacked his boots.

"'S nothing," he declared in a thick voice. "You ain't afraid of a couple of stray shells, I hope?"

"Call them strays?"

"Tha's wha' I callum," agreed Withers, smiling like a Japanese Buddha. "Juz few strays."

Bram! One of those strays struck the parapet of the trench facing the mouth of the shaft. A flying mass of debris hurtled down the steps, and with it came a blast of hot, acrid fumes. A lump of clay struck the brazier which keeled over, spewing red coals into the mud. Withers rolled aside, wide awake and yelling lustily. All the candles had been extinguished by the gust, and the only light came from the coals sizzling and steaming on the wet floor.

From the top of the stairway a voice brayed, "Turn out!" and above the roar of the guns, Withers heard the high pitched wail of a siren. He struggled to his feet. Nobody was paying the slightest attention to him now. He might have been part of the scenery. He was brushed aside by men hurrying toward the shaft. The string on which his uniform was hung broke, and the garments were trampled underfoot among the live coals.

"Where you going?" he inquired anxiously, clutching at a man's arm.

It was the sergeant. "What the heck—" he began. "Oh, it's you. Say, you can stay down here if you like. No call for you to turn out."

"Gor'blimey, and stay behind?" muttered Withers. "Not much!"

"Stay behind," repeated the sergeant. "I get you." He laughed harshly. "Say, boy, you're sure easy to kid. Get that cognac out of your system. A sweet lot of retiring we're going to do! It ain't our style, savvy? C'mon, let go my arm, I got to hustle."

But Withers was not convinced. These soft Americans were going to fall back, retire from this whole line of trenches; they were leaving him behind. Clutching the warm greatcoat about himself, Withers floundered out of the dugout close on the sergeant's heels. The night was wild and full of clamor. The moon had vanished, but the fog still caught at the throat, and with the fog was mingled the stinging bite of high-explosives.

The earth belched monstrous plumes of smoke and flying steel, and the flicker of

bursting shells lighted the crumbling trench with sudden sheets of flame. The Germans were shelling heavily to keep supports from being rushed up to the beset front-line trench ahead.

"Raid," decided Withers, crouching down behind the parapet. "'Struth, ain't we never going to retire like them Yanks said?"

After a time the men in the trench began to move. He followed them blindly, grabbing now at his greatcoat, now at his pants which being too large for him insisted in slipping down over his hips. His legs were bare and bitterly cold, and the tops of his boots were filled with gritty mud. But he kept close to the next ahead, for behind him were other men who stumbled and cursed in a most unexpected and startling fashion.

Dead men underfoot, soft and pliant in the mud. Mounds of wreckage, splintered timbers and tangled telephone wires, and holes where the trench had been. Shrapnel spat down out of the flashing sky. More men were dropping.

They weren't going back at all, Withers realized with a shock of surprise. They were going *forward,* toward the attacked front-line, moving up steadily into the very heart of the clamorous inferno! He felt cheated. This wasn't his show. Why were they dragging him along? He tried to stop, but the man behind him drove him along with the flat of his hand.

At a bend in the trench, someone was standing in the mouth of a dugout, issuing hand grenades. "Two apiece. Here y'are. Keep going, buddy."

Withers slid the grenades into his pocket.

Clang! The man ahead of him reeled sideways and collapsed, scraping against the wall of the trench. Withers caught up the rifle. It was quite different to the Lebel he was accustomed to handle. It felt stumpy and was hard to balance. Still, the feel of a weapon in his hands helped steady his frazzled nerves. If the worst came to the worst he'd show these Americans how to fight. They didn't know the first thing about the business—not them, with their Turkish baths and their doughnuts.

The nightmare walk down the trench came to an end. The line of men bunched and halted. Overhead streamed a screaming mass of steel. The unbroken roar of explosions became titanic.

"These here pants'll be the death of me," snarled Withers, longing for his old pair of frayed trousers which had fitted so snugly about his hips. And he missed, too, the broad black sash of the Legion, which keeps the stomach warm on the coldest of nights. Nor did he like the set of the round steel helmet. Moreover, the fringe of the greatcoat was stiff with mud. It weighted him down and slapped against his bare shanks. Decidedly, there were some things about the Legion that he liked better.

A voice bellowed in his ear. "Fix bayonets!"

"'Struth," he shouted angrily, "I ain't got no bayonet."

But the speaker had gone on, fighting his way past the file of men.

"I ain't going over," Withers told himself. "Not much. Let 'em do their own dirty work. I've had enough."

On either hand men were climbing out of the trench. For a second he hesitated —and a strong, bony hand caught him by the scruff of the neck and dragged him out. What the man said was inaudible. His words were blown away by the monstrous clamor, but there was no mistaking the threat of the revolver which he waved beneath Withers' nose. Withers joined the procession.

Moving very slowly across the broken land, the line went forward behind a leaping wall of flame. Soon the staccato beat of German machine guns resounded over on the left. The beat quickened as gun after gun joined in. A sleet of bullets swept the advancing line, dropping a score of men.

Caught by the spout of exploding shells, whole groups vanished. Still the survivors pressed on, still the machine gun bullets hunted for them among the shell holes and the smoke. If it was just a German raid, it was some raid. Machine guns shifted forward, and everything!

Withers found it hard to keep up with the advance, slow though it was. For a time he saw small clusters of men drifting

through the mist, then abruptly he was all alone in the flashing darkness. He tried to run, but his legs became tangled in the skirts of the muddy greatcoat, which tripped him up. He slithered down into a crater, already tenanted by a wounded doughboy with two bullets in his stomach.

A machine gun battery over on the left was holding up the advance, so the doughboy said, and he swore blistering oaths because he had been hit and could not get at the gunners.

"The Heinies are in the front line, working up the *boyau*. It's lousy with 'em. You hit, too?"

"Naw," said Withers. "I ain't been hit yet."

"Well, what the hell're you waiting for, then? Beat it. I can look after myself."

Strange what fire-eaters these Americans seemed to be! Think of a wounded man telling him to go on and get himself killed. Somehow, it didn't fit in with all the yarns Withers had been hearing. He began to have grave doubts whether the American army was much different from any other army, and he wondered with a self-conscious blush whether that sergeant had been pulling his leg. He felt cheated. According to his way of looking at it he was quite justified in lying under cover until some superior came along and gave him definite orders. Moreover, this wasn't his show.

"It's only a raid, my lad," he pointed out. "Them Huns ain't going to stay in the front line."

"Beat it," repeated the man. "Get those machine guns."

Then he curled up and became absorbed by the fiery pain which filled his bowels.

Withers raised his head over the rim of the shell hole in time to be greeted by yet another man, crawling on all fours beneath the sleet of bullets.

"C'mon, feller!" the newcomer ordered gruffly. "If you aren't wounded, get out of that damn' hole!"

So Withers got out, dragging his rifle behind him. The worst of the dreary business was that nobody understood that he did not belong to the American army, and there was no time to explain the awkwardness of his position.

"Gor'blimey, it's worse'n the Legion," he told himself angrily. "Why don't they bomb their way down the trenches instead of this here gallivanting about in the open?"

He had not the slightest idea where he was going, nor why, but he went. He was caught up and carried along by fresh surges of men, which the machine guns found and hammered into the ground. But there was no stopping them. They reformed and went on with a grim singleness of purpose which nothing could destroy.

The sharp clacking sound of hand grenades told Withers that he must be nearing the captured trenches. On his left, almost behind him, he saw the winking flash of a machine gun. He'd show these Yankees how to fight! Dragging a hand grenade from his pocket, he crawled in a wide circle toward the gun, easing himself forward an inch at a time.

But other men were ahead of him. A dozen grenades burst around the gun which promptly went out of action. The attack had been carried out in a most unorthodox manner, straight in the face of the gun's field of fire.

"But Gor'blimey," wailed Withers, "these here people don't know *how* to fight!"

Maybe not, but there was no pause nor break in the pressure until the whole line had been restored, and then the doughboys went on, out beyond their wire to look for slow-footed Germans. It was dawn before some semblance of quiet was restored. Then began the work of reorganization.

Withers found himself among strangers. A dirty, hollow-eyed man with chevrons on his arm ordered him to get to work with an entrenching tool.

"Listen here," protested Withers, "I don't properly belong to this here outfit. I got to get back."

Didn't these people ever rest? Where was that fried chicken?

"Say, what's wrong with you?" inquired the corporal. "You don't belong to this outfit? Well, who does? But just you take a hold on that spade and clear some of this mess out of here. Make it snappy!"

Everything, apparently, had to be done in a snappy or peppy fashion. They didn't understand the business of war.

Nevertheless, Withers went to work, for there was a mean look on the corporal's haggard face.

SOLDIER of Second Class Michael Curialo sat on a bench outside the Café de la Poste at Abancourt. Before him on the table stood a bottle of red wine. Beside him sat Yvonne, the plump daughter of the owner of the aforementioned café. And her plumpness was good to gaze upon.

"So Monsieur has lost his friend, the poor Monsieur Withers?" sighed Yvonne, who had long ago learned how wise it was to remember the names of her most transient customers. "It is a sad war."

"Most sad," agreed Curialo. "But life

is hard in the Legion. It was by the thickness of a hair that I escaped death myself. The corporal was shot, alas, but I survived, and an hour later the relief arrived. It is good to be at Abancourt and to be alive."

He tried to hold her hand, but she removed it well out of reach.

"And the poor Monsieur Withers rotting in some German prison," she lamented. "Such a pleasant man!"

"A pleasant man, but yes. Still, he is now in prison and safe until the war is over, whereas I— Suppose you sit down and tell me how glad you are to see me."

"Monsieur jests!" protested the diplomatic wench. "Monsieur should grieve for the loss of his dear friend."

"In the Legion one has to be hard," explained Curialo. "A hard life."

Neither of them noticed a strange, shrunken creature, wearing an outsize in sheep-skin lined coats, who came around the corner by the church and stopped in the roadway close beside them. Love, it has been remarked, is blind.

But the shrunken creature suddenly opened its mouth and exploded. "Gor'-struth! You ain't got the sense you was born wiv. A hard life, is it? A hard life? Gor'blimey, it ain't half as hard as some regiments I know of."

"Bert!" yelled Curialo.

"The brave Monsieur Withers!" cried Yvonne.

"D'you escape?"

"Yes," answered Withers. "I escaped —from them perishing Americans. And never again will I have a word to say against this good old Legion, so help me. Never. Fried chicken? Them Americans eats *beans!* And work—and fight? Strike me blind!" He sputtered incoherently and grabbed at the half-filled bottle. "They don't know the first thing about fighting, and they has the nastiest kind of humor! 'Struth!"

"Easy," begged Curialo. "Go easy, Bert. What's all this about? I thought the Heinies came over——"

"I'll tell you slow and clear. But I'm that glad to get back I could cry. I was wiv 'em two days and Gor'blimey, before I could make 'em see who I was, I was half dead what wiv work and war. They don't fight according to no rule, they don't. Just go straight ahead, and fight. Never again!" He poured himself a drink with a shaking hand. "Never again let me hear them Americans ain't fighters. Never again let me hear wild tales about fried chicken and such fare. No, never! They took the regiment I was wiv out of the trenches this morning, and, matey, I kep' right on going till I reached Abancourt. Came across country, I did, to avoid the military police."

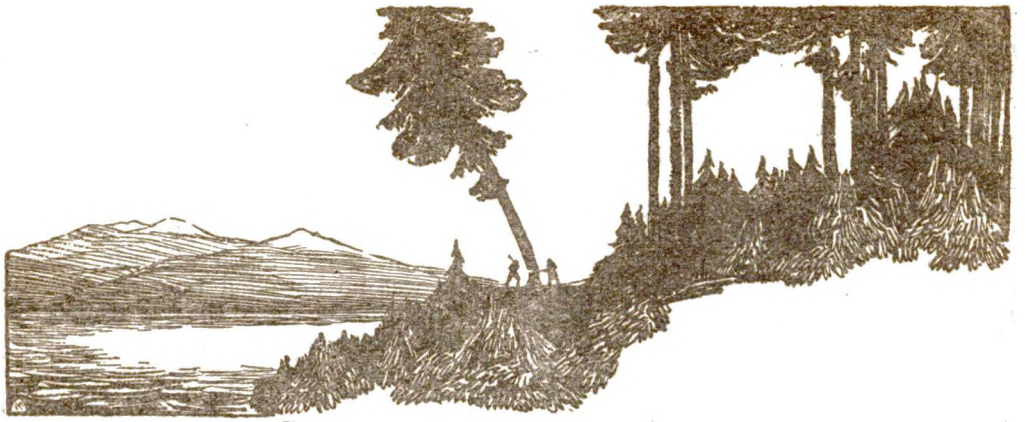
"I don't get you a-tall," complained Curialo, utterly flabbergasted.

"But you will," Withers answered grimly. "And lemme tell you one thing; all you ever heard about fried chicken is wrong. And that's just the beginning."

"Would Monsier care for a little drink?" inquired Yvonne, who spoke no English and craved details of Withers' escape.

"Ah, Mam'zelle!" cried Withers. "But yes, the little drink. To the greatest of all regimints—the Legion!" He turned to Curialo and added confidentially, "We don't know when we're well orf, you mark my words. Them Americans, 'struth, they don't seem to know when to stop, and all they eats is plain beans. It's gospel truth."

Then he busied himself with Curialo's bottle and refused to talk until he was refreshed.



THE JUG OF FAITH

By ROBERT E. PINKERTON

Author of "His Own Logs," "Half Speed," etc.

EVER MOVING WESTWARD, WINTER AND SUMMER, OLD JACK GIVENS IN A LIFETIME HAD TRAPPED AND HUNTED HIS WAY ACROSS A CONTINENT—AND ALWAYS ALONE. BUT OUT ON THE BRITISH COLUMBIA COAST, IN THE HAND-LOGGING GAME, WHEN HE AT LAST TOOK ON A "PARDNER," HE SHOWED THAT HE KNEW HOW TO BE "PARDNERS" BETTER THAN MOST MEN

DICTIONARIES state that "pard" is a slang word derived from "pardner," a corruption of partner. "Pard" may be slang, but "pardner" is not corrupt. In certain circles it has achieved a distinctive place in the language, and makes any conscientious student of words think of love and trust and devotion rather than of cooperative enterprise.

Partner has no more relation to "pardner" than a grocery store to marriage. "Pardnership" denotes the linking of two souls, is an expression of the family hunger of lonely men, of the gentleness in hard lives. Fortunately it exists only in far places and has escaped the devastating scrutiny of science. A poet would understand "pardnership."

It is inevitable that as there are celibates in the land of women there should be lone men in the lands of lonely men. Jack Givens, was one, and for more than forty years he had continued his solitary course. Forty years of wilderness, of rushing rivers and island-sprinkled lakes, of level spruce swamps and lifting ranges! Forty years of folding tents and silent canoes, of tiny log cabins and creaking snowshoes!

That had been Jack Givens' life, a thing of isolation and stark struggle, of familiar hazard and wonted adventure. He had begun as a boy of eighteen, placing a rifle, a pack and a few traps in a birch canoe and starting westward from the Temegami country; and the wilderness had built a wall around him, sheltering the adolescent shyness, preserving the wistful eagerness of youth and its mute longing. When he reached the Pacific he was fifty-six, and still eager.

His journey itself was an achievement, though Jack would have been the last to recognize it. When he left the Temagami country it was with the determination to reach the great ocean across the continent. Sometimes he went north or south, but never did canoe or snowshoe point eastward. As he expressed it, he "kept angling to the west," up near Hudson Bay, back into Manitoba, beyond the Churchill, into the Peace River country, at last penetrating the Rockies, crossing valleys, climbing other ranges. In the end he found a river that ran south, followed it until the great peaks parted to admit a sixty-mile arm of the sea.

At fifty-six he had accomplished what he set out to do. That in itself is sufficiently unique, for so few of us "keep angling to the west." Yet Jack looked upon it only as a step. When his canoe shot around the last bend in the rushing torrent and the gray, icy waters flung him into the

head of the inlet, his lips parted for a shrill, boyish yell. Jack was old in years, old in the wisdom of the wilderness, but in that moment of achievement there was no retrospect. He was ready to begin life anew.

It was with this eager interest that he began paddling down the river-like strip of sea between the white peaks. He had but a slight knowledge of where he was. Maps had served only for backward glimpses of his wanderings. Now he was merely aware that he had reached the coast of British Columbia. What he would find, what he would do, remained to be discovered. All his life he had been looking eagerly around the bends of rivers, down long arms of lakes, over the crests of ridges. Charts and books of travel are for those who stay at home.

Thus, when Jack discovered hand logging, he was fascinated by something wholly new and remarkable. He embraced it with the enthusiasm of youth and unhampered by his forty years of setting traps and stretching pelts. Yet at first he did not believe.

It was the second day of his journey down the inlet. He had laid his course close to shore, for there his livelihood had been, on the borders of lakes and streams. The water had been high in spring, low in late summer, frozen in fall and winter. The mud was a constantly rewritten and easily read page.

Now he beheld hourly changes of level, pools left in the rocks, strange creatures, exotic growths. Crabs and barnacles, queer little darting fishes, sea birds, black ribbons of kelp, starfish, clams that spit at him from the mud, the clear, green depths—it was all new and absorbing and delightful.

But it was above high tide mark that his attention was most often drawn, to the great trees that covered the lower slopes. His life had been spent in a land of small timber, spruce and jack pine and birch and poplar. After he entered the coast district he encountered his first big trees in the valleys. Now he found the mountainsides sprouting the great trunks.

They were the oldest and the largest living things Jack had ever seen. In a flat near the mouth of a small river he discovered a cedar nearly ten feet in diameter. It spread far out near the ground, braced itself with heavy buttresses. Jack walked around and around it, stared up at the great column. Always these mammoth trees seemed a part of the mountains themselves, as steadfast and as enduring.

And yet as he paddled slowly on he saw a great trunk sway out from its fellows a quarter of a mile ahead. It started slowly but acquired terrific momentum, crashed down out of sight in the growth below. The roar of it echoed across the inlet. Jack had felled many trees, had heard the gentle swish of their descent. This was an appalling thunder.

And while he stared the tree reappeared. It had stood four hundred feet up the steep slope. The shock of its fall had shattered the top, broken off the limbs, and now, stripped clean, an arrow one hundred and fifty feet long and weighing many tons, it shot out from the green wall of the forest and into the sea.

To Jack it was astounding. Everything about it had been so tremendous, the tree itself, its fall down the mountain, the roar of its crash, the leap into the water. And it was as unaccountable as it was amazing. There was no wind. Sheer weight and age could not have caused the great trunk to fall.

He paddled forward quickly, eager to learn the cause, but when he reached the great tree and turned at the butt he discovered that it had been *sawed*.

This only added to the mystery, and Jack looked toward shore. At that moment two men came out of the brush, stepped into a boat and rowed toward him.

Though he had not seen a human being for eight months, Jack Givens' interest remained in the huge piece of timber and the startling fact that it had been felled. He did not speak but knelt in his canoe, waiting.

One of the men rowed and the other sat in the stern. They were dressed alike, khaki trousers and soiled undershirts of heavy white wool. They stared curiously at the old trapper, nodded as they passed, drew alongside the splintered top of the tree. The men in the stern drove a steel dog into the trunk, slipped a rope through the eye. Then both began to row, towing the great log after them along the shore.

Still Jack did not speak. He knew a purpose must be actuating such labor, though he could not guess what it was. The men were toiling at the oars, gaining only a few inches at a stroke. Their faces were a little drawn, as if they had worked long and hard. But what would they want with such a log in the water? They could never get it out again.

Jack waited until log and men had dis-

appeared around a point that rose a thousand feet straight from the sea. Then he turned ashore, to the spot where the tree had leaped into the water, and found a lane in the forest. Rocks had been scraped bare. Trees he would have considered large across the mountains had been swept aside. There was a litter of broken branches. After a time Jack turned his canoe and paddled around the high point.

On the other side he found a small cove beneath the cliffs. To the left a cabin floated on a raft of logs, to the right the men were towing the big tree inside a boom, where several other great sticks floated close to shore. Jack paddled forward quickly, and his curiosity overcame his shyness.

"What you going to do with all them?" he asked.

The men looked up, startled.

"Sell 'em, of course," the one in the bow answered.

He was amused, and contemptuous, and his eyes were a little hard, but Jack had to know.

"For what?" he persisted.

"For what they are, saw logs."

Jack grinned sheepishly, and he was silent. The man in the stern, who had been closing the opening in the boom, turned to look at him.

"Where you from?" he asked curiously.

"I just come down the river," Jack said.

"What river?"

"The one back a way. I don't know its name."

The men stared incredulously.

"You mean you come across the mountains?"

Jack nodded.

"Know where you are now?" the one in the stern asked.

"The water tastes like I was in an ocean," Jack answered.

They laughed and rowed on toward the cabin.

"Better come and have supper," the man at the oars suggested.

Jack had been living on meat and fish exclusively for many months, had not heard a voice since the previous fall, but it was the trees that drove him to accept. He still did not believe. It was incredible that puny men could harvest such timber with only an ax and a saw. He had known logging camps in eastern Ontario, where trees were felled in winter and hauled on sleighs, and he had heard how the giant forests of the Pacific slope were subdued by machinery. Now he suspected that he was being made the subject of a jest.

But Archie Ward and Fred Seaver were curious, too, and they were not shy creatures of the wilderness. To them it was incredible that a man should traverse the mountains, should find his way unaided across a continent. They had always worked in the forest, but seldom had they been more than a mile from salt water. They traveled in a gas boat, found their way by means of marine charts. And those ranges Jack had surmounted, those valleys through which he had wandered, were unmapped, practically unknown.

They asked questions while they prepared supper in the little house on the float, and afterward when they sat outside and smoked and the black shadows climbed from the sea to the peaks.

"And you came all that way alone," Archie Ward marveled.

"Yes," Jack said, and he wished they would stop talking that he might ask about the trees.

That night he slept in a berth in the gas boat, which was moored beside the house. In the morning, when they had eaten breakfast, Jack proposed what he felt to be a daring thing.

"Mind if I come along and watch you a while?" he asked as Archie and Fred got into their row boat.

"Look all you want to," Fred answered. "But it's nothing, falling a tree."

It happened that the first tree they cut failed to leap into the sea, which lay four hundred feet beneath the stump. It crashed through smaller growth, shattered its own top and limbs, slid a little way, and stopped. Jack, too shy to comment, felt only sympathy that the hours of toil had been wasted. He expected curses and chagrin.

But Archie and Fred walked leisurely down the slope. Their faces were studious. They kicked tentatively at the great trunk, examined the steep descent beyond, at last picked up their axes and went to work without speaking.

Only they began to fell two small trees. These were larger than Jack had seen across the mountains, but here they seemed saplings, were less than two feet thick at the butts. And, once down, they were cut into short lengths and these rolled and carried to the broken top of the big fir. Then, while Fred began to chop away the jagged end, making it round and smooth, Archie went down to the beach and brought back a heavy steel instrument.

Still Jack did not understand. It was incredible that these two men should even consider getting that inert mass to move. He estimated roughly that it weighed twenty tons. The top had jammed behind a ledge of rock. The bark was thick and rough. One might as well expect a file to slide across sandpaper.

But Archie and Fred removed the bark, using their axes and short steel bars. Then they took the heavy steel instrument, which was nothing but a simple ratchet jack with a long handle that had been built specially for their use, set it under a boulder beneath the top and began to lift that end of the tree.

Imperceptibly it rose until, when the jack had reached the limit of its scope, they could place one of the small pieces of timber beneath the big fir. This was repeated again and again, the cribbing rose higher, until at last the "sniped," or rounded, smaller end of the tree was clear of the rock ledge.

It was late in the afternoon before they were ready for the final effort. Archie chopped a notch in the side of the fir, Fred caught the top of the jack in this and pumped the handle. Slowly but surely the great tree began to turn.

And then without warning it moved. Almost instantly it had acquired the speed of an arrow and the force of a landslide, ripping its way down the mountain and splashing into the sea.

Jack Givens let out a shrill, wild yell, then leaped down the slope to examine the simple contrivance of steel that had permitted these men to move so large a tree.

"It's the hand logger's donkey engine," Archie Ward grinned when he saw the old trapper's interest. "We can 'stump' a lot of 'em, fall 'em right into the salt chuck without a stop. But some of 'em hang, like this one, and then it ain't so easy. It depends on the show you've got."

"Who you working for?" Jack asked.

"For ourselves."

"No boss? You get all you make?"

"Yes, and earn it, too," Fred broke in. "Come on. We got to tow that stick home before the tide turns."

Again they sat on the float while the shadows rose to enshroud the peaks. Jack had never been anything except a trapper, but this novel occupation fascinated him. He, too, had never known a master, yet that was not all. To walk up to one of those great trees that had been standing there for centuries, to bring it crashing to earth, slide it into the sea, nothing could be more satisfying.

In his eagerness he asked the questions that filled his mind. They were naive and simple. Fred Seaver was inclined to make sport of the trapper's enthusiasm, but Archie Ward sensed something pathetic in the shy old man's manner. He explained how the logs are formed in booms and towed to Vancouver, more than two hundred miles down the coast, for sale, how a man obtained a "show," or timber limit, for cutting. He detailed prices for cedar and fir, the necessary equipment and its cost, compared various districts.

"You thinking of hand logging?" Fred asked.

"Maybe," Jack admitted.

"You ought to hook up with somebody. There's tricks to it, like everything else, and you'd learn quicker."

"I been forty years alone."

"Yes, trapping. But take that stick we run today. What if the cribbing had slipped and she'd rolled the other way? It would be fine, wouldn't it, lying there a month under the tree with a smashed leg, waiting for someone to come along? There's men that do it, but not me."

JACK GIVENS heard that theory advanced by others in the next five years, and yet it was not what caused his own vague but insistent longing for a pardner. He was scarcely aware of the desire, would never have admitted it. Nearly all his life he had been alone, outfitting in the late summer at a trading post, paddling away to eight or nine months of solitude. Often the fur trader was the only white man he saw in a year.

As a hand logger, Jack encountered a wholly different existence. He was still alone, working long hours felling trees, making up booms. But the land did not die, as in the fur country, where the intense cold and deep snow held sway for long months. A tug towing logs, fishermen chugging down the channel, hand loggers going for supplies, there was always movement, life. It was seldom that

a day passed when Jack did not hear the crash of a falling tree, the barking of a motor boat or the hoarse bellow of a steam craft.

And boat night! Jack Givens, after five years could not feel himself a part of it. A village afloat on the sea! Store, warehouse, dwelling, eating house, bunkhouse, post office and chicken yard, each resting on a float of huge cedar logs, the whole tied together by heavy boom chains, connected by boomsticks that served as sidewalks.

A community rising and falling with the tides, lying somnolent for five days in the week beneath the great cliffs that surrounded Chance Cove, its four permanent residents never putting foot on shore, sitting there, waiting, inactive. And then the towering rocks suddenly echoing the clattering exhausts of gas boats, the boomsticks lined with craft two and three deep, store and warehouse and landing float swarming with corked-shoed men, laughter and jests and gossip of booms and logs.

Sometimes before dark, sometimes after, the steamship appeared among the islands, nosed up to the float, unloaded its freight. Fifty-two times a year these men watched the ship come, but their excitement never grew less. They crowded about the gang plank, pounced upon certain unmistakable boxes, bore them into the store, and the night was on. There was never liquor in Chance Cove before the arrival of the boat, never any twelve hours after its departure.

It was a mining village on pay night, a cow town after the round-up. These men toiled terrifically through the week. Those who can back their statements by a varied experience say that the lot of the hand logger, in so far as it comprises the expenditure of physical energy, stands at the top of all manual labor. Even with a Gil-

christ jack and a steep mountain slope, a man does not fell a tree weighing twenty tons and slide it into the sea without effort that is truly appalling.

But the hand logger is his own master, and the desire for independence is his dominant trait. He has earned as much as five thousand dollars in a year, and even should he make only day wages, he works when he pleases. If he wishes to tear Chance Cove wide open on boat night, he believes that is his right.

Into this picture of rough, boisterous good nature, of high spirits uncorked, of heavy drinking and poker games in which days of terrific toil were carelessly tossed into the pot, Jack Givens failed to fit. It was not that he was puritan or stolid. He was only a diffident old man who had spent forty years alone in the wilderness, who had been given little opportunity to express either thoughts or emotions.

In his early appearances at Chance Cove he was a curiosity. Archie and Fred had told of his journey and others wanted to hear it at first hand. But those forty years were in the past, and had always been commonplace to Jack. He disappointed the hand loggers, was confused by their blunt questioning. Their very numbers awed him, and none had the desire or the ability to penetrate his reticence and reach the shy spirit within.

Thus, in the end, he became a bit of background, hanging about the edges of laughing groups, watching poker games from a corner, shyly accepting a proffered drink. He was not shut out, but he could not enter.

Yet Jack never missed a boat night. After forty years of isolated trading posts, Chance Cove was a metropolis. The place drew him. Once he had accepted eight months alone as a matter of no importance. Now he looked forward to Thursday noon, when he started his motor and chugged away among the islands. But where he arrived alone, most of the others came in pairs. Pardnership was the accepted thing along the coast. Men worked and caroused together, owned gas boats and equipment in common, sulked and quarreled with, and fought for, each other. Shy, wistful, eager, Jack Givens moved among them, as much alone as before he had crossed the mountains and abandoned his traps for a Gilchrist.

It was in the sixth year of his hand logging that he watched the steamship from Vancouver arrive one evening early in April. Sixty other men were on the float with him as she twisted among the islands just outside the cove and swept in to a landing that always aroused Jack's admiration.

There is only one Chance Cove on the B. C. coast, and it is known from Vancouver to Prince Rupert. Passengers had crowded the rail forward before the ship tied up, curious to see the village that floated in the salt chuck and the hand loggers who

made it possible, and famous.

Captain Watson stared down from the bridge, suddenly relaxing as his hand slipped from the engine room telegraph, and grinning at the crowd.

They all knew him, those men in the white woolen undershirts and the calked shoes. Jack Givens alone had never been aboard the ship. They were gathered in groups, squatting on the platform or leaning against the warehouse. Some had skillfully caught the lines and made them fast in that spirit of service possessed by all men who live on or near the water.

"Thanks, boys," Captain Watson called derisively. "I'd never been able to make it without you."

"Anything to oblige," retorted Harry Frost, an old fellow who claimed to have been on the coast "ever since Puget dug the sound." "What we ought to do is clear out a few of those islands before you hit one."

The captain grinned as delightedly as the hand loggers shouted.

"Tie up your old tub and spend the night with us," Archie Ward suggested. "We'll treat you right."

"No thanks. I've seen the manifests. What you fellows going to do with all that rum? Burn it in your gas boats?"

"It's Gilchrist fuel, rum," Harry Frost answered. "It takes an overproof man like a hand logger to drink overproof stuff."

"Better strap some life belts on before you start," Captain Watson advised. "Half of you'll be drowned by morning."

They laughed their contempt for his admonition as the deck hands trundled off several boxes. The men nearest pounced upon these and bore them away, the entire crowd following.

All except Jack Givens. He never missed the rough banter with Captain Watson. He derived a great joy from it, from being one of the Chance Cove hand loggers. There was a secret pleasure in being stared at by the passengers, and yet he was never able to join that mad rush to the store with the newly arrived liquor. Later, when the jugs were open, when the men thronged about the counter, he would edge in quietly, seek a corner.

Now he watched the unloading for a time, and at last started around the far side of the warehouse.

"Hello, there!" a voice came from behind him. "What's all the excitement about?"

A young fellow had moved away from the crowd forward and was leaning over the rail. He was twenty-two or twenty-three years old, wore a blue serge suit, a flannel shirt and a small felt hat pushed back on his head. But it was the impression he created that drew Jack Givens' attention. The careless pose of a competent body, the eager manner in which he jerked the disordered brown locks that had crept out from beneath his hat, the gray eyes that held dancing lights, that were kindly and alert and frank, these formed instantly a picture of buoyant, ardent, impulsive youth. Before Jack spoke he felt a little glow of pleasure, but it was with pride, pride in Chance Cove, that he answered: "There was four booms sold at once."

"All that bunch sold them, eh?"

"No, but they all get a chance at the jugs," Jack grinned.

"What jugs?"

Jack had never been asked about the community of which he was a member.

"It's this way," he explained eagerly. "When a man sells a boom of logs he sends to town for two jugs of liquor, one to take home, the other to set on the counter in the store."

"Wowie! They always do that here?"

"Most always."

"And those fellows, are they all loggers?"

"Hand loggers."

"What's that mean?"

"About what it says. The big companies use machinery, donkey engines and high leads and sky lines. Some builds railroads if there's a big valley. We get along with just our hands—and our heads and a Gilchrist jack."

The young man was all eager attention.

"You mean you cut down those big trees and get them into the water all alone?" he demanded.

Jack remembered his own first glimpse of the huge logs and smiled as he nodded.

"What do you call a boom?"

"Four sections. That comes close to two hundred thousand feet."

"How much do you get for it?"

"Just now, if it's mostly Number One cedar, a boom brings near two thousand dollars."

"Wowie! No wonder they buy a couple of jugs. That gang—I bet they burn up this place tonight."

Jack grinned. The young man was looking toward the store, from which shouts and laughter were coming in increased volume. He had straightened, was

grasping the rail with both hands. Suddenly he wheeled, ran down the deck, disappeared. A minute later he came back with a suit case.

"Catch this," he called to Jack, and he dropped it over the side, then climbed onto the rail and leaped to the float.

"Thanks," he grinned. "My ticket takes me to Alert Bay but I guess this is the place I was looking for. What's its name?"

"Chance Cove."

"You kidding me? That's too true to be good."

He laughed delightedly, turned to study the floating community with eager interest.

"Where can I put my bag?" he demanded. "I've got to see this show."

"Any place, so it won't be kicked into the salt chuck," Jack told him. "It's one thing we're shy of here—thieving."

"All right. Now come on. Let's see what the four jugs do to this gang."

He grasped Jack by the elbow and guided him through the warehouse, and as Jack went it was with a quickening step, with a strange, new elation in his heart.

"You never been on the coast before?" he asked.

"Not if this is it. How often does this sort of thing happen?"

"There's not many dry boat nights."

"You fellows sell lots of booms, then?"

"A couple of men, if they've got a good 'show,' can get in a boom in two monhs, when the sap's runnin' and the sticks slide easy."

"Wowie! A thousand dollars a month. Never heard of such a thing."

"They don't always do it, of course," Jack explained. "Just spring and summer. It's pretty wet to work much in winter. And then going to town and playing the races, havin' a little bust—it takes quite a lot to keep a hand logger going."

The young fellow laughed again, a burst of sheer exuberance, and he squeezed Jack Givens' arm.

"Chance Cove!" he exclaimed. "I might have named it myself. And boat night! And four jugs! Wowie!"

They pushed their way into the store, were eddied into a corner, and there they stood, watching, listening, while the human whirlpool beg to revolve more rapidly before them

"If you want a drink," Jack began in a whisper.

"Not me. After a while, maybe. Now —I need all my ears and eyes."

It was a night! The four jugs that had been set on the counter did not last long and the four destined for home consumption, and cached in gas boats, were brought out by eager owners, offered upon the shrine of hilarity. Three poker games were started in the bunkhouse. Men gathered in groups, sang, told stories, argued, quarreled, sagged into corners and fell asleep.

Others wandered away, teetering perilously along the unstable boomsticks. Yet only one man fell into the salt chuck. It was directly in front of the store door, in the full light of the big coal oil lamp. Several hand loggers started forward, but Archie Ward was nearest, and he knelt on a boomstick, waiting for the man to reappear. The others drew back, satisfied that the task was being adequately handled.

As they expected, when the wet head bobbed up, Archie reached out. But he did not grasp the gripping hair. He pushed the man under, got up and walked away.

The crowd roared its delight, followed Archie into the store and swarmed up to the counter. Jack Givens and his young companion fished the fellow out. He coughed, spluttered, sat up.

"I wasn't lookin', but I bet that was Archie Ward," he grinned, and he scrambled to his feet and joined the others in the store.

It was rough, it was boisterous, and yet there was something curiously clean about the wild carouse. It was a release of high spirits, not the studied excess of sated debauches. These men gave themselves to terrific toil, to the silence of empty arms of the sea, to the unsoftened lives of far and lonely places. Their behavior on boat night was not a weakness but a vent for their excess strength.

For a time Jack's young companion watched joyously. He asked many questions, and Jack envied his lack of embarrassment when he faced something wholly novel. He made comments, shrewd but kindly, and humorous. Jack found himself chuckling without restraint. At last the youth moved away toward the counter.

He was a stranger, he wore "town clothes" that immediately attracted attention, and some suspicion, but he had assurance and a charming smile. The hand

loggers found themselves grinning back at him, urging him to have a drink. He drank, with a novel toast that brought laughter. When the laughter ceased he told a story. The group about him became larger, and it was always laughing.

Jack Givens remained in the corner, watching. He was peculiarly elated. Never had he talked so freely as with this engaging young chap. For the first time in the long, solitary years he had experienced close contact with another human being. The warmth of it still clung to him and the vague longings of a lifetime began to stir afresh, to assume form.

Yet Jack made no move. His shyness forbade his leaving the corner, experiencing again the kindly touch of the stranger's personality. Once the young man dragged him to the counter, threw an arm across his shoulders, but that moment of felicity was brief. A maudlin hand logger hauled the young fellow away to another group.

"Sing us that song again, about the first drink after the last drink," was the demand, and once more Jack was left alone in his corner.

At dawn eight empty jugs floated away on the ebb tide. Sleeping men sprawled in corners, in gas boats, on the landing stage. Some were still on their feet, arguing, singing. Only the poker games in the bunkhouse continued as before. Jack Givens had gone to his gas boat to prepare a meal. When he had finished he returned to the store. The young man met him on the float outside.

"Been hunting for you!" he exclaimed. "The party seems to be over."

He stretched his arms above his head, looked across the sound to the sun-tinted peaks. His eyes were still clear, still aglow.

"That was some night, wasn't it?" he demanded jubilantly. "Some gang, too. Say, how do you start being a hand logger?"

For a moment Jack Givens was certain his heart had stopped beating.

"You mean——" he faltered. "You want to be one?"

"Nothing else."

It was not canniness that prompted Jack's next question. A great hope, and a great fear had come to him. Each word became of vast importance.

"You ever hand logged?"

"No, but I can learn."

"Alone—it would be pretty tough. You ought to have a pardner."

"I suppose so," and there was a shadow in the young man's voice.

Jack hesitated. Dread had come to him, and then the vague longings of the empty years swept dread away.

"I was looking for a pardner," he said with a laborious attempt to be casual. "We might give it a try."

"Say! Would you?" the young fellow cried. "If you will! I'm green. I've got a lot to learn. But I can work. I'll do anything. Extra hours, whatever you say."

There was no mistaking his delight or his eagerness. Jack felt a heavy thumping in his chest, a contraction in his throat. He looked down, scratched the boomstick with his calks. But after a moment he was able to remark quite casually:

"We'd better be getting back to the show."

IN THE weeks that followed, Chance Cove failed to understand, and, failing, was inclined to scoff. When a jug was on the counter, Don Mason was a fine fellow, but when the hand loggers had returned to their work, when his songs no longer rang in their ears and the spell of his good-fellowship had faded, they considered him from another angle.

"Did you ever see him before?" Harry Frost asked Dave Logan.

"Nor heard of him," was the answer. "But he seems like a nice lad."

"Nice never put logs in the chuck," Harry snorted. "Jack's a fool, picking up with a stranger. I'm betting he don't last long."

The same conclusion was reached in many a float house. There was some compassion for Jack Givens, but now that they considered it, Jack himself had never been completely one of them. Archie Ward recalled his first appearance.

"Too long alone in the bush," he declared. "He's a fine old fellow and I hope this Mason don't play any mean tricks on him."

But the hand loggers of Chance Cove encountered Jack and Don Mason only on boat nights, failed to see the change that had come to the old man. It was as if he were young again, beginning his long journey across the continent. At eighteen

he had been swallowd by the wilderness. At sixty-one he resumed life where it had been broken off.

The vague longings were gone. The wistfulness and shyness faded. He took it for granted that the warm glow which had come when Don Mason spoke to him from the deck of the ship would persist, and it did. In those first awkward, fumbling days, those nights when blistered hands and aching muscles might easily have oppressed a spirit, the youth's warm, buoyant nature endured. He was cheerful, unselfish, had a grin for weariness, a jeer for hardship.

This is vital, is necessary to carry two men through the exhausting labor of hand logging, through the bitter disappointment and struggle of "hang-ups," through the dreary monotony of household tasks. But it is not all. Back of it must be a sense of loyalty and of comradeship, and this grew as the weeks passed.

They lived in Jack's float house, a small cabin of cedar shakes built upon a raft of logs. Boomsticks held it to and off the beach. Water was piped from a spring. An extension of the roof gave shelter for stove wood and gear. It was a beautiful place, in a small arm of the sea, with mountains rising straight from the water. Early each morning they rowed down the shore to work, in the evening they rowed back.

"Tourists would pay good money to look at this, and we get it thrown in with our meals," Dan declared one morning. "Here! It's my turn to row."

It was always his turn.

"You're crazy!" he would shout when Jack, perplexed, protested that he hadn't cooked supper for a week. "You got it last night and the night before. Don't you remember? What's the matter? Your mind failing?"

Don was the one who carried the heavy Gilchrist jack up the mountainside, was always the first to reach the auger when a boomstick was to be bored. He was green, clumsy in the beginning, but he laughed at his mistakes and seldom repeated them. He practiced many deceptions to forestall Jack at various tasks, and Jack would grin, and bide his time, and get even.

The "show" on which they were working was a good one, with heavy timber close to the beach.

"I figure there's two booms here," Jack said after supper one night. "We ought to have 'em both in by late fall, the way we're going."

"And next time we'll get a bigger show," Don added.

"You can't do that so easy any more. It's getting so a hand logger has to take what the donkey engines won't. It don't pay to move a donkey engine for less than half a million."

"Then what we want is a donkey."

Jack did not reply. It had been a dream of his. He knew a few men of sixty-five or seventy who were hand loggers, who could do nothing else. They had not saved, and they were getting too old and stiff to work on "hang-ups," to dodge when the great trees suddenly shot seaward.

Yet he had been afraid. It was machinery, meant a crew, a cook camp, a pay roll. All that was beyond his experience, rather terrified him. But now, with Don as a pardner, wih Don's assurance, his knowledge of so many things!

"What's the matter with our having a donkey, going at this in a big way?" the young man persisted.

"I've figured on one, some," Jack admitted. "Most hand loggers do. Only it's few of 'em get enough money."

"We will," Don declared confidently. "And I'll bet one reason they fall down is that they don't miss many boat nights at Chance Cove. Why can't we get enough supplies to last two or three weeks?"

"I used to, and then it got to be a habit, sort o', getting down to see the other lads."

"We can see each other, and get in more logs. I tell you what, Jack! We're going to make a go of this logging game."

Thus Chance Cove saw little of them. But early in July, when they sold their first boom, they sent for two jugs of liquor, placed one on the counter and, about midnight, brought the other from the gas boat.

To Chance Cove it was only another boat night, but to Jack and Don it possessed more significance than the mere sale of a boom of logs. Their eyes met several times across the milling crowd in the store. Jack, on former occasions, had shyly placed his offering before his friends and retired to a seat. Now he remained at the counter, talked of his work, of "my pardner and me." He drank more than was his custom. It was the greatest night in his life.

Don, too, was excited.

"My first jug!" he whispered to Jack several times. "Hang onto it when it's empty. I want to take it home."

But his exuberance vanished on their way back the next day. While Jack steered, he sat in the bow and stared ahead.

Even as they cooked supper he was silent.

"Look here!" he exclaimed after they had finished eating. "We got no business with a donkey unless we pay more attention to other things than just cutting logs. Soon as that boom was ready we sent it off to Vancouver and had a broker sell it for us. We take chances on him, and on the market, and we pay a commission. What we want to do is sell our own logs."

The thought had never occurred to Jack but he agreed. Don had already exhibited a knowledge of many things of which the old hand logger knew nothing. He spoke familiarly of various phases of city life, and Jack had never seen a city.

"Another thing," Don continued. "We get a check from the broker. We cash it in Chance Cove and bring the money home with us. We've got no business carrying so much around. We might lose it, or the float house might burn. Besides, if it was in a bank, it would be earning interest for us."

Jack knew as little of banks as he did of cities, but he accepted Don's statements.

"I've always let Dave Logan keep my money in the store," he said. "He's got fifteen hundred now."

"Does he pay you anything for the use of it?"

"No, he just keeps it for me."

"That ought to be earning a hundred dollars a year interest. We'll just quit this sort of thing and show these other hand loggers how it should be done."

It was Don who suggested that they both go to Vancouver when they had another boom ready, that they should sell it and open a bank account, but Jack quickly found objections. The mere thought of the city terrified him.

"I'd better stay and watch things," he said. "You can do it just as well."

"But we ought to look around for a donkey, too."

"I guess you know more about one than I do," Jack confessed, and then he added hopefully: "Maybe, with all we'll have after the next boom, we can get one."

"That's another thing!" Don exclaimed. "We don't want any half a million 'show' with a donkey. I've been talking quite a bit to the fellows at Chance Cove, and it's in Vancouver that you get the good timber limits, crown granted stuff that the owner wants cut. Tell you what, old-timer! We're going to be real loggers when we get going."

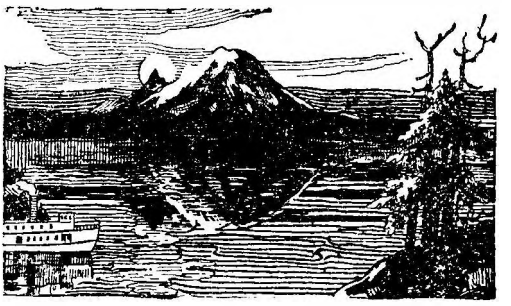
Jack thrilled to the thought. There had been joy in toiling with a pardner but this led far into the future. They were working for something more than the next boom. He saw the years stretching ahead, with Don.

All through the late summer they worked, begrudging the time spent in going to Chance Cove for supplies, heedless of rainy weather, eating breakfast and supper by lamplight.

Don had developed into a capable workman and what he still lacked in experience and skill with the ax he balanced with unwearying effort and boundless energy, with unfailing cheerfulness and the enthusiasm of youth.

"We're a team, Jack!" he often exclaimed when a great cedar wallowed in the sea. "You've got the head and I've got the back. No pair in Chance Cove can beat us."

September saw their second boom in the water. A tug came in for it one Thursday.



The following Thursday Don Mason departed on the weekly steamship for Vancouver. He carried with him Jack Givens' fifteen hundred dollars and the money they had received for their first boom.

"Don't be surprised if I bring back a donkey," he whispered as he went aboard.

Jack grinned. He wanted to punch his pardner in the back, guide him up the gang plank with an affectionate grip on the elbow. There was emotion that needed expression of some sort, but all Jack could do was to call out: "Don't forget the jug."

Don was already aboard. He turned, smiled, waved a hand.

"Two of 'em, Jack."

The old hand logger did not remain in Chance Cove that night but went home in the dark. He did not need liquor or companionship. He and Don! A donkey engine! A crew! More donkeys and a bigger crew! Hand logging was all right, but being an operator was better. And to have a young pardner as bright and clever and energetic as Don Mason!

It was a happy week for Jack Givens, but it was far longer than he had expected.

There was no laughter in the cabin on the float, no quick steps about the cook stove. Forty years of solitude had given him no preparation for the loneliness that came. The following Thursday he started to Chance Cove in the morning instead of at noon, as had been his custom.

"The boat might get in early," he explained it to himself, though the boat had never arrived before eight o'clock.

"What happened to your watch?" Dave Logan asked when Jack arrived at eleven.

"Didn't have much to do and thought I'd angle along early," was the diffident answer.

Dave, who owned Chance Cove, was the banker, adviser and friend of every hand logger within thirty or forty miles. Some of them owed him as much as three thousand dollars, but Dave never worried, and never lost, and first of all he was their friend.

"Mason go out to play the races for a bit?" he asked.

"He went out to sell our boom," Jack answered. "And maybe buy a donkey."

"Donkey, eh? So that's why you wanted your money."

Dave was short and very fat, apparently a stolid individual, but it was his business to know every detail of the lives of his customers. His round, pleasant face masked a quick mind.

"Say, Jack, what do you know about Mason?" he demanded suddenly.

Jack felt that he knew everything and was the more surprised that he could think of nothing to say.

"I never thought when you drew out that fifteen hundred, or when you didn't put the money from your last boom in the safe," Dave continued. "Did Mason take it all with him?"

"He couldn't buy a donkey without money."

Dave did not reply to this. He sat there gazing impassively across the water.

"Expecting him back today?" he asked at last.

"He'll be on the boat," Jack declared confidently.

But Don was not on the boat. It arrived at nine o'clock, discharged its freight and departed. Jack Givens stood in a shadow at a corner of the warehouse. Shyness restrained him from stepping out into the glare of the unloading lights to meet his pardner, and when that young man failed to walk down the gang plank a numbing, crushing terror pressed the old hand logger back against the building.

He stood there for a long time, after the freight was unloaded, after the crowd had surged away to the store. He was stunned, appalled.

But it was only fear for his pardner, for his safety and health, that possessed the old man, fear that the buoyant, engaging personality had dropped out of his life as suddenly and as unexpectedly as it had entered.

That fear was Jack's only reaction. There was no doubt, no suspicion. He saw the one explanation. But the fear was so great it brought the inevitable insistence that even illness or accident could not have come to Don. After a time Jack's dazed faculties began to function. He estimated towing time to Vancouver, recalled the weather. He saw that the tug might not have arrived with the logs. Perhaps, in searching for a second-hand donkey, all their money would permit, Don had missed the boat. Several things may have happened. In the end Jack grinned a little sheepishly and went into the store.

Archie Ward and Fred Seaver had returned from Vancouver that night. Quite conscious of their town clothes, they were the center of a jeering crowd. And the crowd was hitting too close to the truth for comfort when it insinuated that the pair had been cleaned out at the race track. To Fred, Jack Givens was a means of escape.

"Hey, there, old timer!" he cried. "What you staying home for when your pardner's burning up the town?"

It meant only one thing to Jack Givens, that Fred had seen Don, that he was not ill. The old trapper's face lighted.

"Did he miss the boat?" he demanded eagerly.

"Miss it!" Fred laughed. "He didn't try to catch it. He was headed the other way, for the States."

"But he wasn't going to the States," Jack declared simply.

"Maybe. But Archie and me saw him catch the noon train for Seattle about two hours before the boat left."

Several men snickered. Fred Seaver, seeing that he had turned attention from himself, leaned back against the counter. He controlled the situation now, and he did not intend to let it slip.

"You ought to have seen him," he continued. "Some pardner you've got. More style than I ever saw on a dozen hand loggers."

The laughter he had expected greeted the remark and he grinned complacently.

The crowd was beginning to suspect something and stared curiously at Jack. But Jack had only one thought and did not see.

"You got somebody else mixed up with Don," he declared. "He was going to sell our boom and come back tonight. He wasn't going to Seattle."

An amazed silence greeted the statement. Archie Ward pressed forward.

"You don't mean, Jack, that you let him go down to town, sell your boom and get the money?" he demanded.

"Why shouldn't he? Don's my pardner. Half the boom's his."

A boom of logs is a boom of logs. It means long weeks of toil, a prodigious expenditure of energy, and the men gathered in the store did not laugh now. They thought nothing of squandering a boom, handing it over to bookmakers or liquor dealers. But to lose one, have it stolen!

"That's tough, Jack," Archie said. "No wonder he was all dressed up and headed for Seattle."

They laughed at that, as a relief from their sudden emotion of sympathy. And when they laughed Jack whirled to face them.

"It's a lie!" he cried fiercely. "Don's coming back. Why—why, he said he would. And he's my pardner."

They laughed again. Some of them were very gray haired, and they were all boys, thoughtlessly cruel, wholly unconscious of the beauty in the old man's declaration. They had formed a circle around Jack, a grinning circle of heavy-shouldered men, their calked shoes biting into the fir floor.

And Jack Givens, who had always moved diffidently among them, flamed with fresh defiance.

"It's a lie!" he repeated. "Don's coming back."

"Better forget him," Archie advised kindly. "I thought when you picked him up so quick—his hopping off the steamship right into your gas boat, you might say—that you was taking chances."

"Yes, it's tough luck," Fred Seaver added with a wink at the others. "Tough on you and tough on us. That's one boom where we don't get a jug."

The crowd whooped gleefully. Jack Givens glared at them.

"It's a lie!" he shouted. "Don's coming back. He said he would."

It was all he could offer and, to him, it was enough. For a moment he stood there, defiant, and then he burst through the crowd and out of the store. They were still laughing as he stumbled away in the darkness to his gas boat.

Even in that moment of ridicule, of ready acceptance on the part of Chance Cove of Fred Seaver's explanation, there never was a moment of doubt in the old hand logger's mind. Don was ill, injured, perhaps had been robbed. Nothing else could have happened. Jack knew Don Mason.

Even when the last thought recalled his inability to answer Dave Logan's question, "What do you know about him?" Jack Givens' loyalty did not falter. Know about him! He knew everything anyone needed to know. The fact that Don had explained nothing, that he had made only vague references to his past, had never told where he came from, what work he had done, was of no consequence in Jack's mind.

But he did have something, those long months together, those first days when blistered hands and aching muscles had caused only happy grins. Even as he sat there, angry and humiliated, Jack felt a glow at the mere thought of that buoyant personality, that engaging nature which he had seen tested repeatedly by toil and discouragement, by exhausion, and monotonous tasks.

Yet it was something else that lifted Jack above that scene in the store, that made him forget the laughter. Beneath it all, as staunch as his own soul, was faith in his pardner. It needed no support, was invulnerable to attack. It was a part of Jack Givens himself. It surged through him now, raised his chin from his chest, brought a glow to his eyes.

And as Jack sat there that faith brought inspiration. A simple old man who had lived his life apart, who had known only toil and privation, had missed all the softer influences of existence, he leaped to his feet as he recognized the beauty of the thought.

For a moment he stood there, staring in the darkness, then wheeled, started his motor, cast off his lines. A little after daylight he arrived at Alert Bay, over near the north end of Vancouver Island, and

that afternoon an order was in the mail bag picked up by the south-bound Alaskan steamship, an order for two jugs of liquor to be sent to Jack Givens at Chance Cove.

It was not a defensive act, never intended as a subterfuge. Jack's nature was too simple for any attempt to deceive the crowd of jeering hand loggers. In that moment of grief and bewilderment, when he found himself unable to put into words the belief and trust he had in Don Mason, he had turned to the only means he knew whereby he could express the emotions that were his, the faith in his pardner.

That faith did not permit Jack to remain in the shadow of the warehouse when the steamship arrived the next week. It drove him out into the light, among the crowd. He was confident Don would come, but even if Don did not, if he were still ill, the jugs would be there to attest his integrity, to blazon it to his world.

And Don did not come. Jack felt a peculiar tightening at his throat, a strange sensation in the skin all over his body, but he did not falter. Something had happened. Someday he would know. Now he must place his pledge upon the altar. He pushed to the front of the crowd and waited.

The grinning deck hands, with mock ceremony, brought forth, before any other freight, a box which, to the hand loggers, was unmistakable. They pounced upon it but Jack's hands reached it first.

"Get out, old-timer," one growled good naturedly.

"Read the name!" Jack shouted. "Who's it say?"

"Givens," a man read. "Jack Givens."

"Of course it's mine. The only jugs that's come. It's for that boom we sold, Don and me."

And then he added triumphantly:

"Don sent it up. And he said they was both to go on the counter."

A wild yell greeted this and Jack and his jugs were borne through the warehouse and across to the store by the hilarious hand loggers. Skillful hands shattered the box and Jack drew forth the contents.

For a moment he stood there looking at the crowd. He felt no embarrassment. The fervor of his belief had lifted him to heights he had never known.

"Come on, boys!" he cried exultantly. "Step up and drink hearty, on me and Don."

It was a simple thing. A jug of liquor on the unpainted counter of a store that floated on the sea far up that desolate coast. A crowd of roughly clad men whose every step snapped splinters from the floor. Hoarse shouts, oaths, the smoke of black tobacco. And it was beauty, pure and clear.

They drank. Jack drank with them. The tin cups went around again. Jack was exalted. He talked gaily, slapped Archie Ward on the back. And then, after half an hour, he suddenly found himself standing there, cold and trembling.

His faith was as strong as ever, but he could not battle that recurrent and stunning fear. So far as Jack Givens knew, when the steamship left Chance Cove it sailed over the rim of the earth. He could not even follow it in imagination, and somewhere in that terrifying outer world was Don, his pardner, ill, hurt, perhaps dead. Don might be calling him, and he could do nothing. The boistering crowd mocked his grief, and he slipped away, walked down the boomsticks to his gas boat.

It was half an hour later that a white clad sailor found him lying in his berth.

"There's a man wants to see you," he explained. "Told me to bring you."

The old hand logger stumbled out, followed the sailor to the landing float. Moored there was a brilliantly lighted vessel.

"My calks!" he cried when he was led aboard. "Wait until I take my shoes off."

But when he had removed them he turned to the sailor.

"I guess you made a mistake," he faltered.

"Jack Givens is the name. You him?"

"But who wants me?"

"The owner. Come on."

In soiled khaki trousers and a grimy white woolen undershirt, carrying his steel-shod footwear, Jack was led below. He had never seen anything like it, this gleaming varnish and paint and brass, but he had no time to marvel. A door was opened and he was thrown into a room that dazzled him with its polished wood and electric lights.

At a table sat a man in white trousers and blue coat. He had thick, square shoulders, a roughly chiseled face, and glasses added fierceness to his stare.

"Your name Jack Givens?" he demanded at once.

"Yes," was the faint answer.

"Know a young fellow named Don Mason?"

Jack stared at the question and looked more closely at the man.

"I ought to!" he exclaimed. "We're pardners."

"Pardners, eh? How long?"

"Since last spring."

"What do you know about him?"

It was the question Dave Logan had asked, that Jack had been unable to answer. For a moment the old man stared.

"Know about him!" he cried. "I know he's coming back."

"Hasn't he got a lot of your money?"

"What difference does that make?"

"And don't you know that if he has gone, you couldn't get trace of him, on what you know?"

"Look here, stranger," Jack flared. "What you think you're getting at?"

"I want to find out what you know about this Mason."

"Why, we're pardners, I tell you. We worked a show together, got in two booms, four hundred thousand feet. He come up here green as green. He didn't know a falling ax from a Gilchrist jack, or a cedar from a fir. But he had guts. He laughed when his hands were blistered and his back was nigh breaking. He'd come home petered out, and tell funny stories while he cooked supper. For more than five months we worked together, lived together, and that lad——"

Jack stopped, amazed by his own eloquence. But he was still angry.

"Say, you take me for a fool?" he demanded. "Think I don't know a man after all that? Why—why, they're drinking a jug to our last boom in the store right now."

"They're what?"

"Drinking a jug. Don's and mine, on the boom we put in, and sold."

"What!" exclaimed the man at the table as he straightened in his chair. "You mean that you sent for it—on the strength of—because you felt——"

"Because I know Don will be back," Jack finished when he paused.

Again the man stared. There was something fierce and domineering about those eyes behind the glittering lenses, but Jack Givens, the shy old fellow who had known only the wilderness, stared back defiantly. And before his eyes the other's finally fell. The yachtsman turned and pressed a button in the bulkhead. A steward entered.

"We will drink," the man ordered, and then with an inclination of his head and in a suddenly altered voice he said to Jack: "Please sit down, Mr. Givens."

Jack sidled into a chair and perched uncomfortably on the edge of it. The steward placed a decanter, glasses and siphon on the table before him. When the liquor had been poured the man across the table arose.

"Mr. Givens," he said in a voice hoarse with emotion, "I drink to something I didn't know existed any longer—to a faith such as yours."

Jack did not understand and he remained silent.

"I owe you a debt of gratitude, and Don an apology."

"Don!" Jack exclaimed. "What do you know about him?"

"A great deal less than I should, it would seem. I tried to cramp his legs under a desk, and——"

"But where is he? Is he hurt?" and Jack was leaning across the table.

"He's on his way up with a donkey engine and complete equipment and a crew. He expects to reach your show—is that it? —tomorrow. He knew you would be here waiting for him, expecting him on this boat, and I promised I would get here first. But we had engine trouble."

Jack dropped back into his chair with a smile.

"I been afraid he was sick," he said.

"No, but he came down to Seattle to see me, explain what he was doing. He told me all about you, and the two booms, and the jugs."

Jack's eyes were bright.

"Ain't Don—ain't he a fine lad?" he burst forth exultantly.

"He is. Thanks to you, Mr. Givens, I see it. I'm proud to be his father."

"Father!" Jack whispered, and at once his eyes wandered to the dazzling magnificence of his surroundings.

He was the shy old hand logger again, withdrawing to the edge of things. But he knew something was demanded of him and with a mighty effort he thrust his timidity aside.

"Mister," he said, "come ashore with me, will you? I'd like you to have a drink out of that jug."

"Try to keep me from it!" Don's father laughed jubilantly as he sprang to his feet.

THE VALLEY OF THE WIND

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of "Stetson Stew," "The Little Cocked Hat," etc.

GOLD, LOST TRAILS, TREACHERY, EVEN THE THREAT OF THE YAWNING NOOSE; ALL THESE WERE FORETOLD FOR FOLGER BY THE OLD MEXICAN FORTUNE TELLER. AND THEY WERE TO REACH THEIR CLIMAX IN THE FABLED VALLEY OF THE WIND. FOLGER LAUGHED. BUT THAT SAME NIGHT TREACHERY STRUCK

TO ROY FOLGER, standing with his red head brushing the low roof of the *jacal,* the ten dollars he had given the old crone was just money wasted, but he had done it to please Chiquita and there was no doubt about her interest and belief in the fortune telling. Perched on a stool, draped in her gay shawl, with her little head cocked on one side, her lustrous eyes wide as she watched the divination, she seemed like a bright bird.

La Bruja, whose ancient frame seemed jerking on wires beneath her nondescript garment whenever she moved, blew on her charcoal brazier until it glowed vermilion and its acrid fumes grew stifling in the tiny hut. Her exposed skin was like shagbark, her mouth was a mere slot between hooked nose and chin and, when she muttered or grimaced, a yellow tusk showed between the lips that seemed horny as a turtle's mouth. Old she was, incredibly old, with hands like claws, tremulous but efficient as she sifted fine sand on a tin plate, heated the grains over the brazier and commanded Folger to blow upon them.

Chiquita translated, though Folger could follow the crone's Mexican well enough. "You are to blow upon the sand, in the center. One puff."

Chiquita's lips illustrated. Tempting lips, red as cactus blooms, adorable when they pouted. She was a cuddly thing. Clean as an unplucked bloom herself, for all that she danced in the *bailes* and at the Cactus *cantina.* Vivid and vital and in love with the tall, lean cowpuncher who had lately set up for himself.

Folger was not in love with her. He had theories about love and matrimony, fearing the loss of personal liberty, the curbing of adventure. If he let down those barriers, none too strong recently, he fancied he could fall irrevocably in love with Margaret Collins, sister to the sheriff of Caroca County. Whether she would reciprocate was not so certain. She had many suitors. Her blonde, slender, but vigorous beauty, that would long outlast the swift bloom of Chiquita, her accomplishments as horsewoman, housekeeper, and dancer, her love of outdoor things, and her sportsmanship, had swept the county off its feet as far as bachelors were concerned.

And Roy was wobbling. An extra dance, a ride in the hills, a talk in the moonlight, and he would be a goner. Meantime, he was here in the fortune teller's *jacal* with Chiquita. He had come largely because he did not want to hurt her

feelings. He was neither conceited nor a fool where women were concerned. Only with Margaret he lost sense of analysis. Chiquita openly showed her preference for him, but she was a nice kid and he hoped someone else would come along. Not a chap like Emory Gates, the chief deputy sheriff, who was plainly bent on her capture, but perhaps Manuel Valdez, who was a sheepman but a decent sort, prosperous, and crazy over Chiquita, who flouted him.

Folger had a native reverence for women that was close to his own pride. Perhaps he had been foolish in coming here this afternoon with Chiquita—he must not let the thing go too far—but she was undeniably fascinating, and, when she begged resistance seemed almost cruelty.

He blew, and she drew in her breath as the grains went scattering, and La Bruja bent muttering over the pattern, beginning to rock to and fro, to mumble more articulately, to speak at last. Despite his cynicism, Folger was impressed. Wiser men than he believed that La Bruja foretold the future, whether by craft, or by gathering gossip and by judgment of human nature, none might say. It might be clairvoyance or the sheer wisdom of age where virility still cloistered in her brain. She had beyond doubt predicted many things, found lost objects. If she spoke as a sibyl, nevertheless she spoke sooth. How? *Quien sabe?*

Her croaking voice was impressive, droning or rising to a shrill pitch as she rocked back and forth, apparently unmindful of her audience, while Chiquita translated in a frightened little voice.

"Heh, blood I see, and gold! Gold hairs and black; and gold that grows on no woman. Gold in a cage of death. Trouble and treachery, and a lost trail. A noose, but it opens. Love spurned and love returned. Riddles. Riddles! But the gold is sure. Which? Who knows? The gold that is living and curls about the heart of a man so that he loses reason—or gold that shines in the sun and charms him so he forgets the living gold? Riddles. Riddles! Who knows? Fate finds —fate binds."

She turned the plate about and continued her divination.

"A high place, where trees grow and the grass is green. A lake of water with the wind blowing always across the lake and grass and through the trees. A pleasant place where the wind passes but there is death there also. I see dead men staring to the sky with eyes that cannot see. Trail's end. Treachery. And the gold. The gold within the cage of death."

Something flopped suddenly down from the roof, a squirming thing that wriggled on the still hot plate and darted off before it might be known whether it was lizard or roof-snake, or the veritable familiar of the old crone herself. She was startled, Chiquita screamed, and even Folger's nerves twitched a bit while his hand fell to his gun butt as fast as the thing itself had moved.

"So," said La Bruja, arousing herself. "The sands are scattered and I can see no more. Of what did I speak?"

"Gold an' death mostly," said Folger. "I reckon you can't dodge the last an' I c'ud sure use the gold, though I'm no prospector. Ready, Chiquita?"

Chiquita had pouted at the mention of gold hair. That meant Margaret Collins. Why had La Bruja mentioned her and left it all a riddle? She should have been fair to her own race and set Folger's thoughts against *la señorita blonda,* for Chiquita, though she believed in the clairvoyance of La Bruja, was shrewd enough to think that the ancient soothsayer could and did, upon occasion, supplement her prophesies with statements that might be suggestions calculated to bring them to pass. As La Bruja dwelled insistently upon the choice between golden hair and black, Chiquita's eyes began to glitter. Her tempestuous nature ruffled to storm. There was a pain in her heart like a stab. She hated Margaret.

"Yes," Folger went on, half to himself, as they left the *jacal* where La Bruja watched them from the doorway, "I sure could use some gold on the ranch, right now."

"Gold hair?" flared Chiquita.

Folger chuckled, shaking his head at her. He was used to her swift jealousies, and sometimes he had teased her. Gone a bit too far, perhaps. He could see her eyes dilate as she looked at him, her breath suddenly indrawn, her breast rising.

"Dios!" she told herself, "he is good to see!"

Folger guessed something of her thought, and his eyes grew serious. "No. I meant the genuine *oro,* kid. I'm squeezin' through, but it's close pickin's. It'll be another year befo' I've got any of my own three-year-olds tuh sell, an' I need a good herd sire. So, though I don't know ore from chalk, if I run across that gold she

spoke of, if it's in a cage of death or not, I'll likely try tuh lift it."

But he could not halt the storm.

"So! You do not want golden hair? You do not weesh for the seester of the sheriff? No! Oh, no! You *love* her. An' you make fun of Chiquita. You gringos are all alike. You make girls like us your playtheeng. Oh, I should hate you!"

Folger's gravity increased. "Hold on, Chiquita. You're cute an' sweet an' you're sure mighty pretty. *Bien parecido.* Likewise you sure dance like thistledown on the wind. But, I've never made love tuh you. Nor no one else, for that matter. Can't afford tuh, if I wanted tuh. We've been good *camaradas,* why not let it ride thaterway?"

"*Camaradas!* Oh, you col' *Americano.* You theenk love is a horse you can saddle or turn loose in the corral. Rope w'en you like. Bridle. Ride. I do hate you. I weesh I had never seen you."

Folger was uncomfortable. But it seemed the time for a showdown. He didn't want to hurt her. It would be wiser perhaps not to speak.

"I reckon you don't hate me," he said. "Why can't we he just good friends?"

"Friends? *Amigos?* Between a man an' woman who are young? *Madre mia!* You, of the north! Weeth the water of ice een your blood. *Si! Adios.* Do not follow. Go to your *blonda!*"

Tears drowned the fire in her eyes as she thrust rowels into the flanks of her pinto cayuse, riding its desperate plunges down, quirting it. What a fool, to love a gringo! But she could not help it. He was a man. And her heart longed for him. *"Vamos!"* she cried to the indignant pinto. *"Caballo malvado! Vamos!"*

La Bruja peered out of her door, like a witch out of a cave, and hobbled inside, chuckling. It was not so much that she was malicious as that her own fires had died and she liked to blow at other's embers. Those who sought her were puppets on her stage and she pulled the strings. Chiquita was a silly *gallina,* a foolish little hen. She was not so sure of the gringo. *Americanos* were not subtle but they moved on certain direct methods that she did not fathom. But she had told what she saw, or thought she saw, in the grains of sand, coupling it with the gossip for which her *jacal* was the inevitable clearing-house. Chiquita in love with the gringo, he in love with the sheriff's daughter, even if he didn't know it. Oh ho! It was good, for all her old bones that ached so, to watch the play. She tucked away the ten-dollar bill behind a basket that held a mummied head taken from an ancient cliff dwelling, mumbling over the brazier that could never keep her warm, though it was ninety outside in the shade, waiting for her next customer.

Folger whistled softly as Chiquita raced off. He hadn't wanted to make her cry. Perhaps it was just as well. Then he suddenly straightened and swept off his sombrero. Margaret Collins was close on him, riding her bright bay with the white blaze, trim in riding togs, her hair ashine under her Stetson, her eyes looking straight ahead.

At his bow she looked at him, through him and rode on.

"Now ain't that plain, unvarnished hell! No mo' use fo' me than Satan has fo' a burned match. Saw the hull shootin' match. Thinks I'm philanderin' with Chiquita an' thinks the kid's a wrong 'un jest because she's a dancehall gal. It ain't fair. Women are sure catty tuh each other, an' I git inside the scratchin' likewise an' also. Chiquita's straight but Margaret don't figger it thaterway, I reckon. Anyway she hangs me fo' Chiquita's *querido.* I'm in deeper'n a bogged maverick."

He rode on vexed, irritable. He had a good nature and a quick, hair-trigger temper at times. That Margaret, like Chiquita, might be jealous, never occurred to him. The affair wasn't just, and it riled him. He had to go to the depot to arrange for a car to ship some stock he was forced to sell, since the banks had been stingy about further advances on a poor market, insistent on a note now out being taken up. On the way he passed the Cactus, rode into the alley between it and a long, ramshackle shed used as a hardware storehouse, and hitched his roan to the bowed rail. The roan promptly hitched up one hind foot, dropped its nose and drowsed. The alley was in the shade. There were no flies there and no other horses. After nightfall there might be as many as thirty along the rail.

The Cactus bar was deserted. Folger saw two loungers at a corner table and called them up to share his drink.

There was a card prominently displayed back of the bar.

ALL GUNS TO BE PARKED IN
SALOONS AND DANCEHALLS.
BY ORDER OF
DAVID COLLINS,
SHERIFF.

Folger did not notice it, did not realize he had broken the rule, which was really intended only for use after dark. It was a wise order if a stringent one. Vacada, county seat of Caroca County, was close to the border. There was an unruly element that was apt to clash with punchers off the ranch, spending their checks, bent on demonstrating their independence. Collins was a martinet. Gates was more popular perhaps, because he winked at irregularities that, some whispered, he was not above sharing in, on occasion. Whispered also that Gates was out for Collins' job. But the rule was generally obeyed. There was a little room at the curve of the bar, to the right as one entered, where the guns were swung from hooks of an evening as in quieter places cloaks are hung. Nobody ever took the other man's gun. That was an uncontemplated crime to which horse stealing would be petty larceny.

Folger's bone handled six-gun swung at his hip but he did not think of it. He was thinking of other matters, of the eyes of the girl that had gazed through him as if he had been a dust cloud in her way. His back was turned when Collins entered, but he shifted at the sound of feet, none too pleased in his present mood at the meeting. Collins, guardian of his sister in his own estimation, had never been over cordial concerning Folger's attentions to her. Folger might make a go of his ranch but that had yet to be shown.

To Collins he was a happy-go-lucky waddie who had still to prove up. Folger sensed and ignored this. So, in point of fact, did Margaret.

"Hoist one, Sheriff?" he asked.

Collins' eyes were cold. He took his office a bit too seriously, perhaps, zealous of what he deemed his duty and more aggressive than was sometimes tactful.

"I'm not drinkin', Folger. You c'n hand over yore gun. You know the rule."

To Folger this was the last, unnecessary straw. There was sudden tension. The bartender turned his back, polishing a glass, watching in the mirror. The two loungers edged away.

"You want it? Why don't you take it?"

The drowsy atmosphere of the place was suddenly charged with enmity. The two faced each other. Collins cold and Folger hot, but the nerves of both steady, taut for action, their eyes hard and shining like steel. The sheriff's authority had been invoked and defied. The occasion was minor but the issue loomed large.

"Hand it over, Folger."

Folger's left forearm was on the bar, his right hand was poised over the gun butt. Collins' right thumb was hooked in his belt. Folger felt a burning sense of injustice. Collins was going out of his way to belittle him. He spoke in a slow drawl.

"Aw, you-all can go plumb tuh hell."

Then, just as the three lookers-on expected flame and smoke with blood to follow, a swarthy man, thickset, slightly bowlegged, a deputy's star on his vest, came through the swinging doors.

"They told me you were here, Sheriff," he said before he took in the scene.

Collins turned, his face eager. "Bring him in, Gates?"

"No. Someone tipped him off. He'd dragged."

Collins frowned, his cold eyes suddenly burning with blue flame. "Why didn't you—?" He checked his speech. "I'll go up tuh the jail with you," he said, and turned again to Folger. "I'll see you again."

"I'll be waitin' soon's you git yore feet warmed, Sheriff."

There was bravado in his speech and Folger knew it, half regretting it. Collins did not appear to hear the last words as he went out with Gates. The bartender set down the glass he had mechanically been polishing.

"Collins sent Gates out after that stage

robber over tuh Semilla," he said casually. "They heard he was hidin' out in a shack up in the hills. Thousan' *pesos* up for him, *vivo*, or *muerto*. Reckon Collins is sore he got away. They claim it was Pilar."

"Yeah?" Folger straightened up and

strolled to the door. The sheriff was not in sight. Nor did he see anything of him as he loped down to the depot and made arrangements for the car. Riding on out to his ranch, the Bar B, he cooled off, realizing he had been close to tragedy.

"Jest the same," he told the roan, "Collins had no call tuh git biggity. An' he can't run a rannikaboo over me."

He had supper with his three hands, who with him did all the work of the outfit. The fat old Mexican cook served the meal. Folger was silent and the punchers sensed his mood, talking among themselves. After the meal the two cowboys rode in from the neighboring ranch, looking for a game of stud poker. One of them had come from town.

"Collins is sure on the prod after Gates," he said. "Threatened tuh take away his star. Seems he had the straight dope on this holdup gent. Knew where he was hidin', an' Gates loses him. Name's Pilar."

Pedro, the cook, clearing up, halted to listen, his beady eyes agleam in his greasy face. "They allow this Pilar is mixed up with those border coyotes that are runnin' in Chinks an' dope. Some say he's the boss of the outfit," the waddie went on. "Collins is out tuh git 'em, an' some talk that Gates ain't so hostile to 'em as he might be. Anyhow he loses Pilar, an' the sheriff is sure peeved. Gates was lined up tuh the Cactus bar with Smiley an' that breed Romero when I left, drinkin' like they had a contract tuh make the place dry.

"Hear you-all told the sheriff tuh go tuh hell this afternoon, Folger?"

They all looked at the Bar B boss, who said nothing.

"'Lowed he was goin' tuh teach you tuh respect the law an' its representative."

"Yeah?" Folger's riders knew his slow drawl and the mood it stood for. They glanced at one another.

"Goin' tuh sit into the game?" his foreman, Jackson, asked him.

"No. I'm goin' tuh town."

Folger drew his gun from his holster as he spoke, inspecting it. It was clean, but he swabbed the barrel and replaced its cartridges with fresh ones. The rest kept range silence, while he put on his Stetson, nodded and went out.

"He's sure on the prod himself," said one of the visitors. "Looks like he meant tuh smoke out the sheriff. Thought he was sweet on the sister."

The Bar B men ignored the inference.

"Figger we sh'ud ride in?" one of them asked Johnson.

"On'y rile him," answered the foreman. "He's of age. What'll we play for? Either of you punchers got any money tuh lose?"

They heard the crisp gallop of Folger's roan as the game started.

Going into town, Folger cooled off a little. But the resolution to appear in person and see what the sheriff intended to do remained. If he went into the Cactus he meant to park his gun. There was no sense in openly defying a good rule and giving Collins the edge on him. But if he met the sheriff outside and Collins started anything, he was not going to have his weapon confiscated. He had broken the letter of the law but not the spirit of it and Collins knew that well enough.

He could beat the sheriff to the draw. There were few men who were quicker than Folger. Natural coordination made him a crack shot and a swift one. To kill the brother of Margaret, for all her slight of him, was not to be considered. To shoot the gun out of the other's hand, or to put his shooting wrist out of commission, would answer the purpose if it came down to an issue. The main thing was not to stay away after the sheriff's announcements. The puncher might have been trying to draw him, nevertheless a challenge had passed between him and Collins, the town knew of it, and he was not going to keep out of sight.

As for Margaret, she had hurt him so deeply that the sting of it told him he cared, beyond any effort to fight the feeling. He never saw her without receiving a momentary shock. When he was with her he knew that he was beyond reason, out of his depth.

Now Chiquita was the cause of this new state of affairs, but it was not Chiquita's fault entirely. He had gone with her to La Bruja's. And now Chiquita knew where he stood with her, at the cost of his standing with Margaret. He knew that his chance of explaining things to Margaret was remote. She was proud. Unless something extraordinary occurred she would not speak to him, would continue to ignore him. And his own pride was quick enough.

He rode into the alley beside the Cactus in a half reckless mood. He had not met Collins, but the sheriff invariably made the rounds of the *cantinas* in the evening. And he would find Folger there. The hitch rack was crowded with horses, he had to

ride to the end of the sagging pole to place the roan. The ponies stood with their heads toward the warehouse, their heels far enough away from the wall of the *cantina* to give free passage to the side and rear doors. They were there for hours of patient or impatient waiting, according to their dispositions, some docile, others cantankerous, but all fairly philosophical under the restraint of hitching.

Folger entered as the music was beginning for a dance. He saw Chiquita standing with other girls at the wide opening between the dancehall and the gambling rooms, but looked away as Gates claimed her. He entered the little room and parked gun and gun belt on a hook among the rest.

Two or three hailed him as he walked to the bar. There was some chaff as to his "run-in" with the sheriff, a reference to Collins' wrath at Pilar having slid through his deputy's efforts at arrest. A suggestion for poker and adjournment to a corner table.

The game went well. Folger began to win, not much, but steadily. He could not well afford to lose. The shipment of his steers on a low market was necessary for running expenses, and before he got to the place where he would have natural increase to dispose of he was likely to have to sacrifice still more. He needed every dollar, but tonight it seemed as if his expenses were going to be paid. Unlucky at love and lucky at cards, he told himself a bit grimly as he raked in a nice pot. Then his fortune changed and he began to lose it again.

It was a friendly enough game. Talk went on during shuffle and deal, or when a round of drinks was brought.

"Beats me why Collins horns in on the border-runnin' so heavy," said one. "Thet's a Federal job, I'd figger."

"Be a big figger in Collins' cap jest the same if he landed 'em an' showed up the Gov'n'mint chaps. Sheriff ain't all he's after. Collins is plumb ambitious, an' he's li'ble tuh git what he wants. Jest the right type tuh land. That's why he's been herdin' those border coyotes of Pilar's so close that Pilar went into holdin' up stages. Collins is a quiet one but he's been linin' up things, an' Pilar *sabe's* runnin' ain't right healthy an occupation while Collins is on the job."

"Pilar took a risk comin' over into the sheriff's own territory, at that."

"Daredevil sort of hombre. An' he gits clear."

"Wonder why Collins sends Gates an' don't go himself?"

"Collins is keepin' cases close tuh the border. This play of Pilar's might be a trick to leave things clear for a run. It's a cinch Pilar's in cahoots with someone this side of the line. There ain't a Mexican that'd give him away, partly because they're afraid of him, an' likewise because when it comes to a turn between a gringo an' one of their own breed they're goin' tuh back their own side. A *contrabandista* is a hero to them anyway."

The play went on. Folger's chips mounted, diminished, winnings balancing losses. He saw Gates come in from the dancehall two or three times in the general exodus after a dance, Chiquita with him, Smiley with a blonde, Ramon with varying partners. Then the three of them settled down at a little table, cards between them, playing perfunctorily, talking most of the time. Once Folger caught them glancing his way and fancied he was the object of their speech. He knew Gates resented Chiquita's fondness for him and he thought that there was open enmity in Gates' look.

Then he stiffened. Collins had entered. The sheriff seemed alert. There was something about his carriage, the lift of his head and a pale fire in his eyes, that suggested strongly that he was not there on a perfunctory visit. A manner too eager to bother about the parking of a gun, or even the words that had passed between them, Folger decided, and knew his idea justified as Collins, looking about the room, saw him, evidently recognized him, but passed his glance on. Folger saw him catch the eye of Gates, beckon him with a slight backward jerk of his head.

Folger had thrown in his cards, and he noticed Gates say something hastily to Smiley and Ramon and join the sheriff, going with him into the private office of Cardero, owner of the Cactus. The door closed tight behind them.

They did not come out for some time. Cardero was with them, looking sulky, ill at ease. Gates came back to his table as the sheriff went out of the *cantina*. He tugged at his mustache, a scowl on his

face. The three of them sat with their heads close together, whispering. Ramon got up, passed into the little room where the guns were parked, and then made his exit.

After a while he came back, reparked his gun and joined Gates and Smiley. Folger was having a series of low hands and he watched them, not altogether casually. There seemed to be some sort of concerted action between them. It was getting late, but the dance still went on and few had left. Gates, by virtue of his office, wore his own weapon. Smiley was the next one to leave and he did not come back. Collins had not reappeared. Folger had a hunch that something was brewing. The sheriff, he fancied, was on Pilar's trail, or on that of some of his confederates on this side of the line. Gates, who still retained his star, did not seem over keen, and Folger wondered whether he was really friendly toward the runners.

It was certain that he wanted Collins' job, likely that if he was sheriff he would not bother to assist the Federal men.

Chance had brought the hazards of the poker game to an even outcome. Folger had won a few dollars, no one had lost much. It was getting monotonous. One of the players suggested breaking up and another seconded it, proposing a final round. Gates and Ramon got up. Gates sauntered into the dancehall and the half-breed left the *cantina*..

A dance started with whine of violins, twang of guitar, the blare of an accordion and the beat of an Indian drum.

The game ended with Folger winning the last pot. He was some thirty dollars ahead, willing enough to quit. He had shown himself, and Collins had passed the matter over. That incident was probably closed. The sheriff had bigger game on hand. Folger's thoughts turned towards his ranch, the gathering of the steers for shipment, early work to do. With his companions he went to the bar for a farewell drink. The crowd surged out of the dancehall, laughing and talking, girls and men together, Gates and Chiquita among them. Folger saw them pass behind him in the mirror, saw Chiquita's eyes seek his own. At the same moment he felt something thrust into his hand, a folded scrap of paper. He was not certain whether Chiquita had passed it to him or not. It seemed likely. The men beside him were roaring over a story that had just reached its broad point when he read the message. Chiquita had never written him before but this was signed with her name, a penciled misspelled scrawl.

Querido—mus' see you. Plees come outside in allee soon as you can. Do not look my way. In five minutes. I am in trouble. Plees. Chiquita.

He was not her *querido*. She had no right to call him that. But what if she was in trouble? His good nature asserted itself. The friction had gone out of his mood. He said good night, got his gun and buckled it on, and slipped out of the side door.

It was chilly and dark in the alley, the ponies getting restless, the stars still bright overhead with dawn not very far off. His eyes adjusted to the twilight, Folger could see nothing of the girl but he made out the figure of a man standing between him and the street, close against the *cantina* wall, watchful but not looking his way. Then it moved out a little and he recognized the straight, alert carriage of the sheriff. For a moment he wondered whether Collins was waiting for him but dismissed the thought. That was not the sheriff's way in such a matter. He turned toward the far end of the alley where the roan stood.

Suddenly there came a spurt of flame, a report at which the horses plunged and strained at their tie-ropes. Collins started out from the *cantina* wall, reached for his gun, staggered, fell prone on his face.

Folger's own weapon was out in a flash, its owner looking for the assassin, seeing no one. The shot had come from the warehouse side, perhaps from within through one of the roughly boarded windows. He ran toward Collins. Now men were swarming into the alley, Gates in the lead, his gun leveled.

"Man shot! Stick up yore hands, you!" shouted Gates.

Folger obeyed. His own gun was full, clean. Perhaps Gates knew who he was but it didn't matter.

"Don't be a damn' fool, Gates," he said. "It's the sheriff. Shot came from the warehouse. Better git after the feller that done the shootin'."

"The hell you say! Folger, eh? An' you tellin' the sheriff tuh go tuh hell this afternoon. In my hearin'. Keep 'em h'isted! Git his gun an' let me have a look at it, one o' you boys. Two of you hold him."

Folger did not resist. "He's goin' off half cocked, boys," he said. "The right man's gittin' clear."

His voice almost convinced them but they held him. A man passed his gun to Gates. Others were bending over the sheriff.

"Plumb over the heart," said one.

Gates produced a flashlight, his gun in his left hand for the moment. Then he sheathed it.

"Hold him, boys, while I take a look at this. You said it was clean, Folger. Clean, is it? It's just been fired! Grains in the barrel yet. By God, we've got you!"

Folger stood with body and brain momentarily numbed. His gun fired? Gates lied!

But others examined, corroborated. The grip of the men tightened. There were angry murmurs.

The sheriff was being borne away, limp. They were taking him home—to Margaret. Collins was stiff and stern, he had his enemies but many men liked him and most everybody respected him. The town knew that Folger had challenged him, had said he would wait until Collins' feet were warm.

By what trick his gun had been fouled Folger did not know. But he could see where he stood in this predicament. Foredoomed! His own riders and the two visiting punchers knew he had gone to town in fighting mood. His words to Collins prejudged him.

Now he saw Smiley and Ramon close to Gates, grinning. He had the sense of a trap being sprung. But he was in it.

"Cover him, Smiley," said Gates. "I'm taking no chances. Put your hands out, Folger." There were handcuffs in the deputy's fingers. At the sight of them reaction surged through Folger. Those once on he was as good as hanged.

The men pushed him forward, hands on his shoulders now. A girl thrust herself through the crowd. It was Chiquita. What part had she played in this with her luring note, her plea of trouble, she did not answer. She had said she hated him.

Chiquita flung herself between Folger and Gates. She clutched at the deputy.

"*Querido,* they tell me you are hurt. That you are keel. Oh!"

The angry deputy thrust her off. Some fool might have told her it was he rather than the sheriff, but he did not want her sympathy now. She went staggering, blundering back, against Folger. He heard a swift whisper in his ear; the merest murmur of Mexican.

"*Horse, at back.*"

His doubt of her dissolved, if it did not vanish. It was his only chance, if the roan was clear. His hands were free. He drove one fist into the belly of the man to his right and kicked hard at the other's knee. High heel struck bone, his spur rowel gashed flesh, and the man winced with a shout at the sudden pain and shock, while the other one gasped for breath.

Folger wheeled and dived between two of the horses, all excited at the crowd and noise. He struck one on its muzzle and the half frantic cayuse tugged, squealed, snapped at his flying figure and lashed out hard. The whole line responded like a row of pool balls tapped at one end.

Folger raced down between the warehouse and the hitch-pole, the ponies starting back at his bent figure, that was screened by them. Men and frightened girls jammed each other, shouting and screaming.

He shot 'round to the back and saw the roan, head high, ground-anchored by the reins that Chiquita surely must have unfastened from the rack when she led the pony away under cover of the excitement; it had not bolted. A word from Folger reassured it. The next second he was on its back, making for the dry wash that ran back of the main street, the roan jumping, cat-hammed, up the farther slope, as mounted men came in hot pursuit out of the alley. Guns were barking now.

Folger bent low, bullets whining past. It would be foolish to make for the ranch. It must be the hills, rocky ground where trail would vanish. The roan was fresh and fast. There were good horses behind, but not many as good as this.

He made for the sage with twenty riders after him. They were close, and weaponless he spurred for a burst of speed to take him out of gunshot.

Once the roan flinched, struck, he thought, in the flank, but not seriously. He heard the whine of a missile, knew that someone had a rifle, probably Cardero's. Rifle shooting from the saddle was not apt to be accurate. A moment more and——

They had him. High in the left shoulder. He felt the blood ooze out, hot in the cold night, and he bent low. If he could stick in the saddle he'd do them yet. The

rifle spoke again, with the roan stretching out in full gallop, belly brushing the sage and gramma, making for the hills, gaining, gaining, gallant and game in the race.

He must get to cover before dawn. The smell of it was in the sharp air that stiffened the gluey blood that leaked out of him with every leap of his horse. The cold might clot it. He could ride as long as he had consciousness, perhaps after. He was at home in leather as an old salt in the crosstrees. And the pursuers were falling behind.

The wind rushed by him as the roan kept at top speed, nostrils wide, neck extended, ribs rising and falling and great plate muscles working rhythmically.

Where to go? Folger knew the terrain as a ranging hawk knows it, and he mapped out his route. Up Hardwater Canyon, out through the lateral ravine, rimrock on top. On toward Dusty Gap. "Owens' tunnel." If he could cover trail, keep ahead, he could hide out there. Few knew of the mine. Owens kept it secret in his hermit fashion for all he had made no strike in it. Owens was esteemed a crank, if not crazy. He came to town perhaps twice a year for supplies and spoke to no one, handing over a written list to the storekeepers. The rest of the time he waited in his cabin for his partner who had gone out to the desert ten years back and never returned.

Other men swore the partner must be dead, but Owens swore he was alive; maintained, before they jeered him into silence, that he had seen him, in a mirage. Not a dream but part of a desert phenomenon, driving laden burros in the foreground of a green valley where a lake sparkled.

Owens was old now, and rheumatic. He had given up his own personal quest for good but he still believed that Sam Davis was alive and would come back rich from a strike.

He would help Folger. They were friends. Roy and Margaret, they were the only two the old man knew. She and Folger, riding up into the hills, had heard the old man moaning after they had paused at his cabin for a drink. And they had found him in the entrance of his tunnel, pinned down by rock and the timbering he was installing too late.

But for them he would have perished there of thirst and starvation in the lonely place, far off the range, high up on the divide. He had been grateful after they had got him to the cabin where he could treat himself after they had brought him water, prepared him some food. Half mad, perhaps, with queer ideas on spontaneous generation, ever reading through a tattered old encyclopedia, but Margaret was sympathetic and Folger's mood was hers. That was a year ago. They had visited him two or three times and he had told them of the mirage, of the vision of his partner who would come back, some day.

Folger's shirt and coat were stiffening with congealing blood. He was getting weaker, and thought was an effort. But he believed the bleeding had stopped. Now and then he heard sounds of pursuit, saw riders once in a while as he rode up the ridges, the roan going valiantly but tiring, as the horses behind must be tiring, too. Some of them had dropped far behind, out of it.

One more hogback, then Purdy Creek, then the climb to Owens' cabin—and the tunnel. If Owens was up he might—Folger was getting lightheaded now. The sky was graying. Soon the sun would flash red daylight on the peaks, revealing, merciless.

Crossing the creek, the roan stumbled for the first time, gathered itself together clumsily. It balked at the climb, and then Folger felt it give way beneath him. He himself lurched as he got free from the saddle. The roan was lying half in and half out of the water, a gush of dark blood from its mouth dyeing the stream. The shot in its flank must have gone deep. It had been bleeding internally, the hemorrhage aggravated by its efforts. Now it was done, stretching out with a gurgling groan, dead.

Folger swayed. He had thrown the pursuers off a while back, he believed. But day was coming fast. They could read his sign, the trail of the roan down the ridge.

There was a rocky cliff ahead. The light was seeping in so that he could see seams and fissures. He called on his last reserves and sprang for a ledge, clinging, scrambling for footing, clawing up, diving into brush through which he crawled a little way and lay panting. He had left

no sign on that rock. They would think he had gone up creek, or down. The strength was almost out of him, his heart pounding, lacking blood for energy.

On all fours he crept up, listening for shouts, hearing none yet. Overhead, through the brush, he could see the sky turned olive, changing first to blue.

There were trees about the log cabin with its dirt roof and clay chimney whence smoke plumed up. Folger staggered toward it, his sight dim, one arm entirely useless now, the other set against the friendly trunks.

The door of the cabin opened and Owens came to it, gray bearded, wrinkled, but tanned and fairly erect for all his rheumatism.

A faint shout from below came to Folger's dull ears. The pursuers had found the roan.

In a red haze Folger saw the old man's eyes open wide, his figure seem to grow gigantic as he stumbled toward it. Then he felt a sturdy arm about him and a voice talking as if from far away.

"Folger! You're hurt bad. Take a swig of this."

Raw liquor burned his throat but put new life into him. He was leaning weakly against the door of the cabin, things coming back to normal.

"They're after me," he said. "Close. I didn't——"

"I don't give a hoot what you done or didn't do. After you, are they? Likely to come here? By Gorrymy, I hear 'em. Brace up an' come 'round the back. Roof's the place," he went on as he helped Folger along. "They won't think of that. Brush an' grass up thar. Now then, thar ain't no ladder. I'll give ye a back up. You got to make it, son. I'll stave 'em off. They think I'm cracked, but I ain't spillin' over yet. Now——"

He grunted as he bent, grunted again as he lifted. And Folger clutched the edge of the low roof, scrambled up, aided by Owens, rolled over onto the dirt roof where wild shrubs and grasses had long since taken luxuriant root and growth. They were tall enough to hide him from a chance downlook from the heights. He snugged in among them, consciousness slipping out of him.

Riders came through the trees, to find Owens pressing choke-cherries through a rusty colander. True to his character, he turned his back on them and went inside the cabin. Gates swung from his saddle and followed him, the rest crowding in. The deputy set a harsh hand on the shoulder of the recluse, and Owens turned angrily.

"Git!" he cried. "The hull bilin' of ye. I ain't askin' fer comp'ny." He jumped back, nimbly enough, caught an old Sharps rifle from its deer-horn rack and held it at his hip, threatening them, his eyes blazing. They shrank from his fury though their own guns were out.

"Put up that rifle, Owens," said Gates, his face twisted and his eyes alight with purpose. "This ain't a call. There's been murder done. A man named Folger's shot the sheriff an'——"

The hermit did not obey the order. "What's the sheriff to me?" he demanded. "I ain't killed him. An' there's a bigger law'n his up here in the everlastin' hills. The Lord lives here and I'm His servant. I stay apart from men and thir wickedness. Begone, you spawn of iniquity!"

His gaze was fanatical as he swung his rifle from side to side, his finger on the trigger.

"The Lord gives arms to His people and the right to use them ag'in their enemies," he said. "Ye mock at me an' now invade my house. Git! This trigger is filed to a ha'r."

"Crazy as a loon," muttered a man in the rear. Gates swore, controlled himself.

"Look here, old man," he said. "Law's law. We're lookin' fer a murderer. Looks like he might hev come this way. Can't you answer a plain question without gittin' riled up? Hev you seen him? Red headed chap. His hawss died t'other side of the ridge."

"Do I look as if I would harbor murderers? Look 'round, if ye must, seein' you come in force an' I seek only peace. Day's clear enough. Can't you read sign?"

Owens' eyes were anxious for a moment. The ground was hard under the trees but there might have been blood where Folger had brushed against a tree; a branch might be broken.

"We lost his trail at the crick," said Gates surlily. He went to the double bunk and pulled back the old blankets and skins upon the beds, peered beneath.

"Ain't here," he said. Owens had put down his gun and taken up his colander again, kneading the cherries, as if unconscious of their presence. "He went upstream, like I said. Ramon says there's caves up by the falls."

"I tell you I hit him," said Cardero.

"You hit the hawss. He ain't here. Come on, we're losin' time."

They remounted, with Owens paying no attention to him, his face turned away until they had gone through the trees out of sight. Even then he continued to work his fruit, listening, muttering to himself.

"I kin act crazy when it's needed," he said with a chuckle. "An' I kin act cute. That depitty! He's spawn, he is. Bred out o' mud. The pore lad!"

Fifteen minutes later he went outside, called up to the roof, shook his head when he heard no answer.

"Hurt bad. Fainted, likely. Tunnel's the place fer him. Cool, there." Still muttering, he busied himself getting cold food which he put in a cracked dish and tied about with a big bandanna. He put a flask in his pocket, filled a canteen from a pail, got a hammer and nails and fastened cross pieces to two peeled sapling poles that stood against the cabin, making a ladder up which he climbed stiffly to the roof. Folger lay on his face. Owens turned him over, got some whisky into him, revived him.

"You've got to git inter the tunnel, lad," he said. "I'll fix it so they'll never go in. There'll be air through the shaft an' they'll hev a time findin' that. All overgrown, an' a blind man c'ud see no one's been nigh it for a year. Got to make it before the sun gits high an' while they're below ye. They've been here an' gone back to the crick. Brace yoreself, once more."

Folger barely remembered his trip to the tunnel. Once inside, the cool air revived him a little.

"You stay here," said Owens. "Here's whar you rescued me, you an' the gal with the golden ha'r. I'll be back with blankets an' dressin' for yore wound. Healin' gums an' herbs. You're plumb safe, son."

They were well within the tunnel in a

stoped-out place where Owens had worked on his barren vein. He had lit a candle in a miner's iron holder, thrust into the rock's fissure.

"I'll bring more lights," he said. "Rest easy."

Folger was coming back to life. The liquor had helped him. He saw the food on the floor with the canteen, and took a draught of water. The thought of Margaret came to him. Long since they would have fetched the body of her brother home. The posse would return and fresh men would start out, on the trail that led close to the cabin she knew so well. They would tell her of the talk with Owens. Would she guess that the hermit had rescued him? What would she do, think? His mind seemed to spur his body. He was vital when the recluse returned.

"Want to tell you what happened," he said.

"Jest as you like. Better, mebbe. Don't talk too much."

Folger finished his brief story. He started with the quarrel with Chiquita that led to Margaret's cutting him. Owens liked Margaret. And Margaret was the key to his safety, Folger felt. Or his disaster.

"Got thet note with ye, son?"

Chiquita's note was in the breast pocket of Folger's shirt where he had thrust it. It was blood smeared but legible. Owens put it away carefully in an old wallet.

"Folks think I'm mad, lad," he said. "Daffy, as we say in Wales, where I was born. But we Welsh think deep. I may help ye. Don't fear for the lass. And none shall find ye. I'm goin' to pull down the timberin' at the mouth of the tunnel. When the time comes ye'll git out through the shaft, which'll give ye air, meantime. The tunnel's caved in, abandoned, ye see. An' you snug inside. There's grub to last ye, an' water. Here's the 'intment an' the healin' herbs. You'll be able to travel inside a week. Meantime, if news comes along, I'll give it to you. I'll go to town termorrer or the next day an' get in touch with yore foreman about shippin' them cows, like you said. See how things sit in Vacada. I'm not comin' nigh you for a spell. That outfit's likely to come back, an' I don't want to give them a lead. Whoever comes, I'll handle 'em. An' you're snug as a bug in a blanket."

He went out the tunnel. Presently, Folger, drowsy, heard the sound of pick, the rush of falling earth and timbers as the light that came from the entrance was shut off by the cave-in that would deceive all seekers. He was safe. Deeper in, faint illumination and a drift of air located the overgrown and hidden shaft. The dressing eased the throbbing in his wound,

By and by he would think, but now loss of blood and loss of sleep overcame him.

OWENS cleared up things in the cabin, took the ladder apart, and sat down on his bench outside the door, poring through a volume of his worn but precious encyclopedia. About an hour before noon he saw a bay horse coming through the trees, a girl upon its back. Both were familiar to him, not unexpected. Margaret Collins slid wearily from her saddle, wan and heavy eyed.

"They've been here?" she asked.

"The posse? Yep, an' rode away ag'in. Seemed to think I was hidin' out the man who shot yore brother. I ain't."

She looked at him keenly and he met her gaze. In his own mind he was certain that Folger had not killed the sheriff. He was not so sure about the girl. He did not know much about women, he had a certain fear that they did not look at things as a man might. That Margaret was close to being in love with Folger he had long ago told himself, noticing her behavior when the two of them visited him. He had been glad of the romance, liking both of them. Now, he sensed there must be conflicting emotions within her. She would have heard all that could be told when they brought her brother back to the home where she kept house for him. It looked bad against Folger. She was jealous of him over Chiquita. She knew he had had words with her brother whom she was so proud of and close to. It was in Owens' mind to use her to help clear her lover, if Folger was her lover, but he meant to be careful.

"They think that Jim is going to die," she said in a toneless voice. "The Vacada doctor is afraid to operate. We've sent to Ventura for a surgeon and a nurse. The bullet is in his heart muscles. Any excitement or movement might be fatal. He's under morphia. They won't even let me see him.

"They came here after Roy Folger? And you haven't seen him?"

The quiver in her voice, the instinctive betrayal of her real purpose, Owens fancied, reassured him a little.

"You take a dipper of spring water, lass, an' set down."

She drank eagerly, her fingers trembling.

"I met two of the posse," she said. "They were going back with their horses lamed. They seem to think he got away through Cumbre Notch."

Owens suppressed a chuckle. He had trailed a deer over Cumbre the afternoon before. But had not killed. They would be following his sign, no easy trail to trace, broken by rock passage.

"You glad he got away?" he asked, seeking to surprise her, to fathom her eyes. It was not easy. "You think he's guilty?" he asked again, sharply.

She caught at her lower lip with her teeth.

"He quarreled with Jim, challenged him. They found him with his gun in his hand, standing over Jim's body. He claimed his gun was clean but it had just been fired. I don't know. I don't know." Her voice died off, her eyes piteous.

"Looks like he was in bad, don't it?" asked Owens. "Suppose we sort of review things. Who said the gun had jest been fired?"

"Gates."

"Humph! I live up here alone but I go to Vacada once in a while. I don't talk much but I hear quite a lot. Seems to me I heard that Gates was made chief depitty by yore brother because of political obligashuns. Seems to me I heard Gates wanted yore brother's job an 'was plumb sore because he on'y got to be chief depitty. And that he criticizes yore brother a heap. That right?"

"What do you mean?"

"That right? You're close to yore brother, you've told me that yoreself. He don't think much of Gates, does he?"

"No. He was angry with him for not bringing back Pilar. But it wasn't Gates that shot Jim. He was inside the place and came out with the rest when the shot was fired."

"Ever hear of the monkey that got the chestnuts out of the fire 'thout burnin' his own paws? I ain't accusin' Gates. Jest showin' thar might be a motive for him to be interested in yore brother not bein' sheriff. But—Folger ain't a fool. He'd know they'd look at his gun right away. Gates says it's dirty. Does Gates let anyone else look at it, feel of it to see if the barrel was hot an' smelled of powder gas, as it w'ud if it had jest been fired?

"I don't believe much in circumstantial evidence but I do believe in spontaneous generation, an' this Gates crawled out of the same sort of slime thet spawns skunks an' weasels, if I know vermin. Here's another thing. Do they claim yore brother drawed his gun?"

"They think he tried to."

"*Think.* Seems ter me I've heard how

he was quick on the draw. So quick he's got a big name for it. Now then, you think Roy Folger the sort to shoot at a man without givin' him an even break? No, you don't, no more'n I do. Yore brother, least of all. Folger's in love with you."

"No."

Owens blinked, remembering all Folger had told him. Margaret was jealous of Chiquita even as the Mexican girl had been of the blonde Margaret. "No smoke without fire," he mused. "Jealousy's akin to love."

"We'll leave love out of it fer a spell," he said. "Looks like Folger was in a bad mess, seein' he's wounded."

"Wounded? They told me his horse was shot but not—not—oh, you've seen him! Is he——?"

"He's a friend of mine, an' I believe he's innercent. I aim to help prove that, but it's goin' to be a mean job unless I git help. If you'd located him here, what was you goin' to do. Give him up?"

There were tears in her eyes. She set a hand over a wildly beating heart.

"No. Where is he? I can't think he did it."

"He's whar no one kin see him for a spell. An' his wound is fixed up. It

ain't serious. Now, Miss Margaret, I want you to help me prove Folger's innercent an' find out who did shoot yore brother, at the same time. I'm goin' to trust you as his friend, an' mine. Goin' to show you suthin'."

He gave her the blood smeared note. She gave a little sign of pity, and then her eyes flashed. She started to tear up the paper. Owens held her fingers in his own strong palm.

"You don't wanter destroy evidence," he said.

"Evidence? Why do you show that to me? And you said he loved me!"

"Hold on. I look at this thing without prejudice, an' I've done a heap of thinkin' the last hour.

"Suppose thar was someone—we ain't mentionin' names—who wanted to git rid of yore brother an' rid of Folger at the same time. He's sweet on Chiquita, this party is. He knows Chiquita is sweet on Folger. But he *don't* know they've disagreed."

"How do *you* know?" she flashed at him.

"The birds bring me a heap of messages up here. Mebbe I'll tell you later. Here's this man. He gits hold of Folger's gun. That ain't hard, the way they park 'em. A man c'ud stroll out with Folger's gun durin' the evenin', fire it whar it w'udn't attract attention, tote it back, swop it ag'in for his own, an' hev things all set. Then someone writes this note an' slips it into Folger's hand behind his back. Folger's good natured. The gal says she's in trouble. He ain't been nigh her all evening, but——"

"You know that, too?"

Owens nodded. He was watching Margaret and saw that her face had changed. Her eyes were glowing. She wanted Folger proved innocent of more than one thing, even as she wanted to find the real killer of her brother. Her brain was active, her heart prompted her.

"So," Owens went on, "he's tolled outside whar they know yore brother is. Thar's no gal in sight. But thar' a shot, an' then Gates comes out on the jump. An' this Chiquita, seein' what's happenin', helps Folger git away."

"She might have been sorry when she saw what happened. She might have been trying to clear herself if the note was found."

Owens shook his head. Margaret went too fast for him. He had not thought of such possibilities. But he kept doggedly to his idea.

"I'm supposin' she didn't write it at all. That someone else did an' if we find out who that someone was, it'll help a heap. Thar's you an' me with Folger's foreman, Johnson, an' the two other riders at the Bar B, to help him. An' thar's Gates an' all the authority back of him on the other side. Mebbe this Chiquita c'ud help. If you'd ask her?"

"Me? You want *me* to ask her? You must be crazy." Margaret's face was scarlet, her eyes blazing.

"No. I ain't crazy, honey, though some people says so. An' I was sorter bankin' on that. We ain't got much to bank on. You see, I had a notion you might love Folger, gal, as he loves you. Then you'd do anything to help him, even if you do hev to swaller some pride. I figgered

mebbe you'd be willin' to see this Chiquita an' ask her if she wrote this note. You, bein' a woman, c'ud tell if she was lyin'. Mebbe you c'ud git to see her real writin' an' compare it. She might hev to swaller some pride on her side. She's a dancehall gal, an' she likely figgers you despite her.

"It'd sure be one step to'ards helpin' him. Even if you ain't in love with him but jest friends, that calls for trust, an' trust that don't go into action ain't worth much. If they catch him they're likely to hang him off the reel, with mebbe the man who *did* shoot yore brother laughin' up his sleeve."

Margaret sat silent, folding and unfolding the note. At last she put it away inside her blouse.

"I'll see her," she said. "Can I see Roy?"

"No, you can't an' that's a plumb fact. You remember how you two found me pinned under a cave-in in my tunnel? That give me the idee. I fixed up another cave-in, natcheral as kin be, an' he's back of it, with grub an' blankets an' candles. Thar's air comes down through the shaft I sunk when I first started the mine. I don't aim to go nigh him myself for a while because I've a strong notion Gates' outfit is comin' back here when they git through follerin' my tracks over to the Notch. They may cast 'round. Right now, the hill is plumb overgrown along by the shaft, an' a blind man c'ud see no one's been thar for months. But some of 'em might happen to remember I've got a mine an' think Folger hid in thar, whether I put him up to it or not. I aim to git him out through the shaft after a bit an' away from here, soon's he kin travel, but you see you can't see him. I kin take him a message."

Her face was rose-red again, but not with anger, and her eyes were shy.

"Give him—give him my love," she whispered and kissed the old man on his leathery cheek. Then would have gone, but he stopped her.

"Thar's one thing more. Git a message to Johnson of the Bar B an' tell him to go ahead an' ship the steers. Folger says he knows which to cut out. The car is fixed for Friday. An' to deposit the check in the bank. Folger says you kin trust Johnson to the limit. I'm sort of rheumatic an' I never was much of a horseman. Wouldn't do for me to be seen consortin' with Bar B men. Will you do that?"

"Of course." She mounted and rode off through the trees, waving her hand at the dip of the trail.

Owens nodded to himself, well satisfied. "She loves the lad," he told himself. "An' she's game. Not so derned easy for her to tackle Chiquita, I reckon, but mebbe it'll clear things up a bit, more ways than one."

Midway through the afternoon the posse returned, hungry, angry and tired.

"Ramon says you've got a mine," snapped Gates. "Where is it? I want to look at it."

Owens looked from him to Ramon, studying both. Then he emitted a slow chuckle.

"I had a mine once. Leastwise I thought it was a mine, but first she played out on me an' then she caved in. Lies down thar. Foller the trail."

Gates surveyed him with narrowed eyes and went off with two of his men. The others made a thorough search of the cabin, one even boosting another to the roof where he peered about from the edge. The resilient growth had straightened out. Neither without nor within was there any evidence. Gates returned chewing savagely at his mustache.

"You got grub fer us?" he demanded.

"I'm nigh out, goin' to town in a day or so for more. Reckon you'll help yoreselves," said Owens. Nor did he offer to aid them. When they had finished Gates tossed some money on the table.

"Fifty cents a head," he said. Owens watched them go off; then took the money Gates had left and, coin by coin, sent it scaling through the brush. Afterward he washed his hands, as if in a ritual.

"That feller Gates," he muttered, "has got a face that's intended for human, I reckon. But thar's a devil's eyes set into it."

Meanwhile, Margaret rode back to town in resolve to clear Folger and at the same time discover the real shooter of her brother. In her own mind she went over what Owens had said and reviewed certain knowledge of her own.

She knew her brother's growing mistrust of Gates whom he had been practically forced to appoint and had never considered fit for the post. It had soon been clear that Gates was not in sympathy with his chief's endeavors to clear up the smuggling across the line between Mexico and Caroca County; traffic in drugs, pearls from La Paz, Chinese and Japanese. Gates insisted this was the duty of the Federal agents alone, and Collins, aside from the

fact that these agents were few in number and the border long, believed such traffic in his territory a disgrace and a menace to it, considered it his duty to the citizens of the county to maintain peace with law and order.

The border-running was, Collins believed, responsible for much of the lawlessness that had broken out from time to time in Vacada and that had led to his "parking" rule for guns.

There were many Mexicans, and these, whether citizens or not, were undoubtedly more or less in sympathy with Pilar and his *contrabandistas,* from racial loyalty, from a general prejudice against the payment of duty, and from fear of Pilar.

Collins had many lines out to catch those he knew were helping Pilar on the American side of the line, not all of whom were Mexicans, he believed. But so far no fish had been caught, and now he was down.

So close had been his surveillance, though, that Pilar had been lying low. With some of his men he had come across and robbed a stage. The robbery was successful but Pilar was wounded in the leg and had taken cover in the house of a Mexican, to whose wife he made such advances that the man overcame his fear and sent word to Collins. Gates had been sent to apprehend Pilar but Pilar was gone. He had been warned.

Margaret knew how her brother felt about Gates' failure to capture the bandit who had thus put himself deliberately against the sheriff's direct jurisdiction. Doubtless Pilar was across the border again. She knew that her brother had severely reprimanded Gates. She knew more, that he had hoped that night to catch a fish or two.

It seemed as if Gates had a motive, but there was no proof, unless she could find some. To see Chiquita was the hardest task she had ever set herself but she meant to go through with it. Owens had done much, he could not be expected to be very active, physically. Johnson, the Bar B foreman, she liked. He would help, if there was any definite thing to be done.

And she wanted to find out if Chiquita and Folger were still intimate friends. She was not yet purged of jealousy. She fancied that the note might have been written in an attempt on the part of the girl to make up. Nor did she have a high opinion of her as a dancehall woman. But Margaret did know now that she loved Folger, and she hoped to prove him worthy of that love and innocent of the shooting.

She knew her brother did not approve of her friendship with him. Collins had not been able to talk of the shooting. As she rode fast, pondering all these things, her anxiety grew over his condition. They were closer than most brothers and sisters. She knew his ambitions, his scrupulous regard for his office, his severity, and she admired him immensely.

It was dusk when she entered Vacada. She saw that the shooting was still being discussed, that she was observed, wondered at for being away from the house. That could not be helped. They might think her indifferent to her brother's condition, they might be gossiping about her known friendship for Folger. If they could read her thoughts, if they knew where she had been, their feelings would be intensified, the talk increase. It was a hard position for her. She might even be suspected of treachery towards Jim. But her heart told her that Folger was innocent. Owens' shrewdness she respected, knowing him far from crazy, for all his usual reticence, his belief in the miraculous mirage that convinced him his partner was alive.

Their house lay beyond the depot which was at one end of the town. There was no one in sight. Vacada was preparing for supper, the men preparing to go uptown, to talk over the shooting.

Then she saw the tall figure of Johnson on his gray, coming from the depot toward her. Doubtless he had been worried over the shipment. That he was stanch to Folger she did not doubt. The Boss of the Bar B was beloved of his men.

Johnson was nearing forty, gaunt, hard bitten by the life of the range. He took off his Stetson as he neared her but made no offer to greet her. She was Collins' sister. He did not know exactly how she would stand with Folger in this matter. The evidence was all against him. She might believe it. And Johnson himself viewed with gravity the fact that Folger had deliberately ridden to town, ready for trouble. The two punchers who had been at the Bar B knew that. If they talked it would not help matters.

Margaret held up her hand. "I want to

talk with you," she said. "I have a message for you about the shipment."

The foreman's lantern jawed face with its high, Indian-like cheekbones did not change or show the surprise he felt.

"You've seen him, Miss?"

"No. But he's safe. In Owens' mine tunnel."

"He'd best clear out for a bit."

"He will, after his wound heals."

"Didn't know he was hurt."

"Isn't there somewhere we can talk? You'd better not go near Owens. The posse traced him near there. And we shouldn't be seen together."

"We might ride down into the draw, Miss Margaret."

It was dark in the arroyo as they spoke together. Margaret told all she knew, even to the note. Johnson said little.

"He didn't do it," he averred decisively. "For more reasons than one. But Gates is boss while yore brother's out."

"I must get back to him."

"Yes, Miss. I'll attend to the shipping. Put the check in the bank. I'll hev it drawn account of the Bar B. That'll do away with the endorsement, mebbe. The bank'll protect themselves, an' I reckon they'll accept it."

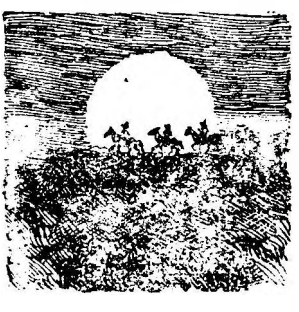
"How about money for the ranch?"

"Me an' the boys ain't broke, Miss. If the bank won't give us any we'll git by."

"I've got some money."

"We won't need it, Miss. An' we'll be ready, any minnit, to ride, or do anything to help the boss. He's a white man, plumb through. Been workin' like sin to make the ranch pay. I'm mighty glad you're with him. An' we'll keep our eyes and ears open.

"Gates is a slick one," he went on. "An' he don't keep over good company, for a sheriff. Smiley's a bad hombre an' I wouldn't trust Ramon. He works for the sheriff, but he's a breed an' he's likely to play both ends. Smiley's a brother-in-law of Cardero. There's talk that there'll be another border-run soon, now yore brother's down. All rumors, but they've likely got some foundation. I got a half hint from Pedro, our cook. He'd go as far as he dared for the boss. There's a reg'lar grapevine among all the Mexicans. They know a lot but they won't talk. We'll come out of this, Miss, an' so'll yore brother."



"I hope so," she said. She left the grave faced, efficient puncher with a renewed liking that was stiffened by his implicit faith in Folger. When she reached the house her brother was still under the drugs, with the surgeon expected within the hour.

On his part, Johnson rode up the street quietly. It looked bad for the boss, but he was safe for the time. And Margaret was true blue.

He was not so sure about Chiquita.

He met the posse coming back. They halted outside the Cactus and he drew rein to listen, unnoticed in the dusk.

"No, we didn't git him," said Gates. "But we will, if I hev to go over the line to do it. He's likely there by now. But I'll git him."

"You might do it at that," drawled a voice. "They say you've got friends on that side, Gates."

"Who said that?"

The man stepped out from the crowd on the high sidewalk. There had been a laugh to follow the sally and Gates was furious. He knew he was not generally popular. He had let two men get away now. If enough prominent citizens took it into their head to petition the governor he might appoint someone else to fill the unfinished term for Collins, or until the latter got well, if he ever did. There was not much chance of that, though, Gates thought.

Meanwhile the speaker, owner of the Circle K, a prosperous rancher, stood his ground. "I said it," he went on. "I'll say some more. I don't believe Folger shot Collins. An' I ain't the only one. He ain't that kind of a man."

Johnson heard the friendly talk with relief. He knew that Folger had friends. He had not been so sure they would speak for him.

"I reckon the prosecutin' attorney'll talk different," Gates replied, controlling himself with an effort.

"If you git Folger. You don't seem to be over lucky of late, Gates."

Again the snicker went 'round, and Gates dismounted and went into the Cactus, Smiley and Ramon following.

"If we kin ever turn up anything," Johnson told himself as he went at a lope toward the masterless ranch, "I reckon we kin collect a few to help our side."

But he was not over hopeful. A man's

guilt, he reflected, was often easier to show than his innocence.

"An' the boss is surely in one jam," he concluded.

The surgeon came, diagnosed, measured, probed gently and decided to operate.

He found the bullet, which Gates stipulated should be turned over to him for the prosecuting attorney. The caliber was the same as that of Folger's gun.

With absolute rest Collins would recover, the surgeon announced. He left a nurse, and Margaret prepared to divide her duty. Jim would live.

At dawn the nurse called Margaret. Collins was conscious. But he had little to say. He did not know who had shot him, had not seen the man. He had been watching the horses of two Mexicans inside the *cantina* whom he suspected of being members of Pilar's band. He had warned Gates not to lose sight of them inside, to follow them when they came out. He had told Cardero that he held him responsible for the men, that he meant to question them. If Gates and Cardero were guilty, partners with Pilar, there was additional reason for them to remove the sheriff. But how to prove it? The Mexicans were gone now.

"Did they get the man who shot me?" he asked.

Margaret shook her head. The nurse made a sign of warning. Collins was not to talk too much.

"Gates tried to arrest him," she said, "but he got away."

"Gates!" The contempt of the sheriff for his deputy was apparent. "Who was it?"

Again the nurse warned, but Collins was insistent. To irritate him might be more dangerous than to tell him.

"They say it was Folger," Margaret said, trying to keep her voice steady.

"I don't believe it. I saw him earlier. We had a little trouble, but I passed it over. He understood. Gates is a fool."

But now the nurse was imperative. Collins was exhausted. She gave him a sedative, motioned to Margaret to leave.

Margaret was comforted. But the evidence was almost conclusive, unless she could find something. She knew that the prosecuting attorney would be keen on trial, that Folger would be charged if caught. Even if Collins lived, as seemed likely, Folger would be sent up for attempted homicide. Her brother could offer nothing but his opinion to the contrary. He had not seen the man.

And Gates would be all the more virulent, if he had plotted to get the sheriff out of the way—virulent against Folger, of whom he was jealous. Jealous with how much reason? Chiquita's move had been clever but she had defeated Gates' purpose. Margaret must see the girl, get the truth from her as far as she knew it. A slender hope. But it steeled her for the interview.

She knew that the Mexican girl rode often on her pinto in the afternoons. She had seen her several times, though only once with Folger. She spelled the nurse from six until twelve, and then prepared to go in search of Chiquita. She told the nurse she was going for a ride, checking an impulse to confide in her, though she felt the other could be trusted.

"We'll keep your brother under opiates for a while," the nurse said. "He's still in grave danger. It may be best for him not to see much of you for a while, Miss Collins. It excites him, and that shouldn't happen again. I suppose Mr. Gates will want to know what he said."

Margaret hesitated, gauging the frank face of the other. "I wish you hadn't heard it," she said finally. "You saw that my brother does not have entire confidence in Gates. And Mr. Folger is a friend, a very dear friend of mine."

For a moment the two looked at each other. "As it happened," said the nurse, "I didn't hear anything at all—though it seemed to be in favor of your—friend." She laughed. "That sounds mixed," she went on, "but I'm Irish."

"You're a dear," said Margaret with shining eyes.

Luck, perhaps, was with Margaret. It was Chiquita's time for riding. Margaret caught sight of the pinto, and the dance-hall girl saw her at the same moment, wheeled her cayuse, galloped out of town on to the sage flats. Margaret spurred her bay, setting it to full speed when she was clear of the scattering huts. Chiquita was in sight, half hidden in dust. Margaret spoke to the bay and started in pursuit. She could ride as well as Chiquita, as well as most punchers, and she had the better horse. Gradually she overhauled Chiquita who, conscious of the chase, curbed the pinto to a halt at

last and wheeled it to face Margaret as the latter pulled up.

For a moment they faced each other, black haired and golden, Latin and Saxon, Chiquita's eyes blazing with dark fire.

"Why do you follow me, señorita? I do not weesh to see you."

"I want to talk with you. About Roy Folger."

"An' I, I weel not talk weeth you. You theenk he keel your brother. An'—an' he, Folger, ees in love with you."

Margaret's face flushed. Her heart leaped.

"Do you love him, Chiquita?" she asked. "If you do perhaps you can help him. I want to."

Chiquita looked at her scornfully.

"An' so you come to me. Why?"

"You helped him once. I do not think he shot my brother. Won't you talk to me. Won't you get off your horse? Please!"

She slid out of her own saddle. Chiquita regarded her doubtfully, then dismounted and led the way to a rise where she slipped reins over the pinto's head. Margaret did the same.

"I do not know why I should trus' you," said Chiquita. "I do not like you. You love heem, but you do not say so. I love heem an' I tell eet. But you have ice in your blood, like heem. You theenk because I dance weeth men that I am a bad girl. I see eet in your eyes. Yet you come to me, to help you. Do you have to make your leevin'? As I do! I am not bad, yet I would give myself eef it would help heem. Would you?" she challenged fiercely.

Her eyes blazed like black opals. Margaret felt the world slip about her. Suddenly she seemed to see things in elemental fashion. The Mexican girl loved with every atom of her nature. And she, herself—would she make such a sacrifice for the sake of the man she loved? There was a sudden surge of feeling in her, sweeping away conventions, a rush of primitive womanhood.

"I would do anything for him," she said. "I love him; we both love him, Chiquita, we two women. Whichever of us he loves, the other must lose him. I thought he loved you. And I do not think you bad. You are clean and true and sweet."

The fiery challenge of the black eyes died in a gush of sudden tears. Margaret bent and kissed Chiquita, and the girl stood sobbing with her head on the other's breast.

"Eet ees not me he loves," she said. "He tol' me so. Eet ees you. But I mean what I said. How can I help heem?"

Margaret showed her the note, explained away the threat of the brown smears upon it, told her of what she hoped.

"I deed not write eet. I did not geev eet to heem. He would not look at me that night. An' I have my pride. I know he does not want me, an' some day, I—perhaps I shall marry one who wants me, of my own race, señorita. But thees? Wait."

She sat as if turned to stone, staring over the flat, her brows drawn together over closed eyes.

"Someone feexed his gun," she said at last. "That was easy to do. Someone who hear him quarrel weeth the sheriff, perhaps, who wanted the sheriff to die an' who hated Roy. That would be Gates. He let Pilar go. He deed not try to take heem. Because he ees friend to Pilar. Weeth Smiley, an' Ramon. *Si,* an' Cardero. They say Cardero hides the Chinos een his cellar. An' Smiley, he dances that eveneeng weeth Helen. Perhaps he make her write that note. She weel not tell, for he would keel her. An' I cannot make Gates talk. He ees mad weeth me because he theenks I help Roy to get away. Eet ees true. But I mus' dance, an' all the time they watch me. Cardero questions me. They theenk I know where Roy ees. You do," she flashed. "You have seen heem?"

"No. But I think I know where he is, safe."

"Thees paper ees no good unless we can prove Helen gave eet. They weel say that he saw the sheriff an' shot heem, anyway."

"Perhaps you could get something in Helen's own writing," suggested Margaret, remembering Owens' hint. She did not doubt Chiquita any more. Woman to woman, they had read each other.

"She does not write letters," replied Chiquita. "She ees much older than you or me, an' she ees what you would call hard. Smiley deed marry the sister of Cardero but she ees dead, an' Helen says that he weel marry her. Eet ees sure he would keel her eef she told. But I weel try."

She paused, looking out over the sage. Her breast heaved. "I weel see Manuel," she went on, tension in her voice. "I am sure that he mus' know sometheeng an' he weel tell me if I ask him. Eet ees he who would wed weeth me, señorita, an' he ees a good man. He grazes his sheep in

Cumbre Pass through which eet ees sure Pilar come weeth *contrabanda.* I know I can make heem tell.

"I hav' geev notice to Cardero. He ees angry weeth me an' I am tired of dancing. I weel send a boy to Manuel an' I weel see you here the day after tomorrow, señorita. *Dios* grant I breeng news."

THE hours crawled to Margaret before their next meeting. Gates' posses still scoured the range and the hills. But her brother was steadily if slowly improving, and a real affection was springing up between herself and the nurse, Mary Conlin.

Chiquita was awaiting her.

"I hav' not much news, señorita," she said. "Notheeng of Helen. She weel barely talk weeth me. But I believe eet was she. The way she look' at me. An' once she say eet ees hard for a girl to lose two lovers at once. She mean me—an' the girls laugh.

"Manuel has tell me what he knows. He deed not weesh to, for eef Pilar knew he talked he would keel all the sheep an' cut the throats of Manuel an' his peons. So Manuel mus' never be mention'."

Margaret reassured her.

"Manuel say' that sometimes a man comes to heem an' tells heem that the grazeeng ees better higher up on the mountains, an' then Manuel drives up his sheep, an' that night Pilar passes.

"That ees in Cumbre Pass where Manuel owns some land and grazes on the open range that the cattlemen do not weesh because eet ees too close to the border. He say also that Cardero ees weeth Pilar an' sometimes keeps Chinos een hees cellar. I theenk that ees true. The girls have smell opium sometimes. An' that Ramon is the *amigo* of Pilar. An' also Gates. But he cannot prove thees. Eet ees known, but who weel talk?

"There ees another theeng." Chiquita's eyes grew wide. "There ees also another pass but eet ees difficult. A hard trail on the *Mexicano* side, an' the desert on thees. So eet ees not often used, Manuel theenks. But he has been forbidden to graze hees sheep there wheech he would like to do because eet ees a high vallee, weeth much grass, weeth trees an' a lake, call' *Boca del Viento*—The Pass of the Weend!"

Margaret, disappointed at lack of real proof, despite confirmation of Gates' interest with Pilar, was struck with the mysterious quality of Chiquita's voice. She spoke of this valley with something close to awe. Presently she went on to tell in a low voice of the visit of herself and Folger to La Bruja.

"Eet ees that same place. La Bruja saw dead men there, an' the gold. She called eet the end of the trail. An' what she say, comes always true. Eet ees there, in *la Boca del Viento,* that theengs weel end, señorita."

Margaret was impressed, despite lack of belief in soothsaying. But it was all vague, indefinite, impractical. Manuel could not be quoted. If he was it would not amount to anything. If Smiley could be uncovered as an ally of Pilar's, perhaps the woman Helen might be made to talk.

Her brother with his authority might have done something with it all, but to Margaret their present forces seemed pitifully inadequate. There were Chiquita and herself, the old prospector, Johnson and the two punchers from the Bar B, arrayed against the evidence, the domination of Gates and his will to arrest Folger.

"You have done everything possible," she said to Chiquita, trying to sound as if she felt that the information was valuable. Chiquita answered very seriously. It was very clear that she considered the description of the Pass of the Wind by La Bruja vital.

"*Si, señorita.* An' I have promise to marry weeth Manuel. He ees a good man, of my own people an' my own faith. An' he loves me," she added simply, not without pride. "Also he has tol' more than you theenk. Señorita, een that valley, where the weend blow by the lake, een *la Boca del Viento,* where La Bruja saw the dead men lie, there eet weel all end. I know eet. How an' when? *Quien sabe?*"

She flung out her hands with the expression eloquent of her racial fatalism. She had made sacrifice. It was on the knees of the gods.

RETURNING home, Margaret found her brother in a relapse. She dared not leave the house for fear of his passing, of his asking for her. She knew that Chiquita would get into touch with her if there was any news, but none came.

Down into Vacada from the hills came the old prospector, Owens, plodding afoot behind his burro, traveling light to town but due to return with a full load.

A few hailed Owens, asking him if he had seen anything of the fugitive for whom search was still ardent. People, following the lead of Rand of the Circle K, were beginning to twit Gates about his failures now that Collins seemed likely to recover. But Owens had nothing to say. Close mouthed, he handed over his lists to the stores, making payment in the colors and *chispa* nuggets he had panned from the creeks, laying in, he told them curtly, a three months' supply.

Johnson, often in town these days, listening, talking a little, trying to pin something on the enemy, saw the burro outside the store. There were not many of them nowadays around Vacada and it was not much of a guess to surmise to whom it belonged. He strolled into the store for tobacco he did not need and saw Owens seated on an empty box, whittling a stick while his order was being made up. Johnson did not speak, there was no greeting between them, but he waited well out on the mountain trail.

"Tell the boss the shipment's gone through," he said, as Owens came up. "Nothin' new that I know of. Gates is bein' kidded considerable an' it looks like he'd got to make an arrest an' git a conviction or they'll laugh his star plumb off'n him. It'd be a good idee fer the boss to lay low a spell or clear out of the country."

Owens nodded. "His wound's healin' fine. He can't stay too long in that tunnel, though. It ain't healthy. I've been down for these supplies an' I'm goin' to outfit him an' send him off across the desert, close to the line, over by Coyote Wells. Not likely for anyone to see him, an' if they sh'ud he'll pass for a prospector. I'll make a trip myself later on. Mebbe by that time suthin' will hev broken. I was hopin' to see Miss Margaret today, but I know she'll git in touch with me if she finds out anything. Not that I kin do much."

"You've done a heap, old man," said Johnson. "The boss sure owes you a lot."

"No, he don't. He got me out of that cave-in when I'd hev died like a dog in a b'ar trap—him an' Miss Margaret. Thar ain't nothin' I c'ud do for them I w'udn't do. Meant for each other, them two. An' Folger's goin' to do suthin' more for me on this trip."

That "suthin'" Johnson shrewdly suspected had to do with the search for Owens' long lost "pardner." The old man was still "cracked" on that score.

The foreman rode back to the Bar B. He had heard that Collins was not so well, and had given up hopes of having any present talk with Margaret. Like Owens, he knew that she would communicate with the Bar B if anything did happen, but there seemed little chance of that. Johnson shook his head, his face grave, when the two punchers asked if he had any news. Pedro, the cook, was serving the meal, listening, none too certain of the American.

"Not a damn' thing," said Johnson. "Things ain't breakin' right for the Bar B, boys."

"Sure is tough luck, five ways from the ace," commented Buck Peters. "Looks like the Old Man's friends don't amount to much."

"You can't play, let alone win, if you don't hold kyards," said Limpy Rogers, lame in one hip from a bucking contest but still a tophand in the saddle.

Pedro shuffled out. In his kitchen he set down empty dishes, scratching his head meditatively and crossed himself after a shrug.

"*Meterse en los peligros et malo,*" he muttered. Which, literally translated, means that a man is a fool to deliberately place himself in danger. But Pedro did not seem entirely content with the quoting of the proverb. Folger was in trouble, and Folger had been very good to him. It was Gates who——

A roar from the other room recalled him to the fact that the punchers were waiting for the rest of their meat. He was not very wise, outside of his cooking, and even that could have been improved upon without scoring a triumph. He muddled over things and he was a fearful man. Gates and the boss? The boss and Gates? He could not see what anything he knew had to do with the boss shooting Collins. *Quien sabe?* He would think it over some more —*mañana.*

THE moon had dropped behind the western range, it was cold under the glittering stars in the narrow gorge where Owens stood with Folger, talking in a low voice though there seemed no danger.

Folger, with one sound arm, the other still to be favored, had helped to haul himself out of the shaft as Owens strained at the ancient windlass. Two burros, old

but rugged, both pack-saddled, nibbled at the chapparal.

"You won't hev any trouble with them," said Owens. "Jinny, she's still some skittish but she won't leave Joe an' he'll do what you ask him. An' I'm keepin' Sammy for my own use. It's two days across the desert an' here's a map with the water marked an' the bearin's for Coyote Wells. That's right at the foot of the Seco Hills. Sweet water. I'll meet you there two weeks from today or sooner, mebbe, if anything turns up. You keep yore eyes skinned for sky-sign. If it looks hostile, keep atop the hills an' make a break for the border. Meantime you kin sorter prospect around for gold."

"I don't know ore from onions," said Folger, his spirits roused after his sojourn in the tunnel.

"Wal, thar's gold thar though I ain't found it myself. But my pardner found it though he never brought it back. They say he's dead, dead long before I saw him. But I did see him, plain. It was a mirage but what is a mirage but a real scene shifted by the sun? You look for gold, Folger, an' watch for sky-sign, but you look for Sam, too. Will ye? Ye might come across him.

"He was thar, drivin' his burros, one of 'em with tools an' grub an' t'other loaded with gold in his packs. I know it. Crossin' a green valley, whar thar was grass an' trees an' a lake, with the wind blowin' through a gap between the hills at the back. Reg'lar bowl, it seemed, with the front broken away an' a piece out of the back whar the wind come. You c'ud see the grass an' water ripplin' an' the trees wavin'. Sam's beard was blown by the wind——"

His voice died away and he stood as if he had lost consciousness of Folger's presence and the business in hand.

Folger stood still also. It was weird, this sudden coincidence. La Bruja had described a valley just like this, where the wind blew and a lake shone. Dead men lying there. Gold, in a cage of death.

He was seeking gold, equipped as a prospector. There had been treachery, the lost trail, the open noose. And now Owens, describing for the first time the details of his mirage to Folger, had drawn La Bruja's valley. A cold finger seemed to travel up and down Folger's spine. He felt the beginning of a hunch that did not, as yet, materialize.

Owens came out of his silence with a sigh. "You'll try to find him, son, won't ye? You might run across the place. Will you try?"

Folger gave his promise. That Davis was alive was not possible. But Owens believed it so.

"You must go now, boy. Down the ravine an' out to the desert. I'll see you a fortnight from today. An' we'll be workin'. Things'll turn. But if they caught ye now you'd have short shrift. Thar's my six-gun an' the Sharps in the scabbard on Joe. I've got another rifle. Thar's ca'tridges. No thanks. You saved my life once an' you're goin' to find Sam. I know it. Good luck to ye. I'll git yore message to her. She believes in ye. It'll come right. I'll take you down the trail to the burros."

As Folger reached the edge of the desert the sun, as yet invisible, set a twinkling star of rose on a high crest. It spread glowing, while the barrens stretched cold and vague, with clawed growths and drifts of sand, lava dykes, ghostly dunes that swallowed him. Ahead, to the south, the hills showed sharp, two-dimensioned, like silhouettes cut out of slate colored paper, untouched yet by the sun that now ennobled the western heights of the divide. These hills were outthrusts of burned rock, sharply serrated.

As Folger voyaged on behind the two burros that were going steadily enough by now, the hill turned purple, taking on form, far off but seeming only an hour's journey away. The last of the scraggly sage gave out, then the greasewood and scattering mesquite. The clumps of cactus were farther apart, the Judas trees and barrel cactus, the pillared *chayas*. Soon

there was no more of them, nothing gray, or gray-green, only the sand and the dykes of igneous rock with here and there cracked surfaces of alkali. The hum of cicadas ceased, there were only lizards and crawling snakes and reptiles, venomous and ugly. A bird soared overhead. He was in the wilderness. To any who might see him from the slopes he had left he must have seemed a plodding prospector, a desert rat, setting out on the everlasting quest. His wound was healing, he could use his arm carefully.

His red beard had sprouted and he meant to let it grow. On the sea of sand, that looked so level from the height, but was in reality filled with undulations, ravines between the dunes where the sand rustled as the hot wind moved it, it was utterly lonely.

Now and then the sand gathered into little whorls, sandspouts that danced in a weird saraband of their own. As the sun lifted, the distant hills seemed to be lifted, their bases aswim on air.

He seemed to be committed to Fate, to be set in some fourth dimension outside of the world in which disaster had overtaken him, the world where Margaret lived and loved him. Margaret and Chiquita, Johnson and Owens, striving to clear him, with so little to help. Folger was sure that Gates had planned the murder, used him as a tool to fashion his own ends. And Gates, in authority, seemed safe. To convict him would require strong proof.

Fate finds. What was he to find in the desert? It seemed to him that there would be something, that this was a thing ordered.

At noon he reached the first spring on the map, a struggling pool of bitter water that the burros snuffed at but drank. Beside it was the skeleton of a steer, hide clinging to it here and there, the carcass torn apart by coyotes or buzzards, both probably.

Night with the air growing cold found him on the verge of the desert proper. He had brought some fuel and he made a tiny fire in a hollow place and sat beside it, smoking, dreaming, with the coyotes in ululating chorus far away, their yaps incessant for a while. The great stars burned above him like candles in a windless vault, infinitely remote and old. He woke to find the patient burros standing by, and made his meal of bacon and coffee with pancakes he shared with the two beasts, saving fodder.

The going was harder the next day. Soft sand, wide dykes of malpais, rough lava like rock candy in texture, blistered here and there into shells that hoofs and feet broke through, sharp edged. His wound ached and he applied another dressing, but the water was tepid and the ointment did not seem to ease it. His head throbbed, the burros lagged. He had no water keg with him, only two canteens. Owens had marked the wells and their bearings were indicated, but there was a curious haze on the desert and the outlines of the peaks were blurred.

A curious feeling came over him that there was something waiting for him in those barren hills, something more than a place where he could hide and survey the desert. He did not think he was being followed. It was not as if he was conscious of being watched—but there was something. His world had been the range and this dry bed of sand and rock, like the bottom of a vanished sea, seemed to hold mysterious influences.

It was well after noon when they came to where the well was marked, and found it dry. Digging deep produced no moisture. It had vanished, absorbed by the suction of the sand since Owens passed this way. He gave the burros water out of the canteens in the crown of his hat, and pushed on. He might have waited until nightfall but something drew him on, through the stifling heat, toward Coyote Wells.

It was still hazy and the sun seemed to be sapping his vitality as it drew the moisture of his body to the surface until there was no more to perspire. His eyes ached with his head, and his wound and his tongue began to swell despite sparing sips of water. The burros kept doggedly on, plodding toward the hills that seemed to mockingly retreat as they covered painful mile after mile.

Then the two brutes stopped on the brink of a rise, balking. He no longer saw the hills. They were blotted out by a moving cloud, dun colored, rolling fast toward them. He retreated down the slope with Joe and Jenny willing enough to follow, and found the lee of an outcrop. The storm came whistling over the rise like a brown wave, gritty, enveloping them, suffocating, roaring, piling up about their feet as they stood, backs to it, Folger with his bandanna over his mouth, the burros muffled with his coat and shirt. He could not see, his eyelids would not keep out the stuff that filtered into his nostrils, his ears, his mouth, despite the cloth.

It passed as suddenly as it had come, and he washed out his eyes, relieved the burros, astounded to find the sky serenely blue, like liquid sapphire, with a wan wafer of a moon hung in the south. As he topped the rise once more he halted, staring.

Before him, close, vivid, he saw an upland park, a lake of water in the midst of vivid green, trees on the shore, reflected there, the whole set in a broken bowl of rugged hills with a notch beyond, like a pass. He could see wind in the grass, the trees, ruffling the sparkling water. It was

the mirage of Owens. He must have come to the same spot, the same conditions. He closed his eyes and reopened them and the mirage persisted, trembling a little as if it was a picture flung upon a gently shaken screen. But there was no figure in it of man or beast, no simulacrum of Sam Davis. Beside him the burros stood quietly as if they did not see what he did. And then—there was only the desert reaching to the hills, close enough now for him to see the gorges and fissures, in one of which was Coyote Wells. The air was sweet though hot. The sand lay in ripples at his feet as if a tide had lately flown there.

He got his bearings and went on. The sunset blazed, painting the desert and the ragged hills. It was smoldering out when he entered the little canyon, the burros quickening their gait as they smelled water.

The walls were white limestone, the shape of the place a narrow corridor ending abruptly in a steep cliff. The water was in a natural *tenaya,* with the droppings of antelope and mountain sheep. There was a scanty herbage the burros cropped eagerly.

The water was sweet, plentiful. Stars shone reflected in it like spangles on a black velvet cloth as he got supper, infinitely weary, numb for sleep.

When he woke the stars were still bright above him but beginning to pale. He looked up into the dim face of a man who was standing over him. His hand sought and found the butt of his gun. Had he been followed? Stars commenced to wink out, the walls of the little canyon changed from purple to gray as the sky lightened.

"No need to shoot, old-timer," said a voice that Folger did not fancy, the voice of a man who had lived hard, the voice of a boaster, a reckless liver. "I'll own up yore outfit looked mighty good to me. It w'ud come in handy. But I was jest thinkin'. You don't need yore gun. Jest blow hard an' I'll fall down. I've come fur an' tolerable fast an' I'm plumb famished. Had a run-in with my outfit, *sabe?*" Then, "Gimme some grub, for Gawd's sake, will ye?" he pleaded, his tone hoarse.

While Folger put on the coffee, warmed beans, sow-belly and started some campbread to bake in the ashes, he took stock of his visitor, liking him none the better. He was a hook nosed man, with predacious eyes, a scar across one cheek, a dirty rag wrapped about his lower left arm. He had a canteen with him that was empty and he had tobacco, but apparently no weapons. Folger still held an uneasy sense that if the man had had a gun or knife he would have shot him while he slept, or cut his throat, and annexed his outfit without compunction. He had given no name. He sat smoking a cornhusk quirly, his clothes rent by contact with thorny growths, as if he had forced a trail through chapparal.

And he gave no explanations. Folger did not ask him for one, eager to get rid of him, playing the prospector himself so that the man might forget him. The meeting meant that he must go into the hills right away from which he could overlook the desert, be near the border. He gathered from the other's scraps of talk that he had had a quarrel with an outfit with which he had recently joined, a fight over cards, or a woman, or both, and that he had left in a hurry without waiting for a general invitation to do so.

"I aim to git even," he said with a nasty look on his face and his eyes evil. "You prospectin' for gold, old-timer? Don't look like much of a place to me."

Folger recalled a saying of Owens' and applied it. "Gold's where you find it."

"Yeah? Jest the same, I'd ruther be campin' out in the place I jest came through. I'd hev stayed there if I had a gun an' if I warn't aimin' to carry out a bit of business across the desert.

"I come on it unexpected. I was travelin' north, you see, an' I struck a trail. 'Most like climbin' a wall in spots, but it leads up to a notch where the wind blows like hell, an' there at the top was a reg'lar park. A lake an' trees an' grass. Not a dern' soul in it. The trail I'd come by was old and ain't been used lately, an' the trail out this side'd beat anyone comin' in from the desert who didn't know it.

"When I looked down an' saw the spark of yore fire I didn't see any way to git down, at first. But fire meant food an' I sure needed it. Then I see a deep cleft where the soft rock has washed out an' left a reg'lar wall standin' out mebbe ten foot from the cliff. Part filled up, it was, an' I made shift to git down it.

"From here it looks like a box canyon, don't it? But mebbe you know the place?"

Folger, staring hard at the end of the

little canyon that seemed closed by the same limestone as the sidewalls, hardly heard him.

The lake again! Wind. Grass and trees. The valley of the mirage! It was uncanny. A sense of Fate leading him inevitably along blind trails was on him. He roused himself to answer.

"I didn't know of it," he said. "Never tried to git up thataway." He tried to strengthen the impression that he was an old-timer in his craft.

"Well, there she lies," said the other. "You go plumb up to the end an' there's jest a crack, ha'f hid with brush an' a piñon nigh closing it. Squeeze through that with yore burros an' you'll see the trail. You'd never tackle it on yore own. You kin git all the fresh meat you want up there. I saw fresh sign of deer. Old-timer, I've give you some information, free an' gratis. I ain't lyin'. You've got a rifle. There's as likely to be gold up there as any place, 'cordin' to yore own notions. Now then, I've got to git across the desert. You stake me to two days' rations an' give me that spare canteen of yores, an' I'll make it. Mebbe you kin give me the location of the wells. An' I'm stakin' you to fresh deer meat an' plenty grass for yore burros. It's a secret that's worth suthin', ain't it? I'll go back with you to prove it, if you say so."

But Folger knew it was there as the man had said. A fine place to hide, keeping a lookout across the desert. He wanted to get rid of the man. He did not like him. He might talk, would be more likely to if he hesitated to stake him.

"I'm on the trail of a lost strike," he said. "I'm not keen to hev anyone know I'm after it. There's folks'd figger what I was after, *sabe?* But I might take a look at this place, if there's grass an' water."

"I *sabe*. I don't talk too glib. You stake me an' I'll forgit I saw you. An' wish you luck with yore strike. I want to git on. I ain't follered. I didn't cotton much to the outfit I hitched up with or they to me. We wasn't what you might call intimate. An' they ain't missin' me none. But there's suthin' I want to 'tend to that won't wait. How about it?"

It was not Folger's business. If this man had pressing affairs of his own he would be more likely to forget the meeting, less apt to mention it. He surmised the other was headed for Vacada, though there was Calor not far away, but he did not want to ask him. He set aside the food and the other bundled it, refilled the two canteens that swung crosswise on his body and made ready to start.

"Good luck to you, pardner," he said and went off, swaggering a bit.

Folger did not watch him long. He was eager to find the trail, to reach the windy valley. The cliff stood apart, an eroded screen of limestone that denied any hint of passage behind it until it was actually reached. They toiled up the steep path to come out on the top of a chalcedony plateau. To the north lay the desert with the figure of the unnamed stranger moving across it, antwise. Beyond was the range where Owens was cabined.

Below, inside, was a grassy vale, the lake, the trees, the notch that showed a triangle of blue sky clear as crystal. A freely blowing wind. The burros picked their way down on nimble hoofs, and Folger followed. He wondered a little that no one had preempted this spot, despite the hard climb and the desert, then remembered that it must be close to the line if the border ran as Owens had said. Still he was surprised no sheepherder had used it for pasturage, unless the travel to and fro was too strenuous. That hardly seemed likely.

He gave up the problem, and unpacked. The vale opened northward, with a gentle slope to the edge of the cliffs. A patrol every few hours would assure him that the desert was clear. The hard looking stranger was now only a tiny swirl of dust but visible enough. To the south was Mexico. Little danger in that direction. Folger washed his clothes, stripped, bathed in the lake. A deer stood at gaze and he saw fish darting in the shallows.

Exploring, he found an old, dim trail leading from the notch. It had not been used for months, save by the stranger. From the notch itself, where the wind blew so hard he leaned against it, the cliffs fell away abruptly, though there was evidently a path established from the terrain below, a wild extent of mesquite thickets and cactus mazes stretching far to where, in a blue blur, the sky, the land and the water of the Californian Gulf merged.

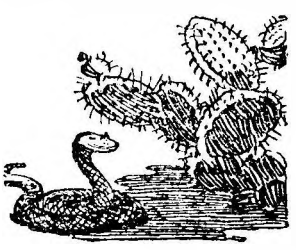
He passed two days in luxury before he did any more exploring. And he moved his camp from the shore of the lake to a tree shaded spot under the western cliff, not far from where he had entered. There was a spring there, with grass and wild mints that delighted the burros. The central lake might find him cut off if men should elect to ride in by night from south

or north, little chance as there seemed to be of such a happening, but a chance he could not afford to take. Every little while he searched the desert for sky-sign of telltale dust but saw nothing but the wind whorls gyrating. He wondered whether his late guest had passed the desert, feeling a little uneasy lest he give out information wittingly, or unwittingly, that would bring a posse to the valley, debating whether it would not be wiser to camp on top of the cliffs that walled the vale, even at the cost of comfort.

This unrest developed with a feeling that made him restless, forced him to a round of the place. He shot an antelope, saw some grouse. Close to his new camp was a gorge rent out of the igneous walls, a narrow, tortuous gash whose floor led sharply upward between black rocks of obsidian, a cleft he fancied might lead to the chalcedony plateau on which the trail from the desert emerged. He made up his mind to go up it. It might be well to have an emergency entrance, or an exit.

It was a tiresome place to achieve but it seemed to lead to the summit and he kept at it, although the obsidian walls, twisted and jagged and seamed, closed in and began to throw back reflected sunheat until he felt as if he was in an oven. Midway, the floor was broken into a series of terraces, the broken treads of a giant's stairway. He heard the whirring warning of rattlers, smelled their musky odor, and guessed them sunning themselves on ledges above his head. Once he saw a sinuous neck and flat, wicked head with topaz eyes and a pink, quivering, forked tongue, overlooking him. Then a scaly body, patterned symmetrically, as long as he was tall, glided ahead, halted, coiled and sounded its rattles.

Folger instinctively hated rattlesnakes, not fearing them, save as a menace to stock. Without thought he whipped out the six-gun and fired. The bullet cut the reptile's neck from its body, the latter thrashing and looping on the ground while the echoes of the report made local thunder. As if by magic the place became alive with snakes. From all sides came the sharp rattling, he could see them emerging from beneath overhanging ledges, peering from crevices, crawling here and there, great lengths of brown sinuousness, diapered in pink and black.



Folger leaped on a boulder, gun in hand, watching them, seeing the disturbance die down. If they had attempted a concerted attack they could easily have disposed of him. It was an uncanny place and these were the gliding devils that lived in it. He wondered, as he had often wondered in a rattlers' den, where the reptiles got their food. They lived in barren places and they had to seek their game. It could not be of too great size yet they would attack anything. And here there were scores, hundreds of them.

He forged on, looking warily about him. A chance step might bring him within striking distance of a serpent whose poison, if it did not kill, would bring him close to death. But it was nearing noon and they were sluggish. The gorge would be no place for a man to pass through at night, or twilight, or in cool weather.

Now the cleft turned at a sharp angle, and as he turned into the new course his heart began suddenly to pump. Walls and floor and fragments were all of black obsidian but here was a white stone, smooth, and the size of—a man's skull. He knew it for that before he reached it. The snake-guardians of the place had found one victim.

There were bones scattered here and there that had been crunched for marrow, most of them the missing bones from this broken skeleton of a man, a white man he judged, by the shape of the cranium. There was nothing left for identification. Years had bleached the remains that beasts had worried. There was a rusty pistol, eaten red. No shreds of clothing. All else had blown or been dragged off.

Had this been Sam Davis, snake bitten, suffering lonely agony as he strove to get back to the valley, bitten again perhaps, going to or from the plateau?

His quest was not yet finished. There was something more to find. The gorge narrowed again until he could have stretched out his arms and touched both walls at once. Another turn and then more bones. The skeleton of some beast of burden, largely articulate. He knew it for that of a burro. It lay on the backbone, the ribs curving out, like a cage.

Like a cage. A cage of death!

The legs were gone, fallen or torn apart, carried away. But the body had been circled with leather saddle packs, with

cinch straps and the lacing of a diamond hitch. Time with the elements had rotted the leather, flesh and hide had gone. Insects had been at work here more than the prowling brutes that had secured the joints, the straps had seemed too much like a trap for animals. Buzzards, perhaps, had helped to strip those cagelike bones within which gleamed the dull yellow of gold, burst with its own weight from the rotting packs.

"Gold in the cage of death!" He had found it. Fate's finding.

The gold was practically pure. To it a little of the matrix clung here and there, but it was ninety per cent. virgin metal, hammered from its shell of quartz. Between thirty and forty pounds of it, he judged. Sam Davis' gold surely! Owens' now.

The next day he retrieved it with what was left of the saddle bags and the rusty pistol for identification by Owens. The skeleton of Davis, if it was Davis, he buried, and placed a cairn above it with a rude cross to mark it.

The natural thought came to him of the source of the gold. Davis might have taken it all but there was an even chance he had not, that somewhere there was a quartz seam only partly ravished. He tried to reconstruct the tragedy. Davis picking out the gold, breaking the rich fragments like a man getting kernels from crushed nuts, coming down to the valley, to the desert, on his way back with partial riches and news of a strike. The burro struck first by a snake's fangs, and Davis next, perhaps as he tried to help his faithful burro. Both perishing miserably. There had been a second burro, according to Owens. He could guess at its ultimate fate. He had seen the trail of a puma by the lake.

It was an ancient story now, but the gold remained. Owens was old, seeking colors and small nuggets in the creek, finding enough to fend off hunger but not age or rheumatism. There might have been some five or six thousand dollars' worth of gold in the packs but, if he could find the seam of quartz, why, he had ten days ahead of him and he might be able to tell Owens he was wealthy when he met him at Coyote Wells.

Once more he ventured up the snake-ridden gorge, this time to the top of the plateau, searching over the uneven surface for signs of miners' monuments or an outcrop of quartz. The piled up rocks that the dead prospector had heaped to mark the claim he never recorded caught his searching eyes at last. What notices had been left there had long since gone but there was the seam of quartz, like a scar, but rich with seeded gold that sparkled dully. How deep it lay he could not guess but there were some forty surface feet of it in length, in places two feet wide, fractured at one end where the dead man had hammered, or blasted, to reach the treasure. A pocket mine at best, but holding a small fortune beyond all question.

Folger brought his burros up to the plateau the next day and made camp there, leaving the comfort of the valley, though it was still his supply house for all of them. Here was work to do for Owens, in repayment; work that checked the fretted current of his thoughts. And it was safer here. The sense of uneasiness still prevailed. He was far from being out of the woods. Every four hours he went to look over the desert, and found no sign as the days passed on to the time when Owens would be coming across the waste to bring him news of Margaret, who filled his dreams and whose face came often between him and the quartz he cracked. Sometimes he thought of Chiquita, going over the happenings of the night when he became an outlaw. That they were still hunting for him, had posted rewards, he did not doubt. That Owens and the rest could do much for him, he did doubt.

One night he woke to hear voices, a snatch of song. He went to the edge of the plateau and saw leaping fires by the lake, many men moving about them, men

in *serapes* and Mexican costume. The valley was invested, and he was thankful for the caution he had taken. It was likely they would not come near his deserted camp, which was among trees, with few visible traces left of use.

These were surely Pilar's men. For some reason they had chosen to come up the stiff trail through the windy notch, perhaps only to a rendezvous, to hand over their contraband. Here was the actual border. It would not be Chinamen this trip, but drugs, to be taken over by agents on the American side, or cached. Who were those agents? Gates? Smiley?

He had no glasses with him and the light was uncertain. Some of the band were camped within the trees. He settled down to watch. The fires were being used for barbecuing meat, portions of which were borne into the trees. The meal over, there was more singing, the twang of guitars, melody that changed in character to drunken howling and then, gradually, silence. They would sleep late, secure, considering no watcher on the plateau. With daylight he could tell better who was there. If the deputy sheriff was with them, trafficking with the smugglers, he would have something to work on, though exactly how he still could not devise. He brought his blankets to the verge and rolled up in them. He might need that rest before he was through.

IT WAS Chiquita's last night at the Cactus. Cardero seemed willing enough to let her go. Gates was surly, not speaking to her, still suspicious of her, vexed by his failure to find Folger, by the news that Collins was slowly on the mend. And he had other fat fish to land and fry before the sheriff resumed authority, before his own might be taken from him.

Smiley's woman, Helen, seemed to Chiquita to regard her with a none too well concealed triumph. And she had discovered nothing.

She arrived through the side door ready to go to the dressing room and put on her garish costume for the last time. Afterward, there was Manuel waiting for her. And Folger still was in jeopardy. She had seen Margaret, who had seen Johnson. Folger, she knew, was somewhere beyond the desert waiting for Time or his friends to clear him, an outlaw.

Chiquita saw Gates at the bar, with Smiley and Ramon, the three talking with Cardero. There were four or five more men in the place, loungers and a couple of punchers. Gates gave her a mean look as she passed and paused in the shadow of the as yet unlit dancehall, hoping to catch something of value.

The front door opened and a man entered, ragged and unkempt, an air at once swaggering and weary about him. There was a scar on his face and his skin was burned red over tan by prolonged exposure to the sun. He looked to Chiquita as if he might have come from across the desert. Her senses quickened.

The newcomer fished in his pocket and tossed a coin on the bar. *"Poco dinero!"* he said in a hoarse voice, "but I know where I'll git more."

No one noticed him. Obviously he could not stand treat and his manner seemed that of a braggart. Gates looked at him once, then turned his back on him. The man swigged the *mescal* he asked for and sauntered across the room close to where Chiquita stood back of the arch between bar and dancehall. He halted, his eyes fixed on two placards. One offered reward for Pilar, and he glanced at it casually. But his eyes gleamed as he perused the other.

He read the headline aloud. "Five Hundred Dollars Reward." His burned lips puckered to a soundless whistle.

"Two birds with one stone," he said with a dry chuckle, and turned to see Gates. "This redheaded hombre plugged the sheriff, did he?" he asked. "Who's actin' chief?"

"I am." Gates showed his badge.

"Then you're the man I'm lookin' for. On two counts, now I see this placard. That five hundred goes for informashun leadin' to his capture?"

"Sure does. Why?" Gates' tone was eager.

"I'm claimin' it. Givin' notice now. You folks are witness. This is a redheaded, red whiskered hombre, tall, with a blue star tattooed on the back of his hand?"

"Yes."

"Well, I ran across him two days back. He's across the desert. I know where he hangs out."

"Where?"

"Hold on. I'm broke. I aim to stay here while I do a little collectin'. This five hundred *pesos* an' a few more. I don't expect to collect in advance, but I want a stake. Do I git it? I talk better with money in my pants. Will you gamble?"

Gates eyed him narrowly. Then took a twenty-dollar gold piece out and handed it over. "I'll take that out of yore hide if you give us a wrong lead," he said.

The other laughed. "That ain't the only lead I'll give you. But you're a sport. We'll drink on it."

"On the house," said Cardero with a nod to his bartender.

Chiquita, in the dark room, leaned with her ear against the thin partition, praying no one would come down from upstairs to light up. The orchestra would be coming soon. A memory of La Bruja, weaving over the plate of sand grains, rose be-

fore her as she listened. For the man was telling about the *Boca del Viento*. Saying that Folger was camping there.

"Or thereabouts," said the stranger. "He'll likely be watchin' the desert if he's hidin' out. I sorter noticed his hands didn't look like a prospector's when I spotted that star. Reckon he's let his beard grow. But it's your man, an' my five hundred *pesos*."

There were more drinks set out while Chiquita's heart hammered. Gates would send a posse. She must see Margaret immediately. It was lucky she had not changed her clothes. Folger must be warned. The Bar B men would ride. She slipped toward the rear door and passed out. Five minutes later she was racing on the pinto to Margaret.

Inside the Cactus the newcomer went on. "But thar's a back way to the place."

"I know of it," said Gates. "On the Mexican side. It's *Boca del Viento*. Border line runs plumb through the lake." He exchanged looks with Cardero, with Smiley and Ramon, reflected in the glass, while the informer, careless of his promise, of the fact that Folger had staked him, saved his life perhaps, thinking Judas-like only of reward, drained his glass.

"That ain't all," he continued. "There's a greaser called Pilar."

"Let's go in the private office," broke in Gates. "Talk better there. We'll hev some drinks sent in."

"All of us?" The man was looking with sudden suspicion at Ramon and Cardero.

"They're all right," said Gates. "Ramon trails an' interprets for us an' Cardero owns this place. We're all on the side of law and order."

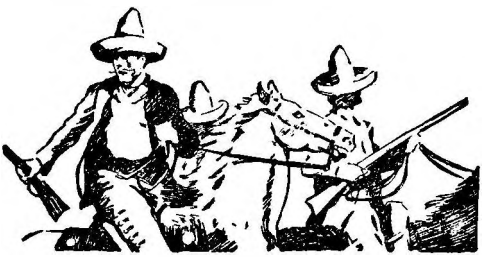
They went inside.

"Now then," said Gates. "What about Pilar?"

The bartender brought in bottles and glasses. Cardero made a little sign to him with his hand before he went out.

"I'll tell you. Never mind why I was on the other side of the line. That's my business an' you ain't connected none with it except as this Pilar comes in. He's wanted. I know that. Wanted for stickin' up a stage. I run into his outfit an' I didn't git along so well with it. I figgered they might be *contrabandistas, sabe,* an' I kep' my ears an' eyes open. I *hablo Mejicano,* but I didn't let them know. They was mighty close mouthed. W'udn't let me in on much till I'd been what they called initiated. I hadn't said I'd jine 'em, *sabe?* But I listened in. It looked like there might be money in it.

"An' I heard a lot. First about this



stickup. Pilar got shot in the leg. They was after him—yore folks, I reckon—but someone tipped him off. That was one thing. The other was that they're goin' to run contraband through this same valley yore redhead's campin' in. I didn't tell him that. If he runs across 'em that's his lookout. I suppose this drug runnin' is Federal business strictly. Leastwise I figger to collect from the Governmint on that score, but you want him for the stage robbery an' I guess there's some *dinero* for that turnup. You kin git two birds at the same time, same as I'm doin'. Take the Federal men along if you want to. I'm stayin' here, sittin' sort of pritty, seems to me. You see I had a little trouble with that outfit an' I quit 'em. Now I'm evenin' things up. They don't know I *sabe'd* their lingo."

Gates slapped him on the back. "You sure are. Some news. Cardero, this *mescal* ain't good enough for news like this. How about some brandy?"

Cardero pressed a button, his eyes creased to slits as he smiled.

The man tossed off the stuff, smacked his lips.

"Thet's the genuine art-i—" His eyes glazed and he slumped in his chair, his head on the table. The four regarded him contemptuously.

"I reckon he's spilled all he knew," said Gates. "An' that's a damn' sight too much. I'll slap him into jail an' keep him tight till we git back. He wasn't on the other side for nothin'. War-slacker, mebbe. We'll pin suthin' on him."

Cardero mopped his forehead. "Close call," he said.

Gates shrugged. "We'll haul in Folger," he said. "Clean that up. Pilar'll be there, 'cordin' to arrangement. We'll take over his stuff. Cache most of it. Collins is comin' through, damn him, an' this may be the last run. We'll go up through Cumbre an' 'round to the Boca trail.

Longer but better goin'. Smiley an' Ramon an' me. An' we'll come back with Folger. Start after we eat."

THE sheriff had rallied. Margaret had given place to the nurse for the night when Chiquita arrived with her news.

"We'll warn him," she said instantly. "You must ride to the Bar B. You know how to get to this place?"

"*Si.* Manuel told me."

"Tell me now, and then Johnson. And get one of them to tell Owens."

"That I weel do myself. There may be fighting. There weel be. Did not La Bruja see dead men? But Owens is old. He cannot ride as the *vaqueros.*"

"He ought to know just the same. Now, where is this place, from the desert?"

"Good," she said when Chiquita had finished. "Tell Johnson I have gone ahead. They are to follow."

"You, señorita? To cross the desert? At night?"

"I can ride as well as a man. My horse is strong and I am light. There is no time to lose. Gates may start at any time. Someone must get there first. Get me that sweater."

They were in Margaret's room and she commenced swiftly to change to riding clothes, slinging a holster across her shoulder with her own gun in it. Chiquita watched, wide eyed, marveling. She had been ready for sacrifice but this, to cross the desert, to start after nightfall, this she could not have done. The desert was an evil place. The *blonda Americana* was strong, like her man.

"Eet ees far," she demurred. "You an' yore *caballo* mus' eat an' dreenk. The *caballo* ees not good for the desert eef you go fast."

"We'll get through," said Margaret briefly. "We must. If I do not, Johnson will. I'll take canteens. Grain for Peter, rice and chocolate for me. Beef extract. I've got to see Miss Conlin. My horse is in the barn at the back, Chiquita. Will you take these things and saddle him? He has mustang blood in him. We'll make it."

She swept Chiquita before her. "I have got to go away," she told the sympathetic nurse. "My—friend is in danger. When my brother wakes——"

"I'll attend to that. He still sleeps most of the time. I'll let him think you're off duty. I'll find some good excuse. And I'll pray for you, my dear."

They kissed, and Margaret went swiftly to where Chiquita had saddled the bay. Margaret examined the cinches, filled a bag with grain.

"We must go far and fast tonight, Peter," she said to the bay.

"Ah, you are his woman," said Chiquita. "Better for me ees Manuel," she added, half to herself. Margaret swung into the saddle. Then they were galloping through the night, to separate presently, Chiquita making for the Bar B and Margaret going down to the desert.

Coyotes slinking from the first waterhole two hours before day drew her attention to the pallid gleam. She loosened Peter's cinches, let him drink a little and get breathed, then take his fill, wisely, as became a horse whose dam had known the desert, who knew there was an arduous task ahead. He was tired but still strong, his sweat dried on him by the sharp air. But she could not let him rest yet. When the sun got high they would have to do so, in some scrap of shade if they could find one, perhaps by another spring if she struck any kind of trail in that shifting waste of sand. If not, the canteens must serve to brace them for the last dash.

She nibbled chocolate as she rode. Later, perhaps, she would use her little stove of solid alcohol, boil some rice and stir in the beef extract. She was no tenderfoot. But thoughts of food were far from her. She had to keep ahead. Those who followed might be riders from the Bar B or they might be a posse. And Gates, if he was guilty, would guess her mission, guess it anyway.

Johnson and his riders would get through if she did not. But she knew she would. Her spirit sustained her and passed into the gallant Peter through the telepathy that existed between them. She had had him since a colt and she spoke to him now, coaxing him, telling him the need of courage and of sure, safe speed.

Sleep she did not need. Sunup, flashing over the world, turning the pale desert to momentary jeweling, found her far beyond the stage that Folger had made with his burros in the same time. There was no trail, no water, but she had ridden straight. The peaks guided her now.

On a rise she looked, half hopefully, half fearfully, for sky-sign of following dust, and saw none. It worried her a little. The punchers at the Bar B might have been absent, started late. Equally Gates and his posse, unless they had chosen another route, were far behind.

They might catch up while she was forced to rest the laboring Peter. This she had to do before all shadow vanished at noon. There was not much water left, but it sufficed, and the bay's eyes were still bright when she watered him, after forcing herself to eat. Still there was no dust. She was ahead.

And now the toll of travel took its due. The horse's hoofs sank deep in the sand, he labored over the treacherous malpais, and fear began to creep into her. It was not a horse's work, this desert travel, for all her confidence. But it had to be done.

"Peter," she said, stooping to pat his lowered, sweat and dust caked crest, "you must not fail me, or him. You *must* do it, Peter. *You must.*" And Peter pricked forlorn ears and shambled on, trying once a lope but falling again to a walk. She saw no mirage but the hills swam before her sleepless, aching eyes, appearing to advance and retreat, mocking and encouraging by turns. The sun westered, still hot, its leveling rays fierce, flinging the shadow of herself and the failing Peter far upon the sand. The bay's tongue was lolling from his mouth, her own was swollen like a mushroom. And there was no more water.

The sun sank and the air grew cold and bitter while the aloof and arrogant stars watched the faltering progress. Margaret, afoot now, leading the horse whose slender legs had been strained and wrenched, whose thirst was still an agony despite the relief from the inexorable sun. The constellations wheeled as they crept on, the steed faithful, the girl tortured with cramps and weariness that dragged like a load but her spirit, her love, her faith, still potent, driving her to step after painful step.

The pendulum of Night's progress was swinging back toward the realm of day. In the quiet desert one might almost hear the creaking of the sun's chariot climbing up the slope, the hum of the turning world. The bay lifted its heavy head feebly, stretching nostrils whose membranes were still sensitive. Water! The cliffs were very close now. Ordinarily Peter would have sensed the moisture miles back, now it came as a relief to a forlorn hope. Margaret was too far spent to notice anything save that the bay's gait quickened. Now he was almost dragging her, one hand on the saddle horn, helping her along.

Direction was gone for her but not for him. He set a new course, straight for the canyon of Coyote Wells, moving stiff legged, eyes slightly luminous.

Into the corridor of stone he led her to where the tank lay, filled with drowned stars, and broke their setting into a myriad rays as he drank deeply. And Margaret, with a sobbing cry, lay flat beside him, cupping her palms full of the blessed fluid, bathing her head, her inflamed wrists and face.

Peter found a little grass, cropped at it but gave up for the time, subsiding with a grunt to lie there, exhausted but not vanquished.

It seemed to Margaret that she had stayed there for an hour until her spirit rose again to action. In a panic she got to her feet. Peter tried to rise and stayed on splayed forelegs for a moment. She stroked his nose.

"You've done your bit, Peter. You'd never make the trail."

She feared she herself would succumb as she toiled afoot in darkness up the pitch between the eroded wall and the cliff proper, falling now and then to hands and knees and then going with better, firmer tread as the sky grayed above her and the spangled stars fell away. It was day and she had yet to find Roy in the valley.

HE WAS not there, but awake on the plateau's edge, watching the slumbering camp. A sleepy man or so were replenishing the campfires below as the light strengthened and three men came riding through the notch. Gates, Smiley and Ramon!

There were the two ways to Folger's lookout; the trail from the end of the one that led up from Coyote Wells, and the gorge where the snakes were coiled. He could not defend both of them. To escape across the desert was impossible, there was no good hiding place on the plateau.

He got his rifle and shells, saw to it that Owens' old forty-five six-gun was fully loaded, and awaited events, gazing down while Gates and his two companions were hailed by the firemakers, halted by them, while one went into the woods. Presently he returned with a Mexican whom Folger, livening to the full situation, judged to be Pilar. The greeting was cordial, jovial.

Other men came yawning from the sleeping quarters and Gates addressed them. Pilar, gesturing, made pantomimic denial of some sort and then pointed to the cliffs where Folger lay behind a rampart of rock, intent, unhearing, unseeing what they saw until their attitude attracted him.

A girl had reached the summit of the plateau from the canyon of Coyote Wells. He barely believed his eyes, his heart. It was Margaret! She walked wearily, almost reeling, and suddenly halted as she saw the valley crowding with men, coming from the trees, mounting, gesticulating, their shouts and voices dimmed but plain enough.

That she was recognized by Gates, at least, was plain. Her slender figure in its riding clothes was too well known. And Gates guessed something of what brought her here, saw instantly the danger of her arrival to find him fraternizing with Pilar. He turned with an oath to Smiley.

Smiley, his pocked face asnarl with fear, the fear of a trapped wolverine, snatched carbine from sheath and fired. Gates struck at him and the aim went wild. The deputy was not yet ripe for murder.

But a shot rang out from the cliff top, and Smiley sagged in his saddle, slewing sidewise while up above Folger, slipping another shell into the breech of the old reliable Sharps, called to Margaret who stood as if fascinated. "Get back! *Back from the cliff!*"

She heard him then, saw him and obeyed, trying to run to him on blistered, aching feet, tottering as he caught her in his arms.

There was no need to talk. She was in no condition for many words. The situation was clear enough, desperate enough.

"Johnson is coming," she told him. "Chiquita rode to the ranch."

He nodded. Three riders against this band were sorry odds though they would reinforce them properly on the plateau. Smiley was lying on the ground, squinting unseeing at the sky. The rest had drawn back a little, consulting. Pilar pointed to the trail, and a little cavalcade rode hard to ascend it. If only they did not know, did not discover the other way up from the valley through the snake gorge!

Twice he fired, and a horse and rider went down. Again, and a man reeled. But the rest got under the cliff where he could not reach them. He heard the clatter of their horses' hoofs, and moved to where he could command the head of the trail, motioning Margaret to cover, taking what cover he could himself. Now they were shooting from below, trying to dislodge him. They began to get the range, scraps of rock flew from his insufficient screen and he moved back a little, to find Margaret close to him, with her eyes shining, her gun ready for action.

The attackers had halted on the trail. They could hear Pilar cursing them, urging them on. There was a little silence that seemed an eternity of suspense with Folger's mind ever holding the peril of the other trail. A stone clicked. There was a sudden rush of men, dismounted, clambering up the rocky way, taking cover, firing as he fired back.

The bullets sang. They passed through his clothes, they seared his ribs as he returned the fire, discarding his rifle. Two stormers went rolling down but a dozen more came on. Now his six-gun was empty and there was no time to reload. They were hard upon him, close to the top, their swarthy faces exultant. In despair he stooped for his rifle with its one bullet intending then to use it as a club. From beside him flame spat and lead sped. The leading man went down, dislodging the next. Another flung up his arms and spun about, half falling, half leaping down, throwing all into confusion while Folger slipped cartridges into his pistol once more with Margaret emptying her own gun.

The assault was over. Folger turned anxious eyes on her. Blood was seeping through his shirt, but it was only a surface, bone-brushing wound. Margaret was unharmed and swollen lips formed a smile that changed as she pointed to where men were coming up through the snake gorge.

He had been a fool to suspect that Pilar did not know of the place.

He fired his rifle and the riders spread out, coming on.

He and Margaret were done for. What Margaret's fate might be flashed through his desperate mind. He would go out fighting, but what of her?

Their eyes met, in a brief instant of understanding and farewell. She was thrusting shells into her pistol. The riders came on, exultant, forming a half circle, closing in. More men were coming up the other trail now. It was the end.

Desperate, not wishing to waste shells on the moving targets, knowing there would be no more reloads, Folger saw the riders nearest the desert cliff, falter, wheel. He heard shouts, the *yip-yippy* of the range. Hard faced, hard riding punchers were pouring onto the plateau, their mounts leaping under the spur, guns barking. Not just three men from the Bar B, but a small squadron of them, driving back the horsemen, dropping two of them before they disappeared, hard chased. Johnson, with Buck Peters and Rogers in the lead, Rand of the Circle K with them, charged down the trail full tilt after Pilar and his demoralized men, who were flying for the notch, pell-mell.

Pilar set no faith in the fact that the border line crossed the valley. He wanted to get well into Mexico. He had seen the handwriting on the cliffs. Something had gone wrong. Let Gates take care of it.

But Buck Peters was after him and Rogers was trailing Ramon. Buck's second string pony drummed the grass. The bandit chief crossed the line. He turned to fling back a shot from his pistol when a bullet from Peters took him in between the shoulders and he went down.

Rogers swung his loop as he raced. Sent it circling out, the dally about his saddle horn. His sturdy mount slid to a halt. Ramon was at the other end of the lariat, struggling in vain to release himself, protesting.

"You have not the right," he said. "Thees ees Mexico."

"I roped you in the United States, hombre. That's where my end of the rope was when I dropped it over you. You're plumb lucky it ain't 'round yore neck. May be, at that, before long." The breed's dark skin turned gray, his teeth chattering as Rogers towed him to where Gates sat, bluffing assurance and authority before Johnson and Rand, who had him circled.

"What in hell does this mean?" he demanded.

Johnson surveyed him coldly. "Reckon you'll find out right soon. Quite a bunch of folks never had much use for you, Gates. You was in an almighty hurry to pin the shootin' of Collins on Folger. But you slipped up some. Smiley slipped up when he got his woman to write that note an' sign it 'Chiquita.' You slipped when you sent word to Pilar you was comin' to take him, that time he was hid out with his leg after the stage robbery. An' now we run right on to you chummin' up with him. We didn't exactly expect that, though we knew you was in with him. But I reckon we'll find contraband right on you. Likewise Cardero's come across. You're likely to spend quite a time behind the bars, first for attempted murder, you an' Ramon, an' then Uncle Sam'll board you free."

Gates' defiance had fled. Rand turned to two of his men.

"Rope 'em up, boys," he said.

The deputy sheriff snarled inwardly. Cardero had talked! They knew he had deliberately warned Pilar! There was the informer he had left in jail! The sunshine had no warmth for him as the ropes tightened, and the shadow of the penitentiary seemed suddenly to fall on him. Ramon, also bound, went to pieces.

"I am State's weetness," he cried. "I weel tell what I know. Eet was Smiley who shoot the sheriff, an' Gates, who plan eet. I——"

"Shut up," said Rand sternly. "You kin tell that to Collins when he gits out to yore trial."

"It broke this way," said Johnson to Folger and Margaret. "Chiquita comes out to the ranch with the news. We're at chow. Of co'se we start to come, an' then Pedro pipes up. He thinks the sun rises an' sets in you, Folger, an' when he hears Chiquita comin' through with her talk he decides to speak himself. Wanted to right along but he was scared. Said he didn't see how it c'ud help you any. His head ain't over strong. But he tells that it was his nephew that rode to warn Pilar an' that Gates sent him.

"That was enough. We figgered on warnin' you an' mebbe rescuin' you. But now we had suthin' on Gates. I knew Rand was with you from what I heard him say to Gates one day, so I calls up the Circle K. Rand says he'll be right along with his outfit, an' when we meet up he's been doin' some phonin' on his own account. There was quite a li'l bunch of us. All friends of your'n. Roundin' up Gates. Didn't figger we'd land Pilar, too, but you kin never tell yore luck when the kyards begin to come yore way.

"We sure rode some an' we had remounts. But we never caught Miss Margaret. Her hawss is down in the canyon, sorter tuckered out but he'll come through."

"How about Cardero?" asked Folger, his arm frankly about Margaret.

"Well, Chiquita tells Cardero's in with Pilar an' Gates, an' so I sorter bluffed

that across the board. Ramon fell for it, if Gates didn't, an' it was good poker." He grinned. "Cardero'll talk later, I reckon," he said.

They were halfway back when they met Owens, plodding on behind his burro toward Coyote Wells.

"Didn't figger I c'ud git thar in time," he said, "but as I told thet Mexican gal, I'd do my dernedest. Her hawss was played out ridin' hell bent for my place, an' she stayed behind."

IT AIN'T my gold, them ain't Sam's packs, nor that ain't his six-gun," said Owens doggedly. "I oughter know, I reckon. The gold's your'n, Folger, an' I'm plumb glad of it. Now you kin git yore herd-sire an' run yore ranch right."

"But the mine's yours. It's recorded in your name. I worked it for you. There's more'n half the seam untouched."

They pleaded with him. At last he stubbornly yielded. "I'll go pardners with you," he said. "I ain't got long to last, an' my share'll go to your children."

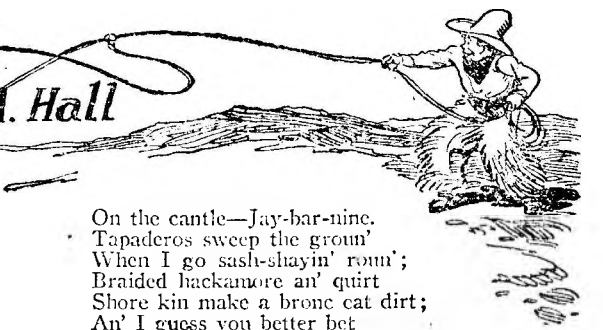
"Chiquita should hev a share," said Folger as they rode away together through the trees.

"For a wedding present when she marries Manuel. Roy, Owens didn't tell the truth. He lied, like the gentleman he is, perhaps because he doesn't want to give up his dream, but I think it was because he wanted you—us—to have it."

Behind them, Owens, fingering the broken packs and the rusted gun he knew so well, gazed out toward the desert. His dream had vanished like the mirages of the waste. Youth and love were riding down the trail together. But the old prospector's thoughts were on a lonely grave that was in a gorge, reached from the Pass of the Wind.

PAW AN' ME

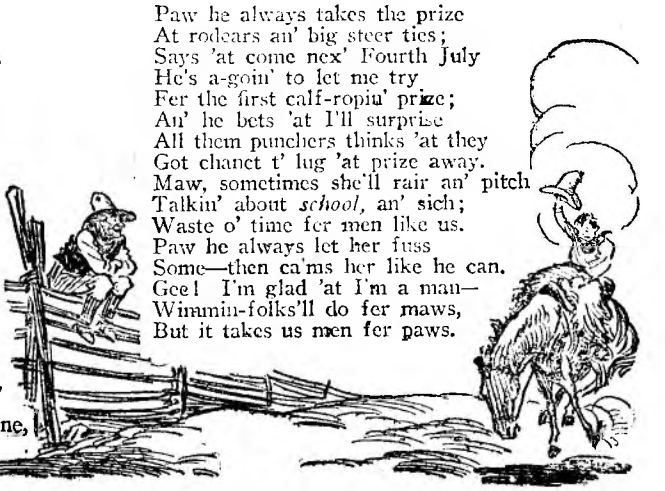
By Sharlot M. Hall



PAW an' me we're men, you bet;
We kin cuss an' chaw an' spit;
I kin spit as fur as Paw;
Roll a wad 'round in my jaw
So ye'd think 'twas mumps I had.
(Year 'fore las' I had 'em bad
On both sides, an' couldn't spit
Ner chaw—well, hardly not a bit.)
Got an outfit jis' like Paw's;
Spanish bit kin break the jaws
Of any bronc gits fresh with me;
An' yer eyes would bug to see
My new chaps—Angorry hair
All fixed up to look like bear.
Silver spurs 'at long ago
Paw he brung from Mexico,
With little bells an' jinglin' chains;
An' my bridle, it's got reins
Wove of hair by Chappo when
He done time down in the Pen.
Fancy headstall—Gee! Now, son,
Finest Chappo ever done.

Silver conchos in a row,
Carved by some ole Navajo
Fer his war-belt. Paw says now
That buck don't need 'em anyhow.
An' the saddle that I ride,
That was Seenyor Calles' pride:
Calles, the Jim-dandy best
Saddle-maker East er West.
Skirts all carved with ballin' steers,
An' broncs a-buckin' on ther ears;
An' our brand—Paw's brand an' mine,
On the cantle—Jay-bar-nine.
Tapaderos sweep the groun'
When I go sash-shayin' roun';
Braided hackamore an' quirt
Shore kin make a bronc eat dirt;
An' I guess you better bet
I ain't swung no *grass* rope yet—
Grass ropes is fer pore cheap Jakes;
But ole Juan Diego makes
Our riatas—Paw's an' mine—
Braided rawhide smooth an' fine—
When ye swing 'em true they sing
Music like a fiddle string.

Paw he always takes the prize
At rodears an' big steer ties;
Says 'at come nex' Fourth July
He's a-goin' to let me try
Fer the first calf-ropin' prize;
An' he bets 'at I'll surprise
All them punchers thinks 'at they
Got chanct t' lug 'at prize away.
Maw, sometimes she'll rair an' pitch
Talkin' about *school*, an' sich;
Waste o' time fer men like us.
Paw he always let her fuss
Some—then ca'ms her like he can.
Gee! I'm glad 'at I'm a man—
Wimmin-folks'll do fer maws,
But it takes us men fer paws.



SHIFTING CARGO

By A. H. MILLER

WITH TREACHEROUS CARGO INSIDE HER AND TREACHEROUS SHOALS BEHIND HER THE FREIGHTER "CALUMET" FLED NORTHWARD UNDER THE LASH OF THE HOWLING HURRICANE. BUT DEADLIER EVEN THAN SHOALS OR SHIFTING CARGO WAS THAT OTHER TREACHERY INSIDE HER, BLACKER THAN THE HEART OF THE STORM ITSELF

HOMEWARD-BOUND from the River Plate, her bows rising and dipping comfortably to the gentle swell of the South Atlantic, the steamship *Calumet* meandered seaward, as a listless helmsman indifferently slipped the spokes of a careless wheel and the green hill, godfather to the City of Montevideo—last of visible, friendly land—receded, then vanished in a crimson dusk. The distant city stirred to night life in an outbursting sparkle of flickering lights that lingered, twinkling on the purple-black horizon.

Eight bells had been struck. The mellow tones died away to faint echoes, but aloft the wind hummed a fleeting breath of melancholy music and the big antenna, as if strummed by an unseen harpist, voiced a restless minor chord. Soon came a moan, a low wail, swelling into a barbaric chant, and an uneasy shiver shook the ship as she found herself smothered in dust borne on a blast of hot wind. Then came flying spray, snatched and flung high from dancing wave crests as an icy cold half-gale drove a rising sea on her starboard quarter.

A half hour later, with a whole gale tearing at her heels, she began to roll and pitch to the impulses of a heavy stern-sea, and by two bells was fleeing under low, black clouded heavens, before a *pampero*, that fleet and fickle, overwhelming, backlashing windstorm of the Argentine.

CAPTAIN SCRIGGS, master of the *Calumet*, was a war product. He had came by his ticket too easily, and "easy come, easy go" might have been endorsed appropriately on his Master's Certificate, reading: "any gross tons upon the waters of any ocean," that filled a serviceable oak frame on the bulkhead in the chart house.

It was his first voyage to the "river of silver" and the land of the *pampero*, and he knew that it had to be successful or it might be his last, as master of the *Calumet* or of any ship of the Line at least.

There had been irregularities; deals with crafty cosmopolite traders in Barcelona, at Genova, and the Pyraeus, sub rosa cargo items, contraband and not on the manifests, also a couple of costly mishaps that spoke none too well for the integrity of Scriggs or his seamanship. Furthermore as he was aware, it was not unknown in certain quarters that there were several things about the business of a ship which he never had found the time or the inclination to master. There were bothersome details of cargo stowage that in these days of commercialized stevedoring he wasn't very keen about. And while he knew his Bowditch in smattering fashion, and a bit about storms and West Indian hurricanes —as much as he'd read on the pilot charts in season—he wasn't up much on Argentine *pamperos*.

He had commanded the *Calumet* in the

Mediterranean trade until it went bad. This was her first voyage to the Plate. At Montevideo and Buenos Aires she had discharged her cargo of structural steel, cement and sewing machines, and had then proceeded up the river to Rosario, where she had taken on her return cargo of linseed and quebracho logs.

Heavy, fluid as quicksilver and nearly as evasive, flaxseed makes bad cargo, and the *Calumet* without divided holds was ill equipped to handle it. With full holds it might have passed muster, but the stuff is heavy, and since a full load by bulk would have exceeded her deadweight carrying capacity she took less than enough to fill the lower holds to the 'tween deck. Another, bulkier, lighter cargo for the remaining space would have stabilized that slippery, treacherous cargo, but additional cargo was hard to get. Up at Santa Fé there was corn, but the river, down to unprecedented low level because of a late cold spring and a long drought, permitted no passage that far. Under such conditions the linseed should have been sacked as Captain Scriggs knew, but sacking is expensive and lumber for additional bulkheads and dunnage boards is scarce and costly in the Argentine. The cargo went in bulk, and into the pockets of Darius Scriggs had gone a neat profit, his customary bit of graft.

Loading finished in late afternoon, Captain Scriggs had cleared for the States and engaged his pilot, and that evening under a rising moon the *Calumet,* wakening echoes among the houses on the hillsides by a long blast of her whistle, moved slowly from her berth and out into the muddy stream. Hatch covers had been spread but left unwedged, booms that should have been chocked were left unsecured. Odds and ends of gear littered the decks, reflecting the slovenly indifference of the *Calumet's* master, whose erratic habits long since had demoralized his officers and crew.

Enjoying the coolness that first evening at the bunker-hatch, the Mate, the "Chief," and "Sparks" the radio man, had grown chatty over their pipes. Conversation had drifted to the prospects of the voyage, the weather outside the river, and the cargo.

"Helluva bad cargo, that linseed," said the mate. "Told the Old Man what he'd oughta done, but you know him. Can't tell him nothing."

"Queer stuff, linseed," rejoined Sparks, "an' liable to raise hell, stowed in bulk this way."

"Skipper oughta know better. He'll come to grief one o' these days, mark my words," added the Chief. "There's a lot he's gotta learn that they didn't teach in that fish-cannery he come from."

Captain Scriggs, listening at the afterport in the darkness of the chart room not far above their heads, had scowled evilly, but kept his own counsel and joined the pilot, under whose skilful guidance the *Calumet* wound her way confidently down the snaky, curving river.

That first night out of Rosario the air had grown sultrier, and a few hours later the sun, rolling up on the horizon like a white-hot ball, had made itself felt like the stinging flare from a suddenly opened boiler fire-door. By noon blistering paint and the odor of bubbling pitch from opening seams on the wooden boat deck, combining with the hot oily reek of the engine room, made the thick air a smothering fluid. To the smells of the ship, which after all were not unfamiliar, was added a heavy earthy taint, strange, disturbing, suggestive of the vast reaches of hot pampas scorching under the brassy heavens.

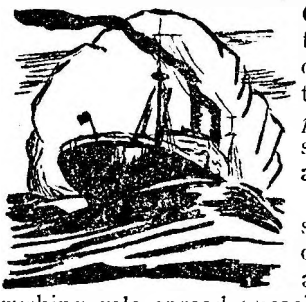
Off Buenos Aires they had dropped the river pilot, and another to Montevideo had taken his place. By late afternoon the burning intensity of fierce sunlight could be felt through the clothing like the heat of a fire approached too closely, and the cloth itself smelled as if it were scorching. The heat was unusual, unseasonable, and unprecedented, as the pilot told the mate. Such heat, coming on the heels of a late cold spring after a long drought, was unknown to tradition in all that region unless it was once, fifty years before, at the time of the worst *pampero.* Then a sudden spell of very great heat had been followed by a cold gale, an icy blast from the Antarctic, blowing so hard that it drove the water over the banks on the northern shore, baring mud flats for a quarter of a mile on the weather-rim, where the river bottom had never been exposed before.

Even as the *Calumet* passed the sea buoy soon after sundown, and the pilot boat off Montevideo was fading in a ruddy dusk, the weatherwise mate, with a feeling of apprehension had suggested to Captain Scriggs the possibility of trouble, but he got a scowl and a grunt for thanks. About the table at supper, which had been delayed till the pilot was dropped, there was more discussion of the cargo. But the mates, discouraged and doubting their own fears in the face of Scriggs' indifference, made no haste to put things shipshape.

"Linseed's bad stuff," said Sparks, addressing himself to the mate as they lingered at the supper table under the fishy, speculative eye of Scriggs. "On the old *Centurion* it shifted on us, and we had to get into the stuff to work it back. One man smothered in it before they could get him out. Ya sink in it like in water."

"Bull!" snorted Scriggs, and the conversation lagged. All were eager to escape his sour sarcasms and the stifling atmosphere of the saloon, to get a cooling breath of salt air that was coming along at last.

Then true to the mate's warning had come the gale. The listless helmsman frantically clutched at the spinning spokes of a wheel suddenly flung free in a hard weather-helm, and the twinkling lights of Montevideo were blotted out by the dusty smother. The music of singing shrouds and stays was overwhelmed in the deep voiced growl of a wind that blew "great-guns" and whipped the wide waters of La Plata to white caps and frothing foam. The



Calumet was fleeing for the open sea from the hell bred *pampero* that snarled viciously at her heels.

The weird scarlet haze of ominous sunset and then the rushing gale spread uneasiness among the crew, and the men went about with the mate in silence. But they jumped briskly as he directed the tightening of wedges to make all hatch-covers secure, gathered the odds and ends of loose gear littering the well decks, and hurried to finish chocking and locking cargo booms.

At eight bells, just before the *pampero* had pounced on them, Scriggs had laid out the course, due east, to be held till the *Calumet* would gain her sea-way. But after two hours, with the fierce wind behind her, it was obvious that she was driving seaward at a breakneck gait and would be carried farther than intended. At ten o'clock the wind was roaring out of the southwest with such a velocity that it seemed to draw the very breath from the lungs, and swallowed up shouted commands as if they were whispers in a shipyard rivetting contest.

To bring her up-coast Scriggs set a new course and the third mate chalked it on the slate before the helmsman, who spun the wheel to bring the ship about on the new course. As the *Calumet* came over slowly she began to roll, presenting her long black hulk more and more directly to the heavy seas and fierce wind, which had been in her starboard-quarter but were now brought full abeam on the port side. The terrific pressure of a ninety mile wind in a full broadside heeled the helpless ship far to starboard. The steersman checked his wheel but the ship still swung, unruly, and slumped soggily into the trough of the seas.

Great green combers, far apart, raced up out of the southwest, and one, gripping the *Calumet,* carried her high out of the trough on its mounting crest, like a cat walking a fence. Then it left her slithering sideways into the trough again, but heeled far to starboard. The phosphorescent gleam of a green wall abeam impended an instant as if stationary, then crept nearer. The *Calumet* rose, heeled further in a long ghastly lurch, and again rode a crest; then sluggish, but still heeled, she answered her helm sulkily and was brought on her course, headed northwestward.

She staggered drunkenly, unmercifully pounded, as she took the seas over her after well deck, then over her starboard side bulwarks forward, and finally over her bridge deck rails. She was nearly on her beam ends, and still yielding.

"Great God!" groaned an apprehensive Scriggs. Consternation ran throughout the ship; down below where the Chief and the third assistant, a fireman and an oiler, were clawing the floor plates in a desperate struggle to regain their footing; up in the fo'c's'le where two seamen on the port side were pitched from their bunks, and the carpenter on the starboard side climbed skyward to get out of his.

Starboard rails were under and through open ports in the engineers' hot quarters the sea poured in streams as if from opened water mains. It flooded rooms. Alley-ways became flumes where water sloshed waist deep, slopping over coamings into the engine room in a series of drenching downpours timed to the movements of the ship.

Captain Scriggs, thoroughly alarmed, beyond his resources, avoiding his first mate to whom he could give but vague instructions, hastily left the bridge and made a difficult way to his cabin. His rat-like brain was working swiftly. Hurriedly putting on a heavy double breasted blue reefer against the sudden and unaccustomed cold, buttoning it as he went, he made his way over the boat deck to the

wireless shack where Sparks was mopping oil that had run from the motor-generator bearings. The armature shaft, lined athwartship, was standing nearly at forty-five degrees.

Scriggs, without greeting, barked to the operator, "Send this!" and dictated:

Captain Sanderson Motorship Astra

Hard hit by gale Cargo bulk linseed shifted Ship listed badly Not righting herself Advise measures for safety

Scriggs S. S. Calumet

"Get that to the *Astra*," he snarled. "She oughta be somewhere in range. Was to leave B. A. this afternoon, according to what the pilot said."

"Yes, sir," snapped Sparks, who had written the message out on a formal "sent-message" blank, with a carbon copy. And the motor-generator started with a hum that rose to a keen whine. Through the open door from outside came the roar of wind. Inside the deck, the bulkheads, and the transmitter-panel were vibrating in a lively dance as the motor-generator came up to speed. But even above it all, there was an audible sputtering and frying sound from the head set that the wireless man was slipping over his ears. It was static, like a machine gun bombardment, but almost as if she'd been waiting for the call the *Astra* answered and took the message.

"*R—QRX* (standby) *Fer ans*," came the *Astra's* acknowledgment.

Scriggs gnawed his fingernails and furtively watched the operator noting the communication on his log.

"Here he is," said Sparks, copying the incoming message.

Captain Scriggs S. S. Calumet

Bad business Reverse your course and put loaded side to wind till ship rights herself Cargo will shift back Make secure If holds not full shift other cargo to fill space above seed Answer

Sanderson MS Astra

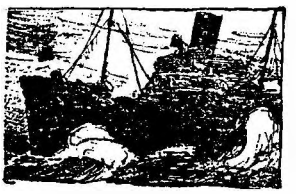
Sparks flipped the sheet from its pad and passed it to Scriggs, who leaned over to read it in the light of the shaded incandescent. He turned as he left the cabin and growled ominously, "An' mind you keep your mouth shut. You know the law about secrecy of messages. I've heard you blabbing to the mate about my business before."

The heavy door slammed and he was gone.

It was easy enough. Hardly fifteen minutes had passed, and Scriggs was on the bridge boisterously yelling instructions through the wail of the wind into the ears of the mate, who knew the remedies well enough but had not dared to act on his own initiative, knowing through many bitter humiliations the jealousy of the ignorant Scriggs whenever his seamanship came into question.

"Bad business, Mr. Larsen, but no danger. What we gotta do is put her right about, see? Just reverse her course and head her down-coast. That'll put the wind against her overloaded side and cargo'll shift back—an'en we'll get back on our course," caught the mate from the captain's shouting, and the *Calumet* was put about under cautious directions to the helmsman.

It was slow hazardous work, but 'round she came, and with her overloaded side relieved of the extra strain imposed by the pressure of a ninety knot gale which by the manouver was made to yield some fifty tons of thrust to stabilize her, she dived her nose into the green-black hillsides, shook herself free, and seemed stable enough. Nevertheless she was still in a dangerous plight, for the wind pressure was merely balancing the displaced load-center, due to the shifted cargo. She must be normally stabilized again by natural flow of the linseed or by moving it, before she could once more head for home.



Setting a course that would keep her slantwise to prevent rolling again, but practically hove-to, Captain Scriggs gave orders to the mate to examine number two and number four holds and prepare to put men in if necessary, to work the seed back to the port side.

"We daren't open those hatches now, sir," protested Larsen. "With this wind and sea, and decks awash more'n scuppers an' fairleads will carry off, it'd be impossible to keep the water out."

"Don't expect you to open hatches," said Scriggs. "Go down by the man-holes. Rig a coupla cargo lights an' go to it."

"Captain Scriggs, a man can't work down there in that stuff an' the old girl pitchin' this way. He'd sink faster in that seed than he would in water," insisted the mate.

"Talk enough," snapped Scriggs. "Lay some tarpaulins over it, an' pull out them temprary bulkheads so that damned flax-seed'll shift back—an' be damned quick

about it. I'm gonna take a few winks. Call me when yer through an' ready to get back on our course," and he left.

Scriggs entered his cabin, slammed the door and started to remove his blue reefer, but hesitated, buttoned it up again, switched off his light and went out. He stepped into the saloon which was dark, and closing the door behind him more quietly than was his habit stood in a listening attitude for a moment, then hurried through the black emptiness of the midship space, and proceeded to the wireless shack.

"Wants an answer. Well, we'd better let him have it," he said to himself, mindful of a persistent interest on the part of Captain Sanderson. "Helluva stew I'll be in now, if somebody gets to shootin' his mouth off. That was a bone I pulled to say anything to that big-mouthed operator. Just puts it in his mind to talk to Larsen," he snarled as he approached the small deck house that sheltered the wireless man and equipment.

Scriggs reached the "shack" but hesitated, unobserved, looking through the big port at the operator, Kelly. He had little concern about Sanderson, whom he knew to be of a conscientious but close-mouthed type and unlikely to be heard from again.

He stood with fists deep-buried in the side pockets of his jacket, a fleeting, malevolent scowl on his face. His hands, tight clenched, were sweating and his forehead was moist, though his body shivered in the cold wind. The situation seemed to grow on him, for his face was distorted as he projected his stubbled jaw, and his teeth squeaked in his own ears when he gritted them in his tension.

There was going to be too much to explain as it was. He knew he was in bad all around and it would take but a straw to break the camel's back, for his reputation had long borne a heavy burden of assorted mistakes and iniquities, till the patience of the owners was about exhausted. Several mishaps had been difficult to explain away to unsympathetic surveyors, and the last insurance adjustment had subjected him to an ungentle hint that another might cost him his ticket. That would mean he would "go on the beach" under a long suspension at least, and defeat his plans already well-ripened for one more voyage, and then a clean-up.

"This big-mouthed busybody'll blab to Larsen, and Larsen'll make a lotta capital outa the mess with that square-head bunch up forward. Then like as not, Kelly'll trot inta the office with the tale n'then where'n hell'll I be? Up salt creek! Gotta shut his fool mouth," mumbled Scriggs.

"By God, there ain't gonna be any talkin'. That's all!" he concluded, with crafty determinaion. His beady black eyes flashed, his lips twitched as resolution gripped him, and he moved suddenly to the door of the cabin, opening it with a vigorous jerk.

Kelly, reading a battered volume from the Ammla box, was killing time on his watch, and looked up inquiringly at Scriggs.

"Send this to Captain Sanderson," said Scriggs.

Sanderson Master MS Astra
Everything all right Much obliged
Scriggs

"Got it all right?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," answered the operator, easily able to remember and quote even long passages from his reading, due to the practised habit of brass-pounders. He drew the pad to him and accurately recorded the text on a service blank.

Scriggs left, but paused outside. His view overside was partly shut off by number four lifeboat, but aft of the boat, only partly enclosed by the rail, was a narrow wing of the deck. He stepped onto it and stood staring balefully at the dimly visible seething sea, whose roaring swash mingled with the wail of the dying *pampero* was still a din in the ears. A bit more than a foot from the patent davit the rail ended, breaking to give clearance for the boat.

"Bad place for someone to walk in the dark," he commented to himself and looked again toward the "shack" where a yellow glow made a round full moon of the big port. He studied it reflectively, unconsciously listening for the crisp, low sping of the signals, but no sound of the transmitter could be heard above the wind. Aloft he could see sparking or a brush discharge at the after spreader, where the insulators in the antenna bridles were leaking, and he knew that his message was going to the *Astra*.

Sparks, having promptly raised the *Astra*, sent the message and waited.

R R SVC OK Tom ses tel Cap Scriggs look out for kickbak" read Sparks. But interrupted by Scriggs himself, who had reentered the wireless room, the operator had not yet written down the text when the captain leaned over and roughly took the pencil from his hand. Picking up a pad of service forms, Scriggs began writing energetically.

Meantime Sparks, in long accustomed habit, followed the *Astra's* message through, memorizing it as it came while he waited for the pencil. The conclusion still uncopied, he threw his antenna switch and the key chattered briskly in acknowledgment. The *Astra's* operator had added:

Tom ses ask ur Cap does he kno wat to do if she kicks bak Hes standing rite hr Wl wate fer ans Wl QRX to hlp if u say so.

"R R SN (understand)," answered Sparks. *"AS* (wait) *Scriggs rite hr bi mi sid Wl ask hm."*

But Captain Scriggs had finished his writing, breaking the pencil point as he ended with a vigorous period, and had torn the sheet loose, stowing it in his pocket. He had stepped outside again and gone over toward the rail. His movements were quick, cat-like, and he looked warily about him, tense, listening as if preparing for some furtive action. Then he moved back with incredible speed to the door of the wireless cabin, which he opened, commanding, "Hey! Come here."

Sparks removed the headset from his ears, and was about to report the rest of the *Astra's* message. As he stepped out he said, "Captain Sanderson says to——"

Scriggs interrupted. "Can you see anything over there? A light? There, to sta'b'rd," pointing particularly. The operator walked to the rail, straining his eyes into the gloom. "No, sir," he answered. "But where are we now, Cap'n? Somewhere 'bout Maldonado, ain't we?"—conscious of Scrigg's mood, and trying to be amiable.

"What's it to you, where we are?" snarled Scriggs, shifting his weight to the balls of his feet.

The operator sensed some sinister quality in the savage tones, and with an inquiring look on his face he turned, staggered sickly, and gasped, half stunned by a vicious blow of Scrigg's fist which glanced from his jaw over his left shoulder, for Scriggs had acted too quickly to tighten his own half closed fist. The operator swung fully about and, half-dazed, grappled with the murderous captain. Another stinging blow caught the lad full in the face, and his body hurtled out into the heaving blackness of the waters.

Scriggs hastily entered the empty cabin where he busied himself in an attempt to camouflage the situation he had created. A moment later he left, moving cautiously. He crossed hastily to the other side of the ship, squeezing through the narrow space between the engine room skylight and the deck house, losing himself in the thick shadows and moving swiftly, unseen, to his cabin. When he reached it he closed the door behind him, locking it before turning on the light.

A sinister animation distorted his dark face, and he studied his features carefully in the mirror above his stand of drawers, seemingly lost in thought. He was warm, perspiring, and started slowly to unbutton the heavy reefer, but paused as if something had disturbed him. The coat swung open. Scriggs' face grew troubled as if something was wrong and he couldn't be quite sure what it was. His right thumb evidently hurt, for he studied it ruefully, discovering that it was quite swollen, and he tried to bend it, moving it gingerly.

A knock at the door brought a swift stealthy movement as he threw off the coat, silently released the bolt on the door, and stepped back a couple of paces to a place beside his brass bed. Then he called, "Come in." The mate, in the doorway, found him rubbing his eyes as if to clear them of sleep and heard him mumble, "Be right up, Mr. Larsen. Little nap just put me right. How'dja make out with that cargo?"

"Been havin' a helluva time with them bulkheads, Captain. Boards was too scarce and too far apart, an' let the stuff work through. She's pretty well leveled herself again, but we've got nothing to stop the stuff from workin' out. Passed some canvas down, followin' the boards in number four, but we ain't finished bracin' up them temp'ry bulkheads in number two. Wanted to know if you think we'd better put about now, sir. Ya see, this wind's dyin' down quite a bit an' I figger we better be on our course 'fore the kick-back comes. Been through one o' these here *pamperos* before, and they always——"

The captain cut the report short, saying savagely, "I'll tell you when to put her about. Get that cargo secured and report to me when ya got it tight, like I told ya before—see?"

Larsen left with smouldering anger in his heart, but concluded that Scriggs prob-

ably "had the cards up his sleeve," as usual, and knew that the *pampero,* leaving a partial vacuum in its wake, would possibly be succeeded by another gale from exactly the opposite direction before very long.

When the door had closed Scriggs threw himself on the bed, mumbling, "Wonder what the hell that square-head means by a kick-back." But with the ease of habit he fell asleep almost instantly.

Down in the stifling murky atmosphere and menacing black spaces beyond the stingy radius of the cargo lights, sweating men moved grotesquely over the small stretch of canvas that kept them from sinking into the treacherous linseed. Their feet seemed to tread jelly and it was difficult to avoid being thrown off into the clutching darkness. It was dangerous work, and fruitless, to attempt to do more than make the boards secure to the long strips uniting their tops, for the lower ends, deep in the writhing mass, were inaccessible. They were too widely spaced, permitting flow of the linseed with the incessant motion of the ship.

On the bridge, the third mate uneasily pondered a change in wind. After seeming to die down as if about to disappear entirely, it was unmistakably rising again, but out of the northeast. He shivered, rolled up his collar and turned about to feel its direction. Nearly abeam, to eastward, he saw the green side-light and the white masthead light of a ship. A voice from the lookout sang out, confirming his observation. The ship, a steamer running southward, was overhauling them rapidly. She was nearly abeam, not over a quarter mile away, and a light was flashing intermittently from her superstructure. The rising and falling glow was interrupted for a moment and then, clear, distinct, came a series of short flashes from her blinker, calling the *Calumet.* The third mate, the only man other than Sparks who could read the blinker code, groped for the telegraph key in its small case under the bridge rail, and acknowledged the signal.

"What ship is that?" came from the stranger.

The third answered, *"Calumet of New York."*

"Where is your radio operator? MS Astra been trying for two hours to raise you. Feared you were in trouble. Are you all right?"

"Yes," flashed back.

"Tell your operator call the Astra. Will tell Astra by our radio you are all right and will call him," came back from the other ship. Whatever else he may have had to say was lost, for the signals were cut out as some part of his rigging intervened, and he faded rapidly, blotted out in the darkness.

Puzzled, the third mate went to the tubes and blew strongly into the one marked "Wireless," then placed the mouthpiece to his ear. Silence. An uneasy feeling came over him, but thinking the whistle at the other end might not have sounded he puffed his cheeks to the effort of another long blast. No sound came back. It flashed into his mind that something was wrong. He made no comment, but took the wheel and sent the helmsman to ask the mate to come to the bridge. "Tell him to see me right away if he can," were his instructions.

The man returned in a few minutes, reporting that the mate would be up presently. There was a touch on the Third's shoulder and Larsen, coming silently out of the darkness, was at his side. Behind the canvas dodger, in the lee wing of the bridge, the situation was explained to the mate.

The wind was rising and the mate pressed his cap hard down on his head as he hurried to the wireless shack. It was dark, but he entered and switched on the light. On a chair beside the bunk was a khaki shirt, much crumpled, but obviously clean and smelling faintly of soap. An old pair of khaki trousers and a complete suit of navy underwear were there too, and redolent with the unmistakable odor of Sunlight soap. "Ain't never wore 'em since they was washed," commented the mate. On the deck, under the chair were a pair of black navy shoes and a soiled pair of socks, which the mate examined. The bunk was disturbed, mussed as if it had been slept in, the covering being turned down and in disorder.

On the work table lay a pad of log sheets, the topmost page being written full to the last line in the lightly traced flowing script characteristic of the absent operator. The reverse of the sheet, marked at the top "P-1," was also written full, beginning with an entry of the time of departure from Rosario on the preceding day. The mate turned it over and studied the page that had been uppermost. It was marked

at the top "P-2," and the last line read: "29th 10:15 PM Nil—heavy static—little traffic."

Larsen stood bewildered, pinching his lip between his fingers, lost in abstraction. "Strange," he said aloud. "Night-owl too. Never turned in early even if he had a chance. Had on a white shirt, white pants, and them Chinese sandals when I was in here at half-past nine."

Ideas began to flow. He sat down at the table and absently studied the log, running back over items of calls heard and calls made, a message text in Spanish from some communication between the motorship *Astra,* and CWA, the Montevideo radio station at Cerrito. He distinctly remembered that after bumming a cigarette from Kelly about nine forty-five, he had watched the operator fill out the headings of a new sheet and mark it "P-3."

A pad of yellow forms, marked "Service," lay before him and he noticed that someone had left an imprint on the top sheet from writing with heavy pressure on the one that had preceded. He studied it and found that by tilting the pad till the light caught it a an odd angle he could make out quite distinctly an erratic scrawl that he recognized as unmistakably characteristic of Scriggs. It appeared to be a message, and there was the signature too to complete the identification. It was directed to Captain Sanderson of the motorship *Astra,* and Larsen managed to copy it in entirety, putting the blank but tell-tale sheet in his pocket with his copy as he hastily left the cabin.

Seized with a sudden conviction that Kelly had met with disaster or foul play, and startled by the thought, he exploded into intense activity. In a stride and a jump he was at the engine-room skylight where he knelt and poked his head into the hatch, bawling in a fog horn voice to the second assistant whom he could see smoking his pipe as he leaned against the stand-up desk on the bulkhead.

"Hey, Second! Is Sparks down there?"

"Nope. Ain't been down here tonight."

Thoroughly alarmed, Larsen sped to the officers' bath, the Chief's cabin, and the other rooms, but his search was fruitless. He hurried forward, entered the alley and then the saloon pantry. The third mate, just relieved and drawing himself a cup of coffee from the steaming urn, reached to the hooks overhead and took down another cup which he filled and proffered in silence to Larsen. On the latter's hard lined face he saw an expression that hinted something wrong. Silent, intent, he followed the mate's story, told in low tones.

"I'm gonna wake the Old Man," said Larsen, "and I want you to be out there in the saloon I'll let his door stand open —it's dark there—and I want you to listen to what he says."

They went quietly to the saloon, from which the captain's cabin was reached, its only entrance being from the saloon itself. The Third crouched himself under the mess table and Larsen knocked smartly on the door, but Scriggs, a sound sleeper, failed to answer and it required several loud raps to bring a response.

"Come," said the captain's voice, muffled, from within.

The mate entered, keping a hand on the door which he held open. "Captain Scriggs, I can't find Kelly." He watched the face of Scriggs, but the captain seemed merely a little sleepy yet, and not much interested in the information.

"Why, he's asleep, ain't he? I mean he oughta be"—looking at the round clock above his desk. "Have you been to the wireless room?"

"Yes, sir, and he's not there. Ain't kept his log past four-bells, or down to ten-fifteen to be exact, and it looks like he musta turned in. Clothes is there all right, but he's not."

"Have you searched the ship?" queried the captain in a business-like tone. "Might be takin' a bath or down in the engine room. Often prowls around down there nights with the second assistant. Do so at once," he concluded, as the mate, for reasons of his own, let it be inferred that he'd made no formal search. "And send him to me when you find him. Can't have him leaving the wireless room at ten-fifteen and neglecting his duty," added the skipper. And the matter seemed temporarily dismissed from his mind.

Scriggs turned to his desk, but lurched to an uneasy roll and pitch combined as the *Calumet* shipped a heavy sea. "More bad weather. Damn the luck! Whatcha waitin' for?"—to the mate who had lingered but now hastily disappeared, leaving the door open as he went. It didn't swing with the movement of the ship, for it had been quietly hooked back. Scriggs scowled but failed to make any move to close it, and instead, went into his bathroom from which he presently emerged massaging his right thumb, while an odor of arnica penetrated to the nose of the third mate out under the saloon table.

The captain lifted his double breasted

blue reefer from the transom seat and put it on. The watcher noticed that he seemed to avoid using his right hand, buttoning up the coat on the left side with his left hand. He snapped off the light, banged his door behind him and left the cabin.

When the Third heard the captain's familiar footsteps on the deck in the chart house above, he swiftly slipped into the empty cabin, producing a flash lamp from his hip pocket. A nervous, hasty search in a small circle of light flashed on the captain's desk revealed nothing of interest. He made a quick general survey and was about to leave when it occurred to him to look in the metal waste basket under the desk. It contained nothing but a small ball of crumpled yellow paper, but he hastily put it in his pocket for what it might be worth, and left the cabin.

In his own room, when he had shut the door and turned on the light, he straightened out the piece of paper, finding it to be a form with the word "Service" printed across the top, and in the captain's handwriting a sprawling, intolerant kind of script, he read:

"Sanderson Motorship Astra Everything all right Would be obliged if you kindly dont mention the matter Not serious but you know how things sometimes exaggerated.

(signed) *Scriggs, Calumet."*

The Third opened a book, placing the paper within its covers for safe-keeping, and then at the sound of a knock at his door, opened to Larsen who entered with a grim look on his white face.

"Not on the ship," he said. "I knew it. Reported to the Old Man and all he did was grunt. Said he always thought Sparks was 'off' somehow, and probably jumped overboard. Went back to the shack with me and the Chief, and looked it all over. Said the last time he saw Kelly was at supper, but he remembers noticin' he was workin' someone along about ten-fifteen, for he saw sparkin' at the after spreader. Says it's a plain case, with the clothes lyin' there 'neverything."

The Third produced the piece of paper from between the covers of his Bowditch and passed it over to the mate, who studied it thoughtfully, then burst into a passionate commentary on the situation.

"I knew he was a damned liar!" he declared. "Nothing to show what time this was sent if it was sent at all, but sure as my name's Larsen, he had something back'n forth with the *Astra* an' I'm gonna find out what it was and when it was. I'm gonna put somma this stuff before the Commissioner as soon as we get to New York. Gimme some paper." And seating himself at the Third's desk he wrote rapidly, finally asking for some oiled paper, as he folded the written pages. A roar of wind and the sound of a thundering sea crashing overhead and against the glass of the port distracted his attention.

The *Calumet* reeled from the blow, and the deck inclined under foot. An arm-chair slid across the cabin and brought up short against the door with a crash, to which was added the clatter of odds and ends from the writing desk, a sliding cuspidor and an overturned bucket in which the Third's wash was soaking. The two men paled, clutching the bunk rail to hold themselves, for they stood as if on the steep slope of a slippery hill. No swing back. Over she was, and over she stayed.

"God help us if that damned stuff slides another mite," groaned the mate, thinking of the linseed now entirely free, for the shifting boards had not yet been replaced. Five minutes later practically the entire crew except the engine room watch were clamoring about Scriggs on the bridge. Scriggs, pale but with a sneer on his face, first tried to bluster about their daring to come on the bridge, then as the *Calumet* settled more loggily on her beam ends, he tried to placate them by explaining that he was going to put about and the ship would right herself as before.

"Right herself hell!" bellowed the carpenter. "This ship'll never right herself in God's world while you're on her."

"I'm vith ya, Chips," seconded the bos'n. "I peen in all kindsa ships under all kindsa captains for more as twenty year, und I know vhen ve is up against it. Come on, poys. Ve'll get a poat over vile ve got a chanct."

No need for an effort to check mutiny which was flaring like flame fanned from a smouldering fire. Another sea took the *Calumet* which had veered around into the trough, and striking her full abeam sent her visibly further over. She would go still further, like a tree in the forest as the

wedges are driven, yielding a little at a time, inclining, trembling before the fall, till she would dip her trucks into the sea.

Frantic scrambling brought the engine room crew up the ladders, like ship's cats to the cook's proffer of emptied salmon tins, for the mate's voice had roared warning down a ventilator from the boat deck. Scriggs himself pulled four long blasts of the whistle and set the alarm bell ringing, the signal to abandon ship.

A shivering, milling, weirdly clad gathering, frantic with eagerness born of fear and desperate difficulties to keep a footing on the steep deck, clamored and argued around the two boats on the starboard side, each man intent on getting himself and some bundle, ditty bag or precious parcel aboard, while stations were forgotten and discipline vanished.

Scriggs was on the bridge deck with the uncomfortable carpenter, who would have preferred being aft with the men, and there was the Chief too, and the bos'n. Already they had number one boat, smaller than the others, cleared for launching. Davits were outboard and falls ready to lower. She hadn't far to drop for the *Calumet* had heeled till the sea, as it rose and fell, slapped the bottom of the boat on each upward surge, shooting cold sheets of water about the legs of the men.

With log book, chronometer and a rolled chart under his arm, Scriggs surveyed the proceedings, his face green-gray in the reflected aura of the starboard side-light. Passing log book and chronometer to "Chips" he unrolled the chart, and his tobacco stained index-finger traced the plotted course of the *Calumet* till it came abruptly at end like a lane without a turning, and he mentally marked the probable grave of his ship. Headed southwestward and with a gale behind them, now booming out of the northeast, a few hours run would put them into Maldonado.

Another ghastly wallow of the *Calumet* put her so far over that it nearly hurled them all into the eager, clutching waters, and sent a cold chill of cowardly panic up and down Scriggs' spine. "To hell with her!" he growled in sickly bravado, scrambling frantically into the bow of the boat, fearful to linger, yet with quaking knees at the prospect that lay ahead.

On the boat deck the first and second mates slowly brought order out of chaos, and in howling wind, driving spray and heaving sea, twenty-nine temporary survivors of the *Calumet* made their escape nor knew her final agonies, for taxed to the limit of desperate men's strength and endurance to keep their boats headed before the wind they rode the seas with water boiling at the rudders as the gale carried them into darkness and the unknown.

There were thirteen living and seventeen dead on the lonely beach that with seeming unwilling hospitality permitted the living at last to creep, or limply crawl, exhausted and battered, out of a raging surf.

That was just before break of day. Among them was Scriggs, like the alley cat he was, apparently well within the allotted limit of nine lives, for he slept where he had crawled, and nothing disturbed the oblivion of complete exhaustion.

There was the first mate too, who had waked with the dawn, and between his clinging blue flannel shirt and his bruised ribs, carefully secured against the salt water, in oiled paper, were a few keepsakes and several pages written closely in his own curley-cued style, forethoughtfully inscribed, "In case of my death deliver to United States Shipping Commissioner, Barge Office, New York."

Then too there was the third mate, youthful, trim-built and fit enough, though battered and bearing a great gash that split his left eyebrow and was ghastly with its dark clotted blood against the pale, salt crusted face. He lay like one dead, but was sleeping deeply.

The mate limped stiffly along the sodden gravel of the beach, searching out his scattered crew, and ranged a half-mile or more, finding his shipmates one by one. Here and there he found the living, battered but undefeated, stout burly bodies, deep in sleep, but surviving. And there were others, overwhelmed and broken, asleep in death.

Mutely he had counted as his search progressed, and incredible as it seemed, there were twenty-nine, himself included—the whole company. No, not quite all. Some instinct, some dogged pertinacity in his fibre, impelled him to desert the scattered company and plod painfully on. The nightmare of the past eight hours gripped his mind and, one by one, the circumstances and events paraded themselves before his inner vision and like the pieces of a jig-saw puzzle arrayed themselves in orderly sequence and relation.

One gap remained. He knew the piece he needed to complete the picture. The habit of the navigator, instinctively placing himself always in relation to last-known fixed points, revived his last impression of the *Calumet's* position on the chart. And

distinctly, as if in type before him he saw the letters "Maldonado" associating themselves with the vague but persistent desire that urged him on.

"About six bells, we wasn't far offa here," he said reflectively. "An' with this wind an' one thing'n another, it's worth lookin'," and he limped on determinedly. Another mile, out of the cove, around the point—and there, alone, as if forgotten even by God, lay a crumpled form. The faithfulness of friendship had triumphed, the picture was complete.

"All present or accounted for," he murmured, devoting his attention to this thirtieth on his roll. The gray still face was gashed and battered but not bloody or bruise-marked. The body was clad in a white shirt and white duck trousers, and the feet were bare. But up about one ankle, clinging by a strap, was a Chinese sandal.

"Poor Sparks," sighed the mate, and then he cursed, long, passionately, and devoutly. He reluctantly roused the sleeping Third who sat up, groaned, gritted his teeth and dragged himself painfully to his knees. A word or two was sufficient. The two men, intent on some strange purpose, tenderly bore the body of Kelly between them, a long, laborious undertaking, from its lonely isolation so far down the beach to a new resting place.

Gently, silently, they placed the still form on the beach. Then the mate's eye lighted, and a grim irony spoke in his husky whisper, as he motioned to the Third. "Let's just lay him alongside the Old Man," and together they shifted the body till it lay almost in the arms of the snoring Scriggs.

The dead operator's right arm was stiffly extended, with its rigid hand tightly clenched, and from between the forefinger and middle-finger hung a shred of blue cloth, quite fast to something that the tight-clasped fist refused to surrender, yet mutely proffered.

The two mates grimly surveyed their work, and with revulsion studied the form of Scriggs in its tight-buttoned double breasted reefer. "Marvel he ever got through the surf with the damned thing on," whispered the mate to the Third.

The coat was buttoned along the left-hand side, and wet, soiled, stained as it was, it still showed a brighter strip of blue between the two rows of buttons. But there was no button in the top space where the unused row ran down the right-hand side. Instead, there was a newly torn hole which extended itself in a long narrow opening like a slash reaching to the next button. The right thumb of the sleeping man was visibly swollen and blue.

"Musta hit somethin' with it," softly voiced the Third.

Grim, stern-faced like jurors in a row behind the master of the *Calumet,* sat twelve men. One threw a big yellow pebble, like a discolored goose-egg, that fell on the chest of Captain Scriggs.

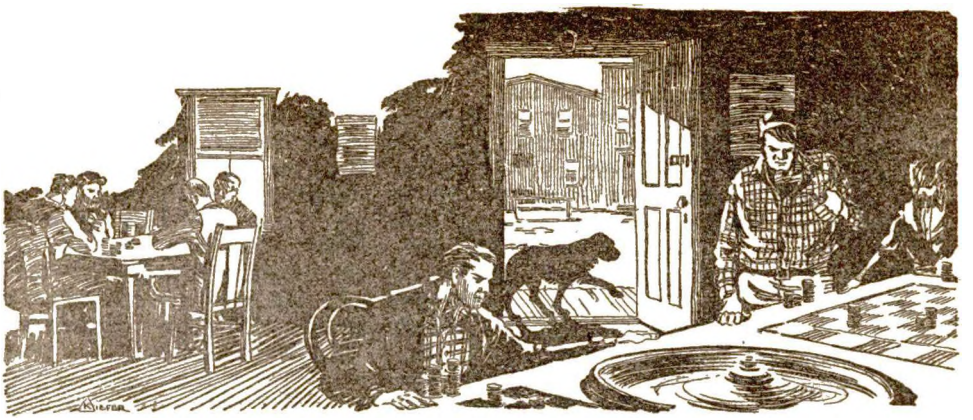
The crafty skipper sat up, snarling at his disturbers. Then his stream of lusty curses suddenly changed to a wild hysterical gabble as he stared, panic-stricken, into the sightless open eyes of his silent, unconsenting victim. And there were words in that sudden nerve-shaken gabble that damned him absolutely before those twelve keen-eared listeners.

"You hear him," said the mate, standing grim and relentless in the gray dawn. "Mark the torn cloth and missing button from his reefer that's in poor Sparks' hand here, too. 'Cause you'll want to get it straight when you stand up in court to tell it to the judge and the jury."

KIT CARSON'S ENDURANCE

ALEX GOWDIE, a French Canadian who for years was an associate of Kit Carson and who died, much respected, in Kern County, California, but a few years ago, said that one of the most remarkable things about Kit, a peculiarity to which much of his success as a scout and messenger was due, was his ability to keep on the go for long periods without sleep or rest.

Gowdie said that he had known of times when Carson crossed half the width of a state among hostile Indians, almost absolutely without sleep, traveling by night and lying up and watching against surprise attack by day. Except for a few individual companions in whose eternal vigilance and exceptional endurance Carson had confidence, Carson refused company on any of these long and difficult trips, preferring to go it alone rather than risk failure in watchfulness.—M. L. W.



SNITCH

By BRUCE JOHNS

Author of "Confidence," etc.

A TRADE WAS A TRADE WITH THE BIG NEWFOUNDLAND DOG OF PARSON CRAMER; BUT HE MANAGED TO TRADE HIS MASTER INTO A LOT OF TROUBLE —AND FINALLY CLEANED UP THE SOUTHWESTERN TOWN OF PLATEAU REQUA

THE Plateau Amusements Inc. owned the one gambling place in the town. There had never been what you might term civic pride about Plateau Requa, and so when Big Top Hennison gave up his circus activities to carry on a gambling enterprise there he found few particularly opposed to him.

It is true Mrs. O'Hara had threatened to crush his derby with her umbrella and offered to stick the point of it in the eyes of his two partners, Baldy and the Dude, but aside from this the town was little troubled about the advent of the "card and pool room vice." To the miners who dragged weary boots out of the mountains on Saturday night it was relaxation; to the Indians a habit. There were tables for pea pool and cards and a roulette. All were against the law of this particular northern California county, but apparently Sheriff John Frane's deputy at Biddle Springs, ten miles north, had not heard any more about it than had the sheriff. He resided thirty miles over the mountains at the county seat.

So for six months Big Top and Baldy and the Dude went on peaceably taking pay checks and whatever the Indians could donate. Then one day "Parson" Alexander Cramer drove in from the south and found much to his amazement that the plateau had no church.

Cramer lacked a divinity school diploma and had come into the business of pointing out the difference between right and wrong because he had a conscience. He was a two-fisted, broad-chested gentleman, which was not very startling when one knew he had not so long previously risen to the top of the four-round game as "Three-round" Cramer. He had won that name, too.

Cramer looked over Plateau Requa and decided first that it should get rid of the gamblers; and secondly that it should have a church. The first was a matter of the process of law, he thought.

And so he had invited the sheriff to his bachelor home to fill him with leg of lamb, currant jelly, boiled potatoes, cabbage, huckleberry pie and much good black tea.

Sheriff Frane, sitting back with his curved pipe resting on his lantern chin, looked across to his host and nodded solemnly at the words of condemnation this vigorous man was saying. Cramer was snapping his words through cigar smoke and there was just a twang of blasphemy in his speech. He was that kind of a parson.

"Damned shame, these fellows! You know I ain't no sweet Mary-Ann when it comes to gambling. You know me at least by reputation. You know I had as rough a neck as any of them. I'm no vanilla sody, I tell you. And I'm not going to change just because I've decided to be a minister.

A God-fearing man shouldn't fear man."

"And, besides, since you're now running for re-election I think your cleaning out of this gang would be a good political move. It would show very plainly that—er—that you were not bothering about a contribution from them to your election fund."

"We'll clean 'em out, I guess," promised the sheriff.

It was just then that Chesty Bob, Cramer's inquisitive-faced Newfoundland dog, came to the table from his bed on the back porch and drank in a great lungfull of lamb smell. He was neither polite nor quiet about the manner in which he snuffed.

"I forgot to feed the big fellow," said Cramer, and he began to scrape the contents of the dishes into one.

But he got off again on a tirade against the gamblers, and his hand was delayed as he argued, swinging a fork before his face. Chesty Bob had been lifting his big, clumsy feet all over the mountainside and there are few places better to work up an appetite than the northern California coast. So he went back to his bed and nosed around.

If you had known "the big fellow" from his pup days you would not have been surprised at his next move. He had been a camp dog, raised with the miners over the mountains and what food he got in those days often was hard-earned. He had been taught to carry a dinner pail to the mines and for this act he was thrown bread. When he went to the camp store with a note in his mouth he got something to eat; when he brought in wood, piece by piece, to keep the supper fire going, he got his meal. It was a trick he had never lost.

So suddenly he was back at the chair of the sheriff and had deposited a small roll of green paper on the floor. Then he licked Frane's hand. The sheriff lifted a bone from his plate and without looking down slipped it into the dog's mouth. This is very permissible in Plateau Requa.

It was summer, and, of course, they had been sitting in their shirt sleeves with their coats on the backs of their chairs. So when the sheriff rose at the suggestion of his host to go onto the porch to finish their smoke, he did not notice that he knocked his coat to the floor and hid the small roll.

But Cramer, returning from outside to give the dog his dinner, stopped long enough to lift his guest's coat. Then he saw the roll and picked it up. He stared at it, his eyes suddenly going toward the front room.

He fingered the roll, counted the bills. Just $1,000! A large sum, he thought for the sheriff to be carrying so carelessly. Then his eyes caught the impression of a rubber stamp on the paper band that held the bills together.

"Plateau Amusements Inc.," he read.

He couldn't believe it was true. No wonder the gambling had been going on unmolested. He rolled the bills again and put them in the side pocket of the coat.

Um! This was too bad.

II

WHEN Sheriff Frane left the Cramer home that night he took away with him an impression that the Parson did not like him quite as much as he had when he first entered the home. Suddenly after supper had come a challenge, a significance in his words that the sheriff could not understand.

As Frane walked along down to the plateau where he had left his automobile, he thought of the task before him. He must carry out the law and get rid of the gang. That would not be so hard. They were operating openly, according to what he had been told. Well, he'd find his deputy at Biddle Springs and come back the next day and drive them out. Then he would send a little something to the Parson with which to help the fund for his church.

He trudged along, his head down now against the wind that was blowing up from the mouth of the river. There was a touch of early autumn coming into the air. He put his hands into his pockets. Strange lump in one of them. He withdrew it, stared at it. It looked like money.

Under the glare of the lights from Joe Perato's grocery, Sheriff Frane examined the roll. He was bewildered. He slipped the band and counted the money. An even $1,000. He suddenly felt guilty of something—he didn't know what. He thrust the money hastily into his pocket and walked away from the light.

He moved to his automobile and got his flashlight spraying on the bills as he opened the roll again. Then he too saw the rubber stamp impression.

"Plateau Amusements Inc.," he read.

He was dumbfounded. Why should Cramer put this money into his pocket? He did not have it before he went into that house. He placed his flashlight back in the sidepocket of the door and stood there in the shadow, his hat pushed back, his hand on his forehead.

The word "election" flared through his

mind continually. This had something to do with dirty politics. There was a certain opponent in this election whose campaign slogan was "Bring back the good old times." The sheriff knew considerable about a certain type of prizefighter. Some were not very square. What if this "Parson" had not stepped as far from the prize ring as he claimed? What if he was the fourth partner to Big Top's gang, making a big bluff about getting rid of the gang to cover his activities—and getting a chance to put marked money into the sheriff's pocket. Sudden appearance of the district attorney, money taken from his pocket, discredited on the eve of election—such were Frane's thoughts.

Then he had jammed his hat down over his eyes, the money had been thrust back into his pocket and he had pounded his fist on the top of the door. The great bulk of him, clad in corduroy blouse and breeches, knee-length boots and wide-brimmed Stetson, was on the warpath.

III

BIG TOP, careless with success, had not even known the sheriff was in town. He had no lookouts. They would have been an unnecessary expense. Plateau Requa did not rate any local enforcement officers, aside from one constable who long ago had told Mrs. O'Hara he had been unable to discover anything wrong about the amusements company.

So Sheriff Frane was able to walk directly up to the lighted front windows and stand there for some time looking in. He wanted first of all to see that the three partners were there. He wanted them together. He didn't see them, but as his eyes went from table to table, they suddenly jerked to a stop as they rested on a tall, wiry man leaning against the opposite wall. Sheriff Frane cursed.

It was Parson Cramer, nonchalantly watching a game of stud. Frane's hands clenched. A preacher by day and a frequenter of gambling dives by night! He watched Cramer and saw that while he was watching the players occasionally his eyes wandered about the room as if he too were trying to find someone.

At that moment the sheriff saw three men come in from the rear door. Frane recognized them at once as the partners. Cramer had given him a very good description of them earlier in the evening. The three went into a large room, partitioned off from that in which the playing was going on. Frane had seen those rooms before. They were large with little furniture, perhaps only a big table and a few chairs. It was where the suckers with big money were taken for "a private little game."

As the three disappeared into the other room, Frane saw Cramer, a strange, keen look in his eyes, race in after them.

Frane left the front windows and dashed around to that rear door. He entered boldly and stood there a minute looking about. His badge was well hidden under his blouse and he was known to few of the players. If any recognized him, it made no difference now.

He walked over and leaned against the partition just outside the door. Just a few words to prove there was a connection between the money and the gamblers and then let Three-round Cramer still be good enough to keep a wad of money from being jammed down his throat.

IV

"AW, THROW him out!"

The voice of someone inside the room came menacingly toward the sheriff. It didn't sound like that of Big Top, for the veteran gambler's, Frane was sure, would be quiet, soft and polite. Then it must be one of the partners. Apparently the Parson was making demands.

"Why he's one o' them ministers. Yeh, hurl him out!"

And Frane heard Cramer's even tones. "Say, buddy, it'd take a dozen mice like you to hurl me out. Quit squeaking at me, will you?"

"Now, Mr. Cramer," came a suave voice that the sheriff instinctively knew to be Big Top's, "if you have some proposition to——"

"Lissen, here," yelled one of the partners. "I ain't goin' to take no gab from this psalm shouter. I'll poke the sap one in the snoot."

"You'll what?" said Cramer quietly. "Repeat that once and I'll hit you so hard you'll be stuck up on the wall for keeps. I ain't no sis and I ain't forgot how to use my hooks either."

"I suppose you think you're a fighter or somethin'?" asked someone.

And then the smooth but sneering voice

of Big Top, "Let's be reasonable about this thing. Bribery is a serious charge."

As the sheriff pressed harder against the door, he suddenly felt the fawning motion of a body at his legs. He looked down.

Chesty Bob was rubbing against his leg, pleading for something. The sheriff kicked aside an aged banana, which, though he did not know it, the dog had brought to him from the garbage heap in the rear of the building.

The dog looked with considerable disappointment at the sheriff's failure to respond. At the supper table that evening the guest had been good about his offering and made fair exchange—a good bone for a roll of greenbacks—To Chesty Bob there was no difference between a roll of greenbacks, a stick of firewood or a slightly used banana.

So Chesty Bob, the food hopper, left abruptly and walked into the room where his master was facing three angry men. He was going after something that would please the sheriff and produce food.

But the sheriff's mind was far from the dog or food either. He had turned now and stood at the door, boldly looking in. The word "bribery" had burned into his ears. He had turned to face them. And they did not face him. They did not even know he was there. Cramer was in a corner, his back to a wall, his chin thrust out. and he was smiling into the sharp, ugly faces of the three men who had surrounded him. They were standing so that all four would have had to turn their heads sidewise to see Frane.

"You won't get out of here unless you are ready to change your tune," Big Top was saying in the same suave tone he had used at first when he was ready to keep peace.

"He ain't goin' to git out no way," breathed one of the partners, whom Frane took to be the Dude.

The sheriff, looking at him as he stood with his back to the one table in the room, suddenly saw a knife thrust into the baize. The Dude had put it there as he talked.

The third man was deliberately standing straddle-legged before the cornered man, fitting brass knuckles over his fingers. He had a smile on his lips that was hideous.

"So," thought Frane, "thieves have fallen out. Well, I'll be damned if I don't let 'em go to it. I'll stand by to see there ain't no killing and none of them gets that knife. Let crook eat crook. I believe in it."

He had taken a good look at the room by now. It was just as he had figured, mostly clear space, with one table and a few chairs. The four were about twenty-five feet from him and had plenty of space to fight in. There was one other room which Frane saw led into a real office. The dog was nowhere to be seen.

He had slipped inside the room, yet so intent were the four upon the business at hand that they had not noticed him yet. Then he thought that the commotion of the fight might cause those outside playing cards to come in and stop it. That was one thing Frane didn't want. All the plans he had made about these men when he had abruptly left his automobile had been swept away by the development of this strange situation.

He slipped out again and stood looking at the players. None of them had as yet noticed anything out of the ordinary. But Flatfoot Jim, the town drunkard, who knew the sheriff so well because of the several times he had been his guest at the county jail, was weaving his way toward him.

As usual, Jim was drunk and was bent on reformation. He had signed the pledge so often that it had become a habit.

"What do you want, Jim?" said the sheriff.

"I seen the Parson go in here," muttered Jim. "Can't chu he'p me reform with him?"

"Listen here," whispered Frane, "what you doing in a dump like this? I'm going to raid it. Better get out fast, and if you got a friend or two you want to save you better tip them off fast."

He watched as Flatfoot turned and began to circulate among the tables. Everyone, as Frane had suspected, was a friend of the town drunkard. It was not a minute before the groups began to break up. Frane, his blouse pulled back to show his star, stood at the rear door. Even the dealers and the table tenders made hasty exodus.

Then he turned and slipped again into the room. Never before had he seen such a strange situation. The men had not yet come to blows. He could see by the actions of Big Top and his partners that they

thought they had their victim well trapped and that it was the best part of valor to make all necessary preparations for his defeat before the actual hostilities began.

They were in the same positions and still talking.

"Who's going to get the first pop on the kisser?" asked the fighting preacher. "I came in here for a purpose and I'm not going out until it's accomplished."

He was rubbing his knuckles of his left hand with the fingers of the right.

"I'm a southpaw," he volunteered in a bantering tone. "Look out for my left."

There was something cruel about the calm way the three gamblers took their time. Big Top had taken off his coat and was rolling his sleeves.

"You'll wish you hadn't butted in," he said as he worked back his shirt. "I hate to lick a preacher but it does seem sort of necessary to chase him out of town."

"We'll carry him out," said the Dude.

"What's left o' him," said Baldy.

They were both short, thin men. Wiry, Frane thought, and perhaps rather shifty with their fists. The sheriff didn't like the look of the brass knuckles on Baldy's hands and was a little worried about the knife on the table. But when his eyes went toward Three-round Cramer smiling in the corner, as he had smiled countless times while awaiting the gong in the prize ring, he changed his mind.

Even if there was a small Bible almost falling now from his hip pocket, Cramer certainly had the appearance of a scrapper, a lumberjack sky pilot, hefty-pawed with the lust of battle in his heart.

"Come on and do something," he called. "Come on, you yellow-bellied tinhorns. Let me see you hit me. I never start a fight, but I can finish one. Come and see the shooting stars. The skies are about to fall. Come and get it one, two, three! That's me, tinhorns, just three rounds. One apiece."

And Baldy, who had the brass "knucks", lost his temper. In a flash he leaped forward, his right fist flying out in a great arc. Then he jumped back.

"Come on! Come on!" he screamed to the others.

Frane saw a welt slowly rising on Cramer's cheek. Then he saw the big preacher get rid of his coat with one swing of his shoulders and arms, saw the smile creep back into his eyes. One foot advanced and the other followed with a sliding, rhythmical motion.

It was a noiseless move. He was shifting his body from side to side, yet coming on, moving slowly, determinedly out of the corner. He nodded his head as if his tight lips were telling the men before him something that was very important. Yet not a sound came from him. Just his piercing eyes looking straight forward.

"Hell!" said Big Top in a breath. "I thought——"

Frane knew what he thought. He had believed the one blow with the brass knuckles would floor the man. And instead it had only served to get him into a fighting mood.

Big Top pointed to Cramer.

"Get him," he said, and Frane noticed now there was no longer such suavity in his voice. There was a quake instead.

The other two—lacking the imagination of Big Top—stepped forward to meet Cramer. They took opposite sides of him.

Then, as if by a signal, they both sprang, their fists flailing about.

Cramer stood there, cleverly shedding blows and continuing the swaying motion of his body. Suddenly Big Top leaped forward into the battle. Cramer was reared back against the wall by the weight of blows. Yet he smiled.

And as he struck his back to the wall, he bounded forward as if from a tight net. He plowed through the two partners straight toward Big Top, unmindful of the rain of fists falling on his unprotected head and shoulders from both sides. They were falling over each other to get at him.

Then Cramer had a little space cleared at his elbows for a fraction of a second and in that time he hurled his fist forward from the shoulder and Big Top went down. Lying on the floor, half on his side as Cramer spun and fought off the other two. Big Top wiped blood from his lips and shook his head.

Frane, watching the strange combat, saw now the look of an animal in the former circus man's eyes. The gambler rose slowly to his hands and knees and began to crawl. He was coming toward the table and there was no mistaking his design. He was going after that knife. So intent was he that he did not see Frane standing in his path.

"You yellow dog," Frane snapped into the face of Big Top as he reached down and brought him up by the collar of his shirt and one arm. "Get back there and fight with your fists. You asked for it and you're going to get it."

"Go to hell!" said Big Top. "An' who are you?"

"Never mind," said Frane. "If I was as yellow as you I wouldn't even dare to swear."

The other three, now milling in the center of the room, still paid no attention to him. He went toward them dragging his struggling captive. He had Big Top so tightly by the collar that his red face was beginning to lose color.

"If you won't fight," Frane snapped, "I'll make you!"

He stepped toward the swirling three a little closer, lifted Big Top as if he were a boy and cast him upon Cramer's back.

Cramer spun as he felt the third opponent and his fist snapped out like a flame from the muzzle of a rifle. Big Top bent his back, dropped his arms at his sides and went down in a loose heap. He did not even grunt.

"Round one!" Frane heard Cramer mutter.

The Parson flung himself now into the melée with renewed strength. He knew one man was not coming back into the battle. So he danced about, while the sheriff leaned against the wall. All had seen the sheriff now, but they were too far into the battle to stop. Besides the Dude and Baldy had never seen the law's representative before and he was to them just a stranger who had wandered in at the sound of battle.

Cramer, the smile still on his lips, began to show spirited footwork. He was pummeling Baldy and that brass knuckle bearer was losing ground Yet Cramer was taking an unmerciful beating as he waded in.

Frane left the wall and followed closely behind the fighters as they moved. He, too, was suddenly smiling. He was appreciating the fact that he was witness to Three-round Cramer's greatest fight.

And as he followed the battle around the room, he at last saw Cramer start his right fist up from his waist as Baldy, in front of him, attempted to clinch. There was a grunt as the fist struck the other's face. Then came up the wicked left that had won so often for Cramer in the old days. There was a crash and Baldy went down and turned over on his face.

"Round two!" said Cramer

He turned and faced his third man. One blow followed another. The Dude turned to flee. Frane, behind him, grasped his shoulders and deftly swung him about. He hurled him back upon Cramer.

"Take it," he muttered.

There was again the crash of the famous left.

"And round three!" said the sheriff.

V

STANDING spreadlegged near the table, Cramer wiped blood from his mouth. Then he spat out a tooth. Big Top was stirring and trying to sit up, but his partners lay propped against the wall where Frane had dragged them.

The sheriff leaning with his back to the door, looked solemnly and steadily at Cramer.

"Well," he said clearly, "it didn't turn out as you thought. So you got to fighting over me? Well, well, now ain't that nice?"

"Yes, over you who ain't worth it," answered Cramer, as he wiped blood from a fast-closing eye.

"You seem to have put up a good scrap over nothing then," commented Frane without hiding the compliment in his voice. "And if I ain't worth fighting over perhaps my job is. Is that it?"

"No one wants your job that I know of," snapped Cramer, "but I guess when they hear of this night someone else will get it."

The sheriff was somewhat surprised at that statement, and showed it in his face.

"Mebbe," he told Cramer, "you can spit out a couple more teeth and get some explanation out of that gab of yours."

He advanced toward Cramer and stood across the table, pounding his fist on the baize.

"Come on!" he shouted. "Yell out what's on your chest. Ain't you man enough? What did you come here for tonight?"

Cramer, too, began to pound at the table on his side.

"I came here," he yelled, a beat of his fist echoing each word, "to make these crooks confess they gave you a bribe to protect them. I told them I was going to run them out of town even if you did take their $1,000 to let them stay. Then they walked into a couple of fists of dynamite!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" ejaculated Frane. "Me taking a bribe! Well, I'll be everlastingly damned!"

"You've got it in your pocket!" roared Cramer. "Unless you cached it."

"So you're trying to carry on your

frame-up," said the sheriff, "even after falling out over it? Well, well, I'm surprised at you, Cramer, posing as a minister."

"Be surprised at yourself," yelled Cramer, "after your good record in office! Yes, be surprised and ashamed."

The blood was mounting rapidly in the sheriff's face. His eyes burned across the table into those of the man who had been his host just a short time before Both men were speechless with anger.

Into the sudden silence came the pattering of claws on the carpetless floor. Neither turned. Then as their eyes dropped at a movement on the table between them they jerked back.

There lay a roll of greenbacks. Chesty Bob, dropping his forefeet from the table, took up a position on his haunches, hopefully awaiting results. He looked first at his master and then at Frane and wagged his tail.

"Well, I'll be blowed!" said the Parson.

Frane said nothing Slowly he reached into his pocket and cast another roll beside that the dog had carried in.

"They look alike," he said.

"They are alike," came a voice at the back of Frane.

They looked at Big Top tottering beside them, his hand reaching toward the money.

Frane struck fast with his open hand against the man's arm.

"Get back, you!"

"It's my money," said Big Top. "Taken out of a cigar box I thought I hid well—in a bundle of papers and stuff in the office."

"Has my dog," asked Cramer, "been around here before?"

"He has," replied Big Top. "I kicked him out of that room this evening earlier."

Cramer found a chair and slipped into it.

"Big Top," he said, "how long has this money been missing?"

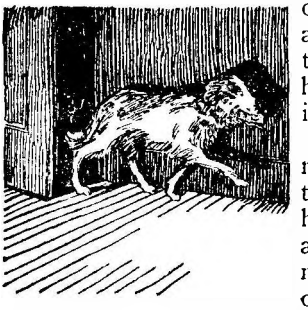
"It ain't been missing at all," said the gambler. "I never seen such a slick slight o' hand as when this guy slipped my roll out of his pocket just now."

"Don't you know this guy?" asked Cramer.

"No."

Cramer pondered the matter for a moment while the sheriff stood looking at the money with a puzzled expression on his face.

"You don't know my dog, do you?" asked Cramer. "You don't know how he was trained by someone to always bring something to get something to eat. It's his one trick. He's a snitch. This time I'm afraid he's overworked it.



"Why, he must have taken this money from here, carried it all the way to my house and dropped it at your chair. He must have thought it was for a good trade, because it had the smell of human beings on it. Dogs do think in a sort of single-track fashion.

"Now, I know enough about Big Top to know he is telling the truth when he says he doesn't know you. I've been an awful fool and taken an awful beating I was sure you got the money from these men. I'm sorry."

"And I thought you put it in my pocket to frame me for them," said the sheriff.

"I put it in only because it was under your coat that had fallen from the chair," added Cramer.

Big Top pressed again to the table.

"Lissen here," he said, "what's all this? Who are you anyway?"

But Frane held up his hand for silence, and then began to talk himself.

"Gentlemen," he said, "Mr. Cramer here is trying to build a church in Plateau Requa. It seems to me this $2,000 here would be just enough. It comes from so many in the plateau that I think it can be considered a mass donation."

He thrust the rolls toward Cramer.

"Here," said the startled Big Top, "that's my money; and who the hell are you?"

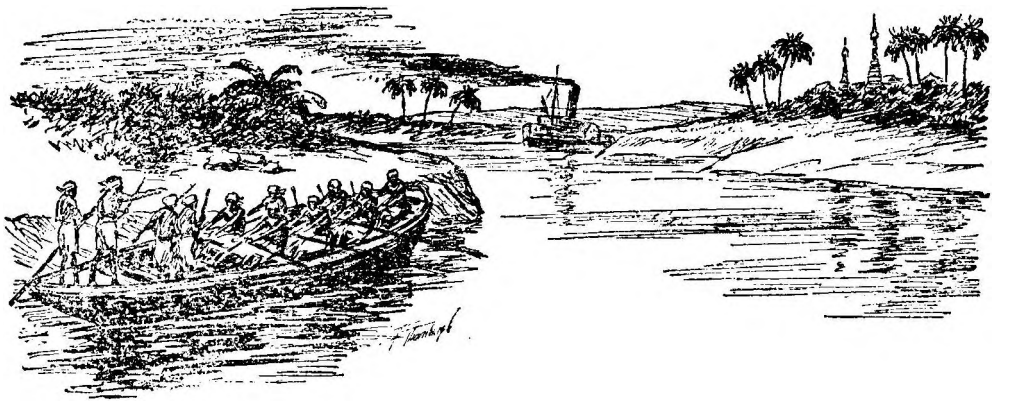
"Oh," said Frane, pushing back his blouse, "I forgot to introduce myself. I'm official skid-placer for gamblers. Toddle along, you three. I'll give you twenty-four hours. Or would you rather take a trip over the mountain and take six months to think it over?"

"Oh, hell," said Big Top, "I guess I know when I'm through. Take the dough."

There was an angry bark at the door.

Chesty Bob was negotiating with Flatfoot Jim. A Bible that had fallen from Cramer's pocket was being offered in exchange for a sandwich Jim held in his hand.

"Oh, I shay," Flatfoot was saying, "thish ish bein' forched upon me."



THE PIRATES OF THE IRRAWADDY

By S. B. H. HURST

Author of "Trial by Jungle," etc.

A STORY OF BURMA, WHICH IS A CUUNTRY, S. B. H. HURST SAYS NO WHITE MAN REALLY KNOWS, NOT EVEN YET, AND WHICH IN HIS TIME WAS A WILD REGION OF STEAM HEATED UNNATURALNESS, WHERE WELL MIGHT HAVE BEFALLEN SUCH A STRANGE ADVENTURE AS THAT OF WHICH HE TELLS

WHEN the last Burmese war officially ended with the surrender of King Thibaw and the picturesque looting of Mandalay, it was in reality merely beginning. For the Burmese army of about four hundred thousand men, armed with Snider rifles, disbanded into small groups, each under its leader—its *Boh*—and went into the ancient and honorable business of dacoitry. They robbed and burned entire villages, they descended to robbing hen roosts, relieved innocent travelers of their money and, if the traveler survived the attack, crucified him to the nearest tree. And the angry British army, also in small groups, hunted these dacoit gangs with zest, sweatings, fevers and unpleasant deaths in deep jungles. Generally the dacoits had the laugh on the soldiers, and all Upper Burma was in what might be called a state of disintegrated siege. Finally, as if to show what they could do, a gang of dacoits stole one of the Irrawaddy Company's steamers, the *Moulmein*.

The *Moulmein* left Rangoon to make its last trip up the river to Sinbo—many hundreds of miles—before the rains made the upper river, "the third defile", unnavigable. She shipped a new crew before leaving—a crew which, under the simple disguise of sailors, was a gang of robbers. She reached Bhamo, the last call before Sinbo, but never reached her destination. A hundred miles above Bhamo the crew took charge. They did it gently, without fighting, as the six white officers had no chance to fight. The crew laughed at these officers, being apparently too delighted with their success to be cruel to them, and set them ashore on the muddy bank of the river to walk where they would. This in itself was sufficiently cruel, perhaps, besides being undignified.

But what annoyed the steamship company even more than the stealing of the steamer was the fact of the *Moulmein's* strong room containing one hundred thousand pounds in sovereigns and Bank of England five-pound notes—the best currency to have around the world in those days. These the dacoits appropriated. They were consigned to the Franco-Chinese Bank in Sinbo. The company demanded the Indian army, the government said the army was otherwise engaged, but that it would look into the matter. And there it yeasted, while the *Moulmein* rusted, high if not dry on the bank of the river.

Sinbo was not much of a place to look at. Scattered native dwellings, ranged unevenly for three quarters of a square mile, and half a dozen better built buildings housed the white people and their businesses. And while it was raining all over Burma, Sinbo had apparently inherited the Deluge. So thought the agent of the Irrawaddy Steamship Co., sitting in his lonely office, smoking Burmese cheroots and drinking Scotch. In the busy season he boasted of a Bengali clerk, but during the rains the clerk went on his vacation.

Outside the window bare footed and straw covered Burmese plodded lazily and for the most part silently—for it is beneath the dignity of a Burman to do any work. More active Chinese and Shans chattered noisily; hens and other animals, trying to escape domesticity and regain their prehistoric jungle life, made equal noise with pursuing Burmese children; and the stench of Sinbo rose in its vast might against the rain, and ascended toward an offended heaven. The agent dreamed of the England he had left, and cursed his need of leaving it. Now and then he thought of the *Moulmein,* rusting high if not dry, a hundred miles down river, and grinned reminiscently at the plight of her officers when put ashore by the native crew and told to be so undignified as to walk. A slight noise aroused the agent, and he looked up sleepily to see, standing in the doorway, a 'gone-native' white man.

The gone-natives were whites who had been driven from their kind by crime or evil habits, who usually had a native wife or two and who drank, stole or begged, and never worked. This one might have been thirty years old, but what with his unkempt beard, his rags and dirt looked any age one wished to guess at. But what gave him a sort of distinction in vagabondage was a single eyeglass which tried valiantly to twinkle in the man's wet right eye.

"Hullo," said the agent, who was a kindly soul. "You look wet and chilled. Better have a drink or you'll get fever."

The tramp shivered, as if he either had fever or needed drink very badly. He nodded, shuffled his bare feet to the agent's desk and took a liberal drink.

'Ha!" he exclaimed.

"Feel better?" asked the agent.

"Thanks, yes," answered the tramp in the cultured tone of Oxford. "Much better, thanks." He took another drink.

The agent was interested. He had been bored, and this tramp was better than nothing as amusement. There had always, apparently, been gone-native vagabonds in Burma, but after the war developed in the province those who had made Upper Burma their stamping ground had drifted down Rangoon way, where it was safer. This chap with the monocle would pass an idle hour, and if he begged, the agent could afford a rupee or two.

"Sit down, and have a talk," he invited.

The tramp grinned. "Want to buy my autobiography—orally?" he asked.

The agent flushed. "I don't do those things," he said.

"I apologize," said the tramp, and now his smile made the agent almost forget the 'gone-native' stigma. "But one in my state of life does not always meet gentlemen."

"Well, I won't ask you what brought you to it," said the agent. "Let's talk as friends. I'm a Merton man."

"I was at Wadham," said the tramp. "But this is not Oxford and that snarling, muddy river outside is a long way from the Thames. I came on business, anyhow!"

"Business!" exclaimed the astonished agent.

"Yes," the tramp grinned. "I don't look like a business man, but you know now and then I hear things of use to my, er, late fellow countrymen. I am *au fait* with all the native dialects, you see. I might hear a chance word about—well, about what became of the crew of the *Moulmein,* and what they did with the gold and notes."

"Going into the detective business?" asked the agent genially.

"I wouldn't call it that—not just that," said the tramp. "But, by the way, did anything unusual occur during the *Moulmein's* trip?"

The agent laughed.

"I would call it unusual," he said. "She had never been stolen before!"

"But apart from that?" the tramp grinned.

The agent shook his head. "The trick of a new crew has been worked before—by pirates on the Yang Tse," he said. "No, the *Moulmein* left Bhamo with everything as usual, and never reached Sinbo here."

"Left Bhamo?" exclaimed the tramp. "Allenbyo, you mean, don't you? Your steamers never call at Bhamo when making the last rush trip before the rains—they want to get to Sinbo and get out safe again."

"It's that way usually," agreed the agent. "But there was freight for Bhamo—extra rates—and as the *Moulmein* was ahead of schedule she landed it there."

"Much freight?" asked the tramp.

"No, just a case of books. That's all."

"A case of books," remarked the tramp. "Who reads books in Bhamo?"

"Oh," smiled the agent, "they aren't all that bad, you know. There is the garrison—half a company, maybe—and a few English."

"Who were the books consigned to?"

"What does it matter?"

"I just wondered."

"But the dacoits had nothing to do with the books."

"Of course not And nobody came on board at Bhamo."

"Not a soul. I personally asked the officers. But there was no need—the entire crew were dacoits."

"Well," said the tramp, "if I hear anything I'll let you know. You have been nice to me. Let me see a copy of the manifest, will you? I know people in Bhamo, but I don't know anyone so interested in books as to pay extra freight to get them."

The agent laughed.

"You're a queer chap," he said, "but I'll show you. Here, 'Case marked L M. Consigned to Lal Muckergee, Bhamo. From Coomer Ali, Rangoon.' Native stuff, you see."

"Thanks," the tramp grinned. "Some Mohammedan sending religious books to a Hindu—trying to convert him, eh? Goodby, old chap, and thanks."

"Er—" the agent stammered, for this man appealed to him. "Er—old man, suppose—I mean, if you are going to try to find out things for us suppose I give you a rupee or two—as a retainer."

The tramp smiled. "You're too decent a chap to beg from. Goodby," he said, and went out into the streaming rain.

It was cold outside—for Burma—and the gloomy afternoon was merging into unpleasant night.

"Beastly assignment," muttered the tramp. "But something had to be done to satisfy the Irrawaddy Company, so Cameron told them he had put his best man on the job. That's me! But this is not secret service work—it's detective stuff. Humph, both are all the same. And I can't find a thing, while I'll lose reputation—with myself. Start up the river and work down—that's my plan. Nothing in Sinbo, so I'll work down river. Next place Bhamo."

And Horace Sinnat, Indian Secret Service, 006, Domestic, who had done wonderful work in his gone-native disguise for years, walked toward the river bank, hoping to board a native boat which would row, drift and sail him down the river to Bhamo.

The gone-native disguise, his unusual methods, his wonderful success, gave Sinnat the unusual distinction of being known as the best man in the Service—a difficult and hazardous service—while among his intimates it gave him the nickname of "Bugs." And now Bugs waited, as patiently as an image of Buddha, for some native boat—the only boats able to navigate the swirling third defile in the rains. He would pay the crew with unprintable native stories, English music hall songs, and pick up information. He knew the native mind as no other white man ever knew it, and had come and gone with safety even among the most cruel dacoits. And presently a harried boat came swirling along. Bugs shouted into the gloom and wet. A straw garbed Burman growled the native for 'Go to the devil', but the swift repartee of Bugs made him laugh. The rest of the crew laughed also, and three of the five of them recognized the well known and amusing tramp.

"Stand in and let him swim on board," said one. "If all the English were like him I could love them."

"If they were," said another, "they would not have won the war."

"They didn't win it," another chimed in. "Our men still fight them."

The boat had been deftly steered near shore, and Bugs clambered on board—wet and very cold. But he at once began to chatter amusing scandal, and a bottle of native spirits was given him to keep out the fever. And so, on toward Bhamo. Bhamo was better off than Sinbo, in that the one track railway from Rangoon ended there. But it was only a strip of sometimes dry land in a vast swamp, and when Bugs went ashore the next night it looked like a most miserable end of the world.

The secret service man was worn and tired from sitting cramped in the boat, which had been a particularly small one, and even his iron constitution had not quite avoided the fever which comes with a wetting in Burma. The angry river buffeted the piles of the old wharf until they groaned, and the heavy rain, harried by a

shrill wind, seemed to be laughing at the misery of Bhamo.

But Bugs had a place to go where he would be welcomed by immoral company. It was perhaps the most remarkable feat of his career when he succeeded in becoming a member of the Jerawahs, the oldest and largest criminal society in India, in the world, which legend claimed had been founded by a small group of thieves who preyed upon the camp followers of Alexander the Great. In Upper Burma, in Bhamo, at the time of the dacoity of the *Moulmein* there were not so many Jerawah go-downs as in later years, but in the place to which Bugs hastened were members of the society who made him welcome, gave him a drink and offered him opium.

Although he steered the talk to the looting of the *Moulmein* he could hear nothing concerning the band who had taken her, nor yet glean a scrap of information regarding the disposition of the loot. Not one of the stolen notes or sovereigns had been seen by any Jerawah.

"And damn few rupees lately," growled a big Pathan, grinning at Bugs. "But, of course," his tone became lofty, "of course we Jerawahs do not admit into our Association such pariahs as dacoits. So far no Burman is with us, and I, for one, don't want them. They always want to kill when they steal, which is silly, because no one will buy a corpse. No, we have not troubled ourselves about that steamer. She was run ashore on the other side of the river, anyway."

Bugs grunted, almost asleep. Around him every variety of criminal talked of his specialty, as one man of business to another. The reek of opium came to the nostrils of the secret service man as it were the breath of an old world dying. As gently as a woman, a great bearded Pathan placed a cushion under Bugs' head. The Jerawah were such a genuine brotherhood that the secret service man hated his pretence of being as much a crook as any of them. But he never did more than pick up information—never gave the police particulars concerning the brotherhood. As a matter of fact, the English police had no idea such a brotherhood existed Only a few white men had an inkling, and Bugs, and one other, were the only Englishmen ever admitted.

Bugs dreamed. The *Moulmein* rocked hazily into his dream. She sailed like a dark cloud across a vast and seemingly endless ocean. It was raining hard. Bugs was steering the steamer, but when he turned the wheel to head her to starboard she persisted in going to port. The rain grew heavier. Bugs looked up, thinking it hailed. A bright, new, gold sovereign hit him in the right eye, bouncing off the monocle without harming it. The skies were raining sovereigns. Bugs was not avaricious but he took one hand from the wheel of the tossing *Moulmein* and caught a falling sovereign. There was something curious about that sovereign, for in place of the name and features of Queen Victoria Bugs saw a queer looking native of India and the words "Lal Muckergee."

He laughed so much in his dream that he awakened laughing. Opening his eyes he saw the big Pathan laughing in sympathy.

"A pleasant dream, brother," said the Pathan.

"A funny dream," grinned Bugs. "And it reminds me about a man. What men named Lal Muckergee do you know in Bhamo?"

"There are doubtless many," said the Pathan. "Did you meet a Lal Muckergee in the dream?" he went on with the gravity of his race when inquiring about dreams. "And was he fat or thin?"

"I did not meet Lal Muckergee in my dream," said Bugs truthfully. "I but saw a sort of picture of him. I know not whether he was fat or thin—in the dream—since I only saw the head. But it reminded me of a funny thing—of a Lal Muckergee who appears to have money—much money, since he is fool enough to buy books. I heard of him and decided to do business with him—blackmail, likely. This Lal had a case of books left here by the *Moulmein* just before the dacoits took her. If he can pay to have books, he can pay me not to bother him. I was away, as you know, so cannot tell where my man may be. But many of our young brothers must have been on the wharf when the *Moulmein* came in—half the city would be there—on her last trip. Perchance one of our younger brethren noticed where he took his books. For myself I have never seen the man. Another friend gave me the tip."

The Pathan closed his eyes to think.

"I had to tell him something," thought Bugs. "Now I will have to follow some young thief to an old book shop—if there is one in Bhamo—and then pretend that the Lal with the books is the wrong Lal. It may be true that everything in the universe is in relation—that I cannot sneeze without disturbing slightly the most distant star—but running after a man with books

is too distant a relation to my job of finding trace of the dacoits to have any sort of family likeness. Still, I must do something to pass the time, and I can't stand the reek of this place much longer, much less sleep in it.

The Pathan shook his head gravely.

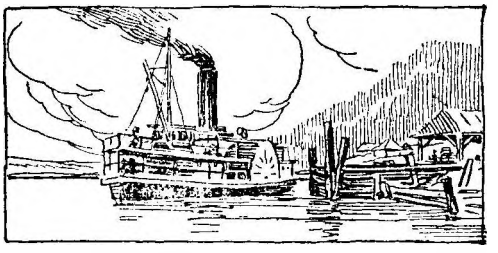
"No," he said, "no Lal Muckergee I know of could buy books. I know none who can read. But your man—— Hey!"

He called and beckoned to a boy at the other end of the room. And when the boy came running—for the Jerawahs teach respect to one's elders!—he said, "Son of several lachs of devils, were you on the wharf learning how to pick pockets without making more noise than a buffalo, when the *Moulmein* was last here? I remember I gave you that assignment that day—it has just come to me that you did not report. For this you shall be beaten, but at present my brother here seeks information. You were on the wharf, playing instead of attending to business. What did you see?"

"Nobody I could rob. But I tried," whimpered the boy.

"What did the steamer do?" asked Bugs, feeling deeply sorry for the small neophyte in crime.

"Just came and went," the boy plucked up courage from the kindly smile of the secret service man. "He," he indicated the big Pathan with the backward jerk of the right thumb by which a Jerawah introduces a Jerawah to a brother, "he did not say the steamer would come. He said, 'Go down to the wharf. Maybe the steamer



stop. If she does there will be white animals there to steal from.' But the white animals must not have known the steamer would stop—there were none there. Yet while I waited the steamer did stop—for so short a time that she did not stop."

"Son of devils," growled the Pathan. "What trick talk is that?"

"She just came to the wharf, and a derrick slung a box ashore to a fat man, who signed for it."

"What did the fat man do with the box?" asked Bugs, not interested in the box but hoping to help the boy escape punishment.

"He had a man with him with a bullock cart. They put it in the cart. It was heavy and they grunted when they lifted. Then the fat Mohammedan told the driver to drive to the railway station. I remember this because we tried to beg from the fat driver—seeing no better game—and he reviled us."

"Maybe he shipped his books to a customer down the line," said Bugs. "But, child, the fat man was not a Mohammedan. He was a Hindu—Lal Muckergee."

"He was a Mohammedan," asserted the boy stoutly.

The heavy hand of the Pathan descended upon the boy's ear.

"Child of shame, don't contradict an elder brother," he growled.

"Never mind," said Bugs. "The boy is sleepy and forgets. It is of no importance."

The boy looked at Bugs, as if again to assert that the owner of the books was a Mohammedan, but the Pathan kicked him and he ran away.

"What now, brother?" asked the Pathan.

"Nothing," answered Bugs. "Yet if I could find Lal Muckergee I might make him give me five rupees."

"How?" grinned the Pathan.

"By telling him I would tell the police that he was a murderer—that is, if the boy is right and he is really a Mohammedan. A Mohammedan trying to disguise himself under a Hindu name means a man trying to escape an awful crime," laughed Bugs. "So I will pretend that he is one way or the other—it's worth trying, because a fool who buys books must have money."

The Pathan laughed. "Good luck, clever brother," he said.

And Bugs went out.

"And in case that somewhat smelly Pathan, who has a suspicious disposition, sends a youthful Jerawah to spy upon me, and because there is nothing else to do, although it has no connection with my assignment—I will enquire concerning the Hindu Lal Muckergee whom the boy said was a Mohammedan. The babu assistant station master will object to being disturbed, yet I will disturb him," mused Bugs.

He walked through the night of Bhamo, which was like walking among the fantastic scenery of a deserted pantomime stage haunted by the hungry ghosts of unpaid actors. The rain had tapered off to a chill

drizzle, but the mud was a foot deep. As Bugs was bare footed this did not matter so much. Slinking shadows—slinking not from fear of the police but for greater stealth in 'doing business'—strange, isolated and seemingly disconsolate bits of weird music, cries of all sorts, groans. And all manner of the unmentionable, in a reek which might have been the fumes rising from the dregs of hell.

The station was dark, but Bugs knew where to find the office of the native assistant station master, the place where that voluble graduate of the University of Calcutta worked and slept. Where he took his meals was his own mysterious business. Upon the door Bugs knocked with a stone. As he expected, he knocked for a long time without waking anything but echoes. Finally a very weary voice told him to go away or "take the reesk of treespassing upon the Company property after closing hours."

"I want the money you owe me," growled Bugs, in English also.

"I owe no man money," lied the babu, whose gambling debts haunted him.

"My friend Lal Muckergee left five rupees with you for me," asserted Bugs.

"Which Lal Muckergee? But none have left money."

"The Lal Muckergee who is very fat, and who brought a case of books here from the *Moulmein* the last time she was here," said Bugs.

"No Lal Muckergee did that," and the babu chuckled. "Go away!"

"No books were brought here from the *Moulmein?*" asked Bugs, irritated.

"Oah, yes, books. But no Lal Muckergee."

"Babu," said Bugs gently, "I have friends who would tear down this place for the fun of doing it. I have but to call on them. Come and open the door, or I will call them."

There were stirrings within the office which indicated that a pious Hindu was surrendering to the heathen of the stronger gods. Then a face, peering cautiously through the window, seen bleared through dark and drizzle. The face saw nothing more dangerous than a white tramp who was very wet and who wore a monocle. He had seen the tramp before.

"Oh," chuckled the babu, much relieved, "it's you."

"I believe so," admitted Bugs.

"You are a poor fellow, eh?" the babu used the tone only his kind can use to a poor and down and out representative of the conquering race. He received a shocking surprise. Bugs was cold and annoyed. He told himself that he was wasting his time, and this irritated him. The insult of the babu brought his temper to a head. With a sudden motion he dragged his revolver from under his arm and poked it through the bars of the window. It rested against the nose of the almost paralyzed assistant station master.

"If you don't reach round and unlock that door I'll blow you to Jehanun," said Bugs. "And you'll be badly off there—the one Hindu among millions of Mohammedans."

"Sir," whined the babu, "please don't shoot. I have wives and children, sir."

And now he spoke as men speak to viceroys.

"Open the door," growled Bugs ominously, barely able to avoid laughing

He walked through the suddenly opened door. The babu looked nervously for the terrible gun, but it was no longer visible.

"But, sir, I have no money here," he whined.

"What have you done with it?"

The babu felt very miserable. His juggling of the company's petty cash mocked him. Then he remembered Bugs' statement that Lal Muckergee had left five rupees, and he grasped at this hungrily.

"But, sir, no Lal Muckergee left money here for you," he said as if apologizing for Lal Muckergee's forgetfulness.

"You lied just now when you said that Lal Muckergee did not bring books here—you are lying now," said Bugs.

"No, sir, no, sir—I can show you record. Not Lal Muckergee. Not a Hindu—it was a Mohammedan, and he said his name was Coomer Ali!"

"Coomer Ali?" Bugs was startled.

"Yes, sir. I show you record."

He turned to get his day book. Bugs was thinking.

"A bit queer. Coomer Ali ships a case of books to Lal Muckergee in Bhamo. A chap calling himself Lal Muckergee gets the books and drives with them to this station. By the time he reaches the station he is Coomer Ali. He has changed his name and religion. Lal is a Hindu of course; Coomer is a Mohammedan. The boy Jerawah was right. It was Coomer—or some Moham-

medan who got the books from the *Moulmein*. The junior officer who took the receipt would not bother about identifying either the man or his faith. So it seems that Coomer shipped the books to Lal, and then either Lal could not pay, or something went wrong with the deal, and Coomer travels all the way to Bhamo to get his books. Some native swindle. No, it wasn't that. Coomer Ali wouldn't travel all that distance—a Mohammedan friend in Bhamo got the books for the Coomer in Rangoon."

The babu returned. By the light of a candle he showed Bugs the record.

"Here, sir. Case of books—a large case. Coomer Ali was going to Rangoon with his books, but they were too heavy for personal luggage, so I made him pay freight. You see, sir."

"You mean that Coomer Ali took his books to Rangoon, and went with them?" asked Bugs.

"He paid for ticket to do that, sir."

"Hum," thought Bugs, "I was right in the first place. Coomer sold the books to Lal. Then he became suspicious of a hated Hindu and rushed up to Bhamo and got the books himself. Naturally, he went back to Rangoon with them. In my youth this would have seemed suspicious to me—since I lack any sort of a clue to the dacoity of the *Moulmein*. But I am grown older, and do not run after every native swindle that appears mysterious and unusual. This Coomer Ali is a sort of unconscious red herring drawn across the trail." Aloud he said, "Babu, for once you have told the truth, and I am so amazed by it that I will not rob you. You, of course, have no whisky here, but if you can find me a good drink of decent stuff I will go away and let you sleep."

The much relieved babu found the drink, and Bugs went his way.

"I must get down river," he thought. "But, first, so there will be no unsettled questions floating around my brain, I will send Wilkinson a wire."

When the telegraph office opened in the morning Bugs sent his wire. Two hours later he received this reply:

"Captain of Moulmein *cannot get another job. Is practically destitute. The company contends he should have fought for his ship. He seems to have had the reputation of being timid. He knew nothing about the shipment of money. It's company policy—wrong, I think—not to take ship officers into confidence about supervaluable shipments. Officers know that articles of value are in strong room, but never know what value actually is. They are put in strong room by Company official. Strong room only opened in presence of consignee, by captain and first officer, who have separate keys. Dacoits blew door off strong room to get gold.*

Moulmein *stopped at Bhamo to land case of books. Have asked third and fourth officers about this. Case had lain on deck several days—sent up from hold by mistake at Allenbyo—and consignee, Lal Muckergee, made awful fuss about books being spoiled by wet. Said he would sue company for damages. No more.*

Wilkinson."

Bugs translated this from code.

"As I expected," he thought. "But I don't believe in leaving frayed ends in my mind—and the captain might have appeared to have inherited money. Company ought to take officers into confidence, but that's their business. And the book episode ends somewhere in a Rangoon godown with much chatter and bad words—unless Coomer Ali sues the Company. Yet somewhere, surely, along this swollen river there must be a clue to the dacoits and the money. I will go along with the tide. No use bothering about how the crew of dacoits got the job. The foreman who had charge of them offered his services, and was signed on. And that foreman, of course, sailed with the *Moulmein* and was the boss dacoit. Government ought to compel river crews to sign on formally before a magistrate, as they do white men. Now for another boat, and down to Allenbyo."

ANOTHER native boat. The swirling river. The big sweeps of the crew—standing facing forward as they rowed. Their queer Shan-Chinese boat song. The desolate river banks. Flooded paddy fields. Crows pecking at what offered, bramley-kites flying low, ready to swoop down for scraps. Two Burmans who were nine tenths Chinese at their interminable oar-song; one at the steering sweep; one resting—relieving one of the others when his turn came. Eighteen hours of work at least for every man in every twenty-four. At Rangoon they would rest a week or two in an opium dream—the rain poured as if to mock the unborn rainbows. Bugs helped and did the cooking.

He was dozing when, about a dozen miles above Allenbyo, the clue to the dacoity came to him. He almost shouted.

As he controlled the impulse he was muttering, "They never knew. They never knew. I wonder if those poor toil-horses at the sweeps are as stupid as I am."

He rose, cramped, from the waist of the boat, where he had drowsed among the cooking gear. The rain still harried all the world—a world of brown mud across which a river sprawled like the eternal and never ending snake of the myth of the Chin Hills. The secret service man's heart pulsed with excitement and the urge of victory in sight—if there was time, if there was time.

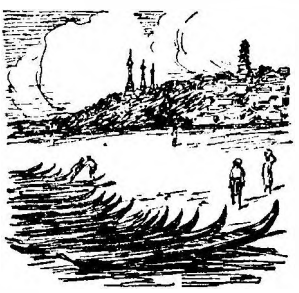
Yet he yawned when he addressed the head-man who swayed as he steered, looking like a straw-thatched gnome borne upon the unlocked torrent of the hills.

"I want you to stop the boat at Allenbyo, and wait there two hours for me while I go on shore to visit a friend," said Bugs.

The bowed and weary figure creaked among its straws but did not answer. It was staring through stoney eyes at its dream, some days ahead in Rangoon, and had not eyes or ears for its present world. It steered the boat like some unconscious automaton, its actions controlled and guided by an equally blind desire. Now and then it grunted, as if in chorus to the boat-dirge of the two rowers.

"I want to go ashore at Allenbyo," Bugs raised his voice, and laid a hand on the figure's right arm. The stoney eyes came back slowly from the dream to the real, and the body shivered at the suddenly realized wet and cold. Bugs repeated his request. The boatman shook his head. A faint smile went over his brown and wintry features—the passing smile of a man whose entire being is set on being faithful to his soul's desire.

"No stop Allenbyo. Rangoon you go on shore," the man grunted, and again began to stare through weary time.



Bugs shook the arm gently.

"Ten rupees," he said with such emphasis that the mechanical rowers heard him and turned their heads to listen.

The boatman quickened to the enticing words. Ten rupees was a fortune—an untilled bliss-valley of dreams. But now he grinned, looking at the ragged white man from whose awful beard the rain dripped gleefully.

"When did you have ten rupees?" he asked, and the two rowers laughed wanly.

Now, underneath his shirt Bugs had a money belt. It lay beneath the arm holster which sustained his gun. But he had no intention of exposing wealth to boatmen who were brigands by inheritance, dacoits by chance, river-men from necessity.

"Twenty rupees to put me ashore at Allenbyo," said Bugs.

The rowers stopped rowing, the headman leaned on his steering sweep, the boat twisted its own unguided way upon the current. The Burmans stared gravely at Bugs, studying him with animal stolidity. At last the head-man spoke.

"Brother," he said enviously, "you dream. You are lucky, but when I get to Rangoon I myself will also dream—of some day possessing twenty rupees!"

"True words," the rowers spoke. "Let him lie down and dream more, for some god of the hills has breathed upon him."

Bugs laughed—the hearty laugh of a sober white man.

"Wait fifteen minutes in Allenbyo for me," he said, and his voice now compelled, "and I will bring you ten rupees. Then I go back to my friend. When I come again, in two hours or less from the time I first go on shore, I will bring you another ten rupees. Then for Rangoon—where I am also in haste to be!"

The boat drifted, swirling, against the bank. But the boatmen took no heed. They stood entranced, staring at a white gone-native tramp who claimed he could go ashore in Allenbyo and come back in fifteen minutes with ten rupees; who could go ashore again, and return shortly with ten more. What manner of conjurer was this? What manner of liar, more likely? For not only could he get this money—he could get it and then give it away as pay to men who merely had to rest and wait for it. They stared at Bugs, as stupid men stare at maniacs. They looked at one another, conversing in some mute code of looks. Then the headman spoke.

"Go on shore at Allenbyo, oh dreamer who can turn the rain drops into money. I never expect to see you again, but for the chance of getting even the first ten rupees I would wait at Allenbyo many minutes—even if the devil himself were to say he would bring the money. Go ashore, brother, and—" he added the ancient jest of the river-men, "don't get your feet wet!"

BUGS breathed contentedly. He had won the first round. Time, time, he needed time. And he had not offered too much to the boatman. For only the offer of a miracle could have made them wait two hours for the fulfillment of their dream-desires in Rangoon.

Again the boat straightened to the muddy current, again the prehistoric song of the old Yang Tse rumbled from the boatmen on the Irrawaddy.

"When you find too many coincidences look for manipulation," thought Bugs. "And I called this very able Coomer Ali 'an unconscious red herring'. But the man I want, and will get, is more able still."

As the tired, wet day seemed to rest a moment at mid-afternoon the boat came round the high mud that looms like a red cliff to the town of Allenbyo. The men guided her to a decaying wharf, free of wharfage to native river boats. Bugs scrambled up a slimy pile. He turned and spoke to the headman.

"In a few minutes, brother, you will be rich," he said, and began to walk rapidly away.

"There was a Burman who had an aunt who was a monkey—" The riverman began that ancient and very sarcastic story, but Bugs was out of hearing.

Behind a pile of teak logs Bugs quickly loosened his money belt, extracting thirty rupees. These he stuffed into a trousers pocket which was stronger than its adjacent rags indicated. He walked more rapidly, toward the government telegraph office. The old street was almost deserted. Only a few draggled crows fluttered here and there.

Ordinarily Bugs would have chaffed the operator, a white man, pretending to hope to have his message sent free. But he did not chaff now.

"I want to wire Rangoon, quick," he snapped.

The tired Englishman looked up. He smiled slightly.

"Sorry, but there's stuff ahead," he drawled. "Come in an hour or two—wire may be clear then."

"You're a patriotic Englishman," snapped Bugs. "You would not, for instance, give information to the enemy?"

Something in Bugs' tone brought the other to his feet.

"Of course not! What do you mean?"

"Give me your word of honor never to mention what I am going to allow you to read?"

"Certainly," said the other man.

And then, for the second time in his career, Bugs showed his Authority. The operator looked at the big seal, gasped, and looked at Bugs.

"Clear the wire for me!" commanded Bugs.

"Give me your message," said the other man, sitting to his key.

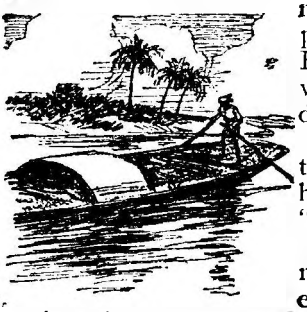
Bugs gave the message he had ready.

"Ought to have an answer in forty minutes, or less, eh?" he asked.

"If I have the code words right, and the other end has no trouble translating—yes," said the operator.

"Good—I'll be back," said Bugs.

He went out, almost running now lest the dream desire in Rangoon lure the boatmen from the promised money. He had no other way of getting down-river.



"Glad I made the offer big," he muttered. "Ah—good!"

He came running round the edge of the creaky wharf. The boat was still there, but voices told of debate regarding the going or the staying.

"Ten rupees, brothers," panted Bugs. "Now, wait a little longer and you get ten more!"

The delighted, and not a little astonished boatmen answered with the laughter of children.

"We wait, friend of the gods of the hills, until you come. Go and see your rich and generous friend again!"

And Bugs went back to the telegraph office.

He waited impatiently, the operator almost as interested as himself.

"Ah," exclaimed the operator suddenly, "here she comes."

The message came. Bugs translated quickly. For a few minutes he walked up and down the floor of the office.

"I'll do it," he muttered. "I may be working on theory, but I feel certain It's ruin to use the 'fairy wand' unless you're right. But I'll use it!"

He wrote on a blank, in the clear.

"*Hold* New Orleans *at Rangoon until I arrive.* MUST! *Bugs.*"

That one word MUST, by which a secret service man in Burma could then invoke the resources of the Empire. To hold the steamer *New Orleans* in Rangoon

for Bugs the government would now use its every resource—because of that one word *MUST* which Bugs had telegraphed. But woe to the man mistaken when he used it.

"I must be right. I know I'm right," muttered Bugs. "By God, I'd call out the entire Navy to hold that steamer, even if it is only to catch one man and a hundred thousand pounds. The reply to my telegram confirmed my theory. This cannot be a coincidence. If I'm wrong—good Lord, what a mess! But I'm not mistaken. And Coomer Ali will be there, also." He handed the message to the operator. "Send this, please, old man. I'll wait for the chap at the other end to repeat. It's terribly important, and it's in the clear."

The operator tapped out the message. The operator in Rangoon repeated it. Bugs said goodby to the somewhat bewildered operator of Allenbyo, and hurried back to the river boat. As he slushed through the puddles the rain ceased and for a moment the sun showed.

"Ah, a good omen," exclaimed Bugs, who was now very nervous.

Then the rain poured down again, and the sun became hidden.

The boatmen were yeasting with the greed of the greater—and longer—dreams to which the ten rupees and the unbelievable other ten were the golden key. They greeted Bugs as if he were a super-generous—or insane—Midas. They even tried clumsily to make his seat among the dirty cooking pots more comfortable. Then, with a haste that disturbed their straw coverings, they obeyed his order to hurry. And the headman—after depositing the last ten with the first ten—was so overpoweringly polite that Bugs was afraid he was going to embrace him.

Down the river they swirled, life now in the rowers, almost a lilt in their monotonous chanty. Down, past Allenbyo—the deserted banks closing in as they went, the rain falling in sheets The headman looked cautiously over his shoulder He saw no other boats, no sign of human life His greed drove him He could wait no longer He uttered a sharp command to the other three men The rester rose from his place in the bows, the rowers stopped rowing and allowed their sweeps to slide Like ogres they crowded about Bugs—looming menacingly in the twilight

"Brother," said the headman, his teeth showing evilly, "the friend who gave you money must have given you more than twenty rupees. For you would not have given us all you got, and to give us twenty shows us that you must have got very much money. We want all you have. As we do not think anybody would believe you ever had money, and so would not believe your tale if you said we had robbed you—we may let you live. But that small matter can be decided before we reach Rangoon. Now, little white man with the funny eye, we will strip you for your concealed wealth. The rain will feel cold, so, after we make certain we have all the money, we will let you put on your rags again—until, maybe, we allow the river and the crocodiles to have you."

Bugs hardly seemed to move. He looked at the four who crowded him. He looked at the nearest river-bank. A hungry bramley-kite was flying toward the boat. The Burmans saw no more movement than a striking cobra makes. True, the right hand of the secret service man pulled something from under his left arm-pit, and there was a flash in the twilight and a report. The bramley-kite fell fluttering into the tide alongside the boat.

"Brothers of the filth," drawled Bugs, "which of you can say his prayers the quickest—him will I shoot first. One by one, for my enjoyment, will I shoot you all. Which is the readiest to die?"

They slunk back, awed by the surprise of Bugs having a gun even more than by his wonderful hitting of the kite—a bit lucky, perhaps, in that light even for Bugs. Then, slowly, to their minds came their awe of the man himself, and of his promise to kill them all. He seemed like some strange death-dealing god who could manufacture rupees. The animism of the ages steeped their souls. They were ready to die at the hands of such a man—and even be flattered at his killing them!

"Well, Headman," said Bugs sharply, "shall I send you to hell ahead of your friends? It would be seemly, eh?"

"Lord," the boatman showed no trace of fear of death, "Lord, the gods visit men in strange shapes and guises; but thou art surely the strangest visitation I will go first, as is my right, surely But would it not have been more just to such witless things as we be to have told us you were a god? Then had we treated you as one. As it is, you will have to row the boat to Rangoon with your own godlike hands—unless you call upon lesser gods to do it for you!"

He grinned, his companions grinned, at the words. Death to them was such a small matter—a sudden sleep during which

a man visited gods or devils, then a dreary awakening to another hard life, made bearable only by such dreams as drugs could furnish.

Bugs laughed.

"First return to me the twenty rupees," he said. "I do not wish to waste good money on the crocodiles."

Very gravely the headman returned the money.

"Now," said Bugs, with equal gravity, "as is always, your lives are in the hands of the gods. Just now they are in my hands, who am more devil than god. Row! Work. Swine of the dust, get me to Rangoon. Do so with all speed, neither resting or sleeping, and please me to the uttermost, and—not merely your lives of no consequence will you have, but the money also. Your lives are of no value—you may keep them. But if you please me I will give you back the money when my foot touches the soil of Rangoon! Now, work, work,—drive, drive, for this god who holds your lives and money in his hand is in a hurry!"

The boatmen needed no further encouragement.

Through the night, never resting, Bugs driving them, all the men rowed. On, on, all next day through the heavy weary hours, faster than the boat had ever traveled before. The men strained and worked, sleepless. Neither did Bugs sleep. He sat, watching and keyed-up, ready for decisive action lest the strain and toil drove the men to where rebellion against even the gods becomes preferable to the heavy load of living.

THE *New Orleans* lay at her wharf, ready to leave Rangoon. She had been held there, spite her raging captain's remonstrances, spite the anger of the passengers, spite the mails—for many hours after her scheduled sailing time. There was no sign of force, no police; only a kindly looking man with a large mustache who apparently was doing his best to make it easier for the captain by telling him funny stories. But there were anxious lines about this man's face, a sense of strain, for he thought a great deal of Bugs, and was beginning to think that the best man in the service had made a terrible blunder. Between his stories he looked anxiously up the river among the horde of native boats—seeking Bugs, who was long overdue. And then, in the middle of a story, he saw the conspicuously driven native boat steering and bumping blindly through her cursing countrymen, with the weary, scare-crow figure of Bugs standing by the headman urging greater speed.

"Ah," ejaculated the man with the mustache. "I am afraid, Captain, that I will have to finish that story when you are in Rangoon next voyage. Here comes my man—the cause of all your annoyance. Now, please, don't appear interested. Just act as if this was every day."

And the man with the mustache hurried to meet the secret service man who, before parting with his weary boatmen, returned the twenty rupees, with five added for good work.

"Truly a god," they told their friends for their remainder of their lives. "Aye, a little mad, of course, but a hill god on a spree all the same."

"What is it, Bugs?" anxiously questioned the man with the mustache. "We held the steamer on your *MUST*, but your questions in your first wire only made things more baffling, and the second gave us no clue."

"I wanted to bag the game myself," answered Bugs. "Besides, if I had told you you might have thought me crazy with fever and allowed the bird to go."

"But what is it? If you want to ask for information of the man you mentioned in your wire why make him wait? We could have done that. This has caused an awful rumpus."

"The rumpus has not really started," said Bugs gravely. "On board this ship is the man who caused the *Moulmein* to be dacoited. I was blind, but it all came clear to me. Now I will prove my theory. Come on, W. B., come on aft. I see the President of the Irrawaddy Company there. I want him!"

Wilkinson clutched Bugs' arm.

"Old man, you're not yourself. Don't make a horrible scene. If you have made a blunder don't make it a scandal—we may gloss it over if it goes no farther. You're feverish—I can see that. Don't make a fool of yourself by accusing Kell of all sorts of nonsense."

Bugs shook off the restraining arm.

"How many blunders have you known me to make in the service?" he asked proudly. "Of course I'm feverish. Who would not

be after what I have gone through? Come on. I want Sir Patric Kell, K. C. B. President of the Irrawaddy Co."

And Wilkinson could only follow the ragged Bugs.

Straight aft he marched, to where the baronet sat talking happily with some ladies. Within call was a fat Mohammedan, his butler. And suddenly Bugs felt sorry for the man—that big, fine looking European whom all the world loved to honor. For a moment doubt clutched at Bugs' heart. Was it possible? Had he not, as Wilkinson said, made a terrible blunder? His head ached vilely, his theories about Sir Patric raced like vicious little cyclones in his brain. He turned to Wilkinson.

"I'll make it as easy as I can for him, W. B.," said Bugs. "Go and ask him to come over here—away from those women—and speak to me."

The baronet nodded courteously to Wilkinson, excused himself to the ladies and walked toward where Bugs waited. And he was as polite to the seeming tramp.

"Yes," he said. "Mr. Wilkinson says you wish to speak to me."

"Yes, Sir Patric," Bugs answered. "Some little time ago one of your Company's ships, the *Moulmein*, was dacoited. There were a hundred thousand pounds in her strong room."

Not a shadow passed across the big man's face. Eager interest, only, showed there.

"Ah," he exclaimed. "And you think you have a clue. Good! There is a reward, you know!"

"Yes, Sir Patric," replied Bugs, "I have a clue. You might tell Coomer Ali, your man, to show some of the sailors where the money is—so we can take it ashore when we take you!"

The big man's eyebrows lifted with anger.

"What's the meaning of this insult, Mr. Wilkinson?" he asked, ignoring Bugs.

"Well, Sir Patric," answered Wilkinson miserably, "it had to be done. Er, this man said——"

"I don't care what he said," stormed Sir Patric. "He's either drunk or crazy. Take him away and lock him up. And I gave you credit for more intelligence, Wilkinson, than to listen to a drunken tramp."

"That's enough," Bugs' voice rasped. "You're coming with me, Kell! And the money is coming, too. When I say *MUST* nothing is allowed to interfere. Come on—the ship wants to sail. You want an explanation, eh? Not for you, but to ease the mind of W. B., listen! The hundred thousand pounds you have stolen explains your sudden ill health and your intention of retiring—to 'seek health in a warmer climate than England.' So the telegram told me when I saw how your Coomer Ali had connived to ship the dacoits as crew for the *Moulmein*—the dacoits who knew as little about you as they did about the gold. A well trained man, this Coomer Ali. The Bank brought the gold and notes to you for shipment—such a valuable shipment could only be handled by yourself. You took a case of junk into the *Moulmein's* strong room, while another case—books packed around the money to make the case larger and safer—was sent into the hold for Bhamo. It was addressed to Lal Muckergee whom Coomer Ali would impersonate when he got the gold. That stopping of the *Moulmein* at Bhamo, when steamers don't stop there at that season, for a mere case of books for a native shipper, grew in my mind like a rolling snowball. And then I wired, and learned that you had a man named Coomer Ali, that you were sailing on the *New Orleans*, and moreover that you had suddenly sold out your stock in the company. But all this will be told in court.

"I won't handcuff you—spare you that. Let us go on shore."

Sir Patric Kell turned haughtily to Wilkinson.

"I suppose I must comply," he said sternly, "because this maniac seems to have authority. But you will regret this, Wilkinson—so will the government!"

He hailed a passing steward.

"Get my hat, and—a glass of water, please."

And he turned his back upon Bugs and Wilkinson while he waited.

Bugs spoke to an officer.

"Have everything belonging to Sir Patric put ashore," he said. "I will check the packages myself."

The steward brought the hat and the water. Sir Patric tipped him. Suddenly he brought something out of his vest pocket with a thumb and forefinger. In an instant, with the water, he had swallowed it. He smiled at Bugs.

"You're a clever chap, goodby!" he said, and dropped dead.

"Cyanide," said Bugs gravely. "I thought he would. It was the best thing to do—he could do nothing else."

THE GALLOPING CLUE

By PAUL SAND

Author of "Head Work," "Open and Shut," etc.

THE METHODS OF SHERIFF DAN BAILEY'S EASTERN DEPUTY HAD PROVED VERY SUCCESSFUL ON SEVERAL OCCASIONS, YET THE SHERIFF COULD NEVER BE QUITE CONVINCED THAT HIS OWN OPEN COUNTRY WAYS WEREN'T BEST. THIS TIME THE KEY TO THE MYSTERY OF THE MURDER AT THE BAR Q RANCH WAS A GOOD PROOF OF EFFICIENCY

"KILLED?" muttered Sheriff Dan Bailey sleepily as he opened the door for the two thumping midnight visitors. "Tim Sharman o' Bar Q killed? Who done it?"

Feef Nelson, Bar Q foreman, and Jim Rand, who owned the adjoining Circle C property and for several years had been a close business partner of the Bar Q rancher, came inside while the sheriff pulled on his clothes. Nelson was a big, square-headed, yellow-haired Swede with a broad, thin-lipped mouth that would have given the impression of subtle amusement if it hadn't been so unvarying. Rand's face was more active. His eyes shot here and there inquisitively and his mouth worked constantly, causing an unkempt mustache to circumgyrate to both mental and physical rumination.

"I don't rightly know who done it," confessed Nelson. "I heard shootin', an' when I got up the ranch house, he was gone—down in a heap by his bunk. Two shots, right yar," he added, putting his hand on his chest.

"You there first?"

"No. His girl, Miss Lois, an' the Chink cook—they were there first. They bunk in the ranch house. They don't claim to know nothin'."

"Nobody hangin' around outside?"

"Not that I seen."

"Was Tim asleep?" went on the sheriff, wiping his weather-beaten face with his hand as a combination wash, shave, and breakfast.

"Don't b'lieve so," replied the foreman, shaking his head. "He was dressed, an' his bunk warn't used."

"Must ha' been 'bout twelve or twelve-thirty?"

"'Bout twelve-fifteen," nodded Feef. "I come right in, stoppin' to tell Mr. Rand at the Circle C—him bein' the boss's pardner."

The sheriff strapped his gun about his hips and roused the Mexican boy out of the back room.

"Go git Mist' Hammet. Tell 'im meet sheriff Bar Q. Pronto!"

The brown lad shuffled out sleepily.

"Who's Hammet?" asked Rand curiously as the three left the town of Piquo and headed their horses through the darkness toward Bar Q.

"Ain't you met Hammet?' queried the sheriff surprised. "He's my new depitty. Dude officer from up East. Out here to

blow a couple o' bugs out o' his lungs."

"Sort o' breakin' him in, eh?"

"Yeah, but he's dern handy to have around. He's a husky lad for a T. B.—no livin' skeleton; an' lemme tell you, as a law officer he don't miss nothin'! 'Course, it's hard for him to git used to the way we do business in Lavera County. He's so used to city flat-foot work, reg'lar round o' the hockshops, smellin' out fingerprints an' all that stuff, that it's a long time before he's settled for sure on who done a thing. But I like to have him along jest to check me up. Don't have no suspicions, do you, Feef," he added, changing the subject, "about who might ha' done it?"

"No. My s'picions are right gen'ral. There's so many might ha' done it. The boss was a right hard 'un to gat along with, set in his ways an' mean as a coyote whan he wanted to be."

"You don't have to tell me that," assented the sheriff. "What about the chink cook? Think he might ha' sneaked in on him?"

"Maybe."

"Reckon his girl would hardly be mixed up in it?"

"Wal, I dunno," muttered Feef dubiously.

"Huh?" grunted the sheriff in surprise. "You think she might?"

"She's been tryin' to get married, maybe you know," explained the foreman. "Sweet on a cowhand named Sellers over at Pothook R. 'Chick' Sellers; you know him?"

"Yeah. Good hearted feller, but not long on brains or even good sense. Sort o' wild an' scatterbrained."

"That's him," nodded Nelson. "The old man run him off the place three or four times an' thratened to turn the girl out if she had any truck with him. She an' the old man ain't been so pally lately; an' I don't know—" The foreman shook his head, failing to finish his sentence.

"Glad you told me," mumbled the sheriff. "Maybe this Sellers might ha' had somethin' to do with it."

"Sharman talked a good bit about her to me," put in Rand. "He had the hell of a time with her. Wanted me to marry her—thought it would calm her down, I reckon. I used to think she wasn't such a bad kid until I got to see what a huffy spitfire she was. Feel sorry for the feller that gets her! Didn't you say, Nelson, that the ranch house was all locked up—from the inside?"

"Oh, well," said the sheriff, "the shots might ha been fired through the winder."

The foreman shook his head.

"That's what I thought, too, but all the winders is screened an' I couldn't find no holes."

"Mmmm," mused the sheriff. He didn't like killings where a woman was mixed up like this. He was shy of the sex and never enjoyed business dealings with them. A hard-boiled killer, if he were a man, he could handle; but a woman, even the least par-boiled, confused him.

They rode on silently through the crisp chill of the night, as the big, late stars dipped behind the peaks of the Sebastian range. Finally they sighted a yellow gleam from among a clump of locusts and cottonwoods that rustled over the Bar Q. Scrambling through the gravelly creek bed, they mounted the low rise on which the ranch buildings sat, just as another rider appeared out of the dark.

"Howdy, Sheriff!" greeted the newcomer.

"H'lo, Hammet!" returned the old-timer. "On the job, I see."

The dude deputy was a blunt looking, heavy-set man with a deceptively disinterested eye. He was the kind of man you expect to see in a plain serge suit and square, regulation shoes; yet in his broad brimmed Stetson and wool shirt he looked perfectly at home. To look at his stocky build and the ruddy tinge of his face, you would never think a germ could make much of a fight against him; and to look at his meaty fist, the set of his jaw, and the quiet, impersonal look in his eye, you would think twice before you made much of a fight against him yourself!

The sheriff made him acquainted with the others and together they filed in the center door of the long, low ranch house.

The room they entered was apparently the room the rancher used as his office. It was of bare boards and contained two tables, a small desk, and a chair or two. Nailed to the wall there was a box of pigeonholes, stuck full of papers.

Except for the litter of papers, it was a neat room for a rancher's. The mounted longhorn on the wall was gray with dust and age, and the two cat hides nailed up opposite were mangy; but there wasn't the usual litter of cigar stumps and leather—saddles, broken whips, old boots, and what not—that you generally find. It was evident that his daughter was a tidy housekeeper or that he was a finicky old maid, or both.

Nelson led them into an adjoining room, about the same size as the first, furnished

with a bed and a washstand, with nothing more fancy in the way of decorations than a mirror and a razor strap.

On the bed was the dead rancher.

"We stretched him out," explained Nelson. "He was on the floor yar, by the bunk."

"You say his daughter and the Chink cook were here first?"

"Yeah. They sleep yar. Yust Miss Lois in that end, an' Ling, the cook, at the other end by the kitchen."

He called to a cowpuncher who had been waiting outside the door of Sharman's bedroom.

"Get Ling an' Miss Lois," he said.

A moment later, daughter and cook appeared in the doorway from the hall. The girl was as pretty as could be found in Lavera County. She was slim and strong and her cheek was flushed with the wind of the plains. Hammet had never seen her before but the sheriff had, many a time, and he had never missed the healthy looking, dimpled cheeks or the homey howdy-do smile. Nor had he missed the point of the chin either, or the flash of her eye when there was trouble. There was that look in her face that made him able, though unwilling, to believe almost anything if she lost her temper.

This morning she was still pretty, but there were no smiles, no dimples. Her tiny mouth was set grimly, her nose thrown back a trifle more than usual, and her eyes scared—scared but defiant.

A tall thin Oriental entered the room behind her. His head was as bald as a brown ostrich egg and the rooty muscles of his neck twisted up from under a tight-fitting undershirt that wasn't any too clean. His eye shifted to almost every object in the room but the men before him.

"These two," explained Feef Nelson impersonally, "are the only ones that sleep yar in this building, an' they were yar first, o' course. I could see lights movin' as I come over from the bunkhouse."

"All the doors," the sheriff put in for his deputy's benefit, "were locked on the inside, accordin' to Nelson."

"Did you try 'em all?" asked Hammet.

"I come to that door first," explained the foreman, "the one you come in—an' rattled the knob. It was locked."

"Is it generally locked at night?"

"Yas. But when Miss Lois come to let me in, she couldn't unlock it—couldn't find the key. So she lat me in roun' at her door."

"And it was locked too?"

"Yas. I heard her turn the key."

"How about the other doors to the building?"

"Thar's only one other to the outside. That's the kitchen. I looked roun' later, an' it was locked too."

The sheriff put in a question, chewing on a straw.

"What did Miss Lois have to say when she let you in?"

"She didn't say nothin' at first. She was all kind o' flustrated. As we come in yar, she says, 'Pop's dead.' An' he was. Ling was standin' over him, shakin' his hands nervous like. Tol' me he heard shots; two, maybe three. Got up an' come down yar. Miss Lois, he said, come out o' her room yust after."

There was no denial of these facts in the faces of either of the two witnesses.

Hammet glanced up at the hanging kerosene lamp.

"Was the lamp lit?"

"Whan I got yar, it was," said the Swede. "Ling says no. That right, Ling?"

"Noh!" agreed the Chink. "Light out. Ve'y fonny. I sleep. I hear gun—bang! bang!—two three time. I sit up. I think. I see nothink. No light. I say, mebbe bad business. I come up hall. Ve'y dock. Black. I go back, get light. See better. Boss dead. Bad business. Ve'y bad business!"

"And his clothes were on? And the light out?"

"Yes. Clo'es on. Fonny!"

"Did it smell like somebody jest put the lamp out?"

Ling couldn't remember. "Mebbe."

"It does seem funny," faltered the rancher's daughter, "that he could have been shot in the dark, still with his clothes on, unless—unless he did it himself."

"Miss Lois," said Feef, "thinks it's suicide."

"Then the gun must be here," remarked Hammet.

"It is. Yar are the only guns in the house except the boss's rifles. The bullets war forty-fives."

Nelson held out two revolvers.

"They're yust as I found 'em," he went on. "This is the boss's; dirty, two empty shells. Miss Lois found it on the floor over yar by the door. This gun is hers."

It was in her room. It's clean."

The sheriff looked over the two guns and passed them to Hammet.

"Ling don't have any?"

"No."

"Hmm," murmured the sheriff. "With the place locked up an' screenin' all over the winders, it does look like he must ha' done it himself. If he did, you'll find powder marks on his clo'es prob'ly."

Hammet was already bending over the body and examining it.

"Any powder marks, Hammet?"

"No."

"Then it hardly seems, Miss Lois," frowned the sheriff, "that he could have shot himself from such a distance as not to leave marks."

"Especially," added Hammet, "as he was shot in the back."

Nelson grunted.

"It looked like that to me," he said, "but I wasn't sure."

"It's easy to see," Hammet pointed out.

He turned toward the girl as if to ask a question, and she broke out crying.

"Here!" coughed the sheriff, moving a chair over for her with an awkward gesture of friendliness. "Don't cry. Sit down here and tell us all about it."

She sat down, and with a handkerchief soon got control of herself.

"Now tell us about it."

Her mouth was set hard, and her eyes turned steely through the remains of her tears.

"I got nothing to say," she decided.

The sheriff, all set to receive final and dissolving confessions, was considerably taken back. His mustache drooped in disappointment, and he grunted in disgust.

"Oh, well," he growled, shrugging his shoulders, "suit yourself. I'll have to put you under arrest."

"All right," she said.

The sheriff pulled his deputy over to one side and let him in on Lois' love affair with Chick Sellers and the old man's attitude toward it.

"This ain't goin' to be a nice case to handle," he added. "I never like to drag a woman to court, specially for a thing like this. When I got to, I got to have plenty on 'em! The way you generally go over everything with a fine-tooth comb don't cut much ice usually; but in this here case your best Eastern sleuthin' tricks will come in handy. You get everything you can scrape up."

"I intend to," smiled Hammet, "but first: what kind of a feller is this Feef Nelson?"

"We-ell," shrugged the sheriff, "I never heard a wrong word about Feef the sixteen years he's been around the county. But I know your way o' doin' business. You don't leave nobody out; maybe you had better watch Feef the same as everybody else."

"Um-hm," nodded Hammet. "Well, the first thing is to take a look over the shack. I want to take a better one when it gets light, but I think I'll give it the once-over now. Better have the girl and the Chink out o' the way. I don't care about the others."

Hammet examined the two rooms thoroughly, including the dead man, the revolvers, the furniture, the windows, even the roof. He did his work quietly and quickly, hardly noticed by the other men, who stood around and argued in low tones over the possibilities of the situation. Finally Hammet called the sheriff out into the room used as an office.

"Find anything?" the sheriff asked him.

"Two or three little points," said Hammet. "In the first place, there's a bullet hole in the roof, right up there alongside that two-by-eight."

"Might ha' been there some time," suggested the sheriff.

"Looked right fresh when I climbed up there."

"You don't think somebody shot through the roof at him?"

"No, it's an outgoin' hole."

"Well, how do you account for it?"

"I don't," admitted the deputy. "Now another thing. See that bunch o' grass an' weeds an' stuff on the floor over behind the door we came in by?"

"Un-hunh. What about it?"

"I don't know. But what's it doin' there? The rest o' the floor was swept yesterday and in general it's spick and span. And even if it was jest missed by accident, I'm wonderin' how it got there in the first place. People don't bring that kind o' stuff in on their feet."

"Ask 'em."

"I'm goin' to. An' there's something else, too."

The something else was easily answered.

"You said, Nelson," quizzed Hammet, "that Miss Lois couldn't let you in when you came to this door because it was locked and the key gone. It's there now."

"It fell out on the floor whan we picked the boss up—fell out of his pocket, I reckon."

"Does he gen'rally take the key at night after locking the door?"

"I dunno, myself. Never thought he did. I asked Miss Lois that same question an' she said she never knew him to take the key out o' the door."

Hammet pointed to the grass over in the corner. "Know anything about them weeds?"

"No," said Nelson. "I didn't notice them before."

"Ask the girl to come in," said Hammet. "Maybe she can help us."

Lois Sharman was still on the defensive, but she didn't see any harm in telling about the weeds and she admitted as much.

"I don't know how they got there. They weren't there yesterday when I cleaned up."

She seemed just as puzzled as Hammet, and even more puzzled that he should regard it as a matter of importance.

"Let me have this extra lantern, Sheriff," said Hammet, "and I'll look over the rest of the house. She better stay here."

The deputy reappeared after five or ten minutes and beckoned to the sheriff.

"This," he explained, "is the girl's room, as you can tell from the clothes and the window curtains. And I found this all crumpled up and stuck behind this piece of studding in the wall. Almost missed it."

He spread out on the table four rumpled pieces of paper that were obviously parts of the same sheet torn twice. The writing on them made the sheriff rub his eyes.

It said that: *I, Timothy Sharman, hereby will and bequeath everything I got to the duly wedded wife of James Rand, of Piquo, Lavera County, whoever she may chance to be, and in case there is no such wife at the time of my death, then everything goes to the Orphanage over at Burnt Springs.*

"Rand ain't married!" objected the sheriff incredulously.

"'Whoever she may chance to be,' it says," Hammet pointed out. "Looks like Sharman knew well enough he wasn't married. A will like that wouldn't be good in this State, would it?"

"No. A will don't have to be a regular lawyer will to be good, but it's got to be witnessed. This one is signed, but that's all."

"Did Sharman ever want his daughter to marry Rand that you know of?"

"Yeah, accordin' to Rand himself; but he wasn't so keen on it as Sharman was."

"Then that might explain this," Hammet speculated. "This looks like a trick of Sharman's to make Rand and Lois marry each other—against their will. It's his handwriting, all right. By jing! I don't blame her for shootin' him—if she did."

"If she did? This jest about proves it."

"Not necessarily," denied Hammet. "She might have jest found this on the table after she came in and found him dead, and thinkin' it might be valid, grabbed it to save her money."

"But who else could have killed him? The cook tells a pretty straight story."

"The cook," replied Hammet in a business-like way, "is a liar. I admit I can't prove that to anybody else—yet; but I can see it."

"All Chinks lie," discounted the sheriff, "so even when they don't have to, they seem like they are."

"I admit," conceded the deputy, "that I can't figure any way he could have got close enough to grab Sharman's own gun and shoot him. But how about Rand? If he didn't want to marry her, he might have shot him. It would have been the—what-d'-y'-call-it?—the gentlemanly thing to do."

"Don't be a damn' fool!" growled the sheriff. "Men don't go shootin' people for women they *don't* want—especially a hard-boiled customer like Rand. If Rand had shot him, it would ha' been for business reasons. I thought o' Rand before I saw the lay-out here, because he might easy profit by Sharman's death in ways nobody but an expert auditor might know for sure. But he wouldn't go around shootin' nobody to rescue ladies from marryin' him! No; if the Chink didn't do it—an' we got no special reason to think he did—the girl, bein' his daughter, would be the only one that could get close enough to grab his own gun and shoot him with it."

"That's true," remarked Hammet, whose long suit was admitting the possibility of a statement and then objecting to it. "And yet he might be jest as suspicious of her as he would ordinarily be of a Chink. You think she came in last night, jest about time he was goin' to hit the hay——?"

"He might have been writin' that will," interpolated the sheriff, "and she comes in lookin' as if she might make up or some-

thin', an' puts her arms around him, and when he don't notice, grabs his gun——"

"Why didn't she use her own?" interrupted Hammet. "It would have been a lot safer."

"Yeah, it would. Maybe she was really willin' to make up, but when she looks over his shoulder and sees what he's writing, she forgets it all an' busts loose."

"But Nelson found him in the bedroom. She wouldn't have dragged——"

"Maybe he chased her that far before she got a good shot at him."

"Maybe," admitted Hammet.

"And then she grabs the will an' turns out the lights an' sneaks back to her room. That fits everything."

"Practically everything," nodded Hammet.

"What don't it fit?" demanded the sheriff.

"The bullet hole in the roof and the grass and weeds over in the corner of the office."

"Hell! What have the grass and weeds got to do with it?"

"Nothin', so far as I can see. Yet they make me think."

"Well, quit thinkin'," growled his superior, "and we'll put up the facts to the girl. She'll come through now."

But she didn't come through. She turned a quick white when she recognized the paper, and started crying again; but her mouth was set as if she had lock-jaw.

"She done it," the sheriff confided to his deputy, "but she's got sand, that girl!"

"Well," said Hammet, "the Chink is the only one we haven't talked to thoroughly. He didn't say whether he or the girl got there first. Come on; let's see what we can get out of him. I sort o' think the girl did it myself; and if she did, I know damn well this Chink knows all about it. We got nothin' but circumstantial evidence; and as you said, it won't be enough—in a woman case. We've got to get at what this Chink knows. My idea is to scare him to death. That don't always work, but the way I size him up I think it will."

"Go to it!" nodded the sheriff. "We'll arrest him for murder, sayin' the girl squealed on him."

Ling, still under the surveillance of one of Feef Nelson's cowpunchers, was automatically beginning to stir around for breakfast. He looked up from the woodbox and found Sheriff Bailey's gun shoved into his undershirt. Hammet grabbed his wrists and handcuffed them behind him, procedure so unnecessary, especially with an armed guard already in attendance, that the sheriff almost grinned in spite of himself.

Ling could do nothing but swallow lumps for several seconds.

"Come clean, Ling," glared the sheriff. "We know all about it. All we want to know is why you killed him."

Ling found his speech, but it came out so fast that it was meaningless.

"Noh!" he gasped, slowing down his syllables a little. "Ling no kill him goo'boy no kill him no noh!"

"Look here," snapped the sheriff. "I'd as lief shoot a liar as a killer. Tell me or me shoot, savvy?"

Ling, no less scared, began to nod his head instead of shake it.

"Don' shoot! I tell!"

"That's better," encouraged the sheriff, moving his gun back an inch or two as a concession. "Spill it all, an' if I catch you lyin', the coyotes'll have Chink for breakfast."

Ling swallowed several times before he began.

"I good boy. No tell big lie. Little fo'get, help Missy. Missy feel bad. I good boy, help."

"Say what you mean!" frowned Hammet.

"'Member, I say, I sleep? That so. I hear gun—bang! bang!—two three time. I sit up. I see nothink. Ve'y dock. I rub eyes. Look see out window. See man outside!"

"Yeah? Man? What man?"

"I no see good. Jes' man."

"Where?"

"Shut door boss office room. Run off. I hear hossprints. Down th'ough trees—away."

"Don't you know who it was? Big man or little man, fat man——?"

"I no see good. Mebbe big, mebbe little. I not know. Missy say she know."

"Oh, she did!" Hammet and the sheriff looked at each other. "Go on," they ordered sharply, as Ling went to turn back toward the woodbox as if he had successfully passed the buck to Missy. "Go on! Who'd she say it was?"

"I go there." Ling jerked his head to-

ward the other end of the house. "See Missy with light. Boss dead. 'I see him.' I tell her. 'I see him go 'way. I tell Feef. 'Feef Nelson catch 'im. Kill im dead'.

"'Noh!' say Missy. 'Don' tell Feef. Don' tell an'body. Mebbe think shoot himself.'

"'Mebbe think *you,* Missy. Mebbe think *me.*'

"'Won' let 'em think you, Ling,' say Missy. 'Think me, all 'ight, too bad! They hang man. No hang girl. Girl get away.'

"I say, 'All'ight. Ling good boy. Say nothink, help Missy. Missy help Ling.' No ve'y big lie."

"But who'd she say the man was?"

"Say name Cheek. My fella Cheek, she say."

"Well, we'll see about that!" growled the sheriff. "You're under arrest. Here, I'll take your handcuffs off so you can work, but you be mighty careful. If he makes a break," he added to the cowhand that had him in charge, "shoot him dead!"

"Hunh!" grunted the sheriff in the hall. "Reckon we did find out somethin'! It eases my mind a heap. I couldn't see how a girl would do it, though o' course, she helped."

"She would have had to let him in, the way you figger?" queried Hammet.

"Sure!"

"Through what door?"

"Well, probably her door. Sharman was still dressed, so I reckon he must have been still up, so she could hardly have let him in the door of the office. Yes, she let him in her door."

"But Ling says he saw him go out the main door."

"Why not? She could have locked it behind him."

"And then put the key in the dead man's pocket?"

"Mmm. I reckon she thought it would look more like suicide."

"I s'pose."

"Well, she's jest as guilty, but it makes the case easier," mused the sheriff. "She must have got her father's gun away from him. Chick Sellers couldn't have done that."

"They probably shot him first," suggested Hammet, "an' then took his gun an' wasted a shot or two out the door to make it look like he'd shot himself. Or through the roof! Why sure—that accounts for the hole in the roof!"

"That's so! Either way, we got it on 'em now, an' that's the main thing. There's not a hitch in the evidence, no matter which way you read it."

"Except those weeds," added Hammet.

"Them damn weeds!" laughed the sheriff derisively. "We'll make a good team, you an' me, Hammet. You round up all the details, but you leave it to me to sift the ones that count from the ones that don't. Your consarned weeds can't have nothin' to do with it."

"Seems funny, don't it? Maybe I read more into 'em than there is. But don't let 'em keep you from lockin' up Chick Sellers, and her too."

"Don't you fear about my lockin' up Chick Sellers as soon as I can lay hands on him. An' her too, but we'll have to let her bail herself out. We ain't got no place to keep a girl like her."

Hammet remained at the Bar Q to make a detailed survey after it was light enough to see footprints. The sheriff dropped in at Pothook R to round up Sellers. Rumor had reached there that Lois Sharman had killed her father, which might have been the reason Sellers had made no attempt to skip. His reddish hair uncombed, his rabbit eyes staring at the sheriff, he mumbled sullenly at all solicitations as to whether he had anything to say.

The sheriff did not see his deputy until the middle of the afternoon. He had jailed his prisoner, turned over all the dope to George Mullin, the county prosecutor, and felt well satisfied with his disposition of the case as he dozed back in a chair in his office.

It was there that Hammet found him. The deputy said nothing at first, but merely sat down and smoked a cigarette.

"What you been doin'?" asked the sheriff.

"Workin'," said Hammet cheerfully.

"Workin'? What at? Measurin' footprints?"

"Tryin' to. But so many been over the ground since, that I couldn't make anything out."

"Well, you're a bear for work!" admired the sheriff. "You do a case up brown. What the dickens you doin' with that key?"

Hammet had walked over to the door to the back room and taken the key out of the lock. He was looking at it as if it puzzled him.

"Oh, jest interested in keys," he answered, putting the key back and writing something in his notebook. "You know," he added, looking at the sheriff, "I think our case is all wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I think we got the wrong man in jail."

The sheriff stared.

"We got the goods on him all right," Hammet went on. "Don't misunderstand me. The facts are all there, good facts—facts enough. But somehow the thing looks fishy; it don't feel right. If Sellers or this girl or the pair o' them planned to bump off the old man, they could have picked a lot better time and place, don't you think? Off on a trail somewhere? It wasn't good sense to pull the thing off where things were so easy to point their way."

"Nobody says they got to have good sense," argued the sheriff. "They thought they'd get away with the suicide story."

"That suicide story wasn't even a good story. If they had counted on that, she would have swore he'd committed suicide, or at least pushed it a lot stronger than she did. And if that was their lead, why didn't they shoot him close, afterward anyway—anybody would have thought of powder marks. And they would have put the gun right in his hand instead of having it lying almost in the hall."

"You're stretchin' it out too fine. You're givin' 'em credit for havin' your brains. They would have had alibis cooked up too, but where are they?"

"That's my point. Sellers tried one when I talked to him this mornin'. One feller saw him go to bed about midnight, or so he says, and he rolled out as usual this mornin'. That don't mean anything—any dumbbell would have rigged up some kind o' alibi better'n that."

"Dumber dumbbells have committed crimes before."

"No question about that," the deputy conceded, "but I'll bet no dumbbell committed this one."

"What makes you think so?"

"Them grass and weeds that was in the office behind the door."

Sheriff Bailey nearly exploded.

"For goshamighty sake! Can't you get your mind off them weeds?"

"No, I can't. It was them weeds that made me ride the Chink. They made me think somebody outside must have done it an' not the girl."

"Shucks! Folks don't walk into a place with that kind o' stuff on their feet. You said so yourself."

"I know they don't. That's what struck me funny."

"Well, how come it bothers you? We're about agreed somebody from outside did it—Chick Sellers."

"But we're also agreed that if it was Chick Sellers, Lois Sharman let him in."

"So we are."

"And that won't account for the weeds. Even if he wasn't let in, it won't. Chick Sellers wouldn't have had brains enough to put those weeds there."

"No," said the sheriff sarcastically. "It would take a genius to bring them weeds into a place."

Hammet grinned sheepishly.

"You wouldn't call Feef Nelson a dumbbell, would you?" he asked suddenly.

"Feef Nelson? No, I wouldn't. But neither would I accuse him o' trackin' grass an' weeds through the house."

"Wait a minute," said Hammet. "You have to admit that if Chick and the girl didn't do this, it was a beautiful frame-up?"

"Looks like it would have to be."

"Why?"

"Well, if anybody outside wanted to shoot him, they would have plugged him through the winder prob'ly. Or if they had done it inside, they wouldn't have been so careful to leave everything locked behind 'em—from the inside."

"Who told you about Chick and the girl? Who knew all about what was goin' on?" asked the deputy.

"Feef," admitted the sheriff reluctantly.

"All right," Hammet went on. "Now s'posin' somebody we don't know about had wanted to get in an' cover themselves by makin' it look like the girl or Sellers did it, how could they get in without anybody knowin' it?"

"With a key. They might have hid inside somewhere all night, but it ain't likely. No, a key."

"Where would they get a key?"

"That wouldn't be hard if they put their mind to it. It wouldn't be hard to find a key that would fit one o' these ordinary locks, specially if you file it down a little where it needs it."

"Right," nodded the deputy. "That's what made me interested in keys." He pointed to the key in the door. "If you filed a little notch in either side of the blade

of that key, you could open Sharman's door with it."

"Yeah? You'll be accusin' me of the murder in a minute. I got a duplicate o' that hangin' there on the wall. Look an' see if it ain't filed like you say."

Hammet actually did reach up and look the key over.

"Well," he said seriously, "s'pose you saw a good chance to bump Sharman off and gettin' somebody else saddled with it, an' you had your key ready, how would you get in if there was a key in the lock on the inside?"

"But there wasn't. It was in his pocket."

"We don't know. Your own theory was that his daughter let Sellers out with it and then stuck it in his pocket. She would hardly have taken time to let him out that door if she had to fish the key out of her father's pocket to do it. Now I think myself that whoever killed him stuck the key in his pocket—not too carefully, or it wouldn't have fallen out so easily. But I know darn well the key was in the lock."

"Even if it was, it would have been no trick to turn it and push it out. If I was doin' it—as you're s'posin'."

"Wouldn't it have made a lot o' noise fallin' on the floor?" objected Hammet.

"I would have waited till Sharman had gone in the other room."

"Don't you think he would have heard it even in there?" asked Hammet, dropping a key to prove his point.

"Yes, I reckon he would," admitted the sheriff, "but I would have unlocked the door quick an' been ready to let him have it as he came out to see what the noise was—if I was doin' it!"

"You take more chances than the feller that did do it, because you're not quite so clever."

"What did this imaginary clever feller do?"

"There's a gap," explained Hammet, "of pretty near three-quarters of an inch under the door—between it and the sill. He stuffed enough grass an' soft weeds under the door so the key wouldn't be heard when it fell."

"Jumpin' jackrabbits!" The sheriff sat up straight in his chair and slammed his hat down on the floor. "That's what them weeds were for. It was an easy trick to do."

"When you think of it," added Hammet. "Well, we'll say you get in quietly. You'd shoot him with your own gun, and maybe again with his gun once, and then fire his once through the roof to account for your bullet. Then you would stick his own key in his pocket, lock the door behind you an' vamoose."

"Un-hunh," grunted the sheriff, following each detail. "You got it worked out purty good."

"What would you do with your key?"

"I'd get rid of it if it was a filed one—throw it away somewhere, specially if I knew you was around, interested in keys."

"That's what I'd have done too," approved the deputy. "But I couldn't find any."

"Did you hunt for one?" stared the sheriff.

"Sure. I looked the ground over a long ways around the house. Even raked the creek bottom at the ford. But no luck."

"So you haven't got a line on anybody after all?"

"Not much o' one," he said gloomily. "I checked up on a hundred keys, mostly on the sly. I combed the Bar Q and the Pothook R and everybody in Piquo that I could think of—people Sharman did business with an' so on."

He showed the sheriff his notebook where he had drawn pictures of keys, pages of them!

"This bunch," he pointed, "shows the Bar Q assortment, an' these are out at Pothook R, where Sellers hangs out. This thin one and this one with the 36 on the handle I spotted at the Circle C, Rand's place, and that one that looks like a dog laughing is the county prosecutor's. This bunch is various people around town. These plain looking ones are my landlady's, an' these here are yours."

"Lordee-o! You ain't nothin' if not whole-hog!"

"Practically every key here," he went on, "could be filed to fit the door of Sharman's office. None of 'em was filed, but there's generally duplicates."

"You'll see keys all night in your sleep!" laughed the sheriff.

"Well," grinned Hammet sheepishly, "somethin' like that did happen already. I came from Bar Q jest before dinner, and I'd got so in the habit earlier in the mornin' o' lookin' the ground over for a key that as I was comin' away—jest this side o' the creek—I swear I thought I saw a door key lyin' in the gravel. I was so sure, I pulled my horse around and went back to look. I thought I knew the exact place I'd seen it lyin', but I got off and went over all the ground with my fingers, and nary a key nor anything that looked like a key."

"Jest what I said," grinned the sheriff.

"You'll be seein' 'em in your soup an' feelin' 'em in your ears."

"Well, anyhow," Hammet said, consoling himself, "if I could find the key that was filed to open Sharman's door, I bet I'd soon identify it!"

"Shucks! You forget that Sellers an' this girl ain't denied a thing. They didn't need no keys. Why would they act like that if they didn't do it?"

"I been thinking them over," said Hammet, "and the way I got them figgered out is this: she didn't *see* Sellers last night, she jest *thought* it was him that did it, and, as the Chink said, tried to cover him with the suicide story, even takin' the blame herself, figgerin' to get off easier'n a man. The will she found accidentally at the same time an' hid it in a panic to save her money and avoid suspicion at the same time. And Chick thought *she* did it, an' when he was suspected, he let it ride to keep her out of it——"

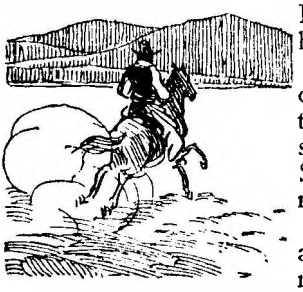
He was interrupted by the sudden opening of the door. George Mullin, the county prosecutor, and Jim Rand rushed in, hot and excited.

"Did you release Sellers?" demanded the lawyer of the sheriff.

"Me?" grunted that officer. "Hell, no! Why should I? You didn't, did you, Hammet?"

"O' course not. I got no orders——"

"He's out," said Mullin. "A feller told Rand he saw Sellers ridin' out toward Bar Q about an hour ago!"



"He was drunk!" snarled the sheriff. "I'll show you Chick Sellers in five minutes."

They hustled around the corner to the jail. Herb Snyder, combination cook and warden, was not in his official cubby hole; but that didn't disturb them, because Herb frequently went across to Baldy's to get a drink. But when they got back to where Chick was supposed to be, they found Herb. He was tied up in one corner with a gag in his mouth. Chick was gone. The dinner on the bench showed that he had probably got out when Herb had brought it in at noon.

Hammet untied Herb, who was explosively brief.

"He pretty near killed me! Went out the back way——"

"Get your horses, gents," interrupted the sheriff. "Your man wasn't so drunk after all."

"No," chimed in Hammet a moment later, "the son of a sea-cook took my roan. I left him out in front of the jail at dinner time."

"Did, uh?" echoed the sheriff, not without a trace of malicious satisfaction. "Reckon a lot o' your pet theories is vanished with him too. Get another horse an' catch up," he added as he swung into the saddle.

The posse set off at a stiff pace through the dusty afternoon. Before it reached Bar Q, Hammet caught up.

"Do you s'pose he's actually out at Bar Q?" he asked the sheriff.

"He headed this way, the feller said. Then his girl's out here, remember."

"Break jail to see his girl?" exclaimed Hammet, incredulous.

"He's that kind," insisted the sheriff. "Maybe they're skippin' together. They could cut east from here through Runnin' Bear to the pass, an' then south."

"Wouldn't she be foolish? She'd be riskin' all her settlement—all her father's property. She'd wait till she got that."

The sheriff shrugged his shoulders and pressed on without argument. As they approached Bar Q, they scattered and crossed the gravelly creek. Feef Nelson and several hands turned out to meet them.

"Chick Sellers been out this way?"

"Yas. What's wrong?"

"Wrong? He broke jail!"

"Na!" gaped Nelson. "Told us he was bailed out."

The sheriff snorted. "Which way did he go?"

"Him an' Miss Lois said they was takin' a little ride around. Looked like they might ha' been aimin' to make Runnin' B'ar, now you mention it."

The sheriff eyed the foreman sharply. From a remark Hammet had dropped, he thought the foreman would be a good man to keep an eye on.

"Get a horse, Feef, an' come along. We might need you."

Hammet was obviously puzzled at this flight of the daughter from what must have been a considerable fortune. Sharman's ranch itself was not so much; but he was reputed to be the creditor of a good many cattlemen around the county. Hammet shifted over alongside of Nelson.

"Think Miss Lois could have got a-holt of much cash before she left?" he asked the foreman.

"I dunno. I don' hardly think so."

"There wasn't much in the house when I looked it over this morning, nor much paper or securities she could have cashed in on. Sharman didn't seem to be very systematic in his accounts."

"Na," admitted the foreman. "I rackon the boss had papers an' accounts, but he did his business mostly under his hat."

Hammet nodded. "Which way do you think they'd take from Running Bear?"

"East is natchelly thar best lead," was the foreman's opinion, "if they're aimin' to leave for keeps. If they can make the pass, they can cut south with more water an' fewer towns than if they want straight south. An' if they ain't steered east, we'll know as soon as we cl'ar the rise east o' Runnin' B'ar. You can see twanty mile from thar to the pass."

The sun beat down on sand and brush with a yellow glare, and the dust they kicked up made it more comfortable not to talk.

They stopped for a moment at Running Bear. No fugitives had been seen; but when they reached the low ridge about a mile east, they could see them easily, two specks in the distance, heading for the mountains at a gallop.

The posse took on speed, clattering over the trail at a rate no fugitive could afford to go for long, if he had to save his horse. The pair ahead was beginning the long drag up the mountain to the pass. They stood out against their own black shadows on the yellow earth.

"My roan, all right!" muttered Hammet.

The posse gained considerably until it too started up grade. Then it was hard to tell, for the country was so rough that either party had only occasional glimpses of the other.

Mullin and the sheriff led the way up the trail, with Herb Snyder and Rand next, and with Hammet and Feef Nelson bringing up the rear. The last they had seen of the fugitive cowpuncher and his girl, they had been nearly half a mile ahead. The sheriff was suspicious of an ambush, but he could not be overcautious if he was going to make any time.

Suddenly the pursuers took a sharp turn in the trail, and there was Chick Sellers facing them, waiting for them in a little depression of the trail less than fifty feet away. He was standing beside the roan—Lois with him—but instead of trying to cut them down, which was their first impression, he raised his arms in surrender.

The sheriff pulled his gun at the first sight of him. When he saw it was no fake, he put it up; but from behind him came the crack of a revolver and the rock back of Sellers spit chips a foot from his head. An agonized helplessness came over the cowboy's face and the girl turned as white as biscuit dough.

"Who the hell fired that shot?" yelled the sheriff. He turned just in time to see Hammet crowd up and knock the gun out of Rand's hand. The Circle C rancher lost his balance and tumbled over in the sand and rocks. He rolled down the steep incline about twenty feet before he brought up against a boulder. Hammet barely saved his scrambling horse from going down on top of him.

"Serves him right," remarked the sheriff. "Old enough to have some control of himself."

Chick Sellers was all in. He was dirty and hot and smeared with sweat, and there were hot tears of defeat and failure in his eyes. The girl's lips trembled and her cheeks were wet with tears.

"You win, Sheriff," said the cowpuncher. "The roan went lame. Must ha' got a nail or somethin' in his foot."

"Tough, Chick," said the sheriff grimly. "You got a girl that sticks by you, though."

"I told her not to come," explained Chick. "I jest went out to say goodby. I told her to stay, on account of her money; but she says she went over the old man's papers today an' figgers she ain't worth much o' nothin'. He kept most o' his business in his head, but a lot o' val'able notes an' things she knows he did have, she couldn't find nowhere. An' then she was scared o' this feller Rand hangin' around."

"Hangin' around?"

"Wantin' to marry her, sure! He even got the old man on his side, and when she come out flat an' wouldn't listen to neither of 'em, the old man was worse about it than he was."

"Well, we can talk all that over back in town," cut in the sheriff, not wishing to listen to Chick's nervous chatter all day. "Better look the roan over and fix him up if you can. You got to ride him back."

"He was all right when I started," explained Chick. "But I soon noticed he was worried about somethin'. I didn't pay no 'tention to it—didn't have time."

He leaned over and picked up the roan's favored foot, and grunted. He pulled out a jackknife and worked at something that seemed to be caught between the shoe and the hoof and bent by rough going until it was partly imbedded between the frog and

the bar of the hoof. The roan didn't like it, but Chick finally pulled out what looked like a long nail or a piece of rake. But it wasn't—it was a key!

It was the sheriff's turn to grunt. He took the key and looked at it. It was an ordinary key; but he could see where a notch had been filed recently in the front edge of it. He called Hammet.

"You're interested in keys," he said. "This came out o' your roan's foot."

The dude deputy sighed disgustedly.

"Boot me one," he offered, "for the prize dumbbell. This must be the key I saw outside Bar Q, when I turned around to look for it, I didn't have brains enough to figger the roan might have picked it up in his foot. It answers a lot o' questions."

"Whose is it?"

"Don't you recognize the 36 on the handle?"

"No."

"It belongs to the man that killed—and robbed—Sharman. A clever man, a man who could file keys and push grass under a door and make things he did look like somebody else did 'em. He stole his own notes back from Sharman, but he was clever enough to know that Sharman, as long as he was alive and able to handle a gun, would not need evidence or court procedure to collect debts. He had to kill him. But I reckon he was out for a little revenge on the girl that give him the go-by, too, the way he fixed things to point her way——"

"Hell!" snapped the sheriff, pulling his horse around. "I know who you mean. Arrest the——"

"You can't," cut in Hammet. "He's down back there in the gully with a smashed skull."

WHO'S GOING TO NAME THAT NEW SERIAL BY JACKSON GREGORY?

THE title for that new unnamed serial by Jackson Gregory is still to be decided. But the time is getting close when the final decision will have to be made, so you had better send in your nominations immediately.

As we stated in our last issue, the reader who first suggests the winning title will receive a prize of **$25.00 in cash** in addition to having the fun of naming a story that will be read the world over. SHORT STORIES has suggested five titles as samples for your guidance, but we hope that some one of you is going to suggest a much better title than any of these. Of course for the sake of the story we are going to have to use finally what seems to be the best possible title, but we sincerely hope that one of you readers is going to win that $25.00.

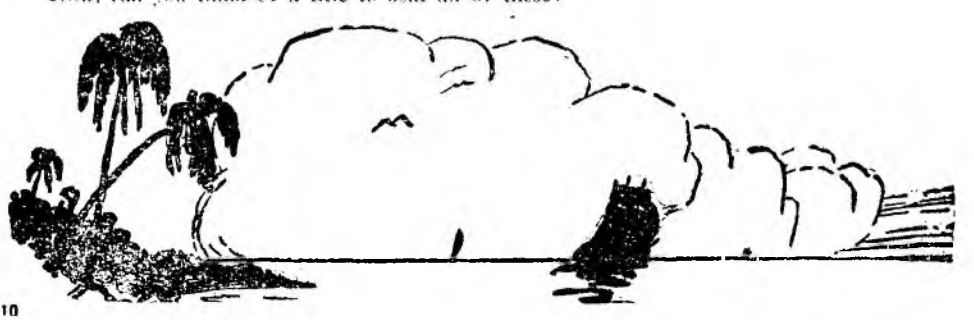
For your help in choosing a title, here's some of what occurs in Mr. Gregory's exciting story.

Young Billy Tremaine buys an island in the South Seas and goes there only to find a piratical captain and his lawless crew in forcible possession. These desperate men have discovered a cache of pearls and are determined to learn where they came from. The only one who knows is a young woman, a white girl, who has lived alone on the island since being wrecked there years before. And Tremaine has an exciting time of it outwitting the villains and securing the girl in her heritage.

The sample titles suggested by the author and SHORT STORIES are: The Island of Allure, The Ghost Pearls, Dangerous Isle, Fortunate Island, and The Pearl Pirates.

Some titles suggested by readers are: The White Pearl, and Plunder Pearls, by B. Loudun; The Isle of a Thousand Perils, by J. P. McKenna; Where Manhood Wins, by C. F. Weidner; Handicap Estate, by G. P. J. Devries; The Isle of Enchantment, and A Chequered Cruise, by Edward Muscat.

Now, can *you* think of a title to beat all of these?



THE BELLED GHOST

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "A Fool for Luck," "The Iron Chalice," etc.

THE CINCINNATI KID HAD FIGURED IN MANY A CLOSE DECISION, BUT NEVER IN SUCH A RACE WITH DEATH AS THAT DAY WHEN A LITTLE MUTT DOG STAYED THE SHERIFF'S HAND

A SMALLISH and very old town, down in the heart of the Cotton Belt. Sandy streets lined with moss-hung liveoaks, and stately white houses retiring modestly behind screens of magnolias and jasmines and honeysuckle-vines. At the center of everything, a weatherbeaten courthouse, with a squat red-brick jail just back of it. In a basement cell that had one barred window set even with the ground level, the Cincinnati Kid waited for his share of the jail's midday meal to be slipped under the door of riveted strap-iron that stood between him and the corridor.

Already he had draped half of the blanket from the cot's outer edge to the floor, in order to hide from view a very small, brown dog of no particular breed, which was tied short underneath. The little mongrel, starved and pitifully lean, had come whining to the window a week before, and Kid Maloney had squeezed it between two of the rusted bars. He looked upon it now as his one real friend, and with it religiously split his meals fifty-fifty. They would take the dog from him if they knew, he feared; therefore he kept it hidden.

Footsteps rang in the dank corridor. Maloney had expected the poky old jailer. Sheriff Mayland Bright appeared at the door.

"Cressy will be away for a week, Kid," Bright said. Cressy was the poky old jailer. "I'm putting Deputy Spot Higdon in his place, and Spot will be here with your grub before a great while."

"Aw right," the Kid replied dully.

The dog lay still behind the blanket. Maloney had been patiently training it to that. Bright tossed a package of cigarettes and a small box of matches into the cell, and was gone before the prisoner could thank him.

"One white guy," the Cincinnati Kid observed, when the soothing smoke was flowing through his nostrils. "One white guy, sure."

He never would have said that of Spotswood Higdon—a poor-white name for an aristocratic old colonel—because it had been Higdon that had arrested him. True, the deputy appeared to be intensely sorry for him now, but that didn't help a great deal.

Once more Maloney cursed fate for the scurvy trick she had played with him as the victim. Then he reached under his narrow bed and caressed the dog, which whined its appreciation; then he straightened, and went to the barred window.

They were thoughtful enough to build the new gallows where he couldn't see the work going on. But he could see the shadow of the thing on the high, jailyard fence, late of an afternoon, and that was worse!

Spot Higdon came, at last, and he brought a very good dinner with him. In-

stead of shoving it under the door, as Cressy had always done, he opened the door and came in with it. The prisoner noted that he wore his six-gun at the point most convenient for making a quick draw.

Without a word, Maloney divided the food into equal parts on the two tin plates, and ate one half without any noticeable relish of it. Then he drank the cup of black coffee. Higdon stood and watched it through soberly. The deputy didn't look well; he was ashen sallow, and there were new lines in his lean face.

Under the cot, the dog whined hungrily!

"What's that?" said Higdon. "You got a dawg in here, Kid?"

"Yep," Maloney confessed promptly. Why deny it? He thrust the dog's half of the meal under the cot, and the mongrel fell to in noisy gulps. "I sure hope you don't mind, Spot, eh? He's only a little mutt, and lots o' comp'ny; you wouldn't believe it."

"I guess I don't mind," drawled Higdon. "Better not let Bright know it, though. Bright's fond o' dawgs, foolish fond, but he's first, last, and all the time a high sheriff, and he'd consider it was ag'inst the jail rules. You see, we had a prisoner here with a dawg once, and it goes out and comes back later with a hack-saw pasted in the thick fur o' its back. The prisoner's wife done it—and that night he sawed out."

After a little period of silence, the deputy went on. "Well, Kid, you got only three days left now. Anything I can do for you? Any kin-folks you want notified, or anything?"

"I ain't got any relatives, and I sure wouldn't let 'em know about—about this disgrace if I had!" cried Kid Maloney in sudden desperation. "You can do this for me—find the gink that croaked Polk Jennison, and save me!"

A shadow crossed Spot Higdon's face, deepening its new lines, making it seem oddly haggard.

"Son, we've done all we could do. The evidence——"

"Daum the evidence!" half wept the Cincinnati Kid. It was not cowardice. It was youth, to which death in any guise is so insufferable a thing. "I didn't kill Polk Jennison, Spot; I'm tellin' you, I sure didn't do it! Listen to me, Spot——

"You've heard it before, but I want you to hear it again, and you'll notice I tell the same thing all the time. I'm a batamweight prizefighter up in Cincy, and they call me a wonder; I has hopes for a try at the championship; see? But I get a trimmin' from bein' too cock-sure, and it busts me all up, breaks my heart in small pieces. I can't even look at the friends who've lost every cent they had because o' their faith that I'd plaster k. o. all over the little Memphis pug, and I run away, headin' for New Orleens to begin life all over again; see?

"Well, pretty soon I'm stone broke, and it's the freight trains for little Tommy Maloney—truss-rods and side-door sleepers, you know. A shack with a heart in him as big as a pin-head ditches me here in this hick town o' yours; see? It's rain'in, and I'm lookin' for a place to bunk up in, when I hear a spat from a gat, and then another. One o'clock in the mornin' it is then; get that. I turn a corner at a street lamp, and this Polk Jennison comes tearin' into me. Jennison looks wild; he's got a gat in his hand, and it seems he's about to crack me one with it. I snatch the gun from his hand, and then I notice red on his shirt's front. Next thing I know, there's a crowd o' half-dressed people, and I'm arrested for killin' Polk Jennison in attempted highway robbery. Jennison has crumpled up like a wet rag and died before he could turn in any dope as to who had shot him. That's the truth, the same as I've told all along; now get out o' here and do something for me, quick!"

"Nobody but the Gov'nor can help you, son," Higdon said, and his voice was weak.

"But he won't interfere, Bright told me!"

Slowly Spot Higdon shook his head. "Everybody thinks it's a clear-cut case, Kid."

Maloney, his throat tight and his eyes dim, stretched himself out on the narrow bed. Higdon left the cell.

The afternoon dragged on. The shadow would soon begin to creep up the jailyard fence. Maloney went to the window, and stood there watching for the shadow, oddly and terribly fascinated. The dog whined under the cot, strained at the short leash.

Then, footsteps in the corridor again. It was so quiet that they rang like blows. Higdon was coming back, the youthful prisoner knew. The deputy was very pale now. He pressed his face against four of the door's iron cross-straps.

"Listen, Kid," he said, holding up a tremulous finger. "What do you hear?"

Maloney listened for some three seconds. "Nothin' at all," he answered; "I don't hear nothin' at all."

"A bell," half whispered Spotswood Higdon, "a little bell. Don't you hear it, son?

Ting-a-ling, ting-aling; don't you hear it?"

"I don't hear nothin'," reiterated the Cincinnati Kid.

"You—you'll be the second man to be hung in this country since I settled here ten years ago," the deputy ran on. "The other one was a fellow named Spicer. He kept hearin' bells, he said, for three days before the execution; little, tiny bells. It's strange, son, don't you think?"

"Spot, you're goin' bughouse," declared Maloney.

"No, I'm not. I hear bells, Spicer's bells." Higdon sought a new grip on himself. "The pity of it was, Spicer was not guilty. It was proved afterward that he wasn't."

The deputy turned and left the cell door. His walk was not quite steady.

An hour later, while Maloney stood at the barred window and watched the shadow of the gallows as it crawled upward on the fence, Sheriff Mayland Bright came.

"You feeling all right, buddy?" the sheriff asked.

"Elegant!" sneered Maloney, wheeling. "Beautiful! Lovely! Put yourself in my place, and see how *you'd* feel about it! But—— Aw, say, I don't mean to be sour to you, honest. You're a square shooter, Sheriff. But it—it's awful to be hung when I ain't any guiltier o' killin' Polk Jennison than you are."

"I'm sorry, buddy. You don't know how sorry I am. I worked for you, Kid. I did everything possible to find a trail leading toward somebody else. You understand that it's not me that's to—to execute you, that it's the law, don't you?"

"I know, I know." Maloney shrugged. "Say, Spot Higdon is sure goin' bugs. Hears bells, he says, the same as that fellow Spicer heard. What's wrong with Spot?"

Mayland Bright frowned. "Spot isn't well. Comes of a nervous family, anyway. He's just given up his job, and wanted to leave now, but I couldn't spare him before Creesy gets back."

"Say—" explosively—"I heard that this Polk Jennison was somethin' of a gambler; right?"

"Yes. A good deal of a gambler, Polk was."

"Is Spot Higdon?" asked Maloney.

"No," readily answered Bright. "But he used to be. You thinking Spot killed Polk, son? Get that out of your mind. They were the closest of friends, my boy."

The Cincinnati Kid narrowed an eye wisely. "All the same, somethin's gnawin' the insides out o' Spot. And I'm wonderin' to beat everything how it happened that he was so close to the place where I met Polk Jennison, that night."

"He lives near there, and he was awake with an aching tooth when the shots were fired. Anything special that you want, son?"

"Nope. Thanks."

The echoes of Mayland Bright's departing footsteps died away. Maloney sat down on the floor beside his narrow bed, lifted the draped blanket, and put an arm around the small, brown dog.

"They're bound to string me up, boy," he said gloomily. "They're bound to do it. Then what'll become o' you? Poor little m-m-m-mutt!"

THE day that the state had set for the execution of Thomas Maloney was a day that the sleepy old Southern town will be slow to forget. Matters at the courthouse and jail seemed queerly out of tune, somehow, and the name of unfortunate Hensley Spicer was mentioned more than once. Spotswood Higdon had a cadaverous look now, and Mayland Bright's suspicions were as yet not aroused—Higdon had an abominable liver, and he was full of malaria, and he'd come of a nervous family.

Higdon went early, that Friday, to the basement cell.

"Bells, bells, bells, all night long," he said. "Didn't you hear 'em? Honest now, tell the truth."

"You nut!" cried Kid Maloney. Then suddenly, "Say, Spot, listen; don't you think you better confess, and save me? It'll soon be too late, y'know."

"Me confess?" At once Higdon bucked up. He pretended that he didn't understand, pretended exceedingly well. "What on earth are you talkin' about, Kid, anyhow? Confess what?"

"The murder o' Polk Jennison, that's what!" flared Maloney. "If you don't them bells will get you; they'll ring you down into your grave—

"'The bells of hell go dinga-ling-a-ling,
For you, but not for me!'"

The two lines of iron song had burst from the inner vaults of his memory and through his lips as though of their own volition. It had no apparent effect upon the deputy. He merely shrugged, and walked off. Maloney, a picture of utter hopelessness, stood there staring at the cell

door after Higdon had gone.

Hours, eternal hours. Chains of leaden minutes, linked by sodden seconds. Time should have flown; instead, even the machinery of the universe seemed to have almost stopped. Then benefit of clergy, with Thomas Maloney still protesting his innocence and flatly refusing to pray. He hadn't been a praying man in life, and he wouldn't be in death.

Then Thomas Maloney stood on the scaffold, ankles and wrists bound, with the black hood on, with the noose about his neck and the hangman's knot caressing one ear like a beguiling wanton with a dagger in the other hand. Only a few persons had been permitted to enter the jailyard, but morbid and curious people watched from windows and house tops. There was silence so deep that it was well nigh terrifying in itself, as Mayland Bright, white in the face, put forth an unsteady hand to spring the trap.

"I'm sorry, my boy," murmured the man inside the sheriff. "Good-by, and God love you."

"God love you, too," came strongly from the black hood. It was the acid test for the heart of Cincinnati Kid. "You're one white guy. I'll put in a good word for you, where I'm goin', if I can."

High in the ether above, a bird sang. Then the awful stillness again, but it was soon broken by a quick, soft pattering, and the little mongrel dog raced up the scaffold steps and sat down on the trap at the feet of the Cincinnati Kid—smiling a canine smile of victory and joy, looking at Bright, looking worshipfully back to its new master, at Bright, back to its new master, and its tail beat a low tattoo on the rough boards. Once more the song of the bird above; again the gravelike silence. The high sheriff could not yet force his hand to do the will of his brain.

Then there came the sound of a bell, clear and distinct, as a peripatetic rogue cow halted to browse along the grassy edge of a sandy street. The commonplace thing became important, in that it provided a dramatic climax for the reign of the belled ghost in Spotswood Higdon's conscience—his voice rang out, shattered and shattering:

"Wait, Mayland—I killed Polk Jennison myself!"

The deafening, jarring crash of Higdon's own six-gun followed, and the deputy had cheated the rope.

Bright saw it all quickly now. He rushed to Thomas Maloney, snatched off the noose, fairly tore away the sombre hood, cut the small ropes that had bound ankle and wrist. Maloney blinked in the blessed sunlight. It occurred to him that it had all been a horrible dream. Mayland Bright was speaking joyously.

"The bell did it, son, but the dog helped; the dog made the minute's delay for the bell, the minute's delay that Spot must have found bitter hard.

"And then," he added, with a narrowed eye, "it's Polk Jennison's dog."

AN ARCTIC REGISTER

AT THE summit of MacDougall Pass, which is the northernmost pass in the Rocky Mountains, stands a lone blazed tree which has served as a register to many of the adventurers who have passed through the back door of Alaska from the MacKenzie River to the Yukon. According to tradition the first blaze to be chipped from the sturdy spruce was in 1842 by Mr. J. Bell, who was looking for a place to establish a trading post for the Hudson's Bay Company. While Bell was the first white man to explore the pass, MacDougall, after whom the pass was named, soon followed his trail and established a trading post on Bell River at what is now known as La Pierre House. Later, Arthur Harper, Jack McQuestion, Alfred Mayo and James McKnipp added their names to the register as they passed through the pass to make history in the Klondike. In 1917 the following list of names was still readable on the blazed tree: Buffalo Jones, A. D. Reynolds, F. T. Lane, Gus Moyute, T. Todman, F. W. Clarke, R.A. Barnard, T. D. Williams, Robert W. Service, July 21, 1911, G. W. Burrell, V. Clausen, H. Driscoll, Emerson Hough, and Jim Cornwell.—D. C.

THE LIGHTNING THAT WAS STRUCK

By HARRY BEDWELL

SUNLIGHT ON THE MEXICAN HILLS, A RAIDING AIRPLANE ALONG THE BORDER AND EDDIE SAND, BOOMER TELEGRAPH OPERATOR, FOUND HIMSELF VERY MUCH MIXED UP IN THE ACTIVITIES OF "THE LIGHTNING FLASH"—A BANDIT OF WHOM HE HAD HEARD MUCH BORDER TALK. AND MAN FOR MAN, ONE MIGHT PICK ONE OF THE INTREPID BREED OF BOOMER OPERATORS TO MATCH AGAINST A RENEGADE BANDIT—BE HE EVER SO CRAFTY

BEING a telegrapher of great skill, Eddie Sand had developed independence of thought and a habit of moving freely about over the face of the land. Men of the craft class such as "boomers" because you seldom see them twice in the same place, unless you take the second look shortly after the first. Even then you may only see them going out and slamming the door.

After a season of excessive travel, far from his usual orbit, time, a bedeviled chief dispatcher and a local passenger train brought him to Pigeon Pass on the Mexican border, where his duties were those of second trick operator for the S. W. P. Ry.

As he got down from the train and tramped along the platform toward the yellow station, he gave his regard to the gray desolation of desert, and the crowding brown hills shouldering in on either side. The afternoon heat was sharply barbed.

"It is a nice quiet place," he decided with satisfaction.

The local passenger train started to move off leisurely. At the depot the screen door to the office was nearly torn from its hinges in his face, and a lean and erratic-eyed young man poised above him.

"You the new operator?" the young man gasped.

Eddie nodded and opened his mouth to reply. But the young man stampeded by, almost knocking him down with a swinging suitcase. He made a flapping, long-legged swoop upon the departing train, threw his suitcase onto the rear platform and himself face down on top of it. The tranquil train bore him away.

Eddie closed his mouth. A grizzled old fellow with a grin like a pirate and a blue eye as gentle as a baby's took the gaunt young man's place in the doorway. This was old Chris Healy, agent and first trick operator.

Eddie wasn't very tall, he looked slightly emaciated, and he wasn't just then feeling his best. Chris towered over him from the door sill in a kind of menacing amiability. He looked like a ragged and ancient Joshua tree. Eddie eyed the old fellow alertly and got ready to dodge clear of any further stampedes. But Chris merely grinned like a buccaneer and beamed like a benediction.

"I was going to say 'yes,'" Eddie remarked, "but he didn't wait."

"No," said old Chris. "He'd been waiting long enough."

"Oh," beamed Eddie.

"Yeh," Chris nodded. "He's the guy you're to relieve; have, in fact, relieved."

"Glad to have met him," Eddie responded politely as he gazed after the sedate local.

"Yeh. This is a nice quiet place——"

"The chief said it would be," Eddie smiled brightly. "That's why I came."

"But it gets lonesome for some people after just so long."

"I suppose it would—for some people," Eddie agreed.

"That boy caught himself holding conversations at night with someone that wasn't here," old Chris related dolefully. "After the third time he got in a hurry to leave. Some get that way."

Eddie took off his hat and rumpled his hair. He ran his eye over the huddle of buildings that made up Pigeon Pass on both sides of the border, and nodded solemnly. It looked absolutely lifeless.

Chris cast a measuring glance over Eddie, and his eyes became an even more delicate blue.

"You look kind of peaked," he remarked.

"I got a touch of fever down in Mississippi," Eddie explained.

"Seemed like distemper," Chris sympathized.

"I caught a bad cold up in Montana after that," Eddie admitted. "Hard to get rid of up there, and I'd seen all that country I wanted to anyway."

Old Chris studied the slight figure in the white sunlight. Eyes met firmly, blue and gray. He decided suddenly that the gray eyes weren't as guileless as he had expected. And there was a glint of fire in the hair. The thin, sharp straightness of the newcomer suggested a knife, clean and bright and twinkling.

"Yeh? Some boomer. Come in," old Chris Healy invited. And then he reflected, "I'll bet he's stubborn."

Eddie Sand sneezed and breathed deeply of the thin, hot air. Anyway, there wasn't any turmoil, or cold dampness, or muck underfoot like there had been up in Montana. He followed the old fellow into the depot.

Pigeon Pass existed because a branch of the main line of the S. W. P. angled off into Mexico to the mining town of Purga, and beyond to the rich valley of the Santa Rita where it ended in a town of the same name. But at the time of Eddie's arrival successive revolutions had plundered this valley and town and had scattered the inhabitants.

The American-owned gold mines at Purga had withstood the revolutionists with a paid army of their own until the activities of a shrewd and popular desperado who was dubbed, doubtless by himself, El Relampago, had gathered such a following as to rule that section of Mexico quite completely. In a remarkably stubborn attack he had nearly taken Purga, so the mine owners had decided to dismantle and abandon their properties for the time being.

The first few days of Eddie's incumbency at the Pass saw the beginning of this withdrawal. One afternoon when he came on duty he found an express company's guard seated in a strategic position in a short passageway formed by a storage room built into the office. Before the guard was the big office safe, and across his lap was a sawed-off shotgun.

Old Chris explained to Eddie that the safe contained the final clean-up of the mines, a matter of some forty odd thousand dollars, which the branch train had brought up that afternoon to be forwarded on the westbound limited at nine that evening.

"Which is too much hard cash to be sticking around my immediate presence," old Chris grinned his piratical grin. "If this shotgun messenger wasn't so close at hand I'd load myself up with the stuff and step across the border."

"That bunch on the other side wouldn't let you keep it very long," the messenger assured him.

Chris perversely tried to disturb the guard's calm.

"As like as not, this here Relampago knows all about the movement of gold," he croaked with melancholy concern, "and is fixin' to step over and take it away with him. He'd sure bump you off first thing, just to see you kick. They say he's awful bold."

The guard smiled starkly. "He's likely got sense enough to stay on his side of the backyard fence," he said. "But if he does take a tour over here, all I ask is that he gives me an opportunity to get both barrels of this into him and his gang. I'll take a chance on his being able to do anything to me after that."

It was the first time Eddie had heard of El Relampago, and when it had been explained that it was the name of no other animal than a bandit newly risen to fame,

Chris gave a free translation of it as it had been given to him. "Streak of Lightning," he called him. "Or Lightning flash."

"He might be a ham telegraph operator," Eddie said. "Because they like to call themselves 'Lightning Slingers.'"

"I guess it's because he's supposed to be fast," Chris opined, and wandered out to buy himself a drink before supper.

The dispatcher called, and Eddie squared himself before the telegraph instruments. The short twilight came and died, and he lit the station lamps.

He was at the telegraph table with his back to the shotgun messenger, who was eating a lunch, when there came a shattering crash. It sounded as if the side of the building had been battered in. But Eddie, whose nerves had been trained to steadiness in the never ending crisis of handling swift traffic, knew what had happened. He had been in holdups before. He got up deliberately, his hands going above his head. At the same time he faced about.

The side door at the end of the little passage had been smashed in. Two railroad ties lay on top of the wreck of it. The door had been bolted and barred, but it had come away completely with one drive of the heavy rams. As it gave way a man had sprung in over the wreckage and had struck the shotgun messenger smartly over the head. The guard reeled and sprawled and lay quiet, still clutching a sandwich in his hand.

The man stood lightly on feet set for quick action. A pistol was leveled carelessly from the hip. He laughed an abrupt approval of Eddie's cool submission, his quick eyes dancing everywhere above the handkerchief tied over his face. A short man came in behind him. He had heavy, stooping shoulders, head thrust forward like a bull about to charge; dull, malicious eyes. He, too, wore a handkerchief mask. A dark face or two hung in the doorway.

"Turn your back to me," the leader ordered briskly, "then lower your hands slowly till your wrists are crossed behind your back." The voice, slightly muffled by the mask, had a direct, autocratic harshness.

Without hurry Eddie turned his back and lowered his hands as directed. There was a huge and ancient pistol on an enclosed shelf of the table within easy reach. The company supplied each station with one. But Eddie wasn't very familiar with firearms, especially of that ancient date; and in any event he didn't want to use a gun on anyone. The gold in the rusty safe didn't belong to him, and he wasn't paid to woo almost sure death to protect it.

The stoop-shouldered man came forward and began to tie Eddie's wrists together with a rough cord. Eddie mentally dubbed him the assistant bandit. He was needlessly vehement, drawing the cord cruelly tight, handling Eddie roughly.

Felix Rayburn, the third trick operator, was asleep upstairs, but Eddie could catch no sound of movement from above. A smashed door meant little to Felix, who was used to sleeping where switch engines kicked cars about.

"Now climb onto the telegraph table and stretch out," the bandit leader dictated in his ear.

Eddie noted the man said "telegraph table," which showed some knowledge of railroad terms. Also he spoke English that had not been learned south of the border.

He climbed and stretched. A cord was twisted about his ankles and drawn tight till it cut into the flesh. He winced and protested.

"I'm not offering any resistance. What's in the safe doesn't mean a thing to me. Loosen the ropes a little, mister," he asked mildly.

The leader bent over him. His eyes danced as if he were hugely pleased. He struck Eddie heavily across the mouth, the blow falling with abrupt brutality upon the upturned face.

The assistant bandit grunted a short, harsh laugh.

"You keep your damn' mouth shut," the leader said with venomous mirth, "and don't do anything that you're not told to do. And listen! I'm a better telegraph operator than you are, so don't try any of this trick stuff of working the key with your hands behind you, because I'll drill you between the eyes when you start it."

He put a hard finger upon Eddie's forehead and pressed savagely. Eddie stared back at him steadily.

"Now tell me, little man," the bandit

went on, still pressing with his forefinger. "What is the combination to the safe?"

"I don't know," Eddie replied evenly. "I haven't any use for it. The agent is the only one of the station force who has it, and he won't be back till nearly nine."

The bandit studied Eddie's face sharply. His stocky assistant stood by stolidly after having tied the last knot in the cord that bound the operator's legs.

"You're probably telling the truth," the bandit decided. "But they always write the combination down and leave it about in case they should forget it. I'll find it."

He went questing about the office swiftly. He found a set of three numbers in a vertical row penciled on the window frame beside the table, and five figures in a line like the number of a freight car on the wall beside the safe. Written on the bottom of a drawer in the agent's desk he discovered two more sets of numbers.

"Seem to change the combination pretty often," he grumbled darkly. He studied the figures he had jotted down. "The last number is always nine." he scowled. "Likely starts with a left turn."

He set a lamp on a chair beside the safe, knelt and began to turn the dial with swift care. He ran through the numbers, paused to consider a while, then began all over again.

Eddie watched him, now and then glancing at the clock. The pains in arms and legs affected him with a black fury that was hard to master.

The table on which he lay was built into a bow window facing the tracks so that the operator sitting at work had a clear view of the main line both ways. At 7:35 he caught a faint dance of light in his eyes. The eastbound limited had just turned from the hills on the straightaway of down grade. It was due by Pigeon Pass at 7:45 and was wheeling along on time for her regular meeting point down the line with the westbound limited, due at the Pass at 9:00 o'clock.

The shotgun messenger still lay starkly in the wreckage of the door. Dark faces of Mexicans moved about the open doorway, and Eddie caught glimpses of figures before the window. They had the station surrounded. The bandit leader turned the dial gently with two fingers on the edge. Presently he paused and breathed a whistling sigh.

"There's one tumbler down," he muttered.

He considered an instant, then reversed the dial slowly. The handkerchief about his face worked down to the end of his nose, settled about his chin. The profile of the upper half of his face was cut clearly into the dim light reflected from the safe door. The lines were sharp and straight, except for a peculiar little hump on the high-bridged nose.

"Like a knot on a log," Eddie decided as he tried to keep his mind from the pain of the tight cords.

Another whistling breath told of another tumbler down.

"One more and I've got her," the bandit glowered with satisfaction.

He changed his position to ease cramped muscles, and touched the dial delicately again.

Then the limited spoke from the desert valley. The screeching blasts racketed across the high hills and away over the dead flats of Mexico. Four times she called. She was politely asking the operator at Pigeon Pass for the signal.

It was then it came to Eddie that the man before the safe was the bandit-patriot of Mexico called the Lightning-flash. The man's concentration slipped away, and he was on his feet and at Eddie's side in the bow window before the second blast had superseded the first. His hand went to the semaphore lever at Eddie's head. As the fourth call came from the limited, he pulled the lever down sharply. One of the semaphore arms outside broke and dropped, the red eye turned green. The limited said "Thank you," sharply.

A proper operator was this bandit, Eddie allowed, disappointed, for he had hoped the man had lied about it.

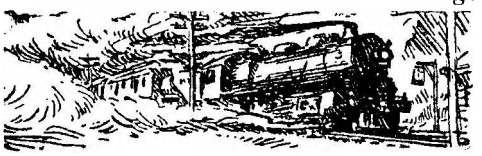
The bandit pulled the handkerchief about his face again, and gave the knot a tug. He stepped back a little from the window and watched the swift approach of the train. It was making close to a mile a minute on that straight down grade.

Its approaching thunder filled the office with restless sound. Eddie turned cautiously onto his side and braced his heels against the iron stand of a sounder box. He glanced upward to measure the inches between the top of his head and the semaphore lever. Then he lowered his eyes and straightened his legs in a head-on lunge.

He knew he must hit the lever at just the right angle with the top of his head to disengage it from the notch that held it, and that he would have to bump it hard. He didn't spare himself when he lunged. The iron bit into his scalp. Colored light whirled in his eyes, the pain burned across

his head, and he felt himself go floating away across a drumming sea. But he didn't quite lose all consciousness. He heard the sharp rasp as the lever came out of the notch, the grinding as it fell forward. He knew then that the semaphore arm had been thrown outward, that the red eye of the semaphore light now confronted the limited.

There was a sharp scream from the train like an animal shot in full charge.



Breaks clashed, the smooth roar changed to a series of crashes.

The bandit, attention on the train, did not in the first few seconds grasp just what had happened. Then his hand shot to the lever, but it came away as quickly to the butt of his pistol. He had realized on the same second he had thought to pull the lever back again that it would do no good; for it is a safety rule that after the signal has been given and then taken away, the train must stop no matter if the semaphore arm is again dropped.

The bandit turned on Eddie.

"Damn your soul!" The black pistol was leveled from his hip. "I ought to kill you for that."

Eddie came slowly back from the drumming sea and grinned contentedly.

The clamor of the train filled the office with tumult.

Suddenly the bandit rolled him from the table to the floor. Eddie came down limply, and a dull thunder rolled about his head. Then the bandit kicked him viciously in the stomach twice, and turned away snapping orders, and went crashing out over the wreck of the door.

A regular conflagration blazed around Eddie. Then he became sick, and the retching felt as if he were being torn to long, quivering strips. But he hung on to consciousness grimly.

The limited came to a thundering stand outside. Conductor and brakeman stormed in, arrogant and indignant at having to make this tank-town stop. And with all the whirling pain in his bleeding head and the boisterous ache of his body, Eddie was true to his training to keep traffic moving. The instant they had cut him free of the biting cords, he pulled himself into his chair and began rapidly to fill in a clearance card for the limited to proceed.

"Get that shotgun messenger aboard," he croaked, "and pull another one off the express car. Then beat it."

He thumbed open the key, and firmly flashed word to the dispatcher of what had happened. Then he crumpled up on the table and groaned.

"He kicked me right in the tummy—twice," he grimaced a tenacious grin. "He was a mean guy."

Eyes caught some of the glint from his hair.

II

DIVISION superintendent Barabe had come down to Pigeon Pass on an afternoon train to get the details of the attempted robbery, and to see the last train from Purga mines come in. He sat with Eddie on a baggage truck on the shady side of the station and went through the whole affair.

"He said he was an operator," Eddie narrated blandly as he squinted at the raw sunlight. "A darned good operator, he claimed to be; and I kind of think he was, although he didn't exhibit it. But when No. 4 asked for the board, and him all absorbed in opening the safe, he did just what any operator would have done—only quicker. He jumped for the semaphore lever."

"Was he a Mexican?" Barabe asked with heavy shortness.

Eddie shook his head. "I didn't see his face, except a little bit in a dim light from behind him reflected on the safe door, but he was an American. You couldn't miss that when he first came in. Fact, he was an experienced station man, because he knew that every time the combination of the office safe is changed, the agent always writes it on the wall, or on the bottom of a drawer, or some place like that, so he can refer to it till he memorizes it. They all think it's a cute trick that nobody is on to, yet all of 'em do it."

Eddie smiled dreamily and sniffed the clean, dry air as if trying to get the remaining northern dampness from his lungs. The narrow valley with the hills crowding in, the wide, gray flats opening out into Mexico, with two blue peaks thrust up above the horizon, all palpitated gently in the white heat.

A faint throbbing that had been in the air for a little time now came from directly overhead. Eddie cast a painful upward glance and located an airplane hung in the silver blue of the sky.

Barabe, too, had his head tilted back.

"An army plane patrolling the border," he stated briskly. "Did this bandit say anything that made you think he was this bird Lightning-flash?"

Eddie swung his feet carefully and shook his head.

"His conversation was brief and no names mentioned," he said. "But he's the guy all right. I'd have named him Lightning myself. He moves like that. He and his assistant assassin, they were both mean guys," he added regretfully.

Eddie put his hand on his sore stomach and cocked his bandaged head likewise.

"Say, mister, your army plane isn't sticking strictly to the border," he announced. "Looks to me as if he had an appointment in Mexico—'way down."

The airplane had swung south at the Pass, to which point it had evidently followed the railroad, and was now a tiny cross scudding for the blue peaks beyond the somber flats.

"Well, I'll be damned!" said Barabe.

"So will I," Eddie agreed brightly.

"He's got no right to do that," Barabe glowered at the speck.

"That doesn't seem to stop him doing it," Eddie pointed out. "But a fellow that'll trundle a little old crate through the air has nerve, so he probably don't care how much right he's got to go wherever he's going."

Barabe gave a puzzled grunt, and relaxed on the truck.

"What did the assistant bandit look like?" he took up his cross-examination.

"He had shoulders about two feet thick and three feet wide, all humped over—and a mean disposition. Looked like a baboon, or a bull, or something. But he didn't say anything."

"You seem to have observed those fellows pretty closely," Barabe commented.

"Yes, sir!" Eddie placed a hand delicately upon his stomach. "Didn't one of 'em tie me up so tight it nearly cut me in two in a number of places? And didn't this Lightning-bug kick me right here—twice? I'll remember them both for a long time yet."

Barabe laughed crisply. "Lightning was once a boomer operator like yourself," he grinned knowingly. "We've found out a little about him, and are trying to run down his record. He went to work for a railroad down in Mexico about four years ago, and hasn't been heard of up here since, until this bandit business. He seems to be pretty sharp."

"And mean," Eddie added.

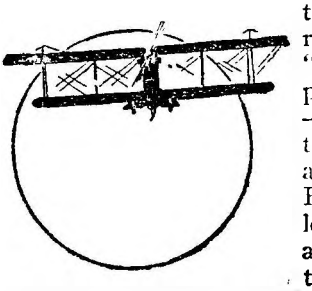
They fell silent, each one pondering.

Barabe was a strong, heavy-set man, ponderously quick in his movements. He had a mind like a steel trap, and he knew his business. He was a veteran of the railroad game, and was quick to pick out a man with railroad sense and training. He liked Eddie's cool carelessness, and the bright gray of his eyes that showed an unmoved nerve.

Beside the superintendent, Eddie looked diminutive and placid. He seemed never in a hurry, although he did things with a deliberate swiftness that was deceiving. He never got excited, because he had observed that in crisis and disaster to get fussed up only made things worse. And there wasn't much in life to get excited about anyway. He was independent and unafraid. If a place, or a job, or a person disagreed with him, he could move on to some other place without inconvenience. In fact, he always moved on anyway.

Barabe regarded him solemnly. "The express company has granted you a $500 reward," he said with a distant twinkle, "and the S. W. P. has voted you a darned good watch properly engraved. Also, I'm going to see that you get a better job one of these days—if you stay with us. All of which isn't much, but it shows appreciation."

Eddie swung his heels and shook his head. "It isn't coming to me, mister," he disowned. "If the Lightning had attended to his business of robbing, he could have taken the works and I'd not have bothered. But no—he had to get rough. He shouldn't have treated me the way he did," he complained mildly as he rested his hand contemplatively upon his stomach. "If I ever run into him again, I don't know what I'd do, because you never can tell. But I'll bet I'd better start some of his own stuff. Ever hear of lightning getting struck?"



"I don't look for any more trouble of that kind," Barabe considered. "That army plane just now—but maybe that wasn't an army plane. Huh. Anyway, a lot more troops are being moved to the border, they're establishing a base camp up at El Cajon, and they're going to make it hard for those birds.

"But about these rewards," he smiled grimly. "You'll have to accept, because it'd disappoint everybody if you weren't blushingly happy about it."

The branch train, which had been held up at the custom house for some time, now drew in to the station. It was a long train, and the little engine had difficulty managing it. A Mexican customs employee shut the gates across the track and locked them.

"I'm sorry," Barabe said gravely, watching. "That'll be the last train from down there for a long time, I'm afraid."

He slid from the truck and stood solidly upon his feet. "There will be a little blowout at El Cajon and some presentation speeches. I'll let you know," he promised, and walked determinedly down the platform.

"Don't go to any trouble," Eddie called anxiously. "Fact is, you'd better send 'em to me without the speeches, because I don't blush politely."

The superintendent threw out an impatient, silencing arm without turning.

"Aw, hell!" Eddie mourned plaintively. "I'm not going if they make speeches. Anyway, what'd I do with five hundred smacks? And a gold watch highly engraved?"

The engine of the branch train groaned to a stop before the station, and the lanky engineer unfolded himself from the cab like a prong of bamboo, many-jointed.

"Hello, Hodges," Eddie greeted him placidly. "What're you going to do now they've taken your run off?"

Hodges stuck his hands into his upright pockets and regarded Eddie cynically.

"That bandit fellow made a sweet mess of you, didn't he?" he grinned. "Well, I wasn't going down there any more anyway, whether they took off this run or not, because I don't want those boys smearing me all up. I'm through with Mexico. I'll buck the board for my run on the main line."

He squinted in the sharp sunlight, spat, and undulated down the platform.

Eddie got carefully down from the truck and turned into the station. It was time to relieve old Chris.

III

EDDIE had brought with him a cargo of reading matter, and was, during the dark hours of the night, brightening his struggle for existence by imbibing some pounds of print. He was on this night in such a state of absorption in the troubles of others that it was only after the sound had ceased abruptly that he realized he had been listening to an airplane passing over the station. Had it been the chattering call of the sounder, or the signaling whistle of a locomotive, he would have acted upon it even in his preoccupation. But the steady drone that crept upon him did not register till at its highest pitch it died suddenly.

He got up and yawned.

"What's he scooting about in the dark for?" he wondered.

The instrument summoned him, he was busy for a little time, and when he got up to glance out of the back window, drawn by a flicker of light, there was a fierce little fire blazing away behind a fold in the valley a mile or so away.

"Maybe an old prospector warming himself up," he conjectured. "But it's kind of late, and that's a pretty big fire."

A freight train crawled into a siding, and the conductor came in for orders. A passenger train westbound winged by bearing the green lights that advertised another section to follow, its sharp whistle calling attention to the fact. A local passenger train slipped into the clear alongside the freight. Then the second section of the westbound passenger flung by, charging the long grade. The local passenger ventured out onto the main line and bore away to the east, followed by the sluggish freight.

The dispatcher ceased spitting orders, took Eddie's O. S., and the sounder went to sleep. The gods of the desert stillness crept back from the dark hills to which refuge the racketing trains had frightened them. They drew in very close.

Eddie stood up from the table and began to whistle softly, blithely, as a man will at his bath, the roar and thunder of the trains still beating in his pulse. Even with a cut on the head and a bruised abdomen, life was pretty keen if you managed it right.

Something creaked faintly. A draft of air smoked the lamp chimney he had polished so carefully that evening. His whistle died away, but his lips did not lose their pucker as he turned, his eyes flashing down the dim little passage to the back door. Although he half doubted his ability to use it, his hand slipped into the little shelf and took hold of the huge old pistol which the company furnished for the protection of life and property. It was heavy and big for his hand. It was a single-action gun,

and the click as he cocked it made an ominous, hollow sound in the still room.

Even in the dim light of the passage he made out that the door was open a few inches. He wasn't going through another encounter with this Lightning-flash without giving battle. He slipped softly along the wall till he stood behind the slightly open door, the huge pistol thrust out before him.

There was something on the other side of the door. He caught the sound of breathing above the drum of his own heart. If it was the Lightning he wasn't living up to his self-applied name. Might be the assistant bandit come to shoot him in the back while he sat at the table working. He would be cautious, that bull-shouldered brute. Eddie decided he'd have to take the first break if it were either of these.

The door swung half open noiselessly.

The huge old pistol, leveled and cocked, nearly obliterated his view of the tiny figure that came slowly into sight. A pair of very round eyes seemed to take up most of the immediate foreground over the threatening gun. The light in the passage was so uncertain that Eddie's first thought was that his own eyes were tricking him. He eased back against the wall and set himself to anticipate proceedings by as many seconds as possible. He blinked at the tiny figure in the half-open door, but it did not change its shape or size on closer inspection. His thoughts revolved like clanking machinery, but they didn't tell him a thing. His hand began to tremble under the weight of the pistol.

By all appearances it was a little girl who stood beside the door. Eyes, in the tricky light, as big as buns. A tiny hand clung to the edge of the door above her head, giving her body an inquisitive slant that, with the long, yellow coat she wore, and the startled little peep she gave, reminded him of a fluffy little chicken.

He lowered the pistol cautiously. They goggled at each other.

Eddie turned his eyes away, shook his head vigorously, then looked again quickly. He didn't believe it was because of the cut on the top of his head; and it wasn't because he had been drinking. In fact, the only drink he had taken since his arrival at the Pass was the one old Chris had invited him to have at the little hotel bar on the evening of his arrival. That one had affected him like a stunning blow just back of the ears, and he had not taken another. Chris was a tough old bird who could thrive on such punishment, but Eddie had decided he himself was too young and tender for such conflicts. So it must be that it was really a very little girl who stood there hanging onto the edge of the door.

"Well, I'll be —jiggered!" Eddie's lips relaxed their pucker at last.

The little girl pushed the door shut behind her, murmuring in a soft, obscure voice. Eddie backed into the room and goggled some more. Mexican—Spanish, he decided as he noted the delicate face in the brighter light. About three years old, he thought, as she came forward steadily, throwing out her feet bashfully till he caught twinkling glimpses of the flat soles.

"Aren't you out rather late?" he inquired genially.

"Peep, peep-peep," she said tentatively, like a dubious little chicken.

Eddie knew no Spanish that he could use in the presence of ladies, and as it was Spanish the little girl was evidently lisping, he never knew the answer to his polite inquiry.

He grinned and knelt before her. A heavy scarf was wound about her head, and tied under her chin.

"Are you lost?" he asked, and she chirped confidingly.

There was the faint odor of perfume and of scorched cloth about her. Earth and tiny twigs clung to her heavy coat as if she had fallen; and now he observed tear stains on her cheek.

Eddie scratched his head and ruminated, but could make nothing of anything. He walked to the door, opened it cautiously, peered out.

"Who's out there?" he called.

She followed him, peered and cheeped into the darkness, and then took hold of the door and pushed it shut. She looked up into his face with a kind of gentle dread.

Eddie gave it up.

"You might have come from heaven, but for the scorched smell," he reflected.

Then he noticed that the back of her coat was burned. Yet that didn't mean anything to him either.

"Might belong to one of the Mexican families on the other side of the line," he

mused. But he didn't quite believe that.

He sat himself down and began searching his mind for an answer.

"That cold in my head," he grumbled. "It won't work so good any more."

For some time Felix Rayburn, the third trick operator, had been moving sluggishly about upstairs, getting himself a meal. No one of the three station men being married, they all abode in the living quarters above, doing their own housekeeping. It was now midnight, and time for Felix to relieve Eddie. He came thumping sleepily down stairs, pausing at the bottom to stretch and yawn. But the yawn stopped midway of its wide career; his mouth hung open, and his arms, upraised starkly, continued immovable above his head.

Presently he closed his mouth, and let his arms sag to his side.

"What yo' got there?" he gargled.

"Felix," said Eddie soberly, "I'm going to let you in on a dark secret."

Felix's eyes began to protrude.

"I wouldn't mention it to a human being," Eddie confided darkly; "but to you, being not quite human, I'll reveal the fact that this is a child, a little girl."

"'S a Mexican kid, ain't it?" Felix gobbled.

"You may be right," Eddie conceded.

"Where 'd ja git her?"

"She walked in on me, Felix. In which case, what'll I do with her?"

"Feed her," Felix decided promptly.

Eddie sprang up and grabbed his hand gleefully.

"Fine! I hope you left something upstairs to eat."

Felix threw the hand from him wrathfully, for he had had to stand some heavy jabs because of the amount of food he consumed.

"You go to—" But Felix checked himself with choking violence under the round stare of the little girl. "Does she understan' American?" he asked cautiously.

"Not much, and we'd better not teach her any of the emphatic kind. Come on, little sister," he invited the little girl.

The name he applied to her warmed his own heart. How would it feel to have a sure enough little sister? The snuggling hand in his lit a faint glow inside.

They climbed the stairs, and Eddie started a thorough investigation of the cupboard. Then a terrible doubt smote him sharply. What was a little girl supposed to eat? He felt shaken.

"If I hadn't thought, I might have fed her anything," he considered appalled.

Eggs, he decided upon, and canned milk warmed, and toast. She was probably awfully hungry. He began to hurry.

She sat upon a kitchen chair and tried drowsily to untie the knot under her chin. He noticed this, and flew to her aid, helping her out of the heavy coat, unwinding the scarf from her head. Her brown hair glowed in the lamp light. She was awfully pretty, and so very tiny. Her dress was cerise and purple, which delighted his color-hungry eyes.

Within a few minutes he had four eggs, a half dozen pieces of toast and about a quart of condensed milk ready to serve.

She ate one egg happily, drank a glass of milk, and then leaned her head against his arm, and with the soft, contented peepings of a drowsy chicken snuggling under a warm wing, went to sleep.

"Well, can you beat that?" Eddie grinned.

His next move he worked out laboriously in his mind while he held a rigid position until muscles began to cramp. Then he took her up anxiously, and put her on his bed. He took off her shoes, and covered her with three quilts. She slept inertly.

He got an old wire cot from another room, put some blankets on it, and after dimming the lamp, lay down fully clothed. Old Chris in an adjoining room slept through all of Eddie's blundering about without changing the key of his snoring.

Eddie was afraid to go to sleep, because she might roll off of his narrow bed and break her neck, or she might smother in the quilts. A lot of things might happen to her if he didn't keep watch.

"Kids are a lot of trouble, I guess," he muttered as he pulled himself out of the sixth doze.

He usually slept until nine or ten in the morning. But when Felix came up at seven-fifteen to awaken Chris, the little girl sat up and began to chatter, which brought Eddie out of guilty slumber. Then old

Chris in ancient nightshirt hove in sight on his way to the kitchen to put on the coffee pot, his huge bare feet slapping the floor explosively. At sight of the little girl sitting up in bed, he stopped in an odd attitude as if a cramp

had suddenly struck him in the middle. He nearly strangled himself on the tall words that came forward naturally, and were held back with extreme violence.

Eddie explained bitterly and at length.

"Whyn't you tell me?" old Chris demanded peevishly. "It wasn't right to let me walk in here with my nightie on."

"Take it off if you want to," Eddie gave his sardonic expression. "I'm not any more used to girls of any age than you are," he explained impatiently. "What am I going to do with her now?"

"Feed her," Chris answered wisely.

"That's all you guys think of," Eddie complained.

The little girl, who had been regarding Chris soberly, began chattering amiably.

"See? I'm right," Chris nodded.

"What's she saying?" Eddie asked hopelessly.

"I don't know the words. But the tune sounds like she wants breakfast. I'll bust along and get on some clothes, and you start shaking up a meal."

By the time Chris was dressed he had entered into a violent quarrel with Eddie over what was good for little girls to eat. Eddie stuck stubbornly to the opinion that milk and eggs were proper diet.

"Everyone knows they're awfully healthy," he defended.

"But they ain't strengthenin'," Chris denounced. "A kid can't grow up on milk and eggs."

"But I'm not going to raise her," Eddie denied fiercely. "I'm going to take her over to the Mexican custom house after breakfast and turn her over to them."

"A helluva—I mean a great guy you are," Chris snarled. "She don't belong in that outfit. You'd try to teach your grandma to suck eggs. I'll take care of her. Here, give me the skillet."

He reached for Eddie aggressively, but within the next two seconds some exceptional things happened to him. He was swept from the tiny kitchen; his huge feet parted from the floor, and were unable to get back to it again. He did a dive that he couldn't with his best efforts prevent, his head fanned the air dizzily, and he came with a bouncing bump upon the bed. Here he was held down firmly. Every movement, every little wiggle he tried started a hurting some place. He had to lie quiet, or else, he felt, something about him would break.

"What the—?" But even this phenomenon did not sweep the little girl from his mind. He looked up dubiously into the face close above him. The gray eyes had a flash of bright metal in them.

"Now who's taking care of this child?" Eddie asked somberly.

Chris gulped. "You are, darn it!" he assured him readily. "Wow! Take that hitch off'n me, Eddie. What're you doing?" The mild blue eyes pleaded.

The glint went out of the gray eyes, and Eddie released his hold. Old Chris got up slowly and began to straighten out some kinks that had been put in his anatomy.

"What was that you did to me, Eddie?" he asked respectfully. "That sure was quick."

Eddie recovered the frying pan from the floor and put it on the stove. He patted the round-eyed little girl on the cheek reassuringly, then began breaking eggs into the pan.

"That was a half-nelson and a crotch hold," he said brightly.

"It felt like a bear-hug and a mule-pat," old Chris grumbled. "Where did you get it?"

Eddie turned the eggs expertly. "Was up in Ogden where some fellows trained. I took up wrestling in earnest, but I never could make over a hundred and forty pounds, so I didn't do well. Lotta fun, though."

Chris rubbed his neck. "I'll bet it was," he said glumly.

But Eddie didn't himself believe the little girl was the kind of child to be found in any of the Mexican homes about Pigeon Pass on either side of the border. Possibly someone passing through.

Immediately after breakfast he took her to the hotel across the way. But she had never been there, the proprietor averred, and his two guests, summoned, had never seen her before.

Strolling down the one sandy street in the hot sunshine, Eddie ruminated. Her little hand fitted into his snugly as she trotted beside him, chattering brightly, her round eyes observing all the raw world about her. A cute kid.

At sight of the uniformed officials at the Mexican custom house, the little girl stopped suddenly and would go no nearer until he swung her up in his arms. The officials looked her over at Eddie's request, shook their heads, and spread their hands.

"No, she does not belong here. She is the child of no one we know," they decided.

"Ask her where she does belong," Eddie instructed.

They put questions to her in Spanish,

but she was suddenly dumb. She would speak no word of any kind. There was fear in her bright eyes now, and it struck Eddie that these men in uniform terrified her. She clutched his ear, was rigid in his arms.

He returned with her to the station.

"I told you," Chris crowed.

"Sure," cried Eddie bitterly. "You're a wise guy. Now tell me what I'm to do with her?"

Chris pulled his long nose and squinted thoughtfully.

"Give her a bath," he exclaimed brightly. "Kids always need a bath."

Eddie looked shocked, then doubtful. But he felt his responsibility. "How do you do it?" he asked dubiously.

Chris started haltingly to explain in detail.

"Aw, you don't know a heck of a lot about giving yourself a bath," Eddie derided.

This brought on another violent quarrel that raged till Felix returned from a cruise about the town. He interjected an opinion, and was promptly jumped upon by the other two.

It ended by the four of them climbing to the bathroom, where Eddie started the water flowing into the huge tin tub; at which the little girl sat upon the floor and waved her feet about, chattering gleefully. He finally interpreted this to mean that she wished someone to take off her shoes and stockings. He did this diffidently, while the other two shouted advice from the doorway as if the affair were taking place at a great distance from them.

"If you don't shut up," Eddie shouted back, "I'll brain you both."

The little girl bounced up and bowed ecstatically before him to have her dress unbuttoned. He held his breath while he did this.

"Now we'll skin out and let her finish by herself," he gasped.

They slipped out and shut the door as she was shaking herself free from the dress. But she pushed open the door and came pattering out after them in her little undergarment, piping excitedly. She bent impatiently before Eddie to have more buttons undone. The three looked at one another hopelessly.

Eddie took a loud breath. "Boys," he said soberly, "we've got to go through with it."

He unbuttoned her to the last button. She slipped out of the little garment, clambered into the bathtub, and began to splash joyously. She lathered herself, splashed some more, spluttered and climbed out. She held up her arms to be dried, chattering happily.

Eddie completed his task, grimly ignoring more shouted advice. She hopped into her clothes, and was thoughtfully buttoned up.

"See," old Chris pointed out. "I told you. She's a bright kid."

"And we're a bright bunch of old hens," Eddie grinned.

IV

THE little girl's name was Lucita. There was a good deal more of it that she tried to impart to him, but which her lisping voice could not make intelligible to Eddie.

As the two of them came down the stairs into the office, old Chris almost groveled before her.

"Sleep well, honey?" he asked in a cracked pipe that was intended to be an imitation of baby talk.

"Sleep!" she cheeped, and mocked the grizzled old ruffian with a show of merry eyes.

None of them knew any more Spanish than did Eddie. Lucita understood no English, and was dumb when questioned by any of the Mexicans about the Pass; but in the days following her arrival they had among them framed a vocabulary that had in it traces of both languages, but consisted chiefly of gesticulations.

Chris handed Eddie a telegram he had just copied. It was signed by the chief dispatcher, ordering Eddie to El Cajon, which was division headquarters, for work as operator in the dispatcher's office. He would be relieved at the Pass the next day. This was evidently the advancement which Barabe had promised.

"You ain't going?" Chris asked glumly.

"Sure. I need the money now that I've got a family."

"You ain't going to take Lucita with you?" Chris almost trilled the name.

"Course. Take her out of this vulgar environment," Eddie grinned.

Old Chris looked down his nose. "Better leave her with me. You'll be skitin' around and can't take care of her. Me, I got enough saved to buy me a little ranch down around Los Angeles and hole up for the rest of my life. I need a kid like Lucita to help me run it."

Eddie looked skeptical. "I've heard 'em talk before," he jeered. "But the second week you've been away from the choo-choos you'll hear a train snorting, which'll irritate the blisters the hoe-handle has made on your lily white hands. So you'll lock up the joint and sneak out to devil some chief to give you a nice soft job of telegraphing. No, mister, after you've been at it till it gets hold of you, any other employment don't mean a thing to you," Eddie declaimed wisely.

"Huh! I farmed before ever I did any telegraphing," Chris defended.

"But not since," Eddie pointed out. "Come on, Lucita. We've got to pack up." They climbed the stairs again.

Lucita, getting some notion of what was happening, brought her singed little coat from a closet where it had hung since her arrival. She offered it to be packed. He started folding it, and caught the faint crackle of paper. They had the first night searched her pockets without finding any identification, and this faint click of paper slightly startled him.

He located it slipped between the double cloth of the collar, and extracted an envelope. There was a narrow sheet of note paper inside written on in a fine hand, no word of which Eddie could read. He stared at it gravely. Here, it was likely, was something to identify Lucita. He felt slightly distressed. He didn't know why, because he couldn't, in his wandering existence, be encumbered with a little girl.

He thrust his head out of the window and looked up and down the one sandy street. A Mexican who hung about the custom house a good deal was loafing torpidly upon the station truck.

"Hi, Pedro!" Eddie called. "Come up here."

Pedro came through the station, and on shouted instructions from Eddie, Chris showed him the way upstairs.

Eddie offered the letter for translation.

Pedro's little eyes set deep in his dark, thick-skinned face, became tiny points of intense light as he went over the letter once slowly, and again. Then the fire went out of his eyes.

"I no savvy much," he said doubtfully. "He is sending hees litta girl away because lotta trouble. Thas all."

Eddie pointed to the engraved letterhead.

"Thasa beeg place down there. I don't know."

Pedro shuffled out stolidly.

"He's likely a darned liar," Eddie judged. "I'll get someone in El Cajon to work on this."

He put the letter in his pocket and finished packing. Then he took Lucita out for their morning walk.

They struck away from the railroad toward the high ground. The air had the keen ardor of desert heat. He hated to leave old Chris. Felix, himself a boomer, would be on the move again shortly. But the three of them had been very contented there with little Lucita to keep them engrossed and amused.

They tramped on over a ridge, and Eddie paused suddenly at evidence of a fire that had been larger than any ordinary campfire. He remembered the glow he had seen in the sky the evening Lucita had appeared and looked over the burned space curiously. There were twisted pieces of blackened metal, and a big gasoline motor on its side in the sand. He realized suddenly that an airplane had burned here. He thought he could distinguish some charred human bones among the wreckage.

Lucita, who had trotted a little forward after his sudden pause, backed into his knees, her big eyes staring. Then he remembered that the same night a plane had re-crossed the sky above the station, and the suddenness with which the noise of its flight had ceased. And it was soon afterward that the fire had flared so brightly.

"Of course," Eddie nodded. "Poor man!"

Lucita looked up, her gaze roving the sky from which this plane had come. She began to cry softly.

Then he remembered also that the little girl had come to him on that same night with her coat singed. Ironically he decided that this dry heat was sharpening his faculties after the cold dampness of the north, for he had realized something else.

"Your Eddie is pretty dumb," he murmured. He held her close. "You came out of the wreck of that plane, and the pilot—didn't."

She sobbed gently, the tears dripping down his collar, as she murmured a name he couldn't [illegible].

V

THE first rending violence of the thunderstorm had passed, and it was raining resolutely when Eddie came on duty in midafternoon.

The dispatcher's office at El Cajon was a long room with a row of tables on either side, their tops divided by glass partitions, where operators and dispatchers worked the busy wires. At the head of it stood the chief's big table. The air was filled with the pleasant patter of many sounders.

This work of handling fast wires wasn't really work at all for Eddie. It was merely being agreeably occupied. Time slid quietly away. The rain splashed steadily on the windows. A stack of messages copied, another sent; the night chief came and took the chief's place at the big table, shaded lights began to glow.

At eight o'clock the second trick dispatcher made a quick sign to Donaldson, the night chief, who thumbed a switch, and a telegraph sounder on the table before him began to chatter smoothly.

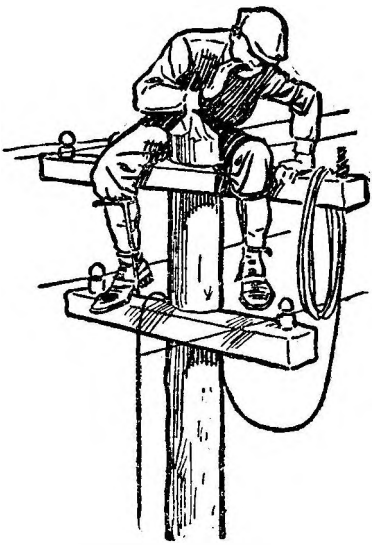
Presently the night chief caught Eddie's eye and he held up a forefinger. Eddie finished sending the top message of a two-inch pile, writing the O. K. with his left hand before he snapped the key shut with his right. The night chief pulled a telephone to him as Eddie crossed the room.

"Hang onto this wire," he snapped into the transmitter. "I want action. Gimme the roundhouse."

He glanced up at Eddie as he waited. "Get this," he said. Then into the telephone, " 'S Donaldson. I want an engine for the wrecker—now! Hello, 'change. Get me the yard office. 'S Don. Crew for the wrecker, and line her up. Drag out of it," he added grimly. "Hello, 'change. Gimme the wrecking boss. Then I want Mr. Barabe and the roadmaster. Hello, Bill. Extra freight in the ditch this side of Sandstone. You'll need the crane, 'cause the engine's off and on her elbow—Yes—'by. Hello, Mr. Barabe. Engine eleven-o-two with six-seven cars in the ditch ten miles this side of Sandstone. No, sir, no one hurt. Rain made soft track, I guess—Yes, sir," he nodded politely at the telephone, "it's hell."

He held his hand over the transmitter while he waited for the roadmaster to answer.

"You'll go out with the wrecker, Eddie," he instructed, "and cut in on the dispatcher's wire at the wreck. You'll find a portable set and some climbing spurs in the wire chief's room, and you'll have time to



get some more clothes and a pack of grub before the wrecker sails—if you hurry."

The rain fell with a splashing permanence. Eddie, burdened with provisions and equipment, steered a wet course through the lightspecked yard to where the taillights of the wrecking train goggled stolidly at the wet world.

The inside of the caboose was warmed by a coal stove and was uninhabited as yet. Two lighted red lanterns set by the rear door, and two small, shaded lamps glowed among the shadows. He stowed his gear in a bunk, got comfortable under a light, and began to read.

Presently there came two distant toots, feet splashed close at hand and then thumped on the rear platform of the caboose as the wrecking train got under way.

The door opened to let in damp air and dim shapes. Barabe peered at him and snapped a greeting as he stamped to the stove. Bill, the wrecking boss, threw off his dripping slicker, sprawled on two seats and charged a black pipe. The roadmaster, the conductor and the rear brakeman moved about noisily stowing coats and lunch boxes, swearing gustily at being dragged out on such a night.

As they got clear of the yard, the train took up a swift, smooth pace through the storm. The rear brakeman climbed to the lookout in the cupola. The others quieted. Occasionally lonely station lights flitted by, and twice they paused to pick up section gangs.

Two hours droned by, then the con-

ductor got up and reached for his coat. He knew by the feel of the caboose hitting the curves exactly where they were, that they were nearing the wreck.

Torpedoes crashed, the train slowed with a screech of the whistle, and felt its way forward to the beckoning lights. Brakes nipped harder; the train stopped, spewing men from both sides. Section foremen marshaled their Mexicans and followed the roadmaster forward to where the derailed engine lay half on its side in the mud.

"I'll want you close by, Eddie," said Barabe as they viewed the scene under the wrecker's headlight. "A sweet mess. Skin up that pole and cut in, then set up your instruments in that box car."

He splashed into the confusion, his voice rising crisply now and then during intermissions in the wrecking boss' roar.

Eddie made his connection with the dispatcher's wire, borrowed a lantern and some leather cushions from the caboose, and set up his telegraph set in the box car just behind the derailed cars.

Presently Barabe climbed in to write some messages and answer some queries of the night chief.

"Looks like someone had pulled out the spikes for a couple of rail-lengths," he told Eddie darkly. "Don't say anything."

He went back into the rain.

Big fires of old ties began to light up the scene. The wrecking crane coughed like a stricken monster. Eddie, sprawled on the cushions, read by the dim lantern light till his head grew heavy. Then he smoked and tried not to remember his sins.

Drowsiness bore heavily upon him as time snailed by. He got up at last, stretched himself stiffly, peered out of the crack in the doorway. The rain had ceased. A star or two blinked from the torn edge of cloud. He slid to the ground and walked briskly back along the freight train away from the fires and the men that swarmed over the wreck. He swung his arms to speed circulation, stumbling along trying to drive away the drowsiness. It was a long train.

Then he blundered into someone who grunted softly. He stopped suddenly to let his thoughts come back to him. A wooden box was pushed against him and he took it before he awoke to what he was doing. It rattled and was heavy. He realized at once that it was a case of canned goods. He had seen thousands of them handled by freight, had helped handle them. Someone nudged him on the other side, muttered, and he passed the box on to hands invisible in the darkness. Another box was offered him on the left and he passed it on to the right. It was like unloading freight from a car when the train crew and station force lined up and passed the pieces from man to man. The cases kept coming and he passed them on rapidly. Then he realized that he was, as a fact, assisting in unloading a car of freight.

He wasn't drowsy now. He had to work rapidly, but he made some observations. He could hear the cases being passed down a line at the end of which was considerable confusion. Horses occasionally shied; tins rattled, there was the faint crash of collision. The cases were coming from the car door just above his head.

There was no doubt now as to what he had walked into. Thieves were looting the car and loading its contents onto pack animals. So that was why the rails had been loosened; the train wrecked deliberately. As like as not more than this one car had been looted. But what was he going to do about it? A shout would only disperse the raiders into the darkness. Before he had decided that anything could be done, the cases ceased coming. A voice growled at the car door from which a match flared in the shelter of cupped hands. The outline of the upper part of a man came out of the darkness. He had heavy, stooped shoulders, the head lowering between them like a bull about to charge. Eddie made him out the assistant bandit of the attempted robbery at Pigeon Pass. Two or three shadows clustered about the sheltered glow, there was the mumble of voices, and the match went out. Men came thumping from the car door, there was a throaty growl, and Eddie was being herded down the embankment, jostled among the others, the burly shoulders driving them from behind.

The mud adhered in chunks. A man or two slipped on the incline and struck the ground with stolid grunts. Others nickered. Eddie lagged in the hope of getting clear, but he was suddenly urged forward by a blunt thumb thrust into his ribs.

They came to the bottom of the embankment among other restless shapes. Eddie mixed with milling men and horses so as not to attract attention to himself. The confusion was accelerated by gruff commands; then it died down quickly. The pack animals were used up while there was still a jumbled heap of cases. A brief dis-

cussion was ended abruptly by the leader, and the men began to mount saddle horses. Eddie took a horse immediately so as not to be left conspicuously on foot. A man started a disturbance because he could not find his horse, there was a brief and bitter argument, and the man was evidently ordered up behind another rider. Then the whole party got under way at a brisk walk, the loads of the pack animals clattering like a swarm of wooden shoes on a pavement.

Eddie pulled cautiously to the rear. A remark was smacked at him out of the darkness in Spanish, and he caught the loom of the assistant bandit's burly, humped shoulders beside him. His heart came up to make more obscure his intentionally unintelligible reply, and he tightened the reins to be in readiness to turn and run; but in the middle of his inscrutable mumbling his horse stumbled and went plowing to its knees. Eddie was flipped neatly over its head to a landing on his face in churned-up slime. He was on his feet within the same second that he struck, half-blinded by mud, shaken and mad.

The assistant bandit grunted a short, harsh laugh, the identical one, it shot through Eddie's mind, he had emitted that night in Pigeon Pass when the Lightning had struck him on his upturned, defenseless mouth. The procession moved on.

Eddie stood in the mud beside his horse and swore breathlessly. The retreating smack and rattle of the bandits and their plunder came out of the darkness. His ears burned and tingled with the sound of that derisive laughter, his face was plastered, and his mind churned with rancorous thoughts. To the north the fires at the wreck glowed warm, inviting him back to safety. But that harsh laugh racked through him, grating on nerves set stubbornly. He began to feel the water he had encountered in his fall soaking through his clothes to his skin. And that bull-shouldered assistant to the Lightning was getting away with it. He scrambled back into the saddle and kicked the horse into a jarring trot that brought him at once among the bandits.

The rear of the cavalcade formed a guard, while strung out ahead were the loaded horses in shoals, each bunch led by one man. Eddie pushed carefully through the rear and on among the pack animals. Some, half-wild and unaccustomed to loads of this kind, shied rebelliously as he came alongside.

He gained the head of the line. The man in the lead was humped in his saddle half-asleep. Eddie began to untangle his seething thoughts, to consider what he was going to do.

The man beside him roused to roll a cigarette. He struck a match and held it before his face; and while the light of it still burned in his eyes, Eddie seized him by the arm and shook him furiously, jabbering shrilly at him. The match went out and the man stopped his horse dead in its tracks. The procession began to crowd upon them. There was a crash as one of the nervous pack horses broke loose and began to buck about. Eddie felt along the man's belt, found a revolver in an open holster, and slipped it out. It was a more modern gun than that furnished by the S. W. P. He fired it twice straight ahead, then wheeled his horse and charged back through the crowding horses, yelling wildly. The Mexican beside him cast away the leading rope, and followed into the crashing disorder. Eddie fired twice again as he got into the thick of the confusion, and some guns were let off from the rear.

Cases of canned food began to burst upon the ground as the frightened, milling horses plunged and knocked against one another. The assistant bandit bellowed, and the rear-guard pressing forward, the pack animals were beset by pressure from both sides. They tore loose and began to scatter frantically, those that still retained their loads clattering loudly through the night.

The assistant bandit came bolting forward, and as he passed close by, Eddie caught enraged phrases. A part of them he understood, as they contained some of the dozen impolite Spanish words he knew. He laughed with abrupt satisfaction; the supplies the bandits had wrecked a train to secure were stampeded far and wide into the night.

He located the glow of the fires at the wreck, and headed his horse that way across the rain-soaked desert.

"Mr. Barabe wasn't altogether right," he brooded, "when he decided that old Lightning wouldn't cause us any more trouble."

He checked his horse to a more cautious

pace as he got free of the confusion he had caused.

"Well, the old head was working pretty freely this time anyway," he bragged mildly.

VI

BARABE had sent for him, and Eddie came early in the afternoon to the solid brick station, going directly to the superintendent's office. As he came into the outer room with its studious clerks, Barabe himself caught sight of him through the open door of the private office, and motioned vehemently for him to come in.

"I suppose you're all set to receive another reward and another blow-out for your brave encounter with the Lightning's desperadoes?" Barabe measured Eddie with an abrupt eye and an ironic gleam of teeth.

"No, mister," Eddie answered politely. "I got out without being all messed up. I'm satisfied."

Barabe rumbled. "This Mr. Lightning is about through on our side of the line," he decided.

"You told me that the firse time," Eddie reminded him mildly, "but he came back—or anyway his gang did—and tried to nick the S. W. P. for a lot of provender for his army. He'll likely do it again."

Barabe glowered. "You'll have noticed that the United States Army has moved in," he growled, "and has established a base here at El Cajon, and has scattered camps all down the border. Lightning'll not monkey with those boys." He blinked his eyes defiantly, and showed another grim glint of teeth. Then he indicated a rumpled envelope that Eddie carried portentously in his hand. "What you got there?" he demanded.

"It's about that little girl who came to me while I was at Pigeon Pass," Eddie explained. "Just before I left there I found this letter sewed into her coat. It's the only thing I found on her that might prove identifying, but it's in Spanish, which I don't savvy. The chief told me one of your clerks knows the language, so I brought it along to ask him to translate it for me."

"You haven't been in a hurry about it," Barabe suggested.

"Well, mister," Eddie hesitated, "she's getting along all right. Seems happy now. I don't know of any rush. The two of us are boarding down at Mrs. McHugh's, and the old lady takes good care of her. In fact she takes too darned much care of her," Eddie complained bitterly. "I'm going to have to read the riot act to her about the way she bosses both of us around. She won't let us do this and that, and she raises hell about the other. You'd think Lucita was made of glass. Yes, and she took an awful gouge out of that five-hundred dollars prize money I drew, to buy clothes for the kid. But say, mister, you ought to see her all dressed up. Honest, she's so darned cute! Ever raise any children?"

"Four—more or less," admitted Barabe.

"More or less raised, or more or less children?" Eddie inquired politely.

"Yes," nodded Barabe grimly.

"You old-timers," said Eddie, "like to be funny with us amateurs. But she's a cute kid, anyway."

"Eddie," Barabe propounded sternly, "you make a swell proud papa. But wait till you get a flock of your own. Now let me see that letter."

Eddie passed it over. Barabe ran through it rapidly, then looked up with a quaint light in his eyes.

"You've sure got hold of something," he growled. "This is addressed to Roderigo Matio, San Nicholas, California, which, as I happen to know is a little town on the coast. The letter is written by his brother from his ranch down there across the line. He begins it by expressing a prayerful hope that Roderigo will be able to send the airplane to the—ah, rendezvous in the hills back of his hacienda where his little girl Lucita is hiding with a couple of—ah, retainers to take care of her. He writes about signals that have been displayed as agreed for the plane to locate them. This brother is preparing to lead the defense of his hacienda against bandits, because he won't leave his people—his hired help—to their mercy. Lots of women and children, and all that. It's a bit tearful, if you understand Spanish. And then he says—shut the door, Eddie, and pull your chair up here—says that he has withdrawn all his cash in gold from the banks—he uses the plural, which sounds big—and has hidden it together with other family treasure at a spot known only to Lucita and himself. That he had diligently drilled Lucita to indicate this spot when you say to her——"

Barabe frowned darkly at the letter, and mumbled to himself.

" 'Where is thy earthly treasure, Lucita?' " he translated slowly. "Not a dumb one at that, when you consider everything

he had to consider. And it isn't a bad sport that will stand by his hired help against El Relampago. He finishes the letter with some more instructions about Lucita in case he's killed, and some more tearful phrases."

Eddie took a deep breath. "Did he write all that on this little piece of paper?" he demanded.

"More or less," nodded Barabe. "And now I'll continue the story from reports I've had from below the line. This man, Lucita's father, and his people—the men anyway—were wiped out by the rebels, who looted the place. It was your friend the Lightning and his gang. He seems pretty fiendish. Now what are you going to do about it?"

"Well, mister," Eddie decided ruefully,

"she's a cute kid, as I said before. Old Chris and Felix think she is, too. But I guess I'll have to notify her uncle where she is. He'll likely want her, don't you think?"

"I'd think," grunted Barabe shortly. "I'll tell you what I know about this uncle. I was on the coast with the S. P. for a while, and I've heard a lot. His ranch includes an old Spanish grant of a good many thousand acres, and he rules his domain like a feudal prince. He's considered a hard old nut—proud and haughty and not easy to get along with. Has had a lot of trouble with American land-grabbers and is touchy. He'll want his little niece, all right, because she's one of the proud old family; and while I guess he will be coldly grateful, it's likely he won't be generous with you."

"Generous, hell!" Eddie spat out savagely in Barabe's face. "Who wants him to be generous? I haven't done a thing for him."

There was a deadly cold ferocity in Eddie's tone, in the set of his thin face, that was a startling change from his usual slow good humor. But Barabe wasn't startled. He looked at Eddie coolly. He liked a drop of tiger blood in a man, and a cool head to see a fight through.

"Keep your shirt on, young man," he advised easily. "I'm just telling you what's on my mind." He slid the letter across to Eddie. "Now, I'll tell you why I sent for you."

Barabe sat squarely at his neat desk like a man at a machine. His adroit mind was working hard at one angle of his job that had him baffled.

"Our dispatching force here has been shot to pieces," he stated bluntly. "First trick man is to go to Colgrove today to try out as night chief, which moves the other two up a notch and leaves a vacancy at third trick. The fellow that goes to first trick is all right. But Bayne, the other dispatcher——"

Barabe turned a sudden look on Eddie that was as hard as a blow. But Eddie didn't flinch.

"You've got a lot of sense, in spots," Barabe growled on. "See if you can get this as I mean it. I can usually line up a man's capabilities on short contact, but this man Bayne has me guessing. He was sent to me a few weeks ago from the general offices in Los Angeles with a letter from one of the officials I take my orders from, and the letter instructed that he be put on as train dispatcher at the very first opportunity. It seemed a little impatient, that letter. I made the opportunity to put him on at once, and he knows his business. He's good. Ever meet him?"

Eddie said he hadn't. "He's on now from midnight till eight in the morning," he explained, "while I'm on from two till ten at night. Never happened onto him."

"Well, you will now, because I'm going to put you on as third trick dispatcher," Barabe stated.

"Thank you," Eddie acknowledged, pleasantly reserved.

Barabe was foxy, Eddie believed, but he now seemed to be talking out of turn.

The flicker of a sardonic smile twisted Barabe's iron countenance. "Oh, that's all right," he mocked grimly. "I looked up your service record and saw where you'd dispatched trains before. I know you're a boomer, and therefore won't stay any longer than the job amuses you. Which is one reason I'm gossiping to you like a grandpa. What I'm trying to tell you is to keep your mouth shut and your eyes open. Let me know anything you think I ought to know."

Eddie got up slowly. "I'm not a detective, mister," he said mildly. "Much

obliged for the offer of the job, but it's not exactly in my line."

Barabe's eyes glinted fire as he turned them scorching hot on Eddie. "You are a kind of a damn fool, as I said, in spots," he said. "I'm not asking you to be a spy, but just to be careful. You wait till you're hurt before you yell. Now run along to the chief, and see if you can't use your head for something besides a place to hang your hat."

He gave a swift, sharp gesture, and Eddie found himself outside.

"It may be he knows what he's talking about," he puzzled as he went down the hallway, "but I'll be darned if I do. He's a wise old bird himself—in spots." He ruminated. "Well, I don't want to forget to write to Lucita's uncle. I'll be darned if I'll wire the old devil."

The racing chatter of the sounders that filled the dispatcher's room dispelled his puzzlement, gave him as always a sense of security. It was the voice of the craft he loved.

The bald and turbulent old chief dispatcher beckoned hectically. He was always trying to do a half-dozen or more things at once, and not getting away with it too well. His little eyes danced over Eddie with sharp and searching humor.

"Know you've been set up to third trick?" he inquired.

Eddie nodded.

"Mr. Barabe thinks a good deal of you," the chief probed.

"It's me charmin' personality," Eddie answered with soft reserve. These insinuations were getting a bit rancid.

The chief's hands moved restlessly over his cluttered table, making notes, scattering papers about like a scratching old hen. He glanced up and nodded over Eddie's shoulder, and Eddie turned. Two young men in clean new uniforms of officers of the National Guard had just come in.

"Mr. Sand," the chief grumbled, "meet Lieutenant Allison and Lieutenant Gregory. You'll probably have something to do with them, because they're looking after the rail transportation of army supplies from their base here to the camps along this section of the border."

Eddie met two pairs of eyes leveled directly at him, exchanged brisk handshakes.

The telephone screeched, the chief snatched it and brayed into the transmitter. Then he lowered his voice to a politely confidential tone. Eddie and the two young officers moved discreetly away to an open window.

"You fellows must think there's going to be trouble along the border," Eddie remarked, "from the preparations you're making."

They stood in the window. On the torrid flat below the town brown army tents of all sizes bloomed in long lines. Soldiers were all about.

"There is trouble," Lieutenant Allison smiled, and pointed to the south.

Eddie turned his gaze along the brown hills below the border till they came onto some antlike figures making their way up a long incline. They seemed to hold an uneven line. A thin dust haze hung over them. A sound like the distant clash of a mowing machine came up through the noise of engines in the yard below. Halfway up the long slope the line stopped, the haze thickened about it, almost blotting it out, and the faint clashing sound increased.

Then some tiny horsemen appeared on the skyline of the long slope. They struck into a jumping gallop, swept down upon the upward toiling figures. Flashes of reflected sunlight were thrown out as if from polished metal. A faint yell dribbled in on the hot air. The lower line of figures broke to bits and scurried from sight behind a ridge, the horsemen dashing after them.

It was the first time Eddie had ever seen bodies of men in deadly combat. It was hard to believe they were wilfully killing one another.

"So that's war," he said breathlessly.

"A certain kind of war," Allison answered tolerantly.

"She kills 'em just as dead as if she was a sure-enough war, doesn't she, mister?" Eddie inquired softly.

The young officer laughed. "It's that rebel who calls himself Lightning-flash," he nodded. "He's clearing out the Federals as fast as he can. But I understand he is in a bad way for arms and munitions for his growing army since we've tightened up on gun-running."

The chief had finished with the telephone, and the two officers nodded smartly to Eddie.

"Lieutenant Gregory is in the ordnance,

and I'm considered to be in the cavalry," Allison explained briskly. "But things over there are in rather a mess." He indicated the brown camp with his eyes. "I'm supposed to know about horses, so I'm helping out at the remount, and the two of us are, among other things, looking after the rail transportation at present. So we'll see you some more, Mr. Sand. Now we've got to arrange with your chief about loading out some horses."

The two went back to the chief's table.

Eddie moved over to the trick dispatcher to watch him at work. Presently the chief bawled across the room, and he went back to him.

A stranger lounged in a chair at the end of the table.

"This is Mr. Bayne," the chief introduced them. "Says he's not met you. Second trick now, you know."

Eddie blinked, for Bayne was somewhat arresting in a desert dispatcher's office. He was as slim as a whip, suavely graceful, and there was the delicate shadow of a beard on lean cheeks, darkening and thickening to a tuft on the chin which added length to the thin thrust of jaw. The same soft shade lay upon his upper lip. Whiskers of this kind were unknown to the desert. Eddie had to make a slight effort to keep his fascinated eyes from a rude scrutiny.

"I hope you'll not mind helping me to get onto the work," he suggested politely.

"Delighted," Bayne said with a bland smile which didn't quite reach to the eyes that looked down his tenuous nose with its slightly predatory curve as if he were sighting along a gun-barrel.

Eddie blinked again. The long fingers released his hand.

Someone came into the room, walking with the long and ponderous strides of a man on stilts. It was Hodges, the engineer. He bore Lucita aloft, and his saturnine face was grim.

"I found her down in the yard among the switch engines," he growled at Eddie. He folded up like jointed bamboo and stood the little girl upon the floor. "You'd better take care of your brat," he snarled.

Eddie set himself for a high spring at the lanky engineer. No one could call his little girl by that name.

"But she's a cute kid," Hodges conceded as he regarded her with a shy grin. Which remark probably saved him from a stiff encounter with the fellow who couldn't make the weight of a successful professional wrestler.

Bayne crouched before Lucita and attempted to coax her to him with affable pleading. But she backed thoughtfully into Eddie's knees and regarded the man with a glum stare.

VII

AT ONE o'clock in the morning the dispatcher's room was a black cavern with a single cone of light thrust into the middle. A sounder sputtered sleepily here and there in the gloom, and outside an engine bell clanged an occasional solemn warning.

Everyone had gone from the office except Eddie—operators, dispatchers and night chief—and Eddie sat half in the single cone of light that poured over the fresh train sheet on the dispatcher's table. He was at the end of his first week on third trick, and was still new enough at the post to check carefully each move he made as the O. S.'s of sleepy operators out on the line trickled in for him to record in straight columns of hours and minutes on the train sheet.

He decided to wait till the next O. S. before changing the meeting point of an overland passenger eastbound and a lumbering freight moving west. Then the operator at Sandstone called to say that an eastbound freight with running orders only to that point, and which had been switching in the yard since before midnight, was now ready to proceed.

This was a slight surprise to Eddie, because he was sure that when Bayne had transferred to him he had mentioned this train with the remark that it wouldn't be ready to proceed till after two o'clock. He framed an order in his mind hurriedly while he called two other stations; and when they answered he whipped the order to all three at once, wrote it in the order book, checked it as they repeated it, and then "completed" it.

A few minutes later a voice came with muffled echoes down the hall.

"Eddie, will you come here a minute?"

It was a little startling, for there wasn't supposed to be anyone else in any of the offices. He peered around the cone of light toward the doorway. The reflected glow of a light shone dimly from somewhere beyond. He felt his way quietly through the darkness to the open door. Down the hall a light came from the half-opened door of the superintendent's office, and there was the movement of a shadow somewhere in the lighted room beyond.

"Mr. Barabe wants you for a minute,"

came an indistinct voice from beyond the door.

"Coming," Eddie answered promptly, and proceeded down the dark hall.

If the boss was in his office at this time of night, something was brewing stormily.

He turned into Barabe's outer office. Only one light glowed under a shade. No one was in sight. It flashed to him then that some deception was being worked upon him, and a sense that he couldn't name set him off like the release of a coiled spring. With no sound at all he was at the door of the private office, and had thrown it wide.

A single hooded light burned over the big desk. The next thing that caught his eye was an open window. But there was no one in the room.

He turned and bolted through the hallway to the dispatcher's room, driven by the instinct, trained and sharpened through the years of handling swiftly-moving traffic, to be always near his post of duty. At the doorway he fumbled for the wall switch, and the ceiling lights blazed. His first glance went straight to a window by his table. It had been opened since he had left the office. The night air came in keen from the desert.

"I don't quite get this," he fretted. "But it doesn't mean any good."

He went to the open window and peered out. The town was dark and quiet under the stars. There wasn't even any movement in the yard now. The blinking switch lights stared back at him stolidly. He pulled down the window and turned to his table, his eye running over the train sheet. It stopped suddenly on a little huddle of figures, and he began to get the grim reason for this mysterious play.

He bent over the sheet, absorbing the full meaning of the firmly inked-in figures. They recorded the time a westbound extra

freight had passed three telegraph stations out of the next division point to the east, the time of its passing the last of these being at 11:35 P. M. But the figures had not been on the train sheet a few minutes before when he had been called from his table. They had just now been written in and blotted; the ink was still pale.

He had not known there was such a train on the division. There had been no record or mention of it in the transfer from Bayne to himself. And these figures meant that there was a train out there in the darkness of his division on which he had made no reckoning.

He reached for the order book. It was open at a page containing the running orders of this same freight train. He had to put effort into the holding of his mind to steadiness then, for he had not seen the order when he took over from Bayne. He turned the pages swiftly under his thumb. It was the last order Bayne had issued. On the page opposite was another one, but it was of no importance. How these orders could have been at this place in the book he couldn't see in the first few seconds he was examining them. Then he noticed some roughened spots on the paper, and then that the opposite page had the same spots, barely discernible, in exactly the same place when the pages were shut together. He guessed that they had been gummed together when Bayne turned the book over to him.

Eddie had analzyed all this within the first minute; and he had also caught the intent of the trick. A swift calculation from the last O. S. told him this extra was now winding through the hills a few miles on the other side of Sandstone. And at Sandstone he had just given a freight train running orders to proceed eastward, making no meeting point for the two trains, neither of which would know of the other. Someone wanted these trains to crash.

The trick had been played with a fiendish cleverness. He felt the snap of the trap that had been so skillfully set for him. Here were two trains rushing into a head-end collision, and Eddie had, by the evidence of train sheet and order book, issued the dread lap order that would cause it. He could explain as much as he liked how he had been tricked into it, but there wouldn't be any to believe such a fantasy. Bayne had snared him neatly, but he would have to dig into that later.

There was always a crisis of one kind or another breaking in this business; he had been through a long, stern training in them, and he knew that hesitation brought disaster. He slipped open the key and

called Sandstone once sharply. He felt his muscles cramp, his heart patter on the roof of his mouth, as he waited a breath for the answer to his call. He could see those two trains roaring head-on for each other through the dark hills. He would doubtless have to call the wrecker in a minute. If the enginemen would only have time to jump before they struck.

He kicked the key open with his middle finger and called SD again. In the silence that followed, the circuit broke with the liquid sound of a drop of water falling into a pool.

"I. I, I. SD——"

The circuit closed.

"Has Extra 1147 left yet?" Eddie snapped.

The circuit broke languidly again.

"I—I—I—" the sounder stuttered thoughtfully.

Eddie held doggedly to his control. He knew exactly what he was doing, what he was going to do in either case.

The sounder began to speak with dispassionate deliberateness.

"He ain't had time yet. The conductor had to take the orders down to the engineer, and they just got through reading them over. She's getting under way now."

"Stop him!" snapped Eddie.

"He's got a good start—" the operator began.

"Stop him!" Eddie shot in again.

"O. K., came back promptly, and the sounder was still.

Eddie set his mind methodically to work framing a new order, while the dead silence crept in closer, settling about him like a thin, chill mist. But other thoughts kept creeping in. The engine of the freight train would be a long way past the station semaphore before the train started. With their orders and a clearance card the trainmen in the caboose wouldn't be on the lookout for any more signals, and the operator couldn't signal them with anything but a lantern now. And night operators were often negligent about keeping a lighted lantern handy. It would be mighty easy for the train to get away from him.

The circuit broke with the clear, liquid sound, and Eddie winced.

"I got him," the sounder sputtered.

"Good!" Eddie snapped back, and held the key open a second to make sure of himself. "Tell him to get back onto the siding. I'm going to bust that order. Nineteen, copy three." He began calling the other two stations.

Again he had his division under the control of his lean fingers.

VIII

THROUGH the rest of the night Eddie pondered the cunningly-set trap that had just missed snaring him. Everything had worked smoothly till it was sprung, and then only the instinct that had sent him instantly back to his post of duty on the slight hint of trouble had saved the two trains from crashing, and himself with them. If he had delayed another minute in Barabe's office, the freight at Sandstone would have got away from him.

Why had Bayne done it? A ghastly thing tc try. It took a crafty and merciless brain to seize the combination of circumstances at exactly the right point and carry them forward with such delicate maneuvering. There must have been some great gain to himself involved to attempt such destruction.

Bayne was, Eddie knew by now, harsh and domineering with most of the operators working under him out along the line. He had wrangled with Felix Rayburn at Pigeon Pass till that young boomer had told Bayne flatly and profanely what, exactly, he thought of him, and had then blithely departed for California, and another job. There had been a number of brawls with Chris, but that old telegrapher thrived on battles; and Chris had stuck. Yet with the two new operators at the Pass, Bayne seemed very friendly—on the wire.

What really hurt Eddie most was the fact that he couldn't settle with Bayne personally. Too much else besides himself was involved. Trains under Bayne's care weren't safe, so Barabe would have to be told. And he realized that the evidence was all against himself—that his own account would likely sound fantastic to the superintendent.

He didn't report the incident when he was relieved at eight in the morning. They would likely catch the irregularity in a checkup; meanwhile, it was a case for the boss to handle. But Barabe wasn't in his office. His chief clerk said he was out on the line and wasn't

expected back till the 5:15 that evening.

It would have to wait then, Eddie decided, because he wasn't going to tell the bull-headed old chief and have to listen to his roar. Eddie went to his boarding-house.

Lucita meet him at the gate, her quiet eagerness showing in her big eyes. Her peeping chatter he mostly understood now. There was the matter of a cake that Mrs. McHugh had promised to make that day, and which Lucita now discussed breathlessly. A little stray dog had come in for breakfast, and she had taxed herself to persuade it to stay. But the little dog, fed, had moved on.

"Just like a boomer operator," Eddie nodded gravely. "When he gets his tummy full he becomes restless."

Lucita advanced the information that hotcakes impended for his own breakfast.

"You've had a busy morning," he remarked placidly.

Mrs. McHugh greeted him with harsh good-humor, bustling and scolding. She always had too much to do, and now this child to take care of——

"I've been thinking that," Eddie brightened. "Perhaps we'd better move over to the Nelsons'."

"And there ye go, takin' the only sunshine out av an old woman's life that's brightened her days for a weary while."

Eddie subsided. He ate with slow contentment, Lucita perched beside him, expanding her plans for the day. He listened, debated with her soberly, intensely delighted. The sorrow of it was that any day now he would be hearing from her uncle in California, that they would have to separate. This cast a shadow on his wandering path ahead, and he had never remarked such a thing there before.

He was back at the station that evening when the 5:15 arrived. But Barabe wasn't aboard. Eddie met the chief clerk coming down the stairs, and was told that the boss had been delayed, but was coming back at seven oclock.

Eddie avoided the dispatcher's room. He paced the platform while the red sunset died over the hills. Darkness shut down at once.

Lieutenants Allison and Gregory came up out of the gloom of the yards, and stopped for a word with him.

"We've been getting out a train," Allison explained. "Machine-guns, rifles and ammunition, and six cars of horses. When you get hold of her tonight keep her moving, because orders are to rush it. Headquarters are getting uneasy about something."

The two moved on toward camp.

Eddie picked out the taillights of the army train moving off down the yard. It stopped at the lower end for a brakeman to open the switch onto the main line. Eddie came out of his brooding to note that the train stood a long time before moving off. The trainmen weren't handling her with proper dispatch.

Barabe came on the seven o'clock, and Eddie followed him to his office, where he told patiently and in detail what had happened that morning.

Barabe shot one question when Eddie was through.

"Were the O. S.'s that had been added to the train sheet in Bayne's writing?"

"Absolutely. You can see for yourself."

"Well, of course the thing is airtight. I couldn't prove you a liar, and neither can you prove that Bayne pulled this trick." He looked keenly into Eddie's untrouble eyes. "But I suppose, even if I didn't fire you, you'd quit."

"Mister," said Eddie, "I'm not, and you're not. I'm going to stick around and get that bird." There was a cold ferocity in Eddie's tone.

Barabe blinked. "As to how?" he asked sharply.

"I don't know yet," Eddie answered readily. "But a crook like that always stubbs his toe. He's too smart. He'll not get by me again."

"You're damned confident."

"You bet. I know this game as well as he does. I may look foolish, but I'm not. It's the way I wear my clothes." Eddie grinned evilly.

Barabe shook his head. "I can't have you fellows wrecking my division," he decided. "You two are like a pair of wildcats, and if you got to fighting you'd smash everything." He pondered. "Also, I can't have Bayne handling trains if he is so darned willing to wreck them."

"You don't want to forget that I may be lying to you," Eddie reminded him cheerfully. "You said you got instructions to put him on, and it might go hard with you if you pulled him out on my say-so."

"You're an impudent son-of-a-gun," Barabe scowled darkly. "But you've got sense in spots. I thought Bayne would get me into a jamb. Huh! It's just struck me the letter he brought to me might have been forged. I never checked it up, but I will by wire in the morning. I've been in this game myself for some little time.

Now let's have a look in on the night chief."

The clatter of sounders broke on them in a surf of sound as they opened the door to the dispatcher's office. The ceiling lights had not been turned on; the faint gloom was stabbed with funnels of light shot down over the tables where the operators bent at work. The room had an eery look, with its lights and deep shadows and drifting clouds of tobacco smoke. The eternal din of the little brass tongues told of restless traffic moving up and down.

"I'll remind you that you are expected to use your head a little," Barabe growled as they made their way to the chief's table.

"Good thing you said a little," Eddie grinned.

He made sure, in a turn of the head, that Bayne was bent over his table, intent on his work, his fantastic beard an aggressive triangle thrust into the cone of light pouring down from above.

The night chief had the yard office on the telephone, and was giving some flat orders with easy briskness. The two took seats behind the table. At his elbow Eddie noted an unobtrusive covered shelf which held a huge and ancient pistol, a duplicate of which, he remembered with a smile, he had stalked Lucita with on the night she had come to Pigeon Pass. The sounder on the chief's table had been cut in on the dispatcher's wire, and Eddie listened to Bayne dealing out orders in firm, swift Morse that was a delight to his highly-trained ears.

The night chief hung up the receiver. Barabe spoke in a heavy undertone.

"Don, what do you think of—now don't look at him—of Bayne? Ever notice him particularly?"

"Noticed several things about him," the chief murmured, leafing through a file of papers, making notes. "'S a darned good dispatcher, for one thing. Quick as lightning, ice-cold under strain. Can figure a thing out long before it happens, and 's arrogant as hell. Also's not here for his health, or for the pay he gets."

"What's he here for?" Barabe growled.

"Are you asking me?" the night chief demanded bluntly.

Barabe's jaw muscles began to stand out. "Don't get funny with the boss," he warned. "I didn't come in here to be kidded. Let's have it."

"T' chief and I figured he was a spotter, sent down to look us over." Donaldson, erect in his chair, stood Barabe's hard look easily. "Caught him a time or two talking with someone on the wire in code. When he's on I always keep my sounder cut in on his wire. 'S got something on his mind."

Barabe's eyes were lit with dancing devils.

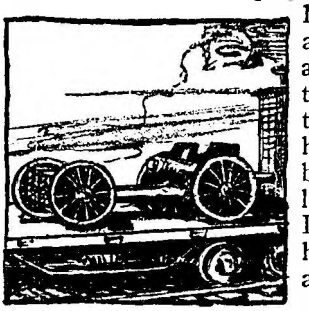
"What are you running here—a secret society? Afraid to say anything to me till I asked you?"

"Figured you were in on it," the night chief defended, "and that likely Eddie was, too. Both seemed to stand pretty well with you."

Barabe's chin stuck out like a rock in a stormy sea. Eddie snickered.

"Shut up!" the superintendent snapped, and Eddie's face straightened. "Now listen," he thrust at Donaldson, "Bayne isn't a spotter. I'm beginning to think he's a damned dangerous man to have around. Eddie has just told me——"

"Yeh, we caught the bull Eddie made last night," the night chief interrupted sardonically. "And he didn't report it this morning. T' chief threw a couple o' fits about it all over the place. There was a lotta artillery and shells aboard that extra west, and if those trains had hit there'd have been some easy loot for the Lightning — if he'd known about it."



"You speak in your turn," Barabe ordered coldly. "If you fellows would do a little plain, common thinking around here instead of gossiping like a set of old hens——"

Eddie, who was getting some grim amusement from the clash, suddenly found himself listening to the sounder on the chief's table. At once he knew that it was old Chris' "send" that had attracted his attention—old Chris at Pigeon Pass, hammering out the Morse with his heavy fist.

"That army freight train," Chris pounded out, "switched onto the branch line from here, and now she's over in Mexico still going."

Old Chris paused, and the silence as the sounder ceased pulsed away in split seconds. Eddie began to notice that Bayne didn't react to this startling statement as he should—not at all like Eddie himself did, who was stung with surprise, his thoughts faltering an instant on this puz-

zle. Bayne's face seemed to pinch suddenly into a sharper triangle, and a glow of rage leaped into his eyes.

Then Eddie's mind began to move. It gained velocity as he realized that Barabe wasn't an operator, that he couldn't read Morse, but that he ought to know at once what old Chris was banging out on his key. So he slid a pad of clip to him, took up a pen, and began to write it down, beginning at the first of it, catching up with a few easy, looping strokes.

Chris was making his report to Bayne, and Eddie, still watching, made out a mounting fury going through the dispatcher like a shuddering flame as the clacking sounder began again.

"That train stopped here at the station for a few minutes," Chris was sending, "and switched over to the branch line, then high-balled for Mexico, busting right through the gates at the custom house."

Bayne broke in with a sharp question. "Where's the second trick operator—he's supposed to be on duty now?" He made the instrument sizzle. "Sure you're not drunk!"

Chris had some trouble with his sending for a little time, as if he really might be intoxicated. Then came some blistering profanity that only a sober man could manage on a telegraph key.

"That second trick man was in on this deal some way," Chris calmed to bang out. "I've had his number hung up for some time—his and the third trick man's, too. They're all mixed up together. I was in the hotel across the street when that train pulled in. Four men got off the caboose, and when they got under the station lights I saw they wasn't any of the regular trainmen. This second trick operator met 'em outside, and they talked a minute; then they high-balled and lit out for Mexico. So I just slipped into the office and laid the operator out cold when he came back."

Eddie saw the thin triangle of Bayne's face contract still more. Rage almost broke him for an instant; then his cunning came back, and he snapped a grim, "Stand by!"

Eddie slipped the pad from sight. Bayne glanced toward the chief's table under the light that flooded from above him; but he evidently couldn't have seen very distinctly because he had been facing the glare on the train sheet. Then he humped over his table, his brows twisting together above his glittering eyes.

"So that's why he drove Felix from Pigeon Pass," Eddie reflected. He was beginning to get a proper line on Bayne. "He wanted a friend on that job."

He nudged Barabe sharply without looking at him, pushing the message he had written into his hand.

"Read it," he murmured. "That's old Chris at Pigeon Pass talking to Bayne."

Barabe read, passed the pad to the night chief, then lowered his head to conceal his blazing eyes. His thick, strong fingers clamped restlessly as the situation began to clear in his mind.

Then above the babble of the instruments, Eddie caught the scuff of uncertain footsteps among the shadows at the doorway. He turned, peering sharply. The large figure of a woman came swaying and staggering toward him. As she came into the light at the table, Eddie got up suddenly. It was Mrs. McHugh. There was a bump across one corner of her forehead, and a smear of dried blood. Her dress was torn and covered with dirt and cinders, and cinders were stuck into one side of her face. She came directly to him, leaned heavily against the table, searched his face with eyes half-blinded by tears.

For the first time in his life, Eddie knew cold terror.

"Eddie," she whimpered in a kind of child-like rage, "they stole the little wan away from us. She's gone."

IX

THE instant he had seen Mrs. McHugh, Eddie had known that something dreadful had happened to Lucita. Nothing less would have brought the old woman there in such a plight. His nerves jumped, tried to stampede him. His frantic impatience romped as his thoughts scurried and scattered. What had happened to—his little sister? He wanted to tear the answer from Mrs. McHugh's throat. But his old training to keep steady in any crisis held his thoughts controlled. He guided the old lady gently to a chair.

"Quick!" he urged.

The room, with its chanting sounders and spotted, eery light went out of his mind; Barabe and the night chief staring at them were no longer in his consciousness. He was within close walls staring imploringly into the disfigured, grimy face of the old woman.

"They came and took her off the back step just at dark. Three av thim." Mrs. McHugh knuckled her eyes that she might see his face. "I saw thim carryin' her out the back gate. She called 'Ed-dee' wance before they choked her off."

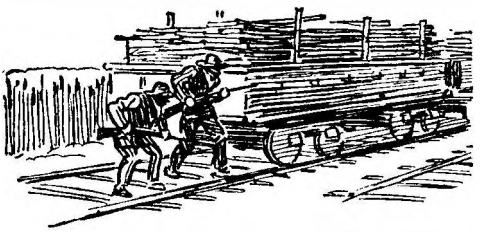
He winced. The close space that confined his senses became a tingling suffocation. His heartbeats were like the throbbing of a drum.

"I must av been too scairt to make much noise. I just ran after thim down the alley to the tracks. I caught up just as they was climbin' aboard the caboose av a freight train, and I tried to fight. But I guess they hit me with something. I just came too."

He knew the rest of it. Lucita had been kidnapped and taken away on the stolen army train that was now tearing south through Mexico. And he also knew why. His mind got the picture of the Mexican whom he had called into the station at Pigeon Pass to translate the letter he had found in the collar of Lucita's little coat. The Mexican's heavy face as he scanned the letter with crafty intentness came out clearly. That man had read and understood the letter, had passed on the information it contained to the Lightning. And now that baffling bandit had not only stolen a trainload of munitions and horses, but had at the same time kidnapped the one person alive that knew the exact location of what was likely a fortune.

He now saw why the army train had stood so long at the switch before taking to the main line. The Lightning's cutthroats were subduing the train and engine crews and the two or three soldiers in charge of the horses. There had been men along who knew how to operate a train. That would be necessary.

The lights about him began to be suffused with red as he realized that he had stood there on the station platform below and watched the Lightning steal a train and his little Lucita. The whole thing wasn't really difficult. Just daring. Which



brought his careening thoughts back to Bayne, without whose help and guidance the theft was impossible. He turned about to peer above the light over the table.

Bayne, at the trick dispatcher's table, tossed aside his pen impatiently, rose to his feet. Above the shade of his light the upper half of him showed but faintly in the gloom. He took out a cigarette and thrust it into his mouth. He scratched a match, cupped his hands, held it to the cigarette. And suddenly his profile was blocked out clearly in the light of the match. In exactly that attitude there showed a peculiar little hump on the bridge of his long nose.

"Like a knot on a log," Eddie's mind ran, then he realized where he had seen that knot before.

He had trouble keeping his scurrying thoughts in order then as they went back to the night at Pigeon Pass when he lay cruelly bound on the long telegraph table and watched the man called Lightning crouched before the safe, his quick, steady fingers turning the combination dial. The handkerchief he used for a mask had slipped down about his mouth, exposing the upper half of his face. The long, keen nose had cut its contour into the light reflected from the safe door, and there was a peculiar little hump on the bridge of it that the light cast up so conspicuously in just that position. Bayne was the Lightning!

Eddie felt a nausea, a terrible self-loathing, that he had not seen this before. Everything pointed plainly to it: the expert telegrapher, the quick, ruthless mind, his cunning attempt to bring about a collision between two trains. It was that fantastic beard that had kept him from recognizing the man. You had looked at that —and no farther.

Disgust, and then a frigid rage. In the spotted light and shadow of the long room Lucita's big eyes seemed to be searching for him. They were full of trouble, as on the night she had come to him from the wrecked plane.

He set his will on panicky nerves and scattering thoughts. This man had kicked him in the stomach, had gone out of his way to be cruel to him when he was helpless. Now he had caused Lucita to be stolen away; and—but he brought himself back from considering what would happen to her after she had served his purpose.

Bayne stood drawing impatiently upon his cigarette. His eyes, a little time away from the glare on the train sheet, now began to take note of things in the half-light about him. He glanced casually toward the chief's table, and met Eddie's eyes. He must instantly have read the deadly intent in them; his life as a successful bandit had developed a sense that told him unerringly of danger, for he abruptly became the lightning-flash. His body flowed

from langour to deadly alertness as he juggled a long, thin pistol from somewhere. His eyes held the sure insolence of the killer.

"Stand still!" he snarled above the clatter of sounders.

The pistol was poised carelessly at his hip as his eyes danced ceaselessly over the room. Then quietly he sidled to the wall and strode forward in light and shadow toward the door.

Eddie's trained control slipped. His hand flashed into the covered shelf and lugged forward the heavy, ancient revolver. He could barely drag back the stubborn hammer under his thumb joint, but the smashing roar of the old gun came before the twice repeated, spiteful smack of the Lightning's pistol. The cartridges in the old revolver must have been as ancient as the gun itself, for the smoke bloomed forth in a rolling, widening cloud. Then the lights went out as the door slammed.

Eddie was at the light switch and had the room blazing, had swung open the door. There was a hurry of feet down the stairs, and then they were out of hearing. He slipped back to the table.

"Don," he said with incisive authority, "take Mrs. McHugh to the emergency hospital room down the hall, and have the nurse call the doctor." He slid into the chief's chair, pulled the telephone to him, gave a number. Within half a minute Lieutenant Allison's brisk voice came on the line.

"This is Eddie Sand. Can you have a platoon of your men at the station at once? No, not mounted. And will you come right up to the dispatcher's office? As quick as you can. Thanks."

He broke the connection, then called the roundhouse.

"'S Donaldson," he mimicked the night chief's voice. "I want the fastest passenger engine you've got enough steam in to move this minute. Grab an engine crew —Tom Hodges if you can get him right now—and have them bring her to the passing track beside the station. Now listen! You've got ten minutes."

He danced the hook and got the yard office.

"'S Don. I want two big cabooses coupled together and set on the passing track beside the station. Grab any train crew that's there, no matter what other orders they have, and tell them to watch for their engine and tie onto her right away. I'll give you ten minutes at the outside. Drag out of it!"

Barabe's voice began to growl in his ear.

"What the devil do you think you're going to do?" he wanted to know.

Eddie got to his feet and slid around the table.

"Going after them, aren't you?" he asked softly. But his eyes glittered. "Aren't going to let them get away with it?" He made for the dispatcher's table.

Barabe followed more deliberately.

"You're moving mighty fast," he complained. "This is international. Liable to bust things wide open."

"You said for me to use my head—a little," Eddie reminded him as he dropped into the dispatcher's chair. "Did you make out that Bayne was the Lightning himself?"

Barabe gaped. It took him a little time to get all this meant.

Eddie bent over the train sheet for a swift study, gauging the position of every train on the division. Then he fanned through the train order book to check the orders each train had. He put the huge pistol on the table before him, his hand slipped to the key, and he spat out a call for Pigeon Pass.

The room was still filled with confusion. Operators pattered about aimlessly, bursting now and then into shrill, nervous laughter. One pointed to a jagged scar made in the brick wall by the heavy slug from the ancient revolver. Donaldson came back and peered over Eddie's shoulder. Barabe pointed to a patch of gauze and adhesive tape on the night chief's ear.

"What's that?" he asked darkly.

"Must 'a got in the way of one of those bullets," Donaldson admitted demurely. "A clean hole right through. Never noticed it till the nurse told me. Bleeding all over, too. Must 'a' been excited."

Eddie was deep in the problem of getting his train started. When old Chris answered his call, Eddie told him a little of what had happened, instructed him to see that his two operators didn't interfere with train movements, and asked him to stand by.

By this time he had a picture of the division in his mind. And as he shot out station calls and operators answered, he framed orders changing meeting points, holding up a train here and there, clearing the line to Pigeon Pass.

Lieutenant Allison came striding in, and Barabe and the night chief began explaining the situation to him, answering his swift questions in a chorus.

Eddie spoke to the young officer without looking up.

"You'll take your men out with us, won't you?" he asked.

Allison's eyes were dancing. He went to the telephone and began talking earnestly into it. He came back presently.

"The colonel says to go to hell and quit bothering him," he grinned. "And if I don't come back he's to get my horse. We're a National Guard outfit and not supposed to know much," he added serenely.

The conductor and the engineer of the special came stamping in. Eddie glanced up to assure himself that the engineer was Hodges.

"All set," the conductor reported. "Where do we go from here?"

Barabe began to explain.

"Copy these orders," Eddie called, and an operator took down a manifold and reached for a stylus.

"Nothing doing!" the engineer decided emphatically when his mind had wrapped itself around the fact that he was expected to go into Mexico. "I know those *hombrecitos*. I'm not going down there again and get my head shot off."

Eddie paused an instant in sending to look at the engineer.

"They've got that little kid—" There was a sob somewhere lodged deep in his throat that made it hard to bring up words. "Tom, they stole Lucita and took her on that train."

The engineer's eyes suddenly became stormy.

"How in hell did they do that?" he demanded. Then he added vehemently, "She was a darned cute kid!"

Eddie got the last operator he needed, and began whipping out his orders. Barabe went to the chief's table and talked for a little time on the telephone. Then he conferred with the lieutenant. A sergeant came in, took an order from Allison, and went out briskly, smiling slyly. Hodges stalked about like a pronged and many-jointed piece of bamboo, now and then kicking the furniture thoughtfully. He encountered the conductor in his wanderings.

"Whadda hanging around for if you ain't going to take her out?" the conductor inquired.

"Who said I wasn't going to take her out?" Hodges thrust out belligerently. "Let's get our orders."

The two went to the table where the operator sat looping briefly paragraphs on frail tissue sheets. They read the orders over together as they came from the operator's hand, signed a "31," and as the operator finished copying and wrote in the numbers on a clearance card, the two checked them.

"He's given us a schedule to Pigeon Pass that's never been made yet," Hodges remarked grimly.

Eddie got up, kicked back his chair, reached for the large and ancient revolver.

"Take the wire," he instructed the night chief. "Everybody ready?" He peered about.

"Yes, m'lord," Barabe answered with heavy sarcasm. "But you can use your head—more than a little," he added.

"Let's go!"

Eddie headed the procession through the doorway and down the hall.

"My men are in the head caboose," Allison said as they stampeded out upon the platform and jumped aboard the bobtail train.

"And there's a switchman at the lower end of the siding to let us out and shut the gate," Barabe called to the engineer.

Hodges got his short train in motion something in the manner of the taking off of an airplane. There was a smooth surge that felt as if they had left the ground. The yard lights began to flicker by; switch points rattled under them, the lights dropped behind, and they were storming away across the flats at a growing speed.

The sergeant came back and consulted with the lieutenant. The rear brakeman sprawled on a seat, chewing a vile-smelling cigar. Eddie, the conductor and Barabe climbed into the cupola. The sound of singing came from the forward caboose where Allison's platoon rode.

As Hodges crowded on more and more steam, Barabe shook his head somberly. The conductor, as he stared ahead stonily, began to lose some of his dark sunburn. In the wedge of the headlight the desert rolled and heaved at them like a threatening sea.

"Too fast," Barabe growled.

"She'll stand it," Eddie assured him.

"Hodges knows what he can do."

He leaned forward and hoped fiercely that the engineer's nerve would hold him to that speed.

Stations flitted by, the semaphore lights clearing instantly on the whistle's screamed demand. Hodges choked her down as they came into the hills, but at that the train smashed savagely into the curves so that those in the cupola had to hold on grimly to keep from being flung to the floor below.

Then they were out of the hills again, and they took a bird-like swoop for Pigeon Pass. The high-wheeled passenger engine roared like a cyclone. The cabooses rocked on their trucks, seemed at times to miss the rails altogether. The singing from forward continued, grew louder.

The station lights of Pigeon Pass began to show, to surge toward them. Hodges thrust the throttle shut, and the racket of the coasting train seemed a mild sing-song as the roar of steam ceased. The semaphore light turned to "clear" as Hodges blew an imperious call; a lantern was tossed frantically in a high-ball signal to encourage them on. Switch-points racketed, and the switch light to the branch line was set for them to go through.

Eddie slid back the window and hung out his head. He got a blurred glimpse of old Chris under the station lights as they swept past, caught some screamed profanity. The huddle of buildings at the border were under them, then were gone. The engine picked up its deep and terrible roar, and they were plunging into Mexico with no orders and no signals to guide and protect them, and no means of knowing if the rails had been torn up.

X

THE night air of the desert bit sharply. Eddie pulled the window shut. On the lighter steel of the branch line, unkept since train service had ceased, the little train rolled and plunged under the driving speed.

"Hodge'll ditch her sure if he keeps this up," the conductor fretted. "This track won't stand it."

Lieutenant Allison climbed to the cupola, and stood beside Eddie, peering ahead at the path the headlight made.

"Making some time, aren't we?" he asked lightly. "Think we are overhauling them?"

Eddie pulled himself out of red depths wherein he was watching helplessly the Lightning's assistant torturing Lucita, while he roared intermittently, "Where is thy earthly treasure?"

"Should be," Eddie looked at Barabe braced in his seat.

"Lord, yes!" the superintendent growled. "If that freight train made half the time we're making, we'll run into it pretty soon strewn all over the right-of-way. And if we do, we won't have more than one full second to say our prayers."

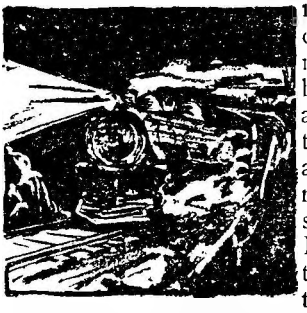
The lieutenant laughed. "My men think it's quite a lark."

Barabe started to tell him just what kind of a lark it would be if any one of the fifteen or twenty things that came to mind readily should happen. Then he decided to postpone the telling till they were safe out of this wild escapade—if they ever were.

Mountains were thrusting their black shoulders higher and higher into the stars as the train pitched forward. Eddie looked at his watch and began to calculate the freight train's probable running time. The stolid desert staggered by in the headlight. The up-grade began to stiffen, and the mountains hung directly overhead. Where a pass opened to take them in, the little mining town of Purga hung lifelessly upon the steep sides. The speed checked as they came to the yard where no switch lights glowed their guidance. The station, with smashed doors and broken windows, advanced in the path of light, came under them, and was lost again in the darkness. Hodges fed more steam to his gamely fighting engine, and it began storming the spiral mountain grades.

"He does seem to know his business." As the ascent began to eat into the speed, Barabe let go a breath that he had been more or less holding onto since they left Pigeon Pass.

The conductor pulled himself off the small of his back, and relaxed muscles that were cramped with tension.



They twisted through the gorge interminably. At any dizzy curve the rails might have been torn up in anticipation of their coming, and the drop at most points was sheer and long. None knew them better than the engineer, but he held his engine to her best efforts, gambling that the bandits considered im-

mediate pursuit impossible, believing that with Bayne dispatching the trains no one would know till midnight at least that the train had been stolen. And even then they had no reason to believe they would be followed into Mexico.

The headlight painted strips across the opposite mountain sides. They snaked over the summit, and began a more or less cautious descent. The air was keen, ringing the echoes clearly. The speed grew under the engineer's knowing hand as dark levels opened up below.

Just before they rounded the last turn in the sheer wall of the gorge, the headlight was switched off. Barabe swore harshly, but Eddie slid to the floor and blew out the two lamps, then stepped to the back platform and brought in the tail lights. Two or three lanterns on the floor were left burning dimly. The rear brakeman yawned at him as he pulled down the curtains, and then went to the caboose ahead. Most of the troopers were asleep on the seats. A couple of card games were going.

Eddie explained to the sergeant. The lights went out at once, and the sergeant was rousing his sleeping men as Eddie returned to the rear caboose.

The whistle moaned a faint acknowledgment of the extinguished lights as Eddie climbed back into the cupola.

"That town—what's its name—Santa Rita?—must be not very far ahead," he suggested.

As they came clear of the pass, and coasted on a long grade, a few lights danced in the distance. Hodges kept the speed more controlled now. They got the loom of trees in clumps now and then, and the shine of stars on a little stream that followed them for a ways. The lights ahead grew. One was a fire that leaped and danced. The tail lights of a train winked at them. Hodges eased the speed, then drew to a stop.

Eddie was the first to drop to the floor. The others followed to the rear platform, and they descended to the ground. Hodges ran flapping back to meet them.

"We're within a mile of Santa Rita," he explained, "and that must be the lights of the train they stole. Think we'd better go closer?"

Eddie looked at the lieutenant. "What do you say to driving right into town?" he asked.

"I'd say it would beat walking in," Allison agreed. "This is a cavalry outfit you know."

"Will you let me drive her in, Hodges?" Eddie asked.

The engineer considered, and shook his head. "I'll take her. I've never been shot at in my life, and I'm not saying what I'll do if I am; but I'm willing to find out. Let's go."

They swung aboard as the train got in motion. Eddie and Barabe followed Allison into the front caboose, where the lieutenant conferred again with the sergeant, gave a few orders.

The sergeant's name was Black. He tried to act always with military smartness, but he couldn't conceal the fact that he was having a wonderful time.

"Well, the big show starts right away," the lieutenant chuckled as the three of them returned to the platform. "The idea is to recapture the train and take it home, isn't it?"

"The idea first of all," Eddie stated flatly, "is to get—say, mister, did you ever meet little Lucita?"

"Mr. Barabe told me about her—and you—this evening."

"Well," said Eddie, soberly, "she's a cute kid, and the first thing to do is to get her back."

Switch points rumbled.

"We're here," Barabe growled. "Say, will someone loan me a gun?"

But it seemed no one had a gun to loan.

Allison leaned out from the lower step. "We're coming up right behind our stolen train," he said, and swung back to open the door of the caboose. "Follow me the instant the train stops," he called.

There was a glow of light from the town. It outlined a street or two leading to it. A campfire was burning somewhere ahead toward the engine of the stolen train. It lit up the low-roofed station, and a few figures standing about the blaze. The yard was empty of cars.

Hodges brought his engine to a gentle stop. The men began to stream from the caboose. Eddie took out the big revolver he had brought from the dispatcher's office, and went forward with the lieutenant and Barabe, the men following.

"We'll search their caboose first," Allison decided.

He halted his men with a gesture. The sergeant took two troopers and softly mounted the front platform, while the lieutenant with Eddie and two men stepped onto the rear platform. They waited an instant, then the doors at either end swung open quietly.

Two oil lamps burned in the caboose.

Seven men were lashed to seats on one side of the car. They were the train and engine crews of the stolen train, and the two soldiers in charge of the horses. All seven were dozing in uncomfortable attitudes in the seats, held so by their bonds. Across the car from them, three Mexicans sat and smoked stolidly, a carbine propped up at the side of each. As the doors swung open, the three glanced up casually, then the whites of their eyes showed as the threatening automatics bore upon them.

The sergeant stepped forward and collected the carbines, and then directed two troopers in untying the crews, using the rope to bind the three Mexicans.

The crews and the two soldiers, coming out of light sleep, and dazed by these silent maneuvers, blinked and gaped till they realized who was now in charge. Then they rose and greeted them joyfully.

Eddie confronted the conductor.

"What did they do with the little girl?" he demanded.

"Took her off the train the minute we got here," the trainman said.

"How long ago was that?"

"Less than two hours."

"Was she—all right?"

"Yes, seemed all right. Not much scared, but she wouldn't talk to them."

"Man with big, stooped shoulders in charge?"

The conductor nodded positively. "That's him."

The lieutenant ordered two of his men to take charge of the three prisoners.

"Have they started to unload the train yet?" Barabe asked.

The conductor didn't think so. "It sounded to me like they went off into town. They've been making some noise over there, like they were celebrating."

The little scene dissolved quietly. As they assembled on the ground, a man came hurrying forward. It was the conductor of their own train.

"After you left," he said breathlessly, "a fellow stuck his head and a gun out of the blankets of the top bunk. He backed us all into the corner, then came down and beat it out of the back door. There wasn't much light, but I'm sure it was this fellow Bayne."

XI

THE pale stars stared down at them with stark aloofness through cold space. There was a thin, chill wind. Men shivered. It was the ebb of the night.

Eddie again felt the horrible nausea as he realized that in the confusion of their getaway Bayne had secreted himself among them and had been in the caboose with them all the way down, concealed in one of the trainmen's bunks. Eddie's faculties seemed on the wane with the night, his thoughts lost and wandering in a cold, red fog. If he had thought of it at all he would have known the Lightning would have dared do anything to get back to his outlaw army, now that he had played out his hand as train dispatcher. With cool and brilliant courage, he kept steadily at his job of being a bandit. Eddie took hold of himself savagely.

"He'll be just too quick some time," he muttered.

Lieutenant Allison was speaking briskly. "Well, that'll make a difference. Sergeant," he ordered, "take six men and round up that bunch there at the fire. Put them in the station. You men with the prisoners, take them along and put them in the station with the rest. Sergeant, leave a guard over them all, and hurry back."

The men went forward in the darkness.

"We've got to be moving, with that man Bayne—Lightning—loose," Barabe growled. He called the crews of both trains about him. "You will have to turn your engines around and get set to return," he dictated. "Let's see, we have a 'Y,' here, haven't we? All right, turn your engines on the 'Y,' and then switch this caboose to the other end of the train. How about fuel? Got enough to get back to the Pass?"

They decided they might have.

"You men on the army train get hooked up and start back at once," Barabe continued rapidly. "Hill, you and Hodges get all lined up to take us back as soon as we're ready. It looks like the sergeant has made his capture all right, so you boys hop to it. Now, lieutenant."

Allison had lined up his platoon on the side of the track nearest the town. Sergeant Black came back with four men at his heels.

"Scout ahead," Allison ordered him, "and see what you can pick up. We're coming right along behind you."

The sergeant and his men slipped away. The lieutenant stepped in front of his platoon.

"Those bandits have captured a little girl," he told them. "We want her back. If you see her, get her. But be careful of your fire so as not to hurt her. The bandits have chased all the inhabitants away, so any little girl you see will be the one. Now! As skirmishers, guide right, march!"

The line thinned, extended and moved forward.

Eddie and Barabe followed behind, a little at a loss how to handle themselves among troops under command. They stumbled across sidings, then came to a level stretch littered with broken furniture, the leavings of the looted town.

They began to get some details of the dimly outlined street before them. It was a block long, and opened at the other end onto the oval of the plaza. Light came from the deep, narrow windows of a long, low building near the end of the street. The belfry of a low, solid church showed against a strip of silver in the east.

A tiny flame speared the gray darkness, and a rifle shot racketed hollowly among the empty houses. Other rifles set up a din from the plaza, and dim forms began to scuttle about. There was the clatter of plunging hoofs on stone pavement. Eddie could make out the horses tied in a long row by the lighted building. Something tore up the ground close beside him.

The sergeant and his men came striding back, and the lieutenant halted his advancing line.

"They're getting all set for us," Black reported. "Got some barricades up in the plaza, and men are scattering to the roofs. But I could see no sign of machine-guns."

Allison gave some directions, snapped an order, and the major part of his command moved away in squads in either direction. A squad stopped at the entrance to each street that led to the plaza.

"Make the rounds of the streets, Sergeant," Allison directed, "and see that the men are all posted. Then take charge on the other side and wait for my whistle to go in."

Eddie at that moment came as near to feeling worship for a man as ever he had in his life. All this to rescue Lucita. And the young officer seemed happy about it.

The sergeant was gone. The din of guns from the plaza had ceased, but someone was shooting at the lieutenant from a nearby housetop. Eddie could see the lancing flame flash toward them, and the racket of the shots spread over the town and away across the valley.

"You fellows had better get down," the lieutenant remarked casually. "He's shooting at you."

"Just what I was thinking," grumbled Barabe. "And I haven't a gun."

"But he's shooting at you, Lieutenant," Eddie declared.

"I hope so," Allison chuckled. "Because then I'd be perfectly safe." He glanced at his watch. "All right, you men," he snapped.

His whistle shrilled, and the squad of men made for the entrance to the narrow street nearest them. It seemed the principal thoroughfare leading to the plaza, for it gave onto the railway station.

Eddie went forward with the lieutenant. The banging guns began again in the plaza, jarring through the streets raggedly. The men divided and went up either side of the street. Allison kept to the middle of the narrow way, and Eddie walked at his side.

Barabe stopped and calmly sat down in a doorway. "I'm not going one bit farther without a gun," he stated flatly.

Little blind alleyways, ending in blank walls, came in from the right beside the houses facing the street. The racketing shots multiplied, and someone in the plaza began to yell orders in a bull voice.

"That'll be the assistant assassin," Eddie decided.

He had the huge old pistol in his hand, but he felt the thing impotently unwieldy. It would take someone with a bigger hand and more experience in the use of firearms to handle that gun correctly. The smell of burning powder touched the crisp air.

Horses' hoofs began to clatter again. There was more yelling; and suddenly a herd of riderless horses charged at them down the street, stirrups clattering together, reins swinging free. The banging of guns ceased. Eddie and the lieutenant took to a doorway, the men flattening out on the house fronts. The horses thundered down upon them with the mad abandon of fear and sudden freedom. Swaying figures came into view above the tossing heads. They were riders driving the horses forward, a half-dozen of them. The light had grown till Eddie could make out that one of them carried a big bundle held tight to him in both arms, riding erect, and fearlessly urging his horse. The set of his arrogant head marked him at

once. Eddie knew it too well by now. He could just see that he was still dressed as he had been in the dispatcher's office the evening before. The soft black hat was conspicuous among the high sombreros of the others. It was Bayne—the Lightning. And that bundle he held to him would be Lucita.

It was a break to get away with her. Bayne hadn't much faith in his men being able to stand off American soldiers. He was ruthlessly abandoning them, using their means of escape to further his own.

The frigid terror had Eddie again. It was all through him like an electric current. Lucita in the hands of that pitiless being. He got the hammer of the ancient revolver back, stepped in front of the charging horses, and fired into the air. The roaring, smoking report dominated all other sounds in the narrow street. It seemed to take up the air and shake it wrathfully.

The band of horses split. Some of them swerved to the house-fronts and went frantically crowding by. The others dashed into one of the blind alleyways, where they milled about wildly.

Eddie seemed to have no trouble cocking his revolver again. The riders at the rear of the herd bore down upon him swiftly. He edged squarely in front of the Lightning's lunging horse. The outlaw saw him, leaned a little forward in the saddle, holding Lucita before him. The other riders closed in about him, making a solid front that surged forward relentlessly. Eddie's slight figure stood like a straw in the way of the leaping hoofs.

The horses' heads, extended in their dashing run, were at his face when he fired again into the air. The old gun erupted with a bellow and a vomit of smoke. The extended heads twisted about sharply, bodies upended, hoofs slid and crashed about him. A gray shape hung over him, knocked him to one side as it came down and plunged on. The shoulder of another horse caught him reeling and sent him to the flank of still another. He got his feet fixed under him. The sharp triangle of Bayne's face stared down at him sardonically an instant; then he caught sight of a dark little head held under the bandit's chin. There was the gleam of round, dark eyes.

"Ed-dee!"

The piping cry nearly tore his heart out. Then the plunging confusion was beyond him, and he bent back, poised a steadying instant, and threw the big pistol at the slim, arrogant back. It took an uneven, turning flight, and descended into the seething ruck.

Dust rose choking. The horses rounded the end of the street, straightened out headlong for the open country.

The silver strip along the east now flamed in red and gold.

XII

THE lieutenant's whistle fluttered a command to his men closing in from all sides.

Eddie had him by the arm with both hands.

"Four men," he begged. "Have you got four men who will go with me? That'll be enough." He turned Allison toward the blind alley where the saddle horses were milling. "Get them to catch horses. I'm not used to horses, and they know. Four fellows will do, and some of them would like to go. Please, mister."

The lieutenant nodded, and his whistle called again.

"Sure," he agreed cheerfully. "But you'll want six so as to have the odds with you. Archer," he turned to a corporal, "take your squad in there and bring out seven of the best horses."

Barabe stamped up the narrow street. "My God! Can't someone loan me a gun?" he rumbled. "Every damn' one of those fellows has been shooting at me, and I haven't anything to shoot back with. What are we going to do now, Eddie?" he asked darkly as the troopers came out of the alley leading some shying horses.

"Going after them. They'll make for Lucita's old home—and the treasure," Eddie answered shortly. "You said you knew this part of the country and where the father's ranch was."

Guns began whanging again from the plaza. A man grunted and sat down in the dusty street. Sergeant Black came briskly around the corner, and Allison spoke to him briefly.

Eddie took the reins of a dancing horse, and scrambled into the saddle.

"I'd better go along," suggested the sergeant, looking his lieutenant in the eye

hopefully. "Won't be much trouble keeping these fellows quiet, now it's light. They're about ready to quit."

He took the reins from the corporal's reluctant hands as Allison nodded. "You stay here," he grinned, and swung aboard. "Let's go!"

"Which way?" Eddie called to Barabe.

The superintendent pointed northeast. "Off there. Not over ten miles. Never been just there."

Hoofs exploded. They plunged through the street and swerved to the right into the flare of the sunrise.

The scattered houses of the town showed ravaged and abandoned in the first clear light. Doors smashed and sagging, windows gapping, personal effects strewn all about. War and desolation. How could men find it in their hearts to destroy homes like this—and lives?

The stirrups were too long. Eddie wasn't a very good rider anyway, and he was compelled to hang on desperately as the horse lunged under him. A mile from town the road took to a wide river bottom where a gray jungle grew above their heads. The sergeant halted them once that he might examine carefully the tracks of the horses they followed. Then they fled on again in the narrow, sandy road, throwing up a thin smoke of dust.

Eddie knew exactly what he was doing, and the length he was willing to go to get Lucita out of danger. His time was principally occupied now in keeping the romping beast between his legs, but he didn't for a second lose sight of the objective of this battering ride.

Eddie and Black rode in the lead, the sergeant's head swinging from side to side, watching for intersecting trails and byroads. The hills choked the riverbed to a narrow gorge, and the road took to higher ground over a bare brown shoulder. As they flung over the crest and raced down a long slope, the wide jungle of the river bottom unwound endlessly before them. In flood-time this was doubtless a surging torrent, but now only a thread of darker green angling through showed where the water moved sluggishly. A thin haze of agitated dust boiled up far out in the gray-green.

"They've got the best horses," Black flung back.

Eddie admired the sergeant's immovable seat in the pitching saddle, the erect back and thoughtless ease. He himself was struggling every second to maintain any sort of position in his saddle.

The tall growth took them again as they descended into the expanded bottoms. The fine edge of the horses' spirit began to dull. They settled into a hard, even stride. It grew breathlessly hot down there in the rank growth under the crowding hills and the climbing sun. Then the road took an upward flight again, sweeping them over a low divide away from the river. A limitless valley was thrown out before them, edged by a dim, jagged line of peaks in the far distance. The plain was tufted with trees, checkered with green and brown, and below was a rolling cloud of dust.

"Not so damned much better horses, at that," Black cried.

The long slope slid up at them and away behind. An abandoned hovel heaved by. The landscape was lifeless except for the boiling cloud of dust ahead.

Eddie hung on gamely to the pommel while the flying stirrups that were too long for him banged his shins and ankles. The seat of the saddle would fall away from him unexpectedly, and then would rise up again suddenly to jar him with its smashing impact. He watched the sergeant's easy seat when he could, and felt aggrieved.

"His saddle don't rock like mine," he complained.

Then the land took on the aspect of more recent life. Deep-worn cattle trails wound about. A buckboard with a broken wheel, its tracks in the soft earth still visible. A field scratched with a plow, the sharp lines of the furrows barely softened by time. Then a wild steer came into the foreground, eyed them defiantly an instant, then turned about, bucked, bawled and flailed the air with his tail as he departed whence he had come at a heavy run. A lame horse mildly cropping.

Eddie could believe they were gaining on the winding cloud of dust. Trust the sergeant to pick the pace. The Lightning had misreckoned again. He had intended to drive all the horses out of town and scatter them so that there would be no pursuit by anyone. Now what would he do? Stand them off at the hacienda of the late Señor Mateo till night, meanwhile forcing Lucita to disclose the hiding place of the treasure. And in the darkness steal away. What would he do with Lucita then? Eddie shut his eyes on a horror. He couldn't let Bayne go through with that.

They came onto a long, gentle rise, and presently at the tip, trees and the profile of buildings.

"They're stopping," yelled the sergeant, and he cast an expert eye about over the terrain.

The cycloning cloud of dust ahead disappeared among the trees.

"Now we'll see," Black grinned over his shoulder.

He slowed his pace, and Eddie forged ahead.

"Just a minute," yelled the sergeant. "Let's look 'em over first."

Eddie lashed with the end of the reins, and the horse plunged at the slope wildly. It was slow work on that long incline, it seemed, and the poor beast was probably tired. The saddle didn't rock so much at least. He lashed again and was sorry; but the horse could rest forever—after they got to the top. He'd be glad never to ride one again.

He picked out the details of the hacienda clearly as he approached laboriously. A thick-set house, the second story set back from radiating wings. Low stables beyond, and a row of squat, brown adobe houses at the rear, some of them smashed. The broken wall of a courtyard. And live oaks all about, with pepper trees drooping over a long balcony and the veranda beneath, their shade black in contrast to the diamond-white sunlight.

No movement of life anywhere as he came to the top of the rise. Then a carbine detonated from above, and he felt the wind of a passing slug. The gun was let off again, with the same result. He came into the black shade of trees, and caught the sound of a voice behind the battered courtyard wall. It was sharp and harsh, and the commands rattled in Spanish. He knew that voice.

Again he all but lost the saddle as he swerved his horse that way, then righted himself as he headed through a breach in the wall. The hoofs thudded on beaten earth as they swept into the enclosure. He heaved on the reins, twisted free of the saddle, came to earth at a staggering run. Between the time of entrance and descent to earth the whole scene in the courtyard whipped through his perceptions. Dried and dusty plants in long beds, the broken bowl of a fountain, litter of pillage thrown about, a colossal pepper tree flaring from the center. The thick walls of the house chipped with circular spots with ominous little holes in the center. Doors and windows ravished. With a foot set upon a broken window ledge, about to enter that way, stood Bayne, half turning back at the sound of Eddie's abrupt arrival.

Some time in the crashing seconds that followed, Eddie realized why the Lightning had become a bandit—a till now successful bandit. The smile that flashed to his face was the hard amusement of a man enjoying himself, expanding in pleased anticipation of violence, of deadly combat. He liked the job he had set himself. He had the keen self-assurance of utter confidence. He didn't even change his rather awkward position. As Eddie took his flight from the horse, Bayne juggled forward his pistol and took two almost simultaneous wing-shots at him.

But Bayne again miscalculated. Eddie was coming faster than he reckoned.

In the diverting racket of shots and the swoop of his own descent, Eddie got a glimpse of a delicate little face peering out over the window ledge beneath Bayne's raised knee. The sight added to his flash-like speed. He didn't pause, as he struck the ground, to correct his uneven stride. He gathered it into a tigerish rush coolly executed. He marked Bayne's face closely as the bandit stood in evident expectation of Eddie's collapse. The bandit's great self-confidence deceived him into the belief that he couldn't have missed with both shots. High amusement crisped his delicately-bearded face almost to the second Eddie collided with him. It straightened decisively at last, and the lowered pistol streaked upward as it came to him Eddie wasn't going to stop. Steady, at point-blank, he grinned with malignant confidence.

Then the little figure at the window under his knee scrambled out quickly, knocking his raised foot from the ledge, scuttling between his legs. He was thrown off center, his third shot spattered on the courtyard wall; and he took the only second he had before Eddie's impact to swing a vindictive, open-handed blow at the delicate, bewildered little face. Lucita went down with a plaintive cry, and lay still in a bed of dry and dusty flowers.

Eddie's calculating coolness was extinguished then, as if a switch had been snapped. A fiend jumped to life within him, gnashing crazily. His left shot up, tilting back the arrogant chin, and the right

smashed across with perfect timing and everything his body with its gathered momentum could put into the punch.

Too high. Bayne ducked a fraction, and it caught him on the forehead. Knuckles crushed as Eddie crashed into the bandit; and they went over the ledge in a smashing fall, fighting as they went.

Eddie tried for a hold as they came down, but there wasn't a thing left in his broken right hand except growing pain. It wouldn't respond at all. He got the heel of his left hand under Bayne's chin, and threw his weight into the fall. The crack of the head striking was like splintering wood. He went over the relaxed body in the easy, practiced roll of a wrestler, but brought up against the farther wall, striking his injured hand, the sudden pain blinding him, sucking away his breath. He lay still and panted till the room ceased to heave and careen about. His sight began to clear, and he sat up.

Across the room was a smudge on his vision. He got it focused presently. It was the Lightning risen to his knees, trying to steady his own rocking world, holding Eddie under a fixed and baleful eye.

There was a fellow once, some place, shot a charging leopard five—seven times—an odd number anyway—holes right through him. But he kept coming till he knocked the fellow down and chewed his head till a companion got a knife into him. Eddie felt that the Lightning ought really to be dead, after the way he had forced his head to hit the floor. But he wasn't. Always reminded him of a leopard. Must be some kin.

They were both on their feet again, Bayne's face a kind of ghastly fury, his odd beard all awry. Blood trickled from his mouth. Eddie automatically fell into the watchful pose of a wrestler, and it wasn't till Bayne started for him that he realized again his helpless right hand. In that one lapse of reason he had thrown away his only advantage in a standup fight.

Bayne's step steadied as he advanced. His face was coldly murderous. He intended deliberately to blot him out. Eddie could have broken the Lightning's arm in a flash—if he only had a good right hand. But he couldn't now; that hand felt like live fire and a million sharp, pressing points that ravaged his strength away. He ducked the first furious cascade of Bayne's blows, maneuvered for the window. But the bandit cooled, and caught him a swinging, club-like stroke on the side of the head, and Eddie took a slow submersion in spotted darkness, his senses dying numbly.

Bayne laughed harshly. He gloated drunkenly. As Eddie pulled himself slowly to his feet again Bayne kicked him viciously. It caught him in the thigh, but it left only a minor hurt among the many. Bayne set himself, grinning with ruthless delight. Eddie, rocking on his feet, watched dully. He sensed the blow coming, turned his head to take it on the temple, and went down with a terrible din in his ears. His eyes began to jump about in his head; Bayne's figure ran up and up in wavering lines to great heights above him. He took a kick in the stomach that brought a death-like sickness, but the gloating chuckle that followed set fire to his blood. He got his left elbow propped under him, and wilfully steadied his jumping eyes. Bayne set himself for another kick.

"I'm going to kill you—inch at a time," he gurgled.

Well, that'd be all right, Eddie decided hazily as time shattered into fragments of seconds and fell away slowly. He couldn't be hurt more than he already was. Yet there was something he'd been trying to do, but it had slipped his mind—or been knocked out of it. What difference? He watched curiously as Bayne drew his foot back.

"Ed-dee!"

His head jerked around. The delicate oval of a stricken little face peered at him over the bright window ledge. He remembered now; and his steadied eyes flashed back to Bayne with his raised foot.

There was a wrestling trick. He'd forgotten the name. Had practiced it a lot at one time for fun. Liable to hurt someone with it if they didn't understand how to get out of it.

He dropped to his side and squirmed into position, as if to avoid the assault; and as the kick was started he hooked one foot snugly behind Bayne's heel, raised his other foot to the bandit's knee, then kicked out with one and pulled with the other. He still had the cunning of long-ago practice. The short thrust with the flat of his foot had the force of a ram, and the sharp

pull at the heel was timed to a breath.

If Bayne had understood the trick, if his weight hadn't been thrown forward into his own kick, he might have cast himself over backward out of harm of this hold. But in his ignorance he threw himself into it. Under the sudden ram and pull his leg snapped softly, and he staggered and went down with a throaty bellow, thrashing about. His leg was broken, which he couldn't realize, and in the growing, numbing helplessness, fear and cunning seized him. Somewhere in the room must be his pistol, dropped in the fall through the window. He located it at once, scrambled for it. But Eddie got his intention at once; he was nearest and quickest, was on his feet and had it by the barrel as Bayne lunged for it. He took an awkward swing with his left arm, and the pistol thumped sharply behind the Lightning's ear. Life went out of him; he dropped with his delicate beard in the dust of the floor.

Eddie let the pistol fall by its lifeless owner, reeled to the window, dropped to his knees at the ledge. Lucita peered at him out of round, frightened eyes. She was peeping breathlessly; her hands went tumbling to his face, and she began to cry.

"All right now, honey," he gasped. "We're all hunky."

He pulled himself to the ledge, swung his feet over.

She had never seemed to like a hug, as if some suffocating experience had made her afraid. She snuggled to his knees, peering anxiously up at him, her tears welling slowly.

"We'll be out of here in a little," he reassured her, and kissed her gently. "Now let's see."

He stepped unsteadily into the courtyard. There had been a man on the flat roof above as he came in, and he was still there in exactly the position Eddie's glance had snapped him. He was standing with his carbine at about port arms, the butt resting on the parapet. He had caught some section of the annihilation of his chief, which had laid a palsy upon his slow mind. But the second sight of Eddie seemed for him a violent infection. His gun dropped into the court, and he wheeled and lumbered away across the roof.

A gun blew off loudly outside, and then there came a thumping and thrashing about from above. Someone had winged the man on the roof. Come to think, there had been some shooting out there within the last few minutes.

The sergeant's voice rose barking orders, and the man himself, followed by a trooper, rode into the courtyard.

"Where's this Lightning-bug?" he called as he came down expertly from the saddle.

Eddie jabbed the forefinger of his left hand downward over the ledge in a sinister gesture, and then sat down unsteadily.

The sergeant, the trooper at his heels, tramped over the ledge into the cool gloom.

"Dead?" the trooper's voice fluttered out faintly.

"Not dead enough," the sergeant grumbled.

Lucita snuggled to Eddie as he sat on the ledge and tried to stop his head whirling. She peered about at her old home hopefully.

"Papa," she called softly.

Eddie's heart pinched. "In a little while, honey," he choked.

"Manuela," she called more authoritatively.

Eddie patted her cheek and talked huskily.

Two troopers on foot herding three dejected Mexicans before them came in sight. The sergeant thrust head and shoulders out above Eddie and stared at them balefully.

"Jake and Bill're getting down the one you winged on the roof," a trooper reported breathlessly, "and one of 'em took out running for the brush. And if he keeps up the way he started, he'll run himself to death in five minutes. Want us to go fetch him?"

Black shook his head and crowded by Eddie into the shade of the huge pepper tree.

Eddie looked about somberly. "Any of you fellows talk Spanish?" he asked.

"Some," said the sergeant.

"Enough to ask this little girl, 'Where is thy earthly treasure, Lucita?' "

"Maybe. But it sounds funny."

He tried it slowly, stuttering over it at first, at last reciting the line glibly. Lucita eyed him calmly.

"What's she supposed to do?" asked Black, perspiring. "I learned my Spanish in the Philippines, and maybe she don't get it."

But Eddie was sure she understood.

"Lucita," he said gravely, "where is thy earthly treasure?"

As she looked at him her eyes began to twinkle. She walked down the path with childish diffidence before all these men. She touched the bowl of the huge pepper

tree, and came back to him.

Buried by the tree, thought Eddie. He explained to the sergeant.

"Well," Black decided, "we'll get all the prisoners together and put a guard over them. Then we'll hunt up some shovels, and see if we can dig it up."

They carried the Lightning out of the courtyard, and marched the other prisoners after him. Eddie and Lucita were left alone. He went to the tree to see if he could find evidence of where the treasure of Lucita's father was buried. But the earth showed no indication of ever having been dug in.

His right hand was hurting with driving pain, and so was his head. He sat down as big black spots began to wheel before his eyes. Lucita was repeating a line that sounded like the question the sergeant had put to her. He nodded at her, smiling faintly.

She stooped and got a stick. She peered at the bowl of the tree, bent over like an inquisitive little bird. Then she inserted the stick into a crack in the bark that was discernible only to herself, and began to pry with childish awkwardness. Eddie put his sound hand on the stick and pushed. A section of the tree detached itself from the bowl, and slid to the ground. In a long cavity hollowed from the tree was a brass-bound and strapped leather chest.

XIII

EDDIE didn't vouchsafe a reply to the telegraphic instructions from Señor Mateo, Lucita's uncle, that awaited him at El Cajon on his return with the rest of the party from their wild run into Mexico. After a painful session with the doctor, and a night's rest, he brought Lucita up from the desert to Los Angeles, thence northward along the coast to San Nicolas, which town slumbered under the hills of Mateo's own domain.

It was late morning when Eddie hobbled down the steps of the pullman at San Nicolas. Lucita followed him chattering. He stood a moment to sniff the smell of the sea, and to listen to the mumble of surf on the low beach.

"It tastes good," he approved the moist scent. "I'll have to get a job by the ocean."

With Lucita in tow, he limped up the street in the sunshine, moving his muscle-wrenched legs and bruised body carefully.

"And I don't care if I never ride another horse," he flinched as he eased himself up some steps. His bandaged hand he carried scrupulously before him. "I must look like disaster and doom," he complained darkly. "and I know I feel like 'em."

In Los Angeles he had made the mistake of giving Lucita ice cream, and had spent the remainder of his time there keeping her attention distracted from these cool, marble palaces; for he was in extreme doubt as to what might be a little girl's normal capacity for this delicacy. Now as he spied the sign of an ice cream parlor extended across the street in front of them, he began mildly indicating things of interest across the way. But the odors from the open doors brought her to a sudden, peering stop.

In despair, he hoped that four in a forenoon would not bring disaster, and followed her into the place.

"It's safer for us on the desert," he protested.

But at least he could sit and ease his aching legs.

A sun-blackened boy in an ancient bathing suit climbed a stool beside him, and wanted loudly a chocolate nut sundae. Lucita beamed upon him approvingly.

Eddie got the attention of the fair-haired dispenser after the ice cream was served.

"How do you get to Mr. Mateo's ranch?" he inquired.

The fair-haired boy eyed him with some concern. "You don't get there," he announced gloomily. "He don't admit strangers, or much of anyone else to his place." He drew near, hooked an elbow onto the marble counter. "Do you know what?" he asked, and Eddie said he didn't.

"Well, his daughters come in here once in a while, and I always serve 'em. They're nice janes. Talk—well, just like anybody. And the old man comes in here sometimes. I thought I had a drag with them. But what do you suppose he told me when I asked him if I could hunt ducks on one of his lakes—'way back?"

But Eddie wasn't good at guessing. He didn't even try.

"Well, he told me to go to—" The fair-haired boy hesitated as he looked at Lucita.

The sun-baked youth in the bathing-suit snickered and scraped the bottom of his dish.

"That's funny," Eddie commented, "because everyone knows there are no ducks in the place you were about to mention. But how," he asked politely, "would a fellow get to his ranch if he was going? Suppose."

"I don't know," the young man admitted. "They're two or three jitneys for hire around town, but they won't none of 'em take you to old Mateo's place. He give it out flat they better not. Keep out, and if you don't like it, what you going to do about it?"

"I'll tell you," said the sun-blackened youth. "Go hire a car and drive it yourself."

"But I can't drive one," Eddie told him.

"Aw, you can drive a lizzie with one arm," the boy assured him, taking note of Eddie's bandaged hand.,

"But I couldn't drive one if I had three hands," Eddie said.

"I'll drive her for you," the boy offered. "I ain't afraid of any guy and his big ranch."

"That's a deal," Eddie closed.

"Wait'll I get my pants." The sun-baked youth fled down the street toward the sea.

He proved later a very capable driver. He was a visitor from the East, had a family of brothers and sisters, and a mother with them, all of whom Eddie knew rather well within the first two miles. The boy had none of the native's fear of this local deity, was immensely pleased at the prospect of anything in the way of an encounter.

They soon left the highway and growled and chugged a zig-zag course over a series of foothills that grew higher toward the mountains. The warm, sunlit air had a mild briskness. Below, the sea climbed steeply from the shore to the steel-gray horizon. "No Trespassing" signs were placed at short intervals along the narrow road. They had a bleak look, and their language was forbidding with threat. They set Eddie to brooding. Lucita chattered and gazed, then slept a little time snuggled to his side, to awake more subdued. She even became melancholy, he thought. He was holding back his own heartache till he had left her. Yet he couldn't but remember that this very happy interlude in his homeless, wandering life was about over, that soon he would go on to the next unexpected thing.

Barabe had asked him as he was leaving with Lucita, "Are you coming back, Eddie?" And there had been dogged hope in his abrupt eyes.

"When the roses bloom again," Eddie had grinned his answer.

"Let me know how you come out." Barabe's bear-growl gruffness had been intended to be sympathetic. "Old Mateo just wired to send her immediately, you know. He probably won't be looking for you. He's a kind of an old nut." The superintendent had tried to be adroit.

"I wish my letter to him had got lost." There had been the hint of a snarl in Eddie's slow voice.

Old Chris had come up from the Pass to curse pathetically into Eddie's ear, and at the last minute to weep openly.

Eddie now began to feel an agitation in Lucita, as if she sensed that something strange confronted her. She subsided, clung to him.

A great old house came into view at the top of the hill. The nearer they came the older it grew. But the concrete and iron fence that surrounded it wasn't old. Eddie had the boy stop the car at the great iron gate. Lucita hung back a little fearfully as they walked the two hundred yards up the driveway to a long veranda. There was a soft, bright quiet about the solid old house, seductive to a battered and wrenched body.

A stolid Mexican girl answered his knock, and shook her head when he asked if Mr. Mateo was at home.

"This is his little niece," Eddie indicated Lucita. "You know about her?"

The girl nodded glumly, and held out her hand.

"You are to stay here till I come back," he told Lucita, the acid of the lie scorching his throat—for he knew he wasn't coming back. But he thought the best thing to do was to make his escape quickly.

His eyes were burning. He had about reached his limit. He turned steadily enough, but he had to feel his way down the long driveway. The light had become uncertain. Given another minute and he would be clear of the grounds. The gravel racketed loudly under his feet that were a little unwieldy. All that long ride, with his feet in and out of the stirrups that had been too long for him, had used up his legs more than he would have believed. And that rap the Lightning had landed on the side of his head had likely loosened something inside, because it felt very dubious.

"Ed-dee!"

There was that damned heart-pinch again. He stumbled uncontrollably. The sunlight was blurred, misty. A huge, silent machine brushed by him, had almost got him.

"Ed-de-e-e-e!"

The piping cry rose to a wail. They couldn't be hurting her! There was a racket of steps in the gravel behind him. He half turned. A man that he couldn't see very well was hurrying down upon him.

"Young man—just a moment." Suave—and imperative.

"Go to hell!" said Eddie very distinctly, and continued his vague way down the drive.

There was a startled scattering of gravel and the man stood before him, blocking his way. Eddie drew up defensively.

"Mr. Sand—please!" There was haste and concern in the voice now.

Eddie took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. If the old devil had delayed another minute, all this would have been avoided. Hard to tell now what would happen. Little feet scratched the gravel frantically, and Lucita bumped his aching knees. She was whimpering faintly, a thing she seldom did. He mopped carelessly with his handkerchief, and got a clearer view of the man. Old he was, but sturdy, active on his feet; and he had rather cold blue eyes.

"Please pardon me, Mr. Sand, but I must have a word with you." The voice was kindly and apprehensive now.

Eddie wavered on his feet. Lucita clutched him desperately by the knee. All the braced resolution in him went in cowardly desertion. He ached and was very tired.

"My legs," he said blankly.

"This is my niece?" The old man went to his knees before the little girl. They looked at each other, and he spoke to her in soft, rippling Spanish. But she clung tightly to Eddie's knee and did not answer. Eddie was suddenly abashed, for the tears were running down the old man's face quite frankly.

He stood up presently to dry his eyes with a great blue handkerchief. "If you will be kind enough, Mr. Sand." He touched Eddie's arm with a piloting hand.

They walked slowly back up the drive to the long veranda. Lucita held to Eddie's hand with a fierce little grip, her round eyes regarding the world distrustfully.

A girl in riding breeches and boots came striding out into the sunlight.

"Marie said———"

She checked her words, but not her impetuous stride. With swift ease she swooped upon Lucita, swept her up and kissed her repeatedly, murmuring softly. She caught Eddie's bewildered stare, and became less impulsive.

"You are Mr. Sand?" she said in a hushed voice.

She seemed vastly respectful, which added to his confusion.

"My daughter, Mr. Sand."

The girl eased Lucita to the ground and extended a deferential hand. And in his derangement he moved his right hand to its sudden hurt. The disconcerting confusion subsided as he looked at her; the soft silence, sparkling like fine wine, came back again to the hacienda. The old man's voice had the gentle roll of his clean, brown hills as he broke it at last.

"I have held quite extensive correspondence by wire with Mr. Barabe since you left him," he said. "He has had a good deal to say of you. Yes. A good deal that we did not before comprehend. And the chest of my brother—it arrived safely by express. It was not so much the gold it contained, although there was considerable of that, but the family treasures and papers and records—all valuable to us in many ways."

Señor Mateo dried his eyes again artlessly.

They talked through the afternoon, the three of them in chairs on the long veranda that overlooked a wide, billowing country which overhung the sea, while Lucita in charge of a maid, came and went in excited explorations. But of what was most on their minds very little was said.

The sunlight softened, and the shadows grew from the mountains at their back. Eddie got up stiffly.

"I must go," he said definitely.

The old man shook his head. "You must not," he announced gravely. "In fact you cannot. I had your machine sent back to town some time ago."

The girl spoke impetuously. "You must

stay, Mr. Sand. Lucita is so fond of you. And we want—father meant to say something to you before this. We all feel—we want you to stay with us always."

There was color in her wind-touched cheeks. She was still sweetly deferential. Her eyes warmed him like ardent sunshine. He had a quick desire to remain in that radiant warmth till it absorbed the aches of his battered body. His wrenched legs gave under him, and he sat down. A pleasant life to sit here in the high, aloof quiet and let unhurried time flow by. Yet he couldn't do exactly that. Under the girl's warm gaze, ambition stirred; he began to consider his nomadic past with disfavor.

The challenging call of a locomotive whistle came up clearly through the soft air. A passenger train flung itself headlong across the foreground, its disturbing racket shaking the silent hills. The race of it swept suddenly through his blood. No, he couldn't as a fact fatten in sloth on the old gentleman's beneficence.

"It's lovely here," he said. "I'd like to stay a while—I feel kind of wrecked. But I'll have to go presently. Mr. Barabe has left a place for me in the dispatcher's office. It's a good chance. I'd like to come back here in vacations—" the girl's eyes filled with so much interest made him a little self-conscious—"to see Lucita."

The old man brooded over his sunny hills. "Youth must strive. Ah, well, my son, call this your home, and come to it when you will."

They watched the blue shadows creep down the slopes, deepening and darkening as they came.

"I'll make the Super sorry he called me a boomer," Eddie decided grimly. "Time I settled down and worked up."

The old man roused. "Mr. Barabe had something to say about an associate of yours—a Mr. Chris Healy. I believe he helped take care of Lucita when it was not known who she was, and that he became very fond of her."

"Hardly fond," Eddie smiled. He groped for a word that would match old Chris' feeling for Lucita. "It was a kind of worship."

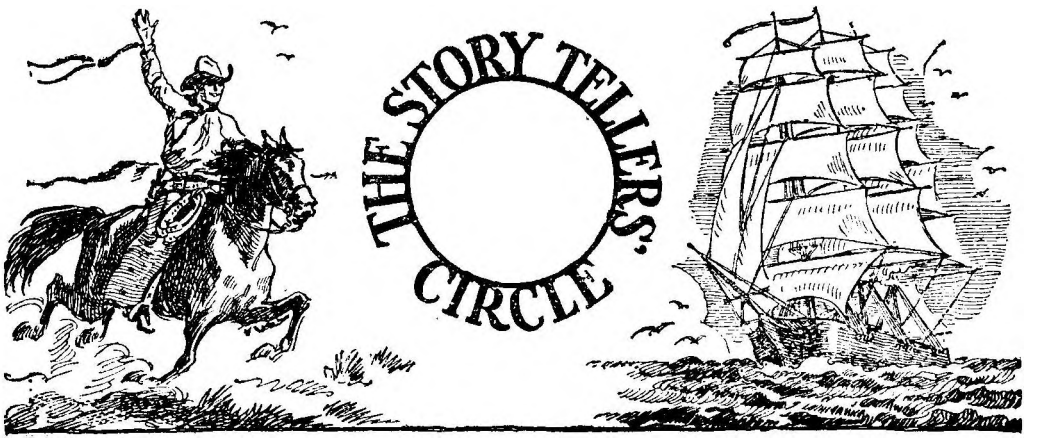
"Chrees," said Lucita from the doorway, peering about.

"I have asked him to come up here to see me," Señor Mateo nodded, his bright eyes softening as he studied his little niece. "Do you think he would care to live in this country? It could be arranged for him to be near here, if he would like it." The old man turned his glance on Eddie for a keen, brief study. "You are without family, my son, and you may not be able to understand our feeling in this matter. We were a big family, and an old one; and now all that is left is here under my roof. It would be our great sadness if you do not let us show you a little of the esteem we have for what you have done for us."

Eddie puzzled over this man who had gained such celebrity for harshness and ill will toward others. Perhaps it was because he had himself not always been treated fairly by the restless, pioneering Americans.

"And there was a lieutenant Allison and a Sergeant Black," the old man went on. "They are, I believe, motion picture people in Los Angeles when they are not soldiering with the militia. I have held some words with both of them by telegraph only yesterday." The old man seemed to quicken in his chair as he flashed his first Latin gesture. "And the sergeant, he says you are the gamest man he ever has seen, and he has soldiered all over the world."

"He's crazy, mister," Eddie stated his amazement. "He never saw me except when I was scared stiff."



THE BRAVE NEW DAYS

NO DOUBT you've all heard the expression "the brave old days," with the insinuation that for adventure and romance the present days aren't worth shucks. Well, say, what's the matter with "the brave new days?" In this issue of SHORT STORIES we have stories of the North and West, of Burmese outlaws and Mexican revolutionists, of war and of logging camps and of the sea. And within recent months here's what actually happened, all recorded in reputable newspapers:

In the North, a trading post that was frozen in and starving, was provisioned by the use of railroads, airplanes and dog-sleds; the call for help reached civilization by means of Indian runner, dog-sled, radio and telegraph. An airplane has just dropped provisions to a snowed-in and starving mining camp in the high Rockies.

In the West, two cowboys ended a range feud of twenty-five years by shooting it out after each had warned the other to "come a-shooting." A trail herd of eight hundred horses has just been driven a thousand miles to be delivered to a buyer in Mexico. Two train bandits at the moment this is written are holding a mountain cabin against a besieging posse of a hundred men.

In Burma, three British officers and a number of soldiers have been killed in a fight with slave traders. In Mexico almost every train carries an armed guard against bandits, and of course there's always the revolution.

In the Northwest, three of the largest log booms ever made were towed hundreds of miles down the coast to the mills. At sea, there were wrecks aplenty; a cutter after a four-day search picked five starving men off a waterlogged schooner; a steamer went down with all hands before rescuers could respond to her S. O. S. And as for wars, if you feel warlike, you can take your pick; there is plenty of fighting going on right now in China, Morocco, Mexico, Nicaragua and all points north, east, south and west.

What about it? Don't *you* think that a fiction writer could find enough material among these actual present day happenings around which to build as thrilling an adventure story as ever was written?

ABOUT JAMES B. HENDRYX

IN ACCORDANCE with our plan of running short autobiographies of our authors so that you may feel personally acquainted with them, we are printing herewith a short one of James B. Hendryx whose Corporal Downey stories you all know, and whose exciting northern serial "Frozen Inlet Post" begins in this number. Mr. Hendryx says:

I was born in Minnesota, and after school and a couple of years of college, I started in on a series of jobs, that ran from salesmanship to railroad surveying and that lasted from one week to 53 weeks. From there I went to Chinook, Montana, kept books for a sheep-shearing plant one season, and then for three years rode for several big cow outfits in Montana and Saskatchewan.

The Montana bad lands, at that time, furnished refuge for numerous outlaws—the notorious Kid Curry and one or two of his gang were lying low there, enjoying the newspaper stories that appeared from time to time of the much wanted Kid's having been seen in the Argentine, in Mexico and even in Australia. The Kelly gang of rustlers and horsethieves also hung out there, as did numerous shady characters who were willing to turn a hand at anything from running a few kegs of rot-gut across the line, to the petty rustling of a calf here or a steer there.

I had filed a homestead on the north edge of the bad lands, hoping later to dispose of the water rights, and part of the year I lived in a shack on the claim. Thus I came into contact with most of the boys who lived beyond the pale of

the law and, with one or two exceptions, I liked them—used to do a lot of "shopping" for them in Havre and Chinook where they didn't care to show up. Also, I kept them supplied with newspapers and magazines, and they retaliated by turning back my horses, and the cattle I was supposed to keep from drifting into the bad lands ahead of a winter storm.

The then deputy sheriff who was most active in that part of Choteau County was a particular friend of mine, and both he and "Corporal Downey" knew of my acquaintance with the boys in the bad lands, yet neither ever asked me a single question concerning them, although I have ridden many miles and have camped with both officers as well as with other officers on both sides of the boundary. And, on the other hand, the boys knew that I was more or less intimate with the officers, yet they never hesitated to talk freely to me, or among themselves in my presence, either in my shack, or on the range.

Next I went north with another cowpuncher and spent fourteen months in the Yukon country, chopping cordwood, playing poker—and chopping cordwood.

Then I got back to Vancouver on a stinking salmon boat and beat my way back to the cattle country and went to riding again.

In 1915 I got married and in 1920 I bought a farm on Grand Traverse Bay, Michigan, where I now live. Most of this farm is already in timber, and I am trying to undo the labor of our hardy pioneer forefathers by allowing a healthy young forest to spring up and cover the fields they toiled so hard to clear. In five years I have succeeded in reclaiming some thirty acres from the plow, and hope within the next five years to wrest the remaining tillable land from the grip of agriculture.

As to my personal habits, my favorite musical instrument is a double bitted ax, and I never allow work to interfere with fishing or hunting.

Sincerely yours,

JAMES B. HENDRYX.

HARRY BEDWELL—A NEWCOMER

MR. HENDRYX is an old-timer with us and our readers, but here is an interesting newcomer to our pages who we hope will eventually become an old-timer also. In accordance with our custom, Mr. Harry Bedwell whose exciting story "The Lightning That Was Struck" appears in this issue, introduces himself to you:

An old Irishman, name of Cadigan, back on the old "Q" taught me railroad telegraphy and station work, and I worked up and down the Mississippi River bottoms till the song of the mosquitoes, drove me West. I worked on the Denver and Rio Grande in Colorado and Utah for a while then went to California and worked on the Santa Fe. Later I drifted farther south, and put in a lot of time on the desert.

About the man called "Lightning" in my story: he came into the telegraph office one night while I was working and entertained me with details of a wild scheme he had of going over into Mexico and putting on a revolution of his own. He explained everything, and asked me to go along. He might have talked me into it—he had one of those overpowering personalities—but a passenger train came along and he bummed a ride on the cushions.

There were always a flock of rumors coming out of Mexico, and I thought I recognized him in some of them after that, but you couldn't tell for sure. But a good deal of time and space later, an operator with whom I was working told of meeting this fellow Lightning—had his name and description down exact. This operator said he'd seen him at Juarez with some revolutionists who were at the moment in possession of the town. They were in front of the Mexican Custom House, pitching gold coins at a crack, and Lightning seemed to be the big noise of the bunch.

Speaking of revolutionists and such, you'll remember Pancho Villa once made a raid across to this side of the border. Since that time I've met—and fed—a number of telegraphers who were, they claimed, working in the station at Columbus, N. M., at the time Pancho paid his call. Some of 'em showed newspaper and magazine pictures of the bullet-perforated station clock as proof of their presence at that sanguinary affair. I've heard so many stories of that raid that I've got a strong desire to meet the fellow who *really* was there just when the clock got plugged, and I'd like to hear what he did when that happened.

Sincerely,

HARRY BEDWELL.

Mr. Bedwell isn't the only one. We'd like to hear, too, and so would hundreds of thousands of our readers. So if any of you know this operator, won't you ask him to write a letter for Story Tellers' Circle, telling about the raid? We know it'll be interesting.

$25.00 FOR A NAME

WE ARE offering a prize of $25.00 for the winning title for that exciting new serial by Jackson Gregory. Details of the contest are printed on page 129 of this issue. Be sure and mail in your nomination *now*.

COMING IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

IN OUR next issue, besides the second installment of the Hendryx serial "Frozen Inlet Post," we have two complete long stories, both of them splendid. One, the novel, is a thrilling mystery story, "The Seventh Letter," by Ellery H. Clark. It has lots of the exciting things that you want in a mystery story; dark woods and hidden passages, feuds and vengeances, midnight visitants and a missing will—and a man murdered under circumstances that will make your very hair stand on end.

The other long story, "A Thousand-to-One Shot," is a gripping Western story by none other than W. C. Tuttle. And all of you know how thrilling and humorous Tuttle can be when he wants to be. We

DON'T FORGET THE COUPON! CUT IT OUT TODAY AND LET US KNOW YOUR OPINION OF THE STORIES IN THIS NUMBER

READERS' CHOICE COUPON

"Readers' Choice" Editor, SHORT STORIES:
Garden City, N. Y.

My choice of the stories in this number is as follows:

1_____ 3_____

2_____ 4_____

5_____

I do not like:

_____ Why?_____

NAME_____ ADDRESS_____

aren't going to tell you anything about this in advance except to tell you that it is a Cultus Collins story, and that even if little Buddy Merz did shoot at cats with that new shotgun he more than made up for it later!

In addition to these long stories there are half a dozen excellent and variegated short stories by such writers as Karl W. Detzer, Hapsburg Liebe, Theodore Goodridge Roberts and others.

If you miss this number, you'll be sorry!

"HERE COMES THE MAIL!"

WE SURELY do appreciate enthusiastic readers like Mr. Benton and Mr. Wunderl. But for the sake of our authors who want good cash for their stories, we hope too many readers don't contract the "gimme" habit.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
DEAR SIR:

I don't think I need your coupon to prove I am an old reader, for there isn't any other choice when it comes to interesting magazines. I agree with our friend B. Davis from South Africa in that.

For my part I sit here eight hours a day in a two-by-four office, checking trains in and out of Cincinnati, so I like railroad stories. I put in three years in the Air Service, hopping off turrets of battle-wagons so I enjoyed "Soft Air" and the Border Patrol stories. I have merchant marine papers, and have been around the Horn and East Indies. I had a streak in the Michigan lumber camps, and also in New Hampshire where later style lumbering is done. And I've heard at first hand "hoodoo" stories from Nova Scotia fishermen.

Being a red-blooded human, I enjoy any kind of athletic story, so let them come as they are. Some say changes are for the best, but not in the case of SHORT STORIES magazine.

Here's yours for a steady run as is.

R. E. BENTON,
Cincinnati, Ohio.

Editor, SHORT STORIES,
DEAR SIR:

I've been reading SHORT STORIES for about six years, and in all that time never found a story that I didn't like. On the other hand, I've devoured about forty-leven thousand of them that I enjoyed to the utmost. There never was, ain't and never will be another such magazine as the good ole red sun book. How do I know? Because at various times I've read issues of practically every magazine that's to be had, and never stayed with any of them for more than three or four months, while SHORT STORIES has been my sidekick from the time I was sixteen on, and I hope you and SHORT STORIES will continue to stand by. Some time ago I conceived the idea of saving every issue which was a bit above par, or carried a Mulford serial. Swell idea, too; only the heck of it was that I found I'd been saving every single one of them, and the first thing I knew, I was told to hire a barn for a storage place, because it was absolutely imperative that there be enough room left for the furnace in the basement. Finally it struck me that others might like to get them, so I gave them to a couple of friends who immediately contracted the "gimme" habit. Now I hardly have time to finish a new issue before they come around sponging it off me. Such is the life of a SHORT STORIES reader, but it's an enjoyable one anyway.

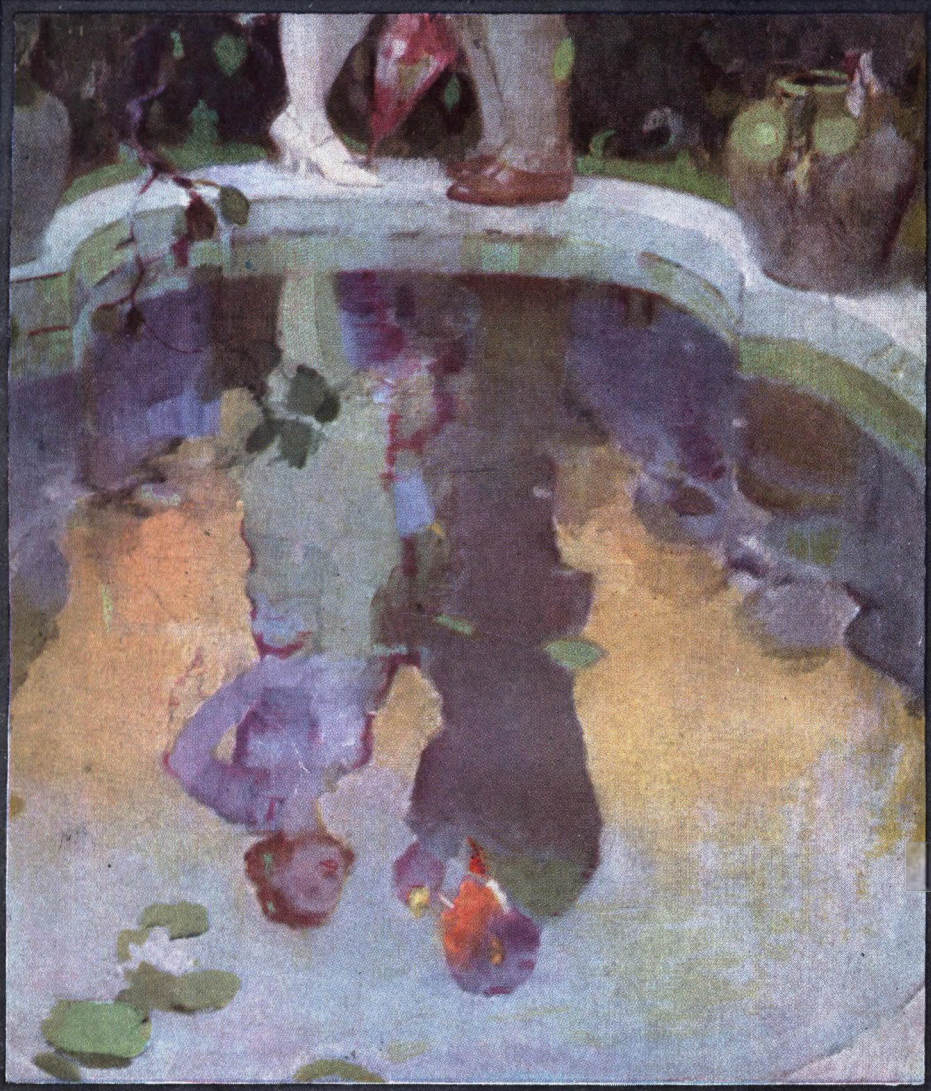
Best wishes for SHORT STORIES. Long may she wave.

AUGUST J. WUNDERL,
West Allis, Wisc.

Keep a Kodak story of the children

Autographic Kodaks $5 up

Eastman Kodak Company, Rochester, N.Y., *The Kodak City*



A reflection of good taste

LIGGETT & MYERS TOBACCO CO.

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