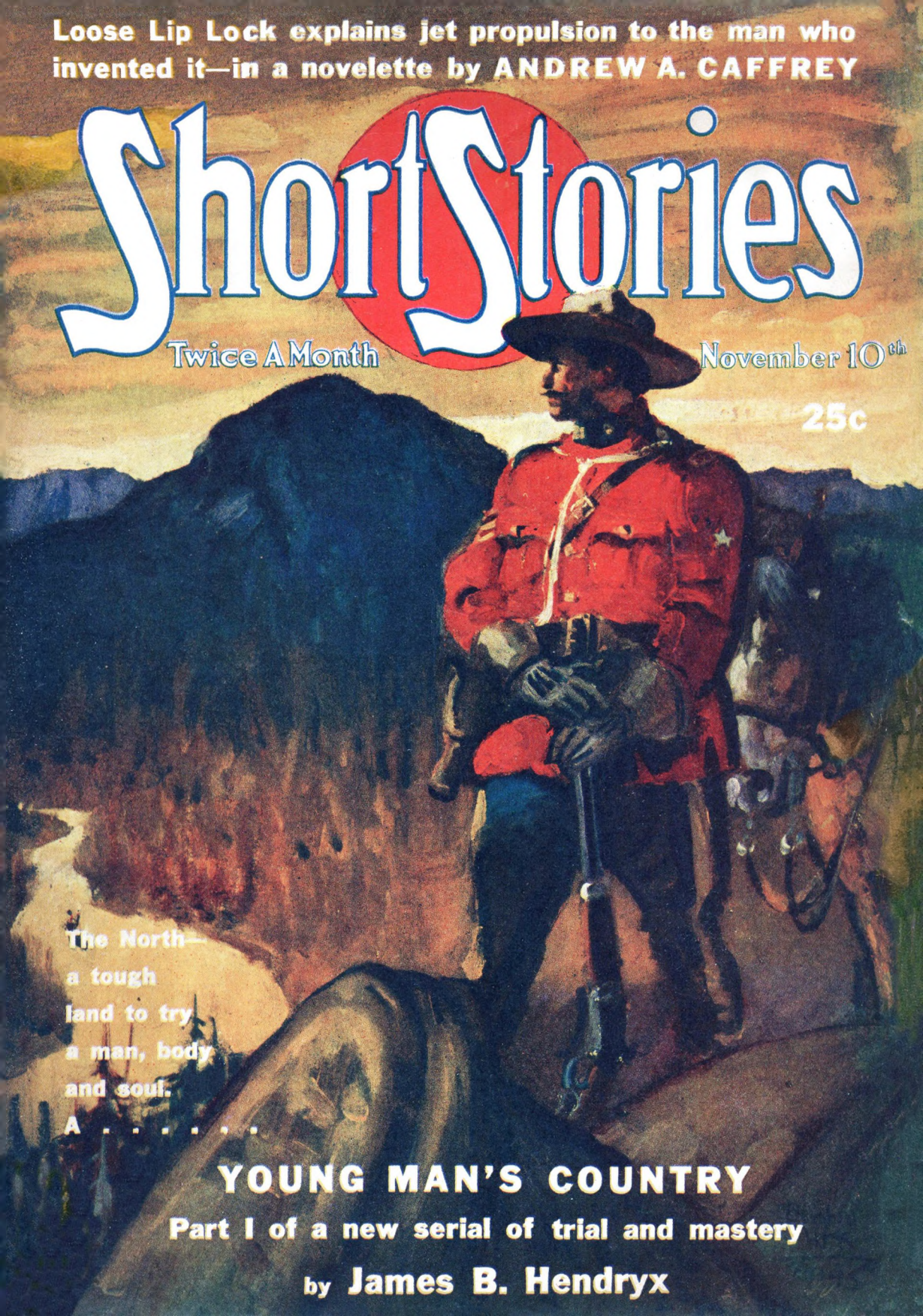
Loose Lip Lock explains jet propulsion to the man who invented it—in a novelette by ANDREW A. CAFFREY

Short Stories

Twice A Month

November 10th

25c



The North—a tough land to try a man, body and soul. A . . . . . .

YOUNG MAN'S COUNTRY

Part I of a new serial of trial and mastery

by James B. Hendryx

Get after Infectious Dandruff with LISTERINE ANTISEPTIC NOW!

Quick Germicidal Action Kills the "Bottle Bacillus" by millions, and Helps to Restore Scalp to Normal Condition.

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They can be evidence that a case of infectious dandruff is getting started and may be well on its way.

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Kills "Bottle Bacillus"

Start immediately with Listerine Antiseptic twice a day, a tested treatment which has brought help to so many and which may bring help to you. Remember, this is the treatment that in clinical tests brought improvement, or complete relief, to 76% of dandruff sufferers in 30 days.

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You simply douse full strength Listerine Antiseptic on the scalp and follow with vigorous, rotary, fingertip massage for several minutes. Thousands who are not troubled with infectious dandruff use Listerine Antiseptic as a precaution against it, making it a part of their usual hair-washing.

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the tested treatment

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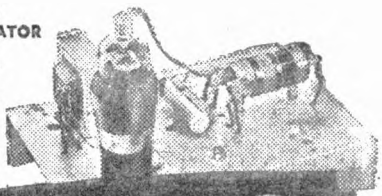

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Short Stories

TWICE A MONTH

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ASSOCIATE EDITOR
LAMONT BUCHANAN

November 10th, 1945

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

The Story Tellers' Circle

Business and Pleasure

FROM Milwaukee come these words from Jim Kjelgaard. Jim has something to say on "Cheena" and a good deal more to talk about on northern pike and ducks!

"I really haven't very much to say about 'Cheena' except that I met and talked with a Filipino, and he impressed me as being a great little guy. He told me one thing and another, and 'Cheena' grew out of the mass of information. That's the way it is with stories, you hear something you just can't forget and by and by—you write the yarn. I will say, though, that I wouldn't want any Filipinos mad at me. The one I met was tough as whalebone and strong as an ox as well as being a great little guy. And he himself told me that he was just a blushing daisy compared to some of the other fellows he knew!

"'Cheena,' except for that, is a wholly imaginative story and I used the character as is just because I thought he'd fit in better than any other. He's strictly my own invention."

So much for business. Now about pleasure—the fishin' and huntin' kind.

"The weather's already turned cold out in this neck of the woods—on the 14th of September a fire doesn't feel bad and we've kept one for the past four days. But, from one angle, that's exactly the right way to bring in this time of year. 'There ain't no gas rationin' no mo',' and you can really get around to all the places that you thought you'd like to get around to while you couldn't. Well, maybe not all of 'em. The old jaloppy distinctly is not what she used to be and maybe she never was. But she still rolls when you want her to, and next week I expect to start for one of the nicest places I ever saw.

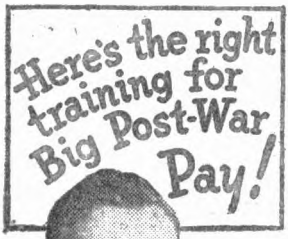
"It's a stretch of river, and probably there isn't another one exactly like it in the whole world. I never measured it, but at a guess it's three hundred feet wide. Cat-tails and rushes, a thick mat that you couldn't even pole a skiff through, extend about forty feet out from the east bank. Then you run into weeds, all sorts of water weeds, everything from lily pads to those long, mossy streamers that catch on the oars and keep your speed down almost to nothing an hour. But there's a knack to rowing through 'em, and after floundering around in the darn' things for two hours one day a fourteen-year-old kid told me how to work the oars. You take a long stroke, stop your oars a second on the back stroke, and the weeds roll off. But the center of the river— Ah and double ah!

"There's an open channel there about twenty feet wide, and the last time I was there I saw at least a hundred and fifty pounds of great northern pike and wall-eyes come out of that channel. Some of those fish weren't any babies either. One fellow snagged a wall-eye on a four-ounce fly rod, and fought it around for forty-five minutes before he got it even close to the boat. Then he made a stab, missed with the gaff, and the fish went away from there as though nothing was holding him. Anyhow, the cold weather should inspire those pike to strike soon—and thus my remark about ideal weather. You do a lot of shivering, but you have a lot of fun. Some day some smart bird will invent a lure with which you can fish those weeds—and that day you'd better be along.

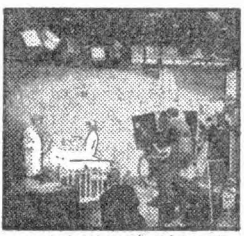
"Besides, it's handy to have a shotgun when you go up there. Possibly there won't be any flight ducks down, but a lot of na-

(Continued on page 139)

I'LL SHOW YOU HOW TO SUCCEED IN RADIO



A RADIO SERVICE BUSINESS OF YOUR OWN



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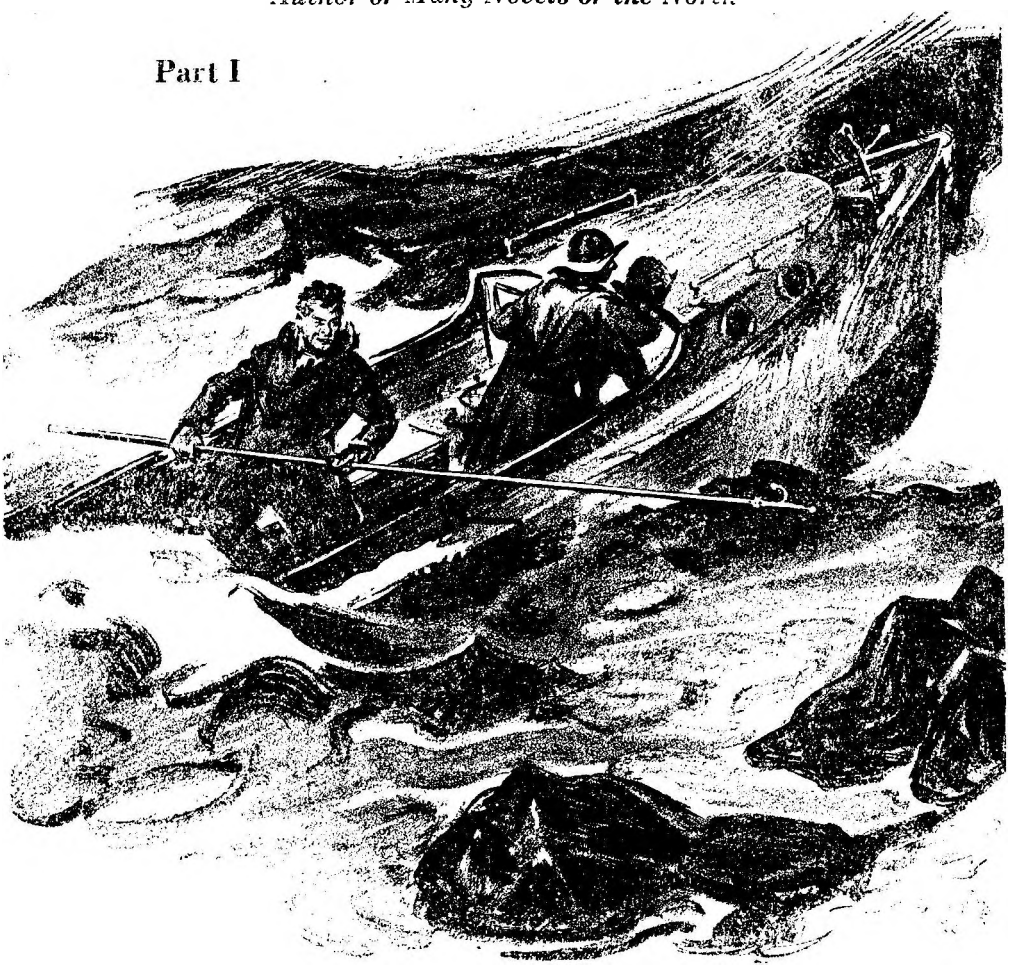
YOUNG MAN'S COUNTRY

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of Many Novels of the North

Part I



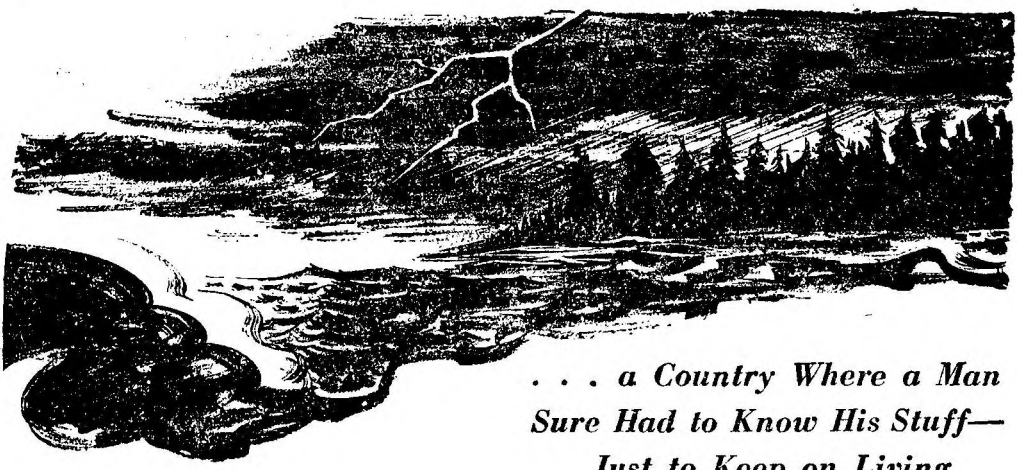
I

THE NORTH

TOM BUCKNER stepped from the deck of the Hudson's Bay Company steamer, *Wrigley,* and picked his way along the plank wharf to the shore, jostled rudely by the half dozen Company Indians and half-breeds that were already at the work of unloading. The wharf seemed to be pitching and heaving, even as the deck of the shallow draught steamer had pitched and heaved in the rough waters of Great Slave Lake.

The trip down the river, save for the monotony of endless spruce forest, interspersed with groves of white birch, had been pleasant enough in the mellow sunshine of the early October days. There had been a tang in the air that had sent the blood coursing through his veins, and made him impatient to begin his battle against the lean, lone land that old Donald Campbell had told him about.

But, in the cold gray dawn of this day in which the *Wrigley* had nosed out into the



. . . a Country Where a Man Sure Had to Know His Stuff— Just to Keep on Living

wind-swept reach of the great lake, there was no sunshine, and no tang in the air—only a damp, chilling wind as the little steamer had wallowed through great billows of fog and cold mist. Dizziness had assailed him and an awful sickness, so that with fingers blue and stiff, he had clung to the rail, not daring to leave it. In the lee of the island it was not so bad, and by the time the boat docked, Tom managed to pick up his leather gun case and his rod case, also of leather, and step to the wharf.

With solid ground under his feet, he paused and glanced about at the motley rabble of Indians, white men, children, and dogs, no one of whom paid him the slightest heed. Making his way to an overturned fish box, he sat down, standing his luggage against a broken windlass.

Before him were the low log buildings of the Company trading post, and off to one side the more pretentious mission, a three-story frame building, with its balustraded balcony and outside stairway. A bearded priest in a curious round cap, long black robe, and wide sash from which dangled a huge white cross stood amid a group of forty or fifty Indian and half-breed children who watched the work of unloading in round-eyed silence.

At the shore end of the wharf a huge man with a grizzled beard stood, list in hand, checking off the pieces as the men carried them ashore—boxes, bags, bales, barrels, and crates were piled helter-skelter on the beach as the men dumped their loads and returned for more.

There was no rude banter—no laughter—no conversation between the dozen or more Indian women who stolidly looked on as piece after piece was added to the ever-growing pile of freight. The business of the North is a grim business in which levity has no part.

Tom shivered and turned up his collar against the fog-laden wind. So this is the North? This is the land that old Donald Campbell had raved about, seated behind his broad mahogany desk in his spacious office in Winnipeg? Winnipeg! The canoes on the river. The summer cottage on the lake — rowboats — motorboats — swimming, fishing—and the long evenings around the driftwood fire, with the guitars and the banjos and the singing and laughter. Duck shooting—deer hunting—and in the winter the skiing, the skating, and the swift rush of toboggans and bobsleds. College—the night spots, the lusty roaring of ribald songs to the banging accompaniment of heavy steins. Kindred spirits seated about round tables sipping heavy drinks from tall glasses. The warm genial glow as the strong liquor took hold—the exuberance that knew no bounds—come on, boys, what the hell—let's go!

Then—the wild prank that resulted in the burning of one of the campus buildings—the swift expulsion from college—the prompt action of the police—the night in jail while his father conferred with the authorities—the intercession of his father's friend, old Donald Campbell, the influential governor of the Hudson's Bay Company.

The release from jail next morning, and the uncomfortable conference in the library at home, with his mother in tears, his father stern and unrelenting. There had been such conferences before—conferences that had wound up in promises and forgivings. But this time no promise had been asked—no forgiveness tendered. Tom shuddered slightly as he recollected that there had been no hint of anger in his father's tone—no hint of anger in the gray eyes that regarded him in cold, almost aloof appraisal.

"You have been in more trouble in the twenty-two years you have lived than I have encountered in my entire lifetime. I have interceded for you, time and again—with the school authorities, the college authorities, and the law. I have accepted your promises, hoping each time that——"

"But he is not bad at heart!" his mother had interrupted. "It is just that——"

"Bad at heart or not, the result is the same—wild escapades that disregard the laws of society, and the rights of others. The fact is, my son, that you have been going from bad to worse. It was bound to come—the time when you would find yourself in serious trouble. And now it is here. I am not without influence in this community—but even so, had it not been for the intervention of my good friend Don Campbell, I doubt that I could have done anything for you.

"Arson is a felony. I am not so sure that a term in Stony Mountain might be the thing that would bring you to your senses."

"No, no, no!" his mother had cried. "Not that. Not prison. Not for Tom. Not for our son! Oh, think of it—the disgrace of it!"

"I have thought of that. It is one of the reasons why I interceded for him—pleaded for one more chance. The other reason is Don Campbell's assurance that the North will make a man of him."

THEN his father had turned to him and delivered his ultimatum. "This is your last chance—you can take it, or leave it. You must make your choice now, here—within the next few minutes. Upon condition that I reimburse the college for the financial loss, they have agreed not to demand criminal prosecution. And upon Campbell's word that he would give you a position with the Company, and send you far into the North, the authorities agreed to suspend action against you.

"After such time as you demonstrate that you have made good, the charge against you will be dropped and expunged from the records. It is up to you, my son. The North—or Stony Mountatin."

As he sat there, half-sick, and wholly disconsolate on the fish box, Tom recollected the terrible finality of those last words. "The North—or Stony Mountain." The North—that North beyond the outposts he knew only by vague hearsay—mosquitoes, black flies, sand flies, ice, snow, barren rocks, roaring rivers, bears, caribou, Indians. Stony Mountain was only a name—but a name, now, that carried with it vast significance. If it was anything like the Winnipeg jail where he had spent the night—iron bars, cold cement floor, hard iron cot, the cursings and mumblings from cells ranged along the dim-lit corridor—he wanted no part of it. He heard himself saying:

"I'll take the North."

His father nodded. "Very well. Go to the Hudson's Bay Company offices and ask for Donald Campbell. He'll be expecting you."

As he was shown into the large well-lighted private office on the top floor of the Company building, the governor dismissed his secretary with a nod. It was with something of trepidation that Tom found himself crossing the wide floor space toward the huge flat-top mahogany desk behind which sat the man whose decisions shaped the course of a vast empire. He knew Donald Campbell, casually, as a friend of his father, and now as he glanced into the stern face with its neatly trimmed gray beard, and met the direct gaze of the blue eyes behind the pince-nez with its long black ribbon, he inwardly braced himself for the lecture that was to come.

Then—the lips behind the gray beard were smiling, and the voice, tinged with more than a trace of Scottish burr was greeting him cordially. "Ah, lad, 'tis a fine morning. I've been expecting you. Draw up a chair. You may smoke if you like." As he spoke he opened a drawer and tendered a silver cigarette case. Returning it, he produced a pipe and plug of tobacco from which he whittled shavings with his pocket knife. "Cigarettes and cigars do well enough

at dinners and director's meetings—but gi' me a pipe and good old Company tobacco. There's a man's smoke." He crammed the shavings into the bowl of the pipe and held a match to it, then blew a cloud of gray smoke ceilingward. "You got in a bit of a jam, they tell me. Well," he paused and his glance strayed to the open window, "'twas a bit of a jam, that caused me to flee Edinborough, full fifty year agone. And, take it all in all, I have na' done so bad." The blue eyes were twinkling. "Too many wild companions, a bit too much good Scotch liquor—a han'some cab overturned in the gutter, and then the heavy hand of the law.

"But my father had a friend in the Company. The judge was a dour man, wi' a small tight mouth and a Presbyterian outlook on life. This friend of my father spoke to the judge in my behalf. I have always suspected that a matter of pounds sterling was somehow involved. Be that as it may—my last three years of college were spent in the bush.

"And by the time my apprenticeship was served, I wouldn't have traded the bush country for all the cities in the world. And had I my own choice to make, I would be in the bush right now—but duty willed otherwise. Have you ever been in the bush?"

"No, sir. That is—not very far. Lake Winnipeg—"

"Foosh! Wi' white flannel pants and a guitar, and a simpering lass sitting amid cushions in a painted canoe!"

Tom laughed. "That's about the size of it, I guess."

"Do you want to go to the bush?"

THE younger man's lips twisted into a wry grin. "My father put it squarely up to me—Stony Mountain or the bush. I'm choosing the bush."

"Aye, and if I'm any judge, five years from now, if the matter was put up to you again—the finest mansion in Winnipeg or the bush, you'd again choose the bush. And the choice would be a wise one, lad. When the magistrate released you under my promise to send you into the outland, he said I was taking a gamble—that you'd been in trouble before—that you were a thorn in the side of the police. When inquiry failed to reveal hint of any moral turpitude in your record, I told him the Company had need of just such thorns. You come of good stock, lad. And blood will tell. I'm sending you into a great country—a man's country. A land of vast distances, and of unlimited possibilities for a man of youth and of vision. A land of stark tragedy, and"—he added with a twinkle in his eye, "mayhap a land of romance, too. If you stay on with the Company, well and good. It is a great company—an honorable company—a company of vast resources and vast responsibilities—a company that holds the welfare, the very lives, even, of thousands of natives in the hollow of its hand. The rewards in its service are great—in pride of accomplishment, in satisfaction of service to the thousands of underprivileged ones, who depend on it for their very existence—rather than in pounds sterling.

"But should you be of those to whom the amassing of dollars outbalances, in the scale of life, the satisfaction of service, the lean, lone land beyond the outposts offers vast possibilities in its millions of acres of timber and pulpwood, in oil, and mineral, and in waterpower. There is wealth in the bush for the man who learns to know the bush. But the man who reaps this wealth must be a man.

"'Tis a tough land—a land to try a man's body and his soul. A land of opportunity for the man who can master it—but no land for a weakling.

"And I am sending you to a man who knows the bush as few men know it. Colin McTavish is a hard man—tough and unswerving as the land he lives in. A man whose word is as good as his bond. A man I have known for forty years, or more—have worked with, and at times have nearly died with. A man I can trust to do as I am asking him to do—teach you the North." The old man paused and his glance travelled about the well-appointed office and sought the open window, where the sounds of the traffic of the city came faintly to the ear. "And never a day passes," he added, a bit wistfully, "that at some moment I do not long to be back there—to live again the forty-odd years I spent in the bush with men like Colin McTavish. But it is a young man's land—a land of high adventure. And I am old. The Company called me here, and here I shall end my days. But each year I defy the

doctors, and make a tour of inspection to some far place that would try both the heart and the muscles of a much younger man. 'Tis the tonic that keeps me alive."

AND now, seated on the overturned fish box, Tom Buckner's lips tightened as his eyes swept the vast reach of tossing green water, the leaden sky, the rolling fog clouds that half revealed, half concealed the limitless expanse of spruce spires. He nursed the collar of his mackinaw tighter about his throat against the sweep of the raw wind, as an Indian added the last piece to the pile of freight. "Tough luck," he muttered, "that old man Campbell has to end his days in a fine office, behind a mahogany desk, with a swell-looking secretary, instead of sitting around in the cold on a damn stinking fish box watching a bunch of Indians dump boxes on a beach. For my part he can have his damn North. I wonder when the boat goes back?"

Captain Bell, who had been watching proceedings from the rail, made his way along the wharf and paused beside the bearded man who had checked the goods in. Followed then, a few minutes of comparing papers and signing invoices. The bearded one issued some orders to the Indians, who proceeded to pack the goods to the warehouse, and headed for the long log trading room.

Tom walked to the wharf where the captain was superintending the casting off of lines. "When do you go back?" he asked.

The man eyed him. "Back? Back where?"

"Why—back up the river. Back to Smith Landing."

"Along in June."

"June! You mean—next June?"

"Well, I shore as hell don't mean last June."

"You mean—you winter here?"

"Nope. Winter at Fort McPherson, twelve hundred miles north of here. Ought to make it in fifteen days—if I have good luck."

"Twelve hundred miles—north—of here! Good God!"

"Yeah—quite a country, ain't it?"

"But—how am I going to get back?"

"Well, you could walk. But if you ain't in no hurry, the easiest way would be to wait for the boat."

II

TOM CHANGES HIS MIND

THE *Wrigley* backed away from the wharf and headed out into the lake. Under the direction of the black-robed priest Indian boys were packing the Mission freight to the storehouse, and off to one side a thick-shouldered man with a stubby blond beard was endeavoring, with the aid of an Indian to spread a tarp over a small heap of supplies. The man cursed volubly in thick guttural accents as the wind bellied the canvas and whipped it about while the Indian tried to weight the edges with rocks. The crowd of squaws had dispersed, only a few lingering as though fascinated by the sight of the endless journeying of the packers back and forth from the warehouse.

Fifty yards offshore a power boat and a sailing sloop tugged at their anchor ropes as they pitched and tossed on the in-rolling waves. A flock of geese winged past, flying low and honking noisily. Far out in the lake the *Wrigley* disappeared in a squall of mist. Tom scowled as he eyed the drab scene, the unpainted frame Mission, the log buildings of the Company Fort, the monotonous labor of the packers, the plank wharf upon which rested his own brand new duffel bags, the ceaseless wash of the waves against the rocky shore, and over all the bleak leaden sky. A cold drizzle set in, wetting his face. "How in the devil," he muttered savagely, "could a man spend forty years in a country like this—and long to be back here! I've been here a couple of hours and I'm bored stiff. Old man Campbell is nuts. To hell with the North! Stony Mountain couldn't be any worse than this."

With set lips and outthrust jaw he strode to the low log trading room into which the big man with the grizzled beard had disappeared. Shoving open the door he crossed to the long counter behind which, at a rude desk the man was fumbling among some papers.

"Are you Mr. Duncan—Stuart Duncan?" he demanded.

The man rose to his feet and peered from beneath shaggy eyebrows.

"Aye."

"I have a letter for you from Mr. Campbell."

"Campbell?"

"Yes—Donald Campbell, of Winnipeg."

The deep-set eyes that had regarded him impersonally showed a gleam of interest. "From Don Campbell himsel', eh? Ah, theer's a mon for ye! 'Twas a gude job when they made him Governor—him thot knows the North none better. The last one had ne'er set foot beyont Piccadilly. Wait—I'll make a light. The dark comes early the noo." He applied a match to the wick of the huge swinging lamp, took the letter from Tom's hand and, after adjusting a pair of steel-framed spectacles, regarded it speculatively, turning it over and over in his hand. Then very deliberately he slit the envelope with his belt-knife, removed the sheet, and holding it to the light, read it through. He paused, subjected the bearer of the letter to a searching scrutiny, and re-read the letter. Folding it, he laid it on the desk, and cleared his throat roughly.

"So—ye're bound for McTavish's, eh?"

"No. I'm bound for Winnipeg. I've had enough of this damned country already. I asked the captain when the boat was going back, and he said in June."

The huge Scot nodded. "Aye, wi' gude luck he'll make it by June—er mebbe early July."

"But I'm going back now. How do I get to Fort Smith?"

"McTavish is not at Smith."

"To hell with McTavish! I'm going back."

The big man seemed not to have heard. His glance sought the window and came to rest on the power boat tossing in the waves. "I was minded to haul oot the fish boat for the winter tomorrow," he said. "She's sore in need o' repairs. But I've a couple o' Injuns that's handy wi' the motor. They'll have her in shape to start the day after tomorrow."

"How long will it take to get there?"

"W-e-e-l-l, thot's accordin' to the luck ye have. Wi' gude luck ye should make Reliance in five days."

"Reliance! Where's Reliance?"

"Fort Reliance—at the east end o' the lake, a matter o' two hundred an' fifty mile. McTavish's post is on Artillery Lake, mebbe forty mile beyont. But onct ye get to Reliance, Cameron'll see ye on from theer."

"But I tell you I'm not going to McTavish's! I'm going back to Fort Smith—and from there on to Winnipeg. There are plenty of Indians around here. If you won't run me back in the boat I'll hire an Indian to take me."

"Losh, lad—no Injun wad tak' ye ootside the clearin' onlest I gi' the word. Ye'll learn, agin ye've be'n here a while, thot i' the North the Company's word is the law." The door opened and the thick-shouldered, blond man stepped into the room. Ignoring him, Duncan continued. "An' so ye'll onderstand thot when Don Campbell says ye go to McTavish's—to McTavish's ye go."

"Who's going to McTavish's?" The guttural voice held a harsh truculent note, and Tom turned to meet the gaze of a pair of pale blue eyes, cold as chipped ice.

Duncan answered. "The lad, here. He's Tom Buckner. An', Buckner, yon is Johan Shultz, a prospector over beyont. Buckner is McTavish's new clerk."

"Clerk! McTavish needs no clerk!"

Duncan nodded. "I dinna know mysel' thot he'd asked for a clerk. But Don Campbell was there this summer. They're great friends—them two. Campbell stayed there longer even than he stayed at Chippewyan—talkin' over auld times, belike. Mebbe Campbell seen thot Colin needed a clerk."

"I met this Don Campbell when he was there. But who the hell is he to be sending McTavish a clerk?"

"Listen here!" Tom cried, eyeing Duncan, "I told you I wasn't—"

"First, you listen to me," Shultz interrupted, his pale blue eyes flickering venomously. "You keep away from McTavish's—if you know what's good for you!"

Tom eyed the man in astonishment. "What?"

"You heard what I said! And, by God, when I say a thing, I mean it!"

At the suppressed rage in the man's voice—the preemptory order, Tom's face flushed, and his eyes narrowed. "Who the hell are you—to order me around?"

"I'll show you who I am!" The man stopped suddenly, hesitated and controlling himself with a visible effort, forced a smile. "Why should we quarrel?" he asked. "I happen to know that McTavish needs no clerk. But I can use a man—and be glad

to get one in place of that damned lazy Indian—glad to quit paying out good gold for poor work. How much was McTavish to pay you?"

"That," replied Tom, "is my business."

"Whatever he offered you, I'll give you ten dollars more on the month. Ever been in the North before?"

"No."

"What do you say? Is it a bargain? Remember, you're a green hand."

"No."

"You mean — you're going to McTavish's?" Again the guttural voice held the harsh note, and the pale eyes were flickering.

"You're damned right I'm going to McTavish's!" Tom retorted. "I'm a green hand, Shultz. But—I'm beginning to like the North!"

"Weel spoken, lad!" the huge Scot said. "I was wonderin' if, fer onct, Don Campbell hadn't made a mistake."

"Sure — that's it!" Shultz exclaimed. "Whoever sent this man to McTavish's made a mistake. It is some other trader that needed a clerk, and they got mixed up and sent him to McTavish's. Hell, Duncan, you know and I know that McTavish needs no clerk — especially a green hand that wouldn't be worth a damn when he got him."

The factor favored him with a cold stare.

" 'Twas not that kind o' mistake I was thinkin' of," he said.

A door opened in the rear of the long room and Duncan's Indian wife announced supper. Turning to an Indian who had entered with an armful of firewood, the factor ordered him to carry Tom's duffel up from the beach, and the three filed into the dining room, where the meal was consumed in silence.

Back in the trading room they drew chairs about the stove and filled their pipes. Duncan glanced at Shultz. "Better tell your Injun to sleep in here. 'Tis a raw night ootside."

"To hell with him. He's got a blanket. Let him crawl under the tarp. If you're sending this man to McTavish's, I suppose you'll be running the fish boat to Reliance?"

"Aye. An' I've some freight fer Reliance. 'Twill save a sled trip later."

"How about a tow, then? With no one to help me sail the sloop but that damn lazy Wolf Jaw if I've got to buck headwinds I might get caught in the freeze-up."

The factor considered. "I'll not be makin' the run, mysel'. But Joe Crutch an' Jack Big Man will take her through. How much freight you got?"

"It'll run about a ton."

"It'll cost ye five cents the pound, cargo weight. That's towin' the sloop wi'oot charge."

"Five cents a pound! A hundred dollars! You're crazy! I'll give you two cents—and it's robbery, at that price."

"Five cents."

"To hell with you!" cried the man, his pale eyes flickering with rage. Leaping from his chair, he turned on Tom. "And you — you keep away from McTavish's, if you know what's good for you! There's a hell of a lot of country at the other end of the lake. Anything can happen, out there—and no one the wiser." Then abruptly he strode from the room, banging the door behind him.

TOM glanced into the face of the Old Scot. "What the devil's eating him?" he asked. "That sounded like a threat."

"Aye. 'Twas a threat. Shultz is a mon o' hot temper. An' when he's in a rage, he's a lunatic."

"But—why should he jump on me? Why should he warn me to keep away from McTavish's? What business is it of his where I go?"

The factor tongued his cheek thoughtfully. "I'm thinkin' that 'tis none to his likin' that a young mon should be winterin' there."

"But why? He doesn't own McTavish's post, does he?"

"Na, na! McTavish's is a Company post. I mistrust 'twould be on account o' the lass."

"Lass! What lass?"

"Why, Helen. McTavish's daughter—as likely a lass as a mon would want to see. There's a glint in her eye, an' a laugh on her lips, 'twould warm the heart o' any mon. An' afoot or afloat she'll do a mon's work, day in an' day out. Wi' Helen there, I canna see why McTavish would be needin' a clerk."

"You mean that Shultz is—interested in her?"

" 'Tis rumored she's promised to Shultz."

"So that's it, eh? Afraid I'll make a play for his girl. Well, who knows? Maybe I will. How old is this Helen McTavish?"

"Weel, the lass is gittin' along—no doubt aboot that. She'll be twenty, come spring—er mebbe it's twenty-one. But theer should be twenty year o' gude hard work in her, yet."

Tom grinned. "I believe I'm going to like the North. You know, when I came in here I'd made up my mind to chuck the whole thing. Sitting there on the fish box with the cold fog rolling in off the lake, watching those Indians plodding back and forth unloading that freight while the women and children looked on without a word or a smile, the whole thing looked so drab and uninteresting — so hopeless. As though nothing could ever happen here, except just what was happening. But, now—things look different."

The older man nodded. "Aye. Theer's a deal o' drabness i' life, lad, no matter wheer ye be. But it's as Shultz warned ye, here in the bush country onything can happen."

"You mentioned that this Shultz is a prospector. Is his camp or claim, or diggings, or whatever you call it, near McTavish's post?"

"'Twould be a matter o' forty or fifty mile. Shultz's location is ten or twelve mile up the Hoarfrost River, an' McTavish's post is on Artillery Lake." The man paused and combed at his beard with his fingers, and when he spoke, Tom detected a twinkle in the shrewd old eyes. "Mind ye, lad, I'll not be sayin' that if I stood in Shultz's shoes, I'd be restin' easy, mysel'. He's no mon to inspire the love o' a lass like Helen McTavish—what wi' his surly manner an' his onseemly rages. The winter is long, an' the work at McTavish's will not be o'er hard. An' he knows, an' I know, that McTavish needs no clerk."

"Then, why in the devil is old man Campbell sending me there?"

"I've be'n wonderin' aboot thot, mysel'."

TOM grinned. "Maybe I can help you out. I got mixed up in a prank, back home that peeved the gendarmes, no end. In fact, they seized me and cast me into the bastile. My recollection of the sequence of events is rather hazy—a gathering of kindred spirits, the tinkle of ice in tall glasses, the burning of an obnoxious dean, in effigy, and a fire that resulted in considerable property damage, the heavy hand of the law, and a night in a cell amid distasteful surroundings. Next morning the pater got me out of the clink and expressed vast displeasure. It seems that his good friend, Donald Campbell went with him to see the proper authorities with the result that I was offered the chance to accept a position with the Company that would take me far from the twinkling lights and the flowing bowl—or else. The 'or else' being an enforced sojourn in Stony Mountain prison. He sent me to Mr. Campbell who gave me quite a talk. He said that there's always a chance for the right man to make good with the Company. But that first he must prove himself—must show the stuff he's made of. He warned me that the North is a tough country, but that it's possibilities for the right man, either in the Company's service, or on his own, are unlimited. He told me tales of his own experience that rather excited my imagination. He said he, himself, had come up the hard way."

"Aye. Don Campbell came up the hard way. He was a gude mon i' the North—a gude mon ony place ye'd put him. McTavish knows him better than I. They was together for many years. 'Twas only this summer Don was through on a trip o' inspection, an' I rec'lect thot he stayed on fer three days at McTavish's post whilst him an' Colin talked over auld times. He spoke a true word, lad, when he said this country wad gi' a mon a chance to prove himsel'. 'Tis a hard land, an' grim. A land thot will make a man—or break him. An' wi' Don Campbell behind him, a mon could go far. Theer'll be times that 'twill take all ye've got in ye of brains an' brawn to survive—an' many a gude mon has na survived. But— 'tis livin', lad! 'Tis livin'!"

"McTavish probably asked Campbell to send him a clerk, when he was there this summer," Tom suggested.

The lips behind the grizzled beard smiled slightly. "Mebby. More likely not. Colin McTavish is no mon to ask fer what he does na need."

"What sort of man is he?"

"Weel, Colin is a gude mon—a gude trader. A dour mon, an' a wee bit closer wi' his money, mebbe, than the run o' men. But

he'll speak ye fair. Ye can depend on what he says, to the last word. But keep an eye on yon Shultz, lad."

"To hell with Shultz! He can't bluff me. I'm not afraid of him."

The old Scot's brow knit into a frown. "I know ye're not afraid o' him. Ye showed me thot—an' him, too—when ye defied him. But the fact remains that he's warned ye, an' he's threatened ye. To gi' the de'il his due, he's a gude prospector. 'Tis rumored he's got gold i' his cache—an' he's takin' oot more gold. He's in a fair way o' bein' rich.

"When he warned ye to stay away from McTavish's, he was na bluffin'. Twice he's warned men off the Hoarfrost—prospectors. One heeded his warning, an' went back upriver. The ither one didn't."

"He stayed there, despite the warning?"

"Aye. But he's no there now."

"Where is he?"

The factor shrugged. "The police wad like to know the answer to that one. It's as Shultz told ye—there's plenty of country oot yon—an' onything can happen. Somethin' did happen—because Shultz is alone on the Hoarfrost."

"You mean Shultz murdered him?"

"I mean that in one of his maniacal furies, Shultz is a dangerous mon. When the fury cools into a cold, calculating rage, he's a double dangerous mon. I'd na trust him far as I can spit."

"But—why would a girl like Helen McTavish fall for a man like Shultz. Hell, he must be twice her age!"

"I dinna say the lass cares fer him. I told ye thot Colin is thrifty—an' Shultz is rich. An' thot 'tis rumored she's promised to Shultz. If the rumor's true, 'twas Colin done the promisin'."

"What! What right has he to promise her to a man she doesn't love?"

"The lass has known few white men—a trader or two, a few men o' the Mounted Police, passin' through on patrol, an' Don Campbell. But e'en so, I'm doubtin' she cares fer Shultz. But love him or no—she'll marry him, if Colin has gi' his word. Make na mistake aboot thot."

"But think—what would her life be like, with a man of Shultz's surly manner and fiendish temper!"

The factor shrugged. "Colin McTavish wad look at the purse befoor he'd look at the mon."

III

SHULTZ

TOM awoke the following morning and lay for a long time between the warm blankets listening to the monotonous sound of waves lashing the rocky shore, as his mind reviewed the events of the previous day—his growing disgust with the North as he sat there on the fish box with the cold wind whipping about him and viewed the humdrum scene—the expressionless faces of the women and children who looked on in stolid fascination as the men plodded back and forth along the wharf adding, piece by piece, to the growing pile on the beach, the solemn-faced priest, and Duncan meticulously checking the pieces on his invoice—all as intent on the business as though their very lives depended on it. "Well, I guess they do, at that," he muttered. "They'd be in the devil of a fix if the boat didn't get here with the supplies." He smiled a bit grimly as he recalled his determination to chuck the whole thing and go back to Winnipeg and face the music, and his resentment against Duncan who calmly ignored his expressed intention. Then Shultz had stepped into the picture with his preemptory order to keep away from McTavish's and, with a thrill of satisfaction he remembered the gleam of approval in the old factor's eyes at his defiance of Shultz and the hearty approval in his voice as he said, "Well spoken, lad."

"Maybe I'm a fool," he muttered, "but I'll be damned if this Shultz is going to order me around." He recalled his conversation with Duncan and what the old factor had told him of McTavish and his daughter.

"It's not that I'm going to make a play for the girl. I'm going in there because Shultz ordered me to stay out. And if the thing should come to a showdown it'll be all right with me." His lips set hard as he recalled the insane fury of the flickering eyes, and the murderous venom in the man's voice. "Because when the time comes, I'll keep my head—and he won't."

The jangle of a bell sounded above the dull roar of the waves, and Tom threw

back the blankets and stepped to the window. The black-robed priest was standing on the high balustraded veranda ringing a hand bell, while on the flat before the mission children scurried about, the boys and girls forming separate lines, under the supervision of a couple of Gray Nuns. Then, at a word from the priest, the lines moved slowly forward and disappeared into the building.

Tom drew on his clothing and stepped from the room to be greeted by the Indian woman who pointed toward the dining room. "You eat," she said.

"Where's Mr. Duncan?" Tom asked, noticing that the table was laid for one.

The woman pointed toward the window. "Fix boat," she said, and disappeared into the kitchen, to return in a moment with a huge caribou steak and a steaming pot of tea.

Glancing toward the lake he saw that a rowboat, its painter made fast to the launch, was pitching and tossing in the waves; saw, also, that Shultz and his Indian were lightering his goods to the sloop in another rowboat.

Breakfast over, he drew on his mackinaw and passed out through the deserted trading room. Two squaws passed him dragging dead spruce poles toward the cluster of cabins in the background. Other squaws were busily hacking at poles with their axes, while several others carried pails of water from the creek that swirled and burbled over its rocky bed. Near the end of the wharf two young women were intent upon the weaving of a fish net stretched on a pole frame. As Tom stood watching them ducks and geese flew over, following the shoreline of the lake on their way south.

Stepping to the trading room, he returned a few moments later with his shotgun and fired twice as a flock of wavies flew almost directly over his head. The young squaws smiled as two of the white geese struck the ground almost at their feet. Tom smiled back and a moment later knocked three bluebills out of a passing flock. "You can have 'em," he said. "I'm just shooting for fun." Instantly the women quit their work and retrieved the birds. Other squaws came from the direction of the cabins and for the next half hour a wild scramble ensued every time a bird hit the ground.

Duncan came ashore and paused for a moment to look on. "Foosh, lad," he said, "if it's ducks an' geese ye want, ye can slip doon to the little bay, yonder an' shoot a dozen to a shot wi' ye're scatter gun whilst they sit on the water."

Tom smiled. "I'm just shooting for the sport," he said. "But it looks like the meat won't be wasted. How's the boat coming?"

"We got the motor tore doon, she's needin' piston rings an' some new gaskets. I've got what we need on hand. Wi' gude luck she'll be ready to pull oot i' the mornin'." He passed on to the trading room, and a few minutes later the rowboat returned from the sloop, and leaving his Indian to load her, Shultz strode up just as Tom made a beautiful double on a pair of shovelers. He grinned into the glowering face. "Not so bad for a green hand, eh?"

"No one but a damn fool would bring a shotgun into the North." the man growled. "Are you still thinking of going to McTavish's?"

"I know damn' well I'm going there. In fact, I can hardly wait to get started."

"I'm warning you for the last time to keep away from there."

"The hell you are? Well, warn, and be damned. You can't bluff me."

The pale eyes flickered dangerously and the words fairly screamed from his lips. "I never bluff! If you go up the lake, you'll never come back!"

The factor, returning with his gaskets and piston rings overheard the threat. He paused and regarded the angry man with a frown. "I'll be rememberin' them words, Shultz, in case onything happens to Buckner."

"Remembering won't prove anything! I was warning him for his own good. Plenty of men have disappeared in the bush. It's no country for a greenhorn."

A splash sounded from the wharf and the three turned to see the Indian vainly trying to retrieve a piece that had slipped overboard from the heaving rowboat.

Cursing like a madman, Shultz plunged toward the wharf, knocked the Indian down with a blow of his fist, and proceeded to shower him with kicks from his heavy pacs.

Gun in hand, Tom followed, and the next moment a hard-driven and perfectly timed blow landed squarely on Shultz's mouth, knocking him flat on his back on the plank wharf. He was up in an instant, his hand grasping an ax that stood against

a pile of lumber. As he raised the ax Tom swung his gun on him. The man hesitated and lowered the missle.

"What the hell did you butt in for?" he snarled, blowing a spray of blood from his lips.

"What do you think?"

"It's none of your damned business how I handle my Indians!"

"I wouldn't stand by and see a dog treated like that."

"You wouldn't, eh? Well, I'm telling you, Buckner, this country ain't big enough for you and me both!"

Tom grinned into the flickering eyes. "That suits me. When are you pulling out?"

"Damn you! I'm not pulling out! And I'm telling you that if you go up the lake it'll be your last trip anywhere!"

The younger man's lips curled in a sneer. "Look here, Shultz—you've threatened me and warned me till it's got to be a joke. Talk's cheap. Any damned coward can shoot off his mouth."

"It's easy to call a man a coward when you've got a gun on him."

"Drop that ax, and I'll lay down my gun. I sure would like to take another poke at that face of yours."

"You go to hell! There's better ways of evening up a score than punching a man in the face," the man growled, and stepping into the boat, shoved off to the sloop.

Duncan shook his head. "Ye've a dangerous enemy there, lad. Ye'd best keep an eye on him. He'll strike like a snake when ye're least expectin' it."

"I'm not afraid of him," Tom replied. "He won't bother me. No one but a damned coward would treat anyone as he treated that Indian."

The old factor nodded. "Aye, 'twas a cowardly act. Ye'll take note, lad, that a man in a temper has no judgment. He loses all sense of proportion. The droppin' of a piece in the lake is a matter o' common occurrence, an' ordinarily would ha' draw'd na more than a cursin'. But your defiance o' him threw him into a fury. Wi' a gun in ye're hand he dared na attack ye, so he vented his spleen on yon Injun. Always ye'll see it—a mon in a fury takes it oot on the weak an' the helpless. Thus cowardice an' uncontrolled temper go hand in hand. Do na underrate him, lad. He's cunnin'—an' he knows the country. An' he'll hate ye the more because ye belittled him before these people. For well he knows that moccasin telegraph will carry word o' it to far places."

AFTER breakfast the following morning a Company Indian stowed Tom's effects on the launch, and Duncan accompanied him to the beach. He handed over Campbell's letter. "Show this to Cameron at Reliance an' he'll see ye through to McTavish's."

Shultz came up. "How about that tow?" he asked.

The factor eyed him bleakly. "There'll be na tow."

"No tow! What do you mean? I've wasted a whole day while you fooled around with the launch. By God, you can't go back on your bargain!"

"Three was na bargain. I offered to tow ye fer a price. Ye refused the price. The offer is withdraw'd."

"Withdraw'd—hell! You can't withdraw it! A bargain's a bargain! You said 'five cents a pound' and I'll pay your price. You can't back down—and the freeze-up right on us. By God, I'll sue the Company!"

Duncan shrugged. "Sue an' ye want to. 'Tis all the same to me. I named my price, an' ye bid me go to hell, after offerin' me a price o' ye're own, which I did'na accept. I'll na go to hell on ye're say-so; an' ye'll na get a tow on mine."

The man's eyes flickered and his voice was hoarse with fury. "I'll sue the Company! If I said 'go to hell,' it was just a way of speaking. I just now accepted your price. Buckner heard me!"

Tom grinned into the face of the enraged man. "Don't count on me for a witness. Remember you told me that if I made this trip I'd never come back."

The man ignored the taunt. "By God, Duncan, you've got to tow me! I'll never make it up the lake, and only that lazy Wolf Jaw to help me. Look at the wind! I can't make an offing till it shifts. The freeze-up'll catch me, sure as hell."

"Aye. Likely. But I heard ye threaten the lad here. An' bein' as he's a Company mon, 'tis my duty to see thot he gets to Reliance in safety. If ye was a mon I could trust, I'd gi' ye the tow. I might e'en think o' it if I

was goin' mysel', so I could keep an eye on ye. But I ain't goin'—an' onythin' could happen oot on yon lake—an' no mon could say 'twas not an accident."

"You lie!" cried the man in a fury, and whirled on Tom. "This is your doing! Well damn you, you'll wish you'd heeded my warning. I'm Shultz—you can't do this to me, and get away with it! Not in this country, you can't!"

For answer Tom turned on his heel and stepped aboard the launch.

IV

ON GREAT SLAVE LAKE

JOE CRUTCH busied himself with the motor while Jack Big Man cast off the lines. As they drew away Tom grinned and waved a farewell to the two who watched from the wharf. The next moment he dived into the cabin as a fountain of spray broke over the bow, wetting him to the skin. Jack Big Man followed, closing the door behind him.

As the light craft pitched and tossed in the waves Tom surveyed the interior. A row of lockers along each side served as seats. A two-burner gasoline stove was wired to the top of a small table fixed to the stern bulkhead. Beside it was a box containing tin plates, and cups, and an assortment of knives, forks, and spoons. Forward of the motor Tom Crutch sat at the wheel peering out through a narrow window below which the compass was fixed. A single dirty pane of glass set amidship on each side served for lighting. Astern, beside the stove, two steps led upward to the deck. The four-cycle, heavy-duty motor functioned in a pit amidship that left only a narrow footway on each side.

So low was the ceiling that it was impossible to stand upright.

Inching his way forward along his bench, Tom brought up beside Joe Crutch and tried to peer out through the window against which, at every pitch of the boat, great splashes of water struck with a force that threatened to smash the pane.

"I can't see a damned thing," he said.

The Indian shrugged. "No got for see. Hol' on compass course. Bye-um-bye, mebbe so tonight, mak' de lee."

"Do you mean we've got to toss around like this all day?"

"Mebbe-so win' go down. Mebbe-so git more."

"I don't believe this damned tub would stand a much harder blow," Tom said, as the cabin shuddered to the impact of a deluge of water. "I sure hope you did a good job on the motor. If she'd ever quit we'd be in a hell of a fix."

Again the Indian shrugged. "Motor no quit. Mebbe-so boat leak too mooch. Got no time to caulk hull."

As Tom slid back along his bench he noticed that Jack Big Man was busy with a hand pump.

The stale air stank of exhaust fumes and hot oil. It was only by bracing his feet against the raised rim of the motor pit that Tom was able to maintain his seat as the light craft pitched and tossed in the huge waves. For an hour he sat glumly watching Jack Big Man's hand go up and down, up and down as he worked at the hand pump. He became conscious of a dull ache in his head, and a feeling of nausea in the pit of his stomach. His damp clothing clung clammily to his skin as he sat there inwardly cursing the North, with its fog and lashing wind, its stinking fish boxes, and stinking boats, and its sombre unsmiling people. He cursed Duncan for not heading him back upriver when he had demanded it. And he cursed Shultz for ordering him out of the country and thus crystallizing within him a determination to stay. And he cursed Don Campbell for sending him here in the first place. He became violently sick and vomited into the motor pit. "A land of vast possibilities," Campbell had said. "A young man's land—a land of romance." Romance—hell! Where's the romance in sitting on a hard board in a dirty stinking boat tossing around in the middle of a lake puking into a greasy motor pit while Don Campbell sits there in his big airy office dictating letters to a swell-looking secretary?

STAGGERING toward the stern, he wrenched the door open, and filled his lungs with clean air. He stood on the lower step, his hands braced against either side of the doorway and retched violently. Huge green waves tipped with foaming white-water swept past in never ending succession.

His eyes sought the horizon. But there was no horizon—only the waves, and rolling masses of gray fog. A huge wave, breaking upon the deck, sent barrels of water cascading down the steps. He managed to slam the door shut and turned to see Jack Big Man scowling as he worked at the pump.

Crossing to the Indian, he took hold of the pump handle. "I'll work for a while," he said. "You must be tired."

The man eyed him dubiously. "You no good for seek," he said. "Got to keep on pump."

"I'll take it. Hell, I might as well be pumping as sitting around wishing I was dead."

Relinquishing his grip on the handle, the Indian made his way aft, picked up a gasoline can, and proceeded to fill the tank of the stove, no mean feat in the wild tossing cabin, and accomplished only after spilling a liberal portion over the stove and table. When, a moment later he applied a match, the whole outfit burst into flame which leaped clear to the ceiling. Unperturbed, the man raised the lid of a locker and drew out a slab of salt pork, and when the flames died down, opened the valve of the burners, and with his belt knife proceeded to cut thick slices of salt pork which he tossed into a frying pan. Picking up a teapot, he stepped hurriedly through the door, and returned a moment later to toss in a handful of tea, set it on the other burner.

The pork sizzled in the pan, sending up a cloud of blue smoke which, together with the odor of the spilled gasoline, blended into the stench of the leaky exhaust pipe.

His head aching as though about to burst and his stomach churning in a deadly nausea, Tom worked doggedly at the pump. A short time later, when the Indian tendered him a plate containing two slices of pork, a hunk of dubious-looking bread, and a cup of tea, black as tar, he all but turned inside out. "Take that damned greasy mess away from here!" he managed to gasp between spasms of retching.

The man nodded, and seating himself on the bench, proceeded to devour the unsavory meal. When he had finished he went forward and relieved Joe Crutch at the wheel, the latter passing aft to devour a like repast. When it was finished, he lighted a villainous pipe, tinkered around the motor a few minutes, and when the pipe was finished, he unrolled Tom's sleeping bag which he spread on the floor, and took over the pump. "You pret' seek," he said. "Dat better you lay down."

Tom managed a wan smile. "I guess I'm not much good," he said.

The Indian regarded him gravely. "Lots of mans git seek on de lak. You good man, a'ri'. Mos' mens no work—jes' puke. You work an' puke, too. You good mans."

And sick as he was, Tom found himself taking strange comfort in the words.

For hours Tom lay on the heaving, pitching floor trying vainly to sleep. If only he could sleep—could lose consciousness, could forget the throbbing pain in his head and the terrible nausea in his stomach. Finally he must have slept, for he awoke as he rolled across the cabin and brought up suddenly against the opposite lockers. For several moments he lay there his throbbing brain half-conscious of a difference—the boat still tossed and heaved, but instead of the fore and aft pitching, it was now a sidewise roll, and there was a strange stillness in the cabin. He sat up to see the two Indians bending over the motor—and suddenly he realized that its steady throbbing had ceased. The air was strong with the odor of raw gasoline.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

Joe Crutch pointed to the motor. "Gas line bust."

CRAWLING to the pit Tom examined the break in the copper tubing near the carburetor. The valve at the outlet of the tank forward had been closed cutting off the flow of gas. He noted that with each roll of the boat the motor shifted slightly on its base of squared timbers. He pointed to a loosened nut. "There's your trouble," he said. "That loose nut let the motor work back and forth when the boat pitched till it broke the pipe. Got any extra tubing?"

After rummaging about in a locker that contained an assortment of nuts, bolts, discarded sparkplugs and other junk, Joe Crutch shook his head. "No got," he announced.

A huge wave struck the cabin of the wallowing craft with a force that heeled her far over and sent all three crashing

against the locker bench. Tom raised his hand to his forehead and withdrew it to find his fingers covered with blood. Blood trickled into his eye and whipping out his handkerchief, he knotted it about his forehead. "It looks like we're in a hell of a fix," he said. "How far off shore are we?"

Joe Crutch shook his head. "Mebbe-so two, t'ree mile—mebbe-so ten mile. No kin tell. Too mooch for damn fog."

Jack Big Man shrugged. "Pret' queek mebbe-so we hit de rocks. Den we go to hell damn queek, ba gos'."

Another wave heeled the craft far over. "A few more like that and we'll hit the rocks bottom up," Tom said, "and the way I feel, the sooner it happens, the better."

Joe Crutch pointed at the water which had begun to slosh about in the motor pit. "She spreeng more leak," he said sombrely. "No kin pump fas' 'nough, now. Bye-um-bye de water she be on de floor."

Seated on the floor with his back against the locker bench and his heels braced against the rim of the pit, Tom stared apathetically at the greasy water that sloshed about the base of the motor. Sick at his stomach, with his head throbbing at every pulse beat, and his forehead stinging from the fresh cut, the words of Donald Campbell recurred to him. "A land of stark tragedy—a tough land—a land to try a man's body and soul—a land of opportunity for the man who can master it—but no land for a weakling." And then old Stuart Duncan's words uttered in the trading room: " 'Tis a hard land, and grim. A land that will make a man, or break him. There'll be times when it will take all you've got in you of brains and brawn to survive. But 'tis living, lad! 'Tis living!"

Something stirred suddenly within Tom, he shook his head as though to rid it of the throbbing pulse beats of pain. "By God, I'm no weakling!" he cried aloud. "Damned if I'm going to sit here and drown in this stinking cabin like a rat in a trap! If the North wants to fight, by God, we'll fight it!"

The two Indians stared stupidly at him, then glanced one to the other, and Jack Big Man, who sat close, drew slightly back.

Tom laughed. "No, I'm not crazy. But we'd all be crazier than hell to sit here and drown or be pounded to pieces on the rocks. Come on—get busy. We can't do anything about the gas line with the boat popping around like she is. But you fellows get out on deck and heave the anchor over. Give her all the line you've got. She may catch and hold before we hit the rocks."

Joe Crutch pondered the order. Half a minute later he nodded, motioned to the other to follow, and together they disappeared through the doorway. When they returned Tom was already working at the pump Jack Big Man eyed the water in the motor pit. "No kin pump fas' 'nough. De water, she come in."

"We can keep the pump going and slow it down by that much," Tom replied. "We'll change off every half hour and pump like hell."

Joe Crutch nodded. "Dat right. Mebbe-so we hol' her. Mebbe-so pret queek de anchor ketch. Mebbe-so night com' de win' go down."

"That's right," Tom grinned, "and mebbe-so if this boat ever quits bucking like a broncho we can find some way to fix that gas line."

IT WAS on Jack Big Man's shift at the pump that the anchor caught. The side roll gave way to the fore and aft pitch, and Tom made his way aft and threw open the door. He stepped out onto the deck holding onto the combing of the roof, and glanced about him. Dusk was gathering. All about him the fog was lifting in great patches, and to the southward he could see the dark green of the spruce forest. The wind seemed steadier, now. It still blew, but the fury of successive squalls was absent. Joe Crutch joined him on the deck. His eyes swept the horizon in a complete circle. He pointed upward where a half moon showed through a rift in the clouds. "Win' go down, now," he said, and glanced shoreward where a line of white foam and dashing spray showed against the dark shoreline. "Ba gos' dat good t'ing we t'row out anchor. You good mans, a' ri'. You damn good mans."

The wind died down rapidly. Tom's headache abated, and his stomach felt better. Nevertheless, while the Indians prepared supper he remained on deck, refusing any food, drinking dipperfuls of cold lake water.

The shifts at the pump were lengthened to an hour, giving each man two hours of

sleep between shifts, and with satisfaction Tom noted that the waterline in the pit remained stationary. Morning found his sickness gone, and he enjoyed a breakfast of caribou steak and heavy bread washed down with copious draughts of black tea. Stepping out on deck he filled his lungs with the crisp clean air, and grinned at the little wavelets that sparkled in the sunlight. "Round one finished—and I'm still in the ring. But it was damn near a knockout, at that."

Joe Crutch joined him while Jack Big Man manned the pump. "How far have we come?" he asked.

The Indian scanned the shoreline. " 'Bout forty mile." He pointed to a rocky point, half a mile distant. "Leetle bay roun' de point. Jim Okabee got trapper shack dere."

"We can probably figure some way to fix the gas line," Tom said. "But I sure wish we could do a little caulking on the hull. If we run into another blow like that she may open up so the pump won't hold her. If we could get her around into that bay we might run her into shallow water and see what we can do."

The Indian pointed to a couple of pike poles slung under the roof combing. "We pull oop de anchor, de win' push her mor' near de shore, den we shove her 'roun' point wit' de poles. Good gravel beach in bay. We pull her out an' feex her."

"Pull her out!" Tom exclaimed. "How the hell can we pull her out? She weighs tons."

The Indian smiled. "Me, I'm rig Spanish win'lass. Cut two skid an' haul her out wit' anchor rope. No hard. We fin' sprung plank—spike her back, caulk her oop—two day—good an' tight. But no kin feex gas line. Got no pipe. Got no tape. Got no solder."

Tom laughed. "If you fellows can manage to get the boat out where we can caulk her, you bet your life I'll find some way to fix that gas line. Come on, let's get the anchor up and get busy. The quicker we get this trip over with the better I'll like it."

It took the combined efforts of the two and the adroit use of a pike pole to free the anchor which had lodged firmly between two rocks ten feet below the surface. When this was finally accomplished, the boat drifted slowly shoreward in the light breeze until, in four or five feet of water, it was child's play for the two to pilot her by standing in the bow, planting the end of the iron-shod poles against the bottom and walking to the stern, and repeating the performance until she was snugly moored in the little bay.

Removing their shoes and trowsers the two Indians lowered themselves over the stern into three feet of water and waded ashore carrying a couple of axes, a light crowbar, an inch-and-a-quarter auger, and a spade.

Standing on the deck Tom realized that if it were humanly possible for them to get the heavy launch into a position for caulking, no more propitious spot could have been found. In the cove a fifty-foot strip of hard gravel sloped gently from the water's edge to the forest of towering spruce. On either side of the horseshoe cove the forest rose abruptly from the very edge of the lake. Just within the edge of the timber at the toe of the horseshoe he could see the windowless log shack of the trapper with its rusted stovepipe sticking out through the dirt roof.

Selecting a spot some ten feet directly in front of a tall spruce, Jack Big Man proceeded to dig a hole, while Joe Crutch shouldered his ax and disappeared into the timber.

Tom grinned to himself and stepped down into the cabin. "If they know what they're doing, they know a damn sight more than I do," he muttered, "but there must be some way to repair that busted tube."

A thorough search of the locker that held the odds and ends of junk failed to disclose anything that might be of use. With a wrench he tightened the loosened nut that had allowed the motor to vibrate and break the gas line. Then he made sure that the nuts on the other five bolts that fixed the motor to the base were tight.

WITH a file, he smoothed the jagged ends of the copper tubing so they fitted perfectly together. Then for a long time he sat there scowling, racking his brain for a solution of the problem. He realized that he was thirsty and picking up the water pail, stepped out on deck and reaching down, dipped it full. As he set it on the table beside the stove, his eye fell on the wooden

hand grip that turned loosely on the heavy wire bail. For a long moment he stood there staring at the wooden grip. It was but the work of a few moments, with the aid of a pair of pliers to remove the bail, straighten it, and slip off the grip. Finding that the hole through the grip was too small to accommodate the tubing, he lighted the gas stove, procured a large spike from the junk box, and heating it red hot, enlarged the hole to the exact diameter of the tubing, each end of which he forced in until they met in the center. It looked like a good tight job, but when a moment later he opened the valve and let gas into the tubing, it leaked badly at both ends of the wooden grip. A thorough search of the cabin failed to turn up any glue, or tar, or other material that might be used to seal the leak.

"Maybe the Indians can figure out some kind of cement," he muttered, and stepping out on deck, he pulled off his shoes and trousers and waded ashore to find the crank of the windless already in shape. This consisted of a peeled spruce shaft, set vertically, its lower end in the two-foot deep hole. On the lake side near the bottom of the hole a short block of spruce had been fitted horizontally, and notched so that the upright shaft fitted snugly against it. Near the top of the ten-foot shaft a loop of rope connected it with the big spruce tree that stood directly behind it. Waist-high on the shaft an inch-and-a-quarter hole had been bored through the shaft to admit the crowbar.

Proceeding up the shore a short distance, the Indians felled two towering spruce trees so that they crashed into the lake. Pulling off their clothing, they waded out and trimmed off the limbs. Jack Big Man waded out to the boat and returned shortly with the anchor rope which was made fast to one of the timbers. Stripping off his own clothing, Tom stepped into the icy water, and all three heaved on the line. Slowly the sixty-foot timber swung until its eighteen-inch butt was free of the shore. Towing it to the cove, the butt end was swung outward, and the line made fast to the small end. Carrying the line ashore Crutch took a dozen wraps around the vertical shaft. The rope at the top of the shaft and the bearing at the bottom were well-greased with motor oil, and as Jack Big Man and Tom manned the crowbar, thrust through the hole in the shaft, Joe Crutch seated himself and with his heels braced took in the slack as the two walked round and round, drawing the timber ashore. The second timber was drawn in beside it, and by means of rope rolling the two were spaced about eight feet apart. With their axes the Indians hewed the top surfaces of the timbers flat, and then cut and peeled half a dozen six-inch rollers. The rope was made fast to the bow of the boat, and Tom wondered, with one man hauling in the slack, and the other two on the crowbar, who would handle the rollers? Joe Crutch promptly solved the problem by boring another hole through the shaft, cutting the rope to the proper length, thrusting the end through the hole and tying it, thus doing away with any slack.

With Tom and Jack Big Man walking round and round the shaft the boat slid silently through the water, and as she reached the ends of the timbers which were well under water, Joe Crutch slipped a roller under her. Slowly the bow lifted and the two on the crowbar labored mightily as inch by inch the craft was drawn up the gently slanting skids, its bow rising higher and higher. Finally the center of gravity was reached, the stern lifted, she teetered uncertainly for a moment, then the bow crashed down onto the new roller that Crutch was holding in place. The strain on the shaft eased a bit, and a half-hour later, resting on four rollers, the craft was clear of the water. The rollers were chocked, and another line run from the bow to the big spruce tree, and the shaft locked by means of another rope passed from the crowbar to the tree.

The sun hung low in the west, and as the three threw themselves down on the ground for a rest, Tom realized that he was ravenously hungry.

He grinned at Joe Crutch who was rolling a cigarette. "By Gosh, yesterday I was so damn sick I thought I never wanted to see anything more to eat—and now I could eat a raw dog."

The Indian returned the grin. "No got no dog. But by damn, pret queek we all eat. We work lak hell."

"I'll say we did," Tom replied, eyeing the two men with respect, "and believe me, you fellows know your stuff. That Spanish windlass trick is sure worth knowing. When you

spoke of hauling the launch out I thought you were crazy. Old Don Campbell certainly spoke a mouthful when he said this is a man's country—and do you know, I'm beginning to like it."

Jack Big Man nodded. "Good country—plent' lake, plent' wood, plent' fish, plent' fur. You like um a' ri'. You got de guts. You no queet. Bye-um-bye you git more savvy. Den you be damn good mans."

After a short rest the Indians rose, Crutch climbed into the cabin and passed out food and cooking utensils. "We go Jim Okabee shack. Got stove in dere—got bunk."

"Your friend Jim don't seem very sociable," Tom said. "We've been here all day and he hasn't even showed up."

"He no live here. Dis winter trap shack. W'en de lake freeze, den he come."

AS Crutch lighted a candle he found thrust into the neck of a bottle Tom glanced into the interior of the tiny shack. A stove, a bunk built against the wall, a rude pole table, and an empty keg that evidently served as a chair constituted the furnishing. Bunches of steel traps of various sizes, and a coil of snare wire hung from nails driven into the wall. A fire was lighted in the stove, and soon the tea pail was a-boil, and thick caribou steaks were sizzling in the pan. They ate outside as the sun went down, sitting cross-legged on the ground.

Leaving the bunk for the Indians, Tom slipped into his sleeping bag placed on a thick bed of spruce branches and the next thing he knew it was daylight and Joe Crutch was shaking his shoulder.

Breakfast over, the hull was pumped dry, a sprung plank was spiked into place, and while Tom and Jack Big Man worked on the seams with caulking irons and oakum, Joe Crutch took the tea pail and disappeared into the timber. Hours later he returned with the pail nearly filled with gum he had collected with his belt knife from spruce trees.

Building a little fire, he heated one end of a narrow strip of steel and went to work with the spruce gum that melted at the touch of the hot steel, completely sealing the seams.

Tom watched the procedure with interest, then suddenly, he laid down his caulking iron and climbed into the cabin of the boat to return a few minutes later with a cup half filled with gasoline. As the Indian looked on in stolid silence he tossed a couple of pinches of spruce gum into the gasoline and for several minutes stirred the mess with a twig as he stared intently into the cup.

"By God, we've got her licked!" he cried, and tossing the contents onto the ground, filled the cup with spruce gum and climbed back into the cabin.

With the boat canted at an angle as she lay on the rollers, he loosened the gas stove which was wired to the table, and by means of his duffel bag, managed to level it on the floor. Lighting it, he melted the spruce gum down, and with narrow strips of cloth torn from an extra shirt dipped into the molten gum, he proceeded to wind his joint into the broken tubing. Twice he returned for more gum, and when he had finished he regarded his handiwork with approval—a cigar-shaped joint, hard as a rock, connected the broken ends of the gas line. Then he returned to his caulking. The job was finished shortlly after sunset and the boat eased back into the water. Tom's glance strayed from the boat floating on an even keel on the placid water of the cove to the lake beyond the point where a stiff west wind was kicking up quite a sea. "Do we pull out tonight, or wait till morning" he asked. "Anyway, the winds in our favor, now. We won't be bucking those damned waves."

"No kin run in de night," Joe Crutch said. "Pret queek de lake she no so beeg, no mor'. Too mooch rocks in de water. But firs' we got to feex gas line."

"The gas line's all fixed," Tom smiled. "I told you that if you fellows could get the boat out where we could caulk her, I'd figure some way to fix the gas line."

The Indian nodded. "W'en I climb een de boat las' night for git de grub I seen how you feex de line wit' de pail han'l. Ba gos', dat look pret' good an' tight. But I'm turn on de gas an' she leak like hell. Waste too mooch—mebbe-so run out of gas."

"She don't leak now," Tom said. "When I saw you sealing up the seams with that pitch I had a hunch that we could use it to seal the gas line, too."

The man shook his head, doubtfully. "Me, I ain' t'ink dat work ver' good. De gas she cut de grease, she cut de tar—

mebbe-so she cut de pitch an' come on right t'rough."

"The gas won't cut pitch," Tom said. "I got some gas in a cup and threw some pitch into it and tried to dissolve it—but the gas wouldn't touch it—so I went ahead and covered the joint, pail grip and all, with strips of cloth soaked in pitch. Then I turned on the gas and left it on. If you go out there and look, I'll bet you'll find it hasn't leaked a drop."

Pulling off his trousers, the Indian waded out and climbed aboard. Ten minutes later he was back. "She good an' tight," he announced, and Tom caught a note of respect in his voice as he added. "You a' ri'. By gos', you t'ink wit' de head."

SUPPER over Crutch eyed the heavens thickly studded with glittering stars. "Git col', tonight," he said. "Mus' got to run boat out an' anchor in de rough water. Mebbe-so de leetle bay freeze oop."

"Do you mean we've got to go out and pop around all night in that damned sea without even a bunk to sleep in?" Tom asked, with such evident disgust that the Indian smiled.

"Me, I'm take her out. You an' Jack sleep here. In de mornin' I run her in close to de point, an' you git aboard."

"But how are you going to sleep out there on the hard floor, bobbing around like a cork?"

The man shrugged. "Mebbe-so sleep—mebbe-so no sleep. Anyhow, in de morning we no be freeze in de ice."

And in the morning Tom realized the wisdom of the Indian's decision as he awoke to find the surface of the cove frozen solid for a quarter of a mile out from shore. A half mile away, the boat tossed at anchor a few hundred yards off the joint.

Jack Big Man emerged from the shack bearing two plates of sizzling caribou steak. Breakfast over, the dishes were washed and, together with what remained of the grub, were placed in a packsack. "We go out to point, now," he said, "an' Joe run de boat in an' pick us oop."

Again Tom's glance swept the ice-locked cove. "A man's sure got to know his stuff in this country, just to keep on living," he remarked, more to himself than to the other.

The Indian nodded. "All time look wit' de eyes. All time learn. No fergit nuttin'. Bye-um-bye you savvy. All time keep de head. All time do de right t'ing—git 'long good. Sometime do de wrong t'ing—pouff!"

"Pouff is right!" Tom laughed. "You couldn't have expressed it more clearly."

V

SHULTZ SHOWS HIS HAND

THE wind held stiff from the west, and running before it, they made good time until well toward evening when the motor started to miss, and just on the edge of darkness they limped into the lee of the large island halfway between Point Keith and the upper narrows.

As Jack Big Man heaved the anchor overboard, he pointed toward shore where, in the heavy shadow of the dense spruce forest, a small sloop rode at anchor. "Dat Shultz," he said. "Two day he got de tail-win'. Make good time."

A few minutes later a canoe put off from the sloop and headed for the launch. Joe Crutch glanced at Tom. "Shultz come," he said. "You watch um. Him bad mans. Him no forgit you knock him down. Mebbe-so try for git even."

"I'm not afraid of him," Tom replied. "He's probably coming to threaten me again. He's good at that."

The canoe drew alongside and Shultz stepped onto the low after deck. "Heard you come in on two cylinders," He said affably. "Came over to see if I could help you out. I've had considerable experience with motors."

"Thanks," Tom replied, looking the man squarely in the eye, "But we don't need any help. There's nothing wrong that we can't attend to ourselves."

"Better let me have a look," the man replied, ignoring the rebuff and taking a step toward the cabin.

Tom barred the way. "Don't go in there," he said abruptly. "Keep away from that motor."

The man's lips sneered. "Afraid I'll damage it, eh? Afraid I'll put it out of commission?"

"I know damned well you would, if you had the chance."

"The trouble with you, Buckner, you haven't been here long enough to know that in this country, if a man's in trouble, we help him whether we like him, or not."

"I've been here long enough to know that I wouldn't trust you out of my sight. Don't play me for a damned fool, Shultz. You warned me to keep away from McTavish's—told me that if I came up the lake, I'd never go back. I'm not at McTavish's yet—but I'm on my way. Let's lay our cards on the table, Shultz. You hate me, and I despise you. That's fair enough. You may get me, because you know the country, and a hundred and one tricks that I don't. But I'm warning you that if you expect to get me you better make it snappy, because I learn fast. And don't expect to get me by any such clumsy trick as pretending to befriend me. I guess we understand each other, now—so get the hell off this boat."

The pale eyes flickered with rage. "Who do you think you are, to order me off this boat? You're nothing but a passenger, and this is a Company boat!"

"Yes, this is a Company boat—and I'm a Company man. Don't forget that. Do you get off? Or do I throw you off?"

With a bellow of fury the man launched himself at Tom, his arms spread to grasp him about the middle. Without bothering to side-step, Tom shot a terrific left that caught the larger man squarely on the point of the chin so that his teeth clashed audibly. Stopped in his tracks, his eyes rolling wildly, he sought to raise his arms as a stinging right and left landed on his face. He staggered backward off the deck and into the canoe which promptly overturned. His head appeared above the surface and a couple of strokes brought him to the side. Reaching upward he grasped the edge of the deck with both hands.

Joe Crutch glanced at Tom. "Mebbe-so step on de fingers, eh? Dat damn good t'ing he git drownded. He try for t'row you in de lake—me an' Jim seen dat. We tell de p'lice."

Tom shook his head. "No. Haul him aboard and right his canoe and put him in it and shove him off. That's twice I've knocked him down. Maybe now he'll leave me alone."

When the man had disappeared in the direction of his sloop, Crutch eyed Tom with vast respect. "By damn, you good mans! How you hit so hard—so fas'?"

JACK BIG MAN returned the ax to its loop of leather on the side of the cabin. "I'm t'ink he t'row Tom in de lake I knock him on de head—nex' t'ing I'm know Shultz is in de lake. By gos', I'm like I'm know how you done dat!"

Tom laughed. "Oh, I was considered pretty good with the gloves, back in Winnipeg. A man can never tell when some trick he learns will come in handy."

The wind rose to a steady roar and the tall spruce spires on the island tossed wildly, limned against the afterglow. Safe in the lee the two boats tugged lightly at their anchor ropes as they rocked in the backwash. While Jack Big Man prepared supper, Tom watched Joe Crutch tinker about the motor by the light of a stinking lantern. As the food was forked onto the plates he gave it up.

"Too mooch dark. No kin see. Mebbe-so crack sparkplug. Mebbe-so distributor. Mebbe-so points need filin'. Fix um in de mornin'."

Spreading their beds on the cabin floor the three were soon asleep. Tom was awakened by someone stumbling over him. In the inky blackness of the tiny cabin he could see nothing, but he realized that the boat was tossing and rolling horribly. "What's the matter? Has the wind changed?" he asked, as Joe Crutch reached the door and threw it open. Sitting up in his blankets, Jack Big Man struck a match and lighted the lantern. Tom glanced at his watch. It was half past three. Wriggling from his sleeping bag, he followed Jack Big Man to the deck.

Stars glittered in the sky. He glanced toward the west, but there was no skyline of spruce—no island—no lee—only huge white-capped waves, with the boat wallowing in the trough between. "The anchor rope broke, and we're drifting!" he cried, hanging onto the cabin combing.

Jack Big Man, with his lantern, followed Joe Crutch along the narrow strip of deck that flanked the cabin toward the bow. Presently the two returned.

"De rope no broke," he announced. "She cut. Dat damn Shultz, she cut de rope." He paused and glanced reproachfully into Tom's face. "Dat better you let me step on

his fingers, las' night. Ba gos', dat good t'ing he drownded in de lake!"

"Hell—we couldn't do that," Tom replied, his eyes sweeping the darkness in a vain effort to pick up a shoreline. "Where are we drifting? How much time have we got before we pile up on the rocks?"

Jack Big Man dived into the cabin with his lantern and consulted the compass. Presently he thrust his head through the doorway. "De win' she shif' leetle bit nort'. Dat damn good t'ing. We driftin' down in Christie Bay!"

"Into a bay!" Tom exclaimed. "Then it won't be long before we're on the rocks."

"Got long time," Joe Crutch said. "Christie Bay beeg bay—forty, feefty mile. Tak' long time to git on nudder side."

"Okay. But even so, we better not wait for daylight to get the motor going. One of you can work on it while the other holds the light. I'll man the pump—and I better be getting at it. My stomach is beginning to churn around, and half an hour from now I won't be worth a damn."

After some five minutes of pumping the handle suddenly met with no resistance and a queer sucking noise was audible. Tom glanced toward the two bent over the motor. "We're in a hell of a fix, now—the damned pump let go!"

Joe Crutch's lips twisted into a grin. "Pump a' ri'," he said. "No got nuttin' to pump. No water in de bilge. By damn, we caulk her good! De pump she suck de air."

DEATHLY sick, Tom curled up on his sleeping bag, and with tight-pressed lips, fought his nausea. After what seemed an eternity of misery daylight broke and he crawled to the doorway and looked out. As the Indian had said, Christie Bay is a forty- or fifty-mile stretch of water, but Tom saw at a glance that the boat was not destined to drift the full length of it. She wallowed helplessly, sinking into the troughs and rising on the crests, directly toward a rocky shoreline, not over two or three miles distant. The wind seemed to increase in fury, every now and then a huge wave would break against the cabin bulkhead and cascade across the deck in foaming torrent. Ahead he could see the high-flung spray where the waves dashed against the rocks. The sun peeped over the horizon and in the added light of its slanting rays he could see the waves breaking over low black ridges of rock reefs a half mile off shore.

Tom had no means of estimating the speed of the boat's drift, but as he looked it seemed that each moment brought the rugged shoreline and the outlying reefs more clearly into view. Without power, without even an anchor to check the relentless onthrust of the boat, he realized that it wouldn't be long before she crashed to destruction on a reef—realized, too, that when she struck there was not a chance in a thousand for any man on her to escape with his life.

He glanced over his shoulder at the two Indians working over the motor, and was about to call to them when he suddenly changed his mind. There was nothing they could do on deck, even if they could keep their footing. The pike poles would be useless as matchsticks in fending off from the reefs. Better not distract their attention—the one hope of safety lay in getting the motor going. With tight-pressed lips, he again fixed his eyes on the breaking waves and the ever shortening foreground of tossing whitecaps. It wouldn't be long, now—a half-hour, maybe—then a crash, and the ripping and grinding of timbers—then icy waters closing over his head, and a few minutes of futile struggling amid waves and cross currents.

As he thus faced almost certain destruction Tom's thoughts turned to Shultz—to the ruthless efficiency of the man's revenge. He knew the country—knew the direction of the wind—knew to a certainty that without power or even an anchor, there was not a chance in the world to save the boat from destruction. And Shultz knew that once the destruction had been accomplished there wasn't a chance of his being held accountable.

His eyes on the ever nearing reefs, Tom was surprised that no surge of fury rose within him against the man who, deliberately and with malice, was ending his life. As Shultz had said, the country wasn't big enough for both of them. A grim smile twisted his lips at the thought that had it not been for the fact that Shultz had ordered him to stay away from McTavish's, he would be on his way back to Winnipeg at this very

moment instead of facing death in the icy waters of Great Slave Lake. In the course of a few short days he and this man, of whose very existence he had been ignorant, had become mortal enemies—and all because of a girl he, himself, had never seen. He realized that with both of them in the North, a showdown was inevitable. "And this is it," he muttered, "and it looks like Shultz wins."

THE reefs were closer now—he could hear the roar of the waves as they dashed against the rocks. He was surprised that he was not afraid. Reaching down, he unlaced his pacs. An explosion sounded overside like the crack of a gun and a puff of blue smoke drifted down wind, then the sound became a rhythmic series of explosions, he felt the hull vibrate beneath his feet, and pitching wildly the boat nosed around into the wind. "Good God—the motor's running!" the words fairly hurled themselves from between his lips, and he turned to face Joe Crutch who joined him in the doorway.

"Fin' wan crack sparkplug, file points, fin' leetle plug in needle valve in carburetor, splice wan broke wire to magneto, an' now she go a' ri'."

Stepping aside slightly, Tom pointed to the surf roaring over the reefs only a few yards astern. The Indian eyed them for several moments in silence as their import seeped into his brain. Then a slow grin twisted his lips, as he wiped his greasy hands on his overalls. "Ba gos'—dat good t'ing we git her feex, eh?"

"Yeah," Tom drawled, aware that his heart was pounding wildly, "a damned good thing."

Jack Big Man joined them, and he, too, stared at the reefs. "By damn," he uttered, "dat bes't t'ing you keel Shultz, or ba gos', heem keel you!"

Tom nodded. "Maybe I will, sometime," he said. "Maybe I'll have to."

Hours later, they returned to the lee of the island to find the sloop gone. The motor was throttled down and Joe Crutch, pikepole in hand, stood in the bow, while Jack Big Man sat at the wheel peering through the little window, taking directions from the man in the bow who, eyes on the shoreline, motioned, now to the right, now to the left. Presently he motioned to cut off the motor, and both Indians began grappling with the pikepoles in some eight or ten feet of water. Finally Joe Crutch raised the anchor line from the bottom and it was but the work of a moment to retrieve the anchor.

Tom glanced about him and turned to Joe Crutch, who was coiling the line. "How in the devil did you know the exact spot we were anchored?" he asked, a note of undisguised admiration in his voice.

The man pointed toward shore. "De beeg dead tree on de hill, she line oop wit' de crooked tree on the shore." He faced halfway around and pointed to a rock face on the distant mainland. "Den, dat rock, she line oop wit' point of de island."

"But why did you do all that lining up when we just put in there for the night?" he asked. "You didn't know we'd ever have to come back here."

"No t'ink we got to come back. But dat bes' you always take sight nort'-sout'—eas'-wes'—den you kin tell if you drif' an' drag de anchor. Dat bes' all de time you know w'at you do."

They got under way and a couple of hours later entered the comparatively placid waters of the narrows. Tom's seasickness, not nearly so violent as the attack of the day before, had abated and he sat on the deck with his back against the cabin bulkhead and watched the shoreline as the light craft threaded its way between the innumerable islands. Caribou appeared here and there on the sand spits, and in a shallow bay a moose broke from the water amid a shower of flying spray and crashed into the timber. Once they ran close to a bear swimming the narrow channel between two islands, while overhead ducks and geese winged past in countless thousands.

JACK BIG MAN appeared with a plate of caribou steak, and Tom grinned. "Don't you fellows ever eat anything but caribou meat?" he asked. "We haven't had anything but caribou and tea and bread, three times a day ever since we started—and it was the same thing at Duncan's. You tell Joe that if he'll circle around and pick 'em up, I'll knock down a few ducks for a change."

"Car'bou good meat. Sometime got moose—sometime got bear. De duck an' de goose a' ri' w'en you kin roast um—no

good for fry—too tough. Mebbe-so you like feesh, eh?"

"Hell, yes! Anything but this damned caribou. It's good meat all right—but a man gets tired of it. If you've got fish, why haven't you cooked some?"

"No got no feesh. W'en you git t'rough I'm take de wheel an' run slow." He pointed to a stout rod rigged with a huge reel of fine wire line, and a trolling bait. "You ketch feesh—I'm cook 'em for supper."

The man went below, and Tom finished his steak washing it down with strong black tea the Indian had served in a bottle to keep it from spilling. Joe Crutch came on deck, and as Tom tossed out the bait and unreeled the line, the Indian proceeded to splice the severed anchor rope. Hardly had the boat slowed down when Tom felt a vicious tug at the line. He reeled in, and presently Joe Crutch leaned over the side and gaffed a fifteen-pound lake trout. "Gosh—what a beauty!" Tom cried, eyeing the flopping fish, its silvery sides gleaming in the sunlight. "What sport a man could have if he had light tackle instead of this damned club of a rod!" He returned the outfit to its rack on the side of the cabin.

"You no ketch no more?" Crutch asked

"No. That ought to be enough for supper and breakfast, and it isn't much sport with that outfit. Sometime I'd like to try 'em with my fly rod."

The Indian nodded. "Wan time comes a man to de post wit' Meester Campbell, an' he have got rod eight, nine foot long an' leetle on de end like de match. Dat rod she don' look like she hol' nuttin'—look like she break all to hell. Meester Campbell sen' me long to leetle riv' dat run in de lake, an' de man tie fly on long piece gut an' t'row de fly out in de riv'. W'en she hit de water de bluefeesh grab him an' I'm t'ink dat leetle rod she break in two. But ba gos', she don' break. She ben' clean roun' like de rainbow—an' de feesh run way—run nudder way for try git loose, but de leetle bit hook in de fly she no break—an' de gut she no break—an' de rod she no break, an' pret' soon de feesh git tire, an' de man pick heem oop in de leetle net. He ketch 'bout forty feesh dat tam—an' de rod no break. Dat dam' tough rod—you bet. You got de rod like dat?"

"Sure. I brought a fly rod along, and plenty of flies, and I'm mighty glad to know there's good stream fishing in the country. But you said the man caught bluefish—what in the devil are bluefish? Back where I come from we fish for trout in the streams—not these lake trout, but speckled trout."

"Got speckle trout in de riv' here, too. But mos' bluefish—w'at Meester Campbell call de greyling—got de beeg square fin on de back."

THE lake widened, the channels between the islands became broader, and presently the narrows were left behind and the boat was again pitching and tossing on monstrous white-capped waves.

Toward the middle of the afternoon, with the course set to clear a long rocky point that jutted into the lake from the southern shore, Jack Big Man, who had been relieved at the wheel, stepped to the cabin door and looked out. "Hey—look!" he cried. "Look over here! Ba gos', dat damn Shultz, he kin no mak' de point! He hol' too close in, an' now he no kin make!"

Joining him in doorway, Tom saw the sloop, pitching in the waves, close hauled, in an attempt to gain enough offing to round the point. But it was evident that she would never make it—that very shortly she would be dashed against the long line of jagged, saw-toothed rocks against which the waves were breaking in fountains of spray.

"Dat damn good t'ing he git smash all to hell!" the Indian said. "Ba gos', he no never cut no more anchor rope."

Tom, his eyes on the sloop, scarcely heard the words. A grim smile twisted his lips. Here was justice—grim, inexorable justice working out right before his eyes. Only a few short hours ago he had stood here in the doorway and contemplated his own certain doom—a doom planned with devilish cunning by this man who now faced the same doom. He wondered what Shultz was thinking about? Was he taking his fate calmly, or was he frantic with terror? Even as he looked the sloop heeled far over, and when she righted herself, the sail was down, draped about the boom sagging off to leeward. He could see two figures moving about the heaving deck. Suddenly one of the figures halted and, jerking the cap from its head, began to beckon wildly. "He just heard the sound of our motor," Tom said.

He turned to Crutch at the wheel. "Run in close to him," he ordered. "And make it snappy. He'll be on the rocks in ten minutes. And you, Jack—you make ready to heave him a line."

The Indians looked astounded. "You goin' to haul heem out?" Joe Crutch asked.

"Sure we'll haul him out. Hell, man—we can't stand here and watch him drown!"

"Ba gos', he like he stan' 'roun' an' see us drownded, dis mornin'! You bet, he no heave us no line."

"That's right," Tom agreed. "Even if Shultz were alone, I'd toss him a line. But there's his Indian—he didn't try to murder us—and he'd drown, too. We've got to give 'em a tow."

"Dat Wolf Jaw, she damn fool to work for Shulz," Jack Big Man growled, as he took a line from one of the lockers, and making his way astern, looped the end around a cleat. They were close now, and Joe Crutch brought the boat around to windward of the sloop. Jack Big Man tossed the coiled line, and in the bow of the sloop, Shultz caught it and made it fast. The line went taut and the sloop swung into the wind behind the launch. Joe Crutch opened the throttle, and slowly they gained offing. Twenty minutes later, the point was astern.

A large island lay a couple of miles ahead, and as they came opposite it, Tom saw that the waves were breaking on a broad flat sandy beach. Stepping aft, he called to Shultz, who stood in the bow of the sloop while his Indian worked at the tangle of ropes about the sail which they had dragged in onto the deck. "Cast off the line! We're leaving you here."

Shultz dived into the cabin, and came out with a rifle. "By God, you're towing me into a lee! We'd be on the beach before we could hoist the sail."

Tom grinned and pointed to the sand. "It's a nice place to land," he said. "No rocks to bust up on."

"If we hit that sand I'd never get her off! The freeze-up would catch us, and we'd have to wait and walk out on the ice."

"That's right," Tom replied. "And that's just what you're going to do. It'll give you plenty of time to think things over. You thought you'd finished me when you cut that anchor rope last night Shultz—and you damn near did. It would have served you right if I'd stood alongside and watched you crash to hell on those rocks, back there—but it would have been too much like murder."

"It's a damn lie—I never cut your anchor rope."

"Someone did," Tom replied, "and you're the one that promised that if I went up the lake, I'd never come back." Drawing the knife from his belt he stepped toward the cleat. Shultz threw the rifle to his shoulder.

"Stand back away from that line, or by God, I'll shoot!" he roared.

Tom sheathed his knife, and stepped into the cabin. "Slow her down, Joe," he ordered. "I don't want to run past that nice sand beach. It'll be fun to see 'em hit it." Opening his leather case, he put his shotgun together, slipped in a couple of shells, and kneeling low, thrust the muzzle over the doorsill. A shot rang out, and then another. The line parted at the cleat, and the sloop yawed into the trough and began to drift toward the sand. Shots sounded, and peering over the doorsill Tom grinned as he saw Shultz standing on the heaving, pitching deck emptying his rifle at the motor boat.

But, owing either to the roll of the sloop, or the blind fury of Shultz, or both, no bullet found its mark. Joe Crutch circled back and slowed down and standing off shore the three watched the sloop hit the sand, and heel far over. Then two figures were running about on the beach, and the waves were pounding against the hull, driving her deeper into the sand, as the spray flew high over her deck.

VI

AT THE HEAD OF THE LAKE

THEY anchored that night in the lee of a long ridge of high hills known as "the Mountain" that rims the north shore for a distance of some forty miles. Daylight found them on their way. The wind had died down in the night, the motor performed beautifully, and seating himself atop the cabin Tom watched the shore slip past. Joe Crutch came on deck and sombrely pointed to a sheet of thin ice that projected a quarter of a mile out into the lake from the mouth of a frozen bay.

"We no git back to Resolution wit' de boat. De narrows, she freeze las' night."

"I've noticed that all the bays and inlets we passed are frozen," Tom said. "But what will you do, if you can't get back?"

The Indian shrugged. "Pull de boat out at Reliance. Cameron sen' her back nex' spring."

"But you fellows? How will you get back?"

"De lake, she freeze pret' queek. Git sled an' couple dog from Cameron. Mebbe-so sometime git de tail-win' rig sail, an' go like hell."

Tom grinned. "You know all the answers. Well—who knows—maybe in a year or so I'll be regarding a two-hundred-and-fifty-mile hike acorss the ice as all in the day's work."

TOWARD noon the Indian pointed to the mouth of a river. "Dat de Hoarfrost," he said. "Shultz, she live 'bout ten, fifteen mile up de riv'. He no git home till de lake freeze. He have got to haul he's stuff on de sled. Ba gos', she be mad like hell! 'Bout t'irty mile now to Reliance."

Cameron stood waiting as the boat slipped alongside the wharf. A tall, lean figure of a man with a deeply weather-lined face.

"I thought my ears belied me when I heard the motor," he said, as line in hand, Joe Crutch stepped onto the wharf. "Has Duncan gone daft sendin' the boat through this time o' year ? My stuff could ha' waited for snow."

Tom stepped from the deck and smiled. "We brought your stuff," he said. "But it was on my account he sent the boat. Here's a letter that will explain."

Cameron took the letter that Campbell had written to Duncan, adjusted his glasses. As Duncan had done, he read it through twice. Folding it, he returned it to the envelope and handed it back, a deep frown furrowing his brow. " 'Tis beyont my ken why McTavish wad be needin' a clerk, what wi' three or four Injuns an' the lass theer at the post. Don Campbell said naething aboot a clerk when he come back from McTavish's in the summer. An' Colin McTavish had ne'er spoke of needin' a clerk. But there's Don Campbell's orders, black on white, an' if he says ye go to McTavish, theer's where ye go. Ye do na look like a Northman, lad. Ye do na look like ye've ever worked o'er hard."

"No, I've lived in Winnipeg all my life."

The thin lips set in a grim smile. "Ye'll find Artilery Lake different from Winnipeg. An' 'gin ye've worked wi' Colin McTavish fer a year, ye'll look like a Northman—an' you'll be one, too. The wee lakes is froze. Ye'll be travellin' light an' make gude time on the portage. I'll send a mon wi' ye i' the mornin'."

WHEN the sloop struck the sand she heeled over on her side precipitating Shultz and Wolf Jaw into the icy water. They scrambled ashore and for a full ten minutes Shultz ran up and down the beach in a perfect frenzy of rage, shaking his fist at the departing boat and hurling futile curses into the teeth of the wind. Then, chilled to the bone, he and the Indian proceeded to salvage the cargo, packing it back into the shelter of the bush where they succeeded in rigging a fairly comfortable shelter out of the sail.

On the fifth night the lake froze and two days later Shultz struck out across the ice for the shore, some ten miles distant. He headed due north for the mouth of a river that drained a long chain of lakes and bisected the Mountain, some twenty-five miles west of the mouth of the Hoarfrost. He knew that the river and lakes were the trapping grounds of many Indians, and he must hire an Indian with a dog outfit to haul his supplies from the island to his camp on the Hoarfrost.

The going was hard. On the long stretches of rough ice, at almost every step his feet wedged between the thin upended slivers that protruded above the frozen mass at every conceivable angle. At one point he was forced to detour two or three miles around an open lead. And on the glassy smooth stretches he was forced to exert himself to the utmost to make any headway against the stiff north wind.

He travelled light, packing only his rifle, sleeping bag, teapot, frying pan, and enough food for two days. As darkness fell he reached shore and, dog tired, pushed into a thick clump of spruce, and slipped into his sleeping bag without eating. In the morning he awoke to find a full fledged blizzard raging. Fine flinty particles of snow, fine as

powder filled the air reducing visibility to an absolute zero. In the shelter of the spruce copse he built a fire and breakfasted heartily on caribou steak and tea.

FOR two days the blizzard raged, and on the morning of the third, with his food gone, Shultz struck off up the river. It was hard going. The turbulent stream had not yet frozen and he was forced to traverse the rough terrain without snowshoes. In the more open places he could walk easily over the surface of the wind-packed snow, but in the timber he sank at every step to his knees, and at places, even to his hips. Rough as the terrain was, he dared not leave the river bank to seek more open country for fear of losing the stream altogether.

At noon he shot two ptarmagin and roasted them over a tiny fire. As darkness fell he was about to camp when he suddenly paused and sniffed the air. Yes—it was unmistakable—the smell of burning spruce. He pushed on, stumbling through the deep snow, tripping over concealed timber, forcing his weary muscles on, pausing every few yards to sniff the air, cursing like a madman when he failed to catch the odor of burning wood. After what seemed hours of gruelling labor, just when it seemed that he could not drive his muscles to another effort, he caught a dull glint of light ahead.

Five minutes later he was pounding on the door of a tiny cabin of logs. The door opened and an Indian stepped aside as the man staggered into the room and dropped exhausted onto the bench beside the table. Closing the door the Indian stood with his back against it, staring in stolid silence. Shultz stood his rifle against the wall, and slipped his limp pack from his shoulders. The heat felt good to the dog-tired man, and he loosened the buttons of his coat. The Indian's silence irritated him.

"Well—can't you talk?" he snapped. "Why the hell don't you say something? What's your name?"

The black eyes met the glance of the pale blue ones squarely. "You ain' know me, huh?"

"No."

"Nem, Johnny Zero. You Shultz. T'ree year ago you chase me off de Hoarfrost. You say 'git off dis riv'. You come back I'm shoot you dead."

Shultz forced a grin. "Oh—well, I'll tell you. I chased a lot of Injuns off the Hoarfrost—some white men, too. The Hoarfrost is my river. I want to be left alone."

"Ain' no man got no riv'," the Indian replied. "I'm tell Cam'ron 'bout dat. He say no man got no riv'. Injun got right to trap on all de riv'. He say go back on de Hoarfrost an' trap all you want."

"He did, did he?"

"He say dat. But I'm ain' go back, 'cause I'm ain' want to git shoot."

"There's plenty of other rivers. What's the matter with this one you're on?"

"No so good trap, lak de Hoarfrost. On de Hoarfrost got only 'bout t'irty mile to Reliance for trade. Here got feefty, seexty mile to go. No so mooch fur here, neider."

"You got a dog outfit—good sled?"

"Seex dog. Good sled. But too mooch far to Reliance."

"To hell with Reliance. I want you to haul some supplies for me. Listen, I went to Resolution for supplies and powder, and coming back my boat ran aground on an island ten miles out in the lake. I've got to leave her there till spring. I waited till the lake froze and then walked out on the ice. I figured I'd find someone on this river and I damn near got bushed getting here. What will you take to haul the stuff to my cabin on the Hoarfrost?"

"How mooch stuff you got?"

"Right around a ton. Hell, you can haul it in one trip as far as the mouth of the Hoarfrost. It isn't much over thirty miles, if you slant across the ice. The last ten or twelve miles up the river to my place you'll probably have to double back."

The Indian considered. "Wan ton, dat more as t'ree hunner poun' to de dog. Too mooch heavy."

"Not on the ice. Hell, man—that sled will slip along over the ice like it was greased."

"Mebbe-so sled break. Mebbe-so ice break—lose de outfit."

"The ice won't break. It's been frozen for damn near a week, now. I came across it when it had only been frozen two nights and it was good and solid. If we hit out in the morning and spend one night on the island, it will be more than a week since it froze—and the nights have been damn cold, too."

"How mooch you pay?"

"How much do you want. It's your sled."

"Your stuff."

"Well, how's fifty dollars?"

"No much 'nough."

"Hell, you'll be back here in three or four days. That's more than you could make trapping in that time."

"Mebbe-so. Mebbe-so no."

"You just got through telling me this isn't a very good trapping ground."

"Not so good like Hoarfrost."

"How's seventy-five dollars, then?"

"No."

Shultz scowled. "I'll give you a hundred—and not a damn cent more. It's a hold-up at that price. You'll never make a hundred dollars any easier."

The Indian was silent for several moments. Finally he spoke. "Me, I'm mak' de deal wit' you. You geeve me wan hunner dollar, an' you let me trap on Hoarfrost. I no bodder you. You no bodder me. You deeg gol'. I'm trap de fur. I no wan' you gol'. You no wan' de fur. I like to trap on de Hoarfrost. But I'm no want to git shoot."

"Okay. It's a deal. Cook me up something to eat and we'll roll in. We want to get an early start in the morning."

WHILE the Indian harnessed the dogs the following morning, Shultz cut a liberal chunk of meat from a caribou carcass on the meat cache, and placed it in his packsack. "No use of me going out to the island with you," he said. "When we get to the lake, I'll point out the island and you go on out there. I left Wolf Jaw there with the stuff and he'll help you load the sled and run the outfit to my place. I'll hit along the shore and get there a couple of days ahead of you. How far is it to the big lake from here?"

"'Bout t'ree, four mile."

"Three or four miles! Man, you're crazy! It took me all day to get here!"

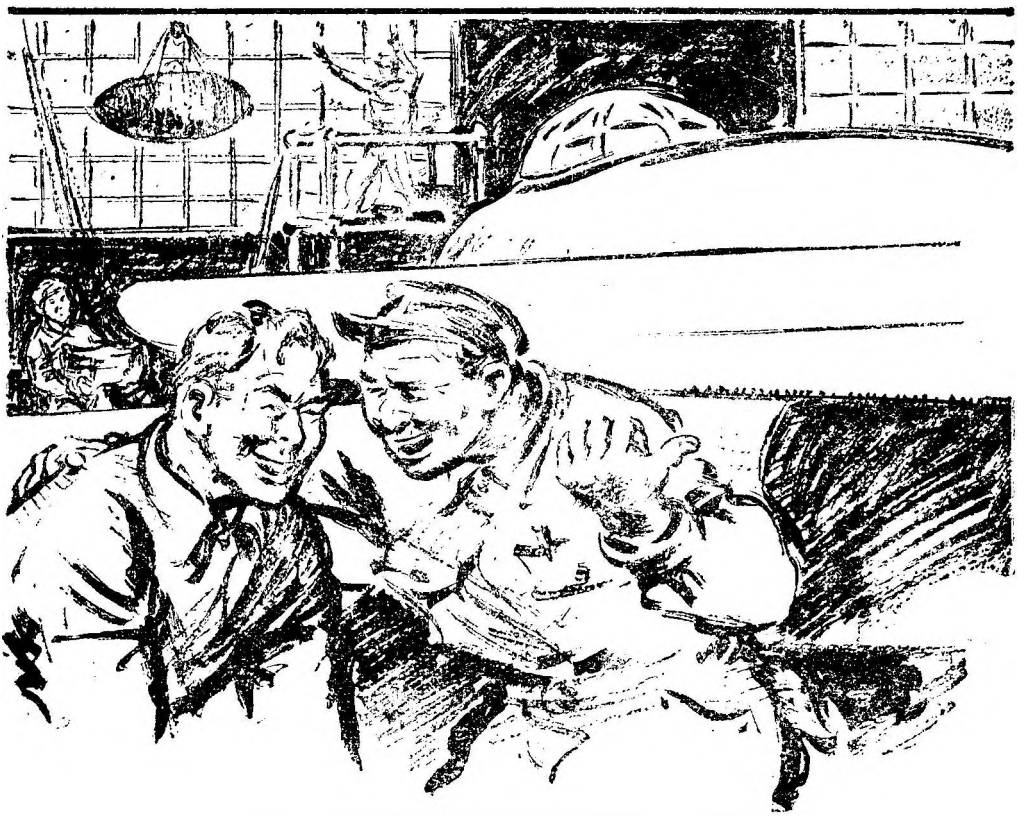
"You fol' de riv'. She mak' de beeg ben'—mebbe-so ten, feefteen mile. We cut straight 'cross. Open country—de snow good an' hard. Wan hour we hit de lake."

As Shultz followed the sled over the wind-packed snow he cursed under his breath as he thought of the long hours of grueling labor he had spent the day before following the course of the river. And he cursed again, as he stood on the shore of the lake and watched the sled outfit diminish to a tiny black dot on the vast expanse of ice. "Damn Buckner! It's all his fault—every damn bit of it! What the hell's he going to McTavish's for? McTavish needs no clerk! I know it, and Duncan knows it, and that damned Don Campbell knows it, too! What's he sending him up here for? By God, that huzzy better not have anything to do with him—or she'll wish she hadn't! I'll settle with Buckner. I'll teach him to sneer at his betters. He defied me—me Johan Shultz! The swine! Twice he knocked me down with his fist! And now, because of him, I am delayed in returning home. My supplies have been damaged by water. I have had days of hard work in finding this Indian, and was nearly bushed beside. I may lose the sloop which may well be crushed by the ice in the spring. For all this he shall pay. It was no idle threat—my warning him not to go up the lake. I'll get him. Luck was with him that the Indians were able to start that motor, or he'd have crashed to his death on the rocks of the south shore. If I'd had five minutes with that motor they'd never have started it. But he suspected me and knocked me into the lake. His luck cannot hold for long—against my cunning. I'll get him. I warned him that if he went up the lake he would never go back—and he never will. And no man will be able to lay the blame at my door."

The tiny dot was out of sight, now—swallowed up in the distance—and Shultz turned and struck out for the Hoarfrost.

(*Part II in the next* SHORT STORIES)

THEN YOU'LL FLY THEM HOME



By ANDREW A. CAFFREY

I

THE *Stingray* was a two-man jet-propelled job. She came down for a fast landing on Federal Proving Ground first thing in the morning. The two R.A.F. flight officers in charge of the new-fangled hot shot were met by just about everybody secret—both Yank and British—connected with the Aviation Section. "Loose Lip" Lock, that long-time, old-time civvie mechanic, said that you could hear the hush-hush till it sounded about as silent as a Florida twister.

The proving ground guards, of course, had rushed out to surround, defend and caress the new arrival; and, after a goodly spell of greetings everybody had strolled across the apron, except for the R.A.F. rear-seater—"the gink with the guns," as Loose Lip always called such aft-seat gents.

And because high stone walls, iron bars and post guards do not a prison make for one Loose Lip Lock, that brassy worthy came out across the apron—till he was chesting one guard—and sang out, "What's she got that ain't been showed in the funny papers, Matey?"

The R.A.F. man, thus hailed, stared back at Loose Lip, then answered, "Four 20-mm cannon. Four .50-caliber machine guns, and a box of rocks, Yank."

"I know that setup, Matey," Loose Lip said. "I been 'round, ya know. She throws the rocks when she runs out of ammunition. Ask me some day an' I'll tell ya about a

"That's Power and That's Climb and That's Speed, and . . . There Goes Tomorrow!"

job we had that even ran outa rocks an' threw—"

"I know that one, Yank," the R.A.F. man cut in. "But let's keep it clean. There's guards, you know. And, anyway, Yank, we've got to keep the secrets. She can fire 5,600 rounds of ammo per minute, and nothing, absolutely *nothing,* can stand a blast from her ruddy guns."

"Well," Loose Lip said, chesting the guard a bit harder, "I guess I'd better climb aboard an' look this baby over."

"Get outa my lap, windy," the guard urged. Get back!"

"But listen to reason, harness bull," Loose Lip argued. "Washington—the President hisself—wants a straight-dope report on this job. We're gonna buy it—blueprints and all—an' your ol' Uncle Sammie don't buy no poke in a pig."

"Pig, the poke will be on your nose, if you don't amskray," the guard threatened. "Must I sap, Sap?"

Loose Lip, slightly defeated, said, "Don't go away, Matey. Don't let this guy scare you off—like he's doin' me. An' me, ol' man Lock's worst-eddicated, dullest smart son. An' the best damned mac on Federal, too."

WHEN noon had come and gone, the *Stingray* was still out there on the Visiting Ships apron. But now, as you'd expect, the new hot craft was not so much alone.

Truth is, just about every mac in the hangars was out there on the apron, sitting on his heels, telling the world just where our own *Black Widow* had it over this British product. Then, of course, there were guys who backed the latest version, long-distance, bomb-and-gun-carrying P-38 beyond and above this new *Stingray,* the *Black Widow* and all others. Maybe they were just

guys from Burbank, but they were willing to advance the conviction behind argument —and cinch it in blasphemy.

Then, without a word of warning, Loose Lip Lock booted his way upon the apron scene—from the general direction of Advance Engineering, the sanctum sanctorum of all Aviation Section's top-hole secret airplane design, acceptance and procurement. While that holy of holies might be top-hole secret for other mere men, it was just another Federal Proving Ground snoop spot for Mr. Loose Lip Lock.

"Now, you guys listen to a gent as knows what he knows—or do I?" Loose Lip ordered and questioned. "You an' your ancient *Black Widdies* an' split-tail P-38's! This here *Stingaree* is what us Advance Engineerin' brains know as the night-fightin' version of the *Mosquito*. You'd think you dopes'd know that when you seen that she was made o' lam'nated wood—an' it's a wonder I didn't fumble too.

"But like I say—she's *Mosquito*, better'n which they ain't any. Yes, sir, we're gonna put this ol' *Stingaree* into mass production output quicker'n a Chinaman would say a long Greek word filled with Ls. So I guess I'd best start lookin' her over for me first prelim'nary report to the Chief of Air. Now."

"Get back, Loose Lip!" the nearest guard on the apron sang out. "Get back or I'll Scotch-hobble you in an' through that lower loose lip of yours. You silly windbag, you!"

About mid-afternoon, an apron cat put its two-line hook onto the new British product and rolled it south toward and into Armament's reconversion shop. There, during the next few days, swarming macs installed a certain number of bomb racks designed for the carrying of the highly-touted M-69 Esso incendiary jelly bombs. They say that Loose Lip Lock was shagged out of Armament's shop on an average of twice an hour during the reconversion construction. Being eased out by the guards on duty, Loose Lip still argued that he was personally representing the Chief of Air, the President and at least two members of the Supreme Court. It seems that Loose Lip was once aboard a transport job carrying two Supreme Court justices from Washington to La Guardia Field. That made them buddies.

The *Stingray*, as revolutionary as its *Mosquito* forerunner, had retained its wing nacelles, but now there were intake maws instead of propellers. The engine compressors were where the power units had formerly been housed in those nacelles and the jet tube tailed out briefly from each aft tip. Both Aerodonetics and Acrodynamics —two eternally confused old duffers—said that such a setup was all wrong, and Aeromechanics, equally as befuddled, agreed with them. But Mr. Loose Lip Lock, knowing a job when he sees one, would tell you that all three of those Aero boys were screwy—and that if the Limies said this was a good ship, she was a good ship!

WITH the small compressor engines thus removed from the ship proper, there was a good-sized cargo space aft the pilot's blister—and the second man's gun position. Along either side of the bomb bay, there was good travel space. Behind the bomb bay there were full tanks. Mr. Loose Lip Lock was bum-rushed for suggesting that the position of those fuel tanks was the one item which loused up a good ship. The slightly listening engineers standing around the ship at the time reminded Loose Lip that all those scars on his grimy mitts came from tools that slipped—not from working sliding rule, square and triangle on a drafting-board.

"Now why don't you go back to test hangar, like a good boy, and catch up on some of the sleep you've lost during the past twenty-odd years worrying about the other guy's business, here on Federal?" one of the big boys asked.

"You've got a idea, there," Loose Lip agreed. "Danged if I won't. So long. See you gents when a she-don't-smell-so-good report on this ship comes back from the poor stiffs that has to fly them in a battle zone—with fuel tanks where fuel tanks ain't got a right to be.

"That's the whole danged trouble—don't shove me, harness bull!—with you pencil-shovers. You don't know what it is to be afire in the air. You don't know what it is to see the next boy to you lookin' at you through a red curtain, tryin' to lap his lips an' close eyes that ain't never going to close no more. You don't know what it is to look down at a kid on a bomb-bay floor

who's burned naked as a barbecued beef—with nothin' but a belt buckle where his bellybutton was, an' a few shreds of smoking web beltin' that used to be chute or gunbelt harness. Yes, sir, I'm the heel that's been worryin' about the other guy's business for twenty-odd years. I should worry. I've been there. To hell an' back, half a dozen trips, via the white-hot burnin'-fuel route."

So the man who had been there half a dozen times—which was a modest statement from a guy usually unknown to maidenly modesty—quit the reconversion shop and went back to test hangar. But, of course, he went back by way of Colonel Call's loft office.

The colonel listened to Loose Lip, and the colonel knew that his old chief mac was as right as right could be.

Colonel Call, officer in charge of test and all test pilots, finally said, "I noticed those tanks, Lockie. They're bad and you're correct as hell. But we'll have to let her come out of shop. No use fighting the other sections. They have their troubles too, you know. Maybe we can do something about it later on. Maybe our test hops will show that the new bomb rack installation, plus those fuel tanks aft, have thrown the longitudinal balance out the window. Then we can recommend that the fuel tanks be moved ahead to either side of the bomb bay, where, as you say, there's plenty of room for half a dozen half-round tanks. So let it ride, eh?"

"Next to me, Cap," Loose Lip said, "you know best. Say, I wonder how old Old Man Lock's bright son will have to be before he stops callin' you 'Cap' an' remembers that you've been a brass hat for more than a year now. The eagles on your shoulders always make me nervous. I remember what a seagull done to me down on the boardwalk at Atlantic City. The damned thing! It was in a glidin' turn, with its motors stopped, when the bomb bay opened an' let me have it. An' me with a dame!"

II

IN DUE course, the *Stingray* was turned back to Flight Section by Armaments. When it came into test hanger, Chief Slim Rand—just to get Loose Lip's goat—assigned the English job to Mechanic Billy Bell's crew. Of course, that didn't bother Loose Lip too much, for, after his own fashion, he belonged to every crew on the reservation—all depending upon what interesting job any particular crew might be working at any unparticular time. Loose Lip had a way of being in at least a dozen places at all times.

However, Billy Bell was the boy who wrote out the work reports. Also, if he chose, he'd be the boy who'd ride as flight engineer when an assigned test pilot eventually started test runs on the *Stingray*. This, Slim Rand knew, might hurt Loose Lip where it hurt the most; and it hurt the most when Loose Lip couldn't go into the air with a new-and-revolutionary job. Why, the old stiff would even argue with the Chief of Air that that was his God-given, Uncle-Sam-promised unalienable right.

Naturally, during the first day when the ship was in Test Section for readying, Loose Lip disregarded all other interesting jobs in the hands of all other crews. Chief Slim Rand didn't object to Loose Lip buzzing around this particular hive of work, for the big loud wahoo could do more useful labor by accident than the average mercenary mac will do for top wages. After all, anything that Loose Lip did for a ship in work was done strictly for love. And the unfigurable wealth of Uncle Sam could not hire the guy to work on a piece of non-aviation labor.

Loose Lip happened to be standing under the portside nacelle explaining jet propulsion to Mr. Anthony Ranton, one of the first inventors of jet engines, when Parachute Shop's work car whirled in through the wide open doors and came to a stop near the *Stingray*. Old "Parachute" Streeter stepped down.

"This the Limie pharter?" he asked. "Oh, that you, Windy?"—this when his eyes fell upon Loose Lip. "Now what the hell right've you got to stand near Mr. Ranton when there's one of these wind-pushin' squirts in the hangar? Loose Lip, you old driftwire-and-dope has been, why don't you get back to your cobwebs down in the museum hangar? The parade's gone by, feller."

"Hello, Streeter," Loose Lip said. "Say, boy, I want you to see that this Limie job has proper parachutes—especially in the pilot's seat."

"Aw, will you kindly find a nice quiet place and go do a die!" Old Streeter said. "Loose Lip, why don't you stop fooling hell outa you?"

"As I was sayin'," Loose Lip said, "look to the pilot's seat with special care, boy. In all my long experience, in all the corners of a round world, I ain't never seen a pilot's seat just like this one. It ain't 'barrel,' an' it ain't standard-chute, an' it ain't right. But it is Limie. Get up there, boy, an' take a look at it. An' Streeter ol' silkworm, you'd better be good!"

"Sez who?" Streeter barked. "Damn these Limie jobs! I never yet worked one that was standard anything. One of these days they're going to send us a ship with a hole—a six-inch round hole—in the seat."

"Aw, naw, that'd be baby stuff," Loose Lip said. "These Limie aviation gents is all-man, Street'. You keep your eye on them an' you'll learn somethin'—like watchin' me."

STREETER and two of his parachute-shop experts climbed aboard to discover whether or not their standard U. S. Air Forces equipment would serve in the *Stingray*, and what Streeter & Company said when they caught sight of the seats shouldn't be said in any place other than a hangar.

"Oh, you nasty devils, shut ya dirty mouths," Loose Lip warned, "or, by hell, ol' Mother Lock'll wash 'em out with hi-test gasoline. But remember, boy, have 'em right.

"Who knows, maybe I'll want to test this job myself. Like the Chief of Air sez to me the last time he was on Federal, he sez—*who the hell threw that!* If I catch the guy wastin' good motor oil soaked into good wool waste on a face like mine, I'll turn him in for wilful expen'sure of strategic materials. Boy; am I all loused up with eddication! Know what? I should get me a job on the staff."

Colonel Call happened to come down the steep stairs from his loft office just as Streeter was getting out of the pilot's greenhouse.

"What say," Call asked, speaking in the general direction of Chief Slim Rand and Loose Lip, "is she ready to rise and fly?"

"Any time now, Cap," Slim answered, being a gent, like Loose Lip, to whom the great Call might never be a 'Colonel'."

"The hell you tell!" Streeter barked. "We've got to build a new chute pack for these so-and-so Limie seats. Nothing we stock will fit in these electric chairs. Have you guys had a good look at these so-called seats—the danged things have half the ship's electrical equipment leading into, out of, or detouring around those thrones. Hell's bells, there's enough fittings in those buckets to rip a pack chute to shreds. Guess maybe we'll have to design a chute envelope out of galvanized-iron sheeting or armor plate."

"That's bad," Call mused. "How long, Street'?"

"Cap, we're up to here in back orders," Streeter said, as he ran a sharp set of fingernails across his own throat. "Give me a couple of days. I'll have to make a mock-up first."

"Why don't you use Lock's lower lip?" Fats McCully, the Engine Shop menace, remarked in passing. Loose Lip's good toe made a fast try for the seat of Fats' broad pants, and the waddling one kept passing—faster.

"Right now, durin' the war, that fatso could make a million bucks on hisself," Loose Lip said, "just by turnin' hisself in to any butcher. Man, his woman could eat meat for a month."

III

STREETER and his parachute crewmen had hardly departed from the *Stingray* before a party of five Air Forces high rollers came into the big hangar. Two of these five were brigadier generals, three of them colonels. All five bulged well-expanded chests supporting at least two layers of overseas combat-area decorations and ribbons. They walked around the *Stingray*. They stooped and walked under the *Stingray*. They took to ladders and climbed atop the *Stingray*. Then each in turn got into the pilot's seat and *flew* the *Stingray*—without even quitting the hangar's floor. In other words these five gents had more than a passing interest in the *Stingray*.

Finally, still doing his turn at the hangar flying, Brig-Gen. Smith gazed down and asked, "Well, what's holding you up, Lock?"

"Holdin' me up!" Loose Lip exclaimed, this in view of the fact that an old-time civilian mac like Loose Lip doesn't hesitate to exclaim even to a full general. "Big Boy, we're ready to do it any time. It's the Chute Shop that's holdin' the parade. Old Street' was just in here an' he tells Cap here that he's gotta build a special chute pack for them Limie seats."

"Aw, chutes be damned!" said General Smith. "If I had my say, gentlemen, we'd go back to the day when we had no chutes. That's when we brought ships home. Chutes, chutes, chutes! Dammit any flying clown can raise an umbrella, and in ten seconds of bad judgment he can throw away a million dollars' worth of ship. Guess most of our pilots are rich men's sons—or drunken sailors."

The immediate vicinity of the *Stingray* was very silent then. General Smith's four companions stood where they were and just eyed the speaker. Smith was truly an old man in air. He had been an ace in that other war. He had flown Spads and the deadly, pilot-burning Nieuport-28. And in a 28, three miles above and east of Metz, motor vibration had broken his fuel feed-line and set his ship afire. And the Smith man—without parachute—did not do as so many other Yank pilots had done under like circumstances. Those other Yanks, disliking cremation, had just stepped over-side and taken the long fall to death. That was the Major Reuel Lufberry way, the accepted way. Smith, however, chose to fly it home. So he banked, stepped out on the lower wing, sideslipped through two miles of fall, blew out his fire at about 3,000 feet, got back into the pit and set her down. That feat lives in Air Forces history. So men were likely to stand by, silently, while General Smith damned parachutes and praised ship-saving methods. Legend tells that Smith, as per Air Forces orders, always flies with a parachute, but his mechanics might tell an inquirer that General Smith has a neatly folded army blanket in that seat pack. Maybe the man's nuts.

Speaking low, breaking the silence but slightly, with his steady gaze now on Colonel Call, General Smith said, "This ship should have top priority. We never thought it would happen, but the Jap is actually matching us model for model. When we put the Super Forts up past 40,000 we never in God's world thought the monkeys would be up there to crash-dive us. But they are. We need the very best. Maybe this ship is it."

Well, orders are orders, and if regulations say that you must have parachutes when you go aloft, then you must have them; but, of course, army orders, as everybody knows, were just made to be broken. It's a case of just use the old head when you break 'em.

So the five high rankers finally stepped down. Then they once more strolled around and under the *Stingray*, even patted it now and then. Finally, as they strolled away, General Smith put a pleading hand on Chief of Test Call's arm and said, "Well, we've got to be getting back to Washington. Nice to have seen you again, Call, old man. Hell, I wish this ship was through its runs and okayed for the boys in the Pacific."

"Cap," Loose Lip mumbled, "does a general have to give you a runnin' kick in the pants to get you off the spot—or off the hole?"

"He's a tough men to disappoint, Lockie," Call mused. "He's a tough man to disappoint because he'd give any airman his right arm. He knows what it's all about. He knows which way they went."

"An' you heard the man say he wants a ship," Loose Lip said. "Well, even if you are the boss, I can't stand around shootin' the breeze all day—much as I like to—so I'll give these *Stingaree* engines a final ready-for-flight inspection. I got me a idea she's gonna push wind backward pretty dam' soon."

AS THE *Stingray* now stood—as it had had been delivered from Armaments shop—its bomb racks were fully loaded with reasonable facsimiles of the real thing. That is, it was loaded with M-69 bombs of the dummy type used in load-carrying and bomb-dropping tests, the size, length and weights of which were true and exact. With the dummies you could learn everything you wanted to know—except how hot a fire might be set by said hellish M-69 incendiaries of the genuine variety.

Along toward sundown of that same day, much to the surprise of nobody, Chief Mac Slim Rand came down from Chief of Test

Call's loft office, flight order in hand, and told Crew Chief Billy Bell to roll the *Stingray* out on the ready apron.

"Gonna hop her without—?" Billy Bell began to ask.

"No," Slim barked. "We just want to get it out where it can watch that evenin' sun go down. So don't ask any dam' fool questions, Bell, an' you won't get no dam' fool answers. Guess you and your crew will have to stand by, overtime, till maybe after that evenin' sun goes down. She's a night fighter, you know; so maybe somebody'll keep her out in the dark awhile."

"I could kill the guy," Billy Bell stated, "that first discovered that airplanes could be flown in black air. It just ain't natural, Chief. Especially when I've got me a priority date over in Liberty. And she's a night-fighter, too. Geeze what a break—with ten thousand other guys loose in town. I think maybe I'd best jack this job an' join the ten thousand. Then again, I like to eat. I'm sticking, Chief."

IV

THAT evening, just when the day crew was quitting the hangars, and before the swing shift came on, Test Pilot Murphy came down from the loft, ready for air and packing his chute and other equipment. Cussing violently at Murphy's heels, packing far more stuff, was Test Flight Observer Joe Faber—a little guy with some twenty thousand hours in the air, a wife and three kids at home, and more than twenty years of ups and downs, most of them in Federal Proving Ground ships. But Joe could certainly get mad when an after-hours job was suddenly thrust upon him. Joe was just human—maybe more than half bird, but just human.

So Pilot Murphy climbed aboard with his required chute pack in full view, dropped that chute pack down behind the Limie seat, strapped up his safety belt, then began to talk ship with Crew Chief Billy Bell, while that mechanical worthy hung halfway into the control blister and told Murphy just what the R.A.F. man had told him about the many gadgets, gauges and gimcracks in and around that greenhouse. Meantime, Joe Faber, tossing his chute aft into the bomb bay, had set up housekeeping in the rear seat. One of Bell's best boys—Sid North—climbed aboard as flight engineer. So Murphy started his engines. The *Stingray* began to breathe, purr, hum, blast and blow; and for men accustomed to propeller-driven craft, with all the roar and crackle, this was something approaching utter silence. And even while his engines ran through their brief warming revs at full throttle, Test Pilot Murphy turned and asked Joe Faber whether he was all set. And this without inter-com equipment, too.

"Take 'er away, Murph'," Joe answered. "These damned asthmatic wheezers! Why must the jugheads always be changing this aviation game! Hey, what's holding you up, Irish? Go ahead!"

Test Pilot Murphy got his clearance from the tower, then he eased power to his units and the *Stingray* began blowing itself cross-field to the head of the east-west runway. In due course of time, Murphy brought up with his nose into the light evening breeze and once more throttled low to await the tower's green flash. Joe Faber cussed the towerman a little when the delay grew to a thing of almost two minutes. But they got the green, Murphy opened the almost-soundless units to full-power, and once more the *Stingray* was blowing itself down the runway, off the ground and into fast flight.

And it was fast, with a take-off and climb not unlike that oft-mentioned homesick angel going back to Heaven.

LOOSE LIP, on his way out, and Colonel Call, just stepping down from his loft, met in the great doorway just in time to see that get-away and climb, and all the big windy guy could say was, "Whoosh!" To which Call added, "—and whoosh, Lockie, That's power and that's climb and that's speed and there goes tomorrow."

"I thunk maybe you'd be hoppin' that baby, Cap," Loose Lip speculated. "You must be gettin' ancient, eh?"

"No. I was going to," the top man said, "but Murph' wants to take a day off tomorrow so he insisted on taking this night hop. You know the Irishman—he'll do his share of air work, even if he's half cockeyed from want of sleep—and other things. Anyway, he'll clean up four-five hours of the routine data on this hop, and is Joe Faber fit to be

tied! But we couldn't help it. He was the only observer in the loft."

"Aw, that little squirt!" said Loose Lip. "He'd even be sore if ya didn't give him a chance to be sore, if ya know what I mean. An' let's see—do I know what I mean? Oh yeah, what I mean is that Joe's somethin' that belongs to a plane. He's all jake, the danged little crab."

TEST PILOT MURPHY'S *Stingray* report was on Colonel Call's desk when the day's labors got under way. Loose Lip Lock came up to make a hangar report for Slim Rand while the Chief was studying the Murphy and Faber findings on the craft's general performance.

"This is Murphy's report on the new jet job, Lockie," the Colonel said.

"Yeah? How about the longitudinal balance, Cap?"

"He reports that it's okay, at all speeds."

"It would be. Any job that Limie A. V. Roe outfit puts into the air is at least 200% right, an' from way, way back durin' that other war," Loose Lip said. "Now why the hell couldn't the Avro Johnnies be wrong just once—for our sake? But right or wrong, Cap, I still say them fuel tanks don't have no right sprawlin' across the aft section of a mid-fuselage bay. Now I wonder why them Limies done that in the first place, eh?"

"Perhaps they were just ship-designing for fun that day, Lockie. I've seen lots of our own jobs that were turned out in the same way," Colonel Call recalled. "We'll keep the tanks in mind."

"Maybe something will show up when they begin to run bomb-droppin' tests, Cap. Think they'll ask you to make 'live' runs?"

"Oh, sure," the Chief said. "I've got the schedule right here"—Call began to riffle a pile of papers on his desk—"and they call for incendiary attack on the dummy village, back in the sandy hills district. Have you seen the village they've set up there, away back on the side of that highest bare hill?"

"Yeah. Guys down in Camouflage Shop tell me that's a exact copy of a Jap village on a hillside northwest o' Tokyo. Us guys is certainly getting scientific, what I mean—settin' up a exact target like that, then thousand miles away from the real thing."

"That's us, Lockie," Col. Call said, with a wee show of regret in his voice—"ten thousand miles away from the real thing. You know, when I see these young guys standing around with their chests caved in with awards and medals, I like to keep quiet and listen to somebody who knows something about aviation."

"Damned if I don't find myself listenin' too, Cap. Like old Street' sez to me only yesterday—I'd better get back to me cobwebs down in the museum hangar, an' you'd better come along."

"I'll be right there," Call promised. "But, first, I'll have to get the day's work started. How about you—anything to do but stand around this loft and talk your head off, and your heart out? Well, put the whip on Bell and his crew and see to it that the *Stingray* is ready to go again. The big boys keep calling in asking about its progress, and that's the stuff I'm supposed to show the most of, come what may. Don't stand there, soldier."

DURING the early forenoon the *Stingray* got more attention, more exhibitional service, more primping and priming than the first bride in a family of eight or ten hard-to-marry-off girls. Again, there were high rankers over from Washington—Yank, English, Dutch, French, Australian, Chinese—and Loose Lip Lock, working head down in an engine nacelle, told Chief Slim Rand that it would be a hell of a fine spot for Uncle Sam to start collecting old debts. Besides the visiting nationalities, representing the many air forces, there were also buzzin' boys from just about every department on Federal.

Instrument Lab was doing this. Engine Shop was doing that, with Fats McCully helping. Parachute Shop had gents taking exact measurements for that before-mentioned mock-up. Gunnery had guys on the 20-mm's and .50 calibers. Metal Shop had its tinkering tinkers inspecting what little of metal they could find on the nearly-all-wood ship. And Wood Shop, knowing its hour of glory, acted as though the *Stingray* had definitely promised to take aviation back twenty-odd years to the days of wooden ships and blood-iron-and-wine flyers. But most active of all were the boys from Photographic Section. They were shooting her from all angles, and in all her parts.

And Loose Lip Lock admitted that he was having a devil of a job trying to get his honest map into all those shots.

Along toward eleven o'clock a red-flagged Ordnance truck pulled in and came to a stop close to the *Stingray's* nose. Its own armed guards stepped down and advised all and sundry to stand back and keep clear. "Hot stuff," one of those guards warned. "Burny, burny, if one of these live M-69 decides to start tossin' its gooey pancakes. That means you too, Loose Lip. One word out of you, windbag, an' I'll shove one of these six-sided babies down your wind-pipe—on a five-second fuse."

So the ammunition handlers began removing all the dummy M-69's from the *Stingray's* bomb racks. Then, with great care, they reloaded with the real thing. Then they red-flagged the craft, left a guard on post, and drove away.

"That means," Loose Lip said to Billy Bell, "that they're gonna put her through the live bomb runs."

"Man you're wonderful!" said Bell. "You figure that out all by yourself, or was Dunninger in on it?"

'Gonna burn hell outa the Jap village over in the sandy hills area. Say, she'll sure make a hot fire—a day like this, eh?"

"That's the first sensible thing you've said since I've been on this post, Loose Lip," Bell said. "Yes, sir, this here day is what I call hot. It's even what a guy from Arizona or Death Valley would call hot. Must be as hot as hell—and plenty bumpy for flyin'—back over that sandy hills district. What you laughing at?"

"I was thinkin' about a guy I saw make a chute jump back over them hills," Loose Lip said. "That was two years ago, just this time of year—August—an' in a heat spell like this."

"What did the guy do?" Billy Bell asked, getting set to safety a handhoe cover on the port nacelle's cowling.

"The guy was doin' a jump for Photographic Section, for the movie-camera guys. The jump ship was at about five thousand, and this guy hits the silk and falls up instead of down. For a fact, Bell, the chute opens in a thermal upshoot an' that dam' sandy hills' heat carries him up to nearly fifteen thousand before the guy gets wise and spills his silk. Then he comes down like a rock, an' the shoot don't bloom full till he's near the ground. That guy still says it was his rubber heels that saved him. I liked to laugh my head off."

SHORTLY after Ordnance's ammunition handlers had departed the scene, one of Armament's small cars came in on the apron. Its busy party of half a dozen armorers began to remove some of the machine guns, two of the four 20-mm cannon and all ammunition belts.

"Hey, what goes here? What's the big idea?" Loose Lip asked.

"We're lightening ship, Wahoo," one of the armorers said. "A couple of our Armaments gents want to ride this bomb-dropping hop. They want to see how these new racks operate under actual fighting conditions. And you know what, Lock?"

"What?" Loose Lip asked.

"I think you scared one of them into it. You remember when Hastings told you to get back to test and catch up on some of the sleep you'd been missing taking care of the other guy's biz?"

"Yeah, an' I told him off," Loose Lip said.

"You did, you loud buzzard. I was there, and I know. But you kind of got to Hastings. When you went out, he turned to Chief Nutter and said, "That big guy hit where it hurt. Maybe he's right about this tank installation. That ship-afire stuff was awful."

"I never knew that gent's name before—Hastings," Loose Lip said. "I know him well enough to insult, an' be insulted by, like I know a few thousand other fellers here on Federal. So he's gonna ride this hop, eh? Well, that's what I've av'cated for twenty-odd years—if they work on ships, they should ride ships. If I had me say every gink on the post'd get off the ground at least once a week. An' that goes for you, Sullivan."

"Why, you loud lug you!" said Sullivan the armorer crew chief. "I'm the other guy who's going to ride with Hastings; and no test-hanger greaseball has to tell me to run up flying hours. Lock, I'll match you hour for hour, over the last thirteen years."

"That you will. That you will," Loose Lip agreed. "Sully, you're tiptop with me, you heel. But you Armaments guys

steal flyin' time. You gents don't rate it. It's us test-hangar macs that really put the ships into the air. You know that, so why don't you stick to your own graft? You're nice and safe in Armaments."

"Lock," Sullivan said, "if you were just a little bigger, and I was five times as large, I'd knock your ears down. *Safe,* sez you!"

Just before the help knocked off for noon lunch Crew Chief Bell got the word to roll 'er out onto the ready apron. As a result, the heel-sitters, after finishing their cafeteria or box-lunch eats, once again gathered in great numbers to squat and gaze at the wonder ship—and this despite the fact that Federal has seen just about all the wonder ships come and go.

At about ten to one, in spite of the hellish heat that kept most of the watchers safely within the shade of the big hangars, old Loose Lip was standing out there in the center of the sun-baked cement apron doing his stuff for the scores of good-looking office girls and female mechanics in the watching throng. As usual, the macs from all departments were swapping badinage and banter with Loose Lip, a swap in which they were bound to be short-changed, this in view of the fact that Loose Lip had known all the answers long before most of his audience was out of grade school. Then again, Loose Lip can talk and yell louder than any other guy on earth.

It was Slim Rand in person who came down from the loft, strolled out on the apron, spotted Billy Bell, and yelled, "Turn 'em over. Get them blowers blowin'. M'gosh, us test hangar people should pass the hat, or maybe charge a flat admission. Ain't none of you guys and gals ever seen a airy-plane a-fore?"

"Sure," Fats McCully sang out. "They can all understand a plane, Slim. What they're trying to figure out is what makes the Lock guy tick. It's a case of they can't see the planes for the lip."

Loose Lip, trying to figure that one out, stood there at mid-apron, wishing that his right toe was close enough to Fats' fat to do some good, and waiting for the McCully-incited laughter to die down when who should come out—all dolled up for flight—but Colonel Call.

"What's the laugh?" Call asked.

"One on Lock," Slim Rand said. "I don't get it, but I guess it was good. Anyway, it stopped the big guy."

When Call neared Loose Lip, he asked, "Don't you want to ride this job?"

"Me? Say, Cap, when a gent asts me to ride a jet job I know it's love, 'cause they used to take me along in the old prop-driven jobs just because they knew I had the strong back an' weak brain that was needed for windin' 'em up."

"Sure nuff, you windbag," Fats sang out, "and now they'll take you along so in case the engines stop you can take up the blowing where they left off. You're a handy guy. You had this jet-propulsion thing long before aviation—only it kept tossing your head backwards."

Hastings and Sullivan came hurrying up the apron, and Call said, "These men are riding, too. Lockie. Guess there'll be plenty of room, eh?"

"Sure. Let Hastings fill the aft seat. Sully an' me'll ride the bomb bay—an' if them new racks don't do it right, us guys'll kick them lousy little M-69 hell'n gone outa that bay.

"Hey, Hastings. I take it back what I said about you shop dudes never ridin' these hot ships."

"Don't use that word 'hot,' Lock," Hastings begged. "We deal all day in fire—for the other guy—and you had to come along and bring the thing right home to us, when you told us off the other day. Don't pile it on."

"Aw, forget it," Loose Lip urged. "I was just shootin' off me big trap. I like you gents down in Armaments, the only trouble is you can't see a wrong fuel-tank installation for the lip"—and then Loose Lip waited for the laugh that didn't come "now why in heck don't I rate a laugh for that crack?"

COLONEL CALL was climbing aboard. He, of course, had his regulation parachute in evidence; and old Jules—the official timekeeper and checker—was on hand to observe the fact. Call placed the useless chute pack down alongside his seat—where Loose Lip could later reach and pull it back to the bomb bay locker. When Loose Lip helped Hastings into the only other seat—the gunner's—the big mac whispered, "You can't use that chute pack in this seat, Hast-

ings. We'll just set it down alongside. I'll stow it later."

"No chute? You mean—?" Hastings began to question.

"These Limie seats ain't made for our packs, but test has orders to push this *Stingaree* through her runs. But, anyway, it's like General Smith was tellin me just the other day. 'Lock' he sez, 'if these present-day pilots had the ol' guts that you an' me used to have, they'd be flyin' these jobs without no chutes. A good airman never opens a umbrella lessen he's on the beach.' That's what the general sez. We have his permission to bust the regulation on chutes."

When Sullivan and Loose Lip went aboard the aft section, they too were carrying dangling chutes for old Jule's satisfaction. And before Loose Lip gave Call the all-ready signal, four chute packs had been stowed out of the way.

VI

GETTING into the air, Call turned the *Stingray* out to sea. The trip across marshes, just a few hundred feet below, was very bumpy. Heat bumps. From the take-off, the pilot, Loose Lip and Sullivan realized that it was going to be that kind of a hot-day hop—all ups and downs. And as for the pilot, well he'd have to fight controls just about every foot of the way. Hastings, being new to flight, must have thought that airmen were nuts, if this was a fair sample of the beauties of air travel. However, the boys who fly 'em and fight 'em in the overseas battle areas have to fly 'em and fight 'em as is, and they can't pick their skies. So, too, the test pilots at Federal never try to hand-pick their atmospheric conditions. So a little thing like rough going wasn't likely to hinder Col. Call in the fulfillment of his scheduled attack on the Jap village. All the more to his credit—and to the ship's battle value—if he could do a nice piece of bombing in a sky that wasn't any too nice for air work.

Once out over the Atlantic, with a quick five thousand feet under the fast ship, the bumps went out of the air. Then Call fell to a careful study of his instrument panel. Loose Lip moved forward until he was leaning over Hastings' shoulder, and he too studied those dials, gauges, gadgets and what have you?

"She's sweet, eh Cap?" the big mac asked.

"She is," Call agreed. "Oh, by the way, Photographic Section has its movie cameras all set up near the Jap village. Are you men all set to be movie actors?"

"Bomb low. Fly 'er way down low," Loose Lip begged. "I want to get me profile in the picters. Danged if I don't hang out the bomb bay doors by me toes. Cameras! Boy oh boy, that's me."

When the ship had ten thousand altitude, and all dials and other control items had been fully checked to Call's satisfaction, he once more banked shoreward and began to line up his general approach to the sandy hills area. There was a fair-sized skyful of other craft—both Army and Navy—and despite its mighty extensive size, the immediate vicinity of Federal Proving Ground was no longer a place where any pilot might close his eyes and allow the ship to loaf across the ceiling. The marsh lands were dim under a thick blanket of heat haze, and only now and then did the open waters show through like light reflected from a dulled mirror. Back west of the lush marsh lands, back where the parched yellow fields of the farms stretched for miles, the rising heat waves shimmered like the pale-blue blaze above a clean-burning red-hot forge. It was hot down there, hellishly hot.

Col. Call studied that shimmering vista for a long time, circling wide, then he called back, "Can you spot that village, Lockie my keen-eyed friend?"

"Danged if I can, Cap. It should be right over there, just west an' north of the old speed range. Man, oh man, that's the hottest-lookin' piece of world I've ever seen. But just a shake—there's your bomb-range balloons. See 'em, down there at about three thousand?"

"I got 'em," Cal answered. They had spotted the red-flagged captive balloons—two such—which were always run up as a warning to other ships whenever a "live" gunning or bombing was under way in any certain test area on Federal Proving Ground. "And look at those poor beat-out bags—they look wilted and discouraged too. But that's our target, gentlemen."

Col. Call then turned to his ship-to-

ground radio and tried for contact with the radio car operations unit which would be stationed near the Jap village. After breaking through the terrific heat static, conversation began to flow more clearly.

"*Stingray* pilot to Jap village operations! *Stingray* pilot to Jap village operations!" Call spoke.

"Operations 66, Jap village range. Say your piece, *Stringray* pilot. Over."

"*Stingray* to operations. Coming in on that run. Is she okay for bomb run?" Call asked.

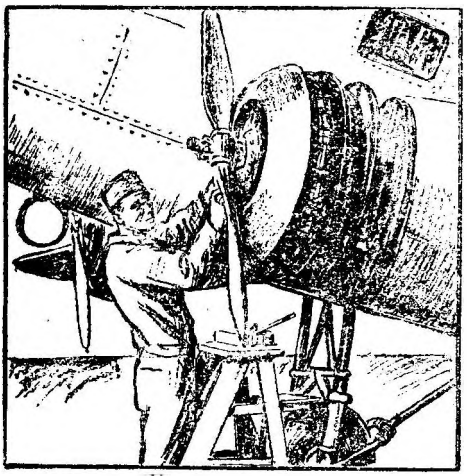
"Operations to *Stingray*. Everything clear on the Jap target. Make your run as you see fit. Hold it! Hold it! Are you still with me, *Stingray?*"

"Still with you, operations. What's holding us now?" Call asked.

"Operations to *Stingray* pilot. Just a Test-Hangar-to-unit flash that General Smith and party wish to observe *Stingray* bomb run on the target. General Smith party flying in from Bowling. Should be over this area within half hour. Got fuel enough to hold off till then? Over."

"*Stingray* to operations. Got fuel enough to hold off till the sun goes down and this place and hell both freeze over," Call radioed back. "Will hold off. Roger."

Col. Call, again turning out toward the sea, explained the new setup to his companions.



"The big boy hisself," Loose Lip enthused. "Super we'll wait for ol' Smithy. Hey, take a slant at that outside thermometer there—87 degrees at 10,000 feet. They'll never believe that when you tell 'em. Hot all the way up. 87 at 10,000!"

"Is that exceptional?" Hastings asked.

"Exceptional?" Loose Lip exclaimed. "Hastings, that there is phen—pheno—it's outa this world. It's plain hell on wings an' then some. Me and Cap never saw that before an' we've been every place that guys can get on a twenty-four-hour pass an' five or ten bucks o' free money—87 degrees! Look at them navy ships over there—that five-ship flight o' Corsairs—rise an' fall. Man, that's what I call a loose formation, an' it better be."

VII

COL. CALL loafed back and forth a few miles offshore until an Air Forces B-17 came up from the south and spoke to him via ship-to-ship. General Smith was in the B-17's left-side seat, doing his own air work, and doing his own talking too.

"Hello aboard the *Stingray,*" he said. "This is General Smith aboard B-17."

"Greetings, General. Call aboard *Stingray,*" the chief test pilot answered.

"Oh, hello Call. Say, you put the whip on it, eh? That's the style! She looks sweet airborne, Call. How does she handle?"

"In a sky like this, I'd hardly know," Call laughed. "Not so much out here over the water, but I mean inland a few miles. We just came out here to remove the bumps till you had time to make the run-up. But I guess she's a good-enough craft, General."

"Well, anytime you say now. I'll follow you in—and I'll keep well out of your way. Maybe you'd better let me run in first and get in position, beyond the sandy hills setup, before you come across in your bomb run. Now where the Billy H. Hell is that sandy hills area?"

"That's what we had to find out—in spite of the fact that we've been living here for too many years now. But you'll hit it just about right if you fly her due west—across that white-foamed tiderip just offshore—then straight in. That heat haze isn't going to give you any too much visibility. But you'll spot the two marker balloons down at about 3,000. They're in place."

General Smith, with the *Stingray* shooting past at close range, gave Col. Call a visual hand wave and turned inland.

The *Stingray,* just to kill time, turned north along the shoreline, then, after a few minutes, once more cut the beach and headed for the designated approach to the Jap village target.

Again Call reached out via radio for the operations unit on the scene; and again that control advised him that the target was clear, ready, and just asking for it.

Call gave Armorer Sullivan the word to make ready his equipment and stand by. Sullivan went to work—Loose Lip egging in with his usual good advice. Hastings, screwed around in his seat, watched Sullivan and added his advice on all matters having to do with the manning and readying of those M-69 incendiary bombs.

"Wow!" Col. Call suddenly sang out. "Did you see that?"

"We wasn't lookin'," said Loose Lip. "What was it?"

"The general's B-17," Call said. "He just crossed the Jap village for a look-see. And just when he was above that yellow arid strip, a damned thermal upshoot hit that big bus and lifted it hell 'n' gone straight up for a thousand feet, or I don't know a thousand when I see it. Eh-eh, and down we go! Did you feel your guts hit the ceiling just then? Oh-oh-oh, up we go, up we go, higher and higher. Don't you men get that? Baby! You should see this altimeter knocking its brains out trying to follow the doings. This is rough!"

Call once more turned to a study of his sky, above, below and to all sides. Pretty soon he'd be putting his ship on the line for the bomb run.

Loose Lip asked, "How're these M-69's fused, Sully—for contact?"

"Not quite," Sullivan answered. "They're fused to let go five seconds after they strike, and what I mean, Lock, these babies can tell time. And the Esso people don't turn out many duds, either. When they go off there's going to be a fire."

Col. Call sang back, "Here she be! I'm on the run!" and at the same time he was opening the bomb bay doors. Sullivan and Loose Lip, getting the red lights and the buzzer, had stepped to safety. And now they were gazing down through the heat haze waiting for the first shimmer of that dimmed-out-by-heat Jap village target.

"We'll set forest fires all over the danged reservation," Loose Lip told Sullivan. "Cap's good, but he'll never put any of these babies on that target today, lessen it's by accident. Oh, oh, down we go! An' ups-a-daisy! Whee!"

WITHOUT taking his eyes off the run Cap Call yelled back "Whee is right. This stinks. Never an idle moment. Well, hold on to your lunch, for it won't be long now. Here goes 14."

A drop of fourteen M-69's in a cluster is considered the most practical dose for accurate timing. So when Call sang out "Here goes 14" that number of M-69's clicked, clacked, swished and went through the bomb bay doors. And at almost the same split second, Colonel Call did something he seldom did—sang out a nasty cuss word—for the *Stingray* was in another thermal upshoot, and the pilot knew only too well that there'd be no accuracy on those fourteen.

"Money thrown away!" he sang back. "Ye gods! I'm off my seat like an angel in flight. You should get a peek at this altimeter—What was that? *What was that?*"

"Something had struck the *Stingray's* right wing; and Call glanced out to see a ragged hole right through that sleek wooden panel. But, at the same time, other things were striking other surfaces, and the ship shook to each blow.

"Close your bomb bay doors! We've got one aboard! One's come back aboard!" Loose Lip yelled; and Call, guessing the worst, began to close the doors, and at the same time turned to see what they "had aboard."

They had an M-69 aboard. It had come back aboard via the hellish upshoot of the thermal rise. And when it came aboard, it rattled right up through the open bomb bay doors, hit the other M-69's still in the racks, then bounced aft and dug its nose into one of those fuel tanks which—as Call and Loose Lip claimed—had no right being where they were, right aft the bomb bay and in line of action.

Armament's Sullivan was quick, and Sullivan was brave. He reached for that 19-inch M-69 bomb and tried to jerk it out of the fuel tank. But only about three inches of its length remained within grasp. And, at the same time, only some small

part of five seconds fuse time remained before explosion. And Sullivan was the man who knew that too. So Sullivan, unable to jerk it free, threw his chest against the butt end of the M-69 incendiary bomb, jammed it all the way into the tank, then stood there—chest against the fuel-seeping hole—and waited for the end. He yelled just two words, "Extinguisher, Lock!"

Then it let go—that hellish M-69—and the *Stingray* took a bounce and shiver that weren't thermal. Fire spewed out around Sullivan's neck, head and armpits. And he went to his knees, didn't even try to turn his head. But the blaze was no longer localized, for the tank had blown its seams; and Armament's Sullivan was on the floorboards under a seathing, spreading pancake of goocy fire.

Loose Lip hit the flames with chemicals. But the M-69's hot pancakes were splattering the roof as well as the floor; and the aft end of the all-wooden *Stingray* was in the red—from the bomb bay to tail service. Now, though, Hastings was at Loose Lip's side, with a second chemical stream on the solid wall of flame.

"Jump!" Col. Call commanded. "You men get out!"

"With what?" Loose Lips sang out. "Take her down, Cap."

"Jump!" Call repeated, forgetting that not even he was sitting atop a chute pack.

"Take her down, Cap!" Loose lip again yelled, and by then both he and Hastings had backed so far toward Call—with the hot flames crowding ahead—that all three men were in very close quarters.

Call took her down. He dropped the left wing low, stood on his rudder, and let her slip. Loose Lip and Hastings, just for a moment, lost their footing and piled up together against the portside wall of the bomb bay. But they kept the extinguishers in play, somehow or other, and Call held to his fast fall. At the same time, Col. Call yelled and warned them to keep clear of the bomb bay doors.

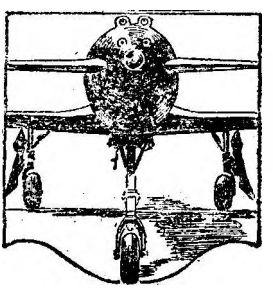
"I'm going to spill the rest of those bombs," he yelled, "and see what a blast of air through that opening will do! Clear!"

And the blast through the open bomb bay doors did it—it blew that fire right out through the burnt openings in the top of the fuselage; and now there was little left of that aft fuselage except a skeleton that might, or might not, hang together. So Call began to ease his ship out of the deadly sideslip, and he eased it out with a prayer. Later, Col. Call was to tell that he never before knew that he had such swell prayer-power within such easy reach.

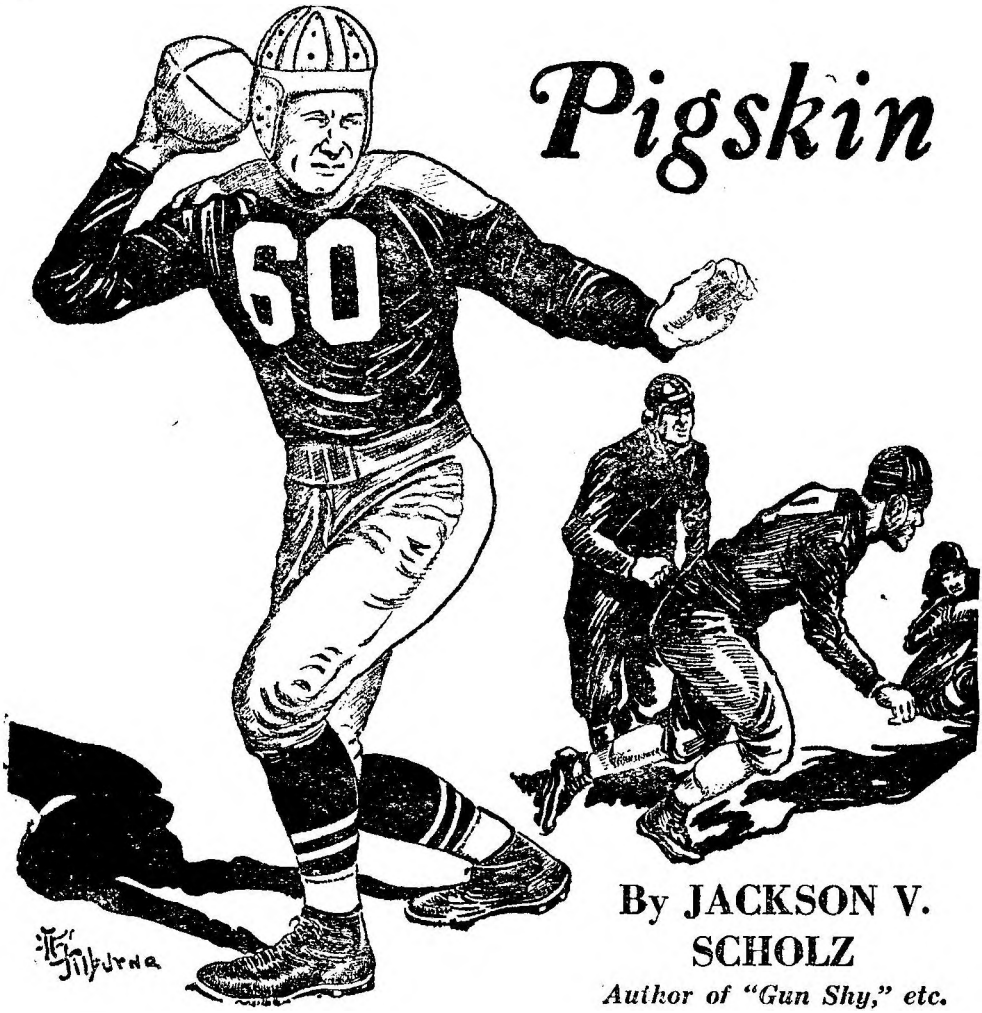
But Col. Call hadn't really prayed hard enough, for he had one dead man and two very badly burnt companions ready for the ambulances which waited on the apron. Down at the post hospital, Major Peel, the flight surgeon, said he couldn't understand why Hastings hadn't been killed. As for Loose Lip, the major said, he wasn't surprised at all.

"Killing's been tried on him so often," said the major, "that the big guy is immune. He'll be up and out of here within a month —telling everybody how he blew out that fire with his own big mouth."

That wasn't exactly the way Loose Lip told it however. But, when he could look across to Hastings' bed, and talk through the folds of wrapping, he said, "It's like I always say, Hastings. Just leave it to me an' Cap Call an' we'll find out what's wrong with any ship, an' make it right. Us gents said we'd find a way to have them fuel tanks changed, an' by hell we done it—the hard way."



Pigskin



By JACKSON V. SCHOLZ

Author of "Gun Shy," etc.

THE COBRAS weren't clicking, and their captain, Kip Terry was annoyed to the stage of irritability. It was only an early practice session, to be sure, but the Cobras had the stuff this year, an impressive weight of fine material which, thus far, was not coordinated.

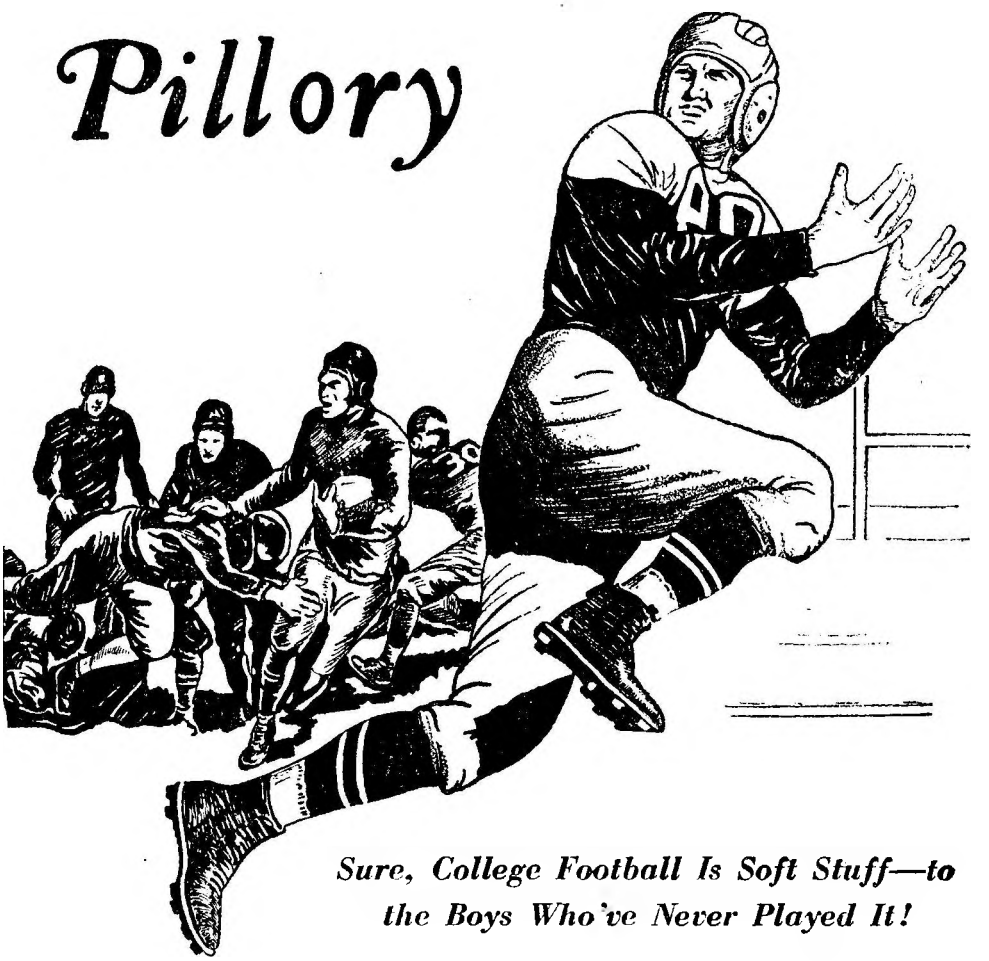
Kip Terry stood disgustedly with hands on hips and said, "You stink. You act like a bunch of old dames carrying eggs in their aprons. What's wrong? Are you afraid of gettin' hurt?"

The Cobras, being a rough, tough bunch from a rough, tough section of Carlton City, wouldn't take that sort of talk from anybody unless assured of one prime fact, namely, that the guy who dished it out was capable of pinning their ears back, and would jump at the chance to prove it. Previous demonstrations had established this and had gained for Terry the profound respect of all his teammates. They were proud of him, proud also of his unassailable position as the "best damn halfback" in the league.

Biff Sullivan, the quarterback said, "Okay, Kip, we stink. We can't get goin'. What's the trouble?"

It was cagey strategy, the business of tossing the responsibility in Terry's lap. His brother, Packy Terry, first string end for the big-league Bisons, was the Cobras' accepted coach, but Packy only spent three days a week with them, and Kip was supposed to accept the responsibility at other

Pillory



Sure, College Football Is Soft Stuff—to the Boys Who've Never Played It!

times. This was one of the times, and getting sore about it wouldn't help the matter.

He scratched his chin. It was blunt and solid, conforming to the other features of his face which was lifted from mediocrity by the startling blue of his eyes. It had the intense penetrating quality of an acetylene flame, possessing also the confusing trait of darkening with anger and lightening with pleasure. His eyebrows were dark and heavy, and his forehead high. His mouth was mobile, quick to laugh. It broke into a grin now, showing strong white teeth.

He said, "Pick up the marbles, Biff, you win. If I can't tell you what's wrong, I hadn't ought to bellyache. So here's a guess. We all think we're pretty hot. Well, maybe we are, but we'll never be any hotter'n ice cube if we don't all get in the same harness and pull the same load. I got a hunch that Packey would tell us the same thing. Now let's try that end-around again."

Things went a little smoother. The first team hammered at the willing scrubs, of which there was abundance, each hopeful of being elevated to the exalted rank of regular, and willing to risk life and limb to get there.

Because the Cobras rated high among the sand-lot squads of Carlton City. The sand-lot teams, all amateurs, were excellently organized, encouraged by the recreational department of the city. They were all given space to practice on the spacious athletic fields of Handley Park. The Cobras were working out there now, together with several other rivals.

There were a few casual spectators on the side-lines, but Kip Terry was too busy to

pay them much attention. He was hot today. The scrubs didn't stand a prayer at stopping him, so he shifted some of the regulars to the second squad just to even things up. It didn't seem to make much difference. He was still a fire-ball, booming along in mid-season stride. It was only natural, then, that Kip Terry should feel somewhat pleased with himself, a trifle on the important side.

He called time out to straighten out a few wrinkles in the squad. He was particularly mild about it, because he didn't want the other guys to think his head was swelling. He was about to start the scrimmage once more when a big man in a football suit approached him diffidently. The man asked:

"Are you Mr. Terry, captain of the Cobras?"

"Yes."

"My name's Judd, and if you need any more players, I'd sure like to try out for the Cobras."

Terry studied Judd with some suspicion. Judd's football togs were definitely makeshift. He carried a ratty helmet in his hand. Terry judged him at approximately one hundred eighty pounds, Terry's own weight, but Judd was considerable more streamlined than Terry, slightly taller, and narrower through the hips. He looked brittle as opposed to Terry's block-like solidness. Judd was also handsome in the sleek, smooth way Kip Terry didn't like. Guys with pans like that were generally arrogant, hard to get along with. His diffidence was not as convincing as it might have been.

"Where've you played?" asked Terry.

"I played tail-back for my high school team out in Idaho. I was pretty good out there, but I guess I must sound pretty cocky asking for a try-out with the Cobras."

IT was the right approach. The Cobras were Kip Terry's pride and joy, particularly at the moment while he was hitting on all cylinders.

"Well," admitted Terry. "We *are* pretty well fixed for material this year; but," permitting a shade of patronage to creep into his tone, "we can always use another good man. Stick around, Judd. I'll look you over in a little while."

He started to turn away when Judd said, "We play pretty rough football out in Idaho."

Terry stopped, turned slowly back, recognizing the needle when he felt it. He caught a fleeting expression of amusement in Judd's eyes. So there *was* something phoney about the set-up after all. Judd figured he was really good. His attitude of diffidence was a come-on.

"You're askin' for it, Judd," said Terry pointedly. "Are you in shape?"

"Good *enough* shape," Judd answered.

"Okay, go in at half-back for the scrubs. The quarterback'll tip you off to the plays as we go along."

Judd grinned, pulled on his helmet and started for the scrubs. Kip Terry, having made his snap decision, felt a little guilty over it. He was afraid he'd let his instinctive dislike for Judd get the better of him, that he was sending a lamb to the slaughter for no other reason than to satisfy his own feelings on the matter. It was hardly sporting, as Terry understood the term, but he reminded himself grimly, Judd had asked for it.

The rest of the Cobras, however, appeared to be suffering no twinges of conscience. Whittling down a cocky stranger to his proper size was right up their alley. It was a job they faced with much anticipation. They brightened at the prospect.

Judd received his brief instructions, nodding as if he understood them. The first stringers had the ball. One of the subs, acting as referee, called time in. In the huddle Terry said:

"He's my meat, gents. Gimme a hole off right tackle!"

THE play had been chosen advisedly. Once through the line Kip Terry would find himself in Judd's defense zone, if the guy had only enough sense to defend the proper zone.

The A team moved to the line of scrimmage. The Bs lined up to face the As. Kip Terry took the ball on a direct pass from center. He made no effort at deception, merely charged at the spot where the hole should be.

It was there. Terry went through it at high speed, noting with a grunt of satisfaction that the play was working according to its blue print. Judd, whether by design or luck,

was in the proper spot, accepting the job assigned to him. He came at Terry low and hard.

Kip Terry aimed a straight-arm at Judd's ragged helmet, careful not to put too much force behind it. He didn't want to bust the sucker's neck, just wanted to deflect him.

Kip Terry absorbed a pair of lightning-like impressions in the next split second. He saw Judd's tackling style, compact, knees bent, straight spine—far from amateurish. He also saw the neat precision with which Judd ducked his head as he came in, just enough to let the straight-arm skid across the top.

Kip Terry's next impressions were not pleasant. They were, in fact, decidedly unpleasant, almost as if he'd stepped upon a land mine. Judd hit him like a bolt of lightning, and Terry went down "as falls on Mount Alvernus the thunder-smitten oak."

TERRY knew he'd been hit. So did the other Cobras. They stood around with astounding looks upon their faces, scarcely believing what they'd seen.

Terry, however, was built to absorb that sort of thing. His self-respect had taken a greater beating than his rugged frame. He climbed to his feet after Judd had released him. They faced each other, Judd's eyes were now filled with an amusement he made no effort to conceal.

"Did I do all right, Mr. Terry? he inquired.

"Yeah," said Terry thoughtfully. "Yeah, you did okay. I'll be through again—same place."

"I'll try to be here."

Kip Terry couldn't dope it out. He knew enough about football to realize Judd was seasoned at the game. But why, he wondered irritably, had Judd picked a sand-lot team on which to throw his weight around. There was no answer to that one, leaving Terry faced with the simple conclusion that he, Kip Terry, was actually the one who'd stuck his neck out. He'd talked himself into a jam.

A smouldering anger formed in him, but he held the thing in check. He didn't want it to obscure his reason. He didn't bother with a huddle. "Same play," he snapped, and the teams went to the line.

Kip Terry poured it on this time. The hole was there, and so was Judd. Terry tried a swiveling change of pace and almost made it good—not quite. Judd snaked a long arm out and hooked a hand on Terry's knee. Terry went into a spinning fall, but only gained two yards.

He tried the same play three more times. Each time Judd nailed him. Both men absorbed a lot of punishment, but Judd, surprisingly, seemed to soak it up as well as Terry. The guy was more substantial than he looked.

He made a chump of Terry. No doubt about it. Judd was just as good a football player—maybe better. The Cobras knew it too, and that hurt. When Judd said:

"Maybe you'd let me carry the ball a little, Mr. Terry," Terry had no choice. He had to say:

"Okay."

The matter needed no discussion. The men all knew their parts, understood the argument to be personal. When Terry told his linesman, "Let 'im through," they nodded.

Judd came through. He came through with a flashing, controlled speed Terry had never faced before. Terry made his try, grabbing nothing but thin air. He was pale with anger and humiliation when he reached his feet.

But he kept his head. Next time he made allowance for Judd's speed and shiftiness. He stopped him with a sloppy tackle—but he stopped him.

Judd tried it four more times, and got past Terry twice, a miserable average for a man of Terry's reputation in the league. The story would get about, no doubt about it. The boys would get some good laughs out of it. Laughs meant fights. He'd be a busy man he reflected gloomily.

II

BUT the matter of this ringer, Judd, had to be settled first. Terry was already in too deep to be permitted to retire with dignity. He was about to suggest a broader field of competition, passing, kicking, open-field work, but was interrupted before he could form the challenge into words.

An older man was striding on the field. His clothes were baggy and his old felt hat was limp, but he carried himself with an air

of assured authority which registered on all the Cobras—also upon Judd.

The players waited apprehensively, their apprehension heightened by stormy look on the tanned, seamed face of the lanky man who came toward them. Tension among the Cobras slackened though when it was obvious the older man's anger was centered upon Judd. Judd looked scared, like a kid caught stealing watermelons. Terry heard him mutter:

"Holy cats! Coach Vale!"

Vale planted himself in front of Judd and said:

"Start talking."

Judd swallowed with an effort. "I—I just thought I'd have a little fun," he finally managed.

"A little fun, huh?" Vale repeated with a brittle undertone. "So you can't have enough fun playing with the Hardin Colts. You have to come down here and be a big-shot mauling these kids around. If it ever happens again, you're through. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Vale turned toward the Cobras. The anger left his face, leaving it astonishingly mild and kind.

"Who's in charge of you lads?" he asked.

"I am," admitted Terry.

"Do you know who *he* is?" nodding toward Judd.

"He said his name was Judd."

"His full name is Judd Nye. He played for Nebraska last year. Came close to making all-American. He transferred to Hardin this year, and will play with us."

KIP TERRY'S anger slipped its mooring. He didn't like Judd Nye's idea of fun. It was a low-rotten trick. He turned on Nye and said:

"You dirty, stinkin' louse!" his eyes were dark blue, almost black. "You could have put some of my boys out of the game for good."

Nye lost his temper too. "What a terrible loss to football," he said nastily.

Kip Terry went for him then. Nye moved in willingly, but Coach Vale was too fast for either of them. He broke it up by moving in between the pair. He snapped at Nye:

"Get out of here."

"Okay, Coach," Nye agreed, moving back. "But you sure saved that little punk a beating.

Terry started to barge around the coach, but Vale stopped him with an, "Easy, son!"

Kip Terry pulled up short, amazed at the authority in Vale's tone, and amazed that he should obey it with such promptness. He watched Nye leave the field, and muttered:

"I'll be seeing 'im."

"Forget it, son," advised Coach Vale. "I'm sorry it happened, but apparently there's no harm done. Go on with your scrimmage."

Terry accepted the advice, glad for the outlet it afforded. He tried to wipe the unpleasant episode from his system through the medium of violent action. He almost succeeded, forgetting time and common sense. Biff Sullivan finally brought him around by protesting:

"Cripes, Kip, have a heart! What're you trying to do, kill us?"

"Huh?" asked Terry absently. Then, guiltily. "Yeah, I guess we've had enough. Knock off."

HE was unaware Coach Vale had stuck around, didn't know it till Vale stopped him as he left the field. Terry's first feeling was one of annoyance, because he associated Vale too closely with Judd Nye. However, it was hard to stay annoyed with a guy like Vale.

"You looked good out there, Kip," said Vale. "Mighty good."

"Thanks," said Terry without much interest.

"Ever finish high school?"

"Huh?" said Terry, puzzled. Then, "Yeah, sure. Graduated last Spring."

"Ever think of going to college? Playing football there?"

"Hell no!" said Terry abruptly. "To start with, I couldn't afford it, and wouldn't want to if I could."

"Why?" Vale insisted patiently.

"Look, Mr. Vale," said Terry pointedly. "I'm headin' for pro football. It's my dish. My brother Packey plays end for the Bisons. He'll get me a try-out when I'm ready. This sand-lot league is tougher than it looks, and the way I figure it I'll be ready for a try-out with the Bisons a whole lot sooner than if I wasted time in college. No thanks. I'll play it my way."

"I could get you a scholarship at Hardin," Vale went on. "And after tangling with Nye today, you ought to know we play a pretty rugged brand of football up at Hardin. I'm giving the boys some pre-season work right now. School won't open for a week. Better think it over."

"Okay, Mr. Vale. I'll think it over. Well, so long."

Kip Terry had no intentions of thinking it over, but it was one of those things a guy couldn't brush off as casually as that. He considered it despite himself, getting himself involved with several persistent factors.

The chief one, naturally, was Judd Nye. The guy kept bobbing up in Terry's mind like an unpleasant spectre. He felt he owed Nye something, owed him plenty in fact. Nye had pulled a fast one on him, and had gotten by with it, a matter which did not fit in with Kip Terry's simple code of ethics. The way he looked at it, it was up to him to pull an equally fast one on Nye. For instance, the thought hit him with unnerving force, what if he should accept Vale's bid to Hardin, then go on from there to grab Nye's place upon the Hardin Colts? The thought excited him, made him feel all hot inside.

Hell, he told himself, he wouldn't have to stick around any longer than the time required to settle Judd Nye's hash. Then he could return to his pals on the sand-lot teams, and ultimately cinch a berth with big-time football.

The whole thing seemed so simple he was scared and worried over it. He still held college football in contempt. But then, the thought came back, if there were many more as tough as Nye upon the Colts, his contempt would be misplaced. He decided to talk it over with his brother. Packey could put him straight, could show him why he'd be a chump to go to college at this time. Packey knew the angles.

Packey said, surprisingly, "You'd be a chump to pass it up. Get yourself a college education, kid."

"You missed the angle," Terry said. "I don't need a college education to play pro football and to coach a big team afterward. That rah-rah stuff's a lot of tripe, a waste of time. I want to square things with that stinker Nye, then call it quits."

"Okay," said Packey. "Do it that way, then. But you'll have to go to college first."

"I guess I will," admitted Terry miserably. "But I hate books."

HIS leave-taking of the Cobras was as bad as he'd anticipated, maybe worse, even though he had entertained no hope that any of them might understand his move. None did. They accepted his decision to go to college as a case of outright desertion, a matter for the firing squad. Their contempt for Terry was complete and devastating. It left him dry and shriveled with a futile anger which could find no outlet, because the Cobras turned their backs on him.

His frame of mind upon entering college was, therefore, not receptive, and he only went through with it because of his inherent stubborness. He doggedly refused to be impressed with the fine old beauty of the buildings, the maple-shaded campus and an athletic lay-out such as he had never dreamed existed. He chose to regard the institution as an octopus whose tentacles had dragged him from his friends and a way of living which he understood.

Coach Vale had this figured out, and lost no time in putting Terry straight. He said:

"It's like this, Kip. If the school's willing to give *you* a chance, you've got to give *it* a chance. Get the chip off your shoulder. Relax and quit acting as if everybody here at Hardin was waiting for a chance to kick you in the pants. We'll meet you more than halfway. Take my word for it."

Kip Terry had brains enough to recognize a bit of sound advice when he heard it. Rather startled that the coach had diagnosed his case so accurately, Terry grinned and said:

"You're right—I'm wrong. I'll try to give it a fair whirl."

Being sincere in his commitment Terry failed to recognize a certain mental reservation until it jumped up and bit him. It had to do, of course, with Judd Nye. As Terry left the coach's office he almost bumped into Nye who was about to enter. It was a bad time for such a meeting, coming as it did before Terry had had the chance to whip his new resolution in to line.

He stopped, bristled like a bulldog, and glared at Nye through sheer instinct. Nye pulled up short, stepped back a defensive pace and braced himself, also instinctively. It

was a silly tableau, a fact which Terry recognized at once. So did Nye. He said:

"Hy, Terry. I heard you'd arrived at Hardin." The words were noncommital, tentative. Nye was showing a poise Kip Terry envied, an emotion which didn't help his present frame of mind.

"That's right, I'm here," he challenged, tossing the ball back into Judd Nye's hands.

Nye handled it with irritating smoothness. "Staying long?" he inquired pleasantly.

"Long enough to finish what I've started," Terry answerd pointedly.

Nye got the point. His eyes went hard. "So that's the way you want it, huh?"

Kip Terry nodded jerkily. "You guessed it."

Nye shrugged and circled Terry toward the coach's office door. Kip Terry left the gym. Still simmering he told himself he'd had the guts to call a spade a spade, that he'd given Nye fair warning. He was pleased with his performance till the heat inside him waned. The brief exchange of words came back to him and took a different meaning, a sharp significance he had to recognize.

He'd lost no time ignoring Vale's advice, but was fair enough to blame himself, not Nye. Judd Nye had left the choice to Terry, war or peace. Nye had offered a compromise which Terry's bull-headed pride had turned down cold. Kip Terry wondered vaguely why he felt a little like a heel, why the palms of his hands were damp with chilly sweat.

III

HE tried to make amends for the blunder he'd made with Nye, not through any consideration for Nye, but through a hard-headed consideration for his own immediate future at Hardin. He made a conscious effort to keep his neck hauled in, to behave himself, and to pretend he enjoyed college life.

The results of which confused him, forced him to a mental readjustment for which he had no precedent. His bewildering conclusion was, that unless he watched his step he *would* like college life, thereby relegating all his past convictions to the scrap pile, and forcing him to the embarrassing admission he'd been wrong in believing rah-rah stuff was tripe.

As Vale had prophesied, the student body, once convinced of his good intentions, *was* willing to meet halfway, and a little more. He made contacts which opened up new and rather breath-taking possibilities. The profs were different from his high school teachers, they seemed to take an honest personal interest in him which went far toward eliminating his bugaboo for books.

Conditions on the gridiron were also better, far better than he'd hoped for from the standpoint of the way the men received him. They didn't fall on his neck or anything of that sort, but on the other hand they didn't try to freeze him out. Their attitude was impersonal and watchful, but essentially fair, leaving him an open path to make the grade —if he had the stuff.

His relations with Judd Nye were cool and strained enough to leave no doubt in the minds of the others that he and Nye had something strong and personal between them, but so far as Terry could tell, Judd Nye did nothing obvious to cramp his style, even though Nye ran the varsity, called the signals from his tail-back spot.

There were, however, several drawbacks which Kip Terry had to discipline himself to face. The Owls were powerful in the backfield with Sam Lambert at number 1, Hap Quigley, quarterback, Van Parker at number 3, and with Judd Nye sparking the combination from the tail-back spot. In the early practice sessions there wasn't much indication that Kip Terry was good enough, as yet, to replace any of these men, least of all Judd Nye.

It was a kick in the teeth, but Terry weathered it, supported by his own huge confidence, and the pertinent fact that he was forced to learn a brand new type of football. He had been weaned and reared in the T-formation school, while Coach Vale was a disciple of the single wing.

Another matter Terry had a bit of trouble swallowing was the fact that Vale spotted him at number 3. This meant that if Kip Terry ever had the chance to replace any varsity man, he'd replace Parker, not Judd Nye. This was bad. Kip Terry hadn't planned it that way.

THE most serious thing Kip Terry faced, however, was a thing he seemed unable to control. He spotted the weakness in himself, and knew the other certainly had

spotted it. Vale told him several times:

"Look Kip, there are ten more men on the team. They're there to help you if you'll let 'em. You're pretty good, but not near good enough to pack the mail alone. Quit battering your brains out. Slow it down. You've got a lot of time."

He knew Coach Vale's advice was sound. He also knew that Vale had put his finger on the weak spot, unintentionally or otherwise, the time element involved.

Kip Terry *didn't* have much time, and that's what hounded him. He was fighting against time, fighting with everything he had to make the grade. Okay, he fought too hard, with too much savagery. So what? He couldn't help it. He was built that way. It was his own style of football. It had paid off with the Cobras. Why not here?

He tried to tell himself it was the single wing-back system. It wasn't suited to his style. He tried to force himself to believe it, but the belief refused to stick. The answer remained hidden somewhere else. He tried to dig it out, but couldn't. So he kept on playing as he had to play, a battering, driving game, a desperate battle against time.

It didn't get him very far except in isolated spurts of brilliance. When the season started Terry warmed the bench. He kept a small spot on the hard wood snug and cozy for the first five games, miserably aware the Owl's backfield had power to spare without him. He watched the team, despite its shaky line, win all five games, and he knew these games would never have been won if it hadn't been for Judd Nye's power and football saavy, another item for speculation which did not improve Kip Terry's disposition.

It turned into a disposition he wasn't proud of. He hated soreheads on general principles, yet saw the symptoms developing in himself. He fought against it, tried his best to retain his normal geniality on and off the football field, but the effort at self-discipline resulted in a conflict of emotions which frazzled his nerves, leaving them ragged and unreliable.

He found himself in this unfortunate condition when Coach Vale gave him his first chance to play with the regulars in a scheduled game. The Owls were tangling with the "Riveters" from Foster Tech, a tough upstate outfit of hairy-eared engineers.

The Riveters had a lot of talent, but it was only one-man deep. They lacked reserves. Knowing this, they opened up with everything they had in the early stages of the game, hoping to pile up a lead which they could hold.

They did all right. Tricky as eleven foxes, they conjured a pair of touchdowns in the opening quarter. They only kicked one extra point, but moved out front 13-0.

The Owls, however, kept their heads, stayed in there plugging. The Riveters showed signs of slowing down in the second quarter, and late in the period Judd Nye rifled a scoring pass into the end zone. He kicked the extra point to bring the score to 13-7.

The Owls got another quick break on the kick-off. The Riveter safety man bobbled the catch, letting it get past him across the goal line. The Owl ends were down on him so fast he didn't have a chance to move the ball into safe territory, so he fell on it, accepting the two point penalty for a safety. The score was now 13-9.

The Riveters came out rested for the second half. They came within an ace of ramming over another touchdown, but the Owls made a spectacular goal-line stand and saved a score. They took the ball on their three-yard line. Nye booted it out of danger, and the game soon worked its way to the center of the field.

Things began to go a trifle sour, then, for the Owls. Van Parker got the wind banged out of him, and was taken from the game. Kip Terry broke out into an expectant sweat, but Coach Vale didn't call his name. Instead, he filled the number 3 spot with a promising youngster by the name of Jerry Polk.

Polk, however, didn't last long. He hurt his ankle on the second play, making it look as if number 3 position had a jinx on it.

Jinx or no jinx, Kip Terry wanted in there. It would have made no difference then if he'd been asked to play against a team of bull gorillas. He'd have jumped at the opportunity. When he heard the coach bark, "Okay, Terry!" he left the bench as if the wood had scorched his pants.

HE galloped on the field, buckling on his helmet as he ran. His fingers fumbled clumsily. His nerves were jumping like a basket full of frogs.

The feel of the turf beneath his cleats, however, brought him back to earth—part way at any rate. The fluttering in his stomach settled down. A taut resolve took hold of him. He'd waited long and bitterly for this first chance. He'd keep his head and make it good. He'd coordinate his playing with the other Owls. He'd follow Vale's advice and mould himself into the functions of the team.

An excellent resolve which hit a snag almost at once. It was something almost indefinable, but it was there—the undeliberated attitude of the other men toward him. They looked upon him as a sub, no more, and a third-string sub at that.

They were justified, of course, but it was a kick in the teeth to Terry just the same. A heat began to creep up from his shoulder pads into his neck. So they figured they'd have to carry him along. They looked upon him as a weak cog in their gears. The blue of Terry's eyes began to darken. He reported to the referee, then waited for the huddle.

The Owls had the ball upon their own thirty-four yard line, first down, ten to go. In the huddle Judd Nye said, "Try L-18."

Kip Terry felt a jerk of disappointment. He'd been given a relatively unimportant part, not even a blocking job. He was merely required to fake an end run, while Nye, after a spinner, hit the line. Terry swallowed his indignation, though, and tried to make his act convincing. Nye blasted inside tackle for four yards.

Terry drew a blocking assignment on the next down, with Nye packing the mail again on an in-and-out end sweep. Nye took the snap from center, faked his line plunge, then swung wide around the end. Kip Terry moved out fast in front of Nye, feeling the pent-up energy drive hard against his legs.

Not until he had crossed the line of scrimmage did Terry realize he had moved too fast, too far ahead of Nye. Terry could tell this by the heads and the eyes of the Riveters which were turned toward Nye. Terry checked his speed and swerved, but the Riveters were already cutting in behind him. He tossed a desperate block which nailed a Riveter—the wrong one. Kip Terry heard the impact of the tackle. He twisted from his sprawled position on the ground, and saw that Nye had been nailed down for a scant yard gain.

Terry had blundered, and he knew it. If Nye had bawled him out right then, Kip Terry could have taken it, knowing he deserved it. Terry had bawled plenty of men out for similar offences. It was right and proper, something he could understand.

But Nye didn't give him hell, merely glanced at him and shrugged. The shrug said plainly, "What can you expect from sandlot upstarts?"

It wasn't a tonic for Kip Terry's ragged nerves. He almost shot his mouth off then, but managed to keep the lid upon his temper. The close call threw a scare into him. His nerves were in worse shape than he'd realized. He tried to pull himself together.

He didn't have a chance to make the grade, because Nye called his signal in the huddle. Kip Terry's heart went bang against his tonsils. Nye was giving him a chance to pack the mail on a spinner plunge to the short side of the line.

Terry took the snap from center, spun swiftly, then went into action like a bazooka shell. He uncorked all his speed and power, but should have waited an instant longer. His own guard tied down the Riveter guard, but Terry reached the line before his blocking back, Sam Lambert, had a chance to get across and mouse-trap the opposing tackle. The tackle, therefore, had an open shot at Terry. The collision was terrific, but the Riveter held on. Kip Terry lost a yard.

He didn't like it. Neither did the Owls, who made it worse by keeping their mouths shut. Nye kicked on the fourth down, and the game settled down to a see-saw battle in the middle of the field.

Terry was geared up now to a speed he couldn't check. He played like a wild man, the very violence of his action tending to offset his poor coordination. It made him adequate, nothing more. But Coach Vale left him in.

From the turmoil of his mind, however, Terry gleaned an obvious fact. He knew he wasn't coordinating with the others, but, either as a result of this, or through deliberation, the fact remained they weren't coordinating properly with him. His twisted thoughts grabbed hold of this and clung to it in self-defense. He finally found what he considered damning evidence of it.

The Owls had hammered within striking distance of the Riveters broad stripe. They

held the ball, third down, two yards to go, on the Riveters' twenty-eight yard line. A line plunge by Judd Nye for the first down was the obvious play. Nye called a fake for just that play, but instead gave Terry the chance to pack the mail.

SMART strategy. It should have worked, but didn't. Kip Terry started off around the end. This time he gave his interference all the chance it needed. Sam Lambert should have blocked the end. He missed. The end got through to pull Kip Terry down for a five-yard loss. Sam Lambert looked incredulous, wondering how he'd missed the block. Kip Terry knew with a flash of intuition Sam had really tried. He also knew that Lambert would have made the block if he'd been running interference for Judd Nye. It was a hard thing to explain.

Kip Terry didn't try. He just accepted it. He accepted it with a completeness of conviction which led him into a vicious trap, a trap constructed wholly of his own disordered thoughts.

It happened a short time later when the game had moved into the final quarter. The Owls, still battering at the weary Riveters, had once more moved into their territory. The set-up was the same as on the previous occasion, so similar as to be almost coincidental. The ball was on the twenty-six yard line, third down and two to go. It was perfect spot, once more, for the play Sam Lambert had messed up. Nye called the play again.

Kip Terry never knew exactly what took place inside him then. Maybe it was an overpowering hunch. Maybe his strong ego finally broke its bonds. Maybe it was bitterness, frustration. Whatever it was, however, it was something foreign to his normal mind, a fact which Terry figured out too late.

The whole thing seemed so simple at the time he did it. It was even sound in logic. He knew he wouldn't get the proper interference, and hence the play would fail. But —what if he should do the thing no one expected him to do? Wouldn't he catch *both* teams napping? Wouldn't he demonstrate one of the first principles of football, beautiful deception? Nor did he overlook the fact he'd be a hero if he pulled it off.

So when the ball was snapped to him he started in the opposite direction, started at high speed around end. His heart leaped high with exhultation when he saw his plan was working. The Riveters were either trying to stop Nye's fake line plunge, or were sweeping toward the opposite end.

His exhultation died somewhat when he also saw the men who believed they were running interference for him, had moved a clean path to the goal line. He could have breezed through for a touchdown. So what? He'd make it this way just as easily.

The Riveter who hit him came from nowhere, some clumsy ape too dumb to be deceived. He barged in from the side and rear. He cut Kip Terry's feet from under him. He sailed into the air, came down upon a shoulder, and the ball was jarred from the cradle of his arm. A fumble! He saw a Riveter flash through the air and fall on it.

He scrambled to his feet and stood there thoroughly shocked in mind and soul. A raging anger tore its way through him, an anger at himself, and at the filthy trick which fate had played on him. It was blind, unreasoning rage which had to have an outlet.

Judd Nye came up to him, his face a mask of fury. "You rat!" Nye snarled. "You dirty rat!"

And then Kip Terry swung at him—a blow as uncoordinated as his game. He missed his target. Nye stepped back. An outraged bellow thundered from the Hardin fans. The referee, tight faced, came charging up.

"Get out!" he roared. "Get off the field!"

Reaction from the thing he'd done swept over Terry. A cloak of horror draped itself upon his shoulders. He started from the field, incredulous and sick. He'd never dreamed emotions could be traitorous as this. He knew, now, he was through at Hardin. Later, he was only partially consoled to learn that Nye had scored the winning touchdown.

IV

THE next few days were bad, worse, as a matter of fact, than he'd expected, because he encountered an elusive factor he had not anticipated.

He'd been convinced that the worst he'd have to face would be the natural freeze-up of the football squad and student body. So instead of leaving school he stuck around to take the punishment he knew he'd earned, assured that he could close himself within

an isolated shell of bitterness, a shell which could protect him from the barbs of glances and contemptuous comment.

As an added precaution he threw up an outer rampart of indifference as to what the student body thought or said about him. He told himself he didn't give a damn, that they weren't his sort of people anyway, that college stuff was still the bunk, and that he'd proved it. He'd be glad to get back to his former way of living.

The elusive factor entered at this point and scared him to the stage of chilly perspiration. It started with a gnawing sense of loss he tried to check but couldn't. He fought against it doggedly, assuring himself he was losing nothing, refusing to admit that something vital was being lifted from his life.

"Okay," he argued with himself. "If you're losing something just what is it? Tell me that."

But he couldn't pin the answer down. He felt it staring at him from dark corners. He tried to wheel on it, surprise it, but he failed. It haunted him.

Another thing he couldn't understand was why Coach Vale permitted him to stay upon the squad. Maybe it was a deliberate form of punishment, because the Coach undoubtedly did not intend to risk him in another game. The Owls, including Nye, regarded him with chill indifference.

But Terry still warmed his spot upon the bench while the Owls skinned through their next two games, a minor miracle which brought them undefeated to the final game, their yearly brawl against the Vulcans of State University.

The game was founded on tradition and fierce rivalry, a meeting in which anything could happen, and generally did. The student bodies of both schools began the build-up weeks ahead, always arriving at the appointed day in a state of hopped-up frenzy. It was part of the tradition, and always simple of accomplishment. They hated each other's guts.

The outlook for the Owls this year was not so good. They were undefeated, sure, but they hadn't produced the steam-rolling scores which the Vulcans had piled up behind the all-American brilliance of their sparkplug, Archie Kent.

The Hardin student body tried to still unsettling doubts by whipping themselves into an extra special lather. Banners and placards, "Vanquish the Vulcans!" were plastered about the town and campus. The Owl fans were doing their best to kid themselves into the belief they had a chance to win.

Kip Terry watched all these preparations with jaundiced eyes. Rah-rah stuff, he told himself. A bag of tripe. He promptly smothered any subversive thought which made him want to be a part of all this idiotic hoop-la. He even went so far as to force himself into the hope the Owls would take a beating. Why not? It would do them good. Do Judd Nye good at any rate. Yeah, he finally convinced himself, I hope they get their ears pinned back.

He didn't attend the huge mass meeting in the stadium the night before the game. The other football men were there, of course, but they'd never miss Kip Terry. They'd be glad he wasn't there, in fact.

He stayed in his room until the sound of thunderous cheering reached him. It annoyed him and made him fretful. So he pulled on a sweater and left the house, breathing the clean sharp air of fall without appreciation.

He started automatically away from the sound of cheering, a route which led him toward the business section of the small town. He was surprised to find it bustling and crowded with citizens and visitors. There was quite a mob upon the streets, in fact, excited fans who wanted to discuss football. Not all of them were sober. Some were maudlin, some were cock-eyed, getting a good head start for the celebration on the following day.

TERRY shouldered his way through them for awhile, then leaned against a building, feeling sour and bitter toward the world at large. A group of four men stopped in front of him. Husky gents, not students. They passed a bottle back and forth. Each took his drag. One heavy-shouldered guy coughed, cleared his throat, and, continuing a previous discussion, said:

"Yeah, a bunch of bums, that's what they are, a bunch of bums. They ain't got the chance of a snowball in hell against the Vulcans. The Owls're bunch of bums." The others nodded with agreement.

Something amazing happened then, as-

tounding no one more than Terry. He removed his shoulders from the building, took a step and hauled the husky guy around to face him.

"Be careful who you're callin' bums," said Terry thinly. "You're talkin' about *my* team."

The big guy, bucket-jawed and angry, stared at him.

"Are *you* an Owl?" he asked.

"You're damn right I'm an Owl. Want to make something of it?"

One of the others said, "Hell, Jake, don't let the young punk talk to you like that. He's askin' for it."

Jake didn't stop to argue. He hauled a big fist back, but never had a chance to cock it. Kip Terry blasted in a wicked right above Jake's belt. Jake grunted, sat down on the sidewalk and looked silly.

Kip Terry whirled as the other three closed in on him. They came in fast and earnestly, and Terry went down beneath their weight. But far from out. It was the sort of gutter fighting Terry understood, and he fought with a savage happiness he hadn't known for weeks.

The local police soon broke it up, and Terry landed in the clink. He was somewhat battered, but still happy. He parked himself contentedly on a hard bench, and tried to dope it out.

He didn't have much trouble, because the facts were strangely simple. They boiled down to the fundamental fact that he couldn't kid himself. Hardin college had its grip on him, and, now that he knew what had been worrying him for days, he was grateful for the knowledge. It cleared his thoughts, gave him a new slant on what he wanted.

He wanted to stick around this place, four years if necessary, as long as was required to prove he wasn't the sort of mug they justifiably suspected him of being.

Coach Vale came in a short time later. The jailer let him in the cell. He took a seat by Terry, explaining briefly:

"The chief told me he'd jugged one of my boys. What happened?"

Terry stretched his legs out, studied his toes with much embarrassment, and said:

"I heard a stinker say the Owls were bums."

"So?"

"Well, I—I sort of took the matter up with him and his side-kicks."

"Why?"

Kip Terry shot a side glance at the coach The coach was watching him intently. Terry returned to the contemplation of his toes, and said:

"I—I guess I must have figured the Owls *weren't* bums."

"Hum-m-m, I see," Vale said. "Well, Kip, let's go."

"Huh? Where?"

"To freedom," Vale said drily. "The chief's a friend of mine. I've sprung you."

"Oh," said Terry, getting up. Then, "Thanks."

They left the jail together. Coach Vale said, "Go home. I've got some things to do down here."

Kip Terry started home. The air smelled good. And then his knees began to go a little weak as he thought of the game next day against the Vulcans. He wondered if he'd get a chance to play. The thought was idiotic, but it clung. It harried him all night. disturbed his sleep. He was drawn and slightly haggard in the morning.

V

HE started the game that afternoon upon the bench, as usual, mildly surprised at the calmness of his resignation, once he was assured the coach did not intend to use him. He was surprised, too, to find that his resentful bitterness had ebbed, that it had been replaced by two distinct emotions which, up to this time, he had not encountered in their present form.

The first was loneliness. His previous sessions on the bench had found him so involved in his own personal problems he had had no time nor inclination to share the feelings of the men about him. Now he felt the urge to share them, an urge impossible to fullfill. He could not, at this late date, expect the Owls to take him in.

The second emotion was excitement, a subtle, gripping sort he couldn't figure out at first—and when he finally did, it still confused him. It was an excitement centered on the game about to start, an excitement having nothing to do with his own longing to play football. He was worried about the Owls, worried to the point of tautness over

their slender chances against the Vulcan powerhouse. It was a revolutionary thought. It bewildered him.

When the game got under way he found his cause for worry amply justified. The supremacy of the Vulcan line stood out immediately. The Vulcan forward wall would not permit the Owl offensive to get started. The Owls were stopped cold in their tracks.

But they couldn't stop the Vulcans, whose backfield also had terrific speed and drive. The Vulcans used the explosive T-formation, and were equipped to make it click. They began to move.

The first half was a nightmare for Kip Terry. He squirmed and suffered on the bench as the Vulcans scored two touchdowns and a field goal, to make the score 17-0 when the second period ended.

It was a miracle the Vulcans had so small a score, a miracle of dogged courage in the Owls as they battled savagely against big odds. They also had a pair of lucky breaks which saved a pair of almost certain touchdowns.

They were fighting hard against discouragement as they rested between halves. Coach Vale sent Terry from the dressing room upon a pointless errand. Terry returned in several minutes, but it took him several minutes more to tumble to the fact that something strange had happened in his absence. The men were shooting surreptitious glances at him, funny, searching looks as if he were a stranger. Kip Terry's pulse went up a notch. Something big was in the wind. Vale sent the Owls back to the field, kept Terry in the dressing room. Vale said:

"I'm starting you in Parker's place."

Kip Terry's muscles jumped.

"Do you know why?" Vale demanded.

"Yes," said Terry quietly. "You've guessed I've finally tumbled to myself, that I want to play football for the Owls instead of for Kip Terry. You told the guys when I was out."

"I hope I'm right," said Coach Vale grimly.

"I hope so too," said Terry fervently.

He headed for the field, understanding the desperate gamble just as well as Vale. It was easy for the coach to say, and easy for Kip Terry to admit he had a different viewpoint, but the proof of it would come upon the gridiron.

The attitude of the Owls toward him was tentative at best. They had to be handed definite confirmation before they'd believe what Vale had told them. Terry also accepted the unsettling possibility that he was actually only kidding himself, that once he had the pigskin in his hands he'd go hog-wild again.

His lack of excitement also scared him some, his calm acceptance of the thing. His hands were steady, and his heart beat evenly. He'd never faced a crisis of this sort before, yet he was facing this one almost stoically. He hoped it was a healthful omen.

THE Owls kicked off to the Vulcans. Kip Terry had a breathless surge of nerves before Nye's toe connected with the ball, but once he was sprinting down the field his jitters left. He realized with a grunt of satisfaction that his muscles all worked smoothly, that his senses were acute.

The pattern of the play formed sharply on his mind, and registered its significance. The Vulcan quarterback Phil Cord was running with the ball, his interference seemed to be carrying him toward the right side line, but Terry noted that another group of interference was clearing a deliberate path farther to the right, and that the Vulcan left half, Greer, was following this group.

Instinctively, Kip Terry covered Greer. A blocker lunged at him, but Terry sidestepped, keeping his head up, watching like a hawk. He saw Cord plow to a sudden stop and whip a lateral to Greer. Kip Terry found himself in line with it. He sailed into the air, reached high, and snagged the ball. He went across the goal line standing up, with not a Vulcan near him.

It was a lightning change of fortune which brought the Owl fans bellowing to their feet. It was the greatest break of luck Kip Terry could ask, because the Owls themselves, forgetting what they'd previously thought of him, were grinning at him now with gratitude. Only Judd Nye regarded him with speculative eyes, refusing to be railroaded. The outraged Vulcan line stormed through to block the kick. The score was 17-6.

The Owls kicked off again, and downed the Vulcan runner on his twenty-four yard line. They tried an end sweep on the first down. Terry swung over fast to meet the threat, his brain still clicking smoothly.

He knew, for instance, that Nye was right

upon his heels. Archie Kent, the Vulcan fireball, was following his interference tightly. Two blockers still protected him as he came to the line of scrimmage.

Kip Terry used his head, something he hadn't done successfully all season. At any previous time he would have tried to crash his way in to the ball-carrier. This time, figuring the set-up, he counter-blocked the leading Vulcan interference man before the guy could leave his feet. He swept the Vulcan from his path, and from Nye's path as well. It gave Judd Nye the chance he needed, an open tackle at Archie Kent. Nye made it good, nailing him on the line of scrimmage. It was a bit of sparkling team work which left Nye's jaw still sagging when he reached his feet. He stared at Terry, then grinned slowly, saying:

"Nice work, Kip. That's *football.*"

Kip Terry waited for his muscles to go taut with quick antagonism. Nothing happened. He found to his amazement that Judd Nye was no longer an antagonist, he was just another member of the squad. It was also a surprise to Terry that his own lips stretched into a grin. He said, without intending to:

"It's time I found it out."

"Let's go," Nye told him briefly. "We've got work to do."

The Vulcans slashed off tackle on the second down. The hole was there, but so were Nye and Terry. Terry hit Kent high, Nye hit him low. No gain. The third down went for three scant yards, and then the Vulcans kicked.

Hap Quigley brought the run-back to the Owl thirty-eight yard line. In the huddle Nye said:

"Kip's ball. L-12. Okay guys take 'im through."

It was a fake reverse. Terry took the snap from center, whirled about and pretended to slap it into Quigley's belly as Quigley sprinted past him. But Terry kept the ball himself, and set sail for the right end.

He got protection, mostly from Judd Nye, who wiped out a pair of Vulcans by himself. Kip Terry crossed the scrimmage line into a swarm of Vulcan tacklers. They came at him with vast assurance, to make quick work of a third-string sub whom they had never heard of.

That's where the Vulcans blundered. They hadn't scouted Terry, weren't geared to his style. They had him figured as a tackling dummy, instead he showed them change of pace, a pair of swivel hips and deadly compact speed. He was working calmly, shrewdly, just as he had worked when with the Cobras, but never here at Hardin. He hustled through for eighteen yards before the safety finally forced him out of bounds.

Back in the huddle Terry sensed an electric chance of feeling in the men. Their weariness had left, their backs were stiffer. They knew a miracle was taking place. They didn't understand it, but accepted it as drowning men accept a life perserver. Their backfield finally had a scoring combination, Nye and Terry.

Believing it, the Owls played up to it. The line amazingly began to stiffen. Quigley and Lambert in the backfield blended their efforts automatically, while Terry and Nye went on to prove they were indeed a wicked striking force.

Nye's leadership was brilliant as he used his new-found weapon shrewdly. He kept the play wide open till the Owls slashed their way to the Vulcan eight-yard line. Then he let Kip Terry fake another sweep around the end. The Vulcans fell for it, and got caught napping when Terry smashed into the line instead. He hit it like a thunderbolt. He found a hole, got through, and carried a pair of Vulcans across the goal line with him. The Vulcan line once more broke up the extra kick, and the score was 17-12.

The Vulcans called time out, poured in reserves who had obviously been hastily instructed by their coach in strategy to slow down Nye and Terry. It seemed to work. When the battle got underway again it settled down into a hammering, see-saw struggle back and forth across the mid-field stripe. The Owls were playing with a new and desperate hope which held down Vulcan gains. The Vulcans, on the other hand, seemed satisfied to stay on the defensive, willing to protect their five-point lead.

THE game raged into the final period. The Owl fans verged upon hysteria. Time was running out, a fact which shocked Kip Terry when he learned it. He'd forgotten about time. He'd been playing for the new-found joy of playing, reveling in a thing he feared he'd lost. When Judd Nye called time

out and said, "Four minutes left. We've got to go from here," Kip Terry's breath jammed in his throat.

THE ball was in possession of the Owls on the Vulcan forty-two yard line, first down. Nye called the men into a small tight group, but addressed himself to Terry.

"Do you know what I've been saving, Kip?"

Terry nodded, letting a grin break through his dirt-smeared face.

"Yeah," he said. "I figured you had a pretty good reason for not letting me try a forward pass or so."

Nye nodded. "I was hoping we could get through on the ground. They've been too smart for that. So now we've got to shoot the works. It'll have to be a hell of a long heave."

"Keep 'em off me till I make it," Terry answered briefly.

"We'll give you everything we've got," said Nye. "We'll try P-21. Let's go."

A wave of nerves hit Terry, but he fought it down. His passing arm had every right to be rusty. He hadn't used it much of late. What if he should—. He fought that thought down too. He wiped his right hand with a hidden gesture, freeing it from sweat. The teams lined up. He took his place, hoping that the ends, McKay and Reed, could break free to the goal line. He'd have the choice of heaving it to either man.

The play broke fast. The ball came whizzing from between the center's legs to Terry. He caged it smoothly. There was a lot of time to kill to give McKay and Reed a chance to cover ground.

He started toward the right end, behind a wall of interference, trying to imitate a man with nothing but an end run on his mind. He deliberately refused to watch Mckay and Reed.

He plowed to a jarring halt just short of the side line. His interference was breaking up. Vulcan's were coming through. One got close enough to throw a tackle. Kip Terry's backward leap just barely saved him. He landed with his legs braced, arm cocked. He had a fraction of a second to select his pass receiver. McKay was covered by the safety man. Reed was in the clear, still sprinting for the end zone.

Kip Terry breathed a prayer and heaved the ball with everything he had. He saw long arms reach for it, barely missing. The ball was on its way.

He knew it was traveling at high speed, but it seemed to be floating up there like a balloon. And maybe it wasn't long enough. Breath left his throat, hot breath that burned. Had Reed gone crazy? Wouldn't he *ever* turn!

And then he saw a white blurred patch—Reed's face. It was looking up. Reed's arms were reaching. He was still running. Maybe the pass was over him, much too long!

Reed left the ground with an easy compact jump. He didn't have to go too high, just high enough to let the ball thud safely in his arms. Connections were exact. He held the pass. Another touchdown!

Kip Terry found himself upon the ground. No one had touched him, his knees had simply turned to jelly, collapsed beneath his weight. He sat there for some moments till his strength returned.

Judd Nye came toward him anxiously. "Hurt, Kip?" he inquired.

Terry shook his head, turned on a feeble grin and said, "Just weak. I couldn't stand the strain."

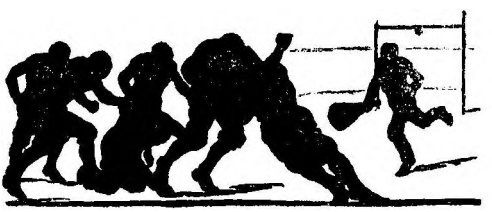
Nye laughed. He grabbed Kip Terry by by the arm and hauled him up.

"You did it, kid," he said.

"*We* did it," Kip corrected promptly.

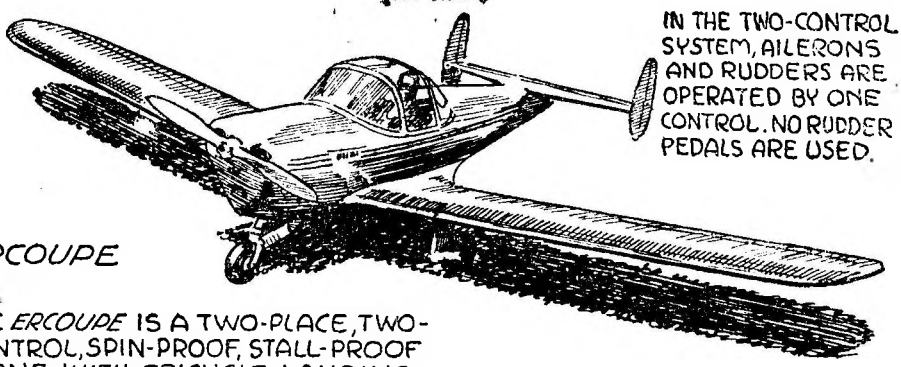
Nye nodded soberly and said, "It's better that way."

Nye kicked the extra point this time. The score was 19-17. Nor did it change again before the final whistle blew.



PLANE FACTS

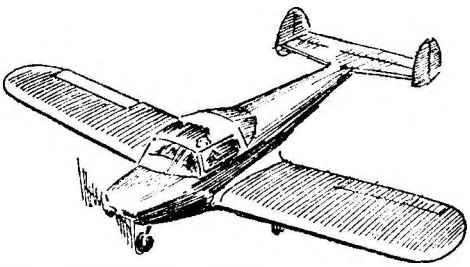
BY



IN THE TWO-CONTROL SYSTEM, AILERONS AND RUDDERS ARE OPERATED BY ONE CONTROL. NO RUDDER PEDALS ARE USED.

ERCOUPE

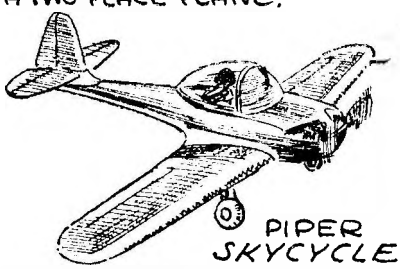
THE *ERCOUPE* IS A TWO-PLACE, TWO-CONTROL, SPIN-PROOF, STALL-PROOF PLANE WITH TRICYCLE LANDING GEAR.



THE AERONCA *CHUM* IS ALSO A SPIN-PROOF AND STALL-PROOF PLANE WITH THE ERCOUPE TWO-CONTROL SYSTEM. IT IS A TWO-PLACE PLANE.

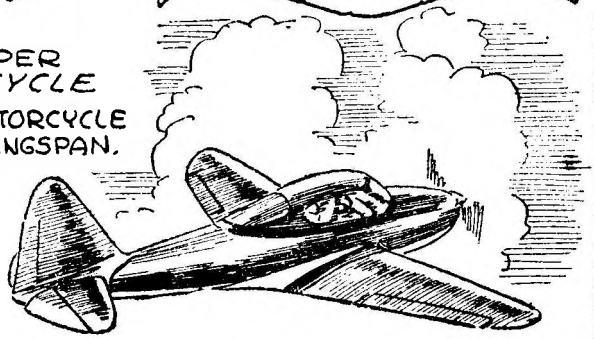
POST-WAR PERSONAL PLANES

PRIVATE FLYING IS SURE TO EXPAND AFTER THE WAR, AND THOUSANDS OF AMERICANS WHO HAVE RECENTLY BECOME AIRCONSCIOUS WILL FLY THEIR OWN LIGHT PLANES. ALTHOUGH MANUFACTURERS HAVE BEEN BUILDING MILITARY PLANES, THEY HAVE NOT NEGLECTED TO DESIGN AND TEST NEW TYPES OF LIGHT PLANES. POST-WAR LIGHT PLANES WILL HAVE SIMPLIFIED CONTROLS, TRICYCLE LANDING GEAR, BETTER VISIBILITY AND EVERY DEVICE TO MAKE THEM SAFE AND FOOL-PROOF.



PIPER *SKYCYCLE*

A 40-HP, SINGLE-PLACE MOTORCYCLE OF THE AIR WITH A 20-FT. WINGSPAN.



THE PIPER *SKYSEDAN* IS A DELUXE FOUR-PASSENGER PERSONAL PLANE POWERED WITH A 165-HP ENGINE. ITS CRUISING SPEED IS 125 M.P.H. ITS RANGE IS 500 MILES.

Mesa Verde—a Stacked Deck, If Ever There Was One. Between Officers, the Gestapo Was

FIREWORKS AT MESA VERDE

I

I HAVE often wondered who it was first said that hell is paved with good intentions. Whoever it was, he must have been back of the eight-ball for sure.

Now, you take those happenings up at Mesa Verde. I reckon I paved a good square mile of hell that time. And yet no honester man, or with better intentions, ever started out than Joseph T. Trimble, if I do say it myself. Pure, that's what I was. So danged pure that I like to died of it.

The way it happened was that I stubbed my toe and tripped, or thought I did, only it proved that I didn't. This was not as mixed up as it sounds.

As the owner, the publisher and also the editor of the Sandoval *County Record*, I should have had more sense than to go barging around the composing room in the dark, but I had left my corncob setting on the stone and thought I could lay my hand right on it.

Instead, I tripped and hit my head on the press and cut quite a gash over my ear. I

the Copper Company, a Gambling Outfit and the Local Peace

Just Like Sucking Eggs

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

phoned Doc Byers. He came over to the office and took a couple of stitches in my scalp, then he set and looked at me as we sat at the desk over a drink.

"Joe Trimble, you're near sixty year old," he began.

"Fifty-eight, Doc," I cut in. "Don't stretch it more'n you got to."

"All right, fifty-eight. You been cow hand, rancher, sheriff, ranger. You've made your pile. You own this paper and the bank and half of Sandoval City. And you got no sense at all."

"Meaning what?" I asked, real mild, because I respected Doc Byers a heap.

"Drinking the way you do."

I was real pained by this, and said so. "Doc, you know I'm no drinking man," I went on. "I take a drop of medicine for my sinus trouble, or maybe with a friend like this—"

"None of your nonsense, Joe. This is serious," he snapped. "I've just given you a careful examination. Do you know why you fell and were hurt?"

"Sure. Tripped."

"That's your imagination; you didn't trip at all. You just lost your grip for an instant —lost control. It'll happen again and again. Then you'll lose control all the time and go into a wheel chair for the rest of your life, which won't be very long."

I mopped my face. "Doc, you ain't in earnest?"

"Dead earnest, Joe. Your liver and lights are all corroded with alcohol," he told me. "I've seen this coming on but hated to mention it. Now I got to let you have it all straight. You're an old-timer, but your time is running out fast."

I gawked at him. "What you mean? I ain't going to pass out, am I?"

"The rate you're going, I give you three months, no more," he replied, and you can judge whether it shook me up or not. "Of course, you're liable to go to pieces any time, and end up in a wheel chair with a nurse, and your head goggling and your hands shaking and—"

"My gosh, lay off, will you?" I told him. Just then, to my relief, the phone rang, and I answered.

"Is this Joseph T. Trimble?"

"Speaking."

"Western Union, Mr. Trimble. We have a message for you. Shall I read it?"

"Sure. What else did you call me for?"

"It's from Mesa Verde and says: Joseph T. Trimble, Sandoval City. Come at once. Contact me first. Your cousin Peter is broke and dying. Signed, Lew Simmons."

Hanging up, I finished my drink and told Doc Byers all about it.

Twenty years back I had a row with my cousin Pete, and we never spoke to each other since, or wrote. He had struck it rich in oil. He was a cantankerous cuss, always standing up for his rights if it killed him, always fighting with everybody. Not like me, you bet. I never get into rows and I believe in peace and harmony, unless I am pushed too far. So Pete Trimble had gone through his money and was broke and dying! Well, I would have to help him, of course. All the fun I get out of having money is helping others with it, and eating regular my own self.

"Mesa Verde? That's up in the high country, ain't it?" says Doc. "That would be a grand place for you to get back your health, Joe. But you got to quit drinking or your cousin will outlive you, even if he is dying."

"All right, durn it, I'll quit soon's this bottle is empty," I told him. "You don't got to rub it in none. But Mesa Verde is at the other end of the state and away off the railroad, and I ain't got the gas to drive there. Even if the war is ending up this danged ration board of ours don't know it."

"Provided you're in earnest about swearing off," said Doc, "I'll get you the gas to drive there; they give it in emergencies. Who's this Lew Simmons?"

"Search me. The name is sort of familiar," I replied, "but I can't place it."

I mopped my face again. I was scared, real scared, and no mistake. To think of me keeling over like that and thinking I had stumbled! Doc Byers talked it over with me some more and allowed it was now or never.

"You got to quit, and quit now, and quit total," he told me. "Not one drink, Joe, not one. Not even a smell. Or I won't answer for the consequences. Not even that one you just poured out. And you'd better make your will, while you're able to sign your name. But if you prefer to be a golliwog in a wheel chair—"

I did not, you bet. Joe Trimble has never been afraid to look a fact in the face; so I done it now, and swore off for keeps. Yes, sir; I quit drinking right on the spot.

WHILE we were talking it over, Judge Fogarty dropped into the office and he was right excited. Seems he had found a case of old bourbon put away in the attic of his house, and he had sent a couple bottles over to the bank for me. I thanked him. He went out, and I looked at Doc.

"Now see what you done," I said. "Durn it, that's twenty-year-old stuff!"

"It's your funeral, not mine. Go on and drink all you want," he told me. "But gimme five bucks now for treating your injury, because I don't think you'll be alive to pay the bill the first of the month."

The way his head shook as he spoke, made me shiver.

We settled everything. I arranged to start early in the morning; it was close to three hundred miles to Mesa Verde, a long day's drive even for my Packard roadster. Doc promised to get me the gas tickets before night. I said goodby and went over to the

bank to draw some money and get a few things shaped up for my absence.

While there, I got another pretty bad jolt.

A check had just come in and the cashier asked had I signed it; two hundred dollars is a lot of money. It was my signature but it certainly looked queer. I had been over to the Junction on Saturday and got into a poker game that night. There was a blank stub in my checkbook but the number corresponded with the check. I did not remember writing it, but I must have done so. Just like Doc Byers had said, I thought. I was getting shaky. Ordinarily I would have laid it to the liquor, but now I knew better, and it gave me another scare.

The bourbon from Judge Fogarty was there. I put it into the back of my car and went home, mighty sad and gloomy, and not on my cousin Pete's account either. He had never meant much to me but he was the only relative I had in the world, and thinks I, Joe Trimble has got to stick by him drunk or sober. Pete was always a drinking man and never knew moderation. I do not approve of taking too much and everybody knows it, and to think that anyone like me could get his liver washed out by an occasional dram was a great pity. So I resolved to take along the two bottles of bourbon, just to help Pete die happy.

I have told all this in detail to prove that my intentions were of the best. I got off before sunup in the morning and made good time, getting into Mormon Wells, which is about halfway, for lunch. I filled up with gas here and went on.

It was around three o'clock when I came upon a car at the roadside, and a man who flagged me down. The car had gone bust. He was a brick-faced hombre with hard gray eyes, and his name was Oliver Stanley Twist, which I took to be a lie. So I says I am Harrison E. Twinells and where you bound for.

"Mesa Verde," he says. "I got a job there working in a restaurant, if I can get there. But I got two terrible heavy suitcases in my car."

"Load 'em in the back end and let's go," I told him, and he was the gratefullest man you ever laid eyes on. He done it, and climbed in, and we went on.

I judged there was something phony about Twist. He talked a lot and had been all over, but his yarns did not hang together any too well. Also, he claimed to have been in the army and got discharged after being two years in China, so I says to him "Himucky-muck," which was Chinese for Good Morning but he did not recognize it. I figured that was a lie too, not that it mattered to me. He had a parcel along, and after offering to pay for the lift, which I refused, he opened the parcel and it was a bottle of Russian liquor called Vodka.

"I want to give you this token of my appreciation," he says, and I had to take it, because of course I did not want to admit that I had just sworn off liquor. It ought to make my cousin Pete happy, I reflected. I was sort of curious to see what it tasted like, but stuck to my resolutions and did not open it.

I MENTION this just to show that no matter how honest and good-intentioned a man can be, some folks are sure to accuse him of being the opposite; because I have heard it said that when I got into Mesa Verde, I was wild and roaring drunk, which was a lie. I had not even had a smell of liquor and was determined not to have one.

We got in just before sundown, and Twist says he will get out at the hotel, which suited me too.

Mesa Verde, which means Green Mesa, was sprawled all over an upland in the hills. It had been quite a place in the old days until the gold boom petered out. I had been there when it was a roaring tough place. What with the war, it had taken to shipping out copper by truck, and had spruced up a lot till it was a right good-looking town, but it was still tough.

There were two hotels. One was the Adobe House, the old original hotel built in desert style, but it was on a back street. The main tavern was the Mesa Hotel, a new and gimcrack modern structure on the main drag, with the Western Union office next door. I stopped there and Twist hauled out his two suitcases and thanked me again.

"I'll be seeing you," he said, and I told myself not if I saw him first. I did not take any shine to him at all.

I headed in to the Western Union office and inquired for Lew Simmons. They said he had been working for Pete Trimble, who lived in the new house opposite the Adobe

House, but had got fired and had left his address at the Adobe House.

So I headed for there with the car, thinking it would be good to see the old place again.

II

THE Adobe House had a big front office building, and stretching out behind was a double row of adobe rooms like a barracks. They were practical, and they were cool; back in the old days before air-conditioning was invented, prospectors and desert rats used to head from all over for the Adobe House, in hot weather. Barring scorpions and an occasional tarantula, the rooms were clean, too. Bugs could not get a toehold in the adobe walls.

As I drew up in front, I took a look across the way at my cousin's house. It was a grand new two-story with a big garage and flower beds in front, and looked deserted. Poor Pete, I thought; to think of him dying broke, with all the money he had! I had a notion to go right over and see him, but Simmons had said to contact him first, so I went into the hotel and says how about supper and a room.

The clerk back of the desk shoved a registration card and a pen at me, when just then up spoke a voice.

"Why, hello, Mr. Twinells! I didn't know you were coming here. I ran over to see a friend who's here—"

It was Twist. I nodded at him and started to register, then thought fast. It would look funny if I used my own name, and I was not in the notion to do any explaining why I had given him another name, so I registered as H. E. Twinells and let it go at that. It was getting dark and I was hungry. Also, my sinus was hurting and it was hard to resist taking a drop of medicine for it, but I done it.

So I brushed Twist off and fetched in my bag and got one of the rooms down back and took the key and started out. I knew my way all right.

Flowers and cactus were growing in between the double row of cells, but otherwise the place had not changed in thirty years. The dining room was up front.

I came back to it after a washup, and settled down at a table to myself. The room was pretty full. Over in one corner I saw Twist, talking to a big beefy man with a heavy under jaw and a head balding in the front and all shiny. He was a hard citizen if I ever saw one.

A waitress came along and I ordered, and got to looking at a little man who had the next table. He was the unhappiest specimen you ever did see. He wore overalls and a checked shirt, had gray hair that stuck out of his head in bunches, and a round red face like an apple, only misery was written all over it. I looked to see him cry into his hash, but he did not. He caught me looking at him, and perked up a bit.

As I ate, I noticed that he glanced once or twice at Twist and the big fellow, and every time he looked at them, a scare came into his face. It was so curious it got me interested. Why he should be afraid of them I did not see.

Pretty soon the desk clerk came in and sat down at the table with him, and the two of them talked and looked at me. The little fellow had evidently asked who I was, and did not seem enthusiastic about it when he heard. Being curious myself, when the waitress came with my pie I asked who he was, and you could have knocked me over with a feather when she looked at him and said it was Lew Simmons.

"My gosh!" I says. "Does he always look like he's going to cry?"

"No, he don't," she says with a toss of her head. "He's a nice man. But he's had some awful hard luck, I hear. I guess he's despondent."

The two of us finished about the same time, and we went out into the office together, and I joggled his elbow.

"If you're Lew Simmons, step along to my room with me. I got a message for you."

"Oh, my gosh!" he says with a gasp. "You're Mr. Twinells, ain't you?"

"H. E. Twinells," I told him, "is on the register. Step along."

He done it, and we got out to my cell. The place was fixed up with electric lights now, and I switched them on and turned to him.

"I'm Joe Trimble," I said. "I got your wire and here I am. Never mind how come I registered as Twinells. It just happened that way."

"You're him!" he gasped, staring at me,

then stuck out his hand and beamed all over. "Oh, this is wonderful! I can't believe it! I thought you looked like Pete—and to think you used another name! Did you know they were laying for you?"

"They? Who?"

He jerked his head. "Bald feller back there. Big one. He's Bull Hutchins."

"Set down and make yourself comfortable," I told him. "This is all news to me. All I know is what your wire said, which wasn't much. Is my cousin dead?"

"No, but he ain't going to last long," he says. "They found out I had wired for you, and they kicked me out this morning and aim to put you through the wringer when you show up. Oh, it's grand to see you here safe and sound! Nobody else can save Pete—"

"Never mind your lodge of sorrow, Lew," I said, "I fetched along some bourbon that ought to raise Pete out of his coffin if he can still smell. Did he send for me?"

"He says to get you if I could, it was his only hope, but he was not sure whether you'd come or not on account of the bad feeling between you. He's mighty chastened, Mr. Trimble—"

"Lay off the formality. I been Joe Trimble all my life and still am. Where have I heard of you before? You've got a familiar name, somehow."

"I guess you've forgot," he says. "It was over twenty years ago. I was in jail over to Quartzite, and you was in the next cell on account of shooting and—"

"All right, all right—by gosh, I remember now!" I says. "Well, since we're old friends, let's go see Pete and find out a few things."

"Wait! Hold on! Look, Joe, you can't do that, not right open. His room looks out on the back porch. We got to sneak around there and talk to him through the window."

"Why? Has he got smallpox?"

"Worse. He's got marriage relatives."

"Well, for gosh sake go to work and explain it all!"

I got my corncob lit up, hoping it would take the place of my sinus medicine, and he started in to talk. He had changed already; he had lost his miserable look, and had begun to act real spry and says he hoped I had brought along a gun. I had my old forty-five in the car but I just grunted at him to hit the story, so he done it.

About five years back, it seemed, Pete Trimble had got tangled up with a woman named Belle Hutchins. It is true that woman cause a lot of trouble, and that is why I have always steered clear of them; but Pete had clear lost his head. He had married Belle. A few months ago she had died, leaving her brother Bull Hutchins, and his wife Minna, as her heirs.

That would not have mattered except that Pete, in an unguarded moment when he had drunk freely, had signed over all his oil stock to his wife. That would not have mattered either, only she told her brother about it and died, and Bull and Minna Hutchins moved in to collect.

Practically everything Pete owned was in that oil stock, which paid monster dividends. But he did not have a leg to stand on and knew it, so he just went to bed and played sick, and pretty soon he was sick. Lew Simmons stuck with him. Pete had the back bedroom and kitchen of his own house, and no more. He barricaded the doors and stayed there. Why I wanted to know.

"They got the law on him," Lew explained to me. "They moved into the house and are there now. If they could serve the papers on Pete, he'd be a goner—but it can't be done. He ain't moved out of his bedroom for a month. I fetch in vittles and such, but he run out of liquor a while back and that was a terrible blow. Now he's dying."

"How you know?"

"He says so," Lew allowed. "He don't dare show his face. They got men waiting day and night to serve the papers—right in the house, too! Minna, she's a holy terror. Bull, he's worse. He's beat me up a couple times. He's got the courts and the sheriff with him, of course. He runs the games over at the Mesa Hotel."

"Oh! What games?"

"Third floor of the hotel. Gambling."

"That's against the law in this state," I says. Lew gave a laugh.

"Go tell that to the sheriff! I will say they've got a swell layout, from what I hear. Free vittles and drinks and so forth. The copper company don't care; their officials play like everybody else."

"What about the prosecuting attorney?"

"Jim King? Why, he's in on the cut, of course. It's a perfect setup, Joe, and you better lay off. Don't go to wrinkling up your

nose like you smelled cheese. This is no gang to monkey with. Poor Pete, I guess he's done for."

My pipe began to taste better. If there is anything I like to go up against, it is a sure thing.

"Looks to me," I said, "like Cousin Pete needed a helping hand and no mistake. Not to mention some prime bourbon. This is really fine stuff, Lew."

"That's how come he's dying. I fetched him what I thought was elegant liquor, and he says it poisoned him and he ain't been well since and has gone into a decline."

"Well," I says, "there's no time like the present. I'll slip out to my car and get what's needed—where'll I meet you?"

"Go across the street and then around the block, and I'll be there," says Lew. "We got to come in through the other houses and hit the back of his lot by the garage. The gate there is locked but I got the keys still. They threw me off the place this morning and I get thrown in jail if I show up there, so I got to be careful."

"We both got to be careful," I told him. "We don't want anything to happen to that bourbon. It's priceless. Wait till I'm gone, then switch off the light and mosey along."

I left him and went out to my car, parked in front of the hotel.

THE night was as dark as they come, and Mesa Verde had no street lights. I tucked the old forty-five into my waistband and felt around and located a bottle, and stuck it under my arm, and then went on my way to meet Lew Simmons.

There was no use cussing Pete for a fool, of course, but all the same his story just went to show what a blessing prohibition would be for some people. I have always held that a drink or two is good for a man, if he has strength enough not to overdo it. I myself never overdid it that I can remember, and it never got me into any trouble either.

Right now, with that bottle under my arm, it was a powerful temptation. There are times when I feel my years, and this was one of the times; a drink would have done me a world of good and oiled up my brain, which needed it. Pete was certainly in a terrible mess, and I did not see any way of helping him out.

In fact, I was thinking of being a martyr and taking a drink, live or die, just for his sake—when I stumbled. Yes, sir. It had hit me again. I did not need to look, to know there was nothing there. It was what Doc Byers had foretold, and it gave me such a scare that it put me into a sweat, because I nearly dropped the bottle. However, that gave me strength to resist the temptation, and anyhow the bottle had not been opened.

So I went along, and around the block saw a dark figure, and it was Lew. He met me in silence and took my arm, guiding me in between the houses. Mesa Verde had alleys, for a wonder. We came at last to Pete's garage; there was a high board fence along the back. Lew felt around till he found the gate, then his keys jingled and he unlocked it.

"Better let me go ahead to make sure the coast is clear," he said. I was willing.

III

I ADMIT that up till now, I did not take the thing very seriously. Pete was in a bad jam, of course, and might even be mighty sick; he deserved to be, the way he had always punished liquor. I had been a lot sorrier for myself than I was for him.

But it hit me all of a sudden, when we had sneaked up to the back porch and Lew whispered at the window and I came along and heard poor old Pete's croak.

"Is that you, Joe?" he says under his breath. "I wisht I could shake hands with you, but the screen won't let me. I'm dying, Joe. I'm done for."

"Dying for a drink, you mean," I told him, trying to joke about it.

"No sir, I ain't never drinking no more," he said. "I done you dirt in the old days, Joe, and I'm sorry. It was mighty good of you to come, but I dunno how you can help me. If you see to burying me proper, that'll be about all you can do. Did Lew tell you the fix I'm in?"

"Yeah. You ain't dead yet; just you lemme get my brains to work and I'll think of something," I said. "Too bad you ain't drinking. I fetched a bottle of prime stuff."

"Wait a minute till I cut a hole in the screen," he says. There was a rip as his knife went through, and he put out his hand. I grabbed it and shook it.

"I didn't mean that," he says. "Where's the bottle? Lemme smell it."

"It ain't been opened," I told him, and passed it in.

He was in the dark, of course, but that was a small matter. Pretty soon I heard the pop of the cork, and then a gurgle. Then there was a terrible gasp and a cough, and Pete started in cussing.

"That ain't liquor! It's hellfire, that's what it is! You trying to kill me?"

"Gosh, that's too bad," I says. "There was a bottle of vodka in the car a feller

give me. I must have got that by mistake. Hand it back, and I'll go find the the bourbon."

"Hold on, you'd better leave it," he says, after a minute. "On second thought, the stuff has a noble feel to it, Joe. I believe it's putting life into me. Say, you know that coyote Bull Hutchins lives right in my house? He does that. So does his hellion wife, Minna, durn her dirty hide! I don't dast to show my nose."

"Well, I'm going to work on your case," I told him. "First, where's that there oil stock of yours everybody is after?"

"I got it hid, Joe," he says. "It ain't safe in the bank because they got a court order to attach it, so I got it hid."

"That won't do you a mite of good," I told him. "They'll make the oil company issue new certificates"

"By gum, they can't do it!" he broke in, smacking his lips. "That oil company is out of the state. It's in Oklahoma! I hid the stock and it's right under their noses, worth two million dollars cash in hand, only I can't get it."

"Can I get it for you?"

"You can if I told you where it was and held a gun on you so's you wouldn't steal it yourself."

"Listen, Pete," I told him, "this is no time to get cantankerous. I'm moving along now. I aim to look things over and learn my way around, and tomorrow night I'll be back with a scheme all cooked up. You got a lawyer I can talk with?"

"Sure. He's the only honest man in town, too; Hoppy Horn, his name is."

Just then Lew showed up.

"Psst! Cut it short, Joe. There's two guys in front with flashlights. They'll be coming around here next. They keep watch all the time."

"So long, Pete," I says. "See you tomorrow night. I'm going to rescue you, so cheer up."

Lew and I sneaked back to the gate, and just got out and got it shut when a beam of light traveled around. We got away quick.

"Now," I says, when it was safe to talk, "you go and get a good night's sleep. I aim to smell my way around town a bit and get acquainted. Tomorrow I got to see this guy Horn. Hoppy Horn, is that it?"

"That's it. One-legged feller," says Lew.

"And tomorrow night I want to get inside and talk with Pete. You'd better not be seen with me; it's danged good luck I landed here under another name. Drop into my room sometime tomorrow and we will settle the campaign. So long!"

"So long," he returned, and drifted off in the darkness. I headed uptown.

Thinks I, it's a funny thing if Joseph T. Trimble cannot find some way to get rid of a few crooks and tinhorn gamblers! I never had much use for lawyers, or for law neither. It did not bother me if Pete was tangled up with the law, because many a poor devil has been lawed to death, and many a crook uses the law to get ahead in the world; for that matter, I've seen the inside of more than one jail myself.

I ambled around to the Mesa Hotel and went up to the desk, buttoning my coat over the gun in my waistband.

"I'm a friend of Bull Hutchins," I told the clerk, "and just got into town. He said to inquire for him here."

"Room three thirteen," he replied. "Take the elevator, but it don't run after midnight, so you'll have to walk down."

I got into the elevator, which was run by a one-eyed jasper, and got off at the third. It was plain to see that this was a smart outfit, because the hall was just like any hotel hall, and room three thirteen was just like any other door in sight. I knocked, and when the door opened I seen it was on a chain, and a thick one. It opened about an inch and a man looked out at me.

"Who is it?" he inquired.

"Me," I told him.

"I don't know you."

"Twist does. I come to town with him today. Tell him it's Colonel Twinells."

"All right, wait a second," he says, and shut the door. Pretty soon he opened it again. "Go down to three sixteen and walk right in, Colonel."

It was a cute little system they had, for a fact. Three sixteen was unlocked and I walked right into the middle of a joint that would have knocked your eye out. Several rooms had been knocked into one big room, and the others were kept for special games and private parties and a bar and so forth. The furnishings were something elegant. All kinds of games were going. The place was not full, but there was a mighty good crowd on hand and of course it was still early.

Hutchins came up to me and stuck out his hand and smiled.

"Colonel Twinells? Glad to meet you. I'm Bull Hutchins. Twist told me about you; he's setting in a private game for the house right now so he can't come out. You just make yourself to home. In past the bar, you'll find a cold buffet all set. Any game you like you can find. Everything except chips is on the house. Will you step in and have a champagne cup with me?"

"Well, I don't mind," I told him, because of course that is not drinking, to take champagne. We headed for the bar. "Ain't it risky to supply free drinks?"

He laughed all over his beefy face. "We pick our clients pretty careful, Colonel. And I don't mind putting up a few drinks, you bet. If you've a mind to try some extry fine bourbon direct from Louisville—"

"You make my mouth water," I told him, "but it can't be done. My stummick is on a sitdown strike where liquor is concerned. In fact, I'm as good as dying this minute. That's why I've come to Mesa Verde, so's the copper dust in the air here will do my liver good."

We walked up to the bar and Bull told the bartender who I was and to give me anything in the house, and we had a champagne cup. Bull says I am the healthiest dying man he has seen in a long while, and we had another champagne cup. He was trying to be real pleasant, but I did not cotton to him. So Twist was just a house man, was he? I never did like tinhorns and that explained why I had not liked him.

I circulated around and bought some chips. The crowd was rough enough, as you might expect in a copper town, but not tough. All the house men were smoothies with slicked hair and quick eyes—you know the type. I took a whirl at chuckaluck and three-card monte and roulette and a few more, and every game in sight was as crooked as a dog's hind leg.

When I bought my chips I had showed a big roll on purpose, so I was not surprised to win at most of the games. I could see that Bull Hutchins figured me for a come-on gent and it might be several evenings before they started in to clean me. The big money was made in the private rooms, naturally, with poker and craps, but I did not poke my nose into any of them. That champagne had tasted good and bucked me up a bit, and I decided that next time I would have more of it, but not tonight because I had to be real careful.

Twist showed up while I was at the roulette table and shook hands. He was dressed up to beat the band and I joked him about his restaurant job, and he introduced me to several folks. One was the sheriff, named Allbright, a cocky, mean-eyed old galoot with a white mustache and he eyed me kind of hard.

"Ain't I seen you before somewheres?" he asked me. "It ain't often I forget a face like yours, Colonel."

"Anything wrong with my face?" I says.

"Oh, no, no," he says in a hurry. "Not that at all, Colonel. Only you look sort of familiar."

"I knew right off where he had seen me and it took me back to the old days when I was a deputy marshal over at Red Gulch

and marched a bank robber to jail at Tucson, and it was him. But I did not jog his memory about that. To think of him being sheriff here in Mesa Verde, showed what sort of a gang was in control.

There were some folks here from a dude ranch in the vicinity, men and women both, making fools of themselves. Some of them were talking about somebody they said was sure a picturesque character and looked like an Injun chief. One of the men, a big hearty jasper, had been drinking too much. He grabbed my arm and says come on and have a drink. It turned out they had been talking about me. I shook him off saying I did not drink.

"You gotta drink," he says, waving a finger at me. "I'm Monte Maise and what I say goes, understand? I'm on vacation and when I say drink, you drink. I don't let no creaky old galoot with one foot in the grave say no to me. Are you going to drink?"

"No," I told him.

He made for me to grab me again, and I hit him. Not hard; just enough to lay him out. Six house men gathered around and I was going for my gun when the sheriff broke in and stopped the fuss.

"Colonel Twinells is dead right, boys," he said. "Here, Mr. Maise, you'd better apologize to the colonel and shake hands."

"If he'll drink, all right," says the dude ranch galoot.

"I'll compromise on a champagne cup," I says, and he apologized and we went to the bar with the rest of his crowd and had champagne. Maise was not a bad sort; he was a big Eastern lawyer and had worked in Washington. He was just drunk, and feeling his oats. He was dead set that I should come out to the dude ranch, which was called the Lazy Q, and stay a while, but I finally got shut of the bunch and went back to the tables and won some more and then pulled out and went home.

Just before reaching the Adobe House, the same thing happened that had happened when I was with Lew Simmons, and at the same place. I stumbled over nothing and came down on my hands and knees. I went on, real shaky; I tell you, it gave me a bad turn. If I could not even touch a champagne cup without feeling the hand of death on me, things were at a pretty bad pass. So when I got back to my room, I was feeling mighty sad and blue, and there was Lew Simmons waiting for me with a package in his arms.

"I was hoping you'd turn up," he says. "Look what I got here! The liquor store got in a shipment today and I got two bottles of it for you and Pete. It took my last cent, but it's worth it."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Hundred proof rye, the finest made!"

I expect I would have fell from grace, except for that stumble; the thought was mighty tempting, but I was scared. So I paid him for the rye, and put the two bottles in my car along with the bourbon, to have temptation out of the way. Then I found out from him where to locate Hoppy Horn, and shooed him out to his own room and went to bed.

But I slept poor. I would have slept a lot better out in the car.

IV

WITH morning, I was terrible achey all over. The rheumatism hurt and my sinus hurt and I felt my age for the first time in a long while. That is what comes of laying off your regular medicine, but there was no help for it.

At breakfast I had a sight of Minna Hutchins. She was alone because Bull was still asleep; being a gambler he did not get up till noon or after. She and Bull took their meals here at the hotel, on account of Pete occupying the back room and kitchen like he did. I heard the waitress call her Mrs. Hutchins so I knew who she was.

I should have known anyhow. She was one of these lean females with powerful dark eyes and a firm jaw and below the neck she was built like a broomstick. You could tell by looking at her how virtuous she was and it was nothing to be proud of neither. She did not have to carry a gun to protect herself.

After breakfast I went downtown to Horn's office but he had not opened up yet. It was upstairs over a drugstore, so I went down and hung around the drugstore and listened to the war news on the radio. Pretty soon a gent came in and says to give him a bromo-seltzer quick. He was old and spav-

ined but still spry, and red and bleary-eyed, and wore imitation cowboy clothes and embroidered boots. There was something about him that looked familiar but I could not place him. When he had gone out I asked the druggist who he was.

"Why, that's old Pecos Bent," he told me. "He works out at the Lazy Q—steers the females around and keeps 'em in the saddle and so on. Too bad. He used to be a great little guy. Had a spread of his own down in the Soledad valley, but he lost it. Drink and bones."

"That's a pity," I says. I had known Pecos Bent right well in the old days but did not say so. He was a top hand when I had the Flowerpot outfit. "I don't drink myself, and glad of it. Liquor has ruined many a man."

"Ain't so much liquor as gambling," said the druggist. "That durned bunch of sharks at the Mesa Hotel cleaned him out, and they keep him clean. I just now cashed a paycheck for him, and I bet you he comes into town tonight and loses every red cent."

"How far is it to that dude ranch?" I asked.

"About ten mile down the crick."

There was a stomping on the stairs, and it was Hoppy Horn with his wooden leg. I went on up and shook hands and told him who I was. Lew had said he was square and I could play straight with him. He was a red-headed man with a long horseface and a good level eye, and when he heard my name, he shook his head.

"Set down and be comfortable, Mr. Trimble. I'm right sorry for your sake you've showed up. I expect you'll have trouble."

"That's all right, they don't know my right name," I told him, and he grinned. It was smart of me, he allowed; he didn't know it was all accident.

Well, we went into the matter of my cousin Pete and covered it from soup to nuts. It seems that Pete had a bad temper, which was no news to me, and had rowed with everybody in town, so when he was down everybody kicked him, and he had few friends. If he had been a quiet, peaceable man like me, things might have been different.

Horn got down to law talk after a bit, and according to him Pete did not have a leg to stand on, and I judged he knew what he was talking about. Bull Hutchins had all the rights in the case, speaking legal. Once those papers were served on Pete, he was done for—he had to hand over the oil stock or go to jail.

"And he can't keep hid much longer," Horn said. "Next thing they'll get a court order permitting them to serve the papers by nailing them to the door or something of that sort."

"Is it a state or federal business?" I asked him.

"State, of course."

"Well, maybe that's different, then. Suppose that oil stock wasn't here, and Pete wasn't either, but acrost the state line?"

He looked at me and let his eyelid droop and recover.

"I cannot, as an ethical attorney, discuss any such contingency," he said stiffly. "It would be contempt of court. Of course, if your cousin and his oil stock were both outside the jurisdiction of this court, I think his health might improve a lot."

"Well, that's fine," I said.

"Maybe you'll change your mind about that," he replied. "The handiest way out of the state is at Socorro. The state police have a highway block there to check on all cars in or out of the state, and Hutchins keeps a man there night and day, I understand. He doesn't mind spending money. It's a big stake if he wins."

"Well, somebody always has got to lose," I told him, "and so long as it ain't me, maybe it'll be him."

He wagged his head. "You're an optimist. This is a stacked deck here in Mesa Verde, and you'll better remember it. Once they get on to who you really are, you'll be lucky if you can get bailed out. Between the copper company and this gambling outfit, and the local peace officers, the old Nazi Gestapo over in Germany was just like sucking eggs compared to the way this town is run. I warn you."

"Oh, all right! Now lemme warn you," I says. "Anybody who monkeys with Joseph T. Trimble is playing with the buzzsaw. I got myself sworn in as a sheriff's deputy up to Sandoval City and that gives me the right to carry a gun—"

"Not in this county, it don't," he cut in. "They'll soak you plenty if they find it out."

"You better lay that there legal mind of yours on the shelf," I told him. "If! If! Ifs be durned. I can hoe my own row and I aim to do it."

"All right. I'll be waiting for a call over to the jail," he says. "That reminds me. Are you a drinking man, Mr. Trimble?"

"No, sir. Not from choice but from necessity, as the old maid said. My liver and lights have gone back on me and nothing stronger than water passes my lips."

He pulled open his desk drawer. "Well, I promised your cousin that if the chance came to get him some really good stuff, I would, and it came and I did. Here's a bottle of bourbon that is really prime, and if you'll take it to him with my compliments, I'll be obliged to you."

HE HAULED a package out of the desk drawer and I took it. It was a wonderful thing, seeing how hard good liquor was to come by these days, that now I had sworn off it seemed to thrust itself on me from all directions. Thinks I, it will go into my car with the other stuff, and the more the merrier Pete will be.

"Doesn't he have a telephone in his house?" I asked.

"Sure," says Horn. "But it's in the front hall, and they usually got a process server hanging around and anyhow Pete don't dare poke his nose out of his hole."

"Can they occupy his property like that?"

"Well, they're doing it, ain't they? I tell you, they got the law on him good and proper! Jim King, the prosecuting attorney, he owns the Lazy Q dude ranch and a lot of other property, and he's thick with Hutchins. Jim's a bad actor, too, bad as they come. He settled here about twelve years back and has took all the law business in town, copper company's business too. He has took his fists to more'n one man, including me."

I could see Jim King was another galoot I was not going to like very much.

"Well," I says, "according to the cards, if I'm going to buy chips in this game I got to do it strictly on my own and operate outside the law. That's all right. It ain't the first time."

"It's liable to be the last, though," he tells me. "If I was you, I'd let Pete stew in his own juice and play safe."

"You ain't me," I replied, and shook hands and went down the stairs.

I had the beginnings of a hunch—just the beginnings. They expected maybe Pete would make a break to get out of the state, and they were all fixed for that, naturally. But the gent that takes the jackpot does it because his cards ain't expected, I have always found, and I begun to think there might be better ways than getting Pete out of the state in a hurry.

It took an awful lot of will power to have that package under my arm and never even take a look to see was it good liquor or bad. Not that I cared, except for Pete's sake. I did not want the responsibility of feeding a dying man any poor liquor. And besides, my brain would work a lot better if I took a couple drops of medicine to make my sinus stop bothering me. However, I resisted.

On my way back to the car it occurred to me that I had better ring up the newspaper office at home and see was everything all right. I had hired a tramp printer to get out a few issues of the *Record* so I could hang onto the county printing contract. The paper shortage had made me stop publication, but I had managed to get enough paper to bring out some issues, and I begun to wonder if that tramp printer would manage. However, there was no hurry, and I judged it might be dangerous to call up from here in town because my true name might get out.

I hung around the Adobe House, after putting the liquor in the car, until noon, and run into Bull Hutchins when he came over to grab some lunch, and set with him and we ate together. He was real cordial and we got to talking and I tells him I am not stuck on this place, and what about that dude ranch I had heard about?

It was a right good place, he told me. Jim King owned it and managed it, but an old cow-hand by the name of Pecos Bent really runs it.

"But I reckon you wouldn't want to stay there," he concluded. "It costs twenty bucks a day."

"Oh, that's all right," I says, and that made him a lot more cordial. "But I got my wife coming maybe tomorrow, and she's an invalid and takes looking after. You reckon I could get in at that place?"

"All you need is the money, Colonel. King's in town today on a law case. Why don't you and me run over and meet him after court is out? He'll stop in at the club for a drink and I'll be glad to introduce you."

The club was what the gambling rooms were called.

"That's mighty white of you," I said. "You say when and I'll be there."

So we arranged to meet there at five o'clock. He said there would not be any games going then but I said that was all right, I had to see a feller on business this evening and would be up later for a whirl.

I loafed around, made up on sleep, and met Jim King at five o'clock.

I have often wondered at the workings of Providence. Here was a man I had been hoping for years to meet and had never run into him before, and it came about by accident, you might say. Yes, sir, ever since the revolutionary troubles down below the border, I had been wishing I could run into this feller.

You see, I was mixed up in them troubles, like a lot of folks were that had no business below the line. There was a bright young chap from San Antone by the name of Larrigan. He was training soldiers for Zapata, and doing right well for himself on a colonel's pay, but not well enough. This here Larrigan not only sold us out to Villa but skipped with all the cash in sight—and left us to be shot. I was not shot because I got back across the border two jumps ahead of the Villistas. Ever since then, I had just been honing and hankering to meet up with Larrigan again.

And this Jim King was him.

He did not know me from Adam but I knew him right off, when Bull Hutchins introduced us and I had a champagne cup with them. He was all Hoppy Horn had said, and more—strapping, big and husky like Hutchins, with a hard, keen face and a big mustache and sleepy eyes that could look murder at you when they opened wide. There was a scar across his right cheek, and I had given it to him in the old days when my bullet missed him that much.

"Sure we got room for you at the Lazy Q, if you got the price," he says. "There's a spare bungalow for two. You say your wife is coming?"

"I reckon she'll get driven here. She's an invalid," I explained, which was a lie, of course, but I had my reasons. "She's liable to show up 'most any time."

"It don't matter. Fetch her along, Colonel, and if I ain't there, Pecos Bent will look after you," he says. "There's a community dining room, but otherwise everyone lives separate."

"And they put up the best meals in this here state," says Hutchins. "They don't know what ration points are, at the Lazy Q. They got an airfield, too."

"Got a couple aviators there right now," says Jim King. "Nice fellers. Civilian air corps officers with a training plane."

"What is this law case I been hearing about?" I asked King. "Some feller name of Trumbull or some such handle."

"Oh, him!" King laughed. "Why, Pete Trimble is an old goat with more money than sense, and now he's got to pay for his fun, that's all. Regular poison varmint, that's what he is—an old souse drinking himself to death."

"Oh!" I says. "Was he the gent I seen downstairs, in a boiled shirt and white goatee and a big diamond pin?"

"Nope, that was Judge Chase," said King. "This Trimble gent has ragged gray whiskers all over his face. They say he's dying but that's all a stall. We're going to have him take a medical examination—force him to it—in a couple days. That'll fix him."

I could see clearer than ever that I was sure being led by Providence. And when I found that Jim King was not married, that was the best of all, because I have never liked to make any widows, and he sure as hell had a settlement coming and overdue.

We had a couple more champagne cups and when I started back for the Adobe House and supper, it was getting pretty dark. I was walking along careless, thinking about Jim King being Larrigan and feeling happy about it—when all of a sudden, I stumbled and just did save myself from falling on my nose, but it gave me a pretty bad turn, you bet.

"Maybe those champagne cups are bad medicine for me," I reflected. "Let this be a warning to you, Joe Trimble, and you had better heed it!"

It had to be done, though it made me feel

pretty sad, because I had just about decided that somebody ought to inspect that bourbon before giving it to my cousin Pete, purely to protect him, of course. But not now. No, sir-ee! I could not take chances about going into a wheel chair and being pawed over by a nurse, like Doc Byers had predicted.

However, there is nothing I cannot do if I set my mind to it; so I told myself that Pete would just have to go unprotected and take his chances.

Sick as I was, my relish for vittles was not affected, and I had a right good supper. And when I got back to my room in the row, there was Lew Simmons waiting for me. I turned out the light and we talked. I did not realize then what a big night it was going to be, on account of Minna Hutchins and all.

V

"LEW, I don't want any questions," I told him, "but tonight things are going to happen; I got the feeling in my bones. You know Pecos Bent?"

"Oh, sure," he says. "Knowed him for a long time."

"Would he give you a job out at that dude ranch?"

"I guess so; they need help. He'll be in town tonight. He fetches in them dudes in a station wagon. Today is Saturday and this will be a big night at the club."

"Well, as soon as you and me get done with Pete, you go hunt him up and get you a job there beginning tomorrow or Monday. Can do?"

"I reckon. But they don't pay much."

"No matter. I'll double your wages," I said. "I expect to be out there myself and I kind of want you on hand."

AT THIS he brightened up considerable. We went out and got in the car and I drove around the block behind Pete's house and left the car standing. I got out a bottle of bourbon and we headed in between the houses. Lew went on ahead to open the gate and make sure all was clear, and it was.

"Watch your step," he whispered as I came through the gate. "The yard's all cluttered up. Don't go stumbling like you done last night coming around here, or it'll make a noise, not to mention hurting the bottle."

It riled me that he had noticed my stumbling, but I said nothing.

We got on the back porch and I scratched at the window screen, and Pete came. He wanted me to hand him the bottle and groaned that he was near dead.

"You lemme inside," I says. "This here bourbon will resurrect you. Besides, we got to have a talk."

"That liquor you left last night done resurrected me twice," he says. "All right. Come to the door and I'll open up."

He done it and I stepped inside. It was dark, but he pulled down the blinds and lit a candle and reached for the bottle.

"Not yet," I told him. He certainly was a mess, but he was far from dying. His gray whiskers were like moss. "Now, listen," I went on, figuring he might get stubborn. He always had been ornery, and now he looked more so than ever. "I been talking to Jim King, darn him. You know what they got figured out? They aim to set fire to his house sometime tonight and smoke you out and serve them papers."

"Oh, my gosh!" he says, pawing his whiskers. "I never thought of that!"

"Well, they did. I'm here to save you and your durned oil stock, but you got to promise to do just what I say."

"I will, Joe, cross my heart and hope to die, I will!" he says, real earnest and trembly. "I'll do just like you say."

I opened the bottle and poured him a drink. The smell of it like to have conquered all my resolutions, but I held tight. He downed the drink like he had sure needed it.

"That's wonderful!" he says. "Gimme some more, Joe. Take a drink yourself."

"No, I got to keep my head if I'm going to pull you out of this jam. Tell me where that stock of yours is hidden."

He poked his thumb at the house.

"In there. In the hall closet on the shelf where I kept my empties," he says. "It's in a Scotch bottle with a thin neck and a big belly and the glass is black. Vat 69 is the name of the brand. I rolled up the certificate and shoved her in, and they'd never guess."

"They sure wouldn't. That was smart," I told him, and poured some more liquor. "Now, how can I get in there without being seen?"

"You can't. Not in seventeen years—hold on! Might be you could, too. I could unlock the door and let you in to the dining room and you could sneak into the hall."

"Now you said something. That's fine," I says. "While I'm doing it, you get them whiskers shaved off. Scrape your face clean so nobody will recognize you. Suit you?"

"Sure, sure, I'll do anything you say, Joe," he says, real pitiful. I felt sorry for him and set the bottle on the table. "You're the squarest feller I ever knew, Joe, to come along and help me out."

"You ain't out yet," I says. "Lemme inside the house, then get rid of them catfish whiskers, and then we'll go."

"You better watch out," he warned me. "That there female is a hellion!"

"So am I. Come on, open her up and mind you don't lock the door again and keep me on the wrong side."

I had sort of sketched my general ideas to him and he had agreed, so I felt a lot relieved. It was that yarn about setting the house afire that had done the trick; otherwise I would have had trouble with him sure, because of his orneriness.

HE TOOK me to the door that he had barricaded, cleared it and got it unlocked —all with the most cautious silence. I went back outside while he was doing this, and told Lew Simmons to clear out and see to his business getting a job with Pecos Bent at the dude ranch. Luckily, I had switched off the kitchen light, because no sooner had Lew got away than a flashlight beam showed that a watcher was on the prowl. I went back and joined Pete in the dark.

He had the door open a crack and we could look into the dining-room. It was dark, but a light showed in the hall beyond and to the right. Somebody was playing the piano in the parlor, where the curtains were drawn.

"Dang it, that's my pianner!" said Pete, and cussed under his breath.

I took the key out of the lock, to make sure he would not lock me out, went into the next room, and closed the door softly, telling him to go on and get clean shaved fast. Crossing the room, I came into the hall and there was the closet, and a big one. I went to it, jerked the door open, and got inside, then fumbled for the light switch and found it. With the door closed, I turned it on and seen I had come to the right place.

ON A SHELF at the end were some empty liquor bottles and one of them was the one Pete had described. I got it down and knocked down a couple doing it but they did not break. I held this one to the light and could see the rolled-up paper inside. So that took a load off my mind.

The closet was hung pretty full of women's duds, all kinds; maybe they had belonged to Pete's wife but I wouldn't know. It happened that by good luck I was wearing my old clothes, with a blue bandanna around my neck. Well, I pecked away at the women's duds and selected a corset and a couple of skirts and a loose Mother Hubbard wrapper and a blouse, and with the whiskey bottle all this made quite an armful.

And right then came a step at the door and a hand rattled the knob.

I turned the switch and jerked up the bandanna over my nose, as the door swung open. There stood Minna Hutchins, with a sawed-off shotgun over her arm.

"Come out o' that, you polecat!" she says. "I heard you, scrimmaging around in there! Step out!"

"Yes'm," I says, and got deeper in among the dresses and things. I had meant to make a break for it, but she looked so danged determined with that shotgun that I got a better idea. "Just a minute, ma'am, till I get this dress—that's right. Bull, he sent me over for an armload of these duds."

With that, I pulled down the bandanna again and took off my hat, and stepped out where she could see me. She let out a gasp.

"Why—why—it's Colonel Twinells!"

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "You were playing the piano, and Bull says not to disturb you if I could help it but just to walk right in and get the stuff."

Her mouth fell open, then snapped shut.

"My land! Are you out of your senses?" she barked. "What you want with those things?"

"Well, I don't want 'em personal, ma'am," I told her. "They're for a friend of Bull's, up at the club."

"A friend of my husband? Explain," she ordered.

"Yes'm. It's that red-haired girl who

dances, you know, the one that has taken quite a shine to Bull and says he's the handsomest man in the state. Well, her clothes got lost or something. I think they got stolen while she was dancing and all she's got left is a G-string and a hankerchief around her neck. Bull is keeping her in his private office till I get back with these duds for her—"

"Oh!" she gasps out. "Oh! So he is, is he? Says not to disturb me, did he? Private office, huh? Oh!" She pulled up the shotgun and cocked it. "Come out o' there!"

"My gosh, ma'am, you ain't going to shoot me?"

"I'm a-going to see that you stay put till I 'tend to Bull and his redhead," she says. "March into the parlor! Hey, Ole! Ole! Come a-running! March, colonel, march!"

I marched into the parlor. Into the house burst a big splay-footed gent with a dumb face and a gun in his hand, and stopped short.

"Watch this guy, Ole," she snapped out. "A hell of a guard, you are, to let a thief walk into the house. Colonel Twinells, you set down and wait till I fetch Bull. I'm right sorry to treat you so suspicious—"

"Oh, that's all right, ma'am," I says, with the bundle still in my arm. "I only hope that poor naked critter will get some clothes—"

"She'll get hell, that's what she'll get!" squawked Minna, grabbing up a coat and sticking on a hat. "And that's nothing to what Bull is going to get. Take care of him, Ole."

"Ja," said Ole, fastening me with a mean eye. "You bet."

She flounced out of the place, leaving the shotgun in the corner, and the door slammed. I turned to Ole.

"Who's paying you? Her or Bull?"

"Bull, ja," he replied.

"Well," I says, "you come into the hall with me and I'll get Bull on the phone. If I don't warn him, you're going to be the sickest man ever seen. Come along."

I gave him no chance to think it over, but started for the hall. He came along and held his gun on me while I caught up the telephone. After a minute I got the club and asked for Bull, and got him on the line.

"This is Colonel Twinells," I says. "Now, listen! Your wife is on her way there and if she gets in, you're a gone coon. I was coming by your house and there was a commotion and I went in. Your wife had caught a sneak-thief and he was giving her some song-and-dance about you having a naked woman in your private office—"

"Oh, my God!" broke in Hutchins. "That's a lie!"

"Of course, but this feller made her believe it," I told him. "She was in such a fury that she let him get away and durned near killed me with a shotgun, and now she's on her way to see you. Thought I'd better warn you. She's all mixed up in the head, of course, and I feel mighty sorry for her, but I'll feel sorrier for you if she gets in the club—"

"She won't," says Bull. "Thanks, thanks a lot, colonel."

"I'll be up after a while," I told him, and hung up. I turned on Ole, who was grinning. "Good for you, Ole! Now, you see, things will straighten out fine. Here, hold these duds till I get me a smoke."

I shoved the armload of clothes on him, and he had no more sense than to let me do it. Then I hit him with the bottle, and by good luck it did not break.

HE LAY nice and peaceful on the floor. I took his gun and a deputy sheriff's star he had, and a flashlight. He was one of the servers looking for Pete, of course. Then I got my load of things and turned out the lights and went back to join Pete.

He heard me coming and was waiting with a gun, but relaxed when he seen who it was. And he had got rid of his gray whiskers.

"Why, Pete Trimble! I never dreamed you were such a good-looking man!" I said to him, and he grinned.

"Have any trouble?"

"Nary a mite. Here's your bottle—better leave the oil stock in there, because no one would ever suspect. And we'd better shove for the car. I had to hit one of your guards over the head and he may not stay asleep long."

He grabbed the bottle. "This is the one! I marked it with a pencil. What you doing with them duds?"

"They're for you," I told him. "Remember, I explained it to you? But you can get into them in the car. There's no hurry. Come on, let's move."

"Wait till I get the bottle," he says. "That's real prime stuff, Joe!"

"There's more in the car," I told him, "but fetch it along."

He was right scary about getting out of the house, but another drink screwed up his courage and we lit out with the flashlight. The car was still standing through the block behind his house, and we went out the back gate and headed for it.

I UNLOCKED the car and he got in. To think of leaving Pete there with all that prime liquor fetched a groan out of me, but there was no help for it. I gave him the half empty bottle and showed him where the other bottles were, and gave him the clothes. Then I locked the car and took the keys.

"Where you going?" he demanded. "Ain't you having a drink?"

"Pete, I'd love to," I said. "I'd like nothing better, but it just ain't safe. I got to watch over you. Don't you set foot out of this car, now!"

"No danger," he said. "I got a corkscrew in my pocket. I trust you, Joe; you're a durned good feller, and I done you wrong! I'll do just like you say."

"You'd better or you're a gone coon," I said. "You can set and listen to the radio while I'm gone. I may be quite a spell, so don't get impatient."

"Not a chance," he promised, and I heard a gurgle and knew that he was safe put for the rest of the night. So I said I would see him later, and got away, aiming to visit the club.

VI

I WAS not reckless in making for the club; I had my reasons.

So far as Minna and Bull Hutchins went, they were sure to get all mixed up and involved over what had happened. It was certain that Minna would figure me for a rascal, but I was not worried about her. Just now, I wanted to stand in well with Bull, and I judged I would if she kicked up any rumpus around the hotel.

She had kicked up plenty and was still doing it, I found on getting there, so I kept out of sight. She was raising holy perdition around the lobby because she could not get into the club. Finally Jim King and Sheriff Allbright came along. They told her two men had just got killed upstairs and the investigation was going on and Bull could not get away or let her in, and after talking a while this pacified her and she went home. I judged she would telephone Bull on finding me gone, so I went right up to the club with King and the Sheriff.

Bull Hutchins looked a lot relieved on finding she was gone, and him and me went into the bar and I was so desperate for a drink I took a champagne cup with him. He asked a lot of questions about the sneak thief but I parried them.

"I didn't know him," I told him. "He lammed Ole over the head, it seems, and got away. Your wife got me mixed up with him. She knows how to handle a shotgun."

He shook his head. "She's terrible when she gets these here spells of imagining things about me and other women, colonel. Are you going to stay around a while tonight?"

"A spell," I said. "I drew some cash out of the bank today and I'll have a look at the tables. Got to get away early to meet my wife. She's an invalid, you know."

I fixed it up with King about getting quarters at the dude ranch. He said he would speak to Pecos about me and introduce me, because Pecos and a crowd from the Lazy Q, including my friend Monte Maise, were due here any minute now.

So I got out my roll of hundred-dollar bills and bought some chips and started in to investigate the games.

In the course of my fifty-eight years I have looked into the gambling situation now and then, and it is my belief that there is no such thing as luck except with dice. The only way to win at the tables is to own them. Crooked tables are not necessary except in

books. Any tinhorn professional gambler that is worth his salt can prove that the hand is quicker than the eye, because it is, that's all; in one way or another, that is. A man cannot spend his life taking advantage of people without learning how to do it to the queen's taste, you bet!

I circulated among the tables, making bets of fifty and a hundred, so the dealers would have their mouths watering and be all set to take me for my pile, next time I came. I figured that next time would probably be the payoff. I sized things up carefully—not the tables but the dealers. None of them knew me from Adam, of course, but there were two I had met up with before and could call by name, so I made a note of it and let it ride.

While I was at this, the Lazy Q crowd came. Monte Maise caught sight of me and shook hands and was real cordial, and I seen King talking with Pecos Bent and the two of them came over to me.

"Pecos. I want you to shake hands with Colonel Harrison Twinells," said Jim King. "I was just telling you about him and his wife coming out to the ranch."

"Glad to know you," said Pecos, shaking hands. Then, when he looked me in the eyes, he all of a sudden knew me and his jaw dropped.

"I think we have met before," I said, before he could speak. "Didn't you work for my brother, Judge Bertram A. Twinells, near Socorro?"

Pecos bobbed his Adam's apple a couple times but took the hint.

"Sure," he said. "Quite a while back, colonel."

"Well, let's get us a drink," I said, "and then I'll set into a poker game for an hour, and say goodnight."

We indulged in a champagne cup, which I figured would not hurt me any more than the other cups had, then Pecos got me aside.

"My good gosh, Joe Trimble!" he says, his eyes bugging out. "Do you know what would happen to you, if these gents learned who you are?"

"They won't learn till I get good and ready," I told him. "If you see Lew Simmons tonight, you give him a job with your outfit."

"I seen him as soon as we got into town," said Pecos. "I done it, all right. Listen, Joe—what can I do to help you?"

"Keep your mouth shut, for one thing. I don't need help; you do. This is the crookedest outfit of tinhorn gamblers I ever run into. Howcome you let 'em trim you?"

" I just did," he said. "No whining about it, Joe."

"No, you're a good sport, Pecos, and always were. But I'm aiming to set you on your feet again—not tonight, though. So just set tight and keep a tight rein."

I got into a game in one of the poker rooms, where Twist was playing for the house, and set into it for an hour, win or lose. There was Maise and another dude rancher, and two mining officials, and us. One of the mining men, named Conkling, was an ugly jasper with a mean eye and I did not take any shine to him.

Not that it mattered. I did not have any particular interest in this game, except to figure out where it was crooked. Twist was the sort of tinhorn that had to play crooked to win, but he was mighty smooth; all I wanted was to see what his crooked angle was, because I know most of them and like to be on the safe side. And next time, I sure meant to be on the safe side.

It took me a long while to figure it out, because it was such an ancient dodge that I had not expected Twist to be using it. The game was a dollar ante, and we were using both silver dollars and chips for higher amounts. Finally I dropped on to the trick and it made me chuckle but I did not say anything because I did not want to bust up the game.

I PLAYED along about even, dropping a hundred or so, and then Conkling got sore because I would not take a drink when he was buying. He got sorer still when he backed three aces against my full house, after I had drawn two cards, and it was a pretty big pot and more than put me even. So I says my time is up and I am pulling out.

"I thought it was your feet I smelled," says Conkling, with an ugly sneer. That riled me and I kicked his shin under the table, and when he leaned forward, I lammed him in the nose. Then I went for my gun and there almost was a fight only Maise intervened and grabbed us both and says to

apologize. So we both did, because Twist's hand went under the table and I guessed he had a gun in his lap, and I wanted no trouble tonight.

So that ended it, and I went out into the main room and run into Bull Hutchins.

"Minna called me up," he says. "She is in a terrible stew about you, colonel. How-come she got you mixed up with that thief?"

"Well, you know how it is when an outsider interferes with a woman holding a shotgun," I says, and he nodded and wiped his bald head.

"Never mind about it," I went on. "It never pays to argue with a woman and show she is in the wrong. I will say yes to everything she says, and send her some flowers in a couple days, and we'll just forget it."

He brightened up and pumped my hand and allowed I was a gentleman. I agreed with him and told him goodnight and left him happy.

I was happy, too. Now I was all set to raid the club, whenever the time got ripe; not that I am a reformer or anything of that kind, but I figured my cousin Pete had something coming, and so did Pecos Bent. Besides, this trip was costing me a lot of trouble and money, and where Joseph T. Trimble is concerned I am a philanthropist first, last and foremost. I had something coming too.

So leaving the hotel, I started back to the car, feeling carefree and happy, only to get an awful jolt. For I got so far, and when I came to the place in the sidewalk where the liquor had hit me before, it hit me now. I stumbled and came down and skinned both knees. I staggered to my feet, feeling shaky and terrible because it had come so sudden. A woman came out on her front porch alongside and hollered at me to quit that cursing and swearing on the public street, and I felt so bad I could not even answer her but went on toward the car. No two ways about it, I could see plain that I was done for; this was the third time it had happened after drinking nothing but champagne cups. Then and there I made a vow that nothing in the way of fermented liquor, absolutely nothing, would pass my lips in the future.

My cousin Pete's house was all lit up and tongues were wagging hard; I judged that Minna Hutchins was laying down the law to Ole and other process servers and they had not discovered that Pete was gone. It was not his fault because he had the car lights on and the radio going full blast. He had got into the woman's clothes somehow and was feeling noble and had a bottle in each hand, one rye and one bourbon, and could not make up his mind which was better.

I had learned which way to head out of town for the dude ranch, so I got in and drove. I had paid my bill at the Adobe House but did not want to reach the Lazy Q till morning, so we drove out into the country a spell and then stopped. By that time Pete was asleep and snoring. I opened the car windows to let out the whiskey smell and fell asleep fighting off temptation.

What with the altitude, and the cold night air, and my sinus and a crick in my back. I was the sickest man you ever laid eyes on about sunup, when I wakened and got to moving. A drop of medicine would have done me a world of good but I dared not take it and kept my vow, even with liquor all around me. Pete woke on the way out to the ranch and got contrary but I told him his house had burned down while he was asleep and he had better trust to me, so he done it.

When we got to the ranch nobody was around but I finally woke up Pecos Bent and he showed us our quarters. There was a big mess hall and a swimming pool and cottages all around, and we had one of the cottages. I felt like I was dying sure and could hardly keep on my feet, but we got Pete unloaded and some of the liquor, and Pecos helped us get to bed.

I woke up about noon and there sat Pete wearing the dressing gown and sampling the liquor, and the smell like to drove me crazy but I would not take a drink. Lew Simmons fetched us some grub; he was now working steady here, and it was pitiful to see how happy Pete was to see him again. Pete had got over his notion of dying and was feeling mighty pert on account of being free; but he had to play being my sick wife so he agreed to stay under cover and in bed, so long as the liquor held out.

It was the first time I had seen a dude ranch and I spent that afternoon loafing around and getting acquainted, but it left me disgusted. Everybody was fixed up in

rodeo shirt and embroidered boots and levis and you would have thought they were top hands gone loco, to hear them talk, but Monte Maise was about the only one who could stick on a horse without pulling leather. All they did was ride, play tennis, and lay around in the sun.

I kept feeling worse and worse all the while. Jim King showed up and said I had ought to have a doctor, but I would not. I knew what was the trouble—not being able to take some of my usual medicine. My brain had gone kind of numb on me, too, and it was hard to keep my thoughts straight. I had come here for some special purpose and could not think what it was. There was a training airplane out on the desert flat and the two student pilots laying up here were spry young gents and I knew the purpose had something to do with them, but could not remember it. I had never been so downright sick in my whole life.

That night I joined the crowd at mess but could hardly eat anything except a steak and a few sandwiches and pumpkin pie and ice cream. Jim King was right worried and said I was looking like a ghost and it was his duty to get a doctor to look me over. But I told him I would be all right in the morning.

He came over to the cottage with Monte Maise that evening and talked awhile, and he was cussing a blue streak some of the time. He says that scoundrel Pete Trimble had up and disappeared, plumb vanished, and the whole town was excited about it and there was five thousand dollars reward offered for him by Bull Hutchins. All the while, Pete was lying in bed in the next room listening and shaking; he was scared, too, because the sheriff had posses out looking for him, according to Jim King.

What was more, he had a warning for me. That ornery gent I had tangled with at the club, Conkling, was manager of the copper company, and word had got to King that Conkling had some of his thugs all ready to beat me up next time I showed my face in town. This made me spunk up a little. I asked King if he had ever been down below the border.

"You look something like a feller I seen a couple times, name of Larrigan," I said. "But that was long ago during the Villa troubles."

"No, I ain't never been down there," he says, and lied like a polecat. So I let it drop, because I was too sick to argue. I got rid of them and went to bed. Next day was Saturday, and it would be a big night at the club because it was pay day at the copper mines. Monte Maise let on that when Jim King came home that night—or early Sunday morning—he would have half the pickings from the club with him and it came to a lot of money.

I got up feeling so terrible that I thought of sending for Doc Byers, back home at Sandoval City. Then that made me remember to call up the tramp printer at the *Record* and see if everything was all right. I ate with the crowd and had Lew Simmons take a breakfast tray in to my poor sick wife. Lew came back smacking his lips and I judged Pete had a bottle open and made inquiries about telephoning. Lew says there is a phone in the lobby and offered to help me find it, so we started.

"You're looking mighty bad," he allowed.

"I got the blind staggers, Lew," I says, and felt mighty sorry for myself. I told him about what Doc Byers had said, and how I just stumbled over nothing at all and had to quit drinking complete.

"Why, even a spoonful of champagne brought it on!" I told him. "That was howcome I would near fall down after leaving the club—remember? You noticed it. Night before last was the worst. I did fall down and skinned both knees."

Lew gawked at me and started to say something but I said shut up, because Jim King was coming. The three of us went into the lobby and they showed me the phone booth and I put in a call for the *Record* office.

Well, sir, the tramp printer answered. He did not need to mention my name because he knew my voice. And right there, the whole course of my life altered, for a fact! I hate to think of what might have happened, if I had not put in that phone call.

VII

"HOW you doing?" I demanded.

"Okay, boss," said the printer, "Only I hurt my head a couple times and ain't very spry."

"Howcome you hurt it? Drunk?"

"No sir, I don't drink and you know it," he says. "I done like you did, only I done it twice."

"Done what?"

"Tripped and fell, going into the composing room."

"I didn't trip," I says. "I just thought I did. There wasn't nothing there to trip over."

"That's what I thought too," he comes back. "Didn't look like anything there, but after it happened twice, I investigated. There was a broom-handle sticking out, where a broom had fallen down along the wall in the dark corner—"

"Good gosh!" I said. "Is that so?"

"Yes sir, and that's what tripped you too. Anyone going into the composing room would fall over it—"

We got through talking and I hung up, and turned to find Lew Simmons waiting.

"Hey! I was trying to tell you about them roots," he said.

"What roots you talking about?" I asked him.

"Well, you know how cottonwood roots do. They spread out after water and come up under sidewalks and bust the cement out and shove up the walk—"

"Are you crazy?" I said.

"Not yet. But that's howcome you stumbled in that dark street, always at the same place, remember? You look at it in daytime, and you'll see how them roots have come up and busted the walk and—"

WELL, you could have knocked me over with a feather. I just stood there paralyzed for maybe as much as a couple of minutes, as everything flashed over me.

Back there at home, Doc Byers had been mistaken; I had just stumbled, over that danged broomstick, without knowing it. And the same here—every time the liquor had hit me, it had not been so at all—just those cottonwood roots in the dark. And to think how I had suffered on account of Doc Byers jumping at wrong conclusions! To think how I had wasted all them good intentions and had pretty near died of thirst because of it, and had made that vow about swearing off complete!

Right on the spot, I took it back and let out a whoop. I was the happiest man in the state, and knocked Lew aside and put for the door and went sprinting for the cottage. I met Monte Maise and grabbed him.

"Come on!" I sung out. "Quick! Run!"

"What the hell's up?" he gasped, breaking into a run. "Fire?"

"Firewater, sure," I said. "Come on!"

We went to into the cottage on the dead run, and I don't know which was more surprised, us or Pete. He was in his red flannels and had just come out of the bedroom to get a bottle of bourbon open, when we surrounded him. I grabbed the bottle and let out a yell.

"I'm cured! Come on, boys, set around—Monte, meet my cousin Pete Trimble! Get out some glasses, Pete—rush it!"

"My gosh! A snake bit you?" he gasped.

"No. I just found out I ain't dying. I ain't got liver complaint. All I got is a thirst. Dig out another bottle there—"

Monte was a good sport. When he found out I was Joseph T. Trimble and not Colonel Twinells, and that my wife was Pete, he like to have laughed his head off. He had heard all about Pete's bad luck and had felt sorry for him, even without knowing him. So then I told about Doc Byers and how he had danged near killed me with his mistaken diagnosis, and we all had a drink and then improved on it, and that was the primest liquor I ever rolled my tongue over, you bet.

We sat there talking it over until pretty near noon. I did not mind trusting Monte with the whole truth, because he was on the level. We were just going to open another bottle, when there came a roaring rush like a tornado caving in the roof, and Pete let out a yell and dived under the couch, and Monte sat laughing his head off.

"That's the airplane," he said. "Those boys are just coming back—they dive in over the place every ride."

That reminded me of everything, and I went out on the run and caught up with the airplane when the two boys came piling out of it.

"Listen," I said to them. "Would you gents like to make ten thousand cash?"

"Never mind how—just say what you do," they replied, and I told them. We stood there in the sun talking it over, and we got everything arranged.

"Seven o'clock tomorrow morning—and I don't mean seven-five," I said. They said

it was a date and I could count on them sure.

I went back and found Monte asleep on the floor, and took Pete into the bedroom and dumped cold water over him. He got mad and lit out at me, and I whammed him down and sat on him.

"Now you listen to me, you durned old horntoad," I said, "I'm acting for your good and if you spoil it I'll sure as hell take you apart. Will you be good?"

"Good as gold, durn you," he said. "You've busted my nose!"

"Take a smell of bourbon and cure it," I said, and went on to tell him everything I had planned. He had sobered down quite a lot and got it all through his head, and put up his hand to me, and there were tears in his eyes.

"Joe, I take it all back. You're the most wonderful cousin a feller ever had! You lemme up and we'll have a drink together—just one drink to your health. Then I'll do just like you say."

So I let him up and took a little more medicine, and he got dressed up in the skirts and corset and so forth and sat up in a chair to eat his lunch, when Lew brought it. I dragged Monte back of the couch and went on out to mess with the crowd.

It was wonderful to be myself again, let me tell you. I had got rid of all my aches and pains, my mind was clear and working good, and Pete and his two million dollars were as good as saved this minute.

I went back to the cottage after eating, and found Pete sound asleep in his chair. Monte Maise was just crawling out from under the couch. He said he did not want any lunch but he had a date to go riding at two o'clock with some of the female dude ranchers. My sinus was hurting so I had a drop of medicine for it, and he had a drop also, and I told him the ins and outs of that gambling club, and how the sheriff had once been a bank robber and Jim King was the Larrigan who had absconded with the cash of all us Zapatistas below the border and so on, and he was real sympathetic.

Maise was a big lawyer back east and he says he will help me get Pete out of here to safety, so we talked it over. I explained some of the dodges employed by those tinhorn gamblers to trim him and others, but you bet I said nothing about the silver dollar trick that Twist used; I was saving that one for my own meat.

While we were talking, along came four females on horseback, with Monte's horse and Pecos Bent to shepherd the bunch, Monte went out to talk to the females and Pecos came in and I gave him a drink and told him to have Lew Simmons up to the club tonight sure and to fetch guns along because they would be needed. Then I told Pecos to stay home, and I would shepherd the dudes, and I went out and forked his bronc and away we went, leaving Pecos mighty worried and anxious because them females were each paying five hundred a week and he did not want anything to happen to Jim King's gold mine.

It felt mighty good to be in the saddle once more. One of the females they called Gloria was a sassy brat with diamond rings that would put your eye out and Monte tells

me she had sixteen million dollars in the bank and three husbands. She got turning up her lip at me and I did not appreciate her being so smart. So I tightened up the saddle girth for her and slipped a burr under the blanket, and in less than five minutes Gloria was hollering blue murder and her bronc was going for the horizon like greased lightning and all of us were going after and trying to save her. We were out in the open desert, mind.

The bronc quit running and began to sunfish. Gloria hung on, but her store pants were not made for that sort of work and they split, and then off she went and landed

in a patch of cholla. There are worse things to tumble into than cholla cactus but I do not know what, and you could have heard that spoiled brat holler all the way to Socorro. She begun to shed her clothes and claw at herself, yelling for help.

"You help her," I told the other females. "Me and Monte will withdraw. Two of you stand around to shield her from the crowd and the other one can pick. You'd better keep your gloves on while you pick, too, if you know what's good for you."

So they done it. Gloves? Sure. Somebody had sold them females fancy gloves like cowboys use, ornamented with pink silk embroidery. It was a durned good thing they had them, too, because cholla prickles are worse to the person who picks than to the one who has them.

Monte fit to laugh his head off. We caught Gloria's bronc and I took out the burr from under the blanket, and we stood talking, And then what happened but all them females begun to yell, and scattered out and left Gloria lying there without any cover. One of them had turned over a stone to sit on and there were two scorpions under the stone and they started flitting around like scorpions do. Then Gloria saw the scorpions and she let out a screech and jumped up and done a war-dance.

WELL, things quieted down finally. You would have thought a female with three husbands would not worry much about a little exposure, but Gloria was mad clear through. She claimed it was all my fault; why, I could not see, but the language she used made me blush for shame. She was still full of cholla needles and riding back home was hard work, so I did not blame her especial. It looked like a good joke all around to me, but I might have known it never pays to make a woman mad, if she is not your wife.

We got home. Monte went to have a swim and a nap, and I joined Pete and found Pecos still there, so I joined them and we talked politics for a spell. Pecos says he had been cleaned as usual, last visit to the club, and I felt right sorry for him. So did Pete, but a couple drops of medicine made us all feel more cheerful. Pete had his whiskey bottle safe with the oil stock still in it, you bet.

Supper was a real scrumptious meal. The two aviation cadets met me in the bar and I wrote them out a check for ten thousand, and had to sign my right name to it, but they promised to keep quiet. They were feeling pretty high and everybody in the mess hall was hilarious except Gloria, who was sitting on pillows. The crowd was going to the club later, and Jim King said I had better go with them in the station wagon, because the games would not get going until about midnight.

I thanked him and said I would stick to my own car, and asked when the session would break up.

"This being Saturday night," he replied. "we usually run till daylight or after. We don't stay that long, of course; anyone can stay who wants, but I come home around three or four o'clock."

After supper they had games of bridge in the lobby, which would last till the crowd got off later for town. I stood around watching, because I had never learned to play that game, when a car drove up outside, and in came Minna Hutchins. She knew everybody and it seemed she usually came over of a Saturday night to play bridge. When she caught sight of me, she drew herself up and compressed her lips, but I greeted her real cordial.

"Don't speak to me, you scoundrel!" she shot out. "After your disgraceful doings at my house, and the way you lied to my husband, you keep your distance."

"Well, ma'am, if that's the way you feel about it, I'm right sorry," I told her.

"A lot sorry you are! I believe you had something to do with the disappearance of Pete Trimble," she said hotly, "and I'm going to get to the bottom of it some day!"

"Never heard of him, ma'am," I returned, shaking my head, but she would not be mollified. She got into a bridge game with Gloria and two other females, and by the way they kept looking thunderclouds at me, I judged the atmosphere was unhealthy and went out to the cottage and made sure that Pete had not drunk all the bourbon.

He had not, but he had done a pretty good job as far as he had got, and it had put him into a sound sleep. I woke him up enough to get him into the bedroom and lay him on the bed, and he was snoring again in two minutes. He had three thousand-dollar bills

in his clothes so I added them to my roll and then took a bath and had me a shave, because I aimed to dress up for the night's work. I laid out my store clothes and a boiled shirt, too.

WHEN I got dressed and ready, I turned out the lights and went outside and climbed into my car, with my gun stuck under my waistband. It was a quiet peaceful evening and I sat enjoying the darkness and the stars, and trying to find my car keys which had got lost in my pockets.

While I was hunting for them, I discovered two bottles in the back of the car—the same two that Judge Fogarty had given me back in Sandoval City. They were twenty-year-old bourbon, he had said. I have always had a lot of respect for Judge Fogarty's opinions, and I hoped he had not been deceived about that bourbon, so I investigated and found that he was dead right about it.

As I sat there, two women came out of the lobby; they were Gloria and Minna Hutchins and they did not know I was there.

"Well, it may be she's his wife, but I'd hate to bet on it," Gloria was saying. "And maybe she's an invalid, too. Nobody here has set eyes on her, though, and that man is a thorough scoundrel."

"There ain't words enough to say what he is," Minna agreed, and I judged they were discussing me. "Well, my dear keep your eyes open and give me a ring whenever you do discover something."

Gloria promised she would, and said goodby, and Minna went to her car and drove off. I corked up the bottle and followed, without turning on my lights, and about a mile on the way to town, I caught up with Minna.

When she took note of that unlighted car behind her, she stepped on the gas and so did I, keeping about ten foot behind her. She got scareder and scareder. My old car will do ninety if pressed, and I had her wide open before we saw the town lights, and Minna kept scooting along like a frightened roadrunner with his wings spread. I'll bet she had the wildest ride of her life, that ten mile stretch, and she hit town with her horn squawking to beat hell, trying to summon help.

I turned off and went around the other side of town, and parked my car by the back entrance to the hotel on the main street. Mesa Verde sure was all lit up for Saturday night, and everybody in it likewise. Neon signs were blazing, stores were open, and gents with a load were staggering all over the sidewalks. Thinks I, it would sure be nice to be sheriff here and clean this place up—and that gave me an idea. Or rather, seeing Sheriff Allbright gave it to me, because after corking up the bottle mighty careful and getting out of the car, I ran into him standing on the street corner.

We shook hands and I asked would he like to step down to my car on a special errand of mercy for men only, and he says nothing would please him more, so we done it and I introduced him to that twenty-year bourbon and I was generous with it. You never seen a happier man than him after he had smacked his lips a couple times.

Pretty soon we walked around the corner to the hotel bar to get a chaser of ordinary liquor. The bar was crowded, but they made way for the sheriff and me. I said to him as we elbowed the bar that my life had been threatened by some bad characters here and could he make me a deputy sheriff so that I could carry a gun.

He slapped me three times on the back and said he sure as hell could and would, right here in front of everybody, and to raise my right hand. He swore me in on the spot and took off his own sheriff's star and pinned it on me, until he could get a deputy's badge. So then I bought the drinks for the crowd and everybody applauded.

And about two minutes later, as I was preparing to leave, in came two hard-jawed mining men and they had their eye on me, and I judged it meant trouble. I was right.

VIII

"ARE you Colonel Twinells?" says one of the two to me, coming up close.

"That's me," I replied.

"Well, you drift out of town and do it quick," he says.

"Or else what?"

By the way everybody scattered, I could see these gents were well known and were bad. Not that I needed to be told.

"He's an old man, leave him alone," sung out someone.

"Go to hell," says the one talking to me.

He and his partner got on either side of me, just the way I wanted them. "Now, colonel, are you leaving or do we throw you out?"

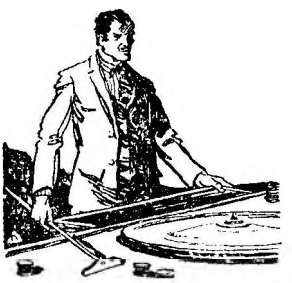
"Neither one, boys," I told them, and unbuttoned my coat. "Just for your own good, you take an old man's advice and go tell your boss you ain't got the heart to hurt me."

"We aim to lam hell out'n you," he says. "Take him, Joe!"

They moved to take me, but I moved first and slid out my gun and whipped that gent with it, smack over the eyes, and swung backhand and slammed Joe over the head and the gunsight dug into his scalp and dropped him. When the first gent could see, he was looking into my gun.

"Git, and git quick," I said, and booted him one as he turned around and sent him flying out the door. The other one, Joe, was dragged out.

Well, for about ten minutes everybody was buying me drinks and congratulating the sheriff on having a deputy who could handle them mining thugs and so forth. It was quite a celebration, and I felt good over not having lost my knack with a gun. Allbright clapped me on the back and says we had better go see if my car is all right, so we went out and around to the car, and finished that bottle of bourbon. He was mighty regretful to see it empty but I did not tell him there was another one back of the seat.



So we shook hands and parted, and he said he would see me later up at the club, and I went along feeling that the evening had got off to a good start.

ALL this had taken considerable time, but I did not hurry because I wanted the news to get upstairs ahead of me, which it did. When at last I went up and walked into the gambling rooms with the sheriff's star on my coat, I got a lot of attention. Monte Maise and the crowd from the ranch were there and Monte insisted on buying the new deputy sheriff a drink, and Bull Hutchins pumped my hand and asked about the ruckus downstairs, and I said it had all been exaggerated but this was my night to howl.

Finally I got down to business and circulated among the tables and played Pete's thousand-dollar bills for luck. The two tinhorns I had my eye on run the chuckaluck cage and the monte game, but I stayed away from them. I had made up my mind that not until midnight had come and gone was I going to open up.

Two of Pete's big banknotes went like hotcakes at the roulette wheel. I let them go, while word got around that Colonel Twinells was playing thousand-dollar bets. I was playing the five straight, and the third bet connected, so I got Pete's money back with interest and quit, and went on to the crap game and just eased along with small bets to pass the time. I told Jim King to let me know when I could get in at Twist's poker game, and he said that a stud game was starting at midnight, so I waited for that.

About ten minutes before midnight I judged the time had come so I went around to the chuckaluck cage. Nobody else was playing there. I looked at the dealer and bored him right in the eye, and threw open my coat to show my gun.

"I'm aiming to make some bets and win," I said. "You're Bill Ryan, ain't you?"

His eyes began to roll. "You're mistaken, colonel," he says. "My name is Parkhurst."

"It was Bill Ryan down to Calexico some years back," I told him, "and you got away from there one jump ahead of a sheriff's posse. Now, there's being a cleanup in this here town and I'm appointed special officer to enforce it. You want me to spread word about Bill Ryan, who shot two gents under the table back in Calexico?"

He turned green around the lips and his eyes flickered.

"I'd hate to have such a story get out," he says. I tapped my gun.

"If there's any shooting around here, I'll do it, see? Now, I know all about how them dice are feathered," I says, and laid down a thousand-dollar bill. "And I ain't betting on sixes, neither, like most folks do. What would you advise?"

He rolled his eyes and said nothing, but stuck out one hand, fingers extended.

"Okay, we are friends," I says. "Maybe I was mistaken about Calexico. Go ahead and flop the cage, brother, and if there's any mistake my hand is going to be a durned sight quicker than your eye."

In ten minutes or less, there was a crowd ten deep around the cage watching me win on fives, and Jim King come along and says the stud game is starting pretty quick. So I quit and gathered up my bale of winnings and slipped Bill Ryan five hundred as a tip, and stopped for a fling at the monte game as I went past.

The dealer there was a hard bird. I waited till the chance offered, and then I looked him in the eye and spoke mighty soft.

"Pleasant evening, ain't it? I hear tell there's a feller around town who got sent up for murder over in Phoenix and busted out of the pen there a few years back. Currie, his name was."

"Yeah?" says the dealer. "That's nothing to me, colonel."

"It will be if I lose," I told him, and hitched my gun around, and started in with thousand-dollar banknotes.

It was remarkable how much and how fast that there dealer lost. Bull Hutchins come along with the crowd, looking worried and mopping his bald front, and I says three-card monte always was my game and went right on hauling in the big money. I hit the house hard there and when I quit was some thousands to the good. So I tipped that dealer too and then went to find the stud game, knowing that Twist would have orders to clean me up.

IT WAS a seven man game, with Pecos and Monte sitting in, a couple of copper mine officials, me and Twist, and a local sport who owned a lot of the town. I slipped Pecos a roll so he could stay in and we settled down to dollar ante.

Things went along quiet for a while, and Twist got a big stack of silver in front of him, and bets began to get hoisted high. So I judged it was time.

"Sell me a hundred of them dollars?" I said to Twist, and he said yes sure. So I reached out and grabbed a pile, and got the pile I wanted.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "You can't—"

I had one hand on my gun and the other on the stack of dollars, and when he looked me in the eye he lost his voice all of a sudden.

"What were you going to say?" I asked him, real quiet.

"I—I—you got my lucky stack there," he stammered.

"I know it. What else?"

Everyone else seen there was something up, but only Twist knew what it was and he did not dare tell. He could see that I knew, too. He just swallowed hard and hoped to hell I would not expose him; and I did not, of course.

A dozen of those silver dollars were neatly riveted together in a pile that bulged out at one side. Opposite the bulge, on the inside, was set a tiny little mirror. If you dealt the cards over the stack, you would know in advance what everybody's hole card was.

"Don't get sick or quit the game or do anything desperate," I told Twist.

Then we started in. Next round, I shoved back the stack of dollars with the mirror at him, and told him to go ahead. I had one of my own all ready and slipped it out among my piles of silver, and every time he used his, I used mine. He had to play along, and set there with sweat rolling down his face as the bets got bigger and bigger.

I engineered it so that Pecos won two whacking big pots, and I rode Twist heavy, making him show his cards when he had a good hand and threw it in, and so forth. He did not dare say a word back; I had him by the neck and he knew it. I did not hesitate to do a little card manipulation, either, so that everybody but Twist took in pots. And if he had so much as three of a kind, he had to bet them to the limit, with me riding him. His nerve broke after a while, and he must have sent a signal, because Bull Hutchins come in and told him to get out of the game, he was losing too much for the house, and took his place. Twist got out and took his stack and mirror with him, so I quit using mine.

Bull knew poker, and he played straight, but about the second deal around I shook him down to his boots, and spoiled his nerve. I leaned over while Pecos was dealing and said a word in his ear.

"They tell me Joe Trimble is here and has got his brother away, and has brought in the F. B. I. and a couple of U. S. Marshals to

fight you and says he'll have you in the pen yet for conspiracy. Is that so?"

"Naw," he growled. "Pack of lies."

It got him, just the same. Next hand he had three tens in sight and I had three deuces and ran him up with thousand-dollar raises, and he quit, figuring my hole card for a deuce. Then I knew I had him.

"I hear the sheriff has got a record as a bank robber, down to Tucson," I told him pretty soon, "and that a grand jury is being called Monday morning to go after you and your dealers. Is that so?"

He just growled something, but after this he could not keep his mind on the game. I was playing straight because he was, and now it just settled down to poker savvy, and Bull was spoiled for that. He began to lose steady, and the more he lost the more rattled he got, and I knew it was time to drop a block-buster on him.

"You know where your bad luck comes in?" I said between deals. "Account of King."

"You're crazy," he snapped.

"All right; what would happen to you if Jim King snitched on you? Listen. His name used to be Larrigan, below the border. Ask him. He absconded with eighteen thousand and left his pals to be shot. Ask him. If he'd do that to them, he'd do it to you."

This really got him and the sweat begun to run down that bald front of his. I kept running the bets up higher and raising him on everything. Pecos and Monte Maise followed suit and they were heavy winners, and he was itching to get out of the room and put what I had said to the proof, which made him play careless. I never did see a man go so completely to pieces, and the way he lost money was something sinful.

About three o'clock the two mining men were cleaned out and they quit, and that broke up the game. We all cashed in. Maise said it was time to collect the girls and be getting home, so he went out and I followed him. We met Jim King and I told him Bull wanted to see him, and he started for the private rooms. And then I caught sight of Twist. He was coming for me and he had been drinking.

"I been looking for you," he says. He was white and wild-eyed and the bulge under his armpit gave me warning. So did his breath. If you ever smelled marihuana you know how it kind of sickens the air. He had been smoking marihuana reefers, and this meant he was out for blood. This scared me, I do not mind saying.

"Pardner, I don't want to hurt you," I told him nice and gentle. "Let's you and me have a drink and—"

"Why, you damned old this-and-that!" he broke out. "You're a blasted hypocrite, that's what you are!"

"All right, all right," I says, trying to soothe him down. Just then came a yell and a crash from the private rooms, and I judged Jim King and Bull Hutchins had come together.

"It ain't all right," yelled Twist. "I'm a-going to pin your ornery old hide on the door right now!"

He went after his gun right in the middle of the big room, and there was nothing else for it—I just had to plug him, and I done it. But I was careful about it and only shot him through the arm.

There was a hell of a commotion, with women screeching and everybody scattering. Jim King and Bull appeared, locked together and fighting cat and dog, and this increased the commotion. King grabbed a bottle and lammed Bull over the head and knocked him out, and I took a couple of shots at the chandelier and a bouncer came for me and I shot him in the foot and he went sprawling.

"Clean up!" I hollered. "Clean up, everybody! The house is raided!"

It was the damnest thing you ever seen. I shot out some more lights, and everybody was yelling, and making a swoop for all the money in sight. Somebody took a shot at me and durned near hit me, and the dealers tried to fight back the crowd and got tromped on his for their pains.

I seen Pecos with one foot on the monte dealer and both hands cleaning the money off the table, and sung out at him to get Lew Simmons and come along. Lew was in the bar having free drinks and Pecos went after him. Jim King was trying desperately to quiet the riot and I went up to him.

"So you don't know me, huh?" I says. He swung around and stared at me.

"What do you mean, colonel?" he says.

"Colonel Hell! I'm Joe Trimble, you

dirty coyote—the feller you left to be shot by them Villa men down below the border and now I'm settling the bill—"

I hit him and he pulled a gun and I hit him again. He shot twice and missed, and that was his bad luck because I lammed him over the crown with my gun and he went down. I took the fat wallet he kept in his breast pocket, and then shot out a couple more lights with his gun, mine being empty. What was left of the crowd was jammed around the doors, with men crawling around the floor and over bodies to keep clear of bullets, and I seen it was the proper time to be on my way.

Pecos and Lew come along and we all three made for the private rooms and got out by the back into the hotel corridor and went down the back stairs. There was a crowd in the hotel lobby and the fire department had been called out and so forth, but we did not trouble them none.

We just sneaked out the back door, and along come Monte Maise and joined us, and we made for my car and everyone crowded in. I drove down the street till we got out of hearing of the riot, then pulled in to the curb and switched off the lights.

"What you doing now?" demanded Monte.

"Got to see if that bottle of bourbon has been damaged," I says, and located the bottle and it had not been damaged, I was thankful to discover.

IX

WITHOUT meaning to, I had stopped just across the street from Pete's residence, right by the Adobe House, which was closed up and dark.

Everybody agreed with me that this Kentucky cream was really something special in the line of bourbon, so I corked up the bottle and sat thinking. The car was only a roadster and four of us crowded it a bit, so I told Lew to sneak around to the Mesa House, since nobody would be looking for him, and get the news and we would wait for him here. He got off on his errand.

"It occurs to me, Joe Trimble," observed Monte, "that aside from the business of your cousin Pete, we are going to have the law on us for everything from mayhem to attempted murder."

"Don't worry about that," I told him. "I'm worrying about that good liquor in my cottage at the dude ranch."

"Well, I'm a lawyer," he says, "and I'm telling you that your scheme to get Pete away from here, far away, by airplane was a swell one. The only thing wrong was your timing. It's about four o'clock, and a lot of unpleasant things can happen between now and seven o'clock when that plane will be waiting."

"Never mind about that," I said. "A fellow can always get out of jail, but prime liquor like this is mighty seldom encountered. Hello, what's that car?"

A big car had turned the corner and was coming along, and drew in to the curb opposite, in front of Pete's house.

"That's Gloria's car," says Monte. "What's up?"

Gloria got out—we could see it was her as she cut across in front of the car's lights—and run up on the porch and begun hammering and ringing the bell. A window was thrown up and Minna leaned out and says what is all the noise about.

"It's me, darling," says Gloria. "It was just like I thought—that man's wife was a fake. He was no other than your Trimble relative. I woke up two of the ranch hands after I went into the cottage and made sure, and we've got him right here in the car. I've won the reward for him, haven't I?"

"You bet you have, my dear," sung out Minna. "Wait till I get a wrapper on and I'll be right down."

Monte poked me with his elbow.

"Your cousin is a gone coon," he says. "They'll serve them papers on him now."

"Like hell they will!" I told him, climbing out. "Pecos, pull your handkerchief up over your nose and come along."

I had the flashlight from the car in one hand and my gun in the other, and come up alongside that other car and flashed the light in it, and flashed it on my sheriff's badge so they could see it. Two men had Pete in there, sure enough.

"What's going on here?" I says.

"It's all right, sheriff," one of them told me.

"Like hell it is," I says. "You two guys

stay put. Pete, climb out quick. Let him go or I'll plug you, you durned galoots!"

I opened the door and Pete clumb out, gasping. Pecos grabbed him and hustled him over to my car, but Gloria came running down from the porch and let out a yell, and I stuck my foot out and she tripped over it and went rolling down underneath the car. The two gents started to come out at me, and I shot twice, and they tumbled back in a hurry. Then I shot one of the back tires.

The two inside hollered bloody murder and Gloria was screeching like an air-raid siren, and Minna came out and started to screech, and windows were flung up everywhere around and other women yipped for the police, so I went across the street quick and jumped into my car. Lew Simmons came along on the run and he squeezed in on top of everybody and I started the car. Just then Minna let fly with her scatter gun but we were out of range and she did no damage with it.

"Are you all right, Pete?" I sung out.

"Sure, only that danged woman woke me up out of a sound sleep and I left my whiskey bottle behind, the one with the stock in it," he says. "Gimme a drink! I'm dying!"

"We got to get your empty bottle and the other full ones," I says. "Pecos, this car is full of gas. You and Lew take it and light out for Sandoval City. When you get there, go to my house and stay put till I get home. Savvy? All right. What news, Lew?"

Lew says there is hell and repeat to pay at the hotel, and the sheriff is getting one posse to catch us if we try to get across the state line, and the town is being searched for us, and another posse is going out to the Lazy Q to get me if I go there and all in all Mesa Verde is not enjoying a quiet Sunday morning.

"Fine," I says. "Now, Monte, the law ain't after you—"

"I'm sticking with you like I promised," he broke in.

"All right, then. When we get to the dude ranch, you separate from us and go to bed and say you left the club before the trouble began. Nobody will know the difference. Your job is to see them two aviators and have them ready and waiting at seven o'clock, and no publicity about it neither. I told them I'd meet them at the plane at seven sharp, and paid them, and you see that they're ready. Suit you?"

"You can depend on me," he replied, like he was enjoying himself. "I'm going with you, too, because you'll sure as hell need a lawyer when you land in Oklahoma City, and I'm a good one."

"Fine," I said. "Pete, quit groaning. Pecos, take your elbow out of my ribs and put your ear close to my lips. I want to speak with you private."

Not that I distrusted anybody, but between Pete and Monte and Lew Simmons there might be a slip, and it was durned important that there should be no slip. We were going out of town fast, and I whispered and Pete says he knows the very place, and he has the keys of the ranch on him besides.

"Do you aim to stay there?" he asked.

"Yes," I says. "I am feeling my age, Pecos, and my sinus is coming on, and my poor cousin Pete is dying, and we are going to take a nice long rest and have a drink and let other folks worry a spell. So shut up."

He done it, and we all finished the bottle. There was only about a whisper each among so many of us, but it done us good. Pete was kind of sad to think about that black glass whiskey bottle under his pillow at the ranch, with his oil stock inside it. He says Gloria had come sneaking in with a flashlight and had woke him up, and when he cussed her she fetched in two of the hands and grabbed him. He was still in his woman's clothes, just the way I had put him to bed, but he claimed the corsets itched something terrible.

I made tracks for the ranch, and warned Monte to have the two student aviators all ready to light out at seven sharp on the minute. If Jim King or anyone got an inkling of the scheme they would stop it, or if they suspicioned Pete and I were around the place, that would sink us too.

Well, we got to the ranch. Everything was dark and deserted there; Jim King and the others had not got home yet and there was no sign of car lights on the road so we had plenty of time. Pete said why couldn't we go in the car like Pecos and Lew, but I explained to him that we would

get stopped sure, and we had to get clear out of the state before we could be safe. Lew and Pecos would get stopped, all right, but nobody would be looking for them.

I TOLD Monte the two aviators might be scared of compounding a felony by flying us off, but he laughed and said he knew them too well for that, so quit worrying. We piled out of the car without making any noise. Lew went off to get stuff that belonged to him and to Pecos. Monte shook hands and went to bed. Pecos came into the cottage with us and while Pete got the bottle with his oil stock, I got the other bottles with the liquor, and then we started off with Pecos, off around the back of the main building. He pointed out to us where the airplane was lying, maybe three—four hundred yards, in the open, then he opened up a big door and says this is it, and we could open or shut it from the inside.

"My gosh, what is it?" says Pete. "A morgue?"

"Not yet," Pecos told him, and showed our blankets he had fetched along. "It's the cold storage icebox for the meat and stuff. There's lots of room for you gents to stretch out and be comfortable. I've turned off the cold, and you can leave the door open as long as it's safe, so while you may find it chilly you won't freeze."

Pete was not much tickled but I was, because it was the one place on the ranch not a soul would look into. There was heaps of room, and an electric light. So Pecos shook hands and went off to meet Lew, and prettty soon I heard the car start up and knew they were gone.

"It's cold as hell in here," says Pete, burrowing into the blankets. I waited by the door until time to shut it, but I did not want Pete to die of a chill so I opened up the liquor. There was a bottle for each of us—the last of my hoard.

We sat and talked over the night's events, and I was pretty well satisfied with Joseph T. Trimble. I had folding money stuffed in every pocket and had given that crooked outfit something to remember me by. Except on Pete's account I could not be touched, once I got home, because those tinhorn crooks did not dare go to law outside their own county.

Pretty soon cars begun to arrive, which meant Jim King and his crowd had come and the posse looking for us, so I shut the big door and wound my watch and set it ready to hand, and started in to wait for seven o'clock to come.

We were closed out of the world and did not know what was going on outside.

It was cold, so danged cold that we just set there and chattered, and Pete says it was a hell of an idea. To keep from freezing, we used the liquor as medicine and for a while it worked fine, but finally we just got colder and colder and the liquor had no effect whatever and we begun to turn stiff.

I got Pete on his feet and we done a war-dance around the room until our circulation took the hint and come back to work, and then we had a drink, and Pete got to cussing me because the liquor had all leaked out of his bottle and he accused me of taking it. So I gave him some of mine, and both bottles were finished in no time. Then Pete remembered that his house had not burned down like I had told him, and he got real ornery about it and I had my hands full.

Six-thirty showed on the watch. I figured we must stay right here and not show a nose until three minutes of seven, then make a dash for it and get aboard the plane. Those were the slowest minutes I ever watched and waited for. We had the blankets wrapped around us but they did not help much. Finally we begun to turn stiff again, so we went to the big door and got it open just a crack, and it was daylight outside.

Also, there were some gents just outside, talking. Jim King was one.

"I tell you, that skunk Trimble is bound to be around here!" he says. "We'll look some more after we get breakfast."

"His car went through Mormon Wells before dawn," spoke up Sheriff Allbright, "but neither of the Trimbles was in it, so they didn't hold it. But I swore in that old Injun-face who called himself Twinells—swore him in legal as a deputy, and I doubt can you have the law after him or not."

"Law be durned!" spoke up Bull Hutchins. "We'll get hot lead after him if we can find him!"

I shut the door mighty gentle. Pete had heard too, and agreed it was bad medicine that the sheriff and his posse were still here. At ten to seven he started in to plead with

me to go ahead and damn the consequences, but I said no. It was a gamble that we would find the airplane ready at seven sharp, and we had to play the game.

"Make a bee line for the airplane when I open her up," I told him.

"I'm too danged stiff to move!" he says. "And I think my feet are froze."

"All right, jog around and warm up a mite."

We done it, while Pete hung on to his bottle and I watched the time. Two minutes to go, and my teeth were chattering. I told Pete to leg it for the plane and I would cover him in case of trouble. One minute passed, and finally the last one, and I took hold of the door and says to go, and swung her wide open.

And there was everybody having a barbecue breakfast.

Well, sir, all that saved us in that first minute was the surprise. Pete hoofed it and nobody knew who or what he was until he shed the blanket. I was right behind him and we got through them all and headed for the plane, and I could see she was warming up.

Then the gang let out a yell, and that made Pete run faster, but his corset come undone and began to flap around his legs, and finally dropped off.

SOMEBODY sent a bullet after us and it come close, and Pete got tangled in his skirts and took a header in the sand. He rolled over and shed the skirts and come up in his red flannels and put for the plane faster than a scared coyote. We had the whole crowd lined up after us, but had enough of a head start to make it, and I could see Monte in the open door of the plane, laughing fit to kill at sight of Pete in his red flannels hugging the whiskey bottle that was worth two million dollars.

There was some more shooting, and I hauled out my gun and whirled around, and you should have seen those gents scatter. But I had forgotten that the gun was empty, and the halt only lost me time, so I legged it again for all I was worth.

Pete had a start on me. I was about a hundred foot ahead of the first hombres of the pack. Their blazing away did not worry me because a running man cannot shoot for sour apples; I was losing ground, though, and the altitude sure had me puffing. Then Pete got to the plane and Monte leaned out the doorway and got him up and in, sprawling all over the place. And then I seen the airplane begin to move.

I hollered, and put on a sprint, and I just did make it. I had the blue staggers when Monte reached down and grabbed my hand. He hauled me in and slammed the door and I just lay there as the engine roared and the plane begun to scoot over the ground. I was puffing, but I was happy, you bet. We had skunked the whole crowd of them, we were off and up, and Pete's bacon was saved.

All of a sudden I heard a yell like a steam calliope. It drowned out even the noise of the engine, and woke me up. There was Pete, sitting up and gasping.

"My bottle!" he hollered. "My Scotch bottle! It's gone!"

"Oh, sure," Monte shouted. "It don't matter. It was empty and rolled out when you got in—"

Pete gave him one awful look, and collapsed; he just keeled over and lay quiet, and I thought he was dead until I seen his lungs working.

The bottle with the oil stock! Well, sir, it pretty near knocked me out too. I explained to Monte, and he just laughed.

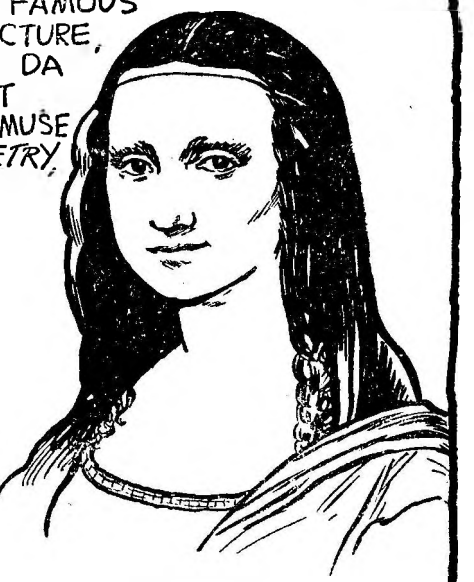
"I told you that you boys would need a lawyer when you got to Oklahoma City! Don't worry about the stock certificates. Pete didn't sign it over and it's not negotiable. The company will cancel it and issue another to Pete." With that, Monte hauled a flask out of his pocket. "Here," he went on, "take this and fetch him around; it's good stuff."

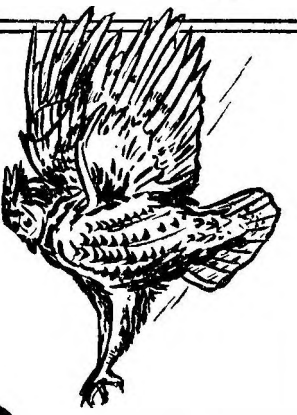
"If you think I will waste good stuff on an unconscious man," I says, "when there's a conscious man in terrible need of it, you're mistaken. When we get to Oklahoma City and we unload Pete in them red flannels of his, he's going to make a sensation."

He did, too, but everything come out all right. But I will never put any more confidence in what doctors tell me, you bet!

Curioddities By Weill

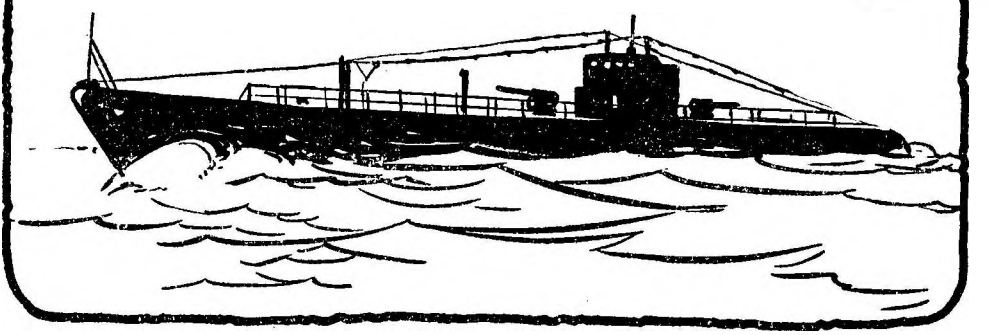
IN ORDER TO CAPTURE THE FAMOUS SMILE IN THE MONA LISA PICTURE, IT IS SAID THAT LEONARDO DA VINCI ENGAGED THE MOST TALENTED ENTERTAINERS TO AMUSE THE GIRL *WITH THEIR POETRY, SOFT MUSIC, AND WITTY CONVERSATION*!





OWLS MATE FOR **LIFE.** WHILE MOST MIGRATORY BIRDS SELECT NEW MATES *FOR EACH SEASON*!

BECAUSE OF THE NECESSITY TO CONSERVE AND RECHARGE THEIR BATTERIES, SUBMARINES SPEND MORE TIME ON THE SURFACE *THAN THEY DO* **SUBMERGED**!



DARK FACE

By THOMAS WALSH

CHAPTER I

THE SUMMONS

AFTER he had switched on the light in his living room Bill Tyler yawned, swung the outer door closed behind him, and tossed his hat and topcoat to the nearest chair. An hour past midnight, it was drowsily quiet in his apartment, with a bit of dark pinnacled skyline framed against his narrow living room windows, and only a slight humming murmur of sound rising from the city streets twelve stories below.

Bill Tyler felt only pleasantly weary through his big-framed body. Everything in the room looked much the same as usual, and even the messed up surface of his desk in one corner failed to warn him. As he passed he noticed it absently, with a lazy yawn. Not until he reached the unlit corridor that ran through to his bedroom and bath did he remember that the day before his housekeeper had cleaned it thoroughly, set everything in order; and when that thought came to him he stopped abruptly, turned, his eyes narrowed in a quick frown.

The steps in the corridor behind him were soft, very light. They were fast too—in the

The Summons . . . the Shadow of Fear . . . . the Face . . . Death on the Ledge . . . . . a White Flower Blooms

breath of time that he first heard them and started to swing about they had reached his back. Something hard and unyielding cracked into his skull, knocking him sideways against the open door of the bath. The blow, the sudden unexpectedness of it, dazed him for a brief moment—instinct more than thought dropped him to his knees so that the second blow missed his head and thudded into the door panel above him. In the shadowy corridor the squat figure of a man loomed up against the living room light, blotting it out. Then it came forward, grunting, and Bill Tyler flung himself at the man's knees.

They went down together, crashing to the floor. The man beat savagely at Bill Tyler's head as they rolled over—short arcs of a gun butt that weakened him, filled his mind with flaming red bursts of pain. But fighting close the other had no room for a finishing swing; they rolled into a wall, caromed from that with Bill Tyler on top.

A hundred and eighty pounds Bill Tyler was—and good bone and muscle, every ounce of it. He got a knee on the other's gun arm, holding it harmless, and drove his right fist against the chin. Swearing desperately in breathless gasps, the stocky man struggled under him, arching his neck to get his head free. In reflected light Bill saw the chin clear, unprotected, and drove for it with his body riding the blow.

The stocky man's struggling ceased; his

body stretched out limply. Moving free of him, on hands and knees, Bill wobbled a moment and then reached for the gun. Above him this time there was no step, no warning —or perhaps it was that in the confusion that filled his mind he could not hear it. A faint rush of wind, a rustle of motion—that was all. Bill did not even feel the blow. Dimly he felt himself sprawling forward—then blackness swirling up around him, deep, dark, almost solid.

Presently in the blackness there was a faint mutter of voices. They didn't seem to matter a great deal; they just went on and on, low toned, wordless. One of them was cold and hard; the other, muttering an answer, seemed to cringe under it. But it wasn't until long afterwards that those distinctions came to Bill; now he lay deep in the blackness, with an odd inability to move over all his body. Even the effort needed to listen to the voices, to understand their words, was too great.

And then the voices stopped. For a long while there was silence. Slowly, out of the darkness, came a great pain that hammered at his skull. That was the thing that brought him around finally—that and the light from the living room that stabbed like raw fire at his exposed eyeballs when he raised the lids.

Holding to the door, he hauled himself to his knees, his feet, and moved groggily down the passage. The living room was deserted and quiet, with the lights still on and the outer door closed—all as he had left it some indeterminate time ago. It was all so quiet that Bill Tyler wondered groggily if he had been dreaming. Then the pain in his head flowed back in a merciless wave. He winced, staggered back into the passage.

In the bathroom he filled the basin with cold water and soaked his head in it. There was a nasty lump at the base of his skull, a smaller one over his ear, with streaks of blood caked on the broken skin. Shakily he poured himself some water and swallowed two aspirins, then went into his bedroom for a clean handkerchief to apply to the cut.

The lights snapped on to a room littered by clothes—shirts, socks, shorts, ties. Bureau drawers spewed linen crazily over their edges. The closet door was open and suits, overcoats, hats were flung carelessly over the bed. Even the small night table had been rifled. Books and magazines were dumped on the floor; a few personal letters he had kept in the drawer were spread out under the lamp.

Bill stared at the mess, achingly trying to think. Sneak thieves, of course—he should call the doorman downstairs, let him know. Then he glanced at his watch, and saw that it was twenty minutes to two. Half an hour then, or more, that he'd been out. Cold Voice and his partner would be well away from the building now.

IN THE living room, apart from the desk, nothing apparently had been touched. And nothing, so far as he could see, had been taken. The whole place had been ransacked thoroughly and completely—clothes, papers, books. The lock on his desk drawer had been broken, the wood around it scarred by the pressure of some hard-edged instrument, and atop the desk, in a litter of papers, he found thirty dollars in small bills—a sum he had kept aside in the drawer to meet some bills.

Bill scowled at them. He didn't know much about the habits of sneak thieves; but surely, when they came across ready cash, they'd put it in their pockets. They could have been frightened off by his entrance, panic stricken—but that cold, incisive voice hadn't seemed one that was likely to get panicky. What had they—?

Almost absently he opened a square leather box before him. And then he saw that one thing was gone—the yellow oblong of the telegram he had received that evening, and that he had tossed into the box after reading, was no longer there.

It hadn't been a very long telegram; Bill could remember it word for word. "Imperative see you Saturday," it had read. "Drive up carefully, prepared stay week. Expect you early afternoon."

It had been signed Harley Kevinlow. At six o'clock, when he had received it, Bill had been puzzled. That "carefully" sounded strange coming from a man who looked on sixty-five miles an hour as an ordinary driving speed. Bill had smiled about it then; now he frowned. Carefully —had it another meaning? Had his uncle, Harley Kevinlow, meant something different, meant perhaps the thugs who had

knocked him out and rifled his apartment?

That seemed to Bill Tyler very likely. Harley Kevinlow was not an eccentric man; he must have had good reasons for warning him. What they could be, Bill Tyler had no idea, but sitting at the desk now, frowning at the empty box, he cast back in his mind for something to go on.

He wasn't very successful. There had been nothing startling in Harley Kevinlow's life, so far as he knew—most of it, indeed, had been spent in the quiet atmosphere of a leading Eastern institute of technology. A professor, Harley Kevinlow—but hardly the conventional and burlesqued professor. Big-bodied, with piercing gray eyes and a firm jaw, he had resigned his professorship to do research work of his own choosing, in his secluded Connecticut home. For a year now he had buried himself there, never visiting the city. And now suddenly a summons and a warning—Bill's apartment ransacked, himself attacked. Was there a thread from one thing to the other?

At any rate, the telegram was Vaguely it suggested a link. But why? Bill could find no answer. For the first time in months he made sure his front door was locked, and afterward, in bed, the questions continued to plague him. Much later he dropped into a fitful slumber, plagued by uncomfortably vivid dreams—swinging guns, soft steps behind him, and a cold, hard voice that rang menacingly through it all.

Saturday was a gray day, raw with rain. Bill slept late, had lunch in a corner cafeteria, and started off in his small coupé shortly after one. The Post Road swarmed with traffic; lines of trucks lumbered along, hogging the road, and pleasure cars darted precariously in and out. Bill did not try particularly to make time; it was late afternoon before he got through New Haven and bore off to his right, to narrower roads that brought him through low, wooded hills with occasional distant glimpses of the shore hidden between them.

Just before six he swung off the state highway to a dirt road, pushed slowly along that for five miles, and came at last around the base of a low hill to a curved arc of driveway sliced in through a thick, tall line of hedge. The house in back was long, white, three-storied, with lights from some windows on the ground floor glittering comfortably out through the evening mist.

A tall young man, slender and bony-faced with thick shell spectacles and a precise little mustache, answered his ring. He blinked, said, "Mr. Tyler," and shook hands.

"Very good of you to come. Professor Kevinlow has been most anxious to see you. He's asked several times already if you had arrived."

"Got up soon as I could," Bill said cheerfully. "And what's all the shooting about? What's up, Victor?"

Conrad Victor, his uncle's assistant, smiled wanly. He had, Bill knew, been with Harley Kevinlow for two years; but the stiffness of the man, his stilted, formal speech, had always roused in Bill a faint feeling of dislike.

Now Conrad Victor merely spread his hands.

"Professor Kevinlow," he said, "will have to tell you about that. I'm afraid I know nothing concerning it."

"Check," Bill murmured.

HE HUNG up his coat and hat, and crossed the entrance hall. In the long, brightly lit drawing room a man rose as he entered. Short, broad, with the purplish red face of the confirmed alcoholic, and the heavy dulled features of a man who had made idleness his profession all his life, Darwin Kevinlow resembled his brother Harley neither in body nor character.

He bustled forward now, hands outstretched.

"My boy," he said, beaming. "Glad to see you. Have a bad time driving in this confounded weather?"

"It wasn't always fun," Bill admitted. He

looked curiously at the girl Darwin Kevinlow had left on the couch—young, slim, with ash-blond hair and clear, soft hazel eyes. "I left New York about one."

"Fine time," Darwin Kevinlow said heartily. "Oh—this is Miss Eastman, Bill. Miss Joan Eastman—Professor Eastman's daughter."

Rising, she gave Bill a cool hand, a warm smile. From a chair at the far side of the fire another man rose—a tall, dapper young man, with amused blue eyes and crisply curled light hair. Darwin Kevinlow introduced him as Nicky Montane. "A friend of Harley's," he explained.

"Honored," the dapper man drawled. "Heard a lot about you, old chap. Been waiting to meet you."

BILL TYLER shook his hand briefly, murmured something, and turned as two other people entered the room. Mrs. Harley Kevinlow, his aunt Sylvia, was a plump, motherly person. She hurried across the room and kissed him on the cheek.

"Harley has been asking about you all day," she began, "though goodness knows what he wants to see you about. I don't know—Harley's keeping it a deep, dark secret. He hasn't even taken Mr. Carrol into his confidence."

"Hard to believe," Archibald Carrol rumbled, "but a fact. A fact, boy. That uncle of yours is getting secretive in his old age."

He was a small and excessively plump little man, with full fat cheeks that slitted up in folds of flesh under his merry eyes whenever he smiled. Furthermore he was Harley Kevinlow's legal adviser, and as he remembered that a faint uneasy prickling crossed Bill's mind. Unusual for Carrol to be here, unless it was something important.

But Harley Kevinlow himself did not put in an appearance. Stuffed up, as his wife said pettishly, in his old study with Professor Eastman, he had not been downstairs all afternoon, though once or twice he had come to the head of the stairs to bellow questions about Bill's arrival.

When the first greetings were over, Bill went up to his room—the one he was always given on his visits. It was a pleasant chamber, looking out over rolling pasture and heavily wooded hills; but now the swift October dark covered the valley, and rain pattered dispiritedly up against the panes.

Bill washed up, probed the bumps on his head with tender fingers, and combed his hair carefully over it, thankful that the bruise was not very noticeable. Aunt Sylvia would worry if she knew—insist on poultices and antiseptics and yards and yards of bandage, even though it bothered Bill no more now than a faint throbbing when he moved his head too sharply.

In ten minutes he was back in the hall, and Aunt Sylvia was halfway up to him, puffing as he climbed the stairs.

"That man," she said, shaking her head. "He promised to be down by six to prepare for dinner but of course he's forgotten all about it. I'll have to rouse him and Professor Eastman."

"I'll do that for you," Bill offered. "Save you the stairs, Aunt Sylvia."

She paused sighing. "Very kind of you, William. Don't you get interested in what they're doing and stay up there with them. Dinner will be ready in ten minutes; don't make me go up after you, either."

Bill grinned, waved at her, and stepped lightly up the second flight of stairs. Rapping his knuckles sharply on a door left of the third landing, he twisted the knob and went in.

The study was a long room, lined with books, a work table in one corner and a massive desk in the center. The ceiling cluster of lights were on, bathing the chamber in intense illumination.

It was Harley Kevinlow's study, but Harley Kevinlow was not in the room. There was a man sitting in a chair to the right of the desk—a thin, dark-haired man, with a sharp, earnest face, and wide open dark eyes. He did not speak to Bill Tyler and he did not rise, but his eyes were fixed steadily on Bill's face. Too steadily, too glazed and empty—even in the first moment that Bill stopped short inside the door he seemed to realize that the man was dead.

II

THE FACE

MECHANICALLY, without thinking, Bill closed the door softly after him. For an instant he remained rigid against it,

gripping the knob tightly with clenched hands, and staring at the white, motionless face. It was very quiet in the room, and it seemed somehow that he must not disturb that quiet, he must not move.

The dead face, the dead eyes, were fixed blankly on him, with the dreadful, aloof incuriosity that nothing in life can give. The head was supported by the chair back, and the hands were clasped loosely in the lap. The thin features were quiet and without distortion, almost placid; there were no signs of struggle, or of the stark fear a man might feel in seeing death reach out for him.

Bill crossed the rug very quietly. Touching the forehead with one finger he found that an odd, chill warmth still lingered there, and almost involuntarily he recoiled. This would be Professor Eastman; but where was Harley Kevinlow, who had been with him all afternoon, who must have been the last one to see him alive?

The study was long and narrow, with only one closet. Bill opened that and looked in without really thinking, because it was the first impulse that crossed his mind.

The closet contained a smoking jacket, a few miscellaneous oddments of clothes—nothing else. The space behind the desk was empty, and in the room there was no other piece of furniture bulky enough for a man to hide behind—or to be hidden by. Harley Kevinlow was not in the room. Certain of that, Bill Tyler stood before the desk, trying to quiet the thick pounding of his heart, while the dead man stared at the door, coldly unmoved.

There was something dreadful here—something hard and solid congealing around his heart. Professor Eastman was dead, and Harley Kevinlow was not here. But wouldn't he have gone for help? Thinking of that, relieved momentarily by it, Bill Tyler drew a deep breath.

Not wanting to cry out, to disturb the girl perhaps, he had no doubt gone quietly downstairs for medicine. But if he had, why hadn't he met Bill on the stairs? There was a back stairway, but why should Harley Kevinlow use that? Why unless—

His thoughts stopped abruptly there. By the side of the desk there was a small typewriter stand, with the oilcloth hood that ordinarily covered it heaped on the floor at one side. In the metal roller a sheet of paper hung jaggedly by one edge, as if someone had tugged hurriedly at it and then released it before the sheet came free.

Crossing to it, Bill yanked the paper off. For a small space down writing covered it, single-spaced lines inked unevenly, as if the typing had been done hastily and without correction. It began simply, without any heading:

"Poor Eastman had a heart attack—he died before I could help him. I must return to the city at once, to make arrangements. Spare Joan as much as possible. I will return as quicky as I can—surely by midnight. Do not worry. H. K."

Bill ran his eyes over it hastily, read it again, slower, and frowning. Arrangements—what had that meant? Why had he gone away without telling anyone, just leaving the body there to be discovered by the first one that came? It would have been kinder to the girl surely to-

There were three taps on the door. As he swung around the knob twisted gently, the door drew back. Joan Eastman came in.

"Oh." Her eyes fixed on Bill first. "I'm sorry—I didn't know. I thought father—"

She saw her father then, and the color drained from her face. With a small terrified cry she ran forward and threw herself on her knees before him.

"Father—what is it? You're—you're not—"

She became very still, staring up at the fixed brooding eyes.

Gently Bill touched her shouder.

"I'm afraid there's nothing we can do for him now," he said.

Supper was a subdued meal, even for the normally exuberant Archibald Car-

rol. No one spoke very much, and Bill sat long over his coffee, stirring it absently, and thinking of his uncle's note.

Harley Kevinlow was not an eccentric man. Then why had he acted in such queer fashion? He had evidently gone down the back stairs and out through the kitchen, though no one had seen him leave. His roadster was gone from the garage, and Darwin Kevinlow recollected vaguely that he had heard a car motor sometime around half-past five. He had paid no attention to it, taking it for the woman cook, the one servant, going to market for something she had forgotten.

It was all jumbled, almost fantastic. There wasn't any need for secrecy. Harley Kevinlow could have come down and told them what had happened, made arrangements by phone. Why hadn't he?

A sense of something else, something sinister and hidden, plagued Bill Tyler. Carefully, Harley Kevinlow had warned him —again why? The questions kept pricking restlessly at his mind, and when the somber meal ended he sat down on the couch, beside Joan Eastman.

Grief shadowed her eyes, showed tremulous in the lines of her mouth. Her slender white fingers were clasped together in her lap, the knuckles showing paper white with the effort she made to control them while she leaned tiredly back against the couch, her eyes half closed, her face white and tensed.

"Close me up if you want to," Bill began gravely. "I know I shouldn't ask you questions at a time like this. But I'm worried about my uncle, about why he went off like that. And I thought you might be able to tell me why your father came here. There's—I don't know—" He scratched his head helplessly. "There's something else around us here. I feel it. Something—well, dangerous.

The delicate lines along her jaw tensed. Half turning to him she breathed, "You feel that, too? I thought it was because—because of father. I've sensed that danger ever since I came. I've been afraid. But I knew father—" Her voice broke. Tears glistened under her lids.

Bill nodded gently. After a moment he asked, "Did your father suffer from heart trouble?"

"No. That's the odd part." Her voice came low, in a husky whisper. "That's why I think—"

Bill's lips tightened. The unspoken thought was in both of their minds. Murder! Having that feeling, half ashamed of it, believing it nerves, he had not suggested it to anyone before. If it was murder, and Harley Kevinlow gone away—well, there was only one conclusion to be drawn.

Bill didn't accept that conclusion. It was too obvious—a signpost pointing the way, but a signpost turned the wrong direction perhaps. He knew Harley Kevinlow; he knew, too, that if Professor Eastman had been killed, Harley Kevinlow had not killed him.

The girl's lips quivered as she stared blindly at the wall.

"Father was always in good health. He wasn't robust; but he'd never been ill so long as I can remember. That's why it seems so—"

"I know," Bill said quietly. "But don't think about that part for a while. Why was your father here?"

Her voice steadied a little under the sympathy in his tone.

"He was collaborating with your uncle," she told him. "They met at college years ago—they'd always been interested in the same things. And father had been working on some new ray machine—dark light, the papers called it. He wrote to your uncle and interested him in its development. They were trying to complete it together. I don't really know what it was—some kind of invisible light, I think, if that doesn't sound foolish."

THERE was a faint sound behind them. Bill turned and saw Nicky Montane standing there, a glass in his hand, a bright, cheerful smile on his face.

"Mrs. Kevinlow ordered me to fix this up for you," he said to the girl. "Help you to sleep, you know. Best thing in the world."

"But I don't—"

"Now, now." Nicky Montane raised a cheerfully admonishing finger. "It won't be so hard, old girl. And it will make you feel heaps better in the morning."

Over her protests he handed her the glass, watched her with quizzical eyebrows while she drank. Bill's dislike for the man

increased; he realized suddenly that Nicky Montane might have been standing there all the time he had been questioning the girl. And no one really knew much about the dapper man—not even Aunt Sylvia; he had arrived three days ago, and Harley Kevinlow had introduced him as a friend. Where they had met and how, Mrs. Kevinlow did not know. But earlier in the evening she had told Bill that she had never seen Montane before, never heard her husband mention him.

All that passed through his mind as Joan Eastman put the glass to her lips. It deepened the faint frown etched between his brows.

"There," Nicky Montane said cheerfully, when she had finished. "Wasn't poison, was it? Make you sleep like a top."

Later that action was to return to Bill's mind vividly. But now he scarcely noticed it, his thoughts absorbed elsewhere. Poison! Montane said it lightly, but upstairs there was a man who had died suddenly from a heart affliction that had never bothered him before. Weren't there poisons that could kill that way—swiftly, painlessly? Poisons that were safe from detection unless an autopsy was performed?

Wandering around the room, Conrad Victor took a cigarette from a table box and lit it, then crossed to a window and looked moodily out. Inwardly absorbed, Bill watched his back, saw it stiffen. But it wasn't until Victor cried out in a shocked, incredulous voice that his mind gave any meaning to the movement.

"Good God!" Victor cried. He was staring through the window, an arm tense on each side. "Come here Mr. Tyler—quickly!"

Bill reached him first, a step ahead of Montane. For an instant, through the rain-spattered mistiness of the glass, he could distinguish nothing but the outer blackness; then he pressed closer, following the other's stricken gaze.

He saw the thing then—something so incredibe that his first reaction was to blink. And yet after he had blinked and looked again it was still there, a thing of shadow etched clearly against the overpowering blackness of the night.

What he saw was a face set in darkness against the black mass of the pines—a brooding, sadistic visage with upturned brows, blank, malevolent eyes, a thin mouth; a gigantic and unbelievable face, an expression of merciless cruelty and hate over all the features that seemed made of darkness, drawn from it, shaped and formed there by some awful power. It glared at them from the darkness, unrelieved by the slightest paling of illumination, and yet vividly, horribly, unaccountably clear.

The others crowded past him. He heard Joan Eastman's soft cry, Archibald Carrol's bewildered and profane exclamation. Then as they watched, the face was gone in a moment, vanished into nothing—Bill Tyler found himself staring out at the pine trees, the rain, the darkness.

"Good Lord!" Archibald Carrol breathed. "It—it— What was it?"

Joan Eastman's face was distorted with horror. She cried, "I know—I know. It's the thing that killed my father!"

Her body wavered in a sudden convulsive shudder. Even as Bill Tyler jumped forward to grasp her, she sagged limply to the floor

III

DEATH ON THE LEDGE

AN HOUR later, in the large room downstairs, the five men sat quietly about. Mrs. Kevinlow had taken Joan upstairs to bed, and with their going silence had descended on the group left behind. Nicky Montane seemed contented enough; with cigarettes and a bottle of scotch at his elbow, he hummed softly over a game of solitaire. Next to him, staring worriedly into the open fire, sat Darwin Kevinlow, while Conrad Victor moved uneasily about the room, smoking incessant cigarettes, and glancing frequently at his watch.

At the table in the center of the room Archibald Carrol wound up a small mechanical insect and chuckled as it ran around before him. Once, when Conrad Victor settled restlessly on the edge of the table, Carrol invited him to smell the flower in his buttonhole, and as that solemn young man bent to comply a stream of water shot outward from the flower to his face. Archibald Carrol was that queer type of adult child who had never outgrown a fondness for practical jokes.

Angrily Victor got up and moved away, wiping his cheeks with a handkerchief. Bill controlled the faint smile on his face and broke the silence.

"What do you think the girl meant when she said that the thing we saw killed her father?" he asked Carrol. "Was it only hysteria?"

Puttering over his insect, Carrol answered without turning his head.

"Mostly that, of course. The Eastmans are an old family in these parts—the natives talk a good deal about them. I summered with your uncle a couple of years ago and got part of the story. Absurd, naturally—the whole thing follows strictly fictional lines. The original Eastman, the one who founded the family fortune long ago, is supposed to have been a sailor who violated an Indian temple and took some jewels from it. Vengeance and sudden death has visited every generation of the family since—or so the story went. Childish, of course—I never paid much attention to it."

Darwin Kevinlow turned from the fire, licking his lips uneasily.

"But damn the thing—we saw it! All of us! It couldn't—"

He lifted a glass of liquor to his lips with a hand that trembled slightly.

Archibald Carrol shrugged his plump shoulders. "A cloud formation, I think, that threw a peculiar shadow down. We were all pretty nervous. All we needed was a suggestion to work on."

"It is," Darwin Kevinlow said harshly, "a beautiful night for the moon to throw down shadows. Wonderfully clear, Carrol." He indicated the rain-drenched outdoors with one hand.

For a moment irritation showed in Carrol's eyes—that and a touch of uneasiness.

"It's my explanation," he said curtly. "The moon could have broken through the clouds for a moment. If it doesn't satisfy you, I'm afraid you'll have to find your own."

NICKY MONTANE put his hands to his head and waggled them. "Don't forget the bogey man, old chap. Careless of us to forget him, what?"

He chuckled in his asinine fashion and looked at Bill as if he expected applause.

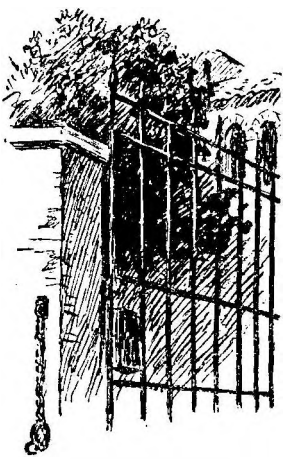
"You've had a long trip, Mr. Tyler," he went on. "A capital idea for you to get some rest, don't you think? Carrol and I can wait here for Mr. Kevinlow. We'll let you know the moment he comes."

Bill hesitated a moment, then shrugged. The company of the others had begun to irritate him, and though he had no intention of going to bed, the suggestion of Montane seemed a way to rid him of the rest.

"Do that," he said. "You know my room."

With a nod he went out to the hall and upstairs, and in his room he took a revolver and a leather windbreaker from his bag. For a while he sat in darkness, listening and smoking. Presently the heavy tread of Darwin Kevinlow ascended the stairs, followed shortly by lighter steps that were presumably those of Conrad Victor. Bill waited a half hour more; then he rose noiselessly from his chair and crossed to the door.

SOMEWHERE around on the other side of the house a wooden shutter banged monotonously in the grip of the wind, but that was the only sound that broke the quiet. After a moment, cautiously, he opened his



door and slipped out to the corridor, where a night light at the head of the stairs threw faint light through the shadows.

The bedroom doors were closed; the corridor was quiet, and nothing moved in the dimness. At the stairhead, Bill hesitated a moment. Looking around the house might not turn up anything particularly useful; but there was a faint chance that it might. At any rate, it could not hurt. The attack on

him last night, his uncle's warning, and the death of Eastman, the face — all these seemed connected in some sinister and as yet unexplained fashion. None of them rang true. Somehow there was a link, a clue—there must be. And he would never find that if he waited for it to come to him.

Softly he went down the steps to the lower hall, and paused at the archway that led to the living room. Inside the lamp was still lit, the table with the cards still up, and on the couch, an overcoat thrown over him, Archibald Carrol snored comfortably. There was only one thing changed in the room since he had last seen it—Nicky Montane's chair was empty now.

That worried Bill Tyler. He stood in the hall, frowning at it, wondering if Montane had grown weary of his game and gone to bed. There was no other sound but the faint whine of the wind, the patter of rain on the glass. Then, from the back of the house there was a sound, low, muffled—a scuffle of noise that died in the moment that it reached his ears. He moved down the hall, passed through a doorway at the end that gave on to a shorter corridor and the kitchen.

In the shadows there he stopped, fingers gripped about the butt of his revolver. The noise he heard might have been anything—the creaking of a board, the sound a door would make when it was opened cautiously. Though dim, enough light filtered through from the hall beyond to show him that the kitchen was empty, and after a tense wait he crossed to the far wall, struck a match at the door. Part of the wooden floor before him was darkened with moisture, and in the center of that spot he saw the blurred impression of a man's foot, with the toes pointing outward.

He drew his breath in sharply. The door had been open—and long enough to admit a brief spurt of rain. Someone had left the house, quietly, stealthily; and that someone must have been Nicky Montane.

Pulling the jacket close about his neck, he went out to the stoop. Rain lashed fiercely at him from the wind swept darkness as he stepped down to the ground. Nicky Montane had gone.

Where? Why?

Bent close to the house, shielding a match in Bill's cupped hands the tiny flare revealed footprints impressed deeply in the rain-softened earth. They headed left, around the house, and after fanning out the match he moved ahead quickly.

THE full force of the wind met him at the corner of the house, driving stinging jets of rain into his face. Lids narrowed against it, his eyes flicked over the darkness of the field beyond, picked out a vague moving bulk against the black loom of the earth. It moved very slowly, and as slowly Bill followed it across the open meadow, to the grove of stunted fir trees at the edge of a bluff that led precipitately downward to the shore.

As a child, Bill had played there often. He remembered a path through the grove, and found it after groping blindly for a while through the thickly placed trees. He no longer saw the vague form or heard the footsteps, and the deep boom of the surf far below, the snarling surge of the wind, made the sounds of his own progress unimportant.

The grove wasn't very deep—ten paces across, no more. Suddenly he was free, on the open edge of the bluff, and nothing moved before him. After an instant of puzzlement he bore down to his left, searching for a path that led downward over the lip of the cliff. Forbidden territory as a child, he had nonetheless descended it often; and in a moment he saw the twin rocks that guarded its beginning.

It was steep but fairly wide, smoothing out under an outthrust of rock that screened it from above. Far under him tumbling waters, capped with white, rolled confusedly about; long gray rollers thundered and boomed, loudened and then lessened in the uneven roar of the wind. Cautiously he moved downward, digging his heels firmly into the soft earth. Montane had passed the grove of trees, came out to the bluff; there was no other way off from that save the path Bill was on.

So he forged ahead, eyes strained into the darkness, body flattened against the cliff face to escape the fierce thrusting of the wind. Twenty feet down the path widened out to a rocky ledge, screened from above by the same outcropping of rock that hid the path. On the ledge, slightly to his right and seemingly cut out of the solid rock, there

was an opening six feet in diameter, slightly higher. It led, Bill knew, into a small cave; he moved for that dark hole now, dropping his hand to his revolver pocket. In the opening he paused, peering inward to intense blackness; and then before he could bring his revolver up a man sprang out of that blackness in a vicious rush, the butt of the gun in his hand swinging down at Bill Tyler's head. Instinctively he ducked, threw his body forward, into the other.

They crashed to the earth, rolled over with Bill Tyler below. Desperately he swung his left for the other's head, then flung the body sideways and rolled over on to it. They struggled up to their knees, their feet, and fell again to the hard rock that rimmed the ledge.

From his shoulders up, Bill Tyler felt only emptiness beneath him. In a vivid flash, as they fought savagely chest to chest, he saw the white-capped rollers far below, the knife edge of serrated rocks that would tear a falling body to pieces. Fighting to squirm backwards he got his shoulders on the rocky edge, drove his right hand up in a blow that had all the power of his body behind it.

He missed as the other ducked, and against the sullen dark sky an arm flashed down across his line of vision, smashing into his shoulder. Strength washed from him in a sickening wave; very slowly he felt his body teeter outward as he grabbed frantically at the wet rock.

But his fingers found no purchase; faster his body plunged downward. Sky and water revolved wildly around him, and for a last brief second his knees caught the sharp edge of rock. Then they too slipped on the rain-polished stone, and head first Bill Tyler slid down over the rim of the path.

IV

THE SHADOW OF FEAR

IN THE whine of the wind his own cry seemed soundless, whipped away from his lips in the moment that it started. His hands caught a bush, tore it free, and he plunged down again, the momentary slackening soon lost. He seemed to fall for hours, for years, his body bouncing over the rough wall of rock; and then his body crashed into something firm, something solid, that checked his fall as it drew breath from his body.

For a moment he lay stunned, staring up at the black sky. Then the thing beneath him trembled, wavered, and his outflung hands dug into a crevice in the rock. Softly the firm thing fell away from his back; ages afterward, over the thunderous boom of the surf, there came a deeper crash.

The cliff wall was rough, pitted with holes and hard outcroppings of stone. Clinging desperately to his crevice, Bill found purchase for his feet, and eased the strain on his arms. The wind battered at him, and rain soaked his body; the left part of him, from the shoulder down, seemed to have no feeling.

Spreadeagled against the cliff, he ventured a glance upward. The rim of the ledge tipped slightly out over him, but the thing that surprised him most was that it was only some twelve feet above, though his fall had seemed to carry him a hundred.

The crevice he held extended upward. Inch by inch he shifted his grip, found new holes for his feet. Once a burst of wind seemed to shake the very cliff under him, and he held still with his fingers dug into the stone until they ached. In the bitter cold perspiration came out on his body; each time he looked upward at the ledge it seemed no nearer than before.

Grimly he kept on, testing each hold before trusting his weight to it. The crevice ran on, under the ledge and around it, to where a shallow cut led upward to the path. Ages passed; the muscles of his arms and legs seemed to shriek in torment. And then he reached the cut, and with a last surge of strength swung himself over to the ledge.

Exhaustion toppled him forward, flat on the path. His whole body seemed to jump and quiver as one great nerve, without enough strength in it to waggle one finger. He lay there, drawing deep breaths, feeling his insides light and empty, for ten minutes. Then he wobbled to his feet and steadied himself against the wall of rock. More hours seemed to pass before he dared trust himself to the comparative easy ascent of the path.

But up on the meadow the wind seemed to whip the heavy miasma from his bones. He pushed ahead faster, and entered the house by the kitchen door. That was

dark, but the lamp in the living room was still on, and Nicky Montane, in bathrobe and vivid yellow pajamas, was whistling softly over his cards. Behind him Carrol snored on the couch.

"Hullo," Nicky Montane said, putting down his cards and looking surprised. "You've been out in this weather?"

Bill Tyler said tightly, "I was. Someone else was too."

"Crazy people," Nicky Montane grinned. "You'd better have a drink."

The smooth pink features of the other man were unmarked, his hair neatly combed. He was still grinning when Bill moved away for the stairs.

But when he reached the upper landing Bill Tyler did not head for his own room. He crossed the corridor and walked up to the other end, opened the door of Montane's room without particular caution. Anger beat hot in Bill Tyler, and he didn't care very much whether or not the other heard him. Inside he switched on a small dresser lamp and moved to the closet.

Three suits were hung neatly on the crossbar, and the one in the middle had its creases blunted and thickened, its material sopped damply by rain. Bill Tyler's lips tightened to a dangerous white line. This settled any doubt. It had been Nicky Montane who left the house; and it had been Montane who knocked him over the ledge.

Reaching out to the lamp he clicked it off, and stood for a while in darkness, the pulses hammering in his head. This was something that Montane couldn't grin his way out of. Harley Kevinlow was gone, and somehow Bill Tyler knew that he would not return by midnight. If Nicky Montane knew the answer to that—

Anger drew him out of his momentary absorption, and started him ahead for the door.

In the dark room the thin line of light that shone under it from the hall gave him the way, and he had almost reached it when it widened quickly, was blocked out by a heavy shadow, and closed again to the narrow line.

Bill stopped. A board creaked before him—there was a rustle of movement, a sigh of indrawn breath.

Something effortfully silent in the approach told him that it was not Montane. He moved to the left, trying to reach the wall and the light switch, slipping his revolver from his pocket; but as he moved his knee struck a chair, and at the rasp of sound someone snarled, moved hurriedly.

REACHING his hand out, Bill touched a shoulder that whirled under his fingers like a cat's, twisted away with a savage oath. In the darkness a gun spat orange flares, filling the room with a pandemonium of sound. Hot wind creased Bill Tyler's cheek, and somewhere behind him glass tinkled. He fired at the stabs of light, holding his own gun breast high. In the reechoing washback of sound there was a dry cough, twice repeated—a heavy thud and the cough again, choked, incessant, horribly liquid. Bill Tyler backed to the wall, groping with his free hand until he found the light switch.

A man was lying on the floor at the foot of the bed, on his face his outstretched hands gripping the rug convulsively. Bill turned him over and saw a dark swarthy face, black eyes that looked up at him distorted with pain and hate. He was breathing in an unsteady gurgle of sound, and as Bill raised his head foamy specks of red appeared on his lips.

Steps pounded in the hall; in a moment the door was thrown back. Conrad Victor peered in, and over his shoulder Darwin Kevinlow's congested face showed pale and twitching.

"What happened?" he cried. "What is it, Bill?"

Victor remained by the door, his gaze rooted on the wounded man.

"I caught him in here and he fired at me," Bill panted. "I had to shoot him. Take his feet, Victor. Let's get him on the bed."

Together they lifted the swarthy man as Nicky Montane pushed through the doorway. Breathless and befuddled with sleep, Carrol glared wildly behind him.

"Who is it? What—"

Nobody answered him. Montane's eyes had lost their humor, their brightly amused, foppish glitter. Compact and small, they swept in a hard arc from the wounded man to Bill Tyler.

The rest of them clustered by the door while he loosened the man's collar. He heard his aunt's trembling voice, her soft cry, but he did not turn, and then somehow

Nicky Montane, persuasive and soothing, but with the hardness still in his eyes, had herded them out to the corridor and closed the door.

"Dying," he said curtly, after Bill bared the wounds in the dark man's chest. "Nothing we can do for him. What happened?"

Bill told him jerkily, over his shoulder.

"You were already in my room?"

Straightening, Bill's mouth was grim.

"I was. I came in to see if your clothes were wet. One suit was soaked with rain."

"Yes?" Nicky Montane considered him thoughtfully. "I wanted to tell you about that, Tyler. It—"

Then he stopped, turned to the bed. The horrible, choked respiration had stopped; it did not start again.

Bill Tyler went out to the hall and downstairs to the living room. As he entered Carrol rose nervously from the couch.

"He's—he's dead?"

At Bill's slow nod he sank back.

"Terrible," he whispered. "Who was he? Why— Did you find out anything about him?"

Bill Shrugged. "Montane might tell you that. I found the man in his room."

Something was troubling him vaguely—a small worry he could not put his finger on. He looked slowly around the room, frowning. Mrs. Kevinlow was sitting by the table, and as he saw her the fear became dreadfully clear.

"Miss Eastman," he said. "Where is she, Aunt Sylvia? She must have heard the shots. Why didn't she come?"

"Joan?" The old lady looked bewilderedly about. "I'd left her in her room—she'd gone to sleep. I didn't notice—"

But Bill did not wait to hear her out. He ran to the hall and pounded upstairs to the girl's room. The door was closed, though unlocked, and he raced in switching on the lights, seeing in his first glance that the bed was empty, and dishevelled, the covers half turned back. Joan Eastman was gone.

V

THE STRANGER

FIVE minutes later Nicky Montane opened the door of Bill's room, stepped in without waiting to be asked. His face was hard and chiselled; and as he saw Bill bring up the zipper of his windbreaker and putting an old brown felt on his head he shook his head slowly.

"No good, Tyler," he said. "You won't find the girl." He perched himself on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette. "I've a notion we should get together; we're both on the same side of the fence. You followed me from the house before, and I fought you on the ledge because I didn't know who you were. That's the truth."

His eyes were grave and earnest. As Bill stopped hesitantly he went on.

"The girl is safe. She's in the cave on the ledge—I took her there. It's safer for her than this house would be—take my word for that. When I came out and saw you there I thought you were one of them. It was dark and I couldn't see you well enough to make you out. Have a cigarette."

Bill took one, staring at him with a faint frown.

"This all seems screwy," he said slowly. "Did the girl go with you of her own will?"

Nicky Montane gave a wry shrug. "She might have. Only—that drink I gave her before was drugged. I couldn't chance a slip up. She's warm and safe in the cave. I carried her down and wrapped her up well."

"It's all coming a little too fast for me," Bill admitted. "You said before you thought I was one of them. One of who?"

Montane got up impatiently. "You'll have to answer my question first. Your uncle left a note—I went up to his study but I couldn't find it. Have you got it?"

Bill took it out of the pocket of his shirt undecidedly, and Nicky Montane snatched it out of his hands, running his eyes over it hurriedly.

"Typed—I should have realized that. Don't you see that anyone could have written this, Tyler, and signed your uncle's name to it? Kevinlow was kidnapped and the note left to keep up here—we all walked like fools into the trap. I've—"

Outside a deep roaring sound surged up under the roar of the wind and drowned it out in another moment. Almost instantly a twin white glare of headlights swept across the window of the room.

Archibald Carroll hurried past the open door.

"Thank God!" he cried. "It's your uncle at last, boy."

Nicky Montane looked perplexed. Silently he handed the note back to Bill and followed him out to the hall. In the lower corridor Carrol already had the front door back, peering out at a big roadster that was slueing to a stop before the porch steps.

But it wasn't Harley Kevinlow who got out of it. Bill knew that in the first glimpse he had of the man's figure. It was a foot at least under his uncle's great height, broad and squat, with a black coat draped loosely around it, and a black, wide-brimmed hat that covered most of the face.

WHEN Bill reached the porch he was already halfway up the steps, sweeping off the wide-brimmed hat as he climbed. It revealed a head set between incongruously wide shoulders—a head so small that upon them it appeared almost a deformity. The features were narrow, rather pallid, curved in a smile just now that touched nothing but the lips. As he reached the doorway he stopped, bowed.

"So sorry," he said, in a voice that had a thin slurring of foreign accent. "I regret very much the necessity to disturb you. But it seems that I miss my road, and then I see your lights. I think perhaps you may give me directions."

Nicky Montane seemed to fold himself back into the foppish manner that a moment ago had completely left him.

He said heartily, "Do come in. Abominable night to be out. Even when you know the road."

The man in black bowed again. Entering after Montane, he murmured, "Kind of you. I am looking for the town of Pine Ridge. You could give me directions?"

"I couldn't," Nicky Montane admitted cheerfully. "Stranger here, you know."

The squat man looked at him with cold, steady eyes.

"I could warm myself perhaps? It is so cold—"

Nicky Montane's grin was a little odd. "Better wait till morning," he said. "You won't find anything tonight."

The squat man shrugged. "I hesitate to intrude. You—"

Nicky Montane gripped his arm, harder than was necessary, Bill thought, and led the way to the living room.

"On that I insist," he said.

Behind them, for an instant it seemed to Bill Tyler that their glances locked. Then suddenly the squat man smiled, shrugged, something malicious and ugly flickering across his face.

"As you wish. The name is Igor Haltrin. When the storm abates and I am warm, you may be good enough to direct me back to the main road."

"A pleasure," Nicky Montane said cheerfully. "A pleasure, Mr.—was it Haltrin?"

The black eyes rose swiftly, without expression.

"That is right."

"Thought so," Nicky Montane answered, the odd grin creasing his lips. "Deuced bad memory for names. But faces—I never forget faces, Mr. Haltrin."

Bill Tyler watched them enter the living room, puzzled by the stranger, by Montane's odd attitude, by the conversation that had been so abruptly interrupted. What had Montane meant by saying that the note had laid a trap into which they had all fallen? Who were they—the group of which Montane had thought he was one? Most important of all, was his story concerning the girl true?

The more Bill pondered that, the more doubtful he became. What if Nicky Montane had lied to him? There was, after all, no guarantee that he was speaking the truth. If he were lying there was just one way to discover it. He must visit the cave himself. Ten minutes there, ten minutes coming back—He'd have returned before they knew he was missing. And if the girl was not there, if Montane had lied—

Bill opened the porch door softly, slipped through and closed it behind him. Keeping close to the shadows he made his way around the corner of the house to the meadow, and ten minutes later had again descended to the ledge.

In the the cave entrance he struck a match, shielding the pin-point of flame as well as he could with his body. Low, rather narrow, it ran back for a distance of twelve feet, ending in a solid wall of rock.

And it was empty.

Bill made sure of that, striking match

after match, going over the place thoroughly. Nicky Montane had lied to him. He'd taken the girl—but where? Not back to the house, surely; not— Stepping out again to the ledge, his eyes dropped involuntarily to the broken surf far below.

He lay flat on his stomach and peered over the rim. But the height was too great, the night too dark, for him to make out anything but the ragged white froth that ripped sullenly at the shore. Slowly he rose and ascended the path, rage and fear mixed in his heart. It was time to have another talk with Nicky Montane—and one that now should not be interrupted.

VI

TORTURE!

ON THE meadow he became conscious that the storm had abated. Rain still fell, but only in a thin mist, and the mad surging of the wind had almost entirely died. But in the quiet there was nothing comforting or reassuring—oddly there came to him the memory of Dark Face as he had seen it against the pines, incredible, fantastic—and actual. It was something that he did not accept, which he could not believe. And yet—

He tried angrily to throw the mood off. Coming clear of the trees behind the house he saw the windows yellow framed against the night, and as he started across the last open strip of ground he saw something else that stopped him stiffly in his tracks.

A tiny spot of flame arched out from the clump of bushes near the steps and glowed ruddily for an instant against the earth before paling down. Crouching low, Bill moved forward after a moment, the revolver loose in his hand. There was nothing else the spot of flame could be but a cigarette stub; and it meant that someone waited there, hidden in shadow, watching the house. Or watching perhaps for him.

Ten feet away there was a faint rustle of sound as the unseen watcher stirred; then silence again, the far off hoot of an owl. Slowly, hugging the ground, Bill inched forward. It would be perhaps Nicky Montane—but with him Bill had decided to take no more chances. He might have missed him, guessed where he'd gone, and come out here to stop him from speaking to the others. Bill's lips stretched tightly; he gained the shelter of the hedge.

Presently there was an impatient breath; a dead branch snapped. Someone cursed, and in a moment a dark figure came toward him along the side of the house. Three feet away it stopped and lit another cigarette, and in the flare of the match Bill saw a sleek, hard-featured face scooped out of shadow. Fanning out the match the other's eyes rose, widened on him—and in the same instant he struck, silently and fast, so that the other's cry died in his throat.

There was a sharp crack, a sound that wasn't quite a groan; and then the guard slumped limply to earth.

Stepping through the bush, Bill knelt a moment above him, bound his hands behind his back with his tie and a silk hankerchief. Then he rose and moved inside the hedge for the back steps that led up to the kitchen. It was dark and quiet there—too quiet; even when he had reached the corridor he heard no sound, though light drifted through in a ruddy stream from the living room.

For a moment he hesitated. The silence was too deep to be natural; when he had left, twenty minutes ago, six people had been in that room. Where were they now? If they were there surely he'd hear a word, a sound. Achingly he listened. Nothing.

With the gun ready before him, he slipped along the wall to the archway and peered through. In the big chair that faced the fire he saw Harley Kevinlow, sitting very still, with his gaze fixed vacantly on the leaping flames. Bill said, "Uncle Harley," with a breath of relief, and stepped through, dropping his gun hand.

But the big man neither moved nor spoke. He just remained sitting there, his eyes staring blankly, a faint, horribly playful smile on his face.

"What's happened?" Bill cried, crossing to him. "Where is everybody?"

When he had come quite close Harley Kevinlow looked up at him with a slow, bewildered grin, like that of a child. He said, "I don't know, I don't know. They hurt me." He whimpered that in a broken voice, lifting his hands and holding them outward.

Bill stared at them in horror, feeling for a moment that he was going to be sick. Raw, blistered skin clothed the gaunt bones

of the fingers, spread in great ugly blotches of seared flesh across the palms.

"Good God!" he breathed.

"They hurt me," the big man whimpered. "I wouldn't tell and they hurt me. Dreadfully—they burnt me with candles and rubbed stones against my fingers. Sharp stones. Oh, it hurt! But I wouldn't tell them even then. I—" He shivered childishly, watching Bill with vacant eyes.

"And they'll hurt Joan. She knows." The big man looked away tiredly. "They'll burn her to make her tell. Poor Joan!"

Controlling the horror in his heart, Bill grasped his uncle's shoulder, forced his head gently around.

"Who?" he said. "Who did this to you?"

TO THE desperation in his voice Harley Kevinlow returned no answer. He stared at the dancing flames, moving his head as they leaped upward; presently his faint smile widened, drooled, became a thing of imbecility.

Bill turned away from him, sickened to the core. The others had gone. Where? How could he hope—

Something white drew his gaze to the dark surface of the window—a pale oval that, distinct against the outer blackness, struck a warning note in his mind. He fired even before he knew the oval was a face, in the instant that it impinged itself on his brain.

Glass cracked, spread in jagged silver slivers away from it. In the breath of time that he saw it was a face, Bill saw too the hole in its forehead his bullet had made. Very gently it seemed to drop away from the window, one hand resting for a fraction of a moment on the outer ledge, the revolver in it catching the light in a last metallic glitter. Then the face was gone, and the gun.

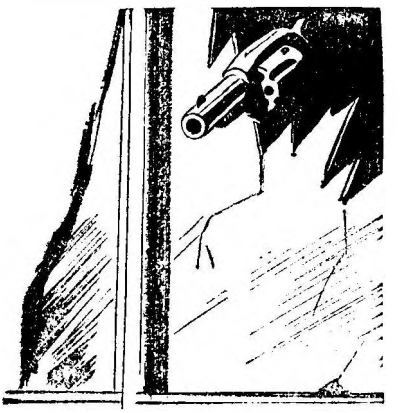
In his chair before the fire Harley Kevinlow might not have heard. Bill gave him one hopeless glance and then raced through to the front steps, along the side of the house to the living room window. His shot had killed the second man instantly; he was lying on his side, features drawn in a snarl. He could get no information from him; but his mate, the one at the back—

He was mumbling as Bill reached him, trying groggily to sit up. With one hand at his throat Bill hauled him erect, and knocked him hard against the wall of the house. The hard black eyes winced away from his, moved uneasily around.

"I've killed your partner," Bill said, in a voice hard with rage, quivering. "You've got a chance to live. Talk fast. Where is Miss Eastman? What have you done with her and the others?"

The man licked his lips sullenly. He did not answer.

Bill released his hold and stepped away. There was a white-hot fury in his eyes as he lifted the gun, drew a deep breath. Perspiration came out on the other's forehead. He breathed quickly, in a rush of words:



"Gimme a break. Don't— "His eyes seemed hypnotized by the revolver; he watched it, mouth working. "I'll talk, mister. Haltrin got them in a house down the road—two miles maybe. We had to wait for you. Then—"

Bill's mind raced. The section was sparsely settled; a couple of miles away he remembered an old farmhouse, long deserted, falling to ruin. Igor Haltrin—the stranger! And suddenly, recalling the squat figure, the small head, the voice came back to him too. Cold, hard—the voice he had heard last night—the voice of the man who had knocked him out!

The little man stood before him, searching his face with sullen, frightened eyes. Grabbing his collar, Bill dragged him into the kitchen, flung him into a broom closet there and twisted the key on him. Not much time—the thought kept beating in his head. Here Harley Kevinlow was safe enough; there was nothing he could do now to help. But Aunt Sylvia and the girl, Montane and Darwin Kevinlow—

In the garage he whipped his roadster out in a burst of speed, backed it around to the house, and nosed it out along the dirt road with the speedometer hovering at sixty-five. Soon the woods thinned out, and land fell away to his left; he braked the car to a stop at a thick bunch of trees, and jumped out to the road almost before the wheels had stopped moving. Past the copse he came to an open meadow and raced across that; then a quarter of a mile ahead, he saw the dark, square outline of the old farm.

He saw no one, heard nothing as he approached. Apparently deserted, the house sprawled clumsily against the side of a hill. Forcing himself to caution, he crossed to it slowly, searching the shadows with his eyes. But no shots, no challenge, came; here Igor Haltrin thought himself safe enough. No need for guards; there were two back at the house, enough to take care of Bill. Only they hadn't; and Bill's mouth set in a tight line. There'd be a surprise this time—but a different one. It would not be Haltrin's.

The front was dark, but on the side thin cracks of light gleamed out through a drawn shade. Bill hesitated a moment, started for that, then stepped up lightly to the porch. The door opened softly, with a thin creak, under his hand. He stepped into a long hall, empty and dim, festooned with cobwebs; halfway down crumpled dusty curtains of some heavy stuff barred off a room. They fell almost to the floor, permitting only a thin edge of illumination to seep out beneath them.

Moving forward, Bill's ears caught the heavy bass rumbling of Igor Haltrin's voice, going on and on in an angry monologue. At the left side of the curtains, between the last fold and the wall, there was an inch of space. Bill Tyler edged close to it and peered in.

There was a large room inside, with a table in the center, and a row of chairs facing him from the opposite wall. In the chairs sat his aunt and Darwin Kevinlow, Nicky Montane and Joan Eastman. Montane's arms were bound; the others were free. The row of chairs seemed to extend further right, but their occupants were hidden from view by the bulky form of Igor Haltrin. He was standing to one side of Nicky Montane, small head thrust grotesquely forward between the great shoulders.

"Perhaps," he snarled," it is a joke. You think so, eh?" He chuckled once harshly. "I shall show you how funny it is, my friend. Hans!"

Into the part of the room that Bill Tyler could see there came a stocky blond man—a heavy, shambling creature with piggish eyes moving from Igor Haltrin to Nicky Montane in an expression of slow grinning cruelty.

"Moscow," Nicky Montane murmured cheerfully. "The name was Rossoff then. You change it often, Haltrin."

Igor Haltrin moved his shoulders slightly, in contempt. "You knew that—but you were slow to act. You would give me rope to hang myself, *hein?* But unfortunately I do not do that."

"Unfortunately," Nicky Montane assented. "Your chappies came in too quickly on us. I should have shot you at the door."

"So?" Igor Haltrin nodded; one side of his face twisted in an ugly grin. "You are frank, my friend. I shall be also. Your Harley Kevinlow was a brave man, but a foolish one. He would not speak. I hope you are wiser."

Nicky Montane still grinned. "Sorry. I know nothing."

"Nothing." Igor Haltrin clicked his lips. "But that is too bad for you. There is but one way to tell if it is the truth—and that way is very painful, in which Hans is very expert."

The blond man looked at him, nodded, and crossed over to that part of the room which Bill could not see. There was a tense minute of silence; then Darwin Kevinlow's drunken features twisted suddenly. He cried in a voice of shaken horror, "Good God! You can't do anything like that—you can't! He doesn't know anything about the light ray, damn you. Only Harley and Professor Eastman know that."

Igor Haltrin chuckled softly, resting his bulk against the table, folding his arms across his chest. Before him Nicky Montane had not lost his grin, but it had paled slightly, his eyes had hardened. From somewhere in the room there came to Bill's nostrils a dry, parching odor that increased with each moment; then, briefly, there followed an almost inaudible sizzle.

Joan Eastman, white faced, wilted in her chair; Mrs. Kevinlow pressed a hankerchief over her mouth. Darwin Kevinlow began

to curse wildly, in a savage, frightened flow. Then the man Hans came back to the center of the room, into Bill's line of vision. One hand carried a poker—and the end of that gleamed redly transparent with heat.

"The eyes, I think," Igor Haltrin said thoughtfully. "We shall try that first, Hans. A man may bear pain until the mind cracks, like poor Kevinlow; it is blindness that may not be thought of. Yes. First we shall try the eyes, Hans."

VII

THE WHITE FLOWER

IN THE instant that he finished speaking Bill swept the curtain aside and stepped into the room. There was no time to think, to estimate chances; the blond man was approaching Nicky Montane slowly, as if he was enjoying it, the poker raised slightly as he advanced. Against the table, negligently, his hands pocketed, leaned Igor Haltrin.

With a sweeping glance as he came through Bill saw the whole room—saw Archibald Carrol and Conrad Victor sitting on the chairs that had been hidden, with another man sitting before them, his arms folded on the back of the chair over which he faced Bill Tyler. An automatic drooped from his right one, but when he saw Bill he did not try to bring his own weapon up; very still, very pale, he spread his fingers and let it drop to the floor.

Bill grinned tightly. "Smart boy," he said. "Everybody else hold it. Take your hands out of your pockets, Haltrin. Slow."

The small head turned to him, the black eyes in the pallid face fixed on his in a gaze that had no surprise, no rage, in it. Just a deadly expressionlessness, beady, intent, hidden. Hans stopped rigidly, swinging his head around over one shoulder, the poker in his hand still extended.

"Drop that," Bill said.

Hans dropped it; Igor Haltrin took his hands out of his pockets, lifted them over his head. The man sitting astride the chair in front of Archibald Carrol was still carefully rigid, his arms hanging outward, palms up.

"Thank heavens," Conrad Victor cried. He got quickly out of his chair and crossed the floor. "I thought you'd never come. It—"

"Watch out," Nicky Montane shouted, "don't let him—"

For just the split part of a second Bill misunderstood. He whirled to the door, and as Carrol's frantic cry swung him back he tried to bring the gun up. But Conrad Victor had already leaped for him, knocking the revolver aside with a vicious sweep of his arm. Before he could level it again somehow Igor Haltrin had moved; his hands flashed out with the glint of steel in it, and two reports beat back over and over from the walls of the chamber.

The first bullet missed; the second got Bill in the shoulder, spun him around and into the wall with a force that knocked breath from his body.

"We have been interrupted," Igor Haltrin said coldly. "That is something I do not like. Now you will go on, Hans. The eyes."

Pain flared up Bill's arm in sickening waves, but he scarcely noticed it in the greater horror of the thing before him. The blond man grinned slowly, evilly; bending, he picked up the poker that had singed a hole in the rag rug on the floor.

Nicky Montane sat quite still, with his mouth set, his eyes steady. He addressed Igor Haltrin quietly.

"I told you I did not know the details of the light ray Professor Eastman and Harley Kevinlow were developing. That is the truth. I do not know where he kept his plans. That also is the truth. They confided in no one—not even in me."

Watching Bill, Igor Haltrin answered without turning his head. "Then you are unfortunate. The machine is in the house, but it is too heavy to move, too easy to trace. We could not get it out of the country. No. It is the plans we must have.

"Kevinlow was in fear of his life. We know that from his assistant, Mr. Victor, who was good enough to keep us informed of his plans." He looked at Bill with a thin smile. "And we know that too, because he sent for his burly nephew here, who is strong and afraid of nothing, because Harley Kevinlow thought he would be some protection. The brave Kevinlow was not afraid of death or torture; but to make sure his work would not be lost, he left the plans with one of you. You are most likely to know, Montane. Kevinlow trusted you. If you do not—the location of the plans is

in the possession of someone else here—they can save you by speaking now."

He stopped, glanced swiftly down the line of chairs. Joan Eastman looked whitely, mutely, back at him. No one spoke. The small black eyes moved back to Nicky Montane with no life, no depth, in them.

"The eyes, Hans," Igor Haltrin said.

Nicky Montane took a deep breath. The blond man, crouched slightly, came forward. And against the wall Bill gathered himself for a desperate and insane rush. He knew that Igor Haltrin, watching him with the deadly black eyes, read what was in his mind; he knew that if he moved he would die.

But that somehow seemed unimportant; he felt drunk with horror, with pain, haunted beyond endurance by the fixed smile that never faltered on Nicky Montane's lips. Slowly, very slowly, the blond man walked to the chair, grabbed Nicky Montane's hair in one hand and yanked back his head.

Bill straightened, tensing his body. And Igor Haltrin, raising the revolver just a bit, looking at him without expression, waited. Then, in the moment that he started to come out from the wall, Joan Eastman cried:

"Stop, stop. I'll tell you—I'll tell you everything you want to know."

Igor Haltrin said softly, "Wait, Hans. Your father's notes—where are they?"

"At the house." The girl's whisper was low, broken. "In my bedroom. There's a window box there, with geraniums planted in it. At the bottom, in the earth, is father's notebook. He was afraid too—he wanted me to leave with Mr. Tyler as soon as he came. But—"

"But unfortunately he died," Igor Haltrin cut in. He was transformed, active, his eyes glittered darkly. "It is fortunate that you did not hide her better, Montane. Josef here followed you and your friend to the cave. Doubtless, when you pushed him over, you thought you had disposed of Josef, and that it was safe to leave her there. I do not know how Tyler is still alive. Clever Montane—hiding her there to protect her. If we could not find her, we could not find the plans. You even drugged her to make sure she'd have no chance to return to the house. It was a—what you call, I think, a tough job—to revive her."

He paused a moment, looking at the girl with a cold thoughtfulness. "Of course you are aware that if this is a lie there will be no more questions. Mr. Montane will be left to the tender mercy of Hans until the job is finished. So if you think to trick us—"

"It's true," the girl said, very low. "Father made me promise to tell no one. But I couldn't see you—" Her breath caught in a sob.

Igor Haltrin nodded, turned to Victor. "You and Hans will come with me, Conrad: I am afraid our friend here has disposed of the house guards. I may need you both. Josef will stay here on watch."

The man sitting astride the chair grinned, rested his automatic on the back.

"I understand, Igor."

"That," Haltrin murmured, with a soft emphasis, "is excellent. I do not like bunglers, Josef. Watch the big one—" his eyes moved briefly to Bill— "in particular. We shall return soon."

He nodded again, turned and went out to the hall, with Conrad Victor and the blond man following him. Presently a car motor purred, receded, and faded slowly out in the silence.

BILL leaned dizzily against the wall, the pain from his wound beating in heavy throbs of agony through his body. A minute droned by, another. Then Bill became aware that from his seat at the side of Josef Archibald Carrol was watching him with a curious sort of intentness. As his gaze crossed the lawyer's, Carrol winked quickly, with his left eye.

Josef did not appear to see that. He was sitting three feet in front of Carrol, sideways to him, while the lawyer kept his arms folded rigidly on his chest, his plump face impassive after that one momentary flicker. Puzzled at first, Bill watched him warily, from the corner of his eye.

Then Carrol winked again. Without the rest of his body he pressed his left arm in against his side, and at the beginning of that motion Bill remembered, threw himself down and sideways. Even as Josef snarled and brought his automatic up a thin stream of liquid from the flower in Carrol's buttonhole spurted out into his eyes and blinded him. He fired wildly, and glass in a picture over Bill Tyler tinkled to the floor.

Then the fat lawyer sprang from his chair, crashing his bulk into the slender man. They thrashed wildly on the floor, and as Bill Tyler raced across the gun skidded out of the melee to his feet. Gripping the barrel, he smashed the butt hard against Josef's head, and the guard stiffened, moaned, slid limply off the prostrate Carrol.

VIII

TO THE DEATH

"TYLER!" Nicky Montane's voice, crisp and urgent, rang across the room. "Quick, man! There's a chance to catch them at the house. They haven't five minutes start."

Straining at his bonds, feverishly impatient, he snapped orders to Carroll as Bill worked groggily at the knots.

"You'll all wait in the woods, outside the house. If anything happens, you'll be free. Get to the nearest phone; get police and a doctor. Tyler and I will go to the house. You've got a car?"

Fighting nausea, fighting the pain, Bill nodded.

"Just up the road."

"Then come on." He shrugged off the last coil of rope and jumped from his chair, grabbed the automatic where Bill had dropped it on the floor. Bill followed him across the porch to the field, dropping a little behind as they reached the road. When he got to his car Montane had already backed it around, and he had barely time to leap to the running board before it shot forward.

It was a wild ride. They bounced madly in ruts, caromed from them once almost against a grove of trees. Weakness flowed over Bill; clinging to the door he swayed dizzily, with eyes half closed. Then suddenly they had stopped, and Nicky Montane was helping him down.

"Can't drive closer," he breathed. "They'd hear us. Keep as close to me as you can, Tyler."

He spun away and started to run, and Bill pounded after him with his legs like lead, moving in a dumb endless torture. He never knew how they reached the porch; suddenly they were there, and Nicky Montane was digging a warning hand into his arm. Leading the way, he crossed the porch lightly, and listened a moment at the door. Then he thrust the door back and slid inside, body flattened against the wall.

The hall lights were on now, and at a table against one wall sat Igor Haltrin, with a thick looseleaf book opened before him. Conrad Victor and the blond man were standing behind him, and it was Victor who saw them first. His breath hissed in with a sharp, startled sound; one hand clutched Haltrin's shoulder.

"Hullo," Nicky Montane said softly, the automatic very level in his hand.

FOR the first time then Bill saw expression in Igor Haltrin's face. Twisted as it swung to them, specks of hate flared insanely in the black eyes. Nicky Montane looked back at him with a thin, hard smile, his body resting casually against the wall.

"Rossoff in Moscow," Nicky Montane said, in his soft voice. "Igor Haltrin here, De Villes in Paris, Krummchen in Berlin—dozens of names, Haltrin, and you're all of them. Espionage agent—but there's a better word, my word. Human Vulture—that's what fits you. You'd torture men for their life-work so you could hawk it about through the countries of the world and sell it to the highest bidder. And dark light was precious—it meant millions. It meant to see and not be seen, to watch people who were unaware that they were being watched. It could pick bombing planes out of the sky, show marching columns at night when they thought they were unobserved. The other uses—the peaceful uses Kevinlow and Professor Eastman designed it for—meant nothing to you. You'd make it an instrument of hell, bathed in blood. Oh, it was valuable. If you had to torture men to get it, if you had to kill them or blind them, what was that?"

Before Bill the hall began to waver, to stream together. The three figures at the table blurred into one. But oddly he could hear Nicky Montane's voice, going on and on.

"You were clever," that voice continued, with something chilled and merciless about it. "You found out somehow the story people told about the Eastmans—about the Indian God that cursed them. Afterward Victor had poisoned Eastman to follow your instructions, after he'd drugged Kevinlow,

you got him down the back stairs, out through the kitchen while Victor stood guard and made sure we were all in the living room, where we could not see you. And a note was left—typed—to induce us to stay here, not to call the police. The machine was too heavy to transport; but although he didn't know the secret of it, Victor could run it. He could paste a picture of an Indian God over the lens, shadow it by strips of cardboard, so that when the current was on it would project the face we all saw. Victor came downstairs and drew our attention to it; the other man you had hidden in the house—the one Tyler shot when he sneaked into my room—switched on the current."

BILL spread his legs apart, tried to prop himself. He felt very hot; blood lay warm on his arm. Light and shadow and the blurred figures spun around him crazily.

"We saw that and it was supposed to frighten us. It was supposed to make us leave. You knew that one of us would carry the plans, and stopping us on the road and searching us was quicker and surer than going over this house. But we didn't leave, and though you tortured Kevinlow he wouldn't talk. So you came yourself to look over things, and then Victor signalled to your men outside. I knew you—but—"

Igor Haltrin, small head bent forward grotesquely between the huge shoulders, seemed to Bill like a monstrous dwarf.

"You know very much, Montane—but perhaps I also know. G-man—I knew that, Montane. You were here to protect the machine—that is so. You fooled most people with your silly talk—but you did not fool Igor Haltrin. Your story—" He chuckled harshly. "It is pretty, yes. But there is a matter of proof. A good lawyer—"

The living room archway was blocked out suddenly by the gigantic form of Harley Kevinlow. His voice was weak, shaking; but in the haunted gray eyes, still bewildered and dazed, there was the beginning of sanity.

"Boy!" He looked around confusedly. "What happened? I can't—" He passed the back of one hand confusedly across his forehead. "It's all blurred, Bill. It's—You're hurt."

He came out anxiously to the corridor, between Igor Haltrin and Nicky Montane. The squat, misshapen frame contorted like a coiling snake's. Snarling, his face full of hate, he whipped his right hand out. Steel flashed and Bill tried to shout a warning, felt himself dropping clumsily to the floor, with no strength in him.

But queerly, for a moment there were no shots, nothing. Harley Kevinlow was clear now, hurrying to Bill, and for a brief and terrible instant the men with guns might have been made of stone. Then the deadliness, the blankness, in Igor Haltrin's eyes wavered and broke. He fired with a snarling cry, but over his single report, with a spaced, sharp, deliberate flatness, Nicky Montane's gun roared thrice.

Before Bill Igor Haltrin coughed, clasped his big hands on his stomach as if there were something there he could not hold inside him. The black eyes filled with terror, hate, desperation. He coughed again, blood appeared on his hands. Choking, pawing before him at the air, he went down to his knees, fell sideways to the floor. Then the coughing stopped, and the convulsive struggling; he lay very still, with his head turned to one side, his eyes fixed and staring. Behind him Conrad Victor and the blonde man stood rigidly against the wall, hands upraised.

"Montane," Bill murmured weakly. "Montane—you're all right?"

He never knew actually whether he spoke the words. Softly, softly, wave upon wave, unconsciousness closed him in.

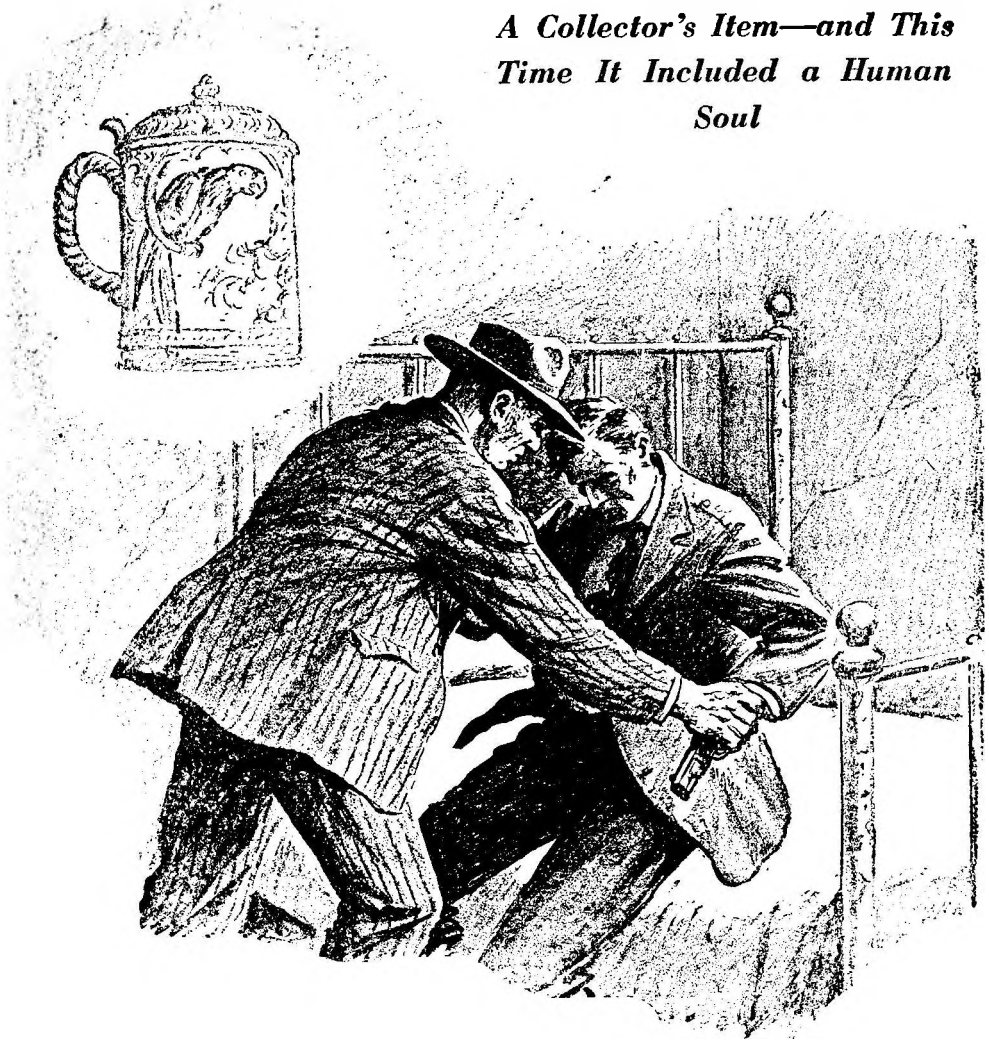
LONG after he was warm and comfortable, and someone was doing things to his shoulder. It hurt a little, and that roused him. Joan Eastman was looking at him anxiously, and behind her stood Nicky Montane, his grin a little strained. It relaxed as Bill smiled at him.

"Kill him?" Nicky Montane chortled. "Not with a team of horses. In a day he'll be out of bed. He'll be fine, old chap."

He clapped a hand on Harley Kevinlow's shoulder. Bill grinned at him, turned his head heavily back to the girl. Nice kid, Bill thought drowsily—nice kid. He sighed and sank down to sleep, and somehow her face was just before him.

It was like a promise—like something he had to come back to.

A Collector's Item—and This Time It Included a Human Soul



THE SILVER PARROT

By B. E. COOK

Author of "The God With the Open Mouth," etc.

INASMUCH as I had locked horns once with Jim Crotan and Joe Trott and had put it over on that slippery pair, I knew that Harden Bayle never would be entirely satisfied till the final chapter was written.

True, the ugly little stone god was safely hidden away in that secret museum of his upriver, and with it the map which might have led to a pretty fortune in loot. But Bayle could laugh only out of one side of his face so long as they still had the Silver Parrot.

Long ago he'd told me the story of how he'd tried to handle it himself and how they'd bested him—which was before he ever got his pinchers on me. Now and then I'd wondered why he didn't set me on its trail; but, you see, it was a hard thing for Bayle to do, sort of pitting his skill against

mine. He'd hate for me to succeed where he had failed. When I showed up with the map, I had fully expected him to follow through with a demand that I now get the Silver Parrot, but no. Though it was on his mind, he was stuffy; that's Bayle.

Remember how I'd played round with the idea; would a forbidden object have value for Bayle if the original urge for it hadn't been his own? Must he be the one to hear of it himself to be sure he must have the thing? Well, I'd gotten my answer. The stone god, in itself, hadn't been worth a continental in Boston. When, however, he'd sprung it on me about the map, that had been a different kettle of fish.

How had he learned about the map anyway? If he'd known about it, he must also have known about the god, yet he'd given no indication of it. Ah, it wasn't my job to figure out Bayle; mine is to go fetch and that, I'll own, is the great kick I get out of living.

Had the case of that god been a true answer? Evidently Bayle had known about the matter as soon or sooner than I; his lack of interest at first could have been assumed to keep me in my place. So, I still was unanswered.

ON THE long, bleak watches down the coast I toyed with the idea, knowing he wanted that silver parrot like all getout; the fact he'd been beaten at it made the thing all the more desirable. I know Bayle; he never forgets, and by the same sign he has never forgotten that it was he who failed to get that bird. Would his desire ever get strong enough to give me the chance to succeed where he had failed? Who was I that he should begrudge me a little triumph? But, being who he was, would he stomach the situation?

Long before we returned in past the lady with the torch aloft, I had resolved to get that silver parrot and give it to him. What he might do with it was his business, but I'd wager a month's pay it would go upriver into that secret museum. Of course, if he had another job to send me on—

He was out of town on business and had left no word, so I was on my own, free to make a play for the parrot. Which presented me with a strange situation; just what was this silver parrot? Bayle never had said. Somehow to me it was a silver pin or some bit of jewelry after the order of that horse jewelry I got him from Brazil.

I recalled now that there had been several golden horses with emerald eyes and the tough stunt was to find the right one. And there seemed to be plenty of bird jewelry in New York too, but most of it was gold. Occasionally I did spot a silver pin or bangle like a bird, but narry a parrot. I spent a whole week while the *Edgemont* was in, getting nowhere at all.

Another line I followed was that "Silver Parrot" suggested some old English inn. Possibly the one Bayle had failed to get had swung on some stout oak sign over a hostelry door, but the nearest I got to that lead was "The Gay Cockatoo" out in Westchester County. Huh, the cockatoo was certainly a very gay one, but with not a trace of silver; besides, it proclaimed a tea room where a covey of women played bridge. I beat it.

Not until the last hours before sailing-time did I turn to the public library, about ready to call the whole thing off. After all, Bayle had not commissioned me and if he should, at least he could tell me what the damned bird was. Half-heartedly I inquired about silver parrots in the reference room, actually hoping nothing would come of it since I could do nothing in the few hours left to me. I hated to have it plaguing me at sea again. But, strangely, the desk girl located what I wanted in no time at all. You'd almost think she'd been waiting for this.

The silver parrot was a tankard, one of those high contraptions men had guzzled brew from in the days before luxury taxes. That particular tankard, one from hundreds, rated a good page and a half in small type in a book on criminal organizations! There was even a sketch, made from descriptions, and it was a sizeable mug with strong handle and hinged top. On one side was a parrot upright and ready to tell the cockeyed world; on the other, a dead one, apparently, with its toes toward the sky. Or maybe he was drunk.

The real significance of the birds had been lost in antiquity, but legends indicated that when the Normans moved in on England the Saxons had organized a sort of maquis outfit to harass them. No big battles, understand, just bedevilment by some one individual or small group. Now the Saxons were mostly illiterate, unable to write their own names. When, therefore, the time came

for a bedeviling, instead of putting names into a derby hat each cut a twig with his characteristic marking and put it into the silver tankard. Finally the cover was closed down, the tankard joggled round and round, then the drawings began.

Presumably the tankard was looted from a wealthy Norman's home, for in those times before time-and-a-half and good pay, only the Norman four hundred or their collaborators afforded silver tankards—and you've noticed that the latter don't end up with tankards or much else.

Another indication that the thing was Norman; under the two parrots there had been a broad band all the way around. Something like a family motto appeared to have been inscribed on it but had become so worn and dug into that no word was distinguishable. It would have been interesting, that, for the Saxons hated above all else the foisting upon them of the Norman language. Even to this day we boast of our short, terse Saxon words.

There was one peculiarity about the name-drawing. In these latter times we rather expect that once a man has been selected thus his name won't come up right away again. Not so with those Saxons; the drawn twig went directly back into the tankard where it might come up in the very next drawing. Strange, but this very custom was what paid me dividends—in this year of doubtful grace when the confusion from a modern war over there makes those Norman-Saxon wrangles look like tempests in teapots—or tankards.

TIMES changed. From race wrangles to highway robberies when highwaymen held up both Saxon and Norman and anybody else foolish enough to venture into the country after dark. A certain Kitts seems to have run the gang; but, contrary to the usual story that a man held up a stagecoach in the Devon area one night and in Lancashire the next, it was not the same highwayman. It was the Kitts crowd. Kitts drew the names from the silver tankard, returning each for the next drawing as soon as the loot came in.

True, folks expected, more or less, to be robbed and there was no blood letting about it. But as times became more civilized, highwaymen grew more vicious with less camaraderie all round. Blood did flow, the highwaymen were hunted and hounded till they moved over onto the continent. There they went in for really tough stuff and politics got mixed into their activities. The last heard of it, Bourbon backers were putting actual blueblood names into the old tankard, getting set for the return of the throne.

"The last heard of it," said the account. That's what the writers of that account thought, but nowadays a certain Harden Bayle had heard of it as the Silver Parrott, coveted it, and I was just the one to get it for him.

I reread the text, especially the description of the tankard, then I had to get back aboard ship. A mate doesn't straggle aboard the last minute before sailing. As I returned the book, the girl gave me a queer sort of look, a bright smile which surprised me. It had been some time since a woman had done that for any good reason. Then she said, "Good-bye," and wrote on a pad. I wanted to know what, I lingered a bit. No soap, so I went my way.

There remained only one more possibility—Larry. Limited in time, I phoned him. Ten to one he was in the armed services by then, but I called the paper he'd reported for. Larry wasn't working there any more and the girl tartly insisted she knew nothing about him. But she gave his phone number when urged.

Larry answered my call right away, but it was a queer Larry. I told him I was the *Edgemont's* mate; even that drew none of the old welcome. Instead, he demanded sharply, "Well, what can I do for you?"

With more time I'd have kidded him along, for I was positive he didn't get who I was. There wasn't time. I came directly to the point. "I told you I'm the mate of the *Edgemont*. I want to ask you something. Yes. Did you ever hear of a tankard, one of those oldtime drinking mugs, you know, called the Silver Parrot?"

I heard him catch his breath, but no reply came.

"Well, did you?"

"Are you one of them?" His voice came in a snarl.

So he had heard of it—or them! "Maybe," I answered.

"Then if you're one of those cutthroats cracking the whip over me, go to hell. If

you're not and just curious about something you've heard about, let me warn you, hands off and mouth shut. If," he added, "you know where you're safe." He slammed up the receiver.

Well, I had plenty to think over, that trip. The girl in the library; had I only imagined she showed unusual interest in me or was it my same old supersensitiveness that sometimes leads me astray? Did my interest in an old silver tankard mean something to her? Had there been anything lately in the news to make folks like her Silver-Parrot conscious?

Presently I wondered whether there was anything peculiar in the tankard's being on this side of the Atlantic, whether it was valuable solely as a collectors' item. Trott and Crotan had possessed the thing; had they brought it from France? If so, why?

Singly or together, Trott and Crotan were bad eggs and I knew it for a fact. Were they merely a fence or were their hands deep in the muck too? That Silver Parrot had been identified with criminal organizations a long time; had it come here, however, only as an interesting antique? Well, clean or foul, Bayle wanted it and I was hellbent for the getting.

THEN Larry came to mind for consideration. Off and on for some five years I'd known that young, promising newspaper man. He'd been assigned to the waterfront when we first met and I'll own I strung him along in his appetite for adventure stuff. Crimes, though, were tops; he loved court assignments and I rather guess he had dreams of cracking some case that stumped the cops—some day.

I liked Larry, he was so keen and clean. If I myself had lived regular and had me a family, understand, I might 've had a son like him. So you see how I'd never told him about Bayle or my assignments from him. No, Larry viewed me as a person who'd been everywhere and knew everything. He liked me considerably.

Then what had got into him that his responses on the phone were so cold? And why had he warned me away from the Silver Parrot? Anyhow he did know something about that tankard and that it still held unsavory brew—and feared for my safety should I get too curious? Little did he realize there was another side to me! No, I don't scare that easy.

The old *Edgemont*, with her new panning beams and clips down for'd, still sloughed and wallowed down the coast and for once the lure of sea life tasted flat to me. The trip seemed endless. Then we ran afoul of a strike among longshoremen in an outport and sweltered there until it was settled and she loaded. Finally we wallowed all the way north again in easterly sets and in past the lady with the torch aloft.

Ashore I jumped, but no call from Bayle and I was glad of it; I was free to nose onto the trail of that Silver Parrot.

Larry had moved but left a mailing address which I used. His new lodging was in so wretched a neighborhood I thought I must have made a mistake. But a dirty urchin on the sagging steps said his room was there, on the third floor at the head of the stairs. I climbed them, full of wonder, for what did all this mean, Larry living here? The fellow was fastidious, squalor made him sick!

I'd hardly have known the Larry who opened the door a crack when I rapped. He tried to close it quickly, but I had one foot in that crack and in I shoved, keeping up a line. "Larry, old sock, what's all this? Down on your luck or what? Thought you'd be in uniform!"

"They wouldn't take me," came sullenly. He was nervous, thin and with a look about him I hated to name. His limbs twitched spasmodically while his eyes narrowed on me suspiciously. Oh, I've seen plenty of dopes on the letdown.

"Well?" he demanded. This from so friendly an acquaintance. Why, he was actually afraid of me! Why? I recalled our phone talk the last time in port and his strange manner then. He'd been hysterical about the Silver Parrot and that had struck me cold.

Ah well, he did know about the parrot and that was my errand and I'd have to get tough to get out of him what he knew. So I settled myself into a chair, right at home style, but kept an eye on him. He had the manners of a cornered animal and even the mildest ones can be mighty dangerous.

"Sit down, sit down, Larry," I said bluffly. "You're all wound up. Hell, this is no way to greet an old friend—or is it?"

He let go a mouthful of rattling desperate oaths and— Relaxed though I appeared, I sprang like a polecat when he made that move toward his pocket. It fair made me sick to discover how little strength he had when I tore the gun from him. He sank to his bed, panting and muttering. I felt sorry for him, the way he had deteriorated so quickly. It didn't seem possible; no wonder the army had rejected him.

I broke the gun and flung the bullets on the table. "You've no business toting a thing like that, Larry. You're too nervous. One of these times you might actually shoot somebody. Then you'd be done for, mister."

"Done for now," he said hollowly, "and you know it—you and the rest of them. You know I'm all shot, that's why you give me no rest. Get all you can out o' me, wring me dry as long as I last, then to hell with me. I tell you it's no mere chance that my name's drawn so often. Don't try to feed me that corn, I know your game."

Name drawn so often! That phrase gave me a picture! Saxons and their successors had drawn names from the tankard again and again; Larry had known about the Silver Parrot when I'd phoned; his name had been drawn from *it* again and again. Huh, he was the tool of some vicious outfit and he couldn't break away.

And he'd connected me with the outfit when I'd mentioned the parrot? Okay. Maybe we could serve each other, once he got the proper understanding. Which would be like opening a sore to clean it, he was so deadly afraid and suspicious of me.

I appeared to relax again. "So they've drawn your name a lot of times, eh? And it looks fishy to you." I turned on him sharply: "Then why in hell do you do it for them? Are you in so deep you can't get clear of them?"

Scorn filled his narrowed eyes. "You should know," he snapped back.

For one instant he had me; he had described my own case perfectly. Bayle had me so deep in that I couldn't get clear of him But Larry didn't know about Bayle or his commissions—then I got his meaning. He had asked me, over the phone that time, if I was one of them. I had allowed him to think that I was. Never had I done so foolish a thing because, as it came out, on that very day Larry had been on the verge of rebelling. Sore that his name had been drawn so soon again, he had decided to stand them up despite the full realization of how tough they could get. He'd had his ticket bought to a little burgh in the corn belt, his home town; then my call had knocked the fight clean out of him.

When I, a casual, friendly person, had mentioned the parrot, he'd known that the mate of the *Edgemont* sure was a spy of that criminal gang, calling to threaten him. I had a hard time of it breaking down that belief. Only through his wretchedness and weakness could I lead him on, my imagination supplying the necessary catch words to keep him coming until—

"If I had the guts I'd 'ave blown my brains out long ago," he wailed miserably. "But I haven't, not enough." He looked up feverishly to add, "If I only had what it takes I'd blow the works to the police. I used to dream o' things like that. You remember."

I did and I wasn't so calloused but what my heart ached when it reminded me of the Larry who used to be. "There's a chance you might be all wrong," I said quietly. "I might know about that Silver Parrot and yet not be a member of the gang at all."

HE TOOK that one slowly, then put out a feeler like a man on shell ice. "You mean—you're not one of them and yet you know? Hey, you're not here for—for the dicks, are you?" Fear challenged hope on his drawn face.

"I might be," I answered.

"O God, the jig's up," he moaned, and he was ready to h'ist his hands for the manacles.

You'll remember it was the Silver Parrot I wanted. If I really bore down hard on him, I could make him spill where it was. That was all I needed—where it was. How to get to it I'd have to figure out but I'm too sure of myself to worry over that. So, should I bear down or try instead for his cooperation? Don't get me wrong, I'm not squeamish, I like rough going; but damn it, I liked Larry and it did seem to me he'd had his share of tough going.

"You've seen that silver bird?" I asked casually.

"Seen it? Of course. We're all there when the names are drawn—so no tricks'll be played," he added bitterly. "Tricks! You

can't tell me it was on the level—or ever is. My name gets drawn too many times."

"What do you expect?" I asked dryly. "Honor among thieves? Thugs like Crotan and Trott don't deal in honor." Naming those two had been a bit of a venture on my part, a verification, see? When he accepted it without a gulp, I was on sure ground. So be it; Crotan and Trott again, eh? Well, I'd trimmed them once, I could repeat.

"Larry, suppose I get you a ticket home and line your pockets. Say one grand. Could you get back on your feet again and make a new start in some other city?"

First his eyes gleamed, but he shook his head. "Too late. The habit's on me strong, too damned strong for anything. Hell, I can't go home like this!" His features sharpened. "Hey, what's all this to you? A guy doesn't hand out so much iron for nothing. If you're working in with the dicks, you'll pull me along in with the rest."

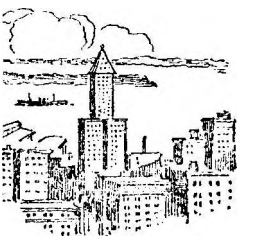
"It's the Silver Parrot tankard I want; it's worth that much and more to me. All the rest I don't give a tinker's damn about. Just tell me where it is and I'll get your ticket and put you on the first train heading your way."

You can see I do not trust a hophead. If I could extract the info while he was in the mood, I'd run him off the scene so he couldn't mess up things. Yeah, I know what that craving does when it once hits them. I added, "Oh, of course, Larry, if you have scruples against letting your pals down—"

"Scruples! Hell! Nothing I'd like so much to see as them sizzling on the hot seat. Especially that Crotan. He got me into it. He and Trott run this and by cripes it's the largest dope ring in this country."

So their racket was dope? I wasn't surprised. War brings in so many ships they can't all get a flawless search; it's the same the world over. "And you peddle for them?" I asked.

"They've got a dozen distribution centers, over in Jersey, out in Connecticut, up the river, all over the city. Sometimes I carry a load that is worth into five figures. Dangerous business, I tell you. The F. B. I. got one of our men in Bridgeport; some day they'll hook me for peddling—or worse. When I'm like this, I'm sick from fear, but I get hopped up when they send me out on a job and mister you can't imagine what that's like. You'll take any risk, you'll face the devil himself, even shoot a man down in cold blood. That's what the guy did in Bridgeport and they got him. Me, I swear I'll break away, see, but I'm too far into the stuff. When that hankering comes on, I'm licked. It costs plenty and I never have the price—only from those guys."



It was the old, old story, of course, and I listened to most of it. Somehow he'd picked up the habit, eventually lost his job, then his frantic cravings had made him easy to draw into the trade, that and promises of big money with constant access to it for himself. His miserable room told me that. No, Trott and Crotan didn't part with good cash to a spineless creature like this man now was; they strung him along with dribbles of the stuff plus barely enough money to exist. Larry was the rabbit Jerry, only the dogs were doing the teasing.

I wondered if he was too broken, too weak to attempt the comeback. They suffer the tortures of the damned and I doubted whether anything in his former, easy-going life had given him the strength to stage the fight. Even if he went home, would it be any use? His parents might prove too easy—or too hard. What he needed was—damn it all! Here was I setting up myself as God in a man's life when all I wanted was that Silver Parrot.

Larry was not worth it, no salvaging possible. While he was in the mood I'd get the location of the hangout, then plan.

He indicated a location over in Brooklyn, an ordinary tenement in as ordinary neighborhood, a three-decker, on its ground floor. The tenant liked poker and it accounted for a number coming in of an evening. Now when men hold a session they like their beer. Let the beer truck haul up and who takes notice? But that truck also brings dope.

I asked him about guards round there. "Only when they have the stuff on hand,"

he explained. "After all, it doesn't come in oftener than a week or maybe ten days apart. They expect some soon, now; maybe tonight. Okay, we all get the call. We show up. Names are drawn and we take the jobs laid out for us. I tell you that drawing's crooked as hell. I get all the toughest layouts, the most dangerous, and I'm drawn every time. Those mugs're wringing me dry till they get rid of me or the dicks the way they did in Bridgeport. Guards? Sure. One machine-gun in the front hall and one in the kitchen covering the whole backyard. Aw, they know the F. B. I. isn't asleep and they're smart too. The F. B. I. fools?" he snorted.

No, not fools by a million; nor were these cold-blooded criminals, and yet they still drew names out of that tankard. There sure is a fancy twist to the master criminal brain. He likes his profits, yes, but he also loves his power, loves to be feared and obeyed. He runs to symbolisms to keep his power ever before the eyes of his underlings. From the day when the Saxons had drawn their twigs from that same silver tankard, some master mind must have directed every drawing and made the assignments. There is something inexorable about the drawing of a name; one can't protest, can't fight against such fate as he would against a human. Your name was drawn, you took your luck and no back talk.

"No dope on hand, no guard around, huh?" I asked Larry.

"No, only a Mr. and Mrs. Mear who pass as ordinary folks; he works at the navy yard."

"Do they keep that Silver Parrot tankard locked up?"

"Search me. It's always on the mantel over the fireplace until the drawing. Drawing!" he ranted again. "Damn 'em they don't draw, it's fixed. Me, I tell you. They've framed me, I get the tough—" His face became ashy gray, his words trailed off, he shook all over.

Well, says I, this should be easy. Without Mr. Mear around, I should manage to bluff my way inside somehow, being expert at that. And the tankard should be easy to locate; even if not in plain sight it was too big to be well concealed. If that woman made a fuss, well, a gag is good for a woman any time.

First, get Larry aboard a train. He appeared eager for it. I'd buy the ticket, give him some of what cash I carried and mail the rest I'd promised. Then, with him safely out of my way, I'd visit this Mrs. Mear before her man could return from his day's work.

Larry, of course, didn't afford a phone nowadays. I said I'd go call the station from a corner drug store about his train time. "You get shaved, tidy yourself up," I added, "for when I get back we might have to hurry. Stay low while I'm gone and eat a snack; might not be time for it before your train leaves and maybe no dining car either."

"And don't forget to put on your rubbers and so forth," he kidded me. For the moment he seemed like the old Larry.

His train would leave at 2:38 and it was now hardly ten. Over four hours. Well, should I return for Larry and see that he got a good feed before putting him aboard or should I first get that Silver Parrot? I could easily go over to Brooklyn and, getting the tankard, be back in plenty of time.

I chose the latter and thereby made matters twenty times harder for myself than if I'd returned directly for Larry. You never can tell!

I HAD that three-decker spotted inside half an hour, just an ordinary working-class affair in an appropriate neighborhood. In front, a wee patch of grass that might pass for a lawn; out back, laundry on pulley lines above the yard. Laundry and machine-guns, eh? It's a far cry from one to the other, both facing that yard. My imagination took over and I seemed to see right through the front wall to the ugly gun inside that end of the place. I pictured a beer truck driving up with its bogus beer, Larry and the others climbing these front steps, Crotan, Trott, the others trailing. Poor Larry, weak with craving but seething with resentment. Larry'd been a darned good lad.

I could have gone inside and gotten that Silver Parrot right then, but my usual failing was taking over—the inescapable urge to play God in someone's life, the urge that had made easy commissions hazardous. For once stick to business, I reasoned; get the tankard and send Larry home. What more can you desire?

Desire? The tankard, Larry away for another start. Yes, and I wanted to smash down Crotan and Trott. I hated them be-

fore; now I saw red at thought of them and their vicious trade. There'd be no more lads broken like Larry. The awful dope had a dozen distributing centers whence to ruin souls and bodies. How could I be satisfied with the Silver Parrot and Larry's escape if I should leave their villainous racket to continue?

No use. If I went inside and took the tankard, they'd get wise, move to new location, set up the poker front and leave me ignorant of how to get to them later on. But I would not call in the police yet, for if no dope was on hand the police would lack evidence. I played with the possibility of delay, of letting Larry play along till they got dope in, issued the call for him and so leave him to tip me off. I would call in the law.

No good, that. The quicker Larry quit town, the better his chance for a comeback. In fact, left hereabouts, he might weaken and blow the works. So, I'd dispose of Larry first, then give the police the story. They'd set their usual trap and I'd have to trust to luck in the confusion of their raid in my efforts to get the tankard. They might have to wait days; well, I'd have to do likewise.

So I turned my back on the easy way.

I made it to Larry's place about noon. The door was ajar. I pushed it open and stepped inside. I'm not usually so almighty dumb as that, but my head was full of planning.

That was the last thing I knew till I came to on the floor with my head aching fit to explode. It still was his room but the door was closed and a stranger stood over me, gun in hand. I shut my eyes, playing dead before he caught me. I tried to figure this one out; either of two things had happened. They had come for Larry, found him prepared for a getaway, hustled him off and laid for me, or Larry had betrayed me. You can't trust hopheads, remember.

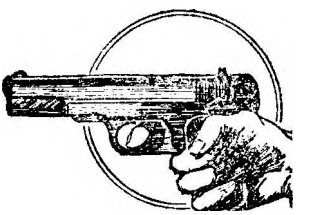
I heard the man come closer. He shoved at me with his foot. I set my muscles to throw him by the leg, but he was too smart to get caught that way. "Get up. Sit in that chair," he ordered. "I got your gun. Don't reach for it."

I ROSE dizzily to the chair. Slowly things came into focus. That scamp might have been some clerk or bookkeeper, any ordinary person—except for his eyes. No sudden rush could catch those cold, hard eyes unawares; nor was he the kind you could bribe. Or threaten. Why hadn't he finished me off while I was out? Surely they wouldn't allow me to go free if they suspected I knew a thing against them. True, they might have come for Larry and he hadn't divulged anything concerning me. But if so, why the heavy-handed reception?

What followed seemed like a bad dream. Having breakfasted early, now my innards growled and the headache persisted from hunger. I attempted to talk; my guard shut it off. If I shifted my legs, he eyed me expectantly. On the dresser a cheap clock dragged hands over mottled face till dreary minutes added up to one hour. It seemed as though I could not sit there longer. I had to.

Not once had that stranger's watch on me relaxed, but when the hour ended I caught onto one thing; his eye and mind were on the time, too. Why? Was he to hold me until a certain hour? Then release me? Scarcely likely. Was the gang, now wise to me, moving headquarters to a new location?

Which reminded me of Larry; had he gone over and tipped them off? Oh I had time to ponder as that day wore away.



The sun slanted along the floor and the hands showed four o'clock when that guard broke silence. His right hand held the gun as ever, his left drew, not a twig from a tankard but a letter from a pocket and slid it my way. I got it, watching him closely for another crack on the skull. The envelope was sealed. Turning it over in my hands, wondering, I became sure that whatever it held for me would be better than these hours of inaction.

Soon I sensed that the guard was curious; I pocketed the letter—if it was that. For the first time he became a human. "Why in hell don't you open that?" he demanded.

Says I lazily, "Why?"

He almost choked on that. "Three hours and here you sit! You hadn't been expecting the whack on the head, had you? Or this long sitting spell? Where's your curiosity?"

I tried out a bluff with, "I know what it's all about. You and your gang think you're smart. Huh, what do you suppose I did when I went out? I got to the police. They're watching that place right now; when the stuff shows up they'll nab your whole outfit." I gave him eye for eye to add, "Now, Mister, you can sit here playing tag with me or you can hotfoot it to Brooklyn and tip them off. It's up to you."

He sneered, "See any green 'round my eyes? Think up another one."

Of course it was feeble, but it proved that I couldn't hope to fox him. So I took out my letter, wondering why they had bothered. They had me, could do as they chose with me, no funeral sermon in advance was necessary—or was this another bit of symbolism from Trott and Crotan as gang heads?

That was good bond paper I took out and the writing on it was in neat penmanship. I went directly to the signature and what in hell do you suppose greeted my stare? "Harden Bayle!"

I damned him from Cairo up the China coast and across Siberia—then read: "There are two of us on the trail of the Silver Parrot and you must own that my chances are better than yours. I have your friend with me. At present he is not accommodating about the address but he will divulge it in good time. As soon as I have that tankard you are free to go. Do not try anything whatever on that guard, it would not be worth your while. As sop to your vanity which may be wounded by this incident, the girl I asked to watch you in the library was quite impressed. She even admits you are her type of male."

So Bayle had had me trapped here and he knew exactly how to bait me. Bayle would keep me idle here three solid hours, then heave this letter at me. Larry didn't want to tell him? Good for Larry; but, as Bayle said, in good time—the hankering. Aye, he'd tell Bayle and Bayle, not I, would get the Silver Parrot.

But Crotan and his gang would slip away to build another foul nest and what would become of Larry? I couldn't see Bayle sending him to his home; here in town he'd be done for. Crotan and Trott would get to him just as soon as they learned that it was he who had been singing. And here I sat, helpless to do a thing, for I knew I couldn't bribe or bluff any man from Bayle.

Under such circumstances, one cudgels his brain for some one possibility. I reviewed all the goings and coming in this affair. I went back over the letter. I recalled all the talking done—and something Larry had said did seem to offer a faint hope. Anyway, around it I laid plans. Aha, I felt better to get the old gray matter operating once more.

Not until six o'clock did the guard tell me to open a box that lay on the floor. In it were sandwiches, bottles of milk. We both ate—no, he did not relax his vigilance one whit.

Now I could sit back in the chair and wait with purpose. It came dark, but light enough came in from the street to let me watch him. However, the same light served him too. How long was this to continue? And how long would poor Larry hold out? He'd been all keyed up that morning and that longing sure hits them hard. Where were he and Bayle? I'd wager a month's poker cash they were upriver at the museum building.

A better character would have prayed for Larry to hold out; my own connection there has been broken a long time, though, so I could only wait, watch this guard and listen. Mister, him too. Every slightest move I made, he made an answering one. His nerves were tuned completely in my direction.

Therefore it was myself who first heard a step on the stairs outside. There had been other footsteps but this one was furtive. It came near our door. I risked leaving my chair. That move drew the guard to me instead of the door. Came the knocking. A low, gruff voice said, "Lemme in, Larry. It is Jim."

The gun pushed harder into my midriff, the guard whispered cautiously, "Not one sound out of you!"

Less cautiously from beyond the door: "Open that door, you yeller belly, I know you're in there." Since another wait drew no reply, he went on with: "Okay, you, play

it this way if you like but there's a poker game tonight and they want you to sit in. Wouldn't stay away if I was you."

IMMEDIATELY I knew it was now or never for me. What happened came so fast that I myself can't tell exactly how 'twas done. All I could think was: that man must not get away, this is the chance I've been waiting for! I brought my knee up high between myself and the guard pressing close. It hit him hard, so hard he howled in spite of himself. At the same time I shouted, "Jim!" and leaped aside to escape that gun. But he was too almighty sick to even work a trigger. Instead, the rascal outside crashed in that flimsy door.

Mister, that was so-ome mixup on the floor. I know because I watched it. Then I was roaring downstairs, crying that someone had been murdered on the top floor. No. I did not make the mistake of leaving the scene altogether; I'd made mistakes enough for one day. I snuggled into a corner till a shrieking, pushing mob came piling out of that tenement building and a police whistle shrilled like a bosun's down the block. Then, by cripes, I got away through the back door of a first floor tenement.

Over a fence and into a different street, the swirl of teeming sidewalk life was another world and I in its midst. This was my chance; that call to a poker game meant that dope was due tonight in the Brooklyn headquarters. The call was out for the hirelings to assemble; me for the police before anybody could tip off the gang.

A cop! Many's the time, dodging the law, it has seemed to me that every other man must be a flatfoot; now not one was in sight. Probably it was only minutes but it seemed hours till I spotted one and my story was ready for him.

City limits and jurisdictions be hanged—the F. B. I. took over and I got the thrill of my life riding with them. By my own sayso, mind; not theirs. Fancy me once again, a crook, wanted in various spots over the world, hurtling across Manhattan with these gents!

For one rare instant I had the crazy idea as to what they'd do if I were to turn them into Bayle, his place up the Hudson, its secret room and all that loot in it. But no, I knew I'd never do that; too much of myself had gone into that collection. Or I had thought of sometime destroying it all myself, but as for turning it over to the law —never.

You know how these affairs go, a murderous interlude of gunfire, some stinking bombs, people trying to see it all without getting hurt. Then that Crotan was done in; so, out of the smudge came Trott and the others under perfect control, rounded up. The dope-laden beer cases were loaded into a car—and somehow I emerged from all the hubbub into the comparative calm of a crowded Brooklyn subway, headed for the big city.

In the train, under the river, I apologized to all hands around me for the bulkiness of bundle hastily wrapped in newspapers. It was hard to the ribs, at that, and it kept ribbing them.

On my way up the river I had one misgiving: were Larry and Bayle still up there? Had they ever been? How would Bayle receive me? Oh well——

It was nearly midnight before I arrived, but through a window I saw the pair of them over Bayle's favorite game, chess. Larry showed tension and exhaustion but he was fighting to stay in the game too. Bayle, damn him, had the mien of a cat about to lick a creamy dish of milk. The old tyrant was biding his time.

Often I have wondered how this all added up, that night, in Larry's overwrought mind. Here I came, walking in with the Silver Parrot which had figured so ominously in his life. I handed it to Bayle. No explanations. Bayle's face went purple, his eyes narrowed in profound rage. Abruptly he whisked that tankard off the table, turned on his heel and up the stairs he marched without one word to either of us.

But perhaps Larry doesn't think much about it after all. I went all the way to his home town with him to see that he got there safely and he did not mention the scene once. I rather suspect he has put all this behind him. Certainly he was bracing himself for the fight ahead, the fight of his young life to make a comeback.

CHEENA

By JIM KJELGAARD

I WAS a lawyer before I was an army man, and I used to watch the prisoners who came before the judge. Little, cringing men and women some of them were, and probably guilty as all get out. But the kick in the face they got was always harder if they hadn't any money. Of course they deserved it, but almost anybody with enough money to hire a sharp lawyer could have beaten at least half the raps they went up for. I guess that's what gave me a sympathy for the under-dog, and probably it's also why I volunteered to defend Cheena.

We called him Cheena because we couldn't pronounce his real name. He was a little guy, maybe an inch over five feet, and his ancestry was as difficult to determine as his name was to pronounce. There were traces of Moro in him, and Portuguese, and Chinese, and Fuzzy-Wuzzy, and God only knows what else. But he had the most dazzling smile you ever saw.

He was charged with being a Jap collaborationist. Before we came he'd been sort of an all-around flunkey for Colonel Yamura, and specifically he was accused of carrying to the buck-toothed little colonel information that had endangered guerrilla bands. I could see by the eyes of McDowell, the prosecutor, that in his mind Cheena was as good as executed.

McDowell's principal witness was another little all-breed named Sam. He spoke passable English, and was a smart little guy. When the Japs came he bowed before them, said he was too-too happy to welcome the new order, and was made a clerk in Yamura's office. But he'd got out quite a bit of information that we'd been able to use.

McDowell put Sam on the stand, swore him in, established all preliminary evidence such as did he know Cheena, for how long, etc., and got down to business.

"Tell the court," McDowell ordered, "what happened on the night of February 3, 1943."

Sam was stiff as a ramrod on the witness stand. I suppose he thought he looked like a soldier—one doing a painful duty.

"General Hasaka was found dead behind the Wallace Theater," he said.

"How was he killed?"

"His head was chopped off with a knife."

"Now," McDowell continued, "tell us where you were the morning of February 4, 1943."

"I was working in the office of Colonel Yamura."

"Was the defendant there?"

"Yes."

"Did he speak to Colonel Yamura?"

"Yes."

"Tell exactly what passed between them.' them."

"He came in," Sam consulted a little notebook in which he'd evidently written everything down, "at seven minutes past nine. He was to polish the Colonel's boots. But he trembled. Colonel Yamura slapped him and asked him what was the matter. He said, so plainly that I and everyone could hear, that he had looked out from his room in the basement of the Wallace Theater and

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seen two of Adag's guerrillas chop off General Tasaka's head and carry it away with them." He was too frightened to leave his room until morning.

"Is that the truth?" McDowell sternly asked Cheena.

The little man bobbed forward and flashed his smile. "Yaas. Yaas," he said.

"Your witness," McDowell said.

I knew that Cheena was a dead duck. But I had still pledged myself to defend him, and I was at least going to put up a fight.

"Did the Japs take action against Adag?" I asked Sam.

"They sent a punitive force," Sam obviously disliked anyone who'd defend a collaborationist.

"Were they successful?"

They caught no one," Sam muttered.

McDowell took Sam over. "Tell the court," he directed, "what happened the night of March 27, 1943."

It was the same story all over. That night, again behind the Wallace Theater, Captain Tajima lost his head. Again Cheena took the news to Colonel Yamura. He had been awakened by the disturbance, and much too frightened to venture out, had seen two more of a hill-dwelling guerrilla band slice off the captain's head and carry it away with them. When McDowell asked Cheena if that was right, again he bowed, smiled, and said, "Yaas. Yaas."

The Japs sent another punitive force, which also failed to catch anybody. I looked at Cheena, a meek and scarcely noticeable little man who was beaming at the court.

"It's news to me that the guerrilla bands of these islands take heads," I told Sam.

Sam, all of one generation removed from a primitive tribe himself, said with great dignity, "Primitive passions run high."

"Why did these officers go behind the Wallace Theater?"

"It led to the house of Madame Tussaye."

"Didn't they get wise to the fact that it was a dangerous place?"

"They patrolled it heavily for two months and for a month afterwards concealed two soldiers in the defendant's room."

"What happened when they left?"

"The night after they left Ensign Yusho—"

It went on and on, nine times, right up to two weeks before we landed, with Jap bigwigs losing more than their face behind the Wallace Theater. Cheena witnessed every assassination, always the work of guerrillas, and next morning carried news of them to Colonel Yamura. Each time punitive forces were sent out, always without results except once when the guerrillas cleaned up the punitive force. Nine times Cheena damned himself with his "Yaas, yaas," when McDowell asked him if Sam's story was true. McDowell looked at me.

"Satisfied, Keene?"

"I—"

Cheena got up and a couple of MP's grabbed him. Still flashing his dazzling smile, he looked at me.

"I show," he said.

"Sit down!" an MP growled.

"Yes, sit down, you slimy little worm!" McDowell spat.

That made me mad. I hadn't any sympathy for Cheena, nor did I question McDowell's epithet. But I guess I never will be able to forget that even a slimy little worm is entitled to every chance he can get.

"As counsel for the defense," I said, "I request that this man be permitted to produce any evidence that may be in his favor."

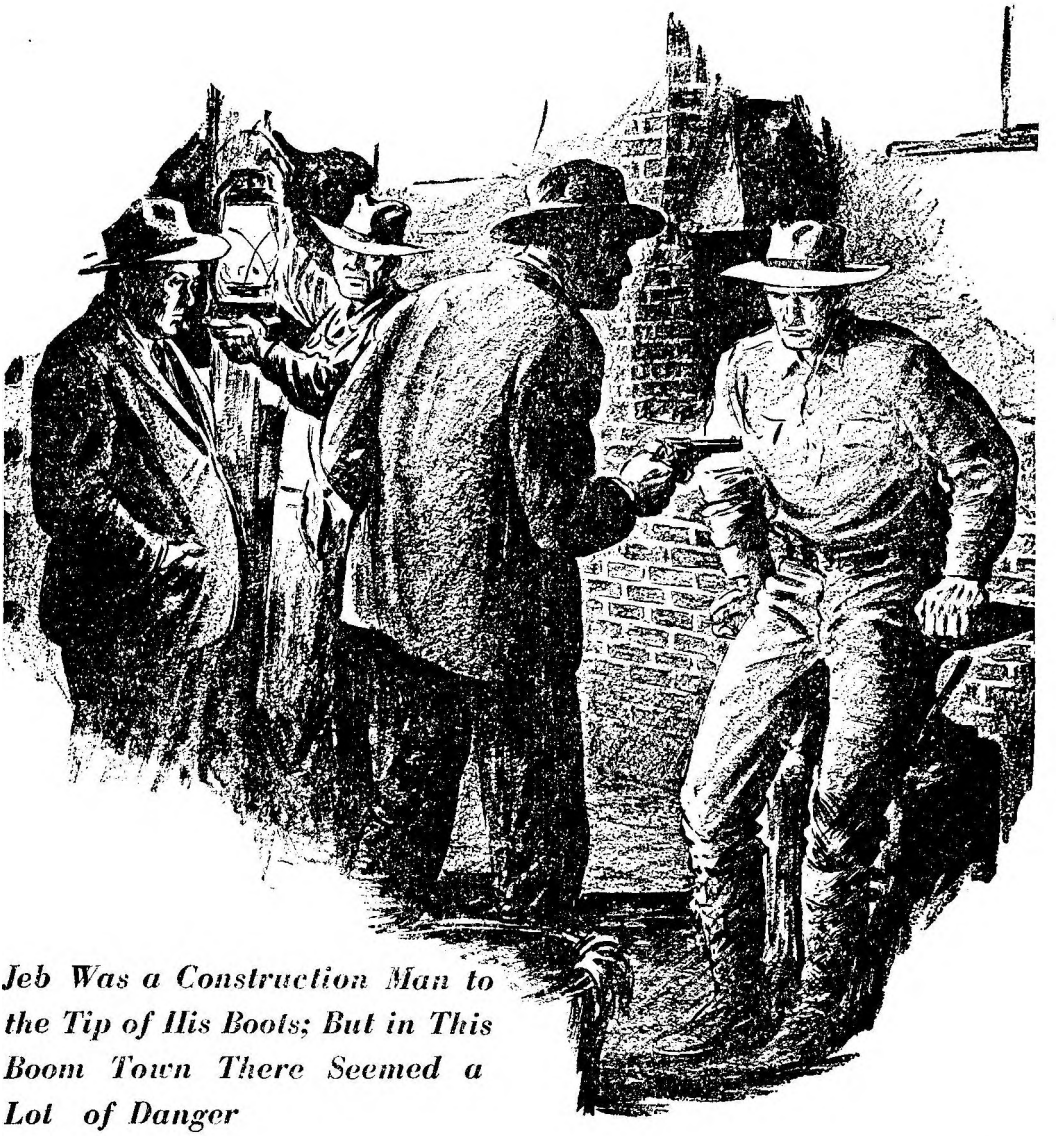
McDowell grunted, "All right with me."

We followed Cheena, with an MP on each side of him, down the street and into a stinking, garbage-littered alley. A dead cat lay in the middle of it. Cheena stopped behind the Wallace Theater, grinned, and ducked down a set of crumbling steps. We entered a musty little room and lit a candle.

The first thing that met my eye was the shiniest and sharpest bolo I ever saw. The next thing Cheena took down a row of ordinary newspapers he'd tacked on the wall and —McDowell gasped. I reeled a bit myself, and heard one of the MP's; "Gawd 'amighty!" Then, I couldn't help it, I chuckled. I thought of Colonel Yamura, who knew that his little, beaten, spiritless slave of the new order would not dare lie to him, sending punitive expeditions out to chase guerrillas that everyone knew they couldn't catch anyway.

"Me do," Cheena said proudly.

He pointed to the nine cured heads, arranged in a neat row on a shelf he'd cut in the wall.



Jeb Was a Construction Man to the Tip of His Boots; But in This Boom Town There Seemed a Lot of Danger

BLOOD TRAIL AT BOOM TOWN

By GIFF CHESHIRE

JEB MARTELL had just fallen asleep when the hullabaloo struck up again in the blacksmith shop next door. Twice in the last half hour a whiskey chorus had sent forth a burst of bad melody and worse harmony. Jeb had avoided the town's hotels and come here to the Misses Bennett's especially because he wanted peace and quiet. His long, gaunt frame twisted for a few moments, then with an oath he lurched out of bed and began to dress.

The tight-closed doors of the other rented bedrooms slipped past as Jeb moved down

the hall a moment later. He pressed down the stairs and out the front door. The singing in the blacksmith shop had stopped again, but Jeb's anger still seethed and he plunged on. It was time somebody whacked the drunken idiots' heads together so the vicinity could get some rest.

Jeb's boot heels pounded on the hard beaten path beneath the elms. The smithy's big, double-swung doors were shut and fastened from the inside, but Jeb hammered them until they rattled on their hinges. The low drone of talk, he noticed as he came up, had halted when he stopped pounding.

"Who is it?" a low voice asked after a moment. It sounded more anxious than drunk, Jeb thought. The interior was silent as death, and Jeb had a sudden electric feeling. Drunks wouldn't clam up like that, even if the whole town was on their tails because of the racket. Jeb heard somebody move across the floor. then a voice demanded, through the crack in the big doors, "What do you want, hombre?"

"Peace and quiet!" Jeb roared. "You jaspers must've lapped up bird milk, the way you cheep. If I get woke up again, I warn you, I'll take this place to pieces!" Jeb's big frame was crouched a little, and in the wash of moonlight he looked capable of carrying out his threat. He paused, as if for breath but actually to let his eye rest on the moon glitter in the crack. A gun was lined on him. "You jaspers either sleep it off or go on out in the country and keep the coyotes awake!" he finished.

"Don't get so danged proddy, mister!" the voice placated. "The boys're in a little game, is all! You know how it goes!"

"I know how this one goes!" Jeb snapped back. He moved off, finding that drowsiness had fled. A little game was correct, he reflected. He passed back under the elms and stalked up the path to the Misses Bennett's porch. He had suddenly become mighty curious about that game. Jeb crossed the porch, but he did not enter the house. He tiptoed to the end where he lost himself in the shadows on the blind side of the house.

JEB MARTELL was a boomer. For three years he had drifted from one frontier town to the next, to any place where construction work went on, for Jeb was a construction man to the toes of his boots. He had hit this town of Owyhee because of what he had heard over the grapevine. The big water development employed hundreds of men and there was much building in the town besides. Jeb had got in the afternoon before, and inquiring about a quiet place to stay he had been directed to the Misses Bennett's.

Jeb was a solitary individual, a giant of a man whom liquor made only more sober, whose eyes often showed black hell and again only a bleak desolation. Jeb took any kind of job that came along, mule-skinning, carpentering, timekeeping. He never stayed long, for always it seemed that there was something from which he fled or which he hunted.

Jeb had no idea what electrified him now, for reason told him he had no business to stick his nose in a place where he might get it lopped off. Yet his feeling was more than a casual curiosity. It was the feeling that ponderous events loomed that somehow bore relation to himself. He sucked in his breath and decided to have a private look into that blacksmith-shop business.

Massive elms cast the rear of the house into shadow. The shop was a long, low structure that disappeared into the same clump. As he passed behind the dwelling, Jeb halted and his eyes widened. A rope hung from an upstairs window. He reconstructed the upper floor plan in his mind and figured that it was Harvey Fish's room. Fish had been pointed out as job superintendent on the reservoir project, and something seemed to have impelled him to take French leave.

As Jeb crept through the trees to the rear of the blacksmith shop, he had time to wonder what nocturnal mission had called Fish forth. No poker game in the wee hours would have justified such secretiveness. Grateful for the thick foliage, Jeb crept up to a window on the rear wall of the shop and pecked through.

The interior, he discovered, was not subdivided, though the light and activity was all down at the front end. The end nearest Jeb was piled high with bags, boxes and kegs. Jeb's eyes narrowed. Rather more in the way of supplies than a smith would require in pursuing his trade.

There were four or five men in the front, hulked together in a circle, but Jeb could

not make out what it was that engrossed them, though he felt sure it was not the pasteboards. As Jeb skulked along the wall he hunted an unguarded opening. A small leanto loomed, with a door fastened on the inside with a plain hasp. He jiggled a little with his pocketknife and had it free. He pushed the door open with a caution and stepped inside.

Moonlight fell through a far window, giving him enough illumination to see fairly well. There was a rack on one wall, piled with steel round, strap and angle iron. Jeb's stomach muscles tightened. Two men lay at the end of the rack, trussed and gagged. Jeb hunkered beside them, straightened and clamped his jaws to restrain an oath. His hand came up wet, stained, and sticky. Jeb knew the feel of blood. A hasty examination showed that both men while trussed and gagged had been killed by something that had crushed their skulls. Helpless, like rats, and no matter what they might have been when they lived, fury swelled in Jeb Martell.

He understood the purpose of the two outbursts of "drunken" song which obviously had been to cover any noise these hombres might have made during the process of being knocked in the head.

Jeb heard movement behind him and whirled to glide behind the door that opened into the leanto from the main building. Jeb had not rehasped the outside door in order to keep a fast exit clear, and now he cursed the fact. Two men came down the long interior and turned into the leanto. When they found that unfastened door, they were apt to raise Cain! With bated breath Jeb pressed against the wall and waited. He bit his lip as he recognized the voice of the speaker.

"Guess that takes care of the situation, Thorne," Harvey Fish said. "They're the only two men in the outfit who've shown any sign of suspicion. You have 'em hauled off and buried. I'll fix the records to show they drew their time yesterday and blowed. Can you use any more cement, Thorne? Another freight wagon's due, tomorrow."

"I can always use cement," the man Thorne replied. "But I need steel, more."

"The steels are hard to get away with!" Fish snapped. "Blazes, Thorne, there's a few items you'd ought to buy for yourself, if only for the looks of the thing!" They had reached the opened door now, and there Fish jerked out, "Hey, what blasted fool left this door open?" There was a second of suspense for Jeb, then Fish rasped out. "Get the boys! Somebody's snooped around in here! We gotta find him!"

Jeb knew his only chance of escaping lay in exploding out now, and he bunched his powerful muscles and sprang. He caught both men in his giant clutch. He rammed their heads together with sufficient force to quiet them, then dropped their inert figures and lurched out the door and into the cover of the elms.

He did not think the scuffle would have made enough noise to attract the men in the front of the shop. Jeb planted his thick gluteals on his heels and waited. He had deliberately gone easy with Fish and Thorne, for he burned to meet them again and alive, particularly the man Fish had called Thorne.

The hell that was in Jeb Martell burned again. A hell that had been kindled four years before with the collapse of the St. Augustine dam, in the south. Jeb Martell had been a bigtime contractor then, reputedly possessing one of the best engineering brains in the country. But even the best construction outfits get into financial difficulties at times, and the dam seemed his hope of salvation. Instead, it had ruined him.

Rather, it was a man who had ruined him, a man he had trusted, who disappeared when the big trouble came. It was the man he had heard talking to Harvey Fish tonight, the man Fish had called Thorne, though his name then had been Frank Halvarson. The St. Augustine dam had been one of two big projects the Martell outfit had undertaken simultaneously, stretching its failing resources, to the utmost. Jeb Martell had devoted himself principally to the Brookings power project, while entrusting the dam at St. Augustine largely to Frank Halvarson.

He had had no reason to distrust Halvarson for a year after the dam was completed, until in the worst high water in years the big spillway collapsed. In the investigation that followed the worst charge that can be hurled at a construction outfit was aimed at Jeb Martell—inferior materials. His financial difficulties were widely publicized. Frank Halvarson, who had had direct charge of the project, had disappeared. Jeb

had known instantly that Halvarson had been practicing the lowest form of dishonesty in the construction game, chiseling on building materials.

Jeb Martell escaped criminal charges only because Halvarson's operations had been cunning enough to get around the state inspectors who had been on the job. These inspectors, in many daily reports, had certified to the acceptability of the work. The state itself was placed in a bad light, and there was a hint of collusion. So Jeb Martell escaped prosecution by the skin of his teeth, but he was finished as a contractor.

Now Halvarson was here in Owyhee, operating the same racket, apparently, under the name of Thorne. Jeb had already learned that Thorne was the contractor on the three-story masonry business block building going up in the heart of town. This time he was on the receiving end of the chiseling racket, it seemed. Fish was stealing materials from the reservoir project, and selling them to Thorne, who was using them on his own jobs. Big profits for both of them. This blacksmith shop served as a way depot, and the two men who had been murdered had gotten wise to the operation. The other three men in the shop were doubtless trusted hirelings.

AS HE hunkered in the darkness, Jeb Martell wanted more than to expose the game. He burned for revenge against Frank Halvarson, now known as Thorne, a revenge that would have to be more personal than simply getting him into hot water. To do this last, all Jeb would need to do would be to rouse the town marshal out of bed and tell him to investigate the murdered men inside. That probably would bring the whole foul business to light.

When Thorne and Fish came to in there, they were going to be panic-stricken, and with no idea as to who had been spying on their activities. Jeb meant to enjoy that with leisured relish. He was well aware that it was a dangerous indulgence, for having killed to cover their stealing these men would kill without hesitation to cover the killing. Chuckling, Jeb made his way back to the Misses Bennett's house, let himself in, climbed the stairs and went to bed.

He awakened early the next morning and dressed, then moved a chair close to his

door where he sat for half an hour, listening until he heard the door of Harvey Fish's room, across the hall, open and close. Jeb followed Fish down the stairs and into the dining room where Miss Elvira Bennett presided over breakfast. They were the first ones down, Jeb noted, for all the plates on the table still lay inverted on the checkered tablecloth. Miss Elvira fluttered them into their places and brought scrambled eggs, bacon, hot biscuits and coffee from the kitchen, where her spinster sister, Rowena, labored over the range.

"You went out last night," Miss Elvira said to Jeb.

"Yeah," Jeb acknowledged. "Some drunks set themselves up for canaries, over in the blacksmith shop. I went over and piped 'em down." Harvey Fish nearly choked himself on a forkful of eggs. "After that, I wasn't sleepy, so I took a little look around."

Fish's eyes came up from his plate, icy cold. "What you could find worth looking at in this stink hole beats me," he commented.

"On the contrary," Jeb returned, "I was plenty interested in what I saw."

Fish seemed to have lost his taste for breakfast and left presently. Nonetheless he was waiting on the porch when Jeb came out, a few minutes later. Jeb ignored him and started down the sidewalk toward town, but Fish fell into step beside him.

"What's your game, Martell?" he demanded bluntly.

Jeb shrugged. "No game. I hit Owyhee looking for a job. I run into things and I take a look. I figure them out. That's work, not a game."

"Look here!" Fish jerked out savagely. "There's no use beating around the bush. How much're you going to shake us down for? I know that's your racket or you'd've squawked already about what you saw. Name your price, mister!"

"You'll know it—and pay it, when the time comes!" Jeb deliberately turned up a side street, leaving Fish standing there staring at him.

Jeb spent the day loafing in the saloons he disliked, picking up what information he could. He learned that Fish's outfit rented the big blacksmith shop, using it as a warehouse, which explained why nobody had become suspicious of the materials arriving and

leaving there. Fish was probably doctoring the records to cover the shortages, and the biggest risk they took was in getting the stuff from the shop to Thorne's storehouses or jobs, but Jeb conceded that many ruses for accomplishing that could be worked out.

Jeb met Fish at supper at the Misses Bennett's that evening, and Fish's worried look had disappeared. Jeb guessed that the chance of exposing them had passed, for they would have disposed of the bodies by now, and a boomer's word as to the rest would not be hard for two big construction men to challenge successfully. Yet Jeb was cheerful. His plan was subtler and would develop in its own time. Yet he expected an attack from them just to make sure there were no unpleasant charges suddenly thrown around.

LATE that evening Jeb strolled downtown. On first glance he thought that the Thorne Construction Company office, on the site of the business block now under construction, was deserted. Then strolling slowly past the front window, he saw light through the door of the cubby, walled off in one corner of the main office. Jeb rapped on the door. He saw somebody stick his head out of the cubby door and take a look, then come toward the street door.

It was Frank Halvarson, alias Newt Thorne, who opened the door and snapped, "What do you want?"

"A talk with you, Halvarson," Jeb returned.

The man he faced was equally as big as himself, and Jeb saw the huge body grow taut. With a jerk of his head, Halvarson beckoned him inside. After Jeb had entered, he closed the door carefully and turned the key in the lock.

"*Jeb Martell!*" he said softly. "Fish said the name of the hombre who spied on us was something like that, but I never connected you up with—with *the* Jeb Martell!"

"Never thought I'd find you, did you?" Jeb asked. "Well, it was an accident, though I've stalked you four years. Now I've got you, Halvarson, where I want you!" He followed Halvarson into the cubby and saw that they were alone.

Halvarson resumed his chair at the desk and waved Jeb into the seat on the other side. "You haven't got me," he denied. Amusement flitted on his heavy features.

He suddenly brought a gun up from a holster Jeb suspected he kept nailed to the knee space in the desk. He lined it on Jeb and grinned openly. "You could've made a mess of things if you'd raised a hullabaloo, last night. You missed that chance. Now, you're going to die."

"Shoot!" Jeb taunted. "There's law in this town, I understand."

"There are quiet ways of killing a man," Halvarson returned. "Probably you've already guessed that we know them. I always figured you were a fool, Martell, and this proves it."

To the contrary, Jeb thought, it proved his shrewdness. Halvarson's elation at this apparent windfall lent validity to the bunch on which Jeb was acting. He heard the rumble of a wagon on the cobblestones outside, heard the clatter as it pulled across the sidewalk and onto the construction site.

Halvarson grinned. "One of my wagons that Harvey Fish's wheelwright fixed, over in his shop," he said.

"Which is one of your ways of getting materials you stole from the reservoir onto your own job site!" Jeb retorted.

Halvarson prodded him to his feet and ordered him out through a rear door, following so closely that the pressure of the gun barrel in Jeb's ribs never wavered. Framework, scaffolding and guard walks cut the interior of the project off from the street.

Prompted by Halvarson, Jep moved across to the wagon, which was covered with a big tarpaulin. Two men swung down from the driver's seat, hard cases both, and Jeb suspected they were the men who had been in the blacksmith shop the night before.

At the same instant a figure turned through the opening from the street, and Jeb could see from the reflected light that it was Harvey Fish. Jeb's breathing quickened. His enemies were gathering, as he had hoped they would.

"We don't have to bring him in!" Halvarson told Fish. "He brung himself."

An evil grin spread over Harvey Fish's features. "Good. Then let's get on with it."

"You and Joe hustle with that unloading, Bill," Halvarson told the two teamsters. "We'll use the wagon to haul him back over to the shop." He laughed sharply. "Better get yourselves tuned up. Looks like

we're going to have a songfest again!" The other three joined in his laughter.

Even if Halvarson had not kept his gun tight against Jeb's ribs, Jeb would not have resisted when, presently, he was ordered to crawl into the unloaded wagon under the tarp. Halvarson and Fish got in with him, and the two teamsters drove the rig back over to the blacksmith shop. Jeb had known something like this was coming and he had started the ball rolling to have it roll under conditions somewhat under his own control.

THE wagon was driven through the big double-swung doors of the blacksmith shop, and they had been fastened again before Jeb and the other two crawled out from under the tarp. Jeb wondered if he was to be bound before he was knocked in the head, as the two men murdered the night before had been. He did not mean to string along with them that far.

A teamster lit a kerosene lantern and hung it on a nail. Jeb dropped weakly to a half-sitting position on the big anvil beside him. "Getting weak knees?" Halvarson jibed. "You let a peep outa you and I'll gut-shoot you and claim we caught you trying to rob the place!"

Jeb nodded, hoping Halvarson had not seen the short-handled sledge hammer resting on the wooden block supporting the anvil, which his body cut off from view. Fish and the two teamsters stood as if waiting for Halvarson's orders. Halvarson said, "Don't unhook the team. We'll need the wagon again, pretty soon."

Jeb moved as the man spoke, getting his fingers wrapped around the sledge handle as quietly as he could. It was repulsive in his grip, for he knew it was probably the murder weapon. Then he sprung and swung, but he did not aim the sledge at any of the men present.

He beat out a ringing tattoo on the anvil, sending sound welling through the shop and all over the neighborhood, then stood grinning.

The men he faced were frozen. "My God!" Harvey Fish yelped. "He's sprung a trap on us! That was a signal!"

Frank Halvarson had blanched. "Quick, hombre! Who you got planted outside?"

"Friends of mine!" Jeb told him. I reminded you before there was law in this

town. Now, do you want to go ahead and kill me?" Disdaining Halvarson's gun, he straightened. "Put the noise-maker away, Halvarson. I only alerted my friends. So far you haven't done anything to incriminate you. Go ahead and act tough, and you'll hang yourselves!"

All four men were badly shaken. The teamsters exchanged panic-stricken looks. Fish had sagged weakly against a pile of jute bags. Halvarson, his face twitching, slowly holstered his gun. "Go ahead. What're you up to?"

"I can start the law on the blood trail that'll pin those murders on you jaspers! I can get Fish's outfit suspicious and started to checking up on materials. I can make it bad for you, all right. On the other hand, I haven't told anybody anything yet. I can get you outta town. I can give you your chance to get away scot free if you meet my price!"

In a voice choked with hate, Halvarson croaked, "What's your price, Martell?"

Jeb produced a paper from his pocket. "Sign this. It's a confession of how your stealing was responsible for the failure of the St. Augustine dam. Sign it and I'll set you on your way, so long as you live up to your part of the bargain." Jeb picked up the sledge hammer, as if to ring the anvil again. "I'll give you thirty seconds to make up your mind." He started counting, holding the hammer poised.

"Wait!" Halvarson gasped, as the limit expired. "I'll—I'll sign your blasted confession!"

Jeb produced an indelible pencil, and Halvarson signed the paper Jeb had drawn up that afternoon. Jeb pocketed it, then took Halvarson's gun and frisked the others. A slow smile spread over his face. "All right, follow me and I'll get you to the edge of town!" They passed through the door, and on the sidewalk Jeb raised his voice intentionally. "All right, Frank, let's you and me and the boys drop over to the Blue Parrot for a snifter before we go to bed!"

The obvious nerve strain on the others would have made Jeb laugh under any other circumstances. They walked together for three blocks. As they neared Halvarson's project, Jeb's pulses began to speed up. He was being deliberately careless, for he knew that given half a chance Halvarson would

release him from his promise not to turn them over to the law.

They were passing the opening through the guard walls along the sidewalk when Halvarson made his play. He lunged into Jeb's side with a ramming shoulder and at the same instant Fish hit him from the rear. They rolled in a knot through the opening. Once concealed from the street, the four hardcases set out to make short work of it.

Then came the personal revenge that Jeb Martell had lusted for, though it was a desperate fight he had on his hands. Landing on his back, Jeb lifted his feet and sent Harvey Fish crashing against an upright so violently the man crumbled and lay still. Jeb heaved himself erect, dodged Halvarson's lunge, seized the two teamsters by the neck and heard their skulls crush as he slammed them together. He pitched one of them at Harvey Fish, who was trying to rise, and knocked him flat again.

Halvarson caught him then with a smoking balled fist driven hard to the side of the head. Jeb staggered, reaching out with lightning rights and lefts. Halvarson was a big man, but liquor and loose living had considerably under-cut him. He did not stand up long under Jeb's battering ram.

"There's only one thing I want to know, Martell!" Halvarson said, when Jeb faced him in the marshal's office the next morning. "Did you actualy have any men outside the blacksmith shop, last night?"

Jeb's grin was a taunt. "Yeah, I did, Frank. Men you've murdered and broke and ruined. *They came out of your own conscience!*"

The Story Tellers' Circle

(*Continued from Page 4*)

lives nest around there. All this—and mallards too!"

Jim Kjelgaard

Taking a Chance

BERTON COOK has some interesting comments to make on the age-old penchant of homo sapiens to set aside at any moment the "sapiens" and take a chance on something—anything.

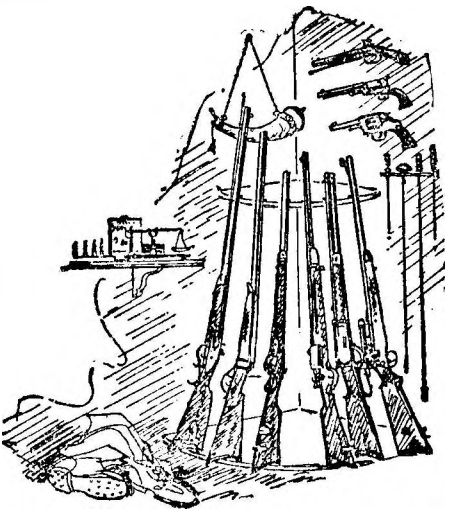
The author of "The Silver Parrot" tells us:

"All the while we were doing 'The Silver Parrot,' the lottery angle in it intrigued us as a side issue of interest. It may well intrigue most anybody in these days of million-dollar takes at tracks, boomtime stakes at poker, the lotto game and innumerable raffles. But the human yen for taking chances isn't so modern. Not until 1800 or so did the staid British stop accumulating cash thus and even in these times an art project over there can raise the boodle by lottery. Louisiana was the last holdout of such practice when the federal government made lotteries illegal at the turn of the last century into this one.

"But laws rarely change human impulses of this nature. We draw lots, thirteen of them, when we play contract. We take a chance when we drive sixty-five an hour, when we eat what we know disagrees with ourselves, when we flip a coin, trade black-market, swing an axe. Perhaps, however, the one lottery that one joins with his eyes widest open is that where he reaches to a hand or, say, a Silver Parrot tankard for broken match or twig.

"This sort of thing rose to the dignity of college study during the nineteen-twenties via the calculus route under the more respectable name of Probability. One professor actually invited guests to his home

(*Concluded on page 143*)



THE SHOOTER'S CORNER

Conducted by PETE KUHLHOFF

Rainy Day Musings

FOR THE past several days we have been sloshing around in the midst of what the boys around these parts call a "nor'easter." The other evening, after a day of "not-much-luck" fishing, we were all snug and warm after a good meal of "Petes mess" —a hot concoction made of the inhabitants of local waters. Everything was tied down and we were enjoying our last smoke before turning in.

With the deer season soon coming on, the talk naturally turned to puns, with the old argument of "what's the best deer rifle?" going hot and heavy.

A few "cracks" were taken at me for going "loaded for bear" last season when we were hunting in a wooded locality where

most of the hunters were toting rifles of the .30-30 class.—But there was a good reason for the Winchester Model 70 caliber .30-06 rifle with a Weaver 330 Scope in Redfield Jr. mounts, which I carried. I had located a secluded spot on a small bluff where I had a good clear view in all directions but part of the west for 350 to 450 yards. Also I wanted to try out some experimental ammunition at long range, so although it was quite cold I had decided to "set it out" in this wind-swept spot.

And speaking of being "loaded for bear" it has always been my idea to carry a rifle with enough power to take care of anything I might contact even though hunting for the little white tail. The black bear, for instance. He is undoubtedly the most peace loving member of the bear family, but when on a rampage he can be plenty dangerous and believe me, when he gives anything a bop with his big paw it stays bopped, be it a hog, a sheep, a deer or a man.

One time years ago I was unfortunate enough to view the remains of a human being, after having been slapped about a bit by a medium-sized black bear. It was a sight to forget.

So, no matter what I'm hunting, if I'm in a country generally believed to be inhabitated by members of the family, Ursus, I want a gun that will knock down Mr. Bruno and keep him there. Sure, I know a .22 through the ear drum at close range will kill a bear, but I, for one, don't want to be hunting around for his ear drum if he's mad at me!

Any rifle of the .30-30 class will put a black bear out of business if the shot is between the eyes, low behind the front leg or through the afore-mentioned ear drums, but I certainly wouldn't think of taking on a maddened big brownie with anything less than the .30-06 or preferable something even more powerful.

Back in the black powder days the heavy .45's and the old .50-100 Express were considered good bear medicine. A favorite of some bear hunters was the old .45-70 Springfield single-shot complete with bayonet.

The bayonet was not used for sticking the bear but rather as a means of keeping the rifle at hand for instant use. It worked like this—the hunter crawled down on the bear, quickly reloaded and approached to

see "for sure" that Mr. Bear was out of commission. If apparently dead, the hunter proceeded to stick the bayonet in the ground so that the rifle was within easy reach in case that the bear "came to life" during the process of being de-overcoated.

Early smokeless powder rifles that were very popular for bear included the .33 W. C. F., the .35 W. C. F. and the 450 Winchester, all three of which are still good as has been proved time and time again. These loads have long heavy bullets which retain their killing power at practically any range they are likely to be used in woods country.

The .33 W. C. F. and the .45-70 in the old lever action 1886 Model Winchester still have plenty of boosters as have the .35 W. C. F. and the .405 in the model 95 Winchester. Both of these model rifles are now obsolete, or perhaps I should say are not now being manufactured. The '86 has been superseded by the Winchester model 71, and I never could see why the '95 was discontinued.

The .35 W. C. F. is unnecessarily heavy for deer and the .405 will practically cut a small deer in two. In fact, the .405, to my way of thinking, is an awful lot of gun fun for anything smaller than Alaskan brown bear or African lion.

As the demand for guns having longer range and higher velocity grew the .30-40 and the .30-06 took the spotlight. Both good long range deer, or most anything else, guns; and especially good bear knocker-downers.

It seems O. K. to me to include the 6.5 mm. Mannlicher and the .270 Winchester in this same class.

My friend, Major Fiala, has killed a number of Polar bears with the 6.5 and believes it good for anything on the American continent when in the hands of a skillful hunter and expert shot. And the .270

has certainly taken everything offered in the Americas.

As a matter of fact, it all boils down to the fact that it's the man behind the gun who really determines just what is a good deer, bear or what-have-you gun. A smart hunter can take most any animal with most any caliber rifle.

But the hell of it is, most of us think we are a lot better than we actually are, which accounts for the small items we see now and then in the news columns during the hunting season. They generally start something like this, "Bear attacks hunter after being slightly wounded. All cartridges had been fired from the hunter's rifle, etc."

Most disastrous accidents similar to this were caused by some hunter getting excited and opening fire on an animal at close range, without remaining cool enough to place his shots where they would kill instantly.

But right now, what I want to know is "Why all this gun talk when there's a lot of fishing to be done."

The Story Tellers' Circle

(*Concluded from page* 139)

to spend evenings over gambling machines and keep their records of wins and losses for him. Treatises have been written, frequently curves drawn, a law of averages put into words that often are referred to by the unlucky in card games.

"But the old-timer who really got down to realities on this matter was the French mathematician De Moivre in 18th century London. He applied his 'probability notions to life expectation and came up with complicated tables which showed all hands and the cook they could expect to live one half of 86 minus their present age. Neat little formula, that, because it really agrees with the more carefully constructed insurance company tables of these times, with few exceptions.

"Nonetheless, the guy who reaches his hand for a broken match or twig is the fellow who gives us the makings of a yarn."

Berton E. Cook

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