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Short Stories

Twice A Month — November 10th

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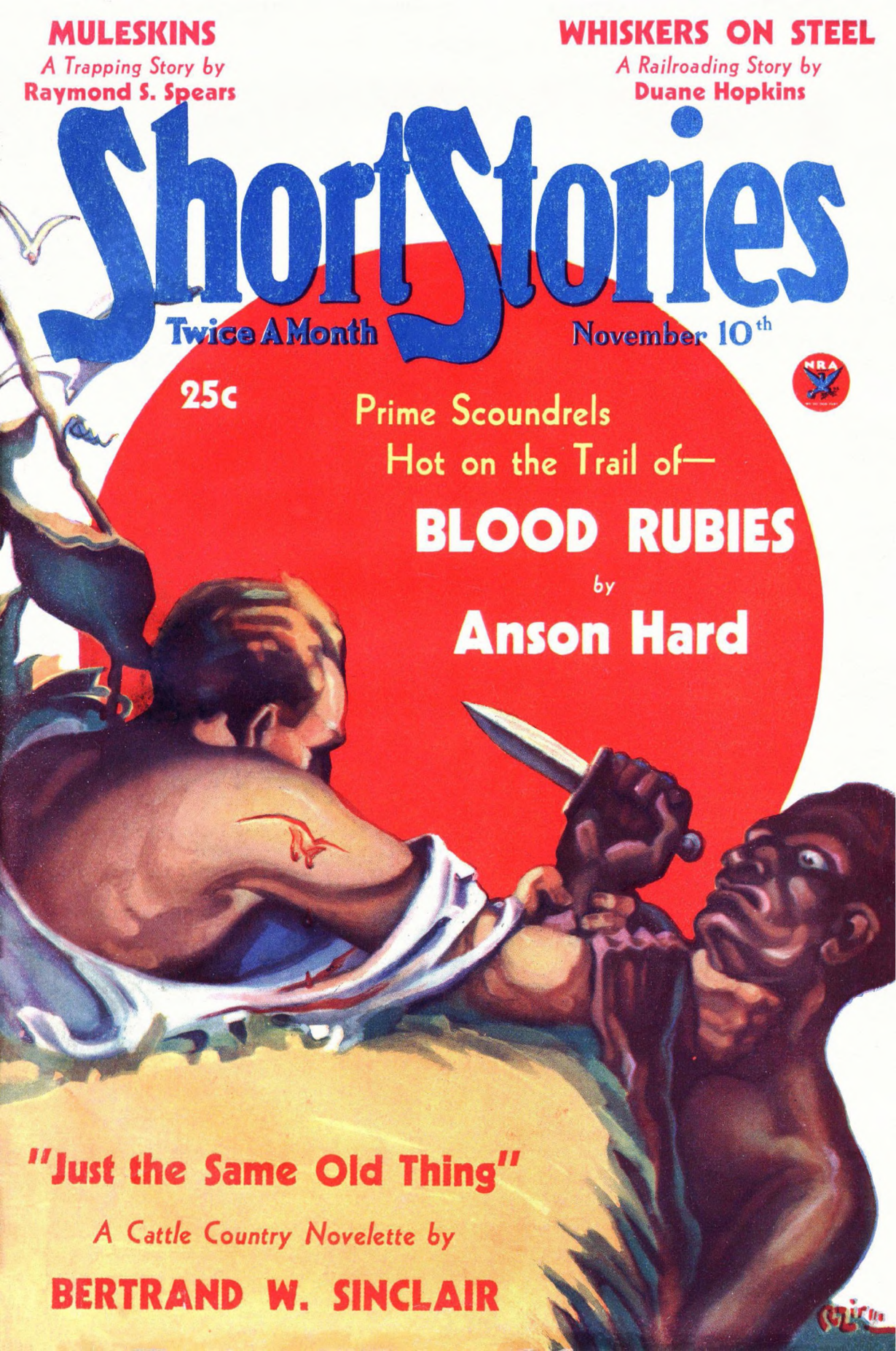

"Just the Same Old Thing"

A Cattle Country Novelette by

BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

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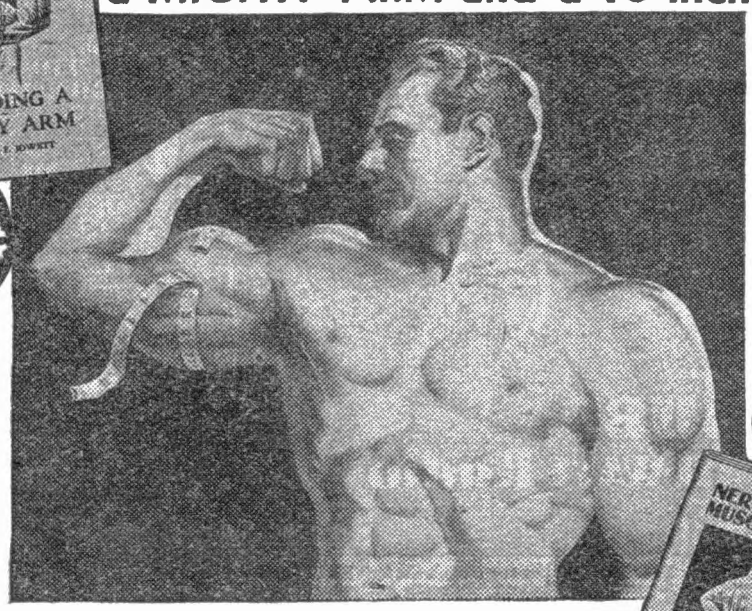

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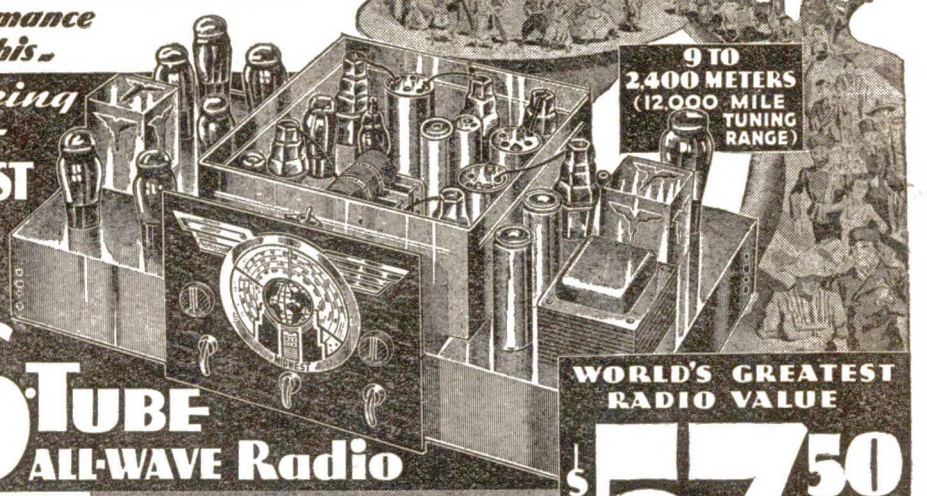

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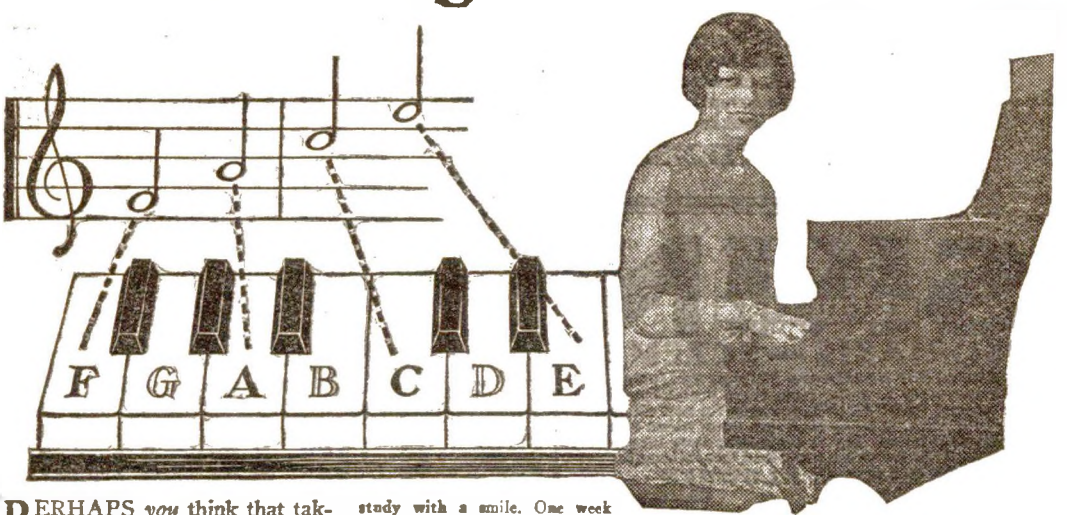

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29x5.25-19	2.95	1.15
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28x5.50-18	3.35	1.15
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.15
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31x6.00-19	3.40	1.15
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30x5	3.65	1.35
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BIGGEST AND BEST—ACTION

Short

TWICE A MONTH

CONTENTS

ADVENTURE, THRILLS, MYSTERY

Stories

HARRY E. MAULE, *EDITOR*

Title Registered in U. S. Patent Office

NOV. 10th, 1934

Vol. CXLIX, No. 3 Whole No. 693

Rustlers Might Think They Were Doing Something New, But to Johnny Farrar, Stock Detective, It Was Just the Same Old Thing

JUST THE SAME OLD THING

By BERTRAND W. SINCLAIR

Author of "Lost Lode," "The Last Laugh," etc.

THE secretary of the Montana Stock Association sat looking at a man across a worn mahogany desk. Neither the main office nor the secretary's nook looked like big business, just as the look of the men who occasionally passed in and out of that office seldom advertised their power or wealth or capacity for action. The business pertaining to a hundred cow outfits numbering in their holdings a million and a half cattle was centered there. There was not much about cattle, cowmen, range practice and malpractice that Dick Colton didn't know. His salary ran into five figures because of that wide knowledge. As an executive he had to know men, too. But at various times he admitted to himself he

could never quite classify the man now sitting opposite him.

A man who looked like a fresh-colored, healthy boy. A man whose height, strength and age were alike deceptive, who had fair, curly hair and very blue eyes, who looked twenty and was nearly thirty, who looked guileless and harmless and was neither. He was indeed without question the most efficient and determined operative on the Association payroll. Dick Colton had often looked across that desk at Johnny Farrar and speculated on the why of this. Colton liked to know what made the wheels go around in a man. All he could ever be sure of about Johnny was that he got results where men with wider experience frequently failed. Deer Lodge penitentiary held several cattle thieves who never realized what put the skids under them, so deftly did Johnny do his work—and then stand quietly aside while someone else sprang the trap and got the public credit. But Johnny got credit with the Association and that was all he seemed to care about.

"He's a born hunter," Colton thought. "Only he lacks the mighty hunter's tendency to swell out his chest and blow his own horn. I wish I had a few more like him in the business."

Aloud he said, "That's all I can tell you, Johnny. You'll find Cullen somewhere on the Lazy H range. Cullen is no fool, yet he says frankly that everything seems to point up a blind alley. So go to it. It looks like clever rustlers at work."

"If rustlers were really clever they wouldn't be rustling stock," Johnny drawled. "They'd be bankers or lawyers or Stock Association secretaries an' sit behind polished desks while somebody else did the work."

"G'wan," Dick Colton grinned. "Why don't you try that recipe yourself?"

"I'm liable to," Johnny stood up and put on his hat. "I wish to the Lord cow thieves would think up a new scheme once in awhile. If I have to dally around with a few more cases where these single track minds that aspire to get rich quick steal cows or horses in the same old way and get caught or shot in the same old way I'm goin' into some business like raisin' chickens or growin' spuds, where there's more variety."

"You clear up Maisie Taylor's troubles for her and you might find a little variety," Colton said jocularly. "She's a widow, young, rich, mighty attractive. I've met her once or twice, and she has got the goods. You might make a hit with Maisie. You never know."

"Yeah?" Johnny drawled over his shoulder, one hand on the door knob. His face clouded slightly. "Antony made a hit with Cleopatra, an' look what it got him."

He didn't linger to exchange any more badinage. The door closed on him, leaving Dick Colton wondering idly just how Johnny meant him to take that last remark.

II

JOHNNY FARRAR watched the Black Peaks grow nearer and blacker all through a warm spring day. The blackness came from massed pine timber, high rocky cliffs and deep gorges. The mass rose out of rolling grassland on the north side and abutted upon a desolate fringe of Bad Lands that fringed the Missouri River on the south. The headquarters of one big cow outfit lay on a creek at the western tip of the hills, another on the east slope, thirty-five miles apart. Out on the plains a few sheep-camps polluted certain creeks and springs. The nose of Johnny's mount was pointed for the middle of the Black Peaks range. There, where the mountains lifted abruptly, stood a cluster of buildings which a man could classify as he chose, camp, town, village. There was a post-office in connection with a general store, three saloons, a hotel, a stage station and a few crude dwellings. Buda served a few great ranches, two small mines just a few hundred yards up the slope, and the passing traveler. It was sixty-five miles from any railroad and no Sunday-school town.

When Johnny walked into the hotel he hardly expected to find anyone he knew. With eyes that marked everything without appearing to do so he saw three men sitting at a table. One he knew by sight, the second he recognized by description. The third he knew well. Yet neither Johnny nor the man who knew him made a sign of recognition. The most striking figure of the three was a bulky man, slightly stooped, with a walrus mustache drooping over thick lips. He was past sixty, but still rugged. He owned ten thousand cattle. His name was Lemuel Cotton, but the Lemuel only appeared on checks and documents. From the Texas Panhandle to the Canada line he had been known as King Cotton long before Sousa wrote that famous march. King Cotton also owned the various sheep-camps Johnny had seen spread out to the north, which made the King's fellow cattlemen sometimes regard him dubiously, they being unable to understand why a man thus straddled the pastoral fence.

The bar, the office, a lounging-place with chairs by little round tables all occupied the same gaunt space. The bartender was also the proprietor. Johnny engaged a room, and then bought a drink. To buy for the house was a custom of the range. The three sitting rose at the bartender's voice and sauntered to the bar. They tilted their glasses toward Johnny in acknowledgment and drank. Johnny moved back and sat down at a table by himself. The men didn't resume their seats. King Cotton stalked out, and he was followed by the second man who had sandy hair and a thin, freckled face, a striking sort of face, Johnny thought. Not a pleasant face, but one you wouldn't easily forget. Perhaps what made it striking to Johnny Farrer was a thin, straight white line of scar tissue that ran on a slant from the man's hair across his fore-

head to end right between his eyes. It stood out like a brand, and in a way it was.

THE third man was about Johnny's size, quite similar to him in feature, but a little taller and quite dark-skinned. He stood rolling a cigarette while the other two sauntered out. Then he came and sat down on the opposite side of the little table from Johnny. He looked at Johnny, and Johnny smiled at him.

"You lost your tongue?" Johnny asked suddenly, in a friendly undertone. "How goes it, Harve?"

"Oh, all right," the other said. "Kinda funny to meet you here, Johnny. I didn't glad hand you. I thought maybe—oh well. You know."

"Don't be a damn fool," Johnny said roughly. "It's just as well you'd didn't tip my hand, though. I've registered here as John Smith. I'd as soon stay under cover for a time. I'm sort of looking for some people who don't want to be seen officially. Why the devil didn't you stop in Helena an' see me?"

"Well, I have to travel my own trail," the other said slowly, bleakly it seemed to Johnny Farrar. "And it led here, old sox."

"Last damn place you ought to be," Johnny said irritably. His tone was troubled. "What in Sam Hill did you want to come back here for?"

"They turn you loose with a shoddy suit an' five dollars state money in your pocket," Harve Amby said. "It didn't matter much where I went. It happens I came back here because—because I had a job offered me. Don't look like that, Johnny. Things like that shouldn't bother you. It's all right."

"It isn't all right," Johnny lowered his voice. "I know you. You got in a jam here, an' you are liable to be entertainin' the idea of takin' a fall outa somebody or other. No sense in that, Harve. It isn't worth it."

"You're wrong for once, Johnny-cake," Harve Amby said indifferently. "I am back here on my old stamping ground simply because I happened to meet old King Cotton in Benton. I had no ridin' outfit. The Fort Benton outfits were all full-handed anyway. Cotton offered me a job herdin' one of his bands of sheep. I took it. I got to work out enough wages to get a saddle, bridle, spurs an' a couple of horses."

"Sufferin' Moses!" Johnny made a sound like a snarl.

"So I'm herdin' sheep for old King Cotton at Gyp Springs," Amby continued. "Kinda ironical, eh?"

JOHNNY didn't answer at once. To him there was more than irony in the situation. A swarm of possibilities buzzed in his brain.

"You didn't have to get down to anything like that, Harve," he said. "You know I'd stake you to anything I've got. I wrote an' told you to come an' see me when you got out. I never bothered you while you were in there. I thought you understood where I was at."

"I do, Johnny," Amby said. "You're white. But I'm past twenty-one, an' a free man again. I got to go under my own steam."

"Have it your own way," Johnny replied. "There never was much use arguin' a point with you. So you're at Gyp Springs, eh? That's not so far. I'll be ridin' that way one of these days. Meantime, Harve, in addition to bein' Jack Smith I'm a Anchor man lookin' for stray horses. *Sabe?*"

"Sure," Harve nodded. "Well, I got to split the breeze. I got a camptender's horse an' he's herdin' the bunch. I wanted to get a few things in the store."

Johnny watched through a dusty window. Harve Amby got a horse out of the livery stable and rode away. Johnny didn't have to kill much time before the supper bell rang. Men appeared from various places. A score sat down in the dining-room. They flowed out into the bar afterward. A poker game began. Glasses clinked. A mechanical piano made a tinny melody when it was fed nickels through a

slot. Darkness closed in and lamps burned.

Johnny sauntered around Buda. At eleven o'clock he was sitting in a poker game in a saloon directly opposite the hotel. He was a fair sum to the good. He played poker as he did certain other things with consistent success. King Cotton had just slipped into a chair beside him, vacated when a player went broke. The game went on in comparative silence, under a ring of intent eyes, expressionless faces. Cards slithered, chips clicked in restless fingers. King Cotton had been drinking. He kept on buying drinks. And winning pots—from everybody except Johnny Farrar. Against Cotton when Johnny raised or called a bet he had them.

ABOUT midnight the tall, sandy-haired man who had been with King Cotton and Harve Amby in the hotel appeared. He also had acquired a fair cargo. He threw down a dozen gold twenties and smote the table so that it quivered.

"I'll clean this darn game in thirty minutes," he announced. "I work fast. I'm a wolf an' it's my night to howl!"

"A wolf ain't the only varmint that howls," Johnny heard King Cotton mutter. Louder, he said. "Good place to git your feet wet, Holland."

Holland ran up against Johnny in a small way once or twice. Later he caught an ace to aces and kings, and with an ace full he stepped out. Johnny Farrar topped him with four tens. Holland snarled and growled and brought out another handful of gold twenties. Presently he got out on a limb with a bob-tailed flush and Johnny, smelling something, hooked him by calling with a lone pair. Holland looked at him sourly.

"You play a nice liberal game, kid," King Cotton spoke to Johnny for the first time as one gambler to another. "Who you ridin' for?"

"B. K. Sloan," Johnny answered casually. "Sent me over to look for some Anchor horses supposed to have drifted north of the river."

"Baby-face," the sandy-haired man snarled, "it's your deal. Deal the cards an' leave the conversation go. I crave action. You're gamblin' with men, pink cheeks, not ridin' no horse-roundup."

Johnny could see something coming as far as most men. His method was to meet whatever it was at least half-way. He held the deck in his hand and eyed the man coldly.

"You got a front sight on your gun?" he asked softly.

"You're damn right there's a front sight on her," Holland barked. "An' my eye is used to lookin' over it, too."

"Better file it off," Johnny advised. "Somebody's liable to ram the barrel of it down your throat—an' a front sight, they say, tears hell out of a gullet."

King Cotton guffawed. The others snickered. Johnny looked so young and tender, and he spoke so softly. Holland's face grew turkey red. He sat rigid for a few seconds. Suddenly his hand darted under the table. As it dipped Johnny slapped him diagonally across the face with a bone-handled .45 that seemed to get into his hand and flick like a snake's tongue. His movement resembled a noiseless explosion.

For a second or two no one moved. The smitten one huddled on the floor, very still, blood streaming off his face. Johnny stood back a little, eyes narrowed. There was always the possibility that a blusterer might have friends willing to take up his quarrel.

"Well, you sure hushed the big noise, kid," King Cotton said with a wolfish grin.

They picked Holland up. The barrel of Johnny's gun had left its mark from the base of his nose across one cheek-bone and an eye. The eye was swelling, the skin over the cheek-bone split. He came out of it slowly. They poured a drink down

his throat. Two men volunteered to take him across to the hotel and put him to bed. The poker game resumed.

AT THREE-THIRTY A. M. Johnny Farrar, King Cotton and the bartender had that saloon to themselves. King and Johnny sat at the green-topped table and the bartender brought them a drink every fifteen minutes by the clock. King Cotton was quite drunk and Johnny seemed to be. But his last ten drinks had gone down the table-leg into a brass spittoon. King Cotton's had gone down his throat. He had taken a tremendous shine to Johnny. He was getting confidential in a vague oblique fashion.

"Nobody never got the best of me, kid," he mumbled. "I never forget nothin'. I pay my debts to them that think I've forgotten 'em. Yes, sir. Before snow flies again I'll have this range in the palm of my hand. Watch my smoke. Ride with me, kid, an' you'll wear diamonds. Ride agin me an' you'll wear a shroud."

"I don't give a darn who's top dog in this darn country," Johnny answered thickly. "All I'm concerned with is findin' Bill Sloan's horses. You nor Maisie Taylor an' your troubles is nothin' to me. I'm a ridin' kid from the Mussellshell an' if they don't trouble me I don't trouble them. Say, King, who was the brockle-faced jasper I slapped for callin' me names? Baby-face, sez he. Pink cheeks! Say, King Cotton, why do tough *hombres* pick on me because I don't look old an' hard-boiled?"

"He won't bother you no more, kid," King Cotton patted Johnny on the shoulder. "He's only a false alarm, anyhow. An' he'll be busy as soon as his face heals up. Shucks, you got more guts in your little finger than he has in his whole carcass. He'll be gone in the mornin'."

"Let's have another drink," Johnny waved his hand. "Here's to crime!"

"Here's to crime!" King Cotton repeated. "One man's crime is another man's credit." He laughed drunkenly, parting the walrus mustache to suck at a cigarette. "Crime. Hell, this range is a seethin' mass of crime. But I'm goin' to clean her up. Clean her up good. Won't be long now. What stock detectives an' county officers can't do. I can. Law—hell! I'll be the law. There won't be no more stealin' when I'm through with 'em. There won't be nothin' but weepin' an' wailin' an' gnashin' of teeth."

"Somebody steal somethin' from you?" Johnny droned. "Well, you got plenty left, ain't you?"

"I ain't got nothin' left," King Cotton said hoarsely. "Nothin' but a ace in the hole. Let 'em steal. It won't be long now. I'll get it all back with interest. I'll make 'em eat outa my hand. Me, old King Cotton. Me, the old wolf, sittin' alone by his den!"

He put his face down in his hands and Johnny Farrar, listening, ready to prod up those drunken incoherences with a suggestion where he could, saw with amazement that tears were squeezing out of those bloodshot old eyes.

TUCKED away in Johnny Farrar's memory stuff were certain facts concerning this old reprobate. One salient item gave meaning to that last phrase, crystallized the feeling of uneasiness that stirred Johnny when Harve Amby told him he was now herding sheep for King Cotton. It struck Johnny to silence. And King Cotton fell silent, too, as if the passion that colored his last utterance had emptied some reservoir of feeling, and left him spent. When after a time he spoke again it was only to say in a dry harsh voice:

"Reckon I'll turn in."

He vanished. Johnny sat for a few minutes thinking. He hadn't bargained for all this. Cross-currents! Harve Amby had just finished serving a two-year sentence for manslaughter. Harve had shot King Cotton's range boss right here in Buda. Harve Amby was also Johnny's cousin. Harve had ridden two years for Maisie Taylor. Now he was herding sheep for King Cotton, who never forgot an in-

jury nor forgave an enemy, who drunk or sober had never been known to make a promise he didn't keep.

Johnny forgot his lawful business in that country, brooding over this. It affected him strangely. It seemed sinister. It made him uneasy. It had nothing to do with him or his business, and yet he sat pondering, wondering why King Cotton wanted Harve Amby around, how, in fact, he could stand having him around! Maybe the old devil had a hidden streak of kindness, generosity, that was just cropping out. Getting magnanimous and helpful in his old age. Johnny snorted. He shook himself out of this mental hazard, and went to bed.

To the man whose face he had slapped with his gun he gave no thought at all. He knew him. He had him classified. Or he thought he had.

III

MAISIE TAYLOR'S home ranch stood by a little creek that wound like a silver snake through a spring green hay meadow. Maisie's father had all Montana to pick from when he chose that place. He had an eye for grass, water and land, old Buffalo Holmes. The buildings were all of peeled pine logs, substantial, with painted shingle roofs. Apart from bunkhouse and mess-room, sprawling stables and circular corrals a house of massive pine logs stood in a garden enclosed within low stone walls, a garden where rose cuttings and seeds had been planted before Maisie Taylor was born. Maisie herself was standing among unfolding buds when Johnny dismounted at her gate.

The sun made glints on her red-gold hair. She looked at him with eyes that were sometimes green and sometimes gray according as the light fell on her face. She was slender-hipped and full-breasted. Her lines, as they say of a ship, were perfect. And she had ways of her own which charmed and exasperated men. Johnny remembered having heard, as he stood before her hat in hand.

"I reckon you're Mrs. Taylor," he said.

"I am," she answered curtly.

Johnny didn't say anything for a few seconds. He stood smiling without being quite conscious that he smiled. The sunlight was on his boyish face, topped by yellow hair that curled in tight little rings here and lay in crinkly waves there. It struck Johnny in that brief silence why men desired this woman, pursued her, and never got anywhere. It was nothing she said or did because she stood there aloof, detached, impersonal. It was simply herself, some intangible quality that emanated from her. Johnny could feel it.

"And who are you?" Maisie asked.

"I," said Johnny without premeditation on his words, "am a rectifier of life's little mistakes."

"Then you had better begin with your manners," Maisie answered quite casually. "Because you strike me as rather an impudent pup. If you are looking for a job you aren't out of diapers long enough to ride for the Lazy H."

Johnny's smile altered but didn't fade He was two years older than Maisie Taylor. He knew a great deal more about her than she could possibly know about him. He had an objective in his oblique approach.

"I don't aim to ride for you, ma'am," he said politely. "I got a ridin' job. I just wanted to know would it be all right for me to make your ranch headquarters for a spell. I'm lookin' for some of Ben Sloan's Anchor horses that are supposed to be north of the Big Muddy."

Maisie moved a little to look over the wall at the left shoulder of Johnny's mount and the beast that carried his bed in a pack. How Johnny came by those two Anchor horses is neither here nor there. Only men who could give a good account of themselves ever rode for the Anchor.

"Oh," she said in a different tone. "If you're riding for Ben Sloan you can certainly make yourself at home here. But I

haven't heard of any Anchor horses on this range."

"There might be things on this range you wouldn't know about, Mrs. Taylor," Johnny took the first opening.

"For instance?" she countered sharply.

"Well, just at random," Johnny drawled, "I'll bet a dollar to one of your Chink's famous doughnuts you don't know Harve Amby has taken a job herdin' sheep for King Cotton at Gyp Springs."

MAISIE put one hand quickly to her breast. Her face went white, whether from shock or anger Johnny couldn't tell. That passed and her eyes suddenly flamed with hostility.

"What is that to me?" she said after a moment. "Or to you? Do you think you're being smart or something?"

"No, ma'am," Johnny replied. "It may be somethin' to you. As to me I may as well tell you that every little thing around here might have some bearin' on my business. I'm supposed to be an Anchor man. What I really am is the Montana Stock Association's answer to a widow's prayer. I'm masqueradin' at present under the name of John Smith—good old well-known Smith. But I was christened John Farrar. Does that convey anything to the feminine mind?"

"*You* are Johnny Farrar of Helena?" she asked in a tone of incredulity. "Why Johnny Farrar is a man. You're just a kid."

"We'll let that pass," Johnny returned amiably. "I'm him, even if I haven't been weaned long enough to suit you. You keep this information tight under that danger signal you wear instead of a hat, Mrs. Taylor. I'm here to look into who's gettin' away with your stock. I work under cover whenever I can. If too many people know who I am an' what I'm after my usefulness to the Association becomes slightly impaired. *Sabe?*"

"Have you any credentials?" she asked in a tone still tinged with unbelief.

Johnny produced them. Maisie handed them back, her color heightened a trifle. She stared at Johnny appraisingly.

"Am I expected to apologize for calling you an impudent pup?" she murmured at last.

"Oh no," Johnny laughed. "I am. You'd be surprised how a little impudence will get you along sometimes."

"You should go far indeed," she commented dryly.

"This is as far as I aim to go today," Johnny remarked.

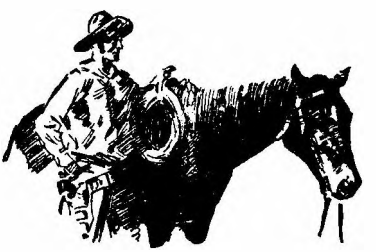
"All right. Put up your horses. You'll find another Association man fooling around the corrals," she said crisply. "You can talk to him. He can tell you all I know about this rustling business."

"I know all you know now, unless you've been holding out on us," Johnny retorted. Her tone nettled him.

"Very well. You have a reputation for catching cow thieves. I hope you live up to it on this job," Maisie said, and turned abruptly toward the house.

"Whew," Johnny muttered. "The woman has a temper. And is she haughty? And did she like me reminding her about Harve? She did not."

A few minutes later Johnny ambled into a corral where Tom Cullen sat re-lacing the stirrup leather of his saddle. Cullen knew Johnny. But he didn't wax effusive.



He merely laid down his gear, shook hands and proceeded to roll a smoke.

"Well, they sent me in answer to the Macedonian cry," Johnny stated. "What's the dope, to date?"

"They ain't none," Cullen declared. "That the trouble."

"Well you don't need look so woebegone

about it," Johnny smiled. "Stock detectives have fooled around for months many a time tryin' to catch some smart thieves."

TOM CULLEN looked at Johnny with the string of a Bull Durham sack still caught in his teeth.

"Well, here's the layout to date," he grumbled. "There is some tall rustlin' goin' on. There's mutterin's an' rumblin's from Mrs. Taylor an' old King Cotton to shake the Black Peaks on their foundations. But it's concentrated on Maisie Taylor's stock, so far as I can see. Maisie don't say it out loud, but I get the impression she thinks King Cotton is somehow takin' a fall outa her. An' old King—I had a talk with him myself—he makes no bones about his idea that Maisie Taylor's riders is workin' on him. They would if she suggested it, all right. But I can't see her playin' the part of a lady rustler. She, herself, is losin' outa her own brand calves an' mature beef at a rate that would soon put a crimp in a year's profits. You know about Maisie, don't you?"

Yes Johnny knew about Maisie Taylor. He could see her now over Tom Cullen's shoulder, the sun making a ruddy flame of her hair as she sat on the porch steps. Maisie's father had been a pioneer, pushing a herd of longhorns into Montana on the heels of the buffalo. Maisie had been born in the house where she was now sole mistress. Her father had sent her to school in St. Louis. Maisie had rebelled at school long before she reached the finishing stage and imperiously married George Taylor. Buffalo Holmes cooled his wrath when this was an accomplished fact. He brought the young couple there to live with him. About the time George Taylor convinced the old man he was all wool and a yard wide Buffalo Holmes fell off the high spring seat of a chuck-wagon and broke his neck. He had a younger son, Rick Holmes. But Maisie inherited everything, the ranch, seven thousand cattle, and a bank-roll big enough to choke several oxen. Exactly three years later a shotgun in the hands of an excited sheepherder put a period to George Taylor.

WHEREUPON Maisie departed from the norm of range custom, code, or whatever one chooses to term the accepted mores and taboos. The cow business was a man's business. A woman had no more place actively on the range than she has in a ship's fo'c's'le. A woman might *own* cattle. Men handled them, and the profits from the handling. The Victorian dictum that woman's place is in the home was never questioned by range men, whatever the women themselves thought about it. The woman who departed from these masculine conceptions at once laid herself open to classification as one craving diversion and range riders who bowed hat in hand before a good woman had no objection to dallying with a bad one if she were gifted with any charm whatever. Maisie had the face, the figure, the fire and personality that would have made her a stick-out in a Broadway leg-show or a Virginia ball-room much less in a region where there were six men to every woman. The frontier had a tendency to make women drab and men colorful. The beautiful daughters of cattle kings were either a myth, or they were immured in private schools until they could be introduced in the proper quarters, since cattle kings who had no social ambitions for themselves frequently had such for their children. So Maisie Taylor came in for a lot of scandalous comment and varied attentions when she persisted in functioning as a cattle queen in her own right. It took her only a short time, however, to prove herself competent to cope with all comers, amorous adventurers and propounders of matrimony alike.

She ran her outfit from her ranch house as expertly as Buffalo Holmes or George Taylor had done. She handled her own business transactions in person. When in doubt she took legal advice, but no other kind. She acted always for herself on her own initiative. She fired one range fore-

man after another until she secured for a roundup boss a lean old Texan who had the wit to realize that a foreman was not potentially a lover or a husband as far as Maisie was concerned.

And she didn't marry.

When Johnny stood looking at her while he talked to Cullen he knew that every eligible man in Northern Montana had spread his loop for Maisie Taylor at one time and another in the past four years. And every throw had missed. Twenty-eight years old. Competent, rich. If not beautiful in the classic sense, at least fully endowed with whatever it is that draws men like a magnetic force, sometimes against their will. They came, they saw, but none conquered.

"Do they fall for her the way everybody says they do?" Johnny speculated. "I wonder."

Tom Cullen flushed through his mahogany tan.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Johnny said. "You, too?"

Tom Cullen was neither dumb nor illiterate. "Aw, hell," said he, "I'm human. She's one of the kind you can't help—well, likin' a lot. Sure they eat outa her hand. Her cowpunchers would ride for their board if she wanted 'em to. All she's got to do is smile a little an' they jump through her hoop."

"Funny she never married again," Johnny hazarded. "She's got this thing they call charm. I could feel that, just the few words I had with her."

Yes, Johnny had felt that. It had made him understand a little more clearly why Harve Amby had come back to Black Peaks, and why he had the air of a man who has lost something he valued which he knows he can never lay hold of again.

"Anyway," Johnny shrugged his shoulders, "go on about this epidemic of missin' stock."

"Johnny," Cullen said with a trace of irritation, "I have rode here an' there for weeks with my eyes open, mouth shut, an' ears spread to the breeze like a pair of fans. I have not uncovered a single lead. Beef steers have vanished. Cows with big unbranded calves lay around on the range with their throats cut an' the calves gone. I've found 'em before they were cold."

"That's a new touch," Johnny observed. "Quieter than usin' a gun to down the cow."

"Two riders work together," Cullen went on peevishly. "They rope the cow, throw her, cut her throat so she can't follow, an' haze off the calf. I see their tracks, but I can never follow their trail anywhere. I can't put my finger on nobody. Them miners around Buda couldn't do it. There is no strangers visible on this range. Everybody is like Caesar's wife. I'm supposed to be a rider on the home ranch here, so I can stall around. Maisie knows. Maybe Rick does too, though I never have tipped my hand to him. I am plumb up a tree. That's why I hollered to headquarters. I'm darn glad Colton sent *you* down."

"When you can get hold of no solid facts," Johnny said, "it's time to let your fancy play. How about this Holland jasper that is wolfin' in the breaks south of here?"

"He's legitimate," Cullen said. "He gets wolves. I have watched him hither an' yon. Noisy, mean-lookin' cuss, but he ain't rustlin' I don't think."

"Good description," Johnny remarked. "Well, Thomas, if we could once find out where these calves an' beef steers go, it would be dead easy to connect up with these invisible rustlers."

"That's the theory I've worked on," Cullen grumbled. "But I have looked in every likely place within a radius of fifty miles."

Johnny stood looking to the west. The Black Peaks began half a mile above the Lazy H ranchhouse. They lifted abruptly until their rocky crests rose above timber line, a miniature of the Rocky Mountains rising out of the plains.

"Have you looked up *there?*" he asked.

"As far up as cows range," Cullen said.

"I don't mean that," Johnny wrinkled

his forehead. "I mean away up under the highest peaks, up where the snow lays ten foot deep in winter an' the Alpine meadows are full of flowers now."

"Hell no," Cullen said. "I never went up where nothin' but deer an' mountain lions roam. Stock wouldn't stay up there nohow."

"Not of their own accord," Johnny said softly. "But suppose they were taken up there an' put in a place where they had to stay? No roundup goes through those mountains. Nobody rides there except maybe to hunt deer in the fall."

"By golly, maybe I've overlooked a bet after all," Tom Cullen stared up at the jigsaw outline, dark against the blue. "As high as I've rode it didn't look any grazin' country to me. I wonder what it's like away up high?"

"I could tell you, but you had better go an' see for yourself," Johnny said. "I have been up there, Tom. Otherwise I might not have thought of this. Long ago when I was a little shaver the old man had a horse ranch west of the Peaks. I went huntin' up there with him various times. It is no place where stock would ever go, but there are some mighty nice secluded mountain meadows away up so high you think you're sittin' on the backbone of the world. It's worth takin' a look. I've found things so often in the most unlikely spots I have got so I look deliberately sometimes where things hadn't ought to be."

"Well, I'll take that tip, Johnny," Cullen grinned. "I got to admit I wouldn't have thought of it. Seemed to me the natural place for a rustler's hideout would be in the Bad Lands. I just didn't figure on the high places in them mountains. I'll start in the mornin' an' they'll be looked over careful an' well. Got anything else up your sleeve?"

"My arm," Johnny replied. He never committed himself to anyone as to any plan or action that involved himself alone. Tom Cullen knew that and did not press the point.

AT SUNRISE in the morning Johnny drifted slowly across the Lazy H range ostensibly looking for Anchor horses. Most of that day he jogged an aimless course with a definite purpose. He saw what he had expected to see, dead cows in hollows. Some of the carcasses were a month old and the buzzards and wolves had fed well.

So that day passed with a little ventured and nothing won. Johnny occupied a bunkhouse that night with two ranch hands. Tom Cullen was abroad in the Black Peaks with three days' grub in his saddle pockets. The Lazy H roundup was somewhere afar sweeping the range. Johnny lay in that silent place staring at the dim ridge-log long after he should have been asleep, thinking not of stolen stock but of King Cotton and Harve Amby—and Maisie Taylor. Something he couldn't put into definite words linked those three. Three utterly differing personalities with conflicting interests. Born in the cattle country, bred in the range tradition, learning avidly and forgetting nothing Johnny Farrar remembered certain things that other people had forgotten if they ever had known. These things had a bearing on the people so vivid and troublesome in his mind. But did they have any bearing on this matter of stolen stock? Johnny's mind began to play on his real business there.

Drowsing, almost asleep, an idea drifted out of the nowhere of his subconscious, and the implications of that possibility made him sit up in his blankets and clasp his hands over his knees.

"Now, why didn't I think of that right off the bat?" he said fretfully. "They must eat tons of beef. *There's* a possible market —fairly handy. Well, it's only a guess, but if you guess often enough you sometimes hit the right answer. I'll follow this lead till it peters out, anyway."

He snuggled back in his blankets. In the morning when he saddled up, a sweat-caked Lazy H horse stood in a stall. A beautiful hand-carved and silver-trimmed saddle hung from a peg. Johnny admired

the gear. When he led his horse outside he saw a man standing in the doorway of Maisie Taylor's house.

"That'll be brother Rick," he reflected.

ABOUT ten o'clock that forenoon Johnny rode into a little draw and came on four dead cows, each with udder distended and her throat freshly cut.

He rode slowly around the dead animals. His eye easily picked out the hoof sign Cullen had mentioned—two riders working together. He followed these tracks a little way. His gaze caught a red gleam in the long grass and he bent from his saddle to pick up a red bandana, the twenty-inch size cowpunchers frequently use as a neckerchief.

A curious faint fragrance lifted to his nostrils. He put the thing to his nose. A scented bandana! A rustler anointing himself with fragrant odors when he went forth to steal. Johnny laughed, put the bandana in a saddle-pocket and rode on. He paid little attention to tracks. That killing was recent enough, but that part of the range had hundreds of cattle and horses drifting from grass to water. No use trying to follow a trail. Johnny never wasted time over either the obvious or the impossible. He had his own program anyway.

His horse's head turned toward every point of the compass for the next few hours, although his general direction was toward Gyp Springs. He jogged easily here and there, as an Anchor man looking for stray horses would. He kept mostly to low ground, but every now and then he would halt on some little rise to sit sweeping that sea of grass with a pair of powerful field-glasses. Any traffic across that country was now of interest to Johnny Farrar.

This intermittent survey which covered everything that moved within five or six miles of him finally brought a rider into view. Johnny wriggled his eyebrows—Maisie Taylor riding a black horse. He got off, sat in the grass with his elbows propped on his knees, watched her come abreast, pass, and vanish toward home. The nine-power glass drew her face right up to him. She rode with a dejected droop to her shoulders, her head bent forward, as if she didn't care where she was going. The reins hung slack in her gloved hands as the black horse loped.

When she was out of sight Johnny turned again toward Gyp Springs. That was where Maisie had been. He felt it in his bones. The mountain had gone to Mahomet. But why?

"Damn these wheels within wheels!" Johnny swore impatiently. "I wish Harve had stayed outa this. It's dynamite for him. He ought to know that. Maybe he does know it an' doesn't care. Maybe as the Indians say his heart is bad. I wish I knew."

IV

THE shadow of the Black Peaks walked eastward across undulating prairie as Johnny rode into the Springs and picketed his horse on what scanty grazing remained by a small cabin and a set of low panels that made a circular pen for three thousand sheep at night. He made a fire in the cookstove and sat down to wait for the shepherd who stood a lone figure on the slope above while two collie dogs herded in the gray mass whose plaintive bleating was a monotonous dissonance and whose strong odor wafted down on the evening air made Johnny Farrar's sensitive nose draw up with disgust.

"What a life!" he muttered. "An' they wonder why sheepherders sometimes go batty."

Ba-a-a-a-a-a-ah! A chorus without end from sunrise to sunset, three thousand voices strong. Alone in a grassy void with

that and two dogs. And a vile smell! Johnny appreciated lamb chops and woollen socks as much as anyone. But not in the raw, on the hoof.

He didn't mention Maisie Taylor to Harve as they sat eating beans and bacon by the light of an oil lamp. He studied his cousin's face, as they talked. It *was* sad. There were lines that should not have been there. A year and nine months in a penitentiary had done something to him. But neither his tone, his manner nor his speech hinted that he had grown bitter or vindictive. Their ways had been apart the last few years. Harve had been a happy reckless youngster, only a little older than Johnny Farrar and they had been closer than most brothers. Johnny knew that Harve had grown steadier and more ambitious. He knew also that imprisonment must have been like crucifixion. But Harve Amby would not steal cattle for either profit or revenge. Johnny was no optimist where the passions or avarice of men in general were concerned, but of that he was certain.

He felt sure now that Harve had simply come back like a moth to the flame that had once singed his wings. Johnny felt sorrier for him now that he had himself come in close contact with Maisie Taylor. He couldn't get the damned woman out of his own mind now.

"Did you know Maisie Taylor had another brother besides Rick?" he shot at Harve suddenly.

"Well, yes," Amby looked surprised. "But I didn't suppose anybody else in this country knew."

"You know. I know. That makes two of us," Johnny said.

"How'd you happen to find out?" Harve asked. "I wouldn't know, only she told me herself, one time. He's ten years older than she is an' a no-good wolloper. The old man disowned him long ago. He never showed his face in this country."

"No?" Johnny said thoughtfully. "Well, his history, description, fingerprints an' official photograph come into my hands by chance, not so very long ago. When the old man located here he left Jud in school in Texas. Later he put him in a military academy in Missouri. When this jasper was about sixteen he ran away an' went to the wild bunch. He got into trouble in Kansas, did five years in Colorado for a hold-up. He has a damn bad record. Buffalo Holmes just wiped him off the family map, I guess."

"You know more about him than I do," Harve commented. "What about this addled egg?"

"Nothin'," Johnny said sharply, "except that you got no call to feel humble when this haughty beauty looks down on you. She's got a pretty slimy skeleton in her own family closet, an' all you did was kill a man—who probably had it comin'."

"Me humble?" Harve Amby flared up. "Huh! No, Johnny. You're wrong. I don't feel like a worm before her nor anybody just because I wore stripes for a while."

"Then quit broodin'," Johnny stormed. "Quit hangin' your jaw. Stick out your chest an' laugh once in a while."

"I don't brood over my wrongs," Harve said quietly. "I got no grudge against the law for what it did to me. Nor her. It just—it just—aw, I can't put it into words. You couldn't *sabe,* Johnny. I'm still a fool about her, an' I can't do anything about that. I thought I was cured."

"Until she finds out you're here an' rides around to see if you can still jump through her hoop," Johnny taunted.

I SUPPOSE you saw her ridin' away from here?" Harve murmured.

"Sure. Hell, Harve, don't let any woman make your heart get like a hunk of lead in your breast," Johnny pleaded. "Get away from here. Quit this lousy job. Go to some range where there's nothin' to remind you. You're a top hand. You don't have to herd sheep two hours' ride from somebody that—oh, well, no matter. I'll stake you to all the money you need for railroad fare an' ridin' gear."

"You're wrong about Maisie," Harve Amby said quite casualiy. "She—well, we'll leave Maisie out of it. But you sure prove that blood is thicker than water. Thanks a lot, Johnny, but I have to get on my own feet in my own way."

"You're a damn stubborn fool!" Johnny said irritably.

Amby smiled, the first time his dark face had lightened like that in their two meetings.

"You stand by your own till hell freezes over, don't you, Johnny?" said he. "That helps a lot."

"Oh hell!" Johnny snorted. "Listen, Harve, there is one more good reason why you shouldn't be on the Taylor-Cotton ranges. There is some pretty tool rustlin' goin' on. That's why I'm here. Somebody is goin' to be taken to the cleaners. You don't want to be hung by the heels a second time."

"That's crazy," for a moment Harve Amby looked startled. "I'm afoot, holdin' a band of sheep right here in one spot. What's any lonely shepherd got to fear because rustlers are at work? I've only been here ten days."

"You been free over two months," Johnny said. "Where were you an' what were you doin' durin' that time? Can you alibi yourself if somebody tries to hang somethin' on you?"

"Good Lord!" Harve said quickly. "You don't think——?"

"I don't. Other people might," Johnny interrupted.

He could not put into plainer words the vague conjectures that were forming in his mind. At best it was an imaginary picture. But for Johnny it was fast becoming the only possible reality. All the tricks rustlers ever invented, all the various ways in which cattlemen protected themselves and their property, and the manner in which men sometimes sought to pay off old, nursed grudges were familiar to Johnny Farrar. From the moment he saw King Cotton, Jack Holland, and Harve Amby together in the Buda Hotel he had a feeling that there was more afoot in the shadow of the Black Peaks than a little cattle stealing for a little easy money. Johnny's mind could envisage passion and malice among the intangibles as clearly as he saw the dead cows that were a mute reality. But he couldn't impart this to Harve Amby or anyone else without at least a few facts to bear him out. So far Johnny had none of any weight. Nothing but a sincere conviction that behind the invisible smoke a certain sort of fire burned, ready to break into a leaping flame.

BUT facts existed. Johnny was on their trail like a hound with his nose to a hot scent when he left the sheep camp at sunrise. He pointed straight north. He was well mounted and he rode fast. By mid-afternoon the Black Peaks were a purple smudge on the horizon and Johnny was looking down from the south bank of a gray valley where a sluggish river looped in long bends through sagebrush flats.

His gaze focussed upon a scene of great activity. As far up and down that valley as his field-glasses commanded, men, teams, scrapers, wagons, camps with smoke pennants streaming from stovepipes, were strung in a long line, like beads on a string. Johnny knew what he was looking at. He knew that for hundreds of miles east and west those dark clusters of moving specks crawled back and forth across the brown ribbon they were stretching across the land. A man named Jim Hill was building a transcontinental railway from Minnesota to Puget Sound.

Here was a potential market for beef, cheap beef, stolen beef. Johnny wondered why King Cotton and Maisie Taylor and Tom Cullen hadn't thought of that. Perhaps Johnny speculated upon the possibility because his activities before now had brought him into close contact with contractors feeding hundreds of men, contractors not particular about any source of supply so long as they got their goods at a low price. A thousand men toiled within range of his vision, beef-eating laborers.

Johnny rode on down to the gray sage flats.

Here and there along the course of the river great branchy cottonwoods made leafy shade. Between, hundred acre patches of berry brush, chokecherry thickets, groves of willow and quaking aspen, fringed the stream. The valley of the Milk wintered a hundred thousand head of cattle. In summer it lay like a desert. There were few ranches, no settlements. It was peopled now only by transient railway builders.

This intermittent scrub growth along the river drew Johnny's attention first. He rode from patch to patch the rest of the afternoon. At sundown he bought a little food from a sour-faced cook in a tent camp. He slept that night by his picketed horse with a sweaty saddle blanket for bedding. At sunrise he began ambling slowly from cover to cover, working down river. Every bend he turned revealed more men, more camps, swarming on the grade that was in the making for steel and drumming trains.

Fifteen miles below where he entered the valley Johnny stumbled on what he sought —a place that served as an abattoir. A crude corral stood in a patch of brush. A lot of beef had been killed there. Feet and horned skulls littered the ground. There was little attempt at concealment. Johnny hunted the vicinity on foot until he found where the hides were piled.

Stretched flat, laid one on top of the other, he turned up and examined nearly a hundred steer hides. Each one bore a Lazy H. The last half dozen were very fresh. The blood on them was scarcely dry.

"Well, here's where your beef goes, Maisie," Johnny muttered. "Pretty bold work. Now, I wonder——"

What Johnny wondered as he stood there frowning was why King Cotton foamed at the mouth, complained to the Stock Association, and in his cups hinted darkly at reprisals and clean-ups—when none of his cows were found on the range with their throats cut, and none of his brand was among the hairy coats Johnny had just examined. But that was not a problem, merely a speculation. Johnny's immediate concern was to find the purchaser of the dressed beef that was hauled away from this illegal butcher shop. Simple enough. He had only to follow wagon tracks plain in the grass.

THEY led him to what looked like a main camp, built of rough lumber instead of canvas. There was a sort of small office buliding to which a man directed Johnny when he asked for the main squeeze. He found in the first room he entered a large florid-faced man poring over accounts.

"Are you in charge of operations here?" Johnny asked.

"Yump," the man growled. "I'm McMinn, of Foster & McMinn. What can I do for you?"

"Put me next to the gent that handles your commissary," Johnny requested politely. "The fellow that buys your beef. I think he'd be interested in my business."

"What's your business?" McMinn demanded. "Spit it out. I got a contract to build twenty miles of grade before snow flies. Time's money, young feller."

"So's stolen beef," Johnny replied urbanely. "So you handle your own commissary purchases, Mr. McMinn?"

"I do," McMinn roared. "What's this about stolen beef? Who the hell do you think you are, comin' into my office makin' cracks like that?"

"Maybe this'll explain me," Johnny said. He turned back the bosom of his black sateen shirt to expose a silver badge. He drew a document from his pocket and spread it before McMinn. "And this."

The paper with an official seal was Johnny's appointment as a stock inspector in and for the State of Montana, with power to enforce all laws relating to the stock industry within the jurisdiction of the state, to search, and arrest with or without a warrant.

"Well?" McMinn's tone was slightly different.

"I got the goods on you," Johnny tried finesse, "so you may as well come clean. We've been keepin' an eye on these camps for a spell, surmisin' you'd be interested in cheap beef. I'm workin' on one specific case myself. I'm not satisfied in my own mind you know this beef is stolen, but you've handled a heap of it lately."

"Wha-at?" McMinn glowered, but he was plainly uncomfortable. "You're barkin' up the wrong tree, young feller."

"I never bark until I'm ready to bite," Johnny retorted. "You've handled nearly a hundred dressed beef from a certain source in the past few weeks. Haven't you? Yes or no?"

"Well, yes," McMinn admitted. A film of sweat began to gather like dew on his forehead. "We use lots of beef. But I bought it legitimate. I can prove that. Paid cash on delivery."

"Can you?" Johnny inquired. "Could you prove in court that you bought it legitimately? Can you produce the man you paid cash to for these cattle, and have them testify to a jury that you did so?"

"I didn't buy no cattle. I bought dressed beef," McMinn protested.

"Sure, sure," Johnny nodded. "An' maybe you didn't know that the rule of the range is let the buyer beware. But you'd have trouble convincin' a bunch of stockmen you were plumb innocent of the source of your supply. Now *I* can understand how a honest, hard-workin' contractor like yourself would want to buy cheap beef, but——"

Johnny paused significantly.

"What you gettin' at?" McMinn stirred uneasily. "What do you want?"

"I want the men who sold you this stolen beef."

"I bought it legitimate," McMinn repeated hoarsely. "I paid cash for it when it was delivered. I——"

"I don't care two whoops how you paid or what you paid," Johnny said brusquely. "I want to know who you got it from. That's all. Come across with that information—or come up to the county seat with me. Take your choice, but make it quick."

"Why I—ah—dealt with only one man," McMinn was visibly shaken by Johnny's threat.

"All right. Where does he hang out? What's his name?"

"Name's Smith," McMinn faltered. "I—I don't know where he hangs out."

"Oho!" Johnny scoffed. "You buy beef from a man named Smith. You don't know his range, where he lives, what his brand is. Eh? All right. Then what does he look like? You better be damned explicit about that, Mr. McMinn."

"A man about thirty-five or so," McMinn said reluctantly. "About five foot ten. Slim built. Sandy haired. Some freckles on his face. He said his ranch was north of the valley."

"When did you last have dealin's with him?" Johnny asked. "I know it was recent, because I've looked over the place he dresses this beef. What day?"

"Yesterday," McMinn spluttered.

JOHNNY wrinkled his forehead. Yesterday.

"Did you notice anything different about his face, if you saw him yesterday?" he asked. "Think hard now."

"Well, it was bunged up some, if that's what you mean," McMinn told him after a moment's thought.

"Yeah? Did it look like he had been hit with somethin' recently right across here?" Johnny drew a forefinger slowly from his left eye across the cheekbone to the base of his nose.

"Yes, he was marked right across there with a scab," McMinn said. "Like he'd been hit with a narrow thing of some kind."

"An' did you ever notice before that that

he had a thin white scar on his forehead?"

McMinn nodded.

"That's all for the present," Johnny said. "Where you get off at in this deal is your own funeral Mr. Contractor. I'm a stock inspector, not a trial judge. But—lemme give you one sound piece of advice. If this beef-peddlin' gent turns up here with a fresh supply don't mention that I was here askin' about him—not if you want to enjoy good health an' continue to build railroad grades."

"What do you mean?" McMinn asked apprehensively.

"Just this. I aim to have my clutches on this jasper pretty soon, but if in the meantime you let him know you've given his description to an officer he'd probably butcher you as neatly as he did them stolen steers. You may have to tell your story in court later, but if you want to be alive to tell it you had better keep your mouth shut in the meantime."

Johnny left the contractor sweating over this unpleasant information. He went jogging south. If Tom Cullen had had any luck in his quest, then once more Johnny Farrar's hunches had proved that a guess will sometimes hit the mark where logic fails. But he had no feeling of triumph. He was sorry for Maisie. After all, since Johnny knew that Jack Holland was also Jud Holmes, Maisie's scalawag older brother, there might be a catch in this that he had overlooked. And his mind was also full of uneasiness about Harve Amby, remembering King Cotton's drunken confidences, vague though they were. Old King Cotton who, like Maisie Taylor, had a skeleton in his closet—and a smoldering fire of hate in his case-hardened old heart.

"I got to make a stab at findin' out what sort of play that old buzzard contemplates," Johnny said morosely to himself. "I wish I was a mind-reader. I can sort of *sabe* why Harve came back here. But I can *not* understand old King Cotton takin' him in tow. He's out for blood for some reason, that old hell-rake. What is the old devil shootin' at? I *got* to find out. It ties up with this some way I can't make out. But I do know that when an old sinner like that gets to broodin' over his wrongs he's apt to uncork some pretty weird stuff."

JOHNNY couldn't make the Cotton Ranch that night. He slept by a brush fire in a creek bottom, rode without breakfast in the morning. Rode into Buda, where he killed two birds with one stone —appeased a terrific hunger and made sure King Cotton was not in town. When he set out he carried two quart bottles of bourbon whisky in his saddle pockets, and in his mind a fairly definite idea of what he was going to do with them.

A little west of Buda a rider bobbed out of a draw ahead of him and waited till Johnny came up.

"Hello there, you," he said curtly. "I'm Rick Holmes—Mrs. Taylor's brother."

Johnny hardly needed to be told that. Jud Holmes—alias Holland the wolfer—was a mean-looking specimen. But this boy Rick carried his kinship with Maisie in features and coloring. His hair was a darker auburn and the whole cut of his face was a masculine edition of his sister's. He was a good deal younger than Maisie. Wild as a hawk from earliest youth. All he had inherited of his father's estate was fifty dollars a month for life, payable at Maisie's discretion. Johnny knew about that phase of it. It had set him thinking. To be disinherited in favor of a sister, a mere woman, must have been galling.

"Happy to meet you on this bright sunshiny spring day," Johnny said.

"I'm not," Rick said. "What you huntin' for on this range?"

"Anchor horses," said Johnny.

"Anchor hell!" Rick Holmes drawled unpleasantly. "You cover a lot of territory, but you ain't interested in horses, fellow. What *is* your business here?"

"Been keepin' tab on me?" Johnny asked pleasantly. "Don't want to seem offensive, but what business of yours is it what my business is?"

"Anything on this range is my business," Rick said slowly. "You act kinda funny to me. There's quite a lot of funny stuff goin' on around these parts. You better be able to give an account of yourself."

"I can," Johnny replied. "But not to you."

"Fair enough," Rick told him gruffly. "But watch your step, old hand. There's such a thing as over-playin' your cards. There are some people around here that would be better off elsewhere."

He rode on without a backward look. Johnny Farrar coiled one leg around the horn of his saddle and rolled a smoke, staring after Maisie's younger brother.

"Now what do you think of that?" he muttered presently. "Was that young squirt utterin' a threat or a warnin'? Or just talkin' through his hat? What do you suppose is eatin' on *him?*"

The empty plains could not answer. Johnny rode on.

V

BY NOON he was looking down on the Cotton ranch—the Cotton cow ranch. Twenty-five miles north King Cotton had a sheep headquarters. He had bands of sheep posted here and there at choice watering spots. But he did not mix the two enterprises. He was an anomaly as the dual owner of both sheep and cattle, which is much like a minister of the Gospel being a bootlegger in his spare moments. King Cotton had ten or twelve thousand head of cattle on the range. He had also thirty thousand sheep in eight separate bands posted at strategic points. This, he claimed, was the best way for any cowman to protect himself against the simon-pure flockmasters—who, if they got a foothold in a cattle country, always tried to hog everything in sight. But his fellow members of the Stock Association looked down their sunburned noses at this explanation. They knew there was money in sheep, if a man was not particular how he made money. King Cotton meant to make money, and he did. They all wanted to make money. The cow business was an industry, not a pastime. But men of the longhorn tradition drew the line at sheep. So they rather disapproved of King Cotton standing with a foot in the enemy camp. And Buffalo Holmes first and George Taylor after him had once or twice manifested this disapproval in violent fashion. There would have been no sheep band camped on Gyp Springs, Johnny knew, if either of them was alive and running the Lazy H instead of Maisie Taylor. King Cotton had moved against the Lazy H horses, foot and artillery a decade back. Maybe he still hankered to expand at the expense of a neighbor whose territory—in which no sheep could graze—rubbed shoulders with him for forty miles.

All these items passed speculatively through Johnny's mind as he rode into King Cotton's ranch yard.

Like the Taylor outfit King Cotton's riders were abroad on roundup. Two ranch hands and a cook functioned there. And King Cotton, who no longer led his own roundup because his years sat heavy on him. He came over to the stable as Johnny put up his horses.

"Hello, kid," said he. "How's the horse roundup?"

"Not so good," Johnny replied. "I didn't suppose you'd remember me."

"I never forget nothin' nor nobody," King Cotton growled. "Come on an' eat. Just in time."

"I come from Buda," Johnny said. "I got some refreshment in my saddle-pockets. How about a snort?"

"Sure," the old man grinned. "I'm a trifle parched. Fact I was sorta dallyin' with the idea of drivin' into town to lay in a stock."

"I got some," Johnny said. "I don't generally mix work an' whisky, but I'm pretty damn sure there's no Anchor horses over here, so it don't matter. I'm about to roll my tail home. One little drink won't do me any harm."

NOR did it. But it did something to King Cotton. He liked his liquor. To him one drink was a gesture, two a preliminary. After the fourth drink he was primed to do a little serious imbibing. The two quarts Johnny carried were sufficient for even King Cotton to extend himself.

By mid afternoon he was droning the story of his life into Johnny's receptive ear, hinting at strange and heroic episodes. He passed rapidly through the mellow, hilarious and boisterous stages and finally verged upon the lachrymose. Johnny listened raptly, took drink for drink when he couldn't avoid it. His own head began to spin at times, but his wits worked and his hearing was nowise affected.

At sundown King Cotton was too drunk to walk. But not too drunk to talk, to go on talking interminably, until at last he seemed to become unaware of Johnny Farrar's presence, to be mumbling his innermost thoughts aloud, discharging accumulated venom like an angry adder.

"God, how I hate that outfit," he drooled through his walrus mustache. "An' now I got 'em just about where I want 'em. All I got to do is tip off the Stock Association an' sic Harve Amby on Jud. Either way I got 'em in my sack. I got 'em where the hair's short. That'll burn her up, the red-headed wench! What the hell do I care if Amby gets hurt? What's one sucker in a game? Nobody cared how I got hurt. Old Wolf Cotton sittin' lickin' his chops by his den, all alone. Oh God, oh God, I'll make 'em pay for that!"

He sat staring vacantly, tears trickling down his leathery old cheeks. Johnny shuddered a little. Yet he was not without a touch of sympathy. He had the key now to all those disjointed, muttered threats, incoherent allusions. He understood quite clearly what motives inspired King Cotton to give Harve Amby a job. His head hot and spinning with the liquor he had been compelled to drink to accomplish his object Johnny wondered fancifully if he could have cooked up so devious and sinister a method of revenge for such a grievance as burned in King Cotton's heart. There was a primitive streak in Johnny Farrar, as well as a cool, calculating one. The code of an eye for an eye had never offended Johnny. He conceded that King Cotton had grounds for hate and a craving for revenge. He was even a little sorry for the old reprobate.

But he meant to spike his guns. Because if he didn't Harve Amby was going to kill again or be killed. And that came closer to Johnny than his duty to the Association, to the state. It was far more important than his specific mission. Strange, he thought, that the two should be so interwoven.

King Cotton slumped in his chair. He breathed heavily at first. Then he began to snore. Johnny tried to wake him. Failing that he hauled him bodily into a bedroom and dumped him fully clothed on his bed. Then he went back to the living-room and stretched himself on a couch. Dark was closing in. Presently he slept.

HE WAS wakened by King Cotton touching him on the shoulder. A bar of sunlight blazed through the east window. The old cowman looked little the worse, except for reddened eyes. Johnny sat up. King Cotton had a bottle in his hand. There was an inch of whisky left in the bottom. The old man grinned.

"Sure glad we had this left for a pick-up," he said. "Have a shot, kid."

Johnny made a face and shook his head. King Cotton tilted the bottle and let it trickle down his copper-lined throat.

"Hah," he said. "That hit the spot. "How about ham an' eggs, kid?"

"Sounds better to me than a drink," Johnny said. "Did I howl like a wolf last night."

"I dunno," Cotton shook his head. "I don't recollect much after supper. I sure had a skinful. I can't carry my liquor like I used to. Oh well."

Breakfast was a silent meal. King Cotton was himself again. In his normal state he was a hard-eyed, watchful old man with little to say. Johnny said goodby at the door of the house, saddled his horse and rode for the Lazy H. Tom Cullen ought to be back—and Johnny had business at the Taylor ranch anyway.

But he stopped at Gyp Springs. He would have gone there first if it had been forty miles distant, instead of right in his track.

Harve Amby sat on a hillock overlooking the grazing sheep. The air was full of their plaintive bleating, the sheepherder's unceasing lullaby.

"Harve," Johnny asked without preliminary sparring, "did you shoot Frank Carver, or didn't you?"

Harve looked at him a long time before he answered.

"I did not. I didn't even intend to shoot him—unless he went on the prod at what I meant to say to him."

"Do you know who did?"

"Johnny," Harve said soberly, "I don't like that subject. If it was anybody but you askin' me——"

"I know," Johnny nodded. "But you know me. I don't pry into any man's soul for fun. Do you know who did shoot Carver?"

"If I did," Harve Amby said quickly, "I wouldn't be here now."

"Suppose somebody told you," Johnny continued, "just who potted Frank Carver, an' where you could find him, what would you do?"

HARVE AMBY didn't need to answer *that* with words. The blaze in his dark eyes, the tightening of his lips, the sudden tensity of his posture, told Johnny Farrar. But Amby did answer.

"Why I'd kiss him on both cheeks an' love him like a brother," he said in a flat metallic tone. "He made a man of me."

And after a moment he continued in voice charged with passion:

"You have sent crooked men to the pen, Johnny, but you have never done time yourself. You've never walked around the bull-ring with a zebra suit on, lookin' up at the sky inside of high stone walls with armed guards in towers at the corners. You never were locked up in a stone cave six feet wide an' eight feet long with an iron grating for a door. Locked up every night in the kennel like a dog for one year an' nine months. An' then you ask me what I'd do if I knew who was the man that lay low an' let me take his medicine. You ask me!"

"I know," Johnny said gently. "I can put myself in another man's shoes once in a while. I am not pryin' out of idle curiosity, Harve. Somebody knows who shot Frank Carver. Some of these days you are goin' to be told—told with the express idea that you will go after him and get him."

"I will," Harve said soberly. "So would you. Why shouldn't I?"

"Admitted," said Johnny. "But—will you listen to sense, Harve?"

"I'll listen to anything you say, Johnny," he answered.

"Then promise me that if you do find out who downed Carver an' let you get sent up for the killin' you'll do nothin' about it until you tell me first you're goin' after him."

"Are you, by any chance, tryin' to protect somebody?" Harve asked earnestly.

"Yes," Johnny said. "You. I can't tell you what all the shootin's about right now. I still got to connect up one or two things. I was not spillin' hot air when I told you the other day that this was a dangerous place for you. And I'm not dealin' in hot air now. I don't aim to tie your hands no way. But I can tell you this—if this information is planted in your ear it'll be fatal—for you. I have no idea of puttin' any spokes in your wheel when I want

you to promise me to talk it over with me before you do anything."

"I'll promise nothin'," Harve Amby broke out savagely. "Not even to you, Johnny. I have a debt an' by God I'll pay it with interest the minute I know who I owe it to!"

Johnny sat silent on his horse. There was no use saying more. He knew his own blood.

"Well, I got to sift along," he said presently. "Don't do nothin' sudden, Harve. Remember what I said."

Johnny wondered as he jogged along if he had been wise to stir Harve Amby up like that. But he had to act on his own judgment and unless he was a mile wide of the mark he had to act quickly or merely stand by and pick up the pieces after the explosion came. And Johnny was determined that if pieces had to be gathered up they would not be pieces of Harve Amby.

VI

HE FOUND Tom Cullen stretched on a bunk.

"You hit it right first crack, Johnny," Cullen rose on elbow. They had the bunkhouse to themselves. "I found a fenced meadow full of unbranded calves south of the main divide. I'd just about give up when I blundered on the place."

"Unbranded?" Johnny commented. "Foxy. But that don't make any difference. No sign of anybody around there?"

"I watched till my grub gave out," Cullen told him. "Somebody ran a batch in there last night in the dark. I heard 'em, but I was in the wrong place to see anythin'. That's only a matter of time, though. All we got to do is lay for 'em. You get wise to anythin'?"

"Plenty. But not what I was expectin'," Johnny said. He sat on the edge of the bunk, thinking. Tom Cullen asked no more questions. He had worked with Johnny Farrar more than once. A good dependable routine man himself, Cullen admired Johnny's capacity for taking short cuts to the bottom of things that puzzled other men.

"We'll talk this over later," Johnny said to him.

He sauntered over to the rambling log house within the wall where buds were unfolding. Like a flower in full bloom Maisie Taylor bent over a rose bush, snipping dead twigs. The sun dropping behind the Black Peaks sent a wide shadow racing swiftly across the ranch. A last golden ray gilded the house and garden.

"Mrs. Talyor," Johnny said in his bland, boyish voice, wearing his disarming smile —which somehow was little effort when he looked at her—"I done lost my neckerchief an' the sun gets powerful hot on a fellow's neck, ridin' all day. You got a old bandana you could spare?"

Maisie got up from her knees. She looked at Johnny with a queer sort of smile.

"You," she said whimsically, "are a good deal of a nuisance."

"Yes, 'm," Johnny nodded. "Lots of folks have thought that. But I don't care, just so I get a bandana to put around my neck."

"I'll see," she said, and moved toward the house. Johnny followed her to the porch steps. She came out presently with a bright Paisley pattern bandana.

Johnny looked at it and lifted it to his nose. An odor that was no emanation from the flowers in Maisie's garden filled his nostrils. He had the mate to that bandana in his hip pocket, tinged with the same perfume—the one he had picked up by the dead cows.

"Women," said Johnny, sniffing, "sure like scented things around 'em."

"I hardly ever use perfume," Maisie told him quite casually, "and certainly not that rank-smelling stuff. That happens to be my brother's."

"Your brother's?" Johnny put one spurred foot on the lower step and looked at her for a second. "Which one—Rick or Jud?"

Once Johnny had helped take a dead

rider home to his girl-wife. The way Maisie Taylor blanched, the stricken look, the momentary horror—or was it fear?—in her eyes reminded him of that other woman.

"You——" she gasped. "Who told you I had another brother?"

"It's my business to know these things," he answered. "I happen to know that Jack Holland, this wolfer, is your older brother. Is this his handkerchief—or Rick's?"

"Rick's," she whispered. "Why?"

"Let's sit down," Johnny suggested. "I got to talk to you."

Maisie seated herself on the top step. Johnny rested on the step below. He drew the second bandana out of his pocket.

"They're mates," he pointed out. "They smell of the same strong perfume. This one you just gave me. This one I picked up in the grass by four dead cows that'd had their throats cut an' their calves hazed off. An' you say it belongs to your brother Rick. Does that spell anything much to you?"

"No," Maisie said without hesitation. "If you imply that Rick is stealing from me, that's ridiculous. If you deserve half the reputation you've got, Johnny Farrar, you should be able to do a little better stock detecting than that. God knows this range needs it. If I were a man I could."

"If you were a man there wouldn't be any snarled wool around here," Johnny said impatiently. "I know my business. I have discovered where your beef goes to an' where your missin' calves are. I can put my hand on the men that do the dirty work. But there is more to this than a simple case of stealing cattle. Who's had the Indian sign on you for the last two years so you jump at your own shadow?"

"Nobody," she declared.

"Then you're a poor fish," Johnny said coldly. "Because you know who shot Frank Carver an' you kept mum an' let Harve Amby go to the penitentiary. Who were you protectin'?"

"That's a lie!" Maisie stormed. The uneasiness went out of her eyes. They blazed with anger. "Harve did shoot Frank Carver. Would I—would any woman stand by and let an innocent man go to prison if she could help it?"

"You would. You did," Johnny went on grimly. "Why this cattle stealin' is nothin' at all to the mess of hate an' double-crossin' that's comin' to a climax around here. Maybe it would interest you to know that besides bein' a stock inspector I'm Harve Amby's cousin. Maybe you think it's nothin' to me that he's bein' framed to kill somebody or get killed himself, or get another ride in the pen. Chiefly on your account."

MAISIE TAYLOR looked and looked at Johnny with eyes that burned. When she did speak the words were choked out.

"I'd like to kill you," she said. "Nobody ever dared talk to me like that."

"Because you're a woman with a come-hither look in your eyes that makes men putty in your hands, anxious to say only what you want to hear," Johnny shot back at her. "By all accounts it gets 'em nothin' except to go down the road talkin' to themselves. If I say things that jar you, it's because I am not concerned with strokin' people's fur the right way when I'm workin' at my job. I was sent here on official business—to protect your interests, which are threatened by some person or persons unknown. I find there's complications in this rustlin' business that don't appear on the surface. I'm not dead sure, but it seems to me what you've done is to throw a little dust on the trail. But I can see as far through a dust-cloud as anybody. At the present date I can produce evidence of theft that any jury will convict on. Now—I ask you point-blank—do you want me to gather these rustlers in an' send 'em over the road?"

"What else?" she snapped. "You're an officer. If you've got the evidence why don't you act instead of hanging around here saying silly and insulting things to me?"

Johnny's eyes narrowed as he stared at her. No, Maisie Taylor didn't even suspect. He felt a wave of pity for her, a profound distaste for his task. But he had no choice. The simple matter of rustling had become a side issue. In the background lurked King Cotton, nursing his hate, laying deadfalls. King Cotton had stacked the deck. At any moment he might elect to play his trumps. Maisie had to take it.

"Listen, lady," he said soberly. "I'm compelled to tell you somethin' that will take the curl out of your hair. If I arrest the rustlers the men brought in will be your two precious brothers. No use you hootin' at the idea. I have the evidence. The jasper who masquerades as Jack Holland is your brother Jud Holmes. His case is a cinch. He has killed and sold for beef nearly a hundred Lazy H steers. Rick is hooked up with him in connection with these dead cows an' missin' calves. No, don't start wavin' your hands. I'm speakin' officially, just as I'd report to the Association. I'm not a cold-blooded man-huntin' machine, Mrs. Taylor. I don't like to spring this on you—but there are the facts. Do you still want me to go ahead an' snare these rustlers red-handed? I can do it."

"Are you sure—*sure?*" she whispered. "I can't believe it."

"My job," Johnny said, "an' sometimes my life, depends on makin' sure of such things."

MAISIE looked past Johnny into the gathering twilight for a long time.

"I can not believe it," she said at last in a tone of deep conviction. "Not about Rick. The other one—he *is* bad. He turned up in this country about a year after George was killed. He's made me have nightmares sometimes, for fear he'd do something that would spoil everything for Rick and me. I've made him keep his mouth shut about who he really is by giving him money."

"Blackmails you an' then tries to steal you blind," Johnny commented. "Nice critter to have in the family."

Silently he thought, "An' that ain't half of it, if you only knew."

"Rick has been a wild kid," Maisie continued in that vibrant melancholy voice that stirred Johnny as it had thrilled many another man. "He got to drinking and gambling when he was only fifteen. He nearly drove dad wild. George couldn't do anything with him. Money goes through his hands like water. That was why dad left everything in my hands when he died. He knew I'd give Rick a square deal. You may think that Rick would be sore, and think he was entitled to the share that wasn't willed to him. But he isn't. He never has been. Lately he has cut out a lot of the foolishness—and that was all it ever was with him. I can *not* believe Rick would steal. Why he doesn't need to. Men only steal to get what they want. Rick can have anything he wants, and he knows it. I would split the Lazy H with him any time he asked me to. And he knows that. You don't know him. I do. Oh, I don't know what to do about this."

"Women have always fooled themselves about their menfolk," Johnny said gravely. "It's natural. Of course what you say does make it seem like he would not be fool enough to be mixed up in this. Yet certain evidence points out that he is."

"Anyway," Johnny said after a pause. "I've given you the facts. If you don't do somethin' about it King Cotton will. He'll force your hand."

"Can he? Does he know?" she asked uneasily.

"Lord, yes. He's got it all down pat," Johnny snarled. "The old hellion has sat in the background an' spun a web like a spider. He's in the clear, an' just waitin' his time to crow. He's got a club an' he's goin' to swing it on your head."

"But why?" Maisie cried. "Apart from the fact that we've had rows with him in the past about his sheep. I've never done anything to him. And how could he——?"

"I wouldn't dare tell you, right now," Johnny interrupted. "You'd go right up in the air. I wouldn't tell you any of this, only you got to know. Things are comin' to a head. An' I want you to tell me somethin' without flarin' up when I ask you. Will you?"

"If I can I will." She looked at Johnny sadly, yet with a curious dignity that stirred his admiration.

"Why did Harve want to tangle with Frank Carver?" he asked. "Was it over you?"

A tinge of color flashed up in her cheeks.

"Perhaps I had better explain," she said slowly. "Carver used to come here quite a bit. He—he was sort of foolish about me. He rode in here one afternoon when all the boys were away. He sort of—well, he must have gone off his head a little. He grabbed me and kissed me and talked like a wild man. It frightened me and I screamed. Ching came running in from the kitchen with a butcher knife in his hand and Frank let me go.

"He sort of apologized and rode away. I decided to say nothing about it. I knew if Harve or Rick got hold of it there would be trouble. But Ching told Harve as soon as he came home, and Harve went straight to Buda looking for Carver. Rick came in later and Ching told him, and he also went foaming off to town. I didn't even know. But the Chinaman told the two men he thought ought to know. He said somebody should kill crazy man who abused a woman. I couldn't blame him for being loyal. Harve got to Buda and shot Carver before Rick was halfway to town."

I SEE," Johnny nodded. "I wasn't at the trial. But I looked over all the evidence later. None of this was mentioned. If you'd testified the jury might have concluded Harve had sufficient provocation."

"They wouldn't let me," Maisie sighed. "Rick and Harve. Harve's lawyer said it was no use, and would only make me a target for a lot of nasty talk."

"Well, according to the testimony," Johnny continued, "Harve was on his feet with a gun in his hand an' a bullet hole through one coat sleeve. Carver was layin' dead in a vacant space between two buildin's. Harve had fired only one shot, but he swore there was several fired. No witness could swear to that. On his own behalf he swore that while he was lookin' for Carver because he had somethin' to say to him, he didn't see Carver at all. But somebody took a shot at him an' he fired into the dark where the shot come from, an' two or three shots followed. He said that he did not see Frank Carver or anybody else an' consequently had not shot him, unless he hit him with the bullet he fired into what he thought was an ambush, which he had a right to do in self-defense. But they gave him two years for manslaughter.

"I am goin' to get mighty personal," Johnny said in a diffident tone, after he had inspected the toes of his riding-boots for fully a minute. "Harve Amby an' I grew up like brothers. His troubles are my troubles. Did you care anything much about Harve then? Do you now?"

Maisie didn't answer. Johnny, staring at her, saw her fingers pressed into her cheeks, tears running silently down each side of her nose. She cried without a sound, without a quiver, with only a slow heave of her breast. It made Johnny Farrar feel queer.

"Maybe you think this has nothin' to

do with me or my business," Johnny said after he had waited a while. "But it has. It's damn important. I wish you'd tell me honest."

"Men have made fools of themselves over me for years," Maisie wiped her eyes at last and spoke. "They look me over as they would a prize beef, or they size up my ranch and stock, and then they start fawning and groveling and slobbering around. I despised men until Harve Amby came along. I did love him. I do still. I always will. I couldn't save him from prison. Nobody could. I would have met him at the gates and married him as soon as he was free. But he wouldn't even answer my letters. He won't even talk to me now. I rode over to see him twice in the last week. He won't even listen to me."

"Put yourself in his place, if you can," Johnny muttered. "Branded as an ex-convict. Turned out of the pen without a sou to his name. You're rich, young, beautiful—just about the prize package of Montana as women go. Harve's proud as hell. And savage as a wolf inside. Because he did *not* shoot Frank Carver."

"I wouldn't care if he shot a dozen like Carver," Maisie wailed. "I want him. And I need him now if ever a woman needed a man. And I can't do anything."

"I can," Johnny Farrar stood up. "An' I'm goin' to. I've got to. So you think you can depend on your conviction that Rick has nothing to do with this rustlin'?"

"I'd stake everything on that." Maisie lifted her head.

"Where is he?" Johnny asked.

"I don't know, but he ought to be in any time now," Maisie replied. "He's home nearly every night."

"Does Rick know this Holland is Jud Holmes, his brother?" Johnny inquired.

"No. Rick doesn't know he ever had a brother," Maisie declared. "I didn't know myself until my father died. He left a letter to me about that. For my own protection, he said. Jud has kept his mouth shut. He knows he'll never get another dollar from me if he advertises himself as the black sheep. Nobody in this country knows Jack Holland is Jud Holmes."

"King Cotton knows about Jud Holmes," Johnny said grimly. "He's savin' that knowledge for his own uses. But I think maybe I can persuade him to keep it to himself."

"Can you put a stop to this stealing without—without——"

"Draggin' the honorable Holmes escutcheon in the alkali dust," Johnny supplied sardonically. "Stop this rustlin' without involvin' Rick—if he is mixed up in it? Restore Harve Amby to your lovin' arms? Well, I dunno. It's a pretty big order—but I'll see what I can do."

Johnny knew precisely what he would do, as he walked through the gate in the stone wall. Rick troubled him still. The two perfumed bandanas, things King Cotton had mumbled in his alcoholic unburdenings. But that was more or less Maisie Taylor's and Rick's own affair. Of all the rest Johnny was sure, too sure for comfort.

Desperate diseases, he said to himself moodily, required desperate remedies. And he would have to apply them with his own hand.

VII

WHILE Johnny and Tom Cullen were saddling up after breakfast Rick Holmes came sauntering over to the stables. Johnny tied up his latigo, and beckoned the boy aside.

"You jumped me the other day about my business," he began candidly. "Thinkin' it over I decided you better know I'm a stock inspector, same as Cullen here."

"Did I sound hostile?" Rick smiled. "If you'd been runnin' yourself ragged for weeks tryin' to get track of thieves that work right under your nose you'd regard any stranger with suspicion."

"I suppose," Johnny agreed. "Say, do you always put scent on yourself?"

Rick flushed a little.

"I happen to like nice smells," he said. "What about it?"

Johnny drew the two bandanas from his pocket.

"I got one by a cow that'd had her throat fresh cut. The other one I got from your sister," said he.

"Yeah, I lost one somewhere," Rick said calmly. "You ain't the only rider around lookin' at dead cows, old hand."

"You know this Jack Holland, the wolfer?" Johnny asked. "You don't have to answer. Anythin' you say may be used against you."

"Sounds official as hell," Rick laughed. "That mouthy shyster? Sure I know him. But I don't think you can hang anythin' on him. I trailed him enough myself to be pretty sure of that. Have you got any lead yet?"

"All I want," Johnny said gravely. "I am goin' forth now to make an arrest. We know where the missin' calves are, an' where the Lazy H beef went to."

Johnny watched Rick like a hawk. The boy's eyes lit up eagerly.

"Say, can I go along?" he asked. "I'd like to make a hand on one rustler roundup."

"Not this one," Johnny shook his head. "An' don't say anythin' to Mrs. Taylor. Women sometimes talk."

"Maisie isn't the talkin' kind," Rick said carelessly. "But I'll keep it dark. Why shouldn't I go along?"

"Not this time," Johnny said firmly. "There won't be any excitement, anyway."

"Maybe Holland strung King Cotton about Rick," Johnny reflected as he rode away. "Anyway, I'm sure King Cotton's wrong about the kid, an' Maisie's right. He's on the square—or he's a finished actor, which no kid like him could be. Anyhow I got to go through with this without no more preamble. That old hellion might turn his wolf loose anytime. If he primes Harve Amby before I get my work in it's goin' to be kinda Godawful all around."

Though time had now become the essence of Johnny Farrar's contract he didn't hurry. They jogged at a slow gait toward Buda. In sight of the town they separated. Tom Cullen went in, bought food and stowed it behind his cantle. Johnny dodged warily into the hills. In a gulch he picketed his horse and waited for Cullen. In the dusk they joined forces and rode on, up into the mountain range that thrust high peaks toward a myriad of bright stars. The lights of Buda and the twinkling dots about two quartz mines above the town faded. They climbed through canyons, along precipitous slopes, shrouded in the darkness, coming at last out on a divide with the crest of the Black Peaks behind them. A fat moon made black and silver tracery on the ground as they rode through a forest of pines.

"She lays in that little basin," Cullen pointed at last. "There's an open place along here somewhere where we could stake the horses."

Cullen found that finally, a grassy glade surrounded by pines, with a trickle of spring water on its edge. They picketed their horses for the rest of the night and cached saddles and grub in a thicket.

A few hundred feet below when Johnny looked from the edge of that thicket down a steep slope he could see dark objects scattered over open ground. These, Cullen told him, were the stolen calves bedded in this hidden meadow. Cullen explained the layout thus:

"There's a hundred acres or so in this meadow. The east an' west walls is too steep for stock to climb. At the south end there's a draw leads out. Narrow. They have a pole fence across that. By the tracks that's the way they mostly come in. North, there is a brush fence across

the only way they can get out. You don't see either fence until you're right on top of it."

"The chances are they will come the way they usually do," Johnny said. "Maybe tonight—maybe not for a week. You post yourself at the north fence, Tom. I'll watch the south end. It won't be necessary to play owl an' sit wide-eyed. We might be able to get some sleep. Nobody could punch several head of stock in here without makin' some noise, enough to wake a man who was handy. At daybreak we come together here, an' watch from up here. They may not necessarily trail in here after dark."

"I get you," Cullen agreed. He tucked a carbine under his arm and slipped away. Johnny drew his Winchester from the boot under his stirrup-leather and went downhill to the south end of this thieves' repository. The moon shone brightly enough to show him how narrow was the southern gateway to the meadow, and he groped about in the scrub till he found the fence. In a mixture of long grass and buckbrush he squatted for his vigil. In that narrow pass only a cat or a wolf could go by him without sound or sight. Johnny was tired. But he couldn't sleep. He couldn't even doze. He brooded. He didn't like this much.

DAWN made a pale glimmer that became a blaze of light. Rose and crimson and gold tinted the clouds that hung about the highest of the Black Peaks. Johnny went back through the timber to their camp. They went without a fire and ate a cold breakfast. Smoke up there would be like a banner in the sky. In daylight the meadow below them was speckled with grazing calves.

"They destroyed a good many thousand dollars' worth of stock to get what they got here," Johnny said. "As well as all the beef they got away with. It's been quite some operation."

"Which is now about to be closed out under due process of law," Tom Cullen grinned.

"You sleep any last night, Tom?" Johnny asked after a bit.

"Cat-napped."

"I didn't," Johnny complained. "You plant yourself in the edge of that thicket where you can see both ends of the meadow, an' watch. I'll bed down for a spell. Then I'll stand guard."

Watch and watch they passed a long day. A night and another day. In the dusk of the third day Johnny Farrar took up his post by some loose bars he had found in the fence. That was where the walking plunder passed into the meadow. Even with a clear sky it was very black in that deep notch.

Well into the night a lucent glow spread across the sky. The moon slid up over the pines. Silver bathed the hill tops. That uncanny brightness grew until it flooded the bottom and the meadow.

Johnny heard sounds that presently became the distinct thud of hoofs, the jingle of bit-chains, low voices. A horse cleared his nostrils. A compact bunch of half a dozen calves eased up through the draw, two men at their heels. They moved sluggishly as if they were leg-weary. One rider trotted around in front, let down three bars, fell in behind again and helped his fellow urge the tired brutes through the opening. They stood dismounted, so close to where Johnny crouched that he could see the flash of eyeballs in the moonglow, the color of their overalls and hats. They stood leaning elbows on the fence.

One, a short, thick-bodied man, Johnny didn't know. But the other was Jud Holmes, alias Jack Holland.

"You know, Jack," the stocky one said, "I don't like holdin' this stuff here too long. Somebody might stumble on 'em. Why don't he take 'em over, an' pay us?"

Who "he" was Johnny didn't know. And he didn't care enough to listen on the chance of finding out. He rose out of his hiding-place, a strange taut feeling

all over his body, and took a step toward them.

"Good evenin', gentlemen," he said softly.

They whirled, hands on the gun butts sticking out of the leather scabbards on their belts.

Johnny didn't make any hostile move. As an officer he might have had his Winchester bearing on the thieves when he spoke. But he had left his rifle lying where he sat. Purposely. At short range—and he stood within twelve feet of them—Johnny Farrar was quick as the dart of a swallow with a six-shooter.

"I wouldn't pull them guns if I were you," he warned. "I'm a stock inspector. You're under arrest."

Johnny's arms dangled at his sides. He didn't move. It was for them to move. For a moment he thought they meant to submit. Certainly some form of paralysis had overtaken the short man. Johnny saw his jaw hang slack in a gape of fear and surprise. But Jud Holmes bounded sidewise, drew his gun and leveled it at Johnny all in one motion.

His finger never managed to press the trigger. Johnny's gun belched and Holmes, alias Holland folded up and pitched forward on his face.

"Stick 'em up," Johnny barked at his companion and the stocky man reached for the stars. Johnny moved up behind him, plucked the gun out of his scabbard, felt him for other weapons, and stepped away. He lifted his voice in a long hail to Cullen. Cullen answered from the middle of the pasture, already on his way.

"Who else was in on this play besides you an' Holland?" Johnny jabbed the barrel of his gun roughly into the man's ribs to give his sudden question emphasis.

"Nobody. Just the two of us," the man sputtered. "Say, listen——"

"Tell it to a jury," Johnny snapped. He was satisfied Holland's confederate had blurted out the truth and that was all he wanted to know.

VIII

AT NINE o'clock in the morning Johnny Farrar and Tom Cullen rode into Buda leading a prisoner tied on one horse and a dead body lashed across the other. They halted before the general store.

"You got a empty storeroom?" Johnny asked the storekeeper. "We're officers. Got a dead man to be laid out till the county authorities take him over."

There was a room available for a temporary morgue.

"Get a livery rig an' head for the county seat with this rustler," Johnny instructed Cullen. "Turn him over to the sheriff an' swear to the usual complaint. Tell 'em to come out an' get Holland. You can make it before sundown if you start now."

Johnny had seen King Cotton's red-wheeled buggy standing beside the livery stable. He was glad of that. He looked in the nearest saloon. Then he crossed the dusty way to the hotel. King Cotton leaned on the bar, nursing a glass of whisky.

"Hello, kid," said he. "Have a drink."

"I'm not drinkin' this mornin'," Johnny replied. "Come along with me. I got somethin' to show you. An' I got somethin' important to tell you when you see it."

King Cotton emptied his glass and followed Johnny. When Johnny turned down the canvas from Jud Holmes' fixed face a strange triumphant gleam showed in the old man's eyes.

"He was rustlin' Lazy H stock," Johnny said slowly. "I happen to be a stock inspector, Cotton. He resisted arrest an' I killed him. So"—Johnny paused for a moment—"I did the job for you, King Cotton, instead of you ribbin' Harve Amby up to it."

King Cotton glared like a wolf for a second. Then he laughed harshly.

"Thank you," he said mockingly. "There's more of the same breed you got my permission to work on. That's one

Holmes that won't get away with nothin' no more."

"This man's name is Jack Holland," Johnny said quietly. "He lived as such. He will be buried as such. Nobody will ever know any different—only you an' me."

"I'll publish who he is an' what he is, an' what he done," King Cotton snarled. "So the whole world'll know."

"No, you won't," Johnny said. "Because if you open your trap I'll take the stand under oath an' tell a story that'll make every white man in Montana spit when your name's mentioned."

"An' what do *you* know? What can *you* tell?" King Cotton thrust out his jaw.

"That you learned from Jud himself last fall that *he* shot Frank Carver, after they'd had a run-in. He bragged to you about it when you were on a drunk together. You didn't have the guts to beef him right then an' there, so you figured out a way to get even with Jud for that killin'. You ribbed Jud up to rustlin' cattle, an' Jud fooled you into thinkin' he had Rick in with him on that. Then you maneuvered to get hold of Harve Amby when he was released from Deer Lodge. You gave him a job to have him handy. When you thought the time was ripe you were goin' to tell Harve this Holland was the bushwhacker hound that let Harve take two years in the pen for a crime he didn't commit. You knew Harve would kill such a man on sight. Then you'd spill the beans about him stealin', tell who Holland really was, an' what his record was, an' take a stab at Maisie that way if you couldn't land Rick along with Jud. You had a nice little hate on this family. You had everything figured out from every possible angle.

"An' when the question comes up why should you lay these deadfalls," Johnny concluded bitterly. "I can answer that too. Frank Carver was more'n your range boss. He was your son."

KING COTTON shrank away from Johnny. His lips trembled under the walrus mustache.

"Will you keep your mouth shut about Holland bein' Maisie Taylor's brother?" Johnny demanded fiercely.

King Cotton nodded mutely. He seemed to slump a little in his ill-fitting clothes, to become a rather pathetic old man.

"She goes as she lays," he breathed after a little. He glared down at the dead man.

"Frank *was* my son," he said wistfully. "I didn't own him public. There was reasons. You'd want to stamp on a snake, too, kid, if his fangs had destroyed the only thing in life that meant a lot to you. The whole Holmes tribe became poison to me when this loud-mouthed fool bragged to me that *he* was the gun artist that killed my boy. It wasn't just drunk brag with him. He thought it showed how smart he was. He figured one foreman was the same as another to me. Ten years back he would a died in his tracks with his words in his mouth. You don't *sabe* everythin'. I couldn't go for him. My eyes is gone. I can't see things no more. A gunsight is just a blur before my eyes. So I set out to get him some other way. But how do you know them things? What's your interest in all this?"

"Harve is my cousin," Johnny said simply. "As to how I know about these things, well, my father was a Texan like yourself an' Buffalo Holmes. He knew you both in the South, all your family. Do you remember old Bob Farrar, who had a horse outfit for a spell some years back, off to the west of the Black Peaks? Well, I'm Bob Farrar's boy. He raised Harve along with me. Dad's old an' feeble, but his mind is still bright as a new dollar. When Harve was sent up for this shootin' it worried him a heap—an' he told me then that Frank Carver was your son as well as your range boss. He told me also the history of this addled egg that Buffalo Holmes hatched and disowned. The rest you told me yourself."

"I told you myself?" King Cotton echoed.

"Yeah. Twice. When you were drinkin' with me," Johnny said. "You were so

full of simmerin' poison that it bubbled outa your mouth into my ear when you were full of whisky. You gave your foxy plays away—an' I beat you to Jud Holmes. You won't show up so well in this if you start draggin' family skeletons outa their closets."

"Leave 'em stay in," said King Cotton. "I'll keep my trap closed if you will."

"That's a bargain," Johnny agreed. "Let sleepin' dogs lie."

HE DREW the canvas over that sightless face and stood up. Out in the sunlight King Cotton turned to him again.

"I ain't sorry for nothin'," he said somberly. "Only that I couldn't stand by to tell this coyote his own chickens had come home to roost. If you ever get to be sixty an' have your own flesh an' blood brought home feet first with a bullet hole through him maybe you'll sabe how I feel."

"Oh, I guess so," Johnny answered wearily. "I'd just as soon not talk about this any more. This mess you cooked up to get revenge on Jud Holmes has put me in a position I don't feel too good about myself."

"You done a Christian act," King Cotton growled. "An' you stood by your own kin, which any man will do if he *is* a man."

King Cotton turned away. Johnny watched him walk straight to the livery stable. He had his team hitched. When the lines were in his hands he drove out of Buda.

For twenty-four hours Johnny Farrar had gone without sleep. For three days he had eaten cold food. He was hungry and he was weary, in mind as well as body. But when he had swallowed a cup of coffee and a stack of hotcakes he didn't lie down to rest.

He got a fresh horse and loped away toward Gyp Springs. Harve Amby stood on a little rise overlooking his grazing sheep. Johnny sat down in the grass beside him and told his story—omitting no detail.

"Johnny," Harve said wistfully, "you shouldn't have done all that for me."

"I could see no other way," Johnny answered. "The man was a thief an' a murderer. But if you had gone after him an' killed him, you know what would happen to you with one killin' already chalked up against you. You know what town judges an juries are beginnin' to hand out to range men who persist in takin' the law into their own hands. Even if you'd got clear he was still Maisie's brother. There's some things—you know—you couldn't—you couldn't——"

"I can't anyway," Harve said moodily.

"Don't be a damn stiff-necked, double-dyed fool!" Johnny Farrar burst out with a sudden strange heat. "Haven't I told you what she said to me—a comparative stranger? You're hurtin' *her*. Go an' put your arms around her an' forget what's happened. Nobody will ever know this carrion Holland was a Holmes. But she knows. Any stigma you may think attaches to you because you did two years for a manslaughter you didn't commit is less than nothin' to her. She said so an' I know she meant it! By God, if you let this load rest on her shoulders any longer I'll begin to think I wasted my powder!"

Harve looked at Johnny queerly for a minute, twisting a blade of grass in his fingers.

"I guess you're right," he said. "Maybe I've been thinkin' of myself more than of her."

"Of course I'm right," Johnny snapped. "Turn these damn stinkin' sheep of Cotton's loose an' head for the Lazy H right now."

"I can't do that," Harve said. "But I'll be there as soon as Cotton can get a man here to take 'em over. You can tell Maisie that if you are goin' back to the ranch."

"No," Johnny said quickly. "I am not goin' back there any more."

"Well, I won't be long," Harve told him. "It ain't no use for me to thank you, Johnny. I was lower'n a snake in the bottom of a forty foot well when I came back here. You've helped me a heap."

"God helps them that helps themselves," Johnny Farrar said as he swung into his saddle and headed back for Buda.

SOME three weeks later Johnny passed through the main office of the Stock Association in Helena into the secretary's private cubicle. Dick Colton smiled and nodded. Johnny perched on one corner of the desk. Minus boots and overalls, clad in gray worsted, with a starched collar about his neck and a bright polish on his shoes, Johnny resembled the general run of young men about town.

"You don't waste words when you make out a written report," Colton remarked. "You're positively stingy with details. You seem to have got results down there at the Lazy H, though."

"You should hire a newspaper reporter to go along with your stock detectives, if stories are what you want," Johnny replied.

"Yes, I can see a reporter following somebody like you around on the range," Colton laughed. "Here's a letter for you."

Johnny ripped open the envelope. A single sheet of paper bore a few words in a handwriting Johnny had never seen. It read:

Dear Johnny Farrar: I thank you from the bottom of a happy heart.

Maisie.

Johnny's vision went beyond that office to a stone-walled garden with flowers breaking into spring bloom and a woman among the flowers with the sun on her hair, to the same woman sitting on the steps of her house soundlessly fighting back tears. Like pictures unfolding one after another he saw the whole sequence up to the moment Jud Holmes pitched forward on his face in the moonlight. Involuntarily Johnny shuddered. The man was a thief and a murderer. Still——

"See much of Mrs. Taylor while you were down there?" Colton asked, and Johnny came out of his reverie.

"More or less," he answered.

"Very attractive woman," Colton went on. "She bowls the boys over like ninepins. You being young and impressionable, Johnny, I thought you'd come back raving about her—if you didn't stay there swinging your loop."

"Didja?" Johnny replied indifferently.

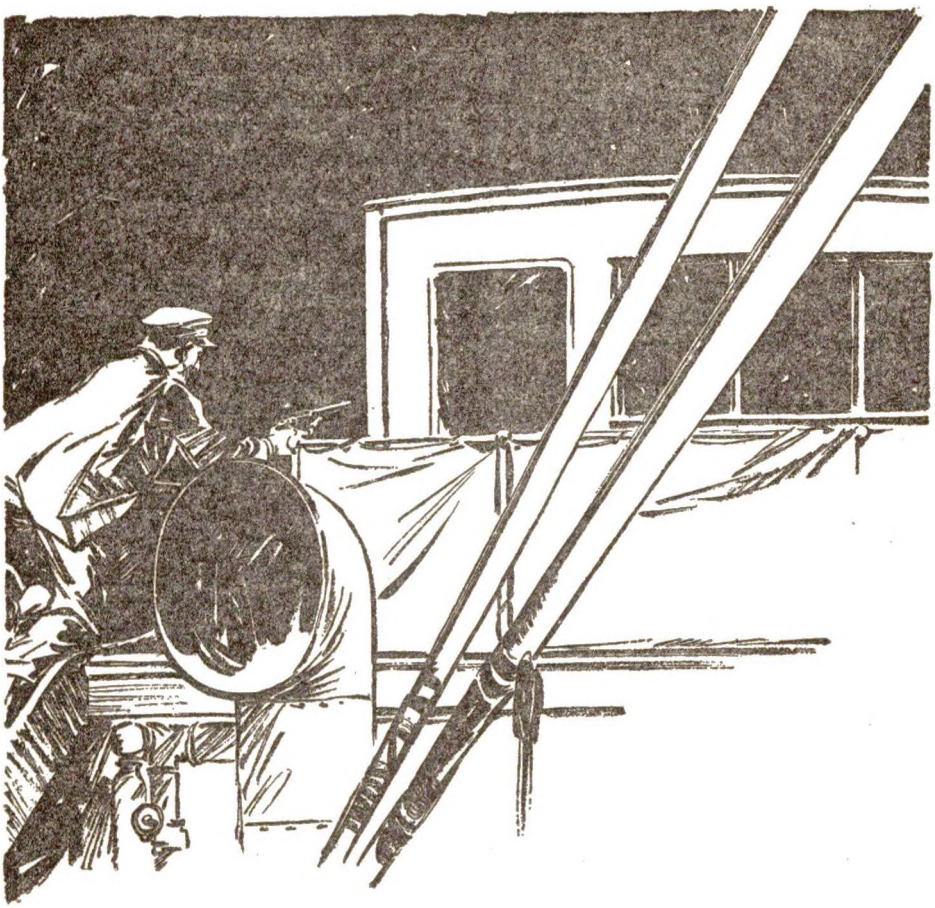
Colton laughed.

"You know, sometimes I think you're not fully grown to man's estate, Johnny," he said. "At least in some phases of a man's existence. I know I'd get a thrill out of just being around a woman like Maisie Taylor. Apart from having to throw a slug into this rustler when you went to arrest him did you find any variety in this case? You were complaining about the lack of variety when you started out."

"No," Johnny said thoughtfully, almost moodily. "Just the same old thing in the same old way."

But what Johnny Farrar meant by that was not at all what Dick Colton thought he meant.

Mr. Terry Was the Same Sort of Guy as Mr. Riorden Who, You Remember, Beat up Several Oceans Because He Had a Sweetheart



THE TERRIBLE MR. TERRY

By FRANK J. LEAHY

Author of "Mr. Riorden Had a Sweetheart," "Alias Pop," etc.

THE S. S. *Northern Light,* southbound for Iquique, was doing a wallowing dance in the gray, wet dawn of the second day out of Callao, and every making sea sent up spindrift that smote Captain Mortimer Parent fairly on the right cheek. The right cheek because he was out on the port wing of the bridge, yelling through a soggy megaphone at a trampish old well-decker which was doing even more of a wallowing dance three hundred yards across an antagonistic sea.

But Captain Mortimer Parent might have been barking at a moon for all the reply he received.

"Mr. Terry, there!" he bawled in final exasperation at a long, lean and lanky figure in oilskins who stood clinging to the lee of the chart-house. "Mr. Terry, launch

a boat and go see what's the matter with that damn' thing."

Mr. Barney Terry, mate of the S. S. *Northern Light,* had been afraid that was coming. But, like a good mate, he shrugged and moved to obey.

"What boat, Cap'n?"

"What boat? Good laws! Have you no imagination?"

Captain Parent resumed his megaphoned yawpings and Mr. Terry swung down the bridge companion. The decks at that hour were, of course, deserted of off-watch humanity; and, furthermore, rumor had magically leaked into the deepest corners of the big flush-decker of what might be expected; so Mr. Terry's dripping invasion of the seamen's fo'c's'le wasn't so much startling as dreadful.

"Six volunteers for a little boat ride," said he.

A mottled-faced young man in long, red underwear complained that he was seasick, so Mr. Terry named him stroke oarsman. And, in the same breath, he named two brawny sons of Erin who deliberately snored in pretended slumber. A pinched white-rat of a Limehouse cockney grinned at the fate of the others, thereby compelling Mr. Terry to select him as the necessary fourth. And by that time Mr. Terry's patience was exhausted and he extracted two blondish descendants of Eric the Red who vociferously pleaded complete ignorance of the handling of boats.

"You'll do," said Mr. Terry. "Now you snoozers pile out and lower Number Three Boat, snappy."

AND he returned aft, mumbling grimly. Not that he resented the lack of voluntary support from for'ard. Not at all. Had it been left to him, he wouldn't have volunteered either. It was Captain Mortimer Parent who aggravated his sense of going about one's own business. What did it matter that the old well-decker didn't answer? It remained that she was a derelict, and because she was so a hundred miles removed from the Peruvian coast she certainly was no great menace to navigation. But no; Mortimer Parent had to dog around, sniffing affairs that were not his own.

The captain had by now worked the *Northern Light* up to windward of the wallowing well-decker. And by the time Mr. Terry's "volunteers" had appeared to wrestle with Number Three Boat the ever-efficient second mate, Mr. Newgaard, had seen to the arranging of oil-bags for the needful streak. To Mr. Terry, however, that streak was, to say the least, rather silly—like attempting to hold one's hand over a safety valve to stop the noise.

Between the palatial flush-decker and the trampish well-decker long seas, crested with foam, and dizzy valleys, like moving-walled craters, cocklofted both ships one moment and all but dropped them out of sight of each other the next.

Mr. Terry spat disgustedly as Captain Parent, safely in the lee of the dodgers, bawled a series of inane orders for the lowering. Then the boat was in the water, and from riding skyward, with all blades fanning air ridiculously, it did a chute-the-chutes to ten feet below the ship's Plimsoll mark. And so it went for several back-breaking minutes before so much as the boat's length was gained. But even that wouldn't have seemed so bad to Mr. Terry if he hadn't caught snatches of Captain Mortimer Parent's continued instructions until what time it took to work off beyond range of human voice in the whistling waste. It was a relief to him, therefore, when the *Northern Light* staggered off into the oblivion beyond three or four mountains of foaming seas and the cockleshell tossed corkishly into the derelict's comparative zone of quiet.

IT WAS an inch by inch struggle across that water that had every aspect of laughing outright at Captain Parent's emissaries, but Mr. Terry was Barney Terry and his volunteers were what they were; and every time the shot-like spindrift gave him the chance he roared at one and at

the other who, it seemed to him, were doing their level best to see how confusing they could make the stroke without upsetting the boat altogether.

"Watch that stroke!"

"Mother o' St. Patrick!" croaked one son of Erin. "We are!"

Mr. Terry opened his mouth to swear and immediately had it washed out with a half pint of briny scud.

"Hell!" he sputtered. "What's the use?"

Whether there was use or not, the boat closed in on the derelict. One moment the old ship showed her stern and the lettering, *Dorothy Campbell,* on it, and then, obligingly, she gave the would-be investigators an aerial glimpse of her deserted decks by sinking drunkenly into a swooping trough.

Mr. Terry, straining to keep the boat's nose into the sea in the face of what was, without question in his mind, the rottenest display of oarsmanship he'd ever experienced, squinted through the hair stringing down from under his sou'wester and tried to figure some way of outwitting that ravaging son of Saturn and Ops—namely, Mr. Neptune—and establishing some kind of a personal record by putting safely alongside the silent hulk for a boarding.

"Why don't you guys try t' help me?" he complained.

THAT infuriated and infuriating remark seemed to be the snapping point —at least for the mottled-faced young man who wore red underwear. He was seasick, and no mate of even twice Mr. Barney Terry's dimensions was going to talk him out of it any longer. He released his death-grip on his oar and the snapping jaws of a ravenous wave snatched it quickly away. And that wasn't enough but that he had to slump over backwards to knock the wind out of the Limehouser with his head. The little man yowled and effected a wild shipping of his oar, the butt of which took one of the descendants of Eric the Red full on the nose. In the confusion the boat lurched around at right angles and drank in a good twenty gallons of foaming brine, and for a brief instant did something like a porpoise-dive under the derelict's counter.

"Well, by the Great Horn Spoon!" exploded Mr. Terry. "What is this, a suicide pact?"

He did what he could to right the boat, then lunged for the thwart vacated by the seasick young man, dragging the steering-oar with him. The red-underweared one was down crumpled in the bottom, with the cockney's feet braced against his mottled face, and he didn't even seem to care.

"I'll show you apple-knockers how t' row a boat," promised Mr. Terry above the wind and above the ragings of the one whose nose spouted perfectly good Norse blood.

Neptune chuckled. There was no doubt about that, for a white-maned sea at that moment heaved a mighty shoulder under the boat, held it aloft for sardonic inspection and tossed it bodily into the temporarily-flooded cofferdam of the *Dorothy Campbell's* fore well-deck.

"Blimey!" screamed the cockney.

And "Ow-w!" a son of Erin.

And the next several moments were star-spangled with the lusty and pained yelps of Mr. Terry and his volunteers as they clawed and kicked and heaved themselves free from the up-side-down wreckage of Number Three Boat.

But the drenched and bruised pilgrims from the *Northern Light* had just enough time to salvage a few fragments of their wits when a sort of apparition confronted them. A great figure of no less than a giant glowered at them from the top of the superstructure ladder, port side.

"Say!" boomed this corporeal prodigy. "What is this?"

Savagery galloped up over Mr. Terry's astonishment.

"What ain't it?" he snarled. "That's the question."

"It's a wonder you wouldn't learn how to come alongside," grumbled the giant. "Who sent for you, anyhow?"

"You did," charged Mr. Terry. "What's wrong with this tub?"

"Sinking, that's all."

"Well, why'n't you say so to our beloved skipper and save us a trip over?"

COMPARING the two, the storm-cloud scowl of displeasure lowering the giant's brow and the battering gales that then and there weltered up from Old Stiff to lift all the waters of the South Sea against the old well-decker, Mr. Terry at the moment saw more of friendliness in the latter.

A strange bird of a phenomenal feather, this apparently sole hanger-on of the derelict. He was well over six feet high, as brawny as a prize bull. He wore dungarees and a buttonless pea-jacket, and bilge grime streaked him from the top of his gearless head to the soles of what might easily have served as Eskimo skinnywoppers. The skin of his face, as seen through a salt-caked and unkempt bristle of red beard, was like the leather of a scuffed old steaming shoe; and beetled brows permitted sharp, black, defiant eyes to peer out as from under brush thickets. He stood firmly planted there on high, a mighty figure of brute strength, a terrible being.

"Looks nuts t' me," decided Mr. Terry in undertone. Then, aloud, "You're the skipper, maybe, stayin' with your ship."

The giant licked his lips.

"Yeh, maybe," said he.

Mr. Terry bristled.

"Well, make up your mind," he shot back.

The giant spat down at Mr. Terry's feet.

"This ship became my ship not three hours ago," he condescended to explain. "Cap'n Lucas Kilbane was her owner and master. I was a coalpasser—shanghaied aboard in Valparaiso. Came the gale of the past week and the plates became strained, to admit water faster'n the pumps could take it. Shortly before you showed up ship was abandoned. I'd been shanghaied because of a grudge Kilbane held against me from 'way back, and I was left behind for the same reason. And now the

ship is mine. My salvage, Mister Man, get it?"

"But she's sinkin'," objected Mr. Terry.

"Yep."

"So what good'll she do you?"

"Good enough," said the giant, smirking.

"Just plain nuts," snorted Mr. Terry to his volunteers.

Then suddenly he wheeled.

"Well, do something, somebody! Climb against the sky somewhere, one o' you, and wig-wag our ship t' come and take us off."

The descendants of Eric the Red looked dumbly at the sons of Erin, and the cockney, with blank expression, vainly peered into the mottled face of the seasick young man.

"What's a wig-wag?" a son of Erin dared to ask.

"Well, it ain't a hog call," replied Mr. Terry viciously. Then, "Go find out how long we got before this tub does a grand finale. That oughtn't to strain your attributes."

THE fo'c's'le head, to which Mr. Terry climbed to wave a recall, was nothing if not a dizzy perch as the old *Dorothy* sunfished around, but the risk of life and equilibrium might have been worth the while had it not suddenly occurred to his bruised and bewildered vision that the *Northern Light* was nothing but a smoke-screened blur, upwards of two miles to windward. So he stumped aft again, mut-

tering dire imprecations upon the head of one spic and span Mortimer Parent—and, for good measure, upon the flesh-and-the-devil hulk of the watching giant.

At which moment his volunteers reappeared from various points to sing him a gloomy song of the holds, where, besides copper ore and sodium nitrate, were sloshing floods of water.

"But the fires ain't out," added a descendant of Eric the Red.

"And a couple o' pumps are pumpin'," said a son of Erin.

"I'm seasick," complained the red-underweared young man.

"You snoopers beat it now," growled the giant.

Mr. Terry's mouth fell open. Of his volunteers he asked, "Now ain't that gratitude for you?"

The *Dorothy Campbell* was very much of a wreck, no two ways about that. Her wireless gear was somewhere gone, one wing of the bridge might have been slapped by a Titan's fist, and salt lay thick over everything. She was loggy and down by the head, and she had about as much grace in her aimless wallowings as a coal barge. But as Mr. Terry saw it, she'd been abandoned by a lot of sissies long before the proper time for panic.

He told the grimy sentinel on the superstructure so.

The giant said nothing.

"Seems damn' funny t' me," Mr. Terry added.

The giant stiffened, further lowered his brow.

"Well, it's not funny," he thundered.

"You tell me," countered Mr. Terry, "I don't know a funny thing when I see it?"

"Yes."

"Well, you——" And as he bounded up three steps of the ladder two things happened—the ship did a buck-and-wing maneuver into a moving valley, and the snub toe of the giant's right shoe cracked him hard on the point of the jaw. So that when he groped up woozily through the stars, and was on his feet again, he found himself being supported by his volunteers.

"If that don't teach you," he heard from the lofty distance, "to stow the gabble, next time I'll try chuckin' you overboard, one by one or all at once."

Nor would Mr. Terry have greatly cared if only the *Northern Light* was standing off within swimming distance. But she was now hull down on the horizon, quite apparently steaming on her way. It didn't seem right, no, but there was the fact gagging at him, at all of them; while the *Dorothy Campbell,* staggering over one sea to another, drifted her sad way into promised oblivion. Continually the wounded old hulk groaned in her bowels. She was lost, and a shanghaied coalpasser was in authority, and Mr. Terry decided that he and his volunteers might as well look forward to a deep-sea dunking before another ship should pass.

BUT the decision was altogether fugitive. For one thing, it would please him much to live long enough to return that snub-toed wallop he'd taken, and for another, he was Mr. Barney Terry, with a sweetheart in San Pedro who'd believed him when he'd promised her to come back some day. He had six men—such as they were—and until such a time as the *Dorothy Campbell* should sink or, possibly, stagger into sight of land, he was the mate of the *Northern Light* and an agent of Captain Mortimer Parent's.

"You can't row for beans," he growled at his retinue. "What else can you do?"

"I'm seasick," murmured the mottled-faced young man who wore red underwear.

"Take the wheel," Mr. Terry said to him. "Steer due east and try t' fetch South America. The rest o' you, follow me."

"Follow you where?" boomed the listening giant from the superstructure rail.

"Below, that's where."

"To do what?"

"To stoke the fires and set this tub in motion."

"You 'll play hell," snarled the giant.

"You'll keep your hands off my ship, or I 'll eat you up."

And just as he started downward, Mr. Terry sprang upward, and they clashed midway on the ladder.

It was an even break, for the giant seized Mr. Terry by the throat to choke further ambition into inert submission—if possible; and Mr. Terry seized him about the waist to remove him as a menace to navigation—if possible. Thus locked in embrace, savage with their own theories on what should and what should not be done with and in the *Dorothy Campbell*, they crashed down off the ladder into the well-deck. There the giant banged Mr. Terry's head against steel and, for so doing, had a leg bent backward into a sizable V, with the snub-toe of his enormous shoe pressed into the small of his back; and Mr. Terry had his throat released. And, at the same instant, a making sea swept them both into the lee scuppers.

That gave Mr. Terry his chance to do a bit of booting of his own; only he used his heel on the giant's chin.

"You heel!" yelped the giant when he could.

And then the ship fell off into a sort of chasm and a splinter of gear fell from somewhere aloft, and the coalpasser-master of the *Dorothy Campbell* and Mr. Barney Terry of the *Northern Light* were knocked into the seventh heaven of dreams by no actual scientific maneuver of their own.

WHEN Mr. Terry finally returned to reality he found himself swaying like a channel-buoy in a heavy sea, again supported on his feet by his volunteers.

"Hey!" he croaked. "I thought I told you sojers t' follow me?"

They followed him now, into the bowels of the old ship, only the mottled-faced young man who wore red underwear breaking ranks to pick his way up to the distorted wheel-house. They found at once that the giant had preceded them and was in the act of manipulating a couple of valves under a pounding pump.

"What you up to, there?" Mr. Terry demanded.

The giant wheeled to confront him.

"How would you know, even if I told you?"

Mr. Terry dropped to one knee on the floorplates and peered long and critically at the two valves.

"Why, you——" he exploded suddenly. "Don't you know nothing? You got this bloody pump suckin' water into the ship, instead o' dischargin' it!"

"You lie!" protested the giant. "Lay up out o' that!"

But Mr. Terry would not. Bear-like paws seized upon him, but the clawing fingers were but tines to prod his indignation. He succeeded in closing the main injection valve—the pump missing not a stroke—and then, and not until then, did he permit himself to be hauled to his feet. Whereupon he struck out like a cobra and planted a traditionally large first mate's fist in the giant's avoirdupois.

The blow doubled the giant up, the rolling ship upset him, and he skidded on his stern into one of the crank-pits.

"Suck water into this ship, will you?" Mr. Terry raged. "You Scapa Flow-er, you! You want only the bilge injection open. This tub's sinkin' fast enough without pushin' her nose under."

"This is my ship," grumbled the giant, climbing back to the floorplates and charging like an enraged bull.

"Help!" yelped Mr. Terry, sidestepping.

Again the volunteers came to the rescue—not according to the rules book, but in such a way as to prove to Mr. Terry that he really had a commanding influence over them. In a moment the five of them were piled on top of the gasping giant.

"Let him up, men," Mr. Terry ordered, "and escort him t' the ladder."

SNARLING direful gutturals through his thatch of whiskers, the giant let himself be given a starting push toward the topside. From the top grating he thundered, "This is my ship and you won't get

away with what you think you'll get away with."

Then Mr. Terry and his volunteers were alone below.

"Now get t' work," said he. "Recess is over."

He went about calling out the stoking laws.

"I've sailed below and I know," he assured them.

The descendants of Eric the Red complained that they were sailors and not stokers, and the brawny sons of Erin protested that they'd signed on in the *Northern Light* and in nothing else that floated; but they stoked the banked fires in the *Dorothy Campbell,* nevertheless. The white-rat of a cockney passed coal, Mr. Terry tended water, and the hands on the steam gauges

were feeling for the pegs when on a sudden the cracked voice of the mottled-faced young man who wore red underwear piped down through the gratings.

"Say, Mr. Terry, our ship's coming back for us!"

"No kid?"

"Yes, sir, no kid."

"All right. Get back on the wheel, you, and keep this tub from fallin' off. You other laddybucks hang on this steam. And don't let nothin' blow up."

The S. S. *Northern Light* was, in good truth, growing on the storm-gray picture. Mr. Terry standing arms akimbo beside the watching giant, on the shelter deck, favored his momentarily quieted antagonist with scorching criticism of the big flush-decker; and he kept it up for just so long as it took her to be worked up, under a streamer of black oil smoke, close to windward of the *Dorothy Campbell.* And then sounded Captain Mortimer Parent's megaphoned voice, the words torn to shreds by the wind.

"Ahoy . . . *Campbell.* . . ."

Mr. Terry, without haste, picked his way up to the bridge and plucked a battered megaphone from the chart-house.

"Hillo!"

"We've . . . picking up *Dorothy's* boats. All . . . aboard here now. So come off from that . . . Terry. . . ."

Rage welled up to bloat Mr. Terry's already battle-distorted features.

"Come off? Why, our boat's smashed t' ten thousand nothings."

"Smashed? You . . . smashed. . . ."

"That's what I said."

"Well, good laws! And you call yourself . . . mate! Our Number Three . . . smashed! I've . . . notion . . . fire you. . . ."

"You what?" thundered Mr. Terry.

"Fire you . . . smashing Number Three Boat. You . . . seaman . . . lubber . . . wanton destruction . . . certainly fire you. . . ."

BUT Mr. Terry, having heard enough, ceased to listen, flung the megaphone from him and swung down the companion ladder. Fired! There was gratitude! A lot of thanks a man got for being a brass-buttoned bounder in the service of a Mortimer Parent. Some day, when he had a ship of his own—if only a mud-scow—he'd tell starch-collared, poet-quoting dandiprats like Parent where to shove their ships.

He clattered back down into the engine room and began at once to turn valve wheels.

"Watch that steam!" he bellowed at his volunteers.

"And you watch your step." The giant, like a great, hairy hobgoblin conjured up, stood behind him. "Where you off to with those engines?"

"Home," snarled Mr. Terry, brandishing a wrench in hand. "Home and Aunt Bella."

He went on with his work about the big reciprocating engines, the giant watching him from under lowered brows. There was a rustle of steam and things began to move.

Mr. Terry cracked open the throttle.

"I bet you blow 'er up," sneered the giant.

"What's the difference? She's your ship."

The engines began to rumble.

"Pretty good," snorted the giant. "Where'd you learn it—correspondence course?"

"In the China river boats," Mr. Terry condescended to reply. "That's where you learn what makes a ship tick—and what makes a ship sick, too. And then you try t' monkey with valves when I'm around!"

He stumped out to the fireroom and adjusted the water checks. There fire doors were banging, shovels scraping on the floor-plates. The volunteers from the *Northern Light* were stoking—with about the same grace that they rowed a boat, but stoking, nevertheless. And, shortly, with the old *Dorothy Campbell* throbbing right along, sudden remembrance came to Mr. Terry that only the seasick young man who wore red underwear had the deck. He wheeled to the loafing giant.

"Say, you," he growled, "let's have you. Get on deck and keep an eye."

The giant stood fast. Mr. Terry snatched a sixteen-inch steam-stop wrench into hand.

"On deck and keep an eye," he reiterated.

THE giant sauntered up the ladder, trailing non-frightened rumblings of laughter after him. The engines sang a throaty cantata, the volunteers played a cacophony with their stoking gear, and Mr. Terry, watching everything with sweat-needled eyes, finally became resigned to whatever fate held in store. But it wasn't easy to take. Not the way it was being dished out to him. He smelled a rat of no uncertain evil odor in the *Dorothy Campbell,* but he couldn't identify it exactly. The ship was sinking and had, therefore, been abandoned, as maritime law permitted under its perils-of-the-sea; was worth, perhaps, fifty thousand dollars—not including her cargo; and because the giant was neither passenger, stowaway, master nor signed-on mariner, but a man who was aboard against his will, would he come into a neat little fortune in salvage money —*if* he saved her. But there was that deliberate tampering with, at least, one wrong valve——

"Maybe it's some more o' that thing called barratry," muttered Mr. Terry as he closed down on a water check.

"Barrister, you sye, sir?" queried the pinched white-rat of a cockney, who chanced to overhear. "I got an uncle in West 'Artlepool 'at's a bloomin' barrister."

"Barratry," growled Mr. Terry. "Barratry's criminal. And so's your uncle, for all I know. Get t' work."

The telegraph clanged suddenly, the hand on the big, brass dial pointing to STOP. Then the shrill whistle of a voice tube.

"Hillo!" answered Mr. Terry.

"Stop those engines!" ordered the giant's voice from the bridge.

"Who said?"

"I said. Close that throttle and close it quick."

Mr. Terry, muttering a string of vituperations, sprang to obey. Closing the throttle, he opened a by-pass, shouted at his volunteers to watch the steam and water and clattered up the ladder to the tune of lifting safety valves.

A BIG freighter, it appeared, had come up and was keeping slow pace to windward of the again drifting *Dorothy Campbell.* Nor was it the *Northern Light,* but the *Night Hawk,* as the lettering on her bow bespoke; a well-decker, of the eighty-five-hundred-ton type and of ex-

tremely disreputable appearance. A boat was being put off, Mr. Terry observed, and he at once had the uncharitable wish that the craft might fare no better than the one he'd come over in. A megaphoned, rye-coarse voice sounded.

"Anything wrong, there, *Dorothy Campbell?*"

"No," replied the giant from the bridge, "not much!"

"You alone, Moose?"

Mr. Terry started.

"No," answered the giant.

"You're not abandoned?"

"Abandoned, yeh. But there's a boat crew from the *Northern Light* aboard. That ship hull down, there, to leeward. But the damn' snoopers are deserted now, so we can just chuck 'em overboard."

"Well, why ain't you done it already?" angrily.

And just as angrily the giant replied:

"Say, don't forget I been stowed away four days in the bilges. I'm weak as a cat."

"Well, shut up about it!" cautioned the *Night Hawk's* speaker. "The fish have ears."

But the giant had spoken his piece. And Mr. Terry knew now the color of the rat he'd been smelling all morning. It was blood-red. The giant, a stowaway, had caused the flooding of the *Dorothy's* holds by manipulating certain valves while in his hideaway in the bilges. The shell plates, a hundred to one, weren't strained at all. And the giant, when ship had been abandoned, had stayed with her, to pump her out again, that she might not sink, but continue to float as salvage for the *Night Hawk* gang, who had engineered such an act of criminal barratry, and who intended now to send over a working crew to first chuck him, Mr. Barney Terry, and his volunteers overboard. The *Northern Light* was, indeed, hull down once again, and this time, unquestionably, for good and all. And unless some quick thinking was carried into action——

"Hey, you guys, below there!" Mr. Terry bawled down through the engine-room gratings. "Lay up here, double-quick! And, you, at the wheel——"

But just then he espied the giant charging along the deck at him, a green-heart belaying pin in hand.

"So——"

"Yes, so!" roared Mr. Moose.

AND then they collided—an irresistible force meeting an immovable barrier—and were in the thick of it again. For Mr. Terry's benefit the *Dorothy Campbell* effected a steep roll to port, rocking them off their feet. The belaying pin leaped to its freedom overboard, and the giant seeing it go worked off his rage by closing one of Mr. Terry's best eyes; which drove Mr. Terry to opening the flood-gates of the giant's nose. The *Dorothy* shuffled them inboard, then tossed them outboard—where Mr. Moose cracked his uncurried head very neatly and Mr. Terry celebrated his momentary release by catapulting a sizable package of knuckles at his adversary's mid-riff.

Then he was on his feet again. But so was the giant; and he retained the use of his voice, which Mr. Terry did not, and he used it to roar at the boat from the *Night Hawk,* which was struggling, even as had struggled one from the *Northern Light,* to put safely alongside. But the crew of the boat from the *Night Hawk* was having difficulties which Mr. Terry and his volunteers hadn't even dreamt of on their trip over. For "Sink that damn' boat!"

did Mr. Terry hoarsely command every time something wasn't hitting him in the face; and so the damn' boat was having

missiles of nondescript nature hurled at it by two blondish descendants of Eric the Red and two brawny sons of Erin; and bucketfuls of boiling water and international profanities were being hurled at it by the pinched white-rat of a cockney and the mottled-faced young man who wore red underwear.

The *Dorothy Campbell* herself threw the Terry vs. Moose towel into the tempest-tossed ring; that is, she obligingly shipped a sea from astern—a great, foaming, green sea—that roared along the after well-deck, geysered up to sweep the shelter deck, whelm over the punch-drunk combatants and wash them down the starboard ladder into the fore well-deck.

That made the fight, as far as the man from the *Northern Light* and the man from the bilges were concerned, a draw.

But the fracas otherwise was a grand and glorious victory. Mr. Terry discovered that fact some time later, when once again he awoke in the arms of his volunteers. He had no accurate knowledge of just how much time had elapsed since he'd gone to sleep, but he saw through the puffs before his eyes that several very remarkable things had happened: he was not still in the well-deck, but on the shelter deck; the giant was on the shelter deck, too—and securely bound with much half-inch line at that; there was a big flush-decker—the *Northern Light*—lying to, close off to windward; there was a ship far off toward the horizon, and that, evidently, was the *Night Hawk;* and last, but not least, of these wonders, the *Dorothy Campbell* was rolling and pitching under him to a degree that made it quite apparent that she was gradually becoming more graceful in the water.

"Mr. Terry!" sounded a megaphoned voice—Captain Mortimer Parent's voice, if Mr. Terry wasn't mistaken.

"Hillo!"

"I've come back. . . ." shouted the captain, the wind again playing havoc with his words. "I tried . . . punish . . . insolence, but thought . . . And now . . . *Dorothy's* not sinking, I'm sending her crew back aboard . . . our boats. You men, of course, will come off . . . resume . . . duties . . . *Northern Light.*"

"No!" boomed Mr. Terry.

"No? No, you say?"

"By the Great Horn Spoon, no! Don't you know an abandoned ship, on the high seas, is anybody's salvage?"

"Yes, but, Mr Terry, this——"

"This is now my ship," Mr. Terry roared the other down. "My salvage. I came aboard as your agent, but since then you fired me and deserted me and her—which cuts you out of the sugar, automatic."

"Mr. Terry! I——"

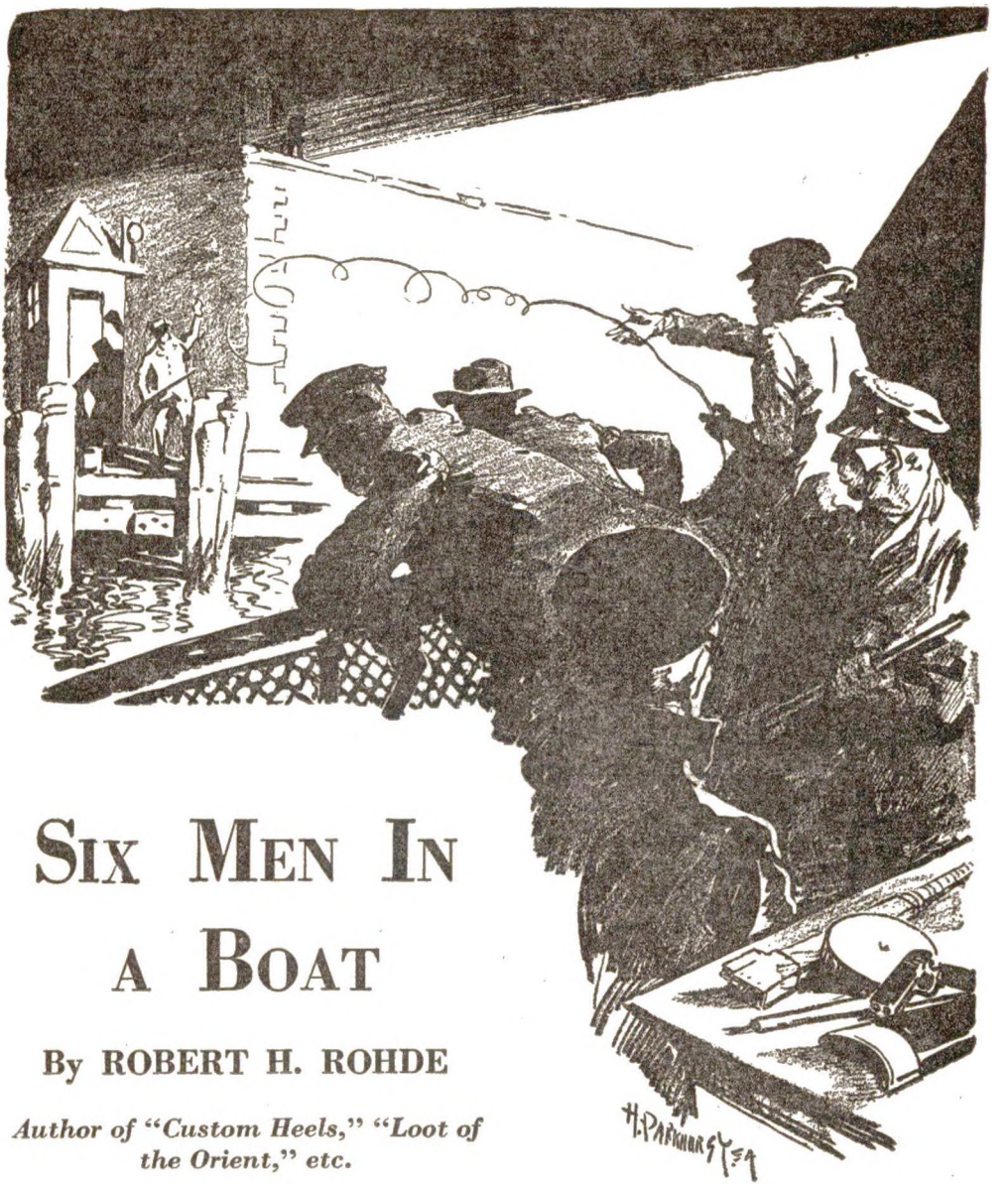
"Tra-la-la!" bellowed Mr. Terry. "Maybe, if I see you in Iquique, I'll buy you a lollypop for comin' back and scarin' off that *Night Hawk.*"

"But, Mr. Terry . . ."

But Mr. Terry's attention was diverting itself to his volunteers.

"Now, listen here, you sojers," he growled, "just 'cause I'm goin' t' cut you in on this salvage, it don't mean you don't have t' cut out this skylarkin'. Get on that wheel and on that steam before this tub buckles or blows up."

"I'm still seasick," murmured the mottled-faced young man who wore red underwear.



Six Men In a Boat

By ROBERT H. ROHDE

Author of "Custom Heels," "Loot of the Orient," etc.

POLICE LAUNCH 17, New York Harbor Division, was miles off her accustomed landlocked course. Many green and dizzily heaving miles. Two hours ago she had slipped through the Narrows. Now in midafternoon the Atlantic Highlands were flattening to sea level astern, and still 17 wallowed on eastward into the open and empty ocean.

A quartering swell made the launch's progress half barrel-roll and half pitch-and-toss—a motion that Detective Sergeant Solo Corcoran, guest passenger,

A Peaceful Pleasure Trip in a Police Boat Going Out to Dump Captured Gangster Guns Ends for Detective Sergeant Corcoran in One of the Most Thrilling Adventures That Ever Befell a Cop

had at first found merely interesting.

It was no longer that. Corcoran, gritting his teeth but staying close to the rail, had to acknowledge it.

This was his day off. He had been en route to the Iron Steamboat pier, Coney Island bound, at noon; had happened to pass the Marine Division slip at the Battery, to his present deep regret, as Launch 17 was making ready to put to sea.

"We're going out to dump some junk," Sergeant Rooney, 17's skipper, had advised Corcoran. "It'll be a lot sweller trip than the ride to Coney. Come along."

The "junk" was in crates forward. Two solid tons of it, Rooney said. Glittering tons of automatic pistols and sawed-off shotguns and assorted revolvers, imported and domestic; of dirks and stilettos and blackjacks and "knucks" taken from captured crooks in the last year's course. Two tons, if you wanted to look at it that way, of testimony to the efficiency and courage of New York's Finest.

"We go twenty-five miles to sea and chuck it all overboard," Rooney said. "Out of sight of land, that is. A real boat-ride. And if you want to fish, Otto'll fix you up with a line."

Otto was Patrolman Frank Otto, Marine Division, Police Launch 17's engineer and crew. He sat at the stern hopefully trolling as the little gray cruiser wriggled farther and farther into vacancy. His was a large stomach and an iron one. He whistled tunelessly and endlessly.

"Once," said Sergeant Rooney from the pilot-house, "Otto caught a couple eels off Canarsie. Now you can't hold him."

Detective Sergeant Corcoran looked noncommittally at the fishless fisherman, speculatively at the launch's cargo and then earnestly at Rooney. Corcoran had a wealth of freckles to match his violently red hair, and his face between the freckles had a notable tinge of green. For a long time he had been thinking that Manhattan Island, with its fine, rock-ballasted stability, offered definite advantages even on a sizzling hot August day like this one.

"Ain't it deep enough here?" he asked Rooney. "God knows, it *feels* deep."

The helmsman shook his head.

"Twenty-five miles, no more no less," he said. "That's the orders. When we sink these rods they go where they'll stay sunk."

"We must," opined Corcoran, "be half way to Europe this minute. So maybe it'd be just as good to keep going as turn back."

A sudden shout came from the stern, and Roony leaned over the sill of the wheelhouse window.

"Luvva Mike! Got a bite finally?"

Otto had stopped whistling. With his trolling line tied to the taffrail he was facing forward, staring and pointing.

"Look!" he shouted. "Boat in trouble over there, Sarge. Port your hellum."

His sight was as good as his stomach. To the southeast, Corcoran made out a dancing dot at the ridge of a swell. It pirouetted and vanished in the trough.

Rooney saw it too. He spun the wheel, and the police launch yawed onto a new and dizzier course.

"Lucky break for somebody," he grunted, "that we came along. A boat adrift out here could drift to hell an' gone."

Corcoran looked doubtful.

"Mightn't they," he suggested practically, "just be fishing?"

"Nobody but a cluck like Frank Otto would try to fish where there ain't anything but salt in the water." Sergeant Rooney jabbed a forefinger over the wheel as the distant dot bobbed again into view. "And see that, will you? Is waving a shirt in the air a way to catch fish?"

FIFTEEN minutes took the quick-stepping 17 to the drifting boat. It was a power dory and there were six men in it, at a glance all youngish. What Otto's keen eyes had seen fluttering at that wave crest was not a shirt but a large towel, tied to an oar. It kept waving until the police launch was within a few hundred yards of the dory. Then the signalman put down the oar and yelled through cupped hands.

"We're stuck, and stuck bad. Engine

no turn over since ten o'clock this mornin'. Throw us a line, will yuh, Coast Guard?"

Otto had the line ready. It went snakily uncoiling over 17's blunt stern as Rooney maneuvered the launch alongside the dory. Hands in the smaller boat caught it and made it fast.

"Coast Guard?" laughed Otto. "Guess again, boys. This is the New York Harbor Squad doin' the rescue."

Solo Corcoran was standing beside him then, holding fast to the rail and looking down into the dory.

"What kind of picnic you fellows been on?" he wanted to know.

"Fishin' trip."

"This far out?"

"The wind carried us. We were only just outside Sandy Hook when the motor went sour."

"I think," said Corcoran, but he murmured that softly, under his breath, "I think you're a bunch of liars."

His blue eyes, narrowed, swept the dory's crew at closer range as the man in the bow pulled her up under 17's counter. Six strange faces, hard faces. He knew he hadn't seen any one of them before, but he had seen their like in the Headquarters "line up" a thousand times. Fishermen? Hell they were!

He moved back along the pitching deck to the pilot-house.

"Those birds," he said, "don't look so hot. Maybe people don't catch fish by waving a distress signal, Rooney. But they don't usually go fishing, either, taking binoculars and three brand new suit-cases along."

Rooney cast an appraising glance sternward, saw the dory's half dozen swarming onto the launch.

"Or with their coats on," he whispered. "Holy Mike! S'pose we're pickin' up a gang of smugglers—dope runners?"

With this to take his mind off inner qualms, Corcoran felt much better. He nodded grimly.

"I'll be finding out," he promised.

He watched one more coated figure climb over the launch's rail, the sixth and last. Then, very suddenly, things were happening.

Patrolman Otto, winding in his trolling line, completely off guard, went flat on the deck under the swing of a blackjack. Guns were flashing aft in the strong sunlight; guns that those needlessly-worn coats had hidden.

"It's a high-jack, Rooney!" blared Corcoran. "For God's sake, sail in!"

He went sailing in himself, unarmed but hard-fisted, reeling crazily along the tilted deck. A pistol thudded and a bullet crooned past his ear, and in the same instant there was a crack of bone against bone as his knuckles crashed to the point of a pirate jaw.

He saw his man go down, limp. Saw Rooney starting out of the wheel-house, blue-shirted and berserk. Saw Otto struggle dazedly up and crumple again under another crushing blow.

Then Corcoran found himself with two huskies on his hands. One was going at him from behind, beating his head with a gun-barrel. He knocked the man in front sprawling, but the man behind had him.

Down came the flailing pistol again, and down went Solo Corcoran. Abruptly the sunlight blurred out; and when he opened his eyes again Rooney and Otto were lying trussed on either side of him and Police Launch 17 had passed from control of the Marine Division, N. Y. P. D.

SERGEANT ROONEY had stopped a bullet. His right arm, lying limp alongside Corcoran on the hot deck, was wrapped in a clumsy crimsoned bandage. Frank Otto, on the other side, had a great gash in his forehead. He was out, plainly, for a long count.

Corcoran found his stomach much improved now, but his head was bursting with pain. His arms, roped behind him, were numb; his ankles tightly bound together, his lips criss-crossed with adhesive tape.

Through slitted eyes he saw that he lay in the lee of the pilot-house.

Somebody nearby was talking. Arguing.

"It's a sucker play, Gus!" The voice was hot, high-pitched. "What we ought to do, we ought to get rid of these three coppers before we head back. Just tie some weights on 'em and drop 'em overboard."

The answering voice came from the pilot-house and Solo Corcoran caught a flash of the man at the wheel. "Gus," he saw, was the fellow who had waved that towel now bound around Rooney's wounded arm. Evidently, too, the leader of this seagoing mob of gunmen.

"Sure," returned the new helmsman. "We could chuck 'em overboard right now. But what good would they be then?"

"What good are they anyhow—except maybe to get loose and start something?"

Gus laughed. "Don't worry about 'em gettin' loose. I tied 'em myself, didn't I?"

"So what?"

"So they'll keep in case we got to use 'em. The time to rub 'em out is when the job's finished and the getaway's made. Something might slip, see? If it does—well, three live cops in our hands could be as good as three aces."

"Three aces, huh? I don't see it."

The other voice sharpened.

"As long as I'm callin' the turn on this deal, Scully, you're not supposed to. Now quit your belly-achin' and help sort out them gats. Everything but the .38s and the .45s goes over the rail, remember. We're not botherin' with the cap-pistols."

The four others from the dory, towing close astern, were busy on the forward deck of the captured police launch. The suitcases that Corcoran had seen in their boat lay open there, each filled with neatly-packed pasteboard cartons.

One glimpse of those cartons cleared the mystery of the suitcases. The cartons, at a glance, were cartridge boxes; the suitcases, as their raised lids revealed, ammunition chests!

Sergeant Rooney was stirring. His eyes were open and a whisper came from a corner of his taped mouth.

"Are you all right, Corcoran?"

Corcoran, twisting his lips, loosened an end of the adhesive; then he could whisper too.

"Might be a lot worse. But Otto got it bad."

UP FORWARD, the raiders were delving into the crates that held 17's lethal cargo. The smaller guns, swiftly weeded, were splashing overside. But nine out of ten of the seized weapons were heavy-calibered, and there were hundreds of them. Many hundreds.

As the Headquarters identification tags were ripped off, clips were being rapidly jammed into pistol magazines, revolver cylinders filled with cartridges.

Rooney saw what was going on. He groaned.

"Three fine cops, *we* are!"

Whispering, Solo Corcoran quoted his own words to him.

"Twenty-five miles, no more, no less. Nothing like obeying orders to the letter. If you'd only been willing to accommodate a seasick pal——"

"Shut up!"

One of the men on the forward deck had come upon a crate packed with knives. A first blade went flashing over the rail, another and another. From the pilot-house rolled a roar of protest.

"Hey! Save them! A lot of guys might be glad to have 'em!"

Rooney slid closer to Corcoran.

"What's it all about?" he breathed. "You'd almost think this bunch had been layin' for us."

Corcoran snorted.

"*Almost!* Damn tootin' they were laying for us. And now they've got rods enough for a regiment."

And ammunition enough, he had swiftly estimated, to launch and carry through a crime campaign on the grandest scale of all time. Each of those big, brand new suitcases would hold several thousand rounds,

and there were three suitcases. Their contents represented sudden death multiplied, for low, ten thousand times.

But what crime in project could possibly call for all this armament?

Explanation came readily, automatically, for everything else. And still that final question remained, unanswered and blankly unanswerable.

Every year at about this time the New York police took all confiscated weapons to sea and sank them; put them permanently out of underworld circulation. There never was any secret about it. Yesterday, for example, every newspaper in town probably had published a paragraph or two about today's trip of Police Launch 17.

Whatever their ultimate objective, the six from the dory had planned swiftly and planned well. They had, of course, trailed Rooney's craft out of the Bay; had swung a wide circle around her in the open sea, keeping her always in sight with those powerful binoculars now swung over a broad shoulder of the gang chief at the wheel. And the rest had been simple. Painfully simple.

"What the hell," breathed Rooney at Corcoran's ear, "would six guys want with six hundreds gats?"

"I'm hoping," said Corcoran, "we live to see."

The sun was low in the west, and in the east clouds were banking up. The wind had veered, gone damp with a promise of rain.

Gus, the launch's new wheelman, poked his head from the pilot-house.

"Hi, Scully!" he called. "Come and steer a while."

A MOMENT after that he came out onto the deck and stood staring down at Solo Corcoran. He was big-muscled, black-haired, hard-jawed, flinty-eyed.

"You a cop, too?" he conjectured. Then he stooped over, flipped back Corcoran's coat and calmly unpinned the gold police shield from his vest. "I'll borrow this, huh?" he said.

Rooney, grimacing between whispers, had worked one side of his mouth free of the adhesive.

"This is a swell pay-off!" he growled. "What do you s'pose I'll do the next time I see anybody wig-wagging for help?"

To Gus there was humor in that. He grinned.

"Maybe," he suggested, "there won't be a next time. Just between ourselves, the lads are all for feeding you cops to the sharks." He scowled at Rooney. "Lucky you didn't hit anybody when you cut loose with that rod. I wouldn't been able to hold 'em if you had."

In the wheel-house behind him a voice rattled in the loudspeaker of the launch's short-wave radio:

"Attention! All squad cars, attention!"

Again Gus was grinning.

"News from home, huh? Too bad you can't talk back and tell 'em your troubles, ain't it?"

Then the voice broadcasting from Police Headquarters cut in.

"Attention!" it repeated. "Six of the convicts who escaped from Joliet Penitentiary, Illinois, last Tuesday are reported traveling together toward New York. The leader is Gus Turner, height five eleven, weight one hundred ninety. He has black hair and eyes and undershot jaw. With him, according to Chicago information, are Steven Scully; Joseph Ruggero, Sam Holland . . ."

Rooney's successor in command burst into a laugh.

"Now," he said, "you're gettin' an earful. This is Gus Turner you're lookin' at. And what the hell are you goin' to do about it, coppers? Breaks are coming pretty tough, ain't they? Well, cheer up. By and by they'll get tougher!"

AT SUNDOWN Gus took the helm again and changed the launch's course. Straight into the glowing west he headed her, with the dory in tow and those squally black clouds pursuing.

The Highlands were lifting over the bow

as darkness fell, and with night came a hurricane blast of wind and driving rain. It was icy rain. The slap of it brought Frank Otto out of his coma. Suddenly he was sitting up alongside Corcoran, raving.

The adhesive, loosened by the rain, hung in streamers from his frothing lips. In the glow of the binnacle his eyes glinted with a light of madness and his voice was a lunatic bellow.

"Leggo of me, Rooney! Hands off, Corcoran! I'm going to get that feller! I'm going to kill that guy that hit me!"

Big Gus was at the wheel again. He sprang from the pilot-house and swung a sledge-hammer fist. Otto, up on his knees, sprawled back and lay still.

Solo Corcoran struggled against his bonds.

"I'll remember that, Turner," he said. "One of these days I'll have you down in the basement at Headquarters. It'll be *my* party then."

Turner drove a heavy toe into his ribs.

"Something else to remember!" he snarled. "But you won't be rememberin' anything long, Brick-top. It's hell you'll be seein' next, not Headquarters." He turned and shouted: "Hey, Scully! Throw these flatties down in the cabin and put some fresh tape on their traps. Half an hour'll see us in the Narrows. We won't want 'em yelping."

One thing sure, Gus Turner, escaped Illinois convict, knew these New York waters. He shaped his course with a pilot's precision. Presently the Narrows lay directly ahead, so near that Corcoran could see the harbor lights glittering beyond through the cabin ports.

The launch's engine, controlled from the pilot-house, idled for a space then. Lying drenched on the cabin floor, Corcoran knew that the dory was being cast off. And evidently Turner was transferring to the smaller and speedier boat, leaving crooked-nosed Scully in command of 17.

Turner's voice came to Corcoran through an open port.

"We'll take the lead, Scully, and you just follow along."

"And what if we run into another police boat?" Scully wanted to know.

"We won't. Not the way we're goin'. There ain't a chance in a thousand. Anyway, they'd only give you a whistle and look for you to whistle back."

Then a stronger drumming rose above the beat of the rain and the dory was pulling away.

The lights of Staten Island paraded past the cabin windows. Below the tip of the island, dory and launch cut to the Jersey shore, giving lower Manhattan and the Marine Division slip the widest possible berth.

IN THE Hudson, later, a two-decker ferryboat bright with lights towered above the convoy. After that, one more smaller ferryboat crossed 17's bow and the way was clear.

Turner had left Scully with only one companion aboard the launch. That was a thickset, swarthy fellow whom Corcoran had heard addressed as "Ruggy"—the Joseph Ruggero, safely enough, of the police broadcast.

Ruggero appeared in the after hatch as the lights of George Washington Bridge twinkled ahead, and swept the captives with the beam of a pocket torch. He saw Solo Corcoran's eyes open and grinned toothily.

"Beginnin' to guess where we're goin'?" he laughed. "No? Well, keep guessin'."

Then the flashlight blinked out and he returned to the pilot-house. Corcoran could hear him talking with Scully there, but the voices were only a hum blurred by the chugging of the engine.

The launch passed under the bridge and continued on up the river, and Ruggero still stayed forward. For long minutes Corcoran lay listening. At last, assured there would be no immediate interruption, he started to work his way toward the after bulkhead.

There, to port, was 17's galley. Nothing

elaborate, of course. Just a small gasoline stove off in a corner; this stove, a dish-rack, and half a dozen hanging pots and pans.

But in the galley, such as it was, Corcoran had caught a promise of release as Ruggero's flashlight circled the bulkheads.

Gaining his feet with his wrists fastened behind him, his ankles bound and the launch rocking crazily in the Hudson chop wasn't a trick to be accomplished at first trial; but after half a dozen tumbles he was up at last.

It was pitch-dark in the cabin as he stood teetering alongside the stove. That didn't matter. He knew what he wanted, knew just where it was. Any one of those frying-pans hung on the bulkhead would do; the job now was to get it.

Back where Ruggero's flashlight had discovered him, Corcoran set himself at a task which he knew would at best be a labor of hours—wondered, starting, whether he would live to finish it. Sitting on the handle of the frying-pan to hold it firm, he began rubbing the stout twine binding his wrists against the pan's cast-steel rim.

IT WAS slow work, painful work. Slower and infinitely more painful after the first strand had been severed.

Rooney had discovered what he was doing; the whisper of a prayer came through his taped lips. But Otto was still unconscious.

Ruggero came aft again and the shaft of his torch speared through the hatch.

"Won't be long now," he said. "Every minute we're gettin' closer to the big excitement."

To his perfunctory glance all seemed well. He went back to Scully, satisfied, and once more Corcoran sat up and sawed.

The radio in the pilot-house had been silent as the launch sidled through bay and lower river, but now it had been switched on. The crisp rattle of the police broadcaster's voice reached the cabin with a miscellany of minor alarms and orders.

Suddenly Corcoran found himself listening, tense.

"Attention! All floating Marine Division units, attention! Personal attention, Sergeant Henderson and Police Launch 21. You are relieved of Lower Bay patrol, Sergeant Henderson, and will proceed at once to sea in an effort to locate Police Launch 17. Number 17, with Sergeant James Rooney and Patrolman Frank Otto aboard, is more than two hours overdue at Battery and believed disabled somewhere due east of Sandy Hook."

That was that. In the darkness and the rain, 17 had slipped through the harbor unreported. Now, far above city waters, she was free to go on unchallenged while the search for her led off over the open ocean.

But where was she heading?

Over and over the question buzzed through Corcoran's aching head as he patiently sawed damp twine against blunt steel, as a second strand parted and a third.

What crime could be on that would call for the use of pistols by scores and by hundreds? Were these six seagoing escaped convicts madmen who actually planned to sack some sleeping up-river city?

A fourth strand gave. Two more now. Only two!

Up ahead the dory was slackening speed. The launch came alongside her, and Turner was calling to Scully.

"Here we are. Slow down. I'm coming aboard."

The clumping of the launch's engine promptly lowered to a purr. The gunwale of the dory bumped the counter, and Turner's feet thudded on the deck.

In a moment another bullseye was stabbing through the open hatch into the cabin. Gus Turner held it this time. The light flickered briefly on Corcoran, lying back on frying-pan and gory hands, and transferred to Rooney and Otto.

Scully stood by Turner, and Turner said: "Go down there, Scull, and take the badges off them turkeys in the blue shirts.

Comin' up in a police boat and flashin' official tins we won't have any trouble at all. Right now I guarantee it's going to be a pushover."

Down the companion-way came Scully and went back with the two police shields.

"You'll make a swell-lookin' cop, Gus." He laughed softly. "But you ought to get by in the dark."

"Just watch me," invited Turner. "What's the time?"

"Little after midnight. Ten after."

"Good enough. Hitch on the dory again and we'll all ride high."

"Goin' right in to the dock, you say?"

"Right in."

Turner switched off the flashlight and started forward. Following him, Scully said: "They keep guards on the dock, Gus."

"Sure they do," Turner agreed. "But the guards'll be easy to take care of. It'll be all over before they know what happened."

HE WAS stepping into the pilot-house then, throwing in the clutch and spinning the wheel. The propeller churned. A gentle swell rolled the launch as she headed in toward the east bank.

After a few minutes there was no more rolling. They were close to the pier, drifting in. A challenging voice rose ashore.

"No landing here! You've got the wrong dock, brother!"

The launch slid alongside the dock, barely grazing it.

"Wrong dock?" Turner sang out. "Throw a light on us and you'll see different."

A sweeping white beam brightened the cabin windows on the starboard side, one after another.

"Oh," exclaimed the voice on the pier. "New York police launch, huh? What the hell you doin' all the way up here?"

"We're on special police business," Turner said. "Grab hold of our lines, will you?"

Corcoran's brain whirled with speculation. He sawed away faster, pain forgotten. Just what point on the Hudson they had reached he had no means of knowing. But up here somewhere the mightiest of all America's multimillionaires spent his summers on a great estate, surrounded day and night by a cordon of armed guards.

If this happened to be his private dock, then the mystery of 17's seizure at sea was solved at last. It was a snatch then that Gus Turner and his fellow-fugitives had embarked on. Probably the boldest and potentially most profitable enterprise in all criminal history. A job in which a dozen men might have to be shot down and a hundred fought off before the kidnappers were in the clear with their victim.

The guard on the pier had been joined, evidently, by a companion.

"Don't blame you fellows," Turner said, "for being careful. The idea is, we're bringin' up a letter from the Police Commissioner."

Corcoran, faint but staying with it, had only one cord between him and freedom as the launch warped in and Turner stepped onto the dock.

"Here's my shield," he was saying. "And if you want to see the Commissioner's letter before I take it in——"

Then suddenly his voice went raspy, and Corcoran knew he had whipped out a gun.

"Stick 'em up!" he grated. "Up high—and don't let out a sound if you want to live!"

There was a moment of dead silence, broken only by the patter of the rain on the cabin roof. Then:

"Gawd A'mighty, what *is* this?"

"A back-door visit. We're callin' on some friends," said Turner. "Strip off them uniforms now. Get 'em off quick. No more gab."

The dorymen were leaping from the launch to the pier. Corcoran heard Gus Turner's voice again through the scuffling.

"This big bozo's regalia'll just about fit

me. You get into the other rig, Scully, and the two of us'll lead the way. Somebody fetch the twine and the tape."

But Turner didn't mean to depend on twine and tape alone. One after another, the watchmen dropped under blows of clubbed guns. Solo Corcoran, his hands finally free, was up and at the cabin window as they fell. A few feet away, Turner was peeling off his wet clothes.

Corcoran stripped the tape from his lips, slashed through the twine that bound his ankles and stooped over Rooney.

"Okay, Marine Division!" he whispered, slashing again. "There'll be two of us on our feet, anyway, when the boys set off the fireworks!"

ON THE dock Turner was issuing low-voiced orders as he drew on the commandeered uniform.

"First thing, we get those gun-crates up handy to the gate. Scully, you know the lay here, so you take charge of that. Joe Ruggero, *you* stay back and mind the cops. No matter what happens, don't get excited and plug 'em. I'll take care of that end myself when the time comes. Give Scull a hand, Holland. And you other guys . . ."

Through the shore-side port at which he crouched, Corcoran saw that the Headquarters property clerk's crates with their freight of loaded pistols were already on the dock. As he watched, two of them were borne off through the drizzle; then two more, two more and two more.

It was no time to start things. Turner stood on the pier and Ruggero on the launch's deck, both with guns drawn, alert. To step out against them unarmed meant sure, swift death.

Under the cloudy sky the night was black. One dim light burned on the dock. Beyond it a long, two-storied building blocked all visibility.

Two by two the eight crates of commandeered guns vanished into darkness, two men to a crate. And as the eighth and last crate passed from the pier, Turner waved at Ruggero and followed.

Down in the police boat's cabin, Solo Corcoran kicked off his shoes.

"Stay put," he whispered to Rooney. "You got to go easy with the bum wing, remember. Just let me take this baby Ruggero by myself."

In stocking feet he climbed the companionway and glided along the deck. Ruggero wheeled, tugging at his pistol, a fraction of a second too late to shoot. Iron knuckles connected with the point of his jaw and wilted him.

Corcoran raced back to Rooney with Ruggero's gun.

"Hold this," he said, "and stick with Otto. He's got to be protected. And there's got to be a guard over that Wop when he comes to. Stay on deck close by him."

Rooney sputtered: "What's it all about, Solo? What the hell are we in on here?"

"If you ask me," said Corcoran, "it's the snatch of the century. But somehow I figure it ain't coming off."

A moment later, stealthily cutting around the freight-shed, he came to a sudden stop and stood staring.

BEFORE him, a stone's throw farther up the river bank, loomed a vast gray pile surrounded by turreted walls and twinkling here and there with subdued night lights.

His jaw dropped.

"Snatch," he breathed, "is right!"

But another kind of snatch, altogether another kind, than he had anticipated.

This gloomy great building on the Hudson was no millionaire's mansion. Its windows were mere slits in the thick granite walls—steel-barred slits. Corcoran was looking, although from an unfamiliar angle, at contours he knew as well as those of gold-domed Police Headquarters in the city.

Here before him, ultimate objective of the plot that had crystallized to action twenty miles at sea, was the most famous

of all American prisons. Sing Sing. The Big House. The "Iron College."

Standing rooted, Corcoran remembered a paragraph in the newspaper account of the Joliet prison-break; a paragraph concerning past associations of Gus Turner, who had led the break.

Turner for years had been a companion in crime of "Tommy-gun" Forbes. Together, sometimes by themselves, sometimes at the head of mobs a dozen strong, they had ravaged the Middle West and the Pacific Coast states.

Now Forbes was under sentence of death in New York. And Gus Turner, leaving three guards dead and two more dying behind the walls of Joliet, was here to liberate him.

Somewhere ahead in the darkness, Corcoran heard voices. On this side of the prison, he recollected, there was a service gate.

Turner was there in the pier-guard's uniform, backed by Scully in the second uniform and the three others with the borrowed police badges, calling on the keeper at the gate to open up.

Two prison uniforms and three New York shields were good enough. Before Corcoran could shout a warning, the gate was creaking and with a rush Turner and his gunmen piled through.

Still in stocking feet, Corcoran moved closer. Where were those crates? If he could just dig into one of them—come up two-gunned, shooting—there could be a quick end of this.

But there wasn't a chance. The guns had been whisked into the prison yard when he tiptoed to the gate.

The keeper had got the same dose as the pier-guards. He lay sprawled just inside the wall, arms flung out, inert.

The gate stood open. Beyond it, in shadow, Turner whispered to his raiders.

"Next the tower guards. We knock 'em off one at a time and grab their machine guns, and there needn't be a sound. Then we got control and Forbes is as good as out."

A whisper from Scully: "And anybody else that wants to come."

"Right. We shoot the locks on all tiers. Everybody's welcome. There'll be rods for most of 'em and knives for the rest. You see, now?"

THEN they were trooping away, and as the darkness swallowed them Solo Corcoran passed wraithlike through the open gate. He stepped over the fallen keeper and closed the steel door.

The spring-lock clicked. But that, as Corcoran instantly and bleakly realized, didn't mean a thing. Gus Turner, who seemed never to miss a trick, had forehandedly carried off the key.

Through this side gate, if he ever got back to it, Turner could open the way to the outer world with a turn of his wrist. His own way and a way for all who cared and dared to follow.

A vision of what the next few minutes might bring sent a cold shiver down Corcoran's spine. He could see the prison rabble streaming out behind Turner and the rescued Forbes; armed, desperate criminals pillaging the countryside for money and clothing less conspicuous than the prison shoddy, killing at any show of resistance, killing without mercy.

Corcoran bent to the lock, found the keyhole with an exploring finger.

It wasn't a modern cylinder lock, but an old timer. A lock to take one of those big brass keys still in use all through this century-old penitentiary.

Corcoran had a flash of inspiration. His hand darted to his breast pocket and returned to the lock. There was a sharp snap and then, vaulting over the prostrate guard again, he was racing up the prison yard.

A moment later a flaming-haired apparition burst into the penitentiary engine-room and waved bloody hands as the mechanic in charge snatched up a gun.

"Shoot if you want to!" cried the gory stranger. "But blow that whistle. For God's sake, blow it! You hear?"

The engineer leaped to a valve and the sudden shrill wail of a siren shattered the silence of the yard. Then somewhere along the wall a machine-gun was rattling throatily and pistols were roaring.

From the engine-room window Corcoran saw two uniformed figures dashing across the yard as the siren gathered breath and cut loose again. They had disappeared into the death-house block before he realized they were not a pair of keepers rushing to riot stations, but Turner and Scully bent with the savage loyalty of the underworld on completing their job.

Turner had his gun raised as the death-house door opened. Flame spurted from its muzzle, and the guard in the doorway toppled.

THE three raiders in civilian clothing were making, at the same moment, for the big new cell-block at the end of the yard. They crashed its gate shooting, and directly after they had entered a horde in prison drab poured out.

Along Death Row the cells were open too. Turner and Scully, reappearing, were followed by a big red-faced man, "Tommy-gun" Forbes himself, and by the dozen convicted murderers who had been his neighbors. Forbes had a gun now. Firing point-blank, he bowled over a running guard.

Turner's thundering voice boomed above the gunfire.

"Keep with me! I've got a way out of here!"

The engineer had belatedly thought of his switches. Powerful arcs flared on everywhere. The yard blazed with light.

Gus Turner sped for the gate at the river end of the wall, the released prisoners swarming after him in a howling pack.

"Guns!" yelled Turner, pointing at the crates. "Help yourselves!"

Solo Corcoran grabbed the gun dropped by the keeper shot down by Forbes. Turner was at the gate, key in hand, and straight for him ran Corcoran while machine-gun bullets from the walls chipped the cement about his flying feet.

Turner saw him coming. For an instant he gaped, eyes bulging. Then his pistol cracked and once more the lights went out for Corcoran. As he pitched forward Turner was bending coolly again to the lock.

When Corcoran opened his eyes, Palliser, the Principal Keeper, was kneeling beside him. The prison yard was filled with a hubbub of voices and the cell-blocks echoed with the "yammer" of excited convicts. But the shooting had ceased.

"Corcoran!" Palliser was pleading. "Come out of it, Corcoran. Look at me. Tell me how you got here?"

Corcoran waved a weak hand.

"Long story," he whispered. "You tell *me* something, Cap. Did they get away?"

The prison doctor, another friend, pushed through the keepers crowding around Corcoran.

"You're a lucky man, Solo," he said. "It's just a flesh-wound. But a couple of inches further to the left——"

Corcoran looked at Palliser.

"Well, did they get away?"

"Not one of 'em," said Palliser. "They had a key to the service gate, but somehow they couldn't get it in the lock. Funny thing, too. Nobody else can, either."

"Providential," nodded the doctor. "If that gate had opened, we'd have seen the worst prison-break in history."

The gate was no more than half a dozen paces from where Corcoran lay. A guard was working at the lock, swearing softly.

"Beats me, Cap," he called over his shoulder.

Solo Corcoran, looking up at Palliser, grinned wanly.

"I guess," he said, "you better get a locksmith. You can charge him up to me, Cap, because I'm the one who gummed your lock for you." Wincing, he fished out a jagged wooden stub. "What's left of my pencil," he murmured. "The rest of it's jammed in the keyhole."

BLOOD RUBIES

By ANSON HARD

CHAPTER I

STRANGLER'S DEATH

THE thin silk rope, strong as a tarpon line, dropped silently through the Indian night. The running noose circled the neck of Barry Huelton, singing, as it tightened below his ears, a song of breathless death. And as the rope tightened there was a powerful tug upward to haul him gasping through the window and drop him to the flagged courtyard thirty feet below.

The unexpectedness of the attack caught Barry napping. It was the old, dacoit trick of dropping death, then dragging of the victim through the window to drop him to a bone-crushing finish. And when his quivering remains were picked up by the Indian police they would call it accidental death.

Huelton was lifted from the floor, a knife-like pain running the length of his spinal column and for the moment paralyzing the nerve centers. Only by superhuman effort, it seemed to him, was he able to thrust out his arms and seize the two sides of the window casing. Even then, swinging as he was, he could get but a feeble grasp.

All this had happened in the span of three watch ticks although it seemed to

the young American that minutes had sped by while he swung half out of the window desperately grasping for a handhold. The grim realization of death slowed the beat of his heart, froze his quick acting muscles, lengthened seconds into eternities.

And then in the dimmed focus of his popping eyes came a vision of Yung Tai and his unveiled threats. Yung Tai who had warned him not to return to Burma.

The remembrance of that sinister yellow face with its cold, unblinking eyes and never smiling lips brought a new strength to the weakening Huelton. His fingers stiffened as the rope pulled more resistlessly upward.

In Barry's right hand was clutched a razor. He had been shaving when the peculiar noise had drawn him to the window. It was the weird cry of "Fee-anwh-wh!" ending in a tremulous waver, the howl of the frightened jackal; and so unusual was it in the streets of Tsagaing that Barry Huelton, accustomed as he was to the oddities of the Orient, went rushing to the window.

AND now that razor, the blade that might cut him free, and he could not use it. By stiffening his arms into ramrods he had prevented himself from being pulled through the window, but if he released a hand from the casing his doom was sealed.

Huelton could feel his arms slowly giving at the shoulders, the muscles weakening under the strain. A few seconds more and they would be folded back, the casing would slip from his tired fingers, and he would be hurled out like a sack of paddi. The dusty stones of the courtyard whitened in the starlight shone up at him like the tops of buried skulls.

There was safety clutched in his hand if he could use it. The keen blade would

A Young American Learns That Evil Stalks the Burmese Jungle Country

sever the cord at a slice; but before he could sever it, he would be hurtling downward. The terrible irony of his predicament struck him like a splash of icy water, thinning the blood in his veins. For one cold moment he gave up in despair.

His lungs, stopped by the choking thread, swelled against his breastbone. A black haze, swirling like a nebulous fog, swept around him. And then at his moment of greatest despair, he mentally ripped out a curse he could not speak, and determined to fight. He was not gone, not yet.

Barry's feet were off the floor, but they were still inside the sill. His mind was clicking with machine precision. And as he thought he acted. Doubling his knees he raised his feet to the sill, then straightened his legs with powerful force, simultaneously releasing and raising his hands.

IT WAS a desperate gamble. If he could grasp with his left hand the upper flange of the window frame, he could hold for the one split second needed to cut himself free.

But could he make it, make it against the pull of those dacoit arms on the roof above? There was not another chance. The silk cord cut into the skin like circling fire, but his hands went above the projecting flange. His left hand caught, slipped, caught again. Even as his clutching fingers were being straightened out, his right hand made a desperate slash at the cord before his throat.

He felt the keen steel snick through. The killing pressure around his neck was gone. He dropped to the floor and went down with all the world spinning about him.

The tremendous relief as he sucked in the first lungful of air was like the light of the sun to a diver long down. He sat up, tearing the loosened coil from his throat, rubbing his throbbing temples, clearing the haze from his brain.

Then he was on his feet running.

The hired killer was upon the roof and —someone more deadly and treacherous than he had hired him. Barry had an overwhelming desire to sink his fingers in that dacoit's throat and squeeze the truth from him.

HUELTON ran into the corridor and headed for the stairs. Beside the broad hotel stairway was another flight, narrow and railed like the companionway of a ship, leading to the roof trap. He went up this single flight in two leaps, shoving up the trap before him. His eyes came to the level of the roof in time to see a brown figure dart from the roof and leap into a tall mohor that shaded the rear courtyard.

Barry turned and ran down the steps. The dacoit must alight in the rear court. Agile as the brown man was he could scarcely hope to scramble down the tree more rapidly than Huelton could descend the steps. It was a race for the ground.

Barry took the final flight in a leap, almost went down upon the floor of the lobby, and plunged for the rear exit. A sleepy night clerk behind the low counter in the corner sat up with a jerk, his eyes swelling to fat almonds.

Huelton was too late, but he saw the dacoit cross the open space behind the hotel, running like a startled jackal. Impulsively Huelton struck out in pursuit.

In the daytime the race could not have lasted one hundred yards. The native would have disappeared, lost his identity among the throngs in the crowded streets; but in the dead quiet of the narrow thoroughfare the brown man flitted ahead like an elusive shadow.

An old-timer, more phlegmatic in his attitude toward the thuggery of the Orient, would never have undertaken such a pursuit. "May as well swim for an eel in a tank as to catch a dacoit, my word!" But as long as the broken shafts of starlight gave glimpses of the fleeting figure, Huelton kept up the chase.

And then the dacoit seemed to fade from the picture as if he had been wiped away by a giant sponge.

FROM the moment the rope had settled upon his neck until the paid murderer had disappeared in the shadows of the narrow street, Barry knew there was more behind this attack than the mere elimination of himself. In that despairing moment before the window he had thought of Yung Tai, the unscrupulous and scheming Chinese trader. Yet the Chinese might not be the one.

True there had been hard words with Tai when Huelton had driven Yung and his thieves from a timber concession on the upper Kyendwen; and when Barry had left two weeks ago for Rangoon, Yung had let him know it would be dangerous to return. But Huelton was back, and if this murderer's trail led to Yung so much the better.

Barry had come out of the crowded wards into a section of more spacious dwellings. The section was still native, but here the wealthier owners surrounded their homes with some semblance of a lawn, attempting to cover, if they could not eradicate, the odors of the lower town with the fragrance of flowers.

Huelton crouched behind a clump of bushes. He was not familiar with all of Tsagaing, but he recognized the home of a wealthy Oriental. And it was at this spot that the speeding killer had disappeared.

The lithe American stole forward. There was a light in this nearest house, showing around drawn curtains. He had no liking to be a spy or an eavesdropper; but the pursuit had carried him this far, and he might as well make the most of it.

Someone had tried to kill him, an enemy who hired thugs to strike in the dark; and that enemy would remain ever present, a power of death always in the offing, until Barry had searched him out.

Huelton edged forward skirting a section of bamboo fence and keeping as much as possible in the shadows of the shrubs and trees. A devil of impulsiveness was urging him. Once he had got into action after the choking scare of the strangler's rope, the reaction carried him to the point of recklessness. A hot passion against the insidious ways of the East, against trickery and deceit and unfair play, roused in him a vindictive anger.

And then he knew that he was being watched, a subtle intuition warned him. It was the same feeling he had had once

before when Yun-nan bandits had ambushed him in the hills of Shan. A palpable emanation of evil struck him like the vibrations of an invisible fan.

Barry did not hear anything; he certainly did not see anything. The house to his right lay bathed in tropic starlight, with thin streaks of light showing about the curtains of one room. No hum of conversation carried through the night air; no sound of movement. Yet, someone was near him.

For a second Barry felt a trickle of fear that was like an icy finger, a sensation that came to him with the glint of polished steel. It was not cowardice; he could not have existed for six years in the out-trails of the Orient and be a coward. It was more a realization of the bleak deadliness of knives that struck silently in the dark.

THEY closed in upon him. Like wraiths from either side dark figures materialized and struck down. The quick

hiss of breath as the men lunged was like the sibilant fury of a serpent.

There was no time for defense. Huelton, crouching, went forward like a runner from his marks. One descending knife ripped through his trouser leg and pinned the cloth to the earth. Both assailants went down in a huddle upon his legs.

That one moment of confusion gave Barry his chance. With a scrambling, catlike leap he jerked himself free and was upon his feet.

One attacker was up, a dark form outlined in an opening between the bushes. Huelton struck, fiercely, terribly, and the man went down with a sucking grunt. Barry whirled to meet the other who was attacking from the side.

The stout American did not hear, as he set himself to meet this second knifeman, a third person come out onto a dark side porch and leap for the ground.

The man before Barry held the knife low, edge on top, ready for a ripping slash upward, the deadliest of knife strokes. Huelton shifted rapidly, staking all on a lightning grasp for the wrist. His right hand closed on the corded forearm as the blade sliced the cloth of his sleeve.

Barry's move would be effective only if carried through with instantaneous precision. He shoved his left arm under the other's right, jerking up the brown arm as he did so. His own left palm went against the bare chest; and then with all the strength he could muster, he snapped the knife-arm down over his own. A howl of pain rose as the hilt slid from tortured fingers.

Something crashed as if a kulib palm had fallen upon Barry Huelton. It was like an explosion within his own cranium, and one rocket of light shot scintillating before his vision. He went down stunned before the very man he had disarmed.

A gruff American voice gave orders. "Drag him in, you coconuts. There ain't nothin' like a Colt barrel to put the stopper on a bucko like him."

CHAPTER II

ENEMIES

BARRY HUELTON felt himself lifted, borne along. There was a lightness, an inconsistency in his body like the unreality of a dream. He felt light and thin as air.

And in that space when his mind was groping, he seemed to recall the events of the past few weeks. Pictures passed through his mind like an unwinding cinematograph reel.

He was upon the veranda of the hotel and a turbaned waiter was serving *chota pegs*. And there was another. Yes, McPherson, the Canadian mineralogist, with his dry humor and his kindly eyes, who had come out of the Chodan with an inch of beard on his face and spinel rubies in his pocket.

That was it, the rubies; but how could others have known?

Barry's mind reversed itself. How could others not have known with the ever-present eyes and ears of the Orient? Like clots of crystallized blood those gems had been, glowing as if endowed with the warmth of life. Not many of them, but McPherson had hinted at *byon* workings, known only to himself, where wealth awaited the digging.

Barry had made his hasty trip to Rangoon where he made his report to the timber company for which he was prospecting. Then he was back to Tsagaing to join McPherson in a return to the Chodan.

Some of the pictures returning to Barry's hazy mind were dim. McPherson was waiting for someone. Oh, yes, his daughter, who was coming up-river from Moulmein. Huelton had warned the older man not to return to the jungle alone. In a week, two weeks, he would be back from Rangoon, and they would join forces, prospect together in the valley of the Kyendwen.

And poked beneath the door of his cabin on the down-river boat Barry had found a note warning him never to return, a note

written with the sharp almost engraved precision of a Chinese penman. Yung Tai?

Was that McPherson in front of him? Barry shook his head; and, as his mind came back to reality, he found himself staring at the men before him.

Yung Tai sat beside the teakwood table clad in a gown of dark gray silk. His expressionless face was as still as if carved from camphorwood, only now and then the lips parting as he lifted a silver pipe from the table beside him. A Chinese of superficial polish, a smooth Oriental article.

BUT this other man, this American? A stranger to Barry Huelton. Where Yung Tai was smooth, the other was rough. Red of face, hard of eye, with thick lips that spread to show stained teeth yellow as Indian corn. He was clad in shirt and trousers of white drill, and his sleeves were rolled to show arms of knotted muscle. He stood, a spotted topi on the back of his head, squinting down at Barry Huelton. The revolver that had crashed so disastrously on the timber scout's skull lay on the table by his hand.

"Comin' out of it, eh? You got a head like a darnick. But when you git prowlin' 'round you git in trouble. You just about cooked your goose this time, laddybuck."

Huelton made no effort to speak. He must get a grip on himself. His hand, exploring the top of his head, found the knot raised by the white man's gun barrel. Pain spread from it like ink from a cuttlefish. But the very intensity of the pain scattered the remaining haze from his brain.

There were more than two in the room. Barry felt the gaze of someone behind him. He twisted his head to see a dark figure not a yard away, a knife in his hand. This man was not Burmese. In one quick glance Barry read the features as Malay, a cutthroat from Malakka. The Malay was bare of torso with a twisted sarong for a loin piece. He may have been the one who tried the dacoit trick—and fumbled it.

Yung Tai spoke. He used clipped schoolroom English, the words intoned.

"You do honor to my humble and unworthy house. Do you seek something of Yung Tai?"

The man in the sun-helmet growled. "Cut the pussy-foot speech-makin'. Is this the interferin' swab or ain't he?"

The Chinese paused again to lift his pipe. "He is. Apparently his neck is tougher than Kwangtung silk, but no matter. May he soon rest with the ashes of his ancestors."

The very calmness of the words carried a menace. The smug confidence of the Oriental was galling.

"Hm," grunted the red-faced man. "Then Matun ain't so good as he said he was. I don't go for these damn lasso tricks nohow."

"No," cut in Barry hotly, "never put a Malay up to a dacoit trick. He's not the right kind of a cat. So you're the ones who tried to rub me out, eh? As fine a pair of killers as ever got together—if you can hire someone else to do the dirty work. I don't know who you are, hombre, but I can tell you what you are—and it'll be in one syllable English."

THE sheer bravado of the words brought a twisted smile to the face of the man addressed.

"The name's Nels Anderson, bucko, if that means anything to yuh. Now listen, Huelton—that's your name, ain't it?—you're in a tight spot, tighter'n you figger. Me and my partner here's in on a little game that nobody cuts in on, savvy? We're Yanks, you and me, and we can talk straight and to the point. You was warned not to come back up river, but you come. That's your funeral. But you can save your neck yet, if you get wise to yourself and come across. Be mule-headed and it's good night, that's all."

Huelton was sparring for time. Every moment he was recovering strength. Of the two men facing him, he knew that the blustering American was but a second-rater in criminality to the smooth, easy-going Chinaman.

"All right, Anderson, shoot."

"Well, it's this. Your jungle pal, McPherson, made a *byon* strike somewhere up in the Chodan. Give us the location and we'll give you a runnin' chance to make the next steamer for Moulmein. Otherwise, good night."

"And what if I don't know the location?"

"We'll still give you a runnin' chance, providin' you clear out of Burma and stay out, but your chances won't be good for gettin' away with a whole skin. Better come across while the comin's good."

SO THERE was the story. McPherson's secret was no secret at all. These two prime scoundrels were hot on the trail, smelling out the hidden wealth as a vulture sights carrion.

And the untold wealth of a new ruby field was enough to excite them.

Huelton did not know the location of McPherson's strike; in fact he was not certain that McPherson had made a strike at all. But he believed he had. All he knew for a certainty was that Mac had displayed a few raw spinels and pigeon-bloods and intimated there were plenty more where they came from. Barry had taken it for granted—as had Yung Tai and Anderson—that the dour Canadian had stumbled on a *byon* working.

"So that's the lay of it, eh? Well, you got the wrong pig by the ear. I don't know any location. And I wouldn't tell a couple of hyenas like you if I did."

Barry's eyes had gone rapidly over the furnishings of the room. It displayed a definite opulence. Polished floor, painted screens, rich draperies, tables and chairs of polished teak, a petroleum lamp with an inlaid shade.

But behind those screens what other paid thugs of Yung Tai might be waiting? How many pairs of hostile eyes might be watching every move? The sense of unseen danger was like the breath of peril at his back.

Yung Tai waved a thin, hairless hand. "We are not arguing. It makes no difference. You are in our way and we shall remove you. You evaded our first plan, but we shall not fail a second time. McPherson himself will lead us to the mine —*but none shall see what happens after.* Achacha, Matun!"

"None shall see what happens after!" The words hung in Barry's ears. Coldly, implacably, without a shade of inflection in his level voice, Yung Tai read the death warrant of Jim McPherson, even as he had pronounced the same upon Huelton.

AN AIR of unreality hung over the room. It hardly seemed possible in this house of quiet elegance that life and death should be dealt with as casually as one might discard a worn slipper; that knives might snick or guns crash amid the haunting sweetness of the *hari shringar.*

Barry Huelton tried to keep cool, collected. He knew from the moment his dazed eyes had settled on Yung Tai that he was—as Anderson put it—in a tight hole. His impulsive pursuit of the strangler had brought him to the men behind the act—and to his own abrupt finish. Ten to one he would be crocodile meat before the morrow.

One chance in ten—gambling odds. He had played closer odds and won through. Sooner or later Yung Tai would give the signal, and he, Barry, must anticipate him by the flicker of a lash. In that little chair of polished wood in which he sat, he gathered his muscles for that one desperate chance at escape.

"Achacha, Matun!" Ready, killer.

The chair in which Huelton sat shot out behind him, sliding like a greased projectile over the shimmering floor. The first blow

would come from the back; Yung Tai chose to strike from behind. But before the first syllable passed the lips of the Chinese. Barry Huelton went into action.

THE chair cracked upon the shins of the Malay, Matun, even as he struck forward with the knife. He went down with a hissing grunt, the knife singing along the polished floor like the scrape of resined gum. A screen to the left tipped over as another man appeared.

Barry's lunge had been straight for the lamp. The table, too solid to be crushed, went hard against the wall, the lamp and shade shattering into tingling fragments. One last expiring tongue of flame and the room was in darkness.

When Huelton figured Yung Tai as the brains of the gang, hiring others to do the rough work, he underestimated the fighting qualities of the yellow man. Before the last running glint of reflected light died from the polished surfaces, hands were upon him, hands thin, powerful, like claws of tempered steel.

One hand went under Barry's left elbow, reached up to grasp his fist. The Oriental's hand reached its mark, and Huelton was caught, gripped in a human vise.

Bare feet were pattering on the floor. Anderson swore at the loss of his gun which had gone skidding from the table. Someone stumbled over Huelton's legs.

Barry knew that seconds were vital. A prolonged fight meant defeat. Having no weapon he must use his fists and use them hard.

There was a counter for the hold that Yung Tai had upon him if he could work it quickly enough. He heard the straining Chinese call for a light. Pain was shooting the length of Huelton's arm like a digging blade. A few seconds more and that arm would be useless, either broken at the elbow or twisted out of joint. He must act.

Barry's legs left the floor and curled up like depressed springs; then uncoiled to catch the Oriental in their clinging grasp. His thighs squeezed upon yellow ribs with a force that brought a grunt. At the same time, twisting sideways, he slid the elbow from the other's grasp. Like a cat Barry reversed himself, setting his knees on either side of the close-cropped head. He clamped hard on the skull in a pressure that was agonizing.

Before the racking pain in the squeezed head could pass, Huelton brought up one knee and set it down hard on the base of the neck. It was like a rabbit punch in wrestling except fiercer, harder. A thin groan of pain came from Yung Tai, and he went for the moment limp.

HUELTON kicked himself free and was on his feet. He had lost all sense of direction; he must fight his way to the wall. A fumbling body brushed against him, and he hurled the fellow away with a side-sweep of his arm.

Then Barry's hands closed upon the heavy draperies. He jerked them aside and was through the window, landing upon the lawn. A shout went up from the house as the starlight framed his exit.

Barry Huelton was running, retracing again the long silent street he had come down minutes before, racing for the protection of the hotel. And as he raced he knew that the fight was just beginning, that Yung Tai would not give up. Up in the mighty Chodan lay the rubies of the Kyendwen, and only he and Jim McPherson lay between the Chinese and fortune.

It would be a fight of blood, red as the gems that came from the calcite beds. A fight without mercy and without quarter in which craft and strength would win. And Barry Huelton felt an exultation at the thought.

CHAPTER III

SURPRISE

HUELTON came running into the hotel. The sleepy-eyed night clerk still dozed behind the counter. The yellow

boy's lids narrowed apprehensively as the American strode toward him.

Barry an hour earlier, arriving tired and dirty from his traveling, had gone straight to his room. He had made no inquiry in regard to McPherson. Now it was imperative that he find the mineralogist immediately.

"Is McPherson in his room?"

The eyes of the stupid-looking clerk blinked. "The Mister McPherson? *Nai nai.* No can do. Long time gone."

The boy gave a shrug. The indifference and disgust of the Asiatic at the "much hurry" of the American stamped his flat yellow face. He said nothing, but his actions translated into an impudent, "How should I know?"

"Where's Hai Chung?"

"He no in hotel. Have many business away."

Barry could guess that business. Away with some of his yellow cronies gambling. Hai Chung, the hotel proprietor, had the Oriental's lust for games of chance.

Huelton had a strong suspicion that these yellow men of Tsagaing were leagued together. Racial opposition to the intruding Westerner banded them all in opposition. This hotel clerk himself might know much, hiding a deep cunning and duplicity behind his bland chromo of a face. He might even be lying in regard to McPherson.

"All gone away, huh? Just the same I'm having a look-see. Give me the key to McPherson's room."

The clerk made no move to comply. "No can do. He gone." The boy turned insolently away.

Barry's right arm shot over the counter. The young Oriental was caught in a powerful grip and half dragged over the low desk. The boy struggled to twist himself from the American's fingers, but he was shaken and held helpless. He was not a *ta chuen* fighter as Yung Tai was, skilled in manhandling.

"You let me into that room or I'll shake your yellow teeth down your throat!"

The clerk sputtered and gasped, the angle of his slanting eyes rising. Force was an argument that he understood. The hotel lobby was empty save for the two, and there was no one to come to his assistance. His insolence turned to grudging servility.

"Me get key, allee right."

THE two went up the stairs, the boy mumbling in unintelligible dialect.

McPherson's room was barren of human occupation. The cold impersonality of the few pieces of furniture was devoid of human touch, mute bits of wood and matting. The Canadian was gone true enough.

The clerk lighted the lamp. Huelton stood pondering. There was something behind this unexpected departure of McPherson. Had he actually gone back to the jungle or was he somewhere in the clutches of Yung Tai or Anderson?

"See here, boy, why did McPherson pull up stakes and get out?"

"Stake? No pull stake. Leavem cause want to."

"No, why did he leave? Why—did—he—leave?"

That one encounter with Huelton's fists had been disciplining. "Oh, me savvee. Getum letter from you. You say gonna stay much long time. No come back Burma. He go allee same then."

"Letter, from me?"

Huelton had written no letter. Still he believed the boy to be telling the truth. Someone had sent a forged letter.

"McPherson himself will lead us to the mine." Yung Tai's words. Clever plotting by Anderson and the Chinese. They wanted the Canadian to return to the Chodan before Huelton got back into Upper Burma. No joining of the two white men. McPherson would have no reason to think the letter spurious, and he had swallowed the bait whole.

Now the mineralogist was heading into the jungle, and, as he worked his way northward, Yung Tai's men would hang like jackals on the trail, waiting, watching

until he led them unknowingly to his find. And then——

Huelton's eyes darted about the room. There was nothing to be done here. His glance fell upon a gray rectangle of paper caught in the wainscoting behind the side table. He jerked it from its place.

A small kodak picture, the snapshot of a woman—a girl. Barry held it beside the lamp.

For a moment the dingy hotel-room faded from Barry's gaze. That picture of the girl grew to fill the full breadth of his vision blotting all other objects. It was like the projection on a movie screen when the camera is shoved near to the actor for a close-up.

And in the blurred background that face stood out clearly, the lips smiling as if about to speak, the friendly candor of the eyes asking to be put in words. A face oval, perfectly proportioned, under a mass of wavy hair that drooped to hide all but the lobes of her ears.

"Hello!" said Barry Huelton unconsciously.

An impertinent snicker from the gawking hotel boy shattered the silver screen of Huelton's thoughts.

"She, daughter the Mister McPherson. You think topside fine picture, huh? You got love?"

Huelton could have struck him, yet he knew the boy was not intentionally insolent this time. His corrupted English knew no better expression.

So this was McPherson's daughter? Barry had thought little of it when Mac had mentioned her coming up from Moulmein. Huelton knew too well the type of white woman who traveled unattended in the Orient; mannish, independent, unromantic as a tin cannister. But this girl? The sight of her picture was a flame to his brain. She was young and superbly, gloriously lovely.

"Where is she?"

"No can say. She go with the Mister McPherson."

"What? To the jungle? Not to Chodan?"

"No say. You know he go Chodan? Allee same she go with him."

That girl in the jungles of the Kyendwen? Impossible! A cold, startled fear swept Barry Huelton. He brushed by the gaping night clerk and stamped up another flight of stairs to his own room.

HUELTON considered himself hard-boiled—at least no sentimentalist where women were concerned. He was not inexperienced with the opposite sex, but his contacts were but secondary issues in his adventure of living. Like Kipling's poetic hero he had "taken his fun where he found it"—but this girl?

McPherson's daughter!

That tiger infested, snake-crawling jungle of Chodan! Surely McPherson wouldn't be fool enough to take her into that region. Yet she might have insisted and good-natured, kindly Mac had given in.

Yung Tai! Nels Anderson! The brown and yellow cutthroats that made their gang. These men like human leeches would swarm the jungle trail. What would happen to her when these killers had finished Mac? Barry Huelton knew what would happen, and his fists clenched at the thought.

Huelton dropped upon his bunk, plans, possibilities, chances running through his mind.

CHAPTER IV

THE JEMEDAR

THE sun rose like a burnished dragon's eye out of the faraway hills of Yunnan. It poured down its splendor upon the green-clad mountains of Burma, upon the spreading *tarai* jungles, gilded the broad, muddy sweeps of the Irawadi and the Kyendwen. It woke to life the human swarms that hive in Southern Asia, roused them to the reluctant labor of living.

The streets of Tsagaing, which Barry had found tenantless in the wee hours of

morning, were now inundated with life. A lane in the native section was like a rotten board kicked over and found trooping with infusoria, thousands of moving things, scurrying hither and thither, bumping, colliding, raucously articulate, militantly self-directed.

Color! It blazed and flamed above the grime and dirt. White and gold turbans, yellow robes, sarongs of gorgeous print. The sun caught and reflected from bazaars of hammered brass-ware; from piled fruit, green and cerise and golden; from stacks of rich silks; from shelves of hand-touched pottery. The light burned in a deeper red from the ends of foot-long cheroots as the women shopkeepers started their morning smokes.

Barry Huelton in this eddying throng felt himself watched. All about him were the inscrutable eyes of the East, eyes that held in their flat orbs the racial animosity of the Orient. Eyes that saw much and told nothing. Any pair of them might be the paid instruments of Yung Tai.

Through the crowded, smelling bazaars into the narrower lanes between windowless hovels. Bare children; starved, snarling dogs; women who stared curiously from dark doorways; here and there an emaciated, infected beggar.

Barry was searching. He did not fear a direct attack from Tai or Anderson here in the daylight of Tsagaing. That he was being watched he was certain, and he made his movements as casual as a sight-seeing tourist. Once he paused to stare at two Padaung women with their necks stretched thin by ring upon ring of solid brass.

In the sunlight against a sun-baked wall he came upon Hakim Anyein, a Karen-ni prophet. The soothsayer sat cross-legged, a folded cloth about his loins, a turban on his head, and about his neck a string of powerful beads to ward off spirits. Near him was a covered wicker basket.

"Good. I have found thee."

"Welcome, Burra Sahib. Welcome with blessings, Master."

Huelton did not glance about. Past them in the narrow street flowed the human current filled with watching eyes. No hint of recognition passed the face of the soothsayer; yet between the two men, one of the East and one of the West, was a bond

of friendship cemented in danger. Hakim Anyein was Barry's right hand man, his Number One boy on his jungle excursions.

The soothsayer took from the folds of his garments a cylindrical box of bamboo, bound with brass. He rattled it as a dice player does a leather cup and shook out a number of charred bones upon the ground. He studied their positions, and his lips pursed.

"I see a jungle trail ahead of Burra Sahib with blood upon the leaves. I see *bagh,* the tiger, and a memsahib of pale face and windblown hair. Dark trails, jungle battles, a hidden god, O Master."

"Keep going with your soothsaying, Hakim, but listen to me. We leave this night for Lemye. Have horses ready in a secret place. We are in danger."

"Spears are hidden in bamboo and jewels adorn a god. Be watchful and wary, O Master."

Barry took from his pocket a coin and tossed it to the soothsayer. Hakim caught the coin greedily and respectfully, touched his fingers to his forehead. To all appearances he had but told the fortune of a passing foreigner.

A brown foot snapped against the wicker basket. From out of the crowd that foot had come and disappeared again. The basket rolled over, spilling its contents.

There, hissing and coiling upon the ground not a foot from Barry's leg, was a king cobra!

THE little colloquy between the two men had not passed unnoticed. Whether the relationship between the two men was known or not, Barry at least was known to the henchmen of Yung. Here in the brilliant sunshine of a crowded street Tai had struck again.

Huelton was momentarily frozen. Had the snake belonged to any than Anyein, he would have kicked it aside. He knew that the ordinary snake fakir had harmless serpents, the poison glands drawn. But not those of Hakim! The flat head that rose spreading and blowing was charged with the deadliest of poison.

That moment of consternation almost cost Barry his life. He could not have moved fast enough to evade the lashing head. And the stunning knowledge that the minions of Yung Tai had turned the very tools of Hakim against him, froze him with the imminence of danger. He could almost feel the fangs sink like red points of fire.

But Hakim Anyein acted as one skilled in legerdemain. His hand slapped down the lashing head and covered the writhing mass with the lid of the basket. So quick that Barry could hardly see the movements of his hands the soothsayer scooped up the cobra and returned it to the basket.

Huelton with the back of his hand wiped cold drops of sweat from his forehead. The incident had passed so quickly that fear came after danger was past.

"A thousand pardons, Burra Sahib. An accident."

Huelton turned and walked rapidly away. He had given his instructions to Hakim, and no more need be said. Anyein could be depended on. But the knowledge that he was not safe upon the streets of Tsagaing brought prickles of fear tingling the nerves of the skin.

Danger one could see and prepare for, that was different. But death lashing out at one from the very dust of the street, from any chance wind that blew, from a harmless and trivial incident, was a test for tempered nerves.

Then came to Barry a memory of the kodak picture he had found, of the face of Ellen McPherson that had affected him as no other woman's face had done.

And the same unclean hands that were striking at him, would reach to seize and violate this lovely girl.

Not while he lived!

Then he must live. He must in the words of Hakim "be watchful and wary." There was work to be done; a devil's spawn to be met.

CHAPTER V

TRAIL TRICKS

THE horses' hoofs thudded upon the sodden jungle trail like the muted stamp of padded feet. On both sides the tangle of tropical verdure made an impenetrable wall of darkness, and overhead between the lacings of the chaulmoogra trees stars shone brilliantly against a background of purple silk.

Barry and the soothsayer had made their departure safely from Tsagaing. They carried little with them except a few personal belongings and firearms. To equalize the protection, Huelton had kept the revolver and given the Lee-Enfield rifle to Hakim.

A queer mixture on the soothsayer's chest. The strap of the rifle crossed the beads, a mingling of the methods of the East and West in combatting the powers of the jungle. But Anyein was not a dealer in spells alone; slung beneath his left arm was a *dha*, the jungle knife of Burma, and the soothsayer could make it slice the steamy air with powerful force if necessary.

One hour, two hours, and the silence

of the jungle settled more heavily about them. By daybreak they should make the river town of Lemye, and peril for the present would be over.

Barry pulled his horse to a halt. A light flared up on the trail ahead. In the solitude of that dark tunnel of a path, the light was an eerie radiance. A pair of gibbons began a squeaking chatter far up in the twining branches.

"What do you make of it, Anyein?"

The soothsayer sat, silently contemplating the approaching light. His dark brows knotted beneath his twisted rag of a turban.

"Thieves do not carry lights, Burra Sahib. A foot traveler lighting his way. Still it is best to be wary."

They were themselves in the darkness. The two eased the horses off the trail and quieted them. Barry had an uneasy feeling that a foot traveler at this time of night was unusual.

A robed figure drew nearer, plodding slowly under the sawing torch he carried. In the other hand he held a staff of bamboo, and his eyes kept a constant watch on the path before his feet.

Barry Huelton grinned wryly. "I'm getting the jitters," he commented inwardly.

The rapid sequence of events in Tsagaing had edged the American's nerves. The deadly machinations of Yung Tai, his unveiled announcement that he would remove Huelton, had three times almost clicked to culmination. And those perils would not cease, not as long as Barry lived and sought Jim McPherson.

Still he should have recognized the yellow-robed priest without having an icy qualm clamp down between his shoulder blades.

That light was a protection against snakes, so that the barefooted apostle of Buddha might not tread upon them; that staff was carried that he might brush the serpents from his path, for the tenets of the priest's creed forbade that he kill anything, not even a serpent.

The priest drew nearer. The robe and headcloth concealed his face and figure. So intent was he in watching the ground that he was passing the mounted men without being aware of their presence.

Then it was that Barry Huelton saw the pointed bulge in the robe back of the priest's left arm and read its meaning. The man was not a priest. Strapped against his side beneath the elbow was a sheathed knife.

Huelton opened his lips to warn the soothsayer, but before the words came the bogus priest had snapped into different action. The robe fell away. The thick bamboo staff split into half cylinders, and from this cavity the footman snatched a spear.

Barry and the soothsayer had ridden into a trap!

TOO late! They might have known Yung Tai would guard the jungle paths. The scheming Chinese would not permit Barry to join the McPhersons. The Oriental's paid killers would lie along the trail to send home eventually the fatal thrust.

The blazing torch dropped from the man's hand, but it still burned where it had fallen with a lurid light, sending grotesque and wavering shadows darting among the overhanging trees, glinting from damp leaves and running like a living thing along the tenuous trailers. It was as if a hundred jungle ghosts had opened their fiery eyes.

The spear came up to poise, and the sinewy brown arm went back. Barry Huelton, pawing for his revolver, looked down into the grimacing face of the Malay, Matun.

Huelton's impulse had been to draw his gun, to trust to getting in a shot before that ten inches of lance blade buried itself in his chest. But he could never drag gun from leather quickly enough to stay that singing spear. His right hand instead slapped hard against the low pommel of the English saddle, and he threw himself sideways as if he had been jerked by a rope.

The horse, frightened, lunged forward, and the spear, already cast, passed six inches above Barry's falling body. At the same instant Hakim Anyein slid to the ground, his bared knife in his hand.

From the forest around them shouts arose. More ambushers plunged toward the spot in the trail. The horses were gone, snorting away from the scene of confusion.

Barry's quick action saved his life. Steel clicked as the enraged soothsayer fell upon the spearman. Both knives were out of the sheaths now as the two brown men slashed and swung in the circle of light.

The two were outnumbered. The lurking henchmen of Tai were closing in. Barry scrambled to his feet and leaped for the torch. In the light of the flames he and Anyein would be perfect targets. He tramped out the licking tongues even as another spear hissed by and buried itself a dozen feet away.

"Let's go, Anyein!"

Huelton swung down his heavy gun-barrel in the direction of Matun. The blued steel struck a hard but glancing blow. In the darkness he felt a body brush by him. "This way, Sahib."

Barry turned to follow the fleeting soothsayer. Behind them spluttering shouts and curses started echoes among the wild mango trees.

It was a mad race. The soothsayer cut into a side trail darker than the other. Barry could not see his leaping form two yards ahead.

The shouts behind them died into silence. Matun and his men had settled down to search for the fugitives.

The damp, hot air of the jungle was trying to Barry's lungs. In ten minutes bands of fire circled his chest. Anyein drew to a halt.

"This trail will lead back to the other one, Burra Sahib. We must make the bridge before the others."

BARRY'S throat was too tight for speech. He knew the jungle stream that they must cross, a sluggish muddy creek infested with crocodiles. They must make the bridge or be hemmed between the giant amphibians and the killers of Yung Tai. A second wind came to Huelton.

"Let's go."

Barry remembered the words of the soothsayer: "Spears are hidden in bamboo." In some uncanny way the fellow had foretold accurately. Chance? Perhaps; yet strange things happen in India. But it was not the power of divination that Huelton now trusted but the jungle-trained eyes and ears of Anyein.

The black tunnel of a path slanted down to join the broader trail. No sign nor sound of the pursuers came through the encircling brush. A damp, muggy smell of rotten leaves and forest refuse announced the creek. Patches of stars showed where the stream parted the canopy of leaves.

Hakim ran forward, leaving Barry for a moment isolated in an ocean of darkness. Then the trusted guide was back.

"They have outguessed us, O Master. The bridge has been cut."

As Anyein announced this disastrous news, there was a sucking churn of mud and a mellow splash. A crocodile slid into the water not a dozen yards from them. The hair prickled at the back of Barry's neck.

"Must we swim?"

"Not unless we seek death, Sahib. Already they have smelled us. We would not last ten seconds in the water."

They were at a desperate impasse. Death before and behind. And across the creek within an hour's run was the vil-

lage of Lemye. Already the first grayness of false dawn was showing. They might elude the pursuers in the darkness, but with the first shafts of light the knife men would track them down.

Barry remembered the bridge of bamboo and rattan, native built. Easy to cut, cheap to repair, but at the moment a broken link in their chain of safety. The insidious cunning of Yung's men had caught them helpless. There was no other crossing within miles.

Barry's brain was humming. Something must be done and done quickly. As a last resource they could swim, but such action, he realized, was tantamount to suicide. Death between crushing jaws was worse than spear jabs.

His thoughts were going in circles, finding no solution to the problem, and, as often happens in distressing problems, the harder he tried to think the more ideas evaded him.

Into that mental vacuum of his mind came a picture, popping up from the dim subconsciousness of the past. A picture in his history book when he was a boy in knickered pants. A picture of Daniel Boone swinging on a wild-grapevine making his escape from the redskins. The solution came full-blown into his mind.

"Quick, Hakim Anyein, the rattan runners that suspended the bridge. Tie them high in the mangrove and we swing over."

For a moment the idea did not penetrate; then Anyein understood. "We are saved, O Master."

Yung's men had cut the bridge, but they had left the materials where they had fallen. Anyein, lustily swinging his knife, cut loose and dragged out long thin runners of rattan fiber. The tensile strands were strong as steel, supple and easy to knot. Hakim clambered up a mangrove to tie the rough cable on a limb that swung over the water. Then as if testing its strength before his master tried it, he grasped the crude cable and leaped headlong.

The brown man swung out like the bob of a mighty pendulum and dropped with a splash within a few feet of the farther bank.

"I am across, Burra Sahib. Come quickly."

Barry sprang into the mangrove tree, clawing upward like an awkward monkey. He found the thin strand of cable. It was small and hard to grasp, but the knots would keep his hands from slipping.

The stars through the broken spaces in the branches shone down upon the muddy stream, reflecting themselves like dull scales of gold. Then some of the reflections were blotted out.

Barry saw a triangular spot, darker than the scummy water, nosing slowly about. Another, and then another! Hakim's splash had roused the crocodiles. They were cruising savagely for food. To drop among them would be like falling into the maw of a huge food grinder. Huelton felt a cold tension that held him motionless, a sudden refusal of the nerves and muscles to act, like the buck-fever of an inexperienced hunter. He closed his eyes to shut out the sight of the man-eaters.

Anyein's hissing call warned him not to delay.

BARRY clamped his teeth, set his feet firmly on the limb, and leaped.

He was riding the air. The mangrove drew away behind him. He saw the jungle stream spread out to broad dimensions. The river was sliding under him and he was standing still.

The knot under Barry's hand slipped. He felt it give, straighten out, and the cable below it drop away. The rattan no larger than a lead pencil slid through his damp palms.

One cold appalling moment in which a thousand icicles concentrated upon him. He could not hold. The smooth rattan was like a greasy string. Below him the water softly lapped before the cruising jaws.

One last desperate clutch and he was holding—nothing! Down, down. He hit

the water with a splash and went under.

Barry Huelton came up swimming. The terror of the great amphibians was behind him. He saw the bank with Anyein's dark figure waiting. Could he make it?

Huelton felt the slap of water behind him. Despite himself he could not help looking back. A giant head was not two yards away! The slippery bank was twice that distance. He'd never make it.

"For God's sake, Hakim, the rifle!"

The terrified soothsayer had forgotten the Lee-Enfield he was carrying. Barry's desperate yell stirred him to motion. Barry thought he could hear a dull, yawning suck as big jaws opened.

Could Hakim act in time? Barry thrust his face under and plowed with all the force in his body.

The rifle cracked over the swimmer's head. He felt the churn in his ears as the repercussion smacked upon the water. He made one last desperate stroke.

Then Hakim Anyein was helping him up the slippery bank.

Chapter VI

INTO THE CHODAN

DAWN again in the wilds of Burma, a chattering, squawking dawn. High in the chaulmoogra trees sacred monkeys, agile pigtails, and long-armed gibbons awoke to a vociferous day. A parrakeet with a scarlet throat and blue crown hung upside-down on a limb and stared at the two men. A minah with wattles of yellow and a hornbill with saffron beak circled around them. A fruit pigeon, like a streak of rainbow color, shot between the trees.

Lemye was a cluster of huts surrounding the square of the rustic pagoda built of twined bamboo and mud which served as the shrine, the meeting place, and the school of the town. A few bazaars were around the outer part of the square, and the dwelling houses ran back irregularly to the very walls of the jungle.

On one side of Lemye the Kyendwen River slid by like a mighty snake. This was the watery thoroughfare that led into the outlands of the Chodan. Small dugouts were pulled up on the bank, and one large cargo canoe was moored by a hemp cable.

As Barry Huelton stared into the clearing of the town, he realized that this Burmese village was the jumping off place, the last settlement before they plunged into the jungles of the Kyendwen.

About the shrine people were gathered. Men in skirts, boys in loin cloths and with tattooed legs, women wrapped in pieces of cloth of brilliant color. A tall spirit pole towered above the assemblage.

"What's up, Hakim?"

"I know not, Burra Sahib. We go see."

The Burmese villagers stared at them apprehensively. Barry, after his plunge in the muddy jungle creek, was not a prepossessing figure. One woman sighting him gave a scream, seized a child, and ran into the protection of the shrine. Mutterings of hostility came from the men. Several reached for their knives.

The soothsayer, understanding the dialect, was quick to realize the situation. "She thinks you have the evil eye, O Master. Remain there; I shall handle them."

The soothsayer stalked forward, one hand upraised, speaking rapidly. The people parted to make way. Words that Barry did not understand shot back and forth between the prophet and the people. Hakim seemed to have a power over them. The chattering villagers became quiet. Anyein, standing like a rustic brown chief among them, held aloft his beads and spoke in an intoning voice. Huelton could not get all the words, but the meaning was this:

"Salutation to thee, O Spirit! Even as the moon wanes in its brightness at the sight of the sun, even as the bird chakora disappears at the sight of the moon, even as the great Vasuki, King of Serpents, vanished at sight of the chakora, even as the poison vanished from his head, so may the potency of this evil eye vanish with thy aid."

It was a powerful incantation, and the

hostility of the people vanished. The woman came forth from the shrine smiling. Hakim signaled Barry to approach.

The people, now petitioning, clustered around the two strange men.

"What is it they want, Anyein?"

"They are greatly disturbed, Burra Sahib. An owl screeched in the night-time; and now, as he went to the river this morning, their chief man was bitten by a serpent."

"What can we do?"

"We shall aid them, Sahib, but we bargain first. I shall cure the snake bite provided they furnish us with a canoe and paddlers, stout men who will not fear the jungle."

In matters of this sort Huelton depended on the native cunning of Hakim. "Good, but the provisions we shall buy."

MORE talk in clicking vernacular. A man was carried from the nearest hut and laid on a mat beside the spirit pole. The people gathered around agate-eyed. Hakim called for someone to bring a jar of goat's milk.

From the folds of his clothing the soothsayer drew forth a cobra stone. This was supposedly taken from the hood of a hamadryad and was an antidote to poison. The stone was the size and shape of a tamarind seed and was dark in color. Hakim dropped it first into a shell of water, and bubbles rose from it as from acid-

eaten metal. Ejaculations of wonder and thanksgiving came from the people.

Hakim then placed the stone upon the punctured skin of the chief man, rolling his eyes upward and muttering as he did so. The stone adhered to the skin as if glued. The people watched breathless. Then of its own accord the seedlike antidote dropped to the ground.

Anyein seized it and dropped it into the milk. A dark stain spread, dyeing the white fluid to charcoal gray.

The soothsayer arose, returning the cobra stone to its hiding place. "He will live, my people. The poison has been transferred to the milk. Cast it away where none shall step."

Anyein turned to Huelton and spoke in English. "All is well, Sahib. They are our friends. We shall have a long canoe with paddlers, good fellows who can swing a knife, and much rice, as well as canned goods from one of the bazaars. We leave for the Chodan in one hour."

Things were breaking better. Over a breakfast of rice and hot tea Huelton learned that McPherson and his daughter had gone up the Kyendwen five days previously. Of the activities of Yung Tai's men he learned less.

"There are always strange men in the jungle, Sahib," said the natives cryptically.

NOW came hours of slow struggling with the current, of fighting the mighty flood of the river between its canyonlike jungle walls. The six Burmese paddlers bent to the task, their bare backs rising and falling monotonously as they dug their paddles into the silted water. Barry from his seat in the bow, the Lee-Enfield across his lap, kept his eyes on the dense green tangle.

Huelton had no fear of surprise. Seven pairs of eyes and ears far keener than his own would warn him of approaching trouble. Yet he knew that somewhere in that tangle of leaf and bough were others intent upon his death. And ahead, deeper in the vast Chodan, was Jim McPherson and the girl.

The Karen-ni soothsayer sat in the stern of the dugout, occasionally plying a paddle. Tied behind him was a round wicker

basket that he had obtained in Lemye. Over it was a cover, laced tight. At the noon camps and in the evenings Hakim would slip away with his basket, mysteriously disappearing into the brush. Sometimes they would hear a low mournful whistling from a basket of bamboo.

The Burmese paddlers gave that wicker basket a wide berth. None but Anyein touched it. They knew and Barry knew that the *jemedar* was charming and catching cobras, huge-hooded snakes to sell to other fakirs when he returned from the jungle.

Huelton said nothing. Anyein was too faithful and valuable a servitor to cross him in this small trafficking of his own. Yet Barry, like the Burmese paddlers, kept away from that basket of living death.

Slowly, imperceptibly, the jungle walls drew nearer. They were getting deeper into the Chodan. Sometimes a cooler breeze swept down into the steaming lowlands from the Lusha Mountains far to the westward. They were approaching the end of the trail. Soon they must find—or fail to find—McPherson.

On the third day Barry was becoming keenly anxious. They should be seeing signs, remains of camps, dugout marks on the bank; but no positive sign rewarded them. These hours of expectancy were galling, fraying the nerve ends like an approaching zero hour in the trenches.

A sudden hiss from Hakim snapped Huelton to more rigid attention; but before Barry could turn to follow the direction of Anyein's outstretched hand, an unearthly, ripping snarl burst from the jungle.

"Bagh! Bagh! Tiger! Tiger!"

The great curse of the Indian jungles was at hand. Rimau Krimat, God of the Tigers, was stalking the trails in striped form.

A shudder ran through the line of Burmese paddlers.

THEN someone leaped above the fringe of brush on the left bank, waving his arms in frantic pantomime. He did not call, but his gestures were terrified, appealing.

"In, in!" Barry waved his hand toward the bank. The paddlers swung the canoe, but they themselves crouched more tightly down in the log hulk.

Hakim alone remained unperturbed. "A little to the left, Burra Sahib, beyond the gnarled mango."

The matter-of-fact tone was an anodyne to Barry's nerves. He snapped off the safety catch of the rifle.

Something churned and lashed beyond a patch of brush. Huge-leafed plants twisted and writhed as if caught in a whirlwind. Trailing lianas, shaken at their base, sent shuddering vibrations upward, agitating the higher branches.

The whole jungle seemed to tremble when Rimau Krimat was on the hunt!

Then above that patch of brush a moon rose, a yellow disk of primordial savagery like some lunar beast come to earth to slake its thirst in blood.

Barry Huelton, thirty paces away, was staring into the tiger mask of a mighty Bengal.

"Fire, O Sahib, fire!"

The canoe impelled by six paddles shot against the shore and was still. Huelton raised the Lee-Enfield. His muscles seemed slow, leaden. His eyes, lining the sights, were hypnotized by the great yellow face. The sights came up, held. Barry was frozen as in a tableau. He was hardly conscious of squeezing the trigger. The jar of the rifle told him that he had fired.

The moon mask rose as if catapulted upward. The full outline of the tiger was limned against the green background as he uncoiled himself in a spring toward the huddled men.

Huelton fired again.

The five hundred pounds of fury fell ten feet from the bank, writhing and tearing the dirt. Patches of jungle mould were thrown high. The great cat tried to get upon his feet, but the strength left him. With a curdling groan he went down upon the twisted mangrove roots.

Huelton's first slug had spotted squarely between the cat's eyes.

Anyein ran into the brush. A native horribly mangled lay among leaves of blood. The long claws had ripped him into ghastly shreds. The dying man tried to speak, but no intelligible sounds came.

Huelton, closely following Hakim, turned away with an unconscious grimace. Before he could look again the native was dead.

"Look, Sahib, it is Kula Itam, the servant of Sahib McPherson."

The soothsayer was right. Barry recognized the trusted jungle man of the mineralogist. The McPhersons must be close at hand.

No sign of a weapon was found near the slain man. The dead mouth, opened in a last contortion, showed the stub of a tongue yet unhealed.

Hakim Anyein looked long at Barry Huelton and said but two words, "Yung Tai."

Barry turned away. The heinous plot was clearly manifest. McPherson and his men were in the hands of the Chinese; and the crafty Oriental callous to suffering, had maimed the servant, cut out his tongue so he could not talk, and had sent him back unarmed as a warning and a threat to Barry Huelton.

The young American gripped his rifle until his knuckles were spots of chalk. The great yellow cat, whose killing would have swelled him with pride at any other time, now meant nothing.

Ahead of him, around him, perhaps at the moment watching him, were foes more deadly than tigers.

CHAPTER VII

STEEL AND LEAD

DEEP silence again settled upon the jungles of the Kyendwen. The rifle shots had stirred the gibbons, but these apes, after a burst of chattering, swung themselves to more distant trees and lapsed into quiet.

But the enemity of the forest was relentless. Thousands of stinging gnats swarmed from the brush to make clouds about the men's heads, and blood-blister flies dropped from green leaves to make red spots upon the human skin.

But as Huelton stood, cursing in his irritation, Hakim Anyein was exploring the brush.

"They are near, Burra Sahib."

"They? Who?"

"A white man I am sure. I have seen the print of a boot. And natives. Kadus perhaps; Ghurkas maybe. I do not know."

A white man? Anderson?

That day in Tsagaing when he had been searching for Anyein and preparing for the trip, had given the partners in crime a chance to depart ahead of him. Matun had lingered behind to guard the trail. Now a devil's pack of them was ahead in the brush.

Barry knew the folly of delay. Better to strike first, put the others on the defensive, than to wait and be surrounded.

"Come on, Hakim. Let's take a look."

Here the jungle slanted up from the river to higher ground. The dense growth near the water had to be hacked through. Hakim swung his knife, that combination sword and bolo, slicing a narrow trail. Blood-sucking leeches began to gather on them, crawling even through the eyelets of Barry's shoes.

Huelton threw the branches aside as Anyein slashed, but wise in the lore of the bush both kept themselves constantly on the lookout for danger.

THEY came onto a higher level of land less obstructed by brush. But the great jungle trees still towered in a canopy, and monkeys screamed at their intrusion.

Huelton wiped the sweat from his brow. No sign of lurking enemies showed itself. Progress was slow, painful, devoid of benefit. If men were about, they were well hidden.

"We're getting nowhere, Hakim. Let's get back to the dugout."

Almost simultaneously with his words a shout rang out from the direction of the river. There was a garbled mingling of voices.

"The paddlers!" said Hakim.

"Fools!" gasped Barry. "While we've been looking for them they've attacked the crew. They'll leave us afoot in the jungle."

A rifle cracked. The slug whined by Barry's head. Huelton and Anyein plunged for the shelter of tree trunks. Another bullet sang into the trail they had cut, burying itself in the soft earth.

Anyein scurried like a lizard to the side of Huelton. "There, there, in that mango. See, a Kadu with a rifle."

Barry's gaze followed the direction of the soothsayer's pointing. He could see nothing, but that second cracking of the rifle had betrayed the hiding place to Anyein.

Then Barry saw. The dark body of the man was so nearly camouflaged by the gray-brown bark of the tree that he was as hard to spot as a chameleon.

HUELTON'S jaw muscles set instinctively. "Here's one brown devil the less!" He sighted carefully.

The brown rifleman twisted as if he had been touched by a lighted taper; then he dropped clawing and scrambling to the ground. Barry's bullet had sped true.

Shouts and the ringing of steel came from the river's edge. Huelton slipped the Webley to Hakim. "Take this and shoot straight. Let's go."

They were forced to retrace the trail they had cut, and it marked their course to the enemy. The prime danger was not so much to themselves as it was the possible loss of the dugout. Afoot, without provisions, they could be easily vanquished.

A Kadu jumped into the trail ahead of Barry. Huelton, running, swung his clubbed rifle. The man went down even as he slashed with his knife. The steel nipped Barry's boot and into the skin, but Huelton rushed on leaving the fallen man to Hakim.

Confusion reigned at the spot where the tiger had been slain. Half a dozen savage Kadus had fallen upon the Lemye canoe men. The loyal Burmese villagers were putting up a gallant fight.

One Lemyen tripped on a mangrove root

and went down. Barry saw the Kadu blade go up to make the killing slash. He dropped on one knee, took quick sight, and fired. A scream rose above the noise of the fighting. Behind him Barry heard Anyein let out a whoop that rang through the arches of the jungle.

The return of the white men and the soothsayer broke the morale of the attackers. They had seen two of their number go down before the gun of the American, and they had no appetite for such accurate shooting. They broke and ran for the jungle.

TO HIS right Huelton heard Hakim bang-banging with the Webley to little effect. He turned to see the soothsayer throw down the hand gun in disgust and reach for his sheathed knife. In the press of fighting the soothsayer wanted a familiar weapon.

Something struck the butt of Barry's rifle crushing it against his side. The blow was like the kick of a mule. The Enfield almost dropped from his fingers.

Beyond the retreating Kadus Anderson

was holding a smoking Colt in his hand. Huelton raised the rifle as Nels drew down the revolver for a second shot.

The forty-four slug had partially splintered, but not badly damaged the stock of the Enfield; but the shock of the impact and the twisting of the gun made Huelton unfit for a quick shot. The gun wavered in his hands as he drew a sight.

The two fired in a single detonation. Barry knew before he pressed the trigger that he would miss. Then the Enfield flew from his grasp, and the world went out in a blast of ripping fire.

Huelton could smell smoke. For hours, for days, he smelled the acrid odor of burning wood, a smoke so thick that it was an impenetrable cloud about him dark as night in a cavern. He discovered that his eyes were shut and he could not open them. The ringing in his ears resolved itself into voices.

THE raising of his eyelids was like the hoisting of weights. At first all was a gray-green tangle. Some of the cloudy spots became leaves, limbs, and branches. One became a parrakeet far up in a tree.

Barry turned his head. He was lying on a bed of branches. Hakim was boiling water in a small tin and pounding up a compound of green herbs. As he turned something caught at the side of Huelton's head and held it.

He remembered now. "Are they gone?"

"Gone, Burra Sahib, yet two will make a midnight feast for the jackals."

"Am I hit bad, Hakim?"

"You are almost not hit at all, Burra Sahib. You have the luck of the pig-faced goddess. The white stranger's bullet barked your head; but if it had not glanced from the rifle barrel it would never have hit you. He is a poor shot, the big man with the face of tile. He should not hunt Rimau Krimat."

Huelton's head throbbed, but his mind was clear. He had had a narrow squeak. He attempted to get up but brown hands pushed him back. Anyein put a packing of pounded herbs on his head and bound it with a bit of rag he had boiled. Barry knew the efficacy of Anyein's treatment. In remarkably short time the furrow on his scalp would be healed.

Barry sat up. Automatically he checked off the paddlers. None gone. A few had minor cuts. These Lemyens were hardy knife men.

The soothsayer reached into the folds of his clothing and pulled out a pocket-knife. "This, Sahib, we found upon the Kadu you shot."

On the side of the small penknife were the initials J. M.

McPherson's knife!

Then the Canadian was near—and in the hands of Yung Tai's men.

The end of the trail *was* approaching, the final clash. In less than twenty-four hours this mad, wild contest with Yung Tai would be over. It would be winner take all, and death to the vanquished.

And the prize lay buried deep in the river clay, the blood-red rubies of the Kyendwen.

CHAPTER VIII

LURE OF THE *Bagh*

THAT clash here on the sodden riverbank brought two things home to Barry's mind: first, that the Lemyen paddlers were dependable; and second, that Anderson was no great shakes as a fighter. The red-faced man had lurked in the background of the battle. Had he charged at the head of his Kadus, his Colt spitting, he might easily have ended Barry's expedition.

The real enemy, as Huelton had guessed from the first, was Yung Tai. That chill-faced Chinese, calm as a graven god, would remain as a formidable foe when the last of his henchmen was gone.

The gloom under the trees deepened. The sun was dropping toward the Lusha Hills. Soon the black shroud of the night

would settle over the jungle like a deluge of ink.

Barry waved his waiting men toward the canoe. "Downstream," he ordered.

Anyein nodded approvingly. "They would ambush us above, Sahib. You are wise like the great Alaung. Later we slip by in the darkness."

Beyond a bend in the great Kyendwen, they slid the canoe into the quiet of a backwater.

"With the permission of the Burra Sahib," announced Hakim, "I go scout the camp of the Kadus."

Huelton agreed wordlessly. Wise as he was in bush lore, he was a child in comparison to Anyein. Like a ghost itself the native could flit silently through the trees.

The Lemyens made a concealed camp. They prepared pickled fish and boiled tea over a flame so small that it made no radiance in the surrounding gloom.

Shadows settled over the spirit of Barry Huelton. The infinite mystery of the jungle with its league upon league of profuse growth, squeezed down upon him minimizing his pigmy strength. It was like being alone upon a great stretch of black waters with no land in sight, with only the sea and sky coldly indifferent to his existence.

He felt pitifully small and weak. But it was men, not the jungle, that he was fighting, men feeble as he was, strong as he was, with only the craft and brawn of human muscles and human brains to pit against him.

BARRY swallowed the hot tea with satisfaction, and with this refreshment came a revival of spirits. In the breast-pocket of his shirt was a rectangle of print paper, the photograph of a girl he had never seen. Would he live through to find her? He must.

A subtle intuition that someone was near warned him. He looked up to see Hakim standing motionless behind him. The manner of the soothsayer, immobile as a statue, emanated a sense of trouble.

For a moment neither spoke. Barry could hear the slight whistle of the Karen's breathing. Hakim, standing there, seemed a part of the night, silent, forbidding, mysterious.

Then the old man squatted beside Huelton.

"They have stolen the skin of the tiger."

"Yeah?" So, the Kadus had skinned the tiger that he, Barry, had shot. "Anderson probably wants to boast that he killed it. No matter. It is nothing."

"It is strange since they too hunt the tiger this night."

"What?"

"Already they have built a platform high in a cotton tree with red flowers. Yung Tai hunts from safety."

"Tai? You have seen him?"

"Unquestionably, Burra Sahib. They camp by a deserted village, old, very old. He is there with his men, and the tile-faced man talks like a spouting porpoise. They argue about a memsahib."

The girl!

"About a memsahib that I did not see," continued the soothsayer. "She was held prisoner with another in a deserted hut."

"What did they say about the memsahib?"

"Much that I could not hear, but this: the tile-faced man desires her for her beauty, but Yung Tai says she must be used to make the man prisoner talk."

The devilish cunning of Yung Tai again. Skilled in the tortures of the Chinese from the tickling of the feet to the Death of Ten Thousand Slices, he had chosen that one type of persuasion that would make McPherson talk, make him disclose the location of the ruby bed—that of injury to his daughter.

Cold again prickled the skin of Barry Huelton, followed by a flame. So Anderson desired the girl for her beauty? The scoundrel.

"What will they do to the memsahib?"

"That I did not hear, Master."

Something must be done and quickly. As soon as McPherson gave in, acceded to

the demands of Yung Tai, his life was finished as far as this world was concerned; but as long as the doughty Scotch-Canadian held his tongue the Chinese dare not kill him. But the girl—that was different. Her life would mean nothing to Yung who had plenty of sing-song girls of his own.

The dissention between the partners was an advantage. Now was the time to strike.

"Into the boat, men. We travel. Upstream."

THE long dugout slipped past the spot where the tiger had been slain. The spot was indistinguishable in the black wall of verdure. Not even the howling jackals had yet come to fight over the dead bodies.

Farther up the Kyendwen, deeper into the engulfing darkness. Hakim directed the paddlers. The canoe slid silently into the mouth of a smaller stream, a tributary to the muddy Kyendwen.

Here was obscurity like a long cavern. The trees closed completely above. Barry Huelton lost all sense of direction.

The soothsayer had eyes like a cat. At his command the snout of the canoe went against the bank.

Huelton as he stepped ashore felt the branches give before him, part into a narrow trail.

Hakim came beside Barry. "This way, not so far, the old town."

"Tell the paddlers to remain here," ordered Huelton. "We must know where they are. They must keep well hidden."

"They understand," replied Hakim Anyein.

Once more plunging into darkness with no objects visible. Huelton felt his way along keeping close behind the native.

"Careful, Master, there are pits."

Barry knew the tricks of the Burmese jungle natives of protecting their camps and villages with deep pits filled with sharpened stakes. He prodded ahead of him with the rifle as a blind man uses a cane. Once the Lee-Enfield crashed through a thin layer of brush and leaves that concealed a death trap.

They were climbing. The trail led constantly upward. The dark path debouched upon a more cleared space. Hakim signaled silence.

Before him Barry could see blurred irregular outlines that had once been houses. So long had the little town been deserted that saplings and brush grew in all the lanes, pushed upward through the decaying floors. The jungle was claiming its own.

The stars gave indifferent light, but compared with the inky depths along the river, it seemed to the American that the place was bathed in soft illumination.

The empty village was at the base of a ridge, and up on the side of this elevation was the smudge of a larger edifice. Perhaps a temple or the house of a minor chief or rajah who had once ruled here deep in the Chodan.

Across the brush-clogged streets, a quarter of a mile away, small fires burned and figures moved like shadow marionettes.

Here at last was the end of the trail. Yonder about those fires were Yung Tai and Anderson and the McPhersons. Barry drew a deep breath as a runner might when setting himself to the marks.

"Nearer, Hakim."

"Oh, yes, Sahib, but careful."

They circled the ancient town, moving with infinite caution. Once when Barry slipped and started the brush shaking, Hakim covered the noise with the snarling, tremulous howl of a jackal.

They gained the brush and trees beyond the camp of the Kadus. Flat upon the damp ground they edged forward until they could identify the men moving about the fires.

Yung Tai in khaki and puttees was giving orders that Barry could not understand. Anderson cut in with growling expostulations, but the Chinese paid little attention to the white man.

JIM McPHERSON was brought from one of the huts, his arms bound, held between two of the Kadus. In the firelight Barry could see his discolored condition, his face blurred by a growth of beard. The Canadian moved stiffly as if cramped from confinement.

Huelton slid the Lee-Enfield forward. His impulse was to drop Yung Tai then and there. The sight of the mineralogist, the friendly jovial fellow who had laughed and talked with him, stirred Barry to damning resentment. He hardly realized that he was experiencing what he had often condemned in the Orientals, racial hatred. The sight of another white man maltreated and tortured by alien hands set his pulses pounding.

Anyein laid detaining fingers on Huelton's arm. "Careful, Master, not yet."

Anderson, scowling, walked out of the firelight. A few minutes later two Kadus disappeared in the same direction.

Torches were lighted at the small fires. Jim McPherson was hustled away between the two natives—not back into the hut but down a brush-grown street and into the forest.

"That way the platform," whispered Hakim.

Then Barry Huelton saw the girl. She was not walking as McPherson had been, but was being carried by the Kadus. Her arms and ankles were bound.

Barry half raised himself. This was going too far. But the soothsayer's elbow shoved him down.

"They are too many for us yet. Careful, Burra Sahib."

Over the tumult of his feelings, Huelton felt one great relief: Jim and the girl were still alive. Yung Tai might yet be foiled. If he could only signal them that help was near.

Back into the brush again the two circled following the bobbing torches. Like will-o'-the-wisps the flames moved, gathering at last beneath a cotton tree.

Barry saw McPherson hauled up to the platform twenty feet above the ground. There were more movements about the tree, more bobbing of the torches. Huelton could make no sense to the commotion.

THEN Yung Tai agilely scrambled up and a rifle was hoisted to him. The men with the torches disappeared, scurrying back to the empty village.

"All go away except Yung Tai and another. Much better for us, Burra Sahib."

"Yes, much better. Hakim had been right in delaying any attack at the village.

Huelton slipped the Lee-Enfield to the soothsayer and unholstered the revolver for himself. Anyein could manage the rifle, but the hand gun seemed beyond him.

"We wait, little more," cautioned Hakim. "At first the watchers up tree very alert. Later they grow careless."

"We'll circle to see better," commanded Barry.

They came around to a spot part way up the ridge. From here they could look down upon the cotton tree and the cleared space about it.

Something was tethered to a stake in the center of the open ground. The starlight made vision uncertain. Barry strained forward to see what it was.

Then—the whole swing of the universe stopped as Huelton's breath choked in his throat. It was unbelievable, impossible, monstrous.

There, bound and tied like an animal to a stake, was Ellen McPherson. The girl of the photograph—tiger bait!

CHAPTER IX

DEATH STRIPES

IN THE heart of the tiger country and a girl—the girl—tied to a stake. In his wildest flights of fancy Barry Huelton had

never imagined he would meet Ellen McPherson in this manner.

It was fantastic, unthinkable, a nightmare. He closed his eyes, but the vision of that bound figure remained as a grotesque after-image.

He saw the scheming of Yung Tai. Up above there was Jim McPherson, a helpless spectator of his daughter's plight. The cruel Chinese held the girl's life in his hand. Should a tiger come, *bagh* with his fetid ferine breath and lashing claws, the bargain would be driven home with terrible fact.

Tai could save the girl's life with one well-placed bullet. But would he? Not until McPherson had disclosed the secret of the gems.

Barry turned to find himself alone. Hakim Anyein had slipped away in the darkness.

What to do? To run to the girl's assistance would bring a bullet from Yung's rifle. To fire at the platform might kill Jim McPherson. Either way he was held at an impasse.

Barry Huelton cursed audibly.

"His-st!" Hakim Anyein was again beside him. "Strange things happen, O Master, in the bush this night."

"Where have you been?"

"Yonder in the bush I have seen tiger men."

Was the night growing more fantastic? Was this all a terrible dream. "Tiger men?"

"Without doubt, Burra Sahib."

Was the soothsayer chuckling? Had he too become a part of a mad fantasy? Those sounds were evident laughter.

"Hakim, are you crazy?"

"No, but the Sahib Anderson is. He takes the skin of the tiger you shot and makes him a tiger man. Fear not, the memsahib is not in danger."

It took moments for the fact to sink into Barry's whirling brain. A fake tiger, eh? A trick to fool McPherson, force the Canadian's hand. Two men under the tiger skin could give a fair imitation of an animal. In the darkness it would be real, vitally real to Jim and the girl, an exquisite mental torture.

"Be very wary, Master," continued Hakim. "I may have been seen. The Kadus are scounting suspiciously in the brush."

That skinning of the tiger had had a definite purpose. It must then be Anderson's plan. Did Yung Tai up on the platform know of the fake tiger? Was it a scheme of Anderson to save the girl that he might have her for himself? Better, thought Barry, the claws of the tiger than Anderson's pawing hands.

A hungry, cavernous howl reverberated from the brush beyond the cotton tree. "Auooum-m-m!" it said. The yowl was petulant, querulous, deadly, the voice of a hungry cat.

Barry stiffened in spite of himself. Whichever of the Kadus made that sound knew his stuff. A scream of feminine fear came from below the cotton tree.

The soothsayer's fingers tightened on the arm of Barry. *"Nai, nai,* Master, not imitation. *Bagh,* the tiger himself!"

As if in confirmation to Hakim's words a horrible shattering roar rent the jungle. The terrific impact of it raised the skin on Huelton's scalp, sank a giddy feeling into the pit of his stomach.

Stripes himself!

The trick of Anderson's had been too late. A genuine Bengal smelled the prey. Tiger bait! Tiger bait!

Barry Huelton leaped to his feet. As he did so the haft of a spear came swishing downward. It glanced hard from his shoulder and crashed upon the gun in his hand. The Webley flew from his grasp.

The prowling Kadus had found them in the darkness.

And down in the hollow below, lashing tail and fiery eyes were drawing nearer to the cotton tree.

Barry Huelton went berserk though he hardly realized it. It was not fear. So many times had he risked death in the last few days that fear was drained from him completely.

And yet it was fear—fear for Ellen McPherson. Fear mixed with a terrible rage, rage at the cruel craftiness of Yung, rage at the bloody Bengal.

Huelton's fists crashed with smacking force upon the Kadu who had attacked him, fists that had a power behind them greater than Barry imagined. The strength of a madman was in his muscles, a flow of fire in his veins.

With spear or knife, the native was expert; but against bare fists—Mother Himalaya, what human devil was this!

HUELTON beat the Kadu down fiercely, terribly. He did not hear Hakim Anyein grunting and slashing at two others who had leaped upon him. He saw only the man in his way, saw at last the brown head unprotected, the whiskerless jaw exposed. His fist crashed upon that jaw with a pop like a wind-broken sapling.

There was no time to hunt for the gun in the brush. The spear that had slashed down upon him lay there on the ground. Barry seized it and ran forward.

"Au-oo-um-m-m!" roared the jungle cat.

Barry came into the open space before the cotton tree. There was an exclamation in clicking Chinese from the branches above. Before him, bound like a terror-stricken animal, was Ellen McPherson.

Events smashed too rapidly for more than surface impressions. In one flashing moment he saw the girl, her face a white mask, heard a voice from above yell, "Huelton!" and then the tiger was upon them.

Barry stood between the girl and the striped fury. The spear in his hands was a reedlike defense against the six hundred pounds of feline fury.

Bagh came out from the brush like a marauding tom, pausing to sniff the air before him, twisting his mighty head sideways as his lips curled back over yellow fangs. His eyes were points of fire. His front legs went down in a crouch as the head turned.

"Au-oo-um-m-m!" again roared the giant tiger, and simultaneously Barry Huelton drove forward with the spear.

Ellen McPherson was too terrified to scream. Above on the platform Jim McPherson, arms still bound, kicked viciously at Yung Tai who was aiming a Lebel rifle at Huelton's back. The Kadus were scampering away from the cotton tree.

The rifle cracked as the tiger sprang, the bullet whining wide. Barry aimed the spear a few inches back of the rippling shoulders and drove it with all the power at his command. The stout haft bent but held. Barry was forced back as if smacked by a typhoon blast. The base of the spear settled deep in the soft jungle floor.

A yellow whirlwind fell upon Huelton. He had only time to throw himself sideways as the claws ripped.

The jungle reverberated again to a shattering roar.

The tiger came down, impaling himself by the force of his lunge. The spear haft snapped as the blade came out the tawny back.

The great cat's hind quarters went limp. He writhed, tumbling and twisting, his front paws like scoops tossing earth and mold.

Huelton rolled free from the damaging claws. He was moving like an automaton as if oblivious to the threshing cat. He was beside the girl, a pocket-knife, Jim McPherson's knife, in his hand. He slashed the tethering hemp, gathered the now fainted girl in his arms, and ran for the protection of the brush.

From above Yung Tai ripped out a Chinese oath like a burst from a machine gun.

Barry was in the brush running, regardless of friend or foe. The weight of the girl was nothing. He knew only that safety was somewhere, anywhere away from that cotton tree.

And as Barry crashed through the underbrush, the tiger gave one last expiring groan.

Chapter X

TRAPPED

HUELTON'S idea was to find the river trail, get down to the waiting Lemyens and the security of the dugout. But no trail opened before him. He was blindly pushing, lunging, breaking through acres of brush.

Human endurance can stand so much. Barry began to tire. He felt the girl stir in his arms, a sobbing gasp come from her lips.

"Father, where are you? Father!"

Huelton put the girl down and cut the bonds that held her hands and feet.

"Is that you, Dad?"

"Now, take everything easy. I'm Barry Huelton, a friend of your father's."

"Oh, but where's——?"

As if in remembrance of the scene beneath the cotton tree, sobs rose to choke her voice.

"Buck up, girl. You've got to pull yourself together."

Barry's arms were around her; her face was buried in his shirt But he felt her consciously suppress her sobs.

"Listen, girl, your father's safe as long as he refuses to talk, safer than you and I are. Remember that. Can you walk?"

"I—I think so."

"I've got a dugout and men down along the river somewhere if we can find it."

"But we can't go away and leave dad. That terrible Chinaman!"

"If we help your father we've got to save our own necks first. Come on."

In five minutes Barry discovered that he had traveled in a circle. He was again at the edge of the ruined town. The fires of Yung's camp had died down so they could give him no sense of direction. Somewhere around the circumference of that dead town was the trail. But where?

Where was the soothsayer? A poignant feeling that Hakim Anyein had met with disaster flooded over Barry. It would be like losing his right hand. Knowledge of irreparable loss swept Huelton.

What to do? He was unarmed. The brush was infested with poisonous serpents. The mate of the tiger might be roaming anywhere. Better to remain hidden until daylight disclosed a course of action.

A sense of responsibility for the girl possessed him, a sense greater than the mere saving of human life. Through the perils of jungle and river he had come to find her, and he must not endanger her now through ill-advised action.

BARRY led her to one of the abandoned huts. He kicked through the debris that had collected on the floor to disclose any lurking snakes and silently bade her to sit down against the wall. Ellen started to say something, but he closed his hand over her lips. "Sh, not now. Even a whisper might betray us. You stay here; I'll watch outside."

Overhead the stars rolled westward like a vast timepiece of nature. Jungle noises rose in an incessant hum as the faraway diapason of an organ.

Barry sat against the crumbling mud wall of the hut, another lump in the disintegrating town. He felt no definite sense of fatigue. Soon it would be dawn—and what would the day bring forth?

He could guess the procedure of Yung Tai. He would do one of two things, or both. He would force by torture the truth from Jim McPherson or he would seek out Barry and the girl to eliminate dangerous witnesses. Huelton believed Tai would concentrate on McPherson, trusting to take care of Barry and the girl later. Yet Jim had seen him from the platform and called

his name. Jim would not be likely to talk, now that he knew friends were near.

Time passed as Barry sat pondering. The night was warm, and a thin mist was rising from the jungle. Slowly the eastern stars paled.

Something moved. Where? Barry was instantly alert. It was not from the hut behind him where the girl was. Yet someone was moving nearby. Animal or man? Friend or enemy?

Huelton remained motionless. He felt like a stalked beast driven to a final covert. Alone he might have sallied forth to find the prowler, but now he dared not leave his post.

Barry could not clamp down upon his imagination. After hearing the first sound, other noises came to him first from one direction then another. He cursed himself for his nervousness; yet actually, it seemed, he was being inclosed by a cordon of enemies.

Dawn came an ashy gray. The mist of early morning obscured vision. Dampness hung over everything like a warm and sickly perspiration.

A stifled groan! Where? Barry, following the direction of the sound more closely this time, stole softly to an adjacent wall. He moved with catlike care and eased himself to a position where he could see.

Huelton's lips curled back as he stifled an exclamation. He was looking down upon a prone native lying face downward. The brown back was lacerated and torn as if it had been beaten with barbed lashes.

It was the back of Hakim Anyein!

Barry, regardless of caution, leaped to the side of his friend. Hakim turned and partly raised himself at the sound of footsteps. His face showed deep traces of pain, but at the sight of his master, the flash of fire died from his eyes. By his side lay the Lee-Enfield rifle.

"Anyein, are you all right?"

"It is nothing, Burra Sahib, except that I have a debt to pay."

"Who did this? Yung Tai?"

"Even so, O Master. They overpowered me when you went to fight the tiger. Tai had me beaten with split bamboo to make me tell where you had gone, but I did not know. The devil shall answer for these scars. I got away, and one of the Kadus shall report no more to his yellow master."

"Good, Hakim, you are worth a hundred Kadus. The memsahib is in this hut. Can you find the trail to the dugout?"

"Easily, Sahib."

Barry picked up the rifle. The weight of it gave him courage. He himself still wore the bandolier of cartridges. "Then quick. We shall get the Lemyens. They are better fighters than the Kadus."

"Much better than the cowardly hill bandits. And they no longer outnumber us. I counted but six remaining Kadus."

Huelton brought Ellen McPherson from the hut. The girl's face was pale, but she had control of herself. For the first time Barry got a good look at her. Boots and breeches, scuffed and soiled, yet even more graceful as use had fitted them to the curves of her boyish figure. A silk waist concealing alluring shoulders; a face more striking to Barry Huelton than the softer, retouched lines of the photograph. Tawny hair that dropped naturally into graceful waves. Huelton could not suppress an intake of breath.

The most charmingly feminine person he had ever seen, despite the ravages of traveling through the jungle. Romantic, alluring in the queen of love and beauty sense when troubadours sang roundels below the moated casements.

Sentiment could not obscure the hard facts of the situation. Barry pulled his gaze away and motioned Hakim to lead. Ellen clutched for a moment at the young American's sleeve as she looked upon the lacerated and blood-clotted back of the soothsayer.

The building that Barry had noted up on the ridge was a pagoda built of enduring masonry. Steps of slabs led to the terrace in front of it. The old temple would make a bullet-proof fortress if necessary.

Even as Barry appraised the abandoned

temple and estimated its possibilities, a warning signal from Hakim Anyein drew them all into the shelter of another hut.

Persons were moving up the stony stairs. Between Yung Tai and Anderson, Jim McPherson was being led into the ruined pagoda.

"Father!" whispered Ellen.

Barry raised the rifle. Should he risk a shot? If he could drop Yung Tai, the mainspring of the gang would be broken.

Before Huelton could determine action, an order cracked out a hundred yards behind them, and the Kadus, breaking from the shelter of the huts, bore down upon the surprised trio.

"Come, Master."

HAKIM ANYEIN was running like a startled gazelle, heading for the brush. A Kadu dropped upon one knee and opened fire with a French Lebel rifle, kicking up dirt about the scurrying soothsayer.

The brushy lane of the street they were in led toward the ridge. A little below and to the right of the pagoda a cave showed among the boulders. To cross the street after the soothsayer would expose Ellen to the rifle bullets.

"Come," ordered Barry, "we can make that cave and I can hold them off until Hakim gets back with the Lemyens."

By bearing to the left, the buildings protected them in their dash. The girl ran nimbly, keeping at the heels of Barry. Shouts rose from the Kadus as their quarry evaded them. More shouts as the Lebel opened fire again. Dirt and grass spit twice in geysers beside the runners before they made the entrance of the cavern.

Barry shoved Ellen in ahead of himself. The Kadu with the rifle was still kneeling in the street, jerking another shell into the gunbarrel. Huelton took one quick shot with the Lee-Enfield, and the Kadu threw up both hands as if stung by a heated poker. The remaining pursuers ducked into protections like rabbits popping into holes.

For the moment the two were safe. The Kadus were not expert with firearms and they had few guns among them, mostly old Lebels smuggled in from Cochin-China.

The cavern entrance commanded all direct approach. Barry with his sturdy Enfield could keep off the natives indefinitely. And the Lemyens? If Hakim could find them, they with their trusty knives would turn the balance of power. The Burmese villagers had infinite faith in the soothsayer and his white master. That trick with the cobra stone and the quelling of the evil eye had won their superstitious natures.

Ellen tapped Barry on the shoulder. "This cave leads somewhere. Far back I found steps leading upward."

Steps! Upon the ridge above was the ancient pagoda. Barry knew that many of the temples of India had subterranean vaults, dark labyrinths known only to the temple priests. Perhaps those steps led to the ruined temple; and up there in that building were Tai and Anderson and Jim McPherson.

The threads of circumstance were drawing into a single cable. The situation that Barry had hoped for now looked possible: A settlement with Yung Tai and the blustering Anderson man to man with no brown knifemen slashing from the back.

Huelton knew what he would do. He would kill Yung Tai as he would kill a snake. It would not be murder. That yellow plunderer represented nothing in human form. He was inimical to all that Barry represented, a killer as conscienceless as the tiger.

"Hold a minute," cautioned Barry to Ellen.

FROM the brush at the edge of the city clearing, dark forms emerged running, each with a naked knife in his hand. The Lemyens! They would take care of the lurking Kadus.

Now for the settlement with Yung Tai and Anderson.

"Come on, girl, show me those steps."

CHAPTER XI

VENGEANCE

THE final culminating moment was at hand. No more dodging the perils of jungle trails, of knife and spear and singing lead whistling death lullabys from the darkness.

The breath of peril must now blow into his face. Barry, gripping the rifle, turned toward the dark maw of the cavern.

The long cave led back into the ridge as if it had once been the bed of an underground stream. The spot of light grew smaller behind Huelton and the girl. The passage turned letting them into a mustier gloom; then they came upon steps cut into an artificial tunnel.

Barry led the way. Three steps up and the darkness became Stygian. Huelton felt his way carefully, the girl pressing close behind him. Something of the climactic nature of the moment seemed to impress Ellen as if she too realized that everything, even life itself, rested on the outcome of the next few minutes.

Up and ever up, twisting in a tortuous trail through the bowels of the stony ridge. Barry examined every step for traps, for pits to catch the intruder, but the stairs were cut in solid rock firm as the hill itself.

They came into a larger cavern, less gloomy. A rectangle of light shot down from a stair at the opposite side, falling in a blue-gray patch on the damp floor. They were coming again into the open, and even as Huelton advanced across this larger room a mutter of voices came from above.

Barry held out a hand palm backward, a signal for silence.

Jim McPherson's voice came out of the murmuring loud and clear. "There it is, you yellow devil, and may every ruby you get off that, light you a fire in hell. If it wasn't for my daughter, I'd have seen you in damnation before I'd led you here."

Anderson's voice rang out in a bellow, the harsh timbre of it exaggerated as it rolled down the tunnel toward Barry. "A god, by the eternal, a god covered with rubies. We're rich, I tell you, rich!"

Slowly Huelton crept forward toward the stairs. Evidently the nature of McPherson's secret had been divulged. The Canadian had held out valiantly, but the very compounding of his misfortunes conquered him.

Barry's face came above the level of the top step. He was to the right and a little behind the three men. He blinked at the sudden drama of treachery that unfolded before his gaze.

THE men were on a broad ledge or shelf that ran around three sides of what appeared to be half room, half cavern. What was below the ledge in the deeper gloom of the pit, Barry could not see; but Anderson was leaning forward, his red face etched in lines of greed and lustful victory, his stubby fingers twitching as if he were grasping something to him. He was staring into the pit awe-struck.

McPherson's arms were still bound, but above the waist he was bare. His shirt and singlet had been ripped down from the collar, and their ragged remains were draped about his belt. On his white skin were the marks of burns.

But it was Yung Tai who caught and held Barry's attention. As Anderson stared gloating at whatever he saw in the pit, the Chinese, his face for once showing traces of emotion, whipped out a knife from his belt and drove it to the hilt in Anderson's back.

The crafty, murderous Chinese had used his white partner for whatever purpose he had intended; and now that the wealth was found, he removed him as he would crush a fly.

Anderson grunted, staggered for a moment on the ledge, and went down wildly pawing at the air. The dead impact of his

body striking below was like the muted thud of a Malay drum.

Barry's face went stiff and chill and hard; then he was up the last few steps at a bound.

Like a leopard whirling upon a foe, Yung Tai swung toward the new enemy. The space that separated them was not six feet, and the yellow man shot across it like a springing jaguar.

TAI hit Barry before he could bring the rifle into position; but the trigger depressed by Huelton's clutching finger fired the Lee-Enfield. The detonation roared like a cannon in the little room, and the bullet, caroming from roof and wall, screeched in a whining monotone.

There was no time to jerk another shell into the chamber. The two men went down upon the ledge in a writhing tumble.

Barry had fought men before. The crush of bodies was no new experience. But he had never encountered anything like the deadly speed and power of the yellow man's muscles. He was overwhelmed as if suddenly twisted in the coils of a giant spring. He was smothered, crushed, broken by a force irresistible.

The Lee-Enfield was torn from Barry's grasp and hurled awawy. A yellow thumb dug in the lumbar vertebra, and a pain keener than that of slicing knives, ran to the American's shoulders. The agony swelled and popped against his brain with dizzying force.

The two men were rolling upon the ledge, Barry attempting desperately to get a grasp on his speedy antagonist. And as they flopped over, Huelton saw, limned in the dark background of the tunnel stairs, the face of Ellen McPherson.

It was like a hot spark to a coughing motor. No drug or yellow wine could have produced the effect, but Barry Huelton became a demon of energy. He was at it now, slug, kick, fight, all rules barred, possessed of one passion only—to crush the Chinaman. In the curious telepathy of youth, those blue eyes carried to him the one necessary flame to ignite the reserve power latent in his body. He felt Yung Tai yield before him.

Barry's shirt was being ripped to shreds, his skin marked by clawing fingers; but he did not notice it. He struggled to his feet, lifting the smaller man with him. He whirled the Chinese over, but Yung, clinging like a leech, dragged Barry again to the ledge with him.

Huelton was gaining confidence with every blow. Before a battery of pummeling fists Yung was giving way. In Chinese wrestling Tai may have been perfection, but against the onslaught of American fists, he was on the defensive.

If Barry could just keep him off, that was the problem now—keep those steel-like arms and legs from clamping on him, beat him down, overpower him with American lefts and rights.

A blow smashing under Yung's eye brought blood. The sight of that red trickle brought renewed power to Huelton. The devil was human despite his graven face, a man of flesh and blood, who broke and bled like anyone else. The formidable character of the Oriental disappeared.

Tai was forced back. Inch by inch he was driven nearer and nearer the brink of the ledge, nearer to the spot where he had murdered Anderson. Six feet below him sprawled the man he had foully stabbed.

The fight concentrated in the space between the head of the tunnel stairs and the pit where Anderson had fallen. Ellen McPherson was prevented from reaching the side of her father. The older man, sick from the torture he had received, stared at the fighters like a dazed man.

HUELTON was fighting now with the set precision of a boxer. He was beating, feinting, working for an opening—and when it came he would uncork everything he had.

His left fist crashed low on Yung Tai's ribs. The opening! It was there. The lean jaw was uncovered. The yellow man was not six inches from the brink. Coolly,

as if he were aiming at a punching bag, Huelton put all of his power behind the blow.

The right fist centered on the target. Yung Tai was lifted from the floor, carried beyond the space of solid footing. He went limp and sprawled into the pit.

Barry wiped his hands across his eyes. For the first time he had a chance to look below the ledge. There raised on a dais at one end of the rectangular pit was a stone altar, and on it, carved grotesquely from stone, was a native idol. Worked into the ornaments of this pagan god as gold might be damaskeened into harder metal were bits of crystalized sandstone containing rubies.

This then was McPherson's secret? This the source of the rubies? Barry shook his head, unbelieving.

The idol must have been one of particular reverence. No steps led down into the pit. Apparently the god had been too sacred for worshippers to approach nearer than the ledge. And scattered across the damp dust of the floor were bones, human bones.

Yung Tai, dizzy, was struggling to his feet. Barry ran down the ledge and retrieved the rifle. The Oriental was at his mercy. One slug would end forever the life of the treacherous killer. Let him die then within sight of the rubies, the gems for which he had slain and tortured, the jewels he had sought along a trail of blood.

Barry raised the rifle, lowered it. After all, he had whipped this man, overpowered him. He had won an honest victory. Could he slay cold-bloodedly now?

Ellen McPherson ran to the side of her father and began releasing him; but it was the sight of someone else that stopped with a chilling damper the blood in Huelton's veins.

Hakim Anyein stood at the edge of the brink. Whether he had entered behind Ellen or had come in through the pagoda Barry did not know; but he did grasp in one blinding second what the native was doing.

In Anyein's hand was the wicker basket, the basket that had been tied on the stern of the dugout all the way up the Kyendwen; the basket in which Hakim kept his cobras, the death basket.

The laced cover was off. Before Barry could move or shout a countermanding order, Anyein turned the wicker container upside-down over the dazed Yung Tai.

Ellen came forward from her father's side. Barry flung himself before her.

"For God's sake, Ellen, don't look!"

A writhing, hissing rain fell upon the Chinaman. There was one piercing shriek as the cobras struck.

Hakim Anyein had paid his debt to Tai.

Chapter XII

McPherson's Secret

AGAIN the campfires burned in the deserted village, a village where once had been worshipped a god, a pagan deity ornamented with rubies. But this time no prisoners lay bound in huts, no men sat and planned, their brains fomenting schemes of torture.

Over the fires tea was boiling, and steaks were broiling, tenderloins from a young wood deer Barry had shot. The Burmese paddlers scurried about, waiting upon the white men. They were silent, but they would have many wonders to tell when they returned to the spirit pole of Lemye.

It was a tattered group that waited about the fires. Of the three white persons Ellen alone had a whole piece of cloth to her back. But it was a happy group now that the McPhersons were reunited and in safety and the effects of that last scene in the altar room had worn off.

Barry could scarcely keep his eyes from the lovely features of the girl. Jim McPherson noted the glances that passed between the two and smiled to himself.

Again by a sun-baked wall Hakim Anyeim sat and meditated, occasionally casting the bones before him and studying their positions. Through all the tumultuous hours he had kept the bamboo box safely knotted in the folds of his garments.

"How did you stumble upon this place

and find the god?" Barry asked McPherson.

"Accident, young man, accident." The mineralogist filled a briar pipe and thoughtfully lighted it. "See here, you're not thinking those rubies I showed you in Tsagaing came from that heathen idol up there, are you?"

"Why, yes," stammered Barry. "I—I thought so."

"Then think again, Huelton. I may be old-fashioned, but I don't despoil shrines even if they are pagan ones. No, I never scratched a pebble off that ugly statue."

"That's not the source of the rubies?"

The older man grinned as one who had long held a secret and at last can divulge it.

"Nope, that's not the place. And furthermore, that idol up there *never was decorated with rubies.*"

"What?"

"Notice how I said that, youngster: 'never was decorated.' I'll admit you saw rubies when you looked at it. That god was carved out of granular limestone, and those rubies were uncovered in the carving. They're a natural part of the stone."

"But I thought at first you had discovered a *byon* working."

"No, no clay. What I did find I kept secret, a secret Yung Tai never got. He was camped in sight of the very thing he was looking for and never found it."

Ellen, who was seated between the two men, clutched at Barry's arm as the two leaned forward absorbed in McPherson's words. Apparently Ellen herself did not know the secret.

"It's that cave, Huelton, that cave under the pagoda. It's what they call a *loodwin* over east of the Irawadi. The walls are granular limestone, and that kind of stone sometimes contains crystals that make rubies and sapphires. *Byon* river clay is not the only place where you find rubies, no, sir. When I noticed the god had been carved from limestone, I began hunting for the stone. I found it in the cave. A little digging and we're rich."

"Well, I'm damn—er, excuse me, Ellen."

McPherson chuckled. "Before we start any mining operations, what say we tackle these steaks, eh, youngsters?"

The two laughed, they hardly knew why.

After the meal they left the older man to his pipe, and Ellen and Barry wandered down to the wall where the soothsayer was sunning himself.

"Well, what do the bones say today, Hakim?"

The prophet gave them a long look. Perhaps he read much from the expression of their faces, but in dead, unsmiling seriousness he rattled the box again and cast the charred bones into the dust.

"The bones say, O Pukka Sahib, that the owl shall screech three times on the ridgepole of your house. And that means in all India that a girl shall be added to the family by marriage."

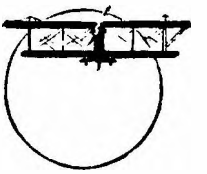
The quick glances that passed between the two did not contradict his message.

THE VALOROUS VISAGE

By

Berton Braley

A TOAST to the face in whose features we trace
The glory of peace and of war,
The face that sets fire to our flagging desire
The face that we dread—and adore.
Oh the spell of the eyes and the lure of the lips
And the fatal enchantment that leaps
From the face that has launched many thousands of ships
And sunk thousands more in the deeps!



Then here's to the Bright Face of Danger
Whose sparkling and truculent gleam
Gives living a glamor that's stranger
Than ever shone out of a dream.

No softness is seen in that insolent mien
No tender and wistful romance,
Unless you can bear that hot challenging stare
You're seared to the bone by a glance.
But he who can answer those blistering eyes,
With reckless and light-hearted mirth
Shall find in that visage a magic that lies
In no other features on earth.

So here's to the Bright Face of Danger
That shimmers with perilous light,
That makes of the plodder—a ranger,
And makes of the Helot—a Knight!

That face is a star leading mortals afar
Over seas, over battlefields red,
Daring Heaven and Hell as they follow pell-mell
The Bright Face of Danger ahead.
The visage that knows neither mercy nor ruth
But shines with a radiance high,
The face they shall love with the passion of youth,
And smartly salute when they die!

So here's to the Bright Face of Danger
Blithe, glittering, Gorgon-eyed, bold
Whose pitiless light is a changer
Of life's leaden metal to gold!

Part III

THE VALLEY OF ADVENTURE

By JACKSON GREGORY

Author of "High Courage," "High Mesa," and Other Great Stories of the Fighting West

WHAT HAS HAPPENED BEFORE

BILL MOUNTAIN'S domain has been inherited from a grand strain of Spanish ancestors. His name is really Montana, and he is lord of a vast upland country that is now threatened by those who know that Bill has no title to his water rights—only the word of old Lane, who sold White Water Valley to his father but no title ever passed for it. There is a fight when the story opens for him to get possession of this property, and into the picture comes Penelope Loring from the East; she thought she was to have the school in the New Mexican town of San Carlos—near

the Montana holdings—but it is Bill Mountain who conjures up a school for her in his own country.

Certain men, led by one Buck Andros, have produced the son of the Lane from whom Bill's father was supposed to have bought the land, and this son says it is all a mistake and he is going to take possession of it. Then some old-timer remembers that Lane's child was not a son but a daughter, and Bill is not so worried. But Andros threatens young Juan, Bill's brother—who is falsely accused of murder—and in spite of the friendship of old Dan Westcott, the sheriff, Bill and his foreman have to ride to Juan's hideout to see to the boy's safety.

Chapter XII

THE first inkling of what was afoot was given Penelope by a sudden voice in the silence, its intonation startling her before she caught a word. She was in her own room, a delightful nest furnished from the old Montana home and though ready for bed had been drawn to the companionable blaze which Consuela had set crackling in her bedroom fireplace. Bubbling over with life which of late had become so zestful an affair, she was impelled to sit by the fire and think of it all. She should be sleepy—but she drew on a wisp of a negligee, got her writing pad and disposed herself cozily to talk it all over with Patty:

"I've got so much to tell you! I've simply landed in the Valley of Adventure. Right at the start, you've got to get Bill right! I got only a glimpse of him, and the wrong glimpse at that, down in San Carlos. The air is clear in our Up Yonder Country, and he is like a mountain, one of those noble old fellows that, the more you look at, the more splendid things you see. I gave you quite the wrong impression in my first letter.——"

Thus far had Penelope's racing pen sped when Ben Hodge's voice put a full stop to

Bill Mountain Stops One, but Is Anything but Out of the Fight for White Water Valley

her letter-writing. She ran to her window and heard everything.

Ben had swung in here at White Water while Bill Mountain turned off into Mule Deer Canyon and pushed on into the mountains to head off Andros and his men. Ben gave his orders hurriedly since he too was impatient to be hammering along the canyon trail. There were several families in the tiny settlement under the trees behind Penelope's school; the men were to arm themselves and follow on and one of the boys was to carry word down to Montana Valley. With these brief instructions given and men sent scurrying, Ben used his spurs and split the air for Mule Deer trail. Hoofbeats ahead of him, dying away between the mountain flanks, told him with what haste his employer sped on ahead.

The moon was rising only now and no ray from it penetrated where Bill Mountain rode. It was dark under the pines in the high-walled ravine but he and his horse knew the way and made daylight speed. It was slower work further on as the trail steepened, but he was comforted by the thought that Andros and his night-prowlers must traverse as difficult ways. As the moon floated clear of the eastern ridges horse and rider broke the skyline on Mule Deer ridge. Ben Hodge, laboring upward far behind, caught one glimpse of the centaur-silhouette.

ONCE on the ridge Bill Mountain again swung along at a gallop, giving his horse its head. Some two miles off to the northeast he saw the bald pinnacle of Anastasio's Mountain glinting where a shaft of light struck a flinty fault which gleamed like dark metal. Where that old Titan loomed above a region of cliff and gorge were Grouse Canyon and Juan.

From an open space whence he could look down a long barren slope bright with the moonlight he saw far off the hurrying figures which he knew to be Andros and his men. Drawn near Grouse Canyon, Bill did not turn down into the hollow to find Juan; instead he dismounted, tied his horse in a small grove of mountain cedars and made his way along the rocky ridge on foot. He knew where the riders would of necessity come; he arrived at the spot well ahead of them and nested down among the boulders. When Andros, riding a horse's length in advance of the others came within range Bill Mountain sent the first warning bullet hissing over his head. Andros came to a dead halt, his men stopping in a clump behind him.

Bill Mountain supplemented the bullet's message with the shout:

"If you bunch up close together that way I can get two-three at one shot maybe! Scatter, you rats; I'm starting in!"

Andros rapped out a sharp command, and his men reined about and scurried off to a safer distance. Andros himself did not move.

"I mean it, Andros," Bill called out to him. "From now on we're death to trespassers on Montana land."

ANDROS surprised him by swinging down from his saddle. For a moment his form was hidden behind the bulk of his horse and Bill fully expected a shot over the animal's back. But Andros had something else in mind. A second later he stood out, clearly revealed, holding his rifle high over his head.

"See it?" said Andros. "Well, here goes." He threw the weapon from him as far as he could and Bill both saw the flash of moonlight upon the barrel and heard the clang as it struck among the rocks. "I want to talk with you, Bill," said Andros then. "I'm coming ahead." He took the first step forward.

"Hold it!" Bill called back warningly. "I'm done talking with you, neighbor. Rifle or no rifle, I'm going to plug you dead center if you don't back up."

Andros laughed at him, retorting good humoredly:

"You can't do it, Bill. You can't plug an unarmed man. It's not in you. I could do it and would jump at the chance. Dif-

ferent breed of cattle, huh? Well, that gives me an advantage, I'd say. And here I come. With my hands up, too!"

He continued to advance steadily and the light was sufficient to show how both his arms were high above his head. They stuck up rigidly like two sticks balanced on his shoulders.

"Because a man throws away one gun it doesn't mean that he's no longer heeled," said Bill thoughtfully. "Watch how you walk, Andros. It would be unlucky for you if you stumbled over a stone; I'd think you were going for your belt gun and, bingo, I'd let you have it!"

"Shucks," said Andros, as cool and good humored as ever. He stopped and said, "Well, here goes my forty-five, too. Please teacher can I take my hand down long enough to pitch it into the discard?"

He was being watched narrowly; he was close enough now for each gesture to be plain, so close that almost the expression on his face could be read. He lifted his revolver out of its holster and pitched it several feet aside of the trail. It began to look as though Andros came in peace.

YET Bill Mountain did not trust him. After last night's talk there should be small unfinished business between them that

could be in any way advanced by further words. So, watchful for trickery, he laid his rifle aside and replaced it with one of those weapons from a shoulder holster in which he put greater confidence in an argument at close quarters. It suggested itself to him that all that Andros wanted was to spy out the land, to seek to ascertain whether Bill was all alone or backed up perhaps by Juan and still others. Bill himself was confident that Juan was nearby, perhaps even now hearing their voices and making a guarded way up from the canyon, and that Ben Hodge and some of the White Water men were well on their way. Therefore he assured himself that Andros would not learn much and that what little he did glean would only lead him into error. Nevertheless he meant to take no chances.

"You'll keep your hands up," he said sharply. "And you'll stop right where you are! It's close enough for a talk. Maybe you're right and I haven't the heart to plug you dead center as I promised, but so help me I'll cripple you if you come a single step closer."

"Oh, all right," said Andros, still good humoredly, and stopped. "Only if I meant to start something do you think I'd send my men back and tie into it all alone? I tell you, I just want a couple of words."

"Let's have 'em then."

"Right. You see, I've got something else to do besides chase all over the world after that hang-dog brother of yours. After all Juan's a sort of side issue. I've got a proposition to make you."

He lowered his hands only enough to clasp them behind his head. The simple gesture was innocuous enough—until it quite completed itself. And the completion did not come until Andros had spoken a few more words. He said, "You see, Bill, both you and I have a lot more at stake than——" Then it came. Andros, before he had started to walk forward, had shoved a second pistol into the neck-band of his shirt, its butt sticking up behind his head. When he appeared to clasp his hands behind his head he was all set for instantaneous action. That action was as swift and true as the snap of a steel trap.

Both men fired. There were but the two shots which came so close together that at a little distance they sounded like one. Andros' men sat irresolute a moment, then began gradually to move forward. Ben

Hodge, panting up the ridge, began playing down a barrage of rifle fire. Juan from the shadows fifty yards above the spot where Bill and Andros had engaged each other, emulated Ben Hodge and for a moment the two rifles set the echoes wild with their crisp, vicious reports.

Andros' men scattered and one of them yelled, "Buck! Buck! What's the game?" They were at a loss, since there had been no time for Andros to coach them. Also, in the saddles and on the upland, they constituted targets hard to miss while they could catch no glimpse of the men among the rocks who were pouring lead among them.

While they hesitated the sound of rushing hoofs told where the men from White Water rode in haste on their bare-backed range horses. Ben shouted to them and to Juan; he called to Bill and when he had no answer he turned all his interest upon Andros' men. They began to draw off, though reluctantly. Ben, cursing them with tears running down his face, yet held a rifle in the steadiest of hands. When he saw a man double forward and slip loosely out of the saddle, Ben laughed at the sight and still laughing, still with tears on his weathered face, he kept on shooting. He knew that Bill Mountain was out of the fight and there was no need to ask why.

Andros' horse, caught between two fires, started to run. The whipping stirrups and lashing bridle reins bred panic and the animal went plunging out of sight down a steep slope. Ben Hodge laughed at that too—the sight of Andros' empty saddle.

"He's dead," choked Juan. He knelt and his eyes flashed wildly in the moonlight as he looked up at Ben Hodge. "Andros has killed Bill."

"And Bill killed Andros," said Ben. "They were not ten feet apart."

Juan leaped up and climbed to the top of a big boulder in full sight of all.

"Come on, you dirty dogs," he yelled excitedly and began firing across the broken lands at the shadowy figures of Andros' hesitant men. "It is Juan Montana, the man that you want. Come and get him! Come on, I tell you, come on!"

A RAIN of bullets poured about him. Ben caught him savagely by the arm, jerking him back.

"Come down, you damn young fool!" he snapped. "Bill's not dead—not so soon. Keep your hair on. We've got to get him home and see what we can do for him. You've gone off your head, man."

"Bill? Not dead?" whispered Juan. He threw himself down on his knees again. "Bill! Bill, old man. It's Juanito calling you. Bill——"

Bill Mountain's eyes opened and he said weakly, "All right, Kid." He managed to move his hand and pressed it against the wound in his chest.

Juan said unsteadily: "Sure it's all right, Bill. We're taking you home—we'll have a doctor in no time——"

"Andros?" muttered Bill. He thought that he was going out, and a man liked to know whether he was to have company.

"You drilled him clean, Bill," said Ben Hodge.

Bill tried to grunt his satisfaction with the news and a sort of twisted smile twitched his lips.

"Dead?" he asked.

Ben hurried where Andros lay and brought back the report:

"Not yet, Bill. But you nailed the snake proper. Now take it easy; a lot of the boys are almost here and we'll have you home in two shakes."

Bill began muttering. Both Ben and Juan leaned very close.

"Doctor—" he muttered. "Andros—ask him——"

Ben, who knew his beloved boss so well, understood; at any other moment Ben would have rebelled like a broncho bucking stiff-legged. But now he only swore under his breath and obeyed the command. He went again to Andros who, lying on his back, looked up at him somewhat blankly.

"Want to lie here and die?" snapped Ben. "We're taking Bill home and getting a doctor. He's inviting you. Or you can have your men cart you back to your own dump. That strikes me as the thing to do."

Andros stared at him a long time. It was with a tremendous effort that he made his faint, gasping reply.

"I'd die before my boys could—Montana's closer— Sure, Ben.— Take me along——"

They took him up gently, for after all they thought that he was dying, and placed him close to Bill behind the boulder. Explanations were shouted to his men; they took Ben Hodge's word for everything, threw down their guns and came to lend a hand. It was a full two miles down to White Water and a truck.

PENELOPE heard the men returning. There was one who raced on ahead of the others and who tarried only long enough at White Water to cry out the dreadful news. The Señor Montana and that Andros had met and both were dying if not dead already. Yet he was speeding on to the old home to telephone for a doctor.

The others, a slow, sorrowful procession, came later. She saw lanterns gathering about the truck. Consuela, weeping, was running with a mattress while Eugenio and Josefa hurried after her with armfuls of blankets. Penelope, already dressed and anxiously awaiting news, ran with them. She stood with the back of her hand pressed tight against her lips, her eyes made round with agony, as a limp form was lifted tenderly by many men to the bed in the truck. She saw Juan then; in the soft light of moon and lanterns his eyes seemed deep, dark liquid pools.

"Juan—tell me——"

"Señorita!" He caught at her arm and held her in a nervous grip. "It is my brother Bill—you understand? All because of me! They are taking him home—they are sending for a doctor! Good God, how slow everything is! There is no time——"

A man climbed to the seat of the truck. Another joined him. This other was Ben Hodge. Juan, who had dropped his horse's reins to come to Penelope, now sprang into the truck bed, sitting down at Bill's side. Penelope climbed up after him but instead of sitting she stood erect and put her hand on Ben Hodge's shoulder.

"Tell me," she whispered.

"Oh, it's you, Miss Loring? Bill's hurt pretty bad. I've sent a man on to try to get a doctor and a nurse." Her fingers had clutched convulsively and he laid his big hand gently on them. "We'll pull him through and don't you worry," he said crisply. "It takes one hell of a lot of killing to wipe out a man like Bill."

"I'm going with you. I can help. I'm not a nurse but—I'll send for Patty! We'll have her with us tomorrow! Patty Lane's the best nurse in Albuquerque."

"Sit tight," said Ben. "We're going."

Then she too crouched down and the truck started, moving slowly. She on one side and Juan on the other of the quiet blanketed form, the two looked fearfully at each other. For the first time she saw Andros though at the time she didn't know who he was; both she and Juan ignored him, bending low over Bill Mountain's white upturned face.

"Pray for him, Penelope," whispered Juan.

His hand groped for hers. She squeezed it tight. She could not answer him otherwise but Juan knew that she was praying.

CHAPTER XIII

PENELOPE came face to face with the most breath-taking fact in the world. Sudden comprehension was like an electric current. She felt a thrill go tingling through her from head to foot, she knew that her cheeks had turned crimson—she harbored for that one instant the panicky thought that it was common knowledge that she had gone rosy to the tips of her toes. She

ran out of the room. It was pure flight, headlong and somewhat blindly blundering at that; she careened full tilt into an amazed Mrs. Richards, gasped something quite incoherent, and bolted for her room, that room which she had occupied the first night in Montana Valley.

That first time it had been an artist's dream captured on canvas which had drawn her; this time it was a higher Artist's dream framed in a mirror to which she sped. She looked at herself with all the intentness she could have brought to bear upon a girl whom she had never seen before but in whom she had some profound interest. It is no very great exaggeration to state that it was a little stranger who glowed back at her in reflection.

Those were Penelope Loring's eyes, as big and sweet and softly gray as there could be any excuse for any girl having, yet they were different. They had never looked back at her—or at anyone—like that! They shone like stars on a soft warm summer night. That was Penelope Loring's saucy red mouth, but there was a different smile upon it making it tenderer and more downright alluring and provocative than it had ever been until this amazing and delicious moment. She had never been so lovely and she knew it, and some-

thing sang within her that this was a new, freshly born loveliness which had come to stay. She pressed the back of her fingers against her flushed face, cuddling her cheek against them, and kept on smiling.

Mrs. Richards tapped hesitantly at her door.

"Is anything the matter, Miss Loring? Juan says that you ran out of the room and——"

Penelope answered her laughingly. Mrs. Richards cocked her head aside and perked up her brows at such spontaneous gaiety.

"It's nothing—I just remembered something—tell Juan I'll be back before he can roll a cigarette."

She had been giving Juan a glass of water. It was now a week since Bill Mountain and Buck Andros had been brought to the house, dying as all thought. Juan, too, had been in bad case what with the exertion of his flight from under the noses of Andros and the deputy sheriff and the shifting of his bandage and the blood loss with minor complications which it brought about. Juan, as well as the others was still in bed. As she played nurse—it was late afternoon and the short school day was over—Juan had dropped a remark or two which were not intrinsically of such stuff as makes history.

"You are so adorable, Penelope," he had said, looking up at her and smiling.

"That's nice," Penelope had returned, as lightly as you please.

"My brother," added Juan, as one quoting the highest authority, "says that you are the one and only honest-to-God girl in the world."

And that was the remark that did make history. Water was slopped over from a full glass to Juan's bed and Penelope heard the music of the spheres.

Was this the way love came? Not according to all the rules of the game. It should burst out at first sight or, missing that, it should be the slow blossoming of time, of years maybe and of an extended acquaintance with the gradual commingling of little interests upgathering into big. It had no earthly business sneaking up on one this way and then jumping out all unexpectedly like some stupid practical joker saying "Boo!" at you! And why hadn't she known before?

She had been too overcharged with dread, for one thing; too weary and anx-

ious; too much on the run to help when there was any help to be given; too heavy with sleep when the lulls came.

A CLICKING of high heels sounded in the hall and Penelope snatched wildly at a book, made a leap for the bed and did her best to give an imitation of a girl absorbed in last spring's best seller. The door opened without any formality of a knock and Patty Lane breezed in. She went to the mirror and began tightening a honey-colored curl about her finger. Penelope looked up at her swiftly, glanced down at her book and said indifferently:

"How is he now, Patty?"

Patty spun about and made a face at her.

"So you've gone and done it, Pen. I said you would."

"Gone and done what?" asked Penelope innocently.

"Climbed to a high place," said Patty, "and made your swan dive. Took a long breath, gave yourself a shake and went overboard head first ker-splash into the puddle of love!"

Penelope flooded her with derisive laughter.

"Laugh, darn you, laugh," said Patty serenely. "Think you can fool one of my wide experience? Where do you keep your powder puff? My nose gets as shiny up here in the mountains as a glass eye in the moonlight."

Saucy and pert and very piquant was Patty Lane, petite and blue-eyed with a mutinous red mouth, alert from her high heels to the tips of her nicely kept and extremely capable finger tips.

"You're not in your uniform," said Penelope.

"Look at what I'm up against!" sniffed Patty. "You're a wickedly distracting little beauty and I've got a pug nose! Think I'm going to go marching about in a blue and white starchy looking rig with you floating about in that sleezy rag that doesn't pretend to hide the fact that you are as God made you. You wrecker! You know darned well that a glimpse of you would send Venus yelling for somebody to lend her an overcoat and yet you make remarks if I climb out of a uniform and drape myself in something that maybe will draw attention from my pug."

"You and your pug nose! It's pert, if you want the name for it and the property of a pert and perfectly upsetting little flirt, Patty Lane, and you know it. What's more you're a red Indian——"

"Dew tell," grinned Patty.

"——and if I catch you trying to add his scalp to your string——"

"You're a funny kid." Patty sat down on the foot of the bed, kicked her shoes across the room. "As long as you were all set for a high dive why did you have to pick out a great lumbering, gawky cowboy that——"

"He's not lumbering!" cried Penelope warmly. "He isn't gawky. He's no cowboy, either—he's a *caballero!* I don't know what you are talking about anyway. And I'm no more in love than——"

"Than Juliet was when she swallowed the druggist's prescription. As if I didn't know the minute I heard your voice over the long distance telephone!" She mimicked: " 'Oh, Patty, Patty, hurry, hurry, *hurry! Listen,* Patty! Can't you hear me? Can't you *understand?* It's a matter of life and—*No, no, no!* I can't say it! He *mustn't* die! He mustn't, he mustn't, *he mustn't!* He is so *wonderful!* Oh, *Patty*——' "

"And," said Penelope reproachfully, "you made me beg and beg, saying something perfectly maddening about another case——"

"Maddening or not," retorted Patty, "I've got to go on that other case the minute I get word and you know it. It's my best chum, next to you, and her first baby, and we promised each other when we were probationers to stand by."

PENELOPE, looking steadily through an open window which gave upon the garden, wasn't listening. Why hadn't she

herself known all along? It seemed now much more than a mere week ago—but then it had been no ordinary week at all —since the jolting truck had brought him home. She had been so desperately fearful! A man whom she had never seen, a commonplace, stolid fellow named George Ladd, came in dressed in faded overalls and dirty boots, smelling of the stable, and took charge. How her heart sank when she took him all in and she learned who and what he was. Bill Montana's veterinarian! And to think that Bill's life depended upon his stodgy hands and his knowledge of the anatomy of horses! She had wanted to caution him, to be at his side every instant so that she could watch and guard against clumsiness. And George Ladd had snapped at her and shoved her out of the way, rolling up his sleeves on thick reddish arms—and had labored so skillfully and to such glorious effect that in her eyes he was no longer stolid and stupid but quite a shining person, and brought stable smells as sweet as new mown hay.

As he had striven with Bill Montana so did he work with Buck Andros and with Juan. Then the doctor had come; he had been located at a thirty mile distant ranch where he was aiding in the advent of twins —quite as though the world weren't already sufficiently populated! Why did people have to choose a time like this to have babies? The physician, a tall red-headed young fellow whom they called Doc and whose name turned out to be Crawford, talked things over with the phlegmatic George Ladd, nodded his approval and went to work where Ladd had left off. For three days and nights the man hardly ate or slept; he snapped people's heads off as only dictators of his profession can; he gimleted at the new nurse, Patty Lane, with a frosty eye; he drove her like a slave and scolded her like a bad child; he jeered at her when she grew white under the strain and later on patted her on her fluffy head; he sized Penelope up with a dissecting sort of eye, cut shrewdly through the outer husks of a rather distracting pulchritude and arrived at the canny decision that she was a young person of nerve and stamina, whereupon he made use of her services equally with Patty's.

"My God, what a physique that man has, and what nerves!" he said when, after probing mercilessly for a fragment of clothing which had been driven along into the wound he came out of Bill Montana's room.

"And therefore," said Penelope steadily, "you're going to be able to pull him through!"

DR. CRAWFORD glared at her but it was only abstractedly; he was tugging moodily at his long lower lip.

"Some men are harder to kill than others. It's like this: you take a dinner plate and shoot a hole in it and it all goes to smash, doesn't it? But you take a piece of sole-leather, poke nineteen bullet holes in it and it hangs together."

"So does a piece of fine silk," said Penelope.

He looked at her in his surgeonly way, always laying back outer flaps of tissue, probing.

"Get me a drink of whiskey," he commanded curtly. He was hollow-eyed and irascible from sleeplessness, fatigue and strain. "Then come along to lend a hand while I see about John Andros. It's like Bill Mountain to try to kill a man, then drag him home and try to heal him. After the dirty trick Andros pulled on him, too!"

When three days later he made them write down his detailed instructions and then took his departure, he was more like a gigantic red wasp than ever; no man had ever labored harder.

"They've got their chances, both of them," he said angrily quite as though this were in despite of all his efforts to the contrary and he hated to admit defeat. "If you girls have got any sense and do your jobs right both the damned fools may live long enough to shoot each other again and

put some more money in my pocket. Juan's out of the woods already. Send for me if you want me; in any case I'll drop in day after tomorrow. Good-by, Miss Loring; you've got the making of a corking nurse in you. Bye-bye, Patty Pert; you'd make a swell blacksmith's assistant."

Patty showed him the tip of a red tongue. But gazing thoughtfully after him she admitted, "He's a marvel, the devil! Why do you suppose an artist like him is satisfied with turning into a country hick?"

"Hick?" said Penelope. "With you, I suppose a hick is any man who has too much sense to be content with being one of the scramble down in the jungles."

"Jungles?" demanded Patty. "Oh, yeah?"

EVERY day Buck Andros' foreman Dave Rance, came for a report. He was a swaggering, insolent young desperado, with cruelly hard blue eyes which had a way of paying the most impudent of compliments when they went roving over either of the girls. This Dave Rance cooled his heels on the front porch until Ben Hodge was at liberty; then the two of them went together to Andros' room where Ben remained during the two or three minute visit. Ben was taking no chances; he did not believe that Andros knew that Juan was in the house, but he did know that Andros was never to be trusted, even though it still was a question whether he would live or die.

"Thanks to my old friend, Don Bill Quixote," said Andros before the end of the week, "I'm going to make the grade with bells on. It would be funny, eh, Ben, if I got well and Bill pegged out!"

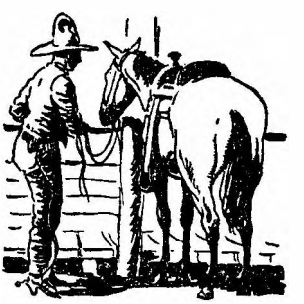
"You'd hang as sure as water runs down hill," Ben assured him grimly.

"Let's hope old Bill pulls through then. And I was dead sure I was nailing the son-of-a-gun square through the heart."

Close enough to the heart had both men shot and the two wounds were almost identical in all particulars. Both had shot a trifle high so that the bullets had torn into the upper chest almost midway between the arch of the aorta and the point of the left shoulder. Given a little less magnificence of physique on both their parts and a shade longer delay in that first aid treatment at the deft hands of George Ladd and a subsequent skill lacking the artistry which was Dr. Crawford's, the Montana-Andros feud must inevitably have been at an end before now.

"As you go out, Ben," said Andros, "ask Miss Loring to step in."

BEN HODGE, tightening his lips, stalked out, but it was Mrs. Richards whom he dispatched to the wounded man's room. Andros however would have none of her and damned her out of his sight. In the end he had his way and Penelope came. All that he wanted was a glass of water but he swore he would die of thirst before he took it from any hand but hers. He called her Pretty Penelope; he began making love to her when



another man would have thought only of his own perilous case.

"I loved you the minute I saw you, my dear," he said quite simply.

His words brought no warmth of color to her cheeks, but instead there were times when they turned her cold and white to the lips.

"There is no earthly reason why you should talk like this to me, Mr. Andros," she told him frigidly. "It doesn't amuse me in the least."

"It isn't meant to amuse," he returned swiftly. "Look into my eyes, girl!"

She did and looked away hurriedly. At the moment his eyes were honest enough, though she had thought there was no sincerity in his warped soul. He was not pretending, he was playing no part, he was not flirting with her as he had flirted with so many girls. For once the man was in dead earnest and in his eyes there was a look which there is no counterfeiting.

With Patty he did amuse himself and Patty coquetted with him to her singing heart's content.

"He's the handsomest thing unhung," Patty informed Penelope quite as though her friend had no eyes of her own. "And I don't believe he's half the bad hombre that you all try to make out. You're just goofy over your mountain man, and because he and Buck have got hot-headed and tried to blot each other out you nail all the wickedness to Buck Andros. He's rather a dear. Maybe I'll just let myself go—there are other things than just being a nurse all one's life."

Penelope tweaked her arm and said indignantly:

"If I thought that you meant a word of that!"

"And why not?" demanded Patty airily. "A girl's got to fall sometime, hasn't she? Of course there's Juan—I adore him, don't you? If I don't get called away pretty soon on my other case, well——" She laughed and began humming, "It's Springtime in the Rockies."

Penelope began to look troubled. She hoped that Patty would adore Juan; it was so much safer than getting too deeply interested in Buck Andros.

"Time to feed the animals," said Patty with a glance at the watch on a shapely wrist.

PENELOPE went thoughtfully to the kitchen. Outside she saw old José standing like a statue, his unwinking eyes fixed upon Bill Mountain's window. There he would stand by the hour. During the first few days and nights there had always been a crowd of Bill's people watching the house, and even when the time came that the men reluctantly went once more about their work there lingered on the women and children, a silent and tense gathering, awaiting patiently any word from the house. The scant tidings which came out to them were carried on running feet: "He is not any worse!" "He is drinking some water now!" "Maybe he is a little bit stronger!" "He is hungry and that is a fine sign!" Alone of them all old José never asked a question, never gave any sign in his copper-mask face and now, with the others beginning to think of other things, stuck at his post. Penelope began to love the old fellow for his devotion. At five o'clock he would come to the house and be admitted to Bill's room. Bill would glance at the bedside chair and old José would make a ceremony of sitting down. It was a part of a small drama re-enacting itself daily. At times José would say two words, at others he would come and go in absolute silence.

The broth on the stove began to hiss; Penelope came up out of her abstraction, filled a cup and carried it to Bill's room. The sight of him plucked at her heart strings, he was so gaunt and weak, his eyes seemed so inordinately large, his cheeks so hollow under the growth of black beard. Only his mouth was the same and it smiled at her.

"I knew you were coming," said Bill. "I can tell your step a mile off."

"A full mile? Are you sure you're not confusing my tread with Crusader's?"

She fed him with a spoon and he was faintly amused.

"I've given you the devil of a deal, dragging you up into all this trouble of ours," he said when the spoon rested in the empty cup. "Why do you go to all this trouble? You ought to make Mrs. Richards or Patty do the dirty work. They're paid for it."

"I enjoy waiting on you," said Penelope serenely, "but if you would prefer the others I'll let them bring you your broth."

"What you bring me is always nicer,

tastier you know, than the stuff they feed me," he admitted.

"You know, Bill Montana, that it all comes out of the same pot," said the matter-of-fact Penelope.

He appeared surprised. That was funny. Honestly, no joshing, somehow it had always seemed to him that she had the knack of seasoning things just right!

She put the cup on the table and sat down beside him.

"You are really a prize patient," she smiled approvingly.

"Nothing of the sort. I'm just a tough old trooper who's used to a lot of rough and tumble and thrives on it."

"Valiant old trooper—the sort it's fun to nurse."

"You're an angel with all the trimmings, white wings and harp and everything." He patted her hand which touched his pillow. "And I've given you a beastly slice of life up here. You ought to be having some real fun instead of working and worrying all the time. Here I am, flat on my back, when I ought to be keeping my promise to you."

"Promise?" She perked up her brows trying to remember.

A glint of humor brightened his sunken eyes.

"I said I'd go out and get you a *novio* to strum a guitar under your window and——"

She flared out at him then.

"It's not very complimentary to a girl, Mr. Montana, to indicate that you feel it necessary to go out and rope some young man for her. Thanks, but when I want a *novio* I can pick out one for myself!"

"I'll bet you can do your own roping!" he chuckled. "Ever think of making eyes at Juan? It would be great to keep you in the family, Penny-lope."

"Juan is quite the most charming youngster I ever knew," said Penelope musingly, and when she knew he wasn't looking cut sideways at him with her eyes. "But he is just a youngster, isn't he?" She appeared to be considering with all due gravity. "The one really fascinating man on the ranch is Buck Andros, you know. Do you suppose if a thoroughgoing girl took him in hand she could make a decent citizen out of him?"

"Good God!" he gasped. He looked at her, alarmed. "Penelope, you don't mean——"

"Oh, of course not," she laughed. She patted his nerveless hand gently, took up the cup and saucer, said over her shoulder, "Shall I look in on you tomorrow?" and carried a lot of sunshine along with her out of the room. Bill, abruptly left to his own devices, stared at the ceiling frowningly.

Chapter XIV

WEARING a tight little sphynx-like smile Penelope went about her affairs which began with dissimulation and ended with a pensive ride to her own place at White Water. The dissimulation conducted with delicate artistry and restraint was all for Patty; that clever young woman who had been so sure that she had nosed out a love story in its earliest stages, was to be set wondering and then begin to doubt her own astuteness. Penelope liked to carry her head high and what girl could do that if she published to the world that she had turned longing eyes upon a man who thought that it would be great to keep her in the family in a safe and conservative sister-capacity?

The enigmatic smile had developed into gay inconsequential laughter when she left Patty, ran down the steps and went swinging her hat and clinking her spurs on her way to the stable for her horse. Raimundo, the houseboy, wanted to bring her horse for her, but she only thanked him, dazed him with her smile and left him gazing worshipfully after her.

Tonito came charging down upon her on horseback as she reached the first gate. It was he who would open it for her; it was too heavy for a señorita like her and

would make her pretty hands all rough. Though it was habit with Tonito to open all gates from the saddle he dismounted and stood at her side. Also there was another gate; he would walk along with her and open that one, too.

"But that is not necesary, Tonito! You must go on with whatever work you were doing. You do work sometimes, don't you?"

Tonito flashed his teeth at her. He was the old Tonito again, very gay, even to a red rose behind his ear. For him to have remained sad would have been for him to cease to be Tonito. Still, when she looked into his laughing eyes, she wondered. Of late there seemed a soberness behind Tonito's smile.

"You see, I had anyway to go to the stable," he said glibly. "I must change to another saddle; this one hurts my poor little horse. And so I can get you your horse." He looked at her slyly. "You like this rancho, *no?* It is fun for you everyday to come and watch the thoroughbreds and the polo ponies?"

She nodded brightly. It was more than fun, it was sheer delight. She had struck up a warm friendship with George Ladd, the veterinarian; he saw her coming now and waved his greeting. He had taken her upon pleasant tours through his demesne, explaining everything and finding her an intelligent and sympathetic listener. Ladd prided himself on his position and on the results for which he was responsible. For was not this nucleus the very core and pride of the Montana properties? Here again Penelope thought of Montana Valley as a mountaineer's kingdom with Bill Montana delegating authority in various quarters; Ben Hodge as general foreman was a sort of caliph's grand vizier and certainly George Ladd about the stables and paddocks was a downright dictatorial lordling. In his small sphere, which by the way represented a lot of money, hundreds of thousands of dollars in fine horseflesh, the veterinarian was eagle-eyed and iron-handed.

HIS stables were the last whisper in modernity. The horses' quarters were clean, fresh, airy rooms; Ladd himself saw to the proper ventilation and roared like a wounded lion at the wrong windows opened creating a draft. It was his job not so much to doctor animals that were sick as to keep them all in the pink of glowing health. He showed Penelope the metal-lined boxes where the feed was kept; no dirty rats allowed. He came as

close as any one man could to poking his finger into every forkful of hay that went up into the high lofts, and if you could have shown him a tiny clod of earth or a pebble or a handful of spoiled hay or grain he would have turned as red as a turkey gobbler. He pointed out in his office in the largest stable, the charts hanging on the wall; therein you had the pedigree of every four-footed living creature with which he condescended to deal. There were other charts, too, recording his experiments in feeding and in dosing, and still other charts containing records of performance. Ages and weights and habits, all were down in apple-pie order.

But most of all Penelope loved to watch the horses themselves, superb creatures, fine-limbed, satin-clad, high-headed beauties each in its own way.

"There comes an old friend of yours," chuckled Ladd.

It was Daybreak, a four-year-old bright bay stallion, a perfect glory of a horse from crest to hoof. He made Penelope shiver with a queer admixture of admiration and fear. Two husky Indian stable boys were leading him to his quarters

after an airing; they had him between them with two ropes through his halter ring and neither of the boys for a single instant took his watchful eyes from the stallion. Daybreak, his flawless skin gleaming, his muscles rippling visibly rolled as watchful eyes upon them and at any moment Penelope looked to see him whip his lead-ropes out of their hands and become in action that engine of destruction which he looked even in half repose.

"The finest of the fine, the greatest blood-horse on the ranch," said Ladd pridefully. "He's going to be the daddy of some mighty nifty running stock. Bill's pet, by the way—or one of his pets anyhow. Bill's the only man that ever rode the old son-of-a-gun. How'd you like to fork Daybreak, Miss Loring?"

"No thanks," laughed Penelope. "I'd far rather ride Mr. Montana's other pet, dear old Dixie. She is——"

"Look out!" roared Ladd. "My God ——"

THE big bay stallion, scarcely requiring the most flimsy excuse to run amuck, elected for sheer terror when a thoroughly familiar stable hand threw open a door suddenly and stepped out to shake a saddle blanket. Daybreak lunged backward and with a savage jerk broke free of his halter ropes and reared high on his hind legs, his teeth bared and wild eyes rolling wickedly. As his waving forefeet came earthward again, striking the hard-packed earth with a thunder clap, the two boys who had held him leaped back from beneath the menace of his hoofs; he lashed out with his heels and then it was that George Ladd shouted his warning, fearful for Penelope. Daybreak however was not concerned with her; head down and muzzle outstretched he charged the two boys who fled for their lives.

One of them, shut off from the barn into which the other had shot like a rabbit down its warren, sprang to a gate and slipped through barely in time to avoid the click of the big teeth. The gate was only closing when Daybreak struck it and went through with a crash and splintering of timbers. The frightened boy swerved with a swiftness which served him well and fairly hurled himself over the fence and back into the enclosure. Daybreak, trumpeting terror and defiance, shot straight out across the field.

And then Penelope saw two little brown babies coming hand in hand from the creek, waving their bunches of flowers. They saw the horse, stood riveted to the ground a moment, then screamed and fled. Even in that breathless instant she had cause to remember Bill Mountain's words when he had said, "I have some of the best riders in New Mexico." Of their number Tonito was surely one. As his toe found the stirrup his horse was off after Daybreak at a dead run. As he struck the saddle his rope was in his hand. A noose leaped into being, whistled about his head, widened and leaped through the air upon its unerring way to whip tight about Daybreak's rebellious neck. Others ran to his aid with other ropes, and presently they returned leading their captive and laughing.

"One more happy ending story," said George Ladd when Daybreak had been returned to his stall, examined for cuts and found without a scratch. "Busted a gate and didn't take a dent in his hide."

"He came close to wholesale murder," Penelope reminded him, "and all you think of is a possible bruise on him!"

"Guess you're right about picking Dixie for a friend," he conceded drily. "Daybreak's sure hell-on-four-legs."

DIXIE was looking at her over a high fence and Penelope crossed a yard to stroke the velvet nose and to talk with this little lame mother of many splendid children. Dixie was now retired; she grew old and was one of the pensioners who had a rich field and a fine snug barn all to themselves. With the first cold days, Dixie at their fore, these would make their annual pilgrimage to another Montana

ranch, one fifty miles away where a warm belt lay along the foothills.

"Bill's doing fine today, they tell me," said Ladd as she rejoined him. "Takes notice about things again don't he?"

"Everyday I tell him all the stable gossip," she informed him. "That's why I had to have a word or two with Dixie; they send love messages back and forth you know."

He saw her mounted on the milk-white mare which Tonito had saddled for her—she was riding Lady May today—watched her ride away and then turned to look curiously at the bareheaded Tonito.

"What the devil were you doing here, anyhow?" he asked curtly. "Seems to me, young feller, that I spot you loafing around the stables a hell of a lot here of late!"

"Me?" asked Tonito innocently. "Oh, no señor. Only this time I come to change my bridle, my poor little horse's mouth was getting sore."

Penelope, homeward bound, looked in on Ben Hodge at his office.

"Glad you rode by," he said as he came out. "I've got another letter from the county school superintendent and all is well-o. It seems we got off wrong-end-to in starting school first and then thinking about such matters as forming a school district, electing trustees and raising funds ——"

"Bill Montana told me down in San Carlos that he was a trustee! Though I did have sense enough to realize when I got here that a school was just in the throes of being born, I didn't suppose——"

"Bill's such an awful liar," laughed Ben. "Anyway, we're all according to Hoyle now and Bill of course will be elected chief. Funny cuss, ain't he?" He eyed her shrewdly. Just like Patty, thought Penelope, swiftly on guard.

"Now that you mention it, he is a funny cuss!" she laughed at him.

"Know what Bill needs most of anything?" asked Ben. He came down the steps and began wreathing his hand in her horse's mane.

"If Doctor Crawford knows what he's talking about——"

"Shucks, I don't mean that." He grinned at her as at the oldest of old friends. "There ought to be a nice little Mrs. Bill Montana knocking his head off before breakfast every morning. Why don't you roll those big innocent eyes at him, Penelope?"

Ben must have begun to suspect himself of being a wit, so gay and mirthful was Penelope's laughter at his suggestion.

"I'm only a girl, Ben," she reminded him when at last she fell to wiping her eyes. "If you want to domesticate Mr. Bill Montana that way you've got to scare up a Houyhnhnms for him!"

"Whoa!" cried Ben Hodge. "That's a new one on me."

"'Whoa' is quite the right word to use when speaking to a Houyhnhnms," laughed Penelope. "You haven't forgotten your Gulliver's travels, have you, Ben? Surely you'll remember that strange country where the people——"

"Were all horses with a name like a whinny!" Ben too began to laugh. "Guess you're right. Bill, the fool, never saw a girl in his life, but I thought——"

"Adios," smiled Penelope, and flashed away on Lady May looking as cool as apple blossoms in the shade.

AS SHE rode by the house Mrs. Richards hastened down the front steps, fluttering her apron and hoo-hooing at her.

"Land sakes, child," exclaimed the housekeeper when Penelope had reined Lady May in at the garden wall. "You're a picture! All pink and white and shining on that frisky white horse!"

"Am I?" said Penelope gaily. "And that's why you stopped me?"

"Bill says you went off without telling him good-night."

"I thought of something I had to do; I did go in a hurry. But I left my good-nights with Patty."

"You and Bill haven't had a spat or anything have you?" asked Mrs. Richards hopefully.

"Mercy no! What put that into your head?"

"If I was you," said Mrs. Richards gravely. "I'd take time to say my own good-nights. Bill's a sick man yet, remember; folks that way sometimes get notions. I think he'd like it. You weren't hurrying so you could ride along with *him,* were you?"

That stressed "him" certainly did not refer to Bill Mountain. Further Mrs. Richards was looking across the fields where someone had caught her eye. Penelope turned to see who it was and even at a distance recognized Andros's impudent and cock-sure foreman, Dave Rance, arriving to make his daily call.

"Certainly not!" retorted Penelope, and her eyes darkened angrily; only yesterday Dave Rance had leered at her and suggested that someday he might ride along home with her. Today he came at a later hour than usual and happened rather accurately to judge the time of her departure. "I'd ride with a wolf first," she concluded bluntly.

"Coming in, aren't you?" asked Mrs. Richards. "Bill does want to see you about something or other."

"Yes, just for a minute." She dismounted, tied Lady May at the gate and the two turned to the house. As she entered Bill's room she heard Mrs. Richards sending Raimundo running for Ben Hodge whose orders were so strict in regard to any visitor to Buck Andros.

"Going?" said Bill, noting her hat and gauntlets. His eyes brightened, but she sensed that they had been moody when she came in. "Lucky Penny! To be able to climb on top of a horse and ride! I'd give an arm to be up out of this and riding along with you!"

"At the rate you're improving it will be no time at all until you're in the saddle again." She smiled encouragingly. "I was down at the stables just now and a lot of your friends wished to be remembered. Old Crusader says, 'Tell Bill to hurry up and drop in on us.' Daybreak says, 'Regards to Bill and tell him if he doesn't come down pretty pronto and tell those polo ponies where to head in I'll bite 'em in the neck.' Dixie, the old darling, just sent love and kisses. She's the loveliest thing I ever saw."

She brought him a lot of bright gossipy items, making mention of Tonito and of George Ladd but saying nothing of the insubordination of Daybreak. As she ran on she noted how intently he was regarding

her and for an instant had the uncanny feeling that he had read her mind and knew of the Daybreak affair too.

"What is it?" she asked, breaking off with her chatter. "You look at me—differently."

"I was just noticing," he said, smiling at her. "That's a nifty little riding outfit you're wearing today."

"This?" She began to laugh. "What ails the man! Why, Bill Mountain, this is the same rig I wore the day I came here, the only riding togs I've got, in fact!"

"That's funny," said Bill.

A MOMENT later she insisted that she had much to do, said her smiling good night and left him. Instead of going back through the house she quitted the corridor by the back door which led to the rear garden and thus, instead of avoiding Dave Rance, as she planned, came face to face with him. The room allotted to Andros was at the far end of the hallway

and Rance, having made his minute-long call with Hodge in impatient attendance, had gone outside in lockstep with Hodge at another door. But today he had left his horse behind the house and Penelope saw him striding toward her through the garden.

Just then Andros's window opened and Patty put her head out, looking mysteriously urgent. She drew Rance's attention with a sibilant whisper and at first Penelope thought to be the witness to a bit of empty flirtation. But Patty for once was strangely sober; a folded paper in her hand was thrust out, swiftly pocketed by Rance and she disappeared. The whole thing was almost as quick a process as the batting of an eye.

Penelope's first impulse on seeing Dave Rance was to turn back into the house, pointedly avoiding a man whom she detested. There was something however in Patty's act, an atmosphere rather than the deed itself, which kept her where she was, a tense spectator. Patty was so surreptitious about it all and so deeply in earnest.

Rance's eyes lighted up.

"How's the pretty little schoolma'am?" he asked, grinning at her, and came forward, his hand out. "Ready to ride, huh? So'm I! Let's go."

"That paper——" began Penelope, her wits at their nimblest, thinking of Ben Hodge's close espionage based on suspicions which he had every reason to harbor.

"Ain't gettin' jealous, are you?" laughed Rance. "Jus' because little Patty han's me a love note?"

"A love note?" Penelope's brows shot up and her eyes hardened.

Rance, the sort of man who for one reason and another was as full of conceit as a wet sponge is full of water, misunderstood. Why shouldn't a pretty girl grow jealous if he looked at another? Such things had happened with him before now.

"God! You little beauty!" he said. Before she guesed his purpose he caught her in his arms. Penelope gasped in consternation and as he tried to kiss her she turned her face aside and struck him across the mouth. Even so his arms only tightened and his lips brushed her cheek. She fought savagely, beating at his face, and all the while his relentless arms were crushing her and it seemed to her that the fool thought she was only pretending, that she wanted nothing better than his embraces. Panic-stricken she began to scream.

They were but a few steps from Andros's room and Andros was the first to hear. Over Dave Rance's shoulder Penelope saw Andros at the window, haggard and gaunt with eyes like a madman's.

"Rance!" he roared. "Damn you, Rance!"

Penelope broke free and stood panting, scrubbing at her sullied cheek with the back of her hand, her eyes bright with anger, her face scarlet. Dave Rance whirled about at Andros's call and stood glowering.

"Well, Buck, what's eatin' you?" he demanded doggedly. "Thought you was supposed to be sick in bed."

Andros, clutching at the window frame to save himself from falling, said thickly,

"You—you put your hands on her! For that, Dave Rance, I am going to kill you."

Rance laughed at him but slowly his face paled, only a smear of red remaining where Penelope had struck.

"Aw, hell, Buck," he said.

"I am going to kill you, so help me God," said Andros, and overpowered by weakness began sagging.

Then Ben Hodge came running about the corner of the house and Penelope hurried to him.

"He has a note," she said brokenly. "I saw it, Ben." She started to say that Patty had given it to him; instead she added hurriedly, "I saw it handed to him out of John Andros's window."

"Bully for you, Penelope," said Ben, and added grimly, "No harm done yet, I guess? He hasn't had time to read it? I'll get it."

HE GOT it by the simple expedient of jabbing the muzzle of a forty-five into Dave Rance's ribs and making his wants known. He read it at a glance and then escorted Rance to his horse and said after him:

"You're not to come back, Rance. No Andros man is. If Andros lives I'll send him over the first day he can travel. If he dies, I'll let you know. Now get t' hell out of here."

Rance rode off as jauntily as he could manage, yet was obviously glad to be gone. Ben came back to Penelope and handed her the note. It said merely:

"Juan is in the house. Get word to Webb Clark right away. Have him raid the place. J. A."

Penelope, very much shaken, went into the house. She would stay here tonight after all rather than risk another meeting with Dave Rance. And she did want to talk with Patty.

Chapter XV

BILL MOUNTAIN commanded that Ben Hodge be sent for immediately.

"What's happened, Ben?" he demanded as his foreman brought a blank face into the room.

"Shucks, Bill," Ben told him with a fine assumption of carelessness, "you've got ears as long as a jackass. Well, too bad to disappoint you but nothing much happened. I had a word or two with Dave Rance and told him not to come back. I caught Andros trying to give him a high sign. That can't go on."

"What about Penelope?"

"She was the first to spot the by-play ——"

"Come clean, Ben!" said Bill irritably. "Something else happened. What was it?"

"She saw Andros slip a note out of his window to Rance," said Ben. "She called and I came running. I got it before Rance could even look at it." His casual air began to forsake him; the angry blood fought for a place in his tanned cheeks and his eyes hardened. "That yellow dog that ought to have been left to die where you shot him hasn't got the sense of gratitude you'd expect to find in a tarantula. Somehow he found out that Juan was here, and tried to put Rance wise."

"Sure he didn't get the word across to Rance?"

"Dead sure. And there'll be no more of Andros's men coming over here to get it."

Bill nodded. Yet his eyes kept probing at Hodge and it was clear that he was not satisfied on all points.

"You're holding something back, Ben!"

"Nary. That's the whole story, far as I know it."

"It's nothing of the kind! Ask Penelope if she'll look in on me once more. She hasn't gone yet, has she? Go see, Ben."

Penelope sent word to him that she would come in a minute; she was changing from her riding things having decided after all to stay over night. It seemed to Bill that she was longer than usual at her toilet; the fact was that she was subject to hot flushes of anger which at the moment played havoc with that smiling serenity one was supposed to carry into the rooms of the bedridden.

"You see," she said gaily when she came to Bill Mountain, "a girl is every bit as changeable as she is supposed to be. You did invite me to stay over until morning, didn't you?"

"Tell me what happened just now," he said, looking fixedly at her.

Like Ben Hodge she strove to dodge the issue, but it was no use.

"Damn it," he cut her off angrily, "if I can't have the truth told me here I'll get up and have it. I heard your scream and it gave me the shivers. I barged out of bed and made a stab at getting to the door; by then it was all over and I toppled over like a drunk. You were scared to death. Did Andros make some sort of a false move at you?"

IN THE end Penelope decided that it was better to tell him the truth than have him juggling feverishly with all sorts of wild conjectures. But her cheeks flamed as she told him.

"Dave Rance tried to hold you and kiss you! My God!" he raged. "A thing like him to touch you. And me flat on my damned back!"

He seemed to hold himself entirely blameworthy; it was all his fault that she was here and that such vermin as Rance and Andros trailed their slime about her. He was so deeply moved that Penelope felt a little pang at her heart and went swiftly to him, taking his nervous hand in both of hers.

"Don't be silly, Bill," she begged him. "It's all right. He didn't—why he hardly touched me, and I slapped his face for him good and hard. Let's forget it."

He flung her hands away and reared up in bed; he glared at her out of the most terribly stern and angry eyes she had ever seen and she fell back from him, frightened.

"Damn Andros!" he shouted at her as though he damned her too along with him. "What right had he to take a hand? It was my place, mine I tell you! And here I lay like a broken-backed dog. Send Ben back to me; I'll have Andros dragged off the ranch with a log chain tied to his legs. Send Ben to me, I tell you!"

Ben had been listening in the corridor and appeared while Bill was still roaring for him. With a firm hand he forced the sick man to lie quiet, then he and Penelope together strove to placate a patient who in a few moments had succeeded in undoing a week's work of faithful nursing. Penelope bit her lips and bent her head, trying to keep the tears back; her little adventure while doing her no harm had succeeded in getting two badly wounded men out of bed, had misplaced Bill's bandages, started a hemorrhage and thrown him into a fever. Patty, who had had so great a part in creating this condition, came in looking professionally capable, administered a hot drink and a sedative and thus made some small amends. It was her deft hands which examined the bandage and replaced it.

THEY left Bill lying white and grim-jawed, his eyes shut as he simulated sleep, and tip-toed into the hall.

"Darned babies, that's what they are," sniffed Patty, and fell to tapping a cigarette against a gleaming thumb nail. "All sick men. About as much reason as a two year old." She lighted her cigarette, glanced at Penelope through the smoke and encountered a pair of eyes filled with condemnation. Up shot Patty's amber brows. "Well, sister," she exclaimed, "what's your trouble?"

Penelope beckoned her out into the patio.

"How could you do a thing like that, Patty?" she asked in a troubled voice.

"Me?" asked the innocent Patty. "Was I the girl who stuck a peaches and cream face up to Dave Rance and asked to be kissed?"

"I don't refer to that and you know it!" said Penelope indignantly. "I've never asked any attentions from that thug and that's another thing you know. But that letter—to think that you would act like that! Patty, what made you?"

Patty flushed up and her big blue eyes gleamed defiance.

"Well, what of it?" she demanded. "There are two sides to everything, if anybody should ask you my dear. One of them is Buck Andros's side. Here he's

corked up in the house of his enemies, down and out with a bullet through him and he can't have a word in private with

one of his men but old Nosey Ben Hodge must be hearing in on it. Now I'm not claiming that Buck Andros is anybody's little white pet angel but what man of this outfit is? I guess he's no worse than the rest."

"He is!" said Penelope wrathfully. "He's a sneak and a murderer—he tried to kill Bill in the most cowardly trickery——"

"If you listen to Bill, yes! But how about listening to Buck's side of it?"

PENELOPE caught her savagely by the arm.

"Do you know what was in that note?" she demanded hotly.

"And don't care—and I'll thank you not to pinch my arm off like a crab," said Patty.

"It was a letter telling that Juan is here. Buck Andros would have died but for Bill's bringing him here and giving him every chance and now he turns square around and tries to betray Bill's brother—Oh, the man is an unthinkable beast!"

"If he was dying," retorted Patty, making a great ado over rubbing her arm, "who was it shot him? If Buck did peach on Juan, well then what has Juan been up to that he's dodging the law? If you're so darned anxious to call people murderers —how about Juan?"

Penelope stared at her incredulously. But she knew her Patty of old and began to understand. Patty, the best natured of individuals under nearly all circumstances did own a blazing temper which now and then broke bounds; Penelope thought of Daybreak's sudden rebellion. The whole truth of the matter, and Penelope was astute enough to guess it, was that Patty had committed an act of which she was heartily ashamed now that she glimpsed its consequences, and that outburst of hers was shame's mask. Penelope ran her arm about her friend's stiff shoulders and the result partook of magic; the shoulders slumped, a cigarette was flung violently down on the tile floor, there was a sob and Patty burst out crying.

"I'm such a darned little fool, Pen; I didn't know—— That Buck Andros is a dirty devil and I'll—I'll put rat poison in his broth. He t-told me that he was just writing about some ranch business and d-didn't want Ben Hodge to know all his private affairs. The liar! I'll never go near him again."

But like many another nurse who has quitted a patient's room vowing she'd never go back into it she did return and it was perhaps Patty's skilled hands which kept the man from dying. He like Bill Mountain, had overtaxed himself and had brought on a relapse which came close to being his undoing. That night was one of hushed voices and hurrying feet, of almost constant ministration and of sleeplessness and anxiety for the household. The only one to know nothing of it was Juan who had been taking his siesta and slept soundly through the afternoon episode.

AFTER a night of strain and many cups of coffee Penelope returned listlessly to White Water and to her little school. The children, a dozen or so of them, bright eyed and noisy and overflowing with animal spirits, were a handful and taxed her. She set some of the bigger girls to helping the little ones, gave them generous recesses and managed to live through one of the longest days of her life.

Convalescence which had been so rudely retarded was gradually resumed. Dr. Crawford came, scolded, ordered and went, and admitted that mountaineers took a lot of killing. Returning a week later he declared both men out of the woods and on the up-trail, provided they didn't fly into a passion and go to breaking heads before he gave them their clearance papers.

Penelope called every afternoon but always returned to her own place for the night. During her few bright minutes at Bill's bedside, neither of them made any reference to what had happened. Of Andros she was determined to see nothing;

she hoped never to be forced to speak with him again as long as she lived.

During these days there was always someone dropping in at the ranch house to pay a friendly call; frequently enough, having come to see their neighbor, Bill Mountain, they remained to fall more or less seriously in love with one or both of the two girls. Oliver Duckworth rode over from his ranch on the far slope of the mountains; Jerry and Tom Hunter, two bronzed, level-eyed young ranchers from Green Valley, took turns in coming over every three or four days; a bald headed old prospector from Mesa Alta proved himself to be the most accommodating of fellows. He offered Bill his services freely, volunteering to go strangle Andros in his bed, and he lost no time at all in offering Penelope a half share in his fabulous mine —as yet undiscovered—if she'd but take him along with it. Penelope refusing him with thanks he took up the matter with Patty.

"Toddle back to see me, Old Timer, after you've found your bonanza," Patty laughed at him. "What you want to learn is to cut your bait before you go fishing."

WHEN old Dan Westcott put in an appearance he made a point of stopping at the stable for a five minute chat with George Ladd before going up to the house; George taking a hint that was as broad as any one of his barn doors sent a boy running with word that the law, as impersonated in the old sheriff, was at hand, and Juan Montana had best have his door shut.

"It's this-away," said Dan soberly. "I been sheriff quite a spell an' I know the law; I ain't got any call to go searchin' a man's house unless I got a search warrant or happen to know that the man I'm after is lurkin' on said premises. Now in the case of Juan Montana, I heard a rumor las' week that the boy was seen headin' for the Mexican border an' goin' fast. That idea that he'd hang aroun' here, knowin' I'm after him, makes me laugh. I expec' he's a thousan' miles on his way by now."

He explained his theory to Bill and got a hearty handshake for payment whereupon he grinned and tucked in the corners of his crafty old mouth.

"You'll be jinglin' spurs in no time atall, kid," he said, and went to look in on Andros. He enjoyed standing in Andros' doorway and smiling benignly on him.

"You're the hell of a feller," he chuckled, "thinkin' you could beat Bill Mountain shootin'! Better learn your lesson an' leave him alone after this, Buck. He'll get mad some day an' ruin you. Right now if he wanted to go to law he could have you arrested for two-three things, trespass an' assault with a deadly weapon an' not mindin' your business better. You know how it is, Buck; if he swore out a complaint I'd have to gather you in an' cart you over to the hoosegow right now."

"You!" jeered Andros contemptuously. "You doddering old fool, you couldn't gather a bunch of wild flowers."

Old Dan pushed his broad hat back and cocked his thumbs into his belt from which depended two revolvers whose black walnut grips were slick and shiny from his calloused old hands.

"It's only by the grace o' God an' Bill Mountain's *caballero* spirit that you're alive," he said stonily, "an' either one o' them sweet factors is apt to peter out mos' any time. Now, bein' an observant sort o' cuss, I've noticed as how Bill mos' usually stomps on his own rats, but the Good Lord has a way of pickin' Him a proxy. So be it as He picks me, Buck Andros, I'll give praise where praise belongs an' try to keep a steady han' as I line up my sights."

TO BILL he said almost tearfully, "Why'n hell don't you let me cart him off to jail, Bill? He's as full o' poison as a bottle o' strychnine. On the way I'd let him grab a gun, an' I'd kill him deader'n a mackerel for resistin' an officer. Might save a lot o' bother that way."

"Thanks, Dan old sport," said Bill. "But

it looks as though this were his fight and mine." And Dan Westcott, knowing that it could not be otherwise, swore at him affectionately and went his way.

As he quitted the house the sheriff was hailed by Ben Hodge.

"Patten's here," said Ben. "Just drove up from Pueblo."

"Who?" said Dan, still wool-gathering.

"Clay Patten. The man Bill has at work on the Pasmore killing."

"Oh, him! Sure, I know. What's he here for? Got anything on anybody?"

"He wants to see Bill, that's all I know. It struck me that you might stick around until we found out what brings him."

"Lead me to him," said Dan gruffly. "I know Patten from halo to hoof."

Clay Patten's halo was a round shiny bald spot fringed with thin pale hair. He was a small urbane individual with a tight mouth and shrewd blue eyes, and it was hard guessing his age; he might be thirty or fifty. The certain thing about him was that he knew his way about. No man ever short-changed Clay Patten.

"No, Dan, I'm not doing any talking right now," he said the instant he saw the light in Westcott's eye. He shook hands, then returned to the chair which he had shoved into a corner of Ben's office. "I just blew in for a little chat with Mr. Montana."

"Suits me not to do any talkin' about the Pasmore business," said Dan, though it suited him not in the least. "But speakin' general of other matters, haven't got any line yet, have you, on the missin' heiress? Meanin' Johnny Lane's girl?"

"I find it pays," said Patten, "to do one thing at a time. This second matter I have passed along to my partner. It's real pleasant weather we're having lately, isn't it?"

Presently he went up to the house for his talk with Bill Mountain. The sheriff and Ben Hodge watched him go and watched for his return; old Dan was first to catch sight of him and went straightway to learn what he could from Bill himself.

"What did he have to say, Bill?" he asked.

Bill, looking inordinately tall stretched out on his bed, and very gaunt, lifted clouded eyes to him.

"If it wasn't for you, ol' timer, always sayin' there's none better'n Clay Patten," he said heavily, "I'd kick him off the job an' put a good man to work. He hasn't anything definite to report; he came to ask a lot of ol' questions all over again. He wants a talk with Juan; damn him, he wants to stick aroun' here three-four days, jus' visitin' an' restin' up!"

Dan's eyes, not in the least like Bill's, grew bright with interest as he exclaimed:

"Leave him be, Bill! Let him stick as long's he likes. It's a good sign." He seemed so downright satisfied with things that Bill tried to hope his confidence in Patten was not misplaced. Old Dan remained only long enough to remind him that after every heavy winter there was a brand-new springtime, better'n all that went before, and then betook himself elsewhere softly whistling, "There will be a bright tomorrow, when the roses bloom again."

AND so Patten was permitted to stick around. He idled all over the place; he admired the horses; he sat on fences and regarded remote distances; he was

never tired of spinning yarns with Tonito. with George Ladd, with old José, even with the children of the place who took a great liking to him.

During these days Penelope saw nothing of Buck Andros, adhering rigidly to her determination never to speak with him again. But Andros willed otherwise and in the end had his way. A score of times he had asked for her and his messages had been carried by Mrs. Richards and Patty; each time Penelope had said a quiet "No," leaving the nurse or the housekeeper to do what polite embroidering of the plain negative appealed to them. On Mrs. Richards' part there was no embroidery, as for Patty who was young and romantic and to whom the man was vastly pleasant and rather fascinating, she softened the refusal as best she could.

But Andros began to order his door left open and kept watch. Seeing Penelope passing along the corridor he called to her, urging her to grant him one moment. Face to face with him, seeing how feverishly his eyes shone at her from a haggard, bearded face, she did not have the heart to deny him.

"What is it?" she asked from the doorway.

"Miss Loring," he pleaded with her, "it's not much that I am asking. Will you listen to two words from me?"

IT WAS the first time since the night of her arrival that he had addressed her as Miss Loring; almost at the outset, in that boldly presumptuous way of his he had named her Pretty Penelope. The "Miss Loring" now decided her and she came into the room.

"Why have you avoided me so pointedly of late?" he asked more mildly than she had ever thought to hear Buck Andros speak.

"Avoided you?" said Penelope coolly. "I'd hardly put it that way, Mr. Andros. I am not your nurse, you know, and you and I have so little in common that it would be pointed as you put it if I had come to see you."

"You see Montana every day," he said swiftly.

Penelope shrugged distastefully.

"Is this all that you wished to say to me?" she asked.

He pulled himself up on an elbow; the eyes he lifted to hers were those of a masterful man humbling himself.

"I have told you already that I love you, Penelope," he said earnestly. "I'll be going soon, just the minute I can make the trip, and I'm growing stronger every day. I had to speak with you before I left, for you are not to think that I am not to see you again. I used to laugh at love; I didn't understand; I thought it was all sentimental drivel. But now—why, I'd go to hell for you, Penelope!"

"Mr. Andros——"

"I tell you I love you so that nothing else counts!"

"No!" said Penelope. "You don't even know me; we've never spoken a dozen words. And certainly I could never love you——"

"You don't know what love is! Haven't I just told you that I didn't believe in such a thing? You don't know and can't know until——"

He broke off short to stare at her, puzzled by her queer little smile.

"Why do you look that way?" he asked sharply. "What are you thinking? If you —Good God!" he exclaimed between wonderment and kindling anger. "You're not going to fall in love with that hulking Bill Montana! Penelope, look at me. Look at me, I say!"

SHE faced him defiantly. But as she felt the hot blood flooding her cheeks under his suspicious eyes she turned abruptly and left the room. Within her breast was so great a conflict of shame and anger that she had not dared trust her voice; the light laugh with which she wanted to answer him would not come. She slipped out of the house unseen and hurried to her horse. For Penelope Loring at that instant she experienced a seething contempt in which was a flick of downright hatred. She who had always held her head as high as any girl, looking at the other fellow with clear,

level eyes, felt humiliated. Patty had guessed; Andros suspected; perhaps Bill Mountain himself, since he was not stone blind, understood her folly and was mildly amused by it.

She did not go straight home that day. It was an early Sunday afternoon and her time was her own. She rode at a gallop, pulling off her hat to let the rush of air blow her hair back and beat in her face which it seemed would never grow cool again. She abandoned the road at the Goose Neck, lured by the murmurous solitudes among the big pines, searching out their cool depths along a friendly winding trail.

In an upland meadow where a dimple in the hills was like a silent, peace-flooded grotto under the pines she dismounted and lay flat, looking upward through interlacing dusky greenery at vivid fragments of blue sky. The faint breeze streaming through the forest was like the very far-off whispering of a great ocean. Borne down by an utter loneliness greater than any she had ever known since the time of her father's death, she thought longingly of him, the best and dearest of men. She recalled his face so vividly that she seemed to see it smiling down at her, and to hear again in treasured memory his repeated words, "The thing to do with this funny old life, Little Bright Penny, is just to be brave and gay. Then everything follows." Always, as she knew him, he had been brave and gay, a man with a quaint smile, crooked and whimsical and very endearing. Thinking yearningly of him she strove to smile as he would command, and the blue bits of sky grew tremulous and seemed all misted over.

Lying lax, cradled in the grass, she tried her valiant best to think things out. She had supposed that when it came, love would be upon iridescent, diaphanous wings, something very bright and tender and happy. Was it instead a sort of fiendish scorpion-thing with a sting that dripped poison? And now that it was here, what to do with it?

"Get your man!" She had heard laughing red lips say that, but did they know whereof they spoke? Did a girl become a huntress, fill her quiver and shoot every shining arrow into the heart of the man she wanted? That was one thing. Another was to hide what she felt, just be brave and very gay, and go on loving where her love was not invited. Still another alternative was to throttle and kill the young love that was only now making its first outcry of the new-born.

SHE listened as though for some message in the hushed whisperings of the pines; she watched the yellow splotches of light mottling the rough brown boles, saw them quiver and slowly shift and vanish; shadows about her lengthened and told the passing of time like gigantic clock-hands; the wild life which her coming had sent scurrying into dim retreats forgot its fears and resumed its various activities. The crested jay which had sighted her from afar had screamed its quarrelsome warning and sailed off on strong blue pinions, but in the end returned to the pine-top directly above her and peered suspiciously down at her. From a score of hiding places striped chipmunks popped into sight like tiny fur-clad bundles of taut springs which were forever flicking them into new positions or scampering flight. From a hillside came the brief, small thunder of a blue grouse's wings and down the same slope through a clearing Penelope saw a flock of wild turkeys volplaning to a dark pine grove. She sat up to watch them out of sight, dusky gleams absorbed in the deeper dark of the trees.

"Just be brave and gay and let things work themselves out? Is that the answer?" she asked of the quiet afternoon.

She mounted and rode down to the Goose Neck where, having a choice of two directions, she elected to return to the Montana home. There was no reason why she should not say her casual good nights, and her departure had partaken of the abruptness of flight. Patty Lane would be sur-

mising, and Penelope was determined to nip that young woman's conjectures in the bud. Penelope looked at her watch; only half past three.

Patty Lane was looking at her watch; exactly half past three. Time to dose John Andros whom Dr. Crawford suspected of having a liver. "I'll say he's got a liver!" muttered Patty with whom during the afternoon Andros had been unusually ill-humored. Arrived in Andros' room, tilting bottle to spoon, she said sweetly:

"Here's your nice medicine, Mr. Andros."

It was nasty stuff to take and she knew it and was glad of it. Andros, lying on his side and looking out through his window with bleak, heavy eyes, said impatiently:

"Take the damned stuff away. I don't want it. Chuck it into the river."

"Yeah?" said Patty serenely. "Anything else you'd like?"

"Yes. Tie the bottle to your neck, then fire away."

"So you won't take it?" She began to stiffen; a hint of rebellion in her domain made Patty as severe as a battle ax.

"No, damn you," said Andros surlily. "And just because you're Patty-the-Nurse around here——"

"Patty to my friends," said that young lady icily. "Miss Lane to you, Mr. Andros." She put down the medicine and took a thermometer from the table.

"Get ou——" Thus far Andros. Patty popped the thermometer home. He jerked it out and flung it across the room.

"That'll go on your bill," said Patty. She grew red with anger but contented herself with the words and a shrug. "If you want anything, my lord," she said over her shoulder, "you can ring; ring and be darned——"

She was half way down the hall when Andros shouted after her. She hesitated, shrugged once more and came back; it was all in the day's work and just one more bit of unreason from that most unreasonable of all created things, a sick man.

"What did you say your name was?" demanded Andros sharply.

Patty's eyes rounded at him.

"Mercy on us, is the man delirious after all?" she gasped. "Here after two weeks ——"

"I know, I know," he said impatiently. "When you first came I didn't listen to names; since then I've only heard you called Patty. What did you say the rest of it was?"

"To you I'm Miss Lane," said Patty.

ABRUPTLY his whole manner changed; he smiled at her and asked her to overlook a poor devil's nervous rages.

"I'll even take the liver-rouser," he said, and kept his word. "I'm sorry I flared up like that; I won't again. It's a promise. So your name's Patty Lane," he ran on chattily. "I used to know a fellow named Lane; a great friend of mine he was, too. Old enough to be your father. Henry Lane, that was his name. Your dad's name wasn't Henry, was it?"

"No," said Patty beginning to thaw yet not entirely forgiving and forgetting. "His name wasn't Henry."

"Of course not," said Andros. "But for just a moment—Oh, I don't know what it was, maybe the way you hold your head when you're on your high horse——"

"Anything else, Mr. Andros?"

Andros laughed good humoredly, yet there was still that oddly serious look in his eyes.

"What was your father's name, Miss Patty?"

"Just why all this interest?" Patty countered. "What affair is it of yours what his name was?"

"Interest in you, my dear," laughed Andros. And added teasingly, "Surely you're not ashamed of it, are you?"

"Ashamed? Let me tell you, Buck Andros, no one will ever be ashamed of you if you're one tenth the man Johnny Lane was. Yes, that was his name; not John like yours, just Johnny. Johnny Lane, and

maybe you can guess from that how well he was loved."

"Johnny Lane," said Andros and looked at her more shrewdly than ever. Then he began to laugh in a way which made Patty actually wonder whether the man was springing a temperature on her.

But Andros, putting himself out to be friendly and entertaining, led her thoughts into other pastures and Patty, instead of sailing out in chill dignity, sat down and remained to laugh and chat with him. When Penelope came into the house from the rear garden she heard their voices. She even caught a word or two and a little flick of contempt came into her eyes. Buck Andros' love it rather seemed to her was an elastic affair after all, for she gathered the impression that he was making a dead set at Patty—and could not guess that with Andros love was one thing and the opportunity to cultivate Johnny Lane's daughter was still another. She heard Andros' quick, exultant laughter and wondered at it. That he had stumbled upon a certain vital discovery in the house of his enemy and under that enemy's very nose, was the sort of thing to be sure to move the man to sardonic mirth. Yet Penelope failed to have the key.

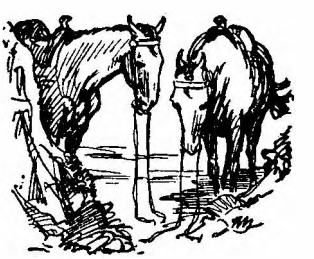
Chapter XVI

LATER it became obvious how swiftly and shrewdly Andros had planned and how at the outset fate itself played into his hand. "'Miss Lane to you, Mr. Andros!'" The man writhed in his bed. No matter how men strove, Chance it appeared made all the difference! Just now the luck was all his, but at any moment she might become Miss Lane to Bill Mountain; a careless remark dropped from a silly girl's lips had the power to bring a man's tallest ambitions crashing about his ears.

The curious fact that neither of the two men most interested in locating Johnny Lane's heiress had thought to discover her in their nurse was, under the circumstances, not the least surprising. She had arrived at a time of stress when both Montana and Andros were beyond noticing who came or went; if Penelope had introduced her friend by name none saw in her anything but a most welcome, urgently needed nurse. Penelope always called her "Patty" and the informal folk here promptly followed suit.

But now conditions changed; the shadow of near tragedy was gone from a household which began slipping back among familiar, placid ways; Mrs. Richards and Patty chatted together in the patio where the housekeeper sewed and the girl smoked cigarettes and polished her finger nails, while Andros chafed at his incapacity to grasp opportunity by the throat. Confined to his bed, shut off from all contact with his men since Dave Rance played Tom-fool, he yet saw a chance to take the winning trick.

He began with Patty, placating her, extending himself to the limits of his resourcefulness in expunging any unfavorable impression and replacing it by another in which he showed her himself in all his most



fascinating aspects. Why in the devil couldn't he have known sooner? Why couldn't he have worked on the girl from the first minute? At least he now made what amends he could, and Patty, astute as she was, began to wonder whether the man were actually falling in love with her.

When he had gone in this new direction as far as he dared, careful of overplaying his hand, he asked her if she would have Ben Hodge come to him.

"You wonder what I want with him?" he said smiling up at her. "I'm going home, my dear. I'm strong enough—and

anyway I'd rather die than remain under obligations here where I am not wanted." With Patty looking at him in surprise he added simply, "I wish that you could go along with me to see that I made the trip all right."

"You are in no condition to go yet," said Patty severely. "And of course, since I am hired by Mr. Montana, it would be all nonsense my thinking of leaving the house."

"Yes, yes, I know," sighed Andros.

Ben Hodge, acquainted with his determination, was not the man to put an obstacle in his path. If Andros chose to die on the road that was his lookout and, as Ben regarded the matter, no great loss to the world. A bed was prepared in a motor truck, a rider sent ahead to advise Andros' men of his return and to instruct them to send a truck of their own to meet the Montana car at the upper end of White Water Valley. Andros, gaunt and haggard yet grim-lipped, took his departure.

"You have saved my life, Patty," he said as his only farewell. "I'll never forget that."

THE next word they had from him came with unexpected suddenness. One of his men rode a foam-flecked horse to the house only four hours after his going, saying that the trip had been too hard for him and that it was feared he was dying; Dr. Crawford had been sent for but pending the doctor's arrival which might not be expected within a dozen or twenty-four hours, would the nurse come to him? If anyone could keep him alive over the interim it must be Patty.

"Too bad for Andros then," grunted Ben Hodge. "She has gone. She left the house about an hour after he did."

In Patty's sudden departure was one of those gestures which chance so characteristically indulges in when men's plans are all in order. The long expected call which Patty had warned them might come at any minute did come at last; she crammed her few things into her bag, said a hurried farewell and was off in haste to catch a train at Pueblo Junction which would speed her some two hundred miles to the bedside of that friend of hers who was about to make the world the shining gift of a new life.

"You'll be back, Patty?" Penelope called after her. "I want you to come visit me ——"

"I'll write as soon as I get there," cried Patty. Penelope knew that she wouldn't. "When the che-ild is a couple of weeks old I'll be out of a job again, I suppose. I'd love to come, Pen. Lots of luck in the big things of life, kid. Bye, everybody——"

And Andros who had made the trip to his own place without mishap, had the satisfaction of knowing that for the present all was well. He had but to make haste in his recovery and be before Bill Mountain in dealing tactfully with Johnny Lane's heiress. The cards were in his hands now, he had ample time to study the game and should be man enough to handle Patty Lane in one way or another.

As for Patty herself, surely she would have thrilled to the tips of her toes had she realized that she was the high card in a game in which men staked their lives. Being however as unconscious of her peculiar importance as is the ace which drops in to make a royal flush, she went serenely upon her own affairs and dropped completely out of sight. She arrived on her new case in ample time, remained to see the newly born babe grow into the lusty estate of four weeks of age, and sent Penelope the first picture post card:

"We're leaving tomorrow for California; the change will buck Margie up and do the kid good, too. Then, what do you think? Margie's sister out there is to have a baby too and I'm to have the case. I'll write. How did Buck Andros stand the trip? Love to everybody."

DURING this time and some weeks to follow Penelope saw but little of her new friends in Montana Valley. These

were days in which she filled her life full of her school work and was grateful for so much to do. From White Water and Montana valleys alone sixteen children ranging in ages from five to fifteen came trooping in to the ringing of her hand bell; from neighboring ranches came still others, two of the boys from a ten-mile distant valley. With every grade represented from the first to the last in the grammar school curriculum, with some young minds keen and eager, and others dull and listless, she had her hands full. But, putting a fresh young enthusiasm into her labors she extracted from them a joy in proportion.

On settling down to work in earnest she had convened her domestic staff and, after explaining as to little children, had discharged them. They must see that with only a country teacher's salary she was hardly in the position to employ four household servants! To be sure, Bill Mountain had engaged her at the absurd wage of a hundred fifty dollars—and had meant all the while, of course, to have Ben Hodge put that amount through along with the rest of the Montana budget. Penelope soon set Ben right on that matter; in time arrangements would be consummated at the county seat, a fund would be allotted to the new district and Penelope would draw her rather more modest salary. So, though reluctantly, Consuela and Josefa and Eugenio and Billy nodded their understanding and accepted their dismissal—and the next day Josefa was again sweeping and bed-making, and Consuela was presiding smilingly in the kitchen, while Eugenio and Billy were all over the place bringing wood and drawing water.

All this was to the lively accompaniment of hammer and saw going merrily, men's voices shouting at teams and wheelbarrows creaking as the new school house was building. It was topped off with a tiny belfry and soon the early morning bellnotes went billowing down the valley and upon occasion were to be heard as far afield as Montana.

THOUGH she saw less and less of Bill Mountain, Penelope knew that he was out of bed now and beginning to creep about the house, renewing contact with his little kingdom. One day when she stood at the big new blackboard setting down an engaging account of the activities of a cat and a rat for the younger ones to copy, she grew aware of a sudden ripple of suppressed tittering at her back. Eraser in one hand, crayon uplifted in the other and a chalky smudge across a flushed cheek, she glanced over her shoulder. Sitting on top of a rear desk at the back of the room was a highly amused Bill Mountain.

Penelope could not keep the gladness out of her eyes. It was so fine to see him looking his own self, up and about the world. But she tried to look merely normally pleased as she came down the room to him.

"Howdy, ma'am," said Bill Mountain, rising and towering over her, and engulfing her hand in his own. "Bein' as how I'm trustee I'm compelled by law, you know, to drop in ever' so often an' see what's doin'. I was real pleased, ma'am too to see you writin' so pretty on the board, an' I was wonderin' whether mebbe I couldn't come to school myse'f an' learn——"

Penelope escaped with a lithe twist, turned from him to the many upturned and highly interested faces and announced in the most matter of fact way:

"Excused for recess, children. Ten minutes. Eyes straight in front; now turn—rise—dismissed." After they departed, twisting their heads backward, she made a face at her trustee. "Any time that you think I am going to have you spying on me, Bill Mountain," she informed him gaily, "your thinking is all wrong."

"Anyhow," he grinned at her, "I done my lawful duty, tryin'."

"May I remind you," said Penelope as soberly as she could, for she was not feeling the least bit sober inside, "that a part of my duty here is to teach the younger generation to speak English properly?"

"Didn't I say as how I mebbe ought to come to school?" he asked as soberly as he could.

It was altogether a very delightful little visit and at the end he made her promise to ride down to have dinner at Montana the next day. She really meant to go, but when the next day came she took a long lonely ride instead and sent Eugenio with her excuses and regrets. Could she have known how savagely a thoroughly disappointed and disgruntled Bill Mountain attacked a specially prepared dinner, she might have felt sorry that she had not gone. It is equally likely that she would have had a happier ride.

THESE were Arcadian days in the Up Yonder country. She saw golden, rippling fields invaded by clattering machines and busy men, and smelled the sweet hay sunning. Enormous wagons heaped high with their overhanging yellow loads creaked away to the big barns, leaving in their wake scattered wisps of sunshine. The reapers swept all before them in the ripe grain fields, and thereafter the broad empty acres gleamed with stubble; fat bags of wheat and barley were conveyed to the granaries. The early apples turned red among the glossy leaves and went into the lug boxes in the shade Cider presses went to work; the sweet fragrance of crushed apples pervaded the air. Trucks in a long line made a rich-laden caravan going out to the railroad. The later apples began coming on and pumpkins turned rich golds and russets and reds making one think of Hallowe'en and Thanksgiving, and striped, vari-colored gourds plumped and ripened along the fences. And Penelope sometimes sat on her porch of an evening that was hushed and still save for faint, far sounds, and inhaled the clean air with its smells and loved the earth and its fruitfulness and peace.

Into her dreamings one tranquil twilight came a rider out of the gathering dusk, Juan Montana whom she had not seen for weeks and who she thought was forty miles away in hiding at the mountain ranch of a friend.

"Juan!" she exclaimed, starting up

He sat beside her on the steps, holding his horse's reins, smoking many cigarettes, a nervous, restive Juan whose eyes gleamed in the dimming light.

"Sometimes I think that I am going mad," he said and was very tense though he pretended to laugh and shrug. Penelope, quick to understand as she was warm and human in her sympathies, sensed the boy's agony and laid a soft impulsive hand on his arm. He covered it for a moment with his, giving it a grateful friendly squeeze; then he sat with his elbows on his knees, his chin in his hands and his eyes staring into the fading distances. "It is hell, Penelope, for a man like me," he said gloomily. "I am not myself; *por dios,* I am another man altogether, one that you do not know and have never seen! I am made for happiness, to sing and laugh and drink the free air like wine, and to be a little drunk just with the joy of being alive. That is me, Juan Montana. And instead I slink and hide and cower and run; I grow into a sneak and soon I shall be a coward. I get so lonely, shut off from all whom I love, that I weep like a girl. The pine forests that I used so to love, I am beginning to hate them; they are still and dark and bear me down like a great stillness at someone's funeral. It would be better if I went down to Santa Fe and said to them, *'Bueno;* here I am. Take me and hang me by the neck and so make an end of me.'"

There were tears in his voice, tears in his weary soul and, before he had done with the rush of his complaint, tears in Penelope's gray eyes. She did all that she could to brighten this one hour for him and in the end Juan did get himself in hand and laugh and tell her that he was just a big baby who had come running to her for comfort since comfort from her was so sweet.

"Does Bill know you have come back?" she asked anxiously.

NO, BILL did not know. Juan had ridden to the house just now and had learned that his brother was away and had been absent already for some days.

"He is down in Santa Fe," said Juan. "Clay Patten sent for him. Poor old Bill! It's all so useless. They will never know who killed Floyd Pasmore. There are times," he cried explosively, "when I wish that I had done the thing! Then——"

"Juan!" she pleaded with him.

"You see!" he retorted bitterly. "It is making a crazy man of me."

She made him come into the house and Consuela gave them coffee and thin wisps of toast with jelly. Juan sighted a guitar and began playing and singing the saddest and tenderest little Spanish love song that ever invited sighs and tears, while outside Consuela and Eugenio and Billy and Josefa and some two or three others from the clutter of houses among the trees organized themselves into a guard circling the house and making sure that none came to surprise the young Señor Montana. In the end it was an outwardly gay though still reckless Juan who said his goodnights and returned to the lower valley for a talk with Ben Hodge.

He came again the next afternoon, saying that he could not wait for night, vowing that he was starving for Consuela's coffee and toast and jelly.

"I am starving; it is the truth," he told Penelope earnestly. "Starving for a little bit of companionship. Maybe you are saving me from going crazy. Who knows?"

"But in the daylight, Juan! It is so dangerous."

He shrugged. Danger it seemed was everywhere and certainly he preferred being taken and thrown into jail than going mad from sheer loneliness. In the jail there would be other good fellows and they would tell one another tall lies and so pass the time humanly.

(*To Be Concluded in the Next* SHORT STORIES.)

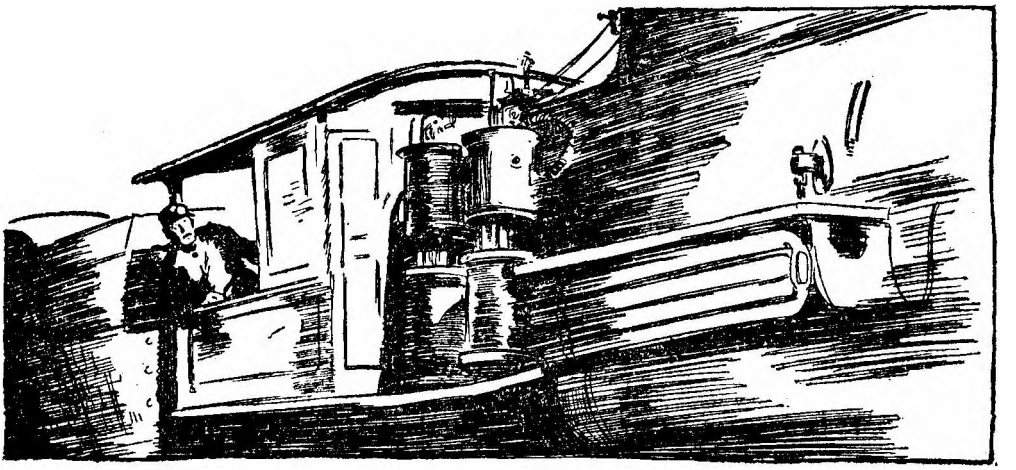
WILD ANIMAL HAZARDS IN WAR

John H. Spicer

THE presence of such wild animals as lions, giraffes and rhinos added elements of surprise that made warfare in East Africa different from that in any other part of the world. Lions of course are a nuisance especially when they prowl around the camp waiting a chance to get one of the transport animals and keeping every one awake with their roars. Military units would sometimes let off a few bursts of machine-gun fire in the direction of the prowlers who usually took the hint and left.

Giraffes were not dangerous but were even more annoying during the East African campaign. It was simply impossible to keep up any system of communications with these animals around. Their long necks broke down the telegraph and telephone wires even faster than they could be replaced or repaired. The only remedy was shooting the animals in the vicinity and the naturalist Akeley has reported that as a result the giraffes were almost wiped out in some of the areas where fighting took place.

It is said that the rhinos were the worst annoyance. When one of these big brutes sighted or scented anything strange in its vicinity, it usually lived up to its bad-tempered reputation by charging at full speed. A charging rhino was almost as formidable as a tank and traveled a whole lot faster. It certainly interfered with military activities and the exasperated soldiers soon decided that the only good rhino was a dead one. The beasts were shot on sight and their skeletons left to bleach on the plains of East Africa so the soldiers could turn their full attention to the enemy.



WHISKERS ON STEEL

By DUANE HOPKINS

Author of "Presidential Special," "Durand Takes the River Division," etc.

SAY, fellers, can you spare a dime? For a hungry old man? And I mean I'm really hungry. No booze wanted.

What's that? Hell no, I ain't no bum! I'm a railroader, same as you fellers. You're yard switchmen, ain't you? Sure, I thought so. Whenever half a dozen of the boys gather in a warm sand house on a stormy night like this, they're generally switchmen having a session of yarn spinning. I know. I ain't no yard hand myself, like you boys, but I'm brotherhood. You bet. In good standing, too.

Prove it? Sure. Lookit this. My clearance. Kind of rumpled and worn, but you can't keep papers in good condition when you're riding freights. Yeah, I just dropped off that tonnage drag that pulled into the lower yard. Nasty night to be riding on the outside, too, for an old geezer with the rheumatiz.

Well, just you take a squint at this paid-up card of mine. See it? B of L E. An engineman, that's me. Boomer hoghead. Old-timer, too, as maybe you can tell by my white hair. Held a throttle before most of you youngsters was born. My working days are about over now, which is one reason I'm on the hummer. But I ain't no stumblebum like you said. No sir. I ain't begging. I asked you boys for bean money, but I'm willing to work for it. I'll earn a handout. How? Well, let me see.

Suppose I spin a yarn for you? A tale of the old days when men were men and railroading proved it. You fellers are probably tired of listening to each other's same old yarns anyway. If my story is worth it, you can stake me to the price of a meal after I'm finished. What do you say, men? Okay? That's fine. Then it's a bargain.

Let's see now. What'll I tell you about? H'mm. Sand, maybe.

In Those Days Railroading Was Different—Grades Were Steeper, Brakes Would Fail, and in the High Passes the Empire Builders Simply Draped the Steel Around the Peaks

Real appropriate subject, us being here in a yard sand house. See the sand in that bin? Just common yeller sand, but mighty valuable stuff. Precious stuff, sometimes. I've seen the time when a hatful of sand was worth more than all the gold ever mined. That's the yarn I'll tell you.

Fairy tale, you say? Don't ever think it! This really happened. Every word of it is true. So make yourselves comfortable around the stove, boys. Let the wind blow and the rain rain. Just give me a chaw of terbacco, somebody, and I'll get started. Thanks, friend. Ready now? All right, here goes.

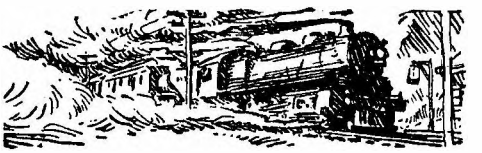
FELLERS, did you ever hear of whiskers growing on steel? No, I guess not. Not hereabouts, in this day and age. But in the old days, up in the high Rockies, whiskers sprouting on the rails was the dread of every steep-steeler in the mountain operating service. "Beware of whiskered track," was Rule A in our instruction manual. And like as not, up there around the Continental Divide, the track would grow a beard overnight. A beard that was thick, white, deadly dangerous—heavy frost.

Frost don't cut much of a figure in railroading nowadays, even on the highest steel of the Western passes. But when I was working the Divide Division, a whiskered track was a death trap, no less. This was due to several causes. For one thing, the grades were steeper than today. The old empire builders really draped steel around the peaks, back there before federal law limited railroad gradients to four per cent at the steepest. Them days, any slope the track would cling to, went. Then too, the equipment wasn't as efficient as it is now. Not by a damn sight. Westinghouse was still a new name when I took a throttle, and his airbrakes were kind of an unperfected novelty. They didn't always work.

So, between uncertain brakes, staircase grades, and whiskered steel, railroading wasn't exactly child's play on the old Divide Division. There was some grand battles fought out between man and a white track. And one of the most spectacular shows was pulled off by a feller named Sam Bailey. The story of Sam's fight with the whiskers is still a classic among the veteran steep-steelers of the Rockies.

SAM BAILEY was a boomer freight fireman. A husky young buck who just wandered up into the high country one day and hired out on the extra board. Because he was only a boomer, nobody looked for him to stick on the Divide Division longer than maybe his second pay day. But Sam Bailey stuck longer than that. Much longer. The reason he kind of settled down to a steady job—well, the real cause was to be found in the station lunchroom at Swiftwater, the division terminal. Her name was Martha. Martha Delancey.

Now, Martha Delancey was only a waitress, but she was more popular than the super's daughter or the town heiress. And far prettier. Every unattached railroader in Swiftwater began to think seriously of getting married as soon as he saw Martha slinging soup down at the depot beanery. This went for Sam Bailey, too. Went double. The footloose fireman began to have visions of a cottage up under the pines, and bringing his pay checks home regular to Mrs. Martha and the little Baileys. But Martha herself had no visions about Sam. She couldn't even see him.



Fact is, Martha Delancey had no eyes for any fireman. Like most hash girls of that time, her only heroes were the young engineers. And most engineers were young, those days when railroading itself was young. There were runners still in their twenties hauling the finest limiteds then.

It was these manly young throttle twisters that Martha adored. A mere freight fireman was less to her than a doughnut crumb under her lively little feet.

Naturally, this was a dismaying state of affairs for Fireman Bailey. It upset him something terrible to have the object of his dreams ignore him that way. So Sam decided to do something about it. He decided to become an engineer. Then he might win Martha's glances, and maybe even her hand as he hoped.

Becoming an engineer, however, wasn't so easy done, even in that era of rapid promotions. Still, the rules of seniority weren't very strict, so it was possible to advance over older heads if you could show the officials you had the stuff. That was the trick—to catch the super's eye by doing something unusual and praiseworthy. Sam Bailey knew it, and he set himself to watch for his chance. So when that chance suddenly came, born of whiskers on the steep steel, Sam grabbed it quick.

ONE frosty fall morning, just after sunup, a long train of coal started down from the crest of the Big Divide. In the cab of the Mogul engine, Sam Bailey sat slumped on the fireman's seatbox. He had worked like the devil to fire the heavy tonnage up the hump, and he meant to take it easy now, going down the other side into Swiftwater.

The minute they started the drop from the pass, however, a commotion arose in the cab. The engineer began to cuss and rave, at the same time cuffing at his airbrake control. He threw on and threw off, released and applied, but without any result at all. Both Sam and the head brakeman watched him, goggle eyed.

Suddenly the runner shouted, "No brakes, boys! The air's froze up tight!"

It was a fact. Water had collected in the hose connection between the tender and the first car. The water had froze solid, clogging the air line. The cab had lost control of the shoes.

"I'll dynamite the string," bawled the front brakeman right away. That was the usual remedy for frozen air. Set the brakes by busting a hose coupling somewhere on the train behind the ice-choked connection.

But even as the shack bawled the words, he knew it was impossible to dynamite the air. For there wasn't any air. The coal drag had stood still on the summit of the pass for a long time, cutting off two pusher hogs and taking water. That stop had been long enough for all the air to leak off the train line. There wasn't a pound of pressure left behind the Mogul at that moment as she started nosing down off the divide.

The hoghead ripped at his air brass again, frantically, and then started looking about him like a hunted man.

"Not a chance in the world to check her," he announced hopelessly. "She's a runaway, that's all. Better hit the ballast pronto, mates. I'm unloading right here."

With that the runner whirled out through the gangway, the brakeman at his heels. Both swung quickly off to the right of way, where they lit rolling and sprawling in the rocks.

And then Sam Bailey did what the deserting engineer should have done. He leaped for the whistle bar and blasted out a desperate call for hand brakes. But even as the piercing shrieks echoed back from the peaks above, he saw the caboose crew go overboard to join their head-end mates in safety on the ground. In the wink of an eye, only the fireman was left aboard the coasting coal drive.

In another wink, Sam Bailey had summed up the situation. He was alone on a brakeless runaway. Behind him were a thousand tons of coal, pushing. In front, thirty long miles of twisting mountain descent, pulling. Underneath, those damn white whiskers heavy on the iron, greasing the skids to destruction. Any way Sam looked at it, it was a mighty tough spot to be in. But——

Sam had been hoping to land in a tough spot. Maybe not quite so tough as this, but this would do. If he handled the emer-

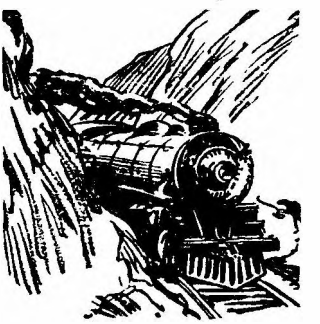
gency right, he would win notice from the officials. That might mean an engineer's job for him. And that in turn might mean the winning of Martha Delancey. So it didn't take Sam more than two driver turns to decide to stay aboard the drifter and fight the battle out. Which was pretty much like deciding to commit suicide, considering the odds against him winning.

But having made his decision, Sam promptly took things in hand. Without a brake working on a single car, he fell back on the reverse and sand. Sand to barber the whiskers off the steel. Sand as a bite for driver tires on the slick rails. Sand against frost and grade, against curve and speed and death. Just sand. Yes, and a boiler full of steam, and the picture of a girl before his eyes.

The runaway was gaining a dangerous pace already. Sam jumped to the levers and slammed the reverse bar over, setting his drivers in the back motion. Then he latched open the throttle, and under power the big wheels spun freely backwards on the frost-coated steel. Next he cracked the sand valve, cautiously, so as not to waste any of those precious grains that were his one weapon against the deadly whiskers. Little streams of sand then trickled onto the rails from the pipes in front of the back-whirling drivers.

As the tires caught the new friction on the slippery iron, the engine hunched sluggishly back against its crowding load. The sand brake took effect, but none too stoutly. Train speed kept right on picking up. The reversed Mogul began to rock and careen crazily down the sheer flanks of the range. Behind it the loaded coal gondolas lurched and danced in a twisting, rushing line. The trailing caboose seemed to leap in the air as it played crack-the-whip on the endless succession of sharp curves. With each passing minute it seemed more doubtful that Sam could hold the tonnage to the track. But he had to go through with it now. Too late to think of taking to the rocks, as the others had done. The speed was too great by this time.

TO HOLD a gauge of steam while he ran the engine and sanded the bends, Sam had to divide his labors between the shovel and the levers. It was a fast and furious round, and just when he was beginning to get dizzy from it, he remembered



something—the train orders! His coal extra was to take the siding at Rockland, less than halfway down the hill, to pass No. 3, upbound, the road's crack limited. But Sam could take no siding on that hill, and he knew it. He was bound to hurtle right past the meeting point and into the up-passenger head on. The first gloomy prospect of a bad scatter on the rocks had now turned into the dire certainty of a disastrous collision.

But was it a certainty? Sam's watch said no, not yet. No. 3 wasn't due at Ridgeview, next station below Rockland, for a couple of minutes. Quick work might avert the smash-up after all.

As the runaway tore around the last curve above Rockland, with no chance to stop there for the ordered meet, Sam pumped his whistle in a frenzy. The wild shrieks of distress brought the Rockland telegraph operator to the window of the station shack. The brass-pounder took one look at the tonnage hurtling down on him, and went into action. All in one motion he sprang for his key, ripped out his watch for a glance at the time, and began hammering out a frantic "19" on the coil, the call of life and death. The cry he sent flashing down the wires was a message to Ridgeview below:

"RV—RV—RV. Clear No. 3 quick.

Coal extra running wild toward you. Clear 3—clear 3—RV clear 3."

Luckily, Ridgeview caught the Morse clicks just as Three whistled for the board there. The RV operator held the red against the upbound flyer, then sprinted out and kicked the limited into his siding. And scarcely was the passenger clear when Sam's rocketing tonnage showed on the heights above, flanges screeching, coal flying off on the curves.

Sam, peering in wild-eyed terror down the slope, saw that Three was sidetracked, the collision averted. There would be no slaughter of a trainload of people. Thank heavens for that, anyway.

And then, before Sam could gasp one good breath of relief, misfortune struck him a knockout blow. His sand was gone! The last grain of priceless sand had trickled from the dome tank on top of the Mogul's boiler. He was deprived of the one brake he had possessed against suicidal train speed.

His reversed drivers immediately lost their slight grip on the whiskered rails. With that loss of friction went the last chance, Sam knew, of holding the track for the rest of the drop. He was beaten, trapped, doomed. The terrific speed spelled death if he jumped, death if he stayed. He was a goner either way.

What a fool he'd been! He had let the whiskers get him, as they had got so many others. He'd never become an engineer now. Worse, he'd never see Martha Delancey again. He was done for, trying to win her favor. He wondered if she'd put flowers on his grave. Somehow there was comfort in that thought, now that all hope was gone.

And yet all hope wasn't gone. No indeed. It was funny, but in his panic Sam had overlooked the one thing that alone could save him. That again was sand, just sand. Not Sam's own sand, because that was really gone. Somebody else' sand. For the No. 3 passenger, in making the slippery run upgrade to Ridgeview, had already sanded the rails below. The treacherous whiskers were barbered from the steel, and in their place lay a life-saving film of grit.

Once past Three in the hole, Sam felt his back-spinning wheels catch a grip again. Looking down amazed, he saw the tires begin to smoke and spit sparks along the rails. And then Sam Bailey threw back his head and laughed aloud in his great relief. Again the engine crushed heavily back against its onrushing tonnage, and by slow degrees the mad speed slackened. Before Sam could realize it, he found himself safely at the foot of the range, on level track, and within sight of his home terminal of Swiftwater.

Sam had hoped that the division officials there would hear of his exploit. They did, by wire, before he arrived. The super himself, a hard-bitten bigwig, was waiting on the Swiftwater station platform when Sam slid the winded Mogul to a stop there.

As Sam swung shakily down from the cab, the division chief ordered him grimly:

"Clear your train on the first yard spur, Bailey, for brake inspection."

Sam's heart leaped at those words. *"My* train?" he asked eagerly.

"That's what I said," snapped the official. *"Your* train. Nobody but a damn fool would try to come down the Big Divide on whiskers, with nothing but sand for a

brake. But fool or no, we need runners like you up there on the steep steel. You're an engineer now, Bailey. Clear your train."

So Fireman Sam Bailey became Engineer Sam Bailey, all because of Martha Delancey who adored the crack runners. And soon after, Martha Delancey was hap-

pily married—to a cross-eyed fireman off a yard engine. Which is just like a woman, ain't it?

WELL, that's the story, boys. And listen, you flat-country switchmen. Don't think it's a sand-house fairy tale you've just heard. The whole thing really happened. Every word I told you is the truth. I'll swear to that, on every white hair of my old head.

How can I swear it? How am I so sure of every detail? Well, I guess you fellers didn't look very close at my papers when I showed 'em to you. Here, take another squint at my engineer's card. See who it's made out to? The name is Samuel Bailey. Yeah, that's me. I'm Sam Bailey himself. But it ain't nothing to brag about.

What say? Yes, you're right. From hero to hobo. That's my record. Some drop, I'll admit. How come? Well, I just hit the downgrade, that's all. And this time there wasn't no sand on the rails to hold me back. The whiskers on the steel of life got me. But that's another story. A long, sad story. And I only bargained to spin one yarn for some bean money. Fair enough, ain't it?

Say, wait a minute! All this for me? Why, it's almost three—four—five dollars. Golly! An old man can eat for a long time on that much. That's sure mighty fine of you fellers. You're railroaders and gentlemen.

Well, I'll be drifting along now. Back to the stormy night. Only it don't seem so stormy now. Thanks a million, boys, for helping out an ancient brotherhooder. And good luck to you, one and all. May you never run out of sand on a whiskered track.

PROTECTING THE WALRUS

John H. Spicer

THE giant walruses of the North may be ugly, clumsy beasts but they now have the protection of the Canadian Mounted Police to see that they get a fair chance. These animals have been diminishing in numbers to such an extent that the Canadian Government has issued strict rules for their preservation, not only to prevent them from becoming extinct but also for the sake of the natives who depend on the walrus for a considerable part of their food and clothing.

The first restrictions were made in 1929 when the government published an order that no one except the natives were to hunt or kill walruses in Hudson Bay, Hudson Strait, or the Canadian Arctic south of the seventy-fourth parallel. Explorers who wished specimens for scientific purposes could take them only under a special government permit.

This amount of protection proved inadequate and in 1934 there were issued further restrictions which limited the numbers that even the native hunters might take. An Eskimo or halfbreed with a family to support is permitted to kill as many as seven but whites or natives without families are limited to only four walruses in a year. White hunters must first obtain a license and no more than two of these will be issued to any company's employees at any one trading post. No one will be allowed to kill walruses at all unless they are to be used as food for himself, his family or dog team and every hunter, white or native, must report to the Mounted Police officers the number he has killed during the year.

As a further step to discourage commercial hunting, the new rules also prohibit the export from the North of walrus hides for commercial purposes or the export of walrus tusks unless they have been carved or otherwise worked up ready for sale in a retail way.

SUNKEN GOLD AND TAKU STORM

WRESTING a sunken ship from depths of 365 feet is considerable of a job, but the *Islander's* reputed cargo of more than a million in gold-dust and nuggets spurred our salvage crew on in one of the biggest salvage jobs undertaken in history. The *Islander,* sunk in August 1901 when she crashed into an iceberg while enroute from Skagway, carried a shipment of the valuable yellow stuff from the Klondike gold fields. Our salvage organization under the direction of a Seattle man, Frank Curtis, undertook to move the hulk of the sunken ship to the beach in the summer of 1933.

Utilizing the *Griffson,* a 4200 gross ton engineless freighter, or barge, we were lifting the *Islander* toward the beach about two miles away with lift cables suspended from winches on the deck. Tides were doing the lifting proper, while we wound up the cable at each low tide. We were within almost a quarter mile of the beach in the month of October when the worst Taku storm for years struck us broadside.

The Taku storm is so named from the Taku glacier to the north over which it blows. Southeastern Alaska knows no more bitter wind. The one that struck us lasted for three days and three nights, and did it blow!

The decks of the *Griffson* were cluttered with salvage machinery—forty lift winches, innumerable cables, gear of all sorts. The lift lines—twenty of them—were one and three-quarter inch steel cables and each one stretched across deck of the *Griffson.* A lift cable on port side was brought over a dolly on our port rail across decks to the winch on starboard side. The sunken *Islander* with its weight of slightly less than 2000 tons below held us better than any anchor could. When tides rose and lifts were on we could not—dare not—drop cables, tightened as they were. The sudden release of weight and shifting of it to other winches would cause a catastrophe.

Saturday, October 21, 1933, the weather had turned much colder than usual. We knew either a snowstorm or a blow was in the offing, but did not reckon on the intensity of the storm that hit us. By supper time the wind had increased considerably. Under the yellow glare of our flood lights we turned out shortly after supper to perform the monotonous and backbreaking job of winding up the forty lift winches by hand, our regular low tide task.

No sooner than one third done than a blast of icy wind from the Tagu glacier swept down on us with the suddenness of a trumpet blast. The *Griffson* had been rolling considerably. Now she began pitching like a bucking bronc. With the surging of our lift ship, the lift cables across deck

began to slack and tighten with increasing peril to every one of the twenty-three of us. *Kerslap! Bang!*

WE HAD made the first winding of the after cables and were working on the forward half of the *Griffson's* deck when the howling storm laid about our ears in earnest. Half a revolution of a ratchet handle would be made on a winch, when bang! The *Griffson* would complete her roll to the other side and the cable on the winch would become taut. Ratchet handle and crew members would fly back the limit of the ratchet. This would repeat itself on each side of the deck.

The sudden jerking of cables became so ominous that several quickly left the danger zone and ran back to a safer spot under the lights of the after deck for a council of war. The salvage skipper was laid up with a broken leg. Several deck foremen gathered together.

"By gosh!" shouted one of them, "we've got to slack those lines in a hurry or they'll snap in two!"

Shouts of agreement came just as a particularly bad roll made every winch and cable on our port side groan and snap. But another's shout put a different complexion on the matter.

"Hell!" he exclaimed. "We can't slack 'em forward. We cut slack of three cables off the forward drums today and there isn't enough left for slacking off!"

The situation was immediately apparent to all of us. We had shortly before been cutting off excess cable on the drums during low tides as they filled up while we wound up cable going toward the beach. This day when the excess had been removed by torch from the drums, enough slack for letting them rewind in an emergency had not been allowed. And all cables had to be slackened at once or otherwise not at all. An unequal strain would break those tightened.

Rise of the tide wasn't something to be delayed until the storm was over. The old saying came to me at the moment. "Time and Tide wait for no man."

There was just one thing to do, and we immediately set about doing it. We had to take them up and make a running try for it in the storm with our precious cargo slung below. We hoped that after our months of effort in getting the lines under the *Islander* she did not slip out now. Slightly more than 100 feet below us she lay. Would the lines hold?

With the surging sea under us and the cables jerking on all sides, a small crew of us set to winding up those forward winches. It was a tough job, and the *Griffson* was plunging harder every minute like a bronc trying to wrest free of its cinches. Gradually, however, we wound up the slack and the forward lines began to lift on the tide.

A few of us checked them for evenness,

as any uneven strain would snap a lift cable easily on this stormy lift and other breaks would likely follow. We had lost six lines at one time previously in getting the Islander out of her thirty-two-year-old bed of mud and silt and we sickened at the thought of it happening again during this storm. A broken cable would take everything in its wake as it went across deck under the terrific pressure at this time.

It was with tremendous relief that we saw the cables become even and tight, and we knew that the *Islander* was being lifted below. Now that the "lines ceased talking," as someone expressed it, we knew that we stood a good chance of getting the gold ship moved on this tide without tearing off some of our winches and other deck gear. Even so, the strain was terrific in the storm, but the jerking had ceased. The wild bronc had stopped its wild plunging and set to work lifting, surging evenly with the swells. That night we moved 200 feet toward shore and deposited the *Islander* in slightly shallower water. And wonder of wonders! Not a cable broke.

The Taku storm howled with increasing fury for three days, however, and we made no more lifts during that time. The crew's bunks, including my own, were under the six after winches. The groans of the burdened timbers above our heads was an awesome sound. Our memories were still fresh with the picture of an accident that had occurred earlier on the job when two winches had broken through timbers farther forward on the ship and plunged into the hold. The mass of splintered timbers and twisted iron was evidence of what would happen to anyone underneath these after winches. Regardless of this and a number of other threats to our well being, most of us slept soundly, for we were all tired.

Thursday, October 24, one of the worst storms in the Passage's history had abated. Ice sheathed the decks of the *Griffson.* The wind had reached a velocity much of the time of more than sixty miles an hour, and we had taken much spray on decks to be frozen immediately.

I went out in the small boat with my motion picture outfit to make a few shots of the ice-sheathed ship. I returned on deck just in time to join in the winding up of cables for another lift. This time, the cable cutting crew remembered to leave a little extra slack for a storm. Several cables broke later as the result of the terrific punishment administered during the Taku blow, but the *Islander* was still in the sling below. When the beaching is finally completed and the salvaging history the crew will always remember that Taku storm, an outstanding experience of any salvage man.

—*Leonard H. Delano*

MULESKINS

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

Author of "Chips of Stone," "No Trespass Trapping," etc.

BURR KANE rode into the Slicker Trading Post driving two loaded packhorses westward toward the Windfalls Mountains. Luck was with him, apparently, for he found that the trappers of the range were nearly all at the old ranch settlement, talking things over in Gunlock Burney's repair shop, figuring things out for the winter fur campaign, and they knew from the make of the loads that the newcomer was good. Shrewdly they noted his 160 pounds weight, trim figure, hard-drawn features and straight-looking gray eyes.

"I'm looking for open trapping country," he said. "I heard that the Windfalls wasn't all taken up."

"Plenty of room, more country than fur," Gunlock spoke for the boys. "It's a long ways back. Nobody's been working up Cloudy Creek Basin for quite a while. Some claims there are reasons. Others say that's just a notion."

"On the Geological Forest Folio seems like Cloudy Creek'd be the nearest and easiest country," Kane remarked. "What's the matter of it?"

"Nothing the matter of the country," Gunlock said, while the boys around sat around, listening with deceptive lack of attention. "The boys jes' don't hanker for it. Moneta Shade, here, has his lines up t' the south end, Blue Holt and Caspar Joe, these boys, are over north. You're a trapper—you know when boys get to know their country, have their camps built, they don't move around much outside."

"It's been trapped?"

"Oh, yes, down to 'bout five years ago—good camps, but prob'ly the line trails'll need brushing out for windfalls."

"I'll sure be glad to take up country that hasn't been worked over for four or five years," Kane exclaimed. "The Park Line don't come down into the creek basin, does it?"

"Oh, no—line is

Trappers Stick Together—Even "Wild Horses" Can't Pull Them Apart

along the summit range," one of the men said. "That's about all there is to it—kinda clost to the Windfalls Park is one reason 'tain't none too popular. You see, it's kinda on the d'rect trail up over the divide."

"Oh-h—um-m—" Kane hesitated, "I reckon all theh is to it, a trapper's supposed to mind his own business as regards what's going on in the state game refuge, or whatever they call it."

"Well, yes—'course——" one of the others assented. "You might put on blinders an' kinda don't see any too far ahead of you, neither."

There was a short, wry chuckle around the group. They sat in a sort of glum, thoughtful silence as they stared at the floor. Some of them rolled their eyes and gazed at the newcomer, watching from under the brims of their hats, but Kane was unfolding the topographical survey sheet which he had cut into rectangles and pasted to fold on cheesecloth. The map showed the timber country in green, and the altitude in brown lines, streams and lakes in blue, and red boundary lines marked the state park area.

Then the men drew up around the map and began to tell the stranger the features. They could tell about where the old Cloudy Creek trap line had been run, and one of them could tell about where the line cabins had been built long ago. The last occupant, Tan Vandick, had made some changes but he had pulled his freight five years ago and since then Cloudy Creek was known as hard luck country.

"The only trouble you'll likely have," Gunlock said, "is in your otter sets. Beaver run all over, and if you catch a beaver they catch you—up to two years in the pen an' a thousand fine. If they catch you, maybe they give you a timber-belt slave job."

"A slave job?" Kane exclaimed, "I don't just get you. I never trapped in these timberbelts before. I've worked in Bad Lands, Green timber in Minnesota; one year in the way-back bush of Canada. I don't aim to make any mistakes. I know how beaver'll get into otter spring brook sets, of course. They even come around otter slides. I'd hate to get into trouble on account of otter sets. I don't see—what's a slave job, anyhow?"

"Well, yo' know'f yo' hold up a stage on a road, an' you're caught maybe they put you to repairing that road," one of the boys said. "An' if you do a fur-law violation back in the green timber, maybe they'll handle you easy—an' give you a muleskin proposition. If you catch a beaver, likely you'll have to trap ten or twenty just so's to make yo' sick of havin' vi'lated once."

"Muleskin proposition?" Kane frowned, "I don't get that——"

"Muleskins are illegal beaverskins is all he means," Gunlock explained. "It's just one of those ways of saying things that get to passing around, sometimes."

"I see——" the trapper from outside said thoughtfully. "You say you have to trap ten or twenty more beaver—and it's against the law to trap one? What are you giving me—a rigging?"

The men sitting around did not answer. Perhaps they had said too much. Gunlock, even, hesitated to speak on the subject, but finally he braced himself as if his remarks took a real effort.

"That's the fact," Gunlock said. "That country is away back, and mostly you must handle your own propositions. If you are caught with a beaver, even if it's an accident in an otter set—well, you know there are two kinds of game wardens—State and fifty-fifty reward seekers. And then there's another kind—they get the muleskin on a man and make him keep on trapping illegal furs or go to the pen for what he done by accident. Course, the more he traps, the tighter they got him. That makes him a slave trapper."

THE big time trappers rode out from the Slicker Trading Post three days later. On their maps colored pencil lines gave each his trapping country. Burr Kane was to have Cloudy Creek Basin, due west, the portal a deep canyon through a wild,

forested ridge. The inner fastnesses of the Windfalls loomed in waves of granite, cliffs of vast height and dark timber belts. Blue Jack Holt and Caspar Joe turned off along the pied-mountain roadway to the north and south ends of the great range. Moneta Shade and Steel Cammon kept on to Red Brier Fork, through the canyon, accompanying Kane to the main cabin which Tan Vandick had built for his line at the foot of the Cloudy Creek Basin and abandoned five years before.

They found the peeled spruce, pine-shingled cabin in good condition. The common utensils were in place with staple supplies protected in jars and metal against squirrels, mice and porcupines. Blankets and robes were slung in netting bags made of chicken fence and mosquito bar.

In the morning they headed into their own countries. Shade went north to Cabin Creek, Cammon south to Horsethief Canyons, driving packed burros, while Burr Kane headed a burro up Cloudy Creek, prospecting the vast and beautiful land.

Kane had gone nearly three miles when Moneta Shade suddenly appeared ahead of him in a long, narrow, grassy glade. He had his rifle over his shoulder and obviously he had left his pack animals over the creek divide in Cabin Valley. Kane, wondering, kept on to the trapper, a dark, stocky, rather stolid figure.

"Howdy—forget something?" Kane greeted, smiling and looking with keen gray eyes.

"No, that's just it—I didn't," Shade said, hesitating. "You're a stranger in this country. I don't reckon yo' got any idee what you're up against. Course, 'tain't none of my business."

"The fur isn't plenty, but I'll make expenses," Kane replied. "I saw two dark mink down the line—and otter sign. I know weather, too."

Tain't that," Shade twisted uneasily. "I'd get killed, myse'f, if any one knowed I fair-warned you. I'm serious. Yo' life ain't worth a penny. You ain't fooled everybody, and yo'r bein' so innocent 'bout muleskins is sho' suspicious. I'm kinda new in this country—but I know what *you're* up against."

"You'd despise me if I turned back, Shade," Kane said flatly.

"Not knowing what I do, I wouldn't." The trapper shook his head.

"Old man, just why did you let me know —what you think you know?"

Shade took off his hat, wiping sweat from his brow on his sleeve, glancing uneasily into the edges of the tall timber.

"I sure despise the scoundrels you're after," he said. "I know yo' ain't turnin' back. I know yo're good. I'm tellin' yo'—I want yo' to believe me. I don't believe in crooked trapping——"

"If I stay you'd have to be my enemy?" Kane asked.

"Why no, not between us, I won't," Shade hesitated. "Likely, though, I'd talk dif'rent around. If you kill somebody—don't brag it. They won't if they tuck you back in under a lot—they'll forget, too."

"I'll have to watch out for Cammon—Bluejack——"

"No, not any of us," Shade denied. *Trappers* stick together——"

"Reckon I get you," Kane said. "I'm staying, old man. I'd like to trap this country. How can I manage it? You know how a man is. I can't pull my freight."

Shade chuckled. "The hell of it is, don't you see, you're *square,*" he said. "You jes' gotta keep *that* secret."

"Oh, they haven't anything on me," Kane grinned. "That being so, I'd like to stay here without being a damned fool doing it. What is the real proposition, Shade?"

"If yo're staying—well, it's *muleskins.*"

"Ah—wild horses, eh?" Kane nodded wisely, and Shade looked at him with a queer expression, then turned on his way again with a quick, "S'long—good luck!"

The main Cloudy Creek Valley led straight up to the Windfalls Park Divide line. In the Lost Pass, the head spring of the Cloudy was less than a hundred yards from the mountain back tarn or pool

in which Pretty Water River started on its way through the natural wild museum set aside for the public, whose creatures were the great solicitude of several state departments, and in no state was a possession more precious than the wild life of Windfalls Park.

Cloud Creek Basin was beautiful. The whole of the Windfalls Mountains should have been included in the park, for it was worthless for domestic purposes, its wildlife a potential treasure. In the Pass Kane found the runway used by deer, elk, bear, pekan, cougar and minor creatures crossing the range. There, too, were muffled hoof tracks of pack animals of raiding outlaw trappers going into the forbidden area.

Kane found hidden in the wilderness the five cabins which Vandick had built on his line. These with the main camp at Red Brier Fork comprised the stops. The trapper in laying out the Cloudy Creek fur domain had shown how good he was. His trap cubbies at every fur runway were of stone; his landmarks, his caches, the country remained intact. Until Kane came to the north end he found everything exactly as Vandick had left it.

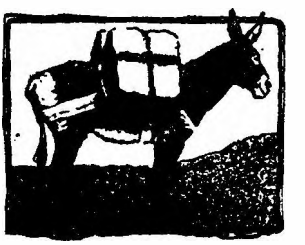
THE North End camp was a dry cave with a cribbed peeled spruce wall half-cabin front, the fireplace at the side. The site was on a bench, almost like a ledge and hidden in a cluster of dense, stunted spruces. Hundreds of square miles of the Cloudy and Cabin Creek basins were visible from the bluff. The trap line followed the foot of the slope through miles of lodgepole pines.

The moment Kane entered the cave he sniffed musk, and beyond the canvas-tarp partition was a nearly quarter sphere-shaped cave in which he found the answer. Dozens of dry castors, perfume stock worth dollars an ounce hung revealed by his flashlight. The discovery gave Kane pause, for it was ominous. That stuff wasn't there by accident.

"I'll stay with it," he decided before sleeping that night. "Perhaps this is the break I'm looking for. They've got me for beaver-possession before I've run a trap. That ought to please the fifty-fifty fine splitters."

When Kane arrived at Red Brier Forks again, his prospecting had uncovered all the cached traps. He had distributed them at the sets which Vandick had used, cut new well-sweep poles and forks, and baited the places where cubbies were used. Mindful of the warning that he make his otter sets where illicit beaver would not spring the steel jaws, he needed all his wildcraft knowledge coupled with skill.

The line route was the best possible, the grades long and easy, the range traversed with the minimum of climbing, scaling and scrambling. Vandick had gone five miles



around rather than risk a slide rock and he had kept down from wind-swept summits in timber. To a stranger the land seemed at first to be just a terrific tumult of stone and tangle of dense forest, but the trail opened pretty routes through it.

Vandick had played wolf, having a wind-swept open between each hidden cabin and the trap trail. Kane had to laugh, for at the side-jumps ten or fifteen minutes of wintry gale covered footprints in the snow and only in a rare calm the ruse might be discovered. Instead of driving his pack animals to the camps, Kane left them down on the line, carrying their burdens on his own back to the cabins which were hidden off-side in ravine and cluster. Thus one following the hoofprints would find none of the shelters. The new claimant hung up deer at each camp for winter meat, cut wood and made all snug.

THE first big snow that looked as if it would stay caught Burr Kane going his first round on foot after having made his sets. The blizzard had held off till late November. When he came to the North End camp he had more than $160 worth of fur on stretchers behind him, and forty-five dollars more to pull onto hardwood boards that Vandick had left, beautifully long, narrow, smooth cut, in each camp.

Kane carried an ash-splint pack on shoulder straps and a pair of light caribou string snowshoes prepared for this storm. Later he would have to wear big ones in the loose fluff until wind and sun packed a good crust.

When he headed into the dwarf spruces that hid the camp the short day had faded, the blizzard wind was sweeping through the bristling twigs of the forest canopy, but only drafts of chill zephyrs, thick with falling needles of fine snow struck along the ground slope.

The cabin was dark. He stumbled to the door and dropped his pack onto the washbench, whistling with relief and leaned a moment against the door jamb as he pulled the rawhide latchstring and shoved the door open. Dragging his feet, he reached the hearth and drew shavings, kindlings, small sticks from the pile always left so that when he came dead tired, he could make a fire though he had to crawl to the place. Unscrewing his matchbox, he fumbled a moment, thumbed a head and thrust the flame into shaved pine knot stuff. Sitting like a bullfrog, he watched his fire grow.

Presently the light chunks caught and he heaved on a pine stump, squirming back as the heat increased. Snow had melted on his face and some on his shoulders began to steam. He pulled off his shirt as he knelt, and rising to his feet took down a dry woollen shirt with red and black inch squares to put it on. Then he stiffened, sniffed and turned to look around for the first time. He had caught a whiff of cigarette smoke.

"Looks like you've had quite a pull," one of two men remarked.

"Why—ah——" Kane took their measure, "I reckon."

GRINS died from their faces. A big, chesty, square-faced man sat beside a tall, gangling, slimly built companion on the table bench, their automatic pistols in their hands. Both were *good,* capable, ready citizens. They wore gray riding breeches, gray shirts and stiff brimmed, low-crowned, peaked gray hats. Laced moccasin boots, wide, brown belts, empty holsters were also alike. Well they might be ready for trouble in that camp redolent of fifty pounds or so of castor musk, illicit perfume stock.

"Looks like I got visitors," Kane said.

"Sure do," one said cheerfully.

"If you don't mind, I'll light a lamp and get supper," Kane said.

"Suits us," the lank man said, "We'd had it ready only we kinda thought you might be coming through. We'll help. You better lay aside that meat-pop of your'n—if it's all the same to you."

Kane unbuckled his British officer's belt, and with the .22-auto' dangling low carried it to the table. One of the men drew the clip and emptied the chamber, and also unloaded Kane's rifle.

"Nothing but twenty-twos?" one asked, puzzled.

"I'm trapping," Kane answered, "a big gun banging scares foxes, the cats, and anything else for that matter. If I was hunting it'd be different."

"Don't you use big bait?" the stockier man asked, curiously.

"I kill venison for meat—no running shots of course," Kane answered. "Personally, I use whatever fur is eating for my bait. Depend a lot on medicine—anise, rhodium, fish-oil, catnip——"

"What's that porcupine in the Cabin Creek cubbies for?" the lank man asked.

"Pekan—fisher, you know."

"They eat fisher?" the stockier man ex-

claimed, surprised, "Why, I didn't know that."

"Course, anybody in bounty hunter uniforms wouldn't know much about such things," Kane remarked. "Why should state men know anything?"

"Hi-i," the lanky intruder shouted, patting his companion on the back, "A man sure betrays his iggerance if he talks too much."

KANE grinned, but it wasn't a happy expression.

"How about it—you going to make trouble?" one asked.

"Oh, I know when I'm licked," Kane assured them.

"We'll take your word for it," and so they prepared supper. Kane brought in three big steaks of venison from his meat box, cut thick before freezing. One of the men remarked what a good idea it was cutting up ready for use before it froze.

"You sure know your stuff," the men remarked now and again, as they put on coffee, mixed flapjacks, set the table.

After supper they stretched before the fire, lying on an old grizzly bear skin and two winter horse hides. For a time there was no talk. Kane presently sat up cross-legged, the others following suit. Then the thicker-set man remarked, "Course, we're official—you know that."

"I ain't hoping anything different," Kane answered.

"Looks like a good winter, catching."

"For you, likely," Kane grunted, "Glad you feel that way."

"How 'bout those castors?" one asked after chuckling a moment.

"A lot I've got to say about them—now."

"You've had hard luck, that's all," the taller said, "Maybe no real friend sent you to this cabin. How about it?"

"Listen, old man, don't talk like that about people I know," Kane said angrily. "Not especially can any damned dressed up blue-hide, samson-hair, flea-bit uniformers talk about a full prime, glossy stuff; compared to fades, shedders an' spongy summer stuff, give me clean firsts in man or beast."

"You know you're up against it, don't you?" one said, hotly.

"Hell, yes."

"Would you rather be up against it in green timber, livin' out or take a four-five year stretch inside, making big rocks small, braidin' hair for fun an' tobaccy money? We got you for two hundred beaver—now."

Kane blinked, narrowed his eyes, giving the two a sidelong glance. The men watched him.

"I don't get-cha," Kane said slowly, "I'm a stranger in this country."

"Iggerance let you into Cloudy Creek," the stocky one said, "You c'n sure trap. Maybe yo're welcome if yo're sensible."

"Then you're phoney, uniformed setups to scare somebody?" Kane jeered.

"Don't fool yourse'f," one snarled, as both reddened in the firelight, the lamp having been blown out to save oil, "My name's Chert Tuohy an' he's Sinjer Cruzan. Here's Special Deputy Bounty Hunter papers, all right. If we say the word, over the line you go. The only question is if you've got sense."

"I can't proposition you," Kane said, "Just like I said, I trap."

"Good sets, too," Tuohy said, "Yo' got 'nough musk stocked to start a perfume factory, 'sides medicine. That's a big season's work already."

"Them castors is dry," Kane said, "Caught last year or before that."

"We got you for possession," Cruzan said, "That's enough for us. Would you do the right thing, now?"

"What else could I do?"

"Now yer talkin'," Cruzan said, glancing at Tuohy, who nodded. "We ain't mean fellers. We don't care if you trap. Hell—go anywhere, catch anything, but at the same time you got a good thing here. We don't get paid much. Nobody's trapped Cloudy Creek since Vandick skinned it. You're making big money, even if you

don't know the country. It's all up to you. We just run around. We never bother to trap. We're int'rested in muleskins—spring primes. The rest is up to you—the pen or slave-trappin'."

"How about my winter take—straight stuff?" Kane asked.

"You get the idea—you're bright," Tuohy exclaimed. "You keep that. Be best if you sold it open at Slicker. Gunlock'll buy it, pay good. We don't care about that."

"But that late trapping?" Kane asked. "I'll be all through by the time muleskins are prime."

"That's just it," Tuohy grinned. "You jes' do some spare time work for us, see? You work through the spring thaw into warming up for us, or you go to court for violatin'—castor possessing. You know what country judges do to anybody caught at flat-tails. You got to produce, though. You've had experience. Get results or over the line you go. That's our way of enforcin' in this country, making violators serve time."

"A man ain't much choice, looks like," Kane shook his head, "Course, I'd get in deeper; instead of just possessing, I'd be trapping."

"Don't come any Philadelphia lawyer stuff on us," Tuohy warned, sharply, "Think it over. Come morning, you'll say *yes* or *no*."

"All right boys," Kane sighed, "I'll figure on it. Looks awful good over the Divide in the Park."

"Not for you, tain't," Cruzan declared, "We got that all took care of right. Keep your nose out of there, minding your business, keeping this side the signs in Lost Pass. The way we do is patent you here in Cloudy Creek Basin, same as others are licensed around. Don't try any tricks on us, get me? You're out on bail, yer own recognizance, that's all. Come spring, and yo' serve time on our account."

"Get the idea?" Tuohy added, "We let yo' finish the winter on yer own. That's real liberal. By good rights we c'd claim in on that catch, too, but we're good fellers."

"Sure looks like," Kane nodded.

"How'd things look down Cloudy?" Cruzan asked, eagerly, "Reckon theh's many in the dams—houses, through the workings? How many do you reckon you c'n pick up there?"

"You mean muskballs, castors?" Kane asked.

"We mean muleskins," Cruzan declared, "Castors are just sidelines."

IN THE morning, Kane emerged from his boughs, robe and blankets, while false dawn was still flashing. The uniformed men wriggled to keep their eyes on him, but this was early for them. Besides, the cave-cabin was chill and uncomfortable until the fire was flaming again.

Fourteen inches more of snow had fallen; it was still coming. Kane summoned his guests to sourdough buckwheat cakes with bear-venison sage sausage, wild honeycomb, with coffee and condensed cream. They ate slowly, sipped at leisure, and smoked afterwards. They'd have to sit the storm out, anyhow. The two were anxious to learn what the trapper had decided to do.

"I could find plenty of witnesses," Kane said, "Any trapper'd swear those castors are old, dried out all summer. You've no case."

"No case?" Tuohy snarled hotly, "No trapper in this country'd dare testify for *you*. We got 'em sewed up tight. Why, we c'n prove anything we want against anybody—against you."

"That's the point," Kane said, "If I tie in with you, don't make any mistake. What's the split on muleskins, anyhow?"

"We just take them," Cruzan said, "They ain't no split."

"Like Hell," Kane exclaimed, "You can't hold trappers down like that. Don't tell me that. What does the trapper get?"

"Why, we just wondered what you'd say," Tuohy interposed, reluctantly, "Generally, it's a four-way divvy, all evens."

"And you were going to leave me out

for a three way?" Kane jeered, "Or did you two figure you could split mine two ways?"

"You don't think we'd snide anybody do you?" Tuohy demanded, indignantly, and Kane laughed in his face.

"You won't cross me up," the trapper said. "I'm a free trapper, and don't forget I can see you a long way before you can me. Now I figure the Basin'll yield up to two hundred muleskins—that's four grand at twenty per. I work fast, and that'll take a lot of handling."

"You c'n deliver them green," Cruzan said, eagerly, "We hire a good handler to clean an' stretch. Good handling makes 50% better price, if done right."

"That's something like for I hate handling," Kane said.

DURING the blizzard Kane made it plain he had to know just who was and who wasn't reliable, and just how reliable, making it understood he never worked with anybody half way, but only the whole hog. He would leave it to anybody who knew if he wasn't all the way, seeing things clear through, right.

"Did you find all of Vandick's camps?" Tuohy asked.

"How do you reckon I found this one?" the trapper asked, "Those castors sure had me guessing. First I thought I'd ship them, but then I figured if I staid with them I'd get hep with good sidelines."

"Be'n sure bad if you'd shipped them," Cruzan declared, "Them's our'n—private. Inspections would have picked yo' up. Easy to git in, but we got yo' sure corraled—don't try any dirty, cheatin', tricky stuff. If a man figures he c'n wallop for himse'f, he's handled. Musks ain't none of your business. Hang up the musk for us, personal. All yo' sit in on is muleskins."

"Yeah? Where'd I be if somebody came that couldn't be fixed?" Kane asked indignantly, "That's a nice bunch inside—all that risk on me. And show me if you c'n get better prices than I can."

"The kind that can't be fixed ain't around these parts," Tuohy chuckled, "We c'n handle anybody. If a yeller pup sticks his nose in, we take care of him, ourse'ves. Why, when the fur traders investigated, all we done was invite them to kiss the affidavies they collected *good by.* Legislators, governors, officials are all alike to us. A good wildcrafter can fool them all easy, if they ain't had personal experience and can't read signs. They never get back where we op'rate through you boys."

"How 'bout chiefs, superintendents—ain't they liable to roam around promiscuous?" Kane asked.

"We put blinders on 'em, an' trot 'em around," Cruzan laughed, "Take this new Windfalls Park boss, Laramie. He's a comical jigger, an amateur sport, soft nature lover, them things. Nothin' practical. Tuohy an' me took 'im for a walk. We actually showed him things, an' he didn't know he'd seen nothin' a-tall. He swallered it when we called squirrels *marten,* he did, actually. A Clarkes crow made him happy all day. Iggerant, he didn't even notice old trap-set breaks in dams. He was sure enthusiastic about beaver cuttin's where they hadn't been none to work in two-three years. He don't know skinned country when he sees it. If he'd seen anything—well."

"You must have caught 'em up, if they're that scarce," Kane said.

"We take ev'ything, clost," Cruzan explained, "What we tell the boys is that a dollar in the pocket's worth a hundred after we're dead."

"Then, too, your jobs won't last forever," Kane suggested, "Somebody is liable to get onto the racket."

"What? Reckon you don't know who's back of us," Tuohy laughed, "We ain't missin' any bets. Don't worry about that. If a man gets smarty, we got the goods on ev'ybody an' all we got to do is take you, or anybody to court, an' to save you, you couldn't get a man to hang the jury even. That's how tight we sew things up. Even judges can't get by us. We don't care who they are, senators or supervisors, if we can't buy them we can fool them, and

what's a trapper more or less, anyhow?"

"Me, f'rinstance," Kane remarked, softly.

"Oh, well, hell—that wan't personal. You're dif'rent, Kane."

WHEN the visitors took their departure to look the boys over in Windfalls Park, they complained about the hard snow-shoeing and at being obliged to break their own trails through the loose fluff over Lost Pass. Kane not only covered his own line, but visited around among his neighbors. The Windfalls trappers at his suggestion all met together for a party at the Government cabin on Old Man Pond, near the Divide in the Park.

The boys who were handling the Park proposition were in with the rest, seven on that job which even the outside trappers

called "ungodly." Two were fugitives from justice, and five had been caught violating on their own personal hook, and so had to "work it out."

"How'd they frame you, Kane?" Candle asked, "Course, tain't none of our business."

"We're all in the same boat," Kane answered, "You know I came into Vandick's line—I knew him. The North Side cabin had more beaver castors hung up to dry than a Hudson Bay post. Sure was a musky camp. One night I came in, dog-tired in that first lasting snow. I just made it. When I built the fire, there sat two fellows in uniforms. Course, they had me dead to rights on possession—reckon you know what happened. I don't often beg, but I know when I'm framed up, right. I knew then what some of the boys meant, shading off on my coming into Cloudy Basin. The two men claimed to be Chert Tuohy and Sinjer Cruzan, and that they'd rather do business in muleskins than have good fellows fined, so they could get 50-50 on the fines. Talk about Free Trappers!"

"They're crowdin' ev'ybody hard," Dummond said, morosely, "The trouble is, they get the goods on a feller if he's vi'latin'. If he ain't breaking the game laws, they frame him. The first time they got me, it was by sticking a beaver into one of my otter sets. Any way they work it, they make a trapper a slave. An' then comes the break up in the spring, they take all the hides, ev'y one a vi'lation—an' dicker with a crooked buyer. They give back what they call twenty-five percent—but they ain't got more'n fifteen plunks for a muleskin in years, to hear them tell it. I know for a fact the boys working open country've be'n gittin' up to $24.50. Course, all our crooked furs is routed through the legal an' license country they keep open. My gosh—they let ten thousand hides go through that one patch, which ain't big 'nough to have a hundred beaver on it. Crooked buyers pay $1000 each to keep it open, too, they tell me."

"I swore last year I'd never stand for it, but the longer a man stays the more evidence is piled up against him," Cammon said, "Well, course, it's better slave-trappin' six weeks than doin' honor-camp road building days an' chained ankle sleepin' nights, let alone stone cell living the year around."

"Jes' the way I feel about it," Shade echoed. "Course, this is my first year here—I never dreamed it was that bad."

"What's your proposition, Kane?" asked one of the boys.

"A trader I know'll come to Slicker," Kane said, "He'll establish a trading post, with Gunlock, who won't lose anything. He'll take all the open-season furs, probably twenty-five percent above the buyers frame-up. All we do is spread down all the open season furs, and we get straight prices and the two slave drivers can't fix

him in. With him is a perfume field buyer. He dickers with Tuohy and Cruzan —and then the same buyer meets them on the muleskin proposition, but by moonshine, of course. They get paid more—they've been beaten down by the combine buying muleskins, themselves. Now they get a look in. If anybody squeals they don't dare make a stink, on account of the kind of a crooked deal it is. Where we come in is Tuohy and Cruzan got to pay us a real twenty-five percent on our whack—not any snide ten percent like they've been doing. And if you boys all come in, the buyer'll add a five percent bonus to all of us on the winter take, besides on the muleskins, too."

"How'll that work out in dollars?" Cammon asked.

"Instead of fifteen dollars on beaver, you get twenty dollars to thirty dollars—split four ways," Kane answered, "that's crooked money and always hot stuff to handle. But on the legal-season furs, it means fifty percent more than you'd get from the buyers. That's what a trappers' trading post does for you. Some trappers get twice as much for furs by combining that way and all selling to honest auction buying."

"Lordy—but that'd be real money," Shade remarked, "I'd get $1200 instead of the $800 we usually figure."

"And don't forget," Kane said, "All the goods they've got on us is goods on them, too——"

"You're taking chances—one of us might squeal on you," Shade said, sharply in genuine warning.

"I'm willing to take the chance on you boys turning down a half higher rate on your winter catch," Kane answered.

WHEN the boys had had their big feast, their get-together party, they all scattered back to their lines, grimly determined. They passed the word around that any one who blabbed on Kane must die. They followed their trails, picking up fur, skinning and stretching it, and cleaning the hides and pelts already on the boards. The passerby in the open wilderness could have seen no sign of the trappers having been organized by the rascals. In the Windfalls Park, of course, the signs that forbade hunting, trapping, or other destruction of wildlife were just so much bamboozling of the public and neither the chance visitors nor honest higher ups could know what was going on, except by following trails.

Kane visited Candle at his line along the eastern boundary of the great outdoor natural history museum, and the old time outlaw welcomed him. He had done time in Folsam, Sing Sing, and Santa Fé. A little job in southeastern Colorado kept him sequestered now. He had taught Vandick fine points of trapping, and he cottoned, as he said, to Kane.

"Summers I'm kind of a day laborer out around," Candle said, "Winters I putter along my lines. I do purty good. Jes' during springs I'm a slave trapper. Them scoundrels would turn me in for a reward, if they knew of one. I told Tuohy and Cruzan about a beaver-pocket over here on ten miles of meander ponds. The hogs are going to trap there themselves. Of course, I cain't say a word, either. Once in the pen I'd never get out alive—not in fifty years."

"I'd sure like to see that country," Kane said.

"Shade said I'd oughta tell you," Candle said, "I'll take you."

Killer, bandit, fugitive, Candle was questionable. Kane knew that the old-timer was helpless, yet desperate. Kane would never forget the strange subtlety of the man's voice. Such a sound could mean much or nothing except an abiding hope of some kind. Candle knew things about deep mountain wilderness Kane had never dreamed, stratagems, hiding places, trail covering, blind tracking. The wonder was the wilderness blackmailers had not been killed long before—uniforms protected them.

The beaver-pocket was a peculiar formation of folded up and pinched off valleys, access to which was only by a tiny entrance

hidden amid a vast tumult of forest-covered ridges. Even the park line patrols had overlooked the valley.

"I thought one time I'd never mention it," Candle said, quietly, "but when I heard yo'd come I reckoned I would. I told Tuohy an' Cruzan. Now I've told you, too, Burr Kane."

"I won't disappoint you, I hope," Kane assured him.

SPRING came. The midwinter primes had had their day when gloss and shimmer shone in the pelage. Then rubbing, fading, early-shed began. Burr Kane took up his traps after middle January and in early February Cruzan and Tuohy came barging in.

"What the hell've you quit for?" Cruzan demanded, "The breedin' season's the best trappin', usin' scent baits."

"Every litter through Cloudy Basin'll average two more pups if we don't disturb them after the rut begins," Kane replied, "I'm going to make a better catch next year, too."

"Who said you'd be here?" Tuohy sneered, "Maybe we'll license somebody else, if we ain't satisfied."

"If not me, some other good fellow," Kane grinned, imperturbably.

"Course, if yo' make good moonshinin', yo' c'n stay on," Tuohy said.

"Don't worry about that," Kane said, easily, "I began learning fur where you left off. You don't even know how to sell, let alone conservation."

"Maybe you c'n tell us how?" Cruzan said, eagerly, "One of the boys said—no matter which one. You got Eastern connections?"

"What if I have?"

"Well, now listen; we c'n use you right ——" Cruzan said.

KANE followed down the streams of the Cloudy. Years of peace and plenty had given the beaver there normal increase in numbers. He had not exaggerated when he said two hundred could be taken. In fact fur-hogs could have stacked up ten or twelve packs. He made elaborate sets, but under each trap pan he jammed a block to prevent the trigger being released. He broke out dams, fussed with swimways, messed around at houses, but he caught none of the living, protected mammals.

Instead he gathered beaver the others caught, moonshine-hijacking, and distributed these around in his sets so that when the two watchful overseers of the trappers came through, they found him apparently doing big business. The two kept tabs on everybody, besides spot trapping themselves through the hidden valley beaver fur pocket they thought they had taken from Candle. Here and there, Tuohy and Cruzan even lifted beaver and left sign to make believe the victims had pulled themselves loose from the steel jaws. Thus they "Johnny Sneakemed"—stole—five animals their own sets had seized and drowned, each of the skins carefully marked by knotted fur, guardhairs and other identification tricks against the day of reckoning. Kane in pretending to violate amassed the exhibits that might be useful for evidence. His camera showed the scamps setting traps, and then the beaver caught at the scene. He was a queer slave trapper.

Traveling night and day, Kane moonshined, hijacked and double-timed. Thus he made up his own big quota by playing at fur stealing, a game many fold more dangerous than that of the forced slave trappers who raided the Park under the auspices of the rascals to escape the other penalties they had incurred. Kane even took the chance of bringing away Johnny Sneakem pelts from Moneta Shade's district.

The spring-prime beaver lasted late. Kane had accumulated facts and proofs beyond his hopes. His winter catch was at the main cabin at Red Brier Forks hidden out. His last hijacking trip took him over into Steel Cammon's country, and he felt that he had made his getaway when, as he came down off the Divide between Cloudy Creek and Horsethief Basin into his own

territory, he walked around a spur and met Cammon and Moneta Shade. The two appeared in the shadowy wilderness on the icy snow, now thawed down and covered with bark dust and shed needles of evergreen trees.

"Looks like yo' been visiting," Cammon remarked.

"I sure have," Kane replied.

"'Tain't the firstest time yo' didn't find me home," Cammon said, grimly. "Jedging by the tracks it ain't."

"That's so," Kane admitted without cavil, "I've cleaned up clear from Candle's and the Rickeys, on beyond, into here."

"Just what's the big idee, exactly?" Shade asked.

"I'll show you," Kane drew, from his pocket a home-sewed, buckskin wallet, and showed them the photographs he had taken. Steel Cammon was the more demonstrative, he chuckled, grinned, uttering low whoops. Then the two glanced at each other and turned to Burr Kane.

"These all you got like this?" Cammon asked.

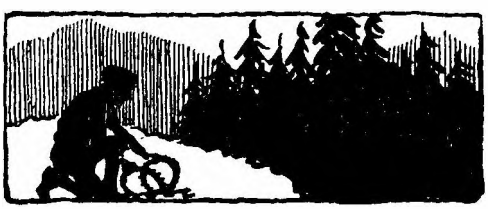
"All—that was my business."

"Where'd yo' git them? I don't know that canyon," Shade said.

"Candle found it, and those two blackmailed him out of it."

"An' yo've got the guts to shove this proposition of your'n through, Kane?" Cammon asked, his voice tense. "You're framing back on them!"

"I've come this far—I've been here ever since last autumn—is that right?" Kane



asked, "I risked coming, and I haven't changed any."

"That's sure so," Cammon said, nodding. "That's all we wanted to be sure about," and Shade added, "Well, good luck and s'long. Count on us if you need our backing."

The two turned back and Kane stood for a few minutes breathing heavily, listening to the crunching of their footsteps on the snow. He hadn't fooled those trappers around him. They had given him a long chain to twist himself up in and then let him go.

KANE cut down to Red Brier Forks where he made up his own private bales of legal furs. The dried castors and beaver pelts, *muleskins* he had cached out, waiting for the grafting deputies' orders.

The warm spring wind had evaporated, melted and carried away the snow. The streams were up. Spring odors were in the air. The trappers' cabins all through the range reeked with the scents of their craft, the sweet beaver musk castors strong in the mountain outlaw dens.

Sinjer Cruzan came up from the wheelroad end.

"We're after the muleskins," he said bruskly, "Didje bring down the dry musk, too?"

"Sure 'nough," Kane assured him, "Can't you smell 'em?"

"Can't smell nothin' else," Cruzan chuckled, "Sure sweet. Some gets sick of it, but I never do. How 'bout that good market for musk?"

"Nothing in it for me, you said," Kane answered.

"We'll split three ways on that, if you can make us a price," Cruzan said, "Tuohy an' I talked it over."

"I can do lots better'n the three-fifty list," Kane said, "Enough more to make you a higher rate, besides my scale. It'll go three grand."

"How 'bout the muleskins, too?"

"The men I know handle everything by airplane," Kane said, "They travel together, a perfumaire and a peltry man, both specialists. They'll be around. I don't sit into the pow-wow, understand. What I don't know about your dickering can't hurt you. I'll introduce you if you want. I stink

enough of the musk without having the hides pinned onto me, too."

"We'll tend to all that, private," Cruzan grinned, "You boys had all the risk of catching. We'll take chances on the bootlegging. What luck'd you have, 'shinin' the muleskins, anyhow?"

"A good fair take," Kane answered, "I got two hundred and three——"

"Why—that's good—an' your first year in this country," Cruzan said, "Some of the boys fell off, considerable. Sure thick in Cloudy Basin."

"I c'n do better when I know the country," Kane said, "Makes quite a wad. Want delivery now?"

"We'll pack 'em down on your burros to the truck," Cruzan said, "Tuohy's with it. We be'n selling to some field buyers, but those fellers thought we had to sell to them. They gouged us down too hard. If yo' got men c'n handle a big proposition, we'll dicker."

"Those others'll have it in for you," Kane said, "I don't want to get mixed up in a fight among you fellows."

"Fight? Say, what we c'd tell if they chirruped, huh!" Cruzan laughed. "Yo' don't need to worry. You're in *right* with us, now."

SOME $16,000 worth of legal season furs were spread in the Slicker Trading Post shed for the buyers to bid on. Sorted out, it looked like a lot of peltry. Prices were down a little, but the catch was up a bit, for the Cloudy Creek Basin had become a fur pocket with no trapping in it for several seasons. The buyers even winked at each other when one of them puttered over a few skunks, bluehide badgers and pale coyotes badly handled by two ranch school boys.

And the cheap little skin-gamesters whispered, taking the assembled trappers off to one side, sniffing at them; "Say, now, you got muleskins, ain't you? Don't tell me *no*. I smell the musk, sure I do."

They even threatened to have them inspected, if they weren't given a look in. One field agent prowled around.

"Where the hell's Cruzan an' Tuohy?" he demanded, but no one knew.

"They must be around," he insisted, "They always are. Listen, I'm from Bergin, see? Get me—*Bergin.*"

The trappers just grinned at him They were standing together, now.

"You tell him to go right straight to hell," Kane jeered, and the field agent backed up, absolutely, utterly dazed. Nobody ever told the big Bergin, or even his man Gursky, to do that—not meaning it.

"Say, mister, who are you?" the agent demanded, asking Kane.

"I'm just the trading post master, that's all—smell?" Kane lifted his fur collar to the man, who sniffed, blinked and led the boss trapper out behind the automobiles.

"Say, now look't," Gursky whispered, anxiously, "Where's the muleskin proposition this year? I make it right wit' you, see—private. Is it them two strangers—did they butt in, heh?"

"Sure they did," Kane whispered, seriously, "They made a straight offer, twenty all through."

"What—twenty? We never paid but fifteen."

"Well, they reached the bounty-uniformers," Kane said.

"That's funny, and maybe them dirty double-crossers think they can get away wit' it," Gursky said, "I better get Bergin to come. C'n you stall things off, like a good feller, till the big boy gets here. He felt something coming in his bones. He's waiting by the phone in Elkid for word from me. He can't afford to lose the muleskin business. It's the rich-cream profits."

"Well, he's needed bad to break up the business," Kane assured him, "The boys got a trading post agreement this year."

"That will ruin our profits, almost," the agent sighed, "And where shall Bergin meet those damned skin-gamers?"

"The Bear-Paw brand outfit. You know it?"

"Sure. Hell, yes—we done moonlight trade there, lots; just wait."

The trappers had combined their whole winter take of furs for the trading post. The fur buyers had to dicker with Kane, who was the post master, and the legal prices were up sixty percent on the combine proposition. The fur buyers looked at each other, finding species and grades of the Windfalls Mountains country all sorted together. Instead of what to the trappers was a $16,000 catch, they had $25,600—which they prorated among themselves, according to the count of the skins.

Then toward night, when the legal-fur catch was sold, Bergin came pounding in in his big twelve-cylinder car, swart, olive faced, shiny skinned and blank eyed, looking for trouble. Would they double-cross him, eh? He jerked his finger at his field buyer, Gursky and they headed over to the Bear Paw with Kane. Bergin started to tell Kane what he thought of the trading post and called him a dirty trouble maker, but Kane slapped his face so hard that the prints of his hand were on the pudgy little man's cheeks.

"Don't talk to me," Kane said, "For two bits I'll kick you all out and let you walk home——"

"But, mister, I don't mean nothing. I just want to do business," Bergin said, "Let's don't get excited. Let's be friends."

"Talk like a friend, then," Kane said.

Real moonshine glowed on the log house, pole fence, creek bottom and sod-dobe shacks at the Bear Paw. A faint yellow glow and wavers of red indicated the sitting room light, and Bergin burst in upon Steel Cammon, his wife, Moneta Shade, Singer, Chert Tuohy and Cruzan. At sight of Bergin the two blackmailing bounty specials gasped. They looked at Kane, whose face wore a serious look of warning. They hadn't expected to have to deal with Bergin and Gursky—only with the independent buyers who had bid the legal catch skins up so high. Nobody could tell which furs came from the park and which from the open country. But any one could tell a crooked beaver.

CAMMON, Shade and Mrs. Cammon listened, leaning back, while Bergin told the double crossers they couldn't back down on him, because he had them dead to rights in their crooked business. And the two men, goaded to desperation pulled their guns. The fur buyer backed up, holding his face, which was already smarting from the slap.

"Don't talk to us," Cruzan said, "We got you a thousand which ways you damned old fur pirate Johnny Sneakem. We'll bury you out in the sand if you open your head."

"Let's be friends," Bergin urged, "I tell you, now we get together right. I meet anybody's price, everybody's price to you. I give you a real price, now. I give you *better* than anybody's. Put up the guns. I made a mistake. Don't you make a worst one. Come, let us do some good business, like we done for ten years—eh, boys?"

Accordingly the three, with Shade and Cammon went out into the patio and over to the tool shed. A two ton truck held the things that Bergin wanted, bales after bales, Hudson Bay standards of eighty pounds each, but they called them muleskins. Bergin's voice purred, squawked, exclaimed, urged, yelped, protested—but, still, it was all right He knew how the boys were feeling. As it was, he would lose money, but rather than lose their business, he would pay, this time. In the past they had done well by him, and he took big chances—he had heavy expenses meeting the exactions of higher ups and such outrageous transportation charges. But live and let live—that was his proposition. So he paid down the price, by an electric flash light—$25.50 straight through, which was, he would leave it to God and man, ten whole dollars and fifty big cents more than ever he had paid anybody before for, well, muleskins. And no hard feelings, and he had a drink to seal the bargain, right. And so the currency was flitted out around, taken by hands from

the shadows and then the shadows slipped away—except Tuohy and Cruzan who stood with the money hugged into their chests and Bergin who rubbed his hands fondly over the bales which were now his, by purchase, legally, with full responsibility and all. "Don't trick me again," Bergin said sharply.

An automobile's headlights suddenly snapped on.

"Hands up, you three," a sharp, hard voice said, "You're under arrest for felony —taking, possessing, trafficking in beaver ——"

TUOHY and Cruzan shrank, their hands dropping to their holster guns, but looked into the double barrels of two shotguns aimed at their breasts. They hesitated, looked to right and left with their lip corners drizzling and then, white and peaked in the light, they raised their hands that flapped like leaves. They felt their guns lifted out by some one who came up behind them. It was Burr Kane.

"Turn and turn about, boys," Kane said, "you wished two grand or so in dried beaver musk onto me—framing me."

"Who are you?" Tuohy gasped, "We're —we're shaping this case up—you see we're —we're putting this case through——"

"No—you took the money and you divided it," Kane said, "I'm the special investigator sent in by the State and Wild Life Investigations, to find out why these magnificent streams protected by law and these parks, supposed to be game and wild life refuges, are being skinned. These are Headquarters men behind the shotguns ——"

"Look who's here," one of the two hold ups chuckled, "Would you believe it—what's your name?"

"Moneta Shade," the man answered, "Superintendent Danton to you, Kane."

"What—Danton?" Kane exclaimed, "You son of a gun—you ordered me onto this assignment—trading me out of the Bad Lands on the Missouri for this job. And you gave me fair warning when I came in——"

"I wondered if you knew what you were up against."

"I knew——"

"Not—not *the* Superintendent Danton," Bergin gasped, "And I be'n trying to reach you—meet you—make it right mit you ever sinct you was loaned by the Government but——"

"Never mind," Danton reassured him. "You'll make it all perfectly all right, now. All you have to do is confess judgment, $1000 fine for each and every beaverskin and throw yourself on the mercy of the court at two years each for each skin—don't forget that the law says the terms must be served in sequence, up to and including the first twenty skins or so."

"I don't forget—I know it already—I'm ruint," Bergin whimpered, "Such a business—and this, in times like these. But —but where's the money I paid to those—those tampt violators——"

"Listen," Kane said, and when they cocked their ears they heard the galloping of horses' hoofs out in the frosty spring night.

"But—but I could testify against them," Bergin said. "Me and these—these two fellers. Those trappers—look what they done——"

"If they testify you'll be convicted for slavery." Kane said. "You know that's the law—when you go in for that kind of stuff. If you want us to, though, we'll——"

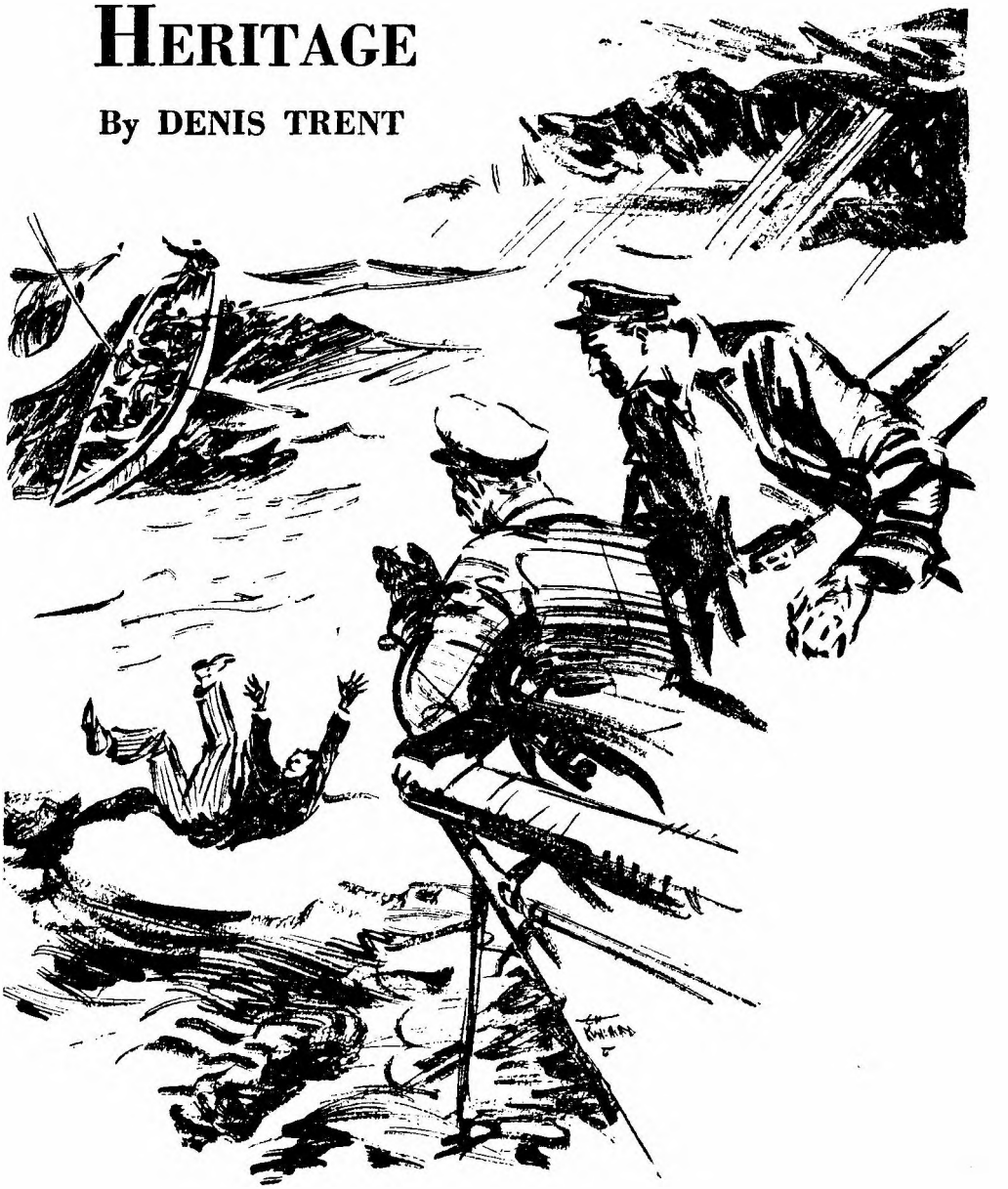
"Oh, no—don't." Bergin gasped, "Maybe I got some pull for mitigating circumstances—I'm sick—and old. Vell—I guess I retire from such a business."

"I wouldn't," Kane said, "with the fur laws and conditions right in the Windfalls. we'll take $200,000 worth of fur there instead of $20,000 or so a winter. A crook gets one tenth as much business as he might get in the fur country, if he played the game straight."

"Well, we'll take him to the County Court," Superintendent Danton said, "Come along, boys."

HERITAGE

By DENIS TRENT



CAPTAIN MARKHAM'S short, stubby figure stood stiffly erect in the starboard wing of the bridge. His eyes were bitter and his mouth drooped. He stared out over the *Laredo's* bow at the calm Atlantic. The sea, on a day like this, always made him think of a lazy woman dressed in shimmering satin, lying on her back with her face upturned to the dazzling sun. He mistrusted idle women. They brewed trouble. He'd seen one of them do it. Make trouble that damn well smashed up the future of the best navigating of-

A Seagoing First Mate Discovers to the Tune of Stormy Winds What He Really Wants from Life!

ficer in the Island Shipping Company.

He glanced surreptitiously across the bridge at big Rodney Blair, his chief mate, who was gloomily scanning a brilliant horizon and probably wondering what the Old Man was doing up here during his watch.

Hang Blair! Of all the cursed fools in life, the greatest was a man who'd let a woman wreck him. And such a woman. "Oh, good enough to look at," Captain Markham sniffed to himself, "but what's looks?" He'd seen a wicked gale come out of a day that had started with a magnificent sunrise.

The Old Man took off his cap and ran a leathery hand through his sparse gray hair, as if to ease the mind that insisted on checking over the years. It checked back to the time Rod had joined the *Plata,* right after the Island Shipping Company had launched her. They'd had to have at least one cruise ship, to compete with all the other lines running down to the tropics. Passengers had begun to demand luxury at sea. The *Plata* had, as Captain Markham had grunted upon taking command, all the trimmings. Sports deck, swimming pool, dance space, palm garden, veranda cafe. The last had stuck in the Old Man's craw. A "veranda" on a ship! She was fitted with all the latest doodads to make her safe, too. And comfortable. Lord, she didn't even roll like a natural ship!

It hadn't taken Rod long to advance to second mate and then chief mate. The lad was a natural. Why not, when all the Blair men had died masters of vessels, from the ancestors who had traversed the Seven Seas in sailing ships to Rod's father, who had gone down on the bridge of his torpedoed freighter during the war?

And now, here he was with his master's certificate and all, sick of the sea. And why? Because a pretty girl had turned him down and married some tailor's dummy who didn't know a windlass from a boom-crutch!

The Old Man shot a furious glance at the chief mate, who remained like a carven image in the opposite wing of the bridge. Probably thinking of Her. Hmph. Her. Why the devil couldn't Rod see she was nothing but a bunch of pretty hair and eyes and clothes? She hadn't the depth of a shallow lagoon. And yet that young idiot had considered her too good for him to propose to, just because she was "Driver" Wilson's daughter, and old Driver was enough to gag a man with his money and his influence in the Island Shipping Company.

The Office was to blame for that. Captain Markham couldn't remember a time when the dollar-pinching gang in the New York offices hadn't trembled before the might of their most important shipper. Anybody'd think Trinidad was the only port in the world and the Wilson cargo the only freight! Sometimes Captain Markham had wondered if the I. S. C. hadn't built the *Plata* just so the exporter and his motherless daughter could travel in style.

Well, they had. Up and down the latitudes in a floating hotel. Resulting in Blair suddenly waking up to the fact that Joan Wilson was always ready to dance with him, to talk to him in the moonlight when he should have been turned in, and to give him a taste of the softer things of life.

And then, just when Rod had been screwing up his courage to ask her to marry him as soon as he achieved command of a vessel, she had married, instead, the ex-rich man's son whom Driver Wilson had, out of friendship to the ex-rich gentleman, installed as secretary to his New York office manager. One of these hot-house products who had never done a real lick of work in his young life.

Well, perhaps it was enough to turn a youngster sour, at that, Captain Markham soliloquized. But not sour enough, he hastily amended his thoughts, to make him snap the heads off the crew. Not enough to make him lose his old joyous grin forever.

WHEN Captain Daniels had died and left the master's berth in the *Laredo* vacant, Markham had expected to see Blair given command. He rated it. But the Old Man had been told curtly by the Office that he, himself, was to take the old ship over. She was no vessel for a younger and less experienced man. She needed someone who could be relied upon in an emergency. Even those landlubbers in the Office knew that emergencies were likely to happen to the *Laredo*.

Captain Markham had been glad to change from the 17,000 ton crack ship, which he thoroughly despised, to the 5000 ton *Laredo*. He felt more at home in the latter. The few women who traveled in the smaller vessel wore clothes. They didn't run about the decks in short pants and jersey bibs. They didn't have to smoke and drink and raise general hell.

His joy had been complete when Blair had asked to be transferred with him. Not that he flattered himself over the request. The Old Man had understood it for what it was worth. As long as Joan Wilson made frequent trips aboard the *Plata,* Rod wanted none of it.

And now . . . Captain Markham's aging shoulders sagged for a moment as he contemplated what lay before him. Well, he might as well set off the fireworks, he decided dismally, and see what happened. He called testily over his shoulder: "Mister Mate!"

Blair stared woodenly across the bridge at the skipper, then ambled slowly toward him, barely touching his cap as he approached. Captain Markham doggedly met the regard of the bleak eyes looking down at him.

"Have you seen the passenger list?" he asked, wishing to thunder Rod might have remembered how to smile.

The mate's lips curled. "No, sir. I'm not interested in the passenger list of the *Laredo.*" The last word was spoken bitterly.

"You're cracking your ship!" the Old Man exploded. "Don't do it. Save your breath for people. They won't serve you as well as ships!"

Blair started to make a hasty retort but checked himself. A slow flush crept up under the bronze on his cheeks. He hadn't needed to be nasty to the Old Man, just because he was fed up on seafaring. Finally he said quietly: "What about the passenger list, sir?"

Captain Markham turned away for a moment and glanced toward the Jersey coast, which sat shimmering along the rim of the ocean in the hot August haze. Dang it, if he were only big enough to shake Rod, beat seven bells out of him . . . anything to snap him out of the hurt that had frozen him into something inhuman for so long. Instead of which, he was about to rub salt into the open wound.

"I thought maybe you'd know . . ." he began feebly. "You might have run into them on deck . . ." He yanked off his cap and violently smoothed his hair, noting that Rod had gone white about the lips. The Old Man swallowed hard and his words fell over each other in their rush to be spoken and done with. "Just why Driver Wilson's suddenly selected the *Laredo,* this trip, is more'n I can say. The *Plata* is northbound and'll soon be returning to Trinidad. However, he's here with us." He paused and played a violent tattoo on the rail with his stubby fingers. Then he blurted: "Of course, Mr. and Mrs. Hammet are along with him."

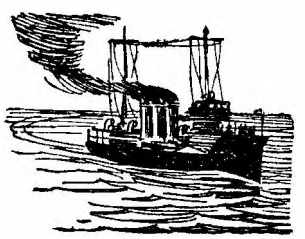
Blair stood rigid, his blue eyes fixed blankly on some distant spot beyond the top of the skipper's head. A slight twitching of a muscle in his face was the only visible reaction to the Old Man's news. After waiting for the explosion that did not take place, Captain Markham went miserably on.

"You've never met Hammet. I have. He'd look swell doing a tango or driving a sport car. Or playing polo, maybe. Not much draft. Lot of shiny bright work. That kind of fella." He shrugged hopelessly as Blair remained silent. "But he's

Driver Wilson's son-in-law. We gotta remember that. And we gotta remember that Wilson snaps the whip in the I. S. C."

The chief mate stirred at last. "If what you're trying to say, sir, is that I'm to kiss Hammet on both cheeks when we meet, I'm sorry to disappoint you. You're right I've never met him, but I've wanted to. Wilson's name has been signed to every one of those letters of complaint about his cargo, but I've known who was behind those letters. Every time they've had me on the Office carpet, I've told them what causes the breakages. It's the rotten way Wilson's stuff is baled and crated. You know that, sir." His eyes now met the skipper's angrily. "Don't think I'm grousing about Hammet because he—because he married —Joan." His tone softened on the name. "This isn't a personal matter. Anyway, if she preferred him . . ." He floundered to a painful pause.

"Never mind that," the skipper said shortly. "Just try to keep the peace, this trip. If the gossip's true that Wilson is



buying ships and launching his own fleet, the I. S. C.'ll be finished. Done. If you get into trouble with Hammet, now, Wilson would——"

"Damn Wilson!" Blair burst out savagely, unable longer to control his feelings. "If you think I'll grovel before Wilson just because he is influential, you're wrong!" He swung furiously away and strode across the bridge.

Captain Markham looked after him yearningly. "Little as I am, I'd beat hell outa you if you groveled before anyone," he muttered, adding fervently: "Oh, damn women!"

AS BLAIR, relieved by Buck, the third mate, started below to wash up for dinner that evening, a sudden weakness made his legs tremble. Joan. Here, aboard the *Laredo,* where he could no more avoid her than he could the sea. Unless she remained in her room throughout the trip. And why should she? If she had chosen to travel in the *Laredo,* it was not to hide herself away from him.

What a fool he was to feel like this! If she had ever cared, would she be here now, flaunting her husband in Rod's face? Joan. Joan with the golden hair and hazel eyes and upturned lips. She conjured up pictures of sunny hours on the sport deck of the *Plata;* hours in the moonlight; soft music to which they had danced in each other's arms. She was connected in Rod's mind with all that was tender and alluring in life.

He was rudely awakened from his thoughts of her. As he was about to pass along the promenade deck, hoping he might not yet have to face her and still searching for her among the few women who still loitered in their deck chairs, a man stepped out of the Social Hall and caught hold of his sleeve. Blair shook his arm loose and looked into a pair of lazy brown eyes set in a handsome face.

"Well?" he asked shortly. "What is it?"

"My room smells," the other returned suavely. "I want something done about it."

Blair's lip curled. "I'm not the steward," he snapped. "Take your complaints about your room to the chief steward. I'm mate of this ship."

"Whatever that signifies," the other shrugged. He smiled insolently at Blair. "It isn't a thing I'd boast of, myself." He laughed softly as he noted the mate's face flush. "Your name is Blair, I believe. I've heard all about you. I am Hammet. Thornton Hammet."

Blair forced himself to breathe evenly. By an effort he kept his hands from clenching into menacing fists. The hot flame that burned his face, he could not control. But

he steadied his voice when he spoke. "Your name is familiar to me," he said coldly. "In spite of the fact that all complaints about the Wilson cargo have been signed with his name, I've understood who was behind them. Those breakages in stowing and discharging haven't been due to carelessness aboard this ship, as you've claimed. They've been due to rotten cases and bales. You might make a note of that and see what can be done when you reach Trinidad."

It was now the other man's turn to flush. A deep angry red blazed in his closely shaven cheeks. "Don't tell me my business, Mister Mate!" he retorted, his brown eyes smouldering. "I represent Mr. Wilson and——"

Blair's long-pent-up feelings had at last found their natural outlet. "To me," he snapped, "you represent nothing but a nuisance. Tell that to Mr. Wilson!"

"I shall," Hammet promised with an ugly smile. "He's had about enough of the Island Shipping Company, as it is. Though the fact hasn't been made public yet, I may as well tell you that we've just completed a deal toward buying two ships. They are to be the . . ." He hesitated, searching for the word he needed.

"The nucleus of the fleet," Blair suggested quietly.

HAMMET'S eyebrows shot up in mock amazement. "An educated sailor!" he exclaimed. "Thanks for the word. It had slipped my mind. Nucleus is right. We are going to own our own fleet of ships which will take care of our cargo, in future."

"Fine!" Blair retorted. "That'll relieve me of a lot of complaints."

"It'll probably relieve you of your job," Hammet purred. "The *Plata* is the only decent ship in your company and we may buy her. Old wrecks like this one would scarcely pay to keep in service without our business."

Blair turned disgustedly away. "Our" fleet. "Our" business. "Our" this and "our" that. He wondered how Joan could ever have married this. . . . At the thought of Joan, he walked abruptly off. But now he looked to neither right nor left, as he hurried down the deck. He didn't want to see Joan, at the moment. He was in haste to get away from Mr. Thornton Hammet, whom he would have liked mightily to slap down.

At the after rail he paused and looked out over the sea. The sun was down in the west and its after-glow shot the wake of the ship with color. At the taffrail the patent log reeled out the slow miles. The *Laredo* crawled. Her engines were so old and so in need of a complete overhauling—an overhauling which was always promised by the office, but which they never found time to allow. Why lay up a ship whose holds were so deep and always so well-filled? Just now they were crammed with a variegated cargo, ranging from pig snouts to corsets, from silk hosiery to galvanized nails. Sausages, telephone batteries, auto parts. . . .

Blair cursed softly as he ran down the after ladder. What a life! Ferrying junk like that, south; ferrying cocoa, cocoanuts, hides, spices, and what-not, north. It hadn't been so bad in the *Plata*. There was something else besides navigation and cargo to think of, there. Well, it would be over for him, soon. He had just about agreed, this last time in New York, to take a shore job with the steamship line in which his father had so honorably served. He was fed up on the sea. Blair scowled at the sweating engineer who was working on one of the winches. Hell, someone was always sweating over something in this decrepit old ark!

He paused at the open door of the second mate's room and glanced in. Over the built-in wash-basin, Carter was dashing cold water on his face. Blair hesitated a moment, then spoke shortly. "We're carrying trouble this trip, Carter. Wilson, of Trinidad. And his son-in-law, Hammet, who's the gentleman that doesn't like the way we handle the Wilson cargo. I just thought I'd drop a hint, because——"

"Oh, I'm sober," the second mate interrupted sullenly. "But I don't know why. I'd rather be drunk aboard this floating hearse," he added.

"So you've let us all understand in the past," Blair commented dryly. "Better cut it out, this trip. The skipper——"

"Oh, don't start preachin'," Carter groaned. "I've got a head. Some party, last night! You should've gone ashore, yourself, Mister Mate, and taken a few to brace yourself for another session aboard this stinkin' wreck."

Blair turned in disgust to his own room, where he made preparations for dinner. In the dining saloon he'd see Joan. Mrs. Thornton Hammet. She'd be sitting beside—her husband. Blair groaned. In his brief conversation with Hammet, he had noticed several things. The man's expensive white flannels. A screaming contrast to Rod's white uniform with its cuffs beginning to fray and rust stains showing, here and there. He'd noticed Hammet's classy sport shoes, which made his own pipe-clayed sneaks look even cheaper than they were. Hammet's hands were shapely and well-kept. Blair looked down at his own rough, brown hands. The only thing that could be said for them was that they were strong.

Facing himself in the cracked mirror over the wash-stand, Blair had to acknowledge to himself that Hammet had class. He belonged in the set Joan graced. What had ever possessed him to think she'd consider himself eligible? He'd had good schooling; his gracious southern mother had seen to that. He'd had grand spiritual training by a father who was a whole man. But after all, he was just a seaman. Hammet's folks had had money and social position. . . .

He heard the gong go for dinner. Squaring his shoulders, he started slowly for the dining saloon.

HIS place at the head of one of the shorter tables that ran athwartship brought him face to face with Joan, who sat at Captain Markham's right. Hammet was seated next to her, with Driver Wilson on his other side. There were the usual pale middle-aged ladies traveling to Trinidad by this cheaper ship; there were one or two school teachers on belated vacations. There were the invariable business men who accepted the *Laredo* as punishment for being too hurried to wait for a better ship; there were the elderly married couples who were in no particular hurry. At other tables across the room were the blacks—for the *Laredo* boasted no second class—islanders returning home after, possibly, a disillusioning fling in Harlem.

Blair, with his heart thumping, forced himself to bow to Joan, who sent him her gayest smile. He nodded curtly in response to Driver Wilson's greeting. Driver, he noted, looked more thunderous than ever.

The meal seemed endless. Try as he would, he could not keep his eyes from straying toward Joan. And each time they did so, she was looking at him. Had she been any other girl in the world, he would have said she was trying to flirt with him. The idea, connected with Joan, was unspeakable.

Blair was conscious that Hammet was watching him, and his big hands became awkward and clumsy. He had difficulty getting his food into his mouth, and self-consciousness infuriated him. As soon as he could leave without appearing to run away from Hammet's contemptuous smile, he excused himself to the passengers at his table—to whom he had spoken scarcely a word—and fled to the sanctuary of the bridge, where he found Buck slouching in a corner of the wing.

"Snap out of it!" he exclaimed testily. "Someday you'll fall asleep on watch and there'll be the devil to pay!"

Buck looked up sullenly. "I was just thinkin'," he muttered. "No crime in that, is there, Mr. Blair?"

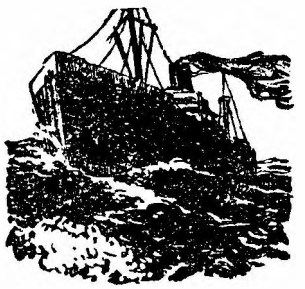
"Not if you were thinking of your ship—which I doubt," Blair growled in response. "Go down and get your dinner."

The third mate, yawning widely, mur-

mured a few words about the course and dragged himself sleepily to the ladder. Blair swore softly at his back. What could you expect in an old tub like the *Laredo?* Better men sought better berths. He glanced over the sea, then stepped into the pilot house and looked at the barometer. All serene. He peered over the quartermaster's shoulder at the tell-tale and saw that the ship was on her course. Muttering a few glum words to the man, he returned to the bridge.

Night was stealing gently over the eastern horizon. Upon the bosom of the sea, soft shadows were settling down. Next to dawn, this was the time of day Blair loved best. There was a beauty in the promise of night, in the promise of day, that he could never find in the fulfillment of either.

The surge of feelings stirred in him by Joan and the man she now called husband, died down. Blair looked out upon the approaching dark that would soon cover the sea like a black mantle, and felt at peace.



THOUGH the ocean remained calm, the *Laredo* logged less and less, each day. At any time she was an irritation to the men who navigated her, and a far worse one to the men who toiled in the heat of her engine room. Now she was driving all hands half-mad with her slowness. To add to their troubles, Hammet occupied his time with criticism of the ship and her crew. It was the quiet, biting, well-phrased criticism that infuriated men not so at ease with words. He goaded Mr. Dunny, the taciturn chief engineer, to a state bordering on manslaughter. He waylaid Carter and Buck and held their ship up to scorn. He ridiculed the efforts of the steward's department to rid his room of its smell. He made soft, scornful comments at table about both food and service. Had he been ugly about it, it would not have nettled the men so. His very softness held a barb in it.

Captain Markham noticed the growing ugliness of the entire crew. He had a shrewd idea that Hammet was trying to impress his father-in-law with his knowledge of the way things ought to be. Probably trying to work himself up into a more responsible position. Well, in a few days more, Hammet would be off the ship and off their minds. There was no use saying anything. Hammet was the kind to make more trouble, rather than less, if spoken to. But the little skipper's hands itched to lay hold of the gentleman and muss him up.

Driver Wilson apparently paid no heed to Hammet. He spent his time in the smoking room, discussing island affairs with one or two other business men or taking a hand in a card game.

Blair went about his duties with lips pressed into a thin line of silence. He was the one person Hammet left alone. As if he were not really worth bothering with. For some reason which he could not analyze to himself, meeting Hammet had set fresh fire to Blair's feeling for Joan. Where he should have been filled with disgust because she had married this "tailor's dummy," as the Old Man called him, he was shaken, instead, with renewed desire for her. Yet, again and again in the short moments he was with her, now, she amazed him with a personality she had not shown aboard the *Plata*. She was petulant—disappointed in the *Laredo*. She had thought it would be fun to travel southward in such a ship—like slumming, ashore. She made witty remarks at the expense of Captain Markham, whom she always called "that funny little captain" to Rod. Mingled with his softer feelings for her, he discovered, to his astonishment, a growing antagonism. It was Hammet's influence, he told himself furiously. She was still all that was lovely, all that was desirable. This was just an

echo of Hammet—it couldn't be a part of his Joan.

Thoughts of her filled his mind now in the early morning of a still day. He was pacing the bridge, sniffing in air that was already spiced with a taste of the islands which the *Laredo* was approaching. The sea lay like glass as far as the eye could see; the atmosphere was heavy, smothery. When he had last looked at it, the mercury in the barometer had stood unusually high. August, Blair thought to himself. A treacherous month in these waters. A month when hurricanes came roaring up out of nowhere. "Tropical disturbances," the weather bureau called them. Disturbances. Hell, the weather bureau ought to try one of 'em on!

Suddenly Blair brought up short. A quick shudder had shaken the ship; almost immediately the dull throbbing of her engines ceased. He raced to the pilot house and whistled down the engine room.

Captain Markham, making the bridge a few minutes later, met his mate at the top of the ladder. Blair touched his cap.

"Engines out of commission," he reported laconically. "Chief says they're working on 'em. The damned things are nothing but a pile of junk!" he added bitterly.

The skipper stared off over the *Laredo's* bow. "Let's hope he gets 'em running again—fast!" he muttered. "I don't like the feel of this day. And I don't like the glass. Sparks send up any reports of weather?" He shook his head hopelessly as he spoke. A lot of good it would do him to know if there was weather making. He couldn't avoid a storm until the engines were functioning again.

THERE had been no storm warning, but an hour later, one came. A tropical disturbance, moving rapidly in the general direction of the drifting *Laredo.*

Captain Markham sighed heavily. "Get along, Rod," he said simply. "You'll have your hands full. Mr. Dunny may have us going before it comes—again, he may not. If it catches up without weigh on us, we ——" He broke off and shook his head. "Better rig up a sea anchor. And oil bags. Look to the battens on the hatches. I'll stand the rest of your watch. No use turning Carter and Buck out. They'll have enough to do if. . . ." His voice trailed off.

Blair went quietly about his work. There was plenty of it. While he oversaw the completion of tasks at which he'd set the men, his thoughts flew to Joan. That she should be aboard the old ship, when God alone could foresee what might happen if the gang below didn't get the *Laredo's* ailing innards cured in a hurry! Sparks, he knew, had wirelessed the *Plata* of their plight. She was making all possible speed toward their position. She ought to be alongside early tomorrow. Tomorrow—with the glass pumping, the mercury falling lower and lower. Continually Blair wiped the perspiration from his streaming face. The air was thick, oppressive. The sky had become overcast, with dense clouds off to the southwest. An olive hue lay over the sea.

By afternoon a long swell came rolling out of the murk. The *Laredo* wallowed deeply to it. The passengers, from whom it had been impossible to keep the news of the engine trouble, became uneasy. Most of them were sick. Though Captain Markham had given strict orders to the crew not to say anything about the approaching storm, Hammet, prowling about the ship, had found men stripping down awnings, covering ventilators, making things fast. Though he had never been at sea in a small ship before, he guessed what such activities meant, and he lost no time in voicing his suspicions.

When Blair ran into Joan on the promenade deck, he found her with eyes flashing. "It's disgraceful," she greeted him petulantly. "This horrid old ship, I mean. First, something breaks on her, and now Thorn says there's going to be a storm and we can't get out of it. The *Plata* always avoids storms."

"This isn't the *Plata,*" Rod replied soberly. "This is one time we can't run in

out of the rain. But you needn't worry, Joan. We'll——"

"Oh, I'm not worrying!" the girl interrupted impatiently. "I'm just bored. Rod, how can you stand it on this smelly old boat?"

Blair stared at her a full minute before he spoke. Then he said shortly: "Sorry you're bored, Joan. We'll have to see if we can't scare up some excitement for you." He paused, aghast at his own words. More aghast at the sudden bitterness which had swept over him as he had spoken.

Before she could say anything further, he touched his cap and hastened away. Excitement? Good gosh, couldn't she see what was coming? Couldn't she *feel* it? Had she no imagination? Rod's mind cleared with the question. That was just the trouble with Joan. No imagination. Life was just a series of dances and good times with her. She was still seeing the Rod she had known aboard the *Plata,* the man with whom she had shared sunny, idle hours. To her, he would always be the dance partner, the star-gazer. He felt a sudden surge of anger sweeping through him. What a fine pansy he must seem to her!

BLAIR went on watch at four in the afternoon. He found Captain Markham still on the bridge. The sea was making, and although the *Laredo's* sea anchor held her up to it, she started pitching—leaning down to a sea that curled angrily along her side, now and then, and straining at the frail contraption that men had fashioned to help her in her travail.

Rod looked hard at the little skipper. Lines of fatigue, lines of anxiety were carved deep in the Old Man's face. It must be hell, Blair thought, to have such responsibility as this. Responsibility for the ship, her cargo, all the lives aboard her. It was enough for a man to shoulder when all went well. But what must the Old Man be feeling now, with a disabled vessel at the mercy of a hurricane? He shivered as he placed himself mentally in Captain Markham's position. Yet, wasn't this just what he, himself, had been working toward, all these years? Command? Wasn't it what all these double-damned jackasses were striving for, who went to sea as navigating officers? A few stripes of gold braid, decent quarters, bigger pay—and responsibility.

Captain Markham peered up at him. "It's coming, Rod," the Old Man's voice said calmly. "We've done all we can. Dunny's last report was that we ought to get weigh on us—soon." He paused and stared out at the ugly sea. Would "soon" be soon enough?

Blair nodded. He'd been below, during the afternoon. He'd seen Mr. Dunny and his men, black with grease, the sweat standing out on them like blisters, working without food, without pause, in a broiling temperature. Blair had gazed about him at the maze of machinery and had felt insignificant. What did he know of leaky joints, choked pumps or the bursting of the main steam pipe? It was up to the engineers.

Dark fell over the sea, and through it came whistling the first squall. Blair clutched the rail. The *Laredo* would never take it! But as he felt his heart contracting at the thought, he heard a shout in his ear. Carter, with the resurrecting news that Mr. Dunny reported repairs finished.

"Cut away the sea anchor!" Captain Markham's voice rang out. "Let's go!"

As he raced for the ladder, Blair felt as if they had been reprieved at the very gate of hell.

It was too late now to try to avoid the storm. It was enough that the ship had weigh on her. Captain Markham, drawing a great breath as he thought of the night ahead of him, listened anxiously for Rod's shout of "All clear!" When it came, he gave a crisp order for full speed ahead to Carter, who stood by the engine room telegraph.

The *Plata* was somewhere out there in the night, forging gallantly toward the *Laredo.* Let her come on. Mr. Dunny's repairs would be sorely strained. They

might hold; they might not. But with the throbbing of the engines, now, the old ship plunged into the advance guard of the seas, shuddering throughout her length as she felt the might of the onslaught.

When Rod reported back on the bridge, a triumphant grin shining out through the water that streamed down his face, Captain Markham merely nodded. "You turn in," he snapped. "I'll be up here with Buck. You and Carter get some sleep. If anything happens. . . ." He left the rest of the sentence unfinished.

Blair had no desire to leave the bridge for a single moment. But he knew how imperative it was for him to be fresh, in case——"

He turned in all standing. The *Laredo,* creaking, groaning, shivering from stem to stern, was crawling forward into the

screaming dark. Rod's last waking thought was of his father who, during the entire day, had seemed amazingly near.

THOUGH his regular watch did not begin until four in the morning, Blair found himself awake at midnight. He rolled from his berth, donned boots, oilskins and sou'wester. For the first time in hours, he had remembered Joan.

The gale was at its height as Blair left his room to battle his way above. Out of the fathomless dark there swept an army of towering seas, which flung themselves down upon the old vessel and battered her, swept her forward deck, pounded her with hammerlike blows. The wind shrieked down out of clouds that seemed to rest on the trucks. Rain swept out of them in such solid sheets that breathing was almost impossible.

At each fresh onslaught, the *Laredo* paused, as if she had come against a solid obstacle and could not budge against it. Yet now she shook herself free of the cascading waters that crashed over her fo'c'sle and rushed viciously over the well deck forward. Groaning in every plate, she trembled as if palsied, shook herself laboriously free, swung dizzily up to meet the next sea. Her bow rose, hung uncertainly over the yawning trough, slid downward, crashed against the following liquid mountain as if it were rock. Each time she did this, Blair held his breath, wondering why she wasn't split wide open. Oh, she was a good ship, a grand ship, he told himself exultingly as he felt her recover and stand up to take the next blow on her chin.

Keeping his feet only through Herculean effort, Blair fought his slow way above. He would look in on the Social Hall, where the chief steward had herded the passengers; look in on Joan. That she should have to be in this! Blair cursed savagely as he thought of her suffering. She was unused to anything like this—Joan of the laughing eyes and tender smile.

Breathless, streaming water, he made the deck house and scrambled up the main stairs into the crowded Social Hall. Men and women sat or lay about, sick, terrified, some silently praying, some openly weeping. His gaze flew to Joan. She was crouching in the corner of a settee, her hands clutching the seat on either side. Her face was colorless, her eyes wide. Blair staggered over to her and, bracing himself as best he could, leaned down over her.

"Are you all right?" he called close to her ear. The thunder of the gale almost drowned out his words.

The girl grasped the sleeve of his dripping oilskins. "Rod," she gasped between chattering teeth, "get me out of this! Take me somewhere else. This is horrible! Why must I stay here among these sick niggers? Why can't I go to my room?"

BLAIR'S face was close to hers. He stared down into her eyes. He could scarcely understand his own reaction as he realized what she had said. Now she was continuing wildly: "I want to be with you. I don't want to stay here. Take me to my room; tell that chief steward I can go to my room if I wish!"

"You can't," Blair returned shortly. "You're better off here."

"Then stay with me," Joan sobbed. "I want you."

Blair regarded her dazedly. "I have work to do," he exclaimed. "Can't you understand? I have to——"

"Let someone else do it!" the girl cried, hysterically. "Stay here with me. No, not here—take me to my room. I tell you I can't endure sitting here and watching those disgusting niggers. . . ."

Blair shook with a sudden gust of fury. "Why do you just sit here?" he asked harshly. "You're not sick. Why don't you go help the stewardess? She has more than she can handle. You could comfort those other women. You could——"

But as she shrank away from him as if he had struck her, he realized the folly of his words. Nothing mattered to Joan but herself. He drew himself erect and turned away from her. Funny; he'd felt something greater, finer, deeper toward his ship, just now, than he had ever felt toward Joan. He understood the ship. He would never understand a woman.

He lurched over to the busy stewardess. "How's it going?" he called.

She paused in her ministrations to one of the sick women to glower toward Hammet, who was gripping the arms of the chair in which he cringed, his eyes filled with terror and his lips working as if he were snarling. "They'd have been all right if that fool had kept his trap shut," the stewardess retorted, furiously. "He's done nothing since we left the dock but tell everyone how old and rotten the *Larcdo* is! Now he's got them gibbering. I'd like to choke him!"

Blair glanced about the room until he picked out Driver Wilson. That burly reticent was neither sick nor afraid. Braced firmly in his seat, he was watching his son-in-law with expressionless eyes. Blair gulped down an oath that was rising to his lips. What a sweet scene of domestic life! Joan, yammering because she had to be cooped up with sick blacks; Hammet, mouthing his fear and spreading its contagion; Wilson, apparently supremely indifferent to everyone and everything, including his daughter.

Blair had a quick vision of the Old Man up on the bridge in this elemental hell, watchful, faithful, doing without rest, without food, without anything but the battering he must be receiving. The Old Man, about whom Joan had always joked—"that funny little captain!"

As he started to pass Hammet, the latter clutched his sleeve. "Are we sinking?" he cried. "Is there any chance of our being saved?"

Blair saw an old negress roll her eyes upward as she heard the words. He shook himself free of Hammet and went to her. Leaning down, he patted her comfortingly on the shoulder. "It's all right!" he shouted cheerfully. "The worst of it will be over soon. By this time tomorrow, you'll all just think you've had nightmare. Don't listen to that ass; he's never been to sea before, I guess, and he thinks he's dying!" Blair's teeth flashed in a friendly smile. "You show him, Missis! You laugh and show him how to be brave!"

As the old wrinkled face forced itself into a distorted grin, Blair laughed exultingly. "Great!" he cried. "You show 'em, Missis!"

THEN he swung about on Hammet and grasped him by an elbow. "You," he growled. "You come along with me." Without waiting for a reply, he dragged the man to his feet and yanked him to the stairs. Holding fast to him with one hand and to the rail with the other, he managed to get him to the deck below. There he turned on him. "You damned idiot!" he

snarled. "If you were sick, I'd have some pity on you. You're too scared to be sick. And the best you could do was to terrify those people up there. Now, you stay down here the rest of the night. Get me?"

Fury swept the fear from Hammet's eyes. "I'll stay where I damn please!" he screamed. "You think I'm not wise to you? Think I didn't see you whispering to my wife? Stay down here, shall I, so you can go up there and——"

"Shut up, you fool!" Blair snarled. "I've no time for your wife or anybody else's wife. All I'm interested in is keeping you from driving those people mad with fear. What's it to you where you stay, anyway? You're as safe here as there."

"Safe?" Hammet gasped. Nobody's safe. If that doddering old captain had known anything——"

Something seemed to snap in Blair's mind. He opened his right hand and brought it hard against Hammet's face in a resounding smack. As the man fell backward, Blair reached out, caught him and shoved him toward a gaping steward. "Keep this down here," he snapped. "Tell him I say I'll beat hell outa him if he goes back to the Social Hall. Give him a drink; he needs it. Keep him quiet. I'll bash him plenty if he makes any more noise!"

Shaking with fury, Blair fought a door open and started for the bridge. He butted savagely into the shricking gale. "Struck a passenger," he muttered thickly to himself. "Wait till he reports that to Driver Wilson! It's a good thing I've got a shore job in view."

The bridge of the *Laredo* was none of your modern, enclosed shelters. It reared itself up naked to the elements. Blair found that even the canvas dodger had been whipped to ribbons, as he struglged forward to the rail, gasping, choking from the driving rain and the stinging upflung spume. He dragged himself along until he felt a form beside him. Then he stood, clinging until his muscles ached, lashed by a wind that was a personal foe, tearing at him, whipping the breath out of him. It caught him by the throat, it lashed his smarting face with water. Its voice was torn past him in everlasting crescendo as it screamed out of the smoking skies.

If, one moment, Blair gripped the rail to keep from being thrown backward upon the bridge, the next moment he was clinging to it to keep from diving over it onto the surging well deck.

FOR two hours the *Laredo* bucked, her plates protesting in groans and shrill creakings, a sea that ran wild out of the night. Blair could feel her yaw, now and then, as her bow swung up and out, as if she were turning to look back over her shoulder, to see what the last crashing surge of waters was doing to her after parts.

But at last Blair sensed a lessening of the wind. Flinging into the pilot house for a look at the barometer, he discovered that the mercury was rising. Though wild seas still swept in endless procession out of the impenetrable dark, Blair, again clinging beside Captain Markham at the rail, realized that the worst of the gale had blown itself out.

Four bells had gone—two o'clock. Five bells. And still the engines were turning over. A fine man, Mr. Dunny. They were all fine men in the engine room, Rod thought, peering always out into the angry welter about his ship. Maybe the office would give the *Laredo* time off, next time she fetched port, for a real overhauling. If they did, she'd be good for years, yet!

But even as he was thinking it, she slithered sickeningly into the deep trough of a sea, slithered as if she had wearied of the fight and were about to plunge forever under the waters that had tried for hours to engulf her. A terrific shudder shook her from stem to stern. Her bow, rising, swung in a dizzying arc. . . .

Captain Markham clung fast, stunned for a moment into silence. Salt spume stabbed at his smarting eyes; in his ears was the roar of water smashing over the

well deck. Above it he heard the rending and tearing of wood. Lifeboats splintered in their chocks.

Then he felt Blair's clutch on his arm. The mate's voice penetrated the uproar. His words came in short gasps. "Chief . . . reports . . . propeller gone."

Just that. The Old Man swayed wearily for a moment, his eyes staring ahead unseeingly. The *Laredo* was again without weigh. Without power to fight longer for her life. Helpless, now, save for what a handful of puny men could do for her.

"All right," the Old Man finally responded bleakly. "You've got your work to do over, Mister Mate. Oil—a sea anchor. If we can just keep her headed up! The *Plata* should reach us in a few hours. If she'll just stay afloat!" The words came brokenly to Blair.

A quick flood of feeling swept over the mate. A grand person, the skipper! The grandest person he'd ever known! He threw discipline and dignity to the diminishing wind and clapped a hand encouragingly down on the bent shoulders. "She'll make it, sir!" he shouted boyishly. "She's a great old ship!" He blew a shrill blast on his whistle; shrugged as he realized the sound wouldn't carry; clattered down the ladder to make his way to the men cooped up in the fo'c'sle—and wondered if he would find them alive.

The well deck was a mess of torn bulwarks, wrecked winches, ventilator cowls. How he managed to traverse it, with waters lashing around his legs, Blair could not have told. He was thrown, washed about until he brought up against something solid; his hands were torn from clutching whatever they could grasp. A cut on his head sent the warm blood coursing down his face. Nothing mattered—nothing but getting all hands on the job.

To the men in the fo'c'sle, men who had scarcely dared hope to live until another day, the chief mate came, water streaming off oilskins and sou'wester. His eyes lit up as he found them whole. He shouted a greeting to them. They sprang to their feet. Here was someone to lead them, to set them to work, to fight the sea that had been fighting them long enough. That death would still be beside them as they fought, didn't matter. With coarse jests and fancy oaths, they piled out on deck behind the mate.

THROUGH the speaking tube Captain Markham had given terse orders to the wireless operator. An SOS had gone singing out into the dark. It might be the death song of his old ship, he realized, but he merely nodded brief acknowledgment when Carter brought him the *Plata's* immediate reply. She was coming as fast as weather would permit. She would be alongside by dawn. Hang on.

Blair, down on the well deck, his voice ringing with confidence as he directed his

men, felt a surge of exhilaration. Battered, exhausted, he knew this was what he wanted of life. Something big, something vital. Something that took all a man had to give.

All that had been done before was repeated now. Oil, fore and aft, seeped through pipes. Oil bags were laid over the side. Panting, cursing, determined men rigged up a second sea-anchor. Got it over—and it held. The bow of the laboring ship once more headed into the seas. Seas with their crests tucked under the oily smear that surrounded the *Laredo*. For what seemed to them like endless years, men, spurred on by the young giant who drove them on the sound of his laugh or his deep grand oaths, did all that could be done to ease the *Laredo* through her labor.

Then, when victory seemed in sight, Chips, sounding the wells, reported a leak. Her battered old plates had taken too much punishment. Somewhere, forward, her seams had opened. Pumps were set going. Blair wondered wearily if they would hold back the sea. Or if, after all, the old ship would fill and sink before help came, and carry all hands to their graves.

He thought of Joan—Joan, sinking beneath dark waters. Somehow the vision didn't move him as much as did one of the old colored woman who had brought a smile to her quivering lips when he had called upon her for courage. He swore softly into the dark. The *Laredo'd have* to remain afloat until that old lady was taken off!

He thought of Hammet and a gust of passion shook him. If they must drown, he wished he had used his fist on Hammet, not just the flat of his hand.

MORNING broke to a lowering sky. The storm had passed, leaving only a tumbling sea. With the first lifting of the dark came the sight of the *Plata*, curling plumes of black smoke pouring from her twin funnels.

And high time. The pumps were not carrying off the water as fast as it made its way into the Laredo. Her bow lay sluggishly low; her forepeak was flooded. Only a bulkhead held back the waters that would rush through her, once that bulkhead gave. Would it hold?

The *Plata* came on. A sound ship. A ship with her soul still in her. A ship with engines throbbing and her propeller urging her forward. A ship that responded to the hand at her wheel. This was the sort of ship the exhausted crew of the *Laredo* wanted. They sent up a ragged cheer as the *Plata* was maneuvered into a position to windward.

"Have me flunkey fetch me a sampan!" shouted a seaman whose face bled from several cuts. "I sh'ld hate to get me feet wet, darlings!"

"You would!" cackled another through salt-chapped lips. "Th' bath they got last night'll do you fer a year!"

Blair grinned at them amiably. Good sports, the whole bunch.

Since not a lifeboat remained whole aboard the *Laredo,* the boats from the *Plata* were swung overside. Oil was spread from the rescue ship, to make the passage as smooth as possible.

Blair checked off the names of the *Laredo's* people as they were taken off. Joan had gone with the first boatload, a white-faced Joan, impatient to set her feet on the *Plata's* staunch decks. He had not even bothered to speak to her; a curt nod in her direction was all the notice he had taken of her. But he had spoken a word of cheer to the old colored woman.

And now, with only the last few men of the *Laredo's* crew waiting their turn to be taken off, Blair suddenly realized that Hammet's name had not been checked off. Hammet. There hadn't been a sign of him! Blair wearily approached the men.

"Anyone seen Mr. Hammet?" he called.

The pantryman stepped forward, grinning. "Saw him last night, sir, when he was gettin' blind drunk," he volunteered.

Blair stared at him. "Drunk?"

"He was drunk, all right," a steward chuckled in the background. "The stewardess said he was botherin' her when she went below to the linen locker. He's probably sleepin' it off in his little bed."

"He's not in his room," Carter broke in testily. "I've been through all the rooms to make sure no one was left below."

"All right. All right," Blair returned resignedly. "Get the men off, Carter. I'll be along when I've found that gentleman."

He turned away, his shoulders sagging with exhaustion. Hammet, drunk and asleep somewhere in the foundering ship. He ought to be allowed to go right on sleeping, Blair thought grimly, until he woke up in Davy Jones' locker. Too bad a man had a conscience about such things.

He climbed up the ladder to the deserted promenade deck, to search the Social Hall and smoking room. As he was about to

enter the former, a voice hailed him from the bridge. A voice hollow from strain and deadly fatigue. "Where you going, Mister Mate?"

BLAIR stopped short and gazed dazedly up at Captain Markham. Of course the Old Man would still be on the bridge. Probably intended to stay there. His face was white and pinched beneath the brim of his sou'wester; his bloodshot eyes were sunk in his head. He was calmly awaiting the end. Blair bit back the cry of protest that rushed to his lips.

"Where you going, I asked?" Captain Markham repeated.

Blair shook himself loose from the emotion that had swept him at the idea of his skipper's remaining.

"Hammet's missing, sir. I'm going to find him," he replied simply.

"You're not," the Old Man snapped. "Get back there with the men and into that boat. The ship is——"

"No, sir," Blair interrupted quietly. "You've been telling me for a good many years that you're proud of me. You'd be the last person to want me to run away from a duty, now."

He knew there would be no answer. He swung over the high doorsill and entered the Social Hall. It was empty, as was the smoking room. There was no sign of Hammet.

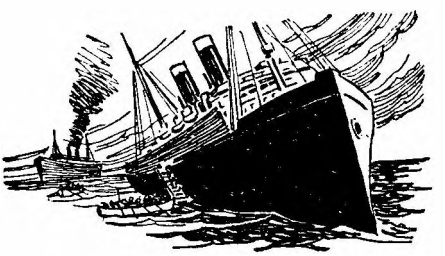
The ship now lay at a peculiar slant. Blair noticed it particularly as he went gingerly down steps that inclined in a wrong position. As he hastened through dining saloon and pantry, looking all about him for the missing man, he felt a vague chill. It was so lonely here where there were usually busy stewards.

Finding no trace of Hammet, he made for the alleyways off which opened the passenger cabins. The rooms yawned vacant before him. The alleyways were empty of life. After the turmoil of the night before, the stillness, broken only by vague creakings in the old ship's bones, was uncanny. Blair raised his voice again and again, shouting Hammet's name. He looked into the lavatories, even in the women's bath, where a drunken man might have staggered. In vain. He was about to retrace his steps when he heard a dull thumping.

"Hammet!" he shouted, and listened. Again the thumping and with it a muffled call. The sounds came from the starboard alleyway. Blair disregarded a sharper tilting of the deck, raced to the other side of the vessel and again called.

Then, right at his elbow, behind the closed door of the linen locker, he heard a muffled groan. For a bewildered moment, he stared incredulously at the door. Then sprang forward and flung it wide.

Hammet lay on the floor inside. His face was bruised and flushed; his clothes were



rumpled and his hair disheveled. A vile stench assailed Blair's nostrils. Mr. Hammet had been very sick.

"Get up. Get out of there. Fast!" The words shot through Blair's set lips.

Hammet answered with a groan. "Can't. I'm half dead. Help me."

BLAIR'S eyes closed sharply for a moment. This was good. Hammet, half-smothered, probably feverish after a night in this small reeking room, too weak to move when he needed to run for his life! Blair shrugged and, sickened though he was by the stench, bent over the groaning man. As he was about to take hold of him, he heard Captain Markham shouting frantically to him. A sudden light glowed in Blair's eyes. The Old Man had come off the bridge. There was still a chance!

"By the linen locker!" he roared back. "Hammet's hurt."

There was the sound now of running feet. Blair, as he waited, threw off sou'-wester and oilskins, and dragged the boots off his feet. Captain Markham came panting down the alleyway.

"Get out on deck!" he ordered Blair, the sternness in his tone mixed with anguish. "She's going. I'll attend to Mr. Hammet."

"You'll what?" Blair growled in reply. "I'll have to carry him. He's badly injured," he lied smoothly, glaring down into Hammet's eyes as he spoke. He bent down and picked the man up. Hammet was not as light as he had appeared. "You come along," he grunted to the skipper. "Better get rid of those extra clothes. You'll have to help me get him overside."

"Over the side?" Hammet mumbled, dazedly, as Blair, followed by the skipper, who was shedding his outer clothes as he went along, staggered up the sloping alleyway. "Are you going to murder me?"

"Oh, shut up, you lousy fool!" Blair gasped, sweating under his load. "The ship's sinking, and we're going to get you off so you can report me for slapping you down, last night."

The way sloped uphill. Blair scarcely dared acknowledge to himself that the slope was increasing. Maybe it only seemed so because he was so tired and Hammet was so heavy. He suddenly noticed that the skipper's footsteps had halted, and paused to look back over his shoulder. The Old Man was yanking off his boots. Blair felt such elation at the sight that he found renewed strength. He struggled on, panting beneath his burden, Captain Markham at his heels.

"If you drown because of that scum, I'll get my hands around his neck and choke him as we go down!" the Old Man snarled, as Blair tripped and then recovered himself with an effort.

They reached the after well-deck—the rail. Blair heard a shout and saw a lifeboat lying off, waiting. There was a sickening lurch under his feet. "Lend a hand!" he gasped to the skipper. "We'll heave him as far out as we can. Then for gosh sake jump with me and help me hold him up . . . the suction. . . ."

Captain Markham caught hold of Hammet's feet; Blair, his shoulders. They raised him aloft, swung him wide. Let go. Then Blair turned toward the skipper like a flash, ready to pick him up and hurl him after Hammet. But the Old Man was already clambering onto the rail, forgetful of self, thinking only of helping Rod. Together they poised, then as a great tremor shook the ship, they jumped. The bulkhead had given.

When Blair came up, he found Hammet thrashing feebly, then the skipper blowing like a porpoise. Between them they grasped Hammet and struck out, away from the quivering ship.

With aching arms and bursting lungs, they made for the *Plata's* life-boat, which daring men were bringing in perilously close to the dying ship. Grand men, Rod exulted. The salt of the earth. He wouldn't live among any but such as these —and Mr. Dunny and his gang—and the Old Man. To hell with a shore job!

Behind him came the sound of things carrying away as the old *Laredo's* bow dipped. Her stern lifted. She seemed to hang suspended for a few moments, as if waiting for the three men to reach a bigger margin of safety. Then she slid down beneath the sea to her grave.

THE *Plata* was steaming through a sea shot with the opalescent colors of a gorgeous sunset when Blair met Captain Markham on deck, that evening. They drew apart from the people about them and stood regarding each other in silence for a moment. Then Blair, smiling down into the Old Man's eyes, spoke.

"Funny for us to be traveling as passengers aboard the *Plata,* isn't it, sir?"

The Old Man grunted. "Hm. You and me . . . and Driver Wilson and Joan."

"Oh, yes. Mrs. Hammet." Rod shrugged. "I'd forgotten her."

"Thought so," the little skipper snorted. "You've been smiling."

They leaned on the rail side by side, looking over the vast expanse of sea, each busy with his thoughts. Blair was wondering if he'd be able to find a berth, even as second or third mate, with so many ships laid up. Funny how a man'd come through what he'd just been through, and want to keep on with it. Want to attain to command, when command meant responsibilities that made a man old before his time. Responsibilities that kept him on his feet for hours, for days, maybe, without rest, while the elements half killed his body and drove his soul through hell.

There wasn't any reason for his sticking to the sea, beyond the fact that here he belonged, as all Blair men belonged to the sea.

He was aroused from his thoughts by a voice at his side. He looked up to find that Driver Wilson had joined the skipper and himself. The man's face was as expresionless as ever. He addressed them both.

"I suppose I've got to thank you for saving my son-in-law's life," he growled.

"Don't do it!" the Old Man snapped in reply. "Personally, I don't think anyone should be thanked for doing such a thing!"

Blair gasped. He would have shouted with laughter, had he not been so taken aback by Captain Markham's sudden disregard for the mighty Driver. His tall shoulders towered over the skipper's as he moved closer to him. His eyes bored into Wilson's. "Hammet's a louse," he remarked quietly. "Furthermore, in case he's forgotten to mention it, I hit him, last night." He paused and waited for the expected outburst.

Wilson gazed quizzically at the big mate. "You did? Then I've really something to thank you for," he rumbled. "I'm so in agreement with your estimate of him that I'm planning to send him and Joan to Paris—she's always wanted to go—for a long stay." He grinned at the two men. "But what I came to tell you," he continued seriously, "was that I'm going into the shipping business. Possibly you heard that I'd bought a coupla ships before I left New York. Freighters. Good boats. I made the trip in the *Laredo* because I wanted to talk to you both about them. Thought you might be interested, Captain Markham. And you," he added, turning to Blair, "you have your master's license, haven't you?"

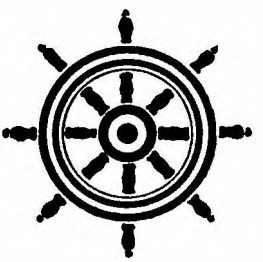
As Rod stood staring, too dazed to speak, the Old Man exclaimed shortly: "He has!"

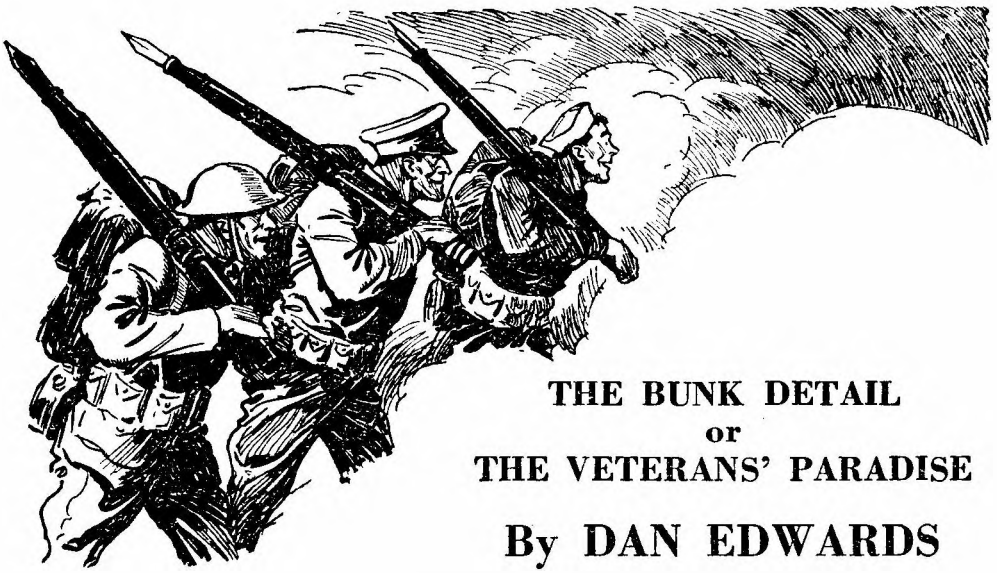
"Good. The I. S. C. is selling out to me. I've already wirelessed an offer for the *Plata*. I need a cruise ship."

A dull red suffused Blair's cheeks. "If your offer of a berth is because I helped save Hammet's life," he began hotly, but was interrupted by a snort from Driver Wilson.

"If I were offering to pay you for saving my son-in-law's life," the exporter growled, "I'd give you a nickel apiece." He cleared his throat noisily. "How about it, Captain Blair?"

The Old Man's shoulders straightened as he saw the look in Rod's eyes. His old head lifted proudly. "Captain Blair!" he breathed, his voice shaken with feeling. The after-glow of the sunset brought out the radiance in his lined face.





THE BUNK DETAIL
or
THE VETERANS' PARADISE

By DAN EDWARDS

A GREAT many of you Bunk Detailers think your old mess officer has little to do save decide arguments between the different services. One man writes in to ask; "As an old timer, whose father do you think you are?"

Those ex-soldiers in Canada write their stories and don't complain if we correct a word here and there, but some other former soldiers do. That is a bit tough for a man who was born in Scotland and raised in Texas. However, if you read my mail, you'd know that the boys from above the Falls are giving us better stories than the men from our own clime, and from my dingy, ill-lit office in the Mess Shack, I'd say that's the spirit your mess officer is trying to instill into you soldats.

Our good old friend C. R. McCashland, who started the war among the Navy men about the good ship "Cyclops," has had the sterling courage to write us and ask if we were mad at him, because so many took a poke at him, as we did. Well, we weren't mad. He tells your mess officer that he's an old timer, as if I deny it. When a man has the courage to send in the kind of stories that McCashland sends in, we have to respect his knowledge and experience, notwithstanding the fact that he is a recruit, if he is. We are not giving him a first prize. He don't expect one. All he wants is to get square with some of his old Navy side-kicks who have been bawling him out. And that's what all you fellows can do, whether you are recruits or old timers. Whether you are nurses, barmaids, old sergeants, or what have you. You can always rest assured your favorite magazine SHORT STORIES *will give you all the consideration you deserve. Because* SHORT STORIES *still pays to any Marine, Red Cross worker, Field Clerk, fighting man or woman, ten dollars for the best story selected, five dollars for the second best, one dollar for the third best, and GREAT big honorable mention for those who don't quite make the grade. All you have to do is to send your story to the tough old mess officer, Dan Edwards, care of* SHORT STORIES *Magazine, Garden City, L. I., N. Y.*

FIRST PRIZE—$10.00

THE APRIL FOOL
By E. Victor Williams
Richmond, Virginia.

A WILD galoot was a brother officer of ours, and one of the most popular.

On the morning of April 1st, 1917, he was smirking with that devil-may-care attitude we usually associated with his pretended innocence. We expected to find tacks in our chairs, or some other bits of his tom-foolery. At 10 A.M. he left his tent in a stealthy manner. He went across

the field to the hangars, presumably to look over his machine. As the squadron was having a day's rest, we supposed he was contemplating a trial flight to right his motors and thought no more about it.

Some time later a patrol from the squadron stationed near us came in off duty from over the lines and told us what had happened.

They had seen our wild galoot take off toward the enemy lines. He climbed up to a good height and headed into enemy territory with his throttle wide open. The occupants of the railway junction in the little town of Lille saw him circle overhead, while anti-aircraft batteries spotted the sky around him with those black and white puffs of smoke caused from bursting shrapnel. A trio of enemy fliers left the ground to bring him down, but had no success. The civil population had taken to dugouts, cellars and other places of concealment. The military awaited breathlessly for the expected crash of the bomb. Then a black, oval object fell clear of the machine. It landed square in the heart of the city. In fact, it fell in the courtyard of the old citadel. Yet, there was no explosion.

"How could it explode?" laughed the Flying Galoot. "It was only a football with 'April Fool' painted on its side."

[*Note: A great many of us bunk detailers would have enjoyed that scene. By and large, the number of surprises the enemy received from us buzzards was numerous. However, we all agree that all were not as pleasant as this one. As you Detailers all know, your mess officer has seen plenty of those eggs laid by aviators. Even if I hadn't seen it happen, I'd claim I had! Yet I never saw one that bounced.* M. O.]

SECOND PRIZE—$5.00

ACTOR CAUSES ACTION

By G. Desmond

Driftwood P. O., Ontario, Canada.

IT ALL happened one morning in '16, at La Clytte, near Kemmel, where delousing operations were under way with the help of two hundred showers. Each bozo received one minute of sprinkling with warm water interposed with cold. Ten score of spindle-shanked, hairy chested cootie havens were scrubbing against time. Through a side door tripped a dainty black haired, silk stockinged madame, her head turned "oo la la-ing" to someone behind her. The panic was on instantly! With a tremendous yell and a surge we nearly ripped out one end of that shed trying to get through a narrow door into the shirt room, and in no time that bath shed was emptied. I crawled back in time to see the ma'm'selle running across the field, her skirts held too high for any lady. The crowd of new made maniacs followed, throwing their modesty to the winds. They had forgotten that there were beaucoup femmes in the village shacks, cafes or cognac markets in the direction in which they were headed, hell bent. At this time we were credited with "full control of the air," and of course, the enemy crates were overhead to prove it. One of them dropped down to have a look-see at our fun, wherewith our gang of sun bathers promptly forgot the object of their chase and dived frantically off to one side into a strip of woods. Give the flier full marks—he never fired a single burst, and I'll swear he wobbled his crate in salute as he climbed into the clouds again. As the limping, swearing group of Tarzans returned, there was further wailing and gnashing of teeth. For it was learned that the "ma'm'selle" was none other than a London actor in costume who was planning to put on a show for the fellows. The woods into which we had so hurriedly dived, was carpeted with thorns.

[*Note: When that gang stampeded it is not quite clear to the mess officer whether they stampeded toward or from the alleged "ma'm'selle," but we are always willing to give anyone the benefit of the doubt. Maybe they stampeded in both directions simultaneously—they were a capable bunch.* M. O.]

WINNER OF A $1.00 PRIZE

STINGING STILETTOS

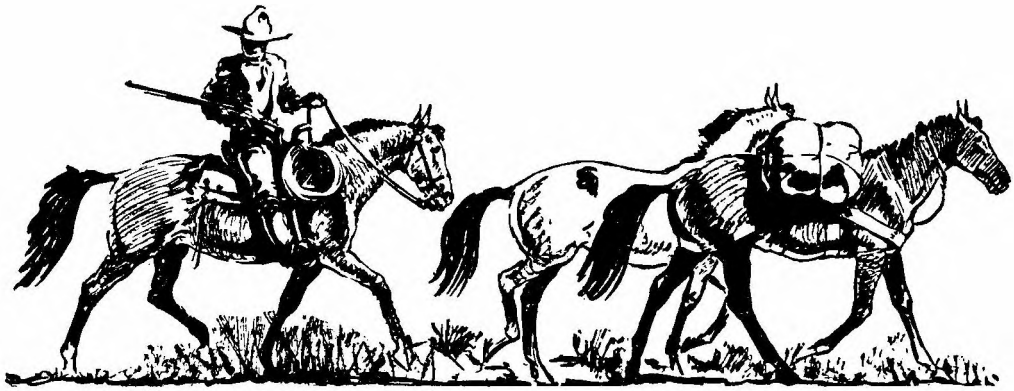
By Gayle E. Prue
General Delivery, Roy, New Mexico.

IN 1917 I was one of the soldiers who tried to get Pancho Villa. My comrades found out that for some unusual reason the very mention of knife blades caused cold chills to travel up and down my back. For instance on one of my birthdays the gang presented me with no less than half a dozen of the deadliest looking stilettos I had ever seen. Some time later when all hands had the jitters more or less because we had been unable to capture old Pancho, I was trying to make up my mind what I would do in case a group of knife throwing Mexicans suddenly attacked us. Finally I sat down to think it over. Suddenly I leaped into the air emitting a yell loud enough to wake the dead. "I've been knifed," I screamed. My comrades came running with their guns ready. They burst into a roar of laughter when they discovered *how* I had been knifed. There on the log where I had been seated, was a Mexican scorpion, waving his tail in anger.

[*Note: Between the two, being knifed or stung by a Mexican scorpion, your mess officer would much prefer the cold steel. I recall an incident while on border duty one time. My outfit, as regulars, was highly resentful of having to share a camp with a militia outfit from Arizona. We openly insulted them at every opportunity. We played a great many pranks on them, as only regular army outfits know how to play them. In desperation several of the militiamen went out into the woods and collected numerous of those little Mexican scorpions. The delegation with several tin cans full of scorpions, visited about three tents at the same time, while the occupants were busily engaged in the pleasant duties of bunk fatigue. They loosed their little stinging captives into the bunks with us. There was a mad dash for fresh air and yelling wholly unbecoming to a group of regulars. After we had painted our stings and rid our tents of the scorpions, we decided it was a better part of judgment to make friends with the militiamen from Arizona.*—M. O.]

HONORABLE MENTIONS

CORPORAL WM. T. JOHNSON, Ft. Sill, Okla., tells a mighty amusing story about truck drivers taking to cover thinking themselves being shelled, and after quite a bit of discomfort learned the engineers were only blowing up a few old stumps. . . . H. E. Culver, Ft. Shaw, Mont., spun one about the boys of '98 burning and throwing away perfectly good bank notes on the Manila Treasury thinking them lottery tickets. . . . Donald W. MacNeil, of the 1st Royal Scots Fusiliers, and himself a Brooklynite, certainly sent us a corking story about the mud in Flanders. It would take too much out of the story if we cut it down to our size. . . . S. L. Kilmister, Moose Jaw, Sask., Canada, wrote us some very interesting things about his experiences in the Mediterranean, Mesopotamian and Egyptian Expeditionary Forces. If he'd give his yarns a service background, it's a bet he'd get into the prize money. . . . Daniel Marsh of San Diego, Cal., once mistook a turtle for a spy. . . . E. L. Hilts, N. Y. City, gave us a snappy version of the "Who's Nuts Now?" theme. We've used that theme recently. . . . Sailor's luck was the base of Ensign W. A. Neilson's story. He won a lot of dough, but the coins were Portuguese Reis. . . . Robert Donaldson, DuBois, Pa., gives us a good laugh about a floating stump and a submarine. . . . J. S. Kearn, Red Wing, Minn., sends us good yarns, two at a time. He'll make this detail yet. . . . U. J. Kielar, St. Augustine, Fla., also sends 'em two or more at a crack. . . . If you detailers ever meet S. S. Harrow of Colburt, Okla., get him to tell you the one about the time he danced on the Colonel's face. You'll like it.



The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

Just The Same Old Thing

IN REGARD to his good Western *Just the Same Old Thing* that heads this number, Bertrand W. Sinclair says, "I have expressed some of my convictions and embodied a considerable amount of range observation and experience in Johnny Farrar and the other characters in the yarn. Having been a youngster in the Northwest, having worked as a range rider for several seasons long before I ever took it into what passes with me for a mind to write fiction it was only natural that the stock detective, as the range police of the various Stock Associations were colloquially termed, should eventually strike me as a rather dramatic figure whose activies were worth embodying in fiction.

"Other writers besides myself have dealt with the cattlemen, the cowpuncher on his native heath, range wars and sheep feuds, but I have nowhere seen the Stock Association man adequately treated as a human being continually dealing with difficult and often dangerous situations in his duty as a protector of cattlemen's interests against predatory individuals.

"I lived and rode over a wide enough territory where the cattleman was king to get a pretty good slant at the gentry who, like Robin Hood, slew the king's deer, and at the men whose business it was to lay these range racketeers by the heels. They had to be men of integrity, courage, and swift on the uptake, because the success of their undertakings, and occasionally their lives, depended on being able to outsmart thieves and rustlers, and sometimes to kill or be killed. Frequently such men found themselves involved in things that involved friendships, loyalties, that made doing their duty a matter of highly conflicting emotions. It was some such situation as this that I tried to deal with in *The Same Old Thing.* I am willing to leave it to the readers to say if I did the job successfully. If Johnny Farrar and his troubles seem half as real to them as they did to me, I'll be contented.

"Bertrand W. Sinclair"

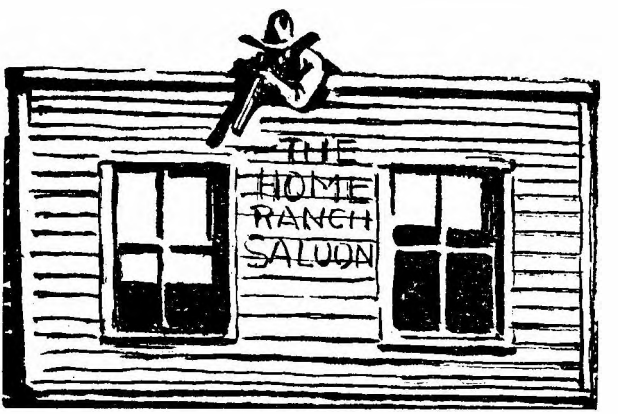
Lure of the East

ANSON HARD, who makes a startling first appearance in SHORT STORIES with his novel *Blood Rubies,* claims India's lure is genuine.

"The characteristic failing of my past years," says Mr. Hard, "is that I have had an overpowering tendency to refuse to stay put. My first adventure was volunteering for the World War, being too young for the draft, and since that time I have touched at various and odd points all around the globe, trying my hand at whatever looked interesting from riding cowponies in Texas to hunting big game in the Far East. Incidentally I have patched in between adventures by doing civil serv-

IN THE NOVEMBER TWENTY-FIFTH

SHORT STORIES



SNAKE BIT JONES by Dane Coolidge

A Western Novel of Spirit and Individuality

IN THE BAG by Bertrand W. Sinclair

A Lusty Northern Action Story Featuring Bill West

BORNEO DIAMONDS by Frank J. Leahy

A Breath-taking South Seas Adventure of Jerry Quade

MURDER in the CAB by Duane Hopkins

A Railroad Detective Story With Inspector Durand

ice work for the federal government both in this country and abroad, done police reporting for a newspaper, greased shackle-rods in an Oklahoma oilfield, and 'professored' in the foreign language department of a state college.

"In regard to the story, *Blood Rubies,* it is largely a composite of my own adventures in Southeastern Asia plus certain ideas and information that came from the conversation of old-timers in that part of the world. There was Old Gubish for example who had been in so many outtrails that he made my own traveling look pikerish. He once told of a native master in Bengal using servants with whom he was angry as tiger bait. I had to take Gubish's word for it, but to one familiar with the Far East such practice would not seem improbable, and I used that incident of using a human for tiger bait in the story. Then there was the Indian fakir who had a pet cobra which he called 'Cholly.' He became the Hakim of the story, but I was never on such friendly relations with 'Cholly' as to want to characterize him. I feel pretty much toward cobras as Andrew Jackson did toward the Indians: 'The only good one was a dead one.'

"We have all heard much about the Lure of the East which certain blasé persons recently have said is pure fiction. I remember one traveler on the S. S. *Trier* cruising from Singapore to Suez who stated that all Oriental towns were the same to to him, 'they were all dirty and they all stank.' I refused to argue this point in realism, but I did not agree with him then and I do not now. Certain spots in towns the world over may touch a sensitive nose, but for unadulterated color give me the Far East. Maybe it's just a weakness, but I must admit I have desires to go back, and go back I probably shall. The spell clings. Call it lure if you like, but once you have heard the temple bells booming you never quite forget it."

The Hindu Stranglers

THE "strangler" angle in Mr. Hard's story is as authentic as the other details, and the Hindu stranglers have today taken firm root in the New World. Centering in California, they operate from the Mexico Border to across the Canadian line. The stranglers are a secret fraternity of

cold-blooded murderers whose methods are more crafty and cruel than those of gangsters.

There are some 3,000 Hindus in California, and from these the sinister brotherhood extracts a portion of its finances by levying a monthly tribute from $10 to $1000 per person, depending on his earning capacity. Refusal to pay brings death. So every Hindu pays for the privilege of living!

The stranglers work under the guise of religious devotion. Hindu temples can be seen in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Sacramento and other coastal cities—temples of Kali Ma, the Hindustan "Black Mother," or Goddess of Death. In these appropriately named shrines the priestly cult heads plot the deaths of marked victims, which are later carried out as a sort of shrine ritual by professional stranglers with a ceremonial silk cord and ebony twisting-stick, as it was done for centuries in India. When dead the victim is decapitated and the remains disposed of.

During the past ten years the murder cults have done away with no less than a score of fellow countrymen, some being prominent Hindus. Undoubtedly there have been many unknown victims. Less than a half dozen of the killers have been caught and convicted. What is known of these thugs of the cord has been communicated to the authorities mostly by natives who, having lost kin at the hands of the garrotters, became informers and official investigators for the law, all who speedily met their doom by the silken cord.

A sideline of the sinister society is the smuggling of Hindu aliens into the U. S. from Mexico. Hundreds of Hindus have thusly been secretly brought in, each one meaning more money in the cult's coffers, tribute paid by the newcomer for the privilege to remain alive. Too, in the undisturbed secrecy of the bizarre temples, plots for the overthrow of British rule in India are freely hatched for use in the homeland. A lucrative narcotic traffic is also carried on, the stuff being concealed in the natives' turbans. For transmitting secret messages, temple symbols are employed, making a code no legal expert can decode.

In their futile fight against these sinister criminals the authorities have been strangely handicapped by the Constitution in that it gives citizens religious freedom, which has kept the police from invading the "sanctified" temple interiors for evidence. For a time this even caused the law to refrain from touching the Hindu's turban because it signified the wearer's piety. But of late detectives have not hesitated to deturban natives, especially when certain the headpiece contained forbidden goods.

*Introduction**

OUR new author for this issue is Denis Trent, whose story *Heritage* is full of the feel of real ships and the tang of salt —and that rarest of all qualities, an understanding of people.

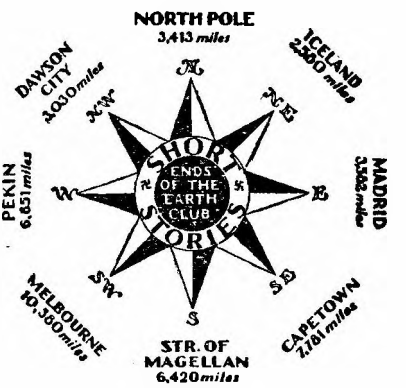
"There is so little to be said about me, that I find it difficult to introduce myself to readers of SHORT STORIES," says the author. "Summing it all up in a few words: I've held jobs in Hawaii and in South America, as well as in the States; I've knocked about at sea quite a bit and love the life. I've always had a yen to sell to SHORT STORIES, because it is issued by the same publishing house that publishes the works of Conrad and McFee, two great sea writers.

"I might add that I sailed in the ship pictured in *Heritage,* and though I sank her in the yarn, for all I know she may still be afloat, though she had been condemned as unseaworthy when I was with her. If she still swims, I ask her forgiveness for sending her to Davy Jones. She had a great heart.

"Denis Trent"

*Through an error for which we wish to apologize to our readers, this item was inserted in last SHORT STORIES.

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, % Short Stories, Garden City, N. Y. Your handsome membership-identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

Laid-up logger would like to get in touch with cowboys and sailors.

Dear Secretary:

I want to say thank you for the nice membership card which I received a few days ago. Of all the magazines I have read, I think SHORT STORIES is the best.

I have knocked around some in the Canadian West and also worked in the lumber woods, but was hurt this winter and maybe will not work again or roam around. I should like to hear from cowboys and sailors as I was going on a ship this year but can't now after being smashed up. So get busy and let me hear from all of you.

Yours truly,
George H. Clark

R.R. 1,
Wentworth Station,
Nova Scotia, Canada

A call from the cold country. Always a lure in the land of snow and big game.

Dear Secretary:

Just a line to say I received my membership card and wish to thank you very much for it.

I have read SHORT STORIES for many years, from many different climes. I even had them once in a while during the fuss in 1914-18 and it passes away many a long cold night away up here in the North.

If anyone is interested in this or other parts of Canada, in auto camping trips, fishing and big game hunting up here, I shall be very glad to give the best answers I can.

Yours truly,
H. S. Richards

P. O. Box 31,
Lac du Bennet,
Manitoba,
Canada

Sailor has just crossed the equator for twenty-first time. He'd better be careful or it will snap under him one of these days.

Dear Secretary:

As a member of the Ends of the Earth Club may I express my thoughts about reading SHORT STORIES far away from home? I and other members of our camp are very interested in reading some of those letters from new members and their requests. I have received letters from members, those letters are on the way for a long time, but on account of my first class mail forwarding arrangement with my post office in New York, I am able to receive my mail at any part of the wide world without loss of any letter.

I am on my one hundred and sixtieth trip, crossed the Equator for the twenty-first time, and have traveled over 62,500 miles in every direction, through gunfire, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, and all kinds of weather, and encountered hard-

ships, adventure, and all kinds of sports during my trips.

I should like to hear from members of the club. I hope someone will want to write to me. On account of distance and location, it takes a long time for letters cannot be answered in one day. Therefore my friends must have patience in receiving their answer from me.

Sincerely,
Otto Paul Preussler

Pan American Scout,
P. O. Box 844,
25 South Street,
New York City

Feeler for philatelists.

Dear Secretary:

Received my card and think a lot of it. Would like to have some of the members write me. I am a stamp collector and would like foreign and United States members to collect stamps for me cancelled, and air mails.

I read SHORT STORIES and think it is the greatest book published. Would like to get in touch with some large collectors of stamps, foreign and domestic.

Respectfully,
Alfred McDonald

U. S. Veterans' Facility,
Chillicothe, Ohio

Stamp traders, here's another kindred spirit.

Dear Secretary:

I am a stamp collector who will trade stamps and I should like to hear from other pen pals. All letters will be answered at once.

I have not missed a SHORT STORIES for a long while. They are great. What say you, pals?

Yours truly,
Harry O. Kraft

1645 Gorsuch Avenue,
Baltimore, Maryland

German globe-trotter wants correspondents.

Dear Secretary:

Being a member of your club since about two years I beg you to be so kind as to enroll me among the list of those who want to correspond with other members of the club.

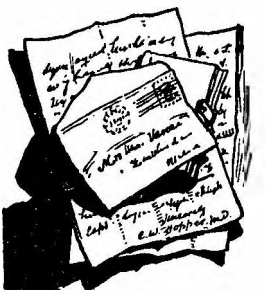
I am twenty-one years of age and I am one of those so-called globe-trotters. I have already been all over Europe, Australia, South Africa, Egypt, Spain and of course I have seen some parts of U. S. A.

Anyone can write to me that wants to and I will try and answer all the questions they want to.

Wishing you and your magazine all the good you can have, I am,

Yours very sincerely,
Hans Heyne

c/o Matthes-Fischer-Werke
Düsseldorf-Oberkassel,
Germany



Soldier in Singapore. We'll wager he gets letters galore.

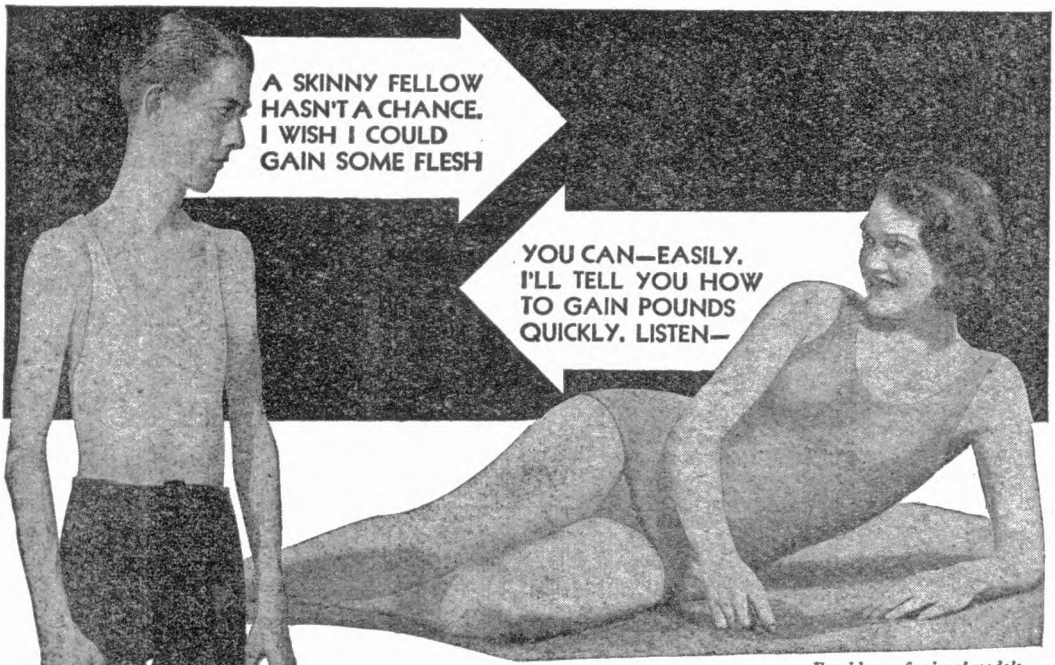
Fellow Members:

Here's a plea from a lonely pal, for some letters. Every letter is assured a reply, and I can promise they will be interesting. I am willing to exchange photos, and views of Malaya, China, Port Said, India and England. Am fond of swimming, boxing and books.

So here's my mail bag waiting for your replies.

Faithfully yours,
J. Spelling

7th A. A., Battery R. A., Blackan Mati,
Singapore, Malaya



Posed by professional models

Skinny! New way adds pounds—*double quick!*

Astonishing gains with sensational new double tonic. Richest yeast known, imported brewers' ale yeast, now concentrated 7 times and combined with energizing iron. Gives 5 to 15 lbs. in a few weeks

FOR years doctors have prescribed yeast for skinny, run-down men and women who want to put on flesh. But now, thanks to a remarkable new scientific discovery, you can get far greater results than with ordinary yeast—regain health, and also put on solid pounds—*and in a very much shorter time.*

Not only are thousands gaining beauty-bringing pounds but also clear skin, freedom from indigestion and constipation, new pep.

Concentrated 7 times

This amazing new product, called Ironized Yeast, is made from special *brewers' ale yeast* imported from Europe—the richest yeast ever known—which by a new process has been concentrated 7 times—*made 7 times more powerful.*

But that is not all! This marvelous, health-building yeast concentrate is then *ironized* with three special kinds of strengthening iron.

Day after day, as you take Ironized Yeast, watch ugly, gawky angles fill out. Hollow chests develop and pipe-stem arms and legs round out attractively. Complexion becomes clear—constipation disappears—you're a new person.

Results guaranteed

No matter how skinny and weak you may be, this marvelous new Ironized Yeast should build you up in a few short weeks as it has thousands of others. If not delighted with the results of the very first package, your money will be instantly refunded.

12 Lbs. in 3 Weeks

"After taking Ironized Yeast three weeks I gained 12 pounds." *Frank Piccunas, 6555 S. Washtenaw Ave., Chicago, Ill.*

14 Lbs. in 21 Days

"Before 21 days were up I had gained 14 pounds. My complexion was muddy and is now perfect." *Yvonne Murray, 906 Dixie Overland Blvd., Shreveport, La.*

Special FREE offer!

To start you building up your health *right away,* we make this absolutely FREE offer. Purchase a package of Ironized Yeast at once, cut out the seal on the box and mail it to us with a clipping of this paragraph. We will send you a fascinating new book on health, "New Facts About Your Body", by a well-known authority. Remember, results are guaranteed with the very first package—*or money refunded.* At all druggists. Ironized Yeast Co., Dept. 744, Atlanta, Ga.

The Forbidden Secrets of Sex are Daringly Revealed!

AWAY with false modesty! At last a famous doctor has told *all* the secrets of sex in frank, daring language. No prudish beating about the bush, no veiled hints, but TRUTH, blazing through 576 pages of straightforward facts.

Love is the most *magnificent ecstacy* in the world . . . know how to hold your loved one . . . don't glean half-truths from unreliable sources. Now you can know how to end ignorance...fear...and self denial!

MORE THAN 100 VIVID PICTURES

The 106 illustrations leave nothing to the imagination . . . know how to overcome physical mismating . . . know what to do on your wedding night to avoid the torturing results of ignorance.

Everything pertaining to sex is discussed in daring language. All the things you have wanted to know about your sex life, information about which other books only vaguely hint, is yours at last.

Some will be offended by the amazing frankness of this book and its vivid illustrations, but the world has no longer any use for prudery and false modesty.

A FAMOUS JUDGE SAYS THAT MOST DIVORCES ARE CAUSED BY SEX IGNORANCE!

Normal, sex-suited young people are torn apart because they lack sex knowledge.

WHAT EVERY MAN SHOULD KNOW

The Sexual Embrace
Secrets of the Honeymoon
Mistakes of Early Marriage
Homosexuality
Venereal Diseases
How to Regain Virility
Sexual Starvation
Glands and Sex Instinct
To Gain Greater Delight
The Truth About Abuse

WHAT EVERY WOMAN SHOULD KNOW

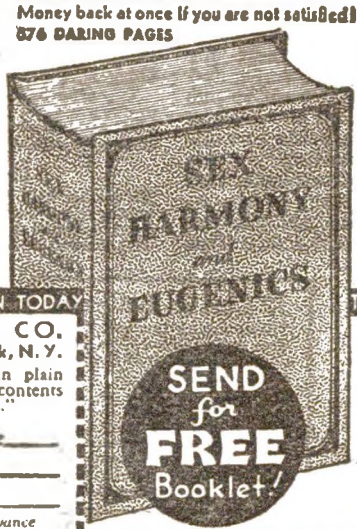
Joys of Perfect Mating
What to Allow a Lover to do
Intimate Feminine Hygiene
Prostitution
Birth Control Chart
How to Attract and Hold Men
Sexual Slavery of Women
Essentials of Happy Marriage
The Sex Organs

HOMOSEXUALITY...SEX ABNORMALITIES

Do you know about the astounding world of "half sexes"? They crave the companionship of their own sex...their practices are unbelievable to the normal mind...yet you should understand them.

Money back at once if you are not satisfied!

576 DARING PAGES



Don't be a *slave* to ignorance and fear! Enjoy the rapturous delights of the perfect physical love!

Lost love . . . scandal . . . divorce . . . can often be prevented by knowledge. Only the ignorant pay the *awful penalties* of wrong sex practices. Read the facts, clearly, startlingly told . . . study these illustrations and grope in darkness no longer.

You want to know . . . and you *should* know *everything* about sex. Sex is no longer a sin . . . a mystery . . . it is your greatest power for happiness. You owe it to yourself ...to the one you love, to tear aside the curtain of hypocrisy and learn the *naked truth!*

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Know *how to enjoy* the thrilling experiences that are your birthright . . . know how to attract the opposite sex . . . how to hold love.

There is no longer any need to pay the *awful price* for one moment of bliss. Read the scientific pathological facts told so bravely by Dr. Rubin. The chapters on venereal disease are alone worth the price of the book.

IS SEX IGNORANCE DRIVING THE ONE YOU LOVE INTO THE ARMS OF ANOTHER?

Let "Sex Harmony" teach you how easy it is to win and hold your loved one!

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"I lost 50 pounds" says W. T. Anderson. "My waist is 8 inches smaller" writes W. L. McGinnis. "Felt like a new man" claims Fred Wolf. "Wouldn't sell my belt for $100" writes C. W. Higbee.

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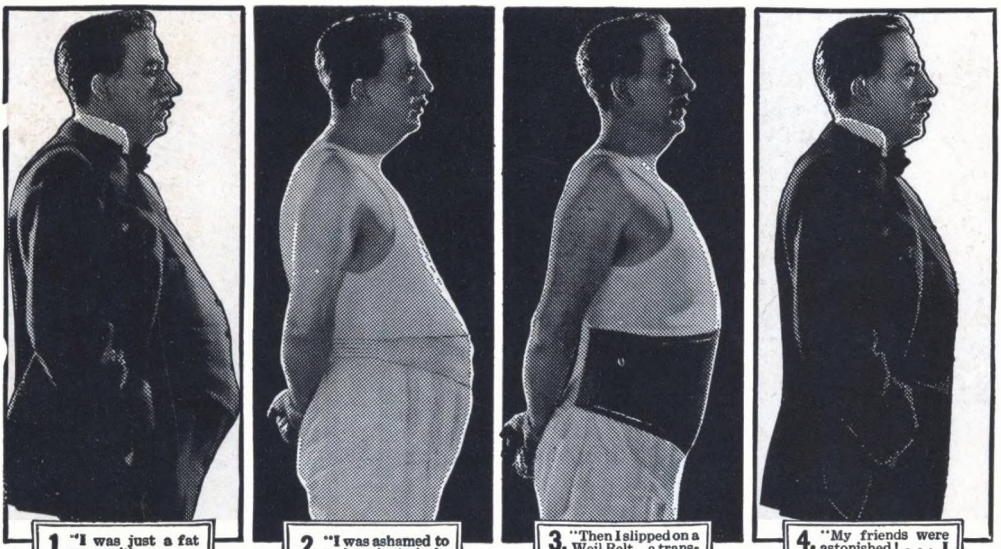

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3. "Then I slipped on a Weil Belt...a transformation took place... what a difference — pounds seemed to have fallen away!"

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We GUARANTEE to REDUCE your WAIST THREE INCHES IN TEN DAYS . . .

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The Weil Reducing Belt will make you appear many inches slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller—three inches of fat gone—or it won't cost you one cent!

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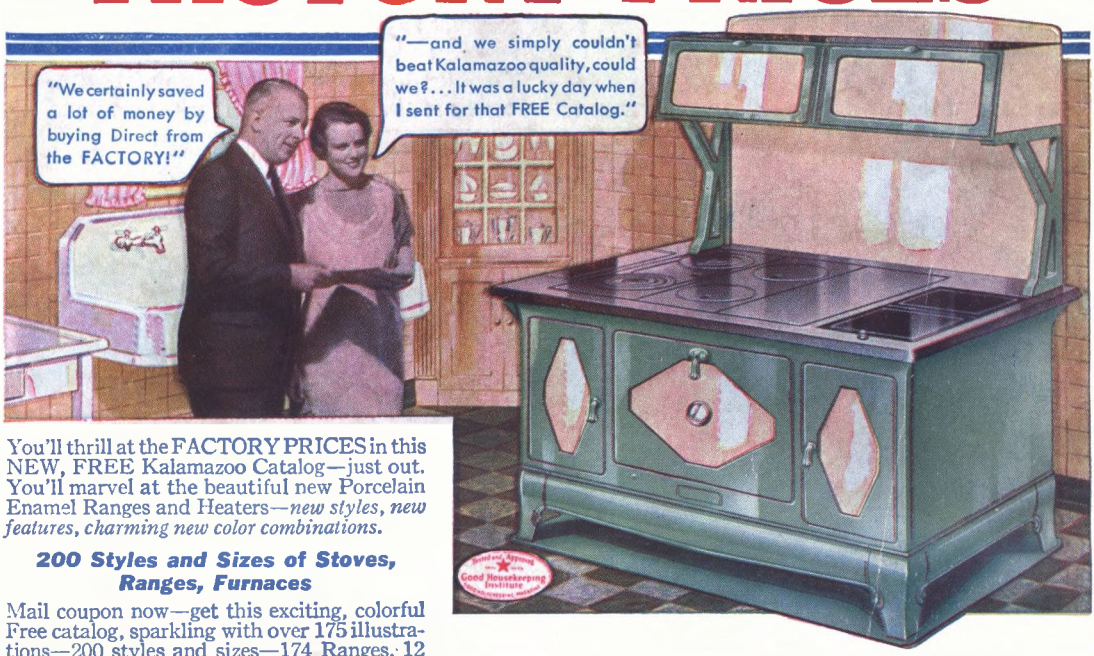

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